

Scotpress

THE
FEMALE
OF THE
SPECIES
is
MORE
DEADLY
THAN
THE
MALE



A Star Trek
fanzine

by Meg Wright

The Female of the Species
is

MORE DEADLY THAN THE MALE

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When the Himalayan peasant meets the he-bear in his pride
He shouts to scare the monster, who will often turn aside.
But the she-bear thus accosted rends the peasant tooth and nail
For the female of the species is more deadly than the male.

The Female of the Species
Rudyard Kipling 1865 - 1936

MORE DEADLY THAN THE MALE?

The devastation was shattering in its completeness; wooden houses collapsed drunkenly, trees uprooted and dying, newly-exposed rocks rearing up towards the pinky-purple sky, gaping fissures yawning wide in the ploughed fields; and over everything the stench of decay and the invisible, intangible threat of disease.

Kirk shook his head in numb disbelief over the sheer size of the problem. It was certainly beyond their power to do more than aid the colonists back to the most basic civilisation in the time available. In only three more days the Enterprise would have to move out whether he liked it or not. He sighed. At these times he raged helplessly over the scarcity of starships available, too few attempting to cover the vast distances, the resulting conflicts that came, when a job had to be left half done because something more urgent landed in his lap, sometimes threatened to harden him too much, forced him to regard each critical situation with a cynicism that troubled him.

He shrugged, mentally castigating himself for wasting time. The immediate urgencies, now that McCoy had beamed the most badly injured aboard, were to oversee the tending of multiple minor wounds, erect new shelters, mend damaged machinery and the colony's ruined radio equipment. Away across the valley he could see the tall figure of his First Officer picking his way across the ruined fields. Obviously Masters had found she could manage alone once Spock had applied his superior Vulcan muscles to moving the largest pieces of fallen masonry from the broken stone hut which housed the primitive dynamo. He smiled at the memory of her excited yelps as she'd caught glimpses of the ancient hardware gleaming dully under its covering layer of dust. The colonists had tended their original machinery with loving care, preserving each precious piece until such time as their technology should advance sufficiently to make replacements simple. They'd nearly made it, too, until this tragedy had come upon them, ruining decades of hard physical labour in two days of cataclysmic seismic release.

Entering the heap of splintered wood and shattered adobe that had once been the colony leader's living quarters, he stepped over the protruding limbs of his Communications Officer, and gingerly inserted his head into the open panel beside hers.

"How is it, Uhura?"

"Bad," she replied laconically. "It'll take at least two days to complete the repairs properly."

"Keep at it."

She took her eyes off the delicate wiring for a moment and eyed him ruefully. "It'd be a lot easier if I could lift the whole section out, but these old AC411 models aren't designed to come apart."

He tried to nod, found it impossible. "Masters has been making similar noises over the power plant," he grinned. "Never thought I'd live to see the day we regretted finding a colony that was too efficient in maintaining everything in good order. I don't think they own anything newer than fifty years old!"

She laughed and returned to the circuitry.

Kirk slid his head carefully out again, banged it painfully on a protruding strut, swore loudly and came upright to find the rising eyebrows of the First Officer beside him. Hiding his amusement, he raised his own.

"More problems, Spock?"

"Apparently there is another settlement on the other major continent, Captain. Mr. Hartswell is concerned about their welfare but also wonders if they are able to help."

"This could hardly have reached them, Spock."

"I did not suggest that it had, Captain. However, it may be desirable to ferry the survivors over there, if the other colony can manage to absorb them. Or

they may be able to offer practical help here, if we bring them back with us. We can only leave a limited number here when we go on to New Canberra."

"You're right. We'll collect a shuttle. McCoy has Kyle working overtime on the transporter at the moment."

A muffled voice spoke at their feet. "If you're going back aboard, sir, I'd be grateful for a second portable micro-welder and a pack of E-shaped armatures. Every time I ask Kyle he's busy with another load of medical or survival supplies, and they have priority."

"We'll get them to you, Lieutenant. Just give Spock a complete list of what you want." He flipped his communicator open. "Two to beam up, Lt...."

"Sir, Medical has priority..."

"I'm aware of that. Spock and I are coming aboard to collect a shuttle. It'll ease the situation down here considerably." He looked over his shoulder. "Ready, Spock?"

Less than half an hour later, he was piloting the shuttle swiftly down into the atmosphere, when Spock looked up from the readouts he was monitoring.

"Brace yourself, Captain, there is an area of...distortion...ahead."

"Distortion?"

"Unknown. The effect may be..."

Dizzily, wrenchingly, reality swung, hung, flipped...

Kirk blinked hard, clearing his dazzled vision. "Good Lord, Spock, what in the nine worlds was that?"

"Some sort of vortex, Captain." He studied the panel closely. "We seem to have navigated through it safely enough; we are still on course."

"Well, that's something. We can't afford to waste any time over the next few days."

"Agreed."

He dropped the shuttle deftly, close to the shattered village. "I'll deliver the things Uhura wanted, Spock. No need for you to come too."

The Vulcan nodded silently, opening the door. Kirk jumped lightly down and scrambled uncomfortably over the tumbled earth to the ruined houses. "Here's the equipment you wanted, Uhura."

"At last. You've taken your time, Jim!"

Kirk looked at her protruding legs in mild surprise. Uhura never called him by his name. He set the package down and turned to go. There were more important matters on hand than enquiry into unusual behaviour.

"Jim!"

Annoyed at the peremptory tone, he turned back, eyebrows rising. She had her head out of the open panel now, and was looking at him with anger and...contempt?

"Just what the hell do you think you are doing in that uniform, Jim?"

Startled, he looked down at himself. "And what uniform should I be wearing, Lieutenant?"

"Lieutenant?" Outrage was written in every line of her as she rose to her feet. "I don't know what you are playing at, Jim," she said dangerously, "but there is no time for games now. You know we have only three days to spare and..."

Kirk didn't hear the rest of it. His brain had now assimilated Uhura's uniform. Starfleet Captain.

She drew out her communicator. "Chief Maxwell, come here please."

"On my way, Captain."

The voice was certainly female, which Kirk's Security Chief was equally certainly not. He spread his hands deprecatingly. "I'm sorry, Uhura, there is some misunderstanding."

"You are mistaken," she said coldly. "I understand only too well. I have thought for some time that you and your Vulcan friend were growing a little... restive. Where is he? In the shuttle?"

"Yes, but..."

She held up an angry hand. "I don't want to hear any more, Jim. I'd prefer you did not condemn yourself to a court martial, although it could still come to that." Her face twisted. "I should be sorry to lose you, you have been an excellent partner." She looked over his shoulder towards the distorted opening that had once been a doorway. "Maxwell, Commander Kirk is under arrest."

Kirk swung round, and found himself staring at a firmly-held phaser in the hand of a greying, middle-aged woman, all muscle and authority. He shrugged mentally. "I'll give no trouble," he said calmly.

The Security Chief eyed his braid and laughed sardonically. "Well now, that's a surprise," she chuckled. "Outside, Commander, where I can keep an eye on you."

"Better tie him to that doorpost." Uhura gave it an experimental heave. "It seems firm enough. We haven't got time to spare to beam him up to the brig, yet, and Spock is still in the shuttle. He must be in the plot, too."

"He's coming over," Maxwell replied. "Must be getting worried about his little friend." She gave Kirk a vicious jab with the phaser. "Captain, if you'd get me that rope from the tree over there..."

Uhura nodded tightly and fetched it. Kirk made no resistance as his hands were neatly strapped behind him. When he judged Spock to be in earshot, he gave a yell.

"Spock! Stay where you are a minute!"

Maxwell's back-handed slap was heavier than he expected, but the Vulcan had stopped.

"Use your phaser," Uhura ordered curtly.

"No!" The word was forced from Kirk.

The Chief's aim was pin-point accurate; clearly Uhura ran a tight ship. He eyed her with respect and said firmly, "That was unnecessary, Captain. I merely wanted to inform Spock of certain facts before he got here."

Enraged, she turned on him. "I don't know yet precisely what your conspiracy entailed, Commander Kirk, but I will know, very soon! Maxwell, call Rand. We'll have to use the mind-link on Spock, so get Chapel to attend to him and bring him over here when he comes round."

"Mind link?"

"Yes. Had you failed to take that into account?"

"It never even occurred to me you could do it," he replied in all honesty. "Uhura, please listen to me. There is no plot, and I am not your Commander Kirk. In my universe, or dimension, or wherever, I am the Captain of the Enterprise."

"In your imagination, maybe. In your wishes, I daresay. In reality, never."

"How are you going to link with Spock?"

She stood and faced him, hands on hips. "Stop playing games, Jim."

"I'm not playing games!" He pushed his anger down. "He's the only telepath on board my ship. Who have you got?"

Doubt flared in her eyes for a brief moment. "You mean you really are..."

"From another dimension, timeline... I don't know. We experienced something in the shuttle." He put all the charm he knew into his smile. "Uhura, don't you remember the I.S.S. Enterprise?"

Her blank eyes clearly showed that she did not, but her ominously stern expression was relaxing its severity a little under the full barrage of his shameless smile. "What is the I.S.S. Enterprise?"

He shook his head. "Obviously it didn't happen to you. A transporter malfunction while we were negotiating with the Halkans."

Her eyes hardened again. "There was no malfunction."

"There was on my ship. It doesn't matter, if it didn't happen to you you won't understand why I mentioned it." He stared across the uneven ground. "Spock seems to be coming round."

They had dragged him none too gently to his feet and were helping him along, Chapel's arm holding his over her shoulders. The stone face showed little as they drew near.

"Captain, are you all right?"

"Captain?" Chapel almost dropped the Vulcan. "Spock, what the hell are you talking about?"

Uhura motioned her to silence and stood in front of the Vulcan. "Your explanation, Spock, and you had better make it swift and credible."

His eyebrow lifted a little as he contemplated the braid on her sleeve. "I would surmise a temporal or spacial distortion vortex," he replied slowly. "We ran into it on our way down."

She made an exasperated sound. "I meant the explanation for your sudden self-promotion to Commander."

"I have held the rank of Commander for over two years."

She drew a deep breath. "You mean you really are both from a different universe?"

Kirk nodded cheerfully. "That's what I've been telling you."

Away to their right the transporter effect was beginning to sparkle.

"Good," said Uhura with satisfaction. "Now we shall know for certain."

The sparkle solidified into a delightful - and familiar - shape. It was T'Pring.

Kirk's expressive face depicted his surprise clearly enough, but the Vulcan's was giving nothing away.

"Security Chief Maxwell tells me you are having problems, Captain." The voice was as melodious - and as cold - as Kirk remembered it from that far-off day in his own world. Plainly that event had ended very differently here.

"I need to know whether these two have some kind of elaborate plot to take over, or whether they really are not our Kirk and Spock," Uhura said succinctly.

"Not ours?"

"They claim to have gone through some kind of vortex in the shuttlecraft."

"I see. I will ascertain the truth."

Kirk accustomed to the deliberate and gentle movements of his friend, was surprised to see her reach for the meld swiftly and without asking permission. There was a long silence, broken only by Uhura's tapping boot and the distant sounds of continuing rescue operations.

Spock crumpled.

Horrificed, Kirk dragged at his bonds. "What have you done to him? Let me go to him!"

T'Pring turned her unmoving face to Uhura. "He has lied to you. I suggest you send them both to the brig."

"You must have seen the truth in the link!" Kirk said furiously. "Captain, I don't know why, but she is the one who is lying!"

Uhura's face was hard. "That is a very serious accusation to make about a Vulcan, Kirk. Take them to the beam-up point, Maxwell, and put them both in the brig. We'll deal with them when we have time." She stirred the still figure of the Vulcan with one foot. "When will he come round, T'Pring?"

"Not for a while," the girl replied. "Shall I beam back aboard with them, Captain?"

"No, Lt. Scott could do with some assistance. I was going to send for you." She sighed. "We'll have to send someone else to check on the other colonists now. Better get Lt. Martine and Ensign Barrows. We can't rely on other male members of the crew not being in on this ridiculous conspiracy as well."

"There is no conspiracy!" Kirk yelled in outrage. "Uhura, listen to me!..."

"There is no conspiracy," T'Pring agreed. "The only two involved are our two partners, Captain."

"You couldn't have seen anything like that in Spock's mind," Kirk began, but a sudden doubt made him pause. Was this his Spock? Yes, of course, he still bore Commander's braid on his sleeve.

His tiny pause, however, served to confirm Uhura's suspicions. "Did Spock think he could hide something from T'Pring?" she questioned him. "Kirk, you know Vulcan women must have complete control over their partners. You have been even more stupid than I could have believed possible. Take them away, Maxwell."

Uhura came out from under the console. "Captain?"

Kirk's face displayed bewilderment. "Uhura? What...why...?"

She looked at his sleeve braid and failed to conceal her utter disbelief. "You think I am your Captain?"

"Yes, of course you are. Uhura, is this some kind of test? You know my loyalty. Surely this is no time to put me to the test?"

She gathered her whirling mind. "Tell me everything," she ordered.

"I don't understand."

"You are not in your own universe any more, I guess," she said impatiently. "Just like that time with the Halkans, you remember."

His bewilderment increased.

"We beamed on board another Enterprise." A brief pause. "It didn't happen to you?" A shake of the head. She took a deep breath. "We'd better call Spock. He was in the shuttle with you?"

"Yes."

Uhura flipped open her communicator. "Chief Harbourne, please go and get Commander Spock and ask him to come over. He's in the shuttle."

"Harbourne?"

"The Security Chief."

"What happened to Maxwell?" Kirk's eyes widened. "That was a man's voice!"

"Harbourne is certainly male," she agreed.

"But...no head of department is male."

"Here they are," she said gently. "Our Kirk is Captain of the Enterprise, and Mr. Spock is the First Officer."

His jaw dropped. "Surely T'Pring would never permit that?"

Her own mouth dropped. "T'Pring?"

"Spock's partner."

"Mr. Spock has no...partner."

Kirk put a hand on the console to steady himself, shaking his head. "Something is definitely wrong," he whispered.

When Uhura saw the shyly smiling face of the approaching Vulcan, she was inclined to agree with him.

"What is your position on the Enterprise?" she asked him.

His eyebrow shot up. At least one thing had remained familiar. "Science Officer, of course, Captain..." His voice trailed away.

"Yes," she said sympathetically. "It would appear that my Enterprise has no Captain, and that yours now has two."

The strange Kirk and Spock looked at each other with horrified eyes. "Then it is to be hoped they can convince our Captain of what has taken place," Kirk said, "or there will be serious trouble."

"What do you mean, trouble?"

"No male may hold a senior position in our universe. It is forbidden. They will be suspected of conspiracy."

Uhura eyed him grimly. "Then the sooner we send you two home, the better. We'll see what the Chief Engineer can do for us."

"Mr. Scott?" Kirk asked.

"Yes."

"A competent lieutenant in our world," Spock said, smiling. "But my knowledge may also be of assistance. If I may be permitted...?"

She eyed him steadily - a smiling Vulcan was disconcerting to say the least, but the Spock of the I.S.S. Enterprise had been trustworthy; she made up her mind swiftly.

"We'll be glad to make use of you, Mr. Spock. Get to it!"

Ten hectic minutes later, Spock was at the computers with Scott, and Uhura left with Kirk to make a report to Sulu. "I would have come to you first," she said worriedly, "but I thought we should deal with the problem of returning them first."

Sulu studied Kirk covertly, reflecting how strange it was that one could see immediately that this Kirk was not accustomed to command. The charm was there in full force, the intelligence, the steadiness, but the power was...subdued, somehow, held in check.

"You'd better take over here, Uhura," he said at last. "Chekov and I will take over the job Mr. Spock and the Captain were going to do. You can't leave the radio work, can you?"

She gave a grimace. "Not really. Palmer is good, but she wouldn't be quick enough."

He grinned at her. "Don't you fancy being in command?"

She gave him a friendly punch. "I might just deal with you if I was," she threatened.

A gentle hand touched her arm. "What can I do to help?"

"What would you be doing on your own ship, Mr. Kirk?"

"I was going to the other colony with Spock."

"Well, we can't let you do that. We must have you here ready to send you back as soon as Spock and Scotty have it worked out." She gave a rueful smile. "I'm not exactly used to the idea of giving you orders, Mr. Kirk."

"I can't hang around here doing nothing," he protested.

She grinned. "Your character is not so different, after all. We do need more hands down at the settlement. Care to do a little hefty manual work?"

I guess somebody has to," he agreed."

A fluttering movement of Spock's hands brought Kirk swinging swiftly round. He went to the recumbent Vulcan and lifted his head gently into his lap.

"Take it easy, Spock, you've been out some time. What did she do to you?"

The dark eyes opened and closed again. "An ancient Vulcan technique, Captain. One that is not used in modern times, except by those dealing with the insane."

"Well, it certainly knocked you out." He helped him to sit up. "Feel up to discussing our problem?" He waved an expressive hand.

Spock took in his surroundings and raised an eyebrow. "Escape from the brig is not a simple matter, Captain."

"It most certainly is not," a cool voice said. "You would be ill advised to try."

Kirk was on his feet. "What's the reason, T'Pring? Why did you do it?"

"I have no intention of discussing this matter with you," she said coolly. "It is Spock I have come to speak to."

"I am the Captain," he said curtly.

"Not on this ship. You have no authority here." She looked behind him to the now standing Vulcan. "Spock, we have much to discuss, you and I."

Spock remained stiffly behind Kirk. "I see no point in discussion, T'Pring. In my universe, your action would have been inexcusable."

"Here it is common enough," she said indifferently. "How else is the female to control?"

"You knew he was not lying," Kirk grated. "Why did you say that he was?"

She gave him a cool, dismissive smile. "My actions are no affair of yours, Commander."

"I am not your Commander Kirk," he said with controlled fury. "I am the Captain of the Enterprise."

"Then I am pleased I do not live in your world." Her voice dripped ice. "I should scarcely feel safe in a world where uncontrolled males are permitted to hold positions of such responsibility. Spock, you may hide behind your friend for the moment, but later, when I have time to spare, I shall come for you."

"T'Pring, wait!"

"She does not seem prepared to listen to us, Captain," Spock said softly.

Kirk swung on him. "You were hiding behind me, Mister," he said grimly. "Just what are you afraid of? What can she do to you?"

Spock surveyed him calmly. "Hiding behind you, Captain?"

"Yes. I could practically feel you breathing down my neck!" Kirk eyes softened. "Spock, this must be a little...strange...to you..."

"I would not have thought it seemed natural to you either, Jim."

Kirk grinned. "You're right. But, by golly, I hope our Uhura gets a command of her own one day. She's quite a girl. Stop changing the subject, Spock. What did T'Pring do to you?"

"She took control of my mind, Captain."

Kirk stared at him in horror. "D'you mean she can make you do what she wants?"

Spock's lips set in a firm line. "Not twice. I shall not be unprepared a second time. Captain, there is someone coming."

Kirk's ears had caught the sound now. "Lie down, Spock. Try and look ill."

He was barely in time to catch him.

He heard a soft exclamation of dismay, heard the forcefield drop, then Christine Chapel was on her knees beside them. The guard swiftly reset the field.

"T'Pring again, Jim? I've told her over and over she'll do this once too often."

"He's all right." Kirk caught her arm. "Christine, are you the C.M.O. here?"

Her eyes looked blankly back. "You know I am, Jim."

"No, I don't. Christine, I am not the James Kirk you know, Spock and I are from a different universe. There, I am the Captain and he is the First Officer." Her eyes widened. "I know, I know. It isn't permitted here."

She shook her head. "You surely can't believe we'd swallow this?" she said incredulously. "What are you hoping to gain from it?" She ran her scanner briefly over Spock. "This unconsciousness is self-induced. Did you hope to escape by such a simple trick?"

"Yes. We want to talk to Uhura."

She rose to her feet, motioning the security guard to let her out. "The Captain will certainly talk to you later, Jim. Don't worry about that."

Kirk made an exasperated sound and bent to Spock. "Aren't you even going to treat him?"

"Treat him?" She reset the field. "I'd like to see T'Pring's face if I so much as touched him," she said bitterly.

Kirk looked at her stiff, retreating back and muttered, "Spock, you sure seem to have the knack of making 'em fall for you, wherever you are!"

"I beg your pardon?" Spock was muzzily raising himself on his elbows.

"Nothing, nothing," Kirk said hastily. "I'm sorry, Spock. That didn't work. I hoped they'd take you to sickbay. We might have been able to make contact with their McCoy - if he's aboard." He put out a hand and helped the Vulcan up. "Any ideas?"

"If I could use the computers..." Spock began.

"Well, you can't!" snapped Kirk. "I thought Vulcans didn't indulge in vain wishes."

"As I was about to say, the calculations would be swifter if I could use the computers," Spock said placidly, "but given sufficient time, I may be able to compute the necessary procedure mentally."

Kirk bowed his head in mock abjection. "Get to it, Spock. How can I help?"

"Can you recall the precise details of the moment we hit the vortex?"

Kirk looked horrified. "Spock, I'm not Vulcan! I don't have eidetic recall."

"I merely wish to check my own memories," Spock said apologetically. "If I may use the meld...?"

"Of course. Carry on."

The gentle fingers touched his face.

Lt. Uhura beamed back aboard at the end of what already seemed an over-long day, and made her way to the bridge. "Palmer, any word from Sulu?"

"Yes. The other colony is quite O.K., and they can spare thirty people to help. Sulu is going to ferry them back during tomorrow."

"Good. With the twenty we can leave behind they should have enough to get them into some kind of stability." She sank into the chair at the library console. "I've done quite well on their radio. It should be complete by tomorrow afternoon. I'll give you a list of spares for beamdown."

Palmer looked at her sympathetically. "Been a long day, hasn't it?"

"You're telling me! And it isn't over yet." She got wearily to her feet. "I hope this Spock is as efficient as ours, otherwise we'll never get them back."

"Never mind, think of the power of being Captain," Palmer grinned.

"Get back to your job," Uhura said shortly. "I'll be in the computer section if I'm wanted. Get all the reports along to me before I go to bed. I'll need some sleep if I'm to get out of this sane."

Palmer nodded. "I'll get them to you."

Kirk was with Spock and Scott, to Uhura's inner dismay. It still felt incredibly unnatural to find him looking to her for guidance...and the look in his eyes when he glanced at her was unnerving as well. Whatever else she had to deal with, she was not prepared to involve herself in that sort of relationship. She'd never be able to look her own Kirk in the eye. She stood firmly beside Scott.

"Aye, we've got the answer," Scott said comfortingly. "Provided they come up with the same one, we're home and dry. They'll have to be at the vortex in twelve hours' time."

"11.941 hours, Scotty," the Vulcan reproved, smiling.

Scott gave Uhura a sideways glance. "A mite more friendly," he said softly, "but otherwise he's much the same, isn't he?"

She chuckled. "I'll take the one we know, thanks, Scotty. Pleasant though these two are, I've had enough of command for a while."

The still figure of the Vulcan did not move once during the long night, but sat staring at a point some light years distant. Kirk dozed fitfully, waking frequently to curse his own helplessness, forcing himself to lie still and not distract Spock. When food was brought in the morning, he again demanded to see Uhura.

Maxwell shook her head. "Don't be ridiculous, Kirk. You know the Captain has to leave here by 4243.9. She hasn't time to waste until we're on our way. Then she'll deal with you."

"Then it may be too late, she may never get her own Kirk back," he said curtly.

She smiled grimly. "It's a good story," she remarked over her shoulder. "You try proving it, otherwise you'll be out of the service for good."

He groaned inwardly, and turned to find Spock's eyes on him.

"You're back with us."

Spock's lack of comment on the inaccuracy of the phrase underlined the seriousness of the situation.

"If I have made no errors, we must re-enter the vortex at 13.29 and 3,4 seconds, ship's time," he said soberly.

"So we have to get out and get a shuttle."

"Precisely."

Kirk's shoulders sagged a little. "If we can get out of here, we'll be doing well," he said sourly.

He was forced to pace the cell vainly for another two hours before any opportunity arose, then as he swung at the turn in his restless pacing, he saw T'Pring arrive on silent feet. He bit back impatient words. Maybe it was as well to let Spock handle this situation. This time the Vulcan made no attempt to hang back, but stepped forward to face her. Their eyes locked in a wordless battle, then she motioned a guard forward to cut off the force field and beckoned Spock to follow her. Kirk quelled a groan of dismay as his First Officer went without apparent protest, leaving him alone in the cell. An hour ticked relentlessly by.

Aboard his own ship, the time was passing with maddening speed, his senior crew driving themselves with proud efficiency, determined to present him with a job as proficient and complete as they would have done were he physically present. At the necessary time, Uhura left her repairs to take a brief farewell.

Kirk bowed over her hand, kissing her fingers gently. "Ma'am, in my own world, you hold a very special position in my life," he said softly. "I owe all that I am to my Uhura's help. Now I owe the regaining of that world to your assistance."

"If our counterparts have also reached the same conclusions," Spock reminded him. He smiled sadly. "From what I hear of your Commander Spock, T'Pring will not wish to let him go."

Uhura crushed her curiosity down sternly. "From all I know of my Commander Spock, he will not submit tamely," she replied. "Nor will my Captain. I wish you both a safe return."

She watched the shuttle lift off and returned reluctantly to her work. The next thirty minutes would be hard to endure.

Had Kirk but known it, Spock's 'battle' with T'Pring had been over within the first few seconds of her arrival. Projecting his own will with a force as great as he had ever used, he had blocked out her attempt to reach him, overcome her resistance and compelled obedience. Following her to her quarters, he had ruthlessly demanded compliance and received it. When the door was safely closed behind them he released her mind again. She looked at him with dawning respect.

"My Spock is not capable of such power."

"I did not realise that I was," he said harshly, "but I will not suffer such domination from you twice. Why did you do it?"

"I desire the Captaincy. With Kirk gone, Uhura would be easy to remove."

"Logical," he agreed grimly. "In my own world, T'Pring was also capable of such flawless logic."

"Was?"

"We are no longer bonded. She gave the challenge."

"You are alone?" She was astounded. "None of our males could function so. Without our control, they become...animals."

"You would find me an unsatisfactory substitute for your own partner. You must release us to return to our own universe."

She smiled coldly. "My purpose will still be fulfilled. Uhura will no longer trust Kirk and will let him go. Then it is but a matter of time."

"What will happen to your James Kirk?"

She shrugged. "Court martial. Dismissal."

Spock experienced a cold, slow anger...and found he had no desire to control it. Lifting his hand he took possession of her mind.

- Control. I demand it. -

Her mind slid away before his, and he sank deeper into the darkness, following where she led, blocking off her retreat until he had her quivering and open before him.

- T'Pring, I do not wish to harm you. See my James Kirk, see what compassion, strength, understanding, tenderness. -

- He is...very whole. -

- Show me the Kirk you know. -

- Tender, laughing, caring. -

- No strength? -

- Yes. Controlled. Surprise. I had not understood. Release me. I beg you. -

- I will release. - He broke the link gently. "This man is worthy of respect, is he not? Even a Vulcan can see that." She nodded unwillingly. "T'Pring, do not break his career for your own selfish ends. I once told my T'Pring that having is not the same as wanting. It is not logical, but it is true. Will the Captaincy truly bring you what you desire?"

There was a blazing anger in her eyes. "No. You have shown me another world."

He looked at her with compassion. "This Human emotion called 'love' is powerful, is it not? Seek it out within your own Spock. You may well find that he has much to offer you. The 'animal' I have seen within your mind is lonely, T'Pring. Give him compassion and he will respond. It is not an easy time for us, even with help."

"You have given me much to think about. I will consider deeply."

"We need a shuttle to return to our own world."

She nodded. "I can arrange it." She smiled gravely. "I no longer desire to keep you here...I see no logic in preferring a partner who can...dominate...so wholeheartedly."

"And Kirk? What will you tell your Captain?"

"That I was over-hasty in my judgement. She will be relieved. She is very fond of her partner. Before, I despised her. Now I wish to try and understand. How much time is there left?"

"We must enter the vortex in 21.4 minutes."

"Come, then, there is no time to waste."

Kirk leaped to his feet at their approach, tenseness in every line of his body. T'Pring ordered the guards to lower the force field and led him from the cell. He gave Spock one penetrating look and relaxed.

"Your powers of persuasion don't seem to diminish, Mr. Spock," he murmured.

Spock raised his eyebrows in mild surprise. "Vulcans are logical creatures, Captain, in whatever universe we meet them."

Kirk stifled a grin.

Uhura heard the descending shuttlecraft and extricated herself from the open panel once more. She could hardly bear to watch while the door opened - held her breath to let it out in a long sigh of relief as the figures emerged. This Kirk was decisive of tread, the aura of command unmistakable. She gave him a broad grin of pure relief as he came up to her.

"Well, Captain?" he grinned back.

"I'm handing over with pleasure," she assured him.

He looked around. "Work seems to be progressing well. How's the radio?"

"About another half-hour, sir. Sulu has just brought in the last load of colonists from the other settlement, and we have completed the new shelters. The department heads have their reports ready for you."

"Well done," he said approvingly. "It looks as though they can manage without us, Spock."

"Indeed," the Vulcan said gravely. "Although I believe a certain example may have had some part to play in that."

After Kirk had heard a complete report of events during his temporary absence, he logged a commendation of Uhura's actions. "Thanks to you, Lieutenant, this temporary disruption has not resulted in any delays... Starfleet owes you a lot. And I'll add my thanks to theirs."

She managed to suppress her gratification, pleased her blush did not reveal itself to the world.

He gave her a teasing smile. "I'm going to watch my step from now on," he said softly. "I can feel you treading on my heels already! I'm going down for a last word with Mr. Hartswell; we'll be leaving orbit in half an hour."

The colony leader greeted him with outstretched hand.

"You're a man after my own heart, Captain," he said gratefully. "Someone who isn't afraid to roll his sleeves up and get on with the job. There aren't many Starship Captains who would bother with the actual physical labour. You run a good ship."

"I've got a good crew," Kirk agreed. "You're happy with things now?"

Hartswell shrugged. "As happy as I can be after all this. You've set us on our feet again. We'll get by."

"We'll be back to pick up our crew and the shuttle in three months, all being well. I'll see you then."

"Well." McCoy dumped his coffee on the table. "It'll be nice to take the weight off my aching feet. I hear it's all gone well."

"How are your patients?"

"We've three still aboard. The rest were well enough to send back. These three should be fit enough by the time we get back there again." He leaned forward confidentially. "By the by, I've been so busy I haven't had time to ask anyone, but it's been on my mind all day. How's Spock?"

"He's all right. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I met him in the corridor this morning, and he gave me the biggest, beaming smile I've ever seen." McCoy shuddered dramatically. "Quite spoiled my morning." He caught Kirk's eye. "Seriously, Jim, I have been worried. Is he O.K.?"

"Thank you for your concern, Doctor, I am perfectly well."

Kirk pulled out a chair. "Sit down, Spock. It's been quite a day."

"Well?" McCoy asked impatiently. "What were you grinning your head off

about, Spock?"

Spock gave him an icy look. "You did not see me this morning, Doctor."

"What do you mean, I didn't see you. Large as life and twice as natural, with a smile fit to split titanium!"

"That wasn't Spock," Kirk informed him. "Not our Spock, anyway. Hadn't you heard?"

"Heard what? I've been too busy for any grapevine runours. What's he been up to now?"

"Well..." Kirk leaned back. "It's quite a long story, Bones. It was like this....."

RETURN

"You did what?" Uhura gazed unbelievably at her second-in-command.

"I gave them a shuttle." T'Pring would not meet her eyes. "I saw...Spock... again this morning. They really were not our partners, as they claimed. I was too hasty in my judgement in that first meld. I saw only the feeling for command. I am sorry."

Uhura regarded her sternly. "Rather a lame story, don't you think, Commander? Let's have the truth this time. Are you in the plot with them?"

"There was no plot. The other shuttle - our own - should be coming through the vortex any minute now. I can show you on the sensors." She went to the library console. "You see, here." She pointed. "There, it is about to happen now, and if our partners have made the same deductions in the universe they went to, then the occupants of the emerging shuttle will be our partners, wearing their own uniforms."

Uhura blinked in surprise as the shuttle on the screen winked out and into existence again. "Then there really is a way through to another universe there?"

"At the present moment, yes. It may not last. Theoretically, the probability has been known for years, but this is the first time an interdimensional cross-over has been experienced in our world. The mathematics of it will be fascinating. I will set Spock to working it out when he returns, though doubtless he will have had to do some work on it already in order for them to be here at all."

Uhura flicked open a communications circuit. "Enterprise to shuttle."

"Uhura? Nice to hear your voice again," Kirk answered teasingly. "I've missed you!"

"Don't play the fool," she said dangerously. "You and Spock are both confined to quarters when you get back aboard. I'll see you later." She thumbed the intercom. "Maxwell, escort the two gentlemen in the shuttle, whoever they claim to be, to their quarters and set a guard on them." She swung round to face T'Pring again. "You seem to have been convinced of their innocence very quickly."

This time, T'Pring did meet her eyes. "In a longer meld I had to be, Captain. The Spock that was here this morning had no wife."

"No wife?" Uhura was shocked to her soul. "But no Vulcan may leave his planet if he is unbonded, once he has reached maturity."

"Not in their universe." She gave a little shudder. "No, I do not like to think of all that power unchecked, either, Captain. That Spock would have been a very dangerous man to have on board, and I believe that James Kirk would have been almost as unsafe."

Uhura gave an unladylike snort of disbelief. "Human males are gentle," she said icily.

"Conditioning has made them so," T'Pring reminded her. "It was not the case a hundred years ago when our races first made contact. Remember your Earth history, Captain."

Uhura gave a little grimace of distaste. "That is long over. We have learned a lot from you Vulcans."

"Yes. But not in their universe. I will be open with you, Captain. When I saw Spock this morning he...dominated my mind, so easily, too. If he had wanted to stay, I could not have prevented it."

Uhura gave her a horrified stare. "In that case, I can only hope that the reversal has been successful. Let's go and see."

Maxwell was waiting outside her door. "Captain, they are back in their own uniforms again." She gave a derisive laugh. "Don't seem to have the courage of their convictions, do they?"

Uhura gave her an icy glare. "It is just possible, Maxwell, that Commander T'Pring was mistaken earlier. Those two really may have been from another universe as they claimed. Bring Spock here, we will see them together."

"T'Pring mistaken?" Maxwell said unbelievably. "That would be the first time, Captain. You're not going to fall for that, are you?"

"Maxwell, I gave you an order. Fetch Spock!" When the ramrod back had retreated along the corridor she turned a commandatorial glare on T'Pring. "If you are right this time," she said pointedly, "then I want a fuller account of your 'mistake'." She swept into her quarters.

Kirk rose to his feet, smiling cheerfully. When he saw the expression on her face, the smile faded.

"It really is me this time," he said softly. "I thought from what they said about him there that you would see at once he wasn't me!"

"I was busy," Uhura said curtly. "I hardly saw him."

The door slid open and Maxwell gestured to Spock to precede her. He went to stand beside Kirk and together they faced their Captain.

"Well?" Her tone was challenging.

"You did not realise what happened?" Kirk asked her. His glance shifted to T'Pring. "You must have known that the other Spock was not your husband, Commander. One meld would have shown you that. Their Spock has no wife."

"I was hasty in my original judgement," she said coolly. "I saw a feeling for command in his mind. I thought there had been some plot made between the pair of you, and I subdued him swiftly with the kroyshuka."

Spock winced, looking down at his boots. "Explain to them, Spock," T'Pring ordered.

"It is a technique to block a mind," he said reluctantly. "It will have left him...mindless...for up to a month or more."

"That you didn't," Maxwell said indignantly. "He was certainly in full possession of his senses when I saw him this morning."

"Because he was not our Spock," T'Pring told them. "I can control this one." She glanced disdainfully at the Security Chief. "Do you really think we ought to have kept a male Vulcan on board this ship that I could not control? When I found, this morning, that the kroyshuka had been unsuccessful, I knew he was not my husband, and I sent him and his friend, the Captain of their Enterprise, back to their own world, and now we have our own partners back."

"His mind was not affected?" Spock said unbelievably.

"Only temporarily," she answered curtly, unwilling to tell him more.

He assimilated the full implications of this, but kept silent. He knew his partner well enough to guess she was holding plenty back.

"You have the full scientific data?" Uhura asked T'Pring. "Starfleet will be interested to hear of this phenomenon."

"Yes." She looked at her husband. "I can provide the mathematics for this universe - can you remember your procedures, Spock? Or did they do the work for you?"

"I worked on it," he answered placidly, "with the full co-operation of their Chief Engineer, Mr. Scott."

"Are all their section heads male?" Uhura asked, scandalised.

"No." Kirk grinned at her. "Their Uhura was Chief Communications Officer."

"Captain," Maxwell interrupted her, "are you really going to believe this story?"

"The data is all there for you to see," T'Pring told her icily, "if you can understand it."

"I'm no scientist..." Maxwell began.

"Then I suggest you leave the decisions to those of us that do understand," Uhura said coldly. "Spock, I shall want a full report from you. Please let me have it as soon as possible. Dismissed."

As the door closed, she turned to her partner, a speculative gleam in her eye. "And their Uhura?" she asked.

Kirk's hazel eyes glinted at her. "Quite a lady," he said teasingly, "same as mine is." He moved forward and took her in his arms. "I missed you," he said softly.

"You had her to console you," She twisted free.

He shook his head. "She was not the Captain's partner." His eyes twinkled. "In fact, she was a little nervous of me when she found out about your position in my life. But she was clearly the same capable person that you are - she took command when she had to, and gave me orders, too, although she admitted it felt strange."

"You did not want to stay - to be the Captain of the Enterprise?"

He took a long look at her. "That's the trouble with denying people something, isn't it?" he said quietly. "You never can really believe whether they want it or not if they say they don't."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one you'll get," he replied curtly. He took her shoulders, swinging her to face him. "Uhura, if my loyalty over the last three years has been questionable, you can end our contract - find another partner."

She choked down rising anger. "I have trusted you."

"Then continue to do so." He turned away from her. "If we men wanted to take over, make no mistake, we would do so. We are physically stronger, after all, and you don't have us under quite such perfect control as the Vulcans do their partners. However, equality is slowly coming; I have no wish to hurry the process."

She nodded. "You have yourself well under control," she conceded.

"Then be content with that. I've never tried to hide what I am from you. I am as capable of command as you are, but I serve you willingly - because you are worthy of respect. In their world, they treat the sexes equally, so it can be done. You are well aware that it is only since we encountered the Vulcans that Human women have taken over authority. What has been reversed once could be again, and I do not want that to happen. I see no reason why women and men cannot work as equals."

"But Vulcan males are not safe..."

"Their Spock is unpartnered. None of their women seemed to go in dread of being raped. If it comes to that, have you ever seen our Spock any other than gentle?"

"He is half-Human after all." She gave a shrug. "His mother was the principal influence in his childhood."

"Yes, and she is Human." She looked at him blankly. "Don't you understand? Neither Spock nor his father has been subjected to Vulcan mind control for many years. I've often thought it was unnecessarily cruel to bond Spock to a Vulcan woman. She treats him with quite unwarranted harshness, you know. She not only told him she had used this...kroyshuka on a man she believed to be him, but she made him explain it to us. A deliberate attempt to humiliate him in front of us."

She looked at him oddly. "You think a great deal of Spock, don't you?"

"I don't like the way he is treated," he replied curtly. "He has one of the best scientific brains I know, he is gentle and compassionate, and T'Pring treats him like an idiot child. Did you realise that more than half the work which she takes full credit for is actually done by him?"

"T'Pring wouldn't be that dishonest." She was shocked.

"No?" His tone was hard. "Do you know how often a Vulcan male undergoes this 'pon farr'?"

"It is not a matter they discuss..."

"Once every seven years."

"Seven...years?" He nodded. "But...Spock is shut away every few months..." Her voice trailed away. "You mean he is doing the work T'Pring claims to have done then?"

"You catch on quickly," he said approvingly. "Yes, that's exactly what I do mean."

"But...how do you know?"

"I asked him."

"But they don't talk about this."

He smiled at her grimly. "I'm a very determined person when I want something, Uhura. Remember?"

Her eyes softened. "Yes, I do remember. I'm still not sure I should have forgiven you for sweeping me off my feet the way you did!"

He took her back in his arms. "I've never regretted it for an instant," he said arrogantly, bending his head to hers.

Spock followed T'Pring back to their quarters and stood by the closing door, eyeing her steadily. She looked back at him, her face unreadable.

"Well?" She controlled her impatience.

"T'Pring, the kroyshuka is not a technique to employ except as a last resort," he said firmly. "What you did was unforgiveable."

She shrugged. "It did not affect him for long."

"Why did you do it?" As she made no reply, he stepped forward and took her shoulders. "T'Pring, you must have known instantly it was not me. Why did you do it?"

"I do not have to explain my reasons to you," she said coldly.

He regarded her sadly. "You saw a swift route to the Captaincy, did you not?"

She drew in a sharp, angry breath and opened her mouth to reply. He laid his fingers across her lips. "Don't lie, T'Pring. The next time you meld with me, I shall see the truth in your mind."

"But I shall block your mouth from speaking it," she answered triumphantly.

He shook his head. "The truth will still be in my head. You cannot make me forget it. Do you wish to diminish my respect for you still further?"

Her eyes snapped with anger. "Do I need your respect, half-breed?" she snapped.

"You dislike my Human half because it resists your control," he said tiredly, "not for any other reason. You blocked it off during the pon farr, you would not permit it to temper my Vulcan nature to make the time easier for us both. You were determined to despise me."

She dropped her eyes before his. "There is work to be done," she said shortly. "The Captain requires a report on this incident. Please get on with it at once."

His shoulders drooped wearily. "I have it straight in my mind. I have but to set it out."

"Then get on with that, and leave me alone."

The door clicked shut sharply. Spock gave a rueful smile, wondering how it was that T'Pring seemed to manage to affect the mechanical closing of the door to resemble a slam, then he shrugged mentally, realising it was his own subjective impression that made it seem that way, rather than any actual physical difference in the sound. Not logical. He set to work. After only a moment or two the door buzzer sounded. Spock was momentarily surprised. It was unusual for anyone to come to their quarters, T'Pring had made it clear to everyone that visitors were unwelcome. However, a second's thought told him who it must be. There was only one person on board who attempted contact of any sort with him since his marriage.

"Come."

Kirk grinned at him from the doorway. "I saw her leave and knew you were alone," he said reassuringly. "Busy?"

"I have a report to make for the Captain," he replied. "It should be done tonight."

"How long will it take you?"

"About another twenty minutes."

"Good. How about a game of chess later? T'Pring is on duty tonight, isn't she?" Spock nodded, ashamed that this too-perceptive Human should openly admit his understanding of his humiliating dependence on his wife's good temper.

"Then you'll play?"

"If you wish it."

Kirk came right into the room, allowing the door to close. "Spock, if I'm ever intruding you'll say so, won't you?"

Spock smiled shyly. "You do not intrude, Jim."

"She doesn't make life too easy for you though, does she?"

Spock looked down at his desk surface, biting his lip. Kirk came closer and laid a fleeting hand on his shoulder. "If you ever want to talk about it, I'll be around," he said gently.

Spock could not trust himself to look up. His emotional control was ragged at the best of times, and this caring Human saw too deeply for his inner comfort. Wretchedly he drew his shields up tightly and raised his head.

"There is nothing to talk about," he said harshly, the Vulcan mask well in place.

"No?" Kirk gave the tiniest of headshakes. "You don't fool me, Mister," he said softly. "I'll see you in the rec room in half an hour."

Surely that click of the door was softer? Spock applied himself firmly to his work.

Kirk moved his bishop and gave Spock a sly grin as he did so. "Mate in three moves," he challenged.

Spock raised a questioning eyebrow, studying the pieces. "Only if you have overlooked this pawn," he said eventually, moving it.

Kirk laughed ruefully. "I had, of course, but one of these days I'm going to beat you!"

"Your game has improved," Spock said. "It is no longer so easy to win as it was. If you continue to improve at the same rate, you will achieve your first victory within the next month."

"As soon as that?" Kirk tried to keep a straight face. "Care to give me any odds?" he added airily. "I'd like to back myself. Sulu's running a book on it."

Spock looked disapproving. "Gambling is hardly a sensible way to employ one's money," he commented.

"It all depends on the odds," Kirk assured him. "What do you rate mine at?"

Spock gave the matter a moment's thought. "Approximately 9 to 2 on," he said at last.

"What do you base that on?" Uhura's voice interrupted them. "Mind if I watch the game while I drink my coffee?"

Kirk pulled a chair forward, studying her face. "It's been a hectic day for you, hasn't it?" he sympathised. "I suppose our counterparts were too busy working out how to get back to be of any help. At least their Spock will have been. If their Kirk's maths are as lousy as mine he'd have been better off at the labouring work I've been doing!"

"They were in the brig," Uhura said shortly. She caught Kirk's startled look and added apologetically, "T'Pring said it was you two originally. She let them go this morning once she'd realised it wasn't you after all."

"Didn't they have access to the computers?" Kirk asked in astonishment. "Uhura, they must have done. They came through at exactly the right moment or we'd none of us got back. No-one could work out maths like that in their heads, could they, Spock?"

"Given sufficient time it would be possible."

"You mean you could do it?" Uhura asked incredulously.

"It would take many hours," he replied diffidently, "but I believe I could do it. I enjoy working out such things mentally, but they are very time-consuming, and computers are a far more practical method."

She eyed him with a new respect. "I'll bear that in mind, it might be a useful asset some time. Why have you never told us what you can do?"

"The situation has never arisen, Captain," he said uncomfortably. To draw attention from himself he moved his queen abruptly, too late seeing that he had made an error of such gross ineptitude that he cringed inwardly at his own stupidity.

Kirk saw his chance immediately, but paused, keeping his hands carefully round his coffee cup. If he took it and won the game here and now, he would expose Spock to the ribbing that would certainly be given him by any of the few interested spectators gathered round them. He came to a decision. With adroit clumsiness he missed the edge of the table with his coffee cup, and jumping up to avoid the stream of hot coffee, knocked the table sharply, scattering the chess pieces from the upper levels into the spreading pool on the table's surface.

"Clumsy ass," he said tolerantly. "Sorry, Spock but it must have been your game. I couldn't see any way out of the corner you were backing me into."

Spock opened his mouth to explain the foolishness of his last move, but Kirk anticipated his honesty and kicked him so sharply on the shin he was momentarily distracted and the opportunity passed. Later, as they walked companionably back to their quarters, he broached the subject.

"You should have won that game, Jim."

"I know." Kirk grinned at him. "Look here, Spock, you've got to stop selling yourself short. Just because one person doesn't think too much of you, doesn't mean that the rest of us can't see what you really are. You made a stupid move because you were distracted by Uhura realising that you're not an idiot make-weight,

he re on sufferance. You had a good career here in Starfleet before it became necessary for you to marry." He stopped outside his own cabin, studying Spock's face intently, then he smiled broadly. "I know you too well to believe that you spend half the time too churned-up over your matrimonial affairs to concentrate on ship's business. You know I made it my business to find out exactly how often you're affected, and now I've told Uhura."

"You should not have done so," Spock said through stiff lips.

"Listen a bit more," Kirk told him. "Uhura tells me that T'Pring let those two go because that Spock dominated her mind. She's not as strong as she's made you believe. Fight for yourself a little, my Vulcan friend." He patted his shoulder. "I'm on your side, never forget that!"

Spock looked at the closing door with startled eyes, moving on to his own door along the corridor when he realised he had been standing like a statue an unconscionable length of time, and would be drawing attention to himself in precisely the way he tried to avoid. He walked with his customary economical stride, outwardly calm as ever, inwardly encountering an emotional turmoil of an intensity that staggered him.

Relieved to find the cabin empty, he switched off the lighting and went to the firepot glowing steadily on its shelf. He settled himself before it and retreated deeply into meditation, searching his mind in a way he had been unable to since his marriage two years ago. The process calmed and steadied him, and he realised with a sudden shock that the inhibition he had previously felt against such a penetrating self-examination was not of his own making, but had been planted in his mind by T'Pring during those early, shattering days of the marriage he had desperately hoped to avoid by his Human blood, but that his basically Vulcan physical inheritance had driven him to against his will. He studied that time remorselessly, recalling each event with appalling clarity; T'Pring's barely concealed contempt of him, her ruthless and uncompromising rejection of the affection his Humanity had tentatively offered, her clinical detachment from the fires that burned in him. She had given him nothing but the use of herself, no pretence at answering passion, no tenderness; no tempering of his physical strength by her calming mind-touch. She had allowed him to use her, to hurt her unnecessarily, and had later gloried in his shame over her bruises. It had been ugly and brutal, and he had never until now been able to see that it had not been his fault that it was so. With understanding, compassion, it could have been the time of mutual rapture it should be. He thought back to his own childhood, to the times when Sarek's temper had shortened and he had been sent away for several days. The home had always been so full of peace and gentleness on his return that he had never minded going. His mother had never developed any telepathic ability, so it was not the lack of the mind-touch supposed to control the male that had caused his own savagery. It had been T'Pring herself who had caused his tenuous control to snap completely. Now he recognised the cold fact it would not occur again. With a deep sense of shame he saw that for two long years he had played her game, her way. He would do so no longer.

He rose to his feet, stretching cramped muscles. Before the day was over, he would have the truth from T'Pring if he had to drag it from her mind as ruthlessly as a pre-Reform Vulcan would have done. Kaiidth! He was a half-breed, and his mother had taught him to be proud of his Humanity. He would use it to the full. He went to the bathroom, showered, drew on a Vulcan robe and went back to the outer cabin to await his wife.

T'Pring completed her final duties and went off watch, feeling strangely reluctant to face her husband. She was aware that she had frequently displeased him in the past, but he had never before openly showed his displeasure as he had earlier today. She gave herself an inward admonitory shake as she walked through the emptying night-time corridors. Spock would be asleep, or feigning it, as he usually was. By tomorrow the tiny frisson of fear that remained from her experience with the unbonded Spock of the other world would have faded. Besides, her own Spock was under her control. There was nothing to be afraid of.

Their quarters were in darkness save for the glowing firepot, and she put out a hand to activate the lights, then gave an involuntary gasp of fright as her wrist was firmly held.

"Spock? Is that you?"

"Of course it is I."

"Then release me." The fingers tightened. "Release me!" she ordered sharply.

"I don't believe I wish to," he replied lazily.

"I shall enforce it." She raised her free hand to initiate the meld, but he moved even more swiftly and caught that wrist also. "Spock, how dare you? Let me go!"

He swept her hands down and behind her back, clipping her close to him. She struggled ineffectually against his strength for a moment, and then abandoned herself to the logic of the situation and stood still.

"You have dominated me too long," Spock said softly. "Your control is supposed to be exercised during the pon farr, T'Pring, and not abused by using it to degrade me at other times." She gave a tiny laugh of contempt. "I am serious," he said even more quietly. "I will not endure such domination at any other time, and even then, you will be gentle."

Her eyes searched the dim light ineffectually. "Have you gone mad?" She drew her breath in. "It isn't...the vortex has not affected...?"

"No. But I have meditated deeply tonight, T'Pring, and learned a lot about myself, and about you. You could have had my trust, T'Pring, even that emotion Humans call love and Vulcans pretend not to understand. You chose instead to try and make me into your puppet, but you forgot that I was not trained in childhood to accept this."

"T'Pau was right," T'Pring suddenly whispered fiercely. "She warned me..." She broke off.

"Yes." Comprehension flooded him. "You saw me as an easy route to command, did you not? You thought you could build on my early years in Starfleet, before I reached sexual maturity. Nothing is ever that easy, T'Pring, as T'Pau knew very well. She also knew that my Human heritage would present problems."

"You have given me no problems," she said coldly. "From the beginning you have been ridiculously easy to control."

"For one reason only!" He said it quietly still, but there was a dangerous edge to his voice all the same. "I believed my Human half repulsed you so I kept it hidden out of respect for you. You have lost my respect, T'Pring, and now you will have to deal with the part of me you cannot subdue."

"This is madness." She struggled against his hands. "Our marriage will be ended by the Elders if I lose control...you know it. Where is your career in Starfleet then?"

"No." His tone was harsh. "You admitted openly before the Captain and her partner that you used the kroyshuka on someone you believed to be me. I do not believe you would care to have to admit it before the Vulcan Elders." He let her go abruptly, turning aside. With a swift, feline movement, she pounced, reaching for the meld.

He permitted it, raising his shields high, allowing her to enter only where he would have her, sending the tendrils of his mind deep into hers as he had never done before. She gave a wordless cry as she found herself defenceless. His mind sought and found her memories of the other Spock, seeing his power and realising it lay latent in his own mind. He ruthlessly studied the whole of that experience as it lay in her memory and then withdrew once more. Then he activated the lights and stood looking down at her. She hid her face in her hands, cowering away from him.

"So, you even lied to him? You felt no wish to learn more of what I had to offer you, you abandoned your plan simply because you were afraid of him and preferred to have me back to deal with." She shook her head mutely. "Don't compound the earlier lies with more," he said roughly. "I have seen the truth in your mind, and I've removed the blocks you set in mine. T'Pring, from now on you will have to be very careful what you do. Don't give me any cause to suspect you of further plots against Jim Kirk or the Captain."

"You are even more Human than I thought," she spat at him contemptuously.

"You chose me as your partner," he reminded her wearily. "Now you will have to take me as I am. I no longer yield to your control."

"I am still your superior officer," she retorted icily.

"I will continue to obey legitimate orders," he replied calmly. "I see no logic in altering the situation openly. I am sufficiently Vulcan to wish to keep our private differences private. But don't underestimate me any longer."

He went into the sleeping area, leaving her alone. He lay quietly, staring at the bulkhead, unsleeping, listening to her movements as she showered and prepared for bed. When at last she lay beside him, he put out a tentative hand to hers.

"T'Pring!" He whispered her name softly. "We have a lot to offer each other, you and I. Do you really despise this...Human feeling? It can be most rewarding."

"I am a full Vulcan, Spock," she reminded him.

He turned his head to smile at her wistfully. "So is my father, T'Pring, but he loves my mother. The Vulcans call it need, this yearning of one mind for another, and we can experience this need for each other if we search for it. Let us begin again, and make our marriage work."

"It seems I have no choice," she said reluctantly.

"I will not force you against your will," he said gently. "T'Pring, you have seen, surely you have seen, that does not lead to mutual respect?"

She met his eyes for a moment, and then lowered hers. "You make me feel ashamed, Spock."

"I do not wish you to feel shame," he whispered. "I wish us both to be content."

She could not look at him still, for the emotional experience of the long day had shaken her and she felt a need to control, to withdraw. She felt him shift on the bed and thought he was turning aside to sleep, but then a feather-light pressure of his mouth on hers brought her eyes swiftly open with shock. He released her at once, but did not move away.

Startled, she said, "This touching of mouths is not Vulcan, Spock."

His mouth curved in a smile. "No, it is not, but it is pleasant, I assure you."

"You have kissed others?"

"Yes. Before our marriage. Maybe I should have kissed you before." He kissed her again, holding her head so that she could not pull away. The experience was...not unpleasant, and she felt herself relaxing under his touch. At last he drew away again. "All things Human are not so bad, are they?" he enquired, teasingly.

She gathered her spinning senses. "No, they are not." She pulled his head down to hers.

In the morning they looked at each other with new eyes, each aware of newly-awakened sensitivity. Before they left their quarters, T'Pring held out her fingers in the Vulcan gesture of affection.

"Thee has opened yet another new world," she said softly. "I have learned much of new worlds recently."

He smiled at her. "I, too, have learned much. Thee and I together can be a formidable pairing, T'Pring."

With surprise she acknowledged it to be so, and her mind considered the possibilities with Spock working beside her, supporting her, instead of passively remaining in the background. He shook his head at her, warningly.

"T'Pring, such thoughts are unworthy."

"You were reading my thoughts?" she said indignantly.

"I did not need to touch your mind, your eyes told me what you were thinking. Even together, I doubt whether we are yet quite the force to be reckoned with that our Captain and her partner are. Do not underestimate either of them, T'Pring, and particularly not Jim Kirk!"

"He is a male." She dismissed him.

He laughed. "I am male, T'Pring. Would you dismiss me that lightly now? And I am only half Human. Jim is no half-breed, and Uhura is the youngest woman ever to be made Captain. It is a privilege to serve such a pair, and as Vulcans, we should give them our loyalty."

"Spock, I cannot abandon my ambitions so quickly," she protested. Seeing the withdrawal in his eyes she said swiftly, "I will make no plots, I give you my word."

"There is plenty of time," he reminded her. "They will grow old while we are still in our prime, remember. There is no hurry. Come, t'ky'ta, I am hungry, even if you are not."

He followed her from the room.

Later that morning while they were working together in the laboratory, the intercom beeped.

"T'Pring, will you send your husband to the sickbay, please. I need to give both him and Mr. Kirk a check-up."

T'Pring controlled her exasperation. "Dr. Chapel, my husband is in perfect health."

"Unfortunately, Commander, your opinion of his condition will not satisfy Starfleet requirements. I need to examine him myself. Will you please send him along?"

"As soon as he is free, yes."

"T'Pring, I need to see him now." Chapel's voice was dripping ice. "McCoy is here as well, he'll be quite safe."

Spock's hand was laid swiftly on his wife's mouth. "I will be there in five minutes, Doctor," he said calmly, and broke the circuit.

"That woman!" There was little evidence of control in T'Pring's voice.

"She is only doing her job," Spock said soothingly.

"Taking an undue interest in you is not her job," she replied coldly. "Just because she was foolish enough to make McCoy her partner simply so that he could get away from Earth when her own promised partner disappeared, does not mean she can consider you her property."

"Dr. Chapel is never less than professional in her dealings with me," he said placidly.

"You know she thinks she's 'in love' with you," she accused him.

"I thought you didn't understand such emotions," he teased.

"If Chapel is to be believed, I'm seething with emotions I'm frightened to show," she said disdainfully.

He laughed. "You can show them to me." He touched her fingers lightly. "T'Pring, I must go."

"I suppose it is necessary," she conceded. As the door began to open she called him back. "Spock, I do trust you."

"Thank you," he said gravely.

McCoy gave him a smile and a wink as he entered sickbay. "Off the lead for five minutes?" he whispered conspiratorially.

Spock's answering smile was a little edgy. Why had he never noticed before how the Human friends he had made before his marriage seemed to sympathise with his present predicament? He must have been living in a daze the last two years, been given no time to think, notice or understand. He made no reply and submitted to the medical in silence.

"Well, you seem perfectly healthy," Chapel said grudgingly at last.

"You should be pleased, Doctor." He pulled his shirt back over his head. "Is Jim all right?"

"Yes." She began recalibrating the instruments, eyeing him speculatively. "Your counterparts were very like you," she commented. "Medically, I should think you are exactly alike."

"I wish I'd seen them," McCoy said regretfully. "I was all tied up with the colonists and didn't have a moment to spare. What was their world like, Spock?"

"Different," he said succinctly. "Very different."

"You must tell me about it some time!" He gave him another wink.

Chapel gave an exclamation of disgust. "If you two men wish to indulge in childish fantasies, kindly go and do it elsewhere, and not in my sickbay."

"Yes, ma'am," McCoy said smartly, and tucking his arm into Spock's, swept him out into the corridor. "Time for a coffee, Spock?"

"That would be pleasant, Doctor, yes." For a brief moment he felt the impulse to call T'Pring to join them, then realised in another flood of comprehension that this was exactly what he would have done before, and that the friendly cup of coffee would have become a stiffly formal encounter, giving no pleasure to anybody. T'Pring had certainly had him well-trained. He felt a sense of self-disgust flow and ebb again. The days of his subservience were over now, and he would not let them return.

They collected their coffee and, seeing Kirk sitting alone at a table, went to join him. He grinned at them both.

"Quite like old times to see you two together," he commented. "Nice to find you coming to join the Human race again, Spock."

Spock smiled. "Well, half of me is with you, anyway, Jim!"

McCoy groaned. "I'd forgotten the awful jokes you used to make, Spock. Still, I guess it's worth it now you seem to be noticing us again. Your trip through whatever-it-was into wherever you went seems to have done you a lot of good. Just what the doctor would have ordered if only the doctor had a twisted enough mind to think of it in the first place...I think!"

Spock winced. "Really, Doctor. The convolutions of that remark are quite unnecessarily sigmoidal, I suggest you ingeminate it more clearly."

McCoy stared at him. "Can I have that in plain, non-Vulcan English?"

Spock stared back, dead-pan. "I believe that is what I said, Doctor!"

Kirk gave an enormous crack of laughter that brought heads up all round the room. Still spluttering, he said, "The Enterprise has its cross-talk comedians again." He got up. "I've got work to do, even if you two haven't."

Spock rose also. "I believe we are on watch together, Jim."

"Yes." A warm smile crinkled the corners of the hazel eyes as they left the rec room together. "You know, McCoy's right. This has done you a lot of good, hasn't it?"

Spock waited until they had reached the privacy of the turbolift before he replied. "I have learned a great deal about myself in the last couple of days, Jim." He smiled shyly. "And about T'Pring also. I believe our relationship can be as rewarding as the one you share with the Captain."

Kirk grinned. "Going to be treading on our heels, are you?"

Spock shook his head somberly. "Not if I have anything to say in the matter."

Kirk looked at him in surprise and dawning respect. "I thought she was the one who kept you under control," he remarked.

"Her presence is necessary," Spock said evenly, "but I do have myself under better control than I thought." As the car slowed down, he added, "Thank you for not losing as much faith in me as I had in myself."

Kirk prevented the doors from opening. "You and T'Pring will make a great team, Spock. Your abilities are greatly appreciated by Uhura, I know."

"And by you?"

"She is the Captain, Spock," Kirk pointed out, amused.

"Yes," the Vulcan conceded, "but I, too, am not blind to the capabilities of my friend!"

Kirk gave him a tiny, knowing wink, and let the doors slide open.

RESCUE

Uhura ran her fingers through her hair and slumped back in her chair. "We'll have to take the risk. That one area is the only place on the whole planet where the sensors have picked out surface dilithium. We've no time to spare for refinements."

"The area is populated," T'Pring said again. "To beam down now in broad daylight as you propose is in direct contravention of the Prime Directive and I must formally protest against your decision."

"Apply a little of your famous logic," Uhura said tiredly. "Without dilithium we don't get to Theta Scorpil 4 in time and we alienate the whole of the Tholian Assembly for good and all. You know their reputation for punctuality as well as I do. You also know that our failure to arrive will make them favour the proposals the Klingons have been making to them. It's obvious these flawed crystals must have been substituted after Masters made her inspection. Someone clearly intends us to be late and I intend we shall be on time." She looked round the briefing room table. "Does anyone have any cover story suggestions?"

There was the briefest of silences and then McCoy said wryly, "A heavenly visitation?" He noted Spock's minutely raised eyebrow and grinned at him. "It might work...if you picked your landing party carefully."

"Not every society has the same type of evil spirit that is depicted in your ancient Earth legends," Spock said placidly. "Your idea would be more practical if we had any foreknowledge of what their gods, if any, were like. It is equally possible for us to create precisely the opposite impression."

Kirk frowned thoughtfully at T'Pring and catching her eye said, "Commander, just how close to the nearest houses are the deposits?"

"The entire area is covered in dwellings. It is on the outer edge of a fair sized town."

"Why can't we wait until nightfall?" Christine Chapel enquired. "We'd run a lot less risk of being seen."

"And we'd run a lot more risk of not finding the crystals in time," Uhura told her crisply. "We need those crystals today - we have to leave orbit by midnight, ship's time, if we are to get to Theta Scorpil on schedule."

"There is an area of scrub," T'Pring began doubtfully.

"Too risky." Uhura shook her head. "I don't want to lose anyone on beam-down. We'll leave now, we've wasted enough time. T'Pring, you will accompany me, you, Jim, Spock, Dr. Chapel and Chief Maxwell. Call her for me please, Palmer. Tell her to be in the transporter room in ten minutes."

"Captain, is it wise to take so many of your senior officers?"

"I need experts, T'Pring. Those best suited to finding dilithium crystals or protecting us while we do it. Besides, if we fail, sooner or later the orbit will decay, then nothing will matter to any of us."

"Logical."

Chapel gulped down the butterflies trying to escape from her throat and followed the rest of the group from the room. McCoy gave her a reassuring wink as she passed him.

Dressed in carefully anonymous robes, hooded for Spock and T'Pring, they materialised in the quietest area they could pick out and were lucky enough to be unobserved.

"Not for long, though." Uhura pointed out a group coming their way. "Maxwell, cover us in case of trouble."

The chief nodded grimly and took up a position on rising ground nearby.

T'Pring and Spock were already busy at work with their tricorders.

"That way." Spock pointed. "Deposits about fifteen metres four centimetres, close to the surface. Yes, Jim, that's it." He turned slightly to make further readings while Uhura followed T'Pring's directions.

"Gotcha!" Kirk held up two crystals in triumph. "I wish it was always as easy as this."

"Try four metres eight centimetres to your right this time, Jim."

"Locals approaching from three directions, Captain," Maxwell called. "They don't look unfriendly, only curious."

"How many crystals have we?" Uhura handed over three.

"Enough and to spare." T'Pring was collecting them all up. "Take them, Spock. I may need to use my phaser."

"Gather round the men," Uhura called, "and be ready for emergency beam up if we have to."

"It would be better to get out straight away," T'Pring said. "We have broken the Prime Directive already."

Uhura flicked her a wry grin. "I'd rather not beam up right under their very noses unless I have to."

"You may regret your decision."

A small crowd had gathered round them by this time and still more were coming, making way for a quiet man with an air of dignity and authority to come forward.

"You are strangers here. You are most welcome." He looked over Uhura's head at Kirk. "I am Neval, the leader. Can we help in any way?"

Uhura took a polite step forward. "We thank you, but no. We are travellers and we wish to journey on."

Neval looked at her in some surprise and then at Kirk and Spock. "The woman speaks freely - are you from far away?"

There was a murmur of restless movement in the small crowd and some smothered laughter.

"Very far." Spock anticipated Uhura's reply and as T'Pring began to step forward sent a warning call through their bond. /Step back. See! There are no women present!/"

Startled, T'Pring studied the crowd and found he was right.

Uhura's head turned sharply in surprise. It was most unlike Spock of all people to push himself forward - the most self-effacing of men. Someone tugged at her arm and she pulled herself free in mild annoyance.

"You seemed to be searching for something," their interrogator said. "If we can be of any assistance...?"

"It's perfectly all right," Uhura told him, wearing her most charming smile. "We found what we were looking for and now we wish to go on our way again with your goodwill."

Again the crowd shifted restlessly and a voice from the back called out, "I'd like that bold one in my house. What will you take for her, strangers?"

Suddenly Kirk understood and he strode out, thrusting Uhura behind him, grinning. "She is not for sale. I have my own methods for dealing with her."

The uncomprehending Maxwell gave a gasp of disgust. "That will do, Kirk. Back to your place and let the Captain deal with this."

"Captain?" Neval was puzzled. "This is most strange. Who is the leader among you?"

"I am." Kirk managed to get the words out first, gripping at Uhura's arm. Out of the corner of his mouth he said, "For god's sake shut Maxwell up. She'll get us all killed!"

Uhura began to turn on him in anger but T'Pring forestalled her, murmuring, "One moment, Captain. Study the crowd. There are no women present. It may be we are breaking some local taboo by being here."

She was right. Looking round Uhura could see only males...and her men, by law, were unarmed. Not only that, but Spock was carrying their precious dilithium crystals and couldn't risk helping Kirk. She walked over to Maxwell and as she passed the Vulcan hissed up at him, "Give them to T'Pring and try to get her phaser as unobtrusively as possible. This could blow up in our faces. Maxwell, don't say another word, you've just put us in enough trouble as it is."

Maxwell's glare contained astonishment and anger but she subsided obediently.

Neval was saying disapprovingly, "You should have your women under better guard than this. Our laws are most strict concerning such matters."

"We do not wish to break your laws," Kirk assured him, "Simply to go peacefully on our way."

"Some of us will accompany you through the town, then. It will not do for unveiled women to walk openly with only the two of you for escort." Neval beckoned two or three older men to come to him. "We will go some part of the way with these strangers and see they cause no trouble."

The crowd was beginning to lose interest now, melting away in twos and threes.

"We will be glad of your help." Kirk considered telling him they had lost men on their journey but decided the lie was unwise. Not knowing the full facts of the situation he could well make things worse with some injudicious comment. He set off beside Neval, signalling the rest to follow.

The local leader eyed him from beneath heavily frowning brows as they walked. "Your customs must be strange," he said abruptly. "Do your women always go about with you?"

"Certainly not." Kirk shook his head emphatically, searching his mind for a valid reason since it seemed he must say something. "But we've experienced great troubles, drought, famine..." He let his voice trail away, shrugging. "We go to my kinsmen in the mountains to the south. It would not do to abandon the women."

"They have their uses," Neval admitted.

Kirk smothered a desire to laugh, hoping Maxwell could hear. She would just love that. They were walking into the centre of the small town now; wheeled carts piled high with goods lumbering along the rutted roads. It seemed it might be market day in the area. He was looking behind him with interest when he heard a yell of warning up ahead and turned in time to see the over-loaded contents of a cart just ahead begin to slip as it lurched heavily over a stone.

"Look out!" His own yell added to the pandemonium as the sacks of vegetables, fully three metres high, came tumbling down in an inexorable cascade, scattering passers-by and sending one youth flying to land, half buried by split open sacks, in an untidy, unconscious sprawl.

Christine was on her knees beside him at once, feeling for his pulse.

The paralysis of surprise held the crowd momentarily still and then an outraged cry broke from everyone but the numbed Enterprise crew, and stones began to fly viciously.

"BE STILL." Neval yelled it compellingly, throwing up his arms. "WOMAN, LEAVE HIM."

Rubbing a bruised arm, Chapel stood up and cast an apologetic look Uhura's way.

"This is too much." Neval was clearly enraged. "Seize the leman."

Kirk grabbed at his arm as the crowd hustled her away. "Where are they taking her?"

"To the place of execution."

"Execution! All she wanted to do was help!"

"You would beg for her after what she has done?" Neval was starting to look dangerous.

Spock came to Kirk's side. "We do not wish to plead her cause," he said calmly, "we wish to understand her offence."

"She has touched a man who is not hers." Neval's eyes narrowed, looking him up and down. "A young man, not yet full grown and ready for pairing. Such an action is unpardonable and the woman must die."

"We understand." Kirk nodded, feeling sick at heart, his eyes darting here and there. There was too big a crowd for them to hope to gain anything by resistance, and no hope that Rand could pick them out from among this many people. "You must do what you have to with her."

"Captain." Maxwell was shaking her arm furiously. "You can't let him get away with that."

"We have to, Maxwell. He's doing just what I would," Uhura murmured fiercely. "Keep out of it and don't make the situation worse."

Neval was calming a little. "It will be best for the rest of you to be out of town swiftly. Come."

"Where will you take the woman?" Kirk began to move, plans taking shape in his mind.

"To the cage of execution, there." Neval pointed to a large stone building on one side of an open market square, now alive with stalls and bargaining customers. Set some two metres up on one of its walls was a metal cage. The angry males were hauling their struggling prisoner towards it. "She will pass the rest of the day exposed to the execration of the crowd and she will die at dawn. You will be long gone from here by then."

Kirk eyed the group surrounding them, his face placid, even while his mind seethed with outrage at Christine's plight. There were far too many of them to make any action possible, their demeanour already threatening.

His eyes met Uhura's as he turned to leave; the cold, raging sickness in them mirrored his own.

It was a very subdued group that walked the road out of town. As they passed the last of the houses their escort came to a halt.

"Go on your way," Neval told them coldly. "And if you value your lives, do not come this way again."

"Understood," Kirk said softly, and led the way down the dirt track.

Once out of sight Uhura whipped out her communicator. "Rand, get us out of here. Five to beam up."

She was still shaking with fury and frustration as she stepped off the transporter pad.

"Get those crystals down to Engineering, T'Pring. At least Masters and Scott can get to work."

"And you can give me that phaser," Maxwell said, prodding Spock firmly. He handed it to her silently.

"You did very well, both of you," Uhura acknowledged. "Thank you. You got us out of a tricky situation."

"Where is Chris Chapel?" Rand asked soberly.

"In prison awaiting execution," Uhura answered curtly. "We were unfortunate enough to encounter a male-dominated system that doesn't like its young men touched by female doctors with more heart than sense." She marched to the door followed by her partner.

They were both silent as they walked the corridors to their shared quarters. When the door had closed Uhura turned to him wearily. "I blew it."

"Not entirely your fault," he said calmly, "and there has been no violation of General Order 1."

"Damn General Order 1. I've left Chris down there to die. D'you think she cares about General Order 1 just at this moment?"

"I think she might be hoping we'll find some way to get her out."

She swallowed hard. "I know. Jim, what the hell am I going to do?"

He looked at the chronometer. "Five hours before we have to leave here, and it will be dark down there in two."

She was calming down. "You're right of course. I'll have a shower, I'll be able to think more clearly when I'm cooler. There must be some way to get her out of it."

"Not you," he said softly. "Let me do it."

"You? Regulations forbid males to beam down alone, you know that."

"I won't tell if you won't," he grinned. "Besides, I don't think I shall be alone. I think you'll find you'll get two other volunteers."

"Spock and McCoy, yes. Does that make it any better? You're still males."

"Well, I'm not offering to go if you send Maxwell with us! It makes sense, Uhura. If any of you women come with us, any at all, we could risk making the whole thing worse."

She eyed him thoughtfully, biting her lip. "I guess you're to be trusted," she said slowly. "I'll let you know when I've had time to think." She disappeared into the bathroom.

Kirk went to look for McCoy.

"Yes, I'd heard," he said grimly. "Isn't there anything we can do?"

"I'm working on it." Kirk patted his shoulder reassuringly. "I've asked Uhura to let me go and see what I can do."

"You think she'll let us go down alone?" McCoy said hopefully.

"Us?"

McCoy grinned. "You weren't thinking of going without me now, were you?" The smile faded. "Chris means a lot to me, she's been like a daughter since I lost touch with Jo."

"Yes, I know."

The blue eyes were brightening again. "And you won't get to go without your Vulcan shadow either," McCoy said as the doors slid open to reveal the tall, rangy shape of the Vulcan Science Officer.

The slanted brows rose. "You have a plan to rescue Dr. Chapel, Jim?"

"Two! One is to chuck her a communicator as soon as no-one's about and beam her out of there fast, the other is more complicated and needs further thought." They both looked at him expectantly. "I'll let you know!"

McCoy looked at Spock. "That means he hasn't thought of anything yet," he said disgustedly.

"He will," Spock said with quiet confidence.

Maxwell stared grimly across the desk. "I've warned you before that you were going to have trouble with those two, Captain. They both of them stepped out of line today and should be disciplined."

"Discipline aboard this ship is my affair, Maxwell," Uhura said coldly. "If you object to having your life preserved by the quick thinking of our partners you are being irrationally blind. They did what was necessary under the circumstances. My commendation stands."

"They are increasingly insolent to me," Maxwell said angrily.

T'Pring raised her eyebrows. "Spock...insolent? It hardly seems likely. Vulcans are meticulously correct."

"Perhaps it isn't Spock," she admitted, "but Kirk is dangerous."

Uhura's eyes glittered frostily. "Lt. Commander Kirk's loyalty is not in question, and as for his manner, since you are of nearly equal rank surely you can find some satisfactory way of solving your differences of opinion? No - " She held up a hand as Maxwell's mouth opened in protest " - I don't want to hear any more about it today. We need to send down a rescue party to release Dr. Chapel and Lt. Commander Kirk has volunteered to go, as have Lt. Commander Spock and Lt. McCoy. They will need phasers - please see to it they receive them."

"Phasers?" Maxwell was shocked rigidity from head to toe. "Surely you're not going to let them be armed, Captain?"

Uhura closed her eyes briefly. "One of these days, Maxwell, you're going to start thinking with your brains instead of your reflexes. They are not going on shore leave; they have volunteered for a difficult mission. Under the circumstances, and since the presence of any female with them will only place Chris in greater danger, they are to be armed. You will issue all three of them with phasers. Is that understood?"

"Affirmative." Maxwell turned stiffly on her heel and marched out.

Uhura saw T'Pring's calm expression and shrugged. "There is such a thing as being too hidebound for your own good," she said ruefully.

"Chief Maxwell's mind works on very rigid guidelines, certainly," T'Pring said coolly. "I have given the necessary orders to Stores. Their clothes will be ready in twenty minutes."

"Good. Thank you." Uhura rubbed the back of her neck and flexed her shoulders. "I hope to hell they can get Chris out of there. They aren't used to working on their own."

"Spock is," T'Pring reminded her. "He was in Starfleet for many years before it was necessary for me to join him." She gave her Captain a half smile. "And your partner always seems to me to be a very determined man."

"He is loyal," Uhura said curtly.

"I do not doubt it. I believe we are both very fortunate." She went to the door. "Is there anything more for the moment?"

"No. We're nearly ready. Have a few minutes to yourself." She guessed her second in command wanted time to speak to her bondmate before he left.

Maxwell handed the phasers over grudgingly. "Where's McCoy?"

"He was delayed in Sickbay. I'll take his." Kirk accepted it and checked the power pack.

"It's all in order," Maxwell growled. "D'you think I'd hand you a useless phaser?"

"It is only logical to check." Spock was inspecting his.

"Typical of males," she snorted derisively. "You never grow up. Any chance to play with mechanical toys or weapons and you're happy."

Kirk grinned at her disarmingly. "It makes it even pleasanter when it's all in the line of duty, Chief."

"Just bear in mind you can kill somebody with one of those," she said shortly.

Kirk watched her solid form retreating, rigid with disapproval. He winked at Spock and led the way to the turbolift. The Vulcan suppressed a smile.

"Perhaps it is unwise to bait her quite so often, Jim."

"She annoys me. 'Bear in mind you can kill someone...!' Maybe one of these days I shall have to do something about her." He grinned at his friend's visibly taken aback expression. "What's the matter?"

The lift doors swished open for them. Spock led the way out saying, "I was wondering precisely what your remark implied."

"Oh, I don't know," Kirk said airily. "Maybe find another culture like this one and get her married off to some despotic male so that she'd have to resign the service and stay out of space."

"My sympathies would be with the male," Spock said softly, pausing by the door to his quarters. The door opened just as Kirk gave vent to a great bellow of laughter.

"You should be preparing for the task ahead of you, Mr. Kirk," T'Pring said coldly. "Your clothes will be in your quarters by now. Hurry up and get ready."

While Spock was dressing T'Pring said abruptly, "Husband, you should discourage your friend from annoying Commander Maxwell. She has complained of his impertinence to the Captain since we returned to the Enterprise. One day he will go too far."

Spock held out his fingers to her. "I have already mentioned it to him, t'ky'ta; however, I believe that Jim does very little without some purpose."

She touched her fingers to his. "Take care, Spock. Do not embroil yourself in something I will not condone."

A half smile touched his lips. "Is your concern for yourself...or for me?"

She avoided his gaze. "For us both. What touches you touches your bondmate also."

He pulled her to him. "I do believe you begin to understand," he whispered and bent his head to kiss her.

When he drew away she looked up at him despairingly. "Oh, you half Human, what can I do with you?" She watched his teasing, deepening smile and added, "If anyone should ever discover how little control I have over you these days your career in Starfleet will be over - and so will mine!"

"Do you really believe I would do anything to jeopardise it?" he asked soberly.

"Not intentionally, perhaps, but your Human blood makes you dangerously rash upon occasions...and I believe you would dare a great deal for James Kirk."

He quirked an eyebrow. "It is not logical to worry about something that may never happen, T'Pring."

"And how you dare to prate to me about logic..." she said crossly. "No, don't kiss me again, you will be late."

Just as the last, lingering daylight was fading from the sky the three men materialised in a rocky area by the road out of town. The weather had changed since afternoon, and a thin drizzle was falling with penetrating insistence.

"Just what we needed," McCoy growled, hunching his shoulders.

"Yes," Kirk said seriously. "With luck it'll keep everyone at home. We

only have three hours and it'll take us over half an hour to get into town. It'd suit us nicely to find the place empty when we get there."

They set off along the dirt road, now churning uncomfortably into mud under their feet. Unfortunately as time went by and the rain got heavier the going became worse, slowing them so considerably that it was almost an hour later before they finally came to the outskirts of the town. However Kirk's optimism proved to have been well founded and the streets were virtually deserted, save for the odd passer-by hurrying along with a fold of his robe over his head and disinclined to linger.

Kirk looked about him, frowning. "It's that way, isn't it, Spock?"

"That is correct, Jim. The second opening to the right."

"We'll take it slowly. We don't want to go rushing in too fast."

They slowed their pace to a gentle saunter, ignoring the uncomfortable, adhering dampness of their clothes, and came round the corner of the square apparently engrossed in conversation.

"Is that where she is?" McCoy could just see the gleam of metal bars in the dim light from an opposite window.

"That's where they said," Kirk told him, screwing up his eyes against the now driving rain. "I can't see her though, Spock, can you?"

"Someone is lying against the wall. I cannot see if it is Dr. Chapel. The person is very still, asleep or unconscious."

"I guess those two may be guards." Kirk pointed to two shapes in the shadowed shelter of the building's ornate doorway.

"And will need to be eliminated," Spock nodded agreement.

"Bloodthirsty Vulcan," McCoy murmured, grinning.

The three of them strolled casually up to the door together, watching the guards move hurriedly upright from their propped-against-the-wall stance.

"A most unpleasant night," Kirk said amiably.

One of them grinned back but the older of the two scowled and said sharply, "You must have urgent business to be out in it, then."

"Indeed we have," Kirk said; seeing Spock had edged close to the shoulder of the older, larger man, he held out a hand to the younger, saying, "Look at this."

The young guard leaned forward and Kirk's hand came up in a chopping motion to his throat just as Spock's hand applied pressure to the other man's shoulder. He carefully caught the dropping figure as it slid ungracefully down into unconsciousness.

"It may be wise to remove them from the doorway," Spock suggested.

McCoy helped drag them into the shadows, grinning. "I see you two have gone back to practising unarmed combat. You'd better see Maxwell doesn't catch you at it. She'd love another chance to slap you both in the brig. I'm not at all sure she doesn't still believe it was you that last time."

"She does." Kirk's eyes gleamed devilishly. "She hasn't got a lot of time for all this scientific mumbo-jumbo, you know. I've often wondered what would have happened if she'd been in that shuttle along with us and actually seen that other universe."

"Doubtless the episode would not have occurred in that case," Spock said. "I do not recall seeing her double on board that Enterprise, do you, Jim? Their security chief was a male, and I presume that for such an interdimensional shift of matter..."

"Not now, Spock!" Kirk said impatiently. "Just concentrate on how we're

going to get up there." He was under the barred cage, peering up futilely in the dim light. "Chris! Chris!" He did not dare call loudly and she did not stir. "Chris! Bones, is she asleep or unconscious?"

"Unconscious, I guess. She's rather far away for me to get a proper reading." He frowned at the tube. "Oh god...Jim, she's badly hurt. We have to get her out."

"Take it easy, Bones, we will. Spock, if I lift you up there, d'you think you can bend those bars? Bones, keep your eye open for anyone around."

The Vulcan climbed carefully from his friend's bent knee to his shoulders, holding on to the cage overhead for support as Kirk straightened up. The bottom of the cage was only a foot or so above Kirk's head and he could get an excellent grip on the bars, heaving at them until the veins swelled on his face and Kirk's shoulders were beginning to tremble from the unaccustomed strain.

"Useless," Kirk said at last. "Come down again, Spock. We'll have to use phasers to take out one side."

"Not yet," McCoy said urgently. "There are a group of people just come into the square. They're coming over here."

Spock leaped down, surefooted as a cat, to stand beside Kirk. There were five men approaching, hurrying towards them. Kirk braced himself, expecting attack and resigned to the prospect of failure. McCoy was no fighter, and his own illegal practice with Spock had only lately been resumed after the two-year break since Spock's marriage, and he knew that for some reason the Vulcan's superior natural strength was lesser now, inexplicably tamed and restricted. Tensed for action he watched the five men pause, laughing and eager.

"Is the doxy still moving?" one of them cried. "We thought we had taught her well enough before the daylight faded. Is it still to do?" He picked up a stone from the dirt of the square, stepped back and threw it unerringly through the bars of the raised cage. It thudded sickeningly onto the still figure; Kirk felt McCoy surge forward and tried to grab him but it was too late.

"Damn you, isn't she hurt enough already?" McCoy roared, charging like an attacking bull. Caught by surprise the man reeled and went down.

"Come on!" Kirk impelled himself forward, closely followed by Spock.

Their attack may have lacked finesse but it was more than compensated for by the surging, righteous anger that lent power to their blows. With the aid of the Vulcan's expert knowledge of the humanoid nervous system they were more successful than Kirk had expected and in less time than he could have hoped. He looked down at the five still figures and grinned.

"Well done, both of you. I enjoyed that."

"There is still a great deal of the savage in the male," Spock said soberly.

"Have you ever seen Maxwell in action?" McCoy said sardonically. "Women can be pretty savage on occasion, if it suits them. Come on. Let's get Christine out of here."

They went back to the cage; Kirk gazed at it, frowning. "She's lying nearer that end, but we don't have much room to spare. We'll have to be pin-point accurate not to kill her."

"Just one moment, Jim. Let me attempt something else first."

"Something else, Spock? What can you...?" Kirk's voice trailed away. "Spock! What the hell are you trying to do?"

T'Pring watched her pacing Captain and said quietly, "There is little point in such agitation. They have only been gone for an hour and a half. There is still over an hour before we need to be concerned."

Uhura paused. "Have I ever told you your efforts to calm me down can be extremely irritating?"

"Yes." T'Pring met her gaze blandly.

Surprised, Uhura found herself breaking into a smile. It was extraordinary just how much easier Spock's prickly young wife was to be with recently - and how Spock himself seemed to have come to terms with his marriage at last. They were proving a most valuable asset to the crew and she knew that Spock meant a lot to her partner. They had always shared a mental rapport before Spock's marriage and Kirk had dearly missed the close relationship when T'Pring had finally joined her husband on board the Enterprise. She'd probably never know just what had happened either to Spock in that other universe, or to T'Pring when she'd encountered Spock's counterpart, but the improvement and relaxation in both of them could certainly be dated from that time.

"And you make them work irritatingly often, too," she laughed.

"I endeavour to be efficient. Do you wish me to..." T'Pring broke off abruptly, her eyes widening in surprise.

"What is it? T'Pring!"

T'Pring held up her hand. "One moment, please, Captain." She steepled her hands, bowing her head to them, and concentrating.

Kirk watched his friend, his head bowed to steepled fingers, his face deeply concentrated. He put a hand on McCoy's arm, preventing him from drawing his phaser.

"What's up?" McCoy hissed.

"I'm not sure. He may be attempting to contact T'Pring."

"From here? I thought he was a touch telepath."

"It's more than that with a bondmate. I didn't know he could make contact over hundreds of miles, though."

"Neither did I." Spock had relaxed again. He cast a swift glance round the square and finding it empty said, "Please support me once again, Jim. I believe I may be more successful now."

This time the bars moved, the gap steadily widening. Once again Spock jumped down and he and Kirk together lifted McCoy until he could scramble inside.

Listening to McCoy's horrified list of the extent of Chris's injuries Kirk came to a decision. He flipped open his communicator. "Rand, four to beam up, quickly. Have a med trolley standing by. Chris is badly hurt."

Uhura studied her second in command anxiously. "Are you all right?"

"Perfectly." However, although the shock in T'Pring's eyes was lessening, she was obviously far from calm still.

"What happened?"

"Spock...he contacted me."

"From the planet? I thought you two had to be much closer than that."

"His ability would seem to be increasing," T'Pring said drily.

"Are they in trouble?"

"No. He wanted me to release him - he didn't tell me why."

"Release him? How?"

"Do you mind if I sit down, Captain?"

Uhura shook her head impatiently, but noting the Vulcan woman's unnatural

paleness fetched her a glass of water. "Now, tell me about it."

"You know that Vulcan women have their men in control...perhaps you do not understand precisely what it entails. We keep a mental lock on their minds, ensuring that they cannot harm us during the mating fever and to...hold back their strength so that they are incapable of overpowering us physically. Spock demanded release from that lock...and I could not resist him."

Uhura stared at her in horror. "You mean Jim has a berserk Vulcan down there to contend with?"

"I do not know. I...doubt it. Spock is difficult for me to handle because of his Human blood and because his mother could not apply the mind touch when he was young."

"But he could be dangerous. I'll warn Jim." Her hand was reaching to the intercom when it buzzed.

"They're beaming up now, Captain," Palmer reported. "Dr. Chapel is hurt."

"We'll be right down."

McCoy laid the still body down and dived for his hidden medikit as Uhura came through the door at a run, closely followed by T'Pring.

"How bad is it?"

"Very bad. We must get her to Sickbay at once, she needs surgery. I'll let you know as soon as I have any news, Captain."

Uhura watched the trolley go, her eyes bleak. It was never easy to have a crewmember injured and Chris was a good friend, but there was nothing she could do about it now and she had other matters to concern her. She turned to the other two men.

"Come to my quarters. I want a full report of what happened down there."

The sharpness of her tone made Kirk raise his eyebrows in silent questioning at Spock. His friend's face was unusually immobile, sternly Vulcan. They fell in together behind their partners, following obediently.

Once her cabin door had shut Uhura went to her desk and waved T'Pring to a chair beside her. "Now, gentlemen, explain."

Kirk reported concisely and accurately. Uhura listened without interruption until he finished, "In view of Dr. Chapel's serious injuries and the limited visibility I elected to take the risk of beaming up straight away. The square was empty at the time."

She nodded. "You made the right decision. And you didn't have to use the phasers?"

"No. I thought we might have to, but Spock managed to deal with the bars."

Uhura looked up at the quietly attentive Vulcan. "Is there anything you want to add to that point, Mr. Spock?"

Spock shook his head. "I believe Mr. Kirk's report has covered everything, Captain."

Knowing how touchy Vulcans could be over personal questions Uhura decided to abandon that problem temporarily. It would help to talk it over with Jim, who knew more about the Vulcan than she did.

"Very well, Mr. Spock. I should cut along and get out of those wet clothes if I were you. You too, Jim. Dismissed."

As both men disappeared, Spock to his own cabin and Kirk into the private area of their shared quarters, she said, "They seem to have done very well."

T'Pring raised her eyebrows. "Would you expect them not to have done so? They are both extremely determined men."

Slightly less wary of T'Pring than she was of Spock, Uhura asked bluntly, "Is this loss of control very important?"

"If Vulcan ever discovers it, it will be the end of our career in Starfleet."

"That serious?"

"He would not be permitted to continue...he would have to be under surveillance as his father is, and I would have to take my place at his side."

"Well, I don't want to lose the pair of you. What can you do about it, if anything?"

"I am unsure. It may be that no one need ever know."

Uhura's expression softened sympathetically. "You're nervous of talking to Spock about it, aren't you?"

"You are very perceptive. Yes. It is illogical to experience such diffidence, but I cannot deny it."

"Should we ask Jim, perhaps?" She could see from the veiled relief in T'Pring's eyes that she had made a welcome suggestion so she got to her feet, walked into their sleeping cabin and called out, "Jim, when you're out of the shower come back into the office. There's something T'Pring and I need to discuss with you."

She went back to her desk and sat down, an impish smile on her face. "I must admit," she said confidentially, "I've never understood how Sarek was permitted to marry a Human woman in the first place."

T'Pring looked faintly surprised. "The story is well enough known. He accompanied his mother, T'Pau, and his wife, T'Lea, on a diplomatic mission to Earth. T'Lea was killed, and when Sarek's time came, a month or so later, Amanda went to him."

Uhura could not repress a tiny shudder. "I'm not sure I'd have been brave enough. Wasn't she fortunate not to be hurt?"

T'Pring shrugged. "I imagine so, but Sarek has always seemed a very gentle man to me."

"As Spock is."

"Indeed." T'Pring looked as though she might have said more but the inner door opened and Kirk emerged, hair neatly slicked down.

"Come and sit down, Jim. This is by way of being an informal discussion." She explained the problem, prompted once or twice by T'Pring.

When she'd finished Kirk said, "I thought it might be something like that. The way he bent those bars was quite like the old days."

"What do you think T'Pring should do?"

Kirk hesitated. "You said this was an informal discussion, Uhura. Don't you think it would be best to include Spock in it as well? He has a right to know what's being said, surely?"

Uhura flicked a quick glance at T'Pring. "I wanted T'Pring to hear what you think about it."

"You don't need to fear Spock." Kirk spoke with calm certainty. "Let Uhura call him here and we'll talk this out together. I'm quite sure Spock doesn't want to leave Starfleet any more than you do."

T'Pring brought her errant feelings under control. "You are quite right, of course. May we consult my husband also, Captain?"

Uhura flicked the intercom to call Spock and he appeared in a few seconds. Embarrassment coloured her voice as she explained why they wished to see him, but she covered it well.

"I'm sorry we had to become involved in your personal affairs at all, but I was present when you made contact with T'Pring."

"I apologise also," he said quietly, "but it was necessary to get Dr. Chapel out and to have used our phasers might have drawn most unwelcome attention upon us, and would have been in contravention of General Order 1.. I had to be free to use my full strength."

"And what will happen now?" Uhura asked. "I am sure you know the risks you run should the Vulcan Matriarchs ever discover what has occurred."

"Naturally I know. The matter will be adjusted once we have time to do so." T'Pring gave a tiny murmur of surprise and he turned to look at her, eyebrows flaring. "You did not doubt it, did you, my wife?"

It was quite clear T'Pring had most seriously doubted it. Taking pity on her embarrassed silence Kirk said, "Do you really have to? After all, you spent your childhood quite freely."

"And I will be the more closely watched as a result. Yes, it is necessary."

"So we've been worrying about nothing," Uhura said cheerfully. "Once again my apologies to both of you. I suggest you go and have a little time to yourselves. Get some sleep in too. There are still a few hours of the night left."

At the door Spock said, "Is there any news of Dr. Chapel yet, Captain?"

"No, not yet. I'm going down to Sickbay now. I'll let you know."

Alone in their quarters T'Pring said abruptly, "Apologies are not Vulcan, but... I experience a certain need to say I am sorry."

"There was too little time to explain properly," Spock said quietly. "Doubtless the manner in which I had to demand release so curtly gave you cause to doubt my loyalty."

She bowed her head. "I have given thee more cause, my husband. Must I take back control?"

He studied her gravely, seeing a new T'Pring, less self-assured, more vulnerable. "I have made you fear me, have I not?"

She acknowledged it in the indirectness of her gaze, her eyes sliding from his.

One mobile brow lifted, teasing her. "Then the sooner we re-establish that particular link, the better." He stepped close. "Give me your thoughts, t'ky'ta."

Her confidence was growing again and this time she met his eyes fully, seeing the amusement gleaming in their velvet depths. She said, "You know full well you can release yourself whenever you wish it."

"But I give thee my word I will never do so without serious need, T'Pring. I am no radical. I do not seek to change Vulcan's laws unaided. The violence of our heritage makes control necessary, I am well aware of the facts. But although my Human blood has lessened the violence within me and I also have the capacity to resist you, I will not do so lightly. We are paired, and I am content with that. More than content."

She turned away and gazed into the firepot, firmly suppressing the emotions of shame and self-disgust that threatened to emerge against her will. "It was wrong of me to have treated thee so at first, my husband."

"I understand." He took her shoulders and turned her to face him. "I do understand. T'Pau warned you so strictly that you were afraid to be anything other than ruthless, were you not? And you were ambitious and resented having to remain on Vulcan under her guidance while I was free to leave alone until my time came."

"You have seen so much in my mind?" She was almost bewildered.

"Not all at once. I have thought long and deeply since I found myself again. We started badly, you and I, but we have the chance to put it right. I wish to stay here with you, in Starfleet, where you also wished to be all those years before we met again at koon-ut-kal-i-fee."

"Oh, yes." She could admit it now, no longer afraid he would take advantage over the illogical weakness she showed in her longing for the stars. "I studied so hard to be ready, to be fit to take my place here. I did not believe anyone would ever understand what drove me on, made the deviousness of diplomacy so displeasing when one thought of the subtle cleanliness of space." She paused. "I will be honest - at first thee were but a means to an end; now I am not sure thee are not the end itself."

"We will accomplish much together." His voice held a world of promise, a total belief. "Give me thy thoughts; let us join once again."

Uhura perched on the side of the bed surveying the doctor with a sympathetic air. "I'm not surprised he won't let you have a mirror, Chris, but it's only bruising. You won't look so bad in a day or two. How're you feeling?"

"Terrible. I ache from head to foot."

"I'm sorry we had to leave you." Uhura was still feeling guilty.

Christine shrugged, winced, and said, "I knew you had to. It's all right." Her swollen mouth tried to smile. "I never stopped believing the cavalry would come over the hill. I'm only sorry I wasn't awake to see the three of them. To hear Leonard talk you'd think they were King Arthur, Galahad and Lancelot."

"Which one's he?" Uhura chuckled.

"Galahad, I suppose. It isn't really Spock's image, is it? Oh Lord, don't make me laugh. It hurts."

"It's time you got some sleep anyway." McCoy appeared in the doorway. "You too, Captain. You've been up all night."

"I suppose you haven't?" Uhura said pointedly.

"Oh, I'm for bed too," he assured her. "This malingerer here will be all right once I've given her a sedative."

"Malignerer!" Chris said indignantly as he applied the hypo. "I could sleep for a month..."

They watched her eyelids close and crept quietly out. "Is she really all right, Bones?"

"Yes. Oh, it'll take time, there was quite a lot of internal damage. From the debris around in that cage I guess prisoners in it were just a target for anyone who felt inclined to throw something. Luckily the bars kept out the bigger stones - but it must have been terrifying for all that."

Uhura closed her eyes to cover her inner sickness. "Look after her." She cleared the sudden huskiness from her throat and walked wearily back to her quarters. She was due back on duty in just over three hours; it had been a long day but at least they had come out of it relatively unscathed - thanks to Kirk and his friends. She'd put in a full report to Starfleet Headquarters in the morning, but first she needed an hour or two's sleep; it wouldn't do to word the report ineptly...there was still so much prejudice against the idea that men should be allowed to make decisions or work unsupervised. It was only twenty years ago, after all, that they had been allowed into space at all, but since Vulcan males had to accompany their wives due to their different biology it had been logical to agree that Human women might also take their husbands with them. From that it had only been a short step to training the

males for useful work, and to an increasing number of contract marriages, such as she shared with Kirk. She'd never regretted it either, watching proudly as he'd been promoted to the highest rank a male could hold. Today he had more than vindicated her faith in him - she doubted whether she could have got Chris out so expertly without breaking the Prime Directive in the process. Their physical strength would have been woefully insufficient even if they had been able to disguise their sex satisfactorily.

She slipped an arm over her partner's warm, sleeping body and was soon asleep herself.

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SABOTEUR

Arrival at Theta Scorpii 4 was right on schedule and Uhura duly handed over the precious stack of documents, tapes, signed agreements and authorisations with a sigh of relief before she plunged into the round of formal talks and negotiations she had been charged with handling; beaming back aboard each evening feeling as though she had been put through a mill.

Somehow it was all the more aggravating to find Kirk placidly reading in their quarters because his forced stay on board while other crewmembers enjoyed shore leave was caused by her absence. While it was hardly her fault, regulations prevented his going ashore without her, she still felt an inexplicable sense of guilt that he should take it so well. She took out her bad temper in snapping at him unforgivably.

He switched off the viewer, pushing it aside, and rose to urge her into his vacated chair, massaging her shoulders gently.

Slowly, as she felt the tensions drain from her, she looked up and smiled. "I'm sorry...not like me to be so snappish."

"Bureaucrats...diplomats...all tarred with the same brush. They think in straight, ruled lines - just like Maxwell." He grinned down at her, shaking his head. "I don't mind not getting ashore," he said. "There'll be other times."

She met his gaze suspiciously. "Just what are you three getting up to now?"

He laughed. "Nothing." Seeing her eye still on him he added teasingly, "If you want guarantees, McCoy is still too busy fussing over Chris to have time to spare for more than a cup of coffee occasionally and Spock's been visiting his parents along with T'Pring."

"His parents?"

"Yes - I thought you'd be sure to have seen them. Amanda's been appointed to head the delegation from the Federation."

Her face mirrored her surprise. "I knew she was well thought of but I didn't realise she was just about at the top."

"One of the most able women around," he agreed. "Sarek's privately none too pleased over having had to give up his teaching post at the Vulcan Science Academy, though, I gather."

"If she isn't able to control him like Vulcan women do, why does he have to tag along anyway?"

He shrugged. "The Vulcans are great sticklers for tradition. You know how they like to quote 'since the time of T'Siau' at you. I'll bet there are plenty of Vulcan males around who secretly wish Surak hadn't been quite so accommodating to his wife, but had upended her and spanked all that 'control' nonsense out of her system straight away."

"Don't let T'Pring hear you talking like that," she said warningly, getting up from her chair and making for the bathroom. "T'Siau is definitely on her list of favourite people."

He came to lean in the doorway. "If she'd been a little less ruthless in her reversal of the male/female roles I might even have her on my list. There's no question but that Vulcan would never have survived to the present day if someone hadn't come up with a solution to all the violent bloodfeuds among the primitive tribes, but you can't deny that T'Siau over-reacted by pushing the males down into subservience, little better than stud material. It was only four or five hundred years ago they were even considered educable."

"Much as women were on Earth," she reminded him coldly.

"Yes, but we were breaking down the old barriers," he said softly. "Equality was coming, slowly I'll admit but quite surely, until the Vulcans found us. Now

it's all to do again - in reverse. It seems such a waste."

"At least the women managed to reduce the amount of violent crime once we'd learned a trick or two from Vulcan women - particularly rape," she said fiercely.

"I've never wished to go back to the old days," he said tiredly. "Men and women are people, different but equally valuable. Why do we have to fight for superiority, why can't we simply rejoice in our differences?"

"An excellent philosophy." She disappeared into the shower cubicle. Over the sound of the water she said, "Maybe one day we'll bring everyone round to our way of thinking."

"We?" Surprise held him still for a moment, then he pulled the curtain back. "Did you say we?"

She smiled impishly and kissed him wetly on the nose. "I can hardly agree to your leading a rescue party for Dr. Chapel one day and the next say you're not capable of taking charge at all, can I? I've worded a most careful report for Starfleet Headquarters...commendations for all three of you. We're taking some of the delegates back to Starbase 4 so I'm expecting to get an answer from Admiral Caine then...Jim! Stop it, you'll get soaking wet!"

He released her from the hug, laughing. "It never pays to underestimate you, Uhura." He handed her a towel.

"I should think not," she said in mock indignation.

Uhura held out her hand, liking the look of the serene, gray-haired woman descending from the shuttle. "Welcome aboard the Enterprise, Ambassador."

"Thank you, Captain." Amanda's eyes slid to her tall son, standing gravely behind his wife. She smiled warmly at them both before saying, "May I present Sarek, he who is my husband?"

Primed by T'Pol, Uhura raised her hand in the formal salute. A female did not offer to touch a Vulcan male without his bondmate's express permission. "You are most welcome, Sarek," she said formally. "If you would care to follow me, Ambassador, I will show you to your quarters."

The Vulcan party was the last of the arriving diplomats to arrive on board and Uhura ordered the Enterprise on her way with an open sigh of relief. They seemed to have come through the Theta Scorpian Conference without a hitch; maybe the tensions would be relieved for a while and the Klingons would think twice before starting up any more little games now that the Tholians had seen things the way the Federation wanted. She shrugged off the worries of the past few days, grateful for the peace of space once more, and went to put on her dress uniform in preparation for the evening's formal reception.

The Chief Engineer shook her head angrily. "Scotty, you're being ridiculous. Ensign Ian's record is impeccable. I can't see any basis for this wild accusation."

Scott sighed heavily. "Neither can I, but there's something about the lassie that isn't right, for all that."

Masters shook her head again in exasperation. "If you could produce one piece of evidence...just one, that she's responsible for the sabotage of those crystals, then I'd go to the Captain. But I can't just go and say, 'Scotty has a feeling that Penny Ian's responsible', can I?"

"You could log a report that I'm uneasy," he flared. "Dammit, Charlene, you've trusted my judgement in the past often enough."

"I'd back you to the hilt if it was an engineering problem," she flared back. "We all know you're twice the engineer I'll ever be, that it's damned unfair you can't ever make Chief and don't think I'm not grateful for all you do, but

my gratitude doesn't extend to making a complete fool of myself without rhyme or reason. Now for everyone's sake, drop the matter and go and get ready for this darned reception. I've just got these last records to go over and then I'll be along, so don't hog the shower."

"When did I ever do that?" he grinned, making for the door.

Out in the corridor, though, the grin faded, steadily replaced by a heavy scowl. He hadn't really hoped to convince Charlene; the Chief could be as stubborn as that up-tight First Officer T'Pring on occasions; he should have known better than to voice what had after all been only an irrational suspicion born of one single fleeting expression while the Ensign had been assisting with the delicate replacement of the new crystals. But the odd feeling had stayed with him and deep down in his bones he was sure he was right. He managed to cast the matter aside as he showered and dressed and refrained from referring to it any more when Charlene arrived, obviously hot and tired. He gazed into the mirror, adjusting his plaid neatly and watching her reflection as she moved about their shared quarters.

Charlene caught his eye and smiled back; she came to his side and leaned against his comforting solidity.

"I'm sorry I yelled earlier."

"Och," he shrugged dismissively, "I daresay you're in the right of it. And besides," his grin broadened, "it'd take more than a wee quarrel to split up a great team like us. Now," daringly he patted her rump affectionately, "go and get ready or we'll be late."

He had more than cause to be grateful to her if the truth were known. All those years of standing on the outside, teaching others how to handle the magnificent warp engines he helped design and build had soured him early, forced him into a pattern of heavy drinking that had threatened to destroy him until Charlene had walked into his life. He chuckled at the memory...not walked, floated! ...sailing ignominiously by after some idiot had fired his jet-pack without warning and cannoned off her, leaving her tumbling helplessly, unable to stop herself until his reaching arm had gathered her in. He chuckled again, remembering how he'd jammed his face mask close to hers, cut off their radios for privacy and given her his clear, concise opinion of idiot apprentices who forgot the simplest of safety precautions their first time out in the weightlessness of the San Francisco yards. It had been three full days before he'd found he'd been talking to the Enterprise's new Chief Engineer, and when she'd seen the longing and envy clearly on his face she'd impulsively offered him a partnership contract for the duration of the five year mission.

Her hand touched his cheek. "Daydreaming?"

"No." He got to his feet and pulled her close. "Don't you go talking to me about gratitude, my lass; if it wasn't for you I'd never have had the chance to be out here at all." He tipped his head and eyed her consideringly, then added, "Besides, you're shaping up to be a bonnie wee engineer yourself, the best I know."

She glowed with pleasure and tugged at his hand. "Break up this mutual admiration society and let's go get this reception over."

They entered side by side, grinned at each other, winked and went their separate ways to make polite conversation. Chatting amiably to members of the various delegations, Scott realised that away in the far corner of the room Penny Lan was in deep conversation with one of the Andorian Ambassador's bodyguards. Half concentrating on the social chatter involving him he was watching her idly, wondering if perhaps he had been foolish to entertain such suspicions of her, when she looked up and caught his eye on her. Even from across the room he could see the start she gave and knew his brows rose in faint surprise - he'd given the girl no cause to look as though she'd bitten her tongue, and he knew Charlene well enough to be sure she hadn't said anything to her. Maybe he'd imagined the whole thing again, she was laughing away happily enough now.

He turned his attention back to what Jim Kirk was saying and found their small group had been augmented by the First Officer, the Federation Ambassador and her husband.

"May I present James Kirk, Lady Amanda?" T'Pring said politely. "He has been a close friend of your son's for many years."

"I am pleased he has found friends here." Amanda shook Kirk's hand warmly, covering the surprise she felt at the mode of the introduction. She had never been happy over Spock's childhood bonding and in later years had positively come to dislike the cold, withdrawn young woman, praying that Spock's Human blood might save him from being forced into completing this marriage. Her own preference had been for a Human wife for him, for she knew he was as gentle and compassionate as his father, but T'Pau had overruled her firmly in the matter. So firmly that even after all these years it gave her a momentary twinge of satisfaction to recall that she had decisively won the later argument over his entry into Starfleet.

Now it began to look as though she must change her ideas about T'Pring; the girl was clearly at home here on the Enterprise, relaxed in the same quiet, dignified manner Spock displayed. Perhaps this bonding had not been so disastrous after all, in spite of the long silence after Spock had come home to claim his wife, when all she'd heard concerning him had been stiffly formal acknowledgements of her regular letters, cold reassurances concerning his continued health.

She beamed at Kirk, liking his look of contained strength and admitting the beguiling charm of his smile, then shook hands with other crewmembers as they were presented to her.

Later, leaving the reception, she congratulated Uhura on the happy atmosphere on board her ship. "It isn't always so, Captain," she said regretfully.

"No," Uhura agreed grimly. "I served in a few unhappy ships myself and I've made sure on my ship that everyone can work to the best of their ability... within the regulations," she added hastily, glad that her skin would not betray her heightened colour. Something in the pleasant gaze fixed on her made her add impetuously, "I've a lot of excellent males on board who deserve to do far more than they're allowed to by present regulations. I hate to see waste like that, and it reduces the possible efficiency of the ship, too."

Amanda studied her thoughtfully. "Perhaps at some more convenient moment you might care to be more specific, Captain. I, too, abhor the illogic of waste."

Uhura caught the twinkle in the politely smiling expression and her own eyes crinkled in response. "I'd be delighted, Ambassador," she said openly. "Perhaps tomorrow afternoon?"

"I shall look forward to that."

Uhura swiftly raised her hand in the awkward Vulcan salute to the grave, silent Vulcan as he followed his wife from the room, and stood gazing after them in surging optimism. To have the opinion of the Federation Ambassador firmly on one's side...

"Penny for them." Kirk took her arm, laughing as she visibly jumped.

"Nothing," she said hastily, not wanting to discuss the matter just yet, to raise possibly unjustified hopes. She yawned uncontrollably, covering her mouth in startled dismay. "Lord, but I'm tired. Everyone that matters has gone now. Let's go to bed."

Scott reached a long arm over his head, the magnetic probe delicately poised over the circuitry - the problem should be in this area somewhere...yes, there! He moved the probe with calm assurance, making the fine adjustment and drew his hand away again, nodding in quiet satisfaction. He clapped the probe onto his belt, wrinkling his nose as a most unexpected scent of syringa filled his

nostrils; he swung his head round abruptly. The movement undoubtedly saved his life.

It was Spock who found him, crumpled untidily at the foot of the Jeffries tube. He laid a finger on the intercon, swiftly calling McCoy to the area, and bent to see what the damage was.

A large, swollen bruise was already showing on the Scotsman's cheek, and as his eyes fluttered open he raised a hand to it shakily. Spock prevented the movement.

"You are badly bruised, Scotty. I suggest you do not attempt to touch the area, it will only cause you increased pain."

"I don't need any more!" Scott groaned, struggling to sit up. Spock assisted him, supporting his weight as he sagged ominously.

"What the devil happened to you?" McCoy had the reader tube out.

"Somebody hit me," Scott said thickly.

"Somebody hit you?" McCoy echoed in disbelief. He raised a questioning eyebrow at Spock, who merely shook his head. "Who was it?"

"I've no idea." Scott submitted his arm to McCoy's hypo and sighed with relief as the analgesic took effect. "I was up the tube and someone sneaked up and knocked me out."

"How long were you unconscious?" Spock asked.

"I don't know. I don't carry an internal cuckoo clock." Scott tried to grin, winced, and cradled his abused cheek in one hand.

"You'd better come to Sickbay." McCoy helped him up. "You were lucky, two or three inches further back and you might not have been talking to us now. Come on, take his other arm, Spock."

Uhura patted the Second Engineer's muscular shoulder. "Do as Bones says, Scotty, there's a good man. A few days' rest and then back to work." She smiled over at Chris. "The pair of you can compare bruises...give you something to pass the time."

Dr. Chapel surveyed her Captain with a none too friendly eye. Uhura laughed. "You look very much better than you did," she said frankly. "Take care, both of you."

She beckoned McCoy into Chapel's office and once the door had closed said bluntly, "What's this about someone knocking him out?"

McCoy was dubious. "Who'd be likely to do a thing like that?"

"You mean he wasn't knocked out?"

"No, I didn't say that. He could have been, the injury would be consistent with it, but he's more likely to have done it when he fell. After a knock like that you'd be genuinely confused."

"But you think it's more likely he fell?"

"On the whole, yes. I'd guess he wasn't out very long and Spock didn't say anything about seeing anyone around."

"I'll have a word with him. Thanks, Doctor."

"Oh, and I'm letting Chris out of Sickbay tomorrow," he said. "She's to take it easy still, light duties only. I'll not have her working full time just yet, in spite of what she thinks."

Uhura laughed at him. "You doctors! You always make the worst possible patients."

After a brief discussion with Spock and further talks with Scott back in

his own quarters the next day, Uhura decided to let the matter rest.

"You really aren't sure it was someone who hit you, are you, Scotty?"

Feeling more than a little foolish and melodramatic, he laughed wryly. "No, not now. I certainly don't remember seeing anyone. I suppose I could have done as Leonard says and given my head a wee bang as I slipped. The whole thing's very confused and becoming more so - His expression made the rider very clear.

She nodded sympathetically. "It takes you like that, doesn't it? I hear Dr. McCoy says you can go back to work tomorrow."

"Aye." Scott's dour face positively beamed with pleasure.

She controlled her laughter but couldn't quite disguise her smile. "You're a great asset to Commander Masters, Mr. Scott," she said softly. "Take care another time."

"I will that, Ma'am." He sat back and picked up his technical journal with a sigh of relief.

The following day brought Scott back on duty good and early, happily buried inside a console in Auxiliary Control, dealing with a problem that had been nagging at his mind for days. Perhaps it wasn't so bad being forced to take medical leave, it did at least give a man time to think a problem through. As always, when immersed in his work, he paid no heed to the passage of time and was mildly annoyed to feel an insistent tugging at his legs, the only portion of him visible. Irritably he wriggled free, prepared to deliver a blistering rebuke, but as he slid his head out a strong wave of perfume assailed his nostrils. Syringa! He moved the last few inches far too quickly and caught his head painfully.

"Are you all right?" a female voice demanded, full of concern.

"No, dammit, I'm not." He clutched at his swimming head, rubbed his watering eyes. "What do you want?"

"Commander Masters sent me to tell you to go to lunch."

"Lunch!" Scott was outraged. He outstared a giggling Chekov working at the navigation console. "And you interrupted me just for that?" His head was clearing again and he scowled ferociously at the hovering Ensign. It was Penny Lan. The scent of syringa was still strong and memory came flooding back. He'd not imagined it the other day either, any more than his earlier suspicions of Penny Lan were imaginary. He nodded his thanks and walked thoughtfully towards the rec room. After lunch he would speak to Charlene again.

"For goodness' sake," Charlene said tiredly, "You're not still harping on about Penny Lan, are you? A look and a smell...what sort of evidence is that?"

"Is this imagination?" he demanded angrily, pointing at his still-bruised face.

"You fell quite a way," she reminded him.

"I'm not a first-year apprentice," he said exasperatedly. "I don't forget to hold on when I'm ten metres off the deck."

"If that's a dig at me..." she began furiously.

"You know damn well it isn't." He was fast losing his temper. "But if you don't go to the Captain I shall have no option but to go over your head. If the Ensign was a lad you'd listen fast enough."

"That will do." She got to her feet. "Go back to your work, Mr. Scott, and don't waste any more of my time."

He grabbed for her arm angrily. "Waste your time? Why you saucy wee..."

"I said that will do!" Masters was deeply angry. She stabbed at the intercom. "Security to the Chief Engineer's office on the double. Mr. Scott is on report for insubordination and is to be taken to the brig immediately."

Horrificed, Scott stared at her. "Lassie, lassie," he said despairingly, "If you'd only listen to reason..."

"It's too late for apologies." Her eyes met his implacably.

He shook his head, a rueful smile lighting his eyes. "I wasn't intending to apologise," he said. "I know I'm right."

Half convinced by his earnestness her expression began to soften. She came round her desk, opening her mouth to speak.

Suddenly, incredibly, the world seemed to collapse about them, disintegrating, reverberating, echoing into oblivion.

"Who was in there?" Uhura demanded.

"The Chief and Mr. Scott." De Salle and Galloway were heaving vainly at a fallen beam. "It's no good." De Salle let go, gasping angrily. "We can't shift it and there isn't room for more than two to get at it."

"Fetch Spock," T'Pring ordered a white-faced Ensign. "And ask the Federation Ambassador's permission for her bondmate to accompany his son."

"Will they be able to move it?"

"I believe so." T'Pring met her eyes. "I will release Spock," she murmured softly. "It will be necessary."

Uhura nodded curtly and catching sight of Christine picking her way through the tumbled wreckage, went to her side.

"Are you sure you ought to be here?"

"I'm fine. What happened?"

"We're not sure yet. Charlene and Scotty are trapped in there."

"It serves him right," Maxwell's voice said harshly.

Uhura swung round. "What do you mean?"

"Commander Masters called for me to take Mr. Scott to the brig and then this happens." Maxwell waved her hand towards the wrecked office. "The conclusion seems obvious to me."

"Scotty?" Uhura could hardly believe it. The idea that the second engineer would do anything that might endanger his beloved engines was so improbable. She pulled herself together. "We'll have a chance to get at the facts later. Thank you for your report, Maxwell." Relief touched her face, Spock and his father had arrived.

Uninhibited Vulcan muscular strength was impressive. Within ten minutes a way had been cleared for Christine to wriggle through while the two Vulcans completed the task of removing the larger debris. Uhura ducked in as soon as it was possible and crouched beside Christine.

"How bad are they?"

"Charlene's only knocked out, I think. Superficial cuts and bruises. Scotty was lying on top of her, he took the worst of the blast...there are a lot of metal fragments in his back."

"But he'll be all right?"

"I can't tell yet."

Uhura watched the med trolleys leave, feeling sick and angry. Was this some further act of sabotage? She would have some answers - now!

"What happened, T'Pring?"

Her First Officer straightened up from the tangled, splintered wreckage that had been the Chief Engineer's desk. "Unquestionably an explosive device, Captain, fired by remote control. It was hidden under here." She tapped the area with one elegant finger. "Fortunately, from the position of the bodies, we can deduce that both the Chief and Mr. Scott were protected from the main force of the blast by this reinforcing panel here and by the fact that they were both on that further side of the desk at the time of the explosion. I will have more details of the type of device employed once I have completed my investigations."

"Very well. Carry on."

"Remote control!" Maxwell snorted. "The man was here in the room. Why go looking for difficulties?"

Uhura stared at her disbelievingly. "Mr. Scott may be a male, Chief," she said coldly, "but he is not a fool. Why should he go to all the trouble of hiding a bomb in his partner's desk and then set it off while he was actually in the room with her? Your accusation is totally unsubstantiated."

Maxwell's face flushed an unlovely brick red. "Men are animals," she barked. "Do you expect them to reason as we do?"

"Men are people," Uhura said icily. "I will not have talk like that on board my ship, Commander Maxwell. You are dismissed."

The grey-haired woman briefly attempted to outstare her but habits of discipline and Uhura's own commandatorial glare prevailed and she walked away delivering an angry exclamation as she did so. Uhura wisely ignored it, deciding that sooner or later she must straight-talk some sense into her security chief. The trouble was, being some twenty years older than many of the women on board the Enterprise, she had been brought up in the days when the rigid suppression of males was only just beginning to ease into the more tolerant modern attitudes, and she didn't really approve of having men on board Starships... But you couldn't go on suppressing them for ever, even the Vulcans were beginning to feel their laws were perhaps too intransigent, too restricting. Equality would come for Human males, whether women like Maxwell welcomed the idea or not. Perhaps if she'd ever married she might have been more tolerant - Uhura had never been sure whether her single state was choice or necessity. She really should have had some dear, meek little man at her back and call, to bully to her heart's content. The Captain chuckled a little unkindly at the thought and saw that her musing feet had taken her to Sickbay.

She found Christine perched on the vacant bed beside the Chief Engineer; Charlene was looking shaky but managed a smile. Uhura gave her a cheery answering wave.

"How're you feeling?"

"Ghastly. Captain, there's nothing in my office that could have exploded like that."

"Oh yes there was," Uhura said grimly. "An explosive device in your desk. T'Pring hasn't got the details yet."

Charlene's eyes closed momentarily. "And I wouldn't listen to him...he tried to tell me..."

"Who tried to tell you what?"

"Scotty. He said he thought Ensign Lan had something to do with those sabotaged crystals...he'd noticed something odd about the way she looked at the ones you got to replace them."

"Looked at them?"

"Yes, I know." Masters shifted uncomfortably. "That's what I said. Then he swore she jumped when she caught him looking at her at the reception and that

she was the person who attacked him in the Jeffries tube the other day. He said he remembered smelling her perfume when he smelt it a second time. I thought he was...over-reacting, you know how he is over anything that affects 'his' engines." She gave a tiny laugh at Uhura's sympathetic expression, then shook her head helplessly. "I got so furious with him... Now I'm not so sure."

"You think there might be something in it?" Uhura demanded.

"I don't know. Lan's a good kid, a hard worker. Scotty's always been full of praise before."

Uhura stared at her pensively a while then said, "Go over it all again, slowly. Everything he said to you."

Masters recounted it patiently, trying to recall everything Scott had said.

Uhura absorbed the information a moment and then said, "I wonder why she was startled when she saw him in the rec room. Who was he with?"

"I'm not sure. I was over the other side of the room... T'Pring, I think, and Spock. Possibly Jim Kirk." She shook her head. "You'll have to ask him." She paused. "Chris, he is going to be all right, isn't he?"

"Leonard's operating now," Chapel said gently. "We won't know how bad he is until he comes round."

"I wish you were operating."

"You wouldn't if you were Scotty," Christine said cheerfully, getting to her feet. "He needs steady hands now, and mine are still pretty shaky. Besides, Leonard's as good a surgeon as I am... Don't you worry, you just get some sleep."

She gave the exhausted engineer a sedative and beckoned Uhura into her office as the weary eyes closed.

"You look pretty rough yourself," Uhura told her. "Are you sure you're fit to be up and about?"

"No!" Christine sank into the chair at her desk. "I'll be all right, don't worry. D'you think there's anything in that story, Uhura?"

"Somebody sabotaged the dilithium and somebody tried to kill Scott and Masters," Uhura said grimly. "It's time I had a talk with Ensign Ian."

She was too late.

Looking down at the small, crumpled body she felt a cold, slow anger. She waited until Chapel straightened and then snapped, "Well?"

"Her neck is broken...by an expert, I'd say."

"Someone wanted to keep her from talking." Uhura's mouth set in a grim line. "Maxwell, have someone go through this cabin with a fine tooth comb. Don't miss anything that might give us a lead. Chris, how soon can I talk to Scotty?"

"Maybe in an hour or so."

"Make it sooner. Maxwell, I want security on their toes...discreet policing of the whole ship. Keep the diplomats happy but keep them off the lower levels and out of engineering section. Whatever's going on, I want it stopped before it's too late." Out in the corridor she said, "I'm going to my quarters, Chris. Have Scotty ready to talk as soon as it's feasible - take risks if you have to. We don't know how much might be at stake. I'll be down in Sickbay in fifteen minutes."

"But..." Chapel closed her mouth over the protest. "I'll see he's ready."

"Jim, Mr. Spock, Lt. Rand," Scott said blurrily. "It was just before

Commander T'Pring brought the Federation Ambassador across."

Chapel stared at the Captain blankly. "I'd back any of them with my life," she said flatly. "Whoever killed Lan, it wasn't one of those three."

"Who was Penny Lan talking to, Scotty, d'you remember?"

Scott frowned blearily, finding it hard to concentrate through the haze surrounding his brain. He tried to recall the scene more clearly.

"Blue," he said. "Someone in blue... No, wait... That's it. An Andorian... one of the bodyguards, the taller one."

"Thanks, Scotty." Uhura touched his hand gently. "Bones tells me you're going to be fine. Go back to sleep now."

His eyes were already closing.

"Really, Captain," the Andorian Ambassador said stiffly, "to make such an accusation against one of my staff..."

"I make no accusations," Uhura said quietly. "I merely wish to interview her and see if she can help me."

Sheva glanced suspiciously at her for several moments before transferring her gaze to Amanda's placidity. "Do you go along with this?" she rasped angrily.

"The request is logical," Amanda said, "and the Captain is well within her rights to make it." There was no need to emphasise the fact that Uhura would also have been entitled to interrogate the woman without permission; Sheva knew that quite well.

"Very well." Sheva shrugged. "I withdraw my objections."

The intercom buzzed shrilly and Uhura tapped the switch with an impatient finger.

"Captain, one of the Andorians just tried to sneak into Sickbay and kill Scotty." McCoy sounded breathless.

"Is he all right?"

"Yes, he's fine. Still sleeping like a baby."

"And what happened to you?"

McCoy chuckled. "Things got a bit hectic in here for a while. That woman's got muscles like a grizzly."

"You saw who it was?"

Another chuckle. "She's still here...also sleeping like a baby."

"I'll be right there."

Sickbay was swarming with medtechs clearing up the mess when Uhura walked in. Kirk and Spock were assisting McCoy to lift displaced bedding and Chris Chapel was frowning at the diagnostic panel above the bed on which the Andorian woman lay, firmly under restraint.

Uhura scowled at her partner. "What are you two doing in here?"

"We came in to see how Scotty was," Kirk grinned, "and walked into the middle of a pitched battle...bodies flying in all directions. Spock managed to get in a neck pinch."

Uhura nodded her thanks to the Vulcan and went to Christine. "What's the matter?"

"These readings are all wrong. This isn't an Andorian...isn't even female. She...he's a Klingon."

"I still need answers." Uhura pounded the briefing room table impatiently. "What were they hoping to achieve and why was Ensign Ian involved?"

"I believe I can give you an answer to the second part of your question," T'Pring said, surprisingly. As Uhura turned a look of enquiry on her she explained. "I looked up her records earlier today. She was born on Kyrialanos."

The name meant something; at first Uhura could not remember what but then recall came sickeningly. "The whole colony was wiped out by Andorians!"

"God, yes." Kirk straightened in his seat. "It was one of the prime factors in the formation of the present, genuinely liberal government on Andor. But I didn't know there were any survivors."

"Twelve out of a total population of four and a half thousand." T'Pring lowered her eyes. "Most of them children under ten years of age. Ensign Ian witnessed the slaughter of her parents and two siblings."

Uhura went cold with rage. "Then what was she doing in Starfleet? Sooner or later she was bound to meet up with Andorians. Didn't anyone think of that?"

T'Pring shrugged. "She was considered to have come to terms with the past."

How in the name of All did you come to terms with something like that? Uhura wondered dully.

"We don't know what sort of pressure the Klingons put on her, Captain," Christine said quietly. "If they had the opportunity to use their mind-sifter on her, she could have been made to believe anything."

"For the rest of it," Kirk said slowly, "it's possible that nothing else was supposed to happen on board the Enterprise...except that they thought Scotty was getting suspicious and tried to kill him."

Uhura's head came round sharply. "Explain."

"As one of Sheva's bodyguard he'd have been able to get access to their President when she made her report to him. It seems most likely he was their next target."

"Indeed," T'Pring agreed. "You have made a most logical suggestion, Mr. Kirk. The present Andorian government is acceptable to the Tholians; however if it were to prove itself unstable..."

"As it would do if anything happened to President Vethal," Kirk put in.

She nodded gravely. "The Tholians would not consider themselves bound by the treaties recently agreed on."

"So if Scotty hadn't become suspicious of Penny Ian we could have had a full scale war on our hands," Masters said, still hardly believing it.

"It seems we owe him a lot," Uhura agreed. "It remains to be seen if we can get any confirmation of our speculations from our prisoner."

Sheva smiled coldly. It was not a pleasant smile. "My Government will demand that the prisoner is handed over," she said smoothly. "Since his intention was the assassination of President Vethal we have the right to deal with the matter."

"That has yet to be verified," Amanda reminded her.

Sheva swung round to Uhura. "You have telepaths among your crew, Captain." The blue eyes viewed her mockingly.

"One does not ask Vulcans to use their abilities for such purposes," Uhura said curtly.

Mocking amusement grew to contempt. "Then it is fortunate we Andorians do not indulge ourselves with foolish scruples. I commend your crew on their powers of reasoning. Their deduction of the facts was essentially correct. I...

extracted the complete story personally only an hour ago."

Uhura's own eyes were glittering coldly now at this monumental abuse of diplomatic privilege. She choked the rage down, aching down every inch, and smiled with icy good manners. "I will pass on your commendations." She got to her feet, pressing the door release button on her desk. "My crew will be most grateful to you. We arrive at Starbase 4 tomorrow and you will be able to make a formal request to Admiral Caine personally."

Sheva nodded, well satisfied, and left the room.

Amanda eyed the diminutive and formidable figure sympathetically. She was not fond of the ruthless methods employed by Andorians either, but it was never politic to say so.

"The Admiral will be pleased," she said softly. "It should help in persuading her to hear the matter you wish to discuss with her more favourably."

The even voice helped dissipate anger. Uhura sat down again. "Do you really think she'll listen?"

"She will certainly listen," Amanda said wryly.

"But you don't expect much success."

"We have been slowly working towards a greater freedom for males, both Vulcan and Human, for many years," Amanda reminded her. "My marriage to Sarek has effectively proved that not all Vulcan males are dangerously violent." She smiled faintly. "And the opinion of a woman as influential as the Captain of a Starship must carry some weight, even if its effect is not immediate."

Uhura laughed. "That's the most tactful way anyone has ever told me to be patient." She got to her feet as the Ambassador did and added, "I am most grateful to you, Lady Amanda."

"I do not like injustice either," Amanda agreed.

The Admiral listened patiently enough, leaning back in her chair, on the surface only half attending but in reality studying the eager and earnest face of the youngest woman ever to be given command of a Starship. She liked what she saw, liked the passion for justice that gave the quiet voice more than simple sincerity. She was intelligent and thoughtful too, tempering her youth with relaxed charm...but she had missed one vital point in the persuasive argument she presented.

"You were of course correct to attempt the rescue of Dr. Chapel," she agreed. "And given the circumstances, right to accept the assistance volunteered by Mr. Kirk. We are well aware that a little...bending...of the regulations must often occur on active service. It is impossible to legislate for all eventualities. However, I must point out that the success of the three crewmen depended entirely upon their ability to employ brute force. It was always man's most deadly weapon."

Uhura's face held a comical mixture of disgust and very real anger. "They were prepared to risk their lives for her!" she snapped.

"Oh, I don't call their courage in question either, but would you wish to have to bow to such physical domination - to have to endure the humiliations and brutalities our grandmothers suffered?"

"Even in the bad old days such men were in the minority." Uhura deliberately kept her voice quiet, unemphatic. "Nowadays it is we women who use force...we run the risk of becoming even more bigoted than the males of the past. We should work together as equals, not continually jostle each other for supremacy."

The Admiral veiled her approval, silently wishing she had more senior officers equally as confident in their own abilities as this young woman. It was clear she did not see the presence of highly qualified males as a challenge

to her authority, but as a means of running her ship at maximum efficiency. She applied a little psychological push towards the right direction.

"Continue to watch your crewmen, however, It would be interesting to discover whether they could ever be capable of applying friendly persuasion instead of mere muscular strength."

Controlling the urge to point out that friendly persuasion was hardly the ideal solution to the problem of bending steel bars, Uhura bowed to the note of dismissal and made her way out of the Admiral's office.

There was a snap of annoyance still in her stride as she left the building but it was not long before her steps slowed pensively as she went over the details of the conversation again. That last remark had meant something, hadn't just been a sarcasm as she'd thought in her initial anger. And the Lady Amanda's friendship with the Admiral was widely known; she must have guessed at the kind of reception she would get. She took a deep breath.

So it wasn't hopeless. She wasn't alone in thinking what a shocking waste of talent it was not to allow men to work freely alongside them. And she'd been shown the way to convince others. She was smiling now, alight with anticipation. The very first time she saw an opportunity for Jim to use that beguiling charm and easy tongue for purposes of diplomacy she'd be sure he took it. Allied to Spock's flawless logic he should be invincible...particularly if allowed a tempering of McCoy's inimitable humour.

The combination was surely exactly right.

FIRST CONTACT

The delicate and touchy business of first contact was always handled by experts, usually after careful cultural studies at first hand had been made by the species most closely resembling, at least in outward appearance, the local inhabitants. The most common guard against future shock was the careful salting of ideas into the local literature and dramatic entertainment - the possibility of friendly aliens, of technology above and beyond existing levels, of faster-than-light travel between the stars - the more open-minded the species the less danger there was of local belligerence having to be forcefully prevented by superior and potentially terrifying means. It was a meticulously planned operation, timed at a precise moment in a planet's development, as the first of their starships finally began their great journeys into space.

Sometimes things went wrong.

Investigations into precisely why Zylostr had been missed would take years; fortunately it was not the Enterprise's task to assist, merely to ferry the appropriate diplomats, socio-technicians, experts of every kind to the newly-discovered world and leave them to get on with their task of communication and welcome, remaining in orbit until such time as their presence could either be safely dispensed with or employed as a deterrent. The job was not a popular one, shore leave was out of the question, and often sheer boredom caused internal tensions among the crew. Uhura saw to it that such a golden opportunity for training drills did not degenerate into undignified squabbling by providing rivalry in the form of inter-departmental competitions of all kinds, varying from swimming through chess to more light-hearted activities such as dancing. Against a little muted opposition, she encouraged the males to compete on equal terms, even, daringly, in the unarmed combat competition although the only techniques they were permitted to learn were those of self-defence and not attack. She was more than a little piqued when Kirk was beaten in the first round by a muscular young woman from Security.

Kirk grinned at her. "Was I as bad as all that?"

"You were worse! Young Docherty from Engineering put up a better show than you did."

"He's twenty pounds lighter," Kirk said pointedly. "Maxwell's already leery of me - if I'd won I'd have had to fight her next."

"And you'd have beaten her." Suddenly Uhura understood. "You lost on purpose," she accused.

"Of course." His expression teased her slowness. "Maxwell's no fool when it comes to unarmed combat, she'd have known I wasn't putting everything I had into it - but equally she'd never have forgiven me for winning, for being stronger, and she'd never believe I don't want to use my strength against her."

"No, you'd rather sharpen your tongue on her."

His smile became a chuckle. "She doesn't always know when I do that."

She raised her hand. "I don't want to know either. Ignorance is definitely bliss in this case. How is the chess going?"

"Spock and T'Pring ought to be handicapped. No-one else stands a chance."

"Except you."

"Me?"

"You could beat T'Pring, she's nowhere near as good as Spock...and you've beaten him a couple of times now." As the intercom buzzed she leaned across him and flipped the toggle with one finger. "Uhura here."

"Ms. Latimer is calling you from the planet, Captain. A matter of urgency."

"Put her on, Palmer. What can I do for you, Martha?"

"We have come across a slight problem," the leader of the diplomatic team

said placidly. "In the course of discussions we have discovered that the Zylostrians have had a ship en route to the nearest star for four standard years, with the intention of making contact if possible."

"The nearest... Epsilon Crucis!"

"Precisely." Martha Latimer nodded. "A Prime Directive society at the most critical phase. Since Zylostrian technology is not yet sufficiently advanced for them to have developed the subspace radio there is no prospect of contacting their ship and preventing a landfall. They will have to be overtaken and stopped."

"Understood. Can you obtain as many details as possible for us?"

"The information is all ready to be fed into your ship's computers. We estimate you will have to leave within the hour; the Questor should be already nearing the end of her journey."

T'Pring absorbed facts and figures, cast a swift look at Spock to find that he agreed with her and flipped the intercon. "Ms. Latimer is correct, Captain. We must leave orbit as soon as possible to rendezvous with the Questor before she arrives within the Epsilon Crucis system."

Within ten minutes they were on their way.

"A crying shame," McCoy said with mock indignation as he set his coffee down on the table. "Now we'll never know whether Life Sciences would have come out top dog or not."

"Strange." Spock moved his chair along to make more room for the doctor. "I was under the impression the results were all a foregone conclusion, weren't you, Jim?"

"I was convinced of it." Kirk grinned at him in return. "Didn't think anyone else stood a chance. Still, the chess tournament is going to be completed. I hear Chris is doing very well. Is that right?"

"She was. She's playing T'Pring next," McCoy said ruefully. "The rest of us are all out of it. How long is it going to take to chase this Zylostrain ship?"

"We should catch up with her in five days," Spock told him. "Twelve days before they would make landfall."

"We ought to be able to talk them round in twelve days," McCoy commented.

"It does depend to some extent on the stubbornness of the species," Spock flicked a glance at his two companions.

They glared back at him, indignation surfacing on both faces.

"Stubborn...!" McCoy spluttered. "Vulcans invented the word."

"Along with obstinate and pigheaded," Kirk agreed, grinning.

Spock nodded coolly. "I find myself in excellent company," he said blandly.

"You won?" McCoy's grin split his face and he aimed a congratulatory pat at Chapel's back, setting her off balance.

She was laughing herself. "I took a leaf out of Jim Kirk's book, made a few crazy moves and put her off her stroke."

"So who do you play next?"

"Janice Rand - but if I get through that all right I'll have to play Jim or Uhura."

"You'll beat Janice," he said confidently. He grinned again. "I didn't realise Jim would be playing Uhura. I might even come along and watch that."

She shook her head at him. "Do you imagine she'd mind if he beat her? Uhura's not that petty...and she isn't afraid of being in command over people brainier than her, either."

"I guess you're right," he conceded. "Still, it ought to be a darn good match all the same."

Before it could be played, however, more serious business had to be attended to once the Enterprise located the Questor on her sensors.

The bridge crew stared in fascination at the small, nuclear-powered ship. It was hard to recall that similar ships were part of their own history.

"She's tiny!" Kirk expressed the sentiment they were all feeling.

"Sensors indicate forty-two life forms," T'Pring reported.

"Forty-two!" Kirk said in disbelief. "They must be packed like sardines in a can."

"Take us within beaming distance and match course and speed, Mr. Kirk," Uhura ordered.

The great ship slowed, inching its way into position.

"Tractor beam on - gently, Miss Masters. Give me a hailing frequency, Lieutenant." It took a moment or two to establish contact; once the channel was open Uhura said, "This is the U.S.S. Enterprise from the United Federation of Planets, Captain Uhura in command. I wish to speak to Captain Ather ver Herika."

There was a grunt of startled surprise, a brief exclamation and then a few seconds dead air. Obviously their arrival had gone unnoticed. Kirk flicked a wry grin at Lt. Rahada; the poor devils were in for more than one or two surprises in the next few hours. He wondered how they were going to take it. The speaker crackled into life again.

"This is Ather ver Herika. Where the hell did you spring from?"

"We were sent by your President, Dikkon du Lestril, to overtake you, Captain. May my senior officers and I come aboard and explain things?"

There was another few moments' silence and then the Questor's Captain spoke again. "You sound very...feminine, Captain...Uhura, was it?"

She chuckled. "Yes, I am a woman. May we beam over?"

"I am afraid I do not fully understand your request."

"To come aboard your vessel."

"How many of you?" Ather ver Herika's voice held suspicion.

"Six of us. We will not be armed, merely carrying communicators. Have we your permission?"

"I suppose so. The way you popped out of nowhere I guess I couldn't stop you if you're really determined."

She laughed. "We're not an invading force certainly, just potential friends. Give us a few moments and we'll be with you." She signalled Palmer to cut the circuit and raised an eyebrow at T'Pring.

"There is room on their bridge," T'Pring assured her. "I have the co-ordinates...as long as their crew is warned to keep well clear."

"Good." Uhura got up, making for the turbolift. "T'Pring, you'd better come along, and Spock. Call Maxwell for me, Palmer, and Dr. Chapel. Jim, you come too. Masters, you have the con."

"Dr. Chapel is in surgery, Ma'am. Will Dr. McCoy be satisfactory as a substitute?"

"Perfectly."

Kirk followed T'Pring and Uhura into the lift, pleased to be given the opportunity to study the alien ship at close quarters. They found Spock waiting with McCoy and Maxwell in the transporter room and took up their stations.

"Are they ready for us, Lt. Rand?"

"Quite ready, Captain."

"Good. Energise."

The first impression was almost claustrophobic after the Enterprise, the low ceiling barely six inches above the blue-black Vulcan head. Kirk caught Spock's involuntary upturned glance and grinned in sympathy, for once not regretting his own comparative lack of height. He turned his attention to the Questor's crew.

There were three men in the room, plainly dressed in loose tunics and short patterned trousers neatly cuffed under the knee; their skin was almost orange and their hair ranged from pure white to a deeper shade of orange than their faces. The two groups eyed each other in silence for a moment. Uhura spoke first.

"Which of you is Captain Ather ver Herika?"

"I am Ather." The tallest of the three stepped forward. His white head was barely an inch or two below Spock's height and he looked down at the diminutive Uhura in perplexity. "You are the Captain of that ship out there?"

"I am Uhura, yes. This is my First Officer, Commander T'Pring; Commander Maxwell, Lt. Commander Kirk, Lt. Commander Spock and Dr. McCoy."

"First Officer Sonmal cwr Lynia, Navigator Tostion sec Volnos." Ather waved them forward and they both bowed jerkily. The Enterprise crew responded politely, looking about them with interest at the instrument-packed walls, the tiny windows into space.

So primitive, Kirk thought. Probably they've no way of telling how big the Enterprise actually is, how many of us there might be. He pulled his wandering attention back to the moment.

"I'm sure my Science Officer and Helmsman would welcome the opportunity," Uhura was saying.

"If they will follow Sonmal then he will take them through the ship."

T'Pring noted the hopeful look in McCoy's eye and added, "Perhaps there might be an opportunity for our doctor to study your medical facilities also."

"I'd like that," McCoy said eagerly.

"Very well." Ather waved them away and indicated chairs for T'Pring and Uhura.

Maxwell wavered, dubiously eyeing the three men as they followed their guide from the room, momentarily unsure whether to go with them or remain with the Captain. In the end, curiosity prevailed and she trotted out of the door behind them.

"That was a very impressive way to arrive," Ather said, sitting down opposite his guests. "I don't pretend to understand the method involved."

"Your own scientists cannot be far away from discovering the principle," Uhura said, "but our Science Officer is the best qualified of all to explain the details to you if you wish."

He laughed. "I'm not sure I'd understand them - but I've crew on board

who might. Now, what exactly do you want?"

There was no way to soften the blow. "I'm afraid we've come to ask you to turn back, return to your own planet."

"Return...!" Ather could hardly get the word out, a tensely comical expression of mingled disgust and disbelief spread over the orange face. "We've just spent four years on this journey, we're within days of landfall, and you calmly sit there and ask us to turn back. In the name of the Seer - why?"

"Because the planet you are making for is still in a primitive state of development. Any interference with their natural progress will cause massive culture shock," Uhura told him earnestly. "Believe me, Captain, the Federation has learned caution the hard way; once we were not so careful and as a result some primitive cultures were totally destroyed. It is vital to wait until a specific time before contact is made. Your own society is a case in point - now you are ready for a meeting like this; even twenty years ago would have been too soon."

Privately she knew that by their as yet unexplained oversight, the Federation had missed the ideal contact time by some four years; she could well sympathise with Ather's dismay at being asked to relinquish his purpose so close to its triumphant achievement.

If I was in his place, she thought, what would I do...how would I feel? Resentful - instinct provided the answer. Strongly resentful and determined to accomplish what she had set out to do. Only a very real understanding of what it was to close off a planet's natural development, to see the rapid descent into apathy, the whining, outstretched hands of those who no longer had sufficient self-belief to continue the struggle now the promised future had irrevocably faded, would make a man like Ather willingly abandon his original orders. She surveyed his grimly scowling brows with sympathy.

"I do understand that we are asking you to make a considerable sacrifice," she said quietly. "I can explain further, cite you specific examples..."

"Then do so, young lady." The scowl did not lighten.

Prompted occasionally by T'Pring, Uhura explained.

"Fascinating."

Kirk had known that sooner or later his Vulcan friend would employ the expression. He shot him a quick, teasing smile and agreed whole-heartedly. Sonmal cwr Lynia was gratified by their interest, visibly glowing with pride over the impressive technology of his ship. While the Questor's First Officer answered Spock's penetrating questions, McCoy pulled at Kirk's sleeve.

"The Enterprise is going to be a bit of a shock to them, Jim, once they get a good look at her."

"They don't if we can help it." Kirk was all too well aware of the abrupt reversal of pride into shamed recall of boastfulness that could be felt. It wasn't always easy for less technically advanced races to see that they had every reason to take pride in their own achievements, and no reason to be put to shame by more advanced peoples. The Zylostrains should be proud of their ship, primitive though she was; she had fulfilled her purpose admirably and would undoubtedly provide some interesting ideas for Federation scientists to study. Every race had something to contribute, some new approach to an old problem.

Tapping Spock's arm he drew his friend's attention away from interpretation of the alien readouts in the engineering control room and jerked his head expressively towards the waiting trio by the door.

"There's a lot more to see yet," he said pointedly.

Spock hid his embarrassment and followed along hurriedly.

The Sickbay was tiny. Tostion sec Volnos shrugged deprecatingly. "We're a healthy lot - usually."

"Usually?" McCoy said sharply. "You have a problem? Can I help?"

Sonmal and Tostion exchanged wary, hopeful glances. "The problem is it's our surgeon who needs help," Tostion said eventually.

"Can I see him?"

The Zylostrian eyes locked briefly and then Sonmal said, "It can do no harm to let you see him, after all. You will need Captain Ather's permission to do anything."

"Of course. Where is he?"

"Through here." Sonmal led the way.

Left alone, Tostion said apologetically, "I'm not really qualified to tell you much about our medical facilities."

Kirk laughed. "I wouldn't know where to begin with ours," he agreed. "Is it permissible for us to see how you store your food and water...do you have processors or some kind of long term storage?"

"Both...and also we grow some fresh food. Certainly I can show you if you are interested. This way."

Uhura stole a look at her wrist chronometer and then looked back at the pensively frowning Zylostrian. After a solid hour of talking she was beginning to feel she was not going to succeed in persuading Ather ver Herika by friendly means, and the Federation would not be best pleased if she had to employ force. She caught his glance sliding from her to T'Pring and found the nagging suspicion at the back of her mind growing to a certainty; Ather was not impressed by her explanation because of an innate and probably unconscious prejudice against women. Zylostr was not a society of extremes, but women were only just beginning to take their share of the running of things - there were no females on board the Questor, for instance. Once again she experienced impatience at the sheer unreason of dominance, over the waste of inequality. It was not the first time potential friends had been dubious about allying themselves with the female-dominated Humans and Vulcans; it had taken the Andorians long enough to be sure and the Tellarites were even now toying with Klingon proposals.

Once again Ather's glance slid from one face to the other, seeing only the soft femininity in both, missing the determination in the set of each chin. He took a long breath.

"You have given me a lot to think about, Captain."

She allowed her expression to relax. "There is plenty of time, you are not due to make planetfall for another twelve days."

His eyes narrowed. "You estimate our journey time accurately."

"It is a relatively simple computation," T'Pring said, "when one knows the limitations of your vessel."

Uhura frowned slightly but definitely, with the tiniest of headshakes. It was unwise to emphasise the technological superiority of the Enterprise; it might well lead Ather to view them as a threat and attempt a hopeless demonstration of his own ship's aggressive capacity. She got to her feet.

"You do not need to come to an immediate decision. If you wish to check on the truth of everything I've told you, you can come on board my ship and we'll arrange for you to speak directly to President Dikkon du Lestril."

He veiled the sudden, hard suspicion. Speak directly to his home planet? Even the youngest kithil in school knew it was impossible to do such a thing, that radio waves could not exceed their own set perfect speed. Alert from the beginning for trickery, he was now certain of it.

"Perhaps I will do so later," he said smoothly, rising also, "after I have escorted you over the Questor."

"I'd be delighted to see your ship," she said honestly.

"Indeed." T'Pring's eyes were alight also. "It must be most interesting; our partners have clearly found it so."

Uhura smiled at her in amused agreement.

"Your partners?" Ather was intrigued and puzzled by the word. "I thought they were your fellow officers."

"They are. Mr. Spock is also my First Officer's husband, Mr. Kirk is my partner. Dr. McCoy's partner is our Chief Medical Officer. She was unable to accompany us today."

Ather paused in the doorway, assimilating the implications of this. "You are...all three of you...superior to your partners?" he demanded at last.

"It is the way of our society." Uhura watched him gravely, wondering how he was going to react.

"That males are subservient to females?" His tone was impeccably neutral.

"There are those of us that hope and believe changes will soon be made," T'Pring said calmly.

Uhura could not control the initial, startled turn of her head towards T'Pring; she had not fully realised her First Officer had seen and comprehended her feelings in the matter. The startled look changed to an involuntary smile; it seemed T'Pring did not disapprove.

"Yes, change is inevitable," she agreed cheerfully. "Where will you take us first, Captain?"

He studied her face abstractedly and was about to speak when there was a flurry of movement in the corridor behind him. He swung round.

"Sonmal? What is it?" His glance moved to the eagerly smiling McCoy at Sonmal's shoulder.

"Their doctor here can treat Feslek sut Jutal," Sonmal said swiftly. "Feslek agrees to it, they have spoken together."

While Ather questioned his second in command, Uhura beckoned McCoy.

"It's a cardiac problem, Ma'am," McCoy explained. "Not a difficult operation, even taking the slight physical differences into account. Feslek himself has given me all the information I'll need."

"Can it be done here or must he be taken on board the Enterprise?"

"I can do it here if I have to, but it'll be much simpler and quicker over there. Recovery time will be reduced 90% with our wound healing capabilities."

"Have you explained that to the patient?"

"Not in so many words...but Feslek understands that I'll work better in my own environment and that we have one or two tricks up our sleeve that can help."

"Tactful of you, thank you." She turned to Ather. "We'll be pleased to offer any help we can, to take him aboard our own ship if you'll allow it."

"I must speak to Feslek myself." Ather did not intend to be pressured into anything.

"Of course." Uhura understood. "I will come to your Sickbay with you and wait while you see him, then we can make whatever arrangements you wish as soon as possible. Will that be satisfactory?"

"Very well." Ather kept his tone bland. "One moment while I speak with Sonmal." He took his second in command some way down the narrow passage. "I trust this lot as far as I can see them," he said pointedly. "They're trying

to tell us to turn back, not to land."

"After all this?" Sonmal was incredulous.

"They're spinning a tale about interference with primitive cultures," Ather said contemptuously, "but since their society is run by women, my guess is they probably come from the planet we're making for and all this talk about a Federation is so much make believe to try and avoid trouble. If they've been monitoring our radio reports they'll have learned quite a bit about us - our language for one thing! Well, we're not an invasion force and I'm not going to waste four years of my life to turn back now. We're going ahead."

"But Feslek..." Sonmal was an old friend of the surgeon's. "If they can help him, and he seems to think they can..."

"Then we'll let them - but strictly under supervision," Ather said. "See what you can get out of their First Officer. Tell her you're taking her to her partner. Where are the other males?"

"With Tostion." Sonmal grimmed. "They've been very polite, obviously impressed. Apart from the way they came on board we've seen no indication that they're superior in any way."

"In other words, they're bluffing." Ather controlled a cold smile. "Let's call their bluff, shall we?" He rejoined Uhura. "We will go to Feslek," he said abruptly. "Perhaps your First Officer would like to join her partner on his tour of our ship. Sonmal can escort her."

Maxwell frowned about her, grunting exasperatedly. She had been so sure they'd taken that turning to the right and now here she was, lost in the maze of corridors in this ridiculously over-crowded ship and she couldn't see anyone about anywhere to set her on the right route again. Perhaps that way... She trotted off down the narrow passage. Halfway along, just at the top of a short flight of steps, a door on her right opened suddenly and a small figure emerged. Maxwell gave another grunt, this time of relief, and grabbed at him peremptorily to demand help.

Bethed du Caynon saw the odd figure loom up at him with alarming speed; instinctively he wrenched himself free of the clutching hand, knocking his attacker away. Taken by surprise, Maxwell slipped, clutched uselessly at the air and went down the stairs backwards, headfirst, to lie limply at the bottom.

Bethed gave another gasp of fright, the back of his hand to his mouth, staring down at the odd figure as if willing it to disappear. Finally he regained composure and crept down the steps.

Close to, panic returned. This was none of his shipmates...some demon! Seer save him, what was to be done? The cold room...only a few hiths away...he could drag it there. The door closed securely enough, had no internal handle, was thick enough... Choking down nausea, he made himself take hold of the creature, averting his eyes from the disgusting, pale pinky flesh, and dragged it out of sight.

Shaking horribly he managed to lock the door, then went on legs that threatened to let him fall, to the nearest fresher where he was decently, thoroughly and uncompromisingly sick.

It was a long time before he regained his composure sufficiently to think coherently, but at last the dreadful shaking came under control and he knew what he must do. After all, the bridge wasn't the place for a mere galley boy, and this was one job Sasfer thon Plasfa couldn't claim was his.... Oh, he wouldn't believe him of course, but one sight of the demon... No, better not think of that. He took a deep, calming breath and went to find the cook. He would be resting now, snoring like a colisk on his bed. A smirk of satisfaction touched his lips, only to fade as he rounded the corner to see the Navigator in company with two more of the demons. He choked down a yell, pressing himself against the wall.

Tostion paused a moment, explaining something. He was smiling and one of the demons was laughing in reply. The other was... Seer! worst of all. The unnatural black head was turning, the ears were...No! Bethed closed his eyes, knowing the sight would haunt him night after endless night.

He felt a hand touch his shoulder lightly, let out a squawk of pure terror and heard Tostion say, "Now then, young Bethed, you'll alarm our visitors if you behave like that. There's nothing to be afraid of, there's a good lad."

He let his eyes open, miserably prepared for any horror, and found the round-eared demon smiling at him kindly, reassuringly. His gaze slid nervously to the other... The brown eyes were...compassionate. His spirits rose again.

Tostion clapped his shoulder again, smiling broadly. "See, nothing to be afraid of! Nothing at all."

Weak with relief, he watched them go, still clutching at the wall for support. Visitors? The otherworld beings they had hoped to find? Oh, Seer! And he had knocked one out, hidden it in the cold room where it would die.

He bolted for the galley - he had a hundred tasks to do. Perhaps no-one would ever know what hand had pushed it in, they'd think it was an accident that it couldn't get out. They had to think it. Had to.

Word of the strange arrivals on board had spread swiftly through the Questor and the Enterprise crew had been greeted with covert stares on their way through the ship, though the Zylostrians were obviously a phlegmatic race for there was no sign of panic or fear on any of the orange-hued faces except the young galley-boy's. Kirk's own friendly demeanour and Spock's placidly reassuring calm also served to encourage a relaxed atmosphere. There was much to admire, much to wonder at; the small ship was designed with classic economy and ergonomic expertise, and its interior decor was pleasing to the eye. It was clear that if the race eventually accepted membership of the Federation they would have much to offer.

Their general tour at last complete, Tostion led Kirk and Spock forward again towards the bridge, chatting amiably as he went. Chuckling openly over one of the likeable young man's pithier statements about the boredom of interstellar sublight travel, Kirk was about to form a reply without revealing his own ship's vastly superior capacity when he felt Spock lurch against him, clutching at his arm. Startled by the unexpectedness of it his own arms went out involuntarily, providing support.

"Spock! What's up?"

"T'Pring." The word tore harshly from Spock's throat. "My bondmate... No!"

He wrenched his arms free of Kirk's and turned back, hurrying down the narrow passage, heedless of those who got in his way.

"Come on." The urgent order from Kirk galvanised Tostion into action, and he followed the pair of them at a run, not even pausing to wonder why he obeyed so instinctively.

Spock moved unerringly, turning corners, diving down steps without hesitation, stopping at last before a small closed door. He hammered at it with clenched fists, his eyes ablaze.

Kirk drew up behind him, putting out an arm to steady the Zylostrian before he ran full tilt into them.

"That's Sonmal's cabin," Tostion panted, bewildered.

"Sonmal's cabin?" Kirk echoed, a dozen suspicions occurring simultaneously. "What's T'Pring doing in there?"

Even as he spoke, two things happened at once; Spock's maddened hammering at the buckling door ceased, his arms falling to his side as his face regained its customary composure, and the door opened to reveal T'Pring, equally calm,

her fingers held out to Spock in the Vulcan ritual gesture of embrace. Behind her shoulder, Kirk could see the slumped figure of Sonmal cwr Lynia.

"What...what happened?" Tostion demanded in bewilderment.

Kirk suppressed an involuntary grin. It wasn't a laughing matter although it did have its grimly humorous side.

"At a rough guess I'd say your First Officer tried to...get a little too familiar with ours."

"Is he...dead?" Tostion was backing away warily; he had to go for help.

"No." Kirk put all the reassurance he could into the negative. "Vulcans are always unwilling to kill, a most gentle people." He saw Tostion's eyes slide to the huge dents in the metal door and shook his head, smiling. "They are also immensely strong, but remember he thought his wife was in danger. They share a very special relationship." He brushed it aside, details could wait until later. "I expect she used a Vulcan technique to put him out. He'll come round in a minute rubbing his neck and wondering what hit him. Come in and see."

Tostion stepped inside, flinching jumpily as T'Pring turned from Spock. "I must go to the Captain," she said quietly. "Will thee deal with this?" She waved a hand at Sonmal.

"We will." His flickering glance included Kirk and she hid a smile as she glided from the small room.

Spock leaned over the two crouching figures. "He should regain consciousness soon. She applied only the lightest of pinches."

"Pinches?" Tostion's jaw was dropping in amazement but the stirring groan of his colleague drew his attention. "Sonmal, are you all right?"

"All right...?" Sonmal whispered vaguely, lifting a hand to the fiery nerves of his neck. "What happened?"

"You have the dubious distinction of being the first of your race to experience the Vulcan neck pinch," Kirk said, sympathy tinting his voice. He helped Sonmal to sit up and added reprovingly, "You really should have been a little more prudent, you know. Are you feeling better?"

"My neck...it's on fire!" Sonmal groaned, turning his head uncomfortably.

"The sensations will subside soon, believe me." Kirk signalled to Tostion to take his other arm and together they helped him up and sat him on the cushioned bench against one wall. Leaving him momentarily to Tostion's ministrations he went to Spock. "It might be better if you join T'Pring," he murmured.

"Indeed," Spock said soberly. "She suspects hostility...she sensed such thoughts when the Zylostrian touched her."

"Go on then, you might be needed. Tostion can show you the way while I straight-talk some sense into Don Juan here."

He waited until the damaged door had closed and then sat down alongside Sonmal, studying him gravely. "You are a very lucky man, Mister," he said softly.

"Lucky!" Sonmal's hand caressed his neck and he attempted as fierce a glare as his still spinning senses would allow.

"Yes, lucky. Oh, I think I can understand why you did what you did, you'd had orders to get her to talk, I daresay, and a...friendly approach seemed the most promising." He grinned, comfortably. "She's a most attractive woman, too, I've always thought so myself, but you always have to tread softly when you don't know how a different race will react. Some aliens have very different outlooks on such matters; I'd hazard a guess that yours and mine are very similar, but the Vulcans are not like us. You're lucky T'Pring dealt with you before Spock got here."

Sonmal was slowly taking it in, squirming a little uncomfortably. "How did he know?" he demanded curiously.

"Vulcans always know if their bondmates are in danger, and it isn't really safe to rouse them. Luckily for the rest of us it's very difficult to do - they're devotedly logical most of the time."

Sonmal looked at his cabin door and shuddered visibly. "I didn't intend any insult..."

"I know," Kirk nodded. "Spock knows it too, don't worry. As far as he's concerned, the matter's already closed, but...don't do it again, will you?"

Sonmal shook his head in heartfelt capitulation.

McCoy tucked his medikit away and nodded confidently down at the Zylostrian surgeon. "Everything will be quite straightforward. You're happy about it all, are you?"

"Perfectly." Feslek sut Jutal looked up at his Captain. "It's up to you, Ather, of course, but I'd be quite pleased to get a chance to see their Sickbay."

Ather grunted. "You wouldn't see much, I daresay."

"When he is recovered," Uhura said. Medical advances were always among the first to be shared, common humanity demanded it once contact had been made.

Ather hesitated. Feslek had asked a good many penetrating questions and seemed content to trust, but he was reluctant to let him go.

"You could do the operation here," he growled.

"I could, yes. He'd take a lot longer to recover," McCoy said patiently.

"We'll leave someone here with you...as a gesture of good faith," Uhura assured him. "I will stay myself."

Ather's eyes narrowed. "You will all stay. All save the surgeon."

"If you prefer it."

Ather's eyes moved back to Feslek. "I will give my decision in a little while. I wish to speak with Sonmal first."

"Of course." Feslek nodded, closing his eyes wearily.

They left the small side ward and went out into the main Sickbay; T'Pring and Spock were waiting by the door. Ather glared suspiciously.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. "Where is my First Officer?"

"With Mr. Kirk." T'Pring eyed him placidly. "I was constrained to prevent him from displaying most unwelcome attentions to me. I daresay he is conscious again now."

"What?" Uhura's eyes widened and she flicked an apprehensive glance at Spock.

Ather saw it and strode to the door. "I will discover what had happened," he said harshly. "You will all wait here."

T'Pring reported events succinctly, finishing, "His thoughts were hostile although his actions were amorous. They are suspicious of us and have no intention of complying with our request that they turn back."

"You are correct."

Uhura whirled towards the door. Ather's voice had been hard, cold. He held a small metallic object in one hand, pointed towards them. "I don't believe a word you've told me, Captain, you've been bluffing." He smiled grimly. "If your ship is run by women it should be easy enough to take it over and while I discover just how best to do it, you can cool your heels in

our guard room."

The metal door clanged shut behind them and they heard the lock mechanism being engaged. The Enterprise crew looked round the small bare room, assessing their situation.

Uhura sat down firmly on the bare wooden bench. "No point in wearing ourselves out," she said mildly, noting the puzzled frown on her partner's face. "What's the matter, Jim?"

"Where is Commander Maxwell?"

Uhura echoed his frown. "I haven't seen her since she followed you three off the bridge just after we arrived."

"Followed us? I didn't see her, did you, Spock? Bones?"

Both men shook their heads. "I assumed she was with you, Captain," Spock said.

Uhura flipped open her communicator. "Palmer, see if you can raise Commander Maxwell, will you?"

There was a few moments' silence and then Palmer reported, "She's not answering, Captain."

"She's still on board this ship?"

"Affirmative."

"Very well. Uhura out." She closed the instrument sharply, tucking it back on her belt. "That settles it. We get out of here. Ideas?"

Kirk eyed his friend enquiringly. Spock nodded and moved to the wall.

"Yes, Jim, there is a guard posted outside."

Kirk grinned at his partner's puzzled face. "Spock can...suggest to him that he ought to open the door. Should we try?"

"Will it work?" Uhura asked her First Officer.

T'Pring shrugged. "My husband frequently displays abilities that surprise me. It might work, yes."

"Very well, Mr. Spock, carry on."

Spock's exploring fingers froze on the optimum area as his eyes closed in concentration, tension building on his face. Uhura signalled T'Pring to one side of the door, tapping her thumb and forefinger together. T'Pring nodded and took up her station. As the door opened her hand closed neatly on the guard's neck. Kirk caught him, easily him down gently to the floor.

"Well done," Uhura approved. "Come on, T'Pring."

The two women moved out silently. Kirk paused to haul the guard completely out of the way of the door and began to follow. The sound of a choking gasp from outside brought him hurriedly upright and through the door. The narrow passageway seemed full of flying bodies, but before he could plunge in to assist the brief fight was over and both Uhura and T'Pring were held by ruthlessly unyielding hands.

Kirk began to burn with a slow, cold anger. "You've hurt them."

"No more than was necessary." Ather raised his weapon. "Take them inside."

The two women were dumped ungently down on the wooden bench, the now-stirring guard was helped to his feet and the door closed on them once more. McCoy dropped to his knees beside Uhura, reader tube out.

"She's unconscious, must have taken a blow on the head." He probed gingerly. "Yes, just here. She'll have the devil's own headache when she comes round." He pressured a shot into her arm and turned his attention to T'Pring.

"I believe her shoulder is dislocated," Spock said quietly. "The arm may also be broken."

"You're right." McCoy eyed her ruefully. "This is going to hurt."

She bore it stoically, but when the shoulder was back she was pale. Kirk winced inwardly, knowing what it took to make a Vulcan look like that.

"You could go back to the ship," he said roughly, taking out his communicator.

"No." Uhura was sitting up shakily, holding her head. "We're not giving up now."

He shrugged. "You're the Captain. Have I your permission to get Maxwell's co-ordinates and have a tricorder beamed over?"

"You've thought of something?" She leaned against the wall, wishing the room would stay still.

McCoy took her shoulders and eased her down until she was lying flat. "Keep still for a while," he said firmly. "You'll only make yourself sick if you move about."

She acknowledged the truth of it with a grimace and closed her eyes. "Carry on, Jim. You're the senior officer, I'll leave it up to you for the moment."

Once the requested tricorder had arrived, Kirk banged loudly on the door, demanding to see Ather ver Herika at once. Hearing no audible response he quirked an eyebrow at Spock, whispering, "Is the guard still there?"

The Vulcan nodded and came to his side. "The lock is very simple," he said quietly. "Would you like me to open it for you?"

Kirk chuckled. "Your wife is right, you're full of surprises, my Vulcan friend. Yes, please. Then we'll ask nicely and see what happens."

There was a flurry of movement outside as the door swung open. Kirk smiled to himself and motioned Spock back.

"We're not coming out," he said conversationally, "but it is rather urgent that we see your Captain now. We want to ask him a most important question. If we do not see him I cannot guarantee the consequences."

He listened to the whispered consultation and the receding footsteps with quiet satisfaction, seating himself beside Uhura to wait.

Ather's mouth was set grimly. "How did you get this door open?"

Kirk shook his head, smiling. "The door is unimportant. What have you done with Commander Maxwell?"

"I have done nothing with her." Ather was clearly taken aback.

Kirk's face hardened. "There were six of us when we arrived here," he said harshly. "Now there are only five. I repeat, what have you done with Commander Maxwell? She has not been seen for over two hours."

Ather's eyes blazed. "This is more of your trickery. Why have you set her to spy on us?"

"We have no need to spy," Kirk reminded him politely. "You have been most courteous up to now. We are becoming concerned for the Commander's safety and request your permission to go to her." He pointed at the tricorder in Spock's hands. "We can trace her with this."

"Where did you get that from?" Ather took a step back.

"It arrived as we did." Kirk did not elaborate; the man was intelligent enough for open threats to be unnecessary.

"And you can trace your missing officer with that?" Ather jerked his head towards the tricorder.

"Yes."

"Very well." He stepped backwards. "But no tricks. I'll have armed men with me."

"Understood."

Spock led them unerringly to the door of the cold room.

"In there?" Ather said unbelievably. "What's she doing in there? She'll be half frozen." He waved an impatient hand to Tostion to open the door.

"Half frozen? What's in there?"

"It's a cold store...for food."

The door was open now, a chilling air creeping out. Kirk stepped inside. The Chief lay curled against the cold, her face pale and filmed with white frost. He went to her, searching for a pulse.

"I think she's still alive," he said gravely. "She'll need a doctor, expert attention." He lifted her gently, carrying her carefully from the room. "May I take her to your Sickbay?"

Ather was surprised again, expecting a demand to return to their own ship. He peered at the woman; there was no question but that she was affected by the extreme cold.

"Very well," he said stiffly. "But there will be a guard."

"Of course," Kirk said easily.

It was not the simplest of matters manoeuvring an unconscious, well-muscled female through the narrow passageways to Sickbay but it was done at last, and an anxious McCoy arrived, fetched by Sonmal.

"Exposure," he said briefly. "She'll be all right. I'll need help though."

Ather was beginning to feel events were moving too fast again. He gave the necessary orders and gestured Kirk and Spock aside. "I want some straight answers," he said angrily. "What was that woman doing in that cold room?"

Kirk saw Spock look up and knew the same memory had struck him. He turned to Tostion. "That young man we met earlier on," he said. "Do you remember? The one who was so frightened. What is his name?"

"The galley boy?" Tostion frowned. "Bathed du Caynon."

Ather glowered thundrously. "Are you suggesting he had something to do with it?"

"It is a logical speculation," Spock said placidly. "He was the only member of your crew to react differently from the rest."

"But the boy is harmless," Ather spluttered.

"Then it won't do any harm just to see him, will it?" Kirk smiled disarmingly. "I am as anxious to get this matter cleared up as you are, Captain."

"Oh, very well. Tostion, fetch the boy to the bridge. We'll see him there."

When Bethan saw the two men he cringed against the wall. Seer, they had found out! He closed his eyes awaiting their wrath, his limbs beginning to shake.

"Don't be afraid."

Ather experienced a stab of surprise at Kirk's gentleness and watched him lay his hands soothingly on the shaking shoulders. "She'll all right, you haven't harmed her. She'll get over the cold. Won't you tell us what happened? Was it an accident?"

Now that the time of waiting was over, Bethan felt himself dissolve before the questioner's compassion. He drew a hand over falling tears and snivelled

dismally. "It frightened me and I pushed it. It fell down the stairs and I thought it was a demon. I locked it in the cold room."

"No, not a demon." He shook his head, smiling. "Thank you for telling us." He flicked a quick glance at Spock, intent on his tricorder. The Vulcan nodded briefly and Kirk felt a surge of relief. The boy was telling the truth.

"Why make the boy lie?" Ather said furiously.

"He is not lying," Spock said mildly. "This instrument shows me that his pulse, blood pressure, respiration rate, are unaltered. He has spoken the truth."

"The poor lad was terrified," Kirk said soothingly. He smiled all round. "Don't you think it's time we talked this whole thing out?"

Ather waved the boy away and pointed angrily at the tricorder. "That's the first thing I've seen that suggests you could make us turn back. Why should we do that just because you ask it?"

Kirk's eyes were steady. "We're friendly, we've said that all along. We don't intend to employ other means unless you insist on making in unavoidable."

"Because you can't," Ather said triumphantly. "You think I haven't seen through your lies - I did so some time ago. You think I can't see that you come from that planet ahead there...that this is all a bluff to keep us away. Well, we're not an invasion force either, this is a friendly visit, no need for it to become anything else, but I'm not turning back."

"Your arguments are most illogical," Spock said. "Our Captain offered you the opportunity to speak to your own President, Dikkon du Lestril."

Ather's eyes gleamed. "The youngest kithil knows it is impossible from such a distance. Do you think I am a fool?"

"Oh, no." Kirk shook his head seriously. "You're not a fool, Ather ver Herika. But your race does not have subspace radio...ours does."

"Subspace...? What in the name of the Seer is that?"

Spock told him; clearly and as concisely as possible. At the end Ather blinked at him.

Reluctant to admit he'd barely understood a quarter of it he said accusingly, "But you speak our language. You must have been picking up our radio transmissions for months, not arrived only hours ago as you claim."

"I'm afraid that isn't so either," Kirk said regretfully. He signed to Spock and they switched off the hidden translators both carried. He looked wryly at Ather and said, "You really should have noted that our lip movements were not always perfectly synchronised with what we seemed to say."

Ather blinked again and spoke incomprehensibly. Kirk switched his translator back on.

"...still on my own and I will act as I think best," Ather was saying, defiantly. "We will outrun your ship."

Kirk watched them move swiftly to their stations at Ather's direction and felt the whole ship quiver as the engines picked up power. The steady hum grew to a roaring, to an unbearable, piercing whine, the fabric of the ship shuddering under the strain.

"Captain!" Tostion screamed it out over the din. "We're not moving, not at all."

"Not moving?" Frantically Ather studied dials, readouts, issued orders, thumped frantic fists on the console and eventually ordered the attempt to be stopped.

As the thundering ceased he stared at Kirk. "What have you done? What in the name of the Seer have you done?"

Kirk viewed him com passionately, seeing the defeated air, the slumped posture. "We are holding you in a tractor beam; it won't do your ship any harm."

"A tractor beam?"

"A force field. Your engines are not powerful enough to break away. Once you have spoken to President Dikkon du Lestril we will take the Questor in tow. Your journey back will take only days, less than the completion of your voyage would have taken.

Ather turned from the screen. "You have been very forbearing with us, Captain Uhura. You could have forced us to turn back any time you wished."

"We could." She grinned at him disarmingly. "But that isn't the way it is with us. We like to be friends with people. Have you been down to see Feslek yet?" He shook his head. "Then I will take you down there myself. I want a word with someone. T'Pring, you have the con."

She beckoned to Kirk to join them. As the turbolift doors closed behind them Ather said wryly, "I'm also prepared to admit that I could have been in error when I thought it would be easy to deal with women." He eyed Kirk slyly. "Your men are no weaklings, either."

"Certainly not," Uhura agreed wholeheartedly, grinning at her partner's innocent expression, "but they are unquestionably devious."

"On Zylostr such a thing is said of women," Ather chuckled.

"There are many means to an end," Kirk said placidly.

Uhura left Kirk to see their visitor back to his own ship once he had visited Feslek sut Jutal, and made her way to Maxwell's quarters where the Chief was convalescing in none too good a mood. She barely gave Uhura time to get right into the room before she broke into a tirade against the unfortunate Bethed. Uhura let her talk herself to a standstill before she made any comment.

Once the irate woman eventually paused she said, "The boy did not attack you, you frightened him and he pulled away too abruptly. You fell and knocked yourself out. He believed you were a danger to his ship and tried to deal with you to the best of his ability."

Maxwell went scarlet, attempted to interrupt the even speech several times. "You'd take an alien's word for what happened?" she demanded. "An alien male?"

Uhura stiffened. "Once you are fully recovered you will report to Dr. Chapel for a psychprofile," she said sharply. As the look of outrage grew on the older woman's face she said firmly, "That's an order, Commander Maxwell." Deliberately softening her tone she added, "I am pleased you have recovered from the rather unpleasant ordeal and that there are no ill effects. We hope to have you fully fit again before too long."

Maxwlll was still simmering with annoyance as the door slid shut.

After the chess match McCoy handed Christine a consoling cup of coffee. "Never mind, you can't win 'em all."

"Jim's good." Christine took an appreciative sip.

"Good enough to beat Spock?" McCoy asked teasingly.

Chapel looked into her cup self-consciously. "He already has beaten him a couple of times."

"But your money's on Spock." McCoy grinned knowingly. "I might risk a few credits on Jim myself."

"And you might lose them." Kirk pulled up a chair.

"You've got to have faith in yourself," McCoy said firmly.

Chapel drained her cup and got to her feet. "The day's been too long already. I'm for bed. Goodnight."

Both men rose politely. As they reseated themselves McCoy leaned forward conspiratorially. "I've good news for you. Maxwell will be leaving us at Starbase 19 next month."

"Leaving? Why?"

"Health reasons." McCoy shrugged. "No, I don't know details and if I did I wouldn't tell you. All I know is that Chris gave her a psychprofile this morning."

"I see." Kirk felt a pang of sympathy for the obdurate, single-minded woman; but if what he suspected of her was true she was better out of Starfleet. There was no room for prejudice in space...of any sort! Such negative attitudes could ultimately produce negative results. He yawned suddenly and grinned. "I'd better go to bed myself. I'll need all my beauty sleep and then some if I'm going to beat Spock at chess tomorrow."

"Go to it," McCoy said with feeling.

EPILOGUE

Admiral Caine sat back in her chair, smiling. "I shall be most interested to hear fuller details of the episode about the Zylostrian ship," she assured Uhura. "It may be just the evidence I need for a small change in the regulations at present under consideration. Please proceed."

Uhura began to speak.
