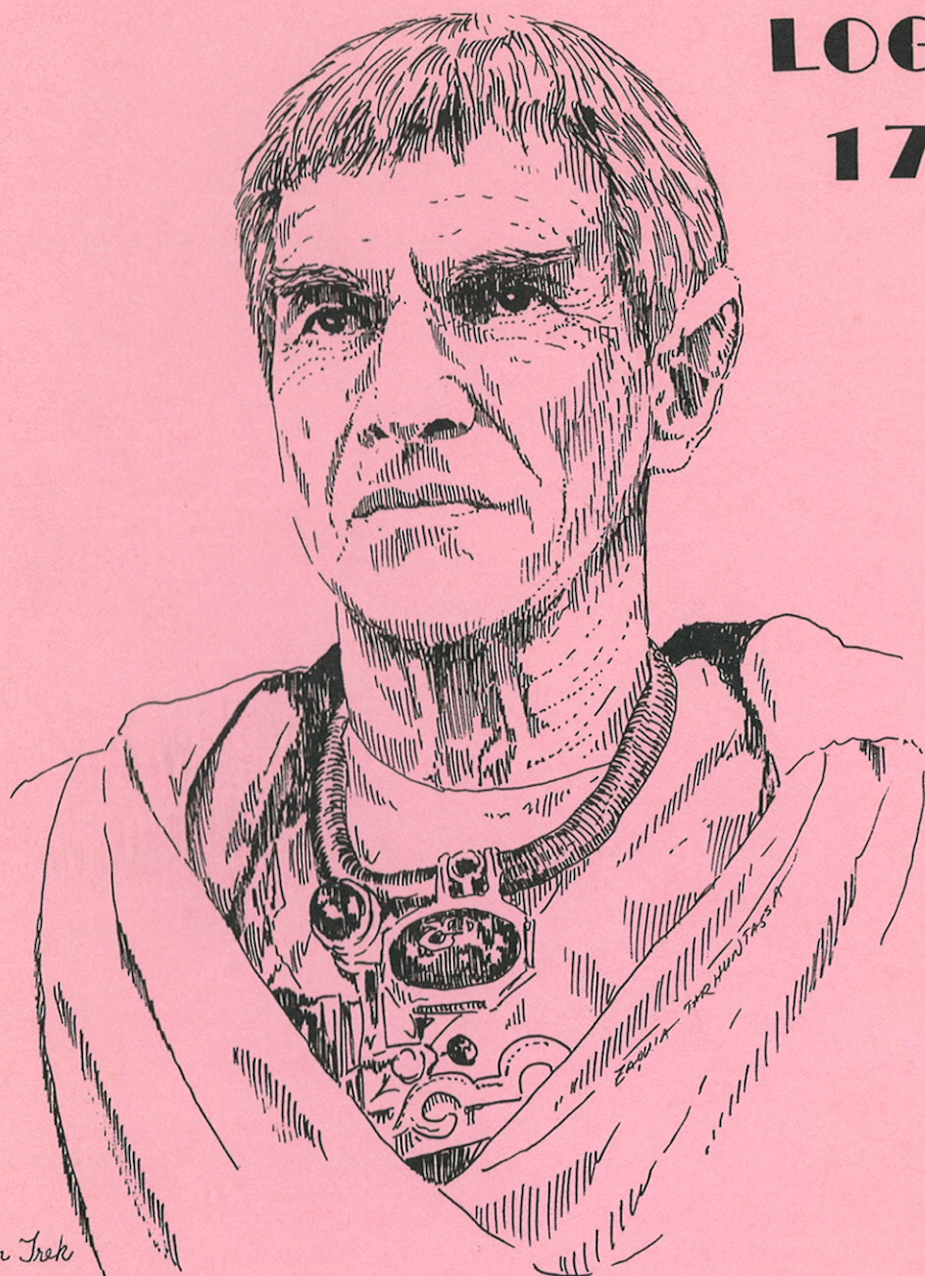


IDIC LOG 17



a
Star Trek
fanzine

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Karen Sparks, Philippa Timms

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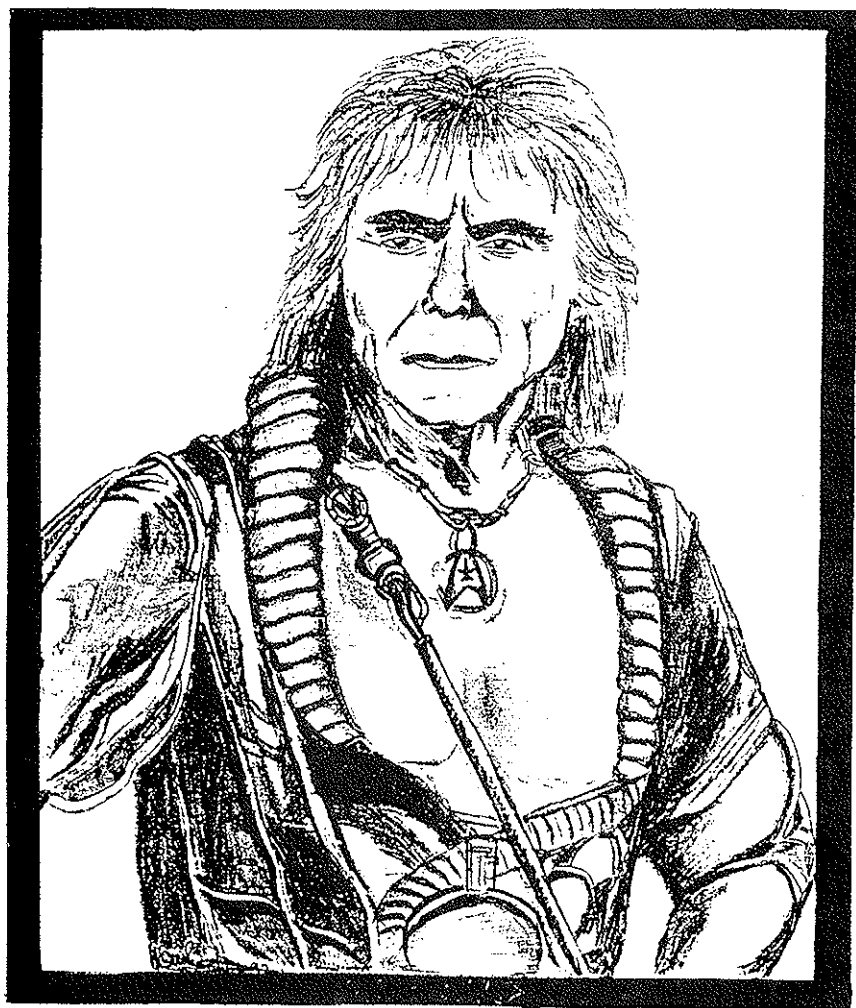
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SUPPLICATION

by

Maggy

(This story is set approximately fourteen months after the five-year mission.)

Dr Leonard McCoy wished that his guide would communicate with more than just a brief nod or shake of the head. Since they had undertaken this journey he doubted they had exchanged more than a dozen words. A usually talkative individual, he found this silence frustrating.

McCoy glanced behind him, back the way they had come. Far down below the sands shimmered bright red in the early planet dawn. Great fissures belched white clouds of steam which drifted upwards, forming a thick layer that cloaked the towering rocks of the mountain range.

The heat, even at this early hour, was unbearable, and because he was unused to such a steep climb, only added to McCoy's discomfort. They had come so far already, but his destination still lay high beyond those swirling mists.

The steep stone steps carved into the side of the mountain stretched up and up. They seemed to go on forever, until they disappeared into the sky. McCoy found himself likening them to a beanstalk from one of his daughter's childhood story books... so long ago...

But this wasn't a plant, it was a staircase which didn't lead to the sky; no giant waited at the top... but what *did* await him? he wondered.

A warm wind suddenly began to whip up sand particles which found their way into his eyes and mouth. As he tried

to clear them the strength of the wind increased dramatically and threatened to tear him from his precarious perch on the rough steps. McCoy felt for his pulse, and wasn't too surprised to find that it raced well above the norm. The higher they had climbed the thinner the air had become, and soon the Doctor was gasping, fighting for each breath. It felt as if someone had tightened a band of steel around his chest, crushing the very life from him.

He began to climb again, anxious not to lose sight of the dark cloaked figure which relentlessly continued to stretch the distance between them.

After two more hours the mists had completely enveloped them in a thick haze of reds, oranges and pinks, blotting out everything except the few steps that loomed in front. McCoy began to feel panic. The silence was eerie, broken only occasionally by the mournful howls of the wind.

Suddenly there came a flapping, beating noise only inches from his face. McCoy jumped in reaction, and nearly fell as something appeared from a crevice in the rock face. A splash of white... He gave a startled cry, only to curse himself as the brilliant white spectre took flight. It appeared to be nothing more than a bird, very similar to a Terran dove.

"Do not alarm yourself. It is but a peace bird. They roost here."

McCoy looked up at his guide,

embarrassed by his fear.

"Are you able to continue?" the guide asked doubtfully.

McCoy pulled himself upright, straightening his jacket. "Yes. Lead the way." He was glad to leave the scene of his foolishness.

Step by step the ascent progressed but, hindered by the gradient and the fact that the steps progressively narrowed, McCoy began to fall well behind his guide, who seemed almost to float, he climbed with such ease.

The steps twisted upwards, a slight covering of moss made them slippery, and the Doctor desperately reached to find a handhold in the steep rock face from which the steps had been hewn. Failing to find any, he glanced up to where his guide was rapidly disappearing into the mist.

"Wait! Please wait!" He carefully took another step and immediately lost his footing; he awkwardly fell several feet, to land with a thud six or seven steps below. "Wait, damn you!" he shouted angrily. What was wrong with these people - were they all deaf?

He smiled at that thought. Of course not - just the opposite, if anything. The guide, now standing waiting for him, could probably hear McCoy's heartbeat even from that distance.

McCoy made a mistake. He looked down. The steps stretched like a ribbon far, far below.

Suddenly overcome by vertigo he gripped the edge of the step and closed his eyes as wave after wave of dizziness swept over him. After a brief pause he felt strong fingers grip his shoulders and lift him to his feet again.

The guide gently released him and stood waiting until he opened his eyes.

McCoy nodded. "Okay, thanks. I'm ready, but walk slower, will you? I'm only Human, after all."

And so the climb continued.

On and on.

Up and up.

Higher and higher.

Until finally they stood at what seemed like the summit, although it was a little hard to tell with the mist thicker than ever. McCoy was sure he was incapable of going any further when through the swirling mists tall towers came into view. They were dark and foreboding.

Was this such a good idea? Aboard the shuttlecraft he had been convinced it was, but as soon as he had stepped off into this terrible heat the doubts had surfaced.

"Not much further." The guide strode on without a backward glance.

This time McCoy made a determined effort to keep pace, and found to his relief that the steps had levelled and finally ended with a small stony path which led to a huge wooden gate, dark with age, carved with strange symbols.

"We're here?" McCoy asked hopefully.

The guide nodded and pushed the gate. It swung inward to reveal a courtyard, bare except for a small well. McCoy licked dry lips. Immediately his guide walked to the well and drew a ladle of water.

McCoy took the proffered drink and downed it in one long gulp. The water tasted bitter and left an after-taste. He pulled a face.

The guide said, "The acrid content of the rocks tends to permeate the water, Doctor. You will adapt to the taste if you stay here any length of time."

McCoy grimaced. He had no intention of prolonging his visit - if anything he regretted coming in the first place.

A bell tolled from somewhere deep within the edifice. It echoed and re-echoed around the high walls.

The guide replaced the ladle carefully and bowed in front of McCoy. "It is the meditation time. Follow, please. I will escort you to a waiting area."

The Doctor was led into the cool, dim entrance hall. The walls and ceiling were just bare, undecorated rock. Occasionally McCoy saw the marks left by the ancient tools that had been used to carve the giant slabs.

As they moved deeper into the building the floor began to slope downwards and the air became considerably cooler. McCoy deduced they must now be deep within the mountain itself. There were no windows, only small grills set into the walls, no doubt part of a ventilation system. McCoy began to feel claustrophobic, and was very relieved as they came to a large wooden door.

As the guide ushered McCoy into the room the Doctor stopped in his tracks, surprised at how light and airy it was compared with the passage. The far end of the room was bathed in light from an open balcony. McCoy moved towards it, glad of light at last. The guide's voice

stopped him in mid stride.

"I must take my leave now. He whom you seek has let it be known he will attend you after the meditation time. He requests that you wait here."

"But how did he...?" The question died on his lips as the guide disappeared through the door. "Please yourself," McCoy muttered.

Now alone, he moved to the balcony and was amazed at the vast panoramic views it gave. McCoy felt an immense sense of achievement as he peered down at the long winding staircase so far below. Now he knew the pleasure James Kirk derived from mountain climbing. But he still hoped the descent would be easier. What would he give for a transporter... but this was strictly unofficial; the fewer who knew about it, the better.

He turned back into the room and slowly walked around. There was little to see. The same stone walls, devoid of decoration. A low slab of deep red stone, which McCoy presumed served as a table or chair. In an alcove stood a large and rather ugly vase. Several small lamps stood in high recesses above it. The floor was bare stone, except for a rug woven in a jute-type material. The centre point of the room was a small glowing firepot.

Having walked around and familiarised himself with his surroundings, McCoy sat on the slab to wait. He felt his head droop and jerked himself awake, but the long flight and then the crossing of the desert, followed by the tortuous climb, had sapped his strength. The slab was cold and hard, so he pulled the rug up onto the stone and lay down, his head pillowed on his arms.

Sleep came easily.

He had reached the second level of mediation when suddenly there was pain, and he became aware of a presence within his mind.

Gradually he pulled back until with an audible sigh he opened his eyes and focused once again on the glow of his fire pot. The pain in his mind remained.

Carefully he investigated, and found the presence was one familiar to him. The untrained mind was broadcasting anxiety and exhaustion. With a shock he identified the source as Dr Leonard McCoy, and the fact that the Human was so near caused him to slam down shutters relentlessly on the long-dormant emotions that threatened to overwhelm him.

Why was McCoy here?

Why?

Why, after all this time?

There was a logical way to find out, but was he strong enough to face the Doctor?

He rose carefully to his feet and stood for a moment quietly surveying his cell. This room had been his sanctuary, his haven, but for how much longer would it be so? He took a deep cleansing breath and made his way to the room where he knew he would find the Master into whose tutelage he had placed himself.

She acknowledged him with a slight bow.

"T'Yar, I request that the Human be asked to leave."

The Master turned away, considering her answer. He waited patiently until she faced him again.

"You sense his arrival, and fear it; or do you fear more what he has to say to thee?"

"I no longer wish to have any contact with him."

"You do not wish to hear his words?"

"He can have nothing to say I want or need to hear."

She gazed unblinkingly into his eyes. "By avoidance, you will not eradicate him from your thoughts."

"I came here to control my thoughts."

"You are shielding yourself from him, but it is not he that you fear, but merely yourself."

He stood straight, back stiff. "I do not understand your words, T'Yar."

"I believe that you do."

There was silence.

Finally T'Yar sat and beckoned him to do likewise. "You came, as many do, to purge yourself?"

"Yes."

"You came here to purge yourself of all emotions?"

"Yes."

"These emotions were most acute, were they not?"

"Yes." He dropped his eyes from her face to stare at the stone flags.

"And these emotions were most acute when you served aboard the

Starship?"

He nodded, too ashamed to speak.

T'Yar sighed. "You and the Human Kirk..."

He stood abruptly and faced her. "I made my choice, and I no longer wish... need... to have contact with Humans. My life is here, dedicated to my quest for total logic. Send McCoy away, I beseech you, T'Yar."

"I hear your words. You say you no longer wish to acknowledge Humans or your radix. Then I ask you to go, tell the Doctor yourself it is so, for if it is as you say you will have little to fear. However, I remind thee that you will not eradicate by avoidance."

"I accept that, Master, but my decision to come here was by no means an easy one; however, now that it is made I consider it irreversible."

She nodded. "Even so, you must face this McCoy. Tell him. It will be your first step in the quest for perfection. Casting off the past is no easy thing; not all who come here are capable. Perhaps your path will lie elsewhere." There was a softness in her voice as she looked upon his face. "Go. See the Human."

"With permission, I will prepare myself."

As he left the room he sent a mind-link to McCoy's guide, then returned to his cell to meditate.

Leonard McCoy woke feeling intensely cold and stiff. The room was now cast in shadows, which gave it an eerie feel. Unable to stand the chill air any longer he crossed to the balcony, but

after a quick inspection found there was no way of sealing the opening from the cold night air.

The wind had risen again and howled, sounding like a child crying. The Doctor began an aimless pacing, trying to keep warm. After circling the room for the umpteenth time he sank down onto the stone slab to wait. It had been hours since he had arrived, and although he hadn't seen anyone to announce his arrival and reason for coming, his guide had said he was expected, and the one he had come to see would agree to a meeting. How? Must have been telepathy - that was the only explanation.

To pass the time he counted the mighty stone blocks that formed the wall opposite. Twelve up. Twelve across. Each one set perfectly to match its neighbour. All exactly the same, hewn from the rocks far below, if the shade of stone was anything to go by.

Fed up with inspecting the walls he left the room and stood in the corridor. The glow of small lamps made it seem warmer than it really was. McCoy wandered first one way, then the other, but met no-one, and unsure of which way to go, decided the best policy was to return to his room.

As he closed the door he realised he was no longer alone. Someone was standing nearby; he could hear the slow breathing.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

A tall figure stepped out from the deep shadows and stood before him.

"Spock!"

The Vulcan moved to the alcove and, reaching up to the high recess, lit one of the small lamps. The flickering

light cast a glow across the thin face.

McCoy gasped at the change in his friend since their last meeting. The figure that stood before him now was a stranger. Still tall, but now gaunt. Piercing eyes gazed from the thin, pale face. They were not the velvet eyes McCoy remembered so well; unblinking, void of all warmth, there was no expression at all. Spock used to say more with those eyes than most men could with their mouths, McCoy remembered.

More chilling, though, was his face. There was no sign of welcome, no affection whatsoever.

Gone was any sign of the neat hair cut. Now the black hair seemed to be softer, and hung long to the painfully thin shoulders in an untidy windswept way.

As a Doctor, McCoy judged that Spock had lost about forty pounds in weight - weight the Vulcan could little afford. The tunic top hung loose; the neckline had dropped off one shoulder, revealing the collar-bone that stood out against the tissue-thin skin. The tattered long over-robe was draped around the other shoulder and fell to cover the long legs, ending at ankle length, revealing Spock's bare feet. The veins stood out, a pale green, against the cold olive-tinged feet.

"Spock! "What in hell have you been doing to yourself?"

The Vulcan's face never altered, but remained set in an icy stare. "Why are you here, Doctor?" At least the deep voice was still the same.

McCoy sat down on the slab, beating his arms to instill some warmth into his frozen body. "I came to see you - what do you think I came for?"

"I do not know, or care, why you came. There is nothing for you here. Please leave."

McCoy's face dropped a mile. "Spock..."

"Please leave, Doctor."

"But Spock - I must tell you..."

"I have no desire to speak to you."

"Well I need to talk to you, and damn it, you'll listen!" McCoy was shouting, his voice echoing in the care room. "Because if you don't, I'll stay in this god-forsaken hole until you do, you hear?"

Spock sighed. "Please leave."

"No!"

Spock turned towards the door.

McCoy grabbed at the tattered sleeve of the robe, and the Vulcan spun round. "Unhand me! I have nothing to say to you, or to any Human."

"Well, is that so? But like I've already said, I need to talk to you... about Jim."

Spock's eyes seemed to glaze, as if they had been covered by a thin layer of ice. "NO!"

"YES!" McCoy shouted at the top of his voice. "Jim needs you."

There was a protracted silence, then Spock asked quietly, "Does he?"

"Yes." McCoy could sense curiosity - Spock's major weakness. Hope rose, only to be dashed.

"Well, Doctor," the voice was calm,

quiet, "tell the Admiral... I no longer need him."

McCoy couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You don't mean that."

"I do." This was said with such conviction fear began to creep into McCoy.

"Spock, please. I don't know what you're doing here, what you're trying to prove by all this, but I've come a long way and I'm tired. I'm not in the mood to play games."

"This is no game, Doctor."

McCoy rubbed a grimy hand across his eyes. "No, you're right, Spock. It isn't."

The despondency in his voice resulted in Spock turning away to gaze out into the darkness for several seconds before he turned once more to McCoy.

"Doctor, I am remiss in blaming you for..." His voice tailed off.

McCoy stood waiting for the Vulcan to finish what he was saying, but after a silence that dragged on he said,

"Spock, I'm sorry. I really am sorry for coming here and disturbing you. I'll leave as soon as we've talked, but you are the only one I could think of... If our friendship meant anything - if Jim meant anything - just give me a few moments to explain, then I'll go."

The Vulcan turned to leave, hesitated, then, "The way down is dangerous at night. I offer you a bed for what remains of the darkness, Doctor. My cell is small, but you will find it is kept at a more agreeable temperature. It is all I can offer you."

McCoy nodded, understanding the meaning behind the cold words. "I don't know why I thought you had changed; maybe I hoped you felt something..."

He realised he was talking to himself. Spock had gone.

McCoy had to run to catch up with the thin figure as the deep shadows closed around him. As they walked through the labyrinth of passages he asked, "Did you say your place is a bit warmer than this? I'm freezing."

"Yes, Doctor."

"Well how do you stand it, being a Vulcan an' all?"

"Vulcan nights are always cold. Physical comfort is not of paramount importance here."

"No. I can see that."

They had arrived at one of the many doors that lined the corridor. McCoy wondered if Spock had to count the doors to ensure he had the right one, as there was nothing to distinguish one from another. Being a Vulcan, probably not. Spock pushed it open and stood aside to allow McCoy to enter first.

The room was indeed small and very sparsely furnished, with a narrow bed and several stone slabs of various sizes that could be used for tables or chairs. To one side McCoy saw a hollowed-out slab with a bowl beside it.

"Is that...?"

Spock nodded.

McCoy went to the bed, lifted the two threadbare blankets to reveal bare wooden slats. No pillow. "Is this the only bed? We can't both sleep on that."

Spock pulled off one blanket and threw it across one of the larger slabs. "You take the bed, Doctor. This will be sufficient for my needs."

After attending to his ablutions McCoy got into the narrow bed and attempted to snuggle under the wafer-thin blanket. Spock had remained standing, deep in thought, gazing blankly into the small fire pot that glowed but gave out no heat. McCoy decided he wouldn't be interrupting meditation if he spoke; Spock's breathing hadn't slowed as it usually did when he entered a trance-like state.

"Spock?"

The Vulcan turned slowly to face the huddled shape.

"Are you cold? How do you stand it here? There's no heat, no fires."

"The mind can control all things, given the right conditions, Doctor."

"Spock?"

"Yes?"

"Are you ready to listen now?"

"I told you, there is nothing I wish to hear."

"But Spock, Jim... He's never been like this, he needs help. You can't turn your back on him now, not after all the years you two have been friends."

"Six years, two months, six days," Spock said tonelessly.

"I'm not leaving till you listen," McCoy stated firmly.

"Very well, but I warn you, it will have no effect. Your journey here was

pointless."

McCoy sat up, the blanket wrapped around his shoulders, arms folded to keep out the chill air. He said a silent prayer he would be able to penetrate the Vulcan wall of isolation Spock had built around himself.

"First, no-one knows I'm here. I mean no-one back on Earth knows. I've spent weeks trying to track you down. I guessed you might be back on Vulcan, but I thought you'd have gone home."

Spock looked down to hide the flash of annoyance, but if McCoy noticed he just carried on regardless.

"Don't worry, I didn't speak to Sarek or Amanda. I was very discreet."

"Thank you for that, Doctor. However, I would estimate that caution was probably ineffective. Sarek will doubtless know that I am here."

"You think he does?"

"I assume so. There is very little on Vulcan he is not cognizant of."

McCoy would have liked to delve further into why Spock had come to this awful place instead of the comfort of his parents' estate, but he got back to the reason for his visit. "Your leaving so suddenly has had a profound effect on Jim." He tried to keep the accusation out of his voice.

Spock clamped his mouth into a tight line, otherwise there was no outward sign of emotion. He sat down cross-legged on the floor, his back ramrod straight against one of the slabs. "He was affected? In what way?"

"Jim changed. He began acting as if he didn't care about anything. When

Nogura offered him that desk job we never dreamed that Jim would take it, did we? Well, he contacted Nogura as soon as he realised you'd gone, and accepted it. I tried to tell him it was a mistake, that he'd hate being permanently based planet-side, but he wouldn't listen."

"He, of all people, deserved promotion, Doctor," Spock stated calmly.

"Yes, he did, but an active duty post, not tied behind some desk at HQ."

Spock's expression didn't alter, so McCoy continued, wondering how the indifferent Vulcan would react to his next news.

"Worse was to come. Jim took out a marriage contract with that woman from Nogura's department, Lori Cianni." He waited for the words to sink in, watching Spock's face, pausing for the response he was sure would come.

To his surprise none was forthcoming, then, "I told you, Dr McCoy, there is nothing for you here."

"Why you cold-hearted, green-blooded... Don't you care? For god's sake, Spock, what's the matter with you? The one man who treated you as a friend... and you just sit there as if we're talking about the weather!" McCoy shouted angrily.

"Please..."

The plea, torn from the Vulcan, brought McCoy's tirade to an abrupt halt. The single word had been full of anguish. McCoy sensed an opportunity to press his appeal; he dropped his voice to a whisper.

"Spock, I came here because Jim needs you, and I guess from the look of you that you need him too... Blast it! If

the truth be known, I need the two of you."

"You speak of Jim's need of me... when I..." Spock seemed to lose the will to continue. He rose in his usual graceful way and said stonily, "It is at an end, Doctor. There is no more to say."

"Well you may have no more to say, Spock, but I sure as hell do! That's just typical of you - a year ago you ran away too. Go on - run away, don't face anything that deals with Human feelings, just in case you get contaminated and actually begin to feel something too! That would be terrible, wouldn't it - to submit to that nasty half of you that's Human. The half you're so frightened of you hide it away in case you feel pain, hate, or - god forbid - love."

"You do not know. You do not understand..."

"Oh, I understand you all right - too well. You're a coward, Spock. You waited until Jim and I were conveniently off the ship before you crept off without a by-your-leave - nothing! Do you know how much you hurt Jim, or even care? Do you?"

"And are Humans the only ones capable of feeling pain, Doctor?"

"You don't know the meaning of pain. You don't feel anything. You never have. You didn't have to see Jim's face when he realised you'd gone. You haven't seen him since you ran away. He's just... given up. He doesn't give a damn, that's the shame of it. A good man like Jim... and all because of a friend who stabbed him in the back."

"You say he is now married. Are you angry because perhaps he now prefers the company of his woman to yours?"

The expressionless face looked up into McCoy's flushed one. At that moment McCoy had the wild desire to punch Spock, hurt him, force him to feel something.

"No, you don't understand. She's a viper. She's lied and lied to keep him with her, keep him away from old friends..."

"Old friends like you, Doctor?"

McCoy clenched his fists. "Spock, I'm warning you!"

The Vulcan ignored the threat and said calmly, "If the Admiral entered into this marriage of his own volition, what concern is it of yours?"

McCoy hissed, "Jim is my friend. I thought he was yours."

There was no answer.

"Jim is lost. He's dying slowly, from the inside out. He isn't the same any more, and I don't know what to do to help him. He won't - or can't - listen to me. If I try to see him, nine times out of ten Lori makes sure I can't. When I do manage to see him he talks about you. That's why I thought you might make a difference. Please..."

Spock lowered his head to stare at his hands. They were gripped into a tight ball, long fingers entwined.

"I have come here to divest myself of all thoughts and emotions that have plagued my life. These feelings... I had taught myself to control them with considerable success while serving under Captain Pike, and in the early days of Jim's command. However, over the years as I became... as we became more and more relaxed in each others company, these emotions increased dramatically - as

a consequence I found it harder to function as a Vulcan. I am unable to help myself, let alone the Admiral... I am therefore unable to assist you in this matter."

"Spock, please. I don't know what else to do."

"Go home, Doctor."

"I have no home, damn it! The Enterprise was my home, and you and Jim my family... Don't you understand? You were lonely too... Why did I come up this bloody mountain in the middle of nowhere to see you? Do you think I'd have done that if I had a family waiting for me? You stupid idiot!"

Spock looked at him coldly. "I see."

"Do you? Well, I can't argue any more - I'm tired out... It just breaks my heart to think of how we once were..." His voice tailed off.

Spock nodded slowly. "Doctor, I find it difficult to ignore your request, but I can never return. It is impossible."

"Why did you go? Just explain that. Did you and Jim have a fight?"

"No. I left because... I could no longer hide from the truth. Jim could not remain only a friend. I had come to... love him, care for him. Do you realise what feelings that strong mean if you are a Vulcan, Doctor? It meant I had failed... shame, disgrace."

"And so you ran away."

"Yes. I came here to attempt to regain all I had lost - to bury the past, begin to find my way again."

"You said you loved Jim, so how can you stay here and not help him? He

does need you, you know."

"I cannot help him. As a small child I made the decision to follow the way of Surak. If I had listened to my father and stayed on Vulcan I would have avoided all this pain."

"And you would never have met Jim - or he, you. Then perhaps he wouldn't be in pain either. You must really hate him, 'cause this isn't love... never love. This cold indifference to another's pain isn't love."

The Vulcan swallowed hard. "Does he know you have come here?"

"No."

"Then I ask you never to tell him."

McCoy shook his head. "Sorry, Spock, but Jim has always blamed himself for you leaving the ship. He says you left hating him. That it was his fault. I can't let him go on thinking that. If he knew that you had loved him, it might make a difference."

"He does know, Doctor." The words were bitter.

"What?"

"He knows of my feelings."

"How?"

"I told him."

"You did?"

"Yes, on the evening before I left."

"What did he say?"

Spock tried to avoid the questioning blue eyes. "He... he was disgusted... he told me to leave. He used a strong

expletive." Spock looked up at the ceiling. "I believe he was about to strike me."

"No... Jim wouldn't. I don't believe it!" But McCoy had never known Spock to lie.

The First Officer's declaration of love must have come as a shock to the womanizing Captain - maybe that explained the sudden marriage to Lori. Perhaps Jim was trying to prove something... Well, it hadn't worked. McCoy was sure as god made little green apples that Jim missed Spock with all his heart.

"It is true, Doctor." Spock's voice interrupted his musing. "I made a grave error in revealing my shameful weakness to the Captain... but I had hoped he would understand... I only told him in order to ease my own pain. If.. if I had foreseen the revelation would lead... to... this..."

McCoy said gently, "How long had you kept your feelings to yourself, Spock?"

"Four point three years."

"All that time you'd loved Jim?"

"He was easy to love," was the simple answer.

"Yes, I guess he was; but Humans... well, physical love between males is..."

Spock's eyebrows rose. "You misunderstand. When I say I loved him, I meant in the Vulcan way. I meant far more than a mere physical joining of bodies. I loved him as T'hy'la. A love of the mind is everything..."

"I think I understand. But maybe Jim thought as I did... Please come back

and explain to him exactly what you feel."

"NO!"

"Why not? What do you have to lose?"

"It is impossible... I cannot... You do not know..." He turned away before continuing, "The pain when he rejected me... As a Vulcan, emotional pain is far worse than physical... it can destroy all that we are. No, I can never risk that again." There was a finality to the words.

"You mean Jim isn't worth the pain of rejection?"

"ENOUGH! This is pointless. Sleep now, and I shall arrange a guide to escort you back to ShiKahr in the morning."

McCoy slowly pulled the blanket tighter. "Very well. I know when I'm beaten, Spock. There's no way I can make you understand. You're going to throw it all away and bury yourself here, and meanwhile Jim will slowly die, inch by inch. Well, if that's what you want, who am I to try to change it? It's just a pity you didn't really kill him while in that first pon farr. It would have been a quicker death."

With that parting shot he lay back down and turned his back on the Vulcan. Although he was exhausted sleep didn't come easily, and when it did the dreams gave him little peace.

He woke up bathed in perspiration, surprised to find he was alone. Tossing off his blanket he stood, stretching his aching muscles. He had a crick in his neck, and rubbed it ruefully.

Spock's blanket was neatly folded, and a tray of assorted fruits stood next to

a pitcher of water on one of the slabs. McCoy cautiously nibbled at several of the strange fruits until he found which were palatable. Having eaten his fill he decided against drinking the water, remembering the taste.

There were no windows in the cell, so he had no idea of the time, but the oppressive heat told him it must be daylight. He washed in the small bowl, then sat to wait for Spock to return. he didn't have to wait long; within minutes the Vulcan entered, stony-faced.

"Your guide is waiting to escort you, Doctor." He looked at the dish of fruit. "Have you eaten enough to sustain you? It is a considerable distance to travel; you will not reach Shikahr until nightfall."

"Yes. Spock, won't you change your mind? Come back with me."

"I cannot."

"You're a stubborn man, Spock."

"So Jim once observed, Doctor." The voice held no emotion, the face was blank.

"Spock, can you do me one favour before I go?"

"I will endeavour to do so, dependent upon what it is."

"I want you to do that mind thing... I want you to wipe out all my knowledge of you and this visit. I want to forget I was ever here... because your indifference makes me sick to my stomach. I've thought about it, and I can't let Jim know about it, and I can't lie to him either. I just want to be able to forget you ever existed. I just wish Jim and I had never laid eyes on your miserable hide."

The Vulcan seemed to crumple before McCoy's hate. There was such sadness in his eyes... how could eyes express so much? Long lashes swept down, masking the dark pupils.

McCoy had never really noticed the length of the lashes before, he had been so mesmerized by the way Spock expressed his feelings with those eyes. As Spock stood before him now McCoy almost had to turn away. The pain of seeing anyone in such anguish - let alone Spock - was all too much. He reached out hesitantly to try to help the shaking figure, bitterly regretting his angry words.

Spock's eyes rose to meet his, liquid pools of pain. Slowly, gently, McCoy took the thin shoulders and eased Spock into his arms. There was no resistance. The Vulcan slumped against his chest, burying his face into the blue velour, glad to hide his anguish.

McCoy began to pat Spock's back gently, as he would a child, trying to express a wish to console.

"Jim... It is all my fault... and now... you too..." The words whispered between sobs and gasps.

"Hush... hush," crooned McCoy. "It'll work out. I didn't mean all I said. You know me, go off the deep end... I didn't mean it. I just don't know what to say to Jim... It'll be all right..."

The sobs were muffled by the tight embrace until slowly Spock pulled himself upright. Without a word he placed his fingers in the familiar meld position.

"Your mind to my mind..."

McCoy felt a warmth deep within.

McCoy was shown into a waiting room by a red-haired girl who looked as if she was modelling the latest face mask. She didn't smile once.

"Sit there," she ordered.

McCoy obediently sat. The door swished closed, leaving him alone.

He gazed at the tank of fish, the pictures of old-Earth sailing ships, the collection of weapons that lined the walls. The door opened; people came and went. Finally the red-head returned.

"The Admiral can spare you a few minutes now." She pointed to another door. "Through there."

McCoy strode into what appeared to be another waiting room, to be met by a fierce-looking Security guard who checked his ID before allowing him to pass into Kirk's office.

James Kirk turned dull eyes from the large window that overlooked the main cadet parade ground. "Doctor McCoy. Nice to see you." The words were lifeless.

"Hi, Jim. How's things?"

"Oh, about the same. I've been trying to keep busy - trouble is, there's not an awful lot to do..." He returned to the window. "Do you remember marching down there? Oh, of course not. You weren't a cadet. Good days..." His voice tailed off.

"How's Lori?" asked McCoy. He wasn't really interested, but it seemed only right to ask.

"She's pushing for a renewal of the contract. It runs out next month. Here, sit down." Kirk pushed a chair out from the large desk and sat down.

McCoy sat too. "And will you renew it?"

"I don't know. I guess so. But... well... marriage isn't like I hoped it would be. Look, that's enough about me. How was the trip?"

"What trip?" asked McCoy innocently.

"To Vulcan. That is where you went, isn't it?"

Oh, that. Well yes, it was okay. Not a barrel of laughs."

Kirk suddenly seemed to come alive. "Did you see anyone we know?"

McCoy shook his head. "No. It was just a whistle-stop thing, you know. Quick visit to Somak Hospital to give a lecture. Boring, really. Can't say I remember much. Spent a lot of the time asleep - must have been the heat."

"Oh." Disappointment was clear in his voice. "I kinda hoped you might run into Spock."

"No. Why - is he on Vulcan?"

"I don't know where he is. Sarek hasn't seen him. Well, I guess I'd better

get on with some work. Where are you off to now?" The voice was listless again.

"I guess I'll take that job researching Fabrini medicine."

"Right. Well, it was good to see you again."

"And you, Jim. Take care of yourself."

"Guess I'll have to, now I haven't got Spock to watch over me." There was regret in the voice.

They shook hands. Promised to keep in touch.

As McCoy left he turned for one final look at his friend.

James Kirk, splendid in his Admiral's uniform, stood, a lonely figure, gazing once more out of the window, hands clasped behind his back in a familiar pose.

McCoy wondered whatever had happened to Spock?

Funny, him going off like that.

Guess they'd never know.

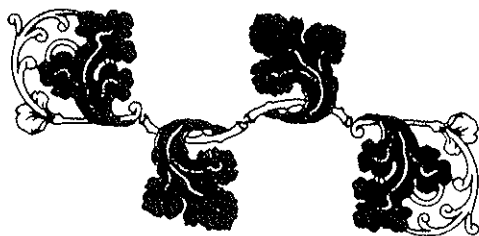


TOGETHER, FOREVER

Parted, yet never parted, my t'hy'la,
Until we can be together again -
This time forever.

In life we travelled the stars together,
And although we were parted
When I returned to Vulcan
After the five year mission,
You knew that, should you have need of me,
That I would return to you.
And return to you I did,
To remain by your side until my time came.
That time came all too soon, my brother,
And we were parted sooner than either of us expected.
I knew that my death would cause you great pain,
And the knowledge that I could do nothing to ease that pain,
Caused me great distress.
Now, though, we are together again,
For the time has finally come for you to join me,
Only this time we will never be parted again.
Come, my friend, my brother,
Be one with me again;
For I have awaited your coming,
As much as you have longed to join me.
Now, we will be together, forever,
And nothing will part us ever again.
For we will be together for Eternity.

Christine J Jones



THE HEART OF THE MATTER

by

Nina Lynch & Tracy Beadle

Dr McCoy had been puzzled all day. He had been searching for something of great importance to him, and now his search had brought him to the corridor, where he continued his quest.

Mr Spock came out of the turbolift, and on seeing him there very intent on inspecting every inch of the corridor, decided he could be of assistance to him and said,

"Dr McCoy, these items were found in the vicinity of your quarters."

McCoy was too busy for socialising, and so replied absent-mindedly, "What items?", but at Spock's words, "These pills," he turned to face him.

When he saw the small bottle Spock was holding he was overjoyed, and took the proffered item from Spock's hand. "Ah yes, my little red pills," he said, and headed towards the turbolift.

Spock's question stopped him in his tracks. "May I ask what purpose they serve?"

McCoy hesitated; this could be an interesting conversation. Putting on his best 'lecturing' face he offered and answer. "They serve a very good purpose, my dear Science Officer. They aid the action of my heart." A small bounce seemed to indicate a brainwave; at last he could get one over on Spock. "But then again, you've no idea what a heart is, have you?" he stared at Spock, almost daring a reply.

"Ah yes, the heart," Spock replied. "A part of the body which pumps blood around the system, the cardio-vascular -"

"Yes, yes," interjected McCoy, "but do you have any idea floating about in that Vulcan mind of yours what a heart means to us in terms of love, honour, affection and selflessness?" *There*, he thought. *Get out of that!*

Mr Spock, realising that McCoy was trying to goad him into giving some display of emotion, decided that logic had the answer.

"The donation of your heart is very commendable, Doctor." He spoke slowly, as if he was carefully choosing each word for the best possible impact. "If you were to give your heart to someone, would it not be on a very short loan?"

"My god, Spock," spat out McCoy, "you have a lot to learn about us Humans!"

Mr Spock replied casually, "When a Doctor, whose profession it is to prescribe pills, *takes* pills, it is most intriguing to we visitors."

Dr McCoy, sensing his adversary was gaining the upper hand, decided to approach the issue from a different tack. "Your visit can be shortened, my friend, if I were to register you," he pointed menacingly at Spock, "as an undesirable alien."

The Vulcan dived into his reserves of logic and replied, "Were I to depart this vessel, Doctor, I dare say you would float

idly in space for many a year before coming across any being," he paused then, remembering a previous conversation with the good Doctor, "sympathetic to your beads and rattles."

"I dare say we'd manage without you," retorted McCoy.

"Hardly, Doctor." After all the time Spock had spent with the Human race he still could not understand their illogical thought processes. he carried on, "Since you rely on pills to keep your body going, upon whom would you rely to analyse foreign materials? Who would interpret alien readings?"

McCoy could say nothing; all he could do was wait until he could get a word in, but silently he was thinking how

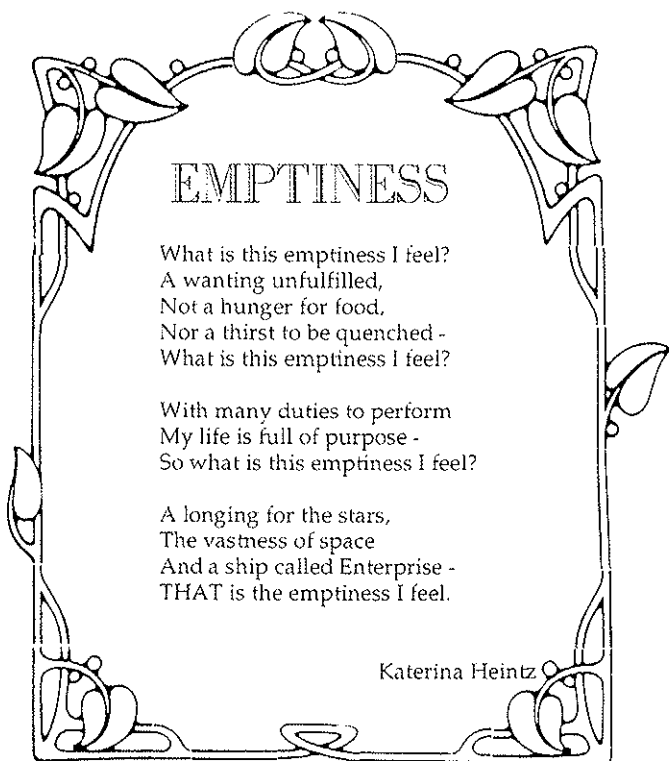
much he sometimes despised Spock's humility.

The Vulcan was still going on. "Who has the inter-galactic knowledge that I possess to forewarn and therefore forewarn the Enterprise? Who - ?"

McCoy could stand no more. With defiant bounce he practically shouted at Spock to make him shut up.

"Dammit, Spock, I'm a Doctor, not a twentieth century quiz contestant!"

He fumbled with the small bottle in his hand, and when he had managed to get a little red pill into his mouth he stormed off towards the turbolift, glancing back at Spock as if to damn any more logical statements.

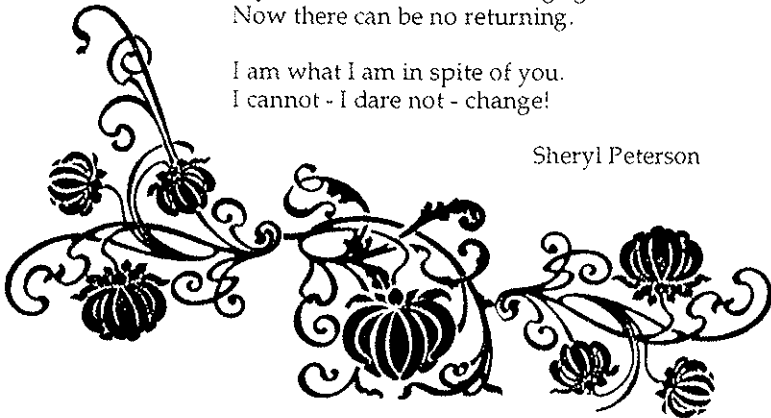


SPOCK : VULCAN TO HUMAN

You are so sure I resent you.
 Yet can I myself be certain
 Though you are the taint which drove me
 From the arms of my own kind?
 Yet, you are also a window
 To a world I never dreamed of.
 Dare a creature born of darkness
 Seek the light that makes it blind?
 If I think of you as weakness,
 If I curse this Human lineage,
 It is not because I fear it
 But because I am not sure.
 You have shown me things
 That other Vulcans never knew existed.
 Can this "feeling" be so wrong?
 I am not certain any more .
 I could tear you from within me,
 Smother you into extinction,
 Imprison you so deeply
 That you never could be freed;
 And yet that little voice
 Formless as wind would always whisper,
 "You cannot live without me
 For I have something you need."
 "I am Vulcan!" is my challenge;
 Those three words ever my gauntlet
 Flung into the face of those
 Who criticise and think me strange.
 My choice was made too long ago;
 Now there can be no returning.

I am what I am in spite of you.
 I cannot - I dare not - change!

Sheryl Peterson



SPHINX

by

Ingrid Schwaller

1.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 6549.3

The Enterprise is on a research mission en route to Star System Beta 910. Twenty minutes ago, however, we received a special order from Starfleet Command. Admiral Hiang Chow ordered us to divert to a planet called Sphinx because contact with a group of scientists there has been lost. I therefore ordered an immediate change of course. We will reach Sphinx in about 0.5 days, standard."

Captain James T. Kirk, commanding the Starship Enterprise, switched off the log computer and sighed inwardly. It was the third time in a row that a routine mission had been interrupted by a special order. Slowly but surely he had had enough. The whole crew, including himself, deserved some rest. During the research mission to Beta 910 they would have been able to relax a bit. But no

Dr. McCoy, who had entered the Bridge during Kirk's last words to the computer, interrupted the Captain's bitter thoughts.

"What's going on, Jim? Why did you change course? And what the hell is 'Sphinx' - apart from a legendary animal from Greek mythology?"

"Ah, Bones! You are just in time. You've already heard that we've got a special order again. I don't know much about this mysterious planet, either."

Kirk turned to his First Officer, Commander Spock, who was seated at his library computer station.

"Mr. Spock, please ask that supercomputer of yours if it knows anything about Sphinx."

"Certainly, Captain."

The Vulcan leaned towards his computer and pressed a few keys. Seconds later the required information appeared on the monitor.

"Sphinx is a Class M planet, Earth-like, with a diameter of 11,973.98 km. It is about 2 billion years old. The atmosphere consists of 75% nitrogen, 21.3% oxygen, 3.7% carbon dioxide and rare gases. The pressure is 0.921 atmospheres..."

Dr. McCoy cut in impatiently. "That's all very interesting, Spock, but why is that thing called 'Sphinx'?"

Spock eyed him disapprovingly. "If you will be kind enough to let me finish, Doctor, your curiosity will be satisfied. The planet was given the name 'Sphinx' because despite its relatively low age it is covered by an extremely dense vegetation, and so far no one has been able to find an explanation for this phenomenon. According to all known laws of nature, it is impossible that such an enormous number of plant species could have developed within a mere 2 billion years. Furthermore, most plants on the planet are unknown. Therefore the research station was established, and the scientists are commissioned to analyse the vegetation and to collect soil samples because it is assumed that the planet is

very rich in minerals."

"Thank you, Spock," Kirk said when the First Officer had finished his report. "Now we know at least what we have to expect. And the scientists haven't called Starfleet for over a month. Let's hope that they're all right." He stood up and stretched. "And now, gentlemen, I'll use the remaining time until we have to deal with Sphinx to get some sleep. Spock, would you please not wake me unless it's really urgent."

"Of course, Captain." Spock watched him with concern as he disappeared through the doors of the turbolift. The Captain really looked exhausted. Hopefully, the new mission would not be too strenuous.

McCoy had noticed Spock's gaze. He gave him a small nod. "You're right, Spock. He looks terrible. If he hadn't gone off to bed by himself, I would have ordered him to do it. Just try to leave him alone for a while." With these words the doctor left the Bridge for Sickbay.

Spock turned to his work and promised himself not to disturb Kirk.

Unfortunately, Spock could not keep his promise for very long. Two hours after Kirk had retired to his quarters the intercom buzzed. The Captain's only reaction was a sleepy growl, but the buzzing did not stop, and finally it penetrated into his consciousness. With an enormous effort he came out of the depths of sleep. He felt as if he had gone to bed only five minutes ago. He got up, swayed a bit, and then switched the intercom on with a silent curse. Spock's voice came out of the loudspeaker.

"My apologies, Captain, but it is

really urgent. We have located a spaceship that does not respond to any of our signals."

At that moment Kirk was fully awake. All his tiredness was suddenly gone. "Could you identify it?"

"Affirmative. It is one of our own ships, the Don Quixote under Captain Leigh Howard."

"I'm on my way. Kirk out."

Kirk quickly slipped on his uniform and rushed to the door. A last, regretful glance at his empty bed, and then the doors closed behind him.

Two minutes later Kirk entered the Bridge. The main view screen showed a small Federation vessel, which moved on a tangential course towards the Enterprise. Chief Communications Officer Lt. Uhura was seated at her console. The fingers of the beautiful Bantu woman danced across the buttons and switches but the impatient frown on her forehead showed that all her efforts had been in vain. Spock was hunched over his computer.

When Kirk stepped to his side, he straightened and reported, "As I already said, Captain, it is the Don Quixote, a surveyor vessel, category B, with a crew of 32. The last order that was entered into the computer concerned the charting of Star System Varia Alpha, which is 7.3 days standard away from our location at the present speed of the ship."

Kirk thanked him with a nod and turned to Uhura. "Still no answer, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"No, sir. I've tried on all frequencies, even on the emergency

channel. I can't make contact."

"Keep trying."

The Captain went to his command chair and watched the view screen. The small spaceship came nearer and nearer. Kirk said to Sulu, "Lieutenant, intercept it. We'll fly on a parallel course to the Don Quixote. We have to find out what's going on there."

Suddenly Spock spoke up. His voice, which usually gave no hint of what he felt, sounded strange. "Captain, I have just completed scanning the ship. All technical equipment is working perfectly, but - " he hesitated for a moment - "my sensors do not indicate any life forms."

Kirk jumped to his feet. "What? That's impossible!"

Spock's answer was definite. "Unfortunately not, sir. The results are correct. I have already rechecked them."

Before Kirk could make a decision, a signal came from Uhura's console.

"Captain, we are receiving another message from Starfleet Command." She stopped and shook her head in astonishment. "That's a funny coincidence, sir. It deals with the Don Quixote. Starfleet Command got an emergency call, but it was only partly intelligible. Something about an unknown disease. We are to see to it, because the ship has to be in our sector."

"That's true enough," Kirk said with slight irony. "All right, Lieutenant, acknowledge and tell them that we've found the Don Quixote." The order had anticipated Kirk's decision.

"Mr. Spock, I'll beam over with a landing party. You have the con. Lt. Uhura, have Dr. McCoy, Mr. Scott and

two men from Security meet me in the Transporter Room. And have light protective suits with air filters issued for everybody."

After all, he did not know what they were going to find over there. With these words Kirk quickly left the Bridge.

When he arrived in the Transporter Room McCoy, Scott, and the two others were already changing into the protective suits. Kirk briefed them about their task.

McCoy only commented, "Let's hope that Spock's sensors don't function properly."

But nobody really believed that.

2.

The five men materialised in the Transporter Room of the Don Quixote: The first thing they saw was the motionless body of the Transporter Chief. McCoy ran to him and stooped over the man. He felt for the neck pulse - nothing!

"Jim, he's dead."

The doctor reached for the dead man's hand, lifted it and then let it drop it again. "And he died only a short time ago. Rigor mortis hasn't fully developed yet."

Kirk took out his communicator and flipped it open. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Spock here, Captain."

"Mr. Spock, I'm afraid your sensor readings were correct. We've just found the first dead. Try to trace back the ship's course. Maybe we'll find something useful. We'll report in every twenty minutes. Kirk out."

The Captain turned to his officers. "Mr. Scott, go into the Engine Room. You, Bones, take a look at Sickbay. Ryan and Mattel, you examine the rest of the ship. I'll be on the Bridge. As soon as you find something, report immediately."

The four men nodded and left the Transporter Room. The ship was a small vessel, it had only three decks, and therefore they quickly reached the designated areas. The corridors were totally deserted. The humming and clicking of machines and electronic equipment was audible, but the crew seemed to have disappeared.

Kirk was ready to face a disaster, but nevertheless, he remained rooted to the deck when the doors to the Bridge slid open. He was confronted with a picture of death. At each station an officer lay slumped over his console. The Captain, a middle-aged man with white hair and a moustache, hung lifelessly in his chair.

Before Kirk could recover, his communicator beeped. He answered it automatically, without being able to avert his eyes from the view of the Bridge.

McCoy's hoarse voice reported, "Jim, all the crew down here are dead, too. They died at different times. Some of them have already been autopsied. The physician collapsed while he was working on one of them. Oh my God, Jim, what happened?"

"I've no idea, Bones. Try to find out if the disease, or whatever it is, is contagious. If you need somebody to help you, have him beamed over from the ship. But only *with* a protective suit!"

Then Kirk called Scott. "Mr. Scott, what's the situation in the Engine Room?"

Scott's voice alone told him everything. "The engines are working

perfectly, but the personnel are dead, Captain."

The two Security officers reported the same. The whole crew of the Don Quixote had died of unknown causes.

Again Kirk called the Enterprise. Spock answered at once. After Kirk had informed him about their findings, there was a small pause. Then the First Officer said in a low voice, "This is the first time that I regret that my sensor readings are correct." He continued, "We calculated the course of the Don Quixote, sir. They came from Varia Alpha via Sphinx to our present position."

Kirk's answer was only a sigh. "Oh no! I don't even want to think of what has happened to the scientists. Well, one problem at a time. Mr. Spock, I intend to leave the ship in orbit around the planet we have just passed. Send a report and the position of the planet to Star Fleet Command. Kirk out."

In the meantime Scott, Ryan, and Mattel had entered the Bridge. All three of them looked shocked and horrified. Kirk and Scott started to plot the new course, and the Security officers went down to Sickbay to help Dr. McCoy put the bodies into the stasis room.

The Captain ordered the computer to eject the log tape to take it with him to the Enterprise. After a few hours of hard work they returned to their ship.

3.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 6549.7

We found the Don Quixote. All crew members are dead. Dr. McCoy confirmed that the disease, affecting the spinal cord, is not

contagious; however, he has not been able to find the cause for it. We put the bodies into the ship's stasis room and left the Don Quixote in orbit around the nearest planet. Mr. Scott tuned the position transmitter to steady hum so that the vessel will be found in any case. We are continuing to Sphinx at maximum speed. The delay will amount to approximately four hours."

Kirk and Spock were in McCoy's office, where the doctor sat wearily at his desk. He had been working since the discovery of the bodies, and now he really felt exhausted. Nevertheless, he had sworn not to rest until he could make his final report.

Kirk looked expectantly at McCoy. "Did you find something, Bones?"

"Yes, I did, Jim. But I doubt that it'll help us much. The crew of the Don Quixote died from a pathological infection of the spinal cord, or rather, from an atrophy of the grey matter of the spinal cord, which contains vital nerve cells. That first leads to asthenia, which is a general weakness, then to paralysis and death. The medical officer of the Don Quixote had found that out, too - I examined his records. He also said that he could do nothing against the disease and was growing weaker himself."

"And what caused the disease, Doctor?" Spock asked.

"I'm not sure, but according to the innumerable tests I have run, they seem to have been subjected to an extremely high dosage of some sort of poison. I haven't yet been able to analyse the individual components of the drug."

"This is illogical, Doctor. How

could such a poison be available on a spaceship, and why should the crew take it?"

"How do I know?" McCoy bristled. "I'm a doctor and not a detective. I'm glad that I found out *why* they died in the first place!"

Kirk interrupted his friends. "I agree, Bones. Would you please stop quarrelling. We have more important things to do. First of all, we'll have a look at the log."

Kirk pushed the magnetic tape into McCoy's computer and pressed the appropriate button. The monitor revealed the face of Captain Leigh Howard. He looked grey and drained.

"This is Captain Leigh Howard, commanding the surveyor ship Don Quixote. Since we stopped at the planet Sphinx on our way from Varia Alpha back to Starbase 10, we all have been affected by a strange disease. The scientists on Sphinx are suffering from the same condition. Three of them are already dead. Their radio equipment has been irreparably damaged by unknown agents. Furthermore, they told us about UFOs which they allegedly saw. We did not see any and think they are simply hallucinating because of the disease. Our ship's surgeon is not able to help us. We know that we'll all die out here."

That was the last recording in the log. The three officers were silent. After a while Spock said gravely, "I am afraid we will not be able to help the scientists on Sphinx."

McCoy nodded. "You're right. The poison must have killed them much earlier." His fist came down on the desk. "If I only knew how that stuff got into their bodies!"

Kirk stood up. "Take a rest, Bones. And then, please, try to find out more about that substance. Mr. Spock, we'll return to the Bridge. We have to be within sensor range of the planet soon."

Both hurried out of Sickbay. McCoy tiredly placed his head on his arms on the desk.

When Kirk and Spock entered the Bridge they faced the usual busy atmosphere. All stations were manned with seasoned officers. At once, Spock went to the science computer and started working.

Lt. Uhura turned to the Captain. "Sir, I've been trying to reach the scientists on Sphinx for the past 15 minutes. They don't respond."

Kirk thought for a moment. Then he said, "I don't think they'll respond. Captain Howard said their radio equipment was irreparably damaged. But try again as soon as we are closer to the planet."

"Yes, sir." Uhura turned back to her instruments.

Kirk went to Spock's console. The Vulcan was bent over the hooded viewer of his computer and working with great concentration. Again and again he adjusted the dials of the sensors. Kirk watched him intently - and when Spock straightened after a few minutes, he knew what the Vulcan would say. For once, Spock's face was clearly readable.

"Our expectations have come true, Captain. A sensor sweep of the planet does not show any Human life forms. We are too late."

Suddenly Kirk felt old and tired. His

only wish was to lie down somewhere and sleep until all was over. More dead. The view on the bridge of the Don Quixote still haunted him. And now....

"Captain, are you all right?" Spock's worried voice broke into Kirk's sombre thoughts. Without realising it he had been leaning heavily on the computer console.

"Yes, Mr. Spock." Kirk looked at his First Officer. "I was just wondering how many people will have to die before we find out what's going on."

There was no answer to this question. Spock preferred drawing the Captain's attention to something else.

"Dr. McCoy said that the disease was caused by some sort of neural poison. We can hardly assume that the crew of the Don Quixote and as it seems at the moment also the research team voluntarily ingested a lethal dosage. Thus, logically, we have to consider some external agent."

Kirk was now listening intently.

"Yes, you're absolutely right, Mr. Spock. Maybe those UFOs are somehow involved."

"Possibly, Captain. If they really exist, we will certainly be able to locate them as soon as we have achieved orbit. Since our instruments are much more sensitive and efficient than those at the research station, there is a very high probability that we will be able to trace them to their point of origin."

Kirk gave him a rather doubtful look. Then he sighed, "I do hope so, Mr. Spock." He went to the command chair and sat down.

"Captain, we are approaching

Sphinx. In five minutes we can enter into orbit," Sulu reported.

"Very well, Mr. Sulu. Compute an orbit at maximum transporter range. We won't come too close until we know what has happened."

Kirk switched on the intercom. "Mr. Scott!"

"Scott here, Captain," the Chief Engineer's voice came over the loudspeaker.

"Mr. Scott, what about the warp drive and the power supply?"

"Everything perfectly all right, sir. It won't be the fault of my engines if something goes wrong."

"Thank you, Scotty. Kirk out."

A few minutes later the Enterprise had achieved a stable orbit around the planet. Sphinx hung in space like an emerald green sphere. Similar to Earth, the land mass was divided into continents and deep blue seas sparkled between them. All continents were covered by an extremely dense vegetation.

"It looks so peaceful," said Dr. McCoy, who had just entered the Bridge. Kirk turned to him.

"It does, doesn't it? But God knows what we'll find down there."

"If you ask me, one or more mass murderers," the doctor answered dryly.

"What?" Kirk jumped out of his chair. Spock lifted an eyebrow and looked questioningly at McCoy.

"I'm sorry, but that's a fact. I analysed the lethal poison. It consists exclusively of substances that have to be

produced artificially. Jim, they *do not exist* in nature."

This statement hit everybody like a blow. Until now they all had hoped that there was a simple explanation for the events. Now they knew that their people had been deliberately murdered.

Kirk's face hardened. "Well, at least now we know what we are up to." He turned to Sulu.

"Mr. Sulu, you are in command. Mr. Spock, Bones, you come with me. We're going to look for the scientists."

4.

The three men materialised in a clearing in the jungle. At least that was what it looked like. But a few hundred metres away, behind the trees, there was the sea. The forest simply provided an excellent natural cover for the research station.

In the clearing there stood seven buildings, the large laboratory in the middle and six smaller living units at the sides. Kirk knew that 15 scientists had to be in this place.

It was absolutely quiet. Only the wind rustled through the leaves and brought a cool breeze from the sea. Without the wind it would have been uncomfortably hot. Spock and McCoy had turned on their tricorders and swung them around.

"No humanoid life form readings, Captain."

McCoy nodded his head in agreement. Kirk looked around. Nobody was there.

"Let's look into the buildings," he said firmly and went to the first of the small living units. Spock and McCoy followed him. The house was empty - like the other five. They all showed traces of recent occupation, but their inhabitants were missing. At last the three officers went to the laboratory.

Kirk turned his head uneasily before they stepped through the door. Somehow he had the feeling that they were being watched, but the tricorders still did not register any humanoid life forms.

Kirk opened the door to the laboratory - and stopped so abruptly that the two others almost bumped into him. McCoy stared unbelievably over the Captain's shoulder, and even Spock, despite his Vulcan control, caught his breath when he saw what was in the room.

The men from the Enterprise looked at the most grotesque scene they had ever encountered. They had expected to find the scientists dead, but in the same way as on the Don Quixote. Here on Sphinx they seemed to be in the stasis room of some funeral furnisher. The 15 members of the research team lay in rank and file on the floor. Their arms were crossed over their chests so that the right hand touched the left shoulder and the left hand lay under the right elbow. At the feet of each person stood an instrument from the laboratory - a test tube, a small distiller, a rack with various chemicals.

"That can't be true," McCoy whispered. Kirk had already recovered from the shock and stepped to the first of the dead. Obviously, it was the head of the station, Dr. Mark Rajah. To distinguish him from his colleagues, he lay on an elevated platform built of layers of stone.

The Captain gestured to Dr. McCoy to come nearer. The doctor stooped over Dr. Rajah and examined him briefly with the medial scanner. Then he straightened and went to the others. After he had completed his examination he turned to Kirk and Spock, who had meanwhile taken a look around the laboratory.

"Those people died about 48 hours ago. All of them, except three, died at approximately the same time; that means they must have taken the poison at the same time because as far as I can tell here, the cause of death is identical to that of the crew of the Don Quixote."

Kirk nodded, then he said thoughtfully, "Well, we expected them to be dead, didn't we? But that... that looks like some sort of funeral ceremony."

"Correct, Captain," Spock answered, "and that dispels the last doubts about whether their deaths were caused by some external agent, since it would be most illogical to believe that all scientists assumed that strange posture in order to die."

"But it would be equally illogical to think that somebody killed 15 people and then put them on the bier according to some unknown ritual," Kirk retorted.

"That is true, sir. I am afraid we do not have enough data to solve this problem." He turned and scanned the room with intent eyes. "As far as I noticed when we entered the room, many instruments have been removed from their places and put somewhere else, but nothing has been damaged. The storage facilities are still locked."

Kirk shook his head. "Something's going on that I don't understand." He clenched his fists. "But I'll find out what it is, and I won't leave this planet before I have done it. There's a mass murderer

loose down here, who has already killed 47 people."

He snapped his communicator open. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Sulu, sir."

"Mr. Sulu, we found the scientists. They have been killed. Beam a few men down, we have to bury the dead."

Obviously, Sulu had a hard time getting over this message. It took him quite some seconds to answer. "Yes, sir."

"Kirk out."

Before Kirk could put away his communicator, he heard McCoy shout from the doorway.

"Jim, Spock!"

There was so much surprise and alarm in his voice that both men ran to him at once.

McCoy pointed upwards. A small oval thing glided across the azure sky.

"The UFO!" the doctor spluttered.

While Spock, with as much presence of mind as ever, switched on the tricorder, Kirk raised the communicator.

"Sulu!" he called.

"Yes, sir." Sulu answered immediately.

"We've just discovered a UFO. Can you locate it?"

"Affirmative, sir. Our instruments are registering it."

"Pursue it and make all possible scans. Kirk out."

Kirk turned to Spock. "Any results, Mr. Spock?"

The Vulcan shook his head. "No, Captain. The UFO is flying too high. It is beyond the range of my tricorder."

Kirk swallowed a curse. Then he said, "Well, at least we know that it's not a hallucination."

At that moment Kirk's communicator beeped.

"Kirk here."

"Sulu, sir. We were able to follow the UFO for a time. Then it was suddenly gone." Sulu sounded puzzled.

"What does that mean - gone?"

"Our sensors were registering it for about a minute and revealed that it was a two-man shuttle with humanoid life forms aboard. The speed was remarkably high for such a small craft. Then it was suddenly gone. Almost as if it had simply vanished."

Kirk, who was growing accustomed to surprises, only said, "Bad luck. Go to Yellow Alert, Mr. Sulu, and send the men for the burial down. Kirk out." Then he turned to Spock and McCoy. "Well, gentlemen, any suggestions?"

McCoy nodded. "Yes, Jim. I'll take one of the dead to the Enterprise and make an autopsy. I have to find out how the poison got into their bodies and whether there is an antidote for it."

"Okay, Bones, and you, Spock?"

During Kirk's talk with Sulu the Vulcan had gone back into the laboratory, and now he was coming back, carrying various magnetic tapes. He put them carefully into a small case on the

tricorder.

"I will concentrate on the scientists' reports, Captain. Maybe they will give us a clue to the mysterious events on this planet."

"You do that, Spock. But I don't think that Dr. Rajah knew what was going on. Otherwise they would have told Captain Howard, and probably they all would still be alive."

Suddenly they heard the familiar sound of the transporter, and four men from the Enterprise materialised beside the laboratory. While Spock and McCoy were beamed aboard with one of the dead, Kirk and the crewmen began their sad work.

5.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 6550.6

We have reached Sphinx. As we expected, the scientists were already dead. After extensive examinations, Dr. McCoy was able to confirm his first opinion, namely that the cause of death was the same poison as on the Don Quixote. I am determined to stay in orbit around Sphinx until I know who or what caused this disaster. The UFO which was seen by Commander Spock, Dr. McCoy, and myself on the planet, has not reappeared. This is another mystery that we have to solve. I have sent a landing party down to reconnoitre the surroundings of the station."

Once again Kirk switched off the log computer. He sat in his quarters thinking about the next steps they should

take. Since their return to the ship he had rested a bit, and now he felt rather refreshed. He could not find any explanation for the various events. Something was wrong. If they assumed that there was one person or a group of individuals responsible for the massacre, there was a strange discrepancy in their behaviour. First, they obviously had the know-how of space flight, because Kirk was convinced that there was a direct connection between the events and the UFOs; however, they killed their enemies with poison, a method that seemed antiquated and rather dangerous, considering the fact that somebody had to bring the poison to the victims. Second, the dead had been carefully laid out on the bier, something that was hardly common after the defeat of an enemy. The events simply did not fit together.

Kirk stood up and paced nervously. Somehow he had a hunch that there was still worse to come. He pressed the button of the intercom.

"Dr. McCoy and Mr. Spock to my quarters, please," he said. Then he called the Bridge.

"Mr. Sulu, remain in orbit and carry out a continuous sensor sweep. I want each square centimetre of the planet's surface examined, and I don't care how long it takes. Lt. Uhura, send a report to Starfleet HQ and tell them about our findings. Report that we'll stay here until we've solved the mystery. Kirk out."

A few minutes later the door bell buzzed, and Spock and McCoy entered. Both carried various sheets of notes. Kirk looked at them with barely concealed expectation. "Well, gentlemen? Did you find anything that could be of help to us?"

McCoy spoke first. "I have been working on the poison, Jim. It is indeed a very strong neural poison, which can

only - with special emphasis on *only* - be produced artificially. It directly affects the spinal cord and damages it in such a way that the patient dies eventually. The scientists as well as the crew of the Don Quixote must have ingested the poison together with food, because that stuff needs a lot of roughage to work quickly. I even found an antidote that might be useful. It is a drug that stimulates the creation of new spinal cord matter and is primarily used in the treatment of the Kinnatis infection. It should also serve in our case. However, the problem was that this drug was available neither at the research station nor on the Don Quixote, because it is rarely needed. And they didn't know the reason for the disease, anyway. The poison has another interesting characteristic; it uses itself up in destroying the grey matter of the spinal cord. If we are able to delay death with drugs until all the poison in the body is used up, there is a 90-percent chance of recovery."

Spock and Kirk had listened intently. Spock had jotted down some notes and compared them with his own results. Now he continued the doctor's report.

"As Dr. McCoy said, the scientists were not able to discern the cause of the disease. They assumed it to be a virus. I read the reports compiled by the research station's head, Dr. Rajah. The scientists came to Sphinx about two months ago. They immediately began their work and were able to achieve some highly valuable results. Among other things, they found gold, platinum, uranium, and a very rare mineral called cilium on the planet. They also catalogued a few of the plants. Approximately a month ago, the UFOs appeared first, mostly two or three at a time. Then, one morning, their radio equipment was destroyed. Therefore they were not able to contact Starfleet."

The Vulcan stopped for a moment and leafed through his notes. Then he went on.

"It is most interesting that several times Dr. Rajah's instruments registered a short energy burst without being able to trace it. Furthermore, a similar incident can also be found in the log of the Don Quixote. I put all data that had been entered into the log after the visit on Sphinx into our computer. A comparison with the scientists' reports revealed that the energy burst measured on the spaceship must have had the same origin as the energy fluctuations on the planet. In this connection, it is worth noting that shortly after that event, the first crew members fell ill on the Don Quixote."

Kirk and McCoy exchanged looks. The Captain turned to his First Officer.

"And your conclusions, Mr. Spock?"

Before Spock could answer, the intercom interrupted.

"Bridge to Captain Kirk!"

"Kirk here."

"Lt. Uhura, sir. I've got a message from the landing party."

"Relay it to my quarters, Uhura."

There was a crackling sound when Uhura put the call through, then they heard the tired voice of Lt. Fernandez, who commanded the landing operation.

"Fernandez here, sir. We were attacked. Those UFOs suddenly reappeared; this time there were three of them. They flew very low and shot at us with something like phasers. Two of my men are dead, sir, and some of the others are injured."

Kirk bit his lips. More dead. Quickly he said, "Have your men and yourself beamed up at once, Fernandez. Kirk out."

Then he wheeled to his two officers. "Obviously, now they are using other methods to get rid of us. But at least we know that there is a link between the UFOs and the killing of our people."

He looked at Spock. "We were interrupted, Mr. Spock. I asked you if you had any conclusions."

Spock, who had listen to Fernandez' report with utmost interest, raised his head and nodded. "Yes, Captain. From all known facts I have deduced that something or someone is guarding this planet and wants to prevent everybody else from dealing with it - thus, we are in grave danger."

Kirk and McCoy winced.

"But why, Spock. Those UFOs can't do any harm to our ship," the doctor said in astonishment.

The Vulcan lifted an eyebrow.

"Doctor, those... UFOs, as you call them, are in all probability only a side effect of the problem. Consider the following facts: Dr. Rajah and his colleagues establish a research post on Sphinx; two months after their arrival they die. The Don Quixote makes a brief stopover on the planet, and the whole crew dies of the same poison as the scientists. Do you want to call that a coincidence? And now we are here - logically, the next attack will be directed at us."

For a moment McCoy looked at Spock thoughtfully, then he said, "I hate to admit it, Spock, but you've convinced me. The only thing I don't see is how

they intend to poison us, if we are all staying aboard."

Kirk agreed. "I'd like to know that, too. But, nevertheless, we have to be careful. We'll maintain Yellow Alert and..."

The sound of the intercom interrupted him again.

"Bridge to Captain Kirk."

"Kirk here. What is it now, Uhura?"

"Sir, we've just received a message from Starfleet Command. Shall I relay it to your quarters?"

"Yes, Lieutenant." Kirk turned to Spock. "I wonder what's wrong now."

The small monitor on Kirk's desk lit up and Admiral Hiang Chow's resolute face appeared on the screen.

"Admiral Hiang Chow to Captain James T. Kirk, Starship Enterprise. We acknowledge the receipt of your report. It seems that on Sphinx forces have been unleashed that cannot be controlled by one single starship. Therefore, you will not beam down to the planet again and you will recall any landing party presently on the surface. You are to stay in orbit for six hours to collect as much information as possible. Then you are to return directly to Starbase 10, where the data will be evaluated. As soon as we have found a solution to the problem, you will return to Sphinx with reinforcements. Hiang Chow out."

Kirk stared at the dark viewer. Then he whirled to Spock and McCoy. The Vulcan had lifted both eyebrows and watched Kirk. He knew very well how the Captain would react to that order.

McCoy said slowly, "Maybe that's

not even such a bad idea. At least we'll be out of danger. There are already enough people dead."

Kirk blew up. "Isn't it great? And how are we to collect sufficient data if we must not beam down? Those paperpushers at Starfleet HQ seem to think that we just have to fly around and the computers are doing the work." Angrily he hit the desk with his palm. "Apart from that, we'll lose too much time if we have to return to the Starbase first."

Spock's quiet voice had the same effect on Kirk's heated temper as a bucket of cold water. "I do concur with you, Captain. However, we received a direct order from Starfleet Command. Thus, there is no other choice but to comply."

Spock was right - as usual.

6.

Captain Kirk and Commander Spock entered the Bridge. The conference with Dr. McCoy had carried on for some time, but still there were no real results. Now they had to "collect information" for six hours - as it was so nicely termed by Starfleet Command.

Spock sat down immediately at his computer to keep working on their current problem. Kirk turned to Sulu.

"Any news, Mr. Sulu? Has the sensor sweep revealed anything at all?"

Sulu turned to face him. "No, sir, except for the fact that the second UFO, which attacked our landing party, vanished over the same spot as the first one. Again it was simply gone."

Kirk thought for a moment, then he

said, "Okay, we'll concentrate on that area. The shuttles can't have disappeared. Survey the planet's surface in a radius of 50 km from the point where the UFO was last seen, and compare the data with all available information."

"Captain!" The urgency in Spock's voice made Kirk whirl around.

"What is it, Mr. Spock?"

"Our instruments are registering a slight energy increase on the surface, like the one mentioned in the reports of the scientists and of the Don Quixote. The frequency pattern is similar to a..." he hesitated for an moment and rechecked his computer screen, "...transporter beam. And..."

Kirk interrupted him.

"Red Alert for all decks! There may be an intruder aboard."

Uhura relayed the order immediately. Kirk turned back to Spock.

"What was it you were saying, Spock?"

"The energy output is too diffuse to be traced either to its origin or to its target. It seems logical, however, that the transporter beam, if it is one, is directed towards the Enterprise."

"I agree. Now the only thing we can do is wait. Continue monitoring the energy output on the planet."

Three hours later they were still waiting. Kirk had cancelled Red Alert, because nothing had happened. The computers were still picking up all incoming data. The sensors had shown that within a radius of 10 km in the area

concerned, the vegetation had to be more homogeneous than on the rest of the planet. In addition, there were only indications of one single species of plants, which was highly unusual, not to say unlikely. Kirk's fingers were itching to send a landing party down because that area was relatively close to the research station but he had his orders.

Suddenly the intercom beeped.

"McCoy to Kirk."

Kirk switched it on. "Kirk here. Anything wrong, Bones?"

"Jim, I've got 12 people in here with symptoms of poisoning." McCoy's voice poured out of the loudspeaker excitedly.

"What??"

"You heard me, Jim. Our enemies must have been aboard. Fortunately, the poisoning is in an early stage - there is no danger to the patients' lives. Their chances aren't too bad with that drug I told you about."

"Thanks, Bones. I'll be down in Sickbay in a few minutes."

Kirk tried to steady his trembling hands. His ship - his crew! Again he saw the scene on the Bridge of the Don Quixote. Resolutely he turned to Spock, who had listened to their conversation.

"What do you think, Spock?"

"We can take it for granted that the transporter beam we registered was directed towards our ship. Somebody seems to have come aboard and poisoned our food - part of it at least. I suggest using the emergency supplies. Their packings are tamper-proof."

Kirk nodded, turned to Uhura and

gave the order. At once she bent over her console and informed the whole crew. Now they lived under a time limit. Within one month they had to reach the next Starbase, because it was impossible for 430 people to live more than a month on emergency supplies.

Half an hour later Kirk sat in Dr. McCoy's office and listened to his report. The doctor seemed to be exhausted, but, for a change, he had good news.

"As I told you, Jim, nobody's life is in danger. We were extremely lucky that it was already after the normal meal time, otherwise more than 200 of our crew would now be ill - or dead. The patients only took a snack. I asked them what they had eaten; the poison must have been either in the fruit salad or in the vegetables... What is it, Jim?"

Kirk had jumped to his feet and stared at McCoy with pure horror in his eyes. "Oh my God, Spock!"

The doctor looked at him uncomprehendingly. "What?"

"Bones, Spock went down to eat later than usual... I totally forgot it. And he always eats that green stuff."

McCoy was startled. He had not thought of that. Then he had an idea.

"Jim, I don't think that Spock ate anything of it. It would have had an effect already. It took very little time in the others."

Kirk glared at him.

"Really? And how often have you told me that Vulcans - and in particular our very own half-Vulcan - react differently?"

With those words he raced out of Sickbay.

perfectly able to hear him even if he had whispered.

When he entered the Bridge - after he had slowed down his pace to a normal speed - he sighed with relief. Spock was seated at his computer console and was busy with some calculations. Kirk stepped to his side. The Vulcan raised his eyes.

"Captain?"

"Mr. Spock, today you ate later than usual, didn't you?"

Spock's eyebrows lifted, and he looked at Kirk with slight surprise. The Captain was interested in his meals?

"Yes, Captain."

Kirk told him what McCoy had discovered. Spock nodded gravely.

"I suppose Dr. McCoy is right. The poison seems to have no effect on me. I feel quite well. Possibly, Vulcans are immune to this kind of neural poison."

"Let's hope that's true."

Kirk turned and went to his chair. He was just on the point of sitting down when he heard Uhura's scream. He wheeled around and saw his most terrible fears come true. Spock had slumped forward over his console and did not move. Uhura was standing beside him and tried to help. Her dark eyes were burning with shock.

Kirk stabbed at the button of his intercom.

"Dr. McCoy to the Bridge. On the double!" he shouted, forgetting for the moment that McCoy would have been

7.

For more than an hour Sickbay had been a mess. When Spock was brought in, McCoy had immediately started to run all necessary tests. Now they were finished, but the doctor fervently wished for a chance to repeat them, thus achieving a different result.

Three times he had reprogrammed the computer, but the machine inexorably yielded the same results over and over again.

Experience had taught McCoy that he must not become emotionally involved with his patients. Every doctor sometimes (much too often, to be quite honest) lost the fight against death, and for his own sake he had to try to stay neutral. But in this case McCoy was not able to do that (he had to admit that even under normal circumstances he was only rarely able to keep emotions out). No matter how often he had an argument with Spock, how often he called him a "pointy-eared computer," he was very fond of him. He would have done anything to help him, but...

Captain James T. Kirk nervously wandered through Sickbay. Time and again he glanced over at Spock, who lay unconscious on one of the beds with blinking control panels overhead. Even though Kirk did not know much about medicine, he saw that the readings given by the Feinberger instrument were extremely low, even for a Vulcan. Dr. McCoy was still standing at one of the diagnosis computers and was working with utmost concentration. Kirk stepped to his side.

"Well, Bones?" The impatience in his voice was barely hidden.

"Just a minute, Jim," McCoy answered without looking up. The computer buzzed and delivered a magnetic tape - for the fourth time. The doctor slipped it into the display unit, read the information, and turned to Kirk.

"You were right, Jim. Vulcans react differently to the poison; that is - they don't react at all."

Kirk stared at him in surprise and without understanding.

"But why..." Suddenly it dawned on him. "But Spock is only half Vulcan."

"Right," McCoy answered. "That damned poison exclusively affects the Human component of his spinal cord. Therefore the symptoms appeared so late and with such vigour. His Vulcan physiology had compensated the effect of the poison for a long time. But now he is practically paralysed."

"And how bad is it, Bones? Will there be permanent damage?" the Captain asked anxiously

For a moment McCoy looked at Kirk, then he averted his eyes. Now the only thing left was to tell the truth. His own voice sounded strange in his ears when he said, "Jim - it couldn't be worse. I... I can't help him!" The doctor brushed with one hand over his weary eyes.

Kirk felt blood draining from his face. He had not considered this possibility. McCoy did not know what to do?

"But Bones, you've got this drug. Why...?"

"It works with Humans, Jim - *only*

with Humans. This time Spock's Vulcan half is the impeding factor."

"That can't be true, Bones! Isn't there any other possibility?"

Kirk's mind rejected McCoy's medical judgement. How often had Spock been close to death and had always been saved? How often had McCoy pulled a trump card out of his sleeve at the last moment?

McCoy hesitated. "Well, there would be one thing to do, but I lack the means to do it, and by the time we reach the next Starbase Spock will be dead. The drug can be adapted to the Vulcan organism by adding a certain mineral."

"What mineral? Can't you be more precise?"

"The mineral is called cilium and is extremely rare, Jim. We don't have any supplies aboard!" McCoy's despair was obvious.

"Cilium?" The name seemed to ring a bell with Kirk. Where had he heard it? Spock had mentioned it somewhere ... Suddenly he knew.

"Bones, the scientists discovered cilium on Sphinx! They must have stored the soil samples in their lab!"

He ran to the next intercom. "Lt. Uhura, alert the Transporter Room. I'm beaming down to the planet." Before the communications officer was able to answer, Kirk had switched off the device. He was already on his way to the door, when McCoy's voice stopped him.

"Jim, you can't go down! That's too dangerous. Just remember the attacks on the landing party. And besides, you've got a direct order not to..."

Kirk interrupted him impatiently, "Oh, stop it, Bones, will you? Do you think that I'll sit here and watch Spock die, if I don't get the cilium?"

He was about to turn again, but McCoy grabbed his arm.

"Jim, think it over. You know I would do anything to help Spock, but what you intend to do is practically suicide. If you don't make it, you're both dead. Not to speak of your disobeying a direct order from Admiral Hiang Chow - and this time T'Pol is not going to save your neck afterwards."

The Captain angrily slammed his palm on McCoy's desk. "Oh, to hell with orders and all that stuff. As Spock once told me, there are some things that transcend the discipline of the service. I'm going down to the planet, and nothing and nobody will stop me!"

Their voices had risen during the argument, and none of them had noticed that Spock had regained consciousness and was following the last part of their discussion.

"Captain!" The Vulcan's voice was weak but clear.

At once Kirk turned and went to Spock's bed. "Yes, Spock? How do you feel?"

The First Officer was deathly pale but the old firmness was still in his voice.

"Considering the circumstances, not too bad, sir." He stopped for a moment, and then he said, "Jim, you must not risk your life and your career for me. I know you did that repeatedly in the past, but I always tried to dissuade you. Please, do not beam down to Sphinx."

Kirk looked into the dark Vulcan

eyes, which clearly showed the anxiety that Spock would never think of expressing openly, and the First Officer met his gaze. Both knew that their friendship could not be influenced by dangers or orders.

The Captain grinned at Spock and said, "Count the times you risked your life for me, Spock." He touched the Vulcan's motionless hand and squeezed it encouragingly. "Don't worry, I'll be back soon."

With all the willpower he could muster, Spock's fingers returned the pressure slightly. Then Kirk disappeared through the door, followed by McCoy's and Spock's worried gazes.

Fifteen minutes later Kirk was aboard again. He had been extremely lucky. First, in the lab he had immediately found the collected soil samples, all of them carefully labelled; and second, this time the unknown enemy had obviously not realised that someone was on the planet's surface.

Kirk ran at once to Sickbay and handed the samples over to McCoy. The doctor sighed with relief when he saw that Kirk was unharmed, and even Spock could not really conceal his own relief.

Together with Nurse Chapel, McCoy started immediately to synthesise the new drug. Kirk was about to step to Spock's bed when the intercom beeped.

"Engine Room to Captain Kirk!" Scott's voice was very excited.

"Kirk here, Scotty."

"Captain, while you were down on Sphinx, something happened up here. One of these chaps must have been

aboard. He stole a part of the pump of the refrigerating system. As soon as we go to warp power, the engines will overheat and we'll all be blown to smithereens." Scott's Scottish burr was as thick as every time when he was really upset.

Now they knew why nobody had paid attention to Kirk; their enemies had been otherwise occupied.

"How could that have happened? Don't you have any Security officers down there?"

"I don't know, sir. Suddenly some of our instruments went crazy. We got totally abnormal results, and all of our people ran to that piece of equipment. It must have been a diversionary attack," the Chief Engineer ended unhappily. "What are we going to do now, sir?"

"Nothing, Scotty. We'll have to think about it first. Kirk out."

Meanwhile McCoy had stepped to Spock's bed with a hypospray injector and had given him the first shot of the adapted drug. Both had overheard part of Scott's report.

"Well, now we're finally in it up to our necks," Kirk said bitterly. Then he turned to McCoy. "How long will it take until Spock is out of bed again, Bones?"

"About six hours. Why?"

"Because I want to beam down with a landing party, and I want to have him with me. I'll send a report to Starfleet Headquarters and explain our situation. Now they can't object when I act on my own account."

8.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 6551.5

A part of the refrigerating pump of our matter-antimatter converter has been stolen, which means that we cannot use our warp engines. Despite the order from Starfleet Command, our only chance is to beam down to the planet's surface. It is imperative that we find the device because with impulse power alone we would be almost helpless in case of attack, and it would take us a very long time indeed to reach the nearest Starbase, far longer than we could afford with just our emergency supplies for food. Since Commander Spock has fortunately recovered very quickly, I will beam down with him, Dr. McCoy, and four Security officers and try to find a solution to our problems."

On the Bridge Kirk stood beside Lt. Sulu. He examined some figures on the sensor displays, then he said,

"Sulu, you have the con in my absence. At the moment Mr. Scott is indispensable in the Engine Room. Do you have the exact coordinates of the area that you surveyed before?"

Sulu nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Okay, then relay them to the Transporter Room. We'll try to beam down as close to that circular area as possible. Mr. Spock supposes that it is a protective screen that not only shields everything below it, but at the same time emanates values that show up as a vegetation cover on any sensors."

Sulu looked at him in astonishment.

"But, sir, something like that doesn't exist."

"You're right, Mr. Sulu. In our technology something like that doesn't exist. But obviously, it's different with our friends down there. Anyway, I want to find out what's hidden below that shield. If we don't call in within six hours, then give a report to Starfleet Command, ask for help, and leave this vicinity on the double. Plot a direct course to the next Starbase, go to full impulse power, and don't take any chances. You know, our food won't last very long."

Sulu's doubtful look showed that he did not agree with Kirk, but the order was clear. So there was nothing else to say but, "Aye, sir. Good luck!"

The seven members of the landing party materialised amidst the jungle. All of them were armed with phasers, holding them ready to fire. Spock and McCoy also carried their tricorders.

The light was dim, the vegetation so dense that sunlight could hardly penetrate the foliage. Bizarre lianas hung from trees with strange leaves and impeded the view.

Spock and McCoy switched on their tricorders and turned in a full circle. The Security officers - Lt. John Fairbanks, Lt. Linda Mannings, Ensign Achmed Sayyid, and Ensign Danuta Polikowicz - looked around carefully. Kirk tried to see through the tangle of lianas. He felt as if he had been dropped right into one of the old adventure movies that he and his brother Sam had been so fond of as boys.

"Captain," Spock raised his eyes from the tricorder, "3.6 km from here there is a large stone structure. Its age is

relatively high, approximately 5,000 years. In addition to that, my tricorder indicates about 350 life forms, probably humanoids. Obviously, the shield does not have any effect here on the surface."

"Well, then let's go," Kirk said firmly and started to struggle slowly forward through the jungle. Spock and McCoy followed him while the Security officers brought up the rear to cover their backs.

The air was stifling hot; within a few minutes their uniforms were soaked with sweat - all but one. Spock found the temperature rather pleasant; it reminded him of his home planet Vulcan. After they had covered about half the distance to the stone structure, they agreed on a short rest. With the sleeve of his uniform McCoy wiped the sweat from his face. He longed for a shower and a cool drink. Spock had sat down on the stump of a tree and was working with his tricorder. He was trying to find out more about the building and the beings in it.

The doctor eyed him irritably. "Spock, couldn't you at least *try* to look as tired and bathed in sweat as we all are? We look as if we had been pushed through a meat-grinder, and you, you look fresh as paint."

The Vulcan's eyes gazed at McCoy under raised eyebrows. His lips seemed to form an ever-so-slight smile.

"Dr. McCoy, may I remind you that on this planet there is definitely no such antique device as a 'meat-grinder.' I also doubt that any of you would have survived the procedure you mentioned. Besides, I do not see any resemblance between myself and a mixture of a pigment and a suitable liquid."

Meanwhile McCoy had sat down too and had rested his head in his palm.

Now he was watching the Vulcan with fascination. When Spock had finished, he asked,

"Why do you also have to take everything so literally, Spock? You know perfectly well what I meant."

"Then why do you not express it clearly, without fancy paraphrases, Doctor?"

The whole group, who had been following their discussion with interest, grinned. Those "arguments" between McCoy and Spock always served to ease the tension considerably. Then Kirk stood up. "I'm afraid we've got to continue on our way, we don't have that much time. Mr. Spock, have you found out anything new?"

Spock nodded. "Affirmative, Captain. The life forms which are registered by my tricorder are definitely humanoid. The stone structure seems to contain a great deal of technical equipment, which generates large amounts of energy. I suppose that it is the generator for the deflector shield."

About half an hour later they had reached their destination. They stood at the edge of a clearing, which was efficiently hidden by the rest of the jungle. In the middle they saw a huge, octagonal stone building, which looked like some sort of pyramid, vaguely reminiscent of the gigantic structures built by the ancient Aztecs or Mayas on Earth. The uppermost part of the structure was hidden by the tree tops. Behind that building there stood five two-man gliders. These were the UFOs!

For a moment everyone was silent. Nobody had expected such a grandiose view. Kirk recovered first.

"Fan out! We have to get to the entrance."

The entrance was a large door, approximately in the middle of the side of the building which they were facing, and which was almost completely covered with vegetation. Only the dark opening was visible. There was not a single being in the clearing. It was absolutely quiet.

The small group cautiously edged towards the building. They had nearly reached the entrance, when Linda Mannings, who had turned around, called out. Everybody whirled.

At the brink of the clearing there stood a dense row of ... Humans? Spock's tricorder readings had been correct, they were definitely humanoid, and they almost looked like Humans. The only visible differences were the pigmentation of their skin, the eyes, and the hair. Their skin gleamed in a light violet, their hair was white as snow, and the colour of their eyes was a brilliant red, like the eyes of albinos. The beings were clad in loose coveralls and high boots, which seemed to be extremely useful for life in the jungle. There were about thirty humanoids facing the Enterprise landing party and holding unknown but deadly-looking weapons in their hands, quite obviously ready to shoot.

They approached the officers slowly. The Security men wanted to draw their phasers, but Kirk signalled them with a gesture not to move. Both groups watched each other expectantly and suspiciously.

Kirk's mind was working in top gear. He did not see any possibility for himself and his people to defend themselves, not to speak of defeating their adversaries. Finally, he chose the simplest and most harmless way of action. He raised both hands to his

shoulders, palms outward, and took a step forward.

"I'm Captain James T. Kirk of the United Federation Starship Enterprise."

On how many occasions had he already said that! In the present situation it sounded strangely inadequate and banal, but it was the only thing that seemed to make at least some sense. He did not expect them to understand him, anyway.

One of the men left the group. He was older than the others and wore some sort of a long white tunic with gold braids over the coverall - it looked rather strange. But, nevertheless, he emanated dignity and self-confidence. In his right hand he held a small device, and when he spoke, his voice seemed to come out of it. Kirk rightly supposed that this device was an electronic translator.

"I am Rayis, the ... Kima of our tribe."

The small pause before the word "Kima" indicated that there was no adequate translation for this expression. But its meaning was clear to all of them.

Kirk, who had never been particularly good at diplomacy at the Academy, forgot the little he had learned there and immediately spat out the question that had bothered him all the time.

"You killed 47 of our people. Why?"

When he thought of the dead, he felt like....

"This is the order of the Old Ones."

Kirk was startled. A tradition? That would make things difficult. It was never easy to erase traditions, even if they

were extremely cruel.

"What did you do with the piece of equipment you stole aboard my ship? We want it back."

Kirk's voice expressed a certain amount of threat. His officers behind him caught their breaths.

"That is impossible. Nobody who comes to our planet is allowed to leave it ever again. This is the order of the Old Ones," Rayis answered quietly.

Kirk felt his already strained patience gradually wearing thin. He knew that they had only about three hours left.

"And what happens with us?"

"We will kill you. You will die the Slow Death, like your friends. This is the order of the Old Ones."

9.

Captain James T. Kirk and his officers were in a large room, which they might have admired for its beauty if it had not been their prison.

After the short conversation in front of the pyramid, which had ended with the pronouncement of their death sentence, the Kima had had them disarmed while they had still been staring at him incredulously and had led them into the building. They had been pushed through a long stone corridor and various rooms, which had been filled with computers and other electronic equipment. Spock had immediately seen that the technological standard of this civilisation was much higher than that of either Earth or Vulcan.

Then they had reached their destination - a large room with about 100 square meters, equipped with beds, small tables, and chairs. The stone walls were covered with bas-reliefs showing strange alien creatures and geometric forms. The heavy door had closed behind them with a loud bang.

After they had recovered from the first shock, they immediately began to examine the room with utmost attention. After all, they were Starfleet officers and could not be so easily intimidated, although sometimes it was hard for them not to show their true feelings.

Now Spock, who had examined the door frame, straightened and said, "As far as I can see, this door is the only exit from this room and, unfortunately, it is so thick that we would need a massed phaser beam to break through."

Kirk's eyes wandered from one to the other. Everybody nodded affirmatively. They had not found a way out, either.

McCoy looked around once again, then he turned to his friends.

"I'm afraid this time we're really stuck, despite all our jail-breaking skills. The only possibility might be, Jim, if you could talk to Rayis again. He seems to be the chieftain or the commander or whatever. Maybe you can convince him that we came peacefully and only want to have our refrigerating pump back."

"That would be worth a try. I hope I'll have the opportunity to do it," Kirk answered. "But there is one thing I don't understand: the incompatibility of all we've seen and heard. The people here obviously have a highly developed technology, nevertheless they live in a 5,000-year-old stone building. They use some sort of phaser weapon, nevertheless

they kill with poison. Their civilisation seems to have reached a very high level, nevertheless Rayis calls himself the Kima of a *tribe*. But a tribe is a rather primitive community of individuals."

Spock had listened intently. Now he nodded. "True, Captain. These were also my considerations. I have drawn up a hypothesis based on all known facts. Of course, I cannot guarantee that it is correct."

"Don't let us wait, Spock. We should seize every opportunity to solve this mystery. Maybe then we'll be able to save our lives."

The whole landing party drew close to the First Officer and looked at him expectantly. There usually was a 99% chance that Spock's hypotheses were right.

"I suppose that those humanoids came to this planet about 5,000 years ago. That is the age of the building in which we are at the moment. They were probably left behind by a group of persons who were either their masters or at least their commanders, as I conclude from the fact that Rayis repeatedly said, 'This is the order of the Old Ones.' I also suppose that our opponents had a rather simple way of life, which was close to nature, on their home planet and that the technology available here was somehow forced on them when they started to settle on Sphinx. This would explain the discrepancies in their behaviour."

Kirk nodded emphatically. "Yes, I do believe, you're right, Mr. Spock. But it doesn't help much. We must find a way out of here."

Ensign Sayyid moved restlessly on his chair.

Kirk looked at him and asked,

"What is it, Ensign? Do you want to say something?"

"Yes, sir. I've got a proposal. What about attacking the guard, when he brings us something to eat, and trying to escape?"

"That's a possibility. I doubt, however, that anybody will bring us food, and, above all, that anyone will be stupid enough to come too close. Anyway, none of you is to play the hero, understood?"

Everybody nodded, but their eyes clearly showed that they were ready to seize any opportunity for action.

Jim Kirk's own eyes were fixed on the ground; he was immersed in deep thought. Then he turned to McCoy.

"Bones, you're the psychologist. Why did they kill the scientists and then put them on the bier? And why didn't they kill us at once?"

McCoy considered the questions for a moment, then he said, "Jim, the mysteries of the Human soul - or of any soul, for that matter - haven't been unravelled yet, not by far. Above all, it never acts logically, as I have pointed out again and again to Spock. The only thing I can do is to make assumptions. After hearing Spock's explanations, I would think that these people do obey the orders of the Old Ones, but somehow they know that killing is wrong. Maybe they try to make up for their actions."

"But that's absurd," Kirk retorted. "If they know that killing is wrong, then they need not do it."

"Jim, I'm afraid you don't understand. They receive an order and they obey it, like good soldiers, without reasoning why. But they think about it. Have you ever heard that all soldiers

liked to go to war? They had to do it - very often, however, they were coerced into it. Haven't you ever received an order which you didn't like? But you had no choice but to obey it."

For a moment Kirk was silent. He realised that McCoy was right. He was saved from answering by a scraping sound at the door.

The seven officers carefully moved towards the door - Kirk fervently hoped that they might be able to overpower the guard, but, somehow, he did not really believe it. The heavy door slowly opened for a crack. A young man slid through the gap. His weapon was stuck in his belt, and he held an electronic translator.

Before anyone was able to jump him, he raised both hands and said, "I'm your friend, I want to help you."

Carefully he closed the door behind him. The landing party stared at him in surprise and with a lot of suspicion. Was it a new trick? Spock had raised both eyebrows - a sign of utmost astonishment. Kirk quickly recovered and moved towards their visitor.

"Who are you?"

"I am Iban, Rayis' son."

The young man was hardly older than eighteen, judging by Human standards. He was tall, lean, and - despite his, for Humans, unusual pigmentation - handsome. Only his left cheek was marred by a fresh scar. He had spoken confidently, but his eyes showed insecurity and anguish. The tension in the room was almost palpable.

Iban stepped towards Kirk and asked hesitantly, "You are the leader, are you not?"

Kirk nodded. Iban took a deep breath, then he said quickly, "If you take me and three of my friends with you, we will help you escape!"

Seven pairs of eyes stared at him unbelievably. The Kima's son worked against his own father! In a society that was obviously bound so much by tradition they had been expecting anything but this.

Kirk arrived at a decision within a few seconds. "Okay, Iban. But we need the instrument that was stolen from our ship."

"Yes, I know. I asked where it is. I will show you the way. But we must wait for one hour, until it is dark outside. Otherwise, we have no chance at all."

McCoy had been watching the young man very closely. Now he asked, "Why are you doing this, Iban? Why are you betraying your own father?"

Kirk glanced at the doctor angrily. It did not matter why Iban helped them; the most important thing was that he did. If too many questions were asked, he might change his mind. And there was still the danger that they were running right into a trap.

Iban, however, was not disturbed easily, because now he knew that the prisoners would not attack him. In a low voice he answered,

"My father and the elders of our tribe insist on obeying the orders of the Old Ones. For 5,000 years they have been waiting for their return. Some of my friends and I are opposed to this. We no longer believe in the old teachings. We believe that killing is wrong. I also tried to prevent the murder of the scientists; my father knocked me down."

His hand touched the scar on his cheek. His eyes glared with hatred. "But at least we put them on the bier according to our traditions." Something very much like triumph was in his voice.

McCoy looked at him thoughtfully. The psychologist in him saw that Iban's actions were not determined by pure and simple love for his fellow men. Obviously, revenge played a central role.

Now Spock turned to the young man. "Iban, can you tell us something about your tribe, about your history?"

Iban nodded. "According to our historians, we arrived here about 5,500 years ago. Our ancestors were warriors, who were forced to serve their masters. They came from another galaxy, millions of light years away. They had travelled for hundreds of years in so-called generation ships. On their home planet they had lived very close to nature, but the Old Ones had conquered them and forced them to fight. They left them on this planet to defend it against anybody. They threatened that one day they would come back and punish us if we did not obey their orders."

Iban hesitated for a moment, then he continued bitterly, "Their orders have been obeyed to the letter. The tradition of our tribe requires that criminals are executed with a poison, which is made of a special plant. When our ancestors came to this planet, they also brought plants with them. All of them grew here, all of them multiplied like crazy, all of them but *the* one. So, after many experiments and great efforts, our scientists managed to produce the poison artificially. Tradition has not been violated."

Everybody had been totally captivated by Iban's story. Now even the mystery of the strange vegetation on Sphinx was resolved.

Spock asked, "But how did your ancestors break through the energy barrier at the edge of our galaxy?"

A hint of pride fleetingly appeared on Iban's face. He smiled slightly. "You must not forget that our technology is much more advanced than yours."

Then he stood up quickly. "I have to go now. If I stay longer, someone will notice. I will be back in one hour."

The door slammed shut behind him.

Kirk and McCoy exchanged glances. The four Security officers discussed the event excitedly.

"Our guardian angel seems to be working overtime once more," McCoy commented wryly. Then he gave Spock an astonished look. The Vulcan, deeply immersed in thought, wandered aimlessly around the room.

"What are you up to, Sock?" the doctor asked. "Why are you running around like a caged sehlat?"

The normally unavoidable answer did not come. Spock turned directly to Kirk. "Captain, I have just had a most unsettling thought. I am positive that the Old Ones will never return."

Kirk looked like a personified question mark. "Why? Why do you think so?"

"Iban's story reminded me of a legend which is told on the planet Beta Sigma II. It says that about 5,000 Earth years ago 'beings in a thundering craft came out of the sky' and tried to conquer the planet. 'Their hands produced lightning, their eyes blazed like fire, and they killed many.' But they themselves were not numerous, and finally the inhabitants of the planet, who had been

torn by internal strife before, united and won the battle. When their leader saw that all his warriors were dead, he stood up straight and shouted, 'This is how the last one of those who traversed the dark abyss dies!' Then he killed himself. This is the legend, told in a rather flowery language. Of course, scientists proved long ago that the aggressors had been space travellers from another planet. However, it was not known where they came from. Now I am sure that they were the Old Ones. Their red eyes 'blazed like fire' and they really had 'traversed the dark abyss' between the galaxies."

Kirk had been listening to Spock with growing interest. Now he said slowly, "I think you could be right, Spock. Everything fits in. But that would mean that the Old Ones can never come back and punish their subjects. Then it should be possible to convince them that the orders of the Old Ones no longer apply."

Kirk had been formulating his conclusions at an ever increasing speed. Excitedly, he jumped up from his chair. Finally, there was a possibility....

McCoy's voice stopped him. "Take your time, Jim. Don't rush. You mustn't forget that for more than 5,000 years these people's lives have been based on the orders of the Old Ones. They are the basis for everything. If you now suddenly destroy everything they believe in, then -"

McCoy was not able to finish his warning because Lt. Mannings, who had been guarding the door, cried out, "Captain, somebody is coming!"

Again the door opened. This time, however, it was not an ally. Three guards came in, weapons drawn. The prisoners retreated. Even seven people were helpless when confronted with three weapons held at the ready. One of the

guards pointed at Kirk.

"You come with us!"

Kirk did not move. Spock and McCoy instinctively stepped to his side.

"Come on!"

"Where are you taking me?"

"To Rayis, the Kima."

The man lifted the weapon. It was quite obvious that he would not hesitate to use it. Kirk did not have any other choice but to follow him. He gave his men a - he hoped - reassuring look and left. Spock and McCoy had to watch helplessly as the heavy door slammed shut behind their Captain.

10.

The three guards led Jim Kirk through various corridors until they came into a large room where Rayis was waiting. He was seated at an oval table, which was covered all over with buttons, switches, and scales. Along the walls of the room there stood enormous computers, whose monitors were bigger than any on the Enterprise. Kirk supposed that he was in the control centre. When the guards entered with Kirk, Rayis looked up. He pointed to a chair, which stood beside his table.

"Take a seat, Captain."

Kirk would have preferred to come directly to the point, but impatience might have ruined everything, so he decided to go along with Rayis. He cautiously placed himself on the edge of the chair, ready to jump up at any time and defend himself.

Rayis watched him with a smile. "You need not be afraid, Captain. Nothing will happen to you here."

Kirk was unmoved. "I'm not afraid, Rayis." His voice was chilling. "I simply don't trust you. Somebody who cold-bloodedly murders 47 innocent people doesn't care much about another one."

Rayis' face became sombre. "Innocent, Captain? They came to our planet and settled here as if it belonged to them. Then even a spaceship arrived. We have to defend our planet - this is the order of the Old Ones."

"They came peacefully. They didn't even know that there were other humanoids around."

"That does not matter. We could not allow anybody to live here. This is the order of the Old Ones."

"Rayis, these men were scientists! They only wanted to investigate the vegetation and the soil!"

"But afterwards they would have brought other people. Therefore, we destroyed their communication device and prevented the other spaceship from reaching its destination. This is the order of the Old Ones."

Kirk had clenched his fists. It was an enormous effort for him not to explode. The stereotypical 'This is the order of the Old Ones' shook his firm intention not to let himself be provoked.

With set teeth he said, "Rayis, this space sector is now being investigated. More and more Humans and members of other races will arrive. Do you want to kill them all? You won't be able to do it. There are too few of you to deal with them. And one day they'll find your refuge, and then they'll overpower you.

"Wouldn't it be better to make peace?"

Kirk was sure that his arguments would convince Rayis. Perhaps he would be able to negotiate their release without Iban's help. Then it might even be possible to reconcile father and son. His hopes, however, were dashed immediately.

Rayis had listened to Kirk's words with unblinking eyes. Now he said quietly, "Do not worry about us, Captain. We will do what must be done. This is the order of the Old Ones." He stood up.

At that moment Kirk suddenly was at the end of his patience. Subconsciously he still remembered McCoy's warning, but rage overwhelmed him. He jumped up and pushed back his chair so that it fell over and crashed to the floor.

"Damn it, Rayis. Your Old Ones won't come back. Five thousand years ago they were defeated and killed on the planet Beta Sigma II! Nobody will ever care whether or not you have obeyed their orders!"

Rayis froze. His eyes widened. No sound was heard in the control room apart from the constant clicking and humming of the computers. The seconds seemed to become hours. Kirk began to realise what he had said. He held his breath and waited for the Kima's reaction.

Rayis straightened up. His eyes seemed to look through Kirk as if the Captain were not there. His voice was toneless when he said, "You are a liar, Captain Kirk!"

He turned to the guards, who stared at Kirk in bewilderment. "Take him back!" Then he turned away.

The three men grabbed Kirk and pushed him towards the door. He

struggled, but he could do nothing against the combined strength of three well-trained guards. He turned his head and shouted over his shoulder. "Rayis, it's no lie! I swear it!"

11.

Nervously, McCoy paced in the large room. The four Security officers glanced anxiously towards the door. They all worried about their Captain. What did Rayis want? Why was it only him he wanted to see?

"How long has he been gone now?" asked the doctor without addressing anyone in particular.

"Thirteen minutes and 25 seconds," answered Spock, who was sitting on a bed, apparently unmoved by all the excitement. A memory suddenly flashed into his mind - Kirk, asking the same question under the same circumstances, when McCoy had been converted into a soulless instrument of two extraterrestrials. Only he himself knew that he was hiding his anxiety behind an extremely expressionless mask.

McCoy gave the Vulcan an angry look but for once he did not say anything. Somehow - he could not say why - he felt that a biting remark would be inappropriate.

Suddenly, they heard somebody handling the door. Everybody whirled. Even Spock could not avoid a rapid movement. The door opened, and the three guards pushed Kirk into the room. Obviously they had recovered from their initial shock and now wanted to pay him back for the 'lie', because their treatment was something less than gentle.

As the door slammed behind him,

Kirk staggered through the room. McCoy ran to him and caught him.

All the members of the landing party gathered around the Captain.

"How are you, Captain?" "What happened, Jim?" "Everything all right, sir?" were the questions that poured down on him.

Kirk answered the last question with a nod, but his face showed something different. With a tired gesture he said, "Nothing has happened yet. But it won't be long. I behaved like an idiot."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "May I ask, sir, how you arrive at this conclusion?"

Kirk gave him a crooked smile. "You may, Mr. Spock."

He briefed his men about the events in Rayis' control centre. When he had ended, he turned to McCoy.

"You warned me, Bones. But my temper ran away with me. If I'd only -"

Spock's quiet voice interrupted him.

"A quite normal Human reaction, Captain. Besides, it is useless to wonder 'what would have happened if...'. On the other hand, we have to think about what we can do if Iban's plan fails."

McCoy added, "Spock is right, Jim. You need not blame yourself."

Kirk looked at both of them, and again he was deeply grateful that they were his friends. He nodded. "Well, let's get started. Let's hold a council of war."

They all sat down around the large table and began to discuss the events from the beginning. But despite the

active co-operation of the younger officers, who made a number of proposals, they came to one single, unpleasant conclusion: they needed Iban's help to open the door. They could not do it themselves.

Finally, Kirk said, "If Iban's plan fails, we must not be caught all together. Some of us have to try to stay free and play for time. We have to cause as much confusion as possible, because we must prevent them from attacking the Enterprise. So far, they haven't done it because they probably want to get rid of us first. Spock, how long is the Enterprise still going to stay in orbit?"

"Exactly one hour and 43 minutes, sir."

"Then we don't have much time, either. We need at least one hour to get out of the area under that protective shield. Under the shield there is no way to get into contact with the ship. I hope our ally is going to come pretty soon."

Like an answer to Kirk's statement, the door opened a little, and Iban slid through the crack. He seemed to be nervous and confused. He looked over his shoulder into the corridor, then he signalled Kirk and his men to follow.

"Come on, we do not have much time."

He gave a phaser to each of them and then disappeared through the door again.

Kirk followed him, but not without first looking carefully around. It still might be a trap! Spock, McCoy, and the others followed close behind.

With soft steps Iban hurried along the corridor. At the first crossing he stopped for a moment so that the others

could join him.

"I will take you to the room where they keep your reactor pump," he whispered and hurried on.

For several minutes they passed through endless corridors, which looked all alike. Kirk had no idea in which direction they were going; he probably would not even notice if Iban led them in a circle.

However, he noticed something else: They did not see any guards. The pyramid seemed to be totally deserted. An alarm bell rang in Kirk's mind; something was definitely amiss. The Captain looked at Spock, who was walking beside him, and saw that the Vulcan intently scanned the rooms they passed. So, he had noticed it, too.

Suddenly, the lights went out. The small group halted abruptly. Now the only illumination came from some small bluish lamps, which were mounted in the corridor at intervals - emergency lighting perhaps.

Kirk took a few quick steps towards Iban.

"What happened?" he whispered.

Iban did not turn. "Nothing," he answered softly. "Hurry up. We do not have much time left."

His voice was strangely toneless. He wanted to go on, but Kirk caught his arm.

"Just a minute, Iban. You know something. What are you hiding?"

Kirk's sixth sense told him that a disaster was at hand.

Iban avoided his eyes. "I do not

know what you mean. We have to hurry. My friends are waiting outside."

Kirk himself knew only too well that time was growing short. However, it was dangerous to be overly hasty. They might end up in a trap. He did not move.

"We won't go one step further if you don't tell us what's going on. And if they catch us, you're in it as well. As far as I know your father, he won't forgive you just because you're his son."

Iban freed himself. He lost the aplomb that he had kept with so much difficulty.

"You are crazy! Well, if you want to know, my father wants to blow up the building. If we do not leave soon, we will be dead."

Kirk stared at him. "What? Why?"

The others were astonished and shocked as Kirk.

"Probably the result of your emotional outburst, Jim," McCoy said gently.

The Captain turned around, disbelief in his eyes. Then he made a decision.

"We must stop him!" he shouted. "Iban, where is the control room?"

Iban's face was distorted. "Let him kill himself, if he wants to! We do not have enough time to do anything. Do you really want to die?"

Kirk glared at him angrily. "No, of course not. But we can't allow Rayis to kill himself and everybody else in this building. You do want the killing to stop, don't you? If you don't show us the way now you'll be involved in the death of 350

people."

He signalled to Spock. The Vulcan stepped to Iban's side, took his arm, and pushed him forward. The young man tried to resist, but he did not have any chance against Spock's strength. Finally, he yielded. He knew that he had no choice. They had to hurry if they did not want to be buried under the ruins of the pyramid.

The control room was not far away. Behind the last corner on the way to their destination Iban halted and stopped the others with a gesture.

"Father has posted guards. We have to be careful. And the elders of our tribe are with him, too," he whispered.

"How many persons?" Kirk asked.

"I am not sure. The Council of Elders consists of seven men. There are, maybe, five or six guards."

Kirk turned to Lt. Mannings. "You stay here with Ensign Sayyid. Prevent anybody from coming near the control room. Put your phasers on heavy stun."

The young woman nodded. She and Sayyid positioned themselves at both sides of the corridor in two small recesses.

The others moved on cautiously. Fortunately, the two guards at the door did not look their way. Kirk and Spock subdued them noiselessly; they did not want to use their weapons, because they wanted to avoid any noise. But Spock's nerve pinch and Kirk's karate blows were just as efficient as a phaser.

Cautiously, Kirk looked through the door into the control room. Rayis and six other men stood in front of a computer. The Kima spoke into a microphone and then passed it on to the next one. Kirk

supposed that they were implementing the self-destruction sequence. He knew they had to hurry.

Five guards stood near the door. In a whisper Kirk turned to his men.

"Try to keep them away from the computer. We must not use the phasers, we might blow up the whole complex."

His officers nodded. When Kirk gave the signal, they rushed into the room. Meanwhile the sixth of the elders was holding the microphone.

The Captain had just reached the man and snatched the microphone from his hand, when one of the guards jumped him from behind.

There followed a fight, which nobody could recall in any detail afterwards. Arms and legs whirled through the air. Shouts were heard. The members of the Council were quickly defeated, but Rayis and the guards presented a problem. They resisted like crazy. And, since they were stronger than Humans, Spock was the only one who was able to dispatch his adversary in a relatively short time. Just when he had stunned him he heard Iban, who had stayed out of the fight for whatever psychological reason of his own, shout, "The computer!"

Spock looked up and saw one of the elders, who had regained consciousness, slowly crawl towards the computer console. Spock dashed through the room and reached him as the man started to speak into the microphone. The nerve-pinch quickly put an end to the elder's efforts. Resolutely, Spock ripped the microphone out of the console.

In the meantime, Kirk and the others had been able to subdue the guards. The Captain ran to the door and

called Linda Mannings and Achmed Sayyid. When they entered the room, he ordered them to point their phasers at Rayis and the other men so that they would not try anything foolish.

Then he turned to Spock. "Spock, try to switch off the computer!"

The First Officer nodded and began to work. Now, finally, Kirk had time to look after his people. Fortunately, nobody was hurt severely. Lt. Fairbanks had a scratch on the forehead and Ensign Polikowicz sported a black eye. Only Dr. McCoy's injury was more serious. His left arm dangled limply at his side; it was broken twice. The doctor's face was distorted by pain. When Kirk came to him, he murmured, "I've had bad luck, Jim. It just shows that I'm a doctor and not a soldier."

Quickly Kirk went to one of the unconscious guards and relieved him of his sash. He joined the ends in a knot, put it around McCoy's neck and helped him to steady his arm. The doctor visibly set his teeth, beads of perspiration on his forehead.

"Stay here, Bones. We'll try to hurry as much as possible," Kirk said sympathetically.

McCoy nodded and closed his eyes. His chalky face said it all. Silently, he cursed Rayis, who had taken away everything they carried, including McCoy's emergency kit.

The Captain went to Spock, who was hunched over the console of the main computer. The various switches did not mean anything to Kirk, but the Vulcan was famous in Starfleet for being able to handle alien machines almost as efficiently as his library computer aboard the Enterprise.

Now he straightened and turned around to face Kirk. "Captain, I think I have found the main switch."

His fingers rapidly moved over the console. Kirk held his breath. You never knew what might happen. What if there was some unknown safeguard against unauthorised tampering with the computer?

Suddenly all monitors went blank. The humming of the computer stopped. Rayis, who had regained consciousness and was watching the two men, sighed. It was almost a sob. Kirk turned, took Iban's translator, and went to the old man.

"Why did you want to blow up the building?" he asked softly.

Rayis looked up; in his eyes gleamed hatred and despair. "We were not able to fulfil our task, Captain. We were not able to defend the planet, we are not worth to go on living."

He hesitated for a moment. Then he continued slowly, "In addition to that - you deprived us of our faith, of the purpose of our life. If the Old Ones do not come back, why should we continue to defend the planet? The Council of Elders decided to program the computer for self-destruction."

Kirk looked at the Kima in astonishment. "But you didn't even believe me!"

"Not at first, that is true. But then I did something that is absolutely forbidden. There is a special memory bank in the central computer - and the Kima is the only one who has access to it. It contains records about the plans of the Old Ones, which should be revealed only on the day of their return. I fed these data, together with the known facts and

your statement, into the computer. The result was..." Rayis' voice broke, his eyes were full of tears, "... a probability of 98.7 percent that the Old Ones will never return and we will be defeated by other beings." He lowered his head, and his shoulders quivered. The other members of the Council of Elders were also the personification of despair.

Suddenly Kirk felt sympathy for them. It was illogical, he knew it - they had cold-bloodedly murdered 47 people and would not have hesitated to destroy the Enterprise and its crew. But they had only followed their orders and their faith - and, as countless times before, faith had taken its toll. Now they stood at the brink of an abyss.

Kirk knelt down beside Rayis. "Rayis, you are now free," he said gently, "You don't have to obey the cruel orders of the Old Ones any more. Finally you can live in peace."

With an effort, the Kima straightened up. When he turned his head to Kirk, his look was empty; he did not even seem to be able to hate the man who had defeated him.

"Captain, what shall we do?" he said wearily. "Freedom is a matter of interpretation. You deprived us of everything. You even prevented our last action, which would have set us free from our despair."

Kirk directed a helpless glance at Spock, who was still standing at the computer, then he turned back to the old man.

"Rayis, suicide is never a viable option. You and the leaders decided to blow up the pyramid. You took the decision on your own. Did you think of the women and the children? Of the other warriors? They have a right to live.

You commit the same injustice as the Old Ones did when they forced their will on you and subjugated your people thousands of years ago. But you have the right to decide without coercion. Do you want to deprive your own men of this right?"

The Kima had listened to Kirk without looking at him. The others, too, had intently followed the Captain's words. The faces of the elders showed the conflict of emotions they experienced. Should they believe an alien? Was there really a future for them?

Rayis turned to Kirk and their gazes locked. It seemed as if the Kima was trying to fathom the true intentions of his opponent. Finally, he made up his mind.

"I... I do not know, Captain. Everything is happened much too fast for us. We have to think it over."

Kirk breathed a sigh of relief. This at least was a promising concession. Again he turned to the Kima, smiling. "Rayis, if you agree, we will leave some of our people to help you in the beginning."

Rayis nodded. He addressed his comrades and spoke quickly. After some hesitation everybody agreed. Kirk was immensely relieved. He gestured to Lt. Mannings and Ensign Sayyid to put the phasers away.

Then he went to Spock.

"Mr. Spock, can you turn off the protective shield? We must reach the Enterprise."

"I think so, Captain."

Spock stepped to a second computer console on which a few lights were still blinking. Obviously, the shield

was linked to an emergency generator in case the central computer failed. The First Officer pressed two buttons, and suddenly an alarm klaxon sounded. Kirk winced and was about to say something, but Spock had already turned it off.

"That was the signal that the shield is down, sir," he told the Captain quietly.

Kirk flipped his communicator open. "Kirk to Enterprise. Enterprise, come in please."

The answer came immediately. "Lt. Uhura, sir. Is everything okay?" One could not fail to hear the concern in Uhura's voice.

"Yes, Lieutenant, everything's fine. Get me Mr. Sulu, please. We've escaped by the skin of our teeth."

12.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 6551.8

After some difficulties detailed in Commander Spock's scientific report, we managed to establish contact with the inhabitants of Sphinx. I offered Rayis, the Kima of the tribe, to leave 10 psychologists and sociologists for three months on the planet to help him and his people in the transitional period. After initial hesitation, the Council of Elders has accepted my proposal.

The Enterprise is now heading towards Starbase 10."

Captain Kirk pressed the off button of the log and took a deep breath. Everything had come out fine, at least for the time being. He sat at McCoy's desk in

the doctor's office, where he had gone after the beam-down of the psychologists and sociologists. Kirk felt that he needed a quiet place to think.

The door opened and McCoy entered the room. His left arm was secured in a plastic splint and his face was still showing traces of the pain he had suffered, but nevertheless he was already active again. His blue eyes sparkled.

"Jim, all of our people have recovered. The effect of the poison has worn off, and there will be no permanent damage."

McCoy's enthusiasm did not seem to impress Kirk. The doctor frowned and looked closely at the Captain, but before he could say anything, the intercom beeped.

"Bridge to Captain Kirk."

"Kirk here. What is it, Uhura?"

"Sir, we're ready to leave orbit."

"Okay. Put the main viewer on Dr. McCoy's monitor."

The small screen on the desk lit up. It showed the emerald green sphere of the planet Sphinx, which actually did no longer deserve its name, because its mystery had finally been solved. Wistfully, Kirk stared at the monitor. Then he pulled himself together and spoke into the intercom.

"Mr. Sulu!"

"Aye, sir."

"Leave orbit. Set a direct course for Starbase 10. Warp 3."

"Yes, sir."

"Kirk out."

The Captain turned the intercom off. The planet was still on the monitor.

The door to McCoy's office opened and Spock came in. He quickly glanced at the doctor and asked, "How is your arm, Doctor?"

"Thanks for kind inquiries, Spock. It'll be okay - eventually."

Then the Vulcan turned to Kirk. "Captain, the food supply is perfectly all right again. After Rayis told us which food had been poisoned, there was no difficulty at all in taking proper precautions."

Kirk nodded absent-mindedly.

McCoy, who had sat down on the edge of the desk, said, "Still, we can be glad to get as far away from this planet as possible. Somehow, I've still got an uncanny feeling." He glanced sideways at Spock. "Even if it's illogical." Then he continued, "We were lucky, Jim, that you were able to convince Rayis of our good intentions."

Kirk did not answer; he was staring at the screen, which showed the rapidly receding planet. The doctor looked questioningly at Spock, but the Vulcan only raised an eyebrow in visible astonishment. McCoy touched Kirk's shoulder with his right hand.

"What is it, Jim?" he asked anxiously. "You're not even listening."

Kirk turned wearily to him and Spock. "I've just been thinking that I almost caused the death of 350 people. If only I hadn't reacted so impulsively - "

"Captain - " Spock interrupted, but Kirk did not listen.

"I know, Spock, 'an absolutely normal Human reaction.' But still..."

"Jim," the Vulcan said quietly, "you are a Starship Captain. It is your task to make decisions, and sometimes those decisions might entail negative results. This is the logical consequence of your power."

Kirk nodded sadly. "You're right, Spock. I know that and I've learned to live with it. But this time it was not a *decision* that almost got us all killed, but simply my temper that gave way."

"Jim, that can happen to anybody. You're not a superman," McCoy intervened angrily. "You're demanding too much of yourself. Even a Starship Captain might do something foolish under stress."

"Dr. McCoy is absolutely right, Captain," Spock agreed - which brought an ironic glance from McCoy. "Spontaneity is a Human characteristic, after all."

In deep thought Kirk watched the screen on which the planet had become a point the size of a pin head. Spock and McCoy were probably - no, certainly - right and Kirk knew that. However, despite the protective shield that he had been forced to develop against the potential negative consequences of his actions in the course of the years, a situation like the current one still affected him deeply - one emotional reaction and more than 350 people....

The ship went to warp speed and the planet vanished in the depths of space.



SPOCK

Dedicated to Leonard Nimoy

Born of two different races
And two different philosophies,
Pulled in opposite directions,
Wanting to be thought of as Vulcan,
You are ashamed of showing any of your Human emotions.

You decided to choose Starfleet instead of
Following your father to the Vulcan Science Academy.
Eventually you came to the Enterprise,
And here you found friendship and acceptance,
Especially with her new Captain - James T. Kirk.

On the Enterprise you finally found a place to call home,
Where you could be yourself;
For your new friends accept you as you are,
They don't expect you to be Vulcan or Human,
Just you - Spock - a unique and valued person,
And their special friend.

From V'ger you learned that knowledge isn't everything,
And that emotions are necessary
If life is not to be totally barren.

Now you are at peace with yourself,
For you accept both sides of yourself
And are no longer ashamed of your Human half.
Now you can rejoice in being both Vulcan and Human,
For you are finally whole.

Now you follow the advice given to you by your friend;
Long ago, he said to you -
"Why strive to be the best of one world only, why not strive
To be the best of both?"

Christine Jones



THE DRAGON IN THE SMOKE

By Alan Boag

From the brow of the hill Alys gazed down at the sprawling farmhouse set in a fold in the gently rolling hills. She had almost forgotten how it looked. For so many years it had been little more than a vague memory, a backdrop against which the dimly recalled dramas of her childhood had been played out. She had been little more than an adolescent when her family had moved to the City and in the intervening years the old farm had crumbled slowly, retaining the vestiges of dignity even now. It stood, stooped rather, amid the hills, the tracks around all overgrown showing through as little more than ancient healing scars on the green of the valley.

It had been at dinner the previous evening. As usual the family had been walking on eggshells as far as she was concerned, choosing words carefully, making no reference to the present or the recent past. Someone had started to talk of the old farmhouse and of the many happy times they had had there. It had been a transparent attempt to distract her thoughts and make her think of happier times. The surprise was that it had worked. She had been struck by a sudden desire to see the old place again.

"I imagine it must be little more than a ruin by now, after all these years," she had remarked wistfully.

Her father had answered her with a short laugh. "All these years? It must seem a long time indeed for one so young as you, my dear daughter, but for we grey-beards six years is not so long. No, the old place does not look so bad. I came over it in a flitter only a couple of days ago on my way back from your uncle's place. I was going too fast for a proper

look of course, but it seemed that time had brought but little change. Decay, of course, but only a little." He laughed again. "I sometimes wish we could have stayed there instead of moving to this draughty place."

The family joined in the laughter, but it had been more duty than amusement on Alys's part. She made up her mind to go out to the farm on the morrow.

Within herself she felt a strong need for solitude and peace, a chance to think. Not, she told herself emphatically, to brood. Certainly not to shed fruitless tears; there had been no tears, there would be none, she was much too strong for that. But she did need time alone, time to come to terms with the catastrophic change that had come into her life, time to bring herself to some sort of acceptance, to see a way forward for herself. Above all she needed to time away from the Mansion and all of its inhabitants with their careful sympathy and their unspoken curiosity. A trip to the old farmhouse suddenly seemed like a heaven-sent opportunity.

She was surprised, now that she was here, to see how much smaller the farm was than her memories told her. In her memory it was a wide and spacious place with an abundance of outhouses providing a warren of hidden and secret places for children's adventuring. Now from the top of the hill it looked for all the world like one of the children's toys her father had fashioned for her back in the days when he had time for such simple pleasures. She had left her flitter at the village, feeling the need for a walk in the open air. The walk had reminded her how

remote the farm was from the local village, never mind Capital. It was even isolated from the neighbouring holdings. Small wonder her father had felt obliged to give it up when he was selected as Planetary Governor.

She approached the house by crossing the grassy hillside rather than taking the longer, though less strenuous, way round by the overgrown road. She was careful not to disturb the sheep grazing there. Her uncle's sheep, she reminded herself. Once they would have been her father's. Somehow as she walked it seemed as if the years slipped away and she was back in the days when she would roam her father's hills watching her father's sheep. A spring came into her step, one that had been absent for too long. She could feel the hide bag bouncing at her hip, heavy with the bread, fruit and wine she had brought with her to sustain her during the day. As she descended the slope a slight breeze came up and teased her hair out behind her in a long soft tail.

The tall stately spires of Desmai seemed so far away at that moment that all her experiences there were more like dreams of another lifetime than memories of recent dark reality. It was, she now realised, an existence she had never, could never have, penetrated. Even in her exalted position as the betrothed to the Heir to the High Throne, Alys had never been more than a spectator to that glittering scene. The brittle sophistication of the Court of the High King of Desmai had been such a contrast to her previous experiences as the daughter of even the most important politician of a minor Federation Agrarian Colony that she had been totally unprepared for what awaited her.

She did not fit, and it was apparent that the whole of the Court knew it. For a short while at Marron's side she had

stood on the threshold of that life, but with his sudden change of heart she had been excluded once more. Amid rumour and scandal she had been abruptly packed off home to her father's house. She had never felt truly happy at Court and she had certainly not loved Marron by the end, but the speed of his change, the accusations, the bitterness, had shaken her, cut her to the very centre of her being. Back home with her family there had been sympathy, but even here there had been whispers. She felt she would never be free of the grey clouds of doubt and guilt that hung about her.

She reached the farmhouse and entered through the back door. She almost had to duck to avoid collision with the wooden door arch that had always seemed so far above her. She stood in the centre of the room and slowly looked around her. She was in the enormous farmhouse kitchen, storehouse of so many of her childhood memories. Standing there alone in the middle of the dusty floor she allowed them to come rushing back to her.

It was here that she had nursed the lamb her father had brought in on a winter's night, new-born and short of breath. It was here on that long low range that her mother and Bryoni had produced those huge meals that would fill the depths of even the deepest of childhood appetites. It was here too that she stood and watched from the window as her brother and his friends wrestled in the mud of the farmyard and Carl, son of Hendorff the engineer from the village, had fallen face first into a cowpat. She remembered still the way his face had reddened even through the mud and the filth when he had heard her delighted laughter and had realised she had been watching him. The sight was so clear in her mind that she chuckled aloud, the sound echoing round the bare stone walls.

She moved through into the main room. One or two floor boards looked none too safe and few of the windows boasted glass any more, but still the atmosphere of the place had survived. The great carven chimney breast still stood, dominating the end wall and looming out into the room. Some whimsical fancy had led one of her ancestors to carve the representation of a dragon on the fire place so that the open jaws of the beast formed the hearth. How easy it had been for children to frighten themselves by imagining that the fiery mouthed beast was a real dragon like those in the tales of Old Earth. It was almost like being young again to stand here and remember those days.

"The old Dragon breathes no more flames these days, Alys," said a deep and unfamiliar male voice from behind her.

She spun about. There was a figure in the shadows. Wrapped in her own thoughts, she had not heard him come in. She did not recognise him. He was tall and dark haired with a lean form and a well boned face. His mouth was open in a wide friendly grin. He stood looking at her, his hands on his hips, his amused expression demonstrating how much he was enjoying her confusion.

"Who are you? What are you doing here? No, wait a moment. Is it... Carl?"

She breathed the last word almost in a whisper. He laughed aloud.

"Carl it is, little Alys. Though not so little now, I think."

"Oh my, Carl" The surprise had all but driven the breath from her body so that she almost gasped the words. "It's been so long."

"Eight years near on to the day when I set out dressed in my finest for a

place at the Starfleet Sectoral Training School and great hopes of a place at the Starfleet Academy to follow."

"And did you? Make it to the Academy, I mean?"

"Well no... I did all right in Training School. Came near the top of my class in any number of subjects but I was only a little above ordinary in Sciences and Engineering and I could barely make the minimum grades in Navigation. So I decided... well no, it was decided for me really... that I would be better off concentrating on the things I was better at and going into Starfleet at Yeoman grade and try to work my way up the ranks by experience rather than theory. It suited my temperament too. You'll remember I always preferred to get on with doing things rather than waste a lot of time in rarefied discussion. So as soon as I passed out of Training School I enrolled as a Yeoman in the Security Service."

He hesitated, as if aware that he had let his tongue run away with itself. Once more though the grin came back. "What am I thinking of with all this talk of myself? Tell me of yourself, Alys. You are not the little girl I used to see among the cows and sheep when your brother Robyn and Brack and myself played hunters in these hills."

"I'm a little older now, Carl."

He chuckled. "You are that, Alys, and a deal taller too. What have you done with yourself in the years since I shipped out?"

"I have grown up." She meant to say it lightly but there was an edge of bitterness to her voice that she was sure he must have detected. She sighed inwardly but said no more. Carl would no doubt hear all the stories and rumours soon enough; there was no reason why

she should have to be the one to tell him.

"You have not married, then?" There was a tone of mild surprise in his tone but he made no further enquiry when she shook her head.

"What has brought you to this old place?" he asked in the silence that followed.

It briefly crossed her mind to wonder the same about him but she brushed the thought aside and replied brightly, eager to change the subject.

"Curiosity," she replied. "Our talk last night turned to childhood days and I felt a strong urge to see the farm again to see how well it had stood up to the last few years." She almost bit her tongue off as she heard the unconscious emphasis her voice had given the single word it.

Carl seemed not to notice. He walked around the room, touching the stone walls, glancing out of the broken windows before he spoke again.

"Time has been reasonably kind to the dear old place, I'd say. Mind you they certainly built to last in the early days of the Colony. Had to, I suppose. There was no certainty that the communication links with The Federation could be kept up. They had to act as if they were on their own. Be self sufficient. It's only since the Federation Colony Programme has been properly organised and Starship visits have become regular and commonplace that Colonists can be confident that communications can be maintained and they can allow themselves the luxury of depending on materials from off-planet."

Alys laughed. "Spare me the history lesson, Carl. We do learn a little about U.F.P. History even here in our backwater. And don't forget, Father is Planetary Governor. I know about these

things!"

He held his hands up, palm forward in a gesture of defence. "My apologies, Exalted One. I bow to your knowledge." He walked to the dragon-headed fireplace and put his hand on the horned nose.

"This old fellow must have seen many a sight in all the years he's been looking after this room. I remember you once told me that this was a magical dragon who came out of the wall at night and that if I fed him with sweetmeats he would fly me on his back to any place I wanted to go."

Alys was pleased that he had remembered such a childish story. She well remembered having the fantasy about the magical dragon but she did not recall having shared it with Carl.

"Did I say that? Well perhaps I was right. Perhaps he did take me to magical places as a child, but the dragon has been sleeping a few years now. All my journeys now are by much more prosaic forms of transport." It was hard to keep the weary cynicism out of her voice. Carl appeared to have noticed nothing amiss.

"Now I'm the one who flies on the back of a dragon with photon torpedoes for flame and warp drive engines for wings. Though I'd best not let either Mr Scott or the Captain hear me talk about the Enterprise like that. They each think of that ship as his baby. Oh Alys," his voice took on a note of high enthusiasm, his eyes sparkled as he took a step towards her, "you would just love travelling aboard a Starship. Every day brings something new, some new excitement, some new wonder. And everything is on such a different scale than here, so much bigger, so much faster. It would be just the life for you. Still," he paused, visibly bringing his enthusiasm under control, "we are here to

look around the old family home, are we not? And we've hardly started. Shall we look at the rest of the house now?"

He opened a door and went through. It was a bedroom, her bedroom, as small and cosy as she remembered it. Alys felt that the years of childhood games and dreaming had left a permanent mark, the very walls seemed steeped in memories. Looking round her brought back all the tales told her in the evenings and the dreams dreamt in the little bed that had lain in that corner there.

They moved from room to room. Carl was still talking but Alys was immersed in her own thoughts and barely heard him. She was aware that he was recalling his own memories of the house and the childhood days when he and Brack and Robyn had played many a game in the hills around the farm. She had seldom been allowed to join in those games. Robyn and Brack, her two elder brothers, did not think it right to let a young girl take part in Hunt the Klingon. Only boys could play the part of Starfleet Officers. Somehow she had always felt that Carl would not have minded.

They left the house and walked into the courtyard. Carl leaned back against the wall of the house and looked up at the sun which had just passed its midday peak.

"It has been good to come back and see you again, Alys." There was a deep warmth in his voice. "We always got along together, you and I."

Alys looked towards him as he spoke. Their eyes met and for a few moments she looked into the pale green depths. Something, something undefinable, she saw there made her turn quickly away.

"Let's look at the barn now," she said abruptly.

As they entered the barn Alys turned her nose up at the smell.

Carl laughed. "I thought you were supposed to be a farmer's daughter. You've been in the Governor's Mansion too long, my girl, if your sensibilities are affected by a pile of rotten hay!" He kicked at a heap and sent up a cloud of dusty fragments which flew around and caused Alys to sneeze violently. Carl laughed once more, so infectiously that despite her sneezing she was forced to join in. He offered her his arm and supported her as they went back out into the yard.

Out in the sunlight Alys quickly recovered her composure. She looked into her bag. "Are you hungry? I have some food here and a flask of wine. There should easily be enough for two."

"Alys, you are magnificent. I am famished and you have food. I am parched and you have wine. You have looked into my heart and read my desires. I believe you must be a witch."

He moved away and did not see the twinge of pain that crossed her face as his light-hearted quip went home. He went to the corner of the yard and rolled out a small barrel which he dusted with the sleeve of his red tunic and offered to her as a seat. By now she had recovered her composure and accepted his offer gracefully.

"Thank you," she said. "I'm afraid we shall have to share the cup."

"It won't be the first time." He squatted on the ground next to her. "Do you remember that day up in the hills just before I went away?"

She did not answer, but unscrewed the stopper of the wine-flask and filled the cup. She did remember. They had spent an afternoon alone together after Robyn and Brack had somehow become separated from them. Brack had been carrying the food that their mother had packed for all three of them, so Carl had shared his with Alys. They had spoken little that day or any other, but looking back she remembered that he had always treated her with a gentle kindness.

It felt to Alys that it had been a long while since she had known any kindness from anyone outside her own family. There had been little kindness in a love that died so quickly. The sweet whispers in her ear had changed so quickly and the angry murmuring in the shadows that took their place had persisted for so long. A few short months of joy had been followed by many long days of bitter regret. Even back home in the protection of her family she still could not shake off the burden of guilt and self doubt. Something must have shown in her face. Carl looked up into her eyes with a look of compassion.

"You are sad," he said quietly. "What distresses you?"

She pushed the cup of wine towards him. "You drink first," she said as if he had not spoken.

He ignored the proffered cup and spoke again, softly and gently. "Can I do anything to help?"

She turned her head and looked straight into his eyes. He'd always been concerned for her and now he was speaking as if there had been no long years to divide them. It was as if time had made no difference to him the way it had with her. She tried to keep her voice light but it was difficult. Surely he would hear the trembling as she spoke?

"I came close to being married earlier in the year, but it came to nothing. It is all over now. There is no need to talk about it. Let's talk about you instead. Tell me all about your adventures in Starfleet."

He kept his eyes on hers as he took the cup from her and sipped the wine. After a second sip he handed the cup back to her. He seemed to have accepted her reluctance to speak of herself and began to talk of his Starship, the Enterprise, her officers and crew. They talked as they ate and drank and Alys found that they slipped into surprisingly easy conversation. Carl recounted some of the exploits of the famous Captain Kirk, and if she suspected that he gave his own part an importance it did not fully merit she said nothing.

In turn, she found herself responding with stories of life at the Governor's Mansion, trying to make the fairly humdrum life of a minor politician cum diplomat and his family sound as exciting and entertaining as that of a Starfleet Security Yeoman. She was aware that he was keeping the conversation light and was steering well clear of the shadows, but as the afternoon wore on she found that she had told him far more than she had intended. It would be so easy to tell him everything.

No! With a quick abrupt movement she stood and packed the flask and cup back into her bag and pulled her cloak about her, making ready to leave. Carl rose to his feet next to her. "We haven't been to the stables yet. Let's go round and see how they are."

"Very well." She was not sure whether to be amused or annoyed at his transparent reluctance to let her leave him, but for now she acquiesced. They walked across the yard, past the old pump that had supplied the water for the

horse troughs. The motor would have long since seized up but true to form her father had had a mechanical pump handle fitted so that they did not have to rely on the village's electricity generators or even the farm's own back up. As they passed it Carl took hold of the handle and gave a few half hearted pulls. There was a faraway rumbling noise but nothing appeared at the tap. He grinned wryly. "It's been a long time, I suppose. It'll need some work to get it flowing again."

They went through the stables where the farm's few horses had been housed. Somehow the place still smelled of horse. Other farmers had long since adopted powered vehicles, hovers or flitters, to get about their land but Alys's father had pointed to the - increasingly few - fuel shortages and had stubbornly stuck to his horses. As they looked round the empty stables Carl continued to keep up a flow of conversation but Alys's heart was no longer in it.

Out in the yard again they paused once more at the old pump and Carl absently moved the arm up and down as he talked. "Do you remember," he asked, "the day I left? You gave me a little wooden figure of a dragon, just like the one in the fireplace. You'd carved it yourself. You said it was a charm, a good luck token to keep me from harm. Well it worked. I carried that charm on mission after mission and came to no harm."

"I remember," she said flatly.

"Do you remember anything else?" he asked gently.

She did. Despite her age and much valued maturity she came close to blushing. When she had given him the little charm she had thrown her arms about his neck and kissed him fiercely.

"It was not a day to be easily

forgotten," she admitted.

Slowly he bent his head to hers. It was a kiss of deep tenderness. Almost of their own volition her arms went round his neck as he held her closely to him. For an instant she felt safe and wanted and full of joy. She smiled into his eyes but did not feel the need to speak. There had been a spark of feeling that made words unnecessary.

Then she came back to reality and her eyes clouded over. She pulled free of his embrace and crossed the courtyard, almost running. Back in the farmhouse she stopped in front of the fireplace, panting, only a foot or so away from the great dragon's head. The old stone beast watched her through unblinking eyes.

Carl caught up with her, placed a hand gently on each shoulder and slowly turned her round to face him. He looked down at her for a few moments then spoke softly. "Let it go, Alys. Let it all go."

Quite suddenly she felt the knot of fear that had gripped her stomach melt away. Yes, she could let go. He would understand; with him there would be no shadow of doubt.

"I was betrothed," she said, "to Prince Marron, son of High King Neston of Desmai. I met him at a trade conference my father took me to. I'm sure he engineered the meeting. Desmai is an important market for many of our products and I'm sure father felt that having a daughter in the Royal Palace would be a helpful influence. He was probably right and if his plan had worked I might have been able to influence things in his favour. After all, Desmai is an absolute monarchy and the High King's word is law. But don't misunderstand, this was not an arranged marriage. I did love Marron, at least at first. For a while I was probably the happiest woman in the

Galaxy.

"Then, after the betrothal ceremony, I went to live on Desmai, in the royal palace. And Marron changed overnight. It was as if a mask had fallen to show the real man behind. He turned from a kind and generous lover into an arrogant boor. He made no secret of the fact that he had other women, flaunted the fact. If I could have ended it I would have but the consequences for father and his trade agreements would have been catastrophic if I had so I tried to make the most of it. It was hard, very hard. And then one of Marron's paramours contracted a fever and died. Marron too fell ill and came close to death himself. When he recovered he decided they had both been poisoned and accused me of causing both illnesses. When I proved that I could not possibly have giving him any poison and certainly had not infected him with any illness he refused to accept the truth and accused me of doing it by witchcraft. Witchcraft! In this day and age. If it were not so tragic it would be laughable, but he meant it.

"It was all my father could do to get me out of there alive. The trade agreement collapsed of course. And when I got home I found that I was getting the blame for that. But worst of all there are rumours going around that I really am a witch. No smoke without fire, they're saying. Oh, not to my face of course. That's part of the problem, nobody says anything to my face. It's all whispering behind my back. It's all too much... I can't stand any more of it."

She sagged against him and the tears she had been holding back for so long flowed freely at last. She felt the tension flow from her body almost as the tears flowed from her eyes. She drew comfort from the warmth of his arms around her. For endless moments he held her, saying nothing. Once or twice he

stroked her hair. Then, as her sobbing subsided, he held her at arms length and looked her in the eyes.

"Feel better?" he enquired.

To her surprise she did. She felt as if a weight had been lifted from her. She nodded wordlessly.

He smiled. "Sometimes all that is needed is to bring things out into the open and hold them up to the light."

"I've been very foolish, haven't I?" she murmured.

"Not foolish, no, he replied. "You have been through a lot and suffered greatly. It's no surprise that you feel damaged and hurt. You felt that almost everyone was against you and you withdrew into yourself for protection. Even your family weren't entirely to be trusted, were they?"

"No." She spoke softly, exploring her feeling as she expressed them. "No, it was just as you say. When I went to Desmai I went from a protected cocoon where everything was safe and warm to the very centre of a nest of intrigue, jealousy and suspicion. And then when I came back home I found that the cocoon was not as safe as I had imagined, that even hear there is suspicion, rumours and whisperings. It all overwhelmed me. I could only shut it out by shutting everything out, by not letting anyone near me. I trusted no-one."

"And now?"

"Now?" She smiled up into Carl's face as she realised the truth. "Why, now I can see things for what they are. I'm not the one to blame for the fact that malicious people make wild false accusations and foolish people believe them. I don't need to feel guilty. I can

make my own decisions, live my own life. Thanks to you."

"Perhaps that's why I returned," he murmured, almost to himself. "To help you face up to things and to realise that the answer lies within you, and always has."

"Yes," she said, "you have shown me that. Things will be different now. I feel it. I wonder why it was that I did not see things clearly before?"

"Perhaps it needed someone from outside, someone who hadn't been part of it, someone who loves you."

Carl's final words were spoken in a low voice, and Alys had already started to speak and showed no sign of having heard him. She had turned to face the dragon and was speaking excitedly.

"Just think of it. As children we dreamed of travelling through time and space on the back of a magic dragon and you've done it. One day I'm going to do the same. All the things you've done and seen. Travelling through space and even time. Journeying to the very edge of the galaxy itself. And after living through all of that you've come home to me!"

"Ah," he said hesitantly, "that's not

exactly how it happened."

"What do you mean?" She felt a sudden stab of apprehension.

Behind her there was a pause before Carl spoke again. "You remember we talked of the little dragon you gave me, the good luck token?"

"Yes."

"I said that I had carried it with me on mission after mission and had come to no harm. That was true. What I didn't tell you was that there was one mission when I neglected to take it with me. I left it on the Enterprise. That was my last mission. So you see I didn't. Live through it, I mean."

She heard his last words as if from a great distance. Slowly she turned. She was alone in the room. She looked hurriedly round the empty room. For a moment she thought she saw a gleam in the eye of the old dragon but it faded quickly, leaving her with only the murmur of the wind for company.

Then, from the courtyard she heard a soft gurgling sound as water began to flow from the old pump into the empty trough.



HOPES

We're on our way to the planet Babel
To make a peace I hope we're able.
We have on board many delegates
Who've come to discuss Coridan's fate.
Andorians, Vulcans and Tellarites -
I hope all we have are verbal fights.



Helen Connor

AMOK TIME REVISITED

or

The Whole Truth about the Vulcans

by Airelle

(Translated into English by Nicole Comtet)

Kirk had not hesitated, even for a second, to risk his career for the sake of his First Officer and friend, Commander Spock. The friendship they had shared - incidentally, the meaning of the word Thy'la had been explained by Spock - was so exceptional, so beautiful and so deep that even his sense of duty to Starfleet, one of the inherent components of Kirk's character, could not counteract his paramount obligation to save his friend's life.

Naturally the fact that he had thrown his ship, his career, his life to the winds in order to give Spock the chance to be married did upset Kirk somewhat. He could certainly have wished for the circumstances to be a bit more dramatic: for instance, Spock should have been a Vulcan prince whose return to his home planet at that precise moment would stop the triggering of an intergalactic war; or Spock, the renowned Vulcan scientist, should have been the only person whose prompt action at the Vulcan Science Academy would prevent the outbreak of an awesome epidemic capable of wiping out three-quarters of Vulcan's population - not that it would be such a great loss, in Kirk's opinion; or the computers of the entire universe having suddenly gone berserk, Vulcan should have put in an emergency request for the finest computer expert, one Mr Spock, to prevent interstellar civilisation from collapsing in total chaos caused by the complete breakdown of the communication nets.

Ah well, never mind, thought Kirk. Daydreaming serves no purpose. If I took all these risks it's to give Spock the chance to have it off. Of course, if he can't... er... well, he will certainly snuff it, and that would indeed bother me! As I've already told him, he's the best First Officer in Starfleet; furthermore he also serves as Science Officer, and who's the smart guy who gets a bonus on his pay cheque for having managed to save a full officer's salary for Starfleet? That's a trick I couldn't pull twice, for sure. Well, I hope the game's worth the candle, and that Spock will make good at the first opportunity. I know his family has great influence in the higher spheres of the Federation.

Such were Kirk's reflections in the turbolift that sped him, with Spock and McCoy, to the transporter room where they would beam down to the arid planet that was Spock's native world. McCoy seemed delighted to have been invited - *He probably expects they'll serve Saurian brandy at the reception*, Kirk thought unkindly - and Spock looked like a clam, or an oyster minus the pearl.

When they materialised near the site of Koon-ut-kal-if-fee, Kirk could hardly believe his eyes. The place looked like one of those 20th century amphitheatres where ridiculously bedecked barbarians used to butcher helpless bovines. What was more, the heat was sizzling, and water fountains and facilities were nowhere to be seen.

Naturally Spock couldn't care less. He has other fish to fry, and furthermore, Vulcans don't possess sweat glands. That may be pleasant for the neighbourhood, but this is really too much! Nothing to drink, no shade, no place to freshen up... What is this? A bad dream?

Poor Kirk's surprises were not over yet. As the ceremony proceeded steadily, and as unbelievable stupidities were exchanged by the parties involved - and one of those parties suddenly turned out to be Kirk himself, without him quite knowing what the hell he was doing there - Kirk felt his irritation increase in inverse ratio to the square of the distance... Oops, the narrator has let his enthusiasm run away with him... not taking the exponential curve of the hypotenuse into account, of course.

The collective insanity Spock had told them about seemed to be quite normal to the participants. The weirdest and most illogical things happened without any of the attending Vulcans so much as raising an eyebrow. Kirk really began to find the whole procedure a bit thick when Spock strove to throttle him, and apparently succeeded in his enterprise.

There's my Spock, thought Kirk, moved in spite of himself and of his precarious situation. *Whatever he undertakes, with that brilliant intellect he has he always comes off with flying colours. Although in the present circumstances, I'd rather have him come a cropper!*

The mental link they shared rang with the warning outcry that Kirk, ignoring the Vulcan's sharp hearing, blasted on the line. Sure enough, it did not fail to produce an effect: Spock, shocked by the deafening mental assault, let his Captain's body flop in the dust,

thus carving a good-sized dent in the ground due to Vulcan gravity.

However, one must admit that this was also due to the Captain's intrinsic mass, a good portion of which was pleasantly distributed on the plump bottom, so nicely enhanced by those tight-fitting black pants, especially when he threw out his chest to conceal his stomach. Lavoisier's law of physics - "Nothing is lost, nothing is created, all is transformed" - coming into effect, what disappeared in front reappeared at the back... (Er... kindly excuse the narrator. This has nothing to do with the plot. Ahem. To continue...)

Then things moved swiftly for the survivors, and the 'corpse', which McCoy's potion had paralysed and struck dumb but which could see and hear everything, thought that it served Spock right. That would teach him to behave like a pre-Reform savage.

It's a good thing I'm not dead, Kirk thought happily. *Not only am I delighted to be still alive, what with all those marvellous adventures still awaiting me, not to mention the easy pile of dollars from the film's copyright, but this also gives me the chance to relish my revenge, for poor Spock looks really distressed at having bumped me off. All the same, I'd better keep a sharp eye on that guy. These Vulcans are real weird types, sometimes. I wonder where on earth they got this incredible fuddy-duddy ceremony. I've seen 20th century movies that came out more real than this. And the costumes - good lord, the costumes! And Kirk convulsed with inward laughter that did him as much good as a filet mignon.*

Suddenly the universe dissolved around him, and he came round on a bunk in Sickbay with McCoy's smug grin planted right in his eyes - and something

else planted in his backside.

"How come you always give me shots in my buttocks, while you give them to Spock in his shoulder? It hurts!" he complained, rubbing at the offending portion of his anatomy. "I'm waiting for an explanation, Bones!"

"And how do you expect me to give Spock an injection into thin air, Captain? Have you ever noticed that his backside is concave?"

"I've never paid any attention to Spock's backside," Kirk lied, "but that's neither here nor there. Okay, forget it, Bones," he sighed, and getting to his feet he accepted a Saurian brandy to help him get over the shock.

The good Doctor took one as well to get over *his* shock, for he had feared, for one awful moment, that he had mixed up the hypos and instead of the neural paralysers had shot Kirk with the emergency dose of Saurian brandy he always kept in his medikit. Not only would the expected effect have misfired, causing Kirk's demise, but more critical still, a Saurian brandy matured in cask for more than 200 years would have been irretrievably lost. Scotty, who had presented him with the bottle, would never have forgiven such a sacrilege.

Eventually Spock beamed back on board and Kirk let him stew in his own juice before letting him know that he had not, after all, killed his Captain. Upon reflection, however, Kirk was somewhat surprised at Spock. How could he believe him dead? Theoretically their mental link ought to have warned the Vulcan that his revered Captain was only paralysed, and not even unconscious.

Well, all things considered, Kirk thought, I am alive, that's all that matters. No point in holding forth about

it. But I wonder what happened between him and T'Pol after we left?

At that very moment, before Kirk could speak, McCoy, all agog, asked, "Well, Spock, what happened? The girl? The wedding?"

"When I thought I had killed the Captain," Spock explained, "I realised that the blood fever had gone."

Kirk and McCoy exchanged a glance.

"But Spock," McCoy resumed, "you said you would die if you couldn't... I mean, if you and T'Pol..."

"Indeed, Doctor, I needed a physical outlet for my condition," Spock replied deadpan. "However, as a physician you do not need me to tell you that there are ways and means for a male to alleviate such physical discomfort."

His blue eyes on stalks, McCoy gaped at Spock, while Kirk, who couldn't believe his ears, was left speechless.

"For Pete's sake, Spock!" McCoy sputtered out. "You don't mean to say that you could solve your problem all by yourself?"

A haughty eyebrow angled upward. "Naturally, Doctor," Spock retorted with stiff dignity. "I am quite capable of satisfying myself."

Kirk, unable to control himself any longer, roared, "Spock! You have the gall to tell me that we've done all this... that I risked my career, my reputation, my life, to bring you to Vulcan, when all you had to do was... was to...?"

"Yes, indeed, Jim."

Then something incredible

occurred. Kirk and McCoy, who had already been favoured with a dazzling smile by their Vulcan friend, now had the stupefaction of seeing him suddenly burst into laughter.

Good heavens! Kirk thought. What's that? Spock roaring with laughter? it has to be seen to be believed. I must admit that laughter suits him - he looks cute with those dark eyes all a-crinkle. I wonder, though, what the heck he can find so amusing? I see nothing funny in the fact that I'll probably be kicked out of Starfleet for dereliction of duty.

Recovering some of his poise, the Captain of the Enterprise took the floor. "Come on, Spock - tell us what's going on. I can hardly understand your hilarity."

"Captain... Jim... Doctor..." Spock broke off, choking with mirth. "Yes, it's right, you didn't have to take me to Vulcan..." His attempt at explanation, interrupted by hoots of laughter, did nothing to set his friends' minds at rest regarding his mental state.

The Vulcan finally managed to quieten down long enough to utter a full sentence. "As I already told you, there is at this moment on Vulcan a very special event which takes place once every seven years in the month of T'Knaht. It is a very ancient tradition going back to the Time of the Beginning. We call it the Koon-ut-kal-if-fee. All Vulcans must participate."

"Yes, Spock, we know all that. But I don't see the connection."

"You have a similar custom on Terra, with the difference that the ritual takes place every year, not every seven years. It happens on April 1st, and I believe you call it April Fool's day."

"April Fool's day?!" two voices

chorused.

"Yes. My grandmother T'Pau is at this very moment despatching a subspace message to Admiral Komack to inform him that the delay of the Enterprise is due to a very ancient Vulcan ritual which I had to attend. My grandmother holds some influence, Captain, and your career will not suffer in the least. I wouldn't have it otherwise. Also I must emphasise that your life was never in danger; even without McCoy's subterfuge our mental link would have warned me of any difficulty in your physical condition, Jim."

"Hmm, all the same I was obliged to shout my head off in your mind for you to release me, Spock. You were strangling me."

"Just a perfectly harmless Aikido grip, Captain."

"Spock, does this have something to do with the fact that we've often blamed you for lacking a sense of humour? If it has, I think I can promise you that we'll never again bring such an accusation, will we, Bones?"

"For sure," grunted the Doctor, who felt that this time he certainly would not have the last word.

"One thing surprises me, gentlemen," Spock resumed. "I wonder how, knowing the Vulcans for a logical and civilised people, you could have believed that incredible pageant was real. I truly thought, at first, that my grandmother had rather overdone it and that you would see that everything was faked." Spock started laughing again. "And when I saw the cardboard rocks - cardboard, mind you! - that they used for scenery, I thought you would catch on immediately. Fortunately you did not, and we were able to carry out the whole show."

Spock dissolved into laughter again, in which his two friends heartily joined, tickled by the humour of the situation.

Inwardly Kirk thought, *Thank god it's only once every seven years! That'll give us time to recover, and be better prepared for the next time. All the same... Spock, you tricky Vulcan...!*

Meanwhile, back on Vulcan T'Pau was quite satisfied with the smooth running of the ceremony. Spock had provided the basic material and she had elaborated on the details. She was particularly pleased with the sedan chair in which she had made a spectacular entrance. That was an excellent idea, and she had noticed that Spock was impressed. Spock's young cousin and her husband Stonn had also played their parts admirably. Poor T'Pring, who would not hurt a fly - assuming there were flies on Vulcan. She had remarkably personified the cold and scheming bitch whose model had been proposed by Spock. On the other hand, the costumes which Spock had recommended by sending the copies of old 20th century historic movies were terribly uncomfortable.

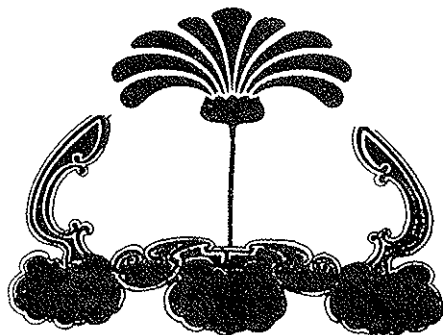
T'Pring had just changed back into her usual clothes, the jeans and checked shirt which she liked to wear, and which were a much more sensible outfit for practicing her occupation as a vet. T'Pau, on the other hand, donned her formal

business suit. Her staff was already busy taking the setting apart, and one of them advised her that her limousine had just driven up.

It was high time. She was soon to chair a board of directors. This, actually, was the reason for her refusal to take a more active part in the political affairs of the Federation; she had too much to do on Vulcan, being the chairwoman and managing director of four pan-Vulcan companies - and she was also in charge, every seven years, of the organisation of Koon, which was no small matter.

Fortunately, this time she had been helped by Spock, a very promising boy indeed. With a fond and amused thought for her favourite grandson, T'Pau climbed into her limousine, followed by her Andorian secretary who lost no time in handing her a whisky on the rocks.

While sipping her drink T'Pau meant to give all her attention to her assistant's reading of the preliminary report of the board of directors, but her thoughts drifted back to recent events. It had indeed been a pleasant day, she thought, and would provide entertainment to the Vulcans for the next seven years with the videotape of the 'ceremony'. Not to mention the handsome commission that she and her grandson would receive from the copyright. Yes indeed, a very pleasant day.



DOUBLE

by

Philippa Timms

The Enterprise was for once on a fairly quiet mission out in the Bwetta Ray sector of space. Occasionally it came as somewhat of a relief to be able to have a breather between Klingons, demi-gods and Tribbles. But then even mapping could get on your nerves if it went on for too long.

Captain Kirk rubbed his tired eyes as he sat in his command chair on the Bridge. His spell of duty would soon be over. He glanced over at Uhura's station hoping that some urgent message would at that second would be passed over to him. Even a "Captain, I'm picking up a distress call" would not be amiss.

Spock was still sifting through all of the data that was coming in from the ship's sensors. Kirk knew that some of his Science teams were working double shifts. After dropping Sulu off onto the planet of Apparition, the Bwetta Ray had fascinated him for the first couple of weeks, but now he was sure that they had seen everything that was there to be recorded. (Spock of course had other ideas about what should be recorded by his team.) Now Kirk was beginning to come to the same opinion as McCoy, and to think that both Spock and his team were getting a might over-zealous.

As Kirk began to remove his uniform in his quarters he was sure that he could still see the lights of the Ray as though they were right in front of him. This mapping mission had affected him

more than he would like to think. As he felt a warmth envelope his whole body he knew that this was not something that was in his mind. He reached quickly over to the intercom to summon Spock and Security. As he was doing so his quarters vanished in the haze of colours that he associated with the Bwetta Ray.

Doctor McCoy could feel something was not quite right when he arrived in Sickbay that morning. It was nothing that he could put his finger on, something that was putting his mind into overdrive every time he came on duty, something that was always trying to push him towards a goal that before they had arrived at the Bwetta Ray he did not even know he was aiming for. He had seen the same occurrence with Spock and the Science team, working all hours, finding new bits of data that were always keeping them happy.

The last time he had seen Scott he and a team of Engineers were heading towards Engineering, murmuring something about raising the engine's efficiency by up to ten per cent. The only one he had seen who seemed out on a limb was Kirk, for everyone was doing everything they should, but before he had even given the order.

McCoy paused for a second. He looked into the microscope at the incurable illness Wattern's Syndrome and wondered. All this over-efficiency could somehow be connected to the peculiar frequencies of the Bwetta Ray, but then that would have been one of the first

things that Spock would have checked. Uhura would know, but she was far too busy trying to tune the ship into low frequency radio bands as well as subspace.

It had been five long days since their Starship had dropped them off. To Commander Peters the Enterprise had been away five days too long. It was all right for them on that cushy mapping of the Bwetta Ray, the ray that they in the last few days had found had something to do with this planet. The first survey team had called this planet Apparition. Most had thought it the Heron crew's sense of humour - that was, until the first night that the party had been alone. Peters was not at all happy with Sulu, who had been left in command of this landing party. Apparition had been his project. That was why he had been transferred to the Enterprise after their last mission on Tellus Four. That was before they had meet with the Shard. Thanks to McCoy and that demi-god he was only on the planet as a consultant.

Sulu watched the distant colours of the Bwetta Ray flicker in the night sky and was amazed at how clear it was. Also from a distance he watched young Commander Peters as he tried to help Ensign Thomas set up his night tent. He thought back to the Peters who mere months ago was on the brink of death. Even now he had some doubts about his health, but McCoy had said he was fit. Even so, Kirk had told him to watch out for him. He had already almost got himself killed. Sulu was sure that he would not let it happen again, not when he was under his command.

Oh, how Peters hated it, everyone still watching, even now when deemed fit by the Chief Medical Officer of the

Starship Enterprise. He glared at the tent that according to Federation Supplies should be up and ready in five minutes. He rubbed his hot wet hands through his brown hair that was now also wet with a haze of sweat and scrutinised the instructions. Deciding that they were for a different style of tent altogether, he threw them down. Two minutes later a member of Security had erected one tent.

One Starfleet issue green and yellow bell tent on one large and lifeless yellow and brown planet. Apparition was such a strange place, for it was a planet where there should not be one, especially not one that they could class as M. Starfleet had come to believe it had something to do with the strange goings-on in the Bwetta Ray sector of space. Ships had been seen to go to the ray, but when they emerged they seemed to have doubled their efficiency. So far no ship from the Federation had been out as far as the Bwetta Ray. Those other races that had, were not saying a word, wanting to keep whatever this ray was doing to their ships a secret. So the best way to find out was to send in a ship. Then, what do you tell the Captain? Scientists at Starfleet had no firm answers to why ships that had been travelling at a maximum speed of Warp 3 when going to the Ray, had been reported travelling back at Warp 6, so the best thing to do was just to send the best ship in the fleet to see what would come out of the Bwetta Ray the other end.

While on board her Commander Peters had found the Enterprise a perfect ship in all areas. So how could you improve on that? That was the one question that Command wanted answered. The Enterprise was just about at the end of Kirk's five year mission. If this Bwetta Ray could somehow show them, teach them, how to improve on something as great as the Enterprise then the whole of the universe could be

opened up for them to explore. No longer would it be just five year missions. The distant stars awaited them.

It had all started late on the first night, the strange energy readings that they began to receive from the far side of the planet. Every night their tricorders recorded more lifeforms with them on the planet. They were not alone.

After the first week of their getting the faint readings Commander Peters wanted to go to whatever was causing them, but it would have taken them a good four days walk to find even the nearest group of what their Tricorders said could be Humans. The best thing to do, according to Sulu, was to wait and just see what happened next.

It was at dawn on the beginning of the team's second week that the readings started to go right off the scale.

"Are you sure that the readings are correct?" Sulu asked as he checked and double-checked all of the incoming data. Peters just wished that for once he was wrong. He knew they had a crisis. For one mile away from them to the north a group of ten Klingons had arrived and was coming their way, and he doubted that it was a social call.

Captain Kegeoh of the Klingon Battlecruiser Ciapaget did not like the view that he was getting from his ship. This was the Klingon A.T.S Sector of space, one of their main secrets that they had managed to hide from the accursed Federation for years. There in front of him was his own damnation, the Starship Enterprise. This could well be his last mission.

"Captain?" Second in Command,

and to Kegeoh somewhat of a hot head, Sageok was trying to get his attention away from his Nemesis. "Could we not just destroy Kirk and his ship?"

Kegeoh felt like laughing at him, but all he could do was sneer. "And lose the service of the A.T.S?" Some young Klingons would just never learn. "The Romulans," he spat the name, "have all been expelled from this sector after the TheriacPah incident. Only to be used in peace, we were told."

Kegeoh knew with half the crew like Sageok about to be transported down the main service planet, soon all hell could be breaking loose. At the back of his mind he wondered what the A.T.S. was making of all of their thought patterns on top of those Humans. Hopefully it had already transported Kirk off the ship. If that were so, the ship could well be empty and unguarded. As if the Ray outside could sense his thoughts it changed colour, and his Klingon ship gave a slight shudder.

"The thing won't even let me think about going into battle!" Kegeoh cursed both the Enterprise and the A.T.S. often that day.

Captain James Kirk shivered as the ice cold wind cut into his bare chest. He had been transported down by an unseen force while he had been changing out of his uniform, and as yet nothing had challenged him.

"I'm Captain Kirk, of the United Federation of Planets," he declared, somewhat hopefully, over the wind that seemed ever colder. Still he secured no acknowledgment from what he knew must be the intelligence behind the Bwetta Ray. He hoped that Sulu had better luck than he was having. He only

hoped that he had been transported somewhere near them. He swore under his breath as again the tingle of the alien beam caught him. If only he knew what was going on.

If only Commander Peters knew what Sulu was planning to do about the Klingons he would be happy, but he just seemed to be doing nothing at all. He had begun to wonder if the pressure of command was becoming too much for the Lieutenant. Kirk would not put his trust in him if he could not handle a few Klingons. Sulu was here for the experience, and Peters was going to make sure that he got it.

When they had detected the presence of the demigod known as the Shard on their way to this mission, Gerald Peters had hoped for a peaceful first contact. The Shard had other ideas. Kirk and the Enterprise had escaped his clutches; Peters had not been so lucky.

For thousands of years it had thought that the Trace had forgotten about the Quickfeta Unit that they had installed in perfect harmony with the Bwetta Ray. For such a long time no ship had been sent by the Trace Empire. Now ships had been arriving back for the treatment, but it would seem that during the interval the Empire had quite a few changes, and not just to their ships. After it had performed all of its proper functions then it would have to delve deeper into the memory banks of these two very different ships. It would take some time to catch up on the Trace's past through their computers. In all of the ships that it had so far developed, not one of them had heard of the Trace Empire, but all had race members on board. Then it had an emergency programme for it had been told that a name does not make

an empire. Since there was life still in the universe that used space then there would be a need for the service of development.

His phaser set to stun, Dale Thomas was now in charge of keeping lookout. Six foot two, with light blond hair and green eyes, he was very muscular, as on the Enterprise the only time you could get him out of the gym was when he was on duty. Sulu and Peters were still checking their tricorders, but Dale was now sure that there had to be something wrong with them. According to them the power around them was still growing, but the Klingons who had been coming at them had now vanished.

He rubbed his eyes trying to keep awake. This was so exciting - his first landing party assignment, and so much was happening. He at last had something to write home about. He had been told by the Security Officer who had first got him interested that the job was always full of daring-do and glamour. He would write that at last he had found one of them.

Before his eyes he saw what to him was some sort of transporter beam. The Klingons must have arrived. With a yelp of alarm he fired his phaser wildly at the beam. With a burst of colour the phaser blast was redirected and augmented, hitting Commander Peters. With a cry born out of both anger and frustration his body collapsed, broken down to its bare atoms. Sulu was shocked. He had lost a member of his party, someone who had been under his command, but for now he had to put it to the back of his mind. A second transporter started to whine just behind where Commander Peters had stood.

Sageok was not at all happy. He had been about to wipe out a group of the Human 'Pagahs' when the dratted machine had picked up his and his fellow Klingons' hostile thoughts. Now he was back on the Ciapaget, with one hell of a temper, his thin, almost ghost-like shape haunting an almost empty ship. Here he would stay. That was until he could think of another way to destroy - no, not destroy, he could not even think that here - reshape the Enterprise. He smiled to himself as a plan formed. He turned swiftly and headed back towards the Bridge. He would convince this machine that he was helping the Federation, being friendly and kind, while blowing them from here to the edge of the universe.

Some day, the computer knew, the Klingon Empire and the Federation would be working together for peace. That was not today. For both Kirk and Kegeoh had been judged today by the many machines. Had it not been for the intervention of one of the Trace Elders, they both would have been banned, as had the Romulans. Beings such as these upset his delicate balance of power. It could have coped with one race at a time, but by the way Kirk and Kegeoh had acted towards each other, once a Klingon ship arrived a Federation ship would arrive, and vice-versa. Each ship would not remember all that went on here, but they would remember enough to come

back in about eighty years time; for now it would shut down all operations to all races.

Master Inovar had instructed the computer what it now had to do. The Master had announced that for the moment the universe as a whole was not yet ready for its services, and this made the machine sorrowful. No longer would it be able to bestow its benefaction of enlightenment to ships that arrived at what the Enterprise Captain had called the Bwetta Ray. For now the Enterprise and the Klingon ships would be put back to how it was before they were doubled, but for some of the people they still would have some ideas of impending improvements. That it could not resist and nor could Inovar. For Kirk had no idea that for the past few months Inovar had been scrutinising the crew of the Enterprise. Soon he knew that he would have to meet them face to face, but for now, no one would recall the events of the Bwetta Ray. Every thing would be just as it was two weeks ago. There were some events that even a demigod could not change. He could not have used Commander Peters any longer since the Shard had attempted to terminate his contact with him. He knew that the enigma surrounding Commander Peters would be with the Enterprise a long time after his death.



'AS GOOD AS GUARDIAN ANGELS ARE...'

by Debbie Lee

Outer space is no place for a person of breeding.
Violet Bonham Carter (1887-1969)

That was him! That had to be him. I had lived this moment again and again in my mind as I had passed interminable weeks on Sigma Spacis, waiting for this one instant in time.

Sigma Spacis, mining colony, the asteroid hell of the Universe. Almost perpetual darkness and constant precipitation guaranteed its dismal, soul-destroying effect on the system of any being, of whatever origin. No sunlight, bad diet and awful living conditions, with a reputation known throughout five neighbouring systems and beyond. But people came here, flocked here, because it was a lump of hell rich in mineral deposits - people could make themselves enough to die a wealthy alien on Sigma Spacis, if the work and environment did not get them first.

But I was not here to mine, I was here to hunt. An interesting concept on Sigma, for it had never supported any form of indigenous life and as far as 'animal, vegetable, mineral' went, only the last category had ever applied. And my quarry had just this moment appeared in the rather rough, but entertaining, bar facility situated in the centre of civilization as Sigma Spacis knew it.

My initial reflex action was to pull the black, masking cowl of my robe further across my face, thus shielding the direction of my gaze from any interested observers. Not that there would be any, for this was the busiest, noisiest bar on Sigma. Between the catcalls of noisily gambling miners and the whistles of the

notorious 'whoremongers' trying to draw attention to their wares, a silent observer could remain invisible. Well, almost.

"Dochwl' DllmeH Huch 'ar DaneH?"

It was an odiously drunk old Klingon, both his breath and his attitude abusive. Oh, by the way, Sigma Spacis also seems to be the place where old dishonoured Klingons go to die. But that seems to take a hell of a long time, and while they are doing so, they do like to enjoy their creature comforts.

I simply hissed and shook my head, hoping he would take the hint and disappear without further comment. No such luck.

"tlhIngan Hol Dajatlh'a'?"

His large hand moved to cover one end of my thigh, and that breath crawled ever closer. This had gone far enough!

I leant forward and snatched his Klingon 'taj from its sheathed position within his boot top, and held it against a physiologically very sensitive part of the Klingon anatomy.

"ghobe!" I snapped. "naDev vo' ylgHoS!"

Which told him to clear off, and at that point I allowed my cowl to slip sufficiently for him to see my eyes.

"Ha'DlbaH!" He spat, edging away with as much speed as he could muster in

his drunken state whilst carefully avoiding the sharp point of the knife still held in my hand.

He swore filthily some more, before he finally managed to manoeuvre himself out of earshot. I eyed his retreat without regret. It never failed to amaze me the number of beings with obviously no taste for one such as myself, something I had been blissfully unaware of as I grew up on my pleasant colony homeworld. Pleasant, as it had been then.....

Ha'DlbaH indeed! I sniffed my disdain at the now absent Klingon, tucked my recently acquired taj into my leather belt and turned my attention back to my quarry, returning the cloth of my cloak to its original position so that I could resume my scrutiny.

The object of my attention was engaged in an animated discussion with two of his redshirts, a third redshirt standing to one side, eyeing the assembled merrymaking hordes with an expression of some misgiving. The redshirts seemed nervous about something, as well they might, for Sigma Spacis was not a particularly safe place at the best of times. And in this bar, at this time of 'night', when most mine workers were off shift, it could occasionally prove injurious to someone's health on quite a regular basis.

In contrast to this, their leader seemed surprisingly at ease in this environment, not at all threatened by the raucous Sigma Spacis surroundings.

If only you knew, I mused to myself, allowing a small smile to creep across my face as I adjusted my position slightly in my seat.

He stood apart from his men in other ways too. The object of my interest was clad in the gold-coloured shirt of

Starfleet that denotes command duty, the gold metal bands at the wrist indicating... Captain. Strangely enough, he was a lot younger than I had been led to believe by Ligia, but then Ligia had always had a habit of leaving out the finer details of one's assignments. But in my heart of hearts, I could not find it in myself to criticize Ligia too much, for it had been Ligia who had told me who I was and had brought some purpose to the life of the lonely, confused child who had been snatched away, along with the entire population of her colony planet, by Orion pirates. I, along with my kith and kin, had been herded up, imprisoned, destined for only the Creator knows where. However upon them seeing me there had been much consternation amongst the Orion crew, and finally they had cast me into a tiny life pod, which they then ejected into deep space, condemning me to a slow, lingering yet certain death away from the relative comfort of my family and friends. Why?

Ligia Terpsichore had told me why, some years later.

I snapped back from my deep reverie with a jolt, in time to see that the Captain had finally been persuaded to leave the facility by one of the redshirts in his company. The distinctive gold-clad figure made his way easily across the crowded bar, few bodies caring to impede his way, and he was followed, a few steps behind, by one of his redshirted Starfleet Security detail.

But I was not the only one to watch them go.

Another figure detached itself from one of the shadowed walls of the facility and followed my quarry with some stealth out of the exit. I moved slowly to my feet so as not to draw attention to myself, but a sickening knot was forming in my stomach as I had time to

comprehend what I had seen following my target from the bar. A Gorn... that huge covered figure would indeed appear to be a Gorn. All the stealth and cloakwork on Sigma Spacis would not be enough to conceal the racial characteristics of that heavily built reptilian race.

What else could I do? I cleared out of the Sigma Spacis facility at speed, pulling the Klingon knife from my belt as I ran, not caring at this point whose attention I caught. I had come too far, spent too many long months, hungry, in this hell-hole with its eternal night, to have my prize snatched from me now.

I took in the scene as I ran into the dark, rain filled 'night'. The redshirt lay face down in the dirt, his prone body almost directly beneath the towering figure of the Gorn, who now turned his attention to the Captain and appeared to be snarling something in Federation basic. The Captain had pulled out his communicator from his belt, and was attempting to signal his ship whilst edging towards the phaser that would have appeared to have fallen from the security guard's hand as he had gone down.

The huge Gorn, however, was having none of it. The reptilian creature launched himself as the Captain stood there with only a communicator in his hand trying to make contact. The mass of sinewy cold muscle hit him full on, the communicator flew from his grasp and the Captain buckled under this latest assault, the only sound being that of the breath being knocked from the Captain's thorax.

Instinct cut in. Well, instinct, and Ligia's training. As the Gorn lunged again at the staggering figure I sprinted in to make my attack. I gripped the taj in my hand as I slewed to a halt, legs bent to

brace myself and keep my balance as I slid somewhat inelegantly across the muddy gravelled space.

Well, at least I managed to gain the Gorn's attention with this display. The huge creature turned towards me, baring his teeth in a truly terrifying display, his green flesh rippling with cold-blooded muscle tone as he advanced on my position. I dodged a swipe from one huge arm, left, then right, and then left again and then ducked under to thrust the Klingon knife at my opponent's exposed ribcage.

What should have pierced the skin and killed a lesser creature simply resulted in a gash along what must surely have been a Gornian rib. Unfortunately, the Gorn was still standing and had every intention of exacting his revenge on me as I stood before him, ruefully - and somewhat stupidly - regarding the taj in my hand. He snarled, and then rushed me, hitting me squarely across the shoulders as I attempted to dodge to one side at the last moment, with enough force to knock me heavily to the floor.

My shoulders and upper spine shrieked a message that I was already well aware of. The Gorn was strong, too strong. He could have defeated me ten times over even at full strength, let alone in my weakened state due to my extended stay on Sigma Spacis waiting for the Federation ship en route for Calypso II to finally arrive. The food and living conditions I had been forced to endure during my wait had left me vulnerable, but I still had my wiles and cunning. And I was in a desperate corner.

I forced myself to lie prone where the Gorn's charge had knocked me, my face down in the dirt, my ears tuned to the reptile's lumbering movements. It sounded as if the Captain had managed to stagger once more to his feet, but the

subsequent crunch and thump suggested the Gorn had returned him once more to the ground. Then I heard the heavy steps advancing toward me; that reptile just had to check, as I had been the one who had managed to cause him most actual bodily damage before hitting the deck, that I was down for good.

He was wrong. As the steps moved closer to my head I twisted to plunge the taj up to its hilt, deep into the flesh of the reptilian foot.

The Gorn bellowed with insane rage as he staggered to one side, unable to get a hold on the delicate handle of the taj to remove the weapon. It was all I needed, giving me the time I needed to scramble to my feet and throw myself at the phaser next to the redshirt. The Gorn, realising my intent, lurched after me and caught at my foot with a bone-crunching grip as my hands folded around the phaser, whipping my body back as if I had been a piece of rope. It was too late. I had the phaser in my hand... and I had set it on kill. I twisted round and looked my enemy straight on as I levelled the phaser directly at the Gorn's head.

'Never kill anything that you are not prepared to look straight in the eye whilst doing so,' Ligia had told me. I looked that Gorn in the eye, and phasered him into his constituent molecules within the breath of a picosecond.

I had learned a long time ago that compassion was a luxury. A luxury that only fools and children could afford to indulge in.

I managed to haul the prone body across my abused shoulders with some difficulty, and staggered thankfully into the choking inky blackness of the Sigma Spacis night. It was instinct yet again

that made this the most sensible course to follow, instinct alone that told me that it was more than likely that the Gorn had associates, associates who would inevitably start looking for their missing comrade as soon as he failed to return from his allotted task.

I had managed to find the communicator, and I had the phaser in my hand, but of the Starfleet security officer there was no sign at all. For a horrible moment I wondered if he had been caught in the line of the fire to the Gorn, but I discounted this as ridiculous. The man had been far too far away to have been accidentally vapourised by the phaser beam. It would appear that he had recovered from the blow that the Gorn and dealt him and had fled.

It would seem that even Starfleet had difficulty getting the staff these days, I thought to myself in dark amusement.

I staggered on, my legs feeling like jelly, my breath coming in rasping gasps even though Spacis had four-fifths of the normal gravity seen on standard Class M planets. Finally I made it onto the last slippery walkway and 'home', for the want of a better word..

My living facility was dark, damp, cold and riddled with vermin. It was in the old quarter of Spacis City, which meant that it was cut partly into the hard rock of Sigma Spacis itself. The whole of the facility had a distinct chill to it, a chill it was impossible to overcome however much fuel one purchased and consumed to alleviate it. So, I had given up trying.

I dropped my prize onto the driest, warmest part of the living area, the sleeping mat, and straightened up stiffly. This move was enough to make a wave of nausea sweep over me, and I staggered against the chill wall in my efforts to stay upright. It was time to rest, but first,

what to do with my hard-fought-for prize?

The golden boy of Starfleet looked curiously out of place as he lay, slumped and unconscious, on the dingy plaid mat. I almost laughed out loud, but then plugged my mouth with a shaking hand as I felt the tears threaten. Is this what my life had become? Is this what I had become? A mean thief, a bodysnatcher...kidnapping innocent people in order to achieve my own ends?

I regarded the communicator and phaser weapon I still had in my hands as I bit back the weakness of tears. I flicked the communicator open, but heard only the miserable hiss of subspace static. The Sigma Spacis rock was renowned for its high levels of mechnanite, which was one of the major exports of Sigma Spacis, so it would appear that ransom via communicator was NOT an option. I threw both items into a storage crate in disgust. I would start plotting my next move later, when I was rested. For now, both I and the Captain would appear to have sustained some damage at the hands of the now-deceased Gorn. My hands and knees were still covered with blood and gravel from where the reptile had smashed me down onto the ground, but the Captain had fared far worse. Still unconscious, his head lolling to one side, it was clear that the Gorn had not intended the Captain to walk away from their encounter alive. He was badly wounded, the worst damage being the evil looking gash running the length of his collarbone. If the other wounds in combination were not enough to keep him unconscious, this one alone probably was. It was in both our interests to get him back to his ship in one piece as quickly as possible, but I had no intention of running into any of the Gorn's colleagues whilst doing so. Tomorrow would be soon enough; let the crew of the Starship USS Enterprise build up a little

sweat before I presented their Captain back to them.

However, on looking at the Captain, I was a little concerned. During that time prior to my being united with Ligia, I had interned as an auxiliary with a Starfleet Medical Facility in a far distant system. It had been my way of saying thank you to the people who had found me, a form of repayment to the crew of the freighter making the Starfleet supply run to Outpost 32; A crew who had been brave enough, or indeed foolish enough, to intercept an unfamiliar life pod as it spun through deep space. The Medical Facility on Starbase 32 had managed to pull me back from the brink of death despite their limited equipment, and if it made them happy that I emulated their efforts, I had thought, so be it.

The man was feverish; he looked hot, yet his skin was cold and almost clammy to the touch. It was possible that the Gorn had tipped his claws in venom, not an unheard-of practice in some other reptilian races, the names of which I could not immediately recall but would, no doubt, after a decent night's sleep.

I would clean up the cuts, administer a herbal draught and keep him warm, but that was about all I could do. I would have to allow him to recover naturally. Or, as Humans so quaintly described it, 'allow nature to take its course'.

That done, I covered the sleeping mat with additional rugs and then the remainder of my material possessions. I removed my thick, black, hooded cloak, my black tunic, my caparison and laid them on top of the pile, my hands becoming cold as the chill of the Spacis 'night' perforated the living facility and cooled my bare arms now that they lacked the snug encapsulation afforded by my many layers. I instantly felt the

cold on my still partially clad body. I hadn't been warm, I mean really warm, for what seemed like months.

I slid onto the sleeping mat beside the still unconscious man, burrowing down beneath the covers to find his hand. It felt warmer, and his colour was better, thank the Creator. As I listened, his breathing sounded more relaxed and easy... it looked as though I was about to have a live hostage to bargain with after all.

I slept well, probably due to the fact that I felt I was very close to completing my present assignment; I felt I had more than proved a match for what had transpired so far. But there is a saying, 'Don't count your Gorns until they are all hatched....'

I awoke to find myself looking into one of the most mesmerizing gazes I think I have ever encountered. The eyes were bright, and even more worrying, lucid, as they regarded me steadily in my throes of awakening.

"My God... Who...? What are you?"

I looked at him dumbly, so befuddled by sleep that I could not think straight or find one word to say. Ironic. Ligia had selected me, of all the Guardians, for this arduous assignment because I had the best command of fluent Federation basic. This had seemed to count for more than the disadvantages of my relative youth and inexperience, but as I lay there trapped with my mind in a spin loop, I could not help wondering if a more mature Guardian could not have handled this assignment slightly better.

The Sigma Spacis version of day, a

dim twilight, had lightened the room slightly.

"Where am I? Do you know where this is? Do you understand me?"

He shook me slightly, and then collapsed onto his back once more, a stiff, slow arm lifting his hand to his head.

"God, I'm thirsty."

That need, I could fulfil. I slipped out from under the covers and moved stiffly to my feet from my sleeping mat. I cursed the Gorn who had dealt me such a vicious blow across my shoulders, and the hell-hole of Sigma Spacis that had reduced me to such a state that I had been vulnerable to the reptile's attack. I collected a pitcher of water, took a sip first, and then offered the remainder to him. He accepted the water graciously and took a few experimental sips as he watched me pull my tunic over my head and wrap my caparison around my head and shoulders, apparently unaware of how uncomfortable I felt being seen with my head uncovered in his company.

"I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful, a faery's child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.."

He still watched me as he raised the pitcher to his lips to drain the last of the water from the vessel, his own movements stiff and obviously as painful as my own.

"Thank you. Are you a native of Sigma Spacis? Am I still on Sigma Spacis?"

I was hopping around on one foot, doing my best to pull on a second black boot. I finally stood, my bones almost audibly creaking, and shrugged.

"You don't say a lot, do you?"

He watched me closely, assessingly, his intelligent gaze seeming to miss nothing, and I could almost hear the intricate thought processes that allowed him to make his own judgements upon these inquiries. His handsome face twisted into a slight frown as he found he was still waiting for a reply. The Captain, it would appear, was one whose questions were speedily answered under more normal circumstances. He was not used to waiting for a response.

"Is it a case of cannot talk... or will not?"

The ensuing silence seemed to echo about us as if we were the only people left on this world, the twilight morning giving the proceedings an even more eerie air until the moment was shattered, shattered into a thousand, tiny, fragmented pieces.

"Enterprise to Captain Kirk. Do you read, Captain?"

The disembodied, aloof voice boomed into the silence with the most incredible volume and the most electrifying effect on both myself and the Captain. Kirk was on his feet in one swift move; his speed took me unawares, as I had considered him virtually helpless in his weakened state.

"My communicator - give it to me."

He looked at me; his facial expression had moved in an instant from that of sympathetic diplomat to hardened warrior. If he could not persuade me to surrender the communicator, then he would take it.

"My communicator, dammit!"

I shook my head, not once, but

twice. Kirk needed to know that I was just as determined as he was in this matter, for this was not in my plan. If Captain James T. Kirk of the USS Enterprise beamed up now, I would be left on this Creator-forsaken rock for yet another cycle, until the USS Potemkin was due to make its run to the planet of Calypso II. I had neither the time nor the inclination to have my plans sent awry by Kirk, but the Captain had other ideas...

"Do you read, Captain?"

That was all Kirk needed to fire him into life. He lunged at the crate where I had thrown both communicator and phaser in such a cavalier fashion. I, remembering the location of the phaser with a sudden lurch of panic in my innards, went after him, kicking his feet from under him in a powerful swipe with my right leg, and pushing him onto the floor. Kirk, unfortunately, fell well. He was on his feet once again before I knew it and so I kicked again, a kick he blocked. Kirk then threw a punch that I parried, but used the momentum of to throw him onto the floor again. He rolled to the far side of the living facility and was somehow back on his feet in an instant. I threw two pitchers and a storage carton which he dodged easily, and then - somewhat stupidly - I went after him, determined not to make the mistake of underestimating the Captain yet again. As I dodged across the sleeping mat, Kirk simply seized the ends and twitched the mat out from under my feet with consummate ease. I went flying, my stiff legs unable to react to the shift in momentum, my knees too weak to keep my equilibrium. I fell heavily to one side, hitting one of my cartons of food on the way down, almost knocking myself senseless as I went.

I was badly winded. I lay there, helpless, as I heard Kirk move quickly over to the crate and repossess his phaser

weapon and communicator. As he moved into my line of vision, I saw he had the communicator open in his hand.

It chirruped sickeningly as he made contact.

"Mr Spock, this is the Captain speaking." His voice was cool, but his breathing was laboured and the wound inflicted by the Gorn had started to bleed once again, if anything worse than before.

"Captain, it has taken us some time to overcome the meclanite in the..."

"Never mind, Mr Spock. Stand by to beam me aboard on this signal. Kirk out."

I lay there, waiting. It has often been said of my tactics that they are hardly original, but they work, and that is all that matters. Unfortunately I had forgotten that Kirk had probably seen me use exactly the same tactics on the Gorn who had so recently departed this existence.

"Are you all right?"

The voice sounded almost concerned, but not very close.

"I have no intention of coming anywhere near you, having seen you use a very similar tactic on the Gorn, Miss... er... Never mind." He sighed almost irritably. "So I repeat, are you all right?"

Slowly, reluctantly, I pulled myself onto my elbows, and then stiffly up onto my feet to regard the swaying, bleeding figure standing before me. He looked incredibly pale, his pallor verging on the chalk white. I nodded, slowly, feeling as sick as he looked.

"Good. That's all I needed to know." He returned his attention to the

communicator once more, and then barked into the device, "Spock. Energize... now!"

No, no, no! I could not let this happen, this just was not fair! In a brief moment of deadly decision I lunged at the waiting figure, desperation fuelling a last powerful surge into my muscles as I dived almost headfirst into the orange blur of the transporter beam.

"What am I doing?" I heard myself gasp. Good question.

If I had felt sick before, I felt positively terminal now. I lay on my back, my limbs spreadeagled, one foot touching something to my left, the incredibly bright lights forcing me to screw my eyes closed. I knew then, from the level of lighting alone, that there was no way I was still on Spacis.

"He's unconscious," stated a terse voice, somewhere to the right of where I lay.

"And look at his damn state. Sickbay, McCoy here... I need some orderlies, now!"

The McCoy person sighed irritably, and the something to my left, supporting my foot, was moved.

"Your prognosis, Doctor? Yet another cool tone washed over my senses, distinctively different to the first and second voices.

"Ask me in approximately fifteen minutes, Mr Spock, when I've got the Captain to Sickbay and have had a proper look."

It was now the Mr Spock person's turn to sigh, but his seemed slightly more

restrained than McCoy's.

"This has been a most unfortunate incident. The Captain should have been quite safe on Sigma Spacis...."

"Spare me the explanations as to why this shouldn't have happened, Spock. It *has* happened - and I would also suggest that you get some of Ship's Security up here to take care of our unexpected visitor."

Me? That had to be me.

"Already done, Doctor," the cool voice assured the one called McCoy. "A Security detail should be here, about... now."

Sure enough I heard the swish of automatic doors, and a grunt of disgust from McCoy. There was a sneeze, and then a cough.

"Security." Spock's tone was cold. "Remove this individual to the Brig. Inform me the moment consciousness is regained."

"Aye, sir."

"And Security," this time it was McCoy's voice, "when you've done that I want you to report to Sickbay. The last thing we need is an outbreak of a cold virus on this ship."

"Aye, sir."

Ouch! Kirk's Security detail could certainly do with a few pointers in prisoner etiquette, I thought viciously as my poor arms were pulled on yet again with more force than consideration. I was removed from the transporter room, dangling somewhat inelegantly from an incredibly broad, red clad shoulder. The spectacle we presented was accompanied by a rousing chorus of sneezes and

coughs from Mr Security, who seemed to be doing his best to infect the best part of the ship with his 'cold' before he got to McCoy in Sickbay.

I've done it. I'm on the USS Enterprise, I told myself, but I found that I didn't really care, as I was in fact feeling dreadfully nauseous prior to passing into a state of merciful unconsciousness.

I felt little better upon regaining consciousness for the second time. There was, however, one major factor of improvement. Although I was the prime suspect in roughing up their Captain and inflicting his present wounds, although I was imprisoned in the Brig, Kirk's ship was undeniably *warm*. In fact, it was verging on the snug. The bedding I was lying upon was soft, incredibly comfortable after Sigma Spacis' rocky floors, and it had the carefully neutral smell so typical of Starfleet laundered textiles.

I could hear Security guards, two, deep in conversation as they watched over my prone body. And I wasn't pretending this time.

"I've never seen the like. The Captain was discharging himself from Sickbay, with McCoy howling on behind him like a manic banshee, the good Doctor calling the Captain a few unsavoury names I've heard, and then a few I haven't. And then, to cap it all, Mr Spock sided with the Doctor, and declared the Captain's action unwise."

"I wish I'd been there to see that!"

"Uh-oh, no you don't. Unpleasant is what I'd call it. As unpleasant a scene as I could ever wish not to witness. They are the senior officers on board this ship, petty bickering is not good for morale."

"At least unpleasant, petty bickering is entertaining. A damn sight more entertaining than watching over a corpse."

Now that *was* me, and it summed up the way I felt at this precise moment in time with a fair degree of accuracy.

"No sign of life yet?"

"Nope."

No indeed. Not a jot. I felt sick, disorientated and so thirsty that my mouth was too dry to even articulate a call to alert the guards to my condition.

"Do you think we should call Sickbay?"

There was a pause.

"Not yet. Look, see... the prisoner is still breathing okay."

Great. The goons were going to wait until I stopped breathing before they went for help. Marvellous.

There was another pause in the conversation.

"Cheer up. It won't be long now... Once we've finished this medical supply run, we'll be bound for Starbase 10, and a well earned bit of R&R."

"Any idea where the medical run destination is?"

Calypso II, you idiots!

"Nope. The only thing I do know is that whatever the destination, we've got one of the biggest shipments of refined Astrathine ever shipped out by Starfleet medical."

"That's an immunological drug, isn't

it?"

"So I've heard."

"There must be some really sick people then, wherever it is we're going."

Astrathine! Astrathine! If I hadn't have been so dehydrated I could have wept tears of real frustration. What's the phrase? So near and yet so far.

I realised then, with almost spectacular clarity, that I was in all probability not going to see this task through. Something was seriously wrong with me and it was, for some reason, getting worse. Ligia would be disappointed in me, as would the other Guardians. But if I was dead, did I really care? At least I had got this close, and the next Guardian, Aglaope, Pisiboe, or even Ligia herself, would get even closer, and if she failed, the next one closer still.

"It's only a matter of time, Vidor Mandale, it's only a matter of time," I vowed bitterly to myself as I once more slipped quietly away into the black depths of unconsciousness.

Water!

Water on my chin, in my mouth, making its tortuous way down my parched throat. But you can have too much of a good thing, and I spluttered awfully.

"Easy now... Take it easy."

I managed a small cough and waved one hand weakly. I didn't know whether to beg for more or to beg my benefactor to stop, but he decided I obviously wanted more. He administered me two more sips.

"Now that's it. I don't want to drown you, Miss."

I flicked open my eyes but OUCH! That light made me try to turn my head away.

"No, no...don't move. Don't do anything. I'm going to get you to Sickbay as fast as I goddamn can. Christine, ten CCs of Norahydrine."

"Doctor?"

"Ten CCs! Did you hear me? This isn't a debate."

"Yes, Doctor."

The female tone was disapproving. I heard a hiss and then felt a slight stinging sensation on my exposed arm.

"That's my best shot. Enough to stabilise a broad spectrum of life signs, but not enough to do anything drastic. I just hope you fall into that broad spectrum somewhere, young lady."

I decided, at that moment, that I liked Dr McCoy. He seemed a most helpful person.

The feelings of disorientation and nausea faded somewhat as the shot of Norahydrine took hold. I was aware of being moved, physically moved, not transported, and to a place where the mattresses were even more comfortable than before. Could this be heaven? Not unless heaven was a Starship and had automatic doors.

I heard such a door swish open in the distance.

"Doctor. On whose authority did you remove the prisoner from the Brig?"

"My own, goddamn it, Mr Spock!"

answered my saviour in that abrupt, almost rude voice. "The day that Starfleet leaves its prisoners in the Brig to die is the day that I pack my bag and leave. Look at your prisoner, Mr Spock; she's one frail humanoid."

"That 'one frail humanoid', Doctor, defeated and killed a Gorn, abducted our Captain and held him hostage, and has managed to board the USS Enterprise without permission."

"Oh? And what did Sigma Spacis say?"

"The Governor was quite adamant. Despite being given a clear description, no one knows who she is, and she will not be admitted back onto the Sigma colony."

"And the Captain?"

"Was clear in his instructions that she be kept in the Brig. Not, Doctor, Sickbay."

I felt a cool hand on my brow, and my eyes flickered open in response. I saw a strong yet beautiful female face staring down at me, a piercing clear, blue, intelligent gaze settled on me with the intensity of a searchlight.

"Doctor...Doctor McCoy... The patient!"

The patient. Hardly any more elegant than the term prisoner, but it was a slight improvement, and would do. Her words certainly caught the attention of the two distant speakers, as there was the sound of two sets of footsteps approaching across the Sickbay floor.

"She appears to be finally coming around," said the woman in blue. "My God, Dr McCoy, would you look at those beautiful green eyes."

"I see them."

Another face moved into view, mature, in its own way almost kindly, certainly trustworthy. This figure was clad in the same blue as the woman.

"Well, hello there. Welcome to the USS Enterprise," he said, a smile on his face but his gaze concerned.

I regarded him with caution. What now? I still felt awful, and found the effort of merely opening my eyes had taken more out of me than I could ever have thought possible. My eyelids started to droop inexorably downwards once more.

I licked my lips - they were silicon oxide dry - and swallowed. I forced my eyes open again and looked at the Doctor, willing him to move closer.

"Astra..."

I swallowed again.

"What did she say? Christine, did you hear that?"

"It sounded like astra something, Doctor. Astrid? Her name, maybe?"

No, Christine, no!

"Astrath..."

I tried again. But my lips barely moved, and my eyes would simply not stay open any longer. I heard someone move around my bed.

"A stimulant would allow Security to commence their interrogation, Doctor," the cool voice pointed out.

"Over my dead body, Spock," that crusty voice replied. "Security have had their chance, now I need mine. This

patient remains in Sickbay, under sedation if necessary, until I can isolate a safe form of treatment for her."

There was a slight pause.

"The Captain respectfully requests that she is returned to the Brig as soon as possible, Doctor," Spock said in a quieter, almost sympathetic voice.

"But Mr Spock, it's just not practical."

"Nevertheless, Doctor, the Captain's orders still stand."

"Not possible." McCoy sounded intractable.

"Doctor..."

"Spock, will you use those goddamn ears a moment and listen to me!"

McCoy took a deep breath, and then had obviously drawn Mr Spock over to the far side of Sickbay, where he believed he would be out of earshot.

"The 'prisoner' doesn't speak, she doesn't eat, she has a viral infection comparable to the common cold that is creating metabolic havoc within the vital systems of her body."

"So, Doctor?"

"So, Mr Spock, her physiology, whilst ostensibly Human, is in fact like nothing I've ever seen before. Therefore I dare not feed her intravenously, and by the same token I am reluctant to use any drugs on her at all. My best bet is that unless I can work some kind of minor miracle within the next twenty-four hours, we aren't going to *have* a prisoner to worry about, anyway, be she in the Brig, or in Sickbay."

Amen to that, I thought, as I felt myself going under for the third time. If I was a swimmer, I wouldn't be coming up again.

But lucky for me, I wasn't a swimmer. I thought that quite clearly as I came to and took my first proper breath in what felt like a long time. I actually felt the sensation of a hypo being administered, but whether it was dream or reality I could not tell you.

But slowly, surely, I felt myself surfacing again. Finally, I felt as though I was about ready to wake up. I just hoped that I hadn't slept past my stop... Calypso II.

I screwed my eyes up and ventured a look out into the sterile brightness of Sickbay, but discovered that some considerate person had dimmed the lights. I started to pull myself up from the bed, and then discovered the restraints.

"Whoa, hold on a moment."

A familiar voice came from my side, at which point I looked around to be confronted by a pair of hazel eyes that were smiling at me from a chair pulled up to the bed. A PADD balanced on the edge; the Captain had obviously been reading it prior to my disturbing him.

His eyes followed my interested gaze.

"I was just catching up on your progress. It appears that you have been causing the good Doctor McCoy something of a headache, young lady."

I eyed him with grim amusement. The irony was that I could probably give him a few years, but I settled for just

gently elevating one eyebrow. I looked with no little meaning at the restraints that bound me to the Sickbay bed.

The Captain just looked straight back at me.

"Er...no, I don't think so," he said crisply, getting up from where he had been sitting. "Not until you've seen fit to furnish us with a few explanations. Until then you are confined to Sickbay, or confined to quarters or indeed confined to the Brig, if that is what is required."

He regarded me for a few moments, his face uncertain, before he finally said, "I am sorry about this. Doctor McCoy tells me that it's you I have to thank for my speedy recovery from the wounds inflicted by the Gorn assassin, and I know I have you to thank for the fact that I escaped at all."

I looked straight into that hazel gaze, and narrowed my own as I took in his composed features, the strong face topped by fairish hair. He did not look sorry at all. That hurt, and stupidly, that alone was enough to goad me into speech.

"And this is how you thank me? By confining me to a sickbed, denying me my liberty?" I finally hissed, my voice husky from lack of use.

"So...you can speak after all."

Suddenly the Captain ducked down so he was leaning across the bed, his face intent on my own, his warm breath almost fanning my cheek.

"I want to know why you abducted me; I want to know what you thought you had to gain from holding me hostage on Sigma Spacis."

"I didn't abduct you. I took you to a

safe place," I replied.

"You don't take someone to a safe place and then deny them the use of their communicator. So, no, sorry... I don't buy that."

I shrugged. What did I care what he thought of me, anyhow? I shifted somewhat uncomfortably within the restraining straps.

"I saved you from the Gorn; doesn't that count for anything here? Surely that shows I am trustworthy enough to release."

"Oh yes, sure. You saved me from the Gorn. I also saw you dispatch that same unfortunate Gorn with a phaser set on kill as if you were calmly taking target practice. No, Madam, someone like yourself does not get to roam freely about my ship. Once the Doctor judges you fit enough, you will be confined to quarters to await interrogation by ship's Security. Do you understand me?" he asked, his tone deceptively soft. It would appear that I was not going to be allowed to cross James T. Kirk twice.

The ship's comm interrupted anything further that the Captain might have had to say to me. A female voice, rich, melodic, was apparent once the Captain had switched on the nearest monitor.

"Captain, we are approaching stationary orbit at Calypso II."

"Thank you, Lieutenant, I'm on my way."

The Captain looked back at me as if I was considered unfinished business.

"As you wish, Captain." I said with mock docility, dropping my eyes to the floor, "but could I trouble you for some

water?"

I felt rather than saw the Captain regard me steadily for a moment, then abruptly he spun on his heel and left.

"Nurse Chapel," I heard him say as he walked across Sickbay, bound for the exit, "your patient is asking for water."

"Of course, Captain, I'll attend to it immediately."

I heard her move from her desk, and I heard the Captain halt near the door.

"And Christine..."

"Yes, Captain?"

"Make sure you get the glass back from her afterwards.... in one piece."

"Yes, Captain."

I heard him leave, the Sickbay doors swishing shut behind him.

Ha'DIbaH! nIS veqlargh... But even my limited Klingon was inadequate to sufficiently vent my anger at Kirk. Damn him, did he really think a couple of restraining straps would be sufficient to stop me from getting to the surface of Calypso II after I had come so far and endured so much?

I regarded the restraining straps with disgust and viewed the Starfleet issue gown I had been given with no little distaste. Even if I could get out of Sickbay, I would be instantly identifiable once I got out into the ship at large. But it was imperative that I escape from Sickbay, not only to complete my allotted assignment, but also to put as much distance as possible between myself and Doctor McCoy's medical scanners now that I was returning to apparent health.

The fact I was here at all suggested that McCoy had indeed tried Astrathine as a last resort; whether he had understood my desperate attempts to communicate or whether he had decided it worth a try himself, the novelty of having me well would soon wear off. Then they would start to question my physiology, and that was not to be permitted.

"Here you are, one glass of water."

Nurse Chapel kindly handed the glass to me, and moved to loosen the top strap so that I could move my arm sufficiently to drink.

"Nurse Chapel, do you think you could slacken off the other restraint also? It is a little tight?"

She looked very doubtful, and I knew her to be nobody's fool.

"Only while you are here of course... just while I drink my water, please?"

She nodded briefly, loosened the restraints and then waited patiently for me to finish.

"You're looking a lot better," she observed.

"Constitution of an Rigelian Water Ox, me," I smiled, settling myself back down so she could retighten the restraints, which she did with her usual speedy efficiency.

"Thank you," I said, and I put my head back on my pillow and closed my eyes.

I heard her return to the desk. A little while later I heard her relief take over from her; it was a man with a deep voice, and he stated he was going to do his best to get all of the medical records

up to date, to which Christine Chapel murmured her assent. They both checked on me and then she left.

Slowly, finally, I released my breath and deepened my breathing from the shallow gasps I had been taking to maintain the increased residual volume held in my lungs. I then started to relax my body from its rigid, tensed state, muscle by muscle, tendon by tendon, concentrating on one part of my body at a time.

I lay there on the biobed, totally relaxed. The last thing I did was to drive as much air as possible out of my chest, at which point I slid out from beneath the restraining straps and onto the floor.

Getting out of Sickbay was the easy part. The male nurse was so engrossed in his work that I could have ridden a Rigelian Water Ox through the facility as part of my escape plan and I don't think he would have noticed. Just as he didn't notice me remove one of several pre-prepared hypos of the sedative Diazine, left on the side. They were obviously prepared in case I proved troublesome.

I was out into the corridor in a few seconds, and some minutes later had equipped myself adequately for my anticipated foray. Captain Kirk had kindly left one of his ship's Security detail outside Sickbay, and it didn't take me long to swop a large shot of Diazine for that gentleman's uniform and phaser.

I pulled the unconscious guard into a small storage bay and left him to sleep off the rest of his shift.

"Daisemi'in ra'kholh, Vidor Mandale. Th'ann-a comes!"

The Romulan words reminded me of my task in hand, my undertaking at the last Council of Yrice held by Ligia, witnessed by Pisiboe of Calliope, Aglaope of Sterope and Ligia of Terpsichore herself.

My pledge?

That I, a Syrene Guardian, would not rest until I had avenged my race for the crimes of Human Federation scientist Vidor Mandale, and had returned the abducted Guardian Iphinoe of Gaea to the Syrene community.

Mandale's crime? The genetic exploitation and mutilation of our race for his own gain.

His sentence?

Death.

I made my way towards the Transporter room, a recently acquired PADD tucked under my arm as I went.

There was a Security guard standing stiffly to attention at the door. The bold approach would have to do.

"I have an urgent message for the Captain," I said, stepping up to the guard and handing him the PADD.

Instinctively he took the PADD from my hand, and activated it.

"Well, it's..." the redshirt started, looking down at the PADD and not at me, as was my plan.

"Hey, hang on a moment. This isn't..."

Too late. I stunned him with the phaser and removed him from duty to a

quiet corner of the corridor. Then I returned to the transporter room and taking a deep breath, coolly entered the facility with my PADD and moved to the back of the room.

It was quite crowded. There was a large number of both Security and Science personnel, the colours of red and blue seeming to predominate within the gathering. But there were the gold shirts of command as well, and one in particular stood to the fore, as everyone's interest became focused on a lone figure materializing onto the transporter pad.

The figure formed into a solid person from the luminescent orange beam we had just witnessed, male, somewhere in his early middle age going by Human standards. He was a man of medium height, with nondescript features, unremarkable light brown hair, but the bluest/greyest eyes I think I had ever seen.

"Welcome. Welcome, Doctor Mandale, to the starship USS Enterprise."

Kirk advanced on the lone figure with his hand extended in greeting, indicating that the recent arrival should step down from the transporter.

Mandale. MANDALE!

"I am James T. Kirk, Captain of this ship. I would like you to meet my First Officer, Mr Spock, and my Chief Medical Officer, Doctor Leonard McCoy."

"This is quite a welcoming committee," observed Mandale, looking at the large number of people there to welcome him. "I have recognised some of you already. But first, Doctor McCoy...pleased to meet you at last."

The two men shook hands.

"It's good to meet you too, Doctor. Thank you for your help, and I have the Acturian brandy I promised."

The room was thick with Human platitudes. It was enough to make one sick.

"Doctor Mandale..." Kirk stepped forward as the 'good' Doctor Mandale seemed predisposed to linger.

"Please, Captain, call me Vidor."

"Of course. But if you would allow me to escort you..."

Oh please...I had had enough! Now was the time that fate had chosen for Vidor Mandale to receive his reckoning for the lives he had taken, for the threat he had posed to a whole Syrene House. The House of Gaea, once a strong Syrene genetic line, now reduced to one woman.

Eye for eye, tooth for tooth,
hand for hand, foot for foot,
Burning for burning,
wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

"I do not think that Doctor Mandale should move anywhere," I said coolly, stepping from my silent point of observation. "Unless, of course, he wishes to die... without knowing."

The whole tableau of activity within the transporter room froze, horrified, as I barred the Doctor's way with a phaser set on kill. Kirk made as if to rush me, but I saw Mr Spock catch at his Captain's arm with a lightening-fast reflex action.

"No, Captain," came the ice cool Vulcan tones. "I do not think that it would be wise."

We all stood there silently watching

one other, although most people seemed interested in my phaser hand.

I looked at Vidor Mandale, I mean *really* looked at him. I studied him in great detail from his nondescript hair to his average sized feet. Burning for burning, wound for wound. I almost wished he had family there with him, that I could make him feel what it was like to lose one of your own.

Finally, surprisingly, it was Doctor Vidor Mandale who spoke the first words in the silence, an uneasy smile twisting his lips as he regarded me with... admiration?

"So then, tell me, which one of those bloodthirsty vixens are you, then?"

He knew. Of course he would know, wouldn't he? He was Vidor bloody Mandale.

"You truly wish to know?" I goaded him, lowering the phaser slightly for a moment. "Then I shall tell you, Doctor Vidor Anatoly Mandale.

"I am Syrene Guardian Thelxepia of Achelous. Yes, heed it well. It is appropriate that you should meet death with the name of your nemesis on your lips."

I twitched the phaser to indicate he should move away from the Enterprise officers who had knotted into a small group behind him. He complied, moving well away and shooting a warning look at the visibly angry Kirk.

"So, what do you want of me, Thelxepia of Achelous, Syrene Guardian?"

"I am here to avenge the crimes you have perpetrated against my race."

"And what crimes may they be, Syrenusae?"

"The grievous genetic exploitation and mutation of the Syrene race. Investigation and documentation of Syrene physiology, in direct violation of the Syrenusae code. How do you plead, Mandale?"

"What else can I plead," he shrugged almost helplessly, "but guilty."

"Then, by a hand of the House of Achelous, prepare to die," I replied, looking him straight in the eye as I raised the phaser to kill him.

I sat slumped in the chair, a large Security guard so close to my side that I could almost feel the heat emanating from his huge bulk.

It was the same Security guard who had been knocked down by the Gorn prior to my timely arrival on Sigma Spacis. It would appear that he had actually returned to the bar facility for reinforcements and had yet to forgive me for abducting the Captain from right under his nose. I had more chance of escaping a Sulamid wrestling champion than this particular redshirt, for now he had something to prove.

The faces around the table were not kind; they were hard, tense, uncomfortable. Kirk's expression alone, as he glared at me across the table, was enough to inspire fear in even the most hardened of prisoners.

I flexed my neck muscles, putting one hand to my neck where it was still stiff from the Vulcan nerve pinch that had so recently saved Mandale's despicable life. Still, I fumed silently, at least I knew for next time - if there was to BE a next

time - never turn your back on the Vulcan First Officer of the USS Enterprise.

Mandale sat at the furthest end of the conference table from my position, obviously feeling much safer with a buffer comprising Kirk, First Officer Spock, Doctor McCoy and Lt Uhura. And I could hardly blame him - I doubt he had ever pictured himself sitting down at a table opposite one of us.

Doctor Mandale looked nervous, and I couldn't resist it.

"What's the matter, Mandale? Are we too lively a race when we're not tanked up to the eyeballs with Diazine?"

He jumped. Kirk banged the table, and then everyone else (with, I think, the exception of Spock) jumped as well. He levelled one accusing finger in my direction.

"You will keep quiet," the Captain bit out. "You will have your say presently."

"I do not want to say anything. I just want to see him dead!" I snapped out, moving to my feet to emphasise my point.

The security Guard behind me thumped me back down onto my chair with a hand on my shoulder.

"You, Madam, *will* keep quiet."

"Or what?" I sneered.

"Or I will personally gag you for the duration of this hearing," returned Kirk smoothly, "until it is your turn to have your say."

"Oh, subtle."

"But effective."

The air was tense. I glared at Kirk with furious ire.

"For God's sake, give the man a chance." It was McCoy who spoke, his emphatic tones directed at me. "This man saved your life, young lady. It is this man whom you are so hell bent on destroying who advised us on the necessary treatment of your condition using the refined Astrathine. At least hear him out!"

I looked down the length of the table. Mandale knew I was coming, he knew there was a Syrene bound for Calypso II, he must have realised that it would be one of the four remaining Syrene Guardians, yet he still came aboard. Why? To confront me... or to prevent me from getting down to the planet.

"Where is Iphinoe of Gaea?" I said finally.

"Iphinoe is dead."

The silence closed in on my ears and deafened me.

"No, no, that cannot be." I stared at him, my heart suddenly chilled. But I knew that he was telling the truth. I would have known by now if Iphinoe was down on the planet; we Syrene have our ways of sensing such things where our race are concerned.

"It cannot be..."

I swallowed, feeling incredibly vulnerable. To find out this way, in front of all these strangers.

"Thelxepia, you know... you can tell that what I say is true. I'm sorry. I am sorry."

"You're not sorry. How can you be

sorry... You've achieved what you set out to do, Mandale. You've wiped out the House of Gaea. Ascuran! Bastard!"

I was screaming at this point, building myself up to a hysterical crescendo. By all the elements, I felt I was almost foaming at the mouth. I was certainly beside myself.

Mandale was attempting to speak. He was saying something, but I couldn't hear him. I was too wrapped up in my own world of noisy grief and pain. All this effort, all this denial, for what? It had achieved what? NOTHING. Before I knew it, I felt a hypo pressed against my arm, and a hiss of spray.

Oh no, not Diazine again! I wailed in my mind as the shot made my head loll back almost immediately. I felt the tears course down my cheeks and I turned my head so that my eyes could be seen by them all. If they could not hear my pain, at least let them see it.

"That's all I'm prepared to give her, Jim." McCoy's voice was firm as he sat down once more in his seat. "And I only gave her that because I thought it might help her." He gave the word 'her' a subtle emphasis.

"I don't want to hurt Thelxepia, Captain. I do not want to hurt anyone. I just want to be left alone."

"But Doctor Mandale, why did you plead guilty to the charges laid before you by Thelxepia of Achelous in the Transporter room? And who was Iphinoe of Gaea?" Spock put his question in his calm, interested tone, oddly at variance to the highly charged emotion involved in the rest of the proceedings.

"Does it matter, Mr Spock? It's all in the past now."

"I think I can answer that one," answered Kirk quickly. "Calypso II is designated a Starfleet colony, therefore it is subject to UFP law. Clear and simple. So yes, it does matter, Doctor. Very much so."

Mandale sighed heavily, his face suddenly looking very old.

"Contact Starfleet for details of my history with regard to my early research work. That should make quite clear how everything stands with respect to some of my work in the past." He looked around the table, his gaze finally stopping on the Captain's face.

"As for Iphinoe of Gaea... she was my wife."

"Doctor Vidor Anatoly Mandale was a young, brilliant, ambitious geneticist. He had graduated with top honours from one of the best research institutions of the UFP. A genius, prepared to make any sacrifice to make his mark in his chosen field of endeavour."

Spock's voice reported his findings to the assembled command crew, and I had been allowed to attend this debriefing at Mandale's request, Kirk's chosen Security detail attached to me like glue, as usual. It stuck in my craw that I was here at Mandale's request, for as sincere and as helpful as Vidor Mandale seemed to be to all concerned, he was hiding something. But nobody else seemed to see that apart from me - or maybe they did not want to...

"Eventually Mandale realised his genius beyond his own hopes and many others' belief. He managed to develop a theoretical working basis for the artificial biological cradle mooted by Dneprov,

also known as A. P. Mitskevich, a distinguished mathematical physicist and author of the mid 20th century. However, to bring this theoretical working model into reality, Mandale required one vital ingredient. Soft DNA."

The Vulcan Science Officer paused in his account to allow comment. He looked towards Doctor McCoy expectantly, and he was not disappointed.

"But soft DNA... that's a geneticist's pipe dream, Spock. A genetic code that's so malleable that it is open to all forms of manipulation simply does not exist."

"Doctor Mandale apparently believes otherwise, Doctor."

"Okay, Spock, that aside, we're treading on ethically unsound ground here."

"Also true, Doctor. Mandale found that in order to pursue his work further, he was required to leave the UFP and find sponsors whose ethical code was not as rigid as that of the United Federation of Planets."

"Did he?" Kirk's voice implied that he had already guessed the answer.

"Indeed. They also supplied him with the soft DNA he required to further his research. They maintained it was from a research station that had been rendered useless due to the outbreak of a virulent space plague."

"And he believed them?"

"He did. Doctor Mandale maintains that he never thought to question the source until he got to a stage in his work that required a move from in-vitro work to in-vivo. It would appear that the Doctor then approached his sponsors to indicate that the project had drawn to a

natural conclusion, and that they would have to accept the medical benefits gleaned from the work so far as all they would achieve."

"But the good Doctor's sponsors obviously did not agree, Spock?"

"No, Doctor, they did not. And they went further. After their own unsuccessful attempts to duplicate Doctor Mandale's work and in an effort to sway his decision, they delivered a live source of the soft DNA that Mandale had been using. It was an attempt to show that a move to in-vivo was possible. That live source was Iphinoe of Gaea."

I felt sick. I dropped my head, and swallowed the bitter taste that had suddenly arisen in my throat. *Lab rats of the Universe unite*, I thought to myself bitterly. I glanced towards Kirk and caught his hazel gaze upon me, his face shuttered, but on intercepting my look he dropped his gaze to the table top before turning away to address his First Officer.

"This is not a very pleasant story, Spock," said the Captain.

"No, it is not, Captain. Mandale, faced with the enormity of what he had done, scrapped the project, destroyed the results and fled back to Federation space with the woman. From what Mandale has subsequently told us, it would appear he made her his wife."

"So what did the UFP gain from his return? Calypso II is almost totally dedicated to Vidor Mandale's reclusive existence. What was the payoff?"

"Jim, Mandale is an eminent geneticist. His work is renowned in several fields... but if what Spock has told us is true, then it could be a case of making sure that neither Mandale nor his work on humanoid physiology falls into

the... dare I say it?... wrong hands." McCoy observed, obviously somewhat disturbed at Mandale's attempts to manipulate DNA in this way. "He has, it would appear, come pretty close to playing godlike games with the building blocks of life."

"But he needed the Syrene woman to do it," stated Kirk. "What is there to stop someone trying to do this again with another one of this race? It would seem that Mandale considered that a possibility, to the extent that he was prepared to actually risk coming onto the ship, knowing that there was a potential assassin on board."

He threw me a doubtful look, but was then distracted by Spock.

"Indeed, Captain. And to that end, Mandale has suggested that the medical logs concerning Thelkepia of Achelous should be... lost."

"Lost?" McCoy regarded the Vulcan with a look verging on the indignant. "Now you hang on a moment..."

"It is just a suggestion," Spock insisted, one eyebrow gently elevating.

"And no doubt you think it logical to throw away records that saved this young woman's life, and may just save another such in the future?"

"That is what is dictated by the Syrenusae code, Doctor," I said quietly, my words addressed mainly to my hands clenched in my lap.

McCoy subsided back into his seat, his tone unconvinced as he said, "Personally, I need a much better reason than that someone says so. With all due respect, Madam," he added with his own peculiar brand of charm.

"Even if it is by the race concerned, Doctor?" I asked.

Mr Spock leant forward onto the table and steepled his hands before him. "Logically, the safest way to protect the Syrene race may well be to leave them... undiscovered at present."

"Mr Spock, I just can't undiscover a different people."

"Of course you cannot, Doctor. But there are fundamental rules of non-interference that forbid us to intervene in another race's development... and by not heeding Dr Mandale's warnings, by not being guided by the Syrene themselves, by making available information on the Syrene physiology that could be used against that race, then we would be as guilty as those who would actually perpetrate any crime."

There was a brief silence and then the Doctor sighed heavily.

"In that case, I'll see what I can do."

But his misgivings were clear on the matter.

"And what of our visitor?" Captain Kirk finally asked, turning to look at me with a wry half smile on his face.

"I have agreed to report these findings back to my race. It is for them to decide what action must be taken now," I replied cautiously.

Should I tell these people that I was convinced that Mandale was hiding something, that we had not been told the whole story?

Mandale. He had saved my life so that I could return with this tale to the other Syrene Guardians, that much I could see clearly. Vidor Mandale had

also, apparently, saved Iphinoe of Gaea from an ignominious death at the hands of this other race, and that claim would have to be further investigated. But I had to know.

"I should like to see Vidor Mandale before he returns to the planet," I stated flatly.

Kirk looked at Spock, Spock looked at McCoy. McCoy simply raised his eyebrows slightly. It would appear that my request had apparently caught all three of them unawares.

"Can we trust you not to harm him?" Kirk finally asked me, cutting through any prevarication with that simple sentence.

"I give you my word," I said. And meant it. I had no intentions of touching one hair on Mandale's head until I had had a chance to report back to Ligia of Terpsichore.

"Then... if you would accompany me. Gentlemen."

It was Kirk himself who escorted me from the conference room, and at last nodded the Security guard away.

"Yes," Vidor Mandale said simply.

I sighed deeply, and sat down in one of the comfortable chairs in the cabin's small living area. I could hear the officers of the USS Enterprise deep in conversation in the corridor outside Mandale's cabin. Kirk had put me on trust, and that trust lay heavily on my shoulders.

"I take it all is not well."

"There were some problems."

Problems I had not foreseen, could not have anticipated. I have had to put her in stasis until I can work out what went wrong, and put it right."

"Will you be able to?"

"I... don't know."

His voice broke slightly, and he collapsed into the chair opposite me, his eyes ringed with deep smudges of fatigue and worry.

"That is why you need the Astrathine. And so much of it," I observed. "I should have guessed."

"Well, you did... in part, Thelxepia of Achelous. Iphinoe told me much about you, you know. She said you were bound for greatness, and having met you myself, I think she may have been right."

"Hah!" I snorted in my most disbelieving tone. "You won't think that if I'm on the next Starship back here, armed to the teeth to carry out Ligia's bidding."

He laughed briefly. "I dare say."

I glanced at Mandale and sobered suddenly. "Has she a name, Doctor?"

"Yes, she has... Patricia... Sorry, you didn't mean *that* name, did you? Iphinoe called her Parthenope... Parthenope of Gaea."

"If you succeed, Doctor, I'll come looking for her. She belongs with us... she is, and will always be, one of us. She will have an important contribution to make to our race."

"And I'll do everything in my power to stop that from ever happening, Thelxepia of Achelous," Vidor Mandale vowed, his blue/grey eyes serious. "And more, if I think it necessary."

I moved to my feet, and held out my hand. "Goodbye, Doctor."

He shook my hand briefly, reluctantly. "Goodbye, Thelxepia of Achelous. I sincerely hope that we will never meet again."

I could not resist a small smile. I turned and walked slowly to the cabin door,

"Oh, and Doctor..."

"Yes?"

"Tell Parthenope I'll be calling on her in about... fifty years standard."

"Over my dead body," he said. And meant it.

"That can be arranged." I smiled, and left while I still had the last word.

I leaned my head against the cold plexisteel glass of the USS Enterprise's observation lounge. Mandale had returned to Calypso II with Captain Kirk and his command team, and I was left here in space to contemplate my next move. It was time for me to return to more familiar space than that which belonged to this so-called United Federation of Planets. If I made good time, I would probably be back in time for the next scheduled Yrice, and would be able to make my report to Ligia and the others with time enough to avoid being reassigned to this particular project.

I had found this particular task a hard one. I had started out with so much already decided in my own mind, only to find I was having to change, adapt, make decisions with regard to Mandale's guilt, and to do it without Council, without compromising the Syrene code. It had

only served to make me feel more isolated than ever, particularly when my existence was placed within the context of the easy feeling of family aboard this great ship. There was such a great sense of belonging for the people here, something that my race would do well to emulate... and it would appear to require a unique form of leadership to achieve this. But would my race ever be able to integrate in the ways seen aboard this ship? The resentment and prejudice that dogged our existence...

"A penny for them."

I spun on my heel. By the Creator, I was losing my touch; Kirk had come right up to my position by the window.

"Pardon?"

What DID he mean?

"An old Earth saying. A penny for your thoughts..."

"Oh... I do not think they are worth quite that much, Captain." I smiled, stepping back to regard him properly, my arms remaining crossed from the way I had stood regarding the starscape.

"Mmm," he murmured, and turned his gaze outwards towards the stars.

"It is beautiful, isn't it?" I said, following his gaze, going on to quote a remnant from my almost forgotten childhood.

"Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars..."

"An assassin who quotes the classics, an angel who fights to the death?"

He looked at me with that intense, scrutinizing gaze. "I do believe that piece starts 'Oh, thou art fairer than the evening

air...."

"Yes, but I was talking about the stars, Captain," I replied primly, turning my attention back to Kirk's face, but I found the urge to break into a smile too much. "And I thought I was in disgrace for abducting you still. Mr Spock seems to think so."

"Spock... worries too much."

"He is a Vulcan. It is not in his nature to worry."

"Spock is half Vulcan, therefore he worries, maybe half as much as he would do if he were Human. But he still worries."

I pulled a face, and looked out of the port again. "I have never heard anyone argue quite so incessantly as Mr Spock and Doctor McCoy," I observed, intrigued. "Do they ever agree?"

"Rarely... and then only on important things, maybe." Kirk finally turned his back on the starscape outside the Enterprise.

I pulled a small moue of agreement. "That is good. Too much friction can be bad for the soul," I said sagely.

"Oh, I don't know... I think they regard each other as an itch that can be dealt a good scratch now and again."

I laughed, briefly, and then held my hand out towards a surprised-looking Kirk.

"My thanks, Captain Kirk, for the help of your good Doctor in saving me from my illness, to your First Officer for seeing the wisdom in allowing our race its secrecy, and to yourself, in allowing Mandale to state his case. Something I would never have allowed him to do."

Kirk took my hand, but didn't shake it. "You seem to be very much a person who acts first, and then asks questions afterwards."

"When the occasion warrants it," I replied, aware of the firm hold on my hand. "Yes, that is a fair observation."

"Was my abduction such an occasion?"

"No." I regarded him without regret. "No, that I had thought about most carefully from the start."

"Really? So you had it all planned?"

"In part. The Gorn was an added unfortunate complication... and you proved somewhat more resilient than I had anticipated."

Kirk laughed out loud, a rich melodic sound that filled the room. "I take it, then, that I took you by surprise that morning."

"Indeed. But you would not have found me so easy to defeat if I had been at full strength," I warned him.

Kirk smiled and lifted my hand, palm upwards, in his own.

"If you had hidden the communicator a little more effectively, you might not have been so eager to fight me."

He touched the base of my hand gently with his lips, a gesture that so surprised me, I physically jumped.

The man was incorrigible!

"So tell me, Thelxepia of Achelous... What do Syrene Guardians do when they are not on duty?"

"We try to keep out of trouble," I told him candidly, but a wry smile was doing its best to pull at my lips. "Occasionally we use the time to settle old scores. Sometimes we travel a little."

"You could probably go some way to achieving all three of those things if you would like to stay on board as far as Starbase 10."

"Captain, no offence, but I have no taste for your Brig, as comfortable as it may be."

"No Brig, no Security detail, and the name is Jim," he replied, his hazel eyes twinkling mercilessly.

"Why, Ca.. James... is it wise so to trust someone who knocked you to the floor so easily on two occasions?" I grinned.

"Maybe, Thelxepia, I think you would not find it so easy the third time."

"Maybe I would not even care to try," I countered.

"Now that," he said in a low undertone of almost regret, "would be a great shame."

I laughed. I laughed long and hard. Now this was a most unusual man.



ENTERPRISE

Enterprise, Enterprise, flying through space,
As you pass by, the stars light your surface.
Enterprise, Enterprise, what is your mission?
Are you on your way to stop a war
Or merely taking Ambassadors to a far distant shore?

Enterprise, Enterprise, pride of Starfleet,
You live in the memory of everyone you meet.
Enterprise, Enterprise, your name will go down in history;
The legend of you and your crew, in all its glory.

Enterprise, Enterprise, so graceful and sleek,
New people and planets are what you seek.
Enterprise, Enterprise, far have you travelled,
And many are the mysteries your crew have unravelled.

Enterprise, Enterprise, long may you reign,
May your crew know pleasure and not too much pain.
Enterprise, Enterprise, you have the best crew,
Their love for each other equalled only by their love for you.

Enterprise, Enterprise, long will we remember
You, your Captain and each bridge crew member.
Enterprise, Enterprise, your crew is unique,
Their names and yours forever will be linked.

Captain Kirk, as always, in the centre seat;
With Spock and McCoy to his right and left.
Scotty, as always, is with his beloved engines,
Which leaves Sulu, Uhura and Chekov to make their number complete.

Christine Jones

