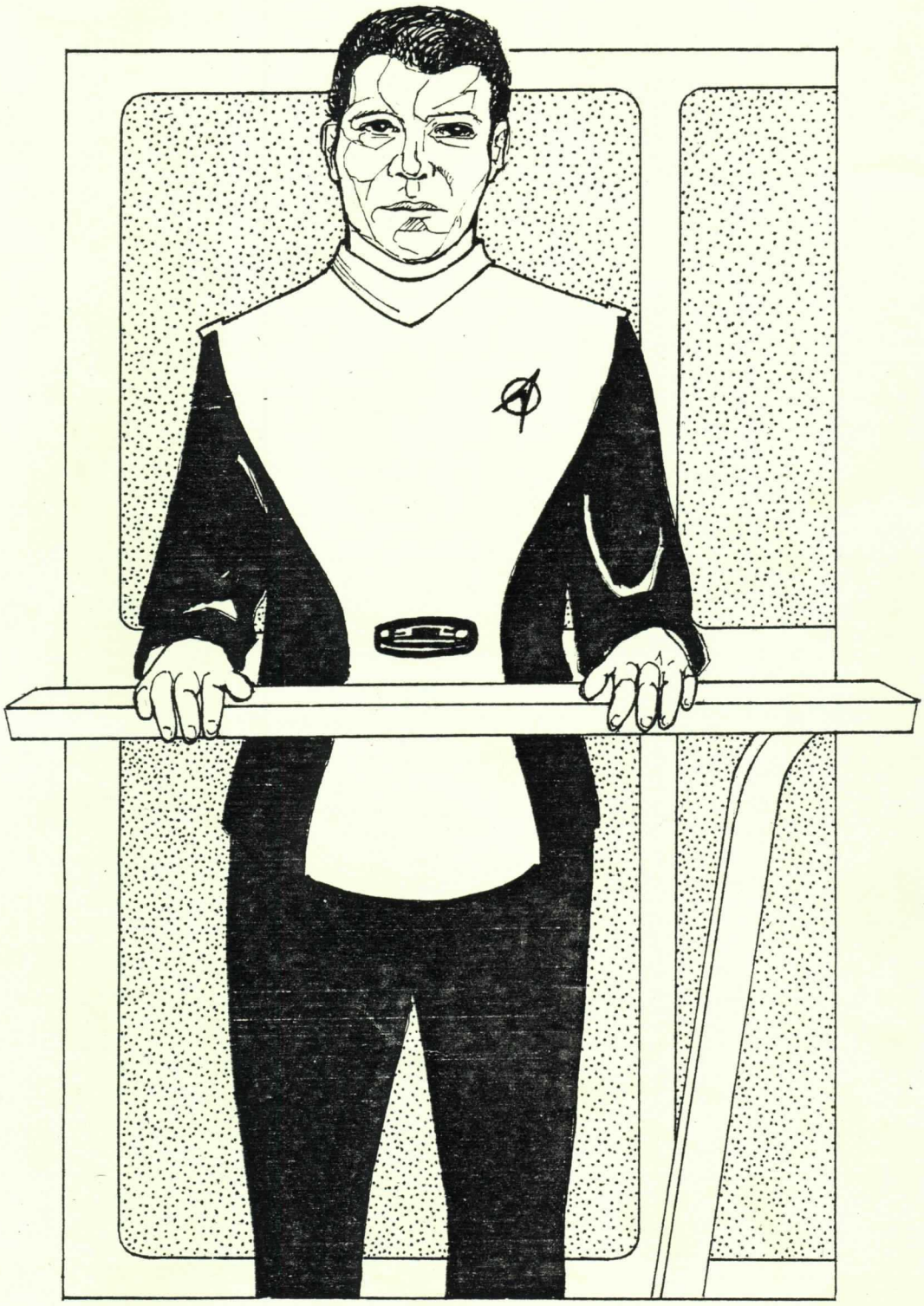
ScoTpress



ENTERPRISE - LOG ENTRIES

a Star Trek fanzine

67

CONTENTS

RAGS OF TIME	by Dolores Gordon-Smith	P 3
THE IRISH VAMPIRE	By David Gomm	P 51
MR. SCOTT'S TROUBLES	by Lynn Hester	P 70
THE SUN WITHIN THE STORM	by Karen Hayden	P 71
TRIBBLE QUIBBLES	by Linda Spencer	P 88
TIME TRILOGY	by Janice Pitkethley	P 89
ROUTINE REPORTS	by Sheila Clark	P 96
A FATHER'S PRIDE	by Sheryl Peterson	P 99

Illustrations: Cover, P2, 15, 19, 23, 40 by Anne Humphrey.

A ScoTpress publication

Editors - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini
Typing - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini
Proofreading - Janet Quarton, Sheila Clark & Valerie Piacentini
Printing of Masters - Janet Quarton
Printing - Warped Out Publications
Distracting - Shona

Enterprise - Log Entries 67 is put out by ScoTpress and is available from -

Sheila Clark
6 Craigmill Cottages
Strathmartine
by Dundee
Scotland

(C) ScoTpress May 1985. All rights reserved to the writers and artists. Anyone wishing to reprint any of the material herein is asked to obtain permission in writing first. It is understood that this applies only to original material herein, and that no attempt is made to supersede any rights held by Paramount, NBC, BBC or any other holders of copyright in STAR TREK material.

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

Hello, and welcome to Enterprise - Log Entries 67.

As Sheila said in the last issue, she and Janet have successfully twisted my arm, and I am now duly mechanised, computerised, bewildered ... and bankrupt. I do *not* have a mechanical mind; to me the ideal machine has an on/off switch and a volume control. However, sheer pressure has prevailed, and I have spent the last few weeks attempting to master a machine that is about as complicated to me as a Saturn rocket would have been to a prehistoric man.

(She's really doing very well - Sheila)

Get out of my editorial, Clark! As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, this is my first attempt at the new system. I have to admit that the zines *look* a lot better for it, so perhaps I will feel more at ease with The Machine soon.

As promised, this issue contains THE IRISH VAMPIRE, by David Gomm, the further adventures of Ensign Potato; we hope David will produce more stories in this series soon.

Because of our new length we are able for the first time to feature a really long story without creating an imbalance in the zine. THE RAGS OF TIME by Dolores Gordon-Smith held our attention all the way through, and we hope you enjoy it as much as we did. Dolores is a new writer to our pages, although some of you will know stories she has written in the past under her maiden name of Dolores Whitbread.

We would also like to thank all our other contributors; it's really because of these people that we can put out so many zines.

We are looking forward to Sol III, where we hope to see as many of you as possible; if it's as good as this committee's last convention, we are promised a good time.

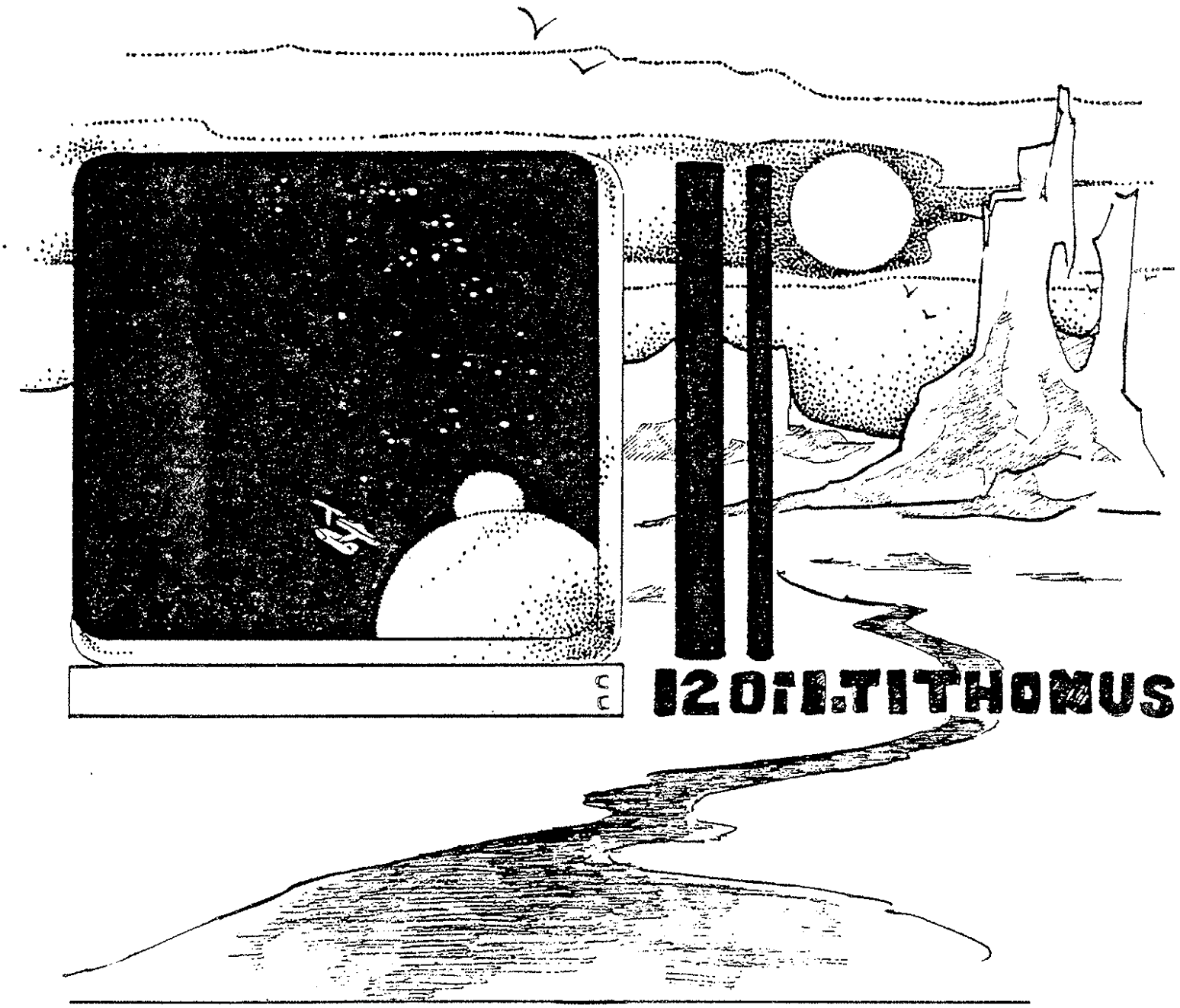
Valerie

As usual we welcome submissions of fiction, poetry and artwork for ScoTpress zines. We are looking for series-based action-adventure stories, preferably with some character inter-relationship. Alternate universe stories are acceptable, but even these should not be movie-based, K/S, or involve the death of main characters, or be primarily about other ships. These *are*, after all, "The voyages of the Starship Enterprise... "

Submissions may be sent to either -

Sheila Clark
6 Craigmill Cottages
Strathmartine
By Dundee
Scotland

Valerie Piacentini
20 Ardrossan Road
Saltcoats
Ayrshire
Scotland



THE RAGS OF TIME

Dolores Gordon-Smith

"But it can't just have gone, Mister!" Kirk exploded, swinging round on the unfortunate security guard.

Lewis snapped to full attention and swallowed hard. He had known that this was going to be rough but it was turning out to be worse than he had expected. He thought of saying, "I'm sorry, sir," decided it was inadequate and for a dreadful moment was left with his jaw half open.

Kirk caught sight of the hesitation and clenched his fist hard, realising that he was close to sheer anger. What he really wanted to do was to hit something - preferably Lewis - hard. What he *did* was relax his hand, lean back in his chair and take a deep breath. In a carefully controlled voice he said, "Report to me in the Briefing Room with Lieutenant Commander Ashton in fifteen minutes, where an enquiry will be held into a possible charge of dereliction of duty."

Lewis wondered whether to move, twitched nervously and stayed still.

"Dismissed!" Kirk snapped and thumbed the communicator button. "Ashton, this is the Captain. Collect all the relevant tapes on Security Project C47 and report to me in the briefing room in - "

"Captain," Uhura's voice broke in urgently.

Kirk swore softly to himself. "Hold it, Ashton. Well, Uhura?" he asked impatiently.

"Captain, we're getting a Priority One from Starfleet Command." Uhura looked at him apologetically. "It over-rides all other business, sir."

"I am aware of that, Lieutenant," he said sharply and then wished he hadn't. Hell, the woman was only doing her job. "All right, Uhura," he said with a rueful grin. "I'll take it in the briefing room." Spock came forward to take the con as Kirk walked towards the turbolift. Damn! Ashton was still waiting. Racing back to the chair he pressed the release button. "Tom - briefing room in fifteen minutes."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Kirk glanced up at Spock. "I'll want you there too, Mr. Spock, plus Dr. McCoy and whoever it was that was on duty before Lewis. See to it, will you - oh, and Spock, contact Scott and see if it's at all possible that C47 was beamed off the ship."

"Acknowledged, Captain," said Spock to Kirk's back as the Captain made for the turbolift at what was practically a run.

Kirk found himself fuming at the slowness of the lift. If he was late in receiving a Priority One... *They couldn't know about C47 already?* No, that was irrational. *He* was going to have the delightful task of breaking that particular piece of good news to them. *Damn Lewis and damn C47!* He hated carrying unknown cargo on his ship. Whatever it was in that package of dull metal was considered so secret that not even *he* knew what it contained. In his more cynical moments he wondered if Starfleet knew. All he was was an overpaid messenger boy, hauling boxes from one end of the galaxy to the other. *Captain, within this box is Starfleet's latest, greatest secret. And no, before you ask, we can't tell you what's in it. Just follow orders, Kirk. We trust you will have no difficulty in carrying this out...*

Thumbing the security flash on the briefing room door he strode into the bare room and activated the viewer with rather more force than necessary. "Uhura, is that transmission ready?"

"I'm trying to clear the static, Captain. We're getting interference - apparently from the Galactic Barrier."

"Then - " Kirk reined in his temper once more. "Then carry on, Lieutenant. Put it through when ready."

Well, at least he would be here when the message came. *Look on the bright side, Jim - why not?* The only problem was that this silver lining had a very large cloud attached.

Uhura's face flashed up once more. "I've got the signal locked, Captain, but there's a great deal of interference." She looked at him apologetically. "It's the best I can do, sir."

"Acknowledged, Uhura," Kirk said heavily. "Put it through."

Amid a spotty haze of static, Conner's face came onto the viewscreen.

"Kirk, the situation concerning the... " Conner's image wavered and his voice turned into an electronic squeal.

Kirk waited patiently, knowing that Uhura was performing a minor miracle to get a signal at all this close to the Barrier.

"... Very grave... need to boost our signal... quency K... must contact Rom... " The electronic squawk grew louder, making Kirk wince. There was a pause of nearly thirty seconds and then finally, irritatingly, the interference cleared and Conner's image appeared just in time for him to say, "And as I have no need to stress, it is vital that contact is made. Good luck, Jim. Conners out."

Kirk rested his weight on his arms, head bowed, and drew a deep sigh before pressing the intercom. "Uhura, did you get any of that?"

She was looking as flustered as he had ever seen her. "Captain, I can't understand it. Even this close to the barrier we should be able to get through. The only thing I can think of is... " She paused, checking a signal from her board. When she looked up it was with an expression of total astonishment. "Sir - tracking station R-Theta has just vanished."

"*Vanished*, Lieutenant?"

"Confirmed, Captain," said Spock. "Checking the readings now... It appears that R-Theta ceased to function four point seven minutes ago."

"There must be *something* there, Spock," Kirk practically pleaded.

"Negative, Captain. Not even a carrier wave."

"All right. See what other information you can get to try to explain what happened. Uhura, go through that Priority One again and see if you can get any more distinguishable words. Then try and get me a channel to Starfleet Command."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Spock here, Captain. Does this over-ride the disciplinary hearing on Ensign Lewis?"

For a brief second Kirk wondered who the hell Ensign Lewis was and then the whole C47 disaster returned to him. "Yes, Mr. Spock, it does. Cancel the meeting. Uhura, contact Lewis... "

She turned two despairing eyes up to him and Kirk relented. "All right, Uhura, I'll do it. And Uhura - get me Starfleet on a clear channel and you're on double rates for a month." She flashed him her widest smile and returned to the board.

Kirk walked out the door, only to bump into McCoy who was trying to walk in. A handful of tapes went flying and the two men did a crazy dance trying to keep their balance.

"Can't you look the hell where you're - " McCoy straightened up and saw who it was he was swearing at. "Sorry, Jim. I've come for the hearing on Lewis."

"Cancelled, Bones," replied Kirk, picking up the tapes and giving them to him.

"Cancelled, Jim?" asked McCoy, falling into step beside him. "Why?"

"Because, Bones, we're in trouble, and I haven't got the time or the patience to deal with some erring Security Guard."

"Are you sure, Jim? If Starfleet's magic box really has disappeared then that sounds pretty serious to me."

As they got into the lift together Kirk gave McCoy a reflective look. "Perhaps I had better see him, Bones. I might as well have *some* story for Starfleet when I make contact - if I make contact that is. It's strange, you know. I didn't feel it was going to be one of those days when I woke up."

"It could be worse, Jim. *You* could have been the security guard."

"Bones, if we don't find it, that's all I *will* be."

Lewis snapped to full attention as the Captain and the Doctor walked into the brig. McCoy looked at the tightly controlled Ensign with a tinge of sympathy that he quickly repressed, trying to replace it with totally professional unbias.

"Sir, before you say anything, I'd like to say I'm sorry for what happened." Two miserable eyes were turned on Kirk. "I could swear that no-one came near the room, sir."

"At ease, Ensign," said Kirk, sitting down. "This isn't a formal hearing."

Lewis relaxed visibly and sat down opposite Kirk.

"Shoot," Kirk said succinctly.

Lewis clasped his hands nervously before starting. "Well, sir, it was like this. I relieved Ensign Sorguson at 19.20 as usual and took over the guard."

"Where did you stand?" asked McCoy, not ungently.

Lewis glanced at him, grateful for the hint of sympathy in his voice. "Outside the room sir. Deck 3, room twelve. I... I would have preferred to be with the C47 sir, but it wasn't allowed."

"Starfleet orders, Bones," said Kirk, answering McCoy's unspoken question. "Carry on, Ensign."

"Well, sir, I think I'd been on duty for about forty minutes when I heard a strange sound coming from the room. I activated the door screen; by the time the opening sequence played through and I got inside, the C47 had gone. Maybe if I'd been quicker, I could have caught whoever it was... " The sentence trailed off as Lewis looked wretchedly down at his hands once more.

For a brief moment Kirk had a memory of the young Lieutenant who had delayed for a couple of seconds and then blamed himself bitterly. He dismissed the memory as irrelevant, but it was with a slightly kinder expression that he turned back to Lewis. "What happened then, Ensign?"

"It was gone, sir. The C47 just wasn't there any more. Sir, can't you run the scanner tapes? They would show everything, surely?."

Kirk avoided the question and tried another tack. "What was the nature of the sound you heard, Lewis?"

Lewis cast his mind back, trying to find the right words. "It was like... like an empty sound, sir," he said hesitantly. "As if someone had gone into an empty room."

"You mean you heard someone in there?" asked McCoy, puzzled.

"No, sir. It was just the... the sound of emptiness." He stopped, embarrassed by his lack of words. "It wasn't very loud, sir," he added more confidently.

"Emptiness is usually quiet, Ensign," Kirk interjected dryly. "Is there anything you can tell us that might help us find out what happened? Anyone around who shouldn't have been around?"

"No, sir," said Lewis a trifle desperately. "I could even have imagined the sound, I suppose. It was so small, you see. As soon as I realised what had happened I called Commander Ashton and after he arrived I was told to report to you." There was an awkward pause. "That's all, sir."

"All right. Lewis. I think you've told us all you can. You're free to go."

"May I report for duty again, sir?" he asked eagerly.

Kirk nodded and turned to go, followed by McCoy, and then stopped in the doorway. "If you remember *anything*, Ensign, let me know immediately."

"Of course, sir - and thank you, sir."

Kirk traded a slight smile with him from the doorway and walked out. He waited until they had got out of earshot of the brig before glancing at McCoy. "Opinion, Bones?"

McCoy sucked in his cheeks thoughtfully. "Well, Jim, going on nothing more than instinct, I'd say that man was telling the truth. I pulled his psych-tape when I knew I was attending the hearing and his honesty rating is well above average. Higher than yours," he added

casually.

"Thank you, Bones," murmured Kirk. "You may not have noticed, but my ability to bluff has got us out of a couple of tight situations in the past."

"Mmm. Sure, Jim, just mentioning it. The honesty rating can be fixed, though. If you're a good enough actor you can be as guilty as sin and come up smelling of roses."

Kirk jerked his thumb back in the direction of the brig. "Does he qualify as an actor?"

"How the devil can I tell? The only theatre I know about is the one in sickbay. When it comes right down to it, the most those psych tests can do is give an indication of general characteristics. There's no precise way to tell what goes on in a man's head - no matter how many tests you throw at him." McCoy cast a shrewd glance at Kirk. "You're not such a bad judge of character yourself, Jim. What do you reckon?"

"My intuition says that he's telling the truth, Bones, but my eyes also tell me that C47 is missing and he was on guard."

McCoy put his hands wide. "So stop asking me to play fortune teller and go run the scanner tapes.

"Ashton should be running them now - oh, hell, Ashton. I didn't tell *him* the meeting was off. He'll be in the briefing room now."

"In that case, Jim," said McCoy, stepping into the turbolift, "I'd let him know. Bridge?"

"Bridge," Kirk replied heavily. There was a whole fresh bunch of problems up there waiting for him and he didn't have the slightest idea how to solve any of them. Why the hell had he ever chosen Command?

Spock vacated the con as Kirk walked onto the bridge but continued to stand by the command chair. On the viewscreen there was displayed a large scale map of their present area of space.

Kirk gave Spock an enquiring glance as he sat down. "Situation, Spock?"

Spock indicated the screen and stood with his hands behind his back. "As you can see, Captain, we are now point four light years away from the edge of the Romulan Neutral Zone and one point three light years away from the Galactic Barrier. The tracking stations R-Theta, R-Iota and R-Kappa form the effective communication links between ourselves and Starfleet Command."

Three glowing dots strung out along the edge of the Neutral Zone indicated the position of the three vital links. Not more than a kilometre across, they were the life-line of a Starship.

"And, Captain," Spock continued in a controlled, even voice, "all three of them have ceased to function."

"What?"

"That's right, Captain," said Uhura.

Kirk swung round to where she and her relief, Anne Palmer, were standing by the communications board.

"Yes, Captain," she continued. "R-Theta went while we were receiving the Priority One and Iota and Kappa followed at intervals of seven minutes." Anne Palmer nodded her agreement.

Kirk mentally shook his head. All three out? "Explanation, Mr. Spock?"

"I have no explanation, Captain, only theories as to the possible cause."

"Well, let's have your theories."

Spock paused for a moment before speaking. "I would remind you, Captain, that these are merely possiblities based not on fact but on supposition. I could easily be wrong in the absence of sufficient data."

There was a muffled snort from McCoy which both Kirk and Spock ignored. "The first theory that presents itself is that there is something wrong with our communications, but Lt. Uhura assures me that this is unlikely."

"Can't you tell, Uhura?" asked Kirk sharply.

"I can't be one hundred percent certain, Captain, but it seems to be the least probable solution. All three tracking stations boost signals on 0900, but I'm not getting their carrier waves. I've checked on 0900 and it appears to be operating, but without an external signal I can't be sure."

Did all his crew have their reservations about their equipment? "Continue, Mr. Spock."

"Another explanation is that all three stations have suffered instrument failure."

Kirk cocked a wry eyebrow. "Now that really does seem unlikely."

"Without further information I would tend to agree with you, Captain. However, that only leaves one explanation that immediately presents itself." There was a moment's pause. "Namely, Captain, that all three stations were subject to a hostile act and that therefore we are in a state of war."

There were a few moments of complete silence on the bridge as Spock's words sank in and then everyone spoke at once.

"Ah, come on, Spock... "

"You can't be serious... "

"Jim, you're not going to believe that... "

"But there *is* nothing there... "

Kirk held out his hands, palms outstretched. "Gentlemen, please. *Gentlemen!*" Under his baleful glare the bridge fell silent. "Now, Mr. Spock, can you give us any further proof of your statement?"

"Negative, Captain. But if an invader were to start a war, the interference with our communications would seem to be the obvious first move."

Kirk snapped a finger at the viewscreen. "But Spock - to knock out all three stations means that the invader must be able to support a battle front of nearly a hundred light years."

"That does appear to be an objection, Captain," Spock admitted.

McCoy, who had nearly bitten his tongue off trying not to speak, couldn't hold himself back any longer. "Objection, Spock? I'll say it's an objection. We don't know anyone who can mount an attack on that scale. Your logic's wrong."

"Granted the premise, Doctor, the logical extrapolation is perfectly feasible."

"Does it *look* like we're at war, Spock? Has anyone attacked us?"

"Merely because no-one has up to the present moment, Doctor, does not mean that an attack is not imminent."

"Rubbish!"

Kirk glared at both of them. "Mr. Spock... Dr. McCoy... please let us concentrate on facts. Sulu, main screen on."

Stars replaced the map on the screen. McCoy leaned forward and grunted, "There's nothing there."

"McCoy!"

"Sorry, Jim."

Kirk got up from the con and indicated that Spock should sit down. He stood for a moment, surveying the bridge crew, thinking carefully before he spoke. "Gentlemen, the situation could be grave. On the other hand, there could be - as Mr. Spock has pointed out - another, completely rational explanation that we cannot begin to guess at because of our lack of concrete data. Mr. Spock, if you see anything so much as blink out there, sound red alert."

He strode to the door, indicating to Uhura that she should follow him. As Anne Palmer took over her position, Kirk glanced at Uhura. "Have you got the Priority One tape with you, Uhura?"

She held it up for him to see.

"Good. Miss Palmer, send a message to Starfleet Command stating the situation and advising them that we are proceeding to Tithonus on schedule." He held up his hand to stop her before she interrupted. "And yes, Lieutenant, I am aware that with the stations out it will take about three months to reach Starfleet. Send it anyway."

Uhura and Kirk stepped into the lift together. "Linguistics," Kirk said briefly, his mind working overtime. Uhura glanced at him but realised that she couldn't interrupt his train of thought. Evidently Kirk reached a decision, for he turned and grinned at her suddenly.

"Well, Uhura, one of these days you could have a ship of your own. What would you do?"

"Take the problems one at a time, Captain, starting with those I could deal with and working up to those I could only do something about when more information became available."

"Good. And which, out of the problems we have to choose from, would you say that we could do something about?"

"The Priority One, Captain. And there's another point too, that it could help us with the mystery of what happened to the tracking stations."

"Correct, Lieutenant. And that's why we're off to Linguistics... "

The intercom shrilled, followed by a request for Kirk. With a weary grin to Uhura he activated the switch. "Kirk here."

"Ashton here, Captain. I've run the scanner tapes on C47."

"Did they pick up anything, Tom?" Kirk asked quickly.

"Well - they picked up something - I'd like you to see them for yourself, though, sir."

"On my way. Kirk out." He turned back to Uhura. "Looks like you're going to have to try with that message yourself. Tell Linguistics I want them to moonstone the message but use your judgement to ensure that they don't feed me some video romance and call it fact. Use your sense - if there are any blanks, leave them blank but give me a list of alternatives."

Uhura got out at Deck 4 and Kirk continued on to the Security Chief's office. Tom Ashton was sitting hunched over the viewer as Kirk walked in, looking at an apparently empty screen. When he saw Kirk, he ran the tape back and the dark screen was replaced by an image of C47 in its metal box.

"Well, Ashton, what have you found?"

"See for yourself, Captain. This is room twelve just before the incident."

As Kirk watched, a blackness seemed to grow round the box, so slight that at first he thought it was a trick of his vision. The blackness grew stronger, like solid smoke, growing round the C47 and spreading out to the rest of the room. Within two minutes the room was totally dark.

There was a brief moment when the darkness round C47 intensified, and then the room slowly cleared and the room was back to normal. The only difference was that the C47 was nowhere to be seen. The door opened and Lewis ran in, phaser in hand, to be brought up short by the absence of the box. He strode to the intercom and called Ashton, keeping one eye on the empty room.

Ashton snapped off the tape and ran it back to before the disappearance. "That's all, Captain. Just darkness and a missing box."

Kirk ran a hand round the angle of his jaw. "Is there any sound on the tape, Tom?"

"Not during the actual disappearance, no. Whatever it was seemed to affect the sound." He pointed to the audio fault button. "That was activated while it was happening but it snapped back to normal afterwards, as you heard from Lewis calling me."

"Any power fluctuations? Loss *or* gain?"

"Nothing, sir. Nothing we picked up, anyway. Obviously something provided the power to remove the box, but our sensors didn't register it. We got nothing."

Nothing, *nothing, nothing* orchestrated to the sound of emptiness. There must be something to fight with, something somewhere that could give him a clue to what had happened on his ship! Without really knowing it, Kirk slammed his fist into his palm as he gazed at the screen. "We can find out more on the spot. Let's go."

Deck 3, room twelve, was one of the Enterprise's four high-security depots for inorganic cargo. Ashton stood aside while Kirk initiated the opening sequence and the doors slid open. Two strips on the ceiling and floor indicated where the force field would snap on when required. Kirk looked round the room with an air of being totally baffled.

"Maybe the ventilation duct?" Ashton suggested tentatively.

Kirk shook his head. "Too small - but worth trying, I suppose. Give me your tricorder, Tom."

Ashton unshipped his tricorder and passed it over to him, watching as he passed the scanner over the floor. "What are you looking for, Captain?" he asked eventually.

Kirk was examining the readings and shaking his head. Half hearing Ashton's question he glanced up. "I was seeing if there was any trace of recent footprints. There are, of course, but that'll be Lewis. There aren't any others I can distinguish. There would be something - crumbs of material from the soles of their boots, sweat marks and skin flakes from bare feet - you know the sort of thing."

"Yes, sir," replied Ashton flatly. "Those were my conclusions."

Kirk cleared his throat and handed the tricorder back to Ashton. "I suppose you've done this already, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir," Ashton agreed smoothly, putting the tricorder back on his shoulder.

Kirk coughed again, feeling that he had unwittingly stepped on Ashton's toes. "Check the ventilator, Tom. I don't suppose you'll find anything, but it's worth having a look."

As he had suspected, the ventilator showed no signs of having been moved since Pike's time. Kirk drew a breath and tried to marshall the facts. "Let's take the order of events again. Darkness filled this room and the box vanished. Now, let's assume that the darkness is a screen for whatever it was that made C47 disappear."

"Well, of course... " Ashton's face made it clear that he had never considered that the darkness could be anything else.

Kirk was less willing to take that for granted. "If that's so, then whoever took C47 doesn't have a body. Well, we've met incorporeal beings before, so we can't dismiss that. On the other hand... " Kirk pressed the intercom beside him. "Scotty?"

"Scott here, Captain."

"Mr. Scott - would you be able to tell if anyone had been indulging in intra-ship beaming?"

"I certainly would, Captain!" Scott sounded scandalised that there should be any doubt.

"Good. Next question is, can you tell me if anything has been beamed out of Deck 3, room twelve?"

"How long ago, Captain?" Scott asked cautiously. "Because if you mean when yon Klingon Kang was aboard and we had that wee bit o' trouble, I might not be able to tell you without some investigation."

"Just within the last two hours, Scotty."

"No, sir. And that's definite."

"Thanks, Scotty." Kirk switched of the intercom with a sigh. The idea that C47 had been beamed out was a grasp at a straw but it had been worth checking out. Kirk caught sight of Ashton suppressing a yawn and suddenly became aware that it was nearly six hours past the end of his duty period. Maybe things would be clearer in the morning.

Maybe.

Thank god he had a male yeoman once more. He relaxed back into the masculine atmosphere of his cabin with a grateful sigh. Janice Rand had been a good yeoman, but the fact she was so overtly female meant that his cabin always held the lingering scent of her perfume when he wanted to slump down and be at ease.

Janice had never been able to resist making comments on the state of his room - how he dropped his shirts, dumped his socks and slung wet towels into the bathroom. Not unpleasant or offensive comments, but possessive in an oddly motherly, oddly wifely way. And he hated being possessed...

Now Craddock, a phlegmatic, ugly Englishman with a peculiar accent (had he said Lancashire or Somerset? - one of the two) would as soon dream of being possessive as he would of laying claim to the ship. With a simple, "I think you're all set now, Captain," Craddock had made his morose way out of the room, leaving behind not the delicate scent of perfume but the pungent smell of cleaning fluid.

He flung his boots and socks to the other side of the room and revelled for a brief, liberated second or so in their untidiness. Then conscience pricked him and he forced himself off the bed to pick them up. After all, why should Craddock have to cope with them?

He was just summoning up the energy to walk, socks in hand, to the laundry chute when the buzzer on his door sounded. "Come," Kirk called automatically and then half-wished he hadn't. If there was another crisis he didn't want to know...

McCoy ambled into the room, bottle in hand. "Thought you might like a nightcap," he said amiably. "Having had a hard day an' all, thought it might be appreciated."

Kirk grinned and dumped the socks again for a long-suffering Craddock to find the next morning and waved McCoy in. "It's not mint julep again, is it, Bones? Because if so, then the answer's no."

"And what's wrong with mint julep?... Relax, Jim, this is a four star Saurian brandy that's probably going to be wasted on you. Where's your glasses?"

"Shelf right behind you. Make mine a double."

"Coming right up, Jim."

McCoy poured two generous glasses and stretched himself into an armchair. Kirk took his and put it on the table. McCoy shot him an acute, appraising glance. He knew that today had been utterly frustrating for Kirk. Problems, minor or serious, acted on him like an unreachable itch.

"I've told Linguistics to contact me as soon as they have that tape moonstoned," Kirk dropped into the silence. "They should have made something of it by now."

"Slow down, Jim. Let them get on with their own jobs in their own time."

"It could be vital, Bones."

McCoy leaned even further back in his chair. "Jim, Spock tells me we could be at war. Uhura tells me that there's a Priority One gone astray and you tell me that C47 is missing. And yet - sickbay is clear, I find the Captain has time to have a glass of brandy for the first time in a week and Spock's gone to take a shower. If this is an emergency I wouldn't mind having a crisis every hour on the hour. And what the hell does 'moonstone' mean?"

Kirk grinned, catching something of McCoy's carefree attitude. "It's a linguistic term meaning filling in the blanks on a message with the most probable words. Apparently they can pick up a lot from the intonation and length of the fuzzed words - so they say."

"Sounds like fiction to me," grunted McCoy. "Where does the name come from anyway?"

For an answer, Kirk picked a book off the shelf behind him and passed it over.

McCoy opened it idly. "'The Moonstone' by Wilkie Collins, first published 1868." He cocked an eyebrow at Kirk. "So?"

"One of the characters in it finds out the full meaning of a message by filling in the blanks with the logical words. S'good book - you'd enjoy it. It's an old mystery story."

McCoy continued flicking through the book until the Vulcan writing at the back caught his eye. "Is this Spock's?"

Kirk nodded and McCoy's eyes gleamed in delight. "*Spock* reads thrillers?"

"Detective stories, Bones. He says the logic appeals to him."

"Thrillers," murmured McCoy happily. "Wait till I see him... "

The intercom on the desk shrilled into McCoy's glee. "Linguistics here, Captain. We have the message from Starfleet for you, but some of it we haven't been able to distinguish at all. The part that we have got reads, after the salutation, '*Something - probably* situation concerning the *Romulans is very grave. Epsilon Two's function has been disrupted by an unknown force and we face wide communication breakdown. We need to boost our signal through the Enterprise so we can make contact with Romulan High Command on Frequency K to determine if we are, in fact, in a state of war. Until contact is made you are to proceed carefully and are forbidden to initiate any action that could be interpreted as an act of war...* Then there's something which we can't make out at all, sir, followed by Admiral

Conner's close, which you heard, Captain."

"Well done, McGregor. Give my congratulations to your staff. Kirk out." Kirk remained hunched over the viewer and swore very softly and violently. When he turned round his fists were clenched. "Damn it to hell, Bones, there's nothing I can do! The whole point of that message was to get us to act as a booster station, but we can't even reach Starfleet ourselves."

"Couldn't you contact the Romulans yourself, Jim? Use this Frequency K to communicate?"

"What for, Bones? I'm no diplomat and the hot line is strictly top brass only. If I called up their Command, all that would do is tell them that we're out of touch with Starfleet ourselves - and that could trigger a full scale attack. We're... "

The red alert sliced through Kirk's voice as Sulu's urgent command boomed over the ship. "All hands, red alert, we're under attack. Battle stations!"

Kirk and McCoy exchanged one brief glance and then ran for the door, McCoy to sickbay, Kirk to the bridge.

McCoy panted into sickbay to find Chapel, M'Benga and most of the medical team already there. "Chris, have we got the plasma stocks ready? All beds operating - M'Benga, get the portable entrogram working - where's the extra feinbergers - thanks, Nurse... Give me a hand to get these drips ready - and let's hope we don't need any of it... " *Dear Lord, let's come through this one...*

Kirk raced onto the bridge, closely followed by Spock. Sulu quickly vacated the con and Kirk found himself looking at two Romulan battle cruisers. Birds of prey to their dove. *All shields up, full power on all weaponry systems...* "Uhura, get me a visual to their bridge."

"They don't respond, sir."

A blue light shot out from the leading ship. Kirk just had time to yell, "Brace yourselves!" when the bolt impacted.

"Main shields holding," Chekov said tersely, picking himself up from the floor. "Shield six buckled."

"Leave it. Get ready to fire phasers... Fire!"

"Bank one away, Captain... Deflected."

"Fire banks two and three when ready, Mr.Chekov. Sulu, course 163 mark 4; warp 8 and hold."

Another bolt, this time from the second ship, sent them reeling. "Shield six gone!" shouted Chekov, clinging to his console. On his knees beside the command chair, Kirk punched the com switch. "Scotty, divert all available power to the warp drive. I need warp 8!"

"She's ready... now, Captain."

"Go, Sulu!"

A shudder of power groaned through the ship as the Enterprise

accelerated away at 512 times the speed of light. Totally unprepared, the Romulan ships were left far behind. Kirk kept up the nearly unbelievable speed for a full two minutes before giving the order to reduce to warp 7.

Heaving a sigh of relief, he looked round the bridge crew. "Well done, everyone. Uhura, kill that damn klaxon, will you?" The blaring of the red alert mercifully ceased, to be replaced by a multitude of little sounds as the fabric of the Enterprise shook itself back into place.

"Damage report, Uhura."

"Shield housing six destroyed, sir, and engineering reports hairline cracks in two dilithium crystals."

"Get a team up there, Uhura. Sickbay?"

"McCoy here, Captain. We've got four casualties... " There was a brief pause as Nurse Chapel said something to McCoy in the background. "Jim - make that three casualties and one fatality. Ensign Lewis just died."

Kirk felt the sick taste of defeat rising in his throat. Lewis, whom he had bawled out - how many hours ago? Two? Three? Lewis with the nervous expression and the high honesty rating... "All right, McCoy, I'll be down when I have the chance."

McCoy looked at the shattered body beside him and dully said, "Leave it until morning, Jim. You can't do anything here."

"Thanks, McCoy. Mr. Spock - status?"

"Power levels down by thirty percent, Captain. It will take us one point five two hours to reach sixty-five percent power, the most we can hope to achieve with two faulty crystals."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock." Idly he noticed that his First Officer had wet hair... pulled out of the shower. He suddenly felt horribly tired. "All hands, this is the Captain. Secure from general quarters." He glanced up and met the eyes of his relief. "Mr. Madaus, you have the con. A and B crews stand down."

As he stood up to go with the rest of the crew he realised that he had just fought the Romulans in bare feet. Ah, well, his crew had seen worse. He knew that he was experiencing the reaction to tension and it was leaving him desperately tired... He slumped against the turbolift wall and looked at Spock. Apart from his mussed-up hair he looked as impeccable as ever. *Well, James T., it just goes to show that some of us have and some of us...*

"A most logical decision, Captain," Spock said approvingly.

"Glad you think so, Spock. With any luck we can still convince the Romulans that our intentions are peaceful. This close to the Neutral Zone we wouldn't have stood a chance if we'd destroyed those ships. The fat would have really been in the fire."

"Have you considered what our position will be if we *are* at war, Captain? With our trading stations inoperable, our situation may be precarious."

Kirk gave him a tired smile. "You do have a way with words, Spock. If there *is* a war our position will be bloody awful. Still, I don't intend to worry about that until tomorrow - more specifically until we reach Tithonus and can pick up some hard information. Until then... " He yawned

suddenly, unstoppably. "Until then, I couldn't give a damn."

'Night, Spock. Dream about whatever it is Vulcans dream about... while I shall probably dream about Ensign... Oh, god, what was he called? Lewis. That was it, Lewis. I wish I hadn't gone for him...

Brendan Rafferty expanded his chest wide and took in an appreciative lungful of morning air. Despite what his friends told him, Tithonus was shaping up to being one of the best places he had ever worked. He smiled as he remembered Roebuck's grim warnings.

"Tithonus? *Tithonus?* Brendan, you must be out of your skull. It's light years from anywhere. Research? You can do research here - there's no need to go jogging off to Tithonus. I don't care if Gareth Llewelyn is there, you can do just as much in Cambridge. You don't know what these hick planets are like, Brendan. No entertainment, nothing to do apart from work - and the weather! You'll either freeze or fry, mark my words."

Hick planet, indeed, thought Brendan affectionately. Why, it was beautiful. It even had its own form of bird life. Of course, they weren't like his own sparrows and blackbirds, but they were birds all the same. He watched delightedly as a small sea bird tried to bury itself in the dust in front of him. Never having encountered Humans before, they were completely unafraid of the scientists at the station. With a white flurry the bird finished its dust bath and flew out over the sea, swooping and diving for insects.

Brendan smiled at the crazy flight as he stretched out luxuriously against a turf-covered rock. The scent of tiny sea-flowers filled the air, mingling with the tang of salt from the breakers crashing in on the rocks. Perfect scene, perfect weather, perfect peace... A clod of turf thumped into the back of his neck and he sprang up to find Adanka almost speechless with laughter behind him.

Brendan gave a mocking chuckle as he picked up a handful of soggy seaweed. Adanka backed off, hands wide. "Now, Bren, you know you don't mean it... Ah, Bren, it was only a joke... ugh!" The seaweed landed squarely on his chest, sending small tendrils down his shirt. Adanka picked out the most visible pieces and flicked them disdainfully on the ground. "Is your Irish pride satisfied now?"

"You can't expect the descendant of Irish kings to sit there and calmly accept some lunatic Polynesian chucking half the planet at him, now can you? There's thousands of years of royal blood in these veins... "

"And Dr. Llewelyn is going to want every drop of it if we're late on duty. C47 is due to be dropped off today and you know what that means."

Brendan groaned. "Not more physicals! I'm too young to be a guinea-pig for some Starfleet surgeon."

"You won't get much older if we're late. We're still got time for a swim if you can stop chattering. Race you!"

"You're on!"

Kirk looked at the blue-white gem of the planet in front of him, but his mind was far away from the appreciation of natural beauty. What he was trying to decide was how to explain to Dr. Gareth Llewelyn that C47 had

gone missing. Reluctantly he came to the conclusion that there was no tactful way to break the news. The only possible approach was the stark truth, tempered by the hope that once Llewelyn had told him what C47 actually was, they would have a better idea of who would want to steal it. As a silver lining it was a bit thin, but...

"This area of space is fascinating, Captain," Spock said, stooped over his viewer. "It has qualities analogous to those we experienced when we encountered the Tholian web."

"You mean we're going to find ourselves in the middle of a heap of alien knitting again, Spock?" drawled McCoy.

"I sincerely hope not, Doctor. That would necessitate another dosage of your compound of Klingon nerve gas and alcohol - a mixture which I found quite repellant. The Tholians were an additional hazard to the weakness in the continuum, not concomitant upon it. It would be a coincidence indeed if there were an entry to Tholian space from this sector as well."

"I wish I'd never asked," murmured McCoy.

"Odds on encountering a trans-dimensional power, Mr. Spock?" asked Kirk with a gleam in his eye.

"Infinitesimal, Captain."

"See, Bones? You can stop worrying."

"Who was worrying? I was making conversation if you must know, but I guess that's the triumph of faith over experience."

"Orbit achieved, Captain," called Sulu, neatly cutting off a retort from Spock.

"Good. Uhura, contact the Tithonus station and tell them we're beaming down. Mr. Scott, you have the con. Spock, McCoy, transporter room." He vacated the chair for Scott and walked towards the turbolift, to be stopped by a sign from Uhura.

"Captain, Tithonus doesn't answer. It could be connected with the continuum distortion we're experiencing... "

In an utterly Human gesture, Kirk strode across to the communications board and flicked the output switch. "Hmm. I suppose you're right, Lieutenant. Keep on trying, anyway. Scotty, if you haven't heard from us in one hour, beam us up. McCoy - do you want any of your staff to help you with the physicals?"

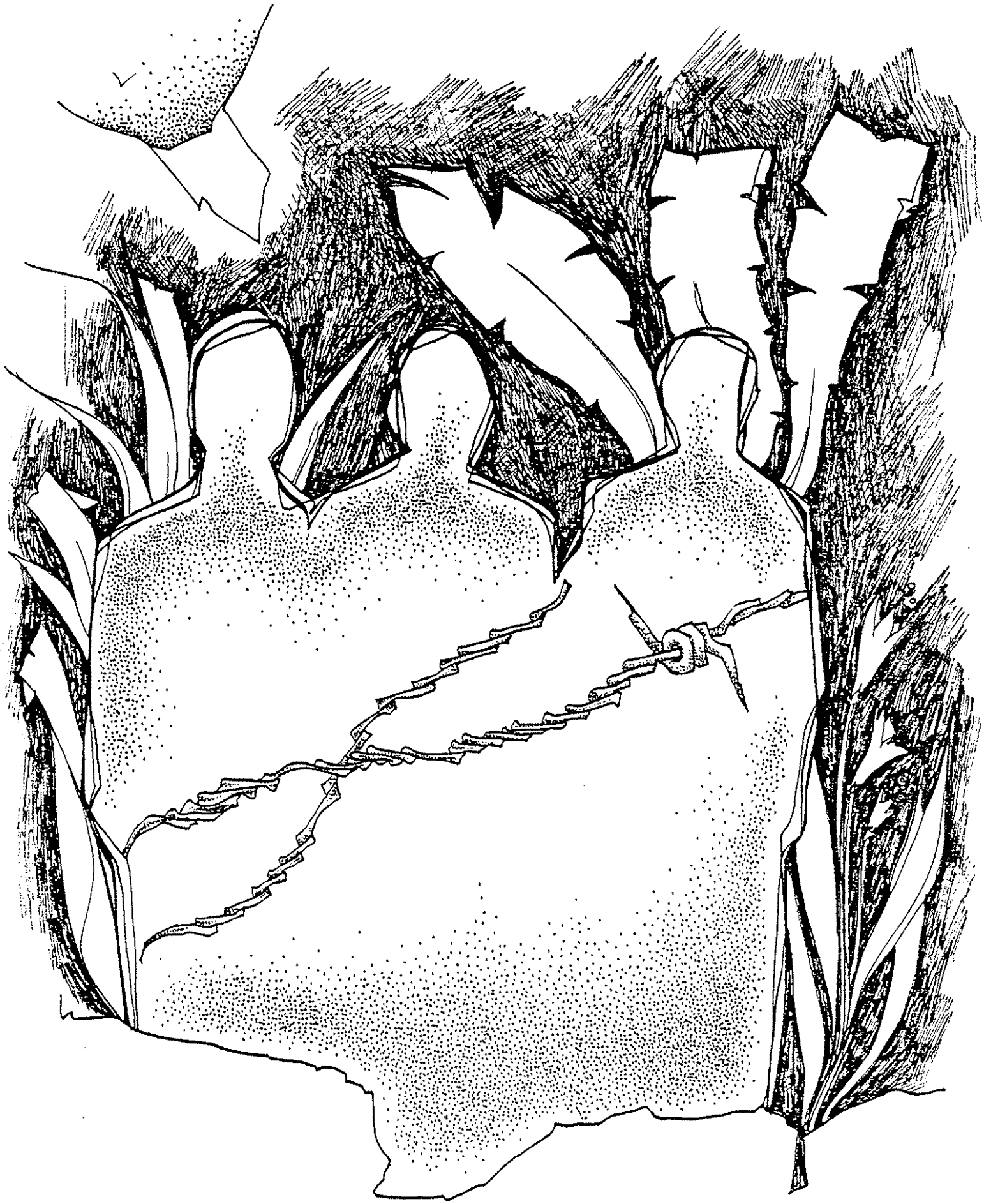
"I can handle it, Jim. There's only fourteen people down there."

"Fine. Scotty, this far out from the Neutral Zone I'm not expecting any trouble, but if you have to, warp her out of orbit. We can take cover down on the planet."

"Aye, Captain."

"Good." He turned to Spock and McCoy. "Well gentlemen, if you're ready, let's go."

The first thing Kirk was aware of on Tithonus was the noise. After the constant mechanical hum of the Enterprise, it was good to hear the natural sounds of the sea and wind once again. Blinking into the bright



sunlight, he hefted his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise." There was a brief hum from the communicator which quickly died. Patiently he switched frequencies and tried again.

"I can't raise them either, Jim," said McCoy, shaking his communicator in a useless gesture.

Kirk rebelted his communicator and raised his hands wide. "Well, gentlemen, I guess we're stuck here for the next hour. Let's make the most of it. We've got a lot of work to get through."

Kirk started walking in the direction of the white-stone research station, Spock and McCoy falling in behind him. Even though the part of his mind that wasn't consciously concerned with C47 was on the communications breakdown, he couldn't help but notice how good it was to have soft turf instead of hard deck under his feet once more. Apart from the large sensor and solar panels on the roof of the station they could have slipped back into a happier, more primitive existence, away from technology, away from insoluble problems. Into paradise.

McCoy cautiously swung open the door marked 'Refectory' and peered inside. A few dirty plates, some cups and three screwed-up napkins met his eyes. An insect buzzed in through the open window and settled on one of the abandoned plates, flying away in a startled blur as McCoy came into the room. All the food dispensers were working - roast chicken was on today's menu, he noted idly. He reached out and touched the metal teapot on the table. Still warm.

"Anyone there, Bones?" asked Kirk from behind him.

"Not a soul, Jim. It's as if they had all just walked out. Didn't even leave a 'gone fishing' notice."

Kirk gave a tight smile and shook his head. "There doesn't seem to be anyone on this side of the station at all. Spock's checking out the computer building. Let's join him and see if he's found anyone."

The research station was divided into two parts connected by a stone-paved courtyard. Apart from the drowsy hum of insects and the distant crash of breakers, the place was as quiet as a sleepy summer afternoon.

Unconsciously lowering his voice, McCoy tried to find a crumb of solace in the situation. "Well, Jim, if everyone's gone, then at least you won't have to explain what happened to C47."

"That's not much comfort, Bones. If... What the hell was that?"

A lightning flash far above them split the air, sending Kirk diving for his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise. Come in, Enterprise." There was dead silence from the communicator. He quickly ran through all the frequencies and tried again.

"I can't get them either, Jim," said McCoy quietly.

"Bones, that's my ship up there!"

"You don't know that, Jim. It could just be that our communications are still out."

"And that was a thunderstorm, I suppose?" Kirk suddenly realised that

shouting at McCoy was going to get him nowhere. "Come on, let's get to Spock. Maybe he can give us some answers."

Breaking into a run the two men made for the door of the computer room to find Spock standing at the door.

"Did you see it, Spock?" Kirk asked hurriedly.

"Negative, Captain. I was studying the computer read-out at the time." He pointed to where a desk-top VDU was displaying the results of the base sensor.

"There was a flash like lightning, Spock, and.. "

"Jim... " Spock's voice softened perceptibly. "I'm afraid the power curve on the screen was that of a ship being destroyed.

"You're telling me that the Enterprise is destroyed? Is that what you're saying, Spock?"

McCoy stepped in, trying to ease some of Kirk's anger and hurt. "It could have been another ship, Jim."

"How many ships d'you think are out there, McCoy?"

"The Doctor's suggestion may be correct, Jim. These readings are far from exact but there are indications of at least two other power sources and... "

Unexpectedly, McCoy held up his hand for silence. Kirk was about to speak but McCoy stopped him. "Jim, there's someone here."

"Over by the main computer, Doctor," affirmed Spock. Together they walked cautiously, phasers drawn, to where the sound was coming from. A sobbing noise, choked off as if someone was trying to keep very quiet.

McCoy knelt down and peered into the dark corner beside the bulk of the computer. Two dark, terrified eyes met his and flinched away. A young man, not more than twenty three or so was hiding there, covering something with his body.

McCoy's voice softened to almost inaudibility. "Hey, come on, son, we won't hurt you." He stretched out a hand and the man recoiled further. "Come on," McCoy insisted gently.

The young man crammed a hand into his mouth to stop himself from crying out. McCoy forward and touched the clenched fist. "Let me help you, hey?"

The fist unclenched slightly. "You can't have him," he said with a sob. "Not my friend. You won't hurt him again. I'll stop you!"

McCoy's face twisted at the challenge in the breaking voice. He looked to what the man was trying to protect. The broken body of a man was crammed into the corner. McCoy carried on talking, his voice even. "What's your name, sonny? You can tell me that."

The young man made a visible effort. "It's Br... Brendan. But you won't hurt my friend!"

"Hey, Brendan, we don't want to. Come on out of there." McCoy stretched out his arms and pulled him gently to his feet. Brendan looked around wildly and then caught sight of Spock. With a terrified scream he

pulled away but McCoy held him firmly and the brief tussle ended with Brendan sobbing desperately into McCoy's chest, the Doctor's arms held comfortingly round his shoulders.

"Not one of your more fervent admirers, Spock," McCoy observed laconically over Brendan's shoulder. An elegant eyebrow gave him all the answer he was going to get. McCoy nodded in the direction of the corpse. "Have a look, will you, Spock?"

Spock pulled the body out of the corner and laid it on the floor. Brendan, quieter now, saw what he was doing and in a quick rush that took Spock utterly by surprise, knocked him way from the dead man and knelt beside the body. "I won't let them get you, Adanka, I promised, didn't I? I'll keep you safe... "

McCoy's hypo hissed in his arm and he slumped over the body of his friend.

Spock picked himself up from the floor and straightened his tunic. "A most interesting reaction, Doctor."

"Interesting, Spock? Why not go the whole hog and call it 'fascinating'? He was scared witless by the sight of you. Now, I wouldn't call you beautiful myself, but I don't think he was merely reacting to your charming smile."

"Agreed, Doctor, but my physiognomy does resemble - as I recall Mr. Stiles forcibly pointing out - that of a Romulan."

Behind them, Kirk nodded. "That fits, Spock. The only question is, where are they now?"

"Unknown, Captain, but I would like to draw your attention to my discoveries regarding the apparent nature of Dr. Llewelyn's work. It seems as if he was investigating the possibility of manipulating a breach in the space-time continuum."

"Another dimension, Spock?"

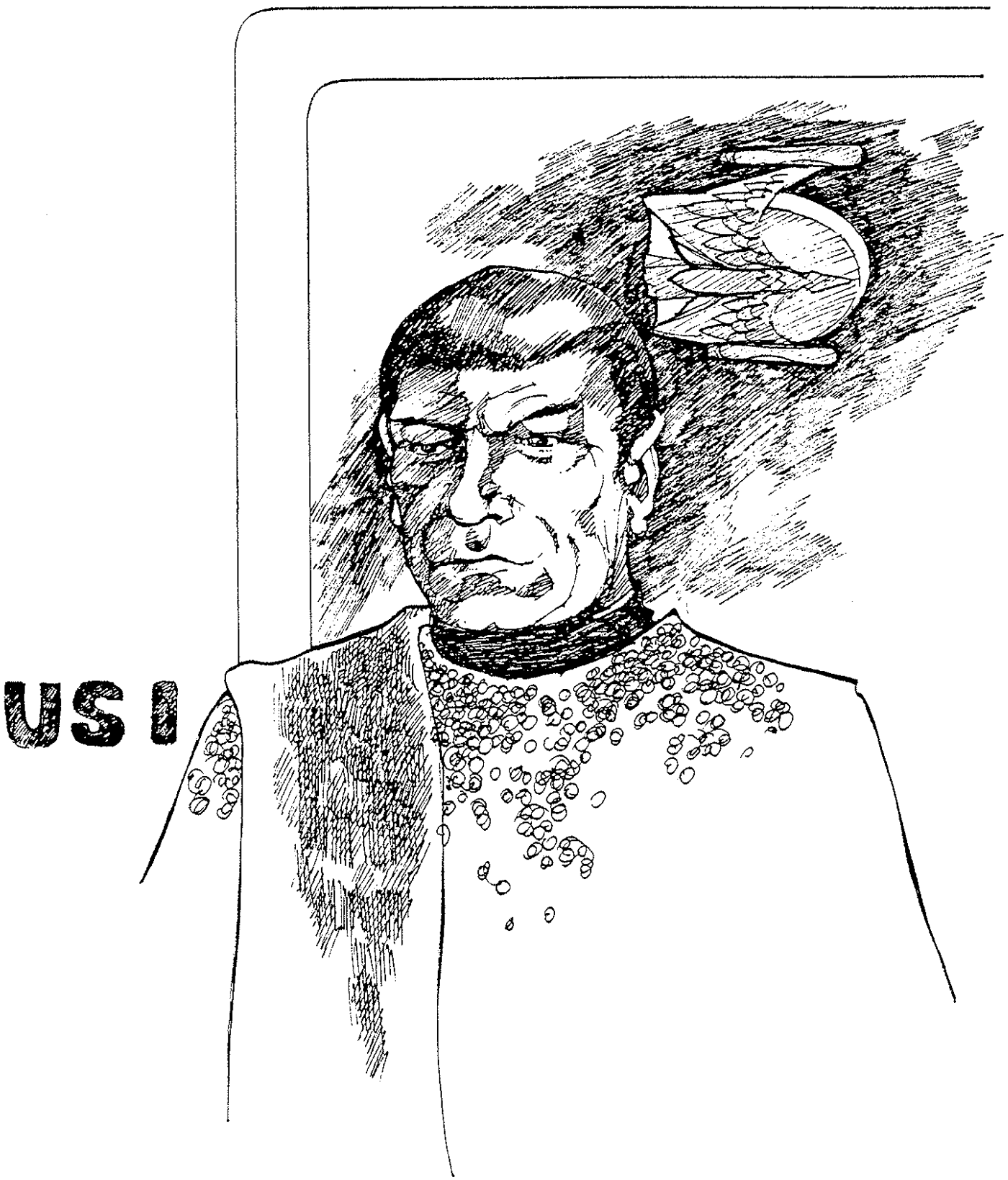
"Affirmative, Captain." Spock quickly keyed up a reference in the computer and Kirk found himself looking at a mainly incomprehensible circuit diagram. "As you can see, Captain, this is a modification of the Cochrane Link. Although the material is incomplete, it is my supposition that instead of warping space, this would enable us to create a controlled breach - given sufficient power, of course."

"But that still doesn't tell us what happened here and what's happened to my ship." Kirk drew out his communicator again, but it remained ominously dead. A hard knot of anger started to grow in him. "Dammit, Spock, my ship has gone, three tracking stations have gone, C47 has gone and most of the personnel from this base have gone." He dropped his voice slightly. "Spock, have you any idea where they could have gone *to*? Into another universe? Is that what you're saying?"

"It seems likely, Captain. The power required to identify and remove specific targets is quite incapable of being generated by this device."

"So... " Kirk let the word hang, cursing an irrational, hostile universe.

McCoy looked up from Adanka's body. "I'll tell you something, Jim. This man's friend was killed by a blast from a Romulan hand gun or I'm taking down my shingle... " McCoy glanced up and his eyes widened. "Look


USI

out!"

Kirk and Spock whirled - to find themselves looking straight at a tall Romulan Commander flanked by two guards. Kirk moved forward slightly and the guns of both guards came up to meet him.

"I would refrain from sudden movement, Captain. You will find my men anxious to protect their Commander from any untoward eventuality." The Commander unfolded his arms and walked to where Spock stood calmly waiting. With a swift movement the Romulan reached out and turned Spock's head sideways to him. "You are a Vulcan? Your people should never have broken away from us."

"Our history shows it was rather the other way about, Commander."

"It lies." The Commander walked up to where McCoy was kneeling by the body. The Romulan's hand shot out again and lifting McCoy by the shirt raised him off the ground and then dropped him.

McCoy, eyes like blue ice, crouched to spring as Kirk snapped out a warning. "McCoy! Don't do it, Mister. That's an order."

McCoy reluctantly sat back and contented himself with a glare of pure hatred. The Romulan watched the byplay with an amused smile. "Captain, I must congratulate you on your discipline. A Romulan would have died before accepting such an insult."

"McCoy!" Kirk snapped again as the Doctor's fists clenched.

The Romulan looked down at McCoy with the air of a scientist studying a strange insect. "I cannot believe that one is a soldier. He is too weak. The Vulcan, on the other hand, Captain, has the making of a fighter. You must have paid a great deal for him - or is he born free?"

"There are no slaves in the Federation," Kirk said tightly.

"So your propoganda says. Lies."

The Commander walked slowly back to his guards and placed himself between them once more. Taking an amulet from round his neck he held it above his head and in the manner of someone taking an oath said, "I am Traman, Commander of the Fifth Fleet and Legate of the Imperial Court. In the name of the Emperor and people of the Twin Planets I declare that my rule is binding and absolute on all present." He put the amulet back round his neck and continued in a different tone. "Well, Captain, you have presented me with a problem. For various crimes against the Romulan people I feel it is my duty to kill you. It is, however, against our ethics to kill an opponent when not engaged in combat with him, for then his soul would be the superior in the afterlife. Neither can we take prisoners and force upon a warrior the indignity of slavery."

"Do your ethics extend to killing an unarmed boy?" snarled McCoy.

The Commander looked briefly at Adanka's body. "He was a non-person - one who was not a warrior. I am in no danger from his spirit."

McCoy looked as if he were about to explode, but the look Kirk shot him would have calmed an over-loaded phaser.

Kirk tried to keep his voice even. "Traman, you accuse us of crimes against the Romulans. What crimes?"

Traman smiled. "Do not add cowardice to your other defects, Captain.

A warrior should rejoice in his deeds."

"But we don't know what we're supposed to have done!" Kirk insisted.

The Romulan's smile disappeared. "Very well, Captain, you may hear what you and your Federation is accused of. Entry into Romulan space, destroying our communications, destroying our ships without a formal declaration of war, refusing to honour the oath to respond to our messages asking for clarification and stealing our scientific equipment. It might interest you to know that the sum total of these activities has embroiled us in a war which we did not start but will certainly win. Your Federation will be nothing but a memory of lies, deceit and tyranny. When the Romulan Emperor is enthroned on Earth - "

"Which will be when hell freezes over!" interjected Kirk.

The Romulan's eyes narrowed. "We believe hell is very, very cold, Captain. It should not take much to make it freeze."

"It'll take more time than you have."

"I doubt that, Captain. A Romulan may live and grow old while three of your generations pass away."

Abruptly he walked away from the guards and placed a hand on McCoy's shoulder. McCoy squirmed under the grasp but could not break free. "You - what are you?" asked Traman. "Hurry - I dishonour myself speaking to you."

McCoy swung a fist wildly. Traman caught it easily, twisting the arm round, causing the Doctor's face to distort with pain.

"I ask you again; what are you?"

McCoy grunted in agony as his arm nearly left its socket. "I'm... I'm a doctor, dammit."

Traman hurled McCoy away from him to be caught by Spock. Without raising his voice the Commander turned to his guards. "He is a non-person. You may kill him."

"Like hell you may," said Kirk very quietly, stepping into the line of fire.

The Romulan looked at him with interest. "A combat, Captain? You tempt me." He raised a hand to his guards. "Do not shoot. I wish to gain glory."

"You'll be there quicker than you think." Kirk's eyes narrowed to slits as the anger he had tried to suppress for the last two days surged up within him.

The Romulan's fist shot out and Kirk just managed to dodge the blow and land one of his own. The second punch sent him crashing into the wall and he staggered up, shaking his head and making a dive for his opponent. Traman parried the blow with a crunching back-sweep of his arm. Kirk was flung to the floor, falling awkwardly. The Romulan dived for him, fists clenched, but Kirk's legs came up suddenly and Traman was thrust to one side. Kirk rolled over, his face inches away from the Romulan's. As Kirk went for Traman's throat he felt a blow on the side of his head but he barely noticed it as his world became focused into the single overpowering desire to keep his hands round a neck that felt like a tree branch and keep on squeezing. A vicious slide-slash slammed into his collar bone and Kirk flung his head backwards, his eyes misting over as the world... flipped and

turned. Turned in a crazy, sickening, senseless orbit with no perigee or apogee but a nauseating plunge into red blackness as the soughing sound of emptiness sang through his ears, turning him over and over... and the world stopped, righted itself and Kirk fell sprawling on the floor.

The nova inside his head continued to explode for another few minutes but at least it was *inside* his head and therefore would stop - would it? He risked glancing up and saw, foggily, the Romulan Commander flung across the room from him, apparently unconscious. McCoy and Spock and the other one - what was he called? - were lying by the computer banks.

Kirk tried to speak and managed a groan. Spock got to his feet unsteadily and walked across to him. He seemed to be swaying but Kirk was nearly sure that that was his vision playing tricks.

"Captain - Jim - I hope you are not harmed." His hand hovered for a moment and then circled Kirk's back, helping him to sit up. Kirk leaned forward with a groan, burying his face in his hands. When the room had finally stopped spinning, he ventured a small smile. "Thank you, Spock. I - what happened?"

"Unknown, Captain, but I believe we may have just passed through a trans-dimensional interphase."

Kirk turned, more suddenly than he should have done. "Another universe, Spock?"

"I believe that could be the case, Captain, but in view of the lack of concrete evidence, I would hesitate to postulate - "

Kirk waved his hand to ward off the torrent of words. "Later, Spock, later." He tried to stand, found his legs were like jelly, and glanced helplessly at his First Officer. Spock pulled him effortlessly to his feet and helped him across to where McCoy was starting to stir. Kirk slumped down beside the Doctor who opened one eye and promptly shut it again, putting a hand to his forehead.

"I haven't felt like this since I had my first Finagle's Folly... and that was more years ago than I care to remember."

Kirk grinned to himself. If McCoy was grumbling then there couldn't be very much wrong with him. The Doctor stirred himself suddenly. "Hey, I've got a patient to attend to. Where's my medikit?" He unshipped his tricorder and passed the scanner over Brendan's sleeping body, blinking at the readings. "Hmm. He'll be all right. Probably missed the worst of it." He glanced over to where the Romulan was beginning to show signs of wakefulness. "Help me get across to him, will you, Jim? That is, if you've decided to quit homicide as a career."

Spock and Kirk extended an arm each and got McCoy to his feet, Spock taking most of the weight. "Why, thank you, Mr. Spock," drawled McCoy. "I don't suppose any of this has affected you, has it? Not that it would dare to, I guess... Well, get me over to him, will you? I'm not holding on to you *'cause I'm* about to propose."

A flicker of distaste crossed Spock's face as he guided the Doctor to Traman's body. "I must confess to finding your humour misplaced at times, Doctor."

"Well, I've never seen you exactly crack up over it, Spock, so that doesn't surprise me."

As McCoy operated his tricorder, Traman's hand came up and tried to

knock the instrument away. McCoy glared down at the Romulan. "Now listen, sonny boy, I'm going to see you're all right whether you like it or not. Damn Romulan readings - everything in the wrong place - guess the Vulcan setting fits as well as anything... "

"I am dishonoured," said Traman. "I should have died in combat."

"Just have a word with the Captain there and I'm sure he can fix something... No, dammit, don't take me so goddam literally! Just lie there, will you? Spock, before you waved goodbye to this bunch they must have been regular bundles of fun."

Despite himself the Romulan half smiled. "Kirk, it is of little surprise to me that your Federation has had such successes if this one is typical of your non-persons." He suddenly saw that McCoy had one hand resting lightly on his chest. "You have touched me."

McCoy gave an exasperated snort. "Well, I'm sorry about that, Mister, but in spite of what Mr. Spock will tell you, I can't cure by faith alone."

The Romulan's eyes were hooded. "No - you do not understand. It is one of our... principles." He was hesitant, searching for the right words. *Principle* had been the translation of a concept, not a word, and from his manner it was clear that it was a subject that he had some difficulty in explaining. "To touch another - to offer help and know who it is you are offering service to, means that... Means that we are in *Harlkanar*." He turned his head restlessly, annoyed by McCoy's puzzled frown. "I cannot explain further. I have said enough."

"*Harlkanar*," said Spock unexpectedly. "It is an ancient Vulcan term. The nearest English equivalent is 'light bonding'."

"The Vulcans may have appropriated it when they seceded from my people," said Traman stiffly. He looked McCoy full in the face. "It means that I am unable to kill you."

Kirk stepped forward and reached down a hand. "Care to make that go for me as well?"

The Romulan stared at the outstretched hand for a long moment and then turned his head slightly. "No, Captain, I would not. These healer's tricks of friendship are not for warriors. I will keep my honour."

Kirk stepped back with an angry gleam in his eyes and didn't even try to restrain his temper. "I think we'd better get a couple of things clear, Commander. With your guards gone I have the superior force, so just on numbers alone I've got the winning hand, and - "

"Very good," said a voice from somewhere in the room. "Captain, your reaction is most promising."

Kirk whirled to find the new speaker but could see nothing.

"And Commander," continued the voice, "your bellicosity is everything I could have hoped for. Carry on, gentlemen, please."

"Spock!" yelled Kirk furiously. "Where's that voice coming from?"

Spock gave the faintest indication of a shrug and indicated the communicator set into the wall. Kirk focused his attention on the transmitter.

"You! Who are you? Where are you?"

"I can't be expected to reveal all my secrets just for the asking, Kirk. Whatever would become of your quest for knowledge if I simply told you all the answers?"

"Where's my ship?" asked Kirk, very quietly. "Where's the Enterprise?"

There was dead silence. Kirk swore uselessly in the empty air but derived no satisfaction from the futile words. Rapidly he turned to the Romulan beside him. "You - were you there? What's happened to my ship?"

Traman regarded the excited Human with disgust. "Three ships of the Fifth Fleet engaged the Enterprise in battle. Sarthos of the Vanquisher rashly laid himself open to attack and was destroyed. Then the Enterprise vanished before our eyes. We assumed that you had used the cloaking device you stole from us. Or - " a gleam came into his narrowed eyes - "that you had run away once more. That is a tactic for which the Enterprise is becoming famous."

Spock quickly stepped in to prevent Kirk's angry outburst. "The situation does seem to be susceptible of another explanation, Captain. If we have been brought through interspace then it is possible that the Enterprise has been similarly transported."

Kirk nodded briefly and shook open his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Our communicators appear to be out, Captain," said Spock, checking his own.

"Phasers, Mr. Spock?"

Spock flicked the power indicator on his phaser. "Phasers are out, Captain. I suggest that there could be an energy damper field in operation."

With a grim smile, Kirk rebelted his communicator. "Let's take it one step at a time, Spock. First of all we'll make it a working hypothesis that the ship is up there, somewhere. What we have to do is find out where we are now and how to get to her. We start by searching this place from top to bottom and if anyone finds that joker who was talking to us - save him for me. Mr. Spock, you've expressed the theory that we've passed through a dimensional interphase. Reasons?"

"The weakness of the area of space we were in, Captain, allied to the apparent nature of Dr. Llewelyn's work and the subjective effects of the passage from where we were to where we are leads me to suggest that we wer brought through a trans-dimensional gate."

"Artificial or natural?"

"Probably a combination of both, Captain."

"Right. So therefore there must be some device - some machine - that can take us back to our own universe. Let's find it." He glanced round the room they were in. "We can start right here."

Kirk hesitated at the entrance and strode out. Above him hung Tithonus' two small, brilliant moons and over to the west lay the powdered stars of the Galactic Arm. A whiff of salt came to him in the air and he could hear the dull roar of breakers crashing in on the rocky beach. Stone

for stone, star for star, they were on Tithonus. The only difference was that the research station had disappeared. The main computer block stood behind him, gleaming whitely in the moonlight, but the other buildings simply were not there.

Spock's dark shape appeared beside him. Kirk indicated to where the buildings should have been. "Any ideas as to where the station's gone, Spock?"

"It would seem that only ourselves and this building were brought through, Captain. Yet even within those limits it must be a selective process for the two Romulan guards and Mr. Adanka's body were not transferred with us. The power and the precision needed to complete such an operation must be immense, Captain."

Kirk chewed his lower lip thoughtfully. "Enough to account for the disappearance of C47 and three tracking stations, Spock?"

The Vulcan hesitated. "In view of what has happened to us, Captain, I would be loathe to say no, but it implies control of a very high order."

"We'll grant them the power, Spock, and take it as a working theory."

There was a footstep behind them and Traman joined them at the doorway. Kirk stiffened instinctively, prepared for another confrontation. To his surprise the Romulan made no attempt to speak but stood gazing intently at the stars. "I cannot see my home star from here," he said suddenly. "Can you see your sun, Kirk, or you, Vulcan, see 40 Eridani?"

"Neither star is visible from this quadrant," replied Spock.

The Romulan continued gazing at the sky. "It is strange that we should come to a place where we cannot see our stars and yet fight for the possession of so much empty space. And yet... These stars and worlds should be ours." He glanced at Kirk. "You named my race after one of your ancient civilisations, I believe?"

"Correct, Commander," agreed Kirk, wondering where the conversation was going. "The Romans ruled half our world more than two thousand years ago. According to their legend, their race was started by Romulus and Remus, who were suckled by a wolf."

Traman half smiled. "The name was well chosen, Captain. Like the wolf, what we take we will keep and fight to preserve. When we launched our mission of conquest one hundred years ago we thought you were barbarians. We were wrong. We made what we thought was a lasting peace between our two cultures but it appears that the Terran regard for peace is not high." He turned sharply to Kirk. *"'Peace with weapons in our hands will only lead to war.'* One of your Roman philosophers said that, Captain. It turned out to be a true saying, for we are now at war."

Kirk recovered from a mild case of culture shock at hearing a Romulan quote Human philosophy to him and countered with a quotation of his own.

"There never was a good war or a bad peace."

The Romulan gave a sudden, wolfish grin. "Now there you are wrong, Captain. Some wars are glorious."

"Even when they have been arranged by an outside agent, Commander?" asked Spock quietly.

"Even then there may be honour to be gained, Vulcan, but I would

rather not fight the wrong enemy."

Kirk smiled, feeling an odd surge of affinity. "Then let's go find the right one." He turned back to the doorway and called, "Bones?"

McCoy appeared, framed in the entrance. "If it's O.K., Jim, I'd like to stay here. My patient should wake up soon and if he has another fit of the screaming heebie-jeebies I'd like to be here."

Kirk nodded. "Stay by him, Bones. We're going to reconnoitre the area. There must be a detectable power source somewhere. Stay alert."

"Do you want me to keep breathing as well, Jim?"

"It might help."

As they walked away, the Romulan looked at Kirk with a puzzled frown. "Do you always tolerate such insolence from your troops?"

Kirk exchanged a look with Spock and found it difficult to keep from laughing out loud. Spock answered, picking his words very carefully. "As Dr. McCoy appears to believe that he invented speech, he feels he must employ his undoubted faculty on every occasion, whether relevant or not. This can sometimes prove trying."

"You are enemies?" Traman asked quickly.

Spock gave him a frozen glance. "Animosity is an emotional state and as such is unknown to Vulcans." He paused, almost perceptibly. "No, Commander, Dr. McCoy and myself are not enemies." He looked down at his tricorder. "Captain, these readings are not precise, but there seems to be a residual power source in the area towards the cliffs. I suggest that we continue our researches in that direction."

"In the Romulan army," remarked Traman, without the hint of a smile, "your healer would be shot."

Brendan stirred drowsily and opened one eye. McCoy bent over him with a satisfied smile as he noted the lack of tension in the muscles. "Well, now, it's good to see you looking better. How d'you feel?"

"Like I'd been asleep for a week. What am I doing here... " Memory suddenly returned to Brendan and he hid his face in his hands. "Oh, lord, Adanka... He's dead, isn't he? I tried to save him but the Romulans - there were too many - I should have been there... "

McCoy laid a comforting hand on a shoulder that had started to tremble. "Don't blame yourself. You did the best you could."

Brendan suddenly looked up. "I suppose I did, but it seems such a waste. He never hurt anyone and only this morning... " He swallowed hard, unable to speak.

McCoy tightened his grip on Brendan's shoulder. It seemed wrong that someone who looked so absurdly young should have to cope with death. As a doctor he was used to death, but every so often the sheer finality of it was brought painfully home and he could only try and comfort where there was no hope

"You're a doctor, aren't you?" asked Brendan after a few minutes. "I remember making a fool of myself when you came. There was a Vulcan with

you, and I thought he was another Romulan. I must apologise to him - I didn't know what I was doing. I suppose the Romulans didn't realise he wouldn't have harmed then - Poor Adanka... "

McCoy's mouth narrowed into a grim line as he realised that he would now have to find the words to tell this young lad that there was now a Romulan with them - and that they didn't know where they were...

Spock reached out for the hand that Kirk lowered down to him and clambered back over the top of the cliff. "Nothing, Captain," he said, straightening his tunic. "At some stage in the recent past there was a small research station set into the cliffs and my tricorder picked up a trace of radiation from its abandoned generator."

"It was worth following up anyway, Spock," said Kirk wearily. "Let's get back to McCoy. There's nothing for us here." Together the three men turned and trudged back across the moonlit turf, the computer building glimmering whitely in front of them.

Kirk paused as he came close to what was left of the station. Its attendant buildings ripped away by the transfer, the computer block stood four-square on the turf. Yielding to an impulse to do *something*, no matter how pointless, Kirk walked round the building once more, tricorder in hand, trying to find a concealed entrance, a stone out of place, just something that might give them some sort of clue. Nothing; again. He shook his head helplessly and led the way back into the computer room.

Brendan, prepared for the sight of the Romulan, made a noble effort not to react. "Good man," whispered McCoy in his ear and was rewarded by a grateful smile. "Allow me to present Dr. Brendan Rafferty," he continued, stepping forward. "Research Assistant to Dr. Llewelyn."

"You are a medical man, Dr. Rafferty?" asked Kirk.

"No, just a Ph.D, I'm afraid. My work was helping Dr. Llewelyn with the Cochrane Link." The sheer normality of the question helped him more than Kirk would ever know.

Kirk leaned up against the computer housing. "So far we haven't had any indication of a power source or where that person who spoke to us could be. Now, if anyone has an idea, I'd like to hear it. I'm open to suggestions."

"Sleep," said McCoy firmly. "That's this doctor's orders."

"We can't just stop... " Kirk stifled a yawn and shot McCoy an apologetic grin.

"Sleep," said McCoy again.

"All right, McCoy, I give in." He looked at Traman quickly. He had no intention of sleeping when Traman was awake. "If two of us stay on watch - I'll take the first one with Commander Traman, McCoy and Dr. Rafferty can take the second and Spock the final one."

"Our sleeping quarters are through here, Captain," said Brendan, leading the way to a door at the back. "We'll be more comfortable in here."

He touched the door control just as Kirk said, "You can't go in there - there's nothing... "

And Brendan opened the door into emptiness.

A rising knot of nausea gripped Kirk as he stared through the doorway. The darkness had a different quality from the outside. This was not the absence of light but the presence of a thick blackness that could be felt. It even sounded empty but with no sound that he could hear. Lewis' words came back to him.

"It was an empty sound, sir..."

Looking into the surging darkness he understood what the Ensign had been trying to describe.

"What is that, Jim?" asked McCoy in a small voice. Kirk shook his head and looked at Spock. The Vulcan had compressed his lips into a tight line as he scanned his tricorder readings.

"I picked up a power surge, Jim, but it has now been shielded." He looked towards the door. "I believe that is our entrance."

McCoy swallowed. *Go through there? Into that...?* "Spock, there can't be anything through there. You've seen for yourself - there's only this room and that door can only lead to the outside."

"Could it be another dimension, Mr. Spock?" asked Brendan. "That sounds stupid, but... "

"I think you are essentially correct, Dr. Rafferty. I suggest we continue our researches on that premise." He snapped off his tricorder and looked enquiringly at Kirk. The Captain squared his shoulders and led the way to the door. To his surprise Traman hung back, a look of revulsion on his face.

Kirk gave him an enquiring glance which Traman countered defiantly. "I told you, Captain, that the Romulan Hell is very cold. It consists of frozen emptiness - it is our non-place. That doorway leads to a non-place, and I am troubled."

"Then stay here," Kirk offered helpfully.

Traman felt a stab of wounded pride at showing weakness before these Humans. "I am the Imperial Legate. Therefore I am here in place of my Emperor, and he has never known fear. Lead on, Kirk."

And, thought Kirk, *if you had said, 'Anything you can do I can do better', it couldn't be clearer.* He led the way through the doorway.

He had expected to encounter some kind of physical reaction from that darkness, but there was nothing. There seemed to be some kind of psychological reaction, though. He had a desperate urge to break away, to run back to the light... Oh God, where *was* the light? The doorway had vanished and he was sightless, without senses, deprived even of the feel of the ground beneath his feet. It was as if the darkness was eating away his eyes, getting inside him, taking him over... He reached out wildly and felt the comfortingly familiar material of his First Officer's shirt. A hand touched his arm and he recognised McCoy.

"Lord, Jim, it's like a Klingon's armpit in here."

"How do you know, Doctor?" asked Spock in a mildly interested voice.

"My personal life is none of your concern, Mr. Spock," retorted McCoy. "Have you worked out what direction we're meant to be going in yet?"

"My tricorder indicates that we should find a minor power source directly ahead. I suggest that you attempt to combine your talents for speech and locomotion, Doctor."

"I'm glad to hear you admit that I have any talents at all, Spock... Ouch!"

"What is it, Bones?" asked Kirk hurriedly.

"It's a door, Jim, and I just walked straight into it. Now, how does it open?" There was a pause while McCoy felt round the door seal, followed by a hiss as the door slid open.

Kirk craned forward to see what was awaiting them in the room - and found himself staring into the room they had just left.

Spock's eyebrows lifted as he rapidly rechecked his tricorder. "It is as I suspected, Captain," he said eventually. "We have not entered 'our' computer room at all, but have come through to the same place in a different universe." He glanced out into the room, which was beginning to fill with grey light. "And one where dawn is about to break."

They walked forward cautiously, looking for anything that was remotely different from the room they had just left. Everything was identical to the Tithonus station, everything as it had been.

Spock walked over to where the window looked out onto a grey sea crashing against dark cliffs lit by a pearl-grey sky that was beginning to show a tinge of red.

As a forlorn hope Kirk tried to contact the Enterprise once more, but the communicator remained dead.

"Good try, Captain," said a faintly mocking voice above them. "Please don't lose hope."

Kirk whirled. "You!" he yelled. "Where are you?"

The voice didn't answer and Kirk spun round on his men, frustration boiling up inside him. "Who *is* that?" he demanded rhetorically.

To his surprise Brendan Rafferty gave him an answer. In a tone of absolute astonishment he said slowly, "It's Doctor Llewelyn... "

One room followed another in an unending maze. The only thing that separated them were the worlds outside the window. Some showed night, some showed brilliant noon, some had storms with the sea peaked to fierce white crests; in some the sea had dried out leaving deserts, and in at least two the red twilight of a gigantic dying sun gave the room a sickly unnatural air. And as a constant, every world was separated by the passage through the sickening, sapping darkness of interphase. Early on in their journey Spock had mentioned to Kirk the slim chance of ever finding their way back to the original room. The look that Kirk gave him told Spock that the Captain was only too aware that they were lost in the way between these worlds of identical pattern.

After walking for well over two hours, McCoy sat down on the floor of a room where spring sunlight poured through the window and announced his intention of not moving any further. "I can't see the point, Jim," he said

flatly. "It's all just the same damn thing after another. I'm through with being a laboratory rat."

"Bones, we've got to get to the Enterprise," Kirk insisted.

"And this is helping us find the Enterprise? C'mon, Jim, face facts. We've been going round like... like... Hell, I don't know. I'm tired."

Kirk hauled him to his feet, furious. "And is that what you're going to do? Just give in without a fight? Aren't you even going to try?"

McCoy's eyes narrowed. "I *have* tried, sir. I'm not running' round in that damn maze any longer, and that's final."

Traman stepped forward and spun McCoy out of Kirk's grasp. "Do *not be* insolent," he growled.

"Keep out of this," hissed Kirk. "McCoy, get walking, Mister."

McCoy shook himself free of the Romulan's grasp. "*Where to,* Captain? Another dimension in this blasted hell?"

"I agree with the Doctor," said Spock unexpectedly.

Kirk swung round on him. "When I decide to command by vote, Mr. Spock, I'll ask for your opinion. Until then..."

"I thought as much," said Llewelyn's voice pleasantly. "You'll fight forever, you know. There is no escape."

The voice acted like a bucket of cold water on Kirk and he dropped his hands tiredly to his sides. "McCoy, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said what I did. Let's rest."

"Giving up so soon, Captain?" asked Llewelyn. "You do disappoint me."

Kirk's fists clenched but he refused to be baited into replying. The approving look he got from Spock told him he had done the right thing. He suddenly felt a surge of guilt towards these two men who were meant to be his friends. By virtue of rank he could order them to carry on, but that had never been his hallmark as a Captain. Sure, McCoy shouldn't have just dropped out like that, but neither should he have reacted with a burst of uncontrolled anger. Hell, what had McCoy done to him, apart from trust him? And Spock? It was part of his job to offer opinions.

He walked slowly over to where McCoy was sitting gazing gloomily across the room and sat down beside him. As Kirk watched he could see that McCoy was trembling with fatigue.

"Sorry, Jim," mumbled McCoy. "I shouldn't have done that. It's just the thought of going through that door again - I couldn't face it any more." He put his hand to his forehead and looked wearily at Kirk. "Shall we go on?"

Kirk shook his head. "Go to sleep, Bones. You've earned it."

With a grunt the doctor rolled over onto his side and, pillowing his head on his arms, fell asleep.

Brendan Rafferty awoke to see Spock sitting crosslegged by the window

looking out onto a sea shot with every shade of red he could imagine. He hardly liked to move in case he disturbed the Vulcan, who sat statue-still. He knew that Vulcans sometimes went into a trance from which (so he had heard) it was dangerous to wake them. Or was it?

Spock, hearing the minute sounds Brendan was making, turned round and gravely nodded a welcome. "I trust you slept well, Doctor Rafferty?"

Slightly flustered, Brendan got to his feet. "I'm sorry, Mr. Spock, I didn't mean to disturb you... You weren't asleep, were you?"

"No."

The reply was curt, but Brendan got the impression that it was not meant to be antagonistic but rather a simple answer to a question. He was very much in awe of Spock and desperately wanted not to offend him. Amongst mathematicians Spock was renowned - the work he had done on Quantum Space was enough to ensure him his place in the hall of fame, and it had been with a mixture of nervousness and hero-worship that Brendan had realised that this was *the* Spock, who seemed to be at home in every branch of science he encountered. Trust him to go and make that stupid scene when he first saw him! He still hadn't apologised for that...

"I'm sorry about earlier on, Mr. Spock," he said lamely, approaching him. "I hope I didn't offend you." *What was he saying? Of course Vulcans didn't take offence - did they?* "That is, I mean..." *Lord, he was rambling now, and he an Irishman who had kissed the Blarney Stone.*

"An apology is not necessary, Doctor Rafferty," said Spock quietly. "I realise that you were upset by the death of your friend."

"Er... yes, I was." Brendan felt a renewed stab of grief which Spock observed with outward calm, realising that the young man had forgotten about Adanka until he mentioned him. The Human ability not to block out but to forget sorrow was a trait that he had difficulty in comprehending. He realised that something 'Human' ought to be said as Rafferty evidently felt ill at ease. He indicated the seat set into the wall. "Please sit down, Doctor Rafferty."

Brendan gave him a brilliant smile, some of his awkwardness vanishing under the influence of Spock's calm voice.

"How long have you been on Tithonus, Doctor Rafferty?"

"About eight months. I joined Dr. Llewelyn's team straight from Cambridge."

Spock inclined his head slightly. "I read your paper on Temporal Displacement in Interphase..."

Oh God, he hadn't, had he?

"... and found it to be a well-researched piece of work."

What was that? "Why, thank you, Mr. Spock," stuttered Brendan. "I - I based some of it on your own research work. The data you collected in Tholian space was unique. It revolutionised our ideas about Interspace."

Spock acknowledged the truth of this statement with a very slight bow of his head. "I take it Doctor LLewelyn offered you a place on his team because of the nature of your research?"

"That's right. We'd all done theoretical work on Interspace - I never

thought I'd find myself going through it, though." He flashed Spock a sudden smile. "I didn't guess it would be that exhausting - I felt a bit like that man in the limerick."

"Limerick?" repeated Spock in a faintly puzzled voice.

"Yes," replied Brendan, wishing he had never mentioned it, but for some reason finding it impossible to stop talking.

"I wish that my room had a floor;
I don't care so much for a door:
But this walking around
Without touching the ground
Is getting to be quite a bore."

Spock was regarding him with a raised eyebrow that McCoy would have found painfully familiar.

"I don't suppose it's relevant at all," added Brendan, a trifle frantically. "In fact, now I come to think of it, it doesn't make any sense at all." The other eyebrow was raised, reducing Brendan to a state of practical incoherence. "That is, I mean..."

""What was the exact nature of Doctor Llewelyn's work, Doctor Rafferty?" Spock asked calmly.

Brendan grasped thankfully at this straw of rationality. "Well, it's a bit difficult to say, really. He never stated his overall aim - it seemed to be just basic research into Interspace using the Cochrane Link. I started to have the feeling that there was more to it than just academic research, though. He was an odd man to say he was such a respected scientist."

"In what way?"

"Well, it's hard to put your finger on it, but he seemed to judge everything by some private criterea that we didn't know about. For instance, Pat Hardy and myself were looking into sub-atomic particle stimulation, and we were stopped by Llewelyn. He said that it was a waste of time - that it didn't matter. Well, we wondered *why* it didn't matter. Then he spent weeks and weeks designing C47, and we couldn't work that one out either."

Spock looked inquisitive, and Brendan hurried on. "You see, none of us knew the exact purpose of C47, but from the circuit diagram we saw it seemed to be able to manipulate and extend Interspace. But then that can't be right, either, because it had a Franklin stasis field stabilizer integrated into the basic design, and that means that C47 couldn't utilise Interspace - could it?"

Spock was looking very thoughtful and Brendan wondered if he had just said something very stupid.

In response to Brendan's spoken - and unspoken - question, Spock glanced across. "Not as a general rule, Doctor Rafferty, no. However, there do seem to be elements of Doctor Llewelyn's researches that do not fit any rules..."

"Still awake, Spock?" yawned Kirk sleepily from the floor. "I thought I told you to get some rest." He stretched lazily. "I didn't mean to leave you to do all the guard duty."

"As you are well aware, Captain, I require less sleep than you and I

thought it desirable that one of us should be awake."

Kirk inclined his head towards Traman. "Any trouble?"

"Negative, Captain."

"Good," grunted Kirk, rubbing his face with his hands. "I could do with a wash. Something to drink wouldn't be a bad idea either." He got to his feet and smiled at Brendan. "Is there any fresh water round here, Rafferty?"

"There's a stream that runs down the cliffs," offered Brendan. "It's not far."

"Right." He bent over McCoy and shook him awake. The doctor woke up grumbling.

"All right, Jim, I heard you the first time - there's no need to carry on about it. Lord, I'm too old to be camping out - my spine's like a concertina - that's crooked to you, Mr. Spock. Stream? Well, it's better than nothing, I guess, though I could murder a coffee. No, no, I'll wake up Traman, Jim, don't you try. As I'm the only one he'll let near him without trying' to transport them to a higher life, I suppose I'd better... "

"That will not be necessary, Doctor," said Traman, from behind closed eyelids. "I have been awake for one point four hours."

"Then you'd better start making it public, Commander. We're all ready to go. Rise and shine time."

Traman, whose usual method of waking up was a respectful, 'Your sleep period has ended, Commander," over a soft-volume communicator, wondered if he should be offended. Rather to his surprise he decided he wasn't. He had decided that Kirk must tolerate McCoy as a Memento Humanii and licensed fool. It would reflect sadly on Romulan adaptability if he could not do the same. He rose to his feet in one easy movement, straightened an already smooth tunic and nodded to Kirk. "I am ready, Captain. You may proceed."

Kirk led the way to the outside door, pressed the switch - and let in darkness, a smell like a rotting corpse and an overbearing sense of corruption. He slammed his fist against the door control and leaned up against it, face white. "Spock - what was *that?"*

"I believe it to be the outside, Captain," said Spock with irritating calm. "The other outside."

McCoy looked out of the window in bewilderment. "But Spock - we can see the outside - the sea, the cliffs - it's not like... that!"

"Nevertheless, Doctor, it is there. It supports a theory that I have been formulating. We are in the central hub of a dimensional vortex. Look out of the window and you will see one universe. Go out of the door and you will encounter another, quite different one. I believe that we are surrounded by a multitude of other dimensions and the entrance to all of them is here." He looked down at his tricorder and checked his readings. "Fascinating," he muttered, more to himself than to anyone present.

Kirk's eyes were sparkling. "Spock - all the worlds we ever dreamed of are out there! Just think of it - a thousand other worlds, and we're at the centre of all of them."

Spock looked up from his tricorder, his face serious. "Unfortunately,

Captain, it is the one outside the door that we have to go into."

"What?" exclaimed McCoy. "Spock, you can't be serious. You saw what it was like."

Kirk waved him silent. "Why that one, Spock?" he asked quietly.

Spock hesitated very slightly before speaking. "When you opened the door, Captain, I picked up a strong power surge approximately 84.7 metres away. It is the power source we have been looking for."

"Let me see that!" spluttered McCoy, taking the tricorder and gazing at the display. "Spock, you're picking up gamma wave radiation. That's your power source. Someone's been having the Mother and Father of a war out there."

Spock pointed silently to another indicator on the display.

"Well, I still say we can't go out there," insisted McCoy. "Even if that is the power source, we'll be dead from gamma waves in less than two hours. Just look at those radiation levels, Spock."

"We should not be exposed to them for more than a few minutes, Doctor."

"How d'you know? What if we can't get where we're going and can't get back in here either?"

"Bones..." interjected Kirk, "just wait a minute. Spock, are you certain you've located the power source?"

"Affirmative, Captain."

Kirk swallowed. Of all the things he wanted to do, going out into that horrifying landscape was about last on the list. Still, if the solution to the mysteries that surrounded them lay out there, then that's where they had to go. "Bones, haven't you got anything that'll counter the effects of radiation poisoning?"

"Sure, Jim, I've got a vial of hyronalin. But I haven't got enough for all of us and I can't administer it before we actually contract the poisoning. It's a counteractive, not a protective medicine."

"But you have got something?"

McCoy paused for a moment then grudgingly said, "Yes."

"Then we go." Kirk turned to Brendan and Traman. "I can't order you to come with us. What's your decision?"

Brendan shot a quick glance at Traman. Whatever happened, he wasn't staying alone with him. Besides that... "I'm the only one who knows Llewelyn," he said slowly. "I've got to come."

"Good. Traman?"

"I will not hold back where Humans go, Kirk, and I look forward to meeting this doctor."

Anything you can do, thought Kirk, and took up position by the doorway, ready to run.

McCoy interposed himself. "Now look, I think this is crazy, but it

seems to be what you're set on doing, so I'd like to give a piece of medical advice. When we get out, don't run - walk. I reckon we've got a safety margin of under two hours BUT if anyone so much as scratches himself out there he'll be dead within minutes. So go slowly, and watch where you're treading. OK?"

"All right, Bones. We'll be careful." He glanced round and gave a nod of encouragement to everyone and then pressed the door control.

The ground beneath them was the stone of the courtyard and should have felt solid underfoot. Instead Kirk felt he was wading hip-deep in sludge. Before them, drifting in the murky haze, was the looming bulk of the research station. That was where they had to get to - find Llewelyn - sort out this mess. His stomach rose at the smell like rotting eggs, and he recognised the first characteristic of radiation sickness. Bands of phosphorescence floated eerily across his chest and face, and he had to fight a desire to try and brush them away. Above them occasional flashes of lightning jumped from cloud to cloud as this world tried to cleanse itself of the sickness imposed on it.

God help us if it rains... we'd be burned to death... What kind of people had these been, who could turn water into death? Beside him, Spock's face was drawn, and Kirk guessed he was fighting his own battle to keep his stomach under control.

The door to the research station wavered in front of him, unsteady in the sick light. Like a man moving underwater, Spock reached for the door control and it slid back with a gloriously homely, familiar hiss.

Feeling as if they had just fought a battle, the five men walked quickly into the sanctuary of the research base. Kirk instinctively rubbed his arms and chest as if some of the filth outside had clung to him. Despite himself, he was vaguely surprised to see that his shirt and hands were still as clean as they had been before he had walked that nightmare.

McCoy ran his scanner over all of them, sucking in his cheeks as he saw the readings. "Well, we've all picked up mild radiation poisoning. Brendan, are you OK?"

Brendan nodded dumbly, not daring to speak for fear of being sick. McCoy shot him an understanding glance and reached for his hypo.

Kirk stopped him. "Save it, Bones. We don't know how bad the situation may get. I think we can all handle the doses we've received."

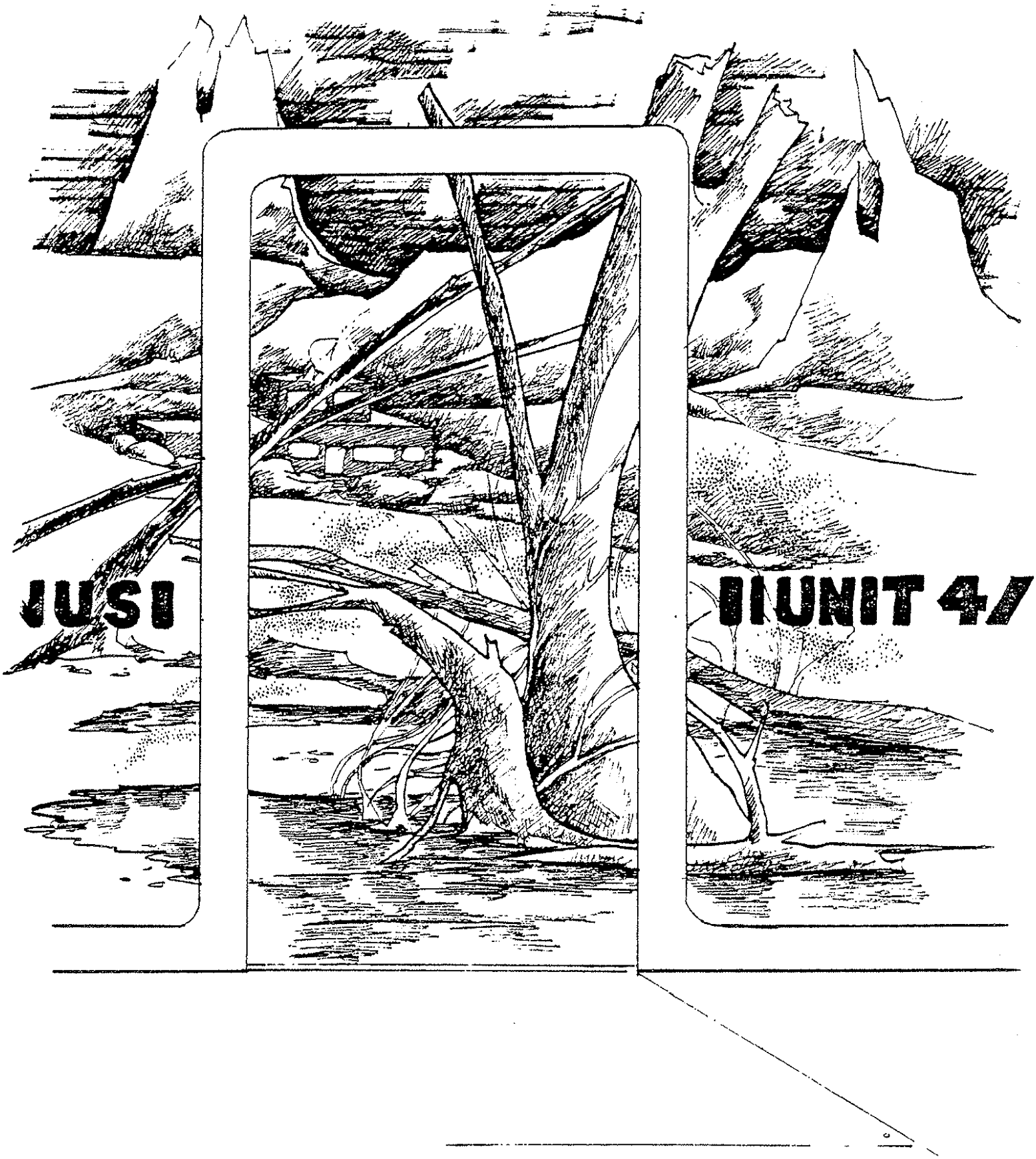
Brendan wasn't looking any too sure about that, but if the others could cope, then so could he. Reluctantly McCoy put away the hypo of hyronalin, realising the truth of Kirk's remark.

Spock checked his tricorder for the power source that was their guide. "The main focus of the power readings is approximately seven metres away, Captain. If we continue up these stairs we should find our destination to the left."

"Dr. Llewelyn's office," commented Brendan.

"Precisely, Doctor Rafferty." Spock placed the tricorder back against his hip and followed Kirk up the staircase.

The door to Llewelyn's office was standing open and, feeling an odd sense of intrusion, Brendan walked cautiously inside. This was the place that Llewelyn had retained strictly as his own. In all his time on Tithonis, Brendan had only been into this room once. That had been on his


JUSI
UNIT 4

first day when, nervous and anxious to make a good impression, he had seen little of his surroundings but had only been conscious that they had been overshadowed by the unstated power of Llewelyn himself.

The room was empty, but had that indefinable sense of someone having just left. Speaking quietly over the soft insect-buzz of machinery, Spock indicated the main computer console. "I believe we may find our answers there, Captain."

He pressed the control switch and a flicker of coloured lights chased across the screen. Spock keyed up the entry code and requested a visual readout of the C47 system. Circuit diagram followed diagram in a bewildering blur until he found the one specification he was looking for. Spock studied it intently for a few moments, his mind enthralled by the sheer simplicity of what he had found.

Brendan, peering over his shoulder, suddenly caught onto the purpose of this segment. "Of course," he said slowly. "He's reversed the Franklin field. Instead of acting as a stabilizer it breaches space - but the Cochrane Link... I don't see where it fits in."

"Do you understand it, Spock?" asked Kirk, a trifle impatiently. "We need information."

Spock turned to him calmly, but his dark eyes betrayed a hint of purely intellectual excitement. "Captain, these are the C47 circuit diagrams. The completed machine acts as a tracer and transporter for any object in our or in any universe. The mathematics involved in such trans-dimensional engineering are perhaps the most impressive I have ever encountered. The power to bring objects through the dimensional gate is provided by the process itself. All the power needed is the power to activate the device."

"You mean to say, Spock, that *anything* can be transported from one universe to another just by flicking a switch?"

"Essentially, Captain, yes. These field equations show how the dynamics of the nucleus are stimulated into movement which is then channeled through the Cochrane Link. The concept is fascinating."

"Mr. Spock," said McCoy, speaking very quietly and very quickly, "you've just described that machine as 'fascinating'. My God, man, you're talking about the destruction of humanity!"

"Precisely, Doctor," said Llewelyn from behind them. "I congratulate you on your perception."

They whirled to see Llewelyn standing with his arms folded, calmly watching them. Kirk and Traman moved forward simultaneously, fists clenched.

Llewelyn laughed softly. "Oh no, gentlemen. You cannot harm me. I am protected by a personal force-field. You would be most unwise to attack me."

Seeing the vague blue nimbus round Llewelyn, Kirk withdrew slightly. Traman gave him a disgusted glance and swung out at Llewelyn. His fist impacted on the force-field an inch away from Llewelyn's face with a crackle of energy.

Traman gave a sharp cry and started away, nursing his injured knuckles. "I challenge you!" he growled.

"And I refuse," Llewelyn said easily. "I would be stupid to do otherwise. Your instinctive recourse to violence is quite out of place here."

Brendan was gazing at him in disbelief. "Dr. Llewelyn - why have you done this? It was you who caused the war, wasn't it? Why?"

Llewelyn glanced at him as if seeing him for the first time. "Rafferty, as I have often had occasion to point out to you, your constant asking of the question 'why' without being able to produce any possible answer is a grave defect. You must try and correct this failing or you will never amount to anything as a scientist. Not that any of you are going to amount to anything for much longer," he added as an afterthought.

"But *why*, Doctor?" Brendan persisted miserably.

Llewelyn ignored him. "Captain Kirk, how long has your Federation enjoyed peace?"

Caught off-guard by the question, Kirk couldn't think of an answer immediately. It was Spock who replied, as calmly as if he was in the briefing room of the Enterprise. "The time from the overthrow of the Vegan Tyranny until the outbreak of the Romulan War was 112.7 solar years; and with the exception of isolated border incidents, peace has continued within the Federation for the last 104.9 years."

"Very good, Mr. Spock," said LLewelyn sarcastically. "You've been well trained. Now let me tell you something of the universe you are in." For the first time a hint of passion crept into his voice. "For the last 104 years we have suffered continuous, unrelenting war. Everything you do in your universe is mirrored in mine. Your peace is our war. But - we have finally had enough. I decided to bring peace to my universe and show you what it is like to face the horror of a total war. Now you will know what it is to be controlled."

"*Your* universe?" asked McCoy. "You're a man from our universe."

"Am I?" Llewelyn stared at the men in front of him. "Your Federation sickens me. So trusting and secure that you can't see a clear fact. Gareth Llewelyn broke through into my world five years ago. Our research was identical, but he had no conception of what he had discovered. When I proposed that we should work together, he refused. Even when I told him the true facts, he turned me down. Ethics, he said. Ethics! With a universe at stake, he whined of ethics.

"And so you killed him," Kirk observed bitterly.

"Where he was weak, I was strong. There was too much at stake to allow one little life to stand in the way. In his place I came into your world and set up this station." He laughed, genuinely amused. "No-one stopped me. No-one questioned the right of the great Gareth Llewelyn to research into whatever field of Interspace he cared to. Even my research assistants had no idea of what I was really planning."

"Hardy and I asked questions," broke in Brendan.

"But you didn't ask the *right* questions, did you, Rafferty? One word from me and you carried on working towards the destruction of your world. You never even suspected what was going on. From C43 through to C47 you accepted everything I did. Machines that could only have one purpose, growing better and more precise with each model, and *no-one* asked what they were for. Why, Starfleet itself built C47 to my specifications. Ironic, isn't it?"

Kirk was getting tired of Llewelyn's boasting. "Why are you telling us this? I'm sure you could find a more appreciative audience."

Llewelyn's face twisted slightly. "Because, Captain, there is no-one else left to tell. Your universe has killed us all. *Now* do you understand?"

There was a moment of absolute silence which was broken by Spock. "I fail to see the logic of stealing C47 when it was on its way to this station."

"Because the time was right to start your war. I cannot expect you to understand the interaction of interspace and dimensional flux - they would be utterly beyond you - but I made the decision with care. C46 removed the tracking stations, but C47 was responsible for the removal of this base and four starships!" His voice became apocalyptic. "One touch of that switch and I could send Earth into the sun. The Twin Planets could be placed parsecs away from their star system. Life would be extinct in seconds." He smiled again. "Controlled power controlling absolutely. It's an awesome thought."

"Then do it," Kirk said flatly.

"What?"

"Do it," repeated Kirk, the faintest touch of anger in his voice. "And when you've killed everyone in the universe you can reach, maybe you can enjoy your brand of peace. You say that our peace is your war. Has it occurred to you that your war is our peace? Or that they may not be connected at all? You've broken the space-time continuum and because you've done that you've taken away whatever chance you had of finding which came first. We've been through dozens of separate dimensions. Any of them or none of them could have caused your war."

"Correct, Captain," agreed Spock. "The same paradox had also occurred to me. Indeed, the nature of the conundrum is such that I fail to see the possibility of making any correct deduction about the nature of inverted development."

Llewelyn's face contorted and he struck out with his hand. As the force-field impacted on his face Spock staggered back with a sharp cry. McCoy put a hand on his shoulder to steady him, alarmed at the livid patch on Spock's cheek.

Llewelyn was breathing hard. "I will not tolerate this persistent questioning. I can take universes while you mouth peace to me. Let me show you what it is I mean by power - *then* try and match yourselves against me." Rapidly he activated the VDU attached to the small computer stack beside him and adjusted the controls.

Despite himself, Kirk gave a small gasp. There, so clear that it felt as though he could touch her, was the Enterprise. "Where is she?" he demanded. "Where's my ship?"

"In another universe, Captain. One where a battle is about to start."

As he spoke three Romulan ships appeared on the screen. Beside Kirk, Traman caught his breath. "That's the Victrix - my flagship. With Syrius and Auluus in support. Shields, you fool!"

A phaser bolt from the Enterprise sheered off a section of the Victrix's engineering nacelle. Syrius and Auluus closed in for the attack, shielding the crippled ship.

Kirk felt his fist clench. *C'mon, Scotty, while there's still a chance... Good! That's one deflected - press it home, Scott - keep that side covered and... strike!* Auluus exploded in a pyrotechnic shower as the Enterprise fought back. The Victrix banked away and then launched into a running attack using Syrius as cover.

Traman's eyes glittered as his flagship pressed home her advantage. The Enterprise turned, looking for more space to fight the attacker, and covered herself with a rapid burst of phaser fire.

LLewelyn smiled grimly as he watched the two enthralled ship captains, then leaned forward and calmly switched off the machine.

Kirk and Traman swung round on him. "You can't do that!" yelled Kirk. "What's happening to my ship?"

"It looks as if your ship is being destroyed, Kirk," said Traman with grim pleasure. "The Romulan force was obviously superior."

"Superior? The Enterprise could handle twice that number!"

"Are you prepared to stake your life on that, Kirk?" snarled Traman.

"You bet... " Kirk stopped, suddenly aware of what he was saying. "Traman, we can't fight. We are *not* enemies - LLewelyn is the one who caused that battle."

Some of the battle light died out of Traman's eyes as Kirk's words sank in, then his natural tendencies reasserted themselves. "You cannot change what is, Kirk. We are at war, and like all wars, the strongest will win."

"Yes!" shouted Kirk. "Him - if we let him make us fight." Impulsively he grabbed hold of Traman's shoulders. *"We are friends,* Commander. Do you understand that?"

Traman brushed Kirk's hands away impatiently.

"Well done, Commander," said Llewelyn smoothly. "I see you are a man who appreciates the realities of life. A pity; in another time you could have led the victorious Romulan armies. Unfortunate... "

"What do you propose to do?" asked Spock. "I should... "

"Do?" interrupted Llewelyn. "First of all, Mr. Spock, I shall kill you, and then I shall bring my plan to fulfillment. You have been outside already, so I imagine that another two hours exposure to the radiation should be more than sufficient. I intend to bring the outside inside - if you see what I mean." He walked to where a tangle of coil linkage was spread apparently at random across a computer.

"Allow me to show you C47 in action. When I activate this control the whole exterior wall will be removed. Without the wall you will die. I am afraid that it might be painful, but I abhor inflicting violence by use of personal force." He picked up the linkage and played with it absently, drawing out the moment.

McCoy touched Brendan's arm. "Just keep him talking," he whispered. "I've got an idea. Don't stop me."

Brendan nodded quickly and walked to where Llewelyn was standing. Calmly he took the linkage out of Llewelyn's hands. "You can't use this, you know," he said softly. "You've been under a strain, Doctor, and you

need to relax. Why don't you sit down for a few moments?"

Llewelyn stared at his young assistant in astonishment. "Give me that!" he said, thunderstruck.

"Now, I don't really think I should," said Brendan, dodging the arm that came up. "You might do something that you'll regret later..."

Llewelyn's fist shot out, sending Brendan reeling across the room. "Young fool! Did you really think you could stop me?" Rapidly he put the link into place and pressed the control switch.

With a dark shimmer the wall separating them from the outside disappeared, letting in the sick light of the exterior. Llewelyn eyed them with a satisfied air.

"In a few minutes you will start to feel sick, and in half an hour or so the weakest amongst you may lose consciousness. Pretty soon you will start to itch, and when you scratch your flesh will flake off. You will suffer nothing that my people have not suffered."

McCoy cautiously approached Llewelyn from behind, silently indicating to Spock and Kirk that they should be quiet. His hand was crooked, holding something that Kirk couldn't see.

Llewelyn's voice rose a tone. "When you are dead I'll call you the peacemakers because every death means new life..."

McCoy sprang, holding one arm round Llewelyn's throat while the other pressed a hypo into the force-field protecting his face. Head back in a silent scream, McCoy hung on grimly, waiting for the tranquilliser to penetrate the field.

Gas must go through it... He's been breathing air... It must work, has to work... It hurts... God, it hurts! Must hold on... Got to hold on... Burned my chest - face - hands... Must hold on - can't hold - must... How much do you want? Can't - hold - on...

Under the force of the struggle McCoy and Llewelyn reeled closer and closer to the gaping hole where the wall had been. As the hypo hissed the last of its contents through the force-field McCoy fell back, unable to stand the pain. Llewelyn, unconscious, toppled to the ground outside.

Kirk swung McCoy up into his arms, looking at the ravaged sores on the doctor's skin. "I'll get him out of here, Spock. Get working on the C47 and see if you can reach the ship."

Kirk, followed by Brendan, took McCoy into the corridor, which was shielded from the fatal gamma rays. Quickly he searched through the medical kit still strapped to McCoy's belt. Hyronalin, that was it... Acutely aware of his ineptitude, Kirk found the vial, fumbled it into the hypo and injected it. McCoy's breathing became less ragged, and Kirk felt a surge of relief.

Brendan quietly took the medical kit from Kirk. "He needs cordrazine, Captain, and perhaps a few cc's of tri-ox compound."

Part of Kirk desperately wanted to stay with his friend; the other part needed to get back to Spock, to see what was happening out there.

McCoy flickered his eyelids open. "Jim - are we safe?" The voice was little more than a whisper.

Kirk put his hand comfortingly on McCoy's shoulder, willing him to survive. "We're safe, Bones," he replied softly.

The eyelids closed again and Brendan nodded in approval. Reluctantly, Kirk rose to his feet. "I'll get back - look after him, Dr. Rafferty."

Brendan, bent over McCoy, didn't look up. "I'll do the best I can, Captain."

With one final look at McCoy Kirk walked back into the room where Spock and Traman were bent over the C47. Spock looked a wordless question at him. Kirk felt suddenly choked. "He's bad, Spock. Bad. We must get out of here."

Spock glanced his understanding and returned to his work. Kirk felt a wave of helplessness. Was there nothing he could do? Damn Llewelyn - death on a universal scale was beyond comprehension, but the death of a friend...

Kirk's pacing took him to the gap that was all that was left of the wall. He glanced down and then wished he hadn't. Unprotected by the force-field, injured by the fall, what was left of Gareth Llewelyn lay spread below, ravaged by the gamma rays. It was like watching acid eat through fungus... No. No-one deserved to die like that. Kirk turned away, telling himself that the sick feeling was a result of the radiation. It wouldn't be so bad if there was only something he could do, but like all the crises in his life, the waiting was the hardest part.

With the dry taste of defeat building in his throat, Scotty looked round his engineering boards. Five yellow lights and one orange glinted balefully from the ship systems panel, replacing the healthy blue that meant the Enterprise was functioning normally. In his mind Scotty traced back those six lights and saw the mass of twisted metal and burned circuitry that they represented. As he watched another yellow light switched to orange and the taste in his throat grew worse.

Crossing to the communicator he called his Lieutenant. "Harper, you've gone to orange on 85/B. Close down on E deck and channel the power into life support." *That way,* he thought grimly, *we might save enough power to boil a kettle.*

What they really needed - apart from a Lithium cracking station and a complete overhaul - was time; and the Romulans had shown no sign of giving them that. His hit-and-run tactics had bought them a brief respite, but how long would it be before the Romulans found them once more? Consigning the problem to the abstract world where it belonged, Scotty squared his shoulders and removed the casing to the anti-matter conduit pod.

He was so absorbed in his delicate task that it was at least two minutes before he heard Uhura's voice calling him. Swearing softly, he crawled out of the pod and snapped down the communicator button. "What is it, lassie?"

"Mr. Scott, we have the landing party plus two others ready to beam up. Can you do it?"

"Tell them we'll send a shuttle. The transporters are out."

There was a brief pause while Uhura contacted the Captain and then returned to Scotty. "Mr. Scott, the Captain says that Dr. McCoy is badly injured and will be dead before a shuttle arrives."

"Damn! I'll see what I can do, Uhura. Get a medical team down to Transporter Room 5 and I'll contact you when ready."

Five minutes later Scotty was crouched under the transporter console with Collins hovering nervously by the controls. With a dubious shake of his head, Scotty rose to his feet. "Try her now, Collins."

As the Ensign slid the controls down there was a white flash and a sharp crack from the console. "The laser generating links have blown, sir," Collins informed him unnecessarily.

"Pass me your phaser, laddie!" Scotty snarled impatiently.

With a mixture of horror and fascination, Collins watched as his Chief fitted the phaser into the burned-out generator. "Sir - you could destroy the whole system."

"Just pass me that feeder line, Collins, and hold your intermix levels steady." With his free hand Scotty flicked the communicator. "Uhura, we're ready to start the beam-up."

Five shapes flickered into view on the pad. Quite unaware that he had added another chapter to his legend, Scotty glared at the staring Collins. "Don't stand there gaping, boy. Get back to Harper." Quickly he took in the Romulan, and McCoy's body. "Captain, what's been going on?"

Kirk came off the platform at a run. "One thing at a time, Scotty." He broke off for a couple of moments to watch the medical team put McCoy onto the waiting stretcher. "Now, Scotty, give me our status."

Scott ran a hand through his hair, uncertain where to start. "We've sustained damage on all decks, Captain. Power's way down and falling. The cause seems to be the area of space. Science reports we've experienced fourteen trans-dimensional shifts in the last three hours, and it's sucking us dry. Add to that the battle damage caused by the bloody Romulans and I can't guarantee life support holding for more than another five hours."

He had just finished speaking when the ship gave a groaning shudder and Kirk felt the sick, empty feeling of interphase. "That won't have helped," Scotty observed laconically when they had righted themselves.

Kirk forced his mind away from his heaving stomach and turned to Spock. "Can you link into the C47 from here and use it to get us back to our own universe?"

"Affirmative, Captain."

"Then get to it, Mr. Spock. Traman, come with me." Without a backward glance he strode from the room, Traman in step behind him.

There was a suppressed buzz of surprise as Kirk walked onto the Bridge with a Romulan in tow. Sulu dragged his eyes away from Traman just in time to see two white dots at the far side of the screen. "Enemy in sight, sir."

"Uhura, get me a channel to the leading ship as soon as it's in range. Power to the shields, Mr. Chekov. Traman, I want you to tell your people what you've learned. Tell them to call off the attack, and tell them we're going to try to get back to our own universe. If they stay with us they have a chance. All right?"

They waited a couple of minutes before Uhura said, "Hailing frequencies open, sir."

Although Kirk could only follow about one word in twenty of the Romulan commands Traman barked into the communicator, it seemed to work, because the two ships drew off to a respectful distance and waited.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Kirk thumbed the communicator button. "Spock, how's the C47 coming along?"

"Rafferty here, Captain. Mr. Spock and Mr. Scott are completing the links between C47 and ourselves. We should be ready in about ten minutes."

"Contact me when ready, Mr. Rafferty. Kirk out."

Down in the computer room Spock pointed to a reading on one of the link systems. "I am not completely satisfied, Mr. Scott. This could be a residual power surge from C47, but it looks as if the Cochrane Link may be generating its own power."

Scotty looked frankly puzzled. "I canna see that, Mr. Spock. I think we should go ahead. Every minute we spend here drains us more."

"Correct, Mr. Scott. Mr. Rafferty, inform the Captain we are ready to initiate the shift."

Up on the Bridge Kirk braced himself against the back of his chair as the world shrank in and spun around them, heaving them giddily through numberless universes, tearing round them in a dizzy cascade of darkness. Then the world stopped, steadied, and fell into place - and before Spock confirmed it Kirk knew they were home.

Tithonis, that blue-white paradise, spun silently below them as it had done when they had first arrived. Never had a planet less lived up to its promise of peace and rest. He would be glad when they were away from here, but first of all they had the Romulan ships to take care of.

"Uhura, contact the Romulan ship and tell them that Commander Traman and myself..."

"Captain," interrupted Sulu urgently, "look at the screen."

Kirk glanced up and swallowed in disbelief. In front of them, one by one, the stars were going out.

"The best way I can describe it, Captain, is a chain reaction." Spock pointed to the area on the VDU which indicated C47. "The action of C47 depends on causing instability at the sub-atomic level before controlling and funnelling the power through the Cochrane Link. It appears that this instability has got beyond the power of the stabilizing field and the result is that the unstable particles are reacting upon previously stable particles in a random wave."

Kirk rubbed his forehead. "And if we can't stop the process then how far will it spread?"

"In time, across the entire universe."

"Putting us all into flux. Eventually the space-time continuum will break down altogether, making the divisions between the universes non-existant. Is that about the size of it, Mr. Spock?"

"Essentially, yes."

"How about reversing it?" chipped in Brendan. "Instead of C47 feeding the Cochrane Link, putting power through the Link into C47."

Spock's eyebrows rose, but he turned to the computer and ran some calculations. "You could be correct, Mr. Rafferty," he said eventually. "If you are wrong, then C47 could become utterly beyond control."

"It's out of control now, Spock," said Kirk quietly. "Let's do it."

Up on the Bridge once more, Kirk was unsure of what to expect. The outcome he was hoping for was a straightforward return to normality with the familiar stars around the familiar planet, but he had a hunch that things couldn't be that simple. So far nothing seemed to have happened, even though Spock had reversed the process a good five minutes ago.

Suddenly a star leaped into view on the main screen, and Kirk heaved a sigh of relief. It was working, then. Another star, then another, and gradually the sky filled in. Chekov and Sulu leaned back happily and exchanged a grin with the Captain.

Suddenly Adams at the Science station gave a warning cry. "Captain, we're getting a massive build-up of power on Tithonis. The entire planet is becoming unstable."

"Get us out of here, Sulu. Warp factor..." Before he could finish the sentence, Kirk was hurled from his chair and sent sprawling across the deck as behind them the entire planet exploded. He had a brief vision of Sulu clinging to the controls, and then he crashed into the railing and everything went dark.

McCoy, plastered from head to foot in new skin, was finding it difficult to speak and agony to move, but he was managing all the same. "But why did it explode, Spock?" he demanded.

"I have not yet completed my analysis, Doctor, but it seems as if reversing the power into C47 had the side-effect of bringing together all the universes that C47 had access to at that one point."

"Y'mean all those planets just piled up on each other and went bang?"

"I would not phrase it quite like that, Doctor, but that is basically what happened. It was a fairly simple illustration of what occurs when more than one set of matter attempts to occupy the same space at the same time."

"Like I said - bang. Did the Romulans get through, Jim?"

"Yes, and they're still with us."

"I bet Traman's pleased about that."

"I wouldn't say that," said Kirk, the memory of the gloomy Traman still fresh in his mind. "He made me a five-minute speech about war, glory, the rights of the vanquisher and the dishonour of the defeated. Apparently he took it as a personal slight that he wasn't able to kill Llewelyn. Then he wrapped it all up by saying he was off to commit suicide."

"He didn't!" McCoy breathed.

"No - not after we leaned on him a little and Spock appealed to his honour, his sense of duty, and pointed out the illogicallity of waste."

"And how...?"

Christine Chapel intervened. "Doctor, that's quite enough talking. You need to get some rest."

"Rest? Chris, if I spend much longer on this blasted bed, I'll forget how to walk."

"Doctor, if you don't rest now you might not be fit enough to see Dr. Rafferty before we beam him down to Starbase 13."

"Starbase 13? That's where..."

"Joanna is, Doctor. Yes, we know. Now if you get some sleep you might be able to see her when she beams up."

McCoy gave a delighted smile. "Beams up? Jim, you arranged this, didn't you? Chris, I've got to be on my feet by then."

"In that case, Doctor..."

"Yes, I know," said McCoy resignedly. "Sleep." His eyes were closed by the time Kirk and Spock left the room.

The Romulan ship on the transporter room viewing screen nosed cautiously closer and then matched vectors with the Enterprise.

Chief Kyle checked the controls and nodded to Kirk. "Ready to energise, sir."

"Very good, Chief." Kirk and Spock turned to Traman as he stepped up onto the transporter pad. Impulsively Kirk offered his hand to the Romulan.

Traman hesitated for a moment then clasped it firmly. Turning to Spock he shook hands briefly. "Harlkanar," he said softly. "With a Vulcan and a Human. Such a thing was never known before."

"I just hope," said Kirk wryly, "that you convince the rest of the Romulan Empire that we're sincere about wanting peace."

"I do not anticipate any problems, Captain," replied Traman with a hint of a smile. "Unquestioning obedience does have its uses - and I am the Emperor's oldest son. Energise."

As he disappeared in the sparkling shower, Kirk turned to Spock with warm amusement in his eyes. "Hey, Spock, that means we've been entertaining royalty."

"We still are, Captain," answered Spock. "Dr. Rafferty is most insistent that he is the descendant of Irish kings... Captain, have I said something to amuse you? I find this reaction most illogical..."

Still laughing, Kirk placed a warm hand on Spock's shoulder and together the two men walked out of the transporter room into a friendly universe.

The IRISH VAMPIRE

by

DAVID GOMM

Captain's Log: Stardate 6004.9

First Officer Spock has been ordered to report to Starfleet H.Q. for debriefing following his primary contact with the intelligent serpentine life-forms on the planet Paxo III Beta.

While Mr. Spock and I were detained on Paxo, the Klingons attempted to take over the Enterprise by infiltrating the ship with telepathic androids programmed with advanced mind control techniques. The attempt was foiled by Security Ensign M. Potato. Sadly, in resisting the androids' will Ensign Potato's brain was wiped clean of all activity, with fatal results. In view of his gallant sacrifice, and as our orders necessitate a return to Earth, I have authorised that his body be conveyed to Earth for burial in his native soil.

"Yellow alert. This is a yellow alert. Captain Kirk to the Bridge."

Uhura's last injunction was superfluous. Captain James Kirk had been asleep in his cabin when the first note of the alarm sounded, but was already in the bridge elevator, having delayed only long enough to don a pair of trousers.

"Situation report, Mr. Sulu," he demanded when the doors parted to admit him.

"Unidentified large object, sir - very large - dead ahead, and approaching at warp speed."

Sulu deftly flipped the switch which would give visual close-up.

And the stars went out.

Admiral Jackson Riley knocked out his pipe on the lip of the waste remover, watched as the remover digested the revolting globule, then turned and took his place at the head of the improvised courtroom table.

"Very well," he said. "Bring in the prisoner."

Lieutenant-Commander Michiko Nissan, First Officer of the U.S.S. Challenger, was on her feet before he had finished speaking.

"My submission, Admiral?"

The Admiral made a dismissive gesture. "Later, Miss Nissan."

Michiko stood her ground. "Now, Admiral," she said quietly but determinedly. "With respect, I asked to be excused this particular duty, but having been ordered to conduct the prisoner's defence, I shall do so to the best of my ability."

With a sigh the Admiral said, "Very well, Lieutenant-Commander. But please be brief."

Michiko turned to face the recording computer. "The prisoner, Donal Burke, is a civilian supernumerary employed on the U.S.S. Challenger in his lawful professions of screenwriter and actor. His function was to create and direct the transmission called 'The Ballad of Saucy Sue', in which he also played a minor role. The exemplary manner in which he discharged his duties is borne out by the brilliant success of his production in influencing the High Augur of Paxo Alpha in line with Federation policy.

"The prisoner is now accused of crimes allegedly committed on the planet Ahayweh; crimes so secret that their nature has so far been disclosed only to Captain Stack of the Challenger, but which are known to carry the death penalty on that planet.

"Ahayweh is a desolate outpost of a world on the far side of the galaxy. Its very name - an acronym for Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here - typifies its isolation. Although it remains loyal to the Federation, recent changes in the structure of the Romulan Neutral Zone mean that it can be reached only by means of a prolonged circumnavigation of the galactic periphery."

"Lieutenant-Commander," Admiral Riley interrupted brusquely. "Your submission."

Michiko, her almond eyes narrowing slightly, continued speaking as if she had not heard.

"Since it would be impossible for the Challenger to return Burke to Ahayweh at this time, sentence of death, if confirmed, would need to be carried out on this ship, without giving the prisoner a chance to face his accusers. My submission, Admiral, is that in the circumstances this trial is highly improper and should be postponed until the matter can be dealt with by higher authority."

The Admiral turned to the Challenger's captain, who was acting as Prosecuter. "Well, Captain?"

"The defence submission is illogical, Admiral. A fully attested record of the prisoner's trial has been made available to the ship's computers. They have analysed it and confirmed that both verdict and sentence are valid in accordance with Ahayweh's laws. The sole purpose of this hearing is to establish identity formally."

"I see." Admiral Riley took his empty pipe out of its special pocket in his uniform shirt and contemplated it, allowing himself time to consider the wording of his ruling.

He was never to give it. The telegraph shrilled twice, signalling a priority call.

"Security to Captain."

"Stack here."

"Sir, Bridge have reported unauthorised launch of No. 4 shuttlecraft."

Admiral Riley leaned over Stack's shoulder and spoke directly into the intercom. "And the prisoner?"

There was the briefest of embarrassed silences before the Security Chief admitted, "Gone."

"Gone!" exclaimed Chekov. "The stars, Keptin. They've... gone."

"So I see, Mr. Chekov. Mr. Sulu, maximum magnification, please."

Sulu ran his fingers over the scanner controls. "Maximum magnification, sir."

The screen remained stubbornly dark. And yet there was... *something*.

"Lieutenant Uhura, over-ride ship's chronometer. Give me night-time status."

"Aye aye, sir."

In common with all Starships, the Enterprise operated a standard twenty-four hour clock; for eight hours of every day lighting was dimmed to simulate night, a practice considered by Starfleet psychologists to be beneficial to the morale of Human crew. The night-time status could of course be over-ridden in an emergency. This was the first time Kirk had ever needed to operate the over-ride in reverse.

Sure enough, as the lights dimmed a faint pattern became visible on the screen, a crazy-paving of darkness, formless grey-brown interspersed with irregular black lines.

"Sensor readings, Mr. Spock?"

"Nothing, Captain, save that whatever it is is solid and impenetrable."

"Life forms?"

"Negative." Spock looked more closely at the scanner. "Wait. There is some evidence of life, but at the microscopic, viruform level only."

"Hmmm. Analysis, gentlemen?"

Chekov was staring incredulously at the screen. "I've never seen anything like it, Keptin. It's like - a great stone wall."

"It's my belief that's exactly what it is, laddie."

Kirk turned, to see that Scotty had joined them. "Explain, Mr. Scott."

The Chief Engineer looked even more agonised than usual. "I've seen this phenomenon before, Captain. When I was a young Petty Officer on the old Implacable. Millions of individual stones packed tightly together, like the drystone walls you find back home in Scotland, but thousands of kilometres long and travelling at enormous speeds. We were lucky to escape with our lives."

Spock looked at Kirk, Kirk looked at Spock, as an awful thought occurred to both of them.

"Asteroid storm?"

"I fear so, Captain." Spock turned to the computer. "Computer, give priority readout of all available information on the phenomenon known as an asteroid storm."

"Working." A short silence. "Asteroid storm: meteoric material, densely packed into a wall-like formation, travelling at warp speeds and representing an extreme hazard to navigation. Causes uncertain: most widely accepted theory is the so-called cheese-grater hypothesis of Professor Domek: residual lattice of anti-matter left following a brief interface when an anti-universe collides obliquely with a neutron star, slicing it into portions below the critical gravitational level; the densely packed neutron material is thus freed to expand to normal densities, while the energies released boost the entire mass to warp velocities. An alternative theory, advanced by Jones and Bogdanovitch, postulates that... "

"Enough." Spock halted the computer in its verbal tracks. "Captain, I suggest... "

"I'm way ahead of you, Mr. Spock. Reciprocal course, Mr. Sulu. Two eight seven mark four one."

"Two eight seven mark four one, sir. CAPTAIN... " For a moment even Sulu shed his oriental calm. "It's too late. Look."

Even as they watched the edges of the wall seemed to reach out for the Enterprise, forming the sides of a cosmic chalice into which the Starship was diving to her doom.

"Fascinating!" breathed Spock. "The outer perimeter must have accelerated through warp twelve."

"Impossible, Spock." Kirk saw the First Officer's eyebrows beginning to lift. "All right, I know - 'Nevertheless, it is happening'."

In the few minutes left to him in which to save his ship, James Kirk displayed all the qualities that had made him a Starship Captain: resourcefulness, ingenuity, imagination, decisiveness, boldness and, above all, a lightning and instinctive reaction to the situation.

"Mr. Sulu. Reverse course again. Take us into the bowl, as close as you can to one wall. Activate number five shield only. Scotty, divert all shields power to number five. Then give us maximum warp."

"Aye, sir." Scott's tone implied, 'I hope you know what you're doing,' but he didn't actually say it. Even Spock was looking at his Captain incredulously.

"Have you ever been skiing, Mr. Spock?"

"Sport is illogical, Captain. But... " as comprehension dawned "... your manoeuvre is not."

Kirk, despite the tension, grinned. "Why, thank you, Mr. Spock." To the others he explained. "We're going to execute a cosmic ski jump, using our lower forward deflector shield as the skis. If we judge speed and distance correctly we can use the storm's own energy to augment our own and *break free*. If not... " He left the rest unsaid. "Speed, Mr. Sulu?"

"Warp eight point one, sir."

"Compute optimum, Mr. Spock."

"Optimum warp for jump, nine point three seven five," said Spock, without hesitation and without troubling the computer.

"More power, Mr. Scott."

"I'm giving ye all I can, Cap'n. Any more and she'll shake herself to pieces."

"Any less and the asteroid storm will *break* her to pieces, Mr. Scott," said Spock, with remorseless logic.

"Aye, Mr. Spock, I expect it will." Scotty flashed the order down to the engine room.

"Eight point nine. Nine oh. Nine one." Sulu counted off the speeds from the digital warp display. "N-nine t-two. N-n-nine t-t-three." It seemed ominously as though Scotty had been right and the Enterprise would indeed shake herself to pieces, but in the nick of time, just as Spock warned, "She's going to blow," Sulu announced, "N-n-n-nine f-f-f-four," and Kirk was able to order, "Throttle back a fraction, Mr. Scott. We don't want to overdo it."

Then, in a chaos of flying bodies, as the ship's gravity cushions failed to cope fully with the enormous G-forces involved, the Enterprise popped out of the bowl of the storm like a cork from a well-shaken champagne bottle.

Damage reports came flooding in. Most were due to flying objects within the ship itself. There was just one strike from a small meteorite, but the holes in the hull were quickly repaired. Nobody noticed that a minor electrical circuit had been disrupted, or that the meteorite had breached the sealed chamber in which was lying the body of Ensign Potato.

In her mad dash to safety the Enterprise had been flung many parsecs across the galaxy. Now she was some seven light years beyond her original starting point, the brilliant white star Paxo. As her speed dropped below warp eight communications became easier, and the first faint message was heard.

"Challenger to Enterprise. This is Challenger calling Enterprise. Do you copy? Over."

Uhura selected maximum enhancement for the Challenger's emergency frequency. "Challenger, this is Enterprise. We read you strength two. Over."

"What is your status, Enterprise?"

"Minor damage only, Challenger. And you?"

"We were caught by the rim of the storm and sustained some structural damage. Our warp engines are out of action and undergoing repairs."

"Do you require assistance?"

"Negative, Enterprise. Estimated repair time, three and a half days."

A new voice broke into the transmission. "Jim, this is Riley. We have two landing parties stranded on Quasi-Paxo, with insufficient life support to last until we can effect repairs and pick them up."

"We're on our way, Admiral." Kirk nodded to Sulu, who was already setting a course. "Please give details of landing parties."

"One man in a stolen shuttlecraft, crashed on the surface of Q-P1. If he survived the crash he has life support for about three days. The

Captain and First Officer of the Challenger beamed down to rescue him. They have oxygen for hours only, unless they have made it to the shuttlecraft."

"Wasn't that rather unwise, Admiral?"

"It was the least we could do, Mr. Spock. The man Burke was awaiting trial on a capital charge when he escaped in the shuttlecraft. Shortly afterwards we received conclusive proof that we had a case of mistaken identity. Captain Stack and First Officer Nissan beamed down in person because lesser ranks might have made him suspect a trap. It should have been a routine operation of a few minutes, had not the asteroid storm struck at just the wrong moment."

"Don't worry, Admiral. If they're still alive, we'll get them off."

"I'm sure you will, Jim. Riley out."

"Do we have details of Quasi-Paxo, Mr. Spock?"

"I have obtained a readout, Captain. Computer... "

"Working." (Tonelessly.)

"Visual schematic to main screen." A diagrammatic representation of a small, insignificant solar system appeared on the screen as Spock continued, "Quasi-Paxo is a red dwarf star situated approximately one point six zero one light years from Paxo itself. As you can see from the schematic, the star has only one attendant planetoid."

"Quasi-Paxo should be within scanner range now, Captain."

"Put it on screen, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye aye, sir."

Sulu did so. And the Enterprise, collectively, gasped.

In the centre of the screen, in place of the single dull red star of the computer simulation, was a nebulous crimson dome of incredible beauty; a city in a distant plane, enshrouded in a blood-red mist.

Kirk looked at Spock enquiringly.

"Evidently the asteroid storm passed this way, Captain. Quasi-Paxo appears to have picked up a few of the stragglers."

"A few!" exclaimed McCoy. "There must be thousands of them. It'll be like looking for a needle in a haystack." Seeing Spock's puzzled expression he explained, "A haystack is a pile of dried grass, used as winter feed for cattle."

"Thank you, Doctor, I am well enough versed in the history of Terran agriculture to understand the meaning of the word haystack. My curiosity centred upon why you would seek to find a sewing implement in one."

"Spock, why must you take everything so confoundedly literally? It's a metaphor, dammit. It means... "

"Gentlemen!" Kirk held up his hand. "It means that this particular needle needs oxygen for its continued existence, and has less than four days' supply left. Let's start looking."

Unfortunately, Quasi-Paxo was so insignificant a star that there was insufficient data in the memory banks to compute the precise location of its tiny attendant. Spock and his assistant, Deputy Science Officer Kinshaw, managed to narrow the field down considerably, but there still remained several hundred asteroids which would have to be individually surveyed. The Enterprise picked her way slowly and methodically through the scattered debris of the storm, and by nightfall (ship's time) had eliminated fifty seven of them.

Kirk handed over the conn to Spock, who could go without sleep for much longer periods. He was heading for his quarters when he was waylaid by an agitated McCoy.

"Jim, I've got to talk to you."

"Can't it wait, Bones?" Kirk stifled a yawn, not without difficulty. "I've only got a couple of hours before I must relieve Spock. He's been on watch even longer than the rest of us."

"It's urgent, Jim. I've discovered something extremely disturbing. And... I need your advice. As for the fatigue, I prescribe a nightcap. We can talk in the anteroom. It was empty when I came past."

For once the doctor's observational powers had let him down. Uhura, also off watch but unable to sleep, had sat down in a quiet corner to pen the notes of a song which had been running through her head. There she had been overcome by a wave of tiredness, and dozed off.

McCoy filled two glasses and gave one to Kirk. Sitting down opposite him, he began speaking in a low voice.

"The small meteorite which struck us as we escaped from the storm did some unexpected damage. No, Jim... " as Kirk hastened to get up, " ... nothing to endanger the ship. It was the mortuary. The missile went clean through it and knocked out the refrigeration system. It also cut the leads to the external temperature gauge, which is why we didn't notice anything wrong."

McCoy leaned forward, his voice hoarse and hesitant as if even he couldn't believe what he was saying. "It was like a hothouse in there - must have been for two days, ever since the storm. By all the laws Potato's body should be showing signs of deterioration."

"And it isn't?"

"Not a trace. It's as if he's alive, and yet not alive." He lowered his voice still further. "If the word didn't have emotive connotations, I'd say that a perfect description of his condition would be - undead."

Fully awake now, but still unseen, Uhura caught the word 'undead'. It brought back vivid memories of her Haitian great-grandmother, a terrifying old woman with a fount of scary tales of voodoo and zombies. She found herself shivering uncontrollably.

That night the first of the attacks happened.

Dr. McCoy was having an irritating morning. Nurse Chapel had uncharacteristically failed to report for duty. Several other members of

his staff were laid up for one reason or another, mostly sprains and strains sustained during the ship's violent escape from the asteroid storm.

Yeoman Maire Potato had been seconded from Uhura's department to act as temporary medical orderly, ostensibly to help out but also to keep her occupied and help take her mind off the loss of her brother. Unfortunately, as a nurse she was proving to be a first class signals technician. The breakages of fragile equipment had reached epidemic proportions; now McCoy's nerves were set jangling again by the sight of the Yeoman walking slowly across the floor in one direction while looking in another, nonchalently balancing a tray of assorted glassware on the palm of one hand.

"For Pete's sake look where you're going, Yeoman!" he snapped tetchily. Then, seeing Christine Chapel in the doorway, "Ah, thank heavens you're here, Nurse. I was beginning to think you'd succumbed to Asteroid-itis too."

"I'm sorry I'm late, Doctor. I had a bit of a shock this morning." Nurse Chapel fingered the whisp of silken scarf which she had knotted around her throat. She opened her mouth to say more, had second thoughts, and closed it again. The movement was not lost on McCoy.

"Nurse, what have you done to your neck?"

"It's nothing, Doctor, really." Christine laughed, a slightly forced laugh. "I think I must have been bitten by a vampire!"

There was a dreadful crash as Yeoman Potato dropped the tray she had been carrying. McCoy cursed inwardly. Like all sailors throughout the centuries, some of the lower ranks were a superstitious lot and, knowing the Yeoman's gift of the Irish gab, the story was likely to lose nothing in the telling. Forcing himself to sound casual he said, "Well, don't just stand there, Yeoman - sweep it up." To Nurse Chapel he said, "Let's have you on the couch, then." And, as she hesitated, "At once, Nurse."

The scarf, when removed, revealed two puncture marks, one above the other and about an inch apart. They were quite superficial and needed only a few moments treatment, but even as he worked the doctor was keenly aware of the need to laugh the matter off.

"I can see you've never made dentures for a vampire, Nurse," he said as he applied the finishing touches. "No self-respecting Dracula would have canines this close together."

Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of Yeoman Potato, deathly white, crossing herself vigorously. "Whatever is the matter with you, Yeoman?"

"Those old movies were Michael's hobby," she whispered. "He always used to make jokes about the fang marks being too close together. Just as you did, Doctor. It's his way of telling us - he's still alive!"

The lifeless body of the Security Ensign was transfered from the mortuary to the Intensive Care section of the sick bay. The life-function monitors above his couch remained stubbornly inert.

The Enterprise surveyed, unsuccessfully, another two hundred and fifty two planetoids. And that night the second of the attacks happened.

This time it was Uhura who reported sick with two mysterious punctures in her throat. Dr. McCoy repaired them with ease. Less easily dealt with were the whisperings of Uhura's Haitian great-grandmother, whose memory now adamantly refused to be silenced. Uhura told Yeoman Rand, who told D.S.O. Kinshaw, who told Ensign Chekov. Who told *everybody*.

It was late in the day when a desperately worried Dr. McCoy appeared on the Bridge. "Jim, you've got to squash these rumours, or the whole lower deck will go to pieces."

"What do you want me to do, Bones?"

McCoy's reply was forestalled by a hysterical Yeoman Potato, on the intercom from sickbay. "Captain Kirk! Come quickly! They're outside!"

Kirk opened the two-way channel. "Calm yourself, Yeoman, and tell me exactly what is happening. Who is outside?"

There was a rustling, a half-heard whisper of, "All right, Maire, I'll take over," and a second voice replaced the first.

"Kinshaw here, sir. There's about a dozen lower ranks outside. I managed to lock the door on them, but we can't keep them out for long. They're muttering something about vampires, and Spaceman Sloboda - I think he's the ringleader - he's carrying a sharpened stake. And a mallet!"

Kirk leaped out of his command chair. "We're on our way. Bones. Spock. Mr. Sulu, you have the conn."

The small rabble outside sickbay were mostly of middle European origin. One of them carried a crucifix. Several were sporting sprays of garlic flowers, hastily and illicitly rustled up by Spaceman Jarovic on the hydroponics synthesiser. Sloboda, the leader, was beyond all reason, raising the wickedly pointed stake threateningly as his Captain approached. Kirk ducked, feinted, and, as Sloboda lunged, side-stepped, causing the mutineer to miss his footing and lurch within range of Spock's outstretched hand. A timely nerve pinch settled the matter and the brief mutiny was over.

"Now listen to me, all of you." Some, but not all, of the anger in the Captain's voice was feigned. "There are three people marooned on one of those planetoids. They may be dead already. We don't know. What we *do* know is that if we don't find them inside the next few hours they most certainly will be. If I hear one more word about vampires you'll all be in the brig along with Sloboda. Now return to your duties."

"We haven't heard the last of it," said D.S.O. Kinshaw to Ensign Chekov, later on in the junior officers' lounge. "One more attack and the rumours will start all over again," Unwisely, she allowed Chekov to pour her a second large vodka. "Unless I do something about it."

Chekov tossed back his vodka at a gulp. "What can you do?" His eyes widened as the D.S.O. told him. "But supposing it really *is* Potato?"

"Not you too!" The D.S.O. put that uncomfortable thought firmly out of her mind. "And anyway, he wouldn't hurt *me*."

"Captain!" Even Spock's voice betrayed traces of suppressed excitement. "Sensors report life readings on Planetoid 657."

"Details, Mr. Spock?"

"Momentarily, Captain." Spock studied the readings even more closely, his lightning brain analysing the results many milliseconds ahead of the computer, which was doing its best to keep up. "Human or humanoid, Jim. Three distinct sets of readings. It would seem that we have found them."

There was a burst of cheering on the Bridge, dying quickly as Kirk held up his hand for silence. "There is no time to lose, they can have only minutes of oxygen left. Mr. Spock, you will lead the landing party. Mr. Chekov, draw deep space gear for Dr. McCoy as well as yourself. I'll have him meet you in the transporter room. Yes, Mr. Sulu?"

"Permission to go too, Captain?"

"Very well. Though why you should want to I can't imagine. Lieutenant Uhura, have Mr. LeCou report to the Bridge to take the helm."

At a hundred yards distance the crashed shuttlecraft looked relatively undamaged, but as the landing party struggled painfully through the thick dust layer towards it it took on a crumpled, lopsided appearance. Clearly it was touch and go whether the pressure hull had survived intact. The outer hatch was closed. Fortunately the Challenger was equipped with the latest Y-Class shuttlecraft, fitted with airlocks rather than single doors, or there would have been a major problem gaining access. As it was, Spock had only to apply a universal key to the hatch. Once inside the airlock they were relieved to see that the gauges showed the atmosphere in the craft to be still capable of supporting life.

The interior door slid open, revealing three figures inside the cabin. On one of the two bunks, his left ankle neatly but amateurishly bandaged, sat the erstwhile prisoner, Donal Burke. On the other, with Lieutenant-Commander Michiko Nissan bending over him with a look of extreme concern, lay the motionless form of the Challenger's Vulcan Commanding Officer, Captain Stack.

Sulu whipped off his space helmet as quickly as the easy-release catch would allow.

"Mitch!" he cried. "It really is you!"

Michiko leapt to her feet and threw her arms around him. "Sue!" she exclaimed.

The greeting, and the mode of address, lent an extra twenty degrees of slant to Spock's right eyebrow and brought a positive snigger from Chekov. The snigger was choked off in its prime by a furious glare from Dr. McCoy, who was already tending to the unconscious Vulcan.

"What caused this?" he demanded. "The tricorder shows terminal brain damage."

Spock stepped forward and made as if to examine the patient. "If you will permit me..."

"Damn it, Spock, no, I will *not* permit you. I'm a doctor, not a committee."

"May I remind you, Doctor, that you are always complaining of a lack of expertise in Vulcan physiology. In the circumstances, to seek Vulcan advice is the only logical course."

McCoy snorted, but stood aside. After the most perfunctory of examinations Spock announced, "The patient will recover."

"How can you be so sure?"

"It is perfectly simple, Doctor. The patient is in a self-induced state of lowered metabolic rate. It is a Vulcan technique to which I have myself had recourse - in your presence, as I recall - which frees the body's energy resources from non-essential functions and concentrates them where they are most urgently needed - on our in-built regeneration mechanism. If Captain Stack's brain damage was indeed terminal he would not have had the rationality to diagnose the need for regenerative coma, or the necessary strength of will to accomplish it."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock." With heavy irony McCoy added, "May I have my patient back?"

"Of course, Doctor." Spock flipped open his communicator. "Spock to Enterprise. Lieutenant Uhura, please patch me through to Engineering."

"Scott here, Mr. Spock."

"Seven to beam up, Mr. Scott. Can you have the transporter divert us directly to the Intensive Care Unit? There was a choking sound from behind him. "Did you want to say something, Mr. Chekov? Is there some reason why we should not beam directly to Intensive Care?"

"I'm trying to think of one," muttered Chekov. Aloud, after a pause, he said, "Intensive Care is werry cramped for accurate beaming of seven people."

"Your logic does you credit, Mr. Chekov. Mr. Scott..."

"Aye, Mr. Spock, I heard. I'll beam you up to the main sickbay." And before Chekov could protest further, the transporter was energised.

Dr. McCoy, without preamble, strode across to the Intensive Care Unit. Its automatic door remained firmly closed. He pressed the button for manual operation but still nothing happened. Puzzled, he said, "It seems to be deactivated from inside." Then, seeing Chekov shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other and looking very red in the face, he exploded, "CHEKOV!"

"She made me promise not to tell," Chekov said miserably.

Spock looked interrogative. "Explain."

"Mees Kinshaw said that the only way to dispel the vampire rumours was for her to spend the night in Intensive Care with Potato's body. Then, when she was unharmed... "

McCoy turned furiously to the duty nurse. "Nurse, did you know about this?" Without waiting for a reply he swivelled the remote controlled camera away from the inert form of Ensign Potato and panned it slowly across the small room - to where the equally inert figure of D.S.O. Kinshaw lay in an untidy heap on the floor below the second couch.

"Do you call *that* unharmed, Mr. Chekov? Computer, over-ride locking mechanism for door No. 27. Open it immediately."

The door slid back. McCoy rushed inside and knelt swiftly down beside the Deputy Science Officer. Taking hold of her chin, which even in unconsciousness had a determined set to it, he turned it gently aside, exposing her neck and throat. Of puncture marks there was no sign.

The D.S.O., thus awakened, said, "Hello! Is it morning?" Finding herself on the floor she added inconsequentially, "I knew I shouldn't have had that second vodka. I must have slipped off the couch."

"I'll talk to you later, young lady," growled McCoy.

As Chekov and Sulu helped the D.S.O. to her feet, and Spock and Michiko Nissan laid the Vulcan Captain on the couch, McCoy himself spared a moment to look at Ensign Potato. And exclaimed, "My God!"

On the Ensign's throat, one of them leaking a little trickle of blood, were two red puncture marks, one above the other and about an inch apart.

"Don't look at me!" said the D.S.O., when everyone did.

There was a pregnant pause. Then,

"It HAS to be Potato," said Chekov with decision. Everyone stopped looking at D.S.O. Kinshaw and started looking at him instead. "Only an Irish vampire would go and bite himself!"

"Illogical, Mr. Chekov," said Spock severely. "However, knowing Potato, it is... possible."

Sulu and Michiko were first into the briefing room. It was the first time they had been alone together for five and a half years.

"Oh, Sue, if only I'd known! And all this time you thought that I... "

"When the Farragut was lost I naturally thought you were lost with her. You were her Helmsman, after all."

"I was posted to the Challenger as Second Officer two days before the Farragut warped out on her last trip. When I head the news I sent a signal to the Enterprise to let you know I was safe. I know it was delivered, because I had an acknowledgement from a Captain Mudd, who assured me he was in direct contact with the Enterprise."

"Mudd!" exclaimed Sulu disgustedly. "That old villain wouldn't... "

What Captain Mudd would not do was lost as Chekov burst into the room with a cry of, "Hello, Sue." Sulu aimed a karate chop at him which, although friendly, did not miss by very much.

"We joined Starfleet on the same day," Michiko explained. "We were inseperable all through training. But he *would* insist on calling me 'Mitch', so I retaliated with 'Sue'. I guess it sort of... stuck."

Sulu glared at Chekov. "And if it sticks on the Enterprise too, the next chop *won't* miss."

"Anyway," Michiko went on, "when we graduated, I was posted to the Farragut and Sue-lu to the Enterprise. We haven't seen each other since."

"What she is too modest to tell you," added Sulu, "is that she was top of every class she ever joined, which is why she's Lieutenant-Commander going on Commander while I am still a humble Pilot Helmsman. So watch it, Ensign! You're addressing a future admiral."

Captain James T. Kirk and the other members of the Board of Inquiry filed into the room and took their places around the table. The Inquiry was a brief and informal affair. Evidence was given that the erstwhile prisoner, Donal Burke, had stolen the Challenger's shuttlecraft while under the impression that he was about to be wrongfully convicted on a capital charge. The loss of the shuttlecraft was a matter within the discretion of the Challenger's Captain; Lieutenant-Commander Nissan gave evidence to the effect that Captain Stack had already decided that in the circumstances it would not be logical to press charges.

The only other matter to be investigated was that of Captain Stack's condition when rescued. When the subject was raised, Michiko showed signs of considerable distress.

"I feel dreadful about that," she said. "It should have been me."

"Please explain, for the record."

Michiko faced the computer. "We were taking it in turns to go outside," she said. "Working on drawing a pattern in the dust, to cast shadows and act as a beacon. Conditions on the surface were so bad that we could only manage half an hour at a time. Donal had just returned. I fitted the Captain with his life-support pack, which must have developed a fault. When he didn't return, we - Donal and I - went outside and found him - unconscious."

"You said it should have been you?"

"It was only when we got kitted up to go in search of him that I realised that the pack left for me was, in fact, the Captain's. I must have inadvertently given him mine."

"I see." Kirk's voice was expressionless. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant-Commander, but I have to ask this. How were relations between yourself and Captain Stack?"

"The Captain was very... correct. Distant, even. Particularly at the approach of Pong Fart."

Chekov emitted a strange noise, part snort, part choke and part guffaw.

"Did you speak, Mr. Chekov?"

"No, Keptin," said Chekov hoarsely.

"I'm pleased to hear it. Miss Nissan, I believe the phrase you are looking for is Pon Farr. Am I right, Mr. Spock?"

"Quite correct, Captain."

"Please continue."

"The Captain was concerned that at the onset of Pon Farr he would... that is... "

"He was scared he'd get the hots for you," prompted Chekov obligingly.

"I shan't speak to you again, Mr. Chekov," said Kirk sternly. Curiosity got the better of him. "And did he?"

"I really couldn't say, Captain Kirk. As a precaution he reassigned the ship's watches so that all female personnel were on the opposite watch to his own. Then, at the most critical time, he had himself confined to his quarters."

"It was sickening," put in Donal Burke, with a grin which did not quite ring true.

"Elaborate."

But before Burke could do so, the intercom shrilled.

"Kirk here."

"McCoy here, Captain. Captain Stack has regained consciousness and requests permission to leave sickbay."

"Your recommendation, Bones?"

"He seems in good shape, Jim, except for a partial amnesia surrounding the events on the planetoid. But I'd prefer to keep him here for observation."

"Captain... " Spock interrupted.

"Yes, Mr. Spock?"

"Minor amnesia is a common side-effect of the Vulcan regenerative process. The best cure is a period of meditation, in complete solitude. Captain Stack's request to be moved to his quarters is therefore entirely logical."

"And once he regains his memory he may be able to shed light on exactly what happened," mused Kirk. "Very well, Bones. Permission granted, unless you think there is any over-riding medical reason for keeping him in sickbay. Kirk out." He turned to the recording computer. "This Inquiry will re-convene when Captain Stack is fit to give evidence."

In the excitement of the discovery and rescue of the Challenger's castaways, the baffling case of the Irish Vampire had been relegated to the status of yesterday's news, barely outstripping in importance the outbreak of petty pilferings, which ranged from a sonic fretsaw from the Metalworking shop to a nineteenth century toasting fork, the pride of transporter Chief Kyle's collection of antiques. One prong of the toasting fork turned up unexpectedly - and painfully - on Uhura's chair on the Bridge.

"We seem to have a magpie aboard," growled McCoy, as he applied minor surgery to Uhura's shapely behind. "One with a juvenile sense of humour, too. Or are you going to blame poor Potato for this as well?"

"Of course not, Doctor," said Uhura, rather huffily.

All in all, the Irish vampire who bit himself had come to be something of a standing joke. (Particularly in Uhura's case.) But that night's attack changed everything.

Security man Pincher was on his way to stand guard outside the Senior Visitor's cabin, the guard having been detailed to ensure that Captain Stack's meditation would proceed undisturbed. Knowing the ship well, as a security guard must, he took a short cut through one of the secondary corridors. In the semi-darkness of night time status the passageway was dim to the point of creepiness, and the silence was complete.

In the last moments of his life, Pincher heard a soft footfall behind him. He spun round, his face registering incredulity as he caught sight of a familiar figure.

"Spud!" he gasped. "Is that you?"

The words ended in a gurgle, as his life ebbed away through the dreadful wound in his throat.

"What exactly do you want of me, Captain?"

"Just some good Vulcan logic, Mr.Spock. We have a series of vampire-like attacks and there is strong circumstantial evidence of a link with the curious undead state of Ensign Potato's body. Now a man is dead, of a similar wound. What am I supposed to do? If Potato is not the culprit, it would be a grave injustice to deny him the promised burial in his native soil. If on the other hand he *is* behind the attacks, then he must be brought to trial. But how the hell do you try a corpse? Spock? Spock, what is it?"

Spock's face had assumed a faraway look, coupled with an expression suggestive of personal bereavement.

"I fear it is more serious than we had imagined, Captain. I had shielded my mind from any possible contact with Captain Stack, out of deference to his need for solitude. But while you were speaking, my concentration lapsed for a moment and my shields were lowered. There is only... emptiness."

"Spock, what are you saying?"

"Simply this, Jim. Captain Stack is no longer aboard this ship. Or if he is, he is no longer alive."

"I've got a bone to pick with you, Donal Burke," said D.S.O. Kinshaw accusingly.

Burke grinned at her engagingly. "Sure, and what have I done, then?"

"Michiko - Lieutenant-Commander Nissan - tells me you wrote that Saucy Sue thing, as well as playing poor old Spud."

"Far be it from me to deny me talents. So?"

"So 'Jean Chinwiska' indeed." The D.S.O. tilted her chin upward and to the right, lips slightly parted - a gesture that had captivated a number of male hearts on the Enterprise, not least that of Ensign Potato.

Burke was uncaptivated, but agreed cheerfully enough, "Smooth as a

baby's bottom."

"And another thing. Whoever heard of a - *that* sort of relationship between a Vulcan and a Human?"

"Did ye never hear of wishful thinking?"

"What? Oh gosh... " The penny dropped and the D.S.O. blushed crimson. "I'm terribly sorry. I didn't realise... "

Burke laughed uproariously. "Only kiddin', me darlin'. Hush, what was that?"

From the cabin they were passing came a sound, less of a scream than a vocalised gasp. They rushed to the door. The D.S.O. knocked twice and, without waiting for a reply, burst in. She saw Michiko Nissan standing beneath one of the overhead lockers, staring horrified at the growing stain on her tunic. From the locker, whatever had caused the stain was still dripping. Viscous. Sticky. And green.

Before they could stop her, Michiko reached up and released the catch. And was virtually flattened by the dead weight of the bloodstained body of Captain Stack.

"She'll be all right, Jim. Just a straight case of delayed shock. Hardly surprising after all she's been through. I've given her a mild sedative and made her lie down for a couple of hours. I could have let her go back to her cabin, but decided it was better to keep her in sickbay, with a nurse on call."

"Excuse me, sir." The D.S.O. appeared in the bridge doorway, carrying Michiko's bloodstained dress. "I suppose this is evidence or something?" And as Chekov looked hopeful, "It's all right, sir, I lent her one of mine. We're much of a size. She'd just finished changing when she passed out."

"Very well, Miss Kinshaw, I'll see to it. Lieutenant Uhura, please have a Security officer collect it."

The D.S.O. turned to go. Almost as if she knew it was important, but couldn't understand why, she added inconsequentially, "It's a good job Donal hasn't got to write a follow-up to Saucy Sue. He'd have a field day with all this."

Spock looked up sharply from the computer readout he was studying. "Say that again, if you please, Miss Kinshaw." And when the D.S.O. had duly obliged, "Captain, I find this extremely disquieting. I have just been analysing a psycho-profile of the man Burke. The picture comes across of a dangerously schizo-psychotic personality, subject to violent jealousies. I was not aware that he had scripted the so-called ballad of Saucy Sue. It is logical to postulate that in the liaison between Captain Jak and the Vulcan Pocks he was sublimating his own repressed emotions towards Captain Stack."

"He said something about wishful thinking," remembered the D.S.O. She went in to recount her own conversation with Donal Burke.

To the pure, all things are pure. Kirk queried, "Wishful thinking? Liaison? Spock, you don't mean... "

"My apologies, Captain. It never occurred to me that you had failed to construe the frequent visits of the character Pocks to his Captain's private quarters as being indicative of a relationship of an amatory

nature."

Kirk, deeply shocked, exclaimed, "Bugger me!"

"I believe I said that, Captain." Thinking aloud, Spock continued, "If my deduction is indeed correct, it would follow that the captain's obvious attraction for Miss Nissan at... a critical time... would exacerbate Burke's condition. It would further follow that Burke has usurped Potato's role as the Ship's vampire, and that the primary victim was not Captain Stack but... "

"Mitch!" Sulu leapt out of his chair. "Permission to leave the bridge, Captain?"

"Lieutenant Uhura, get me sickbay."

There was a longish pause. "They're not answering, sir."

"Chekov, take the conn. Uhura, have all available Security personnel report to sickbay on the double. I only hope we're not too late."

The sealed-off door dividing the main sickbay from the small Intensive care section slid silently aside. A dark figure emerged from it, crossed the floor like a phantom to the strapping male nurse on duty and laid him out with a single blow.

Michiko, awake now and perfectly calm except for a slight widening of almond eyes, said, "It was you all along, wasn't it, Donal?"

Burke smiled.

"And now you are going to kill me."

"Of course."

"Tell me one thing. Why did you kill the Captain?"

"Why? Because you made me. Why else?"

"I made you?"

"By giving him the wrong life-support pack. When he recovered his memory simple Vulcan logic would have told him what happened. I couldn't allow that, now could I?"

"You'll never get away with it."
"Oh, but I will. Those ridiculous rumours of a vampire aboard this ship began days before either of us joined her. When there is another victim, the clamour for - what's his name - Potato's body to be recycled will become irresistable. And once he has been, the vampire attacks will... cease."

He raised the little toasting fork above his head. Its two remaining prongs, just an inch apart, and wickedly sharpened, glinted even in the diffused light of sickbay. Michiko backed way from him, into the Intensive Care Unit, until there was nowhere further to travel.

Soul and body merged with an almost audible 'click'. Sightless eyes focussed on a blue dress, with a single red ring on the left sleeve, denoting a civilian crew member of junior officer status in a scientific

grade. Only one member of the crew was entitled to wear such a dress.

The D.S.O. was in mortal danger!

With a mighty shout of, "NO!", Ensign Potato burst the restraining straps and, all in one movement, seized Burke with both hands and hurled him the full length of sickbay. He struck the wall with a sickening crash and crumpled to the floor, his neck bent at an irrepairable angle. On his throat, where it had come into contact with the toasting fork, were two puncture marks, one above the other and about an inch apart. From one of them there issued a thin trickle of blood.

Potato, seeing Michiko's face for the first time, grinned broadly and said cheerfully, "Hello, Miss. Who are you?"

Rather belatedly, Admiral Riley, aboard the now fast-approaching Challenger, supplied another piece of the jigsaw.

"Spock here, Admiral," the First Officer responded to the Challenger's hailing frequency.

"Tell Jim if you've got our man Burke aboard, clap him in irons. Our computers have just come up with the fact that he faked the evidence against himself which caused him to be brought to trial. The objective seems to have been to give him an excuse to steal the shuttlecraft. Though why he should wish to is beyond me."

"Surely it is obvious, Admiral? Lieutenant-Commander Nissan, as his defending officer - I take it he *did* specifically ask for her to defend him - would consider it a point of honour to follow him to the planetoid, where she could meet her death in less suspicious circumstances than aboard the Challenger. As for the irons - they will not be necessary." With which tantalising lines Spock left the Admiral metaphorically cliffhanging, until his Captain arrived to tell the full story of the last few days.

No sooner had the Admiral faded from the viewing screen that Dr. McCoy burst upon the Bridge. In his hand he carried a small culture phial. For the second time in as many weeks he looked exceedingly pleased with himself.

"Jim! Spock! I did it!"

"Evidently, Doctor. The salient question would appear to be, 'did what?'"

McCoy was much too excited to allow Spock to rile him. He held the phial up to the light. The culture inside fluoresced gently in a cascade of reds and greens.

"Take a good look, Jim. I have here every vampire who ever... lived. From Vlad the Impaler to my star patient."

"How is the good Ensign, Doctor?"

"What? Oh, he's doing fine, Mr. Spock. Where was I?"

Kirk smiled. "About to explain, before you burst a blood vessel, Bones."

"Potato tells me he remembers nothing before the 'attack' on Nurse Chapel. Then it occurred to me that Spock had found sensor readings of a sub-bacterial life form coming from the asteroid storm. That gave me the

clue. Sure enough, in both places where the integrity of the mortuary had been breached by the meteorite I found traces of a hitherto unknown virus." He held up the phial. "*This* virus."

He paused to collect his thoughts. When he spoke again it was upon an apparently different tack. "Throughout history there have been well-documented cases of the mind quitting the body for a short space of time. The so-called out-of-body experience. I believe that the process can be accelerated - even triggered - by this virus. It is not a virulent form - in fact, it appears very weak. To produce the symptom of divorcing mind from body, the link between the two has therefore to be somewhat tenuous to begin with. As, for example, when the patient is in a state of catatonic trance. Or, in this case, had had his mind anaesthetised by a devastating contact with two powerful alien telepaths. In fact, almost all the life forces in Potato's body must have been suspended, or with no heartbeat the process of brain deterioration would have been completed long before he was exposed to the virus. Once contracted, since the body's natural defences were also suspended, the disease would continue indefinitely until a second major shock broke the trance. In Potato's case it was the imminent possibility of - as he thought - Miss Kinshaw, whom he idolises, coming to harm."

"But why the 'vampire' attacks, Bones. Potato's I mean, not Burke's."

"Maire Potato hit the nail on the head, Jim, only we were too dumb to see it. Her brother used to make jokes about the narrowness of vampire bites in the old movies. The attacks were, as she said, his way of telling us that he was alive, and would we please *do* something about it. Dammit, he even perpetrated the ultimate Irish joke - The Irish Vampire Who Bit Himself - and we *still* didn't cotton on."

Chekov gave a frown, half worry, half puzzlement. "How would he have made the bites, Doctor? I mean, his mind may have been mobile, but his teeth weren't!"

"Good question, Mr. Chekov. It seems to have been some kind of psycho-kinetic force. His own description was, 'I just willed the bites and there they were'."

"Okay, Bones, I accept your explanation of Potato's case - but vampirism in Transylvania and all that medieval superstition - no, it's altogether too far-fetched."

"On the contrary, Captain." Kirk looked up, startled, as Spock began to speak. "The doctor's hypothesis is unusually logical. Precisely because your dark ages were so deeply rooted in superstition. Suppose, for example, a meteorite had fallen among the Carpathian mountains. It would have needed only one patient in a deep trance to contract the virus and the course of events would have been entirely predictable. In such barbaric and irrational times, the apparition of the 'undead' spirit of a loved one would itself be sufficient to trigger catatonic shock, allowing a second victim to catch the virus and giving rise to the legend that any*body* bitten by a vampire would become one himself. Then the ultimate cruel irony. No wonder a vampire correctly dispatched was invariably heard to scream."

"I don't follow you, Mr. Spock."

"You do not surprise me, Doctor. One attack of logic on your part is... amply sufficient. Yet you yourself said it. The cure for this disease is a second traumatic shock. What shock could be more traumatic that a stake driven through the heart?"

"Congratulations, Commander!" Kirk shook Michiko warmly by the hand. "Mr. Sulu will escort you to the transporter room."

The Challenger had finally come alongside, a mere three hundred kilometres away from the Enterprise. With her, relayed by Admiral Riley, had come news of a promotion: Lieutenant-Commander M. Nissan to full Commander, and Acting Captain of the U.S.S. Challenger.

Transporter Chief Kyle tactfully quit the room, leaving Sulu to operate the controls. Sulu and Michiko embraced, briefly, and then again, less briefly, before Michiko took her place on one of the stations.

"Sayonara, Sue." A wistful look came into her eyes as she said steadily, "Energise."

"Sayonara, Mitch." For a moment, as he activated the transporter, the wistful look was reflected in Sulu's eyes. Then it was replaced by one of determination as he added softly, "For the moment."

Mr Scott's Troubles * * * *

Mr. Scott's in terrible trouble,
While all else sees one, he sees double.
Doubles of Scotch, doubles of whisky,
Is it any wonder he's feeling frisky?

If the Captain would only double his wages,
He's been on half pay for ages and ages,
All because of a misunderstanding
When he beamed them down for a bumpy landing.

And something's up in the engine room,
It shouldn't go bump, it should go zoom.
"Hit it with a spanner," Mr. Kyle said -
But Scott misheard, and hit Kyle instead.

Time for his check-up; McCoy thinks he looks lorn,
But Scott can't risk him finding the rhino horn.
Sulu said it wouldn't do any harm,
And with Orion girls it worked a charm.

But the worst trouble of all, I think you'll admit,
The one that finds him right in the shit,
It's his puns that are bad, so we can't quibble -
They get him into the most terrible tribble.

Lynn Hester

the SUN within the STORM

by

Karen Hayden

"Mr. Spock to transporter room! Mr. Spock to transporter room!"

It was a request which made Spock's heart grow cold. No facts were available to him, and yet he *knew*, immediately, with no doubt, that something had happened to Jim. He had sensed it 5.7 minutes ago. Something had roused him from his meditation, had caused his breathing to quicken, his sight to cloud as he had turned his thoughts inwards in an attempt to find out just what was wrong. He hadn't even tried to hide what he felt, not here in his quarters. He knew he wouldn't have hidden his obvious distress in full view of the crew, either, for they all knew, just as he did, just how much James T. Kirk meant to him.

Now he felt cold, alone. And afraid of what he might find in that transporter room. But despite the fear he knew where he had to be, where he was expected to be. Within two seconds of the request being made he had exited his quarters and was proceeding at a run towards the turbolift, heading for the transporter room. As the words, "Medical emergency! Dr. McCoy to transporter room!" echoed through the corridors he increased his pace, oblivious of the knowing looks of the crew members he passed on the way.

The turbolift seemed to take an agonisingly long time to reach its destination. As it travelled upwards he had just one thought on his mind.

Jim! In danger! I should have been at his side...

Spock arrived only seconds before McCoy, but when the Chief Surgeon rushed through the doors he almost collided with the Vulcan First Officer, for Spock had halted immediately inside the doorway, the sight of the severe injuries sustained by the landing party shocking him into immobility. McCoy, all business, spared Spock but a cursory glance before walking around him and bending down to attend to the injured men.

All six members of the contact team were hurt, two severely, judging by the amount of blood which ran from their wounds to lie upon the transporter disks. Spock took in these details analytically, taking note that one gold-shirted man was absent, but afraid to admit it consciously.

He remained where he was for several more seconds, his mind active. Control. He swallowed hard. Routine planet survey. Routine. Planet survey... This should not be happening... Should not be happening...

Spock closed his eyes, then, very slowly, forced them open again and forced himself to move forwards, fully in control again. Pushing his shaking hands behind his back, clasping them together, he approached the least injured member of the team, a Science Technician from his own labs, who was sitting on one of the steps holding an evidently broken arm close to his body as his glazed and sightless eyes stared at the floor. His voice was very quiet as he spoke to the shocked man. "Mr. Clark."

There was no sign of his having heard so Spock bent low and gently

touched his hand. "Mr. Clark. I need a report." His voice was calm, and he found himself surprised at the fact.

The young man finally roused himself, and Spock found pain-filled brown eyes focused on him. As if realising who had spoken to him for the first time, the technician tried to rise to his feet, but Spock pushed him back down gently, sitting next to him on the step.

"Sir... We... ah... We... "

The Ensign was afraid. But of what? Spock tried to reach him again with gentle words, trying to do as Jim himself would do. The thought caused a stab of pain to grind his heart and he found himself consciously having to keep his attention from wavering.

"Calm yourself, Ensign. Take your time... but I must know what happened."

Something in Spock's voice must have given Clark the confidence to carry on that he so desperately needed, for he took a deep breath and haltingly began to relate what he had just lived through. But Spock noted that he was unable to meet the Vulcan's eyes as he did so...

"We beamed down with no problems, sir, about two miles from the nearest settlement. We'd made doubly sure that we didn't run into any of the natives, sir. The Captain... " his voice caught on the name, and he had to restrain a sob, "... he made sure of that. We all knew that the Prime Directive was in force, and we knew our jobs. But we weren't expecting trouble. None of us saw them coming... "

"Them?"

"We had spread out into a formation E, sir, tricorders in operation, set for odomite. It was lovely down there, and we were actually enjoying the job we had to do... It was so quiet, peaceful, and we could see how much good it was doing the Captain... "

He looked at Spock, pleading for understanding, obviously feeling as if he shouldn't be talking about his commanding officer this way, but equally obviously needing to. Spock nodded to him to continue.

"They came out of nowhere, and were on top of us before we could do anything about it."

Spock repeated his question. "Who were they?"

"We didn't have time to think about that then, sir. We had to fight for our lives... "

Gently interrupting, the Vulcan asked, "Speculation would help, Ensign. The natives of Rheytiana are peaceful, and are weaponless."

"Sir, these... people... had weapons. Whips, spears, nets - and they weren't afraid to use them. If they weren't the natives we already knew about then they must be a different tribe, one that the other survey teams must have missed... " The memory of what had happened was making the young man more coherent, and Spock said nothing, afraid now of halting the vital memories.

"We had no time to beam up, no time to fire our phasers, even if the Captain had allowed us to. We fought back with our hands and feet, real gutter fighting, it was. But they were stronger, more vicious, than we thought possible, and they soon won."

"They won? How did you get away?"

The Ensign became uncomfortable. "They saw the Captain. He was fighting right up front, trying to help Connors, who'd been hit by a spear, and they must have noticed he was different from the rest of us. They left us alone, seemed to lose interest, and grabbed Captain Kirk... "

Suddenly no more words would come, and Spock grabbed the uninjured shoulder, pleading with him to tell him all he had to know.

"Where is Captain Kirk?"

"They've got him, sir. They dragged him off."

The Vulcan's voice was very precise, very quiet. "You left him?"

Clark, panicking now, fearful of Spock's wrath, became agitated and gripped his injured arm more tightly as he struggled to his feet, looking down at Spock.

"We didn't want to, sir! We tried to fight back, to follow them - that's how Ludlum got killed! - but the Captain *told* us... with his eyes... He *told* us to go!"

Spock had risen to his feet, but before he could say any more he felt a strong hand on his arm, pushing him gently away.

"Okay, Spock. That's enough." It was McCoy the doctor speaking. The concerned friend of James T. Kirk was hidden deep beneath the professional exterior, from necessity. "I've got to treat this lad."

Spock looked behind him to find the room empty. McCoy had already dealt with the badly injured men, had taken Ludlum's body to the morgue, and was now determined to save young Clark any more anguish. He'd known Spock had needed to know, but enough was enough.

"Understood, Doctor." Turning back to the Ensign he spoke in a more controlled voice. "You did your duty, Ensign. You obeyed orders."

"But sir... Doctor... the Captain could be dead... " Spock flinched "... because we left him down there!"

"He is *not* dead. You did all you could. Do not reproach yourself. You did as the Captain wanted you to do - he would have wanted it no other way. Go now with the doctor. Allow him to treat you."

If Clark was surprised by the Vulcan's admission he didn't show it; what he did show was gratitude as he left the room. Bones thanked Spock with his eyes and left with his charge.

For a moment Spock allowed himself to remain, looking at the red stains on the transporter platform, then he left hurriedly, his destination the Bridge.

"Mr. Scott, status." Spock's voice preceded his exit from the turbolift doors, and by the time he had descended to the centre seat all eyes were upon him.

Scotty had vacated the command chair immediately, but Spock did not sit in it. Instead he allowed himself a brief second to run his eyes over the leather seat, then he turned all his attention to the Chief Engineer's

pronouncement.

"All normal with ship's systems, sir. We're ready to leave orbit when you give the word. But... "

"*But,* Mr. Scott?"

"But we won't *be* leaving orbit, will we, Mr. Spock?"

Spock repressed a sigh, then turned slowly around the Bridge, meeting each person's eyes with his own, attempting to convey encouragement, hope. What would Jim have done? What would he have said?

"Gentlemen. Ladies." He nodded in Uhura's direction. "The Captain has been... apprehended... by unknown natives on the planet's surface. His condition is unknown, but be assured that he is *not*... dead. We *will* find him."

"Aye, that we will, Mr. Spock!" Quietly, the Scotsman added, "Thank you for telling us. Will you be making an announcement to the crew?"

"Not at this precise moment, no."

Spock went to his computer station and took readings of the planet. Useless. The Rheytianas were too similar to Humans for him to be able to differentiate them from Kirk. They would have to do things the hard way... He mentally replayed what few details they had about the planet which they had been ordered to investigate.

It was a Class M planet, its inhabitants living in small village complexes, but moving on when the crops gave out. They had been classed as semi-nomadic, but Spock had doubted that to be true, for their family groups were too closely knit, their traditions too hard and true, according to the initial survey, for the initial conclusions now to hold true. He had studied these people well before their arrival here, and had hoped to study them at close hand, but he had been held up in the labs, and Kirk, impetuous and impatient as ever, had insisted on beaming down ahead of him. If he *had* been with them, he might have prevented the attack, might have been able to prevent Jim from being...

He chastised himself. It was profitless contemplating maybes when there was so much work to be done. Who were these strangers, so unlike the local inhabitants, who had attacked their survey team? All should have been well. There had been no apparent danger. What had gone wrong?

He pressed the comm button. "Sickbay."

"McCoy here."

"Is Mr. Clark able to talk?"

"Yes, but... "

"I'm on my way down. Please prepare him for my arrival. I do not *wish him* upset again, but I *must* talk with him."

"Okay, Spock. Be here in five minutes."

"Affirmative." Spock sighed, a quick, unobtrusive release of breath in an effort to calm his nerves. Then he rose from the seat into which he had sunk and stood beside the railing, looking down at the Scotsman waiting expectantly beside the command chair - under the circumstances even he couldn't bring himself actually to sit in it.

"Mr. Scott, you will take the conn. I will be in sickbay – and then I will be beaming down to the planet. I will not be returning until I have found the Captain."

The orders were exactly what Scott had been expecting. He met Spock's eyes, acknowledging what the Vulcan had not said, then watched him as he exited the Bridge. The Vulcan was carrying a pain which he had not been meant to experience. His very being should have circumvented such pain, but because of the existence of one named James T. Kirk Spock had exceeded what his being was and made him something even more special, more rare. Scott couldn't help wishing that he had someone to care about him as much as Spock cared about Jim Kirk.

In the turbolift there was time for deep breaths, for concern to be buried deep within his soul until a more appropriate time. He refused to believe that the concern he now felt could well be replaced by grief... He steepled his fingers before him, seeking control, retreating inwards for an all-too-brief moment. When the doors dilated he was calm again, breathing normally, the shaking of his hands halted.

Sickbay was its normal quiet, efficient haven for Spock, and for a moment he halted just in front of the doors, breathing in that calm before he had once again to face the man who had witnessed his soulmate's suffering. Then, back straight, he walked into the complex.

McCoy met him before he could approach the side wards. "Take it easy, Spock. He's in a pretty rough way. There's more to his injuries than meets the eye... "

"Do you really have to tell me that, McCoy? Do you think I would do or say anything to harm him?" Spock held the doctor's eyes.

"No, of course not. It's just that... " He took a deep breath. "It's just that his injuries are bad, but probably not half as bad as Jim's will be." He regretted having to say that, but he also knew that it had to be said, for all their sakes. They all had to face what *could* have happened down on that godforsaken planet.

"Understood. I will... bear that in mind."

It wasn't like Spock to hesitate in his speech, and that hesitation had spoken volumes for Bones McCoy. Perhaps it was Spock he should be more concerned about than Jim.

The Science Technician struggled to sit up in the bed, and Spock didn't try to stop him this time. This young man still had his pride, and he obviously wanted to show the respect to his commanding officer that he could show under the circumstances.

Standing at the side of the bed, Spock once again placed his hands firmly behind his back, out of sight. "I trust you are feeling better."

"Physically, sir. Doctor McCoy fixed me up fine. But I hurt inside, sir... *I* should be the one down there, not the Captain... "

Spock wondered again at the magic that was Jim Kirk. So many under his command would willingly lay down their lives for him, would rather suffer pain and fear for him than see him suffer them himself. Even this young man, after having been aboard the Enterprise for just six months, had

fallen under their Captain's spell.

"Mr. Clark, the Captain would not want that. He gave you an order, and you followed it. Things are as they had to be. Do not torture yourself any further. I am about to lead a landing party down to the surface, and I *will* find the Captain."

The deep brown eyes of the young man looked closely at the Vulcan, seeing what was hidden beneath the stoic exterior, seeing the meaning of the unspoken words as well as the spoken ones. "I just wish I could walk properly, so I could go with you, sir. If anything happens to Captain Kirk... "

The remainder was left unsaid, but Spock knew what the young man was feeling, for he felt it himself. Yes, he admitted, he could feel it himself. The pain, the desolation, the fear, the anger... Spock acknowledged then, having seen Clark's penetrating gaze, that this young man before him was far more perceptive than he had ever given him credit for being.

"Mr. Clark, is there anything else that you can remember? Anything at all? I need as much data as possible to aid me in my search."

"You've taught me to use my eyes, sir, to remember every detail that comes to sight so that I can use it at some future time. I remembered your advice. Even in the fracas I *was* able to take note of what was happening around me." He lowered his eyes, becoming introverted in thought, and Spock allowed him the time he needed to recall the memories.

"They were taller than we've been led to believe the natives would be - much taller. Almost as tall as the Captain. And though they were dressed in primitive dress they seemed too clean to be natives. They had beards, but they were well clipped, and mainly just on their chins, not full-face ones. And their eyes... " His face contorted and he supressed a shiver.

"Their eyes? What about them?"

"Evil, sir! There was a malevolence within them that I would never have thought possible. And yet... it wasn't directed at all of us, simply the Captain... " He became quiet, then more agitated as memory returned.

"Yes! That's it! The Captain! It was as if they were specifically after him, and we didn't matter. They fought all of us, but as soon as they could get a clear shot at the Captain, they grabbed him and ran!" Then full realisation hit him, and a betraying moisture filled the brown eyes. "Oh, my God... "

Spock placed a hand upon the young shoulder. "You have helped a great deal. Your information could well make the difference between success and... "

He wouldn't say it. Couldn't. Calling Dr. McCoy over he took his leave, unable to face the naked anguish, which so echoed his own, on the young face. He sought retreat in McCoy's office.

When Bones re-entered his office he found the Vulcan slumped across his desk and quickly shut the door behind him, pressing the privacy seal. He wasn't sure what to do or say, and instead of drawing near, kept his distance, saying;

"We'll need some Security men, Spock. Scotty has volunteers standing by in the transporter room. And we'll need tricorders, closely calibrated for Jim's readings. They may make a difference when we get near... "

Spock pulled himself upright. "I have behaved atrociously. How can you bear to be near me, McCoy?"

"Spock, dammit, it isn't wrong to feel, and it certainly isn't wrong to care! Especially for *him.* Don't tell me you're ashamed about the way you care for Jim."

"No!"

"Then don't feel shame for not being able to cope with the worry, then. The fear. In some respects we're more controlled than you are. I haven't been able to give myself time to worry, yet. Too much to do with those injured men. Yet *you...* You care so much you can hardly go on, and it shows... "

Spock flinched, his whole body shaking.

"... but that's not wrong, dammit! Those who have seen you understand. WE care, too!"

Spock turned slowly in the chair to face McCoy. His face was so full of pain that it caused Bones' heart to miss a beat and he hurried forward, instinctively knowing that *now* was the time to give support. He knelt beside the Vulcan, not touching him.

"Don't come apart on me now, Spock. We all need all our strength if we're to find him. Come on... "

Spock was visibly pulling a curtain of control around himself, and Bones marvelled at the Vulcan's ability to bounce back from the brink of despair to be able to face reality again and take action. "That's right... "

Suddenly Spock found his voice. "*We,* Doctor?"

"Huh?"

"We. You said, 'We'll need some Security men'... "

"Well, yeah, of course. You don't think you're going down there without me, do you?"

"The thought hadn't even crossed my mind."

Bones smiled for the first time since the landing party had beamed aboard. "About time you got some sense from somewhere and realised who the most valued member of the landing team is!"

"You are even prepared to have your molecules 'scattered all over the galaxy'?"

Bones turned away, busying himself with getting his medikit ready, then he replied off-handedly, "For him... YES. Come on - let's get a move on!"

As they walked down the corridor Bones noticed that Spock was deep in thought, and after having kept his peace for several seconds, finally asked him what he had on his mind.

"What Clark told me. It disturbs me to think that the theory I have formulated may well turn out to be true."

"What theory?"

"Clark described men who sound suspiciously like Klingons to me."

McCoy's face displayed his shock. "How? What...?"

"Unknown. My sensors did not pick them up. Perhaps they have some new way of blocking sensor readings from the surface of the planet. Reports do not mention Klingon activity in this sector, yet they do seem to have had prior knowledge of our arrival here. Clark told me that their target was Jim."

He said no more, for they had arrived at the transporter room. Spock preceded a stunned doctor into the room, then halted abruptly so that McCoy collided with him.

"Spock, what is it?" He looked around the Vulcan to see what had so astonished the Enterprise First Officer. Before them stood every member of the Bridge crew, all equipped with tricorders and phasers.

Sulu stepped forward, their elected spokesman. "Mr. Spock, our duty shift has just ended, and we would like to go with you."

"Gentlemen? Ladies?" He looked pointedly at Uhura.

"We're off duty now, sir. We need to go... We know the risk, and we have to take it, sir."

Spock looked briefly at McCoy, then looked again at Uhura. He could see in her eyes just how much she cared about Jim Kirk, but he could also see that she knew how much Jim meant to him, too. All of a sudden he knew that he had a real friend, someone he had not acknowledged as such before, in Uhura.

Both Spock and McCoy knew that each and every man and woman aboard their ship would be in that room volunteering to go with them if they could. These six people were just doing what all four hundred crew members wanted to do - and with his eyes McCoy begged Spock not to refuse them. Spock simply nodded at the doctor, then turned once more to the other people in the room.

"This mission has to be carried out quickly, quietly. This can only be achieved with a minimum of personnel. I... appreciate your offers, but I cannot possibly allow you all to accompany us."

He drew near, and met her eyes. "Uhura, join the doctor." She smiled her smile, then moved quickly.

"Mr. Sulu, you too." Sulu executed a swift half-bow, then joined Uhura and McCoy.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Chekov. You will be needed on the Bridge. Mr. Scott may need you to take over my post, and we may need to leave orbit quickly when we beam back aboard."

"I understand, sir."

Spock then gestured to the four waiting Security men to precede him onto the transporter disks, and then joined them himself. Scotty was at the controls, as expected, and Spock simply nodded his instructions to him

before they vanished from sight.

They materialised in the same clearing that the landing party had beamed up from, and they were immediately able to witness the evidence of the viciousness of the attack. The grass was crumpled all around and scattered about were ripped clothing and bloodstains.

Spock walked away from the main group to look closely at particular patch of ground. McCoy, noticing, followed him, but almost wished he hadn't as he saw what Spock had picked up. In his hands was a torn piece of command-gold shirt, patched with red. Spock held it tight for a moment before handing it to the doctor.

"The blood - is it Jim's?"

McCoy took tricorder readings, then nodded regretfully.

A shout rang out from a thicket and both men ran over to the Security man who, phaser in hand, was pointing off into the distance. Before them a river ran carelessly over rocks, its roar so deafening that they wondered how they had failed to notice it before.

"What do you think, Spock?"

"They would not proceed downstream, for the native encampment is at the river mouth. I surmise that the Captain would be taken upstream, perhaps to their own camp. If they are Klingons, then they will probably be waiting for contact from their ship."

He reached for his communicator. "Spock to Enterprise."

"Scott here."

"Mr. Scott, are the sensors still clear?"

"Aye, sir. No ships in the vicinity."

"I suspect that they will arrive at any moment. If you feel the odds are against you break orbit and contact Starfleet. Do not be a hero, Mr. Scott."

"I will assess the situation, sir, and act accordingly."

"Spock out."

Bones smiled at Scott's cryptic acknowledgement of the Vulcan's orders. He knew, and he suspected that Spock knew too, that Scott would fight if he were able, and repay the Klingons for whatever they had done to their Captain.

The other members of their party had drawn nearer, and Spock took the opportunity to speak to them. "Please remember that we are probably dealing with Klingons. They have wanted the Captain for a long time, and will not take too kindly to our efforts to pluck him from their grasp. We must be as devious as they. Keep alert, and remember that the Captain would want no more deaths on his account. Neither do I."

That last had been painful for Spock to say, for he himself would be willing to give anything for Jim's safe return, even his own life. But he could not allow that from anyone else.

They trekked on for most of the day, following the river banks, following the tricorder readings as best they could. There had been no contact from Scotty on board the Enterprise, and, hesitant to use the communicators too much in case the Klingons were near, they could only hope that no news was good news, and that the Klingon ship had not turned up.

Suddenly, as they rounded a bend in the river the leading Security man, scouting ahead, halted and gestured to them to get down. They obeyed instantly, but Spock crept stealthily forward, needing to know exactly what was wrong and what the situation was.

The Security guard nodded at him, then whispered, "There, sir - a camp. It doesn't look like a native one. I think we've found them."

Spock looked in the direction that the man was pointing and pursed his lips tightly. Success. Looking back at his men he pointed inland, and put a finger to his lips. Understanding immediately they all turned away from the river and proceeded into the lush undergrowth for a sufficient distance until Spock was certain that they were out of hearing distance.

"Well, Spock?" Bones was getting impatient, and more and more worried about Jim.

"It is their camp, but we were too far away to make out any details. We will wait until dark, Doctor, then I and one Security man will carry on and reconnoitre their camp and the immediate area."

"Dark?! Jim could be dead by then!"

"He may be dead already, Doctor."

Anger flared in Bones' eyes, but it died quickly as he saw again the pain that admission had caused the Vulcan.

"And they may kill him if we attack now. As I said, we must be as devious as they. We *must* be patient, and do things by their rules if we are to succeed."

Bones nodded reluctantly and walked away. Spock signalled to everyone to rest while they could, then followed Bones, to sit beside him, back against a tree.

"Doctor."

Silence.

"Bones... "

That brought a response from the Chief Surgeon, and Spock found ice-cold blue eyes boring into his. "I'm sorry, Spock. You're in command of this. I shouldn't question you. It's just that... "

"I know. You do not have to explain. It may help you to realise that there is a 99.9% probability that Jim *is* still alive. The Klingons would not go to all this trouble to capture him for no reason. They obviously intend to take him back to their Emperor. He would be a great gift, would bring his captors much power. They will not hurt him unduly and risk his life. He is of more value to them alive."

The ice in Bones' eyes thawed a little. "Thank you, Spock. I needed to hear that. I don't know why I didn't think of that before... "

"Other things on your mind, Doctor."

Bones smiled then, and both men drifted into silent contemplation as they awaited the welcome arrival of the night.

McCoy had drifted into an uneasy sleep by the time that Spock finally roused him. "I must leave. But I will not be long. Await my return please, Bones. Do not do anything foolish."

"Who? Me?" Bones struggled to his feet and watched Spock cross to the Security men. All four of them had stepped forward, all hoping to be picked. They believed themselves to be the lucky ones because they were there to help, whereas their colleagues were waiting for their return aboard ship. But they still wanted to do more. Spock spoke to the same man who had been scouting ahead of them earlier and had first sighted the camp, then they both left without a backward glance.

Instinctively Bones walked over to Uhura's side. He could see the concern in her eyes, but there was no fear there - at least, not for herself. All she feared was what they might find at that camp when Spock eventually led them into it.

It didn't take Spock and his companion long to reach again the river bank opposite the camp. Silently they slipped into the water and swam across, then crept into the camp.

They were Klingons all right. They had discarded their native dress in favour of their uniforms, and aside from a few guards they lay about the camp completely confident that they would not be discovered.

Spock pointed to the left as the Security man crawled under the purple bushes to find out what he could. Spock went right, but after a few yards of crawling was brought to a halt by an agony-filled scream that filled the night. His flesh crawled, and he swallowed deeply. There was no doubt who had screamed, but he also knew that there was nothing they could do alone. He hoped the Security guard would do nothing foolish...

Spock managed to discover that the scream had come from the opposite end of the camp, but he had forced himself to withdraw, to return to his companion's side. Silence. All was silence now. Spock looked at the man beside him then, making a decision, he pointed back across the river, pushing him back. Understanding, the guard ran off, diving silently into the river and swimming as fast as he could to go and fetch the rest of their landing party. He too had forced himself not to act when he had heard the scream, but now he needed to take action, and he regretted having to leave the Vulcan alone, for he knew what he intended to do.

Hesitating only a moment after the Security guard had left *him*, Spock allowed himself to contemplate what the scream which had torn through his very soul had meant. Jim Kirk would not give in to the Klingons unless he had been pushed further than he was able to go, unless he had... broken.

No. He couldn't believe that. The Captain of the Enterprise would not allow himself to break under the control of the Klingons. The scream must have been the only way he had of releasing the pain that the Klingons were so capable of exerting upon him. Simply that.

Simply...? Spock suppressed a shiver which threatened to run along the length of his body. He was afraid of what he would find, afraid that

he would find a body broken beyond repair, despite what he had said earlier to McCoy. He forced himself forward.

Full darkness had fallen, and it made it difficult for him to orientate himself, but his exceptional night vision helped a lot, and in time he found again the place where he had heard that scream.

The Klingons had seemingly retired for the night. Even the guards seemed to be dozing. They had become complacent in their confidence that their camp would not be found, in their confidence that their ship would return to pick them up before a Federation landing party could locate them. Spock allowed himself to feel derision for them, then crept up to the nearest of the guards, applying the Vulcan neck pinch then moving on to the next. It was so easy. He had hoped for a moment that he could use Tal-Shaya, put an end to their enemy, but the thought passed quickly. It was not his way to kill indiscriminately, and he knew Jim Kirk would not want it, no matter what they had done to him.

By the time 6.3 minutes had ticked slowly by five guards were peacefully sleeping in unconsciousness, and Spock had realised anew that the threat to his own party was smaller than he had originally anticipated. The camp had only eleven Klingons in it. Behind a cluster of boulders he awaited the arrival of the good doctor. It did not take long.

"Thank the Great Bird that you had enough sense to wait for us!" McCoy whispered - but only just.

Spock said nothing, but indicated a bend in the river. "When I heard Jim scream... the sound came from over there. I am going to help him. You may accompany me."

Even if Spock hadn't given him permission Bones would have gone, so he wondered why Spock had bothered to say anything, but he nodded in acceptance of the orders and tried to wait patiently while the Vulcan gave orders to the Security men. Uhura and Sulu were to remain where they were, to aid them with the Captain when they returned. They moved out, silently, quickly.

There seemed to be a small cage suspended in the water. Spock and McCoy stared at it dumbfoundedly - until with stark realisation they both had the same idea. Jim was inside it!

McCoy was all set to hurry down to the water's edge there and then, but Spock grabbed his arm in a bone-crushing grip and pointed to the left. Two Klingons stood, pointing at the cage, deep in discussion. As Spock looked at the warriors he suddenly stiffened, and his hand instantly went for his phaser.

Risking a hurried whisper, Bones asked, "What?"

"Kronin!"

The name was mouthed, but Bones recognised it, and a new fear came into his blue eyes. Torturer Kronin. His reputation was renowned. He was a renegade, yet when it suited the Emperor he had been used for missions of great importance. The Klingons must want Jim Kirk very badly to have sent that monster after him!

Sickened at the memories of Kronin's past victims' condition on being found, Bones tried to remember what Spock had told him not many hours before.

"There is a 99.9% probability that Jim is still alive... "

"They will not hurt him unduly and risk his life... "

"He is of more value to them alive... "

But would that precept apply where Kronin was concerned?

Spock was pushing McCoy downwards until he lay upon the ground. Then he gestured that he remain there - and Bones could see by Spock's eyes that he meant it. He *had* to obey, though the one thing that he really wanted to do was to go to Jim *now.* Obviously Spock had a plan... but what? He watched helplessly as without warning Spock rose to his feet to walk blatantly forward, in open view of the two warriors.

In pure shock they were stunned into immobility. By the time they regained their senses the companion of Kronin lay unconscious at their feet. Kronin snarled and dived for Spock, but he sidestepped and watched with pleasure - Pleasure? Yes! - as Kronin landed unceremoniously on his face in the sand. He was on his feet in an instant and this time Spock allowed him to reach him, to raise his arms in an attempt to force the life from the Vulcan's throat. But Spock simply brought the full force of his Vulcan strength down onto Kronin's arms, snapping them instantly. This time it was the Klingon who screamed in agony. Spock then kicked the Klingon's feet out from under him, and stood looking down at him.

"Who are you, that you have such strength and courage?"

The Vulcan allowed himself time to gloat. "Spock. The First Officer of the Enterprise. And the friend of James Kirk."

Kronin knew then that he had miscalculated; he had not known of Spock's existence upon the Enterprise. And he knew in the same moment that he would be lucky to live to see the next sunrise.

But Spock did not reach down to kill him as he thought the Vulcan would. Instead the dark eyes darkened even more, and he turned away slightly, as if hiding what his eyes portrayed.

"Mr. Sulu!"

In an instant the oriental was at his side, a phaser trained on the Klingon, and Spock was racing for the water's edge, where Bones had gone as soon as he'd seen that Spock had - inevitably - won the brief encounter.

The cage had been lowered almost beneath the water. Almost, but not quite. Pressed against the bars at the top, kept above the water level by sheer force of will and rapidly fading strength, was James T. Kirk.

Within seconds Spock had pulled the cage from the water with his own anger-instilled strength, and had gently dragged it ashore.

Jim instantly collapsed upon its floor. Spock ripped the door open, and by the light which Uhura had miraculously appeared with, they peered in. The only sound that broke the night was a sob from Uhura as she saw the extent of her Captain's injuries. With several pairs of eager, gentle hands he was taken from his prison and laid upon the soft grass so that McCoy could do all he could for him. As if finally seeing that he was safe, that he could let go, Jim Kirk instantly sank into deep unconsciousness.

It was horrific. Kirk's face was a mass of bruises, both eyes being almost swollen shut. His lips were cracked and bleeding, blood running down his chin from his mouth and several cuts on his cheeks. Black leech-like creatures clung to him. His hair was wet and matted. Obviously he had weakened and fallen into the water several times. But he hadn't given in, had fought to stay alive, just as they had known he would.

In that moment of witnessing the terrible injuries Spock knew for certain that Kirk would have died before breaking, had almost died. The Vulcan sank to his knees, picking up a limp hand to hold it between his own shaking ones.

Bones was busy tending to what injuries he could. He had injected him with a stimulant and tri-ox compound before he raised his head to look at Spock, his voice trembling as much as Spock's hands were.

"Both legs are broken, several ribs, too. And from what I can tell those leech-things have been injecting a type of poison into his system as well as sucking his blood." He pulled more of the creatures from the open wounds on Kirk's chest. "His back... " He couldn't find the words.

Sulu and Spock between them were balancing Kirk on his side in an effort to alleviate any pressure on the terribly injured back - he had evidently been whipped severely, and judging from the burn marks crisscrossing him he had also been put on some type of grill. Sulu's eyes and McCoy's met, and the doctor found himself shaking his head at the oriental in disbelief. This time he might be too late.

"We've got to get him aboard ship, Spock. Now!"

Spock roused himself. "Will he be able to tolerate the shock of transporting?"

"He'll die right here if we don't beam up. The risk is the same, but he's got a better chance if we get him back home."

Spock nodded and reached for his communicator. "Mr. Scott. Medical emergency. Beam Dr. McCoy and the landing party up immediately."

"And you, sir?"

"Negative. I will remain here until a full Security team arrives."

"Aye, sir."

Spock walked over to relieve the Security man who had Kronin covered by a phaser. The Klingon knew he had lost, but he did not look defeated. He was a monster, but his demeanour almost made Spock admire him. Almost.

As the landing party dematerialised Bones' eyes met Spock's and held them, trying to convey hope to the Vulcan, who was now being tortured as much by the doubt and worry over Kirk as Kirk himself had been physically.

Spock paced the camp, taking tricorder readings for future analysis. He refused to acknowledge that the Klingon even existed, knowing he would not be responsible for his actions if Kronin uttered a word.

Kronin understood how tenuous the Vulcan's control was, and kept his peace. He spent the few minutes until the full Security team arrived regretting his mission, wishing he was back aboard his ship.

On beaming aboard Spock headed for Sickbay. He wasn't sure if he could face the Captain now, but also knew that he had to. He had never witnessed such terrible injuries, had never feared for Jim's very life more than now. And he blamed himself for what had happened, believing that he should have been able to detect the presence of the Klingons before Jim had ever beamed down, and so saved him such suffering. And he fervently wished that it had been he who had been taken, and not Jim. Why Jim?

McCoy was still in surgery. Spock had known that would be the case, yet still he had had to come. He was met by a nurse, but waved her away. He didn't want anyone near him. Not now. Not until he knew if Jim would be all right. He spared the operating room a quick glance, then left again. He knew where Jim would want him to be, and he knew himself where his duty lay.

Scotty, grateful to be relieved of command, eager to be back to his engines, met Spock at the turbolift door.

"Mr. Spock, my opinion is that the Klingon ship has either run for it, or has been apprehended by Federation ships. There has been no sign of them, and I canna believe they would risk leaving Kronin behind."

So, the Security Chief had already reported to Scotty. All the better. Less needed to be said, less risk of showing how he was being torn apart inside.

"Thank you, Mr. Scott. The whereabouts of the Klingons now?"

"In the brig, as per your instructions, sir. I'm... I'm afraid a few of them aren't in... perfect operating condition."

Spock's eyebrows rose to his bangs.

"A few of them must have... fallen... as they were being beamed aboard."

"I see. And Kronin?"

"He's being attended by medical personnel in a top-security cell. He was... ah... already injured, sir."

"Yes, Mr. Scott, I know."

Scotty looked at Spock in complete understanding and softened his features in complete approval.

"You may return to your engine room."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock." But at the door he halted again and turned back questioningly. "The Captain...?"

"There is nothing I can tell you. He is still in surgery... "

Spock sat in his own chair at the science station. He still couldn't make himself sit in the command chair. Not in Jim's chair. Not now. He turned to face Uhura.

"Lieutenant, please make a full report to Starfleet command. Inform them that we will transport our prisoners to Starbase 12."

"Aye, sir."

"Before you do that, I would like to thank you, and you too, Mr. Sulu, for your invaluable assistance on the planet's surface. The Captain will more than appreciate what you have said in your actions as well as in your words."

Hesitant smiles thanked the Vulcan for what he had said, then all Bridge crew members bent to their tasks as Spock ordered them out of orbit on a heading for Starbase 12. They were all more than glad to see the back of that planet.

Several long hours passed slowly by before the communicator on the command chair crackled into life. "Sickbay to Bridge."

Spock was answering it in an instant, needing to know. "Spock here."

"Come on down here, Spock. I have someone just barely conscious who wants to see you."

McCoy's voice was joyously clear, and the faces of the Bridge crew immediately matched the optimism in it. All *would* be well with their Captain, and with their world.

"On my way." As Spock headed for the turbolift he spoke over his shoulder, his eyes lit up with an inner warmth and inner peace which had been absent for so very long. "Mr. Sulu, take the conn."

Spock tried not to run to Sickbay. It would not be dignified. But he wanted to. He would have liked to shout his joy to the whole universe. But it was not Vulcan. He would, instead, wait until he could say what he felt to the one man who mattered to him more than any other.

The outer offices were deserted, and he headed immediately into the inner wards, where he found Dr. Bones McCoy standing next to a bed, his body shielding the occupant from view. Spock slowed his pace and walked calmly towards it.

Sensing his approach Bones moved aside, and for the first time Spock saw Jim, alive and conscious, his hazel eyes meeting his own dark ones in gratitude. He was still ill, would be for a long time, but he *would* live, and that was what mattered. Bones had performed his medical miracle yet again, for all of them, and here, now, lay that man to whom Spock wanted to open his heart.

Bones smiled at them both, happy himself now that all was well again. He'd been worried this time. Things had been touch and go for a long time in surgery, but he would never tell Spock just how close they had come, this time, to losing their Captain and friend. He knew Spock could not cope with that. And anyway, it was enough that they *did* have him back again. He squeezed Jim's arm, very gently, and Jim looked up at him, forcing his still swollen eyes open a little more.

"I'll leave you two alone for a while. But only for a while, mind! You need a *lot* of rest, Jim."

"Okay, Bones." He whispered the words painfully, then somehow managed a small smile. It was only a ghost of the ones he was capable of, but it was enough for Bones McCoy. It managed to raise the doctor's spirits even higher, and it did wonders, too, for a certain Vulcan, who had seated himself upon the edge of the bed and had picked up a heavily bandaged hand,

echoing his gesture on the planet.

Jim turned his head slightly to look again at his Vulcan, and though he knew he shouldn't try to talk he found he had to say the words.

"It's so good... to see you... " He managed to squeeze Spock's fingers a little. "Knew... you'd find me... Knew you'd come... "

"I'm glad you did not doubt it."

"Never."

Suddenly, allowing his fear, his concern, his fatigue full reign Spock allowed his head to fall onto the bed, his lips brushing the hand he still held. He did not care if he was seen, he knew that Jim would understand. He had admitted long ago that he cared so much for James T. Kirk, and he was quite prepared, now, to allow it to show in his actions.

"Spock... " Kirk had allowed the Vulcan his peace, but now he tried to draw him out from his lethargy a little. "Spock... "

The Vulcan raised his head, pulled his back straight, and looked at Jim, his eyes moist. "Why, Jim? Why you?"

"My job... " The words were barely audible, now, and Spock did not push things, did not argue the point. He simply nodded and savoured the look of the golden head before him, his sun amidst the storms of life. Nothing disturbed the solitude of the side ward except for the diagnostic panel registering its good news above them, and he allowed that solitude to settle over them before he spoke again.

But then, before he did speak the words, Spock looked again into the lion eyes and realised that there was no need. Jim Kirk knew what he wanted to say before he needed to say it. Kirk knew him too well for anything to be hidden from him. And Spock smiled his smile, knowing that they had plenty of time now. Once again they had all their tomorrows awaiting them. Time to forget the pain and the fear. Time to be themselves, to be together. Time enough to say what had not been said before. For now, as he watched Jim finally sink into the welcome oblivion of sleep, he simply whispered, "Welcome home, Jim."

Bones had remained in his office, leaving them alone as he had said he would, but when his instruments told him that Kirk had fallen asleep he left to go to Spock's side.

Drawing up behind him Bones touched him briefly on the shoulder, then told him what he hadn't put into words before. "He'll be fine in a few weeks, Spock."

"Yes, I know."

"Tell me... No, it doesn't matter. It's too personal." He made to turn away.

"I do not mind, Bones. Ask your question. We, too, are friends."

Bones smiled at that, but then grew serious. "Down there... When you realised that it was Kronin who had Jim... You wanted to kill, didn't you?"

Spock looked again at the youthful face, at peace now in sleep.

"Yes."

"Even though that is against all you believe in, against what you are?"

"For what he had done to Jim... Yes, I could have killed. But I didn't."

"Why?" Bones walked around Spock, forcing eye contact with him.

Spock returned the look. "Because it would have been too easy for him. He must pay, but he will pay the legal way. And... "

"And?"

"As Jim once said, it *is* possible to say that 'we will not kill today'."

Unable and unwilling to leave it at that, Bones pressed a little more. "But you still contemplated throwing away all you believe in, if only for a brief second. Because of *him*." He gestured with his eyes at Jim.

"You are perfectly correct, Doctor. I am under his spell, just as every *member* of this crew is. Even you. He is one of a kind."

Spock looked away from McCoy then, as if conscious of what he had just divulged of his inner self. Bones smiled, knowing that he had made a break-through where their Vulcan was concerned, and that from that moment on their friendship would mean even more than before. Taking one last look at Jim Kirk's peaceful features, he squeezed Spock's shoulder and left, knowing that Spock would not leave his side until he was conscious again, and knowing also that their future together would be even more special than their past had been.

Tribble Quibbles

"Get them out of my sight!" is the Captain's bellow,
And even the ship seems to cringe.
Overweight tribbles, contented and mellow,
Have been on a quadro-triticale binge.

The tranquilising effect leaves Jim unaffected
As he hisses in rising rage,
"I want each and every tribble collected!"
And Cyrano thinks, *Who rattled his cage?*

Linda Spencer

TIME TRILOGY

by

Janice Pitkethley

"There's no way out, Jim." McCoy felt his way around the stone walls. "We're trapped."

The Enterprise had received a strong distress call from a planet in the Gamma system. The landing party, Kirk, Spock and McCoy, had traced the signals to some ruins, where they had grown stronger. Following the readings, a passageway led them deep underground to a stone vault. Once inside, the door vanished, leaving a bare stone wall.

"There's something funny going on here, Bones." Kirk looked around at their prison.

"Your assumptions are correct, although the Human term... "

"Save us the lecture, Spock!" McCoy grumbled.

"... we were lured here by a false distress call. By whom? And for what purpose?" The Vulcan raised an eyebrow.

"I will reveal all." A disembodied voice filled the vault.

"Who are you?" Kirk demanded. "What do you want with us?"

"We are the Brothers of Peace. We have observed the approach of your vessel and the behaviour of the people aboard for many days. You are an aggressive race. This interests us greatly, and we fear the contamination of our people... "

"We have the Prime Directive, which means we do not interfere in the development of other beings we come across," Kirk interrupted.

"... we will research into your pasts and discover the reason for these tendencies of yours, and your warlike traits. If the answers are unsatisfactory, then you and your ship will be destroyed."

"You have no right to pass judgement on others! Don't trust him, Jim!" McCoy's blue eyes flashed with anger.

"Do we have any choice, Bones?" Kirk sighed.

"Correct, Captain. Be seated and observe. We will begin with you... "

The faraway wall dissolved and with a start Kirk recognised the green farmlands of Iowa. The scene changed to a ranch where a small fair-haired boy leaned on the fence, with his dog at his side, watching the horses in the corral.

He felt the pressure of a hand on his arm in the darkness and McCoy's whisper, "Is that you, Jim?"

"Yes. How are they doing this...?

Silence fell as they watched the unfolding events. Long-forgotten memories came to life, most of them aggressive. Kirk saw himself fighting with other boys, stealing apples from the orchard, and causing general havoc. He was grateful for the darkness to hide his blushes!

The scene changed once more. He was a bit older now, walking hand in hand with Joanne, his first girlfriend. She was the prettiest girl in school; how proud he had been when she consented to go out with him... In the darkness Kirk cringed at the possible events the aliens could show - and they did!

"She's a nice girl, Jim." McCoy's voice came from the darkness. "So *that's* how you got the nickname 'Tomcat'!"

Spock made no comment.

Joanne was a keen horsewoman. They still clung to the old traditions in Iowa - no transporters or aircars for them, except in emergency. Scenes followed of the young James Kirk and Joanne taking their favourite horses up into the hills.

"Thunderbolt!" Kirk did not realise he had spoken out loud at the appearance of the black stallion. How wild he had been, with laid-back ears and snapping teeth. The ranchers shook their heads, saying no-one would ever tame the wild streak in him. With patience and love, Jim had managed it. Thunderbolt would allow no-one else on his back; many had tried, to their regret.

"Oh no! Please... " Kirk spoke again as he remembered an all-too-familiar scene. The screams of Joanne mixed with those of terrified horses, black smoke and flames were pouring from the large barn...

He relived every detail of that unforgettable day. The breath rasped in his throat as he ran the half-mile from the big house to the barn, goaded on by the screams. The figure of Joanne appeared at the window of the hayloft, right at the top of the barn; she waved her arms, shouting for help as the flames crept nearer.

"How can I get up there?" Racing round the side of the barn he almost fell over a ladder propped up against the stacks of hay. He struggled to carry the unwieldy and heavy ladder to the barn. It fell short by several feet. He still couldn't reach Joanne...

Thick smoke billowed around them as she leaned out of the window as far as she could go; still their grasping fingers could not touch.

"Climb down!" Jim yelled. "Get onto my shoulders, I won't let you fall. Quickly, now!"

Trembling, Joanne held onto the ledge and slowly lowered herself down. As soon as her feet touched Jim's shoulders a strong pair of arms held her tightly.

"I've got you! It's all right now... " The rest of his words were drowned out as the floor gave way with a crashing roar, flames and sparks rising to find a new place to feast on.

"Just in time... " He waited until the girl's sobbing had quietened a little before telling her what to do as the flames crept ever closer. Slowly, step by step, they inched their way down the ladder, Joanne collapsing on the grass as soon as her feet touched the ground. Jim had no time to comfort her; he was up and running towards the barn.

Flinging the heavy doors open, a wall of roaring flame met him. Surely there could be nothing left alive in that inferno... but there was! Thunderbolt came plunging towards the wide-open door, his ears laid back against his head and his eyes rolling in terror. Most of his glossy black coat had gone, and his back was covered with swollen burns. He reared up, one mighty hoof catching Jim a glancing blow on the shoulder. There was a sharp crack as bone snapped.

By now several ranchers were running across the fields towards the blazing barn. Jim left the screaming, rearing horse and ran to meet them.

"Give me your gun, quick!" he yelled at the leading man. The rancher threw it to him.

"Forgive me, old friend," he whispered, turning the setting to 'lethal' and aiming at the noble head. Thunderbolt slowly crumpled as the ray hit him.

Jim knelt down and laid the great head on his lap, stroking the white blaze on the nose as the light faded from the glazing eyes.

"Goodbye, old friend... "

The scene faded, the wall becoming cold grey stone once more. Kirk found that he was crying, and McCoy's eyes were unusually bright. Spock's face remained impassive as usual, but his eyebrows were drawn together in what looked suspiciously like a frown.

"Sorry... " Kirk sniffed, wiping his tunic sleeve across his eyes.

"Forget it, Jim." McCoy blinked rapidly a few times. "That would be enough to melt a heart of stone... but not a Vulcan's," he added, glancing at the lean figure.

"We will assess the results of our research when we have seen events from all three of you." The voice came again. "Now Mr. Spock, the Vulcan... "

Spock stiffened at the mention of his name.

Once more the wall dissolved and they saw the red sands of Vulcan, then the city of Shi-Kahr. "My home... " Spock said in a low voice. The house was white with a red roof, the ground floor entrances designed in archways. Wide shutters covered the windows to keep out the harsh Vulcan sun.

"I-Chaya!" Spock's voice came again as the bulk of a sehlat lumbered into view, followed closely by a little dark-haired boy. Spock's sharp intake of breath told Kirk and McCoy who it was.

The boy's face was troubled, an expression he could not hide. Spock remembered the habit of speaking to the sehlat during his childhood.

"I-Chaya, there is something wrong at home. I *feel* it... "

The sehlat whined in answer and sniffed at Spock's face. The boy patted the huge head and walked slowly towards the house.

Amanda looked up from her flower-arranging as he entered the main lounge. She grew increasingly nervous as he watched her; sometimes she felt as if those big dark eyes were reaching into her very soul...

Don't be silly! she reprimanded herself. *He is too young to be able to read my thoughts.*

"What is it you want, Spock?" She spoke out loud.

"I... May I go and speak to Father?"

"He is working in the study. You must ask permission before you enter," Amanda smiled. Cold fingers of ice touched her heart as she watched him leave.

Sarek looked up from his desk as Spock entered the study.

"Greetings, Father." Spock held up his hand, fingers parted in the Vulcan salute. Sarek returned it, and Spock could not help noticing the slight tremor in his father's hand. They regarded each other for a few moments without speaking.

His eyes look strange, Spock thought. "Father, I came first in science today at school... "

Sarek did not reply to that statement. Instead he informed Spock that he would be spending some time at the home of his grandparents, Suvil and T'Pau.

"But why, Father?"

"Vulcans do not question their elders. The subject is closed." Sarek's eyes flashed.

"Will you and Mother be going too?" Spock would not be deterred.

"You ask too many questions. Get out!" Sarek took his arm and pushed him out of the study, so hard that the little figure stumbled and fell.

"What the devil...?" McCoy exclaimed.

Kirk could feel the lean body trembling at the events being shown. He laid a hand on Spock's shoulder. "Spock, how old were you there?"

"Seven, Captain," came the Vulcan's anguished whisper. Kirk and McCoy both understood the reason for Sarek's irrational behaviour.

They watched Amanda packing a small case with Spock's clothes and a few books, then the departure of Suvil and Spock in the aircar. It was obvious that Spock was unhappy in the home of his grandparents. He could not understand why he had been taken away from home without explanation, and he also wondered at the irrational behaviour of his father. When he asked about the whole mysterious business, Suvil told him he was too young to learn the full extent of Vulcan philosophy. T'Pau just ignored him.

Unable to sleep, Spock stared out of the window of his room, gazing out into the darkness, his thoughts in chaos. The familiar crooning howl reached his ears and he strained his eyes to make out the shape of the huge bulk in the darkness.

"I-Chaya!" Spock crept downstairs and out into the hot Vulcan night, still dressed in his sleeping robe.

The faithful sehlat rushed to greet his young master; in his excitement he butted Spock with his great head, knocking him over. I-Chaya had walked many miles across Shi-Kahr to get here.

"I-Chaya, we are going home," Spock stated firmly, his mind made up. The sehlat gave another crooning howl at the mention of the word 'home'.

Five minutes later saw boy and sehlat leaving the house. The city streets were quiet and deserted; hour after hour they plodded on, footsore and weary. I-Chaya carried Spock on his back for some distance; they met no-one since they set out, and no-one enquired about the two strange travellers.

Dawn was breaking as they drew closer to home. "We will rest for a while." Spock sank down beside the street gardens. I-Chaya gave a huge yawn, exposing even more of his tusk-like teeth.

"We do not have far to go now, old friend." Spock patted the sehlat's head. He allowed his mind to clear of all thoughts, only conscious of his intense tiredness after the long walk.

For a long time he sat there, his mind a complete blank. He knew he was too young to mind-meld fully, though he *did* have a certain degree of telepathy, and the ability to meld would strengthen as he grew older.

Something was disturbing his mood of tranquillity - he felt the tingling and the slight pressure on the edges of his mind as another Vulcan mind sought to make contact.

"Who can this be? Probably my grandfather, who has discovered my absence," he thought before allowing entry...

He had a brief glimpse of home, then cried out as he was surrounded by an inferno! The contact broke off as suddenly as it had begun, and Spock came back to complete awareness to find I-Chaya anxiously licking his face.

"Our home... Oh, no!" Spock jumped to his feet and began to run, all tiredness forgotten now. I-Chaya ran at his side, the sehlat's huge bulk deceptive when it came to putting on speed. Spock ran through the maze of streets until he came to a white building. There above the doorway was the torch symbol and the notice in red lettering. "FIREFIGHTERS." He struggled to bring his harsh breathing under control before he could speak clearly enough to give the wall-computer his home address.

He stood back and watched as the special aircars launched themselves from the upper hatchways of the building; he could see the firemen inside as they sped off in the direction of his home, warners screaming.

The next second showed the scene changing, the aircars landing in the grounds of his home and the firemen rushing towards the house, which stood as it had always done, with no sign of smoke or flames anywhere. Sarek appeared, his clothing distinctly rumpled... The scene faded as he talked to the firemen.

Kirk and McCoy clutched each other, helpless with laughter, and Spock's face had a pronounced greenish tinge, right to the tips of his pointed ears.

"You have no warlike traits, Mr. Spock." The voice filled the vault as before. "You display strength of character, stubbornness and an insatiable curiosity. I do not understand what your colleagues were finding so amusing. Explain, James Kirk."

"I... " Kirk couldn't even speak for laughter, and McCoy was in no position to give an explanation either.

"They are laughing because I was too young to understand the fires of Plak-Tow and thought my home was ablaze when my father touched my mind." Spock's ears turned a deeper shade of green.

"Leonard McCoy... " The laughter stopped abruptly at the alien's voice.

Once again the vault darkened as the wall dissolved. As with Kirk, the scenes showed the violent episodes from McCoy's childhood. Both Kirk and Spock heard the good Doctor muttering to himself, then swearing as the secrets of his early life were revealed for all to see.

"Especially that damned Vulcan!" McCoy swore, blushing furiously in the darkness. "I'll never live this down... "

"There is no need to insult me, Doctor," came the Vulcan's voice. McCoy could imagine him raising an eyebrow in the darkness.

Time moved on. They saw McCoy at Medical School, then as a young intern in a busy hospital. Relived now was the breakup of his marriage, then his promotion to Chief Medical Officer in the hospital.

"Hal Pieri!" McCoy exclaimed at the sight of the face on the picture in front of him. It was one of the most difficult cases he had ever experienced, both from a professional and legal point of view. Hal Pieri was the biggest gangster in the South, and was now in the State Penitentiary awaiting execution.

The prison authorities had sent for McCoy when Pieri began to have violent spells, throwing things around his cell and trying to harm himself. He had attacked the guards on several occasions; it was as if he had two different personalities, one normal and one violent. After intensive examinations and tests in the prison hospital McCoy found his patient had a large tumour pressing on his brain. He wanted to remove it, thus sparking off the biggest row in medical and legal history.

The legal authorities argued that it was a waste of time operating on a condemned man; if he did not die from the operation, then McCoy would be prolonging his life - but then they were going to execute him anyway.

McCoy fought against this, stating the pain would increase as the pressure built up, and it was only humane to prevent the patient from suffering.

"If I don't operate, Hal Pieri will be insane. You will be executing a raving lunatic."

They watched the drama unfold before their eyes, the battles with lawyers, judges and senators, plus the Medical Board and neurosurgeons from all over the country.

The medical side won the argument, after McCoy had almost ended up in jail beside his patient for letting his fiery temper get the better of him and calling a high advisor 'an unfeeling old goat'. The patient had his operation when, assisted by another doctor, McCoy removed what he could of the tumour then severed the nerves which transmit pain. Hal Pieri would go to his execution sane and aware of all that was going on around him, but free from pain.

The scene dissolved as Hal, his head swathed in bandages, thanked McCoy with tears in his eyes...

All three blinked in the light as the alien's voice filled the vault. "We have learned much from your violent tendencies. All is not lost, as you show compassion for your fellow beings. In time you will improve. We must not interfere, but leave you to your own ways. Peace be among you. Return... "

The three men found themselves standing at the exact place they had beamed down. "Let's get out of here." Kirk pulled out his communicator, and the three forms disappeared in the transporter shimmer.

That night Kirk summoned Spock and McCoy to his quarters. "Help yourselves... " He indicated the brandy and glasses. McCoy took his Captain's advice, but Spock did not.

"Well, at least sit down, Spock - it's not a formal occasion." Kirk indicated the nearest chair. "We have learned a lot about each other in the past few hours, things we would rather have kept to ourselves. I wish to make it clear that the knowledge we now possess must remain between us."

"Agreed, Jim." McCoy's blue eyes twinkled with mischief as he looked at Spock's raised eyebrow. "Somehow I can't see our Vulcan friend indulging in idle gossip."

"Illogical." The slanted eyebrow climbed even higher.

"C'mon, Bones, have a refill." Kirk indicated the empty glass. Anything to keep the peace!

"You sure gave us a laugh, Spock," McCoy started again.

"Indeed? My actions were logical."

"Matter of speaking! But what did Sarek say to the team of firemen who turned up so unexpectedly?"

"I... asked my father in later years. His reply to the firefighters was... logical."

"I'll bet!" McCoy laughed as Kirk choked on his drink. "Only a Vulcan could do that. But... you *were* a nice kid, Spock."

"I only wish I could say the same for you, Doctor. I recall the Earth term as, 'a little brat'."

"Touche!" Kirk raised his glass, looking at his two friends and knowing that the knowledge they had would never be told to another person.

Routine Reports

by

Sheila Clark

"Come."

As Dr. McCoy entered, Kirk dropped the report he was checking back onto his desk with a little grunt. "Bones - for this relief, much thanks."

McCoy grinned. "You won't be saying that two days from now when you're desperately trying to get the monthly reports finished - you'll be cursing me black and blue for disturbing you when you'd obviously set your mind to dealing with them."

Kirk shrugged. "Not really. I just needed to clear some space on my desk."

"Well, something made you decide to deal with some of the reports instead of just recycling them onto the floor. Spock been nagging?"

"Bones, you know better than that. Spock never nags."

"No? 'It is illogical, Captain, to neglect work that you know must be done... ' In my book, that's nagging!"

"No, no. A dignified reminder, that's all." He glanced disgustedly over the pile of routine monthly reports, augmented as they were by the annual ones that were also due this month. "I wouldn't mind if these things were actually *needed*," he added gloomily as he picked up one of the offending annual reports. "Look - 'Number of shuttlecraft allocated' - dammit, this class of Starship rates five shuttlecraft, and if we lose one we report it and it's replaced at the very first opportunity. They don't *need* this information. It's in the Constitution Class specifications. 'Firepower' - does some idiot at HQ think we've somehow managed to fit an extra phaser - or photon torpedo tube - or that some miraculous new weapon has been presented to us by some primitive race we've helped? Or that - if that happened - we'd decide to announce it in the annual reports instead of at the time? I'll bet nobody ever even *looks* at these f... foolish reports!"

"Someone has to feed 'em into a computer, Jim," McCoy suggested.

"I doubt it. What's more - I'll prove it!"

McCoy looked at the mischievous expression on his Captain's face. With Kirk in this 'beaurocracy is an idiot' mood, anything could happen, and the Doctor shuddered slightly. For a man as reasonable and sensible as Kirk when there was a serious situation to face, the Captain could be surprisingly idiotic when he was bored by inaction.

"How?" he asked, trying to inject a note of 'don't you think that's rather childish?' into his voice, knowing instantly that he had failed. "Jim - you can't deliberately falsify a return - Starfleet'd have your guts for garters!"

"No, no - not deliberately *falsify* anything." Kirk chuckled. "Just a little stammer. Not five shuttlecraft - fifty five. Some of the idiots at HQ are so thick that *if* it's noticed - and I've a bottle of fifty-year-old Saurian brandy that says it won't be - it'll be queried. Symers in Records wouldn't have the guts to assume it was a computer hiccup - if it's brought to his attention, he'll contact us for confirmation that it's a mistake."

The buzzer sounded again, and on Kirk's call, the door slid open to allow the First Officer to enter. McCoy pounced on him with relief.

"Spock, see if you can't talk some sense into Jim. He's come up with a hare-brained notion about proving that nobody at HQ reads routine reports - "

"I am quite sure they do not, Doctor." He glanced at Kirk. "What do you propose to do, Captain?"

Kirk told him, and he nodded thoughtfully. "Simple... but I agree, it would be an effective method of proving the point. Vice-Admiral Symers is not a man to use his initiative in a case like that. Should the 'error' be reported to him - and I am told that he demands that all errors *are* reported to him - he will check with the source because the book says that he should."

"Do you actually know Symers, Spock?" Kirk asked curiously.

"Not personally, but I do know someone who worked under him for some months, some years ago, before he was assigned to Records. Nobody is asked to work under him for longer than six months; Symers is apparently fully satisfied with the explanation that rotation is necessary for juniors so that they can attain wider experience. In actual fact, if they were under him for longer, their sanity could well be at risk. Symers is a man who could drive even a Vulcan into a nervous breakdown."

McCoy grunted. "Doesn't he even have a permanent secretary?"

"Yes - an elderly and unambitious cousin as... fossilised, I believe would serve as an adequate description... as himself," Spock replied.

McCoy turned his attention back to Kirk. "Jim, you can't possibly do this. Dammit, it's... it's unethical!"

"Proving a theory is hardly unethical, Doctor," Spock told him.

"Spock, if Symers is as dull as all that, he'll *enjoy* reading all those monotonous reports," McCoy protested.

"Possibly, but he will hardly have the time," Spock pointed out. He glanced at Kirk, a trace of near-mischief in his own eyes. "Captain - why just fifty five? Why not five hundred and fifty five?"

"Even Symers would realise that was an error - wouldn't he?"

As Spock considered the matter, McCoy cut in again. "Jim, you *can't*!"

"Come, now, Doctor, where is your sense of adventure?" Spock asked.

"Adventure?" McCoy yelped. "Jim's talking about falsifying a return, you're encouraging him, and you - you, a Vulcan! - talk about a sense of adventure?"

"Doctor, it is not logical to require that facts given in the specifications be confirmed each year. It is not logical to give already

busy, indeed overworked, personnel what I believe you call 'make work'. It is not logical to use up computer memory repeating facts which have already been recorded. It *is* logical to attempt to prove, if only to our own satisfaction, that our suspicions are correct, and that nobody does check the data. Once we have that proof, we can attempt to have something done to alter the requirements for routine reports."

"And stick your necks out even further?" McCoy worried. "Some reports are necessary - "

"I don't dispute that, Bones," Kirk agreed. "I'm not quibbling about the necessary returns, but most of the routine ones are just that - repeating what was said last year... and the year before... and the year before... The only thing that changes is the date, but first the Head of Department has to check-and-sign, then *I* do - with a rocket from HQ if it's late, whatever the reason. Remember the fuss there was a couple of years ago when the Hood's reports didn't arrive?"

"The Enquiry proved that it wasn't Captain Ch'avek's fault - " McCoy began a little defensively.

"It wasn't *anybody's* fault, but my point is, there didn't need to be an Enquiry in the first place - and there wouldn't have been if HQ didn't demand this repetitious routine every year! That whole incident was proof of how inefficient some of the staff at HQ really is - *and* how little interdepartmental communication there is. Admiral Fitzgerald knew that the Hood had been caught in that Force 10 ion storm. *He* knew - and Surgeon-General Tokota knew - that Ch'avek was lying unconscious in sickbay when those reports were due. Fitzgerald knew that Commander Rilke had been killed. He knew that Chief Engineer Buchanan was fully occupied keeping the engines in one piece - why else did Buchanan get his Service Cross? He knew that over half of the crew had been killed or were injured and unfit for duty. He knew that the rest were working two shifts on and one off just to get the ship back to Starbase 8. He knew that apart from Buchanan the ranking officer left alive was the senior helmsman - a lieutenant - who took on the position of acting Captain because Buchanan was fully occupied in engineering. Festenstein had enough to do just keeping the ship together without worrying about routine reports. Did a damn' good job too - that's why he's First Officer on the Kongo now. Yet with all of that, nobody seems to have told Symers and when the reports didn't arrive, Symers began to howl. And even then nobody told him he was being unreasonable, that there was a good reason why he didn't get his 2823 waste paper from the Hood. He never did get it either, and the skies have stayed exactly where they ought to be. Because the information wasn't needed, not by Symers and not by Starfleet. Just by the system. And - frankly - the system didn't miss it."

"However," Spock commented, "it might be wise to take the time to formulate a reasoned argument pointing out how much money could be saved from Starfleet's budget by omitting these unnecessary reports, whether monthly or yearly - or both - once you have proved your point about nobody reading them. The incident with the Hood could be included as additional evidence to support your case."

Kirk nodded, and glanced at McCoy. "I meant to. I'm not just trying to be funny, Bones. I really do think there's a point to prove here."

McCoy didn't look convinced. "It's up to you, of course, he said unhappily. "Remember, though, it's your neck."

"On the contrary, Doctor, Starfleet Command should be grateful if we can show how they can save money - "

"Ha! High Command is more likely to tell us that that isn't our job," McCoy growled.

"You're probably right," Kirk grinned. "Personally, I'll be satisfied to prove my point. A bottle of brandy, Bones - fifty-year-old Saurian. If I'm right, I keep it; if I'm wrong, you get it - "

"And either way you will undoubtedly both drink it," Spock said drily.

Three months later, they drank the brandy. Even Spock accepted a glass.

Kirk opened the bottle - to toast the commendation he received for discovering a method of saving Starfleet money...

a Father's Pride

I am Sarek,
Born of Vulcan.
You, Amanda,
Born of Terra.
He is Spock,
Born out of both of us.
But where does he belong?
He has Vulcan looks
And bearing,
And our training
Fiercely follows.
But he 'feels'
More like a Human.
Does that make him weak - or strong?
I would have him
Here beside me.
As a scientist
I trained him.
But he had to find
His own place,
Though he seek it far away.
Eighteen years
We have been strangers;
Eighteen years
We have not spoken.
And though I can
Never tell him,
I know his *was* the better way.

Sheryl Peterson