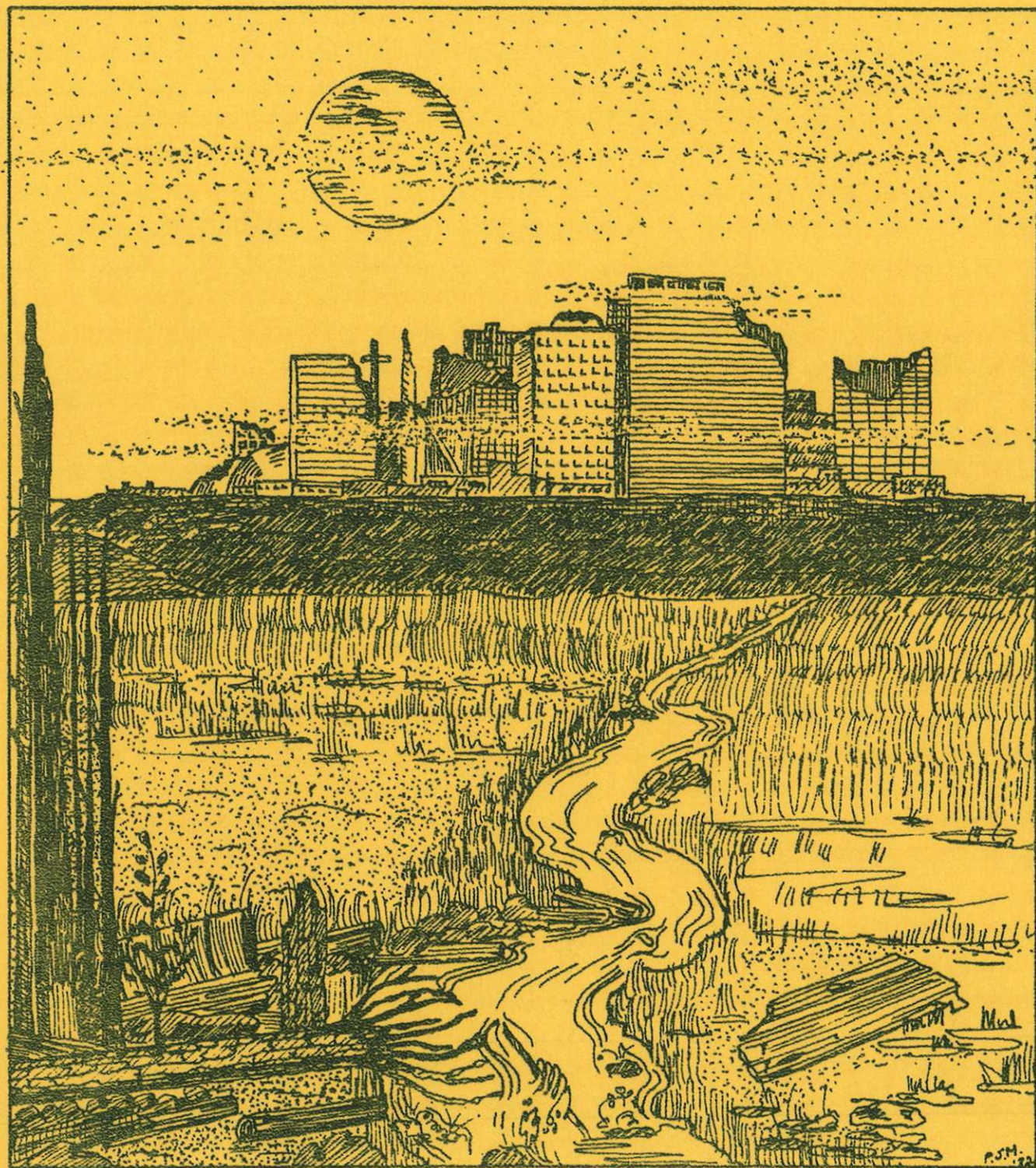


# The WORLD of DIFFERENCE

Scotpress



a STAR TREK  
fanzine

Lesley  
Coles



THE WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

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## THE WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

Lesley Coles

CAPTAIN'S LOG, Stardate 5701.7. We are orbiting the fourth planet of a star system catalogued as GX544. The world shows evidence of a recent nuclear holocaust, with vast areas of the land masses devastated, and life readings greatly diminished. Although we have encountered other planets and civilisations within our galaxy, who have themselves fallen victim to the power and destruction of the atom, this is the first official investigation of a recently wartorn world. Starfleet policy has, in the past, restricted contact with such planets on the grounds that these would be potentially dangerous missions, offering little, if any, scientific value. However, it appears that this particular system occupies a strategic position in this relatively exposed quadrant of Federation space. Consequently, our mission is to investigate, firstly, the degree of recovery within the war-ravished world - thereby protecting their interests - and secondly to survey a nearby sister world, as yet uninhabited, with the view of future establishment of a Federation outpost...endit...supplimentary to personal log - for my own reference I have decided to name this planet...Armageddon.

James T. Kirk completed his log entry, switched off the recorder and sat with only his thoughts to keep him company. A heavy sigh filled the still cabin as he leaned back in his chair and rubbed absently at the stiffness in his neck muscles. Closing his eyes for a brief moment revealed the grittiness and stinging which were sure signs of his growing weariness.

God, he felt tired! Perhaps even a little depressed as well, if he chose to be totally honest with himself. Unfolding his aching body from behind the desk, Kirk deserted the ship's business and began to prowling his quarters in an attempt to sort out his feelings. The last two or three months had been pretty rough...tight situations...difficult decisions only he could make...

Two young faces drifted to the forefront of his mind as he relived a particularly painful memory. The needless deaths, two wasted lives... He paused in his pacing to unlock, briefly, that part of him that protected James Kirk the Captain from James Kirk the vulnerable Human being; the carer. The coolness of the metal helped ease the gnawing ache in his head as he leaned against the ship's strength for comfort - yet it did nothing to ease the pain of losing the two young crewmen...it still hurt so very much when death played the game and won.

And now they had this new mission; one which came at a time when morale on the Enterprise was at its lowest. Damn Starfleet! Didn't they understand? His crew was tired, he was tired, and this whole mission was screaming at him that there was something terribly wrong. Somehow his instincts were yelling at him to stay away. This was ground too close to home, too near to a situation that could quite easily have been Earth's own alternative and devastating history.

"DAMN!". A resounding crack broke the silence as Kirk slammed his fist into the bulkhead, allowing his emotions the outlet they so desperately needed. About to lash out once more, he paused and turned towards Spock's quarters, a look of concern covering his previous anger. His friend had called in earlier with an offer of help regarding the growing stacks of reports and red tape. Normally pleased to be in the company of the Vulcan, Kirk had almost accepted, but then noticed Spock seemed a little pale and tense. As the Vulcan had recently recovered from a rather nasty head injury, Kirk had questioned Spock carefully, to discover that he did in fact have a headache and felt tired. Without any further argument or compromising he had packed Spock off to his quarters saying he didn't want to see him again until morning. Now, here he was, thumping the bulkheads of his cabin with a force that would wake the dead!

He moved over to their adjoining wall and listened for any sounds of movement indicating that he had disturbed his friend. All remained quiet.

Slowly, he returned to his desk and yet another pile of junior officers' reports. He had only been working for a few moments when the sound of his cabin buzzer made him jump. Damn! He must have wakened Spock after all, and how he was coming to see what the devil was going on. He activated the entry mechanism and stood up, ready to apologise.

He was pleasantly surprised. "Bones! What can I do for you?" He smiled, endeavouring to disguise his prior anxiety.

"Oh, nothing much, Jim." McCoy strolled into the cabin, mentally checking off a number of obvious signs revealing his Captain's present state of mind and body. He cleared an area on the cluttered desk for the delicate decanter of amber liquid he had brought with him, and began to search for two glasses. "Just thought you might feel like a drink and a chat - brush away the cobwebs and old wives' tales..."

"Old Wives' tales?" puzzled Kirk.

"Yeah, you know - like the one 'don't go out after dark on the night of a full moon...especially after a nuclear war!'" McCoy knew he'd touched a sensitive chord when Kirk stopped in midstride, tensing visibly. Still under the pretence of glass seeking, McCoy watched his Captain carefully, waiting for the next move. It soon came.

"And what exactly do you mean by that remark, Dr. McCoy?"

McCoy ceased his search and met Kirk's steady gaze. "I meant, Captain, that I'm a little concerned about you and this mission tomorrow, but came along tonight, as your friend, to have a drink - and help, if you'll let me."

For a moment Kirk's eyes blazed and McCoy suspected that he was in for a rough ride. But the anger flowed away as the Captain backed down and slumped into his chair. "You can't help, Bones. This is something I have to work through myself. Go down tomorrow, do what I have to do and get the hell away from this godforsaken place." A restless hand wandered to his brow and rubbed tellingly. "I don't know why Starfleet ordered us here in the first place. We're long overdue for R & R. Dammit, my crew have earned a break! We're not indestructable! There must be another Starship available." McCoy watched in silence as the feelings came pouring out. "They sit there in their safe little offices wondering where to spend the next leave allocation, not caring who lives or dies or where it happens. Christ, they make me sick!" In anguish, Kirk clutched at his head, his fingers rigid with tension. McCoy waited a few more seconds before venturing into his friend's despair. He felt positive there was something else on Kirk's mind, yet wasn't sure what, or how delicately he should explore the potentially explosive situation.

"Jim? Jim, I know how you feel about Starfleet and Starfleet orders, but you've learned to live with that over the years - we all have. I can't believe you're all heated up just because - "

"Don't go any further, Bones! I'm not interested in any of your psychoanalyses! Now, if you don't mind, I have a lot of work to do, and very little time to do it in. Therefore I feel you should leave now and let me continue in peace." Kirk grabbed a sheaf of papers and prepared to shut out McCoy's presence.

A fist slammed into the papers, its purpose clear and undeniable. "Jim! Will you please stop torturing yourself like this! I came to help you. Dammit, don't shut me out completely!"

The air charged itself as Kirk sat and glared at the fist imposing its threat to his inner self. He lifted himself up, his anger straining for release, but, instead, forced himself away from the desk and walked to the side of his



quarters, where he stood leaning against the wall.

McCoy tried again, almost feeling the pain he knew must be consuming this man who was so dedicated and over-protective towards others. "Jim - if there is something worrying you, it does help to talk about it to someone else. We all need each other..." McCoy moved to join his friend and clasped his shoulder, clearly emphasising his concern. "Jim...please...what is it?"

"Bones... Bones, I'm so sorry," Kirk mumbled, keeping his head bent low. "Why do I always shout at my friends when they're trying to help?" He glanced up, realising that he had in fact been leaning on the partition separating him from Spock's quarters. "I don't deserve friends like you and Spock...you're both too good for me."

McCoy remained at his side, offering the support he sensed Kirk needed and waiting for the worries to come spilling out.

"Bones?" The hazel eyes clouded as he turned to face McCoy. "Have you ever thought how lucky we are to be here, on the Enterprise? Reaching out into the universe...learning its secrets...seeing other worlds, other races..."

"Well, I don't exactly call taking a crash course in advanced space medicine lucky, but if you mean..."

"No! No, Bones...you don't understand." Kirk's features strained. "I don't mean you and me at this moment, I mean Us - the Human race." Seeing that he had still failed to make his point clear, he grabbed McCoy's arm and ushering him across to the desk. "Look." He keyed the desk viewer, bringing to life an image of the desolate planet they were orbiting. "That, Bones, is what I mean. We came so close to committing that same global suicide that they did ...so close..." His eyes glazed as he stared at the shrouded world. "How near we were to becoming like them..."

At once, everything fell into place for McCoy, who cringed inwardly for this man who cared so much for life - its glories and its tragedies.

"But it didn't happen to us, Jim. We survived. Overcame the prejudices and fears we had."

"Yes, maybe we did that time, Bones, but that doesn't change the way we are now! We are still as unpredictable at times as we were then. In each and every one of us there is still a part that can be cruel, violent... I know that better than anyone." McCoy watched as his friend relived a particularly painful memory. He reached across to grasp the tense shoulder reassuringly.

"I understand, Jim - really I do - only we are what we are. One man alone cannot change thousands of years of evolution. Besides, we need our weaknesses as well as our strengths in order to grow. Without the two balancing each other, we'd be nothing." He shook Kirk gently. "And we're still growing, my friend - all of us. Perhaps we need to look at planets such as this to fill in some gaps in our education. After all, how often does a young adolescent get the opportunity to see a wrong decision he so easily could have made?"

Kirk studied his companion carefully for a brief moment before a half laugh softened his distressed features. "Yeah, I guess you're right, Bones. Perhaps when I get down there and see for myself, things will come into perspective. It's my own fault anyway that I allow these moods to build up... I think too much about the wrong things."

"No, Jim. You think about the right things, you simply need a little help sometimes to see them straight, that's all. Remember, there are always two sides to everything. We are loving and understanding as well as aggressive. We need both if we are to survive and compete in this life. It's learning to control them that's the hard part...the most dangerous part of that life..." McCoy paused, gauging that the conversation had gone far enough along these lines now to warrant a discreet end to the subject.

"Incidentally, talking of keeping things under control, where's my favourite Vulcan? I thought he'd be here helping you with some of this paperwork."

Kirk fidgeted and hesitated before answering. "Oh...er...you know how it is, Bones - he's in his quarters, working." He rushed the last words and reached over to fill two glasses he had retrieved from a drawer. "Here, let's have that drink you came for."

"Now hold it right there! I'm not starting another game of hide and seek tonight. That was a pretty nasty injury Spock had, and if you two are conspiring against me, there'll be trouble."

"Us? Conspire?" A glint appeared in Kirk's eye as he played up to McCoy's threat.

"I'm warning you, Jim..." A finger wavered in his direction.

"All right, all right, you win. In all seriousness, he's fine... Here." Kirk handed a glass to the wary doctor.

"Honestly?"

"Well...he did say he was a bit tired," said Kirk.

"That's all?" McCoy eyed his Captain suspiciously. There was something going on here. Kirk moved across the cabin to sit casually in an easy chair, not daring to look at McCoy.

"He...er...he might have mentioned a slight headache - " Kirk leaped from his seat as he saw McCoy preparing to go and check for himself. He grabbed his friend's arm and pleaded, "Wait! Please, Bones, that is all, believe me. Don't bother him tonight. I...I promised him I wouldn't tell you." He could see he needed to bargain more. "Look, if he's no better in the morning, I'll make him come along and see you. A deal?" He smiled that irresistible smile that McCoy had never yet succeeded in over-ruling.

"James Kirk, one of those days I...I... Oh, what's the use? But just remember - I want that Vulcan in sickbay tomorrow if there's even the slightest twinge in that computerised head of his. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir!" mimicked Kirk, and he snapped to attention like some raw recruit. He began to laugh, his eyes lightening. "Bones, I'm really glad you came - things have been so hectic lately..."

McCoy smiled inwardly to himself. He'd accomplished his task, and would now stay a while and give to this man who needed so much to relax and forget for a time the stresses of command.

Leonard McCoy glanced up from his breakfast tray in time to see Kirk and Spock entering the mess deck. The two men were in deep conversation and hadn't noticed his presence as yet. Seizing the opportunity of checking them both over whilst they were otherwise engaged, McCoy watched as his friends punched out their respective meals.

The Captain appeared fine, and so, thankfully, did Spock. Perhaps he was being over-protective towards the Vulcan; but then this mission had all the signs of being a tough one for Kirk, who might unconsciously lean a lot on his friend for help and understanding.

"Hi, omes," called Kirk as he approached the table.

"Morning, Jim - Spock," he answered cheerfully.

"Good morning, Doctor," acknowledged the Vulcan.

Nothing out of the ordinary with that reply, mused McCoy. "Sleep well, Spock?" he enquired in a casual manner as he sliced deep into his bacon, carefully avoiding Kirk's icy glare. If there was any hesitation on the First



Officer's part, it passed unnoticed.

"Very well, thank you, Doctor." He then promptly changed the subject by turning to Kirk and saying, "Captain?"

"Ummm?"

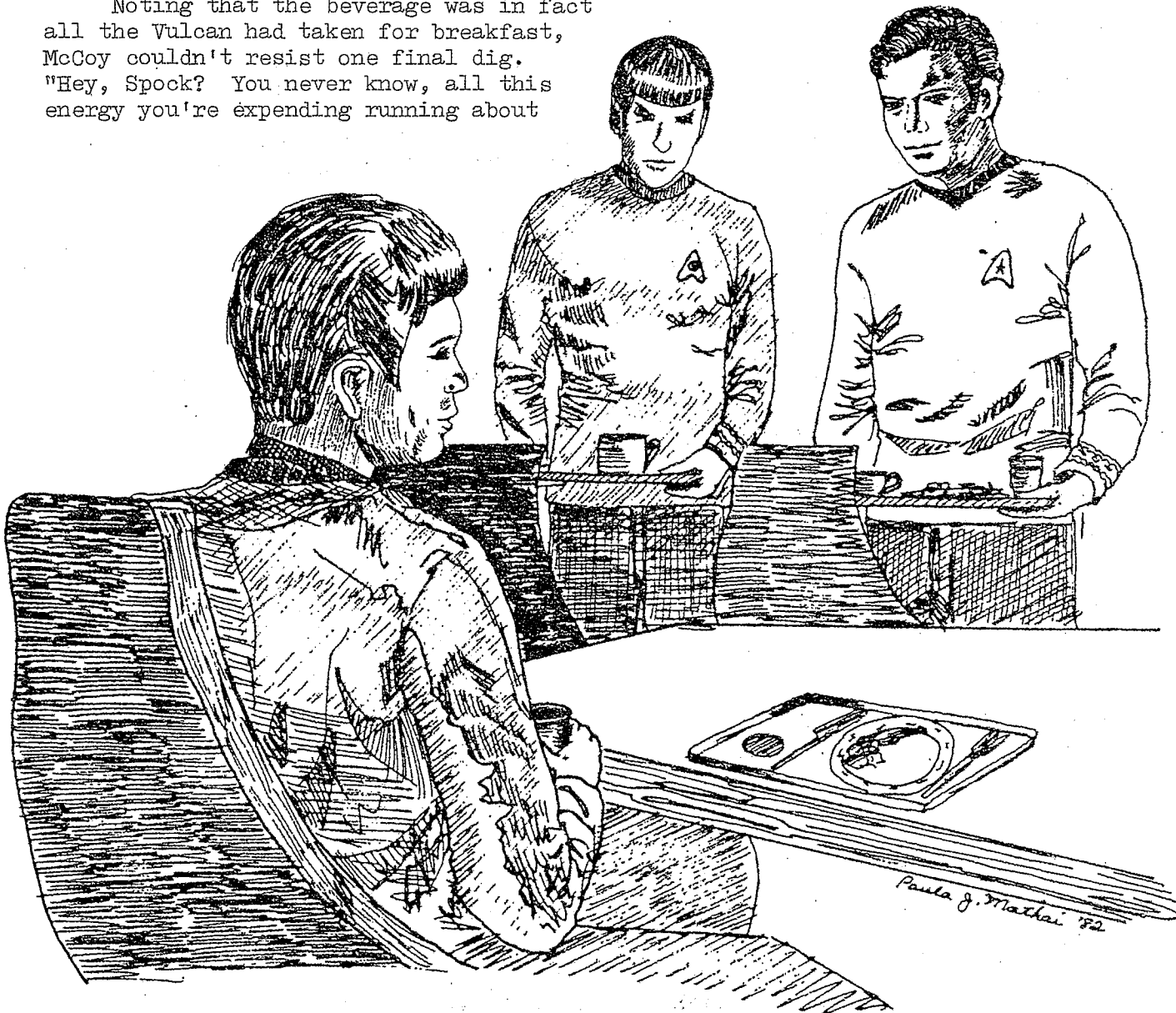
"I have a number of computer entries to complete prior to our mission. Do I have your permission to remain in the laboratories until the briefing session?"

"Sure, go ahead." Kirk waved his fork in Spock's general direction. "Leave whenever you want to. I know you have a lot to do, and Bones won't mind, will you?"

"Fine by me. Just make sure you call down some time for your radiation shots - I'm not hunting round half the ship because you find computers more interesting than your own health or my sickbay."

Spock gave the Human a cool glance as he finished his glass of liquid nourishment and prepared to leave. "I shall endeavour not to hinder your vaccination programme, Dr. McCoy. Now, if you will excuse me, gentlemen?" He pushed himself up from the table, bowed to each in turn, and strode out across the deck.

Noting that the beverage was in fact all the Vulcan had taken for breakfast, McCoy couldn't resist one final dig. "Hey, Spock? You never know, all this energy you're expending running about



the ship from one section to another might well give you an appetite!"

Although the First Officer appeared to ignore the parting remark, it was obvious to Kirk that he had been irritated by it. Once Spock was safely out of the door, he lashed out in defence of his friend.

"Bones! That was unfair, and you know it! I promised him I wouldn't say anything to you about last night, and here you are dropping hints the size of Starships! Why do you do it?"

McCoy snapped in return. "Hell, he's my friend too, you know! And besides, this is likely to be a tough mission, Jim...for both of you.. I'm sorry if I go about things in a funny way, but that's the way I am...too old to change now and...and... Dammit, I care about the pair of you!" His head drooped as he felt a flush of colour burn his cheeks. A gentle touch of understanding penetrated his senses and he lifted his head back up.

"Bones? Bones, I'm sorry... I guess these last few months are making us all touchy." The squeeze on his forearm pressed further. "Am I forgiven?" Kirk's gaze spoke volumes, quickly dispersing McCoy's anger-filled expression of concern.

"Yeah, I suppose so...but please, Jim, be careful down there over the next couple of days. I have my own work to do on this mission without having to babysit you two."

Kirk laughed at McCoy's choice of phrase. "We will, Bones, we will. Now," he checked the time unit, "I'm due on the bridge in five minutes. I'll call down later for my shots, but right now, I must go." He got up hurriedly from the table, managing to collide with Lt. Patterson in the process. With apologies all round, they disentangled themselves and the Captain departed almost at a run.

"Don't bother coming down, Jim," shouted McCoy to the retreating back. "I'll send Christine up to the bridge."

"Thanks, Bones." He waved his hand in gratitude and was gone.

"Dr. McCoy! I am still the Captain aboard this vessel, and my decision stands!"

For the third time in less than twenty-four hours, two friends found themselves facing one another in direct confrontation. This present episode was taking place across the wide briefing-room table. "I have given you my reasons for not including you in the landing party, and will not be subjected to this... this exhibition. Do I make myself clear?"

"Too blasted clear, Captain Kirk! And I'll have you know my decision still stands. I shall enter into the medical log your refusal to include a member of my department on this mission. Now if you will excuse me, sir, I have work to do."

With his anger clearly displayed, Leonard McCoy stormed out of the briefing-room, leaving James Kirk alone to simmer, explode or do whatever his current frame of mind demanded.

The Captain felt his blood pressure slip a notch further up the scale as the tight rein he kept on his fiery tamper loosened a fraction more. Damn McCoy! A fist slammed into the solid deck, his fury obliterating any pain he might otherwise have experienced. Surely Bones could understand why he didn't want him down there on the surface? This mission could become highly dangerous; he needed to take as few people as possible with him, and be sure McCoy's expertise was there - safe on board ship - should they require it.

Why didn't he see it that way? Why couldn't he simply see reason instead of going off half cocked like that? Why, why, why...he was sick to death of why!



...he was sick to death of everything lately.

"Captain:" The quiet voice startled him out of a spiralling depression. The Human turned in time to catch a fleeting glimpse of concern pass across dark eyes. Kirk tried to relax and soften the lines of tension he knew were clearly etched into his features.

"Spock.. I didn't hear you come in. Was there something in particular you wanted, cr...?"

"Jim, when I have ever felt...anxious, or in need of reassurance, in the past, I have known that you were there, always willing to listen and share; I had hoped that I am here - as your friend - to do the same for you."

Kirk leaned heavily on the desk top, his head bowed low. A long sigh filled the air before finally he spoke.

"Bones and I have just had another row."

"Yes, I know."

"You know? How? Did you speak to him?"

"No, I simply observed his behaviour when I reported to sickbay for my vaccinations. Also it was not difficult for anyone to notice that he was... displeased with the briefing session - and intended to take matters further, in private." Spock hesitated. "But that is not all, is it? Jim - I wish to help you, my friend; to listen and share."

Kirk raised his head slowly and saw once again that same expression of concern he had noticed earlier. Only this time it remained, and he realised that he needed to talk and confide in the Vulcan - for both their sakes.

"Oh, Spock, I'm truly sorry - everything's going wrong." He collapsed into a vacant chair, shoulders slumped in defeat. "It's fighting with Bones when all he's trying to do is help me, and now I discover I've been hurting you by shutting you out..." His head dropped onto folded forearms as he gave in completely. "And I'm so tired, Spock...so tired..."

Spock shuddered as he listened to Kirk, and felt his stomach knot as he watched his friend so openly defenceless, and somehow defeated. Reaching a decision, he eased himself into a nearby chair and laid his arm across the lonely shoulders.

"Jim. In the time that I have come to know you, I have watched you grow. Yet I have also watched as you fight a never-ending battle within yourself. No individual is ever perfect - nor is any race. Furthermore, no individual can ever be expected to bear the responsibility of his entire species.

"But I watch as you increasingly go out and feel personally responsible for your people's actions - past and future. I do not openly condemn you for this, as each of us must share in this task if our people are to survive. However, it is important that we each understand and accept our limits and all aspects of our heritage - no matter how destructive they appear.

"Humans have many faces which you alone cannot change, Jim. There is no need to be ashamed or afraid of your race's more sinister qualities. They are there for a purpose - to aid you in life; not for you to fear. Humans may well be unpredictable - " Spock's lips curled in a slight smile - "and illogical - " Kirk looked up - "yet they are a race who give much to this universe - and are deserving of trust and loyalty."

So Spock had realised all along what had been bothering him. Perhaps even more than McCoy. But he had bided his time, and was here now, at the right moment to pick up the pieces. Kirk smiled at his friend, reached over and covered the Vulcan's hand with his own.

"Thanks, Spock...for everything..." He gave an extra squeeze before releasing his hold on the Vulcan and then made a move to his feet. "Now I think I'd better go and apologise to poor old Bones yet again! I still want him to

remain on board. With ship to surface communications out because of those radiation belts, and the problem of transportation, I'll feel much happier knowing he's here with all the facilities." Kirk stretched and prepared to leave. "I'll meet you in the hangar deck in...say...half an hour?"

"Very well, Captain." Spock rose from his chair to watch Kirk as he walked at a slow pace towards the awaiting corridor. The normally broad shoulders were still slumped, muscles tired and in need of rest. Perhaps after this mission the Enterprise would be granted R & R. Spock sincerely hoped so for his friend's sake.

Montgomery Scott turned as he heard the steel of the turbolift doors slide apart to reveal his Captain and ship's surgeon.

"Ah, Captain. Everything's ready, sir. Mr. Spock has fed the rendezvous co-ordinates into the computer, and is now completing the pre-flight checklist."

"Thanks, Scotty." He gazed around his ship almost out of habit. "Well, she's all yours, Engineer." Kirk glanced back at his commander. "Take care of her for me till we get back."

"Aye, we will that, sir," answered the Scot sincerely.

"Bones..." Kirk laid his arm across the blue-clad shoulders and gave them a caring hug. "We'll see you in a couple of days - and don't worry; we'll be back before you know it."

I hope to God you're right, Jim, thought McCoy desperately. Although they had patched up their disagreement, McCoy still felt uneasy at being left on board. Yet Kirk's decision was final and there was no alteration to be achieved now. "Ummm. Well, just make sure you are, that's all I ask - and don't let that pointed-eared computer get carried away with anything 'fascinating'."

Kirk laughed. "No, I'll try not to." For a moment he didn't find it easy to leave his friend. Somehow he had never liked saying 'goodbye', it always seemed so final. Leaving words aside he simply turned his laugh into a warm smile, winked, and headed towards the shuttle's airlock.

Spock glanced up from the array of instruments to see Kirk slip into the accompanying seat and strap himself in. The Human gave him an almost imperceptible nod, together with a knowing smile indicating that all was well between him and the doctor. The Vulcan returned his attention to the task at hand.

"Captain Kirk is now on board. Power up. All instruments activated. All readings normal. All systems go. Request clearance for launch."

A disembodied voice returned the necessary reply in a crisp, authoritative tone. "Columbus, you are cleared for launch. Launch shuttlecraft."

As the huge hangar deck doors swung open, the stars beckoned with a call that had summoned for a thousand years, and the shuttle taxied forward to meet them, sliding quietly out into the emptiness of space.

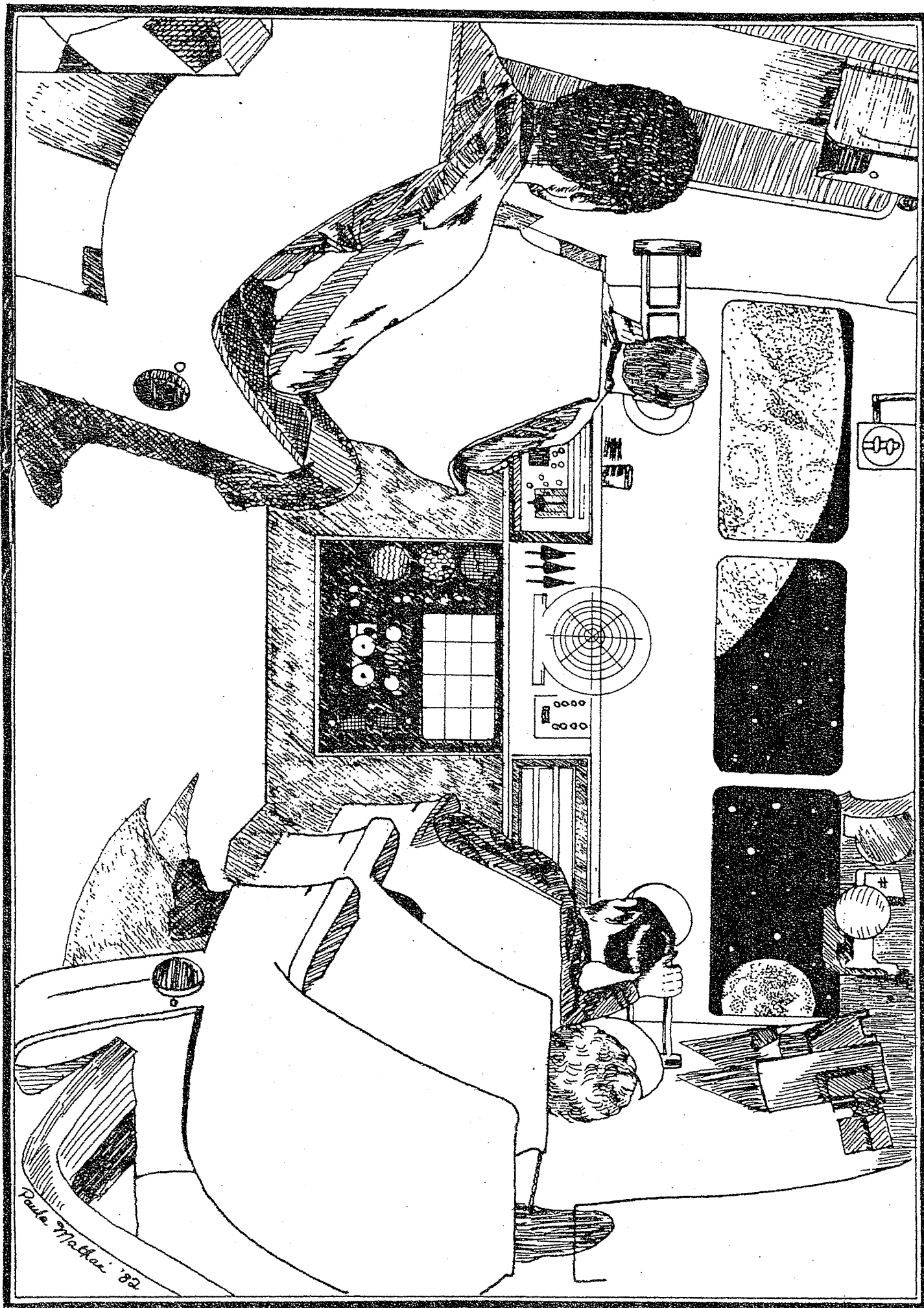
Kirk expertly checked the craft's immediate post launch sequences. "Readings normal. Acceleration normal. Phase one acceleration normal. Position three point six." He opened a channel to his ship. "Columbus to Enterprise. Come in, Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Scott here, sir."

"Everything normal, Scotty. We'll be heading for the planet's surface directly I break contact. Rendezvous time in exactly - " He turned to Spock for that one.

"Fifty-two point five hours, Captain."





" - fifty-two point five hours, Mr. Scott," echoed Kirk, grinning at his First Officer's precision."

"Aye, sir. We'll be waiting for you. Good luck, Captain."

"Thanks, Scotty. Kirk out."

As the circuit clicked shut, Spock waited for his Captain's official command.

"Take her down, Mr. Spock. Gentlemen?" he called back over his shoulder. "Make sure you're strapped in securely, this could be a bumpy ride as we pass through the radiation belts." Kirk's words were no sooner said when they all felt the initial effects of an angry world thrown into confusion by forces other than Mother Nature.

For what seemed a small eternity, Spock and Kirk wrestled with the controls until finally they emerged into the lower atmosphere of a planet ravaged by the act of senseless war.

Across most of the land masses, an eerie glow clung to the air, bathing the barren soils in a light so forlorn that Kirk felt he could almost cry. He tried to conjure up in his mind how beautiful this world had once been. Yet all he envisaged was his own Earth, and the scenes of wanton destruction that so easily could have been inflicted upon his own unscathed lands. Perhaps this was the way all creatures reacted when confronted by situations such as these. A universal despair at such senseless waste.

He became aware that the shuttle had changed course, and was heading for what appeared to be a large continent not dissimilar to Earth's own North America. Here and there he could make out regions where forest and vegetation were struggling to make their mark on the blackened wasteland of nuclear carnage. As the tiny craft straightened and sank towards land, Kirk noticed another day was about to begin on this side of the planet. Another day in the long fight back to life as it had been in the times before a world had gone crazy and devoured itself in hatred and greed. A proud sun came into view, a sun so like his own that had given him life...strength. In the growing light, warm rays reached out to comfort the lonely world...searching...scattering the deadly bands of radiation into whirlpools of colour. How beautiful they looked, thought Kirk... and yet how deadly...how terribly deadly...

"Captain? Captain?" He felt a slight pressure on his forearm.

"Umm?" The spell broke. "I'm sorry, Spock, I was miles away."

"Perhaps 'light years' would be a more appropriate term," the Vulcan murmured, raising his eyebrows fractionally. Kirk's face softened in the early dawn.

"Perhaps, my friend, perhaps... Is this the area you have selected for our first day's research?" His voice firmed up as he began to observe the surroundings with a different eye.

"Affirmative, sir. My instruments indicate several settlements of humanoid life forms on this continent. From preliminary sensor readings it would appear that the southern area of this land received heavy nuclear bombardment. A corresponding continent located in the lower hemisphere, at present experiencing night conditions, was also severely affected.

"Unfortunately, their recovery is negligible. In these northern areas, fortuitous climatic conditions appear to have enabled inhabitants to be more prolific." There was an unaccustomed pause in the report. "Do not misunderstand me, however, Captain. Survival in this area does not interpret as being unscathed by past events. Possibly it is they who should have the word 'unfortunately' placed in front of their mention." Spock's expression was solemn and hid nothing from the Human, who swallowed hard before answering.



"Thank you, Mr. Spock. I think we all get the picture. Simputa? Randall?"

"We understand, sir," came the almost-simultaneous reply.

"Good. Take her down, Spock."

The Columbus dived gently towards a large outcrop of rock. At its base, a few angular trees stretched awkwardly up to the sky, affording a small yet adequate covering in which to conceal the landed shuttlecraft.

With a soft thud, the craft landed. Gradually there was a return to the stillness and quiet as the engines closed down and the Columbus took its place amongst the ghosts of a forgotten world.

Kirk shielded his eyes against the glare of raw sunlight scorching down through an atmosphere thrown into confusion. The air felt hot and muggy; sweat trickled in tiny rivulets beneath his shirt, irritating him beyond words.

He muttered a suppressed oath, pulled at the offending uniform tunic with one hand whilst his other arm continued to cut out the fiery light as he gazed towards the distant horizon. It shimmered crazily as he watched - almost hypnotising in its effect.

So absorbed was he in the dancing display of colours and swirls, that he momentarily forgot he was still walking, and accidentally collided with his First Officer, who had paused to check his tricorder.

"What the - Sorry, Spock..." He steadied himself against the Vulcan. "Wasn't watching where I was going."

"No matter, Captain." Spock's eyes left the humming machine and strained into the wavering terrain. "Something here, sir." He adjusted a control fractionally. "Mr. Simputa? What do you read?"

The tall European was carefully rechecking his information. Confirmation soon followed. "Small group of humanoids - no more than five or six - bearing ...27.9...approximately 500 metres..."

"494 to be exact, Mr. Simputa," corrected Spock.

"Yes, sir, 494 metres," he said almost apologetically, casting a sidelong glance at his Captain. Kirk grinned and shrugged his shoulders.

"That's near enough for me, Lieutenant. Anything else to add?"

"...There appears to be a city of some kind as well, sir. I can't quite differentiate between ruins and intact buildings at this range. Tricorder readings are distorted by the unusual radiation fields over 600 metres."

"Spock?"

"That is correct, Captain. Perhaps if we were to reach that small ridge, a visual appraisal might prove more informative." Spock indicated the area he had in mind with his tricorder. Kirk nodded, checked to see that Randall was prepared, then gave the signal to move out.

Arrival at the crest of the rocky prominence found all three Humans puffing and sweating profusely. The heat and thin air were not to be ignored, and as Kirk slumped down, his mind drifted back to another time and another planet.

He shifted his position slightly to watch Spock, who was once again busy with his sensor recordings, quite at home in this rarified atmosphere. They had come a long way together since that almost disastrous incident...a long way...

"Not very encouraging, Captain. Most of the city is completely levelled and uninhabited. There are a small number of buildings close to the perimeter relatively intact - yet they do not appear to house any of our natives."

"Maybe the city's taboo, Spock. A reminder of the war and suffering. Do

you think they've gone back to living outside the concrete jungle? Trying to rebuild again?"

"A possibility. The aftermath of any war brings disease and pestilence from the breakdown of civilisation's health and safety systems. Therefore a city in this state of corruption is not a viable proposition. However - " The Vulcan hesitated and stared into the distant ruins - "To be totally avoided after this length of time is also inconsistent. I would suggest, Captain, that - "

"Mr. Spock, I've picked up another group of natives," interrupted Simputa urgently. "Larger this time, and coming from the direction where we left the shuttle. It's...it's almost as if they're trailing us, sir." The young officer glanced back over his shoulder nervously. "Do you think they know we're here, sir?"

At that moment Randall reappeared from lower down the ridge, his phaser drawn in readiness. "Problem, sir?" He slid to a halt. "I heard Lt. Simputa mention more natives."

Kirk indicated to Spock that he join the security guard, whilst he himself hurried to Simputa's side. "Let me see your readings, Lieutenant." He reached for the machine.

"There, sir. You see it? A large party...and they seem to be following our tracks exactly."

"Ummm, yes...I see..." Kirk turned to the others. The Vulcan had finished conferring with Randall, who nodded briskly and set off to scout their immediate vicinity. "Spock?"

"We could be in grave danger, Captain. On this open ridge we are vulnerable and can be trapped easily. I suggest we return to the shuttlecraft and relocate ourselves in a more isolated position. Mr. Randall is investigating a return route and should - " A piercing scream prevented Spock from completing his sentence.

"Randall!" yelled Kirk. He spun towards the chilling cry, in time to see the figure of his security guard come crashing over the ridge. The young man was clutching wildly at his back, eyes filled with horror and desperation as he tried in vain to remove an ugly hatchet embedded in his body.

"Randall!" Kirk ran forward, catching the stricken Human as he plummeted to the ground. "Oh, God, Randall..." He grabbed the limp shoulders almost in panic. The light in the blue-grey eyes flickered, began to dim, then vanished as death stormed in to claim another victory. The pain-lined face relaxed and Kirk was left holding another reminder of Man's - and his own - vulnerability in this cruel universe. Doubt and depression loomed again over the weary Human as he held the youthful body tenderly in his arms and cried inwardly for his loss.

"Captain! Jim!" Someone was pulling at his arm. He tightened his grip protectively. "Jim, we must leave here immediately. Jim, do you hear me?" The voice came again, slowly seeping into his battling mind. Strong yet gentle hands eased his grip from the still body. "I'm sorry, Jim - please..." The words held their own brand of compassion as Kirk found himself on his feet. "No-one can help Randall now. We must leave. Come, quickly." The strong arms returned, urging him away from the scene of death and horror.

He glanced back as they dropped downhill, seeing for the last time the lone Starfleet uniform, its vivid splash of red an agonising contrast to the ask cold surroundings of a world gone mad.

Kirk stumbled, his ankle twisting painfully beneath him as he began to slither down a rock-strewn gully. Spock reached out to steady him, but his own



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balance was precarious and together they slid to the bottom in a cloud of dust. Not far behind the, Simputa joined the two men by much the same method, collecting a nasty graze to his left arm on the way.

Clambering gingerly to his feet, Kirk made his way towards his young crewman, who knelt in the arid soil clutching his forearm. "Here, let me take a look at that."

"It's nothing, sir - just a - ouch!" Simputa winced as his Captain probed at the deep cut.

"Sorry, Alex...I think I'll have to take your implant out..." As gently as he could, Kirk removed torn shreds of uniform and parts of the damaged translator unit. He glanced round to see where Spock had disappeared to. "Spock? Have you got the medikit?"

The Vulcan joined his companions, opening up the small field kit as he approached. Kirk rummaged until he found what he wanted, whilst Spock watched their surroundings with growing unease.

"Captain, I suggest we do not delay here for too long." He hesitated, registering the poor state both Humans were in. "I know we have not rested for over an hour, yet..."

"I know, Spock, I know," interrupted Kirk. "Just give us a minute, will you?" He finished off treating Simputa's arm, stood up slowly and wiped the sweat from his face and eyes. For a moment the fiery terrain tipped, and he felt himself tumbling sideways, but then Spock was there.

"Captain?" he murmured, the strong protective grip conveying more than words ever could.

"I'm all right...Spock..." Kirk held onto the comforting support as the dizziness subsided. "It's just this damned heat..." Gradually, his world righted itself and he drew away to stand alone, drawing in deep breaths, before he felt his body beginning to respond.

He glanced across at Spock, knowing full well that the Vulcan was watching him carefully. Endeavouring to reassure his friend he smiled and walked over to Simputa, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Not far now, Alex. Think you can make it?"

"You bet, sir," came the brave answer. "I've been in worse tight corners than this on shore leave!"

Kirk grinned, and shook the firm young shoulder affectionately. "Good man. Spock - we're ready when you are."

"This way, Captain."

Taking the lead, the Vulcan moved out, his keen eyesight straining to catch the slightest movement, the merest glimpse of danger.

Progressing well into the gully, their course took them round a long bend and out of sight. Silently, a group of men clad in heavy makeshift clothing dropped into the empty ravine and began trailing the trio. A tall albino followed them. He stopped, gave his signal and waited for his sweet victory.

The struggle was both quick and violent. Totally outnumbered, Spock took several blows to the skull from a vicious club before he dropped to the ground cradling his head. Kirk tried unsuccessfully to reach him and found himself going down under a swarm of four or five natives. Simputa rushed his attackers with head down, taking several with him before plunging to the gully floor, his arms and legs pinned painfully out from his body.

Kirk was hauled to his feet, vaguely aware of hands fumbling at his uniform and belt before his arms were jerked behind his back. But all he wanted to do was go to Spock. The Vulcan was on his knees, clutching at his



head in obvious pain and offering no resistance to their captivity. Kirk struggled to pull free.

"Let - me - go - damn you! Let me go to my friend!"

Agony spiralled up his arms as they were wrenched further up behind his back. A hoarse cry escaped through his dry lips which he clamped down on angrily. "Spock! Spock! Are you all right?" When no response came, he yelled out again, "Spock! Tell me you're all right!"

In desperation, he lunged, straining to break free from his retainers. "Let me go to him, dammit! What have you animals done to him? Let me - " The words ended as a stream of lights exploded inside his head and an enormous black cavern opened up to catch him as he fell and felllll....

"Captain?"

A voice echoed strangely from a long way off. Kirk mumbled something disheartedly and pushed at an annoying hand.

"Captain! Captain, please wake up." The voice returned, pleading. Then

the hand was back, giving him a gentle shake, helping him over the last hurdle into the conscious world; a world of pain and sickness.

His stomach heaved as he rolled over and tried to sit up. Immediately, the pounding in his head escalated and he was unable to prevent himself from vomiting all over the floor where he was lying. Strong hands held him steady and the distant voice returned, only this time much closer.

"Easy, sir...take it easy..." The spasm passed and Kirk felt himself being eased back, away from the mess and smell. "Try and lie still, Captain...don't move about too much..." Something warm and wet wiped across his face and a familiar face drifted into focus. There was a hesitant smile. "Feeling better, sir?"

Kirk nodded, with care. "How long have I been out?"

"About four hours, sir, as long as I can judge." Simputa glanced up at a tiny window cut high in the walls of their prison. "The sun's well on its way down now. They must have jumped us some time in the afternoon."

Getting up, Simputa kicked the ground with his boot, covering the area where Kirk had been so sick. The Captain cringed and had to turn away as his delicate stomach lurched a second time. A vision of Bones swam into his mind. The gentle features, reassuring voice telling him to lie still and breathe deeply...caring hands saying, 'I'm here - do not be afraid...' God, how he wished he'd brought him along. Was there nothing he could do right?

"Sir?" Simputa's voice entered his depression. "About Mr. Spock. I think they've taken him to - "

Christ! He'd forgotten about Spock!

"Where is he? I must get to him!" Almost demented, Kirk struggled to his feet and rushed towards what could only be the door of their jail.

"No! Wait, Captain, you can't - "

"I have to see him. You don't understand, I..." The pain in his skull soared to a new height, bringing with it blurred vision and a sickening wave of nausea. The floor came up to meet him and he retched uncontrollably as he landed heavily on the dusty ground.

Simputa, caught unprepared, made a grab for him, but missed his footing and together they ended up in a tangled mess of arms and legs.

Suddenly, light poured into the dimness as the entrance to the hut was thrown open to reveal an enormous, powerfully built humanoid. The creature towered above the two men, its deformed features snarling, fists clenched in a pose of rage and anger.

"Quick, Captain! Get back! Away from the door!" shouted Simputa.

Inside his haze of pain, Kirk heard the anxious words and felt himself being pulled, but as Simputa struggled with his commanding officer, a vicious kick caught him in the ribs as the biped misconstrued his actions. Yelping, he fell back, clutching at the ring of fire encircling his chest.

Kirk, still battling with his own pain, heard the cry and instinctively turned on their assailant.

"No, Captain! NO!" Simputa grabbed frantically at Kirk, missing by inches as an enormous hand clamped onto the disorientated Captain's shoulder and in one easy movement swung him up and away from the Lieutenant's reach.

An angry roar buffeted Kirk's ears and the stench of hot fetid breath swamped his senses, almost making him pass out. Then he was flying through the air, hurtled away in disgust as the creature discarded him with the arrogance of a spoiled child throwing away an unwanted toy. He landed in a crumpled heap, gasping for air as his abused lungs struggled to compensate.

Simputa scrambled on all fours to his side, his own injury momentarily forgotten. "Captain? Captain?"

A low moan drifted from the slumped figure. Simputa pulled Kirk into an upright position, gently easing him back against the mud-packed wall. In the background, the alien hovered, growling, but made no further advances towards them. Simputa ignored the creature, sure that no more attacks would occur now that Kirk was out of action.

Kirk opened his eyes. The face before him wavered, then came sharply into focus. "Are you all right, sir?" Worry flickered in the dark eyes.

"Yes... Yes, I'm fine..." he murmured. "That was damn stupid of me, Alex, I'm sorry..." A loud noise of wood being lodged into position momentarily drew their attention, then semi-darkness returned and their prison was once more secure.

Kirk turned back in time to notice Simputa's face grimace slightly as he tried to settle into a more comfortable position.

"Did he injure you, Alex? Here, let me take a look."

"No. No, sir - " he fended off the attentive hands. "It's nothing, really - just badly bruised, I think." He pressed gingerly at his side. "Yes, only bruised." He took a couple of deep breaths simply to reassure his Captain that all was well, then leaned back against the hard wall of the hut.

For an indeterminate time the two sat in silence, each with their own thoughts. Simputa glanced sideways at Kirk. The Captain was staring at the entrance, his face clearly displaying the worry Simputa knew consumed him.

"They...er...they took Mr. Spock to another part of the camp."



Kirk did not answer.

"I'm sorry, sir. With my translator out, there was no way I could make them understand me, and Mr. Spock..." He hesitated. "...Well, he seemed kind of in a daze..."

"Dazed? What do you mean, dazed?" snapped Kirk.

"...Like...like he didn't understand what was happening. You know - confused." Simputa paused as if re-living the nightmare again. "Come to think of it, sir - I don't think he even recognised me when I shouted out to him. The natives were talking to him but he seemed even oblivious of them. Do you think..." Turning to face Kirk, Simputa found his Captain cradling his head and muttering to himself. "Sir? What's wrong?" He touched the bare forearm with obvious concern.

Kirk looked up, suddenly appearing ten years older. "Spock may not have been fit enough for this mission. Remember that ion storm we tangled with the other week?" Simputa nodded. "Well, Spock was working down in engineering at the time. There was a particularly nasty region of disturbance, and he ended up in sickbay with a head injury and concussion. I'm not sure if... Perhaps I..." Kirk stopped before conceding his inner guilt feelings further. Letting out a deep sigh he dropped his burning head back down again tiredly. This was one hell of a mess; and he wasn't sure he was in a fit enough state, mentally or physically, to get them out of it.

"Sir?" Simputa called softly to him. "Sir, it's not your fault." No response. "You should try and get some rest if you can, Captain. I'll take the first watch and wake you if there's anything..."

Simputa caught the merest flicker of a nod from Kirk as he watched the man beside him; watched the loneliness, the agony of command, and above all, he watched the guilt of failing a friend.

He woke into the stillness of dusk. The scent of burning wood and dried vegetation drifted past his nostrils as he listened to the sounds of angry branches snapping wildly in flames of fire.

Cautiously he opened his eyes and began focusing on a lazy spiral of smoke as it laced its way towards a small opening in a roof of woven flax. He cleared his mind systematically, thus allowing his defensive senses complete freedom to roam and explore this strange, unsettling environment.

The air felt warm and dry. Beneath him sprawled a bed of soft skins and he felt the weight of additional pelts covering his naked body. Although stiff and tired, his limbs offered no other discomfort. Only his head ached and his tongue felt huge and swollen in a mouth filled with dust and tasting dry and coarse.

All about him the fire played an enchanting game of shadows, entwining itself within the hazy smoke and flickering wildly in darkened corners. The shadowy images enticed his attention, almost begging him to move, reach out and thereby reveal his wakefulness. But the time was not yet right... He listened... Only the fire spat and crackled...he was alone. He slept...

With the fall of darkness came also a fall in temperature. The disjointed atmosphere of the planet, unable to protect its surface from the gruelling heat during the day, was equally unable to prevent that same heat escaping during the night.

Huddled together, the two men waited for the long hours of darkness to pass. Simputa couldn't sleep. The cold seeped into his bones, gnawing at him until he ached in every limb and joint. Beside him, Kirk shifted and muttered something in his uneasy slumber. Earlier on he had cried out, his fear very real as his

troubled mind gave him no peace. Simputa wished there was something more he could do for his Captain, but the hurt was too deep; and this place too cold and empty.

Outside, the sound of muffled voices drew near and stopped. Simputa stiffened in anticipation as faint movements could be heard coming from the entrance of the hut. He glanced down at Kirk, who appeared to have settled into sleep, exhaustion clearly taking its toll.

Slowly, the heavy door shifted, and a blaze of light filled the prison. Instinctively, Simputa covered his eyes as a flaming torch approached the two men. Something heavy landed near his feet, then the light was moving off into the night air. There was a muffled thud as the door was wedged back into position, effectively blocking off the eerie glow of distant campfires; and darkness returned.

Gently moving Kirk, who had slipped over and lay sleeping against him, Simputa eased himself up and searched the ground near him. Kirk stirred and reached out after him. "Spock...?" he murmured, still wrapped in the coils of sleep.

"Sssshhh, Captain, it's all right...go back to sleep..."

Obediently, Kirk quietened and drifted back into a regular pattern of slow breathing.

Simputa soon found the latest addition to the hut's very basic amenities - pelts of some animal. Although the smell left much to be desired, Simputa thanked whatever gods were watching over them and quickly returned to Kirk. Settling himself close to the Captain, he covered them both with the warming furs and eventually fell off to sleep.

The tunnel sank deeper and further away; further away from the open surface and safety. Rock surrounded him, pressing, suffocating, squeezing every drop of air from his stifled lungs as he ran and ran and ran...

"Spock...help me, Spock...help me..." The voice urged him to go deeper... faster...yet still the plea remained distant, just out of reach. "...Please, Spock.....me..." It grew faint, dwindling, as a candle fights for life, flickers...then dies - starved of air.

He collapsed in frustration and anger as his tired muscles screamed in protest, their needs no longer to be dismissed.

There! A light! And the voice!

Quickly! Go to him! His friend...he must be there!

The headlong dash continued, feet stumbling, arms and hands seeking out any anchoring site to steady his uncoordinated body. A new sound brushed the periphery of his hyperalert mind. Deep...rumbling... He paused as the air around him shifted, the warm draft bringing its message of danger.

He focused his eyes on the ragged walls which stretched before him, in time to see them bulge like pregnant monsters before they split wide open and disgorged their hundreds upon hundreds of tons of thick choking dust and rubble. With incredible speed the passageway filled, effectively blocking his only means through. He watched in horror as the tiny patch of light which meant so much to him began to haze...waver briefly...then wink out.

"NOOOOO!!!" A yell of rage rang out as he scrambled to the pile of debris and clawed frantically with his bare hands. Oblivious of the pain, he dug until his skin was raw and bleeding, the blood mingling pitifully with the impact he was making, turning the rockfall into a sticky sea of misery.

The tormented body tossed and turned, the sweat-laden skin glistening in

the eerie light. Silently, a figure watched from the shadows, her eyes never leaving the lean body as it moved in such restless turmoil.

Soon, the temptation was too great and the woman crept out into the light and stretched out her hand, trembling in anticipation.

"AHHhh!" She jumped back, startled as first, the entrance to the hut flew open and a tall albino stood in the doorway, and, secondly, the strange new brother sat bolt upright and yelled in terror, "NOOooo!!"

With the unexpected distraction, the woman fled from the angry presence of her mate, who was staring at the frightened man caught in the throes of some unimaginable nightmare. As she brushed past him in her eagerness to be gone, he lifted a hand in anger, but then let it drop. He was not interested in the weaknesses of women; what concerned him was the new brother, and why he should be in the company of Destroyers.

By now the worst appeared to have passed, and the stranger was endeavouring to regain some control; the albino drew near.

The Vulcan gasped and flinched reflexively as a cool hand touched his skin. He pulled back, over-bright eyes seeking out the owner of the intrusive touch.

"Who...are you?" he croaked, "and...and where is this place?"

A slightly puzzled frown was his only answer as the tall biped stared at him, the pale eyes bottomless pools concealing the mind held poised within. Spock broke the contact to survey his new surroundings with confused interest. "I...do not understand. The Cap - ahh!" A knife sliced through his mind, bringing agonising pain. He clutched at his head, desperate to force the explosion into submission. Again he felt the cool hands and this time a gentle voice reached out to him.

"Rest, my brother...rest...the Destroyers will be punished for the pain they have inflicted on you..."

Spock's translator conveyed the alien tongue to his exhausted brain, pausing briefly with one word which caused him to question its meaning. "Destroyers? What Destroyers?" he asked wearily.

"The ones who held you captive, of course."

"But...I..." For an instant a vision of two people drifted into his mind's eye; one so familiar that - The pain poured back with a vengeance, and he gasped once more.

"Rest, my brother, rest. We will talk more of this later...you need to rest..."

Morning arrived. Simputa woke to find Kirk asleep on his shoulder, his hand clutching at a medallion of some sort partially hidden beneath his torn tunic.

A shaft of weak sunlight stretched down into the dingy hut, whilst over by the entrance someone had left two bowls of what could only be food and water. Outside, he could make out the sounds of people moving; the world was waking up to a new day.

"Captain?" He shook the pale, drawn figure at his side. "Captain?"

"Ummm? What...ohhww..." Kirk winced as he moved cramped muscles and felt the dull ache in his head resume its steady thump. His legs flopped as he tried to summon energy that simply wasn't available; he felt dreadful.

"How's the head, sir?" The enquiry held concern.

"Not too bad..." he lied, His tongue licked across parched lips. "Is... is there anything to drink around here?" The inside of his mouth felt no

better, it tasted of sand and dust.

"Sure, sir." Happy that at least his Captain was awake and taking notice, Simputa scrambled to his feet and collected the waiting bowls. "It looks pretty clear, sir, but there's no way I can test it, their leader took our tricorders ...," He paused to study the water a little closer. "I suppose we'll just have to risk it?" He handed the water to Kirk, who eyed it warily before taking a long, deep drink.

Simputa was busy investigating the contents of the second bowl when Kirk finished his drink. "This seems to be some sort of cereal." He searched the floor. "No spoons or anything lying around...guess it'll have to be fingers." He glanced up. "Do you want some, sir?"

Kirk looked at the congealed mess, immediately wishing he hadn't as his stomach rebelled. "And I don't think you should either. Water we'll have to risk, but food..." The remainder was left unsaid, for Simputa to put his own interpretation on. The youngster stared at the lumpy substance sticking to his fingers; it conjured up a none too happy picture. "Yeah, I think I get your meaning, sir."

About to replace the bowl on the ground, Simputa was knocked flying as the door flew open and two enormous humanoids barged into the hut. "Hey! What the - " He was lifted bodily from the ground, and together with Kirk, thrown outside into the glaring, unexpected sunlight.

They landed in the midst of what appeared to be the entire population of the camp. Struggling to stand, they watched anxiously as the crowd moved closer, muttering and gesturing in a threatening manner until they were totally surrounded. Most of the people were grossly unhealthy, many with open sores and what could only be fungating cancerous growths. Nearly all were genetically damaged, with wide variations in skin tones and abnormal limb and body development.

As the two Humans stood up and surveyed their situation, some of the more daring ones ventured forward and began to poke the men with sticks. One particularly obnoxious dwarflike creature somehow sensed that Kirk was already injured, and was forever prodding the Captain with a sharp stick. An inane laugh would split the grotesque features whenever Kirk yelped and the weapon drew blood. With growing confidence, the alien jabbed harder and faster until finally the stick became entangled in the Human's legs and he overbalanced, sprawling headlong into the dust.

Simputa moved in defence of his commander, aiming for the creature's head as it danced near to him in frenzied ecstasy. His fist connected with bone, and with a squeal it leaped back into the protection of its fellow beings. Helping Kirk regain his feet, Simputa kept a wary eye out for any other adventurous types.

"Bastards! Leave him alone, you ugly moron! Get away!" he yelled threateningly, and raised his fist again. He glanced at Kirk, who stood swaying at his side. "Captain?"

"I'm...I'm all right, Alex." Kirk massaged his forehead. "Just a bit dizzy, that's all..." He gazed around at the audience with a mixture of sadness and disgust. "Poor devils...to think that could have been us, if - " The words stopped as the crowd parted and a familiar figure stood in front of him. "SPOCK!"

Simputa whirled and followed Kirk's anxious stare towards the tall figure of his Captain's First Officer.

The darkness began to lighten as the sensation of wakefulness probed at his mind. A small tendril of memory niggled, a blurred image of someone who...? No. The thought flickered and vanished as a dull ache crept in and smothered all attempts to remember.

He drifted. The uncomplicated oblivion of sleep so inviting...so safe...





so secure and safe...

An unexpected sound drew his attention back to the fears of a real world and he turned his head to watch the strange surroundings of an alien life crowd in about him. The noise came again and he lifted his head. A young woman was carefully tending a fire, in the centre of which a blackened pot boiled busily. She cast a furtive glance in his direction, then continued with her work.

Further movement caught his attention as a shadow lengthened across the dusty floor and a tall, lean frame uncurled itself from a pile of furs to his right. The woman murmured quietly to the newly-awakened man and waved a crude ladle in the Vulcan's direction. A grunt from her master was sufficient for three empty bowls to be filled from the simmering pot.

Spock found himself in possession of a lumpy, cereal-type concoction; together with a spoon and a decidedly non-existent appetite.

"I do not wish to eat, thank you," he said, carefully replacing the bowl on the ground.

"You must eat, my brother, or the weakness will take you." The alien lifted the dish and returned it to Spock. Reluctantly, he grasped the spoon and consumed the bland contents of the bowl.

With the meal over, Spock found himself being removed from his place of rest and urged to dress in rough woven garments which hung loosely about his thin, angular frame. Throughout the operation, the male was constantly talking to him, his deep voice penetrating and somehow commanding. The Vulcan tensed as the over-sized hands paused to examine a rather nasty bruise spreading along his left shoulder. He stepped back, the sensation of another's touch too disconcerting. "No, wait! No more, please... I...I find this place strange and confusing...I..." He faltered as the two people stood listening, the man obviously concerned about him.

"There is no need to fear now, my brother, you are safe here. We have the Destroyers secure, and awaiting punishment. Come, tell us how you are called that we may find your kinsmen and return you to their care."

"Kinsmen? I have no kinsmen. My name is..." A great emptiness welled up inside his mind.

"Yes, my brother? You are called?"

"...I am called..." The emptiness persisted, a void where there should have been identity...memories...awareness. Now there was nothing, only blackness and above all else, pain and loneliness; his life was gone.

He clutched at his head; the agony mounted and the room spun as the floor came up to meet him. For one awful moment he thought he was going to vomit as his mouth filled with saliva and his stomach heaved uncontrollably. Ashamed, he rolled away from his would-be comforters and lay huddled in a corner - lost and alone. Bhar-an watched, his anger held in check.

"Now you see what the Destroyers do to our people, Shir-an. They cause them to forget their brethren and their stomachs to reject our foods. That is why they must be punished...tortured, as even now they still torture our brother." He turned to the hovering woman, his eyes ablaze with revenge. "Go! Have the bands of darkness prepared. I shall join you with the brother when he is recovered. This is a great day for our people. A victory over the Destroyers. Hurry, Shir-an, hurry!"

"At once, my lord. All shall be as you command." With growing excitement, the woman bowed and disappeared from the hut.

Returning to the huddled figure, Bhar-an knelt down and touched the stiff shoulder. "My brother? It is time for the judgement of those who did you harm. It is for your salvation and in celebration of your safe return to us that we use the bands of darkness." With great strength and gentleness, he lifted the

dazed Vulcan to his feet and led him out into the sunshine. "See...our people...your people..." He held out his hand in an open gesture and the gathered crowd roared in response. "Come, the time draws near."

The crowd cheered as the two walked towards them, some eager to reach out and touch the leader fleetingly. Nearing the centre, an avenue opened up, steering them to a clearing, and as they came to a halt, a sea of misshapen, pitiful creatures flowed in from behind; no-one wanted to be left out on this, a day of victory.

Bhar-an held Spock close to his side as the Vulcan lifted his head and amidst his confusion gazed at the swarm of faces peering towards him. He followed the encircling crowd until his eyes came to rest upon one individual.

"SPOCK!" The sound tore into his ears.

"Mr. Spock? Sir?" A younger voice reached him, its owner stepping forward.

"No, wait." The first pulled the youthful figure back, whilst still staring directly at the Vulcan. "Spock?"

The confusion returned. Somehow he should know this man...that voice...those eyes...and...and 'Spock'? Could that be a name? His name? His vision blurred, the sea of faces wavered and he felt himself slipping.

"What have you done to him?" Kirk turned on the tall alien beside Spock, his anger and frustration clashing with the cold, non-committal attitude confronting him. "Damn you, answer me, or - !" He lunged, too fast for Simputa to catch him.

"Captain! No!"

The Human was pulled back from the scene, his arms forced high behind his back. "Owww..." he grunted in pain, and watched helpless as Kirk was beaten across the back with a heavy staff and dragged back into line on his knees.

Almost ignoring the brief struggle, Bhar-an turned to his loyal masses. "See, my chosen ones! See how the Destroyers still try to hurt our brother. With us he is safe, but not as safe as when the evil ones are punished! And they shall be punished!" he roared, his voice rising to the mood of the people, who jeered and shouted with growing hysteria.

Simputa edged closer to Kirk, calling to him above the noisy throng. "Captain! Captain, can you understand what they're saying?"

"What? No...I can't make out anything. I - " Kirk stopped, realising what he had said. "No...no, I can't understand them!" He pulled free of his captors and examined the tiny implant beneath the skin of his forearm. "Damn this thing - it must be faulty... Owww!" His arm was seized roughly from behind and he was pulled to his feet.

"Captain, I think Mr. Spock's translator is functioning. If we can get through to him we might - "

"Wait - something's happening!" interrupted Kirk. Spock, who had been leaning against Bhar-an, was beginning to recover. He now stood alone and was watching Kirk closely - or, more precisely, something around Kirk's neck.

"Spock..." Kirk moved against his captors' hold. At the sound the Vulcan grimaced, pain showing clearly on his unusually pale features as he glanced up at the Human.

With one tremendous effort, Kirk tore himself away from his restrainers and stumbled towards his friend, clutching the IDIC firmly for Spock to see. "Spock! Try to remember! It's me, Jim, and here is the IDIC you gave me when - "

"Hold him!" yelled Bhar-an in anger. "And remove the evil talisman! Quickly!"

Kirk was again dragged back into line, his knees scraping along the stony

ground as he tried to stand up. He was jerked upright, and rough hands were pulling at his tunic, seeking out his IDIC.

"No! Leave it alone! NO!" The chain snapped and the precious possession was torn from his neck. "Nooooo...!" He cried out his anguish clear for all to hear.

Spock watched from his place at Bhar-an's side as the scene unfolded, the pain revealed in the restrained man lending such sorrow that he longed to reach out to him. Unsteadily he moved forward, his lean arm lifting up to touch the sadness, ease the agony.

Kirk tensed as he saw the movement, watched as his friend opened his mouth as if about to speak. "Spock?" he cried. But the movement was too fleeting, and soon the Vulcan began to sway, his hand automatically reaching for the support of the tall alien leader. Bhar-an grabbed at the unsteady figure, easing him into a firm supportive hold.

Kirk shuddered at the sight, every part of his body and soul yearning to go to his friend, hold him close; remove him from this alien's clutches and keep him safe. Alone, he cried out with his mind - but there was no reply, only a cold emptiness called back...a cold, empty part of his life.

"Captain? Captain!" Slowly he turned to the persistent voice beside him. "Captain, at least Mr. Spock's alive. If we can stay together, and survive, the Enterprise will be back tomorrow with a search party when we fail to rendezvous. Sir? Captain, are you listening to me?"

But Kirk wasn't listening; he was caught within a spiralling depression which threatened to drag him further and further down, like a drowning man losing against the strength of a turning tide.

Simputa persevered, straining to reach into the desolation before him. "Please, sir...you mustn't torture yourself like this...the Enterprise will find us, and Mr. Spock will be all right..."

Kirk glanced up, shaking his head. "It's all my fault, Alex...all my fault...and now I've lost - " He stopped, the naked agony portrayed clearly blocking the need for words. If Simputa hadn't been restrained, he might have offered his comfort with a gentle touch which meant so much to Humans, but this was impossible, and somehow, simply saying he was sorry was not enough.

In silence he lowered his head and waited for fate to play the next round in this cruel game of life and possibly death.

"Bhar-an! Is it time? Time for the bands?" The woman edged closed to her mate, her hands holding out twin metallic devices which glistened like rings of fire in the burning sun. The tall alien smiled as his arm encircled his mate, hugging her triumphantly.

"Yes, my chosen one. The time of judgement is upon us." He raised his arms high into the air. "Hold, my people." The clamour quietened as all waited in anticipation. Turning to Spock, Bhar-an asked gently, "Are you recovered, my brother? Stay close, and the power of the Destroyers will succumb to the bands of darkness. Here, take this, and together we will silence these evil creatures." Spock found himself holding one of the strange devices and listening to the unusual man beside him.

"Kinsmen of the true blood, the time has come for the judgement of those who are Destroyers of our people. Let those who bear not the marks of our forefathers be brought forward that all may see their evilness, and know their punishment. Never again will Destroyers lead our people or spread their evil among us. My brothers!" He held the metal band high in the air for all to see. "It is time!"

A roar filled the air as Bhar-an indicated that the first prisoner be brought



forward. Simputa was dragged to the centre, a knee to his back forcing submission before the leader. Kirk strained to remain with his crewman. "Alex!"

"Don't, Captain!" he shouted back. "There's nothing you can do! Try to - " The words ended abruptly as Kirk watched in horror as the bands were clamped tightly round the young head and Simputa fell to the ground.

Then he too was moving, being hauled to stand in front of the one man in the whole universe he wished to reach. Confusion stared back at him as he uttered the one single word he so desperately wanted his friend to recognise. "Spock!"

A vicious blow from behind forced him to his knees and he gasped as pain clouded his vision. "Please, Spock...it's me, Jim...don't...don't you know me?"

Spock's world was filled with confusion and pain. Before him knelt such unhappiness that the pain he felt soared to a new height. The eyes that gazed at him held such sorrow he longed to close them and forget the deep, hidden anguish. But how could he stop it? How could he escape? The bands! Of course, he could use the bands! He had seen Bhar-an lock the device around the younger man's forehead. Now he could do the same. Eagerly he fingered the metal, feeling its coolness...so smooth...so reassuring as his hands played gently across the dulled edges.

He reached out, placing the rings around the sweating head. Kirk gasped as the cold metal touched his skin. Spock hesitated, his hands trembling as he prepared to close the lock - close those eyes. Kirk felt his own body shudder as he looked up one last time at the tall figure he knew so well. "Spock... please..."

There was a loud click, a flash of brilliance and then he was spiralling down into a whirlpool of darkness.

The air was charged with jubilation. Individuals danced and cheered whilst others merely sank to their knees, the excitement too much for their disordered brains. Spock was oblivious of the raging activities surrounding him. All he could see was the still body of the man lying at his feet. A man who, for reasons he could not understand, meant more to him than perhaps life itself.

He looked at his hands, the image of the steel bands still vivid. The coldness burned into his flesh, imprinting forever the pain he felt. A primitive urge to escape overwhelmed him and he began to gasp frantically for air. Leave! Get away! Do anything but stay here! He backed away from the crumpled figure, bumping into many of the celebrators in his eagerness to escape.

An elated native reached out to touch him and pull him into the festivities. "No! Don't touch me!" The Vulcan swung at the native. "Leave me alone!" He lost his balance and fell heavily on his knees. The surprised creature stepped out of his way and scurried off as Spock clambered to his feet and began to fight his way clear of the masses.

From somewhere a hand reached out to catch him, failing by inches as the tall leader was lifted high on the shoulders of his faithful followers and swept away.

Soon he was free, crouching low as a hunted animal stands poised for flight. In the distance, a hut wavered...a refuge...somewhere to hide - be safe. Go! Do not stay! He staggered towards the drifting image, falling repeatedly in his haste to reach a haven where he could collapse and forget.

Finally he was at the entrance, his hands and knees bloodied, his breathing laboured and harsh. Fumbling at the ragged skins which barred his way, a vision swam across his view. Angry and frustrated, he wrenched at the skins, hoping the face would go away if he could only get inside. But it didn't, and as he fell through the entrance, a voice joined it to taunt him repeatedly.

'Spock...it's me, Jim...don't you know me?...know me...knowme...'

"Nooo...please stop..." The chilling cry echoed around the hut as he collapsed, onto the floor, sharp stones biting into his cheek as his face grazed the rough ground. "Please...no more..." The cry returned, quieter, almost a whisper as he clutched in vain at the hard, unyielding soil. But there was no one to hear, no one to understand; only the walls stood and waited, silent sentinals of time, watching, listening, yet never able to offer comfort... or hope...

With a final shudder Spock passed from his world of confusion and pain into the grateful arms of unconsciousness; stillness returned to the hut, and calm descended.

Bhar-an drew back the tangled skins to his home, stepped carefully over the fallen figure and knelt beside the brother he felt a strange attraction for. Satisfied that he was merely unconscious, he lifted him up and carried him over to the sleeping area, where he covered the still body with an adequate light blanket.

Standing back, he felt doubt enter his mind for the first time since the brother had appeared. This stranger was definitely a brother, a friend in need of protection against the Destroyers. He bore the marks, strange skin and ears - not like the others. They were most definitely Destroyers! His eyes turned cold as he thought of the captives, now confined to the bands of darkness. Oh, yes...evil...descendants of those who had unleashed death and destruction onto his world. It was his duty to protect his people from Destroyers! Handed down from old to young, contain the evil ones; never allow their kind freedom again, or they will destroy!

Yet...there was something wrong with what had happened. Something... different about the ones they had caught. Their clothes, for one thing. When had he ever seen clothes such as theirs? Strange textures, peculiar signs and symbols - where were the skins and heavy weaves common to both his people and the Destroyers? And even more puzzling, why was the brother wearing the same as they, and why had he resisted when first they attacked?

There was also the question of the small boxes. Unfamiliar devices which he had hidden away for fear they were instruments of the Destroyers, bringing more death, more pain. Yet...the brother held one without fear...and if he held one, then...???

Questions, riddles...too many inconsistencies. He needed time; time to think...time alone to decide what was truth and what was lies. His people's future depended on his actions; they looked to him for guidance...for life...

He glanced down at the Vulcan. The sleep was deep and sound; there would be no waking for many hours yet. His decision made, Bhar-an left the peace and tranquillity of his humble home and walked out into the turmoil of his angry, bitter world.

Laughter rippled through the air. Running feet churned the arid soil, dissolving into a scuffle as the laughter faded and there was a soft thud. A loud slap followed, together with an angry shout which quickly changed the whole atmosphere.

Shir-an scrambled into the hut on all fours, a mischievous grin spreading across her features. Thankful to have escaped the wandering hands of Mavah-es, she collapsed on her back and lay regaining her breath as she relived her cruel victory.

Mavah-es would really be mad with her this time. She had deliberately baited him into believing she was truly his, lured him nearer and nearer to



Bhar-an's hut, and then slipped from his clutches as a pou yrax slides into a burrow. What fun it had been...what - "Huh!" she gasped as a sudden noise revealed she was not alone in the hut. "Mavah-es?" she whispered, her heart hammering painfully in her chest. The noise came again, this time more muffled and more like a moan. Slowly she turned, her body tense, ready to spring at -

She laughed; a nervous titter simply to relieve the tension coiled within her. Of course, it was only the brother!

How could she have been so stupid as to imagine Mavah-es following her into Bhar-an's domain. He was weak and cowardly. Now this one, lying so peaceful, so still...he was not weak...he was...

As silent as an evening shadow, Shir-an crept towards the sleeping man. His rest was deep and sound, the earlier movements but a brief disturbance in a troubled dream. Bending closer, she studied the lean angular face, her gaze irresistably drawn to the upswept eyebrows and silky black hair. How strong his body seemed, muscles taut beneath an olive skin which looked so smooth and soft. His maleness sprang out at her, arousing primitive instincts to an almost unbearable level as her eyes scanned the magnificent body before her.

How she longed to reach out and touch him, feel his skin close to hers, his lips to her lips, run fingers through that silken mane of hair which was as black as night. It would be so glorious, so thrilling a conquest; and he was but a whisper away.

NO! She snatched back her hand, a vision of her mate's wrath filling her mind. Bhar-an was a powerful and jealous man. If she were caught here, like this, there was no telling what he might do. Even her very life could be at stake. No, being the leader's mate did have its advantages, and Shir-an was not prepared to risk destroying her privileged position - even for this magnificent creature.

She shrugged and started to walk away, back to the celebrations. Almost at the entrance, she was distracted by a splash of colour spilling out from a pile of sleeping skins. Her curiosity aroused, she moved closer and with a gentle tug released the blue tunic together with an oblong box which clattered to the floor. Jumping with surprise, she watched for a few seconds, then, when nothing happened, stretched out her hand.

Obviously these belonged to the brother, but why hadn't Bhar-an burned them? He had told her that all things, even those of the brother's, which could be associated with Destroyers must be burned. So why had he kept these things ...and what was in the strange box?

She lifted it carefully; it was light - easily held in one hand...but how to get into it...? Her fingers played across one of the areas which stuck out from the general flatness of the box. As she touched it, a stream of hidden data came pouring out in the form of a visual blur across a small panel. Startled, Shir-an almost dropped the machine and in her own clumsiness inadvertently triggered off another control, sending the tricorder into a whirling frenzy.

"Woman! What are you doing here!" Bhar-an's voice boomed across the hut as he stormed in through the entrance.

"I'm...I'm sorry," she stammered, cowering away as she fumbled with the chattering machine. "I didn't mean to...I mean..."

"And what are you doing with that!" he growled, reaching out to snatch the tricorder from her.

"No, wait!" she retaliated, her action so unexpected that Bhar-an stopped immediately. His eyes became angry slits.

"You dare to defy me, woman?" he hissed.

"Nooo...it's only..." she hesitated; the machine became silent...and the

tension grew to an almost unbearable level.

"Yes? It's only...?" He glared at her.

"Only...didn't the brother have this box? I mean, if he has one, why is he not a Destroyer, and if these things are evil, why are they still here? Why haven't you burned them?" she blurted out.

"Woman!" Bhar-an raised his hand, poised to strike out at the defiant mate standing before him.

"No, Bhar-an, please. I beg forgiveness!" Shir-an fell to her knees, her hands held protectively over her head. When the blow did not come, she glanced up cautiously.

"Woman?" His voice had changed. "You are indeed an intelligent and clever mate. I have chosen well. Come, there is much I must tell you, and the brother must have rest. When he awakens we must talk with him; there are things I do not understand that perhaps he does."

He held out his hand to help her to her feet, and together they left.

He was back inside another tunnel, only this one seemed too familiar - walls smooth, glistening with an eerie glow. A sound reached his ears; rocks splitting, crashing, grinding. He snatched at his communicator. "Captain? What's happening?" The silence of static screamed at him. "Jim! JIM! Are you all right?"

He started to run. Faster and faster into the rapidly darkening tunnel until he began to turn...

twist...

tumble into a world of distortion and horror. Vision, hearing, senses all exploded out of control. He was hyperaware of everything around him as images danced grotesquely in his sight - and he was alone, so very much alone...

There! A hand, reaching out to him. A voice so calm...soothing, calling his name... "It's all right now, Spock. You are safe with me..." The hand edged closer. Gradually he stretched towards it...stretched out to the warmth and safety of his beloved friend.

The limb twitched and shuddered, changing into a nest of snakes which writhed and squirmed, thirsting after his blood, their fangs dripping with venom. He couldn't escape; they were plunging into his flesh, releasing their agonising poison again and again. He screamed and screamed until his throat felt raw; but there was no-one to hear, and he began to fall...

fall...

fall...

into a haze of blinding red heat. Beneath his feet the arid soil of his native world Vulcan lay, baked and barren. The strength of his ancestors poured from the very pores of his body and his fists clenched tighter on the ahn woon. A last, rasping sound escaped from his victim's throat and he stared in horror as the hazel eyes of James Kirk rolled up, then closed...for ever.

"KROYKAH!" A rough hand pushed him aside and a familiar voice stabbed into his grief.

"Get your hands off him, Spock. It's finished. He's dead."

Dead...dead...DEAD!

The world drifts...

fades...

disappears into a whirlpool of grey emptiness. He is floating, forgotten and alone in a well of despair. No-one hears when he cries out in fear; for no longer is his life shared with



another - that part of him is gone...he slows...mind and body still. Clutched in his hands is the most treasured gift of his world. From somewhere a light falls towards him, the delicate chain drinking in the precious rays, bringing alive the intricate design. Between the entwining links hangs the symbol of his people's teaching, the balance so precarious as even in life itself the balance between success and failure hangs, so breathtakingly close.

A figure shimmers into existence, eyes smiling, love shining out as a beacon in the darkness which threatens to devour his very soul. With infinite care he reaches out to place the IDIC around the neck of his friend and brother. The hazel eyes meet his, and for a moment the universe pauses to acknowledge their union.

The image turns...

slips...

and his hands feel...

cold steel...

he sees again the man before him, only this time the light in his eyes holds only sadness and the voice lends such sorrow to the pitiful words that strain to reach him. 'Spock? It's me, Jim...don't you know me? Knowmeknowme...'

The worlds flow in, soft...warm...nudging at barriers that have risen uninvited in defence of harm...injury. Gently, they push, probing until finally the last barrier falls and reality emerges from its prison to flood his senses.

He re-lives the fateful journey, sees the brisk but decisive skirmish that led to their downfall; watches as Kirk is dragged to kneel before him, his trust in Spock unshaken. The remainder of the nightmare until he is left with only the image of Kirk lying crumpled at his feet.

Slowly his eyelids fluttered open; he was alone. Outside, dusk was calling, beginning to steal across the land, its dark tentacles sliding into every corner, searching into the huddled camp. In the distance storm clouds were gathering, the deep rumble of thunder disturbing the otherwise silent world.

Reaching a decision, Spock rose from his bed and crept over to the doorway. Across the way, squatting by a large campfire, he could see Bhar-an talking to others of the community. He moved out into the twilight to join them.

"Bhar-an? I must speak with you urgently."

"Ah. my brother. You are recovered. Come, sit with us awhile and be warm." He patted the ground near him.

Spock sat down next to him and reached over to draw his full attention. "Please, Bhar-an...I must speak with you about the others - the 'Destroyers'."

The men close to the fire shifted uncomfortably and began to mumble to each other. Bhar-an lifted his hand and there was silence.

"My brother, there is much we need to talk about, but first, tell me where you are from. Which tribe has lost such a fine warrior?"

"I am from a tribe many days' travel from your village, and my... 'companions' and I are explorers, searching for - "

"Companions?" questioned a young, high-spirited lad. "Where are these companions? We found only you and the Destroyers. Are your companions dead, killed by the evil ones?"

Spock watched the boy warily, conscious that everything could depend on how he dealt with the defiant youth. "I do not know where my companions are...they may indeed be dead...or..." He turned to Bhar-an. "Bhar-an? Where are the Destroyers?"

"Destroyers? Why do you want to know about the Destroyers?" demanded the boy outright, not waiting for his leader to reply. Bhar-an refused to meet Spock's eyes, content to remain silent and allow the petulance of youth a free hand until he chose otherwise. "Well?" the boy insisted.

Spock shifted uncomfortably before deciding that the only option open to him was the direct one. "Because they are my companions," he stated emphatically.

"What? Destroyers your companions!" The youngster leaped to his feet, the anger of adolescence burning bright in his eyes. "Bhar-an, you have brought a traitor into our camp. This is no brother! He deceives us!"

"Silence!" roared Bhar-an, his voice effectively drowning the stream of abuse and accusation. "You will not accuse without proof, and you will not treat our guest in this manner!" He glanced curiously at Spock. "Why do you say they are your companions?"

"But you heard what he said! He believes - " interrupted the youth again.

"I said silence, Lahn-eb! If you cannot still your tongue, leave us and return to the women. The council has no place for those who bleat like the stupid cluxon."

The youth sat down, his rage temporarily cooled, but his words and questions had obviously disturbed others, for already there was much mumbling and furtive glancing occurring. An older man clambered to his feet, body bent with age, his voice calmer, bringing with it the experience of years.

"Bhar-an? May I speak?"

"Jahr-et...we are always eager to hear your words. Please..." Bhar-an indicated that the audience was all his.

"It is clear to all that the brother has much to tell us of his 'travels' - and my grandson had had too much vehan to loosen his tongue, so..." There was an immediate release of tension as the humour filtered through the group of men. "...I say this to you, my brethren...the night grows cold and my bones grow weary. Let us all rest awhile and return tomorrow, fresh and ready to talk again. Perhaps a good night's sleep will cleanse our brother's mind - and unpickle my grandson's head."

Many of the men laughed openly at the old man's choice of words, clearly pleased that the matter had not become too unpleasant. Bhar-an nodded in agreement as he stood up to speak. "I thank you, Jahr-et. You give sound advice. Until tomorrow, I say to you all, goodnight and may you sleep safely until the dawn."

Without further unrest or remark the men began to drift away into the growing darkness, back to their lonely huts; back to their lonely, insulated lives. Finally only Spock and Bhar-an remained, the alien poking idly at the dwindling fire as he squatted down next to the Vulcan.

"Why did you and the Destroyers wear the same strange clothing?" he asked bluntly, without looking at Spock.

"Because we are companions, travellers together, as I tried to explain," started Spock.

"But you are not a Destroyer! You are one of us!"

"How do you know?" questioned the Vulcan searchingly.

"You bear the marks! Only the true people bear the marks!"

"But we are not of your people, Bhar-an, that is why we are different."

"Not of our people? Then where are you from?" He stopped poking the fire and stared long and hard at Spock.

"From lands far away from here, where it does not matter if men bear marks

or not." He paused, assessing how well the alien was accepting his reasoning, allowing him to take the lead.

"Then if what you say is true...these...Destroyers...are known to you... and that is why you dress the same, and..."

"...And came to be travelling with them when you attacked, Bhar-an," finished Spock.

"Yes, you resisted when first my men came upon you," he agreed, "as if you did not want to be rescued." He stopped again, frowning deeply before continuing. "I have questioned these things, and many more, but have not chosen to speak of them to others. You must understand, my brother, I am leader of my people, and I must do what is right for them. If I am seen to be weak or negligent in their eyes..." He paused as if considering.

The moment broke when lightning forked nearby, thunder rumbled ominously close and the first splashes of rain slipped from the sky. "Come. I must show you something." Hurriedly he scrambled to his feet, pulling at Spock's arm.

"But Bhar-an, what of my companions?" protested Spock. "Are they dead or alive? I must know!"

"No! Come quickly! If you wish me to believe you, then you must trust me."

Realising that this was probably the only way to find out anything about Kirk and Simputa, Spock reluctantly agreed. "Very well...I will come with you."

"Good. Now, follow closely and be quiet," he urged.

Kicking the remains of the fire into final submission, the two men merged into the shadowy darkness and headed for the far end of the camp. Almost at the last hut, Bhar-an paused, checked to see if any of his people were about, then grabbed a nearby torch and plunged it into the glowing embers of a lingering wayside fire.

Taking the lead, he approached a tumble-down shack and tore down the staked-up entrance. Ducking quickly inside, he held back a torn piece of skin and beckoned Spock to enter. "Quickly," he whispered.

The flames of the torch burned noisily in the confined space, and sparks danced their way to freedom, eager to be gone. Standing upright, Spock glanced at the alien, who watched him closely for a few seconds then directed the light over to the far left hand side. Lying in an unnatural heap, close to the mud packed walls, were Kirk and Simputa.

Spock rushed to kneel beside Kirk, his eyes taking in the torn uniform, dried streaks of blood and bruises. Gently he eased the listless body over, settling him in the crook of his arm. He caught the faint flicker of a heartbeat as Kirk's head lolled to one side revealing the unsteady jerk of the neck pulse; Kirk's body felt so cold, his first instinct was to hold him close and warm him. Involuntarily he tightened his grip and looked up at Bhar-an.

"Normally they are left outside the village for the wild animals to devour ...but...but Shir-an and I...we moved them here. As I tried to explain, there are many things that I have thought about and Shir-an too has questioned your place here. We decided to keep the Destroyers hidden until I could speak with you. Then, if they were of no use to us, it was a simple enough chore to remove them one night to outside the camp, and our people would know nothing of the incident." He shrugged. "A good leader needs to keep all his options open... wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, Bhar-an, I agree. You are both a wise and a clever man, and I thank you for the lives of my companions - but they are very ill." He glanced down again at Kirk. "We must move them from here, or they will die. Can you help me further, and in return I promise to help you and your people?"

Bhar-an fidgeted, his indecision clear as he turned in the direction of

the main camp. Then he was moving.

"Quickly, then." He thrust the flaming torch into a loose holder hanging from the wall. "I will bring this other one. Return to my hut; Shir-an will have a fire ready...the night will be cold and wet with the storm approaching."

Shir-an glanced up from the fire and her chores as Spock emerged from the rain-filled night, the still body of his Captain clutched firmly against him. Bhar-an followed close behind and shouted to her as he almost stumbled into the warm hut.

"Prepare skins close to the fire! Hurry, woman!"

"But Bhar-an! Why have you brought them here?"

"Do as I say, Shir-an - quickly."

At once Shir-an gathered a pile of furs from the far corner and soon had two soft beds of pelts for the unconscious men. Spock lowered Kirk down, then settled back on his heels, one hand still resting lightly on the Human's arm. "He is developing a fever and his pulse is not strong," he murmured quietly.

Bhar-an stretched over and touched the now over-warm skin. "Does he have a sickness?"

"It is possible..." Spock eased Kirk's head to one side to look closer at the steel bands. "Once released from this, I will be able to assess his condition more easily." He glanced up. "Is there a way to remove this device?"

The alien knelt uneasily at his side. "I am unsure...the bands are reminders of the bad times. We use them against Destroyers to seal their evil minds. To unlock them is a simple task...but I do not know what will happen to them." He stared at Spock long and hard. "We have never had cause to remove a band before. Destroyers are destroyed - forever," came the harsh, bitter words.

"I understand," answered Spock, "and grieve with thee for your loss." Gradually the anguished features softened and he spoke again. "As I said, to unlock the bands is a simple task...but it may kill the wearer." For the first time Spock caught sight of this strange alien's compassion for another as Bhar-an let his gaze fall towards Kirk and he appeared to wince inwardly. Spock reached across to regain his attention. "Bhar-an - he most certainly will die if we do nothing. We must try."

"Yes, you are correct. I waste time." He turned back towards Simputa. "This one is stronger; I will release him first. Watch closely." His hands searched through the mass of dark curly hair. "See here? A small depression just inside..." He eased back to give Spock a clearer view. "Press firmly, like so, and..." There was a loud click and the band was slipping away. "There, he is free."

The stillness of the hut stretched painfully as they waited to see what would happen next. When Simputa showed no signs of responding or even waking, Spock reached over.

"Lieutenant! Can you hear me, Lieutenant?" He shook the tense shoulders firmly. A low moan issued from the pale features, followed by a sharp intake of breath as if the Human was in pain. Spock called again. "Lieutenant! It is time to wake up! Do you hear me? Wake up!"

The limbs trembled beneath his hands as the muscles spasmed and the young crewman started to twitch as if in the throes of an epileptic fit. Then he was choking and gasping for air, returning to reality, fighting to break the surface of a smothering ocean...fighting to...

"Sir?" Sleep-laden eyes opened. "Mr. Spock? Is it really you?"

"Indeed it is, Mr. Simputa. How are you feeling?"

"Tired. Tired, and a...a little confused. How did...how did...?"

"Do not concern yourself with such matters, Lieutenant. You need rest."

"Yes, sir...rest...only..." Anxiety forced its way to the surface. "I must find the Captain...and...and tell him you're here. He's been so worried about you...and...and..." The heavy eyelids drooped. "God, I'm so tired! What's wrong with me? I can hardly stay...awake..." He finally lost the battle and fell into a deep natural sleep, for which Spock was grateful. He turned back to Kirk's side.

"I fear things will not go so easily with my Captain." He paused to brush a lock of damp hair from the burning forehead. "But we must not delay further." With those last words he reached for the spot hidden from view, and pressed firmly.. The bands parted. With disgust, he threw away the painful reminder of his amnesic actions and laid a hand on Kirk's shoulder.

Kirk gasped, his muscles tensing. Spock felt the faint tremor begin to spread through his friend's body, only this time there was no strength to combat the transition back to normality and his breathing appeared to have stopped.

Spock was a blur of action. "Quickly! A piece of wood! Spoon! Anything!" As he shouted his orders he turned Kirk roughly onto his side and pulled his head back to assist the almost non-existent breathing. From nowhere, Shir-an appeared with the ladle from the cooking pot and thrust it into her mate's searching hands.

"Here! Use this!"

Working fast, Spock grabbed the crude implement and managed to get it between Kirk's teeth before he bit down in the throats of an agonising convulsion. The twitching continued for what seemed an eternity and all the while Kirk became more cyanosed as his body was starved of vital oxygen.

"Will he live?" An anxious voice reached into the nightmare.

Spock was vaguely aware of Bhar-an drawing his mate nearer to him, offering strength and reassurance. "I do not know, my chosen one. Spock?"

Spock simply shook his head, not trusting himself to speak. Gradually the spasms eased and Kirk began to snatch at air hungrily as his lungs begged to be filled. Spock allowed the spoon to fall away and felt for a pulse - the heart raced, but at least it was regular and stronger.

"Jim? Jim!" Gently he rolled the limp body over, lifting the floppy head onto a makeshift pillow that was pushed towards him. Again he brushed aside the sweat-laden hair as it lay plastered against the fevered forehead. As his hand made contact, Kirk's features grimaced and his eyelids fluttered. Slowly they opened, confusion and pain reaching out into the world.

"It's all right, Jim - do not be afraid..."

"Spock? His fear mounted as he took in the immediate surroundings and struggled to get up. Spock held the straining shoulders and eased his friend back down.

"Easy, Jim...everything is all right...I am here with you..."

Gradually the tense muscles began to relax and the anxiety faded from his eyes. "Spock? Is it really you? I...I..." Kirk winced, his features growing distressed once more.

"Tell me what's wrong, Jim - perhaps I can help. Is there pain?"

Kirk searched frantically for the reassuring reality of his friend, gripping Spock's forearm painfully as he struggled to control the growing agony.

"Jim!" the Vulcan persisted, his voice tight with worry. "Tell me what's



wrong! I can't help you unless you tell me!"

"Mummy head, my...head...anand..." He gasped and drew up his legs, groaning in desperation. "Aahhh...my guts...God, it hurts...Spock...Oh...Spock - my insides are on fire..." With a final effort he let go of Spock's arm and rolled away, clutching at his abdomen.

Alarm bells were ringing loudly in Spock's head. Abdominal cramps and pain, headaches...fever... Kirk must have eaten or drunk something contaminated. Water most likely.

"Jim - listen to me. Did you drink any of the water here?" he asked urgently, trying at the same time to ease the agony by gently rubbing Kirk's back. In his sea of pain Kirk groaned and curled tighter into his ball of misery. "Jim, try to remember - it's important. Did you drink water or eat food from this planet?"

"Water...aahhh...I had a drink of...water...Spock! Spock, it...hurts...so goddam much..."

"Easy, Jim - easy. I will try to help..." Spock's lean fingers moved to take up a familiar position as he reached for the mindlink. Absorbing much of the pain, he fought to send his friend into a deep sleep in the hope that rest would help conserve his fast-diminishing strength and reserves.

"Is he dead?" Bhar-an's anxious words re-alerted him to the alien's nearby presence.

Slowly regaining his composure, he answered. "No, merely asleep...but he is very ill. Bhar-an? Do you still have any of the equipment we carried?"

"The boxes? Yes, we have the boxes and one other thing." Crossing the hut he rummaged through some furs and located a tricorder and standard field medical kit. "Are these of use to you?"

"Indeed they are. Please bring that small pouch."

Opening the compact kit, Spock attached a broad spectrum antibiotic vial to the hypospray and administered a high dose to Kirk. "That may help, but if he is to survive, I need the services of another friend." He paused, glancing at the tall leader who stood hovering at his side. "Bhar-an, when we spoke earlier I told you we are from lands very distant from here. In times to come, there is much we need to discuss...your people, my people - the ones you call 'Destroyers' - and I promise you we will talk of these things. But firstly I must ask you to let me leave, contact my people and return with one who can help my friend."

The reaction was only to be expected. "No! You cannot leave here or bring others! I have offered you safety - comfort to your companions who, you say, are not evil! Concealed your companions here in my home when all my people believe them dead! No! It is not permitted!" He turned away, clearly not wishing to continue.

"Bhar-an, my friend will die if he does not receive help from his own kind."

There was a long silence. "Then he must die. I cannot allow my people to be betrayed. Already I have deceived them...I am responsible. The answer is no." Cutting himself off, Bhar-an moved into the shadows of the hut and sat alone, his knees hunched up close to his chest.

Checking to see that Kirk was as comfortable as possible, Spock stood and walked over to sit beside this strange, complex man who held such responsibility and loyalty towards his people.

"I underst and your dilemma, Bhar-an, and I do not wish to go against your orders or destroy your beliefs in any way," he began, "yet the time has come for us to speak of things that have passed, and perhaps things of the future."

When there was no response, Spock carried on. "Bhar-an, what do you know of events in your past? Do you know how it came to be that you live as you do, with disease and pain?"

"The Destroyers! They created our world - destroyed all that was good... beauty...life..." His anger surged. "They destroyed my people!"

Spock chose his next words with great care. "If I were to tell you that the ones you call 'Destroyers' are as much your people as those here in the village, would you believe me?"

"My people? My people and Destroyers the same? Are you blind as well as stupid, brother? Can you not see that they bear no marks such as you and I do? They are untouched, protected by the same evil they discharge onto our lands!"

Spock pressed his point home fully. "Yet you only have to look at my companions to see that they are whole! Why then do you believe me when I tell you that these men are friends? And why did you not dispose of them, as is the custom of your people?"

"I...I...do not wish to speak of these things further. I am confused." He made to rise and move away.

Spock grabbed at his arm. "But you must speak of them, Bhar-an. My Captain's life depends on our talking - as does the future of your people! Listen to me, now. The Destroyers and you are the same. A war ravaged your world and created the disease and pain you now endure. A war created by your ancestors, your people. You and the Destroyers are all descended from one people."

"No! I do not believe you! It is all a trick!"

Spock tightened his grip. "There are no tricks, Bhar-an - only the twisted hand of fate. Life goes on even after the most horrific destruction and gradually learns to rebuild. Your people are rebuilding, Bhar-an - rebuilding the true image of your race. The Destroyers are the true image, and in time all will be whole again." Spock pulled the alien around and forced him to look at him. "You must forget the differences, or die - destroy yourselves as your ancestors did. It is a time to live, Bhar-an; live with the differences, and become strong."

Spock glanced across at Kirk. "Physical differences are not what matter. This man has taught me how to live with differences and be...happy. If you knew him as I do, you would feel the same sadness I feel for him now; for he is a man who cares for life very deeply - all life, Bhar-an." He turned searchingly towards the tall alien. "Especially yours - yours and the people here. He cares for your pain and suffering and came to help; and now he lies at your mercy..."

"Bhar-an, please, I must return to my people. With my life I pledge that no harm will come to your kinsmen."

The alien broke eye contact with Spock and pulled away from his grip. He turned towards where Kirk lay; only the Human's rapid breathing punctuating the silence. Then he glanced at his mate, who lay curled up, asleep on a make-shift bed, tiredness overcoming her curiosity. Slowly he spoke.

"Somehow I have always trusted you, my brother - since first I saw you." He looked back at Spock. "And I do believe you speak the truth - only it is difficult...my people..." He stumbled over the words, his eyes filling with the misery and pain of a hundred generations.

"I know, my friend, I know," murmured Spock. "But James Kirk is a good man. When he is well you will come to know him as I do - a friend - a brother. With his help you will learn to live again, without the pain. Enjoy life without the bitterness and fear you now fight without knowing why." A low moan summoned Spock away as Kirk stirred into wakefulness.

"Spock? Spock, are you there?" He groaned again and clutched at his stomach. Spock knelt close by and reached out.

"It's all right, Jim...I am here...try to relax." Gently he rubbed Kirk's back, trying to soothe away the pain and ease the knotted muscles. "Is that better?"

Kirk opened his eyes and found his friend. "Yes...yes, I think so...ahhh! No. No... I...I don't know, Spock..." He tensed further. "I...I think I'm going to be sick."

Painfully, he pulled away and retched, but there was nothing to come up, and he heaved dryly. "And...and I...need the...john... Can you help...me... up?" Anxiously he looked at Spock, his fevered face glistening in the wavering light.

Understanding fully, Spock reached to pull Kirk to his feet. "Come, I will help you..." about to lift him from the ground.

Kirk suddenly yelled and his body went rigid. "No! No, don't! It hurts too much...I can't! Ahhh...Spock...I..." Fresh beads of sweat started from his forehead and he began to tremble. "Oh God no...please no..." He turned his head away in shame and mumbled into the furs, "It's too late anyway, Spock... I...I've..."

Realising all too quickly what had happened, Spock eased Kirk back towards him, speaking softly, trying to reassure and calm. "Do not worry, my friend. It is nothing. Come, you cannot lie like this." With careful movements he began to strip away the damp, offending garments.

"No, Spock...you mustn't..." Weakly Kirk pushed against the Vulcan's administrations.

"Hush, now. Dr. McCoy would not be pleased if I allowed you to remain like this." To his left, a bowl of warmish water appeared, together with some clean rags; he nodded his thanks to the alien, who drew back once more into the shadows, watching the two men closely.

Kirk shuddered as Spock lifted him and eased him out of his wet, unpleasant trousers. Pain sharpened his words and he shut his eyes tightly at the movement. "I...I don't think Bones...is going to be pleased...with me...at all..." He grabbed Spock's arm, effectively halting the Vulcan's actions. "I should have brought him, Spock. But...but..." the anxiety mounted and his eyes flashed bright with their need for understanding and reassurance. "You do understand, don't you, Spock?"

Spock brushed away the sweat-heavy hair. "Yes, my friend, I understand - but now you must let me finish, for you need sleep and rest." He smiled softly, and watched as some of the fear and desperation faded from the troubled eyes.

Resuming his task, he soon had Kirk clean and dry. As he worked he took the opportunity to check for other injuries, but found mainly bruises and minor cuts. Although the fever showed no obvious signs of abating, the abdominal cramps appeared to be growing less severe - perhaps the antibiotic was helping.

Finally, he was finished and Kirk lay drifting towards the oblivion of sleep. Tucking the last fur snugly about his charge, Spock prepared to settle himself nearby in case Kirk should need him during the long hours of the oncoming night.

"Here, take this." Bhar-an knelt by his side and handed Spock a thick cloak of pelts. "I will tend the fire throughout the night. The storm will return - stronger - and the night will be cold and wild." He paused, his features softening in the warm glow of the camp fire. "And you will need to feel rested for your journey tomorrow back to your friends."

Spock glanced up at this last remark, seeing the understanding smile spread across the alien's face. "I thank you, Bhar-an, for both of us. You will not

regret your decision, and when James Kirk is well, together you will succeed in rebuilding your world."

"You say this one man has taught you so much, and that he will help us when he is well?" questioned Bhar-an.

"That is correct," answered Spock.

"And...and he has shown you that differences do not matter?" Spock nodded, waiting for the man to continue. "You also speak of help and friendship. Tell me, would this one still help and call us friends after the pain and suffering I have caused him?"

"James Kirk will be proud to call you friend. He is a man who gives much of himself, yet asks for nothing in return - save only the happiness and peace of others who strive so hard to survive in this often violent universe."

"Yes...I think I understand now..." About to add something further, he hesitated and studied the two men closely. "He must mean a great deal to you, this...friend - perhaps more than words can express?"

Spock shifted his gaze back to Kirk, who stirred in discomfort, murmuring something in his uneasy sleep.

"Perhaps, Bhar-an...perhaps," came the soft, revealing reply.

The wind howled; its persistent fingers probed every corner, every crack left open and exposed. Around the isolated village rivers of mud gushed headlong to freedom along avenues gouged deep in the defenceless ground as the rain lashed from the heavy skies.

Inside a solitary hut, five people slept, safe from the raging storm; safe from the angry elements. Overhead the clouds glowed fiercely with the build-up of residual energy as the battle for dominance continued. Lightning spearheaded its way to the ground, eager to earth itself and release its anger and rage together with a reverberating crack of thunder which fled deep into the night.

Kirk woke with a start, his heart thumping wildly. Thunder growled again and the cruel wind battered the rain ever harder against the fragile walls of his haven. Disorientated, he sat up much too quickly and immediately his head spun, together with the beginnings of what felt like a sledgehammer pounding inside his skull. He thought his head was going to explode and with a groan he collapsed back, clutching his forehead tightly to try and relieve the pain.

Although his stomach cramps were easier, it still felt as if someone had tied his insides into knots and forgotten to undo them...and, Christ - it was so hot under all this fur!

Tugging at the furs, he managed to free himself sufficiently to lie back exhausted, the cooler air of the open hut flowing over him. He moved his head to one side and found Spock asleep next to him. The Vulcan looked tired and strained in the weak light of the dwindling fire. He sighed and lay back, trying to figure out what had been happening in this mess of a mission.

His gut spasmed and he groaned, clamped his arms across his middle and rolled away, desperate not to be sick or wake his friend. A firm grip caught his shoulder and drew him back.

"Jim? What's wrong?"

"Spock? Spock, I'm sorry...I didn't mean to wake you...the storm...I thought..." He heaved again and felt the strong arms of his friend hold him.

"Easy, Jim - breathe deeply..."

His forehead pounded and he cried out involuntarily. "Ahhh! My head..." Then Spock was there, cradling his burning brow, soothing him, lifting the pain. "I'm...okay." He fended off the caring hands. "Let...let me lie down...I'll be

all right if I can lie down..."

Spock helped him to lie flat, his close proximity to Kirk making him all too aware of the overheated body.

"Your fever is still high, Jim. Do you feel hot, or cold?"

"Hot...like I'm on fire - and I'm so goddam thirsty." His eyelids fluttered, then closed, exhaustion clearly taking its toll. Spock frowned, his concern for Kirk growing as the long night dragged on. Across the floor, Simputa stirred as another loud clap of thunder echoed all around. He had wakened earlier in the night, shortly after Spock had managed to settle Kirk. The young crewman appeared to be making an excellent recovery from his ordeal, so much so that Spock had decided that he should be the one to return to the shuttle in the morning and contact the Enterprise.

Getting up, the Vulcan crept over to be certain the young Human was not in any distress. No, he was sound asleep.

Completing his brief excursion, he collected some water and a few more of the rags given to him earlier. Returning to Kirk, he opened the medikit, found some purifying capsules and dropped one into a small drinking bowl, added some water and waited for the designated time. "Jim."

"Ummm?" Overbright eyes searched for the comforting voice.

"Here, I have some water for you. Sip it slowly." He lifted Kirk's head as the Captain reached out eagerly for the precious liquid. "Slowly, Jim - slowly..." The water trickled into his parched mouth and he took a tentative swallow. It burned painfully and he gagged. Spock pulled back allowing the worst to pass. "Sit up a little more, Jim - it may help." His strong arms lifted Kirk into a more upright position and he tried again; the small bowl was soon drained.

"Better?"

"Ummm...much...thanks." He collapsed back down and Spock began to sponge him down. It felt so good to have Spock care for him, especially when he thought - suddenly it all came flooding back to him; the capture, the agony of separation, the anguished look on Spock's face when he had put those... He felt a cool cloth bathe his forehead. He opened his eyes and grabbed at the firm reality of his friend.

"Spock! I remember! You...what happened to - " The fire spluttered into activity as someone stacked it high with fuel and stirred its dying embers into life. Kirk caught sight of Bhar-an as he stood up from his task and started towards him. "The aliens, Spock! They're here!" he cried out in fear, the cloth slipping from his head as he struggled to get up.

"No, no - it's all right, Jim. He is a friend. Now please, lie still," scolded Spock gently. By the time he had calmed Kirk down, Bhar-an was kneeling at his side, watching closely. Spock turned and murmured something to him, after which the tall alien nodded, got up and went back to tending the fire. "We are all safe here, Jim," continued the Vulcan. "Simputa is recovering well, and tomorrow he will contact McCoy. As for the aliens - their leader, the man you just saw, is called Bhar-an. Essentially they're a peaceful people, but their past has led them to fear all those unmarked by the global war of centuries ago. They believed you to be a 'Destroyer'."

"Me? A destroyer? Why?"

"Because you are whole. Your body is not diseased or mutated. I, being a Vulcan, gave the appearance of being 'marked' like most of Bhar-an's people. Therefore I was considered one of them."

"I see," said Kirk. "But surely many of the mutations will be bred out again soon, and these people will be almost normal again?"

"That is their problem, Jim - and partly the reason why we were so easily caught. Those who are reverting to normality live in the ruins of the cities, which are taboo to Bhar-an and his people - too much of a reminder of the destruction. Bhar-an told me his tribe stand guard at the city's edge, ambushing 'Destroyers' as they come out in search of food. Only they do not realise they are slowly destroying their own race."

Kirk sighed deeply. "Poor devils. They must have been through hell trying to survive, and now life's cheating them again." He glanced across to where Bhar-an poked absently at the fire, his strange, mutated features hollow and empty looking. "I hate war, Spock - all war; but most of all I hate nuclear war. Even if you survive the initial pain and destruction, the misery still goes on...eating into everything...killing not only the flesh and blood of millions, but their hopes and dreams as well...memories, ambitions...until there is nothing left to fight for." Exhaustion crept in to claim Kirk as he revealed a part of himself few men had ever seen. "Sometimes I wonder if it's all really worth while when I see worlds such as this..." He closed his eyes. "I'm tired of fighting, Spock...tired of fighting wars that no-one can hope to win...tired of watching the misery...the pain..."

Spock watched as his friend lost the battle against sleep and drifted into an uneasy slumber that he hoped would relieve some of the depression and sadness consuming him.

Bhar-an returned to sit next to him. "He is very sick, yet even though I cannot understand his words they sounded...sad. Why is he sad? Can you tell me?"

"Yes, Bhar-an, I can tell you...and also I will tell you of a fight you must win - for all of us."

Morning came. The air was deathly still as a watery sun climbed steadily upwards, its orange streamers creeping into the village. From somewhere on the outskirts a baby cried with hunger, the plea a stark reminder of the harshness of life on a struggling world. An animal yelped in anger and frustration as its quest for food ended once again in dismal failure.

Spock woke from a light sleep to find Shir-an busy once more with the fire, the large cooking pot bubbling with the now familiar porridge. She smiled at him as he sat up to check Kirk, and hurried over to offer him a bowl of the steaming hot food. He shook his head sadly and her smile melted away.

"I regret that I cannot accept your generous hospitality, Shir-an. Your food and drink is something harmful to us - your ways and cooking are unfamiliar and can make us ill, like my friend." He glanced at Kirk, who lay pale and clammy in the morning light. Shir-an stepped closer.

"He does not improve with your little boxes?"

"No. Unfortunately, I can only help a little. Another friend must come - and soon, if he is to live." He prepared to leave the hut.

"Ah, yes - Bhar-an spoke of this other one to me. He is out gathering the people to tell them of these strangers who are not Destroyers." The woman frowned. "I find it hard to understand all he said - things that happened long ago...how, soon, all will be brothers - even Destroyers. But he is a strong leader, a man of strength and courage like you."

"Shir-an," interrupted Spock gently, "I must go and assist Bhar-an. Help him explain to the people. Would you watch over my friend and call me if he wakes?"

"It will be my honour, my brother. Now go, I shall keep watch."

"Thank you." He smiled, then left hurriedly.



Alone in the hut, Shir-an began to tidy and put away various bits and pieces of her everyday existence; she hummed a gentle melody, a tune she had learned at her mother's knee. Carefully sorting out her mate's sleeping skins, so hastily discarded, she came across the talisman taken from the stranger who now lay so ill in their care. Holding it up against the light, she saw it gave off a warm glow and even seemed to have a life of its own; almost mesmerised, she stood and watched as the object twisted and turned.

"That's mine. Can I have it, please?" The voice made her jump and she almost dropped the precious item.

"You are awake. I must call the brother." Quickly she began to hide the IDIC beneath a pile of furs.

"No...don't! It's mine... Spock? Spock - where are you?" Kirk grew more agitated, and struggled to get up. Unsure what to do first, the girl ran to the doorway and shouted at the gathering listening quietly to their leader.

"Bhar-an! Spock! Come quickly!" Then she rushed back to try and keep the stranger in bed. "You must not move. Bhar-an and Spock will be angry if you do not stay still," she pleaded.

"I must find Spock. You don't understand," he struggled. "Mine - it's mine." He sobbed bitterly.

"I cannot understand your words. Please, do not struggle so," she begged. At that moment the two men rushed into the hut, Spock going immediately to Kirk.

"What happened? Jim! Jim, it's all right, I'm here." He enfolded the trembling figure in his arms and tried to calm the near-hysterical agitation.

"It's mine...mine...please..."

"Hush, now - it's all right." He looked over to Shir-an, and asked again, "What happened?"

"I...I do not know," she stammered. "I was clearing away the night skins and found the talisman, and then -"

"Talisman? What talisman?"

"This..." She rummaged and brought out the IDIC. Everything fell into place. Spock nodded and held on tighter to his precious burden.

"Is it important?" asked Bhar-an, taking the IDIC from his mate and bringing it over to Spock.

"Yes," answered Spock, "especially to him. It was a gift from me to him... on my world it is a symbol - a token of how differences come to make up a whole..." Spock stopped as Bhar-an knelt down beside him, stretched out to touch Kirk and carefully placed the IDIC in his hand. Immediately, Kirk tightened his grip on the solid object and lapsed into unconsciousness. The alien ran his fingers across the damp, burning skin.

"He must not die...not after he has given us so much." He looked up. "I understand now, Spock - all we talked of during the long night. The generations of hate and fear growing within us...slowly destroying us. And it took this one and his friendship for another of different blood to make us see what we are doing to ourselves." He returned his gaze to Kirk. "We have much to thank him for, and you are lucky to have such a friend... One day, I too hope to have a friend such as he..." The moment lingered, then was broken as he stood up, his voice changing. "But come, there is still much to do. Have you told the other one of your plan?"

"No. I moved him to the abandoned hut near the edge of the camp just before dawn and told him to wait for us there, as you suggested."

"Umm...the sun is high in the sky now, and my people have accepted, partially, the reasons why I spared the Dest - your companions." He pondered in

silence for a few seconds. "If he goes for the one you call...MacCoy?" Spock nodded at his correct naming. "Then he must understand to bring him and only him."

"He will not disobey me, Bhar-an, you have my word."

"Good. Then let us hurry." Together they settled Kirk back down, instructing Shir-an to watch over him carefully whilst they were away arranging the next step in the plan.

"How's the Captain?" was the immediate question confronting Spock as he walked into the hut where Simputa was pacing nervously. "I heard the commotion and saw you going back - is he okay?" The words held obvious concern.

"He requires urgent medical assistance," replied Spock, his face as unreadable as ever. "Lieutenant, I must ask you to undertake an assignment - that is, of course, if you feel well enough."

"I'm fine, sir. What is it you want?"

"We need to contact the Enterprise and have Dr. McCoy, and only Dr. McCoy, brought here to the village. I myself had planned to go - however - " he hesitated - "the Captain is very weak and may require extra care. Can you return and activate the distress beacon? We are now overdue by three point nine hours, therefore search parties will be scouting the area soon."

"I'll see to it at once, sir," said Simputa, straightening what remained of his once immaculate tunic. He cast an uneasy look towards Bhar-an. "What about them, sir? I can't talk with them like you - will they let me go?"

"Yes. Lieutenant. In fact, Bhar-an here will go with you for protection."

Taking that as his cue, the albino stepped forward. "Is he ready? Does he know what to do?"

Spock held up his hand and the alien stepped back to continue his wait.

"Mr. Simputa, I have explained to Bhar-an, in language he understands, why you personally cannot communicate with him at the moment. He also knows your mission and therefore you have no need to discuss anything with him.

"When you make contact with the Enterprise be sure no security personnel are landed, only McCoy. These people are still very much afraid of strangers and there is no necessity for large numbers to come planet-side. Is that clear, Mr. Simputa?"

"Aye, aye, sir. I understand completely. Will that be all, sir?"

"Yes, Lieutenant. Carry on." Spock turned to Bhar-an. "He is ready. I will wait with my Captain until you return."

About to move out, Simputa spared a brief moment to study Spock. "Does the Captain know you're okay, sir? I mean..." he hesitated, slightly embarrassed but too far in to back out now. "He was terribly worried about you. I just wondered..." The sentence withered as Simputa caught the icy glare of his commanding officer. "I'm sorry, sir. I shouldn't have asked...stupid of me to - " He headed for the door, wishing his legs could cover the distance instantly.

"Lieutenant." He stopped in midstride. "Thank you for your concern. The Captain does know - and he also knows Dr. McCoy will be here soon." Simputa glanced back over his shoulder to see a different First Officer standing there. "Please, be as fast as you can. We do not have much time."

Simputa swallowed hard as he saw the anguish no longer hidden from view. In the past two days he had been privileged to catch a glimpse of a unique friendship. Now, in return for that, it was up to him to ensure that that friendship survived. Not trusting himself to speak, he gave a brisk nod of his



head, grabbed Bhar-an's arm, and hurried out into the heat of the day.

Time dragged.

Alone in the hut, Spock sat holding the limp head of his friend, and watched as he fought a losing battle against the fever and exhaustion consuming his body. His silent vigil was broken when Shir-an burst into their isolation, her voice high with excitement.

"They're coming! Mavah-es brings word that Bhar-an returns with another stranger!" she shouted.

Outside, villagers were gathering, anxious to catch a glimpse of the new stranger come from lands far away, who Bhar-an told them was to be respected. Amidst the shouting and general clamour, Spock recognised a familiar voice booming out.

"Which hut did you say, Lieutenant? They all look the same to me."

"Here, Doctor - this is the one."

Sunlight flooded in as the daytime skin was thrown back to reveal McCoy standing silhouetted against the glaring background. For a moment no-one moved or spoke, then McCoy was hurrying across the dusty floor, tugging to release his medical tricorder.

"What the hell happened, Spock? Alex tells me only your translator's functioning, and you've been involved in strange ceremonies with aliens who are trying to kill you one minute then friends the next!" By now he was kneeling at their side scanning Kirk. "How long's he been like this?"

"Since last evening, following - "

"And what's all this nonsense about restricting security? We've all been worried sick about you!"

"I can explain all that later, Doctor. Firstly, the Captain - "

"Severe dehydration, but no internal injuries..." McCoy carried on, ignoring Spock's attempts to talk to him, "...yet bleeding from the large gut? Pyrexial...electrolyte imbalance with..." Suddenly he stopped and glared at the Vulcan. "Dammit, Spock, he's got some form of dysentery! No doubt from drinking untreated water on this hell-hole of a planet."

"Affirmative, Doctor. However, he was - " began Spock.

"My God, Spock, haven't I warned you enough times about water on unsurveyed planets, especially ones with histories like this one? You're supposed to be the Science Officer, for Christ's sake! Isn't that the first rule in the book? Don't Drink The Water!"

Spock tried to interrupt the flow of anger and emotion yet again. "Dr. McCoy - "

" - But oh, no - you let your best friend drink anything from anywhere and then expect me to pop out of thin air, wave a magic wand and 'hey, presto!' - the miracle cure!" McCoy vented his anger on the innocent equipment as he expertly gave Kirk a combined hypo shot and hastily set up an emergency intravenous replacement line. "Sometimes I wonder about you, Spock, I really do!"

"That's enough, McCoy!" The doctor found himself pulled round forcefully to face such anger that for a second he actually feared for his life. "I have been endeavouring to tell you that Jim has dysentery, if you would be silent and listen. Yes, he drank the water on this planet - and yes, we all know the rules regarding eating and drinking on unsurveyed planets. So why did he do it? Because, Doctor, Jim is so tired and depressed that even that decision was too much effort - and neither of us was there to help when it really mattered!"

"Jim should never have come on this mission, and if blame is to be laid at anyone's feet, then we should both step forward and plead guilty, along with Starfleet and the whole of this universe which pretends to care for life so.

"There is only one person who genuinely cares in this life, Doctor, but he keeps it so carefully hidden - even from his closest friends - that it has almost destroyed him." Spock paused to wipe the sweat from Kirk's brow as the Captain mumbled and stirred briefly. "Yes, Doctor - we are all guilty. Guilty of being individuals...isolated...not understanding...and guilty of not caring when it matters most." The voice faded as Spock covered Kirk's hand which held the IDIC with such determination, and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I am..." He faltered, unable to continue, and bowed his head low, not daring to look at McCoy.

For a time, a silence built around the trio, its cloak enfolding the tableaux, almost smothering the passage of time into oblivion. The Cloak opened, revealing another inner warmth.

"You're wrong, Spock," whispered McCoy. "There's one other who cares just as deeply...and I've been privileged to know you both..."

It had been a busy week. Long talks with Bhar-an, minor disturbances within the village community, confusion, fear, misunderstanding...it would be a long and painful business before this pitiful planet rebuilt itself, but rebuild it would, and with the invaluable aid of Federation social scientists and doctors already en route, life would resume - and the pain and suffering would be forgotten.

Walking alone the corridor leading to his quarters, Spock met McCoy coming in the opposite direction.

"Ah, Spock - just the fellow I'm looking for," said McCoy earnestly.

"Indeed, Doctor?" ventured the Vulcan warily. So far he had managed to avoid McCoy's medical clutches, submitting only to the brief, standard check upon their return to the Enterprise seven days earlier. Now, with Kirk much improved, he feared McCoy was after him for a more thorough examination. He quickened his pace.

"Are you going off duty?" asked McCoy, endeavouring to keep up with the First Officer's long strides.

"For what other purpose would I be walking in this area of the ship at this time of watch?" he answered flatly.

The Human was almost running by now as he tried to get in front of the Vulcan and stop him. "Dammit, Spock! I only want to talk to you, not enter the hundred metre sprint! Anyone would think you were trying to avoid a medical or something - Oophh!" There was a sudden halt in the proceedings as Spock pulled up quickly and McCoy cannoned into him.

"Do you mean..." began Spock as he turned to find McCoy rubbing his shoulder and mumbling about brick walls and immovable objects, "...that you do not require ...I am not..." He straightened to his full height. "I trust you are not injured, Doctor?"

"What?"

"Injured? Perhaps a brief rest in my quarters? I am of course on my way there now."

McCoy frowned. "Spock? Spock...are you feeling all right?"

"Perfectly, thank you, Doctor - but it appears you are not." He offered a supportive arm openly. "May I be of assistance? Indeed, you look quite pale."

"Pale? No...no, I..." McCoy stepped back, his confusion deepening. "I can manage...are you sure you're all right?" By now he was totally bewildered by the whole affair, and stared at the Vulcan in complete puzzlement.

"I have never felt better. Now, if you will excuse me, I must bid you good day." With that he turned and walked off down the corridor.

McCoy raised his hand to say something, hesitated, then decided to try anyway. "Hey, Spock - just a minute, I forgot to tell you. I released Jim to his quarters. Thought...you...might...like...to...know..." His voice trailed.

"Why, thank you, Doctor," came Spock's departing words. "That is the most rewarding medical examination I have ever allowed you to complete."

"Medi- ? Spock, have you gone...? Spock? Hey...Spock!" But the First Officer was long gone, leaving McCoy scratching his head, positive that he had been totally hoodwinked, yet not sure how. He glanced both ways down the empty corridor. Now, which way was I supposed to be going? "Must be getting old," he mumbled to himself as he set off. "Or working too hard. What I need is a good run ashore..." A smile crept in, soon to be joined by a familiar twinkle in his clear blue eyes. "That's it! Shore leave!"

His pace quickened and his footsteps lightened as he returned to his beloved sickbay, a glass of his favourite Saurian brandy - and pleasant dreams of a certain little bar where the girls were...ummm...

Spock allowed himself a secret smile. Poor McCoy, he did so easily fall into his traps...and yet... A surge of warmth spread from deep inside, and he felt comforted and somehow...happy. Yes - Bones was a good friend to have - and he would sorely miss him if he wasn't there.

Walking on, he approached the cabin door of that other friend who meant so much to him. The buzzer sounded and he listened for the answering call.

"Come."

The quiet hiss of pneumatics released the door and he stepped inside. The lights were set low, but he could still make out Kirk lying on his bunk. Moving across the day area, he watched as Kirk lifted himself up onto his elbows to greet him.

"Hi. I thought it would be you." The features softened into a warm smile as he recognised his visitor. "Did Bones tell you he kicked me out?"

"Not exactly," replied Spock, "although he did...touch...on the subject." The slight faltering made Kirk suspicious that something had been going on. He eased himself up from the bunk, altered the lighting, and swung his legs over the side.

"I see. So tell me - what happened...and who won?" He grinned as he stood, carefully unfolding his body, still weak and slow from the abuse and illness he had suffered.

"Well..." began the tall Vulcan, looking down at his suddenly very interesting feet, "nothing actually happened. There may have been a slight...misunderstanding..." He paused again for effect.

"Yes - but who won?" implored Kirk, recognising that Spock was teasing him and loving every minute of it.

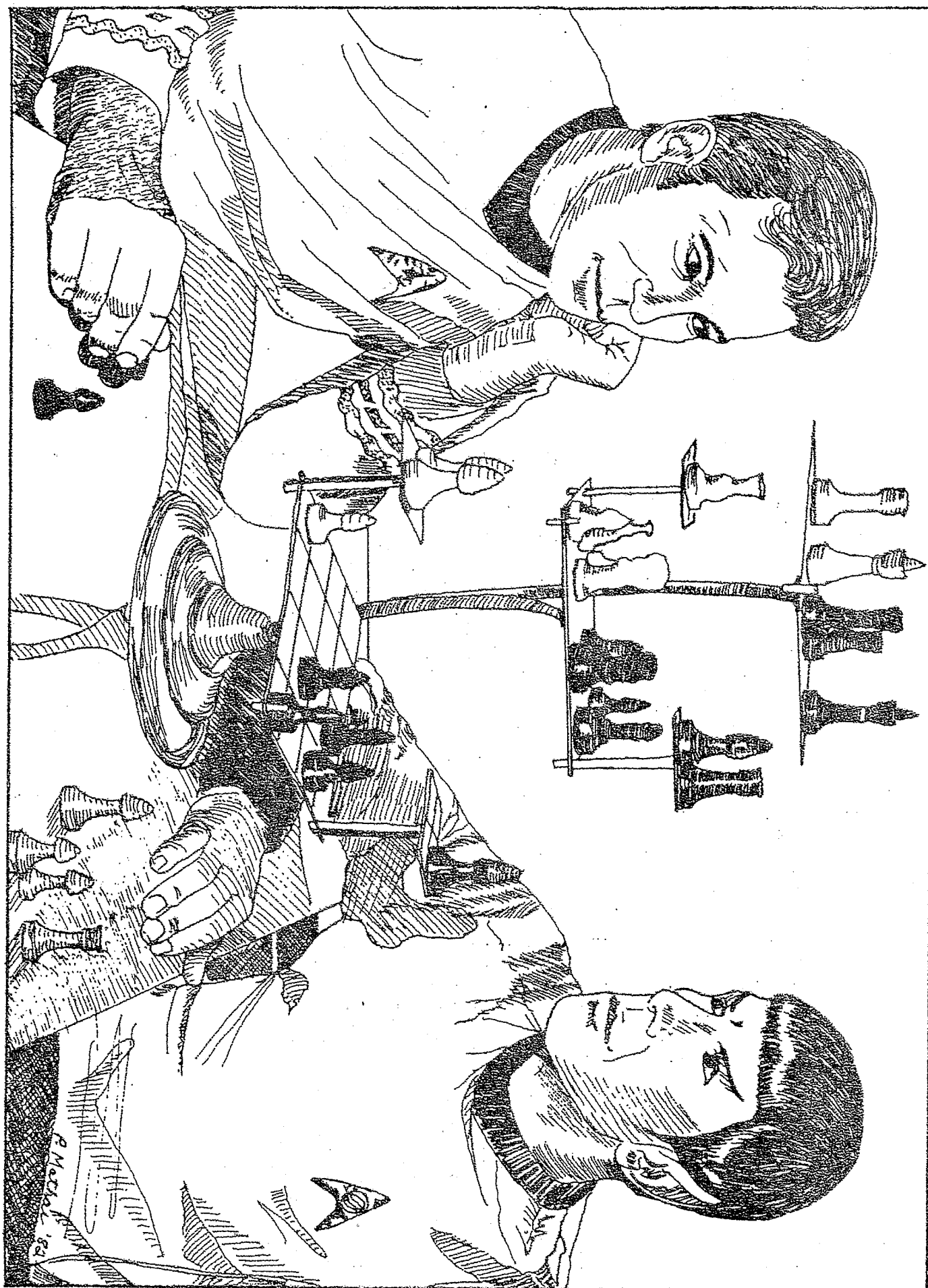
"Why, Captain, myself, of course," came the indignant reply, thereby almost reducing Kirk to hysterics.

"Spock...Spock, you really are a devil..." By now he was at the Vulcan's side. "But you're also a unique and special friend...to both of us." He reached up and gave the firm shoulders an affectionate and meaningful shake.

Not wishing to embarrass his friend unduly, he let his hands drop and said, "What about a game of chess? We haven't played together in weeks. It'll do us both good."

"Do you feel well enough, Jim?" Spock touched his forearm gently, his





concern open and very real. "Perhaps you should be resting, or - "

"Or playing chess," interrupted Kirk. "Come on. I'm fine, honestly. I promise to tell you if I get too tired." He looked up plaintively with his irresistible 'little boy lost' look. "Please?"

Spock conceded defeat with a brief, knowing smile and went to prepare the game. "Very well - but only a short one, for you are still in need of rest," he warned.

Kirk smiled and settled down at the table, completely relaxed and at ease with his friend.

About an hour into the game, Kirk glanced up and sat staring at Spock, his mind obviously on something other than chess.

"Is something wrong?" enquired Spock.

"No - nothing," murmured Kirk quietly. "I was just...thinking, that's all." His eyes dropped to the table.

Spock sighed and thought to himself that this was where their troubles had started before - with Jim 'thinking'. "Would you like to talk about it?"

"Well...I wasn't really thinking...just wondering...about you and me... you know..." he mumbled, still not looking at Spock direct.

"No, Jim, I do not know," said Spock patiently. "What about us?"

"Oh, it's nothing - silly, really. Let's - "

"Let's talk about it," broke in Spock, taking hold of Kirk's forearm, forcing him to look up, "as friends should do..."

Kirk gave a half laugh and began to talk. "That's just it, Spock - friends. Don't you find it strange that we're friends? Different cultures, different ideas...even different sides of the galaxy. Yet we are close friends...why?"

"You have already answered that question for yourself, Jim," said Spock gently, "and that answer has helped Bhar-an and his people more than anything else we could possibly have given them."

"I...I don't understand, Spock," puzzled Kirk. "How can...?"

"Our differences, Jim. By demonstrating that our differences can give such happiness, you united a people torn and divided by the prejudices of differing skins, limbs and minds. You made the world of difference to their suffering. You made the world of difference whole again."

"But it needed you as well, Spock," pleaded Kirk, "and that still doesn't explain why we are so close."

"Because you care, my friend...sometimes more than you choose to admit. Your compassion united those people, destroyed their fears and gave them something to fight for. It takes a very special person to do that - a person who sometimes cares too much," he warned with concern.

Kirk half laughed and glanced back down at the knight he was absently fingering. "Yeah...well, sometimes I do worry about things a little." He lifted up his head and smiled. "But I know now that there's someone else to share the worries of the universe with...isn't there?"

"Indeed, Jim; and not only myself. McCoy also is an excellent listener - and a good friend."

The warm smile spread further as the two men reached a new understanding of each other. Kirk broke the moment by replacing his knight and announcing, "Well, we may as well make a start here and now. It's been a long day - " he stretched slowly - "and I am feeling just a little tired...so - " he eased himself up from the table - "unless I want to be reinstated in sickbay, I'd better

call it a day and get some sleep."

"Is there anything you need before I leave?" asked Spock.

"No. No, Bones has left me all my pills and potions." He stood and watched affectionately as Spock straightened the covers on his bunk.

"In that case, I shall bid you goodnight, Jim."

"G'night, Spock - and thanks again, my friend - for everything."

Spock glanced back over his shoulder, gave a brief nod of his head and a winning smile that he reserved only for Kirk. The steel door opened and closed, leaving Kirk alone... No, that was no longer true; somehow he would never be alone again, not when he had Spock and McCoy to share life with - to share the fears as well as the hopes...the dreams as well as realities, and above all else, to share the living in a universe where differences made all the difference.

CAPTAIN'S LOG, Stardate 5703.5. We are leaving star system GX544, our mission complete. Federation scientists arrived yesterday and are already engaged on many projects with Bhar-an and his people. Our mission has been successful in that we now have a new race who will make a fine contribution to the Federation of Planets once their problems have been resolved. The sister world is unscathed by the nuclear devastation and it is quite possible that Bhar-an and his kind will be re-settled until their true home world has recovered...endit...supplementary to personal log - delete previous reference name Armageddon and enter Genesis...



## APPENDIX -

Bands of darkness: origin - pre-atomic war.

indications for use - probably criminal and mental instability.

action - electrical charge 'short circuits' brain wave activity  
reducing functioning level. Ranges from mild mind  
control to complete state of unconsciousness.

caution - can cause epileptic fitting, upon removal, due to transition of alpha waves into normal phase mode, particularly if patient presents with psychic or physically manifested illness.

power source - solar cell.

