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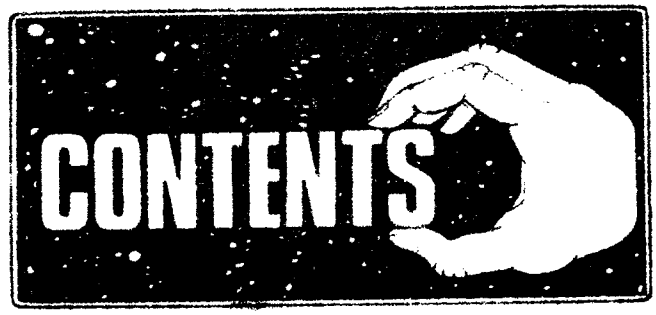
ENTERPRISE -

LOG ENTRIES 45

a STAR TREK
fanzine



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A ScoTpress publication.

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Enterprise Log Entries 45, price £1.15 within the U.K., is put out by ScoTpress and is available from

Sheila Clark
6 Craigmill Cottages
Strathmartine
by Dundee
Scotland.

Foreign rates - addressed envelope and 2 IRCs for details.

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November 1981 350 copies.

ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton and Shona.

Hello, and welcome to Enterprise - Log Entries 45.

We have two slightly unusual stories for you this time, in that they were submitted by two of our readers in Italy, Mariangela Cerrino and Giovanna Ratti.

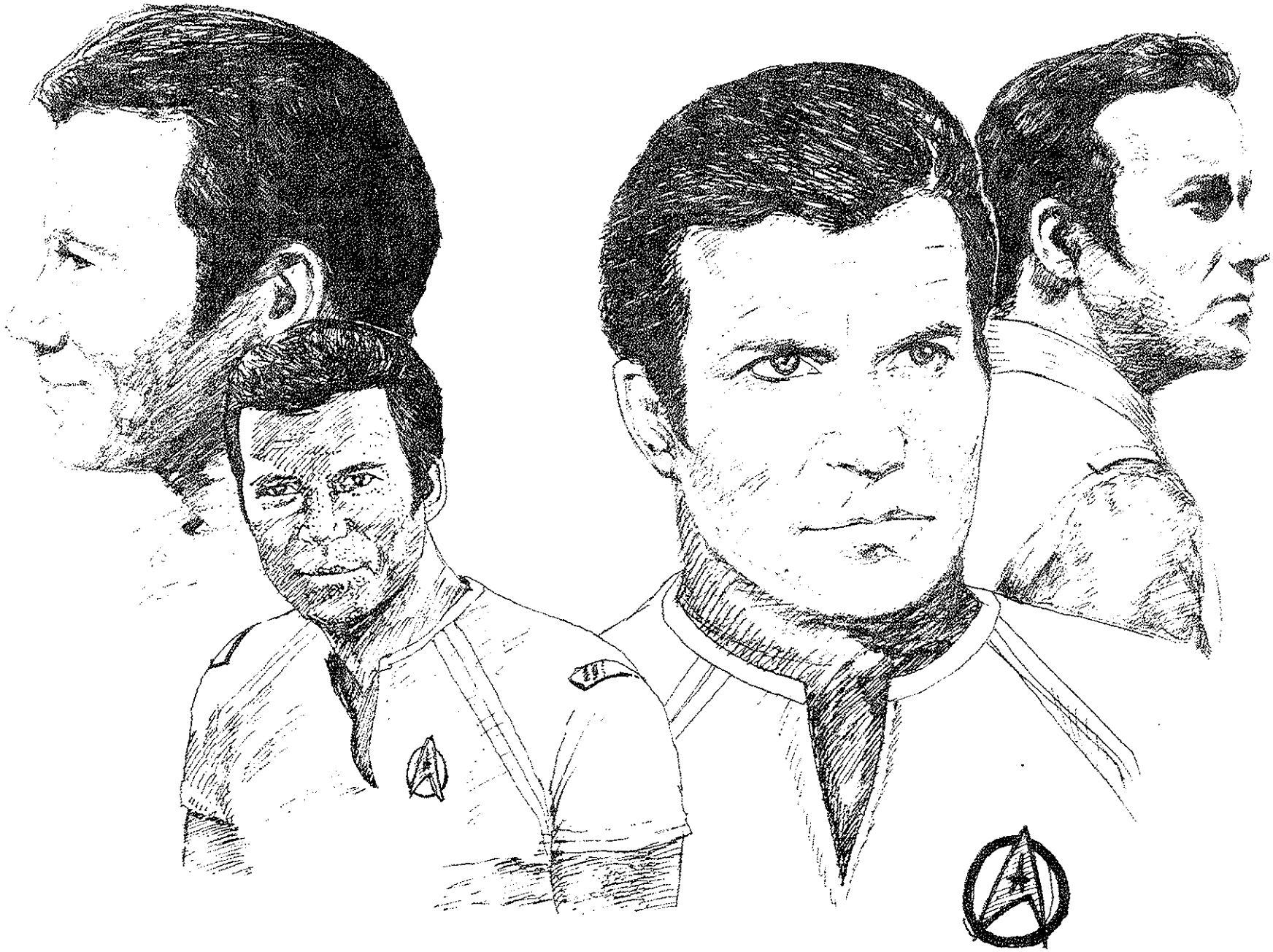
I'd like to take this chance to express my thanks to my long-suffering father. I'd just sat down to begin translating Mariangela's story, when he walked in, peered over my shoulder, and offered to help. We got through with only occasional problems - "I know what it means, but I can't understand it" - well,classical Italian literature doesn't feature many mind melds - until we came to the last page. This caused much frowning, and muttered under the breath comments, until I asked what the trouble was. Dad looked up from the page, and said plaintively, "I'm sorry - I can't think what T'hy'la means."

I hope that you enjoy this issue. Letters of comment are always welcome, as they do help us to try to provide the type of zine you like to read.

Peace,

Valerie

* "The Visitors" by Therese Holmes, was first printed in UFP Con Chronicles 1980.



TO LIVE AGAIN by Mariangela Cerrino

(Translated from the Italian by E. Piacentini)

Captain's Log, Stardate 7860·1

We are heading for Caryl'A, in the Caryl System. This entire system is important to the Federation, and plays a vital role in its commercial life. Six months ago deposits of a new crystal were discovered, which displayed some extremely interesting properties. Known as Caryx crystals, they promise to be more stable and more powerful than dilithium crystals. Scholars and scientists, the best brains of the Federation, met on the planet to study these new crystals; they include six Vulcans from the Vulcan Science Academy.

Command of the Federation Centre has been assumed by Commodore Fris Sloane, since Caryl'A has been attacked by an unknown force. Three ships have been destroyed, two Carilian and one Federation vessel. Their attackers have not only not been identified, but were not even picked up by the instruments. Whatever they or it are, they seem not to be real.

The Enterprise has received orders in Code One to protect the scientists and the entire Caryl system at any cost.

James T. Kirk switched off the recorder and for a moment allowed his gaze to wander around the Bridge. All were at their posts, Sulu, Chekov, Uhura, and the tall, dignified figure of the Vulcan at the Science console.

It was as though no time had passed.

It was his Enterprise, and this was his post. In no other place, in no other world could he have been himself, save here. It was a difficult mission, but he was living again.

He turned, sensing that the Vulcan's thoughts were following the same path; Spock turned at the same moment, and raised his eyes towards Kirk, eyes darker and more magnetic, if it was possible, than they had ever been. They did not have any need of words. The harsh training of Kohlinahr had left the Vulcan slightly more open; the 2·8 years he had spent on Earth had left Kirk more mature.

So there was silence on the Bridge - but a warm, comfortable silence.

* * *

"Why Fris Sloane, exactly?" exclaimed McCoy while following the two Security men. They had materialised in the arrival hall, but it was typical of Sloane not to have come to meet them.

Jim Kirk held back a smile. As an Admiral he could have expected a better welcome, but Sloane was not obliged to inconvenience himself for the Captain of the Enterprise.

"Of all the prejudiced men, Sloane's the worst, so why him?" insisted McCoy.

"Because the society of Caryl'A is based on prejudice, Doctor. To give the command to someone who was totally free from prejudice would be to run the risk of misunderstanding. The Carilians are notorious for being extremely conservative."

"You surprise me, Spock. You say that as if it was something logical."

"I would not say so, Doctor. Prejudice is always founded on misunderstanding, or lack of knowledge. But as this is the situation on Caryl'A, we must accept it."

"The Carilians, however, are not native to this system."

"Affirmative, Captain. The Carilians invaded this system from outside - we presume some 500 years ago. The natives have been relegated to reserves. We know practically nothing of their way of life, their level of evolution or regression. They are called The Ancients."

"And the Carilians will not admit them to their complex and prosperous society."

"No."

McCoy agreed. He had heard similar stories before, and they made him furious.

They were greeted by Commodore Sloane, who was waiting for them in the reception area. With him was the observer from the Federation, Mr. Nagger, and the Prime Minister of Caryl'A, Sim'sai.

Beside the Carilian was a girl. It was absolutely impossible not to see her first. She was tall, and delicate, and her black silken hair framed her face; she was wearing a long violet dress, with a single gem of pure light round her neck, where her skin was the colour of clear gold. But more than anything else it was her eyes that struck you, eyes of an incredible violet clearer than the jewel she wore at her neck. Jim Kirk had never seen a woman like her anywhere. Her eyes disturbed him, yet there was a hint of a smile at the corners of her lips.

Sloane moved forwards. "I am happy to see you here, Admiral," he greeted Kirk formally while shaking his hand.

Kirk managed to gather his wits while introducing Spock. Sloane had nothing against Vulcans as members of the Federation, but he considered hybrids an insult to both species.

"Prime Minister Sim'sai of Caryl, and his daughter Timaya," continued Sloane coldly, "and our Mr. Nagger. His credentials are diplomatic. In effect his task is coordination between the Federation and the government of Caryl."

"Code One, Commodore, implies an emergency. The Enterprise is in orbit around Caryl'A, and that's a situation I don't like. The other three ships were in orbit when they were destroyed."

"I share your apprehension, Admiral Kirk. Believe me, it is not pleasant waiting for something you cannot see or hear, yet that can strike anyone and everyone in a moment."

"Have you recorded any similar occurence on the surface of the planet?"

He turned towards Spock, who had remained a little behind him, and again Kirk felt the eyes of the girl boring into him. It was intense, like a current of hot air. He found himself shivering, then realised that it was not on him that the girl's gaze rested, but on Spock, and it was between those two that the current flowed, the fringes of which he had touched. If it had continued to grow it would have become obvious to everyone in the room.

Sim'sai moved. He was a tall, dry man with a cold gaze. "Some manifestations have been reported in the mines where the Caryx crystals were found."

"Manifestations?"

"Unexplained explosions. But we cannot exclude the possibility that those events were unconnected. Quite often careless mistakes can have disasterous results, and we understand little enough of the Caryx crystals."

"Will it be possible to visit the mines, the places where the explosions occurred?"

"Naturally. I have already given provisional orders. My assistant will give you a pass. Without it you cannot re-enter the Centre."

"It doesn't make sense to me that on a Federation planet the Centre should be a prohibited area."

Sloane's smile faded. "True; but at the Centre there are 28 scientists, our best minds, and I have my suspicions that someone has lured them here with this story of Caryx crystals. It would be a tremendous blow to rob us of so many minds in the same moment." He raised his hand to pacify Sim'sai. "Naturally, I

exclude any reference to your government, Sim'sai. Our enemies are also yours. The victims in the mines were all Carillians."

Sim'sai nodded. "My daughter Timaya will accompany you." From his tone he might have added, "Be pleased - it is a great honour," but he did not.

The girl moved to precede them. As she passed in front of Spock she did not turn her head to look at him. She was as tall as he, and in some way she resembled him. Perhaps it was a similarity in attitude, perhaps a type of aura, or perhaps only an impression.

Caryl'A was a planet of harsh colours; red, violet and crimson blended in the long stretch of desert where the mines were. A high chain of dark mountains bounded the horizon.

The shuttle sped swiftly over the desert. Timaya did not share the passenger compartment. Protocol demanded that she remain apart, since there was no male member of her family present. She had explained briefly at the moment of departure, and her quiet voice had held a hint of derision.

The three were alone and Spock, who until then had never let his gaze stray from the desert slipping away beneath them, suddenly turned.

"The Ancients are confined to the other side of these mountains, to the west. It is not a pleasant life, or an easy one."

"And how do you know?"

"The girl is an exceptionally strong telepath."

"That's what it was, then. That current... that sort of understanding in the room."

"Yes, Captain. It was so strong I had to block it. I sensed her. I felt her in my mind as an irritation."

"The girl knows something?"

"I believe that Timaya di Caryl has all the answers."

"And she hasn't given any?"

"Doctor, if she had I would be obliged not to divulge it. It is curious... so powerful a telepath is unusual in a non-telepathic race."

McCoy agreed. Spock was always able to explain events in the most reassuring manner.

Timaya took them to the principal mine, to the 7th level where the first explosions had taken place, then to the 5th, where they had been repeated, endangering a group of scientists working there, and finally to the third, where the richest vein of Caryx had been found. The crystals had a strange composition, and were the colour of blood.

Kirk and McCoy walked away a few paces - ten perhaps - as a group of technicians arrived. Spock continued examining the vein. Then suddenly he stood up, jumping backwards. That jump saved his life. Lightning, something vivid, luminous, powerful, exploded between him and the wall where the nodules of crystal flowered, engulfing him and throwing him unconscious against the opposite wall.

Kirk and McCoy rushed to him. His uniform was burned in many places, but his face was unharmed, apart from some abrasions. McCoy examined him rapidly.

"No internal damage, but the burns are bad. What was it, Jim? What could it have been?"

Jim Kirk looked up at Timaya. The girl was a few paces away, and her eyes shone like dark jewels. Jim felt no attempt to contact his mind - the girl was not revealing her telepathic powers to him.

"Pure energy," one of the technicians broke in, "that our instruments nevertheless don't register. His tricorder is burned. He was lucky to get away in time."

"Vulcans don't believe in luck," McCoy muttered. "He needs treatment."

Scott's call reached them at that moment. The Enterprise was under attack. Something had lowered the deflectors, but the sensors revealed no ships nearby, and no hostile act directed from the planet. There was nothing, only a mass of energy in the vicinity. The sound of the alarms reached them over the open communicator.

"Get away, Scotty!" Kirk ordered. "Take the Enterprise out of orbit, and get to a safe distance from the entire system. Quickly!"

"Yes, sir."

"Contact me through the Centre as soon as you're in position."

"Yes, sir."

The Security squad from the mine had put Spock on a stretcher and were taking him out. Kirk stopped to pick up the burned-out tricorder, and Timaya waited for him on the last step. The red rays of the sun lit a strange light in the jewel she wore around her neck.

"The Centre is far away, but my home is at the edge of the desert. It is comfortable. I can give your First Officer the medical attention he needs."

"Leave Spock? Is that what you're asking me to do?"

"Your ship is under attack. When it leaves our system you can only contact it through the Centre. Belive me, I can care for your friend."

Kirk smiled. The girl was speaking as if she had always known them.

They rejoined McCoy, who gave them a preoccupied look. "He should have regained consciousness. I don't like it."

Kirk agreed. Could he trust this strange girl, whose eyes changed colour like a field of flowers under a cloudy sky? He looked at Spock's face. His breathing was barely detectable, and the burns were ugly in the light.

"All right, Bones. But you'll stay with him."

"That was understood," muttered the doctor without turning.

"The doctor is asleep. He has been watching over you for many hours. He has been worried about you, Spock of Vulcan."

"I know."

Opening his eyes in the shadow of the room, Spock had felt the girl's presence, so strong and alive as to fill all the darkness. The room was simple, very plain, but through the high open door came the scents of the desert. In those scents, in the sound of the dust blowing in the wind, Spock felt memories of Vulcan. Also Caryl'A had no moon. Like Vulcan.

"Your Captain has returned to the Centre. Your ship was attacked, but is safe outside the system."

Spock waited. All he could see of the girl was her profile outlined against the faint light of the lamps in the garden. She turned, slowly, and reached out a hand to touch his face lightly.

"You are a Master of Gol. We have heard tales of the powers of the Masters of Vulcan. You can help the Ancients - if you choose to do so."

"I am not a Master."

"That is true. You did not receive investiture. But your training remains complete, strict and harsh as it was. I do not have the power to enter your

mind, but with those of your two Human friends, it is easy. Your Captain is anxious about you. He thinks always of you, and his thoughts are constant and warm, like the wind that blows over the desert."

Spock did not reply. Timaya allowed the silence to slip between them like dark satin.

"I have sensed an affinity between us, Spock, though our minds have only touched lightly. In you I have felt the silence, the struggle, the solitude and the strength of the desert. You carry within you all that you have suffered to become a Master of Gol, and all the pain of the long days of Kohlinahr. That makes you like the Ancients. You can understand."

"Tell me of the Ancients."

"I am an Ancient."

"From what I know of the society of Caryl'A, it is illogical to believe that your father, a member of the ruling class, can have any connection with the Ancients."

"My mother was an Ancient. But my father never knew."

"Are all the Ancients telepathic?"

"The power of the mind was our only weapon when we were invaded five hundred years ago. But we reject violence in all its forms, and so we were overwhelmed."

"But not defeated."

"The wind that blows on the desert does not stop. Each year the Ancients sent their most gifted young people to mingle with and marry Carillians. So, in time, the Ancients will regain their world, for our genes are stronger."

"Such a method requires great patience."

"The Ancients are patient."

"And now the unforeseeable has happened."

"Yes. A faction has risen among the Ancients. They are impatient - they no longer accept the methods of the Elders. They want power quickly."

"Are they the ones who caused the discovery of the new crystals?"

"Yes."

"And it is the power of their joined minds that destroys?"

"The strength of their mental union can do much. But you can help. You are a Master of Gol, Spock of Vulcan. You know."

The girl was sitting on the edge of the bed. Spock half raised a hand, the long fingers lightly touching her face. She held her breath.

"This is only half to prove that I have spoken the truth, Spock. I... have never permitted the mind of another to enter mine. Among the Ancients that is... the most intimate of unions. But I shall be happy if your mind wishes to join with mine."

"Your loyalty to your people is strong enough to make you agree to this sacrifice?"

"It will not be a sacrifice, Spock of Vulcan. When I chose to give you hospitality, and to remain with you this night, I left girlhood beyond the door. The conventions of Caryl are very strict. But whatever happens tomorrow, my choice is made."

Spock's hand moved on her face. The girl trembled. The room disappeared. The faint sound of the wind on the desert became a lament repeated through infinite aeons. Her mind opened wide, its veil whirled away by the sand without any resistance, obedient, alive. He went back to her childhood in the house of her father, knowing her fears, her anxieties, her struggles.

Drawn. Alone.

He went back through the generations. He learned the history of the Ancients from the Ancients themselves, as if the hereditary genes had written it all in Timaya; in return she learned of him, and for a moment they were both satisfied, both free, knowing and sated.

Afterwards the shadows of the room returned, and the sound of the wind. Timaya had closed her eyes. She panted, and drops of sweat shone like pearls on her forehead.

"You have given me much more than I asked, Timaya di Caryl."

"You also, Spock of Vulcan. You also."

It proved difficult for them to enter the Centre. There had been two quick attacks in two hours, attacks which had caused death and destruction - and fear, because neither the alarm system nor the defence network had reacted to the intrusion. They were taken to Sloane, and only later was Jim Kirk told - he was at that time helping out at one of the stations under attack.

Sloane was with Mr. Nagger, his councillors, and Sim'sai, as representative of his government. Outside the room the air was heavy in the corridors, and smoke veiled the pulsing of the emergency lights. Inside the meeting had reached stalemate - it was clear that Sloane had no intention of listening to them.

Jim Kirk entered the room like a hurricane. "Spock!" he exclaimed. "You shouldn't be here, but I'm glad you are. How do you feel?"

"Well, Captain. I ask forgiveness for being out of uniform. Mine is irrepairably damaged."

Kirk nodded. Spock was wearing a long tunic over black trousers, in the style of Caryl. The clothes suited him, but made him look strangely... different. On his chest he wore an IDIC - and Spock did not wear that without good reason.

McCoy shook his head. "I'm sorry, Jim. I tried to convince him, but naturally I didn't hope to succeed. Nevertheless, his condition is fairly good now."

"Admiral Kirk, do you not think you owe the Council an apology for this intrusion by yourself and your officers?"

Kirk finally turned towards Sloane.

"It is important that I speak to the Council at once, Captain." Spock's voice was quieter and colder than it had ever been.

Sloane interrupted. "We will decide later whether or not we should listen to Mr. Spock's suggestions. You may remain if you wish, Admiral Kirk, and take part in the discussion. The others may leave."

"No!" Jim Kirk moved to the centre of the room. "You will listen to Mr. Spock, gentlemen, and you will listen now. What do you want to wait for? Until the Centre is completely destroyed? Or perhaps the entire planet?"

"Your First Officer may speak, Admiral, even though my daughter remained with him, violating our code of conduct," intervened Sim'sai, pale with anger. But the reproof in his voice left Timaya unmoved.

Spock stepped forward. The calm he broadcast spread through the room.

"The attacks are caused by a most powerful form of mental energy directed against us. Its purpose is to persuade the Federation to force the Carillians to return from where they came 500 years ago."

"He is mad!" shouted Sim'sai.

"No, sir. Without doubt you know the power of the Ancients."

"We should have been less merciful. We should not have allowed them to live even in the reserves."

"Live? Five hundred years of isolation is an attack, sir."

"And on their part, Mr. Spock?"

"The Ancients are a highly evolved people. Their philosophy is one of non-violence. In that, they are perfectly comprehensible to me. You have mistaken their patience for weakness. The wrong is wholly yours."

"What?" exclained Sloane. "He is mad!"

"Is there a solution?" intervened Nagger. "A concrete solution?"

"Those responsible for the agression are a faction, a minority driven to exasperation by their treatment from the Carillians. But the Ancients are wise. Those with the strongest minds can join together. The attacks can be halted only by an equal and opposing force."

"How can you be sure it will work?" exclaimed Sloane.

"Sir, if you could read my IDIC, you would know."

"And why should the Ancients come to help us?" asked Sim'sai.

"To win what they consider right. They do not ask that you go. Five hundred years of residence have given the Carillians the right to remain. They ask only to live together."

"That is an offence that no Carillian can pardon. Make him go!"

"Your reaction is unconsidered, father," intervened Timaya, drawing all eyes as she moved forward.

"Go. Carillian women do not have the right to speak in Council."

"Carillian women do not, but I am an Ancient. You did not know, but I am proud of it. I can bring the Ancients here. Spock of Vulcan is a Master of Gol, even if he does not carry the symbol, and he can guide their minds to the battle. It will not be easy, but it is all that is left to us. Can I have your word, my father, that the pact will be honoured?"

Sim'sai had grown paler while Timaya was speaking. When she ceased an icy silence filled the room. Sloane and Nagger were too stunned to speak.

Sim'sai lowered his eyes and spoke tight-lipped. "By the custom of Caryl'A I repudiate you, and your mother before you. My House is cleansed of the offence. You have ceased to exist. Guards, throw this woman out!"

Timaya turned, and before the guards could touch her she knelt before Spock. "By the custom of Caryl'A, and as a free woman, I ask you to accept me as property, Spock of Vulcan." Her voice was clear, steady and sure.

The guards halted. The strict observance of custom forbade them to interrupt until the man answered.

Spock raised his right hand and rested it on her black silken hair, lit with purple highlights by the emergency lighting.

"I, Spock of Vulcan, son of Sarek, accept you according to the laws of Caryl'A, and I take it upon myself to be the guardian of your honour and your person, on my life."

There was silence for a long moment. Timaya rose. As the property of a stranger she could no longer be touched.

Quietly, Spock turned. "Doctor, will you accompany her to my quarters, and wait for me."

It was the last thing that McCoy had expected to be asked, but he was too stunned to answer. He looked at Jim, and discovered that he was not the only one taken aback.

"I suppose it's one way to take a wife," he muttered, turning to accompany the girl.

Sim'sai moved to leave the room. "The suggestion of this person is unnacceptable. I will not take part in any meetings without a guarantee that I will

not be subjected to any more insults of this nature."

As he left Sloane approached, furious. "Admiral, this situation has gone to pieces, and it is your fault. We'll never get those crystals. Sim'sai will take the system out of the Federation."

"If he doesn't accept Mr. Spock's suggestion there will no longer be a Caryl system. As far as we are concerned, I don't think the Federation will blame us. Have I made myself clear?" He turned his back on Sloane, and Spock moved away with him.

They entered the smoke-filled corridor, and began to walk towards their quarters.

"Spock, what would have happened if you had not accepted her as your property?"

Strangely, Spock did not answer immediately. Kirk did not find it difficult to understand the pressure his mind was under in this place.

"Without caste, a person does not exist on Caryl'A - especially a woman, who does not even have freedom within her own class. As an Ancient, Timaya would have survived, but her presence here is essential."

"I understand. So you've acquired a wife?"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Acquired?"

"Yes - that is what you've done, isn't it?" And he permitted himself a half smile.

Jim Kirk allowed his gaze to meet that of the violet eyes, again reminded of flowers under a cloudy sky.

"We can't wait any longer, Timaya. Sloane has received an ultimatum - if the Federation does not pledge itself to remove the Carillians, the Centre will be destroyed, and all the scientists killed. Sloane has agreed to our plan."

The girl's face suddenly hardened. Spock's quarters, where she had taken refuge, were filled with the smell of smoke.

"We cannot be certain of success, Captain. We can only try."

"Timaya, if Spock says this is the only way, then it is the only way. I've never doubted his judgement."

"I know that."

Kirk stepped back. Those compelling eyes were stronger than anything else, than any other thought.

"Call the gathering of the Ancients. We must hurry."

"Perhaps my father was right. Why should the Ancients fight for a people who despise them, and for a Federation that ignores them?"

He grasped her by the shoulders, and for a moment he felt the warm wind of the desert blowing in his face. He felt the countless seasons consumed to dust in waiting. Sunsets always the same, mornings always the same. Five hundred years. The determination of a people not to die, the desire to live again.

To live again.

"If it is true that your mind has been one with Spock's, you know the answer, Timaya."

The girl looked away.

"But one thing I can promise you, Timaya. If we get out of this I'll take the cause of the Ancients to the Federation Coucil, even if it turns out badly for your father. I'm sorry for him. Anger has blinded him. If he had been willing to understand, much pain would have been avoided."

"And many deaths," added McCoy, entering at that moment. "I've just come from Block C. The secondary generator has exploded. It was a massacre."

"The scientists?"

"They're all gathered in Block A, but all the shuttles have been destroyed, and we can't contact the outside any more, or the Enterprise. Don't even mention the transporter!"

"Spock?"

"He remained at Block C. He's trying to repair the connections of the secondary computer. If he can't do it, all the blocks will have to be evacuated."

Jim turned to the girl.

"The Ancients are already gathered. They have come from every part of Caryl'A. I will take you to them."

The air scintillated, suddenly alive with an energy that came from nowhere. It enveloped McCoy and threw him against a partition, but before it could enfold Kirk Timaya threw herself in front of him, and the living, pulsing wall of energy shattered against her, breaking into burning fragments.

They all collapsed, and for a long time there was silence, until Jim managed to drag himself up. The girl's face looked as though it had been overlaid with a veil of ashes. He took her in his arms.

"There is no more time, Jim Kirk. Go. The Ancients are waiting for you. I have told them you will be the one to take them to the Centre. You will find them in Wing B, outside the section that Sloane closed when the first ship was destroyed."

McCoy joined them, and Timaya shook her head. "There is nothing you can do, Doctor."

"Your life for mine, Timaya. Why?"

"My mind has been one with Spock's. You know the answer, Jim Kirk." The girl closed her eyes. Her features grew rigid, and something in the change was both terrible and insupportable. Kirk rose.

McCoy nodded. "I'll stay with her." He knelt, and with great delicacy lifted her head a little, and felt his mind being touched.

For a moment he knew the inviolate solemnity of the desert, the hard rules of a law never broken, the patient acceptance of suffering, the sudden joy at a glimpse of living light.

<u>All this is Spock</u>, he thought. But Timaya's touch had gone from his mind, and now he was alone.

The heart of the Centre was big enough to hold everyone, including Sim'sai and the members of his government, whom Mr. Nagger had somehow managed to persuade to intervene. The far side of the enormous hall was entirely filled by the screen that showed a view of the entire base. The opposite side was empty, awaiting the Ancients. In the hall the emergency lights were lit, and on the terminal of the main computer alarm lights were rippling.

The bustle of the large crowd was constant, but controlled. Sim'sai had accepted the conditions laid down by Jim Kirk after Sloane had formally told him that he would be held responsible for the destruction of the Centre, and for the deaths of the scientists; but he had not batted an eyelid on being told of the death of his daughter.

Neither had Spock, and this time Kirk was unable to thaw his frozen mask, or to penetrate to the depths of his feelings.

When the Ancients entered the hall, silence fell. Some of them were young,

youths who had adopted the ways and customs of the Carillians, but who were still unchangeably Ancients. Others came in from the desert, but neither group was inferior to the other.

The last to enter was Spock. He was still wearing the black clothes, and in the poor light his IDIC shone as if it had a life of its own. For a second - but only for a second - Kirk felt the living warmth of his eyes as he passed in front of him. His eyes had an intensity that Kirk had never seen before. In contrast, his face seemed carved out of marble, and his expression held something of the terrible.

"Gentlemen," murmured Nagger, who had joined them. "As far as I know this is the first time that a Master of Gol has agreed to demonstrate his powers before witnesses who are neither Vulcans nor initiates in Kohlinahr."

"This situation is also completely new," interrupted McCoy acidly.

It was impossible to tell from the faces of the Vulcans present what they thought of this break with tradition, but the hall was filled with the tensions of the Humans and the other races who did not know how to control them. That also in some form was energy, and the air was becoming saturated.

The Ancients had arranged themselves with the youngest on the sides and the eldest in the centre. The oldest of the Ancients was the focus, and it was in front of him that Spock halted. For a long moment they looked at each other in silence, then slowly Spock knelt, and from the Ancients came a sound - not singing, not murmuring, not words. A sound.

The eyes of the Ancient were as clear as a winter's morning. He extended his open hand to Spock, and the Vulcan lifted his hand to meet it. In the moment that their two palms met something happened, something unexplainable, impalpable... a sensation only. At that moment the main computer ceased to function, and all the signal lights went out.

A mass of energy moved, surmounted the barriers that isolated the heart of the Centre, and slid towards the newly-created, opposing energy. As they met the entire Centre shook. The barrier of minds held.

The invading force became liquid fire, a vicious mass that they could see on the screen advancing, burning and destroying. But the defensive barrier opened and shut, struck and retired with extreme mobility and effect. It was a living intelligence whose capacity for battle did not come from contemplation, but from a heredity of struggle, abandoned but not forgotten.

Sim'sai's aide had joined them, and he too had eyes clear as a morning in winter. "Now you understand why we had need of a Master of Gol, Admiral Kirk. The Ancients did not know how to use their power in battle."

Kirk nodded. The other smiled. "Yes, I am also an Ancient, even if I am not yet ready to aspire to a place among the Elect. We do not want a vendetta, Admiral. Do not forget that it was Mr. Spock who effectively assessed our situation. We would not have had his help if we had sought revenge."

Flashes of light came from the screen. A part of the invading force was breaking up. The same luminous wave that had broken on the body of Timaya swept into the room. A wave of heat struck them. A tongue of fire engulfed the shoulders of the Vulcan, who remained motionless, his gaze fixed.

The invading energy was breaking up, but the barrier of minds was trembling, as if about to collapse, and everyone felt fear. The fear was a disturbing element, an unwanted one. Energy. Spock had closed his eyes, and Kirk moved.

Too late, Sim'sai's aide tried to hold him back, but Kirk was already beside Spock, extending his open hand towards the Vulcan.

"I can fight too."

Only three words, but in them was all that he could say, all that he could offer. He could not let Spock go on fighting alone.

Slowly Spock opened his eyes. He did not move his head, didn't look at him, but he raised his hand and Kirk placed his own against it. It was as if he had touched a living flame.

The mass of invading energy was condensed into a burning thunderbolt. It began to move, but Spock threw the minds into the heart of that furnace, and suddenly a gigantic sun burst in Kirk's mind. The sound became a wave of insupportable pain. He felt as if he was being broken into pieces and scattered far and wide. He fell into nothingness.

Silence. Only an infinite, immobile quantity of silence, and then the swift and precise ministrations of McCoy. There were lights and voices... He sat up.

"Bones!" he exclaimed.

"It worked, Jim. Don't ask me how, but it worked. That thing is destroyed, wiped out."

Kirk turned quickly. Spock was still kneeling in the same place. The marks of the battle were on his shoulders, and the palms of his hands were burned. Kirk inspected his friend - apart from that he was in one piece.

"You had a lucky escape, Admiral." It was the Ancient who was Sim'sai's aide. "The power of the minds could have burned you."

"You mean I've been in actual contact with the Ancients?"

"No, of course not. Mr. Spock acted as a filter. He took energy from you, but returned it a second before penetrating the force so as not to run the risk that if he failed you would be unprotected."

Kirk rose, pushing McCoy's arm aside. "Bones! Spock is..."

"No, Jim. His heart is beating, but that's all I can say for now."

The sun of Caryl'A was blood-red, a tired sun. For three days Jim Kirk watched it rising then setting from the window of the medical section of the Centre. For three days the motionless figure of the Vulcan showed no sign of life. Only the instrument dials showed that the fight still continued in the depths of his mind, the fight that had allowed the Ancients to live again.

Mr. Nagger was arranging the treaty between the Carillians and the Ancients, but the pact had been respected, and the Enterprise had returned to orbit.

Three days. Kirk approached the bed. There was no sign to tell him that the worst was over, yet he sensed that it was. He touched the Vulcan's still face with his fingertips. He remembered how much the violet eyes had been able to see, and recognised the emotion in the mind that now touched his.

"Tomorrow we'll be back on board," he murmured. "Home again, T'hy'la."

McCoy appeared on the threshold. The night was slipping into a new dawn, and the purple light was stealing though the window, banishing the shadows.

Spock was lying quietly on the bed, his eyes open. The dials were returning to normal.

McCoy began to speak, but the Vulcan put a finger to his lips. On the chair by the window Jim Kirk had finally fallen asleep.

McCoy nodded, gave a slight smile, and let the door close.

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LAST RITES by Barry Maxwell

Kirk had run from the obelisk to the lodge. Now he stood before her supine body. Rigidly controlling his facial muscles he knelt beside her, cradling her torso in his arms. Her eyes flickered open.

"Kirok. It is true... You are safe."

"And so are your people, Miramanee."

"I knew you would save them, my chief... When I am better we will be as we were..." Her voice faded slightly.

"If... if that is what you want," he replied softly.
"We will live long and happily. I will..." He felt her body stiffen as another spasm of pain shot through her. "... bear you many strong sons. And love you always."

His tongue felt dry and swollen. "And I will love you." He bent his head forward and kissed her gently.

"Each kiss is like... the... first..." Her voice faded again. The supple body became rigid, the beautiful face contorted by pain. Then her breath left her in a long sigh, and she relaxed and went limp.

Kirk knelt, cradling her gently, unaware of the passing time. Then, carefully lowering her onto the bed of furs, he rose.

"I love you... my wife," he whispered huskily. Turning, he walked slowly to the door. Lifting the flap he stepped out into the bright sunlight.

McCoy and Spock stood to his left, a respectful distance from the lodge entrance. Kirk lifted his grief-lined face to them briefly before turning to the old chief, who stood to his right.

"It is finished."

The old man nodded and raised his staff. Seeing the movement, the women close to the lodge started wailing the death-chant, and the cry was taken up by the other women of the camp.

Two young Naivi - unmarried girls - stepped towards the doorway. Kirk placed himself between them and the flap, failing to recognise them as Miramanee's handmaidens.

The old man spoke softly. "Kirok. She must be made ready."

Kirk gazed at him with unseeing eyes, nodded, and slowly strode past the two girls. "Take care of... of her," he said, careful not to use her name, which would be a sign of disrespect, before passing round the corner of the lodge.

McCoy stepped forward, intending to follow his Captain. He was halted by a strong hand grasping his arm. He swung to face Spock.

"No, Doctor. He must be left alone," the Vulcan said.

McCoy's eyes flashed. "Alone? Spock, don't you realise what's happened? Two years ago it was Edith Keeler, but now this... the woman he married..."

"Doctor," Spock interrupted sharply, guiding McCoy away from the tent in the opposite direction to Kirk, "I am fully conversant with this situation. What you have failed to take into account is that the Captain has lived with these people for two months. He has accepted their lifestyle, and must now abide by their customs, which are, I believe, that he should be alone at this time."

McCoy opened his mouth to say something, but Spock raised his hand in a signal for silence.

"Doctor, for now there is nothing we can do. However, should Jim need our help in the near future, I am sure he will come to one of us."

McCoy nodded slowly. "Yes... yes, I can understand." He looked back at the lodge, then at the Vulcan. "I'm sorry, Spock. I shouldn't have blown up like that. It's just that..."

"Apologies are not necessary, Doctor. It is only natural to feel the suffering of one held dear."

McCoy looked sharply at the First Officer, but held his tongue.

Kirk did not return to the lodge for two hours. During this time his wife's body was washed and dressed in clean clothes. Her medicine-beads were placed about her neck, and she was bound in a sitting position, with legs crossed. After her robes were placed about her shoulders she was covered by blankets, which were bound about her.

Leaving the lodge after witnessing this last process, Kirk walked to where he had been preparing two horses. One, a magnificent bay stallion, stood with a simple hackamore rein arrangement about its head and a solitary medicine-blanket on its powerful back. The other horse, a smaller dun gelding, was Miramanee's favourite mount. Leading the dun to the entrance of the lodge, he watched in silence as the maidens placed her body on the simple wicker seat strapped to the dun's back.

Mounting the bay, Kirk led the other horse from the camp. Riding past his friends without a word, he set off for the hills north of the camp at a brisk trot.

The sun was dipping towards the horizon by the time Kirk reached the hills. Slowing his pace, he selected a route up into the rocky folds. At first the going was easy, but the higher he climbed the less distinct was the narrow path he rode alone. Finally he was forced to dismount. Leaving the bay tethered to a small, squat tree, Kirk continued his climb, leading the gelding.

Arriving at a small plateau high above the plains, Kirk paused for breath. Across the flat surface of rock, a cliff rose up sheer and impassable to the peak of the hill. Almost level with Kirk's position was a tiny crack in the otherwise smooth rock face.

Rising from the rounded boulder he had been sitting on, Kirk made his way to the crack, which proved to be slightly wider than a man. Stopping the horse he removed Miramanee from the wicker supports and carried her body into the cave.

Gently placing her on the floor he unwrapped the blankets from her body and spread them on a small shelf at the back of the cave. Lifting the rigid form of his wife, Kirk sat her on the blankets so that she faced the East, and her spirit would be guided to the afterlife by the rising sun. For a moment he stood before her, remembering the happiness he had found with her. His hand strayed to the hilt of the knife the old chief had given to him, and which lay sheathed at his right hip. Then another vision entered his mind. One of a great silver vessel, and the faces of two men he held very dear. The hand fell from the knife.

He turned and walked slowly from the cave. Pulling the wicker frame from the dun's back, he led the animal into the cave. Drawing the knife, he followed the Indian tradition of cutting the horse's throat so that the dead would have some form of transport in the life to come. As the animal tumbled lifeless to the floor, Kirk strode swiftly from the cave, and set about piling rocks before the entrance.

It was well after dark by the time Kirk returned to the camp. Leaving his horse in the care of a young tuivitsi - an inexperienced warrior - he made his way to the old chief's lodge.

McCoy had spent most of his time since Kirk's departure pacing the camp or nervously striding the length of the lodge he and Spock had been given while they stayed on the planet.

"Damnit! We should never have let him go off like that. I should never have let him go! God knows what he might do in that emotional state."

Spock rose from where he had been seated on some furs. "Doctor, you said of me not so long ago that self-recrimination was not a healthy activity. Might I now say the same to you. You know full well how headstrong the Captain is. He would have performed his duty to his wife no matter what protests you might have put to him."

McCoy glared at Spock. "Don't start with your cool Vulcan idealism now. For all we know, Jim could have been thrown by that monster of a horse, and might even be lying out there injured... or dead."

"Doctor, I have no reason to doubt the Captain's equestrian skills, and we must understand that a task such as the one he is performing will take time."

"Time? Time? Spock, he's been gone for over four hours! At least call the ship and have them sweep the surface with the sensors!" McCoy blazed.

Spock was about to reply when a quiet voice cut in from the direction of the door flap.

"It is so reassuring to know you have friends who care, even if you do have to keep pulling them off each others throats every five minutes."

Both Spock and McCoy swung to face the owner of the voice.

Leaning against one of the uprights of the door frame, arms folded across his chest, Kirk eyed his friends with a bemused expression.

Spock cleared his throat. "I believe the doctor was just expressing his concern over the possible loss of a fine Starfleet officer, Captain."

Kirk's eyebrows rose slightly, and he moved into the room. Gone were the Indian vest and leggings - instead he wore the uniform of a Starfleet Captain.

"Oh really? Do you wish to refute that, Bones?"

For once the doctor was left almost speechless. "I... er... no, no, not at all, Jim. Mr. Spock stated the case quite adequately." For some reason he could not meet Kirk's steady gaze.

"I see. Well, gentlemen, I suggest that if you've no business here, we return to the ship and start doing what Starfleet pay us for."

Receiving no reply, he flicked open the communicator he held in his right hand. In doing so he turned away from the two men before him, and glanced about the lodge. It was so like the one he and...

Sorrow cast deep lines across the handsome face. Biting the inside of his lower lip he spoke into the communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise. Three to beam up."

All three remained silent. Then the transporter effect caught them and they faded from the lodge. As they did so, Kirk saw again the round face, deep black eyes and high cheek bones. Four words echoed through his mind.

//And love you always.//

Then he was gone.

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THE LAST COMMAND by Ann Preece

The persistent buzzing of the intercom shattered the peace and quiet of Kirk's quarters.

"Bridge to Captain Kirk."

Sighing, Kirk looked up from the mound of paperwork which swamped his desk and, leaning over, flicked a switch. The familiar features of his Communications officer filled the viewscreen.

"What is it this time, Lieutenant?" he asked, a note of resignation in his voice. It was little wonder he was unable to keep up with his reports when he was continually subjected to such interruptions.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir," Uhura apologised, "but I have a priority message from Commodore Conway at Starbase 7. On visual now, Captain."

The scene of the viewscreen changed from the Bridge of the Enterprise to Conway's office at the Starbase. The Commodore, a pleasant-faced man of medium build, sat behind his desk, smiling benignly; yet for all that Kirk sensed a vague uneasiness in Conway's manner, as though the Commodore did not welcome the task that awaited him.

Pushing his chair back a little, Kirk broke the silence. "What can we do for you, Commodore?" he asked, wondering what Starfleet Command had in store for them on this occasion.

Making no attempt at preamble, the Commodore came straight to the point, clearing his throat somewhat selfconsciously before he said, "Your present mission is, I believe, a purely routine one - is that correct?"

"Yes," Kirk replied, puzzled, "but I really don't see what that has to do with..." He paused, as Conway held up his hand for silence.

"Captain... I am authorised to instruct you to proceed, without further delay, to Starbase 7."

"Am I allowed to know why?" Kirk asked.

"The Federation is about to launch its new Starship - the U.S.S. Excelsior. You have heard of it?"

Kirk nodded briefly. "Yes - but I still fail to see what that has to do with the Enterprise."

"Starfleet has expressed a wish that the new Captain of the Excelsior should be none other than your First Officer, Commander Spock. He is, after all, long overdue for a command of his own."

Kirk sat, totally stunned, after Conway had dropped his little bombshell. He had expected anything - anything but this. To be suddenly told, without any warning whatsoever, that he was to lose his First Officer - and his best friend... Kirk found that he had to clasp his hands together to keep them from trembling; he opened his mouth to speak, but there was a tightness in his throat which made speech impossible. Words failed him, and the silence stretched on interminably.

At last Conway spoke. "Captain - are you all right?"

Kirk lifted dull eyes to the viewscreen. "Why?" he managed to ask, his voice flat and toneless.

"Come now, Captain. Surely you don't need me to answer that question for you."

"But Spock has no wish to command. I know that, as First Officer and my second-in-command, he has taken over for me when the occasion has warrented it; but if you consult your records you will see that he has refused the Captaincy time and time again, preferring to concentrate on his scientific duties."

"Captain, there comes a time in every officer's life when he longs for his

own command. You yourself know that to be true. You can't seriously expect me to believe that Commander Spock is the exception to the rule."

"You don't know Spock - I do."

"I do know that Commander Spock is a competent, efficient officer, who has proved himself as suitable for command on numerous occasions. I am certain that you would be the first to admit that. As First Officer aboard the Enterprise he has served you loyally and well over the past years; he has won the respect and admiration of all who have worked with him; and I know that Captain Pike also thought very highly of him. Add to that the fact that his promotion is somewhat belated - surely you can see that it is time that he had a ship of his own. I cannot believe that you are the kind of person who would stand in the way of a fellow officer's advancement."

"I ask again - why?"

Conway sighed. This was going to be more difficult than even he had imagined, yet he had known, when he had taken on the task, that it would not be an easy matter to split up the most efficient Captain and First Officer team in Starfleet. He made another attempt to convince Kirk that Starfleet's decision to promote his First Officer was a necessary one.

"Starfleet has bestowed a very great honour on Commander Spock, Captain. The Excelsior is a new ship - she needs a new Captain. You should be pleased and flattered that the choice has fallen on your own First Officer."

"But Spock is needed here, on the Enterprise," Kirk persisted, determined not to give in without a fight.

"We also need him, Captain," the Commodore answered, somewhat impatiently.

"Not as much as I need him," Kirk murmured, almost inaudibly.

"Did you say something, Captain?" Conway asked.

Wearily, Kirk shook his head, not trusting himself to speak. How could he explain to this desk-bound bureaucrat just what it would mean to him to lose his best friend? Spock had always been there to provide help and support; he had come to mean so much to him. And now... Kirk felt as though the bottom had fallen out of his world. In a matter of minutes his life had been changed, turned upside down. He began to realise what Spock's transfer would mean, not only to the ship but to himself personally; and he didn't like what he saw.

"Has Spock been informed of this 'honour'?" Kirk asked, allowing a note of sarcasm to creep into his voice.

Conway had the grace to look uncomfortable. "Er... no... not yet. We thought it would be better if..."

"... if I told him," Kirk finished for him. "I might have known." Another case of passing the buck. Starfleet Command was taking the easy way out, as usual.

"Well, the news is sure to come as rather a shock, and we felt that it would be easier for Commander Spock if he was informed of his transfer by his Captain, rather than by a complete stranger. I know I would. Don't you agree, Captain?"

Kirk remained silent, refusing to be drawn. Eventually he said, "Will that be all, Commodore, or was there anything else?"

"No, Captain. Your new First Officer will be posted when you return to Starbase 7, as he is not yet available. It just remains for me to thank you for your cooperation and..."

"Thank you, Commodore," replied Kirk, making no attempt to disguise the note of bitterness in his voice as he leaned over and snapped off the viewer.

For long moments Kirk stared at the now darkened viewscreen, too numb with shock to move, his mind refusing to accept the implications of Conway's

news. He felt stunned, almost paralysed with disbelief. This couldn't be true - it couldn't be happening. Surely this was all a dream from which he would soon awaken?

Yet he knew that eventually he would have to face the truth, however distressing it was. Spock would be transferred, and there was nothing he could do to prevent it. Never, in all his years in Starfleet, had he felt so helpless, so totally unprepared for what was to come.

How was he going to break this unwelcome news to Spock? As far as he could see, there was no easy way. Restlessly he began to pace up and down his cabin, his mind going round and round in circles, knowing that eventually he would have to send for Spock - that the painful moment could not be postponed indefinitely.

Glancing at the chronometer he realised with a sinking feeling in his stomach that Spock's duty period would come to an end in five minutes. Taking a grip on his teeming emotions, Kirk activated the viewer on his desk.

"Kirk to Bridge."

The reply was immediate. "Spock here, Captain." The Vulcan's familiar features appeared on the viewscreen.

Struggling to keep his voice steady, Kirk spoke quietly, hesitantly. "Mr. Spock... when you come off duty I'd like a word with you in my quarters, please."

"Certainly, Captain; but if you recall our conversation of this morning, we had already arranged to meet for a game of chess later this evening. Had you forgotten?"

Spock glanced sharply at his Captain - Kirk seemed uneasy, strained, as though something was troubling him. Always susceptible to atmosphere, Spock was aware that something was very wrong.

Shaken by Spock's perception, Kirk stammered, "What? Oh...yes... I had forgotten. I've had a lot on my mind - all this paper work... you know how it is."

"Captain - is everything all right?" Spock asked, puzzled.

"Yes, Spock - everything's fine," Kirk lied, trying hard to keep his expression unreadable. "Five minutes, okay?"

"As you wish, sir. Spock out."

Wearily, Kirk dropped his head onto his arms. The first part of the ordeal was over - the worst was to come.

Punctually, five minutes later, Kirk's door buzzer sounded. Taking a deep breath he called, "Come!"

The door swished open to reveal the familiar, blue-clad figure of his First Officer.

"Come in, Spock... please, sit down," Kirk said, indicating the chair opposite him.

Spock sat, perplexed by Kirk's attitude. Something in his friend's manner told him that all was not as it should be, but he refrained from comment, preferring to let Kirk take the lead.

Once again, Kirk resumed his restless pacing, unable to meet his First Officer's questioning gaze.

"I don't know how to tell you this..." he began, somewhat hesitantly, and paused, fighting for control as the hateful words threatened to choke him. He swallowed hard, trying to force away the lump which had formed in his throat.

"Sorry, Spock. I knew this wasn't going to be easy, but I'm not making a very good job of it..."

"Jim... what is it you wish to tell me? Surely it cannot be so difficult..."

Oh, if only you knew, Kirk thought. Aloud, he said, "Starfleet Command has... requested... me to tell you that... you are to be transferred from the Enterprise. A new command awaits you at Starbase 7 - the U.S.S. Excelsior..." He fell silent, too choked to continue.

At the news, Spock had visibly paled. This was the last thing he had been expecting when he had accepted Kirk's summons. Struggling for control, he gripped the edge of Kirk's desk so hard that his knuckled turned white. Had he been entirely Human he would have reached for a stiff drink; but instead he remained silent until he could trust himself to speak.

"There must be some mistake." The words were merely a whisper.

"No... no mistake - I only wish there were." Kirk's tone was bitter.

"But I have no wish to command - you know that."

"I know - but Starfleet doesn't, although I've done my best to convince them. I tried, Spock... believe me, I tried... but they won't listen. Conway kept telling me what an honour it would be, that we should be proud..."

"It is an honour I can do without." Spock struggled to find the right words, to say what he really felt. "I... have no wish to leave the Enterprise. I am happy here... this is my home. For the first time in my life I have found somewhere I belong. My... friends are here; you... are here..." He paused, fighting for control lest he break down completely before continuing slowly, "I do not wish to lose that - to exchange all this for an empty existence on board the Excelsior. I am unsuited for command. The Captaincy would mean one thing only: loneliness. And I have no desire to revert to the loneliness I once knew. Jim... please... isn't there anything you can do?"

Dark, anxious eyes turned to Kirk, silently entreating his help, and this was the one occasion when Kirk was powerless to assist, the one occasion when he was to fail the friend who meant so much to him.

Dropping to his knees in front of the Vulcan, Kirk silently took Spock's hand between his own.

"Oh Spock - how I wish there was something I could do - something I could say - to help you. But they won't listen - they don't want to listen. They've got it into their heads that you should be promoted, and nothing I do or say can persuade them to change their minds. I... never thought the day would come when I would be unable to help you..." He fell silent, unable to go on.

For a long moment they remained silent, saying with their eyes that which they were unable to say with words. Then, pulling himself together, Spock rose to his feet.

"Have you altered course for Starbase 7 yet?" he asked.

Kirk shook his head. "No, not yet. I wanted to break the news to you first."

"I thank you for that - but as there is no further need for delay, perhaps you could instruct Mr. Sulu to..."

Abruptly Spock turned and moved stiffly to the door, his Vulcan mask firmly in place once more. Only Kirk knew of the inner turmoil which Spock was trying so desperately hard to conceal.

"Spock?"

The Vulcan hesitated in the doorway.

"Spock... I'm sorry... so very sorry..."

The whispered words came back, so quietly that Kirk wondered, at first, if he had imagined them.

"Not as sorry as I, Jim."

The door closed behind him, and Kirk was left alone.

News of Spock's promotion spread rapidly throughout the ship, and was greeted with stunned disbelief, particularly by the Bridge crew, who had worked closely with the Vulcan for so long, and who had come to respect and admire him.

An atmosphere of gloom settled over the Enterprise. Spock withdrew into himself, presenting only his Vulcan half to the outside world. Kirk became irritable, snapping at everyone in sight. And McCoy - well, if anyone had told him that he would regret Spock's leaving, he would have laughed; but he wasn't laughing. He did mind - more than he was prepared to admit.

The days passed quickly - too quickly for the three friends who were soon to be parted. They tried to spend as much time together as pressure of work would allow - but it wasn't enough. With each passing hour Starbase 7 came inexorably nearer, and with it the time of parting and farewell.

Secretly, Kirk hoped that they would be able to take shore leave together before Spock joined his new ship, but his hopes were dashed when, two days after being notified of Spock's promotion, Kirk received another communique from Commodore Conway : although shore leave facilities would be provided for the crew of the Enterprise, Spock was ordered to report to the Commodore for briefing before taking immediate command of the Excelsior. Even the fates, it seemed, were against them.

Four days later the Enterprise arrived at Starbase 7. Another fifteen minutes - and then Spock would be gone. Kirk rose stiffly from the command chair.

"Mr. Sulu, you have the con. I'll be in the transporter room."

As Kirk passed the Communications console, something in Uhura's expression made him stop for a moment. Understanding her feelings, he gently squeezed her shoulder.

Uhura turned, lifting dark eyes glistening with unshed tears to her Captain's face.

"I'm sorry, sir... I didn't mean to... It's just that..." She fell silent, vainly struggling to control her emotions.

Kirk spoke soothingly. "It's all right, Uhura - I know. I... we're... all going to miss him. There's no need to be ashamed to show your feelings."

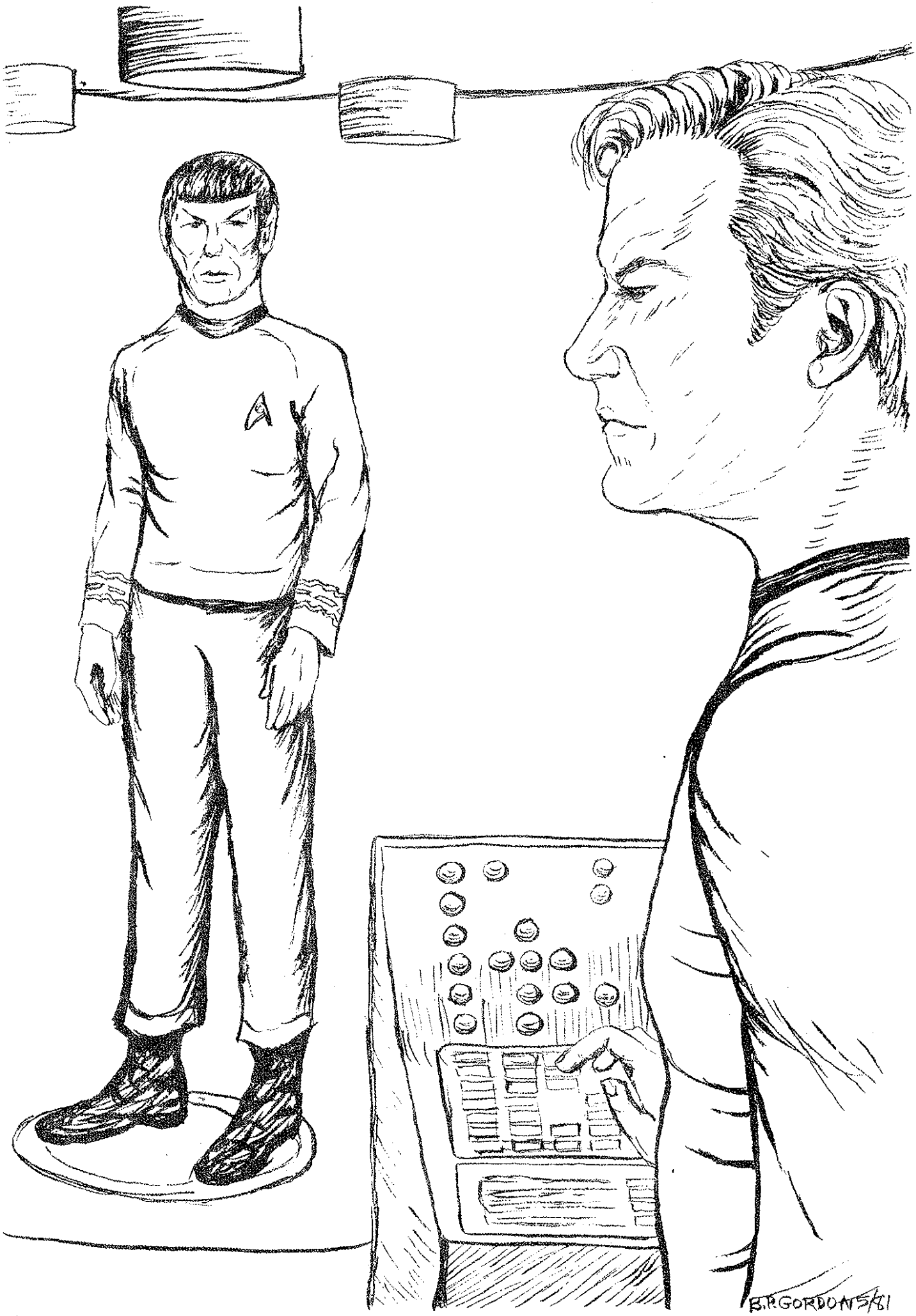
I feel the same way, he thought, but unlike you, I've got to hide my feelings. It wouldn't do for the Captain of the Enterprise to make a complete fool of himself.

Turning away, he headed towards the turbolift. There were just ten minutes left - he had no intention of wasting another minute.

The Captain met his former First Officer outside the transporter room. Gone was the familiar blue shirt which Spock had worn with such pride, and in its place - the gold of command. For an instant their eyes met and held in a silent message of understanding before they entered the transporter room together... for the last time.

The room was empty. Scotty, who would normally have been on duty, had tactfully left the two friends alone to say their goodbyes.

Spock was hesitant, uncertain. There was so much he wanted to say, but now the time had come he was unable to find the words. Kirk had come to mean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so much to him that it was impossible for hi m to say the necessary words of farewell: they sounded so final.

"Jim, I..." He paused. What to do? What to say?

Impulsively, he moved forward to embrace Kirk - somehow, words were unnecessary, after all.

"Jim... you - and McCoy - the two people I could call 'friend'... you will always be in my thoughts."

Abruptly he turned away and mounted the transporter platform.

Voice breaking, Kirk could only say, "Farewell... my Vulcan friend..." before engaging the control levers.

His last image of Spock was that of a very lost and lonely man standing on the transporter platform, his hand raised in the traditional Vulcan salute, his final words seeming to reverberate around the empty chamber - "Live long and prosper."

Kirk stood for a long time, silently staring at the now empty platform, as though by concentrating hard he could will Spock to reappear. Then, dashing his hand across his too-moist eyes, he squared his shoulders and with a determined step he left the transporter room. It was an empty facade, however - he knew he couldn't fool himself.

It was late at night, ship's time, as Kirk made his way slowly to the Observation Deck. Since the Enterprise had left Starbase 7, well over a month ago, Kirk had spent more and more of his free time here, in his favourite haunt. At this hour the deck was usually deserted, even more so over the last few weeks as the crew had come to respect his wish - his need - for isolation. Kirk revelled in the quietness, deriving a small measure of comfort from the peace and solitude which encompassed him.

It was so restful; here, he could be alone - alone with his thoughts, his memories. As he gazed out on the familiar scene before him, he allowed his mind to drift back over the years, remembering adventures shared, dangers faced - and through it all, from the very beginning, Spock had always been there, sharing the good times, and providing help and support through the bad times.

Now, more than ever, Kirk felt the need for the Vulcan's calm presence, his quiet understanding. But he knew that was merely 'wishful thinking' on his part - that could not be. He would have to come to terms with the fact that Spock had gone - that he wouldn't be returning.

Now, more than ever, he wanted - needed - to talk to someone. There was only one other person he could confide in : McCoy. And Kirk realised, with a feeling of guilt, that he had seen little of the doctor over the past weeks. The shock of Spock's transfer had made him forget that there was still someone on board who was probably feeling just as lost and lonely as himself.

As if on cue, he heard a quiet footstep behind him. A reassuring hand was laid on his shoulder, and a soft voice said, "Hi! Remember me? I was beginning to think I'd lost two friends instead of one."

Kirk turned to meet the questioning gaze of Leonard McCoy. "Bones... I'm sorry. I haven't been much company lately, have I?"

"That's understandable, in the circumstances. You've had a lot on your mind, and that's one reason why I've left you alone until now - to give you time to work things out for yourself. However, I don't know about you, Jim, but I'm growing just a little tired of my own company, and I thought perhaps you'd like to talk. I guessed I'd find you here."

Kirk nodded. "It's the one place where I feel most at peace. I find the silence strangely comforting, and it seems to help when I can't sleep."

McCoy looked concerned. "You know, Jim, you'll have to snap out of this - brooding isn't going to help matters, and I know Spock wouldn't want to see you like this. You know that too, don't you?"

"Yes," Kirk whispered. "But Bones... I miss him..."

"Yeah, I understand how you feel," McCoy replied, somewhat gruffly. "I miss him too - only when you see him don't tell him I said so! He'd never let me live it down."

"I don't think you need worry about that, Bones. The chances of us running into Spock in this part of the galaxy are very remote indeed," Kirk answered with a wry grin.

It wasn't the reply McCoy was expecting, but at least he'd succeeded in bringing a smile to Kirk's face, however small.

"There's an unopened bottle of Saurian brandy in my quarters, which I've been saving for a special occasion. This isn't quite what I had in mind, but I think we could both do with a drink. What do you say? And if you feel you want to talk..."

"Thanks, Bones, I'd... like that very much."

"Then what are we standing here for? Let's go."

Resolutely, the two men headed for the turbolift, and the Observation Deck was deserted once more.

They talked until well into the 'night', reminiscing about the 'good old days', reliving memories of happier times - of jokes shared, problems solved. This was what Kirk had missed most of all over the past month, not having someone to talk to - or not to talk, as the case might be; someone with whom even the silences were companionable. With McCoy he could be himself, say what he felt, reveal his innermost thoughts and fears: there was no need for pretence.

Inevitably, the conversation turned to Spock.

"He said he'd always be at my side, whenever I needed him. Loyal, dependable, solid as a rock. My right hand. And now he's gone. If I knew he was happy - if I knew that this was what he really wanted - then I think I could resign myself to the inevitable. But...

Do you know something, Bones? When he stepped onto that platform and I threw the controls, a part of me went with him; and no matter how hard I try, I can't forget the sight of him standing there, looking so lost, so... alone. And I understood how he felt... because I was feeling the same way.

I always tried to tell myself this wouldn't happen - I wouldn't <u>let</u> it happen. Yet, deep down, I always felt that there was a possibility <u>that</u> one day Spock would be given a command of his own - that it was the next 'logical' step.

But I can't pretend that it doesn't hurt, Bones, because it does - it hurts like hell, and these past weeks haven't made it any easier. We shared a very special friendship... we had something so rare... so precious... something that happens only once in a lifetime. And now..." He fell silent, embarrassed to find that he was close to tears.

McCoy spoke softly. "Jim, your friendship with Spock has survived tougher tests than this - you'll come through, in the end. Somehow I can't believe that we've seen the last of him. Don't ask me how I know - it's just a feeling I have. Call it intuition, if you like."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes - I do. Spock will be back, you mark my words. Why, it just isn't possible that we've seen the last of our 'walking computer'," McCoy replied,

laughing, and then he became more serious as he said, "But - and I don't want you to think that I'm preaching - you've got to take a grip on yourself. You can't go on like this indefinitely. I know it's difficult, but remember, it's twice as hard for Spock. At least you are on familiar ground, you have friends who care about you, while he's... well, I think you know what I mean."

Kirk was silent for a long time, lost in thought, carefully considering what McCoy had said. Finally, he said, "You're right, of course. And Bones - I'm sorry. I can't have been very easy to live with over this past month."

"Well, shall we say I've seen you in better moods," replied McCoy, grinning, then he sobered as he noticed Kirk trying to stifle a yawn. He glanced at the chronometer. "I think we've done enough talking for one night, don't you? I propose we try and get some sleep - you look as though you need it."

"You're not looking so bright yourself," was Kirk's quick rejoinder, "but yes - I do feel tired." He stood up and moved to the door. "Thanks, Bones - for everything."

"What did I do?"

"You were here when I needed to talk - you listened - and you understood. I... think everything's going to be all right now."

"That's what friends are for," McCoy repied softly as the door closed behind the figure of his Captain.

Kirk glanced up from the report he was signing, and as McCoy walked ponderously over to the command chair he couldn't quite stop the smile which tugged at the corners of his mouth as he took in the doctor's strained face and bleary eyes.

" 'Morning, Bones," he said, grinning.

" 'Morning, Jim," McCoy replied, and winced as a stab of pain shot through his head. "Ouch - that hurts!" He put out a none-too-steady hand and gripped the back of the command chair.

"Hangover?" Kirk asked, nodding sympathetically.

"What d'ya mean - hangover?" McCoy replied with a poor pretence at indignation. "Who said anything about a hangover? If you really must know, I have a simple headache, that's all - so don't try making anything out of it, okay?"

"Bones, I wouldn't dream..."

"Well, that's as maybe, but I know you. Anyway, enough about me. How do you feel? I must say, you look fine to me."

"I am. Last night, for the first time in weeks, I was able to sleep. For the first time, I feel... at peace with myself - thanks to your help."

"It's good to have you back, Jim."

"It's good to be back. I never thought..." Kirk's voice trailed off. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, he stiffened; he could feel the blood draining from his face; and his hands were trembling so much that he had to grip the arms of his chair to control their shaking.

"Jim! What is it? Are You in pain? For pity's sake, what's wrong?" McCoy exclaimed, alarmed by the Captain's pallor.

After a long moment, Kirk finally found his voice. "It... it's Spock. For a second, I felt... him trying to contact me, but... Bones - something's wrong... He's in danger..."

"Captain!" It was Uhura's voice, urgent, insisting.

"Yes, Uhura - what is it?"

"Sir - I'm receiving a distress call from an unknown vessel in Sector M193." Feverishly she manipulated controls, pressed switches. "Relaying it now, sir."

The silence on the Bridge was broken by the crackle of static. They heard a man's voice, caught fragments of a message, and then it cleared long enough for them to hear the chilling words:

"... If anyone can hear us... we need your help... This is First Officer Delano of the U.S.S. Excelsior..."

Kirk froze - Spock's ship! The unknown voice continued.

"... we have been attacked... Klingons... numerous casualties... extensive damage to..." The voice faded as Uhura struggled vainly with the controls. "I repeat... we need help... please... if anyone can hear us..."

As the words faded, the silence on the Bridge remained unbroken. No-one moved, no-one spoke - they hardly dared to breathe. Eventually Uhura turned to Kirk.

"They're gone, sir. I can't raise them on any frequency."

Kirk hardly heard her - he was too numb with shock; his mind was in a turmoil as he kept imagining what could have happened to Spock.

As if understanding what Kirk was thinking, McCoy laid a comforting hand on his arm. "Jim, try not to worry. Spock's been in tighter corners than this. He'll be all right."

Kirk's control suddenly snapped. "Will he, Bones? We don't know that, do we? For all we know he could be injured - dying ... Anything might have happened. And why was it the First Officer who relayed the distress call? Why not Spock? Where was he...?"

"I can't answer that question any more than you can, Jim," McCoy replied, struggling to keep his voice calm and even.

"But Bones - what if...?"

"JIM! Stop it! Stop torturing yourself. There could be any number of reasons why Spock didn't relay that message. Until we're able to find out for ourselves, don't start jumping to conclusions and imagining the worst. It won't help Spock, and it certainly won't help you. Take a grip on yourself!"

McCoy's words were like a douche of cold water, but they had the desired effect. Kirk made a visible effort to control his teeming emotions, and springing into action, issued orders at breakneck speed.

"Scotty, get down to Engineering. I don't care what it takes, but push this ship as hard as she'll go - understand?"

"Aye, sir." Scotty left at a run.

"Mr. Sulu - ahead warp factor 7. Dr. McCoy - have a medical team standing by. They're going to need all the help we can give."

The Enterprise sped on towards Sector M193, and with each passing minute Kirk prayed that they wouldn't arrive too late - that their errand of mercy wouldn't end in tragedy.

The quadrant of space in which the Excelsior had been attacked was perilously close to the Federation/Klingon border, so it was little wonder that the Federation Starship had met with trouble.

Leaving Scotty in temporary command, Kirk and the Enterprise contingent beamed over to the stricken ship. Materialising on the Bridge of the Excelsior, Kirk moved forward, taking in the scene at a glance - the smoke-filled atmosphere; the damaged controls; and all around them injured crewmen were helping their colleagues who were more badly hurt and taking them to

Sickbay which, miraculously, had escaped the worst of the onslaught. Looking at what was left of the communications console, Kirk wondered at the miracle which had enabled the First Officer to relay his distress call.

A tall man, obviously the First Officer, his uniform torn and smoke-stained, extricated himself from the general melee and moved forward, an expression of relief on his face.

Kirk spoke quickly, his anxiety for Spock growing with each passing minute, for a cursory glance had confirmed his worst fears - his friend was nowhere in sight.

"I am Captain James Kirk of the U.S.S. Enterprise. We received your distress call."

"Captain! Thank goodness! We hardly dared hope that there would be another Federation ship close enough to pick up our call, let alone come to our aid. As you can see, matters are quite serious."

"What happened? Where is Captain Spock?" Kirk was forced to ask, although he dreaded hearing the answers. Yet he had to know - had to put an end to the terrible uncertainty.

"We were attacked - by Klingons."

"But what were you doing here in the first place?" Kirk asked. "So close to Klingon space - and in an area which is comparatively uncharted."

"Starfleet orders, Captain," Delano replied. "There have been several reports of pirate activity within this area, and Starfleet ordered us to investigate further. Captain Spock thought it was quite possible that the pirates, believed to be renegades from the Federation, were using the planet we are now orbiting as a base for their illegal activities. He also surmised that the Klingons were involved in some way." He surveyed the damaged Bridge. "I would say that this is sufficient evidence, wouldn't you? Particularly as we were lured here."

"Lured?" McCoy asked.

"Yes, by a distress call which appeared to emanate from the planet's surface. As life-form readings registered on our sensors, we had no way of knowing whether the call was genuine or not. Captain Spock and a landing party transported down to investigate - we have been unable to contact them since."

"And the Klingons?" Kirk asked.

"They appeared very soon after we lost contact with the landing party, seemingly from nowhere. Before we knew what was happening we were surrounded. It was an unprovoked attack - they didn't give us a chance. Although we returned their fire as best we could, we were greatly outnumbered."

"Didn't they contact you in any way?"

Delano nodded. "Once - and then only very briefly. We were ordered to surrender - or face the consequences."

"Which were?" Kirk prompted.

"If we didn't comply... the landing party would be killed."

The First Officer's words hung heavily on the air, and Kirk felt a chill run down his spine at the thought of what might already have happened to Spock and his men. He forced himself to listen as Delano continued his story.

"Soon after they delivered their ultimatum, the Klingons left. And that is what I can't understand. They could have destroyed us there and then. We had no defences, our screens were down, we were a sitting target. But they didn't."

"Perhaps they have something else in mind," McCoy replied. "Knowing the devious workings of the Klingon mind as well as we do, nothing would

surprise me."

Making up his mind, Kirk turned to McCoy. "Bones - get down to Sickbay. Do what you can..."

"And what do you propose to do?" McCoy demanded, though in his heart of hearts he already knew the answer to that question.

"I'm going down there."

"JIM! You can't! It could be a trap - you could be in danger."

"What do you suggest I do, DOCTOR? Leave Spock down there? For all we know he could be injured - perhaps dying... Either way he needs our help, particularly if he's a prisoner of the Klingons. You aren't proposing that I abandon him, are you?"

"Of course I'm not!" McCoy replied indignantly. "All I'm asking is that you consider the dangers..."

"I have considered the dangers, Bones, and that's why I must go. I can't stay here a moment longer not knowng for certain what's happened. Surely you can see that?"

McCoy nodded, but didn't speak. He knew that while Spock was in danger nothing he could say or do would persuade Kirk to change his mind.

"Jim - take care. And... I don't like to say this, but... be prepared for the worst. Spock may be..."

"Dead? No, Bones, I don't think so. Believe me, I would know if..." He fell silent.

McCoy's expression softened. "Yes, I guess you would," he replied quietly. He turned to leave, but Kirk halted him.

"Bones - when you've finished here, would you follow me down? I... we... might need your help."

"Sure, Jim - you know you can count on me." He slipped away.

Mr. Delano had remained silent during the last exchange. Now he ventured, "Captain Spock... He served with you aboard the Enterprise, didn't he?"

Kirk nodded. "He was my First Officer. He was - is - also my best friend. That's why I have to find out what's happened to him - and standing here won't give me the answers I need." He drew out his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Scott here, sir."

"Mr. Scott, have a Security team meet me on the planet's surface, and lock onto my coordinates. Beam me down when I give the signal. Kirk out."

"Captain - may I accompany you?"

"Thank you, Mr. Delano, but I think not. As First Officer and Captain Spock's second-in-command, your place is here - with his ship."

"Of course, sir - I understand."

"Scotty?"

"Ready when you are, sir."

"Good. Energise... now," Kirk ordered.

The transporter effect caught him and he shimmered, then faded from the Bridge of the Excelsior.

As Kirk materialised on the planet's surface, Security Chief Baillie moved forward to meet him.

"All quiet, Captain," he said. "So far we haven't been noticed."

"Where are they?" Kirk asked.

Baillie nodded to his left. "They've set up camp in a clearing beyond those trees, but I don't think they're planning on remaining here much longer. From what we've seen, they're beginning to pack up, and my guess is that they'll be leaving in the not-too-distant future."

"Hmmm. We'll have to see about that," Kirk muttered. "When they leave here it'll be aboard the Enterprise, with a one-way ticket to Starbase 7." He called softly to the Security team. "Set your phasers on heavy stun, and move in slowly. And remember - I don't want any heroics. No-one - I repeat, no-one - is to take any unnecessary risks." This last remark was directed at the younger members of the party. "Is that understood?"

There were murmurs of assent.

"Good. There are Federation people there, and I don't want to take the risk of their being injured. Let's go."

They moved forward slowly, creeping stealthily through the undergrowth towards their unsuspecting targets. They had almost reached the edge of the clearing when a soft shout from Baillie halted them in their tracks.

"Captain - look! Over there - it's the landing party from the Excelsior!"

Kirk's gaze followed Baillie's pointing finger.

From a roughly-constructed tent on the outskirts of the camp, six figures emerged and began to move very cautiously towards the centre of the camp. Although very dishevelled, Kirk was relieved to see that they appeared unhurt. His relief was short-lived, however - there was no sign of Spock.

The men from the Excelsior closed in on their captors, and the element of surprise in their attack worked well in their favour.

As a major scuffle broke out, Kirk called to his men. "Come on!"

They moved swiftly forward, throwing themselves into the midst of the fray, and providing the help which the party from the Excelsior needed so desperately.

The fight was over in no time at all, and in minutes the enemy had been surrounded and disarmed. Kirk moved forward to assist the Chief Medical Officer of the Excelsior as he picked himself up from the ground and dusted himself down.

"Thank you, Captain...?"

"Kirk. James Kirk, of the U.S.S. Enterprise."

"You arrived at a most opportune moment, Captain. I very much doubt that our attack would have proved as successful without your assistance."

"I'm only too pleased that we were able to help, Doctor...?"

"Maxwell."

"Dr. Maxwell - where is Captain Spock? I understood from your First Officer that he beamed down with you."

"That is correct, Captain, but..." He paused, obviously unsure how to continue.

"Go on," Kirk urged.

Maxwell took a deep breath before explaining, "As soon as we arrived on this planet we realised we'd walked into a trap - a well-armed reception committee was waiting for us. We were relieved of our phasers and communicators, and herded into that tent over there. We tried to escape... but the attempt proved unsuccessful. It was after our escape plan failed that... Captain Spock was taken away. We were forced to watch while..." He fell silent, his eyes clouded as he remembered what had happened, then he added hesitantly, "We... we haven't seen him since..."

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Kirk turned on his heel and walked purposefully towards the group of pirates, who were huddled together under Baillie's watchful eye.

"Where is Captain Spock?" he asked of the man closest to him, his voice dangerously low - a warning to all who knew him.

"I'm sure I don't know who you mean, Captain," the man sneered, making a vain attempt at bravado.

His control snapping, Kirk caught hold of Spock's captor by the shirt, almost lifting him bodily off the ground. "I repeat, where is Captain Spock?" His voice dropped almost to a whisper. "What have you done to him? Tell me - before I forget I'm a Starship Captain."

Terrified by the expression on Kirk's face, the man stammered, "He... he's over there... in that tent."

Satisfied that he'd been told the truth, Kirk turned to his Security Chief. "Baillie - take them out of my sight. Contact the ship and have Scotty beam you aboard."

"It'll be a pleasure, sir, but..."

"I'll follow as soon as I've located Captain Spock," Kirk said softly, answering Baillie's unspoken question.

"Very good, sir."

Kirk turned to the party from the Excelsior. "Gentlemen - if you would care to accompany them? My men will escort you back to your ship - I think your presence is needed there, Doctor."

Then, with his heart in his mouth, Kirk turned and ran towards the tent indicated.

Pulling back the flap, he entered cautiously, not knowing what to expect. He glanced round, his eyes searching the dimly-lit interior, and saw a figure strapped to a wooden stake in the centre of the tent.

Spock - naked from the waist up, his arms stretched painfully above his head - had been bound with leather straps at wrists, waist and ankles. His head was slumped onto his chest, and Kirk was unable to tell whether he was unconscious or asleep. He moved forward carefully, dropping to his knees beside the still figure of his friend.

"Spock...?"

Slowly, Spock raised his head. A gasp escaped Kirk's lips as he noted the terrible bruising on Spock's face, the swollen and bleeding lips, and the dark, pain-filled eyes that lifted to meet Kirk's anxious gaze.

"Jim..." he managed to stammer through cracked lips. "I... knew you'd come... I... tried to reach you with my mind, but... the distance between us was too great... and I was too weak..."

"You did reach me," Kirk answered as his fingers busily worked to loosen Spock's bonds. "I... felt your need - knew you were in trouble - seconds before the distress call reached us."

Very gently, he lowered the painfully stretched arms, and, as Spock began to slip sideways, he was caught and held in a firm, comforting grip. It was then that Kirk noticed for the first time the damage that had been wrought on Spock's back - he had been so badly beaten that his back was a mass of livid cuts and weals, and several of the lashes had also fallen on his arms and chest.

"Oh my god! Spock - why? Why did they do this?"

It was an effort to speak. "We... attempted to escape, but failed. It was felt that... one of us should be punished... as a warning to the others. As Captain...I... was chosen..."

The effort of talking was too much. Spock fell back, a violent bout of coughing racking his tortured body.

Kirk supported him until it was over, holding him close, smoothing back the damp hair from Spock's forehead, all the time murmuring softly, "It's all right, Spock... You're safe with me now... you'll soon be home..."

Spock struggled to speak. "Jim, I..."

"Ssh... don't try to talk... take it easy... that's it..." Kirk soothed as Spock began to relax. "McCoy will soon be here." I hope! Kirk prayed fervently.

As if in answer to his prayer, Kirk heard footsteps outside; the tent flap was pulled aside, and McCoy's welcome figure was framed in the opening. The doctor hesitated for a moment, peering round anxiously.

"Jim?"

"Over here," Kirk called softly, so as not to disturb Spock.

"Sorry I've been so long - I came as soon as I could," McCoy replied as he made his way over to his two friends.

His practised eye took in Spock's condition at a glance, but it was with a great effort that he suppressed the exclamation which rose to his lips when he saw the treatment Spock had received. Hurriedly he set to work with the scanner, working in silence for several minutes, before raising his eyes to Kirk's worried face.

"Relax, Jim - he'll be okay. But I can't do anything for him here. We must get him back to the ship. If you'll give me a hand to support him...?"

"That won't be necessary, Bones," Kirk replied as he gently lifted the Vulcan in his arms. "If you'd contact the ship?"

Spock roused himself sufficiently to protest. "Captain... I can walk. The pain is... bearable... and I am able to control it..."

Kirk grinned affectionately at him. "Shut up, CAPTAIN - I'm giving the orders now."

Too weak to argue, Spock settled back. Did Kirk imagine the almost inaudible sigh of contentment?

"That is as it should be," Spock murmured quietly as, with an order to Scotty to beam them up, they were returned to the safety of the Enterprise.

Four days later the Enterprise was en route for Starbase 7. Repairs to the Excelsior were well under way; the damage was not as extensive as had at first been feared, and a team of engineers under Scotty's experienced eye had worked around the clock to restore warp drive to the engines, while repair work was carried out to other sections of the ship less seriously affected by the Klingon attack. Thus, Kirk felt well able to leave the Excelsior in the capable hands of First Officer Delano, while the Enterprise returned to Starbase 7 with the pirates firmly ensconced in the brig. It was a great pity that the Excelsior's maiden voyage should have ended so disastrously, but at least their mission had been successful in parts.

There had been no further trouble from the Klingons. While the necessary repairs were being undertaken they had appeared once, very briefly, only to disappear just as rapidly. In typical Klingon fashion, they didn't want any part in the proceedings, and were willing to wash their hands of the entire affair rather than admit their involvement in illegal pirate activities against the Federation.

Spock, meanwhile, was convalescing aboard the Enterprise. There was no way that McCoy would allow him to return to the Excelsior, or to duty, until he pronounced him fit. Indeed, it was only on the condition that Spock

promised to rest quietly in his old quarters that McCoy allowed him to leave Sickbay at all. Perhaps the fact that Kirk had also promised to keep a watchful eye on Spock might have had something to do with his early release.

It was with this in mind that Kirk now found himself on the way to Spock's quarters. Even now, he couldn't quite believe that the Vulcan was once more occupying his own cabin - however temporary the arrangement might be.

Coming to a halt outside Spock's door, Kirk pressed the buzzer, and was rewarded by the familiar voice requesting him to enter. The door swished open, and Kirk paused on the threshold for a moment, allowing his gaze to wander around the familiar quarters, empty now of the Vulcan possessions which had made it Spock's home for so many years.

As the door opened Spock glanced up from the tape he had been studying - even when ordered to rest he couldn't entirely stop himself from working - and, for a moment, a warm smile of welcome lit the usually impassive features.

"Jim... I thought it would be you."

"I trust I'm not disturbing you?" Kirk asked as he moved away from the doorway. "I know Bones ordered you to rest, but I thought you might prefer some company, and its been so long since we've talked that..."

"Yes, Jim - I should like that very much. So much has happened since our last meeting..." Spock paused as he noticed the cloud which had settled over Kirk's face at the mention of that last meeting.

"Jim... what is it? What is troubling you?" Spock coaxed.

Kirk sighed. "When you mentioned how long its been since we last saw each other... it made me realise how temporary this arrangement is. We'll soon be arriving at Starbase 7; you'll be returning to your ship; we'll have to say goodbye all over again; and... well, I don't think I can face that, not a second time. It hurt before, but now..." He fell silent, unable to meet Spock's gaze, uncomfortably aware that he might have embarrassed the Vulcan with his overflow of emotions.

Hell, he thought, I came here to cheer him up, and instead I'm only making things worse, making it more difficult for him, as well as myself.

Spock regarded Kirk's bowed head for a moment, relieved that he would soon be able to allay his friend's fears on that point at least, and waited until Kirk was in control of himself once more.

"Sorry, Spock," he apologised somewhat sheepishly, forcing himself to meet Spock's eyes at last. "I guess I shouldn't have gone on like that..."

"Apologies are both unnecessary and a little premature, Jim. You are worrying needlessly."

"What do you mean?" Kirk asked, unusually slow to understand Spock's meaning. "What I said was true - you will be rejoining your ship, and..." He paused as he caught the merest glint of amusement in the dark eyes regarding him steadily across the desk. "Spock, what are you talking about?"

"I am merely trying to inform you, Captain, that I will not be rejoining the Excelsior, as you seem to believe."

"Is this some kind of joke?" Kirk demanded, wanting - yet fearing - to believe what Spock was telling him.

He was rewarded by a quizzical lift of Spock's eyebrow. "A joke? Captain, surely you are aware by now that Vulcans..."

"... do not joke," Kirk finished for him, throwing up his hands in despair. "Okay, Spock - you win. I give in. But I think its time for an explanation, don't you?"

Spock nodded. "As you are aware, when we arrived at Starbase 7 I was

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ordered to report to Commodore Conway for briefing. I was determined to have one last attempt at persuading him to reconsider his decision, and thought that if I could see him personally, I would be more successful.

The Commodore, however, was not in the mood to be persuaded - it appeared that he had other matters on his mind. Over the past months, Starfleet has been concerned about the increase in pirate activity in the areas of space close to the Federation/Klingon border, in particular Sector M193. Attacks by pirates have always been rife, but they have grown in frequency and intensity of late. Starfleet suspected that the pirates - believed to be renegades dissatisfied with life in the Federation - had joined forces with the Klingons, and were engaged in unprovoked attacks against Federation vessels. This was merely supposition, however - they required absolute proof.

Naturally, Starfleet wanted these illegal operations stopped before they could penetrate further into Federation territory. Until recently, the pirates had only been interested in the cargo being transported by Federation freighter ships, but there were very real fears amongst Starfleet officials that action might soon be aimed at the crews of those ships - as we ourselves know, dealings in slave traffic are a common occurrance - and that it was only a matter of time before something more serious happened.

This was where the Excelsior came in. She was a new ship, ready for launch, and Starfleet wanted a new Captain, preferably one who was experienced in dealing with Klingons. However, most of the suitable candidates were otherwise engaged, so..."

"And so they chose you," Kirk said.

"Yes - but I accepted the position on condition that it was a temporary arrangement only - that once the mission was completed, I would be allowed to return to the Enterprise. Eventually, after much persuasion, Conway agreed to my request, although I think he found it very difficult to understand why someone would wish to give up the captaincy through choice, of course..."

A slow grin started to cross Kirk's face as he realised what Spock was saying. "You mean...?"

"Yes, Jim. Once I have delivered my report to Commodore Conway, I will be free to return to the Enterprise as First Officer - if you will have me, that is?"

"If I'll... Spock, what kind of a fool question is that?" Kirk asked, his face alight with laughter. "You don't really expect me to answer that, do you?"

"You already have, Jim," Spock replied softly.

Slowly, the smile began to fade from Kirk's face as he read the unspoken message in Spock's eyes. It never ceased to amaze him that his friend could read him so easily, so clearly.

"I understand," Kirk said, very quietly. Then, trying to lighten the situation, he turned his attention once more to the matter in hand.

"So <u>that's</u> why Starfleet didn't give us a new First Officer immediately! I'd begun to wonder."

Spock nodded. "They hoped that the mission would be completed before it became necessary to appoint a new First Officer to the Enterprise."

"And what of the Excelsior?" Kirk asked. "She'll be needing a new Captain."

"She already has one, Jim. Mr. Delano will be told of his promotion once the Excelsior returns to Starbase 7."

"A worthy choice," Kirk agreed. "He'll make an excellent Captain. I was most impressed with the way he handled matters while you were..." Kirk fell silent, suppressing a shudder. It was still painful even to think of those

hours when he had not known for certain what had happened to his friend; the terrible doubt and uncertainty which had haunted every passing moment. But that nightmare was over now : Spock was safe, and would soon be returning to the Enterprise -permanently. The past was behind them - it was the future which awaited them now.

It was with some reluctance that Kirk stood up, preparing to leave. Although he would have liked to stay longer, he knew what Bones would have to say if he overtaxed his patient, especially on his first visit; and an irate Dr. McCoy was more than Kirk could handle just now. But before he left there was one question he had to ask, something he had to know.

"Just one thing before I leave, Spock. Any regrets?"

"Regrets, Jim?"

"Yes. Do you regret exchanging a command position for... this?" He made a sweeping gesture to encompass the world of the Enterprise waiting outside the cabin door.

The dark eyes regarded him steadily for a long moment before Spock replied quietly, "No, Jim - no regrets. All I want - need - is here. Now I know that this is where I belong - this is my home."

Silently Kirk made his way to the door, too choked for the present to say anything more. As the door swished open, he paused for a moment.

"Spock... I know this may sound selfish, but... it's good to have you back. Welcome home."

"It is good to be back," Spock replied very softly as the door closed behind the retreating figure of his friend.

Kirk's step was light as he made his way to Sickbay to inform a certain doctor that his favourite 'walking computer' would soon be returning to the Enterprise - this time for good.

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COMMAND PROCEDURE by Crystal Ann Taylor

How can you stand there
And proclaim that they should die
For refusing the Empire's demands?

You, who are so gentle in my universe,
So kind, so peaceful and compassionate,
Who'd never wish to kill unless pushed to the wall,
And hesitate even then in hopes of another choice,
Who'd save another being at the risk of his own life,
Regardless of race, creed, or cultural belief,
Who'd argue with me imperatives, expedience, exigencies,
When you fear I'm interfering with the natural order of things,
Who'd defy Starfleet, or the prime directive at my side,
So life could flourish and continue to grow,
Who'd seek an answer in logic, trickery, or evasion,
Anything that would preserve our most precious resource,
Who'd even prefer to lower his personal mental barriers,
To initiate a mind-meld in an attempt to understand.
You, who can be such a man in the world that I love
Can stand here and quote command procedure to me?

There must be something of him in you I can reach,
That's beyond the cold efficiency you project in front of me.
If you can suggest examples, condone murder and death,
Then you aren't the Vulcan whose friendship I'd seek.

****

THE VISITORS by Therese Holmes.

Scotty was enjoying himself. First he would finish this excellent green drink, and then make a start on the very alluring red one sitting next to it. And after that there was a blue one, a yellow one, a pink one - and after that he would order another round and start again. He was sitting in the famous Rainbow Tavern on Beta Aquaria II, his Mecca for as long as he could remember. Currently the place was crowded, but since a surprising little orange number he'd had a while ago - a Deltan Sunset, if he'd heard correctly - he'd been pleasantly unaware that he had company.

He was celebrating in a style befitting his first shore leave for months, and was determined to go on doing so until Security came to fetch him. They were good lads, those young Security officers; he raised his glass to the memory of the stalwart youth who had promised to see that he got back to the ship in time. That lad had potential.

Happily, he turned to the next in line.

Among the convivial gathering was a man named Jarv Alimni - the President's confidential secretary - having a night off. He had been watching the Enterprise man for some time, trying to assess his state, and to pluck up sufficient courage to approach him. Eventually he decided he had better make his move now, while Scotty was still conscious; accordingly, he went to the bar and sat down.

"Er... good evening, sir," he ventured.

Scotty nodded companionably to his glass and wished it a good evening. Jarv watched him down it in one go, and squared his shoulders for a calculated risk.

"Barman," he said, "another one for my friend here. Any colour he likes."

"Yellow," mumbled Scotty, turning to smile fuzzily at his new friend. "Yon's mighty good of you, laddie," he said thickly. "Mighty good."

Jarv smiled back. At least he had the Scot's attention - but for how long? "Mr. Scott..." he began again.

"Aye, lad." He peered closely at Jarv. "Not from S'curity, are ye? No, I don't know you. The nameshcott." He held out his hand.

"I know, sir," said Jarv, taking it. "I'm Jarv Alimni, the President's secretary."

"Have a drink, Mr. Alml - Amnl - Have a drink, Mister. On me."

"Thank you, sir. Mr. Scott, can I talk to you?" He had to move fast now; Scotty seemed to be becoming incoherent.

"Sure, laddie, go 'head. You talk, I'll listen. Good at listening," he nodded.

One hour and a whole spectrum of drinks later Jarv lay asleep on the floor,

his story told. Scotty regarded him paternally. Nice lad, whatsisname. Couldn't hold his drink, though. Worried too much, too. End up with ulcers. He thought back over what the young man had told him. Well, he'd promised to pass it on to Kirk, and so he would, when he got back to the ship. Besides, Kirk was still meeting with the President. There was time for another drink before the Security guard came for him.

Kirk slammed his fist down on the table and prayed for patience through clenched teeth. Tempting visions danced through his mind; mentally, he caught that scraggy neck opposite him and squeezed, squeezed, till the pale eyes popped out and the tongue... With infinite relief he heard Spock's cool voice beside him.

"Mr. President, are we to understand from what you are now saying that no attempt has yet been made to collect these taxes? This is at variance with your previous statement..."

"Well, I..."

"Mr. President," cut in Kirk, back in control of himself. "Please think carefully. We're here to help, but your contradictory statements are simply adding to the confusion that we're trying to clear up. Now then; we ask you a simple question - where are the Aquarian Central Taxes? So far you have given us three separate answers : one, they have been transmitted; two, they are being collected; three, they haven't been collected. Is any one of those true, or do you have another one for us?"

"Well, I... Gentlemen, please. I can explain."

"I hope so," muttered Kirk.

"You see, we're not a prosperous planet, and... er..." The pale eyes darted about the room, looking anywhere but at the two Starfleet officers. "Well, it's difficult."

"Difficult?"

"To make ends meet."

Kirk took a deep breath. "Mr. President," he began with as much patience as he could muster, "you know as well as I do that Central Taxes make a very tiny hole in the resources of any planet. Furthermore, when you applied to join the Federation, you agreed to pay, and the sum was settled perfectly amicably between the two parties. Is that not so?"

"Yes, but..."

"Finally, it was explained to you that should you, for whatever reason, feel that a reassessment of your contribution is called for, you have only to say so, and the accountants will call at your convenience. That <u>was</u> made clear to you, wasn't it?"

The President nodded grudgingly.

"So - is that what you're asking for? An investigation?"

"No!"

Kirk threw himself back in his chair and flung a despairing look heavenwards. Just as he'd begun to think they'd finally found a solution, this infuriating man took them right back to square one. He should have known better than to expect anything more.

Spock leaned forward with narrowed eyes and began again. "Mr. President, what exactly is the problem? Have we established that Aquaria can well afford the amount due to the Federation?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Well then... I am at a loss..."

"You must give us time! Time!"

"You've had three years," Spock said quietly.

"What?"

"You have been a member of the Federation for three years, and you now owe three years worth of Central Taxes. Sir, I have to remind you that if five years go by with no taxes forthcoming, an inquiry will be held whether you like it or not. That is the law."

"I know, I know. But it won't come to that, I promise you. We'll sort it out before then."

"Which is exactly why we are here."

Spock glanced at Kirk, who seemed to have opted out of the discussion. He was still staring despondently at the ceiling.

"I must assure you, sir," Spock continued, "that we are not here to extort money from you in any way. We have been sent to obtain an explanation of the situation, and to help rectify it if possible. No punitive action of any sort will be taken against you. Please..." In another moment he'd be on his knees, he thought disgustedly.

Kirk chose that moment to spring back to life. "Right, Spock, let's leave the President to think it over. We'll come back, sir, in... say, four hours?"

"Yes, all right, all right," said the wretched President, showing his tormentors to the door.

Once in the corridor, Kirk fairly dragged his First Officer out of the building into the open air, where he stopped and stood taking in great lungfuls of fresh air. Spock looked on in some concern.

"Are you feeling ill, sir?"

Kirk grinned. "Yes! Sick! Sick of that man and his whole shifty-eyed, mealy-mouthed planet!" His grin faded, and was replaced by a puzzled frown as the two men started to walk down the sun-drenched street. "You know, Spock, that man's hiding something. He's terrified. Did you feel that?"

"Indeed, sir, he did seem unaccountably nervous."

"Now why should that be? Damn it! Why do I care? What are we doing here anyway?" He shrugged in frustration, as though trying to shake off some burden that oppressed him. "Why do they keep sending us on these missions, Spock? That isn't our job. Maybe I'm getting old, but we seem to be doing this sort of thing more and more often these days."

"Possibly because you have turned out to be so conveniently good at it."

Kirk glanced up in surprise, and smiled briefly. Then he returned his gaze to the ground. "Bureaucracy!" he muttered darkly. "Diplomacy!" His comments became inaudible even to Vulcan ears, and Spock sighed inwardly. This was going to be a difficult day.

Scotty awoke in his quarters feeling none the worse for wear, and with no regrets save that the otherwise admirable Security guard had refused to allow him to smuggle any interesting liquids aboard. His memories of the previous day were clear and rosy; he enjoyed a good blow-out from time to time. Now he sat up and stretched, pleased to be home again.

He remembered Jarv, and grinned, reflecting on the probable state of that young man today. As he showered and dressed, he thought over the story that Jarv had confided to him in the Rainbow Tavern, and which he had rpmised to pass on to the Captain. There might be something in it, there might not; that was for the Captain to discover. Jarv was, after all, close to the President,

and therefore in a position to know. And Scotty had warmed to him as he had warmed to very few of the pale, watery inhabitants of Beta Aquaria II. Yes, he would swear to that young man's honesty.

He adjusted his red shirt with a final tug, and set off for the Captain's quarters.

Kirk was once again on the planet's surface, facing an Aquarian across a table. But this was quite a different specimen from the one who had confronted him the previous day. This an altogether more likeable, more forthright person - a person, moreover, who presented no outward signs of ill-effects following his unaccustomed intemperance the previous eveing. True, his eyes had that nervous habit of darting from side to side common to all Aquarians, but there was a sparkle in them which contrasted sharply with the lack-lustre look of most of his fellows. Notable his superior, the President, who was currently the subject under discussion.

"Mr. Alimni, I understand from my Chief Engineer that you believe your President to be guilty of corruption and incompetence."

There it was in a nutshell, and Kirk watched to see how Jarv would react to the bald facts of his story. He didn't; he merely nodded.

"Yes, sir. You see, I've only been his secretary for about three months, but even in that time I've become convinced that what I've just told you is true."

"You realise that these are very grave charges? On what evidence do you base your accusation?"

"Well, no evidence, exactly. It's just that... nothing ever seems to get done! He meets with Council twice a week, and what they find to talk about I can't imagine. No action is ever taken on any matter of importance. Petty little issues are tossed back and forth until they become so big and complicated that everything else is pushed into the background. I know why you're here - to find out why your taxes haven't been paid. Believe me, that's a minor point. The Administration and Finance Departments are chaos, but nobody dares do anything about it. They all seem to prefer to muddle along and hope things will get better. It's the same everywhere. The President's attitude is, 'ignore it and it will go away', and it seems to be shared by the majority of the population. But I think that's fatal. We're on the road to ruin, and something's got to be done about it. That's why, when I heard Federation representatives were coming, I decided to approach you. Help can only come from outside Aquaria now; we're too far gone to help ourselves."

Jarv sat back, breathless after his outburst, and Kirk nodded thoughtfully.

"If what you say is true, then there's certainly incompetence here, and not just on the part of the President. But corruption? You're going to want more than evidence of widespread incompetence to prove that. You'll need facts, hard facts. Or better still, an admission."

He sat frowning, drumming his fingers on the table. "Mr. Alimni," he said at last, "I was with your President for two hours yesterday afternoon, and again in the evening. His most forceful action throughout was in asking us to go away. He conveyed very strongly the impression of a man trying to hide something, and terrified in case we find it out. He wouldn't stand up to a direct accusation, I'm sure. What do you say we go along there now and put it to him?"

Jarv started nervously. "Oh no, Captain, please. My job..."

"You won't have any job to speak of it you're right," commented Kirk. "But don't worry - we'll see you don't lose out. Come on, Jarv; it's probably the most humane thing to do in the circumstances. Let's go and put the poor man out of his misery before he cracks up."

"Oh no, Captain! If we're wrong..."

We? thought Kirk. He sighed. "Look, you agree something must be done..."

"Yes, but not like this. You can't just crash in and... It needs investigation; like you said, we need facts. We've got nothing to go on. It's just a feeling I've got."

Kirk was well accustomed to acting on his feelings, but he reluctantly recognised the wisdom of the Aquarian's words. Finesse was needed now, not action.

"You're right. I'll contact Starfleet Command and let them put somebody onto it." He rose to go and held out his hand. "Goodbye, Mr. Alimni. In case we don't meet again before the Enterprise leaves orbit, allow me to wish you luck now. It may be difficult, but then reformers never have had it easy."

Jarv smiled weakly as Kirk pulled out his communicator.

"Kirk to Enterprise. One to beam up."

He went to the Bridge as a matter of habit.

"Captain," said Uhura as he entered, "one crew member has failed to report back from shore leave. Yeoman Lian, sir, from Sciences."

"Communicator?"

"Won't respond, sir. We can't get a fix."

Kirk sighed. Shore leave had officially finished half an hour ago, but it was too early yet to start worrying over late arrivals.

"Keep trying, Lieutenant. Meanwhile, open a channel to Starfleet Command, please, and put it through to my quarters. You keep the con, Mr. Spock."

"... there's no-one available, Jim. If you think an investigation is warranted, you'll have to go ahead with it yourself."

"But sir, I'm not qualified..."

"I'm sorry, Jim, but we really can't spare anyone. You yourself admit you have nothing more than hunches to go on. Well, if you can turn those hunches into something more concrete, we'll be right behind you. Until then, you're on your own, I'm afraid. We have faith in you, Jim. We're giving you carte blanche to rummage around and see what you come up with. Sorry I can't be of more help. Stender out."

Kirk turned off the viewscreen and sat fuming. Then he left his quarters and headed in the direction he always took when he needed to let off steam - Sickbay.

Over a cup of coffee, McCoy was sympathetic. "I know how you feel, Jim. I'd be only too pleased to see the back of this place too. Do you know I spent most of my shore leave right here? A more spineless, disorganised bunch than these Aquarians I've never encountered. I discovered I'd rather be in Sickbay, so here I came."

Kirk nodded. "They are, aren't they? I keep losing my temper. Thank God for Spock - I'd have torn that President limb from limb if he hadn't been there."

"Your average Aquarian," stated McCoy, "is a procrastinating, quaking, obsequious paranoid. And those are his good points."

Kirk drained his coffee and crumpled the cup in his fist. "Damn Aquaria. Damn Starfleet. What do they think I am? That's what I chiefly object to, Bones: being sent hither and thither on diplomatic missions like any tame bureaucrat. And then to get stuck here! What do they think a Starship's for?

Well, if it's investigations they want, I'll investigate; I'll investigate like hell. And stuff the results down their throats and hope they choke on them. And if they dare send us on another errrand, I'll lodge a formal complaint."

He stared defiantly across the desk at McCoy, as though the doctor were the hapless Starfleet official responsible for sending them here. McCoy knew his Captain, and let the torrent run its course.

"It's such a waste! It's..." Kirk took a deep breath. "Well, here we are, I guess. We'd better make the best of it. First of all I'm going down to see Jarv again." He paused, and smiled wryly, remembering his last words to the Aquarian. "That'll teach me to be platitudinous," he muttered, turning to go.

As he approached the transporter room he decided he needed Spock with him, and asked the technician at the console to call him.

"Ah, Spock," said Kirk carefully when the Vulcan appeared minutes later, "you've probably gathered that we're staying here for the time being. Starfleet wish us to carry out the preliminary investigations ourselves."

He refrained from using any strong language in front of the technician, but knew that Spock would read his feelings on his face.

"Yes, sir. Captain, Yeoman Lian is still missing."

"Who? Oh... Great. That's all we need."

They materialised in a courtyard in front of the building where Jarv lived just as Jarv himself emerged from it.

"Why ? Captain! What...?"

"Hi, Jarv. Surprised to see me? Oh, by the way, this is Mr. Spock, my First Officer. Spock, Jarv Alimni."

"I am pleased to meet you, sir," said the Vulcan gravely.

Jarv smiled vaguely, and turned again to the Captain. "I thought you would have left by now."

"I would have if I could. Starfleet Command say I'm to stay here and help you, so here I stay. Look," he indicated the apartment building, "can we go in and talk?"

"Well, I was just on my way to the President."

"Fine! Nothing like taking the bull by the horns!"

"Yes... er... actually, I was only going to work."

"Oh. I see. Well, do you mind if we come along with you? Since we're here, I'd like to get this business out of the way as quickly as possible."

They fell into step beside a rather unwilling Jarv.

"What... what are you going to do, exactly?"

"What I suggested before," replied Kirk grimly. "Face him with it."

Jarv stopped. "Captain, I... I really don't think that's a very good idea." He looked pleadingly from Kirk to Spock and back again. "He may be incompetent, but he does have some power. And he has friends."

"Friends? You mean corrupt influence? Good; that's just what we want." Kirk took Jarv's arm and propelled him along the quiet street. "Don't you see, if we can force him to extend himself, make him use his influence to protect himself, and we can prove it - we'll be home and dry!"

"Yes, but... how <u>will</u> we prove it?"

"Well, of course we'll need someone on the inside." Kirk looked meaningfully at Jarv.

"Me? But I don't... I mean, I'm not that much in his confidence..."

"But you're the best we've got."

"But..."

"Jarv!" This time it was Kirk who stopped. "Jarv," he repeated sternly, "it seems to me that you're becoming less than wholehearted about this affair. Remember, you got yourself - and us - into this mess, and now you have to face the consequences."

"Yes. Yes, I know you're right. It's just that... I wish I'd never started this whole thing!"

"I couldn't agree with you more, but the fact remains that you did, so come on."

"All right, all right. But Captain, please listen to me." He shook himself free from the insistent grip. "I honestly feel that this isn't the right way to go about it. I know the President better than you do, and I just feel it would be wrong. He's on his guard already; he could easily have you put off the planet... trump up some charge against you - disturbing the peace, or something. It's not as though you're even an official investigation. No, it just wouldn't work."

"Care to suggest anything that would?"

"Well... no. Not offhand..."

"Captain, if I may make a suggestion?"

"Yes, Mr. Spock?" It was the first contribution the Vulcan had made to the discussion.

"Yeoman Lian is still missing, sir."

"Yes, what of it? I was going to ask..."

"Precisely, sir. You were going to enlist the President's help and cooperation in searching for her. This gives us, does it not, an excellent excuse for being here and indeed for looking around, while in no way involving Mr. Alimni. What could be more natural than that we conduct our own search as well as employing the local police?"

Kirk slowly broke into a smile, while Jarv stared at Spock with saucer-like eyes.

"Excellent, Mr. Spock, excellent," applauded Kirk. "The perfect cover story. What do you think, Mr. Alimni?"

Jarv's eyes never left Spock's face as slowly he too started to grin. Suddenly, and for the first time, he laughed.

"Oh yes. Very good. I think that's very, very good!" He continued laughing all the way to the President's office. Outside, they stopped.

"If you don't mind," said Jarv, "I'd like to go in alone." And he turned to go.

"Wait a minute," interrupted Kirk. "Don't forget, we're relying on you. You're not deserting us, are you?"

"No, of course not. I'm with you. I'm your 'inside man'. While you ferret around outside, I'll be watching him and reporting to you." He turned to Spock. "That was a very good idea of yours, you know." He started to laugh again, but hastily pulled himself together. "Now, Captain," he resumed, "I suggest you give me a few minutes. Go for a walk around the block, or something. If we arrive together, it could look suspicious."

Abruptly he left them, looking more jaunty than they would have believed possible for an Aquarian.

Kirk stared after him with a puzzled frown. "Now what's got into him,

I wonder?"

Spock shook his head as they strolled away.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, Captain." The President stuck out his jaw with something approaching resolution.

"But Mr. President..."

"I'm sorry, Captain." The President suddenly noticed his secretary. "Mr. Alimni, leave us, please."

Jarv, his head buried in a file, quickly complied.

"There can be no question of such a thing, Captain. I suggest you send down a search party to look for your missing crew member. After all, surely you can see it is not my responsibility-"

Kirk was dumbfounded, but Spock suffered from no such weakness. "Mr. President, may I remind you that Aquaria is a member of the Federation, and that one of the conditions of membership is that in the event of any Federation personnel requiring any assistance whatsoever while on a member planet, such assistance shall be freely and fully available."

Kirk nodded vigorously in agreement, but before he could say anything, the President was speaking again.

"Then I regret to inform you, Mr. Spock, Captain - I would have wished the occasion to be more formal - however... gentlemen, Aquaria is exercising her right to secede from the Federation."

Now I've heard everything, thought Kirk, and even Spock seemed temprarily at a loss for words.

Kirk opened his mouth, shut it, and tried again. "Hold it, just wait a minute, please. You seem to be way ahead of us, Mr. President. Of course, Aquaria has every right to do just that, but there are formalities to be gone through first. For example, a referendum, or some other means of determining the opinion of the population, must be held. Now if you've done that, sir, you've been mighty quiet about it. Have you?"

"Well, not exactly... That is, not yet. However, gentlemen, I can assure you the results will be as I say."

I bet you can, thought Kirk.

"Nonetheless, sir," Spock was saying, "until such a referendum is held and the results known, Aquaria remains a member of the Federation."

"And we insist on our right to have the Aquarian police force help us look for Yeoman Lian. Of course we'll beam down our own search party as well, but your people know the place much better than we do. Working together, we'll have a far greater chance of success, surely you must see that? And Mr. President - the Enterprise is not leaving here until Yeoman Lian is back on board."

The Aquarian was wilting visibly. After a long struggle within himself, he capitulated. "Very well, Captain. It shall be as you wish."

Satisfied, Kirk and Spock rose to leave. As the door closed behind them they heard the President asking for Jarv over the office intercom.

Once more in the street, Kirk turned to Spock. "You know, Spock, I'm willing to bet that's the first Aquaria has heard of any plans for secession."

"I am inclined to agree with you, Captain. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that it was the first the President himself has heard of it."

Kirk grinned. "I'm inclined to agree with you, Mr. Spock," he said.

* * *

That evening they once again approached Jarv's apartment.

"Ah, gentlemen. Please come in."

As they settled themselves in his comfortable armchairs, he turned to them with an amused glint in his eyes. "Tell me , how is the search progressing?"

"It isn't, yet. I have a Security team standing by ready to beam down as soon as we hear from your Police Chief. Then we can get started."

Jarv laughed and offered them refreshment.

"No thanks."

Kirk exchanged a glance with Spock, who raised an eyebrow.

"Jarv," said Kirk pleasantly, "you seem to find something amusing. Would you mind sharing the joke with us?"

"You won't like it."

"I already don't like it. Whatever you say can't make it any worse."

"Okay, then... Gentlemen, we have no police force."

For the second time in one day, Kirk was rendered speechless. Jarv, pleased with the effect of his statement, rather reluctantly elaborated.

"That is, we do have one - nominally. But I assure you it couldn't find the President himself if he was sitting in his office, let alone one lone little girl from Starfleet."

"Oh my God!" groaned Kirk.

"Quite. Your Security team will receive no call form the Chief of Police, Captain."

"You mean there is a Chief of Police?"

"Certainly - the President."

There was a long, long silence. Finally Kirk muttered, "I don't believe it. I just don't believe it. Spock, please take me away before I cause some damage to this nice apartment."

"Captain, please compose yourself. Mr. Alimni, everything you say condemns your President over and over again. Surely you have enough to go on to carry your case? Besides which, he has pledged himself to help us. If he is now seen to be unable to do so, he condemns himself. What could be simpler?"

Jarv's face clouded. "I... I don't know. Frankly, Mr. Spock, I'm afraid of what we'll uncover."

"I beg your pardon?"

"There's more here than you think. This place is an utter shambles, as you now see. Logically, it should all have fallen apart years ago. But somehow it's kept going; something has kept it going."

Spock leaned forward in his chair. "Are you implying, sir, that the President and his administration are merely a front for some organisation? A criminal network? Is that what you're saying?"

Jarv gave a short laugh. "You over-estimate us, Mr. Spock. Aquarians aren't capable of such... efficiency. We haven't the organising ability, the aptitude for teamwork which other races seem to have in such abundance." He sounded almost bitter. "No; no, it's nothing like that. There... there have been other things; happenings. Everybody knows, and yet nobody wants to know. We just close our eyes and ignore it."

"What do you mean? What sort of things?" Kirk was alert once more.

"Oh, I don't know. Just things. Nothing I can pin down. Disappearances, I guess."

"Disappearances?"

"Yes. Oh, I know that happens everywhere, but somehow... somehow..." He looked at them helplessly and shrugged. "Just another feeling, I suppose."

Kirk looked at Spock and Spock looked at Kirk. The word seemed to hang in the air between them. 'Disappearances'. Together they spoke.

"Yeoman Lian."

"What?"

"Jarv, you may recall we have a disappearance on our hands."

"Oh yes..."

"Could it have anything to do with... whatever it is you're talking about?"

"How should I know? I don't even know what 'whatever it is' is. Perhaps she jumped ship. Perhaps she committed suicide."

"Spock?"

"Yeoman Lian was a dedicated worker, happy in her job, and in line for promotion. It is unlikely that she should have done as Mr. Alimni suggests."

"But you don't know!" protested Jarv. "Do you? Hell, it was just a suggestion. Okay, so it could be connected with... whatever it is. Where does that get us?"

"It gets us everywhere, Mister. It gets us as far as kidnap, and of a member of Starfleet at that."

"But who...? Why...?" Jarv jumped to his feet as Kirk rose. "I mean, you have no proof!"

"We intend to get some," replied Kirk grimly. "Mr. Alimni, my patience is rapidly wearing thin. One of my crewmembers is missing, and I am going to find her, and I don't care how many skeletons I have to throw out of how many closets on the way. We shall be pleased to have your assistance, if you care to offer it; if not, we shall carry on without you. Is that clear?"

"Yes. Oh yes. Thank you, yes. Of course I'll help you in any way I can. Er... what exactly are you going to do?"

"I am going to see the President, and this time I'm going to confront him with our suspicions; and this time," he glared defiantly at his companions, "nobody is going to stop me!"

It was Spock's private opinion that his Captain could sometimes be a little brusque, a little apt to ride rough-shod over sensitive areas. It was all done for show, of course; there was no kinder, gentler man than Jim Kirk when things were going his way. On Aquaria they were not going his way. Apart from the fact that he resented being there at all, he found himself frustrated at every turn, and mysteries were piling up around him. He did not like mysteries. Consequently, it was in no fair humour that he walked into the President's office, and the President was very soon made aware of that fact.

He seemed startled to see them; not only was it very late, but he had already made it clear (unofficially, of course) that he wanted them off the planet. The sight of Jarv in the company of his unwelcome visitors obviously unsettled him even more, and he began to look apprehensive.

He began coolly enough. "Good evening, gentlemen. Somewhat late for social calls, is it not? I was about to leave, actually."

"Then it's lucky we caught you, isn't it?" replied Kirk, settling himself comfortably into one of the deep armchairs that faced the desk.

The President looked nervously at Jarv. "Mr. Alimni, why have you brought

these gentlemen here at this time of night? Surely tomorrow..."

"Oh, it's nothing to do with Jarv," said Kirk, airily waving an arm. "In fact, he was against the whole visit."

Suddenly he stood up, walked across the office, and perched himself on the edge of the desk. The victim cowered under him.

"Frankly, Mr. President, I'm fed up. With you and your whole mess of an administration. Something is going on here which I'm sure the Federation would be very interested in, and you're going to tell me all about it."

"I don't know what you're talking about. You've no proof, no evidence..."

"No, that's true, I haven't. Call it gut-reaction if you like; for example, the very way you're acting now convinces me that you've got something to hide. I think you can provide us with all the evidence we need."

"Captain, I..." The Aquarian tried to bluster, pathetically. His eyes roamed desperately round the room and came to rest once more on his secretary.

"Mr. Alimni, I don't know what you have persuaded yourself to believe..."

"It's no good, Mr. President," interrupted Kirk. "We are the official representatives of Starfleet, sent here for an official purpose. We were sent originally to see what had happened to some taxes; we find that they're the least of your problems. We've been talking to Mr. Alimni here, who seems a public-spirited sort of man, and it seems you're in deep trouble. Your government is a shambles; in fact, anywhere but Aquaria you'd have anarchy on your hands. You have no law enforcement - I doubt if you have any laws to enforce. And yet, at first glance, everything seems to be running smoothly. Precious little crime, considering; except that Mr. Alimni mentioned one or two things that rather interested Mr. Spock and myself. There have been disappearances, he tells us, which have never been investigated. Well, I'm sorry, Mr. President, but we too have a disappearance, and we're damn well going to investigate it. I have a hunch we could turn up the answer to the missing taxes along the way. What do you think?"

The President had meanwhile been endeavouring to curl himself up into a very tight ball and lose himself in one corner of his chair; however, the anatomy of the Aquarians not being constructed for such ends, he had failed dismally - a habit of his. Now he sat hunched and miserable, as pathetic a sight as Kirk had seen for a long time. He made no attempt to bluff his way out. For a long time he sat, just staring at the desk, while Kirk and the others waited. Finally and wearily he raised his head.

"There is a lot you do not understand."

"You bet there is," Kirk said emphatically, returning to his former seat. "Please enlighten us."

"You say one of your people has disappeared." He sighed. "She will not be found."

"How do you know? Where is she?"

"I don't know where she is. I don't even know if she's alive or dead. I just know she won't be coming back. They never do."

Kirk and Spock exchanged glances, but said nothing.

"You are correct in your assessment of our planet, Captain. We are a mess. We're paralysed, impotent, crippled. We - that is, I and the members of Council - had hoped, vainly of course, that we were not of sufficient importance for the Federation to bother with us. We should have known better, especially over the matter of the taxes. When you arrived my one thought was to get you out of here before you started taking notice, and to sort our problems out in our own way. No-one need ever have known. Unfortunately, I reckoned without Mr. Alimni's interference, and above all, your crewmember's unhappy accident."

He paused and glanced at Kirk, as though asking not to have to go on. Kirk, however, was implacable, and said nothing.

"Very well, then. Some years ago, Aquaria was... visited. To this day only a handful of people know of that visit - myself and the Council. The identity of the visitors remains a mystery even to us; not that we tried very hard to find out. We wished only for them to go away again and leave us undisturbed. This was before we joined the Federation, of course, and we had little desire for outside contact. We still prefer it that way, but... Anyway, these... visitors... were not of the Federation, that was obvious even to us. We don't know who they are or why they picked us. I think you'll agree they didn't make a very good choice.

We closed our minds, ignored them, pretended they weren't here, until in the end we believed it. But they didn't go away, and every so often we were uncomfortably reminded of their presence; oh, unobtrusively, subtly, insidiously. It's my belief they they were studying us. Quite probably they were intrigued by our reaction to them.

Later the disappearances began - I suppose they wanted a closer look at such fascinating creatures. We knew They were responsible, but we had persuaded ourselves that They didn't exist - so we did nothing. By some sort of subliminal communication, some sort of racial consciousness, the people of Aquaria must have sensed our attitude, sensed that there was something happeningwhich we did not want brought out into the open - and they blindly followed our cue. There was no outcry on behalf of the relatives of the Lost Ones, no demand for an enquiry. Confusion and corruption rapidly spread in a vicious circle. We were trapped. In the middle of it all we applied to join the Federation, and were accepted. Whether we expected things to change after that I don't know.

Our visitors are still here, and every day it has become harder to conceal that fact from ourselves, the people, and from you. One word of protest, and the lid would have been blown off, revealing things which we knew we could not face. It has become a sort of sickness, a mass obsession, this delusion and self-trickery.

I think we were never a vigorous, outgoing race like you and others of the Federation I have encountered. Perhaps we were pitiful then, before They came. We are beyond pity now. They have reduced us to this, and I am ashamed. Ashamed."

The President of Aquaria bowed his head on his arms and wept.

For several minutes no-one spoke. The only sound in the room was of the President's muffled sobbing, while his audience strove to digest what they had just heard. Of the three Jarv seemed the most shaken, and he was the first to speak.

"Well... that's that, then. So what happens now?"

Receiving no answer, he went on, "I told you it wasn't a good idea. Now look what you've done. Why couldn't you leave us alone? That's all we wanted. That's all we ever wanted..."

His voice began to quaver, and Kirk feared he would fo llow the President's example and collapse into tears. Instead he started to giggle.

"All this time... They've been watching us... All this time... and we never knew... Watching, laughing, amusing themselves..."

Still chuckling, he lapsed into incoherence, staring with glazed eyes ahead of him.

Kirk, satisfied that Jarv was not becoming hysterical, made a mental note to have McCoy check on him later. He turned to Spock, who was gazing over steepled fingers at the floor.

"Well, Spock?"

"A fascinating story, Captain. The people of Aquaria have exhibited a most curious, even unique attitude, and we should not be too hasty to condemn them for it. They seem to be of a particularly nervous disposition, and so susceptible to culture shock that they have succumbed without the mass of the population ever knowing that they have been exposed to a more advanced race than their own. The condition appears to have spread like a sort of contagion from those few who were aware of the situation, until the whole population was affected; a most remarkable phenomenon, and the first, as far as I am aware, of its kind.

However, none of this can conceal the fact that contact has been made, by a member of the Federation, with a hitherto unknown and apparently superior race of beings, and that notification of this contact has been witheld. The people as a whole cannot be held responsible; I believe the blame rests entirely with the President, but that is a matter for the Supreme Court to decide."

The President's sobs had long since subsided into sniffs, and at the mention of the Supreme Court he sat up and peered at the two men through red-rimmed eyes.

"Will it really come to that?" he pleaded. "Can't it be hushed up somehow? Can't I just...?"

"No, you can't," said Kirk firmly. "There's been quite enough sweeping under the carpet going on around here. It's time a few things were brought into the open. I have no power to remove you from office, but I am going to give Starfleet a full account of what you have told us. Pretty soon thereafter you will be visited by representatives of the Federation who will elicit a sworn statement from you, and my guess is that, as Mr. Spock has indicated, you will eventually find yourself before the Supreme Court on a charge of culpable negligence, incompetence, and a few other things. I'll be surprised if one or two members of your Council don't turn up there too.

The people of Aquaria will be left to elect themselves a new government according to their own system, and any help they may require in picking themselves out of the morass you have left them in will of course be readily available. Personally, I think it may be some time before they fully recover from the demoralising effect of your handling of this situation.

Which just leaves the question of your visitors - and my missing crewmember. You may find this hard to believe, Mr. President, but the standing orders for our mission state, in part, that it is our duty to seek out new life and new civilisations; we actually <u>want</u> to meet these people. Can you arrange that?"

"No."

Kirk grinned. "Old habits die hard, don't they? There's really no point now in trying to evade the issue. Can you arrange a meeting for us?"

"No, really I can't. They've always been the ones to make contact with us; we just did our best to ignore them. There's never been any question of such a thing before. I'm sorry, gentlemen, you'll have to find them yourselves."

"Very well, we'll do that, then."

"What, now?"

"Now." He suddenly remembered Jarv, who had been silent for some time. "Oh, Mr. President, I'll be sending down my Chief Medical Officer to have a look at Jarv. I don't know if his will be a typical reaction to the news which you're going to broadcast in a public announcement this morning, but I should be prepared."

"This morning? Today?"

"Well, the sooner the better, don't you think? If I were you I'd also mention the fact that you're resigning from office. It'll save them having to remove you by force, and it may even soften the impact."

Sarcasm was heavy in his voice, but he had already noticed that Aquarians seemed immune to barbed words.

"Yes, that's probably a good idea," replied the President. "I rather doubt that there'd be an uprising, as you suggest, but I'm finished anyway. It's best that I go." He sighed suddenly. "Everything seems to have happened so fast. In a way I'm glad it's all over at last, but I'm sure I'll never get used to the way you Humans work. All precipitate action, and no regard for the consequences..."

They were already on their way out, but at the door Spock turned.

"Believe me, sir, I have made that same remark myself on several occasions. You will find, as I have, that it is one of the less edifying characteristics of the race." He paused, then continued, "However, it does on occasion have its advantages."

He nodded, and left.

On a planet far removed from Beta Aquaria II, Watcher 1 was troubled.

"Were they ready?"

"They were ready. The longer we delayed, the more difficult would have been the schism. We had supported them long enough."

"But it was we who made that support necessary. We were at fault."

"We have fulfilled our obligations. These people are once more alone."

"Not alone, I think," said another voice.

"No indeed, Watcher 3. You are right. The new ones will make sure of that."

"So the plan has succeeded?"

"We have done what we could. The rest is out of our hands. For ourselves, we have learned a valuable lesson, I think."

His companions agreed earnestly.

"The one called Jarv," said Watcher 1, "he served our purpose well..."

"He is strong and resilient. He will recover. They all will recover."

"And the new ones? They wish to contact us."

"In time, Watcher 1. In time. We will study them first. I think they will amply repay our efforts."

"I am of your mind," said the third voice. "Our new one has created much interest already. If she is typical... it may soon be time for us to start planning another visit."

****

ENTERPRISE NURSERY RHYMES

Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake medical man
Give me a hypo shot quick as you can
Prick it and pat it and shoot it in me
And send me up high on Masiform D.

Scott be nimble
Scott be spry
Get to the engines
Before we fry.

Sulu is a helmsman,
Sulu knows his job.
Sulu has a way with girls
Which makes the Captain sob.

The Wright Family

THE ENTERPRISE

SULU : Give me the helm of a floating ship,
Space the shining sea,
Give me the best in Starfleet,
The Enterprise for me.

SCOTTY : Give me the heart of a lady,
With matter's ebb and flow,
Give me Warp Drive engines,
Power all aglow.

CHEKOV : Give me the nerve of a Starship,
With eyes the wonders to see,
Give me the feel of excitement,
The Enterprise for me.

McCOY : Give me a soul for the healing,
And I will serve you long,
Give me a thought fleeting,
Going where 'no man has gone'.

UHURA : Give me a voice to sing with,
Hail all, sing praise to thee,
Here, in the name of Freedom,
The Enterprise for me.

SPOCK : Give me a logical computer,
Yet I am proud to be,
Giving my all for a lady,
Who's home and sanctuary.

KIRK : Give me my love, my Starship,
And happy I will be,
Give me my love and friendship,
The Enterprise for me.

****

REFLECTIONS OF LOVE

Poems by Ann Smith

CONFRONTATION? ... LOVE!

Damn you, you point-eared pixie!
Why must you always be right?
I'm sick and tired of your logic.
Go! Take a hike!

Leave me to my emotions,
With them I'll muddle through,
I'd rather be an emotionalist,
Than a walking computer like you.

You make me as mad as a hatter,
(Don't ask why a hatter should get mad)
Spock! Don't you dare...
I swear...

My friend... who are we kidding?
We both know that we care.

****

ILLOGICAL LOVE

LOVE :
It is such a little word
Every day it is heard
In every text...
A thousand ways...
A different meaning it displays,
Eternal... fleeting?
Joy and pain?
Each feeling different...
The word the same...
Illogical! LOVE!

Music and beauty reach you...
Ease your mind.
Poetry teach you...
In different rhyme.
Reach out...
touch...
This growing thing...
this feeling.
Set apart...
Fear not to say...
"I love you"
in thy heart.

****

MINDMELD NO. 1

Slender fingers on my temples,
The bodies' slow relaxing,
Feeling the warm mind enter,
Skimming the outer limits

My being trembles,
A moment's resisting...
Surrender.

Calmness flowing into my existence,
Flooding the corridors of my mind,
Filling me with drifting colours,
Merging, melting,
Dissolving into... together...
Lost...
In the coldness which is my pain...
His loneliness,
With eyes that search beyond consciousness...
Reaching...

Through memories... revolving... turning...
Shades of childhood...
Forgotten tombs like lonely sentinels
In the fields of yesterday...
Flowing on... towards the black abyss...

Despair...

Dark wells of pain... reaching out...
Cracking the will... rending the soul...
Stretching... outward...
It would seem forever...
Even to the barrier...
The inner core.

Warm thoughts knocking, mind pressing...
Yield...
The last stronghold...

ONENESS

Dissolving night to luminescence,
Bathing in the glow,
Expanding... enveloping...
Washing over... in and through...
Being...
Pulsing upward from the depths...
Shining with inward fire...
Soaring towards acceptance...
Climbing from the well of birth...
To the pools of consciousness...
Rippling spirals of light...

Untwining... becoming two...
Warm mind receeding...
A moment's haunting loss...
dimming...

Before the final slipping from each other
Acknowledgement...

The pure truth of being...

ONE.

****

ACROSS THE BLACK HOLE by Giovanna Ratti

Captain's Log, Stadate 5234·6

"Starfleet Command have given us a new task; there are strange happenings at the limit of our galaxy, and we are now travelling at warp factor 5 in the direction of the latest phenomenon."

"Nothing yet, Mr. Spock?" Kirk asked.

"Interesting. It was as though a small black hole suddenly formed, but immediately disappeared." Spock continued to look at his instruments for confirmation of his report.

Kirk turned to the helmsman. "Mr. Sulu?"

"My instruments do not record anything, Captain."

"Mr. Spock, at what distance did you obtain the reading?" Kirk asked.

"At approximately 100,000 miles."

"Mr. Sulu, reduce speed to warp factor 1. I don't want to hit any trouble before we understand what is happening."

"Warp factor 1, Captain," Sulu replied.

In the meantime, both Dr. McCoy and Mr. Scott reached the Bridge.

"Something wrong?" asked McCoy.

"I don't know, Bones," Kirk answered, "but we're checking. Mr. Spock says that for a little while a black hole appeared, and then disappeared."

"Captain, I did not exactly say that; I said it was 'as though' a black hole appeared and disappeared - but I cannot say what it was," Spock emphasised, but he did not turn his head; he was continuously looking at the instruments.

Sulu turned and said, "Captain, we are exactly in the place where Mr. Spock reported the black hole to be."

"Okay, thanks. Do you record anything, Mr. Spock?"

Spock did not answer immediately, but after some seconds he said, "Now - on our left."

Everyone was looking at the big screen. Like a cosmic tornado, everything began to collapse inside an indefinite small hole , attracting everything within a radius of 10,00 miles - and the Enterprise was only 100 miles from the black hole.

"Captain, I can't maintain the Enterprise at this distance! We're being pulled inside that thing over there. The energy has gone, we have only 10% power, and it's still dropping." Scotty was working on his control panel while speaking.

"Mr. Sulu, try to go back soon, or we're lost." Kirk was calm as always, but he knew the danger of the situation perfectly.

Spock turned his head slowly and told him, "It is too late. We have already crossed the boundary, and we cannot go back. Furthermore, the black hole is growing."

No-one spoke; everyone was looking - and perhaps praying - where the Enterprise was going through. No man had ever gone through a black hole - or at least no-one had ever come back to tell what there was inside a black hole.

Suddenly they found themselves in another universe, where the planets were exploding, and the stars were forming. There were protogalaxies only - a just-born universe.

They knew perfecty well there was no possibility of going back to their own universe, where they had left friends, parents, wives, sons...

Their last task, perhaps, had been given by God Himself... to start a new life in a completely new universe...

... At last Kirk opened his eyes. Spock and McCoy were looking at him. They were tired and worried.

A smile appeared on McCoy's face. "You're safe now, Jim. Don't move, and don't try to talk. And in future don't try to compete with Scotty when it comes to drinking. At least I can tell you that he's occupying another bed in my Sickbay."

Kirk smiled and closed his eyes again. It had only been a bad and terrible dream.

And still nobody knows what lies across a black hole.

****

LAST HOURS by Gillian Catchpole

Plates and glasses still on the table,
A half empty bottle with a cork beside,
A few wilting flowers.
By his side, Spock's glass,
Returned to the table untouched.
Spock had lifted the glass to his farewell toast,
Accepting the custom,
But as usual the contents had not been drunk.
He'd laughed a little
At the inevitable comment from McCoy,
Something familiar in the face of change.

But for the sound of gentle breathing
Sickbay echoed, strangely silent.
His last patient,
Ready for discharge in the morning.
He checked the indicators - everything normal.
When Spock was playing,
Something in the music,
Such a lonely theme, so lost and searching,
Like himself,
In a time so long ago
Years were inadequate to explain.
He thought he'd wiped that hurt away
And now again so much to lose.

The mood had been quiet
Ending early their final dinner.
Along the shelves had been empty spaces,
Already possessions were in a trunk
Perhaps never to be returned.
Jim had to be free,
Free to pursue what the future held,
There must be no guilt,
No loss of happiness for the feelings they had shared.
Tonight there would be no sleep,
Somewhere now he must find the strength
For this his hardest promise.
If the time ever came
He would be strong and direct Jim forward.
Settling himself like another shadow,
His dark head bowed,
He began to search for the courage.

****

RETURN TO THE ENTERPRISE by Ann Preece

"All I ask is a tall ship... and a star to steer her by."

How readily that quotation from a popular 20th century Earth poem springs to mind. It has always been a favourite of mine, and today I found it particularly apt. Why today? I hear you asking yourselves. Well, the answer is simple - today I regained command of the Enterprise after two and a half years of being 'grounded'. Today I had come home, and in a few magical moments the last two and a half years have become a hazy memory, soon to be forgotten.

Even now, after all this time, I experience the same feelings I always felt when I saw my ship, feelings of pride, wonder, awe - they are all present now as I gaze, silently, on the new Enterprise... my new Enterprise.

True, there have been changes, but that is only to be expected, and who am I to stand in the way of progress? But underneath it all, she is still my ship - and in that instant I knew I was right to fight Nogura for command.

"They gave her back to me."

Inwardly, I smile. The words make it all sound so simple. It is difficult to believe that for twelve minutes, in Nogura's office, I fought for this moment. Now it is here, and I can hardly believe it. I have to pinch myself to make sure that I'm not dreaming.

My Enterprise - how majestic she looks, suspended there in dry-dock, her thousands of lights throwing myriad patterns all around us, enveloping us in her warm glow.

She waits - how silently she waits - for the order... my order... which will take her out into space once more; where she belongs, out there with those other stars. And somehow, I feel that she will shine just as brightly - a jewel amongst a thousand jewels.

The Enterprise - my Enterprise - I control her now, or... is it the other way round? Does she control me? It doesn't seem to matter - now.

Silently Scotty manouevers the shuttle so that we can admire her from all angles, noting, with pride, the grace of her lines, the beauty of her curves.

I have never felt as proud as I do now, and it is a feeling which I am sure is shared by my silent companion. We are afraid to speak - afraid to destroy the magic of this moment by reverting to mere words, for I think we both feel that, in this instance, words are unnecessary.

In a few minutes we shall dock; in a few minutes I shall hear the familiar hum of the engines; once more feel my ship beneath my feet.

Long ago, the stars beckoned; space called out to me - it was a cry which could not be ignored or denied, then or now.

They are beckoning again - I must answer. Now I know I have come home.

****

THE CAPTAIN'S LADY by Ann Smith

She's a lady...
with gentle curves to please the eye of any man.
She's my lady...
my mistress, mother, wife.
We belong together...
together we will roam the stars,

My ship and I...
the Enterprise.

****

ZINE ADS October 1981

CHEAP THRILLS - a no-frills K/S zine - please do not order if you object to the premise. Carol Hunterton, 43 Old Bergen Rd, Jersey City, NJ 07305, U.S.A.

ENTER-COMM - a genzine from Marjorie McKenna, 1068 Bathgate Drive, Ottowa, Ontario, Canada K1J 8E8. Also DREADNAUGHT EXPLORATIONS.

FINAL FRONTIER - an explicit K/S zine from Cynthia Drake, 1387 L Street, Elmont, NY 11003, U.S.A. An age statement (over 18) required.

GRIP - a mixed media genzine from Roberta Rogow, P.O. Box 124, Fair Lawn, NJ 11003, U.S.A. Also TREXINDEX - a listing of stories and writers and where those stories appeared.

GALACTIC DISCOURSE -Laurie Huff, Disc. Div. House, U. of Chicago, 1156 E. 57th St, Chicago, IL 60637, U.S.A. An excellent genzine - issues 1, 2 & 3 available. Also PRECESSIONAL, a novel dealing with lasting changes in the lives of Kirk and Spock. Since Laurie is now at university, there may be delays in getting orders filled, as her stock of zines will probably be kept at home.

OUT OF BOUNDS - a K/S zine from Cindy Deren, 2521 Woodnere Ave, Akron, Ohio 44312, U.S.A. Very A/U stories. An age statement (over 18) required.

SOL PLUS - a genzine from Jackie Bielowicz, 4677 N. Boulder, Tulsa, OK 74126, U.S.A.

SPIN DIZZIE - a genzine at a very reasonable price. No 6 will probably be the last. Marilyn Johansen, 11424 Kensington Dr, Eden Prairie, MN 55344, U.S.A.

T'HY'LA - a K/S zine from Kathleen Resch, P.O. Box 2262 Mission Station, Santa Clara, CA 95055, U.S.A. Will not knowingly be sold to anyone under 18.

VAULT OF TOMORROW - a genzine from Marion McChesney, 3429 Chestnut Ave, Baltimore, MD 21211, U.S.A.

CAPTAIN'S LOG - a genzine from Sylvia Billings, 49 Southampton Rd, Far Cotton, Northampton, England. Make cheques payable to Sylvia Billings.

COMMUNICATOR - a newsletter giving details of zines, reviews, comments, etc. Rosemary Wild, 'Cwm Croesor' Stuckton, Fordingbridge, Hants, England, SP6 2BG.

FEDERATION OUTPOST - the new STAG zine. Make cheques payable to STAG. Sylvia Billings, 49 Southampton Rd, Far Cotton, Northampton, England. Also LOG ENTRIES 38 - 43.

NOCTURNE - a K/S zine from Lee Owers, 23 Maiden Rd, Stratford, London E15 4EZ, England. This zine contains explicit same-sex scenes - please do not order if you object to the premise. An age statement (over 18) required.

ORBIT - a genzine from Doreen DaBinett, 8 De Quincy Close, Brackley, Northants, England. Also some K/S zines which will not knowingly be sold to anyone under 18.

TASMEEN - Simone Mason, Seranis, Danehill, Haywards Heath, Sussex, England. Also LOGICAL THING TO DO, OF DARKNESS AND LIGHT, PRICE OF FRIENDSHIP, and others.

ZENITH - a genzine from Sue Meek, 314 Coach Rd. Est, Washington, Tyne & Wear, England, or Tina Pole, 11F Prior's Tce, Tynemouth, Tyne & Wear, England. Also TICKLED PINK, storied in a lighter vein by Tina Pole.

ScoTpress has many zines for sale, including VARIATIONS ON A THEME, ENTERPRISE INCIDENTS, WINE OF CALVORO, WHEEL OF FATE, BAILLIE COLLECTED, WITH HOOPS OF STEEL, THE TRIBE OF JEN-WAE, FULL CIRCLE, WEAVER OF DREAMS and others. SAE for list to Sheila Clark, 6 Craigmill Cottages, Starthmartine, by Dundee, Scotland.

Please send SAE or addressed envelope and 2 IRCs when writing for information on prices and availability of zines.

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