

Scotpress

ENTERPRISE INCIDENTS

9

Stories by

Sandy Catchick

**a
Star Trek
fanzine**

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Editors - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini
Typing - Valerie Piacentini
Proofreading - Janet Quarton, Sheila Clark & Valerie Piacentini
Printing of Masters - Janet Quarton
Printing - Urban Print
Distracting - Shona & Cindy

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Sheila Clark
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CAESAR OF THE STARS

The Conscience of the King Revisited

by

Sandy Catchick

Spock's thoughts were working in a most un-Vulcan-like manner. The more he fought for control, for logic, for order, the more persistent became the idea that something was very very wrong. The trouble was that he had very little fact on which to base that idea. What he was suffering from was an intuitive feeling; but he had never experienced an intuitive feeling before, and so it was hardly surprising that he found it impossible to recognise one in himself. The person who normally acted intuitively, and who could easily have recognised and admitted to such a feeling, was the person at the centre of his disquiet - Captain James T. Kirk. Giving up his unsuccessful attempt at meditation, Spock decided to review the developments of the last few hours, and the facts as he knew them.

First, on the Captain's return from visiting Dr. and Mrs. Leighton, and after the former's untimely and mysterious death, there was the fact the Captain Kirk knew the Karidian Company of Players would be coming aboard the Enterprise. Such knowledge was impossible, since the Astral Queen and not the Enterprise was scheduled to pick up the actors. Yet when Spock had announced, "Ready to assume course, Captain," Kirk had replied, "I think we are due for a pickup." Lenore Karidian had come aboard and pleaded with Kirk to pick up the stranded company. Spock had asked, "How did you know this lady was coming aboard?" and had received the illogical - and, if Spock was honest with himself, rather annoying - response, "I am the Captain." Since the Captain had previously shown no ability to foresee the future, logically Spock must assume that the Captain had somehow engineered the situation - not unlikely, since Captain Jon Dailey of the Astral Queen was an old friend of his. Past experience had shown Captain Kirk to have great influence with old friends like Jon Daily.

Secondly, the Enterprise was currently on course to the Benecia Colony - and that was against Starfleet orders. When Spock had protested, "The Benecia Colony is 8 light years off our course" Kirk had replied, "If my memory needs refreshing, Mr. Spock, I will ask you. In the meantime, follow my orders." The Captain was not in the habit of disregarding Starfleet orders, particularly when they were officially on a mission delivering medicines. Even more disquieting to the Vulcan, the Captain was not in the habit of telling his First Officer to just follow orders blindly. In was one of the things Spock had first noticed about Kirk when the Captain had taken over from Christopher Pike as Captain of the Enterprise. Kirk made a point of explaining himself to his senior officers and asking for their opinions and comments, without ever relinquishing his right to command. It was one of the Captain's strengths. If Spock had been Human he would have been hurt by the Captain's response. As it was, he found Kirk's reply merely illogical. It was his duty to point out the fact that the Benecia Colony was 8 light years off the Enterprise's official course.

Finally, there was the transfer of Lt. Kevin Riley from communications down to engineering. Riley had come up from engineering, and Spock had asked Kirk if there was any explanation. "He's a fine young officer. He is bound to consider this transfer a disciplinary action," he had said to Kirk. The Captain's unhelpful response had been, "I do not wish to discuss it, Mr. Spock. Please follow my orders." That was uncharacteristic of the Captain. He was, of course, within his rights to make any personnel moves he wished, but he would usually consider the effects on the individuals concerned, and explain the reasons to his officers. Further, he would ask of there were any mitigating circumstances before making any downwards moves.

There was nothing really concrete in these facts, and Spock knew he would not have wished to voice a theory, even a tentative one, if Kirk had asked him for one, with so little to go on. Yet, no matter how illogical, and no matter how few facts there were to support his case, the idea remained that Captain Kirk was not acting normally. Of course, there was also Kirk's questioning of the computer on data submitted to the personnel files. Spock had been on the bridge at the time, and his Vulcan ears could easily have picked up Kirk's questions and the computer's responses. Yet his own nature, and his code of honour, had prevented him from listening further as soon as he had heard the Captain ask for the personnel files. Spock respected privacy. He guarded his own relentlessly, and could do no less than observe the privacy of others - so long as this involved no danger to the ship, and, he added almost silently, so long as it involved no danger to Kirk.

His problem, as a Vulcan, was that he did not think as a Human would, and this made analysis of the Captain's motives most difficult. Abruptly, he made a decision. If he could not analyse the Captain's actions effectively, then he needed a second opinion - a Human opinion. The obvious choice of Human was Dr. McCoy, yet at the thought Spock hesitated. His analysis could at best be described as tentative. He doubted he could ascribe any kind of statistical confidence levels to his conclusion that something was very wrong with the Captain. Of course, Spock did not allow for his own feelings in his calculations, making his conclusions seem less valid than they in fact were.

With some pensiveness at the thought of leaving himself wide open to the doctor's scorn and scathing wit, Spock left his quarters and headed for sickbay. He would after all be willing to risk his life for the Captain, so why not his Vulcan dignity? Although without the latter he knew he would not be able to function as a Vulcan, or as Spock. The stakes were too high for such personal concerns, however. Spock did not intend to let Kirk down. It was his duty to the Captain - and, he added to himself, his desire to help his friend - that were of paramount importance.

McCoy was not as helpful as Spock would have wished.

"The Captain is acting strangely. I am asking if you have noticed?" queried the Vulcan.

McCoy was more concerned with his alcoholic beverage as he replied, "Negative. Do you know, this is the first time in a week I've had time to have a drop of the true..."

The Vulcan refused an offer to join the good doctor in his nightcap, and tried to get McCoy to concentrate on the problem as Spock saw it. "It was illogical for him to bring these players

aboard," he tried again.

McCoy almost laughed in his face. "Illogical! Did you get a look at that little Juliet? Of course, your personal chemistry would prevent you from seeing that. Did it occur to you that he might simply *like* the girl?"

Spock ignored the slight on his Vulcan ancestry. He had heard plenty of Human and other species' jokes about Vulcan biology, since the Vulcan reproductive process was a well guarded secret. There was nothing wrong with his eyes, however, and he did not have to experience something to understand it in someone else.

"It occurred. I dismissed it," he said calmly, as the doctor snorted, half-heartedly trying not to laugh in his face.

When Spock's final attempt to interest McCoy in Kevin Riley's transfer was also a complete failure, the Vulcan decided that he had caught the doctor at an inopportune moment, and it would be best to attempt such a discussion at a more convenient time - preferably when the good doctor was less inebriated. Disheartened, and confirmed in his belief that the Human race, and the medical profession in particular, was totally illogical, Spock returned to his cabin.

While the Vulcan fought a second, personal battle between the need to protect Kirk from whatever was causing this irrational behaviour, and his own deep-rooted respect for privacy, McCoy was guiltily thinking over the recent sickbay conversation.

Spock, of all people, had come to seek his advice; instead of giving it he'd turned all the Vulcan's questions back at him and tried his best to ignore the man. Spock could be damned annoying at times, and was insufferably sure of himself as a rule. Yet he had been concerned enough to visit sickbay without a direct order from Kirk and without Starfleet forms signed in triplicate. And what had he, McCoy, done to encourage these first signs of Human behaviour in the man? He'd sat and nursed a drink - when he knew Spock abhorred alcohol - and he'd as near as dammit told the Vulcan to get lost. He hadn't given any real thought to what Spock had been saying, and he had to admit he'd been so busy with medicals recently that he hadn't paid much attention to the Captain's behaviour.

As a rule the Captain knew what he was doing, but if Spock was worried enough to seek his advice - and to come to sickbay to get it - then there must be something amiss. However he might laugh at Spock's logical view of life, particularly when the Vulcan applied it to others - as in the case of the Captain's illogical behaviour in bringing Lenore Karidian on board - when McCoy thought about it he knew that Kirk would never put a woman, any woman, before his lady the Enterprise. If Spock was right, then it was McCoy's duty as Chief medical Officer, as well as his obligation as the Captain's friend, to consider Kirk's welfare.

If it had been anyone but Spock he would have discussed with them the idea; but perhaps it was only someone like Spock, an outsider, an observer of Human behaviour, who would have noticed anything untoward in the Captain's behaviour. Vulcan eyes were almost as sharp as Vulcan ears, and when you were a Vulcan you must surely have a lot of time to observe, since you rarely participated in anything yourself.

McCoy sighed and resolved to keep both Kirk and Spock under

observation. Then he poured himself another drink.

Spock's honour and his concern for Kirk battled with each other all night, and he was grateful that as a Vulcan a single sleepless night would have little if any effect on his performance as First Officer and Science Officer.

Waiting for a quiet moment on the bridge he turned to the library computer and asked, "Full personal dossiers on the following names: Dr. Thomas Leighton; Anton Karidian; Lieutenant Kevin Riley; and..." Spock sighed audibly and paused for a telling moment before continuing "... Captain James T. Kirk." He fervently hoped his friend would understand his reasons for pursuing the matter.

The computer broke into his tangled thoughts. "Accomplished. Stand by," came its regulated tones.

Spock resumed full Vulcan control and turned his mind to problem solving, something for which his analytical approach was most appropriate. He addressed the computer again.

"Correlate. Check their past histories. Report any item, any past episode or experience, they all have in common."

The computer's "Affirmative" was just what Spock expected to hear. The information it finally divulged was just the opposite, and shook Spock to the core. The only conclusion he could reach was that Captain James T. Kirk was in very great danger - mortal danger - and the Captain seemed to be willingly courting death.

Spock cornered McCoy in the corridor and found that even when sober the Doctor seemed disinclined to listen to him.

"I appreciate whatever concern you may have for the ship's company, Spock," said McCoy, trying to put him off and walk away.

Spock would not be so easily deterred from the path he had chosen. "Then I will continue," he told the doctor firmly, falling into step beside him and ensuring that McCoy could not escape.

He proceeded to tell McCoy what he had discovered from the library computer. The colony on Tarsus IV, home for over 8,000 colonists, had found itself facing famine. The Governor, Kodos, had applied his own theories of eugenics and killed those he had chosen to die. Over 4,000 people had been killed, painlessly but without thought to splitting families. Sons had been forced to watch their fathers die, and mothers to watch their children being killed. Help, in the form of a ship bringing food supplies, had come earlier than expected, but not soon enough to prevent the deaths. Kodos' body had never been positively identified, although the official opinion was that he had died.

"What has Karidian to do with it?" asked McCoy, interested in spite of himself.

"His history begins almost to the day when Kodos disappeared," replied the Vulcan in his usual even tones.

"And you think Jim suspects he's Kodos?" queried the Doctor, disbelief still apparent in his voice.

"He'd better," said Spock, and although his tone remained even there was something sinister in the way he said it.

McCoy was forced to face the fact that the Vulcan was certain in his own mind at least, and more than a little ruffled to let some of his distress show in his voice. Spock obviously was sure that Karidian was Kodos.

More calmly, Spock went on to explain that there had been nine eye witnesses to the massacre on Tarsus IV who had survived, and who had seen Kodos. With the exception of the two Enterprise men, Jim Kirk and Kevin Riley, all the witnesses were now dead; and wherever they had been - on Earth, on a colony, or on a ship - the Karidian Company of Players had been somewhere near when they had died.

"Unbelievable!" exclaimed McCoy, not wishing to believe anything so horrible as what the Vulcan had described to him. The deaths on Tarsus IV, in an emergency situation, were bad enough, but the systematic killing of the remaining eye witnesses when there was no emergency was even worse.

McCoy didn't want to believe that anyone could do such a thing. As a basically caring person, no matter how cynical his view of the Human race, he did not want to accept what Spock told him.

The Vulcan had no such problem in believing the facts. He did not judge people, or races, in the same way as a Human. He merely went by facts, no matter how horrible they were. To him the facts were clear. The lives of the Enterprise men were at the centre of his concern. He could do nothing to change the past, but he intended to ensure that nothing untoward happened in the future.

But Spock was too late, and McCoy found himself reluctantly having to consider what Spock suggested as reality, when they were called to sickbay to see Kevin Riley. The diagnostic panels above Riley's bed wavered towards the lower end of the scales. The instability, and the low levels of the readings, showed the seriousness of the situation.

"You have got to pull him through," Spock said urgently.

McCoy looked worriedly at the unconscious man. "I'm not sure I can," he replied quietly, already feeling guilty for not taking Spock seriously.

"If he dies," said Spock, his voice so intense that McCoy felt his stomach muscles tightening in sympathy, "the only one who will be able to identify Kodos is the Captain, and he will be the next target."

The Vulcan abruptly turned on his heel and left sickbay. He knew he had already revealed more of his concern than he had intended.

Once in the seclusion of his own quarters away from prying eyes - and particularly away from the good doctor's all too close scrutiny - Spock set his mind to considering the best way of confronting the Captain with his knowledge. He could see no logic in the Captain's risking his life in this way. What had taken place on Tarsus IV was a tragedy, but it had happened 20 years ago, and nothing would bring back the dead. It was unnecessary for Kirk to

risk his life now for something he could not change - and with Kodos on board at the Captain's instigation, Kirk had obviously taken the risk knowingly.

Spock had observed Humans in general - and this Human in particular - long enough to know that any move he made would not be welcomed by Kirk. He had checked up on things the Captain would consider as personal, and Kirk would not appreciate that, no matter how honourable his reasons.

Yet he knew he had to warn Kirk of the danger. If he did not try to prevent the Captain from taking this unnecessary risk he would not be able to live with himself. Having made up his mind to face the Captain with the facts as he knew them, Spock headed for sickbay to get McCoy's report on Riley and complete his database.

As he walked into sickbay McCoy was completing the lab report indicating the presence of appreciable amounts of tetralubrasol in Riley's body.

"Someone tried to poison him," said Spock, breaking in on the doctor's recording.

"Tetralubrasol is a milky substance. Someone could have been careless, made a mistake," replied McCoy, who irrationally found himself feeling both irritated and antagonistic as soon as the Vulcan spoke.

Before Spock opened his mouth McCoy had been going to say that it was unlikely that the poisoning had been accidental, since tetralubrasol was a volatile lubricant, and one stored and used with care. The Enterprise was a well-run ship, and that kind of carelessness was unheard of among the crew. With Spock as First Officer, no-one would have dared to be that careless. In fact, with the exception of Kirk, McCoy was the only one with nerve enough to stand up to the Vulcan face to face; and Kirk had an advantage - he knew Spock would do anything he said. McCoy only managed to face down the Vulcan by losing his temper and sending out verbal abuse that Spock could not reply to without losing his Vulcan control, and so proving McCoy's barbs to be true. So in a way he guessed, like Kirk, that he knew himself to be pretty safe from retaliation. The thought didn't make him feel any better, and it didn't disperse his temper.

Spock interrupted the doctor's thoughts, getting straight to the point. *Damn the man! Why does he always have to be so direct - and so right?* thought McCoy viciously.

"I don't believe that. Neither do you," declared Spock, seeing through the doctor's bluster for what it was. "I want the Captain to see that report," he added without pause.

McCoy was still irritated by Spock's persistence. His anger was all the greater because he knew Spock was right. He did not want to lose face. "When I've finished looking at it..." he began.

"Now!" said Spock.

McCoy took one look at the Vulcan's face of stone and knew he'd pushed him too far this time.

"All right," said McCoy mildly, capitulating instantly in the knowledge that the Vulcan was right and had come to the end of his

tether.

The doctor avoided meeting Spock's eye, and so missed the raised eyebrow. Spock had not expected the doctor to back down so easily. He logged the incident away for future reference.

At Kirk's "Come!" Spock let McCoy precede him into the Captain's cabin and took up a position just inside the door. McCoy presented his report to Kirk.

"Will he make it?" asked Kirk, worried about Riley.

"He's got a good chance," replied McCoy, although the optimistic diagnosis came out rather grimly.

Spock's voice broke into the conversation for the first time, instantly capturing the attention of both men. "Can we predict the same for you, Captain?" he asked.

Kirk was not really surprised that his First Officer had seen through him. "All right, Mr. Spock, let's have it," he commanded.

Spock explained his theory that both Riley and Kirk had been eye-witnesses, and someone had now tried to kill Riley.

"It could have been an accident," said McCoy half-heartedly.

Spock exploded. He had had enough of the doctor's unwillingness to face facts, and this was Kirk's life at risk here. "You should be told the difference between empiricism and stubbornness, Doctor," he said emphatically. Then he summoned up all his courage and directed his next words at the Captain. "I checked with the library computer, just as you did. I got the same information," he admitted.

As Spock had predicted in his evaluation of his best course of action, Kirk was extremely annoyed at his move.

"Aren't you getting a little out of line, Mr. Spock? My personal business..." he began.

Spock, forewarned by his own assessment of the Captain's likely response, cut in smoothly. "Is my personal business when it might interfere with the smooth operation of this ship."

Spock knew that Kirk loved the Enterprise above even life itself, and hoped that by appealing to the safety of the ship, Kirk would see the folly of risking his life. Instead, the Captain became even more angry at the Vulcan's attempt at smoothing things over.

"You think that happened?" he demanded, outraged that Spock could even think he would endanger his ship.

Spock, sidestepping neatly, replied very quietly, "It could happen."

Kirk had got to the point where he didn't really think about what he was saying, or how it would hurt anyone else, and yelled at the stiff figure standing before him. "I don't like anyone meddling in my private affairs; not even my second in command!"

Even with the foreknowledge of Kirk's angry reaction, Spock was

deeply hurt by Kirk's comment. He was, after all, acting out of friendship and concern for Kirk's life rather than out of duty. His face became a mask of stone as he firmly squashed the feelings of hurt and betrayal that he knew, as a Vulcan, he should not be feeling at all. He hid his distress well, fooling Kirk completely. But not well enough to fool McCoy.

The doctor realised Spock had been hurt, and realised too that if Kirk went on he could unknowingly damage the fragile balance Spock maintained between his Vulcan and Human halves, and bury the latter deep within Vulcan control, where it had been before Kirk had taken over as Captain of the Enterprise.

He butted in, "Jim, Spock's simply trying..."

"I know what he's trying, and I don't like it," interrupted Kirk before McCoy could finish what he had been going to say.

McCoy was not prepared to let it drop. Too much was at stake here - Kirk's life, and Spock's wellbeing.

"It's his job, and you know it," said McCoy heatedly.

The three stood and stared at one another for a long minute, each lost in private thoughts. Kirk - seeing that his friends were both trying to help him, but not wishing to get them involved in something from his own past. Spock - concerned to help Kirk and almost overwhelmingly grateful to McCoy for interceding on his behalf. McCoy - embarrassed that he had openly supported Spock, and yet in a small corner of his mind ashamed that it had taken Kirk's outburst to let him do so.

Kirk finally continued, "And you also know that nothing is proven."

Spock, attempting to maintain something of his Vulcan demeanour, which had been battered first by Kirk's cutting remark and then by gratitude to the doctor, which was even harder to hide, replied, "Even in this corner of the galaxy, Captain, two plus two equals four." He continued relentlessly, "Almost certainly an attempt will be made to kill you. Why do you invite death?"

Kirk explained that he was not inviting death, but was interested in justice. McCoy wasn't so sure that it was justice and not vengeance that Kirk sought. The Captain had to admit that he was not sure himself. Nor was he sure that Karidian was in fact Kodos. Spock had declared his certainty, but the Captain did not find it as easy as the Vulcan to judge by the facts to hand. He had to be absolutely sure in his own mind before he would accuse anyone of being the Executioner.

Kirk needed time to think. Instinctively sensing this, Spock led McCoy out into the corridor, leaving the Captain alone with his thoughts. Once in the corridor Spock beat a hasty retreat towards his own quarters next Door. He didn't quite make it. McCoy followed him, and as the Vulcan pressed for entry to his quarters and his door swished open, McCoy slipped in behind him. Spock raised an eyebrow in enquiry, saying nothing. He didn't trust himself to speak.

McCoy sighed audibly before speaking. "You were right, Spock."

The Vulcan still said nothing. There was nothing for him to

say. He could not thank McCoy openly for helping him with the Captain, nor could he blame the doctor for not believing him earlier on such flimsy evidence.

As so often before McCoy had seen right through the Vulcan and realised how upset he really was, even if he could not show it.

"Don't take any notice of what Jim said about meddling in his private affairs. You just caught him off balance, and that's why he lashed out at you. Humans often say things they don't mean when they're angry or under stress."

Spock remained silent, his face a mask, hiding his surprise at McCoy's insight. His whole attention was centred on keeping his outward appearance of calm. After a tense moment Spock turned away towards his desk, unable to trust himself in front of the doctor.

For an instant McCoy found anger bubbling up within him at Spock's lack of reaction, making his face red with the rush of blood and twisting his features. Spock, even with his back turned, seemed to sense the doctor's anger and tensed as though to receive a blow. He did nothing to defend himself.

McCoy let out a long breath. He had forgotten how sensitive the Vulcan was to the feelings of others, even if the man would not admit to any of his own. Again he felt ashamed of his own reactions. Instead of shouting McCoy said very quietly, "Give him a while to cool down before you try talking to him."

Again McCoy's words showed a deep understanding of the Vulcan. Spock turned to acknowledge this, but was too late. McCoy had slipped out, and all he caught was the back view of the blue uniform as the doctor vanished between the closing doors.

The Vulcan stood and stared at those doors, his mind trying to assimilate his new knowledge of the doctor, but finding that it did not fit in with any previously observed forms of Human behaviour. The doctor was an enigma. Angry and uncooperative when Spock was being logical, pushing at his carefully raised barriers and laying him open to shame and confusion when he was trying to maintain control, and now, breaking him apart with understanding and support when he least expected it. Spock shook his head in dismissal and carefully picked up the pieces of his life and put them back into some semblance of order. He needed to meditate. Control was the only answer - at least at this point in time.

After meditating for some hours Spock determined to tackle the Captain again.

Kirk welcomed him with an apology that he acknowledged with an almost imperceptible nod before launching into his own logical, well prepared attack.

"Dr. Leighton was murdered while the Karidian Company was on Planet Q. Now an attempt has been made against Lt. Riley while the company is aboard the Enterprise."

Kirk wasn't prepared to accept those facts as proof of murder. "Dr. McCoy isn't sure..." he began to say in self defence.

The Captain broke off in mid-sentence as Spock's sensitive

Vulcan ears picked up a noise that didn't belong, a threatening noise he suddenly recognised.

"Phaser on overload," stated the Vulcan, with just a hint of fear - for the Captain. Even as he said it Spock turned to begin searching Kirk's quarters, knowing that if the phaser exploded it would take out the whole deck.

Kirk joined him in the desperate search, and then ordered the Vulcan to leave and seal off the deck, preventing anyone else being injured if there was an explosion. Reluctantly Spock left the Captain, duty and the danger to other lives making him leave the one place he wanted to be - by the Captain's side. Instead he ran into the corridor and ordered the crewmen he saw there to seal off sections C4 and C5.

Kirk continued his frantic search and suddenly spotted the phaser, held like a living thing, in the flashing red light of his cabin's alert indicator. With fingers thickened by fear he fiddled with the outer cover and finally yanked it off, giving himself access to the phaser. It was too late to turn off the weapon, and with the quick reactions that marked him as a leader of men he ran into the corridor and shoved the offensive weapon into the disposal chute, setting the dials for deep space disposal.

Spock, rushing back to be with his Captain, returned just in time to see Kirk move back from the disposal chute. Kirk gave the Vulcan a grateful smile that washed all Spock's hurts away, just before the two of them were thrown against the bulkhead by the shock waves of the deep space explosion. Kirk and the Enterprise were safe.

Unable to ignore the threat to his life - and more importantly, to his ship and his crew - Kirk moved immediately to face Karidian. He asked him to read the words Kodos had spoken when executing 4,000 colonists 20 years before. Spock had offered to analyse the voice patterns. Even though the comparisons showed a good match between Kodos and Karidian, Kirk was not positive. Machines were never totally trustworthy, and he needed to be absolutely sure.

A careless act on McCoy's part brought things to a head. Believing Lt. Riley to be still in bed, McCoy recorded his medical log, noting Kirk's suspicions that Karidian was Kodos. Unfortunately Riley overheard him, and determined to take action against the man responsible for the death of his parents, a death he had witnessed when little more than a child.

McCoy was about to leave to watch the Karidian Company's special performance of Hamlet when his doctor's instincts made him check on Riley one last time. He found him absent, and immediately alerted Kirk.

The Captain, also warned by Security that a phaser was missing, rushed to the rec room where Hamlet was to be performed. He managed to catch Riley before the young man did anything precipitate, and persuaded him to hand over the phaser and return to sickbay.

Kirk remained behind the scenes to confront Karidian, and was horrified to be a witness to a conversation between Karidian and his daughter, the beautiful Lenore. Lenore admitted that it was she who had killed the seven eye-witnesses, and vowed that she would now

complete the job by killing the last two on the Enterprise to protect her father from the past. Kodos - as that was now undoubtedly who he was - was even more shocked than Kirk, and yelled at her in despair, "My child, my child, what have you done?"

Lenore took charge of the situation and demanded that they be allowed to go through with their last performance before Kirk took any action against them. Once on stage, she grabbed the phaser and aimed it directly at Kirk. Kodos could not bear the thought of more killing, and pleaded with his daughter. It was to no avail. She was beyond words, in a world of dark plays and death that held reality only for her. Lenore tightened her grip on the phaser. The audience froze, lest they precipitate action, and were held paralysed in the knowledge that any action on their part would be too late for the Captain.

Kirk stared death in the face. He was grateful that he would die in space, among the stars, but regretted the things he had left undone, and especially the things he had left unsaid. Above all, he was overwhelmed with sadness that so beautiful a woman could be so destructive.

Time stood still. All were held motionless in the moment. Then Lenore's fingers closed on the firing mechanism. In the last seconds Kodos threw himself in front of Kirk, taking the full force of the phaser. Lenore screamed as her father fell dead at her feet. Madness was apparent in the depths of those blue, unseeing eyes.

Eons later, normality returned to the Enterprise. Lenore had been admitted to an institution for the insane, where she was progressing slowly, and the Karidian Company had disembarked at Benecia to continue their tour without their two star performers.

As the Enterprise prepared to break out of Benecia orbit McCoy came onto the bridge and moved to stand beside the Captain. Gently he asked,

"You really cared for her, Jim, didn't you?"

Kirk ignored the question and asked for warp factor one. The ship moved smoothly into warp drive, and Benecia shrank on the main viewscreen.

Silence was the only answer the doctor received, but for him it was enough. "That's an answer, Jim," he said, smiling understandingly.

Spock, sensing the Captain's mood, came to stand behind Kirk on the other side to the doctor. Both offered their non-verbal support.

Kirk's mind returned to his conversation with Lenore - it seemed so long ago - on the ship's observation deck, his favourite place. She had been intrigued by the power of his position as Captain. What had she called him? Caesar of the stars. That was it.

Kirk looked behind him at the stiff, slender figure of the Vulcan, and the slightly shorter figure of the doctor. She had been wrong. He was no Caesar - and was grateful for it. Caesar had been

betrayed by those about him. Locking eyes with the deep brown and smiling blue orbs above him, both centred on his face with deep-hidden concern, he smiled a gentle smile that lit up his own hazel eyes.

The Vulcan relaxed visibly at that, the half smile he reserved for his Captain playing gently around his mouth. The doctor's face broke into a wide grin, his relief obvious.

No, thought Kirk, he was no Caesar. He was luckier than any man had the right to be. He was Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship Enterprise, and he had very special friends and a caring crew who together made that the most satisfying position anyone could hope to achieve. For a single moment in time Captain Kirk was totally satisfied.

That feeling transmitted itself to the command crew, and the Enterprise left Benecia, Kodos, and the traumas of the last few weeks far behind as they headed optimistically towards their next mission, sharing their Captain's joy.

A NEW BEGINNING

by

Sandy Catchick

Spock blinked. He realised he must have been out for no more than a minute, yet that minute had cost him dearly. He knew without a doubt that he had lost his Vulcan mind disciplines, and they had not come back with returning consciousness.

Immediately he became aware of a more imminent danger. Captain Kirk was approaching him, solicitude and concern written all over his face. Spock tried desperately to get to his feet, but the attempt sent waves of pain shooting up his arm and into his already befuddled brain. Without his Vulcan mind techniques he could not control the pain, and he nearly passed out again. Only his need to appear normal to the approaching Captain kept him from crying out. His left wrist was broken; deliberately he pushed his arm out of sight behind his back, where it would not be noticed by Captain Kirk.

Kirk stared down at the fallen Vulcan for no more than five seconds before turning back to his Communications Officer, Lt. Uhura. "Get hold of sickbay, Lieutenant. I want a stretcher party up here immediately."

"No, Captain!" The words were almost shouted. Spock knew he would have to be careful, or Kirk would suspect that something was seriously wrong. The Vulcan never raised his voice when he was in control of himself, and Kirk had not heard him shout in the two months since he had come on board as Captain. It frightened Spock to think he was not in control of himself. It frightened him even more to realise that he felt frightened.

With a supreme effort he regained a measure of control. It was his Human half that came to his rescue, enabling him to function in spite of the mental damage. Stiffly, but in his normal uninflected voice, he added, "Physical damage is minimal, Captain. A stretcher is unnecessary."

Kirk nodded, misled and falsely reassured, as Spock intended. But only for a moment.

"Let me help you up," said Kirk, putting out a hand towards the Vulcan.

Spock recoiled instinctively. He was assaulted by a barrage of unaccustomed emotions. The physical pain from the weight he had thrown onto his broken wrist in his effort to escape Kirk's touch was nothing to the sense of rejection and hurt that emanated from the Captain at Spock's reaction. Spock found himself swamped by Kirk's emotions, and the immediate sense of loss and desolation he himself felt in the knowledge that he had hurt the Captain.

Kirk's whispered "I thought we were friends, Spock" tore the Vulcan apart, but he knew that without the mind disciplines Kirk's touch would open the Human to whatever Spock felt, and that included severe physical pain and mental agony that he did not wish the Human

to suffer. It was better that Kirk felt rejected than he should be damaged in any way. Spock cared too much for this particular Human to inflict his own pains on him.

Spock covered his own sense of loss as Kirk recovered his composure, withdrew the proffered hand and said in his best command voice, "Very well, Commander. But that was quite a surge of power from your station to throw you halfway across the bridge. I want you to report to sickbay. That's an order."

Spock nodded acquiescence. He did not dare reply in case his voice gave him away.

The Captain turned to Uhura and cancelled the request for a stretcher party, giving Spock the vital seconds he needed to regain his feet unobserved and unassisted. Had any of the bridge crew been looking they would have been shocked to see the usually graceful Vulcan pull himself jerkily to his feet with only the assistance of the navigation console, manoeuvring himself using only one hand. By the time their attention had returned to him the crew saw what they always saw, the tall, straight and silent First officer going about his duty.

Spock made it to the turbolift with his controlled image intact, but once in the safe haven of privacy offered by the firmly closed doors he let go and spent a few unobserved minutes leaning on the cold metal wall for support. His whole body shook with released tension as he relived the last few minutes of his life from the time his sensors had first picked up the severe ion storm to the power surge that had come through his science station.

That surge had entered his body with an impact great enough to hurl him halfway across the bridge, and it had entered his mind with a force strong enough to wipe out his mind disciplines completely. The extent of the mental damage he did not know, but he knew it was severe; a broken wrist, and the bruising to his back which he could now feel surfacing, was very minimal physical damage by comparison.

Even deprived of his mind techniques Spock was too Vulcan to waste time considering things he could not change. No amount of regret could turn back the clock to the time before the storm, a time when he had just begun to respond, even if diffidently, to the Captain's overtures of friendship. In Spock's mind that chance of friendship had been lost with his rejection of the Captain's helping hand. He did not know enough about Humans, in spite of years of living with them, to realise that such a hurt, when the reasons were understood, need not stand in the way of friendship.

He had never before let himself become involved enough with a Human to learn their ways of friendship. His time on board the Enterprise under Captain Christopher Pike had been spent in observation of his crewmates, but not in participation. Friendship needs to be experienced, not observed, and so Spock had little data to go on. His general observations had led him to believe that once the Captain felt hurt and rejected he would not attempt to repeat the experiment.

Without the Captain making the first moves, Spock knew he would not even have attempted to respond to the Human. He knew he could never initiate an approach to the Captain. He had already gone a lot further than he had ever thought possible in little ways like raising an eyebrow or standing behind the Captain's chair. They had never before actually spoken of friendship, and for that Spock was

grateful. It was a pity that the first time friendship was mentioned he had given a negative response.

With a sense of loss Spock turned inwards and hid behind his outwardly cold Vulcan mask. He gave the order for the turbolift to proceed to sickbay. He was, after all, still First Officer, and had been ordered to report there.

Spock was not the only casualty of the ion storm. The Enterprise had been buffeted from the front of her bridge to the tips of her engine nacelles. As a result there was a long queue of people lined up right through sickbay and stretching out into the corridor.

After five minutes waiting in the queue Spock knew he would never make it to the front of the line. Vulcans were touch telepaths, and their mental shields could normally keep out the emotions of others. Spock was now unable to raise his mental barriers, and although not in physical contact with the injured crewmen around him, he found himself assaulted by their pain, fear and confusion. He dreaded being touched by any of them, and in the close confines of the ever more crowded sickbay avoiding another's touch required endless vigilance. Spock was not fit enough to maintain such vigilance, and he knew it was only a matter of time before he lost the battle.

He was saved by the appearance of Nurse Christine Chapel. In his usual frame of mind Spock would have preferred to avoid the nurse, whose obvious concern for him he found disconcerting. On this occasion, however, it was with relief that he heard her say,

"Why, Mr, Spock, what are you doing waiting in the queue? Please come through to Dr. McCoy's office."

Spock followed her with alacrity. It was not his rank or position as First Officer that had prompted Nurse Chapel to call Spock into the Doctor's office, but the fact that she knew he was a Vulcan, and Vulcans were extremely private people. No Vulcan would relish queueing with a group of Humans, and certainly not when ill. Spock never visited sickbay, and she knew he must be ill to be there at all.

Spock's relief was short lived. Nurse Chapel took one look at the Vulcan under the bright lights of McCoy's office and knew there was something very wrong. Her observant nurse's eyes ranged from his pale, drawn face down to chest level, and finally came to rest on the broken wrist.

Spock's reaction was not quick enough to stop her reaching for his left arm as she said, "Mr. Spock, that needs immediate..." She never finished the sentence. As soon as her fingers touched his arm she found her mind overwhelmed by pain, and she collapsed to the floor in a deep faint.

Spock stared at her for a long moment, aware that it was he who had unavoidably caused her pain. He dared not touch her again, knowing it would only cause more hurt. However, he could not leave her on the floor. Logic dictated he call for help.

This time he was fortunate. As he moved back into sickbay his eyes met those of Lt. Kyle. The Transporter Chief knew his First

Officer well enough to be immediately aware that something was wrong - the Vulcan was obviously distressed, although only someone who knew him well would have realised that.

"What is it, sir?" Kyle asked immediately.

Spock was disturbed that Kyle knew something was wrong. He had not said anything, so he must be showing emotion. This was not, in fact, the case; Kyle was alerted by Spock's pale face and the sheer immobility of the Vulcan's features, a sure sign that something was wrong.

"I need your assistance, Mr. Kyle. Nurse Chapel has fainted," Spock said.

Kyle followed him into the office, wondering why the Vulcan had left Nurse Chapel on the floor. He stopped wondering when his eyes fell on the broken wrist.

"You could use some assistance yourself, Mr. Spock," said Kyle with concern in his voice.

Spock raised an eyebrow in response.

The Transporter Chief soon had Nurse Chapel on one of the examining tables and left saying, "I'll go and get Dr. McCoy to look at her."

Spock nodded agreement, although McCoy was the last person he wanted to see.

It was that thought that prompted Spock's next action. He felt he could stay in sickbay no longer, and decided to return to his quarters. He called after Kyle, "I shall be in my quarters should I be required."

Kyle's "Aye aye, sir" was a relief to Spock. He had now reported to sickbay, and had advised another crewmember of his whereabouts.

The Vulcan entered the sanctuary of his quarters, glad to be away from the prying eyes and volatile emotions of his Human shipmates. He had fulfilled his duty by reporting to sickbay. The Captain had not ordered him to do anything beyond report. He did not know what to do next. He dared not go back to the bridge, since he was both mentally and physically unfit for duty. To return to sickbay was intolerable. He could not relax, and found it too painful to lie on his bed, as his back was sore and bruised from being thrown across the bridge, and his wrist was an encumbrance.

Kneeling on the floor in a rather unnatural position, Spock attempted to meditate, although that instinctive method of release seemed beyond him. He was still in that position, attempting to reach the blanked parts of his mind, when the door of his quarters swished rudely open and Dr. McCoy stormed unceremoniously and unannounced into his cabin.

Anger was written in every line of the Doctor's tired face and in every movement of that purposeful, striding walk. The Doctor began a verbal assault on the kneeling Vulcan without even sparing him a glance. His thunderous voice was loud enough to damage Human, let alone sensitive Vulcan ears.

"Well, Mr. Spock, I don't know what you think you're playing at, but not even Captain Kirk would get away with the havoc you've caused me and my staff. What do you think you're up to, calling for a stretcher then cancelling it? The Captain ordered you to sickbay, but you just walk out and go to your quarters. If you're ill you should be in sickbay, and if you're fit you should be on the bridge. Why are you skulking down here? I couldn't believe my ears when Kyle told me you'd decided to go to your quarters. What gives you the right to decide to play truant?"

Without pause, and without really looking at the Vulcan wilting before that verbal and emotional attack on his already weakened person, the Doctor pursued his antagonistic tirade.

"And just what have you done to Nurse Chapel? By all accounts there was nothing wrong with her when she called you into the office, yet two minutes later she'd fainted. Why did you get Kyle to look after her? I knew you were unfeeling, but that's just downright callous, to leave her unconscious and traipse off on business of your own. You don't care who you hurt, do you, Spock?"

The Doctor continued, coming to the one thing that could really hurt the Vulcan. "And what about the Captain? What have you done to him? I had him on the intercom calling to see if you were okay. He said he'd ordered you to report to sickbay. He was worried about you, but I could tell it was something more than that - he was too damned upset, Spock, upset by something you'd said or done to him, and too stubborn to tell me what it was, although I asked. But that's not important to you, is it? I *knew* you'd end up hurting him; knew it ever since I came on board. Jim should have kept well away from you instead of trying to get through that thick Vulcan hide. He's too good a man..."

"Enough!" The one word was forced from the Vulcan, like water squeezed from a stone.

The Doctor was so surprised that he broke off in mid stride. Ever since he had come aboard the Enterprise he had tried to find a spark of Human feeling in the First Officer, who he knew to be half Human. He had tried joking, arguing, being sarcastic, being rude, and every other technique he could think of. Nothing penetrated that calm exterior or elicited any kind of response from this man. McCoy had concluded he was right - the Vulcan had no feelings. This premise led him to argue with the Captain, to persuade him to give up the attempt to break through to his First Officer. Knowing Kirk's hurts of the past, McCoy dreaded his trying to befriend a man who could not return that friendship, and who ultimately would let him down and hurt him yet again. He was not sure the Captain could take it, and saw it as his duty to protect him from such a possibility. If the Vulcan had no feelings, there was no way *he* could be hurt, so he did not come into the equation.

That one word "Enough!" was the first response McCoy had ever elicited from Spock, and it had carried a whole world of feeling behind it. McCoy was shocked as he repeated that thought to himself. He looked at the figure before him for the first time, admitting that he had not really seen the Vulcan at all, and had dismissed Kirk's worry that he might be hurt as more of the Captain's reading feelings into situations where none existed. After all, the Captain seemed to read pleasure, amusement and even disapproval on what McCoy could only describe as a face of stone. Where his Vulcan was concerned Kirk seemed capable of making up the responses he so desperately needed. Why should this time be any

different?

Now that McCoy looked at the First Officer - really looked at him - his medical instincts and his doctor's concern for any patient came into play. He realised that this time Kirk had been right. There was something wrong - very definitely wrong. The Vulcan's face was so pale that it looked almost white. Unaware that he had changed his voice and his approach completely McCoy asked very quietly, "What's wrong, Spock?" His earlier tirade was forgotten completely as he realised that the Vulcan was in trouble.

Spock did not find it so easy to forget the Doctor's tirade. He had never understood the Human ability to change moods so quickly. The Doctor had only confirmed Spock's worst fears that his own actions had deeply hurt the Captain. He did not answer the Doctor. He did not trust the change in tone, and believed it to be yet another trap the man had set to catch him out and make him break his Vulcan calm. This time he knew it would be all too easy.

McCoy watched him, waiting for an answer. Suddenly his eyes lit on Spock's wrist, where the broken bone, uncared for, had shifted and moved nearer the surface. The angle of the hand was totally unnatural, and physically impossible without the break. McCoy drew in his breath in concern, and moved immediately to immobilise the limb and prevent further damage.

Spock, recoiling instinctively as he had on the bridge, tried to throw himself out of McCoy's way, heedless of the wrist or anything beyond the need to keep out of the Doctor's reach. He was not quick enough.

McCoy grabbed Spock's left arm in both hands. As his fingers clamped around Spock's arm the Doctor's brain was filled with pain. Unlike Nurse Chapel he did not faint, but he let go as quickly as he would have dropped a burning hot poker. The reaction was as instinctive as Spock's recoiling from his touch.

But McCoy was an excellent Doctor. He analysed what had happened and realised that it was Spock's pain that he was feeling. As he tried to interpret that small insight into the Vulcan's mind, he realised that he had not only picked up on Spock's physical pain, but also on the thoughts behind it. Those thoughts were nothing like he had imagined. Spock was neither as cold nor as unfeeling as he made himself out to be. As that sank in McCoy realised how much he had wronged this man who now rested rigid and immobile, with bowed head, just out of his reach.

McCoy's contact had lasted only a few seconds, but he had received an impression of several things beyond the physical pain and mental agony the Vulcan was suffering. Despite those, Spock's concern had been for the Captain. McCoy had seen a mirror image of Kirk's hazel eyes, heavy with a sense of rejection as Spock had recoiled from the helping hand on the bridge. He had also seen how much it had cost the Vulcan to reject that helping hand, believing as he did that he was rejecting his only chance at friendship. Yet Spock had chosen to suffer himself rather than cause suffering to Kirk. That was something that could only be attributed to friendship - a friendship Jim Kirk needed desperately, yet which McCoy had believed was beyond the Vulcan's ability to give.

The Doctor realised just how wrong he had been, and how his

actions had hurt not only Jim Kirk, the man he had wanted to protect, but this man sitting before him, whom he had believed incapable of being hurt. Being a caring man, and unable to come to terms with his own actions in the past two months, McCoy began to weep. It was a soundless kind of crying, but one that shook him to the core.

The Vulcan, alerted by some sound inaudible to Human ears, looked up and stared at the trembling Human in confusion. He had tried to avoid McCoy's touch, as he had Nurse Chapel's in sickbay and Kirk's on the bridge, to prevent them from being hurt. He did not wish to harm any of them, even the Doctor.

After a long pause while Spock stared at McCoy, unable to analyse the jumble of emotions that assaulted him, the Vulcan spoke very quietly. "I did not mean to cause you pain."

McCoy raised a wet, tear-stained face towards the Vulcan. "Is that why you think I'm crying?"

Spock nodded. "Vulcans do not cry, Doctor. I can only assume that is why you are crying."

McCoy looked directly into Spock's pain-filled, dry eyes. "That's just it, Mr. Spock. That's why I'm crying. You don't understand, do you?"

The Vulcan could not make sense of this piece of illogic, and shook his head to indicate his lack of understanding.

McCoy sighed. "That's the trouble, Mr. Spock. You don't understand Humans - not very well, at least. As I surely don't understand Vulcans. The trouble is that I didn't realise how little I understood you. I'm crying because I didn't even try to understand that Vulcans don't cry - not even when they're hurt, as you're hurt now."

"That is not logical," said Spock.

McCoy didn't hear him, or chose to ignore the comment. He went on, "I was so sure that Vulcans have no feelings that I didn't stop to think you might be hiding them deliberately. I've spent half my life hiding my feelings so that I don't get hurt, or show how much I care, yet I never even considered that someone else might not want to show they care, and might be frightened of getting hurt. I'm sorry, Mr. Spock. I was so busy looking for Human feelings in you that I overlooked any display of Vulcan feelings."

"Vulcans do not display feelings," responded Spock, but the words were spoken too quickly, belying the statement.

"'Display' might have been the wrong word," said McCoy consideringly, "but I've just realised there's more than one way of showing feelings. You showed yours when you tried to protect Jim on the bridge."

Spock's breath was drawn in so quickly that the sharp sound was loud in the quiet cabin. McCoy stared at him, realising how little Spock understood Humans as the Vulcan said in a voice barely above a whisper,

"So - you have finally got your wish, Doctor. You have finally cracked what you would call my Vulcan shell and looked into my mind

and my heart."

That last word was almost inaudible, then the voice returned more strongly as Spock gave up hope of resistance and bowed to what he saw as the logic of the situation.

"Take what you will, Doctor. My mental barriers are gone. The ion storm has left me at your mercy. My thoughts are open to you."

Even at this stage Spock could not bring himself to say 'feelings' or 'emotions', only 'thoughts'; yet he knew it was his feelings and not his thoughts that made him vulnerable to the Doctor's probing.

McCoy found he could not take his eyes from the Vulcan's brown ones. Spock met his gaze directly, even though he believed the Doctor to be about to invade his mind, a thought far worse than death for a Vulcan. Spock thought McCoy was merely trying to draw out the torture when he asked,

"What exactly do you mean, your mental barriers are gone?"

Spock's voice was so low when he replied that McCoy found his stomach tightening in sympathy. "I have lost all the Vulcan mind disciplines. I cannot meditate, control pain, prevent other people's emotions from invading my mind, or even prevent you from reading my thoughts and ridiculing me, Doctor."

McCoy gasped at the implications of that last sentence, but Spock again misinterpreted his self-hatred.

"You are quite safe, Doctor. Although I could also read your mind, my Vulcan upbringing that you so despise prevents me from making any such attempt. It is so abhorrent to any Vulcan to enter another's mind without invitation that I would prefer to be ridiculed rather than commit such an action. You have nothing to lose. I am at your disposal." With that the Vulcan bowed his head again and remained as still as a statue.

McCoy was devastated. "Spock, you don't understand. I never meant to hurt you, not then and not now. I am really sorry. Don't you see, all this time I have been frightened that you would hurt Jim."

The Vulcan's head jerked up at that. McCoy added, "That's why I've been riding you so mercilessly, to show Jim that you had no feelings to reach, and he was wasting his time trying to be your friend. I was wrong, Spock. I hope you can forgive me. You have a lot to offer Jim, and I was too blind and too bigotted to see it. I never wanted to hurt you - I didn't even think I could. It was because I believed you couldn't be hurt that I thought you didn't care if you hurt others, particularly Jim."

Deep blue Human eyes met and held unfathomable brown Vulcan eyes. Spock broke the spell. "You were not wrong, Doctor. I have hurt the Captain. He believes I have rejected him, and I cannot explain otherwise. No Vulcan could. I cannot respond to the Captain as he would wish. I cannot share his laughter, or his tears."

McCoy, not only a good Doctor but a good psychologist when he wanted to be, broke in. His response was a good and reassuring one. "You're making the same mistake I made, Spock. You're looking

to yourself for a Human response to Jim's friendship. That's what I was looking for. We're both wrong. Only Jim is right. Do you know what he said when I told him he would get hurt if he tried to befriend you?"

Spock shook his head, taking the question literally where McCoy had posed it rhetorically. McCoy had to keep a tight rein on himself not to follow up this particular red herring. Instead he said, "Jim told me, 'You want him to behave as a Human friend would, Bones. But I don't. I don't like him because he's Human or because he's Vulcan; I like him because he's Spock, and I've come to respect all that that entails. He needs to be drawn out a little, I'm certain of that, but then I need to be held back a little, so together we will complement each other.' I only wish I'd listened to Jim then."

Spock was listening to the Doctor's words, but hearing Kirk's voice. Even second hand the Captain's words reached him and gave him the strength to ask in a rock steady voice, "What do you intend to do, Doctor?"

McCoy's answer was simple. "I intend to set that wrist. That's a collis fracture, one of the most common breaks there is, but it needs setting before any real damage is done. Then I'll see what I can do about recovering those Vulcan disciplines for you. It's about time I started acting as a Doctor."

Spock stared at him in disbelief. He, too, had underestimated and misunderstood the other's motives. Although it was even harder for the Vulcan he said, "Although I do not truly understand the Human concept, Doctor, I offer you an apology, for I have misunderstood you also."

"I accept," said McCoy immediately, sure at last that he had won the Vulcan's trust. "Let's go to Sickbay - I can do nothing here."

The Vulcan immediately clambered unsteadily to his feet, ready to follow. McCoy added, "There'll be no-one else there, Spock, so you've got nothing to worry about." It had suddenly dawned on him that Spock had probably left sickbay for his quarters because of all the people, and their emotions that must have seeped into his unprotected mind.

Spock did not reply, but followed the Doctor into the corridor.

McCoy was so sure of his personal victory that it threw him completely when Spock halted outside sickbay and calmly announced, "I regret I cannot come with you now, Doctor. I am needed on the bridge."

The Doctor stared at the Vulcan, utter disbelief written in every line of his face. He even spluttered before finally stammering out, "What kind of excuse is that? You don't even know what's going on up there. If you didn't believe me just now, why didn't you just say so? There's no point in inventing messages we both know you didn't receive just to cover up the fact that you don't trust me."

Spock's response, "In fact, Doctor, I do. Nevertheless, the Captain needs me now, if you will excuse me" took McCoy so much aback that he was too late to prevent Spock from walking around him and entering the turbolift. The Doctor was left swearing to himself

as the doors closed smoothly behind the Vulcan.

McCoy thought quickly and decided the only course open to him was to knock Spock out and then find out what was really wrong with him. He therefore entered sickbay to get a hypo and sedative, and was just closing the medicine cupboard when the intercom bleeped. Absently he answered, "Sickbay, McCoy here."

The Captain's voice, tense and urgent, came through immediately. "Bones, have you found Spock, and is he fit enough to come back on duty? I need him up here urgently."

McCoy's mouth dropped open in astonishment. "How on earth did he know?" he said to himself.

Kirk broke in. "What's that, Bones? I can't quite hear you."

McCoy took a deep breath. "He's already on his way, but..."

The circuit was broken before he could finish his warning that that Vulcan was not, however, fit for duty.

"Damn and double damn!" he added to himself before turning to the medical stores to select some different medication. Spock would need a broad spectrum booster now, but the Doctor didn't replace the sedative. His instincts told him that he might need that too.

Meanwhile the turbolift deposited Spock on the bridge. He had carefully composed his features, and had taken hold of his left arm behind his back to prevent anyone from seeing it.

Kirk was so relieved to see him on his feet that he didn't stop to consider if Spock was well, or even how he had come to the bridge so quickly. He assumed McCoy had released him. His first words, "It's good to have you back, Spock," warmed the Vulcan, who could sense the Captain's sincerity.

Kirk outlined his problem. Spock's computer station had been affected by the power surge caused by the ion storm, and although the computer was functioning in essential areas like life support, it seemed to be having problems calculating, and was taking an enormous amount of time to come up with the answers. They now needed to shut down the warp drive engines and go to impulse power in order to make some essential repairs, and as they were in an asteroid belt this would mean computing vital course changes quickly to avoid being hit by anything.

Kirk finished, "Although Sulu can do the mathematics, he can't compute the answers quickly enough, and I need him on the helm in order to make the course changes. Do you think you could compute the changes in your head and feed the headings to Sulu?"

Spock hesitated for a fraction of a second before nodding affirmatively. Kirk let out a sigh of relief and was on the intercom even before Spock had walked over to his sensors.

"Scotty," he said, "now Spock's back we can cope with being on impulse power. But make those repairs as quickly as you can - we'll be in danger the whole time the engines are shut down."

Scott's "Aye Captain. 'Tis necessary, or I wouldna' trouble

ye. We'll have the engines working again in under the hour," confirmed what Kirk already knew, that they could not afford not to shut down the engines.

He said quietly, "I know it's essential, Scotty, and I know you'll do your best. Keep me informed."

Scott broke the communication with another "Aye aye, sir."

Kirk turned back to Spock, to find the Vulcan bent over his hooded viewer. Spock had hidden his wrist in front of him by this time, and was already at work on the calculations by the time the ship had come down to impulse power. He relayed the first information to Chekov for the navigation computer, and then gave the details to Sulu for him to cope with the delicate helm changes.

After a few seconds Kirk walked over to stand behind Spock. There was nothing for him to do from a command point of view, and he was curious to see what the Vulcan was doing. Spock sensed Kirk's approach, and found himself concentrating on Kirk's emotions of worry for the ship and curiosity about the computations rather than his own calculations. He could not focus on the task in hand with Kirk near him. The contact between them was too strong. Lack of concentration in the present situation could prove fatal, and Spock found he had no choice but to act. In a voice as cold and hard as granite he steeled himself to say what he must.

"Captain, I cannot work with you behind me."

Kirk was surprised. Spock had never complained before, and Kirk wondered if he had done anything to upset the Vulcan. Perhaps that was why Spock had refused his help earlier. The bridge was not the best place for such a discussion, but he wanted to put matters right. He replied very gently, "Spock, I hope I haven't done anything to upset you. If I have, I'd like to know what it is."

Spock's eyes were haunted as he turned to face his Captain. "Please, Captain. It is nothing you have done. I need to be alone to concentrate."

Kirk did not believe Spock, and rightly so, for Spock was normally able to concentrate on more than one thing at a time. This ability had surprised his Captain on more than one occasion. Kirk launched into a response that Spock could not ignore. "Spock, you've never had any problems concentrating before. It must be something I've..." He trailed off as he noticed Spock flinch away from him as he leaned forward in his earnestness.

McCoy's voice, from the open turbolift door saved what was becoming an intolerable situation for Spock. "Jim, may I have a word with you, please? It's extremely urgent."

Kirk whirled at the voice, and seeing the Doctor's desperate signals to come over to him, nodded. He was surprised to hear Spock sigh with relief - a small sound, but nevertheless a sigh - when he walked away.

"What is it, Bones?" he asked. "Can't it wait? We're on impulse power until Scotty can overhaul the main engines, and we've got to be alert to avoid the asteroids in this sector."

McCoy's eyes grew even more serious, if that was possible.

"Is Spock doing the calculations?"

"Yes," said Kirk, "but he won't let me..."

McCoy stopped him before he said anything he might regret. "If Spock's doing the calculations, Jim, there's something you should know right now. I'd rather we discussed it off the bridge, however."

Kirk looked round. Spock was again giving information to Sulu, and it appeared that everything was under control. Could it be that he was the cause of the Vulcan's reactions? Kirk wondered to himself. He looked at the impatient McCoy, who was bouncing on the balls of his feet in his urgency.

"Okay, Bones," he said at last. "You've got five minutes - and it had better be good."

"That's all I need, Jim, and I promise you it'll be worth it."

The two of them stepped into the turbolift as Kirk threw over his shoulder, "Mr. Spock, you have the con." Being very Human, he couldn't help but add, "That is, if you can concentrate on both things at once."

A raised eyebrow was the only response he got.

Less than five minutes later Kirk was regretting that last remark. McCoy had outlined Spock's problem as far as he knew it. Finally Kirk said, "Why didn't he tell me, Bones? He must know I wanted to help him."

McCoy nodded wisely. "That's just it, Jim. It's because he knows that that he couldn't let you. Because you mean so much to him you are the person who can hurt him most - that's why I had to get you off the bridge before you both said things you'd regret. The nearer you are to him the more he feels what you feel. When I came out of the turbolift I could see him struggling to do your calculations while all the time he wanted to reassure you. It must have taken a lot of courage to tell you to go away when that's the opposite of what he really wanted. Until today I'd never have believed it, but there's only one reason he could be acting like he is, and that's because he considers you his friend."

Kirk was astounded. This was the reverse of what he had believed since Spock had turned down his helping hand after the accident. He wondered if he would ever understand the Vulcan properly. Yet he knew that McCoy was right - friendship could be the only reason for Spock's actions. No doubt the Vulcan would be thinking up a logical reason as soon as he got his full logic circuits working again.

He should have realised that something was wrong. He should never have asked Spock to do the calculations - they could have managed with Sulu. Even as he thought that he knew it was not so. No-one aboard the Enterprise could calculate as quickly as Spock. The man was a genius. The ship would be in extreme danger if any of those calculations were inaccurate. That thought prompted another question.

"Bones, will he be okay? I mean, can he cope with the

calculations while under all that stress?"

McCoy looked a little worried himself. "I don't know, Jim. What did he tell you when you asked him? After all, he knows his own physiology better than anyone."

Kirk thought back to the moment Spock had appeared on the bridge. "I guess he hesitated a bit, but he said he could do it."

"In that case, I'm sure he can. What he *can't* do is cope with you - or any of the others, for that matter - at the same time. I'll give him a shot to help him through. I'm sure he'll be fine, but I'd like to stay on the bridge just in case."

Kirk nodded. "Let's get back up there, then. He'll be wondering what's happened otherwise, and I guess that will be a strain, too."

The two of them returned to a bridge that was perfectly calm and orderly. It was as though there was nothing wrong with the Enterprise, and the ship was not being navigated on brain power and impulse power alone. Spock looked over at them as soon as the lift doors swished open, and he nodded with his usual, "Captain," signifying that Kirk had command again.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock," Kirk said as normally as he could. "Carry on."

Spock nodded again, and this time Kirk could see the relief in the relaxation of his back muscles, although his features didn't change at all.

McCoy moved over to the science station and produced his hypo. Spock raised an eyebrow in surprise, but didn't complain when the instrument hissed against his arm. McCoy withdrew immediately, but not before Spock had felt his genuine concern. The Vulcan said very softly, "Thank you, Doctor."

McCoy knew the thanks were not for the injection but for his talk with the Captain. He didn't know how to respond, and so nodded. He was surprised to see a light in the Vulcan's dark eyes in response. He wondered if it was because Spock was not in full control, or whether it was something he'd never seen before because he'd never really looked. He knew he would look more carefully for any response from the Vulcan in future.

Half an hour later the effects of the stimulant were wearing off, and Spock found himself having to work harder and harder to maintain the concentration necessary to keep the ship safe. The quiet exchanges between Spock and Sulu had echoed across the background hum from the consoles; otherwise the bridge had remained silent. Kirk had resumed his place in the command chair, and McCoy had taken up residence next to Uhura. No-one had approached Spock, and he was aware that this was deliberate, although only Kirk and McCoy knew what was wrong.

Finally Spock knew he would have to say something, for he could not endanger the ship knowingly.

"Doctor, if you have another stimulant I would welcome it," he said into the stillness.

Several pairs of eyes swivelled round to him, and in his weakened state he felt the contact like a physical blow. He sat down, purely because his legs would no longer hold him. McCoy was instantly at his side with a second broad spectrum injection, and Kirk eased the sudden tension on the bridge by saying,

"As you were. Mr. Spock is fine. He's just under a lot of strain with these calculations, and it will help him if you concentrate on your own jobs and allow him to handle his."

Spock felt the immediate relief of the second stimulant, but even above that was the relief of no longer being the centre of attention. McCoy, being so close to him, only now began to realise how much the attitude of the crew was affecting the Vulcan, and how close he was to succumbing to the invasion of emotions.

He went back to his place next to Uhura, and with her permission accessed his sickbay computer from her station. She was surprised to see the diagram of a Vulcan brain appear on her screen, but at his silent warning she pretended not to notice and concentrated as hard as she could on her communications board.

McCoy worked hard at the computer terminal, and became so absorbed in what he was doing that he forgot about the passing of time. The Vulcan brain was more complex than the Human, and he became absorbed in his research. However, he did not lose track of his purpose, and was consumed with excitement when he finally tracked down that he believed to be the likely cause of Spock's trouble. He had found a point in the neural circuits of the brain where an excessive charge of electricity could have caused the equivalent of a fuse burning out, and contact between one part of the brain and another could be easily broken. If his theory was correct, then all he had to do was rejoin the broken circuit and Spock would have access to the whole of his brain again. He was sure that he had the right answer, as the part of the brain that would be unreachable appeared to be the part housing the mind techniques. It seemed incredible that such a small section should carry such vital information, but it was not unprecedented. McCoy was all set to run some brain scans on the Vulcan to see if he was correct, just as soon as he could get him off the bridge.

Only Uhura noticed the build up of tension in the Doctor as he turned his attention back to the present time. She had lost interest in his research very quickly, and was pleased to see him reappear from the depths of his concentration.

Time had passed more swiftly than McCoy realised, and he turned to hear Scott announce, "I'll have the warp drive back on line in five minutes, Captain."

Kirk began to grin, but as the smile spread across his face, turning it from that of a serious Starship Captain to that of a small, naughty boy, Spock's voice broke in and spoiled the transformation. The smile never reached its potential, and faded completely as Kirk heard the Vulcan's words.

"Mr. Sulu, prepare for evasive manoeuvre E. Captain, I recommend we prepare for collision."

Kirk took the Vulcan at his word. "All decks - red alert. Prepare for collision. This is not a drill. Damage parties to their stations. Repeat. Prepare for collision. This is not a drill." The Captain's voice had hardly finished resounding around

the ship when he looked back at Spock. He didn't need to ask the question.

The Vulcan turned calm eyes to his Captain and said without inflection, "Captain, there is a series of asteroids ahead of us. With evasive manoeuvre E Mr. Sulu should be able to keep us out of the worst of it. However, the odds against us getting through on impulse power without some contact are approximately 75.4..."

Kirk forestalled the remainder of the lecture. "Thank you, Mr. Spock, I think you've made your point." He turned back to the intercom. "This is the Captain speaking. As you know, we are on impulse power only. It is unlikely that we will make it through the final part of this asteroid belt without being damaged in some way. Be prepared. Take care. Kirk out."

He had hardly finished his personal message to the crew when Sulu threw the ship into the evasive manoeuvres. Kirk clung on to the arms of his chair and was glad of the support. Around him crew members clung to the nearest piece of equipment. Chekov yelped as his neck was caught in a backlash of movement.

One handed, Spock clung to his console with deliberate determination. He seemed to be riding out the worst of it when suddenly the ship was caught in a cross-wave between asteroids. It was not a hit, for the screens held and there was no damage to the exterior of the ship. Inside, however, the damage was almost as severe as that from a collision. The Enterprise was stopped in its tracks, something that required immense force, even at impulse power; then as suddenly it was buffeted to the side before continuing its forward momentum. Sulu did well to hold the ship under control, although he could do nothing about the random movements.

The motion was too much for Spock. He lost his precarious hold on the science console and was thrown across the bridge for the second time in less than a day. With a resounding thud his head made contact with the navigation console, and he blacked out completely. He did not feel his body roll away to become entangled in some loose equipment at the far side of the bridge beneath the main viewscreen.

Spock was not alone in suffering from the buffeting. Uhura too lost her hold, and was only saved from disaster by a last-minute dive by McCoy, who grabbed hold of her. It might not have been a gentlemanly grab, but it was all that saved her from a similar fate to Spock's.

Not surprisingly, Kirk was the first to notice the Vulcan's absence. As soon as the worst of the concussion was over and he had regained enough control of his body to move without holding on, he turned, as had now become a habit with him, to seek the reassurance of a glance from his First Officer. Instead of being met by an understanding, calm gaze, or even by a reassuring glimpse of a blue-clad figure hunched over his computer, his eyes met nothing but equipment. Kirk's yell of "Spock!" was not exactly in the cool, controlled voice of a Starship commander, and its force brought the bridge to a standstill.

McCoy was the next to react. "Damn, how could I have forgotten! He's got a broken wrist, Jim - he's unlikely to have been able to hold on through that shake-up."

Kirk's glance at the Doctor did nothing to relieve McCoy's already surfacing feelings of guilt. How could he have forgotten a broken wrist? he wondered. He did not excuse himself with the fact that he had been concentrating on the far more important subject of Spock's brain. To McCoy it was unforgivable to forget *anything* about the welfare of a patient. Spock had been so quiet about it that he had forgotten completely, and that went against the grain for the Doctor.

Now his eyes searched frantically across the bridge. It was he who spotted the little piece of blue shirt protruding from the general brown and grey of damaged circuitry. He was across the bridge in a few bounds that would have done credit to a much younger man. Kirk was already on the intercom calling for a medi-trolley, and McCoy didn't cancel the order; however, when the medics arrived McCoy shooed them away and personally lifted the none-too-light Vulcan onto the trolley.

Kirk reached across to settle Spock's still form more comfortably, but was stopped by a "No, Jim!" from McCoy that was as strong as any protest the Vulcan himself might have made. Kirk looked hurt, and McCoy felt as Spock had felt just a few hours before.

However, McCoy was not as reticent as the Vulcan, and spoke up immediately to put things straight.

"Right now you'll hurt him more if you touch him, Jim. He's still suffering from that first shock, and I think he'd prefer it if none of us knew what he's feeling. While he's unconscious it's not too bad for me, but he's more vulnerable than ever, and you're too close to him to help him. I've got an idea how to help him, and I'll let you know as soon as I've operated."

Kirk stared at the Doctor. "Operated?" he queried in a worried voice. "Why did you let him back up on the bridge if he wasn't okay?"

McCoy sighed. "I didn't, Jim. He sensed that you needed him even before you put your message through to me. He was halfway to the bridge before I could stop him. All he said was, 'The Captain needs me,' and he was gone. I thought he'd made it all up until you came through. I was getting a hypo to knock him out so that I could drag him back down to sickbay when you called. Once I got up here it was a bit late to do anything but help him through. I don't think he'd have let me do much else. He cares for this ship as much as you do, Jim, and he cares about you. The only stupid thing I did was forget about the wrist. But then I couldn't set it while he was conscious, and he'd hardly let me knock him out while he was working on those calculations, would he? Stop worrying, Jim. I think I've got the answer, and I'll call you when I'm through."

With that McCoy wheeled Spock into the turbolift and was gone before Kirk had time to reply.

Sickbay was filled with crewmembers who had damaged themselves in one way or another while the ship was being thrown all over the place, but no-one was seriously injured. A broken leg was the worst McCoy could see. Orderlies came running over to him as soon as he appeared, but he shooed them away again and wheeled Spock into a private ward, transferred him to the examination table, and set up a

scan.

The scanning took some time - it was a tricky business analysing a brain of any kind. However, the results were encouraging, as there was a definite break in the brain connections. The problem now was how to put things right.

McCoy was not sure how best to proceed, so he turned his attention to the now glaringly obvious broken wrist, still feeling guilty about it. While Spock remained unconscious he had no real problem in touching him. He could still feel a residual amount of pain, but it was not active and burning. However, he could tell that it would take very little to push forward and reach that pain, and the feelings the Vulcan kept hidden. It took quite an effort to restrain himself from doing so out of medical interest, let alone his personal curiosity to find out what the Vulcan really felt. He knew, however, that he could not betray such a trust and live with himself, so he concentrated very carefully on setting the wrist and thinking about nothing beyond that.

Thus it was that he turned to the laser to repair the break, and as with many ideas the solution to his problem surfaced unbidden. What he needed was a miniature laser to operate on Spock's brain. It would be a tricky operation, but it could work.

Having set the wrist, McCoy turned to the intercom and called engineering. Lieutenant-Commander Montgomery Scott wanted to know what McCoy wanted a laser for, but when he found out he could not be more helpful. McCoy was surprised - he hadn't thought Spock would cause that reaction in a Human. He certainly hadn't come over to McCoy as friendly, but then McCoy was beginning to think that perhaps he hadn't given him a chance.

McCoy found this was one itch he had to scratch. He asked Scott whether it was the fact that he would be helping another crewmember, or a commanding officer, or the fact that it was Spock in particular that made him so keen to help that he would deal with the matter personally.

Scott didn't need a moment to think about it. "Mr. Spock's a rare man, Doctor. He might not say much, but he's always there when ye need him, and he's always willing to help. Many's the time he's solved a technical problem for me, and he doesna' ask anything in return. Fact is, he doesna' even understand the concept of being thanked, and will take nae credit for anything. I guess I'd try to help anyone who was ill, but for Mr. Spock I'd go to hell and back. Mind ye, I'd no' ask him to share a wee dram with me, ye understand. It would just be wasted."

McCoy had to laugh. "I guess you're right, Scotty. If you can come up with what I want you'll be pretty good at solving technical problems yourself."

The Chief Engineer's face broke into a broad grin. "'Twill be easy," he said as he signed off.

Half an hour later Mr. Scott had produced a very special laser and came to deliver it personally to Dr. McCoy. He looked at the pale form of the Vulcan with sad eyes. "The laddie looks pretty bad, Doctor. If there's anything else I can do, please just ask."

McCoy took the Engineer at his word, and the two of them were soon busy setting up the laser according to the parameters on McCoy's computer screen. The Engineer kept the instrument steady for McCoy, and together they worked in complete concentration for nearly half an hour. At the end of that time McCoy was satisfied that they had managed to pinpoint the right spot, and the actual fusion took only seconds. There was no apparent change in the diagnostic panel above the bed, where the readings were all well below Vulcan norm. This did not worry McCoy unduly, since he was sure that Spock was suffering from more than one problem, and curing the brain overload would only allow recovery to take place - it would not speed things up.

Scott, not understanding exactly what was wrong, looked rather disappointed. "Did it work?" he asked in a hushed voice.

McCoy shrugged. The gesture was so difficult to make that he realised that he himself was suffering from exhaustion.

Scott, without benefit of telepathy, read the Doctor's thoughts. "Aye, ye'd better get some rest yourself, or you'll no' be fit to look after your patient when he does come round."

It was good advice. McCoy had only one more duty to perform before he heeded it. He showed Scott out and then turned to the intercom.

He knew from the immediacy of the response that Kirk had been waiting by the intercom for hours for just this moment. Kirk didn't need to ask the question that was written all over his face.

McCoy answered the unspoken question. "I just don't know, Jim. I've operated, and I think I've repaired the damage, but he's suffering from exhaustion and shock, and it will be some time before I can tell if I was successful."

It was not what Kirk wanted to hear, but he too could read the haggard expression on McCoy's face. "Thanks for being honest, Bones," he said. "You look pretty exhausted yourself. I'm about to come off duty now, so I'll come down and keep an eye on him while you get some rest."

McCoy was surprised. "You don't have to do that, Jim," he said.

Kirk smiled. It was a tired and worried smile, but McCoy was grateful that he was still able to make that gesture. "I know I don't have to, but I want to. Now we're back on full power there's nothing to keep my attention up here, and there was no severe damage to the ship or the rest of the crew."

McCoy hadn't even noticed that they were back in warp drive. Not that you could feel the movement through space, but he should have been able to feel the return to normal, quiet, steady operation. It showed how tired he was that he had not noticed it. For that matter he guessed that Scott would not have been able to help him with Spock if they had still had problems with the engines. He hadn't thought of that when he contacted the Chief Engineer. He must be getting old, he thought.

Tiredly he replied, "I'll see you in a minute then, Jim," and signed off.

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Kirk frowned as he entered the private ward. The readings on the diagnostic panel were very low, and the Vulcan lay immobile and almost lifeless on the bed. The subdued lighting made it look as though he might be sleeping, but when Kirk commented on it McCoy advised him that it was to protect the Vulcan's eyes and brain should he regain consciousness.

The Captain was horrified at the thought that crossed his mind, and had to ask.

"Do you mean he might *not* regain consciousness, Bones?" he asked. There was desperation and fear in the question.

McCoy wished he could be comforting, but he would not tell a lie. "He means a lot to you, Jim, doesn't he?" he asked. At Kirk's nod he added, "I've come to realise he means a lot to quite a few people. It seems I've been the one living in the dark all this time. If he pulls through I'd like to try again. I think from what I've seen today he could come to mean a lot to me, too."

Kirk was surprised. He didn't know what had transpired between the two of them, but whatever it was it had changed them both, and for the better. He didn't ask McCoy to explain, just put out a gentle hand and touched the Doctor on the shoulder. McCoy smiled shyly in response before turning abruptly on his heel and heading for the door.

Kirk took up a vigil by the bed. It was to be the first of many such vigils in a long and close friendship. He had not realised until this moment just how much the Vulcan had come to mean to him. It is only when a loss is imminent that it becomes a reality, and Kirk's sense of possible loss heightened his awareness of just what he would be losing. Without conscious thought he put his head in his hands and whispered, "Spock? Spock, fight back. Don't leave me now - not when I'm just getting to know you."

He could not believe it when a voice in his mind whispered,
/Jim./

Startled, his eyes sprang open. He wondered if he had been hallucinating, for there was no movement from the bed, and the Vulcan's eyes were still tightly shut. Spock had never called him Jim, and that thought flashed across his mind, only to be answered by the same quiet voice.

/I have not called you Jim out loud, Captain, but I wished you to know how I... believed... while I could still tell you. Now that there is no pain you may touch me./

Kirk put out a hesitant hand and reached for the Vulcan's. As the two touched Kirk said, "Spock?", but he was not sure if he spoke aloud or only in his mind.

The voice that answered, */Here, Jim/* was definitely in his mind. There was no pain, but there was feeling - deep feeling.

Kirk whispered, "Spock!" again as the Vulcan drew back from the touch, but not before the Captain realised just how much he had come to mean to the Vulcan.

As he looked up his eyes caught the diagnostic panel, and he realised that the indicators had risen. He clasped Spock's hand tighter, and pleaded silently for the Vulcan to use his strength to

help him recover.

In his mind a voice said, */I have already done so./*

Kirk became worried as the indicators dropped again, but this time they were evenly distributed, and not quite as low as they had been. He called McCoy on the intercom.

"Bones, could you come in, please."

The Doctor had been roused from a deep sleep, but he made it to sickbay in record time. He looked at the panel readings, and then back at the Captain.

"I don't know what's happened, Jim, but he's gone into a healing trance. That's why the readings are low."

"Is that good?" asked Kirk, still worried.

"Good?" bellowed McCoy. "Of course it's good, Jim! It means he's got his Vulcan mind techniques back. It means he'll make it!"

They both grinned and slapped each other on the back, and then grinned more broadly still when Kirk said, "It's a good thing Spock wasn't awake to see that, or he'd call us both illogical."

McCoy finally sobered with the thought, "Hang on a minute, Jim. From what I read he can hear what we say while he's in a healing trance. He can't respond, but he can hear."

Kirk's, "Well, I'll be damned!" led them into another bout of laughter, and they both had streaming eyes and severe stitches before they could stop. It was such a relief to know that Spock was going to be okay.

McCoy packed the Captain off to his quarters with instructions to take two red pills and get some sleep. Kirk made a face, but knowing that he needed the sleep he accepted the pills and left sickbay with a wide yawn that raised a grin from McCoy.

The Doctor took up the vigil by Spock's bed, having read that the Vulcan would need someone to wake him from his trance. Nothing happened for several hours, and McCoy too dozed off to sleep.

When Spock finally began to regain consciousness his head began to thrash about, and the sound woke the Doctor instantly. As prescribed, he slapped the Vulcan hard across the face several times to bring him back to full consciousness. He was taken by surprise when the inflectionless voice he was used to said quite clearly, "That is sufficient, Doctor. I am now fully recovered."

The normality of the statement, when the Vulcan had been so ill, annoyed McCoy for no reason that he could pin down. Instead of using his bedside manner, he was galvanised into responding antagonistically to the Vulcan, as he had done since he had come on board.

"You may be back to your cool Vulcan self, Spock, but you are hardly fully recovered. That wrist is going to take several days to set, and no-one but me decides who is or is not recovered. Is that clear?"

He became worried when Spock made no reply at all but just

looked at him from those dark, unfathomable eyes. *Damn the man, and damn myself!* he thought. Just when he'd begun to understand the Vulcan he'd found himself pushed back into his usual fighting stance.

With sudden realisation McCoy knew that unless he made the first move now he would never get back that understanding they had formed in Spock's quarters. Unaccountably he found himself desperately wanting to get back to that level of understanding. As he continued to lock gazes with the rigid form on the bed that thought started him crying, and silent tears fell unheeded down his face.

Spock was amazed. Behind the wall of his own making, with his barriers functioning perfectly, he had steeled himself not to react to the Doctor's jibes. He believed McCoy had responded to him before only because he was ill, and it was the Doctor's duty to cure the sick. As he watched the silent tears he began to realise that McCoy had not gone back completely to the time before. He would never have allowed himself to weep in front of an enemy. With that thought Spock realised, too, that the Doctor had responded not with enmity but with the same facade Spock used himself to cover his deepest hurts.

As they continued to lock gazes McCoy suddenly noticed a change in the brown eyes. From being dark and unfathomable they suddenly seemed to melt and look at him with sympathy. As that registered he said just the one word. "Spock?" It was a question.

The Vulcan understood. After a moment of silence while he gathered his thoughts and sought for a way to express himself he said very quietly, "It did happen, Doctor. My memory is intact, but I am still a Vulcan."

McCoy realised what Spock meant. The Vulcan had not forgotten their conversation, and did not hold a grudge, but he was still a Vulcan and not prepared to show his feelings. Well, McCoy thought to himself, he couldn't really complain about that.

After collecting his thoughts he replied, "Well, Mr. Spock, I'm still Human, and I'm still just an old country doctor. Let's just forget the past and start again from right now. It will be a new beginning." So saying he held out his hand to the Vulcan.

Spock considered for a moment, and McCoy wondered if he would reject the gesture, as he did not like physical contact. But Spock responded by reaching out in the Vulcan gesture of greeting. Their hands met and their eyes held for a moment before McCoy said gruffly, to hide his own emotions, "Well, I'd better get the Captain, then. He'll want to know that you're back to normal - for a Vulcan, at least."

Spock understood that it was meant as a joke and responded, "Indeed, the Captain will no doubt wish to know that his First Officer is recovered."

When Kirk arrived McCoy moved towards the door to give them some privacy. Spock's voice halted him in mid stride.

"I should like you to remain a moment, Doctor, for what I have to say is for you and the Captain."

They both stared at him and he continued, "My mind techniques

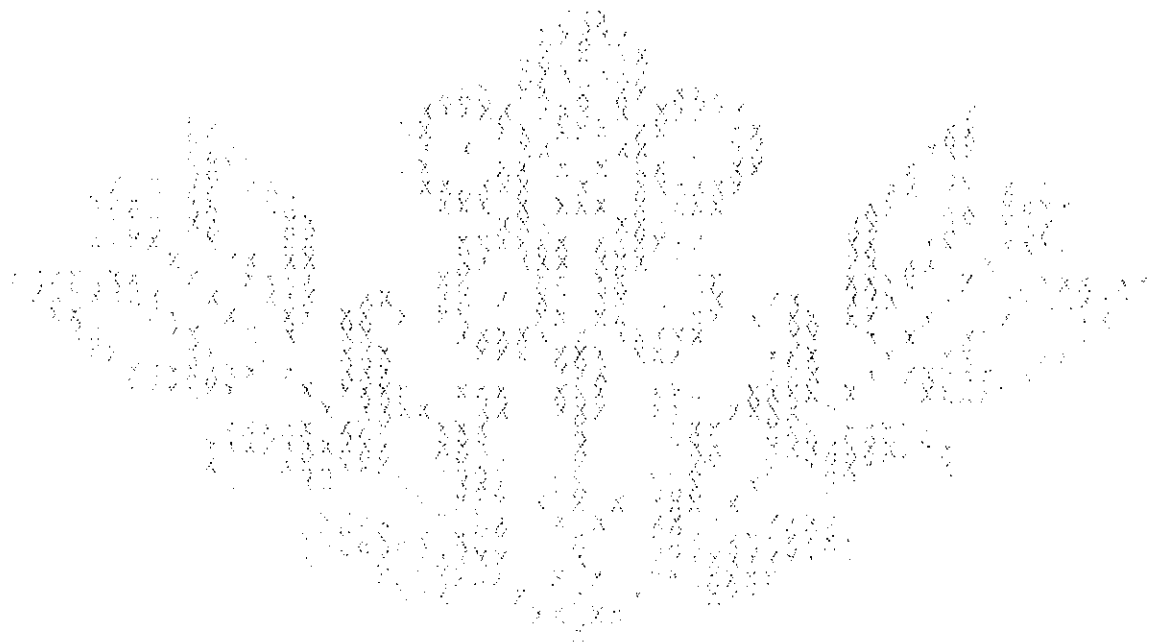
are fully operational now, and I cannot discuss the time when I was without them. I wish you both to know that I have learned from the experience, and will attempt to take into account the feelings of the Humans around me in future."

It was a big concession, and both men realised that Spock was attempting to lower his barriers - at least a little. From the tenseness of his muscles they knew it had been a real effort for him to admit even so much.

Captain Kirk stepped in to seal the bond between the three of them. "Spock, Bones, thank you both. Now I know that not only is the Enterprise the best ship in the Fleet, but her senior officers are going to form the closest partnership in the history of a Starship."

So saying he turned and walked quickly from sickbay, but not before the Doctor and the Vulcan saw the joyous expression and unshed tears mingling in those hazel eyes. McCoy shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and Spock suddenly gained an interest in the sickbay ceiling. Neither looked at the other, and finally McCoy too turned and left. Spock, surprised yet again by Human behaviour, could hear his happy whistle as he retreated back to his office.

Left alone in sickbay, the Vulcan considered everything that had happened and silently thanked a certain ion storm for opening the way for a new beginning.



UNDERCOVER OPERATION

by

Sandy Catchick

The silver form of the Starship Enterprise flew majestically through space, fast, silent, and above all graceful. Captain Kirk had been ordered to spend three weeks on the planet Thassus as a goodwill gesture. Starfleet insisted that the presence of a Starship Captain at the commissioning ceremonies sealing a new friendship treaty with the Thassians was essential. The Enterprise had been the nearest Starship. Despite his protests, Kirk had landed the job.

The Enterprise herself had not been needed, and had headed out into space on routine duties as soon as the Captain had beamed down. Her presence, it was felt, could have been misconstrued as a threat or lever on the Thassian government. Now the Enterprise was returning to pick up her Captain, and to do something useful.

The Acting Captain, Commander Spock, was looking forward to Kirk's return more than most. Being half Vulcan, Spock was not able to express his pleasure at the thought of the Captain's return, but those who knew him well knew that the Captain and his First Officer were inseparable. As different as chalk and cheese, they nevertheless formed a close and formidable partnership. Each complemented the other, and the sum of the whole was greater than the individual parts. In the case of Kirk and Spock, the individual parts were quite formidable in their own right, so the partnership itself was outstanding, and becoming recognised as such throughout the galaxy.

Lt. Uhura broke the peace and quiet of the Enterprise's bridge only ten minutes into first watch. "Message coming in from Starfleet on priority channel, Mr. Spock," she said.

Uhura was the Enterprise's Communications Officer. Neither she, a Bantu, nor the Vulcan Spock could be described as in any way emotional, yet the message brought a palpable tension to the bridge. Spock's calm voice asked Uhura to put the message on the main viewscreen.

The grey-haired Admiral Komack appeared on the screen. His face gave nothing away, yet he began to speak immediately, ignoring the customary formalities.

Spock was not one for idle chatter, and did not notice the omission. The remainder of the bridge crew took the lack of formalities as a sign that something important was about to happen.

The Admiral's voice was clipped. "Commander Spock, I have an urgent job for which I need a volunteer from the Enterprise. There is not time to pick up Captain Kirk at Thassus. You will divert immediately to Quadrant 5 at maximum warp speed. I have fed coded instructions into the computer for your personal inspection, and will contact you in one hour to learn the name of your volunteer. Please set course for Quadrant 5 immediately. Komack out."

Even before the screen went dead Chekov had the new course laid in and Sulu had the Enterprise about face towards her new destination, bringing her up to warp 8. A slight incline of the Vulcan's head in each of their directions had been enough to galvanise the pair into action.

The swift response had not been lost on the Admiral. It was no more than he expected from the finest ship and crew in Starfleet. He needed the reminder that they were the finest Starfleet had to offer. Without that knowledge his flimsy plans seemed almost hopeless.

The trouble with being an Admiral was that you were stuck behind a desk and had to sit and wait while someone else's life was at risk - at your orders - and you could not even advise them if the situation changed. Komack was glad it was the Enterprise that was in the right place at the right time. He needed the best ship and crew if there was to be any chance of success.

Back on the Enterprise Spock wasted no time. As soon as the screen went blank he retrieved the taped orders, rose from the Captain's chair in one easy, graceful motion, and moved swiftly to the turbolift.

"Mr. Sulu, you have the con," he said. He took the time to add, "Good work." His parting glance took in Sulu, Chekov and Uhura.

The three exchanged grins as the turbolift doors closed on the Vulcan. That was high praise indeed from Spock, who was a man of few words and did not give praise lightly.

Precisely 5.4 minutes later Spock sat at the computer outlet in his quarters with the decoded orders. Had anyone been watching him who knew him well, two things would have given away the fact that he was ruffled by the orders. First, he had had to read the orders through twice, almost unheard of for the Vulcan, whose mental abilities were renowned. Secondly, Spock ended by closing his eyes for a fraction of a second. This was a sure sign that the Vulcan was in need of time to regain control of his emotions, which he would ruthlessly suppress but which nevertheless existed and threatened to come out when he was under stress. The Admiral's orders had touched the Vulcan.

Spock was not a man who courted popularity, nor was he a man who feared command. In this instance he admitted to himself that the only reason he did not regret being in command of the Enterprise at this moment was because that duty would otherwise fall on Jim Kirk. The Human would find this particular decision almost impossible to live with. The Vulcan could accept it as his duty, and would suppress any feelings of guilt that doing that duty would arouse. He was glad to be able to protect the Human.

Spock turned to the intercom and contacted engineering. "Mr. Scott," he said without preamble, "please report to my quarters immediately."

Spock switched off the screen as soon as he had the Chief Engineer's acknowledgement. Every minute he was under Scott's scrutiny provided an opportunity for his mask to slip and his concern to show. Spock needed to be Vulcan now more than ever, and he schooled himself into the required thought patterns so that his face would give nothing away.

By the time Scott appeared that Vulcan mask was firmly in place, and the Chief Engineer saw what he expected to see, the calm face of the Vulcan First Officer. It was Scott who hesitated. The First Officer's quarters, although always unlocked, were respected by his Human crewmates, and only the Captain and the Chief Medical Officer, Leonard McCoy, were regular visitors.

Spock did not give him time to think further by saying immediately, "Mr. Scott, please prepare the shuttlecraft Tiberius for a crew of two for a one week flight. She must be ready in 48 hours, by which time we will have reached Quadrant 5."

Scott was surprised, and said without thinking, "The Galileo is already prepared for flight." Even as he spoke he realised that the Vulcan must know that.

Spock admitted that the Engineer's response was in fact logical, since Scott did not know the details of the new orders. "Indeed," he responded, "the Galileo would be an excellent shuttle for most circumstances, but on this occasion the older Tiberius is particularly suited." He added, "I shall also require all defensive weaponry to be removed from the shuttle, and a homing beacon added."

When Scott nodded and did not ask any questions Spock continued, "I shall also require you to produce a very special personal transmitter/translator for which I have just produced the blueprint."

Spock moved back from his screen and Scott was able to see the technical details displayed. His professional interest was immediately aroused, and he forgot to ask what such an instrument would be used for. Spock remained silent while the Engineer studied the drawings.

Finally Scott said, "It will be tricky, Mr. Spock, but I guess it's just about possible. I may need to make a few adjustments."

Spock nodded. "There is no doubt room for improvement in the design, Mr. Scott. How soon can you produce it?"

Scott considered. "What will ye want it for, Mr. Spock?" he asked at last.

If Spock had been Human he would have sighed. Instead he continued to lock gazes with the Engineer for a minute before replying, "I regret that is currently classified." He was relieved that the Engineer did not pursue the matter further.

Scott was secretly pleased that the First Officer did not once doubt that he could produce the device. He replied, "I'll have it for ye in 24 hours, Mr. Spock."

"As I expected," was the Vulcan's relieved response.

"Why did ye ask me if ye already knew the answer?" Scott muttered under his breath as he turned to leave.

He had forgotten Spock's sensitive hearing. The Vulcan's voice followed him into the corridor. "I needed confirmation, Mr. Scott."

Spock spent a few moments in meditation before turning once more to the intercom. "Lt. Uhura," he said finally, "please report to my quarters."

Uhura's "Aye, sir" was very faint. She had never expected to be invited to the Vulcan's quarters. She was half afraid and half excited as she entered.

The Vulcan was standing almost to attention, his hands clasped behind his back, his gaze alert and direct. She no longer found this disconcerting. She did not realise that Spock was studying her to reassure himself that he had made the right decision, and that the Vulcan's hands were not on this occasion loosely clasped behind his back, but were held tightly together to prevent him giving away any sense of inner turmoil. Whatever he saw in Uhura's face reassured him. Nevertheless, he put off speaking for a moment by ushering the Communications Officer into a carefully set out chair and seating himself facing her.

His voice was quiet and without inflection when he finally spoke. "Lieutenant, I should like you to volunteer for a very dangerous mission, one from which you may never return. I cannot order you to undertake it, but the lives of many will depend on its success, and I believe you are the person best suited to the task."

Spock proceeded to outline the mission in accordance with Admiral Komack's orders. His eyes never left Uhura's face, and he found himself feeling an illogical sense of pride in the calm way she took it all in. He ended by asking her, "Do you have any questions, Lieutenant?"

"Just one," she replied, to his amazement, since Spock could see a number of holes in the Admiral's plan, holes which only the operative 'on site' would be able to fill.

Spock leaned forward and gave her his full attention. This was disconcerting, but Uhura pressed on regardless.

"Why did you choose me, Mr. Spock?" She added, "And please don't say because I was the logical choice."

She knew Spock had been going to say that, since his mouth opened and then closed soundlessly. His eyebrows rose as he considered the question. He knew he had to be honest. Finally he said, "Miss Uhura, not only do you possess the necessary communications and technical knowledge for the mission, but you have the personal qualities and resourcefulness to complete the mission successfully - if indeed that is possible. I would estimate the odds against you at..."

"Mr. Spock," she interrupted him quickly, "I don't wish to know the odds against me, but I'll do it anyway, for the Enterprise, for Captain Kirk, and for you. And Mr. Spock... thank you."

Spock stared at her in total incomprehension. Surely no-one would be illogical enough to thank him for sending them to almost certain death? Perhaps she had not understood. He tried again.

"Lieutenant, you do understand that the mission has little chance of success, and that you will be totally alone and vulnerable..."

His voice tailed off as he saw her put her finger to her lips in a very Human gesture for silence. Spock found he needed to understand, and so he said very gently, "Explain, Miss Uhura. I do not understand why you should thank me for sending you to almost certain death."

Uhura smiled at him, a very sad smile. "Where will we ever find another First Officer like you, Mr. Spock? I am thanking you for complimenting me on being the best person for the job, and for showing me just how much you care for my safety."

To Spock's discomfiture and amazement she then took his head gently in her hands and kissed him lightly on the cheek. Spock stared at her as she retreated hastily from his quarters, an unnoticed tear gently rolling down one cheek.

Spock stared after her in utter confusion. Uhura's movements had taken him completely by surprise and he had not had time to shield himself from the personal contact. His telepathic abilities had come into play automatically without such shielding, and he had found himself overwhelmed by her feelings: a sense of concern - for him!

Spock could not understand it. He remained seated where he was for a long time before applying himself to being the First Officer again. By the time he reached the bridge no-one would have known that he had remained for a whole five minutes in his chair, waiting for his hands to stop shaking.

Five minutes before Admiral Komack's scheduled contact with the Enterprise Lt. Uhura returned to the bridge and took over from her relief. All eyes but Spock's followed her to her communications console.

Two minutes before the scheduled contact Mr. Scott entered the bridge, accompanied by Dr. McCoy. The two were supposedly discussing supplies for the shuttle. Spock's eyes caught them both and held them suspended like flies in a trap as he said evenly,

"It would appear, Miss Uhura, that the ship's efficiency extends to rumour as well as official communications."

McCoy and Scott stared at the Vulcan with disbelief. Uhura understood that it was Spock's way of thanking her and wishing her luck, something he would never do openly. She responded with a smile in her voice.

"Why, thank you, Mr. Spock. It seems to be my day for compliments."

"Indeed," was the only response she got. There was not, and never could be, an answering smile from the First Officer, but somehow it didn't matter.

The good-natured exchange was cut short by Admiral Komack's call, which Uhura put on the main screen again. The Admiral looked tense as he said, "Do you have a volunteer for me, Mr. Spock?"

Spock nodded. "Affirmative, Admiral. Our Communications Officer, Lt. Uhura, has volunteered for the mission, and understands that her chance of returning is... slim." He chose the last word with care, remembering Uhura's reluctance to hear the odds against her.

Uhura smiled, knowing he had chosen the word for her benefit even if he had not understood her reasons for not wishing to know the odds. The remainder of the bridge officers were not so

restrained. There was a gasp from the others, and all eyes swivelled first to Uhura and then back to Spock.

Spock continued as though nothing had happened. "The Lieutenant has familiarised herself with the tapes, and Mr. Scott and Dr. McCoy have outfitted the shuttle. I have taken the liberty of suggesting a personal transmitter/translator be produced for the Lieutenant, to be worn subcutaneously and shielded with a small cloaking device the Chief and I have devised based on the Romulan model."

The Admiral squashed his first thought - *Are you sure it will work?* - knowing that the Vulcan would not have suggested it otherwise. He said instead, "I am impressed. My compliments to Miss Uhura, Mr. Scott, and yourself."

McCoy interrupted the Admiral, no longer able to contain himself. "Just one minute, Admiral," he blazed in obvious anger. "What do you think you are doing with Miss Uhura? Just what is she volunteering for that's so all-fired important that she has to risk her life for it? That's what Spock's just said, isn't it?"

"Doctor..." said Spock, in an attempt to cut off the Chief Medical Officer. He got no further. McCoy turned on him, his unabated anger finding another target.

"I know a computerised brain like yours would consider sending a lady to her death as logical, Spock, but the Admiral is supposed to be Human. I'd like to know what *his* excuse is!"

Spock began again, more strongly. "Doctor McCoy..."

This time the Admiral cut him off. "Okay, Doctor. On this occasion I shall overlook your insubordination as I know how close you all are on the Enterprise, but I must ask you to hear me out. I shall then ask you to apologise to Mr. Spock as Acting Captain."

McCoy bristled and said, "I have no intention of apologising to a machine."

He would have continued, perhaps beyond the Admiral's endurance, if not Spock's, had not Uhura broken in very quietly indeed.

"Dr. McCoy, you do owe Mr. Spock an apology, and you know it. I appreciate your concern for me, and I know that is what made you angry, but Mr. Spock is under orders to send someone on this mission, and I *did* volunteer. In similar circumstances, with thousands of lives at risk, you would have volunteered too. And if you had been Acting Captain, you would have had to ask me to volunteer. I just hope that you would have asked me with as much consideration as Mr. Spock did."

McCoy's mouth was not the only one to drop open. Even the Admiral was speechless. Only Spock, his full Vulcan mask already in place to face the Admiral, seemed unaffected by Uhura's speech.

McCoy had the grace to blush. He said gruffly, "Sorry, Spock, Admiral. I guess I owe you both an apology."

Spock's total lack of response made McCoy start guiltily as it suddenly occurred to him that Spock was being extra Vulcan to hide his personal distress. McCoy subsided immediately and moved to

stand directly behind the Vulcan as he would have done behind Captain Kirk. Spock acknowledged the move with a raised eyebrow, and McCoy knew he was forgiven.

The Admiral cut in again. "I too am sorry, Doctor. Sorry that thousands of lives are at risk, sorry that I have to order anyone to order someone else to risk their life, sorry that I have to sit here and wait while my orders are put into practice, and sorrier still that I can't be sure how those orders will turn out. No doubt when you make Admiral you will understand that it is often harder to give orders than to carry them out. Nevertheless, that is why we all joined Starfleet, with the knowledge that one day we might have to lay down our lives in the performance of our duty. This is no exception. I have my duty, Mr. Spock has his, and you, Doctor, have yours."

The Admiral turned back to Spock. "In view of this discussion, Spock, I rescind my order for secrecy. You have my full permission to brief any of your officers on the Canis situation, and I insist that Dr. McCoy be involved. It's about time he shared in some of the responsibility. The transmitter is an excellent idea, and may prove invaluable. Are there any questions, gentlemen?"

To everyone's surprise Spock raised one. "What about Captain Kirk?"

Komack smiled at a memory of Kirk's outraged face. "The Captain was rather upset when I told him about this mission."

"Indeed?" said Spock, eyebrow on the rise.

Komack grinned more widely. "Yes, indeed. However, I've made arrangements for him to join you in Quadrant 5 as soon as possible. You are not to wait for him, but must go ahead immediately. Is that understood?"

Spock nodded, and Komack said, "Then goodbye and good luck - especially to you, Lieutenant. I shall forget we ever had this conversation, gentlemen. Komack out."

No-one moved when the screen went dead. Spock said finally, "Miss Uhura, Doctor, Mr. Scott, Mr. Sulu and Mr. Chekov, please arrange relief cover and join me in the main briefing room in 20 minutes." So saying he moved to the turbolift with his usual measured stride, seeming unperturbed.

Only Uhura noticed that he had not been totally controlled. He had forgotten to hand over the con to anyone. She covered for him, and asked Mr. Leslie to come up and take the con. If Mr. Spock's concern was a personal matter, then that was up to him. She knew it was there, and that was all that mattered to her. If McCoy liked to show his concern to all and sundry, then that was all right, too. She was glad she had such people to care for her.

As she moved away from her board she caught McCoy staring at her.

She said, "I'm a very lucky lady, Doctor," as she ran from the bridge, hiding her own concern and thinking to herself that it was no wonder Spock tried to hide his feelings. He was just better at hiding them than a Human. That didn't mean his insides weren't in turmoil too. She hoped she could remain as outwardly calm when the

pressure was on her.

Twenty minutes later in the briefing room she proved that she could. Spock was the last to enter, inclining his head in acknowledgement of his officers' attendance. He presented the details of the mission.

The Canis, a race who lived somewhere on the edge of Quadrant 5 in a currently unknown location, had recently taken to slavery, with Federation women as the victims. No Vulcans or Romulans had been taken, but the occasional Klingon woman had been enslaved. The Federation had been trying to track the Canis ships without success. They disappeared too quickly and without a trace of their going.

The Admiral's plan was to let a Federation officer work under cover and allow herself to fall into the hands of the Canis. The idea had originally been that this person would take a portable transmitter with her and hide it in her belongings until they could access it safely - it appeared that the victims had been allowed to keep their possessions. Spock and Mr. Scott had devised a subcutaneous transmitter/translator which would allow the operative to contact them, and at the same time would allow her to understand her captors. The cloaking device would make the transmitter undetectable to Canis scanning equipment. Spock at no time referred to Uhura as the operative, although everyone knew that she was.

"What makes you think they'll want a lone woman?" asked McCoy

Spock explained that the Canis operated on the basis that any woman who could be taken with little risk was fair game. The Tiberius was to be used as bait, because they would see the old shuttle as offering little danger to themselves. Spock told them that he would accompany Uhura, since the Canis did not take Vulcans or Romulans as slaves.

"Hold on!" burst in McCoy, but his voice tailed off at Spock's raised eyebrow, as he could think of no sensible alternatives. Finally he said, "Well, just take care of yourselves."

Spock glanced at Uhura and was glad that she held her peace. Only she knew from the tapes that although Vulcanoids were never taken as slaves they were frequently injured or even killed by the Canis if they attempted to interfere with the capture of others. Spock's argument that he was safe because he would not be trying to protect Uhura would not bear close scrutiny, since he would have to make some attempt to protect her to maintain her cover. He was glad she made it unnecessary to put forward such a weak argument.

Uhura did not bring up the subject because one look at the Vulcan's face told her he would go whatever she said. There was no point in making things more difficult for him, or for the others waiting behind.

McCoy inserted the transmitter into Uhura's arm, and Scott and Spock both checked that it would not show up on a scan. The ingenious miniature cloaking device had caused Scott to produce a few choice swear words his ancestors would have been proud of before the apparatus had finally worked satisfactorily. It was a masterly piece of technology, and Scott had glowed with the Vulcan's

unexpected approval of his workmanship.

Finally they reached the right sector of Quadrant 5, and the shuttle was ready for launch. All that remained was for the Humans to exchange goodbyes and wishes for luck. Uhura gave nothing away as she followed Spock down to the hangar deck. Only Scott accompanied them to make sure everything was in order.

Eventually Scott gave the thumbs-up sign. He didn't dare speak. Spock understood, and returned the very Human gesture with a purely Vulcan response. He too kept silent as the shuttle lifted off, moving through the hangar doors into open space, where its tiny size made it seem very vulnerable to the watching Engineer.

Silence was maintained until Spock's first scheduled contact with the Enterprise. He advised them the shuttle was still on course, and reported no contact with the Canis.

Mr. Scott was now Acting Captain, and the Engineer's voice reflected his new position of responsibility.

As soon as contact with the Enterprise was broken Uhura initiated a conversation with Spock, and the Vulcan, recognising her need to talk, responded as openly as his heritage and training would permit. She was curious about Vulcan, and Spock described his home town of ShiKahr in detail. He even described his own home.

However, when Uhura asked about Spock's parents he found it difficult to respond, and she quickly changed the subject, realising that she had probably learned as much as she had because of their present predicament. Spock had never spoken to her at such lengths before, although he was always courteous and responded politely, even if often negatively, to any questions she asked.

She began to tell him about herself, the United States of Africa, and the Bantu nation. Spock was a very attentive listener, and she found it easy to open up to him. Spock was relieved not to have to speak further about himself, and fell into the listener role with practised ease. As an observer of Human nature and a keen scientist, he was a natural listener.

Twenty-four hours passed without incident. Routine reports to the Enterprise, quiet conversations, companionable silence, or sleep were the order of the day.

The routine was shattered when the Tiberius's sensors picked up an unidentified craft. It had to be the Canis. Spock left the shuttle on automatic pilot and concentrated on finding out what he could about the aliens and their craft by initiating some sensor scans of his own.

When it became certain that the Canis could not have failed to notice the shuttlecraft Spock took over manual control and opened hailing frequencies. He identified himself as a Federation shuttle on official business. Getting to response from the aliens he sent out the mayday that would be expected, as well as a recorder buoy, knowing the Enterprise would pick up any useful information recorded if he and Uhura did not make it back.

Finally, as his sensors read the energy increase of the aliens' transporters starting up, he turned to Uhura and said calmly, "We are about to be boarded, Lieutenant." Giving the Vulcan salute he had used to Scott on the hangar deck he added with dignity, "Live long and prosper," before returning the shuttle to automatic pilot.

Uhura mentally prepared herself for the long and dangerous mission ahead, suddenly realising how alone she would be without the Vulcan's reassuring presence. She had no time to think beyond that. The Canis arrived.

There were six of them, humanoid, and all male. They were of only average Human height. Their hair was long, they all wore beards and sported mustaches, and were dressed similarly in black leather trousers and jackets. Their smiles gave the impression that they were not a violent people.

Their first words, addressed to Spock, and surprisingly spoken in perfect, if accentless, Federation Standard, were at complete odds to her first impression, and their smiles.

"We have come for your woman. If you try to interfere we will kill you."

Spock knew that no Vulcan would let a defenceless woman be taken without trying to protect her. To do otherwise now would only arouse the Canis' suspicions. Wordlessly he launched himself at the nearest Canis, his Vulcan strength coming to his aid.

Odds of six to one were not good, but Spock was doing rather well until he made a try for his old-style phaser, chosen in line with the age of the shuttle. All six Canis panicked at his attempt and simultaneously threw themselves at him.

The biggest male, the one he had first attacked, turned and tore a section from the shuttle's metal control panel. Using all his strength he struck at Spock's unprotected head.

As a second, sickening thud indicated that the panel had hit Spock again, Uhura, who had kept out of the struggle as previously agreed, let out a scream. That was the last sound Spock heard as he fell unconscious to the floor, a pool of green blood forming under his mutilated head.

The scream was also the signal for the Canis to freeze. All six turned and stared at her. They ignored the fallen Vulcan, and as though on signal moved towards her. The leader stepped forward, and said, again in perfect Federation Standard, "You will come with us now."

Uhura had little choice but to comply. Her final thoughts before the Canis transporter took her were that it seemed a pity they had wasted time on making the transmitter into a translator too when the Canis spoke Standard so well, and that she would have to be careful about first impressions in future.

No doubt Spock would find both ideas illogical - if he lived. That final thought sobered her.

On board the Enterprise Commander Scott was having some problems of his own. The USS Lexington must have pushed on at

better than warp 9 to catch up with them, but there was no denying she was almost within beaming distance now. There was no doubt, either, that they were within hailing distance - Captain Kirk's raised and angry voice had made that abundantly clear. Scott had agreed to beam the Captain aboard the Enterprise in precisely 20 minutes. Now that was impossible, and he didn't even have time to inform the Captain of his change in plans.

As Acting Captain, Scott's orders were quite specific. The shuttle Tiberius and the Canis were the first priority. The mayday from Mr. Spock over-rode any other considerations. Mr. Scott gave the necessary orders to send the Enterprise in hot pursuit of the Tiberius. Captain Kirk would have to wait. Scott was not looking forward to seeing him again quite as much as he had been.

Less than two hours later the Enterprise overhauled the slowly moving shuttle. Chekov reported from Spock's science station.

"Long range scanners show no other ships in the vicinity, Mr. Scott, except the Lexington."

Scott winced at the thought of his Captain. He'd be fit to be tied. Calming himself, he asked, "What about the tracking device, Mr. Chekov?"

"The homing beacon is coming through clearly, sair. Bearing 104 mark 6."

"Keep tracking it," said Scott. "I wonder why Mr. Spock hasn't made contact?"

Lt. Jones, speaking from Uhura's station, replied, "The shuttle's communications systems read inoperative, Mr. Scott. They must have suffered some kind of damage. It would be impossible for Mr. Spock to contact us at present."

Within 5 minutes the shuttle became visible on the forward viewscreen when viewed at maximum magnification.

Sulu said, "We'll be within beaming range shortly."

The shuttle appeared to be in perfect condition, still moving on its original course.

Scott voiced his thoughts. "No doubt Mr. Spock is maintaining the present course in case the Canis are scanning him. The shuttle's instruments are not capable of long range scans, so he will have to keep up his pretence until he knows for certain he is out of their range."

Chekov's voice broke in, the obvious fear it held attracting everyone's attention. "Mr. Scott, I'm picking up Mr. Spock's life readings. They are incredibly low, sair! I don't think it would be safe to beam him over."

All eyes became rivetted on the Chief Engineer, who began to sweat. He suddenly remembered that part of a Captain's job was delegation.

"Call Dr. McCoy and ask him to report to the transporter room with full medical kit prepared for a Vulcan. Tell him I'll meet him

there in 3 minutes." So saying, Scott handed the con over to Sulu and headed quickly for the turbolift.

McCoy was already waiting in the transporter room when Scott arrived. "What the hell is going on?" he asked angrily. "I thought you said it was quite safe for Spock to accompany Uhura, and now you're telling me he needs medical treatment."

Scott met the doctor's angry stare with a mild response, reminding the doctor of Spock himself.

"I'm sorry, Scotty," he said. "I guess it was that damned Vulcan who said it was safe. He insisted it was only Humanoid and not Vulcanoid stock that interested the Canis. I might have guessed he was keeping something from us."

"Aye," replied the dour Scotsman with instant understanding. "He didn't tell us what happened to those who'd been left behind."

McCoy's mouth fell open as he suddenly appreciated what Spock had done.

They were prevented from further discussion by the Transporter Chief's interruption to advise them they were within beaming range.

"Beam us over then, laddie," was Scott's instant response.

The doctor and Chief Engineer materialised on the Tiberius, and both gasped at what they saw. McCoy moved over to the still unconscious Vulcan, and Scott to the pitted and mangled shuttlecraft controls. Both were distressed by their initial findings.

McCoy stared at the growing pool of blood under Spock's head for less than five seconds before being galvanised into action. He took out his medical scanner and ran it over the unmoving body. Spock had been knocked out, and had been unable to initiate a healing trance. McCoy surveyed the mutilation in despair, and prayed fervently that the Vulcan's formidable brain had not been damaged. He dared not stop the bleeding until he knew more, for stopping the bleeding from such an injury could cause a blood clot on the brain.

"We've got to get him to sickbay right now," said McCoy, injecting the prone form with a wide-spectrum medication, and then with Vitaliser B even as he spoke.

Scott had his own troubles with the shuttle. "We'll have to beam him over, Doctor. This control panel will take several hours to repair, and until that's done we can't alter course."

McCoy wasted no time in reaching for his communicator. It was safer to beam Spock over than to wait for several hours. "Three to beam up. Have a full medical team standing by for blood transfusion, and ask Dr. M'Benga to prepare for possible brain surgery."

"Aye, sir," came the awed but instant response as the transporter took and held the three Enterprise men.

McCoy's team wheeled Spock straight into the operating theatre. Scott returned, unhappily, to the bridge, immediately checking that at least Uhura's signal was still being tracked. It

was.

On board the Canis spacecraft Uhura found herself alone for the first time. On arrival she had been scanned, and had been issued with a suit of leather clothing similar to that of her captors. She had not been harmed. Her fears for the discovery of the hidden transmitter had proved unfounded.

The Canis had taken her fear as natural worry for her own safety. The apparent leader, distinguishable only by his loosely tied headband, had instantly gone to reassure her.

"We will not harm you. We only require your co-operation."

Co-operation in what? she wondered,

His conversation with his men enlightened her, and she was finally glad of the translator, as they used their own language. The leader informed the others that they now had a full ship, and he had decided to head for home. The shuttle's mayday appeared to have alerted a large ship to their passage, and he didn't want to wait around and be caught. Their cargo was too precious to lose. Uhura realised with a sense of finality that she was now a part of that precious cargo.

She was led to a sparsely furnished but comfortable room. She had been expecting to be imprisoned with other captives like herself, but instead she was locked in a single cell. However comfortable it was, the door was still locked, and it was still a prison.

Uhura looked at herself in the full length mirror. That seemed an odd piece of furniture for a prison, and she decided - wrongly, in this instance - that it was a two-way screen. She didn't like the thought that they'd be watching her every move. She would have saved herself a lot of needless worry if she had realised that it was just what it appeared to be - a mirror.

The mirror revealed a very strong, composed face out of which expressive brown eyes studied their owner. The face broke into a smile. If they were studying her, let them see that she was not cowed by her capture, was her accompanying thought. The smile, intended for her captors' benefit, nevertheless reassured the captive.

Her black leather outfit suited her, and the leader of the captors found himself disconcerted by a calm, smiling face topping an almost feline body as the Bantu woman turned lithely round at his unannounced entry. Her smile had given her confidence, and she used it to good effect now, lashing the hapless Canis leader with her tongue, the only weapon she possessed.

"Don't you have any manners?" she began, as though telling off a naughty child rather than a military leader. "You come breaking into my private quarters without even the decency to knock. Who do you think you are?"

The Canis leader began to wonder. This woman really got to him. None of his other captives had behaved like her. They were cowed and frightened by their capture; she almost seemed to thrive on it. He found himself admiring her reaction.

Uhura found his response totally unexpected. She had readied herself to receive a blow, or at the very least some verbal abuse. Instead the Canis bowed his head in a very Vulcan-like gesture that caught at her breath. He then left her cell, and knocked gently on the door.

It took her a full minute to realise that her automatic response of "Come in!" meant she had actually invited her captor into this tiny room.

He didn't give her time to recover the advantage. "My apologies," he began in his uninflected alien version of Standard. "It will not happen again. Etiquette will be added to our areas of study of your people."

Uhura was taken aback, but not for long. She recovered herself quickly, and he admired her response. "I should hope so, too. However, sir, you have the advantage over me. I have not had a chance to study your people."

The Canis leader bowed again. "If I may rectify the situation?" It was not a question, however, for he gave her no chance to reply before adding, "My name is Fonda. I am Captain of the battlecruiser Fodor, of the race you know as Canis. We are, in fact, the Luxor, translated in your language as 'The Segregated Ones'. Since you will be returning with us to our home world, I will arrange for tapes to be provided for you to study our land and its people. When you understand our ways better I shall return to make what you would call..." he hesitated "... a proposal. I shall study your customs, also." So saying, he left a speechless Uhura.

Abruptly she turned back to the mirror, where her own reflection mocked her. "I hope you enjoyed that little exchange!" she yelled at the inoffensive wall hanging. Her eyes fell on a metal plate, and she threw it against the mirror with all her might.

The resulting tinkle of broken glass brought a smile to the face of the retreating Fonda. This woman would be worth winning.

Back on the Enterprise a very downcast Chief Engineer wished fervently that he had something to throw. He didn't need a mirror to throw it at. Right now he'd be satisfied to throw something - anything - at the Captain's head. Kirk had not let up since he'd beamed into the transporter room, and Scott hadn't been able to get a word in edgeways in the short distance between there and the turbolift.

Kirk continued his tirade. "And, Mr. Scott, when I ask to be beamed aboard my own ship in precisely 20 minutes, I don't expect to be left standing in the transporter room. I don't expect to have to chase my ship halfway across the galaxy in order to take command..."

The turbolift doors opened onto the bridge, and Kirk's voice hesitated for the first time since he'd returned to the Enterprise. He soon regained his momentum.

"And why isn't Spock here on the bridge to meet me? He knows the regulations as well as any man. There's no excuse for the Acting Captain to be missing when his commanding officer returns on board. Get him up here right now. He's got a lot to answer for, sending Uhura out there alone on this wild goose chase of Komack's

and leaving me on Thassus with a bunch of diplomats and administrators."

McCoy's bleep on the Captain's intercom interrupted Kirk. He responded automatically. "Bridge. Kirk here."

McCoy's voice reached through Kirk's self-righteous discourse in an instant. "Jim, you'd better get down to sickbay if you want to see Spock alive."

Kirk was back in the turbolift in two seconds flat. It would take Scott a lot longer than that to forget the accusing glare his Captain had thrown at him before he departed. Mr. Scott returned to the Captain's chair and sank gratefully into its contours. He had *tried* to tell the Captain, but there was no stopping him once he got going.

Sickbay was dimly lit, in stark contrast to the bright lights of the bridge. A silent, unmoving form filled the only occupied bed.

"Report!" was the only word Kirk uttered. The sound was as sharp as the report of a bullet leaving a gun.

McCoy explained Komack's orders, and what had happened since, as far as he knew. Kirk listened in silence, his face growing grimmer by the minute. When McCoy's voice trailed off he asked, "How is he, Bones? Can you do anything for him?"

The doctor was all business. "I've stopped the bleeding, but a brain scan reveals trauma of some sort, and he is still not prepared to initiate a healing trance. Until he does so he will not recover."

"What do you mean, not prepared?" asked Kirk, moving up to the bed.

"Jim, I think he's blaming himself for sending Uhura, and I think that's stopping him from trying to return to reality. If he knows you're here it may be different. You have to reach him."

Kirk sat down next to his First Officer and took the warm hand in his own. All his anger had disappeared as though it had never been. Knowing Spock, he would have ordered Uhura to undertake this mission just to prevent that duty falling on his Captain. How did one respond to such loyalty? Kirk responded in the only way he knew, by trying to reach the Vulcan's carefully hidden soul.

Even in his deep unconsciousness Spock felt his Captain's touch. To him it was unique. Spock could never abandon this man. He began to fight to return to consciousness.

McCoy watched, as he had done many times before, and finally was able to reassure his Captain. "You've done it, Jim. He's initiated a healing trance. We can safely leave it to that Vulcan stamina of his now."

Kirk nodded. "I'll be on the bridge if you need me."

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The Captain found that the Enterprise was in pursuit of Uhura's homing signal. They were already entering uncharted space. Kirk brought himself up to date on everything that had happened since he'd been left on Thassus. He didn't want to admit it, but he realised Admiral Komack was right. The Canis were a threat to both the Federation and the Klingon Empire, and a single woman was needed to undertake the Admiral's dangerous, almost desperate plan. Kirk had to agree with Spock's Captains's Log entry, which he played to fill in the background to the mission.

"Captain's Log, First Officer Spock reporting. Lt. Uhura has volunteered for Admiral Komack's special undercover operation." Here Spock's voice held a slight inflection that only Kirk realised was an attempt to mask the Vulcan's confusion. "She not only agreed to undertake the mission, but thanked me for recommending her for it. Since the Canis take only Humanoid captives, I have decided to accompany the Lieutenant personally. Only the Lieutenant and I are aware that Vulcanoids found in the presence of Humanoid victims are frequently left for dead when trying to protect their companions. Since the Lieutenant's capture must appear normal, it is my intention to attempt to protect her, and so maintain her cover. Should I not return I should like to record the fact that no-one left aboard the Enterprise is aware of the risks involved in my participation in the operation. I should also like to record my highest commendation for Lt. Uhura, who has behaved impeccably since the operation was made known to her. Spock out."

Kirk was silent for a moment, and then, turning to Scott, said, "Lieutenant-Commander Scott, I think you should hear this." He had Spock's tape played to the bridge at large. "I don't think Mr. Spock would object to you hearing his log entry in the circumstances."

On board the Fodor, Uhura was listening to some very enlightening tapes of her own. She could hardly believe what she saw and heard. No wonder the Canis called themselves 'The Segregated Ones'. It appeared that their whole planet was inhabited by males. To her they resembled most closely the hippies of Earth in the 20th century. Even their transport on their home world was made up largely of motor cycles. She could see that the leather clothing would come in useful on a motorbike.

The tapes also revealed that the Canis - or Luxor, as she must now consider them - took Humanoid women for one reason only. They were attempting to continue the Luxor species through reproduction. But as generation succeeded generation the Luxor would surely die out, their genes mingling with those of the Humanoid females they took as captives?

On reading further she discovered that this was not so. The Luxor offspring, if male, were totally Luxor, without trace of their Humanoid mothers; if female, the children died soon after birth. Uhura was horrified.

With this terrible exception Uhura found the Luxor to be a humane and civilised race. Their civilisation was well developed and peaceful. They treated their consorts (she could think of no other word) with something close to worship. But they most definitely held them prisoner.

When Fonda returned Uhura tried to argue with him about what

the Luxor were trying to achieve. She could not see it getting them anywhere in the long run. Eventually such a race was bound to die out, and she somehow didn't want that to happen. She tried to explain that the Federation's doctors and scientists would help them find another way.

Fonda listened, but said her ideas were hopeless. The Luxor were as advanced as any of the Humanoids they had encountered, and their scientists had been unable to solve the problem.

Uhura insisted the Federation could succeed where the Luxor had failed; they had scientists as brilliant as the Vulcans.

Fonda reacted negatively to that suggestion. "We have seen your Vulcans. They show no emotions, and even you Humans joke about their reproductive processes. How could they teach us anything? They are little better than computers, and we have enough of them already."

Uhura quickly changed the subject, which was too painful to her with her memories of Spock lying hurt in the shuttle, by asking how the Luxor segregation had started. Fonda sat next to her and took her hand gently in his; he felt he was making progress with her, and wanted her to understand.

He explained that the Luxor had originally been a balanced race, with males and females in roughly equal numbers. Volcanic eruptions on their home planet, Lux, had led them to seek an alternative home base. Their spaceships had moved out into the galaxy, and they had chosen an alternative planet which they had named Lux II. The women had been the first to transfer there for safety, but it was already too late. The men had followed. Within a year they found that every female baby produced died, while the majority of males survived. In a generation females had almost died out.

The Luxor found themselves a dying race. They turned their attention from trying to solve the problem through scientific means to more practical methods. They started to steal women from other planets. They wanted these women to stay and be happy, and they did everything for them; but the women kept trying to escape, and those who remained found their female babies died too. Stealing women became a necessity. Fonda hoped Uhura would understand, and that she would like to stay. He finished by asking her politely if she would become his mate.

Uhura, in spite of the situation, was touched by his honesty. She had no alternative but to turn him down, and shaking her head told him, "I'm sorry, Fonda. My people choose a mate of their own free will. While I am a captive I can never be your mate."

Fonda looked at her for a long minute. "Come," he said finally. "You will not be my captive. I will give you the freedom of my ship."

Uhura was even more deeply touched, but again shook her head. "That's not enough, Fonda. Exchanging a small prison for a larger one is not the same thing as being free."

Fonda held out his hand to her, as his tapes had shown him was a proper approach. "Come," he repeated. "We will discuss this freedom another time."

Uhura smiled in spite of the situation. She had seen a double meaning in his words, for 'Freedom' was the translation of her own name, Uhura. She was glad the Luxor were not telepaths. Fonda took her smile as an indication of acquiescence, and his own face broke into a wide and very personable grin.

The tour of the Fodor was impressive. The ship was as large as the Enterprise, but there were far fewer crew members. Uhura estimated that there were only 200 crewmen. She realised this was because there were at least 100 captives aboard. Only two of these were male. Bearing in mind that her duty was to discover as much as possible about this alien race she asked about the male prisoners.

Fonda was at first worried by this. "Do you find them more attractive than me?" he asked.

Uhura shook her head. In fact, the men were not appealing to her; both looked rough, and neither had Fonda's attractive smile. "I'm just curious, Fonda," she replied.

He grinned again. "They are here to look after the women. There are some tasks we prefer to leave to them."

He didn't go into detail, and Uhura decided it was safer not to pursue the subject. She concentrated instead on learning as much as possible about the Fodor.

Fonda was not worried by this, but seemed to sense her train of thought. "You are free to learn what you can," he said. Uhura didn't give herself away by reacting to that.

It took a whole week to reach Lux, which was really Lux II. There Uhura met her fellow captives properly for the first time. She was not the only member of Starfleet there, and she recognised many Federation races, as well as Klingons. There were some races she was not familiar with, and her curiosity was aroused.

The prisoners were split by race, and Uhura found herself with 30 other Human females. She also found herself one of the two senior Starfleet officers present, and appeared to be one of the very few people coping pragmatically with their situation.

By the time they had spent 24 hours together Uhura had taken the lead and organised the women. She had reassured them all, and made them realise they must keep their spirits up and not lose hope. She also set up an information system, making sure they would all report to her anything that might help them overcome the Luxor, arranging that she was not the only recipient of the information just in case she didn't make it through, and ensuring that each individual didn't know too much for their own good at the operating end of the system. Hopefully this would increase her chances of success. She told only two women about the Enterprise, the two she was sure she could trust; both were Starfleet personnel, one a lieutenant, the other a yeoman.

Meanwhile the Enterprise held motionless in space just outside tracking distance of Lux. With the exception of Uhura the ship was at full complement again, Spock having returned to duty that morning. He appeared almost totally fit, if slightly paler than usual. Only the bald patch on the back of his head, where the hair shaved off for the operation had not yet regrown, gave any visible

signs of his encounter with the Canis.

Mentally he was not as fully recovered as he appeared. In his memory he still heard the resonance of Uhura's final scream. He did not know she had screamed out of concern for him, and would not have seen any logic in such an action; he believed the Canis had hurt her severely, and that was why she had screamed. His Vulcan heritage forced him to suppress his feelings of guilt, but the act of suppression pushed him further and further inside his Vulcan mask, forcing him to withdraw from the Captain and crew of the Enterprise. A part of his mind became constantly preoccupied with Uhura's welfare, and even though he was quite capable of working on several things at one time, he was finding it a bit of a strain in his present state of health.

McCoy was worried about him, and pulled Kirk on one side. "Jim, take it easy with Spock. I don't think he's come to terms with things yet."

Kirk smiled at the doctor. "I'm not going to overtax him, Bones. I'll keep an eye on him. But I do need him on the bridge, and he looks fit enough to me."

McCoy nodded. "He may look fit, but there's something troubling him. I've tried to ask him, but he won't admit anything's wrong. It's that Vulcan stubbornness as usual. Just keep an eye on him, Jim," he repeated.

Spock's presence on the bridge was indeed essential. He did not spare himself, but spent his time tracking Uhura's homing device, computing the options for attacking the Canis without endangering the captive population, and monitoring communications. He also kept the Enterprise carefully out of sight of the Canis spacecraft by spotting them first and giving Sulu co-ordinates to keep the Enterprise hidden.

Finally Kirk had to order Spock off duty, and like McCoy he began to feel the Vulcan had something on his mind he was not telling them.

Eventually Kirk knew he could not rest until he found out what was troubling his First Officer. Spock let the Captain into his quarters with the single word, "Come." Kirk said what was on his mind without trying to beat about the bush; he had learned a long time ago that to avoid going to the heart of a problem with Spock either led the Vulcan into a state of confusion, or allowed him to sidetrack the Captain with a few red herrings of his own.

"Spock, you seem to be troubled by something, and I'd like to know what it is," he said.

Spock was silent for a long time, looking at the floor or the desk but not at his Captain.

Kirk tried again. "Spock, are you fully recovered from your encounter with the Canis, or are you still in pain?"

Spock raised his head to meet his Captain's gaze. "It is not I who am in pain, Captain. It is my belief that Lt. Uhura may have been injured by the Canis," he finally admitted honestly, but with a great deal of reluctance.

"Why?" prompted Kirk.

"The last thing I heard as I fell was the Lieutenant screaming. As Miss Uhura is a well-balanced individual I can see no other reason for her emotional outburst. She did not scream when the Canis came on board, nor while I was fighting them. I therefore find myself computing the odds against her making contact with us, and do not find the results promising."

Kirk was horrified by Spock's admission, wondering that his friend had lived with this worry since the encounter without uttering a word about his feelings. As that thought came to him he realised that the fact that Spock was feeling for Uhura was probably another reason he had not spoken about it, since the Vulcan would be ashamed to admit to such feelings, even to him.

After considering Spock's comments with great care Kirk replied, "Has it occurred to you, Spock, that Uhura might have screamed because she knew the Canis had injured you? You say she screamed as you fell. It would be a normal Human reaction for her to scream as she saw a friend fall before an enemy attack. She would be concerned that you were hurt, particularly if she knew you might have been killed. The sight of you on the floor of that shuttlecraft was not a very reassuring one, according to Scotty, and he's not exactly prone to emotional outbursts himself."

Spock relaxed visibly at that explanation. "That possibility had not occurred to me, Captain. If that is so, and Miss Uhura is unharmed, I would compute her chances of success as..."

"Please, Spock," said Kirk hurriedly, "I'd rather not know the exact odds against us."

Spock raised both eyebrows in perplexity. "Human behaviour is most strange, Captain. It was also the Lieutenant's wish not to know the odds against her. I find that highly illogical."

Kirk grinned. "It may not be logical, but it's normal for a Human, Spock. Somehow quoting the odds against us is disconcerting. I think we'll just use that computing power of yours to work out our optimum basis for attack, and leave the odds issue aside."

"As you wish, Captain," was Spock's only response.

The Captain let himself quietly out of his First Officer's quarters, knowing he had eased his friend's mind at least. He would never truly understand his First Officer's hidden emotional life. The fact that Spock had been able to speak to him about his concern for Uhura was a big concession from the Vulcan.

He hoped he was right about Uhura's scream. That would be a Human response to seeing Spock fall, and he knew that he would have screamed himself - at least inside - if he'd seen it. He'd nearly done so when he'd first seen Spock in sickbay, and that was long after McCoy had patched him up. McCoy's description of the scene had been somewhat clinical, but Scott had eased his own concern by giving Kirk a very full description of the damage to Spock and the shuttle. It had not been a pretty sight.

Uhura finally found an opportunity to pursue her mission. She discovered that the Luxor were holding a massive conference involving almost all their own people. It was a chance she couldn't afford to miss.

Taking care to ensure she was alone, she removed the subcutaneous transmitter and one of her earrings, which she had been permitted to keep. Within minutes she had assembled a signal booster. She crossed her fingers, and saying to herself, "Here goes," she began to transmit. "Uhura to Enterprise."

Spock's voice responded almost immediately, as though he had been hanging on her every word. "Enterprise, Spock here." He put the signal on audio so everyone on the bridge could hear.

Uhura heaved a sigh of relief that was echoed by the bridge crew. "Thank god, Mr. Spock," she said.

"I assure you there is no deity involved, Lieutenant," said Spock in his literal way. "Mr. Scott and I initiated..."

"No, Mr. Spock," she broke in, laughing, causing the Vulcan to raise an eyebrow in perplexity. "I mean, thank god you're alive. The last time I saw you that seemed to be very much in doubt."

So the Captain had been right, thought Spock, finding relief in the conclusion that Uhura must therefore be unharmed. Making an effort to hide his relief he added, more coldly than he intended, "Please report, Lieutenant."

Uhura understood his reaction as well as the lack of time, and reported concisely, outlining her proposed plan of action. She stated her belief that the Luxor were not vicious, merely misguided, and explained their problem.

Spock advised Kirk that there was a chance that radiation had caused the genetic problem and therefore there was a high probability that a cure could be found.

Uhura proposed that the Enterprise should be used to knock out everyone at the conference, while landing parties should be simultaneously transported to other parts of the planet to take over key installations and to free the captives. Suddenly she advised them that she had to go, and the transmission ended abruptly.

"Could they have traced the transmission?" Kirk asked impatiently.

"Unknown, but highly probable," came Spock's calm if unhelpful reply.

Kirk made his decision. "I propose to send back a recorder buoy, giving details of our coordinates and proposed action plan. We will attempt the rescue single-handed, gentlemen. If we are unsuccessful the Fleet can follow up. I think we stand a better chance alone, and if we notify the other Starships of our plans the Luxor could pick up the transmission."

The bridge crew moved silently to ready their own sections.

Sixteen hours later the Enterprise rang to the sound of Red Alert, and the Captain's voice filled the ship with his, "All hands to battle stations. This is not a drill. Landing parties to scheduled transport points. Good luck, everyone. Kirk out."

The Enterprise entered orbit around Lux II.

"Phasers locked on target," said Sulu almost immediately. The phasers had been set to heavy stun and wide angle beam.

"All landing parties report ready," came Spock's voice from the transporter room.

"Commence action now," ordered Kirk, and immediately the landing parties began to beam down.

The Enterprise had luck, or what Spock would have called random factors, in her favour. There were no other ships in orbit around Lux II, and the planet was not prepared to fire on the Enterprise. Occasional irregular fire from the planet did no more than bounce off the shields. The only real danger was a hit while shields were lowered to beam down the landing parties - even Spock's computers could not predict the enemy's fire pattern. Luck stayed with them, however, and the Enterprise suffered no serious damage.

On the planet's surface the conference room filled almost instantaneously with fallen bodies as the phasers took effect, knocking out over 70% of the Luxor in one fell swoop.

Uhura had primed teams of women all over the planet to be ready for just this occurrence. The women, who outnumbered their male captors by nearly ten to one now, began to attack the utterly confused and surprised Luxor. There had never been a female revolt in the history of their planet, and they were overcome as much by amazement as by the actual force used against them.

Within less than half an hour reports were coming in from all over the planet that key installations had been secured and the women freed.

Uhura made contact with one of the landing parties and was able to beam back aboard the Enterprise. Her black leather outfit prompted a wolf-whistle from one of the transporter operators, which in turn earned him a reprimand from the Transporter Chief, although the latter was also impressed with what he saw.

Uhura was just so glad to be back that she replied, "Even a wolf-whistle is welcome today, Mr. Kyle!"

Kyle had to admit that the picture Uhura presented was reasonable grounds for the reaction; dressed all in black leather, she was quite stunning. He grinned back at her.

Uhura wasted no time in apprising the Captain of the situation. She wanted to contact Fonda and use him as an intermediary with the rest of his people. She believed that the Luxor could become stable members of the Federation if a cure for their problem could be found.

Spock, who had led the landing parties, reported in and advised that he had located Fonda. He also announced that he had been working on the Luxors' problems, and an initial analysis of the planet's atmosphere indicated an unusual type of radiation which could be the cause of the female deaths. He asked for Dr. McCoy to be transported down to work with him on a possible antidote.

Kirk wondered how he would ever manage without Spock. Even after all this time it surprised him how his First Officer could work on so many things at once - and operate brilliantly in all of them. Spock had not forgotten his role as leader of the landing

parties, he had made sure of the quick capture of Fonda, and he had worked on the Luxors' cure all at the same time.

"Mr. Spock, you're a three-minute wonder," said Kirk laughingly.

He would have laughed even louder if he had seen the Vulcan's expression. Spock's response gave him an inkling of it.

"I am not familiar with that reference, Captain."

Kirk told him to forget it, but he had a feeling the matter would be raised again in the future. He shook his head.

Turning to business again, he made arrangements for Fonda to be welcomed on board the Enterprise, and for McCoy and his research staff to beam down to assist Spock in his analysis. The remaining Luxor had been rounded up and placed under guard in locations that had previously held women captives. The women had been moved to other areas.

Kirk had to admire the Luxor leader as he came on board. Fonda's first words showed that he had lost none of his humour. "It seems our roles are reversed," he said calmly, looking directly at Uhura, who was now back in uniform.

At a nod from Kirk Uhura stepped forward and formally introduced Fonda to the Captain. Kirk explained that the Federation would attempt to solve the Luxors' problem, and that his First Officer and Chief Medical Officer already believed they had a lead.

Fonda shook his head but Kirk could not tell if it was in disbelief, sorrow or resignation. He looked up, and catching Kirk watching him said, "You Humans are strange people. I do not understand you. You fight hard, and yet you try to help your enemies."

It was Uhura who replied, "You are not our enemy, Fonda. We cannot let you take captives - for that is against everything we believe in - but we do sympathise with your problem now that we understand it. If we can redress the balance you can go back to your old peaceful ways, and we would then welcome you into the Federation. The choice is yours."

Fonda's response was interrupted by the intercom. Kirk answered, but Fonda's sudden intake of breath at the appearance of Spock's face on the screen focused all attention on him. "You! You're the Vulcan on the shuttlecraft. You're still alive!"

Spock's calm voice responded, "That much is obvious, sir, since you are seeing and hearing me."

Fonda asked, "Who are you? And why are you on Lux?"

It was Kirk who answered him. "Commander Spock is my First Officer. He was acting under orders when he accompanied Lieutenant Uhura on the shuttlecraft, and he is now on Lux trying to solve your medical problem."

Spock cut in, "Dr. McCoy and I believe we have a possible solution, Captain. I have isolated the unusual radiation, and the doctor believes he may be able to neutralise its effects. We will need your permission to proceed."

Kirk said, "I'll beam down in..."

Fonda interrupted, unable to control himself. "You? You are trying to solve our problem? That is impossible. We tried to kill you. Why should you care what happens to us?"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "I see no reason why I should not attempt to solve your problem. Vulcans are a peaceful people. Where we can use our scientific knowledge to solve a problem it is only logical that we should do so."

Kirk noticed that Spock made no reference to caring, although he knew that his First Officer cared far more that he was willing to admit.

Fonda picked up on the same point. "Then it is just a scientific exercise for you, Commander? You have no feelings about being attacked, and no feelings about saving the Lux race?"

Spock hesitated for a long moment before answering, and Kirk knew that any answer to such a question would be difficult for the Vulcan, who refused to admit to feelings, and who was ashamed of showing any emotion.

When Spock's answer finally came it was obvious that he had weighed his words carefully. "Vulcans do not express feelings, Captain Fonda. However, we hold peace, life and honour most highly. I am grateful that I am still alive. Since I have knowledge I can put to good use in finding a cure for your people, it is logical for me to apply it. Our earlier encounter is irrelevant to the current situation."

Kirk let out a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding. Fonda grinned his most charming grin, and Uhura's smile lit up the room with its warmth. Kirk laughed wholeheartedly in response to Uhura.

Spock raised an eyebrow and said, "I see nothing amusing in my statement, Captain."

Kirk wasn't sure if it was himself or Fonda Spock was addressing, but he couldn't help but take up the argument. "Possibly not, Spock, but I think you should be grateful Bones wasn't here to pursue the issue."

Before Spock could comment he added, "I'll beam down in five minutes, as soon as Lieutenant Uhura has had time to escort Captain Fonda to his quarters."

Spock nodded and broke the link, a little abruptly, Kirk felt. His First Officer had yet again managed to keep his Vulcan decorum intact while giving the impression that he did care. Kirk wondered if he'd ever get used to the Vulcan's sense of shame at voicing his feelings even obliquely as he had just now.

There were times when he cursed Vulcan for its strict rules and logic that made it so difficult for Spock to share with his Human friends, in spite of IDIC. At other times he was grateful for Spock's ability not to get emotionally involved, and to see things objectively. He supposed he couldn't have it both ways.

Fonda summed up his difficulty. "An interesting man, your First Officer, Captain. He is rather like an iceberg - far more of

him is submerged than one can observe at first encounter."

Kirk sighed openly. Fonda had understood Spock better than many Humans did. Many would have called Spock an iceberg for the cold front he showed the world; few would have seen the submerged depths beneath.

Kirk said very quietly, "He's the best First Officer and friend a man could ever have."

Fonda's, "Indeed," mirrored the Vulcan himself.

On the planet Spock was trying to recreate the conversation for Dr. McCoy, without much success. He ended, "There are times, Doctor, when I do not understand the Human sense of humour at all. I was speaking of peace and honour, and both Captains found it amusing. Perhaps you could explain? The Captain indicated you would relish doing so."

McCoy snorted derisively. "Spock, it was probably the way you said it rather than what you said that had them amused, and if the Captain told you I'd be able to explain it, he was probably pulling my leg too."

At that moment Kirk arrived. Spock greeted him formally in his best Vulcan mask. "Captain."

McCoy grinned and enlightened a bemused Kirk. "He's peeved because I told him you were pulling both our legs."

Spock stood straighter than ever, his hands firmly clasped behind his back. "To be peeved is an emotion, Doctor. The word is not applicable. I am merely at a loss to understand the Human sense of humour."

Kirk forestalled an argument by asking what they had found out about the Luxors' problem.

McCoy explained that Spock had isolated the new type of radiation, which he believed worked on female hormones, affecting the reproduction process when a female baby was to be born. McCoy believed they could counteract not the radiation itself but the effect on female hormones with a simple injection.

Spock concurred with the doctor's findings, and said he could predict no side effects from the use of the injection. He added that a female subject would be needed for a test, but a volunteer was unlikely to be found among the captives.

McCoy snorted again. "Spock, you don't understand women any better than you understand humour. I bet that somewhere among these lady captives is at least one woman who wants to stay and marry one of her captors and bear him children. Love is like that - it turns up in the most unexpected places."

Spock shook his head in negation, but Kirk was firmly on McCoy's side. "You could be right, Bones." He only had to remind himself of Uhura's reaction to Fonda to confirm that this was a distinct possibility. "Let's give it a try," he said. "We'll broadcast asking for volunteers and explaining the situation, and see if anyone comes forward."

Spock's logical protests were overridden by the fact that the women would be free to choose.

Only one month later, long after the majority of the captives had been returned to their home worlds, a very surprised Fonda presented his case to the Starfleet Council, offering apologies for the Luxors' behaviour and explaining their feelings of hopelessness that had driven them to such drastic measures.

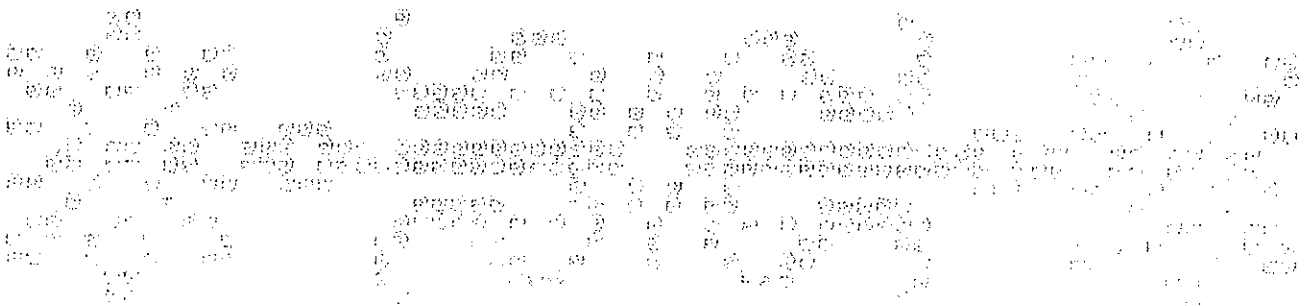
McCoy, at Spock's insistence that the doctor could plead the Luxors' case with feeling, gave medical evidence and confirmed that they had found a cure for the Lux II radiation, which had been tested and proved workable on a number of volunteers.

When questioned he stated that there had been 20 female volunteers who had come forward to try out the injection, and 12 of these had conceived perfectly healthy female babies. McCoy grinned at the memory of Spock's amazement when so many of the women had volunteered and expressed a wish to settle down on Lux II with their captors.

McCoy's speech, or the Luxors' case itself, won over Starfleet Command and Fonda returned to Lux II with Starfleet aid rather than the jail sentence he had expected. The Enterprise was given the honour of escorting Fonda home. McCoy was honoured by the fact that his first 'patient' had asked him to give her away at her wedding.

The final and greatest honour went to Uhura. Fonda advised her that Lux II was being renamed Effir, the Luxor word for freedom, in her honour. This was because she had taught the Luxor the value of freedom of choice. All men and women on Effir would treasure their freedom in future.

Uhura's first undercover operation was logged as a complete success, but it was with some relief that she returned to the role of Communications Officer. She was glad to be back among friends again.



TRAITOR IN OUR MIDST

by

Sandy Catchick

Captain Kirk had prepared himself thoroughly for his new appointment as Captain of the Constellation Class vessel the USS Enterprise. For him it was a dream come true. And he was lucky - very lucky. He was the youngest Captain ever to be appointed by Starfleet. He had studied the details of the ship down to the very last rivet, and the personal details of his crew until he felt he knew them all thoroughly. However, it was different knowing people on paper and meeting them in reality, one reason why interviews still remained an important part of any selection process throughout Starfleet.

When he beamed on board to take over his new command he was not surprised, therefore, to be greeted by a Vulcan. He knew that he had inherited a Vulcan First Officer from Christopher Pike, the previous Captain. He was a being who was both reserved and formal, and who would not welcome shaking hands. Although he did not know the reason for that reluctance, he was willing to respect it as part of his First Officer's culture.

What surprised him was not the look of the man, the dignified, straight, military stance, nor the voice, deep, precise and totally without inflection. It was the eyes.

When Kirk's hazel eyes met the Vulcan's dark brown ones it was as though all time and space stood still.

Kirk wondered afterwards how he had managed to get through the formalities without his inner turmoil being obvious to the rest of the crew. He knew how important first impressions could be, for many people never looked beyond that unless forced to do so. Therefore he had wanted to make a good impression as the new Captain. He was keenly aware that he needed to draw a line between keeping command - vital for one so young and new to his role - and getting to know his people - vital for his own preferred method of operation. That one exchange of glances with the Vulcan had thrown his plans out of the window, and he had been forced to fall back on flannel to get through the introductions.

At last alone in his cabin he lay down on his bunk and reflected on the morning's activities. The Enterprise appeared to be a good ship, and well run at that. The officers he had met seemed competent, and - with the exception of the Vulcan - friendly. He did not expect overt friendship from a Vulcan, but even now he could not shake the memory of that exchange of glances.

Something had passed between them. He was not sure what, exactly, but it was almost as though he had seen in that glance the fulfilment of all the things he lacked: an orderliness to combat his own untidiness; a even-temperedness to ease his occasional swift anger; and above all a cool, calm and collected logic to stay his impetuosity. More than that, he had met an equally free spirit, one with endless curiosity and a love of the stars. Yet how could he know all that from a single glance? Worse still, how did that

assessment hold water when compared with his tour of the ship, when the Vulcan seemed as cold as ice, never speaking unless asked a direct question and deflecting personal questions with a skill worthy of a diplomat? It didn't add up.

Kirk tried to solve the puzzle over the next few weeks by getting to know his First Officer. He had to remind himself that it was 'Mr. Spock', since everyone else seemed to be known by their last name only. Somehow it didn't seem right to address the Vulcan as anything but 'Mr.'. It was obvious, too, that that was how everyone else addressed the Vulcan - he was not sure if it was out of respect or fear. However, the first time he slipped up and just said 'Spock', and waited for a bomb to explode, he was even more deeply puzzled by the lack of reaction from the Vulcan. He had expected the lack of formality to irritate the man, but if he was irritated he hid it well.

The getting-to-know-you process was all one way as far as Kirk was concerned. Mr. Spock never asked Kirk anything about himself, never volunteered any information without being asked, sat alone in the rec room unless someone specifically asked to join him (although he did at least go to the rec room when Kirk had expected him to isolate himself in his cabin) and yet the crew seemed to respect, him if they did not like him.

Kirk reflected grimly on one particular conversation.

"Would you care to join me for a drink, Mr. Spock?" he asked the Vulcan politely when the latter walked into the rec room on an occasion when they were both off duty together.

"Please explain your request, Captain."

"I am asking if you would like to come over here and join me for a glass of wine or a cup of coffee and just have a general chat."

"Vulcans do not drink alcohol or coffee, Captain, and it is a waste of time to chat."

"I don't consider it a waste of time to get to know my First Officer, Mr. Spock. I don't see how I'm going to get to know you unless I can chat to you."

"I see no necessity for you to get to know me, Captain. I assure you that I will always endeavour to give you whatever information you require, and to do everything that is required of a First Officer and Science Officer to the best of my ability."

"That may be enough for a Vulcan, Mr. Spock, but as a Human I feel it part of my duties to get to know my people. Please would you oblige me by telling me just a little about yourself. Nothing too personal. Just something to help us get along better together."

"What is it you wish to know?"

"Well, for example... do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"No."

"How long have you served aboard the Enterprise?"

"That is a matter of record, Captain. Why do you ask a question to which you already know the answer?"

"It's not the answer that's important, Mr. Spock..."

"It is illogical to ask a question to which you do not wish to know the answer."

"You miss my point, Mr. Spock. I don't wish to pry into the details of your family history. I just want to know a bit more about you as a person. I want you to talk to me. It doesn't really matter what we say so long as we get a conversation going."

"I regret I am no conversationalist, Captain. Do I have your permission to go?"

"But you've only just arrived, Mr. Spock. Why did you come to the rec room if you didn't want something to drink? You must drink something."

"I came because it is my duty to know what is going on in this ship. The rec room is the best place to glean that knowledge. Obviously I do drink, since it is impossible for any being to remain alive without liquid refreshment of some kind."

"But if you don't talk to anyone, how will you learn what's going on?"

"Humans talk too much, Captain. One learns more by listening to others than by listening to one's own voice."

"Is that a reprimand for me, Mr. Spock?"

"It is a fact, Captain. I meant no offence by it."

"No offence taken, then. What do you drink, Mr. Spock?"

"I shall provide you with a list from the computer if you require it, Captain. If I may go now?"

"Yes, Mr. Spock. You may go. I see no point in holding this conversation."

"Affirmative, Captain."

Kirk was unhappy. If he didn't break through that formality soon he had a feeling he would never do it. Yet the more he tried the more the Vulcan seemed to clam up. With that exception Kirk was delighted with his new First Officer. Spock was superbly efficient, quick to respond - inhumanly so, in fact - and never seemed to get tired. You could ask him questions about anything and everything under the sun, except himself, and he would come up with an answer, mostly from his own head but occasionally with the help of the library computer. Kirk had never seen anyone get so much information from either a ship's sensors or a library computer. Spock seemed to be able to interpret the vaguest views of a star system and explain exactly what the little dots were. It was amazing.

But how could a Captain trust a First Officer he knew so little about? That was what needled Kirk.

It was exactly one month after Kirk took command that he had his first real doubts about Spock. It was the day of some very special tests for the Enterprise - tests that Kirk wanted his ship to pass with flying colours, not just to confirm his own ability as Captain, but because his ship deserved the best. He had therefore warned the bridge crew - the first team - that they must all report for duty on time.

Spock was late.

It was the first time the Vulcan had ever been late. That made it worse. It was almost as though the Vulcan was deliberately flouting Kirk's orders. As it was a first offence he didn't want to be too hard on the man, but having made it clear how important the day's exercises were, he didn't think he could let the matter pass.

"You are late, Mr. Spock," he said.

"Correct, Captain," replied the Vulcan.

"Did you not hear my request for all the bridge crew to be on time today?"

"I heard it, Captain."

"Then you ignored my orders?"

If the Vulcan heard the question, he ignored it.

"That was a question, Mr. Spock."

"Pardon, Captain. I heard no question."

"I asked you if you ignored my order to be here on time."

"I did not ignore it, Captain. I failed to obey it."

Kirk was exasperated. It seemed that Spock was incapable of giving a direct answer.

"I want no excuses, Mr. Spock."

"I offer none, Captain."

"In that case you are on report."

"I have so logged it."

It never occurred to Kirk that he had not asked the Vulcan the one question that would have given him all his answers - he had not asked Spock *why* he was late.

Only later, in his cabin, did the Captain realise how badly he had handled the situation. He was just cursing himself for his approach when Dr. McCoy, the Chief Medical Officer, buzzed for admittance to his quarters.

When they had finished with ship's business Kirk asked McCoy the question that had been troubling him.

"Do you think I was too hard on Mr. Spock, Bones?" It was a

nickname the Doctor had earned at their first meeting.

McCoy considered the question. "It was his first offence since you took command, Captain, but that in itself is a matter you could not ignore. It was almost a direct challenge to your command to turn up late only on the one day you requested that everyone be on time."

Kirk nodded slowly. "That was my own assessment. But it's so hard to understand that Vulcan that I don't know if he realised what he had done, or if he did it deliberately."

McCoy, unknowingly, sowed the first real seeds of doubt in Kirk's mind. "Vulcans rarely do anything by chance, Jim."

The Doctor looked carefully at Kirk to ensure that the use of his first name was acceptable. Kirk's nod confirmed that it was. He continued, "In the short time since I came aboard I've never known Mr. Spock to do anything without due consideration. He walks deliberately, talks deliberately and acts deliberately. It's a part of his code of logic."

"You're right, Bones. Still, it's my problem. I shouldn't have brought it up."

"Any time you like, Jim. I understand. It must be difficult talking things over with a First Officer like Mr. Spock. If you ever need a third opinion rather than a second one, just let me know. I'm a pretty good listener, so feel free to bend my ear."

Kirk grinned and dismissed McCoy with a, "Will do." But the grin faded as his door closed. He asked himself again, had Spock deliberately disobeyed him? If so, why? And would he do so again?

In the cabin next door Spock too was reflecting on the recent exchange with his new Captain. The Human's questions had been totally illogical. It never occurred to Spock that the Captain might think his actions were deliberate. No Vulcan would consider disobeying a direct order deliberately, and Spock was more bound by duty than any full-blooded Vulcan ever could be. Duty was one thing he clung to in the unstable world of a half Human, half Vulcan entity.

The delay had been unavoidable. His actions had saved a crewmember from further injury, and a life was far more valuable to him than a record for good timekeeping. He had logged his own lateness 2.4 minutes before the Captain had even mentioned the subject - and to him that should have been the only question Kirk needed to ask. He had been highly embarrassed by the attention in front of the bridge crew, and dreaded a similar scene with all emotions focused on him.

He returned to thoughts of that first exchange 4.2 weeks ago, when the Captain had come on board. He had felt some of the charisma and child-like excitement of the new Captain, coupled with a determination that matched his own. He too had felt the possibility of fulfilment in that brief exchange. Here was a man who did not fear his own feelings, who would follow his own intuition without any facts to back it, and yet Spock had appreciated the sincerity and the warmth exuding from him. What frightened him was that this warmth was directed at Spock himself.

He did not know how to respond to it. Not since he had first refused his mother's attempted embrace as he set off for his Kahs-wan trial at the tender age of seven had he felt such an outpouring of emotion directed at him personally. He had passed that first step on the way to Vulcan maturity with flying colours, and had built high the walls of non-emotion.

Why, then, did those walls seem ready to shatter at the single glance of an unknown Human? How easily would they disintegrate if he allowed such a Human to get to know him better - or worse still, to touch him?

It was fear that kept Spock from responding to Kirk's advances. Not fear of Kirk, but fear of himself. He had worked longer and harder than anyone would ever know to achieve the outward stoic face of a Vulcan while suffering the caring inner face that no-one but his mother knew lived within. He believed it to be the weakness of his half Human ancestry that had left him open to 'emotionalism', and so he hid the gentleness and caring of his soul from all men behind an iron mask, and dreaded any loss of control that might expose his weakness.

But until that morning his respect for the new Captain had grown and grown. Kirk had come aboard with a knowledge of the ship that was remarkable for a Human. He had shown his ability with the crew, and won them over in so short a time that Spock was astounded. The previous Captain, Christopher Pike, had been a well respected man, and the crew had been loyal to him. Yet Kirk, in just a few weeks, had won a deeper loyalty from those same people. And if he was honest - and Spock always tried to be - then he had already won that loyalty from the Vulcan too. It was not loyalty, but friendship, that Spock feared to give. Kirk had won his loyalty; he had not won Kirk's friendship. A friendship undeserved was like a loyalty misplaced, something to be avoided. Spock had never had a friend. He did not know where to begin in earning Kirk's friendship; he did not understand that friendship could be a gift - and that it took courage to receive such a gift, as it took generosity to give it.

His thoughts wandered further afield, something that would have told anyone who knew him well that the Vulcan was upset. He turned to consideration of the new Doctor. He was another matter entirely. Spock had no fear of McCoy breaching his walls - if anything his defences hardened from solid steel to impenetrable diamond in the Doctor's presence. His medical examination, as per regulations, had been a trial to them both. Yet the Vulcan did not let the Doctor's abrasive manner blind him to the man's skill. McCoy had his own walls, made not of diamond or steel, but of thorns. Few would willingly risk being torn to shreds to penetrate such a fence. Spock could respect both the skill of the surgeon and the thoroughness of the fence builder.

McCoy would, in his opinion, make an ideal conversationalist for the new Captain. Spock had noted that nothing of their argument had gone beyond the walls of sickbay. The Doctor had promised and given his silence. Spock could ask no more for himself. For the Captain, silence and a listening ear - and someone not afraid to speak up - would be just what the doctor ordered. Spock almost smiled. Almost. But years of practice had turned the inner humour into nothing more than a slight softening of his features. Few indeed would have been able to perceive the minuscule changes in muscle tension. Perhaps the Captain needed to talk more to someone like the Doctor. Perhaps then he would not need to vent his illogic

on the bridge in front of prying eyes.

Spock forced himself to relax and relegated the scene to the back of his mind, where he logged the many illogical actions of his Human crewmates. He wondered if he would ever understand them.

McCoy, too, reflected on the relationship between the Captain and his First Officer. It wasn't fair to saddle an open, friendly young Captain with a poker-faced computer as First Officer. Then again, Spock did have years of experience on the Enterprise to contribute. McCoy had no doubts about the Vulcan's professional ability. He had never seen anyone more efficient in all his life. The question was whether Spock could give his Human Captain the moral and personal support he needed - and McCoy had no doubt the Captain needed such support.

That got him to thinking about Kirk's question. Why had Spock been late today of all days? The Vulcan was stubborn - that was a fact - but McCoy would have bet every last credit on his loyalty. Their argument in sickbay during Spock's medical examination had been far-ranging. He himself had been the devil's advocate, and had got a lot more out of the First Officer than he had expected - yes, he had irritated the man when he had believed beforehand that he was emotionless. He had watched Spock control that irritation. It had been a very interesting experience. If he hadn't had his instruments recording at the time he didn't think he would have noticed Spock's anger. Nothing showed in the Vulcan's face, but when his instruments had read the change in metabolic rate, pulse and breathing, he had looked more closely and had seen the additional tension in the muscles. He had also seen them forcibly relaxed. A fine display of muscle control, including some of the actions he would previously have classed as autonomic. Yes, the Vulcan was going to be a real challenge, psychologically and physiologically.

But throughout the exchange the one thing that had impressed him was Spock's loyalty to the ship and crew, and to both the old and the new Captains. Spock had as good as told him that he didn't consider friendship necessary to efficiency, but loyalty did not require friendship. Both Captains had earned his loyalty, and both of them had it. That was that. Stubborn, pointy-eared... Vulcan!

Yet when Kirk suggested that Spock might have been late by accident that didn't hold water. Spock had been exactly on time for his medical. He had been exactly on time for duty every day McCoy had watched him. Everything he did was exact. Why, then, had the Vulcan been late on the one day his Captain had asked him to be on time?

The question resolved itself within the next few minutes. Nurse Chapel popped her head round his office door.

"Doctor, would you take a look at Ensign Kelly? He was admitted this morning with a broken leg. I wouldn't trouble you normally, but it seems to be a compound fracture."

McCoy checked the time of admission, and a slow smile spread over his face. So *that* was what had delayed the Vulcan, he thought.

McCoy was looking forward to passing on the information to the Captain when he went to look at Ensign Kelly. By the time he had

finished his examination he was glad he had not. The young man did not know who had taken him to sickbay. No-one else did, either. No-one had seen Kelly until they had spotted him lying on the examination table unconscious. But the piece of information that made McCoy's stomach turn over was even more mysterious. Kelly was sure of one thing - he had not fallen and broken his leg. He had been pushed.

The question uppermost in McCoy's mind was whether Spock had pushed him, or whether Spock had taken him to sickbay. In either case that could be the cause of the Vulcan's late arrival on the bridge. But if the former were true, he didn't want to alert the Vulcan to the fact that he suspected foul play.

Had he really joined Starfleet to get away from it all? It seemed that life on a Starship was not quite as routine as he had imagined.

Nothing happened for the next few days. Nothing, except that McCoy started to watch Spock like a hawk. Kirk, apparently, was doing likewise, if for completely different reasons. Fortunately the Vulcan took the surveillance in his stride, outwardly, at least. If he was aware of the extra attention he was receiving he did not acknowledge it.

Then disaster nearly struck the Enterprise.

They were on final manoeuvres before leaving for their deep space mission. All eyes were on the Enterprise once more, and Kirk had given specific orders for everyone to be on their toes. He had had to elaborate, since the Vulcan had taken him literally and asked the significance of standing on tiptoe. Kirk had been about to ask him if he was taking the mickey, when it dawned on him that that too would be taken literally. He didn't want the whole bridge giggling when they should be concentrating.

The bridge seemed to settle down after the initial laughter at Spock and Kirk - mostly at the former. However, they had just completed a tricky set of course changes, with Sulu on the helm handling the Enterprise brilliantly, when Spock said suddenly,

"Change course 0.65 by 3.2, Mr. Sulu."

The Vulcan's voice was as even as ever, but there was something about the way he spoke that attracted Kirk's attention. Further-more, it was not Spock's place but his own to give such orders to the Helmsman. Was this yet another attack on his authority?

Kirk's voice was exceptionally low and deliberate when he turned his attention to the Vulcan, having ensured first that the ship was safely through the maze set for her. If the Vulcan had interpreted that tone correctly he would have been forewarned of Kirk's anger, but he had yet to learn how to read his Captain.

"Mr. Spock, just now you interfered with my running of the ship and gave a direct order to the Helmsman." Bearing in mind his previous debate with the Vulcan he decided to handle this a little better. "Please explain your action."

"I wished to avoid giving you an erroneous reading, Captain."

Kirk took a deep breath. "Do you realise you could have jeopardised the safety of this vessel and all her crew?"

"I am well aware of that fact, Captain."

"I am not satisfied with your handling of this affair, Mr. Spock."

Kirk suddenly noticed the Vulcan's quick glance around the bridge. He realised, if belatedly, that Spock was the centre of attention, and he had read enough about Vulcans to know that they did not like people staring at them.

"Report to me in my cabin in ten minutes time," he said, and he turned on his heel and walked out.

McCoy, who had watched the exchange, kept a close eye on Spock. The Vulcan ignored the stares directed at him and turned to Sulu.

"Take the con, Mr. Sulu," he said quietly, and with no sign of anger.

McCoy realised that Kirk had been so angry that he hadn't thought to transfer command. The Vulcan could make good use of that if he wished to cause trouble. He decided to probe.

"Are you going to log that, Mr. Spock?"

"Log what, Doctor?"

"Log the fact that you have just transferred command to Mr. Sulu."

"Indeed, that is standard procedure."

McCoy grimaced. "I would like to see your log entry."

"It is none of your business, Doctor."

"Nevertheless, I want to see it," growled McCoy, his temper rising as it always did when he spoke to this man.

"If you insist, Doctor."

The Vulcan moved over and McCoy looked at his log entry. He had to read it twice to be sure his eyes were not playing tricks.

First Officer's personal Log. Stardate 3543.2.

"I have been derelict in my duty. At 10.20 hours, ship's time, I was forced to instruct Mr. Sulu, at Helm, to make a course change that was only necessary because my original vector, based on the computer's calculations, was wrong. Since it was my responsibility to maintain the computer at maximum efficiency, and since the Captain ordered all bridge crew to be on their toes - which I believe means to pay extra attention to detail - I have failed to perform adequately. It is most fortuitous that my cross-calculation of our heading enabled me to identify the error before the Enterprise was endangered. However, since the computer was overhauled only 24 hours ago, and since it cannot err, the implications are considerable. I must

endeavour to build additional safeguards against unauthorised access. The fault is mine." I have been ordered to the Captain's quarters in ten minutes time, when I shall put myself on report.

"In the interim Mr. Sulu has the con, and we are proceeding on course, having completed the set manoeuvres."

McCoy looked at the Vulcan, who met his gaze directly. "You didn't need to show me that, Mr. Spock. It was the ship's log, not your personal log, I wanted to see. Why did you?"

Spock hesitated. "I... wished another to be aware of the situation."

"I don't understand. Why not report this to Jim - I mean the Captain?"

"I shall report my error to the Captain, Doctor. However..." the hesitation was more marked than ever "... I do not think he will believe me."

"Why not?"

"Based on empirical evidence of his past behaviour, Doctor, he believes I am attempting to usurp his authority in some way."

"Are you?"

"I am a Vulcan."

"That's not an answer."

"Vulcans believe in doing their duty. My duty as First Officer is to obey the Captain."

"How do Vulcans get to be Captains, then?"

"They are chosen by their superiors. If you will excuse me now, Doctor, I must report to the Captain."

Before McCoy could comment further the Vulcan had gone. The Doctor had a lot to think over. Spock need not have shown him his personal log. On the other hand, the Vulcan was right. It could be a cover-up for his error, or it could be true. If it were true, then someone had deliberately tampered with the computer. McCoy didn't like that idea. However, Spock didn't strike him as the kind of person who would run from admitting an error. Was he power mad? If so, why hadn't he tried for the Captaincy himself? The Vulcan's records showed that he had refused Pike's offer to put him forward as Captain, so why would he want power now? But if Spock was telling the truth, then who else would be acting against Kirk? Or was it against Spock? McCoy decided to do some investigating of his own.

Meanwhile Spock had arrived at the Captain's quarters. He buzzed for admittance and moved quietly through the door when it opened. It was his first visit to the Captain's cabin, and he allowed his eyes to take in the few personal belongings that marked it as Kirk's own.

Kirk remained standing in front of him. He was annoyed by Spock's curiosity. "When you've quite finished inspecting my quarters, Mr. Spock," he said sarcastically.

The sarcasm was lost on the Vulcan, who said nothing, but brought his gaze to rest on the Captain.

Kirk cleared his throat tentatively, and then decided to ask some straight questions. "All right, Mr. Spock. I want you to answer some questions for me, and I want some honest answers. If I can have your honesty I am willing to overlook some... shall we say... misdemeanours."

Spock raised an eyebrow.

"First, did you usurp my authority by giving a direct order to Mr. Sulu while I was still on the bridge?"

"Affirmative."

Kirk was appalled by the single word. He rephrased his question. "Did you realise what you were doing when you gave the order?"

The second eyebrow joined its companion. "Vulcans have complete self control, Captain. Unless I am ill or injured in some way I always know what I am doing."

Kirk was exasperated. "Then why did you countermand my orders?"

At last the Vulcan thought he understood. "It was necessary, Captain."

"Why?"

"To correct my earlier error."

"What error?"

"I calculated our course and checked it against the computer. I realised there was an error. It was necessary to correct it before the Enterprise was endangered."

Kirk nodded. "I see. Well next time, Mr. Spock, kindly ensure that your calculations are accurate, and that you give me correct data the first time round. Do you realise that I rely on you to give me the correct information?"

"That is my duty, Captain. I shall put myself on report."

"That won't be necessary, Mr. Spock. Just try and be a bit more accurate when you calculate in future."

Spock's eyebrows, which had returned to normal during the exchange, shot up again. "My calculations are always accurate, Captain."

Kirk stared at him in disbelief. Was the Vulcan playing games with him? He had just admitted an error in calculation, and now said he never made any. "Dismissed, Mr. Spock," was all he could think of to say.

The Vulcan left as quietly as he had entered.

It never occurred to Kirk that the Vulcan's calculations might be right and those of the computer wrong. No Human would have been able to match the computer's speed of calculation and check it for accuracy. Kirk didn't know how lucky he was that he had a Vulcan at the library computer; had it been a Human, the ship and many of the crew would have been damaged.

Kirk misunderstood Spock's motives, and Spock misunderstood Kirk's questions. A Human's lack of understanding of a Vulcan, and a Vulcan's lack of understanding of a Human, gave ample opportunity for a third party to cause mayhem.

But one man could avert trouble. The problem was that he was just a country doctor, and he didn't know either of them well enough to make a judgement.

Spock's overhaul of the computer made him certain that someone was out to harm the Captain or the Enterprise. He dismissed the possibility that anyone might be out to harm him, since he had been on the ship for a long time and there had been ample opportunity to act against him. He took a sudden interest in crew records, and began correlating information on all new members of the crew.

Dr. McCoy would have been surprised, had he known it, to learn that Spock had already crossed him off his list of suspects. He did check his record, but only in case it helped with the overall picture. Spock had already decided that the Doctor was someone he and the Captain could trust.

Spock spent many on and off duty hours at the library computer. He not only overhauled every circuit, he built in so many failsafes that it would be impossible for someone to gain access without that access being flagged.

Seventy two hours later, Spock was finally satisfied that the computer could be relied on. He was also satisfied that at least one member of the Human crew could not. His cross checking of personal files led him to narrow his list of suspects to five persons. Spock retired for his first sleep in three days with those five names uppermost in his mind.

Kirk, having considered the situation from every conceivable angle and still not having come up with a solution, decided to avail himself of the Doctor's offer of a third opinion. Taking a bottle of Saurian brandy and a pair of glasses with him, he approached sickbay.

McCoy welcomed him non-committally, until his eyes fell on the brandy bottle. "Well now, Captain, is this a celebration?" he drawled.

Kirk grinned rather sheepishly. "It's more of a bribe, Bones. I've come to take you up on your offer of a third opinion. I'm not sure if I'm going mad, if someone is trying to get me, or if I'm just taking things too personally, and am not fit to be Captain of a Starship."

McCoy suddenly became serious. "Captain, sir, whatever the answer, there's one thing I'm sure of. There is no-one better able

to be the Captain of a Starship than you. And that is my professional opinion."

Kirk grinned more widely. "I guess I've come to the right place, Doctor. I could sure use a little cheering up."

They spent the whole evening in conversation. Kirk summarised his exchange with Spock. McCoy, aware of a dual responsibility since he had seen the First Officer's log, did not disclose that information. He was not sure enough of the Vulcan to negate all Kirk's worries, but reassured that Spock had admitted his error, McCoy ensured that the Captain left sickbay thinking that perhaps all that was needed was a lesson on Vulcan logic. Kirk also felt reassured about his own handling of the situation, as McCoy had made him feel that no-one could understand Spock.

It was with a sinking heart that McCoy heard the shipwide broadcast.

"Dr. McCoy to the fitness room, please. Medical emergency. Dr. McCoy to the fitness room."

He acknowledged the call on the nearest intercom and then dashed for the fitness room. At first he was confused by the sight that met his eyes. Steam seemed to be everywhere, and he couldn't see anyone.

Then he heard the Captain's voice. "In here, Bones. Hurry!"

McCoy entered the steam-filled room, aiming for Kirk's voice. Through the haze he could see three bodies sprawled on the ground. A woman's body lay across Spock's knee. The Captain stood slightly to the side of the Vulcan, holding his arm in a vice-like grip.

Kirk's anger was apparent in his very stance. He didn't give McCoy a chance to take in the situation, but said angrily, "They're all suffering from serious steam burns to the face, Bones. And this is no accident - it's deliberate sabotage. Whoever did this couldn't have been burned himself, because only people on this side of the apparatus would have been hit, and the culprit had to have been behind the ducting at the time he set off the hose. I was right here when I heard the first scream, and no-one has left, so whoever did this hasn't had time to escape. There's only one person here who hasn't suffered steam burns to his face, and that's Mr. Spock. In his own bloody terms, logically he is the most likely suspect. I'd like you to bear witness to that, Bones."

McCoy had listened to Kirk's tirade, but hadn't stopped his own work of inspecting the injured. The sickbay team had arrived, and he supervised the gentle removal of the three victims, who to his relief were all alive, but groaning and writhing in agony. He then gently lifted the young woman from Spock's lap. In doing so he caught sight of a burn on the Vulcan's arm, but it was a water burn, not one caused by steam. However, the woman's face had not been burned by steam either; she too seemed to have suffered only water burns.

Kirk swung towards McCoy. "You will witness for me, won't you, Bones? Spock's the only one here whose face hasn't been burned by steam. That's correct, isn't it?"

"What about the young lady, Jim?" queried McCoy. "She hasn't been seriously burned either. She and Spock both seem to have caught the tail end of whatever happened here."

"The young lady would not have sufficient strength to sabotage the sauna equipment, Doctor," said Spock quietly.

Kirk and McCoy both swung towards him; Kirk still had a tight hold on his arm, so that the Vulcan was pulled slightly off balance. He recovered himself as McCoy said,

"Are you admitting to the sabotage, Mr. Spock?"

"I admit nothing, Doctor. I merely concur with the Captain's analysis of the situation, and point out that the lady could not be a suspect."

"Then you do admit it?" snapped Kirk.

"There are other possibilities," Spock said quietly.

"Such as?" prompted the Captain.

"I recommend a thorough search of the locker area, Captain."

"It's a bit late for that, Spock. There have been so many medics through here that there's been plenty of time for anyone to disappear," said McCoy.

"You should have thought of that sooner," said Kirk, and then added, "Or perhaps you did, and just didn't mention it so that you had time to buy yourself an alibi."

"He is right, though, Jim," said McCoy. "Someone could have hidden out here and we'd have missed him in the rush to get to the injured."

"But that doesn't explain why Spock isn't injured. Anyone in here without an injury has to be a suspect."

"You're in here, and I don't see any injuries on you," said McCoy gently.

"Dammit, Bones, I told you I was just outside the door when I heard the screams. Spock was already in here, and no-one ran out past me. It has to have been Spock."

"He could say the same about you."

"I was already in here when the Captain ran in, Doctor. But there has been time for another to get away while we were concentrating on the injured."

"Inventing a third party won't get you off the hook this time," said Kirk.

McCoy halted the argument. "Let's leave the legal arguments until later, Captain. Both this young lady and Mr. Spock have suffer burns, and you and I will need to have our lungs checked out, too. Sickbay, now - and that's an order."

They all filed out of the fitness centre. Kirk still had hold of Spock's arm until the Vulcan said, "I assure you I have no

intention of running away, Captain," and Kirk released him as though he had just picked up a hot coal. The journey to sickbay was made in silence, apart from an occasional moan from the young ensign, who was being carried on a stretcher.

McCoy checked each of the injured and sedated them. He turned his attention to Kirk then, and was able to confirm that the Captain had not been injured by the steam or the very hot water that had escaped from the hoses. He also managed to persuade Kirk not to have any guards with Spock in sickbay, but only on the condition that Security mounted several guards at the entrance to sickbay. Spock's only response had been a raising of his right eyebrow. Kirk left, still angry and threatening to call a hearing.

McCoy turned to the Vulcan and shepherded him into a side room, where he had already recalibrated his instruments. He started by checking Spock's lungs, and was alarmed to find that, like the seriously injured, Spock had inhaled some steam. That didn't make sense, but he checked three times and came up with the same figures.

"Okay, Mr. Spock, I want an explanation. These instruments show steam damage to your lungs, yet your face is untouched and you are not rolling around in agony like the others. If Jim is right and you are the culprit, then how did you get steam damage - or was that when you tampered with the hose?"

The Vulcan didn't reply. McCoy watched him closely, looking for signs of guilt, but that close inspection led to a different discovery - the Vulcan was in pain. McCoy didn't realise it himself, but his voice and his whole attitude changed.

"You have been hurt, Mr. Spock. Where?"

The Vulcan didn't reply, but his head came up, and this time all McCoy could see was the mask of non-emotion which hid the earlier signs of pain.

McCoy wasn't going to let that go. "As Chief Medical Officer, Mr. Spock, I am ordering you to submit to a medical examination. I have that right. Either we can do this by the book, or you can tell me where you've been hurt."

The Vulcan's eyes bored into him. When he spoke McCoy was taken aback.

"As First Officer I submit to your request, on condition that you keep the results of such an examination confidential - unless, as per regulations, you are required to reveal the results as playing a material part in my ability or otherwise to carry out my duties."

"What are you trying to hide, Spock?" demanded McCoy.

"Your agreement to confidentiality first, Doctor."

McCoy nodded.

"Proceed."

"Take off your shirt, then."

"I regret I am unable to comply."

McCoy lost his temper. "Stop playing games, Spock! One minute you agree to being examined, and the next you don't. What are you trying to do?"

Spock blinked at the accusing tone. "I did not say I am unwilling to comply, Doctor. I merely pointed out that I am unable to do so."

McCoy opened his mouth to snap again, then shut it as the import of the Vulcan's words registered. Very gently indeed he lifted the corner of Spock's blue science shirt and looked underneath. He didn't get very far - the skin of the Vulcan's back was melted into the material of the shirt. He came to his own conclusions.

"Why the hell didn't you tell Jim your face wasn't burned because you were facing the other way? Why did you let him think you did it?"

"If I did not, Doctor, then by the Captain's own terms who would be the most likely suspect?"

McCoy stared at him. "No-one would suspect the Captain, Spock."

"No?" queried the Vulcan.

McCoy started to reply when the Vulcan suddenly grimaced in the face of a shooting pain even he could not control. McCoy forgot the mystery and concentrated on being a doctor. Within minutes he had Spock sedated and lying on his stomach. This was one patient he decided he was going to treat himself - he owed it to the man after practically accusing him too.

Some twenty minutes McCoy had completed his work with surgical instruments and plastiskin, and had covered the Vulcan with a sheet when Kirk returned. The Doctor hurriedly left Spock's side and approached the Captain.

"What can I do for you, Jim?"

"I came to see how they are."

"They'll all be fine. I have them all under heavy sedation against the pain, but with current medical practice the worst they are likely to have is a small scar or two."

"And Ensign Jones? The young woman," he added at McCoy's look.

"She's the luckiest of all. She seems to have escaped very lightly indeed."

"Isn't that a bit odd, Bones?"

It was odd, but McCoy had already reached his own conclusions. As he saw it, the chances were that Spock and the girl had been close together, and he had shielded her with his own body. That explained why the Vulcan's back had been burned, and also the angle of the burn, which definitely indicated a man bending over, not one standing upright. McCoy had no doubts about Spock now. No-one would subject himself to those burns; he could not be the culprit. McCoy wasn't sure that Spock was right in thinking the Captain would be blamed, but he was willing to give him a proper hearing.

With that in mind he replied, "I think she and Spock were far enough off to one side that they didn't get so badly hurt."

It wasn't a lie. Not quite. Spock's injuries weren't as bad as those of the other three men, but that was really only because he had had his back to the steam, and the face was more vulnerable.

"Then you don't think Spock caused it?"

"No, I don't think he did. Perhaps he's right, and someone was hiding behind the apparatus."

"If you don't back me, Bones, then I haven't got a case against him. But this, on top of his other actions, makes me damn sure I don't want him as First. It's a great pity I didn't discover that before we set out on our mission. I'll just have to live with it for now - and with him. By the way, where is he?"

"He's sleeping."

"All these people injured, and he goes off and has a snooze! No doubt that's his prerogative, since he's officially off duty. That man's got no feelings. And to think that when I first met him I thought we had something in common."

McCoy was surprised at that revelation. He didn't know what to say. Kirk saved him further embarrassment by turning on his heel and departing.

McCoy returned to the side room to find Spock sitting up.

"You did not give me away," the Vulcan said.

"No, but you do owe me an explanation."

Spock nodded in confirmation and McCoy leaned closer to listen better. He was therefore surprised when the Vulcan rose and said, "As soon as I have an explanation I shall ensure that you are the first to know, Doctor."

McCoy could only stare after his retreating back. "Clam!" he shouted, but it was only to vent his own feelings.

Spock returned to duty that night. McCoy had considered preventing him, but had come to the conclusion that it would only make things worse. He went up to the bridge to check that the Vulcan was all right, and realised that there was tension in the air as soon as the turbolift doors parted.

Spock was bending over his hooded viewer. McCoy considered that was probably the most comfortable position for him with those burns. He gave no indication of the severity of his injuries, and McCoy noted that for the future - he would have to be very careful indeed to know when this man was really hurt. But as he studied the bowed back McCoy realised that if he took the trouble to look he could recognise the signs of pain. Yes, there were little indications of tension that no amount of control could hide. You would have to know just what to look for to see them though, he mused.

It was obvious that no-one else on the bridge had noticed

Spock's discomfort. Sulu passed by the First Officer on his way between communications and navigation, and accidentally bumped into him. Spock jumped visibly, but made no sound. McCoy, knowing how much that must have hurt, was astonished when the Vulcan's calm voice replied, "I prefer no physical contact, Mr. Sulu, but you have not offended me" when Sulu stammered an apology for the accident.

Kirk opened his mouth to make a comment, and then thought better of it.

McCoy realised that any comment he might offer would only make matters worse. "I'll be in sickbay if anyone needs me," he said meaningfully.

Spock nodded almost imperceptibly, and McCoy knew he had been understood.

Kirk said, "I should think you've got your work cut out for you after that little 'accident', Bones." The word 'accident' dripped venom.

"It was no accident, Captain," said Spock, straightening with difficulty, "but the perpetrator of the crime cannot be brought to trial without firm evidence against him."

"For once I agree with you, Mr. Spock," responded the Captain.

"The possibility also exists that more than one person is involved," Spock elaborated.

"I'll bear that in mind," Kirk said acidly.

"I urge you to do so," was the quiet reply.

McCoy left quickly, wondering if Kirk would suspect *him* of being Spock's accomplice. He almost suspected himself.

Two weeks passed with the ship under the constant strain of mistrust. Scuttlebutt had it that the Captain blamed Spock for the accident, but the injured crewmen and the girl, all well on the way to recovery now, insisted that the Vulcan had been with them when the steam had come at them. They were at a loss to explain how he had escaped untouched. McCoy gave a guilty start each time they mentioned the Vulcan escaping unhurt. He seemed to be piggy in the middle, trusted by no-one and full of secrets he himself didn't understand - and that was painful to a man who had joined Starfleet to find a home.

McCoy, sure of the Vulcan now, did his own research. Based on the medical records of the crew he narrowed his suspects down to three possible candidates. All three had what he termed the amateur detective's MO - motive and opportunity rather than *modus operandi*. He hadn't figured out just how they did their work.

One of the suspects was Sulu, the Helmsman. He had been assigned to Helm only since Kirk took over as Captain, and it appeared from his record that he was ambitious enough to want to climb the ladder, had enough knowledge of the computer to change its programming, and had been absent from the bridge when the accident occurred. The only problem was that as a member of the bridge crew he had definitely been present when Spock had been delayed the first

time he had disobeyed Kirk's order to be on time.

The second suspect was Galloway, the Security Chief. He had served under Kirk on a previous ship, and had been demoted on the Captain's evidence against him. He was also known to dislike the Vulcan's being in a position of authority on a Human ship. Unfortunately he appeared to be quite happy as Security Chief, and not too interested in power; he also had a healthy regard for his own well-being, and McCoy wasn't sure if he was the type to risk injury to himself in order to injure another. That was one of his strong points as Chief of Security - he always tried to ensure that he and his men were ahead of the game so that no-one got hurt. He did have ample knowledge of computing, and had been near the scene of the accident.

The third suspect was Lawson, the Navigator. He had a very high score of power and risk-taking, but he was known to respect the Vulcan, and had no known reason to dislike the new Captain. He didn't know much about computers, but he had had the opportunity to cause Spock's delay since he had been on an errand from the bridge at the time. Also, he had been missing during the accident, and he certainly had the strength to have caused that too.

It was a pity McCoy didn't know about Spock's research. The Vulcan had not considered motive, as to him no motive seemed logical, and he didn't know enough about Human motivation to pursue the matter. However, he had his five suspects listed on the basis of their known whereabouts and their knowledge of the Enterprise. His names were Reed, Lawson, Galloway, Bright and McAllister. Unfortunately, none of them appeared to have had the opportunity to be in all three places at the relevant time.

Reed had been nearby when Spock had been delayed on his way to the bridge; he did not have access to the computer, and had been in Engineering at the time of the accident.

Lawson had been seen on deck 5 the day Spock had been delayed, and he had also been missing at the time of the accident, but Spock didn't think he knew enough about the computer to have tampered with it so effectively.

Galloway had been absent from his post the day Spock had been delayed, and he had a good knowledge of the computer, but he had been nowhere near the accident. His alibi was as good as a man could have - he had been with Sulu at the time.

Bright lived up to his name and was a computer expert, serving in Spock's own department. He had been at his post on the day Spock was delayed, but had been missing during the time of the accident.

McAllister had adequate knowledge of computing, but he had been on duty during both the accident and the delay.

Spock concluded that at least two men were working in unison.

It was therefore with some misgivings on Spock's part, and a feeling of butterflies in the stomach on McCoy's, that both learned of Kirk's chosen landing party for their visit to the planet Theta V. The group consisted of Kirk, who insisted that as the new Captain he needed to lead the party; Galloway as Security Chief; Sulu, because of his knowledge of botany; Morley, as science expert; and Lawson, because he had visited Theta V on a previous occasion. There were also to be two additional security guards.

It was known that the natives were humanoid, and that they were at a fairly early stage in their development, but they did have weapons of a primitive nature, and there were many local wars between various warlords. The Federation's main interest in the planet was in the kiki plant, which was a rare member of the foxglove family, and one know to be essential in the cure of certain diseases.

Spock asked to join the landing party. Kirk at first declined, and then changed his mind. "On second thoughts, Mr. Spock, perhaps I'd rather have you where I can keep an eye on you than running loose on my ship."

The Vulcan didn't even raise an eyebrow at that.

McCoy broke in, "Captain, I would like to check out all members of the landing party to ensure that they are fit."

Kirk, having no time constraints, agreed.

In the end the landing party comprised Kirk, Spock, Galloway, Sulu, Lawson and two security guards. McCoy was reluctant to pass Spock fit for duty as his back was still very raw, and some of the blisters there had not yet burst. He was even more reluctant to let Kirk go down without someone to protect him. Galloway, Sulu and Lawson were his three main suspects; it was unthinkable that Kirk should have chosen all three of them for this duty. He finally agreed to allow Spock to go on condition the Vulcan took with him a spray to treat the burns; he would not be able to apply it himself, and McCoy made him promise that he would ask one of the others to do so if he needed to ease the pain.

Thus satisfied with the Vulcan's promise, McCoy accompanied him to the transporter room. "Take care, Jim - and watch your back," he pleaded.

"I will, Bones, don't worry," replied Kirk; and then, "after you, Mr. Spock."

The party took their stations and soon disappeared in the lights of the transporter beam.

They landed on a hill overlooking a small village. Kirk reported their safe arrival, Spock immediately unslung his tricorder and started taking readings, and Sulu was soon bending over some of the native plants, his eyes alight with interest. Galloway instructed his men to fan out and protect their senior officers, and Lawson started a conversation with Kirk about the natives as he remembered them.

Sulu completed his examination of the plants and turned towards the Captain. "I believe we will find the kiki plant nearer to water, Captain. I think the riverside over there would be as good a place as any to start."

"I concur, Captain," advised the Vulcan. "There is a wide variety of flora in that direction, and the surface drainage would be consistent with the preferences of the kiki family."

"That way it is, then," said Kirk. He opened his communicator to advise Mr. Scott, who had the con, of their intentions. "Kirk to

Enterprise. Kirk to Enterprise." There was no answer. "I seem to have a problem with my communicator," he said after a pause.

"May I have a look?" asked Spock politely.

"Use mine," Sulu said helpfully.

"Mine is definitely okay," said Lawson. "Would you like me to contact the ship?"

Suddenly all hell broke loose.

"No, Captain!" shouted Spock, launching himself at Lawson.

Sulu dropped his communicator and grabbed for his phaser.

Kirk yelled, "Watch the Vulcan!"

"Fire on stun!" Galloway snapped.

Spock collapsed under the energy of two phasers set to stun, but not before his iron hard fingers caught Lawson's hands, crushing them and the communicator. Lawson also fell, having caught the periphery of the phaser fire; his own phaser fell from his other hand. Galloway remained standing, a phaser still in his hand, but he looked in amazement to where his two guards had stood moments before. Richardson's body had disappeared under the attack of his crewmate, which could only mean that the latter's phaser had been set to kill. Dawes had then turned the phaser on the Captain, but before he could fire Sulu had fired his own weapon. Dawes had gone down, but had then managed to turn his phaser on himself and fired. He had committed suicide.

Nothing made sense to Galloway, or to Sulu. Little made sense to Kirk.

"I don't understand," Sulu said hesitantly.

"I believe Mr. Spock and Mr. Dawes may have been trying to kill me," said Kirk calmly.

"Mr. Spock would never kill anyone," said Sulu resolutely.

"Why did he attack Lawson, then?" asked Kirk.

"I'm not sure, Captain," replied Sulu honestly, "but if he was trying to kill Lawson, why did he go for his communicator rather than his phaser?"

Kirk looked doubtfully at the bodies of Spock and Lawson. The latter started to move. "Easy," said Kirk.

Lawson looked up to see the drawn phaser in Kirk's hand. He looked alarmed.

"It's okay," said Kirk. "I'm just keeping an eye on things until Mr. Spock comes round. I don't trust him."

"What happened to my communicator?" Lawson asked.

"I'm afraid Mr. Spock appears to have crushed it. We'll have to use Mr. Galloway's."

But Galloway's communicator, and Sulu's, didn't work. Nor did Spock's.

"That's strange," said Kirk.

They were given little time to consider this as suddenly they were surrounded by native horsemen, who seemed to appear out of nowhere.

"Odd that Mr. Spock didn't pick them up on his tricorder," said Sulu.

"Not if he's in cahoots with them," said Lawson meaningfully.

"What shall we do, sir?" asked Galloway, looking around at the small Enterprise contingent.

"I think the ball is firmly in their court, Mr. Galloway," the Captain replied. So saying he dropped his phaser.

The others did likewise. Despite their lack of resistance all of them were dragged unceremoniously through the long grass and pushed into the back of what could only be termed a prison wagon, with bars all around it. The wagon was made of wood, the bars of iron, and the four horses that pulled it were of the slow, strong variety similar to Earth's Shire horses.

"Not much chance of escape just now, gentlemen," said Kirk quietly. "I recommend we bide our time. It is interesting to note how well prepared our friends were, though. I think we have a little birdie in our ranks."

At this point Spock was pushed into the back of the wagon too. He was still unconscious. Kirk bent to examine him.

"At least he can't betray us while he's unconscious. But I don't understand why they left him with us."

"Are you sure Mr. Spock is working with them?" asked Sulu.

"Pretty sure, Mr. Sulu. He certainly seems to be in the wrong place at the wrong time far too often for it to be an accident."

Sulu remained quiet. He had known Spock for some time, and couldn't conceive of the Vulcan's being a traitor. Since he had no explanation he could offer his Captain, silence seemed to be the best answer; but Sulu decided to watch the others. If Spock was not the traitor, then one of them must be.

They were taken for some miles before the road became rutted and they found themselves descending on a circular route. The horses' hooves slipped and slid on the cobble stones beneath their feet, and the cart wobbled precariously. They were going down - and it was dark. Kirk became worried. Underground, they would be hidden from the ship's sensors. It made him even more certain that whoever the natives were, they were working with one of his own people - and Spock was his number one suspect.

He didn't know when the Vulcan had woken up, but suddenly he noticed the brown eyes watching him. "Your friends have us trussed up good and proper, Mr. Spock. But you seem to be in for a slice of the same treatment."

The Vulcan blinked to clear his mind. The Captain's words didn't make any sense to him. "Please explain, Captain," he asked.

Kirk laughed, but it was a bitter sound. "Your native friends have us captive. I'm not sure why they've taken you prisoner too."

Spock looked carefully around the cart - Kirk, Sulu, Galloway and Lawson each met his gaze. "What happened to Mr. Dawes and Mr. Richardson?" he asked.

"Worried about your friend Dawes, are you?" queried Kirk. "You needn't be. He killed Richardson, and would have killed me had Mr. Sulu here not intervened."

"I see," was all Spock said.

He was glad he had been right about Sulu. His problem was that he didn't know if Lawson was working alone, or if Galloway was in league with him. He was positive that Lawson was the traitor, since he had the only working communicator. He was relieved that he had crushed it before he had been out of action. Regrettably, however, he didn't feel able to protect the Captain again for some time. He closed his eyes and attempted to meditate to conserve his strength - what little he had.

The seemingly endless journey ended abruptly in a clatter of hooves and a fierce neigh of terror. The occupants of the cart were all thrown sideways against the bars, and were dragged out before they had a chance to recover. Each found himself tied to the stone walls in complete silence and outside the reach of anyone else. Kirk was about to speak when he heard someone being dragged away from them. He couldn't tell who it was. Then he heard a native voice raised in anger.

"You have betrayed us. You have not lived up to your part of the bargain. For that you will join your former friends in our prison. But you will never forget, for we will mark you with the sign of the traitor. The three whip marks across your back, and the three down it, will be a sign for all to see. It will be a fate worse than death. All turn their backs on a traitor. No-one will help you. When you are all released from jail in one year's time, you alone will have nowhere to go."

Then Kirk heard the sound of a whip. It was a vicious, hissing sound as it fell six times. There was no sound from the victim. *The Vulcan*, thought Kirk. It had to be the Vulcan. A Human would not remain silent through such an ordeal.

He had little time to consider further before he was jolted violently down from the wall and dragged along a dimly lit corridor. He had to run to keep pace with his jailer, and even then couldn't prevent himself from being thrown against the rough stone walls. Once he tripped, and was dragged along the floor until he regained his feet. Then he was pushed forward and found himself face down on the floor with a door clanging shut behind him.

Kirk remained on the floor until his heart slowed its wild beating. He then attempted to discover the extent of his prison cell. It was not very large, but large enough for him to lie down in. There was no bed, but there was bedding in the form of straw and a blanket. He could walk six paces in one direction and four in the other. It was very dark, and he could see only faintly.

Hours or minutes later, he wasn't sure which, there was a grating sound and food appeared through a hole in the base of the wall. It appeared to be some kind of porridge, and was barely enough to keep body and soul together.

Kirk listened carefully, and heard the grating sound repeated further down the corridor, then again. Well, at least their captors didn't intend them to die. The question was whether he could survive for a year on such short rations.

In the next cell Spock had similarly explored the bounds of his captivity and resigned himself to a long wait. He considered the food provided and calculated that there was insufficient to keep a Human in good health. His exploration of his cell had led him to discover that there were three gratings in the cell, one leading into the corridor, the other into the adjoining cells. His sharp ears had already identified Kirk in one and Sulu in the other.

When Sulu's gate was opened Spock pushed his own bowl through into Sulu's cell; Sulu was surprised to find two bowls, but hungrily finished both and passed them back through, hopeful of a refill, but none was forthcoming.

The following morning Kirk found himself faced with two bowls of porridge. One had come from the front of his cell, one from the side. He ate both hungrily and pushed back the empty bowls.

Neither Sulu nor Kirk realised that Spock was in the middle cell, and they never suspected that he was the source of the extra food. They were so grateful to receive it that they never even wondered why they had two bowls at one meal and one at the other.

Spock himself was not too concerned at the lack of food. Vulcans could survive for some considerable time without food. His concern lay with his back, which was becoming increasingly stiff and painful. He knew that the rough journey to the cell had burst some of the remaining blisters, and that his shirt was now firmly stuck to his back. The medicine the Doctor had given him, which would have been immeasurably useful, was lost, and there was no logic in remembering it. Spock spent more and more time lying on his stomach, only forcing himself to rise and make circuits of his cell to ensure he could help his Captain if the need arose.

His chance came more quickly than he had expected. Just two weeks and two days after their capture the cells were rocked by what could only be phaser fire, and the stone walls collapsed around them.

Spock lifted his head from the floor, where he had thrown himself at the first sign of trouble. Rubble and dust settled all around him, but it was obvious that the cell could no longer hold him. He lunged to his feet and found his way over the rubble to greet the Captain, who was coming towards him.

"Mr. Sulu is behind us, Captain," he said formally, returning to give the young Helmsman a hand over the remains of the wall.

Kirk shook his head to clear it. "Where are the others?"

There was no reply. They attempted to search for the rest of the landing party, but were forced to give up when they heard some of the natives coming.

"This way, Captain," said Spock's calm voice.

Kirk had little choice but to follow, since he himself couldn't tell where they were or where they were going. The Vulcan's sense of direction was all that stood between them and capture, since he could not see in the complete darkness either. But that sense did not fail him. After several hours of climbing they emerged into the clear, crisp atmosphere of Theta V's evening. Spock shivered involuntarily as the cold air made contact with his body. The movement went unnoticed in the semi darkness.

Having reached the surface, Kirk took command. "We'll take five minutes rest here, then we'll head back for our beam up point. Mr. Spock, do you think you can find the way?"

"I believe so, Captain. Although I was unconscious for much of the journey, I was able to keep track of our general direction."

"Lead on then, Mr. Spock."

"What about the others, sir?" Sulu asked.

"We'll have to come back for them later. I don't think it would be a good idea to search for them just now."

"Logical," commented the Vulcan.

They set out, Spock taking the lead.

After about an hour, Kirk began to lag behind. Although he hadn't told anyone, he had trapped his foot when the walls had caved in around him, and he was finding it increasingly painful to keep travelling. Spock noticed, and offered to help support the Captain. Kirk hesitated, not wanting to accept help from an enemy, but in the end common sense won out.

Spock put an arm about Kirk's shoulders and readied himself to take the extra weight. He was not prepared for Kirk's arm to come down across his very painful back, and he winced.

Kirk automatically apologised, and then realised what he had done. He added, "Perhaps I should not be sorry, Mr. Spock. I can remember the natives' comment that the traitor would always bear their marks across his back. It would seem that they were correct."

"I, too, heard the comment, Captain. I am sure such marks would be permanent."

"Your conscience doesn't seem to trouble you, Mr. Spock. Not nearly as much as your back does. It really gives you away."

"My conscience is clear, Captain," replied the Vulcan quietly. "However, even the traitor would wish to return to the Enterprise rather than be recaptured by the locals, so logically you have nothing to fear from me."

"Not until we get back, at least."

"Indeed."

The journey continued in silence. Kirk found himself leaning more and more on the Vulcan, and was surprised that the latter made no complaint. It was Kirk who finally called a rest after they had

been travelling for about three hours, and suggested that they slept for an hour or two.

"I'll take first watch if you like," offered Sulu.

Kirk and Spock were both soon fast asleep. Kirk noticed that the Vulcan slept on his side, not his back. That, too, was interesting.

Kirk watched for the second hour, and Spock for the third; when he woke them they continued their journey. The countryside became more open, and they began to look around them to ensure they were not being followed. Kirk's weight, however, was being carried more and more by the Vulcan; he realised just how much only when Spock tripped over a loose stone and both fell. It was Kirk who regained his feet first. Spock took a moment to steady his breathing and replace his Vulcan mask before climbing to his feet. He didn't want anyone to know just how bad he was feeling.

Spock's ploy worked well until they stopped again to eat. Sulu saw what appeared to be the equivalent of a partridge, and managed to catch it. Kirk agreed that they had time enough to roast the bird and eat before continuing on.

Spock caught the smell of the bird cooking and felt sick. He had not eaten in over two weeks; as a Vulcan he was a vegetarian who didn't believe in killing for food, and the smell was more than even his self control could bear. Forcing himself to appear in control he said he should check out the path ahead, and vanished quickly.

Kirk was immediately suspicious, and sent Sulu to follow him; when the Helmsman reported back Kirk felt a mixture of guilt and confusion. Sulu said that Spock had not attempted to contact the natives of the Enterprise, as Kirk had suspected, but had merely hidden himself behind some bushes retching violently.

Spock returned to camp as though nothing had happened. Kirk wasn't sure if his being sick was been a cover or if it was true until he looked at the Vulcan's face. There was no colour there at all.

Kirk was about to comment when Spock said, "When you have eaten, Captain, I believe we should continue on. It is likely that the Enterprise will be looking for Vulcan readings once we are in the vicinity of our beam down point. You and Mr. Sulu are almost impossible to detect, as you are so similar to the natives. but I should be fairly easy for the sensors to pick out."

"A good point, Mr. Spock. Come and eat."

"Vulcan do not eat meat, Captain."

"Not even when they're hungry?"

The Vulcan looked Kirk straight in the eye, suddenly sure that the Human had seen his lack of control earlier. "My body may not always do what is asked of it, Captain, but my mind is still in control."

"What does that mean, Mr. Spock?" asked Kirk, genuinely puzzled.

The Vulcan, suddenly unsure, replied, "It is not important,"

and turned away before Kirk could pursue the matter.

They had only just broken camp and started on their way when Spock called, "Hurry! The natives are behind us."

They all started to run, and arrows were flying around them when they were caught in the powerful beams of the Enterprise transporter. To Kirk's surprise Lawson and Galloway were with their pursuers, and were also transported up along with two natives.

The Enterprise was prepared. Scott's calm and precise voice could be heard as they materialised. "Transport the natives back down now, laddie." The landing party - or what remained of it - found themselves surrounded by armed men from Security with phasers trained on the transporter platform.

Kirk stepped forward, assured and in command now that he was back on his ship. "Security detail, watch Mr. Spock."

The Vulcan called out "Captain...", started to descend from the transporter, then froze as all phasers centered on him. He was no fool; logic dictated he stand still under the circumstances.

McCoy came to his rescue. "'What are you doing, Jim?"

Kirk stared to reply. "I am confining Mr. Spock to..."

"Captain!" the Vulcan tried again.

"... quarters," finished Kirk.

"Please, Captain," said Spock.

Kirk was shocked out of his train of thought. "Mr. Spock, I've never heard you say please before," he said, turning his full attention to the Vulcan.

"It was necessary to get your attention. Mr. Lawson is getting away."

Kirk looked round. While he had been concentrating on Spock, Lawson had seized the opportunity to escape.

"Damn!" That was McCoy.

Scott added his voice. "General alert. Mr. Lawson is to be apprehended and held for questioning." His accent disappeared in the excitement of the moment, and his urgency was reflected in the mechanical voice of the speaker, which should not have been able to pick up such emotions.

A young voice came back. "Too late, Mr. Scott. Someone has entered the hangar deck and taken a shuttlecraft."

"Close outer doors," came Kirk's command.

"Impossible, Captain. Doors are locked open."

"Tractor beam then, Scotty."

"No, Captain," Spock broke in.

This time Kirk turned to him immediately.

"That is the obvious move, Captain. Mr. Lawson will have anticipated that, and prepared a counter move."

Kirk nodded. "Scotty, see if you can check that out."

Scott had a quick, terse conversation with his engineers, and then reported back solemnly. "Aye, Captain, Mr. Spock is correct. A bomb has been rigged to the tractor beams. But there's worse news, Captain. It's a time bomb. Even if we don't use the tractors the Enterprise is rigged to blow in thirty minutes time."

Kirk punched his right fist into his left palm in a gesture of thwarted anger, but his brain was working even as he made the useless gesture. "We'll have to dismantle it. Let's take a look."

They all started forward, when Spock was halted by one of the security guards. "Captain," he called, "I may be of some use."

Kirk nodded his agreement. "Come along, Mr. Spock. I'm sure you'll be keen to help save your own neck. After all, now that your conspirator has escaped there's no chance of you following and nothing for you to lose."

Spock silently fell in behind; the Security guard followed him.

They entered engineering. The bomb was immediately apparent; attached to the tractor apparatus, it looked out of place against the clean lines of the machinery.

Scott and Spock both examined it.

"I'm not sure there's anything I can do," Scott said regretfully.

"I believe it may be possible to defuse it, Captain," Spock said quietly. "There is some risk involved, but as you have already pointed out, there is little to lose. However, the bomb does not appear to be as large as I anticipated, and should it go off it is likely to damage only engineering. Unless it starts a chain reaction in the warp engines, I believe the Enterprise herself is quite safe."

"Are you sure, Mr. Spock, or are you just saying that to get me to evacuate the immediate area and give you a chance to escape?"

"Jim," broke in McCoy, who had followed them, "Spock's on the level."

"I wish I believed that," Kirk replied. "I'd like to believe you, Mr. Spock, but the evidence is against you. The delay, the accident, and above all the injury to your back. I don't feel I can trust you."

"Lives are at stake here, Captain," replied the Vulcan.

"Jim, trust him," added McCoy.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Spock. I need proof."

Spock considered for a moment. His face took on the appearance of a statue as he came to a decision. "I am prepared to give you that proof, Captain, but only to you. If you evacuate engineering and remain to assist me I will give you the proof you desire."

"Playing games again?" asked Kirk. Then he added, "It doesn't matter, Mr. Spock. I accept your terms. Even if there's only a slight chance you're telling the truth I have to take it. There are too many lives at stake not to try. Let's get on with it."

"When we are alone, Captain."

"Wait!" said McCoy. "Jim, there are things I have to tell you."

"Not now, Bones. We haven't got any time to lose. The bomb comes first. You can tell me afterwards if we survive - and if we don't then it doesn't really matter."

McCoy looked not at Kirk but at Spock. The Vulcan nodded in acknowledgement. Admitting defeat McCoy turned on his heel and walked towards the door. Then he turned back.

"Mr. Spock, whatever happens I want you to know that I believe in you and I will find the truth."

The others followed the Doctor out of engineering, and McCoy was not sure if he had heard a quiet "Thank you" from Spock, or if it had been his imagination. The Vulcan's lips hadn't seemed to move.

Kirk and Spock were left alone with the bomb.

"Your proof, Mr. Spock," demanded the Captain immediately.

"The evidence you cite against me rests largely on the distinguishing marks inflicted on the traitor by the natives, is that not so?"

"Yes. The rest is pretty circumstantial, I guess."

"You may look at my back, Captain."

"Not so fast, Spock. I know you and your Vulcan strength. When I get close to you you'll make a try for my phaser and make a break for it. No. You take off your shirt, Mr. Spock, while I stand over here and watch you."

"Logical, Captain. However, I regret I cannot comply."

"Then it's a stalemate. If you won't take your shirt off, then that proves you must be hiding those marks, Spock."

"You misunderstand, Captain. I am not unwilling to comply with your request; I am unable to do so."

"Games again? Why are you unable?"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "My... injuries... prevent me from doing so."

Kirk had had enough. "Okay, Mr. Spock. You just lean against the console over there. Spread your hands out wide and put all your weight against them."

Confused by the command, the Vulcan nevertheless complied.

"What do you intend, Captain?"

"I'll take a look for myself, Spock, while you're in a position where it will be difficult for you to take advantage of me."

There was the sudden sound of tearing material, and then utter silence as Kirk yanked the blue uniform top from his First Officer's back.

The Captain's eyes drifted in disbelief between the torn piece of material in his hand, blue material stained green on the inside and having attached to it what could only be pieces of Human flesh - Vulcan flesh, his mind corrected automatically; and the silent First Officer, who remained rigid against the console, all his weight still on his outstretched hands and only the telltale involuntary ripple of muscles along his back giving any sign of discomfort on his part.

Kirk could hardly take it in. Those were not the marks of a whip. They were burn marks. Flesh that had been burned, blistered, and then had had those blisters burst open unnaturally, revealing torn flesh and a fresh spurt of bright green blood.

It didn't make sense. None of them had been tortured by the natives. Why should the Vulcan be any different? Why hadn't he said anything before? That back must have been agony - and the burns were not new. He had supported his Captain with his back torn like that. Nothing made sense.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Spock," Kirk mumbled in a whisper. "I don't understand, but you are not the traitor."

The Vulcan straightened, with some difficulty. He had not expected Kirk's violent action, and hadn't been prepared for it. The sudden pain had taxed his already low reserves of energy, but his Vulcan heritage forbade him to react. He could sense Kirk's confusion, and his pity, and those emotions battered at his defences. Coupled with the new loss of blood from reopened wounds, the reaction left him light headed.

"The bomb," he said, trying to focus his thoughts on the matter at hand.

Kirk turned wordlessly towards the bomb. He didn't know what else to do.

The two of them examined the device. Spock's agile fingers started to dismantle it. He removed one wire, unscrewed a piece of casing, tested another wire with one of the screwdrivers left by Scott, and then proceeded to connect one wire across to a different terminal.

Kirk watched, knowing that he had no experience, no expertise to offer. The trouble with being a Captain was that you were a jack of all trades and a master of none. He felt helpless.

"If you would hold this firmly, Captain," Spock requested formally.

Kirk bent to the terminal and held the proffered piece of wire. Spock continued his work. Pieces of the bomb were dismantled, and other pieces of the apparatus cross-circuited to new terminals. Kirk watched, afraid of making the comment uppermost in his mind - what was Spock doing?

He hadn't counted on Vulcan touch telepathy. Since both were engrossed in dismantling the bomb Spock could not avoid touching his Human Captain.

"I am attempting to cross-circuit the live fields, Captain," Spock answered the unasked question.

"How did you know what I was thinking?" Kirk asked, alarmed again.

"Forgive me if I have offended, Captain. Vulcans are touch telepaths. That is why we prefer no physical contact. I did not intend to read your mind, but your thought waves were strong and my own defences are low. I shall try not to read you again."

Kirk absorbed this. If Spock was a telepath, then he could have used that ability against Kirk before. Why hadn't he done so? Why had he kept that ability a secret? Was he still hiding something? Could he be trusted? And yet, he had spoken of his defences being low. How badly had he been hurt? Was he being unfair to the Vulcan yet again? He just didn't know what to think. If Spock had been Human he would have understood him, but he didn't know what to make of the Vulcan.

Unbeknown to himself, his tired mind repeated the last thought aloud. "I wish I understood Vulcans. How do I know what to think when I don't know how he sees all this?"

Spock stopped work for the first time. His eyebrows rose in unison.

Kirk suddenly realised he had spoken aloud. There was no point in denying it, so he pushed on regardless.

"Mr. Spock, I just don't understand you. I can't tell whether you are telling the truth or whether you are lying; I can't tell how seriously hurt you are; I don't know when I am offending you; and I don't even know when you are trying to be helpful and when you are trying to offend me. How the hell am I supposed to be the Captain when I know so little about my First Officer?"

Spock remained silent. His fingers started work on the wires again.

Kirk started to lift his hand to grab hold of Spock, to make him answer. The Vulcan's hand encased his own in a grip of steel. Kirk cried out, and the grip relaxed but did not release him. A soft voice said, "If you let go, Captain, you will never find the answers to your questions for the bomb will explode."

There was quiet humour in that response. Kirk looked up into the brown eyes. They were no longer cold and formal. There was a spark of something in them. Kirk couldn't quite identify it, but it was something warm.

"You are amused," he accused. "I nearly blow us sky high, and you're amused by it."

"Vulcans do not recognise humour, Captain. Also your comment is inaccurate. We are well above any sky here, so the explosion would not have blown us sky high."

Kirk put his free hand over Spock's, encasing the Vulcan's hand

between both of his own. He felt the Vulcan stiffen and then relax as his eyes held the other's, and smiled warmly at him. "Mr. Spock, I still don't understand you, but I do believe you - perhaps for the first time. I thought I had an affinity for you that first moment we met, but then it was gone. That is, until now. Now it's back. I hope that's enough."

The Vulcan broke the grip and the lock of their gazes and returned to work. After a brief pause he replied, "It is a start, Captain."

"Jim," corrected Kirk.

"I am a Vulcan, *Captain*. I cannot always explain my actions as a Human would. Some things just have to be accepted."

"And if I were a Vulcan, what then? Could you explain then?"

"Some things are not explained, even to another Vulcan. Certainly not to an Outworlder."

"And if I need to understand, as a Human? A need a Vulcan perhaps doesn't have?"

"I have a duty as a Starfleet officer, and a loyalty to my Captain. I understand your needs, Captain, for I am half Human. But I am a Vulcan by upbringing and by choice. I cannot be otherwise."

There was an earnestness in Spock's voice, a request to be understood. Kirk recognised and accepted it at once.

"You're honest, Mr. Spock. I told you once that if I could have honesty I wouldn't worry about a lot of other things. It is enough."

"Vulcans do not lie, Captain. I have always told you the truth."

"But it didn't make sense, Spock. You told me you made an error, and then you told me that you never made an error in your calculations. That and a lot of other things I still don't understand. Is it too much to ask you to explain?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not."

"That doesn't make sense either."

Kirk was going to press further when Spock suddenly put a hand to his head and swayed dangerously across the bomb.

"Spock?" Kirk queried, alarmed. "Are you all right?"

The Vulcan seemed to get a grip on himself. The glint of humour Kirk had seen disappeared, and a cold, hard mask covered the Vulcan's face. "I must control," he said softly. He seemed to shudder, and then continued his task. Kirk watched, hardly daring to breathe. Then the Vulcan stopped and swayed again.

"What is it? Can I help?"

"Even Vulcan strength has its limits, Captain. I appear to have underestimated the time it would take to dismantle the bomb,

and overestimated my own ability. I have failed you."

"Spock." Kirk shook him. "You've almost finished. You've got to keep going."

"I cannot."

"Let me do something, then. We've got to defuse this. Too many lives are at stake. The ship is at stake. There must be something I can do."

Spock seemed to shudder again, then he came to a decision. "There is a possibility, Captain. If you let me link my mind to yours I will be able to use your strength to complete the task. But understand that I will be able to see all your thoughts, even those you wish hidden from me."

It was a measure of his own control that he did not admit to Kirk that the Captain would also be able to see his thoughts, and that the possibility of him doing so frightened the Vulcan. No-one had ever seen the feelings and emotions he kept carefully hidden within. If the link took place he would be laid bare before the Captain, totally at his mercy. But lives and the ship were at stake.

Kirk swallowed and then said, "What do I have to do? Let's get on with it."

"Just relax, Captain. I will do what is necessary."

The Vulcan leaned forward and put his hands gently on Kirk's face. Kirk felt nothing but the gentleness of that touch for a moment. It surprised him, coming from such a strong man. He panicked for a moment, and then relaxed as the Vulcan's voice said quietly,

"Do not resist, Captain. If you wish me to stop just tell me and I will withdraw immediately."

Kirk swallowed again. Spock had sounded as though he wanted Kirk to say stop. For the first time he wondered if this was difficult for Spock, too, and for the first time he realised that such a link was likely to be a two-way thing.

He was about to ask Spock if that was so when the Vulcan succeeded in making the link, and the question became irrelevant as he felt Spock's apprehension. Then all he felt was admiration. The Vulcan hid nothing from him. He could see exactly what Spock was thinking, what he was feeling. He felt the Vulcan quiver as that thought of feeling was reflected back at him - and with it the dread and embarrassment Spock experienced at the mere possibility of an emotion escaping from his Vulcan control. He saw the long struggle Spock had had to contain such feelings, to be a Vulcan.

He thought back along the link, /You have succeeded, Spock. Never did I suspect how much you cared. Always you have kept your control - and your honour./

Then he felt Spock's mind tapping into his own, and the Vulcan's pain and exhaustion hit him like a blow.

Spock turned back to the bomb. The link remained, but no longer took up all Kirk's thoughts. He was able to watch as Spock

completed dismantling the bomb. His own strength was ebbing, he knew, as the Vulcan called on it, but he doggedly refused to give in.

At last it was done. He knew it was done because he felt the sudden surge of satisfaction and - yes - joy along the link. Then the link was severed, and he slumped down as the Vulcan withdrew.

He awoke some hours later in sickbay. The lights had been dimmed and all he could hear was the quiet hum of machinery. He turned his head to check his surroundings, and the movement attracted McCoy's attention.

"Captain - how do you feel? I was worried about you."

"I'm okay, I think," he replied, surprised at the strength of his own voice. "What about Spock?"

McCoy looked down at the floor. "I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"He hasn't come round since we found the two of you over the remains of that bomb. The readings are all low, very low."

"Can't you do anything for him?"

"I don't know where to start. He's suffering from malnutrition, serious burns, loss of blood, exhaustion, and god knows what else. But the worst thing is, Captain Sir, that he's suffering from some kind of mental distress. I can work on the physical things, but I don't know enough about Vulcan psychology to fill the back of a postage stamp."

Kirk smiled despite the seriousness of the situation. He could imagine the Vulcan's response to *that* piece of Human terminology! Then he became serious. "What do you think is troubling him?"

McCoy's eyes were accusing. "Perhaps he doesn't like being called a traitor in front of the crew. Perhaps he's tired of being your fall guy. How the hell do I know?"

Kirk had the grace to blush. "You're right, Bones. I did accuse him unjustly, I know now. He didn't turn up late for duty on purpose; he saved a young man from injury and brought him to sickbay, but couldn't or wouldn't explain that. He didn't miscalculate and try and damage the ship, or my reputation. No, he did some pretty fast calculations and realised that the computer was wrongly programmed; he stepped in to save the ship and me from disaster. And I yelled at him for that, and didn't understand his explanation.

"Then he took the blame for the 'accident', hiding how hurt he was to cover for me. But you already know that. But you *don't* know that he also refused food while we were captive so that he could feed Sulu and me, because he didn't think Humans could survive on such a poor diet, while Vulcans could go without food for quite a while. And you don't know that he limped off to be sick while we cooked ourselves a game bird - and I accused him of trying to contact the natives. Or that he stood there and let me tear the shirt off his back because he felt he owed it to me to explain in

actions what he could not explain in words, because I was his Captain and he didn't think he'd done enough to warrant being my First Officer. But he accepted all of that. He understood my needs and put them before his own...

"Oh no! That's it, Bones! I've just realised what's troubling him. It's that stupid Vulcan pride of his."

Before McCoy could do anything Kirk had leapt out of bed and headed for the next room, the one he knew McCoy reserved for his Vulcan patient. *Half-Vulcan patient*, he reminded himself.

"Have you gone mad, Jim?" asked the Doctor as Kirk started to shake Spock. "You'll kill him if you keep that up."

"I've got to reach him!" Kirk cried. It came out almost as a sob. "I've got to explain, got to make him understand."

"Understand what?"

"Nothing, Bones. Make him understand that everything he said is between us. That there is nothing he has to explain, nothing he need say to anyone. I've got to tell him."

Kirk tried placing his hands on the Vulcan's forehead as Spock had done to him. Nothing happened. Then he remembered that Spock had spoken to him that first time through a simple hand clasp. He took the Vulcan's hand in his, and thought with every fibre of his being.

/Spock. Listen to me. Spock!/
/

He was so surprised when he felt a response that he almost broke the contact. He found himself pleading with the Vulcan for understanding, explaining that he would never tell anyone what he had seen on Spock's mind, in his heart. He went on to tell of his own guilt at his reaction to Spock, at his disbelief, at what the Vulcan had suffered because of him.

At last Spock reacted. The Vulcan didn't want the Captain to blame himself. He had chosen to act as he had, chosen not to explain.

They thrashed it out between them, with the Doctor standing by watching the fluctuating readings that meant little to him with Human and Vulcan readings intermingled as they were now.

When Kirk released Spock's hand he did so with a smile on his face. McCoy was astounded, but when he looked up at the readings the smile was explained. All had returned to near normal. They were still low, but that was hardly surprising with all the physical problems Spock was facing. But the important thing was that the mental disturbance was gone. Spock was asleep, not tossing in a state of mental unrest, but quiet and relaxed. He looked young and vulnerable like that, and McCoy found himself tucking a blanket around the Vulcan's shoulders and gently brushing his fringe back into place. Spock slept on, undisturbed by the Human touch.

"I don't know what you said to him, Jim, but it worked."

"Me, Bones? I just told him the truth. I told him he was the best First Officer in the Fleet, and that he'd better get back on his feet pretty damn quick because I need him at my side."

McCoy grinned widely. "You're joking, of course."

"No, Bones. We came to an understanding in there with that bomb about to blow us both to smithereens. We broke the barrier between Human and Vulcan, and became just people. Perhaps it's only a starting point, but I think Mr. Spock and I have just taken the first steps towards a long and beautiful friendship."

"Friendship? With a Vulcan? With someone who insists on calling you Captain?"

Kirk smiled, a secret smile. "Captain to my officers, Jim to my friends. But friendship doesn't have to be expressed in words, Bones. You of all people should know that. It's what's in the heart, not what's on the lips that counts."

The Doctor smiled back, looking at Spock as though to see what he had missed. But then he remembered the determination in those dark eyes when the Vulcan had come in with those burns. Perhaps there were other ways of expressing friendship.

"You've been so busy thinking about your First Officer, Jim, that you haven't even asked about Lawson."

Kirk started guiltily. It was true. He hadn't asked about Lawson. He hadn't asked about the ship.

He asked.

McCoy settled him down, confirming that Scott had the con and everything was working beautifully. Then he went on to relate his own part in the plot.

He had researched possible suspects, ruling out Spock since the accident, and had come up with Lawson, Galloway, and Sulu - to whom he would offer an apology. Then he had worked out that one of those had been in cahoots with someone else, and had discovered that it was Bright.

Bright had been caught with a consignment of phasers and radio equipment which he had been planning to beam down to the planet. Scott had put him in the brig, but he had refused to talk until he had heard that all contact with the landing party had been lost. Then he had admitted to being involved in a scheme to sell weapons to one group of the natives to help them win their war against another group. In return he and Lawson would be paid handsomely in gold. Lawson had planned to keep the only functioning communicator among the landing party, to contact Bright and arrange to have the weapons beamed down. Bright would then beam Lawson up from the planet and the two of them would make their escape in a fully prepared shuttlecraft, leaving the Enterprise and its crew to search for the rest of the landing party.

"You didn't know you had a detective for a surgeon, did you?" McCoy asked proudly.

"What about Lawson?" queried Kirk.

"That's easy. Scotty knew that he and Bright planned to use a shuttlecraft for their escape, and sabotaged them so that they wouldn't be able to travel more than a few hundred yards from the ship before their engines stopped dead in space. We had Lawson on board and in the brig before you and Spock finished defusing that

bomb."

"That's where they belong, in prison somewhere. I don't want to have my ship cluttered up with the likes of them. Lawson must have planned all of it, including trying to put the blame on Spock. And I believed him because he was Human. I didn't even suspect him. Interesting, though - Sulu believed in Spock right from the start. But then he's known him longer."

"I didn't believe him either, not at first," said McCoy. "It was only when I saw his back with those burns. And even then I accused him. I asked him to take his shirt off, and he said he was unable to comply. Then I swore at him for playing games. He explained that he *couldn't* rather than *wouldn't*, and that was when I realised he'd been hurt and took a peek underneath."

"Poor Spock," Kirk said quietly.

"Why poor?" asked McCoy.

"I accused him of that, too. Only I didn't put two and two together as you did. I yanked his shirt off while I treated him like a criminal. It was only when I saw his back, and saw the cloth in my hands, that I realised what I'd done."

"It's a pity he's a Vulcan."

"Why?"

"If he wasn't he'd see the funny side. Both of us accusing him of being unwilling to take his shirt off, and playing games, looking at it from the purely Human point of view. It's quite funny in a way."

Kirk smiled. "You're right, Bones, but you're also wrong."

McCoy raised an eyebrow of his own. "Careful, Captain. You're beginning to sound like your First Officer."

Kirk smiled drowsily, remembering the mind link when he had seen Spock's reaction to his request to remove his shirt. Spock *had* found it funny that he and McCoy had used exactly the same words. He hadn't found Kirk's next response so amusing, and hadn't been prepared for the pain. But in that moment, when Kirk had accused him of being unwilling to remove his shirt, inside the Vulcan had been laughing.

He would have to remember that. To understand Spock he would have to look inside him, not at the face shown to the world. Life could become interesting...

With that thought he succumbed to the quietly administered hypo McCoy had produced from nowhere.

"I wish he'd let me in on the joke," muttered the Doctor, but the Captain and the Vulcan were both asleep, and made no answer.

Even if they had been awake it was a joke they would have kept to themselves - for it was the first joke they had ever shared.

