

SOMETHING

HIDDEN

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SOMETHING HIDDEN

The Vulcan youth looked at the application form he had just completed. Long and complicated, it included many questions the purpose of which was obscure; questions that seemed meaningless, illogical, irrelevant. Of what interest was it to anyone but himself what hobbies he pursued? It was perhaps necessary to say that he had no brothers or sisters, or to give his parents' ages - not that he was sure of his mother's age, for she didn't know for certain herself, coming as she did from a planet with a different length of year; she had never bothered to compute the Vulcan equivalent of her Terran age, for she didn't think it mattered - though why it should be necessary to put it in the form, he couldn't think. However, he had endeavoured to answer all the questions as fully as possible, even the ones he considered the most stupid, for this was a form applying for entry to Starfleet, the elite of the Federation; and his greatest desire in life was to become a Starfleet Science Officer...even, perhaps, to attain the almost unthinkable heights of serving aboard a Starship. He still cherished memories of the day when his school class had been taken aboard the U.S.S. Farragut and shown round her. He had had to be literally pulled away from the Science Department, he was so fascinated by the array of beautiful instruments and machines at the Science Officer's disposal. He had experienced emotion that day, even though he was sure he had hidden it so that no one saw - his schoolmates would have been quick to mock him if they had seen. Not envy, he decided, even now unsure of how to label his reaction of that day. No, not envy...something more complicated than that, but surely not so undesirable...the longing to have these instruments, so much finer than the best his school could produce, to work with...

That was the day that he had first decided what career he wanted to follow. If only life was as easy as making that decision had been! For his father wanted him to join the Vulcan Science Academy. They were at least agreed on one thing, Spock thought; they were both decided that he should follow a scientific career.

He hadn't yet told Sarek that he wanted to join Starfleet; he was waiting for a suitable opportunity, for he knew that Sarek would not willingly agree. Sarek, he knew, would take a great deal of persuading...if indeed he listened at all. It was not customary for a Vulcan son to choose his own career, or to oppose his father's wishes in the matter...indeed, in any matter. Even Sarek had been subject to his father for long years after his marriage to Amanda. As a boy, Spock had sometimes wondered how Sarek had ever found the courage to tell his father he intended marrying a Terran, until he discovered that Sarek had presented his father with a fait accompli - a young wife, already pregnant, unlikely as the Vulcan/Terran genetic cross had appeared to be. Only later had he discovered details - the mating fever, eased by the young human girl, daughter of a diplomatic colleague, the Vulcan ethos that made the marriage necessary because of the mental closeness caused by the mating. His parents were fortunate that he survived; a later pregnancy had had to be terminated to save Amanda's life - there was no way that the unborn child could have been saved. Thereafter, she could not conceive again. He had been bitter about it; only six, he was already subject to mockery and taunts from his schoolmates - his Human blood was cause enough for accusations of emotionalism to be thrown at him, rightly or wrongly; he had desperately wanted someone to share his apartness; a brother of the same mixed blood. But his brother had died unborn, killed by antibodies that he had started in his mother's blood...

He dragged his mind away from the unwelcome memory and studied the form again. Everything filled in correctly - even his mother's age, approximated by himself - everything except the date...

Carefully, he put the form away. He still had several weeks before the closing day for applications for this year, several weeks to try to persuade Sarek. He could, of course, apply and present Sarek with a fait accompli; but he didn't want to do that. It would disturb his mother too much. He had only once seen her cry - and it was not an experience he wanted to repeat.

The opportunity he was seeking didn't come for two or three days. However, he was reasonably satisfied; he had thought he might have to wait a lot longer, perhaps even broach the subject at an inauspicious moment in order to deal with it before the closing date.

Sarek stared at him with as open a display of amazement as Spock had ever seen him show, but no anger.

"Starfleet? Spock, you cannot be serious. Oh, I have nothing against Starfleet; its ships do much good, and scientific knowledge has increased greatly because of its exploration. But there are occasions when Starships are compelled to use force in order to keep the peace; if only because there is not the time, nor a trained diplomat present, to find a non-violent solution. If they would only agree to including a trained diplomat on every ship!... Spock, surely your Human blood is not so strong that you would accept being present when there is violence, or willingly serve with those who would kill other sentient beings? Even your mother, Human though she is, detests violence."

"Father, I thought of this. I weighed the good Starfleet does against this. I believe the balance is for good."

"Perhaps. But the violence cannot be forgotten."

"I considered also the many opportunities for scientific research that would - will - be open to me on a Starfleet vessel. I remember the instruments I saw on the Farragut - vastly superior to any I have ever seen on Vulcan. To have such at my command - what I could not discover!"

"Spock - I ask you to consider again, Do you think you will be assigned to a Starship? Is that what attracts you? Your chances of such a promotion are slight. Vulcans advance slowly in Starfleet, I have learned. We are not considered 'Good Officer material', because of our love of peace. You would be assigned first of all to a small research or survey vessel, and would be left there for years, running all the risks, never heard of, getting little credit; have you so little regard for our name? In the Science Academy, you would advance according to your abilities. And the Science Academy gathers data from all over the Galaxy, not just from one ship and the limited technology one ship can cover. I think you will find the instruments at the Science Academy the equal of any you saw on the Farragut - there is no expense spared to give our scientists the best. I am convinced that you would find the Academy much more rewarding professionally..."

But not personally, Spock thought mutinously.

"...I do not refuse you permission," Sarek went on. "But neither do I give it. This must be your decision; only remember that I will not approve of your joining Starfleet. I ask you also to think of your family, and of racial considerations. You know the circumstances that led me to marry your mother. I have not regretted it, to be sure; but her life has not been easy, and I, too, had many adjustments to make. You know the pressures that are put upon you; do you want your son to know them too? T'Pring cannot go into Starfleet with you; she has no training, nor aptitudes suitable for Starfleet. Do you want to become a bigamist, with a mate in Starfleet and a bondmate on Vulcan? That, at least, I did not have to consider; my bondmate died before I went to.

Earth. But had she not, she could have accompanied me. An ambassador's wife needs few skills. Remember too, Spock, I know what it is to live among outworlders. Even the most tolerant of them look at you askance, wondering, speculating...Even in all the years that she has been here, your mother is still regarded as an alien."

"But so am I, who was born here!" It was an anguished cry he could not hold back.

"To leave - to choose to live and work among Humans - would confirm the truth of the accusation." There was little sympathy there. "Think about it a little longer, Spock."

He was dismissed. He went to his room, to think as he had been bidden; but he didn't get peace to think. He had only been sitting in his room for a few minutes when his mother came in.

"Spock - your father told me. Oh, Spock, you can't want to leave us?" The emotion she normally kept hidden with almost Vulcan efficiency was showing fully. He hoped she wouldn't cry...

"Mother, I do not want to leave. But I have my life to consider. I know what I want to do with it..."

"Spock, believe me, it isn't easy living among aliens. Don't think your Human blood will help you; it won't, because you look Vulcan, think Vulcan, behave Vulcan. And you won't ever get the chance for promotion that Humans do. No race favours outworlders before their own people, no matter how able they are, and everyone knows that Starfleet is Human-dominated. Humans are the most chauvenistic of all races, Spock; I'm Human, I know...Spock, your father lived on Earth for several years. He knows what he's talking about. Take his advice. Forget about Starfleet. Please."

Tears were beginning to run down her face; she turned and left hurriedly, leaving Spock staring after her helplessly, more disturbed than if she'd broken down completely.

At last, he walked slowly to the drawer, and took out the Starfleet application. He read it through carefully; then, his lips set in a tight line and anguish in his eyes, he tore it across.

He was unenthusiastic about applying to enter the Vulcan Science Academy; equally unenthusiastic when his application was accepted. Sarek was complimented on his son's self-control, and accepted the compliment with equanimity, believing it to be justified. He never understood, then or later, that for Spock, the zest had gone out of life.

His contemporaries noticed a difference too. No longer did he appear to be fighting to control emotion; no longer was it relatively easy to bait him. He accepted what life offered, now, with quiet resignation; when Sevar tried to mock him, he simply stared at the youth without response. The mockery and taunts stopped that day. The game was no longer rewarding.

He became a Junior Scientist - a grade almost of apprenticeship. He rose to full Scientist with unusual rapidity - his work was accurate and efficient, even by Vulcan standards, and it, at least, was something meaningful to him. At an age when most Vulcans would have considered themselves fortunate to be promoted to full Scientist, he was further promoted, becoming Chief Scientist. He could not rise much higher.

On the day his upgrading was announced, Sarek looked triumphantly at him, permitting himself the luxury of expressing his feelings in the privacy of their house.

"Was I not correct, my son, when I advised you to forget your childhood ambition? Could you possibly have attained this rank so soon anywhere but at the Vulcan Science Academy? You have honoured our name."

Spock said nothing. No trace of elation showed on his face; for even this did not have the power to excite him.

"Have you nothing to say, Spock?"

"I am a scientist, Father. Titles mean nothing to me. All that matters is being permitted to continue with the research in hand."

"A reply worthy of my son. I am proud of you, Spock."

The larger satellite of the planet called Zaynol was close to Roche's limit; so close that it couldn't possibly be long before the gravitational stresses destroyed it, shattering its globe into millions of fragments and killing the many species of animal and plant life that lived there; for Zaynol's system was unique, in that life was possible on the satellite but could not survive in the chlorine-methane-carbon dioxide mixture that made up the planet's atmosphere.

The event itself, while not rare in the history of the Galaxy, was rare enough for scientists from all over the Federation to want to investigate it. The break-up was so imminent, however, that the Federation Council was unwilling for too many of its top scientists to run the risk of investigating the phenomenon personally. One group could go, the Council said. One group only, and that, not more than a dozen men.

The Vulcans had the best claim to be that group; not only had they first identified the satellite as being ready to disintegrate, but also, since the temperature and atmosphere were close to Vulcan norm, they could live there without added environmental protection, unlike any of the other races that clamoured to go. They readily agreed to make their findings available for the study of scientists of all other races.

The Science Academy was asked to submit a dozen names; and when they did so, they recommended Chief Scientist Spock to command the group.

Hurried meetings followed; there was little time. On Spock's suggestion, a team of technicians left immediately, while the scientists were still finalising their arrangements, to build and stock a research station on the doomed satellite, and to set up automatic recording stations on Zaynol itself, the results of which were to be relayed both to the satellite and to Vulcan itself - the moon's destruction would inevitably cause disturbances on the planet itself. The research personnel needed to gather the information to correlate it with information gathered on the moon itself, and the stations would continue to relay information to Vulcan long after the final holocaust, information that could be integrated into the over-all picture. A further recording station was set up on the smaller satellite, although it was so far distant that it was suspected that there would be little effect on it, except perhaps to let it break free from Zaynol to pursue an independent existence round the sun until it was recaptured by one of the other planets. These, at the moment, were all quite distant as well, the two nearer ones to Zaynol itself being on the far side of the sun; the effects on them would probably be non-existent, since the over-all pull of the Zaynol system wouldn't be much affected. The bulk of the satellite would remain; only its composition would be altered.

One remaining personnel problem remained to be settled. Spock had not at first considered it; Sarek brought it to his attention.

"You will, of course, be taking T'Pring," he said.

"T'Pring? I had not thought of it." Spock, never excited by anything, was always at his least enthusiastic when T'Pring was brought to his notice. Bonded together as children only seven years old, they had been given no choice in the matter, no chance of refusal. Their fathers were agreed - and even had they been consulted, neither could have passed much of an opinion; they didn't know each other, had never met before the ceremony. To the seven-year-old Spock, T'Pring had had little more reality than a puppet; thinking about it afterwards, he realised that he must have seemed much the same to her as they moved through the roles so

carefully instilled into them by their parents. But as they grew older, and were permitted to see each other occasionally - a thing many parents did not permit - her lack of what he considered to be intelligent conversation and common sense began to irritate him. The girl was a fool, an echo of her equally foolish but more dominating mother. And - shaming thought - she was that most undesirable of creatures, a woman who occasionally showed emotion. Why, Amenda, his mother, Human though she was, had better control than T'Pring! He was different enough, with his Human blood; there was speculation enough about that, there always had been. And it was hard indeed that he, having a Human mother, should be burdened with an emotional wife!

"You must think of it, Spock," Sarek said urgently. He hesitated, then went on. "Spock, the doctors who examined you all after your selection - they asked me to tell you. As your father, it is my duty. Your Human heritage has altered certain of the physiological characteristics of our race. Specifically, the characteristics associated with the onset of the...the mating urge. By Vulcan standards, you are still by far too young for the onset of Pon Farr. But you are already more than double the age at which most young Humans can first mate. The doctors believe that your Pon Farr cannot now be long delayed. T'Pring must accompany you - or you will die, your work unfinished."

"If T'Pring goes, all others who are bonded or already married must be given the opportunity to take their wives."

Sarek nodded. "Of course."

Spock sighed. "I would prefer to go without her..."

"You dare not. And indeed, Spock, you will probably find it easier to accept her presence...once your union is finalised."

Spock shook his head, almost sadly. "She has no real intelligence. It is impossible to talk to her about anything meaningful. You can discuss things with mother, and know she will make sensible contribution to the discussion. T'Pring cannot."

There was little further delay. The dozen scientists, accompanied by T'Pring and seven other wives, set off for Zaynol. The four unmarried men were all widowed, and old enough to be safely past Pon Farr - it was only the onset of the mating urge that had to be satisfied or end in death. Spock found himself envying them a little...

They arrived as the parties setting up the station and the recording installations were finishing; those men left on the ship bringing the scientists, who settled down to their studies.

One precaution had been taken - the scientists were left an emergency transmitter as well as a standard one which was used to send off the processed data. This emergency beacon was to be activated when they decided that the satellite's instability was becoming too great; and all Starships entering the area were ordered to be on the watch for this signal. Anything smaller than a Starship, it was felt, would be too small to survive the altering gravitational stresses that would be set up by the satellite's change from a single solid body to a mass of small pieces. Noone said anything about what would be done if there was not a Starship in the area...in an emergency, a ship couldn't reach them in time from Vulcan; but the time involved was too uncertain for Starfleet to assign a ship to wait. There was always too much work for Starships to do...

The scientists settled down to what, they felt sure, would be an indefinite period of fascinating study. They knew, indeed, that the research could end with their deaths; the satellite's death could occur without giving them sufficient time even to activate the beacon, even if there was a Starship nearby. But all had considered this; all had chosen to accept the assignment - in a sense, all were volunteers, willing to run this risk for the joy



of making an investigation that no other scientist would be able to duplicate for millions. And the data poured in, accumulating at an amazing rate; from the instruments on the satellite, from the planet below, and even, unlikely as it had seemed, from the distant smaller satellite. Each day's records were radioed off as soon as they were processed; seismicographic records, weather records, animal behaviour records, plant growth, all correlated.

Each day, Chief Scientist Spock made his way from one group of researchers to another, checking their results, his computer-sharp brain comparing the results with those remembered from yesterday.

Sometimes Seval, his immediate subordinate, found himself wondering if perhaps Spock wasn't rather young for his position, then the force of Spock's intellect and ability was forced once more to his notice. A strange man, Spock, he

reflected; grave beyond his years, detached, self-sufficient even by Vulcan standards, he held himself completely aloof, keeping all others at arm's length and asking for no one's company in friendship. Even T'Pol seemed to be granted little of his company - though if she was still a bondmate, rather than a mate, which seemed likely in view of his youth, that was less surprising. But he treated her more as a girl-child, barely schooled, than as a woman soon to be fully mature: almost, it seemed, he scorned her as being unfit to be his wife. Certainly, she was far from being Spock's intellectual equal - though she might, given time and more understanding treatment, develop the confidence and self-assurance that would fit her for her eventual position as matriarch of the family.

It was strange, though, that Spock, who could handle his fellow-scientists so efficiently, should have so little understanding of how to behave towards his own wife. Could it be the effect of his Human blood? And was it that same Human blood that was responsible for the sadness that showed so often in his eyes, even though it was not detectable in his thoughts? Many Vulcans would not have noticed it - but Seval was the oldest of the scientists there, and could recognise it, though the younger among them certainly would not.

Spock himself was unaware, now, of being anything other than almost wholly content. His work was fascinating, rewarding; he had indeed advanced quickly in his career - did it really matter that it was not the career he would have selected for himself? Serek was undoubtedly right; in Starfleet, his capabilities would not have been recognised and rewarded so rapidly.

And if research work was occasionally monotonous, so surely would the long voyages between planetfalls have been...and if he had been an officer on a Starship, he would have been denied the right to investigate this phenomenon...always assuming he had been fortunate enough to be assigned to a Starship, he reminded himself, resolutely refusing to acknowledge the insidious little whisper that tried to remind him that scientific investigation on a Starfleet vessel, even a small research one, would certainly be more varied, and probably sometimes be experiences as unique as this one.

He woke one morning feeling slightly disorientated, conscious of his body in a way that was unfamiliar to him. He frowned, trying to relax, and finding it extremely difficult. He was also unusually conscious of T'Pring, lying at the far side of the one-roomed hut that was their home.

Without waiting for a meal, he went out, and he was half-way through checking some results before anyone else joined him. He moved from one to the other as usual, trying to take his usual interest in his work; to his horror, he found that it was getting increasingly difficult to think properly. Finally, he found that one of his calculations didn't agree with the one presented to him. Normally, he would have asked the erring scientist to check his results; but he retained enough sense to realise that on this day, it could very easily be his own calculations that were at fault. Quickly, he rechecked; how had he come to make such a simple, basic error? But he knew why.

Sarek - the doctors - had been right! This must signify the onset of Pon Farr...well, he might as well get the unwelcome business over with.

He went out of the laboratory hut, back to his own cabin. T'Pring, busy cleaning the place, stared at him in some surprise - this was the first time he had ever come back in the middle of the day. She saw the unusual glitter in his eyes as he strode towards her, and fear dawned in her own eyes. He caught her, and the awareness of her as a female completed his loss of control. He tore the clothes from her and threw her onto her bed. She stiffened, repressing a scream as she realised in her turn what was wrong. He pulled off his own clothes, threw them aside, and flung himself on top of her.

She gasped with the pain as her taut muscles tried vainly to deny him entrance to her body. She tried again to relax, knowing that her resistance, involuntary though it was, was making the whole experience worse for her, but her body was not yet ready for this invasion of her personal privacy. She was a full-blooded Vulcan, and for her the time was not yet ripe.

He thrust deep into her with a rhythmic pressure that went on and on. After a while, he paused for a few moments, then he began again, as avidly and as mercilessly as before. Even the mind meld between them was intensified, but it brought no pleasure either, only added discomfort, for the hormones that would have responded to his need were not yet being produced by her body, and there was nothing that her mind could do to trigger them into production.

Didn't he care how unpleasant this was for her? No, a distant voice told her. The forces ruling his body did not permit him to care.

Would he never stop?

It was many hours before he gave her peace. At intervals, the uncomfortable thrusting ceased while he bit and sucked at her neck and shoulders, marking them, bruising them; while his mouth covered hers so that she could hardly breathe, his tongue forcing its way between her lips in a manner that she suspected had to be Human; and she submitted because she had no choice but to do so.

But even when the thrusting stopped, the unpleasant hardness within her body remained there, paining her, and her legs grew stiff and tired from the uncomfortable, awkward position in which she had no alternative but to hold them; and then the thrusting had begun again, getting more and more painful as her body was bruised more and more by the constant pressure.

The pauses between his assaults on her, during which he kissed and bit at her, slowly grew more prolonged; and at last he withdrew from her, and stood up.

They looked at each other, each aware that the other could not understand how they each had felt. At last, Spock said, quietly,

"Your body was not ready to accept mine."

She nodded silently, tears in her eyes.

He looked helplessly at her, trying to find something to say; but she spoke first.

"Is it always like that?"

"I do not know. I would suspect that the first time always is, however."

"But why? Surely..." Her voice trailed into silence.

"Go on."

"Is that why there must be madness? Because it hurts so much?"

"It did not hurt me," Spock replied slowly. "I think it would not have hurt you, if your body had been mature enough."

She sobbed, once, before regaining a rather precarious control, and saw the distaste in his face.

"Don't you feel anything, Spock? Ever?"

"Feel? You mean emotion, T'Pring?"

"Yes. Spock, you're half Human. Does that mean nothing?"

"I am Vulcan."

"Your mother is Human! That's why...I was glad when you were chosen for me. I was sure...I can feel emotion, Spock. I was sure you would understand, because of your Human blood. But you don't! Seval looks at me with more kindness than you do!"

"I do not understand emotion," he replied firmly, believing that he spoke the truth.

She stared at him. "Don't you feel anything for your family? Your friends?"

"My family? I respect my elders. My friends? I have none. I want none. I respect those of my colleagues who are worthy of respect. Those who, in my opinion, are not, I avoid or ignore. How else should one react?"

"Isn't there anyone you like?"

"No," Spock replied quietly. The sadness Seval had noticed showed in his eyes, but T'Pring was incapable of recognising it. There was no one...Sarek had been wrong. There was not even T'Pring.

Noone mentioned his absence, or that of T'Pring, any more than they - or he - ever mentioned a day-long absence of any colleague, unless he spoke of it first, although Spock considered it certain that everyone knew the reason for it. At least this reticence made it easier for him to face them, embarrassed as he felt about the whole episode. He plunged straight into his work next day, trying to make up for the lost time.

The days slipped past, each one adding to the sum of their knowledge of the forces that were being unleashed. Quakes, minor at first, were now a daily occurrence, each one stronger than the one before. It would soon be time to withdraw.

On the planet below, vulcanism was increasing, although it was not certain how much of that was due to the basic instability of the terrain on it had how much to the altering stability of the moon that was their base. Then the day came when their previously geologically stable world also threw up a volcano.

An earthquake split the ground open; from the crack welled lava, oozing up, sluggishly at first, from a reservoir of magma

deep, deep in the depths of the crust, oozing slowly as if unwilling to face the light and coolness on the surface. They observed from a distance, warned by the continuing tremors not to venture too close. The lava formed a river, flowing down a slight slope towards the encampment. Spock watched it, estimating its speed and direction, and came to the conclusion that even if the rate of flow increased as the new volcano gained in height, the camp was safe; the lava river would not reach it for several days, and then it would pass a little to one side of it. The only real danger would be if a new fissure opened, changing the direction of flow.

He assigned three of the scientists to watch the new volcano, recording its development, and the others went back to their duties in camp. Their eight wives were gathered there, busily attending to their domestic chores. Spock glanced round the group of women, noting with approval the calm way most of them were behaving despite the distant rumbling of the lava flow. His jaw tightened as he noticed the one who was showing most signs of distress. T'Pring was definitely looking frightened. It was no comfort to him to remember that members of other races would not recognise that she was afraid; he did. And it was shaming to him. His immediate reaction was to assign her some duty that would remove her from the presence of these other women, who would also recognise T'Pring's fear, if they had not already done so.

"T'Pring!" he exclaimed.

She went over to him. "Yes, Husband?" She fought to keep her voice steady.

It was time to go, anyway. He dared not wait much longer.

"Go to the radio hut. Activate the recall signal."

"Yes, Husband."

She turned towards the hut; he could see the relief clear in her stance, in the way she moved, and wished it had not been necessary to bring her. For a moment he considered the mating he bits of Humans, such as he knew of them. If he had inherited that from his mother, it would have been a useful attribute! To be able to mate when he wanted to, and not, as on this occasion too recently experienced, when his body decreed he must; to be able to dispense with the presence of his mate on an occasion such as this...most useful!

He sighed inwardly, and turned back to his work, putting the matter out of his mind.

T'Pring, making her way towards the radio hut, fought for self-control, her mind also a mass of warring emotions. Why did she find it so hard to control her feelings? she wondered. And why didn't Spock understand? He was half-Human. But whatever he had inherited from his mother's race, it seemed that emotion hadn't been included. Why even Seval seemed to understand; and the other women...they even admitted to sharing those fears she experienced - when their husbands weren't about. There had been several discussions among the women...private ones, during the hours when the men were busy; she had come to understand that she wasn't alone in feeling emotion; her uniqueness lay in being almost unable to control her emotions.

She choked back a sob, the habit of attempting control restraining her even though she was alone, and pushed open the door of the radio hut. It was a little stiff - had been since a fairly severe tremor had shanek the camp nearly a week ago. There was no way of loosening it, short of removing the door altogether; but they had chosen not to do that, leavind it to protect the radio equipment from the wind-blown sand that could have damaged it severely. Not that such sand-storms were frequent occurrances, although they were increasing in frequency; but it was better to take no chances.

For purely personal reasons, T'Pring was glad they had left it.

She pushed the door shut behind her, knowing that its sound as it opened would tell her in plenty time if she was to be disturbed; and allowed herself to slump tiredly.

Oh, well, soon they would be away from this benighted hole. At least one good thing would come of it; Spock, already known as a promising young scientist, would be better-known once they got back. She would have some honour as his wife. It was some compensation for that awful day that was still too fresh in her memory. Why hadn't her mother warned her it would be so dreadful?

She went over to the equipment; and flicked on the switch of the recall beacon.

Almost as if the beacon was a signal to it, the ground began to shake as soon as the switch was down. T'Pring turned and ran for the door, staggering slightly as the ground trembled under her feet. She tugged at the door. It refused to budge.

She screamed in sudden, uncontrollable terror, tugging in panic at the door with all her strength. What if the roof should fall on her? She was still screaming when the floor of the hut split right open. The communications console with the recall beacon slid into the crack.

She pressed herself desperately against the door as the ground shook again, a long tremor increasing in severity until she lost her balance and fell, still screaming, clutching violently at the air, into the void. A moment later, even as half of the hut fell in too, the crack snapped shut again, and her scream was cut off short.

This had been the worst tremor yet. The other Vulcans, even though they knew it was T'Pring screaming from the communications hut, even though they knew she would not have screamed like that unless matters had been desperate, could do nothing but lie still where the tremor had thrown them until the ground steadied again. Then they went towards the radio hut to investigate. But of course, there was nothing they could do.

They stood staring at the wreckage of the hut; at the one standing wall, held up by the roof that lay with its other side balanced against the ground; at the planks sticking up out of the ground; and they knew what had happened.

Seval glanced at Spock.

"We grieve with you, Chief Scientist," he said formally.

"We will not long survive her," Spock replied calmly. "The recall beacon has been destroyed."

As they stared at him, he added, "Even if T'Pring had time to activate it, it can only have been working for a few seconds. The chances of such a short signal being picked up are...very poor."

They returned to their work. Even though it was highly unlikely that the results they were now programming would ever reach Vulcan, it kept their minds occupied. And if rescue should come - why, it would let the Galaxy see that Vulcans did not allow the lack of any hope to defeat them. They would continue to work, regardless.

Seval felt that he would give a great deal to know just what Spock was thinking with regard to T'Pring's death. He knew that they had mated; formed the final bond. But Spock's eyes, that so often showed sadness, were veiled now, showing nothing.

And indeed, if Spock felt anything, it was relief. Relief that it should have been his wife who died, and not one of the others. They had the right to die with their men. Relief that she was no longer there, under these circumstances, to shame him with her fears. Relief that she no longer needed to be afraid. And, in a twisted way, relief that his own life was soon to end. For when he came to think of it, he really had very little that he valued that he might want to live for. The only thing he had ever

wanted, he reflected, was the one thing he had rejected all his life...friendship. For he had never met anyone to whom he felt really drawn. And he was not prepared to accept second best.

There was no great urgency about the Enterprise's mission to Epsilon Equulei.

It was actually a three-part mission, the other two parts of which were being carried out by the Excalibur and the Kongo. Three trinary star systems to be investigated, all possible data collected, and passed back to the boffins to be processed. A straightforward routine mission.

Captain James T. Kirk sat back in his command chair and yawned. These routine research missions were certainly peaceful, restful, even; but they did have a tendency to become boring. He was playing with the idea of leaving Chekov in command - good practise for the lad! - when McCoy, the Chief Medical Officer, came onto the bridge. Kirk glanced round as he heard the elevator door opening and grinned a welcome.

"Hello, Bones. How're things in your department?"

"Quiet. You wouldn't like to make a detour to some planetary system somewhere so that I could pick up some small animals or something to research?"

Kirk grinned. "Sorry, Bones," he chuckled. "There 's no place suitable along the route - unless you'd like to drop off at Lambda Pegasi and try your luck at finding something living in a chlorine-methane mixture?"

McCoy looked thoughtful. "Bacteria might," he began.

"They'd be small enough, anyway - but if you go down there, you go yourself. I'm not going anywhere near the surface of a methane planet without direct orders from Starfleet..."

McCoy chuckled with Kirk. "Coward!" he began, but was interrupted before he could say anything more by Lieutenant Uhura.

She turned from the communications console. "Captain...I just picked up a short signal on the emergency band, but it cut off after a few seconds."

"Did you get a fix on it, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir. It seemed to be coming from direction 157 mark 4."

First Officer Wood looked up from his station at the library computer. "That's about right for Lambda Pegasi, sir. There's that Vulcan research station there we were told to listen out for. They may want picked up."

"If they do, why cut the signal off?" McCoy asked reasonably.

"Maybe they were just testing their beacon."

"We'll check it out anyway," Kirk decided. "If they were just testing, I'll put a flea in someone's ear for crying 'wolf', and then put in an official report to Starfleet, complaining. Mr. Sulu - increase speed to Warp factor six."

"Warp six, sir," the helmsman acknowledged.

The Enterprise sped on through space.

Kirk, while concerned for the possible safety of the Vulcans of the research group - he wouldn't have cared, himself, to be one of them, sitting on a doomed planetoid, not knowing whether they would get off it before it exploded - did think it possible that McCoy was right; one of the scientists, a species well-known for lack of common sense, had very likely tried the beacon to see if it was working, forgetting that the signal would be picked up. Even Vulcan must have its absent-minded professors, he thought cynically. Well, if it was a false alarm, they would be gratified to have rescue arriving so fast - even if it wasn't needed. And if it was genuine...the sudden cessation in the signal looked ominous. He tried not to think of that, fixing his mind rather on the fact

that this did make a break in the monotony of the trip, which up to now had been singularly uneventful.

At last they arrived - swung into orbit around the still-extant satellite.

Wood looked up from his sensors.

"Extreme instability indicated, Captain," he said. "All that's holding it together is luck."

"So the beacon wasn't set off by accident."

"I don't think so, sir."

Kirk glanced round towards the communications console.

"Uhura?"

"I can't raise them, sir."

Something was seriously wrong..."Any sign of life, Mr. Wood?"

There was a short pause. Then -

"Several Vulcan readings, sir. At least some of the scientists are still alive."

"Give the co-ordinates to the transporter room, Mr. Wood, then take over. I'm going down."

He chose to go alone, although McCoy pleaded to be allowed to accompany him.

"No, Bones. I'm not risking anyone else." He glanced at Kyle, waiting patiently beside the control console. "Energise, Mr. Kyle."

"Energising, sir."

He materialised among a small cluster of huts...wooden huts? Now why had the Vulcans used wood for their buildings? He glanced round and saw that trees did figure prominently in the flora. He nodded to himself. They had simply used the nearest material available in bulk.

In the distance, he could see the glow of a volcano, and hear its muffled rumbling. Nearby, one of the huts had collapsed, and the material of which it had been composed was piled neatly. He walked forward, looking for the residents.

As he walked round one of the huts, two Vulcan women appeared, coming towards him. They stopped, staring with every appearance of surprise - which amazed Kirk, who had been led to believe that Vulcans never, under any circumstances, showed their feelings. He could only assume that, having given up hope, this was their reaction to hope reborn. He moved to meet them.

"James T. Kirk, commanding the U.S.S. Enterprise," he introduced himself. "We picked up a distress signal from here."

"The men are all in the laboratory," one of the women said. She glanced at her companion. "If you go for the water, T'Prell, I will take the Captain to the Chief Scientist."

T'Prell nodded and moved on; the other woman gestured.

"This way, Captain Kirk."

"Thank you, Miss...?"

"T'Par. My husband is assistant botanist here."

T'Par led him to a hut that was rather larger than the others, without wasting words on further conversation. Kirk reflected that all he had heard about Vulcan was undoubtedly true; a Human woman, under the same circumstances, would have been chattering unrestrainedly, asking for news...except that Human scientists would have been unlikely to have been accompanied by their wives. Why had the Vulcans considered it necessary to take theirs, and risk their lives unnecessarily?

She opened the hut door and he followed her in, waving aside her almost instinctive hesitation, her apparent acceptance of the fact that he would expect to precede her. After all, he was the stranger, the guest, here.

The Vulcans inside were all male. None of them seemed to possess enough curiosity to look up from their work, although they must have heard the door opening; T'Par led Kirk to where a tall Vulcan stood watching a seated one at work.

"Chief Scientist," T'Par said softly, when it became clear that Kirk was not going to speak first, nor the men look up from their work.

The standing man raised his head, his face stern. For a moment it seemed to Kirk that the Vulcan was intending to rebuke T'Par for her presumption in daring to interrupt; then he saw Kirk, and an eyebrow lifted.

"This is Captain Kirk, Chief Scientist," T'Par said. She lowered her eyes as if to apologise for her presence, and turned to go.

"Thank you," Kirk called after her, wondering at the Vulcans' lack of courtesy. They had treated her as if she barely existed.

"Captain Kirk," the scientist said. "I am Chief Scientist Spock, leader of our group at this research station."

"We received a distress call from here," Kirk said quietly. "It was cut off short; we wondered if your beacon was being tested, but decided that we dare not ignore the possibility that the call was genuine."

"It was indeed genuine," Spock replied, equally quietly. "The seismic indications are that the satellite will commence to disintegrate within the next day or so. But the beacon had only just been put into operation when a quake destroyed the radio hut...and killed the operator. I am gratified to learn that the signal, short as it was, was picked up."

"Thank my Communications Officer for that," Kirk answered, smiling. "She's a very capable young woman." It wouldn't do any harm to let the Vulcans know that Humans, at least, valued their womenfolk. He glanced round, and went on. "You certainly don't look like a group living under sentence of death."

"There was no logic in behaving in any other way," Spock said. "Even though our results were to die with us, we would at least have had the satisfaction of knowing exactly what were the course of events preceding actual disintegration. As it is, now all Federation scientists will benefit."

"Yes," Kirk said, wondering as he did if he would have had the guts to continue as the Vulcans were doing. They weren't even showing excitement over the prospect of rescue; not even the one whose work Spock had been...checking? had paused, but had continued tabulating his data as if there was no emergency.

"Well, sir," he went on, "if the satellite's destruction is as close as you say, don't you think it would be a good idea to get everyone on board the Enterprise as soon as possible?"

Slowly, almost unwillingly, Spock nodded. "Yes, Captain, I think perhaps you are right. But there are still readings coming in from our instruments here. The ones on Zaynol itself and on the further satellite, are also being automatically transmitted back to Vulcan, but these are not. It would be regrettable if the final readings were all lost."

"The Enterprise has extremely good sensors," Kirk replied. "We - I mean, you - and your men can use them to take the final readings."

"You are generous, Captain," Spock acknowledged. He looked round at his men, and raised his voice slightly. "It is time to go. Gather all your data, and come."

He led the way outside, Kirk at his heels, and glanced round again as the other scientists joined them, one by one. "Fetch your wives."

The seven whose wives still lived left the group; Spock looked at Seval.

"Storl and Smair are checking the lava flow," he said.

"I will get them, Chief Scientist." Seval left, walking rapidly.

The other men began to reappear, accompanied by their wives. The women all walked a little way behind their husbands, Kirk noticed, and wondered why; T'Pau of Vulcan was a woman, admittedly a rather elderly one, yet she was of considerable importance on her planet, and men obeyed her - and this was definitely at variance with the behaviour of the women he had seen so far here. But even as he wondered, he realised that he was unlikely ever to find out the reason for this apparent paradox.

He noticed his acquaintance T'Par arrive, and smiled at her in greeting; but he had seen enough of these peculiarly unemotional Vulcans to be unsurprised when she failed to smile in return, although a slight inclination of her head seemed to indicate an acknowledgement of his courtesy. Just behind her came his other acquaintance, T'Prell, but he didn't feel he knew her enough to make a greeting necessary. He pulled out his communicator.

"Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Wood here."

"The Vulcans here do require a pick-up, Mr. Wood. Ready to start beaming up in five minutes. Kirk out."

He replaced his communicator at his belt, fully aware that he didn't need to spell out his crew's orders. His First Officer would already be arranging for quarters to be made ready for the unexpected passengers; Uhura would already be notifying Vulcan that their research personnel were being lifted. It was very pleasant to have a completely competent crew, he reflected; and for a fleeting moment he compared his present crew with the one he had inherited on his first command, a small survey class vessel, and shuddered mentally at the comparison. Oh, he had licked them into shape, but it had taken some months, and until he had done so, he had had to specify every exact detail of what he wanted done. Though he still felt a certain sense of achievement at the way in which he had eventually welded that crew together, and he still remembered with considerable satisfaction the first time a member of that crew had managed to fulfil an order in all respects without first having it detailed.

He indicated to the Vulcans where they should stand. His first impulse had been the almost instinctive Human one to send the women up first; then he realised that it might be against Vulcan ethics to do so, and instead decided to send up three married couples. And it seemed, as the first six shimmered into invisibility, that he had made the right decision, for he could read no disapproval in the attitudes of the remaining Vulcans - for what that was worth. Though he was aware that he had indulged in some slight favouritism, for he had picked T'Par and T'Prell to go up in the first contingent.

He indicated that six more take their places. As these also vanished, Seval returned with the other two men. There were now eight of them left on the satellite; a married couple, four single men, the Chief Scientist and himself. He guessed that the Chief Scientist would expect to be left till last, and motioned the others into place.

As they also disappeared, Spock said quietly, "Captain Kirk, would you be good enough to leave me a communicating device when you return to your vessel? There are one or two machines whose results cannot be picked up on your ship's sensors, excellent though I know them to be. I will remain and communicate the readings to your ship, if you would add to your goodness by permitting Seval to receive them."

Kirk stared at the Chief Scientist with respect mixed with a little irritation.

"Sir, you are the leader of your group. That you are so although you are far from being the oldest member of the group

tells me that you must be extremely capable. You must know that if you do this, you will probably die - have you thought what a waste that would be? What a loss to Vulcan science? This may be a thing that won't be repeated for millenia, but is it worth the loss to science of your brain? Your ability?"

Spock was silent for a moment. It seemed, almost, as if he was attempting to formulate his thoughts.

"Captain...I do not intend to commit suicide. Such an act would indeed be illogical. But the importance to science of this information is unmeasurable. As much of it as is at all possible must be collected. I will call for...rescue... before it is too late."

The communicator bleeped. Kirk pulled it out.

"Kirk here."

"Standing by to beam you and the last scientist aboard, Captain." It was Scotty's voice. Kirk smiled affectionately to himself. Trust the Chief Engineer to take charge of this beam-up, as if he didn't trust Kyle!

"Continue standing by, Scotty."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk returned his attention to the Vulcan.

"Chief Scientist Spock. You will be busy. How will you know that the moment has come to call for beam-up? Will you not be too engrossed in what you are doing?"

"It...is possible," Spock conceded.

"All right, then. I'll stay here with you. You monitor the readings, and signal them to the ship. I'll watch out for the signs that tell us when to go - you can tell me what they will be?"

"Yes, I can tell you...but Captain, it is too dangerous. You are important to your vessel -"

"No more dangerous for me than it is for you. And you are as important to Vulcan, and to science, as I am to the ship." He flicked open his communicator again. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Scott here."

"Scotty, beam down a communicator. Get Lieutenant Uhura to relay communications from the Chief Scientist to Scientist Seval, and allow one of the other scientists access to the bridge sensors so that they can complete as much as possible additional fact-finding before we leave. I'll have a communicator open as well; keep the transporter beams locked onto our signals, and stand by to beam us up the moment I give the word; the Chief Scientist and I are staying here to collect additional data."

"Captain - is that wise? We don't know if the ship'll stand up to the altered gravitational stresses as the satellite breaks up; we'd be better further away."

"Go out to maximum transporter range; that'll help. And be ready to veer away as soon as we're aboard."

"But Captain...aye, sir."

A violent tremor shook the station; Kirk staggered and caught at a table to steady himself. Not long now, he thought; the tremors had been increasing in violence and frequency over the last three hours, since not long after Spock had begun his steady read-out. The Chief Scientist had continued to relay the readings regardless of these same tremors; but Kirk was beginning to feel that they dared not wait much longer. The only thing that had kept him from yelling for pick-up fully an hour ago was the Vulcan's calm - and the illogical desire to have Spock think well of him. He didn't want the Vulcan to think him a coward, he reflected, and wondered why. He listened to the quiet voice, a little hoarse now after talking non-stop for so long, and found its deep tone soothing. Another tremor shook them; Spock glanced up, his attention attracted at last.

"It's getting lively," Kirk said. Somehow he managed to speak lightly, and wondered where his courage was coming from - or his foolhardiness. Every instinct bade him get out of here.

Spock nodded. "I think we dare not remain for much longer," he agreed.

"How are the readings going?"

"They also are...getting lively," Spock said, and wondered at his choice of phrase. The Human's courage was infectious, he reflected; if he had remained here by himself, he would have given up fully an hour ago, with consequent loss of much valuable data. He did not consider himself cowardly, but as he had said, suicide was illogical. And he found himself wanting to survive. But he could not - would not - show himself as being less brave than this Starship Captain. It was not logical, but he wanted to show himself worthy of the Human's courage. He had already realised that he would like to see more of Captain Kirk once they were safely on board the ship - if the Captain could spare the time. He had little idea of the intensity of duties of such a position; and he reflected that it was the first time in his life that he had wanted the company of any one specific person. And he found himself being distracted from his immediate work by wondering why he should feel this way.

With a mental effort he returned to his monotonous readout. Another tremor shook them; Kirk lost his balance and fell, while Spock only saved himself by hanging onto the table; then, seeing that Kirk had hit his head off something as he fell and was bleeding, Spock moved to him, crawling because of the continuance of the tremors - a long series of them, gradually getting stronger.

Kirk touched his hand to his head and looked at the blood that stained his fingers as Spock reached him.

"Are you all right?" the Vulcan asked. Kirk nodded.

"A gash - nothing serious."

"We'd better go," Spock went on.

"Your data?"

"Near enough complete." He had to raise his voice. The rumbling from the ground was getting louder. "It's too dangerous to stay longer; you are hurt already, next time might be fatal. It was an earthquake like this that killed T'Pring - the ground just opened and swallowed her along with half the radio hut. It might do the same to us if we wait longer."

Kirk nodded. Courage was one thing, he reflected; foolhardiness quite another - and he was already guilty of a degree of the latter. Wisdom had dictated a retreat quite some time ago. The Vulcan was braver than he, too; often it showed greater courage to give up than to go on. He raised the communicator.

"Kirk to Enterprise. Beam us up."

The beams caught them; they dematerialised, leaving the station deserted.

Tremors shook the station for several minutes after they left; then a split, similar to the one that had swallowed T'Pring opened to one side of the encampment, but it was a deeper fissure. Much deeper. Lava welled sluggishly from it; the huts nearest caught fire, the flames leaping high. The wind, which had been rising steadily even although the two men had not been aware of it - the sound of the nearby volcano and the grinding of the almost continuous earthquakes had disguised the sound of it - caught at the flames. Sparks flew, igniting other of the huts. A herd of terrified herbivores, caught between forces they could not understand, shied away from their panic-stricken stampede close to the camp as they tried to escape from the noise and the glare of the lava, additionally frightened by the flames from the burning huts, and vanished into the distance. But there was no safety for them any where now.

The tremors increased in frequency, in strength; then, with a deafening report - had there been anyone to hear it - the satellite exploded into fragments, some fairly large, but mostly fairly small. The atmosphere vanished, dissipated immediately as the gravitational pull of the satellite decreased almost instantaneously; the flames went out, the lava cooled with frightening rapidity in the new, airless conditions. On some of the specks of rock that now littered the area lay the bodies of animals, killed instantly by the shock; on others, plants still lived - for a little while; lichens and algae for the most part. Trees and other large plants lay dying. It takes a long time for a tree to die.

On the planet below, earthquakes also shook the ground, but their effects were less noticeably spectacular. A great tidal wave dashed across the oceans of liquid methane, flooding low-lying areas of the infant continents; but since there was no life there, the damage done was virtually negligible. The distant, lesser moon lurched in its orbit as the attraction of the larger satellite altered so abruptly, but the pull from the planet was sufficient to keep it a prisoner even although its distance from its primary did increase.

The two men materialised on the Enterprise; Kirk grinned at the Vulcan, aware of a certain sense of triumph.

"You should get your ship's doctor to see to your head, Captain, as soon as possible," Spock murmured.

"It'll be all right," Kirk protested.

"Captain, I insist," Spock said.

Why should he, Kirk thought; then smiled to himself. This solicitude - and on the part of a Vulcan, too - was strangely welcome.

"I'll take you up to the bridge first," he said. "You'll be able to see the end of the satellite on the view screen as well as get the final readings on the sensors. Then I'll go and get my head seen to."

He turned to Scotty, standing at the control console.

"Are we headed away from Zaynol yet, Scotty?"

"Aye, sir. Mr. Wood ordered the change of course as soon as he knew we had you fixed in the transporter beam."

Kirk nodded. He hadn't really expected anything else. Wood was a good second-in-command. It was just a pity that, although they got on well enough together, they were not, and never could be, friends.

He shook off the momentary sense of desolation and loneliness that was so familiar to him, and turned towards the door.

"This way, sir."

On the bridge, Sorel was bent over the sensor, his face strabgely tense for a Vulcan. Kirk glanced at the viewscreen.

Under extreme magnification, it was possible to see the huge lava beds that now covered much of the doomed world. Spock moved to Sorel's side, his underling made was for him. He stared, fascinated, as the readings came in.

"Look at that!" Sulu breathed.

Spock glanced round from the sensor. Everyone - even Sorel - was staring at the screen.

It showed the globe disintegrating. Great lumps of matter seemed to be coming up at them like missiles determined to destroy them.

The Enterprise tossed wildly, caught in the altering gravitational pull. Kirk was sent flying again; Sorel landed beside him. Spock, at the library computer, grasped the edge of the console and managed to retain his position; Sulu, at the helm, struggled to regain control. Gradually, the ship steadied as the new gravitational stresses consolidated.

"In new orbit outside the asteroid belt, Captain," Sulu announced.

Kirk scrambled to his feet, then realised that Sorel was still lying there. He bent over him; Spock moved to his side.

The hurt Vulcan didn't move; Kirk glanced at Uhura.

"Lieutenant, call Dr. McCoy to the bridge."

"Aye, sir." She swung round to her console.

Spock said quietly, "Sorel is dead, Captain. His neck is broken."

Kirk stared at him, slightly shocked at the even quality in the scientist's voice. This had been one of the Chief Scientist's men; surely he cared about losing one of his men, even if he had not been particularly friendly with the man?

Spock gave no indication that he even noticed Kirk's scrutiny as he continued, "However, your doctor can now attend to your head, Captain. His trip to the bridge will not be wasted."

Kirk couldn't restrain himself. "Don't you care about your man, Chief Scientist?"

"My solicitude, or lack of it, will not aid him now, Captain," Spock said evenly.

Kirk frowned, honestly trying to understand the Vulcan's attitude. He had enough non-Terran crewmen aboard to know that different cultures reacted in different ways to the same stimuli; but none of his crew showed the apparent callousness in the face of the death of someone they knew. Nor had he ever served with a Vulcan, although he had heard of their lack of emotional display, he still had no idea as to whether this reaction was personal to the Chief Scientist or Vulcan in general.

Something of his confusion must have showed in his face, for Spock, rather to his surprise, said softly, "We Vulcans grieve for our dead; but our grief is a personal thing, Captain. We see no good reason to inflict our sorrow on others."

Spock had spoken so quietly that Kirk knew that no one else on the bridge could possibly have heard him. The realisation that the Vulcan had chosen to make him the recipient of a confidence was flattering; he replied equally quietly.

"I understand, sir. My last question was impertinent; I apologise for it."

"It is forgotten, Captain. But I took no offence; you spoke from ignorance."

The elevator door sliding open to admit McCoy was something of a relief to Kirk, who was beginning to feel slightly embarrassed by the Vulcan's honesty - an honesty, he was sure, that was rarely shown to aliens. Kirk had a feeling that Spock would have left most men thinking that he was callous; would have ignored the shocked reaction of outsiders.

McCoy moved straight to Sorel. He moved his scanner over him and looked up at Spock. "He's dead, I'm afraid," he said.

Spock nodded. "I knew, Doctor. But Captain Kirk has injured his head; it requires attention."

McCoy frowned a little at Spock's calm acceptance of the death as he turned to Kirk. "Let me see, Jim."

"It's nothing much, Bones. The Chief Scientist is being too -"

"Too nothing, Jim. When did you do this?"

"On the satellite, just before we beamed up."

"Hmm. Then why is it still bleeding?"

Kirk hesitated, unsure of the answer; Spock spoke, still quietly. "The Captain hurt his head again when he was thrown off-balance by the turbulence following the satellite's disintegration."

"I see." McCoy gave his attention to the cut, adding, "Have you a headache, Jim?"

"Not really," Kirk replied off-handedly.

"That means you do," McCoy commented drily. He knew Kirk's hatred of giving in to bodily discomfort. "Come on down to sickbay and I'll give you something for it." He glanced at Sorel's body. "Lieutenant Uhura, call sickbay and get them to send up a stretcher for -" he hesitated as he realised he didn't know the victim's name, and finished "- our casualty."

"Yes, Doctor."

"May I remain here to continue observations on the debris, Captain?" Spock asked.

"Yes, if you want," Kirk answered. "I'll be back shortly; when you're ready to go to your quarters, just tell me."

"I will, Captain." Spock bent over the sensors at the library computer, somehow looking completely at home as he did so. Wood moved from beside his station to the command chair as Kirk followed McCoy out.

In the privacy of the elevator, McCoy looked quizzically at Kirk.

"He's a queer fish, isn't he?"

"Have you ever known any Vulcans, Bones?" Kirk asked in reply.

"No...but I've heard a bit about them - and of course we had to learn a little about their basic biology before passing to practice space medicine. Some Vulcan psychology was thrown in. They don't believe in emotion. I didn't quite believe it until now. O.K., so the dead man was just one of his men - not necessarily a friend. But all good leaders feel something when one of their men dies. Only that one didn't..."

"Maybe he did but had too much pride to let it show," Kirk suggested. It was the nearest he could come to defending the Vulcan without betraying Spock's confidence.

McCoy gave a derisory grunt, then added, "But he did surprise me, just the same. After being so cold-blooded about his man dying, he was positively solicitous about you."

"I know," Kirk admitted.

"And that doesn't match up with any Vulcan behaviour pattern we were given."

"What would?" Kirk asked curiously.

"From what we were told, they're quite liable to ignore any personal injuries; so I suppose they would tend to ignore injuries in anyone else too."

Kirk was conscious of another surge of pleasure, and wondered why, even as he wondered at Spock's concern.

"Perhaps he just thinks I'm important to the ship so I must get proper treatment for even minor injuries," Kirk suggested.

"Yes, that would be within the bounds of possibility for a Vulcan's reactions," McCoy conceded.

"You know, Bones, I like him," Kirk went on as the elevator door slid open to permit them access to the corridor.

McCoy sighed. "Well, you've seen a little more of him than I have, staying down there for so long. I don't know whether I like him or not. I do know that I didn't like his reaction to his man's death."

"Sorel," Kirk said.

"Sorel, then. Now he's staying up there to keep on studying the debris. And do you know something, Jim?" he added as they turned into sickbay. "I got a list of the personnel on that research station so that I could check them all out - living down there these last few days must have been quite a strain even for Vulcans, and I wanted to get their normal readings - and there's one missing. One of the women..."

"Yes, he said something about the radio operator being killed when the beacon was destroyed - fell down a crack in the ground during an earthquake," Kirk remembered.

"Well, do you know who that woman was?" He waited a moment, then went on when he received no reply. "His wife, Jim. That's who it was. His wife. And he's up there recording data as if... as if nothing had happened!"

"He could feel that her death would be...would be wasted if he failed to gather as much data as possible," Kirk offered.

"Jim, could you behave like that if it was your wifw that had died like that?"

Kirk considered. He thought over the two or three girls he had ever been attracted to; and grunted. "No, probably not," he admitted. "But then, I'm not a Vulcan. Bones, you know different races react different ways -"

"But all other known races show grief at the death of someone close."

"Bones, you just told me that according to your lectures, Vulcans don't believe in emotion. You can't expect a Vulcan to react as we would."

"Jim, the Chief Scientist is only half Vulcan. According to his medical record, his mother is Human. You can't expect a hybrid to behave according to the normal pattern of either of his parental races."

"To have been selected as head of this particular research, he must be highly thought of on Vulcan. So he must be considered as being Vulcan. He certainly seems to think of himself as being Vulcan."

"What he thinks of himself as being and what he is aren't necessarily the same thing."

Kirk thought about the Chief Scientist for a moment. At last he said,

"Bones...wait until you've seen a little more of him before you judge him - please?"

"I don't suppose I'll see enough of him to let me form a proper opinion; he won't be that long aboard, will he?" He reached into his medical cabinet for the bottle of headache pills. "But I'll try, Jim."

"I've a feeling he might be aboard for longer than you think, Bones; unless we get orders to the contrary, we have to complete our assigned mission before we head back to Vulcan with the scientists - and there's no saying how long it'll take us. Even though it's supposed to be straightforward, a trinary system is bound to give us some surprises. And if it should turn out to have planets..."

McCoy grimaced as he handed Kirk a couple of pills. "It beats me why they don't give these jobs to the survey boys. After all, that sort of thing's meant to be their pigeon."

"We do have more facilities, Bones. A survey ship just isn't big enough to cope with the gravitational stresses in such a system, anyway. It has to be a Starship." He grinned. "Just thank your lucky star that we don't have to do the other two systems as well." He took the glass of water McCoy offered him and swallowed the pills.

"I do," McCoy assured him fervently. Then he chuckled suddenly. "Jim."

"Yes?"

"Think how Vaz will react to having these Vulcan scientists on board."

Kirk thought - and shuddered. "Bones, that's not funny."

"You think not? Personally, I'm going to enjoy watching him trying to pick a quarrel with one of them."

In spite of himself, Kirk grinned. It was true, it would be quite amusing seeing the Tellarite Science Officer, who was well-known throughout the ship for the phenomenal shortness of his temper, failing to win any response from the Vulcans. But it would also make him abominably difficult to live with - more

difficult than usual, Kirk corrected himself. Vaz was never easy to live with. Kirk knew well that Vaz was the reason for the large turn-over in staff in the science section of the ship - the only section of the ship with much in the way of turn-over. Most of the crew were more than happy to remain on the Enterprise; it was a taut ship, and a happy one - unlike one that Kirk had served aboard as an Ensign; it had been a taut ship, but a desperately unhappy one. Occasionally Kirk toyed with the notion of recommending Vaz for promotion that would take him off the Enterprise - and at the same time, make him someone else's problem. But the Tellarite was an excellent Science Officer. Kirk had no guarantee that a replacement would be half as efficient, or any easier to get on with. And it seemed too like giving up on the man, anyway. Kirk hadn't lost hope of understanding what made the Tellarite tick - not quite. But in his more pessimistic moments, he doubted if Vaz himself knew what made him tick.

Chief Scientist Spock was still bent over the sensors when Kirk returned to the bridge. Wood began to get up, but Kirk waved him back.

"Carry on, Mr. Wood." He crossed to stand beside Spock.

The Vulcan - no, correct that, he thought, half-Vulcan - seemed totally intent on what he was studying. However, he looked round after a moment, apparently becoming aware of the Captain's presence.

"Captain Kirk," he said, acknowledging the Human. His gaze drifted to the dressing on Kirk's head. "How does your head feel?"

"I think it'll stay on," Kirk replied lightly, then realised that the Vulcan probably wouldn't understand a facetious answer.

"It's fine, thanks. How is your data-collecting going?"

"Excellently, Captain. Everything appears to be settling down steadily into the new gravitational pattern."

"Then unless you want to continue monitoring for a little longer, I suggest you let someone else take over and come down to your quarters, get a meal and a rest. You've had a pretty busy day."

"You are considerate, Captain. However, we Vulcans do not feel fatigue in the way that you Humans do. I am perfectly capable of continuing for quite some time."

It was like a slap in the face. "If you prefer to continue, sir, there is no more to be said. When you are ready, I will have you guided to your quarters."

Kirk couldn't understand why he felt so hurt. The Vulcan had made a perfectly polite statement, a perfectly matter-of-fact statement. So why should he have taken it as sounding like a personal insult? A brush-off?

"I didn't say that, Captain. I said I am capable of continuing, not that I want to continue. I would be...honoured if you would direct me to my quarters."

Was the Vulcan being tactful or sincere, Kirk wondered briefly as Spock turned to accompany him into the elevator. The Captain surveyed the men on the bridge; selected the navigator.

"Mr. Chekov, continue monitoring the Lambda Pegasi system. If anything interesting does show up, call the Chief Scientist."

"Aye, sir." Chekov moved up to the sensor, bent over it.

"He's a capable officer," Kirk assured Spock as they entered the elevator. "If he reports no major change, you can be sure there's been none."

"Thank you, Captain. As I said, you are indeed considerate."

They fell silent as the elevator descended. It was one of those moments that could be very embarrassing, when neither of them could think of anything to say; and they did not know each other well enough yet to be comfortable with a silence.

Kirk broke the silence abruptly as the doors slid open. He didn't mean to sound intrusive, but even as he spoke he realized that his question must sound that way to the self-possessed Vulcan. And it must surely have been a difficult question for him to consider yet retain his self-control.

"I heard - it was your wife who died?" It was his tone that made it a question.

"Yes, Captain."

"I'm...sorry."

"These things happen." He hesitated as if considering another confidence, but if that was in fact what he was debating, he changed his mind about uttering it. Instead, he said simply, "Her death was quick, Captain. She did not suffer."

"What about Sorel? Was he married?" Apart from the two women, Kirk couldn't remember the faces clearly; he couldn't remember which men had been accompanied by woman when they beamed up.

"No," Spock replied. "He was one of the four who was not bonded."

Kirk stopped at a door. "These are your quarters, sir." He led the way in, showed the scientist the reading screen, the intercom and how to operate them. "Would you rather eat here, or will I show you the way to the mess?" he added.

"Are you also eating, Captain?"

"I think so," Kirk said. "I don't think I'll be needed on the bridge, but if I am, they'll call me."

"May I join you, then?"

"Certainly, if you want. I'll be glad of your company."

As they went, Spock said, "Do many new crewmen get lost during their first days aboard?"

Kirk chuckled. "It has been known to happen. Mostly as a result of a new man being hazed, though, rather than by accident."

"Hazed?"

"Having his leg pulled by the old hands..." He saw that Spock still didn't understand, and thought for a non-colloquial way of putting it. "Sometimes the old established crew play practical jokes on new men. It's a way of seeing what they're like. Giving them wrong directions to get somewhere is a fairly common way of doing that. We call that 'hazing' them. If they take it well - laugh it off, maybe try to play some sort of trick back - then they're accepted. If they get annoyed, they're quite likely to get jokes played on them all the time, and they never really are accepted. But men like that don't often pass the psychological tests."

"I see - I think." Spock sounded a little uncertain.

"There are exceptions, of course. My Science Officer, for example. He's a Tellarite."

"I have heard that Tellarites are best known for their extreme readiness to take offence."

"You could put it that way. Vaz is quick-tempered, even for a Tellarite. He is also very jealous of his position as Science Officer. Even though you are all civilians, he will inevitably see you as threats to his position. He will try to pick a quarrel with you - or if not you personally, with one or more of your staff.

I've never worked with a Vulcan, but I have heard a little about your race. I'm not afraid that you will take offence at what Vaz says, or that you - any of you - would argue back. But...if you would warn your people about Vaz..."

The Chief Scientist's solemn face seemed to lighten for a moment; it looked almost as if he was about to smile but had changed his mind. "I will tell them, Captain; but none of us will quarrel...Captain..."

"Yes?"

"You say he is jealous of his position. Jealousy is foreign

to Vulcans: but as I understand the meaning of the word, I thought one would be jealous of another person, not of one's work...You are speaking colloquially again?"

"Well...yes, I suppose I am. What I mean is, he's afraid that someone else will prove to be more efficient than he is at his work and replace him; or that someone will come along who knows more than he does and make him look ignorant. In actual fact, he's an excellent Science Officer; one of the best in Starfleet. I know that; so should he. But he doesn't seem able to believe it. Just why he should be so unsure of himself, I don't know, and I don't think he does; there's nothing on his psychological profile to indicate why. McCoy thinks that someone might have played a joke on him sometime that misfired; he's very thin-skinned - I mean, it's very easy to offend or insult him without meaning to."

"That must make him very difficult to live with," Spock suggested.

"Very. The junior officers find it worst -" Kirk broke off, suddenly becoming aware that he shouldn't be criticising one of his senior officers so freely in front of someone who was, to all intents, a stranger. He comforted himself by telling himself that it was simply a returned confidence, to match the one the Vulcan had made to him.

"We will be careful, Captain. I would not like to make things difficult for you with any of your officers. That would be a poor return for saving our lives." He hesitated, then added, "I do not anticipate that we will be mixing much with your crew anyway. We still have work to finish, data to correlate..."

"Sir, you may be with us for quite a while. We are on an assigned mission; I can't abandon it without direct orders. We have reported picking you up; but unless we get orders to abort our mission and take you straight to Vulcan, I must continue to Epsilon Equulei, even though there is no urgency about our work there. I don't know how long we'll be there; that depends on what we find. You will have processed all y our data long before we leave there."

"Epsilon Equulei? That is a trinary system, isn't it, Captain?"

"That's right."

"I would appreciate the opportunity to make some studies there."

"That's exactly what I mean, sir. Mr. Vaz won't like it if you do. Oh, he won't be able to stop you, he hasn't the right. All he can do is protest, and I won't uphold his objections. As far as I'm concerned, if you want to make some studies, you're more than welcome to do so. However, he will try to make life difficult for you."

"But it doesn't matter who makes scientific discoveries; the important thing is that they are made."

"Can you understand wanting the credit for discovering something?" Kirk asked.

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow, considering. "I can understand ambition," he replied at last.

"I wonder," Kirk said as they turned into the mess. He showed the Vulcan the serving hatch and waited while the galley computer producer a meal to suit Vulcan tastes - a slightly longer time than it took to produce his own, a cheese dish rather than a meat one out of deference to what he remembered of Vulcan eating habits.

As they went to a table, Kirk went on. "Define ambition."

"Why, the desire to succeed to the limit of one's abilities," Spock answered.

Kirk shook his head. "Not to most races," he said. "To most races, ambition means to rise to as important a position as possible, whether one is capable of holding it or not. For the power it gives. Oh, your definition isn't wholly wrong, many of

us are trying to succeed to the limits of our ability - but altogether too many of us are simply wanting to be important, or to seem important. To have people thinking you're clever, efficient..."

Spock looked slightly shocked. Kirk went on. "...ingenious, good at your work; to have them asking for your advice because they think you know everything..."

"But...but that's...that's illogical." Spock was so startled at the bare possibility of such behaviour in a scientist that his speech showed hesitation that Kirk was certain was completely uncharacteristic.

Kirk shrugged. "You know it; I know it. But by far too many people don't. Vaz...I wouldn't say that Vaz is so fantastically ambitious; he doesn't seem to want to be more than Science Officer on a Starship...but he does want to think that there's no one who knows more than he does..." He sighed. "If you make your own studies of Epsilon Equulei, he'll be terrified that you find something he's missed."

"He could just as easily find something we miss."

"In which case, none of you will feel aggrieved...and he will feel...triumphant."

Slowly, Spock shook his head. "Try as I may, I cannot understand such an attitude."

Kirk grinned sympathetically. "To tell you the truth, neither can I. I can only appreciate that such an attitude exists."

They ate for a few moments in silence, then Kirk went on.

"Well, let's forget about it for the moment. You will want some recreational facilities for your men?"

"We had none on the satellite, Captain. We had our work; that was enough to occupy our time."

"There, yes; but here, once you've finished sorting out your results, won't you need some facilities?"

Spock thought about it for a second. "Not really, Captain. Vulcans find it easy to supply themselves with...with what you would call entertainment. We meet to discuss things; we meditate. We can do these things in our quarters. We do not require to be where we might meet your Mr. Vaz."

"If he wants to meet you - and he will - he's quite capable of going to your quarters to do so - and pick a quarrel. You would find it more difficult to get away from him if he had esconced himself in your cabin."

"Surely he would not be so discourteous."

"Oh, yes, he would. Tellarites have very little notion of privacy, I've found. Or maybe it's just Vaz; he has none. No, what I was thinking of...do you play chess?"

"Occasionally; when I have the time and the opportunity."

"I was chess champion at the Academy; no one on the ship plays up to my standard. So I never get a game. Would you care to have a game with me, once you have time? Though I should warn you, I suspect I'm a little out of practise. I might not be up to your standard."

"Thank you, Captain. I would be honoured."

"And the rest of your men. The rec room facilities are open to them, any time they want. There are several chess sets available, and also a number of other games requiring skill rather than chance."

"I will tell them, Captain."

"Hello, Jim - Chief Scientist."

Kirk glanced round. "Hello, Bones." He looked back at Spock. "You haven't had the chance to meet our Chief Medical Officer properly, sir, have you?"

"No, Captain."

"This is Lieutenant-Commander Leonard McCoy; Bones, Chief Scientist Spock." He looked inquiringly at Spock. "I'm sorry, I don't know if you have any other title."

"No, Captain. The equivalent title on Earth might be professor; but since my qualifications are all Vulcan ones, I am not really entitled to use that term."

McCoy grinned at Spock. He had come, Kirk realised, to make an attempt to follow his request to try for understanding of the Vulcan.

"Sir, I've checked out all your men, medically, I mean. When you have time, I'd like to check you as well."

"What for, Doctor?"

"Well, you must have been subjected to considerable radiation, and there's no saying what the changing stresses might have done to upset your metabolism...Jim, I want to check you, too; you had long enough down there, with that volcano spouting away and the earthquakes, to have been affected too. All your men - and women - are perfectly fit, sir," he told Spock. "I've no reason to suspect you won't be. I'm probably worrying about nothing. But that's my job."

"I see. Very well, Doctor; when I have finished my meal, I am at your disposal."

"Thank you, sir." McCoy moved to the hatch, came back with coffee and a sandwich. "May I join you?"

"By all means, Doctor."

"Call me when you've finished with the Chief Scientist, Bones; I'll be on the bridge," Kirk put in.

"Sure, Jim."

"Captain, may I ask - how onerous are your duties?" Spock inquired.

"Mmm. It varies. Just now - not very onerous. I'm on call all the time, of course, but I don't need to be on the bridge much; so it's a good chance for the other senior officers to get the experience of being in the hot seat. Or even for some of the young men; Chekov hopes to go for Command one day - that's the one I left monitoring the Zaynol system for you. I sometimes leave him in command. It's good practise for him; and if he finds the men won't obey him properly, well, now's as good a time as any for him to find out, save him trying for a command he's not fit for. But he is a good man. He'll be a good Captain one day."

"I see. Part of your job then is training others to do the same job?"

"Yes - at least, I see it that way. I've known Captains who didn't - ones who were jealous of their positions too."

"You mean afraid to let someone else take command in case that person was better at it than the Captain himself, especially since he was less experienced?"

"Yes, Chief Scientist. That's exactly it."

"I fail to understand, however, how a person with such fears could be promoted to Captain in the first place."

"It's an interesting psychological quirk found in some people, sir," McCoy put in. "They lack self-confidence. No matter how much it is proved to them that they are able, they are still afraid that something will happen to prove otherwise. Some races are more vulnerable to this state than others. Medical science doesn't know why."

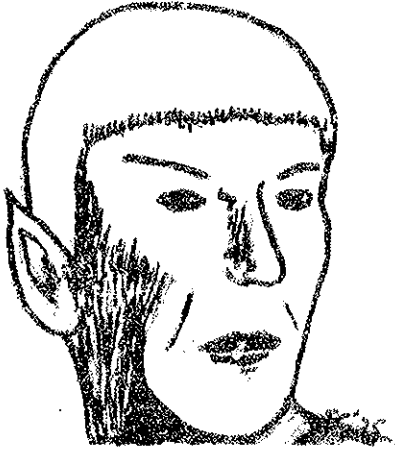
"That is not a logical attitude."

"No, it isn't," Kirk agreed.

A buried memory stirred. "Captain - isn't that one of the things Starfleet tests when one applies to join - one's degree of self-confidence?"

"Yes, you're right, Chief Scientist. McCoy could probably explain it better than I can -"

"It's difficult to explain," McCoy said as Spock looked at him. "With some people, lack of confidence only begins to show after they've attained a certain position. They're all right till they've got there - then they begin to wonder...What happens if I make a mistake? They may even have shown up all right on simulated tests - because the pressure isn't real there. There's even a term for it;



we may say they've reached their level of inefficiency; the level beyond which they are no longer capable of operating properly."

Spock looked thoughtful. "It is illogical to accept a position one is unable to fill properly," he said disapprovingly.

"Ah, but they think they can - until they're in it," McCoy replied. "And then their pride won't let them admit they can't cope. It's false pride - you could even say it's a form of cowardice - but it's a powerful motivating influence - to certain races."

"I begin to understand. But, Captain -" Spock looked at Kirk. "- this does not include your Mr. Vaz?"

"No. He just wants to think he knows everything there is to know," Kirk said.

McCoy glanced at Kirk. "You warned Mr. Spock about Vaz?"

Kirk nodded, and McCoy went on.

"We think that's his...the reason for his behaviour pattern," he told the Vulcan. "But we can't be sure. Psychological studies on Tellarites are sparse, to say the least - even sparser than on Vulcans," he added wryly.

He finished his coffee on seeing that the others were already finished and waiting for him. He pushed his cup away. "Well, Mr. Spock - will we go and get that medical over with?"

"If you feel it is really necessary, Doctor."

"I wouldn't be happy if I skipped it -"

"He means missed doing it, sir," Kirk translated.

Spock's face lightened again for a brief instant. "I believe I did grasp the gist of what he meant, Captain, thank you," he admitted. "But I would appreciate your continuing to translate your Human colloquialisms to me."

They began to move towards the door. They were barely half-way there when it opened to admit a Tellarite and a Human.

The Tellarite took three paces into the room, and stopped, staring at Spock.

"Ah, Mr. Vaz," Kirk said evenly. "Let me introduce Chief Scientist Spock, leader of the Vulcan research group we took off Lambda Pegasus. Sir, this is Lieutenant-Commander Vaz, my Science Officer, and Lieutenant Berkley, his chief assistant."

"I am honoured to make your acquaintance, Lieutenant-Commander. Yours also, Lieutenant."

"Huh!" was Vaz's reply. "I know your kind - insinuating yourself into the Captain's good books already."

Spock's eyebrows shot upwards, almost disappearing into his hairline. Berkley tried to intervene, throwing Spock an apologetic look as he did so.

"Mr. Vaz, the Captain is only being courteous towards a visitor."

"Head of the research station on that moon that disintegrated, eh?" Vaz went on. "I could have found out just as much from a standard orbit, if I'd been given the chance."

"I have no doubt you would have gathered a vast amount of data and correlated it most efficiently," Spock agreed.

Balked, Vaz went on on a slightly different tack. "Captain, I'd like to know why the Vulcans got the opportunity to



observe the break-up on the bridge sensors while I did not."

"Mr. Vaz, you've often said you prefer your own sensors in the science department," McCoy snapped. "Can you blame the Captain for taking you at your word?"

"Sir, we can compare the results the Chief Scientist obtained with the ones we did," Berkley put in. "It would make a valuable comparison."

Not for the first time, Kirk found himself admiring Berkley's self-control. He was the only assistant Vaz had had who had been able to stand him for longer than he had to; even though he seemed to spend a great deal of his time calming Vaz down. He was a capable scientist too; even Vaz admitted it. Kirk sometimes wondered what alchemy Berkley possessed that made Vaz accept him. Logically, Vaz should have seen Berkley as a threat to his position...

"I would be happy to show you our results," Spock answered. "I would be most interested to see how they compare with yours." He hesitated, but only briefly, before going on. "You can also, if you wish, see the final results we obtained from the machines on all three bodies during the final hours preceding the disintegration."

"I'm not interested!" Vaz snapped. "Berkley, if you want to waste your time checking the Vulcans' results, you can - as long as your own work doesn't suffer!" He pushed rudely past them, heading for the hatch.

Berkley hesitated, looking at the Vulcan.

"Any time you want, Lieutenant," Spock assured him.

"Thank you, sir." He glanced over at his superior officer.

"Mr. Vaz is interested, really. He just likes to pretend he doesn't care." He moved to join Vaz.

"That is the one man a board who can stand Vaz," McCoy murmured. "And he gets dog's abuse for it."

Kirk glanced sideways at Spock, ready to translate if necessary, but Spock held up his hand. "From Mr. Vaz's attitude, I gather the meaning, Captain." He spoke as quietly as McCoy.

The surgeon looked up from the notes he had been studying. "Well, sir, you seem to be in perfect health," he said. "Your current readings compare favourably with the ones taken before you left Vulcan. In fact, I'd say you're in better health now than you were then; you've lost a fractional hormone imbalance you had."

Spock's eyebrows lifted.

"May I go now?"

"Yes...think you can find your way back to your quarters?"

"Vulcans have a perfect sense of direction, Doctor. We do not readily 'get lost' - although it can happen to someone who has suffered a head injury. I understand, however, that it frequently happens to members of other races."

"Well, most of the corridors look awfully alike till you're used to them," McCoy said.

"There are subtle differences that a discerning eye can detect."

"Well, you're never likely to fall into Vaz's fault," McCoy commented. "You're too sure of yourself for words!"

"It is not logical to refuse to accept the truth," Spock replied. "It is a well-known fact that Vulcans have the keenest and most discerning eyesight of any race in the Federation."

McCoy took a deep breath, struggling for self-control. "Sir, to you that statement may seem like stating a fact; but to Humans, it makes you sound..." he tried to find a word that avoided being in any way colloquial "...conceited."

"Conceit is an emotion, Doctor. Vulcans are not capable of feeling conceit."

"I didn't say you were, I said it made you sound it," McCoy retorted. "Sir."

One eyebrow lifted. "Interesting, Doctor. Do I understand that you reject the emotion of conceit as being undesirable?"

McCoy stared at him. "Well...yes, I suppose I do. We - Humans that is - don't like conceited persons." He regained control of his too-ready temper. "We call them big-headed - or stuck-up. Neither term is complimentary."

"My knowledge of Human colloquialisms is increasing rapidly, Doctor. Thank you. And...I believe there is hope for your race yet."

Before McCoy could reply, Spock turned towards the door.

McCoy watched him go, then flicked on the intercom.

"McCoy to bridge...Jim, you can come for your check-up any time."

"O.K., Bones; on my way."

Kirk also checked out perfectly normal; he pulled his shirt back on as McCoy finished logging the fact.

"I still think Spock's a queer fish, Jim," he said abruptly.

Kirk looked a little surprised. "I thought you were starting to get on fine with him."

"I didn't say I wasn't. But I came near to losing my temper with him just now - and it wasn't really his fault."

"Oh?"

"It's a matter of different...values, I suppose. What he calls a statement of fact about Vulcans, I'd call big-headed. He's..." he hesitated.

"Chauvanistically orientated towards Vulcan?"

"Well...yes."

"I suppose most of us tend to be orientated towards the values of our own race. It's natural."

"I know it is. That's what I meant - it wasn't his fault he annoyed me. He just did. Even though - basically - I don't dislike him. Just his attitude."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know. Gone to his quarters, probably. Or maybe gone to see how his men are settling in. I asked if he knew the way back to his cabin, and he said he did."

Spock had indeed found his way back to his cabin, without any difficulty. He glanced round it, seeing it properly this time. It was a bare, not very welcoming little room; but to Spock, the bareness was not discouraging. Indeed, it was almost preferable to the clutter of hangings T'Pring had thought necessary - no, correct that, he thought charitably. The clutter of hangings she had been taught were necessary, either to rest the eye or stimulate the mind. It was not T'Pring's fault that her mother was so lacking in mental resources that she assumed everyone else was too; it was not T'Pring's fault that she had been taught to assume it too. It was, perhaps, her father's fault, a little, that he had not interfered to help his daughter...or was he content with his wife? Certainly it would have been against custom for him to have interfered; on Vulcan, a son was his father's child, a girl, her mother's, to be taught the ways of their people. He made his way through to the sleeping area, looking round approvingly. Everything that was needed was there; but there were no unnecessary trimmings. Practical.

He shivered. This was one thing he had noticed about the ship - the temperature was rather lower than he was accustomed to. It wasn't unbearably chilly - but here, in his quarters, he would prefer that one comfort. He noticed a thermostat on the wall. Yes, he could raise the temperature. He did so.

How were his men settling in? Perhaps he had better go and

see...He hesitated to bother the Captain with so slight an inquiry as to their whereabouts, but...The intercom!

He flicked it on. After all, surely the Captain wouldn't have shown him its operation, simple as it was, unless he meant him to use it?

"This is Chief Scientist Spock. Will my men report their whereabouts to me."

He had only a few seconds to wait, then the voices came, giving their room numbers. All on the same level as this one, he noted. He switched off, and went to see his men.

He found Seval first. His assistant was already - or still - buried deep in calculations, but raised his head when Spock knocked and entered. The room was comfortably warm; it seemed that Seval also had made use of the thermostat.

"How is it going?" Spock asked.

"We have data on practically everything. We lost only a few moments between the time you came on board and the actual disintegration, and what happened then can be extrapolated. There is still a vast amount of work to be done on the data; it will be many years before everything is fully integrated -"

"Our primary duty is to tabulate everything, correlated where possible; we are not required to do anything more than that. That is someone else's privilege."

"Of course, Chief Scientist. I am permitting myself to be carried away with the intoxication of our discoveries."

"Understandable. Has any fresh data been relayed from the bridge?"

"No, Chief Scientist."

"In that case, I imagine there will be no more."

"But who is monitoring? I understood Sorel died, and the remainder of our men are occupied here, in their quarters."

"One of the Enterprise's junior officers, Seval. Captain Kirk assures me, a competent observer."

Seval looked a little doubtful. Spock studied him gravely.

"Seval, do you believe that only Vulcans are competent?"

"Why, no, Chief Scientist."

"Why then do you appear to distrust this young man's efficiency?"

"I would have thought, a senior officer, for something of this importance..."

"Seval, to Captain Kirk, this event is undoubtedly of little more than passing interest, important though it may be to science. He has other things to think about; other duties to attend to. It was generous of him to think of taking any officer, even a junior one, from his other work to continue monitoring just in case there might be any change while we are still in scanner range of Zaynol."

"Yes, Chief Scientist."

"The assistant to the Science Officer on the Enterprise is wanting to compare the data his department compiled in the final hours with ours. It could be a valuable study. Who is most easily spared from his work to assist with this comparison? I do want one of our men there."

Seval frowned thoughtfully for a moment. "Sisal, Chief Scientist. He had no further data to collect once the satellite broke up, since all life on it ceased instantly on disintegration."

"Sisal, then."

"Chief Scientist."

"Yes?"

"The assistant to the Science Officer? Not the Science Officer himself?"

"That is correct, Seval. The Science Officer is a Tellarite, and most unco-operative. The Captain assures me that Mr. Vaz will attempt to pick a quarrel with our men, for no reason. I have met

Mr. Vaz, and I am convinced that the Captain is correct. He tried to quarrel with me; when I failed to respond, he turned on the Captain with a petty complaint, easily refuted. But his assistant, a Human - Lieutenant Berkley - told me that he is interested in our work, he just refuses to admit he is. It seems illogical, but who expects logic from a Tellerite? I believe that if we co-operate with Mr. Berkley, Mr. Vaz will not remain aloof. From what Captain Kirk said, Mr. Vaz does not readily accept the fact of someone knowing more about a subject than he does. So his pride will not allow him to continue to feign uninterest. He will surely want to learn as much as he can."

"I am not certain that I understand, Chief Scientist."

"What do you not understand, Seval? The fact, or the motivation?"

"His motivation, Chief Scientist."

"Nor do I, Seval; and according to Captain Kirk, neither does Mr. Vaz himself, illogical though that may sound. I have promised Captain Kirk that we will avoid quarrelling with Mr. Vaz - all you have to remember is that when he sees you, he will in all probability begin to insult you."

"For no reason?"

"For no obvious reason. We reply courteously."

"Of course, Chief Scientist."

"One other thing. Captain Kirk has made us free of the recreational facilities on the ship. Apparently there are chess sets available, some other games of skill in addition, and he says we are welcome to use them."

"Will we have the time?"

"Apparently we will. The ship is on course for Epsilon Equulei -"

"A trinary system!" Seval breathed.

"- and failing orders to return to Vulcan with us, he is continuing on his way there."

"Will we be permitted to make studies?"

"Yes."

"How long will we be there?"

"It seems that that depends on what is found. Again, Mr. Vaz apparently will not like us making independent investigations, but Captain Kirk has already said that he will not uphold Mr. Vaz's objections. We will be free to follow whatever line of investigation we choose."

Spock turned and left, leaving Seval staring after him with an expression of as near joy as a Vulcan could ever come, and made his way to the next room.

When he had seen all his men, and given Sisal his instructions for working with Berkley, as well as warning them all about Vaz and passing on the invitation for them to use the recreational facilities, he made his way back to his own quarters.

He sat down, allowing his mind to sink into the state of half-awareness that, for a Vulcan, frequently took the place of sleep. In this state, it was possible for him to think about something that normally he would have brushed aside as being irrelevant; and he often found that his thoughts during this time achieved a relevance he had not expected. Now, in privacy for the first time since leaving Zaynol's satellite - no, for the first time since leaving Vulcan; T'Pring's presence had not been intrusive, exactly, but he had been unable to forget that she was there - he had peace to allow his mind to consider...whatever it chose to consider. It was not meditation, but something that was at the same time both more than meditation and less. One thing he had learned long ago; it was an ability personal to himself. Full-blooded Vulcans lacked it. It was a benefit of his Human blood; the only benefit, he sometimes thought, remembering schoolday mockery. But it had been responsible

for several of the results he had achieved; the results that had resulted in his promotion, at such an early age, to Chief Scientist. He was grateful for it...

An interesting man, Captain Kirk...why had he offered to stay with him? And why was he being so helpful? That was not the normal behaviour pattern he had been told to expect from Humans...Why was he, himself, intending to accept the offer of a game of chess, and already anticipating seeing the Captain again? Could it be that he felt...friendship...towards him? Friendship. It was something he had never known. He had never felt the need for another person's presence; indeed, he had often regarded the presence of another person - even T'Pol, even his parents - as an intrusion on his privacy. He hoped he would give a good account of himself in the chess game - normally he played only against a computer, a completely different thing to having a live opponent. It was not necessary to win, of course; it was only necessary to play well. Strange...when the Captain had given the invitation, although he had accepted, he had really planned to make pressure of work an excuse for avoiding a match. Now he knew that, without realising it, he had changed his mind. Or had he? Had he really meant, all along, to accept the Captain's...friendship? And why had he asked to accompany the Captain at his meal? He had enjoyed the conversation...Was this friendship?

And the Doctor...he had been...not insulting, exactly, but...obliquely uncomplimentary. Yet he had not given the same offense that Vaz had done. Yes, he would like to see more of the Doctor as well...

What of Vaz? Well, Vaz was an enigma. His people were beyond the comprehension of any Vulcan. His father had met one or two Tellarite ambassadors...Gav, wasn't it...short-tempered, and not one to forget a defeat...all they could do was try to ignore Vaz's insults, reply politely, helpfully if possible, and keep out of his way as much as they could.

Would Vulcan permit the Enterprise to continue on her present course? The Vulcan High Council was very important in the Federation...perhaps they should send their tabulated results off as quickly as possible, keep nothing about Zaynol's moon here to work on; then there would be no excuse for the High Council to recall them, especially as they would be able to make further studies if they went on...it would be interesting to study a trinary system, with its complicated interplay of gravitational forces...it would be pleasant to have the extra time to see more of the Captain...

The ship was not recalled.

The Vulcans quickly settled down to life on board. They frequently mixed with the crew in the rec rooms, and several of them, following the example of their Chief Scientist, challenged Humans at chess; and before long, a Human-Vulcan chess match was in progress; one that gave every indication of being long-drawn-out, with ten men on each side, each playing the best of three games against each of the members of the other team.

Spock and Kirk watched the fraternisation contentedly. They themselves took no part in this competition, but their own personal competition had become a nightly affair, with games often lasting two or three nights. And afterwards, they developed the habit of sitting talking after most of the crew had gone, late into the ship's night. Often McCoy joined them. Their conversations ranged far and wide; they spoke of Earth, of Vulcan; of other planets they had seen. Spock felt at a disadvantage there, for he had been so seldom off Vulcan; but he soon found he enjoyed listening, hearing about the planets the others had visited. They spoke of their beliefs and philosophies, Spock with a candour that surprised himself; they discussed the philosophies found on other worlds. And occasionally, when McCoy wasn't there, Kirk and Spock would sit quietly as it grew

late, strangely unwilling to separate, in a comfortable silence.

This was friendship, Spock decided after one of these evenings, and wondered that, of all the people he had ever known, the one he should be drawn to should be a Human that he was never likely to see again. No, two Humans, for he liked McCoy's company too, and he was fairly sure that McCoy liked his - or why come and join them? He knew that Kirk and McCoy were friends, and McCoy seemed to treat him, Spock, in much the same way that he did Kirk...A Human saying he had heard once came back into his mind, unbidden. 'Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.' At the time, it had struck him as stupid; now, he understood. It would have been terrible to have missed the experience of friendship, even though they would, too soon, have to bid each other farewell. And he faced unflinchingly the thought of the loneliness that would then, again, be his.

For his part, Kirk managed to put out of his mind the fact that eventually the Vulcan would return to his own environment. At first he hadn't been too sure of how Spock felt towards him; but now he was certain that, little as it showed, the Chief Scientist thought of him as a friend. Bones, too; even though Bones often argued with Spock's point of view, it was mostly to keep a discussion going, and he was pretty sure Spock realised that too...

The gravitational pull of the triple system of Epsilon Equulei made itself felt while the ship was still well away from it.

Kirk called for a long range sensor scan. Wood examined the sensors for some minutes before he looked up.

"Captain, I think you should call Mr. Vaz to check this," he said. "There appear to be planets."

Vaz, summoned, stamped angrily onto the bridge, brushing past Spock who, as the leading Vulcan scientist aboard, had also been called to the bridge. By his attitude, Vaz made it clear that he considered it an insult to him that the Vulcan should be there at all; and Kirk reflected how right Spock had been when he refused Kirk's invitation to spend as much time as he liked on the bridge, on the grounds that it was discourteous to Vaz. At least they - or at least, Berkley - could try to placate Vaz with the perfectly correct information that this was the first time Spock had been on the bridge since they left Zaynol. Spock ignored the incident.

Vaz estimated that there were twenty-seven planets orbiting Epsilon, as well as an uncountable number of tiny planetoids too small to be considered anything but a nuisance to navigation, ranging as they did in size from several miles across to small pebbles. They did not form an asteroid belt, but were interspersed throughout the entire area controlled by Epsilon's three suns, two of which orbited each other in a period recorded as about a century, while the third moved around both very, very slowly, its period of orbit unrecorded, unmeasured by any race. The planets orbited all three apart from two whose orbits were inside that of the third sun. They were scorched cinders. The other two dozen planets also had very, very long years; it seemed unlikely that life could exist on any of them except in primitive form; for summer would be when all three suns were showing, and winter was undoubtedly when one of the suns eclipsed the other two - or even, just one of them. When that happened, the change in radiation must surely be lethal to any advanced life form that had begun to develop.

The Enterprise crept slowly closer to the system, deflector shields at maximum intensity. If one of the larger asteroids approached, they would have to destroy it with phaser fire; but Kirk hoped that they would not have to do this, even though it would be good practise for the phaser room crew as well as for Sulu or

Chekov, whichever happened to be on duty at the time. He hoped the asteroids would all stay far enough away from the ship not to endanger her at all.

Several of the planets were on the far side of the system, too far away for anything about them but their presence to be registered; but there was no reason to think that any of them would be any different to the ones on their side of the triple suns.

The outer ones were too far from their multiple primary to be anything other than lumps of frozen rock; several were gas giants. Then came the ones that could be said to be within the ecosphere, two or three of them showing signs of having water - or at least water-vapour - in their atmospheres. Closer again were the ones too hot for any life to be possible.

The ship crept closer to the triple suns. Vaz stationed himself immovably at the sensors on the bridge; Kirk knew that Lt. Berkley would have orders to monitor everything from the Science Department's sensors. There was no way that the Vulcans could make any contribution, and Kirk fumed on Spock's behalf. This was Vaz at his most petty, he considered; but Vaz was Science Officer, and in these circumstances, even Kirk could not override what Vaz considered necessary to his gathering of data. He often did use every available sensor, even though he claimed frequently that he preferred the ones in the Science Department for accuracy - Kirk couldn't even suggest to him that it was the first time he had done such a thing, so why not give the Vulcans access to one of the sensors? It must be galling for Spock; not that the Chief Scientist showed any irritation, but Kirk felt he was beginning to understand him, and he was certain that Spock must be feeling frustration.

"We must investigate the fifteenth planet!" Vaz exclaimed suddenly. "I am getting life form readings from there. Primitive ones...cold-blooded species...quite extensive. The fifteenth planet, Captain!"

Kirk glanced at Sulu. "Take us there, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye, sir."

Vaz chose Berkley to accompany him, two others of his junior staff and accepted two security guards with ill-concealed impatience. Not for the first time, Kirk found himself wondering just why Vaz seemed to trust Berkley when he seemed to trust no one else. He had never included his chief assistant in landing parties prior to Berkley's appointment, never given them any chance to show their ability...no wonder so many of them had applied for transfer. Even his junior staff got little chance to prove themselves...

Once Vaz was safely away, Kirk turned to Spock. "I'm sorry, Chief Scientist. He was just being awkward. If your men care to use the sensors until he returns, they're more than welcome to do so."

"Thank you, Captain." He glanced at Uhura. "Lieutenant, will you ask Seval to come up here, and -" he looked at Kirk. "The sensors in the Science Department, too?"

Kirk nodded. He turned back to Uhura. "- Stron and Selar to the Science laboratory."

"Yes, sir."

Spock turned his attention back to Kirk. "Will we get the opportunity to land, Captain?"

"I think so, sir. Once Mr. Vaz reports back, other landing parties can go down. There's no reason why one of these parties shouldn't be composed of your men."

There was no report from Vaz.

When his time for reporting in was five minutes past, Kirk swung round to Uhura.

"Call the landing party, Lieutenant. Whatever they've found, it's no excuse for missing a report."

"Aye, sir...Sir, there's no reply to their call-sign."

"Have you tried others in the party?"

"All of them, sir. No response."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Trouble, Captain?"

"Probably." He moved towards the elevator. "Lieutenant Uhura, tell a security detail to meet me in the transporter room at once. I'm going down. Take over, Mr. Wood."

"Aye, sir." The First Officer assumed the command chair.

Spock moved into the elevator with Kirk, as smoothly as if he had been doing it for years. "Captain, may I accompany you?"

Kirk thought about it for a moment while the elevator finished its downward trip. As the doors opened,

"I'd like to take you," he admitted. "But it will be dangerous - and I am responsible for your safety while you are on my ship. If you were hurt - I'd be blamed, and rightly so.."

"Even if I left a message to say that I accompanied you of my own choice?"

"Don't tempt me, Spock! It's impossible!"

"You did say we could go -"

"Once the first landing party reported in. But they haven't, and we can't raise them. So something's wrong. Until I know what it is, I can't let you go down."

Spock moved to join Kyle at the transporter console, a disappointed droop that he was unable to contain to his shoulders. Seeing it, Kirk suddenly realised how much it would mean to the Vulcan to be allowed to accompany him. In a way, it would be repayment for the way that Kirk had stayed with him...

"Chief Scientist -"

"Yes, Captain?"

"I shouldn't do it, but - come on!"

Spock crossed quickly to take one of the two empty stations in the transporter chamber. Kirk looked back at Kyle.

"Energise!"

It was a primeval forest. Great tree-ferns overshadowed them; giant horse-tails waved their fronds in the gentle breeze. Creepers ran along the ground, twined their way up the stems of taller plants, strangled them so that their tops wilted while off-shoots sprouted up from below the point of restriction, where there was still sap to nourish them. Underfoot was a mass of rotting vegetation; Spock bent to pick up a handful of the rich humus, and worm-like creatures dropped from it as he lifted it. They quickly burrowed their way back into the mould, out of the glare of the triple sun.

There was no sign of any other life forms; no sign of the first landing party.

"Vaz!" Kirk shouted

There was no sound, not even an echo. His call faded into deadness.

"Is it wise to make a sound, Captain?" Spock asked. "This type of environment sometimes gives rise to unpleasant carnivores; sound would attract these."

"Yes, you're right, sir," Kirk admitted, more quietly. He turned his attention to the three security men. "Spread out; be as quiet as possible. Keep your phasers set to kill, and your communicators handy. If necessary, have yourselves beamed back to the ship; you can rejoin us by beaming back to slightly different coordinates. We're looking for any sign, any sign at all, of the first landing party. Chief Scientist, you stay with me."

Spock followed him obediently as the party scattered. They moved through the forest, pushing their way through the tangle of fallen plants. It would have been impossible if the plants hadn't been soft-stemmed and half-rotten. Underfoot was wet, unpleasant.

Kirk's communicator beeped.

"Kirk here."

"Lenoir, sir. I've found something." He sounded slightly sick. "Someone's leg, sir. And a lot of blood."

Kirk grimaced. "On my way, Lenoir." He swallowed.

"Unpleasant," Spock commented evenly.

They headed back the way they had come, tracking the signal from Lenoir's communicator.

They found Lenoir and one of the other guards in a kind of clearing that looked anything but natural. All the plants that were down were rayed out from a common centre; a great swathe had been mowed through the forest, widening at this one point into a great circle.

Slightly off-centre of the circle were the remains Lenoir had mentioned. The blood was only recognisable as such by the smell, strong enough to overcome the ever-present stench of decay, and by its registered presence on the tricorder; the leg, still clad, still booted, lay bent, as if its owner had been running when he had been caught by...whatever had caught him. A flap of cloth mercifully hid the raw flesh where it had been torn from the body.

Spock surveyed the scene. He noticed an indentation in the mould, and walked over to it.

"Captain!"

Kirk crossed to join him. He was staring at a large depression in the ground.

"What -?"

"This appears to be a footprint, Captain."

Kirk studied the indentation. It was several inches deep; water lay shallowly in the bottom of it. It had the approximate shape of a footprint, right enough - but what kind of creature could have a foot large enough to leave a print fully thirty inches long, and almost as wide? A great three-toed foot...the beast must have been very large, very heavy.

Spock moved slowly forward. He went at least five yards before he stopped again.

"Here is the next one, Captain."

Kirk shivered despite the clammy heat.

"What kind of - of monstrosity could leave a trail of footprints like that?" he asked.

"On Vulcan, before there was any trace of sapient life, there was a creature that we call a do-matya. We know it from fossil remains. It was large enough to leave footprints similar to these ones. I believe there were similar creatures on your Earth - tyrannosaurus, allosaurus, gorgosaurus...These creatures lived when evolution attained the level that would be indicated by the flora here."

"How many years of evolution would be needed to give rise to such horrors?"

Spock shook his head slowly. "Who can say? On Earth, perhaps a million years. On Vulcan - perhaps three-quarters of a million, since our years are longer than yours. Here - how long is a year? These creatures can only have evolved since the planet entered its summer; when winter comes again, they will surely die, as all such creatures have done on all planets when the climate changed." He sounded almost regretful.

Kirk thought he understood why. The death of an entire species...even of a species as unlovable as this...He searched for some comment that might reconcile the Vulcan.

"There is one thing - if the year is so long, they might have time to adapt, he suggested.

Spock shook his head. "They are probably too well-adapted to their present conditions to be able to re-adapt," he replied. "The ones that will be able to survive are the small ones. It is always so."

Kirk decided to abandon the subject. He glanced over at the

three guards. The third one, who had arrived last at the scene of death, was still looking pale and shaken; a young man, on his first assignment, he had not yet had time to get used to the sometimes unpleasant nature of landing party duties. But even so, Kirk noted with approval that he was as alert as the other two. All three, slightly fanned out, were watching both directions of the 'path' that the giant creature had left.

"Any trace of a large life form near?" he asked. He was rather relieved when the reply was negative. In these footprints, he had already seen as much of the monster as he wanted.

"I think we'd better return to the ship," he said. "We've found what happened to the first landing party; I'd hate us to disappear in the same way."

"Captain, the beast is nowhere near," Spock replied. "Will you permit me to remain a little longer to make some studies? Although this is not my main interest, there is a strange fascination in actually seeing a primeval forest such as this, and being able to observe the creatures and see what they actually look like, instead of having to depend on reconstructions. The knowledge will help me to advise on such reconstructions when I return to Vulcan; as a Chief Scientist, I have duties to all branches of science."

Kirk looked at him in some frustration. He had come to respect this man's intellect; yet here, it seemed that he was as stupid and lacking in common sense as all Earth professors were reputed to be. The only sensible thing to do was to leave here and continue their investigations by means of sensors. He said so.

"I realise the danger, Captain. I do not ask anyone else to stay."

"Don't be silly - sir. I can't leave you here alone. It's more than my job's worth. If something happened to you, I'd be out on my ear almost before the court martial could convene. I shouldn't even have let you come down with me."

"I had not realised that the consequences of an accident would be so serious for you," Spock admitted. "I would not care to see you in trouble because of me. Very well, Captain, I withdraw my request."

But oddly, now that he had Spock's capitulation, Kirk chose to be contradictory. The look he gave Spock was almost mischievous.

"We'll take a chance on it. Half an hour - no more." He glanced round his men. "Keep a double sharp lookout. And remember - here, anything could be dangerous."

They began to move forward slowly, leaving the dismembered leg where it lay. There was no point in showing the rest of the crew the harrowing detail of what had happened to their crewmates. They followed the path beaten down by the great saurian. A huge insect whirred past; hovered for a moment as if examining them, then went on. Its wing span was fully a yard across.

"Larger than the biggest insect fossil so far found on Vulcan," Spock commented. "And also, I think, a little larger than the largest Earth fossil insect. The creatures here do appear to be all larger than their counterparts on either of our home worlds, Captain." He scooped up another handful of the abundant humus. More worms wriggled out and fell back to the ground, to bury themselves again as rapidly as the others had done. "See, even the worms are larger. And these grubs." The pallid grubs wriggled obscenely, trying to get away from the light; over an inch long, they were like something out of a nightmare. Spock was welcome to pick them up if he wanted to, Kirk thought; nothing would persuade him to touch them.

They went on.

The 'trees' were thinning out now, giving way to conditions that were remarkably arid, considering how wet it was underfoot in the forest.

"We are rather higher than we were," Spock commented. "The forest must be sitting in a basin with poor drainage; all the rain

water probably runs into it."

The great footprints had petered out now as they came onto drier, harder terrain. They looked round.

It was possible to see for quite a long way across the 'tree' tops; not so possible to see far in any other direction. Something flew up above the 'trees' for a moment as they watched, then plunged back into the sea of yellowish-green, a sea tinged with red highlights.

"What was that?" Kirk asked.

Spock shook his head. "It was like nothing I have ever seen before," he said quietly. "I would speculate that it was some kind of primitive bird, possibly one lacking in true flight ability but able to 'fly' by means of spasmodic efforts in order to escape from danger, much as your Terran 'flying fish' do."

Kirk moved a few yards away from the others to examine what looked like a trail of slime such as a snail might leave, a trail that was descending a slight, but noticeable gradient.

"Would you say this is a snail's track?" he asked, turning back towards Spock. As he did so, one foot came down on the gleaming line. Immediately, his foot slid from under him; his balance gone, he fell sideways onto the slime and began to slip downhill on it, unable to stop himself.

Spock moved before any of the guards had time to recover from their surprise. He ran, not towards Kirk but to a point below him; and caught at his arm as he slid past. He pulled, and Kirk slid off the slime as readily as he had been going down it. Below them, something dark moved, then subsided again. Kirk noticed the movement out of the corner of his eye.

"It's definitely not a snail's trail," he answered his own question. "It's a trap of some sort. Victims must slide right into a pair of jaws just waiting for them."

Spock turned and stared downhill. "Yes, Captain. It is difficult to see it properly; it is sitting too still, and blends in well with its surroundings. But I think it is a spider type. Unpleasant."

Kirk shuddered. "I think you just saved my life, Chief Scientist. Thank you."

They climbed back up the slope, both wondering at the speed at which Kirk had slid down it; it certainly wasn't all that steep.

"The slime must be extremely slippery," Spock said.

"It is," Kirk answered grimly.

They rejoined the guards, who were all staring down at them, forgetting the dangers that abounded in their worry about the Captain. Kirk gave them small thanks for their concern, however; he glared at them, pointedly, without saying a word. One by one they returned to their duty, checking the landscape.

"We had better go back to the Enterprise," Spock suggested.

"I was wrong, Captain; I admit it. I simply did not expect all the species here to be carnivores; logically, there should be many harmless herbivores, with the creatures like the do-matya, and that spider type, relatively rare."

"Maybe they are; maybe we've just been unlucky," Kirk commented. "We have more idea of what we're up against now; let's wait a little longer. I said half an hour; we haven't had that yet."

"No, Captain; there are still seven minutes left."

"We may find some of your herbivores among the 'trees', if we get away from the trail the monster left," Kirk went on. "It's bound to have scared them away."

Spock nodded. "Of course. It is remarkably easy to forget that creatures as stupid as these must have been, with their tiny brains, are quite likely to have a strong fear reflex."

The party moved back into the forest. They pushed their way through the jumble of fallen vegetation, shrinking from touching the

slimy, dying stems of the fallen plants. More insects whirred away from their path. Some bore a slight resemblance to species found on Earth or Vulcan, but most did not. None were brightly coloured; at first Kirk wondered about that, remembering the brightly-coloured butterflies of Earth's jungles, but he hesitated to ask Spock in case the answer should be too obvious; and eventually he reached his own conclusion. Bright colours would have been very conspicuous here, in this forest of muted green, yellow-green and brownish red, a forest in which there were no flowering plants.

Spock drew a little ahead of the others in his anxiety to see as much as possible in the short while left. Slightly to one side of him, he saw an insect-like head; he turned towards it, watching it intently. It remained unmoving, apparently unaware of his presence. Kirk watched curiously, wondering what had caught the Vulcan's attention; then he also noticed the head.

"Spock!"

The Chief Scientist stopped at the alarm in Kirk's voice, looking back.

"What is it, Captain?"

"Come back. Now!" His voice was sharp with urgency.

"But -"

"Come back!" The insect was beginning to move, to sway slightly forward. "Hurry!"

Puzzled, Spock obeyed; and the lightning fast lunge by the insect barely missed him. Kirk let out his breath in a long sigh of relief.

Spock's eyebrow lifted. "Fascinating," he breathed. "Captain, may I ask how you knew the creature was about to attack me?"

"An educated guess, Chief Scientist. I take it you have no carnivorous insects on Vulcan?"

Spock shook his head. "I have heard of such, but no, we have none."

"That one resembles a fairly well-known Earth species - so well-known that even I could identify it. A mantis. Mantises have voracious appetites, and once they catch something - well, they don't let go."

"I see." He studied the insect, but from where he was standing. Its head was fully as large as his own; and while most of the rest of it was hidden by the vegetation in which it lived, its size could be deduced from its head. It was fully big enough to consume him. "I do not believe that I would care to make its closer acquaintance, Captain."

"Neither would I. Let's get back to the Enterprise."

Aboard the Enterprise, the Vulcans had been making good use of the sensors.

They had already accumulated an amazing mass of data about the planet and had even managed to gather some facts about its nearest neighbours; though how they had managed to accomplish all that in the short time they had had, Kirk couldn't begin to guess.

"We assumed that we had only until you returned, Captain," Seval explained.

Kirk looked at him, then turned to Spock.

"Chief Scientist, Mr. Vaz is dead. So also is his second in command. The only scientists I have left on board are young and inexperienced. None of them is competent yet to direct a scientific exploration of this system - and that's why we're here. Could I prevail upon you to take Mr. Vaz's place for the time being? That way, we'd both benefit; you'd get the pleasure of collecting the data, plus a full record of it, and Starfleet would get its report." As Spock hesitated, he went on, "Your men have already made an extremely good start. And it won't be so very different from the work you were doing back there on Zaynol."

"I...do realise that, Captain. My hesitation was for...quite a different reason."

To be a Science Officer - acting Science Officer - dared he? During the years that had passed since he had abandoned that dream, he had learned contentment. What if, by doing this, he should waken the dream again?

Kirk was still waiting for his answer. What should he say? Kirk was speaking again.

"If you prefer not to take on the additional work, Chief Scientist, I won't press you. I realise that you can have very little time to take on extra responsibilities."

"The extra work is nothing, Captain; indeed, I feel quite ashamed at how little I have been doing recently. I find your offer extremely tempting. May I ask - what will Starfleet say about your choice of acting Science Officer? I am a civilian, after all. Would your superior officers not consider that the position should be given to the most senior of the surviving staff on board?"

"Is that all that's worrying you? I don't think they'll mind; you are the most capable man available. Some ships do carry civilian advisers, you know. Anyway, none of the surviving scientific staff has enough seniority to be appointed. This is the first trip for altogether too many of them. You'll have to depend on your own men for a lot of your research, I would think. Will you do it?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Thank you, sir. I would prefer it if you didn't send down any more landing parties - though if you think it absolutely necessary, I'll agree. I will make a shuttlecraft available for your use, however."

Spock nodded, his mind already occupied in considering how he should carry out these new and seductively appealing duties.

"I have no particular desire to make the closer acquaintance of the denizens of that planet," he said. He looked directly at Seval. "I want to examine the results you have obtained," he went on. "Once I have done that, I can make a decision as to whether or not a closer inspection, using a shuttlecraft, is necessary. I tend to the opinion, however, that it will be; I assume that Sisal and Spail will consider it essential to get close enough to observe the animals and plants personally, and we cannot do that without using a shuttlecraft."

Seval looked from one to the other. "May I ask why a landing is undesirable?" he asked.

"The creatures we encountered were all carnivores," Spock explained quietly. "There was evidence to indicate that the first landing party met its end at the teeth of a creature resembling a do-matya."

A momentary expression of horror showed on Seval's face - an expression instantly suppressed. Spock went on.

"In addition, there was at least one species I did not recognise, but which is similar to a species of Terran predator. Apart from a few worms and grubs - and we cannot even be certain about them - the indications are that all life forms are preying on all other life forms. For another landing party to go down would be unnecessarily hazardous."

Kirk watched Spock leave with Seval, already beginning to compose the report on the Chief Scientist that he would have to put in to Starfleet. Despite his certainty that Starfleet would rather have a highly experienced civilian as acting Science Officer than an inexperienced junior, he knew he would be reprimanded at least if his choice proved to be injudicious. And there was a world of difference between research in the laboratory, which was what Spock was used to, and research in the field. The Vulcans' experience on

Zaynol would be useful to them; and certainly Spock had begun well, going off to study the sensor reports before coming to any further decision. Kirk crossed his mental fingers, sucking absently at a small cut on his hand that was beginning to nip. He had no idea of where he had cut himself, unless it was during his involuntary slide downhill. He looked at it, wondering if it was worth bothering McCoy about such an insignificant scratch; then, remembering the bloodthirsty nature of the creatures living down there, he decided that maybe he'd better see about it. It was certainly nipping far more than such a tiny cut should. He glanced at Wood.

"Take over, Mr. Wood." He headed for the elevator.

He was halfway to sickbay when he was stopped by the intercom.

"Bridge to Captain Kirk."

He strode to the nearest intercom, punched it.

"Kirk here."

"Mr. Scott would like to see you in Engineering, Captain,"

Uhura relayed.

"On my way, Lieutenant."

Forgetting about his probably unnecessary visit to sickbay, Kirk went straight on to Engineering, wondering what the problem was. Scotty had a poor view of his ability in the Engineering line - not altogether justified, although Kirk was not, and could never be, the equal of the mechanically-minded Scot. For Scotty to call Kirk down must indicate quite an emergency.

He turned into Engineering. "What is it, Scotty?"

"Well, sir, it's nothing really serious - yet. But it'll get worse the longer we stay here."

"So what is it?"

"The ship's structure was pretty badly strained back at Zaynol, Captain," Scotty reminded him.

"I thought you had repairs well under way?"

"Aye, sir, I did. But I could only repair what I knew about. The gravitational stresses here are causing new strains. Several faults I didn't know about have made an appearance. One in particular is pretty severe. There's not much I can do about it. It needs the facilities of a Starbase. It could be fixed there in a matter of hours. But all I can do is patch it up, reduce the strain as much as possible."

"Scotty, you have to fix it. We've been sent here specifically to gather as much information as possible on this system. Because there are planets, it's going to be a longer job than it might have been. And it has to be done, Scotty. You know how long it took us to get here; we can't abandon the mission lightly. I'll bet the Vulcans tried all they could to get the mission postponed so that they could get their scientists back; if they couldn't manage it, Starfleet must consider it highly important for us to finish it."

"Aye, sir. I'll do what I can. But at best, it'll only be a temporary job. It'll still need to be re-done when we get back before we go anywhere else."

"We'll have to go back to Vulcan with the scientists," Kirk said. "We'll get it done there. We'll have to wait there for a new Science Officer, anyway."

Scotty stared at him. "A new Science Officer, sir?"

"I thought the grapevine would have had it all over the ship by now. Vaz has been killed. And Berkley. All the first landing party."

"I've been too busy down here to hear anything," Scotty explained. "What happened, sir?"

Kirk told him, as concisely as possible, adding, "The Vulcans have made a good start to compiling data; they're fast workers. Maybe we won't be as long getting the information as we might have

been."

"The quicker the better, sir."

On consideration, Kirk passed the information about the condition of the ship to Spock. He had to know they were working against time, in order to utilise that time to the best advantage.

Spock considered the matter for a few moments.

"Captain, I suggest that we leave this planet, at least temporarily, and carry out a survey of the rest of the system. There is still a great deal we can discover here, but we have already completed the preliminary investigations - that is, my colleagues have done so, augmenting the data that Mr. Vaz had already compiled. It would be a pity if no more were discovered about this world, but it would not be disastrous. We can afford to leave it for the moment. Then, if the repairs prove adequate, we can return once we have completed the compilation of data for the remainder of the system."

Kirk drew a deep, relieved breath. "Chief Scientist, you've taken a weight off my mind. I was afraid you would insist that investigating here was the most important thing to do. Vaz would have done so. You've already proved yourself a better Science Officer than he was, just by making that decision."

One eyebrow lifted, in a way that was already familiar to Kirk. The Captain went on.

"Where do you suggest we go next?"

"The most logical way to go about our task would be to study the next inner planet on this side of the sun first; then the next, and so on until we are too near the triple suns to continue in that manner. Then we take solar readings, and work outwards again on the other side of the suns, planet by planet, terminating by returning here if it is possible."

Kirk nodded. "Vaz wouldn't have thought that far ahead, either - or at least, he wouldn't have told anyone his plans for that far ahead," he commented. "He was just being awkward, of course - it was one of the things that made him so difficult to work with."

"I do not anticipate that any of the other planets will be as interesting as this one," Spock added.

The Enterprise swung inwards towards the triple sun, feeling her way from planet to planet. They moved in to the fourteenth planet...orbited it briefly. It was a lifeless, atmosphereless globe, pitted by meteors, similar to so many worlds in so many solar systems. The thirteenth planet was on the far side of the system; it would be explored later. They moved in on the twelfth.

It had a thick carbon dioxide atmosphere. Great clouds covered its sphere, hiding it from the viewing screen though not from the sensors.

"There appears to be no water or water vapour present," Seval reported from the bridge sensors.

Spock, trying to correlate several items of data, nodded as he watched the viewscreen like a hawk, intent on observing every current of air that moved the unbroken curtain of cloud.

"Any indication of life forms?" he asked.

"None, Chief Scientist."

Spock nodded.

"You didn't expect there to be any, did you?" Kirk asked, in some surprise. He raised his hand to his mouth again, sucking at the tine cut that was now getting a little inflamed.

"No, Captain, I would have been most surprised if there had been. But a scientist cannot overlook the possibility of life existing, in even such a hostile environment as that appears to be, to our eyes. One day, we might find a species to whom an oxygen atmosphere is deadly poisonous, but which regards the conditions

down there as being most inviting."

They moved on towards the eleventh planet, then the tenth, eighth, fifth. All were lumps of airless, meteor-pitted rock, none of them even showing indications of metal deposits. This was clearly a metal-light system. Kirk mentioned it idly.

"Agreed, Captain," Spock said. "The indications are that the three suns contain the major part of the metallic elements of the system."

"How much closer do you want to go?"

"The next planet should be close enough, Captain. Closer than that, and the gravitational pull of the suns might make it quite difficult for us to break away again."

The fourth planet was like its predecessors, and Kirk swung the Enterprise into an orbit round the triple suns that was very close to that of the fourth planet. They orbited the suns several times before Spock announced that they had compiled as much data as they were likely to; and then began the slow haul out again.

The sixth planet was the expected airless ball. So was the seventh. But the ninth was different. It had an oxygen-hydrogen atmosphere and an extensive area of ocean.

"Life forms, Seval?" Spock asked.

"Plant life only, Chief Scientist," Seval replied. "There are indications of low-grade animal life in the water, but no sign of sapient life - or even of pre-sapient life."

Spock glanced at Kirk. "May a landing party go down?" he asked.

Kirk nodded. "I don't see why not," he replied. "Take a couple of security guards, though, and watch out for the unexpected."

"Thank you, Captain. You do not intend to accompany us?"

Kirk shook his head. "Perhaps later, Chief Scientist." He resumed sucking the cut. It was beginning to feel quite painful, and remembering his earlier decision to take it to McCoy, he was beginning to regret being side-tracked. No, he would not go down just yet, tempting though the prospect was. He would go first and get McCoy to have a look at this intrusive little scratch. He could go down later, especially if they made a second landing...

Spock took Spail, the botanist, but left Sisal, the zoologist, on the ship along with the assistants of both. Storl and Smair, both geologists, made up the scientific complement.

Kirk waited till they had beamed down, then headed for sick-bay. This time he made it without being intercepted.

"Yes, Jim. What can I do for you?"

"It's probably nothing, Bones, but I've a cut on my hand that's getting pretty sore."

McCoy held out his hand. "Let's see it. I'll decide if it's nothing."

He checked the cut. "It's infected, all right," he said.

"You should have brought it here a while ago. When did you do it?"

"I don't know. At a guess, while we were down on the first planet."

"And how long has it been bothering you?"

"Several hours," Kirk admitted. "I was coming to see you, but I got sidetracked, and then I forgot about it. It started bothering me again about half an hour ago; that's when I decided to come and see about it."

McCoy grunted. The sound said 'Liar!', and Kirk grinned to himself. McCoy knew him too well, and invariably multiplied by at least four the symptoms that Kirk would admit to...and Kirk, knowing this, equally invariably divided the symptoms by at least six, even though he knew he couldn't fool his friend...

McCoy dusted the cut with an all-purpose antibiotic, then gave Kirk an injection. "That should hold it," he said. "But I want you to take it fairly easy, just the same. No landing party detail for you while that cut's still open. Captain. That's a medical order."

Kirk made a face. "I was thinking of going down and joining the party investigating this planet," he complained.

"No, Jim."

"But I'll have to put in a report on Spock and how he's doing his work. I can't do that if I don't see him at work. I very nearly went down with them, but..."

"I'm glad you had the sense not to. No, Jim," he added, as Kirk opened his mouth again. "I realise you'll have to make a report, but if you feel that you must include landing party work, get Wood to go. He's perfectly capable of assessing Spock's performance in the field."

"I wish I could be sure of that."

"Jim, I know you don't like Wood particularly -"

"No, Bones, it's not that. Personalities have nothing to do with this. The man knows his job, he's perfectly competent at doing it. I admit that freely. But I'm not convinced that he is able to judge a man's performance impartially. I think he's too likely to be influenced by whether or not he likes the man. Now that would operate to Spock's benefit, I admit. Wood quite likes him. And that's the trouble. I would never know if Wood's report on Spock was good because Spock was good, or if it was good because Wood happens to like Spock. Whereas, much as I like Spock, I must be sure that the report on him is an honest one. And anyway, how can I put in a report if it isn't all mine?"

"You saw him back on that other planet."

"That was a rescue party, not a scientific landing party."

"Is there that much difference?"

"There's enough difference. Besides, I was in command there. Here, he's in command. Look, Bones, if I can keep the cut covered, surely it's all right?"

"No! And don't tell me I'm being insubordinate, either. On medical matters, I'm in command."

"Bones -"

"Jim, have some sense! Look, if it had been someone else that got this cut, and I'd said 'no' to landing party duties, would you have sent that man on a landing party?"

"All right, Bones, you've made your point," Kirk said disgustedly. McCoy grinned at him.

"Never mind, Jim, you can estimate his ability in the field by the results he gets."

Kirk scowled at him for a moment, then grinned back.

The landing party materialised among sparse vegetation growing on sandy soil. The plants showed certain similarities to the ones Spock had already seen on the other planet; tree ferns and horse-tail types, but smaller, much smaller, due, undoubtedly, to the dryness of the land. Small plants hugged the ground, creeping along it by means of runners, putting down roots every so often and sending up leaves to form a new plant. Rosettes of oddly-shaped leaves grew up here and there, but as on the other world, there were no flowers and the leaves were all green or yellowish green, some of them tipped with red. There were a few barrel-shaped plants with smooth shiny stems, each with a cluster of leaves topping it like a strange, ill-fitting hat. Hills rose in front of them, tinted green by the vegetation on their slopes; behind them, the sea rippled gently against a coast-line composed of the same sand that formed the soil, a few rocks standing out starkly to provide a growing area for small weeds. In all, it was a very beautiful world, contrasting sharply with the awe-full and depraved beauty

of the other one. Spock found himself wishing that Kirk had come down to share this beauty, and pulled himself up sharply. Such thoughts were not only illogical, they smacked of the very emotion he had so deplored in T'Poling.

They spread out to explore.

The plants were all very primitive types, even although some of them appeared quite high up the evolutionary scale. Some were simply algae, although they were remarkably complicated-looking colonies that closely resembled a single plant in appearance until they were examined by tricorder. Most were vascular cryptogams. A few of these made botanist Spaul react in near excitement.

"Do you know what these are, Chief Scientist? Psilophytes! See, no leaves, and spore reservoirs at the top. Vulcan must send a botanical expedition here. These plants are representative of species that have been extinct on all inhabited worlds for millenia. Even the handful of primeval worlds that have been investigated have not revealed psilophytes. This planet is a botanical treasure house!"

"We cannot assume that Vulcan will be willing to go to the expense of sending an expedition here, no matter how strongly we urge it," Spock commented. "I suggest that you record as much data as you can on these plants. It will provide you with evidence to press your case, also."

He turned to the geologists, privately surprised that any Vulcan, even a botanist, should become so excited over a few plants. Certainly it was interesting that these plants, extinct on all known planets, should be, not only extant, but apparently abundant, here, but surely it should be possible to record all the necessary data about them in the time they had.

Storl and Smail were busily checking over the composition of the rocks on the shore - the only place near them where rocks were in evidence. The all-pervading sand covered the bedrock deeply everywhere else.

"Nothing very interesting, Chief Scientist," Storl reported. "Straightforward igneous rock, eroded to form the sand. Fairly fine-grained rock; it must have cooled quite rapidly. No veins of anything. The rocks themselves have probably been eroded off a cliff and washed here by the action of the waves."

Spock nodded, and turned his attention to the sea.

The water glinted in the sunlight, the tip of each wavelet shining. The light danced over the water as the waves rippled in, orange and green and silver white as they caught the colour of the triple stars. He gazed entranced, wondering at his own appreciation of this beauty. There had been a time - not so very long ago, either - when he would have observed this only to catalogue it and its possible causes in the depths of his mind. And, he wondered, why did he have this irrational urge to share this beauty with the Human Captain of the Enterprise?

He pulled his unwilling attention back to the job in hand. Kirk had more sense than he, he reflected; Kirk had known there was nothing he could do down here, so he had sensibly refrained from coming. He was getting on with his own work up there on the Enterprise; it was time and more than time that Spock started doing the same, instead of day-dreaming.

Resolutely, he put the idea of beauty out of his mind. He was faced with a stretch of water. What could he learn about it?"

The presence of a marked line of vegetable debris indicated clearly that it was tidal - something Spock had already surmised it would be, since the planet had three small moons. The tides must show a large variation, depending on the comparative positions of the three satellites, he thought, and wished that the Enterprise could remain long enough to let him investigate the exact tidal progression, even though he knew he could extrapolate it from the

study of the orbits of the three moons.

He checked the water with his tricorder. Fresh. Of course. There probably hadn't been enough time, geologically speaking, for erosion to wash the salts into the sea that would eventually salinate it. There were indications of life forms, but only indications. There was obviously nothing large living there. He glanced back at the vegetation.

Apart from the dryness of the terrain, the plants gave every indication of belonging to the geological era known on Vulcan as Madyar and on Terra as Devonian. An era when fish were lords of creation. If Vulcan and Earth were any guide, there should be some large fish out there; but the tricorder gave no sign of any. No indication that in the waters of this world there was anything larger than small creeping wormlike creatures.

He moved nearer to the sea, his eyes fixed on the tricorder, as if by going a few feet nearer he could somehow produce the fish that so many other worlds had evolved.

He was so intent on the tricorder that it was some minutes before he realised that his feet were getting wet. He glanced down.

He had sunk into the sand, which now covered his ankles. He tried to turn, to move back, and found that he could not. He was immovably stuck. One eyebrow raised as he considered this. This world also had its dangers, it seemed.

He called to the others. Storl, who was reasonably near, reached him first.

"Don't come too near," Spock warned him. "I have no way of knowing how far from the water's edge this quicksand stretches. Is there anything you can use to try to pull me out?"

Storl looked round blankly as Smair reached them.

"We could try the tricorder straps," Smair suggested.

Spock nodded. "It does seem to be the only thing available."

Keeping hold of the tricorders themselves, Storl and Smair threw the loose ends to Spock. He gripped them firmly, and the two Vulcans began to pull.

In vain.

The sand clung lovingly to Spock's feet and ankles, and now to the lower part of his legs. He would soon be knee-deep. And even the combined strength of the two Vulcans was insufficient to defeat the suction the sand produced. It was quite clear to them that even with Spail and the two guards, all of whom were some distance away and would take several minutes to get to them, to help, the quicksand was still too powerful for them. His men looked helplessly at Spock.

It took Spock some seconds longer to think of a possible solution. He pulled out the communicator he had been given.

"Spock to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Uhura here."

"I am caught in a quicksand. Would the transporter be able to remove me from it?"

"Spock." It was Kirk's voice. "Keep your communicator open so that we can get a fix on you. How deep are you caught?" There was tension in the Human's voice, Spock noted. Could it be the emotion caller 'worry'?

"Almost knee deep. Storl and Smair have tried to pull me out, but the suction is too great."

"Stand by, sir. Energising now."

He felt the transporter beam catch him, and moments later found himself standing in the Enterprise's transporter room. He looked over to the control console.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," he said, as the door opened, and Kirk came in.

Kirk came straight to him. "Are you all right, Chief Scientist?"

"Perfectly, thank you. I must remember not to go too near the water again."

"What exactly happened?" Kirk asked.

Spock explained quickly, then added, "I must go back now. There is still work to be done. However, I do not anticipate that we will be too long." He hesitated, then went on, "Would you have time to come down with me? It is a fascinating world. I think you would find it interesting."

"I'd like to," Kirk admitted. "But I can't. Doctor's orders."

Spock looked at him inquiringly. He held up his hand. "A tiny cut, but it was infected. McCoy's forbidden me to leave the ship till it's healed."

"Oh. That is a pity. I think you would have liked it down there." He glanced over to Kyle, waiting patiently at the control console, as Kirk moved out of the transporter chamber. "Energise, Lieutenant."

When he rejoined the landing party, Storl and Smair had already made a check on the extent of the quicksand. It appeared to stretch the entire length of the beach, and to extend for about a yard inland from the water's edge.

They watched as the tide crept in. The belt of quicksand moved with it, a natural part of the planet's geology.

"If the tide had been going out, I would have been in no danger," Spock commented, as he recorded the phenomenon. "I would simply have found myself buried up to the knees in dry sand, and it would have been easy to dig me out. Interesting."

"I cannot understand the presence of boulders on the sand," Smair said. "They should sink into it."

"The presence of the quicksand is undoubtedly the reason why there are not more stones on the beach," Spock agreed. He looked over to one of the boulders, now very near to the water's edge. "Let us watch. It should prove quite instructive."

Slowly, the water lapped closer to the great boulder. It was now well within the belt of affected sand, but showed no sign of sinking. The water reached it.

Spock glanced down at his feet and moved back a little way. It would be not only illogical, but foolish, for him to be trapped again. Storl and Smair followed him.

"Opinions, scientists." Spock looked from one to the other.

"The boulder must be resting on bedrock," Storl said. Spock nodded.

"I agree." He aimed the tricorder at the sand again, and shook his head. "The tricorder gives no indication of how deep the sand is. Perhaps if we were to dig round the base of one of the boulders once the tide has gone out again..."

He glanced inland, aware that it was some time since he had heard anything from Spail. "Continue checking this," he ordered, and turned away from the sea.

There was no need for him to go far. Spail was working happily among the psilophytes, gathering specimens, taking readings, making notes. Spock left him to it, remembering that Spail was not the only other member of the landing party. He looked round for the guards.

Only one of them was in sight. Spock went over to him.

"Have you anything to report, Ensign?"

"No, sir. Everything's quiet."

"What of your friend?"

"Shacter? He's over there." The guard pointed to where a flash of red showed. Spock nodded, and went over.

He stood for a moment, looking down at the guard. Shacter was sitting leaning against a rock - and he was fast asleep.

Spock felt an unaccustomed surge of anger. This was an

apparently uninhabited world, one where the presence of the security guards was merely for the look of things - Spock was quite sure that Kirk would not have bothered with a security contingent if the landing party had not been composed of civilian scientists - but even so, there was no excuse for the man being asleep on duty.

Spock controlled his rage by the application of some Vulcan mental discipline, then, once he was certain he was in full control of himself, he bent and shook the guard awake.

Shacter looked up at him, his face paling. He scrambled to his feet. Spock waited silently. Shacter shuffled his feet uncertainly. At last, Spock said, quietly, "Have you a reason for being asleep on duty, Ensign?"

His very quietness was unnerving. From being pale, Shacter flushed fiery red.

"No, sir."

"What would happen if I were to report you to Captain Kirk?"

"I would be put on a charge, sir."

"And?"

"I would probably be assigned extra duties, sir, as well as having the offence noted on my record."

Spock nodded. "What kind of duties, Ensign?" His voice was still quiet.

"There are a number of unpleasant duties that are usually reserved for men on report, sir. It would be one of those."

"Do you think you deserve such punishment?"

Shacter swallowed. "Yes, sir."

Spock hesitated. He didn't really want to bother Kirk with this...what would a real Science Officer do in such a situation? And fascinating as the planet was to himself and his men, he must remember that to a security guard, a duty such as this one must be incredibly boring.

"Very well, Ensign. You are honest, at least. For this once, let the incident be between ourselves. I will not report it."

Shacter stared at him. "You...thank you, sir. It won't happen again, I promise you."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Ensign, can you really guarantee that you won't be so bored again that you won't feel sleepy?"

It took the guard a moment to realise that Spock was actually making a joke. He grinned. "No, sir, I can't guarantee that, but I can guarantee that if I do, I'll do something to keep myself awake!"

Shacter watched the Vulcan as he turned away. Any landing party the Chief Scientist was going on from now on, especially if it was likely to be dangerous, he decided, he was going to volunteer to go along, even if it did mean extra duty. Even if he was a Vulcan, he was a real leader, not like that Tellerite Vaz. Vaz would have had him on report quicker than it took to get word to the Captain.

They moved round the planet a little way, and a second landing party went down, but the results they obtained were almost identical with those found at the first site. If Spock was a little surprised that the guard Shacter was again assigned to the landing party he gave no sign of it.

On their return to the Enterprise, Spock sought out Kirk.

"There is no reason to remain here any longer," he reported.

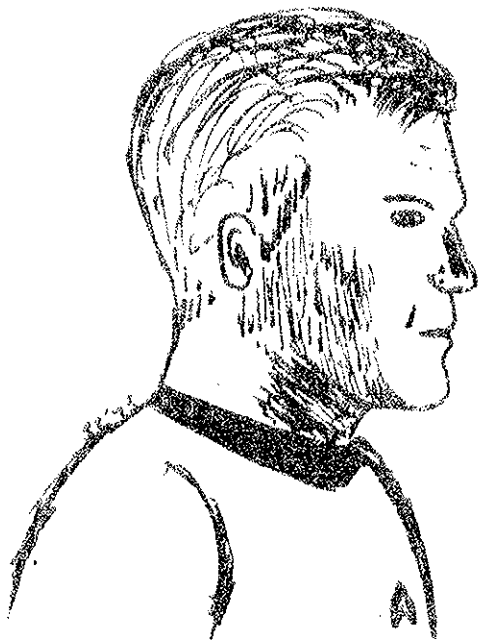
"We have compiled sufficient data on this planet."

The ship moved on outwards. At last, all the planets had been surveyed. None other of them showed any signs of life.

That night, over their customary game of chess, Spock asked,

"Captain, will we be able to return to that first planet to make further investigations?"

Kirk moved a knight, leaving his queen exposed. "Yes. The



repairs are holding up well; you can get twenty-four hours there. I realize that that isn't as long as you would probably like, but it's the best I can do. After that, we'll head straight back to Vulcan."

Spock considered the board thoughtfully. He was getting used to the apparent illogicalities of Kirk's play, and he guessed that the seeming vulnerability of Kirk's queen was a deliberate trap. He declined to accept the lure, and moved a pawn into a blocking position. Kirk grinned appreciatively.

"How long will it take us to reach Vulcan?" Spock asked.

"Nearly a month at warp one."

"A month..." There was a strange wistfulness in Spock's tone.

"It's the best we can do," Kirk replied, misunderstanding the reason for the other's reaction. "I know you're all anxious to get home, but we daren't go faster." He

moved a bishop.

"Not really," Spock answered. "For myself, I could wish the time to be longer." He moved another pawn. "I find being on the Enterprise...quite surprisingly stimulating." He looked straight at Kirk. "Both professionally and personally."

They swung back into orbit around the fifteenth planet. After a while, Spock looked up from the sensors to Kirk.

"Captain, I would like the use of that shuttlecraft you mentioned. There appear to be herds of animals migrating near where we landed last time. We need to observe them closely to discover anything about them, whether they are carnivores like the rest of the creatures we encountered, or whether they are in fact herbivores, such as one would expect on a planet with beasts like the do-matya."

"Yes, of course, Chief Scientist." Kirk glanced towards Uhura. "Tail Engineering to ready the Copernicus for imminent take-off, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir."

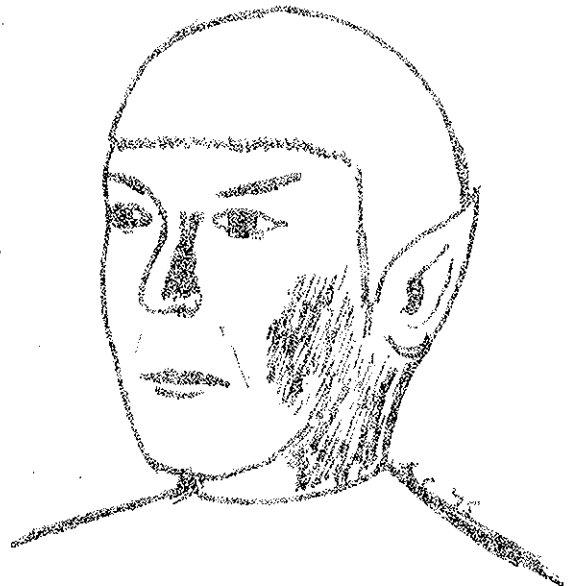
Kirk looked back at Spock. "Who will you take?"

"Sissal, since he is our chief zoologist. And Stori. Three of your junior scientists, to give them the experience - besides, I do not like it to be said that by choosing a Vulcan for acting Science Officer, you have deprived your own people of the opportunity to learn anything."

"Oh. I hoped you hadn't heard that."

"I heard. It was thoughtless of me to take only Vulcans on the two landings we made on that other planet. I forgot that I could use your men as well."

"That's hardly surprising, considering how busy you were." Not for the first time, Kirk was struck by the difference between this man and the Tellarite. Vez would not have cared how many toes he trod on, and would undoubtedly have picked nothing but Tellarites for landing party duties had there been any other Tellarites aboard. Spock was deliberately choosing inexperienced men of another race before his own experienced staff. It was yet another good point for the report that Spock did not know was being compiled.



When Spock reached the hangar deck he was surprised to find Ensign Shacter witing beside the shuttle.

"Ensign?" he asked.

"I'm your pilot, sir. It should have been one of the engineers, but they're all working flat out just now, so I volunteered to go instead."

"Indeed?"

He was prevented from saying anything more by the arrival of the rest of the investigating party. The two Vulcans came first; behind them, the Humans, three ensigns, Orris, Raffin and Stacey, all gratified at being chosen to go on this trip, all still a little startled that the acting Science Officer should, after all, have included Humans in his team, each one hoping that he would perform adequately. It was the first chance any of them had had since joining the Enterprise to show their ability; Vaz had been very impatient of inexperience, forgetting that even he had had to learn.

They boarded the Copernicus; the hangar depressurised; the doors opened, and the shuttle took off.

The Copernicus dropped smoothly through the atmosphere towards the planet's surface. There was little the scientists could do as yet; Spock monitored the sensors while Shacter maintained contact with the Enterprise, letting the mother ship know where they were.

They swooped low over the surface, not much more than skimming the 'trees'. The great swathe of downed vegetation left by the do-matya showed below them, new plants already springing up along the course of it, finally disappearing at the edge of the forest. A little beyond that were the first animals of the great herds that had showed up on the sensors.

"Cut speed, Ensign," Spock ordered. "Take it as slowly as possible."

"Aye, sir," Shacter acknowledged.

The great beasts barely looked up as the Copernicus swooped over their heads. Obviously they were unaware that danger could exist above them. It was another item to be added to the store of knowledge they were gathering.

The six scientists watched avidly.

These beasts were quite clearly herbivores. They were headed for the forest across what was virtual desert. Every now and then, one of them lowered its head to snatch a mouthful of the sparse vegetation as it went. There were several different species of beast, mostly large, but there were also a number of smaller ones, some obviously the young of the large species, but others clearly of smaller races altogether.

Spock glanced round at his men.

"Identify as many as possible to the nearest Earth or Vulcan species," he said. "Ensign, circle the herd. Will the sensors record this?"

"Yes, sir." Shacter flacked a switch. "Recording now, sir."

As the shuttlecraft began turning a wide circle, Spock began counting the different species as best he could. How many species were there living in apparent amity together?

It was the pilot who noticed the approaching enemy, since his attention was being given to more than the immediate herd.

"Chief Scientist!" he exclaimed. "Look!"

Spock glanced to where Shacter was pointing.

A great upright shape was approaching the herd on huge legs. Its movements were clumsy, as if its weight were too great for its legs to bear, though for all that it moved surprisingly quickly; yet it gave the immediate impression that if it fell, it would be unable to rise again. Even at this distance, they could see its long, sharp teeth clearly.



It was needed for the herd of herbivores, none of which seemed to have noticed it yet. It was within a hundred yards of them before it was seen.

Word of the danger seemed to pass through the herd instantaneously. At one moment the grazing beasts were placidly, doggedly, slowly making their way towards the forest; the next, they had scattered in panic. Their movements also were clumsy, Spock noted; it had not been obvious while they were moving slowly. Some were more agile than others, with the smallest species the most agile, but the juveniles of the larger species were little less so; the most awkward were the huge adults.

The great do-matya, for so it had to be, headed on towards the fleeing herd, lumbering on without an obvious target. Spock began to wonder just how one of these beasts had managed to catch the whole of his predecessor's landing party, and immediately decided that whatever had killed them, it hadn't been a do-matya. It was too clumsy, too stupid. Men should have had no trouble hiding from it. It seemed to be ignoring the small species entirely, too. No, the presence of the do-matya's tracks had to be a coincidence. An adult do-matya had certainly not killed them - though a young one might have done so.

The fleeing herd was near the forest now, scattering more and more widely. One of the smaller beasts slipped, fell on its side, and began to slide down a long, shallow slope. Spock watched it. At the bottom, a

dark, multi-legged shape materialised and moved to the fallen creature. It crouched beside it, and began to feed. Spock shivered involuntarily. That was the creature that had so nearly caught the Captain...

The do-matya seemed to have selected its prey at last. It was close to one of the herbivores, another beast that, like the do-matya itself, moved on its hind legs, its front legs atrophied to almost nothing. The fleeing animal seemed to know that the huge carnivore was close, even although it had not turned its head. Fear seemed to overwhelm it; it faltered, looking round as if uncertain of the way to go. The momentary hesitation was fatal; the do-matya pounced, if such a word was applicable to such a clumsy, lumbering brute. Its teeth clashed together on its victim's neck; the unfortunate herbivore went limp, one leg continuing to twitch as if still being urged to action by the dead brain. After a moment, the leg also was still. The great reptile began to feed, tearing huge hunks of flesh from its prey and swallowing them whole.

The rest of the herbivores continued their mad rush for a few minutes. Most of them were well into the forest by now; they slowed down and stopped, looking round; then they began to move together again.

"Surely such a huge herd is too big to be practical, sir?" Orris said, sounding puzzled.

"That is a shrewd point, Ensign," Spock said. Orris flushed with pleasure at the compliment. "Perhaps they only form into these large mixed herds to travel, and have not reached their destination as yet."

They continued to watch.

Sure enough, the major part of the herd having gathered together again, it continued on its way. Stragglers were ignored, as if they didn't exist. One or two of the stragglers joined together, to form a small independent herd that made its way after the main herd; others seemed unable to find any others and blundered round in circles, apparently looking for their herd-mates; after a while a few of these began to make an individual way following the main herd. A handful were left that were apparently unwilling or unable to take any initiative at all.

The do-matya by this time had eaten part of the carcass lying in front of it. It seemed unwilling to bend down too far, a circumstance that seemed to confirm the suspicion that, once on the ground, it would be unable to regain its feet. It began to move after the herd, ignoring the remainder of the fallen carcass. One of the stragglers blundered into its path; it snatched at the beast, its huge teeth crushing this new victim's throat. It promptly began eating again.

"Look, sir," Stacey said. He pointed to the first victim.

A number of small reptiles were already gathering round it. These also were of mixed species; some resembled the do-matya, and were probably young ones. Very young ones. Others were of completely different types, mostly two-legged, but one species, that seemed to be strongly represented, was a four-legged beast. These small scavengers appeared to live in reasonable amity; they were, it seemed, quite willing to share this bounty, left them by the adult do-matya...as least while it lasted.

There were so many of them that the meat the do-matya had left, plenty though it was, very rapidly disappeared. Once it was finished, the tiny predators began to snap at each other.

"Fascinating," Spock murmured as he watched.

He pulled himself from his abstraction. There was a great deal more to see here, and not so very long to see it in.

"Mr. Shacter - see if you can take us back along the way the herd came. I would like to see where it came from - and if possible, why."

"Aye, sir."

Shacter turned the shuttle, following the trail the huge beasts had left. Where one do-matya had not left enough trail to see, a

herd of the size of the one they had just seen did leave a well-marked trail; much better-marked than Spock would have considered possible. It went on and on.

After a while, they came to another forest. A wide track was beaten down through it. The herd had come through here without pausing. Every now and then, a pile of bones showed where one of the herd had met a violent end at the teeth of one of the great predators - had it been the same one, following the herd all the way? They had certainly seen no more...

The forest went on and on, and so did the track, and they went on, following it.

Kirk glanced back at Uhura.

"Any report from the Copernicus, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir. They found the herd they went to look for. Now they are back-tracking it. They've covered over a hundred miles and the track is still unchanged. They're now over another forest, which seems to go on for quite a long way. Reception isn't very clear, sir - there's quite a lot of static."

"Has the static been constant?"

"No, sir, it's been fluctuating. At the moment, it's quite bad."

"Mr. Wood - sensor report!" There was a note of alarm in Kirk's voice .

Wood bent over the sensor. "Magnetic storm, sir. Coordinates, 15863, 24496."

Uhura looked round sharply.

"Captain, that's where the Copernicus is!"

"Recall, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir...Captain, I can't get through to them. The static is drowning out everything."

Kirk's hand tightened on the arm of his chair. He could only hope that the pilot, the volunteer security guard, had enough skill to lift the shuttlecraft above the storm.

The first indication the crew of the Copernicus had that anything was wrong was the first flash of lightning that forked down past the front of the craft, which was promptly thrown off course by the rush of displaced air. Shacter struggled for control as more lightning forked down.

Spock glanced sideways at him.

"I'll try to lift above this, sir," he shouted over the rumble of thunder that temporarily deafened them.

But although Shacter was a competent pilot, he lacked the consummate skill that an engineer like Scotty had. Every time he managed to lift the shuttle, it was thrown down again by the violence of the storm.

"No use, sir!" he shouted. "We'll have to try going down."

Spock nodded. Kirk hadn't wanted them to land - but it seemed that they had little alternative. The shuttle began to descend.

They were very low when a streak of lightning hit them.

The force of it threw them sideways. Shacter struggled to regain control, and in part succeeded; the Copernicus was at least the right way up when it hit the ground.

It bounced, and hit again, this time sliding through the mashed-up vegetation that cushioned the impact. The occupants were thrown forward; Spock and Shacter, in the forward seats, coming off best.

The shuttlecraft slid to a standstill; the crew picked themselves up off the floor. The rattle of rain on the roof was like a death-knell.

There was nothing they could do but wait. Wait for the storm to pass. Wait for the Enterprise to find them.

Shacter looked at Spock. "I'm sorry, sir."

"I consider you did extremely well, Mr. Shacter," Spock replied. "You could not have foretold the storm, and you have at least managed to land us intact, and with a vehicle that is still water-tight. I do not think that anyone else could have done better."

"Thank you, sir." Shacter still sounded subdued.

"He's right, Dave," Stacey put in. "I couldn't have kept us in one piece, and I don't think Claus or Pierre could either."

Shacter shook his head, still looking far from happy.

The storm continued unabated for some hours, during which time the scientists discussed their observations. Shacter listened, once or twice adding a comment regarding something he had noticed. Spock appreciated the pilot's interest, noting that his comments were always sensible and to the point.

The time passed slowly, however; they were all glad when the rattle of rain eased off, and the flashes of lightning diminished in quantity, and the thunder faded away into the distance.

Shacter turned to the control panel, flicking switches, at first eagerly, then desperately.

"Can we take off, Mr. Shacter?" Spock asked.

"No, sir. We must have been worse damaged than I thought when we hit the ground. Communications are out too, sir."

"It could have been the lightning that struck us that did the damage," Spock pointed out.

"Whichever it was, sir, we're stuck here till the ship finds us." Shacter was blunt. There was no point in allowing the scientists to be falsely optimistic. "It might take hours."

"When were you last in contact with the Enterprise?" Spock asked.

"Just before we ran into the storm, sir."

"Then the Captain will have some idea of where to look for us. Meanwhile," he looked round his men, "the Captain was unwilling to risk any of us on the surface. Through no fault of our own, we are here. I know that you are all wanting to go outside, to investigate what you might find. But I agree with Captain Kirk. It would be foolhardy to go out onto the surface. We will remain inside the shuttlecraft."

"It seems a pity," Sisel said.

"I know," Spock agreed. "I also am tempted. But I have seen, as you have not, some of the dangers that lurk here. Although we are probably too small to be endangered by the do-matya, unless perhaps a young one, there are other species that will be dangerous to us. Some of them are ones that we will not recognise as being dangerous. The Humans may recognise types likely to be a danger that the Vulcans do not; the Vulcans may see a chance resemblance to something they know to be deadly that the Humans do not. Even working in pairs, the risk is greater than I consider acceptable, since there must be many species that neither of our races would find familiar. We will not take the chance."

The clouds disappeared; the triple suns shone in the sky. Soon, a new, unforeseen danger made its appearance.

The Humans were the first to notice it. The Vulcans, native to a planet with a much higher temperature, were still considering the temperature pleasantly warm when Raffin said bluntly,

"Mr. Spock - we'll have to go outside. If we don't, we'll die from the heat in here."

Spock looked round the four Humans. All were showing signs of distress.

He frowned. "I had not considered that. For us, it is still tolerable; but yes, the temperature is decidedly higher than it was. Go outside, then, but remain in the shade of the Copernicus. Don't move away from it."

Within half an hour, the Vulcans had joined the Humans.

It wasn't exactly comfortable outside either. The air was humid, unpleasantly so for the Vulcans, and very warm - much warmer than it had been when Spock had been on the surface before. Certainly, they were a hundred miles or so nearer the equator, but that shouldn't have made so much difference. Perhaps it had been the effect of the storm.

The Humans were panting for breath. It wasn't so much that they were short of air, Spock decided, it was probably more the psychological effect of the heat. But for all that, the symptoms were none-the-less real.

"It might be cooler under the 'trees'," he suggested. "I think we can risk going so far. Keep a good look-out for animals, insects - any kind of life - and assume it's hostile."

They moved under the canopy of the forest, knowing that the search would pick up the shuttlecraft. It was damp underfoot - damper than it had been at the other landing site, Spock noticed, though that was probably just the effect of the rain. He looked round carefully.

"We might as well make the best use of our time as possible," he said. "See what you can find - but remember, be careful!"

Shacter loosened his phaser, then, on second thoughts, drew it. He couldn't depend on these scientists - with the possible exception of the Chief Scientist - to keep a proper watch; he would have to do that. His senses alert, his ears strained to pick up the slightest strange noise, he stood guard.

Spock moved from scientist to scientist checking on their discoveries, stubbornly resisting the urge to make his own investigation, just as he had resisted it on Zaynol, accepting it as the price he must pay for being in command.

Suddenly, Sisel let out a surprised, involuntary yelp. The party swung round to stare at him, even the Humans startled at the unexpectedness of a Vulcan crying out in pain. They were in time to see him knock a dark reddish-brown, long-bodied, multi-legged creature off his leg. It resembled a centipede rather closely, except for its forked tongue that flicked in and out in a very snake-like fashion. The fall did not discourage it. It began to wind its way up his leg again.

Spock darted in. He caught the creature and pulled it free with a quick jerk; and threw it as far from them as he could. It promptly began to wriggle back towards them.

Shacter lifted his phaser, took careful aim, and fired. The creature writhed, rearing high on its tail and the last few pairs of legs, then fell. Spock approached it, his tricorder, so far unused, ready.

"Dead," he said. He sounded vaguely regretful.

"I had to kill it, sir," Shacter said apologetically.

"I know," Spock agreed. "It had selected its victim, and was not ready to be discouraged. Were you bitten or stung, Sisel?"

"Bitten," Sisel replied. "I did not know it was there until it bit me." He yawned. "I'm sirry, Chief Scientist - suddenly I feel very sleepy." His eyelids drooped. He forced them open; they drooped again - and then he fell. Spock bent over him.

"Unconscious," he said.

"The bite?" Orris asked.

Spock nodded. "I assume so. Mr. Shacter - if you see any more of these creatures, kill them at once."

"Yes, sir. Sir..."

"Yes?"

"It was phaser resistant, Chief Scientist. It should have been killed instantly, but it wasn't."

"Are you suggesting that all the creatures on this planet may be phaser resistant?"

"I'm not sure, sir." Shacter sounded uncertain. "But if one is..."

"You are keeping a look-out?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, of course; you already had your phaser out. Well, phaser resistant or not, we know that these things can be killed. Presumably anything that size or smaller can also be killed. But if anything larger shows up - warn us in time to let us get back into the shuttle craft."

"Yes, sir. What will we do about Scientist Sisal, sir?"

"We can't do anything for him, since none of us have medical training. He may be able to throw off the effects of the bite by himself. But for his own safety, it might be better to carry him to the door of the shuttlecraft and leave him there."

Spock swung the unconscious Vulcan up in his arms, and took him to the Copernicus. He put Sisal down just inside the door, and went back to supervising the others.

Stacey had found his way to the dead centipede, and was carefully examining it. He looked up.

"Sir - I think I've found out something about this creature. It's a female, and carrying eggs. The young are just about ready to hatch. I think the creature's bite paralyzes its victim, then she lays her eggs in or on his body, and the young have a ready supply of food when they hatch."

Spock's face took on an expression of distaste. "You have a vivid imagination, Mr. Stacey."

"No, sir, there are some Earth species that do that. Insects. They usually prey on things like caterpillars."

"In that case, you had better take a sample of the creature's saliva, so that Dr. McCoy will have something to work on."

"Yes, sir."

Spock moved on.

A movement caught Shacter's eye. Something small was moving towards Spock. The guard raised his phaser and fired.

Nothing happened to the tiny creature. As he fired again, Shacter shouted, "Behind you, Mr. Spock!"

Spock swung round, his eyes searching. The creature was so small that it took him a moment to see it.

It was a crab-like creature that scuttled along, waving miniature claws. Spock picked up a fallen stem, one that was rather less decayed than most of them, that must have been a casualty from the recent storm. He used it to poke at the beast.

The little crab promptly grabbed the stem in its tiny pincers. They cut through it easily. It scuttled on. Spock moved out of its way. It made no attempt to come after him, but moved on past, and vanished into the 'undergrowth'.

Spock's eyebrow lifted. "Interesting," he commented.

Of necessity, the major part of their investigations involved the small, soft-bodied life that existed in the leaf mould; but even it produced surprises. Orris dropped one worm he picked up, with a muttered curse; Spock, moving over to join him, stared in some dismay at the blistering of his hand, blistering that had come up in seconds after Orris touched the worm.

"Its skin must secrete a poison," Spock said. "Mr. Orris, was there anything to distinguish that particular species from the others?"

Orris shook his head. "None that I saw, sir. But I didn't have time to notice much." His lips were white, his face drawn with pain.

"There might be something in the first-aid kit to ease your hand," Spock said. He climbed into the wrecked Copernicus. The heat hit him like a blow. He took a deep breath of the cooler air outside, and plunged into the shuttle, holding his breath. He found the first-aid kit, and hurried out again, his lungs straining for air; but he dared not take a breath of the over-hot air inside. He paused to check Sisal, lying just inside the door, his head in the doorway. The Vulcan was still deeply unconscious, but, to his untrained eye, at least no worse. He rejoined Orris.

The blistering was already spreading up his arm. Spock searched

the kit hurriedly, without immediate success. At last he found a pain-killer, and injected Orris with it; some of the agony left the Human's face. But there seemed to be nothing else that would help. Spock could only watch helplessly while the blistering spread onto Orris's neck and over his face; and then the Human's face twisted again in momentary agony, and he collapsed. Spock bent over him. There was nothing he could do; the Human was dead. Dead. Killed by a worm. Spock raised his head.

"Scientists!"

None of them had been aware of Orris's accident; now, as they turned to look at him, Spock beckoned them over.

"Stop all investigation except by tricorder. Even the worms here can kill."

Storl nodded impassively. Raffin and Stacey stared stupidly at their colleague's body, horrified.

Shacter alone had not joined Spock; he stood a little way away, staring along the route the migrating herd had taken. There was something moving along there - something that hugged the ground and was coming along slowly but inexorably. He moved forward cautiously a few steps. Then he saw. He turned and ran.

"Mr. Spock! We're in the path of an army of ants! That must be what moved the animals - the ants are following the trail the herd left. They're huge, sir - fully six inches long. They're not moving very quickly, but even so, they'll be here soon. Sir, I've seen what an army of ants can do. They eat everything organic in their path. And it might take days for them all to pass!"

Spock raised his eyebrow. "Interesting. We could retreat in front of them, or try to move out of their way -"

Shacter shook his head. "No, sir. Once they smell us, they'll speed up and come after us. We'll have to shelter inside the shuttle craft."

Spock shook his head. "It's too hot in there," he said. "And even if it wasn't, the hull is no longer wholly intact. There are gaps an ant - even a six-inch one - could get through."

"Sir, it's our only chance."

Spock indicated the shuttlecraft. "See for yourself, Mr. Shacter."

Shacter went quickly over to the shuttlecraft, and stopped at the door as the heat hit him. He turned and looked at Spock, despair in his eyes.

On the Enterprise, Kirk waited impatiently for the storm to clear. It did so very slowly, revolving in circles round the area where the Copernicus had been last reported, and even when it finally moved away, diminishing in violence, the static continued unabated for a long time and the electrical disturbance made the sensors inoperative at worst and untrustworthy at best. The only thing they could be certain of was that the Copernicus was down, somewhere relatively near its last reported position - he hoped. His lips set grimly as he remembered the type of creature that lived on that primeval planet.

It took considerable will-power to wait without fussing, accepting that his crew were doing all they could to trace the shuttle craft - they were a good crew, weren't they? The best he'd ever worked with. So why fret this time?

But he knew why. This time, some of the missing men were civilians, for all he had asked them, and they had willingly agreed, to do crewmen's work; important Vulcan scientists. If they were killed, he could be in trouble...No, be honest. He was worried about Spock. He didn't want Spock to be killed...or hurt. He didn't want to lose the Vulcan's company before he had to. But why - why should he feel like that? He had plenty friends. Why should this alien's company mean so much to him? He didn't know.

He looked towards Wood, who was bent intently over the sensors.

"Is the interference clearing yet, Mr. Wood?"

"No, sir. Results are still undependable."

One fist clenched in frustration. What was happening down there?

Standing beside the wrecked Copernicus, Spock watched the advancing army for a few seconds.

"We have no alternative but to attempt flight," he commented. He bent and lifted Sisal, slinging his body over one shoulder. "We must leave Mr. Orris, I'm afraid, if we are to have the best chance to escape. Come."

Without a backward glance, he set off along the beaten trail, away from the advancing ants, as quickly as he could without actually running. Stori followed him; the two surviving Human scientists hesitated, looking at Orris's body. Shacter grabbed their arms.

"He's right," Shacter said abruptly. "Carrying Pierre's body will just slow us. And investigating it might slow the ants, heartless as it sounds to say it. We have to be practical."

Reluctantly, the two scientists followed Shacter, who set a good pace until they had caught up with the Vulcans.

It was not easy to keep up any sort of speed; the fallen undergrowth, beaten flat though it was, was deep, wet and soft, and in many places new growth was already beginning to make its appearance. Occasionally one or other of them tripped; and each time, the delay, slight though it was, meant that the insect army came a little nearer.

Suddenly Raffin let out a yell. The others looked round.

One of the great, six-inch long ants had drawn level with them. Raffin stopped, and brought his foot down hard on its head. He raised his foot again; the ant lifted itself from the soft leaf mould into which he had pushed it without harming it. Its head came up, and a stream of formic acid squirted at Raffin. It hit his trouser leg and he yelped again, this time in pain, as the acid soaked through the cloth and burned him as it reached the skin.

Shacter fired his phaser, without much hope; and sure enough, the insect scuttled back towards the main army.

Within moments, the leading ants had speeded up and were hurrying towards the fleeing men. There was nothing they could do but keep on going, useless as it seemed. The leading ants were level with them now.

"I've got something," Wood reported. "Metallic - it could be the shuttlecraft. But there are confused life form readings all round it - as if there were millions of living creatures down there. Not intelligent."

"Scan round about. Any other readings?"

"...yes. About a mile from the wreck, just on the edge of the confused reading. Human...and Vulcan."

"Give the coordinates to the transporter room." He punched his chair intercom. "Bridge to transporter room; energise as soon as you've locked onto the coordinates Mr. Wood gives you."

He got up, turned towards the elevator. "Take over, Mr. Wood."

He entered the transporter room just as the shapes in the chamber were beginning to solidify. Three Humans and two Vulcans, with Spock carrying a sixth man. Kirk went to them as Shacter stamped on a large insect that had materialised with them.

"Are you all right, Chief Scientist?"

Spock began to ease Sisal to the floor; Kirk reached out to help him. "I regret that one of the Human scientists was killed, Captain," he reported. "Sisal and Mr. Raffin require medical attention."

Kirk nodded to Kyle, who put through a call for McCoy. "What

happened, Chief Scientist?" he asked. "Why didn't you stay with the shuttlecraft?"

Briefly, Spock explained the sequence of events. He hadn't finished when McCoy arrived.

McCoy bent over Sisal while Spock told him what Stacey had surmised, then straightened.

"I'll do what I can," he said, "but I don't know if I'll be able to help him."

"Did you get a sample of the saline, Mr. Stacey?" Spock asked.

Stacey was already feeling in his pouch. "Yes, sir."

He pulled out a small sample bottle, part filled with a sticky-looking substance, and gave it to McCoy. The surgeon examined it, not looking much happier. "Well, it should help," he said. He loaded Sisal onto the stretcher and glanced at Raffin.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Not much," Raffin said. He indicated the squashed insect on the floor of the transporter chamber. "One of these ants squirted acid at me. It burned my leg."

"O.K., come on and I'll have a look at it."

They went out behind the orderly pushing the stretcher trolley. Spock looked at the remaining men.

"Captain, I should like to commend your men," he said. "They performed extremely well in what must have been a very difficult situation for them; Mr. Shacter in particular."

"That's good hearing," Kirk said. He glanced at the men, and nodded dismissal.

As the men, and Storl with them, left, Kirk turned back to Spock.

"If you will come with me, sir, I'll need a full report on what happened for the log."

"Yes, of course."

They made their way along the corridor towards Kirk's quarters. Spock said, hesitantly, "Captain, I know you did not want anyone to set foot on that world again, and events proved you right; but we had no real alternative. The mistake I made was in permitting - no, encouraging - my men to carry out a field survey. If I had insisted that we remain beside the shuttle, ignoring the lure of further research, Sisal would not be in danger of dying, nor Mr. Orris dead."

"Everyone makes mistakes occasionally," Kirk said reassuringly. "I don't blame you for wanting to find out as much as you could; that's a Science Officer's job."

"I have learned from my error, however," Spock went on. "I am not prepared to risk any more lives trying to discover more about this planet. We already have sufficient data to provide a great deal of information about it. To run further risks is unnecessary and illogical."

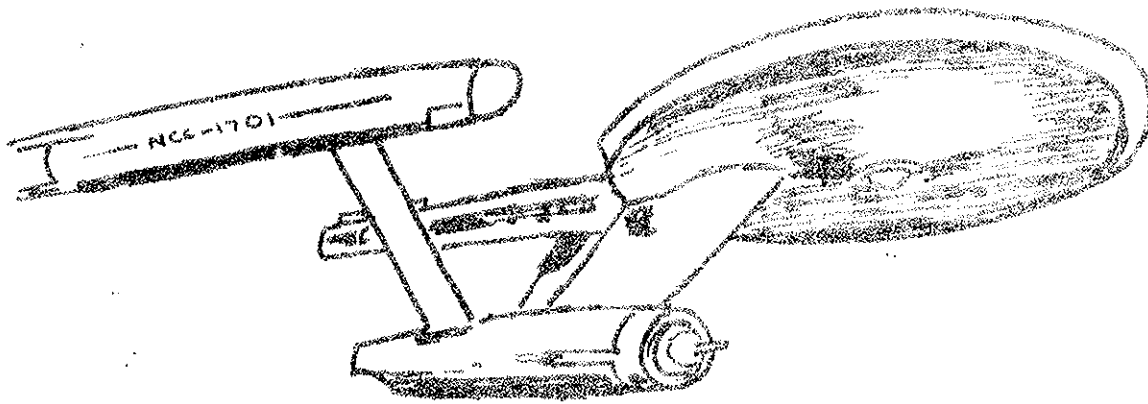
"You're the Science Officer," Kirk said. "It's your decision. I think it's the correct one."

They turned into Kirk's cabin.

The Enterprise left orbit and began her long journey back towards Vulcan. The Vulcans, aided - not entirely efficiently - by the inexperienced Human scientists, began to process the information they had gathered about the Epsilon Equulei system. But Spock was patient with inexperience, and Seval was always ready to advise, the other Vulcans ready to explain, and the Humans found themselves learning more than they would have thought possible a few short days ago. It was getting late when Kirk went down to the lab in search of Spock.

"When I asked you to take on this job, I didn't mean you to kill yourself with overwork," he said. "You haven't stopped since you got back, and that's hours ago."

"Captain, I assure you, I am not tired," Spock protested.



"There's nothing to do that won't wait," Kirk insisted. He looked round the scientists. Even the Humans were absorbed. Well, that was hardly surprising; it was the first chance most of them had had to do anything since they joined the Enterprise, and they were revelling in it. "Everyone's off duty till tomorrow morning," Kirk went on. "That's an order."

He waited, glaring down a protesting look from one of the Vulcans - he didn't know which one. Seval looked at Spock.

"Do as the Captain says," Spock confirmed. He and Kirk watched the scientists leave. Kirk suspected that what would happen was that the discussion on their findings would continue in rec room and cabins, but at least they would be sitting back comfortably while they were talking.

"Now, you're coming with me, sir," Kirk continued. "I've had a meal for you brought to my quarters, and once you've eaten, you're going to sit still and relax."

"Captain -" Spock began. Kirk looked at him quizzically. "Thank you."

The meal was for two, and they ate leisurely, Kirk deliberately directing the conversation to trivial matters. This was a new experience for Spock, and he found himself appreciating it.

Then, the meal over, Kirk crossed to a cupboard.

"Do Vulcans drink?" he asked.

"On ceremonious occasions," Spock replied cautiously.

"Would you consider this one?" Kirk drew out a bottle of Scourian brandy and two glasses, and brought them over.

He was just pouring the brandy when the buzzer sounded. He looked up.

"Come."

McCoy walked in. "Oh, good," he said when he saw Spock. "You'll want to hear this too, and it'll save me looking for you. Riffin's O.K., Jim. He'll be off work for a couple of days - under protest, he keeps saying he doesn't work with his leg, and he's missing all sorts of opportunities to learn - but I want to make him rest. He got quite a nasty burn - I never knew ants packed quite such a punch."

"They were rather large ants," Spock put in. Kirk's lips twitched; he hadn't been sure if Spock would understand McCoy's idiom, but seemingly he did. McCoy went on.

"Sisel...I'm not so sure about him. I think I've got something that'll help, but it'll take a day or two to be sure." He hesitated, then went on. "There's a lot of trial and error involved - the sample of saliva didn't really show up anything that could help us. There were several unknown substances in it. We'll just have to wait and see if the concoction I came up with does help."

"Well, while you're waiting, come and have a brandy with us," Kirk suggested.

McCoy went over for a glass, and helped himself; but although he sat back, and seemed to relax, joining in the casual conversation, he didn't delay long, excusing himself after ten minutes and leaving to return to sickbay.

"If anyone can cure your man, McCoy can," Kirk said quietly when the surgeon had gone.

Spock nodded. "I am quite sure of it, Captain."

Sisal recovered. He regained consciousness within twenty-four hours, although it was over a week before McCoy discharged him from sickbay.

The processing of the data progressed. Within a fortnight, everything was tabulated, ready for delivery to Starfleet's scientific department, with a second set of tapes for delivery to Vulcan's Science Academy.

The night they finished work on it, Spock commented, "I expect I will be given charge of the team handling this data at the Science Academy."

"Looking forward to it?" Kirk asked.

Spock considered, aware of a sinking feeling in his belly. Once, he would have thought it a real challenge; now -

"It will be interesting," he said. He leaned back comfortably, picking up his glass; a new habit had established itself since the night they left Epsilon Equulei. Instead of meeting in the rec room, he had Kirk now sat in Kirk's quarters, and a nightly glass of brandy had become habitual. "It's your move."

"I know." Kirk spared the chess set a quick glance, then pushed it carefully away. "I don't really feel like playing chess tonight, Spock. Let's just talk."

"Certainly, Jim. What do you want to talk about?"

"Would you...tell me something about yourself?"

"There isn't much to tell," Spock replied. "My father was Vulcan ambassador to Earth for some years; while he was there, he met and married my mother, who was the daughter of one of his Human colleagues. They returned to Vulcan just before I was born. I grew up on Vulcan, joined the Science Academy as soon as I was old enough. This is my first time off-world; and it will probably be the last," he added, almost to himself.

"Have you any brothers or sisters?"

"No. The Vulcan-Human genetic cross makes offspring rare, for the two types are not really compatible..." His voice trailed off as he again remembered his unborn brother. Kirk looked sympathetically at him, divining the presence of some deep grief that the Vulcan would not express.

"I have a brother," he said. "But for as much as I ever see him, I'd be as well not to have one."

"What was it like when you were a boy - having a brother?"

"Well - Sam was quite a bit older than me. We weren't really all that close. We didn't get to know each other until I was well into my teens. I used to resent him a bit - he thought he could boss me about because he was older. Eventually, I was old enough to stand up for myself. It was after that that we got to know each other."

"Oh." It was a new thought. Would his unborn brother have resented him because of the six years between them? "Jim - tell me about growing up on Earth."

They sat long that night, and the glass of brandy became two, then three, while each gained a new insight into the other's way of life and the differences between their home planets.

The days passed quickly - too quickly. They were near Vulcan now, to Scotty's undisguised relief. He was getting progressively

worried about the repairs holding out. Kirk, while not exactly happy about the state of his ship, was less worried than Scotty - he had every faith in his Chief Engineer.

Kirk greeted Spock one night with a quiet,

"We'll reach Vulcan tomorrow."

Spock nodded.

"We'll miss you," Kirk went on.

"How long will you stay at Vulcan?"

"I'm not sure. We have to get the repair done properly, but that won't take long. What will cause a delay is waiting for a replacement Science Officer. I've already sent in a request for one, of course, but there's no word of one being available. And we can't really leave on another mission without at least one experienced scientist aboard."

"Will you get shore leave?"

"We could. I don't expect that many of the crew will want it, though; Vulcan's gravity and atmosphere don't suit Humans."

"I know. My mother still hasn't quite adapted to it. But if you think you could bear it for a few hours, I would be honoured if you would visit my home."

"Thank you, Spock. I would like that."

"And Jim - do you think Dr. McCoy would care to come as well?"

"I'm sure he would."

The visit was quite surprisingly successful, even though both Humans found the increased gravity and hot, dry, thin atmosphere too tiring for complete relaxation. They were made very welcome by Spock's family, and thoroughly enjoyed the hospitality. After the meal, where many of the dishes were clearly made up to suit Earth tastes, Spock took them out into the garden.

They sat amid an amazing array of flowering bushes talking quietly, all very conscious of the imminent parting. It came quicker than they had anticipated.

McCoy's communicator beeped; he flicked it open.

"McCoy here."

"Sorry to disturb you, Doctor, but there's an emergency case in sickbay. Nurse Chapel diagnoses peritonitis."

"I'll be right up. Give me two minutes."

Without bothering to close the communicator, he turned to Spock, and held out his hand. "Goodbye, sir. It's been nice knowing you. Thanks for the meal and everything, and give my apologies to your parents for rushing away without seeing them."

Spock nodded. "They will understand." He gripped McCoy's hand briefly.

As McCoy stepped away from them, Kirk said, "Warn the transporter room to stand by, Bones; I won't be long behind you."

McCoy nodded and raised his communicator. "Energise." He shimmered away.

Kirk turned to Spock. "I don't want to go yet, Spock, but I'm feeling the effects of the gravity and atmosphere."

Spock nodded again. "I understand, Jim."

"I...I've enjoyed having you aboard, Spock - I'll miss you."

"I enjoyed being on the Enterprise."

There was nothing else they could say. Kirk held out his hand; Spock took it in a long, firm grip.

Kirk swallowed a lump in his throat. It was an effort to say, "At least I can say goodbye to your parents."

Their hands fell apart. Spock turned to lead the way back to the house.

Kirk gave McCoy's apologies for his hasty departure, then made his own thanks and pulled out his communicator to go.

"Kirk to Enterprise. Ready to beam up."

"Standing by, sir."

He looked straight at Spock. "Goodbye, Spock."

"Live long, and prosper, Jim."

He raised the communicator again. "Energise."

The visitor gone, Sarek turned to Spock. "They appeared to be sensible men."

"You once told me that even the most tolerant of Humans was aware that we were of an alien race. Do you think that of Kirk and McCoy?"

"I must admit they gave me no reason to think it of them."

"They have been like that since the day they came in answer to our distress signal."

"You have been fortunate, meeting Humans with such an attitude."

"It is typical of the attitude aboard the Enterprise. Even one of the crewmen expressed regret that I was leaving. And my men and the Humans mixed very amicably. I saw no indication of racial intolerance at any time - with the possible exception of the Tellerite Science Officer."

"Tellerites are always the most difficult race to reason with. They have no understanding of logic."

The repairs were, indeed, soon effected, and Kirk settled down to await his replacement Science Officer. The Starbase on Vulcan was not encouraging, however, nor was the message they received from headquarters. There just wasn't one officer available who had the experience of the seniority to permit him to be promoted to full Science Officer. Kirk suspected that part of the trouble was the heavy turnover in scientific personnel aboard the Enterprise over the last few years. Experienced science crew just wouldn't want to know, for many of them would believe that the trouble in the Enterprise's science labs was due to more than a bad-tempered and impatient Science Officer. It began to look as if the ship would have to go on without a Science Officer. It was possible, but he shuddered to think of some of the problems that might arise...

They were given a fortnight's break while headquarters continued to check the records of the various assistant Science Officers in the hope that one of them would prove suitable for premature promotion. Kirk interpreted that as meaning, to see if we can persuade someone to transfer to a ship with as bad a reputation in the science department as yours has. It didn't help his depression.

He wandered round the ship, unable to settle his mind to anything. He couldn't remember ever feeling so depressed before in his entire life.

McCoy came to him one evening as he sat in his quarters not reading the book that he had put into the viewer.

McCoy glanced at the chessboard, sitting there with a half-finished game still laid out on it. "How about a drink, Jim?"

Kirk waved a languid hand. "Help yourself."

"How about you?"

Kirk shook his head. "I don't really feel like one."

"Yes you do." McCoy poured two, and gave one to Kirk.

The Captain took it, sipped it absently. "I'm beginning to wish they'd just let us go," he said abruptly. "This hanging about - it's getting me down. They aren't going to come up with a Science Officer for us, so why waste time?"

"That isn't the only thing, is it? Jim, we're all missing the Vulcans. Everyone's feeling depressed. But it won't be quite so bad if you admit that that's what's wrong."

"Bones - yes, you're right. That is what's wrong. I don't even know why I liked him so much. I just know there's a great big empty hole where he was."

McCoy nodded agreement. "Me, too. And I didn't see nearly as much of him as you did. Tell you something else - I'm missing Sisal almost as much. The men who were involved in the chess competition

are all pretty bad, too, and the scientists, and one of the security men - Shacter. They're all worse than the others. Not one of them can give a reason why he's missing the Vulcans - they just do. And that's something else that's odd. Until now, I've never met anyone who'd met a Vulcan who would admit to liking them at all."

"What's that supposed to mean?" It was only a flicker of interest.

"Vulcans are mildly telepathic, aren't they? Under normal circumstances, they don't care what you think about them, and they manage to make it pretty obvious. But these ones - we saved their lives. They were grateful. They wouldn't express it openly - they reject emotion, remember - but they must have radiated that gratitude on a telepathic level. We couldn't actually pick it up - but it did create a link between us, most strongly shown where there was a fairly close contact. Like working with them, playing with them..."

"Yes, I suppose that's possible. It would make us like them, and they would then respond to that liking in a continuing process. I did get the feeling that they were...very ready to respond to friendship." He finished his drink. "But friendly or not, they've gone now. We'll get over this once we're away from Vulcan."

"Will you?"

Kirk looked at him, his eyes sad, and made no response.

Uhura glanced round from her console. "Message from Vulcan Starbase, Captain."

"Put it on audio, Lieutenant."

The face of the base commander appeared on the screen. He looked worn and tired, as indeed he must be, living on a planet of such difficult conditions. Kirk thought of the few hours he had spent on the surface, and sympathised. No wonder the Vulcan Starbase had such a high turnover of commanders. You'd think Starfleet would have the sense to find a Vulcan for the position, passed unbidden through his mind.

"We have a temporary Science Officer for you, Captain," Commodore Ludovic said. "He is only a Lieutenant, and while he is experienced, he has no seniority. If you are satisfied with him, however, we will review his appointment in six months with a view to making the position permanent. If you are not satisfied with his performance, you will be assigned the first available Science Officer, and this man will become his assistant. Is that satisfactory?"

It would have to do. "Yes, sir."

"There will be three other experienced scientists coming aboard as well. That also should ease your staffing difficulties in the science department."

"Thank you, sir."

"The men will be beaming up immediately. Starbase out." The screen went blank.

"Take over, Mr. Wood." Kirk headed for the elevator.

He reached the transporter room as the four blue-clad shapes were just beginning to shimmer into visibility. They solidified, and began to leave the transporter chamber, while Kirk - and Kyle - stood staring at the pointid Vulcan ears, the slanting Vulcan eyebrows. Kirk took a deep breath as the leading Vulcan reached him.

"Spock." He reached out to grasp the other's arms. "You are our Science Officer?"

"Yes, Captain." His face had lightened into its almost-smile.

"Welcome aboard, Spock. Welcome home." With an effort, he turned his attention to the other three. He was somehow not surprised to recognise them, as well. Seval stood there. And Storl. And Smair. The other three unmarried Vulcans. He smiled at them.

"All of you."

They were given orders to leave first thing the next morning. With one last night that he could regard as leave before departure, Kirk left Wood in command while he relaxed in his quarters with Spock. McCoy, busy checking a late consignment of medical supplies might join them later, depending on how long the check took. The other Vulcans were already being involved in a new chess competition.

"You have given up everything you've worked for," Kirk said quietly.

"Not really," Spock replied. "As a child, I wanted to join Starfleet, become a Science Officer. I accepted my father's wish that I join the Vulcan Science Academy instead. But once I had experienced life on a Starship, as a Science Officer...I knew as soon as I went back to the Science Academy that I would never be able to settle to life there again. So I went to the Starbase, and asked if there was a Science Officer available for you. When they said no - I volunteered. They were...a little uncertain at first; eventually they decided to appoint me on a temporary basis. The other three decided independantly of me and of each other that they also wanted to return to the Enterprise. Our qualifications may be civilian ones, Jim, but they are good. I think - I hope - that you will be satisfied with us."

"And your parents?"

"I think my mother was not surprised. My father...does not like it, but that is only to be expected. He does understand that I found a challenge at Epsilon Equulei, and look to find further challenges elsewhere. They know that I tried the way of life that they wanted for me, and found it lacking. They are prepared - albeit unwillingly - to permit me to try the way of life that I want. I have promised that if I find I was mistaken, I will go back to the Science Academy. As a Chief Scientist, there will always be a place there for me. But I know already that I was right."

"I think you are, too, Spock."

Kirk got up, and went for the brandy. He passed a glass to Spock, then he pulled the chess set carefully into place.

"We've got a game to finish, Spock. It's your move."
