



WINE OF CALVORO
by
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cover
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This story is for Janet Quarton; without whose compassionate interest, warm-hearted sympathy, and passionate devotion...

James T. Kirk might stand a snowball in hell's chance of staying out of sickbay for at least one story.

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WINE OF CALVORO

The Enterprise swung in graceful orbit around the planet known to the Federation as Kelora. The air of tension radiating from the senior officers was almost tangible; all sensors were set for maximum range and keen eyes studied them anxiously, not daring to relax their watchfulness despite the reassuring reports that no danger threatened.

From the command chair Spock surveyed the bridge with his usual air of unruffled serenity; McCoy, only too well aware of the concern that would never willingly be revealed, moved closer in silent support, a gesture that was acknowledged by one fleeting glance before the dark eyes resumed their study of the main viewscreen.

For the hundredth time the doctor found himself wondering why they were all reacting like this; it was a simple, routine mission, complicated only by the necessity for absolute secrecy... but Jim was alone down there, and that made all the difference.

It was unfortunate, but unavoidable, that the Prime Directive should be strongly enforced on Kelora; for its inhabitants were many generations away from being ready for First Contact; they were a violent, aggressive people, existing uneasily on the constant knife-edge of war with the small kingdoms and states that were the planet's form of government constantly at each other's throats over some real or imagined slight. The crisis would come when one power developed nuclear potential, but for the moment the limited weapons and explosives the Kelorans did possess were used with devastating effect.

The Federation's interest lay with one of the largest and most powerful of the kingdoms, the Empire of Calvoro; master of several conquered territories, it was reported as being a disciplined, ruthless and efficient society, one which if unchecked would eventually dominate the planet. This was no concern of Starfleet's; what did interest them were reports that vast deposits of dilithium had been discovered in the hills that bordered the rich farmlands that stretched from the North gate of the capital city - also named Calvoro - in an unbroken sweep hundreds of miles to the sea. Though totally useless to the Kelorans, the precious crystals made the planet a tempting prize for any space-going race that managed to obtain a foothold.

The danger was that Kelora, although within Federation space, lay very close to the Klingon sphere of influence; and while the Organian Peace Treaty forbade any contact, it was not beyond the bounds of possibility that an attempt might be made to infiltrate Calvoro, and obtain the crystals by stealth.

To forestall any such attempt, the Federation had planted one of its field agents in the city of Calvoro; living among the natives as one of them, Anton Tesla had the responsibility of keeping watch and reporting on any suspicious activity such as might be caused by illegal mining. So far, there had been nothing to report, but the risk was too great to be ignored.

The Enterprise was responding to a call for assistance from Tesla; normally the agent made his report direct to Intelligence Headquarters by sub-space radio, but the signal Uhura had picked up two days ago had been weak, distorted; his equipment was failing, beyond his skill to repair, and he had requested a replacement. Kirk had relayed this information to Starfleet, and had been ordered to divert to Kelora to render assistance.

It was inconvenient, thought not seriously so, that the Enterprise's transporter system had been contaminated during their last planetfall; this meant that someone would have to go down by shuttlecraft and deliver the replacement transmitter in person. To lessen the risk of detection only one person was to go, and Kirk had immediately declared his intention of being the one - Tesla was an old friend, and he felt that the man would be delighted to see a familiar face in his exile.

There was no logical reason to object, though Spock and McCoy both tried; Kirk, after a good-humoured objection to 'mother hens' overruled their protests and announced his impending visit to his expectant friend before going off to prepare his disguise.

The landing was smooth and uneventful; Kirk watched as the Galileo lifted off - it would return for him on his signal -- and sighed in unconscious anticipation of his unexpected holiday. It would be pleasant to see his old friend again, and despite McCoy's growled warnings, he expected nothing more hazardous than the possible consequences of an evening's enthusiastic drinking and reminiscing - and the good doctor's notorious potions would take care of that! Smiling a little at the thought, Kirk began to walk towards the city some miles distant.

It was unlikely that he would arouse suspicion; the Kelorans were almost identical in appearance to Humans. He wore the blue tunic and trousers that identified him as a member of the merchant caste - Tesla's cover was that of a dealer in fine wines, and Kirk's cover was as a relative seeking employment from a wealthy patron, a not unusual arrangement. The radio equipment was in a concealed compartment in a satchel which appeared to contain only a change of clothes and the usual personal items; a miniature translator had been embedded behind his ear; and the pendant he wore around his neck, besides conforming to Keloran fashion, also contained a signalling device to enable him to contact the Enterprise when he wished to return. To avoid risk of detection if a call reached him at an awkward moment the device could only transmit, but if an emergency arose he could be reached via Tesla.

The streets were crowded when Kirk passed unchallenged through the city gates. He had calculated to arrive about mid-morning, when the shops would be thronged with citizens going about their business.

Kirk looked around with interest as he edged through a bustling marketplace, recalling the briefing he had been given in Keloran society, and that of Calvoro in particular. Supreme power lay with the Emperor, but little was known of him - he and his court lived secluded in the sprawling Imperial Palace that dominated the city, rarely appearing among the people. His secular role was combined with that of the chief religious authority, as by all accounts the Imperial family was held to be semi-divine; Tesla had reported that, except on religious festivals, all contact with the citizens was through the State Council, headed by Havron, Commandant of the Imperial Guard.

It was a society governed by a rigid class structure; no man might rise above the caste of his birth, no woman marry outside it, yet there seemed to be little oppression. If it was impossible to rise above the caste of birth, it was equally impossible to fall into destitution - even the unskilled labourers were organised into a guild that cared for the elderly and sick, even supporting the family of a member who had died.

As a result the faces that Kirk saw around him expressed a satisfied security; everyone seemed adequately fed and clad, and even in the poorest quarter of the city the houses were neat and cared for, the streets clean. The goods on display in the market were plentiful, of good quality, and reasonably priced; if this was a dictatorship, Kirk thought, at first sight it appeared to be a benevolent one.

Reflecting Calvoro's military importance, Kirk noticed the deference that was paid to richly-uniformed soldiers he passed. Civilians stood aside for them with an eager alacrity, they were automatically served first at the market stalls, and this without any resentment on the part of the citizens who had to wait. Kirk noted that with interest - a military elite which seemed to have the full support of the population.

Leaving the market Kirk turned down a wide street into the more prosperous area of the city, searching for the shop to which he had been directed. He found the sign halfway along the street and entered confidently, too

absorbed to notice the speculative eyes that followed him intently from across the street, the eyes of a tall man in the uniform of a centurion of the Imperial Guard.

The shop was spacious and well-lit; three assistants were waiting on clients at a long counter, while Tesla himself was seated at a high desk in the corner, poring over a ledger.

Kirk caught his eye, and grinned broadly. "Greetings, cousin," he said.

"Cousin James! You are welcome," Tesla greeted him formally, but with a twinkle in his eye. "Follow me, we have much to talk of - it has been long since we met."

Talking earnestly of fictional relatives he urged his supposed cousin through a door at the back of the shop into his living quarters; only when the heavy bolt had been firmly drawn did he drop the pose.

"Hello, Jim; it's been a long time. I'm glad to see you."

"Too long, Anton," Kirk agreed. "That's why I came myself - I thought you'd like to see a familiar face."

"You were right at that. When do you have to get back?"

"Tomorrow morning. I've arranged a rendezvous with the shuttlecraft, but it won't come until I signal."

"Then we've time to catch up on all the news," Tesla observed with satisfaction. "Tell you what, Jim - I'll install the equipment now, then the rest of the time will be ours."

Kirk watched with interest as the agent crossed to a heavy, ornately-carved set of shelves that stood against the wall. Drawing off a ring he wore he inserted it into a gap in the carving, and twisted it into place; there was a sharp click, and the heavy shelves slid smoothly aside, revealing an alcove in the wall.

With Kirk's help Tesla installed and tested the replacement equipment; Uhura on the Enterprise confirmed that reception was excellent, then the shelves were restored to their former position as though they had never been moved.

"The ring keys an electronic lock," Tesla explained as he replaced it on his finger. "There's a destruct mechanism in the alcove - if anyone tries to open it without following exact procedure, all they'll find is an empty hole. Well, now that's done, how about a meal?"

One of Tesla's assistants served a light but enjoyable meal, after which the two friends settled down with a bottle of the merchant's finest wine to recall old times and bring each other up-to-date with what had been happening in the years since they had last met.

"I heard they gave you Chris Pike's ship, the Enterprise," Tesla said. "How does it feel, having your own command?"

"Wonderful - and frightening, sometimes," Kirk admitted with a grin. "The responsibility can be pretty awesome, knowing that I'm the ultimate authority, that I take the final decisions for so many lives."

"It must be lonely," Tesla commented, seeing the memory of his responsibility shadow his young friend's eyes for a moment; then Kirk's grin flashed again.

"Not always," he said, "I have good friends there. You know Leonard McCoy, don't you? He's my Chief Medical Officer... and of course, there's always Spock."

"The Vulcan?" Tesla looked up enquiringly at the softened tone of Kirk's voice. "Chris told me about him - said he was efficient, but a cold fish, wouldn't let anyone get close to him."

"I like him," Kirk replied briefly, then changed the subject pointedly to comment on the orderly and apparently contented society he had seen; at his remark that this seemed unusual for such a warlike race Tesla nodded in agreement.

"It's as if they get rid of all their aggressive instincts in war," he said. "The crime rate is very low - mind you, penalties are pretty barbaric, especially for anything that offends against their religious code - and I've seen no signs of unrest. The Emperor is revered as semi-divine, so any rebellion is regarded as blasphemy."

"And what's this Emperor like?"

"I don't know - I've never seen him, he rarely ventures outside the Palace grounds. There's an enormous estate to the west of the city that's reserved only for the nobles."

"Surely there's some dissatisfaction?"

Tesla shook his head. "I've never heard of any. Everyone knows his place in society, and is content to fill it. No-one starves, no-one is allowed to suffer illness untended - equally, all must work and pay taxes. It seems to work, Jim."

"Have you..." Kirk was interrupted by a sudden loud knocking on the door.

"Open in the name of the Emperor!" a harsh voice called.

Tesla flashed a worried glance at Kirk. "I have to open," he murmured. "I wonder why they're here - I've had no trouble. Say as little as possible." As he spoke he crossed the room and drew the bolt. An officer of the Imperial Guard strode in, followed by four of his men. The officer's ornate uniform and his air of confident authority made Kirk suspect his identity even before Tesla said, bowing low,

"My establishment is honoured by your presence, Lord Havron."

"You are the merchant Anton Tesla, dealer in wines?"

"I am. How may I serve Your Excellency?"

"And this?" Havron continued as though Tesla had not spoken, indicating Kirk with a jerk of his head.

"James Kirk, Your Excellency - a distant relative seeking employment..."

"Which he has now found. Take him!" Two of the Guards stepped to Kirk's side, grasping his arms; struggle was so obviously useless that he did not attempt it, but faced the nobleman squarely.

"What have I done?"

"Done? Nothing." Havron seemed surprised by the question. "You are greatly honoured - you have been selected as a candidate for the Imperial Guard." He surveyed Kirk appraisingly. "A promising specimen - the centurion who reported your presence in the city will be well rewarded."

"But Excellency," Tesla broke in, "although we are of course honoured, my kinsman is unworthy of such an opportunity - like myself, he is only of the merchant caste..."

"The Imperial Guard answers only to the Emperor," Havron said. "The decision will be his, and if it is favourable - as I have no doubt it will be - your kinsman will be raised to the military caste." He turned on his heel, but Tesla's call made him swing round impatiently. "Well?"

"When will I be permitted to see my cousin?"

"Only after completion of his training. The Guards' quarters are within

the Palace, and no commoner is permitted to enter. Do not seek to send a message, for it will not be delivered until after his training has been completed. A signal honour has been confirmed on your family, merchant - be content with that."

Kirk only had time to exchange a reassuring glance with Tesla as he was led out, and received a quick nod of understanding.

As soon as he was alone again, Tesla bolted the door and with a worried frown crossed the room to the alcove where his transmitter was hidden.

Aboard the Enterprise Commander Spock received Tesla's report in complete silence. Only when the man had finished did he say quietly,

"Is there any chance that you can contact the Captain, Mr. Tesla?"

"None, while his training lasts," the agent answered gloomily. "I couldn't even find out how long that's likely to take. He'll be confined to the Guards' barracks until then - although I was told that once he's been formally recruited he'll be allowed to visit outside the Palace."

"We cannot afford to wait. Do not endanger your position by appearing too concerned, Mr. Tesla; I shall consider the problem, and attempt to effect the Captain's recovery from the Enterprise."

"Let me know if I can help."

"I shall do so." Spock gestured to Uhura to cut transmission, and returned to the command chair. His face betrayed not the slightest emotion, but one pair of very keen eyes noticed the almost imperceptible hesitation as he took his seat; for that reason McCoy schooled his voice to gentleness before he could bring himself to ask,

"Can you find him, Spock?"

"I do not know, Doctor - but I will try." He hesitated for a moment, then continued thoughtfully, "The Captain carried a translator implant. Mr. Chekov - concentrate sensors on the palace and programme to scan for the metallic compound. Mr. Scott - " the command chair swung round " - is the transporter working yet?"

"No, sir; and it won't be for a while."

"Then we must wait," Spock said calmly, but McCoy noticed the unusual tension in the hands that rested, apparently calmly, on the arm of his chair.

Minutes crawled by, each seemingly endless, until a sigh of frustration came from Chekov.

"Are you having some difficulty, Ensign?"

"It's the compound, sir. There's a native metal of similar composition that's considered precious - and being a Palace... "

"Life form readings?"

"Very close to Human,,sir. It can be done - but the differences are so minute, both for metal and life forms, that it'll take hours."

"Then please begin at once. I will arrange relief from the Science Department every hour - concentration must be precise."

"Aye, sir."

"Mr. Spock, I have Starfleet - Admiral Shandor speaking," Uhura reported.

"On screen, Lieutenant."

The image of Kelora dissolved from the screen, to be replaced by that of the Andorian Admiral.

"Enterprise. Commander Spock here."

"Where is Captain Kirk?"

"I regret, sir, that while delivering the consignment to Agent Tesla, he was detained by the Imperial Guard. We are at present attempting to locate him in order to effect a rescue."

"Most unfortunate." Shandor looked distressed. "Your search must be postponed for the moment, Commander. We have received a warning from the Klingons that the Federation colony on Taletha is threatened with attack by one of their renegade ships which has crossed the neutral zone without orders. We have their permission to destroy the ship, but only the Enterprise is close enough to have a chance of reaching the colony on time."

"But the Captain -!" McCoy protested.

"Be silent, Doctor." Spock's voice was cold. "The Captain would not risk an entire colony for the sake of one man - nor can I. Mr. Sulu - prepare to leave orbit. Mr. Chekov, lay in a course for Taletha."

The Admiral leaned forward. "I understand your concern, Doctor," he said quietly. "Commander Spock, you may return to Kelora as soon as the renegade has been dealt with."

"Thank you, sir. Spock out."

"Course laid in, sir," Chekov reported.

"Execute. Mr. Scott, you have the con. Proceed to Taletha at maximum safe speed." For a moment the dark eyes surveyed the concerned faces on the bridge. "We will not abandon the Captain," he said quietly, answering the unspoken fear in the eyes that turned to him. "A swift and successful completion of our mission will ensure our speedy return."

"Aye, Mr. Spock." Scott's quiet acknowledgement expressed the acceptance of all.

"Doctor - a word with you, please."

As McCoy followed the tall figure to the turbolift he reflected, not for the first time, on how greatly Spock had changed during his years of service with Kirk. Not in any outward display - to strangers he was still the cold, impassive Vulcan - but to the crew of the Enterprise he had somehow learned to transmit the same sense of security and trust that Kirk could provide so fully. Spock liked to maintain the fiction that he could not understand Humans, but those few words had proved yet again that he did; he had seen and shared their anxiety for their Captain, and his quiet determination that Kirk would be rescued had reconciled the crew to the enforced postponement.

In Spock's place McCoy knew he would have raged at the dangerous delay; the Vulcan, though equally anxious - if not more so, judging by that rigidly-controlled expression - had wasted no time in argument, but had seen at once that to ensure Kirk's safety the Enterprise must leave and return with all speed.

Shaking his head ruefully, mildly surprised to find that he now accepted Spock's decision where once he would have protested it, McCoy bestowed a reassuring grin on the bridge crew, and stepped into the turbolift.

Back on Kelora Jim Kirk paid careful attention to his surroundings as his guards led him into the Imperial Palace. The vast complex of buildings was surrounded by a high, sheer wall broken only by an enormous entrance gate. Sentries ringed the wall, each within sight of two others - it would be impossible to approach the wall unseen.

Once inside the gate he saw that the screen of sentries was repeated around the interior of the wall, and his uneasiness deepened. Without assistance,

escape would be very difficult. It looked as though he would have to wait until the transporter was repaired - at least Tesla would have contacted the Enterprise, and Spock would be looking for him.

With some curiosity Kirk realised that although he had been virtually abducted, his captors were being unusually careful with him; his hands had been bound, but in such a way that he suffered no discomfort, and they were making no attempt to force him to hurry - a reasonable attitude, he conceded, for if he was injured, his training would be prolonged.

He had just reached that conclusion when the party halted in a large, open courtyard; to the left a long, low building clearly housed the barracks, for guardsmen of all ranks were hurrying about their business. To Kirk's surprise, Havron dismissed his escort, and grasping Kirk's bound arm tightly led him to the right, halting before an ornate metal gate; two sentries stood guard outside, while an elderly man dressed in what Kirk would soon come to recognise as the uniform of the Palace servants requested their business.

"Lord Havron to see Lord Zathon," the Guard commander announced.

"Admit His Excellency." At the order the sentries swung back the gate and the two men passed through.

Ignoring the respectful salute from the gateman Havron led Kirk through a maze of corridors; male and female servants shrank back against the wall at their approach; sentries stiffened to attention, saluting their commander; several times they passed nobles of the court who greeted Havron, then studied Kirk with a detached curiosity that was somehow more disturbing than a more direct one would have been.

Their journey ended at last when Havron led him into what appeared to be a doctor's surgery - primitive compared to McCoy's sickbay, but Kirk guessed that it would be very advanced for this world. Motioning Kirk to remain where he was Havron crossed to an inner door, opened it, and called, "Zathon! Show yourself, man! I have a recruit for you."

"Must you make so much noise? Really, Havron, strolling in here just when you feel like it... I might have had a patient with me..."

Preceded by a mumbling flood of complaint a stout, middle-aged man emerged from the inner room. He was richly dressed in long, flowing robes, and his face appeared kindly and good-natured - until Kirk looked into the cold, piercing eyes, which studied him with the same impersonal interest he had seen McCoy bestow on one of his laboratory slides.

"Well, what have you brought me this time? Sit him down, sit him down - how do you expect me to run my tests? And who might you be, young man?"

"James Kirk," the Human replied as calmly as he could.

"Kirk, eh? Unusual name - still, that's not important. I am Lord Zathon, Custodian of the Imperial Health. If you prove a suitable candidate, we should see a great deal of each other. Get on with it, Havron - I'm ready."

Havron pushed Kirk into a heavy chair, and cut the ropes securing his wrists; before the Human could move, however, metal rings emerged from the chair to snap into place around his forearms and waist, holding him securely.

Zathon, who had been searching in one of the cabinets that lined the walls turned towards him; Kirk realised that he was holding items of medical equipment long outdated in his world - he only recognised some of them as a result of having studied McCoy's collection of antique medical apparatus. Zathon came closer.

"Relax," he said cheerfully. "This won't hurt."

"What are you doing?" Kirk asked.

"Merely a blood sample - we have to be certain of your suitability."

Suitability for what? Kirk wondered as Zathon tore the sleeve of his tunic and swabbed the bend of his elbow with a cold liquid; intuition warned him that this was more, much more, than a mere medical examination to decide his fitness to be recruited into the Imperial Guard - that would hardly require the Emperor's personal physician. Then he drew in his breath in surprise as a sharp needle pierced the vein in his arm, and watched with curiosity as the syringe slowly filled with blood.

Zathon withdrew the needle, swabbed the point of entry again, and moved over to a long bench where he busied himself for several minutes.

Havron, who had been lounging nearby, strolled over to peer over his shoulder. "What have you found?"

"Get out of my light, man!" Zathon said absently, reaching for a microscope. "Where did you find him?"

"Ah, yes, an amusing joke," Havron chuckled. "He belongs to the caste of wine merchants."

"Very appropriate." Zathon raised his head and looked at Kirk appraisingly. "The sample is of the finest quality - this one is destined for the Emperor himself. You have found a prize indeed, Havron."

"I am happy to serve. What happens now? I have never had the opportunity to watch you at work before."

Zathon rummaged again, selected another syringe, and filled it with a clear liquid. Approaching Kirk he leaned over him and turned his head to answer the other. "Stay, by all means, if you are curious. I will operate at once - no point in delaying, and I am anxious for the Emperor's opinion." He raised the needle and grasped the Human's arm.

"No!" Suddenly desperately afraid Kirk began to struggle, but was held too securely. His writhings made Zathon back off, however.

"Hold him, Havron!" the physician snapped irritably. "This will tame him." Held motionless by the powerful hands Kirk could offer no further resistance as the needle was pressed into his arm; almost at once he began to feel dizzy, and the last thing he heard before unconsciousness claimed him was Zathon's voice.

"A wine merchant, you said, Havron? Truly, an excellent vintage."

Even at full warp the Enterprise reached Taletha too late; the colony was a shattered ruin, the bewildered survivors stumbling among the wreckage trying to tend the injured and locate lost friends and relatives, too shocked to function with even the semblance of efficiency.

The Klingon renegade had fled, but not quickly enough - sensors were able to pick up its trail. There was a very short delay while McCoy assembled a full medical team to beam down - Spock added as many Security men as he could spare to aid in the search for survivors.

"Help is on the way," he told McCoy as they waited in the transporter room for beamdown to be completed. "Do your best for now, Doctor - I will return to pick you up when we have caught the raider."

"It's odd," McCoy said musingly. "These 'renegades' seem to be breaking out a bit too often for my liking. Yet if the ship was acting under orders, why did the Klingons warn us about it?"

"That had occurred to me," Spock replied, "but at the moment it is unimportant. First we must capture the ship, and return to Kelora."

"Yes, Jim will be anxious, wondering what's happened to us. He knows that we would never abandon him, but... "

"He may be concerned that something has happened to the Enterprise. Mr. Kyle is ready for you, Doctor - I shall return as swiftly as possible."

"Do that - and try not to worry, Spock; Jim can take care of himself."

"Will you guarantee to follow your own prescription, Doctor?" was the only reply; and for a moment brown eyes and blue clung, each reflecting the anxiety they shared.

With the teams safely on the surface the chase was begun, a chase of short duration, for the Klingon raider was no match for the Enterprise. Seeing the impossibility of escape the Klingon turned to fight, proving that her fire power at least was to be reckoned with. The slow, deadly battle of attrition wore on, ending only when the Klingon, hopelessly crippled, risked everything in a final suicidal attempt to ram the weakened Enterprise. Somehow a collision was avoided but the shock waves as the Klingon craft self-destructed at close quarters completed the damage to overstrained engines - the Enterprise limped back to Talotha at Warp one.

The mercy ships had reached the colony when they arrived, and a weary McCoy beamed back aboard to report. Despite his furious protests Spock relieved him of duty, ordering him to rest for a few hours while Scotty assessed the damage the Enterprise had sustained, and made what repairs he could. In the face of the Vulcan's determination McCoy obeyed with ill grace; there was nothing anyone could do until the ship's status had been determined, and in his present exhausted state the doctor knew that he would only be a liability.

Twelve hours later three grim-faced men took their places around the table in the briefing room. McCoy was the last to arrive, and began to speak even as the door slid open to admit him.

"Spock, why aren't we going after Jim? We've done all we can here - you're wasting precious time."

The dark eyes surveyed him expressionlessly for a moment, and McCoy's gaze fell under the intensity of their gaze; then the Vulcan turned to the man on his left. "Mr. Scott?"

"It's nae that simple, Doctor," the engineer said reluctantly. "The engines are badly overstrained - we can just about make Starbase four at Warp one, but any further... the whole system would fail, and we'd be reduced to impulse power. Forbye that, the ship's defences are seriously weakened, and I'm even worried about life support... I have tae recommend that we put in for repairs."

"I concur." Spock's voice was very quiet.

"You mean you'll just leave Jim?" McCoy stared accusingly from one to the other. "God knows what's happening to him... "

"Doctor, please." The weary patience in the Vulcan's voice caused McCoy to look at him sharply, and bite back the caustic words that trembled on his tongue. "I do not intend to abandon the Captain, but what purpose will it serve to cripple the ship? As Mr. Scott has stated, we cannot even reach Kelora in this condition. Admiral Shandor is in command at Starbase four, and is aware of the situation. I am certain he will do everything in his power to expedite our repairs. As for the Captain... He is a resourceful man, and I am certain that he will be able to protect himself until we can return for him." For a moment, the cool voice seemed to soften in appeal. "Surely you can see that it would be wiser to wait until we can be certain of reaching him? To try now, and fail, would be pointless."

"But suppose..." McCoy stopped, and sighed heavily. "I know, I know... the ship comes first. That's how Jim would want it." He straightened, and continued formally, "Mr. Spock, I endorse your decision."

"Thank you, Doctor. Mr. Scott, we rely on you to get the Enterprise to Starbase four at maximum safe speed."

"Aye, sir. Don't worry - I'll get you there."

As the door slid shut behind the engineer McCoy turned to study the man beside him. By mutual consent the seat at the head of the table had been left empty, and the absence of the man who usually occupied it suddenly came home to him with an almost physical pain.

The Vulcan was sitting, fingers steepled in his usual pose of deep concentration; his face was expressionless as usual, but something about the weary droop of the slim shoulders made McCoy say gently, denying his own fear,

"We'll get him, Spock."

The bowed dark head rose at that, and fathomless eyes gazed unseeingly into his.

"We will," the Vulcan stated in a tone of absolute certainty; but for a moment a cold hand clutched at the doctor's heart as he wondered just who the Vulcan was trying to convince.

Kirk came slowly awake to lie for a few moments trying to assess how he felt. His head ached abominably, his mouth was dry and parched, and he felt sick - presumably the result of the injection he had been given. An attempt to sit up produced such a sensation of dizziness that he lay down again and contented himself with studying what he could see of his surroundings.

He was lying on a comfortable bed in a small but pleasantly furnished room; in the wall at the foot of the bed was a large window looking out onto an expanse of garden, but light curtains had been drawn across it to provide shade from the strong sunlight while allowing him to see out - they stirred fitfully in the refreshing breeze that blew in from the garden. On the wall to his left a screen had been folded back to reveal a small bathroom, while an open cupboard on the far wall held clothes, but none of his own.

With a sudden thought Kirk felt at his neck, but his pendant was missing, and with it his only hope of signalling his position to the Enterprise.

Feeling slightly steadier Kirk threw back the covers and sat up, noting that he was now wearing the uniform of a male Palace servant, a short tunic and trousers in a white cotton material.

As he stood up a small pain in his left arm attracted Kirk's attention, and he carefully unwound the bandage that had been placed there. A frown of puzzlement creased his forehead - Zathon had spoken of 'an operation', and this must be the result; but he could see no purpose for the tube which had been inserted into the vein at his inner elbow - it had been securely stitched into place, and could not be removed without causing considerable damage.

There was a knock at the door, and Kirk hesitated a moment before replying with the instinctive invitation, "Come."

A man of about his own age entered, holding the door for a younger woman who carried a tray; both were dressed as he was in servants' livery, the woman's tunic similar to the man's, but reaching to the knee. Both smiled at Kirk.

"Greetings," the man said. "I am Darel - this is my companion, Cera. You are...?"

"James Kirk. Can you tell me what's going on, why I'm here?"

"That is why we have come. Newcomers are always confused when they awaken." He gestured Kirk to be seated. "But please - before we begin, you should eat... and you must be thirsty."

Kirk obeyed, aware that he was extremely hungry. Cera handed him a goblet. "You will find this refreshing, and it will help the sickness," she said in a pleasant voice.

Kirk sipped, and found that the drink - some kind of fruit juice, he thought - did ease his parched throat, and he drank thirstily. The two servants watched him curiously while he ate; then Cera removed the tray, and Kirk turned to Darel.

"You said you would explain?"

"I know that you will find this confusing at first, and that there is no reason why you should trust us, but let me assure you that we - all of us within this compound - are in the same position as yourself. I have been ordered to instruct you in what is expected of you so that you can join us in our service to His Imperial Majesty."

"You mean I'm a slave?" Kirk asked.

"In effect, yes. You will not be harmed or ill-treated, you will be fed, cared for... but you will never leave the Palace, and service will be enforced on you whether you consent or not. Just now you are confused, bewildered, upset at being parted from your family; but in time you will come to appreciate the honour that has been bestowed on you."

"What honour can there be in imprisonment and slavery?" Kirk asked.

"Oh, the greatest honour!" Cera broke in. "It is we who sustain the Empire."

"The Brothers will instruct you fully later on," Darel said, "but for now, Cera, explain to our friend the vital role we play."

The girl smiled, and turned to Kirk. "You know of course that the Imperial Family is descended from the Gods, and that divine honours are paid to them."

Kirk nodded; this information had been included in his briefing.

"In the old time," Cera went on, "sacrifices were made to the Gods, for as all know, blood is their tribute and their sustenance. So many lives... then, long generations ago, the Brothers realised that it was not necessary to kill, that the blood so desperately needed by the Incarnate Gods could be drawn from a living donor. Since that time especially honoured servants chosen for their strength and beauty have been kept here to supply the blood that is the life of our Imperial Family. Nourished by the willing sacrifice of their people, the Emperors grew stronger, and as they flourished, so did our land of Calvoro, until soon the whole world will be at peace under one rule.

You were chosen as a fitting donor, but no harm will come to you. Each day the required amount of blood will be drawn off through the tube in your arm - see, I have one, so does Darel. We are cared for, given special foods to maintain our health so that we do not sicken, and to ensure that our blood is rich and sustaining. Great care is used so that not too much is taken from you - you need not fear any ill effects."

"You are especially fortunate," Darel said. "When Lord Zathon's attendants brought you here, I overheard one of them say that your blood will be given to the Emperor himself."

Kirk shuddered inwardly, but managed not to show his revulsion; although Darel and Cera seemed friendly, he sensed that they genuinely believed that he would accept his fate resignedly - it might arouse suspicion in their minds if he showed reluctance.

"I'm... a little tired still," Kirk said at last. "Do you mind if I sleep now?"

"Of course." Darel rose. "I hope you will join us later, James. The attendants will come this evening to receive your tribute. Come, Cera, we must let our friend rest - it is time for our meal."

When the door had closed behind them Kirk stretched out on the bed, thinking over what he had just learned. He would not submit to this! There must be some way out, some escape... just because Darel and Cera accepted their fate

so resignedly didn't mean... but was escape possible? Desirable? It was pleasant here, safe and protected and....

With a sudden start Kirk sat bolt upright, puzzled and alarmed by the trend of his thoughts, by his reluctance to act. Suspicion awoke as his eye fell on the flagon Cera had left beside the bed, and he sniffed at it cautiously, certain that he could detect a bitter aftertaste in his mouth.

So that was the explanation for their resigned acceptance, for his own muddled thinking! It made sense, when he thought about it, that the food would be drugged to keep the servants docile, unquestioning their fate, but it meant danger for him if he allowed himself to be drugged into tranquillity before the Enterprise found him.

Hoping to clear his head - he thought that the juice he had drunk could not have affected him too badly - he stepped out of the window and began strolling through the carefully-tended gardens; to his relief the fresh air sharpened his thoughts, and he became aware of a nagging anxiety.

Tesla must have contacted the Enterprise, warned Spock of his capture; so the Vulcan should have located him by now. The sensors would have revealed that he was now alone, so why had he not been beamed up at once?

His heart lurched sickeningly - the Enterprise! Was she in danger? Not necessarily, he reminded himself; it might well be that a Klingon ship was in the area, and the Enterprise had been compelled either to take evasive action, or to maintain full shielding - in either case it would not be possible to operate the transporter. Or perhaps the transporter itself was still inoperable and Spock would not risk sending down a shuttlecraft in such a populated area.

He grinned to himself in relief - trust you, Kirk, always to imagine the worst! - and sat down on the rim of a fountain to consider his next move. There would obviously be some delay before the Enterprise could retrieve him, and he had to plan his next moves carefully, balancing the need to avoid suspicion against the possible effects of remaining here too long.

For just a moment, though, he could not help smiling at the thought of the confrontation that was no doubt taking place even now on his ship - McCoy's frantic and extremely voluble anxiety matched against Spock's quiet determination to act as his Captain would have wished. Worry for the Vulcan clouded his eyes for a moment at that thought - Spock would be deeply troubled by this delay ... but Kirk knew, beyond question, that no matter how long that delay, Spock would not leave without him.

However, he could do nothing for his friend now - at this moment it was his own situation that concerned him. Idly, he noticed that the bushes growing by the fountain bore attractive-looking fruit; he picked one and examined it carefully, breaking it open. The flesh, which resembled a peach but was white in colour, looked and smelt wholesome, and he tasted it cautiously. Finding it delicious he shrugged his shoulders and ate it - if it was harmful there would no doubt be some sort of treatment, and if it should prove nutritious he had found a way to avoid consuming the drugged food that would be given to him. Fruit and water from the fountain would not be a very exciting diet, he thought resignedly, but it would maintain his strength if ill-luck had it that he must remain here for a day or two.

The seemingly endless journey to Starbase four limped by with agonising slowness. Scott nursed his engines like the babies he named them, somehow holding them together long enough to allow the crippled ship to achieve a safe orbit; then at once plunged into an orgy of consultation with the engineers from the base, planning the repairs that were needed.

Spock handed the con to Sulu, and collecting a by-now frantic McCoy, beamed down to Headquarters for their appointment with Admiral Shandor.

"Welcome, Commander Spock - and congratulations." Shandor rose as they were shown directly into this office. "Had the Klingon raider escaped, it would have undoubtedly caused great havoc. And you, Doctor - the rehabilitation team reports that but for your skill the final death toll on T'Pol would have been much higher..."

"Thank you, Admiral," Spock cut in, and McCoy glanced at him in surprise -- the Vulcan's tone was distinctly edgy, almost... impatient. "I am gratified that your orders were carried out to your satisfaction, but Captain Kirk's situation must now be considered serious. I respectfully request that every effort be made to repair the Enterprise so that we may return to Kelora as swiftly as possible."

"Captain Kirk. Yes." Shandor inclined his antennae head, and McCoy's blood ran cold at the wariness in the Andorian's voice. "Please be seated, gentlemen; I have some... distressing news."

Spock's mask of control was rigidly in place, but McCoy noted with anxiety the tenseness of the slim body as the two men sat down.

Shandor hesitated, then continued. "I received a communication less than an hour ago from our agent on Kelora; I think it best that you hear the tape." Abruptly the Admiral leaned forward and activated the player on his desk; Tesla's voice, familiar to them from previous communications, issued from the speaker, heavy with grief.

"It is with deep regret that I have to report the death of Captain James T. Kirk of the U.S.S. Enterprise. His detention by the Imperial Guard has already been reported; today I was informed by Lord Havron that Jim had been selected as a potential recruit to the Guard, but that he was accidentally killed during a training session. As his supposed kinsman, his ashes were returned to me for burial, along with his personal effects; these included a limited-range communicator concealed in a pendant, and there can be no doubt that it is the one Jim was wearing." The disembodied voice wavered for a moment, then continued, "I shall retain Jim's ashes until an opportunity arises to return them to his family. Starfleet has lost one of its finest officers - and I... a valued friend."

Shandor reached out and switched off the recorder. "May I offer my condolences," he said quietly.

"Thank you." McCoy forced the reply through numb lips, for Spock was staring blankly ahead as though unaware of his surroundings. "This is... we expected... we hoped to get him back..."

"I understand, Doctor." Shandor's voice was sympathetic. "Starfleet cannot easily afford the loss of such a Captain. Commander Spock," he continued briskly, "you will assume command of the Enterprise while repairs are completed, and until a new Captain is appointed. I think I can say, the decision will not be difficult. Now gentlemen, if you will forgive me..."

"Spock?" McCoy prompted, laying an urgent hand on the Vulcan's sleeve as he showed no sign of having heard; the rigid muscles flinched slightly, Spock blinked twice, very slowly, and rose to his feet.

"Of course, Admiral. I will be aboard the Enterprise should you require me." The quiet voice was utterly lifeless.

With something approaching panic McCoy hustled his strangely apathetic companion from the Admiral's office back to the transporter room of the Starbase. He fretted impatiently while the coordinates were fed in, aware of the need to get Spock safely aboard the Enterprise before that brittle facade of calm crumbled, as it was threatening to do; he gave a sigh of relief as he stepped down from the transporter pad, and led the unresisting Vulcan into the privacy of the turbolift. Only then did he speak.

"Spock, I..."

"Be silent, Doctor!" The Vulcan's tone was harsh, but after a moment he continued more gently, "Not yet, please, McCoy. I cannot speak of it..."

Leaving the privacy of the car they walked in silence to Spock's door, where they paused. Conscious of the lump in his own throat McCoy asked, "Can I help?"

"Later, perhaps; for the moment, I must... I must... Forgive me!" With an abrupt movement Spock stepped into his quarters and the door slid shut behind him.

McCoy stared unseeingly at the blank metal, his own grief raw in his mind; at last he moved on, heading for his own cabin.

"Poor devil!" he whispered. "Oh Jim - you were the only one he'd accept comfort from - how can I help him now?"

For Kirk, the days of his imprisonment in the Palace dragged wearily. As he was not a servant in the usual sense there were no duties to fill his time (and perhaps to distract his mind a little from his situation); only every evening brought Zathon to draw the regular measure of blood from the tube in his arm. The man was careful, efficient, even gentle in his way, but Kirk was nauseated at the thought of the use that was made of his blood. After each withdrawal Zathon injected him with drugs that would, he claimed, speed up the replacement of the blood that was taken - a necessary precaution, as each evening approximately half a pint of blood was extracted, and his system would otherwise not long withstand such massive losses. The treatment worked, but with unfortunate side effects; perhaps the Keloran metabolism was slightly different, for he alone seemed to experience the agonizing bouts of cramp that racked him mercilessly. Lack of food was also taking its toll, and it was becoming more and more difficult to summon up the energy to stagger into the garden to gather the fruit that was all he dared to eat.

His unusual weakness, and the consequent long hours he spent in fitful sleep, puzzled Zathon, who was unable to account for such debility in his prize specimen; Cera and Darel were deeply concerned, for they had been assigned the task of caring for him until he adjusted to his imprisonment, but he could not be sure how far he could trust them. In common with the other servants Kirk had his own room; because of his lethargy Cera served his meals there, which made it easier to dispose of the drugged food - she saw no reason to be suspicious of his request to be allowed to eat alone, and had no idea that the tempting meals she served were flushed away in the disposal unit.

As the days passed and passed with no sign of rescue, illness and hunger slowly began to cloud Kirk's mind; he was sinking slowly into a dull lethargy, almost convinced that he had been abandoned, and he wondered with some bitterness if it would not be easier simply to accept his fate, swallow the drugged food, and be spared the problem of trying to retain his individuality. Kirk considered that temptation for a few moments; then his stubborn instinct for survival, his basic integrity and courage, awoke horrified at the thought - he would fight, he would struggle on somehow, for however great the effort, the loss if he did not was more than he was prepared to contemplate.

More for the sake of keeping himself occupied than because he had any real hope of escape, Kirk lengthened his painful excursions for food, exploring the gardens; as he had expected they were well guarded - he could roam where he pleased, but any attempt to approach one of the gates found his path blocked by a respectful, but inflexible, guard.

Only at one point did there seem any possibility of evading the vigilant sentries, and that would leave him as much a prisoner as before, although the cage would certainly be greatly enlarged. Where the formal gardens ended in a terrace a steep bank dropped down to a grassy plain which receded far away. It was tempting, but Kirk knew well from his conversations with Darel and Cera

just how false the illusion of freedom would be. The plain, thickly wooded in places and apparently bounded only by the mountains he could see hazy in the distance, was in fact a hunting reserve for the Imperial Court, and was as securely guarded against intrusion - or escape - as the rest of the Palace. Cera had told him, in hushed tones, of a Palace servant who for some unknown reason had attempted to escape by this route; the man had been relentlessly hunted down by the Imperial Guard, and his body thrown to the hounds.

Despite this Kirk thought that he might have taken the risk had he been fully fit, but he was only too well aware that in his present condition his recapture would be ignominiously swift. He was not afraid of dying, but it seemed that some value was placed on him by the Emperor, and he would only be returned to his prison.

He had tried to evade the injection he was given, but Zathon insisted; his blood must be replaced, and there were elements in the drug that stopped his blood from clotting, and prevented his body from rejecting the drainage tube inserted into his arm. In addition, he was by now slowly starving; his meagre diet of fruit and water was not sufficient to sustain him; the nausea caused by the drugs allowed him to retain little of what he did eat, and he was only too well aware that the time was fast approaching when he would be unable to remain on his feet. Yet if he collapsed, Zathon would certainly supervise his treatment, and he would be forced to eat the drugged food that would lull him into passive acceptance - and if that happened, all chance of escape would be lost... he would forget even the necessity of making the attempt.

To his own problems was added a by now frantic concern for the Enterprise. he knew that, whatever orders he received, Spock would not abandon him - the Vulcan's extreme loyalty was a fact he had long since ceased to question, that he could only accept with wondering gratitude; that being so, the length of his imprisonment could only be due to the fact that Spock - and therefore the Enterprise - was not there to search for him. Kirk's nights were made hideous by dreams in which his ship was attacked by Klingons or destroyed in an ion storm or... A thousand possibilities, each more agonising than the last, rioted in his brain, until the combination of his worry and weakness overwhelmed him entirely, and he raved blindly in a fevered delirium.

Cera and Darel, taking seriously their task of caring for him, heard his muffled groans and came to soothe him - without success. Alarmed by the raging heat of his skin - for he tossed now in a burning fever - they summoned Zathon, who prescribed the only treatment he knew.

The three Calvorans watched with anxiety during the long hours of the night as his temperature soared. Zathon's concern was for his Imperial master's displeasure should harm come to his new favourite - and besides, the man was an interesting phenomenon. Cera's concern was more personal, for she fancied she saw in the Human a resemblance to a much-loved brother from whom she had been parted when she was chosen to serve the Emperor; while Darel saw in Kirk a comrade he would have enjoyed adventuring with had they both been free men. Though Cera was his woman, he saw no cause for jealousy in the care she showed for Kirk - she was tending the man he had come to think of as his friend with the same care the women of his people had always bestowed on their husbands' comrades-in-arms.

There could be no question of taking blood from Kirk that night; as Cera bathed the sweat from the Human's shivering body Zathon frowned in concern at the gaunt face, the bones showing clearly beneath fine-drawn skin.

"Has he been eating?" he demanded abruptly.

"Yes, Lord Zathon." Cera glanced up from her task. "As you instructed, I myself collect his meals and serve them to him here."

"Strange, then, that he should have grown so thin," the physician mused.

"I have observed, Lord Zathon..." Darel hesitated.

"Yes? Out with it, man!"

"It is only... I have observed that James has grown steadily weaker since he came amongst us; even before the fever took him he often seemed tired, and he would sleep long when the rest of us gathered for company."

"Indeed, it is curious. He may have been sickening when he was captured. I wonder... I have detected certain elements in his blood that I cannot identify... these may affect him in a way previously unknown to me. However -" Zathon raised Kirk's head, forced between his lips another dose of the bitter draught that - until now - had successfully treated most forms of fever, "- I can do no more for him now. By dawn the fever will have broken, or he will be dead. Remain with him, and report to me in the morning."

"Yes, Lord Zathon." The two rose respectfully as the physician withdrew, then resumed their seats on either side of the bed.

Kirk's delirium grew even wilder as the night wore on, and it took all Darel's strength to prevent him from throwing himself out of bed when his body convulsed in violent spasms; in addition he raved wildly, hoarsely, in what they assumed to be his native dialect, so that the question he posed had perforce to remain unanswered, and they could not give him the reassurance for which he seemed to plead.

Cera tended him gently; but it was to Darel that the fever-bright eyes turned most often, to Darel that the husky, imploring whisper, "Spock? Help me, Spock!" was directed.

"Who's Spock?" Darel asked as for the dozenth time he pressed the convulsing body back onto the bed, drawing the covers closely around the shuddering shoulders.

Cera shook her head. "Perhaps a friend, a comrade from whom he has been parted?" she guessed. "Who can say? If - when - he recovers, he must learn that the life and the friends he knew have gone forever."

"I wonder..." Darel mused.

"What is it?"

"I wonder why James has never accepted his position, Cera? All of us recognise the honour, only he resists. I did not mention it to Lord Zathon for fear of angering him, but you know that it is so - James chafes against his confinement... he dreams of... escape."

"Hush!" Cera looked round wildly. "If anyone should hear..."

"I will not endanger him," Darel assured her, "but I fear James will die rather than submit."

"I share your fear," Cera admitted sadly. "Perhaps his ties with... outside... are stronger than most; but oh, I fear for him! He must accept that he can never leave."

"He knows that, but he will not accept, and so he is in danger. He must learn contentment. Cera, it may be that not being a city-dweller, his teaching in religion has been faulty, that he does not fully understand the glory of our sacrifice. Perhaps, if I speak to one of the Brothers from the temple, he could be properly instructed, and so brought to a full understanding of the need for the service we render."

"Please try it." Cera returned to her task of bathing Kirk's flushed face. "It may be his only chance, for if he should attempt to escape... I would not see him harmed," she finished sadly.

Many light-years away the Enterprise circled in orbit around Starbase four. Under Mr. Scott's personal supervision the engineers worked like men possessed,

repairing the damage the great Starship had sustained.

While all but a skeleton crew enjoyed shore leave, Dr. McCoy remained aboard, pacing his quarters restlessly, haunted by his pervading worry for Spock. Since the interview with the Admiral the Vulcan had remained in his own quarters, emerging only to deal with urgent matters. He had studiously avoided McCoy, and from all reports seemed to be behaving normally, but the doctor knew by now just how brittle his control must be. As though his dead friend was actually with him, McCoy could almost hear Jim's last whispered request,

"Take care of Spock."

It was a request he ached to obey, not only for Jim's sake, but for Spock's; but how? What could he say, what could he do?... Jim had been the only one... but he had to try.

Reluctantly, McCoy punched the intercom; there was no reply from Spock's quarters. His frown of concern deepened, and after a moment he called Uhura.

"Do you know where Mr. Spock is?" he enquired.

"He called in a short time ago to say he was beaming down to the Starbase," Uhura replied. "Doctor, do you think...?"

"He'll be all right," McCoy assured her, with more conviction than he felt, aware that she shared his concern for the Vulcan. "If anyone wants me, I'm... er... stretching my legs ashore."

"Understood, Doctor." He could hear the relief in her voice.

In the transporter room Kyle glanced up from the controls as McCoy bustled in. "All ready for you, Doctor," he said cheerfully. "Coordinates already fed in."

"But you don't know where I want to go - I've only just decided to beam down," McCoy said testily.

"Oh, I thought... It was Mr. Spock, sir - he said you'd be following him down soon."

"Now how did he know...?" McCoy bit back the question, aware that once more Spock had demonstrated his very thorough understanding of Human nature. With a nod to Kyle he took his place on the transporter pad, and submitted himself to the always-disconcerting process of beam-down.

Wonder what crack-brained scheme he's thought up this time? was his final thought before all thought faded.

He materialised in the grounds of Starfleet Headquarters, standing beside a bench which commanded an excellent view of the main entrance; he started forward impatiently, then checked - Spock had made his wishes plain, he was to wait here. With a sigh he sat down, drumming his fingers nervously on the arm of the bench.

More than two hours passed before the slim, blue-clad figure passed through the doors and descended the steps with unhurried grace; unmindful of his own dignity, McCoy darted forward.

"What happened?" he demanded abruptly. "Did you see Shandor? Is there...?"

"Not here, Doctor." Deliberately the Vulcan led the way down one of the side paths to a more secluded part of the grounds; the instant he halted, McCoy pounced.

"Spock, will you tell me what happened?" he demanded. There was silence for a moment.

"I have been offered the Captaincy of the Enterprise; I have accepted." Spock's tone was utterly devoid of expression.

Somehow, McCoy choked back the instinctive protest that rose to his lips; he too had learned something in the last few years. "Go on," he said quietly, and was convinced that for a moment gratitude shone in the dark eyes.

"Starfleet are convinced that Jim is dead," Spock continued, "and indeed, I cannot blame them. That being so, the Enterprise cannot remain here in idleness. Once the repairs are completed, I am to take the ship on trials, then resume our duties, in command. We leave at once."

"And?"

"As I pointed out to the Admiral, it is unreasonable to expect me to take over immediately. I have considerable leave time accumulated, and it is a long time since I saw Vulcan. The Enterprise leaves for her trials with Mr. Scott in temporary command - when she returns I will assume the Captaincy."

"Shandor swallowed that?"

"Doctor." A slanting eyebrow rose in reproof. "I am certain that Admiral Shandor is aware that Vulcans have a reputation for being incapable of lying."

"To coin a phrase -- in a pig's eye!" grinned a relieved McCoy; and earned a freezing stare for his pains.

Kirk's fever broke at last and he lay for several days too exhausted even to be concerned about his future. Mercifully, Zathon considered him still too weak to be dosed with the tranquillising drugs, and his food - the little he could force himself to swallow - was harmless. There was no further deterioration in his condition as he was able to eat properly, but his attempts to regain lost ground were defeated - his stomach rejected the extra he tried to eat, and he was forced to abandon that idea.

He had few visitors, for Zathon did not want him to become overtired. The physician came daily to check on his progress, still anxious lest his prize specimen suffer a relapse, his touch filling Kirk with loathing as he remembered the reason for the man's concern.

Cera and Darel were regular visitors, bringing his meals which he tasted cautiously before eating, alert for the faint, bitter aftertaste that would warn him that he was again being drugged. He was grateful, for their presence prevented him from thinking too deeply - he was by now convinced that something had happened to the Enterprise, that Spock and McCoy were dead, for if not they would have found him by now. Darel confessed that he had mentioned Kirk's self-imposed isolation before his fever, concerned that it would mean trouble for his friend, but Kirk reassured him. It didn't much matter, he thought dully; as soon as he was strong enough he intended to take his chances in the hunting preserve - better a quick death under the fangs of the Imperial hounds in an attempt to escape than submitting tamely to this obscene slavery, to the slow, degrading leeching away of his blood. Instinctively he concealed the extent of his recovery from Zathon, hoping to gain a little more time to recover before he made the attempt.

He suffered one new annoyance, though - Darel's unthinking suggestion had borne fruit, and Zathon had arranged for Kirk to be instructed by priests from the temple in an effort to reconcile him to his destiny. Kirk's head ached as they droned on and on, repeating over and over again the same meaningless tales and instructions, stressing the honour that was being offered him; but he lay passively, seeming to listen for fear of arousing suspicion if he seemed to reject the creed in which they believed so whole-heartedly.

One of the younger monks, who soon became a regular visitor, seemed gentler than the others; Kirk welcomed his appearance, for he would often intersperse his prayers and instructions with news of the city. From Brother Fahan Kirk learned that Tesla had been told of his supposed death during

training as a guardsman, and the last flicker of hope died. Spock would never have accepted such unsupported testimony, but Spock was dead, and Starfleet would have no reason to doubt Tesla's report. There was no reason, either, why Tesla should question what he had been told - he had no way of knowing the true reason for Kirk's detention.

There was another reason why Kirk was glad to see Fahan; with an unusual awareness the monk seemed to know just when one of his almost insupportable headaches plagued him, and on those occasions he would make no attempt to carry out his duties. Instead he would quietly draw the curtains to shade the room and retire to a corner where he would sit silently fingering his prayer beads, his presence ensuring that for the duration of his visit Kirk would be undisturbed. Kirk was grateful for the consideration, and tried to express his thanks, but the monk's lifted hand silenced him.

"I do not understand," Brother Fahan said on one occasion, "but it seems to me that this is... wrong for you, that you have no place here. No, do not tell me anything," he added hastily as Kirk opened his mouth to answer. "What I do not know, my vows cannot force me to reveal. I fear I can give you little aid, but if there is any comfort I can give, send for me; I will come at once."

"Thank you," Kirk replied. He would have liked to confide in the monk, to ask his aid, but that oblique warning had not gone unheeded - Fahan might sympathise, but he would not break his vows. Only if he knew the full truth might he act, but to tell him would be to violate the Prime Directive. Kirk was on his own.

One evening, when Kirk was beginning to think that within the next few days he would attempt to escape, he had an unexpected and unwelcome visitor.

Cera and Darel had just awakened him with his evening meal when the door of his room was flung open and Zathon bustled in, accompanied by two of his assistants, bearing the familiar equipment that was used to drain his blood.

"Quickly, clear this away!" Zathon gestured impatiently at the food, and Cera hurried to obey. "You are honoured, James - the Emperor wishes to inspect you himself. He will be here soon, and we must be ready."

The servants began to set up the equipment, and after a hurried inspection of the now tidy room, Zathon nodded.

"You may remain," he told Darel and Cera. "It is an honour for you to be permitted to look upon the Emperor."

"Thank you, Lord Zathon," the two replied, and the physician turned again to Kirk.

"Extend your arm," he ordered, and the Human obeyed, turning his head aside as the connection was made to the valve in his arm. When it was detached again he looked round in time to see that the blood had been caught in a crystal flagon instead of the usual laboratory flask; this was carried to the table by the window where a silver tray bearing a matching goblet stood in readiness. Although less than the usual amount of blood had been drawn from him this time the fever had lowered Kirk's resilience, and he sank back on the pillows, his head reeling, his stomach churning with sickness. He was grateful when Cera leaned over him, gently wiping away the sweat that broke out on his forehead, and he thanked her silently. She started away, however, when the tramp of marching feet echoed along the corridor, and a harsh voice barked a command.

"The Emperor!"

Zathon glanced round, and at a gesture Cera and Darel sank to their knees. Kirk bowed his head, and lay waiting, wondering if it would serve any purpose to appeal to the Emperor for his freedom, and deciding that it would not.

He knew that several people entered the room, heard Zathon's hushed, respectful greeting, but he would not look up until a hand grasped his chin and

tilted his head backwards so that he looked for the first time upon the Emperor of Calvoro.

Kirk was not quite sure what he had expected, but any remaining hope of mercy died as he met that impersonal, curious stare. The Emperor was only a few years older than he, with cold grey eyes set in a resolute face; despite the rich clothes, the shimmer of jewels, there was no softness or corruption to be seen - this was a strong-willed man accustomed to instant and total obedience.

"So this is your prize, Zathon. A most unusual face - he has none of the timidity of your other cattle. From the merchant caste, I think you said? He has more the look of a soldier."

"I assure Your Excellency..." Zathon began, but the Emperor waved him to silence.

"No matter - his pedigree is unimportant. But why is he still ailed? I thought you said he was recovering? I trust there are no lasting ill effects from the fever."

"None that I can detect, sire. However, your palate is more discriminating than mine. Would it please you to make trial?"

"It would." With a final searching glance into the hazel eyes the Emperor released Kirk's chin and turned to receive the goblet that was respectfully handed to him. He sipped slowly, delicately at the thick crimson fluid, and Kirk's stomach heaved with revulsion. "Delicious - a subtle, delicate flavour. I have missed this sorely - you must tend him more carefully in future, physician." There was a scarcely-hidden threat in the cold voice.

"I hear and obey, Your Excellency. It seems a pity that we cannot obtain further specimens of this quality - his blood is unique in my experience."

"And in mine." The Emperor sipped again, with relish. "Pedigree, Zathon... perhaps that is the answer. Others of his family..."

"I fear not, sire." Zathon shook his head sadly. "I thought of that at once, and made discreet enquiries. It seems that he is not blood-kin to his family, but an adopted foundling. His parents are believed to be nomads of the Great Desert - useless to attempt to trace them."

"A pity. But wait." Kirk looked up fleetingly as the Emperor returned to lean over him, shuddering as the bittersweet breath fanned his face, heavy with the scent of his own blood. "He is young, strong, and - I would judge - virile; mate him to some of the Palace women, Zathon - establish a new herd. It would be wasteful not to take the opportunity."

"A brilliant solution, sire," Zathon agreed. "True, it would be years before the young were mature enough to be of service, but if we are careful he should last until then. I will begin the selection of suitable mates at once, sire."

"See that you do." The Emperor's eyes fell on Cera. "This one, for a start, seems suitable. I'll have no ill-favoured sluts - choose his mates for their grace and beauty, and I'll warrant he can establish a promising breed. Keep me informed of progress - in fact, draw up a list of potential mates and submit it to me - I'll monitor this breeding myself."

"Yes, Your Excellency. I will begin as soon as he recovers enough strength."

The cold eyes bored into Kirk's. "I think, when you are strong enough, you will grace our court," the Emperor said musingly. "My nobles would relish... shall we say?... a new diversion."

Kirk coloured, understanding the implications, as the Emperor turned and left, followed by Zathon and his assistants; the door closed behind them.

After a moment a movement in the room caught Kirk's attention; Cera had risen and was clinging to Darel, weeping softly. Darel in turn was holding her gently, whispering comfortingly, but over her bowed head his eyes met Kirk's, full of despair.

In the face of their distress, Kirk forgot his own concerns. He knew that Cera was Darel's woman, and realised that the Emperor's order must have been a shock to them as well - the servants were usually permitted to form their own relationships without interference, and none of them had considered this possibility.

Perhaps they'll help me now! Kirk thought with a sudden surge of hope; struggling to his feet he moved slowly towards them. "Don't cry, Cera," he said awkwardly. "Please believe me - I won't harm you."

"I know you don't want to," Darel said, "but you heard the Emperor - there are drugs... they'll make you..."

"They can't make me if I'm not here," Kirk said grimly. "I must escape, get out of here."

"James, you can't. You'll be killed." Cera turned to look at him. "Or perhaps not killed - you're too valuable - but you'll be punished - horribly. It's not... I like you, you're an attractive man... it's only that I love Darel... but I'll do it rather than see you harmed."

"I agree." Darel's voice was firm. "I think of you as the friend I would like to have had outside, James. I trust you - even with Cera."

"Thank you, my friends," Kirk's voice shook, and he smiled at them with affection. "But I can't accept - I won't spoil your lives to save myself. Besides... this place... I don't belong here, I'll die or go mad if I have to remain. I must try to escape - and if I fail, I'll make sure I'm not taken alive. You won't be implicated, all I ask is that you don't give me away... I need a few days..."

Kirk swayed on his feet, and Darel reached out to support him. "You're still weak," Cera said as they helped him back to bed. "Lord Zathon shouldn't have taken blood so soon. Rest, James. We understand... and we thank you. In the morning we will talk further, but now you need sleep. Goodnight."

Kirk sank back into bed as they dimmed the lights and left him alone; but he could not sleep. It had now become a matter of urgency that he made his escape attempt as quickly as possible... and if he was killed, he thought dully, what did it matter? He had nothing to go back to... Spock, McCoy, the Enterprise... all were surely lost to him...

In his private room at the rear of his shop Anton Tesla paced nervously, awaiting the arrival of his unwelcome visitor. Jim was dead, he must be, or he would have contacted his friend before this... why couldn't Starfleet take his word for it?

But it wasn't Starfleet, he remembered suddenly. When he had received that message from the Enterprise two days ago, informing him that someone was on the way to investigate Kirk's death, he had contacted Admiral Shandor at once.

"For Pete's sake, stay off my back!" he had pleaded. "I can't afford to have any attention directed here - call your man off, can't you, Shandor?"

In response the antennaed head had inclined closer to the screen. "No, I can't. And this is strictly off the record, Anton. It's Kirk's First Officer, Commander Spock. He seems to have some idea that Kirk may still be alive, and he's investigating on his own account. Officially he's on leave, and there's nothing I can do to stop him."

"He told you he was coming?" Tesla said incredulously.

Shandor grinned wryly. "He told me without telling me. He made it very plain that if I attempted to stop him he would simply resign from Starfleet and go anyway - and to hell with the consequences. Look, Anton - he's a Vulcan, so he knows how to be careful - he won't land you in any trouble. And if he thinks there's a chance... well, give him all the help you can - without, of course, compromising your own security,"

"Okay, I'll go along with him - but he's wrong."

That conversation had disturbed Tesla more than he was prepared to admit. He had accepted Kirk's death without question, but could it be that he was wrong, that Havron had lied to him? If so, then he must be rescued...

But the danger of a Vulcan roaming the streets of Calvoro! If discovered he could not hope to pass as a native, he would be in danger every moment... it was strange that a member of such a rational, level-headed race should risk so much on such a slim possibility. He knew of Vulcan loyalty to a commander, but surely Spock's defiance of the Prime Directive in order to rescue a man who must be already dead was more than the simple obedience due to a Captain? For it all came back to that one inescapable fact - why should Havron have lied? If Kirk had been discovered as an outworlder, then he, Tesla, would have been questioned too, but he had not. There was no reason for such deceit - Kirk had died in an accident, as stated. He would explain it to the Vulcan...

The low hum of the transporter effect caught him by surprise, and he swung round to watch as a tall, slim figure in Starfleet blue materialised from the shimmering column of light. A dark head inclined in acknowledgement of his presence, a hand was raised in formal salute.

"Greetings," Spock said quietly.

Tesla's first thought was how distinctive the Vulcan was, how easily he would cause alarm among a people who could not even conceive the idea of a being from another world; his second, that no argument he could employ would shake that calm resolution.

Nevertheless, he said nervously, "This is crazy, Commander. I beg you to return to the Enterprise before you are seen - your presence here could damage... "

"That will not be possible," the Vulcan said calmly. "The Enterprise is no longer in orbit."

"But surely... ?"

"Starfleet Command agree with your report that the Captain is dead; they have refused, therefore, to take the risk of allowing a Starship to remain in orbit lest the Klingons regard its presence as a violation of Keloran neutrality. I am here unofficially, while the Enterprise, under the command of our chief engineer, has left to undergo trials. Meanwhile, I will locate the Captain."

"But Jim's dead!" Tesla burst out. "I told you... "

"The Captain is alive," the Vulcan stated flatly; and Tesla, while maintaining his own reservations, ceased to argue.

"What do you propose?" he asked.

"In the morning I will survey the Palace to see if it is possible to gain entrance. I have observed the respect accorded to the military forces in Calvoro - can you obtain for me the uniform of a Centurion in a regiment on active service? A bandage around my head will conceal my ears, and as a wounded officer on leave, I can come and go unquestioned."

"The uniform's easily obtained, Commander, but that won't help you get into the Palace - the sentries recognise their own men of sight, and all others must produce a pass."

"When I have assessed the situation a solution may present itself; at the moment I am handicapped by ignorance."

"Even suppose that by some miracle Jim is alive, and by a greater one you manage to get him out, then what? It'd be too dangerous to hide you here, and you say the Enterprise has left."

"As to that - at the conclusion of the trials, Mr. Scott will pass close to Kelora; I have arranged a rendezvous with him, and if I am successful I will signal him at the appointed time."

"And if you're not successful?"

A slanting eyebrow rose. "Mr. Tesla, I had not considered the possibility of failure," replied the Vulcan serenely.

It was late the following day when Kirk awoke from a heavy, unrefreshing sleep which left him feeling dull and lethargic. In the few days since he had made his decision to escape he had attempted to build up his strength, but the aftereffects of the fever, the nightly loss of blood, and sheer starvation were defeating him. His meals were again drugged, so that he could no longer eat the food provided, and it was becoming more and more difficult to find fruit in the gardens; he had stripped most of the bushes, and what little remained was by now sour and inedible - yesterday he had vomited back everything he had managed to swallow, and the bout of sickness had left him so exhausted that even Zathon's regular visit to draw blood had not aroused him.

Grimly Kirk realised that his escape attempt could be delayed no longer, or he would be too weak to make it at all; and the sooner he began, the better - he would not be missed till evening.

Having made up his mind Kirk rolled over in bed - then choked at the sight of a cowed figure sitting by the bed.

"Brother Fahan!" he exclaimed. "Forgive me - I did not expect you..." Trying to speak lightly Kirk sat up, but the abrupt movement drained the blood from his face and he sank back feeling weak and sick with hunger.

At once a strong arm encircled his shoulders, lifting him into a sitting position, and a goblet was held to his lips. "Drink," a voice urged softly.

"No!" Kirk turned his head aside, refusing the offer, and somehow brought his voice under control. "I'll be all right..."

"It is not drugged," Fahan said compassionately. "I bought it myself in the market place. Will you not trust me, my brother? I wish to help you."

Kirk looked up into the clear grey eyes that held his own with open candour; at last he nodded, and sipped experimentally. The wine was rich and full-bodied, warming him; after a few moments Fahan removed the cup and placed a bundle on the bed. "The food, too, is pure," he commented as he unwrapped bread and meat and handed them to Kirk, who began to eat hungrily, though with care not to take too much at once. At last, with a sigh of satisfaction, the Human set the remainder of the food aside, and glanced up enquiringly.

"Why have you decided to help me?" he asked.

Fahan gestured in bewilderment. "I scarcely know - I only know that I must. There is something about you... I cannot explain, you would not believe me if I did... but I know that you must leave this place. Before you awoke you dreamed of escape, did you not? I am aware that you have been refusing food, and as you cannot travel any distance if you are half-starved, I thought to bring you food that you could eat. James... while my vows forbid me to aid your escape, for those reasons I cannot explain I am prepared to break them - will you not trust me in turn?"

Kirk hesitated for a moment. "All right - yes, I must escape. Zathon and the Emperor intend to mate me to some of the female servants - starting with Cera - in an attempt to establish my blood-line. I will not be used so, nor degrade a woman who has shown me kindness, and a man who has been my friend. More than this... I cannot live as a prisoner, no matter how comfortable the cell, and I find it obscene that my blood should be used in such a way. Possibly I will be killed in the attempt to escape, but rather than submit tamely to an existence I think abhorrent."

"Have you formed a plan?"

"Not really. I thought to reach the plain below the terrace, to lose myself in the hunting lands beyond; but I don't know how long I can evade the hounds."

"They won't use the dogs to hunt you," Fahan said positively. "They are trained to kill, and you are too valuable to waste. No, only the guards will be set on your trail - or perhaps the nobles will hunt you for sport - but their aim will be to capture you, and with good fortune you may elude them. Yet if you do, the hunting lands are enclosed, and they stretch as far as the coast... it might be possible for you to escape by sea... James, give me a few more hours to consider. I will return tonight, and bring you food for the journey - a cloak too, for the nights are cold. And there may be maps in the Temple library... will you wait?"

"I will." Kirk held the grey eyes. "I am forced to trust you, Fahan - but I do not think you intend to betray me."

"Thank you, my friend. But you have also aided me, for you have settled certain doubts that have long troubled me. Many aspects of our religion seem to me to have been perverted - we have strayed too far from the teaching of the old Masters. One day, if the Gods permit, I hope to be in a position to right many wrongs, but you have shown me the necessity to do so. Now I must go, but I will return tonight. Alas, they will take your blood once more, but the food should help you withstand the loss. Rest while you can, my brother - your way will be hard."

The young priest made a gesture of benediction, then slipped quietly out of the room. As he made his way through the corridors, absently acknowledging the respectful salutes of the sentries, his brow was furrowed in thought.

Spock had passed a fruitless, frustrating morning. Wearing the uniform Tesla had obtained for him, with a heavy bandage round his head to conceal his betraying eyebrows and ears, he had aroused no suspicion as he surveyed the boundary where Palace and city met.

As he had expected the main entrance was heavily guarded; sentries challenged all who approached, and if a password was the key to admittance it was uttered too quietly for even Vulcan ears to catch. Even his borrowed uniform would not help, for several times he saw high-ranking officers turned away with firm politeness.

Close to the Palace wall his awareness of Kirk, his sensitivity to the Human, increased; indeed, so vivid, so real did Kirk seem to him then that he reached out longingly with his mind, hoping that his great need would provide the impetus to allow their minds to meet. The attempt failed, as logic had warned him it would - a Human and a half-Vulcan needed physical contact to achieve a meld. For the hundredth time he found himself wishing that it was possible to maintain a permanent link with his friend, but he knew that could never be - Kirk's naked emotions would be too unsettling for his Vulcan control, and Kirk... Spock shrank from the thought of even this so-trusted Human learning just how vulnerable his friend could be.

Resolutely Spock turned his mind back to the question that puzzled him so

deeply - just why had Kirk been taken? Havron had said he was to be recruited into the Imperial Guard, but why then had he not made contact with Tesla before now? With distaste the Vulcan faced the possibility that some form of mind control - perhaps hypnosis or drugs - had been used on the Human. Certainly Command training should have rendered him invulnerable to hypnosis, but so little was known of Kelora that it was possible some unknown technique had been employed against which the Human had no defence.

With this idea in mind Spock had undertaken a weary circuit of the Palace wall, glancing briefly at each of the sentries in turn, hoping against hope to encounter a pair of familiar hazel eyes. He was unsuccessful.

Returning at last to the main entrance Spock found a table outside an inn just across the square, and ordering wine sat to consider his next move. When the watch changed, he decided, he would repeat his tour of inspection; and if that was also without result, another approach must be found.

At last came the moment he had been waiting for as with military precision the sentries at the main gate were relieved of duty. Spock rose, tossed a few coins onto the table, and began to wander, as though aimlessly strolling, across the road.

As he approached the steps leading up to the main gate his eyes became fixed on one of the sentries just beyond the entrance; he could not see the man's face, but the stocky build looked familiar, and he quickened his pace.

Spock's attention was so concentrated on his target that he did not see the man who came hurrying down the steps until they collided heavily, stumbling together against the wall. The sentry turned at the commotion, and Spock knew a bitter disappointment as he studied the strange face... he had so hoped...

Recovering himself with a start he turned to assist the man he had bumped into, noting idly that he wore the robes of a Temple monk. The man was visibly shaken, white-faced, clutching at the Vulcan with trembling hands. Gently, Spock disengaged himself.

"I ask your pardon, sir," he said formally. "I trust you are unhurt?" Receiving a nod in response he turned to move on, but a hand caught his sleeve urgently.

"Wait!"

Spock turned round, a trifle apprehensive; surely he had done nothing to arouse suspicion? He waited for the monk to continue, but the words that came in a low undertone made him start visibly.

"Don't go - I have news of... him you seek."

How does he know? was Spock's first thought as he glanced warily at the guards; but the monk spoke again.

"I will not betray you. Please come with me - we must talk." There was so much urgency in his tone that the Vulcan paused, considering the man thoughtfully; if the priest intended to denounce him the logical time to do so would be now, when the Palace guards were within call. And if he had news of Jim...

Deciding quickly, Spock inclined his head. "Very well, I will follow you." The priest moved off and Spock followed at a discreet distance; to any watcher, all that had passed was a brief encounter amicably settled.

His guide led him across the main square of the city to the Temple complex; once inside he waited for Spock to join him, then led the Vulcan down a side aisle, halting at a heavily barred door.

"The monks' quarters lie beyond," he murmured, producing a key. "We will not be disturbed, nor spied on."

Beyond the gate the corridor curved away, empty and silent; numerous doors opened off it, and the priest led Spock through one of these into a small,

simply-furnished room that looked out onto an inner courtyard where cowed forms paced sedately. As soon as the door closed behind them Spock faced his guide challengingly.

"Who are you? And what do you want of me?"

"I am Brother Fahan; as to what I want..." The grey eyes met the Vulcan's calmly. "Some time ago I was assigned to duty in the Imperial Palace - one of the Emperor's... servants... was to be instructed in the finer details of our religion, as is the custom with all who serve the Emperor so closely. That servant's name was James Kirk - it is he whom you seek, is it not?"

Spock swung abruptly to gaze unseeingly out of the window for some moments; sure as he had been, to be given confirmation... When he was certain that he had his voice under decent control he asked,

"Jim is alive?"

"He is. But I fear he may not long remain so."

"Explain!"

Fahan nodded in satisfaction, for his visitor had whirled at that, and the dark eyes burned into his, alive with unconcealed fear.

"The danger is not immediate. He is not, I think, one who will tamely submit to captivity - he would sooner die. He proposes to escape, but the attempt is doomed to failure without aid I cannot procure. It occurs to me that you might wish to recover him."

"You know that I do," Spock answered slowly. "But how do you know?"

The monk gestured helplessly. "I possess... a talent, the ability to sense the emotions and some of the thoughts of those I touch. I do not expect you to believe me, but it is so. When I collided with you outside the Palace I became aware that one thought obsessed your mind - the face of the man I wish to help. You are his friend, of that I am certain; I wish only to bring you to him."

Spock held the grey eyes steadily, considering what he had been told. At last he made up his mind and extended one hand, his fingers spread. "You say that you were able to sense my thoughts; I also have that ability. May I see your mind in turn?"

Fahan nodded assent, and Spock touched his fingers to the monk's face. The impressions he received were blurred, indistinct, but he realised that the Calvoran possessed a rudimentary telepathic ability - he had been able to sense Kirk's despair as he had sensed Spock's purpose, and his compassion had prompted him to help.

Spock dropped his hand, unwilling to probe further. It was not necessary to read more deeply, he knew for certain that the man was sincere and intended no betrayal.

"What must I do?" he asked simply.

The day had seemed very long to Jim Kirk. He had rested, trying to control his impatience until evening, when Fahan would return. Darel and Cera had visited him as usual, but all were too much aware of Zathon's intentions for them, and the atmosphere was uncomfortably strained; Kirk was relieved when they left. He had considered telling them that his escape attempt was to be that night, but decided against it - the knowledge would have relieved their anxiety, but they might betray him without meaning to do so. He ate once more of the food that Fahan had brought, enjoying the freedom from hunger, but drank only sparingly of the wine - it was too rich for his weakened

constitution, though diluted with water its warmth heartened him. Then in late afternoon, driven by an obscure compulsion to survey his escape route for the last time, Kirk went out into the gardens.

Leaning on the railings that edged the high terrace Kirk looked out over the hunting preserve, trying to fix the lie of the land in his mind. He would make his attempt while it was still dark, and so easier to elude the sentries who patrolled the grounds. Unfortunately he would be weakened by the evening's drawing of his blood, but he would have a good start - he was sure he could rely on Cora and Darel to conceal his absence during the day, and so he would not be missed until the following evening. Then there was Fahan - if the monk kept his promise to aid him in even the small degree he had mentioned, for a few days at least he would not have the problem of seeking food - he could concentrate all his energies on travelling.

Satisfied that he had the beginnings of his route firmly established, Kirk allowed his attention to wander. Involuntarily he tilted his head and gazed with hungry longing into the cloudless sky. His world lay out there, a world to which he longed to return... but what would be waiting for him? No Enterprise, no McCoy... no Spock... He bit his lip, aware that a successful escape would only result in his exchanging his present prison for a wider one; the planet itself would be his jail unless he could contact Tesla. For a moment he quailed at the thought of the task before him - hundreds of miles of unknown territory to cross, in danger both from his pursuers and the wild animals that roamed the area; the uncertainty as to whether it would even prove possible to escape by sea as Fahan had suggested - and if it did, the long and difficult journey back to Calvoro, the danger of reaching Tesla without being picked up... and for what, finally? To return to a world that no longer held his friends?

Firmly, Kirk pushed the thought away. Escape first, then worry, he told himself. But the grief stayed with him as he turned away from the terrace and headed back to his room. He would rest, he thought, and conserve his strength for the night ahead; idly he wondered whether Fahan would return before Zathon came to him - he hoped not, for he felt a curious reluctance for the monk to witness his humiliation.

A pale moon was rising when two cowed figures passed the watchful sentries at the Palace gate and walked without further challenge to the wing where Zathon's specimens were confined. The smaller of the two paused, pushed open the door of the latest recruit, and beckoned his companion inside, leaving the door slightly ajar to have the earliest possible warning of any interruption.

It was a warm, humid night, and the sleep of the man on the bed had clearly been restless; a slanting band of moonlight fell across his face, revealing to one pair of anxious eyes the lines of stress newly engraved there.

"What have they done to him?" The taller of the intruders started forward, but checked as his companion hissed a warning.

"Zathon is coming! You must hide - get behind the screen, and at all costs remain silent, whatever you see or hear."

Spock slipped into the bathroom and Fahan pulled the screen half across; when the physician and his assistants entered the monk was sitting quietly in a corner, his hands busy with his prayer beads.

"Brother Fahan! I did not expect you at this hour," Zathon greeted him.

"My place is with those who are troubled in spirit," the monk answered gently. "It is my hope that I may yet reconcile James to his destiny."

"I hope you can, Brother - the Emperor is personally interested in this one." Zathon stepped over to the bed, and shook Kirk awake. "James, it is time."

Though adequately concealed by the screen Spock could see the room clearly. For a moment he did not understand what was happening, but as one of the attendants moved, and he saw Kirk's blood flowing into the container, his lips tightened in anger. Why this should be done to Kirk he did not know, for there had been no time for Fahan to explain, there were too many arrangements to be made - but anguish convulsed the Vulcan's heart at the sight of Kirk's despairing submission to this indignity, and at the pallor that spread over the Human's tired features. Evidently Kirk's rescue had been too long delayed.

At last Zathon straightened from his task. "Forgive the interruption, Brother," he said to Fahan. "I will leave you now."

"Please ensure that we are disturbed no more this night," the monk replied; securing the door behind the physician he turned to smile reassuringly at Kirk. "I have kept my promise, James; I have brought help."

"Thank you, my friend." Kirk closed his eyes and continued wearily, "I just hope I can make it - I'm sure Zathon took more blood than usual tonight."

"He will take no more. But will you not examine the aid I have brought?" Kirk's eyes snapped open at the teasing note in the monk's voice. "I think you will be... pleased."

Turning, Kirk saw the robed figure emerge from behind the screen.

"A companion for your journey," Fahan continued, "and one I think you know."

Kirk's eyes widened as slim hands rose, pushing back the concealing cowl.

"Spock!" he gasped and leaped from the bed to grasp the Vulcan's arms frenziedly. "Spock, I thought you were dead!"

"Jim." His First Officer's tone was one of satisfied contentment, but the dark eyes were shadowed as Spock felt the unaccustomed thinness of the shoulders he gripped in answer.

For a time the two stood simply looking at each other in silence, knowing that questions and explanations could wait; for the moment it was enough to simply accept that they were together once more.

At last Kirk dropped his gaze and sank down to sit on the bed - but his hand slid down the Vulcan's arm to catch around the warm fingers. "This changes everything," he said with a shaky laugh. "Spock, knowing you you have everything planned already. What do you want me to do?"

"I have indeed made arrangements to bring you to my rendezvous with the Enterprise," the Vulcan answered, tightening his fingers in response to the light that flashed in the Human's eyes at this mention of his ship. "However, it will be six days before the Enterprise returns - when your escape is discovered, they will search for you."

"I could stay here," Kirk said reluctantly. "It would be safer for you - and you could come for me nearer the time..."

"No!" Spock's reply was firm. "Brother Fahan has told me what is planned for you; and you are ill - you cannot long endure such treatment as I saw tonight. I will not leave you here."

"There is, perhaps, a compromise," Fahan said thoughtfully. "James, could you follow your original plan, allow the guards to think you have escaped into the hunting preserve? You can then return here and leave with us - while the guards follow a false trail, you will in fact escape by the route Mr. Spock has arranged."

"That makes sense." Kirk rose enthusiastically. "Come on, let's get on with it - I want to get out of here."

"In a moment. Mr. Spock, remain here please until we return. Do not open

the door to anyone, although after my request to Zathon I expect no interruption. I will go with James and ensure that he returns here unseen." He paused at the Vulcan's nod of understanding, then continued, "There is, however, one thing I would ask of you - indeed, I should have mentioned it before."

"What can I do?"

"There is a danger... there are drugs which will compel me to speak the truth when questioned if I am suspected of involvement in James' escape - and I will be suspected when it becomes known that I was the last to see him. Though I would not willingly betray you, I will not be able to resist. With your powers, can you not make me forget what I have done this night?"

Spock considered. "I can, if you wish it," he said at last. He touched the monk's face gently, and concentrated for a few moments, then drew back. "That should suffice. If you are questioned you will automatically repeat what seems to you to be the truth - that you left James sleeping in his room, and did not see him again. You will remember at other times what has taken place, but the censor I have set in your mind will take over if keyed by questioning, and no drug can defeat it."

"I am pleased - I would willingly have lost this memory to protect you, but it will be... pleasant, to remember. Come, James - and be careful; the guards are armed, you will recall."

Kirk laughed reassuringly. "Don't look so worried, Spock. Very antiquated weapons - Sulu would be in his element. I doubt if they could hit a barn door with them. Don't say it," he added hastily as Spock's eyebrows rose. "I don't suppose they would want to - it's just a saying. Here's another one - sit tight. I won't be long."

With a last reassuring smile for his friend Kirk followed Fahn into the deserted corridor.

It had been a long watch, even more uneventful than usual, and Trooper Mahon was eagerly awaiting his relief. The night was still young, he had a two-day pass... if he was lucky the Centurion would let him leave as soon as he came off duty, and there was that serving-girl in the tavern by the South Gate...

A flicker of something white moving in the bushes caught his attention, and brought him fully alert.

"Halt! Who comes?"

There was no reply but Mahon knew he had not been mistaken, and headed towards the place where he had seen the movement.

"Reveal yourself, or I fire!" He levelled his weapon, hearing the clatter of footsteps as the relief, alerted by his shout, ran to join him. "Over here, Centurion - someone in the bushes!"

As though alarmed by the answering shouts a white-clad figure leaped to its feet and began to run in blind panic.

"Halt, or I fire!"

There was no indication that the fleeing figure had heard the warning; certainly it showed no sign of slowing, and Mahon's finger tightened on the trigger just as the Centurion reached him.

"Don't shoot!"

The command came too late as Mahon fired; the white shape stumbled, then plunged on, vanishing into the bushes.

"Hope you didn't hit him," the Centurion muttered. "It was the fair-haired one, the Emperor's special servant; he must be recaptured, but unhurt

if possible. Which way did he go?"

"There - towards the terrace." Mahon and the Centurion led the pursuit, emerging at last onto the empty expanse of the terrace.

"Look, Centurion!" One of the Troopers pointed to where one of the ornamental urns that decorated the railing lay broken, pushed from its place.

"That's all we bloody needed!" the Centurion snarled. "He's made a break for it, the idiot, trying to escape into the hunting preserve. No use trying to follow him tonight. I'll report to the Guard Commander, and the lords can amuse themselves hunting him down in the morning - they'll enjoy the sport. Back to your posts, men."

A few yards away, concealed in the shrubbery, Kirk crouched awkwardly, trying to control his ragged breathing. At last the guards moved away, and as silently as possible the Human slipped back on his tracks until he came at last to the summer house where Fahan was waiting for him.

"Thank the Gods! I heard a shot, and... You're hurt!" Fahan exclaimed, seeing in the moonlight the blood that darkened Kirk's shoulder.

"One of the guards got in a lucky shot," Kirk said. As he spoke he sagged against the wall, feeling the waves of sickening agony that spread through his body from the torn shoulder.

"But this must be tended!" Fahan protested.

"Later - there's no time, we must get away." Kirk pushed himself upright, and strove to speak normally. "Can you find something to bind it? I don't want Spock to know..."

Fahan quickly tore a strip from the hem of his robe; folding it into a pad he tore another to bind the wound, his lips tightening anxiously as he saw how quickly it became soaked with blood.

"That'll have to do - it can be properly tended later." Kirk moved impatiently. "Spock will be worried if he heard the shooting."

Despite the seriousness of the wound Fahan knew from the tone of Kirk's voice that it was useless to protest further. Resignedly he helped the Human into a monk's robe he had brought, and pulled the cowl closely around the fair head. "Can you walk?"

"Yes."

Side by side the two returned to the Palace; the sentry on duty in the corridor saluted them respectfully as he passed on patrol.

Fahan tapped on Kirk's door and called softly; it opened, and Spock, his cowl once more in place, joined them; casually, with unhurried steps, the three made their way out of the Palace gate.

As they crossed the square it took all Kirk's will-power to keep moving. He longed to cling to Spock, ached for the support of the Vulcan's strength, but he could feel the sentries watching them and knew that he must do nothing to arouse their suspicions. It was difficult, though, to keep pace with his companions, and he was bathed in sweat by the time the door of Fahan's room closed behind them.

Sensing the dark eyes fixed on him Kirk grinned casually and took a step towards the only chair. The small attempt at deception proved useless, as he had known really that it would be; careful hands steered him to the bed, pressed him down, light fingers brushed the sweat from his forehead and upper lip, and the quiet voice demanded urgently,

"Where are you hurt?"

"My shoulder," Kirk admitted. "It's not too bad, Spock - leave it for now."

"You lie." The robe was parted and folded aside to reveal the improvised dressing, soaked with blood that could be ill-spared by the exhausted man on the bed. Long fingers probed delicately.

"The bullet is still inside," Spock said, "and must be removed. Brother Fahan, bring me..."

"No, Spock." Kirk's voice was determined. "I can hold on a little longer. We can't afford the time right now... we've got to find somewhere to hide..."

"Unfortunately, James is correct," Fahan echoed agreement. "You must be ready to leave the city as soon as the gates are opened at dawn. All the arrangements have been made - you must be out of the city before anyone suspects that James is not in the hunting grounds."

"If he travels in this condition the wound will bleed heavily, and may become infected," the Vulcan protested.

"Certainly it would be best if he did not; but there is no safe refuge for him close to the Palace. If it were possible for him to remain here... but in a community such as ours his presence would soon be discovered."

"The wine shop? Surely his friend would conceal him?"

"Spock, that's the first place they'll look for me," Kirk said. "They'd expect me to seek help from my only known relative. We can't endanger Anton, you know that. Just get me on my feet and keep me moving for a few hours - we'll find somewhere safe to rest up, and I'll let you play doctor then. That's an order, Mr. Spock."

The hazel eyes were soft with understanding, but Kirk spoke now as the Captain of the Enterprise; recognising that, Spock bowed his head.

"Yes, Captain."

He sounded so subdued that Kirk pressed his hand in a gesture of reassurance, and turned to Fahan. The monk, who had been searching in a chest, came forward with a pile of clothes which he quickly tore into bandages while Spock bound the wound firmly.

When he had finished, Kirk lay back breathing heavily; the pain was almost intolerable, like red-hot knives piercing his flesh. Fahan offered him a small flask. "This will ease the pain."

Kirk turned his head aside, distrustful of this world's drugs. "It will not harm you - it is not a sedative, but it will dull the pain."

Spock took the flask and tasted its contents experimentally. "It will not affect your mind, Jim. It is a simple herbal pain-killer - you may drink it safely."

"Only two drops," Fahan cautioned as Kirk turned, trustfully allowing Spock to administer the dose. "In small quantities it is harmless, but a larger dose can have unpredictable effects. Keep the flask - you may need it again."

"Thank you. Jim, will you not rest for a short time? I will call you when it is time to go."

Kirk nodded and settled back, closing his eyes; the tearing pain in his shoulder did seem to have eased a little. He thought vaguely that he should ask Spock how they proposed leaving the city, but it was too much of an effort.

Leaving the bed Spock moved over to join Fahan, who was hastily packing a small satchel. "I managed to find some extra clothes in case you need them," he said. "Keep the robes - the nights can be cold, and they will at least be warm. And while you're wearing them you're unlikely to be stopped and questioned - the country people have a great respect for monks. Bandages - yes, I put those in, and you have the painkiller. I have no medical instruments, I'm afraid, but you'll find a couple of fine-bladed knives - that's the best I can do. Some

food, a flask of wine... oh yes, and the map. It's a hasty sketch, I'm afraid," he added apologetically as he unrolled a scroll, "but the roads are clear enough, and it will give you some idea what to expect. The pass across the mountains is marked - it's easier than it looks - but it's a pity you're not travelling earlier in the year. Here's the valley I mentioned, and here is the Hermitage I spoke of. No-one lives there now, but the Brothers sometimes use it as a retreat; it's empty at the moment, and if any passer-by sees it occupied, they would not dream of disturbing you. That's all, I think - I only wish I could do more."

"You have done much, and I am grateful," Spock answered. "I do not think I could have got him out so easily alone. Though I would have reached him," he added, glancing across at the sleeping man, his face softening for an instant.

"He is important to you, is he not? I have the impression, my friend, that if he died life would lose its sweetness for you."

"He is important." Spock started suddenly, as though all at once aware of what his eyes and voice were revealing. "I am sworn to serve him," he continued formally, "and it would be a violation of my oath to permit him to suffer."

Fahan remained silent for a moment, then said thoughtfully, "It is convenient, is it not, when duty and inclination coincide." Though phrased as one, it was not a question.

Spock shot him a suspicious glance, but any reply he might have made was cut short by a soft rapping at the door.

"Who is it?" Fahan enquired.

"Tesla," came the muffled answer.

The agent slipped quickly into the room; he was dressed in a heavy travelling cloak, and greeted Spock with relief before turning to Kirk, who had wakened at his entrance.

"How are you, Jim?" he asked. "I'm glad to see you - they told me you were dead."

"A premature report," Kirk said drily, extending his good hand.

"I'm relieved to hear it." Tesla clasped Kirk's hand for a moment then turned to the others. "It's time to go - the wagon is in the courtyard."

"Are you taking us out of the city?" Kirk sat up alertly, ignoring the pain in his shoulder. "But if you're discovered..."

"All will be well, Jim," Spock said, helping Kirk to his feet. The four men passed out of the room and along the corridor to an enclosed courtyard where a large wagon drawn by a team of horses stood waiting; it was laden with wine casks, one of which was open and empty.

"Hurry!" Tesla urged. "My men are delivering the other barrels to the temple cellar - you must be hidden before they return. Climb into the cask."

Kirk looked dubiously at the tall barrel, but before he could move he was swung off his feet and lowered carefully into the cask; the base had been well padded with cushions, he found, and there was plenty of room for him to curl up. He smiled reassuringly at Spock's anxious face peering down at him, then was plunged into darkness.

"An extra precaution," he heard Tesla's voice explaining. "A false inner cask, so that if the alarm is raised and the sentries search, the barrel will appear to be filled with wine. I do not expect any trouble, though - the guards are used to me making deliveries to important clients in person."

"James," Fahan's voice called softly, "we will not meet again; may your Gods be with you."

"Thank you, Fahan." Kirk paused, then said quietly, "I know how much I

owe to your kindness -- I wish I could repay the debt."

"If Mr. Tesla will inform me of your safe return home, I will be well paid. Farewell, James."

"Goodbye, Fahan."

"Jim, my men are returning," Tesla broke in urgently. "For your life, remain silent from now on. Mr. Spock..."

The voices faded, to be replaced by the clatter of hooves, the creak of harness as the wagon jolted into motion. Kirk lay down, trying to make the most of the enforced rest as the cart edged its way out of the temple courtyard into the street.

He could hear the sound of the city awakening around him, and from the conversation of Tesla's labourers who rode on the cart so near him, he became aware that they had reached the city gates. Here the wagon halted for agonising minutes until a blast of trumpets heralded the dawn of a new day; there was a pause while he listened to the heavy gates being opened, then the cart lurched forward once more.

"Spare us some wine, merchant!" called one of the sentries; and Tesla laughed in answer.

"A precious vintage, this, for a most exalted client. However, soldier, this for your trouble. Catch!"

"A full skin! You are generous indeed, merchant. Safe journey." They were through the gate and heading along the broad highway which led from the city.

Kirk was just beginning to wonder where Spock could be -- he had not heard his voice since they left the temple courtyard -- when Tesla called to his men.

"We will break our journey at the Red Rose tavern for the mid-day meal. You have done well of late, my servants, and you may order what you will."

So, Kirk thought, I'll be in here for a few hours yet. Might as well sleep while I can.

Making himself as comfortable as possible considering the lurching of the wagon, Kirk resolutely ignored the nagging ache in his shoulder, and soon drifted into a restless half sleep.

When Kirk next became aware of his surroundings all movement had stopped. It was very hot, and the air inside the cask felt thick, heavy -- he could almost taste it. His leg muscles were cramped from the hours he had spent lying in the confined space, and worst of all the painkiller Fahan had given him had worn off so that pain spread like fire along his nerves.

Suddenly the closeness of his refuge seemed to press in on Kirk, and he found himself having to suppress the irrational feeling that the cask was closing in on him, crushing him, squeezing out the air...

From outside came a clatter of movement, the cask lurched, steadied, and there came a flood of bright sunlight and a welcome stream of fresh air. Kirk screwed up his eyes and breathed deeply, filling his lungs with the sweet air.

"Hurry, Jim!" Tesla whispered urgently; somehow Kirk struggled to his feet, and could not wholly suppress a gasp of pain as Tesla, forgetful in the need for haste, caught his injured arm to help him from the cask.

"Sorry. Are you all right? We must hurry -- someone might see us."

They were standing outside a country inn; through the open windows came cheerful voices, loud laughter, but Kirk was grateful when Tesla, instead of leading him inside, helped him to a table in the inn garden.

The agent vanished for a moment, then reappeared bearing a tray; he poured two glasses of an iced drink and handed one to Kirk, who drank thirstily, the cold liquid soothing his parched throat.

"Where's Spock?" Kirk demanded at last, with a sudden fear that the Vulcan had been detected leaving the city.

"He's coming," Tesla assured him. "Our ways part here, Jim. You will let me know when you get back safely?"

"I'll have Uhura call you," Kirk promised.

"Jim, what happened in the palace? Spock wouldn't tell me - he just came back, demanded that I arrange to get you out of the city. The barrel was his idea - of course, he didn't know then that you were hurt."

"I don't want to talk about it." Kirk shuddered, and refilled his glass. "Anton, don't forget to let Fahan know when I'm safe - and ask him to tell Darel and Cera I made it home - he'll know who I mean."

"I will. Sorry our little reunion had such an unfortunate result."

"Can't be helped. We'll make up for it next time. I..." Kirk broke off suddenly; his hazel eyes, fixed on a point behind Tesla, widened and grew soft with affection as his lips curled into a smile of contentment.

Wondering what had produced that expression in his friend's eyes Tesla turned to see Spock coming towards them; though the cowl was firmly in place the tall slim figure, the swift, graceful movements, were unmistakeable.

"Jim."

The satisfaction in the simple greeting echoed Kirk's own, and Tesla glanced curiously at this most unVulcan Vulcan; his companions were too concerned with each other to be aware of his interest. Tesla was accustomed to the almost obsessive reserve and desire for privacy of the Vulcan race, and in contrast Spock's concern for his Captain was marked - of course, Jim had said the man was half-Human...

Shrugging, Tesla rose. "You'd better be on your way," he said. "Good luck, Jim. Take care of him, Mr. Spock."

"Goodbye, Anton." Kirk accepted Spock's hand to help him to his feet, bracing himself against the heightened pain the movement caused him. He smiled cheerfully, anxious to conceal the extent of his suffering from Spock, and followed his friend round to the front of the inn.

Beside Tesla's wagon stood a small cart pulled by an animal Kirk could only think of as a donkey, an animal whose expression of patient resignation was so obvious that he chuckled aloud.

"Supplied by Brother Fahan," Spock said, indicating their transport. "He assured me that, despite appearances, the creature is strong and capable."

Despite Kirk's protest that he could manage, Spock helped him into the cart, then moved to take hold of the donkey's harness and lead it away from the inn, down a side road that branched away through a wood.

It was pleasant in the shade of the trees after the close confinement of the last few hours, and with appreciation Kirk breathed in the cool green freshness of the forest. The small cart was surprisingly comfortable, he thought; investigation revealed that it had been well padded with soft cushions under the rough sacking that lined it. Relaxing gratefully Kirk tried hard to ignore the throbbing pain in his shoulder, aware that there was nothing the Vulcan could do to help him at the moment; someone might pass on the road ... they must find shelter first... Automatically Kirk's gaze returned to the robed figure forging steadily ahead and he smiled sympathetically, aware of how irritating the Vulcan must be finding the cowl he still wore - Spock hated anything covering his sensitive ears.

After a moment, however, his smile changed to a frown of concern - he had managed to snatch a few hours' rest in the wagon, but Spock, who had been driving the cart, could have had very little sleep since his arrival on Kelora. With some vague notion of offering to change places for a time Kirk began to sit up; but a sudden lurching of the cart threw him back against the softly-padded side; there was a tearing wrench at his shoulder, and with a low sob of startled pain Kirk slid into unconsciousness.

A few feet ahead Spock turned at the almost-muffled sound, just in time to see Kirk slump awkwardly. He stopped the cart, walked back to settle the Human more comfortably, then returned to his place, urging their donkey to a faster pace. Fahan's map was printed clearly on his memory, and he recalled that if he took a side path into the wood about a mile further on he would come to a forest ranger's hut. The monk had assured him that it would be unlikely to be occupied at this season, and it would provide a much-needed shelter for Kirk, as well as an opportunity to extract the bullet that was still embedded in his shoulder.

At last the path came into sight, and with a sigh of relief Spock followed it. He was desperately worried about Kirk - since that last sob of pain the Human had neither moved nor spoken.

The hut, when they reached it at last, was dry and weather tight, but sparsely furnished. Spock carried in the cushions from the cart, piling them on the floor to make a soft bed. There was wood stacked by the hearth and he soon had a fire going; drawing water from the stream a few yards away he set pans to boil, then lifted Kirk and laid him on the rough wooden table.

With gentle hands he removed the robe and unfastened the bandage, so thickly encrusted with dried blood that he had to soak it off with warm water. The bleeding had stopped, he saw with relief, but Kirk's tunic was so badly smeared he had to cut it away before he could bathe away the blood and examine the deep hole in his shoulder. There was no exit wound, confirming his earlier conclusion that the bullet was still inside - he only hoped that he could extract it with the primitive implements at his disposal.

Opening the pouch Fahan had given him Spock placed the knives in a pan of water and left them to boil, the only means of sterilisation he had. There was, of course, no anaesthetic, and Spock was reluctant to use the mind link to control Kirk's reaction to pain - he still did not know fully what had happened to the Human during his imprisonment, but he had certainly been drugged, and any further interference with his mind could be dangerous. Mercifully, the Human was still unconscious, and Spock decided to wait no longer. Picking up one of the knives he sliced firmly into Kirk's shoulder.

The bullet proved difficult to locate, and Spock was sweating by the time the point of the knife hit something solid; gradually the Vulcan worked the bullet out of the torn flesh and examined it carefully - it had not fragmented on impact, he saw with relief. For lack of an antiseptic he poured a little boiling water into the wound, biting his lower lip as Kirk stirred, and moaned softly. Reaching for the Human's neck Spock applied pressure to the vulnerable point, and Kirk subsided again while the Vulcan placed a soft pad over the wound and bound it tightly. That done he lifted Kirk from the table and placed him on the bed of cushions, covering him with the heavy robes. He was grateful that Fahan had suggested they retain them - apart from their value as a disguise, their warmth was comforting for Kirk as night drew on, and would prove even more so when they began to climb into the mountains.

While he waited for Kirk to come round Spock cleared away all traces of the operation, burning Kirk's bloodstained livery - he dared not wear even the trousers again for fear it would be recognised as part of the uniform of a Palace servant. Spock then began to prepare a meal, using the supplies that Fahan had given them to concoct a soup - he thought Kirk would feel better for

a hot meal, and after his long starvation he somehow had to replace the blood he had lost.

So it was that when Kirk awoke it was not to the pain and discomfort he had expected but to a sense of well-being. He was warm and comfortable, the intolerable pain in his shoulder had faded until he was scarcely aware of it, and he lay dreamily watching the flickering patterns of firelight on the ceiling until the enticing smell of something cooking made him turn his head questioningly.

Between him and the fire the dancing shadows silhouetted a dearly-familiar shape, and he smiled with unconcealed delight. "Spock," he whispered.

"How do you feel, Jim?" A warm hand brushed his forehead, seeking any signs of fever.

"Wonderful - my shoulder hardly hurts at all. Did McCoy...?"

"No, I am alone. We will talk later, Jim - first you must eat."

"I am hungry," Kirk admitted. "I couldn't eat the food in the Palace, it was drugged."

"Yes, Fahan told me."

"Right now I feel as though I'll always be hungry," Kirk grinned, struggling into a sitting position.

"Do not strain your shoulder."

An arm slid round him, supporting him comfortably as Spock held a mug to his lips. The soup was thick and nourishing, and Kirk swallowed avidly as he felt its restoring warmth spread through him. At last he pushed the empty mug away.

"That's better," he announced with satisfaction. "What happened, Spock? Why did you take so long to find me?"

The Vulcan's eyes dropped. "I regret... that you were harmed," he said painfully. "We... the ship was ordered to protect the Talleth colony against a Klingon raider. I... I had no choice, Jim."

"Spock, I didn't mean..." Kirk lifted a hand to the Vulcan's face, raising it until the troubled eyes met his. "I understand -- I know you wouldn't have left me... but I was so worried... about you," he finished softly. Then, briskly, "What happened?"

"We pursued the raider..." The voice was that of the First Officer reporting to his Captain; but Spock's arm still encircled Kirk's shoulders as the Human accepted the support trustingly -- somehow it did not occur to either of them that Kirk would be equally comfortable lying down.

The Vulcan detailed the pursuit and destruction of the Klingon raider, and their return to the Starbase. Kirk's immediate question was, "My crew? And my ship?"

"All safe, and the Enterprise has been fully repaired. Mr. Scott has her on trials now."

"If Starfleet Command believed me dead," Kirk said slowly, "they must have appointed a new Captain."

"I was offered the captaincy; I accepted," Spock confessed quietly.

"But you're here..."

"I thought, if I accepted, it would prevent them from appointing anyone else. Officially I am on leave prior to assuming command, but when we return you will resume your place." The Vulcan's tone was one of quiet satisfaction...

"Wait a minute, Spock. If you're supposed to be on leave, how did you get

here? Kelora is off limits."

"I know - that is why I could not bring the Doctor with me, although he begged to come. Admiral Shandor guessed my intentions, I think, but I informed him that if I was refused the leave I was due, I would resign."

Kirk tilted his head, mischief sparkling in his hazel eyes. "Mr. Spock, you are becoming an extremely proficient blackmailer," he teased.

"So it seems," the Vulcan sighed. "Doubtless the contaminating influence of so many Humans. Sleep now, Jim, we have far to go to the shelter Fahan suggested."

Gently but firmly he settled the Human comfortably, drawing the covers close around him, then seated himself in a chair by the fire. As Kirk drifted into a deep, restoring sleep his last sight was of the calm, resolute face of his Vulcan friend, the dark eyes fixed on him with watchful tenderness; for the first time in many nights his sleep was untroubled.

The following morning Kirk awoke feeling rested, alert and impatient to be moving. Perhaps it was only the contrast with his enforced idleness, the realisation that he controlled his own life again, but his high spirits came as a relief to Spock, who gave thanks and thereafter relaxed slightly the anxious watch he had been keeping.

Over breakfast they discussed the route they must follow to reach the Hermitage belonging to the temple; if all went well they had sufficient time to reach it before Spock's prearranged rendezvous with the Enterprise - for they had to be in a secluded spot, certain of being unseen, before Spock signalled the ship.

"We go over the mountains," Spock explained. "My main concern is that it is late in the year - it will be bitterly cold in the high passes, and if snow falls early, it will delay us."

"Can't be helped," Kirk said practically. "We'll just have to make the best time we can."

He was whistling cheerfully when they loaded up the cart, and announced his intention of lightening the load by walking with Spock; with some apprehension the Vulcan agreed, reluctant to seem to treat Kirk as a helpless invalid but privately determined not to allow him to overtax himself.

They made good progress during the morning, stopping briefly for a hasty meal at the edge of the forest. The road thereafter climbed steadily through open country, leading towards the mountains where they would have to abandon the cart and proceed on foot with only the supplies they could carry; it would be a difficult stage of the journey at the best of times, and in Kirk's weakened condition...

With this in mind Spock scrutinised the Human closely as the afternoon wore on, and at last he halted; effortlessly, disregarding his protests, he picked Kirk up and deposited him in the cart.

"Rest," he commanded. "Time enough to walk when you must - for now, conserve your strength."

Recognising the truth of that Kirk subsided; in truth, he was not unwilling, for his head was beginning to ache, he felt sick, and his shoulder had begun to hurt again - not the sharp agony of the day before, but a dull hot throbbing that echoed the pounding blood in his temples. He was grateful when Spock called a halt for the night, but by the time the Vulcan came to help him from the cart he was smiling cheerfully, concealing his discomfort.

There was little shelter to be had, but Spock made camp as best he could between two rocks. A wind had risen, gusting fitfully from the cold peaks that

towered above them so that their fire flickered uncertainly, making it impossible to cook food. It was all that Spock could do to heat enough water for a drink, and Kirk sipped his share gratefully, trying to choke down his bread and dried meat; his throat was sore now and it hurt to swallow, so he returned most of his portion to their stock when Spock was not looking.

When they settled down for the night the icy wind made Kirk shiver, preventing him from sleeping; he looked over at Spock to find the dark eyes fixed on him consideringly.

"If you will permit?"

At Kirk's nod of assent the Vulcan rose and joined him; soon they were huddled together in the shelter of both robes. Spock's more-than-Human warmth gradually seeped through Kirk and he relaxed at last, making no protest when the Vulcan slipped an arm under his head to cradle him more comfortably, drawing one of the hoods over his face so that he was completely sheltered from the wind.

"Better?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you," Kirk answered drowsily. "It's nice to be warm..." He yawned, shifted position slightly, and was quickly asleep.

Spock lay awake for some time, wondering idly why it was that only with this man did his customary dislike of physical contact seem to be in abeyance. With all others a physical contact opened his telepathic mind so that he was compelled always to maintain his barriers against the uncontrolled thoughts that would otherwise have reached him.

Kirk, though... Kirk had the sensitivity to realise how intrusive an unwanted mind touch must be, and imposed his own controls. Yet it was... pleasant, when their minds did link, a most unusual feeling of welcome, of belonging. Kirk accepted him gladly, with none of the fear most Humans instinctively felt for telepaths, and none of the reservations his fellow Vulcans had about coming into contact with his Human side. He had sensed that reservation in T'Poling, that deliberate withholding of the joyful union the bond should have inspired; and that fear, though resolutely subdued, had filled McCoy's mind, and Scott's, on the Melkotian planet. Dimly he realised yet again that whatever it was he had found in Kirk, that Kirk had found in him, it was something unique, infinitely precious...

As he looked down at the sleeping face a frown of concern creased Spock's forehead; did Kirk's breathing seem harsher than before? With great care not to waken him Spock laid one hand to his friend's cheek, and his frown deepened - the pale skin was flushed, and burned beneath his fingers.

Infection! It must be - the one thing he had dreaded. But he could do nothing here, there was no shelter, and he could not risk probing the wound without a fire to sterilise his knives. Perhaps tomorrow... there was a village a few miles further on... perhaps he could ask for shelter, tend Kirk there?

Accepting reluctantly that for the moment he could do nothing, Spock pulled his Captain closer, tucked the covering more firmly around him, and settled to sleep, aware that all his own strength would be needed for the journey that still lay ahead.

In the morning Kirk's temperature was still high, and as if to add to his misery the weather had changed; cold rain fell from bleak skies, persistent and chilling. Their fire, which had burned fitfully enough the night before, was completely out and they could not rekindle it - the wood Spock had gathered the evening before was wet through. Grimly Spock measured two drops of Fahan's drug into a measure of wine and made Kirk swallow it - he was not sure if it would help, but it was the only medicine they had.

There was no reason to linger; Spock harnessed the donkey and placed Kirk once more in the cart, sheltering him as much as possible from the driving rain. Then, grasping the leading rein, he urged the animal forward, doing his best to guide it over the smoothest parts of the rough track they were now following.

With no shelter in sight Spock kept walking until by late afternoon he could see the outline of a small village just ahead, and he halted, weighing his alternatives. He would have liked to avoid any contact with Calvorans in case anything had gone wrong and they were being pursued, but there was Kirk to consider. The Human was now running a high fever, a racking cough tore his weakened body cruelly, and both men were soaked and chilled to the bone. The wound should be inspected and cleansed, Kirk should have warmth and shelter -- another night in the open could prove dangerous. Had he been alone Spock would have passed on, but he would not risk Kirk; he headed for the village.

Once more the monks' robes Fahan had provided proved their worth; as the bedraggled cart entered the village square the inhabitants came out to greet them with respectful dignity. A tall, elderly man stepped forward.

"Greetings, Brother. I am Varen, Headman of this village. How may we serve you?"

"I seek a night's shelter," Spock replied. "I am Brother Johan from the Temple in Calvoro, on my way with Brother James to the Hermitage beyond the mountains. Our cart overturned on the road, and Brother James was injured -- he needs rest and warmth."

"My house is yours," Varen replied. "Will you honour us, Brother Johan? Your animal will be tended -- wife, prepare a room for our guests."

Gently, Spock lifted Kirk from the cart, startled and worried by the waves of heat pouring from the too-thin body in his arms, and followed his host into the welcome shelter of the house, through to an inner room.

"Reva, my wife," Varen said, indicating the woman who rose from lighting a fire in the hearth. "Bring hot water, woman, and prepare food."

"Of course, Varen -- and some extra blankets, perhaps?" The woman bustled off, to return in a few moments carrying a pile of soft, sweet-smelling blankets. Two younger women -- her daughters -- followed with a basin of hot water and some towels. The bed was quickly made up, then their hosts withdrew tactfully, leaving Spock to tend Kirk.

With a gentleness he would have shown no other Spock removed Kirk's sodden clothes and dried him, wrapping him in one of the blankets; then he turned his attention to the injured shoulder. The wound was swollen and badly inflamed, the skin stretched tight over the gathering poison. Spock cleaned the shoulder carefully, then held the knife-blade in the flames; when it glowed red-hot he slashed quickly and resolutely across the festering wound, releasing a flow of thick, foul-smelling yellow-green poison; Kirk groaned as the blade sliced deep but he did not waken. Spock bathed the infected matter away, continuing until fresh blood flowed from the cut he had made, then he returned the knife to the fire to heat again. He considered using a nerve-pinch to anaesthetise Kirk for what he must do next, but abandoned the idea reluctantly -- the Human was too weak, and it would be over quickly.

When the knife was glowing again Spock placed his left hand firmly over Kirk's mouth to stifle any outcry which might alarm their hosts, and deliberately placed the red-hot knife in the wound, turning it to cauterise the raw flesh.

Beneath his hands Kirk's body convulsed in agony, and the breath hissed between the Vulcan's clenched teeth as he forced himself to complete the task; then he tossed the knife aside and examined his handiwork.

It was the best he could do, but his eyes were troubled as he bound up the wound again, gently bathing the sweat from Kirk's face, and dressed him in the spare clothes Fahan had provided. Kirk had lost so much blood already, and the

prolonged starvation had further weakened his powers of recuperation; now he must also fight off the effects of his wound, and that cough must be exhausting him...

Settling Kirk on the bed Spock stripped off his own wet clothes, dressed, and spread the wet garments before the fire to dry. His reflection in the room's mirror made him pause, and remembering something Fahan had said he rummaged again in the bag of clothes and found two close-fitting helmets of fine cloth, designed to cover the head from the eyebrows to the back of the neck - it was customary for monks to cover their heads at all times, and he was thankful for that as his betraying ears were concealed. The second helmet he slipped over Kirk's head; better if they both conformed to custom, and besides, although light-coloured hair was not unknown on Kelora, it was uncommon among Calvorans, and would be remembered if enquiries were made about them.

The disturbance when he was moved brought Kirk to semi-consciousness and the racking cough started again, deepening the flush on the Human's cheeks. Spock held him, trying vainly to sooth the spasms, aware that each convulsive movement was further wrenching the injured shoulder.

A light tap on the door brought the automatic response, "Come!" and Reva entered, her kindly face concerned.

"I couldn't help hearing the Brother coughing," she explained. "I have some small knowledge - this syrup of herbs and honey may help him." She held out a small flask.

Spock sniffed cautiously, and tasted experimentally; he could detect nothing harmful, and raising Kirk's head to his shoulder managed to force a few drops between the pale lips, tilting the Human's head backwards and stroking his throat to encourage him to swallow.

The syrup eased the cough and Spock gave an unconscious sigh of relief as he settled Kirk once more.

"He will sleep now," Reva said. "Would you honour us by sharing our meal, Brother Johan?"

"My thanks." Spock rose, aware for the first time that he was, in fact, quite hungry. He cast an apologetic glance at Kirk. "If he should wake..."

"You can leave the door ajar - we will be in the next room, and hear if he calls for you. Come now - you must be tired and hungry."

Submitting to her gentle urging Spock allowed himself to be led into the next room where a place had been laid for him at the family meal. He was more tired than he had realised, for worry for Kirk had disturbed the little sleep he had managed to snatch since the Human had first been lost, and it was an effort to respond to the quiet conversation of his hosts.

They were a simple people, these mountain-dwellers, but content in their small village crouched in the shelter of the high peaks. Here, on the lower slopes, tiny fields were cultivated, but their principal source of income was the wool and flesh of the goats that roamed on the high pastures. The food was plain, but plentiful, and the fact that Spock avoided meat aroused no comment - monks were often vegetarian by choice, though it was not a requirement of their rule.

It was perhaps because of his tiredness, but it was only when Lana, Varen's youngest daughter, leaned over to refill his plate that the necklace she was wearing came fully into focus, and he straightened in his chair.

"That is a most unusual ornament you wear," he said pleasantly. "May I examine it?"

With a smile she slipped the string of crystals over her head and held it out; Spock confirmed with a quick glance that her mother and sisters wore similar necklaces.

"Women's fripparies!" grumbled Varen, but his tone was one of affectionate indulgence.

A close inspection revealed that the stones were indeed dilithium, crudely fashioned into beads. "I have never seen the like," Spock said quietly. "Where were these obtained?"

Varen gestured vaguely with his pipe. "There is a cavern in the mountains - these stones are common as pebbles in this area. We never thought much of them, but some time ago a merchant from the city came in quest of them - seems that fashionable ladies have taken a notion to wear them as jewels." He laughed. "It costs us nothing to bring a pocketful on the way from the pastures, and the merchant pays a good price. These foolish ones conceived the notion of aping their betters, and I permit them a necklace each - they work well, and are obedient." Varen smiled fondly at his wife and daughters.

"I would be interested to see the source of these stones," Spock said. "Could you show me?"

"Of course." Varen rose and peered out of the window. "It's blowing for a storm on the heights tonight - there will be snow on the high passes." He turned back to Spock. "The cavern is not far - I can show you tomorrow."

"Good," Reva approved. "The young Brother could do with a good long rest - you can visit the cavern tomorrow, stay here over night, and continue your journey the following day if he is well enough to travel... that is, if the pass is still open," she added, glancing enquiringly at her husband.

"Hard to say - depends on how much snow falls tonight. Some years it's blocked at first fall, others it stays open well into winter."

"Then we must see," Spock rose. "Now if you will forgive me, I will retire."

"Best thing you could do," Reva nodded. "You look tired, Brother Johan. Rest well."

Withdrawing into the bedroom Spock closed the door firmly and leaned over to study Kirk. The Human was still feverish, but not so much as he had been, and the touch of the Vulcan's fingers on his cheek roused him.

He blinked sleepily for a moment, then said, "Hello, Spock." His voice was very faint.

"How do you feel?"

"Much better. Warm, comfortable... and my shoulder doesn't hurt at all." He yawned, then turned his head as Spock lay down beside him. "It was all a bit vague, but I could hear you talking to someone... a woman... she called you 'Brother Johan'."

"That was Reva, our hostess. I gave her that name because I thought 'Spock' scarcely a typical Calvorean name, and that was the first I thought of. Why do you smile?"

"It was just..." Kirk yawned again. "Johan... that's like John; James and John... they were brothers, you know." The heavy eyelids closed as sleep claimed him again and Spock in turn settled down and composed himself to sleep. He found that he too was smiling at the curious coincidence, then weariness mastered him, and he slept.

The following morning was dry but cold, and the heavy skies were threatening. Over breakfast Spock related his discovery of the previous evening.

"It is not impossible that the crystals are indeed used as jewels," he ended. "After all the Dolman had a similar necklace, you will recall. Nevertheless, the possibility does exist that the Klingons are obtaining them by

stealth - I should examine the site, and question Varen further."

Kirk looked at him with troubled eyes. "I suppose so; but be careful, Spock."

"I will, have no fear." Spock rose and donned his dry robe. "Get as much rest as you can, Jim - Reva will bring you food. I should be back by late afternoon."

Kirk smiled an affectionate farewell as Spock left, then lay back luxuriating in the simple comfort. He dozed away the morning, rousing only when Reva came in to tend the fire, or to bring him a light meal, chatting idly of her small domestic affairs. Her only son was married, she told him, and despite her respect for his status as a monk she relished the opportunity to fuss over him with motherly concern. Soon, however, seeing how tired he still was, Reva produced another dose of the soothing syrup and left him again to rest.

For a time he lay quietly, longing for Spock's return, until the dancing flames lulled him into a half-sleep from which he started awake suddenly, his heart pounding, wondering what had disturbed him. All seemed quiet, however, and he struggled to a sitting position, frowning in concern as the fading light through the window told him that the afternoon was far advanced - he didn't like to think of Spock out on the mountain in this cold weather, though to be sure, Varen was with him.

It was at that moment that the murmur of voices in the next room reached him through the partly-opened door, and he stiffened in sudden apprehension. Reva was saying, "My husband should return shortly, Master Kehar; will you not take some refreshment while you wait?"

Then came the voice that had startled Kirk. "My thanks. It has been a long journey in this weather, but I trust it will be a profitable one." It was not the words, but the voice in which they were delivered - the familiar harsh accent of a Klingon.

"You obtain a good price, then?" Reva continued.

"Indeed. It is a most satisfactory partnership."

Kirk sat still, not daring to move and call attention to himself, hoping that Reva would not choose just that moment to see if he needed anything. From the conversation he would hear it was evident that the Klingon was posing as a merchant, but what could he wish to obtain in such secrecy from these people? Surely only dilithium...

Anxiously Kirk glanced towards the window, torn between longing for Spock's return and fear of what might happen if he walked in unexpectedly. The Calvorans, never having seen a Vulcan, saw nothing unusual in Spock, but Kehar might recognise him for what he was.

"May I refill your mug?" As Reva spoke Kirk recognised the smell of the hot drink he had been offered with his meal. "Excuse me for a moment - I will take some to Brother James."

"Brother James?" The harsh voice was curious, but not as yet suspicious.

"A monk from the city, travelling to the Hermitage. He was injured on the road, and sought shelter here." The door opened wider as Reva came in, but Kirk only had eyes for the figure behind her. The Klingon stared curiously at him for a moment, then his eyes narrowed.

"A great pleasure - Brother James!" The emphasis on the name told Kirk he had been recognised. "You have no reason to remember me, but I believe you know an... associate... of mine - Koloth."

"Indeed." With an effort Kirk kept his voice light as he turned to thank Reva for the steaming mug she placed by the bed.

"Perhaps I might speak alone with... Brother James?" Kehar was all silky courtesy. "It is pleasant to recall old... friends."

"Do you feel well enough for company, Brother?" Reva asked.

"Yes; I'll be all right." Kirk knew that Reva was alone in the house - at all costs he must protect her from learning the Klingon's true nature.

"Well, if you're sure, I'll just pop over and see my neighbour for an hour or two. I didn't like to leave you alone, but Master Kehar will keep you company. You won't overtire him?" she asked the Klingon anxiously.

"I am sure we will have an interesting discussion," the Klingon replied, taking a seat beside the bed. He remained silent until the house door closed, then his smile broadened to one of triumph.

"So - Captain Kirk. And alone, for once. Lost your tame Vulcan, have you? Now, will you tell me at once what you are doing in Calvoro, or must I resort to more... violent methods?"

"I might ask you the same question," Kirk replied as calmly as he could. "My presence here is an accident - yours, evidently, is not, and is therefore a violation of the Organian treaty. There are penalties..."

"Only if I am discovered," Kehar sneered, "and you will have no opportunity to denounce me."

Leaning forward he pulled Kirk to his feet; the Human struggled, but was unable to break the powerful grip on his injured shoulder. He bit his lip, trying to conceal the pain he felt, but was taken by surprise when a savage blow crashed into his stomach, driving the breath from his lungs. Kirk doubled over, gasping, but was dragged upright again as Kehar changed his grip to hold him by the throat; he writhed, fighting for breath, as further merciless blows thudded into his body, then he was thrown back onto the bed while the Klingon stood licking his bleeding knuckles, eyeing him consideringly.

"Ready to talk?" he demanded.

Kirk shook his head, and the Klingon chuckled. "You'll be begging to tell us all you know soon," he promised. "My ship returns shortly to collect the latest consignment of crystals; I will take you with me when I leave, and hand you over to my fellow officers - I am certain our interrogator will loosen that stubborn tongue."

"You can't force me to go with you!" Kirk gasped out.

"Can I not?" Kehar's grin was pure malice. "I am certain you will see reason - it would be a pity if our hosts suffered for your unwillingness to cooperate." Almost absentmindedly he swung his hand against Kirk's face, knocking the Human sideways so that he crashed into the wall and lay half-stunned. Kehar began to search the room and Kirk could only pray that there was nothing to indicate that he was not alone, that he would have the opportunity to warn Spock...

Kehar straightened as the house door was flung open and men's voices echoed.

"Do you see to Brother James," Varen directed.

The Klingon glanced at the seemingly-unconscious Kirk, and took his position behind the door. "Seems I'll have to dispose of a witness after all," he muttered.

Behind him Kirk blinked, shook his head dazedly, and with sick horror focussed on the disruptor in the Klingon's hand. He knew that it was Spock just outside the door... he must save him...

Kirk tried to call out, but no sound came from his dry throat; gazing round desperately his eye fell on the mug Reva had left by the bed, and without stopping to think he hurled it at the waiting Klingon. In his haste he

misjudged his aim, but the sudden distraction startled Kehar, who jerked round abruptly in the very act of firing. The sound alerted Spock, who sprang through the door in time to see the disruptor beam strike Kirk.

With a scream of anguish Spock reached for Kehar and felled him, then dropped him carelessly to the floor as he hurried to Kirk's side.

It had been only a glancing blow - Kirk was unconscious, but breathing steadily; with a sigh of relief the Vulcan clutched him tightly for a moment, disturbingly aware of how it would have felt to lose Kirk now.

"Brother Johan, what is happening? Master Kehar - he's dead... and Brother James hurt... what does this mean?" Varen, startled by the noise, had followed Spock into the room.

"A moment, and I will explain." Spock settled Kirk on the bed, using the moments thus gained to contrive a logical explanation. At last he turned and surveyed the anxious Calvoran.

"In the name of the Emperor, I pledge you to secrecy," Spock began solemnly. "For some time we of the Temple have been aware that there is treason in Calvoro, that certain accursed ones conspire with our enemies to overthrow the Emperor."

"Blasphemy!" Varen exclaimed.

"Indeed." Spock relaxed a little, sensing that Varen believed it. "This Master Kehar is a courier for the conspirators, using the fashion for crystals as an excuse to journey to these mountains to confer with the group's foreign allies. He was suspected, but there was no proof, so Brother James and I were ordered to follow him - unfortunately, as you know, Brother James was injured, and so we sought refuge here. He must have recognised the Brother, and knowing that his presence here, and the letters he is no doubt carrying, would condemn him, attempted to kill us both before we could denounce him."

"Such treachery!" Reva whispered from the doorway; she had seen her husband return and had come home, only to find her guests so brutally attacked. "How could he - how could any Calvoran - conspire against the Emperor, and injure a priest?"

"The finest house can have rats in the cellar," Varen growled. "What do you want us to do, Brother Johan?"

Spock thought quickly. He knew that Kehar must have been gathering the crystals for collection by his ship - if a satisfactory explanation for his death was not forthcoming his fellow Klingons would investigate. He glanced out of the window; snow was falling again, and that gave him an idea.

"Perhaps an accident?" he suggested. "On his way back from his meeting he became lost in the storm, and fell over a cliff. Can you arrange that, Varen? His associates will search for him, and if they find him with all his possessions intact they will not suspect that they are known to us." It would mean sacrificing the latest batch of dilithium to the Klingons, but rather that than have them, as well as the Imperial Guard, on their trail.

"I will arrange it, Brother." Varen signalled, and his son, who had entered with his mother and listened in white-faced silence, dragged Kehar's body out. "I will also ensure that our people know what story to tell if they are questioned."

"Wait!" Spock hesitated, then continued, "It might be as well if you omit any mention of either Brother James or myself, whoever questions you. We cannot be certain how far the conspiracy spreads, but it is possible that even members of the Imperial Guard are involved. The coincidence of our presence might be noticed, and for the safety of the Emperor it is vital that we continue our investigations unhindered."

"Very wise," Varen approved. "I'll give the necessary instructions."

When the Calvorans had gone Spock crossed to the bed to stand looking down at Kirk; he had thought the Human still unconscious, but as he watched the hazel eyes opened and looked into his with profound relief.

"I thought... He was going to kill you, Spock," the Human murmured.

"He would have done, had you not distracted him in time. Jim, you are hurt!" he interrupted himself, catching sight of Kirk's bruises.

"It's nothing much - he knew he couldn't make me talk, but I think... he enjoyed trying. But he didn't do too much damage - he was saving me for the interrogator."

"Let me see." The Vulcan examined the bruises carefully, knowing that despite - or perhaps because of - Kirk's dismissal, they must hurt. More serious was the fact that his shoulder was bleeding again.

Carefully, Spock bathed and rebandaged the wound, thankful to see that there was no sign of further infection. As he busied himself with the task he kept his attention on his hands, aware that Kirk's eyes were resting with satisfaction on his face.

"Jim - thank you for my life," he said at last. He sensed rather than saw the Human's smile.

"After what you have done for me? Spock... your life, mine... one means the other to me. Without you..."

"I know," Spock whispered. "It is so for me also."

For a moment he felt a light, delicate touch on his hair; startled, he looked up and his eyes locked with Kirk's as a glance of awareness and understanding flashed between them.

Then, breaking the emotional mood as it had to be broken, Kirk smiled. "I'm hungry," he announced.

"I will bring you food." The Vulcan rose, looking contentedly at the relaxed figure. "For once," he murmured, "the good doctor would find no cause to complain that you are overweight."

Kirk's eyes flashed a delighted recognition of the gentle teasing. "Be sure you bring plenty," he called. "Remember, I've got all those missed meals to catch up on."

Later that night as they lay waiting for sleep, Kirk said slowly, "Well, now we know for certain that the Klingons are obtaining dilithium from Kelora, we can report to Starfleet Command. Our evidence should smooth over any difficulty caused by your violation of the Prime Directive."

"It also explains the raid on Taletha," Spock replied. "It was a diversion to lure the Enterprise away so that the Klingons could receive their cargo without detection."

"They are ruthless, to sacrifice one of their own ships like that. I wonder if their impatience means that they're having difficulty obtaining crystals from regular sources."

"We can suggest that to Starfleet in our report. Now get some rest, Jim, we must move on in the morning or risk not being able to contact the Enterprise on schedule."

The following morning Spock rose early, leaving Kirk sleeping a little longer while he joined their hosts for breakfast. He announced his intention of travelling on, and asked Varen whether the high pass was open.

"The snow last night was heavy even here, Brother Johan; I fear the pass

will be difficult. It might be possible for you... but I do not think that Brother James could manage the crossing."

"I see." Spock considered the position worriedly. He was desperately anxious to reach the certain seclusion of the Hermitage so that there would be no delay in placing Kirk under McCoy's care, for the drugs he had been given in the Imperial Palace were still affecting him... and if his shoulder was not properly treated soon there was a very real chance that Kirk might lose the use of his arm.

Certainly, if he did not signal, Scott and McCoy would scan for him; certainly, his Vulcan readings were distinctive, but as they had no idea where he was, the scan would take time, and Starfleet Command would certainly wonder why the Enterprise was lingering in a prohibited area. They would order her away, Mr. Scott would refuse to go, and while Spock cared little for his own career as long as Kirk was safe, he was troubled by the thought that Scott and McCoy would be disciplined for loyalty to him. And he did not dare signal while they still sheltered here; so far his breach of the Prime Directive had done no harm, but if the villagers here should learn, through him, of advanced technology, Starfleet would 'throw the book' at him - and at Kirk with him, which was more important.

Kirk. The Human was certainly too weak to undertake the arduous journey over the mountains; he might have made it in clear weather, but the additional hazard of the snow lessened his chances considerably.

Spock seriously considered leaving Kirk here and going on alone; once in contact with the ship, he could arrange a new rendezvous, return and take Kirk to it; but he was reluctant to be parted from Kirk again. The Klingons might after all investigate the death of their colleague, he rationalised - or the Imperial Guard might have widened their search for Kirk, and find him...

"Is there no other route?" he asked, a hint of desperation colouring his voice.

Varen shook his head. "I fear not. You could skirt the foot of the mountains, but it is many weeks' journey."

With other villages frequent on the way, Spock guessed. "I see." He sighed softly; he must go on alone, then.

"Varen, we are fools!" Reva broke in suddenly. "Have you forgotten? There is the Low Road!"

"Of course!" Varen struck his forehead in exasperation. "It is seldom used," he explained, turning to Spock. "My people are so accustomed to the mountains they have a dislike of being enclosed, and the Road is only used in winter for emergencies. It's the perfect answer, though, for you; you will be sheltered from the weather, and if you are careful you should win through more quickly than you would crossing the pass."

"Where is this road?" Spock asked.

"It leads from the cavern where the crystals are. It's actually a natural tunnel leading through the mountains; the path is hazardous in places, but no more so than climbing would be. I can give you lamps to light your way... and as I recall, you could take your cart, so that Brother James will not have to walk."

"Will you show me the road? I wish to lose no more time."

"Gladly. I'll have your cart made ready, and we can leave as soon as you wish."

"And I'll pack food for you," Reva said as Spock rose. "At least Brother James will be sheltered from the worst of the cold... and I'll see that you have enough blankets. I tell you straight, Brother Johan, I don't like the idea of him travelling in such a condition - if he was a son of mine... but

perhaps I shouldn't think like that about a priest?"

"I see no wrong," Spock said as Reva seemed to expect an answer. "His own mother would feel as you do, I am certain. He is a priest, but he is also a man. No, it cannot be wrong to have compassion."

"Thank you, Brother. Well, I'd best get on." Reva turned away, while Spock went through to pack their few belongings.

When all was ready, he shook Kirk awake, and helped him to don the monk's robe once more, then brought a breakfast tray from the kitchen; while the Human ate Spock explained the change in plan, and Kirk smiled.

"It'll be easier on you too," he said at last. "You'd have had to help me, and I know how susceptible you are to cold. Will we be in time, do you think?"

"The time we have spent here will be made up by taking the faster route," Spock explained. "Come, Jim - I think Varen is ready."

Kirk, still feeling a little shaky, was glad of the support of Spock's arm as they went out; Varen's family clustered around them, bidding them a respectful and affectionate farewell.

"Are you sure you can find the path?" Varen asked, for Spock had decided that he need trouble their host no further - he knew the way to the cavern, and if there were Klingons in the area, it was better that Varen was not involved. "I could come as far as the cavern with you."

"That will not be necessary. I remember the way perfectly, and we must not impose on you any further."

"We are happy to serve. Safe journey, Brother."

The cart was waiting, and Spock helped Kirk to climb in. Someone - probably Reva - had covered the cushions with blankets; various nooks and crannies held parcels of food, and a heavy covering of animal hide had been stretched over the cart as a final blanket so that Kirk was protected from the snow which was falling again, although the wind had dropped.

"Wait - the lanterns." Varen drew back a corner of the hide to show two lamps lashed to the side of the cart. "The large cask contains oil, the smaller, some of our wine."

Spock remembered the final words Fahan had spoken to them. "May the Gods be with you," he said, then took the leading rein and set off up the path. Kirk waved until they were out of sight, then settled back watching the Vulcan's resolute figure as he trudged doggedly onward, head bowed against the snow.

Later the wind rose again, its icy fingers reaching even through the blankets, making Kirk apprehensive for Spock who had even less resistance to cold than he. In fact he was just about to suggest that they seek shelter to allow the Vulcan to warm himself when the cart swung aside to enter a large cavern.

Out of the wind it was not quite so cold, and Kirk looked round interestedly; he recognised the presence of the dilithium in the rocky walls, and could see where sections had been chiselled out. If this was the Klingons' only contact on Kelora they could not have been long at work - perhaps the Enterprise had been diverted to enable them to pick up their first shipment.

Spock paused inside the cavern to fill and light the lamps; he fastened one to the cart, and carried the other to light his way when he returned to lead the donkey onward, searching for the tunnel he had been told to look for. He found it easily, an opening high and wide enough to allow easy passage for the cart. The floor was not quite as smooth as he would have wished, and as a result the cart jolted over the uneven surface; but it was much quicker and easier for Kirk than walking would have been, the Vulcan thought with satisfaction.

When they halted to eat he joined Kirk in the cart, resting thankfully as they shared the food Reva had provided; she had even thought to include a bundle of dried grass for the donkey, and the hard-working beast nuzzled Spock's fingers gratefully when he laid it down.

Kirk chuckled affectionately at the sight of the Vulcan absently petting the animal, then asked, "Spock, are we still going to make it?"

"It seems probable." Realising what he was doing he pulled his hand back guiltily, and continued, "We would be better, however, not to waste any time. Have you finished your meal, Jim?"

"Yes." Kirk repacked the remaining food and passed one of the lamps over to Spock, who resumed his place at the donkey's head.

Despite the swaying of the cart, Kirk dozed intermittently. He woke at one point to gaze sleepily at the determined figure ahead, and to call out, "Spock, won't you rest?"

"I would prefer to wait until we are through the mountains, then I will rest." The Vulcan smiled reassuringly. "I am not tired, Jim."

"Oh. Well, if you're sure." Kirk yawned and snuggled down to sleep again; for a moment he was troubled by a vague feeling of unease, then dismissed it impatiently as he fell asleep.

Spock plodded patiently onwards. Though he had denied it he was tired. His worry for Kirk had prevented him from sleeping properly, for he had been compelled to wake up at intervals to check the Human's shoulder was not bleeding again. In addition he had in the last few days covered a considerable distance on foot, and was further plagued by an almost feverish impatience to reach his destination and place Kirk under McCoy's care.

So he was, perhaps, not just as alert as he would otherwise have been when the left hand wall and roof of the tunnel began to recede so that the path they followed became a ledge along the side of a cliff. Only gradually did he realise that the donkey's hooves were dislodging small stones which vanished over the edge to clatter into the depths below.

The sound roused the abstracted Vulcan, and he reached out to grab the harness and bring the donkey to a halt; even as he did so the edge of the path crumbled under the wheel of the cart and he watched with horror as it began to tilt slowly towards the abyss.

"Jim!" The scream of despair woke the Human, who blinked stupidly for an instant before he realised what was happening; with a convulsive effort he flung himself to the front of the cart and hung on grimly.

Spock now had a moment to assess the situation. The donkey was straining forward, made nervous by the sliding weight behind it, but more of the path was crumbling under the slipping wheels. With horror Spock watched as the tailboard gave way and a few of their bundles fell out to vanish into the darkness; worst of all Kirk was slipping, his weight pulling against the grip he had on the cart - his weakened shoulder could not long take the strain.

There was no time for the Human to scramble to safety - so steep was the angle of the cart that if he released his hold he could easily slide over; Spock let go of the harness and grabbed for the front of the cart, his muscles cracking as he heaved. For long moments nothing happened, then suddenly the donkey stumbled forward a few steps, and the cart lurched to the comparative safety of level ground.

Too frightened to linger, Spock led the donkey along the path, carefully testing each step before he moved. The cart was difficult to pull, and he had to add his own strength to keep it moving. Within a few hundred yards, however, the wall and roof closed in again, the ledge became a tunnel once more, then opened into a small cavern. There was movement in the air, and

although there was no sign of light Spock knew they must be very near the surface.

He dropped the reins and turned, intending to go to Kirk; but to his profound astonishment he seemed incapable of taking the first step. He sank to his knees and crouched trembling on the dusty ground, overwhelmed with misery as he contemplated what had so nearly happened.

He had been stupidly, criminally careless; he should have been on the alert, should have seen that the path was dangerous. Only chance had enabled Kirk to hang on long enough... he shuddered at the vision of the Human falling, screaming, plunging down to be dashed to pieces on the rocks far below. He would have been responsible, he who had sworn to serve Kirk, to protect him... he was useless, even dangerous... Kirk had trusted him, and he had failed...

A few yards away Kirk lay tangled up in the jumbled blankets; he could hear the wild beating of his heart, and fought to control his ragged breathing. After a few moments, however, he sat up abruptly - where was Spock? He had not seen or heard the Vulcan since that frantic cry. He had not thought... could Spock have gone over the cliff?

He called anxiously, "Spock!" but there was no answer. Suddenly desperately afraid Kirk fought himself free of his coverings and climbed shakily to the ground. Somehow the lamp fastened to the cart had remained unbroken and alight, and Kirk gasped with relief as he saw a huddled shape crouched by the wheel.

"Oh, Spock!" Forgetful of his bruises Kirk hurried forward to kneel down and grasp the trembling shoulders. "You gave me a fright - I thought I'd lost you."

"Jim." The dark eyes were sick with misery. "You could have been killed. It was my fault... I should have been more careful."

"You're tired, and no wonder." Kirk tightened his grip, remembering his apprehension earlier. "I knew you were, but I didn't think... I should have ordered you to rest. As usual you've been looking after me without a thought for yourself." He gave a gentle shake. "Come on - we're both going to get some sleep."

Insistently he led the Vulcan back to the cart, and made him lie down on the remaining blankets. The donkey, with patient indifference, had already sunk down in the shafts to rest in its curious crouching posture. Kirk knew that it would not move until given the command to do so, and he really was too tired to unharness the creature. He was shaking with reaction as he crawled into the nest of blankets beside Spock, smiling as the dark eyes turned to him anxiously.

"We'll sort all this out in the morning," he said, indicating the jumble around them. "For now, sleep."

When Spock woke at last a shaft of sunlight slanting across the cave confirmed that the end of the tunnel was close by. He turned, seeking his companion, and blinked in bewilderment at finding himself alone. A most unVulcan panic was just beginning to build in him when he heard footsteps and Kirk appeared, smiling cheerfully.

"Wake up, Spock," he called. "I've just had a look outside - it's not been snowing on this side of the mountain, and I think I can see the Hermitage. We should reach it easily enough before dark. Come and have breakfast - such as it is," he added disparagingly.

Spock looked round, and saw that Kirk had been busy. Most of their possessions had gone, fallen beyond recovery, but what remained had been neatly sorted.

"We have one lamp left, and the oil," Kirk recited. "The clothes are gone, except for what we're wearing, but I was so tangled up in the blankets that most of them are safe. The food's going to be a bit of a problem - there's only bread -

but the wine's still here," he concluded triumphantly.

"It was my fault," Spock said guiltily, and Kirk faced him with determination.

"I thought we'd settled that last night. If I hadn't insisted on going to see Tesla in the first place, none of this would have happened. I'm the one who should feel guilty. Now, will you come and eat?"

Spock smiled faintly, recognising the affectionate exasperation in Kirk's tone; but he was still worried.

"How is your shoulder?"

"It hurts a bit," Kirk confessed. "I must have wrenched it - but don't go imagining things - it's not bleeding, and I'll be fine."

Unconvinced, but resigned for the moment, Spock joined Kirk for what turned out to be a hilarious meal. The hard, biscuit-like bread they had been given was too dry to eat alone, so Kirk soaked some of it in diluted wine; lacking spoons, they had to eat with their fingers, and the Human made a game of trying to manoeuvre the slippery pieces into his mouth. Faced with such infectious good spirits, the last of Spock's tension vanished and he followed his friend's example over the undignified meal, self-consciously aware that he would have gone hungry rather than display such behaviour to anyone else.

Their meal finished, they discussed their next move. Kirk reported that the path down to the Hermitage seemed steep and rocky, and lacking tools to repair the cart they would be forced to abandon it rather than try to move it over such ground. At Spock's insistence Kirk seated himself on the donkey's back while Spock gathered the rest of their possessions into a bundle for him to hold.

As they set off down the winding path the Vulcan blessed for the hundredth time the patient strength of the placid little donkey; the creature picked its sure-footed way between the rocks, and Kirk had no difficulty holding on after Spock imperiously relieved him of the bundle.

By tacit agreement they halted only long enough to allow the donkey to drink at the small stream they came to at the end of the path; both were anxious to reach the Hermitage, as though being within its walls would somehow bring the Enterprise closer.

As Kirk had predicted it was early afternoon when they passed through the open gates; Kirk slipped to the ground and stood looking around as Spock closed and bolted the gate - Fahan had told them that the closing of the gate was an indication that someone was in retreat within.

The Hermitage itself was a small, one-storeyed building, solidly built of grey stone. A well stood conveniently close to the front door, and beside it a massive wood pile; further over was a small orchard, the trees bare so late in the year, and beside this a small paddock. Spock unharnessed the donkey and turned it loose, and Kirk could not help smiling as the patient creature rolled deliciously in the grass, enjoying its freedom. The whole complex was surrounded by a wall of the same stone as the house, broken only by the gate through which they had entered.

"We are in time." Spock's tone was one of quiet satisfaction as he secured the gate of the paddock and joined Kirk. "It will be warmer inside while we wait, and we can have a fire."

Inside, the Hermitage was very simply furnished, Kirk saw as he folded back the wooden shutters over the windows. The one room held four beds, a table, and benches all roughly carved from wood. A cupboard stood against the wall, presumably intended to hold supplies, but it was empty - Fahan had said that monks on retreat brought their own food. There were some dishes, however, and a cooking pot hung in the stone fireplace.

Spock came in with an armful of wood, and soon had a fire burning, while Kirk spread their blankets on two of the beds.

"I'm hungry again," Kirk announced mournfully. "When exactly is the rendezvous, Spock?"

"Dawn tomorrow." The Vulcan removed his pendant and placed it on the table, activating it. "Knowing the good doctor, as soon as the Enterprise is within range he will beam down to us."

"Good. It'll be nice to be home, Spock."

"Indeed."

Spock set a pan of water to heat on the fire, and mixed it with the last of the wine. Into this he crumbled some more of the bread, and poured the resulting mixture into two bowls he took out of the cupboard.

"At least we have spoons this time," Kirk grinned as they took their seats to eat the scanty meal, remembering their antics of the morning; then while Kirk washed up Spock built up the fire and they retired to bed, confident that the morning would bring McCoy.

And the Enterprise... and a shower... and a hot meal, thought Kirk longingly.

When Kirk awoke next morning his first sensation was one of extreme hunger, and he amused himself by planning the meal he would demand when he returned to the Enterprise. After a few moments, however, the brightness of the sunlight streaming through the window opposite his bed made him uneasy, and he got up to look out; the sun was high in the sky, the morning well advanced.

"Spock! Spock, wake up!"

Despite his exhaustion the Vulcan woke instantly. "What is wrong?"

"Look! Look at the sun!"

Puzzled, Spock obeyed, and his eyes clouded with concern.

"Dawn was hours ago!" Kirk exclaimed. "Someone should have found us by now - where's the Enterprise?"

"I do not know." Spock examined the communicator. "It is still signalling our position. Jim, it may be nothing... a slight delay..."

"Yes, you're right." Kirk managed a shaky smile, trying to mask his disappointment. "It's just... I'd counted on being home by now. Still, what's a few hours?" A sudden thought struck him. "Spock, are you sure we weren't late? They might have been here and left..."

"We were exactly on time," Spock replied. "The ship must have been delayed."

"Then we wait." Kirk began to build the fire, which had died down during the night, while Spock set out their remaining food. Two biscuits of travel bread remained, that was all; though Kirk made a valiant effort he found it impossible to swallow the dry bread with only water to moisten it, and with an apologetic smile he pushed his portion aside.

Spock made no comment, but he was worried - Jim needed proper food to maintain his strength, and to counteract the massive loss of blood he had suffered.

The afternoon and evening crawled slowly past as they spent the time resting and waiting. To occupy their minds they talked over some of the adventures they had shared in the past, instinctively avoiding those with tragic associations and concentrating on the amusing memories.

"Surely the Enterprise will be here in the morning," was Kirk's final, hopeful comment as they settled down for the night.

Spock was not so confident. McCoy and Scott, as worried as he about Kirk's fate, would have made every effort to reach the planet on time. Luckily Kirk had not yet thought of it, but there was always the possibility that the Enterprise had encountered Khar's ship... although he had every confidence in Mr. Scott's ability to deal with a Klingon. Perhaps Jim was right, he thought as he composed himself for sleep, and he would be awakened in the morning by McCoy's enthusiastic greeting.

But he was not. In the soft dawn light he stood looking down at the sleeping Kirk, noting with anxiety the pallor of the Human's face, and his uneven breathing. Soon he would wake; he would be hungry, really hungry, and Spock had nothing to offer him. Rescue might come in the next few hours, but it might not, and Kirk needed food now.

For a moment longer Spock hesitated, all his teaching and conscience warring with his loyalty and affection for his Captain; then, his decision made, he turned and resolutely left the house.

When Kirk awoke two hours later he knew at once that the Enterprise had still not arrived. He sat up, looking for Spock, and his eyes widened; the Vulcan, his back to him, was working busily at the table.

Curious, he got up and went to see what Spock was doing; the Vulcan turned as he approached, and Kirk's question caught in his throat as he understood.

On the table lay the bodies of three small animals about the size of rabbits, but with no visible ears and long furry tails; Spock was working on the skinned body of a fourth, cleaning it, his hands covered with the animal's blood.

"Oh Spock!" Kirk looked at the Vulcan helplessly, close to tears at this silent proof of Spock's care for him. "You shouldn't have had to do this... I know how you feel about the taking of life."

"Jim." Spock's voice was steady, his eyes calm as he held Kirk's gaze. "I will always believe that it is wrong to kill for food when there is an alternative; but in this case there is not. We have no other source of food, and I do not know how long we must remain here. The lives of those animals... or yours." His tone softened. "For me, there can be no question."

"And will you eat too?" Kirk asked.

"I will. You cannot hunt for yourself, and I have reached a stage of exhaustion where I must eat to maintain my strength. It will not be pleasant, but I will do it; it is only logical."

"I suppose it is, put like that." Kirk picked up another knife. "Here - let me help."

Four days passed with agonising slowness. The communicator continued to signal their position, but there was no response, and Kirk was by now frantic with anxiety, but knowing that he could do nothing he resigned himself to the waiting.

Spock quickly recovered from his tiredness, but it was as much as Kirk could do to walk slowly round the enclosure; it was clear that he needed proper medical attention urgently, for his shoulder, while showing no further infection, refused to heal - possibly, thought Spock, a side effect of the drugs that had been forced on him.

They had discussed what they would do if the Enterprise did not come at all; Spock suggested they might return through the mountains, and that Kirk could remain with Varen and Reva while he, Spock, returned to Calvoro and

contacted Tesla. It was not a prospect the Vulcan contemplated with any enthusiasm, but it seemed the least risky plan; the main problem being that they did not know how long to wait in case the Enterprise had simply been delayed. Kirk put off the decision from day to day, always hoping that the next hour would bring the end of their exile, but he knew that he must make a positive decision soon.

It was worse for Kirk than it was for Spock, for the Vulcan at least had the diversion of his hunting trips. He would leave early in the morning, never straying far from the Hermitage, and when he returned he would bring their day's food with him, perhaps some of the rabbit-like creatures, or fish he had caught in the stream that ran through the paddock.

For his part Kirk kept their refuge tidy, and helped Spock to prepare their meals; but for most of the day there was nothing to do but wait.

To pass the time they talked, talked endlessly; had it not been for his anxiety about the ship Kirk would have enjoyed those hours of companionship he spent with the Vulcan, for they had reached the stage by now when there was no longer any aspect of their lives one wished to conceal from the other.

On the third morning Kirk woke to find that during the night Spock had improvised a chess board as a surprise for him, and when he returned from his search for food they settled down to play, enjoying even the confusion that resulted with a careless move upset the whole precarious construction; as he scrambled after a fallen rook Kirk saw Spock's smile of genuine amusement, and was shyly proud that because of his presence his friend could openly admit to enjoyment of such a small thing.

The fourth day was wild and stormy; Spock returned from his foray soaked to the skin and shivering with cold. The storm raged violently all day, and in the evening they sat talking by the light of the fire - for their oil was now exhausted - the shutters closed against the wind and rain; gradually they fell into a companionable silence, and retired early to sleep.

Somehow the storm wove itself into Kirk's dreams, and he felt himself buffeted by the cold blasts; he huddled deeper into his blankets, murmuring protestingly as the shaking followed him even there.

"Come on, Jim - wake up, will you! To think we've come charging halfway across the galaxy, and all he wants to do is sleep!"

The lazy, affectionate grumbling could have come from only one man, and Kirk started awake instantly.

"Bones!" He looked up into concerned blue eyes, their suspicious brightness belying the cynical words. Without a thought for any possible company the doctor might have Kirk grabbed his friend and hugged him fiercely.

"All right... easy, Jim. You're safe - I've got you." McCoy's voice was rough with emotion as he returned the hug. Over Kirk's head he met dark eyes as Spock, awakened by the noise, raised himself on one elbow and regarded them tolerantly. The two men exchanged a long, steady look, then McCoy smiled slightly, and Spock inclined his head in acknowledgement, and both returned their attention to Kirk.

That was all the open admission of their friendship there would ever be between these two men, but it was all that was needed; neither had any illusions about the depth of their concern for each other.

Spock rose, and began to dress methodically; as he headed for the door Kirk looked up, startled.

"Where are you going?"

"First, to open the gate, so that anyone passing will know the place is unoccupied; second, to turn the donkey loose," Spock replied. "Since the good doctor has arrived - at last - I assume we will be leaving; it may be some time

before anyone else makes use of the Hermitage, and the creature has served us too well to be allowed to die of starvation should it consume all the grass in the paddock."

Kirk smiled. "Trust you to think of that. All right, but don't be long; I want... to go home." His grip tightened on McCoy's shoulders.

Two days later, Spock, once more the immaculately-uniformed First Officer of the Enterprise, entered McCoy's office at the end of his shift. Before he could open his mouth the doctor forestalled him.

"Jim should be waking up any minute," he said. "Let's go through."

As they had so often done they stood one on each side of Kirk's bed, studying with satisfaction the readings on the indicator panel; all registered normal.

"Those Calvoran drugs were nasty," McCoy said. "I had the devil of a time getting them out of his system. His shoulder - your surgery was pretty rough-and-ready, Spock, but you did the trick. It'll be weak for some time, but exercise will put it right."

"The scar?" Spock indicated the angry red weal on the Human's shoulder.

"Won't be one, when I've done. Seriously, Spock - you got him out just in time. If he'd taken those drugs any longer... well, let's just say I'm glad he didn't."

Spock, about to reply, changed his mind and stepped closer to the bed; he had seen the first flicker of Kirk's lashes, and leaned forward to savour his awakening.

"Hello, Spock." The faint whisper came even before the hazel eyes opened and laughed teasingly into his. "I knew you'd be here," Kirk explained simply.

"Yes, Jim."

"Bones?" Kirk turned his head, seeking the third.

"Here."

"I knew that, too." The laughing voice took on a tone of mock indignation. "What kept you, Mister? Think Spock and I have nothing better to do than hang around until you graciously decide to rescue us?"

The snort of indignation he received in response was pure McCoy. "Now I know you're on the mend. Blame Starfleet, not me. Stupid, idiotic, time-wasting...! Seems some diplomatic bigwig had to be moved from A to B urgently - complete with wife, family and assorted baggage. Couldn't wait his turn, of course, had to be done right away; we dumped the whole lot pretty unceremoniously, I can tell you - we didn't know what was happening to you, you see," he finished simply.

"Thanks, Bones. What are our current orders?"

"We were told to report back to Starbase four. Jim, I'm sorry... you and Spock are to report to Admiral Shandor as soon as possible. He's none too pleased at having the only Starship in the Fleet with two Captains."

Kirk and Spock looked at each other with dismay; they had forgotten that complication - Starfleet, it seemed, had not.

"... so, gentlemen, the Federation has laid your evidence before the Organians, and appropriate steps will be taken. We are most grateful for your report. And now," Admiral Shandor shuffled the tapes on his desk, "we come to the question of the captaincy of the Enterprise."

Kirk shifted uneasily in his chair as the Andorian raised his head.

"Captain Spock... "

"Admiral, I should tell you... "

"Please do not interrupt, Captain. Your promotion, and your appointment to the Enterprise, have been confirmed by Starfleet Headquarters. You will take up your duties immediately."

"Admiral, please." Spock's voice held a note of quiet desperation. "I do not wish for command; my scientific duties... "

"Did I mention command?" Shandor interrupted enquiringly. "No, Captain, your reassignment to the Enterprise is as First Officer. The Enterprise has been reclassified as the Flagship of the Commodore responsible for this sector. He will, of course, also function as Captain."

Kirk paled. "I didn't know that a Commodore had been assigned to this sector, sir."

"No, it's a recent appointment."

"Who is it?" If he had to lose the Enterprise, why could it not have been to Spock?

Shandor shuffled tapes again. "I had it a moment ago... ah, here it is... Commodore James T. Kirk."

"What!" Kirk leaped to his feet. "Sir, is this true?"

"I am not in the habit of lying," Shandor said stiffly, but his antennae were quivering with mirth. "Yes, it's true - my congratulations, Commodore and Captain."

"But why this suspense?" Spock asked, bewildered.

The Admiral smiled. "Shall we say... simply getting a little of my own back for your blackmail stunt, Mr. Spock. Now, gentlemen, may I offer you a drink to toast your promotions?" He rose, and crossed to a side table; lifting a bottle, he turned to Kirk. "This could interest you - Anton sent it to me. He says it's one of the finest vintages even known in Calvoro."

For the rest of his life Admiral Shandor was to wonder why, at that innocent remark, Starfleet's newest Commodore turned a delicate shade of Vulcan green.
