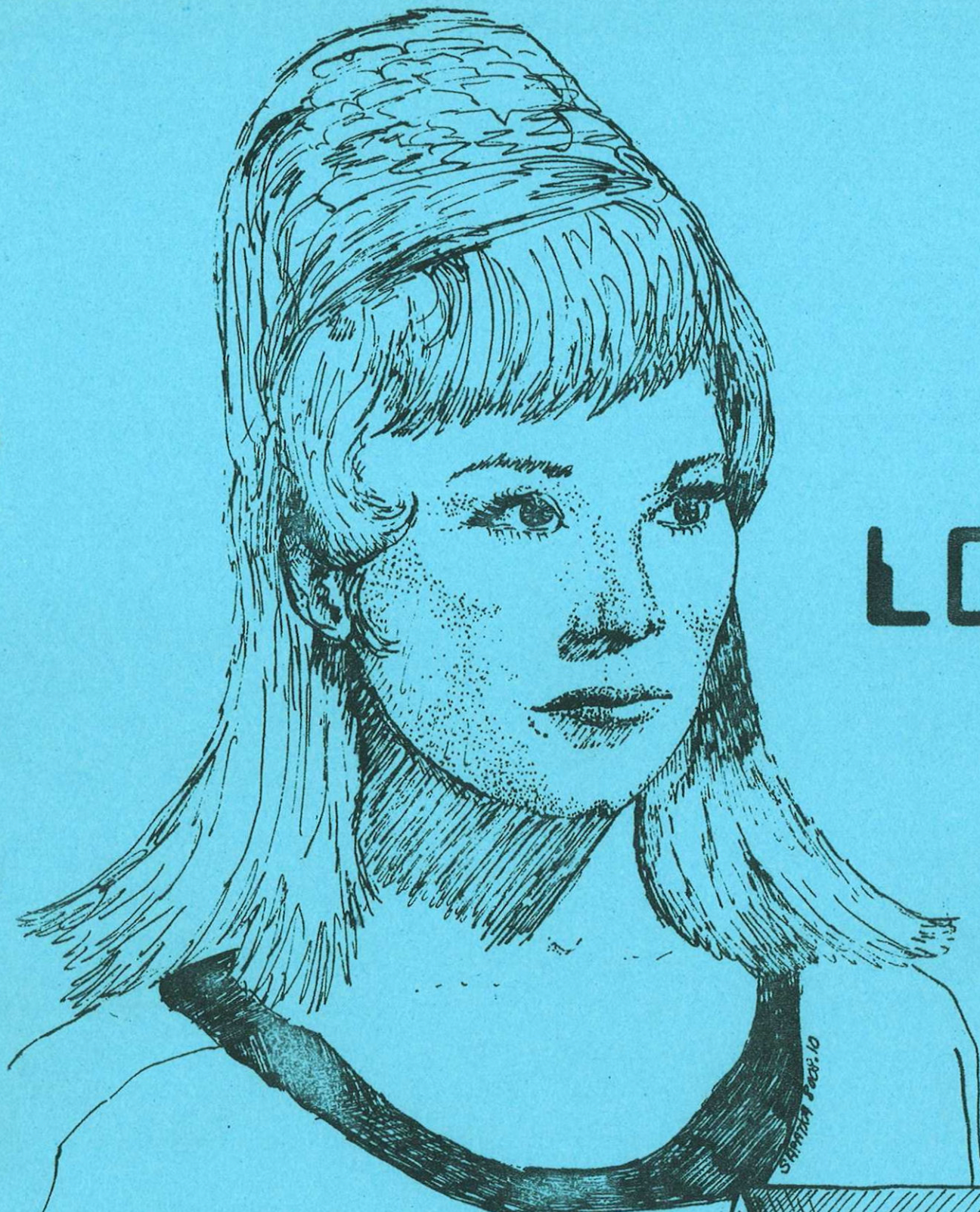
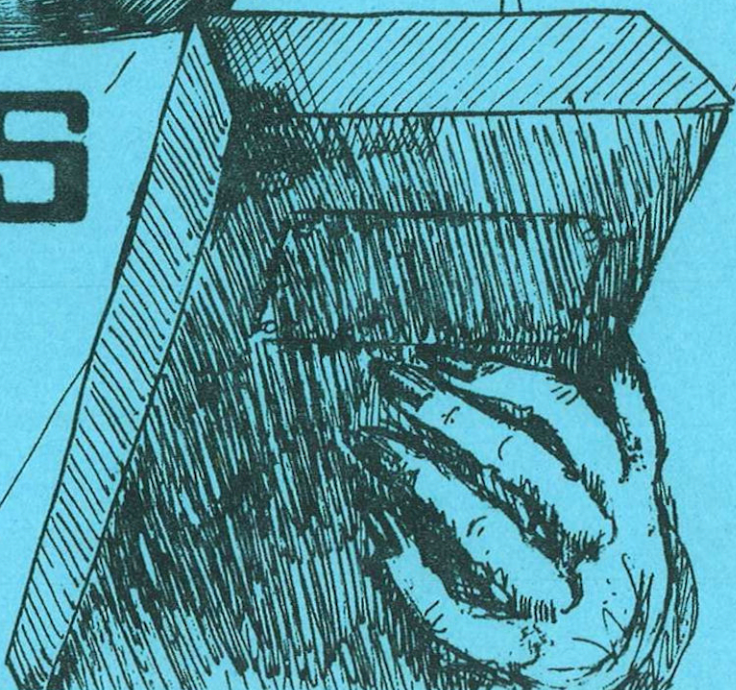




LOG

ENTRIES



a STAR TREK
fanzine

41



The Difference Between Us	Margaret Sibbald & Margaret Edgar	P 3
Logic	Susan Meek	P 34
Cause of Death : Unknown	Bettina Marloth	P 35
Conversation	Linda Hughes	P 38
Chekov's Last Stand	Judy Miller	P 40

Artwork - Cover, Sandy Sapatka
P2 - Martin Delaney
All others - Roo

Editor - Sheila Clark
Assistant Editor - Valerie Piacentini
Typing - Valerie Piacentini
Proofreading - Sheila Clark
Printing - Janet Quarton & James T.
Collating - Sheila's Chain Gang - Frances Abernethy, Lorraine Goodison,
Cory King, Hilde McCabe, Allison Rooney.

A STAG Publication

STAG Committee - Janet Quarton (President), Sheila Clark, Beth Hallam,
Sylvia Billings, Valerie Piacentini.

Log Entries 41, price £1.15 inside the U.K., is put out by the STAR TREK
Action Group and is available from

Sheila Clark
6 Craigmill Cottages
Strathmartine
by Dundee
Scotland.

Foreign rates - addressed envelope and IRCs for details.

(C) STAG April 1981 350 copies

All rights are 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 supercede any rights
held by Paramount, NBC, BBC or any other holders of copyright in
STAR TREK material.

There are two stories in this issue which concern death, but this does not contravene our policy on this theme as we only reject stories involving the death of a major Star Trek character.

I'm often asked at the sales table by certain members if a zine contains a Chekov story - well, this one does, and just in time for the Con. Happy, girls?

There is an extra zine this month, containing the winners, runners-up and commended entries for the Con fiction and poetry competitions. As I write this, the closing date has passed, and judging has begun - a very difficult task. (Sheila has just interrupted me to say that she's very glad that she's not involved in the judging this time. Instead, she's handing out the aspirin.)

February, 1981.

Valerie



THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN US by Margaret Sibbald and Margaret Edgar

The USS Enterprise swung in graceful orbit around the beautiful blue and green planet of Carmenna. The First Officer, Mr. Spock, and the Medical Officer, Dr. Leonard McCoy, emerged from the transporter room and walked together along the corridor towards the turbolift.

"I'm glad to see Jim finally off on shore leave," McCoy said with some relief. "Three weeks of R and R will do him good... He's been overdoing it lately."

"Yes," the tall Vulcan beside him agreed. "The Captain does tend to push himself beyond even his exceptional endurance."

"Yeah, I know somebody else like that," McCoy said, eyeing Spock. He didn't like the look of the Vulcan at all. In the last few weeks the already spare frame had become slightly leaner, the dark eyes clouded with fatigue... and in unguarded moments McCoy had noticed the normally rock-steady hands trembling.

"It's a pity you couldn't have gone with Jim, Spock. You could do with some leave. You look like you could use the rest."

"Nonsense, Doctor... I am perfectly fit," Spock insisted quietly. "And you must know it was impossible for me to accompany the Captain. I am needed on the ship for the next three weeks."

"It's only a routine survey mission, Spock. Scotty could've taken command."

"It may only be a routine survey mission, Doctor, but the area we have been instructed to survey is notorious for erratic weather conditions. Should any adverse situation occur, Mr. Scott would find it difficult to manage the command post and see to his engines."

"You, of course, can manage to cope with command and your science duties... and anything else that happens to be thrown in, without any bother," McCoy ranted in a sarcastic tone of voice.

"I am quite capable of doing more than one job, Doctor. I have done so on numerous occasions... and since I have never failed in the past, I do not understand how you come to the conclusion that I will be incapable of it this time," Spock said, with what McCoy was sure was a smug expression - for a Vulcan.

"Oh, never mind. Forget I ever mentioned it," McCoy grumbled, ushering Spock into the turbolift. "Come on, let's have some lunch."

Spock could raise no objections to McCoy's suggestion. He would rather have gone to the Bridge, but he had already given Mr. Sulu instructions from the transporter room to take them out of orbit after the Captain had beamed down.

Once out of the lift he reluctantly followed McCoy to the officers' dining area. They collected their lunch and sat down at their usual table.

As Starbase 8 was located on Carmenna, the Enterprise had picked up supplies and mail while she was there to drop her Captain off for his much-needed shore leave. Nearly every table in the dining area had a letter, tape or package on it awaiting their owner's arrival. There was a letter at Spock's place, and a package containing a medical journal at McCoy's.

Ever hungry for fresh medical news, McCoy was into his package at once, flicking over the pages of the journal between mouthfuls of his lunch. Spock did not usually read his mail in the dining area - he preferred the privacy of his quarters - but this letter was different. He had been waiting for weeks for an envelope with this bold handwriting on it. He opened it, thankful that McCoy was too engrossed in his journal to notice his trembling hands.

He started to read, quickly skimming over the first paragraph... anxious to get to the important details. As he read on he found himself struggling to breathe. He had come to the sentence he had hoped wouldn't be there. He read and re-read it as if his repeated attempts would, by some unknown magic, change

what was there. It didn't. The words glared at him from the paper, daring him to deny the message they had brought.

He felt as though something heavy had fallen inside him. Unconsciously, a small strangled sound escaped his lips, making McCoy look up from his journal.

"Spock...?"

Spock didn't hear him. All at once came the urge to flee... to run from the room whose walls had begun to sway... whose floor was see-sawing with sickening consistency. He stumbled to his feet and left the table without a word of explanation to the baffled McCoy.

It seemed to take forever to cross the small space of floor to the dining area exit, and once outside in the corridor he had to force himself to walk with his usual measured pace to the turbolift... concentrating, one foot in front of the other. He didn't think about the letter, about the pain... he didn't think about anything except getting to the safe haven of his quarters. In the turbolift beads of sweat began to form on his forehead with the effort of suppressing a most unVulcan need to cry out to break the pressure on his nerves.

When the lift reached Deck 5 he left it with the same controlled, measured pace. No-one must see anything of the turmoil going on inside him. They would see nothing more than the calm Vulcan First Officer of the Enterprise on the way to his quarters.

When the door of his quarters was safely closed behind him he leaned against it. The letter slipped unnoticed from his nerveless hand on to the floor where it remained. Then his brain began to function again, despite his efforts to prevent it... thoughts and memories returned. His eyes did a tour of his quarters. A look of disbelief, of confusion crossed his face. Why was he here on the Enterprise? He shouldn't be here... shouldn't be light-years away from...

Suddenly he turned, arms raised above his head, and slammed the whole length of his body against the closed door. He splayed out his fingers against the cool metal, clenching and unclenching them in an agony of guilt. He wished illogically for the door to disappear, for the whole ship to disappear, and let him be where he wanted to be. It didn't happen, of course, and he closed his eyes tightly and drew in a long, shuddering breath. Something inside of him, something he hadn't even known existed, had been amputated and was screaming out in an agony of loss. Vulcan training made sure no visible tears came... but something racked him inwardly. An emotion he could neither deny nor control, that tore away inside him, making him sob and sob... but bringing no relief without the normal tears he would not allow to fall.

His knees buckled beneath him and he began to slide down the tightly-closed door, his body so rigid with desperation that his fingernails scratched the cold unrelenting metal as he went down. Huddled on the floor, he put a hand to his chest and pressed hard to try to ease the aching emptiness that pulsed with pain. Anguish forced a constriction to his throat, remorse stung at the back of his eyes... but still the tears did not fall. He was a Vulcan. He could not - would not - shed tears. He let his hands fall slack between his knees, a dry, hollow, aching void, too crushed and empty to even feel the pain from his torn, bleeding fingernails.

Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew he was due on the Bridge soon, but he didn't want to go. He wanted to withdraw into himself and forget about the Bridge... about responsibility... about living. For a few moments he plunged over the edge into suicidal madness... and amid the swirling darkness and pain the only sane thought in his mind was of the one man in the whole galaxy he wanted, longed for, to be with him now... Jim Kirk.

It was nearly an hour after lunch before McCoy found the time to go up to the Bridge. Sickbay had suddenly become busy with a long line of headaches and backaches... the usual trivial complaints that came from the thought of the boredom of the routine survey mission which lay ahead.

As he stepped out of the turbolift onto the Bridge he was relieved to see Spock in the command chair. Spock just getting up from the lunch table and disappearing without so much as a by-your-leave was uncharacteristic... not to mention downright strange.

Spock stared straight ahead at the viewscreen. The blackness of open space with its twinkling stars resembled the inside of his head, except that there were no stars in his dark thoughts. The only spark of light that had shone through the darkness of an hour ago was Jim Kirk. It was the thought of the warm hazel eyes, the affectionate grin and the soft, understanding voice that had given Spock the strength to get back up to the Bridge and carry on as normal.

He suddenly realised that McCoy was standing beside him. He turned to the doctor with an enquiring look.

"Doctor?"

McCoy stared at him, those piercing blue eyes threatening to break down the frail barrier he had built up.

"Are you all right, Spock?" McCoy asked in a concerned voice.

Before Spock had a chance to reply, McCoy saw the normally well-manicured fingernails were clipped short, and there were traces of blood around them. Spock had repaired them as best he could, but it was impossible to hide all the damage.

"What happened to your hands?"

"It is of little importance, Doctor," Spock said evasively.

"Not in my opinion, Spock!" McCoy snapped in hushed tones so that the rest of the Bridge crew couldn't hear. "You left the lunch table like a bat outa' hell, and now I find your hands in this state! I want to have a look at them now...and I want to know how they got like that."

However, McCoy's demands were quickly over-ridden when Chekov spoke from the science station.

"Mr. Spock, weatherscan indicates severe disturbance ahead."

"Doctor, if there is severe disturbance ahead you may well have casualties. I suggest you return to Sickbay at once," Spock ordered coldly as he left the command chair and joined Chekov at the science console.

McCoy grunted in disgust and left the Bridge.

"Readings, Mr. Chekov?"

"Ion storm, sir. Medium intensity, but it covers a large area and there are localised readings of tremendous energy surges," Chekov reported as he stood aside to let Spock look into the viewer.

"Unusual," Spock murmured calmly. "This area is well known for erratic weather conditions, but I would not have expected a storm of such magnitude. Lieutenant Uhura, sound yellow alert," he ordered, "and inform Mr. Scott of the approaching storm. Mr. Sulu, deflector screens up, and reduce speed to warp factor one. Try to avoid any pockets of excessive turbulence."

"Yes, sir," the helmsman replied, activating the necessary controls. "We are entering the outer edge of the storm now, Mr. Spock."

"Steady as she goes, Mr. Sulu."

The huge ship was normally so stable it was hard to believe that within a few minutes she would be little more than a plaything of nature. Already they could feel her beginning to rock gently.

"Red alert, Lieutenant Uhura," Spock said evenly, his voice betraying none of his inner tension.

Suddenly the swirling energies of the storm enveloped the Enterprise and the crew were tumbled out of their seats. Even Spock's Vulcan reflexes were not

quick enough to prevent him from being thrown backwards over the Bridge railing. He managed to regain his feet, but within seconds had lost his balance again as the ship lurched crazily and thrust him **into** the back of the command chair with such force that he heard his ribs crack on impact. Red hot pain flared through his body, stunning him and taking his breath away for a moment. Then, using Vulcan mental disciplines, he reduced the pain to a tolerable level and eased himself into the command chair. The overhead lights on the Bridge had flickered and dimmed for a moment, but had brightened again. The crew picked themselves up off the deck and hung grimly onto their consoles throughout the rest of the turbulence.

"Damage reports, all decks, Lieutenant Uhura," Spock ordered crisply when the ship finally steadied a little. "Mr. Sulu, try to put us back on the correct course."

"I can't, sir," the young helmsman replied, surveying his console, which was now almost blank. Only a few flickering lights remained. "There isn't enough power... we're barely making warp one."

Spock punched the intercom on the arm of the command chair. "Mr. Scott, what's happened to the warp drive?"

"The engines were badly overstrained by the first burst of energy we hit. Deflector shield 4 was down for a few seconds, and before back-up power came on the port propulsion unit was blasted by the storm, causing an internal explosion. There's a hole in the propulsion housing big enough to fly a shuttlecraft through," Scotty finished dejectedly.

"There is no need to assume such a pessimistic attitude, Mr. Scott. The starboard unit is still functional, is it not?" Spock asked calmly.

"No, it isn't," Scotty came back sadly. "It's too overstrained to be able to provide any more power than it's giving now... and even at this rate it won't last long."

Spock was silent for a few moments, then said, "Do what you can to keep it going, Mr. Scott. I'll require enough power to take us out of the storm, and then obviously we will have to return to Carmenna."

"Well, with a bit of luck we'll make it out of the storm, sir... but I canna say about Carmenna."

"First things first, Mr. Scott. Divert power from all non-essential areas of the ship, and let me know when you think we will be able to fight our way out of the storm. Spock out."

Uhura swung her chair round to face Spock. "All decks report no damage, sir," she reported with some relief. "Engineering seems to be the only place that was hit. Dr. McCoy has a dozen or so casualties... but he says nothing serious... just cuts and bruises."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Spock said quietly, then turned to face the Bridge viewscreen.

The normal panorama of starfields was replaced by a dense greyness shot through with swirling colours. Like a giant catherine wheel the storm vortex emitted brilliant bursts of coloured 'sparks', each one with enough raw energy to destroy the Enterprise should her shielding falter again.



As he watched the storm, Spock gradually became aware of the sharp stabbing pain from his cracked ribs. The intensity of it diverted his attention away from the storm and the ship until he was only aware of his own being. During the last hour of frantic activities his personal problems had been pushed to the back of his mind. Now he found himself remembering the letter. He felt the same leaden sensation in the pit of his stomach he had experienced earlier, and there was a pain in his chest that wasn't coming from his ribs. Suddenly, an unfamiliar stinging built up behind his eyes. He shifted in the chair, leaning on one elbow and pressing the back of his hand against his mouth to hide his quivering lips. The viewscreen blurred in front of him... and he closed his eyes tightly for a moment, horrified as he realised how close he was to breaking down in full view of the Bridge crew. He pulled himself together sharply, disgusted with himself for allowing his thoughts to wander in such a direction while he was on duty. He knew if he permitted his own shields to falter now, he'd be finished. He'd never get the ship back to Carmenna... and Jim.

Under control again, he punched the Engineering button on the intercom. "Mr. Scott, do we have enough power to get out of the storm yet?"

"I can give you warp 4 for a short while... but God knows what it's goin' tae do tae the only engine we've got left," Scotty replied, his lapse into his own Scottish accent betraying his worry.

"I would prefer you to know the exact consequences, Mr. Scott, rather than God. However, warp 3.5 will be quite adequate." He turned to Sulu. "Mr. Sulu, lay in a course for Carmenna, warp 3.5." He then turned to Uhura, "Lieutenant Uhura, as soon as we clear the storm centre try to contact the Starbase on Carmenna. Give our position and status, and inform them that we are returning."

"Yes, sir."

The Enterprise swung sluggishly through 180° and began pushing her way out of the storm. She was tossed and rolled unmercifully, the steady hum of her remaining engine turning to a high-pitched whine as the damaged machinery became unable to cope efficiently with the forces it was being pitted against. The straining engine sent protesting vibrations throughout the whole ship.

Scotty's agitated voice came over the intercom. "Mr. Spock, she can't take much more. We'll have to reduce speed."

"Just a little longer, Mr. Scott. We will soon be out of the storm," Spock said reassuringly. "Maintain warp 3.5, Mr. Sulu."

Denied the respite her Chief Engineer wanted, the Enterprise battled on at a speed far beyond her present capabilities. She began to vibrate violently, the high-pitched whine of her engines increasing gradually until it became an ear-splitting screaming of tortured metal.

Spock sat like a statue in the command chair. His receptive senses heightened by the danger, he was able to feel the tension and fear emanating from the Bridge crew. Jim Kirk would have said something to ease the situation, to banish the fear... but he could not say such words.

The Enterprise gave one massive shudder as they reached the edge of the storm, then steadied. By some miracle she was still in one piece. The absence of the screaming of the engine made the Bridge seem ominously quiet. A sudden whistling from Uhura's console startled them. Uhura jumped back as it gave out a burst of sparks, and there was an acrid burning smell. Spock joined her, surveying the burned-out console.

"I was trying to get through to Starbase 8. sir... and it just blew up on me."

Satisfied that there was no fire risk, Spock went back to the command chair and tried to call Engineering. There was no response.

"Mr. Sulu, you have the con. I will be in Engineering."

The normally immaculate Engineering section looked as if a major refit was

in progress. Spock found Scotty with a harassed look on his face, trying to co-ordinate the work going on around him.

"Mr. Scott, the communications network appears to have shorted out. Can you repair it?" Spock asked calmly, as if Scotty ~~was~~ doing nothing more important than having afternoon tea.

Scotty gaped at the Vulcan incredulously, then pushed past him on his way to check a control board.

"Mr. Scott, I asked you a question."

"Do I look as though I've got time to repair a bloody communications network?" Scotty snapped irritably over his shoulder.

Spock blinked like a surprised cat. He wondered if he would ever understand Humans. He had not said he wanted the communications network repaired now...

"There is no need for obscenities, Mr. Scott. You obviously have problems, but no doubt they can be corrected."

"This ship is about twelve minutes from blowing up," Scotty informed him in no uncertain terms. "I dinna ken if ye'd call that a problem... but I certainly do."

"Yes, I do, Mr. Scott. Can I help?"

Scotty relaxed visibly. Even though Spock was famous for understating dangers there was no-one else like him to have around when it came to overcoming those dangers.

"Well, the matter/anti-matter overload bypass valve had jammed, and if I can't close it manually the whole starboard unit will have to be jettisoned before it blows or the whole ship will blow up with it," Scotty explained.

"The temperature is almost critical now," Spock observed.

Scotty picked up a communicator and an instrument belt and headed onto the maze of access ways.

"Mr. Spock, if the temperature goes into critical before I can free the bypass valve you'll have to jettison the unit immediately. Don't wait for me to get back along the access ways. There won't be time."

"I understand, Mr. Scott," Spock said quietly, as Scotty disappeared.

Spock didn't take his eyes off the monitors for a second, ready to jettison if he had to... but a tiny part of him wondered how he would face Jim Kirk if he had to go back to Cernenna minus the ship's Chief Engineer. Scotty was Jim Kirk's friend. Kirk had lost so many people who had been close to him already... Edith Keeler, Miramanee, Rayna... his brother Sam. Spock knew only too well now how it felt to lose someone close. He didn't want to inflict another tragedy on Kirk.

His thoughts were interrupted by the bleeping of the communicator Scotty had left him.

"How's the temperature, Mr. Spock?"

"Almost critical, Mr. Scott. I would advise you to proceed as quickly as possible."

"Starting now," Scotty replied.

The Jeffries tube in which the bypass valve was situated glowed eerily. The damaged circuitry sent out a trickle of energy that danced bright, sparkling but dangerous jigs around Scotty as he worked.

Meanwhile, back in Engineering, Spock watched the temperature climb into the critical. It looked as if he had no choice but to jettison. With a heavy heart he turned to Scotty's second in command.

"Mr. Lawson, prepare to jettison the starboard engine unit on my command."

"Mechanism armed, sir," Lawson replied.

Illogically, Spock waited another few seconds. The communicator in his hand remained depressingly silent... and he daredn't break Scotty's concentration by questioning his progress. He turned to a white-faced Lawson.

"Mr. Lawson..."

"The valve is free now, Mr. Spock," came Scotty's exultant voice over the communicator.

A great cheer went up from the Engineering crew.

"How's the temperature?" Scotty asked through the whooping and yelling.

"It is coming down slowly," Spock answered calmly, but his bones felt as though they had turned to jelly with relief.

He turned to the Engineering crew and silenced them with a raised eyebrow. Scotty appeared and his crew went back to work, knowing better than to hang around idly in his presence.

"Well done, Mr. Scott."

"Thank you, sir."

"Will the starboard engine get us back to Carmenna?" Spock asked.

Scotty shook his head. "No..." he said worriedly. "That was only a temporary repair. I'll have to shut the engine down in a few hours."

Spock did a rapid calculation. "On impulse power it will take us three weeks to reach Carmenna, which means we will pick the Captain up on schedule; but of course the survey mission will have to wait until the ship is repaired."

"That might take a few days, even with the sophisticated repair facilities at Starbase 8," Scotty said mournfully.

"No doubt you will enjoy supervising the repairs, Mr. Scott," Spock said as he turned to leave Engineering.

Scotty brightened at the thought. "Aye... that I will, Mr. Spock," he said with a whip-cracking gleam in his eyes.

By the time McCoy had treated all the minor casualties the commotion in Engineering was over and the ship was on her way back to Carmenna, the ion storm behind her.

When he stepped onto the Bridge, everything was quiet. Spock was in the command chair, seeming perfectly relaxed as he stared at the viewscreen.

"Any casualties up here, Spock?"

"Nothing serious, Doctor... some minor bruising."

McCoy eyed the Vulcan suspiciously, then noticing that Spock was paler than usual he promptly took out a scanner and began running it over him.

"You don't look too good," McCoy said accusingly. "I thought you said it was minor injuries?"

"I am functional, Doctor. Attend to your casualties."

"Functional, my foot!" McCoy snorted. "You've got two cracked ribs, and your blood pressure doesn't seem right either... and since I've already attended to my casualties, I want you in Sickbay... now, Spock!"

Before Spock could open his mouth to protest McCoy was rattling on again. "No arguments, Spock. The crisis is over now, nothing will happen if you leave the Bridge for half an hour. I want to check your blood pressure on a diagnostic panel, and those ribs need attention."

It was obvious that the Doctor was not going to be put off, so Spock gave in gracefully. He doubted if he could summon up the energy or the necessary frame

of mind to start one of their famous arguments; anyway.

"Very well, Doctor. I will come to Sickbay. Mr. Sulu, you have the con."

McCoy grinned his satisfaction as Spock rose from the command chair and followed him obediently into the turbolift.

In Sickbay Spock sat on a diagnostic bed and had to suffer the indignity of letting McCoy help him off with his shirt.

"All right," McCoy said. "Lie down."

He slid a supporting arm under the Vulcan's shoulders, easing him down gently. When the reluctant patient lay flat on the bed he murmured a quiet thank you, then remained silent as McCoy went to work, adjusting the panel for a Vulcan patient.

"Well, the ribs aren't broken, but they must be giving you a lot of pain."

"It is not intolerable," Spock said quietly.

McCoy didn't answer. He was staring at the diagnostic panel with a puzzled look on his face. He checked to see if it was adjusted properly, but his face still bore the same puzzled expression. He ran a few instruments over Spock.

"I don't understand it," he muttered. "Your blood pressure is up... Not much, mind you, but I've never known it to go up before."

Spock raised a seemingly unconcerned eyebrow.

"Usually it drops if anything is wrong with you," McCoy said. "Must be your Human half playing up, Spock," he added with a grin to cover his apprehension.

"I am afraid I can offer no explanation, Doctor," Spock said quietly.

Alarm bells rang in McCoy's head. Spock hadn't risen to the bait... He had let the remark about his Human half go unanswered. That definitely wasn't like him.

"Perhaps I could offer an explanation if I were to keep you here for a few days observation," McCoy said quietly. "You could use the rest with those ribs."

"No!" Spock almost snapped, the thought of being under McCoy's constant scrutiny making his voice harsh. "The ship is severely disabled... I am needed on the Bridge," he added in a more even tone.

"It was only a suggestion," McCoy muttered defensively. "But I guess I should've known better."

They were both silent for the next few minutes while McCoy put a spray dressing around Spock's middle.

"That should help the pain a little. I can give you a shot to kill the rest."

"That will not be necessary," Spock said, sitting up. "I am quite able to control the pain myself." He pulled his shirt back on, struggling to control his rising annoyance when he found McCoy running a scanner over him yet again.

"I'd like to keep an eye on your blood pressure, Spock. I want you to report here every day to have it checked," McCoy ordered.

"If you wish, Doctor."

McCoy studied the Vulcan with a clinical gaze for a few seconds. "How d'you feel, Spock? Any dizziness or headaches? Or do you feel tired? God knows, you look tired."

"I have none of the symptoms you mention."

"Even if you had, you wouldn't tell me," McCoy grunted.

Spock shot him a withering look then started to get off the bed. McCoy put a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Stay where you are, Spock. I'm not finished yet. I want to look at those hands."

"Please be brief, Doctor. I have been here too long as it is," Spock said sharply.

"Spock, this is Sickbay. I rule the roost here," McCoy announced firmly. "You'll go when I say you can go."

He took the slim hands in his own and examined them. He sprayed something soothing around the torn, bruised nails, then still keeping the long fingers resting on his own he looked up at the Vulcan's face.

"I suppose you still don't want to tell me how they got like this?" he said quietly.

"As I said before, it is of little importance," Spock replied, pulling his hands out of McCoy's grip.

McCoy had no doubts that the damage to Spock's hands was self-inflicted, and it worried him. He wanted to know what had upset the Vulcan so much.

"Is something worrying you?" he said gently. "I know you must be worried about the ship, but there's something else. You were upset before the ship was damaged."

"Upset?" Spock queried. "Doctor, Vulcans do not become emotionally upset."

"Well, you did," McCoy retorted. "It was after you read that letter at lunchtime... Who was it from?"

"That does not concern you, Doctor."

"Yes it does, if it affects your health. So come on, Spock, tell me. Was it from home?"

"Yes," Spock admitted very quietly.

"Is something wrong at home?" McCoy asked gently.

"Nothing that either you or I can change, so please forget about it."

"It might help to talk about it," McCoy coaxed.

"No, it will not help, Doctor. Now, if you will excuse me, I must return to the Bridge."

Spock left Sickbay without another word.

"Blasted Vulcans!" McCoy muttered to the closed door, then took himself off to his office.

Five minutes later saw him relaxed in a chair, feet propped up on his desk, a steaming hot cup of coffee in his hand as he studied the medical journal in his lap. He soaked up the fresh medical news with lively interest. There wasn't the faintest notion in his head of pointed ears or green blood pulsing faster than normal through its owner's veins. As he delved deeper and deeper into his journal he didn't give Spock or any other Vulcan a thought.

Much later that evening, as he turned the last pages of the journal, the word VULCAN seemed to jump out from the page and hit him between the eyes. He realised then that he'd been fooling himself for the last few hours. He continued to read the paragraph which was explaining graphically to him just exactly what was wrong with Spock...

NEW IMPETUS HAS BEEN GIVEN TO RESEARCH INTO THE BRAIN DISEASE CERBRACALINIA. A RECENT VICTIM OF THE DISEASE IS THE WIFE OF SAREK OF VULCAN, THE FORMER AMBASSADOR TO EARTH. AMBASSADOR SAREK HAS FINANCED A NEW RESEARCH PROJECT ON VULCAN.

"Oh God... no wonder he's been acting so funny!" McCoy muttered to himself.

"He must be almost out of his mind with worry."

McCoy glanced at the chronometer. It was 10pm.... Spock would be off duty by now. He quickly took a medikit from a cabinet and left Sickbay with an angry look on his face.

He marched resolutely along the night-dimmed corridors of the Enterprise, cursing Spock under his breath for being so stubborn and stupid as to keep all this to himself.

He buzzed impatiently at the door of Spock's quarters. When the door slid open Spock was there, blocking the way in. For a moment McCoy was lost for words as he studied the gaunt Vulcan face, the dark eyes carefully guarded so they did not reveal the agony withing.

"What can I do for you, Doctor?"

"You can start by letting me in," McCoy said.

Spock stepped aside, and McCoy came in. "Forgive me," Spock said quietly once the door were closed. "I was neglectful of my manners..."

"It's all right. I'm sure you have other things on your mind," McCoy said as he took a quick glance round the Vulcan's quarters. He had never been in them before, and was surprised to notice the walls of the sleeping area were draped in a rich red material which seemed to spread its welcoming soothing warmth out into the living area, which was starkly bare in comparison.

"Doctor...?"

McCoy turned to face the Vulcan. "Why didn't you tell me your mother is ill, Spock?"

"There was no point, Doctor... there was nothing you could do. However, I'd be interested to know where you came by your information. I have told no-one."

"I found out from my medical journal. It said your father is financing a research centre for Cerbracalnia," McCoy explained.

"Yes, that is correct."

"Well, aren't you going to do something about all this?" McCoy asked, bewildered at the Vulcan's seeming disinterest. "Cerbracalnia is incurable, Spock. Why haven't you asked for leave to go home?"

"That is also pointless. On her current mission the Enterprise is too far away from Vulcan."

"Spock, Cerbracalnia can kill someone within a week, or it can take as long as six months. No doctor knows how quickly it will progress in any one patient... so you can't possibly know whether you have time to get to Vulcan or not. Surely you must want to try... Your mother will want you to be there."

There was no answer. Spock had fixed his gaze on the far wall of his quarters.

"Spock, I said your mother will want you with her."

Spock turned and looked at him. "My mother... is dead." There was only a slight hesitation in his voice, just the barest hint of a catch.

For a moment McCoy stared at him in shocked silence, then his blue eyes suddenly glistened.

"I'm sorry, Spock," he said very softly. "When your mother was with us on the journey to Babel I grew to like her very much. She was an exceptional woman."

"I agree," Spock said quietly. "But there is no need to be sorry. On Vulcan a death is not to be mourned unless the life of the person concerned was wasted... and my mother's certainly was not."

"No, of course it wasn't," McCoy agreed. "But there must be more to it than that. Surely you want to go home?"

"No," Spock said very quietly. "I would have preferred to be with my mother, of course, but the disease progressed too quickly. It was not possible for me to get home in time. Now, there is no need."

"What about your father? He might want you there."

"Doctor, of you are suggesting my father will need any kind of support from me because of my mother's death, then you are wrong. My father is Vulcan, and like all Vulcans he is totally self-sufficient. He has never needed support from me or from anyone else - and no doubt never will."

"What about you?" McCoy asked softly. "You look tired. Are you totally self-sufficient, or can I offer you something to help you sleep?"

"No, thank you. I am perfectly all right... Vulcans have no need of such drugs."

"Spock, stop hiding behind that Vulcan facade," McCoy said tiredly. "You're nowhere near all right - you can't be. You've just found out your mother is dead."

"Doctor..." Spock said patiently, "I have already explained there is nothing to mourn if the person's life..."

"Yeah, I know," McCoy interrupted. "...if the person's life wasn't wasted. So that's all there is to it, huh? No regrets... not grief... nothing."

"Grief is illogical, Doctor. It will not bring the dead person back to life."

"No, it won't," McCoy muttered, his voice tinged with sarcasm. "How stupid of me to think that you might be feeling the loss of your mother. I'd forgotten how... illogical... that would be."

"Obviously."

"Spock, do you have to be such a stiff-necked, cold-blooded...?"

"Doctor," Spock interrupted, "I do not recall asking you for a character reference."

"No, you didn't!" spluttered a thoroughly enraged McCoy. "And you don't seem to need any help, either. I don't know why I bother to come along here."

"Then I see no reason for you to remain any longer. Goodnight, Doctor."

When the door closed behind McCoy, Spock sank down on a chair and clasped his hands together tightly in an effort to stop them shaking.

McCoy hadn't been fooled one little bit by Spock's outward appearance of calm in the face of his mother's death. The Vulcan had dismissed his grief and loss with logic, and had been his usual restrained, controlled self... but McCoy got the impression that behind the control there was the power of a vast dam of emotion waiting to be unleashed.

A week went by, Spock dutifully reporting to Sickbay every day; and every day McCoy saw the Vulcan's blood pressure go up another few points. He had given Spock drugs to reduce it, but to no avail. It still continued to rise with a will of its own.

By the end of the next week, McCoy was really worried. Spock's blood pressure was becoming dangerously high. He decided it was time to have a no-nonsense talk with the Enterprise's First Officer... but first he wanted to make sure there was nothing else wrong with Spock. So when the Vulcan arrived for his daily check, McCoy instructed him to prepare for a full physical.

It was only a few weeks since Spock had been subjected to his last

compulsory physical examination, so he could have refused another one. However, he dismissed the idea of refusing. The tone of McCoy's voice told him it would be useless.

Clad only in a skimpy Sickbay examination gown, which thoroughly offended his dignity, Spock lay down on a diagnostic bed and let the doctor proceed.

McCoy took his blood pressure and jotted it down. "Your blood pressure is still rising, Spock. I don't like it," he said worriedly.

"As high blood pressure is virtually unknown to my race, there is no Vulcan technique to reduce it, so there is nothing I can do," Spock said.

"I know it's very unusual in Vulcans - that's why it's so dangerous. I don't seem to have a technique to reduce it, either," McCoy said, feeling totally inadequate.

He went over the Vulcan with almost every instrument he possessed, but could find nothing wrong. Then, suddenly deciding to try old-fashioned methods, he undid the front of Spock's examination gown and felt gently around the Vulcan's ribs.

"Your ribs have healed fine," he said quietly, then proceeded to run his hands over Spock's middle, pressing gently in various places, then down to the abdomen, still pressing gently, saying nothing.

"Doctor, what are you doing?" Spock inquired frostily. "I am sure all this prodding is unnecessary."

"All right," McCoy soothed. "I'm all finished now."

Knowing Spock's modesty he fastened up the gown, then sat down on the bed at Spock's side and looked down at the Vulcan.

"There's nothing physically wrong with you that can be causing such a drastic rise in your blood pressure... so it must be emotional," he said quietly.

Both Spock's eyebrows almost climbed into his hair. "Doctor, do you always have to be so insulting?"

McCoy ignored Spock's comment. This was no time for a verbal sparring match. He studied the Vulcan for a few moments, then spoke very gently.

"You won't like this question, Spock, but I have to ask it. Have you cried since your mother died?"

"Really, Docotr!" Spock said, rigid with distaste, his elegant ears flushing green at the tips.

"Oh now... for God's sake, don't get embarrassed," McCoy grunted.

"I am not embarrassed... I merely see no reason for such a personal question."

"Well, I do," McCoy insisted. "I'd like you to answer it," he said firmly.

Spock glared at him, and if looks could kill McCoy would have fallen off the bed there and then. Undaunted, the good doctor went on, "Have you cried?" he quietly asked again.

"Certainly not," Spock said stonily.

"Why not?" McCoy asked gently.

"Doctor," Spock said patiently, "even if I were capable of such an emotional act - which I am not - it would be illogical. My mother's life was not wasted."

"Yes, I know. You've already pointed that out to me," McCoy said. "But I'm not about to be taken in by that old spiel that you're incapable of emotion. I've never believed that, and I never will. You have a Human half which is quite capable of emotion... and I'm positive your Vulcan half is, too."

"You are entitled to your opinion, Doctor," Spock said non-committally.



McCoy rose to his feet, sighing in exasperation. "Spock, it's all that bottled-up emotion that's making your blood pressure rise. You're tense from head to foot, your chest and stomach muscles are tied in knots with the effort of containing all the grief you're too stubborn to let surface." He paused for a moment, then went on, "Take a piece of medical advice, Spock. Go hide yourself away somewhere and let it out - before it kills you."

Spock wasn't impressed by the doctor's diagnosis. He sat up, swung his legs over the bed, and started to dress.

"Tears, Doctor, alter nothing," he said sternly. "All they do is make the individual concerned feel sorry for himself."

"I'm not saying they'll alter anything, Spock... but they do ease the heart a little - and in your case, the blood pressure as well," McCoy explained gently.

Spock pulled his shirt on and looked steadily at McCoy. "I appreciate your concern, Doctor, but I cannot change my way of life. If you have completed your examination, I must return to duty."

Defeated, McCoy nodded, and Spock strode towards the door.

"Spock..."

The Vulcan halted, and turned to face McCoy.

"Spock, if you want my help... you know where to find me."

"Yes, thank you. I will keep your offer in mind," Spock said very quietly.

Yes, but you won't use it, McCoy thought to himself. "All right, then - off you go," he said softly.

Spock nodded curtly, then left Sickbay.

"Huh," McCoy grumbled to himself. "There isn't a snowball in hell's chance of him ever coming to me for emotional help! Goddamnit... what am I supposed to do with that toffee-nosed machine? He's so screwed up inside he can hardly think straight. Jim Kirk, as much as you needed R and R, I wish you were here. You're the only one who can deal with him."

There was no-one to talk to, so McCoy sat down, poured himself a stiff drink, and confided his worries to his personal log.

"Spock has known about his mother's death for two weeks now. He carries on as if nothing has happened, and I'm sure he thinks his act has convinced me... but it hasn't. I know he's hurting... and there's something else torturing him besides grief. Knowing Spock, I'd say it's guilt. He must have felt something for his mother - and very probably he now regrets being unable to show it. Whatever it is, it's pulling him down rapidly. I've never seen him so depressed, and I suspect he isn't sleeping well. At mealtimes I watch him forcing food down as though it's choking him - and although he tries to hide it, I know most times he brings it all up again.

I've seen the shape of grief so often, but having to watch it on someone as proud as Spock hurts more than I ever thought possible. The fact that he tries so hard to hide what he's feeling seems to make it all the more painfully obvious. Sometimes I can hardly bear to watch him making the effort. But what really worries me is the physical damage that

can result from such high blood pressure! If it continues to rise, physical collapse of some nature is certain... either heart or kidney failure... or both. I've tried to persuade him to ease up, to let go - but he won't. I don't seem to be able to get through to him. I'll have to try again, but I doubt if it will work.' I'll keep trying till we get back to Carmenna - and Jim. If Spock makes it that far before becoming seriously ill."

As it happened, McCoy had to see Spock that night to hand over his report on the injuries during the ion storm. They had arranged to meet in the briefing room for convenience, as it was half-way between the Bridge and Sickbay.

When McCoy entered the briefing room he found Spock hunched over the table, his head down on his arms. For one heart-stopping moment McCoy thought that Spock had at last given in to his grief and was weeping. That thought was quickly dispelled as the Vulcan straightened up on hearing the doors close.

"What's wrong, Spock? Do you feel ill?"

"Just a moment of dizziness," Spock admitted reluctantly. "It has passed now, there is no need for concern."

McCoy put the tapes he had brought with him down on the table. "Spock, you can't go on like this... hardly eating or sleeping. The dizziness you experienced just now was caused by your high blood pressure. From there it can go on to serious physical failure. You know what can happen... you don't need me to spell it out for you."

Spock stared silently at his clasped hands resting on the table.

"Can't you tell me what's torturing you? Is it guilt because you weren't there when your mother died? Or because you could never show her any affection when she was alive?" McCoy asked bluntly.

Spock's head came up sharply. The dark eyes were pain-filled, but his face was tight with controlled anger.

"That is enough, Doctor! My relationship with my mother is not a subject for discussion," he said coldly. "During the last two weeks you have constantly pried into my personal affairs. I will not tolerate it any longer. In future you will kindly refrain from mentioning anything which ~~is not~~ related to duties on this ship."

"Spock, I'm not trying to pry. I only want to help you... I'm worried about you."

"Then please stop it at once. There is no need. I will be perfectly all right without you hovering worriedly over me like a mother hen."

With that, Spock rose to his feet and, back ramrod straight, he strode indignantly from the briefing room.

Looks like I blew it again, McCoy thought with a sinking heart.

McCoy hadn't really made such a hash of things as he imagined. In actual fact he was perilously close to the truth, because no less than an hour later Spock lay in bed tossing and turning restlessly. As always, sleep evaded him even though he was desperately tired.

He was tortured continuously by memories of his mother... and with those memories came soul-destroying guilt which reduced him to a depth of despair that was so crushing and suffocating that it was like being buried alive.

As he had once told Kirk, life had been hard for his mother on Vulcan. An Earthwoman on a planet where love and emotion were in bad taste could be little else but difficult at times. The childhood memory that haunted him most during his long sleepless nights was of hearing his mother weeping bitterly when his father had been unnecessarily harsh with her. And because he had chosen the

Vulcan way of life at seven years of age he could do nothing to help her. But sometimes, when he could stand the sound of her weeping no longer, he would creep quietly from his bedroom to go to her and just sit by her. Of course, on his appearance she always bravely tried to cover up her tears... but he knew she was often unhappy, and he could do nothing. On some of those occasions he actually felt ashamed of her because of her Earth emotions, and would be torn by guilt and remorse for days afterwards; but most of the time her unhappiness made him want to put his arms around her and tell her how much he loved her. But he never did. Now, it was too late. She was gone... lost to him forever... and so was his chance to tell her of his love.

The passing hours did not bring the much-needed merciful oblivion of sleep to release him from his cold, empty existence and painful memories.

With growing desperation he turned on his side and lay clenched in the foetal position, curled up protectively as if he was trying to defend himself against further hurt.

For the next few days McCoy kept out of Spock's way. The only time he saw him was when he came to Sickbay to have his blood pressure checked. Even then there was only the minimum of conversation. Spock had made it crystal clear that he didn't want any help, and since his last tangle with the Vulcan McCoy had resolved not to interfere again.

However, the day before they were due to arrive back at Carmenna, Spock reported to Sickbay as usual. McCoy looked him up and down. He had lost so much weight that the Starfleet uniform just hung on him. His haggard appearance destroyed McCoy's resolve, and unleashed his tongue and temper... again.

"Sit down!" he snapped at Spock.

Wordlessly, Spock sat down on the chair at the other side of McCoy's desk.

"I don't know why you bother to come here every day," McCoy said irritably as he walked round beside the Vulcan and proceeded to take his blood pressure. "It's still dangerously high," he said accusingly. "And there's precious little I can do to reduce it while you're too pig-headed to take my advice. All I am doing is watching you kill yourself!"

"Doctor, please..."

"And you don't need to sit there looking as if I'm boring you out of your mind, you jumped-up bag of bones!" McCoy exploded. "Look at you - if you lose any more weight you'll be non-existent! Why is shedding a few tears for someone you loved so far beneath your dignity? What makes you think you're so different from everyone else?"

"I am a Vulcan," Spock said simply.

"Human... Vulcan... it makes no difference to me," McCoy said angrily.

"It does to me," Spock replied frostily.

"You're half Human, Spock," McCoy said, trying desperately to get through to the Vulcan. "You need the same emotional releases a Human would in this situation. I'd rather have you weeping all over me now, than have you in Sickbay in a few days time, dying on me with heart or kidney failure."

"Doctor McCoy," Spock said, his voice dripping icicles, "I assure you most emphatically that I have no intentions of weeping all over you either now or in the future. I refuse to discuss the matter any further. Might I remind you that I instructed you only a few days ago not to mention the subject again."

"I don't give a damn about your instructions!" McCoy yelled. "I'm responsible for your health, physical and emotional... and might I remind you that you're not faring too well in either direction."



"That is my problem, Doctor... You will not be held responsible."

McCoy couldn't take any more. Something snapped inside him and he took the unsuspecting Vulcan by the shoulders and began shaking him violently.

"What's the matter with you?" he almost screamed. "Are you so used to death you can't feel your own loss?"

Spock didn't answer. His tired body went limp and he shook like a rag doll in McCoy's grip. The great convulsive shudders which began to run through him betrayed his distress and quickly brought the doctor back to his senses. He stopped shaking the Vulcan at once. When Spock looked up he saw such indescribable agony in the dark eyes that his anger was quickly dispelled by an overwhelming wave of compassion.

"You do feel it, don't you?" McCoy said softly.

"I cannot speak of it," Spock said simply, in a hoarse voice.

"No, of course you can't... not to me," McCoy said gently, suddenly understanding how much Spock needed Jim Kirk beside him now. He squeezed Spock's shoulders in a comforting way. "I'm sorry - I shouldn't have yelled at you," he apologised softly. "Jim will be back on board tomorrow. You'll let him help... won't you?"

Spock nodded, holding on to that one thought.

Jim was only a day away.

It was early afternoon the next day when the Enterprise limped into orbit around Carmenna, her First Officer in much the same exhausted condition as she was.

Spock stayed on the Bridge until the great ship had been safely manoeuvred into a repair dock, then he went down to Engineering to help Scotty organise what had to be done.

Uhura had managed to contact Starbase 8 only a few hours before their

arrival, so Jim Kirk had been informed of the Enterprise's misfortune.

He had been there to watch his crippled and battered ship dock. Naturally he wasn't overjoyed at the state of her, but the fact that his crew had escaped the storm uninjured was of more importance. Bones, Spock, Scotty and all the rest of them were back safely, and that was all that really mattered to him.

He was on board as soon as possible, and his first question was, "Where's Mr. Spock?" He was duly informed as to the whereabouts of his First Officer, and he hurriedly made his way to Engineering, anxious to see Spock. He had missed the familiar, much-loved Vulcan face during his three weeks leave. Now, he literally bounded along the corridors, filled with enthusiasm at the thought of being subjected to long lectures in logic, and the calm, serene presence that was always Spock.

Amid the hustle and bustle he met in Engineering, he caught sight of the Vulcan in Scotty's small office, standing over the desk studying engine charts. Kirk opened the door, went in quietly, and crept up behind Spock.

"All right, Mister... What have you been doing with my ship?" he demanded, his voice hard and accusing with mock anger.

Spock turned round quickly, his face draining of what little colour there was in it. In his low emotional state he had taken Kirk's tone of voice seriously.

"Captain..." he almost stammered, his voice hoarse with shock. "I did not disable the Enterprise deliberately."

Kirk couldn't answer. He just stood there aghast. Spock's haggard appearance left him speechless. This wasn't the cool Vulcan he had left behind three weeks ago. Something must be terribly wrong to make him look so ill and defeated ... but Kirk couldn't open his mouth to ask.

Spock watched him, waiting for his reply, but when it didn't come his shoulders sagged. It was not Kirk's reprimand about the ship that hurt, but his silence now, which seemed to Spock to be a withdrawal of the affection and understanding Kirk normally gave so freely. It was a painful reminder of the affection his mother had been constantly forced to withhold from him after he had chosen the Vulcan way of life. The terrible feeling of total rejection and loneliness he had often felt as a child rose uncontrollably in him and completely overwhelmed him.

"Are you angry with me?" he asked awkwardly, unable to keep a slight tremor from his voice.

A horrified look spread over Kirk's face as he realised the Vulcan had taken him seriously.

"No, Spock... no... of course I'm not angry with you," he said softly. He gripped Spock's shoulders reassuringly. "I was only joking," he explained gently. "You don't usually take me so seriously, Spock. What's happened to you? You look terrible."

"I am a little tired... nothing more," Spock said evasively. He didn't dare try to tell Kirk what was wrong here in Engineering. His control was precarious, and if he started to talk about his mother now he would make a fool of himself.

"I must apologise for the condition of the ship, Captain," he said, moving to a safer subject, "but I assure you the storm was unavoidable."

"Never mind about the ship - it can be repaired. You're more important," Kirk said, his eyes searching the Vulcan's face for some clue that would explain all this. "Spock, something's wrong - I know there is," he said softly.

"No..."

Spock was saved from further explanation by the intercom buzzing.

"Kirk here."



"Hi, Jim," came McCoy's voice. "I heard you were on board. Have a good leave?"

"Yes, thanks, Bones."

"Jim, could you come to Sickbay? I'd like to talk to you."

"Sure, Bones... I'm on my way," Kirk said. He had never taken his eyes off Spock during the conversation with McCoy.

"I won't be long in Sickbay. Will you be all right?"

"Yes, of course, Captain."

"I'll see you later, then," Kirk said, his eyes still fixed worriedly on Spock as he backed out the door.

In Sickbay, McCoy was waiting for him.

"What's wrong with Spock, Bones?" he asked as he sat down and sipped the Saurian brandy McCoy had put in his hand.

"You've seen him, then..."

"Yes, I've seen him... He looks terrible. Is he ill?"

"Ill with grief," McCoy explained. "He got a letter from home when we dropped you off here three weeks ago. Amanda's dead, Jim. Cerbracalinia."

"Oh, Bones... no! Why didn't you tell me? I could have cancelled my leave."

"I didn't get it out of him until after the ion storm hit us," McCoy said. "I'm worried about him, Jim. His blood pressure is way over the danger level... and if it doesn't come down... we could lose him."

"What's causing it, Bones? Emotional pressures?"

McCoy nodded, suddenly deciding to pour himself a brandy. "Yes... that and something else. Something else is worrying him. I'm sure he hasn't slept in weeks."

"Isn't there anything you can give him to help him sleep?" Kirk asked.

"I've offered him sleeping pills, but he won't take them. Damn it, I can't force them down his throat!"

"No, of course you can't."

"I've talked to him, Jim... I've tried to get him to relax... unbend a little and give in to his grief - but he won't. You know how stubborn and stiff-necked he can be. He dismisses the whole thing with logic... but no matter what he says, I know he is feeling Human grief." McCoy stared thoughtfully into his brandy glass for a moment, then said, "Considering a Vulcan's lifespan, Spock is still very young. He's never had to deal with losing someone close to him before. I don't think he knows how to handle it."

"Bones, I still have the house I rented during my leave. Would a few days away from the ship help him?"

"Yes, it would."

"And I'm sure you have any amount of pills you could give him to ensure he relaxes during his leave?"

"Yes, but it would be a waste of breath asking him to take them."

"He'll take them, Bones... and he'll be all right. Don't worry," Kirk soothed.

Once in his own quarters, Kirk asked Spock to join him.

"Sit down," Kirk said gently when the Vulcan arrived.

Spock silently obeyed.

"Bones told me about your mother, Spock," Kirk said softly. "I'm sorry."

Spock nodded his acceptance of his Captain's sympathy, but found himself unable to say anything. For weeks he had longed to have this man by his side... but now that Kirk was here he couldn't even talk to him.

"Spock, I'd like you to have a few days away from the ship. I still have the house I rented during my leave. You'll like Carmenna - it's a beautiful planet, very much like North America was in the nineteenth century."

"There are the repairs on the ship to be seen to, Captain."

"Scotty can see to the ship, Spock - and he'll love every minute of it. You need a rest," Kirk said firmly. "Will you beam down with me?"

"If you insist, Captain."

Kirk grinned. "Yes, I insist... but before we beam down I'd like you to go to Sickbay and let Bones check you over - and if he offers you any medication I don't want you to refuse it."

"No, sir."

The scenery of Carmenna did indeed resemble North America in the mid eighteenth hundreds. It was a Federation-owned planet, and having no inhabitants of its own it had remained completely unspoiled. Its lush green countryside dotted with small cabins and a few larger houses provided restful shore leave facilities for the crew members of the ships in the dockyards of Starbase 8 for repairs. It was ideal country for hunting, fishing and riding. A great rocky mountain range rose majestically in the north, providing a challenge for anyone energetic enough for climbing.

Kirk rented two horses, and he and Spock cantered off in the direction of the rented house at an easy pace, the afternoon sun pleasantly warm on their backs.

Spock had never ridden a horse before, so this was a new experience for him. However, he mastered the animal very quickly, as he did with every new task set to him. After half-an-hour's travelling, and a few helpful hints from Kirk, he looked as though he'd been born in the saddle.

They crossed grass-covered plains, then headed up into higher country which overlooked Carmenna's water supply, Lake Sapphire. Occasionally Kirk pointed out interesting parts of the planet to Spock as they rode along. Spock answered him, but other than that he remained silent. Kirk noticed the Vulcan's curiosity seemed somewhat diminished, but knowing his state of mind he didn't push him. He enjoyed Spock's quiet companionship. He didn't mind the lack of conversation at all; the beautiful scenery made it unnecessary.

As they climbed higher into the thickly-wooded hills Kirk dropped back and let Spock take the lead along the narrow trail. When Spock finally reached the top of the long climb, the view which appeared suddenly in front of him made him sit up sharply in the saddle.

The cool blue shimmering expanse of Lake Sapphire, surrounded as far as the eye could see by green, pine-clad hills, was breathtakingly beautiful.

Although Spock claimed he didn't see beauty, this panoramic view made him remember tales his mother had told him of her homeworld when he was small and curious to know what her world was like.

Her blue eyes had become suspiciously bright as she'd described the scenery, and now for the first time Spock began to understand why she had longed to see it again. Somehow this new understanding made him feel close to her. It brought

her back to him from the cold clutches of death to flood him with the same feeling of peace and security her presence had always given him so many years ago as a very young child.

Kirk rode up beside him a few minutes later. "I thought you would like the view," he said.

"Yes," Spock said quietly. "That was why you wanted me to reach the top first."

A faint smile touched Kirk's lips. "A view like this should be seen for the first time alone."

"It is very impressive," Spock agreed.

"Why don't we rest here for a while?" Kirk suggested.

"Are you tired, Captain?"

"No..." Kirk said, laughing, "... but I will admit I haven't ridden this much in years - and that horse is shaped a little differently from a command chair."

They sat down under a tree. Kirk glanced at his First Officer and was pleased to see he seemed to have relaxed a little since they had left the ship. The dark brown eyes had softened, and there was a far-away look in them as if the scenery reminded him of something pleasant.

Kirk smiled, sharing his momentary happiness. He kept quiet, though, not wanting to intrude.

After a while Spock said, "The lake is incredibly blue."

"Maybe it was named after the gemstone," Kirk suggested.

"Yes," Spock agreed. "In ancient times the sapphire was credited with the power of ensuring mental health... and the lake is certainly very restful and pleasing to the eye."

"I'm glad you like it, because you'll be seeing a lot of it in the next few days," Kirk said. He pointed to a house nestled among the pine trees on the other side of the lake. "That's the house over there. You can see the lake from the front door. And talking of the house, I think we should head there now - it's getting late."

By the time they reached the house and bedded the horses down for the night it was beginning to get dark. The house was a low, two-storeyed ranch type, blending in well with the scenery. Inside, it smelled refreshingly of the pine logs it was built from. The front door opened straight into the living room and dining area, which occupied almost the full length of the lower half of the house.

A welcoming log fire blazed merrily in the large stone fireplace, and old fashioned oil-type lamps cast a soft warm amber glow over the walls and the solid period furniture. The whole house gave an impression of strength and permanence that would stand up to anything.

"Make yourself at home, Spock," Kirk invited. "Bedrooms and bathroom are upstairs. I'll see what I can rustle up for dinner."

Luckily the kitchen didn't remotely resemble the rest of the house. It possessed all the modern equipment required to produce a meal as efficiently and effortlessly as possible. Kirk took a selection of vegetables from the freezer and set them to cook. He resisted putting a steak on for himself, knowing how meat-eating revolted Spock.

Upstairs, Spock had unpacked and washed the trail dust off himself with his usual fastidiousness. He then looked at the two pills Dr. McCoy had insisted he bring with him 'to help him relax and sleep better'. Since he had four days leave he did wonder why he had been given only two pills, and why he had been instructed to take them both at once. He swallowed them down, too tired to try to unravel McCoy's reasoning. He decided it was to his advantage that there

were only two pills -- the less he took of the good doctor's dubious potions the better.

When he went downstairs he found Kirk had dinner on the table. He wasn't really looking forward to it. Mealtimes had ceased to be pleasant weeks ago. Now, each meal was an ordeal of trying to keep down food his stomach wanted to reject. However, he sat down at the table with Kirk and stoically began on the meal.

Kirk had hoped Spock would talk to him about whatever was bothering him, but so far the Vulcan hadn't come anywhere near to talking about himself. Finally Kirk realised he never would. He was far too well-mannered to ever think of burdening anyone with his personal problems. Kirk knew if he was going to do anything to help Spock he would have to raise the subject himself... and there was no time like the present.

"Spock, I'm sorry I was on leave when you heard about your mother," he said quietly.

"It was hardly your fault that your leave coincided with my news from home."

"I missed you anyway," Kirk said with an affectionate smile.

"I too missed your presence on the ship," Spock confessed quietly.

"I gather Bones gave you a hard time, then?"

"Dr. McCoy can be persistent to the point where he becomes insufferable."

"He means well, Spock," Kirk said quietly. "Anything he suggests is usually for your own good."

"I have no doubt his intentions are good, Captain, but he constantly overlooks the fact that I am Vulcan. He expects me..." His voice tailed off with embarrassment as he suddenly realised he was saying too much.

"Go on," Kirk urged gently.

"He expects me to weep as a Human would when losing someone close to them," Spock said very faintly.

"Well, that's up to you," Kirk said. "But if you do feel the need to cry, then I don't see any reason why you shouldn't."

"That is the difference between us, Captain. On Vulcan such emotional display is considered to be in bad taste."

"Yes, I know, but you're not on Vulcan now," Kirk reminded him. "You're with me... and I certainly don't consider it to be in bad taste."

Spock didn't answer. His Human and Vulcan halves warred within him, one part of him begging for release, the other part firmly dismissing it as illogical and degrading.

Tension knotted in his stomach, twisting and squeezing. He felt moisture forming on the backs of his hands, and he knew he was close to nausea. He looked towards the stairs and knew he wouldn't make it to the bathroom. He rose from the table and made an undignified dash out the front door.

Outside, he ran a few yards from the house, found a big rock, leaned over it and vomited explosively. When the first spasm was over he rested his forehead against the smooth rock, gasping for breath as he waited for the next spasm to overtake him. It came, ripping, erupting, convulsing his stomach muscles and aching in his throat. He felt a strong arm go round his waist to support him as his knees buckled. He continued to retch helplessly.

"Breathe deeply," Kirk instructed. "There's nothing else left to come up."

Spock obeyed, and within a few seconds the retching had stopped. He straightened up and let Kirk lead him back towards the house.

"What caused that, then... my cooking?" Kirk asked with a grin as they walked.

"It was more likely to have been Dr. McCoy's pills," Spock said wearily. "I have found that most of his concoctions are designed to upset the digestive system."

"It's just as well he's not here to hear that," Kirk said, chuckling.

Back in the house Kirk could see that Spock was pale and shaken... and shivering slightly from the chill of the evening air. The Vulcan began to sway, his legs refusing to support him any longer.

"Come on, you'd better sit down before you fall down," Kirk advised, helping him over to the fire.

Spock sank down cross-legged on the goatskin rug in front of the big fireplace.

"Sit there until you're warm," Kirk said, then disappeared into the kitchen. He came back a few moments later with a glass of milk and handed it to Spock.

"Try to drink it... it'll settle your stomach."

"Really, Captain, this is all quite unnecessary," Spock protested weakly.

"Don't argue, Spock. Just do as you're told," Kirk said with a smile as he sat down on the couch which was close to Spock's side.

Spock drank half the milk, then put the glass down on a small nearby table.

"Can't you manage any more?" Kirk asked.



Spock shook his head.

"I know," Kirk said softly, understanding how Spock was feeling. "Everything you try to swallow feels as though it's going to choke you."

"Yes..." Spock admitted very quietly.

Kirk had never seen the Vulcan look so miserable, so totally beaten. "It won't always hurt this much, Spock," he said gently. "It may seem that way now... but it won't be."

Spock shook his head. "Time will not change the fact that I was not at my mother's side when she was dying."

"That wasn't your fault, Spock. You mustn't think like that."

"I saw so little of her after I joined Starfleet," Spock said regretfully. "But I still felt part of me belonged on Vulcan while she was there. Now..."

"Now, you belong with me, on the Enterprise," Kirk said, compassion welling up in him for the lonely man Spock was. For a moment he had an almost irresistible longing to get down on the floor beside the Vulcan and hold him comfortingly, as he would have done to another Human, but knowing Spock's dislike of too much physical contact, he stayed where he was.

Spock sat there, head bowed, struggling with every Vulcan discipline he knew to control what was going on inside him... but McCoy's 'relaxant' had weakened his control considerably.

It came over him in waves, a strange, illogical feeling of wanting to put his head down and weep. All that was stopping him from giving in to the overwhelming urge was Kirk's presence. His barriers had often been down with Kirk, but never to the extent of weeping openly in front of him... and he had no wish to embarrass his Captain.

He had managed to fight the feeling for the last hour, but now he acknowledged to himself that he was losing the battle. His chest was unbearably tight, his throat constricting painfully, and it didn't take logic to tell him that it was all going to come pouring out any minute. It did seem logical, however, to get out of the living room before that happened. He tried to get up, but his legs wouldn't move. It was as if an iron hand was holding him where he was - and to make matters worse the good doctor's pills seemed to have loosened his tongue alarmingly. All his feelings of guilt were coming tumbling out...

"Sometimes... I was ashamed of my mother... because she was an Earthwoman," he heard himself confess raggedly. "I did love her... but I could never tell her. I wanted... to... tell... her... but..." His halting voice broke completely and he couldn't go on.

Kirk reached down and took one of Spock's hands in his own. "Spock, I'm sure she knew of your affection for her. Human women seem to sense these things... especially mothers. I don't know whether it's instinct, or intuition, or both, but they do know when someone cares for them," he said confidently.

Spock looked up at him, his dark tortured eyes glinting with unshed tears. "Do you really believe so, Captain?" he asked shakily.

Kirk smiled reassuringly, squeezing the warm hand he held. "Yes, Spock - without a doubt," he said softly. "So I think it's time you stopped torturing yourself with guilt." He gently touched the Vulcan's strained face with his free hand, trying to ease the tension lines away. "Don't hurt yourself any more," he murmured.

Spock closed his eyes against the sting of tears. This special kind of tenderness that only Jim Kirk could show was an overabundance of stimulus, more than his mangled emotions could accommodate. Great tears forced their way out from beneath his closed eyelids, glistening in the lamplight as they ran in rivulets down his face.

He pulled away from Kirk, hastily brushing the shameful tears away, but it

was no good - this misery was beyond what little control he had left. His strong Vulcan face suddenly crumpled like a child's, making him look so strangely vulnerable that Kirk was near to tears himself.

Spock covered his face with his hands. Sobs rushed up to his throat and he swallowed hard in an almost frantic effort to choke them down again.

"Captain... I respectfully suggest... that you leave me alone," he managed to say in a strangled voice.

"No," Kirk said softly. "I can't leave you like this."

"Please, Jim... go!" Spock pleaded. "I do not wish to be seen."

"I know. You're ashamed of what's happening to you; but there's no need to be - not with me, Spock," Kirk said, remembering the last time he'd heard those words. He watched the Vulcan's shoulders heaving silently. This agony was worse than any *pon farr*.

He watched Spock fighting to contain himself until the Vulcan became a quivering, shaking mass of suppressed emotions. The need to comfort him ached inside Kirk until he couldn't bear it any longer. He got down on the floor beside Spock and put an arm around the trembling shoulders.

"Spock... Spock..." he murmured, "don't fight it. You can't hold it all inside for ever."

He leaned back against the couch, supporting the Vulcan with his right arm. Gently, but firmly, he took Spock's hands away from his face.

"Jim, no. Please don't," Spock protested brokenly, desperately wanting somewhere to hide his tear-streaked face.

"Ssh, now... ssh. It's all right," Kirk hushed, pulling Spock close, instinctively pressing the Vulcan's head to his shoulder.

Spock didn't resist. He buried his face blindly in the gold command shirt, but his arms stayed clenched by his sides, his body rigid with shame and the struggle to regain control of himself.

Sensing the effort of the struggle, Kirk gently rubbed Spock's tense back between the shoulder blades, trying to persuade the Vulcan to relax. He felt the warm dampness for tears seeping through his shirt, but there was no sound... and he began to suspect that Spock was actually frightened to give in to his need for emotional release.

"Come on, Spock - let it out," he coaxed softly. "I'm here with you... you'll be all right."

Spock's right arm moved in shy response. He let his hand rest on Kirk's chest for a moment in silent gratitude, then he gripped the front of the gold shirt and held on to it tightly as if some unseen force might spirit his Captain away.

"It's all right, I won't leave you," Kirk reassured him. "Come on now - let it all out."

Suddenly the last shreds of control snapped with an agonised whimper, and



the dam broke. The lean body in Kirk's arms shook with hard, ragged, soul-wrenching sobs.

"That's better... that's better," Kirk murmured against the warm cheek as he held the Vulcan tightly, rocking him like a child.

Kirk had often thought that Spock's emotions, when unleashed, would be more passionate than any Human's. Certainly he had never heard crying like this in his life before. He could feel the racking sobs convulsing the Vulcan's midriff with such force that he knew they must be hurting Spock physically.

For a long time Spock lay huddled in his Captain's arms. Kirk stroked the dark hair, murmuring softly, comforting and soothing as the Vulcan's body shed its load of grief.

By the time the sobs had gradually subsided and become nothing more than tiny jerks on his breath, Spock felt as though his lungs were going to burst. He turned his head and rested the side of his face against Kirk's chest as he gasped for air, too exhausted to move any further.

Kirk looked down at him and was relieved to see the dark eyes had lost the torture of earlier on.

"You'll be all right now," he assured him.

Spock nodded, trembling uncontrollably with a combination of relief and reaction.

"Just relax here with me for a while," Kirk said gently.

In the warm circle of Kirk's arms, Spock slowly became calmer. The trembling stopped and he breathed more easily. The physical closeness was reassuring, and the sound of Kirk's even breathing and strong, steady heartbeat close to his ear had a tranquillizing effect on him. No-one had held him like this for so many years that he'd forgotten the sense of comfort it could bring.

Warm, comfortable, and finally at peace, still leaning against Kirk, he slept.

Kirk tightened his hold on the Vulcan, the tiny little jerking sobs which still shook Spock tugging at his heart. The outline of the Vulcan's face was softened by sleep, and the hand that had held on to the gold shirt so tightly now lay loosely curled on Kirk's chest.

Kirk smiled and relaxed. The world seemed a better place now that his Vulcan was all right. The flickering flames of the log fire cast bright, dancing shadows on the walls of the living room, and even the great tall pine trees outside seemed to rustle and whisper happily as if they knew all was well within the house they surrounded and protected.

It was nearly two hours later when Spock stirred and murmured, "Jim..."

Kirk looked at him, smiling at the somewhat puzzled expression on his face.

"You've been asleep," Kirk told him softly.

For all his upset, Spock's eyebrows were still active.

"Do you feel better?" Kirk asked.

"Yes," Spock whispered. "Thank you."

With gentle fingers Kirk brushed the remaining dampness from Spock's cheeks.

"Jim, forgive me... I did not mean to weep so," Spock apologised in a quiet voice that still shook slightly.

"There's nothing to forgive," Kirk assured him. "It's what you've needed

to do for weeks, so don't worry about it." He smiled encouragingly. "Come on - you're still tired. I'll help you get ready for bed."

Spock was only vaguely aware of the firm but gentle hands that washed his face, undressed him, and put him into sleepwear. He felt as though he was floating on a cloud of relaxation, drunk with sheer exhaustion, physical and emotional. Layers and layers of Vulcan training and control had been stripped away, and the agony of his tortured soul revealed completely. It was as though a great burden had fallen from him, allowing him simply to exist, free and spent for the first time in his life.

He felt himself being turned over onto his side and the bedcover being drawn up over his body. He forced his eyes open and looked up at Kirk.

Kirk smiled. "It's all over," he said softly. "Close your eyes again and try to sleep."

"Stay with me?" Spock asked drowsily, one hand sliding out from beneath the coverlet. He didn't have the strength left to lift his arm, and the hand hung limply over the side of the bed in an appealing way.

"I had no intention of leaving you alone," Kirk said, sitting down on the bed and taking the slim hand in his own.

Spock was too tired to talk any more, but his dark Vulcan eyes showed his gratitude.

"Now will you please go to sleep!" Kirk said with fake exasperation.

Spock's eyes closed... a look of amusement crossing his face.

He felt the tendrils of Kirk's kindness and affection drifting around in his consciousness until the darkness of sleep claimed him again.

As the early morning light filtered through the curtains, Spock's eyelids fluttered and opened.

Almost immediately he noticed that the other bed in the room had been slept in, but was now empty. For a moment he wondered where Kirk was... and thinking of Kirk turned his thoughts to the night before. He remembered the feel of the smooth material of his Captain's shirt against his face, mingled with the salt taste of his own tears as they had run down his cheeks and into the corners of his mouth.

He had never behaved in such an unVulcan manner in front of anyone in his life... but then, he had never known anyone like Kirk before. Kirk had always had the power to render his Vulcan defences useless, leaving him open and vulnerable. When Kirk smiled at him the room lit up; when he touched him secret understandings seemed to flow between them like live electric currents. Last night the compelling hazel eyes had enveloped him with such love and compassion that his courage and Vulcan reserve had both melted away completely and let him accept the tactile reassurance his Human half had craved. The encouraging touch of a warm hand, the comfort of an understanding face, and the security of a gentle embrace... all invaluable benefits derived from a relationship governed by trust and affection.

He stretched luxuriously under the warm coverlet, revelling in his new-found contentment.

"Morning, Spock."

Spock rolled over onto his side only to see Kirk coming into the room with a tray.

"Good morning," Spock replied softly.

"How do you feel this morning?"

"Much better, thank you," Spock said, sitting up.

"Good," Kirk said, smiling, as he put the tray down in front of Spock. "Have some breakfast." He sat down on the bed, took his own plate off the tray, and started to eat.

"Jim, you should not be doing all this for me," Spock said, looking at the tray.

"You've looked after me often enough... let me spoil you for a change," Kirk said firmly.

For a few moments Spock sat quietly, propped up on his pillows, watching Kirk.

"Jim, I must apologise for my behaviour last night. I did not think I would be able to face you this morning."

Kirk stopped eating and looked at the Vulcan. "Now we agreed last night that there was nothing to worry about or to apologise for, so why don't you forget all about it," he said quietly. He grinned encouragingly at Spock. "I still think you're the best First Officer in the fleet... so come on, eat your breakfast."

Spock obediently began drinking his coffee, but his dark eyes still rested intently on his Captain's face.

"I doubt if I will ever forget last night's events," he said quietly. "I inflicted an embarrassing situation on you... but you were kind and understanding. Thank you."

Kirk grinned, blushing slightly at Spock's compliment. "Well, you've got to get emotional nourishment from somewhere," he quipped.

Any reply Spock might have made was silenced by the sound of the heavy brass door knocker.

"Sounds like we have a visitor," Kirk said, surprised.

When Kirk went downstairs and opened the front door he found their caller to be none other than a rather dusty, dishevelled Dr. Leonard McCoy.

"Bones! How did you get here?" he asked, struggling to suppress a giggle as McCoy blustered inside, slapping the dust out of his uniform with a force that showed his famous temper was more than a little frayed around the edges.

"A bag of bones that's passing itself off as a horse," McCoy grumbled in answer to Kirk's question.

Kirk glanced outside before closing the door and saw McCoy's 'bag of bones' - a somewhat ancient equine specimen munching on a clump of grass with what Kirk could have sworn was a 'to hell with it' expression on its face.

"Damn stupid way to travel!" McCoy muttered as Kirk turned to look at him.

"Why didn't you beam down?" Kirk asked innocently.

"That's another stupid way to travel!" McCoy snapped back at him. "I thought an early morning ride in the invigorating fresh air would be a pleasant change from having my molecules scrambled... but that 'horse' had other ideas. It nearly succeeded in scrambling my brains. I'm sure the guy who rents these horses stuck me with the meanest one of the bunch. The damn thing threw me off twice on the way out here," he complained irately.

"Oh yeah, Bones... I can see that horse is mean," Kirk agreed, openly humouring him. "You can see the mean glint in its eyes... it probably threw you off just for the hell of it," he finished, then promptly dissolved into helpless laughter as he visualised the good doctor being dumped unceremoniously in the dirt.

"It's not that funny," McCoy said, glaring at him. "Anyway, what d'you expect - I'm a doctor, not a rodeo rider."

"Sorry, Bones," Kirk said, schooling a final grin off his face. "I take it you're here to see Spock?"

"Yes, how is he?"

"Well, he said he felt much better this morning," Kirk reported with a smile.

"I'm pleased to hear it," McCoy said with some relief. "I'd like to check him over, Jim. Where is he?"

"Still in bed."

"Is he awake?"

"Yes, he's having breakfast. Why don't you go up?" Kirk said, smiling at the thought of Spock being caught having breakfast in bed... by McCoy! "I'm sure he'll be pleased to see you, Bones."

"Yeah, that'll be the day!" McCoy drawled, heading for the stairs.

"Bones..."

McCoy stopped on the stairs and turned to face Kirk.

"He was a little upset," Kirk said hesitantly. "Don't..."

"It's all right, Jim - I won't tease him."

Kirk smiled.

"Morning, Spock," McCoy said, breezing into the room.

"Why, Dr. McCoy, I did not expect to see you here. I was under the impression you did not make house calls," Spock said, surveying McCoy's unkempt appearance with typical Vulcan distaste. "What have you been doing? You look most disreputable."

For a moment McCoy didn't answer. He was so used to Spock being a man of such iron control and in command of every situation that the sight of the Vulcan's exhaustion and swollen eyes unnerved him. It was obvious that Spock had been more than 'a little upset'.

"Shut up, Spock!" he snapped to disguise the compassion welling in him. "I'm here to examine you, not to listen to smart remarks on my appearance." He whipped the coverlet off Spock in one brisk movement, sat down on the bed, and began running a scanner over him.

"How d'you feel?"

"Reasonably well, everything considered," Spock said placidly.

"Well, your blood pressure is almost back to normal... and I'm glad to see you're eating," McCoy said, eyeing the empty plate on the breakfast tray beside the bed. "Did you enjoy it?"

"Is there any reason why I should not have?"

"No... Think you'll be able to keep it down?"

"Yes."

"Good... Now lie down," McCoy ordered.

Spock obediently wriggled down the bed until he lay flat. With gentle hands McCoy examined his chest and abdomen.

"My breakfast will not stay down long if you continue to disturb it with your constant prodding, Doctor," Spock said warningly, tired of McCoy's fussing.

McCoy ignored Spock's complaint. "Mmm... good," he murmured eventually. "All those knots you had in your stomach are gone. Looks like you're well on the way to recovery, Spock."

He covered Spock up, rose to his feet, and packed his scanner away. "I'll be off and let you get some rest. I'd like you to stay in bed today... you have a lot of sleep to catch up on."

"I do feel a slight lack of energy," Spock admitted as he sat up again. "But you should know, Dr. McCoy, that it is impossible to regain the benefit of sleep lost... so staying in bed would be pointless."

"Suit yourself - but don't do anything strenuous," McCoy said, making for the door.

"Doctor... before you go, there is one matter I must discuss with you."

"Oh yeah, what's that?" McCoy asked casually, but thought to himself, Here it comes! He cringed mentally, waiting for the onslaught.

"It became obvious to me last night that the pills you gave me before I left the ship were not sleeping pills," Spock said accusingly.

"No, they weren't; but I'm sure they made you sleep eventually," McCoy said smugly.

"Admittedly," Spock said icily. "However, you failed to mention what their effects would be before they finally induced sleep."

"Well, it couldn't have been fatal, Spock," McCoy said with a grin, pleased that he had finally put one over on the Vulcan.

"Doctor, what you did was a severe breach of medical ethics," Spock said sternly. "I do not like deception - particularly the kind you practiced yesterday - so in future you will refrain from insisting I swallow any of your concoctions."

"Well, pardon me all to hell!" McCoy drawled sarcastically. "I may have breached a few ethics... but if I hadn't you would have been dead within a very short time."

"Doctor, you are being ridiculous. Vulcan physiology is far superior to that of Humans. Your interference was unnecessary," Spock said coldly.

"I'll decide when my interference is or isn't necessary, Spock - and as for the ~~matter~~ of you refusing medication... we'll see about that some other time. It's lucky for you you're under your Captain's protection, or it would be now," McCoy threatened. "No doubt Jim would have my hide if I did yell at you... but let me tell you, I certainly feel like it, you ungrateful, pointed-eared... Oh hell... what's the use...!" he spluttered and stormed out the door.

Spock's eyebrow rose in silent amusement.

Kirk met McCoy at the bottom of the stairs. "What did you think of him, then? He certainly seems to have ruffled your feathers a bit," Kirk observed with a grin.

"That's an understatement if ever I heard one!" McCoy said. "He's getting better, all right. He's just as starchy and insulting as ever, the ungrateful, two-legged computer. Y'know, I really don't know why I bother... he's indestructible."

"Stop it, Bones. You know very well why you bother," Kirk said, grinning knowingly.

McCoy chose to ignore that remark.

"He's better now... that's all that matters," Kirk said quietly.

"Yeah, well, I'm going back to the ship," McCoy muttered, pushing a bottle of clear liquid into Kirk's hand. "Bathe his eyes," he ordered, making for the door. "If you need me, send for me... otherwise I'll decline making any more house calls. Enjoy the rest of your leave, Jim - if that's possible with someone like Spock on your hands!"

When the door closed behind McCoy Kirk looked down at the bottle of eye solution in his hand, and smiled. Bones McCoy, who do you think you're trying to fool?

Kirk went upstairs again and found Spock leaning back against his pillows.

"You all right?" he asked, a little alarmed.

"Yes, perfectly all right."

Kirk smiled and sat down on the bed. "Close your eyes... I want to bathe them. Bones left this," he said, indicating the bottle he was opening.

Spock closed his eyes and Kirk began carrying out the doctor's instructions.

"Are your eyes sore?" he asked, concerned.

"A little," Spock admitted. "Obviously Dr. McCoy noticed."

"Of course he noticed," Kirk said gently. "Did you think he wouldn't?"

"That would have been too much to hope for. Dr. McCoy misses very little."

"Don't worry about it," Kirk said, noticing a green flush starting to spread up Spock's neck. "Grief isn't new to him... and he isn't the hard cynic he tries to make us think he is. He has warmth and understanding by the cargo-load."

Spock opened his eyes and looked at Kirk. "You are trying to tell me he would have understood me, had I confided in him."

"Yes."

Spock looked thoughtful for a moment. "Perhaps you are right," he conceded finally.

Kirk smiled. "Come on then, Mister... out of this bed. We have four days leave to enjoy."

They spent those four days together, happy and relaxed in each others company, exploring, riding, going for long walks... and Kirk even managed to persuade Spock to try swimming in the lake. Spock had complied mainly to please his Captain - but he could never stay in long, the water being too cold for him.

The only thing he didn't participate in was fishing. He didn't consider it a fair sport or much of a challenge, so when Kirk fished Spock was content just to sit and watch.

At night they just sat and talked quietly by the log fire, both of them tired from their exertions in the fresh air during the day.

Once in bed, sleep came easily to Spock, and induced pleasant dreams that even McCoy would have approved of.

By the time their leave was half-way through, Spock began to look more like his usual self. The peace and serenity of Carmenna, and the companionship of his beloved Captain, helped to heal the gaping wound inside him.

Although he wasn't keen on swimming the lake was a constant fascination to him, and the rare occasions he was not with Kirk he sat on the grass-covered banks, staring thoughtfully over the blue water.

It was there Kirk found him in the early evening of their last day on Carmenna. Spock had disappeared in the middle of the afternoon, and when he did not return in time for the evening meal, Kirk began to worry and went in search of him.

He had an idea Spock would be at the lake. Even though the Vulcan had improved daily it was only natural that there were times when the pain and horror of the last few weeks returned to haunt him. It was on those occasions

Spock went off alone to sit by the lake. Kirk understood, and let him go. Perhaps the lake did have something to do with the gemstone that was said to have ensured mental health. Spock certainly seemed to find peace in watching the cool, rippling water... but this time he had been gone too long.

Kirk caught sight of the blue-shirted figure between the big trees and walked towards it, relief flooding through him.

The Vulcan turned his head and watched his Captain's approach with a welcoming look in his eyes that told Kirk he had managed to lay his ghosts to rest.

"Mind if I join you?" Kirk asked.

"No, of course not."

Kirk sat down beside the Vulcan and for a while they both sat in silence, enjoying the scenery.

"Well, back to the ship tomorrow," Kirk said at last.

"Yes. I will regret leaving here," Spock admitted.

"So will I... but we can come back... and next time you'll be over all this and as good as new," Kirk said reassuringly.

"Yes. I'm afraid I have managed to spoil your leave quite effectively this time," Spock said apologetically.

"Is that what you've been sitting out here worrying about for so long?" Kirk asked, astounded that Spock would think his presence was an imposition.

"I should have gone somewhere else, Jim - at least until I was not at the mercy of Dr. McCoy's pills and feeling sorry for myself," Spock said very quietly.

Kirk turned to face Spock, gripping him by the shoulders to try to convince him how wrong he was.

"Spock, you were exactly where you should have been when you were upset - with me. You haven't spoiled my leave at all. I've enjoyed having you with me... regardless of the circumstances," Kirk told the Vulcan gently but firmly. "I wouldn't have wanted it any other way... so don't ever think I don't want you."

After such a lecture, Spock could raise no arguments. He just looked at Kirk, his dark eyes shining with his inner happiness. He knew without a doubt that he belonged with this man - and always would.

"Your Human compassion knows no bounds," he said at last in an almost incredulous voice. "One of my own race would have rejected me for such an emotional display."

Kirk smiled, happy because Spock was happy. Then, suddenly seeing an irresistible opportunity to tease his Vulcan, he put on his best innocent expression and said, "Of course, you realise that emotional display of yours has messed up your idea of there being a difference between us."

"Yes, it would seem so," Spock had to admit. "But I cannot pretend to understand how it all happened," he said with an equally innocent expression. "I will just have to put it down to exceptional Human compassion."

"Oh, we Humans set great store by love and compassion, Spock. In fact, we believe love can conquer almost anything," Kirk explained in an exaggerated confidential voice. "I'll let you into a little secret," he whispered. "That Vulcan facade of yours has never stood a chance."

A smile tugged at the corners of Spock's mouth. Certainly with this particular Human his Vulcan cover was useless.

"I will have to believe you, Jim," he said, then subdued the smile and raised a cool, disapproving eyebrow to add, "... even though the idea that love

can conquer anything is most illogical."

Kirk burst into laughter at the typical Spock comment. He released the Vulcan's shoulders, sat back against the tree again, and relaxed.

"I've got my logical Vulcan back," he said confidently.

"Yes, I am here," came the familiar quiet voice from his right side.

They sat together, Captain and First Officer, Human and Vulcan, friends and brothers... two lives that shone as one... and watched the sun set over Lake Sapphire, both of them secure in a love that was as evergreen as the trees that surrounded them.

LOGIC by Susan Meek

Logic...

As a child it was offered to me
As one of two alternatives.
In a divided existence
It seemed the only possible choice.
And so I became its most ardent disciple;
Decisions seemed easier to make
When weighed on the scales of rationality.
Life seemed so much simpler when I believed
That Logic is All.

Logic...

It seemed to be the only straight path
Through the chaos of existence.
I followed it relentlessly,
Cutting myself off from other pathways.
I kept myself separate, detached;
Safe, or so I thought,
Always believing the dichotomy
That Logic is All.

Logic...

I used it to build walls round my heart,
Solid fortifications that no-one could pass;
Sheltering my aloneness from the world.
Through all I experienced, the barriers stood firm,
Built secure on the premise
That Logic is All.

But...

Then came one
Who did not conform with my precepts of logic.
He smashed through the barriers
With the force of his personality,
And melted down the walls with his warm, open love.

And now I know that
Logic is an excellent tool;
Logic is important,
But
Logic is not everything.

Sulu says: Bird in hand make it hard to blow nose.

CAUSE OF DEATH : UNKNOWN by Bettina Marloth

(With apologies to Sheila Clark for using the title of one of her stories.)

Personal Log, Daniel Phelps, Stardate 3119.3

It's now been three days since Miriam and I came aboard the Intrepid, and I still can't get used to the sight of those Vulcans around here. 'Course, it's not only their appearance but their attitude as well that bothers me... Damn logical minds they have! For instance, I've hardly seen so little recroom activity on a spaceship. When off duty those Vulcans seem to retire to their cabins and stay there until their next duty shift begins - just meditating, or what the hell else they have to do...

At least they are not impolite. In fact, Miriam even likes them a bit, although I can't quite understand why. As a veterinary it's not so boring for me, after all - they have some pretty good scientific facilities here - but for a woman, and my talkative, vital Miriam at that?

Well, guess the quietness does her good - there will be enough activity once the baby's here. Besides, it's only four more days until we reach Ysymthia. Miriam is fairly excited about it - what will our new home be like?

Think I'll have a stopover on the Bridge now. Captain Stel invited me to have a look, although I think he didn't really mean it at the time. He sounded so... formal, as if it was his duty to invite me, and really he didn't give a penny... 'May I inform you that as a guest on board you are entitled to a tour of the ship.'

Oh well, I don't mind. As long as they have it their way, and let me have mine, it's all right with me.

Captain Stel quietly explained to Dr. Phelps the various stations on the Bridge. He found that the Human listened to him politely, but nonetheless showed no great interest in what he said. It seemed that the veterinary was already impatiently looking forward to their arrival on Ysymthia.

At last, returning to his command chair, Stel excused himself. "I have to carry on with my work. If you wish to remain on the Bridge, you may do so."

But don't dare disturb me in any other way, Phelps added in his thoughts. Don't worry, Mister - I won't! Aloud, however, he said, "Thank you, Captain."

He was just strolling leisurely towards the elevator when a message came in from Starfleet. Stel had it put on audio.

"Intrepid, you will divert to solar system Gamma 7A immediately. We have lost contact with the system. You are to investigate and report. Starfleet out."

Frowning, Stel addressed the helm. "Proceed towards Gamma 7A, Warp 5. Full range scan, feed results into the computer."

"Er...sir..." Phelps tried to address the Vulcan Captain when Science Officer T'Pas, bending over her console, announced clearly,

"Long-range sensor scan indicates Gamma 7A has just died." She looked up and added, "Energy emissions negative, life readings negative. More data will be available in 2.4 minutes."

"What does that mean?" asked Phelps in a shocked voice.

Stel turned around to face him, slight surprise registering on his face, as if he had long since forgotten the presence of the Human on the Bridge.

"There will be a delay in our arrival at Ysymthia. This is a rescue mission, and of course has priority," he explained, unperturbed. He eyed the nervous man quizzically. "I must request that you leave the Bridge, Dr. Phelps. A critical situation may arise."

"What do you mean, a critical situation?" asked Phelps anxiously.

Instead of replying, Stel spoke to his First Officer. "Commander T'Para, status?"

"Gamma 7A six point zero eight light years ahead, sir. E.T.A. 12.54 minutes." There was no trace of excitement when she continued, "Sensors report an as yet unidentified phenomenon on Sector 39G, four point six light years ahead. Calculations place it on course from Gamma 7A heading towards solar system Beta 3, interception point in six point four minutes, maintaining present speed."

"Sir, all channels to Starfleet shut down due to major distortions," reported the communications officer, Sonn.

"Science?" Stel demanded curtly.

"Readings indicate energy turbulence ahead. Data-feed to library computer in progress, no results yet. Visual on screen - now."

To Phelps, the black 'hole' on the screen looked extraordinary compared to the usual view of star-filled space, but not as ~~deadly~~ dangerous as Stel would soon know it to be.

With no information about the phenomenon, Stel was taking no risks. "Reduce speed to Warp 2. Sound yellow alert. Activate deflector shields. Prepare to launch telemetry probe."

The activity increased at the various stations, silent, efficient. Phelps tried to read the Vulcan faces, but they certainly showed no feelings about the situation they were in. He turned his attention back to the incoming reports, trying to get some clue from there.

Finally the helmsman announced, "Probe launched." Phelps was not prepared for the impact of loud static that hit the Bridge, and winced visibly. Sonn quickly handled his board and the noise subsided, but ~~nonetheless~~ a wave of dizziness swept over Phelps and he had to grab the console beside him for support. Obviously none of the Vulcans had been affected.

"Dr. Phelps, I demand that you clear the Bridge instantly," Stel told him with calm authority. "Lt. Sonn, help Dr. Phelps to Sickbay."

"Just a minute!" Phelps said, losing his temper. "What is all this about?" He gestured towards the screen. "Will someone please tell me what's going on!" he nearly exploded.

But Captain Stel's attention had already gone back to the science console. "Lt. T'Pas, deliver updated information about this phenomenon," he said with the slightest hint of impatience.

Then Phelps felt himself being pulled into the elevator, and the closing doors shut out the Science Officer's reply. He sensed that he was being scrutinised by the Vulcan, and tried to calm down. "What is the Captain going to do?" he asked.

"He will endeavour to interfere with the phenomenon that has probably caused the destruction of solar system Gamma 7A," came the reply.

"But... if a whole solar system couldn't defend itself, how can a Starship?"

"It is our duty to investigate. Even if it means our own destruction."

Phelps again lost control of himself, and shouted, "How can you stand there and analyse a situation which will cause our deaths? If you don't care for your life, I damn well do! Christ, don't you understand? I've got a pregnant wife on board this ship, that's all I care about. What interest do I have in a dead star system?"

They had reached Sickbay, and Sonn had no intention of wasting any more time with the Human. "You will excuse me." He headed back towards the Bridge.

In Sickbay Miriam Phelps was nearly crying, frightened by the alert and upset by the absence of her husband. Finally Daniel came in, and she clung to him.

"Oh Daniel, where have you been? What's going on?"

"Sh, sh," he tried to soothe her. "Everything's all right, don't worry. Come on, sit down." He stopped a passing nurse. "Get a doctor here, and fast!"

A voice behind him said with authority, "There is no need to shout. I suggest you sit down here and let my staff do their work."

The tall Vulcan clad in a blue tunic seemed to be the physician. He took readings with his Feinberger on both of them and raised an eyebrow, but refrained from comment. "I shall be back shortly. Please stay where you are," he told them, and disappeared to consult the life science computer on sedative medication for pregnant Humans.

Only seconds later the red alert began to sound. They were both frightened at the sudden sound, and Miriam begged, "Daniel, please, get me away from here! I can't stand that... please!"

"Come," he answered determinedly, and led her out of the office.

In the corridor they heard a quiet voice through the speakers. "Attention all hands. Brace for impact in ten seconds."

They stopped short and leaned heavily against the wall. Miriam trembled violently.

"Come back here at once," the doctor called from the office, and just managed to shove them back into their seats when the impact rocked the whole ship. Although the shaking didn't last long they felt terror rise, and the Vulcan doctor, realising that they were panicking, administered the two shots he had been preparing for them. They slumped in their seats, and Miriam began to weep. Daniel stroked her head helplessly.

With the time passing - it seemed to them like an eternity, but it was only minutes - they felt a growing weakness. Also the lighting of the room had dimmed considerably, and it had become very cool. Through an open door Miriam caught a glimpse of a Vulcan woman with a head injury; the unfamiliar sight of the green blood made her lose the rest of her frail control.

"Oh no! We're all dying! Please, Daniel, get me away! We're dying!" She began to sob violently.

The doctor, who had been working in the next room, returned to his office, another hypo in his hand. "It will make you sleep," he explained almost softly to the hysterical woman, pressing the hypo against her shoulder. Almost instantly she subsided. Daniel took her in his arms and held her firmly.

The air had become very thin, and the temperature fell fast. The Vulcan doctor slowly went to the intercom at his desk and listened intently to Science Officer T'Pas' low-pitched voice.

"Power drain now 84.5%, life support systems will be dead in...2.53 minutes."

He showed no reaction to the news, but turned to Daniel Phelps and told him quietly, "I suggest you prepare yourself for death."

"Prepare for death," Daniel repeated tonelessly. "Can't you even shout at the prospect of your death?" he whispered.

"It would be of no use, and therefore illogical," the doctor replied.

Uncomprehending, Daniel Phelps closed his eyes and began to sob.

All over the ship Vulcans stood at their posts, an air of disbelief and calm acceptance around them. The phenomenon now mercilessly pulled them with unmatched force towards its centre.

When their agony began, Daniel and Miriam Phelps were already dead. They never knew the cause of their deaths.

CONVERSATION by Linda Hughes

A certain young crewman happened to be passing the Captain's quarters one day just as the First Officer was about to enter.

This is the conversation rumoured to have been heard :

Kirk : "Ah, Spock, come over here, I want to show you something..."
(Pause... footsteps...)
"Now, what do you think of it?"
(Pause...)

Spock : "Well, Captain... it is a little... large. I would go so far as to say that, in my opinion, it does seem rather... long. It does not seem to fit in here at all well."
(Pause...)

Kirk : (In a high-pitched squeak)
"Careful! Spock, please don't hold it like that - you may drop it!"

Spock : "Am I to assume, Captain, that it is not yet fully grown?"

Kirk : "Well, of course. It'll get a lot bigger, before very long. In fact, I have been told that it could end up as much as three times this length."
(Silence...)

Spock : "That could be dangerous. May I ask what you intend to do with it, then?"

Kirk : "I'm not really too sure - give it to Bones, I suppose. Why, are you offering to take it off my hands?"
(Laughter...)

Spock : (Quickly)
"No! No, sir, I have nowhere to put it. I was merely wondering whether it is within regulations to keep that sort of thing on a starship."

Kirk : "Mmmm. I hadn't thought of that. Oh well, it's here now, too bad if it isn't within regulations."

Spock : "Captain, I do think you should have it removed, before it becomes any larger. If you are not careful, it could trip you up."
(Pause...)

Kirk : "Yes, I suppose you're right. Now I come to think of it, the end does tend to waggle about - it could be dangerous."
(Footsteps...)

Spock : "Perhaps it would be adviseable to speak with the doctor before you do anything further. Also, a wise precaution would be to clear the corridors on the way to Sickbay before you are ready to take it there."

Kirk : "Yes, Spock, I agree. Good God, if news of this reached Starfleet, I might not be here myself for much longer!"

The door opened and the First Officer's back could be seen as he turned to speak, prior to leaving the Captain's quarters.

Spock : "Captain, I very much doubt that Starfleet would ask you to resign over a small matter like that."

Kirk : "I hope you're right, Spock - after all, I am Captain of this ship and I'm supposed to be in charge here."

At this point, Spock nodded smartly and turned to leave.

Several days later, the Bridge viewscreen picked up an unusual occurrence in the corridors of Deck 5.

Just prior to this, another conversation took place in the Captain's quarters, as Mr. Spock entered.

Spock : "I have cleared the corridors, Captain. Are you ready to go?"
(Footsteps...Creak of bedsprings...Groaning...A small thud...)

Kirk : "Yes, almost... Aaaaah... Come here, you little...! Spock! Quick, grab that end, there! Watch out! Got it?"

Spock : "Here, Jim, let me take this end!"

Kirk : "Pull a bit harder, can you?"

Spock : "I don't want to hurt you."

Kirk : "That's all right, I'll soon yell if you do."
(Shuffling noises...Thuds...Silence...)

Kirk : "Got you! Spock, bring that cover over here, please, will you?"
(Footsteps...)

Kirk : "That's it, mind the tip. Good. We should be all set to go now."

The door opened and a rather dishevelled-looking Captain emerged, carrying a bundle under one arm. Mr. Spock walked at his side, one hand resting on the bundle, behind the Captain's elbow, his other hand hovering in front of the Captain's waist - watchful eyes alert and ready for trouble.

The bundle was approximately 2 ft. long, 1 ft. around the centre, and tapered off to a point at each end. The back end of the bundle was wriggling considerably, while the front end moved up and down vigorously.

Spock : "I suggest you hold on to it tightly, Captain."

Kirk : "Don't worry, Spock, I've no intention of letting it go until we get to Sickbay. It's already had me on the floor once today!

The Captain and the First Officer marched smartly towards the turbo-lift. A short and gratifyingly uneventful ride took them to the required deck, where they entered Sickbay, to be met at the door by Dr. McCoy.

From this point the Bridge viewscreen switched to the Sickbay area.

McCoy : "Ah Jim, you've brought it - good. I have a nice little place for it, in the lab. Will you bring it through?"

The Captain crossed to the open lab. doorway. Entering the lab. he placed the object of attention in an enclosed area, complete with a shallow pool of water. He pulled the cover away and smiled down as the contents of the bundle made a graceful sliding movement into the water.

McCoy : "Incidentally, Jim, did you find out about its sex?"

Kirk : "No, I didn't. Anyway, how do you tell the sex of a baby alligator?"
(Laughter...)

McCoy : "Same way as you'd tell the sex of a baby sand-flea, I suppose.
Ask it!"

Spock: What does the X-ray of my head show?

McCoy: Nothing.

* * * * *

Spock: Stop acting like a fool.

McCoy: I'm not acting.

CHEKOV'S LAST STAND by Judy Miller

Night fell with a swiftness that, despite his having witnessed two such sunsets upon this planet, still caused him to cast a startled sideways glance at the sky. The rapid transformation from cloudless blue to star-sprinkled ebony made him gasp, although the science-trained realist in him noted the natural explanation of the event, the hard facts behind the charm.

This, then, notched up his third night here. Nights spent sleeplessly, as were the days; long, wearisome stretches of time filled with a grim determination to keep alert, and filled also with a hideous truth - he was ill, and slowly but inexorably his illness was becoming worse.

"What do you think will kill us first?"

Chekov's attention was pulled back full force to the alien seated opposite. 99% of his concentration was constantly there, but it was that vital 1%, permitted to observe the sunset and sunrise, whether beyond the cave it rained or the sun shone, that would, if he was not very careful precipitate his death.

"Will it be thirst?" the other continued. "Starvation? Or..." He let his words trail into loaded silence. He knew Chekov was ailing. That his affliction had not yet loosened his grip on the phaser he clasped was irrelevant - soon an opportunity would arise and he'd be quick to seize it.

Chekov narrowed his eyes, piercing the gloom, for the pale violet moonlight had only just begun to cast its fragile rays into the cave. He was loath to use the phaser's precious power to heat a sizeable rock so that it would glow and lighten their surroundings. Thus far, they had managed at night with the feeble moonlight, and his eyesight had always been one of his most valued aids.

Chekov inwardly chuckled mirthlessly. Had been. The past tense was very appropriate, for how long could he guarantee the accuracy of his eyes? Would his sight deteriorate as he grew weaker? And would he fail to notice the movements of his prisoner as the alien rose and grabbed the phaser, and blasted him into oblivion? For this, the young Russian knew, every muscle in the Klingon officer's body ached to do.

"One of those deprivations will kill us," the Klingon went on, his guttural voice ringing harsh in Chekov's ears, "because they aren't going to come back, you know. Your beloved ship has deserted you - if, that is, it is still operational. They've left you for dead." He paused, calculatingly. "Which isn't so far from the truth, is it?"

Chekov didn't reply. The Klingon's favourite pastime during the past two days had been to taunt him, chip methodically away at his courage and optimism. But the worst part was that Chekov was painfully aware that the Klingon was probably right... on every count.

It seemed far longer than two days they had been here, entrapped on this world, a Class M planet known only by impersonal reference, revolving with its multitude of kin around their fiery sun.

The star system was newly charted, the planets catalogued and indexed, the way paved for a second, more thorough investigation, the kind a starship was qualified to undertake; and the Enterprise, traversing a nearby sector, was given the job.

The system was a veritable paradise to the Enterprise's scientific contingent, whatever the individual's field of study. Coupled with the prospect of exploring virgin territory was the fact, established in the initial survey, that there were no sentient beings on any of the worlds; flora and fauna in abundance, but no signs of habitation, past or present. 'An anomaly of nature' was how Spock had termed it, Chekov recalled. An anomaly, perhaps, but a fact nevertheless, and an enormous asset in their explorations. As one of Chekov's colleagues had remarked, somewhat irreverently but honestly, 'The Prime Directive is a noble and admirable dictate, but once in a while it can be a pain in the backside.'

MZ20 was the fourth planet of the system to be visited and, as on the three

previous occasions, six teams beamed down to the surface, four scientists and two Security guards to a team. Kirk had an active distrust of worlds that were, to all appearances, peaceful, idyllic, and devoid of hostile natives. He had too many memories of other such havens which, often to their cost, proved to be anything but. So, Security men were assigned to each team, and Kirk rested a little easier.

Neither Kirk nor Spock accompanied the landing parties to MZ20. Kirk had had an ample quota of fresh air and open spaces on the other planets they'd called at, and Spock and his ship-based team were well occupied with assimilating and logging the information gathered to date.

The first flaw in MZ20's paradisiacal setting was found early in the day. Lt. Zanduchi, a zoologist in charge of one of the teams, relayed a warning via the communicator that he'd come across a species of animal inimical to Humans. The animal, not an attractive creature by any measure of beauty, was small, goggle-eyed, and lethal, its finely-honed fangs dripping a yellow venom; and Zanduchi, after quick but efficient testing, declared the poison not only dangerous, but potentially fatal. The zoologist sent one of the animals up to the Enterprise, suitably caged to prevent accidents, for further analysis and hopefully to find an antidote to its deadly bite. The order was superfluous, maybe, but officers-in-charge issued a 'steer clear' instruction, telling their teams to keep watch for the animals' nests.

Chekov's group was situated some way from Zanduchi, whose team delved among the vegetation of a wood. Chekov's time was mainly spent in making extensive geological notations, and though he was unaware of it, the Ensign was under close but subtle scrutiny. He had been recommended for promotion, and the survey on MZ20 was to be the last addition to his report before it was submitted to the hallowed Starfleet board. The Lieutenant-Commander supervising kept an appraisal of Chekov's conduct and performance of his duties, and was of the firm opinion by the close of their spell of duty that the promotion was more than justified.

Word came over the communicator that four of the landing parties had returned to the ship. Chekov's party strolled to join Zanduchi's amid the trees, the heavily-fronded branches reaching down to caress their faces. The crew-members began to beam back to the ship, laden with specimen bags and boxes and hard-worked tricorders until only Chekov and five others remained, assuming the position and stance of men about to be transported.

Then uproar struck. Looking back, Chekov was amazed at the speed of the attack. From an open communicator came Uhura's strident call for their urgent return to the Enterprise. They heard the word, "Klingons!", then the sound of phaser fire cut rudely and frighteningly into the broadcast. But by then it was quite unnecessary to tell them Klingons were abroad, for six had just appeared before them. Chekov's own recall of detail was confused. Because it had happened so fast? Or was it another symptom of his ailment? He didn't like to ponder on that.

Weapons were fired, Terran and Klingon. Two of Chekov's party slumped to the ground; he and those left dashed for cover, as did the Klingons.

The ranking officer, Duvic, shouted to them to adjust their phasers from stun to kill. It was obvious that their erstwhile companions, sprawled out on the hard turf, were never going to rise again, and a phaser set to kill seemed to be a better deterrant to this display of Klingon force.

Chekov dived behind a rock outcrop, an assault of blaster energy skimming past his head. Retaliatory fire from the Enterprise men felled three of the Klingons, but one raised his pistol as he crumpled and sprayed shots wildly, catching Duvic as his attention was taken up elsewhere. Chekov did remember Duvic's horror as he collapsed - the ghastly facial contortions stuck in his mind when other details did not.

Only he and Statsgaard were left, and the Security guard was pinned behind a solid tree bole, taking apparently inexhaustable fire from a Klingon pistol.

From the corner of his eye Chekov glimpsed a black/silver shapo scurrying furtively through the trees. Chekov yelled, Statsgaard spun, and the shot from his phaser struck the Klingon down. Chekov's covering fire for the distracted Statsgaard hit a Klingon as he rolled for the protection of a boulder, but the other alien took aim as Chekov was diverted, and the young Lieutenant from Security dropped with sickening finality. Now, it was one against one.

Chekov scooted around the outcrop, firing constantly, trying to prise the Klingon from his shelter. It worked. Endeavouring to keep Chekov in his sights while maintaining a safe distance from him, the Klingon followed the Ensign. They moved through the wood, skipping from trunk to trunk, their weapons spitting shots which grazed and scorched the mustard-hued boles.

As they pursued their terrible game of seek and destroy, it suddenly dawned on Chekov that the Klingon was a valuable source of information. After all, how had the Klingons managed to spring so unexpected an attack, and what had become of the ship? Could the Klingons have a cloaking device as had the Romulans? Was there an alliance between them, battle techniques shared? Why had the Klingons arrived on the surface of MZ20 - to massacre or to kidnap? If they had believed Kirk or Spock to be with the landing parties, as they commonly were, it could have been their intention to take a hostage of high rank. Chekov debated, and decided. He adjusted his phaser to stun. If the Klingon's blaster scored a hit, Chekov wouldn't have a second chance, anyway; but if he got in first...

Chekov circled, fired several shots at various angles, making the Klingon uncertain. As the alien turned to take stock of his adversary's position, Chekov rushed him, a part of his consciousness screaming he was insane. He fell to one side as the blaster emitted a killing shot, missing him but disintegrating his dislodged communicator; in a split second Chekov raised his phaser and hit the Klingon squarely in the chest.

The alien folded noiselessly to the ground across Chekov's aching legs. For a moment the Ensign was too drained to push him off and get up. He inhaled deeply, calmed his thumping heart, then shrugged the not inconsiderable weight of the Klingon from his lower limbs.

He stretched out his hands to gain some leverage, and gave a cry as a white-hot needle of pain stabbed wickedly into his left palm. He drew his hand hastily to his body, forcing flat the curling fingers to inspect the injury; there were two tiny holes amid a mass of tingling flesh.

Chekov glanced round to see what had caused the neat wound... and froze. By a bush of amber, fern-like leaves squatted a small, pop-eyed creature, its short fur quivering in the faint breeze. The eyes seemed to laugh at him, shining with animalistic glee at having claimed another victim, wrought its vengeance against the being who had disturbed its nest.

Chekov recoiled as gradually, horribly, the truth wormed its way into his mind. Zanduchi's creature, the venomous bite, the poison that was potentially fatal... Some perverse side of Chekov's character grinned at the irony of it. The potential was about to be proven. He stared blankly, and in that instant the animal rushed away. The Ensign gazed at his palm; already the tingling had subsided, the holes merely pin-pricks, but the crawling within his palm belied the sudden flare of hope that the fangs hadn't fully penetrated.

Even now, sitting in the cave, Chekov could recall how strangely dispassionate he had been in those few minutes after having been bitten. Circulation! he'd thought. Impede the circulation!

Chekov stood and tugged at a long, slim frond dangling from a tree branch; once he'd pulled it free he rolled up his sleeve and wrapped the frond tightly around his forearm, grimacing as the tourniquet cut into his flesh. As he inspected his handiwork he wondered, almost idly, if it would serve any purpose.

Death. How men and women feared it; yet, when it looked to be a cast-iron certainty, the fear was replaced by a feeling akin to indifference.

A groan from the Klingon brought Chekov back to reality. There was still this problem to deal with, and a stubborn voice in him vowed to deal with it until he died.

If he died, that same stubbornness corrected. His practicality wrestled with this thought. Zanduchi was - had been - a brilliant scientist who did not make wild pronouncements. The poison was deadly. Chekov could not hide from the truth.

He stamped on the blaster pistol, the act of destruction oddly satisfying, and rendered it totally useless. Chekov hunted around the Klingon's clothing; he found no more weapons, but he did discover the Klingon equivalent of a universal translator, a metallic medallion tucked inside his shirt. It was a recent innovation the Federation had not long known of, and it solved one problem, that of communication.

The Klingon's eyes fluttered open and settled on Chekov, noting the stony expression and the unwavering aim of the phaser.

Semi-recumbant at Chekov's feet, the Klingon bowed his head. "Our positions may soon be reversed, but I believe your Starfleet regulations require I say, 'I surrender'."

"Get up," ordered Chekov.

The Klingon got to his feet with elaborate slowness and drew himself up, perhaps to boast the extra centimetres he possessed in height. If it was intended to intimidate Chekov, it was unproductive.

"Who are you?" asked Chekov.

The Klingon chuckled. "This Human predilection for wishing to know the names of their enemies! However, I am Lieutenant Kralik of the cruiser Deonna. And you? May a prisoner know the name of his captor?"

"Ensign Pavel Chekov of the USS Enterprise. But there, you knew the latter, didn't you?"

"Oh, do you intend to question me, Ensign? Unravel the mystery of our arrival here?" At Chekov's silence he added, "How would you question me? By pointing that weapon at me and threatening to kill me if I refuse to divulge my Empire's secrets? If I'm dead I cannot answer your questions. Elementary logic."

"Quite so," agreed Chekov, as if the thought hadn't occurred to him. Of course it had! But it had been quickly dismissed for what it was - unthinking bravado, the first mad scheme of an impossible situation. By what means could he quiz Kralik? It was a task for truth drugs and mind probes. Chekov couldn't conduct an interrogation. He had neither stick nor carrot to prompt the donkey. There was an alternative.

Chekov motioned with his head that the Klingon was to move. "Walk."

The Klingon raised an eyebrow. "Where? All the way home?"

Chekov turned a deaf ear to the baiting. "One of our survey teams discovered caves not far from here. There we will wait."

Kralik, who had taken a few steps urged by Chekov's phaser, halted abruptly. Chekov's reflexes were sharp enough to enable him to stop simultaneously, or else he and the Klingon would have been entangled, an ideal opportunity for the alien to seize the phaser.

"Wait for what?" Kralik asked.

"For whom," Chekov revised. "For the Enterprise to come and pick us up."

Kralik regarded Chekov pityingly. "Your precious Enterprise has, by now, been added to the rest of the cosmic debris floating in space. Are you really labouring under the delusion that your ship has escaped the Deonna's onslaught and will hurry back to rescue you? I have the wisdom of several more years than

you, young Ensign, and I can tell you..."

"You'll tell me nothing!" said Chekov, quietly fierce. "The Enterprise will return."

Kralik smiled and shrugged. "As you wish." He waved a hand to the west. "In that direction?"

Chekov nodded. Kralik took a step, then stopped in mid-stride. His eyes rested on Chekov's crudely-tied arm.

"Are you injured?" he enquired with feigned solicitude.

"It's nothing," replied Chekov. He wouldn't admit his weakness to Kralik. He kept his arm close to his side, but his next involuntary movement betrayed him. He screwed his hand into a fist as though to shield the site of the wound from Kralik, despite the marks being so small as to be scarcely noticeable. Kralik saw the movement, and his eyes glinted.

"Nothing?" he echoed. "Not even a scratch, or tooth marks? We reconnoitred this world before you landed here, Ensign, and we have knowledge of the animal, the only drawback on an otherwise perfect planet, for its poison is deadly to Klingons, too. It strikes with its fangs, does it not? Injects poison into the blood? I now see the reason behind the tied arm." His grin broadened, and Chekov had an almost irresistible urge to erase it permanently from the leering face. "Ah, my friend, if the Enterprise, by some unlikely deliverance from fate, does come back, will you be alive to greet it?"

Chekov did not know how he controlled his rage, but he mastered it with an effort and ushered the Klingon on unceremoniously.

"Does it hurt?" asked Kralik.

"No!" snapped Chekov. His arm ached like hell. "Just walk!"

With now further comment, Kralik obeyed.

Now, two days later, they still sat in the cave they had chosen; the interior was musty and damp, the walls gleaming with an occasional trickle of moisture, but it was the most hospitable accommodation the caves could provide.

Chekov wiped his free hand across his forehead. It came away wet. He was unbearably warm. Had the other nights on MZ20 been as warm as this? He concentrated, but failed to remember. He'd felt a heightening in the temperature throughout the day, but had attributed it to MZ20's odd seasonal cycle. But that was ridiculous, he knew. No matter how peculiar the cycle, the nights would be cooler than the days. That science training of his was being suffocated beneath a welter of excuses. He knew why he was hot, and hated the understanding.

His arm did not hurt now. There was no ache, no paralysis, merely a general discomfort, and the same crawling sensation throughout his body, especially in his stomach and chest. The tourniquet hadn't worked; he'd suspected it wouldn't. All he could do was wait and hope help arrived before the debilitating effects of his sickness grew too great for him to handle.

Berie violet light fully lit the cave, and the Klingon, lounging against the cave wall as if it were the most luxurious of cushions, eyed Chekov, a vulture staking out a prospective prey. Chekov, conscious of the stare, rallied his drifting senses. If the Enterprise was intact and viable - and Chekov could not, would not believe it otherwise - it would come to learn what had happened to the last members of the landing parties. He had to keep going till then. The past days had to count for something. His idea of holding Kralik prisoner until relief came, handing him over to the authorities to become their informant, had ~~sprung~~ like a scorching flame into his brain. It had become all-important. Too important to let slip away. He shook the mists from his head and desperately hoped his face showed an alertness he did not feel.

Chekov shifted, flexed the muscles in his cramped buttocks and thighs.

Kralik, damn him, looked as if it were his customary practice to spend days cooped up in a dank cave, for although he's spoken of their lack of provisions, he was not apparently suffering. He was seemingly as fresh and tireless as he'd been on that first day. Willpower? Klingon survival tactics? Well, his beard could do with a trim, thought Chekov pettishly, and his uniform wouldn't stand up to an inspection.

The Klingon smiled.

"Share the joke?" Chekov asked.

Kralik was pleased. "Ah! I am glad you've decided to converse with me - I was getting lonely. I had begun to think your advancing sickness had inhibited your vocal cords."

Chekov bristled, then relaxed. What the hell? He was sick. No, be honest. I'm dying, and he damn well knows it. Why deny it? His glowering silence in answer to Kralik's jibes would only add ammunition to the Klingon's barrage.

What the hell? Chekov repeated to himself, and was brought up with a shock. He was drifting again, surrendering to the enveloping fog.

"And the joke, Ensign," Kralik was saying, "is not a joke at all. I was simply finding humour in our predicament."

Chekov struggled to formulate coherent speech. The Klingon mustn't suspect! He had to maintain the pretence.

"You have a weird sense of humour," he finally said slowly - too slowly. But he had won the struggle... this time.

"Haven't you Humans always know that of we Klingons?" Kralik posed, his eyes and ears missing nothing.

"I suppose it's mutual," Chekov said.

Kralik raised both bushy eyebrows. "Be careful, Ensign. There was a touch of 'We're all brothers under the skin' about that remark."

"You will never be a brother of mine, Kralik," Chekov stated emphatically. "Your race and mine cannot form any sort of friendship while..."

Kralik lifted a hand in a mute plea for him to cease speaking, and Chekov, his reflexes a fraction of a second more hesitant than they should be, hoisted the phaser to follow the movement through. The hand fell, and Chekov lowered the phaser.

"I can easily guess what your patriotic tirade would have contained. That we Klingons are the aggressors, we start the battles..."

"You started this one," Chekov interjected.

Kralik nodded. "Yes, we did."

A thought struck Chekov, somewhat belatedly. "The Organians," he murmured. "They didn't intervene in your attack. Why?"

The Klingon rubbed his hairy chin contemplatively. "Our peace-loving, self-appointed minders are obviously not as omnipresent as they would have us believe. If too many other things occupy their time..."

Chekov frowned. "Divisions? Organised by your people so you could attack the Enterprise?"

Kralik appeared to reach a decision. More likely play-acting, Chekov opined. The Lieutenant would tempt him with a snippet or two of information until he literally begged for the rest. He'd be damned if he'd cooperate with that! Let him tell his story if he wanted to! He wouldn't get any further encouragement.

Kralik, however, did not need prodding. "What's the harm in telling you? Neither of us will leave this world alive. Even after you die, I will be condemned to eke out an existence here for the remainder of my days. The

Decma, aware that our mission here did not succeed, will not come back to collect those who failed so miserably."

Kralik hadn't mentioned his own personal plight before. Chekov wondered if the alien was softening through lack of food and drink. He doubted it. More play-acting?

"Shall I tell you of our mission?"

"As you please," Chekov said shortly.

Kralik lughed. "Your sickness has strained your temper! How do you feel, by the way?"

"In the best of health," Chekov lied glibly. The fog was thickening and his words sounded stilted in his own ears. And what scared him far more was that his sight was becoming blurred. The Klingon's outline was indistinct, and his voice was not in synchronisation with his mouth. Chekov decided it was time for a little play-acting of his own.

"Despite your limited enthusiasm, I will tell you, even if it is only because I detest sitting in silence. You are not an entertaining companion."

"I am sorry. I'll try to polish up my manners," and Chekov refrained from adding, "in future."

"Your Enterprise," Kralik began, "is a blight upon the honour of the Klingon Empire. It has done more to vex my race than the rest of Starfleet combined. Time after time, it has made fools of us, paraded us as incompetent buffoons to the universe and slapped down our schemes as one would an infant's prank. There could have been no finer symbol of the Federation to crush, and with its destruction a massive blow would have been dealt to the vain self-confidence of your peoples."

"And the truce?" reminded Chekov.

"What of the truce? It is a fallacy, and has been since the day of its signing."

Chekov inclined his head at the veracity of this statement, and discovered that his head was reluctant to rise again - a dead weight pressed upon his skull.

"The Klingons have never desired peace," he said.

"And the Federation has?" asked Kralik sceptically. "Our races were not destined to be united, we shall be forever antagonists."

"Does that also... also..." Chekov wiped sweat from his eyes, strove to construct his words, "... also apply to the Romulans?"

Kralik's brow creased slightly at the question, but he answered, "There are obvious advantages to an alliance with the Romulans, but the disadvantage that upsets the balance is that they are as belligerent as we Klingons, and as ruthless in their quest for power..."

"Redeeming qualities!" rused Chekov, almost inaudibly, but Kralik had heard.

"It depends upon your viewpoint, Chekov, but can you understand that an alliance would not work, for they would not be content with equal rule, nor could they be the subordinate power. They would always crave more."

Chekov gazed at Kralik through sweat-smearred eyes. "No alliance? No compact?"

Kralik's puzzlement was, Chekov was sure, genuine. "No, none. Why do you insist...? Did you believe...?"

Chekov shook his leaden head. "I did not know what to believe," he said. An alliance had been so plausible, but Klingon technology was as advanced as the Romulans - they could easily have manufactured a cloaking apparatus of their own. Another military secret for the Federation to appropriate? "Your attack on the Enterprise, then, was a step to initiate war?"

Kralik looked offended. "Hardly so unsubtle!"

"The first of many steps, then," Chekov wearily amended. "And your party's arrival here? What were they to do? Kidnap?"

"Your powers of deduction have not diminished, Chekov," was Kralik's ambiguous reply. "But perhaps you have learned enough. True, a dead man cannot speak, but my conscience and honour might disturb me if I disclose more. At least you know the reason why the Deonna was sent to destroy the Enterprise."

"It might have been the other way around. I know a helmsman who shoots a pretty good phaser," murmured Chekov. An image of the chirpy Sulu sailed fleetingly through his mind; no thought or visual suggestion was capable of being retained for long. Other images followed... Uhura, the Captain, Scotty, even Spock, his scientific mentor, many friends... surely they hadn't perished? The Enterprise, in her career, had cultivated an aura of invincibility. Had the legend been unfounded?

"Why go on, Ensign, with this foolish optimism? Why go on at all?" said Kralik, quietly, reasonably, persuasively. "You are accomplishing little. Release me, and I will allow you to die with dignity."

Chekov's instincts rebelled against the creeping black stupor. No, dammit! He was a soldier, a graduate of Starfleet Academy, and above all he was Russian. And he had a duty. Irina might have ridiculed him, scorned his loyalties, but... Irina! Why think of her now? Fine time to whip up old memories. What had become of her? Was she on Earth? Still with revolution in her blood? He'd never know.

"Give in, Ensign. Permit yourself a final peace."

No! He wouldn't give in! He'd fight... fight... How he wanted to! He fought against the black lethargy, but the poison in his body, initially sluggish, had quickened its dominance over his brave defences.

From an immeasurable distance he heard Kralik breathe a heavy sigh and say, "Such a determined but wasted effort."

Wasted? No!

Kralik lunged, gripped the wrist of the hand that clutched the phaser, and viciously jerked it up and back to smash it against the wall. The pain barely registered, but Chekov's lacerated fingers loosened and the phaser clattered to the rocky floor. Chekov told himself to lash out, snatch the phaser, turn the tables again in his favour, but he had no strength... He had to sit there, sick at heart and helpless.

Kralik picked up the weapon and weighed it experimentally in his hand. "I'd have preferred a blaster pistol, but this should not be difficult to operate, and where my survival is concerned, Ensign, I cannot afford to be overly fussy."

Kralik rose and was compelled to stoop as his head brushed the cave's low ceiling. He massaged his legs with his left hand, grunting as feeling returned to his constricted limbs. Apart from necessary trips for sanitary purposes there had been no exercise. Kralik studied Chekov's limp figure, the open eyes the one sign he was still conscious, but they were glazed, the flicker of life waning.

"I must bid you goodbye, Chekov. I think to leave you to die and rot in private is dignity enough. You would not wish an audience, particularly when it would consist of one who will not mourn your demise." Kralik fell silent, then continued, "But I ought to give you due credit, Ensign; your courage impressed me." He glanced from Chekov to the phaser and back again. "No, I won't kill you and complete the poison's job prematurely; and it would be distressingly ironic to end your existence with your own weapon." Confident, smiling smugly, Kralik tucked the phaser into his belt. With his hunched shoulders, the impression he gave was of an evil, black and silver vulture, even more strongly than before. "Farewell, Chekov. I hope your suffering is not prolonged."

Kralik saluted mockingly and turned without another word of false sympathy. His retreating frame blotted out the moonlight and Chekov was in sudden, though transient darkness. An icy tremor of dread at his impending death swamped his previous fatalistic resignation, and the fear it ignited stirred him. It couldn't finish like this!

Frustrated beyond endurance he summoned every last vestige of will power, bullied his senses into revival, however momentary. If this gesture hastened his death, it would be worth it just to show Kralik he could die with his own special dignity.

Chekov pushed himself upright and tumbled onto all fours, the blood from his battered hand staining the cave floor. With tremendous resolve he staggered to his feet, willing every fibre to do as he commanded.

Kralik was just past the cave entrance, standing there with balled fists on hips, no doubt judging what route to take, whether or not he would be safe travelling at night. It was only a few metres to where he stood...

Chekov flung his anguished body forward, bowling into the Klingon by sheer force of momentum. Startled, Kralik crashed to the ground, and as he twisted his head, Chekov saw utter incredulity written on his face. Incredulity - and grudging respect. Chekov laughed inwardly. He'd shown him!

And now...? Chekov had collapsed upon the Klingon's legs, spent, not a spark of energy left in him, and from half-shuttered eyes he watched as Kralik, incredulity succeeded by terrible anger, reached for the phaser at his belt. There was no mercy in him now. Not the merest suspicion. How long Chekov would have lingered was about to become theoretical.

"Fool!" Kralik spat, gripping the phaser and taking steady, murderous aim. "Fool!"

"CHEKOV!"

The intent to murder was gone. With lightning speed Kralik's attention switched from Chekov to the origin of the shout. Shocked, disbelieving, he saw five men stride into view by the furthestmost cave. The violet rays of the moon threw the colours of their uniforms into confusion, but their design was that of Starfleet, and Kralik suddenly caught a flash of gold. Command gold, as Intelligence had taught them. Kirk! It had to be! All five men held phasers, and the stark tableau formed by Kralik and Chekov had been spotted.

With little thought for Chekov's condition, Kralik pushed him roughly away and scrambled to his feet. The Klingon fired a wide indiscriminate shot, sweeping the air before him, and the Enterprise men ducked, sought cover, giving Kralik the chance to spin on his heels and flee.

And run he would, he thought. He'd evade them, but circle back to plague and harm them until either they shot him, or he turned the phaser upon himself.

Chekov rolled several times, then lay deathly still. He had heard the shout, felt his flagging heart leap with recognition at his Captain's voice, but he had not the strength to raise his head or call Kirk's name. Something within him wanted to weep at his inability to even acknowledge their presence. As he sank into unconsciousness, he felt the warm pressure of a hand on his cheek, then was aware of nothing more.

"Bones?"

McCoy, one hand on Chekov, the other on the medical scanner, said tightly, "He's dying, Jim." Professionalism concealed his sorrow as he flipped open his communicator. "Scotty, get me up there on the double!" he said harshly. "Two to beam up, and have a full medical team meet us in the transporter room."

Scotty's reply was lost on Kirk, who rose and stepped back to join the rigid Vulcan; both were left standing on the periphery of the transporter sparkle as it engulfed McCoy and the prone Chekov.

Addressing the two Security guards and Spock, Kirk waved his phaser to indicate the Klingon's path. "After him!" he barked.

Kralik, running for all he was worth, heard the unmistakeable sounds behind him of men giving chase. Faster and faster he ran, his legs losing their stiffness. They would not catch him! Compared to Klingons, Starfleet men were miserable specimens, he knew; their peak of fitness was the stage at which a Klingon officer began his training. He'd outstrip them, beat them, score a victory to offset his earlier failure... Kralik turned his head to sneer, to gloat, to mock their impotence. He turned his head and never saw the fissure in the ground into which he fell, his scream ripping the night apart.

And it was thirty minutes later that the Enterprise men found his body there, on a ledge some ten metres down, broken and lifeless.

Sickbay hummed softly with its many reassuring, sub-aural sounds. The ward was dimmed in a simulation of night, and relief from the programmed twilight came from the diagnostic equipment and from the lamp at the desk where McCoy worked.

The ward housed one patient, and he was waking, dazedly blinking, then fully opening his eyes and focusing on the seated, blue-shirted figure. McCoy. Sickbay. Aboard the Enterprise. Home.

The realisation that he was alive overwhelmed Chekov and sent the various markers on the diagnostic panel above his bed bleeping alarmingly. McCoy's chair scraped the floor as the doctor hurried to Chekov's bedside, but the panel had quietened and McCoy's smile soothed even more.

"Welcome back, Pavel," said McCoy; then with a sprinkling of his typical caustic wit, "You sure chose a hell of a way to skip duty!"

Chekov's answering chuckle was feeble, but it was all he could manage.

McCoy patted his shoulder paternally. "Get some more sleep. Time for explanations later."

Chekov nodded and shut his eyes, not to slip back into the comatose state from which he had emerged, but to fall into a healing, natural slumber.

"... they were upon us before we knew what was happening. Their screening device is far more sophisticated than the Romulans', not even a rippling of space to aid us in detection. They came out of the screen shooting, but their first shot was askew. Perhaps the device momentarily altered their sights, or perhaps they were too busy congratulating themselves on surprising us to align their weapons properly. We were able to adopt battle stations and get in a couple of disabling shots before they'd even begun to obliterate us."

"I told Kralik I knew a helmsman who..." Chekov's smile faded in conjunction with his words and his gaze turned inwards, reliving an incident his companion could only guess at.

Kirk glanced over at McCoy, who was stocking instruments in a cabinet but had one ear cocked to the conversation. McCoy's mobile face advised Kirk not to worry. Naturally memories troubled Chekov, but he was mature, stable, and young. Soon, it would not renew the pain to talk of past events.

Kirk cleared his throat. "The Deonna was crippled, but by then the Organians had got wind of the Klingons' abuse of the treaty and came galloping to the scene like the old-time cavalry."

Chekov produced a smile which bore a trace of his old mischief. "Russian cavalry, I trust, Captain?"

Kirk grinned as the tension vanished. "Certainly, Mr. Chekov."

"With snow on their boots to prove it," put in McCoy. He voice-locked the cabinet and walked over to join them.

Kirk sat on a stool by Chekov's bed where the Ensign half-lay, half-sat, his black hair contrasting sharply with his pallor. McCoy had conceded to his having visitors today, and the Captain was the latest in a long line of callers. A steady stream had passed through the doors, overseen by McCoy, who had complained they turned his Sickbay into the main conference hall at Babel. Among them had been Uhura, who'd warmed him with a hug; Scotty, who'd magnanimously offered to smuggle him in a bottle of vodka if it would assist his recovery; Sulu, who'd brought him a get-well gift, a large unruly plant which occupied a side table, much to McCoy's chagrin; and the quietly-comforting Spock.

Kirk was the first of his visitors to ask him his story, and the first to relate the events in space while Chekov was on MZ20. The Ensign suspected the others had been under instructions not to speak of it, and he was correct. McCoy hadn't wanted Chekov to be bothered by snatches; he'd deemed it wise to have both stories told in one session. And Jim Kirk knew how to present the facts to a recovering but nonetheless ill young man.

Chekov had been in Sickbay for five days, for two of which he'd been deeply comatose. When McCoy had beamed up to the ship with the dying Ensign, he hadn't an inkling of what ailed him. His bloodied hand was the one indication of poor treatment by the Klingon, but his condition was more suggestive of some disease.

It had taken McCoy and his staff an hour, which Chekov looked unlikely to last, of thorough testing and examination before they'd identified the poison in his bloodstream, and it was only because they'd had a role in the considerable analysis made on the animal Zanduchi had sent to the laboratory that they'd been able to recognise the poison's constituents. A hunt for bite marks had been rewarded, to confirm the diagnosis, and before the Deonna's attack re-commenced work started at a frantic pace. McCoy remarked afterwards that one day he would be allowed to carry out his research in the correct chain of experimentation without having to test possible antidotes on a live subject, however tenuous the link with life might be. McCoy's hasty concoction had stayed the poison's progress, but it had been two days before they'd known whether it would actually reverse the process.

"What did the Organians do?" asked Chekov.

"Reprimanded the Klingons..." began Kirk.

"Much good it will do," McCoy interrupted. "They're off with their collective tails between their legs for the moment, but for how long?"

"Don't be pessimistic, Bones. This might have taught them that even if they appear a little late, the Organians will come and thwart their plans," said Kirk, but he could tell McCoy was unconvinced. "But I imagine, Pavel, you'd rather know why the Enterprise took two days to rescue you."

"I had wondered," Chekov said, lightly and without accusation.

"I'm ashamed to say that it wasn't until the attack was over and the Organians had dragged the Klingons off by the scruffs of their necks that we realised all the survey team members hadn't beamed aboard. The transporter technician had been injured as a result of the Deonna's first shot exploding too near to the hull; he was thrown against the console, knocked unconscious. No-one else realised that..."

"There were many separate beamings, Captain, so much equipment... It could easily happen," said Chekov, attempting to rid the Captain of his obvious discomfort. "And the Deonna's attack left no time..."

Kirk smiled gratefully. "Thank you, Pavel, but..."

McCoy cut short Kirk's words. "But, Pavel, he attaches the blame to himself."

A silent exchange between the doctor and the Captain argued the point, but by mutual agreement and regard for the Ensign's health, it hung in the air unsettled.

"When we discovered everyone hadn't been accounted for," Kirk went on, "we would normally have instituted a sensor sweep." He grimaced. "But although the Deonna wasn't successful in blasting us into smithereens, it had effectively damaged most of our sensors. It was a repeat of the kind of search we had to make when the Galileo was stranded on Taurus II. Centimetre by centimetre. It was sheer luck that Spock, with pinned-together circuits and taped wires, located two sets of readings. We couldn't judge accurately where to beam down, but we gambled..." Kirk became quiet; his recollection of what had occurred next was crystal-clear. The scream still echoed in his ears.

"I'm pleased you take the odd bet, Captain," Chekov said, bridging the pause. He toyed with the edge of the bed covering. "What...?" He did not know quite how to ask, did not even know why he wanted to, except to satisfy a curiosity, not malicious, not spiteful... Chekov couldn't define it. "What ... Kralik's body...?"

Kirk understood. Matching his tone to Chekov's emotionless timbre he answered, "It was beamed aboard, then handed over to the Klingon authorities at a designated place."

Chekov nodded and McCoy, hawk-eyed, recognised the signs of encroaching fatigue. The doctor stood, and gestured to Kirk to follow suit.

"Visiting time is at an end," he said. "Enough is enough for one day."

Kirk leaned towards Chekov conspiratorally. "This is what Spock and I have to contend with whenever we have the misfortune to be ill or injured! A spell in here, Pavel, and you'll be doing your utmost to keep out in future!" At McCoy's pained expression Kirk shrugged apologetically. "Only joking, Bones!"

Kirk stepped back and nearly cannoned into Sulu's present. Stroking the long silky leaves, he asked, "What is it, by the way?"

Chekov looked embarrassed. "Sulu did tell me, but I'm afraid ancient Latin was not my pet subject. It is supposed to have healing properties... it's in the scent. The natives of Galencia III place them in the rooms of the sick."

"Lot of mumbo-jumbo!" growled McCoy.

Chekov smiled. "So you said when Mr. Spock was here, Doctor."

Kirk's eyes twinkled knowingly, and he winked at Chekov. "What did Spock say to that, Bones?"

McCoy snorted. "What do you think? 'I'd have thought you'd be quite at home with it then, Doctor.' You wait - one of these days I'll show him I can be as much the scientist as he is!"

"Do you believe you'd win against his logic?"

McCoy ruminated on that. "No," he said at length. "But I'd have a damn good try at calling his bluff!"

Kirk laughed. "I'll look forward to it, Bones." He turned back to Chekov. "I appreciate he's the bossiest individual around, but you're to do as he says. You are sorely missed on the Bridge, Mr. Chekov."

Chekov grinned. "I'll be there as soon as I can, Captain."

The Captain and McCoy headed out of Sickbay, something buzzing between them about confirmation of a promotion tomorrow, but Chekov was too weary to take much notice. He settled down to sleep, which was all he did of late, and enjoyed the gentle fragrance of Sulu's unpronounceable gift.

Mumbo-jumbo? Maybe. But there could be some truth in it!
