

# THE WEB OF SELAGOR

by SIMONE MASON

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Cover by Michael Cleaver.

A STAG publication.

The Web of Selagor, price 60p within the UK, is put out by the  
STAR TREK Action Group and is available from

Beth Hallam  
Flat 3  
36 Clapham Rd  
Bedford  
England.

Foreign rate - Write to Beth, enclosing IRC, for details.

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September 1977

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## PART 1 - CHALLENGES

"Fascinating," murmured the Enterprise's Science Officer as all eyes stared at the large screen on the bridge, literally mesmerised. A huge translucent web of luminous filaments filled their vision, glittering against the darkness of space, a silvery web which could be out of a fairy tale or a monster's legend.

"What is it, Mr. Spock?" asked Kirk in awe.

"A force field, Captain, nature unknown."

"Speculations?"

"It could be what it appears to be, a web to trap the ship, or it could be a warning to keep away, or..."

"Captain," interrupted Mr. Scott, "we are being pulled towards the web's centre."

"All power to engines. Go into reverse, Mr. Sulu."

"Yes, sir."

All efforts proved of no avail and the Enterprise stopped some kilometres from the centre of the web, where a red light sparkled like a huge ruby - or glowed like a fire of hell.

"Anyone behind or in that web, Mr. Spock?" asked Kirk

"Possibly, sir, but our sensors cannot penetrate that field."

"Any contact on hailing frequencies, Lt. Uhura?"

"No, sir."

"Send the following message: 'This is Captain James T. Kirk of the U.S.S. Enterprise. This ship represents the United Federation of Planets in this quadrant of space and is on a peaceful mission'."

McCoy had just arrived on the bridge and stared at the screen.

"'Come into my parlour, said the spider to the fly'! Jim, can't we get out of here? I don't relish the idea of being a fly, and spiders are predators I don't fancy meeting!"

"Spiders could not live in space, Doctor..." Spock started to say, but Uhura interrupted.

"Sir, I'm getting a signal."

"On audio, Lieutenant."

An image formed slowly on the screen, and again the crew stared as though mesmerised at the strange being staring back at them from glowing eyes, bringing to mind the bug-eyed monsters of the old science fiction stories.

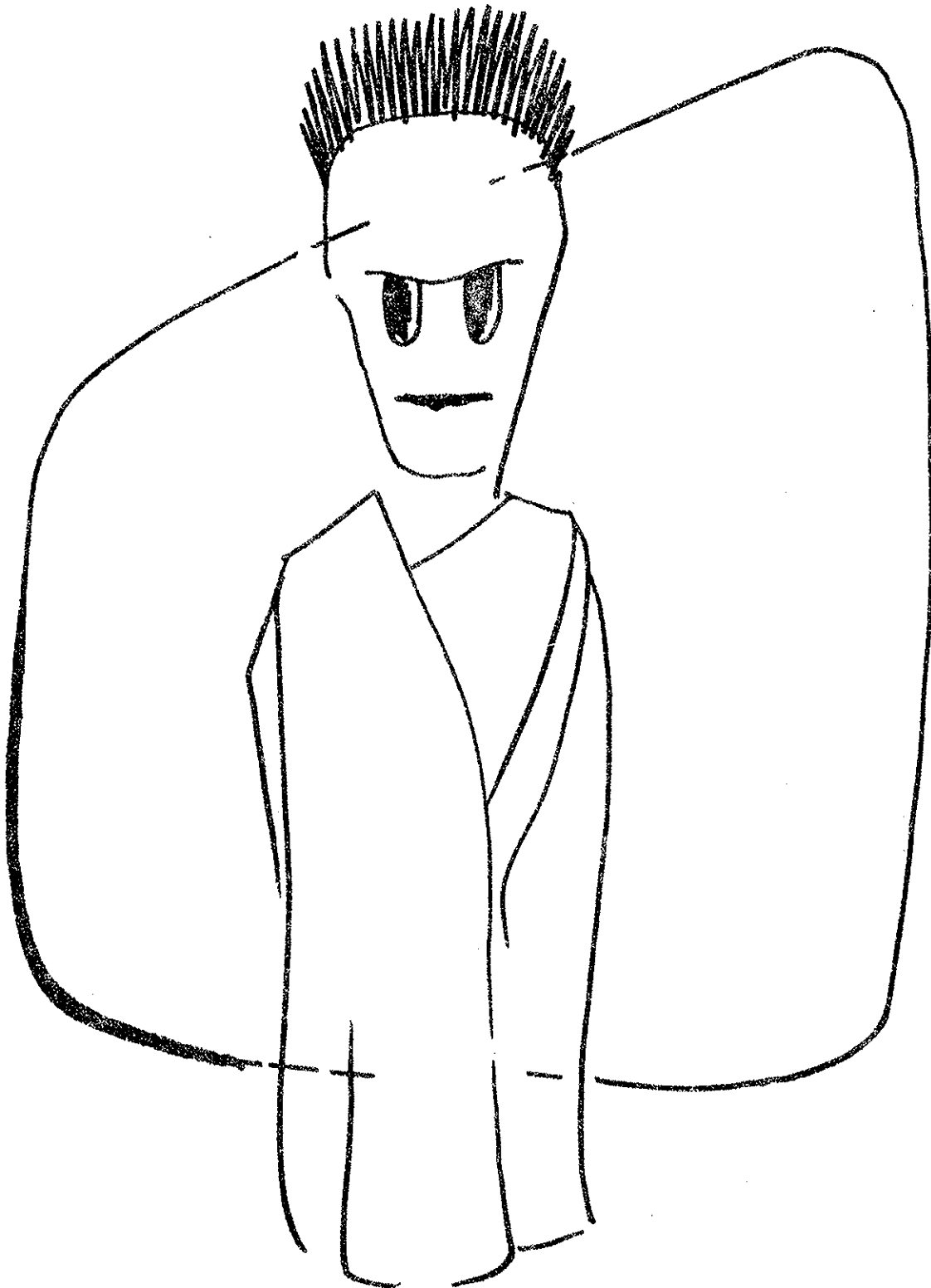
The alien was humanoid, with a huge head, hair standing on end like a halo all around it, no nose and a large red slit for a mouth. The rest of him was covered by a loose robe.

"Just as well," whispered McCoy. "God knows how many arms or legs it has!"

"That picture looks unreal, Captain," said Spock, "more an image than a person."

"It is an image to us, Mr. Spock," argued McCoy.

"I think I see what he means," said Kirk. "Can any alien look like that?"



"Why not?" asked McCoy. "We have seen worse - not much, I admit, but..."

"The eyes lack intelligence, Doctor," said the First Officer.

"A Zombie!" exclaimed Kirk.

"A very apt description, Captain, but appearances can be deceptive."

The message was repeated, and an answer came at last. "So you come in peace, Captain Kirk," said an unexpectedly normal-sounding voice. "What proof have I of this?"

"If it comes to that, what proof have I of your intentions when you

immobilise my ship?"

"Your vessel is in our space, Captain, therefore subject to our laws. We do not know your intentions, and until we do, your ship stays immobilised. Should you wish to leave, however, you will be allowed to."

"Our purpose is to explore space and contact new races, sir, not run away at the slightest obstacle. I am willing to receive a deputation of your people aboard."

"Unacceptable, Captain, you could hold us hostage."

"Trusting, aren't they?" remarked McCoy ironically.

"Like Humans, Doctor," said Spock.

"What do you propose, then?" Kirk asked the alien.

"We have rigid rules concerning possible encounters with aliens. If you wish to pursue the matter of contact with us, we require two of you to take a test."

"What kind of a test?"

"A survival test, Captain, on a planet with a suitable atmosphere and requirements for your race, but no inhabitants."

"What happens to my ship in the meantime?"

"Nothing, it remains where it is."

"If the test fails... "

"The test fails if both people die. If only one survives, the test may be a success and we will consider accepting contact with your Federation. Failure of the test means that your ship is released to leave this area of space, but it will be attacked immediately should it ever return."

"And if we refuse to take the test?"

"You may leave, never to return."

"Then let's leave, Jim," said McCoy. "I don't like all these regulations."

"Mr. Spock?"

"An interesting challenge, Captain, the purpose of which eludes me for the moment."

"Why should they want to know if we are tough?" mused Kirk. "However, I don't fancy reporting to Starfleet that we just turned tail and ran away!" He addressed the alien again. "Could you please give us more specific details about the test?"

"Certainly, Captain Kirk. You select two officers for it, but we have to approve your choice. We send a craft able to carry two people only and it will take them to the planet where the test is to take place. A map of the route to follow will be in the craft. You are not allowed to bring anything with you. Water, suitable food and necessary supplies will be found at your destination. The length of the test is variable, according to the speed of your progress. Should one of you die, his body is to remain on the planet."

"Why?"

"It is one of the rules; you either accept or reject them all, and I warn you, Captain, this survival test is severe and extremely dangerous, with death as the probable outcome. You don't have to agree to it, but once started there is no going back."

"Not very encouraging, are they?" reflected Kirk aloud.

"Captain, I don't think they want us to take the test," said Spock.

"My opinion exactly, Mr. Spock, and the more intriguing!"



"Indeed, sir. Why have tests they don't want aliens to take? Illogical."

"If they reject logic, they must be Human!" remarked McCoy with his usual sarcasm. "But don't let your curiosity run away with you, Jim, we don't have to..."

"Accept? It is our job to investigate - and we have little choice."

"Suppose they just kill you and capture the ship?"

"Why go to all the trouble of getting two officers away if they want my ship? It would hardly make any difference to the outcome. I think they mean what they say."

"I suppose so! Well, you and I had better be the ones to go, Jim."

"Mr. Spock, is there any point in taking a hidden tracking device on us?"

"Negative, Captain, nothing could be detected from the Enterprise beyond that web."

"I thought not. Any comment before I give my answer, Mr. Spock?"

"One thing puzzles me, Captain. Since we were not scanned at all, how do these aliens know our requirements?"

"They may have sensors we could not detect, Mr. Spock."

"A possibility, Captain, even if remote."

"I will ask those aliens if they approve my choice. I'm sorry, Bones, but you are not to accompany me."

"Jim, I volunteered!"

"No doubt all my officers would, Bones..."

"Would they? I wonder! Mr. Spock, do you volunteer?"

"No, Doctor, it is up to the Captain to select the most suitable partner."

"Meaning your..." McCoy started to shout in anger.

"He's right," interrupted Kirk sharply, hiding his surprise. He had expected Spock to volunteer, was the Vulcan just trying to infuriate the Doctor? Pushing speculations aside, he addressed the screen and stated, "My First Officer, Commander Spock, and myself will take the test. Does that meet with your approval?"

"Yes, Captain, very interesting! Tell me, what do you call your races?"

"Mr. Spock is a Vulcan and I am a Terran."

"Thank you, Captain. The craft will collect you in approximately fifteen minutes." The image disappeared, and Kirk turned to his Chief Engineer.

"You have the con, Mr. Scott. If we fail to return, get away from here if you can and report to Starfleet. While you're waiting, work on ways of breaking that force field."

"Yes, sir. Good luck."

\* \* \* \*

Kirk and Spock left the bridge accompanied by McCoy, who let Spock get ahead so as to speak to the Captain alone, and Kirk, intrigued by the manoeuvre, said to his First Officer,

"Will you go and keep a check on the craft's approach, Mr. Spock? I'll join you in a few minutes."

"Yes, sir," replied the Vulcan, disappearing into the control room next to the hangar deck where the open doors awaited the alien vessel.

"Now, Bones, I suppose you're sore because I'm not taking you, but I could only take one..."

"And you chose an alien! Was it wise? In a dangerous situation of that nature, are you sure you can trust him as you would another Earthman? or as you would trust a full-blooded Vulcan? He is both, and an unknown quantity."

So that's it, thought Kirk as his mind relived the recent months since he had taken command of the Enterprise. After the initial difficulties in establishing friendly relations with McCoy, friendship had developed quickly between the Captain and the Doctor, but Kirk had wondered if McCoy resented the Vulcan, even although Spock never intruded whenever the Captain and the Chief Medical Officer spent off-duty time together. Kirk had been glad of another officer's friendship as relief to the loneliness of command. He esteemed and respected the abilities of his First Officer, but was finding it difficult to establish any personal contact with a Vulcan, even although the fact that Spock had already saved his life and proved a very able second made Kirk sure of his loyalty. There were times, however, when the Captain could have screamed at the cold mask to let go of its rigid control if only for one second, but he had controlled such impulses, impressed as he had always been by the unfailing dignity and complete privacy his First Officer maintained; A privacy which must make the Vulcan as lonely as I am, mused Kirk; why not try to alleviate each other's loneliness? But in spite of a few chess games, Kirk had not been able to cross the barrier of Vulcan impassivity to reach whatever was hidden behind it, and by now he was wary of trying. His esteem for his First Officer was growing with each mission and he did not want to upset him, for he was starting to suspect that such fierce desire for privacy and deliberate avoidance of personal contact could hide hurt and a deep reluctance to let the protective mask slip, if it could. McCoy was sure it could not, but tried just the same, without result, which often infuriated the Doctor. Sometimes Kirk could have sworn Spock was amused by his obvious efforts. And why had Spock not volunteered? As defiance to Kirk to choose him? or to anger McCoy? or simply to avoid possible rejection? His answer had been right however, it was up to Kirk to decide, and somehow the Captain had felt no hesitation in his choice.

"Jim!" shouted McCoy with understandable impatience, "What is the matter with you?" He even had to shake the Captain, who came out of his reverie with a start.

"What is it? Has the craft arrived?"

"No, not yet. Will you please tell me why you chose Spock, without going into a trance this time?"

"Look, Bones, he was the logical choice, and... "

"Don't give me logic when your life is bound to be in danger and any injury could need a doctor. The truth is that you want to know what he is made of, if anything, apart from logic, don't you?"

"Not a bad guess, Doctor," smiled Kirk.

"So you will be testing him. If he fails, your life... "

"That's enough, Bones; about his loyalty I have no doubt, and neither have you. He's saved both our lives, remember? And a Vulcan is always loyal."

"I know, but he is part Earthman! And what does life mean to a Vulcan? When we received the message that his Vulcan grandfather had died, he showed no grief."

"No, he didn't," replied Kirk thoughtfully, remembering how he had asked Spock if he wanted compassionate leave and the First Officer had refused, adding in his usual expressionless voice,

"Grief is a personal matter, Captain, and will not affect the discharge of my duties in any way."

That Vulcan will share nothing and show even less, Kirk had thought with some resentment, and yet the Captain could not help feeling increased respect for the rigid control and proud dignity of the alien.

"Don't you dare go into a trance again!" exclaimed McCoy with his usual impatience.

"I was only thinking, Bones, and it is time I came back to the present and the future. Let us join Mr. Spock. You know, somehow I'm looking forward to this double challenge."

Spock appeared at the door of the control room. "The craft is here, Captain."

McCoy accompanied them to the small vessel, and said as they prepared to step inside, "Look after Jim, Mr. Spock, and don't dare come back without him - even if it is logical!"

"You should know better than to say that, Bones," exclaimed Kirk with some anger.

"All right, I didn't mean it," replied the Doctor hastily. "Good luck and come back, both of you."

"We will endeavour to do so, Doctor," said Spock. "I expect we will manage better without your nauseous drugs."

Kirk laughed and waved to McCoy, and followed his First Officer into the alien vessel.

\* \* \* \*

The craft, completely automated, took them through the web and landed on a planet without incident. They had found the map and Spock estimated that the journey would take at least five days and perhaps up to ten, according to the nature of the obstacles, days here lasting twenty hours, nights ten.

"It doesn't look easy, does it, Mr. Spock? There is a large desert area to cross there. Let's go and find what equipment has been provided."

They walked to the place indicated on the map and found some containers for water and food, a couple of ropes and hooks, two knives, lamps and blankets. The planet was pleasant and Earthlike, and having discovered water nearby, they filled two containers then loaded themselves. As they started on the journey, Spock said,

"I do hope you will never regret having chosen me instead of Dr. McCoy, Captain."

"Why should I regret it, Mr. Spock? I have always been glad to have you by my side up to now. Why did you say that?"

"We have no medicine of any kind, sir, and should one of us be injured, we would miss the Doctor."

"Yes, I expect we would, Mr. Spock, but I only had a choice of one and I am sure I shan't regret it."

"Thank you, Captain."

Kirk took the lead in a small lane with a frown. Had he chosen McCoy, Spock would have accepted the Captain's decision without the protests the Doctor had voiced, but would he have been hurt? upset? jealous? or indifferent? Why was the Vulcan so shy of relationship? Why did he keep so aloof? Habit? Well, I have many answers to find, thought Kirk with a sigh.

They found a small wood at the end of the lane and were suddenly attacked on all sides by several animals the size of tigers, but of a bright red colour. Knives were poor weapons, but they managed to put them to flight after suffering only light scratches, and Spock stated, "I should be the one to walk in



front, Captain, I could have sensed these animals."

"Maybe, but animals are not necessarily the next danger we meet, Mr. Spock, so we'll take it in turn. Let's have a short rest first, though." He went towards a small clearing and suddenly disappeared into the ground with a shout. The First Officer approached cautiously and saw a gaping hole.

"Captain, can you hear me? Are you all right?"

"Yes, I fell on soft earth, but I can't climb out, the sides of the hole are also soft earth. It doesn't feel too safe. I think a cave-in occurred, and it could continue."

"I will lower a rope, Captain. I would advise a careful ascent, the strength of the rope is unknown."

"Right, I'll take it easy."

The rope arrived and he tied it round his waist, then started climbing cautiously, getting little help from the crumbling earth on all sides. About half-way up, the top edge of the hole subsided and Kirk felt himself slipping back slowly, but irresistably. He managed to wrap the rope round his wrists to check his fall. He gave a sharp cry of pain that he cut off short as it cut into them, but his fall had been stopped. He heard Spock call,

"Captain, are you all right?"

"Yes, coming up again."

He made it to the top this time and the First Officer helped him away from danger, then Kirk fell gasping on the ground.

"There is a small river nearby, you should bathe those wounds, Captain."

Kirk made it there and drank deeply, then washed his wrists and saw the Vulcan standing by with his hands behind his back. He eyed him suspiciously and asked, "Mr. Spock, what was the rope tied to?"

"Does it matter, Captain?"

"Answer me, what was it tied to?"

"Myself, sir, no tree was near enough."

"I thought so! Let me see those hands."

Reluctantly, Spock brought them into view and Kirk gasped at the sight of the raw burns inflicted by the rope. He tore his shirt and made compresses soaked in water to relieve the burning. Using his shirt again, he then cut strips to make bandages in order to keep infection out if possible, and said with anxiety, "All I can do is bandage them as tightly as possible, Mr. Spock. The rope slithered through your hands as you tried to stop my fall, didn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you helped me up! Those burns are nasty and I only hope they don't become infected."

"Let me bandage your wrists now, Captain."

"It's only deep scratches. Still, you'd better do it as we have nothing against infection."

Spock tore his shirt in turn and Kirk smiled. "I don't think we shall be very smart by the time we finish this test! Those aliens aren't joking, are they, but why?"

"I may have an idea now as to the purpose of this, Captain."

"Out with it, then."

"It is getting dark and we should find food and shelter, Captain. One of those caverns will do, we won't be overheard inside." He indicated a point on their map, near where they were, which had caves marked.

"By whom?"

"Please be patient, Captain."

They found a suitable shelter and gathered some roots and fruits shown on their map as edible, as well as some wood for a fire, then settled to a frugal meal by the heat of the flames and Spock stated,

"We are watched all the time, Captain, by remote control cameras probably, and only inside these caverns can we be sure of not being overheard."

"How do you know?"

"The Zombie image appeared to me after you fell in the hole, sir."

"Oh! What did he say?"

"That you had been careless falling into that trap and that I should go on alone to win."

"Did he now? What did you say?"

"Nothing. There was no logical answer to such an illogical suggestion."

Kirk laughed, just imagining Spock's frozen and disdainful stare.

"After I had lowered the rope," continued the Vulcan, "I asked if they were spying on us all the time, and was told yes, but the caverns were not under watch if we wanted to talk privately."

"How nice of them! Do you believe it?"

"It would be too difficult to instal equipment in all those caverns, sir."

"Yes, I expect you're right. And what is the purpose of this test, then, Mr. Spock?"

"To see if we collaborate fully and help each other in all circumstances?"

"You could be right," said Kirk thoughtfully. "It would indicate that I can trust an alien, and vice versa. Perhaps it is just as well that I picked you!"

"They might have insisted if you had not, Captain."

"Mr. Spock," said Kirk, staring at him with a frown. "Have you wondered why I chose you as partner for this test?"

"The thought had crossed my mind, Captain, and I regret that your choice upset Dr. McCoy."

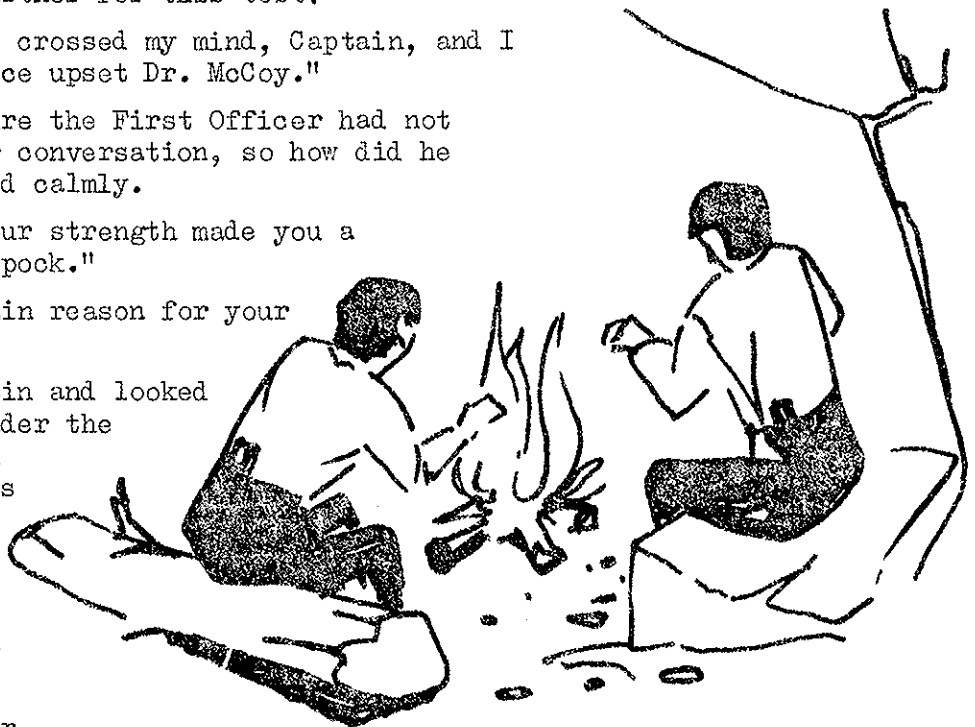
Kirk started, sure the First Officer had not eavesdropped on their conversation, so how did he know? But he answered calmly.

"As a Vulcan, your strength made you a logical choice, Mr. Spock."

"Was that the main reason for your selection, Captain?"

Kirk started again and looked into the dark eyes under the satanic eyebrows with some misgivings. This alien showed him suddenly an insight into Human emotions he had not suspected, but then he was half-Human.

"You're right, Mr. Spock," said Kirk gently.



"I chose you because I hoped we might know each other better by the end of this challenge."

"Quite logical, Captain, you have to be sure of your First Officer. I have little doubt that we shall both come through this private testing."

Kirk started for the third time. "Do you mean to say that you are also testing me?"

"Yes, Captain."

Kirk nodded. "Yes, of course," he said with wry amusement. "Vulcan loyalty... but you have to be sure your Captain is worthy of it - just as I have to be sure of my First Officer."

"You could say that, Captain. May I suggest that we take it in turn to sleep now?"

"Yes, I'll take first watch, you sleep."

The air was cold now that it was dark and Kirk wrapped himself in his blanket and sat by the fire trying to fathom the tonal undercurrents in that last conversation. It sounded almost as if... could it be that Spock was not testing the Captain as a Captain, but as what? as a man?

Kirk's mind cleared as he realised what the Vulcan had meant. His First Officer had never responded to his Captain's friendly advances because they did not know each other. Now was their chance to discover if they could establish contact or friendship, and Kirk understood and no longer resented the Vulcan's testing and even looked forward to what they could discover about each other.

His thoughts were interrupted by a slight noise and he saw that Spock was asleep but going to wake up because of the cold, so he rapidly took his blanket off and put it around the First Officer, trying to avoid the physical contact he knew the alien disliked, but unable to succeed completely. Spock woke up; roused by the touch.

"I will take the watch now, Captain."

"I'm sorry I woke you, Mr. Spock, I tried not to touch you, knowing how distasteful you find it."

"Thank you, Captain. I will keep warm by the fire."

Kirk lay on the ground in his blanket trying to control the hurt he felt at the recoil from him he had sensed in the half-asleep Vulcan. This is carrying privacy rather too far, thought the Captain, tossing about restlessly, and next time you can freeze before I lay one finger on you, Mr. Spock of Vulcan!

Tired of tossing after vain attempts at sleep, Kirk sat up to see Spock's eyes on him and the First Officer said before he could speak,

"Captain, I regret having offended you. There is a very logical reason for our avoidance of physical contact."

"Is there?"

Spock ignored the almost uninterested note in Kirk's voice. "A physical touch enables our telepathic minds to sense strong feelings or emotions. This does not matter between members of a family, but with others... Even though we sense very little this way, it is still an invasion of privacy abhorrent to us where a stranger is concerned."

"I see. It does you credit, but why didn't you ever mention it before instead of having fun made of what some call 'this tribal rite of yours to avoid physical contact'?"

"I tried to explain once, but the result was... It is time you slept, sir, dawn is near."

Spock's voice had taken on the well-known impersonal tone and Kirk felt a well-known frustration. "Mr. Spock, if you never say anything, how do you expect us poor non-telepathic people to learn, to understand? What happened when you explained before? Where was it?"

"It was during my one-year compulsory stage at the Space Science Centre on Earth," replied Spock with obvious reluctance, "and it was not the other students' fault. I could not explain clearly before they thought they understood."

"Understood what?"

"They believed that a simple touch was enough for me to read their thoughts."

"And so they treated you like a leper from then on and it was their turn to recoil from you!" exclaimed Kirk.

"An understandable mistake, Captain. We were all in competition against each other and secrecy about our work was essential."

"Why didn't you explain further?"

"I did not wish to, Captain," replied Spock with an air of finality the Captain understood. Once rejected, the Vulcan would never have tried to be accepted again, preferring loneliness to the company of people who could think of him as a spy on their minds, and it fitted with the proud dignity Kirk had already noticed and admired in his First Officer.

"Before you become overwhelmed by pity for my loneliness, Captain," continued the Vulcan coldly, "may I say that I preferred it that way? I was not in fact lonely, work was my constant companion."

"Mr. Spock," answered Kirk barely, "whatever emotions you inspire in me, I can assure you that pity will never be one of them."

"Thank you, Captain."

Kirk settled back to sleep with a sigh. This challenge had become a double challenge as far as he was concerned, and he wondered if getting to know his First Officer was going to prove as difficult as winning the Zombie's test. But he felt that some progress had been made as he went to sleep at last.

\* \* \* \*

The next day was bright and they were breakfasting from a particularly nourishing nutty fruit when the image of the Zombie appeared.

"Good morning, Captain, Commander. This planet's diet offers you roots and fruits, and also meat if you care to catch and kill the small animals pictured on your map route."

"Thank you," said Kirk politely, "but these fruits are adequate and I can forego meat for a few days. We have better things to do than hunt."

"As you wish."

"I have a complaint, however."

"What is it, Captain?"

"Why were you trying to make my First Officer leave me in that hole?"

"Why should it worry you, Captain? If you thought he could leave you, would you have chosen him as partner?"

The image disappeared and Kirk laughed. "They don't give anything away! Well, what's ahead of us now, Mr. Spock? Monsters?"

"I don't know, Captain, but today's map looks like the final year's endurance tests at the Space Academy."

"That bad? Better get started then."

They took adequate fruits and water as well as the other equipment shared between them and started on the route which soon stopped being a pleasant country walk. The first obstacle was a torrent, over which a rickety bridge of thin wood swayed.

"This does not look safe," said Kirk, eyeing the structure dubiously.

"The wood is broken in several places, Captain."

Kirk tied a hook at the end of one of their ropes and threw it at the bridge, then both he and Spock pulled hard and the bridge collapsed.

"Logical," said Spock. "We have to cross by our own means."

"Not swimming, that's for sure! Could we make a bridge, Mr. Spock, using these creepers as rope?"

"It seems so, Captain, a cross on the map indicates a cache of tools."

They set to work and spent the next few hours sawing and tying branches. They worked quickly and efficiently, as befitted senior officers of Starfleet, and enjoying the change of work from Starship routine. Kirk admired silently the effortless Vulcan strength of his First Officer whose lithe frame hid such controlled energy. One thing he did not have to worry about with a Vulcan partner was overtiring him!

"If only McCoy could see me!" exclaimed Kirk, wiping the perspiration from his forehead. "He said I needed physical exercise or my muscles would run to fat."

"Such an occurrence seems a very remote possibility, Captain, and out of keeping with your character."

"Why?"

"Because you are energetic, a man of action."

"I would not be Starship Captain if I was not!..This bridge is a work of art if I say so myself, Mr. Spock."

"We would get full marks at the Space Academy," agreed the Vulcan. "I suggest we have enough length to throw it across now."

"Yes, and I hope I have enough energy left!"

"I regret I can't offer..."

"Of course not, with those hands! You did most of the heavy work carrying, so let me do my share."

He threw the large hook and rope to the other side of the torrent and they tested the hold, then Kirk glided across to receive and fix the bridge end firmly, then came back to help Spock complete their work, after which the crossing was only a matter of minutes.

The route now took them through thick forest. They had to hack their way through at times, then they had to swim quite a distance across a lake, but neither of these obstacles presented any difficulties, even if they were starting to feel very tired. But Kirk felt increasing optimism.

"Those Zombies did not take our training into account, Mr. Spock. However I see we have a deep ravine to cross next, and as we're getting tired, we'd better stop for the day and tackle this tomorrow."

They were not far from the obstacle and walked to it, observing that the ravine was so deep they could not see the bottom.

"Not much hope of rescue if we fall down there," remarked Kirk drily.

A large smooth tree trunk provided a possible way across and they could see no fault with it as Kirk added, "Might as well make sure of its strength now."

They threw large stones at it and the bridge did not budge. "Good, building more bridges would be monotonous! Let's find shelter for the night, Mr. Spock, there's only about an hour of daylight left at most."

"Captain, I don't think we should stay here, we should cross the ravine now."

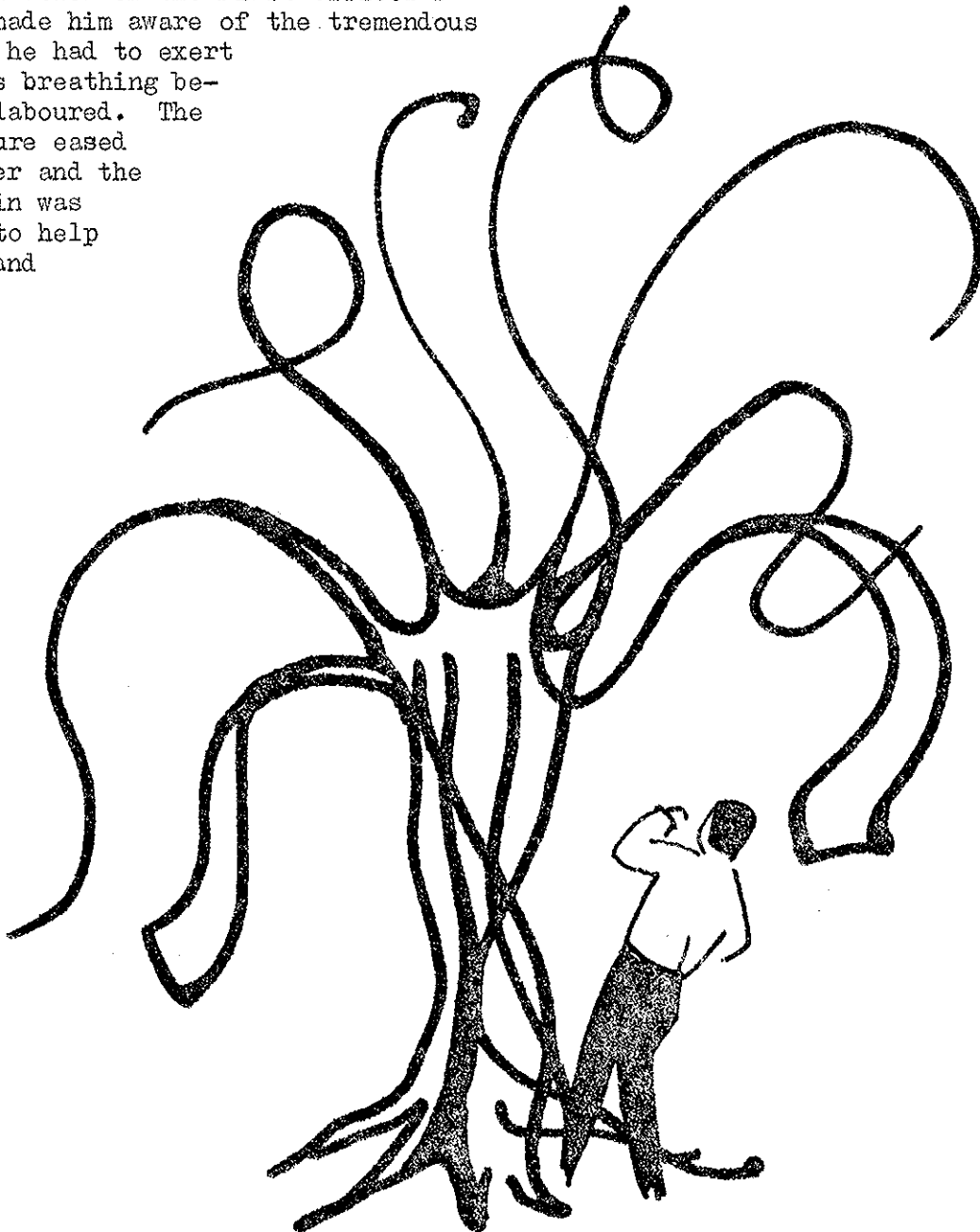
"Why? We're very tired..."

"I am sure we are being stalked, Captain, some beast, I believe."

"Have you sensed it for long?"

"No. It's possible that the noise we made hitting the tree trunk attracted ... Captain, look out!"

Kirk did not have time to heed the warning as two wide tentacles, more like two planks of wood, seized him, fitting across his body back and front, then squeezed hard. He fought the increasing pressure to little avail and his breathing became painful. He felt the Vulcan close to one side and his breathing eased as Spock applied all his strength to pushing the two plank-like tentacles away from his Captain. Kirk could help little at first and the perspiration on the First Officer's face made him aware of the tremendous force he had to exert as his breathing became laboured. The pressure eased further and the Captain was able to help then and





managed to extract himself from the vice-like grip, after which they ran away from the strange beast whose speed fortunately did not equal their own.

They both fell to the ground under the weight of exhaustion, keeping a wary eye out for more moving trees, and Spock stated,

"We can't stay here, sir, we must cross. That beast may not be alone."

"We have no choice, but in the exhausted state we're in... "

"Sir, I doubt that I could be of further assistance against those things... "

Had he not been so tired, Kirk would have smiled; assistance indeed, Spock had done all the pushing!

"There are no caverns nearby, Captain, therefore no shelter."

"I had noticed, Mr. Spock. We'd better get on with the crossing," replied Kirk wearily.

"It is logical, sir," said the Vulcan as they walked to the bridge.

"What is?"

"The test becoming harder and harder. Worse is probably to come."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Spock, but such encouragement I could do without!"

"It was not meant as encouragement, sir, but a statement of fact, and I don't understand... "

"Never mind, forget it!" said Kirk, controlling a surge of anger with difficulty, anger which was due to his exhaustion, as he very well knew. "We cross one after the other, Mr. Spock. I'll go first and you wait until I reach the other side, then come across too. The tree trunk being smooth, we can tie a noose around it and around us, so that if one falls, he will only fall the length of the rope and be able to climb back to the bridge. If this happens, whoever is on solid ground can throw his own rope to help if necessary."

Kirk straddled the trunk and started the crossing, pushing the noose in front of him and glad of the other one around his chest. The smoothness of the bridge made crossing quite fast, but the danger of slipping off existed. He was about half-way when he heard a noise and looked back to see his First Officer fighting one of the tree-like beasts, whose tentacles however looked different, long and thin, and he realised they were the ones used for victims who were not nearby; the two planks were ready and waiting by the beast.

"Hold on, I'm coming back," he shouted, slipping the noose under him and turning his body towards the struggle.

"No, neither of us will cross if you come back, Captain, so it would be illogical."

"You would bring logic into this, wouldn't you?" replied Kirk irritably, trying to hurry as he saw how near the edge of the ravine the fight was. Spock was now throwing stones at the beast while managing to keep out of reach of the tentacles, and a particularly large stone probably hit a sensitive spot as the tree-beast stopped all movements.

"Throw your rope to me and cross, Mr. Spock," shouted Kirk. "Hurry, that beast won't follow."

It must have been a logical order, thought Kirk wryly as he caught the rope he knew had already been round his First Officer's chest in readiness. The Vulcan started to cross with an agility and speed which reassured the Captain, but the beast was moving again and showing signs of rage at its victim escaping. Kirk saw it threaten a last blow to Spock with its longest tentacle.

"Watch out, hold on tight!" he shouted, hastily putting the noose around himself; there was no time to undo it and put it around the tree trunk, and it was a miracle the rope happened to have a noose this end too. The vicious blow struck Spock's head and he went limp, then his body fell from the bridge. The Captain braced himself for the strain, and a choked scream escaped him as the weight slammed him to the tree trunk while the rope cut into him and impaired his breathing. Gripping the trunk with his legs as firmly as he could, he eased the strain with his two hands on the rope, and managed to make it slide a little further round him, allowing him to breathe easier.

"Are you all right, Mr. Spock?" he asked anxiously, his voice still sounding choked.

"I was only stunned for a moment, Captain."

He was interrupted by a loud noise and the tree trunk vibrated and shook. The beast was hammering at it to make the two men fall. That is all we need, thought Kirk as he fought to hang on to the smooth surface.

"Captain," said Spock's voice from under. "I have no knife or other implement to cut the rope. Can you do it your end?"

"Why should I cut the rope? Are you mad? Come up and join me... It's an order."

"I regret that I cannot comply, sir."

"Why not?"

"The injuries to my hands, apart from a general lowering of my strength due to recent events, make it impossible for me to climb the rope, sir, so the only logical solution is for you to cut the rope and save yourself."

"Blast your logic, Mr. Spock," croaked Kirk in a rage. "I have enough to contend with at the moment without your throwing logic at me on top of everything!"

The vibrations and shaking of the tree were making his head ache and he desperately tried to see a way out when the image of the Zombie appeared.

"Have you come to help?" asked Kirk hopefully.

"We cannot help, Captain. It is against the rules."

"Then what are you doing here? Being ghoulish?" asked Kirk, his patience running out fast.

"We deplore your plight, Captain, and assure you that even if your Commander dies, you can win the test."

"Never mind about your fiendish test! Can't you make an exception and help?"

"No. You should heed your Commander's suggestion, Captain."

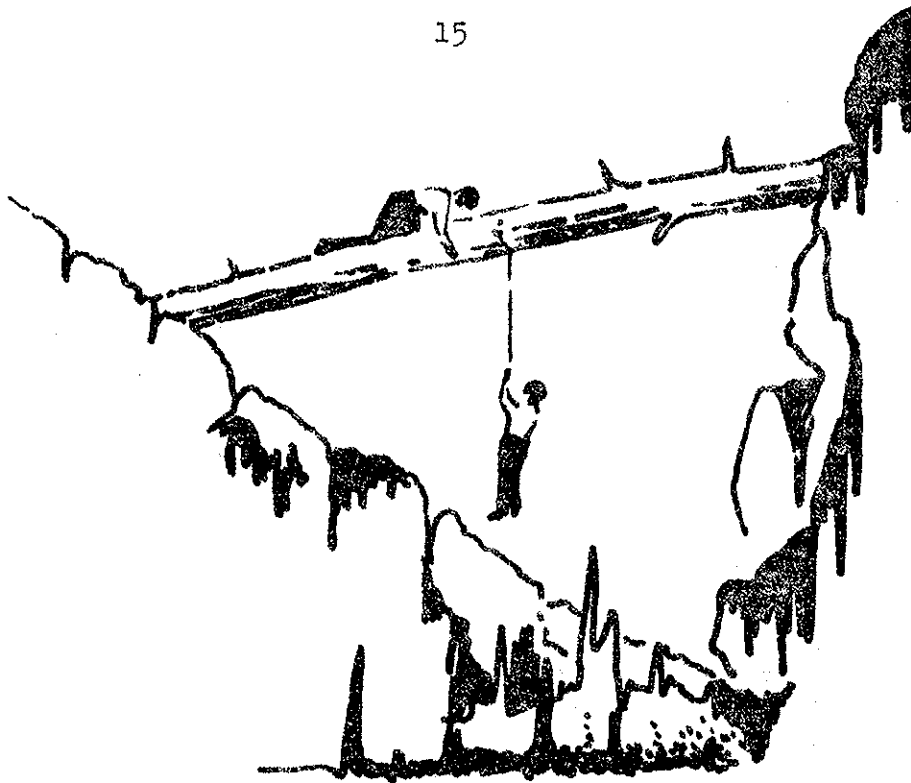
"And you should go to hell!" Kirk managed to shout, now fed up to the teeth with the aliens, "you make me sick! If that is how you would behave in my place, you are even worse than you look, Zombie. Go away, can't you see I'm busy?"

The image disappeared and Kirk noticed that the shaking had stopped at last. He managed a look at the shore and saw no sign of the beast; it must have become fed up too.

"Mr. Spock," he called down, "I will untie my rope and lower it to you, then you should be able to get up helping with your legs, and the second rope will ease the strain on me, too, as it is tied to the trunk."

"Captain, your security will be impaired, if I have the two ropes. How will you stay on the tree?"

"Like a monkey, with my arms and legs. My grandfather used to tell me



I was a direct descendant from monkeys."

He was lowering the rope and heard Spock murmur, "That is an odd coincidence."

"What is?"

"My Vulcan grandfather used to tell me I also resembled a species of small mammal similar to Earth monkeys."

Kirk mastered the impulse to laugh - his position was too precarious for that!

"Captain, this is illogical," added Spock. "You can save yourself if you leave me..."

"Mr. Spock, one more word about logic and you are on a charge! Come on up, and that's an order."

"I will endeavour to comply, sir."

Kirk helped as much as he could and was relieved to see the Vulcan manage the climb and finally settle on the relative safety of the trunk. The First Officer did not look well, a gash on his forehead and his face strained by exhaustion, while the Captain did not dare look at his hands. They managed the rest of the crossing relatively easily compared to the previous ordeal, and collapsed on the ground at last in sheer exhausted relief.

"You should have left me, Captain," murmured Spock.

"Not that again! Look, would you have left me?"

"An illog... I mean, an unreasonable question, sir."

"Why?"

"Because I gave an oath to assist you at all times."

"And you think a Captain has the right to abandon his men? If I had left you, it would have been murder! Who do you think I am, Mr. Spock?" asked Kirk in anger.

"A very emotional man, Captain," replied the Vulcan with a strange half-smile Kirk looked at in wonder, a smile which made his eyes alive and warm, but hardly touched his features.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock, even if I am not sure whether you complimented or insulted me!"

"I was stating a fact, sir, and another fact is that I am putting myself on a charge."

"Whatever for?"

"The likelihood of my being able to obey your order concerning the mention of logic is so remote that it becomes logical to anticipate the charge."

Kirk refrained from bursting into laughter with great difficulty, and thought he perceived an answering gleam in the Vulcan gaze. "We'll forget about that order then, Mr. Spock, and about the charge. Night isn't far off; we'd better see to food and shelter, and forget about going back for any equipment."

"Unnecessary, sir, there is another cache marked on the map nearby."

They found the usual supplies of containers, knives, lamps, blankets, ropes and hooks and gathered fruits hurriedly, then discovered a suitable cavern without any trouble and settled for the night by the warm fire after Kirk had done what he could to clean and bandage Spock's hands, relieved that no sign of infection was apparent.

"I don't think I like those Zombies," said Kirk as they ate their meal.

"Any specific reason or just an emotional reaction, Captain?"

"That Zombie urged me to go on and leave you!"

"Part of the test, perhaps, Captain, to see if winning was a temptation either of us might not resist."

"But he didn't help, you could have died!"

"I would have, had I been carrying my knife."

He means it, thought Kirk, both moved by the willing sacrifice and appalled by such a cold acceptance of death. Anger seized him at the idea of the near tragedy and he seized his First Officer's shoulder in a fierce grip.

"Look, Mr. Spock, I will not have you commit suicide even for a logical reason! We both made it, therefore it would have been illogical. Anyway, I need you to complete this test, so in future you will not commit suicide unless on my specific order, is that clear?"

"Quite clear, Captain, I shall await your order."

Kirk saw the smile in the Vulcan's eyes and smiled back, then took his hand away and turned the talk to their respective grandfathers who called them both monkeys. The Captain was pleased when his own reminiscence brought some from his First Officer and he listened with interest to Vulcan legends Spock remembered hearing from his grandfather.

"He died not long ago, didn't he?"

"Yes, Captain, and had I been able to get to Vulcan while he was still alive, I would have accepted your offer of leave. It was a great loss to the family. I remember him as gentle and helpful, always seeing me as his Vulcan grandson, not as a half-Earthman."

"Weren't you considered as Vulcan?" asked Kirk curiously.

"It was easier after my seventh birthday. From then on I had chosen to be a Vulcan and proved to myself that I was my father's son. It is late, Captain, we both need rest."

Disappointed, Kirk however accepted the end of talk and insisted on taking first watch, pacing the cavern lost in thought about the kind of childhood Spock had. An easy guess was that it could not have been easy; had he ever

been accepted by anyone for what he was, half-Vulcan and half-Earthman? If Vulcan rejected him and Earth rejected him, thought Kirk with a shudder, no wonder such a child had chosen Vulcan as a protective shell against a loneliness I can only guess the extent of! And no wonder his First Officer remained impervious to anything and anyone - or did he? He had smiled twice, a hopeful sign that perhaps Kirk would get through to the being hidden by the impassive mask one day!

\* \* \* \*

The next morning saw them get up rested and ready to resume their journey, which was not very promising, involving a very large desert area. They took a minimum of food and as much water as they could carry and set off for the trip which they estimated would last three days.

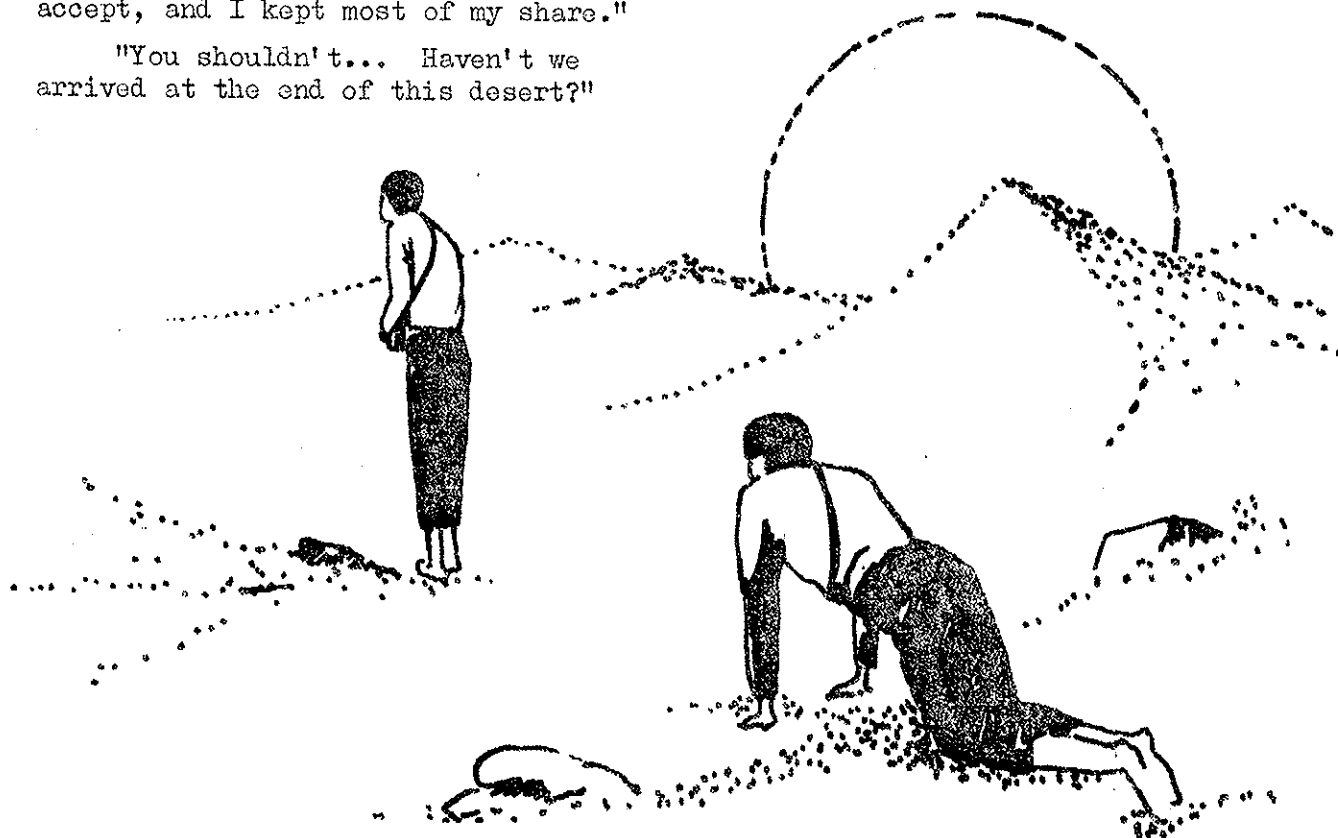
After a few hours in the blistering heat, they made protective turban hats out of their trousers, and their skin glistened with perspiration. Night brought little relief and after two days, the food had gone and the water was nearly exhausted. Spock was more able to bear the intrusive heat, being half-Vulcan, but Kirk was finding the journey a nightmare. Sunburn was an added torment to him.

A sandstorm did not help. They found no shelter and their skin became sore and inflamed by the sand, giving them the sensation of being on fire, and increasing their desire for water ten-fold. By the time the storm was over, the water was long finished. They were well into the fourth day and Kirk collapsed gasping for a drink he knew would never come, his eyes, nose and mouth inflamed by sand. He thought he was dreaming when he felt liquid trickling into his mouth, and swallowed avidly in a desperate need for survival. But sanity soon returned and he pushed the water away, looking up at his First Officer with a weak attempt at anger.

"It is yours... Why... "

"Captain, I can manage without water for longer than you, a psychological fact we both have to accept, and I kept most of my share."

"You shouldn't... Haven't we arrived at the end of this desert?"



"Captain, I regret to have to report that we are lost."

"Lost? How? You did most of the map-reading!"

"I accept full responsibility, Captain. Either my eyesight is failing, which I doubt, or the map was wrong, to prolong the journey and make the test harder, even make us fail altogether."

"The sandstorm did not help either! Don't blame yourself, Mr. Spock, those aliens are fiends determined to see us fail."

"It is my belief that they have a special dislike or grudge against you, Captain, the reason for which I can't fathom."

"Neither can I! I've never met a Zombie before to my knowledge! Why did you say that?"

"This test across a desert indicates that you have been chosen as the logical victim, or at least the first one."

"Let's go on," Kirk muttered. He was suddenly extremely determined to disappoint the aliens. "Your water revived me, we can go on and navigate by the sun, I presume?"

"That is all we can do, Captain, and hope this desert finishes soon."

\* \* \* \*

They lost notion of time as they trudged on and on over the burning sand. Kirk's physical stamina and endurance were exceptional, but he had to accept Spock's help and could not stop him from giving all the water to his Captain, and he read the anxiety in the Vulcan's eyes which meant the supply was now definitely exhausted.

"Had we crossed a glacier instead of a desert, Captain, I would be the one in your position," said the Vulcan as he helped Kirk to walk on. Kirk smiled gratefully and felt less bad about being a burden, making himself go on by sheer will power.

But the time came when he collapsed and just could not go on, his whole body burning and his mind delirious as he kept seeing mirages of shimmering water. He even thought he heard voices and tried to understand what they were saying, but could not. Night brought some relief from the direct sun-heat and he came back to reality with the shocked awareness that he was alone. He could not shout, but managed to croak his First Officer's name several times, in vain. He was alone. His mind nearly snapped under the stress, refusing to accept the idea of Spock's betrayal, when a light appeared and he saw the familiar image of the Zombie.

"Your First Officer left you to die, Captain, water is a powerful incentive to a thirsty man. You would have done the same in his place."

Would I? thought Kirk in a nightmare of pain and shock.

"No, I would not," he managed to whisper, "and he didn't leave me to die, he did not..."

"You are alone and dying, Captain; you should not have trusted an alien, an emotionless Vulcan who thought it logical to leave you and finish the test alone."

"He did not..." protested Kirk weakly. Then a horrible idea seized him and he gasped, "Is he dead? Did you hide his body?"

"No, Captain. Accept the truth. Someone had to win the test. He could not save you, so he saved himself. It was logical."

This shocked Kirk into even forgetting his thirst for a moment as he croaked, "Go to hell! That's where you belong! Mr. Spock did not betray me! If he's not here he must be dead. I am dying too, and have no wish to die in front of ghouls like you!"



The Zombie disappeared and Kirk's mind sank into delirium again, a delirium where he still refused to accept Spock's betrayal, but he was becoming too weak to fight the gnawing doubt that the Zombie could have told the truth. When the night was over, the sun soon appeared again and Kirk passed out under the renewed heat.

\* \* \* \*

Some kind of impact he did not know the nature of made him come to. He was on Vulcan, aged seven years, and travelling across a Vulcan desert for a test. He was that Vulcan!

I never imagined that dying involved such vivid hallucinations, thought Kirk, and why hallucinations about Vulcan when I am an Earthman? Or was he? He was both an Earthman and a seven-year-old Vulcan boy! I heard of schizophrenics at birth, exclaimed Kirk mentally, but at death? Perhaps I am going mad!

Whatever was happening he could do nothing about, so he let the hallucinations take their course, his mind too weak to fight them or understand what was going on; whatever it was, it was better than dying of thirst! He also had the fleeting notion that he was not alone, but enclosed in a sanctuary where a gentle hand was guiding and helping him. Who could have believed that death was so strange? Try as he might, his enfeebled mind could not grasp at the truth or understand the process, so he stopped trying, resigned himself to being a schizophrenic and followed the visions whenever he could.

The hallucinations kept changing, sometimes very quickly, sometimes more slowly. He was coming back from school on Vulcan after a particularly harrowing day and desperately fighting tears a Vulcan would not shed. Then comfort appeared, his mother! He could only see her vaguely, but she was there, and yet he must not go to her or he would cry. But if he did not go to her, she would be hurt! Kirk experienced the double agony of not only having to refuse the comfort offered, but also of having to appear to accept it while violently quashing all emotions in order to avoid the unheard of disgrace of crying.

It was with relief that Kirk saw the hallucination fade; he would not forget that tearing apart feeling in a hurry! Then he sensed a sorrow he could not understand the nature of, but it was so painful that he tried to escape the agonising knowledge that he would always be alone. A lost brother? But he had a brother! He was not alone, he shouted in his mind as he ran and ran, trying to escape the unbearable truth.

Again Kirk experienced relief to see the vision changing; he was now at school on Earth, facing a bunch of hostile Earth children shouting, "We know it was you! You have strange powers like the devil himself. We can't fight your ways taught by Satan, but you'll pay. To Coventry!" The cry, taken up like a chant, hurt Kirk's ears. He was innocent, but kept silent, an already stoic and dignified silence which infuriated the Earth children further, then the images faded.

Other hallucinations followed in quick succession, many of which he would not see clearly because his exhausted mind could not concentrate for long. He saw a fleeting image of a tall distinguished Vulcan, his father he admired so much who would one day be proud of him, followed by a glimpse of home on Vulcan, and the Vulcan Science Academy on graduation day with his father very proud of him. Then there was some conflict, but the jumble of thoughts and images was such that he did not try to sort them out, he was too tired - so tired it was a relief to become unconscious.

When he came to, he felt cool and comfortable, so he was still hallucinating. His eyes opened to meet the familiar Vulcan dark eyes and slanting eye-brown, and he swallowed the water trickling into his mouth, surprised when he did not cough.

"I am no hallucination, Captain," said Spock, "and you can drink normally

if you wish. You have been taking water since yesterday."

"You came back... "

"Did you think I would not, Captain?"

"I didn't know what happened, that Zombie... I never believed you left me, not while I was myself..." stammered Kirk, still dazed.

"I understand, sir, strange thoughts can occur during fever of delirium. Did you say the Zombie came to you?"

"Yes, to make me admit your betrayal! Could I have a drink, please?" He swallowed thirstily, then accepted the fruits Spock handed him and sat up with his help, sighing with the newly-found feeling of well-being. "Now tell me what happened, Mr. Spock."

"Yes, Captain. When you could not go on, I tried to carry you, but was unable to, my strength had also been eroded. I was deliberating what to do when the Zombie appeared and recited the usual string of illogicalities about winning alone, then said that if I left you, I would find a route to the end of the desert. I tried to tell you I would come back, but you could not hear and haste was essential, so I left at as fast a pace as I could muster and arrived at the edge of the desert where I found a water hole. I travelled back with the water and helped you here."

A precise account which leaves out all the harrowing details, thought Kirk, conscious of the extreme limits of endurance his First Officer had gone to in order to get back and help him to safety. Looking out of the cavern he was sitting near the entrance of, he saw trees and vegetation.

"This is no water hole surely?"

"No, sir, we are out of the desert altogether. There was no shelter before this, and as I was in no state to keep constant watch while you rested, I preferred to reach safety before..."

Before you collapsed, Kirk nearly said aloud, but he refrained, not wishing to embarrass the Vulcan, and asked instead, "What were those hallucinations, I wonder?"

"Forget them, Captain, you were delirious."

"Was I? Mr. Spock, what happened?"

His First Officer looked away and murmured, "I would rather not say, sir."

Kirk, remembering some vivid images he now understood could not possibly have come from his mind, exclaimed, "The mind meld, of course!"

"Captain," said Spock in a strange voice, betraying some concern for the first time since Kirk knew him, "I realise that I had no right to merge minds without your permission. It was a direct violation of our ethics. But my physical strength was below par and I could not carry you all that way, so I had to..."

His voice petered out and Kirk understood what it had cost the Vulcan to sacrifice the privacy of his own mind in order to save him. "It was the logical thing to do, Mr. Spock, and I am glad you did, or I would not have been alive now."

"I will of course erase all memories of the hallucinations - as you call them, sir..."

"No!" exclaimed Kirk. Then he added with some embarrassment, "I remember only small things, and I would rather keep the memories of what I glimpsed, if you don't mind, Mr. Spock."

"I don't mind, Captain. The meld was erratic and patchy, due to our poor state of health, and I had to try and keep your mind off your painful condition. I assure you I kept the linkage to the minimum and did not attempt to see more

of your mind than I could help."

"I hadn't thought of that!" said Kirk with a start, wondering what the Vulcan had seen.

He looked at the First Officer and was for once able to read fear in his eyes, fear that Kirk would be revolted by the intrusion of an alien into his privacy.

Vivid memories of the Vulcan mind he had shared flooded the Captain's mind. Now that he was in full possession of his faculties, Kirk could understand many of the things he had seen and felt, and he knew the meld had been an experience he would not forget, aware as he now was that their two minds had found something in the merging, something Kirk had no hesitation in recognising as friendship. He had absolutely no doubt that he could trust that alien never to reveal or even mention to him what he had seen. A door had opened between them, through which they had glimpsed each other's true selves, and Kirk for one was not going to slam that door into Spock's face. Friendship had taken root and for his part he sincerely hoped that it would flourish.

He had sensed more about Spock's childhood than anything else, he reflected further, perhaps a deliberate attempt by the Vulcan to keep him from present thoughts, but it had not obscured what Spock was like. The fact that the Vulcan child he had suffered with had become his First Officer through sheer will power and an iron determination, a determination which resembled his own, made him fully aware of the First Officer's value. Many Earthmen in his place would have gone pshcho or turned to crime! Kirk looked forward to perhaps compensating for some of his fellow men's lack of trust toward an alien whose dignity and courage he had already admired, but whose gentleness he had not suspected, a gentleness that was shy of being further hurt, and the pervading loneliness he had seen borne with such courage and pride was never deserved.

"Sorry, Spock," said Kirk, dropping the 'Mr.' for the first time, "I was 'in a trance' as McCoy would say! You have more patience than he has, and did not shake me out of it."

"Your silence had a purpose I respected, Captain."

A friend who even respects your silence is definitely worth having, thought Kirk with a further smile as he said, deliberately putting his hand on the Vulcan's shoulder so that he could sense the truth of his words,

"Whatever happened between us, Spock, I don't want to forget any of it, and whatever you saw in my mind, I don't want you to forget any of it either. I have no fear of telepathy when it is handled by someone like you, and in a similar situation, don't hesitate to use the mind meld again; you have my full permission. You saved my life, so wouldn't it be illogical of me to object?"

"Yes, Captain, it would," replied Spock, the fear in his eyes now replaced by the half smile, "and you can be very logical! We have been resting for over a day now, so if you feel strong enough, there is a lake nearby for swimming."

"Water!" exclaimed Kirk with true exhilaration. "Come on, let's enjoy it and forget that awful test for a while."

They ran out of the cavern to be confronted by the Zombie image who started to say, "Captain, Commander, the test..."

"Who cares about your test?" Kirk exclaimed. "I have just ordered a holiday for my First Officer and myself, which does not include any test. Why don't you heed my words, and go to hell where you belong?"

"Rudeness will hardly..." the Zombie started to say.

"Captain," interrupted Spock, "let him talk to himself, only a Zombie could listen to as much illogicality as this one has produced."

Kirk laughed and they plunged into the water, taking no further notice of

the Zombie who disappeared when deprived of an audience.

\* \* \* \*

That evening as they shared the usual frugal meal in the cavern where they had found renewed supplies, Kirk was aware of the new ease and relaxation they now felt in each other's company. He had stopped wondering about Spock, and probably vice versa, thought Kirk, munching a particularly tasty root, their private test was over and he looked forward to the future which could only confirm and reinforce the friendship. One thing he would learn a lot about was logic, and he nearly smiled at the reflection. He had resented, for instance, Spock pointing out that he was probably the aliens' earmarked victim to die in the desert, and it had been stupid to feel resentment when at the same time the Vulcan had been determined to see the aliens fail.

Spock had respected his silence and Kirk knew it would be a feature of their friendship, the ability to share silence as well as words, if it was logical! The Captain was tired and did not try to hide a yawn.

"I'll sleep soundly tonight, Spock, but you will wake me up to take my share of the watch. That's an order."

"Yes, Captain."

\* \* \* \*

It was bright sunlight which woke Kirk and he got up angrily. "I'll make that Vulcan regret disobeying orders just to let me sleep! As though he did not need rest too, the stubborn..."

His voice petered out when he saw his First Officer lying by the entrance. He ran to him and was alarmed when his hand touched an icy cold Vulcan hand. Dragging Spock into hot sunshine and taking care to put his head in the shade took only a minute, and Kirk started shaking him, to no avail. Shouting into his ear had no effect either, and only the faint beating of the Vulcan heart reassured Kirk a little. After further attempts at revival, without success, he felt helpless and for the first time missed McCoy. His First Officer's body was much warmer now, though, even hot. A fever? He ran to the lake and came back with some water he bathed Spock's face with, then he tried to make him drink, and the Vulcan coughed and his eyes opened.

Relieved at first, Kirk felt renewed fear when he noticed how difficult they found it to focus, and how lustreless they were.

"Spock, tell me what's wrong, please!" he begged as he gripped the Vulcan's hand, a hand nearly healed, so it was not a case of infection.

"Don't blame yourself, Captain," replied the First Officer in such a weak voice that Kirk could only just hear it. "There is... nothing you can do... I believe... we were meant to die... on this planet... the Zombies expected it... You are the one who should live... save yourself... the ship... I am ... expendable..."

"You're not," shouted Kirk, his voice a mixture of anger, fear and emotion, "I need you alive, not dead! and so does the ship! Spock, listen to me. With time the crew will know and trust you, extend the hand of friendship - and I am ashamed that few Earthmen did before!"

"You did... Jim... Thank you... I regret the wasted time... when I trusted the Captain... but not... the man and his emotions... You passed the test..."

"And so did you," said Kirk in a choked voice.

"Thank you," he heard the Vulcan say faintly, then Spock's eyes shut and the voice added with a last effort, "I regret having... disobeyed your order ... Captain."

His hand went limp and Kirk bent over and heard the beating of his heart, but the First Officer was unconscious. What had he meant by 'disobeying'?

The Zombie was to give him the answer as it appeared. "Commander Spock is dying, Captain; it was his decision."

"What?" shouted Kirk in shocked disbelief.

"He did not tell you then? Interesting! He was offered a route out of the desert to save himself, but warned that the first water he found, while harmless to you, would poison his Vulcan blood either through drinking or through the wounds on his hands, and he would die. He gave no heed to the warning in order to save you. Had he gone on to this lake, he would have lived, but you would have died - he would have got back to you too late."

Kirk turned his back on the Zombie to hide his shocked grief, he was not going to give that monster the satisfaction of seeing it! And Spock did not even tell me, reflected Kirk, wiping his eyes. If it had been a bluff from the Zombie, I would never have known that he chose to die instead of me! But then that is the kind of man he is, and he is not dead yet! He turned back to the Zombie and forgot pride to beg,

"I am willing to concede defeat in the test if that is what you want, and order my ship away, but please let me contact the Enterprise, get a doctor to save my First Officer."

"To contact your vessel through the web is impossible, Captain, but you can save Commander Spock."

"Why didn't you say so, your fiendish alien?" shouted Kirk, his voice full of exasperation and hatred. "How can I save him?"

"Under the white stone on the right of your cavern, you will find a map. It will show you a route to an underground cave where the water from the spring will save Commander Spock's life, if combined with the pollen from a giant red flower you will find on your way back."

"What is this?" asked Kirk in bewilderment, "a quest for the Holy Grail? or the Golden Fleece? Any monster with many heads?"

"Only six, Captain. Most giant red flowers have a parasitic six-headed insect you will have to dispose of. You have two days, after which Commander Spock will die."

"Look," asked Kirk suspiciously, "how do you know when he will live or die? How do you know that queer mixture from a legend will save him? Aren't you just trying to kill me with these further tests? What if I refuse?"

"You are free to refuse, Captain, but we have not lied to you. Commander Spock dies in two days unless you save him by the method described. It is up to you."

"I have little choice, have I? And I suppose I will die if I touch something or other?"

"No, Captain, the sting from the insect you will fight is not poisonous, and the giant red flower burns the skin, but it is not fatal."

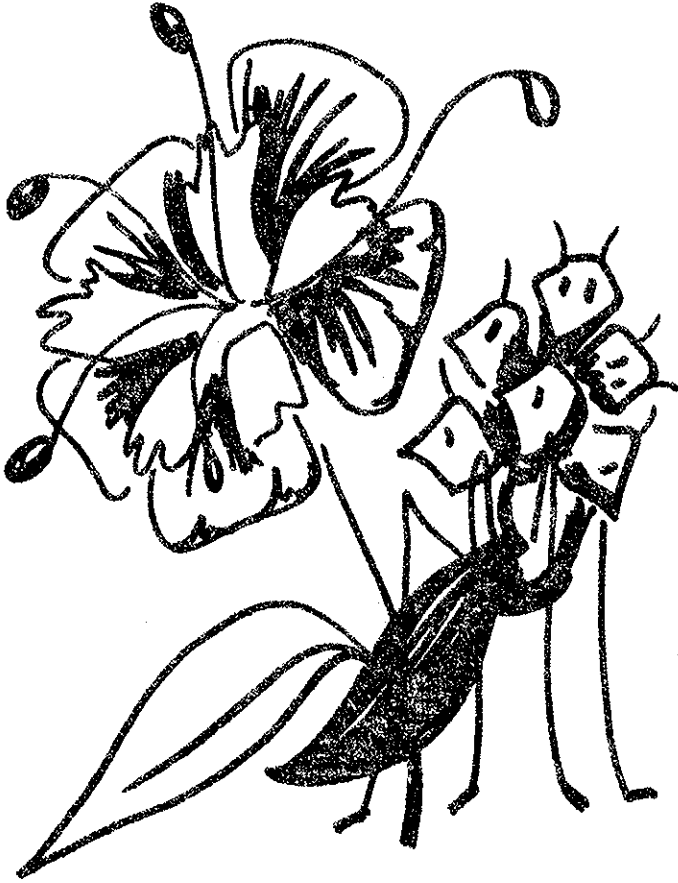
"Thanks! I am not sure I believe all that, but I have only two days and had better get going. Who will look after Spock?"

"Settle him in the cavern with the blankets and his condition will remain static for two days."

"I can only take your word for it!"

Kirk did as instructed, wrapping the two blankets around his First Officer as securely as he could, then found the map and addressed the Zombie.

"You may be telling the truth, and I hope for your sake you are, because if I come back within the time stated and find Spock dead, somehow or other you'll pay for it, I give you my word."



"He won't die unless you are too late, Captain. One last warning - no matter how thirsty you are, never drink the water from the spring."

"Or I will die?"

"No, you will sleep."

The Zombie disappeared and Kirk set off at a fast pace carrying a water container, a lamp, a couple of ropes and hooks and a knife. He memorised the map and checked it by the sun, just to make sure there was no repetition of getting lost as had happened in the desert during the sandstorm. His way to the cave was straightforward and he felt hopeful as he went underground at nightfall, but soon changed his mind when he discovered the difficulty of the descent into the cave. By the time he reached it, his hands, arms and legs were bleeding from deep scratches, his head was aching from a bump against a rock and he was exhausted.

I think I have done enough physical exercise to last me a lifetime in these last few days, he thought ruefully as he made his way to the spring and filled his container. The water looked clear and pure and he fought the temptation to take just one drink; God knew how long it would make him sleep!

The way up was even more exhausting and by the time he was out of the underground system of caves, only the thought of saving Spock kept him going. It was bright daylight, so the second day was well underway, he had to hurry. Finding the giant red flower was easy, he had noticed several before, and the six-headed insect, far larger than Earth insects, had a nasty sting, but Kirk put it to flight successfully and managed to get the red flower. To touch it though proved sheer agony, it burned his scratched hands as he extracted the pollen and he plunged them into the water with relief.

The mixture ready, he hastened back towards the cavern; time was getting short, but he should make it and his parched mouth looked forward to a drink from the lake.

His head was getting muzzy though and his legs heavy. What was wrong with him? What ghastly trick had the Zombies played on him? He nearly fell and understood, he was sleepy! But he had not drunk the water! Wave after wave of dizziness made him fall and he desperately tried to get up.

"Oh, no," he moaned, "I should never have put my hands in the water, my blood absorbed the sleeping drug through the scratches!"

He fought the sleepiness to the extent of pricking his arms with the knife to keep awake, managing to walk for a further fifteen minutes by sheer will power, but at last he fell knowing he could not go on and his last conscious thought, as tears of rage and frustration fell from his eyes, was,

Spock, forgive me if you can; I shall never forgive myself!

\* \* \* \*

When he awakened, it was still bright daylight, but which day he had no idea. He got up with the water container still intact, all sleepiness gone now, and finished the journey back to the cavern in a desperate run, knowing only too well what awaited him.



Spock lay exactly as he had left him, but as expected, there was no longer any heart beat.

After having hastily made a screen out of branches and leaves to shut any view into the cavern, Kirk spent the following hours alone with his grief, a grief aggravated by his guilt, but aggravated above all by the knowledge of having lost a newly found friend whose friendship he had not had time to enjoy and whose loss, perhaps because of the recent mind meld, brought him great pain.

\* \* \* \*

At last, his sorrow exhausted, unable to find any more tears, numb and haggard, he stumbled outside, put the screen back into place and looked at the Zombie awaiting him with dull eyes empty of feeling.

"Whatever you want me to do now, I won't do it. Kill me if you wish; get it over with."

"The test is finished, Captain. As you know, the death of one does not preclude failure, and you may have won."

"I have lost."

"You can go back to your ship. A craft will land in a few minutes. We will now process the test and let you know the result."

"When can my ship leave?"

"After the results of the test have been released, Captain."

The Zombie disappeared and Kirk climbed into the craft, where he found a new uniform thoughtfully provided, and the small vessel took him back to the Enterprise.

On the way, his obligations and responsibilities to his ship reasserted themselves, and he set to carrying on with his duties in spite of the aching hurt and void and guilt he would carry to the end of his days.

\* \* \* \* \*

## PART 2 - SELAGOR

The Enterprise officers were thrilled to see the craft returning after so many days of anxious waiting, sure the challenge had been won. As soon as it was safe, McCoy ran into the hangar deck with Mr. Scott and started to say when the door opened, "Welcome aboard, Jim, you showed those aliens..."

The words died on his lips as Kirk stepped out alone, his face an undeadable set mask out of which hollowed eyes seemed haunted.

"What happened, Captain?" gasped Mr. Scott. "Where is Mr. Spock?"

"Dead."

The statement came out flat and unemotional, and the same flat voice continued, "Dr. McCoy, why no reaction from you?"

"Jim, what happened down there? Did the aliens kill him?"

"No. Let me ask you a question, Doctor. Had Commander Spock returned and stated that I was dead, what would have been your reaction?"

"Grief, of course! Do you doubt it, Jim?"

"What else?"

"I don't understand. You are in a state of shock, Jim, come..."

"No, Doctor, I am not in shock, and you won't answer my question, so I will answer it for you. Had Spock come back instead of myself, you would have

blamed him for my death, hounded him mercilessly to make him suffer for your grief, am I right?"

"Maybe, it was his job to protect you! Jim, I am sure that whatever happened, you did all you could."

"That is where you are wrong, Dr. McCoy, but because I am who I am, I get no blame; and yet I killed my First Officer."

Both officers stared at their Captain with further shock and obvious doubt for his sanity, and McCoy took his arm soothingly. "Jim, you are overwrought and overtired. Let me give you some sleeping pills and..."

"Negative, Doctor, I have work to do, and I have slept far too much lately! Let's go to the bridge."

In his command chair, Kirk surveyed the bridge with a quick look, not avoiding Spock's station, but not dwelling on it either, then asked, "Is the ship still held stationery, Mr. Scott?"

"Yes, sir, no change."

"Lt. Uhura, hail the aliens, please."

She obeyed and the Zombie appeared on the screen. "Captain, we have not finished..."

"I couldn't care less, whatever result you come up with. The test is lost as far as I am concerned, and my report will recommend a ban on any contact with your species."

"Captain Kirk, is it fair to blame us for your own mistake?"

"Crime is a more appropriate word, and I will submit to a court-martial, having no fear on that score. But you, Zombie or whoever you are, had you possessed one ounce of compassion you would have saved my First Officer, and yet you did not. Throughout the challenge you pursued one object, to see one or both of us die, preferably by the hand of the other."

"So you guessed that."

"It was obvious. You have had half your wish, and I am not going to recommend contact with barbarians who set up challenges to see people kill each other to amuse themselves, so if you hope for contact with the United Federation of Planets, you can think again!"

"Captain, you forget one thing. You are the one who asked for the contact and took up the challenge voluntarily, and you chose Commander Spock."

"And I killed him. I accept all that, and my duty is clear, apart from paying for my crime. So you might as well release my ship now. No United Federation of Planets vessel will ever return."

"Aren't you interested in the result of the test, Captain?"

"No, I lost. May we go?"

"Unacceptable and contrary to the rules, Captain. Your vessel stays until we have processed the test and told you the result."

The Zombie disappeared and Kirk sighed, then asked, "Mr. Chekov, has any attempt been made to break that field?"

"Yes, sir, with no success."

"Spock might have found a way. Let the Science section work on it further and let me know if you succeed. Mr. Scott, I am relieving myself of command and handing over to you. You are now temporary Acting Captain. I shall be in my quarters writing my report for Starfleet."

"Sir," managed to stammer a shocked Chief Engineer, "there is no reason..."

"Jim," added McCoy hastily, "it's not up to you to condemn yourself, and until a court-martial..."

"My decision is final," interrupted Kirk in a tone admitting no contradiction.

He left the bridge and shut himself in his cabin only to be pursued by McCoy who insisted on a check-up and attending to his burns and minor wounds, then asked gently, "What happened, Jim? Can't you tell me?"

"You will see the report, Doctor."

"How did Mr. Spock die? You didn't kill him."

Kirk explained very briefly how he had been too late and McCoy exclaimed, "That is manslaughter at most, not murder!"

"Does it matter? The result is the same."

"Look, Jim, I feel there is more to it than that, and whatever occurred down there, I have to know in order to write my own report. So if you don't tell me, I'll have to take it upon myself to find out, if necessary by hypnosis or..."

He was not prepared for the violent reaction of cold anger and near hatred as Kirk stated bluntly, "If you do such a thing, Dr. McCoy, this ship will be too small for both of us."

McCoy stared at him, stunned, then the hurt of Kirk's utter rejection made him turn on his heel and walk out. As he went back to sickbay, he thought, I'll see the complete report first, it might give me a clue.

Kirk sat down with a shudder. The very idea that McCoy might have taken him by surprise and succeeded in making him relate all the past events, which included what he had seen in Spock's mind, filled him with revulsion. Even with his First Officer dead, he could not bear the idea of anyone spying on what he had been privileged to see. No-one else had any right to it, and he would defend Spock's privacy to the last. He set the recorder and related the happenings during the challenge, stating facts only, then sent copies of the report to McCoy, Scott and Uhura, ready to be transmitted to Starfleet, complete with a request for court-martial.

Relieved of this duty, he set his personal log and started to reminisce slowly into it with bitter sweet pleasure. He was remembering what he had seen of Spock's aspirations, some, like joining Starfleet, similar to his own, when the inevitable McCoy burst in and stopped short, struck by Kirk's relaxed and even smiling features. But the Captain wiped his face into impassivity and asked coldly, "Couldn't you have knocked?"

"I'm glad I didn't, you may not be as bad as I thought!" He sat down and continued, "I've seen the report, and Scotty and I agree that you have nothing to blame yourself for."

"If Spock was in my place, you would have been only too happy to see him punished!"

"Maybe, but it's not the same! I know you, while he was... an unknown quantity in many respects, you must admit, a Vulcan with Human blood. How can you predict the results of such a half-breed who always hides behind logic?"

And what you didn't trust was his Human half, thought Kirk, which is no credit to us Humans!

The Captain's features remained set into an impassivity which reminded McCoy of Spock with renewed fear. He did not know his friend any longer! When Kirk remained silent, the Doctor, in his anxiety, begged, "Please tell me everything, Jim, I want to help and won't have you guilt-ridden. Any Court of Inquiry would exonerate you!"

"Guilt is an affair of conscience, Doctor."

"So you condemn yourself. Why?"

Again Kirk remained silent. His report had said nothing of the way Spock had saved him from the desert and the reason he had given for Spock's death was accidental poisoning he had been too late to cure.

More and more worried, McCoy got up and went around the desk to put his hand on Kirk's shoulder. "Do you grieve that much for a Vulcan, Jim?"

The Captain recoiled from his touch and shouted, "Grief is a personal matter, get out!" unconsciously using Spock's words.

Hurt and angry, McCoy shouted in turn, "You won't let me share anything, will you? How can I do my job and help you if you reject me so utterly that our past friendship might never have existed?"

Kirk's rigid features softened a little. "I'm sorry, Bones."

"That's better! Do you realise it's the first time you called me 'Bones' since you came back?"

"I'm sorry... "

"If it helps, Jim, I can receive what you tell me in total confidence."

"It's no use, Bones," replied Kirk, shaking his head, "I can't talk about it, not now. I doubt if I could put it into words anyway. You wouldn't understand."

"Thanks!"

"You wouldn't understand because it's something you have to experience for yourself. Perhaps one day I'll tell you, but in the meantime, will you respect my private thoughts?"

"I haven't much choice, have I? As your doctor, however, I have to recommend sleep now, you're tired."

McCoy made sure Kirk was asleep before he left and joined Scotty to share their worries about the Captain.

\* \* \* \*

Kirk had gone to sleep quite easily thinking of Spock, and found it natural and unavoidable to dream of his First Officer. Far from upsetting him, he welcomed the vividness of the dream when someone or something intruded, and he could have sworn that he heard Spock call him 'Jim'. He woke up in a cold sweat, assuming it was his grief and his guilt affecting him, and managed to go back to sleep. Again he heard the call, even more vividly this time, and he woke up with a start, shouting, "Spock, where are you?"

"So it has come to that!" said McCoy's stern voice. "You need a doctor, Jim, whether you like it or not."

"I'm not insane, Bones, I heard... "

"Voices, no doubt. People under severe strain often do."

"I heard him calling to me... "

"Into my surgery, and no argument."

Kirk followed mechanically, trying to understand what had happened to him, and dutifully swallowed the pills McCoy provided after a check-up.

"You are O.K. physically, Jim, but your mind... We'll see, it's only stress, I hope." He made sure his patient was comfortable, and added, "I wish your guilt didn't make you look and sound like Mr. Spock at times, Jim."

He left and Kirk reflected that he would resemble Spock if he was in a mind meld, but that was not the case. But that call? Was Spock's mind reaching out to him from beyond the grave? The Captain shivered and rejected the idea immediately, the Vulcan had not saved his life to try to draw him into death. So what was happening? Insanity? Temporary hallucination, more

likely! He fell into sleep again thinking of Spock. There was little point in attempting to think of something else with the tragedy so recent.

\* \* \* \*

This time the dream was so vivid that Kirk could have sworn it was real. He saw Spock inside the cavern where he had left him. A strange light and haze filled the air and the Vulcan appeared to be trying to move away from something, murmuring, "My Captain did not leave... Jim... "

The call was so clear that Kirk woke up in spite of the drug and tried to get up, seeing McCoy approach sternly with further medication.

"No, Bones, I must go!

"Lie down - Doctor's orders."

"I must go back, Bones, I have to go back."

"Back where?"

"To that planet, of course! I think Spock is alive! No, I'm not insane, Bones, please trust me, believe me! If you don't let me go, I will go mad!"

"You're mad now!"

"Even if I am, I must go and see for myself, don't you see? How can I ignore the possibility that Spock's alive?"

"I'm sorry, Jim, but mad or not, you need the sleep, and I can't let hallucinations... " Kirk did not hear the rest, sinking into a dreamless sleep because of the injected drug.

When he awoke, he was alone. He got up hurriedly, then ran to his quarters where he armed himself with a phaser. His dream was still vivid and he was not going to let anyone or anything stop him.

He met McCoy and Scotty at the hangar deck door where they had gone to wait when discovering his absence from surgery and the two officers saw the phaser with disbelief.

"I am going back, Doctor, and you can't stop me."

"May I remind you, Captain, that you have a duty to the ship... "

"The ship is immobilised and has an Acting Captain, Mr. Scott. I can do nothing here."

"At least let me come with you, Jim."

"You are not coming with me, Doctor. Our shuttlecraft may not be able to get through the web, and blow up, or the Zombies could have more 'amusement' in store for me. I am going alone."

Nothing McCoy or Scotty could say or do had any effect and they watched him leave in the shuttlecraft with deep misgivings.

\* \* \* \*

Kirk remembered the course easily enough once past the web and was relieved to be able to get through and land on the planet without interference from the aliens. Perhaps they are asleep, he thought with mounting anticipation as he ran out of the craft towards the cavern.

He found the screen of branches and leaves at the entrance intact and pulled it aside, going in slowly with a strong feeling of fear now mixed with his anticipation. If he is dead, he thought anxiously, it will be like losing him again!

Spock was lying where he had left him. Kirk put his head down and could have screamed with joy, there was a heartbeat! The Vulcan was either in a

deep sleep or unconscious, though, Kirk could not wake him and there was that strange haze in the air he had seen in his dream, a gas? a drug? He hoisted his First Officer on to his shoulder and took him outside, and saw his breathing become deep and regular with renewed joy.

"Spock," he murmured, touching his face lightly.

The dark eyes opened then and the smile in them brought tears to Kirk's eyes, tears he was not even conscious of.

"Jim, I knew you would come back."

"Thank God I did! I thought you were dead! What happened?"

"I'm not sure, Captain. I thought I was dying, then came to inside that cavern, feeling weak and unable to move. There was that strange light and haze in the air, and a voice said you had left me and gone back to the ship. I did not believe it, but then I had to retire into a mental trance to avoid the effect of breathing too much of the air in the cavern. There was a gas or drug giving me hallucinations and dreams and attempting to convince me that I was left alone on this planet for ever."

"And you called me."

"Did I?"

"I heard you in my dreams, in my mind! Why? How?"

Spock looked away and did not answer, and Kirk waited patiently, respecting in turn the silence of his companion. At last the Vulcan faced him again.

"I am reluctant to admit it, Captain, but there is only one explanation I can give. The mind meld we shared, even if incomplete and spasmodic due to our poor state of health, revealed an affinity between our two minds which makes a telepathic link easy to establish, even at a distance. You were thinking of me on the Enterprise, and I was thinking of you here, but too weak to help myself. Our two minds did the rest and connected."

"I see! And if you think it upsets me, Spock, you can think again! Without that, I would have gone on believing you dead..."

His voice choked and he heard the Vulcan ask curiously, "Do you know that you are crying, Captain?"

"Am I?" replied Kirk, laughing and wiping his eyes, "Yes, I am! Why not? Don't worry, they are tears of joy."

"Quite illogical to cry with joy, Captain. Still, if it makes you happy cry by all means."

Helpless laughter seized Kirk and he had to make a huge effort to stop. "I'm sorry, Spock, but you can't know how good it is to laugh at the end of a nightmare!"

"No, Captain. I am however gratified that you did not feel the need to hide such violent emotions."

"The idea never occurred to me, Spock. I am what I am, a very emotional man - as you once said."

"And I am what I am, a Vulcan."

In the silence which followed, each understood the strength of the growing friendship between them and wondered at the development of such a bond between two aliens, so different and yet perhaps so similar.

"We'll have to make a deal, Spock," said Kirk, breaking the silence with a smile.

"A deal, Captain?"

"Yes. I put up with your logic and you put up with my emotions."



"It seems we have no choice," replied the Vulcan with a slight twitch of the lips Kirk read as a hidden smile.

"That's settled then, and may we both have patience!" exclaimed Kirk with a laugh. "Do you feel well enough to walk to the shuttlecraft now, Spock?"

"I'll try, Captain, but to tell you the truth, a drink and some food would help."

"Yes, of course, why didn't you say so before?"

He got water and rations from the shuttlecraft, gathered some of the nutty fruits they both liked and they shared the meal in companionable silence, a relaxing silence Kirk was finding most enjoyable, when a Zombie appeared.

"Not you again!" sighed Kirk. "Haven't you gone to hell yet?"

"Those Zombies are not only illogical, but rude as well, Captain," added Spock. "We are having a meal, would you mind coming back later?"

"Captain, Commander," replied the Zombie in a stiff voice, "do you have to be so impolite?"

"We are not," protested Kirk, "my First Officer for one is never impolite."

"He looks upon us with contempt and pity as though we were morons, and you keep telling us to 'go to hell', which therefore cannot be a very nice place, Captain Kirk, and you are not impolite?"

"After what you put us through, do you wonder?" asked Kirk drily. "What do you want?"

"Your crew is anxious and I advise you to go back to your ship."

"Oh! You do, do you? I am getting fed up with being pushed around on this planet! Spock, before we go back, what do you say to a swimming session and when it gets dark, a night fire and native food, then sleep if we're tired? A small holiday?"

"I am with you, Captain."

"Good. Zombie, please tell my crew that we are fine and will be back in about ten hours or so, when we are ready. Off you go!"

"How dare you give orders..."

"You pushed us about enough, do what you are told for a change."

The Zombie disappeared, with what feelings they could not tell from its blank mask, and Kirk said, "I suppose we'll have to face them sooner or later. Any ideas, Spock?"

"I am not sure, Captain, but they may not be as bad as you think."

"What! You nearly died..."

"But I did not, Captain."

"Yes, I see what you mean. Do you believe they'll say we won the challenge?"

"Yes, Captain."

"So do I, and contact will be established. I shall want some answers! I wonder what they are like?"

"Not like Zombies, that image is made up, and they must be very different."

"That's a relief anyway! I'm looking forward to meeting them now."

"So am I, Captain, it could prove a fascinating experience."

\* \* \* \*

McCoy and Scotty would not believe the Zombie's message, so the alien transmitted a view of Kirk and Spock bent over a wood fire, absorbed in some task, and they heard Spock say very seriously, "I don't think I have much talent for cooking, Captain."

"I'm sure I have even less! Let's hope it is eatable!"

"It should prove an interesting combination."

"If it makes both of us ill, that will set McCoy some problems!"

"The solution of which would be drugs, a prospect far worse than any inconvenience from the food!"

The picture faded and the crew had to accept that they were safe and could only await their return.

At last the shuttlecraft was sighted and they heard a request from Kirk for a uniform of the First Officer's to be beamed aboard. It was with relief and pleasure that McCoy and Scotty saw their Captain leap out of the shuttlecraft in high spirits, followed by Spock whose impassivity as usual revealed nothing.

"We should have known better than to think we were rid of you, Mr. Spock," said McCoy's sour voice, "but then you can't kill a computer."

"Thank you, Doctor," answered Spock blandly as they went to the bridge. The Captain smiled, but McCoy had seen the flash of anger in Kirk's eyes at his words. So that is how it is, mused the Doctor as they stepped into the lift, what on earth happened between those two?

Being honest with himself, McCoy knew he was jealous. Up to now, Kirk had turned to him only for friendship, even if he esteemed and respected his First Officer. Now he had clearly found another outlet to his loneliness, and McCoy already could sense the strength of the new relationship in the easy and relaxed way Kirk behaved with Spock as they settled on the bridge. The other officers also noticed and hid their surprise, while Mr. Scott whispered to the Doctor, "I already had a sneaking regard for that Vulcan, Doctor. I see it was justified."

Kirk was coming back to his command chair after giving an order to Uhura and McCoy went to him and murmured after he had sat down, "Can't you tell me now, Jim?"

The eyes that met his were friendly, to his relief, and Kirk smiled. "No, Bones, you must find out for yourself or it would be of no value."

"Am I too illogical?"

"I hope not!" laughed the Captain.

"I can't help it if that Vulcan and his logic put my back up!" Going towards the Vulcan's station, the Doctor added, "Actually, I'm glad you came back, Mr. Spock."

"Indeed, Doctor" I was under the impression that you did not like computers."

"I don't, but I liked even less the idea of Jim here carrying guilt for the rest of his life."

"What for, Doctor?" asked Spock as Kirk exclaimed furiously,

"Really, Bones!"

"So you didn't know, Mr. Spock!" exclaimed McCoy in turn, rather bewildered.

"Did not know what, Doctor?"

McCoy explained briefly about Kirk being too late to save him and a trace of concern appeared on the Vulcan's features as he said, "You should not have blamed yourself, Jim."

The stupefaction on the bridge at hearing him call the Captain by his first name was tangible and McCoy could not believe his ears at this unprecedented occurrence. Conscious of it, Spock added hastily, "I apologise, Captain..."

"Illogical, Spock," interrupted Kirk, amused by the astonishment around them.

"Why didn't you tell me about your ordeal, Captain?"

"You didn't tell me that you were under sentence of death, did you?"

"It would have been illogical to do so, Captain."

"Why?"

"Had the Zombie lied, you would have worried for no logical reason."

"I should know better than to try and beat you at logic, Spock," said Kirk with a smile, "but as..."

He was interrupted by Uhura. "Captain, I have the aliens now."

The screen showed the familiar Zombie and Kirk protested, "Isn't it time you discarded that masquerade?"

"As you successfully passed the test, Captain, it is, as you say, time." The Zombie disappeared and a gasp could be heard at the image which replaced it, while Spock murmured,

"Fascinating!"

Their first impression was that the alien was made of glass! A more attentive look showed that the previous 'Zombie' was now a small humanoid, about five feet tall at the most, with thin and delicate features, a diaphanous skin and a general appearance of fragility reinforced by the two beautifully translucent wings fluttering behind him. His face and smile were attractive and the whole effect was of a beautiful glass figurine, so easily broken.

The alien laughed at their astonishment and the two small antennae on his forehead quivered and swayed gracefully. "I hope I have heard the last of that word 'Zombie', Captain?"

"Yes, of course," replied Kirk, "but why? Excuse my rudeness, what is your name?"

"A polite Captain Kirk! A very nice change! My name is Sahel, Prince of Selagor."

And we called him 'Zombie', thought Kirk, aghast.

The alien was laughing again, a crystalline laugh in accordance with the made-of-glass appearance. "Please, Captain, don't distress yourself! In your place, I might have been far more insulting!"

Kirk smiled, relieved, and the alien turned to Spock. "As for you, Commander Spock, I hope to convince you that I am not a contemptible moron! I found your attitude magnificent and congratulate you. You are the first person I ever met who can say so much without uttering a single word."

"Thank you... should I say 'Highness'?"

"No, no, Sahel will do. I feel I know you quite well by now. Captain Kirk, Commander Spock, you are both invited to Selagor, with your senior officers of course."

"Thank you, Sahel," replied Kirk with some hesitation. Now that the surprise of the alien's appearance had worn off, the memory of the tests brought him some doubt about their safety.

"Before we accept," he said aloud, "I would be grateful to know the exact purpose of the challenge you put my First Officer and me through. Why were you trying to make us betray each other?"

"The reason should be obvious, Captain, but I will explain. About one hundred and fifty years ago, Selagor welcomed an alien vessel which claimed asylum. Unknown to us, the refugees had weapons and a technology superior to our own, and we were no match for their physical strength either. The aliens established a dictatorship of terror and servitude. It took my people over twenty years to overcome their power, after such deaths and torture that our population was declining. So we learned our lesson, and developed a science and technology to protect ourselves, much of which we learned from our tormentors and improved on. As a consequence, however, we vowed never to trust any aliens again unless we were sure they were trustworthy."

"I see," Kirk said thoughtfully, "but didn't you go rather too far? Did you have to make me kill my First Officer?"

"Captain," said Sahel, his voice and face expressing genuine contrition, "we realised our cruelty too late, and we regret the suffering you went through. Remember that we did not see or hear you when you were inside the caverns, and only guessed fully at your quality when Commander Spock saved you from the desert. We wanted to discover if our guess was right. It brought us final proof that two men from alien races could rely on each other, so you were both worthy of trust. By the way, you were never, either of you, in danger of death."

"You mean the whole thing was faked?" asked Kirk, astounded.

"No, but there was a control room underground and throughout the test, surveillance and safety devices would have stopped either of you from serious injuries, although not minor ones, as you found out. We faked your Commander's death by simply blanking out his heart beat. He was overcome by a harmless drug and slept."

Kirk had listened in growing amazement as he paced the bridge and now stood by the Vulcan. "So we aren't heroes after all, Spock! Those aliens are putting us in our place."

"A very logical process though, Captain, and I suspected part of it, but not that much."

"Captain, Commander," said Sahel earnestly, "I assure you that the safety factor does not diminish your merit; you did not know. We were of course particularly impressed by the way you chose an alien as partner for this challenge, Captain, with so many Earthmen to choose from, and by the way each of you unfalteringly kept faith with the other. The grief you could not hide was an indication of... But I should not say too much; like Mr. Spock, we respect privacy. Will you accept our invitation, Captain?"

"With pleasure, Sahel. Do we beam down to Selagor or come in a shuttlecraft? We only know the way to the test area."

"The web is now inoperative, you may come through and orbit Selagor with the Enterprise, then beam down."

The fantastic web looked the same except that the red light was no longer operating, and the Enterprise went through what was now a door and established orbit round Selagor. Kirk beamed down with Spock, McCoy, Mr. Scott and several other officers, all eager to visit a new world.

They were welcomed, and the delicate and frail beauty of the structures and people filled them with admiration and awe, afraid as they were of crushing or breaking something inadvertently. But the inhabitants were very agile at keeping away from any clumsy movements and no incident occurred.

Sahel took Kirk and Spock to the Science Academy and showed them a film of the tests, indicating all the safety precautions taken. "For instance, Mr. Spock, had you fallen into that ravine, you would have landed on a ledge you could not see from the top and been able to climb up again. A special optical effect made the ravine appear bottomless; it was not in fact all that deep."

Of course the desert crossing was the actual test, and we found it hard to watch, but it was only in extreme conditions that we could establish the extent of your loyalty to each other."

"Understandable, but painful, Sahel," said Kirk reminiscently.

"Logical, though," added Spock.

"Are you the telepathic one, Mr. Spock?" asked Sahel.

"Yes."

"And you, Captain?"

"I am not, I'm afraid."

"Our guess was correct then. Mr. Spock, would you please touch my antenna?"

The Vulcan complied and after a few seconds took his hand away as Sahel sighed, "I thought so! What we have is empathy rather than telepathy, isn't it?"

"Yes, Sahel," replied Spock, "you only sense very strong feelings or emotions, not thoughts."

"It is nevertheless good to know that telepathy does exist. Who knows, we might one day... But I must not keep you here when you have so much to see."

"I will join my officers and visit the capital town," said Kirk. "Coming, Spock?"

"With your permission, Captain," asked Sahel, "I would like a further talk with your First Officer."

"By all means," agreed Kirk. "Join us later, Spock."

He left with a smile. Telepathy was a fascinating subject and he was sure Sahel wanted to talk about that.

\* \* \* \*

Selagor was beautiful and its people warm and friendly. By the end of the day, no Enterprise officer doubted it and they were attracted to the delicate beauty of the inhabitants. Their art forms were outstanding and McCoy was surprised to see Spock admire them.

"Isn't art emotional, Mr. Spock?"

"Beauty is of an intrinsic nature, Doctor, you see whatever you wish in it."

"Not logic, surely?"

"Why not, Doctor? This beautiful structure for instance has a logical shape, a mathematical..."

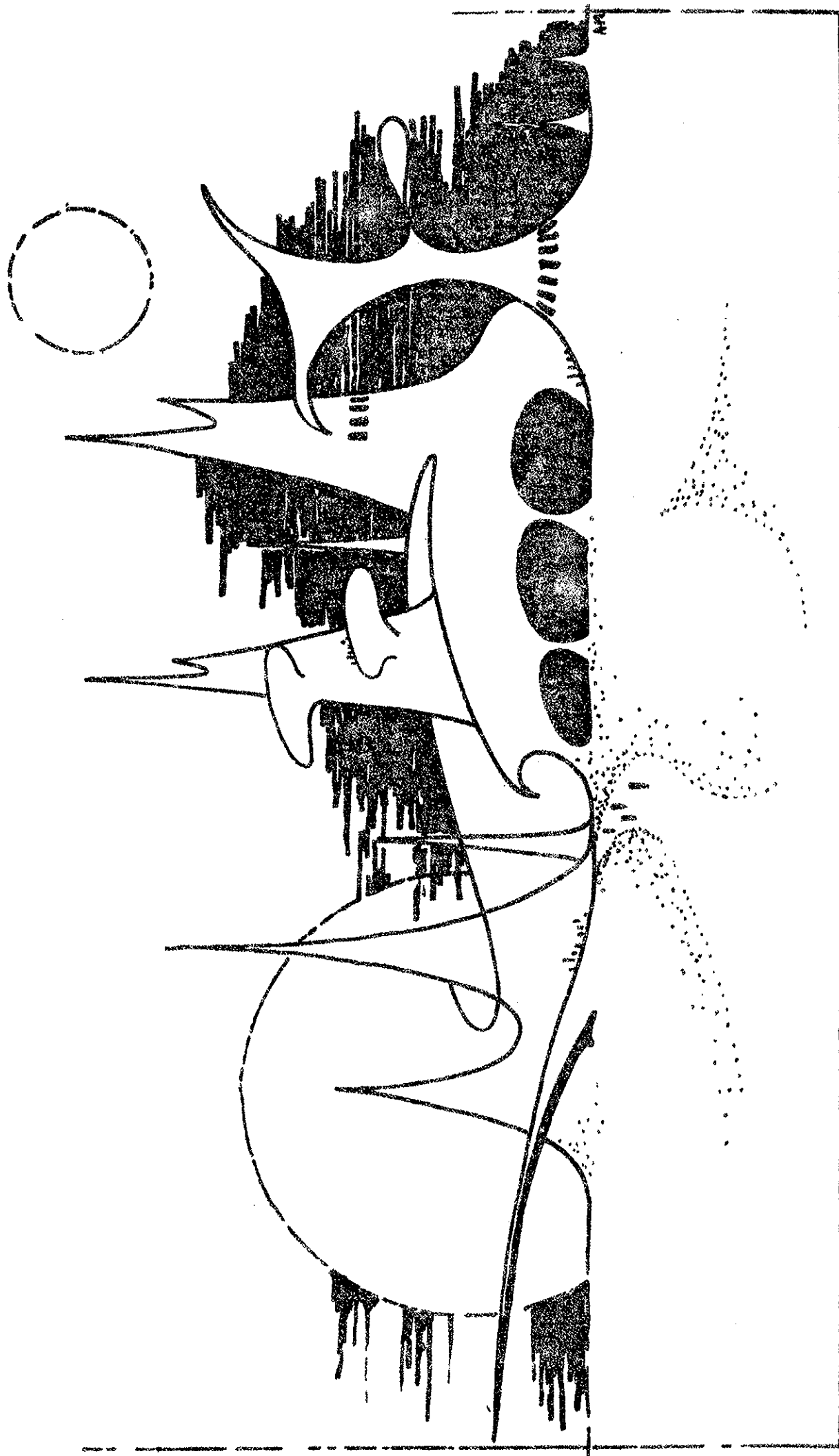
"I give up!" said McCoy with disgust as Kirk smiled. Those two would probably never stop.

The winged people could fly and achieved an elegance and gracefulness in the air which charmed the Earth people. They watched with envy.

\* \* \* \*

The next day Kirk had serious talks with Sahel and his government on a possible alliance with the United Federation of Planets, and the Captain asked, "One thing I shall have to report on of course is the ordeal you went through at the hand of those aliens. Have you any records we could see and copy?"

"Just a few, Captain," replied Sahel, "not very pleasant to watch. Do you have to?"



"I'm afraid so, some of them at least. Can you have copies made for Starfleet?"

"Yes, Captain."

The records were shown and the Earth people were horrified and even queasy at some of the scenes of cruelty and torture.

"What they inflicted on us was love compared to the insane hate of those scenes, Spock," whispered Kirk, appalled.

"Yes, Captain, after such suffering, their challenge showed remarkable restraint."

"No wonder they didn't trust aliens!"

A particularly horrible scene where wings were pulled off was being shown and Kirk shut his eyes, unable to watch and wondering how anyone could behave so cruelly towards a then defenceless and fragile race.

Sahel stopped the tape and asked, "Must you see more, Captain? It happened a hundred and fifty years ago."

"What were those aliens called?"

"We just called them 'masters'."

"Didn't they ever show their faces?" asked McCoy. "Such inhuman creatures can't have been shy! All the ones we saw were dressed in a red suit hiding all features."

"The torturers always wore red, Doctor," said Sahel.

"But surely you must have had records showing the aliens in other costumes," asked Kirk.

"We may have had, but only these remain."

He's lying, thought Kirk with a sinking heart, distressed to have to doubt the winged peoples' truthfulness. "Sahel, you must understand that the United Federation of Planets would like to know who these aliens were. Should we meet them, we would then be prepared."

"They were all killed by my people, Captain."

"But other vessels full of them may be roaming the galaxy! You can't possibly be trying to protect them, or can you?" he added with fear, wondering if they had fallen after all into some awful trap.

Sahel did not answer, but looked at Spock as McCoy said, "Jim, your First Officer spent hours last night looking at records. Perhaps he knows whatever is being kept from us."

"Do you, Spock?" asked Kirk.

"Captain," replied the Vulcan with a strange expression Kirk could not read, "I see little point in finding out more about these aliens. They have all been killed."

"So you do know!"

"Were they Vulcans behaving like barbarians, Mr. Spock?" asked McCoy. "Is that why you made Prince Sahel hide part of the truth?"

"Even if they were, Spock," said Kirk, "no-one could hold you responsible for... "

"Captain," interrupted Sahel firmly, "your Commander did not make me do anything under duress, and I find Dr. McCoy's comment particularly distasteful, so... "

"Sahel..." Spock started to say, but again the winged man interrupted. "No, Mr. Spock, I will go no further. Fetch the other records," he added to one of his aides.

Kirk, unable to believe that Spock had deliberately tried to hide evidence, met his First Officer's eyes and paled as he read the truth at last. Spock was at his side immediately as Kirk sat down and put his head in his hands, murmuring, "No, I can't believe it!"

"Jim," said Spock in a low voice, "remember your own words, no-one here can be held responsible."

"What's all this about?" asked McCoy suspiciously as Kirk sat up to watch the new records being brought in. "How did you manage to make Sahel want to hide the fact that your ancestors were barbarians, Mr. Spock?"

"Shut up, Bones," said Kirk, "your illogic is showing too much this time."

McCoy's mouth opened in sheer surprise at his Captain's unusual comment and Kirk could have laughed had he not felt so nauseated by what he now knew.

The tapes started and the Enterprise crew fell into a miserable silence as they saw the recording of the arrival of the Earth space vessel Vomba on Selagor, and the men getting out were undoubtedly Earthmen. "Now you know," said Sahel, stopping the record. "Is there any need to see any more?"

"No," replied Kirk. "Vomba... That name rings a bell."

"It should, sir," said Mr. Scott. "Don't you remember the Vomba murders? The horrible massacre aboard a space vessel and the escape in it of a large group of criminals?"

"Yes, I remember, one of the most gory events in space history, and this explains why the criminals were never caught or heard of again. I see now *why* you know so much about us, Sahel, and understand why you did not want the challenge taken up and would have preferred to have nothing more to do with us."

"It was not an easy decision to make, Captain, mainly when the web makes us feel so safe, but the fact that you had an alien aboard the Enterprise intrigued us, and another factor was that many of us, now that we can travel within our own solar system, are hoping to go to the stars one day. We also realised that after a hundred and fifty years, your people were not necessarily the same, but we had to make the challenge severe to protect ourselves, and we did want you to fail at first."

"I would have felt the same in your place."

"We understood that you could not be like the Earthmen we knew, and Mr. Spock explained how they were escaped criminals, so I agreed with your Commander's request not to show the identity of our tormentors; it was not important *that* you should know, and we had no wish to take revenge on innocent people. Mr. Spock is right, Captain, emotion can be bad. I followed an impulse of anger when I showed that record."

"While Spock felt compassion," smiled Kirk.

"I see what you mean," Sahel smiled back. "It depends on the emotion."

The Vulcan was protesting, "Captain, there was no logical gain to be... "

"Yes, I know, Spock, you don't have to explain," Kirk said soothingly.

\* \* \* \*

They went on to a farewell reception in their honour and Kirk realised his Chief Medical Officer seemed to have disappeared. He sought him out and found him at a window staring vacantly outside.

"Something wrong, Bones?"

"That Vulcan knew all along who the torturers were, Jim."

"He knew and we would never have known if you hadn't put your foot in it and antagonised Sahel. Are you starting to see what kind of Vulcan he is?"

"I'm not blind! But his constant rejection of emotion makes me wild! He



is half Human and should accept that part of him instead of behaving like a true Vulcan."

"He chose to be a Vulcan and for my part I respect his choice."

"I think it was the wrong choice and I will try to make him see it."

"I won't interfere," replied Kirk with a smile, "mainly because I suspect that you both enjoy trying to prove each other wrong."

McCoy smiled back and his face became thoughtful as he asked, "Jim, how do you communicate with someone who asks for nothing and wants nothing from you?"

"It's up to you to find a way, Bones. How do you know that Spock needs nothing?"

"I don't, Jim. If I knew... "

"A challenge for you! Spock and I faced many challenges behind the web of Selagor; now it's your turn to discover the kind of special Vulcan we have as First Officer of the Enterprise."

The Captain went back to Sahel to say goodbye, and the native drew both Kirk and Spock aside, his gaze full of genuine friendliness as he said, "If I had not seen it with my own eyes, Captain, I would never have believed that two aliens as different as you and Mr. Spock could understand and respect each other to the point of friendship and collaborate in such harmony! I would even go as far as saying that you achieve a similarity of action which demonstrates that underneath the differences, there is resemblance, and your friendship no longer amazes me."

"In a sense we have Selagor to thank for it, don't you agree, Spock?"

"Yes, Captain."

"It would have happened sooner or later," smiled Sahel, "but I am glad our challenge had such a result. Captain Kirk, Commander Spock, you will always be welcome on Selagor."

"Thank you, Sahel," said Kirk with an answering smile.

"Thank you," added Spock, making the Vulcan sign. "Live long and prosper, Sahel."

Kirk waved and they disappeared in the shimmering glow.

\* \* \* \*

On the bridge of the Enterprise, Kirk directed the ship from Selagor's orbit and through the web which still filled the screen with the luminous translucence of its delicate filaments.

Spock approached the command chair and said in a low voice, "Fascinating, isn't it, Captain?"

"We found so much behind that web, Spock."

"Yes, indeed, Captain."

"I wasn't referring to Selagor itself, Spock."

"Neither was I, Jim."

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