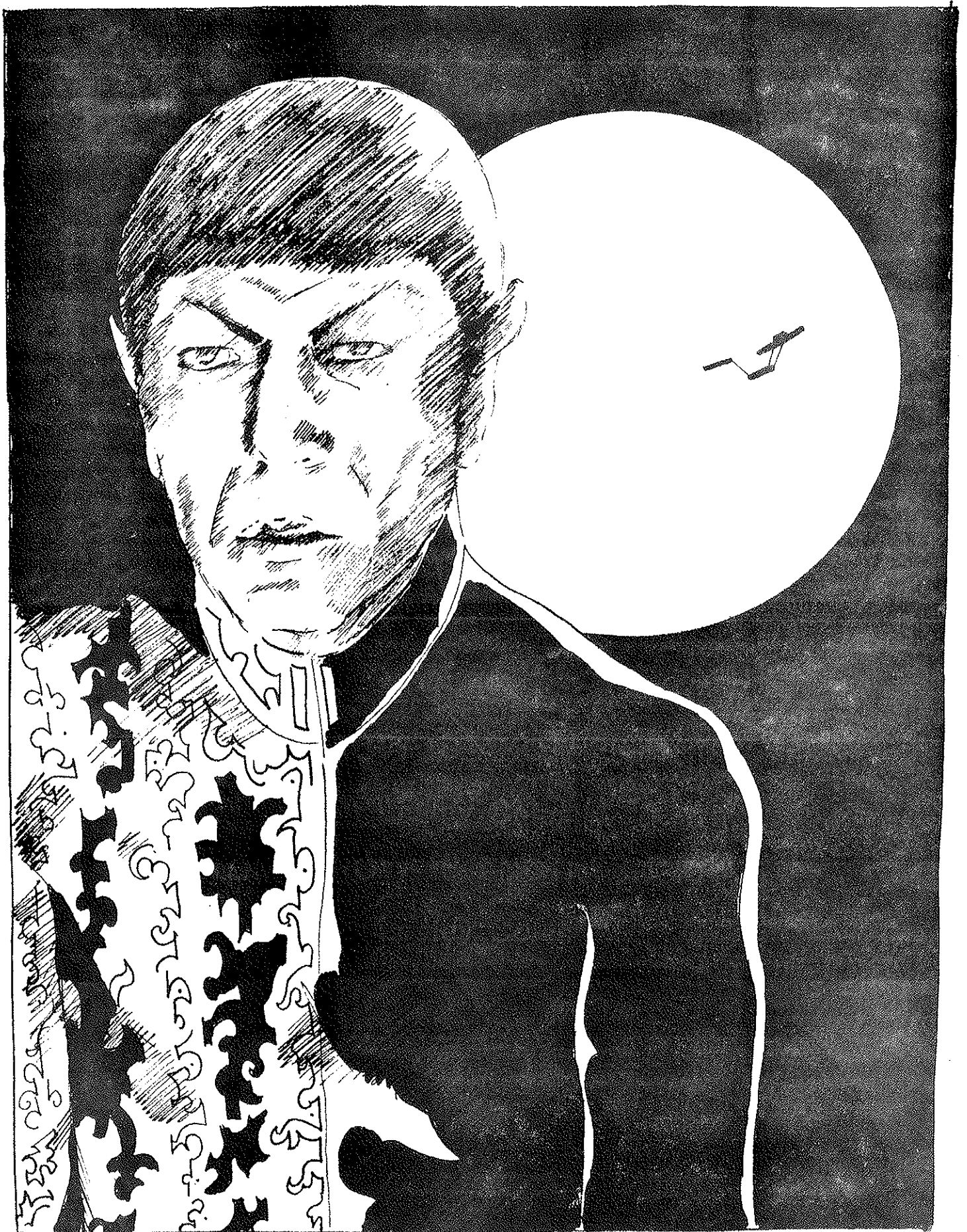


# TOMORROW IS ANOTHER DAY

Lesley Coles



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TOMORROW IS ANOTHER DAYPART I

James Kirk was bored. There was no denying the fact - he was utterly and totally bored. Routine planetary surveys, monotonously stretched over the last three months, accounted for his present mood - which was anything but happy. The only excitement encountered recently was the odd cold virus Ensign Dawson apparently picked up from one of the few beamdowns. The virus spread like wild fire throughout the ship, affecting almost everyone in some form or other. But if you can class having a bunged up nose for a couple of days exciting, then you must truly be bored!

Sucking through his teeth and staring blankly into space, Kirk suddenly realised his opponent was speaking to him.

"What...?"

"I said, Captain, that it is your move," repeated Spock calmly.

"Oh! Yes...my move..." Kirk scanned the various levels. "I'm sorry, Spock, I can't seem to settle lately - my concentrations... Well, let's just say I'm finding it a problem. Now, my move...ummm..." Carefully he reconnoitred the situation before him. His queen trapped, in danger of being removed to join one knight, two bishops and various other pieces already acquired by Spock. He reached a quick decision, grinning impishly as he moved the endangered queen to apparent safety.

Spock's knight advanced. "Checkmate." Two cool, calculating eyes searched out across the chess set towards the Captain.

"WHAT!" Kirk did a double take of both game and Spock, his astonishment lingering as first he checked his king's defeat and then his opponent's strategy. With lower jaw still sagging, he shook his head slowly before speaking.

"But...how? I mean, when did you move up your...?" With a spontaneous wave of resignation he sighed deeply and admitted defeat. Leaning heavily on the table he pushed himself up, stretching stiff, tense muscles. "I'm sorry, Spock - my game was atrocious. Worse, in fact! It's these damn routine missions, on and on, same thing day after day, week after week. I tell you, I'm sick of them! And reports!" He started to pace the deck, arms held high in disgust. "Duplicate! Triplicate! Sign this...sign that... I'm supposed to be a Starship Captain, not some..."

Spock sat patiently, waiting for him to 'get it out of his system'. Past experience had accustomed him to these odd Human reactions, and he found remaining silent his best approach to the situation.

Suddenly Kirk swung round, a broad grin emerging rapidly. "How about a work-out in the Gym? Give me a chance to dispel some of this nervous energy - and maybe a few of these extra pounds McCoy's going on about." He mumbled the latter whilst glancing down at his midriff.

"Very well, Captain. If you feel it may be beneficial, I agree." Spock prepared to vacate his chair.

"Good, good!" Kirk slapped his thighs loudly, and began to scrutinise the cabin chronometer. "Let's see now, I have three hours before I'm due back on the bridge...that means..." He was so engrossed in his new venture that he failed to see Spock's face contort with pain as the Vulcan made to replace his chair beneath the table. A sudden crash interrupted Kirk's train of thought, causing him to jerk his head around to meet the scene. Spock leaned precariously over the table, clutching desperately at the edge for support, with eyes held tightly shut, his face grimaced in agony, teeth grinding behind drawn back lips. One scattered chess game explained the crash...but this was irrelevant to Kirk. What mattered was his friend, and it was to him he dashed.

"SPOCK! What's wrong?" He was there within a second, grasping the trembling shoulders firmly as the Vulcan began collapsing over the strewn table. "Spock! For God's sake tell me what's wrong! SPOCK!"

No reply came. Only a surge of shaking as Spock fought for control over an agonised body. Knuckles whitened as his grip increased; eyes snapped tighter and breaths were snatched irregularly. The vice-like grip relaxed and Kirk, still grasping his friend's shoulders, tried to ease him into a hastily drawn-up chair.

"Sit here a minute...you're all right now...that's it...just sit quietly while I call Bones..." He gazed concernedly at the pale features, not knowing quite what to do first. "I'll have to leave you to get to the intercom - just sit still. Don't move." Hesitantly, Kirk started across to the wall intercom, depressing the button swiftly.

"Kirk to sickbay."

"McCoy here. What can I do for you, Jim? Diets are on special - " McCoy's cheery voice broke into the tense atmosphere, only to be cut short.

"Bones! I'm in my quarters. Get down here right away. Spock's collapsed - he must be in pain because - SPOCK!" Kirk had been watching his friend carefully whilst calling McCoy, so was ready for any change. That change was now occurring as Spock wrenched himself pitifully from the chair and staggered dangerously towards the bathroom.

Leaving the intercom immediately, Kirk raced across the cabin towards Spock, followed by McCoy's shout. "I'm on my way, Jim!"

But they never made the bathroom. Collapsing in agony once more, Spock doubled over and was violently sick. Cradling a now burning brow, Kirk tried to ease the convulsing body.

"Easy, now...Bones'll be here soon...take it easy..." He could hear his own voice tremble as he tried to sound reassuring. His stomach churned, contracting uncomfortably as his anxiety grew. Thumping heart and unsteady hands betrayed the frightening situation he now found himself in.

Long moments dragged until the vomiting began to ease, but it didn't seem to help in any way. Spock continued to jerk spasmodically as if in the throes of a convulsion. His pallor, along with his conscious level deteriorated rapidly, bringing Kirk close to the edge of panic.

Where was McCoy? What was keeping him so long?

Turning Spock carefully onto his side to help his breathing, Kirk reached back into the bathroom grabbing frantically for a towel, untidily dropped on the floor. Snatching it towards him, he started to wipe meticulously around his friend's face, paying particular attention to his mouth and neck. When he'd done all he could, he gently settled the limp head on his lap tenderly and stared anxiously at the door.

The steel flew aside revealing an apprehensive face. "What happened? From the beginning, Jim!" McCoy's voice was authoritative and professional, displaying just the right tone to enable Kirk to relate everything calmly and methodically. Only in command of the full facts, Bones was able to relax his attitude a little - his eyes left the humming tricorder to watch the Captain. The disturbed look sprang out towards him, threatening his own composure. Reaching for the hand resting lovingly on the blue-shirted shoulders, he spoke.

"Sit over there a minute, Jim, while I get Spock onto the trolley." Pausing, he beckoned to the waiting medics, and then administered an anti-emetic to the pale figure lying before him. "I'm not sure what's wrong exactly, but it looks like some sort of infection. Right now, though, he needs life support and a lot of care. He's in septicæmic shock, knocking out his own Vulcan healing powers. The sooner we get him to sickbay the happier I'll be..."

In one easy movement, Spock was transferred to the trolley and then wheeled speedily towards the waiting turbolift. As the doors moved across, McCoy turned back to Kirk. Jim sat pale and visibly shaken, eyes transfixed into space, mind devoid of all thoughts excepting his friend. Edging closer, Bones laid a reassuring hand on the despondent shoulders, squeezing firmly. Sad eyes met his, exchanging a silent message. Helping the Captain to his feet, the doctor guided him towards the door, and they emerged into the deserted corridor.

Bones stood watching the diagnostic panel closely. The steady hum and monotonous beat of the machine echoed eerily around sickbay. Spock's vital signs were all abnormal; his blood picture revealed a marked increase in the Vulcan equivalent leucocyte count. Which, together with dehydration and toxicity, were indicative of a serious systemic infection.

Reaching a decision, McCoy adjusted a hypo and pressured a further 5cc into the prone figure. Satisfied with his action, he turned his attention to Kirk, hovering anxiously at his side.

"He's still very ill, Jim, but stabilising." He grasped the Captain's arm. "Let's talk. Christine will call if there's any change." Kirk nodded, moved away reluctantly.

Once inside his office, McCoy poured out two large glasses of brandy, placing one in the still trembling hand of his friend. "Right! Drink that down, it'll make you feel better." He cast a professional eye over Kirk as the shaken Captain swallowed a large portion of his drink.

"Thanks, Bones - I needed that. Do...do you know what it is, yet?"

"Well, it's still early, but I'm 99% sure it's a virus. Probably the same one you and half the crew tangled with a few weeks back. Only - somehow it's mutated...possibly because of Spock's different body chemistry. Or during its passage through us... But mutate it has, and..."

"He is going to be all right? Isn't he?"

"...I think so. He's a pretty tough guy, all things considered, but I'm a bit concerned over..." Bones frowned as his voice trailed. "You see, it attacked his central nervous system primarily, presenting a picture similar to meningitis - hence the vomiting and convulsions." He paused again to sip at his own drink and observe Kirk's reactions. "We've isolated an anti-biotic to which it appears sensitive, but we won't be sure until another six hours or so."

Traces of colour were returning to the Captain's features as he nodded understanding, then turned to stare into his drink. "It...ah...gave me quite a fright, Bones. I mean, one minute playing chess...and then..." He gestured the feeling. "It was all so sudden. Something I could have seen - a fall, an accident...anything but that! Bones, I honestly thought he was dying. Dying - and there was nothing I could do to stop it. He just lay there, and...and..."

McCoy could see the pressure mounting as the fearful memories flooded back. "It's over now, Jim. Try and forget it." He lightened his tone as he rose from the desk. "What you need is a good night's sleep. I'll fix you up with some pills - take them, go straight to bed and stay there till morning. Doctor's orders!" He grinned, fatherly.

"But I'm due on the bridge - it's time..."

"It's time you went to bed - Captain! Scotty's on the bridge and everything is running smoothly, so no more arguments!"

Kirk managed a weak smile. "All right - I know when to quit." He retreated from the office and took a final look at Spock. "But you will call me if anything happens, won't you, Bones?"

"Yes, yes! Now go on - OUT!"

With the departure of Kirk, McCoy turned his attention back to his patient.

"How is he, Christine?"

"Definitely stabilising now, Doctor. Antibiotic levels almost at maximum."

"Good. Thank you, Christine. Now go and have something to eat. I'll watch him for the rest of the night."

"But I'm really not hungry, Doctor - I'd rather stay and - "

An exasperated voice interrupted. "Nurse Chapel, you have been on duty all day PLUS half the night. Now I'm in no mood to stand here and argue with you when to eat or when not to eat. What I do know is that in the morning, I'm going to need rested, efficient staff! So GO!" He pointed emphatically to the exit.

"Yes, Doctor." He was right - of course.

Sighing deeply, McCoy settled himself at Spock's bedside. It was going to be a long night.

Forty-eight uneasy hours were to pass before Spock began to show signs of improvement. Once on the road to recovery however, progress was to be rapid and trouble free. With vital signs returning to normal by the fifth day, he began to look more his old self. So much so, that Bones even allowed him up for short intervals. These 'short intervals' were soon to become a bone of contention between the Doctor and the Vulcan, resulting in the end of the week seeing Spock released to his quarters, although still officially unfit for duty.

At the end of two weeks, a reluctant Dr. McCoy declared him medically fit and discharged him. But something was bothering the good doctor...nothing specific that he could pin down. Just a vague uneasiness which persistently gnawed away at the back of his mind. Putting it down to a case of being over-protective towards the Vulcan's health, Bones finally succeeded in dismissing the worry, and prepared to catch up on the backlog of medicals steadily mounting up.

Normality once more descended aboard the Enterprise, as she continued on to her next assignment.

## PART 2

Bridge activity was minimal, Orbiting a small planet situated in the outer regions influenced by a dwarf star, the Enterprise was engaged in investigating and logging vital scientific data. A soothing buzz of computers whirling and intership communications drifting in and around him, created for Kirk a twilight zone. Into his day-dream swam memories of shore leaves past and maybe future; pleasant memories of adventures shared, excursions survived. As he sat recalling one particularly memorable incident, his mind was keenly snatched back to the present.

"Er... Mr. Spock... Are you...er...sure that is the correct method of entering this class of information" I mean, sir...the computer banks are..." The words trailed off as young Chekov realised everyone was staring at him. That is, everyone excepting Kirk, who initially sat bolt upright, questioning his ears. However, on failing to hear a reply from Spock, a stab of ice-cold fear penetrated his thoughts, spiralling down his spine. He spun round to confront the tableau.

Chekov appeared flummoxed, almost to the point of embarrassment, but worse was still to come. On Spock's face there was an expression of pure astonishment. But this was not the astonishment of being questioned, it was a

look of pure fear and bewilderment.

Quick to react, Kirk was across to the science area within seconds. "What's the trouble, Ensign?" He drew Chekov aside and continued softly, "All right, Chekov, I'll see you later. Try to carry on as normal."

"Aye, aye, sir - and thank you, sir." The Russian edged away nervously, not knowing quite what was happening...yet somehow glad to be getting away.

Mind racing, Kirk approached Spock. "Spock? Feeling all right?" No reply. "Spock? Can you - "

"Yes, Captain. I can hear you. I...I must apologise for...the momentary lapse...of...of memory. It will not happen again." The words came haltingly as a trembling hand moved towards anguished features.

"What's wrong? Tell me!" Kirk gripped the raised arm in an attempt to get his First Officer to speak. "Are you in pain again? Is it like last time?"

"No... No, Captain. Only, for a brief moment I...I forgot how to programme the computer." Continuing to rub his forehead, Spock paused. He seemed to be reaching deep inside himself, as if trying to delve and discover a solution. "But I cannot understand how that could be..." The troubled expression broadened, causing Kirk to intervene for fear of the situation becoming much more serious. Drawing closer to his friend, he tried a little Human psychology.

"Well... Don't worry about it now. Perhaps you're just over-tired, need some rest. After all, it's not too long ago you had that virus. What do you say we call it a day - maybe have a bite to eat, call in on McCoy and see if he can give you something to help you sleep. Good night's rest'll do you the world of good." Kirk watched Spock carefully, hoping his ploy was succeeding. Inwardly, he relaxed.

"Yes... Yes, Captain, I believe a rest may help."

"Good." Leading the way towards the turbolift, the Captain paused briefly to hand over command. "Mr. Sulu! You have the con. Any problem which cannot wait, get in touch with Scotty. Chekov, I'll see you in my quarters later."

"Yes, sir." He saw the troubled expression Kirk wore, and was eager to help in any way he could.

The doors closed swiftly.

Much to Kirk's surprise, Spock went along with all earlier suggestions - even to the point of visiting McCoy. Prior to entering sickbay, the Captain had felt a little apprehensive. Suppose the good doctor was in one of his 'get one up on Spock' moods? But any such thoughts were soon allayed as the Chief Surgeon dealt swiftly and somewhat consolingly with the problem. It was as if he knew the consultation would arise, and exactly how he was going to treat it.

Now Kirk found himself returning to sickbay, his mind a sea of questions. He had spent the last half hour or so settling his friend down for the night. As the sedative finally took hold, he had sat and watched Spock sink into a deep sleep. It had been during these last few minutes that the questions began to emerge. How could Spock forget the programming of a computer? And why had he agreed so readily to everything suggested? McCoy's half expectant reaction? Did Bones know something he didn't? What was going on? The questions bombarded his mind continuously, but no answers appeared.

Sickbay doors parted, bringing a furious Captain Kirk and a worried Dr. McCoy face to face.

"Dr. McCoy! What the devil's going on around here? You KNEW he was ill - didn't you? And yet you allowed him to remain on duty, with no mention whatever to me that there was anything wrong!" Kirk felt angry. Angry because he didn't understand; and he also felt hurt and deceived.

"Hold it right there, Captain!" Now it was McCoy's turn to vent anger. "I know it looks bad - and you may well have the right to reprimand me. But you don't understand the situation - and I'm not sure I do either. So let's just both calm down, and try and see things with a little more perspective."

An audible sigh filled the air. "I'm sorry, Bones - I didn't mean to get at you. It was stupid of me to think you were neglecting Spock, only..."

"Yes, yes. I know." McCoy rubbed a weary hand across tense neck muscles. "C'mon. Let's sit in my office. Discuss a few points." With his other hand resting along Kirk's shoulders, they moved towards the office area.

Once settled within the office, Kirk proceeded to explain the incident with Spock on the bridge. McCoy listened without interrupting, merely nodding as certain details emerged. His silence however did not remain long. When Kirk had finished, McCoy rose from his chair and began pacing the deck anxiously - something he did only when truly worried. Moments later he turned to confront the Captain.

"Jim - I'm now almost certain there's something seriously wrong with Spock." The statement came professionally, but not altogether without emotion. "It's all piecing together, like some puzzle... The answers, though? Where are the answers?" He continued to pace, mind spinning; fists clenching and unclenching as tension increased. Kirk was becoming annoyed again - frustrated. Still in the dark, he desperately wanted to understand.

"Bones! For God's sake stop pacing up and down and tell me what's going on!" He slammed his fist onto the table, emphasising his need to know.

"All right. Just...just calm down and I'll try to explain." McCoy waited for his friend to relax a little before beginning. "That's better. Now, as for diagnosis - I have none. What I do have are isolated instances of unusual behaviour in Spock. Ever since he had that infection, something has been gnawing away at the back of my mind, but it's only recently that I've been able to pin-point it. For instance - have you ever known Spock to 'mislay' things? Like important coding data, survey reports? Well, anyway, it seems he's been doing a lot of that just lately."

"But how do you know all this and not me?" questioned Kirk.

"I'm coming to that... I noticed he was rather withdrawn as if worrying about something, but it wasn't until Uhura came to me yesterday and told me about the reports, etc, that I really started to worry. Uhura's very perceptive, Jim - understands people extremely well. Anyway, let's just say she came to me because she didn't want to worry you. I decided to watch points for a couple of days and then see you. But, as this meeting so clearly shows, things came to a head before then. I'm sorry, Jim. I didn't mean things to go this way..."

"Yes - I understand, Bones." The furrow of concern deepened across Kirk's brow. "And you haven't any idea of what's wrong?"

Sadly, Bones shook his head. "None whatever. It's how I said at the beginning - everything fits into a pattern, but as for a solution..." He raised his hands denoting a feeling of helplessness. "I'll get him down here tomorrow and give him a **thorough check-up**. Could be I've missed something - that damned Vulcan physiology of his can be tricky at times. But there's no more to be done tonight. Let's both sleep on it." He cast a professional eye over his friend. "Nood something to help you sleep?"

"No. No, Bones, I'll be fine. Thanks, though." He rose and stretched stiff legs. "Think I'll look in on him before going to bed. Make sure he's still asleep."

McCoy nodded and smiled. "Sure, Jim. And then get a good night's rest yourself. See you in the morning."

Kirk waved his farewell and walked towards the door. "G'night, Bones... and thanks."

"Night, Jim. Sleep well."

Once out in the corridor, Kirk felt an overwhelming need to think, reorganise his thoughts, and above all, walk! He moved along the vastness of his ship, feeling the 'night' press in and around him, confining, restraining him in its claustrophobic grip. Most people enjoyed the quiet and relaxing atmosphere of the Starship's 'night', but not he - often, sleep would evade him as an over-active mind or bout of depression plagued his brain. The loneliness of command, the need to be constantly making decisions, provide answers to almost insoluble problems, they all made him vulnerable. The peace and stillness of night merely accentuated these obstacles ten-fold, producing the now present restlessness.

McCoy knew this state of mind existed in Kirk - hence the suggestion of a sleeping draught - but he also knew his crew and friends extremely well, and he didn't like to force his Captain too early. He would bide his time and allow nature a free hand initially.

Kirk walked for about an hour, clambering up and down gantries, in and around hangar decks, in fact, everywhere his restless legs took him. Finally, he found himself outside Spock's quarters.

He entered.

Carefully adjusting the lighting to infra-red, he passed into the sleeping area and approached the slumbering figure. He was as Kirk had left him, apart from one long, lean arm which now sprawled languidly outside the coverlet. The earlier signs of tenseness seemed to have disappeared, but how pale and drawn he looked in the eerie red haze of the artificial light.

Kirk's eyes began to roam casually, absorbing many of the cabin's treasures. A chess set, with a game in progress... a half completed mathematical problem awaiting patiently for the return of its solver... Spock's harp... the familiar blue shirt... Here they all were, all the little things, the personal individualities which came to make this entity into a friend - a part of himself.

Fitfully, Spock stirred in his sleep, fighting the enforced unconsciousness of the drug. Incoherent mumblings left the uneasy mind as he tossed restlessly. Bending over, Kirk lifted the now trailing arm and gently replaced it beneath the coverlet. It grieved him to think of what might be happening inside that magnificent mind, and he longed to help. Reaching for his friend's shoulder, he spoke softly.

"Try to rest, Spock. You need to sleep. I'll be here with you... only, please try to sleep." He watched the restlessness continue for a few moments longer, sighing thankfully when at last the normal rhythm of sleep returned.

Time crept by on its never-ending journey, with only the flicker of changing digits to mark its passing as the Human continued his vigil.

Eventually, he left.

Although his body was still tense, Kirk felt the beginning of tiredness creeping into his thoughts and actions. Thankfully he slid into the solitude of his cabin, ignoring the lighting, and sank gratefully into an inviting chair.

"What the...?" He sprang up at the realisation that there was something or someone in his chair! He punched the lighting panel.

"Chekov!"

At the exclaimed sound of his name, a slightly bemused half asleep young Russian leaped to attention in startled wakefulness. "Captain! Sir! Sorry... I mean... I am sorry, sir."

Kirk produced a fatherly smile as he realised what a fright he must have given the young officer. "It's quite all right, Chekov, my fault entirely. I completely forgot I'd asked to see you... But wait just a minute - what time is it?" He searched out the chronometer, but Chekov beat him to it.

"02.45 hours, sir." Slight hesitation. "Sir - I...er...must apologise for falling asleep in your quart - "

"What! That late? Pavel, please, it's me who should be apologising. I really am sorry... Now, off to bed where you should have been hours ago. There'll be no talking tonight - so, c'mon, out!"

Chekov relaxed, displaying one of his warm smiles as Kirk ushered him quickly towards the door. "Yes, sir. Goodnight, sir."

"Goodnight, Pavel...and, Pavel - "

"Sir?"

"Thanks for waiting."

"Not at all, Captain. Mr. Spock has been very good to me, sir. Anything I can do to help him, or yourself, I consider an honour." The young Russian turned smartly and departed into the ship's night, leaving Kirk staring affectionately after him.

The activated cabin door slid firmly across, this time definitely allowing Kirk to be alone. He collapsed onto his familiar bunk, closing his eyes in an attempt to welcome sleep. But it was a long time before his mind accepted the slumber - and that slumber was far from restful.

Morning found James Kirk waking up fraught and over-tired. Troubled dreams had given his mind and body no peace, and now gaunt features stared back at him in the bathroom mirror. Following a brisk shower, he shouldered his way into a fresh uniform and prepared to meet the new day.

Although hunger was the farthest thing from his mind, he decided to go and have breakfast anyway. He knew McCoy would be there, waiting to see he ate, and he felt in no mood to have the good doctor fussing around if he didn't show.

He moved into the busy dining area, nodding to various crew as they acknowledged his arrival.

"Morning, Jim...sleep well?"

Kirk eyed his Chief Surgeon sarcastically. "What do you think?"

"Sorry - I just thought..." The sentence withered as McCoy mentally chided himself for being so cruel. That was half his trouble - he just didn't think before opening his mouth. He thought carefully before speaking again. "If it's any consolation, I didn't sleep too well either." No answer. "After you left I rechecked Spock's lab reports - couldn't find a damn thing...nothing... Want a cup of coffee?" Kirk nodded, McCoy secured two cups of steaming black coffee and continued, "Anyway, I have everything set up ready for him. It's simply a question of time before we find the problem, devise a solution and get him back to normal." He paused. "I...er... I called in earlier and ran the tricorder over him. Still asleep, but his mental activity was rather high... Unusual, that - even for Spock..."

Kirk sat scrutinising the swirling pattern in his coffee, formed by his continual stirring of the same.

"Jim? Jim? Did you hear what I just said?"

"Ummm?"

"You haven't heard a word I've said, have you?" Bones sighed wearily. "Look, this is getting us nowhere. Why don't you go up to the bridge - try

and take your mind off things with a little work. I'll collect Spock, start the tests and let you know how it's going in a couple of hours. Agreed?" McCoy waited patiently for the reply.

"Yes, Bones... I suppose you're right - you usually are. I agree." Kirk knew this was the right decision, but that still didn't make it any easier. Reluctantly he pushed himself away from the table, and the two friends moved out together.

Two undrunk coffees remained.

The turbolift doors slid open as Kirk waved an absent farewell at the departing McCoy. Moving inside he vaguely registered the presence of a young, broadly built crew member. Automatically he reached for the control horn, and gave his instruction.

"Morning, Captain." The deep Australian accent broke the silence. Kirk quickly checked the owner's uniform and smiling face.

"Lt. Prentise." The response was curt and formal.

Prentise, about to say something else, paused momentarily as the car began to slow in preparation to picking up another passenger. The doors moved aside revealing a very irritated Lt. Sulu, who stormed in wildly clutching an extremely naked plant stem. Totally ignoring his Captain's presence, he slammed the poor specimen into Prentise's chest, forcing the startled officer back against the rear of the lift.

"I knew I'd catch you this time! You're responsible for this, aren't you! Go on, admit it! And all for that Yeoman Chang... I've seen the two of you together!" Sulu's eyes blazed with anger as his temper rose. Kirk, momentarily nonplussed by the speed at which events were happening, now stepped in before serious consequences arose.

"Lt. Sulu! What is the meaning of this interruption? This is a Federation Starship, not some off-world brawling bar! Explain!"

Sulu spun to face his Captain, face hard and filled with rage. "I'm waiting, Lieutenant," continued Kirk, not giving an inch.

"Sir! Sir, this...idiot stole my Matabeeliasia. I spent months cross-fertilising, nurturing, to produce this particular strain - it's the only one in existence - and this...this maniac..." He rounded on Prentise, who had begun to clench his fists defensively.

Kirk was between them immediately. "That's enough, Mister! I will not tolerate fighting aboard my ship! Lt. Prentise - you will apologise to Lt. Sulu NOW!"

"But sir, it's only a..." His lilting accent gave way to a chuckle as he questioned the absurdity of the whole affair. Sulu moved against the restraining arm of his Captain.

"That's enough! I don't care what..." began Kirk, his tenuous thread of control finally slipping. "Damn it all! Spock's seriously ill and all you two care about is some godforsaken flower!"

Instantly the tableau froze, the full effect of Kirk's outburst descending like a cold shower. Quietly, without any further comment, Sulu disengaged the mechanism halting the lift and directed it to the nearest access point.

As Kirk stood silently with head bowed, the lift arrived at its destination. Passing a swift, non-verbal message, Sulu indicated the opening doors to the Australian.

"I'll...er...I'll catch the next car, sir," said Prentise cautiously.

"Yes...yes, all right, Lieutenant," answered Kirk from behind a rigid

composure, tense hand worrying away at an anxious brow. Thankfully he heard the doors slide back over, and he resumed his journey alone.

Stepping out onto the familiar bridge, Kirk drew in a deep breath and treid very hard to switch into the role of Starship Captain. But still a part of his mind refused to accept the change, and this was not helped by the fact that he now felt guilty at losing his temper so quickly with his two young officers.

However, the passage of time did help him a little, and slowly he began to unwind. By the time Sulu arrived to take up his shift, Kirk had begun to view the earlier episode in the turbolift in a totally different light. So much so, that he now saw the hilariousness of the whole situation. That poor stem... and the look on Prentise's face! Reaching a decision, he moved to stand between his helmsman and navigator.

"Mr. Sulu - Mr. Prentise," He spoke quietly. "I must apologise for my shortness of temper earlier on. I...er...I had something on my mind," he finished hastily.

Sulu, quick to see his Captain's need for contact and reassurance, spoke first. "Captain, there's nothing to apologise for. It was stupidity on my part, and if we'd known about Mr. Spock..." now it was his turn to hesitate "...sir, we do understand."

Gazing into the dark brown oriental eyes, Kirk could sense the feeling of concern; not only of this one man, but he knew, the whole crew. Deeply moved, he nodded thankfully and broke eye contact. After a brief pause, he looked back at the two men and began to grin slowly.

"You know, it was funny really. You holding that ridiculous stem..." Sulu shrugged and began to laugh, recalling the event vividly, "...and you, Prentise - the expression on your face!"

Paul Prentise, eager to help his Captain relax even further, followed up with his jovial Australian drawl. "And wouldn't you just know it, sir! That flower was never really worth it. Yeoman Chang only happens to suffer from hay fever - out on my ear I was, flower and all!"

For the first time in hours Kirk finally let go and laughed heartily. As he relaxed in the company of his crew, a silent message passed between the present members. Even if it was only for a short time, they had helped their Captain over what looked like being a difficult time.

The remainder of the day passed relatively peacefully. Kirk found the time to have his talk with Chekov, but the Ensign could add nothing significant in their search for clues into Spock's problem.

With no word from McCoy, Kirk decided to go down to sickbay and see for himself what was happening. Bones had no news for him, and his Vulcan friend appeared even more confused and vague. Finally, the Doctor's short temper, resulting from his anxiety and pressure of work, made Kirk feel awkward and intrusive. Dejectedly, he accepted McCoy's offer of a sedative and retired early to his quarters.

Sleep came easier that night, but worry still seeped through into his dreams.

Another day dawned.

Kirk called into sickbay early, hoping to find McCoy in a better mood. He made for the office - empty. Moving out into the main area he slowed his pace. Spock lay sleeping, head tilted slightly to one side; and there, close by, lay McCoy. Fully dressed and sprawling along the adjoining couch, Bones snored gently - dead to the world.

A tendril of guilt crept into his mind - not once had he given any thought to his friend Bones. The poor fellow must have been working non-stop since

the whole thing started.

God, what a mess! Loyalties, fears, anxieties, they all tumbled into his mind, increasing the depression and inadequacies he was already experiencing.

Quietly, he left.

Six hours further into the day, McCoy called Kirk to his office. He said he'd found something, but if the tone of voice was anything to go by, the discovery held little if any hope.

Still feeling guilty from the morning, Kirk opened the conversation warily. "Bones...I've been very thoughtless. I simply let you carry on without so much as asking if you were getting your rest...not once did I even..."

McCoy's initial surprise and puzzlement quickly vanished as he caught on to Kirk's train of thought. "Now hold on there just one minute, Jim." His face lit up in the familiar reassuring smile. "Kindly worry about one person at a time, will you, please - otherwise I can't keep up with you! I'm quite capable of looking after myself - besides, I've been doing it longer than you - so stop this nonsense and think about yourself a little more. The ship needs you, and so does your crew." He waited patiently for a few moments before continuing. "Now, would you like to talk first, or see Spock? He's awake."

Need he have asked?

"Just one thing before you go in..." McCoy hesitated, trying to soften the blow. "He will act strangely - speech detached, thoughts vague, that sort of thing. Try not to let him see you notice - it only agitates him. Keep it short and I'll explain when you come back in."

Ten minutes later, Jim returned, face ashen and disbelieving. "Bones? What's wrong with him? He's worse... You said - "

"Yes. Yes, I know what I said. Look, Jim, I might as well tell you now - I can't help him. I think I know what's wrong, but there's nothing I can do to help him." McCoy was having great difficulty admitting his defeat. Spock meant as much to him as he did to Kirk. This inability to find a solution was heart-breaking. Doubly so, as it meant hurting Jim as well. He tried a constructive approach.

"Listen - what do you know about D.N.A and R.N.A.?"

"Not much... Something to do with genes, heredity factors..." mumbled Kirk absently.

"Yes, that's right. D.N.A.'s the principal factor, whilst R.N.A. kind of copies and acts as a messenger. But it has other functions as well - one of them being action in the brain and memory areas.

Let me simplify it a little for you... Have you ever wondered how you remember things? Imagine your brain as being the computer on this ship. Anything you put in is analysed and stored away for future reference. Now, when you need some information from a computer, what do you do? Punch out a code, and - " he snapped his fingers loudly " - bingo! Out it all comes.

Well, your brain works on very much the same idea. Only this time a message is sent to the memory and depending on various chemical reactions, etc, back comes the answer. That's where our old friend R.N.A. comes in.

You see nucleic acids must be present for memory to function correctly. Theoretically, therefore, the more R.N.A. you produce the higher your intelligence, as you should be able to retain and recall vast quantities of information. This is true to some extent of course, but there's a lot more to it as you can imagine.

Back in the second half of the twentieth century, scientists the world over experimented with rats, and sometimes Humans, in an attempt to produce

super-intelligences...but it can't be done. You and I are proof of that." Kirk was spell-bound. "Anyway, let me show you something." McCoy swiftly selected a tape, pushed it into the computer, and activated the screen.

"Here's a normal cell structure showing the nucleus. Now this..." the image expanded, "...area is called the nucleolus... See how it shows up darker?" McCoy increased the magnitude. "Now we can see the nucleic acids - those helically coiled strands are where we find our D.N.A. and R.N.A." Kirk watched carefully, fascinated by the swirling world of molecules.

"The R.N.A. production is only 2% compared to D.N.A.'s 18% of the nucleolus, but it's very important."

"Yes - I see."

McCoy rapidly switched tapes. "Now we come to Spock's problem. This is a cell taken from him and reduced to the same detail. His molecular composite is more complex, but as he's humanoid and oxygen breathing, his nucleic acid chains can still be easily recognised." The image changed, and Bones pointed out the differences.

"But... But they don't look right. Their shape? Some of them look odd ...wrong..."

"That, Jim, is our problem! Somehow, that virus he contracted has interfered with his R.N.A. production. The cells are malformed and unable to carry out their function - and if they can't function, then it follows all the other processes begin to fail. Result? Spock is unable to think, assimilate new information...and what's more important, his ability to use past experience and knowledge will gradually disappear.

Even now his brain is slowing. Remember I told you his mental activity was 'way up the other day? Well, that was him trying to compensate. But it doesn't work. Slowly, everything will break down...memory, ability to make a decision, even the - "

"But Bones! Surely there's something you can do? That magnificent mind of his..." The pleading eyes were pitiful, causing Bones to divert his attention. "He'll be trapped - alone! He's always been alone until he met us! This can't happen to him now! Bones! BONES!"

"Believe me, Jim, I've tried. He needs more than the facilities aboard this ship - perhaps Vulcan can help. I just don't know any more." A weary head sank into waiting hands, as the pace began to tell.

For uncountable seconds silence pressed in around the two lonely figures as they each sat with their own thoughts.

"There is something you can do, Jim."

"Yes! Anything - tell me..." Kirk's mind sprang alert, eager for any positive action.

"When he gets worse...he's going to need a lot of help. Even now he's finding it difficult to maintain that Vulcan image of his...he'll want..." Finding the right words was proving difficult for McCoy. "Dammit, Jim! You're his friend, the only one he'll turn to - just...just take care of him, that's all!" He rose abruptly and whirled from the office. He had to get out, if only for a few minutes to compose himself.

Kirk's head pounded. This was all some terrible nightmare, it had to be! Any minute now, Spock would come in, wake him up, and he'd realise it had all been some weird contrivance of his tired brain. Still wrestling with fact or fiction, he failed to notice the return of McCoy until the doctor's voice entered into his deranged world.

"Jim. Jim? I...ummm...I've been thinking. There's no point in keeping Spock here any longer. You may as well take him back to his quarters...it'll be easier for the both of you there... You know I'll keep trying, but until

we reach Vulcan...I can't hold out much hope."

"Yes, Bones, I understand...and thanks for telling me. It must have been hard for you." He stretched out a comforting hand towards his friend's shoulder, squeezing it gently. As he struggled to find further words the heavy silence was interrupted by a voice from the doorway.

"C-Captain? Why...why am I...here? Am I...ill?" The words came uneasily from an agitated face. Awkwardly, he tried to walk towards them. Kirk was beside him at once, steadying him into the chair McCoy was positioning.

"Yes, Spock, you have been ill." Kirk smiled warmly. "But you'll be fine soon - won't he, Bones?" McCoy nodded warily, preferring Kirk to carry on. "Would you like to go back to your quarters? Dr. McCoy says it's all right."

Once again the bewildered look returned as a hesitant answer emerged. "Yes...I believe...only...only...is it far from here? I...I seem to have..." The words trailed as he fought to remember.

"No, no. I'll take you. Try not to worry about it. Come and get dressed - I'll help you." Guiding his friend carefully, Kirk led him back into the ward area. Within a short time they were ready to leave, Kirk pausing briefly to nod at McCoy that he had the situation under control. Slowly they left.

Alone with his thoughts, McCoy questioned his decision. Perhaps he should have kept Spock here, not involved Kirk to such an extent. Maybe Kirk hadn't truly accepted the situation, the seriousness of it all? No - he had made the correct decision! Kirk needed to be actively involved - for everyone's sake.

McCoy reached into a nearby cupboard, extracting an elegant decanter and glass. Steadily he poured himself a very large drink. The time ahead was going to see more of this therapy - that was one thing he could be sure about!

Days passed into weeks as the Enterprise sped hungrily through endless space. Following a rather arduous time with Starfleet Command, Kirk had succeeded in establishing R & R on Rigel III, together with a special concession period in which he could escort Spock to Vulcan.

During this time, the Vulcan's condition continued to deteriorate pitifully. Kirk spent almost all his off-duty time talking, comforting...simply being with his friend. But each day proved to be even more of an ordeal. Routine things, things which to him were part of living, presented obstacles which needed to be overcome. Dressing, undressing, feeding...they all had to be painfully gone over each and every time.

For Spock, his world was slowly shrinking...disappearing in a swirl of faces he barely recognised any longer. But there was one face he would always remember, and it was for this that he anxiously looked whenever anyone approached. Upon waking - sleeping the unrelatable times between - Jim was always near, always there smiling...talking to him...sharing his fears.

Two weeks out from Rigel III, the Enterprise encountered an unusual gas formation. The 'cloud' emitted strong electro-magnetic energy fields, which even from a great distance, threatened to drag the vast Starship from its course.

"How are we managing, Mr. Sulu?"

"Maintaining course, Captain."

"Very good." Kirk punched decisively at the communications panel. "Scotty! How's the warp drive standing up to all this?"

"Slight power drain, sir... Nothing I canna' handle."

"That's fine, Scotty. Keep me informed. Kirk out." Closing the circuit, Kirk let his mind drift back to Spock. How he'd love this phenomenon - that great mind of his thrived on the unexpected, soaking up data like some gigantic

sponge. Unravelling the mysteries of the Universe was built in to the man, who was in many ways a mystery himself. Kirk closed his eyes, shuddering involuntarily as a vision of his friend sitting alone, mind shut away, perhaps forever, swam in front of him. Why did it have to happen to him? Why? WHY?

"Sir!" Chekov spun from the science console, snatching Kirk back to reality with his urgency. "There's been an explosion of high energy from the 'cloud'. Expansion rate... Captain! It's off the scale of our instruments!"

"Course, Chekov?" demanded Kirk, mind instantly engaging the crisis.

The young Russian's face paled. "It's...it's heading straight for us, Captain."

Command training coming into play, Kirk verbalised into action. "Shields up! Sound red alert! Mr. Sulu - change course 45 degrees to port - new heading, 72 mark 8. I want full power and I want it now! Get us out of here, fast!"

"New course laid in...speed increasing..." Sulu's fingers danced expertly across the array of switches and tumblers, changing readouts and displays like magic. With the howl of klaxons and the flash of red seeking out every corner of the ship, the Enterprise surged away from the expanding mass of destruction.

Lifegiving seconds evaporated as the warp drive strained to oppose the beckoning pull of the energy fields. It was a race against time - a duel between man's technology and the forces of the Universe.

Alone in his cabin, Spock lay quietly on his couch.

Suddenly his silent world was shattered by the terrifying wail of the klaxon. Deep within his mind something stirred, vanishing almost immediately as a new sensation stormed in cruelly - fear. He leaped to his feet, eyes wide with panic, frantically searching for the source of the sound. What was it? What was happening? Covering his ears in an attempt to blot out the anguish, he ran across the cabin and cowered in a corner.

But the noise continued, gnawing into his brain, bouncing from walls and ceiling, in and around - everywhere! He must get away - out of this nightmare, anywhere!

Bolting for the door, he lurched clumsily out into the corridor. People...lots of people... His panic increased as he became caught up in the urgency of the red alert. Clinging instinctively to the wall, he found himself swept along in some vague direction.

Someone was staring at him oddly. "Mr. Spock... Sir? Are you all right, sir?"

The owner of the voice was trying to touch him. He flinched, drawing himself further up against the cool embrace of the corridor partition. Oh, how his head ached with the pounding, the echoing, the...noise!

"No... No more...please...PLEASE!" He lurched sideways and fled. The confused crewman debated whether to follow or not, but his indecision allowed Spock enough time to disappear from view. The young Ensign shrugged his shoulders and hurried to his station - Mr. Scott's wrath produced a much greater incentive - he didn't dare be any later.

Captain Kirk arced his chair to face Chekov. "How long?"

"Impact in 33 seconds, sir!"

"Scotty - can you give us more power?"

"She's doin' 9.8 now, sir! That thing's got a terrible hold on us!" The Scot's strained voice reflected his feelings.

"Try, Scotty. Try!"

"Captain! Expansion rate decreasing... Down 12%... 18%..." An excited Chekov continued to read off new calculations.

"Can we outrun it in time?"

"Readings indicate - " the Ensign lacked Spock's precision and speed but had learned well " - a projected limit of..." Seconds lengthened. "Yes, sir. We will have six seconds to spare!"

"Scotty! Did you hear that? Just a few more minutes and we'll be there!" Mesmerised, Kirk stared at the main viewer as the menace continued its headlong drive towards them. He could detect no changes in the seething mass - had Chekov made a mistake? He was young, under pressure... No! He was a good man, reliable in a crisis. There! It was beginning... They were increasing the gap ...the force was reducing at last.

"Reduce speed, Scotty. We've made it." He didn't wait for his Engineer's reply, but sighed audibly and allowed tense muscles to relax. "Well done, Chekov. Maintain full sensor scan - that was just a little too close for comfort."

"Very good, sir."

"Sulu - remain on present heading. I want to give that area a wide berth. Lay in a new course when you think fit. Secure from red alert, but remain on condition yellow - we may not be out of trouble yet." As Sulu acknowledged, Kirk swung to face communications. "Lt. Uhura, I think we'd better inform Starfleet of this - "

Interruption came in the form of a frantic Dr. McCoy exploding hurriedly from an arriving turbolift.

"Jim! I can't find Spock! Have you seen him?"

"His quarters. He's in his quarters - "

"No, he's not! When the red alert sounded, I went down to check he was all right. The place was empty. Jim - " He gripped Kirk's chair in desperation. "Jim, he no longer understands. That noise has most probably scared the hell out of him! We've got to find him, and fast!"

The Captain swung round again to Uhura, but she had already anticipated him. "Ship wide communication channel open, sir."

His silent thanks met the understanding in her eyes. "Attention all hands! This is the Captain! Instigate an immediate all decks search for Commander Spock. Report to me directly he's located. On no account is anyone to try and move him when found. Kirk out!"

Running for the elevator, with McCoy close at his heels. Kirk swiftly transferred command to Sulu. Steel doors moved across, isolating the two men.

"Deck five." Silence bored into the air. Kirk listened to the blood pumping in his ears as his pulse raced. Each man held himself responsible, the guilt steadily building in the travelling turbo. They had tried not to leave him alone, but a Starship's needs are often impossible to foresee, and there are times when the unavoidable happens. Doors parted revealing their destination.

As they moved out, an urgent voice sprang from the intercom close to Kirk. "Lt. Prentise to Captain Kirk!"

Slamming the switch, he answered. "Kirk here! Have you found him, Prentise? Where are you?"

"Yes, sir. We're down in the storage area, next to hydroponics... Sir?"

Swift to respond to the uncertainty, Kirk interrupted, "Prentise - is he all right?"

"Yes, sir... It's only... Sir, he's crying..." The faltering speech revealed how unnerving this whole incident was to the young officer. Prentise had worked alongside Spock on numerous occasions. He held a great deal of esteem for the First Officer, understanding the Vulcan enigma well. This totally uncharacteristic Spock obviously distressed the Australian more than he could cope with.

"Listen, Prentise, stay with him, only don't try to move him or anything. Dr. McCoy and I'll be right there." As an afterthought he added reassuringly, "Good work Lieutenant. You've done well."

Boots thudded along corridors, reverberating all around as the two friends sped anxiously to the area. Within minutes they were there, skidding to a halt as Prentise's relieved features greeted them.

"He's over there, sir - behind that locker." Gesturing the way, he hurried to the right. As muffled whimperings drifted towards them, he hung back to let Kirk through. Pale and shaken, the Australian sank back against the wall, inhaling deeply. Conscious of the doctor's presence, he looked up.

"Feeling better, Lieutenant?"

"Yes. Yes, I think so, sir. Gave me a bit of a start, that's all. I'll be all right in a minute." His composure was already beginning to return.

"Good man! You can return to your duties now - and thank you."

"Very good, sir. And, sir - I'm sorry about Mr. Spock." McCoy merely nodded and clasped Prentise briefly on the shoulder as he left.

Kirk had rounded the corner and now stood fighting down the sadness surging within him. Spock lay huddled in the shadow of the unit, knees drawn up tightly. The blue shoulders heaved as uncontrollable sobs of fear left trembling lips. Kirk felt the sting of tears as his own eyes welled up.

"Spp..." His dry mouth choked on the word. He tried again. "Spock..." Hearing the sound, the panic-stricken figure drew closer to the wall, raising his arms over his head in an attempt to hide even further. "Spock, it's me, Jim... Don't be frightened. You're safe now." He edged closer, hands reaching out to the shuddering body. "Come on, now, Spock...no-one's going to hurt you..." Taking a firm but gentle grip, he unfolded unresisting arms. and looked lovingly into the frightened amber eyes. "There...you see...it's me... I'm with you now..."

The quivering lips parted. "J...Jim..." It was only one word, but enough. Instinctively Kirk gathered the sobbing Spock into his arms, and hugged him close.

"Oh, Spock..." With an overwhelming sense of grief that he was totally unable to control, he felt the warm tears trickling freely down his face. Shamelessly, he cried.

Oblivious to McCoy's approach, he only responded when he heard the hiss of a hypo and Spock gradually became a dead weight as the drug took effect, easing the wracked body into a calm state of unconsciousness.

"Let me take him now, Jim."

Through the blur of tears, Kirk gazed up at McCoy. "Bones... What am I going to do...?"

The reaction was expected. For weeks Kirk had hidden behind a mask of efficiency, carefully building an elaborate wall of pretence that he'd accepted the truth. Only McCoy had seen through this facade, the years of experience preparing him for what was now happening. It had simply taken the pitiful state Spock was in to break the fragile defence and the inevitable had occurred.

Gently he pulled Kirk away from the tranquillised Vulcan, and beckoned a hovering medical team summoned earlier.

"Take him to sickbay. I'll be along shortly." He watched as they moved with expert efficiency, and then turned his attention once more to his Captain.

Kirk leaned heavily against the locker, hands covering his tear-streaked face. McCoy laid reassuring hands on the trembling shoulders and offered what comfort he could.

"Let it come, Jim. Don't bottle it up any more."

The safety valve was breached and the pent-up emotions spilled forth. When the worst was over, McCoy eased his friend away from the unit, and began to make a move back to Kirk's quarters. Safely inside the cabin, he administered a specially prepared medication - the drugs were so arranged to induce sleep and help repair much of the trauma.

Unaware of the hypo, Kirk sank gratefully back onto the pillow of his couch, and drifted off to sleep. Carefully, McCoy removed his boots, and covered him lightly with the coverlet.

Quietly he left.

### PART 3

"You know what to do, Scotty?"

"Aye, sir. You take care of Mr. Spock, and I'll look after the Enterprise. You've nae need tae worry about a thing."

Kirk's eyes wandered around one last time, then he stood alongside McCoy and prepared himself for beaming. "Right, Scotty. We'll be waiting for you in about a month. Ready, Bones?" McCoy nodded somberly. "Energise."

The familiar hum and sparkle of the transporter effect filtered into the area and the two men dissolved into their respective atoms. Spock was already on the surface, carefully being boarded onto the waiting Vulcan space craft. All arrangements had been conducted expertly and efficiently, with tight schedules leaving barely enough time to breathe.

During the past two weeks, their journey had been uneventful. McCoy confined Spock to sickbay, deciding to keep him under sedation following the traumatic episode during red alert. He felt this to be in the interests of everybody, especially Kirk who once more had become withdrawn and strained. McCoy sensed he was again refusing to release mounting inner tension. But there was nothing he could do right now. The future depended solely on the outcome of this attempt by the Vulcans to solve Spock's case.

The journey was fast and smooth, which was only to be expected when one travelled aboard Vulcan transport. Upon arrival planet-side, they were met with continued competence and organisation, finding themselves whisked away into the vast complex of the Medical Centre.

Spock, still under sedation, was immediately removed from the Humans' care, and passed rapidly from their sight. Already, relevant facts and details were being analysed by Vulcan scientists who had picked McCoy's brains clean on the journey.

This apparent 'unwanted' attitude now made McCoy feel discarded like some useless piece of equipment. No doubt the Vulcans failed to see it this way, and any insult to his ability was clearly unintentional, but the fact remained that McCoy felt he was being treated as some inferior individual - and it hurt!

Left alone with their thoughts, the two friends failed to register the approach of an elegantly attired couple. Sighing dejectedly, Kirk turned to his companion.

"C'mon, Bones. No use..." He stopped in mid sentence. "Ambassador Sarek!

Amanda!"

"Welcome, Captain Kirk, Dr. McCoy." The tall Vulcan raised his hand in an all too familiar fashion. "It is pleasing to see you again; however, most regrettable that the circumstances cannot be more fortunate." The ice cool stare gave nothing away. "Would you honour us by being our guests during your stay? We understand your ship does not arrive until ten days from now."

"Please say you'll stay, Captain - there is much to talk about." Amanda's pleading eyes searched deeply into Kirk's; she was desperately trying to conceal her worry.

He smiled warmly and replied. "Thank you, Ambassador, Amanda. We would very much enjoy staying with you - wouldn't we, Bones?"

"Why, certainly...very much, sir. Thank you, m'am."

Amanda appeared relieved at their acceptance of the invitation, causing Kirk to reflect how difficult it must be at times for her to live in this seemingly cold society. Sarek prepared to leave; once again the anxiety returned to the Earthwoman's features.

"Husband? Is it permitted for me to see our son?"

McCoy shifted his feet uneasily and began to study the floor intently. This was going to be awkward! Kirk however anticipated in good time.

"If you'll excuse us, Ambassador. I have a few arrangements I'd like to make regarding the arrival of the Enterprise. Perhaps we could meet you outside in a short while?"

"Very well, Captain. We shall be but a brief time here."

The two Humans beat a somewhat hasty retreat. They didn't like the idea of leaving Amanda, but there again, Sarek was Spock's father and Amanda's husband, and they couldn't interfere.

For the next ten days, Kirk and McCoy tried to rest and relax in the pleasant surroundings of Spock's home. It proved extremely difficult to unwind mentally, as their anxiety for Spock remained constant. However, their bodies did relax, and with regular meals to build them up, the day of departure found them physically replenished.

The days had passed all too quickly, with no hint of a breakthrough in the treatment of their companion's condition. All attempts to reverse the production of atypical cells had met with failure, and by now serious complications were beginning to manifest themselves. Spock's neural cells and other body cells were undergoing changes which could result in a terminal condition. Although drugs were at present alleviating the problem, it was still very much a major hazard.

Throughout their stay, Amanda had maintained a brave front, talking freely of things past, present...and future. She never ceased to live in hope. She and Kirk often walked in the solitude of the extensive gardens which formed just part of Sarek's vast estate. They would wait until evening, when briefly as the great Vulcan sun vanished below the horizon the climate became cool and refreshing. With the scent of exotic flowers to tantalise his mind, Kirk regarded this time of day as Vulcan's most beautiful. Alien...yet somehow welcoming and reassuring.

It became habit that following dinner Sarek and the two Earthmen would talk long into the night. Each had something to offer and they would draw from each other - sometimes unconsciously. But never once did Sarek relax his stoney image. There was never the slightest hint that he felt anything.

It was this non-committal attitude which caused Kirk's respect for the Vulcan to grow. It must take a great deal of courage to remain so detached -

to stand by and watch your only son reduced to such a helpless individual, when the future had promised so much for the talented mind. McCoy hadn't seen it in quite the same light, but then again that was McCoy - rather set in his ways.

So now it was time to leave. Amanda had promised to send them news, although they both knew it often proved somewhat difficult to deliver mail to a busy Starship. On their last evening together she also told them of her plans for Spock's care. If nothing further could be done, she would take him away from the research unit. It was unbearable to think of him as some experimental animal - he was her son. And...half Human.

As the Enterprise swung high in her orbit, Kirk and McCoy paid one last visit to Spock. The Captain had prepared himself to say farewell to his friend, perhaps for good, so what now confronted him hit home with the force of a physical blow. With yet another investigation under way, requiring absolute sterile conditions, they were only permitted to see Spock from behind a three metre square isolation partition. Kirk stood silently watching, his hand pressed firmly against the transparent divider. So near and yet so far, and Spock looked so alone... Vulnerable.

McCoy checked the centre's time unit. "C'mon, Jim. Time to go, I'm afraid. It's in their hands now..." Gently he clasped his companion's shoulder, and drew him away from the cubicle. Reluctantly they walked back along a deserted corridor. Turning a backward glance, Kirk began to falter.

"He looked so lonely in there, Bones... I wish... If I could only stay, even to..." Hands began clenching in worry.

"Listen, Jim! We've been through all this before. You know he's in good hands. Amanda told you she'd take care of him...and you know you can't stay. Now, come on..." He tugged at the resisting gold-shirted arm. "Scotty's waiting." He pulled again, knowing full well this was going to be hard for both of them, but the break had to be made, and soon. "Jim! Your ship's waiting!" About to urge Kirk once more, he caught sight of Amanda and Sarek waiting in the reception area. They had come to bid farewell.

"There's Amanda and Sarek, Jim. You must come away now or there won't be time to say goodbye!" Pulling once more he was startled as Kirk wrenched his arm free and glared menacingly at him.

"All right, Dr. McCoy!" The air froze electrifyingly. But then he immediately regretted his anger and cooled his tongue. "I'm sorry, Bones. I didn't mean to... I'm coming." Together they walked towards Spock's parents.

Amanda managed a brave smile as they approached. "I'm sorry to see you go, Captain Kirk - and you too, Dr. McCoy. But I understand - and so would Spock..." She faltered slightly; Sarek stepped closer to his wife.

"It would please my wife if I were to thank you both for all your past attentions to our son. It is regrettable no further treatment is available at the present time." The unrelenting stone features stared at Kirk. "Our home will always remain open to you both." Now it was his turn to hesitate. "This is the least I can do for my son's friends." As the dark eyes bored into Kirk's was there just a trace of something? Sadness, perhaps? Whatever it was passed fleetingly as Sarek prepared to say farewell.

"Live long and prosper, Captain Kirk - Dr. McCoy."

"Thank you, Ambassador - and goodbye."

McCoy said his goodbyes and began to leave. But before joining him, Kirk had one last thing he wanted to say to Amanda.

Gently he clasped her hands in his. "If ever you should need me - for anything - send for me. Never hesitate, I'll always come, somehow. Goodbye,

Amanda - and take care."

As her eyes filled with tears, he knew it was time to leave. It would be cruel to prolong the departure any longer, and he wished Spock's mother no further suffering than she was already enduring. Nodding his understanding of her dilemma, he turned and hurried after McCoy.

The new Science Officer edged reluctantly towards his Commanding Officer. Hesitantly, he spoke.

"All data recorded and classified, sir. Ready to move on to inner planets - with your permission, Captain."

Without facing the young man, Kirk delivered his abrupt reply. "Permission granted. Mr. Chekov - plot new course and prepare to leave orbit." The abruptness continued as he rose briskly and strode across to the turbolift. Without even a backward glance he transferred command. "Mr. Craig, you have the con!" and was gone.

Stephen Craig sighed audibly and moved over to the vacant chair, but somehow he couldn't bring himself to sit there, and instead found himself between Sulu and Chekov. Sensing the Englishman's unease, the helmsman opened up the conversation.

"Try not to let him get you down, sir. He doesn't mean to treat you so rough. The Captain's a great man to serve under, believe me!"

"Huh! You could have fooled me!" Resting between the two men, Craig gazed forlornly around the bridge. "Do you know, I actually envied you guys at one time? It was my one and only dream - to serve aboard the USS Enterprise - finest ship in the Fleet... When that order came through I couldn't believe my eyes - me! Stephen Craig! Science Officer to Captain James T. Kirk!... I wish I'd never heard of him, or his dam' ship!" He spat out the last sentence in bitter anguish.

Chekov completed his computations and looked up at the Lieutenant Commander. "You've just come at a bad time, sir. The Captain and Mr. Spock were very close friends - they had served together for many years. It's been very difficult for him to accept what is happening. Mr. Spock - "

"Mr. Spock! Mr. Spock! That's another name I'm sick of hearing! Even when it's not actually said I can hear it! When will you people finally realise I'm NOT Mr. Spock - and never will be! Especially him!" He pointed emphatically towards the departed turbo. "I tell you, I've had enough!"

For a few seconds the only sounds to be heard were the gentle whirrings of computers and the background buzz of intraship chatter. Chekov and Sulu eyed each other warily but elected to remain silent. Finally the heavy atmosphere was broken with a quiet, "I'm sorry - I shouldn't take it out on you guys; it's not your fault. Am I forgiven?" He managed a weak smile as the others nodded their understanding and smiled back. "Shall we leave orbit, Mr. Sulu? Apparently the next planet is something of a botanist's paradise...and do I recall hearing about a certain helmsman who dabbles in that field?"

"Yes, sir! I was hoping to be included in the landing party!" Sulu's eyes sparkled with expectation as he thought of the next day's activities.

"Well, what are we waiting for? Let's get going!"

"Aye, aye sir," resounded from an exuberant Sulu. Quickly he manipulated the controls, swinging the great Starship out into interplanetary space.

Below decks, Kirk sat moodily finishing his coffee. He glanced at the chronometer - 19.30 hours. The day had seemed long and drawn out - all routine and mundane. As he was about to leave, McCoy breezed in, glad his day

was over. Tucking into his meal hungrily, he proceeded to tell Kirk the highlight of his day - how Ensign Morgan did a streak through the crew quarters! Poor girl was taking a shower whilst maintenance were overhauling the water system.

"...luckily the poor kid wasn't scalded - only a little pinker than usual." Looking up momentarily, with an impish grin on his face, McCoy realised Kirk hadn't heard a word he'd said. Slamming down his knife and fork he started again. "All right, Jim - let's have it. What's happening now?"

"Happened? Nothing's happened - everything's perfectly normal."

"Like hell it is! You haven't heard a word I've said!" A frown crept across his features as an inkling of Jim's troubles began to emerge. Earlier that day, they had rendezvoused with the Potempkin. The sister ship had recently R & Rd at a Starbase, picking up mail during her stay. Now, as their paths crossed on her way to her next mission, a brief exchange of hellos, goodbyes and mail had taken place. That must be the answer!

"Did you hear from Amanda?" McCoy's heart began to beat faster as he saw Kirk stiffen visibly. He had been right! But why hadn't Jim said anything? For an awful moment his worst fears sprang to mind - suppose Spock had died! No - surely he wouldn't keep that to himself. Before McCoy could postulate further, Kirk broke the growing silence.

"I'm...I'm sorry, Bones. I should have told you...only... Look, can we go to my quarters?" He glanced round apprehensively. "It's quieter there."

"Sure, Jim - c'mon." McCoy was worried over Kirk. He'd noticed he looked tired recently - perhaps this was an ideal opportunity to get things sorted out. It had been almost three months now since they'd left Vulcan, and although Jim never mentioned Spock a great deal, McCoy knew he still missed him - deeply.

Once inside his quarters, it all came spilling out. "Bones? Bones, I've really tried to forget - really I have! But I can't seem to...I didn't come to you because...well, I can't keep running to you every time... This is something I've got to fight myself! Now this tape... It brought everything back to me... That day we left...just walked out and..." The anguish returned to Kirk's features as he recalled the scene vividly. "And poor Craig. Each day I try to accept him for what he is - a damn' good Science Officer - but every time it's the same. I find myself resenting him, abusing him... Bones, I don't mean it - I just can't help it..." He lowered his head, shaking it sadly.

"Listen to me, Jim! I've told you before, it's all reaction. These things take time - time to adjust, time to get over losing Spock. But you will get over it - believe me!" He paused briefly. "What did Amanda have to say? Is she well?" He desperately wanted to know how Spock was, but he must tread carefully with Kirk as he was.

"Oh - yes, the tape's there - I left it for you. She asks after you, and ...well, you listen to it."

McCoy glanced towards the desk, immediately locating the cassette. Carefully he inserted it into the terminal and adjusted the audio to low.

"My dear Captain Kirk.

My greatest wish would be for this message to convey the news you so long to hear. Alas, I am afraid this cannot be so. Our scientists have reached the end of their research with no breakthrough to give us hope for the future.

As the Medical Centre no longer requires Spock on a permanent basis, I have at last been allowed to have him home. Sarek was concerned that the strain would prove too much for me. However, I was able to persuade him that this was not so - eventually.

I do not know if Spock realises he is at home, but somehow I like to think he does. We sit together in the gardens, under a specially

constructed canopy, and I talk to him constantly. Perhaps he understands in his own way - I have no way of telling. I speak of you and the good Doctor often; remembering for him past memories and stories which I know he holds dear.

Spock is sleeping peacefully at the moment...he tires so very quickly lately. At this time of day I always adapt the polarity of the canopy to enhance shade and allow him a few hours' rest in the open air. Shortly, however, I shall wake him for the evening meal, and tell him of this message. It would please him to know.

I do hope you and Dr. McCoy are well. I have missed you both over the past weeks...especially our walks together, Jim...but as I remind Spock constantly, we shall see you both again soon.

Sarek is to attend a special case conference tomorrow. If there is any news I shall of course send word to you immediately. Until then, take care. Peace and long life.

Amanda."

As the tape came to an end, McCoy looked up to find that Kirk had moved away and now lay stretched out on his bunk, head resting on clasped arms. Observing him closely in this defenceless state, Bones winced inwardly at the dark shadows under Jim's eyes and the lines of tension engraved deep. It hurt to see his friend so disturbed and unhappy...but more than that, he knew he must now possibly hurt him even further.

So far he had played things by ear - sympathy, tact, time for nature to heal things her way. But now it was more than obvious that all these approaches had apparently been useless. Kirk had merely withdrawn deeper into himself, the pangs of guilt eating fiercely into his mind. Guilt that he'd deserted his friend when he needed him most; guilt at treating his new Science Officer so badly; even guilt that he'd not confided in McCoy himself... This snowballing complex was beginning to gain an unhealthy grip on Kirk and sooner or later could make him really ill - even jeopardise his ability to command!

He, McCoy, would have to change his tactics - and pretty quick. Make a firm stand before matters became out of control completely. He decided.

"Jim. Jim - are you listening to me?"

"Yes, Bones--- I'm listening." The reply was flat and unresponsive.

"Well you'd better listen good, because I'm talking to you now as Dr. Leonard McCoy, Chief Medical Officer aboard this ship; and I'm only going to tell you this once!

In a short while, I'm going to give you something to make you sleep round the clock; when you wake up, you'll be Captain James T. Kirk, in command of the USS Enterprise - finest ship in the Fleet. And why? Because you built that reputation, together with Spock and the rest of the crew, who would follow you anywhere to keep that reputation.

Now I'm not going to stand by and watch all that disappear together with your career - and neither would Spock if he knew. So the choice is yours - give up everything, forget us and go and wallow in your own self pity and guilt, or pull yourself together and start living again!" With those last painful words, McCoy turned and departed for sickbay to prepare Kirk's medication.

Alone, with just McCoy's words thundering in his brain, Kirk suddenly became even more confused. How dare McCoy speak to him like that! Who the hell did he think he was? And yet... His ship...his crew. How could he desert them? And Spock... If events had been reversed and it was Spock in command and himself the injured one? Of course McCoy was right! How could he have been so foolish...

God! What a mess he was in... Now even more than ever he needed to prove

his loyalties and friendship... That's what it was all about!

McCoy reapproached the Captain's quarters warily. Suppose he had gone too far? Pushed him just that bit too much and tipped the precarious balance the wrong way. But even if he had, he'd have to face him some time and it might as well be now. Half expecting a boiling mad James Kirk, he re-entered cautiously.

All was quiet. The lights were dimmed for the approaching night. Moving across to the sleeping area, Bones readied himself for the possible verbal explosion. It never came.

Kirk lay with eyes closed, patiently waiting for his friend's return. Raising the hypo, McCoy pressured the drug slowly into the bare arm. With the gentle hiss breaking the stillness, Kirk opened his eyes and gazed gratefully up at the concerned blue ones. Drifting rapidly towards the abyss of sleep, he smiled weakly.

"Thanks, Bones..." Rolling over, he offered no resistance to the coursing drug. He was at peace with his mind.

When he left Kirk's quarters McCoy went directly to Scotty. It was essential he explain the situation as it now presented itself; and also have someone in command of the Enterprise.

The two men sat long into the ship's night, talking, confiding in each other and sharing a comforting drink. Scotty had not been surprised at the doctor's visit, confessing that he'd expected him sooner. He too revealed a growing concern over Kirk, having noticed changes both physical and emotional, and had been in two minds whether to seek McCoy out before now.

Finally they parted, each a little easier in his own mind, and able to sleep a little sounder. For even Scotty's words rang with just that small inkling of truth, giving hope to McCoy's tired head.

"Dinna worry so much, Leonard. Nothin' ever stays the same. Somethin' ll turn up...tomorrow's always another day!"

Science Officer Craig inspected his landing party one more time - Sulu beamed broadly, eager to begin; Ensigns Clarke and Panshin appeared excited to be included. The two security guards wore expressions of indifference - for them, the thrill of going planet-side had long since passed.

They were set. Craig depressed the intercon button. "Survey party ready to beam down, sir." His voice was relaxed, confident, on account he knew Kirk was not on the bridge. Apparently the Captain was not feeling too good - or so Mr. Scott said. But the real reason for his absence was irrelevant as far as Craig was concerned - all that mattered to him was the fact that he could get on with his job without feeling uncomfortable and incompetent.

"All right, laddie, off ye go - and mind what I said! Any sign of trouble, and it's straight back up you come. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir, I understand." Laughing to himself, Craig moved to the vacant transporter pad. He loved to hear the Chief Engineer's accent, and the way he referred to everyone as 'laddie'. It reminded him of home and his own Scottish grandfather on his mother's side. But enough of this daydreaming, there was a job to be done! He gave the order.

"Energise!"

The planet was indeed a botanist's paradise; and also a geologist's. Four pleasant hours quickly disappeared, during which time many new species and strains were discovered. But alas, all good things come to an end, and all too soon it was time to pack up and leave. Craig called his men over the

communicators - another thirty minutes and then it was back to the Enterprise.

Collecting his samples he began to wander back towards the beam-up coordinates. As his eyes roamed for the last time over the alien landscape, he noticed an unusual crystalline rock formation set in a leafy glade, unlike anything he had ever seen before. His curiosity was aroused... He approached.

The rays of dissipated light, filtering down through the overhead foliage, played strange tricks with the crystal structure. Curious blends of colour swam and reflected across the craggy surface, tempting his inquisitive mind. He must have a sample!

Bending closer, he began to chip...no good. He would have to use his phaser. Selecting a low setting, he stood up and began to fire. The crystal remained intact, refusing to yield to this irritating nigggle. Gradually he increased the power...higher, higher...

The colours wavered steadily, glowing eerily in the heat of the weapon. Without warning, changes took place, colours flashing spectacularly; light, almost blindingly brilliant in its intensity... Faster...faster... A gigantic kaleidoscope mesmerised Craig as he stood transfixed.

The beginnings of fear crept into Craig's eyes and an icy chill swept along his spine, but it was already too late. Innocently, he had triggered into action an irreversible process. A cleverly concealed prison was even now being released, as with each fleeing second an intricate molecular structure was steadily breaking down. With its ultimate destruction would come death and disaster, carried forth by a creature that had remained imprisoned for almost two thousand years.

Craig's arms shook with tension as he tried desperately to lower his phaser. His body ached as slowly his strength was sapped away in the fight for control. With one last ounce of energy he opened his mouth to scream out his fear; and perhaps summon aid. It was to no avail. The alien was free and it held the young Human mercilessly in its clutches.

No longer requiring the power-packed phaser, Craig found himself able to release the agonising grip. Defeated, he sank to his knees, eyes misting over with unpreventable tears. Swirling around his hunched figure, a seething wind probed cruelly at its intended victim. Unable to move in any direction, Craig curled tighter into himself. The nightmare world was further invaded by a new, chilling sound - that of malevolent laughter; a hideous sound which echoed round and round his brain until he felt his head would burst. And then...

"SO! YOU THOUGHT TO KEEP ME HERE FOR ETERNITY? I KNEW EVENTUALLY I WOULD BE FREE. FREE TO RETURN...FREE...FREEEEEE!!!!!" The laughter began again, buffeting Craig until he could stand it no longer.

"Please... No more... Please..." he sobbed bitterly. Responding curiously to the Human cries, the alien paused, analysing its prey.

"AH! MY RELEASER! YOU ARE A WEAK CREATURE... INEFFICIENTLY DESIGNED. HOWEVER..." Craig cried out in pain as he felt the creature ripping into his mind, "YES - YOU WILL SERVE MY PURPOSE WELL! I AM IN NEED OF AN ENTITY WITH WHICH TO DEPART THIS MISERABLE SYSTEM. YOUR BODY AND YOUR STARSHIP WILL PROVIDE MY TRANSPORT. AWAY...AND FREE TO RETURN TO MY TORMENTORS. NONE SHALL ESCAPE MY WRATH! NONE. NONNNNNNEEE...AHHHHHHH...."

The contemptuous laugh returned as the alien condensed its atomic structure and dissolved into the confined body of Craig. He could feel its presence, probing...tearing open his innermost thoughts...sneering at his most private of memories. He felt sick.

"NOW, MY LITTLE HUMAN!" The voice shook his brain as it roared from within, "YOU WILL OBEY MY EVERY COMMAND. IF I AM NOT OBEYED..." A searing bolt of agony crashed into his body. Instinctively, Craig snapped into a foetal position, gasping for breath and whimpering,

"I'll obey...I'll obey... Please stopppp..."

"GOOOOD... NOW COME! MY STARSHIP AWAITS AND I AM ANXIOUS TO DEPART FROM THIS PLACE..."

It was a pale and very subdued Lt.-Commander Craig who returned to the Enterprise later in the ship's day. As the party vacated the transporter pads, Sulu asked concernedly, "Feeling all right, sir? You don't look too good."

"What? Oh - I'm O.K., thanks, Sulu - just a bit of a headache, that's all. Think I'll lie down for a while. Perhaps we can check the new data later on - I don't really feel up to it right now..."

"That's fine by me, sir. I need a couple of hours to introduce my latest arrivals to their new home." He grinned, indicating numerous plastic bags filled with abundant cuttings and roots. Nodding weakly, Craig left him to it and moved out into the corridor. As he traversed the various decks, the alien began to probe its new surroundings systematically.

"THIS CRAFT IS PRIMITIVE. I SHALL NEED TO RE-PROGRAMME EXTENSIVELY. YOU WILL REMAIN IN YOUR PLACE OF REST WHILST I INVESTIGATE FURTHER."

Thankfully, Craig opened the door to his quarters and stumbled inside. Too exhausted to attempt any defiance, he collapsed onto the comforting bunk and wept. Silently the creature withdrew from its Human host, inducing a state of unconsciousness before dissipating itself into the internal structure of the Starship. There was much to do with this crude craft...

Sector by sector the alien searched the ship seeking out knowledge and information. It reprogrammed the primitive computer, improving where able to meet its own requirements. The power source proved most disappointing - a crude propulsion unit with limitations. However, the efficiency could be increased. Neutralising all manual over-rides and safety by-passes, the creature finally transferred complete control of the ship to itself. But the time was not quite right. Its devious mind wanted to play...see its new-found toys squirm a little. Carefully, it prepared the course and headings in readiness for when it decided to strike. The final destination lay far out in what to the Federation was uncharted space - an unknown galaxy millions of light years away, one which they could never hope to reach in their brief life spans. But the alien cared not for the poor Humans, they were merely pawns to be used and then discarded.

Slowly, Craig drifted up from the induced sleep. Immediately he sensed the creature's return and stiffened defensively.

"SO, MY LITTLE HUMAN, YOU ARE NOT GOING TO RESIST ME? BUT IT MATTERS NOT. IN SIX OF YOUR CONCEPTUAL TIME UNITS KNOWN AS HOURS, I SHALL HAVE ALL OF YOU TO AMUSE ME. YOUR FELLOW BEINGS ARE PATHETIC - CREATURES OF HABIT, YOU REQUIRE MUCH REST FOR YOUR INEFFICIENT BODIES. THE CYCLE KNOWN AS 'SHIP'S NIGHT' FINDS MANY OF YOUR KIND IN A STATE OF INACTIVITY. THIS SHALL BE MY MOMENT OF ATTACK! HAAA, HOW I SHALL ENJOY WATCHING YOUR FUTILE ACTIONS...FEEL YOUR HORROR AS YOUR PRECIOUS SHIP IS TORN FROM YOU...HAAA..."

Unable to restrain himself any longer, Craig yelled his protests at the repulsive creature lurking within him.

No! No! I won't let you do this. You can't...Aaaagh!" The pain and agony coursed through his body, every nerve ending screaming in protest. Blood roared in his ears as his back arched uncontrollably. Begging for mercy, his tortured mind screamed and screamed...

"HAAA - SO YOU BEG FOR YOUR MISERABLE LIFE, HUMAN? WHEN WILL YOU LEARN I AM NOT TO BE DISOBEYED?" Again the agony reached a higher notch, then disappeared. "FOR THIS ONCE YOUR SIMPLE MIND IS FORGIVEN... NOW GO ABOUT YOUR PITIFUL DUTIES. I TIRE OF YOUR WEAKNESS. BUT REMEMBER - I AM WITH YOU CONSTANTLY! MY POWER IS INDESTRUCTABLE AND I SHALL BE OBEYED. OBEYEDDDDDDDDDDD...."

Kirk stirred fitfully. Stretching sleep-heavy limbs, he squinted at the digital display by his bedside. 20.10 hours. He must have been asleep for almost twenty-four hours! Mind you - he felt much more relaxed for it. Dreamily, he opened a channel to reach McCoy. He heard the soothing voice answer, but the words seemed somehow meaningless to his fogged mind.

Enjoying that numbing, floating sensation one experiences between slumber and wakefulness, Kirk heard McCoy's voice drift towards him.

"Sleep well, Jim? Bet you're feeling hungry."

Dragging himself back to reality, he spoke huskily. "Ummm...I could...eat aaa..." He tried to sit up, leaning unsteadily on his elbows for support. "Good God, Bones, what was that stuff...you gave me? I can hardly keep my eyes open..." The elbows buckled and he fell back onto the pillow.

McCoy laughed as he watched his friend struggling to keep sleep at bay. "THAT, Jim, was the general idea! Here - I've brought you some soup and a glucose drink." He helped Kirk to sit up, pausing whilst the drowsy Captain attempted to wipe the sleep from his eyes. "Swallow this down and then you can go back to sleep." Carefully he spooned the hot soup into Kirk; the mouth opened and closed automatically - his trust in McCoy total.

"Here, now - hold this glass..." Kirk's heavy eyelids lifted slowly, searching out the proffered glass. "That's the way...good..." With McCoy's supportive arm about his shoulders, Kirk drained the glass in one go. Exhausted, he sank back onto the pillow, eyes fluttering as sleep approached once more.

"That...that...was lovely, Bones...thann..." Rolling languidly onto his stomach, head cradled gently on an outstretched forearm, he was asleep again.

Smiling, Bones pulled the coverlet further up, collected the empty dish and glass and crept out. The Captain was going to be fine...just fine.

The time was 02.20 hours; Montgomery Scott was twenty minutes into his watch on the bridge, with the Enterprise eagerly searching out the next star system on their schedule. All was quiet.

Without warning, the peace and tranquillity shattered as power and lighting faded rapidly throughout the ship. The loss lasted for a few seconds only - but those few seconds were all the alien required to implement its carefully planned scheme.

Scotty leaped from the command chair, making for environmental control. "Mr. Andrews! Check your board - " His sentence failed to reach its conclusion as the great Starship lurched violently to starboard, spilling unsuspecting crew painfully to the deck. With gathering momentum, the Enterprise was ripped from her stable course, and flung turbulently out towards the unknown.

Kirk was dreaming vividly! From his command chair he peered anxiously towards the main viewer...the Romulan Battle Cruiser veered swiftly to starboard, luring the Federation vessel into the neutral zone. He allowed an unsuppressed oath to escape his lips, then shouted the expected order. Grasping the arms of his chair, he held his balance as the Enterprise banked steeply in pursuit. All around the klaxons beat out their tireless warning - red alert! Red alert! Red alert! Re...

But somehow this all seemed too vivid, too real! Struggling to dispel the burden of sleep, he dragged himself up towards consciousness. Waking found him gripping the edges of the mattress as his cabin reeled precariously at an angle of 30°. The wailing siren continued, jolting him further into sensibility with each passing second of its haunting cry.

"Captain Kirk to bridge!" The circuitry crackled feebly. His heart hammered loudly as the beginnings of panic started forth. "Kirk to bridge! Somebody answer me! Kirk - "

"Captain! Sir! Lt. Prentise here!"

"Prentise! What the hell's happening to my ship? Where's Commander Scott?"

"Sir - Mr. Scott's unconscious. Something's wrong with the controls... they're locked - jammed. I don't know, sir..." The Australian voice galloped shakily, betraying the young officer's inexperience. Becoming more alert, Kirk interrupted calmly.

"All right, Lieutenant. Now listen carefully. I'm coming straight up, but in the mean time I want you to try all the manualaoverrides. Lt. Sulu should be there soon, he'll help you. If that doesn't work, get through to Engineering and try to cut power from there. Have you got that?"

"Yes, sir." Steadiness was already returning to the anxious voice as the calm reassuring words of his Captain penetrated jumbled thoughts.

Leaping from his bed, Kirk hastily drew on trousers and boots, grabbing his shirt as he dashed from his quarters, bumping into McCoy in the process.

"Jim! Are you feeling all right? I heard you talking to Prentise and..."

"Yes, Bones, I'm fine." He pushed his head into the tunic, pulling it down over firm shoulders. "C'mon, there's no time to waste." Setting a fast pace, he headed for the waiting turbo.

Once inside he gave the curt command, "Bridge!" then turned to McCoy. "What about Scotty? Prentise said something about..."

"I don't know, Jim. I sent M'Benga while I came to you. We'll find out soon enough..."

Steel parted, revealing his familiar bridge. With no hesitation Kirk swept into action. A cursory glance established the presence of key personnel already actively involved in the crisis. Crossing the deck he dictated orders briskly.

"Uhura - get a message to Starfleet Command, giving our last known position. Sulu, if there's nothing you can do from here, get down to Engineering! Make sure the anti-matter isn't tapped directly or we're in serious trouble. Prentise - status report!"

The Australian stood to attention beside the Captain's chair and began. "Helm and navigation non-responsive, sir. All over-ride systems have somehow been neutralised. All attempts to disengage computer control have met with failure. We are unable to determine present course or speed from here, but Engineering reports warp drive running at 8.6 and increasing steadily."

Kirk held up his hand for a brief halt as he saw McCoy directing medics towards Scotty. "How is he, Bones?"

"Not good. Nasty laceration to the head, and I'm afraid he may have a depressed fracture. I'll be able to tell you more in about an hour."

Kirk nodded slowly and felt his brow begin to crease. "Take care of him, Bones... I've a feeling I'm going to need him..." He waved Prentise to continue and listened to the remaining report whilst already planning his moves. Scotty out of action meant he was left with no full Commanders where he needed them most. Still, he did have a Science Officer - or did he? Now he came to think about it, he couldn't recall seeing him on the bridge. The Captain raised his eyes to the deserted station.

"Where's Mr. Craig?" It was not a question. Prentise shifted his weight uneasily.

"Er...I was just coming to that, sir. He's missing."

"Missing? What do you mean, missing?"

"No-one's seen him since he returned with the landing party at 18.00 hours, sir. When the red alert sounded we called his quarters, but there was no reply."

There hasn't been time to carry out a search. Sir? Sir, I'm sorry if..."

"It's all right, Lieutenant, not your fault. You did the right things first." He smiled encouragingly at the youngster. He was a good man and had coped well in the initial instance. "Go and see if you can help out in Engineering - you worked in that area before transferring to the bridge, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir - Mr. Scott taught me quite a bit."

"Captain?" The return of Sulu redirected Kirk's attention.

"Yes, Sulu. What's happening down there?"

"You were right, Captain, what's aboard this ship has already by-passed the main channels and now has a direct link up to the main system." Kirk uttered a particularly vicious oath. "But there's something else, sir."

Throughout the red alert the experienced helmsman had been conscious of something not quite right, and now he knew what it was. "I just overheard your conversation with Prentise, and I think I have an explanation.

It was when we beamed up from Thavia III. First of all, Mr. Craig was late in returning to the co-ordinates, and he looked unsteady...quiet. Then he complained of a headache and wanted to lie down. He never came back to finish his watch, sir, and that's not like the Lieutenant commander at all...he's very conscientious." Sulu's face clouded with concern as he realised where this conversation was heading. "Captain? You don't think...?"

"I'm way ahead of you, Sulu! Did you record anything unusual on that planet - energy readings, strange deposits, anything at all?"

"Nothing, sir...everything was routine."

For an indeterminate time, tense silence ruled. Finally -

"Sulu - what do your instincts tell you? Was that our Stephen Craig who beamed back aboard...or could it have been someone...something...else?"

Their eyes locked. "It may have been Craig's body, sir, but I have that gut feeling that it wasn't him at all. I hope I'm wrong, Captain, but..."

"No, Lieutenant, you're not wrong. Lt. Uhura - I want ship-wide communication."

Experienced fingers danced across keys. "Go ahead, sir!"

"This is Captain James T. Kirk, commanding the USS Enterprise. I know you've gained access to my ship through one of my officers. What I want to know is why!"

Silence. He tried again. "We are on a peaceful mission to this part of the galaxy, intending you no hostility. Failure to communicate with us may result in our use of extreme measures in order to resist you." Kirk toughened his voice, trying to sound confident; but already he knew words were futile. The alien's takeover of his ship in this rapid and efficient manner displayed beyond doubt its high intellect - and its power. With still no response, the Captain turned to his next avenue of possible defence.

"Security alert! All decks immediate search for Lt-commander Craig. He may be dangerous therefore approach with extreme caution. Set phasers to stun...repeat, set phasers to stun. Kirk out."

Alone in his cabin, Craig cowered meekly listening to his Captain's words. The creature's chilling laugh pounded into his mind, making his head ache.

"SO...YOUR CAPTAIN HAS ENTERED INTO THE THRILL OF THIS GAME! HE IS BRIGHT THIS HUMAN...AND BRAVE... THIS ENCOUNTER IS PROVING MOST ENTERTAINING. EVEN NOW HE TRIES TO TRICK ME...A MOST UNUSUALLY DEVELOPED INSTINCT FOR SURVIVAL

YOUR SPECIES HAS... HE WILL TRY ALMOST ANYTHING TO RE-POSSESS HIS SHIP. AMAZING..."

Craig felt the alien's intense evil seeping further into his mind and body. He could feel its ecstasy at having inflicted pain and suffering...the smell of success was sickly sweet to its being. For Craig it was sour and bitter - it made him feel sick. He must do something and soon - before it was too late.

"You must let me go to the bridge! My Captain is searching for me. He knows all about you! If you let me go I can protect you from - "

"YOU? PROTECT ME? HHHAAAAA! I NEED NO-ONE TO PROTECT ME! IN FACT I AM TIRING OF YOUR COMPANY AND THAT OF YOUR PATHETIC KIND... I HAVE THE STARSHIP - SUFFICIENT FOR MY NEEDS..."

Immediately the words echoed around the cabin, Craig realised he'd walked into a trap. The creature's paranoid mind was switching back and forth like a see-saw, and he had inadvertently signed every crew member's death warrant with that last sentence. Panic-stricken, he yelled, "No! Wait! Listen, I know we're primitive, but we do provide you with entertainment - you said so yourself. Think how lonely you'll be without us... It must be a very long way to where-ever it is you're going and this ship is slow. Please think about it. I'll do an - "

"ENOUGH, EARTHLING!" The roar battered his ear drums painfully. "YOU ARE EITHER VERY CLEVER, HUMAN - OR VERY STUPID. BUT I HAVE NO TIME TO DEAL WITH YOU NOW. YOUR PRECIOUS 'SECURITY' ARE ALMOST HERE AND IT HAS BECOME NECESSARY FOR ME TO ADJUST THIS CRAFT'S POWER SOURCE...I HAVE DETECTED UNDUE STRESS ON THE EXTERNAL STRUCTURES AND YOUR MEDDLESOME CAPTAIN CONTINUES TO INTERFERE...YOU MAY GO TO YOUR FELLOWS...BUT THEY SHALL GAIN NOTHING FROM YOU! I AM IN CONTROL ...CONTROL...CONNNTTT..."

As the alien drifted out and into the ship, Craig became aware of a cold numbing sensation creeping into his body. Desperately he tried to reach the intercom, but it was no good; his arms, his legs...nothing responded to his urgent commands. His mind grew hypersensitive, reacting painfully to the simplest of stimuli, but no matter how much he tried to scream out, his lips remained sealed...his voice silent...

And that was how they found him. Alone, with an expression of sheer horror - one which no-one would forget; one to haunt people's nightmares for many months to come.

Gently, they removed him to sickbay...and waited...

Hours vanished rapidly aboard the possessed Starship, with orders and counter-orders flying thick and fast. Unfortunately time was also running out with the same rapidity. Already the craft was well beyond the edges of known space, penetrating deep into territory reserved only for the minds of would-be explorers - scientists and imaginative speculators.

Kirk moved uncomfortably in his purpose-built chair - everything he attempted resulted in defeat; the alien was always that one jump ahead, anticipating his every move. He felt like an experimental animal...enticed, teased, made to undergo the test and then be subjected to withdrawal of any assumed reward. Frustration was beginning to rear its ugly head - and he could also feel the beginnings of a headache.

Subconsciously, he rubbed his forehead where the gnawing ache threatened his concentration. If only Spock had been here... He'd have found an answer. Perhaps if he thought back to some incident in the past... As he searched long and hard into his mind, he became aware of an all-too-familiar hum. Pulling himself erect, Kirk spun the chair to confront his Chief Surgeon.

"Bones! For God's sake stop playing that damn thing over me every five minutes! I told you half an hour ago I was all right, so..."

"Jim! That half hour happens to be three hours and more!"

Two sets of eyes glared angrily at each other. Kirk relented first - realising that the doctor was only doing his job, and a damn good one at that.

"Sorry, Bones - didn't mean to snap." He managed a faint smile. "Got anything for a headache?"

McCoy lowered the now redundant tricorder and rummaged in his pouch of magic potions. The tough exterior relaxed. "Sure, Jim - take these..." He extracted two tablets from a foil packaging and handed them to his friend. "And have something to eat - that's probably half your trouble. You haven't had a decent meal since God-knows-when!"

"I'm not hungry, Bones. Really..."

"Nonsense!" Insistently he jabbed the intercom. "McCoy to sickbay."

"Sickbay. Nurse Chapel here."

"Ah, Christine. I want a high protein meal brought up to the bridge for the Captain, soon as you can...Oh, and bring me a chicken sandwich or something, will you?"

"Certainly, Doctor. Anything else?"

"No, thanks, Christine, that'll be fine. McCoy out." Bones switched his gaze back to Kirk. "May as well join you - can't remember when I last had something myself!"

When Christine arrived on the bridge, McCoy took the opportunity of receiving an up-date on his patients. Scotty was resting comfortably, his fracture causing no undue concern at the present time. As for Craig, there was simply no response whatsoever. He remained totally withdrawn, still staring anxiously into nothing.

Kirk shook his head resignedly and picked at his food. "I can't understand it, Bones. Whatever this thing is, it obviously doesn't need Craig. I mean, all the time it continues to reprogramme the computer, stay that one move ahead of us...and yet it still keeps him under some sort of control. Why?"

"I don't know, Jim. It's all beyond me." McCoy's voice dwindled away as he began to rethink the past events. Almost without realising it he said, "Spock would have thought of something..." He laughed half-heartedly. "Him and his blasted logic! Always had an answer, even if you didn't want one! But I wish he were here now..."

Kirk looked up, seeing for perhaps the first time how the loss of Spock had affected his friend. "You miss him too...don't you, Bones?"

Sighing deeply, McCoy focused misty eyes on Kirk. He swallowed hard. "Yes, Jim... I miss him..."

Kirk's hand moved towards the back of his chair and covered the Doctor's reassuringly. A gentle squeeze and nod was all they each required to understand...

Time marched on...and within the confines of sickbay, an overwrought mind struggled ceaselessly to be free. Despite the alien's absence for many hours now, Craig still found it impossible to break loose from the creature's control.

Frustrated, and on the brink of final defeat, he allowed his previously suppressed feelings of sadness and despondency to rise. God! What a mess! And not only was it a mess for himself alone, his foolishness had threatened the existence of over four hundred people - friends...people he loved and cared for. As the tortured mind wandered aimlessly, he suddenly found himself remembering Earth. The golden days of childhood...sunshine, happiness...the dreams and

ambitions of a young boy entering the world of adulthood. The successes... failures... They all tumbled in and around, jostling for position. A sea of faces swam through the turmoil...his mother and father, smiling in that special way... Jack, his best friend, always laughing and joking...his first girl...first kiss... and then there was Mary...Mary, the girl he would some day have married...

She knew how much Starfleet meant to him, but had promised to wait. Her laughing face danced around his mind, the lilting voice almost real. 'Go have your fun, Steve... I'll be here when you come home. I'll always be waiting for you. Always...al...' The cheeky grin softened lovingly. '...love you...love you...love...' The two small words repeated themselves over and over again.

Silent tears trickled untouched down the anguished features, as Craig tore himself apart inside with grief. Alone with his agony he grasped for the only remaining straw in an ocean of hate and despair - his unbounding love for Mary. With renewed strength, possessed from the knowledge that nothing in the Universe could destroy his love for Mary, he screamed into his mind the hatred he felt for this obscene creature who dared to invade his very being.

/Listen to me, you cretin! I am no longer under your control! Your power is pathetic, no longer a match for mine. Now it is I who tires of this game and it is time we ended it!/  
/

With unsurpassable strength and will power, Craig dragged his semi-paralysed limbs into action and lurched defiantly across sickbay, crashing over various items of equipment in his bid for freedom.

The noise startled McCoy, causing him to jump in his chair where he had been quietly dozing. Instantly alert, he ran towards the ward area in time to see Craig making for the exit. He quickened his pace, grabbing the blue-shirted figure roughly from behind.

"Craig! Where do you - " But it was an action soon to be regretted by McCoy as a powerful clenched fist connected with his jaw and sent him sprawling to the deck. As he wavered on the edge of consciousness, he saw Craig staring down at him concernedly. The man was trying to tell him something...disjointedly the words drifted towards him.

"I'm sssoorrry... Dddoctoor...s...sooon you will...under...standddd... Ttteelll the...the Captainnn...." The end of the conversation was lost as first McCoy failed to beat the unconscious state inflicted upon him, and second, Craig felt an overwhelming need to hurry. Time was short...so very short.

Stumbling almost blindly, Craig finally reached his destination. The area was deserted as his fevered mind had prayed it would be, emitting an atmosphere of calm and solitude, allowing him to think. His decision reached, he frantically activated dormant systems, bringing to life latent power. Thank God! His worst fear was over, the alien had obviously disregarded these circuits as unnecessary to its needs. Trembling, he set the controls and activated the automatic timing device. It was almost time! Only one more item remained...hastily he searched for a report board and began to write...

Now he was ready! He stepped forward.

"All right, you bastard! Come to me now and see if I am still weak and feeble minded! Come, damn you! Or are you afraid of a mere Human?" He laughed scornfully, knowing he wouldn't have long to wait.

"I AM BECOMING TIRED OF YOUR IRRITATING HABITS, EARTHLING. THIS TIME YOU SHALL PAY DEARLY FOR INTERRUPTING...I HAVE BEEN FORCED TO LEAVE A PARTICULARLY DELICATE OPERATION..."

As the creature's voice chilled Craig's mind, it once again condensed its form and entered the Human's body, obviously unaware of its present location, so clever had been the deception.

Stephen Craig felt the beginnings of pain boring into his brain as for the last time he strained to keep his eyes fixed on the distant control panel. Only

seconds now...seconds before...a smile emerged on the agonised features.

Suddenly aware of trickery, the alien cried out in anger. "WHAT IS THIS! YOU THINK TO TR- " But it was already too late. The mechanism was operating, reducing the structure before it into a million sparkling atoms. "NO...NOOO, YOU CANNOT...DO NOT DESTROY ME...PLEASSSEEEEE..." The levers moved, matching the co-ordinates set for wide dispersion and deep space.

Still smiling, Craig felt the transporter taking his body. He had won! Above the alien's cry of fear, a solitary voice rang out, echoing round the lonely chamber, lost forever into the emptiness of space...

"I love you, Mary...I love you...I love you... "

After hours of rewardless activity, Kirk was still to be found haunting the bridge, alone in his position of command decision. Although defeat had never been a word he freely admitted to, tendrils of doubt were steadily building within his mind, causing him to consider that possibly this time he was not going to find a solution.

By the law of averages it was inevitable that they would one day meet opposition totally beyond their strength and intellect. Well, obviously this was the day, and like it or not, he was going to have to admit to being beaten.

Shifting uneasily in his chair, he scratched his chin, now sprouting two days' growth of beard. The stubble irritated and made him feel unkempt and inefficient. Maybe a shower, change of clothes would help. Rising stiffly, he moved sluggishly across the deck, leaning heavily on the railings and addressed the science console.

"Anything, gentlemen?" Blank expressions answered his question silently. "Very well. I'm going to my quarters for half an hour. Call me if - "

"Captain!" Chekov's voice burst into the conversation. "Someone's using the transporter!"

"What?" Swinging round, Kirk leaped up to stand beside the young Russian. Sure enough, there was the tell-tale light blinking spasmodically. "Get a security team down there right away! I wa - "

"Sickbay to bridge! Emergency!" Chapel's anxious but calm words sprang urgently from the intercom.

"Kirk here. What is it, Nurse Chapel?"

"Captain! Dr. McCoy's unconscious and Lt-commander Craig is missing!"

"Is McCoy all right?"

"Yes, sir -- only knocked out. But Mr. Craig..."

"Don't worry, Christine, I think I know where he is. Take care of McCoy... I'll be down later. Kirk out!"

"Aye, aye, sir." Christine closed the channel quickly, already moving to assist a somewhat groggy Chief Surgeon who was attempting to stand.

Sliding to a halt, Kirk rushed into the transporter area, followed closely by his security back-up. Somehow he had an uneasy feeling that they were already too late. But too late for what? A strange stillness filled the empty chamber.

Cautiously, Kirk moved towards the control console, eyes searching for the unexpected. He found the hastily discarded report board. Almost reluctantly he lifted it up and read the scribbled words.

Please forgive me, sir. I tried so hard not to let it happen. I'm sorry. Tell Mary I loved her very much. Stephen Craig.

Kirk stood quietly looking down at the stark lonely words. They meant so much...and not just a young man's life. Here was an answer to a question asked countless times throughout Man's climb to his destiny. Somehow, through overwhelming odds, this young tortured mind had fought and vanquished a power of evil...fought and won because he had one vital ally on his side. One which can never be destroyed if you trust and believe fully. Here today stood the proof of love's undying devotion. Nothing in this vast, boundless Universe can take away the strength of love's will to survive.

"Shall we continue the search for Mr. Craig, sir?"

"What?" Kirk jolted his mind back to the present and gazed sadly into the blue eyes of the security guard. "No. It's all right, Lieutenant. We've found him."

Still clutching the report board tightly, Kirk paused for a few seconds longer. Finally, he sighed and pointed to the control panel with his free hand. "Deactivate the power source and then return to normal duty. I'll enter a complete report of the incident in the ship's log. No need for you or your men to make out a report. Dismissed, Mr. Schifrin."

A slightly puzzled Lieutenant acknowledged his Captain's orders and then beat a hasty retreat with his equally puzzled men. Obviously the Captain understood exactly what was going on, and no doubt they would - eventually.

Alone, James T. Kirk allowed himself a brief moment of relaxation. Once again he was in control of his ship, his Enterprise. The moment, however, was to be brief, for although he commanded, the Starship still plunged on relentlessly towards unknown space. Even if he could find out where they were, how much damage had they sustained at the hands of the alien...the warp drive... navigation...the problems could...

He snapped himself out of the looming depression. It was time for action!

"Kirk to bridge!"

"Chekov here, sir."

"Mr. Chekov! The store's back in business. I'm going to Engineering to see what kind of state our drive system's in. In the mean time, try and get some information out of the computer, and activate every sensor you possibly can. I want to know where the hell we are, and I want to know five minutes ago! Got that?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Good man! Kirk out." As the channel closed, Kirk stood quietly for a few more seconds... What did the future hold for them? Perhaps this was their future...the end of the line...

Like hell it was! Defiantly he punched another channel.

"Engineering!"

#### PART 4

McCoy sprawled uneasily on his mattress and stared blankly at the thatched roof of the hut. Eerie shadows performed a frenzied dance as the glow from a large waning moon seeped in between the loose fibres. Shivering involuntarily, he pulled up the rough-textured homespun blanket further round his shoulders, and turned onto his side. Closing his eyes for the umpteenth time, he tried to relax, free his mind and sleep. The attempt failed yet again.

That his insomnia was becoming a problem he knew only too well. However, bouts of depression similar to this were a frequent visitor, and he had long ago

given up trying to treat them medically. McCoy was a great believer in self-cure - especially when it came to himself.

The cool breeze which had momentarily chilled him began to rise dramatically. The new wind sighed forlornly through nearby trees, shifting majestic branches as they bowed in obedience to the beckoning call of nature. Once again McCoy opened his eyes, catching a shaft of moonlight slanting in through a torn slat of the adjacent shutter. Its path now unimpeded by the adjacent trees arrowed swiftly towards Kirk's mattress, bathing the slumbering figure in a golden haze. Fitfully, the sleeping Captain stirred, moaning quietly into the soft pillow as he turned, burying his face.

For the next few moments, McCoy lay and watched his friend closely, wondering what troubled him so. Since planetfall, Jim had appeared much more relaxed; and had been sleeping well. This night, however, he was far from relaxed, tossing and turning repeatedly. Perhaps it was simply a bad dream... nothing to worry about...

The beam of light began to retreat rapidly as the swaying trees swung back to their almost perpendicular stance, once more obliterating the sinking moon. The sighing faded as swiftly as it had begun, leaving McCoy with only the sounds of distant breakers tumbling powerfully onto drifting sands.

With sleep still evading him, Banes found himself reflecting events as they had presented themselves over the past weeks.

His knowledge of Stardrive technology was pretty limited, but from what Kirk told him, he understood only too well what a predicament they were in. With warp drive dangerously drained and navigation suffering extensive damage, it was obvious even to a good old country doctor that they were going nowhere fast.

Add to this fact that a) they were in an area displaying no familiar reference points, b) the star patterns were all uncharted and unknown and c) what communications they were able to operate offered nothing but static and space chatter... and the situation required no further elaboration.

As morale plummeted like a stone, it appeared that fate was to deal but one card in their favour. Just two days distant on impulse power lay a large watery world offering viable conditions, and perhaps a place to rest up and make a few plans. And so it was to here, a planet they learned was known as Lanatia by its people, that the great Starship limped in search of refuge and peace of mind.

McCoy remembered the day they established orbit as if it had been yesterday. Excitement had mounted as sensors indicated humanoid life scattered throughout the large solitary landmass dominating the equatorial regions. Although their level of development was relatively low, here at least was civilisation...one with which they could possibly communicate...and if necessary, remain.

Actual contact had been something of an occasion for both parties. Kirk, already anxious and a little apprehensive, had been taken completely by surprise when he found himself being greeted by name and in English! Once recovered from this initial shock, there was no holding the friendship and help which naturally appeared.

The Lanatians were a telepathic race of high intelligence, with their life style dependent on the sea. Using their evolved gifts, they harvested the vast ocean, controlling many marine species in a form of symbiotic agreement. With their diet totally vegetarian, they offered protection for the gatherers both from natural enemies and planetary elements. And it had worked - for centuries.

Their telepathy had detected the Human minds at an early stage, quickly analysing thought patterns and language and they were eager to test their new

skills. Many hours had passed, discussing cultural and environmental achievements - and failures. Yet somehow their world had grown with none of Earth's traumatic problems. Crime and violence had failed to rear their ugly heads... even disease and starvation were virtually non-existent. All in all, Lanatia appeared an idealistic world - a veritable paradise.

So here they were, still lost, but at least in an hospitable environment where one could stay permanently if necessary - and right now that prospect appeared somewhat appealing to McCoy who was both tired and depressed.

Stretching languidly, he rolled over onto his back, rested a weary head on clasped hands and sighed. Suddenly the silence was shattered as Kirk sat bolt upright and screamed at the top of his voice...

"SSSPPOOCKK!!!"

Jumping with fright, McCoy leaped from his bed and stumbled hurriedly to his friend's side. Kirk's eyes were wide with panic, and he was drenched with sweat. Claspng the rigid shoulders, Bones shook him violently in an attempt to break the spell of torment.

"Jim! Jim, for God's sake wake up! It's only a dream! Wake up!" He shook the stiffened body again, cringing as the look of agony on Kirk's face burned into his brain. Gradually the tension eased, and Kirk began to shudder uncontrollably, gasping for breath as reaction set in. "Take it easy, Jim... It's over now...c'mon, you're all right..." As Bones' gentle reassurance entered his nightmare world, Kirk gradually gained control of the situation. Breathing deeply, he shut his eyes tightly and drew a tremulous hand across the sweat-laden brow.

"Feeling better?" McCoy probed cautiously. "Must have been some dream, that... Sure scared the hell out of me..." The attempted humour obviously helped at Kirk smiled briefly, relaxing a little more.

"Yeah... Sorry, Bones...but..." He paused, features beginning to harden again, "It wasn't a dream."

"What are you on about, 'it wasn't a dream'? You've been fidgetting around all night and..." jumped in McCoy unintentionally.

"Bones... Bones!" Kirk shouted for understanding. "Please, just listen a minute, will you?"

"All right...all right, take it easy." He cooled his tongue, inwardly scolding himself for upsetting his distraught friend further.

Jim sat silent for a while and then looked up hesitantly. "It was Spock."

"What? Are you mad? Do you seriously think that - "

"Bones! Will you listen to me or not?" Kirk's eyes were aflame... anger, fear...Bones didn't know what he saw, but he realised he must let Jim speak.

"I'm sorry, Jim, I didn't mean to... Carry on - I'm listening."

"Well, it all started off like a dream...everything floating, me, faces... things...all floating... Then they all started to disappear and I was alone... alone, and it was getting darker. No matter which way I turned there was no-one and it kept on getting darker. Bones? Bones, I've never been that scared before...it was really terrifying..." McCoy remained silent, knowing there was more to come.

"Then suddenly, I knew Spock was there! Don't ask me how, I just knew. And...and he was calling to me...calling my name! I called back to him, but he couldn't hear me...and all the time he was getting fainter and fainter... I tried so hard to reach him, but he was too far away...always too far away..." The tension was steadily increasing again as Kirk relived the last few hours. Beads of sweat re-emerged as he clenched his fist in frustration and thumped

the mattress repeatedly. "Too far away..."

"Take it easy, Jim... You've been under a great deal of strain lately -- Craig, the ship..." began McCoy soothingly.

"But you don't understand, Bones! Spock tried to contact me!" Frantic eyes stared pleadingly into McCoy's. "Don't you see? That means he must be well...he's recovered!"

"Yes...maybe, Jim...maybe...but you can't just..."

"Maybe, maybe! There's no 'maybe' about it!" He stopped abruptly, eyes boring into McCoy's, seeing into his very soul. "You don't believe me, do you? Do you?"

"It's not that I don't believe you, Jim, only..." He reached out to help his friend, only to be rebuffed hurtfully.

"Leave me alone!" He threw back the blanket angrily and swung his feet to the dirt floor. Grabbing his trousers he hastily drew them on, pushed his feet into familiar black boots, snatched his tunic from under McCoy and headed stormily for the door. "You can believe what you like! But I know it was him! Spock's looking for us and we're stuck in this Godforsaken place and I couldn't tell him!"

"Jim! Wait - " But it was too late. Kirk marched out the doorway, almost tearing down the gaily woven blanket protecting the entrance. He was obviously distressed and there would be no reasoning with him in that state. Best leave him alone to cool off by himself.

Sighing deeply, McCoy returned to his own bed, lay back down and listened to the fast fading footsteps as they trudged along sand packed pathways. They soon disappeared and he was left alone with his thoughts. He wanted so much to believe Kirk, but he was tired and under stress...the mind is a funny thing...a funny thing...

Dawn began to creep slowly in past the half torn blanket. God, he felt tired! His eyes suddenly felt like lumps of lead. He closed them gratefully and fell into an uneasy slumber...

The hot, merciless sun beat down upon red dusty soil, scorching rays seeking out every crack and cranny left naked and undefended. Far off into the rugged landscape a swirling dust storm could be seen imposing its will on the barren terrain. Alone and anxious, the Earthwomxn watched vigilantly for signs of movement; the familiar walk...a flash of colour...anything.

Nothing...only the funnelling dust particles, playing, deceiving her eyes.

Gazing once more into the shimmering heat, her mind looked back, recalling the events of fate leading up to this moment. She had never imagined Sarek could look so happy; even that day long ago when she had told him of her pregnancy he had never truly 'let go', shown her his real feelings... But that day...

"Amanda! Amanda!" She rushed out to meet the urgent call.

"Sarek! What is wrong?" Her heart raced, galloped to catch up with a growing dread of something awful. "Sarek?" She paused, caught between her mind's fear and what her eyes told her. Then she knew!

"Oh, Sarek! They've found it?"

His expression revealed to her what no words could express. Instinctively he held out his arms, and she ran into the strong comfort of his love.

Together in the coolness of their home, he began the long detained account of the work which had been involved.

"...and so, my wife, as a last attempt, they decided to investigate Spock's foetal development. Perhaps there was a flaw, some as yet unidentified weakness in his cellular structure or his physiology. We assembled every slide, investigation, computer record, indeed, everything relating to the birth of our son. It has taken many weeks, Amanda. However..."

"But Sarek, why did you not tell me of all this? As his mother, did I not have the right to know?"

He looked at her with a rather hurt expression. "I did not wish you further distress...if I had given you hope and we had failed..." He faltered, and Amanda knew it was time to rescue him.

"It does not matter, my husband. You did what was right for us both. Now, tell me - what was it you found?"

He was at ease again. "If you recall, my wife, Spock was removed from your uterus and placed within the artificial environment necessary for his survival at a relatively early stage. Well, it appears that during his growth within your body, he began to develop the need for a certain trace element vital to Human life.

However, as a Vulcan, his bio-chemistry had no need of such an element, and therefore retarded the retention ability he was beginning to acquire. The important factor which we have discovered is that the percentage required by Humans is essential to the production of specific catalysts necessary for inducing R.N.A. growth and reproduction. Partly Human, our son needed the small amount he possessed."

"What you're trying to say is, that he has a deficiency of some kind?" asked Amanda.

"In simple terms, my wife, yes."

"So then it must be very easy to cure!"

Sarek lifted his hand to interrupt. "It may be simple; however, there has been...certain damage... which may take time to heal. Also his auto-immunity system has been impaired, leaving him susceptible to illness. We shall have to be patient, Amanda, and he will need a great deal of care."

So there it was. Spock's career in space had almost cost him his life. His unusual make-up had unfortunately made him a victim of circumstances. The virus encountered had a marked affinity for the trace element discovered, and Spock's low amounts had soon disappeared, leaving him defenceless. Had he been pure Human, his higher production levels and own body defences would have succeeded in overwhelming the organism before serious damage resulted. Had he been pure Vulcan, he would have had no need for the element in his bio-chemical functions, and the virus would never have chosen his life-form as a host.

It had been so simple, and yet so nearly fatal...

The dust storm began to disappear over the distant horizon, returning Amanda's thoughts to the present time. They had all worked so hard to return Spock to health; even he himself, striving each and every hour given to him, with some indescribable momentum that amazed even Sarek. And now this had to happen...

Once again her eyes searched the endless desert before her, remembering...

"Do you have to tell him?" Amanda's voice pleaded sadly. "He's been through so much. Sarek?"

"Believe me, Amanda, it is necessary. Perhaps even now I have left it longer..." He paused, turning slightly as a lean figure approached from the estate's south entrance. A mid-morning breeze snatched playfully at a flowing cape sending a swirl of blues and purples into the sunlight. Amanda stole a quick glance in his direction, then turned desperately to her husband, but there was no relenting. Before her stood the hardness of Vulcan.

Spock stepped closer, sensing something was terribly wrong. His mother

appeared...worried? Sad? He could not quite decide; and his father? The day was but hours old, so why had he returned so soon, when he had told them he would be returning that evening?

As he reached his parents, Amanda placed a reassuring hand on his bare forearm. "Spock...your father has some news for you." Gently, she squeezed his arm. "I'm sorry, Spock, but..." He could see the tears welling up within her eyes as her touch tightened. He nodded slightly, trying to make her see he understood. His body stiffened as he turned to face his father.

"Father?" The voice betrayed none of the inner anxieties.

"Spock, I have this morning returned from the Vulcan Space Central. For a number of weeks there has been concern over the USS Enterprise. I did not tell you of this before, as I considered you in need of peace and solitude in which to recover from your illness. However, I now feel it is my duty, as a father, to inform you of this unfortunate fact."

"Indeed... I thank you, father." Again the voice was calm, steady.

"I have not quite finished, Spock." Their eyes locked. "Overdue communications do not necessarily cause concern. However, a partially understood message, obviously released in an emergency situation, with no further communication, does indicate serious problems. These circumstances have presented themselves to Starfleet Command, leaving them no alternative but to officially report the Enterprise as missing - presumed destroyed."

Sarek observed his son closely before he continued. "There remains one established fact. The Potempkin was diverted from a nearby quadrant in order to search for vessel debris or hard radiation. There was none. Therefore it is possible that the ship is merely crippled or lost..."

Spock interrupted before any further speculations emerged. "Father - where exactly was the Enterprise located on her present assignment?"

Sarek had known the question would come, just as surely as he knew he could keep nothing from Spock. "They were surveying remote star systems close to the boundaries of our known region of the galaxy." The answer was short and to the point. Further elaboration was unnecessary - they each reached their own conclusions all too soon.

The wind flapped again amidst the folds of Spock's cloak, breaking the silence with an urgent call. He spoke.

"Thank you for telling, father. If you will excuse me, I wish to be alone for a short while."

Sarek bowed his head slightly, thereby giving his permission; proud and tall, the young Vulcan turned to leave, his mind tumbling like the waters of a raging river. He flinched visibly as Amanda reached out instinctively to protect, heal the hurt she knew consumed him. Darkened eyes bored deeply into hers.

"Spock..." She whispered his name lovingly.

"Please do not concern yourself, mother - I am perfectly all right." The words were controlled, uttered from tight lips.

Eager to be gone, Spock spun on his heel and strode purposefully out and into the garden. Amanda moved to follow, she could not let him be alone, not when he had lost so much; but a firm, gentle grasp held her steady.

"No. Let him go. He needs no-one but himself."

Silently they watched as their son disappeared from sight, heading far out into the desolation of Sas-a-Shar...

"Amanda? Amanda!" The Earthwoman jumped at her husband's voice; she had not heard him approach, so intense had been her thoughts. The sun was beginning its descent, casting long shadows across the landscape.

"What time is it, Sarek? He has been gone for so long...and the dust storm ...!" Her voice rose matching pace with her rising anxieties. The older Vulcan calmed her gently.

"Spock knows the desert. We must leave him, my wife. He will return when ready. Now come into the house. You must be tired. Come."

Reluctantly Amanda accepted the proffered arm, and walked up towards the welcoming house.

As the hush of early evening stole stealthily across the endless desert, a cool breeze plucked warningly at the sleeping Vulcan. Cautiously he roused himself - this was no place to lie unprotected. The sun was setting and he must hurry to reach home before dark. The sounds of his boots clung to the air as he set off, his mind remembering that fateful morning...

On and on he had walked with a defiance grown from many years. In his head drummed the words, 'The Enterprise is missing...missing...Jim is dead...missing...dead...' The sounds merged, laughed mockingly at him. And still he walked, boots smashing into the arid soil, kicking the dust into fantasies to tease his mind. He could see Jim, smiling affectionately, mischievously...then McCoy frowning...Scott grinning with drunken delight...and then Jim again...

His brain was awash with untamed emotions threatening to drown his Vulcan heritage and training which cried out for control and order. As he'd stumbled blindly on, the terrain changed and he found himself caught in the edges of a twisting dust storm. The flying dirt sprang into his eyes, stinging painfully as it irritated delicate membranes. Losing his steadiness of gait he had fallen, landing heavily on all fours amidst the blinding storm.

As the storm raged about him, inside he fought another storm. His Human soul cried with anger...rage...grief...frustration...he knew not which. And yet his Vulcan half struggled to remain detached, logical... As the battle grew he found himself slamming a clenched fist hard into the cracked soil. Above the roaring whirlwind he yelled an anguished "NOOOOOOO.....", hearing it echo around his ears as the wind played cruelly with his agony.

Suddenly the storm had moved on, and he was alone...alone with the pain of an abused fist still pounding into sun-baked soil...the pain of bereavement... of losing a part of himself.

But wait! Losing a part of himself? Of course! That was the answer! Why had he not thought of it before. Possibly it was a result of his weakened state - the illness, long hard times endured, they had all contributed, allowing his undisciplined Human half to over-rule the logical counterpart that normally controlled him. But now he was in control again...now he was forcing order into the chaos...and now he could feel that spark of energy deep within his mind that he knew was James Kirk. James Kirk was alive. Alive!

He sank back thankfully onto his heels, simply soaking in the overwhelming feeling of content and happiness he was experiencing. Suddenly his face clouded as new thoughts penetrated his peace of mind. Danger...injuries?...where?... He must find them. Somehow he had to find them!

He had made a decision. Closing the still smarting eyes, he steepled his lean bloodstained fingers, emptied his mind and prepared to search. He knew it was dangerous - he might reach out too far and lose his way back - but he had to try.

Further and further, ever outwards, the tireless Vulcan mind reached. The hours came and departed, and still he stretched out, using every scrap of training, every iota of knowledge, until he could feel his very being taut as a bow string as it cried to return - or be set free to be lost, perhaps forever, in the blackness of space.

Then he felt it! An awareness of a sensation all too familiar. Countless

times in the past he had mindlinked with his friend, each time strengthening the bond, each time cementing their relationship. Now he knew that he was near - but the distance... Would he be able to reach him?

Gathering every last ounce of energy he possessed, Spock flung his over-  
taxed mind just that last immeasurable distance. He had to make it! He had to!  
At the last possible moment, when he could feel his mind beginning to shrink  
back, he yelled the one solitary word that he ached to release, before collaps-  
ing exhausted onto the red Vulcan sands. "JJJIIIIIIIIMMMMM...."

Physically and mentally drained, he had drifted off into a deep untroubled sleep. Jim was safe, and dared he hope for too much? - McCoy and the others as well.

Now as he approached the family home, it was an entirely different Spock who was returning. Gone was the anguished, confused individual - in his place stood the strong decisive figure of Spock of Vulcan, First Officer to Captain James T. Kirk of the U.S.S. Enterprise. He would find his friends again - even if it took a life-time, or meant his dismissal from the service. They would willingly sacrifice their careers for him; and so likewise would he.

"Dr. McCoy...Dr. McCoy..."

Someone was shaking him, calling his name... He mumbled incoherently and slid further beneath the blanket, but still the shaking persisted. "Dr. McCoy! Wake up!"

"Dammit! Can't a man sleep for five..." Opening bleary eyes he focused on the anxious features of Christine Chapel. "What's up? Chekov been bitten by one of those crabs again?" He roused himself sloopily, perching awkwardly on unsteady elbows.

"No, no. I'm sorry, Doctor. We didn't want to wake you, but do you know where the Captain is?"

"The Captain? No. We...er...we had a bit of a disagreement; he went for a walk...but wait a minute..." Still foggy with sleep, Bones suddenly realised the sun was well up. He must have slept for hours. "What time is it?"

"The sun's been up around six hours - it's 11.00 hours ship's time."

"What! That late! Why didn't someone wake me before now?" About to get up, Bones suddenly realised he was completely naked under the sprawling blanket. Clutching the covers protectively, he eyed his uniform across the hut, then Christine.

"Er...Nurse Chapel - would you mind...?"

"Mind?" Momentarily perplexed, Christine paused for a couple of seconds. Then realisation dawned. "Oh. Really, Doctor..." She looked at him, grinning to herself. "Such a fuss about..." His eyebrows lifted daringly. "All right, all right! I'll wait outside." Continuing to smile she departed quickly, leaving the good doctor to dress alone.

Within a few moments he emerged shouldering his way into the regulation blue tunic. "Now, shall we start again?" He smiled affectionately at his head nurse. "We're looking for Jim Kirk - right?"

"Yes, Doctor. We've been searching for him all morning... He's just disappeared."

McCoy's smile rapidly deserted him as uneasiness filtered into his mind. "Well, I haven't seen him since around dawn. He had a strange dream last night - woke up screaming Spock was looking for him. Wouldn't listen to a word from me, simply stormed off angry as a Castalan bobcat. I let him go, figuring a few hours on his own would cool him off...but that was..." McCoy frowned as he calculated the time factor involved. "Have you asked LuaLi? He's become pretty

friendly with Jim since we arrived here."

"That's another thing, Doctor. We can't find him either - nor any of the older inhabitants. Only the young people are left, and all they do is smile when we ask them anything... Doctor - I'm really worried. Suppose something awful has happened to the Captain? He may be lying somewhere, hurt or..."

Moving closer, McCoy encircled the anxious shoulders protectively, giving them a reassuring hug. "C'mon, now, don't worry. Jim can take care of himself. Let's go back up to the ship, we've a better chance of locating him from there. Has Chekov tried the sensors? Those things can find a fly at..."

The conversation continued as the two walked briskly to the beam-up area.

Once aboard the Enterprise, McCoy thought he'd feel more at ease, more confident. After all, one man shouldn't prove that difficult to find, not with the sophistication of Federation technology. But somehow things were not working out that way. Their equipment told them nothing, and as time marched steadily on, he began to feel insecure and tense. With Scotty still confined to sickbay, no Science Officer and no other rank above his own, he was in effect in command. Oh, he had commanded parties before, but never this many crew - and never the ship! He was extremely conscious of the fact that the crew was looking to him for guidance - and he didn't like it one bit!

Giving himself a mental shake, he reprimanded himself for feeling so inadequate. This was ridiculous! All he had to do was think calmly and logically. What would Jim do in the present situation? Or come to that, Spock?

Endeavouring to speak confidently, he asked for a complete report on all avenues so far explored. When all stations reported negative, he drew on past experience as his only means of hope.

"Right! Search for any unexplained power source. If they're holding the Captain behind some force field, they'll need power of some sort to produce it. Also let's find out if there are any large areas of metal or anything underground to suggest a complex of some sort..."

As all stations worked flat out, McCoy paced the deck nervously, almost praying for some clue no matter how small. Damn this planet! He just knew it was too good to be true! And all that business with Jim last night. God! He was sick of the whole dam' thing!

A sudden shriek from a young Ensign manning communications snatched him away from almost breaking point. "Dr. McCoy! Lt. Uhura has found the Captain! He's on the surface with her now!"

"Quickly, Ensign! Put them on audio!"

Excited fingers manoeuvred the appropriate buttons and switches. "Go ahead, sir."

"Jim! Jim, are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right. I..."

"Where the hell have you been? We've all been worried sick about you!"

"Bones... Bones, quit panicking, will you, and calm down..." He paused. "Bones? Bones, I hope you're ready for this." McCoy could almost feel Kirk's excitement as the voice leaped from the radio channel. "I can't tell you everything right now, but the important thing is... Bones, we're going home!"

Shouts and cheers rang about the bridge as crew jumped from their posts and began to celebrate with each other. Only McCoy remained impassive, somehow detached from the excitement. Going home? How? It just wasn't possible... But if Jim said so... And yet... Into the uncertain mind came the voice of his friend again.

"Bones? Did you just hear what I said? We're... "

"Yes, Jim. I heard you. Only..."

Sensing the uneasiness, Kirk interrupted quickly. "Get down here, you old Doubting Thomas. You still don't understand about last night - do you?"

"Jim, I..."

"I'll expect you in five minutes. Kirk out!" The lilting voice of his Captain and friend echoed coolly round the deck. McCoy transferred command and headed solemnly for the transporter room.

Perhaps he was just tired and depressed. These last months had been very demanding; what with Spock and then Kirk's bad patch. Only thing for sure, though - he hoped to God Kirk was right! With morale low already the last thing he wanted was a disappointment the size this one could create. He for one just couldn't take it.

As the shimmering effect of the transporter beam solidified into the figure of McCoy, Kirk ran forward to grasp his friend's arm, and drag him over to the smiling LuaLi and his party.

"Bones, you're never going to believe this...I can't get over it myself..." Hurriedly McCoy found himself whisked away into one of the larger huts, with no time to express or even think of his doubts. Once inside he was deposited on one of the gigantic, comfortable cushions he had come to recognise and enjoy as part of the Lanatians' life style.

With everyone seated, LuaLi began. "I regret we have been unable to speak freely until now. But, as I explained to your Captain, we had to be sure you represented no serious threat to our culture. It was not until we detected the presence of an alien mind searching for you that we realised the time was right to reveal ourselves - and possibly help you return to your own kind.

You see, my friend, we are not as we appear." LuaLi paused, allowing the Human a brief moment to adjust mentally to this new concept.

"Our civilisation is older by many millenia than your own Human race, and it is through this longer existence that we have developed our present form. What you see before you is but a brief interlude - the corporeal stage in a life which spans the eternity of time itself.

Long ago, we, like your own restless ancestors, were barbaric, and almost totally destroyed ourselves. There was much hatred, jealousy and anger, especially with the emergence of the telepathic abilities. It took great courage and determination, and many lives were lost, but finally we overcame those prejudices, tore down the idols of technology which had almost caused our holocaust, and began to live as we believed we were meant to live.

As I said before, this you now see is but merely an interlude within our life span. Within the confines of a physical body, we survive fifty solar rotations of our world. As we pass to the higher levels, another is born to take our place. This way we shall never abuse our evolutionary greatness, and we continually learn to respect all others found within the vastness of the Universe...regardless of how primitive they may appear.

Once our allotted time is over we leave the flesh, allowing it to be re-absorbed into the earth from whence comes our future and our past; and it is at this time that our true being emerges..."

As the words flowed slowly across to where McCoy sat mesmerised, thousands of sparkling particles of light descended, swiftly filling the air with a kaleidoscope of colour. Swirling, dancing, the lights played in and around both Humans and Lanatians, creating a prismatic fantasy as the sunlight split the air. McCoy sat with mouth sagging in awe and wonder. Kirk watched his friend's reaction, smiling happily in this new-found challenge and discovery. LuaLi continued:

"These, my dear friend, are the ultimate beings of our race; the final transformation...true Lanatians... Each spark represents a living mind, perfectly evolved and free to exist in the realms of space, time...even infinity... We are happy to be one with you."

The enchantment spread, filling McCoy with warmth and an experience he could not explain. He had never felt this way before. It was strange...alien... yet somehow restful... LuaLi was speaking again.

"They came to tell us of the entity searching for you - the one you know as Spock - just as they told us of your approach from deep space. They were..."

McCoy found himself unable to hold his tongue still another second. "Did you communicate with Spock? Does he know where we are?"

LuaLi held up his hand quietly, smiling knowingly. "Patience, my friend, patience..."

"Sorry, I...er...I didn't mean to be rude." He let the sentence trail, but the Lanatian knew his needs and continued softly. "..."

"I cannot answer all your questions. However, there is this that I can tell you; your friend is well. He misses you and your Captain greatly - as you yourselves miss him. But you shall be reunited, and soon..."

McCoy felt a flush of embarrassment pass fleetingly over his face as he gazed into the understanding eyes. "Thank you," he whispered.

Throughout this last exchange, Kirk had remained silent, but now he chose to ask a burning question. "LuaLi? You told me earlier of encounters with others in our galaxy, but that this was the first time you had ever revealed yourselves. Why?" With the last word, the sparks of light became agitated, darting and glowing frenziedly. Anxious that he might have spoken out of turn, Kirk hastily offered an apology. "Please forgive me, LuaLi - I did not intend to offend you in any way. I'm afraid we Humans are extremely guilt where curiosity is concerned. We often ask without thinking."

With laughing eyes, the Lanatian shook his head and smiled affectionately at the perplexed Kirk. "My dear Captain, you have almost answered your own question." Seeing the bewildered look still lingering, he continued, "Your race is curious, which in turn leads to a strong will to survive. This raging curiosity governed your growth from cave to nuclear fission to the conquest of space. You simply had to know everything you possibly could. And along that difficult, treacherous path you learned - sometimes the hard way - to respect diversity, to accept criticism...and through this you earned the respect of others."

You still have much to learn, and the way may still prove too much - but your potential is great and your race still young and strong." Now it was Kirk's turn to blush and he found himself stammering for words until LuaLi relieved the pressure from him.

"But come now! We must prepare a plan for your return home. The one called Spock was unable to communicate with us, nor we with him. His projection ability is very limited compared to ours - indeed it is quite remarkable that he was able to reach this far."

Although we failed to link, some of our 'family' followed his mind as it shrank back towards the depths of space. Even now they know where he is and could, if you wish it of course, communicate with him. We would not do this without your consent as we wish him no harm. Entrance into an individual's thoughts may prove mentally disturbing if he were not prepared. As his friends, you know him perhaps well enough to assure us of his safety?"

Kirk considered for a moment. "Could you tell him we're safe and coming home? If you could somehow show him my mind, he'd know the mind link was safe."

"Of course. If you permit us access to your private thoughts we could

convey these to your friend, thereby proving our substance and reality."

Without a moment's hesitation came Kirk's answer. "I agree. When can we start?"

"It has already begun," came the gentle reply, and even as he spoke a number of sparks seemingly entered Kirk's body.

In a few seconds it was over, and all Kirk had experienced was a mild irritating sensation similar to the beginnings of a headache. As the particles of life re-emerged into the air, LuaLi continued the conversation.

"Those who now have your thoughts will transfer them across the gulf of space to others nearer your friend. When his mind has recovered sufficiently for us to reach him, he will know all you wish him to know - and he shall be at peace with himself."

"Thank you, LuaLi. You have done more than I could ever repay you for..."

"Your existence within this universe is payment enough. We are pleased to help... It gives us great joy to be one with you all..."

However, let us pause at this time and partake of some food. I am sure you must feel hungry; with full stomachs we can resume the planning of your return journey. Come, eat!" At once, a harvest of foods appeared and together the men ate hungrily.

Evening approached, finding McCoy and Kirk strolling along golden sands reflecting the dying rays of the setting sun. So much had happened that day; even now it seemed like a dream. A fantasy. At times they were both silent, each thinking, reliving memories, planning the future...

"What I want to..." They both started together.

"Sorry, Bones. You first."

"Well, I was only going to ask you - where did they take you this morning? I mean we couldn't find you anywhere, not even with the sensors."

Kirk pulled up quickly and stared puzzledly at McCoy. "Funny you should say that, Bones, I was about to ask you the same thing! I honestly don't know. I remember walking off this morning, angry that you didn't believe me..."

"Oh, you remember that, do you!" butted in Bones playfully.

"Yeah, well..." Kirk grinned impishly.

"I know. Go on"

"Anyway, I even remember LuaLi explaining everything to me, just as he did to you. But as to where I was or how I got there..." He shook his head and raised his hands negatively, "...I haven't the faintest idea. Still I suppose they are entitled to a few secrets, and we must learn to control our curiosity a little better."

McCoy laughed, finding himself totally relaxed for the first time in weeks. A cool off-shore breeze swept keenly up towards them, causing Jim to shudder as it forced the temperature down noticeably.

"Brrr. C'mon, Bones, we've got a big day ahead of us tomorrow, in case you've forgotten; tomorrow's the day we go home!" He slapped his friend playfully across the back and grinned from ear to ear.

Enjoying each other's company, the two men turned and walked back towards the settlement, intent upon having an early meal followed by a good night's rest.

A couple of hours later, as they lay on their mattresses preparing to sleep, Kirk looked across at McCoy and said, "Bones - you asleep yet?"

"No. What do you want?"

"Nothing...nothing really... I was just thinking..." With no further encouragement, Kirk decided to go on anyway. "Do you think Spock knows we're all right by now? I mean...what do you think he's doing right now...?"

"Welll..." started McCoy slowly and seriously, "if it's night...and he's got any sense at all..." gradually he speeded up, "...he'll dam' well be asleep like you should be! Goodnight!"

"I asked for that, didn't I?" laughed Kirk. "G'night, Bones."

Many light years distant from that conversation, held by two friends during their last night on a strange planet, lay another friend equally unable to sleep.

Spock stretched stiff muscles and changed his position yet again. Claspng long fingers together, he cradled his head within the palms of his hands and stared blankly at the ceiling overhead. The stillness of a sleeping house echoed from every alcove, bringing memories of times long past; times when he had lain here before, struggling with the pressures of a boy learning to cope with two cultures, two identities. But those years were over, and he had chosen his position in life with the maturity of age and the shield of adulthood to protect him. Now, if he was to succeed in the task before him, he was going to have to use every scrap of that training.

He had arrived home late that evening, exhausted but strong within himself. Amanda had fussed, as was her usual Human custom, anxious to know where he had been for so long, chiding him for overtiring himself and inwardly longing to console him in what she thought was his grief. He elected to maintain silence at present, not wishing her undue stress. He would tell her when the time was right.

Throughout the meal she prepared for him, his father watched him carefully, but remained silent. When he had planned and decided on a course of action he would speak with Sarek.

That had been a number of hours ago, and still he remained awake, organising his thoughts, analysing the problems involved.

All at once he became aware of a strange sensation, a niggling, irritating sensation close to the periphery of his mind. Cautiously he extended a tendril of thought. /Who are you? What do you want?/

The niggling continued, and then a vague answer nudged carefully at his mind. /We intend thee no harm (projections of calm and tranquillity entered his mind) We seek the one known as Spock./

/Who are you?/ he asked again.

/We are Lanatians (projection of rolling seas and fertile landmass) May we link with thee?/

For Spock, a split second's indecision was quickly over-ruled as logic dictated the request to be non-hostile. /You have my permission./

Immediately his mind was flooded with the emotions of happiness, gratitude and love as the Lanatians swept in to greet him. Recoiling mentally, Spock gasped audibly and tried to shrink his mind away from the raw thoughts which shocked him so. Sensing his discomfort and pain, the aliens withdrew rapidly, anxiously sending, /We intend thee no harm (calm and tranquillity) Please forgive our insensitivity. Thou art not like the one known as Kirk (smiling laughter) We are sorry (sadness)/

With these thoughts entering his hurt mind, Spock was able to recover sufficiently to send /Do not concern yourselves. It was unintentional, and I am recovering. But what of James Kirk? And how do you know of Vulcan?/

/We are pleased you are not injured. We who are the life of Lanatia speak for all (tall humanoid race, light reflecting in the sunlight) Our place of

origin lies many light centuries from your world (star patterns) It is on our planet of physical being that the one known as Kirk is to be found. We detected thy mind searching much time ago and followed - it is within our ability. (hesitation) We have not offended?/

As Spock received the patterns and projections he realised how everything fell neatly into place. Totally recovered from the Lanatians' initial outburst, he immediately sent /No, no - please continue./

/Our mission is to communicate with thee for purposes of reunion (Kirk and McCoy greeting each other) We bring thee messages and news from thy friend (Kirk smiling) The one known as Kirk permitted us entry into inner thoughts for purpose of present experience... It is in order for us to continue?/

/Yes - it is in order./

And so the exchange began, with Spock learning of Kirk's and McCoy's well-being and the plans being prepared for their return.

With their mission completed, the Lanatians prepared to break the link, sending their farewells to Spock. All at once he felt uncomfortable and unsure of himself. Sensing the uneasiness, the aliens sent gently /Art thou not pleased? What troubles thee?/

/I am more than pleased...only...I wish to thank you and know not how. The Vulcan way is.../

Before he could finish the Lanatians interrupted, sending, /Do not be troubled, one known as Spock. We understand (images of Vulcans tall and proud) It is enough that thee allowed linkage and we were of service to thee. We depart. Farewell, one known as Spock. Perhaps we shall meet again? We are indeed honoured to have known thee (scintillation of light fading slowly into the black abyss of space)/

/Farewell/ sent Spock as he drifted down into a relaxing, long overdue sleep. /...I am truly grateful.../

The warming rays of a giant sun streamed down towards the shimmering sands where Kirk and McCoy were saying their last farewells to LuaLi and his fellow Lanatians. Against the background of tumbling surf, they waved for the final time and headed briskly towards the beam-up point. In one respect they were sad at having to leave such new and steadfast friends, but the call of home rang loudly in every crew member and they were eager to be on their way.

Settling easily into his command chair, Kirk let his eyes flow around his comforting bridge. The faces of his crew told their own story - happy, relaxed, yet alert should the need arise.

Pausing at the Engineering section he registered Scotty busily checking his precious engines together with his newest young prodigy, Lt. Tilley. During Scott's absence, the youngster had apparently worked miracles with the warp drive, providing them with almost 75% power to cruise home with. His Chief Engineer, being of the nature to give credit where credit was due, had immediately seized upon this opportunity, and was clearly grooming the boy for greater things. Some future Starship commander was going to be very lucky...

Finally he was back - and ready to go! "Mr. Chekov - is our course plotted and laid in?"

"Affirmative, Captain, although I am not too sure how I did it." The Russian looked rather quizzically at Kirk. "My fingers did all the work, whilst I just sat and watched... It was very weird, sir. I only hope those minds, or whatever they are, know where they are putting us - we could end up anywhere!"

"I don't think we have anything to worry about, Chekov. I'm sure the Lanatians know exactly what they're doing... But if we do get lost, the person to blame is Mr. Spock."

"Sir?"

"Well, we're depending on him to have given them the right directions, otherwise we could find ourselves dropping in on the Klingons!"

"Oh, yes, sir!" beamed the young navigator. "I'll remember that if we do meet our friends!" Chekov returned to his panel, and Kirk took one last look at the swirling blue world beneath them. Time to move!

"Mr. Sulu! Take us out of here on our new heading. Let's go home."

"It will be my pleasure, Captain...leaving orbit now..." Watching the overhead viewer whilst manipulating various controls, Sulu smiled happily as he manoeuvred the Starship out and into the void of space. Plunging proudly through the embracing darkness, the Enterprise surged towards her waiting star system - and home.

With the passage of a few hours initial excitement died down as routine patterns of ship duties re-emerged. The gentle hum of automatic systems and quiet murmur of conversation tripped lightly through the air, providing Kirk with a peaceful oblivion in which to wonder...

"Penny for them, Jim," ventured a curious McCoy.

"Ummm? Oh, Bones - I didn't see you come up." Kirk's mind was far away.

"That's obvious! I could have dropped a photon torpedo in here and you wouldn't so much as have batted an eyelid! What's going on in that head of yours now? C'mon, confide in your good old friendly doctor."

"Oh, it's nothing really, Bones - I was just thinking about the Lanatians. Do you think, by the time we meet them again, that...that we'll have 'grown up' a bit more? Enough to...to be accepted? What I mean is, they are expecting so much from us, and we have such a lot to learn. Maybe we won't make it. We still make stupid mistakes...think we know all the answers, when in fact we know nothing!" He raised his hands, fists clenched, to emphasise his feelings. "Spock's right, Bones, we always do before we think, let our emotions play too big a part. Maybe we'll never grow up..." Dejectedly the words trailed as he turned absently to stare at the progressing star fields.

Sighing deeply, McCoy shook his head gravely. "There you go again, Jim, taking on the trails and tribulations of the Human race. Forget about that for now. Think of the present...the future...our future. Your future! Spock's well again, waiting for us to come home. Everything we know and love is waiting for us. Think of that, Jim, and let the Homo Sapien race grow up on its own! After all - it managed to get this far with only a little help from James T. Kirk! I think it's got a good chance of making it all the way. Don't you?" Clapping his friend's shoulder, McCoy shook it gently but firmly, eager to dispel the despairing thoughts. Sighing heavily, Kirk lifted burdened eyes to meet the blue understanding ones of his friend.

Allowing the beginnings of a smile, he shrugged casually. "Yeah - I guess you're right, Bones - you usually are. Only..."

"Jim!" The Chief Surgeon's voice carried a note of warning.

"All right! All right! I promise not to say another word...honest." He grinned boyishly. "How's about a drink? Guaranteed to dispel all thoughts of gloom and doom in one easy lesson! Just what the doctor ordered, eh?"

"Agreed! I've this bottle of Saurian brandy - been saving it for just this sort of occasion. You provide the glasses and..."

"Did I hear a wee mention o' Saurian brandy from my dear old fren' Dr. McCoy?" An unmistakable voice made its presence known from the direction of Engineering. McCoy, caught in mid-sentence, eyed Kirk, who in turn passed a silent, mischievous message. Jim began,

"Pity Scotty can't join us. Unfortunate business that bang on the head..."

"Yes, Jim, most unfortunate," took up McCoy. "Of course it means no alcohol for quite a while, you know."

"Oh, really, Bones? Why's that?"

"Complications. You can get some pretty nasty complications from cracks on the head. Very unpleasant." McCoy shook his head sadly. "Do you know, only the other day I -"

"Jist a wee minute there!" Scotty came bounding over to stand by the two men. "Whit's all this nonsense aboot com -"

"Scotty?" Kirk pulled a face, showing obvious concern. "Shouldn't you still be in sickbay? You know you still don't look too good - he doesn't look too good, does he, Bones?"

"Nooo...not well at all. In fact... I think you'd better lie down straight away - no telling what damage -"

"Lie down? Damage?" began a somewhat bemused Engineer. "Captain, Dr. McCoy! I'm perfectly all right, and I'll no' be wantin' tae lie doon onywhere - least of all yon torture chamber ye ca' a sickbay!" He smiled expectantly. "Now, aboot that wee dram..."

McCoy and Kirk exchanged gloomy looks again, this time Kirk shaking his head somberly. "Complications. Not advisable, Scotty."

"Wh...?" He turned from one to the other. "Complications? Whit are ye on aboot, complications?" With pleading eyes the poor Scot looked forlornly at his Captain, Kirk merely shrugged his shoulders and switched his gaze to McCoy, who was apparently engrossed in the examination of his medical tri-corder. "Whit complications?" No reply. "Dr. McCoy! WHIT...COMPLICATIONS?"

"Oh! Sorry, Scotty - were you talking to me?"

Scotty's face was indescribable. His exasperation had been steadily building and now this apparent detachment by McCoy was the final straw. As he exploded with the force of an erupting volcano Kirk found himself no longer able to restrain the laughter which had been slowly bubbling to the surface. He snickered - loudly.

Two eyes of burning steel rounded on him, but quickly moved on as McCoy now began to laugh. As if on cue, the whole bridge erupted, sending showers of laughter rippling through the air.

The only one not laughing, understandably enough, was Scott. He stood quietly steaming, his blood simmering just that fraction under critical, his face almost matching his uniform tunic.

Kirk deciding enough was enough, rose slowly from his chair and nudged his Engineer affectionately. "Ah, Scotty - we really had you there, didn't we? You've certainly earned a drink after that. C'mon."

"Poor Scotty," added McCoy. "Friends?"

A few seconds ticked away before a broad grin appeared, directed at each of them in turn. "Aye, I guess so. But afore we start - I have a wee bottle o' Scotch hidden away. Is it all right by you, Captain, if I bring it along?"

"But of course, Scotty! Don't they always say 'variety is the spice of life'?"

"Aye, they do indeed, sir...they do indeed."

"Well, gentlemen - if we're quite ready? Mr. Sulu, you have the con, and I don't want to be disturbed for anything less than a Vulcan orgy!"

"I'll bear that in mind, sir!" answered the grinning helmsman, happy to see his Captain finally relaxing completely.

As the steel doors moved across, an anxious voice drifted out and into the bridge. "Dr. McCoy - ye werena' serious aboot yon complications? Were ye?"

Laughter drowned any reply - if there ever was one.

So time moved ever onward, with days merging rapidly each into the next. Activity thrived both on the Enterprise and the planet Vulcan, as the drama of life continued to unfold, displaying the complexities of fate - and determination.

For the Enterprise it was simply a question of time. Patience. Until the moment when the communication channels, long silent, would chatter once more with voices old and new. Patience until familiar star systmes would make their presence known to deep searching sensors. And patience until that final moment when Kirk could say, "Gentlemen! We're home." With mounting excitement and anticipation, they waited.

The situation on Vulcan, however, was a little different. Spock, with his usual determination and stubbornness, continued to research and investigate all known data connected with this experience, to which he was such a vital link.

It had been by no means easy on him. Initial reception of his facts - and theories - had met with strange looks of disbelief, and low mumblings concerning his sanity - or alleged lack of it. Eventually, however, he had won through - with a little persuasion, or perhaps it was a little more of that stubbornness again.

But the long hours of discussion and analysing were beginning to take their toll, bringing a tenseness and over-tired look to tax his recovering mind and body. With no reserves to rely upon, he soon became a concern to his parents, who knew him a great deal better than Starfleet personnel. But no matter what methods they attempted, he was adamant over his commitment.

Matters reached a crisis point when he informed Sarek and Amanda of his intention to leave Vulcan and travel to Starfleet Headquarters. "It is necessary for me to be available at all times," was his emphatic statement...and there was no dissuading to be achieved.

Just before his departure, Amanda and Sarek somehow managed to achieve a partial success. They persuaded him to place himself under the supervision of the Medical Authority at Starfleet, and abide by any decisions they chose to make regarding his health. Reluctantly he agreed.

Days now passed quickly, with much preparation and co-ordinating in readiness for the Starship's return. The Enterprise was to travel direct to Starbase 9, where extensive repairs were to be conducted, and an official 'Welcome home' reception was standing by.

Spock involved himself totally with the hive of industry, appearing to take sufficient amounts of rest in order to keep the medics at bay. Failure to understand him as well as some persons left them all utterly confused, resulting in his ploy being a complete success.

Not until contact with the Enterprise was finally made did he allow himself the luxury of relaxing - but by that time, he required more rest than he cared to admit - or even realised.

Actual contact came as a moment of rather organised chaos, with everyone wanting to talk at once, offer congratulations, express feelings of relief and ask the inevitable questions; the sound resembled graduation day at Starfleet Academy. Add to this the problem of damaged communications systems on board the Enterprise resulting in audio only, and the confusion was doubled.

Amidst the cheering, laughing and shouting, however, Kirk did eventually manage to achieve some sort of order, only to find himself assaulted by various high ranking officers eager to hear every detail of the almost disastrous voyage.

Gradually the excitement began to abate and the Captain was at last able to voice the one burning question which had been foremost in his mind since initial contact. During the past thirty minutes or so, a most persistent Chief Medical Officer had continually bombarded his left ear with agitated whisperings of "Ask him, Jim! Ask him now!"

Holding up an exasperated hand in an attempt to quieten McCoy, he tried to appear casual as he slipped in the vital question. "Oh - er - by the way, Commodore - does Mr. Spock happen to be there with you?"

"Commander Spock? Why, of course he's here, Jim! Couldn't have made it this far without him! Want a word with him?"

"Well..."

"Course you do! Spock? Come over here and speak to the Captain..." The Commodore broke briefly to allow a sly laugh to escape. "Tell him how you resigned and were reinstated, all in the space of ten minutes!"

Aboard the Enterprise Kirk and McCoy exchanged mischievous grins. Evidently Spock had been up to his old tricks again. Any further speculation, however, was cut short as the familiar deep voice swam out from the intercom.

"Spock here, Captain." The words flowed warmly as they had in distant times past, and as they would in future occasions yet to come. Kirk positively glowed with happiness, feeling the sting of held-back tears of joy in his eyes. He blinked hard, switching his gaze towards McCoy. The Surgeon's eyes sparkled a deep blue with an understanding only revealable to Kirk. Gently, Bones squeezed his friend's shoulder and nodded - the long wait was almost over.

Returning to the silent intercom, Kirk spoke slowly, "Mr. Spock... It's good to hear your voice again." He hesitated, discovering a sudden difficulty in finding words. For so long he had waited for this moment and now he was groping, stammering like some raw recruit on the carpet before his commanding officer. Swallowing hard, he tried again. "Er...shall we be seeing you at Starbase 9? Or does Starfleet have something else lined up for you?"

"No, sir, I shall be departing for the Starbase in exactly three hours, eleven minutes and twenty-seven seconds."

"That's if the Medics allow him to go!" butted in a playful Commodore. "He's been running circles round the docs here for the past ten days, but I've a feeling they've finally caught up with his little game..." he finished knowingly.

"That is not true, Commodore," returned an indignant Spock. "I have fully complied with all requests, and fail to understand why I should be refused permission to leave for Starbase 9!" There was a slight pause at this stage, as Spock seemingly reassessed the situation. "However, if you prefer, sir, I shall place myself under the care of Dr. McCoy immediately I am aboard the Enterprise."

Upon hearing this glowing statement of alleged faith, Bones couldn't resist a reply. "Why, Mr. Spock! I'm sure you've just paid me a compliment. I didn't realise you had such faith in my skills as a doctor."

"Ah, Dr. McCoy. I was wondering when we would be honoured with the sound of your voice. Unfortunately, you have once again misinterpreted my words - as you so frequently do. Perhaps the use of one of your Terran expressions may clarify the matter?"

"What?"

"I place myself under your care simply because it appears to be a case of 'rather the devil you know than the one you do not'."

"Spock!" exploded a storming Surgeon.

"Yes, Doctor?"

"Why you...you green-blooded overgrown pixie... I ought to string you up by your pointed ears and...and..." Frustrated fists threatened the empty air surrounding the now quiet intercom.

Laughing heartily, Kirk intervened before McCoy damaged something - possibly the poor innocent communications channel. "Gentlemen, please... I think we've had quite enough excitement for one day. Spock - see you at the Base."

"I look forward to that, Captain."

"Bones? Say goodbye to Spock."

"Humph! Don't see why I should! Probably be insulted again. 'Devil you know' indeed..."

"Bones - just say goodbye."

"Oh, all right." His voice changed perceptibly. "'Bye, Spock."

"Goodbye, Doctor." The message had been passed.

Once more the cheery sound of the Commadore returned. "I can see there's going to be quite a reunion when those two meet, Jim. Sure you can handle them? I'm offering my services as a referee if you need one."

"No, no - I can manage my own refereeing, thank you, sir - I think!" finished Kirk.

"Very well, Captain! Look forward to seeing you very soon." He laughed his way through the sentence, ending with, "But remember! I did offer!"

"Thank you, sir. Kirk and Enterprise out." Sighing audibly, the Captain spun his chair towards navigation. "Mr. Chekov! Compute and lay in course for Starbase 9!"

"Already computed, Captain!" came the proud return.

"Excellent, Chekov, excellent... And I suppose Mr. Sulu is merely awaiting my official order to change course?"

"Right first time, Captain!" The itchy fingers were poised.

"Very well, then, gentlemen. Let's see how fast the old lady can sprint the last leg... Initiate course change! Speed - warp factor 4."

"Warp factor 4 it is, sir!"

An impatient buzz demanded attention, causing McCoy to twist his neck around sharply. The stiffened collar of his tunic snapped open.

"Damn and blast it!" murmured the fuming Surgeon. "Come in!" He continued to growl frustratedly. The door slid gently aside revealing a bouncing Captain Kirk.

"C'mon, Bones! What's keeping you?"

"This is what's keeping me!" boomed an irate doctor, fiddling urgently with his dress uniform. "I tell you, Jim, that blasted computer's got it in for me. I'll swear these measurements are all wrong. Damn near choking me, this is!"

Chuckling merrily, Kirk moved over to his friend's side. "Here - let me fix it for you." McCoy extended his head back allowing Kirk to secure the elusive fastenings. "There you go, Bones...all hatches battened down and secure, as the saying goes." He took a step to the rear to admire his handiwork. "Very smart, Dr. McCoy - very smart."

"Humph!" he snorted. "Feels like a straight-jacket to me, and the sooner I'm out of it the better." He paused, twisting his head cautiously in a circular movement. "Right - let's get it over with... I hate these formal receptions... I can see it all now! I'll either be bored to death by some bumbling old professor...or slowly asphyxiated by this monstrosity!"

Kirk grabbed his friend's arm and physically dragged him towards the door. "Quit moaning and get a move on...everyone's waiting for us..."

Continuing to express flowery statements concerning uniform designers, McCoy was bundled out the door and off towards the waiting turbolift.

"If we hurry we might catch Spock - I could only speak to him for a few minutes, but he said he'd be waiting for us near the reception area."

"Why didn't you say so before? We could have beamed down earlier!"

"No good, Bones - you know how it is. I had to wait for the relief crew." The voices faded as they turned into the lift and departed.

Before Bones even had a chance to register he'd accomplished yet another successful beamdown, Kirk was off the transporter pad of Starbase 9 and heading for the exit. Quickly catching up with his companion, McCoy immediately recognised the reason for their rapid transit out and into the corridor.

Standing with his back towards them and watching out of the vast observation panel stood a tall familiar figure in dress uniform.

"Spock!" The name sprang urgently from Kirk's lips.

Turning directly, the figure took a step forward, hesitated, then stepped forwards again, this time continuing to walk directly towards them.

Kirk, unable to control his pace quite so calmly, almost ran the last few metres, already extending eager arms to greet the friend he at one time thought he'd never see again.

"Spock..." They clasped hands with a firmness of unity, immediately experiencing the surge of empathy which had drawn them together across the light years of space.

The Vulcan remained silent, simply drinking in the presence of his friend, the warmth of their hands together...the sparkle within smiling eyes which held a message only he could interpret. He had no need for words...Jim understood completely. He knew.

The magic lasted until the spell was broken as Spock caught a glimpse of McCoy hovering in the background. Releasing Kirk's hands, he turned slightly to approach the doctor. Somehow McCoy appeared nervous, and obviously unsure of what to do with his hands, he was fidgeting so.

"Hello, Spock," came the soft, cautious voice.

"Dr. McCoy." Spock stood before him, looking directly into the twin pools of searching blue. All at once McCoy felt the tenseness drain away as the Vulcan reached out to clasp the worrying hands. Instinctively he clutched the welcoming hands and allowed his feelings to surface.

"God - it's good to see you again, Spock. It really is."

"Indeed, Doctor, I must admit to this being one occasion when I agree with you - totally."

For a few seconds, McCoy held the grip tighter, feeling the sting within his eyes as his vision began to blur. Swallowing hard, he gave one final squeeze, then began to relax and look over at Kirk, who was smiling broadly.

"Yesss...well, um..." He let go the Vulcan's hand, and started to fidget once more. "I..er...I think I'll go on and leave you two together for a while." He backed away, nodded at Kirk. "See you both later, then?" He continued to walk backwards, obviously overwhelmed by the whole affair.

"Sure, Bones, sure!" replied Kirk, smiling affectionately.

With one final wave of his hand he spun on his heel and walked briskly

into a nearby access corridor.

Chuckling to himself, Kirk turned back towards his friend. "Do you know, I really don't think I've ever seen him so...so..." He searched the air with open hands to find the right words. "So...so emotional and embarrassed all at the same time!" He shook his head in wonder. "Poor old Bones..."

"He was clearly pleased to see me, Captain, as I am...to see you, Jim," he finished, quietly. Kirk looked up, laid a reassuring arm across the Vulcan's shoulders and began to walk slowly.

"Let's go someplace to talk." He glanced up, frowning slightly. "You look tired - are you all right? I mean, what was all that business about the medics?"

"It is nothing, Jim. I am merely..."

"Ah! Captain Kirk!"

"Oh no," muttered Kirk as the call of his name brought the two men to a standstill.

"Where have you been hiding yourself? Now come along, there's no time to lose - everyone's waiting." The bustling figure of Commodore Martin J. Lee stepped between them. "You too, Commander Spock!" Speedily he ushered them towards the reception area. "Can't let our celebrities miss all the fun!"

The doors slid open revealing a mass of gleaming faces - High Command, civilian hierarchy, Ambassadors, they were all there, eager to hear and see everything. Escorted through the centre, Kirk found himself assaulted by hand shakes, slaps on the back, and all the other refinements associated with this sort of occasion.

As the crowds surrounded them, he became separated from Spock. Angrily he tried to look back, only to see the Vulcan dragged off into the company of some enthusiastic scientists. Cursing all Starfleet brass, receptions and red tape in general, Kirk conceded to the demands of his social duties and switched his mind to the cascade of questions currently bombarding his ears.

The reception continued to be all Bones had said it would be. Formal, tediously long and utterly boring! Kirk had spoken to so many Commodores, Admirals and Vice-admirals, he was beginning to feel like a machine programmed to spew forth the same recorded information time after time.

Eagerly his eyes scanned the area for Spock, but he couldn't see him anywhere. Mind you, there were still places where he hadn't ventured at all as yet, so possessive had been some of his audience. Half listening to his present company of unstimulating conversationalists, he caught a glimpse of McCoy - still tugging sub-consciously at his collar. Kirk smiled to himself and continued to watch the Doctor for a few more seconds.

Just as he was about to turn his attention back to his company, McCoy glanced his way. Recognising he had Jim's attention, he gave a brief jerk of his head indicating he wanted him. Kirk nodded.

"If you will excuse me a moment, gentlemen. I've just seen someone I wish to talk to..."

"Certainly, Captain. Perhaps we can continue this another time?"

"Indeed yes, sir. Thank you, gentlemen." Bowing slightly Kirk retreated into the sea of people and headed for McCoy.

"How's it going, Bones? Enjoying yourself?" ventured Kirk, mischievously.

"Like hell I am!" came the mumbled reply. "But listen, Jim, have you seen Spock lately?"

"No - not since we arrived. We became separated, but I guess he's around here somewhere," answered Kirk, straining his neck to search the ocean of heads surrounding them.

"Well, I think we'd better find him soon." McCoy's concerned voice affected Kirk like a cold shower.

"Why? What's wrong?" he demanded urgently.

"No, no, it's nothing serious." McCoy laid a reassuring hand on Kirk's arm. "Only I've been talking to the Base Medical Officer - we were old drinking buddies in our younger days - anyway, according to him, Spock's been overdoing things. Bob gave me the gist of his illness and treatment including the most important part - the fact that he still needs plenty of rest and... Well, you can guess the remainder.

Being his usual obstinate, pig-headed 'I know what I'm doing' self, that's the one thing he hasn't been doing!"

"I thought he looked tired! Damn! Where do you think he is?" asked a now anxious Kirk. "And why hasn't he taken the medics' advice?"

"That's our Spock. Always got to finish the job, no matter what it takes."

"Yes - but if it threatens his life in any way... Where the hell can he be? I knew there was something wrong earlier on, but that blasted Commodore had to come along and..." Kirk was becoming agitated, turning frantically from left to right.

"And I knew I shouldn't have told you..." mumbled McCoy absently.

"What!" jumped Kirk.

"Nothing...nothing... Hey, there's Scotty. Heading this way by the look of things..."

Edging his way politely through the peopled floor, Scotty at last reached the two men. "Captain, I've been lookin' for ye all over the place. Hae ye seen Mr. Spock?" He appeared worried.

"Nol Have you?"

"Aye, sir, and he disna' look too grand. I'm thinkin' ye'd best tak' a look yersel'... You too, Leonard."

"Where is he, Scotty?"

"Well, I left him talkin' tae Lt. Uhura. Thocht it best tae keep tabs on him... They're across the room a ways..." He began to drift back into the throng muttering polite 'Excuse me's as he went. Kirk and McCoy followed like two silent shadows. Finally Scotty slowed his pace and said, "There he is, Captain, over tae yer richt."

Striding on tip-toe, Kirk managed to spot the familiar black sheen of hair. As he moved closer, other features came into view, together with an impression that Spock was standing awkwardly.

"Bones?"

"I don't know how I missed it earlier on, but...Jim, he's plain worn out! Damn stupid Vulcan! Never knows when to quit... C'mon, let's get him back to the ship where he belongs." Kirk knew how McCoy had missed the tell-tale signs earlier on - they had been so pleased at the long-awaited reunion that they had both missed the obvious. But now they wouldn't miss a thing!

Urging Kirk forward, McCoy changed his voice for Spock's benefit. "Spock! You old son-of-a-gun! Trying to sneak off without us knowing, eh?"

Visibly pulling himself together, the Vulcan straightened hastily, but it was too slow by half for his anxious friends to miss. Now Kirk realised why he had appeared to be standing awkwardly - Lt. Uhura had been helping to support him. Now as he left her welcome strength, he swayed unsteadily and would have fallen had it not been for Kirk's speed of movement.

"Oh, Spock - what have you been doing to yourself?" He gazed worriedly

into the tired, dull eyes as McCoy quickly manoeuvred a chair into position.

"Sit here for a minute, Spock, and let me look at you."

"Doctor... I am..." But Spock had only to see the look in McCoy's eyes to realise it was useless to proceed. His defences were crumbling as time and overwork finally caught up with him. Closing blurring eyes in an attempt to hide his failing composure, he felt his limbs begin to tremble. At once strong, secure arms were there - as they had been that time all those months ago, when he had felt so afraid and alone.

He opened the smarting eyes and focused with difficulty. "Jim... I..."

"I know, Spock. I know." The words trailed as once more the empathy asserted itself between them. Giving the Vulcan an extra squeeze, Kirk looked around for Bones, who was checking something with the departing Scotty and Uhura. The Doctor nodded briefly to Kirk, indicating he had everything organised - as usual.

"C'mon, Spock. It's bedtime for you...just as soon as I get you outside of here."

"And THAT'S an order," finished Kirk.

Spock offered no counter moves, only a simple "Thank you, Jim...Bones..."

Smiling broadly, Kirk uttered a quiet, "Gentlemen...let's go home."

They gently helped their friend to his feet; the three figures headed slowly for the exit...

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