

Scotpress

Enterprise Incidents 10

*Stories by
Sandy Catchick*

a Star Trek fanzine

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

FREEDOM

Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship Enterprise sighed as he switched off the Captain's Log. Three crewmembers dead, and among them Gary Mitchell, a longstanding personal friend. Delta Vega was one planet he would never forget. He still had one final duty to perform, to return each individual's personal effects to Starbase 10, from where they would be sent on to their families. This was one task he intended to undertake himself as a token of his respect. It was little enough in the circumstances. Elizabeth Dehner, Lee Kelso and Gary Mitchell; three fine people. A high cost for going where no man had gone before.

Kirk moved quickly to the transporter room, leaving the Enterprise in the capable hands of his First Officer, Commander Spock. The Vulcan, who had seemed so threatening and unreachable at first, was fast becoming a very special friend. Like Gary, Kirk thought sadly.

But Spock was not like Gary. Spock was like no-one Kirk had ever met. But then that was not surprising, since he was the unique offspring of a Vulcan father and a Human mother.

McCoy would be surprised to learn how close they had become. Vulcans were not supposed to have feelings, and McCoy swore that Spock was inclined to act more like a Vulcan than a Vulcan did to compensate for his Human half. Kirk would be glad to see the doctor again. He needed McCoy's brand of medicine - a few quiet evenings together over a glass of Saurian brandy.

Dr. Piper and Lt. Alden beamed down to Starbase 10 with Captain Kirk. The doctor was retiring, and had only stood in for McCoy on their last tour of duty. In the circumstances he had coped very well. Lt. Alden was returning to the Academy for further training. He was after a captaincy of his own. Kirk wished them both well.

Back on the Enterprise Spock settled into the command chair. He checked and signed fuel consumption reports and then turned to the crew listings. Three people would be beaming up to the Enterprise here. The first was Dr. McCoy, returning to duty as the ship's Chief Medical Officer. The others were new to the Enterprise. Ensign Boma would be joining Spock's Science Section. It would be his first deep space assignment. He was replacing Ensign Garth, who had been promoted to the post of Leading Physicist. That job in turn had become vacant through the promotion of Lt. Sulu, who had just been made Helmsman, a post which had fallen vacant through the death of Lee Kelso on Delta Vega. Spock approved of the young oriental, and had recommended the move. Sulu's mathematical brain and quick reflexes would not be wasted at the helm. Spock glanced down at the young Helmsman working at the console a few feet in front of him. Sulu felt Spock's penetrating gaze and concentrated more fiercely than ever on the task in hand. He would have been both surprised and pleased to learn that Mr. Spock had recommended his promotion.

The second newcomer was Lt. Uhura. She would be replacing Lt. Alden as Communications Officer. Spock read her details with extra attention. The Communications Officer was an important member of the bridge crew and her role was vital to the efficient running of

the Enterprise. The Lieutenant was listed as a native of the United States of Africa on Terra. Her record showed that she spoke Swahili and English as well as Federation Standard. Her qualifications were impeccable and Spock closed the record, satisfied on paper at least.

The intercom interrupted his thoughts. "Bridge, Spock here," he announced in his usual controlled voice.

"Transporter Room here, sir. You asked to be notified when the replacement crew were beaming aboard. We'll be beaming them up in a few minutes."

"Indeed?" Spock raised a critical eyebrow and the young ensign was quick to amend that to, "That is, in 3.65 minutes precisely, sir."

"Thank you, Ensign Peters," said Spock drily.

The Ensign was so pleased that the First Officer had remembered his name that he forgot all about the silent criticism and responded, "Thank you, sir."

Spock sighed inwardly and wondered if he would ever understand Humans. "You have the con, Mr. Sulu," he said as he made his way to the turbolift.

Spock would have despaired of ever understanding Humans had the turbolift doors not closed before Sulu, the inscrutable oriental, let out a rebel yell on the bridge. It was the first time he had ever been given the con. It might not be a dignified way to take control of the bridge, but it certainly expressed his feelings. The Acting Navigator, Lt. Bould, and the relief Communications Officer, Lt. Lower, grinned back at Sulu understandingly. It was a perfectly normal display of Human exuberance to them.

Spock, saved from the emotional display by the soundproofed turbolift doors, arrived in the transporter room and took up a position next to the control console. He stood, as usual, almost at attention, tall and straight with his hands clasped behind his back.

It was in fact 8.56 minutes before the three crewmen beamed on board. Spock could show no sign of impatience, although he had noted the wasted time. His Human colleagues felt no such restrictions, and fidgeted and mumbled about the delay. They would have said something about it openly had not the First Officer been standing there. Spock would have preferred to remain on the bridge, but the Captain made a point of personally welcoming all new crew members whenever possible. Spock saw it as his duty to do the same.

When the three materialised on the transporter pads Spock stepped forward. He gave the newcomers the courtesy of welcoming them first.

"Lieutenant Uhura, Ensign Boma, the Captain has been detained on the surface. I am First Officer Spock. Welcome to the Enterprise." The words were spoken in Spock's usual measured tones.

While Spock intended them as a welcome neither the Lieutenant nor the Ensign could see any welcome in the Vulcan's stance or features, and both remained ill at ease. Lt. Uhura reached out to shake hands with the First Officer. She was about to thank him for

welcoming them. Spock almost recoiled from her and clasped his hands more tightly behind his back, turning his penetrating gaze on her and making her flinch. Ensign Boma took the hint and remained frozen to the spot.

Dr. McCoy, stepping forward, came to the rescue. "Miss Uhura, Mr. Boma, don't mind Mr. Spock here. Vulcans don't shake hands. It's something you'll get used to." He added, "I see you're still your usual smiling, charming self, Mr. Spock." Grinning from ear to ear, he left them to it.

Spock turned to Ensign Peters, the whole incident forgotten as far as he was concerned. "If you would show the Lieutenant and the Ensign to their quarters, I will make arrangements for their belongings." Spock felt safer with belongings than with the Humans, and there was relief all round when Ensign Peters grinned at the newcomers and led them out of the transporter room.

Some ten minutes later Lt. Uhura stood just inside the door of her new quarters and slowly let out a long held breath. She wondered if she had done the right thing in applying for a transfer to the Enterprise. They said it was the best ship in the Fleet, with the finest crew. She'd have to wait and see. First impressions were not always correct, but her arrival on board had done nothing to encourage her.

The First Officer seemed standoffish. She had found out from young Ensign Ty Peters that the scruffy individual who had beamed up with them had been the ship's CMO. She didn't think she would want to trust him with her belongings, let alone her life. Judging by his comments about the transporter and scattered molecules, he'd hardly advanced beyond the Dark Ages. Ty had referred to it as his 'country doctor syndrome'.

She dismissed her doubts. She was surprised to see her belongings neatly stacked inside the door, and turned to unpacking them. The First Officer had managed to get them to her quarters before her own arrival, so perhaps he was efficient if not friendly.

Before long her quarters began to look a little more homely. She was interrupted by the entry signal for her door, and was quick to say, "Come in!" She was surprised when Dr. McCoy entered - she hardly recognised him in his blue uniform.

He interpreted her look correctly and said, "Ah, Lieutenant. The uniform surprises you, does it? I thought I'd come and give you a real introduction to the Enterprise. You can't trust a Vulcan to do such things properly. No doubt Mr. Spock has given you a list of the regulations and a duty roster, but I'll show you the *real* Enterprise."

Seeing the disarming smile on his face she couldn't help but agree. He proffered his arm and escorted her from her quarters.

The doctor was as good as his word. The tour took in the usual places - the rec rooms, the science labs, sickbay, engineering etc., but his descriptions made the ship come alive for her. He included such highlights as the Chief Engineer's distillery, the Helmsman's kitchen garden, and his own 'vintage collection for medicinal purposes'. She couldn't help but laugh. He ended by taking her up to the bridge, where she would be working.

Uhura was astonished to find the Vulcan in the command chair. Ty had said he'd been on duty since the early hours of the morning, and she wondered if it was normal for the bridge crew to serve such long shifts. Or did the First Officer want to make an impression in the Captain's absence?

Spock acknowledged her presence with a slight inclination of his head and a quiet, "Lieutenant." The doctor, he ignored.

McCoy was not about to let that go. "Well, Mr. Spock," he began, "how have you been getting on without me? It must have been quiet for you without our sparring matches. I bet you missed me."

If he had, the First Officer gave no sign of it. McCoy, getting no answer, pushed on.

"Things were obviously too quiet without me. You seem to have slipped back into your insufferable Vulcan mask. Couldn't you at least raise an eyebrow so that our new Communications Officer knows that you're alive?"

Involuntarily, Spock complied.

"That's better," said McCoy. Turning to Uhura he added, "Mr. Spock needs a bit of encouragement. He's really quite Human once you get through his hedge of Vulcan thorns."

Uhura wondered if it was normal to accept such insubordination on the Enterprise. Perhaps it was, as Spock made no response.

The doctor, tiring of the game, said, "Never mind, Spock. I give up - for now. Miss Uhura, come and meet the rest of the bridge crew. They at least will welcome you properly."

However, when he turned to the rest of the bridge crew he found the introductions a problem. He didn't recognise any of them. He had not caught up on the Enterprise's last mission, and didn't know all the things that had happened. In his ignorance he asked brightly, "Well, where are Lee and Gary?"

The surreptitious looks passing round the bridge told him he had asked the wrong question. It was Spock who came to his rescue.

"Mr. Mitchell and Mr. Kelso were..." Spock hesitated "... lost ... in the performance of their duties on our last mission. I believe you should read the report on Delta Vega before the Captain returns." So saying he handed McCoy a copy.

McCoy knew there was something more when Spock added, "If you have a few moments, Doctor, I should like to fill you in on some of the details. Your office would be most appropriate."

If Spock felt he ought to fill McCoy in there was something important here. Spock was not one for idle chatter. McCoy said immediately, "I'm free right now, Spock." Turning to Uhura he added, "Lieutenant, that about sums up our tour of the Enterprise. The bridge is where you'll spend most of your time, so I'm sure there'll be a lot to interest you here."

By the time McCoy turned back Spock had already risen and headed for the turbolift, handing the con over to Lt. Wells. The doctor found himself hurrying to reach the turbolift before the doors closed on him.

Uhura found herself alone on the bridge with three unknown officers. The silence was deafening. She finally broke the ice.

"Is this the communications console?" she asked, knowing perfectly well that it was.

Lt. Wells nodded and said, "Yes, Lieutenant."

He seemed ill at ease; she was not aware that it was his first time in charge of the bridge, and he was very nervous. To him she seemed to be totally cool, and he therefore felt himself to be inadequate for the task.

She tried again. "I am new here, Lieutenant. Is there a library computer I could use?"

Lt. Wells became even more nervous, but he indicated the library computer at the science station. Uhura didn't know that it was Spock's station, and that the Lieutenant was mulling over what the Vulcan would say on his return if he found the new Communications Officer at his station. She settled into Spock's chair and began to research general information on the Enterprise and its crew, oblivious of the Lieutenant who sat in the command chair as though on a bed of nails.

Uhura was interested in the crew information. The Captain appeared to be a hotshot daredevil. He was the youngest Captain in the Fleet, and seemed to have seen a lot of action, having been cited for bravery. The First Officer appeared to be brilliant at absolutely everything. He had served on the Enterprise for years. Why, then, was he only First Officer, and not Captain? she wondered. The Doctor was another enigma. He seemed to have found the cure for just about everything but a rainy day, yet he had given up everything to join Starfleet at the peak of his career. It seemed a bit odd. Still, you couldn't tell much from a file. Pursuing that thought she decided to look at her own file. It told her exactly what Spock had read a few hours earlier. To her own mind she sounded dull in comparison with the three senior officers.

She was so enthralled by her research that she didn't even notice Spock's return. Lt. Wells vacated the Captain's chair with alacrity, and looked worriedly over to Uhura. Spock merely nodded to him and turned his attention to the paperwork piled up neatly beside him. He had noted Uhura's use of the library computer, and considered it an indication of her ability to use her own initiative. Vulcans did not consider their place of work to be their personal property, and had he read Lt. Wells' mind he would have been confused by the Lieutenant's concern.

It was Kirk's arrival on the bridge that made Uhura jump. Spock had returned silently; the Captain, returning from the Starbase a *little* the worse for wear, having drowned his sorrows with the Base Administrator, bounced in with a, "Spock, what are you doing still up? Isn't it past your bed time?"

Spock looked the Captain up and down and was pleased to see that Kirk had finally let go of some of his pent-up feelings. While he did not admit to feelings himself, he was perfectly capable of understanding them in others, and he knew that the Captain had been under a lot of strain. Humans often relaxed by imbibing alcohol (although he could not understand how poisoning your system could be such a benefit to Humans) and Spock was, if anything, relieved. Dr. McCoy had asked him to bring the Captain to sickbay when he

returned, but he knew that Kirk needed to sleep off the effects of the alcohol.

"Captain," he said calmly, "if you would accompany me there is something I would like to show you." He handed over the con to Mr. Wells and gently pushed the Captain back into the turbolift. Spock escorted Kirk to his quarters, and put him to bed. The Captain's last sentence was, "Spock, what did you want to show me?" Spock hoped he would forget the question by the morning.

Spock let himself out and went to find Dr. McCoy. He apprised the Doctor of the Captain's condition, and turned to leave. McCoy stopped him with an apology.

"Spock, I'm sorry for the things I said just now. I didn't know about Gary, Lis and Lee, or what happened on Delta Vega. I guess I thought you were trying to impress the new lieutenant with how Vulcan you are. I should have known better. Thank you for telling me about Jim before I saw him."

Spock turned back to the Doctor. He didn't really understand the Human concept of apology, very different from the formal Vulcan apology. He did know that whatever McCoy said, the Doctor did care, particularly about Captain Kirk. He therefore tried to put the Doctor's mind at ease.

"It has been a very difficult mission for the Captain. I believe your return to the Enterprise will be of assistance to him." So saying, Spock turned on his heel and left a flabbergasted McCoy feeling even more guilty.

So Spock really *did* care. McCoy had always suspected it, but found it annoying that the Vulcan would not admit to it. Why was the Vulcan so blasted difficult to reach, and why did he always bring out the worst in McCoy? The Doctor sighed. Spock was right about one thing; what the Captain needed right now was a good night's sleep, and McCoy was glad he had another night to think before facing Jim.

The next morning Uhura reported for duty early, and was astounded to find Spock in command yet again.

"Aren't you ever off duty, sir?" she found herself asking.

She expected to be reprimanded, but he merely replied, "Vulcans can do without sleep for a considerable period when necessary, Lieutenant."

He turned to Lt. Sulu, who was now back at the helm. "Perhaps you would introduce the Lieutenant to the bridge personnel, Mr. Sulu. Humans do seem to need a personal introduction to their colleagues before they can operate efficiently."

Sulu was pleased to accept the duty, and escorted Uhura around the bridge making introductions and pointing out pieces of equipment. When he reached the science station and pointed out the library computer access point Spock broke in.

"I believe the Lieutenant is familiar with the operation of the library computer."

It was a statement of fact, without rancour, but when Uhura explained about the previous evening Sulu whistled and grinningly told her how Mr. Wells must have felt about it. Uhura began to feel more at home.

Finally she reached the communications console. Her console. Dr. McCoy had been right about one thing. Mr. Spock had given her a very complete set of paperwork covering the minutest detail on everything she was likely to need to know, from the operation of particular points on her console to a schedule of her duty periods. The only problem was that she needed a computer to find the pieces of information she really needed. For that matter he had even given her details of how to use the computer to access and sort the information she required. He was obviously a very thorough man.

She had asked Dr. McCoy why he had had everything printed out. The Doctor had replied that Spock thought Humans preferred to deal with paper rather than computers, but didn't understand that it was really a preference for dealing with people rather than machines. He had added that she would be wasting her time asking Spock personally - she'd do as well asking the computer. She had received the distinct impression that the Doctor and the First Officer did not get on too well. Once she sat down at the communications console she settled down to work and forgot everything else.

When Captain Kirk came onto the bridge two hours later Spock vacated the Captain's chair and moved gracefully to his position at the science station. He immediately became engrossed in the readings on his hooded viewer. Uhura glanced over at him. His station was the one next to hers - she had not thought she would be working so close to him. The thought bothered her. It was quite obvious to her that nothing bothered him.

Kirk took his time to settle in. After two cups of coffee he suddenly became aware of his beautiful new Communications Officer.

Spock, though deep in his research, had not forgotten the rest of the bridge. Knowing his Captain would take a little time to reach his normal state of efficiency after his time on Starbase 10, he had reserved a part of his mind for watching the bridge generally. He was immediately aware of the Captain's dilemma and said helpfully, "Lieutenant Uhura, Captain, our new Communications Officer."

Kirk didn't need a second chance to open a conversation with a beautiful lady. "Welcome aboard, ...Miss... Uhura." He hesitated on the 'Miss', but Spock had anticipated him and nodded confirmation of the title. The Captain, beginning to recuperate fast, said, "Uhura - that's a rather unusual name."

Uhura was surprised when Spock broke in again. "A beautiful name, Captain. It means 'Freedom'."

If Uhura was surprised that Spock knew the translation, Kirk was astounded that he had admitted to recognising beauty in a name. "Beautiful, Mr. Spock? I didn't think you admitted to perceiving beauty."

"On the contrary, Captain, Vulcans are quite capable of appreciating the aesthetic beauty of art, music and literature. "Uhura is, by those standards, a beautiful name."

"I see," said Kirk, not seeing at all, and wondering if he

should have a third cup of coffee.

Dr. McCoy entered the bridge in time to hear the tail end of the conversation. "It seems you've managed to impress the unimpressible, Miss Uhura," he said. "I've been trying to get Spock to appreciate beauty ever since I came on board, and I can't say as I've made any impression at all."

"On the contrary, Doctor," came Spock's immediate rejoinder, "you made a lasting impression. On meeting you I was left with the distinct impression that it would be wise to keep out of sickbay and away from your pills, potions and Human anecdotes."

"Why, Spock," said McCoy, "I didn't think you'd noticed. Besides, if I didn't have to recalibrate every instrument in sickbay to accommodate that haywire Vulcan physiology of yours..."

"Bones," Kirk cut in, his headache foremost on his mind, "let's not give Miss Uhura the wrong impression of life on board the Enterprise."

Uhura, looking at the Captain gingerly holding his head, wondered for the umpteenth time since coming on board what other impression there could be of life on the Enterprise. The senior officers seemed to be at each other's throats, the Captain seemed to be a playboy, and the rest of the crew just seemed ill at ease. She had not realised that she was not the only new person on the Enterprise's bridge.

When the time came for change of watch Sulu invited her to join him for a cup of coffee and she accepted willingly. She was glad to see that Mr. Spock came off duty too. The Vulcan's presence in the lift cut off any chatty conversation. If he was aware of the effect he had on them he didn't indicate it.

Spock also went to the rec room and helped himself to coffee and a salad, then sat at a table alone. Sulu helped Uhura to coffee, and after a single glance towards the Vulcan led her to another table. He filled her in on the mission to the edge of the galaxy which had ended in disaster on Delta Vega. He explained that he had only just been promoted to the position of Helmsman on the death of Lee Kelso, and that the other members of the bridge crew, with the exception of Spock and the First Officer, were also all new. The Enterprise had yet to be assigned a replacement Navigator, and Mr. Bould was only standing in until such time as a permanent appointment was made. He told her that Captain Kirk was the best Captain he had ever served with; that the Enterprise was the sleekest ship he had ever handled; and that once she got to know everyone and they got to know her she would join him in thinking herself lucky to be on board.

Uhura hoped he was right.

The Enterprise left Starbase 10 and moved out into space. The next two weeks were passed in star mapping, and Uhura found herself slipping into the routine of life on the Enterprise. If it didn't live up to her hopes in terms of excitement, it did at least seem a lot better than her first impressions.

During the two weeks the Captain seemed content to leave the First Officer in charge for much of the time. Even when he was on

the bridge he left things to Spock, spending his time pacing up and down like a caged tiger. Spock did not appear to notice.

The only time the Captain seemed to come alive was when they practised manoeuvres, which they did at least once a day. At such times Kirk became a living part of the Enterprise, firing out rapid orders to Navigator and Helmsman, Science and Communications stations. These manoeuvres did more than anything else to weld the bridge crew together as an operational whole. When they were over, though, the Captain always handed over to Spock.

Uhura's respect for the First Officer rose tremendously during the weeks of star mapping. Spock spent long hours hunched over his hooded viewer calmly passing her co-ordinates and references for her to send out signals and track responses. His maps were the most accurate she had ever seen. She found it very easy to work with him. His orders were always clear, precise, and unhurried, and his sharp eyes missed nothing. He never lost patience or became bored. Even when she found herself losing concentration he seemed to be able to bring her back to the job in hand without making her feel bad about it. He was always courteous, and totally self-contained.

Although she tried to break through to the real man, she found him adept at avoiding all personal contact. The crew had dubbed him 'the walking computer', or alternatively 'the talking encyclopedia', and although she could understand that she found it harder to understand McCoy's baiting of the Vulcan. If he was withdrawn, he was not inconsiderate. His response to her lack of concentration on occasion showed that. He did not expect her to behave as he did, as a Vulcan would; he accepted that she was Human. She could do no less than accept that he was Vulcan. Perhaps the Doctor should try that too.

The peace of star mapping also gave her a chance to get to know the Helmsman. She and Sulu became really good friends. He told her of his love of ancient weapons, and demonstrated his ability at fencing, to her unending delight. She admitted to her own interest in music and in ancient musical instruments, and they spent long hours off duty discussing shops where ancient weapons and musical instruments could be purchased. They both hoped to see many new planets, and to be able to add to their collections during the Enterprise's mission.

The peace - or alternatively the boredom - of star mapping was ended suddenly at a time when Spock was again in command. A signal came through on Uhura's board, and although she almost immediately turned to advise the First Officer of it he beat her to it.

"Put it on the bridge speaker," he interrupted her, "and tie in the universal translator."

She complied, wondering how he had heard the signal at all, and how he knew it was an alien signal.

Spock was right on both counts, however. The mechanical voice of the translator came through on the bridge speaker, as controlled and even as that of the First Officer.

"This is the Kai. We have a medical emergency. Please help us." The Kai's coordinates followed.

Uhura found excitement building inside her as she tried to establish two-way contact. Spock's voice broke in on her thoughts.

"Lieutenant, call the Captain to the bridge." He turned to Mr. Bould and added, "Navigator, plot a course for the given coordinates."

"Laid in, sir," was the almost instant response.

Sulu spoke in a rush. "Changing course..."

Mr. Spock's voice cut in on him, razor sharp. "Belay that. Maintain present course until advised otherwise."

"Aye aye, sir," came Sulu's crushed response.

Kirk's voice came through on Uhura's board. Spock nodded in her direction and she put it on the bridge speaker.

"Spock," he said, "what's going on up there?"

"We have picked up an alien distress signal, Captain. A medical emergency. No specifics. Course is laid in for the given coordinates."

"I'm on my way," said Kirk.

Within minutes the turbolift doors opened and Kirk strode onto the bridge, followed by Dr. McCoy. Spock vacated the Captain's chair and moved quickly to his science station.

"Report," said the Captain.

Uhura doubted Spock would have anything to add to his earlier conversation with the Captain; she didn't yet know the First Officer well. He answered Kirk immediately.

"Long range scanners reveal a planet at the given coordinates, Captain. First indications suggest it is Class M, two-thirds the density of Earth, atmosphere breathable. But Captain..." Spock's voice betrayed his curiosity, "there are no life form readings."

"Perhaps we're too late," said McCoy sadly.

"It is possible that we are picking up a recorded signal," confirmed Spock. "The Communications Officer has not yet been able to establish two-way contact."

Uhura was surprised that Spock had noticed her efforts to establish contact, particularly with all the other things he had on his mind. He seemed capable of dealing with several things at once.

Kirk turned to her. "Lieutenant, keep trying to establish contact."

"Aye aye, sir," she replied automatically. Didn't the Captain realise she was still trying?

"Since it could be a matter of life and death, and since we are here to investigate other life forms, let's go and investigate. Ahead warp factor 3, Mr. Sulu," said Kirk.

"Aye aye, sir," Sulu replied happily, glad to be doing something useful at last.

"It will make a break from star mapping," said Kirk, "even if

we're too late to help the..."

"Kai," supplied Spock helpfully.

"The Kai," repeated Kirk.

"Unable to establish contact," Uhura reported.

"Keep trying, Lieutenant."

Uhura looked over at Spock. The latter was busy at his computer and did not look up. If he felt her eyes on him he gave no indication of it.

"Aye aye, sir," Uhura responded again after a slight hesitation.

As they approached the Kai's planet Spock said, "Coming within visual range now, Captain."

"Put it on the screen," said Kirk.

Spock silently complied and the bridge viewscreen was filled with the familiar pattern of space. In the centre of the screen a small mauve and blue planet revolved majestically on its axis.

"Maximum magnification," said Spock. "Sensors reveal no life forms. However, there are indications of an abandoned habitation on the far side of the planet, Captain."

"What do you make of it?" asked Kirk.

"Insufficient data," replied the Vulcan unhelpfully.

However, Kirk could sense that Spock did have a theory. He decided to push him, knowing that the Vulcan liked to be absolutely sure before he came out with anything, but also knowing that Spock's initial theories were often adequate. "You appear to have some idea, Mr. Spock," he said.

The First Officer raised an elegant eyebrow. He did not believe he had betrayed any emotion in the matter, and wondered how the Captain had guessed he had an idea. "Indeed, Captain. I fail to see the logic behind your..." he began.

"Intuition, Mr. Spock. Good old Human intuition," broke in the Captain. "It's rather like my illogical approach to chess."

Spock was well aware of the Captain's illogical approach to chess, which enabled him to win on occasion when he made moves Spock just could not believe a sentient being could possibly make. The Vulcan found the Captain's intuition fascinating. This time was no exception, for Kirk was right - Spock did have a theory.

He replied, "I should have preferred to cogitate on the possibilities for a while, Captain, but since you insist, initial indications would suggest a research outpost of some kind."

McCoy didn't like that idea. A medical emergency on an alien research outpost could be very dangerous for other life forms as well. "I don't like the sound of it, Jim," he said.

"I don't like the idea either, Bones," Kirk agreed, "but we

can't just leave them. Standard orbit, Mr. Sulu," he added. "Let's take a good look before we commit ourselves to anything."

Sulu established the Enterprise in orbit and Spock concentrated on his sensor readings. All eyes were on Spock when a signal came through on Uhura's board.

"Fascinating," said Spock. "They are sending in Vulcan."

"No," said Uhura, "it's Swahili."

"I'm getting it in good old-fashioned English," said McCoy.

"Japanese," added Sulu.

They all heard the same message, however. "This is the Kai. We have a medical emergency. We do not wish to endanger you, but we need your help. Please make contact."

"Fascinating," repeated Spock.

"Is that all you can say?" asked McCoy.

Spock did not spare him a glance; all his attention was on his sensors. "Sensors now reveal an underground vault, Captain. There are four life form readings, all humanoid and all very weak. There appears to be a force field of some kind around them. The aliens are boosting our signal, which is why we are breaking through it now."

"Lieutenant?" asked Kirk, turning to Uhura.

"Hailing frequencies open," she responded, little realising that this would be the first of many occasions on which she would use that precise phrase.

"This is Captain James T. Kirk of the Federation Starship Enterprise. We have picked up your distress signal, and are responding. Please advise the nature of your emergency," said Kirk.

While they waited for an answer Spock added quietly, "I am picking up no harmful substances on my sensors, Captain. The Kai would appear to be an advanced civilisation. The force field is like none I have ever encountered. It is beyond our current technology."

"Let's hope it's not a trap," said McCoy.

"Unlikely, Doctor," said Spock.

An alien voice interrupted them, filling the bridge with its quiet despair. "This is Dr. Lau, leader of Kai Research Station 33. Thank you for responding to our distress signal, Captain. We need medical assistance. We are all dying, and we do not know why. We are all research workers - we have no medical staff. Do you have a doctor on board?"

McCoy looked over at Kirk. Receiving his permission he took up the conversation.

"This is Dr. McCoy, Chief Medical Officer. We'll do what we can to assist you. We need to know more about you, and about what has happened. Whatever is affecting you could also be dangerous to

our species."

"Understood," came Dr. Lau's voice. "Unfortunately, we have no information. We started to fall ill just three weeks ago, although we have had our research station here for almost six months. We are unaware of any changes on this planet, and our research was not of a dangerous nature. Whatever is affecting us is attacking our nervous systems. Three of us have died already, Doctor. The rest of us have only a week or so to survive unless you can find a cure."

Kirk, McCoy and Spock conferred, and reluctantly Kirk agreed to send a small landing party down to investigate. He advised Dr. Lau of their intentions, and gave orders for Dr. McCoy, Nurse Chapel, and two security guards to beam down.

Spock broke in, offering to go down too on the basis that it was an ideal opportunity for research. Kirk denied him, saying it was too risky. He didn't want to put more people at risk than necessary. Spock would stay on board where it was safe.

Dr. McCoy and Nurse Chapel collected their medical kits and reported to the transporter room, where two security guards were already waiting. Spock gave the Transporter Chief the co-ordinates for the beamdown, and the four of them soon materialised in the underground chamber. Since the Enterprise's communicators would not work at that depth the aliens were boosting their signals through Uhura's communications board.

Returning to the bridge, Kirk and Spock were in time to receive the Doctor's message. Uhura reported that they had arrived safely. Dr. McCoy said that the Kai were very ill, and he would really like to beam them up to sickbay. However, in the circumstances it would be sensible to enforce a quarantine, and he therefore asked for biocomps and other equipment to be beamed down. Spock got onto it right away, and McCoy soon acknowledged receipt of the equipment.

Half an hour later Uhura was able to report no progress. The Doctor could find nothing wrong with the aliens, except that their bodies were subject to continuous mild tremors. There seemed to be nothing dangerous in the air, in the food, or the water, or in anything else that he could examine. He just didn't know what was wrong. He was continuing his research, but he didn't like it.

Uhura monitored communications for almost two hours. She was glad of the respite when Janice Rand, the Captain's Yeoman, brought coffee up to the bridge. As she looked up to smile her thanks at Janice she was the only person to see what happened.

Mr. Spock was standing, also watching the yeoman although he had refused coffee, when he suddenly put his hands over his ears. He looked directly at Uhura, his gaze cutting through her like a knife through butter, and he shouted something unintelligible at her before sinking to his knees and finally curling up on the ground in an almost foetal position. His whole body seemed to be shaking, as though with the ague.

Afterwards Uhura didn't know what made her do it, but something made her switch on the recorder as Spock came towards her, and she taped the sound of his raised voice and falling body. She had never heard Mr. Spock raise his voice, and the sound shocked her at least as much as his collapse. It took her several seconds to pull

herself together.

In those same seconds Captain Kirk turned from his command chair and rushed over to the Vulcan. He was too late to catch Spock, and found he could do nothing for him. He swung back to Uhura. "Get Dr. M'Benga up here right now!"

She jumped to it.

M'Benga was on the bridge within minutes, a medical team with a trolley not far behind. But M'Benga, too, could do nothing for Spock. He merely lifted the Vulcan onto the trolley and transferred him to sickbay.

Kirk turned Uhura again. "Please get Dr. McCoy and recall the landing party. I want some answers, and I want them now. If Spock has caught the illness up here there's no point in worrying about quarantine."

McCoy was shocked by Uhura's news. He reached the same conclusion as Kirk - if Spock had contracted the illness on the Enterprise it was nothing they could quarantine against. He informed Kirk he would beam back with the four survivors of the Kai research party. The Enterprise's sickbay was better equipped to find the cause of the illness than the planet. Its facilities were almost as good as those of a Starbase. They had to be.

Arrangements were made. Soon five sickbay beds were filled with alien life forms. Sick, dying alien life forms, four Kai and one Vulcan.

McCoy struck his desk in frustrated anger. He seemed unable to do anything for any of them. All his scanners showed perfectly normal. All the readings on the diagnostic panels above the beds read normal - as far as he could tell. The only indicator that was way out was the energy consumption indicator; that was high for the Kai, and almost at maximum for the Vulcan.

Dr. M'Benga had tried a relaxant drug on Spock. Instead of helping the Vulcan to relax it seemed to have made things worse. It was almost as though relaxing had lowered his resistance to something. The trouble was that McCoy had no idea what that something was.

Dr. Lau confirmed McCoy's worst fears for Spock. None of the Kai had succumbed so quickly or so violently to the illness. While each of them was slowly dying, gently shaking almost non-stop and wasting precious energy, the Vulcan was vibrating incessantly and uncontrollably to a much greater degree. His energy reserves were depleting at an alarming rate.

McCoy repeated all his tests on air, water, blood, tears and anything else he could think of. The results were negative.

The Captain paced the bridge. The only result was a build up of tension.

Uhura tried to do something useful. She replayed the recording she had made when Spock collapsed. A sudden thought came to her, and she switched on the universal translator. If she had been taken ill suddenly she would probably have reverted to speaking Swahili; so it was likely that Spock, a Vulcan, even after years of serving with Humans, would under stress revert to his native tongue.

The translator worked perfectly. She had set the volume to low so as not to disturb anyone on the bridge. A flat, mechanical voice said in her ear,

"Please turn it off. Please. No. I can't be... I can't..."

Uhura had been right about Spock speaking Vulcan, but she knew she had been very wrong about something else. Spock's real voice was not without inflection. It was not mechanical. He had appealed to her, to her personally, as he had collapsed. She had felt it in every fibre of her being. The translator did not do him justice. If she ever heard anyone speaking of him as a walking computer again she would give them a piece of her mind.

Another thought occurred to her. Captain Kirk had not noticed her playing the translation. He had not heard it. Yet Spock had heard the Kai's first distress signal as soon as it came through on her board. Spock was a Vulcan. One of the most noticeable characteristics he had that made him stand out from his Human crewmates were his ears. His elegant, pointed ears. Her brain began to whirr, putting pieces together.

Spock had highly sensitive hearing. Spock had collapsed desperately trying to cover his ears. Spock had appealed to her to 'Turn it off'. What could she, a Communications Officer, turn off, except a noise of some kind?

Noise was one thing Uhura knew a lot about. It was part of her training. Some noises, inaudible to Human ears, could be picked up easily by dogs, hence the development of special dog whistles that did not disturb their Human masters. Other noises could set your teeth on edge, like a dentist's drill or Human nails scratching a hard surface. When your teeth were set on edge it sometimes set up a vibration in the rest of your body, too. That was it! Uhura knew she had the answer.

She turned to Captain Kirk. Not sure how he would take it she began hesitantly, "Captain, I have an idea."

Kirk was a desperate man, although only his pacing of the bridge gave him away. Even if her idea had been totally unlikely he would have heard her out. As it was he listened to her explanation and the tape translation with growing excitement. His intuition joined hers in thinking this was the solution.

He called Dr. McCoy to the bridge, and when Uhura had completed her explanation and played the tape again, McCoy also agreed.

"Now all we have to do is find out where the noise is coming from and put a stop to it," said Kirk.

Even as he spoke he looked down to see McCoy's hand beginning to shake. None of them were safe, then. It was just that Humans, like the Kai, had a little more time than Vulcans.

McCoy tried to reassure the Captain. "Now we know what we're fighting, Jim, perhaps we can do something to overcome the effects. There are drugs that will deaden the senses. If I can refine one to deaden audible inputs to the brain I might be able to keep the reaction down, relieve some of the tension, and give people's bodies a rest from the incessant shaking. I'll get on it right away."

Kirk turned back to Uhura. "Lieutenant, can you trace the

source of the noise and give us a direction?"

His voice held as much of a personal plea as the Vulcan's had done. How could she let him down? "I'll give it my best shot, Captain," she said.

He nodded his thanks.

Uhura wished she had Spock to help her at the science station. The two of them had worked together so effectively on star mapping. Kirk seemed to read her thoughts and asked Sulu to assist her at the science station. Uhura asked Sulu to compute the likely range of sound frequencies that could cause such a reaction, and using his calculations set up search fields on her own console.

Suddenly she had it. A light flashed on her console; by moving her dials she homed in on the signal and got a frequency reading right across her screen.

"I've got it, Captain!" she said triumphantly. "Whatever it is, it's artificially produced and not a natural phenomenon. It appears to be some kind of beacon."

"Tying in the ship's computers now," said Sulu from Spock's station.

The Navigator was just as quick. "Course laid in, Captain," he confirmed.

"Let's go and get it, then, gentlemen," said Kirk. "Ahead warp factor 6."

"Aye aye, sir," said Sulu, returning to the helm.

The Enterprise broke orbit and moved gracefully into her new course.

The co-ordinates correlated with an innocent-looking moon. As they approached the effects of the inaudible noise grew. They all began to shake, as though their limbs had acquired a life of their own.

McCoy contacted the bridge, his voice full of concern. "Jim, you've got to do something. The nearer we get to whatever it is, the more it's affecting Spock. He's used up all his energy reserves, and I don't know how much longer I can keep him alive."

Kirk turned to the Helmsman. "Sulu, are there any life readings at all from that moon, or any indication of habitation?"

"Negative, Captain," said Sulu immediately. "The moon is incapable of supporting life."

Uhura broke in, unasked. "There are definitely no communications from the moon, Captain, only the beacon. Whatever it is, it's mechanically produced and it is not receiving our signals. I've tried all known frequencies."

Kirk made a decision. "Arm photon torpedoes, Mr. Sulu. We have no choice but to destroy that beacon."

"Target locked in," said Sulu calmly.

"Fire," said Kirk.

There was a satisfying firework display that lit up the whole screen and flooded the bridge with intense light for an instant; the normal, well-lit bridge looked dull by comparison when the fireworks faded.

Every single person on the bridge felt a sudden release of tension, a tension they hadn't realised had built up inside them. Kirk sat down in reaction, as though his legs could no longer carry him. The sound of the bridge monitors rose to fill the silence.

McCoy's voice broke the spell. "You've done it!" he said delightedly. "It's going to take time, especially for Spock, but they'll all make it now."

A week later the Kai had returned to their research station. They departed with overwhelming expressions of thanks to the Enterprise crew, and left armed with an invitation for the Kai to join the United Federation of Planets. Kirk had expressed everyone's feelings when he told them the Kai would be a welcome addition to the Federation.

There were still some questions to be answered about the beacon, why it had been suddenly activated, and who had put it there. Dr. Lau confirmed that finding the answers would become a top priority for the Kai research team. They all had a personal interest.

Back on the Enterprise only one bed was still occupied in sickbay - the one filled with the tall, sparse frame of the First Officer. Uhura was the first visitor Spock was allowed.

She moved hesitantly into the room. The diagnostic panel above Spock's head showed all readings normal - for a Vulcan hybrid. But that Vulcan's face still showed signs of his long struggle against the noise that had almost overwhelmed him. He was pale and drawn.

Some impulse had made Uhura go to Spock's cabin and bring the Vulcan harp Sulu had told her hung on his wall. As Sulu had said, his door had been unlocked; the only difficulty she had had was in reaching the instrument on its bracket above his bed. Now she stood in the open doorway, harp in hand, frightened of disturbing the exhausted figure in the bed.

Spock heard her, in spite of the care she took to enter quietly. His tired gaze took in the wary Communications Officer, and then the harp. A single eyebrow lifted in silent query.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Mr. Spock," Uhura said quietly, almost reluctantly. "Mr. Sulu told me you played your harp regularly, and I thought you might miss it. Dr. McCoy said it would be in order for you to have it in sickbay, so I brought it for you."

Spock looked at her. Although he did not move a single muscle Uhura knew without a doubt that he was touched by her action. His voice, when it came, was hardly more than a whisper - it was still an effort for him to speak. He said simply, "When Dr. McCoy allows it, perhaps I can teach you to play?"

He did not say thank you. Not in so many words.

Uhura's mind went back over the few weeks since she'd joined the Enterprise. She had come a long way since then; she had learned a great deal, and wondered how she had ever thought of Mr. Spock as stand-offish. A little voice said in her head, 'Vulcans don't shake hands,' and she knew, too, that they did not say thank you. Yet she had come to respect and like this man.

She had learned, too, to like and respect Captain Kirk and Dr. McCoy. Like the First Officer they kept much of what they felt hidden beneath the surface, hidden from people who did not know them well. She was glad that she had come to know them, and had a feeling that she would come to know them even better now that she was part of the Enterprise. Yes, she was glad she had applied for the transfer.

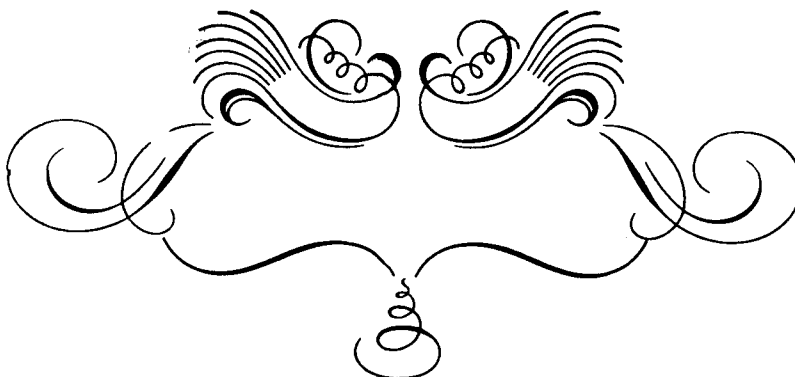
Her thoughts came back to Mr. Spock, whose gaze had not left her face. "Oh yes, Mr. Spock," she said delightedly, "I'd like that very much." Her face broke into a wide smile.

She knew that the Vulcan could never smile back at her, but a flicker of response lit his dark eyes. As though embarrassed by his reaction, Spock closed his eyes quickly. That hid the tell-tale signs from Uhura, but did nothing to stop the illogical voice that reverberated through his brain as incessantly as the overpowering noise had done earlier.

Freedom, I owe you my life, it repeated.

But Vulcans did not owe or collect debts. Like shaking hands or saying thank you, it was illogical. Spock applied himself to regaining control of his thoughts, a control his weakened condition seemed to have dissipated. He concentrated his mind and called on his depleted reserves of energy.

As the Vulcan slipped back into an exhausted sleep, the harp held in his hands, Uhura suppressed an illogical urge of her own, an urge to tuck the First Officer into bed. She laughed to herself as she considered how a Vulcan who recoiled from a handshake might react to being tucked in. It would - almost - be worth trying it.



ENDURANCE

Only the telltales, softly illuminating the control panel, threw any colour into the cockpit of the long-range shuttle. It was night time. The darkened interior of the shuttle reinforced that fact for the Humans aboard, since space itself was indifferent to such minor matters as day and night. Sulu grinned into the darkness. The reflection from the white of his teeth, exposed by the movement, gave him away to his co-pilot, Schulz.

"What's so funny?" asked the German, sotto-voce. Sulu replied as quietly, bearing in mind the sleeping passengers, among whom was Captain Kirk himself.

"You can go back to sleep, Jo. I was just enjoying the peace and quiet, that's all."

Schulz grinned too, but he wasn't about to let Sulu off the hook that lightly. "Come on, Hikaru. You don't grin like that for nothing. What are you dreaming about?"

Sulu relented. After all, the night watch could be long and dull without some form of diversion. "I was just remembering that fencing tournament. I still can't believe I won. Boy, what a final!"

Schulz snorted. "Is that all. There are times I despair of you. I thought it was at least that feisty new brunette in the botany lab, if not ..."

He never finished the sentence. The shuttle lurched suddenly and went out of control. Schulz reached for the helm controls and switched off the autopilot. It made no difference. Their speed increased. Sulu checked their position and put on the automatic mayday signal. Almost immediately the whole control system shorted out and they were plunged into complete blackness. Sulu had time for only one final thought - that at least he was going to die happy - before his head hit the control panel at a particularly violent lurch and he knew no more.

Of the passengers, only Spock, the First Officer, woke up long enough to realise that something was wrong, but his knowledge did him little good, since even his Vulcan strength was insufficient to conquer the forces of gravity. Everyone else slept on unaware, moving from sleep to unconsciousness, and for some to death, without registering the fact.

The shuttle finally came to rest on an uncharted planet some way from its intended course. Only a miracle kept the craft on an even keel as it sped, unpiloted, through the atmosphere to crash land through a canopy of trees into a kind of dust bowl. The trees broke the pace of the craft, which finally came to rest, upside down, with its nose in the air and its aft quarters buried beneath the blue-grey dust.

Spock was the first to regain consciousness. He instantly became aware of two factors. First, that he could not move; and

second, that Nielson was lying on top of him. Further exploration of his surroundings, limited by his lack of manoeuvrability, led him to two conclusions: he was trapped until such time as someone found him; and Nielson was dead. To conserve what air there was, Spock put himself into a light trance and prepared to await developments.

It was a long wait, even for the patient Vulcan. He might be half-Human, but he knew even a full-blooded Vulcan would have hesitated at the prospect of spending an unknown time sharing a small, enclosed, metal coffin with a dead man. He had to force himself not to think of the possible fate of his Captain. He had not yet admitted, even to himself, just how deeply he had begun to care for that particular individual. Such emotions had always been ruthlessly crushed by him in the past. The intensity of his feelings, heightened by the possibility of losing Kirk to a lonely death, frightened him, and made his lonely vigil seem even longer.

Six hours passed slowly. The heat inside the metal shell of the shuttle became intense. Spock, in his enclosed space, began to find difficulty in breathing. His thoughts turned from the fate of the other members of the crew, and the Captain in particular, to his own survival. He concentrated all his efforts on a single subject - the erstwhile simple act of breathing. In out in out.

Some way above him James Kirk coughed softly. His eyes flew open as the coughing brought an unexpected pain to his chest. A drop of sweat ran down his forehead and found its way down his nose, finally dropping to the metal floor of the shuttle. It took him a moment to realise that the floor below him was in fact the upturned ceiling - and another for it to dawn on him that they had crashed.

"Spock! Bones!" he shouted immediately.

"Here, Jim," came the Doctor's mumbled reply from not too far away.

"Spock!" he repeated, anxiously.

The Vulcan's tones were steady when he replied, "Here, Captain."

The delay in his replying had been partly due to his return from trance, and partly to give him time to gain control of the surge of joy that had swept through him as Kirk's cry had registered, confirming that the Captain lived. He had also needed time to gather enough breath to make an audible reply. Luckily there were no instruments working to record the sudden quickening of his pulse, or McCoy would have been able to register the Vulcan's emotional response. McCoy couldn't see his face either, but that had remained as impassive as ever.

Kirk questioned him further. "Any idea how long we've been here, and any idea where here is, Mr. Spock?"

"Unknown, Captain."

Kirk hadn't really expected him to know. He had just been clutching at straws.

McCoy broke in. "Were you knocked out too, Mr. Spock?"

"Affirmative".

"Are you hurt?"

"I am functional, Doctor".

McCoy muttered about the inaccuracy of the word "functional" and asked, "When did you come round?"

"Six point two five hours ago."

McCoy lost his temper - which was pretty frayed anyway, since he had just woken up with a headache, a bad taste in his mouth, and a feeling of being boiled alive. "Six hours! What have you been doing all that time, Spock? Have you searched for the others? Have you found out anything about what happened?"

"Give him a chance," said Kirk quietly, calming the Doctor as much by his gaze as his words.

"I regret I have been unable to find out anything. I am trapped beneath some debris, but quite safe, I assure you."

McCoy subsided and looked guiltily down at his boots.

Kirk, sensing something in Spock's reply but unsure what, asked, "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I am undamaged, Captain. I would suggest you locate the others first and then return for me. They may be in need of the good Doctor's ministrations, and I believe it will take you some time to dig down to me."

McCoy grunted, and muttered to Kirk about First Officers acting as though they were Captains.

Kirk grinned. "Okay, Spock. Sit tight. We'll get back to you as soon as we can."

"Captain?" queried the First Officer.

"Yes, Spock?"

"I regret I cannot comply with your order."

"What order?" asked Kirk, confused.

"There is not enough space to sit, tight or otherwise."

Kirk laughed out loud. "I just meant hang on. I mean stay where you are until we get back."

"In that case I have no option but to comply," replied the Vulcan.

McCoy snorted and whispered, "I thought he said Vulcans never joke."

Kirk grinned widely, thinking that there were times when the Doctor underestimated the Vulcan. Then his grin faded as it dawned on him that it hadn't sounded like a Vulcan joke. But Spock had said he was okay and undamaged. The sudden worry that had caught at him was crushed as he turned his attention to the survival of the rest of the crew.

The inside of the shuttle was not a pretty sight. They found more people dead than alive. It was with relief that McCoy shouted, "Jim, I've found Sulu and Schulz and they're both alive. Schulz looks like he'll be coming round any minute. Sulu's got a nasty head wound, but he'll be okay given time."

Schulz' eyes fluttered open at that moment and met the Doctor's anxious gaze. "Dr. McCoy," he stuttered. "What happened?"

McCoy smiled reassuringly. "All in good time, my lad. You just rest easy a minute."

Schulz nodded and then wished he hadn't. When his head stopped swimming he grabbed McCoy's hand and said urgently, "I remember now, we were out of control. We were on autopilot and then there was a sound like a fuse blowing and then we just dropped. Sulu... Where's Sulu?" His voice rose in despair.

"Sulu's gonna be just fine," said McCoy gently. "He's taken a knock on the head, but that won't hold him back for long if I know Sulu - and I reckon I do."

"The others?" asked Schulz.

McCoy's smile disappeared. "I'm afraid you and Sulu are the first people we've found alive."

"We?"

"The Captain and I. Oh and Spock too, although he seems to be trapped back there. Says he's functional though, so I guess he's okay."

Schulz shivered. "Only five of us then." There had been twelve on board the shuttle when it set off on its peace mission. Twelve. And now there were five.

"We'll make it, son," said McCoy with a fatherly pat on Schulz's shoulder. "Together we'll make it. You'll see." But McCoy himself wondered if his prediction would come true. They didn't know where they were, and were unlikely to be missed for some time. They would need all the luck they could get to survive this one.

Meanwhile Kirk was endeavouring to rescue the remains of McCoy's medical kit from the safety locker. Every time he thought he was getting near it everything would topple down around his ears and he'd be back to square one. He knew the kit could mean the difference between life and death for some of his party, so he kept at it doggedly, trying to wedge things in place in the hope that they would stay where they were long enough for him to reach the locker.

McCoy, having checked on Sulu, turned back to the Captain. "Perhaps you'd better give it up, Jim. The only one still missing is Nielson, and if we haven't found him yet he could be under the same pile of debris as Spock. Shall I go back for Spock?" he asked.

Kirk turned a grimy, sweaty face towards the doctor. "You do that, Bones. I don't want to give up that kit without a fight."

McCoy laughed. "Seems like it's put up quite a fight already judging from your face."

Kirk wiped the sweat away with a sleeve, and turned back to the task in hand. McCoy watched him for a minute and then trudged back towards where the Vulcan's voice had been coming from. He found his location easily enough, but Spock was well and truly trapped.

McCoy started moving pieces of equipment and upholstery that had worked loose in the crash and now lay between him and the Vulcan. He worked silently for about twenty minutes without much progress when the Vulcan spoke suddenly, if calmly.

"Doctor, I would be obliged if you would move two feet to your right, as your weight is now directly on top of me."

"I haven't changed position, Spock!" shouted McCoy, more alarmed than angry.

"Sorry," came Kirk's tired voice. "I guess that was me, Spock." The Captain, who had just walked up having given up on the medikit for the time being, obligingly moved over.

Spock made no comment, so Kirk and McCoy exchanged glances. "Are you okay now?" asked Kirk worriedly.

"Affirmative," came the formal response, and neither officer realised just how grateful Spock was that the Captain had moved. It had taken a great effort for him to request the move, and even to add the one word "affirmative" had been a painful experience. Spock was both short of breath and suffering from the excess of pressure on his chest, but he was unwilling to admit to either.

"You might have said thank you," growled McCoy, but Kirk cut him off with a look. Spock heard, but did not respond.

With Kirk and McCoy working together on the debris they soon cleared a space large enough for a Human to crawl through. McCoy, who was in front, looked through the hole into the dark interior and spotted Spock's arm directly ahead. Without further thought he put his own hand down into the hole and grabbed Spock's, saying, "Here, let me give you a hand out of there, Spock."

"No!" shouted Spock, uncharacteristically loudly. At the same time he pulled away from the Doctor, who had to let go of the slight grip he had established.

"Don't be ridiculous, Spock!" said McCoy hotly. "I know you don't like to be touched, but this is an emergency."

Spock's voice was hardly louder than a whisper when he replied. "Please, Doctor, ask the Captain to come down here."

Spock was relieved when the Doctor turned away, but he was also worried by the look of anger that crossed McCoy's face. "If I'm not good enough for you, Spock, I'll get the Captain" he said roughly.

McCoy's body blocked the hole for a few seconds and Spock was returned to utter blackness. He heard the doctor call, "Jim, that blasted Vulcan doesn't want my help, he's asking for you. I'll go back and see what I can do about the medikit. Perhaps Sulu and Schulz will find me useful, because Spock certainly doesn't want me around."

The Captain's face showed that he was upset when he looked into the hole. He too could only see Spock's arm. "Let me give you a

hand," he said calmly.

"No, Captain," said Spock.

"Come on, Spock. It's not logical to turn down help when you need it."

"You cannot help by offering me a hand, Captain. It will take more than a hand to move me from my present location."

"Couldn't you have told McCoy that rather than upsetting him like you did? That wasn't a very nice thing to say to him. It's not like you, Spock. Why did you say that?"

Kirk couldn't see the Vulcan's face in the darkness, but he caught the movement as Spock averted his gaze. "I did not wish the Doctor to come down here, Captain."

"Why?" asked Kirk, still confused.

Spock didn't reply, and he kept his head averted. After waiting for a response Kirk sighed loudly and clambered into the hole. Once inside there was a bit more space, but he couldn't see a thing in the darkness. His eyes weren't going to adjust to that level of light so he did the obvious thing and turned on the torch he had brought with him. The sight that met his eyes caused him to switch it off again immediately.

"I'm sorry, Spock" he said very quietly. "I should have guessed it was something like that."

What his eyes had noted was Spock completely and utterly trapped under Nielson's obviously dead body, and in such a way that only his arm protruded free. Apart from movement of his hand, and the ability to turn his head slightly, it was immediately apparent that Spock had been lying totally immobile in complete darkness for a very long time. Moreover, he could understand why the Vulcan didn't want McCoy to be the one to find him, both because McCoy would be even more upset than Kirk himself at seeing Nielson as mutilated as he was, and because Spock would not wish to seem so vulnerable to the Doctor. Kirk could tell from the rigid way Spock was turned away that the Vulcan didn't want to meet his eyes, let alone the Doctor's. The Vulcan's distress was obvious, and that in itself was not very Vulcan. Kirk didn't think that even a full Vulcan would have stood up to such an incarceration without any signs of distress, but he doubted Spock would believe that if he told him. Spock always felt any signs of weakness in himself to be due to his Human half and therefore set almost impossible targets for himself.

Kirk sighed openly. Then he started to work at getting the weight off Spock, without another word. The Vulcan was grateful for his Captain's silence, and it dawned on Kirk that this was another reason the Vulcan had not wanted McCoy to come down. He knew that if he himself had said anything it would have made it harder for Spock to maintain his front of equanimity. There was no way McCoy would stay silent if he saw what the Vulcan had endured. That was the problem. They both cared too much, and while the one would hide his caring behind a wall of silence, the other hid his behind a wall of eloquence.

Kirk's anger at the situation lent energy to his hands, and he soon had a seat back pushed between Spock and Nielson to use as a

lever to release the Vulcan. The effort it took to raise the weight even slightly made him realise just how heavy the pile on top of Spock had been. He could understand why the Vulcan had asked him to move - his own weight added to that lot must have made it unendurable, even for a Vulcan.

In the end Kirk had to lever the weight off Spock and pull the Vulcan out at the same time, since Spock seemed incapable of helping himself. The Vulcan fell to the floor with a loud thud, and then the rest of the debris piled into the gap left by his body, crushing Nielson's body beneath. There was no way they would be able to release the young ensign; this would be his final resting place - on consideration Kirk felt that it was not a bad one. He was more concerned for the Vulcan, who had not risen since landing on the floor.

"What's wrong?" asked Kirk worriedly, still reluctant to put on the torch.

Spock's voice was strained when he replied. "Nothing, Captain. It is only cramp." Although he made no sound it was obvious from the way he rolled on the floor that he was in agony.

Only! thought Kirk. Having been stuck in one position for so long, it was no wonder Spock was suffering from cramp. Kirk knew just how painful cramp could be, having suffered it himself on odd occasions, particularly after a long swim. He should have thought of that. He was glad he had not put on the torch, as darkness would help Spock come to terms with the pain without the added worry of being watched.

Kirk bent down and started to rub Spock's arms and legs. The limbs moved away from him of their own accord and he had to hold on tightly and rub hard to get the circulation going. It occurred to him that McCoy's rejection might have been simply a case of cramped muscles reacting. He doubted Spock would admit it either way, and there was no way he could tell McCoy without giving Spock away.

McCoy's voice called down anxiously "What's going on, Jim? Isn't Spock out yet?"

"He's fine, Bones," replied Kirk, with his fingers crossed unobtrusively behind his back for a moment. "We've found Nielson. I'm afraid he's dead, and there's no way we can get to the body. We'll have to leave him here."

"Didn't Spock know he was down there too?" asked McCoy suspiciously.

Kirk was about to reply when Spock answered for himself. "Indeed, Doctor. I was aware of Mr. Nielson's demise. It did not occur to me to report it. An oversight on my part."

Kirk put a hand on Spock's shoulder and squeezed gently. He stepped in before McCoy could lose his temper. "What he means, Bones, is that just surviving down here was tough enough. I don't think I'd have thought to report it if I'd been trapped like Spock was. I think that's why he didn't want you down here - it's not a pretty sight. I turned off the torch as soon as I'd put it on. And Spock didn't need a torch with his eyesight."

"I see" said McCoy after a long pause. And he did see. "Are you sure he's okay, Jim?" he asked.

Spock spoke up quickly. "As I have already assured you, Doctor, I am functional."

Kirk grinned into the darkness. If you called rolling about on the floor in agony functional he guessed Spock was right. He didn't contradict the Vulcan, but whispered softly. "There are times, Mr. Spock, when you are not very logical." He felt the Vulcan stiffen, and laughed out loud.

McCoy heard the laughter and concluded all was well. He turned back to his battle to reach the medikit.

Schulz and Sulu between them had collected the rest of the belongings that might be useful to them. The water supply, thankfully, had survived the crash, and the emergency food rations and blankets were all retrieved pretty well intact.

It was Spock, eventually, who managed to obtain the medikit, by taking the weight of some of the debris on his back while McCoy crawled underneath him and gratefully secured the box. McCoy noticed, just as gratefully, that the Vulcan did not flinch when he touched him. Perhaps he had been too hasty in blaming Spock for rejecting him. Kirk had refused to speak about what he'd found below, and told him to leave it alone and not to bring up the subject with Spock.

Kirk ordered that the shuttlecraft should become the final resting place of the dead members of his crew, a decision reached after much heart-searching. The dustbowl in which they found themselves was just a basin of the dirty grey sand - a sand that would be moved easily by any wind. To bury them in the sand would be pointless. Instead, the shuttlecraft would keep out wild creatures. Each of the bodies was wrapped in a blanket, except Neilson, who was well and truly buried now in any case. Kirk led a short service while the men gave their last respects.

It was with much regret that the small party of survivors, having buried their dead comrades, abandoned the shuttlecraft with its grisly load and headed out across the dustbowl as the evening brought a coolness to the desert. Spock had set an automatic distress beacon in the shuttle and sealed the doors. He had no way of knowing if the device was functioning, but it was logical to try every possibility.

The Vulcan led the way across the sands, unerringly leading them in a straight line in the direction in which the Captain had indicated he wished to go. But they knew nothing of the country, and the Captain's direction had been chosen at random - or on a hunch, as he himself had described it. Spock carried their water and a large proportion of the other supplies. He set out at a good pace, since the night was becoming cold and he needed to stride out to keep warm.

Logically they should stay close to the shuttlecraft, since any rescue attempt would be likely to concentrate on that, but this was impossible because of the landing site in the desert. The dustbowl was a heat trap and the temperature during the daytime had been phenomenally high - higher even than he had been comfortable with. Only the cool air within the shuttle had initially aided them, and since the crash this had got increasingly hotter, until both inside and outside the shuttle the temperature was almost unbearable. They had used the shuttle for shade then, but all members of the party were suffering from exposure to too much sun and heat - and the

water had to be used sparingly, for they did not know when they would find more. Spock had initially refused any water, but McCoy had insisted that even he must drink if he were to survive - and he had been grateful for the lukewarm water, although that in itself was an admission of lack of control on his part.

They had used seats from the shuttle to indicate, by arrow, the direction in which they were headed. The chances of rescue, however, were low, since they had strayed far from their flight path and had landed on an unknown world.

They had no choice but to move out, if they were to survive. They must find water, food and shelter - and quickly. The Vulcan suppressed a shiver and slowed his pace as he realized he was drawing ahead of Sulu and Schulz. McCoy was lagging even farther behind, and the Captain brought up the rear. Doggedly he pushed on, knowing they must travel as far as they could before the heat of the day sapped their strength.

Far away another drama was unfolding. Lieutenant Palmer sat at the communications board and repeated her story for the tenth time. This time, however, her audience was both understanding and supportive. Lieutenant Uhura listened in silence, but the warmth of her brown eyes held only encouragement, while the others had seemed accusing and disbelieving.

"I cannot be certain, but it did seem like an automatic mayday signal, and then it was cut off. It was only for a second, but I am positive I heard it."

"But you canna find it on the automatic recording," stated Scott quietly.

"No, Mr. Scott, but it was at about the time the tapes were being changed, and it is just possible that the recording missed it while I did not. I definitely heard something - and an automatic mayday is my best guess."

"I canna send the Enterprise on a wild goose chase on your best guess, lassie. I have to be sure."

"If Lieutenant Palmer thinks it could have been an automatic mayday, then we have to answer it, Mr. Scott," said Uhura firmly. "She would not have brought it to your attention if she wasn't pretty sure in her own mind what it was - and if it was cut off there is no way she could do anything other than guess about it. I would stake my reputation on the fact that the Lieutenant subconsciously identified the call correctly."

"If that's the case, then the only vessel due to be in that part of space is the Captain's shuttle. But it will mean our going to where they might be instead of to where we should be for the rendezvous. I don't like it. What if it was just a noise, and the shuttle is left stranded at the real rendezvous while we go off on some wild goose chase?"

Lieutenant Palmer spoke softly. "It was not just a noise, Mr. Scott. Whatever it was it was certainly some form of communication - and I still think it was a mayday."

Uhura checked the tapes again and used all her skill to break

down the various noises into their basic components, and slow the recording. After several minutes of concentration she added her confirmation.

"It is definitely on the recording. There is something there just as the tapes are changed. I can only get the beginning of it, but it could - and I stress the word could - be a mayday. Even if there's only a slight chance of it we've got to look into it."

"Aye," said Scott resignedly. "Plot us a course to Lieutenant Palmer's verified coordinates."

The Enterprise swung around 180 degrees and headed back towards what was, in fact, the last known location of the shuttle. Unfortunately they had no way of verifying that fact.

"If only Mr. Spock were here," sighed Uhura. "He'd be able to use the computers to enhance the recording and perhaps we'd know for sure."

"Aye, lassie, but he's not here. Let's hope he's not there, either, for if that was a mayday, then the shuttle is going to have great problems surviving. None of the planets in that area are very hospitable. Most of them are not even able to support Human life, and a shuttle is not a very large object to find, even with a Starship's sensors.

"Lieutenant Palmer, go and get yourself some rest. I didn't mean to be so hard on you. It's just that I had to be sure. We're committed now. I wish the Captain were here. He's much better in this sort of situation. I look forward to returning to my engines."

But Scott didn't return to his engines. He sat down in the command chair and gazed at the forward viewscreen as if it could unravel the mystery for him.

The survivors made it to the edge of the dustbowl by morning - a fact that probably saved their lives. It was unlikely that even Spock would have survived in the desert heat without even rocks to provide shade. But they were by no means safe yet. The edge of the dustbowl in this case turned out to be some extremely high rocks, almost sheer, and certainly impossible to scale without ropes.

Kirk and Spock split up and each took opposite directions to see if they could find an easier route out of their predicament. It was agreed that they would return to where the others were ordered to rest after an hour if they were unsuccessful. McCoy had already sunk gratefully to his knees when they'd reached the cliffs. The rock offered shade from the burning heat of the day, but the Vulcan had already realized that this would not remain so as the sun continued on its path across the pale blue sky. By late afternoon the rocks would act as a heat trap, reflecting the sun back at the landing party. They had to find a way out before then.

The Vulcan returned unsuccessfully at the end of the appointed time. He did not move a muscle on his face, but McCoy knew immediately that he had not found a way out. The Doctor remained seated on the ground, his head resting on his knees. The rock was already too hot to lean against, and even the sand below them was burning hot. Sulu stood to welcome his senior officer, but Spock gestured him to remain seated, and soon joined the three of them,

sitting cross-legged on the desert sand.

The Vulcan soon became worried about the Captain. Even taking into account the Human's slower pace, Kirk should have returned by now if he had turned back after an hour.

McCoy voiced the worry Spock was hiding.

"Jim should have been back by now. Why don't we go and look for him?"

"The Captain ordered us to wait here, but since there is nothing in the direction I have been following it is logical to pursue the alternative. We will proceed in the direction the Captain took, and take the equipment with us."

So saying Spock rose to his feet and picked up the water supplies and equipment. Sulu and Schulz soon scrambled upright. McCoy found it harder. He was surprised when the Vulcan put out a hand to help him.

"I can manage," he said gruffly, remembering the fact that Spock had not allowed him to help when the Vulcan had been the one needing assistance.

The hand remained offered towards him. McCoy ignored it stubbornly, but when he had almost regained his feet he lost his balance, and it was only the Vulcan's quick reflexes that allowed him to catch McCoy under the elbow until he had regained his equilibrium. The Vulcan withdrew his hand quickly, without speaking and took the lead as the group set out on Kirk's tracks.

He found McCoy suddenly beside him.

"Thanks, you blasted... idiot," said McCoy hotly. But he didn't have the breath to argue further, and the Vulcan's mind was already far away, thinking about the Captain.

They had only been going for twenty minutes when Kirk came into view. Spock eyed him critically, but he seemed undamaged.

The Captain didn't need to ask if the Vulcan had found anything. Spock might be as impassive as usual, but the others looked downright unhappy.

"There may be a way out this way, but it's going to take some climbing."

"I'm not a bloody mountain goat," said McCoy despairingly.

Schulz and Sulu laughed at that and offered the Doctor their support. Kirk became aware of the Vulcan's silence, and the brown, accusing eyes. He suddenly realised what was troubling the Vulcan.

"Sorry I was late getting back, Spock. I hadn't found anything when the hour was up. I just couldn't resist pushing on a bit further. The rock seemed to be changing." There was no point in adding something like 'I hope you weren't worried' since it was obvious to him that Spock had been worried. The Vulcan didn't say anything, but Kirk was aware that he had relaxed.

Kirk grinned. "We're like a pack of scouts at summer camp," he said cheerfully, if irrelevantly.

"Speak for yourself!" responded the Doctor, but even he cheered up.

Kirk led the climb up the rocks. They did have to use the rope to get over some of the difficult parts of the climb, and McCoy cursed his companions, the environment and life in general - but nevertheless continued climbing. Spock took the place directly behind the Doctor, and it was Sulu who brought up the rear. They were all pretty exhausted when they reached the top of their climb. It was a relief to see that the country above was more hospitable. There were rolling plains of waist high grass, dotted with areas of forest.

While the Humans flopped exhausted on the ground, Spock remained standing until he had his breath under control, and then with an acknowledgement from Kirk started to investigate the surrounding area. He came back in less than an hour, having located a freshwater stream. This so perked up the Humans that they were soon following behind singing. The Vulcan was at a loss to understand their reaction.

The stream proved beneficial in more ways than one, since it also contained fish. McCoy was the one who put together a "Georgia style fishing rod" and started the fishing. Sulu was not far behind with a fishing spear, which also proved effective. Schulz took longer to make an implement, but finally produced the most productive - a fishing net. It was made up of the outer portion of one of the carrying bags and a long stick. It worked so well since the net was three sided, enabling Schulz to pull it along the base of the stream where a multitude of flat fish rested on the bottom, unaware of the danger.

They all ate well, even Spock, who, although he would not eat fish, had found some fruit which the tricorder indicated was perfectly safe for consumption. Kirk decided they should remain near the stream for the night, and they spent what was left of the day searching for possible weapons. Unfortunately the crash had put paid to a great deal of their equipment. Most of it had been crushed or twisted until it was useless. Spock had retrieved one working tricorder, which he kept, the medical scanner, which McCoy was relieved to see, two communicators, and two phasers. Unfortunately only one of the phasers was in full working order, but the Vulcan believed he could repair the second given adequate time. He set about doing this while the others worked on bows and arrows and spears. They did not know what dangers they faced.

The night was again cold, but not as cold as it had been on the desert. They had found adequate wood to build a fire, and the Vulcan slept close to it, feeling the cold more than the others. They each took a turn on watch, but nothing untoward happened.

The next morning everyone felt much fresher. Kirk decided that they must push on to find a better place to shelter. Here they had a good food supply, but they were far too open to be safe. There was nothing to protect them from wind or rain and they did not know enough about the climate to know what they would face. They headed towards an area of low hills that looked as if it could offer the shelter of limestone caves. They took some fish with them, and also some of the fruit for Spock.

"How do you feel, Mr. Spock?" asked McCoy, wondering if the Vulcan was recovered from his ordeal on the shuttle. He did not know what Spock had faced, but Jim's concern had been enough to alert him to possible danger.

"Specify, Doctor," came the not unexpected reply.

"Are you still only functional, or are you fully fit?" queried McCoy innocently.

Spock raised an eyebrow, but he did not reply.

McCoy began to get worried again. Was there something wrong that the Vulcan was not telling him about?

"I am serious, Spock. Are you hurt in any way?"

"I was not injured, Doctor" replied the Vulcan reassuringly, but McCoy caught the glint of something in his eye. Remembering Kirk's warning he didn't push Spock, but he had a feeling that something was still troubling the Vulcan. He made a mental note to mention it to Jim. Spock would talk to him even if he wouldn't to the doctor.

Just then there was a scream from up ahead. McCoy's brain had hardly registered the fact that it was Kirk's voice when he realised that the Vulcan had gone. McCoy followed in his tracks, but more slowly.

When he emerged from the long grass, he stopped dead in fright. An enormous beast, built like a rhinoceros, was bearing down on Kirk. It was obvious that it had already attacked once, since the Captain was lying in the open, trying to drag himself towards what McCoy suddenly realised was the one and only operational phaser, but unable to move very quickly. McCoy could see he was not going to make it before the enraged beast ran him into the ground.

Seeing almost in slow motion, he watched the Vulcan running towards the beast. Spock passed the prone Captain without giving him a glance and rushed at the rhinoceros. It looked ludicrous to see the Vulcan's slender frame attacking the tank-like creature. There was no way the Vulcan would do any damage to the beast - it appeared to be armour plated as well as many times heavier than the Vulcan.

McCoy had misjudged Spock's actions, however. At the last possible moment, the Vulcan side-stepped the charging beast and threw himself onto the animal's back. McCoy couldn't understand what Spock intended to do. The Vulcan sat astride the animal, but obviously could not turn it from its charge, and it was almost on top of Kirk already. Then the beast faltered in its stride, and flopped onto its side. The Vulcan was thrown clear as it fell, but he lay as still as the animal.

The Doctor came back to life and ran over towards Spock. Kirk was injured, but he could obviously move; Spock had not risen since hitting the ground. McCoy ran his scanner over the prone form and became alarmed. Physically Spock seemed unhurt, but the mental patterns shown on the scanner were, to say the least, erratic.

"What is it, Bones?" asked Kirk who had limped up behind the Doctor. Sulu and Schulz appeared on the scene, the former having

retrieved the phaser which Kirk had forgotten in his concern for Spock.

"I don't know, Jim. There's no bones broken, nothing like that. But something is wrong. His brain pattern seems disturbed, but I don't know what it means, or even if it's good or bad."

"Shall I dispose of the animal?" queried Schulz.

"No, I don't think that's necessary," replied the Captain. "We should be able to get out of its way if Spock is all right. I'd have been okay if it hadn't been right on top of me before I spotted it. I think I gave it a fright, which is why it charged. I was unlucky that it knocked the phaser out of my hand when it turned its head towards me, but I could still have got out of its way if it wasn't for falling over that damned rock and pulling a muscle."

"You mean it didn't maul you?" queried a much relieved Doctor.

"No, Bones. I just tripped trying to get out of its way."

Just then the animal started to quiver and then attempted to get to its feet. The fight seemed to have gone out of it, for it just shook its big, ungainly head a few times and then scrambled up and walked away from them, nose almost resting on the ground.

As it rose the Vulcan also stirred, shook his head and scrambled to his feet.

McCoy turned towards him, took a second look and then slapped him hard across the face. Kirk thought he'd gone mad, and then was relieved when Spock's own hand grasped the Doctor's and the quiet voice he knew so well said calmly, "That will be adequate, thank you, Doctor."

"My pleasure, Mr. Spock," said McCoy with a grin.

"Just what did you do to that creature?" queried an angry Captain, who had just realised the risk his First Officer had taken.

"I surmised that the animal could not be stopped by orthodox methods, Captain, so I melded with it and advised it to go to sleep. Unfortunately, once it was asleep I was unable to give it further instructions and could not break out of the meld. The Doctor enabled me to return to my own mind."

"Spock, you are not to risk your life like that. Do you understand?"

"My life was not at risk, Captain."

"No?" *Only your sanity*, thought Kirk, but what he said was, "I suppose you knew the kind of mind that animal had? What if it had been stronger than yours? What if McCoy hadn't brought you out of it?"

"It was a calculated risk, Captain. Such animals are rarely actively aggressive and do not tend to have..."

"Spock," interrupted the Captain.

"Yes, sir?"

"Thank you."

"For what, Captain?"

"For saving my life. And I want no arguments about it. Shall we continue?"

But it was a while before they moved. McCoy was not satisfied with Kirk's or Spock's health, and insisted on checking them both thoroughly. Kirk won himself a pain killer, and Spock a reprimand to take more care of his mental health.

They continued across the grassy plain. Although they saw more of the rhinoceros type animals, none of them attacked the Enterprise party. They had hoped to cross the plains and reach the forest area before dark, but it became obvious that Kirk was not going to keep up the present pace. It was Spock, noticing this, who suggested they camp early. Kirk, about to squash the suggestion, was overruled by the ever observant McCoy.

"Just what the Doctor ordered," he said. "For once I agree with you, Mr. Spock."

"Illogical," replied the Vulcan.

"What do you mean?" asked McCoy, falling into the Vulcan's trap.

"After all the time you have consistently proved yourself illogical, you suddenly act logically. I find that highly illogical, Doctor."

McCoy was lost for words - for once - and the others thought that hilarious. They had made camp before Kirk had time to voice his objections. This time Spock had to go hungry since there were no edible vegetables or roots nearby and the store of fruit was exhausted. The Humans still had some fish left, and Sulu managed to trap a field mouse type animal, but one as large as a rabbit. It proved very tasty. Everyone was tired, so they went to sleep early, Spock again remaining close to the fire.

Everyone took his turn on watch, but again the night was peaceful, although they heard a few howls that indicated there were wild animals about.

The next day was uneventful. They continued through the plains area and reached the edge of the forest just as darkness descended.

Kirk was becoming worried about the Vulcan, since they had still not found anything for him to eat. McCoy insisted he had some of the food supplement from the emergency supplies to keep his strength up, since the party was relying on him and his Vulcan strength. Spock agreed reluctantly, but he had wanted to save the emergency supplies in case they did not find a natural food source later on. They had no idea how long they would be trapped here before rescue, and it could be a very long time indeed. The Vulcan had not voiced his fears, but the shuttle was so far off its original course, and in an area of little known space, that he had calculated the odds of their being discovered here as little more

than negligible. He correctly assumed that the Humans would not wish to know that.

Kirk had also worked out that rescue could be a long time in coming, although he had not calculated the odds. He knew instinctively that Spock had done so, and purposely avoided the subject so as not to dampen anyone else's spirits.

That evening though, Sulu brought up the subject.

"Captain, do you think we stand much chance of rescue here? We are a long way off our original course."

There was a long moment of silence, during which Sulu had time to regret asking the question. He realised from the looks passing from face to face that each of them had already had that thought.

"I suppose you've calculated the odds, Mr. Spock?" asked McCoy, trying to lighten the mood.

"Indeed." But Spock did not enlighten them. That made them all feel even worse.

"No doubt, though, you forgot to take account of Human ingenuity and instinct. Scotty will find us, don't you worry about that. He'll search high and low for us."

"I fail to see how that will help, Doctor. We are neither high nor low."

"Shut up, Spock."

"You started the conversation, Doctor. If you did not wish to hear me speak you should not have asked my opinion."

"I didn't ask your opinion, Spock. I asked you for a calculation. Of course if your calculations have deteriorated from facts to opinions, well then perhaps you'd better have an extra food supplement."

Spock raised both eyebrows. "My calculations are always based on fact, Doctor. This is why your Human illogicality and what you term ingenuity are incalculable."

"So you admit your calculations are likely to be wrong where Scotty is concerned."

"My calculations are correct, Doctor. However, I can no more calculate Human reactions than you can cure the common cold."

"Hmmm. I bet I find a cure for the common cold before you find a way to calculate Human reactions, Spock."

"Vulcans do not bet, Doctor, but if they did I assure you that you would have to offer me extremely good odds before I took you up on that challenge."

McCoy smiled. "Well, what do you know. I finally got him to admit that he can't deal with everything through logic."

"After long association with you, Doctor, I could not fail to notice the illogicality of Humans. Logic deals quite adequately with everything. Sadly, Humans have never learned to follow its

rules and continue to be a source of amazement to me."

"And I suppose amazement is a non-emotional term."

"Indeed, Doctor. As applied to the antics of Humans, amazement merely describes the illogic of such actions as being outside the frame of normal scientific reference."

"Give up, Bones," said Kirk tiredly. "He's never going to admit to acting emotionally." Kirk smiled over at the Vulcan, and as their eyes met, Spock knew that Kirk was referring to his unarmed combat with the rhinoceros-like creature and thanking him yet again. Highly illogical. But Spock's eyes smiled back although Schulz, sitting next to Kirk, never realised that the Vulcan had responded to the Human's smile, since the smile was there and gone in an instance, and never touched the Vulcan's face. But Kirk and McCoy both saw it - and both relaxed.

"Time for bed, everyone," stated Kirk. It was not an order, but they all complied nevertheless.

Spock took the first watch this time, and Kirk walked over to him and spent several silent minutes by his side before going to bed.

The next two days were spent working their way through the forest area until they reached the limestone hills. Almost immediately Sulu found a small cave. They investigated further and found it to be the entrance to a larger cave. There was evidence of use by an animal of some kind, but the use was not recent and they felt they would be safe in occupying the cave. It would take longer to investigate the opening at the back and the larger cave system behind. That was unnecessary for the moment. What they needed was an operational centre where they could make themselves comfortable and protect themselves from the elements and the wildlife.

Each member of the party was assigned a different task by the Captain. Schulz and Sulu were ordered to scout the area, to look out for any game or fruit or nuts that could be used for food, and to seek for possible sources of weapons, too. They were not to hunt in the immediate area, as local game could become invaluable if they were unable to travel for one reason or another.

McCoy was given the specific task of looking for fruit and vegetables that could be eaten by Spock, since the Vulcan could not exist on the emergency supplies for ever, and since he would not eat meat. He also agreed to look out for possible medicinal plants.

Kirk and Spock set about turning the cave into a stronghold and long term habitation, and Spock was also given the task of repairing the second phaser and working on the communicators.

As part of his work on the cave Spock went in search of suitable wood to use as a support for camouflage over the cave's entrance. He felt that they themselves had found the cave very easily, and unless the entrance was disguised others would find it easily too. They had no idea if there were any other humanoids on the planet. So far the tricorder had only shown animal life apart from their own party, but there was a strong possibility that some form of civilisation had developed on this part of the planet; there was sufficient wildlife to support it, and the temperatures did not

appear to be extreme, although of course there could be seasonal variations which they did not know about.

It was while Spock was reflecting on the likelihood of there being other intelligent life on the planet that his sensitive ears picked out a strange sound. He lifted his head and listened intently for several minutes. His patience was rewarded as the sound was repeated. It could have been the cry of a wild animal, or it could have been someone in trouble. Taking a risk, the Vulcan spoke out loud.

"I mean you no harm. If you understand me please identify yourself."

"Spock!" came the surprising reply.

"Doctor McCoy?"

"Spock, I've got my foot caught in some kind of trap. Help me. Please!"

The Vulcan immediately started up the slope towards the area where the Doctor's voice seemed to come from, using some of the branches from the trees to assist him in the climb. He was almost at the top of the slope when something halted his progress. It took an instant for Spock to realise that his own hand had been caught in a trap. Then his mind registered the clink of metal and an agonising pain that shot from his arm into his head. He had to use all his mental disciplines to prevent himself from crying out.

Once he had himself under control he applied logic to the situation. There was no way that he was going to be able to pull the trap apart with the use of only one hand. The longer the trap stayed embedded in his hand, the tighter it seemed to close. He was fortunate that it had closed around the hand and not higher up his arm. But he had to get to McCoy, for if the Doctor had his foot trapped in a similar contraption, then that could be very serious indeed. Using both his feet and his good right hand, Spock threw all his strength against the steel chain that held the trap locked into the ground. It gave suddenly, and he found himself falling back down the slope he had just climbed, his left hand still tightly caught by the teeth of the trap preventing him from breaking the fall.

McCoy heard the rustle of leaves and falling stones as the Vulcan fell.

"Spock, are you okay?" he shouted.

Spock picked himself up and started back up the slope, using his good hand to assist in the climb and watching carefully for further traps. He made it safely to the top, but he knew that his strength was being sapped by the trap, and he was losing control of his senses. He looked down at McCoy, his left hand and the attached trap carefully hidden from view behind his body.

"Thank God, Spock," said McCoy with relief. "See if you can get this blasted thing off my foot. It's killing me. The damn thing is cutting right through the boot. If you can hold the jaws apart for just a second I should be able to get my foot out."

Spock's face was like stone.

"I regret that will be impossible, Doctor."

"Spock, you've got to try. I'm in agony. Please."

"I will get the Captain."

"That could be too late, Spock. With your Vulcan strength you should be able to release the trap. You've got to try. Dammit Spock, what's wrong with you? You'd save Jim if it was him trapped here - even if it risked your own life to do so. Don't I mean anything to you? You can't just leave me here. You've got to do something."

The Doctor moaned softly. "Please, Spock. You've got to."

"I am unable to release your foot, Doctor. I will send the Captain to help you. Do not attempt to move."

Then the Vulcan was gone. McCoy heard him scrambling down the slope and yelled after him.

"You unfeeling, cold-blooded, half-breed! You didn't even try. Are you that afraid of touching me, Spock? What is it that frightens you? It sure as hell can't be your hidden feelings - because you haven't got any to hide."

The Doctor wore himself out with these last words. He felt totally defeated. How could the Vulcan just leave him here like this? Anyone with even a small amount of common decency would try to get him out of the trap. He'd not do less for a dog, let alone a Human being. The pain in his foot was becoming unbearable. He knew that alone he could do nothing but wait, but the waiting itself was torture, and all the time he blamed the Vulcan for leaving him without trying to help.

Kirk had a similar reaction when Spock ran into camp and advised him that the doctor was trapped a little distance away and needed assistance to get the trap off his foot. Spock described the trap and explained that something would be needed to force the jaws of the trap to release the foot.

"If you didn't manage to open the thing then we're going to have quite some difficulty getting it open."

"I believe it might be possible to open the trap by forcing the jaws apart, but I did not attempt it, Captain."

"Why on earth not, Spock? Surely you should have had a go before coming back here?"

Just then Sulu returned to the cave and Kirk ordered him to bring the medikit and the tools from the emergency kit and follow them. Spock had already turned and was leading the way back before Kirk could comment further. His left arm was again carefully hidden from the Captain's sight, and Kirk had no idea that the Vulcan was hurt. He knew Spock was out of breath, but assumed that this was due to running back. He cursed the Vulcan for not using his brains, knowing that Vulcan ears would pick up the mumblings while Human ones would not. If nothing else it made him feel better.

McCoy was lying on the ground, his hands clawing uselessly at

his trapped foot, and his body curled around in an unnatural position. Kirk forgot the others and ran over to him.

"Bones," he murmured soothingly. "It's all right. We're here now."

Sulu rushed over with the medikit and with McCoy's instructions gave the Doctor a shot of painkiller.

Kirk called to the Vulcan to come and help get the contraption off McCoy's foot, but there was no response.

"He's got something against me, Jim. Ever since the crash there's been something wrong."

"Nonsense," said Kirk, remembering the claustrophobic hole in which Spock had been entombed and the cramp that had wracked the Vulcan's body. But he could not explain Spock's absence now.

Instead Sulu and Kirk between them, using an axe from the emergency kit, finally managed to release the Doctor's foot. The trap sprang open with another metallic clink, and the Doctor passed out. Very gently the Captain straightened his leg and made him more comfortable. He didn't know what to do for the mutilated foot, and decided it would be best to wait for McCoy to come round. Instead he covered the Doctor with a blanket and settled down to wait.

Turning to Sulu he ordered. "Go and find Mr. Spock for me and ask him to report to me here. If he resists, tell him it's a direct order and I'll... Never mind. Just tell him it's a direct order."

Sulu nodded and disappeared.

Kirk was surprised when the lieutenant returned within a few minutes, unaccompanied.

"Well, where is he?" he asked Sulu sharply, but before Sulu could reply he added, "he wouldn't ignore a direct order just to avoid McCoy."

"No," said Sulu, almost whispering. "Captain, I think you'd better come quickly. Mr. Spock is unconscious. His hand is caught in a similar trap ... but it must have happened earlier, sir. He's trailing the chain from the trap, but he's nowhere near anything that could possibly have been attached to it. It looks awful."

Kirk had already turned and grabbed the medikit and the axe. He followed Sulu without a word.

The Vulcan was still unconscious, lying at the bottom of the same slope. Kirk looked at the hand and swore. The teeth of the trap seemed to have gone right through the palm of his hand and it looked very nasty indeed. Kirk felt ill just looking at it, let alone experiencing it.

"You damned fool!" was all he said, but to the listening Sulu the words came out as a term of endearment.

Between them Sulu and Kirk finally managed to spring the trap open. They didn't know what to do for the Vulcan once they'd done that. Kirk checked the medikit and pumped the Vulcan full of a pain-killer. To his surprise Spock almost immediately opened his eyes.

"The Doctor?" were his first words.

"We got the trap off him, Spock. He's unconscious, but I think he'll be okay."

Spock nodded. "You understand, Jim?" he queried. "I could not tell him."

"No," said Kirk extremely quietly. "I guess you wouldn't be you if you weren't such a fool at times." But the words were robbed of their sting by the smile which accompanied them, and the hazel eyes regarded Spock with such understanding that the Vulcan knew that everything would be all right. He relaxed back and almost immediately dropped into unconsciousness.

Kirk left Sulu with Spock and clambered back up the slope. Almost at the top he came across the remains of the trap that had caught the Vulcan. He could see where the rusty chains had recently been broken apart, and he realised what had happened. Spock had been almost up to McCoy when he himself had been caught. Unwilling to tell the Doctor he had been hurt, and unable to help McCoy while his own hand was incapacitated, he had returned for help without explaining what he was doing. Poor Spock, and poor Bones. Both of them were too stubborn and too proud for their own good.

McCoy had already come round when Kirk got back to him.

"I was beginning to think you'd abandoned me too, Jim," he said - more truthfully than he cared to admit.

"None of us would abandon you, Bones. You mean too much to us. And I don't mean for your medical skills, but for yourself."

"If you'd asked me before the crash, I'd probably have agreed with you, but I don't think everyone feels that way. In fact some of us don't feel at all."

"Bones..... I'm not sure how to tell you this. Spock didn't abandon you. He was hurt. That was why he couldn't..."

"He was hurt! Come on, Jim. He didn't get near enough for me to touch him so how the hell could I have hurt him? I'm the one who was rejected, not him. I know you always defend his actions because he's a Vulcan, because he can't show his feelings, because he's lonely. But this time you're wrong. He just stood there looking down at me and said he'd go and fetch you. I pleaded with him to at least try and get the trap off me. I was in agony. He just turned a stone face to me and left me there and he didn't care one little bit. So don't you give me that 'he was hurt' rubbish."

Kirk waited patiently until McCoy's outburst ended. He knew it was caused as much by the pain McCoy was feeling as anything else, but his heart contracted painfully in sympathy with the plight of his two friends who hurt each other because they refused to admit they cared.

"Let's get you back to the cave," he said quietly, deciding this was not the time to trouble McCoy further.

That was not so simple to achieve. In the end Kirk had to return to the cave and fashion a travois from the wood and blankets stored there. Luckily Schulz returned to camp, and between the two of them they were able to get McCoy onto the travois without too

much discomfort and get him back to the cave. The Doctor remained conscious throughout; it was not a pleasant journey for him and he breathed a sigh of relief when they arrived.

"Make him comfortable," Kirk ordered Schulz.

"Where are you going?" asked McCoy when he realised Kirk was going to leave him.

"I've got to get Spock, Bones."

The Captain had disappeared before McCoy had really registered the answer. It left the Doctor wondering just what Kirk meant. He was not sure that he liked the direction in which his mind was taking him.

Kirk did not have to go all the way back. He met Spock and Sulu walking slowly towards him. As Spock saw him the Vulcan straightened up, but Kirk had not missed the fact that he had been leaning on the slight figure of the Helmsman for support. Sulu's blush would have given Spock away even if Kirk had not seen it with his own eyes.

"How is the hand?" asked Kirk, knowing this was little better than asking Spock how he felt.

Spock chose his words with care. "It is a relief to be free of the trap."

Immediately Kirk took up station at the Vulcan's shoulder, and before long Spock was unobtrusively leaning on him for support. Both of them were very glad indeed when the cave came into sight. Sulu, wisely, went on ahead to get things ready.

But when they got to the cave it was a different story. Spock straightened himself up and walked in unassisted, head high and the mangled hand hidden behind him. Kirk groaned inwardly, thinking of McCoy's reaction.

McCoy looked up with pain-filled eyes. With a great deal of discomfort for the Doctor Schulz had managed to cut off the regulation boot to disclose the mauled foot. The boot had taken the worst of the force out of the trap, but McCoy's foot had been pierced three times by its teeth. They had managed to clean out the wounds and disinfect them, and wrap the injured foot in a bandage, but blood was already seeping through - a bright red stain against a pure white background. It was not just the cut that was painful, but the bruising to the whole foot, for even with the boot to protect it, the foot had been severely disfigured. Already it had begun to swell and the bandages were becoming tight as well as blood-soaked.

"Enjoying my discomfort, no doubt, Spock," grated McCoy before the Vulcan had a chance to open his mouth.

Spock felt the force of McCoy's anger battering at his already weak defences. He could not understand how such dislike could be directed at him by one he considered to be a friend. He was too exhausted to understand McCoy's all-too-Human reaction to the situation, or to make allowances as he would normally have done. The Vulcan took a step backwards as though he had been slapped in

the face.

That was his undoing. The action brought him up against Schulz, who had moved to stand behind him. His arm became trapped between Schulz and his own body. With McCoy's anger still reverberating in his head and with the renewed pain from his hand Spock found his senses reeling. He put his good hand to his head and soundlessly collapsed.

They were not quick enough to catch him and his body fell heavily onto McCoy. The doctor yelled as the movement hurt his own foot, but then he caught sight of Spock's hand and watched mesmerised as green blood flowed freely onto his trouser leg. He sat there, frozen, for several seconds, then his years of medical experience took over and he was ordering them to give him the medikit and lay Spock down. His own injury almost forgotten, McCoy worked feverishly on Spock's hand, first cleaning the wound thoroughly before stemming the flow of blood. He then pumped Spock full of antibiotics.

Kirk spoke for the first time.

"Will he be all right, Bones?"

"I can't tell, Jim. Injuries to the palm are pretty nasty and can lead to very unpleasant complications. Just below the skin there's a tough sheet of fibrous tissue. If that trap caused any infection it could spread along the natural line of tissues from there. The fact that it hasn't swollen yet is a good sign. I just hope that full spectrum shot I gave him will protect him. How long has he been like that?"

Kirk's eyes slid away from the Doctor's. He couldn't meet that piercing blue gaze.

"How long?" repeated McCoy anxiously.

Kirk continued to stare at the cave floor as though the dirty limestone surface held some special attraction for him. It was Sulu who answered.

"It must have happened when he first tried to reach you, Doctor. I found him unconscious at the bottom of that slope when the Captain sent me to look for him. The trap was firmly embedded in his hand, but he'd broken the chain attaching it to the ground and the other end was nowhere near."

"It's not your fault, Bones," said Kirk, realising from the doctor's face that he blamed himself for not realising. "You couldn't know he'd hurt himself. He obviously tried to hide it from you like he hid it from me when he came back here to get my help. I noticed he was out of breath, but I didn't think anything of it. That is, not until Sulu told me."

"That was what you tried to tell me when you said he was hurt, wasn't it?"

Kirk nodded.

"I guess I owe him an apology."

"No, Bones. You just acted as any of us would have acted when in pain. And he just acted as any Vulcan would act. The trouble is

that Human and Vulcan reactions are very different. Normally we make allowances for each other, but under stress that's not always possible. When he's feeling all right again he'll understand that you said what you did because you were hurt. When you feel better you'll realise that he also didn't talk to you because he was hurt and afraid of showing it."

"I should have realised something was wrong. I said some pretty awful things to him. When will I realise what I'm doing to him? I don't want to hurt him, but somehow I always do. He brings out the worst in me and I just can't help myself."

"It's because you're both alike, Bones. You both keep things bottled up inside. Then when you can't contain them any longer you lose your temper. When he can't he just withdraws into himself and builds a wall between him and the rest of the world. Just remember Vulcans never hold grudges. He'll forget all about it."

"No, Jim. He never forgets anything. But you're right. He won't hold a grudge." McCoy smiled tiredly and added, "Thank goodness."

"What's the matter? Have you got a grudge against me?" asked Chekov tiredly. For days they had been searching this area of space, hoping beyond hope to find a trace of the shuttle. They had picked up definite traces of the shuttle at the exact coordinates of the automatic mayday. They had followed a course that shot off at an angle from that location, and then they had lost the trace altogether and had searched blindly. Poor Chekov had taken over Spock's station and had kept a vigilant watch on the sensors ever since. He'd refused to leave his station other than to eat or sleep, and each time Scott had had to issue direct orders to ensure he kept himself going at all. Scott had suggested yet again that Chekov should take a short break soon, and the young man had taken personal affront at the suggestion.

Scott laughed. "Against you, lad? Noooo. But against that infernal machine, maybe. You're only Human, Mr. Chekov. You can't keep working without a break. I'll tell you straight, though, if those sensors don't come up with something soon I'm going to have to call this search off."

Chekov was aghast. "But you can't do that, sair. We found traces of the shuttle. It must be around here somewhere."

"Aye, but where? We're just searching blindly and around here is a very large portion of uncharted space, lad."

"Mr. Scott, I've got something," came Uhura's excited voice from the communications station.

"Yahoo!" yelled the Scotsman, and then more sedately added, "What is it?"

"I think it could be an automatic distress beacon. It's very faint, but its regular. I'll have a fix on it in a minute."

Before long the Enterprise was zooming in on a class M planet, as yet unnamed. The distress beacon led them unerringly to the crash site of the long range shuttle.

Mr. Scott himself led the landing party, turning the con over to Lieutenant Uhura. He materialised with Chekov and two security guards. The area into which they materialised was like a furnace. The shuttle was partly buried in the sand, and it was upside down, but the beacon's signal continued to send its message clearly. Little else in the shuttle seemed to be in working condition. Their tricorders indicated that there was no-one alive in the vicinity. Scott didn't like to think what it would be like inside the shuttle. The smell coming out of it was enough to turn their stomachs. One of the security guards, Bowman, spotted the arrow, although it had been partly buried by sand and it took them some time to realise its significance.

Scott had them beamed back to the ship and from there they used the sensors to track life-forms, following in the direction of that arrow. The Chief Engineer was terrified that the party might have survived the crash, only to succumb to the desert.

Only a few minutes later Chekov found the readings they had been looking for - four Humans and a Vulcan. But two of the life-forms were unconscious.

Rather than beam them up suddenly, Scott beamed down with Dr. M'Benga, Nurse Chapel, Uhura and two security guards. This time Chekov was left with the con.

"Scotty, I was never so glad to see you," Captain Kirk greeted him with a smile. "Somehow I knew you'd find us, but I didn't think it would be this quickly."

"Aye. We have Lieutenant Palmer to thank for that, sir. She noticed the automatic mayday just as it was cut off, and that put us on the right track."

Kirk turned and congratulated Sulu and Schulz for their actions which had allowed the mayday to be sent. Both officers were pleased, although they looked sheepishly at each other.

But Kirk was soon brought back to the present and asked Dr. M'Benga to take a look at Spock and McCoy, explaining what had happened. Both officers were unconscious, and M'Benga was worried about them. Within minutes he had organised a medical team to be on standby and had them beamed up to the Enterprise.

Kirk, Sulu and Schulz were beamed up with the landing party, but stayed long enough to remove the major signs of their visit. It seemed there were other inhabitants of the planet, for someone must have set the traps. They were probably not that high up the development scale, and they ensured that nothing was left behind that would seem out of place. Kirk was very glad to see the back of the planet, and had no regrets about it being unnamed. In fact he preferred it that way, as it would be less memorable.

In sickbay McCoy soon came round after having been treated by Dr. M'Benga. The Enterprise had a far greater selection of drugs, and McCoy awoke to find his foot was no longer painful, at least not unless he moved it too much. Kirk and the Doctor were both staring at him as he opened his eyes.

"How do you feel?" queried M'Benga.

"I'll live," said McCoy shortly. "You seem to have done a good

job on the foot."

"I'll give you the details later," replied M'Benga with a grin.

"How's Spock?" was McCoy's first question.

"I'm afraid I wasn't so lucky with Mr. Spock. Infection seems to have set in and I haven't found anything to combat it yet. The hand has swollen up like a balloon, and he's got a bad fever. He's delirious, and he didn't get a chance to go into a healing trance."

"Let me see him," McCoy demanded flatly.

"You're not fit enough to be up and about yet, Doctor," replied M'Benga.

"I want to see him - now!" said McCoy hotly.

M'Benga looked to Kirk for support, but the Captain realised McCoy would never rest until he'd seen Spock. "You'd better let him have a look, or he'll never give us any rest."

McCoy was eventually transferred into a wheelchair and wheeled into the intensive care unit where the Vulcan lay on a diagnostic couch. The indicators were not low, but they moved erratically.

McCoy examined the hand. It looked terrible. Not only had it blown up out of all proportion, but the green bruises and congealed blood made it look very nasty indeed. It didn't look as though it belonged to a living being at all.

The two doctors went into conference for some time, and Kirk was left watching Spock, unable to understand more than one word in three of the conversation. He took the Vulcan's good hand in his and sat down beside him, hoping that his presence would somehow help.

The doctors disappeared, and after a lot of noise from the laboratory returned with a phial of red liquid. This was injected into Spock's arm, and then they too sat watching Spock and the diagnostic panel.

Time passed and night came and went. McCoy fell asleep in the wheelchair. M'Benga left for a short while to get some sleep when Kirk ordered him off duty. Kirk remained awake for a long time before succumbing to sleep himself, but even in sleep he held tightly to the Vulcan's good hand.

M'Benga awakened them all when he came in to check on them. The Vulcan's vital signs seemed to have steadied. M'Benga gave McCoy another shot, and ordered him back to bed.

Thus it was when Kirk was alone with the Vulcan that Spock finally regained consciousness. The dark eyes drifted slowly around the room, taking in the familiar contours of sickbay. They finally came to rest on the Captain, still asleep over his hand. Without moving his body, the Vulcan raised his left hand and examined it. It was very painful still, and it looked swollen, although he could not see the damage below the bandages. He laid it back on the bed and closed his eyes. He was very tired and his head was still spinning.

When he sensed Kirk awakening Spock opened his eyes and looked

directly at his Captain. The hazel eyes shone with relief. The dark ones lingered on the familiar face, seeking strength, before the Vulcan again closed them. He did not want Jim to see the pain he was feeling - not just physical pain, but his very un-Vulcan worry about the Doctor.

But he had forgotten just how well Kirk knew him.

"It's okay, Spock," said Kirk softly. "McCoy is fine. He didn't know you'd been injured. He's blaming himself for not realising something was wrong. I too should have known when you came to fetch me. But everything is all right now."

The brown eyes opened again and regarded the Captain steadily.

"Explanations are not easy for me, Captain. There was no excuse for leaving McCoy as I did. It is I who am at fault. It is my inability to admit the truth that caused his distress. I should not have left him without telling him the truth. As a Vulcan I would have expected no less from him."

"Don't you start blaming yourself, too," said Kirk, becoming worried as the diagnostics above Spock's bed danced erratically as the Vulcan spoke.

The Captain stood up silently and gently disengaged his hand from the Vulcan's. He moved next door and was relieved to find McCoy awake and arguing with M'Benga about his treatment.

"Spock's just come round, Bones," he said. "He wants to see you."

It was not exactly what the Vulcan had said, but it was more or less what he had meant.

"Me? Spock wants to see me after the way I spoke to him back there? Are you sure you're not making it up, Jim?"

"He blames himself for not telling you the truth."

"But..." McCoy stopped. "Damned idiot is doing it again, isn't he? Don't worry, Jim. I'll put some sense into that Vulcan head of his even if I have to hit him to do it."

So saying, McCoy ignored the wheelchair, reached for the crutches that had been left by his bed, and propelled himself unceremoniously over to the intensive care unit.

The Vulcan met his gaze directly and without flinching.

"I regret I withheld the truth from you," he said without preamble. "You were quite correct to believe I was abandoning you, knowing only what you knew. I did not have the... courage... to ... explain."

McCoy knew it had cost the Vulcan dearly to admit this. He had understood completely once Jim explained what had happened. But he knew that Spock's reaction in the shuttle earlier still bothered him. He did not understand it and until he did he could not feel fully at home with the Vulcan. Spock had been honest with him. It was his turn to be honest with the Vulcan.

"I... accept that, Spock. I understand, too. I might have

done the same thing myself in the circumstances - if I'd had the strength to go for help after being trapped. But that isn't really what hurt me. I still don't understand why you would not accept my help in the shuttle and had to ask for Jim. Dammit I'm your friend too. If you can't accept help from me, then I can't be much of a friend to you. Why wouldn't you take my hand? What could Jim do that I could not? I could understand if it was mental contact that was involved. I know I'll never be as close to you as he is. But that didn't make sense to me. If you're willing to explain I'd like to know your side of that."

Silence stretched between them. Spock closed his eyes, remembering and re-living the awful experience. When he opened them again it was to find that McCoy was quietly retreating from the room.

"Doctor!" he called.

McCoy stopped and turned his head.

Spock held the blue eyes, and almost under hypnotic influence McCoy returned to his bedside.

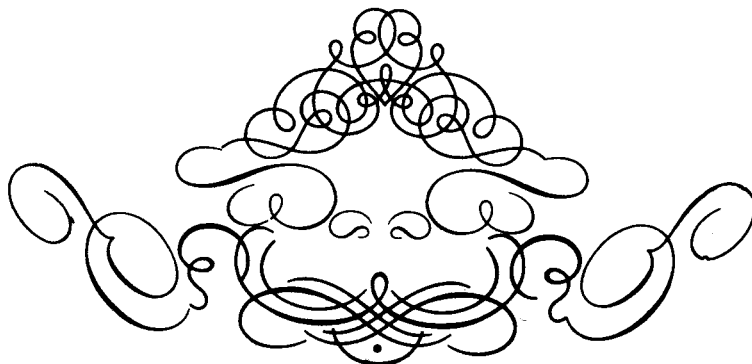
"I do not believe I can adequately describe the experience," stated the Vulcan honestly, "but perhaps I can show you."

Without another word he reached for the meld position with McCoy, getting immediate consent from the widening, surprised blue eyes.

After it was over, and McCoy had shared those hours of hell with Spock, there was nothing they needed to say. McCoy squeezed Spock's good hand gently and ordered, "Get some rest." The Vulcan obediently lay back, closed his eyes and was soon asleep.

McCoy watched him, and as Spock's face relaxed in sleep, McCoy's own softened in response. "I don't think I'll ever understand you," he said to the unhearing Vulcan, shaking his head in disbelief, "but I'll never doubt you again. I'll always remember what Jim knows instinctively - that inside you care and you hurt and you bleed. The things that you endure in silence - my Vulcan friend."

McCoy was still shaking his head when he returned to Kirk and reported that Spock was asleep. The Captain didn't have to ask if everything was all right between them. He knew that it was as instinctively as he understood both his friends.



FIRST STEPS

Kirk had been aboard the Enterprise for a full month. He had settled into the role of Captain with an ease that surprised himself, despite the fact that his whole life had been geared towards commanding a Starship of his own. It was a good ship, a Constellation Class Starship, one of the most advanced ships in the 'Fleet. He had also inherited a good crew. Captain Pike had done a good job with them. Morale was high, efficiency ratings were above average, and the crew had accepted him as their new Captain without a murmur. He felt as though he knew each individual member of the crew - all four hundred and twenty eight of them - and he certainly knew his senior officers well. All except one.

Captain Pike had left him notes on each member of his crew. About some members there were several paragraphs, about others just a few lines. For example the note on Dr. Piper read, "A good doctor. Also a good listener. He won't give you advice, but he'll act as a sounding board and anything you say will stay within the four walls of sickbay." There had been an addendum, "He is a bit old fashioned." The latter Kirk found a slight problem. The doctor was a good man, but he was too old to really understand a young Captain like Kirk. Besides, he was due to retire shortly. Kirk already had a replacement in mind - if he could persuade the man to join him.

The one person who still worried Kirk was his Science Officer. Pike's note on him had been of very little help. "He is a Vulcan. If you have never served with one before, and it is unlikely since the majority of Vulcans stay at home or venture out in research or scientific expeditions rather than the 'Fleet, I can only suggest you take him as you find him. He is highly intelligent, ultra efficient and the best Science Officer I have ever met. Beyond that I do not know what to say, since I don't believe I have ever got to know him as a person. I have found it best to leave him to get on with things. He has never failed me."

Pike had been right. The last month had proved beyond doubt that Spock was an able and efficient Science Officer. The problem was that, like Pike, Kirk felt he did not know Spock as a person. Pike might have been content to operate like that. It was all too easy to give things to Spock to do and then forget about them in the knowledge that they would be done. But to Kirk command of a vessel meant more than operating efficiently. It meant operating together as a team, knowing what everyone would do in a given situation and therefore knowing what you should do and what you could ask of them. But how could you know what someone would do if you didn't know them as a person?

Kirk faced another problem. As a new Captain, he had been entitled to choose some of his own officers to replace those members of the crew who had gone on to other posts and other ships. One of the men he had chosen was Gary Mitchell, appointed as Navigator. The two of them had been through the Academy together and were very much alike in many ways. Kirk liked having Gary with him because he could talk to him man to man, rather than as Captain to subordinate. Gary was not afraid to tell him if he thought Kirk was wrong or out of line. Gary was also good at suggesting courses of action; the only problem was that his suggestions were often wilder even than

Kirk's own, and Gary did not seem too concerned about the safety of the crew when he put forward a plan of action.

Kirk's problem was that he had to appoint either Gary or Spock to the position of First Officer. His personal preference would be to appoint Gary, his friend, but he was not sure if that would be the right thing for the ship. It seemed odd, but Spock, despite his aloofness, or perhaps because of it, was able to command respect from his fellow officers. Gary was obeyed, but Kirk had recently come to realise that he was not respected. He played too many jokes and talked too freely to earn respect. Yet Kirk could talk to him, and so far he had not made much progress in talking to Spock.

Kirk still had a month in which to make up his mind. The trouble was, if he did not get to know Spock he would be making the decision in the dark. If he knew both men, then he could live with whatever decision he made; but if he failed to get through to Spock - assuming there was someone behind that ultra efficiency to get through to - then he would always wonder about the validity of his choice. He could only compare like with like if he knew them both. Unfortunately Spock had so far resisted his every attempt to get to know him.

Kirk found talking to Spock rather like talking to the computer. Ask a direct question and you would get a direct answer. That was all you would get. If you didn't ask in an exact manner you didn't get an answer, or at best you got back a question asking you to give further details. If you wanted further details you had to ask more questions. No, perhaps that was not quite fair. Spock did occasionally volunteer information where a computer would not, but if you asked him anything personal, like the computer he would just switch himself off as though his answer was, "I am not programmed to answer in that area." But Vulcans were people; no matter how logical they might be, or how unemotional, they were sentient beings and must have individual characters. Kirk knew very little about Spock's character.

Kirk paced his cabin for the umpteenth time and then decided to make another attempt to talk to Spock. The Vulcan responded to his call immediately. "Spock here."

"If you could spare a minute, Mr. Spock, I should like you to report to my cabin." Kirk waited for a raised eyebrow or a question.

All he got was an, "On my way, Captain."

Kirk had never before asked Spock to his cabin. He hadn't given the Vulcan any reasons for asking him to report there now, yet Spock had shown no curiosity, merely obeyed. Surely he must have been curious? The Vulcan had himself admitted to curiosity. He had manoeuvred Kirk into stressing how important curiosity was to a scientist, and then merely pointed out that he was a scientist, and logically was curious.

Spock showed none of his curiosity when Kirk bade him enter. He did not indulge in looking around the cabin, as a Human would have done. He didn't say anything. He stood just far enough into the cabin to allow the doors to close silently behind him.

Kirk was forced to start the conversation. "I guess you're wondering why I asked you to report down here, Mr. Spock?"

"It is your prerogative, Captain."

Great start! thought Kirk. "I asked you here because I wanted to speak to you somewhere private, where no-one can overhear us."

Spock nodded. Nothing more. Kirk pressed on. "Aren't you at all curious to know why, Mr. Spock?"

"Logically you would not have asked me unless you wished to tell me. I see no reason to ask unnecessary questions."

"Please sit down." The Vulcan sat in the indicated chair, still stiffly formal.

"Would you like a drink, Mr. Spock. Coffee perhaps?"

"No." Then after a short pause the Vulcan added, "Do not feel inhibited from having one yourself, Captain."

Kirk decided he needed one - probably something stronger than coffee, but that would have to do. He went to the selector, programmed a coffee and returned. Spock had not moved. Kirk decided to use a bit of logic of his own.

"Mr. Spock, if I asked you to tell me all about, let's say Mr. Scott, what would you say?"

"What precisely did you wish to know?"

"Let me give you an example. If I wanted to know about Mr. Scott I would want to know about him as an officer and as a person. I would want to know that he was an excellent engineer, that he had an aptitude for making things work when most people would give them up as lost, but also that he was a Scotsman, fond of his whisky and fond of a good fight. Some of that I could find from the computer, some of it I have come to know because I have come to know Mr. Scott. Now, if I asked you the same question about say, Mr. Sulu, what would you tell me?"

The Vulcan responded immediately. "Mr. Sulu is an excellent mathematician, but his first aptitude and his first preference would be for piloting. He is of oriental descent. He has a variety of ever-changing hobbies, but his greatest interests are in botany and fencing. He favours the rapier, but is highly proficient in the use of many side-arms."

Kirk had not expected Spock to know so much. "That is not recorded in the computer, is it?" he asked.

"Some of the information is within the computer's memory banks, Captain."

"And the rest, Mr. Spock? Where did you find out about Mr. Sulu's preferences and hobbies?"

"Observation, Captain. Mr. Sulu has been on board this vessel for..."

Kirk broke in. "Just a moment, Mr. Spock. You knew he prefers piloting to being a mathematician by observation?"

"Indeed, Captain. I observed his reaction to taking the helm and I observed his reaction to being presented with a mathematical

problem. Further, I checked the results of his work in both fields. Mr. Sulu is an excellent mathematician and pilot, but he has a strong preference for the Helmsman's duties."

Kirk became interested for other reasons. "If you had a free rein, would you leave Mr. Sulu in Sciences or transfer him to the Helm?"

Spock paused. "I do not understand the question."

"I mean, if you were Captain which would you do?"

"I would transfer him to Helm, Captain."

"Why? Surely not because he would prefer it? I didn't think Vulcans took personal preferences into account."

"Indeed not, Captain. His personal preference has little to do with the efficient running of this ship. However, we have several young officers with an aptitude for mathematics, geometry, trigonometry and statistics. Although our present Helmsman is reasonably proficient, he does not have Mr. Sulu's ability to pilot the Enterprise, nor does he have such quick reflexes to respond to emergencies on the bridge."

"Does Mr. Sulu's preference make any difference to you?"

"To me? No, Captain. However, it does make a difference, since Mr. Sulu himself puts more effort into the things he enjoys. Therefore I must take account of his preference as it has an input into the results."

Kirk had not expected Spock to show such insight, nor to understand so much about his fellow officers. He had not himself known that Sulu preferred the helm to his science duties, nor that the young oriental was, in Spock's opinion at least, a better Helmsman than the current incumbent, Mr. Alden. Now that was the kind of information it would be handy to get from a First Officer.

Kirk was just beginning to feel he was getting somewhere. He decided to push forward. "If I were to ask you the same question about yourself, what would you say?"

Spock answered immediately. "I am not competent to answer such a question, Captain. My response would not be objective."

"Nevertheless," pressed Kirk, "how would you answer that question about yourself?"

Spock hesitated a fraction of a second. "I am a proficient Science Officer with a particular aptitude for computer sciences and I am a Vulcan."

"That's it?" queried Kirk. "I could have got that from the computer. I could not have got what you told me about Sulu, nor what I said about Scotty from the computer. Surely there must be more? What about hobbies, or likes and dislikes? You must have some preferences?"

To Kirk's amazement Spock stood up. "My personal life is not a subject for discussion. If you will excuse me, Captain?"

Damn, thought Kirk. Polite perhaps, but a brush-off just the

same.

"A moment please, Mr. Spock." (The Vulcan reseated himself. "I am not trying to pry into your personal life. I am trying to understand you well enough so that I can make the right decisions. As you found it helpful to know about Sulu's preferences, as it affected his efficiency, I would find it useful to know about yours. Surely you cannot deny me that information?"

Spock inclined his head. "As a Vulcan, Captain, I am not influenced by such subjective considerations. I will always perform to the best of my ability no matter what task you assign to me."

Kirk sighed openly. "But Spock, surely you must prefer being Science Officer and working with the computers to being, say, an engineer?"

"My efficiency ratings are higher in Computer Sciences, Captain, but should you be considering reassigning me to Engineering I am sure Mr. Scott would find somewhere where my services would be of value."

"You miss my point, Spock. I want to know whether you, as an individual, would prefer being Science Officer or Engineer?"

"I should have thought that obvious from my choice of career, Captain. I am the logical choice as Science Officer. My aptitude for engineering is adequate, but no more."

"So you do have a personal preference? You do like being Science Officer?"

"My likes and dislikes are not a subject for discussion. I am a Vulcan. You can rest assured that in any situation I shall opt for the logical solution."

"And if logic is not enough?"

"Captain, I am a logical man. I cannot respond in any other way."

"But what you told me about Sulu - that isn't based on logic."

"Indeed it is, Captain. Mr. Sulu behaves illogically, as do all Humans I have met to date. I have merely studied his behaviour logically and attempted to isolate those factors in his personality that affect his behaviour. There are frequently unknown variables in any scientific equation. By eliminating as many as possible the results become more predictable."

"Surely we are more than equations to you, Mr. Spock? Don't we mean anything to you as people?"

Spock hesitated. Kirk got the feeling that his Science Officer was covering up something when he replied. "You are life forms, Captain. All life is sacred."

Kirk decided to change the subject. "I am told that Vulcans do not like being touched. For example you prefer not to shake hands."

Spock again inclined his head.

"Please explain why you volunteered to help Mr. Stocker in his

unarmed combat exercises in your off-duty hours when this involved hand to hand fighting with eight students, and demonstrations with Mr. Stocker himself."

"Mr. Stocker requested my assistance. His students have never fought with a non-Human adversary before. He wished me to demonstrate to them that they would have to be prepared for the unexpected. It was a logical request. I saw no reason to refuse."

"Yet unarmed combat involves touching someone, moving from one hold to another, attempting to throw or be thrown. Surely this is worse than shaking hands?"

"Incorrect, Captain. The hands and the face are the most open to telepathy."

Spock suddenly realised what he had said and stood again.

"Telepathy?" echoed Kirk.

"You need have no fear, Captain. Even if I were in close enough proximity to you to read your mind, custom would prevent me from doing so. However, I prefer to avoid physical contact as it can be tiring to continually erect barriers against the emotions and thoughts of others."

Kirk was astonished, amazed that he had not even known Vulcans were telepaths, and suddenly understanding of Spock's careful avoidance of physical contact. Yet the man had agreed to unarmed combat exercises. It was not just self-protection then, but fear of hurting others that Spock considered.

Spock misunderstood Kirk's astonishment for distaste. "If it bothers you to know that I am a touch telepath, Captain, you have only to say so."

Without thinking, Kirk responded as he would have done with a Human. He put out a hand and grasped Spock's forearm in an attempt to detain and reassure him simultaneously. The Vulcan jumped, as though scalded, and then looked pointedly at Kirk's hand, until the Captain realised what he had done and quickly removed it.

"I am sorry, Mr. Spock. I didn't mean to hurt you. I did not know you were a touch telepath. I meant only to detain you. A Human gesture. I hope you will forgive me. It does not bother me to know. I hope you will not let my knowing change the working relationship we have between us?"

"If you will excuse me, Captain," was all the Vulcan said. Yet as he retreated out of Kirk's cabin he could still feel the touch of the Captain's grip on his arm and still sense the genuine sympathy and reassurance he had felt. But Spock did not want sympathy from his Captain. He cursed himself for not handling the interview better, then control reasserted itself. What was done was done. He could not change it. Kirk was within his rights to try and understand his officers, but Spock did not want him prying into his personal life.

Spock thought he had escaped, but Kirk called him back. "You are not yet dismissed, Mr. Spock."

Spock returned obediently, if reluctantly. Duty was duty.

"Sit down," commanded Kirk again.

Spock sat, yet if Kirk had thought him formal before, he now looked frozen.

"Forgive me for asking this, Mr. Spock, but I must know. Have you ever read the mind of any member of this crew?" Kirk's question was prompted by Spock's knowledge of Sulu, a knowledge he had not expected the Vulcan to have. He did not expect Spock's response either.

"How little you understand, Captain. It is totally abhorrent for a Vulcan to enter another's mind unbidden. A Vulcan will not meld with another Vulcan without their express permission to do so. I cannot read the mind of another unless I have melded with the other, with their permission. It is then possible to read that person's mind if it is broadcasting strongly even after the meld has been broken. However, touching another being, if I am unprepared for the contact, can lead me to be enveloped in their emotions, emotions that are alien to me and are therefore difficult for me to control. So you need not fear me. I have not and would not read any mind unbidden. Nor could you force me to read another's mind, for I would only do so with permission. Neither would I wish to do such a thing. Vulcans hold privacy in high esteem. It is a pity that Humans do not."

Kirk stood silent during Spock's tirade. It was the longest speech he had ever heard from the Vulcan, and it was the first time he had ever forced any emotion out of the man - for Kirk had felt Spock's anger. He had felt it, and understood it.

"You are right to be angry, Mr. Spock. But I had to know. I had the rest of the crew to consider. I was not proposing to force you to do anything. I just wanted to protect myself and my crew if that was necessary. I can see it is not. I will not mention this to anyone. I regret having hurt you."

Spock looked up, suddenly composed. "Hurt and anger are Human emotions, Captain. What you asked of me should not be asked of any Vulcan, yet it was my duty as a Starfleet officer to reassure you, as it was your duty to ask. It is I who should apologise, for you did not know what you asked of me."

Kirk put out a hand again, but the gesture was frozen in mid-motion by a single look from Spock. The Vulcan was too rigid, too controlled. Kirk realised that if he didn't let him go, Spock's control could snap - and he didn't want to be the cause of that. He had done enough damage to the man already.

"You may go," he said softly.

The Vulcan wasted no time in complying.

Spock was trembling by the time he reached his quarters. Thankfully he passed no-one on the way. It was with great relief that he entered his private sanctuary and dropped onto his bed, where he lay for a long time, until strength and control returned to him. He had not thought mere words could cause such a reaction in him, yet the idea that the Captain could suspect him, or any Vulcan, of reading another's mind unbidden went so against the grain, and against everything that he had been taught, that he felt tainted by it. Telepathy always scared non-telepaths. He understood that. But they never bothered to consider that telepaths must live by a

code of some sort if they were to survive. If not the thoughts of others could only overcome the thoughts of an individual. Fear, like superstition, was based on lack of knowledge and pure emotionalism.

Yet he should have expected his Human Captain to react emotionally. Kirk was rare in that he had not assumed the worst. He had asked Spock the extent of his abilities - and he had not questioned the veracity of Spock's reply. No, it was Spock who had reacted emotionally - and that embarrassed him and made him feel guilty. He did not know how he was going to face the Captain again after their recent conversation, but he was due on duty in two hours and fifteen minutes - and it would have to be done.

Kirk too lay on his bed and reconsidered his conversation with his Science Officer. He realised that he had pushed Spock beyond what would be acceptable in Starfleet, if Spock had wished to take up the matter. Anti-discrimination laws existed to protect minority groups; Spock was most certainly a minority on the Enterprise and asking a telepath about his telepathic abilities would surely be outside those laws. If he thought about it, Starfleet must know that Vulcans were telepathic - Spock had after all graduated from Starfleet Academy. They must have some code that prevented them reading the minds of others or Vulcan would not have been accepted into the Federation, let alone its people being accepted into Starfleet. Yet by asking Spock directly he had got a reaction out of his Science Officer. A negative one, perhaps, but nevertheless a reaction. It proved beyond a doubt that there was something more to understand about the man than plain logic.

He had seen revulsion in Spock's eyes at the suggestion that he would read another's mind. Such revulsion could not be a pretence. That meant that Spock's understanding of Sulu came not from reading his mind but from another source. The scientific observation Spock admitted to would not allow such insight. Spock must have the ability to understand, or the observation would have been meaningless. For that matter, Spock need not have replied to Kirk's questions. He had said he could not be forced to read another's mind. He most certainly could not be forced to answer a simple question - and he also knew the regulations backwards, including anti-discrimination clauses, yet he had replied, although it had hurt him personally to do so. Was it because he considered it his duty to do so? Or was it because he understood Kirk's need to ask? It seemed that Spock understood him and his needs a lot better than he understood those of the Vulcan.

Kirk determined he would have to learn. There was little in the computer about Vulcans, except the general information like avoiding physical contact and not shaking hands. There was no mention of telepathy. It seemed that Vulcans generally, as well as Spock in particular, revered their privacy. Kirk was not daunted. He sent out three messages, to old Academy contacts, asking for whatever information they could send him on Vulcans in general, and Vulcans in Starfleet in particular.

Then Kirk, too, realised that he was due on duty on the bridge shortly - and he could not avoid meeting the Vulcan there.

Spock, as usual, reported for duty precisely on time. If he seemed more withdrawn and aloof than usual, then Kirk was the only one to notice it. The duty period was a long one for Kirk. He spent the whole time cursing himself, and attempting to behave normally towards the Vulcan, knowing all the while that Spock, in

turn, was trying to behave normally towards him. Neither mentioned their earlier conversation. Nothing was normal.

A week passed in similar vein. It was as though Kirk and Spock fought a personal battle of wills, both refusing to acknowledge that anything had happened, both pretending a normality that did not exist.

Then a flu epidemic hit the Enterprise. It was nothing serious really, no-one was likely to die from it, but it was inconvenient. The virus spread quickly and crewman after crewman succumbed to the bug. Sickbay was crowded, and sufferers began to be confined to their own quarters. What Kirk found surprising was that Spock was among those who became ill. He had not expected a Vulcan to be at risk from the same illnesses as a Human. He was even more surprised when he found Spock had been confined to sickbay rather than his own quarters.

Kirk went to visit him, as he did all the sick crewmembers, despite the doctor's warning that he too could contract the virus. The majority of patients in sickbay were in a bad way, with sweat pouring off them in the worst stages of the fever that accompanied the flu. Yet Spock lay there, eyes open, staring at the ceiling, with no signs of fever. When Kirk approached him he didn't know what to say and asked stupidly, "Are you okay?"

The Vulcan replied, "I am not in difficulty, Captain."

The simple sentence gave him away. His voice was hoarse and he obviously found it hard to speak. Up until that moment Kirk had wondered if Spock was really ill; now he just said, "Keep fighting it, Mr. Spock. I'm missing you up on the bridge." Then he turned to the next man.

Spock repeated the words over and over to himself. No-one, except his mother, had ever told him that they missed him. Yet, even if he was missed for his scientific services, somehow he found it pleasant to be missed at all, especially by the Captain. He put it down to a side-effect of the flu.

Kirk took the time to quiz Dr. Piper about Spock's admission to sickbay. Piper informed him that he had no idea how the flu would affect Spock, and so he had to keep him under close observation. Kirk told Piper the Vulcan seemed to have a mild attack, with none of the symptoms of the fever the others were experiencing. Piper laughed at that, and told Kirk he should keep to command matters and leave medical things to the doctors. Vulcans did not perspire easily, and the fact that Spock did not show the same signs of fever belied the reality that he nevertheless had the mental symptoms, and also the physical symptoms like dehydration. They just came out differently in him.

Kirk then suggested Piper should have records of other Vulcans subjected to flu. Piper, checking first to ensure they were alone, responded that Vulcans did not suffer from the flu. Kirk's eyes asked the obvious question. Piper told him Spock was only half Vulcan; his other half was Human. He was the first such hybrid on record. Anything Spock contracted was a first, and it was therefore necessary to take extra care of him. Fortunately, his hybrid constitution made him strong, and he was rarely ill.

Kirk left sickbay with a great deal on his mind. If Spock was half-Human, it explained to some extent why he chose to serve on a Human ship. Yet he looked Vulcan - or was that only because Kirk had never seen a full Vulcan? Then again, he called himself Vulcan, and he certainly made no effort to behave as a Human. He obviously saw himself as Vulcan. That was hardly surprising with the cant of his eyebrows and the points of his ears. One thing it made Kirk sure of: there was a part of Spock he had not got to know at all, a part well hidden, but one that was highly sensitive to those around him - sensitive enough to recognise a desire in Sulu to become Helmsman when no-one else had noticed that fact.

Thus it was that when Lieutenant Alden went down with the flu and was confined to his quarters, Kirk called on Mr. Sulu and asked him if he would be willing to take over temporarily on the Helm. The sun that lit up Sulu's face was enough to confirm that Spock had been right in his analysis.

Three days of having Sulu at the Helm were enough to demonstrate to Kirk beyond any doubt that Sulu had a special aptitude for piloting the big Starship. Yet it haunted Kirk that the Vulcan had been the one to recognise both the man's skill and his desire. Sulu confirmed that he had never discussed his wish to be Helmsman with anyone, although he had stood in as Helmsman before.

When he asked Kirk who had recommended him for the post he was amazed when the Captain advised him that it had been Spock. He said, "I didn't know Mr. Spock had even noticed me, Captain. He never said anything. I guess there's no point in thanking him, though. He'd only be embarrassed. I think the best I can do is prove him right by being an efficient relief Helmsman."

Kirk said that was an excellent idea, but to himself he thought that Sulu had understood the Vulcan better than he did. Kirk knew he would have thanked Spock and embarrassed him. He would have to bear that in mind. He realised for the first time that perhaps one of the reasons he did not know Spock was because he hadn't taken the trouble to examine the little things. The direct approach was not always the best. Sulu was right - actions could speak louder than words, and were perhaps the key to understanding his Science Officer.

Spock was still in sickbay when the results of Kirk's three despatches on Vulcans came through. Kirk was disappointed with the information he received. There was a great deal about Vulcan scientific advances and Vulcan influence in various walks of life in the Federation, but very little about the people or their customs and beliefs. The fact that they were emotionless was mentioned several times, and caused Kirk to question the validity of the despatches. The fact that they were logical people came out time and again.

Interestingly only one of the despatches mentioned that Vulcans were touch telepaths. This one went on to say that they had very strict cultural and moral codes about the use of telepathy, and were more concerned by the danger of being influenced by others through this ability than anything else, since they shunned emotions and feared contamination from the emotions of others. The despatch mentioned that a mind-link, a joining of two minds, usually only took place between a husband and wife, or brothers, except when used by a Vulcan Healer to assist in restoring to health anyone with mental injuries, or anyone suffering from pain. It also said all

Vulcans were trained in disciplines of the mind and in basic healing techniques, including self-healing.

Then Kirk spotted one line that caught his interest and his imagination. It said that it was incorrect to assume that Vulcans had no emotions. Their way of life was based on controlling emotions and acting according to logic instead, but Vulcan history showed that before such control became a part of the culture Vulcans had been a violent and passionate people. They feared reverting back to such violence and passion.

Kirk reflected back on his earlier conversation with Spock. He had broken Spock's control by making him angry - and had caused that anger by stepping over the bounds of Vulcan tradition. Worse still, he knew he had done so deliberately - and Spock would know that too. Yet he saw no way to find out about the man without asking questions. Interestingly, on reflection he realised Spock's anger had been at the thought of reading another's mind, and possibly at revealing too much about himself and his people. It had not been directed at Kirk. It was embarrassment that had caused the unrest between them, not anger. Now he understood that, it was up to him to put things right.

When Spock returned to duty he had the grace to raise an eyebrow at Sulu's position as acting Helmsman. He didn't ask any questions, but Kirk told him anyway.

"Mr. Alden is down with the flu. I thought Sulu might like to stand in as Helmsman until he's back on his feet. I'd appreciate it if you'd check his efficiency ratings for me. He's doing so well on the self-recording that I'm beginning to wonder if he's cheating!"

Spock's eyebrows both climbed up his forehead and he looked slightly alarmed, for him anyway, when Sulu burst out laughing and said, "Why, thank you, Captain. If Mr. Spock can confirm my grades do you think I can always act as relief Helmsman?"

"We'll see," responded the Captain. "First I want you to show Mr. Spock just what you can do at the Helm. I had to read those results twice before I believed them myself."

Kirk expected Spock to make some remark, either about Sulu being there, or about watching him not being part of Spock's scientific duties. He did neither. He just walked over to the Helm, worked for a few seconds at one of the boards, then returned to his science console.

Kirk waited the whole watch for Spock to look over at the young Helmsman. When the watch was over and he did not, Kirk called Spock over on one side.

"Mr. Spock, I asked you to keep an eye on Mr. Sulu's progress. Do you know why?"

The Vulcan said nothing, and it dawned on Kirk that any reply would probably sound like a wisecrack, knowing what he now knew. He couldn't see Spock joking, "I can't read your mind," or, "I'm not telepathic." He rephrased the question.

"Sorry again, Mr. Spock. I asked you to keep an eye on Sulu's progress because he's doing so well and it would mean a lot to him to have someone like yourself, a senior officer he respects, acknowledge that fact."

"There is no need to apologise, Captain. The task was not an onerous one. No explanations are necessary."

"Why didn't you do it then, Mr. Spock? I meant for you to start monitoring right away. Otherwise Mr. Alden will be back on duty before we have much time to record."

"Captain?" queried the Vulcan. It was obviously a question, and yet Kirk couldn't see how Spock could fail to understand such a simple task.

"What exactly didn't you understand, Mr. Spock?" he asked, trying to keep a rein on his rising temper.

"I did not understand your question, Captain." Simple, yet exasperating.

"Let me make it clear. Why didn't you record Sulu's reactions on the Helm during this past watch as I asked you to?"

"I did, Captain."

Kirk looked his disbelief. "I didn't see you look at Mr. Sulu once during the shift. There's no reason to lie to me. If you didn't understand you should have asked me. I am not going to bite your head off."

"I assure you that Vulcans never lie. I understood your order, Captain, and carried it out. It would be a physical impossibility for you to bite my head off, Captain, and I fail to see why such a thought should enter my mind."

It was Kirk's turn to be confused by Spock's literal interpretation. He wondered if the Vulcan did that deliberately to throw him off the point. Trying to avoid being drawn off the subject at hand, he rephrased yet again. "When do you intend to start recording Sulu's performance on the Helm?"

"I started recording eight point nine five hours ago, Captain."

"How?" queried Kirk. "How could you record his performance when you never even looked at him? That's impossible, Mr. Spock. Impossible - unless of course you were using some other hidden talent of yours." The Captain said the words without thinking - only realising as they left his mouth how they must sound to Spock. The Vulcan came to attention, with hands clasped firmly behind his back.

"I tied Helm systems into my science station, Captain. It was unnecessary for me to continually observe Mr. Sulu and distract him from his work. I have recorded all relevant performance data including speed of turns, accuracy of following given vectors and response time. Is that not what you required?"

Kirk was stunned. He felt a fool, but he was not so big a fool as not to realise he owed Spock an apology.

"I am sorry, Mr. Spock. It is I who misunderstood. I should have realised you had found a simpler way of carrying out my orders. I keep underestimating you - and insulting you, don't I? You are a very hard man to get to know. The harder I try the more I put my foot in it. The more exasperated I get with not understanding, the more I forget that just because I don't

understand doesn't mean that there is not a reason."

Spock stared at him so hard that Kirk felt sure there must be a hole where the Vulcan's gaze touched him; but the words Spock spoke were soft.

"If trying hard does not work, Captain, logically the alternative would be not to try."

Kirk smiled, and the smile lit up his whole face and made it look boyish and vulnerable.

"I've never been accused of being logical, Mr. Spock - and I'm not about to start now. I can't give up when a goal is worth achieving. But I am a quick learner. I don't often repeat mistakes. I will remember that Vulcans do not lie or read minds uninvited, and that Human emotionalism is not the right approach to a Vulcan. The more I put my foot in it, the more quickly I can learn what not to do, and eventually I will stumble onto the right track. In the meantime I can only say I am sorry for what I said, and even more important, for doubting you without reason. I hope you will forgive me?"

Kirk was not sure, but Spock seemed to relax slightly. All he said was, "Vulcans do not need continual apologies either, Captain."

Kirk's grin widened. "The apologies are not for your benefit, Mr. Spock. They're for mine. I feel as guilty as hell for what I said. Humans feel a lot better when they've done or said something wrong if they are allowed to apologise for it. That is so long as the apology is accepted?"

Spock blinked. "I accept your apology. The Vulcan apology is not so simple to give or receive. I regret I cannot reciprocate."

Kirk's grin faded - although he noted that for once Spock had neglected to call him Captain - a hopeful sign. "You don't have anything to apologise for, Mr. Spock, but if you did have I would not expect you to play it by Human rules. I'm not trying to influence you or your behaviour. I only want to understand. Is that clear?"

Spock nodded. Kirk's grin returned. "Then do me a favour, Spock and join me for a cup of coffee."

The Vulcan complied.

After that things between the two of them returned to normal. If Kirk made no progress with Spock, at least he felt they were no longer trying to avoid each other.

Less than a week later Spock's sensors identified a strange energy field on an uninhabited planet they were mapping. He was unable to identify the nature of the field or its source, and Kirk became frustrated when he refused to guess. After pacing the bridge for several minutes Kirk made a decision.

"Mr. Mitchell, plot a course to put us into orbit around that planet. Mr. Alden, slow to warp one. Mr. Spock, get those sensors working on the whole planet and let's see what we find." After receiving a host of aye aye's, Kirk reseated himself in the centre seat and began drumming his fingers on the arm of the Captain's chair.

Sackett, on Communications, advised him that hailing frequencies were open but he was getting no response on any channel. However, something or someone was interfering with reception and reducing the field over which their hails could be heard.

Kirk apologised. "Sorry, Mr. Sackett. I had forgotten all about you."

Spock raised an eyebrow. Kirk asked him if he'd found something. The Vulcan's response was not the one Kirk expected. "No, Captain. I was attempting to understand the nature of your apology to Mr. Sackett."

Gary Mitchell led the rest of the bridge crew in laughing at that.

Spock waited until they had quietened down, ignoring the laughter, and then added, "The question was a serious one, Captain."

Kirk had refrained from laughing, but now he could not hide a small smile. "I didn't doubt it, Mr. Spock. I was apologising for not issuing Mr. Sackett with any orders when I gave them to everyone else on the bridge. It was my way of showing him I appreciated his acting without orders."

"Mr. Sackett was only doing his duty, Captain. It was unnecessary for you to issue orders. I fail to understand the logic of your apology."

"It was not a matter of logic, nor even really of apology. Both of us were aware of the official position. It was just my way of telling Mr. Sackett I had noticed he was doing a good job."

Spock made no further comment, but Kirk could see he had not really understood. The others on the bridge were merely amused by his lack of understanding, and Spock himself did not react to this, so it did not damage the atmosphere of teamwork that was building. Then Gary added his penny's worth and spoiled the pleasant atmosphere.

"You'd best stick to understanding your sensors, Spock. Human behaviour is far more difficult to assimilate, and right now you seem to be having enough problems with the sensors."

Kirk was about to cut in when Spock responded on his own behalf. "As a scientist, Mr. Mitchell, I am interested in understanding all aspects of the universe, animate and inanimate. Although I may not always succeed, the store of my knowledge is increased and the odds of my understanding are improved. The only way to avoid failure is not to attempt anything. I prefer to learn and fail than to stagnate successfully."

Although Spock spoke to Mitchell Kirk was acutely aware that the Vulcan glanced once in his direction before looking at Mitchell. He realised that Spock had just confirmed that he, like Kirk, was learning to understand, that learning involved making mistakes on both sides. Kirk realised that the Vulcan was trying to tell him that he had accepted Kirk's earlier apology in full.

Mr. Sackett joined the conversation. "Mr. Spock has got you there, Gary."

Gary snorted. "It sounds good in principle, but it sure takes some people a long time to progress."

Kirk interrupted before things got out of hand. "Let's get back to the task before us, gentleman. I want to know what that field is and why it's there." He turned to Mitchell and spoke so softly that no-one else could hear him. "And before you criticise Mr. Spock for his lack of understanding, Gary, just consider how little you understand of Vulcan behaviour. Mr. Spock is way ahead of any of us. At least he speaks our language fluently - and I am certain from the 'boring old crew records' as you called them when I came on board, that there is absolutely no-one else on this vessel who speaks a word of Vulcan."

Mitchell muttered, "Who'd want to?" but Kirk chose to ignore the remark. He had made his point.

Kirk glanced over to Spock to see if he'd heard the conversation - he'd forgotten the Vulcan's ultra-sensitive hearing - but Spock's concentration was focused on his sensors.

"I have isolated the readings on the energy field. It is still impossible to identify its composition, but I have identified its precise location. It is localised to an area of some 100 square miles around the northern pole of the planet. Readings show temperature on the planet to be a uniform 65 degrees fahrenheit, and there is no indication of magnetic activity which could account for the energy field. The planet itself is Class M; atmosphere similar to Earth, with a higher proportion of oxygen and also of trace gases, but all within acceptable levels. There is an abundance of wildlife, much of it quite large, about the size of an Earth elephant. However, the wildlife is located mostly near the equator. There are indications of animals some 10 miles distant from the energy field, but none nearer. There appears to be a barren, animal-free boundary extending for between 8 and 15 miles around the circumference of the energy field."

"Is the energy field uniform, Spock?"

"No, Captain. It most resembles the outline of a seated cat."

"A cat? Aren't you getting a bit poetic, Mr. Spock?" asked Kirk, grinning.

"No, Captain. I was merely attempting to describe the phenomenon in a way you would understand visually."

"Let's see it on the screen, then."

The cat-shaped field appeared on the viewscreen. The outline of the planet was real, but Spock had superimposed a schematic of the field on top of that.

"I guess it must be natural rather than artificial. It certainly looks like a cat," said Kirk.

"There is insufficient data to support or reject your hypothesis on the natural source of the field. Sensors are still unable to identify the nature, source or effect of the field."

"In that case, gentlemen, I think this calls for some further investigation. Mr. Mitchell, Mr. Spock, report for landing party duty in ten minutes time. Mr. Sackett, please contact Mr. Sulu and

ask him to join us. Perhaps we can satisfy his interest in the local flora. Spock, I want us fully equipped to research this energy field. Gary, I also want us equipped for survival and self-defence, just in case those elephants wander in our direction. And before you tell me, Mr. Spock," - for Kirk had seen the Vulcan's eyebrow on the rise - "I am well aware that they are not really elephants. Mark and move, gentlemen."

Kirk reflected that it was not only curiosity about the strange energy field that prompted his decision, but also curiosity about how Mitchell and Spock would react on the landing party. He made an entry into his personal log explaining his reasons for choosing the members of the landing party and pointing out that Mitchell had already guessed that he and Spock were vying for the position of First Officer. He believed Spock was also aware of this, but did not seem to consider it a question of competition. Kirk hoped the planet would allow him to see both men at work. Later he had to admit that the planet did not fail him.

The landing party coalesced in transporter sparkle in the middle of an open plain. Despite Spock's readings of a constant 65 degree temperature, Kirk felt cold. There was a wind here, almost as though they were in a wind tunnel of some sort, but Spock's tricorder showed no mountains or cliffs that could account for the effect. The wind seemed to be fairly widespread.

The four members of the landing party spread out, each with his own specific duties, except for Kirk himself, who just wandered aimlessly after contacting the ship to confirm their safe arrival.

When he asked for reports he found that the planet, as expected, had a rich, loam soil, but all the vegetation in the area was low. There were no trees or even bushes to offer protection from the wind. Sulu was disappointed: the majority of plants were just grasses. Mitchell, too, was unhappy: there was nothing nearby with which to build a decent campsite or defensive position. Only Spock seemed his usual self, but then he never looked happy. Kirk sighed. This landing party was getting depressing. Spock confirmed the strange energy barrier was located approximately three point five miles from their present location, in a northerly direction. However, the tricorder readings were not as accurate as he had expected and he was unable to identify exactly where the field started.

Kirk decided they might as well push on towards the energy field and see what they could find out. Mitchell and Sulu joined Spock with tricorders out in front of them. As Spock had indicated, the readings did not make any sense. They could not tell where the barrier began. Mitchell was just saying, after an hour of steady walking, that he hoped they'd find the barrier soon, when Spock suddenly grimaced, took a step backwards and declared, "I believe we have found it, Mr. Mitchell."

All three consulted their tricorders, and Kirk looked over Mitchell's shoulder. The readings showed nothing at all. After a pause Kirk asked, "What makes you think we've found the barrier, Mr. Spock? I see nothing to indicate any form of energy field here."

"Fascinating!" responded the Vulcan. "Do none of you hear the noise coming from approximately one foot in front of me?"

Kirk looked at his people. All shook their heads. "Are you sure, Mr. Spock?" he asked. "We can't hear anything."

"I will test my hypothesis, Captain," Spock replied. So saying he stepped forward. Almost immediately his face froze into a mask of concentration. He walked on for six steps, turned slowly in a full circle, tricorder still working, and then walked back to them. "I am positive, Captain. The field is producing a constant noise. It commences one point two feet from where I am standing and does not change in density, or volume, as far as I can tell."

Kirk walked forward six paces, following Spock's exact footprints, turned around and walked back. "Nothing," he declared. "I don't hear anything at all, Mr. Spock."

"That is evident, Captain."

"What do you mean?" asked Kirk, not sure how the Vulcan could tell what he could or could not hear.

"The noise is a considerable inconvenience, Captain. Were you able to hear it I believe the signs would have been visible."

Mitchell walked forward. "Well, we can't hear anything. That means we can push on and see if we can locate the source of this field."

Kirk looked with concern at his Science Officer. "What do you think?"

The Vulcan replied immediately. "Mr. Mitchell's suggestion is the logical next step. However, as a precautionary measure, I recommend we contact the ship first. It is possible that the field could interfere with communications since it appears to have an auditory effect."

Kirk took out his communicator and signalled the ship. Nothing happened. Mitchell, Spock and then Sulu followed suit.

"Fascinating" repeated the Vulcan. Without orders he commenced to take his communicator apart. The others watched. After a moment he commented, "One of the connecting circuits is burned out. I believe I shall be able to reinforce the wires on all the communicators if I can use one for that purpose."

Kirk nodded his approval.

It took Spock fifteen minutes to dismantle one communicator and use parts from it to get a second communicator working. Kirk signalled the ship. Scott was relieved to hear from him. Kirk explained their situation and asked for more communicators to be sent down.

Spock interrupted, "That will not work, Captain. It is only by reinforcing the N and P circuits with some from a second communicator that it is possible for it to operate within the field."

Kirk asked how long it would take Spock to get the other communicators working. The Vulcan estimated between 12 and 15 minutes per communicator.

"Scotty, we'll push on with the one communicator we've got. Contact again in one hour's time. Captain out."

"How do you know the communicator will work within the field,

Spock?" asked the Captain conversationally.

"I have already tested it, Captain."

Kirk smiled. "I am glad that at least one of us can tell when we enter the field."

He was not so happy about that when after only five minutes of steady walking the Vulcan suddenly increased his pace to come alongside the Captain and stated, "Captain, I am unable to continue through this field. The pressure on my ears is building up steadily, although the noise itself is no worse."

Kirk studied the Vulcan closely. Yes, he could see the signs of strain around Spock's eyes. There were little furrows of concentration across his brow and a tenseness in his posture that had not been there earlier. Kirk nodded. "I think it would be better if you returned to the edge of the field."

"Thank you, Captain," said Spock simply.

Kirk would have smiled if the comment had not increased his concern. It was the first time Spock had thanked him for anything. It must be important, and the noise problem must therefore be more serious than he had thought. It was hard to believe it could affect Spock like that when the rest of them couldn't even hear it, but the effect could not be denied. He knew Vulcans had far more sensitive hearing than Humans - better hearing in most situations, but obviously not in their current predicament.

Mitchell broke in. "Going back already, Mr. Spock? Given up on that scientific curiosity?"

"Regrettably this is yet another occasion when I have failed, Mr. Mitchell. However I have no doubt that the landing party is adequately equipped to continue without me." With that Spock inclined his head towards Kirk and then turned abruptly and made his way back along the route they had just taken. He did not run, but Kirk was sure his strides were longer in retreat than they had been in advance.

Kirk reprimanded Mitchell for antagonising Spock unnecessarily.

Mitchell merely smiled. "Come on, Jim. He's so stuffy about everything that he leaves himself wide open for jokes. We don't get much chance for a bit of fun. It's not as though it hurts him or anything, is it?"

"We don't know that for sure, Gary," replied the Captain seriously.

"Huh. You've only got to ask him. He'll tell you he's got no emotions and he's not bothered by our jokes."

"Maybe not," said Kirk "but I don't like one of my officers being picked on, even if he himself doesn't object."

"Spoil-sport!" laughed Mitchell, spreading his hands wide. "Okay, Jim. I'll be good."

Their humour restored, the three of them pushed forward. They were interrupted some 25 minutes later by a bleep on the communicator. It was Spock.

"I have assembled a second communicator, Captain, and will establish a base camp here while I await your return," he reported.

"Good," said Kirk. "We'll keep in touch. You might as well contact Scotty when you've finished work on the base camp, and have yourself beamed up."

"Acknowledged. Spock out."

The landing party resumed their journey. It was Mitchell who spotted the strange vegetation, which looked rather like a vine. They all moved over to investigate. It seemed out of place near the low lying grasses.

"It smells sweet," commented Sulu, sniffing the air.

Mitchell bent to break off a branch, and that was their undoing. Even as the vine broke in his hand, a crevice opened in the ground in front of them and widened so quickly that they were all engulfed in it before they had time to react. Sulu made a valiant attempt to grasp one of the vines, but missed it by mere inches. The three of them fell, and fell, until they were brought up hard on the impacted earth at the base of the crevice. They were all winded.

Gary was the first to recover. "A trap," he stated. "A trap - and I had to set it off."

"It does seem as though there is intelligence behind this," commented Kirk. "Is everyone okay?"

They all were, except for cuts and bruises, but as first Mitchell and then Sulu attempted to scale the almost sheer walls it became obvious that they might be unharmed, but they were well and truly trapped.

"This calls for Mr. Scott," said Kirk. He took out his communicator and signalled the ship. Nothing happened. It must have been damaged, he thought.

Sulu, with the same thought in mind, put out a hand for it, examined it, and said he could see nothing wrong. In the middle of his report on the state of the communicator Sulu broke off with an "Ooh!" Kirk was just about to ask him what caused the comment when he found out for himself. A swell of icy cold water lapped over the tops of his regulation boots. As they watched the base of the hole began to fill with water.

The situation was no longer just dangerous, it had become critical. Although they might float to the surface of the crevice on top of the water, the very iciness of the water would deny them that chance. They would be too cold to keep afloat long before they reached the top.

With little hope of achieving anything, Kirk attempted to contact Spock. The Vulcan, to Kirk's surprise, responded immediately. "Spock here."

"I thought I told you to beam up to the ship," said Kirk. But before the Vulcan could comment he added, "Never mind. We've got into a little trouble here. We've fallen into a trap and can't climb back out. Also the hole is filling with ice cold water, so we can't afford to hang around. Get in touch with Mr. Scott and have

him beam us out of here."

"Impossible, Captain. The Enterprise has left orbit."

"What?" exclaimed Kirk. "Left orbit?"

"A freak ion storm, Captain. Mr. Scott had no alternative. He estimates he will be able to return in four to five hours time."

"Damn!" cursed Kirk, forgetting the communicator was still working.

"What is your position?" queried Spock.

Kirk gave it to him, then commented that that wouldn't be of much use since they were over thirty minutes walk into the field, and they didn't have any equipment to get them out even if Spock could reach them.

"I shall improvise, Captain," replied the Vulcan - and he signed off before Kirk could comment.

Now what did that mean? How could Spock improvise if they had no equipment and the Vulcan was unable to enter the field without it affecting him?

Spock was wondering the same thing, but he did not waste much time before coming to a decision. He would need ropes, and these were not available in the immediate area. Checking his tricorder, he moved off at a steady lope. He reached a stand of trees and water-borne vegetation along the edge of a stream in just under 20 minutes. As he had hoped, there were reeds growing here. Just as he had done as a young boy, he expertly wove the reeds into a strong rope. He made it very long and wound it around his torso. Then he checked near the trees and found some thick green moss. This he carefully picked up, and wrapping it in a leaf, carried it back with him as he returned to the edge of the field. He wasted no time there, but unwrapped the moss and stuffed it quickly into his delicate, pointed ears. He had no idea what long term effect the moss would have, but anything that would dampen that noise would be of benefit.

Spock entered the field running steadily. He maintained this pace for only 10 minutes before he was forced to slow to a walk. The pain in his ears had become excruciating, and the noise was building up so that he could feel it reverberating through his head. Even his mind-disciplines were unable to stop the pain. Pain was another physical input that could be controlled, but this was more than pain - it was an external pressure that built and built until he could not ignore it.

By the time he reached the Captain's given location it had become so bad that his vision was blurring and sweat was pouring down his face, also affecting his already streaming eyes. Unsure where to start his search, he called out.

Kirk responded immediately. The landing party was also in difficulty. The icy water was already lapping around their waists. Spock looked around. There was nothing to which to tie his rope. Carefully, he uncoiled the reed rope from about his waist and then tied one end securely around his chest. With an effort he refrained from covering his ears with his hands in an attempt to stop the persistent noise. Gaining partial control at least, he lowered the

rope.

Kirk told Sulu to go first, but the oriental insisted he should be last since he was the lightest and they would find him easiest to lift when they were tired. It made sense. Kirk, the heaviest, started to climb. It was not an easy climb. Spock's rope was corded, which was helpful, but his own hands were slippery from their immersion in the cold water, and, if he was honest, from sweat. Before long his hands had blistered, and the blisters soon burst and started to bleed, but Kirk kept climbing.

It was only when Kirk made it to the top of the rope that he paused, trying to gather the strength to manoeuvre his body over the lip of the crevice to safety. A hand reached down to him. He grasped it, palm to palm, and was lifted bodily upwards. It was the rope snaking down past him that revived him. It dawned on him that it was the Vulcan, the man who did not like physical contact and who didn't shake hands, who had pulled him to safety. He had not felt any form of telepathy, so Spock must have been prepared. He turned to thank Spock, when his voice was stayed by what he saw.

Spock lay flat on the ground, the rope tight around him, pulled tight by Kirk's own weight as he had climbed. But it was the Vulcan's face that arrested Kirk's attention. It was lined, deeply, with pain. His jaw stuck out with such determination that Kirk could trace the white line of the bone beneath the skin, and an occasional moan escaped from him, when he would let go of the rope and clamp both hands over his ears. Kirk was horrified.

"Here, let me help," he said.

Spock did not and could not hear him. Kirk tried to take some of the strain off the Vulcan, but the rope was so firmly tied around Spock's body that he could not move it, let alone release it. He knew it must stay tied to someone to take the weight of Mitchell, who had already started to climb. The best he could do was to guide the top of the rope, leaving Spock's hands free. The Vulcan, realising this, immediately let go completely and covered both his ears, pressing so hard that Kirk wondered that he did not damage his head. The Captain didn't know what to do.

Mitchell made it to the top, and they sent the rope back for Sulu, but Sulu was now almost totally immersed in the water. He could not drag himself out of it long enough to get a purchase on the rope. Each time he started to climb he was dragged back down by the water, and in danger of drowning.

"We've got to pull him up the first bit" said Kirk.

Spock didn't hear. With great difficulty Kirk pulled the Vulcan's hands from his head and repeated what he'd said.

The Vulcan shouted, "I cannot hear you, Captain."

It was the first time Kirk had ever heard Spock raise his voice. It reminded him that Spock still thought he was trying to be heard over a noise, but there was no noise for Kirk. He gestured movement backward; Spock caught on quickly, but his attempt to move backwards failed.

Between Mitchell, Spock and himself, they struggled to take the strain until Spock could move backwards enough to shorten the rope and pull Sulu free of the water. Thankfully, once Sulu was out of

the water, he was able to climb on his own. In fact he made the climb quicker than any of them. Kirk was more than relieved when he was able to put out a hand and offer Sulu his assistance over the last hurdle.

The three of them stood, shakily, on the lip of the crevice while Spock remained flat on the ground. Kirk bent back down to the Vulcan. Spock had his eyes closed and his hands again covered his ears; he didn't even notice when Kirk leaned across him in an attempt to remove the rope. He was unsuccessful. Realising they had nothing with which to cut the rope, the phasers already having been found not to function here, Kirk re-wound it, not without difficulty, around Spock's waist, and then lifted the Vulcan in a fireman's lift. The Vulcan was heavier than he had expected, and Kirk himself was near exhaustion after his long climb and his efforts to pull up Mitchell and Sulu, but he knew Spock would not have wanted anyone to carry him, and if it had to be one of them he thought Spock would prefer it to be him. He knew he was not going to let Mitchell carry him.

They made it back the way they had come, since Kirk was sure they had to remove the Vulcan from the energy barrier if he was to recover. Mitchell wanted to press on with finding the source of the field, since the barrier did not affect him or Sulu. Kirk denied him permission. It was too dangerous, with the possibility of other traps, and he preferred that they stay together.

They had no way of knowing when they reached the edge of the field, since Spock did not seem able to hear Kirk's question, and the Captain was not sure he was able to respond to it anyway, but when they spotted Spock's base camp Kirk realised this must be outside the barrier. However, Spock seemed no better here.

Kirk laid him down gently and set to work removing the reed rope. It had embedded itself so deeply into Spock's flesh that when he pulled it away he took the Vulcan's skin with it in places. The ragged weals left behind looked nasty, but they did not really concern the Captain; what did concern him was the fact that Spock did not seem to be recovering.

When he forced Spock's hands away from his ears again and took a look at them, Kirk thought Spock's ears were bleeding. Then he realised they were stuffed with a sort of moss. However, when he pulled that out, green blood followed. Kirk tore off a strip of his shirt and tilted Spock's head gently against it, hoping the blood would come out and not run back into Spock's brain. He had familiarised himself with first aid enough to know that it was better to allow blood to run freely from an ear wound. The problem was that both Spock's ears were affected and he couldn't let both bleed freely. That was an impossibility.

Unexpectedly, the Vulcan suddenly opened his eyes. Since Kirk was watching him closely he saw the look of agony cross the brown eyes, unguarded in the moment of regaining consciousness. Then the pain was quickly replaced by Spock's usual mask of non-emotion. The eyes became rock hard, reflecting back the looks thrown at them, and preventing anyone from accessing whatever the Vulcan was really thinking or feeling.

Kirk noted the transformation with interest. What he had read and believed was correct. The emotion was there, but it was controlled - so controlled, in fact, that the majority of people didn't even see it. He himself would not have realised just how

much pain Spock was hiding if he hadn't seen those unguarded, uncontrolled waking moments. The Vulcan was good at hiding his hurt. It made Kirk wonder how many other hurts he hid behind that mask, hurts caused by careless comments like the ones Mitchell had made. They would probably never know.

"You are safe!" shouted the Vulcan.

"What's he shouting for?" asked Mitchell, coming closer.

Kirk waved him back. "It's all right. I'll see to him. You see if you can find us something to heat up some water with. We've still got several hours to wait before Scotty comes back for us.

"Can you hear me, Spock?" he asked, leaning back over the Vulcan.

Spock shook his head, and then obviously regretting the movement clamped his hands back over his ears. He stared disbelievingly at the warm, green blood that seeped through his fingers. He had not realised he was bleeding.

Kirk watched him analyse himself. He wanted to give the Vulcan time to adjust. After a moment, Spock's eyes left his hands and travelled back to the Captain's face; they were still blank, still reflecting back like a mirror.

"I cannot hear you, Captain, but if you face me I believe I can read your lips," he shouted.

Kirk smiled, despite the situation. "I am quite certain you have lost your hearing, Mr. Spock. Do you realise you are shouting at me? It isn't every day a Science Officer gets a chance to yell at his Captain."

The Vulcan actually blinked. "Is everyone safe, Captain?" he asked, in a loud, but more normal voice.

It was Kirk's turn to nod. "Gary's hunting up some fuel to warm some water and Sulu's still trying to contact the Enterprise. You just keep still. We've got nothing to worry about. It's just a matter of waiting."

Spock took him at his word and closed his eyes. Kirk was amazed at his ability to switch off and relax so completely despite his condition.

But they were not out of the woods yet. As darkness began to fall, Sulu reported readings of a mass migration of animals - in their direction. Mitchell had got a fire going, and after bathing Spock's wounds, they had all settled around it to drink coffee. The Vulcan alone had refused a drink. Kirk hoped the fire would keep the animals at bay. With this in mind they built up the fire, but there was not a great deal of fuel. Mitchell had had to travel several miles to collect what wood they did have. It would not last the night.

As though to confirm their worst fears, a lone, wolf-like creature suddenly appeared. It did not seem to see them, but trotted past, migrating northwards. Then it howled, a blood-curdling, terror-filled howl. They all jumped, even Spock, who, although he had not heard the sound sensed the pain and anger in the wolf's cry. It screamed again, then turned around, and ran

back the way it had come, tail between its legs.

Mitchell was the first to realise what had happened. "It must have Vulcan ears," he joked.

It dawned on them that this was the case. Two further wild animals came past them and were turned back by the invisible, and to Human ears inaudible, barrier. It became obvious that whatever the barrier was it inflicted pain and pure terror on those animals that came into contact with it. Kirk glanced worriedly at his Science Officer. The Vulcan, too, had been subjected to that, and he had endured it for a long time for their benefit.

But as more animals amassed, their own position became precarious. Sulu suggested they took refuge behind the barrier. That was a good suggestion, but it did not help Spock. However, the Vulcan had not lost his ability to reason.

"Logically, you must retreat behind the barrier, Captain" he said calmly. "I shall remain near the fire. They will perhaps ignore a single person." His voice was still raised, but Kirk didn't have the heart to tease him about it now.

Kirk had the remainder of the landing party to consider. They were all his responsibility. He made his decision. "We'll pull back behind the barrier." He leaned over the Vulcan and formed the words carefully. "Spock, tell me as soon as we reach the barrier." He told the others that he intended to make camp within the confines of the barrier, and to lay Spock inside with only his head sticking out. That way he wouldn't make much of a target for the wild beasts.

As it turned out, Spock didn't have to tell them when they reached the barrier. He just doubled up like a jack-knife snapping closed as soon as they stumbled into it, but after a moment he unwound himself, and at Kirk's bidding lay down so that only his head remained outside - and free from that terrible noise.

They remained as they were for over an hour before one particularly belligerent animal, resembling a giant sized armadillo, took an interest in the Vulcan. The huge beast stumbled over to them, pawing the ground with its giant feet and making rumbling noises with its distended snout. Faced with the wild beast, Spock was forced to retreat behind the barrier yet again, but it was obvious that he found either option unattractive.

Kirk took command of the situation and ordered the others to follow him in attacking the beast with fire branches, much as their ancestors must have done centuries before. The beast eventually retreated from them, but not before it had given them several heart-stopping moments. Spock was again able to lie down just beyond the reach of the sound barrier and they settled back to wait.

Kirk's communicator beeped so suddenly that it took him by surprise. He cut short Scott's apologies and ordered the landing party beamed up immediately and sickbay put on alert. Spock was rushed to sickbay on arrival, and Kirk, Mitchell and Sulu were ordered to follow, since they had all suffered cuts and bruises from their experience.

All but Spock were quickly released once they had been cleaned up properly. Kirk decided it was worth risking another landing party to discover what lay hidden behind the barrier that someone

wanted kept from the animals.

He again led the party himself, allowing Mitchell and Sulu to be involved. They took down a bigger group this time though. Their extra precautions included providing reinforced communicators and phasers. Without Spock they never knew when they entered the barrier, but they were well inside it when they first hit trouble.

Lawrence, the security guard taking the point, accidentally tripped yet another trap, in spite of the warnings Kirk had issued. This time, however, luck was with them. Van Morris, thinking quickly, managed to throw a rope to Lawrence and haul him out of the opening pit before it even started to fill with water. The landing party gathered on the edge of the phenomenon and watched the water begin to swirl in the bottom. It was obviously a part of the trap that water should fill the hole, since this trap was some way from the first one they had tripped.

The landing party camped for the night within the barrier. They had discovered that the ship's sensors could track them here, but the transporter refused to function. The tricorders still gave confusing readings, and they could find nothing of interest within the barrier to explain its existence.

The second day was as disappointing as the first and even less eventful. Kirk gave them a third day to traverse the centre of the barrier, but they still found nothing. Weighing the chances of finding something useful against the delay, the Captain decided to give up and return to the ship. They headed back towards their beam down point.

It was on their way back that they stumbled across the tracking station. It was based in a low, metallic building. Their tricorders gave them the first indication of its presence, but even when they reached the station they could discover very little about it. The equipment appeared to be functioning, but it was not obvious to what purpose. Kirk wished he had the Vulcan with them - Spock's scientific knowledge would have been valuable.

He did have Sulu and Mendoza, but neither of them was able to identify either the metal from which the station was constructed, or the nature of the radar-type equipment. However, the equipment was pointed towards the ground and not towards space. Whatever it was meant to track was here. They speculated about the interior of the planet but nothing useful came out of the debate. The equipment took no notice of the landing party at all.

Eventually, having recorded what they could on one of the tricorders, Kirk ordered them back towards the beam up point. He concluded that the tracking station was the reason for the barrier - to keep the animals away - but as to the reason for the tracking station, well, that was yet another mystery. Perhaps a follow-up research group could look into that; Kirk didn't think it warranted a Starship remaining in orbit.

Back aboard ship Kirk checked on Spock's progress. The Vulcan had undergone an operation of sorts, but Dr. Piper insisted it was merely to clear blocked passageways and nothing serious. Kirk felt reassured until he saw Spock. The Vulcan was attached to a variety of tubes and was being fed intravenously by some sort of drip. Piper assured him this was only because ear, nose and throat were connected and he could not restore Spock's hearing without by-passing his system. He had therefore performed a tracheotomy,

allowing Spock to breathe through a tube, and had set up the drip to allow him to obtain nourishment without eating.

The Vulcan could now hear, but he could neither eat nor speak. Kirk spent some time with him, telling him about the discovery on the planet. Spock indicated a yes or a no with his eyes, by blinking a response, but as the Vulcan rarely spoke more than a few words, Kirk did not find this a problem. He found that talking to Spock about the experiences helped clarify them. When he left sickbay he reflected that he had actually enjoyed visiting Spock and must repeat the experience.

So over the next week Kirk became a regular visitor to Sickbay. Piper couldn't understand what he found to say for such long visits when Spock could not respond. Kirk, however, discovered that with Spock unable to speak to him he had started to search for other responses; not just the raised eyebrow, which he knew expressed certain reactions, but also a tightening or relaxation of the jaw, swallowing, and best of all, though rarely seen, a slight twinkle in the eye. Kirk discovered in those hours with Spock that he could in fact interpret the Vulcan's responses if he took the trouble to look closely. He realised that Spock had all along responded to him, but he had not been aware of that response because it was so minute. It was almost like the barrier that Spock could hear and he could not. But in this case he was learning. He realised just how much he had learned when Piper joined the conversation one day and had no idea how much Spock said to him. When Piper retired in some confusion at Kirk's amusement, Kirk told Spock off for making him laugh so much - and was rewarded with the slight twinkle in the dark eyes that he had anticipated.

During one such visit, however, the red alert suddenly sounded and Kirk forgot the Vulcan in his rush to get to the bridge. Spock, who spotted the flashing red light above the sickbay door, attempted to follow, but was stopped by the assortment of tubes that still fed him and allowed him to breathe. He started to pull needles out of his arm when Piper appeared and roared at him to get back into bed before he injured himself.

Spock did not consider himself unfit. The fact that he could not speak was a problem, but he still had his eyes and it was those that were needed to analyse the reports from sensors. He pointed to the sickbay computer terminal, but Piper shook his head in dismissal. Spock ignored him and attempted to stand. Piper went for his medical kit and filled a syringe with a heavy dose of sedative. He knew Spock's strength and was grateful that the Vulcan was hampered both by the tubes and by his breathing equipment. Even so, as Piper went to inject the Vulcan the ship was suddenly hit and the whole of Sickbay rocked with the impact and was thrown into darkness.

When emergency lighting was restored Spock rushed to Piper, who was flat out on the floor. He realised, belatedly, that the doctor had injected himself with the sedative. He knew that Piper would be out for a long time, since Humans were far more susceptible to the drug than Vulcans. Although Spock had managed to reach Piper without difficulty by removing the intravenous feed, he found that the assortment of tubes that allowed him to breathe did not give him enough leeway to reach the computer. Yet he knew that the computer was his only source of knowledge on the reason for the red alert.

Frantically he sought an alternative means of reaching the terminal. Then he realised that if he moved the oxygen equipment

with him he would be able to reach it. The task was not an easy one since the equipment was not meant to be portable; however, Vulcans were strong and patient by nature, and eventually he managed to inch across to the terminal.

Quickly he set about discovering just what had caused the red alert. The computer fed him pictures of the forward viewscreen, where an alien vessel could be seen within firing range of the Enterprise. He checked sensor readings and also asked for a battle update. Yet, when he analysed the so-called unprovoked attack on the Enterprise, he discovered that there was no attack at all; the other vessel merely used a propulsion method so antiquated that the standard residue from that system appeared to be attacking the Enterprise, since it affected the Starship's screens.

Horrorified, Spock realised that Kirk intended to retaliate against the attacking vessel, having obtained no response from open hailing frequencies. Spock could not speak to the Captain and explain the situation. He took the only alternative open to him - he used his access to the computer to override Kirk's order.

Back on the bridge, Kirk's fist impacted so forcefully with the arm of his chair that Sulu's coffee cup, several feet distant, jumped off the console. "What do you mean you can't fire on that ship?" he asked angrily.

At that moment Scott's aggrieved voice came through from Engineering to advise him that the shields couldn't take much more of a battering from the mysterious alien. Just as Kirk was about to reply Mr. Sackett stepped in. Kirk tried to override him, but Sackett persisted. Realising that the man would not interrupt him a second time unless essential he turned to the young crewman.

"It's Mr. Spock, sir," came the rather breathless response.

"But Spock is in sickbay and he can't speak" stated Kirk.

"I mean it is Mr. Spock who is preventing us from firing, sir. He is speaking through the computer."

"I'll speak to him!" shouted Kirk.

Everyone on the bridge became excessively busy at their stations as they heard his tone of voice. None of them would like to be in Spock's place.

However, Kirk didn't get a chance to speak to the Vulcan. Spock spoke first. As Kirk asked for a connection through to Sickbay all he got was a squawk on the channel. He received instead a string of words from Spock which came over the computer.

"Captain, I have prevented you from firing on the alien vessel. We are not under attack. The shields are being depleted by the residue from the propulsion unit on their vessel. I have the necessary data to strengthen the shields and am feeding the information to Mr. Scott now. You cannot contact the vessel because they do not have suitable receiving equipment. I am attempting to alter our message down to their level, but it will only allow you audio and not visual contact."

Kirk read them with disbelief, but got Sackett to put him through to Scott. The Engineer confirmed that with Spock's equations he had been able to adjust the screens. He was just

checking the effectiveness. After a moment's pause he confirmed that the Enterprise was now secure and the shields were coming up to full strength. Kirk breathed a sigh of relief.

He tried again to talk to Spock. This time he got a picture of sickbay and not a computer read out, but what he saw did not immediately comfort him. He could see Spock at the terminal with tubes all around him and something dripping onto the floor from at least two of them. He could also see what appeared to be Dr. Piper's body. When Spock indicated that he could not hear the Captain, which Kirk had forgotten, Kirk told Sackett to advise Spock through the computer that he was going down to Sickbay.

Kirk made the journey in record time. When he got there, however, he found he had to wait for Spock to finish what he was doing on the computer. The Vulcan ignored his attempt to speak to him and shrugged off his attempt to swing him round to face him. When the Vulcan finally deigned to notice him Kirk forgot to reprimand him. He was shocked by the Vulcan's appearance and aware that Spock would not have abandoned all those tubes and support systems without reason. It was plain to him that the Vulcan was having considerable difficulty in breathing. Spock indicated the computer screen and again writing quickly appeared before him.

"I have altered the communications system, Captain. You may now contact the other vessel if you wish."

Spock stepped back and indicated the microphone to Kirk.

Somewhat in a daze, Kirk stepped forward and said, "Alien vessel, please identify yourself."

His voice could be heard from all the ship's speakers. He waited. Then there was a cheer from the other vessel.

"Hey, whoever you are, are we glad to find you! If you are Alders, please help us. We have discovered that our home world is about to blow up and we need help to evacuate our people. This is the only spaceship we have been able to send out. We are desperate. Please help."

Kirk swallowed hard. He had been about to blow up a vessel that had been launched to seek help for a whole planet.

Now he understood the situation, Kirk became the Captain he was soon to be famous for and smoothly gave orders to the rest of the crew. Before long the Enterprise had beamed aboard the Alders, sent engineers onto their vessel to take it over and make repairs so that it could return to its home world under its own steam, and prepared both scientists and medical teams to help with the situation they would find on Alder.

It took the Enterprise only two hours at sub-light speed to cover the distance the Alders had taken several weeks to cross. Kirk didn't wish to demonstrate the warp power to these people just yet - they were impressed enough with impulse speed.

They found that a volcano was about to erupt near the only centres of civilisation on the planet below. However, the far side of the planet was completely free from seismic disturbance. With little trouble they were able to beam the inhabitants from the cities to the safe part of the world. Dr. M'Benga, Piper's second in command, was forced to take charge of the medical aid given,

since Piper himself was still sleeping off the effects of his own sedative. Gary Mitchell was given responsibility for the evacuation of the cities, a task he performed well.

It took two days to complete the emergency work, and would take longer to establish decent habitations in the new area. When everything was safe once more, and peaceful talks had been set up with the grateful Alders, Kirk went down to sickbay to see his Science Officer.

Kirk was delighted to find that the tubes had finally been removed and Spock looked much his old self, although a recovered Piper had threatened to kill him before the situation had been explained to him. When Kirk entered Spock attempted to sit up and the Captain had to force him back onto the bed and order him to stay there.

The Vulcan spoke before Kirk had time to say what he had come to say. The voice was hoarse and very quiet still, but Kirk heard him easily enough. "I wish to put myself on report for disobeying a direct order, Captain."

"I'm giving you a direct order now, Mr. Spock, so please obey. Be quiet and listen."

The only response he got was two eyebrows climbing comically into Spock's hairline. Controlling the impulse to giggle at this, Kirk managed to appear cross.

"I do not like to have my orders countermanded by my senior officers, especially when I don't even know they are being countermanded. However, in the circumstances, I am pleased that your willingness to act in the only way open to you prevented me from killing all the people on that ship and all the innocent lives on Alder they were attempting to help. So, unless you wish to have me put myself on report for attacking a defenceless vessel we will say no more on the subject."

"Captain..." started Spock.

"You wish to put me on report?" challenged Kirk.

The Vulcan shook his head.

"Good," said Kirk, rubbing his hands together. "Now that we see eye to eye, Mr. Spock ..."

It was his turn to be interrupted, by a demand for an explanation. With Vulcan patience, Kirk explained. It was not just an explanation of the colloquial phrase "eye to eye" but also of just what that meant to Kirk and how he finally felt he understood Spock, perhaps not totally but enough to be the start of not just a working relationship but a friendship. Kirk appeared serious throughout. He didn't want the Vulcan to misunderstand him now of all times. Then, unable to hold his pose any longer he allowed a big grin to spread across his face.

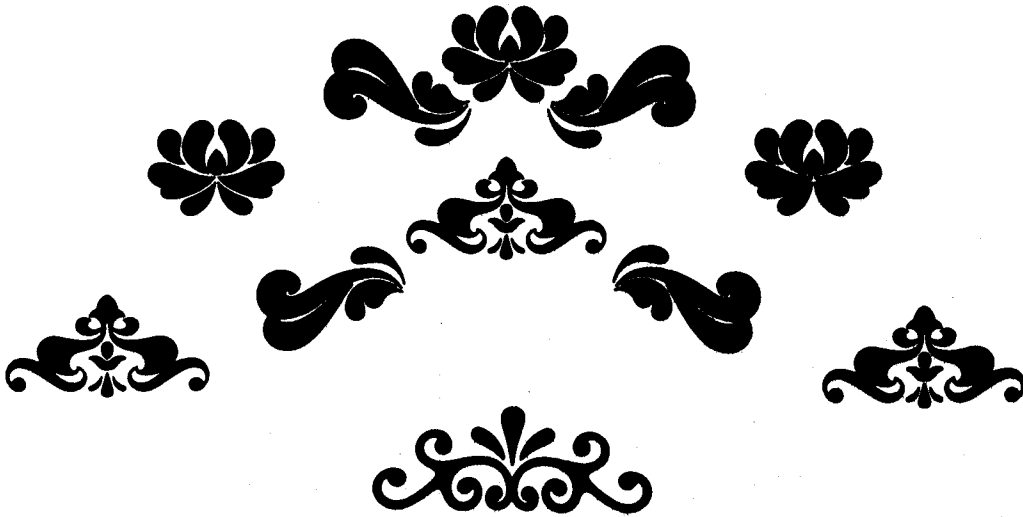
"Mr. Spock, I have here your release from Sickbay together with your new orders to assume the role of First Officer and Science Officer of this vessel. You are due on the bridge in precisely five point two five minutes."

The Vulcan was left speechless - and it wasn't due to his

recent ordeal. This time, however, Kirk didn't need words. He had learned to interpret most of the fleeting expressions on the Vulcan's face. He knew exactly what it meant when he saw the gleam of pure joy that lit the dark eyes.

"Come on, Mr. Spock. You don't want to be late for your first period of duty as First Officer, do you? After all, you've got quite a reputation to maintain."

Impetuously Kirk put out a hand to the Vulcan. It was his eyes that lit up in a mixture of surprise and joy when he felt warm fingers clasp his own. Spock's reaction had been anything but reserved and he could feel the Vulcan's pleasure, which only matched his own. Together they left sickbay, walking past a bemused Dr. Piper.



SICKBAY

[Idea sparked by Valerie's story about Spock and Captain Pike (The Dissimilar Parallel) in Log Entries 20]

McCoy had been on board the Enterprise for just over a month. As new CMO he had taken it upon himself to arrange medicals for every member of the crew, just so that he could meet them all. He had started with the bridge personnel, since they were his personal charges. He had come aboard wishing to forget the disaster that had been his marriage and more especially the hurt of the divorce. It had taken him a long time to realise that his wife had been playing around for years, and even longer to appreciate that she was only using him for his money. He blamed himself - he had been too engrossed in his work as a doctor to spend enough time with her or his daughter, Joanna.

Well, he had learned his lesson the hard way. It didn't pay to care about anyone. McCoy intended his time in Star Fleet to provide him with so much research and medical work that he would not have time to worry about the past. He had made a firm resolution not to care for anyone ever again. If he remained behind a wall of his own making, he would not get hurt. The only wall that came naturally to someone of his naturally caring nature was one of sarcasm and wit. The various visitors to Sickbay soon learned that it did not pay to cross the new CMO. Only two of his patients got under his hard-fought disguise.

The first was the young Captain. Kirk's ready smile and warmth of character had melted McCoy's prison walls within minutes of the examination starting. Hard-pressed to maintain his distance, McCoy had resorted to attack and yelled at the Captain for not maintaining a sensible diet. The Captain had only found his new CMO's outburst amusing, and agreed to go on the prescribed exercise and diet plan without complaint. McCoy was left feeling guilty for being so hard on him; he had gone so far as to apologise later, over a shared cup of coffee in the rec room - and he had found himself beginning a sort of friendship, despite his best efforts to avoid human contact.

The second was the Vulcan First Officer. Spock's own barriers were so high that McCoy found that for once he didn't need to maintain his distance. There was, in his opinion, nothing to maintain his distance from. You couldn't be hurt by a machine without feelings, and, more important for McCoy, you couldn't hurt a machine without feelings. He took the time to vent his anger on the Vulcan, having found that such anger was neither reciprocated nor commented on. For the first time since joining Star Fleet McCoy felt safe with someone. He didn't have to care for a machine, so he was under no obligation. McCoy actually found that he had enjoyed the medical. Spock was an interesting subject, being only half-Vulcan and half-Human, and McCoy had got a lot of information to study. Spock had not objected to any of the tests he had made, only commenting once that he was due on duty and that the doctor should complete his examination within the prescribed time. McCoy had done so and Spock had left sickbay without exchanging a single word with him outside the line of duty. By the end of the examination McCoy had actually felt relaxed for the first time in months, so much so that Nurse Chapel had commented to him that at last he seemed to be settling in. McCoy had even smiled at her.

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Thus, when McCoy was called to the ship's Number One Gymnasium on a medical emergency, of the patients waiting for his attention, he ignored only one - the Vulcan. Machines did not need medical care, only the occasional patching up. His studies had confirmed that Spock had the constitution of an ox and was very unlikely to need medical attention of any kind.

When McCoy came in he saw Spock and Chekov lying on the floor, the former having landed on top of the latter. The other injured party was Ensign Donaldson, who was also lying on the floor. Spock was just getting to his feet as McCoy entered, and as he searched for his scanner the doctor missed the Vulcan's involuntary wince of pain. By the time he looked up he saw just what he expected - an impassive, unresponsive Vulcan face and two open, obviously hurt Human ones. McCoy ran his scanner expertly over both Humans, responded to the Vulcan's query to the effect that damage was minor, and organised transport by stretcher back to sickbay. Then he departed with his two charges.

Spock, although injured, was relieved to see him go. He had no wish to subject himself to yet another examination by this particular doctor. At first the Vulcan had been grateful for McCoy's no-nonsense manner and the lack of useless chit-chat, but as the examination continued he realised that the reason for the doctor's attitude was that he considered Spock to be nothing more than a machine. It was true that many crew members called him a walking computer, and he took that as a compliment to his not inconsiderable brain power, but there was a difference between being consulted as Science or First Officer in order to obtain information and being examined by a doctor. Vulcan doctors were impersonal; however, they cared for their patients, and Spock knew that in Vulcan hands - no matter what an individual thought of him or his hybrid existence - respect for life would ensure that he got the best of treatment. With this Human Spock suspected that he was nothing more than a machine, and he had no wish to be treated as such.

Once before, when he had tried to understand the Humans with whom he worked and had lowered his barriers in an attempt at friendship, he had been deeply hurt. He had been roused early from a healing trance - a dangerous step that could have meant his death. He had felt Captain Pike's concern and had believed it to be for him. Instead, when he had made the tremendous effort to break out of the trance and had come out of it with barriers lowered because he was not yet fit, he had found that the Captain's only concern was for the ship and the fact that he was the only one that could save them. Worse still, the Captain had neither known nor cared what coming out of the trance had done to Spock. He hadn't even asked the Vulcan if he was fit, nor had he taken the trouble to find out if anyone else could have saved the ship. He had treated Spock as a piece of machinery. The Vulcan had never forgotten the experience. It had taken him months to come to terms with the fact that he would always be a machine to the Humans with whom he worked; but he had vowed then never to lower his barriers and never to be treated by a Human doctor unless it was absolutely essential. Dr. Boyce had not made much attempt to explain how dangerous it was to wake a Vulcan from a healing trance, Captain Pike had never bothered to find out if doing so had had any detrimental effect on Spock. Spock had become, at face value, the machine they expected him to be.

But the new Captain, James T. Kirk, had gently eroded the Vulcan's strong barriers with his determination to make him a

friend. Spock had tried, unsuccessfully, to keep the Captain at arm's length. He had watched the crew succumb to the Human's charisma within days, and he himself had been more affected than he cared to admit. Finally he too had succumbed to James Kirk's charm and in the lowering of his own barriers he had found, not rejection, but acceptance. It was the first time in his whole life that he had been accepted for what he was, just for being Spock. Even his mother had not offered such acceptance, for always she was careful of offending his father. To Kirk he had become not just a First Officer and right-hand man, but a friend. Kirk was a friendly man, and he had many friends. Spock was a lonely man, and he had just one friend. James Kirk was his first friend, and because of it he had won from Spock the loyalty and devotion the Vulcan had kept hidden all his life, ready for one worthy of it - together with the secret love that he could only dare admit to in the privacy of the mind-meld, when Kirk and he had shared their deepest thoughts, and each had found a reciprocal love and respect in the other.

Spock had never dared hope to find such happiness. His life had been a hard and lonely one - trying to live up to Vulcan standards, trying to prove his Human blood had not tainted him, yet living with the Human emotions he had to deny in order to exist. Kirk had tapped the well of compassion within him and had allowed it to escape without the embarrassment and defeat he usually felt when any emotion was forced from him. He had come to understand that with Kirk he was free to give his trust, because that trust was not thrown back in his face, but cherished and reciprocated a thousand fold.

Thus when Kirk came down to the Gym, it was Spock he approached for a report on what had transpired. The Vulcan reported in his usual concise way.

"Lieutenants Sulu and Forbes were attempting to carry the weight-lifting apparatus along the upper gangway when Mr. Sulu missed his footing. The apparatus fell. Lieutenant Uhura raised the alarm, but Mr. Chekov and Mr. Donaldson were too absorbed in their badminton match to be aware of the danger. I managed to shove Mr. Donaldson out of the way, but was myself too slow to prevent Mr. Chekov from being injured."

Kirk read between the lines. He was too used to Spock by now to be fooled by the off-hand, third person approach of the report. He asked formally, "Were you injured yourself, Mr. Spock?", but the softness in his eyes belied the formality. The Vulcan became interested in the toe of his left boot. "Nothing major, Captain."

Kirk grunted non-committally. "Mr. Sulu, are you and Lieutenant Forbes okay?"

"Yes, sir," replied Sulu quickly, "but if Mr. Spock hadn't acted so quickly I think Pavel and Rick would have been gonners."

"Gonners?" queried Spock.

"Dead, Mr. Spock," said Kirk quietly.

"I assure you it was not my actions but Miss Uhura's quick thinking that prevented any serious injury, Captain."

Kirk turned to his Communications Officer. "What did you do, Lieutenant?"

She managed to turn a shade of red, despite the ebony colour of her skin. The effect was quite stunning in an already beautiful woman, and Kirk found his mind wandering from the task in hand. "Well?" he asked, when she did not reply.

"I screamed, sir," she admitted, not looking him in the eye.

"That was your quick thinking?" queried Kirk, turning back to the Vulcan.

"Indeed, Captain. Had Miss Uhura not raised the alarm I would not have been aware of the danger."

Uhura finally responded on her own behalf. "I am sorry, Captain. I know it was a silly thing to do. But I saw Sulu slip, I saw the apparatus fall and I knew that Chekov and Donaldson were in its path. I was too far away to do anything myself. In fact I thought Spock was too, but he heard me, recognised the danger, and managed to push Donaldson out of the way. The apparatus nevertheless landed on top of him, and he landed on top of Chekov."

"And where are Chekov and Donaldson?" asked Kirk.

"They have been ordered to sickbay, Captain," replied the Vulcan.

"Why aren't you there too?" asked the Captain.

Kirk was surprised when the Vulcan again became interested in his boot. In fact he went so far as to follow the line of Spock's gaze to be sure there was nothing fascinating about the boot that he was missing, but when he was sure that there was not he prompted his First Officer for a reply. "I am waiting, Spock."

The Vulcan didn't look up. Instead he mumbled a reply about not being ordered to do so by the doctor. Kirk knew about Spock's distrust of Humans and of sickbay in particular, but he also knew the Vulcan needed to be checked over.

"Report to sickbay now, Mr. Spock. And that's an order. I want you to let McCoy examine you and then I want you to do whatever he tells you is necessary, whether you like it or not. Is that understood?"

The Vulcan finally looked up, and Kirk caught the quickly extinguished look of fear in his eyes. "Yes, sir," was all he said.

Kirk touched his shoulder lightly. "It's for your own good, Spock. I know McCoy is a bit irascible and sarcastic, but he is a damn good doctor and he cares for his patients. You needn't worry about that. If anything he cares too much."

Kirk did not understand the look that passed fleetingly over Spock's face, possibly because it was a mixture of fear, disbelief and trust. He feared sickbay, did not believe that the doctor cared and yet trusted Kirk implicitly. He also believed that Kirk was a better judge of Human character than he was himself. He therefore turned towards sickbay with an open mind, willing to let the doctor prove his care.

As he left he heard the Captain congratulating Uhura on her quick thinking and asking Sulu to make sure safety procedures were improved to prevent such an accident occurring again. He realised

that the accident had affected him more than he'd thought. After all, he as First Officer should have ordered a review of safety regulations to prevent a similar accident. He sighed inwardly and steeled himself to report to sickbay.

McCoy had completed his examination of the two young ensigns when Spock appeared.

"I suppose you've come to enquire about the health of Chekov and Donaldson?" he asked, adding the words, "Well, they're fine," before Spock could reply.

The Vulcan was, however, too honest to leave the doctor under any misconception of why he had come.

"I am gratified, Doctor McCoy. However, I came to report to sickbay for an examination since the Captain believes I should be checked out."

McCoy, who had forgotten for a minute about the conclusion he had reached, that Spock was nothing more than a machine, was brought back to reality. "Well, I might have guessed that you were not in the least bit concerned about anyone but yourself, Spock," he said unfairly. The Vulcan did not comment.

"What makes Kirk think you need a checkup?" McCoy asked after a moment.

"Since I was involved in the accident he felt I should be checked out also, Doctor."

McCoy snorted. "There's not much to go wrong with computer circuits and fuse wire, is there? From what I've seen so far Vulcans don't get ill very often and even when they do they resort to self-healing most of the time. I don't know what he thought I could do for you. Besides, you weren't hurt, were you? After all, you landed on top of Chekov and it was him that had to suffer the ignominy of having your weight land on top of him. It's damned lucky that he hasn't broken anything, not that you'd care. Serves him right for playing games with a Vulcan in the first place."

The tirade was aimed at Spock without once giving the Vulcan a chance to reply. Spock realised that the doctor was talking to himself and decided to say nothing.

McCoy grew annoyed at his silence. "Well, don't you have anything to say for yourself?"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "You did not seem to require an answer, Doctor," he said after a moment.

McCoy pointed to the bed. "Get up on there and let me give you a quick once-over before you waste too much of my time. I'm a doctor, not a bloody mechanic, you know. Can you feel any pain?"

Spock settled himself on the bed without showing a flicker of pain on his face, but he had already come to the conclusion that he had at least one, and possibly two, broken ribs. He did not intend giving the doctor the pleasure of realising that he was hurt.

"Answer my question, Mr. Spock," demanded McCoy. "Can you feel

any pain?"

"Vulcans do not feel pain, Doctor," replied Spock stoically.

McCoy snorted in disgust. "All sentient beings feel pain, Spock."

"Perhaps I should rephrase, Doctor. Pain is an input to the brain and like any other input it can be controlled to within tolerable limits. Feeling does not come into it."

If McCoy had taken the trouble to listen to the Vulcan he might have realised that Spock was trying to explain that as a Vulcan he was not allowed to feel pain, only to control it. But McCoy didn't know enough about Vulcans to realise, and didn't know enough about Spock to appreciate the concession Spock had just made to him. He walked all over that concession and threw it back in the Vulcan's face.

"If you don't feel pain, Mr. Spock, then there is no point in your reporting for a checkup. My advice to you is to go and report to Scotty and request an oil change."

The Vulcan didn't fully understand the Human concept of a joke, and had no idea that McCoy was making one now, but what the doctor had told him did not seem quite right. "Am I to understand that you wish me to report to Mr. Scott for an oil change? That is your medical advice to me?"

McCoy shook his head and under his breath swore about Vulcans who did not even understand a good joke but when he turned to face Spock it was not to explain that he was joking. He was too tired and too annoyed. "Yes, Spock. Stop wasting my time and get the hell out of here. I've got really sick people to attend to."

Spock stood up without a word, and Vulcan pride enabled him to walk out of sickbay without his hurt becoming apparent to the doctor. Once in the corridor, however, the Vulcan stopped for a few seconds to recollect himself. Jim had been wrong and he had been right to distrust the doctor. McCoy saw him as nothing but a machine too. There was no caring there. He would have been surprised if he could see McCoy turn back to Chekov and speak soothingly to the young Russian. None of that gentleness had been shown to the Vulcan.

Spock, taking McCoy at his word, contacted Uhura and requested the location of Mr. Scott. The Chief Engineer was amazed when he answered the buzzer to his quarters to find the Vulcan standing in the doorway. The First Officer was not known to be a visitor to anyone's quarters, except the Captain's of course.

"Aye, come in, Mr. Spock," he said formally. "'Tis rare indeed to get a visit from ye." His accent was very strong in his surprise.

The Vulcan stepped forward far enough for the doors to close. "I do not wish to intrude, Mr. Scott, but I was ordered to report to you."

Scotty stuttered, "I don't understand, sir. I am off duty at the moment. Why would the Captain ask you to report to me?"

"It was not the Captain, Mr. Scott. Doctor McCoy gave me a

medical order to report to you for an oil change. I do not understand the significance of this, but Captain Kirk told me to follow his orders completely, so I am doing so."

Scott's amazement turned to humour and he burst out laughing, then realising that it was the Vulcan, and that Spock would not understand the joke, he rapidly became serious again. He liked Spock and didn't want to offend him. He had known him for years and knew that Spock had only recently come out of his shell, and he had no intention of pushing him back into it.

"I am sorry, Mr. Spock. Really I am. The doctor has been unfair to you. I am afraid it was a joke. The doctor is always playing jokes on people. He probably didn't realise that you would not understand. An oil change is what used to be given to engines in the old days when they had to go in for a service. I guess it was his way of saying that you didn't need a medical checkup at all. But he shouldn't have played a joke on you like that."

Scott studied the serious face before him and realised rather belatedly that not only was the Vulcan not amused, but also that he was in fact so impassive as to be hurt. The Engineer knew him well enough to know that Spock was most Vulcan when something hurt him, or when he could not control his emotions. He did not know him well enough to broach the subject properly, but he did his best.

"I am sure he did not mean to offend you, Mr. Spock. We Humans play these stupid jokes sometimes."

"Offence is a Human emotion, Mr. Scott. However, I expected any Starfleet officer to be capable of doing his duty without resorting to jokes. It seems that Doctor McCoy is more fond of playing jokes than treating patients."

With that cryptic comment Spock bowed, apologised for disturbing Scott in his rest period, and retreated rapidly from the Engineer's quarters. Scott spent a long time staring after him, cursing McCoy for his insensitivity and trying to decide what Spock's last comment had meant. He gave up.

Three days later the bridge was involved in tactical manoeuvres and the ship was attempting to beat its already impressive response time record. Sulu at the helm swung her around onto new battle vectors as though she were a tiny attack craft and not a majestic starship. Chekov called new headings rapidly one after the other and Spock gave sensor readings. They were well on their way to beating their record and only had one more manoeuvre to go when Spock faltered with his reading. This was so unheard of that the whole bridge came to a standstill for several seconds.

The Vulcan spoke into the silence, giving the readings required. He, more than anyone, was aware that he was 15 seconds late with his reply.

James Kirk covered for him by issuing a barrage of further orders. The Captain said nothing to the First Officer and Spock continued as though nothing had happened. They continued the exercises until Kirk was completely satisfied.

At the end of the duty period Kirk waited for Spock to close down his station and then walked with him to the turbolift. Sulu

was about to follow him in when Uhura perceptively side-tracked him and allowed the Captain and First Officer to enter alone. Once inside Kirk ordered the lift to remain stationary between levels.

"What was that about, Mr. Spock?" asked the Captain without preamble.

The Vulcan did not pretend to misunderstand. "Your pardon, Captain. I was late with my reading."

"I know that, Spock. What I don't know is why? That's not like you. Not like you at all. Is something ...?"

He never finished. The Vulcan's eyes suddenly closed and he caught at the rail in the lift to prevent himself from falling; yet within seconds he was back in control and facing Kirk stiffly at attention.

Kirk's features softened. "Something is wrong, Spock. There's no use in denying it. You were on the verge of blacking out just now, and I have no doubt that something similar was behind your reaction time on the bridge. Do you want to tell me what it is, or do I have to drag you to sickbay myself?"

Spock said nothing for several seconds. Kirk continued to look at him, his anxiety showing. "I should prefer to return to my quarters, Captain," came the eventual response.

Kirk shook his head. "That's not good enough, Spock. We're not moving from here until I have an explanation - and one that satisfies me. Is that understood?"

Spock finally admitted defeat. "I have two broken ribs, Captain. The blackouts are caused when they press ..."

"What?!?" broke in Kirk. "Why didn't McCoy order you off duty? Or did you ignore my order to follow his advice?"

Kirk immediately regretted the last sentence. Spock drew himself up, obviously hurting himself in the process, and replied, "I assure you that I followed your orders, and his."

"Well, what did he say about the ribs?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"That is correct."

"What *did* he say?"

"He ordered me to report to Mr. Scott for an oil change. I did, so and Mr. Scott advised me that the doctor was joking."

Kirk almost burst out laughing - he could picture the scene between Scott and Spock - but then he thought how Spock must have felt, and he realised that the dignified Vulcan would have been deeply affronted by such a joke. It then occurred to him that oil changes were something that applied to machines, and the joke didn't seem so funny. Kirk became angry on Spock's behalf.

"I see," was all Kirk said. He put his hand up to the bridge

control and said, "Sickbay".

The turbolift started to move again. Spock, about to protest, looked at Kirk carefully, saw the anger, and refrained from commenting. Kirk caught the look and made his own comment. "You're damned right, Spock. We're going to sickbay and we're going to have this out with McCoy once and for all. No-one treats my officers like that. No-one. I know McCoy has his own problems and that he is frightened of trusting people after he's been let down so badly himself, but that is no excuse for taking out his frustration on someone else, just because he thinks they will not be hurt by it."

Kirk's description of Doctor McCoy was news to Spock. He had not considered that the Doctor himself might distrust other Human beings. Spock was basically a compassionate man. It dawned on him that if the Doctor had been hurt and had withdrawn behind a wall of sarcasm and dry wit, then the joke played on Spock was not personal but just part of that wall. Spock began to see things in a different light.

"I believe I may be at fault myself. Captain," he said very quietly.

Kirk looked him up and down. "You're not the easiest person to understand, Mr. Spock, but this is not a fault-finding matter. Doctor McCoy has a duty as Chief Medical Officer to ensure that no-one leaves his sickbay without a thorough examination and without appropriate treatment. Unless you refused to let him treat you he had no business letting you go in that condition. Do I make myself clear?"

Spock nodded.

Kirk marched out of the turbolift and Spock reluctantly followed.

"Ah, Captain," greeted McCoy as he caught sight of Kirk entering sickbay. "An unexpected pleasure."

"Not for long," replied Kirk. "In here please, Doctor." Kirk pointed to the Doctor's own office. "You wait outside, Spock. I'll call you in in a minute."

The Vulcan nodded, looking very uncomfortable.

"What is all this, Jim?" asked McCoy as the door shut on him.

Kirk gave McCoy a good going-over, checking exactly what had happened at that examination. McCoy had to admit that he hadn't given Spock a medical checkup. When Spock had told him Vulcans did not feel pain he had felt it unnecessary. Spock had not complained of being hurt and McCoy had assumed it was just a formality, a waste of his time. He had told Spock so and the Vulcan had not denied it.

Kirk was furious. He didn't care what McCoy had thought. He didn't care what Vulcans did or did not feel. It was McCoy's duty as a doctor to give every patient a full examination, especially when he'd been involved in an accident, and especially when the Captain had ordered such an examination.

McCoy lost his temper in return. "I don't know what lies he's

told you, Captain, but he was not involved in the accident at all. It was Chekov who got the worst of it. Spock landed on top of him and he's no light weight. It was Chekov I was concerned about. Although I told him it served him right for playing games with a bloody computer!"

"That is enough, Doctor McCoy. Perhaps you don't know very much about Vulcans, so I will enlighten you. Vulcans do not lie. Spock told me nothing about what happened except that you had ordered him to report to Scotty for an oil change and that it was his fault. His fault, dammit! But before you launch on another holier-than-thou speech, let me put you right. Spock was not playing with Mr. Chekov. Chekov and Donaldson were playing together. Sulu dropped some apparatus by accident and it was heading straight for them when Uhura yelled a warning. Spock was the nearest and the quickest to react, so he pushed Donaldson out of the way and protected Chekov by covering him with his own body. Sulu thought Spock had been hit by the falling apparatus. I knew he was hurt, but I didn't know how badly, so I told him to report to you for a checkup - and to follow your orders to the letter. He damn well hates coming to sickbay at the best of times. So what do you do? You treat him like a piece of apparatus and order him to report to Scotty for an oil change, without even giving him an examination."

McCoy defended himself. "But he wasn't hurt. He said he didn't feel any pain."

"No, Doctor, he was hurt. He might not have admitted it to you, but when I asked him just now he told me he had two broken ribs."

"But I asked him. I swear I did, Jim. He said he didn't feel any pain."

Kirk sighed. The anger seemed to drain out of him. "Look, Bones, I don't expect you to understand him instantly. He'd never admit to feeling any pain, especially not to someone he doesn't trust, but I can assure you he *does* feel pain. Vulcans are not allowed to express their feelings. They have to control them. So they also control pain. But they still feel it. You've got to ask the right questions to get the right answers. I don't blame you for not getting it out of him, but I *do* blame you for not examining him properly. That was indefensible. It was your duty as a doctor, and as a Human being."

McCoy went red. He shuffled his feet. "Honestly, Jim, I didn't think he was hurt. I never dreamt he'd pretend not to be hurt. Why? It doesn't make sense. I thought he was wasting my time and I told him to go and see Scotty just as a joke. I know he didn't appreciate the joke, but I just wanted to get back to people who were really hurt."

"More hurt than someone with broken ribs?"

"No! But I didn't think he'd been involved in the accident. He never said." McCoy looked down at his feet. Then he looked up. "You'd best let me see him now. If he has got broken ribs, then running around with them for three days won't have done them much good. Why didn't he come back if they hurt?"

"Did you expect him to come back to someone who thinks of him as a machine? Would you go back to your wife after she hurt you?"

Kirk realised what he'd said. "I'm sorry, Bones. I didn't mean that. I guess I owe you an apology."

McCoy smiled. His blue eyes lit up. "I guess I deserved that, Jim. I'd better see your Vulcan friend."

"Spock, Bones. He does have a name. And, yes, he is a friend. A good friend. And I'm not overly fond of machines."

McCoy nodded. "I understand, Jim. I'll try and curb my temper. I promise."

Spock was waiting patiently when Kirk and McCoy came out of the Doctor's office. McCoy took the lead.

"I owe you an apology, Mr. Spock. It seems that you were hurt when you came in for an examination after the... accident in the gym, and I did not take you seriously. I would like to make up for that by giving you a thorough examination now."

Spock looked at Kirk in mute appeal, but his plea fell on deaf ears. Kirk just grinned. "I'll see you later, Spock. Just remember, you're still under McCoy's orders."

The Vulcan turned dejectedly towards the bed and lay down ready for an examination. McCoy was watching him closely, but could detect no signs of pain. He wondered if Spock had pulled a fast one on both of them, but then remembered what the Captain had said about Vulcans not lying. Then he looked at the seriousness of Spock's face and concluded that Spock would not know how to pull a fast one. He turned on his scanner and passed it over Spock's unmoving body.

The broken ribs were almost immediately apparent, and McCoy swore as he realised that they had splintered and the pieces were pretty close to piercing the Vulcan's lungs. Without a word McCoy started to feel around the tender area, gently probing with his fingers. Spock, unprepared for the personal contact, flinched away and then schooled himself to endure.

"Easy, Mr. Spock. This won't take long, I promise."

The Vulcan did not reply. McCoy felt the rigidity of the Vulcan's body under his fingers, but it was impossible to tell whether anything he did hurt or did not hurt the man.

McCoy began to get annoyed. "If you don't react to what I am doing, Spock, how the hell am I supposed to know how badly hurt you are? You're supposed to yell when it hurts, you know."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Vulcans do not yell, Doctor. If you wish to know the extent of the damage you need only ask. Two ribs are broken, the top one having splintered. The splinter appears to be moving fractionally and is in danger of piercing my lung."

McCoy stared at the impassive face below him. "You knew all that and yet you just walked out of here and reported to duty. Why the hell didn't you tell me you had broken ribs?"

"The matter did not appear to interest you at the time, Doctor. I had no wish to waste any more of your time than was

absolutely necessary."

"Broken ribs are not a waste of time, Mr. Spock. When I asked you if you felt any pain I expected you to tell me that you had broken ribs."

"That is a non sequitur, Doctor."

"Pardon?"

"The fact that I have broken ribs has no relationship to the question of whether I feel pain."

"Well, if you don't feel pain how am I supposed to know that you are hurt?"

"If you had asked if I had been injured I would have told you. You asked if I felt pain and I explained that Vulcans controlled pain. I did not appreciate that you did not understand my explanation."

McCoy looked horrified. "Well, next time I ask you if you feel any pain I want you to tell me if you have suffered any damage of any kind at all. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly."

"Well?"

"Well what, Doctor?"

"Does it hurt when I press on it?"

"Do you wish to know if it is damaged?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"Yes. The motion of your fingers pressing on the damaged rib moves it closer to ..." As though to emphasise the point Spock passed out.

McCoy stared at his patient, exasperated and also ashamed. Spock hadn't shown any indication whatsoever of being in pain. That first flinch had been as much against the Doctor's touch as anything else. He had not been anywhere near the bruised area at the time. However, he could clearly see the three-day-old bruises and was in no doubt that they must hurt. It seemed that he had only made matters worse by pressing on the bones, but it was the only way, in a Human at least, that he could tell the extent of the damage. By telling which bit hurt most he was normally able to judge the extent of the damage. With the Vulcan he had only the sensation of his own fingers to go by. He had no idea which bit had hurt Spock most, except perhaps that the last dig had caused him to lose consciousness. That meant it must have been pretty severe. But still Spock had made no sound. "Damned fool," muttered McCoy. But he was talking as much to himself as to the oblivious Vulcan.

While Spock remained unconscious McCoy took the time to use an x-ray machine to check on the splintered rib. He then called in a nurse, gave the Vulcan a sedative, and proceeded to operate to remove the danger from Spock's lung. It was not a long operation and he was soon satisfied with the result. It was his first experience of operating on someone with green blood, and he found it

quite hard to get used to, but the basic structure was the same, if the heart was on the opposite side. Spock's vital signs had remained steady throughout.

When Spock woke up, he realised immediately that his ribs had been straightened and tended to. His own Vulcan strength would do the rest. McCoy came over to him as soon as he woke. "Good to see you back with us, Mr. Spock."

An eyebrow was raised in question.

"What I am trying to say is that I am sorry I didn't check you out properly the first time, even if it is half your fault for not admitting to any pain - and I don't care if that is the Vulcan way. It's bloody stupid to be hurt and not to say so. However, I know I've been pretty nasty to you. I've been so preoccupied with my own hurts that it never occurred to me that I might be hurting someone else. Or then again, perhaps subconsciously that is just what I was trying to do - hurt you to get back at all the people who have hurt me. It wasn't meant personally. It is just that you happened to be there. Do you understand?"

"Not entirely, Doctor. But I assure you no apology is necessary. When may I return to duty?"

McCoy swore. "This is a sickbay, Mr. Spock. You are sick. You are on duty. That duty is here and you're going to stay here until I say otherwise. If you do what you're told I just might let you out of here in three days time."

"Three days? I am a Vulcan, Doctor."

McCoy realised that he really didn't know if that would make any difference to the time it would take for the laser-knit bones to be strong enough. "Well, we'll give you a check up every day just to be sure, but you'd better not think about getting out of here until you are perfectly fit."

"Understood."

McCoy wondered if there had been a fleeting note of dejection in that voice, but then dismissed the idea. People who wouldn't admit to feeling pain sure as hell wouldn't feel dejected.

"The Captain wants to see you. I'll send him in."

McCoy turned and was not quick enough to catch the sudden glint that appeared and then disappeared from the Vulcan's eyes. He didn't stay long enough to hear the concern in Kirk's voice or the reassurance the Vulcan gave him.

Spock returned to duty after two days. McCoy insisted he return to sickbay for a checkup every twenty-four hours for the next three days, and he did so, reluctantly, but it seemed that the ribs had knitted together well and everything was back to normal.

Kirk tried to persuade McCoy that there was more to learn about Spock, but McCoy, although admitting that he had got it wrong about the Vulcan, still believed that Spock was an uncaring, if not an unfeeling person. He couldn't see how anyone who cared could refuse to ask if someone was okay, or could ignore the impact of their

behaviour on the enjoyment of others.

"But he's a Vulcan, Bones. You can't expect him to behave like a Human. He's not *allowed* to show his concern. If he did he would be ashamed of it. That doesn't mean he doesn't care."

"Why didn't he ask after Chekov or Donaldson, then?"

"He didn't have to. He knew from my reaction that they were fine. Besides, you told him so yourself."

McCoy harrumphed. "Why doesn't he join in when we celebrate, then, or when we are joking? For example, when Scotty got news of his brother's grandson, why didn't he join us in the toast?"

"He doesn't drink, Bones. Besides, he couldn't show his feelings, so he prefers to take himself away so that he doesn't spoil our fun. I've been trying to persuade him that he's making things worse that way, but he just doesn't see it. As for joking, he does have a sense of humour. It's just different from ours."

"Spock? A sense of humour? You're joking!"

"No. He really does. I've seen it. Oh, he doesn't come right out and laugh, but I've seen his eyes light up and I know he's laughing inside."

"Jim, there's no expression whatsoever in those eyes. When I set those bones he just fainted on me, but there wasn't even a glimmer of pain in his eyes. He's just not Human."

"You're right, Bones. He's Vulcan. He keeps everything inside him. You have to earn his trust before he'll let you see more than the surface level. It has taken me six months to get to know him as well as I do - but it has been worth the wait. He's a very special person, Bones, but he's been hurt too many times to trust easily. Can you imagine what it's been like for him? I've tried a few times, but I've always shied away from the loneliness before my imagination got going. Yet he's turned out so gentle and compassionate when most people would have been bitter with what he's lived through."

"Jim, are we talking about the same person? I just don't see Spock as gentle or compassionate. Name one thing that he's done like that, just one."

"He didn't report you for misconduct over the gym incident."

"That's not compassion."

"Isn't it, Bones? He'd be within his rights. You're always saying how he goes by the rule book. If he'd gone by the rule book then you'd have been grounded by now. I didn't ask him if he wanted to do anything, because I wanted to forget the whole thing, but if he'd wanted to be awkward he could have been."

"That's just my point, Jim. He's not awkward either. He just isn't anything. He's like the computer. He just exists."

"You're wrong, Bones. You don't know how wrong. He has made my life complete. And it's not just me. You ask Scotty or Uhura. They'll tell you."

"Maybe he works for you. But not for me."

"Give him a chance."

"I am doing, Jim. I'm not trying to judge him. It's just that he doesn't have any effect on me."

The situation had not changed when they reached their next port of call - a Class M planet which was being reconnoitred to check it out as a possible colony planet. There were no signs of intelligent life other than animals. Plant life was abundant.

Kirk chose to lead the landing party himself, despite Spock's protest. He was accompanied by Sulu, who led a scientific team of three, and also by two security guards. Spock took the centre seat as the landing party beamed down.

The planet was a beautiful one. Tall mountains stretched towards the sky. The lower slopes were covered with pine trees, the upper slopes with an icing of snow. Where the landing party materialised, within a sheltered valley, the temperature was warm and spring grass grew beneath their feet. Sulu soon had the scientific team working hard, collecting specimens and aiming their tricorders at anything unusual. Kirk and the security men fanned out and generally kept an eye on what was going on.

An hour later Kirk felt they had gathered enough information to satisfy requirements. He opened his communicator and called the ship. Spock responded instantly. However, as Kirk continued with the conversation he found himself interrupted by a considerable amount of static. Spock broke off to check his sensors and then reported that some kind of magnetic disturbance was interrupting communication and would also affect the transporter. They would need to send down a shuttlecraft for the landing party.

As Kirk was about to sign off, the ground beneath his feet began to shake. "Earthquake!" he yelled. "Run for cover. Get down, everyone."

Spock, safely on the ship, heard Kirk's cry, but the communicator, although still open, only replied with static to his question.

He turned to the science station, manned by Chekov, and ordered a sensor sweep of the area. The magnetic storm made sensor readings impossible. Spock moved over to check for himself, but even he could make little of the information. He believed that the epicentre was only a few miles from the landing party's location, but he knew it was as much guess-work as scientific data that led to that conclusion.

Without wasting time, Spock ordered a shuttlecraft ready for launch and called Scott to the bridge to take command. He intended leading the rescue team himself. Dr. McCoy and Nurse Chapel were among those selected to accompany him.

The shuttlecraft left the Enterprise smoothly, Chekov at the controls. As they entered the atmosphere of Planet AB13, nicknamed Planet Able by the original landing party, the small craft began to be buffeted by the freak weather conditions that accompanied the magnetic interference. Spock joined Chekov at the controls and

between them they battled through the morass. However, when they approached the last known position of the landing party, there was no sign of them. Spock refused to land, and attempted further sweeps of the area to see if Human readings could be located by the sensors. McCoy, worried sick about the landing party, yelled at him to stop wasting time and get them down there where they could help.

The Vulcan ignored him completely, not even deigning to reply. This angered the Doctor even more and he released his safety belt and started forward towards the Vulcan. Just then the craft was buffeted by a sudden gust of wind, McCoy lost his precarious footing - and it was only Spock's iron grip on his arm that prevented him from falling.

"Return to your seat, Doctor" ordered the Vulcan, in a tone not to be argued with.

McCoy, still nursing his bruised arm, complied. He knew that but for Spock he'd have more than a bruised arm to worry about.

The craft made two more useless sweeps of the area, when Spock finally got something on the sensors. "Put us down at 28.42.04 please, Mr. Chekov. I believe I have just located the landing party."

"But that's the other side of the mountain to where we left them, sair," responded the Russian. "They can't have crossed the mountain. It's impossible."

"Follow your orders, Mr. Chekov."

The shuttle moved towards the given location, and it became obvious that this side of the mountain was sheltered from the worst of the storm, and had been virtually untouched by the earthquake.

"What are you doing?" shouted McCoy. "What's the matter, Spock? Are you scared of landing in the danger zone and using that as an excuse to bring us to the wrong side of the mountain?"

"Calm yourself, Doctor," replied the Vulcan quietly. "I am attempting to land this craft as near to the landing party as possible."

"But Chekov just told you they couldn't have crossed the mountain. We'll be miles from them if we land there. I saw the schematic too, Spock. That range of mountains is over 10,000 ft high."

"12,425 ft to be precise, Doctor."

"Exactly. They couldn't have crossed that. What are you trying to do? Don't you want to save the Captain? Is that it? If he doesn't come back you'll be Captain. Is that what you're aiming for?"

Spock raised an eyebrow in utter astonishment. "Highly illogical, Doctor."

He was saved from further comment as the shuttle came in for a bumpy landing and everyone was forced to hold onto something to stop themselves being thrown out of their seats.

"Everyone outside," commanded Spock. "Please check the medical

equipment, Doctor. Mr. Chekov, please break out the emergency equipment and issue shovels to all but the medical team."

"Shovels, sair?"

"Indeed, Mr. Chekov. The landing party are below the surface. It might be necessary to dig them out."

"How do you know, sair? I couldn't even be sure that it was the landing party we picked up on the screen."

"It was the landing party, Mr. Chekov. I located seven Human readings. They were approximately one mile below ground and just under a mile north of our present position. If you would follow me, gentlemen."

Spock led the way, carrying the bulk of the heavy equipment himself, and holding his tricorder before him like a talisman. The tricorder showed an extremely fuzzy picture, but Spock was sure of what he could see. The seven members of the landing party were moving slowly towards them through some kind of caves under the mountain. It was most peculiar, since the mountain was not chalk or limestone, but a much harder rock where caves were less likely, yet a series of caves most definitely existed.

It was Chekov who spotted an entrance to the caves. They followed him down the quite large passageway. Spock's curiosity was aroused, since the passageways did not appear to be natural formations, but for once he curbed his instinct to investigate further, knowing time could be essential to the lost crewmen. As they got nearer to their destination Spock increased the pace. They had been moving through the caves, seemingly endlessly, and McCoy began to think they were lost.

"Just where are you leading us, Mr. Spock? We seem to be going round in circles."

"An illusion, Doctor. We are following my tricorder readings."

"Let me look at that thing."

McCoy snatched the tricorder from the Vulcan's hands and stared at the fuzzy image on the screen. Then he shook it in frustration. All he could see were black, grey and white intermingled patches, which looked like a black and white sea with seahorses prancing around on it. In a fit of temper he threw the instrument on the ground.

"There's nothing on that tricorder, Spock. I'm not moving another step from here until you tell me what you're doing. There are no signs of the landing party, you've got no idea where we are, and you're just trying to waste time." To emphasise his point he sat down.

Silently, Spock picked up the tricorder. He had to suppress a wave of panic when he saw the screen was broken. None of his inner turmoil showed on his face. Calmly he turned and faced the Doctor.

"I am in command of this mission, Doctor. There are seven crewmembers missing who may need your medical attention. Without the tricorder it will be more difficult to find them, but I do not intend to give up. We will proceed with our search. If you do not wish to continue you may go back to the shuttlecraft."

With that Spock turned and set off again at a good pace. Chekov followed quickly behind. The two security guards looked to the Doctor, then to the rapidly retreating Vulcan and back. Nurse Chapel solved the problem.

"Even if there's only a slight chance of finding them, Doctor, it is our duty to take it."

McCoy glared at her, but knowing she was right he stood up. He took out his frustration on the poor security guards.

"Well, what are you hanging around for? We've got work to do!"

Both men immediately set off after the Vulcan, leaving Nurse Chapel and McCoy to follow more slowly.

Twice they entered dead ends, and McCoy felt guilty each time, knowing that with the tricorder they might not have wasted the time, but he still didn't believe anyone could make sense of that picture. To himself he admitted that when Spock had the tricorder they had not followed any dead ends, but there was such a thing as luck, wasn't there?

Then Spock put up a hand and they all stopped. They could hear nothing but the occasional movement of falling sand. Spock stepped forward confidently, however.

"This way. I can hear the landing party calling for help."

Before long they emerged in another passageway to find five members of the landing party valiantly attempting to move rocks from an obvious cave-in. Sulu lifted a begrimed face from his task to grin broadly at the new arrivals.

"Nice to see you, gentlemen." Then he became serious and added, "The Captain and Mr. Jefferson are trapped behind the cave-in. I haven't been able to get through to them and I've tried to contact them by banging on the wall and yelling, but they don't reply. I think they were both hit by rocks. They could be dead."

"The Captain is alive," stated Spock quietly.

"You don't know that," exclaimed McCoy. "That blasted tricorder couldn't have told you that much even if it was still working."

"That is true," said Spock. "Nevertheless, the Captain is alive."

So saying Spock ordered Chekov to take charge of the security guards and start moving rocks and sand, using the shovels they had brought with them. He asked Sulu if his men felt fit enough to continue with the rescue work.

McCoy broke in. "That's my responsibility, Spock. You might be in command of this mission, but I'm the doctor here and I'll say who's fit and who isn't."

"Very well," replied the Vulcan. Without another word he carefully set down the pack he had been carrying, retrieved a shovel and joined Chekov at the cave-in. McCoy felt he had won an empty victory. Sulu and the original landing party all wanted to continue digging. None of them were seriously hurt, although there were

several nasty cuts and bruises.

They continued digging for six hours, and yet the rocks were still piled up before them.

"It's hopeless" said McCoy. "Even if they were alive when we arrived they won't be without any air getting through to them. Besides, we can't kill ourselves. We've got to rest for a while. Surely we'll be able to contact the ship soon?"

Spock stopped work and turned to face his antagonist.

"I have been attempting to contact the ship at regular intervals. There is still no sign of the magnetic interference dissipating. Your suggestion of rest periods is a valid one, however, Doctor. Mr. Chekov, please work out a rota allowing each person fifteen minutes rest after each hour they work. We could be here for quite some time. Doctor, please examine each person during their rest period to ensure they are not being overtaxed. I will take your advice on whether further rest is required."

McCoy was so astounded by the concession that he didn't reply at all. Spock took this as an acceptance and turned back to his work.

"What about you, Spock? You need rest too. It isn't all that long since those ribs of yours knitted together and this kind of heavy work is too much."

"Unnecessary, Doctor. Vulcans can continue without rest for a lot longer than Humans."

McCoy took out his medical scanner and passed it over each of the security guards who had been allowed to rest. They both were pretty near exhaustion. Then, without warning, he turned the instrument on the Vulcan. He too showed signs of exhaustion, though not as great as the Humans. But Spock resolutely refused to face the Doctor to allow a proper examination, and he continued to work without rest. Even McCoy's taunts and yells had no effect. Eventually McCoy stopped yelling through sheer exhaustion himself.

Three long hours later, hours during which fear for the Captain grew within each member of the rescue party, they finally broke through to the other side of the cave-in. The hole was a small one, hardly big enough for a person to get through.

"I will go first," stated Spock. "If you would follow, Doctor, as your services will undoubtedly be required. Mr. Sulu, you will take charge of the remainder of the party and continue attempting to contact the ship. On no circumstances are you to follow us through the hole, and if there are any signs of further cave-in you are to lead the team back to safety. Mr. Chekov will know the way."

Chekov wasn't so sure of that, but he nodded anyway and Sulu accepted leadership of the rescue team without comment. Only McCoy was not happy with his orders.

"How am I going to get my equipment through that? It's hardly big enough for me to get through on my own."

Spock held out his hand and took the Doctor's medikit. Without a word he moved to the cave in, scrambled up the slippery, rocky slope and put his head into the hole. Wriggling through on his

stomach, with the medikit firmly held in his left hand, Spock proceeded forward. Soon all the rescue team could see was his boots disappearing through the hole.

"In for a penny in for a pound," said McCoy, and he too launched himself up the slope, if rather more slowly.

Twice Spock got stuck in the narrow passageway, and his shirt was soon ripped open on the spikes of rock that jutted out below him. Each time he stopped and cleared the way for the Doctor so that the Human would not be caught either by the jagged rocks or by the small size of the passageway. McCoy could hear him working, moving rocks out of the way, but the Vulcan said nothing and McCoy was damned if he was going to give in to his curiosity and ask what Spock was doing.

So it was in silence that they emerged into a further passageway on the other side of the cave in. Spock stopped long enough to offer the Doctor a hand through the opening, and the latter accepted it without thinking. Only later did he ponder on the fact that the Vulcan had offered to touch him and had not flinched when doing so.

Spock was still facing the Doctor, so it was McCoy who first spotted the protruding boot of one of the missing men.

"Come on!" he yelled, and rushed to the fallen man. Spock joined him, and side by side they worked to remove rocks from on top of the man. It turned out to be the young science ensign, Jefferson. He was dead.

McCoy slumped down, defeated.

"All this for nothing."

"We have yet to find the Captain," came Spock's quiet rejoinder.

"There's no hope, Spock. If Jefferson is dead, and he only caught the tail end of the cave-in, what chance is there for Jim?"

"The Captain is alive, Doctor. If you would assist me."

Spock turned to the rocks and started moving them aside, digging deeper and deeper. McCoy watched him for a moment. The Vulcan worked frantically, as though his life depended on it. He was cracking up. That was it. Spock couldn't stand the strain of being in command. He was telling himself that the Captain was alive just so that he would not have to face being in command and telling the crew he had failed. It was obvious that Spock was not used to failing. Since he didn't care about anyone it must be the strain that was affecting him. McCoy stood up.

"It's no use killing yourself, Mr. Spock. Why not admit that you have failed? Let's get back to the others. Those men need medical attention."

"If you wish to go back, you may do so. I shall keep your medikit as I will have need of it."

McCoy grabbed Spock and swung him round to face him.

"Enough is enough, Mr. Super-Vulcan. There's no chance of Jim

surviving here. It seems to me that you have cracked up. You just can't admit that you have failed."

His words acted like a cold shower on the Vulcan. He saw Spock sway precariously on his feet and realised how close to exhaustion he was. McCoy's voice became gentle.

"Look, Mr. Spock. There's no point in killing yourself too. Come on. Come back with me. You're exhausted."

Spock's eyes bored into his and the Vulcan straightened himself to his full height. "You are wasting time, Doctor. The Captain may not have much time."

With that he turned back to work. McCoy tried to stop him physically, but the Vulcan was too strong for him and shrugged him off. Eventually McCoy gave up and just stood watching.

"Kill yourself if you want to, you crazy fool! See if I care!"

To McCoy's amazement that stopped the Vulcan. He turned and faced the Doctor.

"Is that why you are shouting, Doctor? Do you really care what happens to me?"

McCoy swallowed. He'd never been the recipient of such a piercing look. It was as though Spock could read his very soul. He didn't want to admit that he cared, but something told him he had to be honest. This was too important.

"You are killing yourself, Spock. It is my duty to save life."

Spock seemed to shake himself. "Your duty. Of course."

McCoy realised he'd said the wrong thing, but he was too late. The moment had passed and Spock was again ignoring him. McCoy had time to think about that. *Did* he care about the Vulcan or was it just a matter of duty? He wasn't sure, and he didn't like the idea that he had sunk so low that he didn't care about another person. Was it just because Spock was Vulcan? Was it because Spock did not seem to care about anyone else? But that was no excuse. After all, he'd care for a wild animal, and it wouldn't care about him. Or was it because Spock did not retaliate? He could yell at the Vulcan, safe in the knowledge that Spock was safe to yell at. Also that Spock was not affected.

But what if he was wrong? What if Spock was hurt inside? He himself hid his own feelings and yelled at people to keep them at bay. If Jim was right and Spock ignored them to keep them at bay, then he was wrong in taking his own troubles out on the Vulcan. What if Jim was right? What about Jim?

"Jim!!!"

McCoy had just glimpsed a piece of command gold shirt sticking out under the rocks. "Spock! You've found him!"

The doctor immediately joined the Vulcan in digging out the Captain. Both scrabbled at the rocks almost frantically until Spock threw aside his shovel and started to dig with his bare hands.

"Don't move him if you can help it, Spock. I need to check him

out."

The Vulcan nodded in acceptance and very gently removed some dirt from Kirk's face. The Captain was alive. Alive - but only just holding on. He was unconscious. Spock already knew that, even if he wouldn't admit to himself that he knew.

McCoy pushed him aside and ran his scanner over the Captain's unresisting body. He couldn't imagine how Kirk had kept on breathing under all those rocks, or how he had hung on to life with so little hope of being found.

Spock could have answered that. The Captain had known that Spock was looking for him, and that the Vulcan would not give up until he had been found. But McCoy did not know of their special relationship. He wondered what had given Kirk the will to live, buried under all that rubble, cut off from his people.

"He's pretty bad but I think he's coming round now," announced the Doctor, unnecessarily.

That much was obvious. Spock could see the Captain's eyelashes flickering, and he could see the red blood flowing from various cuts.

Kirk's eyes fluttered open. He looked at the two faces leaning over him and smiled, then winced in pain as the action hurt him. "I knew you'd come," he said simply. Then he closed his eyes again, his breathing still laboured, but a small smile still on his lips.

McCoy swore and took Spock to one side.

"I can only stop the bleeding if I operate, and I can't operate with just a field medical kit. I've got enough sedative to put him out, but if I do that he will not know what is going on and the trauma could be too much for him. If I give him pain killers they will run out before I finish operating, and then the pain will be too much for him. If only I could get him back to the ship!"

Spock tried his communicator. Sulu answered him immediately and was advised that they'd found the Captain, which raised a cheer from the rescue team. There was still no possibility of contacting the Enterprise. Sulu was ordered to keep trying the ship and to advise Spock as soon as he managed to make contact. A medical team would need to stand by. In the meantime McCoy and he would do what they could for the Captain.

Spock faced the Doctor. "There is no possibility of our returning to the ship for some time, Doctor. You will have to do what you can to save the Captain."

"But I can't. I have to operate. If I don't operate he'll die from loss of blood. If I do, without pain-killers he'll die. If I put him under completely he won't know what is going on and won't be able to compensate, so the shock will kill him. If only there was another way."

"Perhaps there is."

The words were so softly spoken that McCoy wondered if he had imagined them.

"What did you say, Spock?"

"Perhaps there is another way, Doctor."

"Out with it, man. Jim will die if we don't do something. What do you have in mind?"

"An appropriate comment doctor. There is a Vulcan mind technique, known as the meld, which can allow one mind to touch another. Through mind disciplines it is possible to take a sick person's pain away and control it in one's own mind. Vulcan Healers are practised in these techniques. All Vulcans have some knowledge of what is required. I believe I could relieve the Captain's pain in this way and enable you to operate."

McCoy's face lit up as hope sprang into his mind. "Spock, that's great. How come I didn't know about this before? If I realised you could do that I wouldn't have worried. If I can operate and stop the bleeding Jim will be fine. We can wait to get on board the ship for the rest. It's not a major operation, but it is a painful one. Can you do it now? Will you just take away the pain and then let me operate?"

"It is not that simple, Doctor. I shall need to be in contact with him throughout the operation."

"But that could take an hour or two. Couldn't you just do it and then let me operate?"

The Vulcan shook his head.

"Okay, then, we'll have to do it your way. I'll get ready."

McCoy turned to his instruments. He didn't have a vast assortment of things with him, but it would be adequate for the holding operation he had in mind, so long as Kirk could be kept conscious without being in pain.

"Right. Let's go to it," he said finally.

Spock had been preparing in his own way. He had set his mind in the disciplines necessary for the meld, forcing down his own emotions and his own fears. It was not Jim he feared, but the doctor. He didn't mind being open to Jim, but what would McCoy make of the emotions that would inevitably show in the meld?

"What's wrong?" asked McCoy. "We haven't got time to waste. You've got to do it now, Spock."

The Vulcan moved over to the Captain.

"Jim, the doctor advises me that he must operate on you but you must be conscious. The trauma could be too much for you if you are not aware of what is going on. Please allow me to meld with you so that I can ensure you understand what is happening."

"Will it hurt you to do that, Spock?" asked the Captain in a small voice.

McCoy immediately felt guilty. He hadn't even asked what effect such a thing would have on the Vulcan.

"It is not beyond my capacity to endure, Captain. I wish to do this for you. There is no other way."

But James Kirk knew Spock too well. Something was bothering him. "Spock. Something is wrong. Are you being honest with me?"

The Vulcan lowered his eyes. "It is the Doctor."

Kirk touched the Vulcan's arm. "I understand."

McCoy was amazed. He didn't see what he had to do with it. "Me? What have I done?"

Spock looked up and met McCoy's outrage directly. "You have done nothing, Doctor. It is just that... If I meld with the Captain you will know that I am not the... machine I seem. I am not sure... I do not wish... feel able... to trust you with that knowledge. Forgive me. I am being selfish. Being Vulcan is not as important as saving Ji... the Captain's life.

"If you will permit me, Captain," he added firmly, turning back to Kirk.

Kirk nodded. "If you are sure, Spock."

"I am sure."

McCoy watched in fascination as Spock placed his hands to Kirk's face and temple, and the Captain reciprocated the action, making it plain that he had done this before. McCoy regretted not asking more about what to expect.

Kirk's hands dropped back to his side, but Spock's remained on the Captain's face.

"You may proceed, Doctor," he said formally.

McCoy started work on his surgery. He forgot all about the meld and about Spock as he concentrated on the delicate work required to stop Kirk bleeding to death. Occasionally he glanced up at the Captain, to make sure all was well, but Kirk seemed completely relaxed and at ease.

McCoy started talking to him, explaining what he was doing and how that would stop the bleeding and repair the damage. "You're doing fine, Jim," he'd say every few minutes, just to reassure him.

All that time he had no idea that it was Spock who needed the reassurance and Spock he should have looked at.

Purely by accident, when McCoy found sweat dropping into his eyes, he turned from the work he was doing to wipe at his forehead. As he did so he caught sight of Spock.

The Vulcan's face was scrunched up in pain and sweat poured off him like rain off a duck's back. His whole body was tense and rigid, yet he endured in silence. McCoy was alarmed. He could see a muscle in Spock's arm quivering with the effort of holding the link, and he could tell that Spock was breathing in short, rapid, panting breaths, each a strain on his system.

Yet he did not know what to do. If Spock stopped now, Kirk would get the full force of that pain, and the Captain was not ready for it. He had no idea how long the Vulcan could endure. He just prayed Spock would hold on and turned back to Kirk with renewed vigour.

The operation took another thirty minutes. McCoy, alert to the Vulcan's difficulty now, never ceased to wonder at how Spock maintained the link. It was obvious that Spock could break it if he wished, and in fact was having to exert a lot of effort not to allow it to break of its own accord. But Spock would not give in. His determination was obvious in the set of his jaw. His shorter and shorter breaths became a pounding in McCoy's ears, reminding him of the necessity of finishing the operation quickly.

"It's done. You can relax now," said McCoy at last.

Nothing happened. Spock remained linked to the Captain, unaware that McCoy had spoken.

McCoy, still mindful of Kirk's condition, gave him a sedative. The operation was over and Kirk would now benefit from rest. As the sedative took effect on Kirk, Spock's muscles relaxed in sympathy. McCoy found himself forcibly removing Spock's hands from Kirk's face. As he did so Spock seemed to come out of it. His whole face contorted in agony for a moment, and then his Vulcan mask fell into place. McCoy watched in fascination as overtired and misused muscles formed themselves into the non-emotional facade he knew so well. It was almost as though Spock deliberately ironed each crinkle out of his face by willpower.

"Will he be all right?" he asked, not without difficulty.

"He'll be fine," said McCoy reassuringly.

Spock nodded once, then he let go and collapsed in a heap on the ground. McCoy was aware of only one thing - the total relief that lit the Vulcan's eyes for a single moment before the collapse. He remembered what he had told Kirk about nothing showing in the Vulcan's eyes. Nothing at all. How could he, a Doctor, have been so wrong?

Very gently McCoy laid Spock's body into an easier position and cushioned his head on his own rolled-up shirt. For the first time he noticed the green blood that showed through tears in Spock's own shirt. He took the time to clean the various cuts and bruises and to marvel that he had not seen them earlier, and that Spock himself had made no mention of them. For the first time he saw the Vulcan in sleep, and realised that without his fierce control the alien's face was gentle and compassionate. This was the side of Spock that Kirk had seen. This was the side the Vulcan had feared showing to McCoy. McCoy vowed that he would keep Spock's secret no matter what.

Just then the communicator came to life. The ship had made contact and was now able to beam them aboard.

McCoy made arrangements for a medical team to be on standby. He gave the order to energise and was never more thankful for the blasted transporter, no matter what it did to his molecules.

"Sickbay," he ordered.

He rushed with the two stretchers to sickbay. He knew he had to deal with Kirk first, since the Captain was still in danger, but he took the time to make sure Nurse Chapel was looking after the Vulcan and making him comfortable on another bed. He declined to answer what was wrong with Spock and just said that he needed rest.

When he emerged from operating on Kirk for a second time, Spock had come round. The dark eyes looked straight at him for a moment, and then slid away.

"How are you?" asked McCoy, unsure how to approach this strange enigma that called himself Spock.

"How is the Captain?" countered the Vulcan.

"He's going to be just fine. He just needs time to recover. It is you I am worried about."

"I am ready to return to duty," said Spock quickly, too quickly.

McCoy's voice was gentle as he replied, "I don't know exactly what you did down there, but I know what it did to you. Thank you. Without your help I could not have saved the Captain. I never really thought what it would cost you to do that. I didn't even take the trouble to ask. I know you didn't want me to see you with your guard down, but I am glad I did. I didn't believe the Captain when he told me you were a gentle and compassionate..."

"Let me finish, damn you!" he shouted as Spock opened his mouth to interrupt.

"What I am trying to say is... Nothing that happened down there will ever go further than these four walls. Your secret is safe with me. You can be as Vulcan as you like, but now that I've seen for myself what goes on behind that cold front you put out I can't forget it. As a doctor I have to advise you that it is not good for you to suppress all your emotions like that, so I'm going to keep trying to get you to release some of that emotion - for your own sake. You see, you've taught me a lesson. I've been so tied up hiding from the pain of my divorce and the people I loved who no longer care about me, that I've stopped myself caring for people, just to avoid being hurt. You showed me that if you care you can get hurt, but it is better to care and to take the consequences than to pretend not to care. I guess I could say that if for you being Vulcan is not as important as saving Jim's life, then attempting to be self-sufficient is not as important as learning to trust again. You trusted me in order to save Jim. It is about time I started trusting people again. I would like to show you that Jim is not the only person you can trust either, Spock. I hope you can trust me too."

"Trust must be earned, Doctor," said Spock, flattening the Doctor's hopes before he'd started.

"Do not look so crestfallen. Trust must be earned on both sides. I did not give you a chance to earn my trust because you are a doctor, and because sickbay is where I was hurt once before - the incident itself is not important. You did not give me a chance to earn your trust because you refused to acknowledge I was capable of doing so. It is perhaps fortunate that the Captain, Jim, has shown us both that it is possible to... care."

As it dawned on McCoy that the Vulcan had in fact responded to his admission, he rocked up and down on the balls of his feet and allowed a smile to spread across his face.

Spock did not smile back, but McCoy saw the answering gleam in the dark eyes.

"If I may return to duty now?" asked the Vulcan politely.

McCoy shook his head. "No chance. You are confined here for twenty-four hours, Spock. I want to be sure you have got over your illogical fear of sickbay!"

Spock was left speechless as McCoy beat a hasty retreat. The Doctor had a feeling that it would be a long time before he beat Spock again in the logic stakes.

