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Something
issuing

by

Sheila

Clark

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SOMETHING MISSING

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Something Missing, in which the Enterprise is sent to investigate a number of inexplicable disappearances, is put out by ScoTpress and is available from -

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

Although on a casual glance this story would appear to be mainline Trek, this is actually the third story set in the universe established in Something Hidden.

Something Hidden was based on the premise that Spock went to the Vulcan Science Academy instead of joining Starfleet. During the course of the story, Spock, promoted to Chief Scientist, was heading a survey which was investigating the imminent breakup of a moon. The scientific party was rescued from the moon by the Enterprise, and when the ship's Tellerite science officer was killed, Spock took over the position. On the ship's eventual return to Vulcan with the rescued scientists, Spock managed to join the ship as science officer.

In the second story in the series, Something Lost, a navigational malfunction sent the ship into unknown space. It had been established in Something Missing that Kirk did not wholly trust the judgement of his first officer, a man named Wood. When Wood was killed, Kirk appointed Spock to the position of first officer. This brought the series almost into line with series Trek; the only difference being in Spock's background.

Usually an alternate universe story has obvious differences from series Trek; this one does not have obvious differences. I have in mind a fourth story for this series, but unless it produces these differences, it will be written as ordinary series Trek.

However, obvious alternate universe story or no, I hope you enjoy Something Missing.

SOMETHING MISSING

Of necessity, a subspace letter was always kept short. With so many essential businesses and administrative matters occupying the time of the communications systems of the various planets in the Federation, air time was expensive - prohibitively expensive for most - and even the comparatively wealthy could only afford to send such a letter at most once a year. Most people kept in touch with relatives and friends on other planets by means of space letters - sometimes written communications, more often taped, sent by means of whatever spaceship happened to be travelling in the correct direction. These letters frequently took a year or more to reach their destinations, and often several, sent over a period of some months, would arrive together, having met up somewhere en route while waiting for a change of ship to take them on towards their delivery point. Even Starships, the elite of Starfleet, were called upon to act as postal carriers from time to time.

Sometimes complaints were made to Council Members about the lengthy delays suffered by letters and an enquiry was made, but the findings were always the same; because of the distances involved, because of the paucity of personnel at some of the more remote colonies and research bases, it was totally unfeasible to run a regular mail service except between member planets and some of the longest established, and therefore most heavily populated, colonies. It was regrettable that most colonists should receive their mail a year and more after it was sent, but it was unrealistic to expect better service while so many of Starfleet's resources were tied up with showing a strong front to both the Klingons and the Romulans. Of course, if they preferred a fast mail service under Klingon rule...

It was therefore a reason for considerable pleasure when, among all the rest of the mail that caught up with the Enterprise one day, McCoy received a packet of three tapes from his daughter Joanna.

Each tape was dated on the outside - standard procedure because of the tendency for tapes to be delayed and then delivered in batches. Eagerly, he slotted the first one - dated some two years previously - into the viewer. Joanna's face, alight with happiness, shimmered into view.

"Hi, Dad. By the time you get this, I'll be a married woman. Yes, I've finally found a man I love, respect and trust; a man into whose hands I know, without any doubt, I can place my future happiness. He's Jiri Revisec, a first generation colonist here on Doranna; his parents came here direct from Earth as soon as the experimental phase was over and full settlement implemented. He's a doctor at the main hospital complex here, which of course is how I met him, although he went to Earth to train. He's as dedicated as you are, Dad, and I know you'll like him when you eventually meet him. I hope your ship is assigned into this quadrant real soon..." The tape went on with general small talk for a few minutes, but most of it washed over McCoy's head. Jo - married. He only hoped that she would not be as disillusioned in her marriage as her mother had been. But no - she was a nurse and knew the score; she knew that her fiance - her husband - was totally dedicated to his work; she had, after all, commented on how dedicated he was.

McCoy turned to the next tape.

"Dad, I'm pregnant!" She looked, if anything, even happier. "Jiri and I wanted children, but we didn't dare hope that I'd get pregnant so soon. I've been properly tested, of course, because there is a 10% occurrence of birth abnormalities here - something to do with the different radiation from the sun - but I'm one of the lucky 90%. I asked them not to tell me the sex of my baby, though Jiri knows. It's hard for him to keep it a secret from me, especially since he can't understand why I should want to wait until it's born to find out, but he humours me because he loves me..." She went on with details of her life and hopes for the future.

Well, McCoy wouldn't have to wait nine months to find out, or have to hide his knowledge for that period either, for the tape was dated eighteen months previously. The third tape was dated seven months later.

"Dad, you're a grandfather! You've got a beautiful little grandson. We're calling him Leonard, after you." She looked a little tired, and McCoy realised that she'd taped the letter within a very short time of giving birth. Her face shimmered away and was replaced by a man's.

"Dr. McCoy, this is Jiri Revisec. Jo wanted to let you know immediately, although we realise you won't get this tape for some time, but I would only let her give you the news, and promised to finish the letter for her. It was a difficult labour and she is still exhausted; should she insist on having another child, it will have to be born by Caesarian section - but you can be sure that I will not permit her to endanger herself. We wanted several children, but I would prefer to have only one rather than risk her health and safety. I love your daughter very much, Doctor, even although my work does not permit me to devote the time to her that I would wish - but as a nurse herself, and a doctor's daughter, she understands that, has always understood. It is my hope to keep her as happy as she is at present, as happy as she has made me.

"I realise that your duty ties you at the moment, but I look forward to meeting you one day. You have a home here any time you care to claim it."

McCoy sat back as Revisec's face faded, aware of a confused mixture of emotions. He was glad that his daughter was happy, had a good husband; was as proud of his year-old grandson as if he had personally produced him, but he was also aware of a certain depression that Len Junior would grow up not knowing him.

It wasn't impossible, of course, that the Enterprise would one day be sent to Doranna - they were already in the general area - but the planet was in a region of Federation space where regular patrols were unnecessary. Doranna itself was visited only by supply freighters, because it was well away from both the Klingon and Romulan boundaries. There was relatively unexplored space flanking the area, but the handful of scoutships sent into it had found nothing but developing cultures, some technically advanced enough to be experimenting with the beginnings of spaceflight, and which would be contacted officially in the not-too-distant future; some still in the early stages of technology; some existing in a stone age; and a couple showing only the beginnings of sapient life. None of the planets discovered were advanced enough to be of any danger, however remote, to a Federation planet, even an undefended colony. Starfleet could not waste its resources, already stretched fairly thin by its two hostile neighbours, on a region that was considered to be totally safe.

McCoy poured himself a small brandy and raised the glass in the general direction of Doranna...

"Glad to see you, Jim."

Commodore Ericcson, Commander of Starbase 6, handed Kirk an unofficial but not quite illegal drink, before he continued. "I know you've got an assigned break here - three weeks, all crewmembers to get two weeks R & R, and the ship to get a general overhaul... but frankly, I have a problem on my hands and you might just be able to help me out."

"Well, I'm due you a favour," Kirk commented as he savoured the brandy. "Hmmm - this is a good brand - I don't think I recognise it..." He looked queringly at Ericcson.

The Base Commander grinned. "No, and you're not likely to either. It's a special brand that the Saurians keep for themselves. I don't say none of it is ever sold off-planet, but not much is. A lot of planets export their best products, and the natives have to make do with second best - but not the Saurians. They keep their best brandy for home consumption. I first tasted it several years ago - you remember the trouble we had with Orion raiders before we convinced them that we were stronger than they were and fully intended to protect our colonies and member planets? I was second in command of the Hood at the time, and she was assigned to protect the area around Saurius. A pirate sneaked in one time, grabbed a couple of dozen prisoners, and ran for it. We caught up with it, of course - the Orion raiders could only manage warp six in those days - and rescued the Saurians. One of them was the son of one of the richest men on the planet, and he gave us enough of that vintage to let everyone on board have a measure. I've dreamed about it ever since... Well, when I got my promotion to here, I had a word with a trader who owed me, and he managed to get me a couple of bottles. I keep it for the friends that I know will appreciate it."

"Well, Sven, if you could get a bottle for me, I'd really be due you a favour - half a dozen, in fact." Kirk was only half joking.

"I'll see what I can do," Ericcson replied lightly.

Kirk took another appreciative sip. "Ahhh... Well, Sven - what can I do for you?"

Ericcson frowned slightly. "It's not for me, exactly," he replied. "It's one of the colonies on the edge of explored space. Been settled for a good thirty years now; a nucleus of original settlers, a good few who have moved in since it was proved, plenty of young adults who were born there and, this last five to ten years, a good crop of second generation births. Ideal planet - fertile, several native plants that crop well and provide both a staple in the food supply and a growing export crop, one plant that provides an excellent substitute for quinine - which is still the indicated medication for certain fevers - and an animal that was so easily domesticated that the colonists still can't believe their luck, and which provides a fine wool that is in such high demand that it's a luxury item, even on its planet of origin - rivalling - no, even more in demand than the finest silk ever was. Mouflette wool alone has made the colony self-supporting - the other things just add a bit of cream to the jam."

"Self-supporting after only thirty years? That's pretty good going. Anything less than fifty is usually considered better than average, isn't it?"

Ericcson nodded. "Some of the mining colonies have a higher annual income, but even the richest of them cost so much to establish that they take years to pay back the loans they needed to get started. An agricultural planet, on the other hand, starts off owing very little, so they're profitable faster. Oh, there are still a few things that Doranna must import," he admitted, "as well as some luxury items they import from choice. But they can afford to. Their income from the wool and from quinare more than balances the books, even without the other crops they export."

"So what's gone wrong?" Kirk asked.

"This last few months they've had a number of unexplained disappearances. No - more than unexplained - totally baffling, even impossible, disappearances."

"Disappearances?" Kirk frowned. "But the planet would be thoroughly surveyed, checked out for potentially dangerous life forms before it was cleared for colonisation - even exploratory parties shouldn't run into anything too hard to handle even in the first years, let alone after thirty."

Ericcson grunted. "It's not as easy as that, Jim. The disappearances haven't been exploratory parties; they've all been children."

"Children?"

Ericcson nodded. "Children. Mostly toddlers, but a couple of babies have vanished too. Now some of the toddlers *might* just have wandered off, got lost in the scrub surrounding the settlements, but not all of them and certainly not the babies. *They* must have been taken, but nobody knows just *how*...

Kirk's frown deepened. "Infanticide? One of the colonists gone insane but still managing to hide it?"

"I'd like to think that," Ericcson said gloomily. "No, I mean it; it would give the planetary authorities somewhere positive to start. As it is, they're screaming for help - at a complete loss."

"But why? How can you be so certain that - "

Ericcson gave a hopeless shrug. "I know. There have been a lot of theories over the centuries, but nobody's quite sure what causes insanity. However, it's a rare beast in a new colony. Everyone is too busy *building* - a home, a job, success for the colony... There may be pressure, but it's not the sort that causes even nervous breakdowns. All potential colonists are well-screened before they leave their home planets, too. Any whiff of a nervous disorder for three generations back and they can kiss goodbye to their chances of getting off-world. They're out of the colonisation programme - O-U-T, out, faster'n they can be shoved out the door. Jim, the colonists on Doranna - on any colony like Doranna - are so well-balanced that they're... they're abnormal!"

Kirk grunted, accepting Ericcson's assessment. "And wild animals couldn't get babies."

"There aren't any big carnivores on Doranna anyway."

"None at all?" Kirk was slightly sceptical. It didn't seem possible to him that any planet could exist without *some* large life forms.

"Oh, possibly in the sea, but none on land - none big enough to carry away a Human baby, anyway. Doranna seems to have missed out on whatever caused gigantism on a lot of other planets. The biggest carnivore discovered comes in about the size of a fox; the biggest herbivore is about the height of an undersized Shetland pony and is lighter built. That's partly why mouflette wool is so expensive. The mouflette may *look* like a sheep, but it'd make a guinea-pig look positively huge. That's on the continent we settled. On the other one - there are only two, and a lot of islands of varying sizes - there are some ape-like creatures between three and four foot tall. Those apes are the only other creatures of importance on Doranna. The initial survey indicated an early level of intelligence and a minimal culture - say about the level anthropologists reckon for homo habilis or homo erectus - which is why we left that continent alone. It'll take a million years before they're intelligent enough to have a civilisation as opposed to a culture. They seem to be predominantly vegetarian, though they will take carrion, and there's no sign anyway that they're cannibalistic even if they lived on the continent we settled."

"Which you're sure they don't."

"Which the survey team was sure they didn't. They don't have boats, their culture isn't that sophisticated yet, but even if they did they're thousands of years away from coping with the sort of long-distance voyage that getting to the other continent would entail. There's a couple of thousand miles of sea separating the two."

Kirk grunted. "And the planetary authorities want help."

"They're desperate for it. Jim - I could put a crew aboard the Enterprise to carry out the overhaul - they could do it as easily in orbit around Doranna as here. I know your crew is due leave, and Doranna hasn't the facilities that we have... but..."

"But a Starship has equipment that would make a search relatively easy? Sven, I don't want to sound pessimistic, but how long is it since those kids vanished? Why didn't you send in a Starship right away, as soon as they called for help?"

"I didn't have one. Yours is the first ship to come here this year that hasn't been on a basic pick-up-stores-then-head-off-again - urgently - visit. How long? The first ones, five to six months, the most recent - I got the report yesterday. That makes it three days ago."

"And another two days till we could get there. Sven, do you know the odds on any of those kids being alive?"

"Poor. I know. But if there was another one? The disappearance rate averages out at about two a week - "

"As high as that?" Kirk asked, startled. "I thought you were talking about - oh, ten to a dozen, spread over the time. Which would be bad enough, but not as bad as that."

"If you were *there* when the next one went missing, you could search right away. The authorities reckon that all they need is to find one, just one, preferably old enough to explain why he wandered off, *how* he wandered off, to work out what has been happening."

"What about the parents?" Kirk asked. "What have they been doing?"

Ericcson answered obliquely. "Kids on Doranna have had a pretty easy-going life style up till now. School, of course, and chores to do around the house, but evenings and weekends, plenty of countryside to play in, to explore... They worked the system of teaching the older kids responsibility by leaving them to watch over the younger ones, and until six months ago it *worked* - same as it worked over a lot of Earth centuries ago, same as it still works in rural areas. And as well as teaching the older kids responsibility, it left the parents free to get on with their work. Since the second kid vanished, though, the parents have always tried to make sure that there was always an adult around."

"The *second* one? Why wait till then?"

"The *first* *could* have been an accident."

"How come?"

Ericcson was silent for a moment, then - "There are several settlements on Doranna. The kids at the largest one had been out in the woods, playing hide and seek. At first, when nobody could find young Davie, they just thought that he'd found a really good hiding place, unusual though that seemed for a four-year-old - apparently the older kids usually pretend they can't see the younger ones at first, to keep them interested, stop them from becoming disheartened by being caught too easily. Then there's a couple of years when they're about eight or nine when they're caught as they're found or catch as they see, then they're old enough to join the 'conspiracy' - just as soon as their parents think they're old enough to be given full charge of their younger brothers or sisters. But I'm getting off the point. Eventually, after everyone else had either been caught or had got 'home', they tired of looking for him and called to him, telling him that he'd won and to come out. When he didn't, the oldest girl told half a dozen of the oldest to keep looking while she took the other young ones home and reported what had happened.

"There were a dozen men, mostly with dogs, including the boy's father with a mutt that was devoted to the child, searching within an hour of his disappearance. Nothing - not a trace."

Kirk looked thoughtful, his mind going back to childhood days, to memories of playing in the woods near one of the many homes he had known before his father died and his mother returned to her own childhood haunts, taking her sons to a flat, featureless farming area that both had hated, but where the family farm provided them with a home. Their maternal grandfather had been more than pleased to see his only daughter return to roost and on his death two years later she had inherited the place, the only one of his children to care for the land as he did, even although she had left it for several years to accompany her husband in his wandering throughout the galaxy. The money that Kirk senior had left - a reasonable amount, for he had been the sole heir of his parents, and he had never been spendthrift - his widow had kept in trust for her sons; knowing, even in the first days of her bereavement, that neither would ever settle to life on Earth. Sam's share had partly gone to pay for his training as a

research biologist, but Kirk's half of his father's estate was still intact; his choice of career had seen to that. Sometimes Kirk wondered what would happen to the farm when his mother died; perhaps one of Sam's three sons would be interested in inheriting it.

Pulling his mind back from his memories, Kirk asked, "Could the kid have fallen into a swamp?"

"They thought of that," Ericcson replied. "There was no swampy ground nearby - and then, of course, while they were still trying to work out what had happened, the second child went missing - just four days later."

"What happened that time?"

"Colinda Walsh - age three. Same settlement." Kirk noticed that once again Ericcson knew the name without referring to any report, and realised that the station commander had been going over and over the reports since they started coming in. "Her house has a big garden - " Kirk noticed the use of the present tense, as if Ericcson was refusing to admit that the child might be dead - "and after Pete Davie disappeared, her mother wouldn't let her go out with the other kids. They were welcome to play in the garden, but Colinda was not to go out of it. Mrs. Walsh is an incomer to Doranna, brought up herself in a tradition of 'it's the parents' - for that read mother's - 'duty to care for and bring up her own children'. Authority might be passed to grandmother, but to nobody else. She belongs to a religion that decrees that a woman's place is the kitchen, and that she has no right pretending to be able to do anything other than run a house - no right even pretending that a woman has brains at all, come to that. Her husband has given up trying to persuade her to change her attitude, and to be honest I think that her subservience to him has tickled his vanity even though he would hotly deny it, but he had insisted, up till then, that Colinda be given the freedom that her mother never had.

"Anyway, when this happened and Mrs. Walsh - well, 'put her foot down' is probably too strong a description, but insisted that she didn't want her daughter running into possible danger and wanted her to stay in the garden where it was known to be safe, her father, probably somewhat worried too in face of the mystery of what had happened, agreed. Possibly he was glad that his wife was prepared to handle the extra work having her daughter underfoot would entail.

"The day Colinda vanished, the other kids had gone off to watch the regular supply ship arrive - it's an old one, one of the design that can actually land on a planet, and Colinda was quite upset at not being allowed to go too, but her mother was adamant.

"Mrs. Walsh had twisted an ankle the day before, and had orders to rest it, so she sat outside the door watching Colinda playing." He gave a helpless gesture. "The child was playing with a ball, bouncing it off the wall and catching it - well, trying to catch it; she was too young for her co-ordination to have developed properly. She missed a catch, the ball bounced away and rolled into a shrubbery. Colinda went after it. When she didn't come back out right away, her mother assumed that she was having difficulty finding it, but when a minute had passed, Mrs. Walsh called to her, and there was no answer. She'd gone too."

Kirk's frown deepened. "How thick a shrubbery?"

"Thick enough for Mrs. Walsh to lose sight of the child, but

open enough for anyone, even an adult, to walk through it, between the bushes, without any difficulty."

"No indication that the child could have been transported away?"

"That was considered as a possibility, and dismissed. Later events did seem to prove otherwise, too. And after all, who would want to beam away such young children?"

"I wouldn't put it past the Klingons. Catch Terran children young enough, train 'em their way, and send them back, young adults, as spies... Simpler, though longer-term, than trying to send in surgically altered Klingons." Kirk was silent for a moment, then went on. "What about the others?"

"Well, after Colinda, there was a minor panic. Parents, even the parents of the older kids, the ones just on the point of leaving school, who would normally have been given a great deal of responsibility, decided that they preferred not to let their children out of their sight.

"It didn't make any difference. The third one was also the oldest who actually vanished - a five-year-old. He'd been told to wait at school till his mother came for him, but she was delayed. He was an independent child who'd been used to going home on his own, along with two slightly older boys who lived fairly near, and he rather resented being returned, as he put it, 'to babyhood', so he started off home with them as usual. Emil was last seen by the two of them where their roads separated, beginning to run down his road before they went on themselves. His mother just missed him at school and returned home, but he wasn't there. Either he never arrived home, or he did but left again with his schoolbag, before she arrived.

"As you might guess, that really did it. No matter what happens, there are always those who are half inclined to shrug and say 'It won't happen again'; even those ones started to worry at that point. Supervision of the kids doubled overnight.

"The next disappearance was in one of the other settlements. The parents there had been told about the disappearances, of course, and were watching their kids, but not *quite* as hard - they were being careful but they weren't scared - then. Not until four kids vanished - together. Their mothers had had a baby-sitting rota worked out, but they'd all been letting the kids play in the gardens while they got on with the housework, got the dinner ready, that sort of thing. The mother in charge that day was in the kitchen, glancing out of the open window every few minutes, but able to hear the kids yelling to each other. There was a sudden silence, and she looked out - and they'd gone. She was ex-Starfleet, and would have recognised a transporter hum if she'd heard it. She was insistent that there was no noise; one instant the kids were yelling, the next there was total silence.

"That put the cat among the pigeons in all the settlements. The parents started keeping the kids in under their feet... Two days later the first baby vanished - from a bedroom with a dog in it. The dog started to bark, and when Mrs. N'Goma went to check, the cot was empty. The window was still closed and latched.

"A week later, two kiddies, twins, went missing from a third settlement. Again, all possible precautions had been observed; the parents had them in a sort of 'playpen' in the garden that their

father had fenced off so that they could play out of doors. It was even roofed over with wire mesh, and entered from the house by means of a french window, and their mother was in the room it opened out of. She saw nothing; again, she became aware of silence, and looked out to find them gone.

"That's been the tale since, Jim - kids vanishing when you'd have said it was physically impossible. All the settlements have had losses now - the last was three days ago, as I said. One of the doctors had been called to a difficult labour, and took his wife, a trained nurse, to assist. They took their son, who was about a year old, and put him in the next door bedroom with the older child of the house, a girl aged two - and both children vanished.

"The Dorannans are desperate, Jim. There has to be an explanation, but they're at a complete loss to find one."

Kirk scowled. "My crew needs a rest, God knows... but I'm sure they'd all volunteer to search if I asked them. So I won't bother asking first. Yes, we'll go, Sven."

"And that's the situation," Kirk finished, looking round the circle of his senior officers.

"But who would want to kidnap such young children?" Someone was bound to ask the obvious question. This time it was Chekov, his voice a mixture of anger and curiosity.

As Kirk repeated his Klingon theory he became aware that McCoy was looking more and more strained. "Bones?" he asked.

Instantly, everyone swung round to look towards the surgeon. He was clearly on the point of breaking down.

"Bones, what's wrong?"

McCoy made an obvious attempt to pull himself together. "My daughter lives on Doranna. She's married to a doctor... and they have a son who'll be about a year old now." Despite his best efforts, his voice shook.

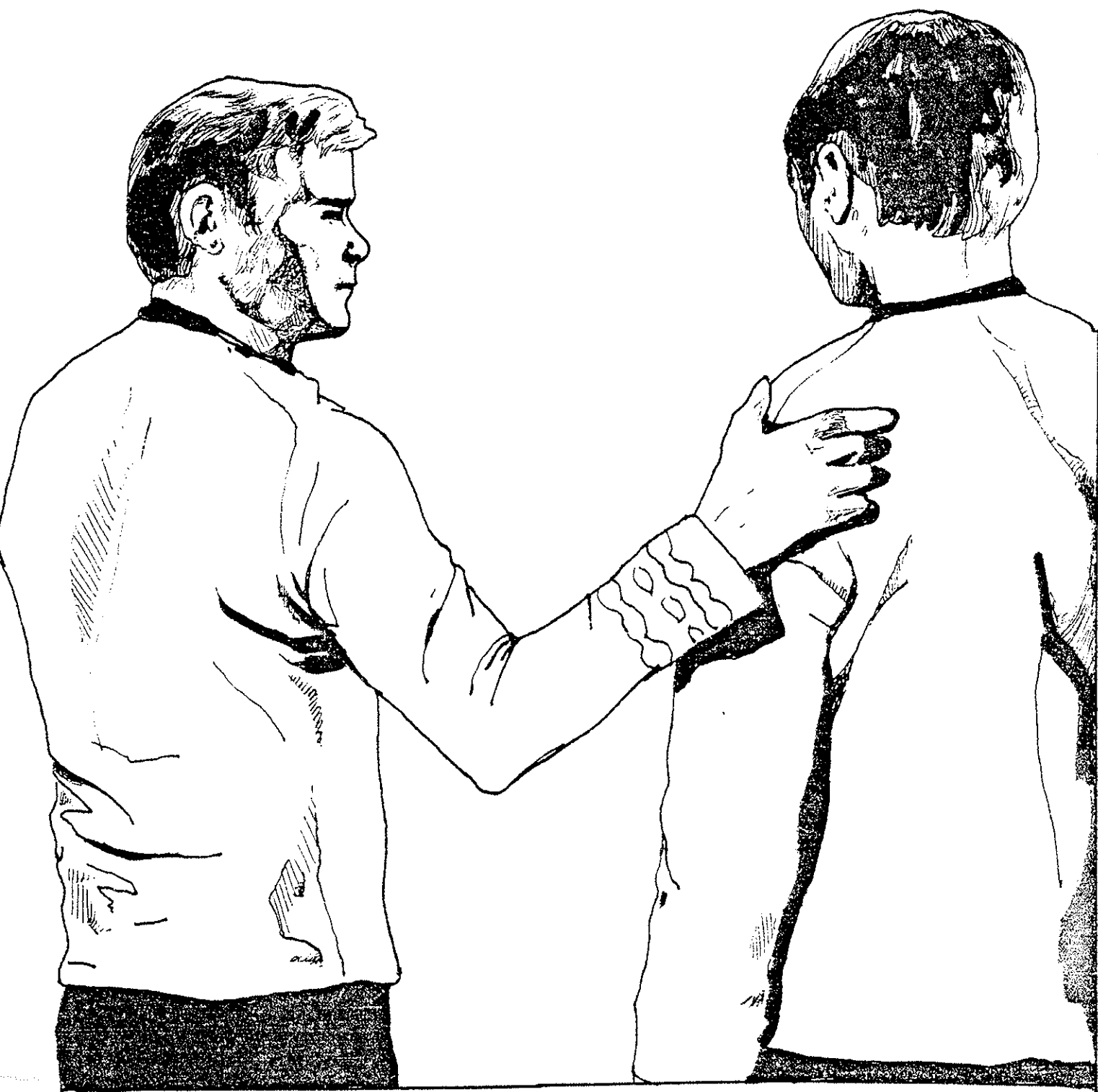
"It might not be your grandson," Kirk said slowly, aware even as he spoke of the futility of offering false hope.

"Jim, Doranna's not all that heavily inhabited yet." McCoy's flat comment said clearly that he too recognised Kirk's words for the meaningless attempt to delay facing the truth that they were. "I don't see who else it could be. Oh, God, Jo must be off her head with worry!"

Kirk reached a sympathetic hand to McCoy's shoulder. "We'll be there in two days, Bones, and you can get time off to stay with your daughter, of course." He looked round the others. "I'll be beaming down as soon as we arrive to consult with Governor Laski. Spock, I'll leave you to take charge of the initial scan. Look for readings in the rough ground around the settlements."

"Yes, Captain."

"Spock..." Kirk glanced towards McCoy. "You're probably looking for bodies..."



McCoy paled slightly more, if that were possible, but he showed no further reaction. Spock, too, was looking towards McCoy, a touch of concern just discernable in his eyes as he repeated, "Yes, sir."

"At the same time, keep a watch on the settlements as far as possible - Doranna's settlements are all on the same continent. There's a species of apeman on the other one, so it's been left alone. It should be relatively easy to cover them all. Specifically, watch out for any movement outside the settled areas... and that includes farmers seeing to their crops and stock. I want to know if a mouse as much as blinks!"

"Of course," Spock replied evenly.

Kirk looked round again. "Does anyone have any suggestions?"

There was an uneasy silence. Kirk suspected that some of his officers might indeed have suspicions of one sort or another, but that none of them was sure enough of his theory to voice it. At least none of them was questioning his decision to go to Doranna - though he would have been most surprised if any of them had. Now that Commander Wood was dead there was nobody in the crew who was likely to make petty objections to an extra, unscheduled mission like this, even though it did mean the loss of a much-needed shore leave.

"Dismissed."

As usual, Spock delayed until the others had left. It still gave Kirk a warm feeling of... yes, satisfaction... that the Vulcan should do this; he suspected it always would. Wood, Spock's deceased predecessor as First Officer, had never thought to offer his Captain this sort of support. It was quietly unobtrusive; if there was a problem, it gave Kirk the opportunity to comment on it; if there was no problem, it offered the Captain the opportunity of a few moments of quiet, undemanding relaxation in the middle of a busy day. Only someone on whom the strain of command pressed unrelentingly day after day could appreciate how helpful such a break could be; even more restful, in some ways, than his off-duty hours, many of which were filled with the demands of paperwork - a chore which seemed endless, repetitive and frequently unnecessary. He sometimes promised himself that if he should ever be promoted to the dizzy heights of Starfleet Command he would try to do something to ease the strain of the repetitive paperwork...

This time, it was obvious that Spock had something on his mind. "Captain, do you really think the Klingons are responsible?"

The Human sighed. "It fits," he said gloomily. "I can't think of any way to leave a locked room - or even an unlocked one with someone outside it - unseen, except by transporter... and I can't think of anyone except an enemy who would want to steal children. Orion slavers come to mind too, except for the age of the children - it's older folk the Orions usually go for, captives old enough to be sold as workers, not infants; I would expect them to go for the ten to fifteen age group if they were kidnapping children; even as old as the early twenties if they simply wanted men for sale as labourers."

Spock nodded. "Neither can I see the Orions daring to raid a Federation planet, even a colony as far from the centre of government as this one is. Surely they know from experience that retribution would be swift - and painful."

"Provided their crimes were proved," Kirk finished. "It's a pity that Doranna hasn't bothered with better facilities; as things stand, the Dorannans depend on visiting ships contacting them to announce their presence. It does make the possibility of a kidnapping vessel rather higher than it would be on most other planets. Which could also explain why so many children were taken from the one colony," he added thoughtfully. He sighed. "It's a few years since the Orions were last knocked down to size; some of the young ones, the ones too young to remember their last clash with the Federation, could well be getting restless and wanting to show their mettle. You can't change a planet's culture overnight, Spock, especially when you've no diplomatic contact, let alone the opportunity to let them see another system in operation."

"Nor when that planet has a natural slave race living on it," Spock said wryly.

Kirk thought of the green Orion slaves, and nodded. A species distantly related to the dominant race, they had only rudimentary intelligence and would have died out long since had they not been domesticated, rather as dogs or horses had been. The females were remarkably beautiful and highly sexed, probably as a result of careful breeding, but were not cross-fertile with their masters. The males were handsome, strong and willing workers.

"Though it always has seemed strange," Kirk commented, "that with a whole race of slaves on-planet, the Orions should take the risk, run the dangers, of stealing slaves from other planets. It's not as if there's a general market for slaves."

"In the Federation," Spock finished.

Kirk looked at him. "Are you suggesting that the Orions could have been selling their victims to the Klingons?"

"How much do we really know about the customs on most Klingon worlds? The Klingons might even have employed the Orions to kidnap these children - taking advantage of the wish of the young Orion males to prove themselves." He hesitated, then went on. "However, Jim, to kidnap children one or two at a time over several months, a vessel would have to remain in orbit. Whatever one might think of the habits and morals of both the Klingons and the Orions, they are not stupid; and for a kidnapping vessel to remain long in orbit over a victim planet, even one as apparently unprotected as this, would be stupidity."

Kirk sighed. "I know." He passed a tired hand over his face. "I've been telling myself that - but offhand, I simply can't think of anything else to account for the disappearances."

"There is absolutely no chance of a native animal being responsible?"

"You checked the survey report, Spock. Ericsson was right. The biggest carnivore is sized with a fox, too small to consider anything larger than a rabbit as possible food. There isn't even a record of it taking carrion. And anyway, how could a fox get into a locked room where a dog was on guard?"

"Unlikely, I admit. Yet there must be a logical reason for the disappearances."

"Can you think of one?"

Spock frowned slightly. "When I was at the Vulcan Science Academy..." he began, then, uncharacteristically, he hesitated.

"Go on," Kirk encouraged, once he was sure that the Vulcan, for once, had spoken without thinking first and was feeling diffident about continuing.

"It was purely theoretical," Spock protested. "A theory without a scrap of logical proof. The surprising thing was that any scientist, even one as inexperienced as - No, I will not name him. He was ridiculed enough at the time for being so foolish as to formulate a theory then look for proof of it. He had nothing except several old legends from various worlds on which to base his suggestion." He fell silent again, his thoughts obviously elsewhere.

"You wouldn't be referring to yourself, by any chance?" Kirk asked gently, and knew instantly, from the expression in his friend's eyes, that he was right.

"It was foolishness," Spock repeated, clearly regretting that he had even mentioned it. "It could have destroyed my career."

"But it didn't - Chief Scientist," Kirk said softly. "Perhaps the ridicule was not because of the theory itself, but only because you couldn't prove it."

"I had not thought of that," Spock said.

Kirk looked at him expectantly. "Well, come on - give!"

The Vulcan hesitated for a moment longer, then began, at first diffidently then with increasing confidence as he sensed Kirk's genuine interest.

"Many worlds have stories of unexplained disappearances. Your own Earth has the region called the 'Bermuda Triangle', where there are many tales of both ships and aircraft disappearing without trace. Books were written, both in support of something mysterious happening - there were even claims that the Bermuda Triangle was only one of several such regions on Earth - and also in opposition, claiming that in fact there was nothing mysterious in the region, and that there were no more disappearances in that area than in any other region of the sea. On Vulcan, too - nobody knows what happened to the people who lived in the Vretthon Valley. They were a pastoral people who are credited with first domesticating the thoral and the an'chak. The Vretthon Valley was difficult of access; easily defended; although peace-loving in an era when the Warrior cult flourished, the Vretthon were not foolish enough to neglect posting guards at the passes through the mountains. They traded with other tribes who wanted an'chak wool and tamed thoral for their chiefs to ride, and were probably the most wealthy of all Vulcan tribes. Then one day - a party travelling to trade with them found the valley deserted. The thoral herds, the an'chak flocks, were still grazing peacefully, but the people had all gone. There weren't even bodies. No other tribe emerged as suddenly wealthy, thus betraying themselves as having overcome the Vretthon... There was simply no explanation for the way they vanished. There wasn't even a strange race suddenly appearing elsewhere at around the same time - and if they had decided to migrate, why did they not take the thoral and the an'chak, the source of their wealth? There are similar stories from Andor, Teller, Catulla..."

"So you began to look for a common answer?"

"Yes. The answer I reached was... possibly unorthodox, but when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable..."

"Sherlock Holmes." Kirk identified the quotation easily. "And real life solutions can easily be more bizarre than anything one could imagine. Truth *is* stranger than fiction - anyone in Starfleet knows that. We've seen things that would be laughed at as totally ludicrous if they appeared in a book or a movie. What conclusion did you come to?"

"The possibility of a parallel universe or another dimension co-existing with this one, normally divided by a barrier, with disappearances happening if the barrier was breached, the victims... sliding... into the other universe or dimension. Of course, the weakness of the theory was that there should have been mysterious appearances as well, people slipping through to here from there. I was unable to provide these."

"I'm not sure there haven't been," Kirk said slowly. "Something I remember reading, once... something about two green-skinned children suddenly appearing - oh, centuries ago." He pushed the errant lock of hair back from his forehead. "The trouble is, as you said, finding proof of such a theory... and in this case, there's an additional drawback."

"The youth of the victims."

"Yes. Given a doorway into another dimension, I'd expect everyone in a given area to vanish - not just children younger than five." He sighed again. "In any situation, the simplest solution is the one to be preferred..."

"Only in this case - there is no 'simplest solution'," Spock finished.

Laski welcomed Kirk with open arms.

The Governor of Doranna was a man of indeterminate age; although his hair was grey, Kirk decided that it was prematurely so and that he was probably around forty. He looked tired and strained, and there was a slight air of worried waiting in his attitude. A quick mental calculation gave Kirk a possible reason; if as Ericcson said the disappearances had been averaging out at one a week, it was about time for another, and Laski must be even more aware of that than Kirk was - and Laski was not merely a visitor come to see if he could help, but ultimately responsible for the members of the colony. It was his people, his people's children, who had been disappearing, and Kirk could well sympathise; he knew what *his* reaction would have been to the situation.

"Have there been any further developments?" Kirk asked anxiously.

Laski shook his head. "No more disappearances, but everyone is terribly nervous," he said.

"I'm not surprised. From what Sven Ericcson told me, there doesn't appear to be any defence."

"None," Laski said gloomily.

"Sven gave me a very full report," Kirk went on, "but I'd like to hear it again from you. You might add something - some detail - that he either forgot or didn't know about. Meanwhile, my Science Officer is organising a thorough sensor scan of the area around all the settlements. If anything happens and it's not spotted on the sensors, someone in the science department will be looking for a new job."

Laski half smiled. "All they would see would be a reading suddenly disappear, Captain," he said wearily.

There was nothing in his tale that Ericcson had not already told Kirk apart from a few minor details. The dogs, for example, had been unable to find any sort of trail; they had simply milled around, apart from the one that had been in the room with the N'Goma infant and the one that had belonged to Pete Davie, the first child to disappear. Both had reacted with wild barking and raised hackles when they were taken to the areas where other children had disappeared, but nobody had been able to decide why.

"As if they scented something?" Kirk asked.

Laski looked slightly doubtful. "What would there be to scent?" he asked. "And if they did scent something, why didn't the other dogs react the same way? The children just vanished. There weren't any strangers around - everyone on Doranna knows everyone else, anyway. The youngest kids might not know everyone, but the older ones certainly do. Someone who didn't belong to the settlements would have been noticed. And besides, people here have to work - we may be self-supporting, but we still can't take it for granted; nobody has time to waste. The adults all have work to do, and they get on with it. The time of day Pete Davie vanished, the adults would all be busy - were all busy, with plenty of witnesses to prove it, too." He shook his head wearily. "That was the first thing we did, believe me - checked to make sure everyone was accounted for. Just in case someone *had* gone crazy."

"Sven said that was a practical impossibility."

"It is. But we checked it anyway. Everyone was accounted for." He looked at Kirk with the utter weariness of a man who has been finding life too much of a strain but has no idea what to do to ease things, and for the sake of morale cannot - dare not - let the people he works beside realise it. "Oh, God - what are we going to do?" His shoulders slumped helplessly as he dropped his pretence of calm, unworried efficiency, relaxing in the undemanding company of the fellow commander for whom no pretence of infallibility was needed.

Kirk looked sympathetically at him, understanding only too well the hopelessness that he must be feeling; the nagging sense of responsibility that made him accept these disappearances as his fault, accept that there must be something that he could do, should be able to do, to discover what had happened to the missing children. It was a headache that all leaders knew; it came with the job.

"There has to be an answer," he said, repeating the meaningless reassurance that for Laski had become trite. He hesitated. Should he mention the 'other dimension' theory that Spock had so reluctantly shared with him? No, he decided; Spock had clearly been uncomfortable with the memory of the 'foolishness' of his younger days. It was a measure of his trust in Kirk that he *had* explained

his initial comment; the Captain was quite sure that anyone else would have been palmed off with a casual, 'It's not important', in the unlikely event of Spock's having been careless enough to make that comment in the presence of anyone else. It was only with Kirk that he totally relaxed the guard that he normally placed on his tongue - he might half relax it in McCoy's presence, but never in front of anyone else. It would be unfair to repeat to a third party something that the Vulcan would certainly not want made common knowledge for no better reason than to provide a 'reason' for a mystery.

Instead, he turned the conversation slightly. "This is maybe a silly question, Governor, but has anything else been disappearing?"

Laski looked at him, startled. "Odd that you should mention it. Some of the farmers have been reporting an unexplained drop in the numbers of mouflette in their herds. Not that any of them can possibly know exactly how many of the little beasts they have - you can't do a head count on a flock of identically-coloured guinea pigs; even when they're gathered for shearing dozens manage to dodge the dogs. Most of these are picked up later, in ones and twos, but there are always a few that the farmer might keep on seeing, long-haired and standing out among the cropped mass, but can never catch. This last few months, though, several of the farmers have been saying that there seem to be fewer beasts in the fields. Some might have escaped - they may have been domesticated quite easily, but they go wild again just as easily. Some might have been taken by a tod or a big hawk - there are always a few go that way each year. They're relatively long-lived, and breed quite slowly - one kit per year is the norm - and the naturalists think that there must be some sort of natural check on the numbers that we haven't found yet, for although a few are eaten, the mouflette doesn't seem to be part of the staple diet of any of the native hunting beasts. Tods and hawks don't form any sort of threat to the herds, yet even in the wild they're in no danger of over-running the land. But the farmers reckon there are more missing than can be accounted for by natural causes. If disease had hit the herds, they'd expect to find the bodies." He shrugged. "It'll reduce this year's crop of wool slightly, but the books will balance - less wool, higher prices. I'm not worried about that."

Kirk grunted. "Any correlation between the start of the mouflette disappearances and the children's disappearances?"

Laski scowled. "The first of the mouflette disappearances was commented on about a month after Pete Davie went."

"But they could have been going before that?"

"Well, yes. The herds were semi-neglected around that time - folk were out searching for the youngsters, often when they really should have been tending their fields. There could have been mouflette disappearing too, and nobody would notice because the herds were being left to get on with the job of turning grass into wool."

"And nobody has seen the possibility of a link between the children and the mouflette?"

"Captain, they may have begun to disappear at around the same time, but what link could there possibly be? Human children and admittedly intelligent but tiny animals that are kept for their wool?"

"Intelligent?"

"Intelligent enough for some of them to be able to avoid, and keep on avoiding, the annual shearing," Laski said drily.

Kirk grinned an acceptance of the comment, privately deciding that this man had a sense of humour that matched Spock's. "O.K, I'll concede the brains. I agree that there's no obvious connection between the herds and the children apart from the disappearances, but I'm not so sure that we shouldn't be looking for one. I'll have a word with my science officer, get him to extend the range of our scans."

"What do you think you could be looking for, then?"

"God knows." Kirk, too, was willing to show his vulnerability in the company of his fellow commander, in spite of his sympathetic wish to ease the Governor's tension. "It could be something as simple - and I admit unlikely - as a cattle - I mean, a mouflette rustler also stealing children to be brought up as slaves working on his hidden mouflette farm."

Laski grinned tiredly. "Were you brought up on a diet of old - and bad - Westerns?"

"Well, I guess all kids brought up on Earth see their share of those, though I always preferred space opera myself." Kirk stood. "I'll pass this additional bit of information on to Mr. Spock, see what he makes of it. He's a hard-headed Vulcan, so you can guarantee he'll keep me from being carried away by any theories gleaned from old movies."

On consideration, Kirk changed his mind about going straight back to the Enterprise when he left Governor Laski. He called the ship and told Spock about the disappearance of the mouflette, then went to the hospital.

There, he asked for the doctor whose child had disappeared. There was a brief delay before a tall, thin-faced man in hospital whites appeared.

"Captain Kirk?"

Looking at him, Kirk decided on a direct approach. "Doctor. I'm here at the request of Commodore Ericcson of Starbase 6, to see if I can find anything to indicate where the missing children disappeared to. I understand that your child is one of the ones missing. I don't want to rub salt in the wound, so to speak, but so far I got one scrap of information from Governor Laski that wasn't in the report Ericcson gave me. I wondered if you could go over the events leading up to your son's disappearance for me, just in case there's something new that I don't know - something that might give me an extra clue."

Revisec looked steadily at him for a moment. "Captain, I trust you are not intending to ask my wife the same question?"

Kirk shook his head. "If I want to know anything more from your wife, Doctor, I'll get her father to ask her."

"Her father? Dr. McCoy?"

"My Chief Medical Officer. I imagine he's with her now. He beamed down the same time as I did."

"It'll do her good to see him. She's very depressed."

"I can imagine," Kirk said sympathetically.

"Are you planning on seeing any of the other parents?"

"Possibly. I'm willing to take advice on which parents would react adversely to being questioned again. I came to you because as far as I can make out, you're pretty well the only father who has been around when a child disappeared; it's mostly the mothers who've been nearby, and I realise that they're more likely to be upset by being asked about it again. Yet going over and over what happened is the only way to get all the facts. First time round you get the main details; with repetition, sometimes you get extra little clues. What I have are the main facts. I need more."

Revisec nodded. "I understand." He rubbed his hands over his face, massaging his forehead with his fingers; the gesture of a man tired beyond the power of mere sleep to rest. "Shall we go to my office? If we stay out here I could be called for at any time; in my office, I can give instructions not to be interrupted unless it's a real emergency."

Once in his office, Revisec gave the necessary order to his secretary, then turned his attention back to Kirk.

"How much do you know about Len's disappearance?" he asked.

"Assume I don't know anything," Kirk said. "Tell me as much as you can remember - anything, anything at all, about what you thought, how you felt - anything."

"Right." The doctor paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts. "The one thing this hospital lacks is a good obstetrics department - most of the women here prefer to have their children at home. We tend to agree that it's a good idea; on the whole, women are more relaxed in their own homes, and relaxation is important in childbirth. Most of the women have produced their children with no trouble at all; there are only a few who need more than minimal help. Len - my son - is one of the few who were born in hospital.

"Mrs. Chang had difficulty with her first child, and we knew that she would always have difficulty. We wanted her to come into hospital for her second delivery, but she refused; her child was going to be born at home, where the first thing he saw would be the surroundings that would be his, not the sterile environment of the hospital. We tried to persuade her; Jo pointed out that Len had been born in hospital with no ill effects; Dr. Aarons - the senior doctor here - tried to point out that should we finally decide that she must have surgical intervention, it could be terribly dangerous moving her; but she absolutely refused to change her mind.

"Normally the hospital sends a nurse as midwife when we're told labour has begun; with Mrs. Chang, Jo and I both went. We couldn't get a babysitter - young Chang decided to start fighting his way into the world during the night, and we didn't want to disturb anyone - so we took Len with us.

"We put Len into the nursery with Rhona Chang. He was sleepy, and settled down quickly; young Rhona didn't even waken. We left both the nursery door and the door of Mrs. Chang's room open so that we would hear if the children woke - all the windows in the house were closed, and the outer door - there's only one - was fastened

shut. Lee Chang stayed in the room with us - he was quite worried. Indeed, if he'd had his way, his wife *would* have been in hospital. But she wouldn't listen even to him.

"As it happened, the baby arrived with less trouble than we'd feared, but we *were* fully occupied with the birth for some hours. It was about dawn before we were cleaned up and Jo went through to the other room for Len - and the two children were gone."

"And you'd heard nothing?"

"Not a thing."

"Did you check the room?"

"Yes, although there didn't seem to be much point. The window was still closed and clearly hadn't been opened." He hesitated. "The only odd thing..."

"Yes?"

"An unusual smell - sort of damp earthy. It faded very quickly - I noticed it when I went into the room; five minutes later, after Lee and I had checked the rest of the house to see if there was anywhere an intruder *could* have got in, it had faded - when I went back into the room I couldn't smell anything."

"Did anyone else notice it?"

"Nobody mentioned it, and I didn't like to in case the Changs felt insulted - the inference would have been that their house was damp, at the very least."

Kirk grunted. "Smell... Governor Laski said that a couple of the dogs go crazy any time they're taken to where a child has disappeared - as if there was something they could scent that was affecting them. But of course, dogs can't tell us what's bothering them."

"None of the other parents has mentioned smelling anything."

"Most of the disappearances have been in daylight, haven't they? When many of the children have been playing outside."

"Well, yes - Len and Rhona are the only ones that vanished during the night."

"You said it was dawn. Maybe they had only just vanished - with daylight coming in. If the smell faded quickly... How quickly were the other children missed?"

"Some of them, very quickly."

"How many of these were indoors?"

"Oh. Not many, come to think of it. The N'Goma baby was one..."

"Out of doors, would an earthy smell be noticed? It would blend with the natural scents of the countryside."

"Yes, it would, wouldn't it." Revisec looked thoughtful.

"Indoors, a child *could* have been gone for half an hour before being missed. I think we'll have to check with some of the other parents, see if any of them *did* notice a smell they haven't thought to mention. Thank you, Doctor - I realise this can't have been easy for you. Rest assured, we'll do everything possible to recover the children... or at least find out what took them," he finished soberly, realising that Revisec was too intelligent to accept a glib assurance that all would be well.

"I'm sure you will, Captain." He glanced at the big clock on the wall. "I go off duty in five minutes; would you care to accompany me home?"

Kirk hesitated. "I think it might be better if I didn't, Doctor, thank you. You said yourself, your wife isn't feeling on top of the world; having to be polite to a stranger might be good therapy, but on the other hand, the last thing she must want right now is to meet a stranger. I've given Bones - Dr. McCoy - discretion to stay planetside for as long as we're here; I hope that having him around will be enough to cheer her up a little. He's a very matter-of-fact, down-to-earth man; he should certainly manage to keep her from brooding."

"I suspect that part of Jo's depression was caused by wondering how to tell her father that Len had disappeared. Now that he knows, I would hope that she can start thinking more positively again."

"I hope so too," Kirk said sincerely.

He left the hospital with the doctor, watched as he walked briskly down the street and then, as Revisec turned the corner out of sight, Kirk contacted the Enterprise.

"Kirk here. Ready to beam up."

As soon as he rematerialised, he went in search of Spock.

The Science Officer was, as Kirk had suspected, bent over a sensor. The Captain paused for a moment watching him, appreciating the dedication and unfaltering attention with which the Vulcan was approaching his task - monotonous and so far unrewarding though it was.

"Spock."

The Vulcan straightened, turning to face the Human. "I regret, Captain, I have been unable to discover anything useful as yet." To Kirk's ear, attuned as it was to the subtle nuances of his friend's voice, Spock sounded slightly depressed.

"It's early days yet. Have you done anything about checking up on the numbers of mouflette?"

"Yes - that was easily checked. The report appears to be accurate; the mouflette are grazed in large fields bounded by fine-meshed netting which extends some distance under the ground - the mouflette is a shallow burrower. The farmers appear to keep some five hundred of the creatures in each field. In some fields there are only approximately two to three hundred. The conclusion is that roughly half of the mouflette in these fields have either escaped, been released, succumbed to some disease - though why only half of

the occupants of the field would be affected is a question to which there is no logical answer - been attacked by a predator... or simply vanished. There is no indication of a break in the fencing or burrows under it, there are no carcasses either in the fields or nearby, there is no sign of 'wild' mouflette anywhere nearby although there are signs that some do live wild in the territory not yet occupied by the colony - I would say the colonists have been most efficient about catching the wild mouflette and domesticating them. I do not totally discount predator attack, even although you were assured that the mouflette are not extensively eaten by wild carnivores, but it seems unlikely that this would account for the number missing - and in addition, I would expect there to be some indication of inedible remains."

"Which leaves us with 'unexplained disappearance' as the most probable answer?"

"Yes, Captain."

Kirk sighed. "Children... small woolly animals. What connection could there possibly be?"

Spock shook his head. "No obvious connection."

"And you can add this to the equation - a damp, earthy smell, fading quickly - at least to the point where Human noses can't distinguish it. A possibility that dogs can, however."

"A smell?"

"I spoke to McCoy's son-in-law. He mentioned an earthy smell, fading within five minutes of its detection, in the room the children disappeared from. Governor Laski said that two of the dogs reacted with wild barking in the areas where any of the children vanished. One of these dogs was in the room with one of the children at the time of disappearance, and the other was the pet of the first child to go missing, and was taken on the search as soon as the disappearance was reported."

"You think they are detecting, and recognising, a scent that to them is significant?"

"I think it probable."

"Dr. Revisec did not recognise the smell?"

Trust Spock to have discovered the name of Bones' son-in-law, Kirk thought. "No."

"Manark sand-bats look like crystals when they are at rest. Such a creature might very well have an 'earthy' smell," Spock offered.

"True. But if such a creature lived here, I would have expected it to have made an appearance before now."

"Such a creature could have an extended larval stage during which they could be indistinguishable from rock crystal," Spock offered.

"Agreed - but it still doesn't explain how anything managed to get in to a totally sealed room and out again, taking with it the occupant of that room." Kirk sighed again. "We're talking round and

round in circles, Spock. Whatever we think of comes right back to that one inescapable fact - some of those children were magicked out of sealed rooms."

"We have not considered magic, Jim."

"I know that stage magicians do seem to make people disappear and reappear elsewhere, Spock, but there's a simple enough explanation if you happen to study stage 'magic' - it's illusion, pure and simple."

"I realise that. But it is a documented fact that some people - and no one planet holds a monopoly of them - can apparently cause impossible things to 'happen' - with no trickery being involved."

Kirk pushed his hair back from his forehead. "Spock? You? Believing in something as illogical as magic?"

"When such ability has been demonstrated, it is illogical to deny its existence."

"Spock, most of these 'magic' tricks are like the stage ones - illusion. The 'magician' is a clever psychologist; a skilled con man whose stock in trade is making people believe what he wants them to believe... and I wouldn't have expected a Vulcan to be taken in by it." He looked at the Vulcan thoughtfully. "No - come to think of it, it's perfectly logical that you would be. You're so honest yourselves that you expect everyone else to be. As a race, you're so literal-minded at times that it hurts."

"I am aware that Vulcans do not have the penchant for statements with double meanings that Humans so delight in," Spock agreed. "And we have never understood why anyone should claim something that is not true. Therefore we believe that those people who claim to be able to perform magic are indeed possessed of ESP ability of some sort. Is it so surprising? We possess certain ESP ability ourselves - we are telepathic. It is therefore perfectly logical to us that other races have other abilities... including that which is termed 'magic'. After all, to some races, telepathy is undoubtedly considered as 'magic'."

Kirk looked at his friend, a touch of surprise in his expression. It had simply never occurred to him that the logical Vulcans could possibly consider magic logical - since most Humans, known though they were as one of the Galaxy's most superstitious races, nowadays considered magic as a totally impossible, totally imaginary ability, the result of gullibility, self-hypnosis or possibly even of drugs. Yet now that he came to think about it, it was logical that a race possessed of one type of ESP ability should consider 'magic' as another type of ESP ability.

Added to that, they had on occasion encountered races that possessed ESP ability and that ability *did* at times resemble magic. He recalled the being who called himself Apollo - a member of a long-lived race which had once visited Earth and been regarded as gods because of the things they could do. He and his crew had escaped that time only because Apollo could not abide ridicule. There were still times when Kirk felt slightly guilty at the way in which he had manipulated the self-styled 'god', but it had been the only way to save his ship; and in a sense he had released Apollo from an almost intolerable situation, by forcing him to terminate his wait for 'Man to come out to the stars... and return to herding goats' in a pastoral existence that he had long outgrown. The other 'gods' had

known that they had become redundant, and left, returning to wherever they had come from; only Apollo had remained, refusing to admit the truth - the truth that Kirk had finally forced him to see.

Just where had Apollo and the other 'gods' come from, Kirk sometimes wondered. They certainly appeared to have possessed the ability to transport themselves through space without providing themselves with an artificial environment, if the way Apollo had finally disappeared was any indication. Of course, it was always possible that, congenital exhibitionist that he was, he had simply chosen to vanish in that fashion, to reappear elsewhere on the planet and construct whatever kind of vessel he needed for his journey.

Yes, Apollo's abilities could well be classed as 'magic', and had probably been so regarded by the simple peasants of the ancient culture of Greece - although the educated nobility had possibly been more cynical; it was usually, though not inevitably, the uneducated masses who were the devout followers of the 'gods', even when education was the monopoly of the religious orders.

Kirk became aware that his First Officer was watching him, respecting his abstraction but clearly puzzled by it. He smiled slightly.

"You're right, of course," he admitted ruefully. "Humans do tend to be very materialistic. It's very easy to pass off as impossible or even totally imaginary something we don't understand, and to claim that only superstitious primitives who don't understand the mechanics of nature could possibly believe that someone has caused - oh, an earthquake, a gale, a drought - by means of magic. But Humans don't, for the most part, have any marked ESP ability, and stage 'magic' is always illusion, sleight of hand... so educated Humans automatically assume that any magic performed by witch doctors, in which the primitive tribes believe implicitly, is also illusion..." He sighed wearily. "Magic... The only difficulty about that as a theory is, who or what is performing that magic?"

Slowly, Spock nodded. "Yes," he admitted, his expression totally expressionless, his voice stiffly formal. "Since there is no sapient race on Doranna... I apologise, Captain; as with my earlier theory at the Science Academy, I spoke before thinking."

"Hey, don't get all upset on me!" Kirk exclaimed. "It's a First Officer's duty to make suggestions, to give his Captain the pertinent facts, to offer help when the Captain is totally flabbergasted by an impossible situation - even if the suggestions you make do seem at first to be equally incredible. It's amazing how much an apparently unlikely suggestion can get the old brain cells ticking over. Now you've just swung my thinking right away from a standard path onto a side track; I don't know where it's going yet, but I intend to be open-minded enough to consider everything I see on that track - and that's thanks to you." He grinned reassuringly at his friend. "Your predecessor was very little help to me that way - his thinking was ultra conservative." His expression changed ludicrously until it was slightly rueful. "Silly, isn't it - the illogical Human giving me nothing but useless generalisations, and the logical Vulcan providing me with all sorts of way-out theories calculated to make me take a good, fresh look at things."

Spock looked steadily at him, as if trying to decide whether or not Kirk was merely trying to cheer him up with a well-meant and - he conceded wryly to himself - necessary 'white lie'. The Captain's reassuring smile widened; the Human fully understanding his Vulcan's

uncertainty. Kirk had no intention of ever endangering his friendship with the Vulcan by even implying that he thought any of his suggestions ridiculous, even though he knew that he would sometimes have to argue with one of them. Memory of the scorn Spock had admitted enduring following the announcement of his unproved theory was bound to have left him feeling insecure with regard to putting forward a suggestion for which he did not have any positive evidence.

Spock's face relaxed slightly into his half smile as he accepted Kirk's comment as the truth that it was. Kirk's smile widened even more, though when he considered the situation on the planet he felt far from smiling.

"Now," he said. "Any more ideas? Even really way-out ones?"

Spock looked thoughtful. "I'm not sure," he said slowly. "The sensors have detected nothing unusual around any of the settlements or around the mouflette fields. Everything we have found fits the information we were given. But what about the other continent?"

"What about the other continent?" Kirk asked. "It was deliberately left alone because of a pre-sapient hominid race living on it."

"Were you given any other information about it?"

Kirk shook his head. "No, nothing, but I assume that the range of wild life is similar to that of this one."

"In other words, we were given insufficient data about the planet."

"Do you think we really need to know anything about the other continent?" Kirk asked.

"Perhaps not - on the other hand, since the colonists are faced with an insoluble problem, surely it is sensible to extend the field of search to the remainder of the planet."

"Spock, I'm not trying to be awkward, and the last thing I want to do is make you think that I'm denigrating your suggestions, but we're talking about children vanishing, not adults. How could such young children get more than a very short distance from home unless someone else took them? - "

Spock looked at him without speaking, an eyebrow lifting quizzically, and he cut off the rest of what he had intended to say, suddenly and almost stupidly pleased that Spock had the confidence in him to react with an implication that he was making a silly comment, and with the almost simultaneous realisation of what his Science Officer was thinking.

"Spock - do you think that our postulated Klingons might be basing themselves on the other continent?"

"I think it... possible. Since the Federation has chosen to ignore that continent under the requirements of the Prime Directive, the colonists have had nothing whatsoever to do with it, have they? Was it ever totally scanned once the initial survey determined that a pre-sapient creature lived there? Was any study even made of that creature? It would be a perfect place for a race as careless of the rights of other species as the Klingons appear to be to set up a

base. I suggest that we at least scan the other continent as well as checking the ground around the settlements on this one."

"Go ahead," Kirk agreed promptly. He considered the idea highly unlikely, but it was no more unlikely than his own suggestion of the Klingons sitting in orbit beaming up children. And he had to all intents promised Spock that he would consider any suggestion, no matter how unlikely, with an open mind - 'I intend to be open-minded enough to consider anything...' He had a possibly unworthy suspicion that Spock had the idea of using this situation as an excuse to make a study of the hominid and its habits - at least as far as could be determined from standard orbit; and if that was what was in Spock's mind, Kirk had no objections at all, knowing as he did that the Vulcan would never skimp his duties to pursue a private investigation.

He turned away from the Science station and moved to the command chair. He sank into it, staring unseeingly at the viewscreen; in his mind, a picture of Dr. Revisec, hanging on to his self-control with grim tenacity and determined that nobody would do or say anything that would further upset his wife; a picture of McCoy, his friend, worried about his daughter, worried about the grandson he had never seen.

"Captain!" There was a sharp note in Spock's voice that Kirk had never yet heard the Vulcan use. It pulled him back instantly from his depressed thoughts; he swung round.

"Yes, Mr. Spock?"

"Something... The sensors will have it recorded and we can study it in more detail in a moment - but there was a... I can only describe it as a flicker in the sensor reading. For a brief moment, a foreign reading appeared, mixed with a Human reading - then it vanished again, and the Human reading with it."

Kirk stared at him for a moment as he digested the report. "Lt. Uhura, contact Governor Laski."

There was a brief pause before Uhura glanced round. "Governor Laski is on channel one, sir."

"On screen, Lieutenant... Governor, we've just detected what we think may be another disappearance, but we do have a sensor report on it that my Science officer is already studying in depth."

"Another one?" Laski asked wearily. "Where?"

Kirk glanced over at the Vulcan. "The smallest settlement," Spock told him, and returned his attention to the readout. Kirk passed on the information. Laski pressed a button on his desk; his secretary entered.

"Contact Riverside; see if there's any word of a disappearance."

"Do you think there might be, sir?" She sounded worried.

"The Enterprise reports one."

The woman went out briskly, but there was a strained look on her face; Laski looked after her sympathetically, and when the door closed, he said quietly, "Maura comes from Riverside. It's small enough for almost everyone to be related to everyone else."

Kirk nodded, understanding. Spock straightened. "There's no doubt, Captain. A new signal - something never before recorded - appeared for a moment at the settlement; and as it flickered away, a Human reading went with it. Unfortunately, I have been unable to detect where it went."

"Never before recorded - you're quite sure of that, Mr. Spock?"

"Yes, Captain. It has no resemblance to the readings of any known race."

"Spock, start checking that other continent now. I know the creatures there were described as pre-sapient, but as I remember the little anthropology I ever knew, some species - Man is thought to be among them - appear to have possessed ESP in their pre-civilised days, but lost the ability as their civilisation developed. *Could those pre-sapients somehow be responsible for this?*"

Spock flicked several switches, and bent over the viewer again. "Scanning the other continent now, Captain... Have you any idea how widespread these creatures are?"

Kirk shook his head. "No. The survey teams left it alone, remember?"

Spock grunted. "On Earth, early Man - homo habilis, homo erectus - was confined to a relatively small part of the planet, as I recall." He gave the impression of speaking to himself. "Parts of Africa, parts of China... On Vulcan, signs of early vulcanoids - r'azja drav'ra - were limited to the area now covered by the Sas-a-Shar Desert... we've found traces of their 'culture' at one or two places, but only one or two... This race could be like that - sparse; I can't find any immediate sign of permanent habitation. On the other hand, I can find no sign of 'settlement' by any race of our acquaintance. Captain, I suggest we risk beaming a small party down, once I do detect some trace of a hominid species. We may find something on the surface that is indistinguishable from space."

Kirk frowned slightly. He was not averse to bending the Prime Directive slightly if he felt the occasion called for it; but he was not yet convinced that this occasion did call for it. Surely the natives of the other continent would leave some indications of their presence if they had any sort of culture; and if they didn't, their development was likely to be at a very vulnerable stage.

Governor Laski coughed slightly, discreetly drawing Kirk's attention back to the viewscreen. "Sorry, Governor; at the moment we're clutching at straws. We've initiated a search of the other continent to see if it holds any answers, but - "

He broke off as the door opened; the secretary entered, her face white and tears evidently not far away.

"There was one?" Laski said tightly.

She nodded. "My sister's daughter. Two years old. Governor - April was a very quiet child - almost too quiet. She was terribly shy. She would never have gone off willingly with a complete stranger - she'd have screamed and yelled... But she didn't! She just... went away, as if she knew whoever took her, as if she was perfectly content to go, without making any sort of fuss at all."

"Where was she?" Kirk asked. He was aware of sounding brutally

unsympathetic, but he had to have more information. If any sort of pattern could be detected...

"In a garden with a good high fence round it. There wasn't even a gate - it had to be entered from the house. And it wasn't. But there was an odd thing - my sister had some pet mouflette that lived in the garden - and they've gone too."

"No chance they could have burrowed out?" Kirk asked.

"No - my brother-in-law is a mouflette farmer, and they know all about making the fences deep enough. Anyway, these were young ones Maeve and Fingal had hand-reared, and they were almost too tame - they were more likely to try to sneak into the kitchen than dig their way out of the garden."

"Children and mouflette..." Kirk muttered. "Dammit, what connection can there *possibly* be?"

On consideration, Kirk decided to limit the proposed landing party to six. Spock, of course; and he himself - if there was to be any difficulty with Starfleet over their breach of the Prime Directive, he wanted to be able to state exactly what had been done, and why. He thought long over the choice of personnel to make up the other four who would complete the landing party, debating with himself what qualities would be most needed by them, finally deciding on two of the ship's biologists, Verris and Thekar; Dr. Maris, a member of McCoy's staff who had trained at Starfleet's central hospital where cases that posed problems for the doctors on their home planets, or Starfleet personnel, injured beyond the capability of their ships' facilities to handle, provided considerable experience of alien life forms; and - to satisfy the book - Shacter, a security guard who, from the early days of Spock's presence aboard the Enterprise, had appointed himself as the Vulcan's personal guard. Neither Kirk nor Spock himself had ever known just exactly why Shacter had developed this interest in the Vulcan, although Kirk suspected that it might have something to do with an incident that Spock had eventually mentioned to him, months after its occurrence. On one of Spock's early duties as acting science officer after the unmentioned loss of the Tellarite Science Officer Vaz he had found Shacter asleep on duty. It had been a perfectly safe planet, with security represented only because it was an unknown planet and Spock was still a civilian; Spock had simply wakened the man and taken matters no further, satisfied that Shacter understood that he had been warned and that a repetition of the offence would not be excused. Kirk realised, as he knew Spock did not, that Shacter probably appreciated being given a second chance like that, and that his devotion to Spock was the result.

Whether his guess was accurate or not, Kirk knew that Shacter was the best choice for a guard on this particular mission. His attachment to Spock had ensured that he frequently swapped duties to make sure he accompanied a landing party when Spock was part of it, with the result that his understanding of scientific matters was somewhat higher than that of most of his fellows. *This* landing party was one where the more knowledge its members had, the better it would be.

He considered his chosen group, and frowned slightly. He would have preferred McCoy to Dr. Maris, he knew, in spite of the range of her knowledge... but he doubted that he could justify dragging the

doctor away from his daughter. Jo Revisec needed her father right now; her importance to the colony was such that McCoy's prime duty lay in encouraging her back to an acceptance of life, rather than the marginal chance that he could contribute his knowledge to a probably fruitless search of the other continent for a hominid race so sparse that it had not yet shown up on the ship's sensors.

No - he must leave McCoy at the settlement.

Activating the intercom, he called his chosen group to a briefing.

Kirk looked round his selected landing party almost apologetically. "First of all, gentlemen, ladies, you must understand that what I plan to do constitutes a direct breach of the Prime Directive," he started. "You've all been on the Enterprise long enough to know that there are times when we've had to bend the Prime Directive a little, usually because the culture has not been the developing, healthy organism that Starfleet has believed it to be, or because we ourselves have discovered that an apparently primitive culture has already been interfered with or is actually the remains of a once-advanced civilisation.

"That is not the case here.

"The situation here on Doranna is unusual. This is a planet with a developing intelligence - however, because the planet is well-suited for development by the Federation, and because the hominids who live on only one of the two continents are so primitive in their development that it will take probably a million years for them to attain anything resembling a culture as we understand the word, the Federation has a colony co-existing on the planet with the hominids - who should not know of the existence of that colony - and under strict instructions not to visit the hominid's continent.

"Note I say *should not know*. You all know that children have been disappearing from the settlements on Doranna - the last one, earlier today. Mr. Spock."

Spock looked round the small group. "Our scanners picked up the disappearance. An unidentifiable reading appeared momentarily then disappeared again, and a Human reading disappeared with it. Captain Kirk confirmed with Governor Laski that a child had indeed vanished - from a garden entered only by means of a door from the house. This agrees with the facts we have on several of the disappearances - many of the children disappeared in a manner suggestive of the use of some form of teleportation."

He glanced at Kirk, who continued. "Mr. Spock reminded me that some races possess unusual talents. Primitive races frequently have abilities that apparently atrophy as the race develops a 'civilisation'. I have therefore decided to act on the assumption - for which I have no proof - that the hominids here have the ability to teleport themselves - and possibly objects near to them as well - over a considerable distance.

"Mr. Spock has been unable to detect large concentrations of the hominids on the other continent; the population density appears to be quite sparse. We don't have any records of the initial survey either - so we just don't know how widespread they are supposed to be, whether they live in small communities - say family groups - or are

solitary, coming together only to mate and with the young remaining with their mothers only until they reach a degree of independence. They may even be nomadic. We are therefore planning to beam down to an area where we think, from the readings, that we will find some.

"You have all been selected because of your particular skills in biology or medicine. Mr. Shacter, because this is an unexplored area, we need a security guard, and I know that you have picked up some knowledge of science. However, should any of you feel strongly about this breach of the Prime Directive, you can, without prejudice, refuse to accompany this landing party."

"You think that the hominids can teleport, even over the distances involved, and have kidnapped the missing children, sir?" Maris asked, a note of what might be termed disbelief in her voice.

"We are considering it as a possibility."

"Haven't you picked up any readings for the children, Mr. Spock?" Uerris asked.

"No. Even the readings that I think indicate the presence of the hominids are not quite the same as the ones that appeared when that last child vanished... but there is a similarity. Enough to make me believe that the Captain is right - the other continent should be checked. Even if all we accomplish is to let the hominids - if they are indeed kidnapping the children - know that we are watching them, it might be sufficient to stop them from carrying off any more."

The Andorian Thekar was frowning sceptically. "Captain, you're talking about a distance of... what? Two thousand miles? More? I'm willing to consider teleportation in itself as being possible - some individuals of my own race claim to possess the ability to move objects a short way - though not more than a few inches, and it's never been done in a strictly supervised test situation."

"Do you mean it's never been tested, or that the people being tested failed under the test conditions?" Kirk asked.

"Those being tested failed. The usual excuse is that the scepticism of the judges causes the failure."

"It could be," Kirk said. "It's long been known on Earth that an apparently terminally sick person can recover because he was determined to. It's equally known that a perfectly healthy person can fall ill, even die, because he believes that he's been cursed. The power of the mind is surprisingly effective, Ms. Thekar."

Thekar nodded. "As I said, Captain, I'm willing to accept the existence of the ability to teleport. What I doubt is the ability to teleport over the distance involved."

"It is only a matter of degree, Ms. Thekar," Spock said. "I remember reading a treatise by a Ster Shevas on that very subject. From reading old documents, he theorised that the ability of Andorians to teleport was once quite considerable, but that as civilisation developed and methods of communal travel were discovered, the ability was used less and less until it was lost. Of course, his theory could not be proved, since no Andorians now live in a Stone Age."

"I've heard Shevas's theory," Thekar admitted. "But I've also

seen some of the material he read when he formulated his theory, and I'm not convinced of the validity of his reasoning."

"Do you deny that an ability, if it is not used, will be lost?" Spock asked.

"No, Mr. Spock. I don't deny that, but I'm not convinced that Andorians, as a race, once used teleportation to travel around the countryside."

"Luckily we're not speaking about Andorians at the moment but about the hominids native to Doranna," Kirk interrupted. "You two can finish your discussion another time - if you think it's worth finishing, that is," he added dryly, "since neither of you can prove anything." He glanced at Spock, and winked with the eye Thekar could not see. "By then you might even have some evidence to back your position."

"Yes, Captain," Spock agreed instantly. Thekar nodded reluctantly.

Kirk looked round the five faces. "Does anyone want to stand down? No? Good. Are there any more questions?"

"Exactly what are we looking for, Captain?" Maris asked.

Kirk shrugged. "That's a good question. I wish I had an answer. Anything that might link the hominids to the children - or the mouflette that have been disappearing too. Anything that indicates that the hominids can actually teleport. Any sign that the hominids are more advanced than the surveys indicated. Even... any sign that there has been a prior disturbance to the hominid culture. Mr. Spock checked the continent for signs of settlement by Outworlders and found nothing, but it's always possible that there has been contamination by a race that has now gone. In addition, we want a record of the hominid culture, as far as possible. I'm keeping our interference to a minimum by only beaming down the one party - as yet - into an area where the readings indicate that hominids live. I hope it's enough to let us assess whether or not they could possibly be responsible for the disappearances."

The landing party materialised in a sparsely wooded area some two kilometers from a group of hominids - "At least ten individuals," Spock reported. Its members glanced round, taking in the immediate scenery, each one alert to different aspects of it. Nearby, a small herd of mouflette was grazing; from time to time one of them glanced round as if looking for danger, but they ignored the landing party as if they knew that Humans - and Vulcans and Andorians - posed no threat to them. Thekar moved slowly towards them; they ignored her. She had almost reached them before they began to move away, and even then they moved slowly. Thekar took two quick steps, bent and scooped one up; even that failed to alarm the others. The Andorian walked briskly back to Kirk with her prize.

"Quite tame," she commented as she rejoined the landing party.

"That is a characteristic of the mouflette, Lieutenant," Kirk pointed out. "Apparently they don't really have any natural enemies. They were very easily tamed by the settlers."

She touched the long wool gently. "So soft," she murmured.

Spock studied the little creature carefully, a finger stroking its head lightly. "You are right, Lieutenant, it is not afraid of us," he said. "On the other hand, it is a totally wild example of the species."

"You're sure, Spock?" Kirk asked.

"Yes, Captain. Its thoughts are surprisingly easily to sense. It has never seen anything quite like us."

Kirk grunted. "Let it go, Lieutenant," he ordered. Thekar obeyed, not without regret - Andorians were not given to sentimentality, but she would not have been averse to keeping it as a pet. It ran a few steps towards the others, then stopped and began to feed again.

Shacter came back from where he had been checking among the trees. "Everything's quiet," he said.

"Let's go, then," Kirk said. "Remember, we want to observe these hominids; once we get close to them, there's to be no talking."

They moved briskly at first, Shacter a little ahead of the main group, Spock, his eyes fixed to his tricorder, close behind. The two scientists and Dr. Maris were recording busily as they went; Kirk himself kept an eye out for any danger - unlikely though that seemed - approaching from behind them. Alert for danger as he was, he still found time to notice the obvious fertility of the area; many of the trees carried fruit or nuts.

After a while, Spock said softly, "We're getting close."

Kirk nodded. For a little while they moved forward from tree to tree, checking that nothing could see them before they moved on to the next tree, but finally Spock signalled again that they were now very close to the readings he had detected.

They dropped flat and began to wriggle forward, going more slowly now, using every scrap of cover they could find. Finally, Shacter stopped, his head raised as he peered through the long grass. Spock joined him; Kirk wriggled forward towards them.

The hominids were possibly two to three feet tall, a little smaller than the reports had indicated. They were gathering round a tree, the branches of which drooped low from the weight of fruit that hung from them. As the landing party watched, the largest - big only by comparison with the others - reached up cautiously and picked itself a piece of the fruit. It ate it slowly, then, more confidently, plucked another fruit. As if this was a signal, the others also began to pick the fruit, scattering a little before they began eating.

The landing party studied the creatures carefully.

They were covered with short hair of a mottled brown that matched the colour of the tree trunks. Indeed, when one of them moved in front of the trunk, it almost seemed to vanish. Not that they moved much; they seemed content to remain stationary for lengthy periods, then moved quickly to snatch another fruit. Their faces were almost pointed, rather than primate-flattish, giving them a squirrel-like appearance which was enhanced when they crouched to eat the fruit they picked. One was nursing several infants.

Spock glanced at Verris and Thekar; they were busily recording the behaviour of the hominids. He turned his attention back to his own study of the creatures.

Kirk found his attention drawn to one of the infants. He frowned as he concentrated. Yes - a tail was twined around its mother's leg. He touched Spock's arm.

"That youngster has a tail," he breathed. "But I don't think the adults do."

Spock focused on the infant, nodded, then studied the others, tricorder busy.

"They don't seem to be picking any to carry away," Kirk breathed in Spock's ear a few minutes later. The Vulcan withdrew his attention from the infants and looked at him. "Too primitive a culture to think of food storage?"

"Or else a climate so equitable that they don't need to consider where tomorrow's meals will come from," Spock replied as softly.

"It's certainly warm enough," Kirk commented. "But this does seem to indicate that they're not advanced enough yet to have a culture of any kind, doesn't it."

Spock, still watching closely, nodded reluctantly.

Kirk called a standard debriefing for the landing party immediately on their return to the Enterprise, not really expecting it to be anything but a formality.

He looked round the group, a rueful smile on his face. "Does anyone have any comments to make about the hominids?" he asked. "Spock?"

"I need to study the tricorder readings before I formulate a full hypothesis," Spock said, "but it is my impression that the young of that creature are born with tails, possibly an evolutionary survival from a period when the creature lived in trees. Since the adults did not appear to have tails, it is possible that these are absorbed into the creature's body in the same manner as a frog loses the tail it had as a tadpole. Other than that - " He gave an apologetic half shrug.

Kirk looked round the others.

There was a brief silence. Finally -

"The report said the hominids used tools, didn't it?" Thekar asked.

"Yes."

"We didn't see any sign of tool using, did we?"

"No - but all they had to do was pick fruit. They might use tools if they were searching for - oh, roots, say," Kirk replied. He looked round the five faces again.

"We may find something in the record that we didn't notice while



we were on the planet, Captain," Verris said, almost apologetically.

Kirk nodded, knowing that that often did happen, but disinclined to think that it would happen in this case. He was feeling quite depressed; unlikely though the theory of kidnap by the hominids was, it was at least something to go on; now they were back to square one, with a mystery that had no possible solution.

"There was one other thing..." Spock said slowly.

"Yes, Mr. Spock?"

"Their fur colour. I understood that there were no large carnivores on Doranna?"

"So we've been told," Kirk agreed.

"And they were eating fruit, which would indicate a vegetarian - or at least predominantly vegetarian - diet."

"Yes."

"In that case, why do the hominids have fur that gives them protective coloration?"

Kirk stared at him. "Yes, they do, don't they," he said thoughtfully.

After a moment, when nobody else advanced any comment, he glanced at Shacter. "Your opinion of the hominids as a possibly aggressive species, Lieutenant?"

Shacter shook his head. "They seemed to have a perfectly amicable relationship with all the others inside their group. No indication of aggression. That first one seemed to be some sort of leader of the group, and none of the others challenged its position - if the species was inclined to aggressiveness, I'd expect it to regard some of the younger ones as possible rivals. It didn't seem to be bothered about them. There wasn't even any indication of possessiveness where their food was concerned - maybe it's too easily obtained to be worth fighting over."

Kirk nodded and looked round. "Does anyone have anything to add? No? But bear in mind - this was only one group. We may go down again to observe others. Dismissed."

He watched them leave, then turned to Spock who, as always, had remained behind.

"Anything to add, Spock?"

The Vulcan shook his head. "Not really, Captain. I do find it interesting that the hominids have protective coloration when all reports indicate a lack of animals that could be considered dangerous to them, but there could be a simple explanation - as simple as the recent extinction of a predator that was dangerous to them."

"I'm more concerned about whether that was the pre-sapient species that the survey thought so important. On the basis of what we've seen so far, I wouldn't report this as a hands-off, Prime Directive continent. If I was reporting on it, I'd probably suggest 'caution in interfering with the primates' - but I certainly wouldn't call the ones we've seen so far hominid. At most, I'd call them

pre-hominid."

"I would tend to agree. Therefore the species we have observed is not the one the survey teams observed. As you said, this is only one group. We ought to go down again to observe others."

The landing party beamed down again the following day, this time choosing a site some fifty miles from the first one, where Spock's readings detected another group, a little bigger than the one they had already seen. The readings were not quite the same, which Spock considered probably indicated a slightly different species.

Once more, they beamed down some distance from the exact co-ordinates and walked cautiously through the trees - which were thicker than at the other landing site.

Spock was right. These creatures were totally different from the ones they had already seen. Petty squabbling, which had been completely lacking in the first group, was quite marked in this one, with its individuals keeping their distance from each other.

The group was made up of an obviously dominant male and its harem; a dozen or so females of varying ages, and two or three youngish, probably immature, males. They were gathered round a small clump of bushes, harvesting the red berries. As they watched, the big male moved to where one of the females was contentedly feeding from a large clump of berries on a low branch, baring his teeth, and she moved hastily away, leaving him in possession of the bush. She retaliated - if it could be called that - by challenging another of the females. After a brief snarling match the challenged female moved away; it was fairly clear that the 'pecking order' was already established, with the second female knowing herself to be subordinate to the other but resenting it.

One of the smaller females was unable to get near a bush - every time she approached one, another of the hominids chased her away; she seemed to be the least dominant member of the group. She had picked up a long stick and could be seen using it to dig up roots. From the fact that she was left in peace to eat them, it seemed likely that the roots were less palatable than the berries.

There was only one infant in this group, a little older than the ones they had observed with the other species. This one was old enough to wander away from its mother, but the other adults snarled when it approached them, and it soon fled back to the protection of its mother, and scrabbled in the long grass in the shade of the bush its mother was harvesting, its hand moving to its mouth from time to time as it found pickings, occasionally snatching up a berry that the female dropped. It was quite clear that even the mother was unwilling to share the crop on her bush, thick though it was, with her offspring. The youngster, it seemed, had to be content with what it could glean from the ground until her appetite was satisfied.

The younger male moved away from its bush, its attention fixed on the ground. It crouched, picking something up from the ground, and gnawed at it. A few minutes later it returned to the bush.

The landing party watched for a while, then, as the hominids began to drift away, studying the ground and from time to time picking up and eating something unidentifiable - they might almost be called 'browsers', Spock decided - Kirk called for beamup. They

would learn nothing more from these creatures.

"It's totally different from the last group," Shacter commented. "The other lot were quite peaceable; there was far more aggression shown towards each other in this lot."

Spock was looking thoughtful. His mind was clearly occupied with comparisons. "One of the obvious causes of aggression is sex. There was no obvious sign of sexual awareness inside either of the groups we have seen, but the females of the second group may have been competing - even subconsciously - for the attentions of the dominant male. It is possible that the first species has a positive rutting time, and greater aggressiveness might occur during that time."

"You know," Maris commented, "there were not enough young in either of those groups. They were both mixed-sex, mixed-age groups, but there were hardly any young!"

"Perhaps some of the young were elsewhere, hidden. Some species do hide their helpless young - " Thekar suggested.

"Very small infants might be, but what about ones old enough to walk? There wasn't any sign that any of the adults in either group were gathering fruit to carry away with them; anyway, doing that is an indication of a fairly advanced level of behaviour, even though it's only directed towards the young by their mothers; and that mother we saw today wasn't paying any attention to the needs of her child. The behaviour of the adults in the second group also seems to indicate that the species hasn't developed that kind of tolerance yet. Anyway, a rut usually happens yearly; unless Mr. Spock's suggested rut only occurs once every so many years, which isn't likely, there ought to be young arriving every year."

"There are species that breed only every two or three years," Spock said flatly.

"Yes, *individuals* of these species breed only every two or three years," Maris agreed. She threw him a quick glance. "The longest period I know of is fifteen years - a reptilian species that lives on Catulla. But there are some individuals of the species in heat every year; there are young born every year; there are yearlings every year; there are two-year-olds every year. Even if these creatures had a two or three year rut, I'd still expect there to be some young each year."

"But given that the young are apparently left to go hungry until the adults are fed, wouldn't a lot of them die?" Thekar suggested.

"They may be chased away from the trees with the heaviest, easiest-to-reach crop, but there's plenty of food there for them all," Verris pointed out.

"I suggest you study the tricorder readings," Kirk said. "You may find something there that we missed while we were actually watching."

A study of the readings produced no immediate additional information. It was almost impossible to distinguish the sexes

inside the first group; only the one with young could positively be identified as female although one or two of the others read as pregnant. It seemed probable however that the group was predominately female. At least it was easy to sex the members of the second group.

Dr. Maris tried to estimate the ages of the members of the two groups, but it was largely guesswork as they had no way of knowing what the average lifespan of the creatures was. What she could estimate however was the comparative ages inside each group.

She decided that the big adult in the first group was in the full prime of life and would probably retain the position as 'leader' of the group for some years. The others showed a spread from very young, through a couple of pre-adolescents and several young adults to one that looked quite old. The spread in the second group seemed to be a little less - the dominant male seemed to be quite young, newly adult, and the only other male in the group was pre-adolescent; all of the females were past adolescence but none were old. Most of the females in the group were in different stages of pregnancy, which made the lack of young even more surprising.

"Captain," she finished her report. "If we assume an average life expectancy of about twenty-five to thirty, with adolescence at about ten, then the youngest hominids we saw - apart from the obvious infants - would be about eight or nine years old."

Kirk grunted. "Have you any reason to assume that particular life expectancy?" he asked.

"That's about the average for most races, from several planets, who still live in a stone age or pre-stone age culture," Maris explained. "Of course, that doesn't mean that none of them live past thirty - the low average is caused by child mortality. The ones who survive childhood - or childbirth, for the females - often live to be - oh, fifty or even more. I'm also talking about years of their own planet," she added, remembering the different lengths of year of various of the Federation planets.

Kirk frowned slightly. "What you're saying is that for the past nine or ten planetary years both these groups of hominids have lost most of their young?"

"It looks that way. The fact that the females are mostly pregnant seems to indicate that they've been breeding all right."

Kirk glanced at the Vulcan. "Mr. Spock?"

"Both groups are too small to be truly viable."

Startled, Kirk said, "Would you care to explain that?"

"The species appears to be at the 'live-off-the-land' level of development, not yet positively gathering food to be taken back to what might be termed a home base; probably not yet possessing a home base but rather remaining in one area only while food is easily obtained then moving on when it is exhausted, sleeping wherever they are when night falls. Possibly even drifting a short distance each day.

"I would expect such a group, in time, to evolve into a semi-nomadic way of life; building a primitive shelter, taking gathered food back there. Making a home - of sorts; following a

route that takes them round in a circle and back over the same territory annually. By that time they would have a few simple possessions - digging sticks, grass baskets, simple spears - which the first group we observed appeared not to have. In the second group, although I noticed one individual using a stick with which to dig, she appeared only to use one that was lying there, and dropped it after she used it; in other words, she had not yet thought of keeping a good one to be used again later.

"Basically, such a group would evolve from a family; new groups being formed as the older males drive the young ones away and as these young males steal females from under the noses of the older males. The second group we observed might indeed have been formed in that way. But it has been discovered by anthropologists that the optimum number of adults within a group is around thirty, preferably composed of the members of three or four families, not just by the members of one family - although the various families may of course be related to each other."

"How would you estimate the level of intelligence of the groups we observed?"

Spock frowned slightly. "Low," he said flatly. "The first was certainly not advanced enough to be termed pre-sapient. The second... I would not like to have to make a decision based on what we observed."

"In that case - are the creatures we saw the same ones that the survey teams reported?"

"The readings were not quite the same as the one I detected at the settlement..."

"Then are we speaking about at least two hominid species, possibly even three or four, with one of them more advanced than the others?"

"It seems unlikely, Captain, even although we have seen two..." he hesitated. "Of course - Earth has more than one primate species! I had forgotten. Vulcan only has the one."

"So does Andoria," Thekar said.

Maris nodded slowly. "And although I am of Human extraction, I too had forgotten; I am from the colony on Benecia, which has no native primate species."

"So it's possible that the first group we saw were more akin to - say, gorillas - rather than a species developing active reasoning intelligence? And the second group maybe more like - oh, say chimpanzees, which have been observed to use tools?"

"It is possibly inaccurate to deny gorillas the possession of reasoning intelligence, Captain, but in essence you are correct. We need to discover the whereabouts of a species with more... flexibility of behaviour," Spock agreed.

"And sensor readings don't help."

"No," Spock admitted. "Yet a species developing active intelligence should be gathered in relatively large groups - as I said, groups of thirty at least. So far I have found no signs of groups that large."

"All right. Then we check out smaller groups; any concentration of hominids might be a sub-group of a larger... shall we say 'tribe'?"

"Yes, sir," Spock agreed.

"We'll stick with the same landing party," Kirk added. He looked round the table. "Unless any of you have objections at this stage?"

None of them produced any objection.

A careful scan revealed a wooded area some hundred miles from their first landing site that had what could only be called a scattered concentration of hominids.

"The readings aren't quite the same as the hominids we already saw," Spock said as Kirk joined him at the science station. "They're not exactly the same as the readings I detected when the child April disappeared either, but of course with her Human readings in such close proximity I can't be entirely certain I have an exact record of the reading."

Kirk thought about it for a moment. "Spock, I think we'll go down prepared to stay for a few days. We can construct a simple shelter for ourselves, and if the hominids have no natural enemies and are as trusting as the mouflette, it might be possible to get a good close study of them. Of course, we'll have to be careful not to demonstrate any great level of technology - we'll have to live very simply, in fact, and if we can remain unobserved we should." He rubbed the back of his neck. "What worries me - *really* worries me - is the lack of Human readings. We're carefully formulating a theory for which we have only the faintest suggestion of possibility, but the one thing that would give us some solid proof - Human readings - is totally missing."

"Detecting a single reading - or even a dozen readings scattered over a possibly wide area - is not easy, Captain," Spock reminded him. "That is partly why we're having such difficulty in picking up readings of the hominids; they're scattered." He did not add his own growing fear that if the hominids *had* been able to kidnap the children, it was for food.

Kirk glanced round the almost-empty bridge; Sulu, at the helm, on duty only because someone had to be there in case of instrument failure, was openly reading, glancing automatically at the viewscreen and his console at intervals too regular to be anything other than assessed by some predetermined method - he had probably programmed the reader to flash him a signal at set times. An ensign at the engineering console, too junior to dare imitate the senior helmsman, smothered a yawn as he watched the unchanging readouts. The only other person on the bridge was Uhura, who was lying on the floor underneath her console, a panel open and her hands busy somewhere out of sight. None of them was paying any attention to their senior officers.

Many of the crew, of course, were down on the planet, most of them wandering around the areas where children had disappeared, tricorders busy. The only departments on the ship that were almost fully staffed were engineering, where Scott's men were assisting Svenson's, and science, where the scanners and sensors were in full

operation round the clock, searching the planet for any sign of the missing children. It wasn't impossible that one of the crew on the planet might discover something, but Kirk privately considered it unlikely; the parents had had every incentive to search thoroughly, and if they had discovered nothing... As for the sensor scan, if Spock couldn't detect anything positive, Kirk doubted that anyone else would.

"I'll go and get things organised," he said with forced cheerfulness. He was already beginning to fear that for once he would fail in something he had set out to do - and it would be impossible to escape from the memory of the failure, for McCoy's very presence on the ship would be an ever-present reminder.

He turned away, almost tripping over Uhura's legs, and strode into the turbolift.

He found Maris and Thekar together in sickbay, carefully studying yet again the readout of their observations of the group of primates on the second continent, so intent on it that they remained oblivious of his entry.

"Find anything new?" he asked.

Both women jumped. "Oh - Captain!" Maris exclaimed. "No, I'm afraid not. We've confirmed our conclusions about the groups we saw, but that's all. And we think that you were right, and that these *are* this world's equivalent of gorillas and chimpanzees. If there is a pre-sapient race living here we haven't found it yet."

"There's no 'if' about it, Doctor," Kirk said. "The initial survey was quite emphatic that there was - though I don't know how they reached that conclusion unless their readings were more detailed than we've been able to come up with so far."

Both women looked startled. "But we have the most advanced equipment of any Starfleet vessels," Thekar began.

"You don't mean the reports could be wrong?" Maris asked in shocked disbelief.

"If so I doubt it would be deliberate," Kirk replied thoughtfully. "The survey team could have been reporting what they thought they saw because it was what they wanted to see. They don't seem to have investigated deeply once they decided there *was* a pre-intelligent species here, just recommended that this continent be left alone."

Thekar frowned slightly. "I suppose it *is* possible to assume that a primate species is pre-sapient, just the same way as we all forgot that it doesn't have to be."

"Except that Mr. Spock's findings do seem to indicate the presence of at least one other species of hominid apart from the ones we found." Kirk sighed. "Maybe we just beamed down in the wrong place. Maybe if we'd beamed down someplace else we'd have seen more evidence of intelligence. Well, we're going to try somewhere else just as soon as we can get everything organised." He looked from one to the other. "I plan to stay down there for a few days this time. I don't intend to take tents - we can build brush shelters. But I *do* want us to have a degree of comfort - so I want you to get

fabrication to produce some thermal blankets, made up to look natural, and get enough emergency ration kits together to do our party of six for... say a week."

"Yes, Captain."

The territory in which they materialised this time was even more heavily wooded than the previous landing site. Indeed, it was almost a forest. The ground, however, appeared to be just as fertile, the climate as equitable; various of the trees carried ripe fruit or nuts, some carried unripe fruit, while others were still in flower.

Spock swung his tricorder round slowly. "Hominids, Captain. I estimate... thirty to forty individuals scattered over an area of perhaps five acres." He spoke softly. "The nearest are perhaps five hundred yards from us."

"Thirty to forty? That's just over the number you estimated for optimum for a group of food-gathering nomads, isn't it?" Kirk kept his voice quiet too.

"Yes... and they *could* belong to the same group; split up while they collect food. They may or may not take it back to a home base - we'll need to investigate a little more to find that out. There are no more hominid readings within... twenty miles. That lends credence to my belief that these are the members of one group. I can detect traces of similar hominid readings to the north, west and south of here - at distances of twenty to twenty-five miles."

"How do the readings compare with the other group we saw?"

"Indications of intelligent behaviour..." He looked up, shaking his head. "From the readings I would hesitate to announce that I consider these creatures to possess a high intelligence, but they are certainly not - I believe 'dumb animals' would probably be the best description. They are definitely more advanced than the other groups we have seen."

Kirk looked round again, and pointed. "Over there - under that tree. The ground is relatively clear of undergrowth, the tree will give us basic shelter, and there's running water just a few steps away." He licked a finger and held it up. "The wind - as much as there is of it - is coming from that direction. So if we can build a windbreak over there, we should have a relatively comfortable camp." He glanced back at the Vulcan. "Any indication that the hominids have a... a base camp?"

"The readings are too scattered," Spock replied carefully. "If there is a base camp, we will need to wait until they return to it. However, there are indications of heat approximately a mile in that direction." He pointed. "There could be a base there, possibly with a fire."

They set to work and before long they had a serviceable windbreak built, its top meeting the lower, drooping branches of the tree. The whole provided a natural, tent-like shelter.

Shacter walked briskly to the rocky little stream and collected some water in a simulated hide 'bucket' that had been carefully manufactured to a style that was known to be one of the simplest - and earliest - that any stone age culture could achieve, placing it

under a little waterfall until it filled. He carried it back to the camp, where Maris had just finished laying out the simulated wool thermal blankets.

Kirk nodded his thanks to the security guard and turned his attention back to Spock. "Think we can get close to any of the hominids?" he asked.

"We can try," Spock replied. He set off, treading carefully, with Kirk close behind him and the others following, watchful. Shacter's hand was close to his phaser - not that he really expected any trouble, but he was taking his duty very seriously. If these creatures were the ones responsible for the disappearance of the children, they must be considered a danger to all Humans on the planet.

The hominids were collecting food.

The first group that the landing party reached was made up of three females and a toddler whose sex was not at first apparent. They were more sparsely furred than the other hominids they had seen; the fur seemed to grow thickest on their heads while their faces and the upper parts of their bodies were more lightly furred. The fur was brownish in colour. The other hominids they had seen had been uniform in colour; here, each one was a slightly different shade from the other three. One showed traces of grey around her head. They stood a little under four foot in height.

The adults wore what could only be called skirts that looked as if they were made of mouflette wool. The toddler was completely naked. Two were carrying baskets that appeared to be made of stiff reeds. The greying one was collecting fruit, which she put carefully into the basket fastened to her waist; another, who looked a little younger, was gathering nuts which she tossed with practised ease over her shoulder into the basket slung across her back. The third - who looked quite young - was digging with a long stick, and with the enthusiastic but unskilled assistance of the toddler was putting the roots that she was unearthing into a third basket that lay on the ground beside her. It was when she moved a few yards and the child scrambled to its feet and staggered after her that the landing party saw that the youngster was a boy.

Kirk glanced at Maris. "Ages?" he breathed as Spock carefully recorded the workers.

Maris watched them consideringly. "The one who is digging is possibly ten or eleven. The one gathering nuts is probably in her mid to late twenties - the one going grey might be touching forty. Possibly it's a family group - grandmother, mother and children. Or - depending on how young they mature - the baby is the son of the youngest female, making a four-generation group."

Kirk nodded, frowning slightly as he watched the hominids. The older ones were oddly alert, glancing round from time to time; not totally absorbed in what they were doing, as he would have expected. Only the toddler was concentrating completely on his task.

The baskets were filling rapidly. Finally, with the baskets full, the youngest female took one and the oldest one the other two, lifting them easily onto their heads to carry them away, the toddler clinging to the girl's skirt. The other adult took the digging

sticks, glanced round carefully, then followed the others, her attitude one of a strange alertness.

"Now what is she afraid of?" Kirk asked softly as she disappeared among the trees.

"Wood spirits," Maris muttered.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Wood spirits. Dryads."

Kirk looked at her thoughtfully. "No, I don't think so, Nurse. She was holding those digging sticks as if she could make them double as spears. You don't fight spirits with spears."

"She may have heard our voices," Spock suggested. "Creatures at that level of development frequently have very sharp hearing, and -"

"You're missing the point, Spock," Kirk commented. "She was afraid of something she thought she could fight with a spear. The other hominids had protective coloration. I'm asking myself why."

"Oh. You think that there is an animal here that *is* dangerous to the hominids?"

"I'm beginning to think it possible."

"Just how thorough was the survey here, Captain?" Spock asked.

"Thorough enough to detect the presence of intelligent hominids - and you know how hard we had to look to find them, even knowing they were here."

"Yet the survey did not discover any creature large enough to pose a threat to the hominids - and the mouflette do not appear to be concerned about anything."

"A creature doesn't have to be large to be a threat, Spock. I know that on most planets we tend to think of small predators going after smallish prey, but that isn't a hard and fast rule. Don't you have any species of small creature on Vulcan that everyone knows is dangerous? Like poisonous snakes, or piranhas?"

"Well, yes... but that does not explain the confidence of the mouflette. They are clearly unafraid, and I would expect them to show caution if they were preyed on by anything."

"I'd say too dumb to be frightened, except that Laski reckoned they were quite intelligent. Anyway, he also said that they aren't a staple on anything's diet."

"But that something acts as a stabilising force on their numbers."

Kirk scowled, staring in the direction taken by the four native Dorannans. Strange how his concept of them had gone from 'hominid' to 'Dorannan' with the simple discovery that these ones possessed simple tools.

"Puzzles," he said, his mind clearly elsewhere. "This world holds nothing but puzzles."

Spock watched him for some moments, respecting his abstraction, realising that he was probably thinking over everything that he had been told about the planet. Then - "Do you want to follow the hominids, Captain?" he asked.

"I'm... not sure. There's still the Prime Directive to consider... I don't want to stretch it too far. I think we've seen enough for the moment to know that we've found the pre-sapient; I think we'll leave them alone for the moment. Any readings worth mentioning, Ms. Thekar?"

The Andorian looked up from her tricorder. "They are gathering together... they appear to be making for a central point about half a mile from here."

"Right. Let's get back to our 'base', get something to eat and then consider what's best to be done."

Once back at their 'camp', Kirk looked round the members of the landing party.

"Comments, anyone?"

"These hominids are definitely more advanced than the others we have observed." Spock began with the obvious statement.

"Agreed. What would you estimate as their level of development?"

"Possibly 1 on Richter's scale of cultures. Early hunter-gatherer, showing social awareness but with an extremely low level of technology. We would require to observe other members of the group - possibly the males - to determine the full range of tools available to them; also their base, to see what is their attitude towards the more helpless members of their society. We can be fairly sure that their technology includes the use of fire. We did detect a source of heat in the direction they were heading. However, they may not be able to light a fire but are dependent on keeping alight a fire that they have found - one started by lightning, for example."

"Can we be sure that they use fire, sir?" Thekar asked. "The climate here is warm; the supply of fruit, which does not need to be cooked, is apparently unlimited. There are no big predators. Would they actually *need* fire?"

"They were also gathering roots, Lieutenant," Spock pointed out. "Roots are generally considered more edible if they are cooked; for example, would you care to eat raw t'keras?"

Thekar shook her head emphatically. "No, sir." T'keras, although a staple item in the Andorian diet, was mildly poisonous unless thoroughly cooked. It was unlikely to kill, but it did make anyone eating it very, very sick for several days.

"Any more observations?" Kirk asked, faintly amused at Thekar's reaction.

"They are advanced enough to be able to weave," Maris said.

"Those baskets - made of grass, but strong enough to hold a fair amount of whatever they were gathering. And their 'skirts' - those were woven, too - not just mouflette skins roughly sewn together."

"Spock?"

"I agree. However, I must remind you that some of your Terran primates - for example, chimpanzees, as we already decided - are known to weave themselves nests in which to sleep, have been observed to use simple tools, but are not considered to possess a culture. Although we observed these creatures using sticks as tools, and having woven... let us say artifacts, there is no guarantee that they possess any more of a culture than chimpanzees do."

"Yet chimpanzees would certainly be considered pre-sapient, with the beginnings of a culture, if we encountered them on a planet with no higher form of culture or 'technology'," Maris protested.

"There is one thing," Shacter commented, slightly diffidently. "As I understand it, chimpanzees simply pick up a nearby stick or stone, use it, then drop it again once they've finished with it, like that hominid did in the other group we watched. They don't seem able to think, 'This is a good stick so I'll keep it in case I need it tomorrow' - tomorrow they just pick up another one, which might or might not be as suitable. These creatures took their digging sticks away with them. And - " he glanced at Kirk - "you noticed yourself, Captain, that the one who took them looked as if she might use them as spears if necessary."

"There's another point that makes these creatures more advanced than chimps," Verris said. "They were actively *collecting* food to carry away with them. I think that *that* is the quality that indicates the true beginnings of a culture - retaining a useful tool might be the start of reasoned thought, but storing food shows a realisation that tomorrow exists and might not be as good as today. A memory that winter returns; that last winter we went hungry, so let's do something to make *next* winter easier."

Spock said mildly, "Mr. Verris, the fossil evidence on all planets indicates that intelligent life began in tropical regions and spread out from there *after* the culture developed."

"I was speaking figuratively, Mr. Spock. I could have said - a lot of animals follow a seasonal migratory route; some of them go in a big circle. The reasoning could be 'Every time we reach this point, there's a shortage of food. But if we carry some with us we won't go hungry'. The social implications are obvious; if some of the group can't gather their own food for whatever reason, a store of food in camp serves the same purpose."

"Isn't it more likely to be the other way round?" Maris asked. "A youngster with a broken leg, young enough still to be partially dependent, and mother carrying food home to him? Then seeing carrying food as a means of avoiding starvation during migration."

"Would they *need* to migrate?" Kirk asked. "The supply of fruit seems to be inexhaustible."

"Here, yes," Spock said. "I believe my colleagues are talking about other planets, however."

"But whatever is applicable on other planets isn't necessarily going to count here," Kirk pointed out. "I take Dr. Maris's point

about a mother carrying food home to an injured youngster, but we're not here to discuss the origins of intelligent culture. We are observing to find out if these creatures here could possibly possess the ability to kidnap young children from another continent hundreds of miles away."

"So far, there is nothing to indicate that they do," Spock said.

"There's nothing to indicate that they don't, either," Kirk grunted. "I think we want to continue observing them." He glanced round. "It's beginning to get dark; let's eat, then see if we can creep up on their base. Seeing them 'at home', so to speak, might give us some more clues as to their general abilities."

It was half dark before they left their 'camp' and began to move carefully in the direction where the tricorder told them most of the hominids were gathered. One or two were some distance away from the main group, almost as if they were on guard, but, warned by the tricorder, the landing party found it easy enough to slip between two of them and approach the base.

Their first indication that they were getting close was a faint smell of burning, and Kirk exchanged a quick look with his Science Officer. The hominids did indeed know how to use fire.

The landing party crawled cautiously forward, pausing when they finally saw the dark shapes hunched in smaller groups round several fires. Spock switched on his tricorder.

As the last of the faint twilight faded, the hominids lay down round the fires where they were, leaving one of each small group sitting over the fire. While the landing party watched, one of these carefully laid more wood on the fire beside it.

"Back," Kirk breathed.

It was a slow trip back to their camp, crawling at first until they were sure they were past the outlying guards, then slightly faster until they reached the shelter of 'their' tree.

"Comments?" Kirk asked again.

"There is definitely something of which they are nervous," Spock replied.

"Mr. Spock's right," Shacter said. "You don't set guards unless you know there's danger or are afraid there might be. The ones sitting up at the fires were just to keep them lit - I think Mr. Spock was right when he suggested that they find fire rather than lighting it - but the ones further out - they were there to guard the main group."

"But what against?" Varris asked. "A rival group?"

Spock shook his head, an action that went unseen in the darkness. "No, Mr. Verris. Creatures at this level of culture rarely fight with rival groups. A minor clash, perhaps, and the weaker group moves away. A warlike culture develops only when the land cannot support all who live on it, or when a group has a vested interest in staying where it is, probably because there are crops planted. This planet is a long way from those stages of

development."

"Whatever it is is probably the same thing that those females were watching out for," Kirk put it. "It might be a good idea if we lit a fire and posted a guard ourselves," he went on. "If the natives think it necessary, who are we - ignorant outworlders - to neglect such a simple precaution? Spock, you and I will take first watch; Mr. Shacter, Ms. Thekar, you will take second watch, Mr. Verris, Dr. Maris, third watch."

They bustled around for a few moments, gathering up dead wood from the ground round about and making a small fireplace out of a circle of fairly large stones, then Kirk put some of the wood into the fireplace and used his phaser to light it. Within seconds the fire was crackling cheerfully, sending shadows dancing on the branches above and around them.

Although it was not yet cold, they rolled up in the thermal blankets, so carefully made to resemble mouflette wool. The four whose turn it was to sleep lay down, and Kirk and Spock sat beside the fire, Kirk with his blanket round his shoulders, Spock with his still folded neatly beside him.

Both sat silent at first, staring into the fire, each busy with his own thoughts. Finally Kirk said gloomily, "I think we're chasing a wild goose, Spock. If those beings could teleport, wouldn't it have been easier for them to do that rather than carry those baskets back to camp?"

"The ability could be limited to only a few individuals..." Spock began, but Kirk could hear the doubt in his voice.

"Or else we still haven't found the species with the ability, even though these are the most advanced of the hominids we've seen," Kirk finished, stubbornly refusing to be completely disheartened. "You said yourself, the readings still aren't quite the same as the one you got when little April disappeared."

"Jim, we have already found three distinct species of hominid. The existence of another - "

"Is still possible," Kirk said. "On Earth, there are still three species of ape, as well as Man - and anthropologists reckon that even Man as a species is made up of different sub-species - negroid, mongoloid, caucasian - they all have quite distinctive physical characteristics. And the fossil evidence shows that there were several other species of man, like the neanderthals, that have now died out. There's a precedent for more species of hominid here than we've seen."

"Sometimes I forget about the range of life forms on other planets," Spock said, sounding slightly subdued. "When Vulcan's climate changed, thousands of years ago, so many species died out... including all of our higher 'primate' relatives. We nearly wiped ourselves out, too, in the struggle to survive, until Surak taught us that reason was a better tool for survival than the destruction of our neighbours."

Kirk reached over and laid a gentle, sympathetically understanding hand on his friend's knee for a moment as he realised how difficult it must be for his gentle, compassionate Vulcan to contemplate the violence of his planet's history. Then, briskly, he continued. "Well, we'll observe these beings for a little longer,

just to make sure, but I think we have to look further afield yet." He glanced up at the sky, which was clouding over. "I hope it doesn't rain."

Spock half smiled. "On the contrary, Jim - I would welcome some rain. Except for my visits to Earth, and a few occasions when I was on Zaynol's moon, I have rarely seen rain."

"Spock, believe me, rain is no fun at all when you're camping - especially like now, when you've no tent to shelter in. Of course, we *could* go back to the Enterprise..."

"If you wish to do so, Captain, I hereby volunteer to remain on the planet to observe the hominids' behaviour during such inclement weather - "

"Spock!" Kirk grinned, pleased at having successfully pulled his friend's leg.

The Vulcan looked at him, barely able to distinguish the smile in the dim firelight. "I do not think I will ever fully comprehend the Human sense of humour - " he began, and Kirk chuckled.

"Spock, you understand it perfectly well."

Spock reached over for more wood for the fire. "Most of the time, perhaps," he admitted. "But I did say *fully*; there are still occasions when I simply do not understand what you find amusing in a situation."

Kirk's grin widened. "You know something, Spock? Half of the time, half of the Human race doesn't understand what the other half finds funny in any given situation."

The threatened rain did not fall that night, although by morning the sky was completely overcast. It made the atmosphere very humid, so that even Spock was forced to admit that he was conscious of the heat, while Thekar, whose native Andoria was slightly cooler than Earth, found it so unbearable that Kirk ordered her back to the Enterprise. She protested, but not particularly vehemently; it was clear that she did so only as a matter of form, and Kirk easily overruled her objections.

"No, no, Lieutenant. You can return when climatic conditions are more suited to your species. Meanwhile, you can devote your time on the Enterprise to studying the tricorder records of the three species we've observed so far - this could be of tremendous help to us."

Once she had shimmered out of sight, Kirk turned to the others. "Right," he said. "Back to work. Spock, is there any sign of life from the hominid camp?"

"Some movement, Captain, but nothing out of the ordinary. The outlying guards have joined up with the main group, so it should be easy enough to regain our position of last night."

"All right. We want to observe as much of their behaviour as possible; now it's a fair assumption that some will go out gathering fruit and roots again and some will probably go hunting. Yesterday we watched a group that was gathering vegetable matter; so today we

will follow any group that looks as if it might be going hunting."

"Yes, sir."

"Then let's go."

The hominids were gathered in a group, and from the buzz of noise - fairly muted at the distance - apparently having an animated discussion. After some moments, the group broke up, scattering to pick up baskets and sticks. After another moment, Kirk whispered,

"Spock - would you agree with me that there are no adult males in that group? The adults are all females?"

The Vulcan nodded slowly. "It would appear so."

"But surely that's impossible," Shacter muttered.

"It does not entirely follow," Spock replied softly. "There are some species that live in same-sex herds for most of the year, coming together only at a specific mating season."

"Yes, but not... not apemen."

"I agree it does seem unlikely, when the other species of hominid we have observed live in mixed-sex groups - granted with more females than males. But we have the evidence of our own eyes here. Do you see any adult males, Mr. Shacter?"

The security guard shook his head. "No, Mr. Spock."

"That could explain the guards," Kirk suggested. "If they don't have any males around, they could feel nervous..."

"It does not follow," Spock said again, watching thoughtfully as the hominids began to head away from the base, one or two of the women with young either clinging to their skirts or fastened to their backs by means of a wide strip of woven mouflette wool, leaving only a couple of obviously elderly females to look after the camp.

It quickly became clear that 'look after the camp' really meant 'look after the fires', for they carefully and conscientiously checked the small fires at regular intervals, replenishing those that were burning low. Apart from that, they sat together, apparently talking together.

"They do seem to have a positive language," Kirk breathed.

"It certainly appears so," Spock replied. "This species is very advanced... But it seems strange that they are living without any males nearby."

"Might the males all be out on a hunting trip?" Shacter suggested.

"It's possible," Kirk said thoughtfully. "Spock?"

The Vulcan was frowning, almost uncertainly. "It seems a reasonable suggestion... but the group is already at what is believed to be the optimum number. Any others joining it would take the number too high to be efficient. It seems more likely that for some

reason the sexes do split up, at least for part of the year; possibly two or three groups join together, the females having a harvest camp while the males have a hunting one?"

A sudden flash of lightning, almost instantly followed by a crack of thunder, made Kirk jump. He didn't notice his companions' reaction, however, for his attention was instantly drawn to the behaviour of the two old females.

Neither had panicked, as he would have expected primitives to do. They reacted instantly and efficiently, thrusting sticks into the ground around one of the fires and using them to support a sort of 'umbrella' of woven grasses which they used to protect the fire. They were so quick that the cover was over the fire before the first heavy drops of rain splashed down. Then they turned their attention to covering the stock of wood beside the 'encampment'. That done, they began to cover the other fires, but unhurriedly, as if it hardly mattered if they were extinguished by the rain. As long as the one fire remained burning and the stock of wood remained dry, it would be easy enough to rekindle the others.

Neither made any attempt to shelter from the increasingly heavy rain. Nor was there any sign that the others were even considering abandoning their gathering just because they were getting wet.

Kirk motioned with his head as thunder crashed again. "Let's get back to camp."

They wriggled away, soaking their clothes thoroughly in the process; they had gone some distance before they dared stand. Once on their feet they made rapid time back.

Their camp was relatively dry; Kirk had selected his tree well. He was less happy, however, about the danger from the lightning, which continued to fork down with horrifying regularity, the thunderclaps which followed each flash showing how close the storm actually was. He flicked his communicator open, but obtained only the crackle of static from the electricity-filled air around, and closed it again with a resigned shrug.

"We're stuck here, like it or not, till the storm clears," he grunted. "We can only hope that nothing near us is hit and set on fire."

"I would estimate that storms such as this are relatively frequent, if the behaviour of the hominids is any guide," Spock commented. "They were clearly unafraid of the lightning and the thunder, and considered the rain more of a danger because it might put out the fire. They were fully prepared to deal with the danger of rain."

Kirk grunted. He could not say he was *afraid* of storms, exactly, but he had no great love of them, having, as a child, seen the damage a bolt of lightning could do. And although he knew his ship was in no danger, the lack of contact with her made him uneasy.

The sound of the little stream near them was getting louder, and to give himself something to do, he walked down to it.

It was still contained within its banks, but it was now much deeper and faster, muddy and carrying with it a mixed flotsam that held twigs, small branches, and grass along with other unidentifiable objects. Along with the noise of rushing water was the deeper rumble

of rocks being carried downstream by the force of the current.

Spock joined him, watching the not-so-little stream with some awe. "Water is a surprisingly powerful force," he said at last.

"Constant dripping wears away a stone," Kirk replied almost absent-mindedly. "In one form or another, water is probably the most powerful permanent force on the surface of any planet."

"There are other, more powerful, forces," Spock protested. "What of volcanic action? And earthquakes?"

That Spock had good reason to remember the force of both earthquakes and volcanic action, Kirk knew well. "Those are only temporary," he said. "A volcano erupts for a day... a week... An earthquake shakes the ground for a minute, and during that time it can do a hellish amount of damage, I agree. But then they both lie dormant again, maybe for years - centuries. But water... A sudden flood might do a great deal of damage in a short time, and then subside - but the water doesn't just go away. It flows on, slowly eroding its banks... slowly dissolving the limestone around it... slowly carving a hole by swirling a stone round and round in a hollow... and ice; it splits rocks, glaciers wear away the ground they pass over... No, I think water has more effect than anything else in shaping the face of the land. You just don't think so because Vulcan has so much desert; so little rain."

"That is true," Spock admitted. "We have practically no surface water; no big rivers, no seas..."

The stream was now lipping its banks, little waves splashing over the edges. Kirk glanced back at their tree.

"I think we'd better move camp," he said ruefully. "This is going to overflow its banks any moment, and where we are isn't much higher. We need to gain a bit of height." He turned and led his First Officer back to their camp.

Shacter, who had been watching his senior officers with one eye and the stream with the other while he debated whether he should suggest moving, nodded, relieved that the decision had been made.

Verris, on the other hand, hardly glanced at the stream. "Surely we're high enough here to be safe?" he said.

"I wouldn't like to risk it," Kirk told him. "We might be all right if the water just went on rising gradually - but I've seen what a flash flood can do. In this sort of wooded terrain, all it needs is one fallen tree that's partially damming the stream where its bed is deep. Debris builds up behind it, making a bigger dam. Eventually the force of water shifts it - possibly even breaks the master log, if it's jammed tight enough - and you have a wall of water rushing downstream, spreading as it goes and carrying away anything in its path. No, Mr. Verris - I'm not about to take any chances with a flood."

They gathered up the blankets and supplies and began to follow Kirk as he headed away from the stream towards slightly higher ground.

The land sloped upwards in the direction opposite to the one

where the hominids were 'camped'. In one way this was unfortunate, for it was taking them further from the 'tribe', but in another, Kirk decided, it was quite lucky, for it meant that they did not have to proceed with caution in case they walked into some foraging natives. It was gently undulating ground rather than hilly; they were not going to be able to gain much height, but fifty feet of it would surely be enough to see them safely above the rush of water from a flash flood.

They topped a shoulder of the rise and found themselves looking down a fairly steep, though relatively short, slope to a larger river. The stream they had already seen joined it some hundred yards upstream of them. They were still a little way below the actual top of the rise.

Kirk glanced up the slope then across the river at the opposite bank, just as sharply sloping as the one they stood on. Finally he looked down at the rushing water. The top ten feet or so of both banks were covered with lush vegetation: below that was sparser growth, giving way to bare rock just above the water line.

"I think we're safe enough here," he said, selecting a tree that was not quite as tall as its neighbours. "It doesn't look as if the water ever quite reaches the top of this cutting."

They dumped their equipment close to the trunk of the tree and settled down in as sheltered a position as they could find. Spock selected a spot from which he could watch the ever-rising river, intent on studying what was to him a novelty, and Kirk, after a minute, joined him; in spite of his confident words, he was not entirely sure that the water might not reach them, and he decided that he preferred to watch it until he was sure there was no danger. Shacter moved to where he could watch his senior officers. Maris and Verris crouched over their supplies, using their bodies as an 'umbrella'. During the hours of daylight, wet clothes could be ignored; it was certainly warm enough despite the rain. But night would be a different matter entirely. They might be able to contact the Enterprise before it got dark; on the other hand, if the storm continued, they might not. It had moved away, but it was still rumbling in the middle distance; it could easily circle round and continue interfering with communications for hours yet. It would be a good idea to keep the blankets as dry as possible.

The persistent, almost hypnotic, sound of rushing water suddenly grew louder; Kirk caught at Spock's arm, pointing upstream.

"Look!"

A wall of water was cascading down the river. As they watched, they could see the broken trunks of quite large trees being carried along by the irresistible force of the water.

"Are we high enough?" Spock asked urgently, his desert-bred senses instinctively alarmed by the unfamiliarity of the danger.

"I think so - "

The bank seemed to shake as the flood water entered the relatively narrow gully. Great tree trunks, snapped off by the force of the water, beat against each other and hit off the banks as they were carried past. Close to where they watched, the branches of a massive trunk caught against one bank and the tree swung side on and wedged between the banks; for a moment both water and other tree

trunks piled up behind it, and Kirk was already pointing, opening his mouth to yell, "Get higher! Get up to the top!" when the weight of debris-laden water proved too much for the damming tree, and it snapped, the two parts carried away in the swirling water, swept out of sight in seconds. Muddy, foam-flecked water surged and boiled in the channel some ten feet below them, dropping slightly as the first force of the flood exhausted itself. Now they could see the bodies of small drowned animals being swept along. Two mouflette were washed past, clinging desperately to a small branch; the branch bumped against the far bank, and jammed there for a moment; one of the little animals saw its chance and took it, transferring its grasp to the shore and crawling up the bank away from the water with what was clearly the last of its strength, to collapse, clearly exhausted but alive, as the branch that had saved its life was swept away again. The other was too exhausted to realise that it had a chance to escape; its grip slackened and it slid right into the water, to be carried downstream alongside the branch that was no longer a raft.

"Jim!"

Kirk drew his attention from the mouflette and turned to Spock. The Vulcan was pointing upstream.

One of the hominids was being swept downstream. It, too, was clinging to a branch; it, too, was clearly near the point of exhaustion where it would be unable to make the effort to remain afloat.

Kirk reacted almost without thought. He was moving, scrambling down to the water's edge, even as he identified the creature. Spock was only a second behind him.

Shacter sprang to his feet and began to follow his superior officers, but he was far too late. As the brown head drew level with him, Kirk plunged into the flooded river, striking out energetically towards the hominid. Spock remained on the bank, turning instantly to race downstream, keeping level with Kirk more easily than he had expected despite the unevenness of the ground.

Shacter followed.

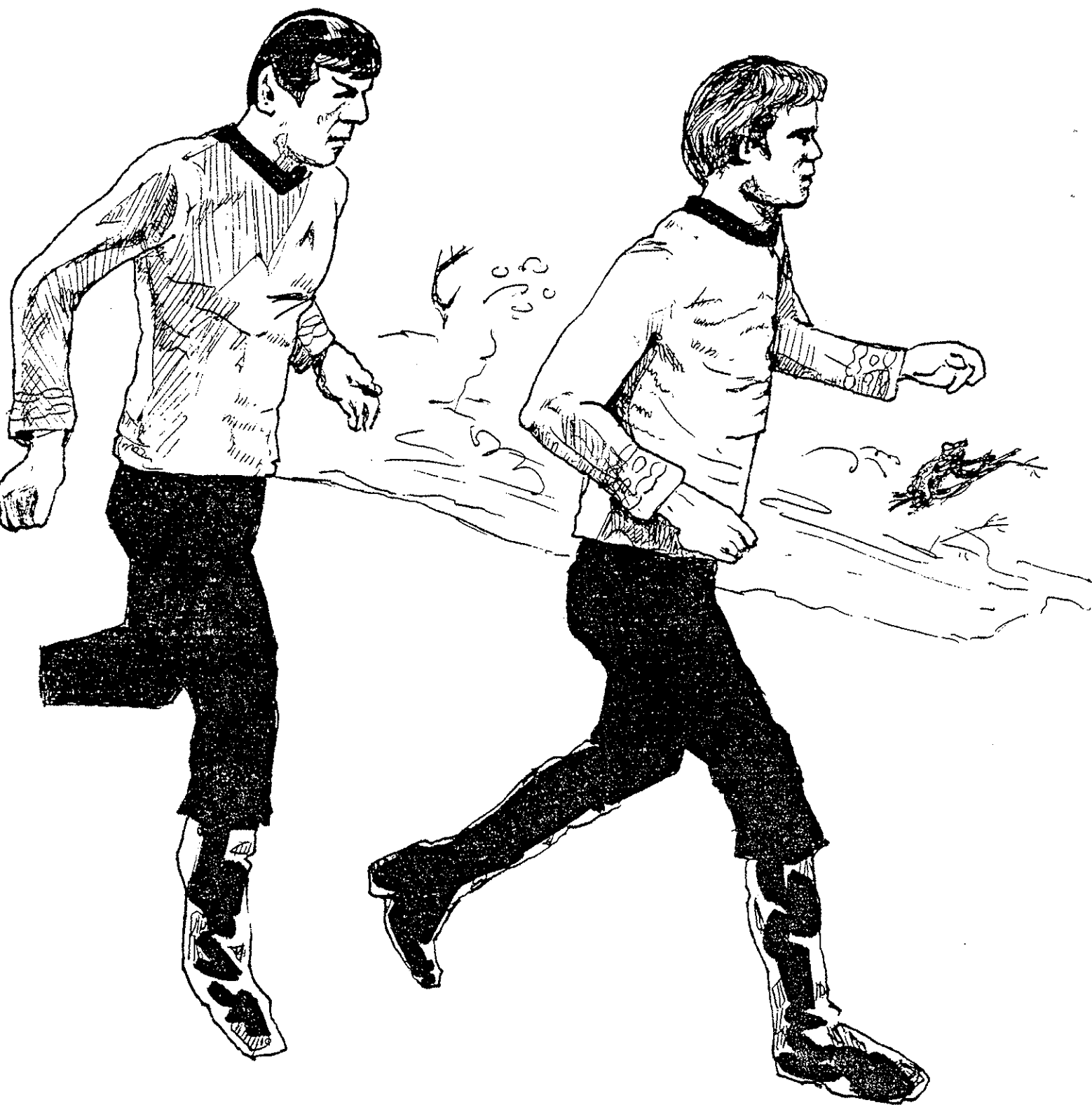
The water was cold. Very cold. Far colder than the rain.

Kirk, experienced in river swimming though he was, had not expected it to be so cold. He knew that he had very little time in which to save the hominid before he would be forced to abandon the attempt in order to save himself.

The current itself was not giving him much bother; high though the water was, there was no undertow, no eddies, and the water was deep enough for any unevennesses in the bed to be hardly significant at the surface, even although he was sure that the river was carrying large boulders along. He felt he could swim for ever in this as long as he did not have to fight the current and swim upstream again - if it had been warmer.

Two more strokes and he caught the end of the branch supporting the native. The hominid looked at him with terrified eyes as he began to kick out, towing it back towards the bank.

The sides were steeper here, rocky and cliff-like; there was no



place he could land. He resigned himself to freezing a little longer, glad that he could use the support of the branch. Good swimmer though he was, the cold was already beginning to drain his strength.

Ahead of him he saw another branch that was jammed against the bank. It was not big enough to dam the river, although it was holding back some flotsam. Close in to the side as he was, he was being carried towards it.

He struck out desperately with his free arm, but despite everything that he could do, he was unable to swim clear of the branch. He was swept forcibly into it. He was only half aware of the stabbing pain in his cold-numbed arm as the jagged end tore a great gash down it.

It was still impossible to land, although he was now very close to the rock wall of the gully. The current was pushing him hard against the jammed branch, and he struggled to pull himself away from it without losing hold of the other branch that was providing him, and the terrified alien, with a support. With an effort that almost drained the last of his strength, he dragged himself free of the twiggy fingers that clutched hungrily at him and allowed the current to carry him on downstream.

Ahead of him, he saw the banks opening out slightly, and Spock already there, kneeling at the water's edge. He kicked out, keeping himself as close to the bank as possible as the branch supporting him - and the native - was swept towards the Vulcan. The sound of rushing water was getting louder, and he realised that there was a waterfall not too far away; he knew that this was probably the last chance they would have to escape the river. It was possible to survive being swept over a waterfall, if you went feet first, it wasn't too big a fall and there were no rocks underneath it, but it wasn't a chance he wanted to take. Not with the river this high, when the force of water could beat under, and keep under, anything going over the fall.

Spock knew that this - the first chance he had seen - was also the last chance he would have of getting Kirk out of the river. He could see the water disappearing over a fall in the distance; he had no idea how big the fall was, but he didn't think it possible to be swept over a waterfall and live to tell the tale.

He had found it relatively easy keeping up with the floating branch, except when he had to detour to avoid rocks or undergrowth; eventually, as the gully sides steepened so that the river was running past a sheer wall several feet high, he had simply run as fast as he could in an attempt to get back to the water's edge before Kirk was carried too far downstream, realising that he must get ahead of him or risk losing a chance to help his friend. For part of the time he had not known whether he was getting ahead of Kirk or not. He was still not fully aware of how desperately he had run, plunging through bushes with total disregard for his skin; he was bleeding from many cuts and scratches which he had no memory of receiving; indeed, his awareness of them was only superficial, overwhelmed by the relief he felt that he had indeed managed to get ahead of his friend.

Now he aimed for the largest target he could see; the branch itself. As he caught it, the tug of the water nearly overbalanced

him; he threw himself backwards to avoid being pulled into the water just as Shacter, who had been delayed by a heavy fall on uneven ground, arrived.

The security guard took in the situation at a glance as he leaped down the last few feet of the slope. He reached the water's edge just as the hominid lost its grip on the branch, and splashed into the water clutching at it. He caught a handful of hair and pulled, kicking out against the current as he regained the land, hauling the half-drowned native out of the water with an ease that surprised him until he saw that it was only some three feet tall and very thin - probably a young one. It was quite clearly of the same race as the females they had been watching.

Kirk, meanwhile, had gained a grip on the bank while he scrabbled for the footing that he was too numb to feel. Spock, relinquishing his hold of the branch, caught his Captain's arm and pulled him out.

Kirk lay gasping for a moment, then sat up, shivering. "Thanks." He glanced at Shacter. "Is it alive?"

"Yes, Captain. I think it's in shock, though."

"That doesn't surprise me. It didn't give up, but I bet it was resigned to dying. It was just hanging on - these creatures can't be able to swim." He forced himself to his feet and looked down at the little native.

It was naked, whatever garment it had been wearing probably torn off by the force of the water. It was male.

Kirk shivered uncontrollably. "Let's get back to the others."

"Are you able to walk, Captain?" Spock asked, a note of anxiety in his voice. His eyes were fixed on the bleeding gash in Kirk's arm.

"Best thing to get me warmed up a bit. And the medikit is with Maris." He suddenly realised Spock's condition. "I think you need a bit of attention yourself."

Spock shook his head. "Superficial scratches only, Captain." It was not entirely true; with the immediate urgency of the situation past, he was becoming conscious of an ankle that stabbed pain as he put his weight on it; a clod of earth, shifting unexpectedly under his foot, had thrown him momentarily off balance and wrenched the ankle. He had continued to run on it, not even realising that he had injured it, in his desperate anxiety about his Captain.

"Hmm." Kirk glanced at Shacter. "How about you, Lieutenant? Are you - ?"

"Just a few superficial scratches, like Mr. Spock," Shacter replied, ignoring the ache where he had caught his shin on a fallen branch and the grazes, hidden by his clothes, that he had suffered in his fall.

In their control, Kirk saw their evasion. "You'll both report to sickbay for a full checkup when we get back to the ship," he told them.

"You will also be reporting for a full check, I trust?" Spock

held Kirk's gaze for a moment until the Captain nodded.

"Can you carry our friend?" Kirk asked Shacter, who nodded immediately. Then he looked at the slope above them, took a deep breath, and began to plod resolutely and doggedly up it. He was tired enough that he accepted Spock's help without protest. Shacter swung the little hominid over his shoulder and followed, permitting himself to limp now that his officers were no longer watching him.

At least the rain had stopped.

They could still hear thunder rumbling in the distance, and the sky upstream was still very dark and threatening; a flash of lightning forked down, but it was many miles away. Overhead the sky was clearing, a watery sun just beginning to shine through the clouds.

"How far are we from our new camp?" Kirk asked after a minute.

"About two miles," Spock replied.

Kirk gritted his teeth against their chattering and kept on going.

Before they had gone more than half a mile, they met Maris and Verris, who, realising that if Spock and Shacter could not help Kirk a bigger group was unlikely to do better, had delayed to gather the equipment together before setting off downstream after the others; Maris knew that Kirk, to say nothing of the apeman, would be suffering from exposure after his soaking - provided he was pulled from the water alive.

The Doctor took one look at Kirk, pulled out the medikit and began to attend to his arm. After some moments, she raised her head. "I'd rather we went back to the ship to deal with this, sir."

Kirk glanced at the unconscious hominid. "Now we've sort of made contact with one of the natives, I don't want to lose him - but we shouldn't take -"

"Captain, we *could* lose him, from shock, if we *don't* get back to the ship. I'd say he needs proper care too."

Kirk nibbled his lip for a moment, then nodded. "All right." He groped for his communicator, only to find that it was missing, probably pulled loose by the force of the water. "Spock."

The Vulcan nodded, pulled out his communicator, and flicked it open. "Spock to Enterprise."

There was still some static, but the atmosphere had cleared enough for contact to be made. "Six to beam up; alert sickbay to be standing by."

Maris knew very well indeed both McCoy and McCoy's attitude towards other people, no matter how experienced, seeing to his senior officers; anything other than an injury needing minor first aid was

firmly dealt with by McCoy himself. She therefore suggested that the Chief Medical Officer be recalled to the ship for long enough to see to them. It was not that Maris doubted her ability to deal with her senior officers' injuries; she simply did not want McCoy to think her presumptuous.

Her suggestion met with no encouragement from either Kirk or Spock. They both knew McCoy's attitude too, but in this situation they preferred to endure the scolding they knew they would probably be given - in the privacy of their quarters - rather than call McCoy away from his daughter. Even an appeal to the senior Nurse won Maris no support; Chapel fully agreed that McCoy's duty at this time lay in helping and encouraging Jo Revisec.

Kirk's arm was soon dealt with, though it was a jagged gash that required considerable skill to laser closed properly, and Maris decided to keep him in sickbay overnight to make sure that he suffered no ill effects from his prolonged chilling and the shock of the injury.

Spock's injuries were indeed as he had said, superficial, apart from the ankle. Maris bound it firmly with instructions that he was to rest it, and released a reluctant Vulcan to his quarters on the understanding that he remained off duty for the rest of the day.

Shacter had not escaped so lightly. He had chipped a bone in his shin and given himself a very nasty gouge on a dead branch when he fell; he also had multiple abrasions, and much to his annoyance Maris decided to keep him in sickbay for a couple of days.

The hominid was checked over very carefully, some water removed from his lungs, then left in a corner bed to sleep off his shock while the medical staff took a full record of his physiology. Kirk had rescued, they decided, a half-grown male of the third species they had seen. Kirk reflected that the landing party had already guessed that.

The Captain then convened a meeting of his landing party in sickbay. Maris tutted about it, but had not the authority to refuse, and found herself wondering if this was not also part of the reason why Kirk had refused to summon McCoy; the Chief Medical Officer was not in the least awed by Kirk's rank; it was certain that he would not permit Kirk to overextend himself. Maris herself, while not awed by Kirk's rank, was too outranked to be able to outface the Captain.

"Question," Kirk said. "Can we say definitely that we have now discovered the hominids the survey team reported?"

"I would say yes, Captain," Spock replied. He nodded over towards the sleeping native. "His readings indicate a large, well-convoluted brain with well developed centres of reasoning. The centres of speech are less well developed, but we know that some level of vocal communication does exist. Of course, how well the translator will be able to cope with his 'language' is impossible to predict at this moment. We can, however, attempt to communicate with him - if our appearance does not frighten him out of his wits."

"Captain." Chapel glanced over from her self-imposed watch over the hominid. "He's coming round."

"It looks like we're soon going to find out if it does," Kirk said wryly.

Ignoring the pain that was beginning to stab at his chest with every breath, Kirk pushed himself upright and sat on the edge of the bed. Maris caught his shoulder.

"Captain, will you *please* lie down. I haven't passed you as fit yet." She sounded exasperated.

"Doctor - "

"She is within her rights, Captain." Spock, who was watching him intently, spoke quietly. "You are still her patient."

"Dammit, there's nothing wrong with me!" Even as he spoke, Kirk knew that he lied, for the pain stabbed afresh when he took a breath to answer; but as always when there was a job to do he refused to give in to it.

Spock looked him straight in the eye, aware of a tension in Kirk's body even although the Human had managed to keep from wincing. "You were thoroughly chilled, Captain. Even now - you still feel cold, do you not?"

Spock knows me and my ways rather too well, Kirk thought ruefully. "A little, but that's nothing to worry about." He tried to brush off the comment as unimportant.

"Prolonged chilling can lead to various infections," Maris said severely. Aware that she had Spock's support, she added, "So you can just lie down again."

"Doctor, I am not an invalid."

Seeing that Maris was on the point of giving in, Spock asked, "Doctor, do you pass Captain Kirk as fit for duty?"

"No, Mr. Spock," she replied. "Not until morning, ship's time, at the earliest."

"In that case, Captain, as second in command it is my duty to relieve you until you are declared medically fit." He trusted that Maris would say nothing about having taken him off duty as well.

Kirk glared at him; Spock looked back unmoved, his bland expression masking the very real concern that he was feeling. Kirk took a deep breath to retort, and gasped as the pain stabbed afresh, this time unable to control his reaction. Instantly, Maris pushed him flat on the bed. Releasing him, she looked up at the diagnostic board.

"So you're fit for duty, Captain?" she asked grimly. "You're *not* fit, and you won't be for several days. You've got a touch of pleurisy, Captain, and that won't get better by itself." She glanced over at Chapel, who was bending over the now restless hominid, and touched a button to call in another nurse. "Ah, Nurse Arbet - I want 10 ccs of rhonomyalin for Captain Kirk immediately, and a further 5 ccs every three hours for the next forty eight." She looked back at Kirk. "After that, Captain, we'll see how you're getting on."

Kirk gave a helpless gesture. "I need to speak to the native," he said obstinately.

"Then we'll bring him over to you," Maris told him. "How's he doing, Nurse Chapel?"

Chapel raised her head. "Regaining consciousness fast. Ah - "

She was interrupted by the hominid's terrified scream as he tried to shrink back away from her, staring at her with eyes wide with a fear that intensified as he realised that he could not move away from this terrible, huge creature with unheard-of blue fur because there was a cliff behind him. It chattered incomprehensively and Verris muttered, "Talk to it? How? The translator can't make any sense out of that gabble."

Kirk glared at him. "For heaven's sake, man, give the translator time! It's got to hear some of a new language to get the feel of it before it can begin to operate!"

Chapel straightened slightly, realising how her alien appearance was frightening the native. "It's all right," she said softly, knowing that the creature wouldn't be able to understand her but hoping that tone of voice would work instead. "It's all right, we're not going to hurt you. Once we're sure you're not hurt from your soaking, we'll take you home again. It's all right. Sssh. Sssh. Don't worry. You're safe here. Yes - safe. It's all right."

It seemed to work. The hominid's near-hysterical chattering slowed; stopped. The little native looked at her. Then, more slowly, it said something; the translator picked out the word, "Hurt."

"We're not going to hurt you," Chapel repeated.

":*f &'&% !';;] take \$&*!* home."

"Yes, we'll take you home," Chapel assured him. "But we want to speak to you first. Perhaps you can help us."

It took some time, but at last the translator seemed to be able to make sense out of most of the alien's language. It was a very simple language, consisting mostly of nouns and verbs, with few adjectives or adverbs and a minimum of prepositions and conjunctions.

Finally, Chapel coaxed the hominid to his feet and led him over to Kirk's bed.

Kirk smiled encouragingly and the native shrank back again, pulling against Chapel's hold on his arm.

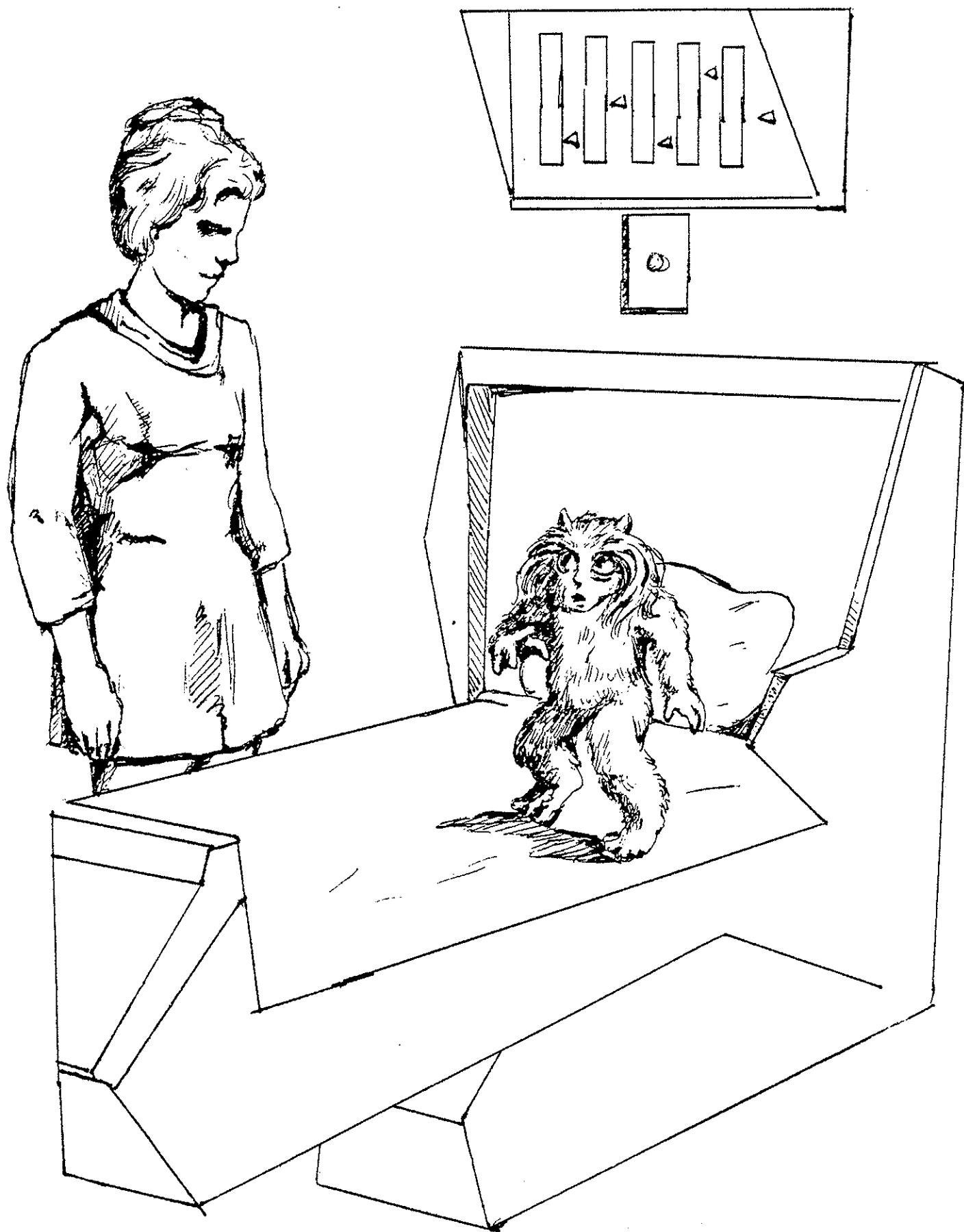
"Your teeth, Captain," Spock suggested. "He thinks you are snarling; possibly that you are intending to eat him."

"What is your name?" Kirk asked softly, speaking as gently as he could.

"Warra." The native still looked wary, but seemed to respond to the gentleness.

"Warra, we come from a long way away. Some of our children have been disappearing. Do you know anything about children disappearing?"

Awareness showed instantly in the wide eyes. "Warra belong Anar's stirp. Young belong Anar's stirp disappear. Ten-year Meeting after last cold season; decide. Men go search; women stay, guard young - young-not-disappear." Warra gave a little gesture that was akin to a shrug. "Men no find. Men think half-men take. Find



half-men. Half-men, young disappear. Half-men silly; half-men no worry."

Kirk glanced at his Science Officer. "Interesting; Warra's no more than half-grown, yet he doesn't think of himself as 'young'."

"Warra man," the hominid said, sounding slightly indignant.

"He understood you, Captain," Spock said. "I have no doubt that Warra has been expected to carry a man's responsibilities for at least half of his life."

Kirk nodded. "Sorry, Warra - I didn't mean to insult you. Among my people you would still be counted, not as a child, but as... in between; not a child, but not yet a grown man." The hominid looked slightly puzzled, as if the concept was too difficult for him to grasp. Kirk went on. "So your people don't know where your young disappeared to."

"No."

Kirk grunted. "Scratch the Klingon theory, anyway," he muttered. "And the Orions. Neither of them is going to be interested in Warra's race - or the 'half-men'." It was an interesting, and somehow apt, description for the more primitive hominids they had seen; while Warra himself was proof that beings of the cultural level of homo erectus were undoubtedly far more intelligent than palaeontologists believed possible. He looked back at Warra.

"Warra - can your people... can they move themselves from one place to another without walking there?"

The little native looked puzzled. "No."

"Have you ever heard of anyone able to do that?"

This time he merely looked puzzled, and Spock said, "I believe the question will not translate into Warra's language."

Kirk scratched his head. "I'm not sure I can reword it."

"I suspect the answer would be no, anyway, Captain. His answers have been quite full. If he had known of anyone, I suspect he would have said that members of *his* 'stirp' can't but that there are those who can."

"So we're back to square one," Kirk said gloomily. "Only the mystery is a little wider than we thought it was. Not just Human infants; infants of all the primate races on the planet."

"Warra - one more question," Shacter put in suddenly. "How long have your young been disappearing? How many seasons?"

Warra looked round at the big male with the bright red fur, the thought passing through his mind that he had never before seen any creatures with body fur a different colour from their head fur, or any stirp whose people had so many different colours of fur. For a moment, he wondered about it, but it was of no real interest compared to the things in life that mattered - finding food, keeping the fires alight in the rain of the cold season, and - soon now - choosing a mate. He considered the question, then held up a four-fingered hand and closed the thumb and little finger across his palm.

"Two cold seasons since last Ten-year Meeting,' he said.

"Eight years," Maris said. "And apart from a couple of infants, the youngest of the... the half-men that we saw would be about eight or nine. It tallies - for this continent."

"If children have been disappearing for eight years, why wait till now to search for them?" Verris asked.

"Young die easily. Thought..." he gave his near-shrug again. "Happens. Young dies; body found later. Ten-year Meeting; Anar talk Unra, talk Ranna, talk Wannar, talk Nahu, talk Hunnan. All stirps lose young - many young. Anar, Hunnan, say look - warm season, men look, women store food. Anar, Hunnan, join. Unra, Wannar, join. Ranna, Nahu, big stirps, no join. Four ways. Men look. No find."

Thekar was looking very puzzled. "It's a very... economic... language, isn't it," she commented. "But it's so economic that I can't understand properly what he means."

Kirk translated. "Warra's - er - stirp - I suppose that means 'tribe' - thought it was plain bad luck until they joined up with other tribes at a ten-year meeting in the spring. Then they discovered that all the tribes were having losses so they decided that the men should search while the women saw to storing food for next winter. Two of the tribes were bigger and remained independent, but the other four joined up in two pairs. That let them search in four directions. But they haven't found anything."

He looked at Maris. "Is Warra fit enough to go back d... er, home?"

"He seems to be."

"In that case, I don't think we need damage the Prime Directive any further. We've found out enough from him to tell us that the answer isn't here. We don't need to show ourselves to anyone else. Spock - "

The Vulcan laid a gentle hand on Warra's shoulder, and before the hominid could react, long fingers pressed and Warra collapsed unconscious.

"Beam him down quickly, and leave him beside the river, a bit upstream from where we got him. With any luck his people will find him quickly, and he'll think he dreamed all this."

Spock nodded. "I'll do a quick sensor scan of the area first, and see if I can pick up his tribe."

"Good idea, but hurry - you don't have long before he comes round, do you?"

"About ten minutes, unless his nervous system is very different from that of most humanoids."

"I'll take Warra to the transporter room for you, Mr. Spock," Chapel offered.

"Thank you, Nurse." Despite his bandaged ankle Spock strode out at a speed that in a Human would have been called a run but in the Vulcan somehow managed to look like a brisk walk. Chapel scooped Warra up in her arms and followed him out.

Kirk relaxed, trying to keep his breathing fairly shallow, thinking.

"Eight years for the Prime Directive continent," he said slowly, "but only about six months for the other one."

"It looks as if the answer *could* be on Warra's continent," Thekar said slowly. "It started there."

"Whatever is taking the children doesn't seem interested in differentiating between levels of culture," Maris commented. "It takes everything from Human immigrants through an intelligent, up and coming hominid race, to creatures that are little more advanced than animals. As if intelligence doesn't count."

"And they're all very young." Kirk sighed. "I hate to say this, but if age is the criterion rather than intellect, it begins to look as if the missing children - of all species - were taken to provide their kidnappers with food."

"Wouldn't it be more sensible to take adults in that case, Captain?" Verris asked. "Bigger, more eating on them..."

"And tougher," Kirk said flatly. He yawned as the events of the day finally caught up with him. "Dismissed," he told Verris and Thekar. "Carry on checking over the readings we got in case you come up with something - anything at all out of the ordinary, I want to hear about it." He looked back at Maris. "Doctor, I want to see Spock as soon as he's taken Warra back home. Even if I'm asleep, he's to waken me."

"Won't the morning do?" Maris asked.

"Morning would mean a delay of several hours. I want to get this solved with as little loss of time as possible. After I've spoken to him, I'll rest - I promise."

Maris still looked doubtful, but she realised that Kirk would only fret himself into worse condition if she refused, so she turned to the intercom, contacted the transporter room and left the message. Kirk nodded his thanks.

Spock found a small group of hominids some five miles upriver from where they had rescued Warra, and concluded that this was the group the boy had been with. He beamed down with Warra to a point some half a mile from the group, then carried the unconscious native upstream until he could see the others through the trees.

The hominids were moving slowly downstream. Satisfied that they were unlikely to stop until they had passed where he was, Spock placed Warra carefully beside the river, positioning him so that it looked as if he had managed to crawl out by himself, and retreated hastily but cautiously until he was positioned where he could see and hear but was unlikely to be seen.

Warra was stirring before Spock heard a shout. The little band went running forward and clustered round the boy. For a few minutes there was a confused babble of voices, then the group moved on, more quickly now, taking Warra with it.

Once they were out of sight, Spock signalled for beam up. Warra

would be all right.

The Vulcan stood for a moment looking down at his sleeping Captain, sorely tempted to allow him to sleep on. Maris joined him.

"He was very insistent," she said. "But he promised that he would rest once he had spoken to you."

"Will wakening him harm him in any way?"

Maris shook her head. "No. We caught the pleurisy early - no thanks to him. For an intelligent man..." She broke off, aware that she should not criticise her senior officer so bluntly. "He's warmed up now and unlikely to have any sort of relapse," she went on more briskly, "but try to make it quick."

Spock nodded and shook Kirk awake as Maris moved across to check Shacter before returning to her office.

"You wanted to see me, Captain."

"Oh, Spock. Yes. Yes, the answer to all this has to lie on the 'native' continent. Children have been disappearing from there for eight years - it's as if whoever or whatever is responsible only turned to the Human children on the other continent when children on this one became scarce.

"Warra said he didn't know anything about telekinesis, and I believe him - that language didn't lend itself to anything other than the plain, unembroidered truth. Besides, he didn't smell."

Spock shook his head. "That is not necessarily definitive proof - he was only half grown. Often only the adults - specifically the adult males - have a strong body odour. However, I waited on the planet until Warra was found, and the party of males that found him was also without a strong body scent. And I do not recollect smelling anything damp or earthy - other than the wet earth during and after the rain - in the vicinity of any of the other hominids we observed."

"Which brings us back to a possible fourth species. Spock, I want full sensor scanning on this continent; We've got readings on the three species we saw, so it'll be easy enough to avoid those. You have that single reading you got when April disappeared. Try to match it. Take that continent mile by mile - yard by yard - inch by inch if necessary; but find me something positive."

"It will take a little time," Spock began.

"Then the sooner you get your department started, the quicker it'll be."

"Of course, Captain. I was merely trying to point out that it is highly unlikely that we will have anything positive to show by - say - the morning."

"We have more than a week." Kirk gave a faint half smile. "And if necessary, I'll call in a couple of favours I'm owed to let us stay a few days longer."

"I'll get the scan started right away," Spock said. "Goodnight,

Jim - and sleep well."

"Goodnight, Spock."

Kirk was asleep again before the door had slid shut behind the Vulcan.

By mid-morning next day he was thoroughly bored and feeling so much better that lying in bed, which, although he would never have admitted it openly, had been a welcome fate the day before, no longer seemed to be any sort of good idea.

He tossed restlessly, trying to relieve his need to be doing something. When Maris finally appeared, he smiled engagingly at her.

"Good morning, Doctor." He spoke with a cheerfulness that was mostly forced.

She looked at him suspiciously, and he wondered if McCoy automatically warned all his staff not to trust anything their Captain said when he was in sickbay. "Good morning, Captain. How do you feel this morning?"

"Do you know, I feel fine. Oh, I realise I'm not fully fit again yet, but I don't think I need clutter up a bed in sickbay any longer."

"Then where would you propose to - er - 'clutter up a bed'?" she asked dryly.

"I could go to my own quarters." He smiled again, the charming smile that over the years had caused many a female heart to flutter.

Maris simply looked at him, a suspicious expression on her face. "And what would you do there?" she asked.

Yes, her voice was definitely suspicious too, Kirk decided. "Well, I can rest there just as easily as here," he bluffed. "I'd relax easier there," he went on. "My own things around me... a good book... a - "

" - lot of paperwork that is sitting waiting to be done, a too-easily-reached intercom to keep you in touch with what's going on..."

"Please, Doctor. I'll be good - "

"Yes, just until you realise that you simply must check on how the overhaul is going, or... No, Captain. I simply do not trust you to rest properly if you're unsupervised. Besides," she pointed out, "your course of antibiotics is not finished yet. I am certainly not assigning a nurse to go chasing round the ship looking for you when it's time for your next injection and you've absented yourself from your cabin." His wry smile told her quite plainly that Kirk appreciated her unerringly exact reading of his character.

It did not make the long hours of inactivity any easier to endure, however, and Kirk found himself gazing enviously at Shacter, who, while awake, was lying back as if he appreciated the rest. Yet the security guard was, as Kirk well knew, an active man who thrived on work. Unless, of course, Shacter was more seriously hurt than

they had thought.

"Mr. Shacter?"

"Yes, Captain?" There was a pause of almost a second before Shacter answered, as if he had had to pull his thoughts back from wherever they had been.

"How can you just lie there?" Kirk asked. "Don't you get bored?"

"Bored?" Shacter seemed to consider it for a moment. "No, not really. It gives me time to think..."

"But you're normally so energetic!"

"I suppose I am... but sometimes I like to sit and just - well, let my mind wander. Think about something and try to remember everything I can about it. It's good training for the memory."

"Were you thinking about anything in particular just now?" Kirk asked curiously.

"About the hominids. The different kinds." He was silent for a moment, then he said, almost diffidently, "Captain, I'm not sure that they *are* all hominids."

"What do you mean?" Even if the suggestion hadn't intrigued Kirk, he would still have asked, for the conversation at least was doing something to ease his boredom.

"Well... I'm not a scientist, Captain, and I don't want to be one; I'm happy in security. But I can't deny that I find science interesting; I've read up a bit about it, and Mr. Spock has taught me a little as well. So I'm not totally ignorant about the subject."

"I know - that's why you were selected for landing party duty," Kirk told him. He grinned slightly, almost mischievously. "Anyway, I knew you'd wangle a swap if I *did* assign someone else. You'd never entrust Spock's safety to any other guard."

Shacter ignored the interruption, although he appreciated the compliment and silently acknowledged the truth of the final comment. "I didn't notice it at the time, or when we ran over the tricorder readings - we were too sure we had the right idea about the different species of hominid. But this morning I started to think about the natives, and I realised - that first lot were quite a bit different from the other two. I think they're an example of parallel evolution."

"Go on." Kirk's interest was totally caught now.

"Warra's kind just have ordinary brown fur, with as much individual variation in shading as there is in - say - Human hair. The second lot we saw - the aggressive bunch - were all ordinary brown too. Both species have flattish faces with eyes quite close together and look to the front. Binocular vision. But that first lot looked more like squirrels - their faces were more pointed, so that their eyes were set a little further apart, and if you remember their fur blended in with their background. They were smaller than the reports indicated for the Prime Directive race. And their young seemed to hang on to their mothers' fur, at least part of the time, while that kiddie of Warra's species had to walk hanging on to

mother's skirts - the females' hair isn't long or thick enough to let the young hang on to it. Then Warra spoke of the 'half-men', as if he knew of only one kind of more primitive hominid on the planet."

"Yes, he did, didn't he. Though that could have been a fault in the translation."

"I thought of that, Captain, but - well, Mr. Spock said it at the time; Warra's answers were exact."

"Well reasoned, Mr. Shacter," a quiet voice put in from the door. Both men jumped at the unexpectedness of it, and glanced round, to smile a welcome - Kirk's enthusiastic, Shacter's more diffident - as Spock moved from the door towards their beds.

"How much did you hear?" Kirk asked.

"Enough to agree that Mr. Shacter is probably correct. There is another thing; we wondered why the first group - let us call them the 'squirrel men' - had protective colouring, and debated whether there was a recently-extinct predator who had preyed on them. Now I wonder whether that predator is still alive; possibly even Warra's people."

"Huh?" Kirk looked startled. "All right, I'll buy it. Why?"

"We know they are hunters; they carry primitive spears. I admit we do not know for certain what they hunt, but the 'squirrel men' are of a size to be... shall we say, worth hunting?"

Kirk made a face. "It's too like cannibalism for my liking."

"Captain, for a long time monkeys were considered a valid item of food by primitive tribes on Earth," Spock said. "This is no different. Indeed, the relationship here could well be less close than that between monkeys and apes - including early Man - on Earth."

"You'll be telling me next that there were sound reasons for cannibalism." Kirk sounded just a trifle disgruntled.

"There were," Spock replied simply. "At least in the eyes of the races involved."

"Such as?"

"Mostly, it was part of the religion; a means of acquiring the courage, endurance, speed and other admirable qualities of the dead person. To be eaten was quite a compliment, as I understand it. From the practical point of view, lack of any other form of protein was another reason."

Kirk shuddered. "I wouldn't have expected a Vulcan to condone cannibalism," he admitted.

"I do not condone it. I understand why it existed."

Shacter interrupted. "Captain, you did say yourself that the children might have been taken for food."

"I know I did. But that was before I realised how humanoid the Dorannan hominids are."

"Need that make any difference?" Spock asked soberly. "They are still at a stage of development where the daily search for protein

food must be a major concern."

Kirk looked at him, horror in his eyes, then said slowly, "Warra said that at first they thought the half-men might have taken their young. Could the half-men be the ones hunting the 'squirrel-men'?"

"It is not impossible," Spock agreed, "but I am compelled to point out that we saw nothing to indicate that they actively hunt or eat anything other than fruit - and possibly other vegetable matter - and perhaps carrion. The reports say 'carrion eaters' and we know that Warra's race hunts and therefore prefers fresh meat - but is probably not averse to taking carrion when they find it. We cannot be certain which species the survey party actually saw."

Shacter said, "Mr. Spock, would animal protein from one planet necessarily be edible to carnivores from another planet?"

Spock's gesture said wordlessly, *Who knows?* Alien foods, alien diseases; some were compatible, some were not. The foods that were not were usually instant poison; the diseases that were were always severe, almost invariably fatal. It would seem that if Human children were being stolen for food, they were indeed edible, for if they were not, only one would have disappeared. The thieves would then have known that Humans were not a food resource for them.

Yet there might still be another answer. If only they could find it.

Twenty-four hours later, Kirk was released to his own quarters, with medical orders to remain off duty for at least another day. By then, Shacter was as bored with lying in bed as Kirk, and very aware that he must endure another twelve hours at least in Sickbay.

To give himself something to think about, he called up the report on the hominids once more - the one on the creatures they thought Warra meant by 'half-men' - and began to look through them once more, this time at half speed, and paying more attention to background details than the main image, which had already been fairly thoroughly examined.

Almost immediately, his attention was drawn to the young male in the middle distance that stopped picking the berries and crouched on the ground, and he magnified that part of the image, slowing down the action even more.

The picture was blurred, and he called on the computer to enhance the image. Then he studied the picture again.

Although none of them had actually registered it at the time, although none of them had noticed it when they studied the record - possibly because it was so blurred - it was almost certain that the hominid half-hidden in the grass had actually caught a small animal and was munching enthusiastically on the carcass. It looked like a mouflette.

Although vegetable matter probably accounted for most of their diet, the 'half-men' were indeed able to assimilate meat, and not just carrion; they did indeed catch small animals. It was probably opportunist hunting rather than deliberately planned hunting, but hunting it certainly was.

It was evening before Spock visited Kirk with a report on his latest scan of the continent below them.

"None of the hominids are particularly numerous," he said. "The 'squirrel-men' seem to live exclusively in the southern half of the continent. I haven't established positively why they have a northern barrier, but it could be one of temperature - they are all found south of the planet's equator. The half-men and Warra's people are more widely dispersed, with Warra's kind more numerous than the half-men towards the north."

"As if they were spreading out from their points of origin?" Kirk asked.

"It is possible," Spock agreed, "although from the data we have it is impossible to state categorically that this is the case."

"And you've still found nothing further afield?"

Spock shook his head. "We are extending the scan in all directions, but we are now scanning nearly a thousand miles from the last hominid reading and have detected nothing but non-sentient animal life."

Intent on their conversation, both men jumped as the intercom beeped shrilly, interrupting them. Kirk reached for it.

"Kirk here."

"Is Mr. Spock there, Captain?" It was Thekar's voice. She sounded as excited as it was possible for an Andorian to be.

"Affirmative." Spock leaned forward.

"We've found something, sir. Just over a thousand miles north of the main concentration of hominids. We picked up a reading of a small group of hominids - Warra's kind - *and there was a Human reading with them.* The reading was only on the sensors for a minute or so, then it vanished again, but it was long enough for us to get a positive fix on the position."

"Get our landing party together, Ms. Thekar," Kirk snapped. "And give the co-ordinates to the transporter room. We're going down there." He snapped off the intercom.

"Mr. Shacter will not be able to go down," Spock pointed out. "Indeed, you should not go down either. Dr. Maris has not yet cleared you for duty."

"We have a reading on a Human," Kirk said urgently. "If we go down right away, it's possible we might discover something."

"And it is equally possible that we will not," Spock said quietly. He hated having to disagree with Kirk in this fashion, but - concerned though he was about the missing children - Kirk's well-being concerned him more. He would not willingly watch the Human doing anything that might endanger his full recovery. "The readings disappeared suddenly - the way the child April's did. The group that the sensors detected could be a long way away by now."

"Spock, we've got to go down," Kirk said quietly, ignoring his First Officer's objections. "I'll be all right. I'd have been back to full duty tomorrow, after all. I'm only anticipating that by a few hours."

The Vulcan looked doubtful, but was prevented from saying anything more by the intercom, which bleeped again.

"Kirk here."

"Maris, Captain. Ms. Thekar's been in touch with me. You do realise that Mr. Shacter will not be able to accompany the landing party?"

"Yes, doctor."

"As for yourself, Captain - provided you promise to behave and not try to do too much, I won't push medical authority to stop you."

"Doctor, I see this as being in the nature of a reconnaissance. None of us will be doing much."

"Very well, Captain." The image disappeared, and Kirk glanced at the Vulcan, a touch of almost apologetic triumph in his eyes.

Spock's answering gesture could not have been called a shrug - on the other hand, there was nothing else it could have been called.

Kirk grinned appreciatively. Spock, however, was not finished.

"What about a security guard, Captain?" he asked. "Regulations state - "

"Regulations also state that this is a prime directive continent, so we shouldn't be going down anyway. No, Spock - I'm not willing to have anyone else going down, even though it does mean going without a guard. None of the other security guards knows enough about science to be any use to us - and it's not as if there are any dangerous animals or people, after all."

"We cannot be completely sure of that, Jim," Spock said seriously. "Any creature that can kidnap small children from a closed room must be considered at least potentially dangerous."

"True - but on the other hand, they did go for very young children. They might consider a fully-grown adult of our species too much of a mouthful, and run away from us. Shall we go, Mr. Spock?"

"After you, Captain," Spock agreed, still reluctant but resigned.

Kirk headed for the door.

Thekar, Maris and Verris were already waiting in the transporter room when they arrived. Maris eyed Kirk, assessing his condition with automatic professionalism. He directed his most charming smile at her, and knew instantly that he was wasting his time. Maris would assess his fitness by her standards, not by his.

As Kirk entered, Verris asked, "Aren't we taking a security guard, sir?"

"No," Kirk said briefly. He had given Spock, who had the right to ask the same question, his reasons; damned if he was going to explain himself to the junior officers as well. "We won't need one."

He strode over to the transporter platform and took his place, Spock at his heels. The other three followed.

"Energize."

Although they were a thousand miles further north, the members of the landing party discovered that the climate was still very warm, although a quick glance round showed that the trees no longer spoke of all-year-round plenty. These trees were more seasonal; they all bore not-yet-ripe fruit, as if it was late summer - almost autumn. A clump of bushes however did carry fruit; small reddish-purple berries, some of which had fallen to the ground and were being hungrily eaten by a small herd of mouflette.

Nearby, a bare cliff face rose steeply, the ground at its base littered with fallen rock. There was no sign of hominid life.

Kirk glared round, giving his crew the impression that he was blaming the wholly innocent landscape for the problems the colonists were having. His eyes finally rested on Spock.

"Mr. Spock," he said with controlled patience. "Are you certain that these are the co-ordinates for the readings that were detected?"

"Yes, Captain," Spock replied quietly, his control indicating quite clearly that he, too, was experiencing frustration at the lack of anything to confirm the readings. "We are within a hundred yards of the position that was recorded."

"And there's nothing here."

"It would appear so, Captain."

Kirk sighed. "Par for the course, isn't it," he muttered, his voice disgruntled. "This whole planet has turned into a massive game of hide and seek. Even some of the natives are having to play!"

He looked round again, then glanced at his people. "Have a look round," he ordered. Despite himself, he sounded discouraged. "I don't expect anyone will find anything, but I'm not going to take this place at face value. We got a positive Human reading from here. That has to mean something."

Maris, Thekar and Verris headed off towards the trees, tricorders at the ready, leaving trails of footprints in the not-yet-dry morning dew. Spock delayed, staring at the cliff, and Kirk, about to set off after Verris, paused.

"Spock?"

"A cliff, Captain." He aimed his tricorder at it and studied the reading. "Limestone."

Kirk looked sharply at him. "Caves?"

"Not uncommon in limestone country," Spock agreed.

"Do you actually detect any?"

Spock frowned. "The readings are indistinct - as if there might be something blocking them. But there is an indication of... of hollowness. The rock is not solid; but that is all I can say for certain."

"If there's a maze of caves in there, there has to be an entrance of some sort," Kirk said thoughtfully.

"It might be miles away," Spock protested.

"Yes, it might. But some readings appeared here. *Appeared*, Spock. Hominid readings mostly, but one of them was Human, where no Human reading should be. What does that say to you?"

Spock thought about it for a moment. "Someone inside the caves came out for a moment?"

"I'd guess *got* out rather than came out. There isn't any Human here that came here voluntarily - and I'd guess there isn't any of Warra's race here voluntarily either."

"And the reading disappeared again because whoever kidnapped the children recaptured them?"

Kirk gave him a grim smile. "That's how I read it. So - there's got to be an entrance to the cave system hereabouts."

Spock nodded. He swung the tricorder slowly, quartering the cliff face, his gaze fixed intently on the readout.

Maris rejoined them. "There's no sign of anything over that way." Her voice was disheartened. "I hit a patch of soft mud beside a river that bubbled out from under that cliff; no footprints of any kind. That's when I came back."

"We think the answer's inside the cliff," Kirk told her absently, his eyes following Spock's every move. "Go and get the others."

"Yes, sir." Maris moved briskly away.

She was barely out of sight when her words penetrated Kirk's consciousness.

"A river!" he exclaimed.

Spock raised his head to look at the Human. "I do trust that these caves are less... exciting... than the ones we saw on Ethara," he commented dryly.

Kirk waved a dismissive hand. "If there are... beings... living in them they're bound to be relatively safe. But - " excitedly - "a river gives us a way in! And if there aren't any footprints around, it could even be a back door, so to speak."

"Jim, I am compelled to remind you that these... beings... managed to remove several children from secure rooms without being seen. Logic dictates that they have no need of a door - front or back."

Kirk's shoulders drooped slightly at the reminder, but

straightened again as voices announced the return of the others. He might relax his guard in front of Spock, or even McCoy; he would never be less than the Captain in front of lesser members of his crew.

He gestured Maris forward, and as she led the way towards the river he managed to walk after her as briskly as if he was wholly optimistic.

Whatever slight degree of optimism he might have felt vanished the instant he saw the river.

...bubbled out from under that cliff Maris had said; and bubbled was exactly what it did. It swirled out from the base of the cliff into a pool that swirled and eddied, boiling so fiercely that Kirk doubted that anyone falling into it could survive. There was a place close to them where one eddy did create a small patch of dead water beside the shore, and it was here that the muddy patch Maris had mentioned was located.

As a doorway into the cave system - front or back - this river was a complete non-starter.

Spock lifted a considering eyebrow. "If we can judge the cave system from this river, it would appear to be fully as... exciting... as the Etharan caves," he commented dryly.

Kirk sighed. "Check the cliff here for another entrance, Mr. Spock," he ordered, pointedly not responding to the Vulcan's comment as he tried to ignore the sinking feeling that accompanied his own realisation that the cave system - or at least part of it - was probably very dangerous. He was beginning to wonder if they were following a completely false trail.

"Captain..."

"Yes, Mr. Spock?"

"Up there... about twenty feet up..." The Vulcan pointed in a direction partway between where they were and where they had been. "There's a small opening..."

"How small?"

Spock frowned. "I would doubt that any of us could get through it. A child could, however."

Vulcan and Human looked at each other. "Jackpot?"

"It is... possible, Captain."

"But we can't get it."

"Not by any means we can detect."

Kirk rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "And we still have to consider that a river - with a pretty fierce current - runs out of that cave system."

Spock nodded. He was still studying the cliff carefully with his tricorder.

There was a sudden blur of movement, and then Kirk realised that

he was alone - and it was very cold.

He looked round. There was no cliff anywhere near; there were no trees. He was surrounded by a vast snowfield. The sun, hanging low in a cold blue, cloud-flecked sky, seemed to offer no warmth, but when a cloud drifted over it the chill bit more deeply.

He raised his eyebrows at this proof that something on this planet was capable of telekinesis and reached for his communicator.

It was gone.

Spock looked round at the desert landscape that had replaced the forest, aware of a strange smell that he could not - quite - place. Then he looked at his empty hands. The tricorder was gone. He was not surprised when an automatic check told him that his communicator was gone as well.

He looked round again, assessing his situation. The sun was high in the sky, and from its position he knew that he was still in the northern hemisphere of the planet and further east than he had been, for the day was further advanced. It had been quite early in the morning; now it was closer to midday. It argued a considerable telekinetic talent.

His desert-bred senses assessed the temperature, even as he considered the time of day. It would become a little hotter, but not, he judged, impossibly so. Survival would not be a problem.

At least, he corrected himself mentally, it will not be a problem for me. If the other members of the landing party had also been transported to this desert, survival might indeed prove to be a problem for them.

But if the other members of the landing party had been transported to this desert, why was there no sign of them? And - what had happened to his tricorder and communicator?

It seemed unlikely that whatever had transported him here was skilled enough - or knowledgeable enough - to be selective about his equipment... but he could not think that it was capable of transporting living creatures only, for if that was the case, his clothes should also have been left behind with his tricorder.

Even as he debated the point his eyes were studying the terrain, considering it, assessing it, looking for possible shelter... and looking for a possible supply of liquid. He would be able to survive this day without drinking, but if his rescue was delayed he would find himself in dire need of a source of water. And he would need shelter from the chill of the desert night.

He had no doubt that he would be rescued relatively quickly. If only he had been moved, the remaining members of the landing party would report it to the ship; if they had all been moved, Uhura would try to contact them when their next check-in was overdue; when she failed to obtain a response, Scott would order a sensor check of the continent they were on. When there was no sign of the landing party beside their communicators, he would undoubtedly widen the field of search. A great deal depended on how far they had all been moved from their landing point.

He refused to let himself consider the odds of survival of the entire landing party, if they had all been magicked to as hostile an environment as this.

Thekar stared at the choppy sea that trapped her on a rocky beach, then turned and stared at the overhanging cliff that completed her entrapment, and wondered how she had reached this inhospitable place. And... where were her tricorder and communicator?

She turned her attention back to the sea. A line of vegetable debris marked the tideline, and she knew that she was in no danger of drowning. Even at high tide there would be a fairly wide strip of the beach left uncovered.

She shivered slightly, wishing that the sun was high enough in the sky to allow the sunlight that danced on the water to reach the beach; but the cliff behind her cut it off, throwing a shadow across the entire shoreline.

Not that it was cold, exactly... but neither was it warm, even by Andorian standards. She looked round again, assessing the situation.

There was fresh water to hand; a small stream fell down the cliff at one end of the beach, plunging into a pool from which an overflow ran through the rocks to the sea. Near it and close to the cliff face she found shelter of a sort where two huge boulders leaned close together, their tops touching to form a dead cave. The back of it was formed of debris, smaller rocks and soil, that had fallen from the cliff, probably loosened by the fall of the boulders.

Like Spock, she was fully confident of rescue within a relatively short time, but she knew that it would probably take two or three days. The beamdown point was many hundred miles inland; even although the ship only had to search for readings alien to the continent, it would surely take a little while to find them all, if they were all as far from the landing site as she appeared to be.

Resigned to a boring few days, she began to search the plant debris littering the tideline to see if she could find anything that would help keep her warm during the night.

Verris sat on a small island of dry land staring gloomily over the swampy ground that separated him from the tree-clad hills that he could see barely a mile away.

They might as well have been a thousand miles away.

As he had discovered, the swamp was very, very soft and very, very treacherous. He was wet and covered with mud to the waist, evidence of his attempt to negotiate the swamp. He had only barely managed to struggle back to the safety of the little patch of higher ground.

He shivered slightly, wishing that the wind would blow the clouds away and let the sun break through to dry his wet trousers.

He could do nothing but sit still and wait. As he waited, he reached out absently and picked some berries from a nearby plant, and



slipped them into his mouth.

Maris ducked away from the enraged attack of a pair of birds as she tried to decide where the nest they were defending was hidden. Not that she could go far to avoid them; the island she was on was barely half a mile across. She dodged the irate birds again, moving a little further away from the shore of the island, past a tiny spring.

She was almost totally across the island before the birds stopped chasing her, and even then one of them stayed threateningly airborne.

She found shelter of a sort under a tree. At least the branches helped to hide her from the bird, and from that doubtful sanctuary she studied what she could see of the mainland several miles away across a choppy sea - a mainland of cliffs, she thought.

It was too far to swim, she decided immediately. Even if the water had been flat calm, it was too far to swim. No; she was stuck here, with a very limited range, until a search found her. It was a pity about the birds; if they had not been there, it would have been quite a pleasant place to spend a day or two, small though it was.

Watching the bird through the branches of the tree as it soared overhead, she hoped it would not take too long.

It was getting very cold.

Kirk shivered, slapping his arms round himself in a vain attempt to keep warm while he desperately thought over the survival routines taught at the Academy.

Unfortunately, none of them covered this situation. Academy survival exercises - and some of them had been pretty grim - had all assumed that the stranded crewmen would have *some* equipment or be in an environment where essentials could be fabricated from the natural resources of the land. Here he had neither.

He glanced up at the sun, dropping now towards the horizon. It would be dark soon - and with the dark the cold would intensify. And he couldn't just stand around until he froze.

He looked around again.

He couldn't remember ever seeing a land so empty.

The ground undulated gently, apparently uniformly covered with snow; the surface was unrelievedly smooth. There was no place he could see that offered shelter. Yet he must have shelter if he was to survive.

A vague memory stirred. Shelter... in snow...

A hole! He must dig a hole...

Almost frantically, he began to scrabble in the snow, finding that it was not easy to dig with cold hands. He had expected the snow to be reasonably soft - his feet had sunk two or three inches

into it - but it was surprisingly firm, and he made slow progress.

The sun was touching the horizon when he realised that he would never manage to dig a big enough hole before dark, and turned his attention to the heap of snow he had scooped out. Half a shelter would be better than none; he could shape this snow into a wall, and give himself a windbreak.

Half an hour later, in the half dark, he crouched in the semicircle of snow wall that he had built, his arms wrapped round his knees as he curled into a ball, trying to keep his internal organs as warm as possible.

As the last dim light faded he resigned himself to a long, cold wait. Scott would order a search, of course, when the landing party missed its evening call-in; but he was aware that he must have been moved further east. Evening would not come to their beamdown point for some hours.

He began to shiver. Movement would help him keep warm, but it would also tire him. And in the dark he could easily stumble into an unseen crevasse.

Somewhere far away some unnamed creature howled and was answered by another, more distant, howl.

When he got back to the ship, he would organise survival courses, not like the Academy ones with even minimal facilities, but ones where the participants were alone and with no equipment at all.

How had he reached this Arctic desert? The only logical answer was that the telekinetic hominids, who had now betrayed their existence, had moved him - and possibly the others as well - because they were getting too warm.

The others! For the first time he realised that the other members of the landing party might be stranded in this waste as well.

Yet there had been no sign of anyone else anywhere within his range of vision. If the others were here, worrying about them was futile; they were so far away from him that there was no way he could help them.

Telling himself that and making himself believe it were two different things. He *ought* to be able to help them!

His eyes drifted shut. He was beginning to feel very sleepy. He forced them open. Whatever else he did, he must not sleep. In this cold, sleep was almost synonymous with death.

How had the hominids managed to separate him from his communicator? And... the fact that they had done so proved quite positively that they were advanced enough to know what a communicator was.

That was... quite interesting.

One thing... was certain, he thought. Whatever... has moved me, it was... not a... transporter. I would... recognise a... transporter effect... even though... it was... an... alien... one...

His eyes drooped shut again. With an effort he forced them open, then they drooped again. *Just for... a moment, he thought.*

Just... for... a moment... to... to rest... my... eyes...

The creature in the distance howled again. Kirk did not hear it.

If they had known, their disappearance was noted much faster than they had expected. Chekov, manning the bridge sensor, had been monitoring the beamdown area in the hope of detecting another sign of the Human reading that had been registered, and had been instantly aware of the loss of readings.

"Mr. Scott!"

"Aye, laddie?"

"The landing party... it's vanished, sir!"

"What?" Scott was on his feet instantly, and crossed to the computer station. Chekov stood aside to give him access to the sensors. Scott studied the readings for some moments, then grunted and made a fine adjustment to the reading.

"Have another look now and tell me what you think."

Chekov glanced at him, puzzled, then returned his attention to the sensor. He studied the readings carefully, then looked up.

"It looks as if the people in the landing party put their tricorders and communicators down before they... before they were taken away."

"Aye. It does." He went back to the command chair and punched the intercom. "Scott to transporter room... there are some loose tricorders and communicators at the beamdown point. Bring them up."

"Aye, sir." There was a brief silence, then, "We've got them, sir."

"Anything odd about them?"

"No sir."

Scott rubbed the back of his neck. "Acknowledged. Scott out." He went back to join Chekov.

"Mr. Scott, do you think the Captain has been taken to the same place as the children?" Chekov asked.

"What?" Scott stared at the young navigator. "I think... No. It's not likely. If whoever kidnapped the children wanted adults too they could have taken some of the colonists. They didn't. No, I think they've moved our landing party somewhere else, to get them out of the way. So - widen the scan. We know that there's only one Vulcan and one Andorian on that planet, so look for their readings first."

"How far will I scan?"

"How do I know, laddie? We don't know what the teleporters' range is. Just scan out in a spiral and keep looking until you find something."

"There's no chance that they've been transported away by... say, Klingons?"

"Not unless they can transport through the planet," Scott told him. "If there was a Klingon ship in orbit to do that, we'd be able to detect it."

"Aye, sir." Chekov looked quite subdued.

He bent over the sensor again. Scott watched him for some moments, then returned to the command chair.

It took quite a long time. Several hours passed, and Scott was slumped gloomily in the Captain's chair when Chekov turned. "Mr. Scott, I've found Mr. Spock."

"Give his co-ordinates to the transporter room." He hit the intercom button. "Transporter room! Prepare to beam Mr. Spock up from the co-ordinates Mr. Chekov is currently feeding into the computer."

"Aye, sir." Kyle's voice sounded cheerfully optimistic. There was a brief pause, then, "Mr. Spock had been beamed aboard."

"Are ye all right, Mr. Spock?" Scott asked.

"Affirmative, Mr. Scott. What of the other members of the landing party?"

"None of them are where ye beamed down. We looked for you first because Vulcan readings were going to be easier to pick up. Chekov's extending the search now. I take it none of them were near you?" Even as he spoke, Scott knew it was an unnecessary question.

"That is correct, Mr. Scott," Spock confirmed. "I would suggest that Mr. Chekov concentrates first on inhospitable environments. Since I was transported into a desert, where one's chances of extended survival might be considered slim, it is logical to assume that all members of the landing party were taken to equally hostile areas."

Scott glanced over at Chekov. "Did ye hear that, laddie?"

"Yes, sir. Complying."

"I'll be right up, Mr. Scott," Spock said. The intercom clicked off.

If the bridge crew didn't know that Spock had been found in a desert, they would never have realised it from his appearance. He looked almost as immaculate as he usually did, and gave no indication that he was feeling in any way distressed from the hours he had spent in the desert, yet he had not even taken time to go for a drink. The Humans were all well aware that if any of them had been subjected to such an ordeal they would be desperately thirsty, and probably barely conscious by now.

He crossed straight to the computer sensor, gesturing Scott to remain in the command chair, and Chekov made way for him with a

silent sigh of relief.

"I haven't detected any other readings yet, sir," he said as Spock bent over the sensor.

Spock nodded acknowledgement, his hands already busy on the controls. After a moment, he raised his head. "I have co-ordinates for Ms. Thekar and one of the Humans," he announced, and fed them into the computer.

Scott punched the intercom. "Transporter room - retrieve members of the landing party from the co-ordinates Mr. Spock has just fed into the computer."

"Aye, sir," came the response. A moment later Kyle's voice sounded again. "We've got Ms. Thekar and Dr. Maris."

Spock ignored the report and continued to study the sensors intently, but it was some minutes before he detected another reading.

This time Kyle reported Verris's safe arrival while Spock continued to search, apparently calmly but with increasing inner anxiety. Where was Kirk?

Nearly half an hour passed before Spock finally detected another reading; faint, barely detectable, but definitely Human. He fed the co-ordinates into the computer, then turned and walked briskly from the bridge while Scott gave the order to energize.

Kirk shimmered into view just as Spock walked into the transporter room. The Captain was curled into a ball and lay unmoving on the platform.

Spock leaned over the unconscious man, checking him quickly. He tried to straighten him out gently, but even unconscious Kirk still clung to his legs, holding himself in a ball. Spock was compelled to use force to release the desperate grip.

Kyle moved over. "Is... is he dead, Mr. Spock?"

Spock scooped his Captain up in his arms. "No, Mr. Kyle, but he is close to death. Warn sickbay." He strode out.

Maris was waiting for him when he entered sickbay. "Put him on the bed," she told him. She glanced at the diagnostic screen. "He's suffering from severe hypothermia," she said. Chapel hurried over with a thermal blanket and Maris helped her to spread it over the unconscious man as Spock nodded. He would have been surprised if Kirk had not been suffering from hypothermia after spending fully eight hours in an Arctic climate without any protective clothing. "What about frostbite?" he asked.

With her patient warmly covered, Maris studied the readings again. "Yes, there's frostbite," she confirmed. "I can't say yet how severe, but I don't think the period of exposure was enough to cause any permanent damage. We'll let him warm up naturally, I think..."

"How long before he regains consciousness?" Spock demanded.

"I don't know," Maris admitted. "Hypothermia is a funny thing.

Different people have different reactions, different recovery times. He could recover inside a couple of hours; it might take much longer."

"I see."

Maris thought she detected a dry note in Spock's voice. "Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy would give you exactly the same answer," she said defensively.

"Yes," Spock said. If he had been Human he would have sighed. "I have no doubt that he would." He admitted to himself that it would probably have been in many more words. "I had no intention of denigrating your ability, Doctor." *But McCoy would recognise the concern that I cannot express openly and use those words to reassure me. You can't do that.*

He turned towards the door. "Let me know when there is any change in his condition. I will be on the bridge."

On the bridge, he returned immediately to the computer sensors. He focused on the area where they had beamed down, and resolutely setting his worry about Kirk to the back of his mind, he concentrated on studying the readings.

The readings told him nothing. The area seemed to be deserted; the only creatures around were a few mouflette. He concentrated the sensors on the cliffs, but could detect only what he already knew, that the limestone cliffs were riddled with caves. But he could detect no sign of life in those caves.

He smothered a sigh, reflecting ruefully on this all-too-Human habit that he was picking up, and extended the range of his scanning. Nothing.

He sat back in his chair, thinking. They had detected a Human reading - briefly - in that area. *It had to come from somewhere*, he reminded himself.

If they held to the logical assumption that any Humans on that continent were the children who had disappeared, they must be prisoners, kept somewhere where their readings could not be easily detected. It was possible that the reading they had detected had been that of one of the Human children - and some of the hominids - who had somehow managed to escape but had been almost immediately recaptured.

Logically therefore they must be someplace close to the spot where the landing party had beamed down. That was confirmed by the way in which the members of the landing party had been transported to other parts of the continent. The kidnappers had made a mistake doing that; it had removed any doubts that Spock might have had of the validity of Kirk's hypothesis.

The cave system seemed an obvious hiding place given the level of technology of the planet; but the readings seemed to indicate that the caves were empty.

So - where else could the kidnappers be?

Perhaps the tricorder readings the landing party had taken

before they were so rudely removed from the area might reveal something. He headed off in search of the tricorders.

He ran them to ground in the science lab and settled down to study the readings carefully. Maris's results covered the ground that they had seen, and he put that tape aside almost immediately. Verris's readings showed trees and part of the cliff; nothing of interest. Thekar's, however, after covering some of the wooded ground, showed a long, low hill about half a mile from the cliff, overgrown with low shrubs and tangled grasses.

Spock studied the reading carefully. There was something about the appearance of the hill that drew his attention. It had a symmetrical quality that reminded him of something. The reading showed solid rock, but a tricorder was not as powerful as the sensors.

He moved to the lab sensor and focused it onto the landing site. Then he widened the field, searching for the hill.

From above, the symmetrical nature of the hill was even more marked. It was like a huge square, with sides fully a quarter of a mile long.

There was no way that nature could produce a square like that. A circle, yes - but not a square. It had to be artificial, and from the overgrown state of the place it was very old.

Yet building of that kind was far beyond the capability of a race of hominids as primitive as the natives of Doranna appeared to be.

Spock frowned, not sure that he liked the implications.

He focused on the hill and studied it carefully. Yes - it was artificial and it was indeed quite old - several thousand years old, and not surprisingly it was in less than perfect condition.

It seemed to be shielded; he was unable to detect anything below the surface rock. He concentrated on examining the surface.

Finally Spock decided that the shielding was accidental; an intrinsic quality of the rock that had been used to build the structure. The walls seemed to be very thick - fully ten feet thick in places, and in others, even more.

He began mapping the layout of the place, and it slowly took form; it started to look more and more like an ancient walled city. Yet - given the level of development of the planet - that was impossible. Unless, of course, it had been colonised at some time, several thousand years ago, by a race that had chosen this place to build in order to avoid disturbing the hominids too much - it was, after all, still several hundred miles north of the nearest concentration of migrating natives, and if the accepted average rate of spread - some twenty miles per generation - was continued, it would still be the best part of another thousand years before the hominids reached it.

He was buried so deeply in considering the problem that when he was interrupted by the intercom, it took him some seconds to realise what the persistent, slightly distorted sound was.

"Spock here."

"Sickbay here, Mr. Spock. Would you report here as soon as possible, please." He did not recognise the slightly strained voice, but knew that it did not belong to either Maris or Chapel.

"On my way."

Was Maris simply checking up on his condition, or was something wrong with Kirk? He feared the latter, and hurried.

The moment he entered sickbay he knew that his fears were reality. Maris and Chapel were both bending over Kirk's bed and even as the door slid shut behind him another nurse hurried over to the bed with a hypo.

Spock waited until Maris had injected Kirk and straightened. "Doctor? What has happened?"

"The Captain's had a relapse," Maris said bluntly. "The chilling he got - the pleurisy's back and worse than last time, even though we've caught it quickly again."

"I see." Spock looked down at the still unconscious Human as Maris went on.

"There is some frostbite, but it's not serious."

"I think we'd better call Dr. McCoy up this time," Spock said slowly. "Not that I doubt your skill, Doctor, but -"

"I quite agree," Maris said. She was well aware of what Spock meant, and would gladly have called McCoy in to check on Kirk a couple of days earlier.

Spock went straight to the transporter room, and had himself beamed down to the main Dorannan settlement. A single enquiry was sufficient to give him directions to Dr. Revisec's house and he made for it without delay.

It was McCoy himself who answered Spock's knock, and he looked at the Vulcan in some surprise.

"Spock? Is something wrong?"

"Yes and no, Doctor. First of all, how is your daughter?"

"Who is it, Dad?"

The voice sounded strained, and the woman who appeared at one of the three inner doors looked tense, worried - as if she was living on her nerves - and very tired, as if she had not slept properly for too long. When she saw Spock, she made an obvious attempt to cover her distress. "Oh. You must be Mr. Spock. Have... have you found anything?"

The urge to say something optimistic lasted only for a moment. Even Spock realised that false hope disappointed could be worse than no hope at all, and indeed he had nothing truly hopeful to say. "We are investigating a possibility, Mrs. Revisec, but so far we have discovered nothing positive. I'm... sorry. I came down to have a word with your father."

"Yes, of course." She was holding herself together, but only just; even Spock could recognise that it would take very little to

shatter her fragile control. She looked at her father. "I'll wait in the bedroom; you can take Mr. Spock into the living room." She disappeared through one of the other doors, and McCoy gestured Spock into the room she had just left.

It was quite a small room, comfortably furnished, and in one corner was a child's playpen, with a box of brightly coloured blocks of either wood or plastic inside it. A small stuffed animal sat on one of the chairs - Spock recognised it as a teddy bear, although it was an improbable pale blue in colour. He looked at it, then at McCoy, who shrugged.

"Jiri and I have tried to persuade Jo to put Len's things away, even just into his room," he said. "But she won't." He gestured Spock to a seat at one side of an open fireplace and sank into its partner on the opposite side of the hearth. The Vulcan watched him, realising for the first time that McCoy, too, looked very tired.

"I would have thought that having them constantly present would be too much of a reminder..."

"It is, but she's got it into her head that if she puts his things away, she's - well - closing the door on him, on his chances of being found. That as long as his things are lying around, he'll be back." He looked at Spock with a shadow of a glare. "And don't bother telling me that's illogical."

"I need not, Doctor; you know it is as well as I do." Spock took a deep breath. "I came down because the Captain is ill."

"What?" McCoy, who had clearly relaxed for the first time since beaming down, straightened abruptly.

"Dr. Maris has been extremely proficient, but circumstances have caused a relapse; the Captain is currently suffering from pleurisy for the second time in a few days - "

McCoy was on his feet before Spock had finished speaking and heading for the door. He pulled it open. "Jo!"

"Yes, Dad?" She appeared from the bedroom so quickly that she must have been hovering near the door, probably just waiting for Spock to leave.

"Jo, Captain Kirk is ill. I've got to go up to the Enterprise to see to him, but I'll be right back, I promise."

"That's... that's all right, Dad." Spock could see how much of an effort she was making to maintain her control. She was not, he decided, playing for sympathy. The mystery of the disappearances, the not knowing what had happened to her son, was almost too much for her.

McCoy pulled out his communicator. "Enterprise! Lock on to my transmission. Two to beam up."

As they shimmered out of sight Jo Revisec crossed to the teddy bear. She picked it up and sank into the seat clutching it.

Alone, with nobody to see, she abandoned control and allowed the tears to flow.

As they left the transporter room for sickbay McCoy realised that Spock was hiding a limp, and decided that although he was here to attend to Kirk, he must take time to do a check on Spock, too.

"What happened to Jim?" he asked as they headed along the corridor.

"It's a long story, Doctor," Spock said almost gloomily. "I didn't tell your daughter the whole truth; we suspect that the answer to the problem lies on the other continent - " He gave the doctor a quick resume of events, finishing just as they reached sickbay.

McCoy hurried to Kirk's bedside and studied the diagnostic readings. He grunted and reached for the unconscious wrist as Maris came through from the office.

"What medication did you give him?" McCoy asked.

"For the pleurisy? The first time, ronomyalin," Maris replied. "10ccs to start with, then 5ccs every three hours for forty-eight hours. He was back to light duty when we beamed down again, and he'd have been all right if he'd been transported anywhere but an arctic region. When we retrieved him from there we just wrapped him up in a thermal blanket for the hypothermia and let him warm up naturally. The frostbite wasn't severe enough to require additional treatment."

McCoy nodded. "Yes, I agree," he said. "What did you give him for the pleurisy this time?"

"I decided it would be better to change the medication, and gave him 10ccs of amphetillin," Maris said. "With another 10 prescribed for every five hours."

"That sounds about right," he agreed. "Now, what about Mr. Spock?"

"His ankle was badly twisted, and I've kept it bound up. I kept him off duty for twenty four hours, but with the Captain ill too..."

"Yes, I know," McCoy growled. He ran a worried hand through his hair. Every instinct bade him stay at Kirk's bedside until he was sure that his friend was fully recovered, but they also told him to go back to Doranna to his daughter. He glanced over to the bed where Shacter lay, looking slightly bored with the prolonged inaction. "What about Mr. Shacter?"

Maris told him, adding, "I'm releasing him to his quarters tomorrow. He can go back onto light duties the day after."

"Could you bring Mrs. Revisec up to the Enterprise?" Spock asked from his position at the other side of Kirk's bed, instinctively realising McCoy's dilemma.

McCoy frowned. "I doubt she'd come. She's got this fixed idea that she's got to stay in the house in case Len reappears as suddenly as he disappeared. She really ought to be working, but the hospital has given her leave of absence on medical grounds. If she hadn't been given it, she'd have resigned. I suspect she might anyway, when - if - Len - the missing children - are found. She'll be scared to let him out of her sight again for a long, long time. And she's not

the only one. The Dorannans, especially the women, have made quite a change in their style of life this last few months; I suspect that change is going to last for a long time - at least for the ones whose children have disappeared."

"I would like to be able to say when, Doctor," Spock said softly. "But we still cannot be sure of why the children were kidnapped."

"You mean you think they're dead?" McCoy said bluntly.

"I fear they might be. Apart from the one reading we picked up, we can't find any trace of Human readings on that other continent."

McCoy's eyes were fixed on the readings above the bed, but Spock was fairly sure that the doctor was not seeing them. "Spock, why would anyone want to kidnap children just to kill them?"

"A good question, Doctor. But then - as we have already asked - why would anyone want to kidnap such young children in the first place?"

A soft moan drew their attention to the bed between them. Kirk was stirring slightly. As they watched, his eyes opened slowly, blinking in the light.

"Jim?"

Kirk's eyes focused on McCoy. He looked from the doctor to the Vulcan and back to the doctor again.

"Bones?"

"We thought it best to call Dr. McCoy to the ship to check on your condition, Captain," Maris put it.

"What about Mrs. Revisec?" Kirk asked hoarsely.

"She understood," Spock said. Kirk looked slightly doubtful. He began to push himself up, and McCoy promptly pushed him flat again.

"Just you lie still, Jim - you can't afford to take any chances right now," he said. "Dr. Maris prescribes at least two days bed rest, and I agree."

"We can't afford to lose two days!" Kirk exclaimed, wincing as his forceful exhalation irritated tender tissues despite the pain-killers he had been given. "Our time here is limited - "

"Your time will be even more limited if you don't give yourself a proper chance to recover from this little incident," McCoy told him bluntly. "You've already pushed your strength, going back down there when you were barely over your soaking - " he chose not to go into the details, which Kirk knew better than he - "and if you keep on like that you'll end up straining your heart. Now you know what that means - dicky heart equals shore posting."

"All right, all right," Kirk growled. "You've made your point. But Bones - we must have been close, really close, to finding out what's been happening; I was whipped away from the landing site as neatly as the kids were kidnapped, taken miles away and dumped. I suppose the same thing happened to the others in the landing party?"



Yes?" as Spock nodded. "That wouldn't have happened unless we were treading hard on the kidnappers' heels."

"Yes - you were all dumped," McCoy snapped. "From what Spock tells me, you were all dumped in as hostile an environment as possible. Don't tell me that wasn't an attempt to kill you all."

Kirk frowned slightly. "No, I don't think it was. If they'd wanted to kill us, they'd have dropped us a hundred miles out to sea. I think they were warning us; sort of "Look what we can do; keep away." We can't afford to let them off with that. We have Federation nationals on this planet. Dammit, the kids that were kidnapped are Federation nationals! We have to look after our own - we have to be seen to look after our own. Besides - if these people are that advanced, we should be trying to make contact with them."

"It would seem that they do not want contact," Spock pointed out.

"We should try to make some kind of contact," Kirk insisted. "Even if we came to an agreement with them that we leave them alone and they leave us alone, it would be something."

"Captain," put in Shacter, who had been lying silently listening to the exchange, "can we be sure that these beings are all that advanced? They might be as primitive as Warra's race, but just have that one ability that makes them seem advanced."

"I don't know," Kirk replied dispiritedly.

"They might also continue to refuse contact by teleporting away anyone who goes near them," Spock reminded him.

"I think we still have to try," Kirk said quietly.

On Kirk's promise to follow Maris's instructions without insisting that he was better than he actually was, McCoy returned to the surface. He would worry, he knew, for he did not altogether trust Kirk's word; he knew that Kirk would totally disregard both his promise and Maris's medical instructions if he thought he had a chance, no matter how slim, of making the contact with the kidnappers that he considered so vital. However, Spock was there and could be trusted to keep a watchful eye on his Captain. And Jo really did need to have someone around all of the time if she was not to succumb to the guilt-depression that threatened.

He found his daughter staring listlessly out of a window. She didn't move as he entered, and he stopped, looking at her anxiously.

"Jo?"

She jumped, and he realised that she had been a long, long way away.

"Oh! Dad. How... how is Captain Kirk?"

"Recovering nicely. I'm glad Spock had the sense to call me, but Verna Maris is perfectly competent; she's given him exactly the same treatment I would have done."

"What exactly happened to him?"

He hesitated, realising that she was only making conversation, then said, "Jim got soaked and developed pleurisy."

"That's nasty," she said with an effort. Then, after a moment, "Did... did Mr. Spock say anything to you about the search?"

Torn between honesty and the wish not to raise false hopes, he replied, "Well... they're following up something, but so far it's mostly guesswork, I'm afraid."

Her shoulders drooped. "I know, Dad. That's all we can do, isn't it - guess."

"I'm sorry, Jo."

The sound of the outside door opening interrupted them. She straightened, so that when her husband joined them she gave the impression of control.

To McCoy's professional eye, Jiri Revisec looked tired - and as strained as his wife. He crossed to a chair and sank into it.

"There's been another disappearance," he said flatly.

"Oh, no!" Jo exclaimed before he could say anything more, her voice horrified, her eyes filling with sympathetic tears. "Who?"

He pushed his hair off his forehead. "Tina Shendark," he replied. "But this time..." He hesitated. "This time, her mother vanished too."

His wife and his father-in-law stared at him, the one in shock mixed with near envy - wherever Laura Shendark was, presumably it was with her baby daughter - the other with a too-clear memory of the way in which the Enterprise's landing party had been scattered, with most of them dumped in an environment that could only be described as inhospitable - if one was disposed to be charitable - and had almost proved fatal to one of them.

"Are there any details?" McCoy asked.

Revisec shook his head. "Curly Shendark was busy in the garden while his wife was getting a meal ready. He could hear her talking to Tina. Then she stopped speaking, in mid-word he said. He called to her and when she didn't answer he went in. Both she and Tina had gone."

McCoy pulled out the communicator that it was second nature for him to carry. "McCoy to Enterprise."

The answer came immediately. "Enterprise. Uhura here."

"McCoy. There's been another disappearance."

There were background voices, then Spock's deep voice. "Acknowledged, Doctor. We picked up the disappearance. It seemed to be a double one."

"Yes - the mother was taken too."

There was a split second of silence before Spock replied, and McCoy knew that he had understood the silent message. "It would appear that our kidnappers are getting more daring. Thank you,

Doctor." The channel clicked shut.

The moment the channel was closed, Spock gestured to the sensors. "Mr. Chekov - extended search of the second continent."

Chekov was already on his way to the science station. "Aye, Mr. Spock."

Uhura looked at the Vulcan, her observant eyes noting the minute signs of worry. "You think the mother might have been stranded the way you all were?" she asked.

"It seems almost certain." His failure to quote any sort of odds told the bridge crew with brutal clarity how worried he actually was. "It may be that the kidnappers did not realise that they could move anything as big as an adult until they teleported the landing party - the life forms of this planet are all quite small. I suspect the kidnapper wanted the child and took the mother as well because she was there. Having an adult close at hand has been a defence until now; now it seems they have realised how easily they can get rid of anything even as big as a Human female."

"So that in trying to help we might actually have made things worse?" Uhura asked, startled.

"It is a possibility we must consider," Spock replied gravely, and headed for the turbolift. "You have the con, Lieutenant."

He had doubts about reporting this latest disappearance to Kirk, but he knew that the Captain would never forgive him if he failed to do so.

Kirk received the news in grim silence. Spock could almost see his mind working as he considered this new development.

Finally, he said, "Do you think that moving us gave them the idea?"

"I think it... possible," Spock said quietly, not entirely surprised that Kirk's mind should have worked in the same way his did.

"You're searching, of course?"

"Of course. Mr. Chekov is extremely competent with the sensors."

"We've got to go down again," Kirk said. "Only this time, a bigger landing party. Try to stretch them too far."

"Not yet, Captain," Spock said urgently. "Two days - "

"Spock, in two days that woman could be dead!"

"Jim, killing yourself will not help her - or anyone else. If Mr. Chekov cannot find her, a landing party over-stretching the kidnappers will accomplish nothing. If they have teleported her to some other part of the continent, she is already there. Over-stretching them will not bring her back."

Kirk stared at him, horror dawning in his eyes as he realised the truth of Spock's comment.

Her head nearly brushing the ceiling, Laura Shendark shrank back, clutching baby Tina so tightly that she began to whimper with the discomfort, as she stared in horror at the lightly-furred, mouflette-wool clad figure that stood before her, arms outstretched to take the baby.

"No!" she gasped. "No! Tina's mine!"

"Auntie Laura..."

Startled, she looked past the not-quite-five-foot high hominid. "Pete!" She wasn't actually his aunt - his mother was her cousin - but in the close-knit society of Doranna, where so many of the population were related in some degree, first cousins were regarded as being almost as close kin as brothers and sisters.

Pete Davie began to move towards her, but was stopped by another of the hominids, who caught his arm, uttering some soft sounds. He answered, and Laura remembered that he had had several months to learn the language - and that children were notoriously quick learners of foreign languages. The hominid spoke again, and Pete, with rebellion in every line of his body, moved slowly away, drawing her attention to more Human children crouching on the ground - and, with them, more hominids - hominids that even her inexperienced eye could see were different from the one facing her. Both the Human children and these different hominids were wearing the same kind of mouflette-wool clothes as the taller natives - armless, fairly loose one-piece tunics that fell from shoulder to mid-thigh. Some of the older Human boys had retained their trousers, the legs of which showed under the tunics in an incongruous fashion that, in other circumstances, might have made her laugh. Most were barefoot.

Several hominids who were clearly of the same species as the one facing her were standing round the children. One of them was holding a Human infant in a grasp that looked oddly maternal. Laura saw the child's dark skin and realised that this was M'sura N'Goma. M'sura had been only half weaned when he vanished, and looked thin and ailing in spite of the obvious care the hominid was giving him.

She clutched Tina even tighter as the hominid facing her took a step closer. "No!" she gasped again. "Tina's mine!"

The hominid spoke then, a series of incomprehensible sounds. Laura licked her lips nervously.

Although he was only four - no, touching five now - Pete Davie was an intelligent child. "Pete, what does it want?" she managed.

"She wants Tina, Auntie Laura."

"Why?"

"They don't have any babies of their own," he replied simply.

"Pete, can you tell them that Tina is so young she can't eat anything but milk? If they take Tina away from me, she'll die - she'll starve to death."

Pete dodged past one of the hominids who tried to stop him, and ran to the one facing Laura. He spoke in the soft, musical language and the hominid replied. He looked back at Laura. "Assha says she knows. She says she will look after Tina now. When Tina is hungry, she will get you to feed her. That's why they brought you here too. To feed Tina."

"What about M'sura? And there was another baby just a few months old taken too," Laura asked.

"Anneli's sick," Pete said. "Sicker than M'sura. They chew the food first before they give it to the babies, but all babies need milk too, don't they?"

Laura sighed as she nodded. The two babies were probably starving to death. If she could feed them, keep them alive, she must.

"Pete, if I give them Tina, will they let me feed the other babies?"

There was a brief exchange then Pete said, "Yes."

Still reluctantly, she handed Tina over to the eager hominid, then pushed past it to go to the one holding M'sura N'Goma. Even as she took the child, another hominid came out of the shadows carrying Anneli. Moments later, with one baby sucking hungrily at each breast, she knew that whatever the cost, she must stay here without attempting to escape, and do everything she could to keep the two babies alive, in the desperate hope that the authorities would eventually discover where they were and find some way to rescue them.

Chekov straightened himself as his relief tapped his shoulder and cautiously unkinked a back that was stiff from the hours he had spent bent over the sensor. He gave an involuntary grunt as he stretched protesting muscles, and Sulu, who had taken over the command chair almost an hour earlier, swung round from his unrewarding study of the viewscreen.

"Found something, Pav?"

"No - just stiff." He stretched again, slightly less cautiously, and grunted again, this time with relief. "Ah - that's better." He turned back to Bob Leslie, wondering fleetingly - as he always did - why the one twin should have gone in for science while the other seemed perfectly content in Security. Someone had once suggested - not in their hearing - that Bob had inherited all the brains, leaving Dick just stupid enough to have chosen security as a career; Chekov's own opinion was that Dick was just as intelligent as his brother, but possibly had less ambition; though having formulated an opinion did nothing to keep him from continued speculation each time he saw either of them.

"I've checked out all the places where we picked up the landing party," he said. "They were all blank. Since then I've been doing a steady scan of the continent. I haven't found any sign of a Human reading, alive or dead."

Leslie nodded and replaced Chekov at the sensor. The navigator stretched once more and headed for the turbolift.

When he left it, it was to make for sickbay, planning to spend a few minutes visiting Shacter before going for a meal. It would also give him the opportunity to report to the Captain without making it obvious that he was doing so; McCoy might accept that Kirk would rest easier when he was in receipt of frequent status reports, but Chekov knew that Maris did *not* understand the Captain's almost obsessive need to be in touch, his total inability to relax if he was kept incommunicado.

He stuck his head round the door, hoping that Maris might be off duty this late, only to see her fussing round Kirk's bed. Somewhat to his surprise, there was no sign of the First Officer. He heaved a silent sigh and said, "Doctor."

Maris swung round. "Well, Mr. Chekov?" She did not sound too encouraging.

"Can I have a word with Dave Shacter?" he asked.

She looked suspiciously at him, and nodded in the security lieutenant's direction. Shacter was still sitting up but looked as if he might be settling down for the night at any moment. Chekov crossed to him.

"How are you, Dave?"

"Getting a bit bored," Shacter told him. "But I'm getting out of here in the morning. Dr. Maris isn't passing me fit for duty till the day after, though." They both knew that if she hadn't been there he would have referred to her in far less respectful terms; she had her job to do and an exacting superior to answer to if anything did go wrong, but Shacter was now of the opinion that she was overdoing the caution by more than a trifle.

"That's good news." Without turning, Chekov gave an almost infinitesimal nod of his head towards Kirk, who was lying with his eyes closed.

Shacter made a slight face that said *not good*, then said, "How're things going?"

Chekov sighed. "How much have you actually heard about what's happening?"

"Mr. Spock came in and told the Captain that another baby's disappeared, and the mother with it. They thought the mother might have been moved to get rid of her."

"That was ages ago. I've been looking for her ever since we heard about it. Nothing. Not a trace."

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing at all. Dave, I've scanned that continent so thoroughly that I swear I'm beginning to recognise individual trees. I could pinpoint for you any one of a thousand tribes of the hominids. But there isn't one Human reading down there, and I'd bet my career on it."

The sound of brisk feet crossing the floor attracted his attention and he glanced round to see Maris disappearing into the CMO's office. As the door closed behind her, he looked over at Kirk.

The Captain lay unmoving, and Chekov realised that he was in a probably drugged sleep. "Let him know if you can," he muttered. Shacter nodded. "How is he, anyway?" Chekov added, the anxiety that all the crew was feeling about their Captain clear in his voice.

Shacter glanced over at the office door, but it remained reassuringly shut. "He'll be all right," he said, "but Spock must have been worried about him - he got Ol' Blue Eyes up to check him, and the Dragon didn't resent it at all - she practically kissed him when he walked in." He grinned slightly, and added, "You could almost see her preening herself when McCoy told her he'd have given the skipper the same treatment she did."

Chekov grinned too. "It can't be easy for junior doctors working under McCoy," he commented thoughtfully. "No matter how experienced they are, they must be aware all the time of McCoy's reputation." He looked over at Kirk again. "How long is she keeping him in?"

"A couple of days anyway. The Captain wasn't too happy about it - he wanted to go straight down again - but Spock backed her."

Chekov frowned. "But the last time a landing party went down everyone was transported away from the beamdown point -"

"Exactly."

Kirk looked around the group in the briefing room. It consisted of the usual landing party, restored to full strength again, plus the Chief Engineer. All six faces wore much the same worried, puzzled expression that he knew was on his own face.

"I think we can be fairly sure that our last beamdown point is close to wherever our kidnappers are," he said slowly. "They wouldn't have been so keen to get rid of us otherwise. At the same time... Mr. Spock?"

Spock pushed a cassette into the viewer beside him. "I have spent the last two days studying the area - that includes the tricorder records that were made at the time of our last landing.

"At that time we thought that the kidnappers might have lived in the caves we detected. Now I believe that those caves are not inhabited.

"There are clear indications of an artificial construction near the cliffs we saw. I would estimate this as the ruin of something that was erected several thousand years ago.

"I would hesitate to describe it as a town, for - large though it is - it all appears to be one continuous structure. I have compiled a diagram of the layout of its main walls." He flicked on the viewer and the diagram flickered into view. "The work involved in constructing this must have been tremendous," he went on. "At their thinnest the walls appear to be fully ten feet thick. The material of which they are built..." He hesitated. "The stone used for the building is not local, but I did discover a vein of it in the hills nearly four hundred miles to the south. There were also indications that that source had been quarried.

"What I was not able to find was any other similar structure,

although there are traces of possible foundations some distance away. I am therefore of the opinion that the beings who built that 'town' were immigrants, either colonists or refugees, possibly the survivors of a crash, who originated elsewhere, and may have tried building in another spot before moving here.

"The rock used for the building has a high mineral content that shields the interior from sensor probing. That shielding also makes it impossible for us to beam directly into the structure. But I am convinced that our answers lie within it."

"What we must therefore do," Kirk said, picking up the cue, "is find an entrance. There must be one."

"However, we cannot forget that we could be transported away from there a second time, just as easily as we were last time. I therefore propose to take certain precautions."

"Dr. Maris - you will implant subcutaneous transponders in all of us." He looked at Scott. "That is where you come in, Scotty. The transporter room will keep track of us at all times by means of the transponders. If by any chance you lose us, the transponder signal will alert you to our whereabouts immediately and you will then return us to the point from which we were removed. Of course, if we've been transported from inside the building, we'll have to be returned to the front door."

"We can't fight these beings with their own weapons, but if we can make them *think* we can..."

"Aye, sir," Scott breathed. "We'd be facing them on equal terms."

"Exactly." He looked round the anxious faces once more. "Any questions? No? Then we'll be on our way. Dr. Maris."

"It'll take me a few minutes to prepare for insertion of the transponders," she said. "If you would all report to sickbay in ten minutes?"

"Very good," Kirk said. "Carry on, Doctor."

Half an hour later, the transponders in place, the landing party assembled in the transporter room. Scott took his place at the console beside Transporter Chief Kyle as the landing party took up position on the platform.

"Energise," Kirk ordered quietly.

They materialised within sight of the cliff, Spock with his tricorder already poised and his eyes fixed on the readout.

"That way," he said, gesturing towards the trees.

Kirk set off briskly, the others close at his heels, Spock's attention still fixed on his tricorder.

They stopped at the base of the overgrown rock. Thekar and Verris examined it carefully - Spock remained intent on his tricorder readout. Shacter stared round at the innocent-looking countryside, every sense alert for any sound, any sight, that might indicate the

arrival of any other creature. Kirk watched the scientists; Maris kept her attention on Kirk.

Slowly, Thekar began to move in one direction while Verris moved in the other, scanning busily.

"Something!" Spock began. A moment later he found himself standing in a hot, humid forest, staring at a mouthful of sharp white teeth that snarled angrily. It was pure threat, he knew; he was much bigger, and carried much more mass, than the fox-like creature that crouched, glaring, at him. He took one step forward towards the animal, and it swung to one side and ran. Seconds later the transporter beam caught him and he rematerialised beside the artificial wall.

Kirk ducked, dodging the swooping seabirds, looking round for some sort of shelter, and muttering "Hurry up, Scotty!" He dodged a second attack and tripped over a stone. He had a bare moment to decide what to do; and decided that it would be best to relax and let himself fall.

He hit the ground at Spock's feet.

As Spock helped him up Shacter shimmered back; a moment later Verris rematerialised.

"It worked!" Kirk exclaimed as Thekar reappeared.

His communicator bleeped and he flicked it open. "Kirk here."

"Scott here," came the disembodied voice from the Enterprise. "We've lost Dr. Maris."

"What do you mean, lost Dr. Maris?" Kirk demanded.

"The signal from her transponder suddenly stopped, Captain. It might ha' malfunctioned, of course... but I've never heard of a transponder malfunctioning."

"There's always a first time," Kirk said gloomily. "Get someone to scan the continent for Human readings."

"Aye, sir. Scott out."

"May I point out that there is a more optimistic possibility?" Spock interrupted.

"What?" Kirk demanded.

"She might have been taken into the building."

"Why? We were all moved away last time; why suddenly kidnap one of us this time?"

"I would not care to speculate," Spock admitted gloomily.

Kirk pushed his hair back. "Well, they've made their move," he said, "and we've countered it - partly. There's nothing we can do down here for Dr. Maris, so let's go on. Spock - did you get a reading at all?"

"Yes, Captain. The readings match those we got when the child April vanished."



"Well, if we needed any more confirmation of our theory, we have it now.

"Ms. Thekar; Mr. Verris. Have you found anything?"

"I *may* have found an entrance," Thekar said slowly. She offered Spock her tricorder.

He took it and quickly rewound it; then he pressed the play button and began to watch the readout.

"Hmm." He raised his eyes from the tricorder and looked up at the grass-and-shrub covered mound. "Up there, Captain."

He pointed upwards. Kirk followed the pointing finger and saw a dark shadow. "Not a door," he said. "Not up there."

"No, not a door. It could be a window, however; or even just a ventilation shaft. But it *does* appear to be a method of entry for us." He handed the tricorder back to Thekar and began to feel cautiously for hand and foot holds. Beside him, Kirk, too, groped for holds.

It was easier than either man had expected. It would have been impossible when the building was new, but thousands of years of erosion had damaged the joins between the big blocks; plant roots had forced their way through tiny cracks, widening them; small pieces of stone had broken off, making space for bigger plants. There were plenty of good handholds, not quite so many good footholds. But there were still enough secure holds to permit them to climb up steadily. Shacter was just behind them; Verris and Thekar watched until they were about halfway up, and then followed.

Kirk reached the hole first and squeezed into it. He paused and flicked his communicator open.

"Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Uhura here."

"We're going... underground, Uhura. Odds are the transponder signal will be lost."

"Understood, sir. I'll tell Mr. Scott."

Kirk wriggled forward into the hole with Spock close at his heels and Shacter close behind him. Thekar and Verris followed, seconds behind.

The long tunnel opened into a dim corridor so low that it was impossible for any of them to stand upright. Spock swung his tricorder around.

"There seems to be something along there," he said, nodding to the left. "Moving this way," he added.

Kirk glanced along the corridor to the right, sniffing. The place smelt damp. There was no obvious hiding place, and he shrugged. "Maybe this is our chance to meet the kidnappers."

"No, Captain," Spock said as the reading became clearer. "A Human reading... and a hominid of Warra's race."

They looked at each other. A moment later, two small shapes ran round a corner in front of them, the leading one slightly smaller than the one behind.

There was a muffled gasp as the leading figure saw the group of tall shapes in front of it and stopped. His companion bumped into him.

"It's all right," Kirk said quickly. "We're here to help you."

"Can you take us home?" It was the voice of a young boy who would not admit that he was still just a child, and who was near to tears but would not allow them to fall for fear of being thought babyish, especially in front of strangers.

"I hope so," Kirk said. "What's your name?"

"Emil Gundorf. And this is my friend Uwua. He's been here nearly a year."

The hominid with Emil said, "Hullu."

The accent was so thick that it took Kirk a moment to realise what he had said. "Hello, Uwua," he replied.

"Uwua doesn't speak Standard very well," Emil said. "He does understand it, but he can't say some of the sounds."

"Can you speak Uwua's language?" Kirk asked.

"Yes, it's easy. It doesn't have many words. The At'tha have a harder language but I know it too. I can't speak to the half-men, though. They don't have a proper language."

"The At'tha?"

"Yes - the people who brought us here."

"The At'tha aren't Uwua's people, then?"

"No. He was kidnapped same as we were."

"Emil... do you know - is everyone who was taken away here? Are they all right?"

"Yes. M'sura and Anneli were sick, but since the At'tha brought Auntie Laura here they're getting better."

"Auntie Laura?"

"Mrs. Shendark. She's really Pete's auntie, but she told us we could all call her that."

"And who are M'sura and Anneli?"

"They're just babies. They needed milk."

"Oh." Kirk was silent for a moment, slightly taken aback. "Er... Emil - was another woman brought here today? Just a few minutes ago?"

"I don't know," Emil replied. "We managed to duck away early today. We got out once before with a couple of others, but we'd only

just got out when the At'tha caught us and took us back. We thought we'd try again, first chance we got, but just the two of us. So we haven't seen anyone new today."

"Well, Emil, we want to speak to the At'tha, but we'd need you to translate for us until the universal translator picks up enough of the language to do it."

"Oh - like Pete translates for Mrs. Shendark?"

"Yes."

"Will you make the At'tha let us go home?" Emil asked.

"I hope so," Kirk told him.

Uwua said something in his own language. Emil replied as Kirk switched on the translator, then he turned back to Kirk. "Uwua's people too? There are a lot of them."

"We might not be able to take all of Uwua's people back to their own families," Kirk said cautiously. "Because we don't know where their own families live. But we can take them back to where some of their own people live."

This time the translator caught Uwua's words. "Not see Umal tomorrow?"

Kirk stared at him as he detected the underlying unhappiness in the words. "Emil, how much does Uwua know about Humans?"

"We told each other all about our own homes," Emil said.

"Just you and Uwua?" Kirk asked hopefully.

"No, all of us. Except the littlest ones."

Kirk glanced at Spock. "There goes the Prime Directive."

"Young children would not know about that, or be aware of its importance even if they did," Spock replied.

"Yes, that's true," Kirk said thoughtfully. "However, it does leave us with a problem. The Dorannans were not supposed to know about us. Now some of them do - and in some detail."

"It was not the children who were responsible for this situation," Spock pointed out. "The Prime Directive has been breached by the At'tha, not by the Federation."

"Not see Umal tomorrow?" Uwua repeated with a child's grasp of essentials.

"Emil's home is a long way from yours," Kirk said cautiously.

"Uwua old enough leave stirp," the Dorannan offered. "Uwua live Umal's stirp?"

Emil looked hopefully at Kirk. "Could he come home with me?"

"Emil... did your parents ever speak to you of the Prime Directive?" Kirk asked.

The boy frowned, puzzled. "What's that?"

"We're not supposed to let any race still living the way Uwwa's people do know about us. They have to find out for themselves about farming instead of gathering their food - things like that. If Uwwa goes with you, that's interfering in his life."

"Then could I go to live in his stirp?"

"Your parents might have something to say about that," Kirk told him gently.

Spock touched Kirk's arm. "I suspect that other friendships will have been formed between Humans and Dorannans," he said. "And it would be cruel to enforce separation."

"I know," Kirk replied gloomily. "I wish I could think of some viable alternative. But we have to uphold the Prime Directive. What else can we do?"

The boys led the landing party deeper into the labyrinth of passages and finally into a fairly large chamber. Even there the roof was not high enough for the Humans to stand upright, let alone the slightly taller Spock, while Thekar hunched down unhappily to protect her sensitive antennae.

Their eyes were accustomed to the dim light by now, and they were able to see that there were a lot of children of both races in the chamber, plus some that reminded Kirk of the species that Warra had called 'half-men'. There was one fairly large cluster in one corner that was being watched by a taller hominid; and other, younger, children, mostly Human, were being tended by other hominids.

The smell was very distinct here; damp, earthy...

Emil indicated them. "The At'tha," he whispered.

"Who's the leader?" Kirk asked.

"Assha," Emil said, pointing to the hominid who stood watching the group in the corner.

Kirk moved forward, urging Emil on in front of him. The rest of the landing party followed him.

"Assha," he said clearly when he was within a couple of yards of the hominid.

The native swung round, and he saw that he was facing a female. *A matriarchal society?* he wondered.

She sounded disbelieving as she answered.

"Emil?" Kirk asked.

"How did you get back here?" he translated.

Kirk reminded himself that he must keep his words simple to allow for the simplified vocabulary of a child. "Tell her that we, too, have a way of moving a long way in just a moment."

"Captain!" Emil's attempted translation was interrupted by the two women, each of them carrying a baby, who rose from the crowd of children when they heard his voice.

"Doctor!" Kirk exclaimed, relieved to see her safe. "And Mrs. Shendark? You're both all right?"

"Yes, Captain," Maris replied for them both. He nodded and looked back at Emil, who resumed his interrupted translation.

Assha's voice sounded rueful as she replied, and Emil said, "We did not know that. But you did not come back the first time."

"Until you moved us away, we did not know where you were," Kirk said. He waited until Emil translated, then continued. "We went back to our own place to speak about what had happened." With that, too, translated, he went on. "Why are you stealing - I mean, taking - " he corrected himself hastily as he guessed that the more specific word might not translate - "our children?"

"We have no children." The translator was beginning to learn the language.

Startled into wordlessness, Kirk stared at Assha. "But... No children?"

"For many seasons, no children have been born to us. We want children."

"So you took children from other people?"

"We want children," she repeated as if that was reason and excuse enough.

"But the children's parents want their own children too," he protested.

"They can have more." She sounded uncertain.

"That's a lot of use if you keep taking them all!" Kirk exclaimed. "Assha, we saw some of the families who live south of here. They had no children because you had taken them all. And my people across the sea - they are unhappy because their children have been taken away from them and they do not know where they are." The translator squawked unhappily and Kirk realised that he had overtaxed its current capacity in this language. "Tell her, Emil."

The boy obligingly translated. Assha looked at him.

"They can have more children," she said again. "We cannot. For many years, most of our children were sick and died. And for the last twelve years our females have had no children at all. Now there are only a few of us. Once we filled this Uraa. And the people who live to the south are our distant kin. In the days of our strength we inseminated the apes; their children were more intelligent and broke away to set up their own culture. If we take some of those children we are simply reclaiming our own."

The speciousness of the comment almost took Kirk's breath away. "The fact that you interfered once is no excuse for interfering again. They have the right to their own lives now."

"They would not be there if it was not for us," she repeated.

"Can you prove that?" Kirk demanded. "These people can't teleport - damn!" as the translator squawked again. "They can't move to another place in seconds."

"Our males were never able to do that," she said. "Only the females."

Kirk glanced at the scientists in his landing party. "Is that possible?"

"Yes," Spock replied immediately. "There are many instances throughout the galaxy of diversity of natural accomplishment between the sexes. A simple example can be found in all mammalian species; the females secrete milk, which the males cannot."

"We're talking about something a little more involved than that - " Kirk began.

"If you belonged to an avian species, Captain, you would undoubtedly regard the first lactating mammalian female you encountered as - "

"All right, I take your point," Kirk growled. He turned his attention back to Assha. "How would you like it if your children suddenly disappeared without trace, with nothing to show where they had gone?"

"I do not know, since I have had no children," she replied. "I do know how I feel about not having children. Can you not understand how much we want the children we are unable to bear? Our only answer is to take some of these children - our distant descendants."

"But the half-men aren't your descendants - neither are my people," Kirk protested. "You might think you have some vague moral right to seek children from the race you claim as your descendants, but you have no rights at all over any other race. No, don't tell me - you want children."

"We need children or our race will die."

"Assha, to foster the children of other races isn't the answer!" Kirk exclaimed with brutal directness. "When you're all dead and they're left, they won't be your race! They'll still be a mixture of half-men and men and Humans. But the At'tha will all be gone."

She stared at him as if the realisation was completely new. "They are our descendants... distant, it is true, but still our descendants."

"The half-men aren't. The Humans aren't. And the men don't have your abilities. The At'tha will be dead! There's only one way to keep your race alive; find out why you're not having any children and see if we can correct whatever's wrong. It's possible," he said encouragingly. He glanced at Maris. "Isn't it?"

"Captain - " She hesitated, and he could almost see the words *Prime Directive* running through her mind.

"I think we can forget the Prime Directive," he said quietly. "The At'tha know about us; and they've obviously been an advanced race in their time. Now - it would be possible to help them, wouldn't it?"

It might be possible," she admitted. "I wouldn't like to be more positive than that without knowing their genetic makeup."

He nodded, accepting the qualification. "Now - what about the children?"

"The babies are in poor condition, but all they need is a little feeding up; they were too young to be put onto nothing but solid food - even chewed solid food. And Laura has already begun feeding them. That was why they brought me here - they thought I might be able to help feed the babies."

"And the others?"

"I haven't had a chance to check them, but Laura reckons they're fine."

"Thank heavens for that." He returned his attention to Assha. "Let us take our children home," he said.

"And the others? The ones that are not yours?"

A hand tugged at his arm. "Please, Captain. Please - the Dorannans who are our friends. Take them with us." It was Emil.

"He's right," Laura Shendark put in. "Our children - the older ones, anyway - and some of the Dorannan children have become good friends. The damage is already done as far as they're concerned. We can't let them go back to their own people for fear of contaminating the whole race."

Kirk looked from her to Assha, and from Assha to Spock. Then he looked round the chamber.

Some of the younger children, Human and Dorannan, were clinging to the mouflette-wool skirts of the At'tha, obviously imprinted on them; but the Humans would soon readjust once they were home again. What to do with the Dorannans was harder to decide; they had no way of knowing which stirps they had come from. Many of the older children of both races were clustered together. Only the young half-men seemed to be on their own, and Kirk remembered what Warra had said; the half-men weren't worried about their missing young. He looked back at Assha.

"Let us take our own children now, and also those of the children you say are your descendents who have formed friendships with our children. We'll leave the others with you just now. And we'll get a medical team down to check your people. If there's any way of helping you, we will."

Assha looked at him for a long time. At last, she seemed to slump.

"Very well," she said.

Kirk felt something like a piper as he accompanied Assha along the corridor that led to the main doorway from the Uraa, for behind him came a mixed group of children, mostly Human but with a fair number of Dorannans among them. The other adults followed behind the children.

Kirk's first action once they emerged into the open air was to take several deep breaths, even as he blinked, trying to readjust to the bright light of full daylight. He found himself taking time to relish the freshness of the air after the mustiness inside the building. Then he flicked open his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Scott here."

"Scotty, we've found them! Have staff standing by to assist, lock on and begin beaming when ready. And let Laski know."

"That's grand news, Captain. Beaming will begin in two minutes."

With the Human children, and those of the Dorannans who wanted to go with their friends, beamed aboard the Enterprise, Kirk turned to Assha. "I'll get someone down almost immediately. I can't promise that we'll be able to help you, remember, but what we can do, we will." He lifted the communicator again. "Energise."

The last remaining Humans on the continent dematerialised, leaving the At'tha and the handful of young Dorannans and half-men who had stayed with them to return to the shelter of their once-city.

Aboard the Enterprise, Kirk found Uhura, assisted by Laura Shendark, already beginning to separate the children into groups according to the settlement where they lived. Satisfied that everything was going smoothly, Kirk went to the intercom.

"Bridge."

"Bridge. Sulu here."

"Get me Governor Laski, Sulu."

He could almost hear the chuckle in Sulu's voice. "Already standing by, Captain."

"Governor Laski?"

"Captain! Your Mr. Sulu tells me you've found the children?"

"Yes, sir, and as far as we can discover they're all there. However, we do have one problem."

"What's that?"

"We also have several of the native Dorannans. During the past months some of them have become very friendly with your children, and of course they all discussed their own homes and backgrounds. Obviously we can't return them to their own people, to pass on the knowledge that they obtained. We'll have to settle them somehow on your continent."

"No real problem," Laski said, the euphoria of discovering that his own people were all right allowing him to react to the situation with cheerful acceptance. "There's plenty of room here. We can make space for them."

"There have been some close friendships formed," Kirk warned. "Some of them won't want to be separated. Indeed, I don't see how we can just give them a territory and leave them to fend for themselves; although they are probably fully independent, they are still just children - the oldest can't be more than about twelve. Many were kidnapped as infants, and even the ones who were older when they were taken might know some of the skills of the hunter-gatherer but are lacking in experience. To expect them to set up their own community would be inhuman. But it could be possible to try to integrate them with your community instead, provided that everyone remembered that they are an intelligent species and not just - well - pets or native servants."

"I see what you mean," Laski replied thoughtfully. "I take it you will be recommending to the Federation Council that these particular natives should be accepted as full members of the Federation?"

"Yes." It was a clear warning, although Kirk had no reason to think that the Dorannan colonists would even consider treating these young natives as slaves.

To satisfy himself that the Dorannans *would* be all right, Kirk beamed down with the children going to the largest settlement. A crowd that looked as if it consisted of all the inhabitants was waiting, and as the groups of children began to materialise, the parents pushed forward to claim their own. A tall, balding man pushed forward calling, "Laura!" and Mrs. Shendark ran to meet him.

Kirk became aware of Uwua standing beside him, watching as Emil, his 'grown up' control abandoned, was claimed by his parents. The little Dorannan's shoulders were slumped and his whole attitude bespoke misery. Kirk glanced round, to see that all the Dorannans had much the same abandoned look.

"It's all right, Uwua," Kirk said softly. "Emil hasn't forgotten you, I promise. Think what it would have been like if we'd taken you home and Emil had gone with you. You'd have spoken to your parents first, wouldn't you? Then told them about Emil."

"Yuh." The voice sounded unsure. Then Emil turned. Holding his parents' hands, he tugged them forward.

"Mum! Dad! This is my friend Uwua."

The two adults looked slightly doubtful, and Emil pulled away from them to put an arm round Uwua's shoulder in a gesture that was both protective and oddly adult. "Uwua's my friend," he said again, and Kirk found himself envying the certainty of childhood as, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed other children claiming their Dorannan friends. "He understands Standard," Emil went on, "but he doesn't speak it much 'cos he can't say some of the sounds."

The adults looked at Kirk, who smiled reassuringly. "The Dorannans are as intelligent as any race in the Federation," he said quietly.

"He's right," Laura Shendark said from behind Kirk. "Many of the kidnapped Dorannan children chose to stay with the At'tha, but the ones here wanted to remain with their Human friends, and I believe we are morally obliged to give them a home until they are old

enough to think about marrying and setting up for themselves."

Her husband nodded. "I'll take Laura's word on that," he said quietly.

Suddenly, Kirk realised that many of the parents were listening. And then, as if the Shendarks' words had triggered something, hands reached out and drew the Dorannans into the Human families.

They did not have long to investigate the At'tha; they had already stayed at Doranna longer than they should have done, though they had a valid excuse. Spock was in the party that beamed down, and McCoy, once he saw his grandson safely returned, insisted on joining the landing party as well. When they returned some hours later, Kirk met them in the transporter room.

"Any luck?" he asked hopefully.

"Yes and no," McCoy replied gloomily as they walked out en route for Kirk's quarters. "There's nothing wrong with the females; they could produce a youngster every year, no bother, though some of them are getting rather old for motherhood. The problem is the males. There are only half a dozen of them, and five of those are completely sterile. The sixth one is producing sperm, but the tests indicate that it's diseased. Any young he was to father would be hopelessly handicapped. I haven't been able to work out what's wrong.

"I've recommended to Assha that they try to find some way of mating with the Dorannans they claim as their descendents. The younger At'tha, of course, can wait until the oldest boys among the kidnapped natives are old enough to mate, but if the older ones want children, they'll have to go out and do something about it."

Kirk grunted. "What about you, Spock? You discover anything?" He led the way into his cabin and dropped into the chair behind his desk, motioning them to seats.

"At some time in the past, these people have known something about science," Spock said. Deep in the heart of the Uraa there are some machines. Only one is still operating, and its power source is almost exhausted. It is that which gives them their light. The other machines..." He shrugged. "I have a tricorder record of them, but I have been unable to discover what they were designed to do; and the At'tha could not tell me. The Uraa itself shows a level of building sophistication that is surprising, although the survivors of the race can no longer build in that fashion and no longer make use of the facilities the building offers. In the unused section, for example, were sanitary facilities the equal of any I have seen anywhere - and they had not been used for centuries."

"Any indications that the At'tha might have come from another planet?"

"I think not," Spock said slowly, "although they have been remarkably advanced considering the cultural level of the remainder of the planet. But then such things can happen. Many planets have produced one race that were surprisingly advanced compared to their contemporaries, and whose sophistication was lost because they lost the drive that had motivated them until they were easily overcome by stronger, but more primitive, tribes."

"That's true."

"What's happening about the Dorannans we brought back?" McCoy demanded.

"I've made it clear to the Governor that the Federation will look with disfavour on any attempt to turn them into slaves. Mrs. Shendark spoke up for them, and they've all found homes with the children who are their friends. They'll never integrate completely, of course, because they're a different race; cross marriages may occur but they're almost certain to be childless. I'm hoping that a viable 'double culture' will emerge, with the two races living peacefully together.

"Meanwhile - we'll have to leave here in the morning. Let's go down and visit your family."

They were greeted enthusiastically from all sides as they made their way to the Revisec's house, and the signs were that the Dorannan children were already being accepted as part of the colony. At their destination they found Dr. Revisec at home as well as his wife. Both adults were fussing over the child and Kirk suspected that Len Junior would be the recipient of some concentrated spoiling for some time to come.

They were greeted warmly and Jo, who had recovered from her depression very quickly once her son had been returned to her, hurried to get a meal for them, taking Len with her.

"Captain, I don't know how to thank you," she said once they had eaten and were settled with mugs of tea or coffee. "You too, Mr. Spock."

Kirk grinned. "All part of the service, Jo - I may call you Jo?"

"Yes, of course. Dad spoke so much about you, I almost feel I know you. He was sure you'd find Len." She bounced the child on her lap.

"I wasn't," Kirk admitted.

"Can you tell us anything about what happened?" Revisec asked.

"Well, we haven't been able to work out all the details - there'll be a team coming in from Starfleet to investigate as soon as one can be got together - but the kidnappers were surprisingly informative about themselves once we actually made contact. It seems that one of the races native to Doranna had a high level of culture thousands of years ago. I would have suspected that they might even have been colonists themselves, but they claim to have interbred with a more primitive race, and that would seem unlikely if they came from another planet. From what they found, Spock and your father think they're native to here.

"There don't seem to have been terribly many of them, even when they were at their strongest, and their numbers have been dwindling for a long time. About twelve years ago they stopped producing children altogether - but they realised that without children their race was finished. The females could teleport, so they used that ability to kidnap the young of the other races on their continent;

there are very few young left now among the other native tribes. So they expanded their activities, and took our children too. Yet even with their undoubted intelligence, they hadn't realised that it wouldn't help ~~their~~ race - that when they died, their race would be finished, no matter how many children they kidnapped from elsewhere.

"We have discovered that the males are sterile. What we haven't had time to discover is why."

"Poor things!" Jo exclaimed, pity predominant now that she had her son safely back. She could understand now, as she might not have been able to understand before, how these childless females must have felt.

Kirk nodded. "They do seem to have a very strong maternal instinct, and they did look after the children well."

"And why did they take Laura Shendark?" Dr. Revisec asked. "And - since they've proved to be so reasonable - why did they try to kill you?"

"One of them wanted Tina but realised that she was too young to take without her mother to feed her. It's a pity they didn't realise that when they took the other two babies, but we got to them in time. They'll be all right." M'sura and Anneli were still in sickbay, their mothers in attendance, but they were recovering fast. "As for the landing party - they didn't mean us any actual harm. Apparently as well as being telekinetic they're mildly... well, not exactly telepathic - it's more like a sort of radar. They can detect things that they're thinking about, but to 'collect' them they have to go to them. It only takes a second, then they carry them back home. But to send someone or something away, they just need to think about moving them. They simply moved us away. They didn't know where they were sending us - just that it was somewhere on dry land. It was sheer bad luck that I landed in an area where survival was pretty well impossible. The others - well, it was possibly lucky that it was Spock who landed in the desert. But the others all ended up where there was fresh water and something edible - even if it was only raw shellfish. It just seemed hostile because of circumstances; an icefield, a desert, a stony beach, a marsh, an island... which would have been perfectly all right except for the accident of a pair of strongly territorial birds having a nest there. The second time - when we had the transponders - nobody was in as hostile an area."

"What about the mouflette?" Revisec was curious about the other disappearances.

"Oh, yes, the mouflette. They were a puzzle all along. Spock?"

"The thing that seemed strangest about the mouflette was that they did not appear to have any natural enemies," Spock said slowly. "Granted they do not breed particularly quickly, but they were in no danger of over-running the continent. And there were mouflette on the other continent too, though not nearly so many, although all the other animals recorded are more localised - they belong to one continent or the other, tropical or temperate... The At'tha were the answer, of course. They had found the mouflette and seen the potential in their fur; and also considered mouflette flesh a delicacy." A faint expression of distaste flickered momentarily across his face. "I suspect that the mouflette originated on the other continent, and the At'tha brought them to this one, where they had no natural enemies, some time in the past - we have some reason to believe that the half-men will take them if they get the chance,

and possibly the Dorannans too. The At'tha left the mouflette to run free and multiply, and when there were enough of them, the At'tha simply teleported as many as they wanted back home..."

"Why no creature on this continent ever added mouflette to its menu over the years remains a mystery, but the At'tha are the predators that we knew there had to be," Kirk finished.

They relaxed gratefully, knowing that tomorrow they would be on their way again; once the team from Starbase 6 was dropped off anything could happen. But when they left it was with the warm awareness that the Revisecs considered Kirk and Spock almost as much a part of their family as McCoy.

Kirk leaned back in the command chair. He glanced round the bridge, seeing in the faces around him the same satisfaction that he felt.

"Take us out of orbit, Mr. Sulu; ahead warp factor one."

