

ScoTpress

SOMETHING

LOST

by

Sheila Clark

a STAR TREK

fanzine

S O M E T H I N G L O S T

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Something hidden. Go and find it. Go and look behind the Ranges --
Something lost behind the Ranges. Lost and waiting for you. Go!

The Explorer

Rudyard Kipling

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and becomes lost, is put out by ScoTpress and is available from

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6 Craigmill Cottages

Strathmartine

by Dundee

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S O M E T H I N G L O S T

"No, Admiral, I do not agree."

The Surgeon-General fought to control his exasperation, but it showed clearly in the studied quietness with which he spoke. "It has been clearly established that well-adjusted introverts are better suited to Starship life than most of the more blatantly extrovert types. They are better suited to Starbase life - especially those bases sited on planets rather than those set on artificial structures...insofar as they are suited to Starfleet life at all."

"Oh, come now, Doctor." Admiral Fitzgerald knew that the Surgeon-General preferred that title to his rank. "You can't deny that a few extroverts serve to liven up a dull rec room."

"Sure - if there's anyone in it except those same extroverts," Dr. Tokoto muttered, a note of cynicism in his voice that Fitzgerald either failed to catch or chose not to notice.

"Well, then," he said cheerfully, "I repeat my proposal that we no longer assign personnel of marked extrovert characteristics to Starbases, regardless of their attainments, but assign all personnel graduating from the Academy to posts on Starbases or Starships depending on their qualifications. We have, in my opinion, been prejudiced against extroverts in Starfleet for far too long, on the basis of a generalised psychologists's recommendation dating back almost three hundred years. It is time we realised that we are living in the twenty-third century, gentlemen, not the twentieth."

There was a murmur of general agreement. Looking round, Dr. Tokoto realised that he was in a minority of one, and gave a resigned shrug. Even here in the upper echelons of Starfleet, people could be moved by emotional rather than rational argument, and he paused to regret yet again the death of the Vulcan Admiral St'lar, his friend and sure ally in matters requiring logical thought. If St'lar had even been replaced by another Vulcan...but no, the space in the ranks of Starfleet Command had been filled by the Tellarite Vik, an intelligent and capable being but too prone to be swayed by emotional considerations. But then, he mused, that was a common failing of the Tellarites... Just who was responsible for this current idiocy Fitzgerald was dropping in their laps, he wondered, with a strong suspicion that someone, somewhere, was pulling rank for personal considerations.

"Very well," Tokoto conceded. "But may I make one last plea for what I consider sanity? Make this decision experimental, limited to one Starship, for a period of at least a year, and then reconsider on the basis of that crew's performance and adjustment to the new situation at that time."

Fitzgerald looked round the others. Tokoto added, coaxingly, "It would be foolhardly, surely, to make a decision that goes against all psychological recommendations without leaving an 'escape clause' - in case it proves that the psychologists of the past were correct."

"Three ships out of the twelve Starships," Admiral Komack, Fitzgerald's chief rival for the chairmanship of the Command meetings, suggested. "One might be insufficient for an accurate assessment. Shall we say the next three to require replacement crew?"

Tokoto made a face - bad enough to have one ship's efficiency rating under risk, but three was still better than the entire Starship Fleet. "All right, three ships," he agreed, glad that the rivalry between the two most senior Admirals was leading Komack to side with him, however reluctantly, and knowing that his reluctance to accept even this compromise was clearly audible.

Fitzgerald looked round, ignoring the tone of Tokoto's agreement, and apparently well enough pleased to accept the compromise himself. "All agreed? Excellent. Now we must consider a petition from Beta Draconis V..."

* * * * *

Captain James T. Kirk made a face as he watched the tape containing his new orders. It was the sort of mission he detested - semi-diplomatic, carrying representatives of a world anxious to learn more about the Federation to a meeting of the High Council. Such a mission was fraught with pitfalls, and since the Babel mission in particular, permanently nerve-racking. The Klingons would, he knew, do everything in their power to prevent further expansion of the U.F.P.

Spock watched the expressive face with some amusement - well-concealed, of course. It was a constant source of refreshment to him - even in the privacy of his own thoughts he denied that it was a source of amusement - to watch the changing and oh-so-revealing expressions on his friend's face.

Resignation - he had learned most of his now-extensive understanding of Human facial expressions from Kirk - replaced the annoyance-indignation-disgust-frustration flicking in rapid succession over the Captain's face as he sighed wearily.

"What do we know about the Ubarrak, Spock?"

"Very little." Spock paused briefly, considering. "They are of course humanoid and are thought to be of canine descent. Their appearance concurs; they still possess tails, and the angle at which the tail is held signifies their position in their culture - their rank, if you prefer. Our lack of tails to indicate our...degree of pride...will be a handicap in our dealings with them; they will possibly be inclined to consider us as subordinate as those of their own race whose tails are carried low. Their mouths and vocal cords are incapable of forming any Federation language, and for the same reason, no race in the Federation can master their language; translators will therefore have to be in use at all times."

Kirk made another face. "I don't like being completely dependent on translators," he commented. "You lose too many shades of meaning."

"You can do that even when both languages are spoken fluently, since different races usually have different concepts, different bases for thought," Spock replied evenly. "Too many abstract concepts are just that - abstract, and depend on the race's ethos, its views on honesty, morality, strength or weakness - all of these are subjective. Even I - I speak both Terran and Vulcan fluently, was trained in both from infancy although I spoke mostly Vulcan until I joined the Enterprise. I do not properly understand many Terran colloquialisms - as a teacher, my mother spoke properly grammatical Terran...and I would find it extremely difficult at times to translate completely accurately from one language to the other, retaining all the shades of meaning. I manage from day to day because I can think in both languages."

Kirk nodded, accepting the comment. "I suppose they will have the intelligence to realise that little problem. About the tails - we'll just have to hope that they will accept rank insignia in lieu of tails carried high. If they're already in contact with the Federation they must know we're all tail-less." He sighed. "I wish - oh, how I wish - that they'd let us get on with purely exploratory work!"

"This ship is too successful, Jim," Spock said sympathetically, responding to the wistful note in Kirk's voice. "Were we less successful, we might indeed be permitted to concentrate on exploration. Unless you with the Enterprise to lose her reputation as an extremely efficient vessel, you must accept these little inconveniences."

"Little!" Despite himself, Kirk laughed. "Yes, I suppose they are. Trust you to put things into perspective, my friend."

* * * * *

"Remember," Sgrral cautioned his underlings. "No member of any Federation tribe possesses a tail." A picture flashed onto the screen in front of him. "This pattern worn on the sleeves of Starship uniforms indicates the Captain. He is the senior officer on the ship we will be travelling on, and commands all the others." The picture changed. "This pattern indicates the Captain's immediate subordinates - if the Captain is equivalent to me, his immediate subordinates are of rank equivalent to Vrrrak."

There was a murmur of acknowledgement from the assembled Ubarrak. "However, as I understand it, there is some degree of responsibility carried by certain of those wearing this pattern that the others do not possess. Among themselves, those of the Federation understand this and who possess that responsibility. It will probably be best if we assume that all those wearing this pattern are of equal status. The next pattern - " a third pattern flashed onto the screen - "is more complex. I understand there is a considerable disparity in status among the wearers of this pattern. Some have much authority over even the others who wear this symbol; they are, in fact, in the position of Secretaries such as Rrorval - at least, that is the nearest I can come to understanding it. We must be careful not to offend. You understand, it would be easy to give offence without intending to, without even realising that we were giving it. The ship coming for us will be crewed predominantly by Humans, I understand. Their facial expressions tell what they are thinking, for those who can read such expressions. This - " another picture - " is a smile. It varies in degree from a slight upward curling of the mouth at the corners to a parting of the lips such as this, which closely resembles a snarl. It indicates pleasure."

Brrbrr, a nervous Junior Secretary whose tail was carried permanently between her legs, shivered. Sgrral noticed the shiver, and wondered if it was not too late to replace her. But he knew that it was. This group had been selected as the most suitable for the mission, and Brrbrr's knowledge of Terran - she could read it fluently although it was impossible for her to speak it - might be of considerable importance. It was a pity her attainment had not improved her self-confidence. He liked his underlings to show proper respect, but not to the degree of Brrbrr's fawning obsequiousness. Fortunately, the Terrans would not realise how extreme her attitude was. He would have preferred a male 'interpreter' - but no male had had Brrbrr's ability with Terran. She was a mere schoolgirl, too, barely adolescent...

Sgrral looked round. "Are there any questions?"

"Do all Terrans carry one of these patterned marks on their sleeves?" Drakk, his Adviser's Undersecretary asked.

"I understand there are some who do not," he said. "These are of the lowest rank, but again, there are degrees of seniority, I believe the word is. You cannot assume that because a Terran carries no pattern on his sleeve, that he is completely subordinate. It might be best to assume that the lowest ranking of them is equal at least to an Undersecretary." Sgrral knew that Drakk was inclined to bully those subordinate to him, and he did not believe that a Starship Captain would take kindly to one of his more subordinate visitors trying to bully any of his crew. "In addition, once we are off the Starship, we will be unable to depend on visual indications of seniority, and I have no information on how we will be able to identify rank."

"Must we mix with these Terrans?" Rrovral asked.

"It is probably unnecessary, yet it would be an ideal opportunity for us to observe members of the Federation in their everyday lives. I make no orders on this. If you wish to socialise with them, I see no harm; if you prefer to devote your time to working on our presentation to the Federation High Council, you are at liberty to do so."

Rrovral subsided, his tail drooping slightly. No, the wily old dog had made no order, but Rrovral knew well enough that the presentation had already been thoroughly gone over by the top Ubar government officials and it would

certainly be counted presumptuous for any mere secretary to go over it as if it had been compiled by a Junior Secretary like Brrbrr.

Sgrral looked round again. "Are there any more questions?"

There were none, and the Ubar Ambassador growled with satisfaction. "Very well. You are sure you all remember the patterns? Drakk?"

"The Captain wears two bands with a broken band between them. His immediate subordinates wear two bands. The next rank carries one band, but there may be some of them who are senior to the others, with nothing to indicate which the they are."

"Very good. You will meet here at dawn tomorrow. Dismissed."

The Ubarrak diplomatic group waited politely until Sgrral had left, then headed towards the door in strict order of rank. At last only Drakk and Brrbrr were left. She watched the Undersecretary nervously as he approached her. His ears pricked thoughtfully as he studied her. "You are going to be nice to me on this trip, aren't you, my dear?" he asked sweetly, but with an undertone of menace in his voice. She shuddered at it, but forced herself to say,

"You are already mated. What will your mate say?"

Drakk growled softly, deep in his throat. "She will not dare say anything, my dear. Indeed, she will probably be happy that I have not desired her to accompany me, as I could have done. You see, I knew you would be there, my dear - and you do want to be nice to me...don't you?"

She looked at him, eyes bright with fear, then, forgetting his right as a more dominant Ubar to precede her, she turned and darted out of the room.

He followed slowly, tongue lolling out in avatistic satisfaction. As he reached the stairs, he closed his mouth politely, well aware that if he was seen indulging such animal behaviour he would, even at this late date, be removed from the Ambassadorial party. And that would never do.

He had his own plans for the future -- and they did not entirely coincide with Sgrral's...

* * * * *

"Welcome aboard the Enterprise, Ambassador." James Kirk made no attempt to pronounce the Ubar Ambassador's name even although he knew the translator would correct any minor errors in his pronunciation.

"You honour us, Captain." Sgrral knew that the 'i'sound in the Captain's name would be unpronounceable; he also chose to omit the name.

"This is my First Officer, Mr. Wood; Chief Medical Officer, Dr. McCoy; Science Officer Spock; Chief Engineer Scott." Kirk had debated including Sulu, Chekov and Uhura, but had decided not to - it would be difficult enough for the Ubarrak to remember the five of them apart - well, the four of them if Spock's ears could be taken as an identifying feature. He knew that he was going to find it difficult to tell the Ubarrak apart, although the Ambassador was distinguished by a touch of grey round the muzzle.

Sgrral turned to his party. "My Adviser, Vrrak," he introduced. "Also Rrovral, Chief Secretary."

Kirk inclined his head politely, wondering if the Ubarrak would recognise the intent behind the gesture. Two pairs of ears pricked forward, and Kirk groaned silently. Not that he hadn't experienced this problem before; most greetings are stylised by custom going so far back that no anthropologist could even begin to trace their origins. The Ubarrak's stylised greetings, however, were dictated by the use of muscles which in Humans had atrophied into complete disuse, if indeed they had ever existed.

"Mr. Wood will show you to your quarters, sir," Kirk continued, "while I

take the ship out of orbit. I will be available to take you on a tour of the ship, if you wish one, an hour from now."

"I would indeed be interested to see around your ship," Sgrral said. "Is welcome."

Uh-oh. A phrase the translators had fallen down on, giving the closest meaning they could to the spoken words.

"If you would come this way, gentlemen," Wood said.

Kirk watched them go, slightly disturbed by the way that the last member of the party to leave carried his tail between his legs. It was some time before he discovered that several of the party were females.

He entered the bridge and stopped dead. "What the - What the devil is causing that smell?"

"We don't know, sir," Sulu replied as he rose from the command chair. "It's coming from life support, but they can't discover what's causing it."

"It's like sulphuretted hydrogen," Lt. Seval put in from the science console.

"A good old-fashioned stink bomb," Kirk translated. "Can't Life Support do anything to clear it?"

"They say not, sir - they say their circuits are clear."

"Well, we can't work in this stench. Chekov, Seval, Uhura, go down to Auxiliary Control and take over from there. The rest of us will join you as soon as you've secured your positions."

"Aye, sir." The three retreated thankfully.

When the report came through that Auxiliary Control was operative, Kirk, with a sigh of relief, gave the order to vacate the Bridge. He let the others go on, and turned off, headed for Life Support. There, he found everyone checking and double-checking their consoles. It was a scene of activity that should have gladdened any irate commander's heart, but it did nothing for Kirk's temper.

Lt. Prohaska came over to him. "I'm sorry, sir, there's nothing to indicate where that smell might be coming from. And we can't clear it until we find the source."

"Then I suggest you stop checking those consoles and try checking out the various access links in the system," Kirk said with deceptive quiet. He was just beginning to realise that they must have a practical joker aboard, and he didn't like the thought. There was no place on his ship for someone so irresponsible, and when he discovered which of the new crewmembers was the guilty party... Fuming, he headed for Auxiliary.

The hour that he had mentioned to the Ubar Ambassador was nearly up before Prohaska reported to him that the stink bomb had been found. It had been planted in the last access link before the Bridge, and was a slow-working kind, designed to emit fumes over a period of some hours. There was no indication of who had planted it. Kirk was not surprised.

He glanced round the command crew. "Well, that's the stink bomb found, but Life Support haven't cleared the air in the bridge yet. Once they report they have, you can go back there. If I'm wanted, I'll be showing the Ubar Ambassador round the ship." He paused at the turbolift door. "Mr. Sulu, you have the con."

"Aye, sir."

He found Spock waiting in the corridor assigned to the Ubarrak delegation, and paused. "You wanted something, Mr. Spock?"

"Captain, should you warn the Ambassador that someone aboard the Enterprise has a sense of humour that is warped, even for a Human?"

"Even for a Human? Prejudiced, Spock?"

"Captain, you must admit that the Human sense of humour is frequently somewhat...bizarre."

"Well, yes, I suppose it is. As for warning the Ubarrak...I hadn't thought of it. Do you really consider it necessary?"

"I am not sure. I have no doubt that in time we will discover who among the new crewmembers has a penchant for causing unpleasant smells, but until that happens, he could easily make a considerable nuisance of himself."

"I've been trying not to think of that. I don't think I'll say anything to Sigral just yet...but meanwhile, why don't you have a word with McCoy? Go over the psych profiles of all the new crew, see if any of them show anything out of the ordinary."

"Very well, Captain."

Kirk watched the Vulcan disappear round a bend in the corridor, then buzzed at Sgrral's door.

Spock found McCoy already deep in an investigation of psychological profiles. He glanced up as the Science Officer entered. "Yes, Spock. What can I do for you?"

"You seem to have begun already. You heard about the incident on the bridge?"

"By now I reckon everyone has."

"The person responsible must be one of the new crewmembers."

McCoy nodded. "It seems fairly obvious. But - " he indicated the profiles he had been studying - "nothing here shows any tendency towards practical joking. Two of the men show a higher extrovert rating than I'm happy about - I've always understood that blatant extroverts were always assigned to Starbases where it was easier for everyone else to get away from them. I mean, Jim's bete noir Finnegan at the Academy - I did some checking up on him, and he was assigned to Starbase 17, although from his ratings otherwise he'd have made a top engineer. But neither of these fellas shows any inclination towards practical joking. Right enough, I think I've spotted them - they were doing a 'funny man' act in the rec room a couple of nights ago, and give them their due, they were good; exhibitionists, maybe, but they seemed to want to be the life and soul of the party rather than sneak jokers. This boy looks more like someone that gets his kicks out of knowing he's causing mischief, even though nobody else knows it's him."

Spock considered the statement. "Mischief?" he queried.

"Yes. A stink bomb is a nuisance, an inconvenience, but hardly dangerous - at least, under normal circumstances, though I shudder to think what the consequences would have been if an emergency had arisen while Jim was moving command to Auxiliary Control. It's a schoolboy type 'joke'...maybe I should be looking for signs of immaturity."

"The Captain would certainly be gratified if you could discover anything definite, Doctor. Is there anything I can do to assist you?"

McCoy shook his head. "I don't think so, Spock, thanks. How can I tell you what to look for when I don't know myself?" He sighed. "It's typical, you know. If we'd picked up two or three new crew, it would have been easier to pinpoint one of them; but did we pick up two or three? No. We picked up twenty-seven, that's how many we picked up. And were any of those twenty-seven assigned to Life Sciences, the most obvious one to check out for this particular 'joke'? No. This lad's cunning, Spock."

Spock frowned slightly. "I believe I can follow your logic - for once. You think that any future tricks he perpetrates will be aimed at places where it will be difficult to assign blame, so that he can remain 'lost in the crowd'?"

"I could almost guarantee it."

"Seval and I could meld with all the new crew members -- " Spock began.

"If we can't find him any other way, we might have to take you up on that," McCoy said. "But I wouldn't ask it of you just yet, Spock, and I'm sure Jim wouldn't either. It's not as if he was endangering the ship."

They were interrupted by the door opening. Kirk entered, escorting four Ubarrak -- the grey-muzzled Sgrral, one that Spock decided was Vrrak -- his facial hair seemed fractionally lighter than most, Spock thought -- and two who had certainly been in the group who had not been introduced. Sgrral's tail was carried high, almost at right angles to his body; Vrrak's almost as high. The other two were held low -- certainly lower, Spock decided, than Rrovral's had been, and he wondered why these two should be included in the tour when Rrovral was not. Later he discovered that these were the mates of Sgrral and Vrrak; of low status, as all females were, but granted certain privileges because of the high rank of their mates.

McCoy moved across to greet them politely and Spock dropped back beside Kirk while the Doctor explained as concisely as he could the purpose of the diagnostic beds.

In a low voice he repeated the gist of his conversation with McCoy, and Kirk frowned.

"He's right about one thing, Spock -- I won't let you or Seval meld with all those people unless there's no alternative and the safety of the ship is at stake." He thought for a moment. "I wonder if one of his extroverts is still the joker, carrying out a double bluff?"

"Captain?"

"Acting up, getting himself noticed...so that it's so obvious to suspect him that nobody does."

Spock considered the explanation. "Humans can be very devious at times," he sighed.

"I think the best thing to do right now is -- apparently -- ignore it. We'll know he caused some trouble, of course -- that's unavoidable -- but a practical joker gets half of his fun out of the furore he causes. Not getting any official notice would be quite galling to him. And we'll continue to ignore his little games in the hope of drawing him out, encouraging him to be just a little careless."

"And if he plays some trick on the Ubarrak, Captain?"

"That could be awkward. If that happens, I'll throw the book at the entire crew -- yes, I know that's unfair, but crew reaction would be so obviously against him that I think he would get the message. And the Ubarrak would be appeased -- at the moment that's the most important point."

McCoy returned the visitors to Kirk, who ushered them towards the door. As they went, Sgrral said, "Is welcome, Doctor."

As the party left, McCoy glanced at Spock. "What would you say that meant, Mr. Spock?"

Spock's eyebrow lifted. "I assume he meant to say 'Thank you'."

Drakk left Brrbrr's room with a satisfied smirk on his face. The young, terrified Junior had indeed 'been nice to him' and her unwillingness had added spice to his pleasure.

He turned a corner and almost bumped into a Human crewman busily occupied with a brush outside Sgrral's door. The Human jumped, almost unduly startled.

Drakk remembered his orders. It would do no harm to adhere to them -- for the moment.

"My apologies," he said, albeit ungraciously.

"Oh, that's all right. I didn't expect to see anyone around this late."

It was difficult to detect tones of voice in the even, translated voice, but Drakk's sensitive ears could find no trace of embarrassment in the Human voice. "You are working late," he commented, only mildly curious since it seemed the man had the right to be there.

"Yes, there are some jobs that have to be done during ship's night, like this painting one. I thought your party would all have been asleep by now."

Drakk allowed a note of amusement to creep into his voice. "Not all of us are accompanied by our mates. And if a young and pretty Junior is willing..." He allowed his voice to trail off suggestively.

The Human bared his teeth in the snarl that Sgrral had said denoted amusement. "You've been enjoying yourself?" the Human asked. "Me, now, I find a bit of a fight adds spice. Makes me feel more dominant, like; more of a man."

Drakk decided that this Human -- he wore no pattern on his sleeves -- must be of low status, yet ambitious. "How long have you been on this ship?" he asked. The answer might be quite informative, give him some insight into these Humans.

"Oh, I'm newly qualified -- I joined the ship two or three weeks ago."

"So you are still quite young?"

"I'm twenty three." This time he sounded defensively insulted.

Twenty three? Twenty three was...almost revered ancient! But...

"What is the Human life span?" he asked shrewdly.

"Hundred to hundred and twenty."

Ah. By compasiron, he would be perhaps four by Ubar standards. Newly adult, like Drakk himself. So -- Humans, like Ubarrak, had a status hierarchy that went by age as well as strength.

A half plan was dawning in his mind. It would do no harm to cultivate this young Human... "So long?" he asked as if awed. And indeed, he was slightly awed. A hundred... That was practically immortality!

The Human stared at him. "How long do your people live, then?" he asked.

"The Ambassador is twenty five, and he is very old. He should have retired almost a year ago, but he refuses to admit his age. I wouldn't expect him to live for more than another few months."

"Twenty five?" the Human whispered. "We've barely fully qualified then! How old are you?"

"I am nearly four years old," Drakk told him.

The Human had heard ship's gossip that the Ubarrak were of canine descent. Apparently this extended -- approximately -- to their life spans, four to five times less than Human. Amazing how superior it made him feel. The Ubar seemed friendly, too; memories of the First Officer's general lecture on how they should behave towards their passengers flashed through his mind, and in the same moment he dismissed them as so much diplomatic hot air. This Ubar was like a friendly dog -- by God, it would make the Captain and First Officer sit up if he was seen going around with one of them! And that blasted Science Officer, too...

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Drakk. What's yours?"

"Rivas. Ensign Carlos Rivas." He shrugged. "I haven't been assigned to

a department yet - for the moment I'm still in the Maintenance squad. I'm hoping to get into Life Support."

"Ah. I am an Undersecretary. It is a good position, and one day I will be in line for an Ambassadorship." No need to mention that at his age he should still be a Junior Secretary. He had been...fortunate. "Of course, until now all our Ambassadors have been involved only in intra-planet diplomacy; it would be good to be Ambassador for Ubarr on another world."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I could have got work on Earth no bother, and with a lot less effort than getting through Starfleet Academy - even though I didn't specialise in anything there. The ones who specialise have to do an extra year, sometimes even two. But I wanted to get off Earth, see a bit more of the Universe."

Drakk yawned cavernously. He had had a long day, and so much had been happening that he had missed his mid-afternoon nap; bed was beginning to seem most attractive. "I regret, friend Rivas - I have had a busy day, and I grow weary. However, I would like to talk with you again - I think we have many opinions we could exchange to our mutual benefit. When can I see you again?"

"Well, I'm on night duty," Rivas said. "I come off duty 0700 hours tomorrow morning. Some of the fellows on night duty stay up then, go to bed in the early afternoon, and get up in time to go on duty again. Me, I prefer to go to bed then, get up mid-afternoon and have some off-duty time when I'm wide awake. I'm free till 2100 hours."

"Whereas I will be attending to my duties until..." Drakk hesitated while he converted Ubar time to ship's time..."1800 hours."

"Say we meet up at 1900 hours, then, in rec room three?" It was the biggest of the rec rooms, the one where he would be most noticed. "That'd give you time to eat."

Drakk sniffed carefully, committing the Human's scent to memory. "1900 hours in rec room three," he repeated. He knew he would stand no chance of remembering the man from his appearance, and suspected that the opposite might well also be true. However, despite Sgrral's implied order that they fraternise with the Humans, it was unlikely that any other of the Ubarrak would be entering rec room three at the exact same time; Rivas would have no problem in recognising him.

It was with a certain feeling of self-satisfaction that Drakk entered his cabin. He would be seen to be obeying Sgrral's 'order' while at the same time possibly advancing his own ambition...

Rivas painted on. Monotony, relieved for a few moments while he spoke to Drakk, set in again; the Ensign began to ponder ways of relieving it once more.

The exposure was tremendous, the surface greasy and treacherous. Kirk was just reaching for the vital handhold when an alarm bell sounded, making him jump. He felt his balance going, and grabbed wildly at the rock face for something to permit him to retain it just as the alarm sounded again.

This time he identified it, and reached, suddenly wide awake and with heart beating wildly, for the intercom. "Kirk here."

"Sulu here, Captain. Sir, I just passed the Ubarrak's cabins on my way to the bridge, and someone has painted 'Good dog' on all their doors."

Kirk drew a deep breath. That bloody practical joker! Luckily it was unlikely that any of the Ubarrak would be able to understand the words, but the sooner they were obliterated again, the better. "Get someone from Maintenance down right away to paint it out," he ordered grimly.

"Yes, sir." The intercom went dead.

Kirk punched it again. "Kirk to Wood."

There was hardly any delay. "Wood here, Captain."

"I'd like a word with you in my quarters in five minutes."

"Yes, Captain."

By the time Wood appeared, Kirk had washed. He was pulling his pants on as he said, "Our joker's struck again, Mr. Wood."

"He has?" Wood frowned.

Kirk gave him the details as he finished dressing, and the First Officer thought for a moment. "I think Maintenance is working in that part of the ship at the moment," he offered.

The Captain grunted, and returned to the intercom. "Maintenance," he said.

There was a short delay. "Maintenance - Lt. Frew, here."

"Lieutenant, what work is currently being done in the region of Deck 5, cabins 9 - 18?"

"It's being painted during the graveyard shift, sir - sorry, I mean third watch."

Kirk allowed a touch of amusement to tinge his voice. "I am aware of the term, Lieutenant - I've served my share of duty on it. Can you tell me who was working there last night?" He knew Frew would be just on duty.

"Just a moment, Captain, and I'll check the roster... Ensign Rivas, sir."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." He glanced at his chronometer. "Ensign Rivas will be off duty now," he muttered to Wood, who nodded. "I'd like a word with Mr. Rivas as soon as possible, Mr. Frew," he went on.

"He usually goes straight to bed, sir," Frew told him, and he nodded. Some men did, he knew.

"In that case I won't disturb him. But I'd like to see him as soon as he comes on duty again."

"I'll leave word for him, sir."

Kirk flicked off the intercom. "I would doubt that Rivas is the guilty party," he said, half to himself. "It's too obvious. But he should be warned not to leave paintpots lying around where anyone else can get hold of them."

"Come to think of it, Captain, Mr. Rivas is one of our new crew members," Wood said. "Though from what I have seen of him, he appears to be a sensible man."

Kirk stared at him. "Not one of McCoy's pair of extroverts?" he asked anxiously.

"No, sir. They are both assigned to engineering."

As it happened, Rivas had not yet gone off duty, but had been promptly assigned by Lt. Coupar, just before he went off duty, to paint over the offending slogans. He did so with bitterness in his heart, knowing that Coupar suspected him of having painted them on in the first place.

When he returned to Maintenance with the paintpot, Frew intercepted him. "The very person! Rivas, the Captain wants to see you."

"Now?" He was already half an hour into overtime for which he would receive no credit, he knew; it was just hard luck if someone's watch over-ran.

"Yes, now - and he didn't sound too pleased, either."

Rivas sighed. No, the Captakn probably wouldn't be too pleased - even though the slogan hadn't been insulting and the aliens probably wouldn't have been able to read it anyway.

He buzzed at the Captain's door reluctantly, and obeyed the brisk 'Come!' that replied to it.

The Captain was not alone; he was checking over something with the Science Officer. Rivas shivered. Not that he had anything against Vulcans, exactly... but they looked at you as if they could see right into your head, could detect every thought...and he had already clashed once with Spock over a job that the Vulcan claimed he had skimped. And he hadn't - he had just...cut a few corners while he was doing it.

Rivas pulled himself to attention before the desk. "Ensign Rivas, sir."

Kirk nodded. "Ensign, you were painting in Deck 5 last night."

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see anyone while you were working?"

"Only one of the Ubarrak, sir. He had been visiting one of the others - one of the females - and was on his way back to his cabin."

"I see. And when you finished the job, what did you do?"

"I took the paintpot and brush back to Maintenance, sir."

"About what time would that be?"

Rivas hadn't really paid that much attention. "I'm not sure, sir. About half way through the watch."

Kirk nodded. "Very well, Ensign. That is all."

"Thank you, sir." Rivas left smartly.

Kirk gazed at the closed door. "What do you think?"

"I don't know," Spock replied slowly. "I have seen him before - I caught him performing an inadequate cleaning assignment in the science lab some ten days ago - a quantity of corrosive fluid had been dropped accidentally. He was, I consider, not best pleased at being supervised while he re-did the entire task."

The Captain grinned. "I bet he wasn't," he said, even as he thought, Thank heaven you spotted him, my friend. "Wood thinks he seems a sensible man," he said, half provocatively.

"I do not. I do not think he appreciated the danger even after I pointed it out to him," Spock said drily.

"Which would make him too unimaginative to be our practical joker," Kirk suggested.

Spock considered. "Does a practical joker have much imagination?"

"Depends on the scope of his pranks. Some practical jokes are quite clever - looked at objectively."

Spock merely grunted.

Kirk's hopes of a quiet trip, already low because of the practical jokes, died completely the next morning when McCoy reported to him that he had just been called to Vrrak's cabin by the Ambassador, who had been called by the Adviser's mate. Vrrak was dead; a heart attack. It was not, his mate admitted, entirely unexpected; Vrrak had had two heart attacks in the previous year but had been passed as fit for this assignment by his doctor. However, he had not felt well when he went to bed, and he had been dead when she woke in the morning. McCoy had had time for a quick examination, and had confirmed what she knew; Vrrak's heart had been unable to stand the strain or the excitement of this assignment.

After that, Kirk thought, things could only get better.

The next two days passed uneventfully. The remaining Ubarrak seemed to be

anxious to mix with the Enterprise personnel; Kirk, not entirely willingly, found himself being approached constantly by Sgrral. The Ambassador's questions were intelligent, the Ubar clearly wanting to discover more about the Federation and its workings than he might do from the diplomats officially representing it, but it cut into Kirk's precious free time to an enormous extent. Whenever possible, Spock joined them and frequently directed Sgrral's questions towards himself, so that Kirk had little to do save sit with them, listening and putting in the odd word, but it was impossible for him to relax completely.

Wood, who might have helped him, seemed oblivious of the demands the Ubar Ambassador was making on the Captain. Indeed, Spock was doing much of Wood's social duty while the First Officer sat in a small group composed of Ensign Rivas, Ensign Cerbah from Engineering, Lieutenants Zmuda and Lester from Security, Yeoman Schumacher and one of the Ubarrak - one of the more junior ones, to judge from the lowish angle of the tail. All were relatively new crew, Kirk noted subconsciously, and frowned slightly. It wasn't necessarily bad for discipline for the command crew to be on friendly terms with the juniors, but it wasn't all that good either...especially considering what he already knew about Rivas. He must remember to ask Scotty and Security Chief Baillie about Cerbah, Zmuda and Lester. Schumacher he knew as a conscientious enough but rather woolly-headed girl who wasn't likely to make any serious mistakes but would never be good enough for promotion either. She seemed to be making a play for Cerbah, who was certainly handsome enough, but who seemed to have little interest in her. Lester was good-looking in a brittle sort of way; Wood seemed to be paying her particular attention, and she did not seem to be averse to it. Just as long as she didn't take advantage...

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Uhura had taken another Ubar under her wing - the rather delicately-built one with a tail carried so low that it was held curled between its owner's legs. Uhura seemed to be carrying most of the conversation, too.

Kirk commented on it to Uhura on the second day. The Communications Officer frowned.

"Yes. Captain, I'm not happy about the situation there. Birbrr is very young, even by Ubar standards - just a teenager. She's been pushed into a job she's not mature enough to handle because she has a rare gift for learning languages. She reads Terran perfectly. But she doesn't have any social awareness - her entire life has been one of study...at least since her gift was discovered. Ubarrak females have only recently been emancipated - her mother's generation... well, it was unthinkable for a properly-brought-up female to work, and it's only been in the last five years or so that there have been changes. Of course, in our terms, that would be twenty to thirty years. Females are still - well - undominant, with very few exceptions; it's easy to declare sexual equality, but attitudes die hard. She doesn't know how to assert herself, and her mother certainly wasn't able to teach her... But what's really worrying me is, one of the males in her party is forcing himself onto her. She doesn't say much about it, but I gather he's older, more dominant because of that anyway, and she's terrified of him. They rely a lot on honour making their system work, and as a rule it does, but there is the odd case where someone without honour comes along - like Drakk. And Captain - Drakk is the Ubar that was with Mr. Wood last night."

Kirk knew what she meant. Uhura, too, didn't trust Wood's judgement. However, rather than encourage Uhura to say anything that could be construed as openly critical of her superior officer, he changed the subject slightly.

"You've managed to worm a lot out of this Birbrr."

Uhura smiled. "It wasn't terribly easy to get her started, but once she did... Of course, she should complain to Sigral, but she says that if she does, Drakk will find some way to punish her."

"A typical bully, in other words."

"Yes, Captain."

"Well, do what you can to build up her confidence."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk was still thinking about this exchange when he found Sgrral waiting for him in the mess. "Good afternoon, Ambassador."

"Good hunting, Captain."

By now Kirk suspected that this was as standard and stereotyped a greeting as 'good morning', spoken for politeness and without really meaning anything.

Kirk sat and pulled his tray towards him. He savoured his first mouthful of coffee. "Ah -- I needed that."

He glanced round the mess; it was fairly busy, with crew just come off watch anxious for coffee, at least, even if they didn't mean to eat until later. Another Ubar was sitting talking to Lt. Masters; even as he watched, a second Ubar entered, tail held very low -- though not as low as Brrbrr's -- and joined the pair. "It's nice to see your people mixing with mine, Ambassador."

Sgrral gave a rumbling sound deep in his throat that sounded vaguely reassuring -- the translator failed to interpret it. "My mate and Urrav's," he identified.

"They don't have an official position in your party, I understand." It was the first time the subject had arisen naturally, and it was most a propos.

"No, although of course they welcome the opportunity to see members of your Federation at close quarters, and their comments are of value to me."

"Do any of the others have their mates along?" Kirk asked casually.

"Brrvral brought his. Drakk chose not to," Sgrral said, his translated voice even more expressionless than usual.

Kirk's eyebrows lifted, as much at the lack of expression as anything else. "Surely that is unusual?" he asked.

"We were somewhat surprised," Sgrral agreed. "Ubar males tend to be possessive of their mates, and Ubar females very jealous."

Which was much the same thing, Kirk thought. "Perhaps -- er -- he felt he would like a little female company -- outside his marriage?"

Sgrral's whole body seemed to stiffen. "The very thought is an insult!" he snapped.

"Is it?" Kirk asked. "Ambassador, ask Miss Birbir what she thinks. According to my Communications Officer, Drakk has been forcing his attentions onto Birbir. And one of my ensigns on a late night assignment saw Drakk leaving a cabin where he was 'visiting' a female and returning to his own quarters."

Sgrral's jaws gaped. "Impossible!" he whispered.

"Perhaps that is why my people have seen it while you have not," Kirk suggested. "It is reprehensible, but not unknown among Humans. We have an eye for scandal which your people lack."

"Yes... I will ask Brrbrr."

"According to Uhura, she's terrified of Drakk, who is using his superior status to force her acquiescence," Kirk added helpfully.

"I will find out," Sgrral promised -- Kirk wasn't sure whether he was promising the Human or himself that he would take action.

However, by evening the next day, nothing appeared to have been done.

Kirk was pondering the situation with regard to the Ubarrak as he walked along the corridor towards his quarters. Just off duty, he intended to have a relaxing evening; a leisurely meal, then a couple of hours' chess with Spock.

And then his feet went from under him. He just had time to register that someone had left the corridor littered with something like ball-bearings before his head hit the deck with a solid thump.

Half dazed, Kirk pushed himself into a sitting position, the pounding in his head making it difficult for him to think.

Ball-bearings. He was sure of it. He ran his hands over the surface of the corridor - reaching over to investigate further afield when his first sweep detected nothing - still finding nothing.

Cautiously he scrambled to his feet to move equally cautiously towards the nearby intercom. The floor seemed good and solid this time, with nothing underfoot that should not have been there.

Lips set, he punched the intercom. "Security."

He was answered almost instantly. "Security. Duty Officer Shacter, sir."

"I want a couple of security guards to check over corridor one, deck five," he ordered. "Purpose - to find any objects on the floor that should not be there."

"Aye, sir."

If Shacter was surprised by the order he gave no sign of it. Kirk walked, still slightly hesitantly, on to his cabin.

Inside, he sank gratefully into the chair beside his desk. He still felt dizzy from the fall, slightly sick, and his left leg ached abominably where he had wrenched it.

He debated whether to call McCoy, feeling slightly silly at even considering calling for him because of a mere fall, then changed his mind. His head was pounding so badly that it needed the relief of a painkiller. The last thing he felt like doing was walking to sickbay; unsteadily still, he reached for the intercom. "Sickbay."

"McCoy here."

"Bones, can you spare a minute? I'm in my cabin. Oh - bring your little black bag."

"My... Jim, have you hurt yourself?"

"Nothing serious, but I'd appreciate a painkiller."

"I'll be the judge of whether it's serious. I'll be with you in two minutes."

He arrived in several seconds less than that, slightly out of breath. Kirk grinned. "You didn't have to run, Bones, I'm not dying."

"Hmm." McCoy cast a quick professional eye over his Captain. "What happened?"

Hesitantly, Kirk explained. McCoy pursed his lips, a worried look on his face. "Could this be our practical joker again?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Kirk said, wincing as McCoy ran would-be gentle fingers down his leg. "Ouch!"

"Sore? Hmm. You haven't broken anything, but you've pulled a muscle. You'll ache for a day or two - though there's no serious damage done. What you do have though is a mild concussion; I'm ordering you to take it easy for a couple of days. Here will do, but if I catch you trying to go on duty, it'll be in sickbay. Understood?"

He took a bottle out of his medikit and shook a tablet out onto his hand.

"Here; this'll sort the headache."

"Thanks." Gratefully, Kirk swallowed it.

McCoy shook his head enviously. "I wish I could down pills without water. Come to that, I wish more of my patients could. It's a useful ability at times."

Kirk grinned slightly. "Considering what the water on board tastes like, I don't blame you."

"It's perfectly pure..." McCoy said.

Kirk's grin widened at the doubtful note in the doctor's voice. "I keep trying to tell myself it's all my imagination because I know it's recycled," he admitted, "and I don't convince myself very well."

"I don't even try," McCoy admitted. "It tastes foul, and that's all there is to it."

"The price we pay for having a career in Starfleet," Kirk commented, relieved to feel the dwarves who had been trying to hammer a hole through his skull lessen their attempts. "Are those new pills you've got?"

"Acting already, are they? Yes. I got a batch last Starbase, but you're the first guinea-pig to get one. Their use is restricted to specific pains, and we've had a trouble-free flight since...if you discount practical jokers and aliens with weak hearts."

The intercom buzzed, and Kirk leaned over to it. "Kirk here."

"Lt. Shacter, sir. We can't find anything in the corridor that shouldn't be there."

"Nothing at all?" Kirk sounded slightly incredulous.

"There were a couple of ball-bearings beside the wall, but you'll often get the odd ball-bearing lying around."

"Yes, of course... Thank you, Mr. Shacter." He flicked the intercom off, and looked up at McCoy. "Ball-bearings," he said.

"So?"

"Two ball-bearings."

Understanding dawned on McCoy's face. "You wouldn't have skidded on just two of them. What happened to the others?"

"Yes. What happened to the others. I must have been out for a few minutes - long enough for whoever scattered the things to come back and clean them up. Which also means that he must have been close, probably watching."

"So I could have been right. This could have been our joker."

"Yes." Kirk's voice was grim. "And I don't like it. Something like a stink bomb is bad and bad enough, but it's a childish prank, does no actual damage, just causes a helluva lot of bother. This was downright dangerous. Someone could have been seriously injured."

"He probably got quite a fright when he realised his victim was the Captain," McCoy suggested. "Maybe it'll teach him a lesson."

"I hope so." If anything, Kirk's voice became even grimmer. "Bones - don't say anything about this. Keep your ears open. See if anyone shows any sign of knowing about it. Word'll get round that I ordered a search of an empty corridor; only the culprit is going to know why."

McCoy nodded. "I'll do that. Now, time you forgot about work; relax, try to forget about the ship...it'll manage for a few hours with Wood in the command chair."

Kirk made a face. "I suppose so." It would be so much easier if he trusted the man more!

McCoy watched him settle down with a book, and left. He studied the floor carefully as he went - but like the security guards, he found nothing.

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"I want a report," Kirk said grimly, "on the new personnel." He looked round the section heads accusingly.

The Chief Engineer shrugged. "All the Engineering staff are good at their work," he replied simply. "The two 'song and dance' men are particularly good - though nobody likes working with them. They get a bit wearing after a wee while, and that's the truth. But all that you can say against them is that all that concentrated extrovertness gets very tiring. Irritating. Distracting, even. It could make someone careless - but there's a long mile between carelessness and deliberate..." He broke off, unable to think of a word that suitably expressed his opinion of practical jokes.

"Thank you, Mr. Scott," said Kirk. "Mr. Sulu?"

"Well, I only got two new men in my department. They're both good solid dependable types; I don't think either of them is the kind to think about practical jokes - in fact, I get the impression that one of them at least is rather low on sense of humour."

"Any chance that he's running a complicated bluff?" Kirk asked suspiciously.

"No, I'd back Sulu on that," McCoy put in. "I know the man he means; almost too serious for his own good. He swings almost too much towards introversion; a little further and he'd be almost depressive."

"Mm. Mr. Baillie?"

The Security Chief shook his head. "Like Mr. Sulu, I didn't get many," he said. "I got three - one with this last batch and two when we were at Benecia a few weeks ago. Zmuda is a cheerful sort of chap - likes socialising, but his sense of humour seems to stop short at the dirty joke level. Strang is too busy chasing Yeoman Colt in his off-duty hours to think about anything else, and Lester has her eye on promotion already. I think she sees herself as the ship's next Security Chief."

"Do you?" Kirk asked curiously.

Baillie grinned, then said seriously, "Not unless she stops sticking her neck out. She's young enough to mistake recklessness for courage. She's not your man, Captain; she's a career officer, and not one to do anything as stupid as play practical jokes."

Kirk grunted. "Spock?"

"Only one new member of staff joined me, Captain, and she has been slow to 'find her feet', I believe is the expression. She appears to be very shy."

"So you discount her?"

"Yes, sir."

"Miss T'Pol?"

"I'm sorry, sir; none of the personnel assigned to my department stands out. Yeoman Schumacher is the only one I've noticed at all, and though it is for negative reasons, they're not the right ones."

"So what's wrong with her?"

"I'd say she joined Starfleet for the wrong reasons. She's looking for a husband, and doesn't have any real interest in her work."

"In that case we'll recommend her for transfer as soon as possible. Mr. Wood?"

"I haven't noticed many of the new crew particularly," he said. "I've spoken to one or two in the rec room on occasion, of course... As Mr. Baillie

says, Lt. Zmuda is a lover of slightly off-colour jokes, and indeed knows a great many, though he does temper the ones he tells when there are any female crew in his audience. I've spoken to Cerbah from Engineering, too - he's another one for dirty jokes. The only other ones I've had anything to do with are Ensign Rivas - I think he has potential if we could only find the most suitable department for him - he's interested in Life Sciences, and I think we could try to slot him in there as soon as there's a vacancy - Yeoman Schumacher and Lt. Lester. Miss Schumacher is harmless; not very clever, but I think Uhura is being a bit hard on her."

"I'm not sure," Kirk said thoughtfully. "I noticed her myself, on day, and it did seem to me that her mind was very much on Cerbah. Go on."

"As for Miss Lester - now she is potentially brilliant, and I can't understand why she's wasting her time in Security."

"You don't agree with Mr. Baillie, then?"

"What, that she's reckless? No, sir, I do not. I think she is possibly the most outstanding of our new personnel."

"That's quite a testimonial." Kirk knew that he would be more impressed if it had been made by anyone other than Wood. As it was, he noted it with a touch of scepticism, feeling that Baillie's more astringent comment was probably more accurate. Wood was too inclined to let his own feelings rule his reaction to someone, and would certainly mistake recklessness for bravery if he liked the crewman. Momentarily, he wondered if Wood was sleeping with her; from the ruthless assessment Baillie had made about her, it didn't seem unlikely.

"So none of you can come up with any possible suspects for our mystery 'joker'," Kirk said.

His senior staff looked at each other. Nobody answered.

"Very well, gentlemen. Dismissed."

Spock and McCoy both remained behind when the others left. Kirk looked from one to the other, well aware that his First Officer should be the one to be here offering a helping shoulder to his worried Captain. But Wood never did seem to think of anything like that.

"Any ideas?" he asked gloomily.

"Nothing useful," McCoy muttered dolefully.

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A flashing light on his console drew Sulu's attention; he pressed the button to extend his desk viewer and checked it as soon as it was fully extended. "Mr. Wood," he said, "we're heading into an ion storm. Magnitude...three at the fringe...possibly as strong as magnitude six at its heart."

Wood looked round towards the science station, but Spock was not there; the console stood empty, and he remembered that the science officer was currently checking over some test results. With a muttered "Damn!" at the waste of time, he said, "Red alert, Uhura - and call Mr. Spock to the bridge."

"Yes, sir." She gave no indication that she considered the second part of the order superfluous. As soon as the red alert sounded, Spock would automatically head for the bridge.

In the event, Kirk arrived along with the Vulcan, who had actually been reporting to him when the alert sounded. As Spock headed for his station, Kirk snapped, "What's the trouble, Mr. Wood?"

"Ion storm, sir." No need to add that he was waiting for Spock's report before deciding whether to alter course or not. He made no attempt to hand command over to Kirk; he knew that the Captain was off duty on McCoy's orders, whatever his superior officer might think about those orders at this precise moment.

"Storm strengthening," Spock reported. "Now magnitude four." He glanced over towards the command chair. "Recommend altering course to avoid the heart of the storm, sir."

"Mr. Sulu - " Wood began. The Enterprise jolted; once, twice, again. The lights dimmed, flickered, and brightened once more; flickered again as the ship jolted yet again, more violently this time, sending those of the crew who had not fastened their restraints flying, and steadied to light up a scene of tangled arms and legs.

Crew personnel picked themselves up and scrambled back to their posts. Kirk sat where he had fallen, seeing no point in getting up in order to stand while his second in command occupied the command chair.

"Report!" Wood snapped.

The reports began coming in. Damage minimal...no serious injuries...

Spock straightened from his science console even as Sulu glanced up towards the viewscreen with a worried frown. "Sir," he said, an odd note to his voice. "There is no longer any indication of an ion storm...and the star patterns do not match any that we have in the computer records, let alone the one that was showing a moment ago."

"What?" Kirk twisted to his feet, the ache in his leg, intensified by the fall, instantly forgotten. He reached the science console while Wood was still assimilating the information.

Spock made way for him; he bent over the viewer. Finally he straightened. "Navigation - "

"Sorry, sir," Chekov said apologetically. He, too, was bent industriously over his console. "No immediate point of reference - and there's a blank in the navigational record."

"A blank? What do you mean, a blank?"

"One of the readouts seems to be jammed, sir - it's giving our position as - well - where it ought to be. We don't have any record of our change of course and position."

"Do you mean to say we're lost?" Kirk demanded.

"That would appear to be the case," Spock replied soberly.

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Kirk looked round his department heads, noting the worried expressions on all the faces except Spock's...but then Spock would look just as unconcerned in the face of a charging lion. Or - remembering the little he knew of Vulcan wild life - a charging le-matya.

"Well, gentlemen? Any speculation?" He forebore to add, "Any ideas how to find out where we are?", knowing that Navigation was already working on that.

Almost unconsciously, he found himself looking towards the Science Officer; equally unconsciously, so did most of the others, so that when Spock, who had been studying the report in front of him, looked up, it was to see many eyes fixed on him.

"I can only assume that it is a side effect of the ion storm," he said, his voice slightly doubtful. "Very little is known about such storms, but ionic power has long been postulated as the most efficient potential energy source possible, should we ever learn to harness it. The storm was increasing in violence with every passing second; it is more than likely that some freak effect of it possibly transported us over a considerable distance."

"Is that possible?" McCoy queried unhappily. Kirk glanced at him, wondering if the Doctor was losing his nerve.

"I know you profess to distrust almost everything mechanical, Doctor," Spock said drily, causing a slight chuckle to ripple round the table. "But an ion storm hardly qualifies as 'something mechanical'. With ions, almost anything is theoretically possible."

"So that if the boffins ever come up with a practical ion drive, the ships it powers could very well end up light years from where they're supposed to be?"

"Obviously, Doctor, if the 'boffins', as you call them, come up with a practical ion drive, it will be practical and such mishaps would not occur."

Kirk grinned, knowing now that his friends were deliberately trying to lighten the mood of the meeting. Worried men could not think straight. "Well, shall we assume, then, that the ion storm acted as a transporter - at least until we learn differently?" he asked. Nods from all round the table assented, and he went on. "Navigation, what is being done to ascertain our position?"

"We are comparing the brightest stars in the area with our star charts to see if any of them are present in our charts, even as faint stars. Even although the computer works very fast, it will take some days before everything is checked. If that fails, we'll have to try again using the farthest away stars from here, and seeing if any of them match stars in our charts."

"We can't just hang here while we do that," Kirk commented. "I propose selecting a nearby solar system and orbiting a planet there while these checks are carried out."

"Agreed," McCoy put in. "It would give the off-duty personnel a chance for some time off, if we could find a nice uninhabited planet."

"What about the Ubarak, Captain?" Uhura asked.

Kirk glanced at her. "What about the Ubarak?"

"What are we going to tell them?"

"Oh. Good point. We can only tell them the truth - that accidents do happen, we're trying to find our way home...and apologise for the inconvenience to them." He shrugged. "It'll be a good way of letting them see how we operate in an emergency."

"Assuming that they don't take the delay as a mortal insult," Wood said. He sounded gloomy.

"I doubt Sigral is that intolerant," Kirk protested.

"I know he seems O.K. - but I've been talking to one of the others, and according to him, Sigral is quite well-known on Ubar for the shortness of his temper."

"Which one?" Uhura demanded, forgetting the respect due to a superior officer. and speaking with an abruptness that was almost rude.

"I can't remember his name, but he was with Ensign Rivas the other night."

"That would be Drakk," Uhura said slowly, pointedly, to Kirk. He nodded, understanding what she meant. What they knew about Drakk did not incline him to trust anything the Ubar said.

He debated mentioning this, and decided against it, remembering what he had always thought about Wood - that he was a competent officer but too inclined to be swayed by whether or not he liked someone. Obviously he had liked Drakk, who had probably gone out of his way to please - in Kirk's experience, bullies were usually anxious to please those in a position of authority, and he was pretty certain to recognise Wood as being in such a position.

He frowned to himself, wondering just what was in Drakk's mind. Why was he trying to undermine the Humans' opinion of Sigral? He wasn't in a position to replace the Ambassador, should his superior be discredited in any way, which would be the most likely reason in a ruthless society. But from what Uhura had told him, this was a race that depended largely on honour. Such a race was not one to

be ruthless...at least in such a way.

He looked round. "Does anyone have anything further to say?" he asked.

There was a brief silence broken by Spock. "Does the Science department have permission to make studies, Captain?"

"Of course, Mr. Spock." Kirk knew the Vulcan's inquisitive nature only too well, and also the urge to learn that he had instilled into the science department in the eighteen months he had been on board. His initial temporary appointment had been made permanent very quickly, and in the past six months two of the three other Vulcans who had come aboard with him had been transferred to positions of authority on other ships. Seval, the third, could have been promoted also, but had preferred to remain with Spock.

"Anything else?" When there was no reply, Kirk flicked on the intercom. "Bridge - Mr. Lomax, what are the co-ordinates of the nearest solar system?"

After a short silence, the filtered voice sounded. "285 mark 6, sir."

"Set course for it, Mr. Lomax," Kirk ordered. "Long range scan in operation as soon as we come within scanning range. I want an uninhabited planet if possible, but if that's not possible, an uninhabited region of a habited planet."

"Aye, sir."

As Kirk flicked off the intercom, he said, "Thank you, gentlemen."

As the assembled officer began to file out, Kirk realised that - as so often happened - Spock was holding back. As the last man left and the door slid shut, Kirk asked, "What's wrong, Spock?"

"Have you considered the possibility that we will not be able to find our way back to our own area of space? We cannot travel - say - five hundred light years then try again - we could very well be headed in the wrong direction. Indeed, the odds are that we would be travelling in the wrong direction."

"I've been trying not to think of that," Kirk said ruefully. "I don't think we could have been thrown that far, though."

"The one thing I have learned since joining the Enterprise is that anything can happen in space, and frequently does," Spock said quietly.

"I know," Kirk said gloomily. "There's also a law which is known by any number of names, but 'Murphy's Law' is possibly the commonest - in any given situation, if something can go wrong, it does - usually at the most inconvenient time."

Spock considered that. It held a somewhat cynical note, he felt...but it was not without a certain shrewd wisdom. Yet... "It is only when it is inconvenient that one notices and remembers that something went wrong," he suggested.

"I suppose that does help one remember it," Kirk conceded. "But haven't you ever noticed that when things are going well, everything seems to go well? And once it starts to go badly, it all goes badly?"

Spock considered the statement, and nodded, albeit reluctantly. "I am forced to admit, Captain, that you are correct. Once things start to go wrong, it does seem as if everything goes wrong."

"Like a conspiracy - or as another of Earth saying has it, the innate cussedness of inanimate objects."

"Inanimate objects, by their very nature..." Spock began, then seeing the laughter in Kirk's eyes, paused. How often had he heard McCoy mutter, 'Damned machines! Never work when you want them to!' - and it was true, so often it was the very machine one wanted that chose that precise time to malfunction. Chose? He was getting as bad as the Humans! He allowed a half smile to dawn. "Yes," he agreed. "Machines have no intelligence, no feelings...yet sometimes they do react as if they do."

"Humans have always been sure they have," Kirk commented. "Men like Scotty, for example - to him, his engines are living creatures, children to be looked after, cared for... Men like him have always seemed to be able to get that much more than the best performance out of a machine. Just as some Humans have 'green fingers' and can get literally any plant to grow well for them."

Spock nodded agreement. "My mother is like that," he said. "Her garden flourishes always, while others, with technically skilled gardeners employed in them, wither...at least, if conditions are adverse." He half smiled again, reminiscently. "She even manages to grow some Earth plants - the heat-tolerant ones, of course; even she cannot persuade cold-loving plants to flourish."

Kirk sighed, and stretched. "God, I wish this trip was over! That we could find a source of reference within the hour and get home quickly. I don't fancy the thought of being stuck here in unknown space for the rest of our lives with these Ubarrak diplomats."

"I consider the chances of our being so fortunate as - "

"Don't say it, Spock. I don't really think I want to know."

The intercom buzzed and Kirk crossed to it. "Kirk here."

"Chekov, Captain. We are just approaching the solar system. There are three planets within the ecosphere; one is just at the outer limit and appears to be desert, one is at the inner limit and has an oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere, but the temperatures are between 40° and 50° Celsius. The middle planet is nicely situated, just like Earth, has a wide range of temperatures...but Captain, we get intelligent life form readings. Status - apparently 7 on Richter's scale of cultures."

"Damn. O.K., Chekov. See if you can find us a nice lonely spot with not too extreme a temperature. Once you find one, lock the sensors onto it so that we get early warning of any natives likely to be entering it."

"Aye, sir." He paused for a second, and added, "The readings are humanoid... not Human, but close."

Kirk nodded to himself, not particularly surprised. There seemed to be a preponderance of humanoid types of varying closeness to the Human norm throughout this section of the galaxy. Vulcanoid races were the next most common. Nobody had ever been able to explain why, although many treatises had been written on the subject. Those intelligent races that did not have similarities to Humans or Vulcans were mostly biped and mammalian too, even though some were of obviously reptilian origin or... He cut the train of thought off as unrewarding. "Divergent enough not to make any mistakes?" he asked.

"Aye, sir." The reply was immediate, and the Captain relaxed. If Chekov was that confident, he did not need to worry.

"Carry on, Mr. Chekov." He switched off, glanced at Spock. "Well, my friend. There you have it. A nice inhabited - fairly advanced - planet to survey. There is one thing," he added almost to himself. "We want to avoid contact if possible, but at least this world is advanced enough that we're unlikely to do much damage if contact is inadvertently made."

Chekov's report, when it finally came, was quite reassuring. "We've found a nice spot, Captain. It's in the southern hemisphere, the centre of a large land mass that is fairly sparsely populated. It appears to be a region of open woodland with plenty of water and wild animals. It is mountainous, which probably explains why nobody has settled there. All the centres of population in this land mass are round the coastal areas, extending not more than fifty miles inland."

Kirk studied the image in the viewscreen. "Looks like this planet's version of Australia," he commented, "except that there are no primitive native

inhabitants." He glanced over at Spock. "I'd like someone on your staff to do a scan on the wild life of the other continents, with a view, later, of comparing them with that of this continent."

"Yes, Captain." Spock did not entirely understand the Human's reference to 'Australia', but that hardly mattered. Presumably he knew what he was talking about and had a logical reason for asking for such a comparison.

Kirk thought for some moments. "Uhura, instruct shore leave parties one and two to prepare for beamdown. Mr. Chekov - you are certain there are no intelligent life forms in the selected area?"

"None, sir."

"Your scans have likewise detected no animals likely to be dangerous?"

"None, sir."

"Very well." He punched his chair intercom button. "Shore leave parties - remember that little is known about this planet except what we have been able to detect from space. Be on your guard. If you see anything that you are unsure of, leave it alone and report it immediately to the science officer. And remember, our presence here must go undetected. This planet is in unknown space."

As he switched off, McCoy's voice at his shoulder said, "Jim, aren't you forgetting something?"

Kirk looked round at him. "What?" he asked somewhat suspiciously.

"The Ubarrak."

"Oh, my God." It was true, he had forgotten about them. So much had been happening... "What do you suggest we do with them?"

"Well, you could ask Sigral if they want to go down there...you're duty bound to give them the chance."

"I suppose so...but dammit, Bones, it's going to be hazardous enough down there with just our trained crew landing. The Ubarrak aren't even properly humanoid - they're cananoid, and - well - "

"But intelligent beings," McCoy reminded him.

Kirk rose wearily. "I'd better go and see Sigral," he said resignedly.

He was halfway to the door when Uhura turned. "Transporter reports a malfunction, sir."

"Malfunction?" How the hell could that happen? They hadn't been under any stress - except the buffetting from the storm, and that had been minimal compared to some of the batterings they had taken in the past.

"Well, the transporter isn't working," Uhura said almost sympathetically, as if she was following his thoughts.

Muttering something about 'Innate cussedness...', Kirk entered the turbolift. Mechanically driven or not, the doors seemed to shut with a slight snap, giving the impression of having been slammed.

The transporter operator looked up with some relief as Kirk stamped in, his presence cutting short the muttered discontent of the waiting crew members. "I see you haven't found the fault yet," he said. Kyle was relieved to note that there was no condemnation in his voice.

"No, sir. I've double-checked all the controls, and they're working fine, so the fault must be somewhere either in the wiring or in the transporter console."

Kirk thought about it. Checking either was a long job. He did a mental calculation of how long it would take to ferry the crew down in shuttlecraft,

and looked apologetically at the disappointed crew. "I'm sorry," he said. "We want shore leave, the transporter seems to have other views. I'm sure Chief Kyle and his crew will work as fast as possible to detect the fault, and as soon as they do, you'll be called. Meanwhile...dismissed. You're still off duty."

Disgruntled, the waiting crew filed out, soft muttering reaching Kirk's ears. He found himself wishing momentarily for Vulcan ears to overhear what was being said, then decided that perhaps it was as well he didn't. He looked back at Kyle. "Do your best, Chief," he said unnecessarily.

"Aye, sir." As Kyle bent to remove the cover from the back of the console, Kirk headed back towards the door. The more he thought about his coming meeting with the Ubar Ambassador, the less he liked the thought.

In the event, however, he found Sgrral less of a problem than he had feared. He explained the situation concisely, but fully, and Sgrral nodded as he finished.

"I see," he said, sounding thoughtful. "And you have no certainty of discovering our present whereabouts?"

"No, sir. We'll do all we can, of course...but if we can't match up some of the stars we can see from here with some that we know, we're stuck. We don't even know the direction the ion storm carried us...assuming that that's what happened. We could even have hit some form of space warp... I'm sorry."

Sgrral looked at him, his eyes sympathetic. "It is not your fault, Captain."

"Ambassador, when something goes wrong, it's always the Captain's fault."

Sgrral's ears moved slightly. "I see your people have the same sense of responsibility as mine. It is so in my work also."

Kirk opened his mouth, thought better of what he had been about to say, and closed it again. Sgrral looked at him, a question in his expressive eyes, and Kirk decided to say it after all. "Then what about Brrbrr, sir? Haven't you done anything?"

The Ambassador's tail drooped slightly in discouragement. "As yet, no, Captain. It is a difficult situation; it is unprecedented. I do not know what is the best thing to do. For the moment I am watching; but while their work continues efficient, unaffected, I have no right to interfere in their private lives, no matter how indignant I might be about the situation."

"Whura was certain of her facts." Did the Ubar think they were lying?

"I do not doubt her word, Captain. But unless Junior Brrbrr herself makes the accusation, or unless her work is affected, I cannot act on mere suspicion, on the evidence of a third party." He lowered his head. "Yes, I know I said I would take action...and I will, when the time is ripe. As yet it is not."

"And while you wait, the girl is subjected to more abuse."

"The remedy is in her hands, Captain. If she were to come to me - or even to my wife - and complain, then I could act immediately. That she does not makes me wonder if in fact she is as reluctant as she tells your officer she is."

Kirk stared at him. "I don't quite understand, sir."

"Junior Brrbrr is unusually submissive, Captain, even for one in her position. It could be that she secretly enjoys being thoroughly dominated, even humiliated."

It was a shrewd point, and Kirk considered it. "I suppose that is possible. The trait is not unknown among my people." He sighed. "Life can sometimes be very complicated, Ambassador. Why does this have to happen to us?"

"I think every leader must say that to himself at some time in his career... indeed, I think he must say it often," Sgrral said. "Yet would you really have it otherwise?"

"No," Kirk replied.

The crew used the short-range scanners to gather more information about the planet and its solar system while the long-range scanners were busily occupied in checking the star patterns and spectral types, and comparing these with the information in the computers. It provided concentrated work for the science and navigation departments, but left little for the other departments to do.

McCoy insisted that Kirk himself take the chance of a few days off. There was little that he himself could do on board ship; with Spock in charge of the short-range scan of the planet, and Chekov at the long-range one, both were efficiently commanded; it would do no harm to leave Wood in command. McCoy's arguments were persuasive; Kirk agreed to go down with McCoy for a couple of days.

However, Spock finally went with them. The short-range scan was routine, and Seval, his second, could handle it easily while Spock himself could take more detailed readings on the surface. His slightly alien appearance would make little difference should they be seen, but in view of the remote area Kirk selected for his landing, the chances of their being seen were slight.

They landed the Columbus in a small clearing.

It was a beautiful mountain region; nature at her most lavish. Snow-topped peaks soared high above the treeline; the trees themselves marched in serried ranks down the lower slopes, huge sturdy ones on the higher slopes, trees designed by millenia of evolution to bear the weight of the winter's snow uncomplainingly. Lower down were more lightly-built trees, trees that clearly did not have snow weighing down their branches for many months of the year. On the lowest slopes big trees grew more sparsely, with large stretches of grassy ground between them. Grassy? Yes - but mixed among the various grasses were many brilliant flowers of a hundred species. Large butterfly-like creatures fluttered around, almost impossible to see unless they moved, for when they rested their colours were absorbed into the mass of flowers carpeting the ground - protective colouring at its most effective.

Kirk drew a deep breath, savouring the sweet scent of the many flowers. He looked round appreciatively. "God, this is beautiful."

There was no answer. His companions could only agree wordlessly as they too gazed round the untouched beauty.

"We must endeavour to cause as little disturbance as we can," Spock said at last.

Kirk agreed. "Let's move over under one of those trees," he said, nodding towards a nearby giant whose leaves shadowed the ground to such an extent that little grew under it. "Normally I wouldn't consider 'camping' under a tree because of the danger from lightning, but I'd hate to damage any of these flowers more than we already have. You could swear they were alive," he adled as a ripple of swaying movement ran across the open glade.

"Plants are alive," Spock said accusingly.

"Oh, Spock... Bones knows what I mean, don't you, Bones?"

McCoy nodded. "He means that you'd think they were free-moving, able to communicate..."

"Can we prove that they do not, Doctor?" Spock asked seriously. "Consider Mr. Sulu's sensitive plant - "

"What - the one he calls Gertrude?" McCoy asked.

"Yes, Doctor. That, although it cannot move from place to place, can react to external influences, can communicate fear through sound - "

"Don't, Spock," Kirk said. "Just accept that what I said was the comment of an inexact Human that doesn't have to be taken literally."

They looked at each other for a moment, and a silent message passed from one to the other. "Very well, Captain," Spock said formally. McCoy remained unaware of the flicker of amusement that Kirk received through that look.

They moved the Columbus quickly, then Spock moved off purposefully, tricorder in hand. Kirk leaned back against the tree, his eyes fixed on the distant mountains. McCoy glanced at him, then at the object of his gaze, decided that for the moment Kirk was relaxing completely and happily, and wandered a little way off to take some readings of his own. The rich plant life of this region might just have some medical potential...

Kirk's lazy mood lasted only a few hours, and towards evening, as a three-quarter moon slightly larger than Earth's rose, he was deep in plans for an expedition away from the immediate neighbourhood of their camp, heading towards the mountains.

"If you wanted to go mountaineering, why didn't you land nearer the mountains?" McCoy demanded irritably. He had some interesting readings that he wanted to pursue further.

Kirk grinned at him. "You don't need to come if you don't want to."

"You don't think you're going alone, do you?"

"Spock'll come with me - won't you, Spock?"

The Vulcan nodded and turned his attention back to the meal he was concocting. It smelt good, and even McCoy, who had had some reservations about letting Spock prepare a vegetarian meal for them, was beginning to suspect that he would have no regrets.

"You're not aiming to stay away from here overnight?" he persisted.

"McCoy, what do you take me for? This is our camp, dammit! I'm not going more than a few miles, and I'm aiming to be back here in plenty of time for supper - but I'd like to see a little more of this countryside, and I'm sure Spock'd appreciate the chance to get some more tricorder readings from further afield. Come to that, you might get some too," he added thoughtfully.

The doctor looked up sharply at that. "Yes, I might," he admitted. "But there are some interesting readings here that I want to follow up. I'd be better to cover one area thoroughly than several areas roughly."

"We do want as much information about this planet as we can collect," Spock pointed out. "Even if it is incomplete, it will give us a wide-spectrum view of it and its potential. It is advanced enough for the Federation to consider contacting it officially - provided it is close enough to Federation space for such contact to be worthwhile," he added cautiously.

"If it isn't I doubt we'll ever get home again," Kirk said pessimistically.

"All right," McCoy agreed hastily, more to take Kirk's mind off that subject than because he wanted to indulge in - probably - a twenty-mile hike. "I'll come along too."

He was rewarded by Kirk's grin. "Great. If we leave early we can probably make that point up there - " he pointed - "and still get back here long before dark."

Spock considered the indicated point. "It could be further than you think."

"I know the air here is fantastically clear, but surely it isn't more than ten or twelve miles?" Kirk said.

Spock frowned. "I would estimate rather more," he said. "In addition, we do not know what the terrain is like between there and here." He gave one final stir to the mixture he was tending, and lifted the pot off the heating unit.

"Supper is ready."

He dished out the steaming plates of mixed vegetables. The Humans tasted, and Kirk, never one to stint praise, said, "Spock, this is...nectar!"

McCoy took several more mouthfuls before contributing, his voice surprised, "It is quite tasty."

"Tasty!" Kirk exclaimed. "Spock, I think we'll let you do all the cooking. It's more than just tasty. It's the best meal I've had in ages."

"It makes a change," McCoy conceded, "but you'd soon get a real craving for some good red meat."

Spock nodded. "I am forced to agree with the doctor. Your system requires animal protein."

"Vegetarians manage fine without," Kirk pointed out.

"Most vegetarians consume milk products and eggs, which gives them the animal protein they need," Spock replied. "I believe you are thinking about vegans, who eat no animal products at all."

"There are times I reckon I'd get on fine as a vegetarian," Kirk said.

"And times you know perfectly well you wouldn't," McCoy told him. Kirk grinned in mute acknowledgement, and turned his attention back to his vegetable stew.

"This is one of the times I do," he told Spock, who half smiled in acceptance of the compliment.

They set off next morning within an hour of dawn. A slightly overcast morning with rapidly clearing cloud gave promise of a good day; the sun had not heated the air yet, but Kirk knew from experience of similar days on Earth that it would soon be quite warm. They carried the minimum of supplies; Spock and McCoy were armed with tricorders, Kirk back-packed some food.

They had not gone far when Kirk said slowly, "I've just realised something."

"What?" McCoy was panting slightly, but was not feeling distressed enough to leave the talking solely to Kirk and Spock - yet.

"No flies." He looked round almost suspiciously. "Come to that, no biting insects at all."

"It is possible that such creatures are not attracted by our alien smell," Spock said. "I have noticed that when I am on Earth, I am never troubled by biting insects even when all the Humans around me are; conversely, my mother has never been troubled by the biting vhaeks of Vulcan - and I assure you, there are many of these."

Kirk grinned. "It's a pleasant thought. It'd make this planet a paradise for rich Terran hikers and camera-hunters, if it ever joined the Federation."

"Eventually, if enough aliens visited here, either they would inadvertently bring their own parasitic insects, or some of the local species would adapt to utilise the new food supply," Spock warned.

"Too many visitors would ruin the very beauty they would be coming to see," McCoy added.

"I know," Kirk agreed. "But seriously, I doubt many Terrans would be able to afford to come here. Space-flight for holiday purposes isn't exactly cheap, you know. That's why we get so many applicants for Starfleet."

They walked on, McCoy slightly distressed by Kirk's sudden cynicism. He had never thought Kirk suspected Starfleet's applicants of any ulterior motive for joining, and said so.

"The ones who want to join for the wrong reasons are weeded out right at the beginning," Kirk said seriously. "But you'd be surprised how many of them there are. You came in through different channels to the one I did, Bones. The year I entered the Academy there were almost five hundred applicants in my field of study, which at that time was helm/navigation. God knows how many hadn't got that length through not having the proper qualifications, things like that. Of those five hundred, do you know how many were actually accepted? Twenty. The others..." He shrugged. "There were fifty of us sat the entrance exam in my area. We had time to talk in the evenings - the exams covered several subjects, and last-minute studying wasn't allowed; you were supposed to know everything thoroughly before you applied. Well, of that fifty, thirty-two just wanted off Earth; to travel, to see the galaxy. 'Why pay to go to Alpha Centauri on a space liner when you can go on a Starship and be paid for doing it?' one girl said. Of the other eighteen, seven wanted 'To be among those carrying the benefits of Terran civilisation to the uneducated aliens'. Not one of those thirty-nine passed; some of them were brilliant in every other subject but failed on their psychology tests. Of the other eleven, three passed; the other eight missed by failing other subjects. You had to make 80% pass to specialise, though it's only 75% for security and non-specialist crew."

Spock nodded agreement. "Do you remember how I came to join the Enterprise, Doctor," he asked.

"Yes, of course I do," McCoy replied. The Enterprise had been short-staffed in the Science department, and Spock, travelling with them after the Vulcan civilian scientists he was commanding had been rescued from Zaynol, the exploding satellite of an uninhabitable planet, had acted as science officer for the remainder of the voyage. He had enjoyed the work so much that on his return to Vulcan he had gone to the Starbase there asking to join the Enterprise...and three of his party with him. They had all been delighted when the four Vulcans had joined the Enterprise, albeit on a temporary posting which, within six months, had been made permanent. Two of them had now been transferred to other ships, but Spock and Seval were still with them.

"Our qualifications were completely acceptable to Starfleet," Spock said, "but we were given a psychological test before we were accepted. The temporary posting was in lieu of the training period when any further psychological inadequacies might have shown up."

McCoy looked from one to the other. "I knew of course that the psychology tests failed a percentage of applicants for Starfleet," he said, his voice troubled, "but I hadn't realised it was so high."

"That's because you've never been involved with new applicants, Bones."

"Yes, I know, but only about one percent of medical staff fails for psychological reasons. I assumed that percentage was about the norm."

"People who go in for medicine usually know what they're letting themselves in for," Kirk said. "Selfish people don't usually choose that particular job."

McCoy nodded, dropping the subject. They walked on for some minutes in silence. The trees thickened after a while, then thinned out again. In the more open space, a herd of animals was grazing. One looked up as the Starfleet officers walked out from among the trees, watched them for a moment, then lowered its head again.

"They're not afraid of us," Kirk breathed, stopping entranced.

"We did select a particularly remote area to visit," Spock pointed out, equally quietly. "They may have little, if any, acquaintance with bipeds."

"Or else this planet has true conservation?" McCoy suggested.

"Maybe Spock got it right with the insects," Kirk said. "We smell wrong; they mightn't recognise us as a possible danger."

"But we're not - are we?" McCoy asked. It was one thing to slaughter farm animals that were bred for their meat; it was quite another even to think of

murdering one of these dainty pixie-mounts.

"Definitely not," Kirk replied. Spock looked from one to the other, not quite sure why beings who normally and cheerfully consumed meat should be so opposed to killing one of these creatures. Certainly they were attractive, but then so were many of the animals that Humans slaughtered for their tables.

Another beautiful head lifted for a moment; the creature walked a few paces and lowered its head again, nibbling at the lush grass. A butterfly landed briefly on its shoulder, and as a muscle twitched, flew off again.

They watched for some minutes while the herd drifted part way across the clearing, then they walked on, leaving the animals still grazing peacefully. "There did appear to be some small insects present apart from the butterflies," Spock commented.

"Those twitching muscles also indicated that insects do bother them," McCoy said. "People can't twitch their muscles like that - the ability has atrophied, if ever Man had it, since primates learned to use their hands to brush annoying flies away. And creatures that aren't bothered by flies never develop the control to twitch muscles - they don't need to."

Shortly after that, they heard the sound of rushing water, and speeded up, curious. They came out of the wood and stopped short; then backed into the shelter of the trees again.

Ahead of them was a river. It flowed out of a cave and rushed rapidly downhill into a deep valley. Its descent could not be called a waterfall, but it did pour down in a succession of rapids and tiny falls, though for how far they could not see from their position hidden among the trees. It would have halted their advance even if the place had still been deserted. But it was not.

Beside the river, just below the cave on a piece of relatively flat ground, sat a vehicle. From its general build it was clearly designed for travelling over rough ground, and that was underlined by the complete lack of any obvious track leading to the cave. Beside the vehicle, a big tent and several smaller ones had been erected; Kirk glanced at Spock, his face accusing.

"Why wasn't the presence of this camp noted before we came down?" he hissed.

McCoy was watching the men bustling about the tents and vehicle. "I think they've just arrived, Jim," he muttered.

Kirk looked back, noting the equipment still being carried from the vehicle. "You could be right - sorry, Spock."

They continued to watch, Spock taking a record of the proceedings on his tricorder. "I think our camp will remain undetected," he murmured at last. "It appears to be a mountaineering expedition - observe the ropes."

"No, not mountaineering," Kirk replied after a moment. "Caving. Those are wet suits they're unpacking now." He glanced up at the sky. "Well, they've certainly picked a good time for it. The river looks quite low, too; I doubt it's rained for a while, and it looks set to stay dry for another day or two."

They watched as the group of natives, oblivious of their watchers, began to carry some equipment into the cave mouth, confirming Kirk's conclusion. "They are taking a lot of equipment with them," Spock said.

"Looks like they may be planning a trip to last a few days," Kirk said. "They've set up a base camp, and I suspect that a couple of the party will stay there - maybe more. The other's'll explore onwards through the caves. They may come back out at night, leaving a set route - ropes fixed, etc - to help them get back to their exploration zone each day - until they get too deep to do that. They must have a pretty good idea that that's a deep cave system."

"You sound as if you know something about caving," McCoy said.

Kirk shook his head. "Not really. I never went in for it, but my brother

did some spelunking when he was at university - they had a speleological club, and they did one or two fairly extensive explorations. Most of the more accessible caves on Earth have been pretty thoroughly explored in the last three hundred years; what were left were caves in less accessible places and ones that the techniques of the past weren't sufficient to get into. I went along with the club during one school holiday as part of the surface team - they were always glad of one or two non-cavers for surface support, to do the cooking, etc. And to raise the alarm, call for help, if things should go badly wrong. One of Sam's friends used to talk about one trip he had done - the surface party was made up of cavers too, and while the main party went deep, the surface lot decided to do some exploring of their own. And of course something went wrong; there was a rockfall, and the 'surface' lot, who weren't supposed to be underground at all, were trapped. When the main party returned towards nightfall, there was no sign of their 'support' team and no indication of where they had gone. It took a week of searching before they found the rockfall, reached the correct conclusion, and dug, but by that time it was too late; they were all dead. The fall had got one of them, and the other two had died of thirst and cold. So they were always keen for one or two folk along who didn't want to go underground. However, they took us down a couple of times - not deep, just enough to let us know what was what - to let us see what it was like." He grinned. I wasn't drawn to it, but I suspect that that was what made me interested in mountaineering; in many ways it's similar. But I prefer to have space above my head...not hundreds of tons of solid rock."

He turned his attention back to the group around the cave mouth. "There - they're getting ready to take some more of their equipment into the cave. They may be storing it in the mouth of the cave for accessibility - and to leave more room in their tents."

As they watched, it became clear that nothing major was planned by the group at the cave for that day. The natives - who on first sight could well have passed as the same race as the Humans - began to busy themselves with little tasks about the camp; they were clearly intending to stay for some time. After watching for a while, the Enterprise men, their direct route onward doubly blocked, withdrew silently.

Still, Kirk mused, this has not been a wasted day. We've had a good walk, and we've learned quite a lot about the native race. Spock got some good, reasonably close-up readings on them.

They made their way back to their own camp slowly, each man enjoying the peace and the beauty of the scenery.

Their camp was undisturbed - not that they had expected anything else. Kirk contacted the ship, asking for the latest news on the scans.

"Mr. Chekov is hopeful about one group of stars at 249 mark 3," Wood reported. "The star groupings, while not exact, are close to one in our records; he is checking out the spectral types now." He hesitated. "Captain, we have more evidence of our practical joker." His voice was grim.

"Yes, Mr. Wood?"

"A piece of chewing gum stuck inside the navigational console. It explains why there was that blank in the navigational record; it was jamming a contact."

Kirk's lips tightened. "That isn't a joke. That becomes sabotage," he growled.

"It was undoubtedly meant as a joke," Wood said. "The perpetrator couldn't know that the results would prove serious." Kirk could almost sense his shrug. "All that was probably intended was for whoever was in navigation when it was discovered to get a very red face."

"Maybe. It still isn't funny, and once we get back into Federation space I intend to send a very strongly-worded message to Starfleet Command on the subject of a break-down in the psychological testing somewhere. There's no place

on a Starship for anyone as irresponsible as a practical joker. What about the Transporter?"

"Still nothing, sir."

"You could try looking for chewing gum in that, too," Kirk said pointedly.

The information put him out of temper for the rest of the evening, despite all that his friends could do or say. Without that blank in their navigational record they could perhaps have found their way home without so many of the crew having extra work to do.

Eventually McCoy gave up trying to cheer him up and joined his muttering. "But I'll get him," the doctor assured Kirk. "I'll get him. What if there's nothing in their psychological records to show that one of the crew's a practical joker - I can always re-test them."

Kirk half smiled an acknowledgement of McCoy's support. "It's not fair to give you the extra work too," he said, but half-heartedly.

"Jim, I want to catch this idiot just as much as you do. It'll be worth the extra work," he assured his friend.

They settled down early that night. Although they had not covered half of the distance they had originally intended, all - even the indefatigable Spock - were tired, and they slept well.

They carefully avoided the direction of the natives' camp over the next couple of days as they explored their surroundings. They saw many animals, and all were surprisingly tame; they saw no carnivores, but found evidence that these did exist when they came across a half-eaten carcass, the bones showing scratches that could only have been made by large fangs. Kirk looked at the marks thoughtfully. "If the crew ever does get shore leave, I hope everyone remembers not to lose caution," he said grimly.

That night - the fifth of their stay at the planet - McCoy had invoked his medical authority to force Kirk to stay there so long, with Spock supporting him enthusiastically - as they sat over their evening meal, a cold wind started to blow gustily, bringing clouds with it.

"Looks like we've had the best of the weather," Kirk commented. "I hope the cavers' surface team are reporting the change of weather to the folk below ground. It will rain tonight."

Before he could make his nightly call to the Enterprise, Uhura called them, confirming his forecast. "I've been listening in to some of the native transmissions," she said. "The forecast for your area is a severe storm."

"Hmm. I think we'll come back up," Kirk glanced at his friends. "The picnic's over. Let's get packed up. There's no point in letting ourselves be caught unnecessarily in a storm."

"I could get - " Spock began.

Kirk shook his head. "You'll get all the readings you're going to get from the ship, Mr. Spock. I don't like this drop in temperature. Even without Uhura's confirmation, I was thinking of going home anyway."

They bustled around, packing everything up. Half an hour later they were back aboard the Enterprise.

Kirk headed bedwards a couple of hours later, passing his First Officer and Lt. Lester from Security in the corridor as he went. He paused and glanced after them, watched them disappear into Wood's cabin. He scowled, unhappy at the inferences. It was not good for discipline for senior officers to be on such intimate terms with the junior crew, but if Wood wanted to stick his neck out, he was welcome to. Kirk was too tired at the moment to care; he was looking forward to a long relaxing shower and a read of his favourite book before he put

his head down.

Within five minutes he was cursing angrily. He punched the intercom. "Kirk to Engineering."

There was a brief pause, then, "Scott here." The Chief Engineer sounded harassed.

"Scotty, something's wrong with my shower - "

"It's running cold," Scott finished with him.

"You know?"

"There's not a drop of hot water to be had on this ship, sir. I've been run off my feet this last ten minutes with complaints from folk... Someone unknown has tampered with the master thermostat and jammed it on cold. It was easy enough to discover that - but the dcil's in it to know what to do about it."

"Unjam it," Kirk said reasonably, with the quiet patience of a man who dares not lose his temper.

"I can't, sir. Whoever jammed it did a thorough job. It needs a replacement unit..."

"Which we can't get until we get home again?" Kirk guessed.

"Aye, sir."

Kirk drew a deep breath. "Well, there is this to it," he said, still quietly, "whoever was responsible will have to suffer cold water along with the rest of us." Damn practical jokers! he thought.

Then he remembered the Ubarrak. He had better warn Sgrral, at least... With a longing glance towards his bed, he left the cabin.

He was almost at Sgrral's cabin when the door opened and Rrovral came out. His tail was angled unusually low, and his ears were drooping. Kirk had just long enough to wonder what Sgrral's newly-promoted aide had done wrong when Rrovral saw him.

"Captain." There was a slight tremor in his voice. "I was just coming to find you. Sgrral... The Ambassador is very ill."

"What's wrong?" Kirk knew that the Ubar sensed his very real concern.

"His age. The Ambassador is very old, Captain. He had hoped to accomplish this one final, so-important mission for Ubarr...in spite of all our Healers could say. He was advised to retire, but he refused to consider it."

"I've known Humans the same," Kirk said sympathetically. "They're terrified of seeming useless, of admitting that they're old enough to retire...and they usually die in harness. If by any chance one of them is forced to retire, he seldom lives long."

"I think Sgrral will be one to die in harness," Rrovral answered soberly. "Indeed, I think he is quite close to death now."

"That bad?" Kirk was startled. He turned towards the nearest intercom. "You don't have a Healer in your party, do you?"

"No."

Kirk punched the intercom. "Kirk to Sickbay."

"McCoy here."

"Ambassador Sigral's ill, Bones. Rrovral thinks it's just old age, but can you come down and have a look at him?"

"On my way." The intercom clicked off.

Rrovral turned to accompany Kirk back into his superior's cabin. "As the Ambassador's Chief Adviser, you will be heading your group during his illness -

am I correct?"

"Yes. And if he does die, I will become Ambassador in his place. I am not ready for the responsibility yet, Captain. I am only a Chief Secretary; under normal circumstances, I would not have been promoted to Chief Adviser for at least another year." His ears flattened even more. "I am not - might never be - ready to be an Ambassador."

Kirk looked sympathetically at him. "You mean you're not experienced enough?"

"How can I be a good Ambassador without even the experience of one mission as an Adviser?" Rrovral asked. "Especially since I have not had a full cycle of experience as a Secretary."

"I'm sure the others will help you - " Kirk began.

"Help me?" Rrovral interrupted. "Yes, they would if they could - but all of us are now automatically raised a grade by Wrrak's death, and if Sgrral dies too, we will all be raised two grades - and none of us are old enough yet for the new responsibility."

'Old' enough? Was promotion among the Ubarrak usually by age, then, or was the translator merely giving the closest approximation it could to what Rrovral had actually said. Well, it didn't matter. "As the new senior of your group, sir, I must speak to you on the matter that originally brought me here."

"Ambassador Sgrral did mention the problems that made it difficult for us to land, Captain. We all concur with his agreement."

"No, that isn't the problem, sir. You may have noticed that it is impossible to obtain hot water?"

"I had not...but then, my race does not use heated water for anything."

Kirk sighed with relief. "Then this is not an inconvenience to you." He thought for a moment, then said, "I'll explain after Dr. McCoy has seen the Ambassador."

"Very well." Rrovral buzzed at Sgrral's door; entered, followed by Kirk. The Human crossed to the bed and looked down at the Ambassador.

"I'm sorry you're not feeling well, sir."

Sgrral made a weak gesture. "A passing weakness, Captain, nothing more."

"I'm sure of it, sir, but I've called Dr. McCoy to have a look at you anyway, as I understand you have no Healer in your party."

Sgrral rumbled slightly, deep in his throat. "Does your Healer know Ubar medicine?"

"Not much," Kirk admitted as the buzzer sounded once more. Rrovral glanced at the subservient female who stood at the foot of the bed, and called, "Come in."

McCoy entered; so fast that it was clear to Kirk that he had barely delayed long enough to hear the permission. The doctor hurried over, scanner already in hand. He ran it over the Ambassador's body, and frowned; repeated the examination, and said, "I want the Ambassador in Sickbay immediately."

As Kirk reached for the room intercom, Rrovral said, "What is wrong with Ambassador Sgrral?"

McCoy looked at him, his lips set. "In my opinion, the Ambassador's been poisoned."

The group that met in the briefing room less than an hour later was utterly depressed. Fast as McCoy had moved, it still had not been fast enough; Sgrral had died a few minutes previously.

Kirk looked round the group. McCoy, of course; Rrovral; Sgrral's mate, her tail drooping almost perpendicular to the ground, her acquired status lost with her mate's death. She looked very old, and Kirk suspected that she, too, might die before they could leave here. Spock. Wood, who as First Officer really should be here as well, had been left on duty; Kirk doubted that he could add anything significant to their enquiry.

"Have you any idea what poison was used, Bones?" Kirk asked.

McCoy shook his head helplessly. "The one thing I'm sure of is that he was poisoned," he replied. "But it had to be a Ubar poison. One that was painless, too; the Ambassador was in no pain. He just...faded away."

Kirk glanced at Rrovral. "Have you any idea who might have wanted the Ambassador killed?"

The Ubar's ears flattened slightly. "Any one of us might have seen the opportunity for advancement," he said honestly, "even although we had already been advanced one place by Yrrak's death. The Ambassador was old; I myself thought it was only his age... Whoever killed him must have depended on the lack of a Healer with our party to disguise the fact that it was poison. Your Healer is most skilled, to identify this in a species unknown to him."

Kirk made a mental note that in spite of his diffidence, Rrovral was managing to carry out his new responsibilities pretty adequately.

McCoy was speaking. "Poison always shows up if the examination is carried out soon enough after death," McCoy said gloomily, not at all cheered by the compliment. "The idea of an untraceable poison is very nice - for a murderer - but it's a myth. Provided a doctor knows the basic physiology of the patient, any foreign substance imbibed shows up. When I knew we'd be carrying your people, I did some checking up, just in case..."

"Are there any painless Ubar poisons?" Kirk asked.

Rrovral's ears flattened slightly more. "There is one," he said with obvious reluctance. "It is used by Healers to give euthanasia to the incurably ill...provided the patient requests it. It is almost impossible to obtain for those who are not Healers."

"But not completely impossible?" Spock asked.

"Nothing is completely impossible to obtain if one wants it enough," Rrovral answered. "It is not unknown for a Healer to give a dose to a friend who wishes to put a pet out of pain, for example. Of course, if it is discovered, the Healer is denied further supplies, and is disgraced..."

Kirk nibbled his upper lip, wondering how to put the next question without offending. "Did the Ambassador say anything to you about a...a problem one of your juniors is having?"

"No," Rrovral said, but Kirk noticed the female's ears twitching.

"He mentioned it to you, Ha'am?"

The female glanced at Rrovral as if asking permission to speak before she replied. "My mate mentioned it," she said. "He was concerned, and asked me to speak to Junior Brrbr when the occasion arose. He did not want to...to stress it, but he thought to investigate..."

"Did you speak to her?" Kirk asked gently, realising that all Ubar females were very lacking in self-confidence. Damn sexual inequality anyway!

"Not yet - the opportunity had not arisen."

"What is this problem?" Rrovral asked with all the authority of his new position, and Kirk nodded approvingly to himself. The Ubar was certainly trying to develop his self-confidence.

He explained briefly; Rrovral's ears flattened entirely. "Impossible!" he gasped.

"That was what Ambassador Sigral thought, but what reason would my communications officer have for inventing such a tale?"

"Undersecretary Drakk did not bring his mate," the female pointed out. "And ...if you ask your mate, Ambassador Rrovral, I think you will find that she does not trust Drakk either."

"Do you?" Kirk asked her pointedly.

"No," she whispered, her ears flattening.

"Why not?" Spock put in.

"I...fear him," she replied. "Captain, without asking...I believe Brrbrr's story is true."

"Yet that does not make him a killer," Spock put in. "All it might prove is that he has no morals where females are concerned."

Kirk scowled. "Commander Wood likes him," he said. "And he told Mr. Wood that Sigral was known on Ubarr for the shortness of his temper." He was watching the Ubarrak.

"Sgrral? Short-tempered?" Rrovral exclaimed. "Never!"

"I didn't believe it either," Kirk said. "Yet Drakk said it. Ambassador, I think that Drakk needs to be watched."

"Captain...Drakk has always done his work efficiently," Rrovral said. "Sgrral could lose his temper with an inefficient worker, yes -- but he had never needed to do so with Drakk."

"So he had some other reason than spite for saying that," Kirk commented. "Ambassador, would you call Drakk ambitious?"

"Within reason, yes...but no more so than many of our race. Promotion would inevitably come with age. By the time he is fifteen or so, he could reasonably expect to be an Adviser."

"Perhaps he is more ambitious than he has let you see," Kirk suggested. "Well, we can prove nothing...but may I suggest that you watch what you eat, Ambassador."

"You think the killer may try to murder me, too?"

"It isn't unlikely...unless it was a personal grudge killing," Kirk told him.

"Unimaginative, Captain," Spock put in. "The more Ubar who die, the fewer are left to suspect; and the killer must surely be Ubar."

Kirk nodded, then glanced at Rrovral. "There is one other thing," he said. "We have aboard this ship what Humans call a practical joker. He has -- we assume he has -- been responsible for several...jokes...some of them quite 'dangerous'. So far we have no clues as to his identity -- but we'll get him. I didn't say anything before, but he's extending the scope of his 'joking' into areas of maximum inconvenience to the maximum number of people. I mentioned cold water to you earlier -- my race prefers to use warm water to wash. That is currently unobtainable, thanks to him."

"Ah, I see, Captain."

The group broke up, the Ubarrak leaving together. Spock murmured an excuse, and also left; the two Humans looked at each other.

"Could Rrovral be the killer, Bones? He's the one who stands to gain the most..."

McCoy made a face. "They all move up another step in rank, don't they?"

"You mean an over-ambitious younger one wanting to move up even further before he's really ready?"

"Yes. Provral strikes me as a steady, conscientious, competent worker, but not a particularly ambitious one; someone who will accept promotion when - if - it comes, but won't necessarily go out seeking it...and who will probably make a damn sight better a job of it than the ambitious pusher. Some of those over-ambitious ones don't know their limitations."

"Are you saying that ambition is a bad thing?" Kirk asked.

"Not necessarily. Ambition can be a very good thing if it pushes someone on and into the job he's most suited for. But over-ambition - that's bad."

Kirk sighed. "One of the younger ones... That could very easily bring us back to Drakk." He stood, suddenly needing to move, and walked round the table to McCoy's side. "I know - it's easy to accuse someone just because we know something about him that we don't like, consider unacceptable. The only one of us all who has had any direct contact with him is Wood, and he likes him."

"Drakk is matey with Rivas, too - and that isn't a recommendation in my book," McCoy said bluntly.

"I know Spock had a little...difference of opinion with Rivas over a skimmed cleaning job that could have endangered the whole ship...what have you got against him? I haven't noticed him particularly except that he was on a paint job the night the Ubarrak doors were 'decorated', and he denied all knowledge of it. I'm inclined to believe him, too - he didn't strike me as having much imagination."

"I don't like his psyche reports. Oh, they're all within acceptable limits or he wouldn't be here, but I wouldn't like to trust him in a really tight corner. I think he might just snap."

"Lack of stability?"

"Indicated." McCoy frowned slightly. "Self-interest ratings are only just within the acceptable range, too."

"I'm not sure that I care for that combination," Kirk said slowly.

"Nor do I, but there's nothing I can do about it since the Academy doctors passed him - until he does snap."

"By which time he could have caused the deaths of several good men," Kirk growled. "Why don't they make sure Academy doctors have actual space experience?"

"Some do," McCoy protested. "But I'd agree, they should all have some, even if all the Academy did have them posted to the medical department of a Starship for six months before their appointment. The Surgeon-General did try at one point to make that a ruling - not Tokota, the one before him - but he was voted down, the given reason being that most Fleet medical staff were over-age when they retired and didn't want a shore posting before that, and they wouldn't get staff if they insisted on arbitrary shore postings...the argument being that anyone who wanted to go into space applied for an active posting and those who didn't shouldn't be made to. As Spock would say, it wasn't exactly a logical argument; if six months' active service was a pre-requisite for a damn' well-paid job, applicants would know the score and accept it." He hesitated, then went on. "Jim, you're not going to like this - I didn't when I read it. It came in with a lot of other reports, and I only got round to reading it now. This business of the practical joker, and those two clowns in Engineering. Starfleet Command pushed through a new ruling that superseded the old one about not having extreme extroverts on Starships. Tokota fought it, but the best he could manage was to have it made for a trial period initially, and on only three ships - but we seem to be one of them. Personally, I'd say the experiment hasn't worked. The two in Engineering were funny originally, but I've noticed that now, when they get started, folk begin slipping away, and Scotty tells me they're not liked in his department. Good workers, always pull their weight...but

they're not liked."

Kirk was scowling blackly before McCoy finished. "Well, the report Starfleet gets from me will be one they don't like. It's already partly drafted... Bones, are you still sure the practical joker isn't one of your two 'funny men'?"

"Pretty sure. No, the joker isn't that obvious. He's hiding it - I'm sure of that. Somewhere along the line he's learned something about psychological tests, and how to fake 'normal'. I have a horrible feeling that this situation would have arisen even without Starfleet's new ruling. And I'll tell you something else - it's not helping morale among the new crewmembers, either. I've had several of them come to me with minor ailments, and in every case the real cause is that they feel that the rest of the crew is watching them. I've scored them all off the list of possible suspects," he added wryly. "It's down to fourteen or fifteen now."

The intercom buzzed. Kirk reached to it. "Kirk here."

"Kyle, sir. We've finally traced the transporter malfunction. It was another bit of chewing gum...and whoever planted it knew exactly where to put it for maximum effect and minimum traceability."

"Can you get it fixed?"

"Transporter working now, sir."

"Well, that's something. Well done, Mr. Kyle. You can start beaming down shore leave parties - if anyone wants to go down in the rain." Kirk switched off and looked at McCoy. "Whoever planted the gum knew where to put it. Whoever gummed up the navigational console also knew where to put it... That says 'engineer' to me."

"It does look like it," McCoy conceded. He was interrupted as the intercom buzzed again.

"Kirk here."

"Uhura, Captain. I'm picking up a signal from the planet. There's a big caving expedition trapped underground by flood water as a result of the recent storm, in the area we selected for shore leave."

Kirk groaned. "That must be the group we saw. The place'll be thick with rescuers, relatives, Press... Hold the shore parties again. See if Mr. Chekov can find someplace else as remote."

"We could maybe help those natives, Jim," McCoy said.

"Bones... The Prime Directive..."

"It's a Class 7 culture, Jim. Ready for contact. But we don't need to reveal ourselves as offworlders. Go in as a group on holiday and offer to help. You have climbing experience..."

"I'd like to help, Bones, but..."

"You've broken the Prime Directive before when it's been necessary," McCoy pointed out.

"Yes, but we don't know that it's necessary this time."

Uhura broke in again. "Captain, the reports are that it's impossible to reach the trapped men because of the water. They don't have sufficiently advanced breathing apparatus to get through one flooded section. The forecast is more rain - if we don't help, those trapped men are dead."

"All right," Kirk said decisively. "Put me onto shipwide communication, Uhura... This is the Captain. I require five men or women with experience of caving - or at least mountaineering. Report to the transporter room in ten minutes, wearing civilian clothing."

"I'm coming with you, Jim," McCoy said. "You may need a doctor."

"You don't have any experience, do you, Bones?"

"Well, no, but -- "

"But nothing. You can come down, but wait on the surface, preferably out of sight -- we won't tell them where we come from if we can avoid it. But if one of your staff volunteers, then I'll certainly take him -- or her."

Spock met them on the way to the transporter room. "I have some experience," he said quietly, "I volunteer to accompany you." The offer was expected -- especially since the Vulcan was wearing civilian clothes very like those they had seen on the surface.

Kirk looked pointedly at the Vulcan's elegant ears. "Not unless I can't get the full quota among the Humans," he said. "But I would appreciate it if you stood by with a second group -- if we get that many volunteers -- just in case we need you."

"I would be wearing a helmet," Spock pointed out.

"I know...but Spock, I do need someone I can trust to head a possible back-up group. We don't know if the trapped cavers are injured or if they're just unable to get past the water. We'll take life-support belts -- that'll be the lightest and most efficient way of getting through the flooded tunnels -- "

"In that case, you might as well shout 'We're offworlders!' before you start," McCoy commented. "Who on this planet possesses such a thing? But at least they're far enough advanced to realise it's technology, not witchcraft."

Kirk sighed. "You're right, Bones. Damn." He thought hard as they continued on their way to the transporter room. "We'll have to tell them...if those men are to be saved."

There were nine of the crew in the transporter room when they entered; eight men and one of the junior nurses. Five of the men, Kirk knew, had suffered some degree of injury during the ion storm that carried them here, but he had no choice but to accept their offer. Kirk picked his group quickly, leaving four of the injured men to form Spock's back-up group. Then he collected the belts, with a dozen spare ones, and they beamed down among the trees overlooking the cave.

The area round the mouth of the cave showed little movement. About twenty people were gathered together round the tents; there was an air of waiting about them. Kirk glanced up at the overcast sky. It had a heavy, brooding look and a haziness near the horizon spoke to him of rain falling. Within the catchment area of whatever rivers ran through the cave? Probably. As the transporter hum signalled the arrival of the second group, Kirk walked forward.

They were almost at the tents before they were seen. A man with an air of authority that still failed to mask the worry on his face turned to meet them.

"What news of the rescue?" Kirk asked.

The man shook his head. "The rescue party can't get past a long passage-way that's filled with water. Who are you?"

"My name's Kirk. We think we can help you, Mr....?"

"Keowen -- Dom Keowen. I'm Chief of Police for this State." He was still looking questioningly at Kirk and his party.

"It's too complicated for me to give you the full story now, but I think we have equipment that will let us reach the trapped cavers," Kirk said. "Exactly how many of them are trapped?"

"There are five men underground," Keowen said. "We don't know if any are hurt."

"Right." He glanced at his group. "Let's get on with it."

"Wait a minute," Keowen interrupted. "Just how experienced are you? That cave rates D+, and I don't see that you have that much equipment with you."

"As I understand it, it's lack of breathing apparatus that's holding the rescue back," Kirk said quietly. "We have special breathing apparatus that will let us past the flooded section. I assume there are fixed ropes to that point, and that the initial party will have left ropes beyond it too, down to wherever they are."

"Well, yes," Keowen agreed, "but - "

"With respect, sir, there isn't time to argue about it. There's more rain falling even now. My group all have some experience, and one of them is a nurse." He glanced at Spock, waiting with the four men who were to provide the back-up group, and the Vulcan gave him his quiet almost-smile.

"I will explain to Mr. Keowen," he promised. Kirk nodded and led his group towards the cave.

Keowen watched them go, then looked at Spock. "Explain?" he began. "Explain what - ?" His eyes widened as, for the first time, he registered the elegant pointed ears, the green-tinted skin.

"We do not belong to your world, Mr. Keowen," Spock said quietly. "We are from other worlds. Your own culture is on the verge of developing space flight, is it not?"

Keowen nodded, still looking slightly stunned. "We've put up artificial satellites," he said, his voice oddly blank, "and sent a couple of probes to the moon."

"The usual beginning," Spock agreed. "Many other planets have reached - and passed - that stage of development. When we find a culture advanced enough, we make contact, usually after some years of study. Here... We found your world by accident; our communications officer picked up your broadcasts. We realised that these men would die without our intervention; so - here we are."

"And what happens now?" Keowen sounded slightly suspicious.

"Happens? We can tell your people about our Federation - but that is all. We are lost."

"Lost? As advanced as you are, and you're lost?"

"It sounds unlikely, does it not. A space storm threw us off course; a temporary malfunction caused a gap in our navigational record that makes it impossible for us to retrace our course. Currently we are working on ascertaining our position, but it is a long job."

Keowen grunted, only half believing the story. "You're not planning to take us over?"

"Indeed not," Spock said, horrified. "If, on consideration, your people wish to join the Federation, you would be welcome; meanwhile, we would give you any help we could. Your laws would remain yours, and all Federation planets would - will - honour them."

"That's easier said than done," Keowen said with a wry laugh. "Our laws? Each country has its own, and while basic laws against theft, etc, are much the same from country to country, there are a few laws in the statute books that are unique to one country or another - and in some countries things that are illegal that are perfectly legal in others." He laughed again. "And you speak as if the whole world might have one set of laws?"

"In some worlds, that is indeed the case," Spock said. "In others, different areas have their own local legislation, as you do. All these laws are respected."

He was interrupted by a shrill bleeping. Keowen jumped; Spock simply reached for his communicator. "Spock here."

* * * * *

Kirk's party made good time through the cave. The fixed ropes helped a lot, of course, and in this first part of the cave there were even fixed lights on a continuous flex draped over protrusions in the rock walls just above head height. The initial descent was fairly shallow, with a reasonably flat, sand/mud floor. Then the cave levelled off for a hundred yards or so, after which it descended abruptly down a long chimney. The party abseiled down on the fixed ropes, reaching the bottom with very little effort.

The passage, no longer lit by the fixed lights - these had ended at the top of the descent - stretched on, lower now, without even fixed ropes to mark if it was the right way; only the marks of feet in the mud floor showed that people had recently passed that way. Ducking, Kirk led his party into the tunnel, his hand-light, so much brighter than the ones on the fixed flex, cutting into the darkness. After a few yards he had to crawl, but this very low section only lasted for a few yards and he was soon able to straighten again, albeit cautiously.

His torch caught the waxy, wet-looking sheen of calcite, dirty white streaked with grey, brown and green, that coated one wall, but he had neither the time nor the inclination to pause to study it. Above, the roof rose, high and narrow; ahead, the light caught the shape of stalactite curtains hanging down, and on the ground, a low wall of stalagmite that rose to meet it. He stepped over it carefully, even in his haste; such a beautiful thing, it had taken so long to grow; it would be the work of a second to kick it to pieces. He felt a momentary regret that Spock was not here to see this, then dismissed it - Spock could come down later. But, he promised himself, he would come with his friend. He would welcome the opportunity to see these stalactite growths in peace.

The cave widened out slightly, and water welled up from somewhere underground. The stream flowed beside them for a few yards, then vanished again into the rock wall. They went on, now picking their way through broken rocks that had fallen from the roof, making the floor of the cave uneven. They were descending again; another fixed rope offered a handhold to steady them, and they were not ashamed to use it.

There was a light ahead of them, though they could only detect it when Kirk's movements made his torch dip so that it pointed towards the ground. The cave opened out into a big, high chamber; at the far end of it was a group of men. The Enterprise crew strode across to them.

One of them turned to the newcomers. "It's hopeless," he said gloomily. "There's a four-hundred-yard passage through there, and the water's got to be up to the roof the whole way. You can't even see the mouth of it above the water."

Kirk looked towards where the man indicated. There was a deep pool at the end of the chamber; it was impossible to see where the water came from or went to, though it seemed to be moving from his right towards his left.

"Chay - the water's getting higher," someone said.

"It's raining again," Kirk told them. He pressed his lips together. "I've got some new equipment that might let us through," he said. "If you just wait a moment till I report to the surface, we'll carry on." He pulled out his communicator, and was answered immediately.

He could see that the natives were startled by the voice, and realised that this kind of hand-held, wire-less...radio...was new to them.

"Spock here."

"We've reached the flooded section, Mr. Spock. The water level is rising. There doesn't seem to be any danger of entrapment to this point. If you want to come in to here, do. We're going on now."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk put the communicator away, and glanced round his group. "Ready? Belts activated. Let's go."

He waded into the water. Even through the force-field that now surrounded him, he could feel the chill of the water, and he knew that cold was going to be a dangerous enemy. When he was waist-deep, he ducked down and began to swim. A quick dive, and he was underwater, beginning to make his way into the long tunnel that -- with luck -- was all that separated them from the trapped men.

The tunnel was far from smooth, although it was probably easier swimming along it than it must have been walking along it. Probably it was always partly filled with water; he swam past some small stalactites, but there was no sign of stalagmite growth under them.

It seemed a long four hundred yards. After a while, the roof dipped, and he hauled himself along, gripping the stones that littered the floor of the passage. At this point, he realised, the original cavers must have been under water, crawling along -- had the cave been explored this far before this group came exploring, he wondered, or were they the first? No, not the first -- Keowen had said the cave was graded D+. So they would have known how far the usually flooded section was. But the very first cavers to explore this far would not have known. Kirk wasn't sure he would have liked to be the first man to grope his way along here, not knowing if he would pass beyond the flooded stage before his air gave out, not even knowing if there was a way past this section, or if he would have to try to wriggle out again, feet first. Then the roof rose again and Kirk, allowing himself to rise with it, realised that they were through the flooded section. The roof was high enough that his head was above water. But the entire width of the passage was still flooded. He dropped his feet, and found that he was standing in about five feet of water. He waited till the heads of his party bobbed up beside him, checked that they were all there, then turned to swim on.

The passage went round a corner, and there was another big cavern similar to the earlier one. The floor was of fairly hard-packed sand/mud and marked with ripple marks; the sign of earlier, even more severe flooding. Kirk shone his light round the cavern, wondering where to go now.

There was a dark opening where the river disappeared underground again -- Kirk hoped it was a passage. He led the way towards it.

Yes; this was the way, all right. A fixed rope beckoned them on.

He glanced round his party again. Five minutes wouldn't make that much difference to the trapped men, but it might make all the difference to a possible rescue. Deliberately, he sat on the firm mud and leaned against the wall. "We've done well so far," he said. "Take five."

The others sank down, and Kirk wondered if the same thought had occurred to them that was now bothering him. There must be at least one more flooded section that the cavers were unsure of getting through. He pulled out his communicator.

"Kirk to Spock."

"Spock here." The reception was very poor, and Kirk realised that this was the last report he would be able to make -- at least until he was back to this point again.

"We're past the first flooded section, but the trapped men aren't here. There must be another flooded section further on."

"I understand. Do you want me to continue to your present position?"

Kirk grinned to himself, the question was so typical of Spock. "Negative. Stay at the first chamber. I'll leave one man here to relay messages, but we're so deep underground now that I doubt I'll be able to stay in touch with him for long."

"Understood."

As Kirk closed his communicator, he considered his men. The girl was doing better than he might have expected - medical staff didn't have to maintain quite the same high standard of fitness that other Starfleet personnel did. But he couldn't leave her, anyway; she might be needed when they found the trapped men. Grewer was an older man - fit enough, but obviously feeling the effects of the minor injury he had suffered in the storm.

"Grewer," he said, "I want you to stay here as relay. If there's no word from me inside the next two hours, use your discretion about calling Mr. Spock in and coming on. The conditions might have changed by then to the point where it would be foolhardy to risk the back-up group."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk hoped it wouldn't come to that. As well as Grewer, the men with Spock had all suffered in the storm, but in this emergency he had simply had to use the volunteers he could get. He had no doubts that all his crew would have volunteered, had they had the necessary experience.

Deliberately, he relaxed, using techniques Spock had taught him to ease stiffening muscles, then, with the five minutes fully up, he rose smoothly. "Let's get on."

This passage climbed for a few yards, then began to descend steeply. They clung to the fixed rope as they slithered down, loose bits of rock fallen from the roof slipping from under their feet.

D+, Kirk thought. D+. He didn't know all that much about caving, but apart from the flooded section, especially the end of it, he hadn't seen anything yet that he would have graded terribly hard - yet Keowen had spooked as if D+ was pretty difficult. Perhaps further in... Gods, the cavers hadn't got themselves stuck somewhere inaccessible, surely? Maybe they were even in a dry bit of the system and didn't realise yet that it had been raining? No - surely they had had some surface contact, such as Sam's friends had had...yet he couldn't see, hadn't seen, any sign of a telephone wire.

A loose rock slid away from him; he heard it go, then silence, followed three or four seconds later by a splash. "Stop!" he snapped, clinging frantically to the rope.

He shone his torch ahead of them, and gulped. They were some three yards from a sheer drop; the cave passage seemed to open out somewhere near the top of yet another big chamber, and if he hadn't kicked that stone, he would have been the one to go hurtling down there... He flicked open his communicator.

"Grewer."

"Grewer here."

"Warning - the passage goes down a steep slope and over a sheer drop."

"Noted, sir."

He put the communicator away once more, and inched on downwards. At the edge, he leaned forward carefully, and shone the torch downwards.

"Hello!"

The cavers! Where were they? The echoes distorted direction. He shone the torch in all directions, and saw nothing but the gleam of the light reflecting off water.

"Where are you?" he called.

"To your right - over a little - "

There! He could pick them out now - four...no, five faces staring upwards.

"Are you all right?"

"We're not hurt, but when the water began to rise, we lost our lights. We couldn't do anything in the dark but sit and wait."

"Can you get over to the rope?" Kirk asked.

"We'll try."

While Kirk shone his lamp down for them - Umlanga edged down beside him and also leaned over, adding his light to Kirk's - the trapped men began to make a careful way over towards the fixed rope that was their only means of exit from this chamber.

The water, which from above appeared motionless, swirled round the wading men as they made their way, waist-deep, towards the rope. The light from the two lamps was barely adequate, at this distance, to let them see what they were doing, but at least it was giving them a direction, and they held on to each other for balance. It seemed a very long time before they reached the base of the cliff.

The first man began to climb, prusicking his way steadily up the rope. When he reached the top, Kirk hauled him over the edge, and he scrambled up the passage out of the way. The second man was already beginning to climb.

One by one they made their way up the rope. Once they were all at the top, Kirk gave the signal for the party to head back. At least the rescued cavers, cold though they were, were all mobile. It made life much easier. Indeed, Kirk was pretty certain that if they hadn't been able to climb out of the big chamber under their own steam, it would have been almost impossible to rescue them all.

As they scrambled upwards, Kirk pulled out his communicator once more. "Grewar - on our way back. We have them." He thrust the communicator back into his belt without waiting for an acknowledgement.

When they reached Grewar, they sank down for another rest. Nurse Arbet checked the five cavers quickly before she too sat, nodding to Kirk. "Cold and tired, sir, but fit enough."

"Good." He reached for the box containing the spare belts, removed five, and slung the box over his back again. "Put these on," he told the men, and grinned slightly at their startled expressions. "It's a sort of...breathing apparatus to get us through a flooded section."

"Belts?" one of the rescued men muttered, disbelievingly.

"This is how you switch them on." He demonstrated.

"Belts," the doubting one muttered again.

Kirk glanced at the Nurse. "Would you lead the way?" he invited, aware that masculine pride would not permit the doubter to hang back while a woman went on ahead, apparently trusting completely to the belts that seemed so inadequate and unlikely to him.

She grinned at him, fully aware of his reasoning. She felt no resentment at being used like this; indeed, masculine pride was a weapon she had herself used once or twice in the past even among her own shipmates. If she was surprised at Kirk's knowing how potent a weapon it was, she gave no sign, but instead turned and waded into the water. Kirk indicated that one of the cavers should follow her, then one of his own men, another caver, and so on.

They swam easily along the passage, negotiating the flooded section without problem. There was no current in there, a backwater formed by floodwater... and emerged, to find themselves greeted by the group who had been there - the thwarted rescue party - and Spock's group.

They were beginning to feel very tired. Kirk thought of the climb back to the cave mouth. It seemed a very long way.

* * * * *

In the first chamber, with a caving helmet covering his betraying ears -- Spock did not really feel like explaining where they came from again just yet -- the Vulcan waited tensely for further word from Kirk's party. A cheer went up from the waiting group when the news was relayed that the cavers had been found, and one of the waiting natives headed back towards the cave mouth to pass the word on to the waiting reporters.

The assembled natives made to pull the returning group out of the water as they appeared, but Spock stopped them. "No," he said. "Let them wade out themselves. With the special breathing apparatus we're using, you wouldn't be able to touch them." He knew that the men couldn't really understand, but he was still in no mood to give further details. Why hadn't Kirk let him go too? He was aware of definite concern for his friend, even though he knew that Kirk was alive and perfectly well. Yet not so long ago, he had experienced fear -- no, terror -- a sudden awareness that Kirk was in danger. Awareness? Or merely apprehension? He didn't know. But he would not be able to relax until Kirk was back here, safe.

Friendship, he thought. For so long it had been nothing but a word -- a word whose meaning he had known but which still had been meaningless to him. Until the chance that had brought the Enterprise past a dying world in time to rescue a small group of Vulcan scientists. Since then, his life had come to revolve, illogical though it was, around that emotional concept...and he had no regrets, unVulcan though he knew himself to be now. Only Kirk -- and to a lesser extent, McCoy -- knew of his emotional motivation; as long as the rest of the universe continued to believe him to be wholly Vulcan, his private emotionalism didn't matter.

A head broke the water -- Nurse Arbet. She waded out, turning when she was still knee deep to watch the next swimmer surface. He was unknown to Spock. One of the natives. Then others, but not the one he watched for so hungrily. At last the familiar head appeared, last -- as he should have expected. Spock took a deep, steadying breath, and moved slowly forward. He met Kirk at the water's edge.

Kirk grinned at him. "What did you think of the stalactites?" he asked.

It took a moment for Spock to realise what Kirk was talking about. "I don't believe I noticed any," he admitted.

"Well, you can have a look at them on the way out -- we'll have time to think about the scenery instead of the job in hand," Kirk commented, tacitly giving the Vulcan an 'out'. "I only barely noticed them myself, we were in so much of a hurry."

The natives were talking animatedly among themselves; the word 'belt' was being repeated. Kirk sighed. There had been no way to help the cavers without revealing themselves, and the belts had done that more effectively than anything else could have done. And if they had not helped, the cavers would certainly have died there in the cold of the cave system; the little island of rock on which they had been sitting would have been underwater shortly. Even as it was, he was aware that the level of the water in this cavern was fully a foot higher than it had been when they went in.

"Gentlemen," he said loudly, "I suggest we get ourselves above ground as quickly as possible. The river is still rising."

On the way up to the surface, Kirk had time to realise just how tired he was -- and the other members of his rescue party too. Pride forced him onwards, but the climb up the fixed rope nearly finished him, and as they emerged into open air he noted that some of the others had not disdained a helping shoulder.

Keowen met them at the mouth of the cave, profuse with his thanks; Kirk smiled an acknowledgement and turned down his offer of, "If you come with us,

we'll give you accomodation -- "

"Not necessary, thank you, sir. We'll return to our ship. If you can contact your government, get them to arrange a meeting between my people and representatives of the main countries of your world, all you need do is broadcast time and place. I'll have my communications officer monitoring your trans-missions -- no need to fear we won't pick it up. And please stress our peaceful intentions."

He nodded to his people, and they followed him back into the trees before the newsmen who were present realised his intention. The moment they were shielded by the trees, Kirk flicked up his communicator. "Enterprise -- beam up, fast."

When the first of the reporters reached the spot some seconds later, they could see nothing; their visitors were gone, leaving no indication of where.

* * * * *

McCoy met them in the transporter room. He took one comprehensive look round the party, then fixed his eye on Kirk. "Bed," he said firmly. "All of you."

"Not necessary," Spock said. "Five of us were not directly involved in the rescue, and are not tired. But I agree, those who were in the main rescue party should retire immediately; they had a strenuous day."

"Spock, I never thought I'd see the day you agreed with McCoy," Kirk began, but the sternness with which he attempted to speak was lost when he found himself unable to suppress a yawn. He glanced round at his rescue party. "You heard the Doctor, gentlemen. Bed."

"Aye, sir." A chorussed acknowledgement of the order as they left the transporter room gratefully.

Kirk glanced at his Science Officer. "Give Uhura the order to monitor communications," he said. "I doubt there'll be any response for some hours, but I imagine they'll be strongly motivated to arrange a meeting for soon, rather than in three weeks' time," he added drily, with a snide reference to the usual speed of diplomatic arrangements.

"Yes, I'll do that, Captain, and also if you wish formulate a resume of the work of the Federation that they can be given."

"That'd be useful. Thanks, Spock." Kirk yawned again.

McCoy scowled at him. "Jim, are you going peacefully, before you collapse, or must I get Spock to carry you?" he demanded.

"I'm going, I'm going!" Kirk said hastily. He left quickly, before McCoy could carry out his threat, leaving a broadly smiling McCoy and a mildly amused Spock.

McCoy glanced at the Vulcan. "Is it just tiredness?" he demanded. "Or is he hiding some injury?"

"Just tiredness," Spock assured him. "Strain, if you like. He was very aware of the water rising... It was fortunate that none of the trapped men was injured, however."

McCoy nodded. "He'll also be very aware of breaching the Prime Directive," he added thoughtfully.

"This planet is advanced enough for contact."

"I know...but..."

He had no need to say more. Both men were well aware, without discussing it, of the recent courtmartial of the Captain of the Exeter -- his crime, contacting the natives of a Prime Directive planet when looking for suitable

crystals to replace two burned-out dilithium crystals in his engines. The fact that without replacement crystals his ship was literally stranded almost a hundred light years from a Starbase, that the natives were advanced enough to accept the existence of other inhabited worlds, that their planet was a source of high-quality power crystals - not dilithium, but an excellent substitute - was not accepted as a valid defence, and the Captain was summarily demoted to Lieutenant and assigned to permanent Starbase duty. McCoy, who had met Captain Tracey, suspected that Starfleet Command had merely used this as an excuse to remove him from a position of responsibility - there was some reason to doubt his stability; since his promotion to Captain, his readings had been only just within acceptable limits, and it seemed that he was a man who could cope satisfactorily in any test situation since he knew it to be unreal, but who, when it came to it, was unable to handle the tremendous responsibility involved in being a Starship Captain. But it set an unfortunate precedent.

"I must go to the bridge," Spock said abruptly, and McCoy nodded.

On the bridge, Spock passed Kirk's orders on to Uhura, who nodded understanding of them and returned her attention to her console. He then resumed his station for a brief time before heading for his office beside the science laboratories.

There he studied the readings he had obtained of the planet. An advanced world, right enough...but there were indications that unless something happened to prevent it, a war between the two main nations was relatively imminent.

He hoped that their arrival was sufficient to prevent it.

* * * * *

Drakk sighed wearily - but silently - as Carlos Rivas talked on. He had long since stopped paying much attention to anything the Human said - Rivas was dull company, after all. He might be ambitious, but he lacked the spark of drive to get anywhere; it showed in his every word, and Drakk now regretted the impulse that had led him to cultivate the Human in the first place. On the other hand, occasionally Rivas let drop a few words of useful information - and on consideration, Drakk had decided not to terminate the acquaintanceship, although he pleaded pressure of work to avoid seeing the Human quite as often as he had done in the early days of their journey. It was not wholly a lie, either; with Sgrral's death a second automatic promotion had come, and he did have to study the new work.

Drakk allowed his attention to wander slightly, keeping just enough of it on the Human for Rivas not to realise that his companion's mind was elsewhere. Sgrral's death had been accepted as an accident, but of course the Ambassador had been old. Rrovral, now... Rrovral was looking at him suspiciously, or so it seemed...yet he could know nothing. But if he was suspicious... It would be harder to remove Rrovral without anyone suspecting. But the poison was quick-acting and left no traces; half an hour after death it had broken down into its component elements, and these were found in the bloodstream of any normal Ubar.

Could he risk the poison again? Perhaps...but with Rrovral out of the way, he would be promoted three steps, up to eight years before he could have hoped for such a position if he had let nature take its own course. And that thought made him pause. Fast though the Ubar could learn he was finding it quite difficult to cope adequately with the increased workload he was already facing. He did not feel he could cope with a further promotion - not just yet.

In addition...according to Rivas, the ship was lost; the Humans had no idea of where they were. In this benighted forest of stars, it was no wonder! Drakk thought. Perhaps it would be wisest to postpone any action against that half-witted fool Rrovral, who could see no further than the end of his nose. No need to risk discovery - not that he feared it - by killing Rrovral just yet. Time

enough when they were nearer the cities of the Ubar, or the strongholds of this Federation the Humans belonged to. It would give him longer to accustom himself to the demands of his new rank before he stepped up that third place.

The Humans...fools, every one of them! Not one of them had guessed, any more than his own stupid superiors had, that he had killed Sgral using the vrax he had stolen from his Healer father and which his father had never missed. Yes, it was easy for someone with intelligence and unburdened by a conscience to make things go the way he wanted...

Suddenly, all the lights went out.

* * * * *

"Scotty!" Kirk snapped, thankful that his hand knew its own way to the intercom.

"Scott here, sir. Everything's out except air supply."

"Our blasted practical joker again?"

"Aye, it looks like it. If it was a straight malfunction, even the air supply would be out...but the emergency backup system would be working. That's out too - as far as light and heat are concerned."

Kirk's lips tightened. "We can make do with lamps for light, but if heating is out, it's going to get very cold... Do you suppose our joker realises that?"

"If he doesn't, he should - unless Academy training is a lot different from what it was in my day," Scotty growled. "I've got everyone working on it, Captain."

"Yes, I know, Scotty. I'll let you get on with it."

Kirk groped for the emergency hand light and switched it on. Then he flicked the intercom on again, opened his mouth to speak, changed his mind, switched the intercom off and strode out of his cabin. A dancing light coming towards him showed where some other crewman was about his business - it had to be one of the on-duty watch, since the off-duty personnel would all be in either rec room or cabins, and they, in this emergency, would know to remain there out of the way.

He strode to the turbolift and stopped dead when the doors refused to open. "Damn!" Even when he was carrying a hand light, habit died hard. He turned and headed purposefully down the corridor. It wasn't that far to sickbay, but there was a definite tendency for everyone to use the turbolifts...

McCoy looked up from where he was peering at some papers in the relatively dim light of a small hand lamp.

"Busy?" Kirk asked, managing to cover his annoyance at forgetting again and expecting the door to slide open for him. He had bumped into it rather hard before remembering that he would have to use the manual override.

"Once Scotty gets the power on again, I'm having all the new engineering staff down here for a psych test," McCoy said bluntly. "It's got to be an engineer. There's too much technical knowledge behind most of these 'jokes' for it to be anyone else."

"Starting with your two 'funny men'?"

"I'm still doubtful about its being one of them," McCoy said. "Indeed, I'd stake everything I know on it. Practical jokers don't go in for 'song and dance' routines. This joker isn't one of the extreme extrovert type, Jim - he's underhand. He gets his kicks out of knowing he's caused embarrassment or inconvenience - and he's totally without a conscience, too. Just look at the scope of his tricks - and the simple fact that he's kept on with them even after one of them resulted in the ship's getting lost. It's as if nothing really

matters to him except getting a good laugh at everyone else running around trying to mend his damage. He probably even goes through the motions of helping, to cover up. Like I said, he's cunning."

Kirk thought for a moment. "You said once that you reckoned he's learned to fake his psych results."

"The routine ones, yes. But I've got a few tricks up my sleeve from my days in hospital. I did a two-year stint in a mental hospital not long before I opted for Space service - and believe me, until you've spent time in a mental hospital, you just don't have any notion how convoluted the Human mind can be. Look - some practical jokers own up to it. They play a joke, they catch you out, but they make no secret of it. Those ones are a pain in the neck, but at least they're honest. The dishonest ones - well, to my mind they're unbalanced. Not insane - quite - but not entirely sane either."

"Bones, in my book any practical joker is unbalanced."

McCoy smiled wearily. "I think you're being a little too sweeping, Jim." He gave a half shrug. "Don't tell me you never pulled anyone's leg by -- oh -- "

"Bones, there's a big difference between teasing and practical joking."

"It's just a matter of degree, Jim. Some people can't take being teased either. A practical joker probably assumes, quite honestly, that the rest of the world doesn't have much of a sense of humour. But this kind of joker... Jim, we're talking round in circles."

"Yeak, I suppose we are." Kirk shivered. "It's getting cold."

"It'll get colder."

"I know." Kirk nibbled at his lips. "I may have to order the crew down to the surface if only to provide adequate heating for them all."

"And wouldn't our joker just love that."

As suddenly as they went off, the lights went on again. Kirk raised his head. "Well, well. I'll bet the heating's on again, too."

The intercom buzzed. McCoy reached out. "McCoy here."

"Scott here. Do you want to see those men now, Bones?"

"Yes," McCoy said grimly, ignoring Kirk's raised eyebrow.

"They'll be right down."

Kirk leaned over. "What was wrong, Scotty?"

"The main unit just had a small component removed. It had been left lying beside its bed, so it was easy enough to put back once we found it. We havena' found the fault in the back-up system yet."

"Let me know when you do." Kirk flicked off the intercom. "Scotty knew you wanted those men?"

"I called him to find out what had happened - sickbay might have had to get something rigged up urgently - and told him then."

"I'll leave you to get on with it. Good luck."

* * * * *

Almost twenty-four hours had passed since their return to the Enterprise and the radio waves from the planet beneath them had been carrying stories that varied from the sensational ('Visitors from Space helped in a dramatic rescue... then vanished') to the frankly disbelieving ('Although these strangers did indeed rescue the trapped cavers, their claim to be of extraterrestrial origin must be treated with extreme suspicion. Radar has detected no sign of UFO activity, and the most up-to-date astronomical telescopes have been unable to focus on the mysterious ship in which they claim to have reached Earth...') It

was interesting, Uhura mused as she monitored the airways, that almost all races called their world of origin by a name that translated as 'Earth' or 'ground'. Even 'Vulcan' meant 'land' in one of the older, more obscure Vulcan languages...

The turbolift door swished open, and Kirk strode onto the bridge, an expression on his face that made the clear-conscienced Uhura wonder briefly what sins of omission she might have been guilty of, followed by relief that it wasn't her he was angry with. The practical joker, of course. She wouldn't like to be in his shoes when they finally discovered just who he - or she, of course - was. Once Kirk had finished with him, it would be the turn of the crew to make their feelings plain...

Kirk glanced over at her. "Any messages from the planet, Lieutenant?" He made an effort to speak quietly, aware that there was no point in taking out his bad temper on his experienced and trusted crew, who were all as annoyed by the 'joker' as he was.

"Not yet, Captain. The people down there don't seem to know what to believe, if the newscasts are anything to go by. Some of them don't believe in little green men, others seem quite keen on the 'aliens from space' angle. If they're reflecting their governments' official views, it might be a while before they reach any sort of decision to meet with us."

Kirk nodded. "Yes, that seems about par for the course," he said drily.

"Indeed," Spock put in as he rose from the command chair. "The inability of politicians to reach a reasoned conclusion in a minimum of time never fails to appal me. And yet these are the very people who are running the various countries of which the planet is made up."

"The doubting attitude could be meant to avoid possible panic," Kirk mused.

"Panic?" Spock asked. "We made contact by offering them help!"

"A logical race would see that, Spock; but most races are not logical. A lot of races see anything strange as potentially if not actually hostile, and most worlds' science fiction includes a lot of stories about invasion from space. Far more exciting than an alien race dropping in with a trade agreement and no hostile intentions, wouldn't you agree? But not exactly conducive to feelings of trust and security if once the aliens do arrive."

"The ability to differentiate between fiction and reality - " Spock began.

" - seems very lacking in a lot of emotional races," Kirk finished.

Uhura nodded. "Serials about 'life in a small village' or 'the everyday life of a typical family in Smallville - or Small Street' are very popular on Earth, Mr. Spock. Now it's the way of things that in any 'everyday life' that goes on for years - and some of those serials do - people die...are born...get married. You have no idea how many wreaths, baby clothes and wedding presents are sent to the characters by viewers who seem to believe that they are real - not just parts acted by people who have nothing in common with the parts they depict. Even if the actor who played a character who 'died' is subsequently interviewed anywhere, the public still don't seem to be able to understand... Oh, not everyone gets quite so...involved, there are plenty in the audience who do realise that it's all fiction..."

"There's a well-authenticated story on Earth, dating from the twentieth century," Kirk joined in, his mind distracted - temporarily at least - from the practical joker. "Have you ever read 'The War of the Worlds' by H.G. Wells?"

Spock nodded. "It had quite an ingenious denouement, as I recall."

"Yes. Well, a radio station, I think it was, in Old America decided to present a dramatised version of it, presented as a documentary - 'Our official car is jammed in with many others who have come to see these alien spacecraft that have landed...the doors are opening now... Oh my God! They're monsters!' type of thing. For some reason a lot of people tuned in to the broadcast after

it had started - there was probably something they'd all been catching on another channel - and thought it really was a documentary, that strange alien monsters really had landed... There was quite a panic." He stiffened suddenly, becoming aware of a potential practical joke that nobody had so far thought of.

Spock, as he so often did, followed his thoughts. "Could our practical joker cut into our transmission capability, Miss Uhura?" he asked.

"From engineering - yes," she said simply, "and I wouldn't be able to do a thing about it."

"He wouldn't even need to hang around for long," Kirk added softly. "He could leave a tape running... How long would it take to find such a tape?"

"Not long," Uhura assured him. "There aren't many places he could attach a playback unit, and they'd only take a couple of minutes to check out."

Kirk nodded. "McCoy's testing all the engineering staff we picked up right now," he said. "They're the prime suspects, of course. But just in case he fails...Uhura, be ready to make that check!"

"Yes, Captain." She hesitated. "Captain...I wonder..."

"Lieutenant?"

"You said it yourself, Captain - this joker is clever. All the jokes have shown some degree of technical know-how...pointing the finger at engineering crew. But what if he isn't engineering? What if he's deliberately making it look that way?"

"A good suggestion, Uhura, but how many non-engineering staff have that much knowledge of the innards of - say - the transporter console? It was sabotaged in the single most effective yet hard to detect place. He's shown too much technical know-how for him not to be in engineering."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk glanced round, suddenly realising that there was someone missing. "Where's Mr. Wood?" he asked. "It's his watch." Spock ate work, Kirk knew, but that gave Wood no right to hand over command to the Science Officer while he disappeared, taking advantage of the Vulcan's willingness to oblige.

Spock half shrugged. "He was here, sir. When the power failed, he gave me the con and went off down the emergency stair."

Kirk punched the intercom. "Mr. Wood report to bridge."

There was no answer. "Mr. Wood?" Nothing. "Mr. Scott - have you seen Mr. Wood?"

"No, Captain."

"He would have been going to engineering," Kirk said thoughtfully. "Why didn't he get there?"

"Perhaps he tripped over something and stunned himself," Uhura suggested. "Those hand lamps can throw some nasty shadows."

Kirk nodded. "Security - phase one search for Commander Wood."

"Aye, sir," the duty officer replied.

He did not have to wait long. Within two minutes the intercom bleeped, and he smacked his hand down hard on the button. "Kirk here."

"We've found Mr. Wood, sir. He seems to have slipped coming down the ladder from the Bridge. Sir - I think he's broken his neck."

"Have you alerted Sickbay?"

"Yes, sir."

McCoy's voice cut in. "I'm here now, Captain." The intercom went silent for a moment, then McCoy's voice resumed. "Perez is right, Captain. Mr. Wood's neck is broken. There's nothing I can do. Even if I could revive him - and I'd be unwilling to try because he's been lying here a while and the brain is bound to be suffering from oxygen deprivation - he'd be paralysed from the neck down."

"Thank you, Doctor..." Slowly, Kirk switched off the intercom. Then sudden suspicion made him slam the circuit open again. "Mr. Perez!"

"Yes, sir?" The delay was so brief that Kirk knew the security officer could not even have begun to turn away.

"Check the rungs of the ladder. Is there anything on any of them that Mr. Wood could have slipped on?"

"Aye, sir." There was a brief pause, then Perez' voice. "Captain, there's something on three of the rungs about halfway up. I think it's oil."

"I see. Thank you, Mr. Perez." Deliberately, Kirk closed the circuit.

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Kirk scowled at the report McCoy had just handed him. "Does this mean that you've cleared all the new engineering personnel?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm afraid it does. They all read normal. This test I've got - it's impossible to fake normal. Anyone who tries to fake, in terms of 'what answer is expected here?' gets a false result - and no, I'm not telling you how it's done! Whoever this joker is, it isn't one of the engineering staff - which will please Scotty, at least."

"We're not talking about a practical joker any more, Bones - we're talking about a murderer."

"It doesn't follow. Yes, I know you're thinking about the ball bearings in the corridor, and I know that shows considerable irresponsibility. But spilt oil... Jim, that doesn't have to be a trick. It could just happen, be a pure accident..."

"Bones, how often is the emergency ladder from the Bridge used? How much maintenance is carried on up there? I don't think it's possible for it 'just to happen' - not on that particular ladder. I think our practical joker is an irresponsible idiot who gives absolutely no thought to the danger inherent in a lot of his so-called jokes. There was only one - no, two - of his tricks that weren't potentially dangerous. And most of his tricks have shown technical know-how. You can't get away from that, Bones."

"All right. The next step is to test all the rest of the new personnel," McCoy said matter-of-factly. "But Jim - don't make the mistake of blaming everything that goes wrong on our joker. Accidents can happen; a crewman can make a mistake -"

"Yes, but a well-adjusted, responsible crewman admits to it," Kirk pointed out.

McCoy grunted and changed the subject. "You'll have to select someone as acting First Officer," he said. "Any ideas?"

"Yes. I was thinking of Spock. No, wait -" as McCoy opened his mouth to speak. "Let me finish. I know he doesn't have that much space experience, but he is experienced in handling men. Scotty certainly wouldn't want the job, and anyway a Chief Engineer has enough on his plate without the extra work being First Officer would entail. Sulu and Uhura could both do it perfectly well, but only at the cost of hours of overtime. On the other hand, Vulcans eat work. Spock could do the job, and carry on as Science Officer, and barely feel himself worked to capacity let alone overworked. Add to that, he and I get on really well together, and that would certainly be to the ship's advantage."

"Jim, you're arguing to the converted," McCoy said, grinning, as Kirk at

last gave him the chance to speak. "That was what I was just going to say. Spock could do the double job easier than anyone else on board. The alternative would be to give the job to Sulu or Uhura and promote their seconds to acting head of department, and I don't think that would be nearly as satisfactory."

Kirk grinned responsively. "I'm edgy," he admitted. He stretched and yawned. "God, I'm tired."

"Worry can be very tiring," McCoy agreed. "I prescribe bed."

"No," Kirk objected. "I'd just lie awake, tossing and turning... I'd rather see if Spock can spare the time for a game of chess. We haven't played for ages, and I find it more relaxing than anything else I can think of -- anything else that's practical, that is."

"O.K., but if he isn't free, don't pull rank."

Kirk grunted what might have been agreement. "I've got to see him anyway," He reached forward and switched on his intercom. "Mr. Spock report to the Captain's quarters as soon as possible."

McCoy turned towards the door. "I'll go and get these tests laid on," he said.

Kirk nodded and McCoy left, to walk briskly down the corridor. There was little enough he could do to help the Captain; if he could find the practical joker, that would be at least one worry off Kirk's mind.

* * * * *

Spock buzzed, and entered the Captain's cabin on command. Kirk grinned up at him. "Spock. How is the star search getting on?"

Spock shook his head. "Badly," he said, his voice as gloomy as it was possible for a Vulcan's to be. "The cluster of stars at 249 mark 3 looks most promising, but it isn't a definite match for anything in our charts. I've initiated a more detailed study of the area, but from the data we have so far, I would hesitate to recommend that we commit ourselves to heading in that direction."

"Well, it's something," Kirk said, determinedly cheerful. "I'd've been a lot more worried if nothing at all matched... Spock -- I'd like you to take on Mr. Wood's job until we get home."

The Vulcan stared at him, momentarily speechless. "Jim -- you honour me, but surely there are several other officers with more experience, more claim to the promotion -- "

"Yes, there are," Kirk admitted, "but none that I think would be able to double up positions. I think you could do both your job and First Officer's, and still not feel yourself worked to full capacity -- and from a purely selfish point of view, I'd be glad to have a First Officer who was also a friend. Wood and I never openly disagreed, but we rarely saw eye to eye on anything."

"Then -- if you are sure none of the senior officers will feel offended -- "

"McCoy's in full agreement with me. Scotty's the only man senior enough to think the post might have been given to him, and he wouldn't want it -- it would take him away from his engines too much. Now -- I also know that you've been working flat out since we came back up from the planet. I want you to take the rest of the evening off. An extra hour or two isn't going to make much difference -- and I'm feeling like a game of chess."

Spock looked at him. "Pulling rank, Captain?"

Kirk smiled slightly. "I suppose I am. But McCoy advises rest, and I'll rest better over a game of chess than tossing and turning in bed with insomnia."

"In that case... The sensors can continue the search without me. Seval is fully capable of supervising it -- indeed, he has been doing most of the supervisory work. There seem to have been several other things taking up my attention recently."

Kirk began to lay out the chessmen. "McCoy's cleared all the new engineering staff," he said.

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Interesting."

The buzzer sounded suddenly, frantically. The two men looked at each other even as Kirk reached for the release.

The door slid open, and a Ubar almost fell into the room. The alien's ears were almost flat along its skull, and the tail was held curled hard between its legs. It was almost sobbing. A second Ubar showed in the doorway and paused when it saw the Captain.

"What's all this?" Kirk demanded.

The second Ubar's tail drooped fractionally, then lifted again. "The lady is being coquettish," he said easily.

Kirk looked hard at the Ubar, then turned his attention to the whimpering one that crouched on his floor, realising who it must be. "The lady seems to be more than merely coquettish," he said grimly. "From what I've heard, she is unwilling, but being forced into compliance through fear. I think you've gone too far this time, Drakk."

"Captain, you have no right to interfere in the internal affairs of my people." Was there a touch of insolence in the voice? It was always difficult to say when every word had to be translated.

"By coming here, Birbir has asked for my help," Kirk said firmly. "If you have any quarrel with that - or with me - you can take it through Ambassador Rrovral. Do you want me to call him?"

Drakk snarled and retreated. The door slid shut.

Kirk bent to the young Ubar. "It's all right, Birbir," he said softly. "He's gone. We can tell Rrovral, and he'll see to it that you aren't bothered again." He nodded to Spock, who activated the intercom.

"No!" she gasped. "He...he..."

"Rrovral is the best person to protect you," Kirk pointed out gently.

"Drakk... Drakk is not afraid of Rrovral," she gasped.

Kirk glanced at Spock. "Get Uhura," Kirk ordered. He turned his attention back to the terrified Ubar, stroking her back as he would a frightened dog. "It's all right," he said softly. "You trust Uhura, don't you? I've sent for her."

The quivering lessened fractionally, and she began to relax ever so slightly. The sound of the buzzer made her stiffen again. Kirk nodded towards the door, and Spock moved to open it. Uhura entered, and crossed straight to where Kirk crouched beside the frightened Ubar girl.

"What happened, Brrbrr?" she asked softly. The young alien seemed unable to reply; instead, she buried her head against Uhura's shoulder.

"Drakk was following her," Kirk said quietly. "She buzzed on my door -- from desperation, I'm sure - I don't think she even knew whose cabin this is. I offered to get Rrovral, but she didn't want me to. Uhura - keep her with you. Drakk can't do anything to her if she's always with someone else. Even if it means taking her to the Bridge when you're on duty."

Uhura nodded. "Yes, Captain." She turned her full attention to Brrbrr again. "Will we go to my cabin, Brrbrr? We can't talk girl talk with the Captain around."

"Yes." It was little more than a whisper.

Uhura kept an arm round her as they walked to the door. Kirk watched them go, a worried frown on his face.

"You've done all you can, Jim," Spock said. "If the girl won't appeal to her superior, there's nothing else you can do for her."

"I know," Kirk said slowly. "But why won't she appeal to Hrovral, Spock? That's what I'd like to know."

* * * * *

McCoy's test failed to come up with anything among the rest of the new crew members either. He reported to Kirk, a discouraged droop to his shoulders. "I've never known the association retrieval test to fail," he said gloomily. "We're not dealing with a normal personality disorder here, Jim."

"Is there anything 'normal' about a personality disorder, Doctor?" Spock asked blandly.

The Doctor ignored him. "I'd say this boy seriously believes that what he does is right because he does it; he isn't aware of being anti-social on any level. No guilt reaction. Not even momentary doubt."

"Doctor, are you trying to say that someone with enough of a personality disorder not to realise he is being anti-social when he perpetrates such foolish behaviour would not show up as abnormal in your tests?" Spock was frowning.

"No, I'm not. The usual psych tests would pick him up. This test is designed to catch the ones who are cunning enough to pretend to be completely normal - completely sane, if you like." He shook his head. "Somehow this fellow is managing to cheat both kinds of test."

"I wonder. Doctor, I suggest you extend your testing to include all personnel - not just the ones who are new on board."

"Spock, are you suggesting that the joker isn't one of the new crewmen?"

"We have always admitted his cunning, Captain. Suppose he had been on the ship for some time - we took on five new crewmen at Benecia three months ago, and another eight at Starbase 8 two weeks prior to that. Did you test any of them, Doctor?"

McCoy shook his head.

"Any one of them could have waited until he was 'long-established' on board and a new group of newly-qualified personnel arrived in order to disguise his trail, knowing that the newest men on board would be suspected first. This group - twenty-seven, as you pointed out to me, Doctor - is large; and in addition includes two extreme extroverts. Perfect camouflage, wouldn't you say?"

Kirk and McCoy looked at each other. "None of those thirteen you mentioned was newly qualified," Kirk said slowly. He indicated the viewer. "Pull their records, Spock. Let's have a look at them. I don't usually dig too deeply into a man's previous record - personality clashes do occur, and where it happens it's easy for a crewman to get a bad name without entirely deserving it. If someone has asked for a transfer, I don't usually ask why; if it's something as simple as wanting wider experience, the man usually makes no secret of it..."

"Ready, Captain," Spock said. They began to play through the reports.

The first few were routine enough, and as report followed report, Kirk began to think they were on another false trail. The tenth record, however, drew their attention instantly.

'Lester - Janice. Lieutenant. Engineering, Lexington. Recommended for transfer and reassignment to security, stardate 4580.0.'

Kirk let out a long breath. "Paydirt?" he asked.

"Could be," McCoy agreed. "I wonder why she was recommended for reassignment?"

"The fact that she was," Spock commented, "without explanation, is definitely

suspicious. And such a person would have the technical knowledge...and just possibly a motive...for the incidents that have occurred."

"I remember her," McCoy said. "Very self-possessed - almost too self-possessed, come to think of it," he added. "No matter how fit they think they are, most people are slightly nervous of routine physicals. She didn't turn a hair."

"Wood," Kirk said. "He mentioned her at that meeting we had...and he came to me again after it and suggested again that she was too capable to be wasted in security. I told him she was too new on board to be looking for reassignment just yet; I didn't realise - how could I? - that she was actually looking for assignment back to her original speciality. I can't think why I didn't think of her as a possible suspect rather sooner..."

"We were all misled by thinking it was one of the new crewmen," Spock reminded him.

"Even so."

"Wood didn't think of her," McCoy pointed out.

"Wood presumably liked her. He saw a lot of her, off-duty; I suspect he was sleeping with her. He was always disposed to think well of someone he liked."

"Mr. Baillie discounted her also," Spock commented.

"As the joker - but did you really feel he thought highly of her?" Kirk asked. Their eyes met. "Reckless...wasn't that the word he used?"

"Young enough to mistake recklessness for courage..." McCoy said thoughtfully. "I knew at the time that something sounded wrong about that - unless what Baillie actually meant was 'immature enough'. She's no chicken, Jim - she's nearly forty, though she doesn't look a day older than twenty-five."

"Nearly forty? An engineer that age recommended for transfer to security... Hmmm. Incompetent?"

"Could be, though why it wasn't marked on her record I don't know," McCoy said.

"Well, I'd better have a word with her." He reached for the intercom. "Security - Lt. Lester report to the Captain's quarters immediately." He flicked off the switch.

There was a brief delay before the expected buzz at the door. "Come." Kirk's tone was deliberately routine.

The woman who entered did, as McCoy had said, look to be in her mid twenties; and as Kirk had once noticed, she had a brittle beauty that the Captain judged owed nothing to artificial aids. This was not a woman to use her looks and charm to gain her any favours.

"Lt. Lester, sir."

"Have a seat, Lieutenant." Kirk nodded to the chair in front of his desk. She took it, glancing as she did at Spock and McCoy, seated as they were one on each side of the Captain, then she ignored them completely.

"I've been looking through crew records," Kirk went on conversationally. "I'm afraid it's one of those routine jobs that sometimes fall behind a bit when I'm busy, so I hadn't had occasion to look at the records of the new crew - that is, the ones who have come aboard in the last four months - until now. I notice you were originally in engineering?"

"That's right, sir."

"Why did you decide to transfer to security?" He made it sound a perfectly natural query. "Starfleet is always wanting good engineers."

Her face flushed and her lips set in a line that instantly destroyed all

claim she might have had to beauty. "I was denied the chance of promotion," she said harshly.

"Surely a simple transfer...?" Spock said reasonably.

"I tried that," she said scornfully. "But you men are all the same. Power mad. You're all too jealous of your positions as Captains and Heads of Department to give a talented woman a chance."

Kirk stared at her, honestly puzzled. "Uhura is Head of Department," he reminded her.

"And how many men go in for Communications? If you had a man in the department, would Uhura still be head of it?"

"There's no reason why not. She's highly qualified."

"But there's no place in Command, or even as Chief Engineer, for a woman. Oh, the Fleet pays lip service to the equality of the sexes, but that's all it is - lip service. Even in Security - your Security Chief keeps me down all the time!"

Kirk and McCoy glanced at each other as she went on. "I'm good at my work; I always have been. But every ship I've been on, the men at the top have prevented me from getting promotion. Then that bastard Wesley used his position to have me declared unsuitable for engineering. Unsuitable! I've been in engineering for twenty years! But he ignored all that... I knew more than his Chief Engineer did, and that's a fact! But the male ranks always close when there are women about. Wesley wouldn't hear a word against DePaul." Her voice was very bitter. "If I'd been born a man I'd have made Chief Engineer ten years ago!"

"So you resent Commodore Wesley?" Kirk asked.

"I think he was prejudiced against me because of my sex - sir." There was anger in her voice.

"Was that why you played all those tricks on us, then - to show us how much you know about engineering?" Kirk asked mildly.

She was too carried away by her sense of rightful indignation to spot the trap. "It certainly showed I know more than any of the men!" she snapped triumphantly. "It took them long enough each time to discover what was wrong!"

"Lieutenant, didn't you stop to think that you were endangering the Enterprise - and yourself with her?" Kirk asked.

Her jaw dropped. Kirk went on. "The transporter, now - on the face of it, you merely deprived everyone of a much-needed break. But what if an emergency had arisen, that required the use of the transporter? As for the navigational console - it was your interference with it that caused the gap in our records that means we are hopelessly lost. As for the ball-bearings in the corridor and the oil on the ladder - "

"I don't know what you're talking about - sir," she interrupted.

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I admit to causing the malfunctions in the transporter and navigational console - among others. But I know nothing about ball-bearings in the corridor or oil on any ladder." She drew a deep breath. "But that's typical, of course - you'll make it sound like a hysterical woman playing childish tricks."

"Lieutenant," Spock said quietly. "You are telling us you know nothing about these two incidents?"

"You're damned right I am!"

The three men looked at each other. Then Kirk said quietly, "Doctor, I would like Miss Lester tested - a full psychological scan. Considering her apparent belief that all men are out to 'get' her, I suggest that you ask Nurse

Chapel to do the actual testing so that she can be assured of a fair test."

"Yes, Captain." McCoy nodded to Lester. "If you will accompany me, Lieutenant..."

"I refuse! This is a blatant denial of my rights - "

"Miss Lester, either you accompany Dr. McCoy peacefully, or you go under arrest," Kirk cut in icily. "Contrary to your apparent expectations, I would prefer not to have to throw the book at you - but if you force me to it, I will."

She glared at him, then rose with an air of offended dignity and marched out, McCoy following her. As the door swished shut, Kirk turned to look at the Vulcan.

They had found one practical joker. It seemed that there was another one still to be identified.

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The expected radio call came, and Kirk, accompanied by Spock and a security contingent, beamed down to talk with the representatives of the various nations of the planet. Keowen, as the man they had first contacted, was also present.

It was a meeting fairly typical of many that Kirk had attended over the years; as always, some of the representatives were in favour of allying themselves with the newcomers while others, more suspicious or more cynical, held back. Kirk answered questions with the ease of practice. Keowen pointed out that their first contact had been to help a small group of men trapped in a cave; surely, he said, not the action of a would-be conqueror.

One self-important-sounding diplomat answered that he thought it perfectly possible for potential conquerors to come in the guise of helpers, and cited a case from history, which Keowen promptly parried by pointing out that it was from history so ancient that it was practically a myth.

"We don't need an answer yet, gentlemen," Kirk told them. "I'm here merely to advise you of the existence of our Federation...to which we may never get back, unless our navigational department is more fortunate than it has been so far." He smiled wryly. "Indeed, it may be that we will be the ones seeking your help in the long run; for if we cannot find our way home, we will have no option but to make our homes, our base, here."

It was finally decided that a delegation should be selected to return to Federation space with the Enterprise should they be successful in determining their position, to discuss the possibility of their world joining the Federation. The last doubters finally gave way when Kirk pointed out that there was in the galaxy at least one race that was a conqueror. "I realise," he admitted with disarming candour, "that any representatives of the Klingon Empire would also claim that we are aggressors. However, it is a firm rule of the Federation that all member planets retain their own laws, which all member planets must respect. The Klingons give overrun planets their laws which must be obeyed on pain of death. This is not hearsay, gentlemen; I was unfortunate enough to be on a planet that was attacked by the Klingons, and for a brief period overrun by them; I know their methods from experience. However, if a planet is allied to the Federation, it is protected by the Federation."

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They returned to the Enterprise reasonably well satisfied with the meeting, to find McCoy ready with the report on Lt. Lester.

"Totally unstable," he said bluntly. "I don't say she always was -- her initial testing must have been within acceptable limits -- but something has pushed her into the edges of insanity. She is paranoid about sexual discrimination; feels that any criticism of her is occasioned by her sex rather than her performance, that any criticism of her performance is because she's a woman -- that a man who did the same thing would be praised... I would doubt that she

ever had the capacity for command of any description, though she might have made a good second in engineering."

"Recommendation?"

"Medical discharge - and she won't like it."

"She'll claim we got rid of her because she's a competent woman and our delicate egos couldn't take the competition?"

"Something like that."

Kirk shrugged. "It can't be helped. She's a danger to herself, quite apart from any ship she's on now."

"And Jim - she keeps on and on that she wasn't responsible for any ball-bearings or oil lying anywhere."

Kirk nodded. "I tend to believe her. She was too proud of the technical tricks, of having kept us guessing for so long. Although it does mean that we've another practical joker to identify."

"Well, I've cleared most of the new personnel now. It won't take long to check out the rest," McCoy offered.

"Is it possible..." Spock began, then, uncharacteristically, hesitated.

"Go on, First Officer." Kirk knew that Spock was occasionally still diffident about his new position.

"Is it possible that neither of these were 'jokes', but genuine accidents; that the person responsible took fright when he realised what had happened with the ball bearings and swept them up to cover his mistake; that the person responsible for the oil - not necessarily the same person - did not realise that he had dripped oil on the ladder?"

"Yes," Kirk said slowly. "McCoy suggested that too. It's possible...we could be being paranoid about practical joking because of the circumstances. somehow I don't think so." He rubbed the back of his neck reflectively. "Something here says to me it's all deliberate."

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Kirk walked onto the bridge and looked round thoughtfully. Everyone still looked alert, as if orbiting an unknown but civilised planet was the most exciting duty they had undertaken in months, and he logged a mental commendation to them all. Uhura appeared to be explaining the communications console to Brbrr, and he nodded approvingly; pleased that the young Ubar, in spite of her...shyness? nervousness? was - even as a result of her fear of the unpleasant Brakk - coming out of her shell. It could be - it probably was - a wish to cling to the Human female who seemed to be protecting her, but if as a result she learned even a little about communications, it would give her a second source of employment. As he turned to the command chair, Brbrr seemed to be asking a question.

Kirk sat, saying, "Report, Mr. Sulu."

"Everything routine, sir."

Kirk had expected nothing else. He would, he decided, remain here for a while - show the crew that he was willing to participate in the boredom of such a routine watch, even though they knew perfectly well that he asked nothing of them that he was not willing to do himself - then go and see how McCoy was getting on with his tests of the remaining recent arrivals on board.

"Captain!"

"Yes, Lieutenant?" Kirk swung round to Uhura.

"Captain, Brbrr says she knows the way home - at least, back to Ubarr."

"What?"

"She's so junior that nobody, even her own seniors, thought to tell her that the ship was lost. She thought we were here deliberately. I mentioned the problem to her just now, and - go on, Brrbrr, tell Captain Kirk."

But the young Ubar shrank back, ears flattened nervously.

Kirk scratched the back of his neck. He knew how to cope with nervous dogs -- as a boy, he had rescued a stray that had clearly been badly mistreated by its owner and had been terrified of everyone who came near it, and he had won its confidence, not easily but relatively quickly, though it had remained nervous of strangers all its life. This, however, was not a dog but an intelligent being, even though she so resembled the canines from which her people were descended. She would certainly resent being treated like a dog -- just as much as he would resent being treated as an ape by another intelligent species.

Uhura, it seemed, recognised the problem; she shrugged as if to say, 'Well, I tried', and said, "Some Ubarrak have retained an instinctive 'homing' awareness; the females rather more acutely than the males. On Ubarr, the ability is considered of little use, even atavistic. Brrbrr has it to a considerable degree -- which is another reason why she is so...nervous. She says she knows exactly where Ubarr is in relation to this solar system."

"Where is it, Birbir?" Kirk asked, trying to speak gently but with his anxiety to know -- his need to know -- clear in his voice. He was already thinking how useful this ability would be on a scoutship -- they didn't get lost often, but navigational failure wasn't unknown on the small craft. It could be as useful as the known navigational skills of the Medusans...

She looked to Uhura for guidance, and the Human woman nodded encouragement. "Yes, Brrbrr. Tell the Captain."

"That way," she whispered, and pointed.

"Sulu?" Kirk asked.

"243 mark 7," Sulu replied after the briefest of pauses.

Kirk rose. "Thank you, Birbir," he said. Even if she was wrong, it was worth trying. "Mr. Sulu, you have the con. I'll be in the science department if I'm wanted."

He strode out.

* * * * *

Spock lifted his head from the schematic he was studying as Kirk entered, and rose. "Yes, Captain."

"Spock -- you told me you had a set of readings that looked promising. What heading was it again?"

"249 mark 3."

"Ah. Birbir hit the jackpot."

"Jackpot?" Spock asked, puzzled.

Kirk grinned, "Apparently some of the Ubarrak have a sort of homing instinct. Uhura just discovered Birbir has it -- apparently nobody had thought to tell her we were lost -- and Birbir's indicated direction is 243 mark 7 for Ubarr."

"Have you checked with Rrovral for the reliability of Brrbrr's...instinct?"

"No, mainly because apparently it's sort of frowned on to have this ability -- not quite civilised. I suspect Birbir has kept knowledge of her ability to herself. She's only told Uhura because Uhura is another female and sympathetic. She wouldn't open her mouth to me at first -- Uhura had to coax her like anything. But it agrees with a direction that you thought was promising. I think it's worth taking a chance. After all, we know we can get back here -- and if it is

wrong, we'll be no worse off than we are now. If anything we'll be better off, because we'll know which direction it isn't." He stretched, unkinking tight shoulder muscles. "I'd better contact the planet, and let them know we'll be setting off in a promising direction as soon as possible."

* * * * *

After a slight initial shock at the sight of the Ubarrak, the delegation from Ethara settled in quickly. They were interested in everything they saw, which reinforced Kirk's belief that they had been more than ready for contact. Not normal politicians at all, he mused as he strode along the corridor after depositing the last of them at their quarters. It was lucky that the Ubarrak contingent had taken up only some of the guest cabins. It wouldn't be the first time one or more of the senior officers had had to give up his - or her - cabin to visiting dignitaries, but Kirk thoroughly disliked having to ask it. An officer's quarters were his home, and territorial instinct, even among the foot-loose personnel of Starfleet, was still quite strong.

As he passed a Jeffries tube, he stumbled; something fell from the tube and struck him heavily. Already off balance, he staggered, bounced off the corridor wall and landed on the floor. He lay motionless.

* * * * *

"Lie still," McCoy said sternly.

"But..."

"But nothing. Either you lie still when you're told or I put you under restraint. Now which is it to be?"

Kirk subsided, rather less reluctantly than he was trying to pretend. His head was aching where it had been struck, pounding steadily with a headache of massive proportions in addition, he felt sick, and in truth was not altogether sorry to be ordered to lie still, even though pride forced him to claim to be feeling better than he did.

"That's better," McCoy said approvingly.

"What happened?" Spock, in spite of his concern for his friend, was rather more inclined than the doctor who had known Kirk for longer to take the Captain at his word concerning his state of health - and as First Officer, felt it his duty to find out anyway.

"I'm not sure. I stumbled - I'm sure I tripped - something fell down the Jeffries tube and hit me, I was knocked off-balance against the wall...that's all I remember."

Spock frowned. "Captain, after Mr. Keowen found you, I was the first person to reach the scene. I saw nothing that could have hit you lying on the floor..." His voice tailed off at the expression on Kirk's face. "You are thinking of the ball-bearings?"

"Someone swept them up..."

"Jim, a man'd have to be totally ruthless to play a 'joke' on someone then just leave him lying unconscious - especially in a pool of blood."

"A pool - Bones, you're not serious!" Kirk looked rather startled.

"I am. You were quite literally lying in a pool of blood. It's not too serious a gash, but a head wound always bleeds heavily and looks much worse than it actually is, though it needs someone with some knowledge of first aid to be aware of that. Your average man in the street tends to panic at the sight of that much blood - and so does your average man on a starship. Keowen didn't because as a police chief, he does know something about first aid." McCoy studied Kirk intently. "Are you quite sure that something hit you?"

"Positive. Spock - did you think to check the corridor - remembering what

has happened in the past?"

"Not as such, Captain, but I looked carefully at the scene. There was nothing there but Mr. Keowen, yourself, and - as Dr. McCoy so dramatically puts it - a pool of your blood."

"Well, you're not to worry about it right now," McCoy put in. "You have concussion and you need sleep. Behave and I'll let you away to your quarters in the morning. Worry about it and you'll stay here for the next week."

"Bones, how can I help but worry about it? Something definitely hit me - and since there was nothing lying around, and Lester - I assume - is under guard - it bears all the marks of a deliberate attack, possibly even attempted murder, by a person - or persons - unknown."

"Murder?" McCoy looked startled. "Surely not. Who on board would want to murder you?"

"The proposed victim didn't have to be me," Kirk pointed out.

"Who else would you suggest?" McCoy asked gloomily, aware that until Kirk had talked himself out no threats would serve to quieten him.

"Ambassador Sgral was murdered," Spock reminded him.

Kirk looked sharply at his First Officer. "Are you suggesting that the person who killed Sgral is trying to murder me?" he asked.

"No, Captain; but that corridor leads only to the guest cabins. The proposed victim could have been another Ubar - I doubt it would have been one of the Etharan who are new on board. You just happened to pass along before the planned victim, and fell into the trap - and of course the culprit tidied away the evidence then left you to be found by someone else."

Kirk considered for a moment, as fully as he could concentrate for the steady thumping inside his head, struggling to think straight. "I think I like that hypothesis even less," he said unhappily. "What would it have done to potential relations if it had been an Etheran attacked, left lying? Can you imagine what we'd say? 'I'm sorry, sir, we think it was a mistake, the attacker meant to kill someone else?'" He yawned, suddenly very sleepy. "Bad enough that Keowen found me... What did you tell him?"

Spock and McCoy looked at each other. "Mr. Keowen is of the police, Jim," Spock said. "He knew immediately that you had been attacked... We tried to leave him with the impression that it was probably a practical joke gone wrong - having explained to him that we had been bothered by a joker during the trip." He hesitated. "I am not sure how far Mr. Keowen believed me; but he pretended to be convinced. He also knows the value of discretion; he will not speak of it to his compatriots, I am sure."

Kirk grunted, his eyes already closed. Spock waited until he was sure Kirk was sleeping before he asked softly, "Just how bad is he, Doctor?"

McCoy drew a deep breath. "His skull is fractured. As it stands, it's not serious, but if he was to be struck again at the same point..."

They looked at each other. "Spock - you don't think someone is trying to kill the Captain?"

Spock frowned slightly. "I don't know. It seems likely that if the Captain is not the intended victim, then it must be one of the Ubarrak...bearing in mind the death of the Ubar Ambassador."

"I could understand Sgral's killer trying to kill another high-ranking Ubar," McCoy said impatiently. "A low-ranking one wanting a step up...although with another of the Ubarrak dead, it narrows the list of suspects quite a lot. But why should he want to kill Jim?"

"Someone hiding in the Jeffries tube would not know it was the Captain

approaching rather than his intended victim," Spock said slowly. Even he sounded unconvinced.

"Come off it, Spock! I've never heard anyone walking along these corridors as quietly as the Ubarrak do. The Humans are all much noisier; you can hear them coming a mile away. Nobody could mistake Jim's steps for a Ubar's."

Their eyes met again. "Then we are forced to conclude that the attacker did indeed want to harm the Captain," Spock said deliberately.

McCoy looked thoughtful. "The only Ubar Jim has clashed with is Drakk," he said slowly. "And no sane person is going to kill somebody else whose sole offence is to interfere in his...pursuit...of a female..."

"No sane Human, perhaps. We do not know Ubar morality. Besides...from what Uhura was able to discover from Brrbrr, Drakk was virtually raping her, using her fear of him to...persuade...her to - er - co-operate. Would such a being be completely sane?"

"I don't know. Like you said, different races have different moralities..."

"When Jim spoke to Sgrral about it, the Ambassador was horrified, which would argue that a Ubar capable of such behaviour was not regarded as totally sane."

"Yes, but at the same time, he wasn't prepared to do anything unless the girl herself complained."

"Our evidence against Drakk was...very much hearsay. We had no proof other than what Uhura said Brrbrr had told her." His frown deepened. "I think I must have a few words with Brrbrr," he said slowly.

"If you can get her to speak to you at all," McCoy said gloomily. "She seems to be terrified of all males, of whatever species."

"Provided Miss Uhura is present, I think it might be possible to talk to her," Spock said confidently. He strode out.

McCoy sighed and turned his attention back to his patient. At least Kirk was resting comfortably...

* * * * *

Spock found the young Ubar on the bridge, still keeping close to Uhura. He could only wonder at the patience shown by the Communications Officer - sympathetic she might be, but Brrbrr's presence must be getting in her way; Spock knew how intently Uhura worked, and Brrbrr must be a distraction.

Uhura smiled up at Spock with her usual friendly greeting, but Brrbrr shrank close to her Human protector. Spock ignored her as he would a nervous animal, waiting for her to relax. He discussed ship's business with Uhura for some moments, unobtrusively watching the Ubar as he did so. Faced with this undemanding situation, she was slowly relaxing. Finally he said lightly, "How is your apprentice getting on, Miss Uhura?"

Uhura smiled. "Brrbrr? I just wish I'd understood a comm. board as easily as she does. The Ubar life span makes it difficult to assess just how long a Ubar would need at the Academy to assimilate the full course, but I'd certainly recommend Brrbrr any day if they do decide to admit Ubarrak to Starfleet."

"I see no reason why they should not," Spock said. "Provided the Ubarrak do become full members of the Federation." The short life span would provide difficulties, though, he silently agreed. There were two or three races in the Federation who were forever barred from membership of Starfleet, through no failing of their own but rather because of some physiological or psychological condition of the race. But for the moment, the idea might just encourage Brrbrr, give her some much-needed self-confidence. He turned to the Ubar. "Do you think any of your compatriots would be interested in the opportunity to join Starfleet, Miss Brrbrr?"

"Yes," she whispered, her ears flattened in embarrassment at being noticed by so important a personage as one of the crew who wore two unbroken bands on his arm.

"But not your present companions, I suppose. They are all diplomats, of their own choice, are they not?"

"Yes. I...I am here only because I have a gift for languages. I did not want to be a diplomatic secretary."

Uhura glanced at Spock with some respect. She had managed to worm some information out of Brrbrr, but Spock, with almost no effort, had, it seemed, won the Ubar girl's trust.

"What did you want to be?" Spock asked. He sounded genuinely interested, Uhura decided, and wondered whether in fact Vulcans were better actors than Humans had always thought - Vulcan had no tradition of drama - or if he really was interested; and if he was, it signified a considerable change in his attitudes since he had first come aboard. It had never been openly stated, but the grapevine had buzzed with the rumour that the Vulcan woman killed in the volcanic activity on Zaynol had been Spock's wife. He had behaved as if she never existed, with stiff formality and an apparently total lack of understanding of emotional reactions...and she herself had known that rumour to be fact, for she had become friendly with the other Vulcan wives who had travelled with them for so long, and had learned a lot, not just from what was said but also from much that was not said.

"I was not sure. Now I know. I...would like to be a Communications Officer."

"A lot would depend on how the talks between your people and ours go - but the word of any officer in this crew carries a lot of weight, and if Miss Uhura is satisfied that you have a talent for the work, we'll speak that word. I'm sure that some compromise can be reached over your shorter life span."

"Thank you." Her ears flattened again, but her tail had lifted ever so slightly.

"However - " Spock went on, more sternly now. "As a Starfleet officer, you would occasionally have to perform duties that were...unpleasant. Would you be prepared to do that?"

"It...it would be my duty, would it not?" she asked nervously.

"Yes. Miss Brrbrr, you can begin now, if you would."

"Now?" she whispered. Her tail drooped again.

"You can tell us about Drakk. Tell us, and tell Ambassador Rrovral."

She looked at him, terror in her eyes. "Drakk is not afraid of Rrovral," she said as she had done in Kirk's cabin.

"Perhaps not...but perhaps it is time he learned to be. Was Drakk afraid of Sgrral?"

Her ears drew back. "I think perhaps he was...Sgrral was older, very dominant."

"And Rrovral is not so dominant?"

"No. He would not have been promoted even to Advisor for at least a year in the normal way, perhaps never beyond that. Sgrral's death...since Wrrak also died...has given us all responsibility we are not ready for."

"Sgrral was poisoned...did you know that?"

"Poisoned? No..."

Spock grunted. "Another case of the most junior members of the Ubarak group not being told anything, for Ambassador Rrovral certainly knew." He was speaking to Uhura.

Almost, it seemed, Brrbrr took a deep breath. "Drakk...has vrax in his cabin."

"Vrax?"

"A fast and painless poison given to end the suffering of the incurably ill. It is...not lawful for any but a Healer to possess it."

Spock's eyes met Uhura's for a brief instant of near-triumph. "You are quite sure, Brrbrr?" he asked encouragingly.

"Yes. The bottle is unmistakeable. I know; my mother's sister was given it shortly before I left Ubarr."

"Does Drakk know you know?" Spock asked anxiously.

"No. I was afraid... I saw it, but he didn't know I recognised it for vrax -- even if he realised I saw it."

"Why didn't you tell anyone?" Uhura asked. "You knew Drakk shouldn't have it."

"I was afraid. I am still afraid. But if I am to enter your Starfleet, I must speak."

The things ambition can accomplish, Spock thought. Newly-learned, it was still enough to help the young Ubar overcome her terror. He only hoped that Starfleet would accept the Ubarrak for training...but the newly-discovered homing instinct possessed by some of the females would be of considerable value, even though the Ubarrak did not specialise in navigation. It also made the females potentially of more value to Starfleet than the males...which might help encourage a speeding up of the equality of the sexes, which, on Ubarr, seemed to be badly needed.

"Drakk is evil," Brrbrr said with surprising firmness. "He told me his mate would be glad he had chosen to leave her behind... Ubar mates are...very possessive of each other. No female would be glad to be left behind by her mate unless he had given her good reason to fear him...and whatever her reasons for fearing him, she too would fear to speak out."

"That's how bullies always win," Uhura said angrily.

"Brrbrr -- did Drakk hate Captain Kirk?" Spock asked.

Her ears drew back again. "Drakk hates everyone superior to him."

"And bullies everyone below him in rank?"

"Yes."

Spock's lips drew together. "Uhura, call your relief. We -- the three of us -- are going to see Ambassador Rrovral. I think it's time he was brought into this discussion."

Brrbrr's tail curled between her legs again. "Now, Brrbrr, the Ambassador won't bite you," Uhura said encouragingly.

"I knew...but...but..."

"Miss Brrbrr, you have already proved yourself to be of much value to the Federation -- alone among your party, you have given us valuable help. You have no need to feel diffident in the presence of a superior."

The young Ubar's tail lifted slightly at Spock's words. Uhura hastened to stress the point. "Mr. Spock's right, Brrbrr. Nobody else on the ship had any idea which way to go to get home. Your ability to tell us is really valuable to us. Oh, you'll have to carry out your duty to Ubarr by taking part in the discussions as Ubarr interpreter, but after that's done you don't need to go back to Ubarr if you don't want to. I'm positive that we'll get you into the Academy. The first Ubar to get into Starfleet Academy, Brrbrr; and a female, too. You can be proud of yourself."

The tail lifted, hesitantly, a fraction more. "That's better!" Uhura encouraged.

"I will come," she whispered. "But Drakk...still has the vrax..."

"I think we can do something about that," Uhura said cheerfully when it became obvious that Spock, having accomplished what he set out to do, had withdrawn from the conversation again, leaving it to her to continue reassuring the Ubar girl. She could sense it was the right thing to do, too; Brrbrr was far more relaxed in female company than she ever was with a male around, and Uhura found herself wondering just how thoroughly Brrbrr had been brainwashed into the idea of male superiority despite the five-year-old legislation that gave the beginnings of female emancipation on her planet. Legislation did not always accomplish what it set out to do; parental attitudes had a lot to do with the formation of responses to certain situations - and Uhura more than suspected a very dominant father and a positively cowed mother.

Uhura called her relief, and when Palmer arrived, the three set off for the Ambassador's cabin. They found Rrovral studying the deceased Sgrral's papers; he looked up almost with relief, as if he found his task somewhat beyond him.

He looked from one to the other of his visitors, recognising the officers by virtue of the pointed ears and the colour of their skin. "Yes, Mr. Spock? What can I do for you?"

Uhura's lips tightened slightly. This was the sort of attitude that Brrbrr had had to put up with all her life; the immediate assumption by a male that in any mixed company, only the males would have anything of importance to say. Out of respect for Spock, however, she controlled her tongue.

Spock, however, had no intention of pandering to Ubar chauvanism. "Not for me, Ambassador; rather for your secretary Brrbrr."

An ear flicked, and Rrovral turned to the young girl. "Yes?" His tone, while not discouraging, was not encouraging either, and Brrbrr glanced at Uhura for guidance. The Human smiled encouragement. "Go on, Brrbrr."

"It's Drakk, Ambassador. He has vrax."

Rrovral stiffened. "That is a very serious charge. Are you sure of your facts?"

"Yes, Ambassador." Resolutely, she kept her tail at its new level, knowing that Rrovral had noticed it, afraid of his reaction, but anxious to maintain the new self-respect that Spock and Uhura had given her. "Since we came aboard, he has been...forcing me to spend many of my off-duty hours in his bed. Usually he came to my cabin, but once or twice he called me to his. I saw the vrax bottle there. He...might have been using it to hold something else, of course...but they told me Ambassador Sgrral was poisoned..."

Rrovral's ears flattened in what Spock had come to suspect was the Ubar equivalent of a frown. "I think I must speak to Drakk."

"Ambassador, might I suggest that you do not see Drakk alone. You need his accuser, witnesses...and a security detail in case he becomes violent," Spock said.

Rrovral looked at him. "You are right... I am unaccustomed to this work, Mr. Spock. I had expected to serve as a Chief Secretary for at least another year before being promoted to Adviser, and then to serve for some years in that capacity before being even considered for an Ambassadorship. But even for Sgrral this situation would have been most difficult. It is...unprecedented. I cannot remember ever hearing of a Ubar being accused of killing another, deliberately. Only a Healer kills...and then only the incurably ill..."

"Yet your people must have had...warrior ancestors, just as mine did," Spock said. "We established the discipline of logic, and overcame our violent instincts - yet even now, from time to time, a Vulcan loses control and kills..."

it has been established that such behaviour is the result of genes, recessive in everyone else, being, through some chance, dominant. Drakk could be one such as this -- a throwback to an earlier, more violent, period of your evolution."

Rrovral's ears twitched. "It is possible, though I have never heard of anything like it before."

* * * * *

Drakk sat in his cabin, thinking, his mind far from the papers in front of him. He knew now that he had not succeeded in killing the interfering Captain -- there would have been uproar throughout the ship if the Captain had been dead -- and he wondered how he could possibly get to the Human with a lethal dose of vrax.

He had hated Kirk on sight, just as he had hated Sgrral; he had sensed that with the Human Captain out of the way as well as his own superior, he would find it easier to manipulate events to suit himself. He had been quite surprised that no harm at all had come to the Human after he had littered the corridor with the little metal balls he had so conveniently found just before he knew the Human was about to pass along it. The Human had been unconscious, after all -- and a Ubar knocked unconscious like that frequently did not recover.

The oil he had carefully left on the rungs of the ladder from the bridge -- he was still surprised that, although the plan had worked, it had killed the wrong man. He had seen Kirk using the ladder once, and had assumed -- wrongly, it seemed -- that it was reserved for the Captain's use.

But he had been certain that he had succeeded when he saw the blood pouring from the head wound inflicted when he had so cunningly arranged a tripwire just beside the tube he could hide in. The weight he had dropped was considerable, too; he had only just managed to lift it, and he was strong. The accursed Human must have a head made of zlxan!

As for the Human female who had encouraged that lust-arousing little junior to refuse his attentions... She should have been honoured that he deigned to desire her! Though her unwillingness had certainly added spice, he admitted. When he was Ambassador, he must certainly make a point of including in his retinue several very young and totally submissive juniors.

What should he do about the Human female? He hesitated. Confident though he was that nobody suspected him, he still retained enough sanity to realise that too many deaths, even apparently natural ones, would arouse somebody's suspicions. Not that anyone would be dominant enough, with Sgrral and the Human Captain dead, to control. That weak fool Rrovral was not yet dominant enough for his newly-acquired position; the Human's immediate underling was also dead, killed instead of the Captain. In a way, Drakk regretted that; he had found it easy to manipulate the Human Wood into believing everything he, Drakk, said. However, none of the other Humans could have the seniority to be a dominant Captain in place of Kirk...

No, it might be as well to ignore the female. After all, although the journey was not yet ended and by leaving his mate behind he had deprived himself of his captive bedmate, he was beginning to tire slightly of the little junior. Her constant whining was an irritant in the long run, satisfying though it had been to start with. But once there were no dominant leaders on the ship, he could force the junior back into his bed, and make her pay for her resistance, too.

How to get to the Human... He thought over his acquaintances among the Humans, wondering which, if any, of them he could coerce into unwitting aid. Reluctantly, he was forced to reject them all.

Wood was dead; Lester, Wood's bedmate, had vanished; Zmuda was a fool, who uttered the howling that Humans called 'laughter' over the most meaningless of anecdotes, most of them too short to say anything; Schumacher was only interested in trying to get into Cerbah's bed -- Cerbah? Now he was a possibility...

Drakk had quickly seen that in Cerbah he might have a soul-mate, for Cerbah too was interested only in himself -- though he was a fool if he ignored Schumacher's open invitation, as Drakk thought he had. Rivas was useless.

Cerbah... Now how could he persuade the Human to do his bidding, and at the same time ensure that if suspicion that the Captain's death was anything but accidental should arise, Cerbah, not he, would be blamed...and not think to counter-charge Drakk.

No. There did not seem to be any way...

Just how secure was the medical facility on the ship, anyway? His tail drooped slightly as he decided that the Captain would be well watched.

He was so deep in his own thoughts that he jumped violently when the door swished open without any warning. He rose quickly, turning to face the door, ready to react with anger at the intrusion.

Rrovral! Behind him the submissive little junior...her tail as erect as Drakk's own! Higher than any unmated female's had the right to be! With them, the pointed-eared alien and the brown-coloured interfering female -- practically the only two of the crew he could identify by sight rather than smell. There were two red-shirted males behind them.

"Ambassador?" he asked, adroitly masking both his anger and his contempt for the undominant male who was now Ambassador.

But instead of speaking to him, the Ambassador turned to the young female. "Brrbrr * the accusation is yours."

She stepped forward. He read nervousness in her scent, but she spoke firmly enough. "Drakk, I accuse you of misusing your position, by forcing me to submit to you. I accuse you of the unlawful possession of vrax. I accuse you of the killing of Sgrral, a healthy Ubar who did not consent to his own death."

He stared at her, his mind working furiously. Spock stepped forward. "We further accuse you of attacking our Captain and attempting to secure his death."

Brrbrr walked past him to the locker by his bed, and opened it. His move to stop her was halted by the alien Spock, who grasped his arm in a hold that rendered him immobile in spite of the strength Drakk was so proud of. The girl reached in and lifted the bottle of vrax.

"I admit to possessing a vrax bottle," Drakk said. "My father is a Healer, and has many empty bottles. I borrowed one to hold a supply of a tonic I occasionally need during this journey."

Spock took the bottle from Brrbrr with his free hand. "In that case, you will not object to swallowing some of it?"

In that moment, Drakk knew he had miscalculated. Dominance among the aliens was decided by something other than age and maturity...perhaps ruthlessness! Spock was totally dominant even although he held a subordinate position. The expression on the face of the female Uhura was as unrelenting; she too, female though she was...and the two red-shirted males with the single stripe on their sleeves -- even they...even Brrbrr, by some alchemy he could not understand, could now outface him; and Rrovral, in the company of these aliens, had an authority he had previously lacked.

They knew it all. He had failed. His mind rehearsed almost instantaneously the penalties for the crimes he had committed, and he knew that quick death was preferable. He reached for the bottle. "Very well," he said.

But Spock pulled it away from him. "No, Drakk," he said softly. "You will not escape so easily. We can easily prove what is in this bottle...but we will not permit you to suicide, as I see is in your mind. Guards!"

The two security guards moved forward, to take up positions one on each side of the now-terrified Drakk.

"Take him to the brig...and see that he is well guarded."

"Aye, sir."

Drakk stiffened his shoulders as he was marched away; his tail, drooping dispiritedly, showed his action for the bravado that it was.

Spock handed the bottle to Rrovral. "Will you take charge of this, Ambassador?"

Rrovral held it as if it might explode at any second. "I... Mr. Spock, even for someone as senior as an Ambassador, it is unlawful for anyone who is not a Healer to be in possession of vrax. Will your Healer McCoy take charge of it until it is required for evidence? That way, the letter of the law will be obeyed."

Spock took the bottle back. "Very well, Ambassador. I appreciate your position."

Rrovral turned back to Brrbrr. "Well done, undersecretary," he said. Her ears flattened in embarrassment even as her tail lifted slightly further.

Uhura nodded, satisfied. Even if Brrbrr did not gain a place at the Academy, the therapy was complete. She had learned confidence, as rapidly as she learned everything.

* * * * *

Kirk looked up as Spock walked briskly into sickbay. The Vulcan paused beside his Captain. "You are looking much better, Jim," he said.

"I feel much better, but McCoy won't let me out yet."

"You received a severe blow to the head - and head injuries are always bad things to be careless with," Spock said firmly.

"You're as bad as McCoy!" Kirk grumbled.

"Only when there is need to be," Spock replied blandly. "However, I believe that there is no longer any need to be - this time."

"Eh? What's been happening?" McCoy asked from his office door.

Spock half smiled. "We have apprehended the Captain's assailant." He handed the bottle he was carrying to McCoy. "Rrovral asks that you take charge of this for the remainder of the journey, Doctor - admittedly it has not yet been tested, but the bottle, at least, is that used to contain the poison that killed Sgrral - and it is not empty."

McCoy whistled. "Who?"

"Drakk. Miss Brrbrr finally found the courage to accuse him. Captain - " he turned back to Kirk. "Uhura says that Brrbrr has considerable talent for communications; and she herself would be interested in such a career, short though it would be because of her species' life span. We have promised to use our influence on her behalf with Starfleet and the Academy - and it was that promise that gave her the courage to go to Rrovral."

"If Uhura thinks she's good enough, that's enough for me," Kirk said. "But would Starfleet consider training someone who would only be able to serve a few years?"

McCoy shrugged. "I don't see why not," he said. "The Ubarrak life span averages out at twenty-five, but it's mostly productive. They have a very short childhood - they're physically mature at about a year, and in that year they learn everything that a Human child takes about twelve years to learn - or a Vulcan child, about fifteen. The next three to four years they slow down a bit - those years are about equivalent to the twelve to twenty age in Humans - but they still learn incredibly fast. By the time they're five they're counted fully adult. Then they have eighteen to twenty years of productive adulthood - yes, they get old, but their old age is quite brief - six months at the outside. Few

actually live more than two or three months after their retiral. Signal was very old - almost on borrowed time; I doubt he expected to live much longer than was necessary to complete this mission.

"All Starfleet needs to do about the Ubarrak is figure out a way of condensing three years of work into about half that to fit the natural Ubarrak learning capacity."

"Easier said than done," Kirk muttered. "It's a pretty concentrated course even for Humans."

"True - but if the Ubarrak have - when young - almost perfect recall...and the indications are that they do...they only need to have something explained once - even the brightest of the Humans mostly need more than that. Maybe something could be done with the Vulcan course - after fifteen a Vulcan's learning capacity increases tremendously. It still isn't on a par with the Ubarrak's at the same stage of development, but a Vulcan can absorb the basic Starfleet course in six to twelve months less than a Human."

"I'd heard that. I wouldn't have thought it possible to feed the info. much faster than the Humans get it, though."

"If the Ubarrak are to get a place in Starfleet - and they deserve to, from what I've seen of them - it would be a waste of six months of their lives not to condense the course to fit their learning capacity," McCoy said.

"I agree," Spock put in.

"Then we'll speak that word to Starfleet and point all that out," Kirk decided.

"Spock," McCoy said. "Drakk had poison - but Jim was hit over the head - not poisoned."

"Drakk was his assailant nevertheless," Spock replied. "The Ubarrak have a strong mental pattern and poor shielding; I had occasion to catch his arm, and I was able to sense his thoughts without any effort. He has been trying to kill the Captain since early in the voyage; he was responsible for the ball bearings in the corridor and the oil on the rungs of the ladder - apparently he thought it was used as a private route by the Captain only, since he had seen the Captain, and only the Captain, use it. He was quite surprised when his victim turned out to be Mr. Wood. He apparently believed that with the Ubar Ambassador and the Human Captain both out of the way, his ambition could proceed unhampered by higher authority. We have him under arrest; he will be held until he can be returned to Ubar for trial by the proper authorities."

"So what we've had on board is two different people with grudges against authority?" McCoy said, half disbelievingly.

"It appears so, Doctor."

"My report on the dangers of a practical joker on the ship will still go in, however," Kirk said decisively. "Along with Scotty's comments on the reaction of his staff to engineering's pair of extroverts."

"And mine," McCoy added. "You won't believe this, Spock, but one of them came to me this morning - it had suddenly struck him that folk were avoiding him, and he was worried about it. I advised him to cut down on the funny stuff - then I went and checked the other. He was completely unaware of not being liked, thought his mate was imagining things... I've got some hope for Verannen adapting and being accepted, but the other one - " He shook his head.

The intercom buzzed, and McCoy answered it.

"Is Mr. Spock there, Doctor?"

Spock moved over to the intercom. "Yes, Mr. Seval?"

"We've just entered a region that begins to tally with our longest-range

star charts, Mr. Spock. We should be able to navigate properly again very soon."

"Very good, Mr. Seval. I'll be right up." He looked at Kirk. "You can relax, Captain; we're as good as home."

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McCoy walked briskly into Kirk's cabin, waving a tape. "Sanity at last!" he said happily. "The order's been rescinded, Jim. We can get rid of the extroverts -- though I'd tend to recommend that Verannen be allowed to stay on board. Since he realised that the crew doesn't like extroverts, he's quietened down a lot, and he's begun to be accepted. He'll always be more outgoing than usual on a Starship, but his actual extrovert rating isn't much higher than Sulu's -- he just seemed more so because he got in tow with Dubrovski."

"I'll accept your recommendation, Bones. I've got nothing against extroverts as such, just the ones who think it's their mission in life to keep everyone else amused."

"How long till we reach HQ?"

"Just under a week. I'll be glad to get there."

"Me, too." McCoy stretched stiff neck muscles. "Oh -- by the way -- I found out something interesting. Just between ourselves..."

"Mmmm?"

"It was Admiral Fitzgerald who pushed that order about extroverts through -- and do you know why?"

Kirk shook his head. "No, but I bet you do."

"He had a nephew training to be an engineer, who wanted to get into space. A nephew whose extrovert rating was too high..."

"Don't tell me. One of ours?"

"Yup. No, don't ask me how I found out... Well, Scotty said he was a good engineer -- and he'll be a better one away from Dubrovski's influence."

"Bones -- that isn't why you're recommending we keep Verannen?"

"No, Jim. He does merit it, provided he doesn't break loose again." He glanced towards the door as the buzzer sounded.

"Come."

Spock entered. McCoy looked disgustedly at the sheaf of reports in the Vulcan's hand, and said, "Well, if you two are going to talk business, I'm off."

As McCoy retreated, Kirk grinned up at his First Officer. "All right, Mr. Spock. Report..."

He relaxed in the sheer normality of everyday things as the Vulcan began to speak.

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