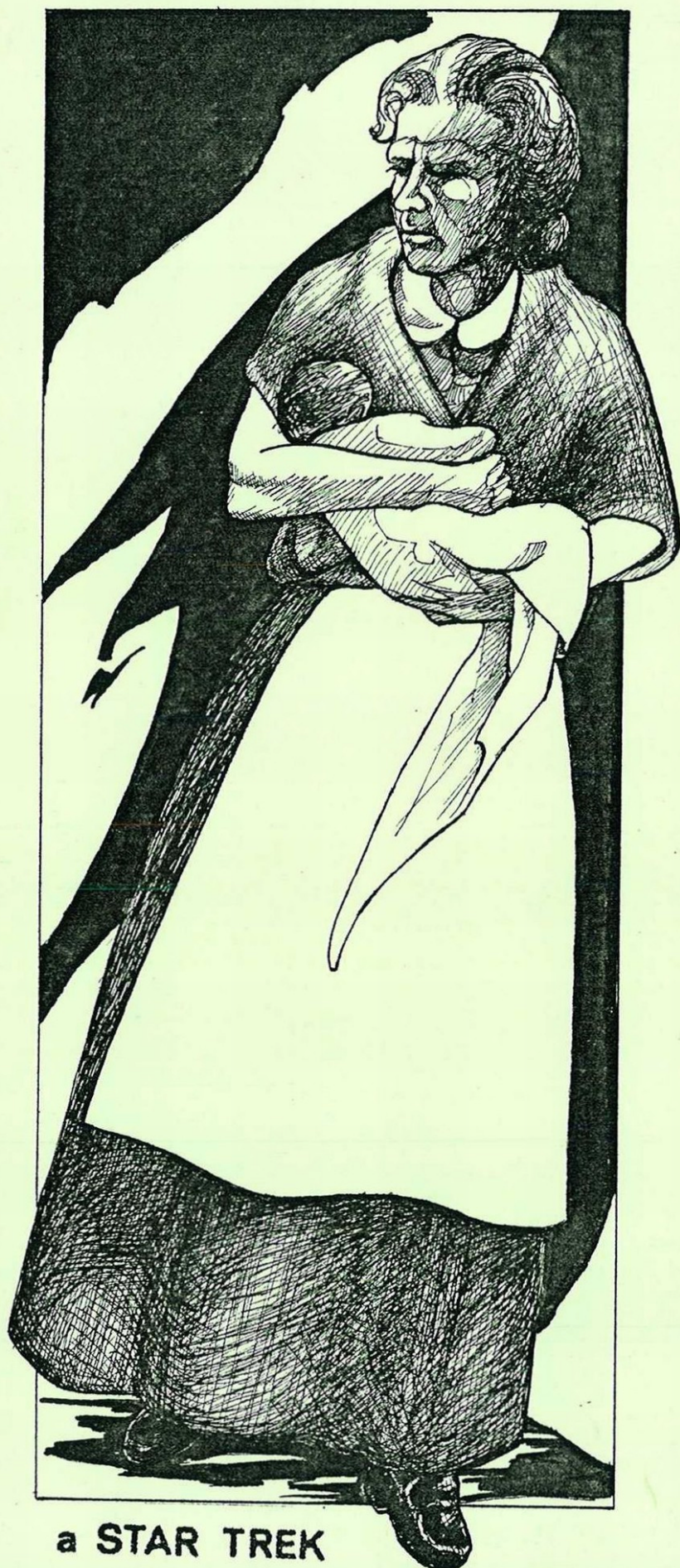


Scotpress

**the
MARK
of
CAIN**

Pam

Baddeley



a STAR TREK
fanzine

THE MARK OF CAIN

by

Pam Baddeley

illustrations by

Ann Humphrey

Dedicated to Gordon

Matthew Chapter 7 verses 17-20

Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.

A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.

Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

* * *

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PROLOGUE

Darkness clung around the ramshackle wooden buildings, lurking in the narrow, rubbish-strewn alleys between them as if reluctant to disclose what lay there to the unprotected eye. But the western sky was already staining to purple, deepening to a rose pink flush. Rays of sunlight began to pick out the tops of the buildings as the darkness at their bases turned to grey. Slowly, the details came into focus: dirt, squalor, the prone forms of a few beggars. A scrawny dog sniffed cautiously at one of the carcasses, then raised a hind leg, but a hefty blow sent it, yelping, down the street.

From the upper room of one of the houses came a faint, incautious whimper, then a sudden startling howl of protest. New-born lungs had drawn breath for the first time and found they cared little for the sensation. The sound was promptly muffled, but not before a window shutter in one of the houses opposite had swung back with a loud creak. A tousled head peered out, its wrinkled features creased in a disapproving scowl.

"Disgraceful, absolutely disgraceful. Should be whipped out of town. Standards! The young have no standards these days." For a moment, she considered fetching a broom and knocking on the shutters of the house next door to rouse her neighbour. But then she thought better of it. Loud snoring on the mattress behind her reminded her that it was better to let sleeping husbands lie. With that in mind, she closed the shutters and went downstairs to open her shop.

As she carefully pulled on the much patched and mended blind that screened the shop window, there was a piercing scream from the storeroom. She ignored it, tying the string she held to a catch on the wall, to secure the rolled up blind. It would only be another rat, caught by her dog. She took a besom from the corner and began to sweep some of the dust on the floor into the road outside. Flies were already buzzing round some stale cabbage leaves lying there. That done, she finally went through into the storeroom.

Her dog - a scruffy animal of indeterminate ancestry - was chewing with relish at the animal's remains. Angry with it for making such a mess, the woman raised her besom. Instantly, the dog dropped its prey and fled past her, tail between its legs, into the shop. Frantically, it pawed at the door, then turned, cringing and whimpering pitifully as the woman followed.

"Oh, get outside with you." Impatiently, she yanked open the door. The dog slipped outside, grateful to have escaped a beating for once. The woman set her broom against the wall, wiping her hands on her faded apron, and went to peer out through the cloudy squares of glass, set in their wooden framework. She was very proud of those panes: they would cost a lot to replace. Of course, in the old days, a shop would have had one large glass window in place of all these - so her grandma had told her, leastways. But the old woman had rambled a lot; who could make a pane of glass that large?

The house opposite was without movement. But who knew what wickedness was going on behind its innocent-seeming facade? Disgruntled, the woman turned away to dust the counter with a ragged cloth. Abruptly, the little bell above the door jangled into life. The woman beamed at the sight of her first customer of the day. "Why, good morning, Rebecca."

The other woman nodded gravely, nearly dislodging the long grey hair that was precariously pinned up on the crown of her head. Her long dress was faded with age and much darned and patched, but there was no shame in that: it was no different to the shop-keeper's own.

"Here. I've brought a pot for your man to mend, Sara." She set down the battered metal object on the counter between them. "And have you any of those candies? The little ones like them so."

Neither woman spoke while Sara measured out a portion of the honey confectionery and Rebecca produced a copper coin from her tiny purse. The ritual completed, however, they were free to indulge in the real reason for Rebecca's visit. It was Rebecca, herself, who made the cautious opening gambit.

"You'll have heard the noise at first light, I suppose?"

"The child, you mean?"

Rebecca nodded. "Shocking business."

"Shocking!" The shop-keeper leaned across her counter, her manner that of a fellow conspirator. "You know, I wouldn't be in Leah's shoes for anything. I mean - a bastard for a grandchild."

"Indeed. Abigail's pa whipped the hide off her when it first started to show. Wonder what he'll do now she's dropped it?" Rebecca spoke with relish.

"Drown it in a bucket, I shouldn't wonder."

"What I'd like to know though is - who's the father? The Jones boy, I reckon - or Michael Morrison."

"No way of knowing," Sara replied. "Abigail went with so many, I don't reckon she knows either. Well, this'll be a lesson for her."

Abigail Marshall lay, near exhaustion, on a grubby, straw-stuffed mattress. Her dress clung uncomfortably to her skin, soaked in sweat. Restlessly, her gaze roamed about the warped and stained walls of the little room. She carefully averted her eyes from the bundle, wrapped in cloth and cradled in her younger sister's arms, however.

"Won't you at least look at her, Abigail? She's a sweet little thing now she's asleep. Abigail, *please* - "

Abigail closed her eyes in exasperation. "What's the point? You know what we have to do." Her words were spoken in a flat, exhausted tone. She had no energy to spare in getting angry with her sister's failure to face unpleasant facts.

"I know." Sadly, Martha looked down at the small face reposed in peaceful sleep.

"It's bad enough that it's a bastard," continued Abigail, trying to convince herself as well as Martha. "Perhaps then - perhaps we could've got round Pa, though another mouth to feed's the last thing we want round here - "

"But we're one short now that Samuel's gone," Martha broke in, momentarily forgetting the truth in her eagerness. Their brother had been the first to see marriage as an escape from Isaac Marshall's drunken temper.

"Don't be stupid," Abigail reminded her, heavily. "That - that *thing* you've got there is a blasphemy against the Book. If we don't get rid of it before the neighbours find out..." She left the words to hang by

themselves, ponderous with their implied threat. Martha knew the doctrine as well as she, after all.

"Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them," Martha said slowly. She didn't need to quote the entire passage: they had heard it ranted from the pulpit often enough.

"So if the fruit's bad, so is the tree, right?" When Martha would not answer Abigail persisted. "You're from the same tree as me - so's Naomi - so's Sam. We all stem from Ma and Pa. That's one life against our whole family."

"But it's such a *little* thing," Martha pleaded. "An extra finger, that's all."

"That's enough to hang us all, and you know it!" Laboriously, Abigail pulled herself up till she could sit up by leaning against the wall. "If they find it - Martha, you've got to kill it. I'm still too weak. Go on... while it's still early. While no-one's about."

"Abigail..."

"Go on, I tell you! Ma'll do it if you won't!"

"All right." Martha bit her lip, then got up quickly and went to the door. But then she hesitated once more, looking down at the child in her arms.

"Do it, Martha."

She looked up, her dark eyes meeting Abigail's blue ones, usually so clear but now clouded with... what? Grief? It was her child, after all, her first. But there was anxiety in her sister's gaze too, fear for herself and for all of them. Martha knew she could not fail her now. Wordlessly she nodded, then left the room.

As she passed the other door on the landing, she heard quiet snores: her mother must have fallen asleep after being up all night with Abigail. She heard giggling too; little Naomi, probably playing with her rag doll. She hurried down the narrow, creaky staircase, hoping that her father would not choose that moment to lift the latch of the front door. With any luck, he was still lying in one of the barns out of town, sleeping off an evening's moonshine drinking. Liquor was frowned on, of course, but despite all that the respectable folk, led by the minister, did to try and stamp it out, rough men like Isaac continued to sneak out to the farms come sundown.

Martha peered out of the back door into a dingy, ill-smelling alleyway. There was no-one around as yet; only a ginger cat sniffed disdainfully at a pile of rubbish. Martha slipped out, clutching the baby tightly to her chest, and hurried away.

She soon left the alley, but kept to the back streets, meeting no one. Before long, the ground was sloping gently downhill to a stained and half rotten board fence which ran directly north to south. She hurried along, keeping it to her left; this marked the easternmost border of town. Despite its dilapidated condition it still eased the minds of the superstitious and fearful townspeople; it kept things out. Martha was glad she was not a farmer's daughter; the people on the farms were altogether too exposed, although there had been no trouble for a long, long time. Still, there was a psychological safety in numbers about living in town.

The baby stirred, whimpering. "Quiet!" Martha hissed. "Do you want to die?" But her luck was still holding, and now the gap she sought was just ahead. She ducked through, heading across the rough ground that dropped away gradually, covered with scrub and grass. At its foot lay the dump, and beyond that the slope resumed in earnest, falling more steeply to the plain with its winding, jewel-like river. Early morning mist lay in all directions and served to obscure the lines of the foothills marching away to north and south - left and right - of Martha. But she had no eyes for their beauty in any event, keeping her attention on the uneven ground with its thick tussock grass. She most especially did not look straight ahead at the mesa which rose sheer from the plain some distance away, but also on this side of the river. The abode of evil; better not even to think of it.

The ground was now levelling out, strewn with an assortment of broken earthenware pots, axles, rusty cooking pots. Moving carefully, so as not to cut her bare feet on these treacherous objects, she skirted great piles of junk - the wreckage of centuries.

"Abigail won't feed you, baby, and I've got no money for milk, so I'll have to leave you here. At least you'll have a better chance than you'd get off Jude's Rock." Carefully, she laid down the child by a pile of assorted rubbish near the centre of the dump; it would provide a little shade from the growing heat. Then, blowing a kiss to the infant, she clambered away and was soon gone, hurrying away up the hillside.

The last sound of Marth's departure died away, leaving only birdsong and the buzzing of insects. The baby whimpered, then began to cry.

There was a scuffling nearby; a squeaking and a scampering. Then a dark shape emerged from the shelter of an upturned barrow and sniffed the air. Another followed closely. For a moment, they paused - neither was especially hungry, having dined well on puppy meat only the previous night. Still, the chance of food, presenting itself when they had no way of knowing when their next meal would be, could not be passed up. The two rats stealthily moved towards the inviting scent. Their progress was slow but deliberate - there was an air of intelligence about them. Only at the last moment did they emerge into the open, jaws drooling with anticipation.

Other ears had also heard the child. A large shaggy face eyed the rats from the concealment of a torn flap of canvas. She ignored the tormenting flies that crawled round her eyes and muzzle, her long pink tongue lolling from her mouth in the heat.

The stray breeze brought her the scent of the slinking, dark-haired forms. She stiffened; that scent was imprinted upon her memory. She had found it in the small den she had made beneath a heap of broken axles, the den where her cubs had been waiting while she hunted... Her teeth bared in fury as her hackles rose.

The male rat opened his jaws, revealing sharp, yellowed fangs as he darted forward to nip at the baby's tiny foot. Without warning, powerful jaws snapped shut on the back of his neck. His body twisted in mid-air then dropped limply to the ground as the bitch released him. Shrieking with rage, his mate leaped up at the larger animal. There was a confused moment of vicious snarling, a blurred motion and then the female rat lay sprawled at the bitch's feet, blood oozing from the tiny crushed skull. The bitch licked the salt fluid from her muzzle, then lowered her head to sniff hungrily at the carcass.

A sound came; a whimper. She pricked up her ears, suddenly remembering the bundle of cloth. Cautiously she paced over to it and sniffed at it: the scent was human, which meant danger. She made to

withdraw but a tiny hand tugged insistently at one foreleg. Responding, she bent her head and gently closed her teeth on the cloth that cocooned the child, lifting and carrying the bundle away.

As the day wore on, a tension gripped the town, a subtle expectancy. The people kept to their homes, reluctant to raise their voices above a whisper. They sensed Heaven's growing wrath.

About mid-day, a solitary raindrop fell into the dust beside the rat corpses, leaving a phosphorescent circle. Others followed, pattering gently, and soon a steady drumming beat down on the nearby flap of canvas. In the space beneath it, the bitch opened one eye, then raised her head to listen to the distant rumble of thunder. Curled up beside her, the baby stirred but did not waken, nestling into her fur. After a moment, the animal drowsily lowered her head onto her front paws, and closed her eyes.

Purple lightning sheared the skies. Almost immediately, loud thunder came, rattling Sara's glass panes in their frame. Frightened, she snatched the string from its mooring, allowing the blind to crash down, then dived behind her counter. Moaning in terror, she fell to her knees to pray.

Outside, the heavens had opened, turning the dirt roads to a mud bath in moments. A homeless beggar, too old and drunk to move, lay semi-conscious, drowning in a puddle down a back alley. Rain forced its way through leaky roofs, trickled down flimsy walls and dripped heavily onto floors. There was a faint but pungent smell of mildew and dampened cloth.

Slowly, the rain died away, the storm clouds clearing to the east. Weak sunlight bathed the earth and the cooled air. Soon, all was steaming as the heat intensified, baking the muddy roads to dust again. Sluggishly, life returned to the town.

Sighing, Sara Crawford brushed the dust from her apron, caught up a tattered shawl from a hook behind the door and, wrapping it around her shoulders, went next door to Rebecca's house. As her friend admitted her, Sara exclaimed, "Becky! What a storm! Do you remember another like it?"

"Not since two years gone, come autumn - "

The two women looked at each other with dawning comprehension.

"That was the time when Mary Cooper had that..." Rebecca said slowly.

"Could it... have happened again?". Sara's voice was husky, underlain with a growing excitement.

"A sign of the Lord's anger... Yes, we cannot rule that out." Abruptly, Rebecca turned to lead the way out of the gloomy passage into the cramped front room. Her daughter was there, cradling a young child on her knees. "At least my grandchild's not a blasphemy against the Book," she continued meaningfully.

The young woman looked up, her blonde hair falling in wispy curls about her face, having completely escaped its restraining pins. The child pulling at it supplied the reason for such lack of decorum. "What's that, Ma?" she asked plaintively.

"Never you mind, Ruth," her mother said, a little severely.

She turned back to Sara. "We need to find out if any more were born last night - we know of at least one. Whoever won't show their child - they'll be the guilty one."

"Ma, what trouble are you stirring up now?"

"Hush! I'm just doing my duty, is all. Now you just pin your hair up like a decent woman and get along. That husband of yours'll be back from work soon and it's about time you fixed his supper."

"Yes, Ma." Ruth spoke with long-suffering resignation as she began to obey.

Rebecca gripped Sara's arm confidently. "We'll be at the bottom of this soon, Sara. You'll see."

Reverend Jacob Forester was snoring noisily in the darkened front parlour when a loud creaking awoke him. Startled, he sat up in his chair, peering into the darkness. "Wha... Who is it?" he demanded.

"Only us, Mr. Forester. Sara Crawford and I."

Jacob stifled a groan. There was no mistaking that voice. Ever since Rebecca Arkwright's husband had died of the fever that had gone round a couple of years back, she had made herself the town conscience - 'its busybody' was the description Jacob preferred, though he kept that to himself. Reluctantly heaving his stiff old body from the chair, he groped his way to the window and pulled back the heavy curtains, blinking in the reddish evening light that streamed through the open shutter. Eyes watering, he turned back to face Rebecca and her crony.

"What can I do for you, good woman?" he asked, as pleasantly as he could manage.

"Mr. Forester, we've come about a matter of some delicacy," Rebecca began.

Jacob's heart sank. It was going to be about the morals of some drunkard or whore-monger, that was for sure. It always was. Why couldn't she just get on with it instead of beating about the bush?

"One of your neighbours?" he prompted.

"Yes, Reverend. We've discovered that only one child was born last night - "

"That bastard of Abigail Marshall's," put in Sara in her usual blunt and tactless way. Jacob winced: he had wished for frankness, yes, but not *that* frank.

Rebecca frowned at her companion before resuming her righteous duty. "The storm we had this afternoon is proof that the brat must be Marked, Reverend."

"Yes..." Jacob kept his voice and face carefully neutral. His heart had by now reached the level of his worn old boots. Well, he had known it would come to this sooner or later. The woman was obsessed with sinning, especially of the carnal variety. "You're quite sure that the woman was delivered of her burden last night?"

"Quite sure; we both live opposite her house. We heard the child's

cry."

"Yes, yes," Jacob said, nodding, while thinking furiously. "Well, yes, something must be done, of course. The guilty must be punished."

"They've probably thrown it off Jude's Rock by now," commented Sara.

"Never fear. They shall not escape the Lord's vengeance that way. The Lord must be appeased or the whole town will suffer. No, worthy ladies, you must notify your neighbours. Tell them to assemble outside the house. I shall be along directly."

Angry muttering rose from the crowd. Despite the minister's repeated hammering on the door, no-one had admitted him. Hoarsely, he shouted again. "Open, in the Name of the Lord!"

This time the door creaked open a little. A frightened voice stammered, "Reverend Forester? What is it?"

"Your daughter bore a child last night - "

"Mr. Forester, my husband is not here at present. Can you not speak to him in the morning?"

"Then my business is with you." Jacob eyed the lined and careworn face peering out at him, lines that shifted and deepened in the uncertain light shed by the torches behind him. His sympathy stirred at the woman's obvious fear, but he could not afford to show weakness in the sight of his flock. "Come, woman, do you deny that your daughter gave birth last night?"

"No, Reverend, she...she did..."

"And do you deny that the child bears the devil's Mark? The Mark which sets it apart from all true issue? The Lord allows the devil to create such evil ones when sin takes hold among us, but they are Marked so that we shall know them, just as the Lord placed a Mark on Cain to set him apart from all other men."

"Reverend, it's not so - "

"You are lost, woman. You have shielded the enemy of Jehovah in your house."

"No, no, I - I love God. I'd never do anything wrong. The baby was normal but Pa threw it off Jude's Rock - her not being wed, you see - " Leah gabbled.

"Don't damn yourself further with lies. The Lord has revealed the truth to me. I demand to see the child."

"Mr. Forester, it's dead, I swear. It must be. It couldn't have survived a fall like that - "

The minister's dark eyes bored relentlessly into Leah's terrified blue ones. "The child is utterly destroyed?"

"Oh, yes, Reverend, though a more normal baby you couldn't hope to see. My family love God, there's been no sin here - "

The minister stepped back from the door. "I'm going to speak to the

flock," he said ominously.

Panic seized Leah's heart. She had seen the flock in action a few times; been part of it herself - it was safer that way. The last time had been nearly two years ago when they had lynched the Cooper family. Trembling, she shut the door and fumbled with the bolts, then fled upstairs.

"The minister knows - he's telling the flock now," she cried as she reached the landing.

Moaning with fear, Abigail clutched at the door jamb of her room, trying to stand upright. "Why don't they lynch the one that did it? He's the devil's spawn, not me." Tears glinted in her eyes in the reflected torchlight from outside.

"Can't lynch the whole town, can they?" snapped Martha. She had been watching the street through one of the cracks in the shutter. Now she turned from the window and picked up Naomi, who was busy sucking the head of her rag doll. "Ma, come on. We're going out the back."

"But Abigail's still weak - "

"Ma, we can't all die for Abigail - "

"You callous little bitch! She's your sister - "

"Ma!" cried Martha, stung. "She's brought all this on herself. Now come on!" Then she hurried away down the stairs, long dark hair flying behind her. Leah pushed back her own grizzled hair.

"I'll help you, Abigail." Supporting her eldest daughter, she started down the stairs.

Martha lingered in the alley at the back of the house, torn by concern. "Oh, come on, Ma!"

Sudden screams of rage, unidentifiable as issuing from human throats, erupted from the front of the house. There was a heavy pounding, and the splintering of wood. Unable to wait any longer, Martha broke into an unsteady run, clutching her baby sister tightly.

Abigail and her mother had reached the foot of the stairs and were heading along the dark passage to the rear door when the front was broken open. Desperately, the terrified women quickened their pace as the mob surged in and up the stairs. Leah groped for the hooks on the left hand wall as they entered the kitchen.

The back door opened in front of them, a darker shape visible against the blackness.

"Leaving, Abigail?"

The voice was familiar; Abigail choked back a scream as Michael Morrison, whose hands had caressed so gently, reached out to enclose her throat in a very different embrace. Then the young man's legs folded under him. There was a low groan, then silence. Bewildered, Abigail looked at her mother's indistinct shape beside her, then saw a glint of firelight on the large knife in her mother's hand.

"Come on, Abigail." Leah's voice was perfectly even. Together,

stepping over the body on the floor, they moved outside. Firelight lit the alley, reflected from the upper window. Keeping to the wall, they crept silently by, hearing the shouts of rage above.

"Where are they?"

"Reverend, they're gone! The devil has saved them!"

As they left the house behind, there were shrieks of rage and the smashing of earthenware plates. A loud thudding began as if someone chopped frenziedly with an axe; the orgy of destruction by the frustrated mob had just commenced.

Hearts beating fast, the two women made off through the back streets.

"We've got to get to Samuel's place," Leah muttered.

"Ma? Ma, we can't. They'll head there next now we've gone - "

"But we've got to warn him! We've got to - " Leah broke off as Abigail stumbled, nearly falling. Somehow she kept her own balance and steadied her daughter. With a sinking heart, she realised that Abigail was too weak to reach Samuel's in time anyway, and she couldn't leave her. They would have to go on and find the others.

"Forgive me, Samuel. Forgive me," Leah muttered as they hurried unsteadily on, the tears rolling down her ravaged face.

1

"Good morning, Mr. Spock." Kirk waved towards the empty chair on his right. Nodding, his First Officer set down his breakfast tray and sat down. The two men ate in companionable silence for a time, then, reaching for his coffee, Kirk remarked, "Well, I've got a good feeling about this mission, Spock." The Vulcan merely raised an eyebrow, but the gesture spoke volumes. "All right, I know - nothing logical to base it on. As usual. But you must admit, my hunches have a habit of proving - "

"Sanguine?" finished Spock. Kirk nodded, smiling.

"Well, Jim, you're looking extra cheerful this morning."

Both men looked at the craggy features of the Doctor. Without waiting for an invitation, McCoy set down his tray. "What's all this about hunches, Jim?"

"The captain has just explained that he currently entertains a considerable, though logically unfounded, expectation of success during our forthcoming planetary survey."

"Hmmm..... But you must admit, Spock, that our fallible Human intuitions happen to work out in practice quite a bit."

"Doctor, statistically I would compute the percentage of fulfilled intuitions - "

"Please don't," Kirk put in, holding up his hands. When his two friends both turned to him, he explained. "I'm in far too good a mood for statistical arguments." He swung round his chair and stood. "I'll see you for final briefing in twenty minutes?"

The Vulcan nodded.

"Sure thing, Jim," added McCoy cheerily.

With another confident smile, Kirk left them and headed for the bridge. On the main screen, the yellow-green planet rotated serenely, innocently. Soon it would give up its secrets.

"All right, what've you got this time?" the old woman demanded, queenlike, from the rocking chair. As she rocked, it creaked with a dry wizened sound - dry like the old woman's bones.

The bare-footed urchin, her face sullen, let the ragged curtain drop behind her, shutting off a little of the noon glare. Squinting after the brightness outside, she stepped further into the cave. Its relative coolness was inviting after the heat.

"Just this." She held out a handful of copper coins.

"Bah! Is that all you've got to show for a morning's work?" Peevishly, the old woman struck at the girl's hand, dashing the coins to the dusty floor. The girl scowled as she rubbed her hand, then bent to retrieve them.

"It's not easy, Ma. I've got to be careful." The old woman merely grunted, unconvinced. "I mean it, Ma. Look!" Insistently, the girl thrust her hand almost under the old woman's nose.

"So? You've got an extra finger. I know that, girl."

"But no-one else must, remember? It gets harder, not being noticed, not getting caught." When the old woman merely rocked on, staring impassively at her with watery blue eyes devoid of reaction, the girl exploded in anger. "Don't you know the risks I take? For you, Ma! How else would you eat?"

The crone smiled slightly, continuing to rock herself. "I saved your life, girl. Don't you forget that."

The girl frowned. "That's what you always say. All right, then. Tell me about it."

"Why? I've told you before. I found you in the dump. If the rats hadn't got you, you'd have starved. So don't talk to me about eating, missie. It's thanks to me that you're here at all."

"Is that right?" The girl moved closer, bending to peer into the old woman's lined face. Vague impressions were skating across her mind; images, thoughts that were not hers. This had been happening more often lately, though she had always been aware of it. Isolated from other people because of her deformity, she had been most aware of it in the old woman's presence. And she had always been afraid of the old woman and her ready stick, until now. Now, she reached out and gripped the bony arms, abruptly halting the old woman's rocking. Simultaneously, she was aware of a heady confidence, almost a recklessness.

"What are you about, girl? Hey - " Angrily, the old woman tried to pull free, to snatch up the stout walking cane propped against the table beside her.

"Is it true? I want to know!" The physical contact and the old woman's fear were sharpening the images. They were coming thick and fast

now; a naked child, tottering unsteadily out from beneath a torn sheet of canvas. She felt the old woman's curiosity as she had watched the baby lose her balance and sit down heavily. Then she was inside the memory, reliving it as it had happened.

The old woman ducked back into hiding as a tawny shape trotted out and nosed affectionately at the child. The germ of an idea began to form in her greed-dominated mind. She clenched her stick more tightly, her sly gaze taking in the scene before her with growing excitement. Then she set down the sack of items she had scavenged and straightened up as the animal trotted away to investigate a stray scent.

Fine little apprentice that'd make. The thought rose from the murky depths of the old woman's brain and lodged itself into her consciousness. With an apprehensive glance in the animal's direction, she edged towards the baby, who had begun playing happily with some stones, picking them up and dropping them.

Abruptly aware of danger, the bitch turned. Seeing the threat to her cub, her hackles rose, her lip curling back in a snarl. Unaware of her surroundings, the baby continued playing.

Growling savagely, the bitch bounded forward and sprang.

Desperately, the old woman lashed out with her stick. More by chance than design she caught the bitch a blow on the head, stunning her. Reeling, the animal stumbled, never seeing the stick that descended again, this time to break her skull.

The baby looked up, hearing the yelp and the thud, followed by the old woman's frenzied breathing. Wanting the comforting warmth of fur, she tried to stand. Instead, she was swung into the air and clutched to a bony bosom that was swathed in harsh cloth. She began to cry as the woman chuckled gleefully.

The memory abruptly segued into a later scene. She recognised the familiar cave. The old woman, in the act of wrapping the child in a warm blanket, halted in shock, looking down at the tiny fists that beat against the air. Then, ignoring the child's cries, she grasped one fist and forced it open.

"Six fingers... One of the devil's spawn, eh?" For a moment, the woman felt a chill of foreboding; better to get rid of the child right away. But then she reconsidered. "Well, if you're already the devil's, you'll take to this life all the better." She cackled, suddenly amused. "Maybe six fingers will make you a better thief?"

The girl relinquished her hold on the old woman's arm and stepped back, the world coming slowly back into focus for her. As it did so, her normally sullen face set into smouldering anger.

"Child, what's the matter?" The old woman's voice was tremulous; a note of fear among her confusion.

"You...killed her. The dog. She saved my life - not you."

Bewildered, the old woman struggled out of the chair and grabbed her stick to support herself. "But, child, how could a dog bring you up? You'd be an animal by now. Who'd have taught you to talk, to walk upright? You've been far better off with me. I've looked after you well, haven't I?"

Her whining voice faltered as the girl stepped closer. Fearfully, she raised the stick to strike as she had done so many times before.

This time, the girl's strong brown arm flashed out and her hand grasped the stick, wresting it from the old woman's clawlike hand. "Better? Thieving for you? Being beaten, half starved - " The girl's face was horribly transformed from its habitual withdrawn expression - twisted with rage.

"BETTER?" She shrieked the word, bringing the stick down. Instinctively, the old woman ducked; the stick hit her across the back. Screaming in a high, thin voice, the old woman collapsed, throwing up her hands to shield her head. The stick descended again, inexorable, as if it possessed a terrible life of its own. The old woman's brittle bones were no match for it; her neck broke instantly.

Breathing heavily, the girl waited for the world to come back into focus. At last she moved, looking down at the broken stick in her hand. She frowned, trying to understand, then noticed the bundle of rags on the floor. White hair draped the stick-like shoulders, a gnarled, scrawny hand protruded from beneath the ragged shawl.

"No..." The girl shook her head, refusing to acknowledge what she had done. Then she flung down the stick and backed away to the curtained doorway. With a choked cry of anguish, she tore outside into the sunlight.

2

"This schematic shows the position of Salem's twin townships."

The personnel grouped around the briefing room table turned to study the illuminated screens at its centre. Two red dots represented the known settlements on Salem's northern continent. Above them, roughly equidistant from both, was a blue dot.

"At first, communication with the few merchant ships that entered this sector was maintained," Spock continued. "But fifty point zero nine years after the colony was first established, the settlers failed to respond to the signal of a passing merchant vessel. Its personnel logged the fact, but were disinclined to investigate."

"As were everyone else - until now," Kirk added.

"At the time that contact was lost, these two townships were the only ones established - the older, New Zion, and a few years later, New Nazareth. The nuclear power plant which they had transported to the planet was situated ten kilometers beyond New Zion and twelve point seven five kilometers from the other one."

"A little too close for comfort, Spock," McCoy broke in. "Those reactors weren't exactly well known for their reliability."

"Indeed. Our sensors show a higher level of radiation within the vicinity of the power plant and the townships than elsewhere - indicative of an accident at the power plant."

"And the probable cause for the loss of contact. Apart from the toll on Human life, they obtained all their energy from that reactor," Kirk commented.

"Where were they obtaining their uranium?" Scotty asked.

"From a mine in the hills to the west of New Zion," Spock replied. "The presence of a small deposit there seems to have governed their decision to settle in this region. The workings now appear deserted and derelict - consistent with having been abandoned since the accident."

"What about the medical consequences of radiation leakage, Bones?"

"Well, Jim, they seem to have stayed where they were - according to Spock's sensor readings. There's a small population in New Nazareth, a larger one in the other town - about five hundred or so. The initial death toll would depend on the prevailing winds, precipitation and so forth, but the likely outcome is a high level of genetic damage throughout the population."

"Hmm... There's another possible hazard too, gentlemen. This colony consisted of a fundamentalist religious sect who left Earth to escape what they saw as a Godless society. They may resent our intrusion, so we'll have to tread carefully."

"Well, in that case, Jim..." McCoy glanced aside at the First Officer. "No offence, Spock, but isn't it possible... I mean, with all the possible disruption and all... They might think you're Satan?"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Do you think that a likely possibility, Doctor? Perhaps it would be better if I were to remain aboard."

Smiling ruefully, Kirk shook his head. "Out of the question, Spock. We need you too much on this one. Anyway, contact with Vulcan had already been made by the time these colonists left Earth. But to keep Bones happy, we'll get Stores to rustle up something... concealing."

Spock's other eyebrow rose to join its fellow, but he refrained from further comment. Kirk, knowing how his friend's sensitive ears were irritated by constraining headgear, silently sympathised. "Satisfied, Bones?"

The doctor nodded sheepishly.

"There is the added complication, Captain, of a rift between the two communities - over a matter of religious observance, it appears. It was that which caused the establishment of the second township. According to records left by the ships with which they traded, the inhabitants were still co-operating over the uranium mining and the maintenance of the power plant, but there was no social contact between the towns."

The others digested this additional information of Spock's. Kirk eyed the schematic again. "Strange... The way they stayed in the area after the accident; they must have realised the danger."

McCoy shrugged. "It's possible that they viewed it as a punishment from God, Jim - something they had to suffer." Kirk nodded, turning the suggestion over in his mind. "Talking of which... I've got the anti-radiation shots all ready," McCoy added.

Kirk threw himself out of his mood of introspection. "Right. If there are no further questions...? Landing party will assemble in the transporter room in thirty minutes. Dismissed."

As the others filed out, McCoy lingered behind. "Still feeling lucky, Jim?" At Kirk's answering smile, the Doctor grinned. "Glad to hear it. Maybe my services won't be needed, then - just this once!"

The musty silence of the deserted, decaying house was disturbed by the banging of a shutter, then the creaking of floorboards protesting at the weight of human feet after so long. Breathing hard, the girl flopped down in a darkened corner and waited for her pounding heart to slow. Dust rose as she sat, catching at her throat and making her cough.

She had run all the way from the cave, but had not succeeded in leaving her guilt behind. Again, she saw the old woman in her memory, the broken body sprawled awkwardly on the dusty floor, one splintered half of the walking cane lying across it.

"Oh, Ma," she groaned, burying her head in her hands. When she had witnessed the old woman's memories, something inexplicable had taken possession of her - a blinding rage that had surged up at the death of her mother-surrogate. Now she could believe the stories that the old woman had told her, stories that she in turn had heard in the dark little clapboard church. There were forces of evil - devils - that could possess human beings; surely that explained what had happened to her. Terrified, she pushed the thought away, to consider what she had learned. The scrawny dogs that always came whining round everyone, begging for food, had never repelled her; she had never felt an urge to cuff them away like the old woman - like the people she saw on the street. She now knew why. But what was the explanation for her link with the old woman; for the brief surges of emotion that she sometimes experienced, that always seemed to come from outside herself? Could those be sent by devils? Terrible anger... and now the old woman was dead. And she had been right: what did a dog matter?

The girl pulled out the coins she had stolen earlier and turned them over in her hand, despairing. Who would use them to buy food for her? She bit her lip to hold back tears of self-pity; the coins were useless. Angrily, she dashed then to the floor where they clattered noisily. Instantly frightened that they might have been heard, she got up and peered through the warped shutters.

Outside, the town shimmered under its afternoon haze. A few people moved listlessly along the dirt road below, but none spared a glance at the abandoned house. Relieved, she stepped away. Most people would be indoors now, sheltering from the heat; it was past mid-day, and she had not yet eaten. Hunger rumbled insistently in her belly. She sat down again to turn the alternatives over in her mind, the bare facts.

Firstly, she could return to the cave and eke out a precarious living on what she could trap or harvest. Secondly, she could make her quarters in one of the abandoned dwellings in town and sneak out at night to steal. There were a few garden plots where vegetables were grown by the more affluent citizens, and there were the farms outside town. But winter would come; the rains would fall unceasingly and nothing could then be cultivated. *Then*, she would have to take many risks to steal from the barns where the town's vittles would be stored. And they would be well guarded...

She couldn't ignore the seriousness of her plight. If she couldn't steal the dried meat, the corn and all the other things the old woman had bought for them both, she would starve. Game was scarcer in winter, unless she was willing to go far afield indeed, and she had a deep seated reluctance to do that. The wilderness beyond New Zion was infested with monsters, or so the townsfolk believed... But now that she was growing

older, theft was becoming more and more risky, even in summer. People didn't overlook her as they had done when she had been younger and smaller. She couldn't use her favourite ploy any longer - edging close to food stalls in the market while shamming absorption in childish games.

Well, there was one other possibility: the other town to the east, on the plateau. She had learned - the hard way - not to talk about it when the old woman had cuffed her for her pains. But she had learned that the New Zioners believed it a place of evil. Sometimes she had seen grey smudges rising from it: the smoke from cookfires, surely? Unlike the old woman who had always carefully averted her eyes from it, the girl had felt an odd attraction drawing her gaze towards it. It had seemed an inviting refuge as well as a place of childhood terrors. If it was truly a place of evil, how could it harm her when she already bore a Mark like the man Cain in the story?

Yes, the possibility seemed increasingly attractive by the moment. Very well. As soon as it was dark, then...

3

The landing party materialised at the foot of the plateau. In the distance they could see the line of foothills that rose to the west, and the dark blotch part way up that marked the position of New Zion. The river, descending through the hills, emerged onto the plain about two kilometers away, and wound eastward, by-passing the northern end of the plateau so that both townships were on the south side of the river. To the north, the spur of high ground where the power plant had been built was lost in the blue distance. The people here had built on high ground, Kirk knew, because winter floods had inundated their first, temporary, camp. Still, he also knew that they had continued to take advantage of the low ground's greater, flood-brought fertility by farming the plain. From where he now stood, however, he could see no sign of cultivation even though it was high summer in this latitude. Perhaps the picture would become clearer when seen from higher ground - or perhaps agriculture had been abandoned after the accident?

Tricorders were out, registering background radiation which was still considerably higher than the natural level found elsewhere on this continent. Kirk eyed the gently sloping hillside above him, that steepened gradually towards the summit. What would be found up there, he wondered; a viable though struggling community or a population of genetically wounded individuals? Taking charge of the landing party, he led the way as they commenced their climb.

The heat, at first pleasant, grew more oppressive with their exertions. However, a refreshing breeze sprang up as they went higher. Finally they halted to gather their strength for the last stage of the climb; thankfully, a short one.

"Spectacular view, eh, Jim?" McCoy sat down on the slope beside Kirk.

Kirk nodded, squinting against the bright afternoon sunshine. His earlier good spirits had not evaporated; he was finding exercise in the open air invigorating after the confinement of shipboard life. Even the confirmation of his earlier impression - revealed from this height the plain was a featureless tract of greenery unrelieved by dirt tracks or chequered fields - did not daunt him.

Rested, they set out on the final leg of the climb. The rock face, though inclined to crumble a little, provided many foot and hand holds and



was not steep enough to require mountaineering gear. Soon they were at the top and regaining their breath while they made another tricorder scan.

Spread out before them, the summit was scrub covered, with sporadic clumps of trees that broke up the skyline. There was no sign of New Nazareth, so they set off, alert but not unduly wary. Before long, Spock reported that he was registering a cluster of wooden buildings up ahead. There were also life form readings nearby: humanoid but not distinctly Human.

"What do you make of it, Bones?"

"I don't know, Jim. The readings are too closely related to Human ones for this to be a coincidence. It could be evidence of the genetic damage we expected."

"Right." Kirk looked round at the faces of his team: Spock, McCoy, Goertz the historian, the bright-eyed and eager face of Shiels, xenobiologist, on his first landing party duty. Behind Shiels, the two security guards, confident but ready for any trouble, were casually watching the undergrowth around the party. "It seems we've found the people we're looking for. They'll be frightened - possibly hostile - so it's up to us to be as unthreatening as possible." Satisfied that they were calm but alert - they were a good team, he already knew - Kirk led them forward.

Before long, a ramshackle group of wooden dwellings came into view. At first sight, they were obviously rotten, leaning drunkenly against each other. Two rows faced each other across an expanse of weeds and bushes that had once been a street.

It was this decaying town that first took their notice. But then they realised that a cleared patch in the foreground was occupied by a semi-circle of roughly made skin tents. At its centre, a cooking pot bubbled over an open fire. The camp was deserted, however.

"They're here, Captain, but out of sight - behind the houses," Spock said quietly.

Nodding, Kirk stepped forward, spreading his hands to show that he held no weapon. "We mean you no harm," he began. "We're friends - come to help you." He felt the back of his neck tingle warningly but did not look behind; that would show fear and probably doom their efforts from the start. "Your ancestors came from a world - a place - called Earth. So do we. We've heard that you need help, and we've come here to help you."

A groan from behind finally did make him turn.

Shiels was sprawled on the grass, a humped form crouching over him, a club in its hand. Others stood around, dressed in skins and levelling their spears and stone knives at the chests of the landing party. The two security guards had been immobilised by strangleholds. Sensing more, Kirk spun to face the camp.

A semi-circle of ragged men and women were closing in on him, all armed. Feeling helpless, Kirk slowly raised his hands to signify that he would not resist.

Pain exploded at the back of his skull. Instantly, darkness rushed up to meet him and closed over his head like a black river.

Light - ruddy behind his eyelids. A pounding at the back of his skull that peaked to agony then, mercifully, began to subside. He opened his eyes with caution, wincing at the glare of firelight, and found that he was lying on bare earth, packed hard by the impact of feet over many years. Pushing himself up onto his elbows, he tilted his head back with care, not wishing to reawaken the headache of a moment ago, and saw a skin-clad figure standing over him.

"Stay where you be, blood eater."

The top of a spear pressed against his chest. Squinting, he made out a lined face framed by tangled dark hair. He glanced to either side, and at the other members of the landing party sitting beside him. A man was crouching behind Goertz, the historian; Kirk saw him look up and nod to the woman before moving on to one of the security guards. He unwound a strip of what looked like rawhide from his own arm and began to tie the guard's wrists.

"Why should blood eaters be so far from home?" The woman's voice was mocking, but, underneath, Kirk detected a note of anxiety.

"We came to talk. We want to help you - "

The woman spat at his feet. "When did blood eaters ever help us? You skulk in your town, afraid of your own shadows."

A man, heavily built, his face obscured by fuzzy dark hair, stood beside her. Now he spoke. "There's more of them than us, Rachel. That's why we decided to keep away, long ago."

"Yes, yes, I know," the woman snapped and the other drew back. Kirk could now see a band of skin clad figures - about thirty or so in all - grouped around them. All held spears of stone knives, eyeing the prisoners with fear and hatred. For the moment, fear appeared to have the upper hand - but for how long would that last?

Some of the individuals were short - dwarves or children, Kirk was not quite sure, but all had the same hostile, adult face. He had the sudden insight that there was no childhood here as he understood it. And was this band dying out? Unless a number of them were away from camp, there were only about thirty individuals. After all, how many people could be supported by living off the land without farming - and how many children were born too badly deformed to live?

The man who had been tying up the security guard now moved to Kirk, pulling his arms roughly behind him. The Captain steeled himself not to react as the sinews bit tightly into his wrists.

"What do we do with them, Rachel?" It was the heavily built man who ventured to speak. He did not appear obviously mutated, but the voluminous and ill-smelling skin garment that he wore concealed most of his body.

"They'll be slaves - like the women." She eyed Shiels, who lay to Kirk's right, still unconscious. Kirk recalled the sight of Shiels sprawled on the ground, a humped figure crouched over him. "We'll see if he still lives in the morning. It would not be proper now the sun is down."

Kirk's feet had now been lashed together. The man who had tied him moved on to McCoy.

"Wait!" the doctor said. "That man is injured - I am a Healer. Let me tend him."

The man behind him looked questioningly at Rachel.

"No, we shall wait for first light. If he wakes by then, you may tend him. Otherwise..." She began to turn away in dismissal, swinging her body round. Kirk realised that her leg was twisted.

"Rachel, wait!"

She turned back to see the cause of the alarm and saw Spock slowly removing the cap he wore. One of the men raised a spear butt to strike him but Rachel grabbed the man's arm. As Spock lowered his hands, holding the cap, gasps of amazement sounded from the band.

"He is Marked - "

"- one of us!"

Whispers swept through the crowd as fire through dry grass. Rachel seemed unperturbed, however, only eyeing Spock with wariness. "Brother? Why keep such company? These be sons of Adam, not Cain."

"They are good men. They wish only to help you."

A hard gleam grew in Rachel's eyes. "Now I understand." She raised her voice. "We have a traitor here!"

There were murmurs of outrage, that grew to shouts. "Kill him! Kill the traitor!"

Rachel flung up an arm. "Silence!" Slowly the noise died. "We shall consider this in the morning. Tonight, they will be guarded. Suzanna and Mark - you'll take first watch." There were nods of agreement though some murmurs of discontent continued. "First, we shall eat and sleep. This is a weighty matter - it must be thought on."

With that the band drifted away and began to sit down around the fire. Two women, one fair, the other dark, moved among them, handing out roughly made bowls full of broth. Tied hand and foot, Kirk and the others received only a few sips of water from a bowl held by the dark haired woman.

After the meal, Rachel ordered that the prisoners be tethered to make them more secure. Longer lengths of hide rope were produced and tied around each man's neck, except Shiels', and then fastened to small wooden pegs that were hammered into the earth with stones. The band then filed into their tents, leaving only the two guards and the two women who had served the meal. Both women fastened tethers round their own necks before lying down to sleep, causing Kirk to wonder how long they had been held captive. *A long time, he judged, to be so conditioned to obedience.* He would have tried to speak to them, ask about New Zion, but they were on the other side of camp and the two guards sat close by, spears across their knees and faces hostile. Instead, he contented himself with murmuring to Spock, "Nice try. Pity it didn't pay off."

"It may have slightly tilted the balance in our favour, Captain. The woman is not entirely unreasonable or she would have killed us outright. Perhaps in the morning..."

"Shiels may not last that long," McCoy whispered angrily. "All the reason in the world wont fix a fractured skull."

Kirk had been attempting, unobtrusively, to work his wrists free, but now had to give up. "My bonds are too tight... Any luck with yours, Spock?"

"Negative."

Kirk glanced at the other members of the party and they shook their heads. "Then there's nothing we can do. Bones, except wait for morning like Spock said."

"Maybe Scotty - "

"He has his orders. No landing parties that might alarm the colonists. Besides, he knows it might not be possible to make contact for some time once we got here. I'm afraid we're strictly on our own."

4

Knife tightly clutched in her fist, the girl moved through the stunted bushes at the foot of the plateau. It would soon be light; already a mauve glow crowning the western hills told her that the sun was climbing behind them.

It was with great reluctance that she had decided to return to the cave before sunset; she had needed the supplies of food and the knife. Averting her eyes from the corpse, she had gathered up the things she needed and plunged out into the evening coolness. Now she was tired, having walked all night - walked further than she ever had in her life - nerves jangling at every cry of a night creature, every rustle in the bushes. No one ever left the town at night: evil spirits lurked in the outer dark, eager to trap the unwary. It was too wild, too open - since the Wrath of God, no-one had even dared to venture down to the formerly rich farmlands, leaving the crops to die unharvested, and the land to revert to its former state.

There was something else that she had noticed beside the eerie sounds and unseen presences; for the first time in her life she had felt really alone - still did - and her mind felt empty without the subdued murmur of other minds. That had been a background noise she had been unaware of until now, when it was gone. The fear of last night had drained her of emotion so that, now, she could feel only a weak sense of relief at the nearness of her goal. She began to climb carefully, pausing often for breath.

By the time she reached the top, it was fully light, though a vestige of darkness still clung to the lowlands. Looking westwards, she tried to distinguish the town she had known for so long, but the sun was in her eyes, blotting it out. So she climbed into the heart of some bushes to eat her meal of dry bread and a little cheese, washed down with water from the capped bottle that had been the old woman's. Idly, she traced its discoloured surface with one forefinger, wondering what it was made of - not wood, or metal - not even glass, for she had seen that in old Ma Crawford's shop window. A lot of things in New Zion had no explanation - and people were not encouraged to look for one. She replaced the bottle inside her shoulder bag made of sacking and hoisted it back onto her shoulder before continuing on her way.

By now, her emotions had been revitalised by the rest and refreshment so that she felt a growing nervousness, expecting something to leap out from every bush she passed. She was not sure now what she expected to find here: people like herself, or monsters? Her heart was beating faster with hope and apprehension.

At last evidence of other people came in sight - a town. Instantly afraid, she stopped. A town meant people whose tolerance would never

encompass one like her. She must hide; she had made a dangerous mistake. At the same moment that these thoughts crossed her mind, she became aware of a familiar pressure, also; one she had been free of during her long journey. People - very close. Terrified, she crouched down low and ran for the shelter of some nearby bushes. There she waited, listening. A murmur of voices sounded from the direction of the town - distant laughter, also. Perhaps they hadn't seen her? Heartened, she crept closer, keeping to cover.

As she drew nearer to the town, she saw that the houses were neglected - derelict. Then a camp of skin shelters came into view; what were they called? They had been in the stories that the old woman used to tell her - stories that came from the Book, the old woman said. She had never bothered to remember; what did the Book have to say to *her*? She was supposed to be a blasphemy against it.

Figures; one was throwing wood onto a fire and hooking a pot over it. Drawn by curiosity, she edged yet nearer. Yes, she could hear their words now. They were taunting and jeering at someone; she couldn't see for the crowd. On the other side of the camp, two women were sitting dejectedly on the ground, rope tethers fastened round their necks and secured to stakes in front of them. Their hands were not bound, but perhaps they knew, from bitter experience, that escape was futile?

A sudden gap in the group of skin-clad people revealed a glimpse of their victims. All wore brightly coloured shirts - odd in itself, to one who was used to faded and patched clothing. The colours formed a vivid contrast to the dull browns of their captors' skin garments.

Another movement of the crowd cut off the girl's view again. Frustrated and wanting to see more, she dared to creep closer still until she was level with the crowd, and peered through a gap between two of the skin shelters. At last! Now she had a clear view of the prisoners. One was lying as if dead or deeply unconscious, his head pillowed on the knees of another, a craggy-faced man. The injured man's hair clung damply to his forehead, his face curiously vulnerable and very young looking. The man who was tending to him was speaking boldly to the crowd.

"Do you understand me? This man is very sick - he needs tending. I can help him if you'll give back the things you took from me. Please - those things can't harm you, they're only medicine,"

The girl listened intently; his accent was strange, but she could understand him. The crowd responded by shouting more insults. 'Blood eater' seemed most prominent. One of the figures jabbed at him with the butt of a spear. But he was not cowed. And the other prisoners; although their hands and feet were tied, they had grouped themselves protectively around the injured man. An odd mixture of emotions filled her. Those men must be unMarked to be treated thus, yet, traitrously, her sympathies were going out to them for their courage and obvious concern for their friend. She shook her head in bewilderment.

The figure who had jabbed at the craggy-faced man now directed her spear butt at one of the others. "They'll learn manners soon enough," she said. She seemed to be speaking to a burly, bearded man beside her.

"What about *him*?" the man asked, nodding towards the injured man.

"Yes, we must decide." The woman turned to the others. "Come." She beckoned them to one side and they followed, muttering and glancing ominously at the prisoners. The girl strained to hear what was being said, but could not make out their words. One, however, gestured towards the cooking pot over the fire; the gesture apparently meant something to the

others, since they nodded in agreement. The woman spoke again, louder.

"Although their flesh is not ours, yet God will not punish us for it. He will grant us this revenge. Let the blood eater's strength become our own." There was a chorus of agreement, then the crowd moved back to the prisoners.

"Wait! What are you doing - " the craggy-faced man objected as the unconscious man was lifted. A spear was levelled at his chest, then he was seized from behind. The others struggled to stand, but their bonds prevented them.

The young man did not react as he was carried away from the camp. The girl wondered if he perhaps was dead, after all. She watched as the woman who appeared to be in charge stopped to untie the halter of one of the tethered women prisoners. She glanced at the burly man who was waiting for her. "You have the sacrificial knife?"

In response, he drew it from his belt and grinned. The woman nodded, satisfied. Both turned to follow the rest of the band, leaving two guards with spears, one of whom still held the craggy-faced man securely. Puzzled, the girl frowned and wondered where they were going.

"Abigail! Come back! Abigail!" The other female prisoner was climbing to her feet and fumbling with the fastening of her tether as she shouted after the departing figures. Cursing, the woman turned and limped back, striking her heavily across the mouth. She fell to the ground, clutching her mouth and moaning. "Abigail, no... It's murder. You'll go to hell for sure."

The girl stared in horror. Suddenly, everything - the gesture towards the cooking pot, the words she had heard - came together. Simultaneously, the male prisoners came to the same conclusion. "No! We came here to *help* you! Don't kill him, he's only a boy. If you must take a life, take mine!"

It was a man in a yellow shirt who had shouted. Angrily, one of the guards brutally kicked him. The woman in charge merely watched dispassionately, then turned and followed the rest of the band.

Numbed, the girl tried to understand. Her mind shied away from the thought of what those people - *her* people - were doing at this moment. Instead, she considered the man in yellow. Why should he offer his life for another? She could not understand. But these people... At close quarters, she had seen the humps and other deformities beneath the rough and smelly garments. One individual lacked an arm; another's face had been covered in lumpy protrusions. All were her kin - all bore the Mark of Cain, that set them apart from those born in God's image. And yet... They could do this. How could she join such people?

Sick at heart, she backed away, deeper into the bushes, and slipped away. She rejected them now, but she knew that hunger would soon drive her back to them. She had nowhere else to go...

5

It was early the next morning before the girl finally slunk back towards the camp. She hoped that they had finished their grisly meal; that she would not be forced to partake of it. The very thought made her nauseous. Approaching through the bushes, she crept closer to the side of the camp where the male prisoners were tethered. Hearing a voice, she

she stopped; the accent was strange, and she realised that it was one of the strangers speaking. Edging still closer, she peered through a gap in the leaves. Yes, it was the yellow-shirted man, she saw; well built, muscular. He wouldn't have looked out of place in a farmer's patched and earth-stained shirt and trousers.

"Bones, if I'd only done *something*... I should have realised." He was talking to the older, craggy-featured man whose shirt was blue. Two other men in red shirts and another in a blue shirt were lying nearby, still asleep. Then, with a shock, the girl noticed another blue-shirted man, Marked like herself. Why had he been made a prisoner? He must have allied himself to these sons of Adam, she decided - after all, he wore the same strange garments. But that was a further puzzle, for they seemed to accept him - he was with them, seemingly equal. Their normal reaction would have been to stone him or hang him from a tree.

The older man was speaking now, "There was nothing you could've done, Jim. You can't blame yourself for any of this - you mustn't. How could anyone have foreseen cannibalism..." His face twisted in disgust but he continued. "One thing's for sure; these people don't want our help. They've been so badly affected by the radiation they wouldn't even be able to understand us."

"The other community may have been less severely contaminated." It was the third man who spoke, the one who was Marked.

"Yes," the man in the yellow shirt - Jim? - agreed heavily. "Prevailing winds... It might have escaped such a heavy fall-out."

"If their society is still intact, they might be able to accept our help," persisted the Marked one; the girl decided to call him Pointed Ear for the moment. She sensed that, in some odd way, he was trying to comfort Jim. Perhaps it was working, for he now nodded.

"You're right, Spock. But first we have to escape."

Abruptly, the flap of one of the skin shelters opened and a figure emerged; the woman that the girl had seen the previous day, the one who had been in charge. She limped forward, twisting her body awkwardly. The girl had noticed the woman's disability before but the events in the camp had driven it from her mind; now she glanced down at her own six-fingered hands. For the first time, she realised how fortunate she had been, instead of cursing her ill-luck. She had never known how *lightly* afflicted she was until she had seen these others. "Well, are you ready to obey now?" the woman asked. The men remained silent, though they kept their heads down, trying to appear cowed. "You would not eat with us yesterday."

"We couldn't." It was Jim who spoke.

"I do not understand your kind, blood eater. How may your dead live in spirit otherwise? It is your kind who sin, not us." She looked at Pointed Ear. "But you - you're Marked, like us. Why not join us?"

Pointed Ear declined to answer. With a scowl, the woman hobbled away and snatched up a spear from where it was propped against a shelter.

Impulsively, with an unformed notion of saving the stranger, the girl stepped from hiding. She realised her mistake as the woman spun, quick for all her apparent clumsiness, and hefted her spear as if to throw it. The girl's throat closed up in terror and she prepared herself to run but the woman slowly lowered the weapon. The girl was suddenly aware of sweat lying cold on her skin in the early morning air.

"So. More of you - how many more?" The woman eyed her suspiciously before raising her voice. "Jethro! Jethro, out here - quick."

The large bearded man that the girl remembered from the previous day emerged from the woman's own shelter, stopping as he caught sight of the girl. "Well, well... Pretty little thing, isn't she?" His grin faded at the woman's answering scowl.

Carefully, the girl raised one hand, spreading the fingers. She saw the shock in their eyes.

"By Gabriel! She's Marked, same as us." The woman's scowl disappeared, replaced by an uncertain smile. She stepped forward, her voice more kindly. "Where do you come from, girl?"

"The other town."

The smile changed to a suspicious frown. "They kill all mistakes over there - so they told us." She pointed to the women captives who were still asleep.

"Not me. An old woman found me in the dump and raised me. I worked for her and she sheltered me - hid me."

"Why come here, then?"

"She died," the girl answered shortly. Her instinct for self-preservation cautioned her. "I heard that people like me lived here."

"You're right welcome," Jethro eagerly asserted, then saw the disapproving look from the woman beside him. "She'll be a good hunter," he said defensively. "She's hardly Marked at all."

"Aye, she's that," the woman conceded. To the girl, she said, "We all work here, you understand." The girl nodded. "Good. I'm Rachel and this here's Jethro. What's your name, child?"

The girl shrugged, keeping her gaze off the man; she didn't like that look in his eyes. "The old woman called me Hannah."

"Hannah, then."

"What - what you said about hunting - you'll have to teach me. I only know how to set traps, snares for rabbits and such."

The couple looked at each other in astonishment. "How do they live in that town?" Rachel exclaimed.

"Well, they grow crops and make things. Then they barter them or buy other things - with money." She realised from their blank looks that her words meant little to them.

"The women told us something like that, but we didn't believe them. But since you say it, it must be true."

Confused, the girl suddenly realised that Rachel must be referring to the prisoners. "Why didn't you believe them?"

"All blood eaters are liars, child. You remember that."

Jethro, who had edged closer, now patted her shoulder. "We'll soon teach you to hunt, Hannah, don't you fret yourself." He turned aside to enter one of the shelters; grunts and quivering tones of voices sounded from

within as he shook the occupants awake. Then the girl felt Rachel's hand on her arm, the strong fingers digging in with bruising force.

"One thing you should understand, Hannah, if you're staying with us - Jethro's my man." Wincing against the pain, the girl nodded. The last thing she wanted was Jethro; just the way he looked at her made her feel nervous. "Good." Rachel released her arm as some of the Marked ones began filing outside. They stared in surprise at the newcomer, more of them appearing as Jethro moved from shelter to shelter.

"Hannah here says they don't hunt in the other town. We call them 'blood eaters', but perhaps we should now call them 'grass eaters'." Laughter greeted Rachel's suggestion.

The girl felt an obscure urge to defend New Zion. "They don't need to hunt - they have tame animals for meat - and milk, too. They have eggs and make butter and cheese..." Her voice trailed off as she realised that, once again, she was up against incomprehension. "Do you only eat meat here?"

"No, we gather roots and berries too. You won't lack for anything," Rachel assured her. Numbly, the girl tried to smile as the skin-clad figures crowded round her and prodded at her with grimy, broken finger nails. After a while, they lost interest, and drifted away, some picking up baskets woven from bark strips for gathering plant food. Most of the others gathered spears for hunting. Before they left with Rachel and Jethro at their head, Rachel spoke to her. "Stay in camp today, Hannah, and help the others prepare the food. Do whatever they ask."

The girl was careful to keep her resentment hidden: was she only exchanging one taskmaster for many? But she consoled herself with the thought that she was young and strong - and not misshapen. In time, she could climb to a position of trust, perhaps even leader.

Then the hunting party was gone, together with those who carried the baskets. The girl looked round apprehensively at those who had stayed behind, but none seemed eager to give her an order. The two women captives had wakened up and been given a hide which they were pounding with water-polished stones - to make it more supple, she supposed. On the other side of camp, people were sewing more skins together or chipping at bone with knives of stone, while keeping an unobtrusive watch on the male prisoners. The two women, however, were it seemed being left to their own devices. Curious, she sidled over to them. Like their captors, they wore roughly sewn skins, though theirs were more dirty and threadbare. Their hands were red and roughened with hardship, their hair tangled. One, her blonde hair greying, appeared to be in her early-to-mid thirties; almost an old woman, in fact. Most people in New Zion died in their forties, although a few individuals enjoyed greater longevity - Reverend Forester and the old woman were examples that sprang to mind. Guiltily, the girl's mind shied away from thoughts of the old woman. Instead, she studied the other prisoner, whose dark hair was beginning to be streaked with white; the girl guessed her age at about twenty-six. She squatted down beside her, meeting the other's wary gaze. The other woman continued to pound mindlessly on the hide, her gaze blank.

"How long have you been here?"

The dark-haired woman blinked, surprised by such an opening. "Thirteen summers."

"That's a long time. Why come here, though - you're not Marked?"

The woman laughed mirthlessly. "Some of them found us - brought us



here. Abigail had a Marked child."

The girl frowned, momentarily puzzled, then remembered the woman's shout the previous day. She glanced aside at Abigail, but the blonde woman still showed no awareness of her presence.

"You're one of them but you don't look it." The dark-haired woman's voice brought the girl's attention back to her. In reply, she held up one hand. "Six..." The woman stared. "You'd be about the same age, too. But you can't be! I left her in the dump - "

"A bitch found me, looked after me till an old woman killed her and took me for her slave. Now she's dead too and I'm here." Abruptly the girl stood, trying to escape her memories and afraid of what she would hear next.

"Wait! If that's true, then... then you're my niece." The girl eyed her, sullen, then looked at Abigail. That was her mother? Why had she ever come here?

"You say that as if it's something important."

"It is. I'm your Aunt Martha. Abigail and me are your family - your only family."

The girl raised an eyebrow but changed the subject. "What's wrong with her, anyhow?"

"I've watched her go like this since we came here. The beatings... what happened to our mother and little sister. They died of the hardship inside a year." Martha looked expectantly at the girl but if she had wanted some sign of sympathy or human warmth, she was disappointed. "Now she just does what they tell her to. She never speaks any more. Yesterday... They told her to kill someone, and she did it." Martha paused again but the girl did not respond. "You can help her... Hannah? She's your mother, after all."

"If she's my mother, why did she leave me to die?"

"She had no choice. After you were born, the townsfolk came to kill us. We got away - with nothing but the clothes on our backs. We were half-starved when these... people found us. They've worked us hard here - that's why our mother and Naomi took sick and died."

"It's nothing to me."

"Hannah! You can help us. Just tell them Abigail's your mother and I'm her sister. They'd free us - "

"I don't owe you anything - or her. She didn't have to dump me - "

"But I told you: she had no choice. People are afraid of the Marked ones, of being over-run by them. They kill the whole family, not just the baby."

"She could have come here - they'd have accepted her if she had a Marked child with her. Your family would have been safe then." The girl began to turn away, to hide her tears of anger and rejection.

"Hannah, please. Help us!"

"My name's not Hannah. I don't have a name - or a mother."

As she walked away, one of the Marked ones approached her. The figure was bulky in its skins, but she guessed it must be a woman by the lack of a beard. Beady eyes were sunk beneath overhanging brows, on either side of a bulbous and twisted nose.

"Collect some wood for the fire," the voice said, accompanied by stertorous breathing.

The girl nodded, biting back a furious retort. Instead, she marched away towards the trees, hoping to find some broken twigs there. However, the ground was bare; evidently any fallen branches had already been gathered up. Sighing, she wandered further off, glancing frequently back at the camp and hoping she would not have to go out of sight of it. But although she found a few branches, they were not enough and before long she had left the camp behind.

Nervously, she moved among the trees, clutching her small armful of dead branches. Birds were singing nearby and there was a fresh scent in the air. Gradually she added to her collection, and at last, with much relief, decided that she could now return. She began to retrace her steps, her thoughts now free to dwell on the story she had learned from Martha.

Before, she had always been able to fantasize that her mother had died to save her, perhaps leading a mob of frenzied townsfolk away from the dump when she saw that she could not escape with her child. But now she knew: her mother had cared more for her own skin, had no doubt sent Martha off to kill her without a qualm and Martha's greater mercy had saved her. She remembered once coming upon numerous tiny bones, picked clean by scavengers, when setting traps. Looking up, she had seen Jude's rock, the overhanging boulder silhouetted against the sky. She had never gone there again.

A creak of breaking twigs off to her left jolted her from her reverie. Frightened, she halted and stared at the bushes and trees. A moment later her heart jolted as Jethro, a grin on his face, stepped out from behind a wide bole. "Are you lost, Hannah?"

"N-no, I'm just getting wood for the fire. I'm on my way back." She took two or three hesitant steps in the direction she had been heading before, hoping it was the right direction.

"I've lost the hunting party. Perhaps you'll stay awhile and keep me company?"

The girl forced herself to smile. "I have to get back, Jethro. It's taken me a long time to find this wood. They'll be needing it by now."

"Oh, they won't be needing to kindle the fire yet." As he spoke, Jethro edged closer, the same insincere grin on his face. The girl stepped back, ready to drop her burden and run.

"Jethro! Jethro!" A chorus of voices broke out among the trees a short way off. Rachel's voice added, "Where you be, Jethro?"

The man's grin promptly transformed itself to a snarl of frustration, then, recollecting himself, he smiled once again. "Ah, they've found me at last. Perhaps we can talk another time."

"Per-perhaps," the girl stuttered as Jethro, still smiling but with a feral gleam in his eyes, turned and began to hurry towards the voices. Then she bolted, clutching the branches tightly to her chest, her canvas bag bouncing against her hip. She did not slow until she neared the camp and even then she glanced frequently behind to see if Jethro had followed.

Her heart beating fast, she wondered what to do: Jethro did not look the type to give up easily. But if she told Rachel, who had already warned her off and might not believe her, if she was as jealous as she seemed, what would happen then?

Still confused, she re-entered camp and laid down the firewood near the ashes of the dead fire. No-one paid her any attention; so she strolled across to the male prisoners, drawn by the reawakening of her earlier curiosity about them. Their hands and feet were still tied and a woman now stood guard over them, leaning on her spear. Her attention was fixed upon friends of hers nearby, with whom she was chatting, however, so the girl felt it safe to approach.

Remembering what the one in yellow - Jim, short for James? - had said, she spoke without preamble. "You came here to help these people?"

As he looked up, his gaze was searching, seeming to read her inner self. "Yes," he said gently. "We don't mean your people any harm."

"Where are you from?" she asked, sitting down in front of him. "I never saw you in New Zion - and your clothes are strange anyway."

Choosing his words with care, the man said, "We're... we're from the place your people came from before they founded New Zion."

"They're not my people. These are my people now." She waved vaguely at the camp behind her, voice defiant because, deep down, there was already a kernel of doubt in her mind. But it was just a little thing, down there in the darkness, and it did not bother her much - yet. Curious, she eyed Jim frankly; a good looking man, face fearlessly open, eyes clear brown with flecks of green. There was a little half smile on his lips despite his eagerness. She could not recall ever seeing a face like his before - not even here where things were free. Not the physical form but the expression in his eyes. He didn't look the type to go grovelling at Reverend Forester's feet beating his breast like the worms in New Zion. Unbidden, another face floated upwards into her conscious mind like a bubble of noxious gas rising from rotting leaves at the bottom of a pond to its clear, tranquil surface. Jethro, with his sly smile that his evil thoughts; she had not been able to read them as she sometimes could pick up the thoughts of others, but she did not want to. There was a dread in her mind already just at the thought of him. But this man's thoughts would not be like that, she knew instinctively; they would be fresh and clean like a wind off the heights.

"You're from the other town?" he prompted.

A little suspicious, she did not answer immediately. He must have heard her conversation with Rachel and Jethro. Was he making fun of her, or was his interest elsewhere? For the first time, she wondered if a man could find her attractive. What she had seen of herself, reflected in water or in metal pots, or those funny little pieces of glass in old Ma Crawford's window made her doubt that. But compared to those around her -- twisted, malformed? She was young, straight-limbed, tall for a girl of her age - already as tall as a grown woman - might she not appear attractive by contrast?

"Yes," she answered cautiously. "You heard me telling the others about it."

He nodded. She could see no trace of guile in his eyes. "They keep livestock, and grow crops. They make things to sell or barter, is that right?"

"Yes. You understood what I meant?"

He nodded again. "We all come from the same place. Even the people here lived like that once. But then... something happened."

"The Wrath of God, you mean?"

"Is that what you call it?"

It's what *they* call it." She pointed to the west. " *Their* God, not mine. They say I'm not in His image, that my creator's the evil one. Well, if so I've never seen him. I wonder if he even exists." She looked skywards, self-consciously defiant. "I wonder if God exists either." She faced him again. "You're called Jim, aren't you - from James?"

"Yes, Jim Kirk, that's what my friends call me." The warmth of his smile implied that he was inviting her to enter their circle.

Suddenly shy, she said, "Call me Hannah, if you like. It's not my name, but it'll serve for one."

"What *is* your real name?"

For a moment she hesitated, but a feeling that she could tell this man anything, trust him with any secret, overcame her instinctive fear of others. "Did you hear me earlier - talking to those two women?" When he nodded, she continued, "Then you know that the one out of her head is supposed to be my mother. She never gave me a name, as far as I know. Hannah's what the old woman called me sometimes. Mostly I was just 'girl'." She glanced aside at the guard to check that she was still chatting to her friends, then turned back to Jim. "Why's *he* with you?"

He followed her gaze over his left shoulder to Spock, who was watching her impassively. "Spock? He's our friend."

"Your *friend*?" The girl stared, unable to believe her ears. "Jim, he's Marked by your God - one of the damned, like me."

Jim shook his head emphatically. "No, don't believe that, Hannah. You're persecuted, but you're not damned." She heard the sincerity in his voice; she could believe him though if anyone else had said those words, she would have thought them lies. "We've come here to help you - all of you."

"What makes you think we need help? Seems to me that you're the ones who need it," she said, but without rancour. Again, she checked that the guard was otherwise occupied, then leaned forward and spoke more quietly. "Perhaps *I* can help you."

Her heart was beating fiercely and she wondered as she spoke, *why* she was making such an offer. After all, she had a place here - hadn't she? But there was already the spectre of Jethro casting a shadow over that.

Jim merely raised his eyebrows, not allowing any glimmer of hope to alert watchers.

"Tonight, when they're asleep... I might be able to free you."

"That would be risking a lot..."

She shrugged nonchalantly. "Perhaps I don't want Ma to cut any more throats." Before he could say anything else, she got up and walked away.

"Do you think we can trust her, Jim," whispered McCoy.

"Your guess is as good as mine, Bones. Right now, she's the only chance we've got. They smashed our communicators, and Scotty has orders to keep clear."

"There's another factor, Captain," Spock's quiet voice added. "The girl is an incipient telepath."

"Spock? You're sure?"

"When she was here just now, she appeared to be drawing random thoughts and emotions from you, Captain. I believe she did so unconsciously, but if her ability grows, a crisis may be imminent."

"The onset of puberty... and with it, uncontrollable telepathic awareness."

"Precisely, Captain."

"Then she needs our help as much as we need hers."

McCoy cleared his throat. "Both you gentlemen seem to be overlooking something. The girl's developing a crush on you, Jim."

Startled, Kirk looked at McCoy. Behind him, Spock remarked, "Crush. Doctor? I am unfamiliar with the term."

"An infatuation, to you, Spock. It was obvious from the way she was looking at Jim."

"Since I lack experience in such matters, I shall trust to your judgement, Doctor. That would, however, appear an unreliable ground to base any expectation of rescue."

Kirk found his voice. "Not necessarily, Spock. In fact, it provides the motive for her wanting to help us at all."

"I have to agree with Spock, Jim. Adolescent affection is notoriously fickle. She might be planning to run off with you and leave the rest of us behind."

Spock had raised an eyebrow at the spectacle of McCoy in accord with his own opinion, for once, but did not comment. Instead, he watched Kirk calmly, sensing his Captain absorb the import of the Doctor's news and reflecting that Kirk, for all his sensitivity to the emotions of others, had revealed a blind spot in relation to this girl.

Kirk turned the suggestion over in his mind. Hannah was taller, thinner, her skin tanned by exposure to Salem's hot summer sun, but her dark hair reminded him of another adolescent girl who had developed what Bones had just called a 'crush' on him. Miri, sharpening pencils for him, painfully eager to please, to perform any small service for him. Like Miri, Hannah was no beauty, but her youth and a suppressed energy he had sensed about her - a bottled up vitality - gave her an attractiveness unrivalled in her present company. "We'll just have to tread carefully, Bones."

McCoy murmured in agreement, not voicing the fact that Kirk would now be well aware of; he would have to encourage Hannah a little to ensure her co-operation, but not too much - otherwise she would either abandon them altogether or build up her hopes too high, and he had no wish to be so cruel.

By nightfall, the hunting party returned, empty-handed. Kirk and the others watched anxiously as the band gathered around the bubbling pot - the fire had been relighted from the embers kept in an earthenware container - which, unlike the previous evening, contained only roots and other vegetables. However, the broth was ladled out into roughly made earthenware bowls, and a bowl handed to each of them, including the prisoners. Shiels had, it seemed, been the victim of a ritual act; one probably deemed merciful - a coup de grace carried out on a dying enemy. Kirk and the others drank the almost tasteless liquid with eagerness, having had nothing to eat since the previous day. Afterwards, a fermented liquid was handed round in oddly shaped, grey coloured bowls - though only to members of the tribe. All the prisoners were excluded.

With a shock, the girl realised that the cups were, in fact, formed from skulls and tried to hand hers back, but a frown on the face of the woman who had given it to her made her accept it with a forced smile. Rachel, seated beside her, began to explain.

"The blood eaters have not raised you well. I see that we shall have to instruct you in all observances. These are the skulls of our ancestors. We reverence them thus by drinking from them."

"I... see." Gingerly, the girl sipped from hers. The liquid was warming though not pleasant to taste. Gritting her teeth, she drank it down.

"Perhaps it is different among the blood eaters, but here, when one of us grows old or sick... or is injured too badly to recover, then his or her life is taken by a strong warrior, using the Sacred Cord. Part of the flesh is sacrificed to Jehovah on our altar; the rest is eaten so that the spirit of the dead person will live on."

The girl bit down on her lip, hard, trying not to vomit up the burning liquid she had just drunk. The thought that she might have to participate in such a grisly feast if she stayed here... "I was told, in New Zion, that it was wrong to take human life," she blurted, before she could stop herself. But Rachel was not offended.

"It is only wrong when blood is shed mortally. That is why we use the Cord. But when the body is dead, it may then be drained of blood as we drain the animals that we kill. Then there is no sin. It would be sin to eat the blood then." Rachel paused while she emptied her skull-cup. "We'll take you hunting tomorrow, Hannah. You can sleep in Suzanna's tent tonight."

"Tent? Oh, you mean shelter?"

"Haven't you seen a tent before?" Rachel laughed. "What do blood eaters live in - rabbit holes?"

The girl shook her head. "Houses - like those." She pointed to the dark forms behind the camp.

"Them? They're not safe. We can't live in them any more."

"The ones in New Zion are better..." The girl's voice trailed off as she saw the other's eyes gleaming in the dying firelight.

"But they're wood, aren't they... like those?" Rachel smiled strangely, sending a shiver down the girl's back. Then the woman stood, hobbling over to the tent where the ancestral remains were kept. When she returned, without her cup, the girl spoke to her.

"I'm not tired yet. I'll sit out here for a while." The idea of the darkened interior, sweaty bodies lying closely together, did not appeal. Rachel bid her a good night and entered her tent.

Disturbed, the girl stared after her. There had been a peculiar air of excitement about Rachel and, for a moment, an image had entered her mind: raging flames, dark silhouettes dancing at the ends of ropes. She shook her head to clear it, and sat down, throwing a handful of twigs on the fire. Around her the rest of the tribe were returning their drinking cups to the storage tent, then filing into their own tents. The girl sensed someone remove her own cup but did not look up.

Soon, apart from the prisoners and a guard sitting on the other side of the fire, she was alone. The last eastward glow faded from the sky and snores began to rise from the tents. The man on guard duty yawned, his form indistinct in the waning light. Before long, his head was dropping forward until his chin rested on his chest. The girl felt for her knife inside the canvas bag, glad that she had not let the others see it. Metal was scarce here, she had learned; the only other knife like hers was the sacrificial one, kept by Jethro who was nominally leader but whose wife had in reality taken his position. That knife had been brought by the women prisoners. The girl guessed that hers would likewise have been speedily confiscated.

When it was fully dark, she made her move, creeping over to where Jim and the others waited. She found him first and felt for his bonds; the prisoners' hands had been retied behind them after the evening meal. His muscles were well-formed; he was a strong man, she thought. A strange sensation was growing in her, pleasant but disturbing. Suddenly, she had the oddest feeling; wiry, dextrous hands were running along her biceps - six-fingered hands. Then she found the ropes and there was a splitting - a separation. She was back in her own body, dazed and a little frightened. But there was no time to consider what had happened. Hurriedly, she severed Jim's restraints, leaving him to remove his neck halter as she moved on to the rest.

The unsettling experience was not repeated, but she was conscious of fear, excitement, anxiety, all somehow outside herself. It was like the experience with the old woman, but less intense. Then she found the last one - the one she had named Pointed Ear but whom Jim called Spock. A strange name, like everything else about him. As she felt for the sinews that bound his wrists, she sensed a barrier between herself and his thoughts, unlike the others, and somehow knew that it was of his own making.

On their feet, the men began to move quietly off into the bushes, the girl starting to follow. She had thrown in her lot with Jim by her actions. Wherever he came from - whatever forgotten township - was the place for her. If Marked and unMarked lived together in acceptance as Jim accepted Spock, then they would surely take her in. Besides, there was something about Jim - his honesty, his warmth - that intrigued her, drew her to him like flies to Sara Crawford's honey cakes.

A strong hand seized her arm, fingers digging painfully into her flesh. With a gasp of alarm, she lashed out, feeling her bare foot connect with bone. There was a grunt of pain, but the grip on her arm did not slacken. As she desperately tried to pry apart the bony fingers, there was a clatter of wood and the fire flared up, throwing everything into sharp relief.

"Jim - run!" a voice cried out fearfully, then she recognised it as her own. A hand struck her heavily across the mouth, drawing blood from her lip. Stunned, she shook her head, seeing Rachel's face twisted in a



snarl of fury. Behind the woman, the firelight glittered on a forest of spear points like the pins in old Ma Arkwright's hair. The girl turned her head to see if Jim had escaped. Her heart sank: he and the others were surrounded. As she watched, he was brutally clubbed to the ground by a figure who stepped out of the crowd then retreated back into its anonymity. Jethro - ?

Jim!" It was the craggy-faced man who spoke, stepping forward to help his friend. but he was seized from behind.

"So - another traitor - like him." With her free hand, Rachel pointed to Spock.

"No! They came to help us. Let them go!" Thoughts were crowding in on her mind: hate, anger, fear - she couldn't tell which were hers and which were the others'. "Please!"

"Traitor!"

Rachel struck her again, this time so heavily that she was knocked to the ground. Dazed, she felt a knife laid against her throat, and realised that it must be her own.

"No, wife! It would be murder!" Jethro pulled Rachel's hand away.

"What, then? Let her do it?" Rachel pointed to Abigail who had wakened up and was staring blankly at them.

"No," Jethro objected. "There are other ways to kill. She is our own kind - let it be the Thong - "

Rachel shook her head. "No! The Sacred Thong cannot be polluted by the flesh of a traitor. It would be an honour she does not deserve. But there are other ways, as you say." She grinned savagely, eyeing the girl's cowering figure. "What we discussed earlier still holds, Jethro - agreed?"

"Agreed," Jethro readily replied.

Dimly, the girl was aware of their voices, but she was being overwhelmed by the images in her mind. She clutched her head, trying to shut them out, moaning.

"What's wrong with her?" Rachel snapped. "I did not strike her so hard." Impatiently, she pulled the girl to her feet. "I'm going to burn that town of yours to the ground - everyone in it, every pure son of Adam and daughter of Eve, will burn with it."

"Please... no..." The girl shook head, moaning. She couldn't see now: it was like looking at Ma Crawford's shop window - all the little bits of glass that reflected your image over and over. Only it wasn't one image but many - all different, all through a different pair of eyes. And all beat upon her mind: rage... ANGER...

With a scream of despair, she went down into the darkness.

Reverend Jacob Forester brooded as he sat alone in his untidy parlour. A candle, burning fitfully on a small table beside his bed, provided the only illumination; he had closed the window shutters and pulled the heavy drapes across earlier, secrecy being second nature to him now. It was at such times, in the dead of night when he could not sleep, that his thoughts would turn to... them. The ones who had felt the 'mercy' of his flock -

the Coopers, the Marshalls and their ilk. Thankfully, no Marked child had been discovered for over ten years. The Marshalls must have been the last... yes, that was right... and most of them had escaped. He was glad, in a way; after all, why should the whole family die for the sin of one? Of course, they had not been a respectable family; for one thing, the father had been a drunkard. Despite his own efforts to stamp out the illicit stills - denouncing the evils of drink from the pulpit, organising a band of upright vigilant citizens who made surprise visits to farms - men of a certain class still continued to sneak out of town at sunset to the latest secret location of the drinking clubs. But Isaac Marshall, at least, had paid for his sins.

Jacob recalled the flock's frenzy when they had discovered the house empty; they had torn the place apart then grown even more ugly. A party had raced off to young Samuel Marshall's house. Despite his years, Jacob had somehow managed to keep up with them and had saved Mary, Samuel's young wife, from their rage, by pleading that she was not Marshall issue. He had been unable to do anything for Samuel, however, and he wondered why he had bothered at all; within a month, Mary, gone back to live with her parents, had hanged herself from a beam in their home. Many supposed it grief and shock at seeing her husband hanged, but Jacob privately thought she had realised herself pregnant and believed that the baby would be Marked.

Yes, there had been Samuel... and Isaac. When the old sinner had finally wandered home next morning from his drinking bout, he had found visitors waiting. Afterwards, both men's bodies had been thrown on the midden heaps beyond town and the two devastated houses boarded up. He wondered what had become of the Marshall women; eaten by wild animals, he supposed.

From thoughts of other Marked ones, his thoughts came back to himself - and pray God no-one ever found out. His parents had taken the knowledge to their graves; to this day, he wondered what sin of theirs had caused him to be born with an extra toe on each foot. The many hours they had spent on their knees had borne fruit, however; he had never detected a love for the devil in his heart. It seemed he had been redeemed, but was forced to conceal his secret nevertheless. By the time his parents had died, he had safely established himself as successor to old Reverend Aaron. He was also careful to appear a man of exceptional piety who eschewed the temptations of the flesh, so that they should not think it odd that he had never taken a wife. It had never been an easy road, especially in his youth, but it had been worth it.

Yes, it was unfortunate that others had had to die, others whose fate he would have shared if his parents had been less careful, but he had no choice. If he did not lead the flock in its righteous anger, it would be quick to guess why and turn on him. Besides, he was fulfilling his duty to God by this penance; acquitting himself from the eternal flames which, it was believed, awaited all Marked ones after death. With that comforting thought he yawned and lay down on the bed, reaching out to snuff the candle. As he did so, there was a scream outside.

Normally he would have ignored it. He was used to the shouts of irate husbands, of the exasperated yells of women at their children. Even at this late hour, it was not unusual to hear the less respectable members of the community arguing at the tops of their voices, probably fuelled by strong liquor. But this was different. It sent an icy chill down Jacob's back.

For a moment he lay on the bed, unable to move, aware of the rapid pounding of his heart. Then he struggled to his feet and hurried out into the darkened passageway. Cautiously he opened the front door a little way and peered out.

A bright glare of fire lit the sky behind the main street. He could hear the crackle of flames, smell burning. Another wild scream sounded, broken off short. By now, the townsfolk had begun to stir, some opening the shutters of top storey windows to look out, others running into the street in their night clothes. Jacob hurried out to join them.

"Reverend Forester! Oh, thank the Lord that you're here!" It was old Ma Crawford, her gray hair in dishevelled wisps beneath the tattered cloth she tied round her head as a bed cap.

"My daughter, we must fetch buckets. A line must be formed from the pump," Jacob began crisply, all authority. He was gratified to see instant obedience as they dashed back inside and re-emerged with wooden buckets. Clutching them like talismans of good fortune, the children dancing round them with excitement, they followed him up the street.

As they turned a corner into a side street, the blazing houses were revealed. The flock recoiled in fright as a building collapsed with a roar of wind and sparks, then strung themselves out in a line. They ignored the screams of someone trapped in an upper storey and instead began to pass their buckets to the end where two boys were vigorously cranking the pump handle. Water gushed into the large trough beside it. Buckets were dipped in, filled and passed back along the human chain to be emptied, hissing, onto the flames. For anyone trapped in a burning house it was already too late: the townsfolk's priority was to prevent the fire spreading till half the town should be ablaze.

Relishing his new-found leadership, Jacob extolled them to greater effort, but then a hand gripped his arm and a horrified voice spoke in his ear.

"Reverend, look!"

He followed the line of the pointing finger towards the north end of town. A bright glow marked another fire. As he saw it, so did others, and voices broke out in consternation; one fire could be accidental; a candle, left to burn, knocked over. But not two...

At that moment, a woman screamed, pointing along the street in the opposite direction. A band of figures, flaming branches in their hands, were standing in front of Jacob's little clapboard church. Even as he watched, one of the figures tossed a burning brand through its open door.

"No!" Jacob shouted. "Stop! The Lord will strike you dead!"

The figures stepped away from the door, a glow within revealing that the wooden pews were already alight. Silhouetted against it, they appeared oddly shaped - their clothes were bulky and without form. They held other things besides improvised torches; spears and clubs. The townsfolk dropped their buckets, faces pinched in fear, and began to back way. The fire inside the church was now licking up the wooden supports and sprouting from the roof. Its flickering light revealed the ill proportions of the strangers' bodies; humped backs and withered limbs.

"They're Marked!" shrilled Sara Crawford.

"Satan's own," whimpered a man close to Jacob. Around him, he could hear mumbled prayers for deliverance, but his own tongue had been struck dumb. He could only watch as one of the Marked ones advanced, brandishing a spear.

Another followed, catching at its arm. "Rachel, no. We can't shed human blood - it's a mortal sin." The voice was that of a man.

Impatiently, the other tried to shrug him off. "There'll be much meat here. Animals, the girl said - "

"All right. Then we find those and go. But we can't shed human blood

The first figure lowered its spear, eyes glittering in the light of the flames. "Then we burn them!" Turning to the band who stood uncertainly behind the two, it commanded, "Drive them into the flames!" Eagerly, they lumbered towards the petrified townsfolk.

Angrily the man shook the other. "Who rules here? It's the woman's place to follow. Obey me!"

"You're weak! The strong rule - *that's* the law!" Rachel pushed him aside and hobbled forward. As the man followed, raising his hand, some of the others waved their spears at him. He halted, arm falling limply to his side. The townsfolk suddenly found the strength to break free, running away along the main street. With yells of hate and fury, the Marked ones raced after them.

7

"Spock? Kirk edged as close to the Vulcan as the rope round his neck would allow. The party had been bound hand and foot, with two guards posted to watch their every move. Man and woman, both faces equally grim and fierce in the firelight. Just beyond and nearer to the campfire, lay the girl, tightly curled into a foetal position. Keeping his voice low, Kirk asked, "Spock, will she die?"

"Possibly. But if she lives, she will certainly become insane if she does not establish mental barriers."

Kirk glanced up at the nearer guard. She returned his gaze challengingly. "Our only chance is to persuade Rachel and the others when they return."

"How are you feeling now, Jim?"

Kirk detected the anxiety in McCoy's voice despite his friend's attempt to sound casual. Since Kirk had regained consciousness, the Doctor had fretted at being physically unable to examine the head injury. Apart from a headache, however, Kirk was not aware of any lasting effect. "Fine, Bones, just fine."

"Well, I'll be more confident about that when I get you back to the ship for some tests," McCoy grumbled.

"Captain." At the urgency in Spock's tone, both men turned their heads, Kirk wincing as he did so. "To the north-west..."

Awkwardly, the two shifted position for a better view. Kirk glanced apprehensively at the guard, but her attention, also, was fixed on the north-west. Then he saw why. There was a red glow through the trees. In the darkness it was impossible to tell if it was nearby or far away, but none of them had any doubt about its exact position.

"New Zion..." Kirk said, hopelessly. "People we might have got through to... helped." He looked up at the guard again, anger beginning to kindle. "I thought your religion outlawed murder."

"We are forbidden to shed their blood," the woman answered calmly. "Fire purifies." Her gaze returned to the distant glow and her crooked teeth were revealed by her satisfied grin. Simultaneously, Kirk recalled overhearing Rachel's words to the girl Hannah. Beside him, McCoy was muttering in disgust.

"A complete distortion of every religious principle..."

"Not quite, Doctor," a voice said diffidently. Surprised, they turned to see Goertz, the historian, who flushed a little at their scrutiny. "There are precedents for a lot of the things we've seen here, sir. For instance, the..." He trailed off, lacking the confidence to broach such a sensitive subject unaided.

"Shiels?" Kirk coaxed.

Goertz nodded. "Yes, it was a widely held belief that... to eat an enemy was to assimilate his strength, courage and so on. And sometimes it was seen as a means of obtaining the ultimate revenge - of expressing hate most vividly. It - it's termed exophagy. But they also practice endophagy here, from what we've heard and seen - the drinking cups, they eat members of their own group to preserve their spirit... life force."

"But - what about this crazy idea that murder's fine if you don't spill any blood?" McCoy objected.

"Well, erm... it could be tied in with some verses in the Old Testament: I can't recall exactly - "

"Deuteronomy, Mr. Goertz. Chapter twelve, verses twenty three and twenty four, to be exact. *'Only be sure that thou eat not the blood: for the blood is the life: and thou mayst not eat the life with the flesh.'*

"Thou shalt not eat it: thou shalt pour it upon the earth as water," Spock quoted. "There is also a reference in verse twenty seven concerning sacrifices: *'And thou shalt offer thy burnt offerings, the flesh and the blood, upon the altar of the Lord thy God; and the blood of thy sacrifices shall be poured out upon the altar of the Lord thy God, and thou shalt eat the flesh.'*"

For a moment the whole group was taken aback. Then Kirk remembered that his friend had studied a wide range of classical Terran writing, including religious texts. "Yes, that would tie in with their references to us as 'blood eaters'. And their... method of food preparation." Kirk grimaced at the recollection.

"You mean, when they took Shiels out of camp, it wasn't just to murder him... That smoke we saw...?"

"Was a burnt offering, Doctor? Yes, it was customary to offer certain organs in this way. Not just the ancient Hebrews, but the Greeks also made such sacrifices, eating most of the animal themselves."

"Animal, yes! They didn't sacrifice Humans - "

"There is evidence that such may have been the practice in earlier times. In any event, there is abundant evidence of such practices in historical times - the Aztecs, for example."

"Never mind that - " McCoy began angrily, but Kirk broke in with a pained expression.

"Bones..." When the Doctor subsided, Kirk asked, "You think that

could be why the population split originally, Spock? One faction insisted on returning to Old Testament observances?"

"Indeed. If these people have lost the ability to read - and we have seen no evidence to the contrary - their rules of behaviour must be based on oral recollection. And those recollections are subject to distortion."

"Yes," Kirk agreed. "Considering the disruption that must have occurred following the power plant accident, the casualties, deaths, the disintegration of moral codes - "

"Look, what good's all this theoretical speculation?" McCoy broke in, no longer able to restrain himself.

"It just might help us to understand them a little more, Bones. Then... well, maybe we'll still be able to communicate."

"Well, you could be right, Jim. But I've got my doubts."

They broke off their quiet conversation as a figure limped hastily into camp. "I saw their torches," the man's voice barked in hoarse excitement. "They're coming back."

The male guard nodded. "Good. Go back to your post now, Jeremiah. And let us pray that all is well with them." As the other hobbled away, the guard added to the woman who was with him, "And pray too that they bring meat!"

Time dragged by. Kirk's headache grew steadily worse, settling in a constant thumping on the left side of his head. And that wasn't all; he felt strangely hot, his pulse pounded in his ears. He tried, fitfully, to doze like the others, but his discomfort kept him awake. Not wishing to disturb the others or worry them when nothing could be done anyway, he kept quiet, resting his forehead on his knees.

At last, dawn light began filtering through the trees, revealing the campsite. The girl was still lying comatose by the dead fire, having not moved since her collapse. Kirk stirred, raising his head as Jeremiah returned.

"They're coming up the longer way. I think they've got animals with them - I heard odd sounds."

The two guards grinned in delight. One made a remark about full bellies but Kirk could not tell which had said it. Things seemed a little disjointed; sounds and vision going in and out of focus like a damaged recording. He was dimly aware of Spock and the others waking beside him.

At last, the band of New Nazarenes appeared through the trees, driving a few exhausted, stumbling goats and sheep. Some of the party carried dead chickens by the legs. The noise of their triumphant chattering roused the two New Zion women from their sleep. Abigail merely stared disinterestedly but Martha started up, then, jerked to a halt by her tether, sat down again, still staring worriedly at them.

Rachel flung down her spear dramatically: it quivered, upright, in the earth. "We did it! The blood eaters are no more!" Her cry was the signal for a babble of excited boasting as the women and men emphasised their courage and tenacity in fighting the enemy. Only Jethro hung back, unnoticed by his people, his dour face darkened with anger and doubt.

Martha watched in consternation. "What have you done?" she demanded, but her words went unheeded in the general uproar. Frenziedly, she tugged

loose the halter round her neck and stood up, throwing the hide rope to the ground.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?"

The noise slowly died away as Rachel eyed Martha in amazement. Somehow she found her voice. "We've burned your town. We drove your people into the flames. We hung them from trees."

Martha stared at her in disbelief. When she had been roused by the noise in camp the previous night, it had been in time to see the tribe lighting branches in the campfire. Before moving off, Rachel had remarked, with a savage grin of triumph, that they were 'going hunting'. Now she could understand.

"Murdered," she whispered, then found her voice. "Murderer! God will punish you - " A heavy-handed blow across the face knocked her to the ground.

"Your people are dead! Your town is in flames!" Rachel laughed as Martha shakily got to her feet and staggered back to Abigail, putting an arm protectively round her sister.

"We didn't find many animals, though," put in Jethro sourly from the back of the crowd. "And most of the ones we did find got away."

"That doesn't matter," Rachel insisted, pointing to Martha. "She'll know how to tend these creatures. We'll raise them - like her people did. Then we'll always have meat."

"That's not the true way!" Jethro objected. "If we kill them now, we'll have full bellies."

"And empty heads!" Rachel retorted. "We'll pluck the birds - eat those. But we keep the beasts - to breed."

Jethro subsided - for the moment. Rachel's authority with the others now reigned supreme. While the tribe threw down the dead chickens before the captive women to prepare, Rachel went over to the girl's prone body. She prodded her with one foot. "Get up." The girl did not respond. Angrily, Rachel limped away to retrieve her spear and levelled its butt against the girl's side. She repeated the command.

"She cannot hear you," a voice said quietly. Fiercely, Rachel rounded on the prisoners.

"Which of you spoke?" Her blue eyes glared through her tangle of dark hair.

"I did." Spock eyed her calmly.

"Why cannot she hear me? Answer!"

"It is a... sickness of the mind. But I can help her."

Rachel spat. "If she's sick, let her remain so. She'll die soon enough, anyway."

"If I do not help her, she will become insane." Seeing that Rachel did not comprehend, he tried again. "She'll go mad."

"Mad?" The woman backed a pace or two away from the girl's body. "You mean... evil spirits are claiming her?" She stared warily at the

girl. "Evil spirits? Can you exorcise them?" She turned her gaze demandingly on the Vulcan.

Spock nodded. Immediately, Rachel drew a metal knife from her belt - the girl's own which she had claimed. "All right - help her. I want her to... appreciate... what I have planned for her." She smiled nastily before hobbling over to free Spock. "Don't try to escape or attack me. If you do, your friends will die. There are many ways that do not involve the shedding of blood."

8

*Terror - struggle futilely against bonds and rough hands -
laughter - rope tightens - my neck - choking -*

*The minister's body - it's dancing like a doll on the end
of that rope - I'm next - just a moment or two - Lord, help
me! They're - they're pushing me - another noose - more of
them ready to pull it up - no - scream - no -*

*A worn boot drops to the ground - bare foot hangs before my
eyes - what? - six toes - the minister! He was Marked! -
Rope - pulls tight - aaaagh!*

*Flames - scorching air - can't breathe - coughing - fire
coming closer - falling beam - can't breathe - choking -*

Hot - so hot - air sears my throat -

Can't breathe - rope - choking -

Choking -

Shaken, Spock withdrew. For a moment he sat, breathing shallowly, eyes closed. Sweat beaded his forehead.

Despite the pounding of his own fevered head, Kirk noted the pallor of the Vulcan's skin. "Bad?"

"Yes. It is... worse than I expected. She tapped into the deaths of those killed in New Zion, and now her mind is reliving those deaths again and again."

Kirk struggled to concentrate on his friend's words. "Like... like playing a recording loop," he murmured. "Can you interrupt the sequence and reach her?"

"I believe so, Captain. It may, however - " Spock paused, glancing up at Rachel's stony face - "take some time."

"Do it!" the woman ordered.

Once again Spock leaned forward and placed his fingers to the girl's temples. Anxiously, Kirk and the others waited.

This time, Spock dived straight in, seeking the girl's self awareness buried beneath the crushing weight of psychic trauma. He forced himself, painstakingly, to block out all the terror and agony that she was reliving so vividly. Finally, below the level of conscious awareness, he found her.

Slowly, carefully, he began to construct a barrier that would shield her mind from psychic input. He felt her mind stir a little: good, he was not too late. Tentatively, he established contact, aware that he must not alarm and drive her deeper within herself.

"I am Spock, a friend. I am here to help you."

"Spock? What... The prisoner? Jim's friend?"

"Yes. Do not be afraid. You are safe now."

"I... I've been dreaming. It was horrible - people were dying and they were me, somehow... It wasn't a dream, was it?"

"No. But it is over now."

"How... did I feel those things?"

"It is... part of the way you are different - "

"Different? You mean 'Marked', don't you? I can see people's thoughts - is that it? Like the old woman - "

Spock steeled himself to bear the anguish of that thought. Simultaneously, there was an image - an old woman lying on a dusty stone floor, a splintered walking stick lying across her body. Then it was gone.

"I am evil."

"No, not evil," Spock insisted. "Merely different. The people here - both in your old town and in this - do not understand. They fear those who are different to themselves."

"But isn't it like that where you come from?"

Spock sensed her confusion, sought to banish it with images of the friendship between himself and Jim... and McCoy, too. "No. Differences there can be accepted... enjoyed."

"Yes, I see... in your mind. Jim's your friend... Yes, he is a good man... I sensed that when I first saw him. And the other one, too... Craggy Face... "

Spock suppressed something suspiciously unVulcan in his makeup and filed the reference away for use in a future sparring session with McCoy. Then, for a timeless instant, he showed her images of the world outside Salem, the place where she would have to go to learn how to control her ability, cushioning her, through the medium of his own mind, from the 'future shock' that would otherwise have been inevitable.

But... I'm free of it now, aren't I? You took the pictures away...

"I have built a temporary barrier in your mind and I will show you how to maintain it. But to be truly well, you must go to my world. My people will teach you how to use your ability only when you wish."

"Yes, I see. I want to go, Spock - there's nothing here for me anyway." She saw the question in his mind. "Abigail? If she is my mother... Can you help her too?"

"It is possible. You, too, may be able to help if she will accept you as her child... But I must go now."

"Must you? There's so much I want to know."

"I will try to help you. But we are still prisoners. We have to escape first." Spock imprinted the knowledge of how to maintain the psychic barrier then, gently, broke contact.

"Well?" Rachel's voice jerked him harshly into full awareness. Beside him, the girl's eyelids fluttered as she moaned softly. "Good! Tie the man up."

Unresisting, Spock was dragged back to the side of his friends and bound with sinews. Rachel turned her attention to the girl who stirred a little, seemingly dazed. "Get up!" A savage jab with the butt of Rachel's spear brought a groan of pain from the girl, who rolled over, clutching her stomach, and tried to sit up. Seeing the woman standing over her, features twisted in cruel gloating, she scrambled to her feet in terror. For a moment Spock thought she would run and be speared in the back, taboo or no taboo, but she caught sight of his gaze, willing her to calmness, and stood her ground. Jethro and one of the others grabbed her, twisting her arms behind her. Rachel smirked. "You have a choice of deaths. Shall we burn you or hang you?"

The girl shook her head. Through clenched teeth, she spoke. "Please - let us go." Jethro jerked cruelly on her arm, drawing a cry of pain.

Watching, Kirk's face was burning, his breathing harsh. A red mist lurked at the edges of his vision. "This is my fault..." he whispered. "New Zion... everything - "

"No, Jim," Spock insisted softly. "The girl's arrival here precipitated this. I saw that in her mind - Rachel had already decided to attack the other town before our escape attempt."

"My fault... Shields' dead... New Zion... All my fault..." Kirk evidently had not heard Spock's attempt at reassurance. Concerned, the Vulcan looked at McCoy, but the Doctor was already leaning forward, trying to see Kirk's face.

"He's flushed, Spock - damn it, his pupils - they're unequally dilated. It's compression - must be. That second blow on the head - "

By now, the girl was being dragged over to the trees to the west of the camp. Struggling, she was forced against one of the smaller trunks while hide rope was passed round her body and the tree. Another tribeswoman bound her wrists behind the tree, the sinews cutting into her flesh. As the group walked back to camp, Rachel called to them. "Have you made her secure?" When one of them answered in the affirmative, she continued. "Good. Now, we must gather wood and cut two stakes." She pointed to the decaying houses behind the camp. "That wood is dry enough - we'll use that for the pyres." When there were nervous mutterings at this and wary glances passed between her people, she raised her voice in angry denial. "That wood may not be used for the camp fire because that would bring ill fortune - yes! But it may be used for this sacred purpose: such a holy fire purifies. Do as I say."

Grumbling, her people moved reluctantly towards the rotting houses.

"You're going to burn her then?" Jethro asked.

"Yes, I have decided. And him also," She pointed to Spock. "The rest of them will serve us as slaves."

"No!" Kirk shouted the denial. "Spock - " Abruptly, he slumped

forward, head lolling slackly onto his knees.

"Jim! Jim!" McCoy spoke urgently. There was no response. He met the Vulcan's anxious gaze. "Spock, unless we get him back to the Enterprise and operate - " His voice trailed off as he realised that Rachel was standing over him. She bent down and grabbed a fistful of Kirk's hair, pulling back his head to study his flushed face. McCoy could only watch, face livid with fury at his powerlessness to stop her, blue eyes blazing.

"He's dying," she noted with satisfaction. "Good. We shall make sacrifice to Jehovah." She released his hair, letting his head drop back onto his knees.

"No, you murdering - " A heavy blow silenced McCoy. Blood trickled slowly from his lip. Tasting it, he had a sudden idea. "You just drew blood."

Rachel stared in surprise, then recovered. "Not a mortal wound. The sin is in letting blood in a mortal wound."

"What about him, then?" McCoy nodded to Kirk. "You've drawn *his* blood."

"I see no blood. What trick is this?"

"No trick. He was hit on the head - twice. It's blood inside his skull - pressing on his brain. That's what's killing him."

Disturbed, Rachel looked from McCoy to Kirk, then back again. "This is true? You swear it - in Jehovah's Name?"

"I swear."

Rachel turned to her stunned people who had frozen in their tracks to listen. "Who struck the stranger?" she demanded. "Who?" There was no answer. "Then the sin is on all of us. We have drawn blood in a mortal wound. We must pray. We must fast. We must offer sacrifice." She turned back to the prisoners and, for an instant, her eyes met Spock's. He recognised the frustration and malice in them. "Two days we will make penance. On the third, we will prepare the pyres and burn the traitors at sunset." With that, she limped away and entered her tent.

"Congratulations, Doctor," the Vulcan said mildly. "Your logic has at least bought us a little time."

But not for Jim." As Spock's gaze met his, the Doctor explained. "I'm sorry, Spock, but for Jim it's just a matter of hours."

9

"Any response yet, Lieutenant?"

"Negative, Mr Scott. There's nothing but static, as if the communicators were non-operational."

"All right. Weel, keep trying anyway."

Scotty sank back in the command chair, thinking hard. The Captain's orders had been quite specific - to do nothing which might alarm the survivors and perhaps undo hours of difficult negotiations. But his call

was many hours overdue; since he had reported their safe arrival, there had been nary a word. That, coupled with the malfunction of all the communicators... And there was also the odd incident of the raging fires in the other town, plus evidence of population movement. Could the Captain have arrived during a war - perhaps been taken prisoner... or killed? Till now, he had given the party the benefit of the doubt, appreciating that it might have been impossible to sneak away to communicate with the ship. But orders or no orders, he had to put a landing party down there, at least to observe.

His mind made up, he turned to Lt. Palmer. "Lieutenant, I want five volunteers from security in the transporter room."

"Aye, sir - " But Palmer was speaking to empty air. Scott was already gone.

Smoke spiralled up into the cloudless blue sky then was snatched away by the steady breeze. Rachel, gore splattered the length of her arm, stepped back from the altar as the last of the terrified sheep, struggling feebly in the hold of two of the tribesfolk, bled the last of its life onto the darkened stones. Wearily, she wiped sweat from her brow with her free hand, then stepped forward again to make the ritual incisions and lift out the organs for the burnt offering. The tribesfolk then lifted the carcass and bore it away to a stout old tree so that it would be properly drained of blood and thus fit to eat. But there would be no feasting yet; they must not eat again until the two traitors died in the flames.

The girl sagged against the bonds that cut harshly into her ribs and wrists, her eyes closed. Hearing a twig break underfoot, she opened them and saw a burly figure approaching. Her heart lurched as she recognised Jethro, his swarthy face lightened with an attempt at a friendly grin that conveyed only nervous tension. Apprehensive, she watched as he halted beside her, then glanced past him to the camp to see if anyone could - or would - come to her aid. All she could see were figures on their knees, begging forgiveness of Jehovah, dirt heaped upon their heads.

"Shouldn't you be praying with them?" she asked rather sharply, made jittery by his nearness. He leaned against the tree, staring at her.

"Don't you have a kind word for me? I could help you." He stretched out a hand and traced the underside of her chin, trailing his fingers down her neck. Terrified, she closed her eyes. If she had been free she doubted if she could have moved, petrified with fear. She could no longer see into minds, but she remembered his manner when he had come upon her collecting firewood. She opened her eyes and gazed desperately at the figures in camp, willing them to help her.

"What about Rachel?" she managed to ask. It was hard to talk; her throat seemed dried up - constricted.

"She's seeing to the sacrifices. Those animals we brought back have to be killed after all." His hand slipped beneath the neckline of her faded blouse and cupped one of her small breasts. She bit down a scream; what could she do except kick him, while he could easily strangle her.

"Rachel - " she choked out.

Jethro took a guilty look over at the camp then, reassured, turned back to her. "Don't you worry about Rachel. She hasn't been very clever. We only got a few of their animals - and we've killed those, like I said. Rachel won't be very popular for long. You just do what I tell you and

I'll see you all right... I saw how you looked at that man - did you know he's dying? Why don't you look at me like that?"

The girl stared at him in shock, seeing the hard glint in his eyes, and remembering the burly figure stepping back into the crowd. Now she was sure who had struck Jim. And Jethro, of course, would not admit it - otherwise he alone would have undergone a penance. This way the whole tribe suffered - and so did Rachel's standing.

"Yes, I see you understand. Well, you just remember - do right by me and I'll save you from the fire."

The girl bit her lip to swallow her revulsion. The man before her; swart, coarse, dirty, smelling of poorly tanned hide, his teeth crooked and his breath foul - how could she avoid comparing him with Jim? Jim was fair, clean smelling, his face open and honest where this one's was closed and sly. How had she looked at Jim? It was true; she felt something for him - still did. What Jethro said must be true; she had caught Rachel's announcements and enough of what Jim's other friend had said, toknow Jim was dying.

Somehow she forced herself to smile. It was the hardest thing she had ever had to do. "You'll be leader?"

"I've talked with some of the others. Rachel's support lessens." Jethro grinned in delight. "You'll be the wife of a leader."

"That'll be good," she agreed, still smiling. Inside, her guts were in knots.

Jethro nodded, then looked over at the camp where he saw Rachel had reappeared, and quickly withdrew his hand. "I'll come for you tonight."

As he hurried back to the tents, the girl drew a shuddering breath, sure that she was going to be sick. After a while the feeling subsided, but she could still feel the sensation of his touch, like a dirty mark on her skin. She told herself that it was for Jim, and felt a little better. If he could only hold on to life a little longer, if she could get free when Jethro freed her... That was a lot of 'ifs'.

"God, if you are real, help him, keep him alive. I'm only a Marked one, I know, but he's one of Your own. Please... help him."

10

Reuben Tanner wiped the sweat from his brow and stepped back from the heavy barred gate. "That's the last of them," he said, then turned from the restless, jostling animals to Levi. "Sure you'll be able to handle them, son?"

The boy nodded. "Sure thing, Pa. I'll spread the hay out in the mangers in the barn."

"Be sparing, eh? There's not much left from last winter. Never thought we'd have to use winter feed in the fine summer, but we can't trust to those devils overlooking the high pastures twice." Reuben stepped away to pick up the sharp-pronged fork. "Tell your Ma we'll be back tomorrow. We've a good notion of where the devils hide out."

"Are they really devils, Pa?" the boy asked solemnly. "I mean - we've got no minister now, and - "

"He wouldn't have been any use against them, Levi. Not now it turns out he was one of them. Anyway, they're the devil's children right enough, but they're not devils themselves. Real devils don't need to hang folk to kill them. No, it's our fault, boy. We never should've left those Marked ones to live alone on that high place. We should've cleaned them out when the Wrath of God first fell on us. Well, now His wrath's fallen on our town again because we lacked the courage to do His will in the first place."

"Wish I was going with you, Pa." Levi's voice was wistful. Reuben chuckled and ruffled his son's hair affectionately.

"Someone's got to stay here and help your Ma with the farm - that's the man's part too. You just get those cows in the barn, and don't forget - " He tapped the large knife in its sheath at the boy's belt. "You keep that on you at all times. And keep praying to God."

"I will, Pa. I'll pray He keeps you safe."

Levi watched as his father shouldered the hay fork and marched off along the road into town. He felt a light touch on his shoulder and looked up: it was his mother, tears glistening brightly in her eyes. They both watched as Reuben's figure receded; once, he turned to wave and they both waved madly to make sure he could see them. Then he continued on his way. At last he was out of sight.

"Abigail, you've got to listen. Your daughter's here, Abigail. Your baby. They're going to burn her. Abigail, they're going to murder your daughter!"

Was there just a flicker of response? Martha could not be sure, but she had to keep trying. If nothing else could reach Abigail, this surely must. Since the deaths of their mother and Naomi, Abigail had retreated into a shell, a world of her own. Martha believed she could even understand it in a way - Abigail wanted to ensure that she could never be hurt again. Now it was up to her to break the shell: Abigail must be made to understand, must be reconciled to her child when that child lay under sentence of death. She began again.

"Abigail, remember the baby, remember the day she was born? I didn't throw her off Jude's Rock, Abigail. I left her at the dump instead. She's alive, Abigail. She's here - and she needs you."

On the other side of camp, Rachel was handing the confiscated medikit to McCoy. "Here! If you can save him, do so."

Carefully, McCoy examined the kit for damage. His tricorder had been wrecked, but they had not been able to open the kit with its concealed fastening. He adjusted the hypo spray and placed it against Kirk's arm. Satisfied that McCoy was keeping his word not to escape, Rachel moved away.

"That should relieve the pressure a little," he explained to Spock and the others. To Spock, he added quietly, "But he still hasn't much time. We have to get him to sickbay."

"Perhaps reasoning may work, Doctor. After all, it did win us this postponement."

"Yes - my imperfect, *Human* reasoning - "

"Being Human, you have a natural advantage in understanding the process of Human reasoning. Doctor."

McCoy eyed Spock suspiciously, uncertain as to whether he had just been flattered or insulted. But he realised that Spock was merely concealing his anxiety about Jim, so he conceded the point. "Well, yeah, it's worth a try."

Goertz had heard the last few words. Concerned, he asked, "What's the matter, sir? I thought you said the Captain would be all right now."

McCoy hesitated momentarily, but Spock came to his rescue. "I am going to attempt to reason with our captors. Mr. Goertz, in order to gain our freedom. Fascinating though our present environment may be in providing living examples of some interesting historical behaviour patterns. I'm sure you'll agree that we appear to have overstayed our welcome."

Bemused, Goertz could only nod.

They awaited an opportunity. After some time, Rachel approached them to check on Kirk's condition. Spock noticed that she appeared nervous and preoccupied; doubtless her authority over her people was becoming insecure.

"Rachel," he began. "It was wrong for the people of the other town to persecute Marked ones like yourself - like us," he added for emphasis. "But it was equally wrong to kill them."

Rachel shook her head angrily. "They were a danger to our people, but no longer - "

"Not true!" Martha's voice rose over the murmurs from the bowed heads. They looked up in affronted surprise and Rachel flushed at the disapproval of her implicit in their stares. Furious, she strode over to the tethered woman and raised her spear. Undaunted, Martha cried, "My people *never* threatened yours. They were too afraid of you. But now they'll be angry. You can't have killed them all. They'll come here for revenge."

"Silence!" Rachel reversed the spear to strike Martha with the butt, then realised that the murmured prayers and turned to angry and resentful mutterings. Faltering, she stepped back, lowering her spear.

"It's true!" Jethro broke in. "They *will* come to kill us."

"We'll post an outlook and guards," Rachel insisted. "They are cowards - you saw how they ran into the flames rather than fight! Don't be fools! We're safe here!"

Cowed for the moment, the kneeling figures returned to their prayers, but as Rachel turned her back on them and entered her tent, there were a few speculative glances in Jethro's direction.

11

Darkness began to claim the campsite once more. As the sun dipped eastwards to its rest, the girl became more and more jittery. Now she started, aware of furtive movements in the trees behind her. Heart racing, she steeled herself not to scream. Suddenly a hand closed over her mouth. She had dreaded this all day: now the moment was here. She tried to

relax, not wishing to arouse Jethro's suspicions.

But the hand was not rough and calloused, and a voice spoke quietly, its accent strange - the girl's hopes kindled - as Jim's and the others' accents had seemed. "Don't be afeared, lassie. We won't hurt you." Then the hand was removed. Her eyes widened as she saw the figure standing in the shadows beside her: he seemed to be wearing clothes like Jim and his friends, and like them he had no beard.

"Are you a friend of Jim's?"

"Eh?... Oh, aye, that we are. We call him 'Captain', though."

"Is he your leader?" At the other's nod, she recalled Jethro's words. "You'll be the wife of a leader". That would be good, yes, but not of the leader he had had in mind.

"Can ye tell us what's been happening here? We've had an eye on the camp most o' the day, but we've been too far off tae make out most of it."

The girl nodded. "Jim and the others are prisoners. Jim's hurt - dying, they said. And they're going to burn Spock and me the day after tomorrow."

The man gave a low whistle. "What a bad business. If I'd only suspected sooner, orders or no orders - But don't worry, lass, we'll soon hae ye out o' here."

In a few moments he had untied her bonds. Gratefully, she rubbed her swollen wrists, aware that it was now too dark for those in camp to see her clearly. "You wait here while we go and get... Jim and the others." The man then waved to unseen figures: she sensed them gliding off into the bushes. By now, there were only a handful of sentries awake in the camp, outlined by the low-burning fire. Everyone else had gone inside the tents.

"No..." she whispered, but it was too late; the man had already slipped away. Well, she could not wait here while her friends were still in danger. Wishing that she had her knife, she began to follow.

When she reached the camp, she found the guards lying motionless - dead, she thought at first. But when she touched the neck of one, there was a slow but steady pulse in the artery. They had been knocked out without a sound. Impressed, she stepped across the prone body and approached the man who was freeing Jim and the others.

"Lassie! I thought I told you - och, never mind. How is he, Doctor?"

"Not good, Scotty. I've got to get him to sickbay."

"Right." The man called Scotty produced a small box from beneath his shirt - the girl's memory supplied the name - communicator. It was one of the things Spock had 'showed' her in the meld.

"We have to take this girl with us too, Mr. Scott," Spock put in. The other raised his eyebrows but obviously knew better than to ask questions at a time like this. Instead, he flipped open the communicator. The girl listened in fascination to the warbling sound it made.

"Scott to Enterprise. Stand by in the transporter room for a medical emergency and beam up - "

As Scott was speaking, the girl had caught at Spock's sleeve and pointed to her mother and aunt, who had wakened up blinking in the

firelight. "What about them?"

"I regret that we can do nothing at present. If we took - "

A voice cut across both men's voices. "Hold!" All looked round.

Rachel was standing outside the entrance flap of her tent, the firelight glinting on the sharp-edged blade in her hand. Before they could react, she grabbed the girl's wrist, twisting her arm behind her and holding her knife to the girl's throat. As she forced her nearer to the captive women, Spock calmly addressed her. "You cannot shed her blood, Rachel."

"No, but this one can!" Triumphantlly, Rachel slashed at Abigail's neck tether and yelled, "Stand, woman!" Her knife instantly returned to the girl's throat to ensure that she could not struggle. Then she gave her arm an extra twist so that the girl cried out, too much in pain to try to escape, and handed the knife to Abigail. "Kill the girl!"

Distantly, the girl was aware of a voice coming from the little box Scott held. "Mr. Scott? Mr. Scott?" Now she heard a sudden loud hum. Turning her head, she was amazed to see sparkling lights begin to engulf the figures of Jim and the others. No, they were disappearing!

"Jim, no! Take me with you!" she cried.

Rachel released her and backed away in wide-eyed fright, looking from the empty space where the men had stood to the girl, and back again. Then, regaining her composure, she snatched up a spear and hissed, "Witch! 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live' - that is the word of Jehovah! Your evil spirits have deserted you, girl!"

"No..." Pain tore at the girl's heart; the pain of despair. All the lies... Spock had promised to take her to his home where she would be made well. *And perhaps, her thoughts had continued, she would one day have found favour in Jim's eyes...* But it was all gone. Numbly, she saw the sharp blade in her mother's hand. Better to die now and end this pain. Her mother had given her life, abandoned her and was now to take away her life. She looked into the other's blue eyes, now purple in the firelight, expecting to see a mindless blank.

Instead, there was... what? Confusion? A dawning self awareness?

"I gave you an order!" Rachel snapped. "Kill the girl! Kill her!"

"Abigail, no! She's your daughter!" Martha leaped up to grab her sister, but Rachel struck her aside savagely with the spear. She fell, groaning, but at the same moment, Abigail acted -

The knife took Rachel through the heart.

Numb astonishment in her eyes glazed into death as Rachel folded to her knees, then pitched forward. The girl stared at the bloody knife in her mother's hand.

"Deborah... I would have called you Deborah." Her voice was creaky with disuse. "She was a great woman - a leader. Ma used to tell us that story."

Another groan from Martha broke the trance that held the girl. Gently, she took the knife from her mother's hand then knelt beside the injured woman. A hum suddenly filled the air and when she looked up, her face lit in an incredulous smile. "You didn't leave me - "

McCoy checked Rachel then quickly knelt beside Martha, running a scanner over her prone body and studying the readings on the new tricorder he held. "Serious head injury, Spock. We'll have to get her to the Enterprise."

Martha was gripping Deborah's hand. The girl leaned closer to hear the whispered words. "She didn't kill you - Abigail didn't kill you... I wanted... to tell you... You're the daughter I never had. God bless you, child..." She sighed and closed her eyes. Dazed, Deborah gently disentangled the older woman's fingers from hers.

"Too late," McCoy's voice said.

"Doctor, get back to Jim." Deborah looked up, surprised, and then remembered seeing Spock materialise with the Doctor. "I'll bring... Hannah - and her mother."

"My name's Deborah, Spock," the girl said proudly as McCoy shimmered from sight. She stood up, and put an arm round her mother. "She named me - my mother. She remembers me." She turned to Abigail. "Don't worry, Ma, you're coming with us."

A smile appeared on Abigail's face, confused but happy. "Deborah? You're coming home with Martha and me. Wait till Ma sees you. She'll be so proud."

Aware of rustling inside the tents, Spock quickly flipped open his communicator, even though he deduced that the fear and superstition of these people would probably keep them inside. "Spock to Enterprise. Three -"

A sudden whistle of air and a thud made him turn sharply. Deborah screamed as her mother collapsed, transfixed through the heart by a spear. Jethro stood by one of the tents, exultant. "My people, see me! Our leader is slain, but I have avenged her! I brave the penance for you, my people!"

"You killed my mother!" Deborah screamed. Before Spock could prevent her, she threw the knife. As the beams took them, the last thing they saw was Jethro, clutching the knife in his belly.

12

"How is she, Bones?"

McCoy looked down at Kirk's pale face that was dwarfed by the plastifoam dressing protecting his head injury. "She's fine. It's you we've been worried about."

"What were you saying before we beamed down? Hoping your medical skills wouldn't be needed? This was one hunch of mine that didn't pay off."

McCoy chuckled, recalling Kirk's lucky feeling about the mission. "Human intuition can't be 100% infallible, Jim. Otherwise we'd be biological computers. Speaking of which, that's one statistic I'm not going to remind him about - we'd never hear the last of it."

Kirk smiled muzzily. "He hasn't forgotten, Bones. Just biding his time till your next try at needling him."

"Me? Needle him?" McCoy assumed an indignant innocence. "Listen, I haven't got a laser scalpel in this entire sickbay that can get through that thick hide of his."

"Okay, Bones, you win. Now tell me how Hannah is."

"Well, to start with, Jim - its not 'Hannah', it's Deborah. You see, it's like this..."

Deborah straightened up, wiping her face with the tissue Spock proffered. "I'm sorry, I've made your shirt wet. And I know you don't like people showing feelings." She turned away to blow her nose. "What I don't understand is why Bones wanted to go back and help Jethro when you told him what had happened."

"Deborah, please understand that my decision not to return with medical aid for Jethro was based not upon any notion of revenge but on observation of his people's custom of killing and consuming their sick and injured."

"You mean, if my knife didn't kill him outright, his people would finish him off? You don't approve of what I did, do you?" As Spock made to speak, she went on. "No, listen. I've already told you what he said when I was tied up to that tree. He wanted to get rid of his wife - he didn't care about her at all, he just wanted to be leader. He killed my mother because it made him... look good." She turned away to hide the tears that threatened to well up again.

"Deborah, killing - for any reason - is wrong. Now can you see why my people have rejected emotion? All the deaths you saw were the *result* of emotion. Anger, hatred, greed, grief - *that* is why those people died."

Deborah shook her head. "My mother didn't kill Rachel for any of these reasons, Spock. She did it to save me."

"Love is sometimes the worst of all."

She stared at him. "I've shared minds with you, but I still don't understand you. You care about Jim - he's your friend. Isn't that love?"

Awkwardly, Spock turned away and paced to the other side of the cabin that they had given to Deborah. "The Captain is a supremely effective, highly intelligent and compassionate individual. He is the best Captain in Starfleet. As such, he is worthy of the loyalty that a Vulcan offers to his superior."

Wearily, Deborah sat down at the small table, resting her elbows on it and putting her head in her hands. "I know what all those words mean because you've - shown - me. But I can't see... I can't understand. And you say I have to live among your people till I can control my mind and the things it does." She ran her fingers through her long dark hair then looked up at him. "I don't think your people can be so very different from us - not if our minds were together. You've stopped me from fearing all this." She waved a hand at the cabin around them. "But what you've said still sounds to me like - like dressing friendship up in a lot of words that don't mean anything so it won't sound like friendship any more."

Spock turned to go. "You should rest now. If you need anything, press this button and speak." He indicated the viewer by the bed.

"Before you go... Will Jim be all right?"

Spock nodded. "He is in the best of hands. Dr. McCoy is a very good surgeon - though please do not mention that I have said so."

Deborah frowned in perplexity but decided she would understand this attitude, also, in time. Shyly, she said, "If you've seen all in my mind - everything - then you must know I like Jim, mustn't you?"

"It is not the Vulcan way to pry into the privacy of others, Deborah, especially not that of the mind. But if you entertain affection for the Captain, please remember that he is a leader with heavy responsibilities. He has to give himself to many people."

"Perhaps I could become worthy one day to become one of them... like you?" When he declined to answer, she smiled tiredly. "Never mind. Perhaps I could become a leader too - like Deborah? I know the story - the old woman told me it." She looked down at the table and blinked away tears; that was a painful memory too.

"You are young," Spock conceded. "Anything... is possible."

Among the trees, Reuben and his friend Joseph crept closer, their gaze fixed on the half circle of tents grouped around the dying fire.

"Is that where they live, Rube?" Joseph whispered with subdued excitement.

"I reckon so." Reuben clutched the comforting strength of his hayfork more firmly. The tines were darkened with the blood of a Marked one who had attacked them when they first reached the plateau's summit, killing one of their number. After that, the band had decided to send two scouts ahead to check for more ambushes, but they had found none so concluded that the stray devil's spawn must have been a lookout.

Reuben made his decision. "Go and get the others. Tell them we've found the place." As Joseph hurried away, Reuben continued to study the tents, relishing the sensation of the adrenalin now pounding through his veins. "It's the Lord's work we do tonight," he muttered. Yes, that had a good sound to it.

"The Lord's work."

Deborah looked up as the door swished shut, but Spock was gone. Frowning, she went over to the bed and sat down again. Thoughts tumbled through her mind; what would be her future, far from home, no family - so soon after finding one - hard study among an alien people... Spock's people.

Perhaps she would get to like them? And perhaps, some day, she would join her friends in their travels in the stars. Even... become a Starship Captain herself? She still wasn't completely sure of what that entailed.....

..... but there would be plenty of time to learn.

