

IDIC

**HOME
to
ROOST 2**

**a
Star Trek
fanzine**



CONTENTS

Headaches Are Imaginary	by Sheila Clark	P 3
Highly Unethical	by Valerie Piacentini	P 16
Totally Illogical	by Sheila Clark	P 26
Blind Alley	by Sheila Clark	P 30
Reverie	by Valerie Piacentini	P 43
Symbiosis	by Sheila Clark	P 48
Jungle Trek	by Sheila Clark	P 59
The Korvan Incident	by Sheila Clark	P 83

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Hello everyone, and welcome to this second issue of HOME TO ROOST

As with the last issue, all of these stories were originally printed more than ten years ago in various zines, some of them in America, and all have been out of print for years.

There's not terribly much else to say about these stories. Totally Illogical was the result of a suggestion by Ann Looker's son, who at the time was about ten years old - Ann and I were both going to write something based on the suggestion, but I came up with mine first and she ended up not doing one. The story originally went to Alnitah, however, because of the source of the inspiration. Just one thing for those of you who are bothered by typos - all the misplaced apostrophes throughout it are deliberate.

We do have enough stories left to produce a third issue of HOME TO ROOST later this year, probably in time for Midcon in October. It will be a little shorter than numbers 1 & 2, and will include two stories that have already been reprinted once (though not by us).

We are getting more submissions for a zine of original stories (ie ones that have not been printed anywhere until now). With luck we should get the first issue of this IDIC zine out in the autumn. We are, however, wanting more stories for IDIC zines as well as more submissions for ScoTpress. I believe that everyone has the ability to write at least one story. If you haven't already tried - why don't you?

We have been asked why, when we're already putting out zines through ScoTpress, we're putting out IDIC zines. There are several reasons - for example, clubs usually do put out zines; members who write like to have their stories in a club zine - but the main one is quite simply one of theme. ScoTpress is our own press and regular buyers of ScoTpress zines know that we have a fairly tight policy for theme of story, based on our personal preferences. This policy means that we have had to reject some very good, well written stories on the grounds of theme. IDIC's policy, however, is to consider anything except explicit sex. This means that IDIC can put out zines on a wider range of subject than we accept for ScoTpress, thus catering to those who prefer more variety in their reading matter. Some of the stories that are in the HOME TO ROOST series were originally submitted to other zines because we were members of the clubs involved; others, however, were submitted there because their themes were outwith our policy - even although we wrote them (i.e. Janet didn't like the theme and vetoed them).

We hope you enjoy the stories in this zine.



We are soliciting submissions of Star Trek stories, poetry and artwork, both original Trek and The Next Generation, for inclusion in IDIC zines. Any aspect of Trek will be considered except explicit sex of any kind; all we ask is that the stories include at least one character who appears in aired Trek. Submissions can be sent to either:

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HEADACHES ARE IMAGINARY

by

Sheila Clark

"How are those tests going, Bones?"

"They're not, Jim. I'm going to have to re-do some of them."

"How long'll that take you?"

McCoy shrugged. "Till I'm finished... Seriously, all day today, and very probably tomorrow as well."

Kirk made a face. "Pity. We'll be coming up to Beta Ceti in a couple of hours, and I wanted you in the landing party."

"Can't be done, Jim, I'm sorry. The tests have medical precedence. I've got to get them finished as soon as possible."

Kirk and Spock beamed down with Sulu, biologist Houston, geologist Masters and a security guard - not that Kirk expected to need him.

Beta Ceti Two was a strange, cold world, a planet of a K-spectrum sun. Its primary gave out little heat; the plants were all a reddish colour, all of moisture-preserving types - ground-hugging lichens, cactuses, algae. The animals were small, thickly furred, none of them showing any signs of either incipient intelligence or the remnants of past intelligence. None of the animals were particularly nervous of the landing party; indeed, many of them showed an almost touching tameness, and Houston had no bother catching specimens to examine, being extremely careful not to hurt any of them. Spock and Sulu turned their attention to the plants, taking careful samples. Masters wandered here and there, probing, examining, picking up and dropping pebbles. Kirk took in the overall impression of the planet, to enable him afterwards to correlate more easily the various reports of his specialists. Although it was primarily Spock's job as Science Officer, Kirk liked to know what was going on too. After all, he was often asked, unofficially, for his opinion on a planet's suitability for colonising, for example, quite apart from the official report. A planet with a perfect bill of health from the scientist's point of view sometimes turned out to be less than perfect for colonising, due to some small, seemingly unimportant detail that never got into the main report. Like one planet that had been cleared for colonising almost a century previously. There was a strong scent of flowers in the air, very pleasant... until you had to live with it. After a couple of days, the scent - which varied according to the temperature, so that it was impossible to become acclimatised to it - no longer seemed so pleasant; within a month, the colonists had packed up and left, unable to bear the smell any longer.

Security guard Young wandered aimlessly round. He didn't expect to be needed; this was the most routine of routine surveys, no dangerous animals, no intelligent life forms. He began

inspecting the plants casually. He was a man of no great intelligence, capable in his work but with no ambitions to move on to greater things. He knew it was possible for an ambitious guard to pick up enough learning in the field to move into the labs as an assistant, and go on from there to become an assistant scientist - albeit a very junior one, without much chance of further promotion, but it was still higher in rank than most security guards attained. Nor had he any real hobbies. He worked out in the gym with his friends, he played cards with them during the monotonous hauls between planets when security had very little to do - on some ships, he had heard, security was kept quite busy, keeping the peace between rival sections of ship's personnel, but there was none of that aboard the Enterprise. In his more thoughtful moments, he sometimes doubted whether those stories were true; but always there was someone who knew someone who swore that it was true, that aboard some ships the brig was seldom, if ever, empty because of inter-section feuds. He drifted on, not really looking where he was going. These plants were odd, weren't they? Red, not green like good plants should be, no matter what their planet of origin. He began, almost, to see why some people - Sulu, for example - were interested in finding out about them, even if it wasn't their job. He moved on round a huge, cactus-type plant with great spiky leaves, staring at the long daggers it carried in place of good honest leaves, when he bumped into Kirk, who was moving towards him from the other direction.

Both men staggered. Young managed to retain his balance; Kirk fell sideways into the clutches of the long, spiky leaves.

"Sorry, sir!" Young gasped, reaching out his hand to help Kirk onto his feet.

Kirk took it, knowing that he wouldn't really be able to get up unaided - it wasn't possible to get up without pushing against the ground, and he couldn't do that without putting his hand on at least one more of the long sharp leaves. He had already been cut by at least one of them.

"Not your fault, Mr. Young," Kirk reassured him. "I wasn't looking where I was going either."

"Did you hurt yourself, sir?" Young asked.

Kirk shook his head.

"There's blood on your sleeve, sir."

"A prick, nothing more," Kirk said, passing it off. Spock nagged at him to be careful, McCoy nagged at him... He more or less had to take it from those two, it was their job, but he was damned if he was going to let a mere security ensign worry about him!

Kirk moved on unconcerned, but Young had lost the mild interest he had been developing in the red plants of this odd-ball world. Whoever heard of the plants of low-spectrum suns being of any use for anything anyway? He sat down, watching the activity of the other members of the landing party, wishing they would hurry up so that he could get back to his interrupted game of cards, away from this chilly temperature.

Slowly, so slowly that he thought at first it was merely

imagination, Kirk also began to feel the chill. He shivered. He was becoming conscious of one of his all-too-frequent headaches. They were something he had had to learn to live with; not even McCoy knew how often these headaches bothered him. It was part of the price he had to pay for the responsibility he was so proud to bear, that of being the youngest Captain in the Fleet; the headaches were brought on by nervous tension, not by anything organically wrong; sometimes he told himself he was too conscientious, that if he worried less about his ship and his crew, he would get fewer headaches; but he was temperamentally unable to stop himself. He was beginning to feel a little sick, too.

Spock came over to him after a while. "We aren't going to get the survey finished today, Captain," he began. Then - "Captain - are you all right? You have blood on your sleeve - "

"Cut myself on a sharp leaf, that's all," Kirk said. "Nothing to worry about."

"Indeed, Captain? You are also looking very pale. I suggest you beam up and let Dr. McCoy do something about that cut, minor though you consider it to be. I can quite easily take over command of the landing party."

Kirk shook his head. "McCoy's busy," he said. "It's nothing serious. Doesn't even hurt." But even as he spoke he realised that he wasn't speaking the exact truth. His arm was beginning to ache a little.

"Captain, if it had been any of us who had been hurt, you would have insisted on that man going back to the Enterprise for attention, since Dr. McCoy is not with us. Please do not deny yourself the attention you would insist on others receiving."

Kirk looked at him, knowing that he was right, and thinking that it would indeed be pleasant to sit back for a few minutes, letting McCoy tend his arm, and letting himself forget his worries for those few minutes.

"All right, you win, Mr. Spock - as usual, your logic is inescapable." He pulled out his communicator, flicked it open. "Kirk to Enterprise - one to beam up."

When Kirk reached sickbay, it was to find the newest recruit to the Enterprise's medical staff on duty. Dr. Nimmo had only been on the Enterprise for a few weeks, and had not yet had an opportunity to show his ability - this was their first planetfall since he had joined the ship, and no-one had been sick. There had been only a handful of routine examinations. He hadn't even been able to assist McCoy in the tests he was now processing - M'Benga was doing that. McCoy still had no idea of how efficient his new assistant was, and was taking no chances on his spoiling the tests - he already knew how easy it was to make a mistake, he had had to redo some of them already, and an inexperienced assistant could have made it necessary to redo the lot.

"McCoy about?" Kirk asked when he came into sickbay.

Nimmo, his eyes on the blood on Kirk's sleeve, shook his head. This was almost certainly a minor, routine injury, hardly worth bothering about unless you were going by the book, which said that

any injury caused by alien materials must be tended to as soon as possible. But it was a chance to show the Captain that he was an efficient worker.

"No, Captain. I'm sorry. He's still very busy processing the tests, and he gave instructions that he wasn't to be disturbed. He's wanting to get them finished today if at all possible."

Kirk nodded. He would rather McCoy saw to his arm, which was now throbbing quite badly; indeed, he had been almost looking forward to feeling McCoy's gentle hands tending him - even though he knew the attention would be accompanied by a scolding for not being more careful. However, he didn't want to be selfish; McCoy had been kept too busy with the test results, and he didn't want to be the cause of delaying him still more.

"Can I help you, Captain?" Nimmo was saying.

He had to pull back his wandering attention. "It's not much," he said. "I cut my arm on a plant down there, and it's a bit painful."

Nimmo nodded. He didn't know Kirk well enough to realise that Kirk invariably minimised any injury he received - it was, in part, an almost unconscious attempt to save McCoy worry - something McCoy had seen through long ago.

Nimmo rolled Kirk's sleeve up. There was an almost invisible cut, showing slightly red. It was very small.

"The leaves of the plant were long and thin," Kirk said. "One ran into my arm."

Nimmo ran a diagnostic instrument over it. "It's not bad," he said. "I'll just put a dressing on it..." He dusted it with antiseptic powder, and put the dressing over it. "It should be all right in a couple of days, Captain."

Kirk nodded. He couldn't complain of Nimmo's treatment; but *always getting McCoy has begun to spoil me for attention from any other doctor*, he thought. There had been a personal touch lacking.

"Oh, Doctor," he added. "I've got a bit of a headache as well. Can you give me something for it?"

Nimmo stared at him for a moment. A headache?

In one way, Nimmo had made a bad choice of career. He had never suffered from a headache in his life - he didn't believe in them. He considered them to be purely imaginary - an excuse for laziness, an excuse for work badly done; purely psychosomatic, a sign of hypochondria. He hadn't thought Captain Kirk to be a man who would suffer from hypochondria, but apparently he was wrong.

Despite his training, he did not even pause to consider that the headache might be a symptom of something - any time he had been ill he had still never had a headache; and he decided that Kirk was just angling for sympathy.

He went over to the medicine cabinet, glancing through the drugs it contained. Then he took down a container and removed a handful of pills from it. He put them in a small bottle, which he gave to Kirk.

"Take one every two hours until you're feeling better," he said.

Kirk nodded again, and regretted it. "Thank you, Doctor."

He went out and made for his quarters. He would take a tablet, change, and... and what? Go back down? Hardly worth it; Spock would soon be bringing the landing party back for the day. He wouldn't bother going down again tomorrow - he'd already seen all he needed to see. Go to the bridge, of course... If only he didn't feel so sick...

In his cabin, he stripped off the blood-stained shirt and went to wash. The movement hurt his arm, and with the sudden pain of it, his sickness reached a peak. He vomited, retched, vomited again. After his stomach was empty, he still kept on retching for a minute before the spasms stopped. He straightened wearily. He had hoped that his sickness would clear his head - sometimes it did help if he was sick. But not this time. His head was still throbbing as badly as ever.

Although his stomach rejected the thought of anything entering it, he swallowed one of the pills Nimmo had given him, washing it down with a glassful of water. He still felt nauseated - the water would at least give him something to bring up if he was sick again. However, the pill did seem to work; by the time he had washed and re-dressed, his head was beginning to bother him less, and he was beginning to feel fresher. He considered lying down for a while - but before he could do so he was called to the bridge.

A distress call had been received from a Federation vessel. From the co-ordinates, Enterprise was the nearest ship to the stricken craft. Mayflower was an old ship - she should never, in fact, have been cleared for take-off. But colonising vessels were often past their prime. Although in some ways uneconomic, unscrupulous traders often used these old ships to provide cheap transport; picking up goods cheaply from the new colonies for expensive resale on their return and making their profit that way. Now the life support systems on this one were failing; simple wear and tear faults, but beyond the capabilities of the Mayflower's engineers to repair; the ship didn't carry the spares. The breakdown hadn't yet occurred - if it had, it would already be too late - but it was imminent.

Kirk had no choice; the survey programme would have to be abandoned while he escorted the Mayflower back to the nearest Starbase - if her systems lasted that long - or take off her passengers and crew if they didn't. In addition, he would have to charge the Captain, who was also probably the owner, with criminal negligence.

Kirk gave the appropriate instructions to his bridge crew. The Mayflower was some distance away; they would have to travel at warp six at least to be sure of getting there in time to be of use. He took another of Nimmo's tablets, this time swallowing it without water, and recalled the landing party, aware as he did so that he should have done that first. He had almost gone away and left them... At least, he knew that if he had given such an order, Chekov would have queried it, and he wouldn't have left them, but he had very nearly made a mistake that a cadet taking his first command situation simulation would not have made. And that was not like him.

Once the transporter room had confirmed the landing party aboard, he ordered the new course executed, and the Enterprise swung out of orbit.

Spock seemed to be taking a long time getting back on duty... Oh, yes, of course, he would be seeing about the processing of the specimens; the emergency wasn't so imminent that he had to be on the bridge just yet.

He took another tablet. Funny... it wasn't doing anything for his headache any more, though he was beginning to feel very alert; and his arm was throbbing more and more. He was beginning to feel very sick again too, and the two feelings were warring in his mind, one part of him wanting to lie down and die, the other part wanting to... to what? Do something active, anyway.

Would Spock *never* come? He was beginning to feel disorientated now, and regretting the impulse that had made him decide not to disturb McCoy. Wait, though... He could speed Spock up. He took another pill.

"Lt. Uhura," he began. "Call... call... "

Without finishing his sentence, he slipped sideways in his chair and fell to the floor.

Spock and McCoy, called by Uhura, arrived on the bridge together. McCoy took one look at Kirk, checked him over quickly, and glanced at Spock.

"Help me get him to sickbay, Spock."

The Vulcan picked Kirk up easily, as if he were a child, held him gently. "What's wrong, Doctor?"

"I'm not sure, but there's indications of poisoning."

The turbolift doors slid shut on them; the bridge crew looked at each other with concern on their faces.

Nimmo was off duty now; McCoy got Spock to put Kirk on one of the examination couches where he checked him over more thoroughly.

The first thing he discovered was the now angrily red, slightly swollen cut. He removed the dressing, frowning in puzzlement.

"How did he cut his arm, Spock?"

"Did he not tell you?"

"This is the first I've seen of him since you all beamed down," McCoy growled.

"He ran a long pointed leaf into himself - almost a thorn. He didn't want to bother about it, but I made him beam up to get it seen to. But if you didn't see him - who did?"

"Nimmo!" McCoy exclaimed.

"But surely... "

"I was busy, and Jim knew it. He may have decided that Nimmo would do to see to it, save calling me away from those blasted test results." He crossed to the desk and checked the treatment record, and the medication given.

"The fool!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?" Spock asked.

"All he did was disinfect the cut. But Jim asked for something for a headache as well. That should have told Nimmo that something was seriously wrong. Even as inexperienced as he is, he should know that a headache following an injury on an alien planet needs to be checked out. But all he did about that was to give Jim diurate. It's a nasty drug, one I don't like using. There *is* a painkiller in it, but it's combined with a stimulant - it's meant to keep you going under extremely adverse conditions."

"It does seem an unlikely combination."

"And it can have side effects - some people are allergic to it." He ran another quick check. "No sign of allergy, thank the lord... "

He took a quick blood sample. "I'll go and test this for foreign matter. Stay with him - and call me right away if there's any change. *Any* change at all." Spock nodded. As McCoy left, he added, "I'll have Nimmo's hide for this. He's shown complete disregard for all the tenets of medicine..." The closing door shut off any further remarks he might have made.

Spock stood by Kirk's side, looking down at him. With no-one there to see, he allowed his face to relax slightly; the worry showed clear. It was almost a relief for him to be able to relax his control for a moment. He knew McCoy would understand, did understand, but it wouldn't be in McCoy's nature to refrain from making a comment about it.

Kirk lay deeply unconscious, breathing heavily.

"Jim," Spock whispered. He took Kirk's hand in his for a moment, but he was afraid of McCoy coming back and finding him like that; he let it go again.

When the surgeon did come back, it seemed to Spock as if he had been gone for a year even though his infallible sense of time told him it was only a few minutes.

"He's definitely been poisoned," McCoy said on his return.

"The plant?" Spock asked.

McCoy nodded. "Though the stimulant in the diurate didn't help."

"Can you pinpoint the poison, Doctor?"

Slowly, McCoy shook his head. "Not without a sample of the plant that did the damage."

"I'm not sure myself which one it was," Spock said slowly. "There were several that had long thorn-like leaves. I'll go and see if anyone from the landing party knows - and if we've any of the leaves among our samples."

Sulu, of course, knew nothing. Nor did Houston nor Masters. Spock didn't think Young would be any wiser; he knew the man to be conscientious enough as a crewman, but not exactly intelligent or observant. But he spoke to him anyway.

Young looked guilty when Spock questioned him.

"It was my fault," he admitted. "I wasn't looking where I was going, and accidentally knocked the Captain into the plant."

"Would you recognise it again if you saw it?" Spock asked.

"I don't know... I might. I'll try," he said. "I'm really sorry, Mr. Spock. I just didn't think -"

"You could not know what your inattention would do," Spock told him. "And if we are to assign blame for the Captain's present illness, there is someone else more at fault than you. Come with me."

Spock took Young to the lab where Houston and a biology team were beginning to process the plants they had gathered.

"Have a look at the specimens, Mr. Young," Spock said. "Do you see any plant that resembles the one the Captain fell against?"

Young looked carefully at the mass of plants. Several had long pointed thorn-like leaves, but none were quite like the one that he remembered all too well; after all, it was the one he had been examining at the time of the accident.

At last he shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "This one's like it, but it's not quite the same. The one you want had redder tips to its thorns."

"Might this be an immature specimen of the same plant?" Spock asked.

"I don't think so, sir. It looks different, somehow. The red tips are only part of how it looked different."

"Very well, Mr. Young. Thank you." He nodded dismissal, and Young thankfully returned to his quarters. Spock hadn't *seemed* angry, though of course you never really knew what he was thinking - though rumour had it that the Captain always knew. He still felt terribly guilty about it, though.

Spock went back to sickbay to report failure.

"We gathered samples of dozens of plants," he said, and McCoy thought he could detect some bitterness in his voice. "But somehow we failed to obtain the only one that would be of present use to us."

"We'll have to go back," McCoy said.

Spock looked at him. "Doctor, I do not know the nature of the emergency that caused us to be called away from Beta Ceti - only

that the Captain did not think it necessary for me to go directly to the bridge; the emergency, he said when he recalled me, was two days' journey away, even at warp six. I am quite certain that if the Captain ordered us to travel at warp six for that length of time, it must be something rather urgent. To go back - no matter how important we may think it is to do so... "

McCoy hesitated. "All right, Spock; find out *now* where we're going."

Spock nodded. He turned to the intercom. "Spock to bridge. Lt. Uhura, what is our present mission?"

Uhura told him and played back the message from the Mayflower. When it was finished, McCoy said, "The emergency hasn't arisen yet. We've not come that far. We could afford the two or three hours it would take to go back, even if we had to travel at warp eight to make up the time."

Spock looked at him, torn between what he wanted to do and what he knew Kirk would want him to do. McCoy's suggestion was very tempting.

"Doctor, the Captain did not order warp six for fun. He ordered it because we do not know how long it will be before that emergency is a fact. If we go back and lose those few hours, it might make all the difference between being on time and failing utterly. There are over two hundred innocent lives on that ship, Doctor, some of them young children. It was not their fault that the owner of the ship they chartered was a rogue, running a ship that should have been scrapped years ago."

"Spock, I know all that. But it's Jim's life that's at stake here, too. If I can't find what it is that poisoned him I may not be able to treat him satisfactorily. Those components may last a week yet, and we're only two days away - "

"Spock."

Both men swung round. Kirk was looking at them, pain in his eyes. "Spock. You must go on. Promise me... promise me you'll go on... "

"Jim - " McCoy said.

"Promise me, Spock... " He caught Spock's wrist weakly.

Spock and McCoy looked at each other. Kirk's voice was very faint, but the agitation in it was plain.

"I promise, Jim," Spock said quietly. "We'll go on."

Kirk relaxed. He fell back, too weak even to acknowledge the promise. Moments later his eyes closed again.

McCoy said quietly, "Without a sample of that plant, there's almost no chance, Spock."

"Would you have me break my promise, Doctor?"

McCoy looked at him. "No," he said at last.

"If anyone can find a cure for him, you can," Spock said, so

softly that McCoy almost didn't hear him, as he turned to go.

When Spock came onto the bridge, it was Sulu who asked, "How is the Captain, Mr. Spock?" - but it might have been any of the others.

"Dr. McCoy is not sanguine as to his chances of accomplishing a cure," Spock said evenly.

"You mean the Captain's dying?"

"Perhaps," Spock replied.

"What is wrong with him?" Uhura asked.

"He cut his arm on a thorn-like plant," Spock answered. "The plant appears to have poisoned the Captain."

"And McCoy can't do anything?" Scott asked.

"Very little," Spock replied. "None of the many plants we obtained as specimens seems to be the one that injured the Captain. We cannot go back without endangering the success of our rescue mission. But without a sample to investigate, Dr. McCoy has little chance of finding an antidote."

Sulu said, "Mr. Spock, I took some samples for my own collection. I think I put a piece from each plant I took into each collecting bag, but..."

"Lt. Uhura, contact Security. Have Ensign Young join us in Mr. Sulu's quarters. Mr. Sulu, shall we go and check your samples now - just in case?"

Young was more than a little nervous as he went to Sulu's cabin. Certainly the helmsman had no authority to discipline him... but why else had he been sent for? He was still suffering from a very guilty conscience. Nor did it help his nerves when he saw that Spock was there too.

However, it was only to check some more samples of plants. He relaxed a little, looking over the mixed bag of cuttings. Sulu hadn't had time yet to put them in any sort of order, and Young picked them over carefully. Several had the long thorn-like leaves.

"This one, sir," he said. "I'm sure it was this one."

Sulu looked at it. "I remember," he said. "I'd just got that one when we were recalled. I just stuffed it into one of the bags without bothering which bag it was."

Spock took it carefully. "Thank you, Mr. Young," he said. "And you, Mr. Sulu. This may save the Captain's life."

He went out with it.

McCoy greeted the sample enthusiastically but cautiously. While Spock stayed with Kirk, the surgeon went back to the lab to

check it. He was back in a surprisingly short time.

"This shouldn't have had such a serious effect," he said irritably.

"?" asked Spock's eyebrow.

"Oh, it secreted a poison all right, but it's a very *mild* poison. About as serious as a stinging nettle. Probably a secondary defence against being eaten by something that isn't worried by the spines. His arm would have been sore, sure; but apart from that, it should have - oh, reddened a little, maybe even swelled a little too; but nothing more."

"So it doesn't help after all?"

"It is certain that it's the same plant - not just one closely related to it?"

"Ensign Young was certain," Spock told him.

McCoy scowled. Then, abruptly, he snapped his fingers. "The diurate!"

"You said there was no allergic reaction," Spock reminded him.

"No *allergic* reaction," McCoy agreed. "But there might have been a *chemical* reaction." He turned to the medical cabinet and took the diurate container back to the lab with him.

He was away rather longer this time. While he was gone, Spock bent over Kirk anxiously. The Captain was no longer breathing heavily; he was breathing so softly that for a moment Spock was afraid that he had stopped breathing at all, and was only reassured by the diagnostic panel.

The swelling was spreading up his arm. By now, too, his hand was swollen and he was looking very flushed. Suddenly, so suddenly that Spock jumped, Kirk began mumbling, too indistinctly for Spock to make out what he was saying.

"Doctor!" he called.

McCoy appeared at once, realised immediately what was wrong. He checked Kirk quickly, gave him an injection. Kirk quietened again, but McCoy still looked worried.

"How is it, Doctor?"

"Bad," said McCoy shortly, and turned back to the lab.

"Can I do anything to help you?" Spock called after him.

"You can help me best by watching Jim," McCoy said simply.

At last McCoy returned with a hypo filled with a yellowish liquid. He injected Kirk, and stood back.

"That may or may not work," he said. "But if it doesn't... " he shook his head.

They watched as the minutes ticked by. There was no obvious change. Kirk began to toss restlessly.

McCoy shook his head. "He's still fevered," he said dully. "It hasn't worked."

He got up from his seat on the edge of Kirk's bed, and made his way dispiritedly back towards the lab. "I don't know what to try now," he said hopelessly as he went through, leaving Spock staring helplessly after him.

Kirk began to mutter again. This time Spock could make out something of what the Human was saying. He was thinking of the rescue mission. Spock reached out and touched Kirk's forehead.

"Jim... it's all right. We're on course, we'll get there in time..."

Kirk quietened again. Was the angry flush fading from his face? Spock looked at the injured arm. The swelling was definitely less...

"Doctor!"

McCoy came through again, fear on his face. "Is he...?"

"He's looking better, Doctor."

McCoy strode over, suddenly alert. He examined Kirk quickly.

"He'll do," he said. He sat down abruptly on the edge of the bed. Spock put a gentle hand on his arm.

"You simply underestimated the strength of the medication you gave him," he said. McCoy nodded.

The door opened; Nimmo came in. He looked at the scene by the bed, and came over.

"What happened, Dr. McCoy?" he asked.

McCoy looked up at him grimly. "Nothing much," he said with a viciousness that surprised Spock. "Just that your treatment of the Captain nearly killed him."

Nimmo paled perceptibly.

"Doctor, Dr. Nimmo is very inexperienced in xenomedicine," Spock put in.

"I don't care how inexperienced he is, it's the truth. Listen, Doctor, and remember. If a man who has been injured by an alien substance, no matter how slightly, complains of a headache, the last thing you give him is a stimulant. You get him into bed - and you keep him there until you have checked out thoroughly - and I mean thoroughly - any and every possibility. And you never give a patient diurate unless as an absolute last resort. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"And as long as you're on this ship - if the Captain - or Mr. Spock - comes looking for medical help, send for me. I don't care how busy I am, send for me. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. There's some stuff in the lab I was working on. Go and check it over. I want your comments on the results by this evening."

"Yes, sir."

Nimmo left hastily. Spock looked after him but said nothing. McCoy glanced at him.

"You think I've been too hard on him?"

Spock said slowly, "No, Doctor. He has to learn. A lesson of this magnitude so early in his career might make the difference between his developing into an able doctor instead of a merely competent one."

Kirk said clearly, "Who are you talking about?"

They both turned to him. "Nimmo, Jim," McCoy said.

"Oh."

"He won't try treating you again."

"He was competent enough," Kirk said.

"No he wasn't. His treatment nearly killed you. I've told him he's not to attend to you again. If anyone's going to kill you, it's going to be me." Kirk grinned at him.

"How are you feeling now, Captain?" Spock asked.

"I'm all right, Spock. Bones, when can I get back on duty?"

"Has your headache cleared up?"

"Yes."

"All right. Now, I suppose. Spock, you keep an eye on him. If he shows any signs of a relapse - "

Spock nodded. "I will bring him straight back."

Kirk grunted. "You're a pair of bullies," he told them. "Mr. Spock - shall we go?"

McCoy watched them leave, a smile on his face. Then he sighed, and moved towards the lab. Nimmo still had a lot to learn; he might as well make a start on helping him to learn it.

First printed in ZAP! 2



HIGHLY UNETHICAL

by

Valerie Piacentini

If I had realised in time what was happening, would it have made any difference? I don't see what I could have done, and yet... and yet...

To watch a patient suffering, and to be unable to help, is - oh hell, who am I trying to fool? I'm fond of that stubborn, crazy Vulcan. To see him like that, and to know that I could do nothing, gave me the worst few months of my life.

It was a simple first-contact mission to the planet Cyros. The Cyrosians had agreed to a meeting, and Jim took me along when he and Spock beamed down to confer with the planet's leaders. We walked straight into hell.

I learned later that the Cyrosians had intended only to test us, to find out what we were really like; they didn't realise that our brain patterns were so different from theirs that what to them was a simple test nearly destroyed our sanity.

Those hallucinations! Even now I wake up sometimes, my skin crawling at the memory, knowing that the nightmares are the palest reflection of the terrible experience, for Spock took the worst of it when he reached out to shield Jim and me from the full impact.

It was indescribable, as though everything I had always cherished, believed in, turned round to mock me with its utter worthlessness. Then the wonderful calm as that cool, sane mind of his stepped between me and complete madness. It was the same for Jim, I learned later, but Spock paid a terrible price. I think he would have preferred death, but by then he was beyond choice.

As soon as the Cyrosians realised what was happening to us they dissolved the illusions, but it was too late - Spock's mind had gone. Whether it had been utterly destroyed, or had retreated to a level I could not reach, I could not determine. Oh, the physical reflexes were still there. He responded to touch, reacted to light or sound, could obey the simplest of commands, but that was all. If food was placed before him he ate, but he could not so much as ask for a glass of water.

We took him to the nearest Starbase; the doctors there were as helpless as I. Then on to Vulcan; it was beyond even their skill. Jim grew frantic with worry as hope faded, and I - I blamed myself bitterly. I should have realised that the strain of shielding three minds under such pressure was more than he could take; if I had been more alert, made more of an effort to protect myself, perhaps he could have coped. But as we all tended to do, I had taken his endurance too much for granted, and now he was paying for my carelessness. I could not even discuss my feelings of guilt with Jim - he had enough of his own to cope with. I'll never forget his eyes as the three of us beamed back from Vulcan the day the Healers told us there was nothing they could do.

We saw Spock settled in sickbay, then Jim and I retired to his quarters, intending to get thoroughly drunk. That's when the plan came to us - we'd never have thought of it had we been fully sober.

Starfleet orders were very clear, very precise. Spock was unfit for duty, and must be discharged from the service, returned to the care of his family or confined in a Starfleet hospital. We obeyed those orders - officially. How Jim persuaded Sarek to agree I'll never know, but when the Enterprise left Vulcan, Spock came with us.

We had fitted out quarters for him next to sickbay, where he spent all his time. The crew rallied round magnificently - one of us was always with him. Jim and I spent most of our free time there, talking to him, trying to rouse some spark of memory. It was useless; the dark eyes, once so full of life and intelligence, were the eyes of a dead man, totally unresponsive. It was worse for Jim than for the rest of us. He was so much closer to Spock than anyone else; they had always seemed to have an almost uncanny awareness of each others feelings, even without the mind link.

So the months crawled by. That quiet room and its unheeding occupant had somehow become the ship's very heart. Chekov would sit with him by the hour, chattering away about everything and nothing. Sulu too could be found there, trying to win some sort of response by enthusing over his latest hobby. Scotty formed the habit of dropping in to think aloud over his engineering problems in case the familiar terms should strike a chord in his memory. Uhura came too, singing the music he had loved, her haunting voice floating softly through the room. She reached him somehow, for he would sit with closed eyes, listening; but even she could win no response. And Christine? She was wonderful. Though it must have distressed her immeasurably to see him like that she cared for him with all the devotion I had come to expect from her; indeed, I had to restrict the hours she spent with him, for in her anxiety she would have overtaxed her strength if I had allowed it.

Despite all the failures, all the disappointments, we clung to a frail hope. On the Enterprise we encountered so many cultures, so many civilisations, that there was always the chance that some time, somewhere, we would find help for Spock. It may have been pure sentiment, I don't know, but he was so much a part of the Enterprise that none of us could bear the thought of going on without him.

But wherever we travelled, the answer was always the same - there was nothing that could be done. We still did not know if Spock's mind had been destroyed, or whether that magnificent intelligence merely slept. All we *did* know was a fierce determination that as long as the Enterprise flew Spock would go with us.

By common consent the late evenings were reserved for Jim. He would sit with Spock, talking quietly, while I made my final rounds. When I returned we would have a drink together before I settled Spock for the night.

One evening I entered Spock's quarters feeling more than usually dispirited. I was becoming concerned about Jim - his frantic worry for the Vulcan was depressing him more and more as time passed. To tell the truth, I was on the brink of giving up hope, of insisting that Spock return to Vulcan. It would be hard to abandon him now, but I had the well-being of the others to consider.

As I came in Jim was talking to Spock, recalling the details of a leave they had spent together. I pantomimed the offer of a drink and he nodded acceptance, going on with his story while I fetched the glasses.

After a moment he fell silent, then,

"Bones!"

He spoke quietly, but the urgency in his tone brought me round at once. I froze in position, afraid to say or do anything that might interrupt the scene that confronted me.

Blindly, gropingly, Spock's hands were reaching for Jim's face in the familiar way, as though he sought to establish a mind link. He held the pose for a moment, and I could swear there was a hint of puzzlement in his eyes before he dropped his hands and lay back in his chair, remote as ever.

"Did you... Was there any contact?" I asked hopefully.

Despondently, Jim shook his head. "Nothing. Bones, was he trying to meld, or was it just an instinctive action?"

"I don't know, Jim. It could mean anything... or nothing. It certainly looked deliberate, and it's the first spontaneous gesture he's made since we left Cyros, but don't build up too much hope."

I hated to be discouraging, but it was up to me to keep things on an even keel - by then, Jim would have clutched at even the faintest hope.

As he rose to go Jim touched Spock's shoulder, and sighed. "You know the worst thing, Bones? I sometimes get the idea that beneath this shell Spock - the real Spock - knows what's happened to him. Mindlessness - the one thing he dreaded. If his mind was... really destroyed, I could learn to accept it, I think; but when I start to imagine that he's locked in there somewhere, suffering, waiting for me to help him... Bones, it tears me apart."

He left then, and I watched him go in silence. There was no comfort I could offer, for he had finally put into words the fear that had haunted me from the beginning.

The following day I learned that Spock's action was not an isolated incident. Something seemed to have upset him, and Christine reported that he was refusing food. I was sitting across from him, trying to persuade him to swallow some soup at least, when his hands began to reach for my face, very slowly and uncertainly. I remained very still, trying not to distract him, but instead of the firm, confident touch I had been used to his fingers travelled lingeringly over my face for a moment, then his hands dropped into his lap. Again I saw that fleeting shadow of confusion in the dark eyes before they were veiled again behind that unheeding mask.

I knew a sudden surge of excitement. Once might have been chance, but now I was sure that somewhere Spock's mind still lived. In response to that certainty the pattern of my treatment began to change. Until now I had concentrated on complete rest and relaxation, proceeding very gently to the stimulus of familiar faces and voices. Now I began to demand more of him, to phrase my orders to him in a more complicated fashion. It hurt me to see his frown of bewilderment as he struggled to comprehend the commands I shouted

at him, but I persevered.

Jim protested at first, tried to shield the Vulcan from my insistence, but when I explained my purpose he bowed reluctantly to my judgement. I did not allow Jim to use this method, believing it would be best if Spock could always turn to him for comfort if my demands on his intelligence became too great. I could not afford to be concerned that Spock might come to fear or even hate me, as long as I could win some response from him, but strangely he did not. If I had ever needed proof of the basic gentleness of his nature, I had it in full measure now. However irascible I forced myself to seem, he still struggled to please me, to win my approval. And my tactics seemed to work; gradually his comprehension improved, and although he still had not spoken his eyes turned now to Jim and to me with awareness, and almost with recognition.

It was the hardest thing I had ever had to do, and my rewards were meagre - a hesitant, shy smile when I praised him for completing some simple task I had assigned him, a sudden glow in those dark eyes when very occasionally I touched a buried thread of memory.

I watched him closely for the next few weeks, and the improvement was definite. It was especially obvious when he was with Jim; instead of merely sitting while Jim talked to him it was clear now that he was concentrating, his eyes fixed steadily on Jim's face. Occasionally his hands would reach out in that hesitant, groping way, and each time I held my breath, praying that this time the link would form; but each time Jim would shake his head despondently in answer to my enquiring glance. Less frequently he would touch my face, and I tried to reach out to him, but I was much less familiar with the meld than Jim, so my failure did not discourage me.

At last I decided that he was ready for the next step. Since we left Vulcan Spock had not been out of his new quarters. Now I decided that the sight of the once-familiar science labs might stimulate his mind. The labs were cleared, and I arranged with Security that the corridors we must pass through would be empty. I was familiar with the Vulcan's almost pathological pride; if - when - he returned to us he would be shamed by the knowledge that any of the crew had seen his weakness; it would be hard enough for him to accept that even his friends had seen him so helpless.

Jim, Scotty and I escorted him to the lab. He walked quietly, displaying no curiosity as we passed along the corridors. It was hard to judge the extent of his reaction to the lab itself. We stood back as he walked slowly around the room, occasionally pausing to peer at some piece of equipment, but he would touch nothing, and did not show any special interest in the research he had been engaged on when we beamed down to Cyros. On the whole, though, I was not displeased; I hadn't been looking for miracles, and we could repeat the experiment later.

It was on the way back to his quarters that the incident occurred that would eventually provide the key. As we passed the turbolift the doors opened and a young ensign from Engineering ran out, colliding with Jim and causing him to stumble heavily into the wall.

Scotty was just about to demand to know what his junior was doing there in defiance of orders when we were all startled by a low, menacing growl from Spock. I turned to look at him. His eyes

had narrowed to slits, and were fixed coldly on the unfortunate ensign; his fingers curled in a way I recognised, and as he moved forward I grew alarmed. Spock's phenomenal strength was usually well under control, but all restraints were now gone. If he should attack, I doubted if even the four of us could easily restrain him.

Luckily Jim recognised the danger. "He thinks you attacked me, Ensign. Get out of here - fast!"

The boy shot one look at the Vulcan and fled; I can't say I blame him. Jim walked over to Spock, and laid a hand on his arm.

"I'm all right, Spock. It was an accident. Relax, now."

He spoke calmly, soothingly. Gradually the rigidity went out of Spock's stance, the disturbing glitter in his eyes faded. He shook his head several times, as if trying to clear his thoughts.

"Jim?" he said hesitantly, his voice very unsure.

"Yes, Spock, it's Jim. You are safe. Come with me."

We just managed to reach his quarters before he fainted. With his lack of control, and his weakness, the emotional shock had been too much for him; I could only hope it hadn't sent him back to the beginning.

Fortunately, when he came round he seemed none the worse. The dark eyes searched the room anxiously, finally coming to rest on Jim's face. He relaxed visibly as Jim spoke to him, and at last he slept.

No, there was no miracle, but there was a steady improvement from then on. If Jim or I spoke to him he would answer now, but he still would not respond to anyone else. We repeated the visit to the lab; later we took him to his old quarters, even to the bridge. He reacted to the once-familiar sights, but his comprehension was still very limited. I was convinced now that his former intelligence could be restored, but the key still eluded me.

One evening I sat in his quarters, watching as he and Jim faced each other over a chessboard - not the hideously complicated three-dimensional chess at which he had once excelled, but the ancient game played on a square board. Even this simplified form of the game stretched his mind now; he had to be taught even the basic moves.

As I watched he lifted a piece, hesitated, and glanced at Jim enquiringly. Jim reached over, took his hand, and demonstrated the move again. Spock positioned the piece carefully, looked up at Jim, and smiled.

At that moment the half-formed plan in my brain began to crystallise. There were grave risks, but I judged them worth the taking; nothing could be worse than having to witness that proud intelligence so humbled. If I failed I would blame myself bitterly to the end of my days, but I knew that if he was capable of understanding, Spock would want me to try.

Many people have the wrong idea about my relationship with Spock. We're both stubborn men, as Jim has pointed out on more than one occasion, and find it difficult to express our feelings; but we don't really need to. I know that in his strange Vulcan way Spock

is fond of me, and he knows that at times I would trust him even before Jim. We don't need to talk about it; we looked into each other's minds once, and... But that's another story.

So on that evening, when Jim had gone at last, I sat alone for a long time, working out the details. At last I rose and went to Jim's quarters. He was preparing for bed, but admitted me at once. I looked at him carefully - so much depended on him.

"Sit down, Jim. I've got to talk to you."

Three weeks later I was sitting with Spock in his quarters. I had devised a series of tests which I conducted at regular intervals to check the rate of his progress. He had improved under my treatment, but I knew that something more was needed if he was to recover fully.

Suddenly the Enterprise shuddered violently, and I was almost thrown from my seat; at the same moment the red alert sounded. In automatic response Spock leapt to his feet, then stood gazing round in confusion, wondering what to do next.

I ignored him for the moment, went to the intercom, and called the bridge. Jim's worried face appeared on the screen and Spock crossed to join me as I asked, "What's wrong?"

"Klingons. We've been ambushed, Bones. There are three ships out there - it's going to be pretty rough for a while."

"Shall I report to sickbay?"

"No, M'Benga can handle things there - he'll call you if he needs you. You stay with Spock, try and keep him calm. I must go, Bones. Kirk out."

I snapped off the intercom and turned to Spock, who was gazing at me anxiously. "Don't worry, Jim will deal with it," I told him, trying to sound more cheerful than I felt. "Come on, Spock, let's finish those tests."

The next few hours dragged slowly by. From the frequent violent manoeuvres of the ship I could tell Jim was putting up a good fight, but against three Klingon vessels I knew we would stand little chance. Spock sensed my nervousness, and grew more and more tense as time passed. At last the ship steadied, and for a long time there was stillness, until the intercom summoned me.

It was Jim, speaking from the bridge, but this time a Klingon officer stood beside him.

"Bones, I've had to... surrender the Enterprise." His eyes met mine with an unreadable expression. "This is Commander Karten. He assures me that the crew will be released on the nearest neutral planet - they only want the ship. I had no choice but to agree. Please remain where you are until further orders. Kirk out."

As the screen faded I turned again to Spock; he was looking very troubled. "Do you understand what's happened?" I asked him.

He frowned uncertainly, a hand raised to his forehead. "Klingons? I... seem to remember... they cannot be trusted. There

is danger... for Jim... for us all."

"You're right, Spock, there is grave danger. I don't trust Karten. Think! Try to remember. Jim's going to need all the help we can give him."

He shook his head dispiritedly. "I try, but... it will not come. It's so close, but each time I think I remember, it slips away again."

From the corridor came the heavy tramp of feet; gruff orders were barked in the guttural Klingon tongue. The door slid back and Karten strode into the room. I looked back at him with all the defiance I could muster; Spock only stared blankly.

"Well, I see that Captain Kirk spoke the truth for once," Karten said, a hint of amusement in his voice. "A pity - Commander Spock would have appreciated the exquisite subtlety of our plan. I had intended to confine you with the rest of the crew under guard, but I hardly think that will be necessary now - a doctor and an idiot are scarcely a threat to me. You may as well remain here until... shall we say, until you are needed?" He grinned unpleasantly and swept out; the marching feet faded and were gone.

Spock gazed at me with troubled eyes. "I think... he lied to Jim," he said. "He does not mean to let us go. What can we do?"

"We can't stay here," I told him. "Perhaps if we could get to the science labs, we might be able to come up with something."

Cautiously I opened the door. The corridor was deserted. Apparently Karten thought us so little of a threat that he hadn't bothered to post a guard on us. The route to the labs was clear; presumably the Klingons were concentrating on the rest of the crew. As the door slid shut behind us I breathed a sigh of relief. So far so good. I turned to Spock.

"Take a look round," I urged him. "And for pity's sake, try to remember."

As he wandered around the room I crossed to the viewscreen and began to scan the ship. I glanced at Spock; he was paying no attention to me. When I located the scene I wanted I called to him.

"Come here, Spock."

"What is it?"

I pointed silently to the screen. In the briefing room Jim was strapped securely to a chair. Karten stood beside him. As Spock joined me, Jim was speaking in a bitter, angry voice.

"You promised me my crew would be safe."

"Naturally, Captain Kirk. By doing so, we avoided any further resistance on your part, and consequently any damage to the Enterprise. I told you we needed only the ship - why burden ourselves with four hundred useless prisoners? When we reach our destination they will be killed."

"Our destination?"

"Ah yes, I did not tell you *why* we want the Enterprise. The

plan is very simple, Captain. With you as hostage your crew will take the ship to Starbase 10; it will seem a normal approach, there will be no reason to suspect a trick. It is amusing, is it not? A Starbase destroyed by one of Starfleet's own ships. Once that is accomplished the Enterprise and its crew will have served their purpose; they can be... removed.

"However, have no fears for yourself. You will return with us. You have caused considerable inconvenience to the Empire in the past, Captain; certain of my colleagues have... plans... for you. I think I can safely say that your death will be spectacular - and prolonged."

A sudden movement at my side brought my attention back to Spock. I switched off the screen and faced him. That disturbing glitter was back in his eyes, and he growled softly in his throat. I must do something - Spock in a killing frenzy would be as useless as he was in his present state. Somehow, I had to gain his attention.

Taking a calculated risk I slapped him hard across the face. Slowly his head turned, and he surveyed me through narrowed eyes. I slapped him again.

"Come on, Spock! Wake up!" I screamed at him, knowing this was my last chance to reach him. "We need you. You heard Karten. So many lives at stake - four hundred on this ship, the staff of Starbase 10. And Jim - you know what they'll do to him, don't you? You're our only hope - you *must* think of something!"

Silence. I had failed. Tears stung my eyes. My hand, raised to strike him again, began to fall limply to my side. My wrist was caught and held firmly.

"There is no need to *shout*, Doctor. I assure you, my hearing has not been impaired."

I looked up, unbelieving, to meet cool, sane eyes that stared into mine, alive with all their former intelligence.

He nodded slowly. "We will... talk later. We have work to do." He stood for a moment in thought, then moved briskly to the bench.

"You have an idea?"

"Yes. There is no time for subtlety - we must work quickly, produce a sufficient quantity of anaesthetic gas, and introduce it into the ship's ventilation system. Unfortunately, our own crew will also be affected, so it will be up to us to disarm and secure the Klingons before they regain consciousness. I am afraid that we shall be very busy for a time, Doctor."

He bent over his equipment, already absorbed in his task. Behind his back I smiled quietly to myself, and made certain preparations of my own. Spock was back, and I didn't make the mistake of underestimating him.

Sure enough, after a few moments he raised his head. "Doctor McCoy, there are several aspects of this affair that puzzle me."

"Uh, can't we discuss it later, Spock?" I asked, moving closer.

He bent to his task. "As you are fully aware, I can concentrate on two subjects at the same time," he said severely, "and I should like clarification on several points before I proceed any further. For example..."

His voice broke off as my hypo hissed against his shoulder. For a moment he stared at me, dawning comprehension in his eyes, before he slumped forward over the bench.

I passed a shaking hand over my forehead, and found it wet with perspiration - it had been very close. Wearily I pushed the intercom button.

"You can come in now," I said.

Only the muffled sound of the indicators broke the silence of sickbay as Jim and I stared into each other's eyes across Spock's silent figure. I could gauge the intensity of his anxiety by my own, but he could not begin to understand the special, private fear that haunted me. The crazy plan had worked; Spock's frantic concern for Jim had been the key to release his mind, but when he woke how would he react to the knowledge that he had been tricked?

The responsibility was mine. I had deliberately used my knowledge of him, a knowledge neither of us would have admitted that I possessed. My first concern must always be the welfare of my patients, but would he see it like that? Or would he feel that by using my awareness of his carefully hidden feelings, I had betrayed him? I would soon know.

Jim stirred restlessly, and I looked up. "It won't be long now," I said quietly.

Only a few moments later Spock's eyes opened. They were clear and aware as they surveyed me calmly. Whatever happened now, at least I had brought him back - it had not been, as I had secretly feared it might, a temporary improvement.

"Spock, how are you?" Jim's voice was not quite steady.

"I am... fully recovered, thank you, Captain. I am gratified to see that you are, after all, in no danger. May I enquire how you induced a Klingon officer to assist with your plan?"

"I didn't. The whole thing was Bones' idea."

"I might have known." The dark eyes lingered on my face for a moment, then returned to Jim. "Go on, please."

"When we realised that your mind hadn't been destroyed, we thought that - perhaps - a shock might awaken you, but we knew it would have to be convincing. You remember Carter Winston, the Vendorian? Bones thought of him. He agreed to help, to play the part of Karten, but we had a job to convince Starfleet - I don't know how Bones managed it. We knew it was a risk, but we felt we had to take every chance, that you'd prefer..." His voice trailed off.

"You were correct, Captain. I am... grateful." He turned to me again. "You were most convincing, Doctor. It was only when my mind began to function again that I began to see the illogic of the

situation, and to realise that the Captain would never agree to surrender the Enterprise."

"I was afraid you'd spot that," I confessed, "but I gambled that when you began to reason out the truth I'd be fast enough to sedate you until you were fully recovered."

"I see. I must congratulate you on your powers of invention. However, it does seem that your methods have been... highly unethical; is it standard medical practice to indulge in confidence tricks at the expense of your patients?"

I snorted. "Of all the ungrateful...! If it comes to tricks, here's one for you - you're going to stay right here until I'm satisfied that you're fit for duty. And if you make any more cracks like that, I'll double the time!"

I stalked off, leaving Jim and Spock alone; they would have much to say.

Fifteen minutes later I returned, sent Jim packing, and settled Spock for the night. He made no protest for once - the emotional shock had tired him. As I turned to go a hand on my wrist detained me. The dark eyes met mine with a long, searching stare. I returned his gaze, smiling.

"Welcome back, Spock," I said quietly.

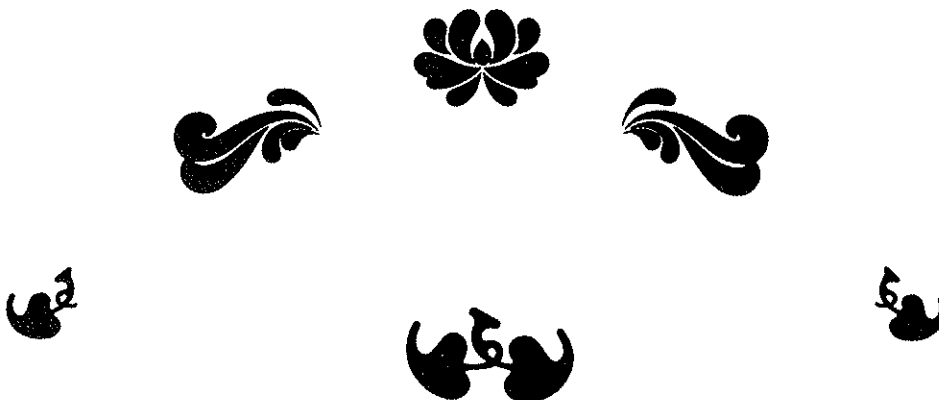
"Thank you, Doctor McCoy."

We understood each other perfectly. I felt the gratitude he could not express, and he could sense the fear for him that had haunted me, but we would never speak of it. We didn't need to. Those few words expressed all that was necessary.

I remained for a few moments after he had fallen asleep, looking down at the quiet face, then I left him. Walking back to my office I had the curious feeling that somehow the very atmosphere of the ship had changed, as though her heart had been restored.

We would go on together, Jim and Spock and I - until the next time.

First printed in CAPTAIN'S LOG 11.



TOTALLY ILLOGICAL

by

Sheila Clark

We weren't far from Gamma Triangulum, where Starfleet had ordered us to survey the fourth planet. They didn't tell us why they wanted such an unpleasant planet surveyed, they just left us to get on with it.

"Will we be able to survive without life support units?" Jim asked me.

I looked up from the sensor. "I doubt it, Captain," I told him. "The sensors show that the oxygen content of the atmosphere is only about half of what we need. We could survive a little while, but not for long. There isn't any sign of surface water either."

"We'd better have a shuttle standing by with a water supply, then," Bones suggested, taking for granted that he would, as usual, accompany us.

"Yes, I was going to order that," Jim said. "In fact, I think we'll go down by shuttle this time."

I saw Bone's pleased grin with inner amusement. He hated the transporter, for no clear reason that I could understand, but probably for a similar reason to why I had never liked the escalator at Starfleet Academy. It would have been so undignified to have stumbled coming off it. Not that I had ever done so... but the fear was always there. Bones, I suspected, was afraid that one day the transporter would only half materialise him... with as little reason. Humans are illogical, and contact with them... Well, there is a degree of contamination, hence my pointless dislike of a perfectly efficient means of gaining height.

We took a geologist, Lt. Carstairs, and two probably unnecessary Security Guards, Abrams and Wills. Jim never bothered when I was there. It was very pleasant to feel so trusted.

We landed and began the survey at once. The guards patrolled around us while we made our first investigations. Bones was interested in the few primitive plants that grew there. They had to have very long roots, I thought at first, to survive in this place that was even drier than the ShiKahr Desert. Then Bones pointed out that in fact they had no roots; only a sort of 'holdfast' to keep them in place. I recorded the fact on my tricorder, and that they must obtain moisture by making it themselves, inside themselves, by combining gases from the air. Fascinating! Mr. Carstairs attracted my attention next, and I called Jim as soon as I saw Carstairs' results.

There was dilithium here - in a crude form, certainly, not pure crystals - but usable. Very definitely usable.

Suddenly Abrams yelled. We looked round at him but before we could move, he disappeared - hit by a killing phaser beam.

We scattered. Just in front of me, Wills stopped, his own phaser raised to cover me, and almost at once he too vanished. I zigzagged, hearing a phaser bolt pass me close, and threw myself behind a rock.

Why was I so breathless? I hadn't run far. Then I realised. The back of my suit must have been holed by the nearness of the bolt. And there was, of course, no way that I could reach the hole.

"Spock!"

It was Jim. I thumbed my suit radio to transmit.

"Here, Captain," I gasped.

"What's wrong?"

"My suit's holed... Leave me."

Then I saw him running towards me, dodging from side to side as he came. Phaser bolts hissed past him, somehow missing him, and he flung himself flat at my side.

"Where's the hole?"

He pressed a patch over it. Moments later I drew a deep, satisfying breath.

"O.K. now, Spock?"

"Yes, Captain. My thanks."

I saw him grin, then he turned and peered towards the spot where the attack had originated.

"Do you know who attacked us?" I asked.

"Klingons," he answered.

"But there wasn't a ship... "

"Their ship must have left a survey team, then gone on somewhere. But how they hoped to get away with murder - " He broke off as a phaser bolt knocked chips from the rock that sheltered us.

"You should have stayed away," I said. "There's no point in us both dying."

"Spock, do you really think that I'd leave you?" he asked.

"No, Jim. But it isn't logical, just the same."

"Oh, Spock, Spock. After all these years, you still haven't learned that Humans can make illogic work perfectly well."

"I do know it, Jim. I just find it difficult to remember."

He chuckled, then went on seriously. "Spock, I want you to show yourself for a moment. That way, I'll get a clear shot at them."

"You're going to kill them?" I asked, seeing him slot his phaser to the lethal mark.

"It's the only way, Spock. Show them that we mean business. And after all, they started it. Two of our men are dead."

This was my only... criticism... of my Captain; the ease with which, at times, he could kill.

Obediently, I raised my head for a moment then ducked back. The phaser bolt hit the top of the rock, sending more chips flying, then Jim fired.

"Got him!"

I crawled a few yards and lifted my head again. A distant phaser fired, but nothing came near us.

"Good," said Jim. "That's Bones or Carstairs."

Another phaser fired in the distance then there was silence.

"Come on!" Jim said.

Together we ran towards the shuttle. No-one tried to stop us. Bones and Carstairs were both beside it. We piled in and took off.

When we reached the Enterprise, there was still no sign of the Klingon ship. Jim made his report to Starfleet. The matter was out of our hands now. The future of the planet was in the hands of the politicians, in agreement with the Organian Peace Treaty...

The Grandmother looked up from the essay without reading any further, to stare accusingly at the School Doctor.

"You asked me to come here to discuss... such a fantasy?"

"Exactly, Madam. Such a fantasy. It is, you understand, extremely unusual for a boy so young to produce such a rounded-off story. His grasp of vocabulary is likewise most advanced for his years. It indicates that he could have a highly lucrative career as a storyteller, although I realise that you must hope for something better for him."

"Indeed yes," the Grandmother replied. "His father wishes him to follow a political career."

"I understand his father is a politician himself."

"Yes, Doctor. He is Ambassador to Shassar."

The Doctor nodded. "A demanding position," he conceded. "I can fully understand why he left the boy with you."

"It was not entirely the danger involved that led my son to leave the boy behind," the Grandmother said. "We both thought it better if his schooling was uninterrupted. Besides, his chances of a decent schooling in Shassar would have been slight. The Shassarans are still little more than barbarians."

"What of the boy's mother?" the Doctor enquired.

"She is dead," the Grandmother replied. "The boy was barely a

year old. He cannot remember her."

"I see." The Doctor hesitated, for this was a part of such interviews that he thoroughly disliked, then went on firmly. "Madam, we are wandering away from the point of this discussion. This essay. It is extremely... disquieting that the boy should invent, not one, but two races so... so undesirable socially. His teacher was at first pleased with the quality of the work, then, on re-reading it, he became disturbed, and questioned the boy as to the source of the story. Madam, your grandson said he *dreamed* it - and further, that he frequently dreamed about these people.

"Naturally, the teacher reported the incident to me, and I spoke to the boy. He was perfectly open about it. He even referred to the people in his dreams as 'his friends'." The School Doctor allowed an expression of faint distaste to show momentarily. "Madam, I must be frank about this. It means that your grandson is showing definite indications of abnormality in his emotional development. It should be attended to as soon as possible - otherwise lasting harm might result."

The Grandmother considered for a moment. "You will, of course, deal only with those parts of his mind that concern the dreams." It was a statement, not a question.

"Of course."

Spock lay on his bed aware of a terrible feeling of loneliness and loss. He couldn't think what was missing, only that something was gone that should have been there... should have been...

The Vulcan way of life flowed placidly on, even and serene. But for one lonely Vulcan there was forever a blank in his life that he could not understand.

For, of course, love - especially an imaginary love that serves no other purpose than to satisfy the emotional requirements of a lonely small boy - is totally illogical.

This story grew out of an idea by Gareth Looker, at the time a small boy, that all Star Trek was only Spock's dream. First printed in ALNITAH 6, 1977.



BLIND ALLEY

by

Sheila Clark

For some time there had been speculation in Federation scientific circles about the star 28 Tauri - Pleione in the star cluster known as the Pleiades. Like the rest of the stars in the group, Pleione was a blue-white, very hot star, and was, in addition, an irregular variable. For this reason, it was avoided by starships, although it was known to have planets, unfortunate bodies alternately scorched and frozen by their primary's erratic behaviour, and whose inhabitants, if any, had to be most unusual life forms to be able to survive the variation, both of temperature and radiation - neither of which could be efficiently forecast - that was thrown at them by their unpredictable sun.

It was, however, obvious to the starship captains that eventually, and sooner rather than later, one of them would be unfortunate enough to be selected to make a survey of the solar system of this unwelcoming star.

The selection fell on the Enterprise.

As they approached Pleione, Captain James Kirk ordered a long-range scan to determine which planet was the one most worth a visit, and also set his First Officer to studying the spectroscopic history of the star in an attempt to try, at least, to forecast what its unpredictable variations might do. It didn't take long to show that the eleventh planet was the one best placed in the ecosphere, and the one showing most signs of useful ores. Spock took rather longer over his task.

Eventually he straightened to say simply, "Captain, I cannot be certain of anything with regard to this star. There is simply no pattern to its fluctuations that I can detect, even checking back over a period of three centuries."

"Speculation?" Kirk asked.

"I am inclined to the opinion that it will remain relatively stable for several days. However, I do not recommend that we use the transporter to visit the surface; a sudden unforeseen change in the sun's radiation could disrupt the beaming process, resulting in the loss of whoever happened to be being transported at the time. I suggest that on this occasion it would be more prudent to utilise the shuttlecraft."

Kirk nodded thoughtfully. "I was thinking much the same, Mr. Spock. I want you in the landing party; Mr. Sulu, would you care to join us? Lt. Uhura, contact Dr. McCoy and tell him to meet us on the hangar deck. Mr. Chekov, hold orbit at twenty thousand miles; but if the sun throws out too much radiation, get the ship out of here, the minimum distance required for safety. We'll follow you in the shuttle."

"Aye, sir."

The three men headed for the hangar deck to join McCoy.

McCoy was far from happy about their going down to Pleione Eleven. He considered the risks too great, and privately thought that Starfleet Command needed its collective head examined for ordering them - or indeed anyone - to visit such a place. If it had to be anyone, he reflected, it would have been better, much more sensible - he refused to use the word 'logical' - to have sent a crew made up of the natives of Altair Six, new though they were to the Federation and very few of whom had, as yet, joined Starfleet; they at least came from a planet of a white sun, and had a much higher radiation tolerance than either Humans or Vulcans, even though their sun was not a variable. But the Enterprise had been selected, so they had to make the best of it. At least they were going down this time in a shuttlecraft... and he admitted to himself that he would have been much unhappier left behind. This way, at least, he could keep an eye on Kirk and Spock. Even if it was unlikely that he could keep them out of trouble, at least it meant that he was on hand if they needed him.

They had not long left the Enterprise when they discovered that they were having communications problems. A routine call to the Enterprise barely made contact; the amount of static caused by the sun's waywardness was considerably greater even than Spock, who had expected some such difficulty, had anticipated. They managed to push one message through to the ship, telling Scott to give them at least ten hours before he started to worry about lack of contact, then they were on their own, descending towards an unwelcoming-looking arid surface through an atmosphere that was becoming increasingly turbulent. Suddenly they found themselves in the middle of a violent electric storm.

The Columbus was shaken backwards and forwards by the force of the storm. Lightning crackled near; and the shuttlecraft tossed on the rush of air that filled the lightning's path with a great rumble of thunder. More lightning forked near, and they were rocked again.

"The shuttle's structure cannot tolerate much more of this," Spock said calmly. "I suggest we attempt to rise above the storm as rapidly as possible."

Kirk nodded. "Take her up, Mr. Spock."

But the shuttle refused to answer the controls. The very violence of the storm had disrupted the delicate computer system. Tough enough to withstand a great deal of physical violence, it could still be destroyed very quickly by an electrical disturbance as great as the one they were experiencing.

"We have no choice, Captain," Spock said as calmly as before. "We must go down."

"Crash landing?" Kirk asked.

"I believe so, Captain."

They braced themselves against the battering the atmospheric

turbulence was giving the Columbus; Spock struggled with the controls, trying to keep the shuttle on an even keel. For some minutes he seemed to be succeeding; then as they got lower they discovered that a gale-force wind was blowing gustily. The shuttle was tossed even more roughly; used to the stillness and even flight of the Enterprise, the men began to feel slightly air-sick. Spock alone remained relatively unaffected; he had too much to think about to have time to feel sick. But the others, with nothing to do, found it increasingly difficult to think of anything but their disturbed sense of balance. Soon they found it impossible to think of anything but their misery, although they did manage to keep from actually being sick.

They were very near the ground now. A gust of wind caught them, and threw them sideways. Spock, wrestling with the controls, managed to level off; then another gust came from another direction. Still compensating for the first one, Spock was caught unaware; and the shuttle crashed into the ground. The capricious wind blew her over and over, her passengers tossed about as she went, and she finally came to rest, a battered wreck, against a huge rock. Small pieces of metal were blown on past her. Rain lashed over her, finding its way in through the many holes the unfriendly ground had torn in her sides. Thunder rumbled overhead; the wind eddied round. Small pebbles, dust and sand, and one or two tiny bits of metal were blown against her, to rattle unheard against the now-useless hull.

Slowly the storm blew over. There was longer between the flashes of lighting and the rolls of thunder now, though there was no-one conscious to hear. Gradually the thunder sounded from further and further away as the rain stopped and the wind fell. The clouds began to blow away and to dissipate in the heat of the sun. As the sky cleared the sun shone down with an eye-damaging brilliance, sucking up the moisture quickly - yet not quickly enough. The planet, which had seemed so barren, was beginning to blossom as the hardy plants that lived there gorged themselves on the sudden feast of water that the storm had given them. What looked like oddly-shaped rocks now put out pseudo-branches, leaves and flowers, vegetation that would have a brief life but, in that life, would ensure that the plant itself stored enough food to see it through the next weeks, perhaps months, until the next storm, and that it produced seeds to ensure the continuance of its species. Many would never sprout... but some would. One of the planet's rare storms - though strong winds were common. The crew of the Enterprise had been fantastically unlucky.

Spock slowly raised his aching head.

He was lying, wet and uncomfortable, across what had been a seat but was now twisted out of shape to match the damage to the hull to which it was fastened. Something was lying across his legs. He took several deep breaths, concentrating on controlling the pain in his head. When he was satisfied that he had mastered it he turned his attention to his surroundings.

The weight across his legs proved to be McCoy. Spock pulled himself free and glanced round. Sulu lay nearby in what appeared to be a most uncomfortable position, unconscious; he couldn't see Kirk at all. Repressing his immediate instinct to go in search of his captain, he bent over McCoy.

There was some dried blood on the doctor's face, but investigation showed that it came from a slight scalp injury, and in fact looked much worse than it actually was. Other than that, McCoy appeared to be uninjured, merely senseless - Spock spared a moment to consider how best to use that phrase to irritate his sparring partner.

McCoy's medical kit, fastened to his belt, had miraculously escaped damage; Spock pulled out a hypo, checked it, set it, and injected McCoy with it. He had not long to wait. Almost at once McCoy stirred weakly.

"Doctor!"

McCoy grunted, then opened his eyes reluctantly. "Spock... what happened?"

"We crashed, Doctor. You were rendered senseless - more so than usual, I mean - but you have now revived. Mr. Sulu is over there, in need of your services, and while you attend to him I will go in search of the Captain."

"Jim? Isn't he here?"

"I am unable to see him, Doctor. He may have been thrown clear."

Spock chose to search the shuttlecraft carefully first, however, but there was no sign of Kirk in the twisted mass of metal that had been a beautiful, fully-operational vessel so short a time before.

Automatically Spock looked for his tricorder before going outside. He found it, caught where its strap had hooked over a shapeless seat; but the delicate circuitry of the instrument was shattered. Broken components fell from it into a tinkling heap as he picked it up.

He dropped it again, accepting what had happened philosophically, and climbed carefully out through one of the larger, jagged holes to look around the miraculously changed landscape. His scientific mind appreciated the changes the rain had caused while his conscious mind concentrated only on finding the yellow-clad figure that must be lying helpless somewhere near.

Kirk was surprisingly easy to find. His body was partly covered by earth and tiny pebbles, but he had fallen - or been thrown - partly into the shelter of a pile of rocks. Kirk's clothes were torn, and every inch of his exposed flesh was raw where the sand had rubbed the skin off as it was blown past him. In addition he had several minor cuts and one very nasty-looking gash on his arm. There was a bad bruise on his head.

Spock inspected him quickly. Although not medically trained he had a fair competence in this field as well as many others - Starfleet training included a minimal amount of first aid. As far as he could see, Kirk was not too seriously hurt, although he could not guess at how much blood his Captain might have lost from that one bad gash. He called McCoy.

The doctor looked out of one of the holes, saw Kirk lying there, and clambered out to join Spock.

"Sulu's still out, but he's not badly hurt," McCoy reported as he bent over Kirk. He checked him quickly but comprehensively.

"That gash is nasty," he said, echoing what Spock had already surmised. He put a dressing over it, then disinfected the raw sores that covered the unclad parts of Kirk's body.

"Apart from the cut, Doctor, how is he?"

"Not too bad, I'd say. I reckon we got off lucky."

Spock nodded, whether in agreement or simple acceptance of the comment, McCoy couldn't guess.

"I think we'd better get Jim under cover, though, Spock," McCoy went on. "This sun is pretty fierce; we'll all be better off in the shade somewhere."

Spock glanced at the shuttle. "Inside the Columbus?"

"No," McCoy said. "You may not have noticed it, coming from a planet with an average temperature resembling an oven, but the temperature inside there is definitely too hot for Humans. We'd lose too much sweat. In fact, we'd better get Sulu out of there, fast, before he roasts."

Spock nodded again. He had been too concerned to notice it before, and he wouldn't give McCoy the satisfaction of knowing it, but even he was feeling the heat, now that McCoy brought it to his attention.

"Will the Captain be all right while we fetch Mr. Sulu?"

McCoy looked down at Kirk. "I think so. He's still out cold, and we won't be long."

Before they left Kirk, however, they did move him. Spock lifted him easily and carried him into the shade of one of the newly-flowering 'trees', then he followed McCoy back to the shuttlecraft.

But although they had managed to climb out comparatively easily, it proved much harder to repeat the exercise carrying an unconscious man. None of the holes was large enough for either of them to get out carrying Sulu over a shoulder or in his arms; the wreckage was twisted so awkwardly that it was equally impossible for them to carry Sulu between them; and the holes were so jagged that they couldn't begin to think of dragging him out. Nor did it help that the temperature in the Columbus was now excessively high. Even Spock was sweating profusely - an experience new to him. He hadn't even realised that he had operative sweat glands.

They were forced to pause for a moment to rest. McCoy went to the back of the shuttle, to where the craft's water container should be - and stopped, staring unbelievably at the uneven hole that gave mute testimony as to the fate of their water.

He returned slowly to Spock, who had moved closer to their exit hole in order to breathe cooler air for a moment.

"The water's gone," he said hopelessly.

"Then we must endeavour to manage without it," Spock said

evenly. He looked back towards Sulu. "Doctor, I think we will have to wait until Mr. Sulu recovers consciousness so that he can climb out himself."

McCoy shook his head. "We can't wait that long," he answered. "Much longer and he'll be suffering from dehydration and heatstroke, without ever coming round. We have to get him out."

"Perhaps an injection - " Spock began.

"I've tried that," McCoy interrupted. "Are you trying to tell me my job, Spock?"

They were interrupted by Sulu, who groaned softly. McCoy moved to him.

"Sulu."

"Doctor... it's so hot..."

"Yes. We have to get out of here. Can you walk?"

"I'll try."

Together they helped Sulu to his feet. "I'll manage him now, Spock," McCoy said. "You go and check Jim. We've been away from him far too long."

Without answering, Spock turned to climb out. McCoy, helping Sulu, was half-way out when Spock called him. "Doctor - Jim's gone!"

Kirk regained consciousness unwillingly. His head ached, and his body felt as if someone had been polishing him with sandpaper. There was a steady pain in his left arm. He tried to look at it, but had trouble focussing at first. Then, after a moment, he realised that there was a dressing on it. That meant McCoy had to be somewhere near... what about Spock? And where were they?

"Bones," he called, but his throat was so dry that only a hoarse croak came from it. He tried to swallow, but even his saliva had dried up in the relentless heat of the capricious sun.

McCoy. Spock. Where were they?

He staggered to his feet, looking round. Everything was blurred. His gaze wandered over the ruins of the shuttlecraft, but in his dazed state he didn't realise that the twisted mass he barely saw was, in fact, the Columbus, or that the men he sought were inside it.

There was nothing to indicate to him which way he should go. But he had to find Spock and McCoy. His confused mind didn't realise that McCoy, having tended him, must be all right and know where he was. He had already forgotten that his arm had been tended - he was only aware that it was extremely painful. He had to find them. They might need help. He staggered and fell. The temptation to lie still was great; with an effort he pushed himself erect and began to stumble forward, his feet dragging in the soil. The dry earth slid back to fill the shallow hollows his feet left.

He staggered on towards a gully that cut deep into the ground. It was becoming increasingly difficult to focus; he was aware only of greenness around him, not seeing clearly the 'trees', lush with new leaves that were already past the pristine freshness of spring that they had shown only an hour or so before. He couldn't see the brighter green of the 'flowers' which were now beginning to wither in the deadly heat. He couldn't see the stones over which he stumbled and nearly fell in his desperate search for his friends - nor did he realise that even if they were near he wouldn't be able to see them.

The gully towards which he was moving curved to form a huge 'S' shape before cutting deep into the rocky hillside, then straightened as it became shallower higher up the hill. It was thick with the strange vegetation; in the shaded gully water did not evaporate quite so quickly, and the leaves on the 'trees' there were still comparatively fresh.

Kirk reached the edge of the gully - and walked straight over. An involuntary cry left his throat as a harsh, voiceless sound. He hit the 'branches' of a 'tree' and slid through them, tearing himself on them as he went, but they broke his fall and he hit the ground with less force than he might otherwise have done. The impact drove consciousness from him again.

McCoy helped Sulu to the shade of the plant where he had left Kirk. He and Spock looked at each other silently. McCoy felt guilty - he had been so sure that Kirk would be all right, but they had taken so long to get Sulu out; however, Spock said no word of blame. Then -

"I'll start looking for the Captain while you attend to Mr. Sulu," Spock said quietly.

McCoy opened his mouth to protest at being kept from helping to search, then he realised that Spock was right. He owed his services to Sulu too.

Sulu wasn't badly hurt, however. Out of the enervating heat of the shuttle, he recovered quickly, and in a surprisingly short time was insisting that he was certainly well enough to help look for the Captain. McCoy, worried sick, didn't try to dissuade him, although he knew that had the Enterprise been immediately available he would have insisted on Sulu remaining in bed for the next twenty-four hours. None of them was going to be in very good condition shortly, he reminded himself; they already needed water very badly, and were soon going to be suffering considerably from the lack of it. So the quicker they got on with the search, the better, he thought, then once they found Jim they could begin to think about finding shelter from the killing rays of the sun; and salved his conscience with the thought.

Spock started by circling the area, looking for footprints. At one point he thought he had found some, but the marks petered out within a couple of yards, becoming lost in the general pitting of the ground.

"He can't have got far," said McCoy, joining the Vulcan. "We weren't really that long getting Sulu out, and he wasn't in a fit state to move quickly."

"Perhaps not, Doctor, but we may still have considerable difficulty locating him. Not only is the terrain extremely uneven, there are many holes where an unconscious man might lie for days, unseen."

"You think he may be unconscious again?"

"Don't you, Doctor? I think it extremely probable. Although the ground is uneven, we are on the slope of a hill. It should be comparatively easy to pick out a moving yellow shape. Therefore he must be lying down. I do not think he would lie down while he was still conscious, as I imagine he went in search of us."

"But he must have seen the shuttlecraft," McCoy objected.

Spock glanced towards it. Lying against the rock, windblown earth piled up against it, it was difficult to distinguish it as anything but another rock. "Perhaps not, Doctor. Look at it."

McCoy looked over towards it. "Where - " he began. "All right, Spock, I take your point. Let's get started."

They split up. It seemed fairly obvious that Kirk hadn't gone anywhere in the general direction of the shuttle; even semi-unrecognisable as it was, if he had gone closer to it, presumably he would have recognised it. McCoy took the area to the right of the shuttle, Spock went to its left, while Sulu took the direction leading away from it.

It wasn't long before Sulu approached the gully. He paused at its edge, looking down at the fading leaves, the withering flowers, noticing as he did that they were less faded than their counterparts on the hillside above. A break in the canopy caught his eye; *something heavy crashed through there recently*, he thought. But even as he looked, a boulder fell loose from the side of the gully about a hundred yards from him, and fell through the 'branches', leaving a similar break. He half smiled, feeling annoyed with himself for nearly jumping to a conclusion that was obviously wrong. He moved on, along the top of the gully.

Kirk regained consciousness with his head pounding unmercifully. His arm, already sore, felt worse than ever. There were several other aches and pains he hadn't been aware of before, as well. He lay for a few moments, eyes closed, enjoying the relative coolness of his present position, but his anxiety about Spock and McCoy - and to some extent Sulu - forced him to move. He opened his eyes - and was immediately aware of a surge of panic. He could see nothing clearly. He was completely unable to focus on anything, and could see only blurred shapes.

He tried to call out again, but his throat was too dry. He lay still for a minute then, thinking. He remembered his fall, but he had no idea of how far he had fallen; he must, he thought, be lying in a hollow of some kind. And he had to find the others. He could only hope they were all right; if they weren't, he couldn't possibly help them now. But he had to find them...

He scrambled to his feet and moved forward slowly, his hands outstretched, trying to find his way. He stumbled over a root he couldn't see, and fell heavily. He pushed himself upright, and stumbled on, to bump into a 'tree trunk'. It felt rough and

unyielding, yet it seemed to move under his hands.

He sprang instinctively backwards, afraid of the unknown, unsure, even, of what it was, trying desperately to see. Was he going blind? Would he ever be able to see clearly again? If not, there was an end to his career. An end to any career he might want to pursue. How could he learn to cope with blindness?

He forced self pity out of his mind and went on, only to bump into another 'tree'. He began to grope his way forward more slowly, feeling carefully in front of himself before he risked moving on, but he couldn't protect himself from all the boulders that were too low for him to feel. He tripped and fell again before he could put out his hands to save himself. This time he lay for a while. It would be so easy to wait here... to sleep... Perhaps when he woke he would find that it had all been a nightmare, find that the shuttle had never crashed...

He woke to feel something gripping his wrist tightly - too tightly to be a friendly grasp. He tried to speak, to call out, forgetting that his throat was too dry to articulate. Only a croak came from him, and the grip remained unaltered. When he tried to pull away, he was held firmly. He felt with his free hand. Something was wrapped round his wrist. There was something sharp pressing, and he realised that it would soon puncture the skin. Something else touched his upper arm where it was gashed, and he put his free hand to that, wondering what it was.

It felt like a plant tendril of some kind; it must be another of them that grasped his wrist. But why? Then with a shudder of revulsion, he realised that the plant must want the liquid of his blood.

He tore at the twining tendril with all his strength, and was barely strong enough to pull it away from him. Aware of a new danger now, he scrambled to his feet. How many of these blood-sucking plants were there? And... where there were blood-sucking plants, there must be animals... at what level of evolution? Were the animals as bloodthirsty - literally - as the plants? Somehow he felt sure that they were. He staggered on. Movement was his only defence against the plants; yet he realised, in fear, that he could easily stumble into the avid tentacles of one... or, as easily, into the teeth - or whatever served as teeth - of some animal.

Keep moving...

He fell again, and rolled over several times, coming to rest with a thump that winded him, against a rock... he hoped it was a rock.

He gasped for breath, sure that his whooping attempts to breathe would attract the attention of some creature. After what seemed an eternity, he managed to draw a deep breath. He tried to push himself up again.

Something sticky was holding him down...

He pulled away in panic, and a sharp, tearing pain told him that he had left some skin behind. What was the 'rock' against which he had fallen?

His legs were beginning to ache now from the unaccustomed

exertion. Gym exercises didn't keep the walking muscles in trim, no matter how fit they kept you otherwise, he realised. Yet he dared not rest. He might hear the approach of an animal - if animals here in any way resembled those on the many worlds which he knew, which he doubted, but he had no defence against the plants, except movement.

He repeated it over and over, like a litany. Move or die. Move or die...

Spock stared bleakly at the desolate landscape.

The vegetation had all gone now, withered from the 'trees'; the seed pods were splitting explosively, and the seeds bursting from then battered the three men as they searched. McCoy had a nasty bruise where a seed, fired at random at very short range, had hit his face; he was lucky it had missed his eye. The unpleasantness of their surroundings and the discomfort caused by the lack of water and the seeds added to their fear for Kirk; and McCoy was beginning to be uncomfortably aware that they were all, even Spock, getting too sunburned. There was no longer any shelter to be had from the relentless ultra-violet. Had they only known, Kirk, in the gully, was slightly better protected; but for them, there was no shelter, except inside the shuttle, where the heat made it impossible to go. And none of them seriously thought about looking for shelter anyway, with Kirk still missing.

Slowly, Spock rejoined the others, who had met a few minutes previously.

"I do not think we are going to find the Captain until a rescue shuttle arrives," he said, his voice harsh from the dryness of his throat.

"Spock, you're not just giving up until then?" McCoy croaked. "It won't be here for hours yet."

"Not more than three point seven hours, less the time when we were unconscious in the shuttle, Doctor," Spock replied. "But no, we'll continue with the search, even though there are too few of us to search the area thoroughly."

"Mr. Spock," Sulu gasped, "do you think we do have any chance of finding the Captain?"

"There is always a chance, Mr. Sulu... but I must admit, I am not feeling too sanguine about it. The conditions are too inimical, and he is already hurt."

He turned away, and began once more to investigate the ground between the wrecked shuttle and the gully.

When the Galileo arrived less than an hour later, guided to them by readings from the wreckage of the Columbus, Spock immediately initiated an air search, backed up by a sensor search from the Enterprise and a ground search by four of the crew of the Galileo. Spock himself, McCoy and Sulu, all very badly sunburned and dehydrated, went in the shuttle.

It was difficult to drink only a little as the shuttlecraft took off, but Sulu was the only one seriously tempted - both Spock and McCoy knew the dangers of drinking too much too quickly, and resolutely resisted the urge.

The shuttle flew silently over the ground they had searched so laboriously, scanners working and viewscreen operating, but there was nothing. Nothing at all. It seemed that Kirk had vanished from the face of the planet.

Sulu began thinking again, remembering what he had seen in the gully so many hours before.

"Mr. Spock... This may be nothing, but... In the first search, I looked down into that gully over there. Something had fallen through the 'trees'. I didn't think too much about it, because I saw a boulder falling, and I thought it must have been just another boulder - after all, the Captain isn't likely to have walked over the edge of a gully. But there isn't any sign anywhere else. Could he be in the gully?"

Spock glanced at the pilot. "Fly over the gully, Mr. Middleton."

"You should have mentioned that before," McCoy said sharply.

"Mr. Sulu is correct," Spock said imperturbably. "The Captain is unlikely to have walked over the edge of a cliff. But since he is quite obviously nowhere else, we must consider it."

The Galileo flew up the length of the gully, turned and flew back.

"Something!" Middleton exclaimed. The splash of yellow that showed on the viewscreen for a split second was gone again before they could be sure they had seen it.

"Take it as slowly as possible, Mr. Middleton," Spock ordered. The Galileo turned again.

This time they all saw it - a dot of yellow, moving slowly, slowly, through the 'trees' that were getting sparser as the gully climbed higher up the hillside.

"Land as near as you can," Spock said.

"Aye, sir."

The shuttle landed. Spock swung out, McCoy at his heels. "Stay here, Mr. Sulu," McCoy called as he went.

The heat hit them like a furnace after the coolness inside the shuttle. The sun sucked from them the moisture they had obtained in the Galileo - a sun that had hardly changed its position in the sky during the hours they had spent on the planet.

The gully was much shallower here. Spock paused at the edge of it, and called, "Jim!"

The stumbling figure stopped, looking round. Spock scrambled down, McCoy close behind him. They could see Kirk's lips moving, but the Captain could only croak voicelessly.

Spock caught Kirk, steadying him, and looked at McCoy. "We must risk beaming him up," he said.

McCoy nodded. Kirk was obviously in no condition to try walking further, and it was imperative that they should all get out of the sun as quickly as possible.

"I will go back to the shuttle and send the Enterprise the co-ordinates to pick up the Captain and yourself," Spock said. He lowered Kirk gently to a sitting position. McCoy bent over him as Spock turned to walk away.

There was a medical team standing by in the transporter room when Kirk and McCoy beamed aboard, but McCoy insisted on treating the Captain himself, ignoring his own condition until he had done so. He was barely satisfied that he had done all he could for his semi-conscious senior officer when Spock and Sulu arrived. He turned to tend them, but Nurse Chapel interrupted, her voice adamant.

"You need attention too, Doctor. If you see to yourself, I will attend to Mr. Spock and Mr. Sulu."

"I agree, Doctor," Spock said. "As the Captain is incapacitated, I am in command; and I order you to take remedial action for your own condition."

McCoy glared at him, but he knew Spock was right. The pain from his sunburned skin was becoming almost unbearable. And he was terribly thirsty...

With Spock, Sulu and himself treated for sunburn and dehydration, McCoy turned his attention back to Kirk. The Captain was beginning to stir; he opened his eyes, and looked around. Sudden panic showed in his face.

"Easy, Jim," McCoy said.

"Bones? Where are you?"

"Here, Jim." McCoy bent over him.

"Bones... I can't see... "

Spock moved forward, and caught Kirk's blindly groping hand. "Easy, Captain."

"Spock - are you all right? And Sulu?"

"Yes, Captain." Spock gave no sign that the fierceness of Kirk's grasp on his hand was giving him extreme pain as it pressed the sunburned skin. Kirk himself was less burned because of the slight shelter the gully had afforded him.

"I can't see, Spock," Kirk repeated. "Everything's blurred."

"Doctor?" Spock asked.

McCoy was already busy checking Kirk's eyes. Then he reached

for a hypo and injected Kirk. The Captain fought the drug for a moment, then his eyes closed.

"I don't know, Spock. There's no indication of damage, apart from that one bad bruise. It's possibly just the effect of concussion; given rest, his eyes should recover. I'll put a bandage over them for a couple of days, to rest them properly."k

It was a long two days, but at last they passed.

"I'll take the bandages off slowly, Jim," McCoy said. He nodded to Nurse Chapel, who dimmed the lights; then he slowly unwound the bandages.

"Open your eyes, Jim. Slowly."

Kirk obeyed. He blinked. The silence seemed to drag on for a long time.

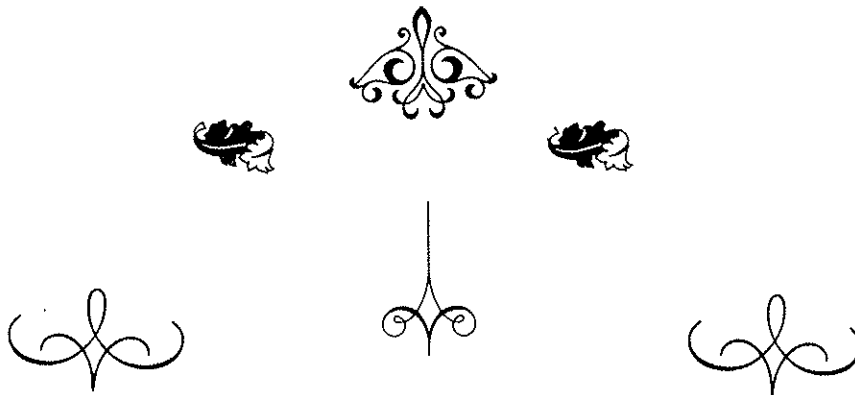
"Jim?"

Kirk looked straight at him, and smiled. "What have you been doing to your face, Bones? And you, Spock?"

McCoy chuckled. "Your own isn't much better, Jim, Sunburn."

Kirk grinned. "I wouldn't have thought sunburn was an occupational hazard for a Starfleet officer." He sat up and stretched. "When can I get back on duty, Bones?"

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REVERIE

by

Valerie Piacentini

Across the moonlit garden a soft breeze brought the music faintly to the ears of a man who wandered alone by the river bank. The reception seemed endless, hot and stuffy as such affairs usually were, and he had taken the opportunity to escape in search of a breath of cool air. He was bone-weary. He had smiled, made polite, meaningless conversation until his head ached - he felt like some mechanical doll going through its set routine, but the spring had run down, he needed a respite.

He had arrived hours ago, full of hopeful anticipation, to greet old friends, distinguished colleagues, but time passed and the one face he watched for so eagerly did not appear. Nothing definite had been said, he reminded himself, but he had hoped...

Coming at last on a seat thoughtfully placed at the water's edge he sank down thankfully, enjoying the breeze on his face, the faint, haunting scent of the garden. Leaning back he studied brilliant stars with pleasure, the familiar constellations of home, of Earth. He could scarcely remember when he had last seen those stars - the night skies of Vulcan, of Capella, of Rigel, were more familiar to him than those of home.

Behind him the music swelled louder for a moment, and he frowned, remembering the reason for his presence here now. He had reached mandatory retirement age, and this reception was in his honour, Starfleet's farewell to its Commanding Admiral, James T. Kirk.

How far he had come since the day he had first stepped onto the bridge of the Enterprise, a fresh-faced, enthusiastic, dedicated young Captain. Above all, how young - the youngest Captain ever appointed, he had been then.

Now he was old, and tired, and alone. Somehow there had never been time for all those things other men found so essential in life - home, a wife, children. The years had flown by so quickly, there was always tomorrow, next year... but the unheeded years in their passing had stolen the spring from his step, the sparkle from his eyes; had spirited away all his tomorrows, until all that was left was his career - a career that now too was ending, leaving him with... with what, exactly?

A caseful of medals he never wore, a family at second hand - for Sam's boy had married - a reputation held in high honour throughout the Federation and beyond. And memories. Yes, he still had those, some tender, some bitter, others he could not bear to recall. Faces. So many faces. Friends, lovers, enemies, most gone now, lost to the past, or to death.

Bones, Scotty... they at least had lived their lives to the full, were enjoying their retirement; but Sulu - gentle, laughing

Sulu, who had become, long after Kirk's departure, the Captain of the Enterprise - had died with his ship, blown apart in the last desperate battle with the Romulans.

Chekov, the incurable romantic, had in his turn achieved Captaincy, as had Uhura. She was here tonight, but Chekov had years ago headed an exploratory mission beyond the galactic barrier - there had been no word since.

Kirk sighed; how long ago it all seemed now.

Wings fanned his face as a night bird, deceived by his stillness, swept past his head and out over the river.

Strange, how he had always been fond of water. 'A beach to walk on'... he had said that long ago; he could have it now, he supposed, but where?

Where in all this wide galaxy he had once roamed so freely was a home for an aging career officer? Sometimes he wondered whether the extended Human lifespan was really a blessing. A century ago he would have been old, finished, waiting only for the slow decline into senility and death; now years of life stretched ahead of him, years which were theoretically a reward for his long and distinguished service.

By any standards he was a wealthy man. He could go where he chose, do as he wished for all the time that was left to him; but he could think of nothing that moved him to enthusiasm. He supposed, with distaste, that he would eventually settle somewhere, would turn into one of those pathetic figures he had always pitied and despised, a retired Starman, boring on endlessly with repeated tales no-one wanted to hear. He had learned tolerance since then...

It would have been better, he thought bitterly, if he had died on one of those long-ago missions, died grandly, extravagantly in the service he had loved, leaving at least a legend of the heroic Captain he had been.

Heroic! He chuckled grimly, remembering the reputation he had had in those days. If only they had known, all those wide-eyed, admiring crew, how scared, how frankly terrified he had been! Had they all been the same, those captains whose names came back to him now, April, Garrovick, Pike? Had even Kor, Koloth, known the bitter taste of fear? He would never know, for they too were gone now.

Brave enemies, those Klingons had been; a man could respect such a foe. Their successors still tested Federation strength from time to time, probing, waiting for a chance... But the Organian Peace Treaty held secure. He wondered if somewhere a young Captain matched wits with his Klingon counterpart as he had once done.

Yes, he had his memories, more than most men. He had loved - and had been loved. Yet the strongest memories were, curiously, the earliest, from the old Enterprise days.

Edith - she had been the most important to him, yet his own decision had condemned her.

Miramane - after all this time pain still cut deeply. An enchanted idyll, doomed from the beginning, for it had been founded on a dream. She had loved her god Kirok, knowing nothing of Kirk, the Human, fallible man. She had carried his child, a child who died unborn, and there had never been another, for radiation exposure had made him sterile soon afterwards.

Ruth, earliest of all his loves - he had never seen her again, except when his imagination had conjured her image on the shore leave planet...

An endless procession of nameless faces and bodies, enjoyed for a time, quickly forgotten when the stars beckoned him away.

He had been so headstrong, so impetuous in those days, always eager for change, for a new challenge; now remained only the most difficult challenge of all, learning to accept that he was useless, unwanted.

Tomorrow another would take his place. He remembered his own youthful, contemptuous dismissal of aging, desk-bound officials, and looked back with wry understanding at that insensitive young cub. *You'd never have understood, Jim Kirk, but experience teaches... many things.* He had grown cautious, diplomatic, and acquired patience... and perhaps a little wisdom over the years.

He had served to the best of his ability, giving his life to Starfleet, and there *had* been rewards, the knowledge of a job well done, the respect he had earned. Yet at the end of it all he faced the bitter knowledge that nowhere in this galaxy was he needed; there was no-one for whom he came *first*.

In the reception room behind him men and women had gathered to do him honour on his retirement, but tomorrow they would turn again to their busy lives, while he would go on into a suddenly bleak future. No responsibility, no decisions to be made - the years stretched ahead of him, empty and without purpose.

Where did the years go? he wondered. Age had been kind, had touched him lightly. The mirror showed lines around his eyes and mouth, his hair turned to silver, but deep within himself he felt scarcely older than that young Captain who had stepped, trying to hide his nervousness, onto the bridge of the Enterprise.

He could remember that day so clearly, the sudden realisation that he, James Kirk, was now responsible for this tremendous ship, answerable for the lives of her crew. Beneath his mask of calm he had trembled with apprehension at that responsibility, had felt his confidence waver...

... And then he had looked up to meet dark eyes that saw through his pretence, saw and understood his doubt - and denied it. The confidence and compassion in those eyes had strengthened him, and he had responded to their encouragement.

Vulcans, he had been told, were proud, reserved, did not make friends; he only knew that in *this* Vulcan he had found the other half of himself. With Spock at his side he had been able to face anything.

As though in response to the thought of that name a familiar,

warm presence touched his mind, and he turned with calm certainty to await the man he knew was approaching unseen through the darkness as clouds veiled the moon.

"Spock!" he exclaimed in joyful welcome, and his outstretched hands were enfolded in warm, strong fingers.

"Jim, you are cold," came the reproachful reply. "You should not be out here - come back inside."

"In a minute. I want to talk to you first."

Spock sighed, and joined Kirk on the bench. For a time the two sat in silence, then the Vulcan stirred.

"I am sorry I was delayed," he said quietly. "The formalities of my resignation took longer than I had expected - but from tomorrow I am as free as you."

"I still can't believe it," Kirk confessed. "When you didn't come I thought... I thought you'd changed your mind. After all, you have many more years of service left - why give them up for me?"

"Because I promised. And because I wish it," Spock replied.

Kirk's mind flashed back through the years to the day he had received his promotion to Commodore's rank.

"Come with me?" he had asked lightly, but his eyes had pleaded.

"I will always come," Spock had answered.

And he had.

Even the tradition-bound High Command had recognised the worth of that team, and had ensured that wherever Kirk was sent, Spock followed. Captain and Commander they had been when they met as young men; Commanding Admiral and Chief of Starfleet Operations they were now; but the unique friendship that had begun long ago on the bridge of the Enterprise still held, strong and true.

Over the years each had become extremely sensitive to what the other was thinking. Now Spock said quietly,

"What's wrong, Jim?"

"Nothing. I was just remembering; and wondering... what we'll do now."

The Vulcan met his eyes gravely. "We will do as we have planned for so long," he answered. It seemed to Kirk that there was a note of hesitant joy in his voice.

"There was never time enough for ourselves, to do what we wanted. Now we can go back at last, revisit all those places we longed to explore..." His tone deepened with understanding. "You have been brooding, have you not, Jim? I know you so well... You have been depressed because you think the worthwhile years are over. They are not. How often have we said, 'One day...'? Our day has come at last, and I confess I have awaited it eagerly. But perhaps I was wrong? Perhaps it has not been so for you?"

Kirk's eyes dropped before that suddenly troubled gaze. "I

feel ashamed," he murmured softly. "You're right, I've been sitting here feeling sorry for myself, wanting my youth over again... I really don't know why. They were good years, but they are over.

"Spock, do you remember Edith, her reply when I asked her where she thought we belonged? She looked at you and said, 'At his side, as if you've always been there, always will be.' She was right. You've been a part of everything worthwhile I've ever done, and it won't end here. I owe you a lot."

"And I to you, Jim. You taught me long ago to value my Human blood. I would not, if I could, become again the confused, so-rigid Vulcan I was when we met at first, always trying to hide the feelings I would not admit but could not deny. I tried so hard... but you won in the end, and I have never ceased to be grateful for it."

Impulsively Kirk reached out and hugged his friend. He grinned broadly, all the old mischief dancing in his eyes.

"And I thought I was going to finish up an antiquated wreck! There's no chance of that, with you around. We learned how to serve - now we're going to learn how to enjoy ourselves. Come on, Admiral - we'd better get back to the reception. It won't look good if the guest of honour is missing for too long."

Moonlight broke through the clouds, drenching the garden in silver light, erasing the years from Spock's face so that Kirk saw for a moment the young man he had met so many years ago; only now the Vulcan's lips curved in a smile that desperately-striving man would never have revealed. They had both learned much over the years, and with gladness Kirk welcomed the years still to come, for the friendship which had ripened so gently had come at last to fulfilment.

Perhaps, after all, the best was yet to come.

Side by side, as they had always walked, they turned back towards the distant music. The laughter in Kirk's voice echoed back along the path as he said,

"You know, Spock - you never *did* get around to teaching me that neck pinch."

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SYMBIOSIS

by

Sheila Clark

The colony on Delta Bootis III was well established. In fifty years, it had grown from a small cluster of huts to a world of several million inhabitants, spread widely over one of the planet's three continents.

Right from the start, the settlers had believed in the importance of conservation, of living *with* the environment rather than altering it to fit what they felt was a false set of values. They had succeeded so well that not only was there a waiting list of would-be immigrants from many other worlds - not all of them Human, either - the planet was a popular tourist attraction for those wealthy Federation members who believed in hunting solely by camera. The number of tours offered in any one year was strictly limited; the inhabitants had no wish to see the very wild life that brought the tourists disturbed to the point of changing their habits.

The other two continents were still undeveloped, although consideration was being given to opening them. There was no problem with regard to one of these continents, and a planetary survey team was already there, studying its ecology - different from that of the settled continent - with a view to opening it up.

The third continent, however, was different.

Sensor readings, both at the time of the original survey and subsequently, showed indications of intelligent life forms. Yet no-one had been able to pinpoint any creature on that continent that showed any sign of having that intelligence. Finally, in an attempt to trace which of the creatures was sentient, the planetary authorities requested the assistance of a Starship, with its considerable facilities.

Starfleet knew that if they could come up with no positive answer, the colonists would leave the continent undeveloped rather than interfere; the Federation, bound by its own laws, would not force the issue - could not - yet they wanted that continent developed, for, developed, it would provide a taxable income. The nearest Starship was therefore assigned to the search, to remain at the disposal of the Bootean authorities until a positive answer was found.

Captain James Kirk regarded his orders with a degree of uncertainty. Certainly this made a change from the normal run of missions and it would be almost as good as shore leave for the crew, but it did seem to be such a waste of a Starship. If all the surveys that had been carried out - and the records showed them to have been plentiful - had discovered nothing, he suspected that there was nothing to discover. It must be some chance reading, perhaps a freak amalgam of two or three unrelated ones.

He voiced this opinion to no-one, however, not even to his Science Officer or Chief Medical Officer; Spock might admit the possibility, then produce several logical reasons why it was impossible; McCoy would certainly regard such a freak chance as completely impossible and Kirk didn't really feel like trying to support what even he felt was a most unlikely contingency...

It was indeed a beautiful continent. The climate was warm temperate grading into subtropical, and in some ways would have been a better zone for the initial settlement than the mild temperate continent they had used... had it not been for those elusive sentient readings.

The whole continent was wooded. *Wooded rather than forested*, Kirk decided; there were large open spaces where bushes grew, but never too thickly; the trees stood far enough apart for plenty of sunshine to reach the ground. Soft moss-like grass grew there, starred with the bright reds and purples of a myriad flowers - no soft pastel shades here, but brilliant vivid shades that caught the eye. A stream ran close by the landing site, a chuckling, gurgling fairy-like stream that danced over stones, rippled in the shadows and sent little veils of sparkling water over tiny waterfalls. Tall flowering plants edged the shallows, deep orange-yellow petals moving gently in the almost non-existent breeze. Insects droned sleepily by, pausing to visit the flowers then moving on. There was a serenity here that made Kirk realise fully just why the settlers were so ecology-minded. It would need very little encouragement for him to sit down for a while and simply *live* - relax, do nothing except absorb the peace and beauty of the place. It was with an effort that he forced himself to remember their mission.

The landing party split up into three. Spock headed one group, McCoy, who frequently doubled as a biologist, took one, and Kirk took the third. Not that he had any particular idea what they might be looking for - Spock's senior assistant, Lt. Carstairs, was in his party to provide the technical knowledge - but it gave him the illusion that he was doing something useful. M-5's brutally honest comment that he was non-essential personnel on a survey had stung more than he had ever admitted, even to himself.

These are single intelligences similar to the ones we have seen in the cold lands over the last fifty gale-times. They work well in their individual solitude.

Is single intelligence truly viable, however? Should one die, his knowledge could be lost to his group... Do they understand how to work in symbiosis? We should test this...

There are three queens - it seems, an older and two younger. Without true symbiosis, the young queens would seek to destroy the old one.

This must be tested...

Everything was so quiet and peaceful that Kirk decided to keep the landing party on the planet that night. Camping equipment was sent down to them, and it was with almost a holiday atmosphere that

the group of scientists organised themselves.

Daylight lasted long here, on a world whose revolution was rather longer than Earth's, and it was still full light after they had eaten. Kirk, who had decreed that the day's work was most definitely done - no-one was to go gathering any more data, daylight or not - looked round.

"Anyone fancy a walk?"

"Sure, I'll come," McCoy accepted. Kirk glanced over at his First Officer.

"Spock?"

Reluctantly, the Vulcan shook his head. "It would be most pleasant, Captain, but I must finish compiling this data, otherwise the stockpile tomorrow would be most inconvenient."

"Let Carstairs do it," Kirk suggested.

The Human scientist nodded. "I'll be happy to, if you want to go, Mr. Spock."

Spock looked rather tempted. "We can do it together, Mr. Carstairs - Captain, when we finish, I will walk out to meet you, if you have not returned."

Kirk sighed. "All right, Mr. Spock." Inwardly, he felt a degree of disappointment. He enjoyed McCoy's company, of course - but it would have been pleasant having Spock along as well.

They set off through the trees, not hurrying. It was very pleasant, just strolling along aimlessly, listening to the wind whispering through the branches and the faint droning of insect wings. Somewhere not far off, water chuckled over stones. Neither felt any great urge to talk; the sense of peace made even the voice of a friend an unnecessary noise.

The sound of falling water intensified, drawing them to a small but infinitely beautiful pool. The tall yellow flowers grew thickly round the banks; deep red waterlilies floated on the surface. A trickle of water laced over the rock face down which the little stream fell into the pool.

The rock face stretched for some way to right and left of the pool; small clumps of flowers clung to tiny ledges, making a rock garden to delight any flower-lover. Rocks, fallen from above some time in the long distant past, lay all along the foot of the low cliff; and a dark hole showed behind one.

Curious, the men crossed to it. Inside, moss grew thickly, shining brightly enough to illuminate the cave. Here and there flowers glowed, more vivid than the surrounding moss.

"Sulu should be here!" McCoy commented.

Kirk grinned. "Let's have a look inside."

"Okay, but shouldn't we let someone know where we're going?"

"It doesn't look as if it goes very deep," Kirk replied.
"It'll only take a couple of minutes." He moved into the cave.

McCoy hesitated for a moment, then shrugged and followed. *Jim's right; this won't take long.*

The cave was deeper than it looked, but they went on, lured by the changing shades of the luminous flowers. From deep reds they had muted to pinks; subtle tints of yellow and orange began to appear, edging the pink petals.

Insects lived here too; less luminous than the plants, they flew around, dancing sparks of living fire. It was like a never-ceasing fireworks display. Half hypnotised by the moving lights, they watched the kaleidoscope patterns that led them deeper and deeper.

The dream ended suddenly as the ground vanished abruptly from under their feet. Equally abruptly, the shining insects disappeared. The men crashed down, to hit the ground with stunning force.

Spock and Carstairs finished compiling the gathered information fairly quickly, and Spock then succumbed to temptation and left his assistant to send the accumulated data to the Enterprise while he set off after Kirk and McCoy. He moved briskly, intent on joining them as quickly as possible, absorbing some of the beauty around him but for the moment more anxious to join his friends than to appreciate his surroundings - not that he would ever have admitted that.

It was beginning to get dark now, and he began to experience some slight concern. He should have met them by now - even if they had moved away from the direct line they were following, the trees were not so dense that he would fail to see them. He reached the pool, and stopped.

They would not have gone beyond this; the cliff, low as it was, provided a barrier that Kirk might attempt but the more sedentary McCoy certainly would not. He must have missed them.

Disappointed, Spock pulled out his communicator. "Spock to Kirk." There was no answer. "Spock to McCoy." Silence. "Spock to Carstairs."

"Carstairs here."

"Have the Captain and Dr. McCoy returned?"

"No, Mr. Spock."

Spock bit his lip anxiously. "Thank you, Mr. Carstairs."

McCoy swam out of darkness into an aching awareness of his surroundings. Pain stabbed in his left ankle; his eyes were open, and he could see nothing.

"Jim?"

There was no answer.

McCoy peered round, eyes straining, his mind refusing to admit

the possibility that he might have been blinded. He was rewarded by seeing the glow of light above his head, but it barely brightened the darkness where he lay. As he waited for his eyes to adjust, he probed gently at his ankle. It wasn't broken, he decided, but it was certainly badly twisted. He could walk if he had to, although it was not advisable - and he might yet have to, to get help for Jim.

At last he found that he could make out something of his surroundings... barely. A dark shape lay near him in a crumpled heap. He crawled over and checked his Captain as best he could.

There seemed to be no serious injury, but until Kirk regained consciousness and could tell him what hurt, he could not be sure.

Spock stared round the darkening terrain. Where were they? They couldn't have gone further than this...

Movement caught his eye; a dancing spark of light, then another and another, emerging from the cliff. And there was a faint glow coming from it...

He moved forward, stopped at the cave entrance. Could they have gone in here? Quite likely; and it would be typical of Human thoughtlessness to have done so without letting anyone know. Spock opened his communicator again.

"Spock to Carstairs."

Only crackling static answered him. An eyebrow lifted considerably; it was a bare ten minutes since he had spoken to his assistant. What was causing the static?

No matter. It should not take long to check the cave, and he could easily find his way back to the camp thereafter; a nearly full moon was beginning to gleam and would certainly be bright enough to light his way.

Spock went into the cave. Just inside, he noticed that the moss on the floor was not all glowing; showing dark against the surprisingly bright glow were two sets of footprints.

They had come in here, then - and they were still here. He set off briskly.

He had only gone a few paces when he became aware of the insects gathering around him. There was a sharp, stabbing pain on the back of his hand, and he realised that he had been stung. It was only the first of many stings. Light insect feet moved over his exposed skin, tickling infuriatingly. He brushed them off his face, knowing that he was killing many but unable to tolerate the steady irritation. There seemed to be several different species of insect, too; Spock suspected that in addition to being stung he was being bitten, although the bites were painless.

Fire was spreading through his body from the repeated stings. For a moment he debated retreating, then he realised that he could not; Kirk and McCoy were here, the footprints were only going one way. Perhaps they had been driven deeper into the cave by the attacking insects, perhaps the insects were nocturnal and his friends had been trapped deep in the cave by them - no-one, given a

choice, would run this gauntlet. But most likely they were lying in here, poisoned by the stings of the angry insects. He had to find them!

Ahead of him was darkness; he paused, eyes straining. The insects had withdrawn as he reached the dark section, but the fact barely registered.

"Captain! Doctor!"

"Spock!" McCoy's voice. What of Jim? Spock started forward, to be stopped again as McCoy went on. "Be careful - we fell over a drop. I don't think we fell terribly far, but it was unexpected."

"Are you hurt? The Captain?"

"Jim's unconscious. I've hurt an ankle."

"What about the insects? Were you stung at all?"

"No. The insects didn't bother us."

Spock felt his way forward with great care. He found the edge of the drop; sat on it, then let himself go. He hit the ground almost at once, and realised that the hole was only seven or eight feet deep.

"Doctor?"

"Here."

Spock groped his way over to McCoy.

"You shouldn't have come down here, Spock - you don't know if you can get out again. You should have gone back for a rope."

"No, Doctor. That would have taken too long." How much longer could he fight the agony in his body, the growing weakness that made him want to do nothing more than lie down and rest? If one of them had been able to walk it would have been easier; as it was, he would have to carry them, which would mean two trips... he would have to expose himself to the insects three more times. Spock wondered if he could, and gathered resolution about him firmly. He could, because he must.

Which one to take out first? he wondered. Every instinct bade him take Kirk, get Kirk to safety; but McCoy was the doctor. It would be more logical to get McCoy to safety - then even if he collapsed while getting Kirk, when the rest of the landing party got them out, McCoy would be there to tend them. Carstairs would come and look for them - eventually.

His decision made, Spock acted on it immediately. "I will carry you out, Doctor, then come back for the Captain. When you are outside, you can attempt to make contact with the ship and arrange for the medical department to be prepared to treat us. Should I take the Captain first, time would be wasted, since he is not conscious to make such a call."

McCoy grunted. "How are you planning to get us up that drop?"

"I will take you on my back, Doctor," Spock replied as if amazed at McCoy's stupidity. "Please refrain from clutching at my

neck."

McCoy climbed onto Spock's back and clung desperately as the Vulcan began the scramble up the rock face to the main cave. It was much easier than Spock had feared it might be, and he realised with relief that it would not be too difficult to repeat the climb carrying Jim over his shoulder. Except... McCoy seemed much heavier than a Human normally did.

At the top, Spock wrapped his arms around McCoy's legs to support him, and set off, resolutely keeping his mind from his growing weakness. His head was beginning to throb now, every step jarring it.

They were near the mouth of the cave before Spock noticed that the insects had not attacked again. He put the fact to the back of his mind to consider later, and stumbled on, out into the open air.

McCoy slid off Spock's back. In the now brilliant moonlight he glimpsed the marks on Spock's swollen face, but before he could speak, Spock had vanished back into the cave.

Carrying McCoy had drained the Vulcan more than he would have considered possible, but he refused to acknowledge his weakness as he stumbled back along the passage. Every step intensified the throbbing ache in his head and sent fresh streams of fire burning through his limbs; and the insects were attacking him again. Were they simply trying to drive an intruder away from their territory, letting him leave freely because he was retreating?

He was almost grateful for the pain, however, for it helped him to fight the growing drowsiness that urged him to lie down and sleep. He couldn't sleep; he had to get back to Jim...

He saw the darkness ahead just in time to stop himself from falling, and dropped into the hole, landing with a soft thump.

"Who's that?" The voice, while not as decisive as usual, was reasonably strong.

"Jim." Relieved though he was, Spock was now physically unable to utter more than a gasping exclamation. He found himself unable to straighten from the crouching position in which he had landed, so he crawled forward towards Kirk's voice. He touched warmth, and stopped.

"Spock." A hand pressed his shoulder. Then, more briskly, "I can't find McCoy."

"He's outside," Spock gasped. "I... got him out and came back for you."

"What's wrong with you?" This exhausted voice was unlike Spock.

"As I came through the cave... I was badly stung by the insects. The poison... is weakening me."

"Spock!"

"What... of you, Captain?"

"I'm fine." Kirk shrugged the question off as irrelevant,

although he spoke gently. "A bit sore, but nothing to worry about. Now - how do we get out of here?"

Spock concentrated for a moment on controlling his physical condition. "We can climb out of here, Captain; you have to feel your way, but it is not too difficult."

"Lead on."

By the time Spock reached the top of the short climb, he was wondering how he could complete the walk to the cave entrance. Despite his weakness, however, he turned to help Kirk over the edge.

In the light from the luminous moss, dim though it was, Kirk saw Spock's swollen face clearly enough to be horrified. He hadn't realised how bad Spock's 'badly stung' had been; although he knew now that he should have done - Spock invariably minimised bodily discomfort.

As they stood, the Vulcan swayed; Kirk caught him to steady him, and he leaned weakly against his Captain.

"Put your arm round me," Kirk told him. He slipped his own arm round Spock's waist to support him.

As they started off down the passage, he knew that he was supporting fully half of Spock's weight - a burden he was more than willing to bear, and that slowly became greater as even Spock's determination could drive his failing strength no further.

About half way through the cave, Kirk stopped. "Let's rest for a minute."

They sank down, to lean against the cave wall. Wearily, Spock allowed his aching head to sag against Kirk's shoulder. The Human held him comfortingly, unsure whether the tremors that shivered rhythmically through Spock's body were caused by pain or by cold; probably a little of both, he decided.

After a few minutes, Kirk felt rested enough to go on. "Come on, Spock," he urged. "Not far now."

Spock tried to stand, but failed, despite Kirk's help. Anxiety lent the Human strength; he lifted Spock and began to carry him. The Vulcan made no protest; he simply allowed his head to droop against Kirk's shoulder once more.

An interesting experiment; individual intelligences can indeed work in symbiosis, although the importance attached to one individual, even a queen, out of so many individuals, seems unnecessary unless that one is the receptacle for some item of knowledge none of the others possesses.

The lesser queens show great regard for the old one and for each other; this is good.

That she also considers her successors is equally good. We will not discourage these intelligences... it will give us a better chance to watch/judge them if they come here than if we had to continue depending on the chance of one of our individuals being

swept to the cold land during the gale-time.

Kirk fidgeted restlessly as he waited for McCoy's verdict on the unconscious Spock. Even to his inexperienced eye the readings on the diagnostic panel looked uncomfortably low, and he fretted at his own helplessness.

He swung round as McCoy limped in, and his heart sank at the hopeless expression on the Doctor's face.

"I don't know if I can do anything more," McCoy said unhappily. "As far as I can make out, he was bitten as well as stung, and the two irritants have combined in his blood to poison him. Any of us, I could have done a full transfusion, but we just don't carry enough Vulcan T-Negative blood. I've given him injections that should counteract most known insect bites and stings, but he's not responding."

"All the exertion would poison him quicker, too," Kirk said dully. "Carrying you out, then coming back for me..."

"I know." McCoy checked the readings and made no comment. It added to Kirk's depression - no news, in this case, had to be bad news.

"What I don't understand," McCoy went on, "is why we weren't stung at all."

"I know," Kirk said. "What's more, there weren't any insects buzzing about bothering him while he was with me."

"Or with me," McCoy agreed. "It doesn't make sense. Jim, you should go and rest - I'll call you if -"

"No, Bones, I want to stay. Then I'll be here if... if..."

Several hours dragged past. The readings slowly dropped lower and lower, and McCoy gave the failing Vulcan another shot. Eventually, the Doctor got up.

"They'd have let me know from the lab if they'd come up with anything," he said, "but I think I'll go and see how they're getting on." He limped out.

Kirk leaned over his unconscious First Officer, listening to the laboured breathing, willing Spock to go on breathing. He reached out and took Spock's face between his hands.

"You can't die, Spock," he whispered. "You can't. The ship needs you... I need you... Spock..."

Almost as if he had heard, Spock opened his eyes.

"Jim." It was the barest thread of sound.

Somehow Kirk managed to smile. "Spock..." Then, briskly, "If you don't hurry up and get better, Spock, I'll never speak to you again."

A touch of amusement shone deep in the dark eyes. "If I don't get better, Captain, I doubt that I'll be in a position... ever to speak to you again." His eyes closed once more.

"Spock!"

There was no reply. Kirk looked up at the panel, but the readings seemed unaltered. Spock had slipped back into unconsciousness.

McCoy looked no more cheerful when he returned.

"He came round for a minute, then passed out again," Kirk said tensely.

McCoy checked the readings then bent over the unconscious figure. "He's gone into trance."

"You're sure?" Hope stirred irrepressibly.

"Who's the doctor here? Of course I'm sure! Those crazy Vulcan readings, though..."

Kirk found himself grinning; the difference in McCoy's attitude was eloquent. Then the Doctor looked at him.

"Call me when he comes round," he said gruffly, and disappeared into his office.

Kirk paused at his First Officer's cabin door and pressed the buzzer.

"Come."

Spock was sitting back, his chair pushed away from his desk, fingering his lyrette. He put it aside as Kirk entered. "Yes, Captain?"

"How are you feeling now?"

"A little tired still." Spock would admit that much to James Kirk, but to no-one else.

"Spock..." Kirk hesitated. "Spock, I know that between you and me, thanks seem a little unnecessary," he said quietly. "But all the same, I want to thank you... for coming back for me."

"It seemed the logical thing to do, Captain." Spock was silent for a moment. "Yet it is I who should thank you, Jim - for bringing me out."

Kirk's lips twitched. "Well, Spock... it did seem to be the logical thing to do."

Spock's eyes gleamed in response. "Logical? Perhaps... but I know that that was your last consideration."

"And we both know... that it was your last consideration, too."

Spock sighed, but he did not deny it.

Seeking to bring matters to a more mundane level before his friend became too embarrassed, Kirk glanced at the chess board.

"Do you feel up to a game of chess?"

Without replying, Spock reached over and pulled the chess board into position.

First printed, CAPTAIN'S LOG 6



JUNGLE TREK

by

Sheila Clark

"Report, Mr. Spock."

"The planet does not exactly fit any standard classification, Captain," Spock replied slowly. "Considering its large mass, its gravity appears to be little more than standard - approximately 1.1424751 of Terran norm. In composition it appears to be midway between the density of a gas giant and that of a small, solidified world. The atmosphere is basically oxygen/nitrogen with an unusually high proportion of free nitrogen - not sufficient to render the atmosphere explosive, but higher than one would normally expect. The upper layers are composed of pure oxygen. Air pressure at ground level is unusually high also, but the surface is extremely uneven, and in fact the mountain ranges reach an altitude that brings their upper slopes into the more tenuous oxygen layers. There is extensive plant and animal life, including sapient readings, despite the fact that I can detect no surface water."

"How can life exist without water?" Kirk asked blankly.

"Certain species of desert animals..." Spock began.

"Spock!"

The Vulcan subsided obediently, mentally shaking his head. He would never understand the Human passion for asking questions to which they did not desire the answers.

"Can you pinpoint a settlement of these intelligent beings?" Kirk continued.

Strangely, the Vulcan, studying the sensor screen intently, was in no hurry to reply.

"Spock?"

The silence dragged on a few moments longer. Had Spock been Human Kirk would have thought he was being deliberately hesitant because of the reprimand, mild though it had been; but that would have been petty, and Spock was never that.

"No, Captain."

Kirk had been so keyed up for a set of coordinates that it took him a moment to remember just what his last question had been.

"Not at all?" he asked.

Spock paused for a split second to wonder if this question was rhetorical, and decided that it was not.

"The sapient readings are sparse, Captain, and are concentrated on the higher mountain reaches where there are occasional pockets of the standard atmosphere, but there appear to be no settlements as we

understand the term. Probably the air pressure at the lower levels is too great for their species, despite the fact that animal and bird species live at those levels. The culture seems to be non-mechanised..."

"So if the Federation wants to employ native workers, we'll have to begin by teaching them what mechanisation is," Kirk mused aloud.

"It would appear so," Spock agreed unenthusiastically. He could never readily accept the ease with which the Federation High Command - including its Vulcan representatives - could ignore the non-interference directive when it suited their purpose. If such interference had been over a moral issue, Spock could have understood and accepted it; but the reasons were almost always economic. In this case, long-range scans had detected the presence of pergium. Since there was only one other known source of this ore inside Federation space, it was inevitable that someone - in this case the Enterprise - should be sent to investigate more closely.

"What about the pergium, Mr. Spock?" Kirk went on. The Vulcan was ready for the question.

"There are several extensive sources, Captain. All are situated much lower down the mountains than the natives choose to live."

Kirk swivelled round to look at him. "How much lower?"

"Between five and ten miles lower, Captain."

Kirk considered this. "Could any of the Federation races tolerate the air pressure at the level?"

"I believe so, Captain, although they would probably be more comfortable under pressurised domes - or, more accurately, depressurised domes."

Kirk nodded thoughtfully. Unlike his First Officer, he could accept the breach of the Prime Directive; what he disliked was the exploitation of the native inhabitants, who were often ruined morally by the sudden riches earned at Federation scales of wages, while lacking the sophistication to know what to do with such wealth. He found himself strangely satisfied that these particular natives should, by their biological structure, be difficult to exploit; and, knowing Spock's views, he was pretty sure that the Vulcan also was experiencing a feeling akin to satisfaction.

"Just how rich is this pergium ore, Mr. Spock?" Kirk continued.

Spock looked slightly dubious. "I would not care to make an estimate without a closer examination of the ore, Captain."

"All right. Take a landing party down and check it out. Better test two or three deposits while you're down there... You think you'll be able to tolerate the air pressure?"

"A short exposure should not be detrimental to our health, Captain."

Kirk grunted. "You'd better go down by shuttle, though. That way you'll be able to visit several areas in one trip, as well as having a handy pressure chamber, should it become necessary."

"Yes, Captain." Spock considered Kirk's phraseology for a moment, then added, "You are not accompanying the landing party, Captain?"

"I don't think so, Spock. You know what you're looking for, and I've got some paper work to catch up on: one or two routine reports I've been putting off doing, but I can't put them off any longer." He sighed. Most of these routine reports were totally unnecessary, never varying from one month to the next, and he sometimes wondered at the level of mentality of the people who studied them - if indeed they were studied and not just quietly tossed into a file somewhere to gather dust. *If doing them is tedious*, he thought, *reading them must be even more so, by the time the reader gets through all the reports from all the Starships!*

Spock considered who to include in his landing party. If Kirk was occupied with routine reports, McCoy would be also. Which member of the medical staff should he include? Andersen, perhaps. Although he was young and relatively inexperienced, it was unlikely that the trip would provide anything more exciting than some slight nausea caused by exposure to the unaccustomed pressure. It would be valuable experience for the young doctor. Carstairs and Bayliss from his own department - he didn't want to risk too inexperienced a scientist for this survey. Yeoman Mears was reasonably competent on landing party duties, and, since she had a steady boyfriend in Engineering, she wasn't likely to try a 'helpless female' act in order to attract the attention of one of the Human males.

Spock shuddered mentally as he recalled one such act that he had witnessed. He still, despite giving the matter considerable thought, completely failed to understand why the Human males present on that occasion had crowded around, all anxious to help her, for he knew - and knew that they knew - that she was fully able to manage for herself.

Better take two security guards, too; there might be dangerous animals. Spock checked the duty roster. The first two names were Becket and Reynolds, both good men. He summoned his chosen group to the hangar deck.

The shuttle dropped lower and lower through the tenuous upper layers of the atmosphere. Suddenly it hesitated, as if it had reached a barrier; then it continued downwards through air that the sensors told them was now breathable. Spock noted the fact that there seemed to be a distinct dividing line between the upper oxygen layers and the lower standard atmosphere, a line marked by an apparent force field. He put the item to the back of his mind for later consideration as they continued on downwards.

Strong winds began to tug at the shuttlecraft, blowing her steadily off course. Spock tried to compensate, but found the strength of the prevailing wind too great for the power of their small craft. Inexorably, they were carried from their chosen route, away from the mountain range whose slopes they had planned to follow down until they came to a pergium deposit.

Spock considered rapidly. There were pergium deposits over most of the planet, and the further down the mountains they got, the more deposits there were. They didn't have to reach the one he had originally selected. Any half dozen sites would serve the purpose equally well. He let the wind blow the shuttle onwards, still

dropping steadily towards the lower levels.

After a while the wind began to veer around and carry them back towards the mountain range that they had originally been descending. Spock's eyebrow lifted as he pondered the vagaries of climatic conditions.

They had been seeing many small birds, both singly and in groups, but most of these had remained reasonably distant, at the limit of visibility in the steadily thickening atmosphere. Now one large bird swooped close and hung beside them on motionless wings, its unblinking eyes glaring at them menacingly. Its hooked beak looked dangerously powerful. It sailed along, paralleling them for some minutes, then it turned aside. The small, unwary bird that had unwittingly come too close probably never knew what hit it. Still gliding along on outstretched wings the huge predator bent its head to its talons and, with two or three tearing bites, consumed its prey. It cast another look at the unresponsive shuttle, then apparently decided that the intruder wasn't going to threaten its territory, for it turned and flew on slowly flapping wings back the way it had come. There was a general sigh of relief from the Human members of the crew.

Visibility was gradually diminishing now, due to the oncoming darkness and thickening mist. Spock was puzzled at first over the prematurely fading light; the sun should still be high in the sky. After a few rapid calculations, he realised that the layers of clouds through which they were passing must be reducing the density of light reaching them. There might not be any surface water, he reflected, but there was an ample amount in suspension in the atmosphere.

The wind was getting erratic and gusting spasmodically. Spock frowned slightly. He wasn't worried... not really... but he found this change in the wind's behaviour disturbing as he edged the shuttle downwards.

Baylis, at the sensors, jerked his head up in alarm. "We're almost on the surface, sir!"

Spock nodded acknowledgement, wrestling with the controls. The wind's erratic behaviour was explainable now. He was still unable to see the surface, but guessed that it must be very uneven. "Is there a pergium deposit near?" he asked calmly.

His calmness had its effect on the near-panicking Bayliss. "Yes, sir," he replied, more quietly. "Course two mark five nine."

Spock swung the shuttle on to the designated course. "How far, Mr. Bayliss?"

"Not more than half a mile, sir. If you land anywhere near here we'll be right on top of it."

Spock proceeded to set the shuttle down. The ground looked reasonably even in this half-light, despite the fact that it was sloping slightly. They touched down, and the soil slid from under them in a landslide caused by the shuttle's weight. Spock had already cut power; he snapped over the lever to repower the craft, but too late - they were carried downwards by a shifting mass of soil and loose rock. The shuttle tipped sideways, throwing the crew about like so many dolls. Built for travel in space or atmosphere, the small craft's structure was never intended to withstand such

treatment. Its walls began to buckle and tear open under the strain.

They finally came to rest a full half mile further down the mountain. Spock rose carefully from where he had braced himself to avoid being tossed about too wildly, finally becoming aware of the increased pressure. The hull of the shuttlecraft was no longer intact. Andersen lay in a crumpled heap nearest to him. As Spock walked towards him he discovered that, in the increased pressure, his movements were not so rapid as usual.

The young man was very pale; there was a trickle of blood running from the corner of his mouth. Kneeling beside him, Spock reached into the medikit for a diagnostic scanner and passed it over the unconscious man. His lips tightened slightly. A broken rib had pierced a lung, and there were other internal injuries. Andersen needed immediate, skilled medical help.

Spock proceeded to check out the others, who were all beginning to show signs of scrambling to their feet and reacting in their various ways to the many bumps and bruises they had suffered. Satisfied that none of them were seriously hurt, Spock turned back to the control panel. He flicked the communications switch.

"Shuttlecraft to Enterprise." There was no reply, but he had not seriously expected one. He reached for his communicator.

"Spock to Enterprise." There was still no reply. *Strange - they shouldn't be out of communicator range.* "Spock to Enterprise," he repeated, with the same result.

He examined the communicator carefully. It was functioning, but something as yet unidentified was blocking the signal. Might it have something to do with the pressure? Unlikely as that seemed, it was the only answer that he had. He must assume that it was the pressure, and that being the case, the only way to regain contact with the ship would be to get to a higher altitude where the pressure was lower.

The crew gathered around, waiting for orders.

"Mr. Reynolds, Mr. Becket. Find something to use as a stretcher. Dr. Andersen is badly hurt and will have to be carried. Mr. Carstairs, see if the water container has remained intact. Yeoman, issue the phasers. Mr. Bayliss, check conditions outside."

The crew scattered to do his bidding, the action helping to overcome shock. Mears retrieved the phasers from their slightly battered container and slipped the spare power packs into her pouch along with the seventh phaser - the one Andersen wouldn't be able to use. She moved among the men, handing out the weapons.

The water container also had escaped serious damage, unlike another occasion Spock could remember all too vividly. At least there was no danger of sunburn or extreme, rapid dehydration here; fortunately, for the amount of water in the container was little enough for seven, and might have to last them for several days. Carstairs rigged up a harness for it out of spare straps and fastened it to his back. A thought struck the Yeoman, and she added several disposable cups to the load in her pouch.

Becket and Reynolds, however, were having difficulty manufacturing any sort of stretcher. At last they settled for a

long strip of metal torn from the shuttle's wall, sparsely padded with stuffing from the seats, to be carried - with difficulty - by means of more tricorder straps. One strapless tricorder went into Mears' pouch. Two more were wedged at Andersen's feet, once he had been lifted carefully onto the makeshift stretcher. The Yeoman and the three scientists each carried one.

They gathered around the stretcher, the Humans oddly unwilling to leave the doubtful security of the shuttlecraft. Spock, however, knew only too well that without radio contact it was unlikely that the Enterprise could detect them. The very atmosphere was their enemy, its density rendering sensor readings indistinct and completely unreliable. They had to reach higher ground where the pressure was very much less. Then, perhaps, a communicator signal might reach the ship.

It was fortunate, he thought, that none of them had experienced any immediate difficulty. Extreme exertion, however, might be detrimental to their condition. Slow and steady must be the watchwords.

"Report, Mr. Bayliss."

"Everything around us seems... dead, Mr. Spock. Only very primitive lichens and a few worms and arthropods. We seem to be below the level at which much life exists."

Spock nodded, the report confirming his own suspicions. At this level, the air pressure was simply too great for most forms of native life, even though they, the visitors, seemed able to tolerate it. He looked around, his senses feeling out for the correct direction.

"This way," he said confidently, pointing. "Mr. Bayliss, go in front. Mr. Carstairs. Yeoman. Do a supplementary check as you go. Mr. Reynolds, you and I will take the stretcher first. Mr. Becket, be ready to relieve either of us when it becomes necessary."

After a scattered chorus of acknowledgement they set off, walking over rough, uneven ground. The dust that filled many of the hollows was too fine and soft to provide adequate footing, causing them to trip and stumble in the dim light. Visibility was hampered by the thick mist that hung clammy over everything, limiting their vision to only a few twilight yards. A multi-legged centipede-like creature scurried away from almost under Bayliss' feet, invisible in its camouflaged colouring until it moved, and disappeared again among a colony of lichens that hugged the rock in sparse mottled greyness.

They found it impossible to move with any speed. Not only was the footing uneven and treacherous, but the pressure of the air weighing on their bodies definitely slowed them up. It was like walking underwater, except that their bodies lacked buoyancy and they were restrained by the additional weight of the extra gravity. Even Spock felt its effects; probably, he suspected, because he had lived for so long in a purely Terran environment. His body would readapt quickly, but for the moment he was as physically distressed as his Human companions.

After about half an hour Spock called Becket to relieve Reynolds, and they went on without a break. Spock suspected that conditions were unlikely to improve, and it was uncertain how far they had to travel. He wanted to get as far as possible before the

crew began to feel the cumulative effects of gravity, inadequate water, and an uncertain food supply. The moisture in suspension would ease the water situation considerably, for while they were breathing moist air they were unlikely to become too dehydrated.

By the end of the next half hour Spock was feeling surprisingly tired, and gave the order for five minutes rest before continuing. He bent over Andersen before he sat down, however.

The doctor was still unconscious. Fresh blood continued to trickle from his mouth. Spock shook his head; there was still hope for the injured man, he could still be saved if they were found soon - but it would have to be very soon.

Abruptly, Mears coughed.

"What's wrong, Yeoman?" Spock asked.

She choked back another cough to answer. "There's a lot of dust in the air, sir. It caught in my throat."

Now that she mentioned it, Spock realised just how gritty the atmosphere was. All atmospheres contain dust, but here the specks were quite large, several of them being visible to him even in this half-light, now that he was looking for them. They were sinking, but very, very slowly. Spock sat on a large rock and surveyed the others.

"I am afraid that the dust is another hindrance we are forced to accept," he commented.

"I know, sir," Mears replied apologetically.

On board the Enterprise Kirk shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Now finished with his reports - they never took him very long, it was just his distaste for them that delayed him every month - he was becoming concerned that Spock hadn't reported in by now. He swung round to Communications.

"Any word from Mr. Spock yet, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir." *I'd have told you if there was*, her thought continued, a little irritably. "I've been trying to raise the shuttle for nearly twenty minutes, but there's no response."

"Check the coordinates for the shuttle's first landing site, Lieutenant, and relay the position to the transporter room." Kirk punched his intercom button. "Kirk to Security. Two men for a routine check. Beam down and attempt to contact Mr. Spock, who should be at, or very near, their beam-down point."

"Acknowledged." The voice continued, more faintly, before the intercom was switched off. "Who's top of the duty...?"

Fasleur and Norwin materialised in a thick mist. Visibility was only a few yards. They could see nothing but mist, and around their feet the soft-bodied vegetation moving gently in a steady breeze - a breeze so light that it was little more than a draught. Insects danced around; a bird swooped out of the mist, open-mouthed,

and soared again, breaking through a veil of the tiny creatures and banking to scoop up more of them in its open maw. The insects continued their dance, oblivious to their danger. The bird turned once more to harvest the flock of insects, then it vanished back into the mist.

Fasleur studied his tricorder intently, peering at it in the half-light. Nothing... no trace of any worked metal. There were large pergium deposits near... some ferrous ores... traces of copper... but nothing more. If the shuttle had ever been here, it must have moved on to the next site Mr. Spock might have chosen for investigation.

Norwin pulled out his communicator. "Mr. Spock." There was no reply. The two guards looked at each other. "Norwin to Enterprise."

After the two guards had been beamed back aboard, Kirk ordered the search to begin.

Andersen died without ever regaining consciousness, barely an hour after the party recommenced their determined plod towards the planned landing site. They stopped long enough to dig him a shallow grave in the soft earth, then went on. Although he regretted the man's death, Spock was also, in part, a little relieved. Carrying Andersen had been a considerable drain on the cumulative strength of the group. They had done everything they could for him - now they could continue with a better chance for their own survival. He knew better than to say so, however; the Humans would never have understood. Even though, as he had discovered, they could accept such paradoxical attitudes as admiring and disapproving of someone at the same time, they could never understand that death, undesirable as it was, could sometimes benefit others.

Spock led them on thereafter for almost a mile before the already faint light began to diminish, and he knew that the planet's long day was drawing to a close.

There was no real shelter to be had here, either. They were still traversing a barren, apparently lifeless plain, but who knew what creatures might emerge from their dens with the coming of darkness? Creatures that would not require eyes to detect them, and from which the fugitives would have little, if any, chance of escaping out here in the open. If the sunlight could only produce a dim twilight, moonlight - even that of a full moon - would certainly fail to illuminate their surroundings.

Just before it got too dark to see they found a semi-refuge where two great boulders lay together, providing a place where they were sheltered by two sides of a triangle. There was no protection on the third side, or above, but it was better than nothing. Spock decided to let them all sleep, if they could; in the pitch dark of night a guard would be unable to see anything, and a prolonged watch would only result in a strain on eyes and mind, with absolutely no possibility of being able to warn or defend the others should danger approach.

The air, already chilly, seemed to get even colder as visibility dwindled to nothing. Spock decided that the apparent drop in temperature was imaginary, and remained obstinately aloof, but the Humans huddled together for warmth. One by one they fell

asleep, until only the Vulcan remained awake.

The night was completely still. Spock found himself, as he had known would happen, straining his eyes to see in the Stygian blackness, straining his ears to catch a sound in the utter silence, and forced himself to relax. The moist breeze caressed his face with icy fingers, and he gave an involuntary shiver. Memories of forbidden Human stories read in secret, or told to him by his Terran cousins, rose unbidden in his mind. Not that he had ever believed in ghosts, of course, but...

Spock took a deep breath. *It is imagination, he told himself. Ghosts do not exist. They are a figment of the imagination of generations of superstitious and illogical Humans. What I feel touching me is the wind, silent because there are no branches through which it can blow. There is nothing here to frighten me...*

His thoughts trailed off as he saw a mysterious bright light moving towards him. There was a dark, shadowy shape behind it that he found himself wishing he could see more clearly. The light was strangely hypnotic; he felt himself drawn to it... He began to sit up...

"NO!"

He wrenched his mind free from the attraction, forcing himself to look away from the light. When he had regained control of himself, he looked back; if he had been Human he would certainly have laughed with relief. The creature had turned away, and could be seen quite clearly in its own light - a bird, large but not excessively so, and the light a brilliant, glowing spot at the tip of its beak. He doubted that it was large enough to constitute a real danger to any individual in the party. A creature something like a Terran angler fish, but avian; an interesting sight. He reached for his tricorder.

After a few minutes the bird flew slowly away. Soon the light was gone, swallowed up in the mist. Spock yawned, and lay back down again, suddenly sleepy.

It was still dark when he awoke, but his sense of time told him it would soon be day. He sat up, aware for the first time that his clothes were quite damp, and frowned. There was nothing they could do about it, but it would not be good for any of them to remain in wet clothing. Before long one or more of the party would begin to suffer from some malaise brought on by the damp conditions, and he had an uncomfortable suspicion that he might be the first to succumb. Vulcans, accustomed to a hot, dry climate, were very susceptible to ailments caused by cold, wet conditions.

Gradually the light grew brighter, and once it was clear enough for him to see Spock roused the others. None of them complained about the hunger all were beginning to experience, knowing that there was nothing they could do about it, but all were grateful that Spock allowed them each a little water from their scanty supply. Only Carstairs noticed that Spock himself took none. Without letting the others know, Carstairs moved over to the Vulcan.

"Aren't you having anything to drink, sir?" he asked softly.

"I do not need it, Mr. Carstairs," Spock replied equally softly. "Vulcans are accustomed to living in an arid climate, and there is more than sufficient moisture in the atmosphere to satisfy

my requirements."

Carstairs was unconvinced, but accepted the explanation, well aware that Spock knew what he was doing. He swung the water container onto his back again, ready to move off.

Slowly their surroundings began to change. The sparse lichens became more widespread, and instead of hugging the rock grew more profusely, reaching upwards to a maximum height of fully half an inch. Spock bent to examine these new plants carefully, and looked up at the Humans.

"It will not be particularly palatable, gentlemen, but this lichen is edible. I suggest that we all eat, and then gather as much as we can carry. We may find a small stock of food quite valuable, since we cannot guarantee always finding something we can eat."

He was right; the little plants were not very appetising, but all were hungry and choked them down. It was very dry eating, too; Spock allowed them all a mouthful of water when they had finished their meal, and even took one himself. They set to work to gather what they could, and after stuffing Yeoman Mears' pouch with the dry lichen, moved on.

Small creatures were becoming more common too, darting here and there among the low plants with short, abrupt movements. It proved impossible to catch any to examine closely; the little animals could move much faster than their prospective captors, and were too restless for a tricorder examination to be anything but frustrating. At least a report on them was being fed into the tricorders, which could be replayed much more slowly once they regained the Enterprise, and would let them discover something about these tantalising mites. There were more of the multi-legged arthropods, too, scuttling here and there but seemingly harmless; far and away the largest creatures in their universe, the tiny animals still seemed to have a full awareness of danger, for they scurried away when any one of the party drew near, and Spock remembered the angler bird he had seen during the night. Did it prey on small ground creatures as well as on flying ones?

What looked like a grey and brown mottled moth fluttered past Reynolds to land on Bayliss' arm. He looked down curiously at it, seeing at once that it was not an insect but a multi-legged creature. A long proboscis uncurled, reaching down towards his arm, and Spock, noting it, brushed it off. It fluttered away, giving a comical illusion of annoyance.

"Why did you do that, Mr. Spock?" Bayliss asked. He sounded a little irritated.

"We are unfamiliar with these creatures, Mr. Bayliss," Spock replied evenly. "It may have been harmless, but I do not think we should risk being bitten. Bloodsucking creatures frequently carry disease, and we have no doctor now."

Bayliss looked unconvinced, but followed obediently as Spock turned to walk on.

The lichens grew longer now, and the creatures among them were larger, though still of the same kind as the ones they had been

watching for some time. Mixed with the lichens were other plants, moss-like growths with short, stiff stems supporting little spore reservoirs. Spock stopped again.

"I think we had better eat again while we can," he said. "We are passing out of the area where the lichens grow, and we cannot be certain of finding another source of food."

For the second time that day they choked down some of the dry, tasteless lichen, grateful that it at least eased the hunger pangs. As they went on the lichens did indeed vanish, and only moss was left underfoot. The animal life was different, too - still composed of small, scurrying creatures, but these seemed to lack the perfect camouflage the others had possessed. Perhaps it was because they lived where there was more shelter to be found.

Yeoman Mears choked on a scream. Spock looked at her with some impatience - surely he had not over-estimated her reliability? No. She was staring, horrified, at a long, green shape that he now saw gliding towards them. The creature had an alarming resemblance to a snake, moving gracefully in long, even waves, its head swaying hypnotically. When they moved out of its path it altered its course to follow them.

Becket pulled out his phaser and fired. The creature reared up on its tail, then dropped. Spock moved cautiously towards it.

Its mouth had dropped open, revealing several rows of sharp teeth: sharp, tearing teeth. Although its mouth clearly could not open wide enough for it to swallow any of them whole, which its size had suggested, it probably wrapped itself around its prey, then tore the flesh from its bones.

"Most unpleasant," Spock commented. "Gentlemen, if we see any more of these animals, we must shoot them immediately. And be doubly watchful; I surmise that these are not the only creatures that will be dangerous to us."

They went on, leaving the fallen beast. Within moments it was covered with the tiny fauna of the mossland, feasting on the unexpected harvest. So intent on their feast were the tiny denizens of this region, they failed to notice the gathering birds, which in turn swooped to prey on the unsuspecting little creatures and then - the surviving animacules of their attack having scuttled for shelter - settled to feed on the remainder of the snake's body. Within ten minutes nothing but bones was left of the once-feared killer. Stunned or dead made no difference. In this environment, to be injured was to die.

The landing party moved on. Although he chose not to say so, Spock was satisfied with the progress they were making. So far they had covered at least eight miles from the crashed shuttlecraft, though they had gained little more than quarter of a mile in altitude. There was still a long way to go, but they had made a good start.

They reached the top of a long, gradual incline and paused in some dismay. In front of them the ground was descending again, for as far as they could see. Spock lifted an eyebrow.

"It would be illogical to expect the ground to rise steadily all the way, just because that would be more convenient for us," he said, knowing as he did so that he was saying it as much to convince

himself as the others. "We are still headed in the direction of our original landing site; the ground will surely begin to rise again shortly. This may be only a very short descent."

His assumption proved to be correct. At the foot of the incline the ground was very soft, a thick layer of fine earth into which their feet sank as if it were a quicksand. They scrambled back onto hard ground and paused to consider how to proceed.

Spock picked up a stone and tossed it gently onto the ground as far in front of him as he could see. It sank, slowly and gracefully, slipping from sight while the soft dust oozed back level again. The Vulcan shook his head.

"We cannot cross here. We have no alternative but to attempt to make our way around this soft area."

He glanced right and left. To their right the ground appeared to rise slightly. "We will go this way," he decided, turning in that direction. "The dust may have collected in a low-lying basin; it should be possible to go around it."

"Can't we rest, Mr. Spock?" Yeoman Mears asked. "Just for a few minutes? I'm terribly tired."

Spock smothered a sigh, and nodded. "Very well, Yeoman. We'll stop for ten minutes."

The Humans sank down gratefully, and Spock realised that, in fact, all five of them were equally tired; sheer pride had kept the men from admitting it. Spock himself had become re-acclimatised to the greater gravity; while the pressure still dragged at him, slowing his movements, he was not unduly distressed and he had forgotten that his companions would require longer to become used to the conditions. The girl would be a valuable member of the party after all, for she could be trusted to ask for a break before any of them reached the point of collapse.

He gave them fifteen minutes before he called them to their feet again, and they set off, if not with alacrity at least with a little more energy than they had previously been showing.

They did not have to travel too far before it became obvious that the band of 'quicksand' was narrowing. On the other side of it they could see rough ground again, although it was still too wide for any of them to jump in these conditions. A few hundred yards further on it suddenly became narrow enough for them to step over it. They had only been taken about a mile out of their direct way.

Spock led them on, allowing for the detour. The ground began to rise quite steeply, and their pace slowed considerably: two or three laboured steps, then a pause for breath, then another few slow steps. Spock slackened his pace to what he felt was a positive dawdle, and still the Humans had to stop frequently. After they had been climbing for nearly half an hour, during which time he estimated they had covered a bare quarter of a mile, he relented and allowed them another break.

They sank down, and Spock crossed to Carstairs. "I will take the water container now," he said. "It was inconsiderate of me to have you carrying it for so long. I have become acclimatised, and it will place no strain on me. I forgot that you would find the conditions less bearable."

The scientist felt that he should protest, but the thought of getting rid of the weight on his back that had slowed him down was seductive, and he slipped the straps off his shoulders. "Thank you, sir."

Spock looked around. Visibility was no better here; higher they might be, but the cloud was still as thick. He would have preferred to scout ahead, but even with his perfect sense of direction he knew that in this mist he could very easily lose his way back to the landing party. The steepness of the slope was troubling him; if they came to a cliff, they would have no way of knowing if it was only a few feet high or many thousands - no way to know if they should in fact attempt to climb it or make a long detour. And what if they reached the top of a mountain that had to be descended again before they could go any further? With an effort he put the troublesome thoughts out of his mind. He was in command of the group; it was his responsibility to encourage the others, not discourage them.

He eased the water container onto his back and stood. "Shall we go on, gentlemen?"

This time he set a very easy pace. The Humans found that, for the moment, they could keep up, and plodded steadily upwards. The moss under their feet thickened; the little creatures of the moss forest darted away from them. A bird swooped close, suddenly spotted them and whirled away again.

Spock looked around and was far from happy; the long day was drawing to a close, and they must find some sort of shelter for the night. Memory of the snake was vivid in his mind. He hoped that it was a diurnal species. In the absolute darkness of this world's night, there was nothing they could do to defend themselves against it or any other carnivorous creatures.

The slope rose higher, a long incline surfaced with small stones and earth cemented together by the two-inch tall mosses. There was nothing to indicate whether shelter might lie a few yards to either side of them, hidden by the ubiquitous mist, but he doubted that any did.

"Mr. Spock."

"Yes, Mr. Bayliss?"

"It seems to be getting dark," Bayliss said uneasily.

"Yes, Mr. Bayliss. It is."

The Vulcan didn't need to say anything more. All realised the danger. Soon they would have to stop, with or without shelter.

They travelled only a few hundred yards further before they came to an extremely steep part of the slope. In the failing light they could see that it only stretched above them for about two yards, but at least it offered protection on one side.

They each ate a few mouthfuls of the lichen they had gathered earlier, washed it down with a mouthful of water, and settled down for their second night in these dismal surroundings. Despite their fatigue, none of them found it easy to get to sleep; memory of the snake kept disturbing all six, even Spock. In addition, the Humans found themselves too tired to sleep,

A raucous cry broke the silence - all the more startling because it was the first sound they had heard, other than what they themselves had made - a harsh, eerie call that made the Humans shiver.

They spent a cold, uncomfortable night, and all were greatly relieved with the arrival of dawn.

"We had better reserve our remaining food for later," Spock said. "Also our water. Let us go on; movement will soon warm us again." Hoping he was right, he was suddenly aware of a tightness in his chest that could easily be the beginning of a respiratory infection.

None of them could move very fast because their muscles were stiff from the cold. They struggled on, skirting the steep part that had offered the illusion of shelter.

The moss grew longer, becoming interspersed with taller growths that resembled nothing that any of them had ever seen before - long, thin stems held upright by what resembled air bladders, swaying gently in the steady breeze, long tendrils floating out from the tips. Sparse at first, they became thicker until the party had to brush through them.

Yeoman Mears yelped as soon as she entered the 'grass'.

"What is wrong, Yeoman?" Spock inquired.

"This stuff stings!" she replied. "It's all right for you men, but my uniform doesn't give me any protection. Starfleet ought to design a uniform with trousers for female crew members to wear on landing party duties!"

Spock considered her complaint reasonable; having her legs badly stung by the vegetation would be most uncomfortable... and possibly dangerous. The sting could produce an allergic reaction.

"Follow after the rest of us," he instructed. "Gentlemen, trample down the vegetation as much as you can."

The men obeyed and, travelling carefully, Mears managed to avoid being stung again, but she was more than glad when, after about a mile, they climbed above the stinging plants. Spock noted that the vegetation was distinctly layered. He checked it carefully, and after deciding that the plants were innocuous, declared a pause. He suddenly began coughing, trying to clear his congested throat.

Animals, which had been sparse among the stinging plants, were more abundant here. Larger than any they had seen so far, except for the birds and of course the snake, these creatures moved about with much more deliberate movements than the tiny life-forms they had seen at the lower levels, in seemingly a steady search for food. One shell-covered creature grazed placidly on the plants; another crept through the stems to pounce on yet a third that had allowed its attention to stray from its immediate and permanent danger. A flock of tiny birds - perfectly formed elfin hummingbirds - flicked into view through the mist, swerving and darting in perfect unison, only to pass quickly out of sight.

Spock coughed again, grateful that the others also were coughing fairly frequently because of the dust that had never ceased

to trouble them. They were unlikely to realise that he was developing a chest condition typical among Vulcans exposed to cold and damp. After a certain length of time, which varied according to the individual, the lung damage caused by the condition was irreversible, even by a healing trance. Should this occur, he would be forced to resign from Starfleet and live out the remainder of his normal lifespan as a chronic invalid. That would trouble his companions if they knew, he realised; little though he understood it, he knew he was liked by the crew. He was relieved to realise that, should any of them recognise that he was ill, they would assume his illness to be nothing worse than a cold, and without lying he could continue to allow them to think it. The prospect of permanent illness chilled him slightly; he resolutely put the thought out of his mind. Jim would not allow himself to become depressed by the magnitude of the journey in front of them, but would continue with cheerful optimism, saying that of course they would be rescued soon. He must behave as he knew Jim would expect, but he was secretly wishing that McCoy was around with one of his noxious potions.

Something moved sluggishly across the ground in front of them. For a heart-stopping moment they thought it was another snake, but then they realised that it was fatter, darker in colour, and had no discernible head. As it went it seemed to absorb the vegetation it crossed, leaving a narrow, bare trail behind it. Spock aimed his tricorder at it.

"Fascinating!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Carstairs! Mr. Bayliss! This creature is, in fact, vegetable in composition, with only the most minimal of animal physiology."

The two scientists joined him in examining it, gathering as much data into their tricorders as possible. Then, leaving the primitive life-form behind, they moved slowly on, still climbing steadily..

The vegetation was becoming taller and more dense. It now stood waist high, and while it could still be pushed aside with ease, they had to part the individual plants in front of them so that they could see where they were stepping. That slowed progress considerably, but they didn't dare chance that the ground in front of them was even and unbroken. Although it seemed to be remaining fairly smooth, a thin layer of soft dust filling the hollows, here and there a larger stone projected.

Spock tried to ignore his increasing physical discomfort by considering the dust. Logically, in view of the moisture in the atmosphere, he would have expected it to be wet - mud, in fact. That it remained powder dry was interesting. The plants must obtain most, if not all, of their water requirements from the air. He coughed again harshly, a dry cough that gave him no relief - it only aggravated his already irritated tissues.

This region seemed to be uninhabited, and the only creatures they could see were several large birds that swooped just above planet level. The birds worked their way closer to the party of intruders, seemingly oblivious to them. Then, startlingly, one of the birds swooped down at Bayliss' head. The scientist ducked, and the bird overshot, then turning, dived on Carstairs. He flung himself on the ground and the others crouched too. Their attacker was joined by others, which circled unwearyingly, clearly knowing that their cornered prey would eventually make a break for it, and when one of them made a dash for safety the runner would surely be

caught.

Reluctantly, Spock reached for his phaser. He had no desire to kill any creature that was living according to its own nature, but it seemed that he had no choice. Merely to stun one or more of the birds would simply mean that the unfortunate avians that he selected as his targets would then be eaten alive by their flock-mates - unconscious, certainly, but still alive. There was little chance that he could stun them all. Unwillingly, he slotted the phaser to the lethal setting and fired.

The dead bird fell heavily a few yards from them. The survivors took only a second to realise the bounty that awaited them, and converged on the body. The landing party crept cautiously away through the waist-high plants. Behind them, a chorus of squawks indicated a rapacious fraternal squabble.

The party forced its way on, despite straining lungs and aching legs, until the angry squawking had faded in the distance. Then they all, even Spock, sank to the ground from exhaustion.

Despite his illness Spock still recovered first and sat up, alert to their surroundings. They were still in this forest of of waist-high plants, waving fronds held where they could catch the maximum light, air and moisture by long bare stems. A few small creatures darted about, and he decided that the previous lack of wild life was due solely to the presence of the hunting birds.

He checked his tricorder and fought to control his anxiety. They had passed out of the region where only the most primitive of life-forms lived; in this region were the larger creatures, predators like the birds. The ones they had already seen, large though they were, were a comparatively small species. Beyond, above them, were the big ones, like the great bird they had seen while still in the shuttlecraft. He gave little credence to Human superstitions, but here he could only hope - hope that the largest birds were creatures of the open spaces, birds like the Terran albatross that spends many months at a time out of sight of land. Meanwhile, he decided, he had best not pass this information on to the Humans. Bayless was probably not experienced enough to realise the danger, but Carstairs might figure it out for himself. If so, with luck - superstition again - he would tell Spock first, and then the Vulcan could warn him not to divulge the situation to the others. Spock fully respected the courage of the security guards and his two scientists, and had a higher opinion of Mears than of many of the female crew members, but even so he felt it better not to make them nervous. In such a condition most Humans were inclined to act first and think later.

As the Humans began to sit up, indicating their recovery, Spock motioned to Mears.

"I think something to eat is indicated, Yeoman. A handful of lichen each - no more. I do not require any."

"You must eat something, sir," Mears protested as she groped in her pouch, beginning to hand out the tiny ration.

"Vulcans can fast for long periods without harm," Spock replied, suppressing the knowledge that, ill as he was, fasting would indeed be harmful. However, the unappetising dry lichen was unappealing, and he knew that in any case the Humans would need the small amount he would have consumed even more than he did. He did,

however, accept a mouthful of water. In doing so he had to fight the urge to drain the container - his illness was making him very thirsty.

When their meagre meal was finished the party headed on. The plants grew taller and taller, until they were making their way between thick, bare stems topped by huge fronds that waved steadily in the sharply gusting wind. The plants provided some protection, for which they were grateful. The air, already cold, was rendered icy by the wind. This forest also concealed them from flying predators, Spock realised, for they must be invisible from above.

Ahead of them, an animal darted through the 'trees'. It was impossible to determine any details of its physical structure, yet its timidity indicated that this creature, at least, was no predator - unlikely as that had seemed. Apart from the mobile vegetable they had seen earlier, almost every creature on this world seemed to prey on smaller ones. They might be safe from flying predators, but they weren't safe from quadruped ones - or creatures like the snake.

Soon they discovered another advantage of being among the 'trees'; the atmosphere was no longer so dusty. The Humans' coughing diminished, but Spock's persisted, in spite of his attempts to alleviate it.

Mears noticed his continued coughing first, and mentioned it. It took Spock only a moment to decide on a minimised version of the truth.

"I appear to have developed a mild respiratory infection, due to the constant dampness," he admitted.

The girl searched in her pouch for the small emergency medical kit. Spock reached out to stop her.

"We should keep the medication for absolute emergencies," he said.

"You're not being logical, sir," she replied. "An antibiotic injection now could keep the infection down. But if you wait until it gets any worse, it might take more antibiotic than we have to sustain you."

"Yeoman, I appreciate your concern, but this infection is no worse than a cold, and if we use what little medication we have on something so mild, it will no longer be available should any of us become injured."

"Colds can be a lot more weakening than most people admit, Mr. Spock," Mears insisted. "Besides, we need you. If you collapse we really will be in trouble."

"I am hardly likely to collapse from a respiratory infection, Yeoman..." Spock began.

"I'm sure you've heard Dr. McCoy say that the best time to catch a disease is when it's just starting," Mears said. "I know I've heard him say it lots of times, and you know him better than I do." She pumped a dose of antibiotic into the Vulcan's arm before he could protest any further.

"You misquote the good doctor, Yeoman," Spock said with a touch of wry humour. "What he has frequently said is that the best time

to catch a disease is *before* it starts."

Mears returned the medikit to her pouch. "Whichever it is, sir, it's still better to do something about it now."

At heart, Spock knew that she was right. At least he could tell McCoy that his condition had not been neglected - he shuddered at the thought of the caustic-tongued medic's comments and the enforced sojourn in sickbay that would be his eventual lot.

Before long Spock was forced to admit that Mears had been right; he felt much better for the injection. But he knew that at best the relief was only temporary. More than a general antibiotic was needed, and he could expect no real improvement in his condition until he was away from this cold, damp atmosphere.

The group was halted by a scream. They swung round to find Bayliss, who was bringing up the rear, flat on the ground with a snarling animal crouched over him.

Becket, nearest to the fallen man, reacted first. He pulled out his phaser and fired. The creature collapsed and they rushed forward to heave the carcass off Bayliss, who sat up shakily.

"Are you injured, Mr. Bayliss?" Spock asked.

The scientist shook his head groggily. "No, Mr. Spock. The creature knocked me over when it pounced, and you turned on it before it could continue its attack."

Spock looked down at the animal. Although not very large - no larger than a Terran wolf - it was clearly a creature to be feared. Its mouth was larger than a wolf's and filled with ugly, pointed teeth. No wonder the earlier beast they had seen was so timid.

The ground was becoming steeper again, and Spock found it increasingly difficult to climb steadily upwards without pausing for breath.

Abruptly they came to the edge of the 'trees'. The mountain sloped upwards ahead of them as far as they could see, devoid of large plants or any sort of shelter. As it was getting late, Spock decided that this was probably as good a place as any to stop for their third night on the planet.

As they settled down, Carstairs and Bayliss looked at each other, then advanced towards Spock.

"I know you don't like close physical proximity, Mr. Spock," Carstairs said with polite obstinacy, "but the conditions are worse for you than for any of us. For your own sake, you must let us keep you warm."

The Vulcan looked from one to the other. Had this been Kirk and McCoy he would not have hesitated. He had grown accustomed to the knowledge that these two were not fooled - had never been fooled - by his apparently complete self-possession, although McCoy pretended to be, and he knew that the warmth of other bodies close to him would be welcome. He had also grown accustomed to the knowledge that Kirk and McCoy were fond of him, and could accept it without embarrassment, but the two junior scientists were another matter. In his weakened condition it would be very easy for him to let his normal dispassionate reserve slip. Dare he risk it? It

would be most unethical for him to meld accidentally with either of the young men and so discover their secret thoughts; or even worse, let them see the Human warmth that dwelt so near the surface of his mind.

Practical considerations decided him. As Mears had said, the Humans needed him if they were to stand any chance of reaching a point from which they could contact the Enterprise. Reluctantly, he nodded.

"Very well, gentlemen. And thank you."

The young scientists settled Spock between them. The change of position, from upright to prone, made him cough again. He was not surprised when Mears came over and gave him another injection before he even realised that she was there. Then she joined the two guards and huddled down with them.

Spock slept fitfully, afraid to relax completely, but knowing that the warmth, slight as it was, and the injection, were doing him some good. If his condition was not improving - he knew it would not until he received the proper treatment - at least it was not deteriorating.

The group roused as it was getting light. The change of position again made Spock cough, but he stopped the Yeoman as she reached into her pouch.

"We have very little of the drug," he said. "It is inadvisable to use it all just yet. Some must be kept for emergencies." He had grown quite hoarse, but knew the futility of trying to clear his irritated throat.

They ate the last of the lichen, Spock again refusing it to leave more for the Humans, and allowed themselves a little water. There was hardly any left in the container, and Spock decided that the remainder should be kept for as long as they could possibly do without it.

Rested, but not refreshed, they set off again up a slope sparsely covered with the short, moss-like growth they had first encountered part-way through the second day. They had not gone far, however, when they were stopped by a chasm that cut across their path.

It was a fairly narrow ravine, not more than fifty yards across, but it might have been fifty miles, for there was absolutely nothing they could use to bridge it. Even had the plants through which they had recently passed been a little longer they were too soft-stemmed to bridge the gap.

Spock peered downwards, but he could only see a short distance before the universal mistiness blanked out visibility. The canyon was at least a hundred yards deep - the distance he estimated he could make out any details - and the sides looked unclimbable except by mountaineering experts. A strong wind blew through the ravine, causing the mist to eddy and swirl but doing nothing to clear it.

Hopeless to try and climb down, for it might descend not just three hundred feet but three thousand, and they had no ropes or any other safeguard. There was no alternative; they must travel parallel to it in the hope that they would, before too long, reach the end of it. Nor was there anything to indicate which was the

better way to go. Spock turned to the right, knowing that his choice of direction was purely arbitrary.

"We will try this way," he said quietly, wishing he felt as confident as he sounded.

On board the Enterprise Kirk had long passed from extreme anxiety to acute worry. Repeated sensor scans showed nothing, except that below a certain altitude nothing was detectable, and it was rapidly becoming clear that Spock and his party must be below that altitude. Otherwise their bodies would have been detected. The scan of the area into which the shuttle had been headed was so thorough that they were recognising characteristics of certain individual animals that lived in the area. Yet how could the shuttlecraft have got so far down the mountain side?

The first reports from the searching Galileo told him. It was impossible for any of the shuttlecraft to maintain a course, let alone carry out a proper search, because of the strong, gusting winds. The shuttle could be anywhere, carried by the wind, its course unpredictable because of any action taken by its pilot.

Kirk could understand that Spock would not want to return to the Enterprise without having conducted some form of survey - which would explain why he hadn't given up when his shuttle was first thrown off course. But that would mean that he could be anywhere on the planet's surface... And what was keeping him from coming back?

Sick with worry, he remained on duty until McCoy came and forced him to go and rest, sedating him into unconsciousness. McCoy himself was desperately worried - and not only for Spock. But at least he knew he could do something for Kirk.

It took the landing party two days to reach the head of the ravine, days when they grew more and more exhausted from the pressure that slowed their movements. Fortunately they had found another edible plant, this time a barrel-shaped fungus that had a high moisture content, and this had satisfied their need for liquid as well as filling their stomachs with a not particularly nutritious meal. Again they had stopped for long enough to harvest as much as would fit in Mears' pouch, as well as squeezing some to fill their water container. All six were rather relieved, although none of them said so. Despite the moist atmosphere all of them needed water, and the filled container would last them several days.

The ravine passed, they resumed their interrupted march towards the original landing site. Bird life was now far more frequent. Small flocks of birds of varying sizes flew in formation, changing direction in unison in what appeared to be normal protective behaviour everywhere for any creatures that were subject to attack from others larger than themselves. Larger birds occasionally flicked out of the mist to swoop on the small ones, frequently missing but occasionally catching one. Unwilling though he was to kill any of these birds, Spock checked them for edibility, but all were incompatible with Human requirements.

The ground was more broken here, and it slowed them even more. Unwary speed could easily result in a twisted ankle, and that they dared not risk.

They had strung out a little. Spock still took the lead, for only he had a sense of direction sufficiently acute to keep them going in the right direction. Becket was close behind him, with Bayliss at his heels. There was a short gap, then Mears, with Carstairs at her side, and Reynolds bringing up the rear, but the distance between them was only a few yards. Every time the group at the rear lagged too much they called out, and the leading party stopped and waited for them. The girl was doing the best she could, but having shorter legs, though she took step for step with the men each stride covered less ground, and she had to throw in an extra step every so often. It made the journey that much more tiring for her, so that inevitably she found herself lagging slightly.

The rear group was passing a fallen boulder when a tentacle reached out sharply from under it and caught Carstairs. He was jerked a step towards the rock before he recovered enough to resist the pull. Immediately a second tentacle joined the first.

Reynolds drew his phaser, as did Mears even as she screamed, "Mr. Spock!" They fired under the boulder simultaneously. The tentacles lifted Carstairs right off the ground, then dropped him. The scientist did not move.

The leading group moved back quickly, but by the time they reached Carstairs the action was over. They bent over the fallen man, who was gasping noisily. Before they could do anything, however, he managed to draw a deep breath and sat up.

"Just... winded," he gasped.

He scrambled to his feet, and they crossed to the boulder to see what had attacked him.

It was like a creature out of a nightmare, an amalgam of octopus, sea anemone and insectivorous plant, the tentacles only two out of a countless number ringing a gaping maw that seemed to lead directly into an insatiable stomach.

"Most unpleasant," Spock commented.

Mears shivered.

"It's strange, though," Reynolds was saying. "I was behind and saw quite clearly. The Yeoman was closer to it, yet it reached past her for Carstairs. And it didn't try to catch either her or me while he was trying to pull free, although it certainly has enough tentacles to have tried it."

"Maybe it just doesn't like red," Bayliss suggested in an effort to lighten everyone's mood.

"You could be correct, Mr. Bayliss," Spock said slowly. "As I recall, all the attacks that have been made on us have been directed at the scientific staff - the personnel wearing blue. It is possible that the creatures living at these levels are not aware of red. There are precedents from other planets, including Earth."

They carried on, the Humans casting nervous glances at the terrain around them. Where there was one of those creatures, it seemed possible there would be more. However, they passed out of the region of broken ground without further incident.

Spock called a halt soon after. His condition, having remained

static for some time, was worsening. A tight band was constricting his chest, and he was having increased difficulty in breathing without showing signs of distress. There was little point in telling the others; they could do nothing to assist him. Even the antibiotic was finished now, apart from one dose that he had insisted should be kept for an emergency.

To provide a reason for the halt, Spock took out his communicator.

"We may have gained enough altitude now," he said. Privately, he doubted it. "Spock to Enterprise... Spock to Enterprise..."

"They will still be there, won't they, Mr. Spock?" Mears asked.

Spock knew what was in her mind. "Yes, Yeoman, they will still be there," he replied. "On this occasion, there is nothing to take them away."

"But they won't search indefinitely, will they?" she persisted.

"They will search for as long as there is any hope at all of finding us alive," Spock answered confidently, privately certain that Kirk would not give up the search even after that. Kirk would continue until he found their bodies - but he chose not to say that, for it would sound too emotional.

They resumed their steady plod upwards after a short rest. Vegetation began to thicken again, becoming a knee-high carpet of wide bladed leaves, each on its own stalk. Once more it was difficult to see where they were stepping.

It was the unfortunate Yeoman who encountered the next hazard. As she had already pointed out, the uniform that Starfleet provided for its female personnel was most impractical for landing party duties; where the men were able to brush through the plants with no ill effects, Mears soon found that she had acquired several unwanted passengers in the form of leech-like creatures that clung to her legs. Fortunately, they pulled off fairly easily, but each one left an itchy spot where it had been clinging to her.

Although they were sympathetic the men could do nothing to help her; as time went on, Spock began to get rather worried about these parasites. It was getting late, and they would soon have to stop for the night - but if they stopped in this region where these creatures were so plentiful, all would be attacked by them as they slept, and might even be drained of blood before the morning. It was not a pleasant prospect. None of the other regions through which they had passed had been extensive, however; with luck they might get clear before dark.

Shortly before Spock estimated they would have to stop for the night they passed out of the region of wide bladed plants and back into a region of moss. Mears stopped to pull the last of the parasites from her legs and throw them back among the plants where they lived. Then they headed on, trying to put a reasonable amount of distance between themselves and the creatures before they had to stop.

They finished the cactus-like plants they had gathered and settled down for the night. Exhaustion was making them all sleep now, despite the cold; even Spock accepted his juniors' succour now without demur, glad of the heat from their bodies.

In the morning it was clear that Mears was far from well. They checked her as well as they could with the scanner in the medikit, but even Spock, with his greater knowledge of medical matters, could make no positive diagnosis. There were signs that the girl, too, was developing a respiratory infection, but there was more than that, and he suspected some poison in the saliva of the leeches was responsible. It took only a moment's consideration for him to decide to give her the last dose of antibiotic - it might arrest the infection and give her a better chance to fight the poison.

Spock allowed them all a drink, then indicated that they should go on. Mears struggled gamely on in spite of her growing weakness, but the men all knew it was only a matter of time before she would be unable to walk any further. *At least, Spock thought, Mears is the lightest member of the party, and carrying her will be less of a drain on the rest of us.*

They passed into a region where the very rocks looked strange, interlaced with coral-like growths. Spock checked them curiously and realised that they were similar in structure to Terran coral, each tube of the structure housing a polyp. Waving antennae protruded from one tube. A large insect was caught in the draught from them and was drawn towards the sedentary redator. When it was close enough the insect disappeared, caught by the delicate-looking feelers. Fascinating! Such polyps existed on a dozen worlds, but Spock had never heard of any that were not underwater dwellers.

Visibility was improving slowly - slowly but noticeably. They must be gaining altitude quite rapidly. There were more birds about now, too, larger flocks than before, but still flying as one, with a precision of manoeuvre that was eye-catching.

Mears was coughing badly now. Spock called a halt and allowed them all another drink before taking out his communicator again.

"Spock to Enterprise... Spock to Enterprise..."

On the Enterprise Uhura swung round from her console, jubilation in her voice. "Word from the Galileo, Captain - they are in communicator contact with Mr. Spock." Kirk heaved a sigh of relief. McCoy, hovering on the bridge as usual, gripped his shoulder, and Kirk knew that the doctor shared his relief.

There was a short pause, then Uhura activated the main screen. Spock's face looked out at them.

"Captain, I have to report that six of the original landing party are safe. Dr. Andersen was unfortunately killed when the shuttle crashed. Please inform Dr. McCoy that we will require a decompression chamber on our return to the Enterprise, and that Yeoman Mears and I will require medical attention."

"What's wrong, Spock?" McCoy asked sharply.

"Miss Mears has a mild respiratory infection and was badly bitten about the legs by creatures resembling leeches. I have a Vulcan respiratory infection that could become serious if it is not treated quickly."

McCoy glanced down at Kirk, and looked quickly away from the renewed worry on the Captain's face. "I'll be ready for you,

Spock."

Kirk strode into sickbay to stop by Spock's bed. The Vulcan looked up at him pleadingly.

"Yes, Mr. Spock?"

"Captain, can't you persuade Dr. McCoy to let me return to my own quarters?"

McCoy glanced over from his office door. "There's gratitude for you, Jim! It's not forty-eight hours since he told me he would need medical attention - actually told me - and now that he's had it he can't get away from me quickly enough!"

Kirk grinned. "Could he go back to his own quarters, Bones?"

"Not until that cough clears up - and don't try telling me it's just residual and doesn't mean anything, Spock. You know better than I do what that infection of yours could mean." McCoy's head vanished back inside his office.

Kirk looked down at his First Officer sympathetically. "He's right, you know," he said softly.

Spock's eyes gleamed with a touch of humour. "Yes, Jim, I know," he replied equally softly. "But you don't expect me to tell him so, do you?"

Kirk grinned broadly. "No, I guess not." He sat on the edge of Spock's bed. "Care to tell me all that happened?"

"You have already received reports from the other members of the landing party, Captain," Spock replied evasively.

"Yes, but you were in charge. I want to know how things looked to you. Especially since I have to put in a report on that pergium, which we still haven't surveyed."

Spock sighed in resignation. "My first recommendation would be pressurised domes to live and work in - for comfort and for protection from the damp conditions and indigenous fauna... Jim, can't it wait for another day or two? I'm still not feeling well."

Kirk had the admission he wanted. He took Spock's hand and pressed it gently. "All right, Spock. Just you rest."

The ghost of a smile touched the Vulcan's lips. Then he closed his eyes peacefully and slept.

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THE KORVAN INCIDENT

by

Sheila Clark

Although Starships are the main exploratory ships of the Federation, Starfleet also has a number of survey/research vessels whose primary function is to make preliminary investigations of planets which the better-equipped starships then follow up. Sometimes an ill-advised first contact has unfortunate or worrying results, however, for the Starship crew that has to make second contact.

Korvan was a Class M planet with a culture that, while apparently still highly civilised, existed on a fairly simplistic level. The people were, in the main, farmers, and although several fairly sizeable ruined cities showed conclusively that at one time the planet had had a reasonable industrialised culture, the only crafts that were now pursued were weaving, carving, and some simple craftwork using such metals and semi-precious stones as could be found without mining activity. Gold, panned from mountain streams, was the most commonly worked metal. Sensor scans, though, showed the presence of dilithium - not an uncommon substance, but rare enough to generate considerable Federation interest in a world that had a good stock of it.

The Captain of the scout ship that discovered Korvan made contact when sensors detected the dilithium. The natives, friendly at first, became suddenly - not hostile exactly - but unenthusiastic when he mentioned trading. They were not interested in trading and preferred to be left in peace. Their world provided them with all that they needed and they wanted nothing. Balked, the scout ship departed and its captain reported to Starfleet Command; not the triumphant report he had hoped to give, but a more subdued, apologetic one.

Starfleet Command did not waste time in recriminations; the man had done his best. Instead, the records were checked to discover which Starship was nearest, and the Enterprise was assigned to make a second contact, and try to arrange for the planetary head of government to at least meet with an official Federation representative. There was too much of a chance of the Klingons finding Korvan and exploiting it to allow the Korvans to forget that a substance on their planet was of value to more technological cultures.

Kirk savoured his first sip of Saurian brandy appreciatively.

"Where do you get it from, Bones?" he asked. "Somehow, you always seem to have the best brandy available. I buy the same brand - but it's different, and I don't know why."

McCoy chuckled. "Maybe it's the joy of drinking someone else's that adds flavour," he teased.

Kirk grinned. "In that case, Scotty's should taste better too,

and it doesn't."

"Then it must be the pure alcohol I add to it to eke it out - two parts spirit to one part brandy. Three bottles for the price of one."

"Now that's the miserly country doctor speaking..."

"Sure, it was my granddaddy taught me how to do it without being found out."

They laughed companionably. Kirk sipped again, knowing he wasn't going to get a straight answer, and leaned back with a sigh.

"It's good to be able to relax occasionally."

"No reason why you can't do it more often."

"Oh, I don't do too badly. As long as I have you to laugh with sometimes, and Spock to play chess with two or three evenings a week, I really don't do too badly."

"So what's worrying you right now?"

Kirk made a face. "I'm not looking forward to visiting Korvan. Yes, I know our standing orders - 'seek out new life, new civilisations' - but they don't say anything about sorting out messes that a half-trained survey crew has made!"

McCoy gave him a searching look. "You're not usually so intolerant."

"I know, Bones." He sounded contrite. "I know, the crews are well trained, but they're not qualified to handle first contacts. They're meant to observe inhabited planets and report their findings to Starfleet. Only too many of their Captains think they know what they're doing and make contact anyway. Usually they get away with it - often enough for Starfleet to accept the odd boob as the luck of the draw. But... I dunno, Bones, I've got a feeling deep down in my gut that this is going to be one of those occasions."

"Now that's being silly," McCoy protested. "Time enough to start getting premonitions of trouble when we actually get there and meet the people."

"That's what I keep telling myself. Then I remember how little we were actually told about the first contact - just the bare fact that it had been made, but the natives weren't keen to trade. That tells me that the survey Captain somehow managed to botch it - we weren't even told who it was." Kirk sighed. "What's really wrong, I suppose, is that I'm not keen on these diplomatic missions. I don't like carrying Ambassadors and High Commissioners around, but I sure wish they'd sent one with us this time."

"What you're really scared of is that you'll do so well in diplomacy that Starfleet promotes you away from the Enterprise to be a High Commissioner yourself," McCoy said cheerfully.

"That's not funny," Kirk replied, almost sharply. "Sorry, Bones - but a purely diplomatic career is my idea of hell."

"I've often thought that diplomats had to be slightly insane," McCoy answered. "Otherwise they'd either not be diplomats or they'd

carry out their duties more directly, and cut out the deviousness."

"Now that would never do," Kirk protested. "If they did that, they'd carry out their duties too efficiently and work themselves out of a job."

McCoy refilled the glasses. "Vulcan certainly seems to be the only planet that doesn't have a top-heavy diplomatic service," he admitted. "And don't you dare tell Spock I said so!"

"Logic has its uses, huh?"

McCoy grinned. "If the Vulcans would only admit to the positive emotions," he said, "like love and laughter. They could ignore the negative ones - hatred, envy, jealousy - as much as they liked. We'd all be better off without those."

"They all stem from insecurity," Kirk said thoughtfully.

McCoy nodded. "And they all make everyone involved very unhappy. We can't even be sure of what causes insecurity," he added. "'External forces acting and reacting with heredity', they told us at a psychology lecture... And yet two children in the same family, brought up apparently identically, can be so different... One can end up as self-confident as they come, while the other is crammed as full of insecurities as it's possible to be. That's why Spock clings so hard to being Vulcan and maintaining Vulcan habits, you know. It gives him something positive to hang onto, to help him overcome his insecurity. And that's why I tease him so much - trying to let him see that he doesn't need that support any more."

"You think Spock feels insecure?"

"Dammit, how could he be anything else? With Humans calling him cold and unfeeling and Vulcans calling him emotional, he never could have known where he stood when he was young. His father demanded one hell of a lot from him; and while he had the intelligence, the ability to cope... I've no doubt that Sarek was never satisfied, and made no allowances at all for his Human reactions, which must have shown up quite a lot when he was a child, before he learned to control them. He probably lay awake at night wondering how he was going to manage, if he was going to live up to his father's expectations the next day... He probably got into the habit of reminding himself 'I am Vulcan...' to help him overcome those Human reactions... and never got out of it."

"And he's still afraid of letting the Human in him show... "

"He's learned to unbend a bit with you, although most Humans wouldn't realise that he was unbending... And I'm teaching him another kind of reaction, and he's responding pretty well. Sarek never did understand my crack about the teddy bear, but Amanda did - and so did Spock. I laid myself wide open, and he picked it up neat as anything."

Kirk grinned reminiscently. "And how!"

"I don't know how much it helped him - if at all - but... I don't care how good a face he put on it, Sarek's behaviour must have hurt like hell, and scoring that one over me just then - well, it must have done something for his confidence."

Kirk nodded. "And then being able to let Sarek see how well he

could cope with command... "

"The whole incident did help him quite a bit. His psychological profile steadied fractionally after it."

"Did it?"

"Mm. I didn't think it possible either, but it did."

"As if he didn't quite believe he was competent, despite his reputation, until he'd shown Sarek he was?"

"Looks like it." McCoy filled the glasses again.

"I think so. Spock's proved he's a competent officer and Sarek can see how highly he's respected... They seemed to be fully reconciled, as far as I could see, and while I don't pretend to understand Vulcans all that well, Amanda must and she seemed happy about it. I don't think Spock has any family worries now."

"Good." Kirk yawned. "Think I'll hit the sack."

"How're you feeling?"

"Just a bit sleepy."

"Sure? That stab wound wouldn't be bothering you by any chance?"

"No, it isn't."

McCoy looked suspicious.

"Bones, it's been over a month! Of course I'm fit again!"

"I'll believe you... Go on, off to bed!"

Despite Kirk's fears, the Korvans agreed willingly enough to meet him, provided he limited his party to not more than six persons. He considered the composition of his landing party carefully. McCoy, of course; a yeoman to record the talks and any agreement that they might manage to reach; one or more security guards to add dignity - something Kirk didn't normally bother about, but he had a feeling that there it might lend a degree of formality that the Korvans would appreciate.

Spock?

He wanted to include Spock, but would the Vulcan's alien appearance hinder the success of the talks? Or would the fact that his party included someone who was obviously of a different race encourage the Korvans? It might...

He would take Spock, he decided.

They were met by the President of Korvan, flanked by two aides, and supported by a dozen officials. Beside the simple, unassuming garments of the Presidential party, Starfleet's dress uniforms appeared gaudy, almost garish, and Kirk realised that they might

have done better to wear standard uniform. They were very definitely over dressed, but it couldn't be helped. Formality would have to be maintained, and the book clearly specified dress uniform for meetings of this nature.

To Kirk's surprise, the meeting took place in the open air. Chairs were placed round a large table on a raised platform, even for the honour guards whose chief purpose was clearly unsuspected. The Korvans clearly imagined that the two guards were simply minor members of Kirk's entourage.

Kirk stated the Federation's case simply and clearly, and gave a warning, as strongly worded as was consistent with his role, of the danger to Korvan from the Klingons.

The subject was debated at length. At too great a length, Kirk decided. A cold wind was blowing, and he blinked as grit was blown into his eyes. He managed to blink them clear without being too obvious about it, and out of the corner of his eye he saw one of the guards doing the same.

It eventually transpired that President Varnan himself, his aides and eight of the officials favoured their government's forming an alliance with the Federation, and trading their dilithium for items not produced on the planet. Their only stipulation was that the mining activities should cause as little damage to the environment as possible, and any damage so caused should be repaired before the miners left the area. This Kirk could agree to immediately and cheerfully, knowing that it was standard Federation procedure, and thereby discovered that that had been the obstacle preventing earlier agreements. The scout captain had been hesitant about it.

The other four officials were unenthusiastic, although of the four, only one - Herdar - seemed to be actively opposed, the general tenor of his words being that it would be foolish to believe the strangers on their bare promise to conserve the countryside.

"If you distrust us on sight, how can we give proof of our good intentions? Surely the time to distrust us is after we prove untrustworthy," Spock suggested evenly.

"That would be too late to undo the damage you had done," was the uncompromising reply.

Kirk sighed inwardly. It looked as if this meeting was going to last quite a bit longer than would be comfortable. He shivered again as the wind gusted sharply, once more driving dust against their faces. Automatically, he closed his eyes until the flurry of dust was past, then opened them again to see Varnan blinking uncomfortably.

That might speed him up, Kirk thought with near-malicious intensity, aware even as he formulated the thought that Varnan wasn't the hold up. He was probably as frustrated by Herdar's opposition as Kirk himself.

"Our visitor is right, Herdar," Varnan said firmly. "It would not be just to accuse the Federation of untrustworthiness when we know nothing of them. Let us permit mining to begin in one area, say in the most barren region where this mineral is found, so that any damage to the environment would be of less importance than in a more fertile area, and judge from that whether they can be trusted

or not."

There was a general murmur of agreement, the one man, Herdar, being the only dissenting voice, the other three seemingly quite satisfied with Varnan's compromise. When he realised that he stood alone, Herdar said grudgingly, "Very well. I accept the will of the majority. But let the initial agreement also be for a short time only."

Varnan glanced at Kirk, who nodded. "I sympathise with Mr. Herdar's views," he said, "and although I know that he has nothing to fear, I accept his caution. Let the initial agreement, then, stand for one year, and be reviewed one month before its end. The Federation would have the rights to mine in one desert area during that year, keeping the disturbance to the environment to a minimum."

"Agreed," Varnan said.

He clapped his hands, and after a moment a servant came up with a tray of drinks. He took them round the party; first Kirk, then the President, then the others in turn.

Varnan raised his glass. "To our friendship."

"To our friendship," Kirk repeated. They drank the toast, even Spock accepting the need, on this occasion, to do so, although he barely moistened his lips with the liquor.

The meeting immediately became more informal. Even the hostile Herdar seemed resigned now to his defeat, and spoke cheerfully to McCoy, who shortly found himself deep in a discussion of medical techniques. Herdar, it seemed, was a doctor also, and mention of some of the Federation's medical technology seemed to do a great deal to reconcile the man to his political defeat.

The drinks were replenished. Kirk drew a deep breath; a glance showed him that Spock shared his weary resignation, even though he was sure that no-one but himself could recognise it. If these diplomatic talks were boring, the socialising was even worse! He turned slightly to avoid having more dust blown into his face by the gusting wind.

"We would be honoured if you would attend a dinner tonight to celebrate our union with the Federation," Varnan was saying.

"Thank you." There was no other courteous answer possible, and Kirk bade a regretful farewell to the relaxed evening he had hoped to spend. "We would be very happy to attend. What time will we join you?"

"About seven, our time."

"We'll be there. Now, if you will excuse us, we must return to our ship. I must report to my superiors."

"Yes, of course, Captain Kirk."

Kirk flicked open his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise. Landing party ready to beam up."

"Acknowledged, sir."

Kirk tossed back the last of his second drink. As he replaced

the glass on the table, the landing party began to shimmer into invisibility.

Kirk materialised gasping for breath. He clutched at his throat, choking. Attracted by the sound, McCoy looked towards him, and sprang into action. It took him a second to realise that Kirk was not, as he had first thought, simply choking through having swallowed the last of his wine the wrong way. Spock, watching, came to the same conclusion almost simultaneously.

"I'll bring him, Doctor." Spock swung Kirk up into his arms.

By the time they reached sickbay, Kirk's breathing was extremely laboured. He breathed in little moaning gasps, his face twisted in agony. Spock laid him quickly but gently on the examination table, and stepped back to make way for McCoy, looking up at the diagnostic panel as he did so.

Even to his inexperienced eye the readings looked bad. McCoy drew his breath in sharply and moved fast. Within seconds, Kirk was on full life support.

"What is it?" Spock asked as McCoy straightened for a moment.

"I don't know. His blood pressure's down, yet his pulse rate has speeded tremendously. It's feeble, though. His rib muscles are partially paralysed, so he's having problems breathing. Without life support, I doubt he'd manage. And the pain... Spock, he's in agony. But I daren't give him a sedative."

The Vulcan looked down at Kirk's sweat-beaded face. "Not even when he's on full life support?"

"Not even with full life support," McCoy said gloomily. "The paralysis..."

Spock's lips tightened fractionally. "What caused it?"

"How can I know yet?" McCoy snapped. Kirk blinked up painfully as the surgeon took a skilful blood sample and gave it to Nurse Chapel.

"Bones..." It was an almost voiceless gasp.

"Be quiet. Don't try to talk, Jim."

"The dinner... Spock..."

"I'll go down," Spock said quietly.

"Be... careful..." They could barely hear him.

Spock and McCoy looked at each other sharply. "You think there was treachery?" McCoy asked disbelievingly.

"Seems... likely..."

"Herdar? But the man's a doctor, Jim. He wouldn't - he couldn't!"

"A doctor would have the knowledge," Spock said evenly. "And he did take his defeat... rather more philosophically than I would have expected. Although I cannot see how he could choose his

victim. It seemed that we had a free choice of glass, and there was no other way that poison could have been administered."

Kirk managed to nod.

McCoy looked from one to the other. "All right, I'll pump out your stomach, Jim, and get the contents analysed." He turned for the requisite equipment.

The analysis turned up nothing. There was nothing - nothing at all - in the contents of Kirk's stomach that shouldn't have been there. Wearily, McCoy sighed; Spock looked at him a little uncertainly.

"It would appear that we were mistaken in considering the possibility of poison," Spock admitted.

"Not necessarily," McCoy replied. "There are certain poisons that dissipate very quickly and leave no trace." He sounded subdued. "The fact that I found nothing... doesn't automatically mean that there was nothing. It just means I have nothing to go on. I'm working in the dark, Spock... And if I guess wrong..."

Spock nodded. It would have been Human to say something completely meaningless and unnecessary, like 'Do your best,' - but Spock was not Human, and he refrained. For once, McCoy was grateful for Vulcan reticence. Instead, Spock merely said, "I must prepare for tonight's dinner." He managed to give the final word an intonation that made it sound positively indecent.

Despite his concern, McCoy couldn't help but smile. But he, also, chose not to say the obvious. Instead, he said quietly, "Be careful."

Spock nodded again. "Very careful," he said.

When Spock contacted the planet, however, he discovered that the situation there was far from peaceful. No-one quite knew what was happening. Varnan and two of his supporters had collapsed just after the Enterprise's landing party had left. All were seriously ill, and nobody knew what was wrong, although poison was suspected. Herdar and the other three opponents of the union were under arrest, accused of attempted murder, but all four insisted that they were innocent.

Inquiry produced the information that the symptoms - pain, breathlessness, rapid pulse - were identical to Kirk's.

"Captain Kirk is suffering from the same affliction," Spock told the aide who had answered him. "Our doctor can find no evidence of poison." A thought occurred to him. "Do you have life support systems in your hospital?"

"What is that?"

If they didn't know what life support was, they didn't have it. "Then perhaps we should bring President Varnan aboard the Enterprise," Spock suggested. "Also the other two victims. Their physicians may accompany them, of course. Our facilities are at

your disposal."

"Thank you," the aide replied. "I shall inform the physicians of your offer. I'm sure they will welcome your assistance."

Spock sat pondering matters for a while before returning to sickbay, during which time Varnan and his two companions had been transferred to the Enterprise and placed on total life support.

As the Vulcan entered, McCoy glanced over from his position at the bedside of the Korvan President.

"We got them just in time," he said. "They'll live, on full life support... I've never seen anything like this before. Yet... It runs in my mind that I should know what caused it. The symptoms... they're not familiar. I know I've never encountered this... ailment... before. It's as if someone told me about these symptoms... I've thought and thought, but I just can't remember. Perhaps if you were to link with me... "

"Negative, Doctor. Even if the knowledge was there, since you have forgotten it so thoroughly, a simple mind meld would be insufficient to detect it. If you could remember any detail, even of the circumstances in which you had heard of it, I would have some chance of tracing the memory. Otherwise, I could search your subconscious mind for months and still fail to discover anything useful."

"I probably heard it during training. We were told a lot of odd, rare symptoms from time to time - normally prefixed by 'You're not likely to encounter this, but - '. I won't say we didn't listen to them... but we had so much to remember that was applicable that something we were told we weren't likely to need didn't make much of an impression."

"That is not sufficient to help."

"I know."

Spock sighed. "I think I will see if I can speak to Herdar and his friends. It might prove informative."

"Spock, I can't believe Herdar had anything to do with this. Dammit, the man's a doctor!"

"So you said already. But Doctor, much would depend on how strongly he felt against the trade link. When a man's deepest principles are at stake, lesser ones, no matter what they may be, are automatically superseded."

"Spock, the saving of life is a doctor's deepest principle."

"It certainly should be... but in this instance, we have no other suspect. Doctor, I do not say that I believe Herdar to be guilty; merely that he, and only he, had cause to wish this treaty defeated - as the deaths of the agreeing leaders would surely do - and the professional knowledge of how to cause those deaths. If he himself was condemned and died also - why, martyrdom is no hardship to the staunch believers in any cause - indeed, it is frequently welcomed."

"I know." McCoy's shoulders drooped wearily.

Spock had little difficulty in arranging to see the prisoners; indeed, the prison authorities seemed quite glad that someone was taking the responsibility for doing something. There were no precedents for the arrest and questioning of an important member of the Government.

The three prisoners were being kept together in what was clearly a 'holding area' rather than a proper cell. It was comfortably furnished and, except for the bars on the window and the locked door, it could have been a hotel room.

Spock stood for a minute just inside the door looking at the man who stood, simply staring back at him. Finally, Herdar said quietly, in an almost-defeated voice, "Do you also believe us guilty, Mr. Spock?"

"There is no proof that you are," Spock replied. "However, neither is there any proof that you are not, and therein lies the problem. I must admit that I cannot see what opportunity you had. Even to poison some of the glasses - you had no certainty that others would not take the safe ones, leaving only poisoned ones for yourselves. No, I do not think it logical that you are guilty."

"We are not," Herdar replied. "I do not agree with the Council's decision, but now it has been made. What would I gain by killing those who made it?"

"The rescinding of the decision, perhaps, if the new Council members thought as you do regarding it."

Herdar shook his head. "I have heard that this might happen on other worlds - but not here. Here, once the decision has been made, it cannot be altered."

"So you would have no motive either, save revenge."

"Revenge? What purpose would that serve?"

"None," Spock agreed. He was silent for a moment, and then continued. "Herdar, you are a healer of this world. Do you know this ailment?"

"I know only that Varnan, Shevar and Merran are ill, to the danger of their lives - and their ailment has not been diagnosed."

"Not only those three - Captain Kirk is also affected."

"What!" The Korvan's shock could not have been simulated. A quick glance showed Spock that the other Korvans also looked completely shocked.

"You did not know?"

Herdar shook his head. "How ill is he?"

"Dr. McCoy has him - and the other three - on total life support. Without that, all four would be dead by now."

Herdar sank down onto his chair, shaking his head. "Will they recover?"

"We do not know." Spock looked keenly at him. "Herdar - the symptoms are extreme pain; paralysis; the blood pressure has dropped

alarmingly; the pulse is feeble and very rapid. They would be unable to breathe if the machines were not breathing for them. Do those symptoms mean anything to you?"

"Strange... A man was brought to me some weeks ago who had such symptoms. He... died. I could find no reason. From what his friends said, he had been with them constantly for several days, eating and drinking with them. The only external mark on his body was a rash on the sole of one foot - but I could discover nothing that might have caused it. He seemed perfectly healthy. No hostile micro-organism in his blood, no disease germs... "

"I see. Who was this man? His business?"

"He was a shellfish collector. They go out in small boats and dive in shallow water for shellfish, working their way along the coast for perhaps ten miles. At night they camp on the beach, then work their way back. It's not an easy life, but shellfish fetch good prices in the market. A boat with a crew of six can make enough from one trip to keep them for several weeks. They go out about once a month, on average - and not more than two boats operate on any given stretch of coast, to prevent over-fishing. This man collapsed in camp the night before they were due back from a fishing trip."

"Interesting. I wonder if there could be any connection."

"Mr. Spock, what connection could there be between a shellfish collector going about his trade and a group of Government officials - and an alien? Forgive my choice of word, but your Captain is of a race alien to here."

"I know." Spock spoke calmly. "We already know of one link - their illness."

"There couldn't be any common cause of that. Even if Varnan and the other two had eaten of shellfish the dead man caught, your Captain did not."

"True. Have you considered wind-borne bacteria?"

"Wind-borne...?"

"The wind was blowing strongly during our meeting."

"Then why were we all not affected?" Herdar demanded.

"Natural immunity, perhaps; in any epidemic, there are those who are immune," Spock pointed out.

"Do you really think that is the explanation?" Herdar asked.

"Not necessarily. I merely suggest it as a possibility," Spock said. "Thank you, sir. You have given me food for thought." He turned to the door, and rapped on it. It was immediately opened for him.

He thanked the chief of the prison staff and returned to the Enterprise, his mind working furiously.

His first stop was sickbay. Although he knew that it would have been reported to him immediately on his materialisation if there was any major change in Kirk's condition, he worried all the

way over what he would find when he got there. It was almost a relief to discover that there was no change in the condition of the sick man. Spock stood for some minutes looking down at Kirk's ravaged face, knowing that his Captain was only vaguely aware that he was there, but was comforted by his presence just the same. Beside him, McCoy's stance indicated utter defeat.

"You have made no progress, Doctor?"

"No," McCoy said flatly.

"I think I might have a... 'lead', I believe is the word. According to Herdar, a fisherman was recently affected with these symptoms. If I could have a word with the man's colleagues, it might prove helpful."

Although he knew that he must, it was far from easy leaving Kirk's side.

Spock beamed down to the harbour area and went in search of the dead fisher's crewmates. These proved easy to find; they were working on their boat, clearly preparing for a trip.

The fishing boat's Captain was fairly young, as indeed were all the men in the crew. Diving, even in relatively shallow water, was no task for the elderly, and two of the crew were little more than boys.

Spock explained why he was there, pointing out that if he could discover the cause of the ailment, it might be of some advantage to the other fishers.

Bernal shook his head. "There is little to tell. It was on our last night in camp. We went seeking driftwood for our fire, as we always do. Veslar cried out suddenly as if something had pained him - by the time we reached him, he had collapsed, gasping for breath. We abandoned camp and brought him straight in to Healer Herdar, but as you know, he died soon after. His son - " Bernal indicated the younger boy - "now sails with us."

"Will you show me where this camp was?" Spock asked.

"We should go in the opposite direction this time," Bernal said.

"To prevent over-fishing," Spock agreed. "Yes, sir, I know. But if you do this, and take me to the camp, you can sail in the opposite direction thereafter. It would mean lengthening your trip by two days, or cutting the distance slightly, but it might help me to learn what killed your friend - which, in turn, might help to protect the rest of you, and the crews of other fishing boats."

"You think we might also be in danger? But the President - and the other Government officials - never go near the shore."

"The first man known to be affected did; and on the day the President was struck down, there was a strong wind blowing from the sea - strong enough to be carrying grit."

Bernal swallowed. "Very well," he said. "We will do as you ask. We sail with the tide - soon now."

"I am ready."

Ready or not, Spock was far from happy as he boarded the little boat. Although he could swim well, it was a skill he had learned at the Academy; a skill for which there was little need on his dry, near-desert world. He did not feel comfortable in the presence of so much water, and the boat seemed a very frail object when he looked at the jagged, tooth-like rocks projecting from the sea.

The trip was not of long duration, however. They sailed only about three miles before Bernal turned the little boat's nose in towards the shore, to where a strip of sand offered smooth beaching.

Bernal led Spock up the sandy beach to some yards above the line of debris that marked the high tide line; debris that consisted of seaweed, small shells and some pieces of wood, with none of the less-organic remains found on the shore line of most 'civilised' planets.

A circle of large stones, smoke-blackened, showed that this was where, by tradition, the fishers built their fire.

"Some went that way to gather wood, some in this direction," Bernal explained. "Veslar went along here."

He led the way along the sand. He was nearly at the rocks that rimmed the beach before he stopped. "Veslar collapsed here."

Spock examined the ground carefully. A dull, transparent film of something caught his immediate attention. It stirred a faint memory; somewhere, on another shore, he had seen something similar.

"What is that?" he asked, pointing.

Bernal bent to study it. "I don't know," he said, sounding very puzzled. He reached out to touch it.

Sharply, memory connected. "Wait! Don't touch it!"

Bernal looked up. Spock said slowly, "I think... this could be what killed your friend."

"That? But whatever it is, it's dead."

"There is a sea creature - on another world - that is, apparently, almost helpless. It floats with the tide, as the ocean currents take it, and can barely direct its course. If the tide washes it up on the shore, it is helpless... and when the tide goes out, it dries up and dies. The dried-up body... looks very much like this."

"If it is helpless - "

"Helpless only to move more than approximately where it wants to, slowly and with much effort. However, it has long tentacles, to catch the tiny fish that it eats - and those tentacles carry a poison strong enough to kill a man - even when the creature is dead."

"There is no creature like that in our seas," Bernal protested.

Spock looked pointedly at the remains, and Bernal qualified his statement. "I have collected shellfish for over twenty years, and I

have never seen any such creature. Nor have any of our brotherhood - that I swear. There is no record of such anywhere in our annals."

"Wait." Spock took out his communicator. "Spock to Enterprise. Put me through to Dr. McCoy."

"McCoy here." The surgeon sounded unutterably tired.

"Doctor, does the word 'jellyfish' remind you of anything?"

"'Jellyfish'? Oh, God, yes..." The pain in his voice filled Spock with horror.

"What is wrong, Doctor?"

"Spock, there's no known antidote for virulent jellyfish poisoning - only alleviants that I can't use. They're applied externally to the weal to ease the pain. If Jim and the others have been given a poison based on jellyfish venom, there's nothing I can do!"

"Nothing?" An icy hand seemed to grip Spock's heart.

"Not if it was taken internally."

With an effort, Spock forced himself to speak evenly. "I suspect that it was accidentally ingested, Doctor, in the form of wind-carried dust. There is a dead jellyfish here - very dessicated. The tentacles must have fragmented into dust weeks ago. Is there nothing at all that you can do?"

"All I can do is keep them alive. Eventually the effects wear off and then they should be O.K. But if the dose they got was too large... the strain on the heart could still kill them."

The relief was almost too much for his control. "I would doubt that it was very large. There seems to be only the remains of one creature here. Spock out."

As he returned the communicator to his belt, the Vulcan turned to Bernal. "You are certain there is no mention of creatures such as this in any of your traditions?"

"Quite certain," Bernal replied. "There are many dangers for shellfish collectors; a creature such as you described, no matter how uncommon, would certainly be included, had it even been encountered."

"Hmmm."

"Though there is one thing..." Bernal hesitated.

"Yes?"

"You say that creatures like this one move with the ocean currents."

"Yes."

"For some reason - we do not know why - the currents have altered in the last two years. A warm off-shore current has moved much closer to the land. It has affected the habits of the shellfish - not much, but enough that we can see it..."

"How close has the current moved?"

"From just beyond the range of the regular fishing boats to the edge of the shellfish collectors' ground. The fishing boats have had to move further north - large fish do not frequent the warmer currents."

"Will you take me out to the regular fishing grounds? I know that you do not normally go there, but you will not be fishing, just helping me to prove what killed your friend."

Spock had to fight back fear as the little boat headed away from the shore. The sea seemed such a very big place... Even the members of the crew looked uneasy as the shore receded, for normally they sailed within less than a mile of it. The land was little more than a smudge on the horizon, when one of the crew shouted, "Look!"

The water around them seemed filled with near-transparent shapes. Long tentacles rayed the water below and around each. Bernal gasped.

"So many... and yet we ever heard of them before... "

"Have you any way of knowing the regular fishers' list of dangers? Spock asked.

"It is much the same as ours," Bernal replied. "They do not know this creature either, I'm sure."

Spock nodded. "On the world I'm thinking of, the most poisonous of this kind of creature frequents warmer water. Here, too; normally, it probably lives too far from land to be seen. But the currents have changed; it is being carried close to land."

"Too close," Bernal said.

"Yes," Spock agreed. "Until the current shifts back to its normal position, you must be careful, very watchful."

"Watchful indeed," Bernal replied. "Do you wish to see more?"

"No," Spock replied. "I think we have seen enough. Take us back to land - and thank you for your assistance."

"We should be the ones to thank you," Bernal answered as he swung the boat around. "Without your knowledge, more men might have died before we discovered why... "

"Your comrade's death was not wasted," Spock said quietly, hearing the grief in Bernal's voice. Once he would not have recognised the emotion, he reflected, but years of close association with Humans had taught him much. "It served to show you of a new danger in your waters, and through you, all the fisherfolk of Korvan. No, his death was not wasted."

The hall was a hubbub of satisfied noise; voices talking, individually low but en masse rather loud; forks clattered busily against plates. The dozen Starfleet dress uniforms stood out quite distinctly against the muted pastels and greys of Korvan evening

wear.

Finally, as the meal finished, Varnan stood.

"Friends," he said clearly. "We are gathered here to celebrate our newly formed alliance with the United Federation of Planets, as represented by Captain Kirk of the USS Enterprise and his crew. We are particularly grateful to them for the help they gave us during the recent illness of myself and two other Government officials. Although tied to us by nothing more than a temporary trade agreement, they not only gave us the advantage of their medical knowledge, but also discovered the cause of our illness."

As Varnan paused, Spock threw a grateful glance at Kirk, aware that only his friend's appeal had kept Varnan from embarrassing him by a public acknowledgement of the part that he had played. Kirk's eyes smiled warmly back at him.

"I think there can be little doubt," Varnan went on, "that the agreement will be extended when the time comes. And now, let the celebration begin."

Kirk managed to escape fairly quickly thereafter, pleading tiredness. Spock left with him, shamelessly leaving McCoy and the others to do their duty in a situation that all of them thoroughly disliked.

In his cabin, Kirk leaned back in his chair and smiled over at his friend. "Come on, Spock," he said happily. "A game of chess is much more fun than all that socialising. Or don't you think so?"

Spock's face lightened into his near-smile. "Much more enjoyable, Jim," he said emphatically.

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