

Star Trek - TOS - Idic Plan

CHAPTER 1

Captain's log Stardate 4235.60

.....After our hostile contact with the unidentified vessel which tried to destroy us - and succeeded in damaging irreparably all our dilithium crystals, in use and reserve, by an as yet unexplained,...

Kirk glanced at Spock, who was concentrating on analyzing the readings that were recorded automatically during the attack

..energy field, we are cruising at 0.2 light speed to the nearest planet that Mr. Spock has detected up by the long range scanners as being plausibly a rich source of dilithium minerals. At present we do not know whether the planet has been charted by the Federation and we do not know if it is inhabited.

Jim paused, as he reflected on how often his log entry contained those words - if it is inhabited?. The vibrations of the Enterprise, leisurely cruising at such a slow speed seemed unnatural to him; it just didn't feel right. He noticeably missed the hum of the warp engines.

The noise of the turbo lift doors shook him out of his reverie. He would finish his log later, he decided when he saw that it was an unusually grim Dr. McCoy that entered the bridge and made his way towards him.

"Well?" Captain Kirk asked

McCoy shook his head wearily, but remained silent.

"Bones..!" Jim's voice pleaded

"I just don't know, Jim." Dr. McCoy looked even more miserable " He is stable, but..."

Chekov, who up to now was sitting quietly at his station, trying not to listen to the conversation going on behind him, could contain himself no longer. With anguish in his voice he turned round and demanded:

"Dr. McCoy, will he live?"

At his station, Spock, his face hidden from view by the computer hood, winced slightly at the strong raw emotions emanating from the normally reserved bridge crew. He tightened his mental block, preventing further physical discomfort that he inevitably felt at such times. Then, composed again, he too looked inquiringly at the doctor.

McCoy wished he could transport himself light years away. Away from these people he cared so much about, away from all the responsibilities he carried as Chief Medical Officer aboard a starship. "Damn it I am no magician!" he thought to himself, then realised that he MUST be one - that was part of his job.

"Chekov....he is stable, but the energy beam that hit him disrupted his cell structure pretty badly, and I don't know how much of that can be recovered in time before permanent deterioration sets in."

" Stasis field?" Kirk asked

"That would delay deterioration, but it would also stop regeneration, Jim." McCoy paused, then continued, while looking at Spock for confirmation. "If we could get him to Vulcan on time, the nerve-cell regeneration field developed by Dr. Corrigan and healer Sorel(1), would help him recover."

Spock inclined his head in agreement.

Jim swore under his breath; 'On time! - They had no warp drive, at this rate Vulcan was over 60 years away!'

"Keptin, may I wisit Sulu, please?" The strongly accented voice of Mr Chekov broke the heavy silence after McCoy's last pronouncement.

Jim looked at Bones, who nodded slightly.

It was highly unusual for an on-duty bridge personnel to request to leave his or her station for personal reasons. But this was an unusual situation, and an over-emotional crew member was not going to perform up to standard either.' Kirk thought as he got up and approached an apprehensive Chekov.

"Now, Mr. Chekov?" the Captain queried.

A thoroughly miserable looking Chekov nodded, then quietly added, " Yes Sir." He suddenly didn't care whether this would compromise his career in Starfleet. Not when his best friend might not live.

"Very well, Mr. Chekov. Call Mr. Daniels to take over from you. Then you are relieved of duty, until further notice."

Chekov felt a chill running down his spine "...till further notice.." So the Captain was not happy with him, oh well, he had already made his decision... These unhappy thoughts kept running through his mind as he paged his relief- officer. Then, with Dr. McCoy, he left the bridge for sick- bay.

Jim sat at his desk, a small glass of untouched brandy in his hand. He looked up from the golden brown liquid in his glass into the deep dark brown eyes of his First Officer sitting opposite him.

"What do we know about this planet, Mr. Spock?"

"The information available to us is not very accurate, Captain. The Federation's first log of this planet is from approximately 50 years ago. The planet, designated P11265, was then in a state of protracted destructive war between its many tribal-like groups. It was decided then that the peoples of this planet were not ready for contact with the Federation ,and the planet has been placed on interdict status 6b/sa. Since then, the planet seems to have been forgotten by the federation authorities. There have been unconfirmed contacts with the inhabitants of this planet by various free-traders."

"Didn't anyone stop these contacts, if an interdict status was in force?" Jim interrupted.

"Negative. When Star Fleet did not intervene in the first instance, the number of contacts increased in frequency. It is known that even Vulcan merchants have been to P11265, which is now evidently at peace." Spock paused, raised an eyebrow and continued, "No one, however, who has been there seems forthcoming about the planet."

"So we have to break General Order 1, if we go there, Spock."

"Negative, Captain."

"What? How so?"

"The order of no contact has expired 13 months ago, and has not been renewed. As I said before, it seems to be a forgotten planet, at least by Star Fleet."

"Well, at least that's one thing in our favour, Spock. Have you seen Sulu recently?"

"Forty five minutes ago. I initiated a mind meld."

Jim looked surprised at that information.

"Dr. McCoy wanted to know how aware Mr. Sulu was, Captain." elaborated Spock at Jim's surprised look.

"And...?"

"He is quite aware, Captain." Spock said softly.

"You mean, he is fully conscious, but can't communicate?" asked Jim with concern in his voice.

"Yes, he is awake and fully conscious but he cannot hear, see or feel anything. Apart from within his brain, all neural transmission has ceased. He is undergoing total sensory deprivation." At the anguished look on his Captain's face, Spock hastened to add, "He does not feel any pain. And I will mind touch him every day, Jim, to prevent insanity."

"Won't that be uncomfortable for you, Spock?"

"Jim, it is not a full mind meld like we have...occasionally....shared. It is sufficient to touch Sulu telepathically, to ease his...aloneness." Spock finished and wished that this conversation was over. He knew that Jim was distressed by the occurrences over the past few days however, and therefore let his personal shield slip a little, acknowledging openly his friendship to this special human.

Jim Kirk was aware of Spock's support and appreciated it. He was about to take advantage of this rare openness when the terminal beeped for attention. At the beep, Spock's demeanour changed and his calm efficient First Officer replaced the deep and sensitive friend the Vulcan could be to his Captain.

Jim flicked on the communications on his console. The face of Mr. Yehudy Offer, the replacement helmsman appeared before him.

"Yes Lieutenant Offer, what is it?" Jim tried to keep the annoyance from his voice at the illogical disappointment he felt at being interrupted and not seeing Sulu at the helm.

"Captain, you asked to be notified when we come into visual contact with the planet."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Offer, we'll be on the bridge momentarily." With a flick of the hand Jim switched communications off.

"Well, Spock, let's hope we have something to trade with these people." He said, raising from the chair, regarded the untouched brandy for a moment and, followed by Spock, hastened to the bridge.

Lieutenant Offer frowned as the communication with his Captain was cut off. Although Sulu was his superior, he was also his friend. And it felt unfamiliar to be on duty on the bridge during the main shift, without Sulu's and Chekov's presence. He glanced surreptitiously at the navigator seated beside him, Ensign LaPierre. A woman of great beauty, but also of inflexible convictions that have often led to heated disagreements between the two of them. It was Sulu who would, in his cheerful manner, quieten things down between them, before they could get out of hand. Now they had to work side by side. He hoped that they both were professional enough, to do that without the near hatred that LaPierre felt for him surfacing. No, not hatred for him as such, but for what he believed, and did not hide. He could not understand that LaPierre had managed to get into Starfleet, with her inflexible outlook on things, her belief that all other but her own ideology was inferior. Her belief that any beings but her own were lower on the scale.

He had asked her once, what she was doing on a Starship, with its multi-racial complement, and its ideology of contacting new races. He was rendered speechless by her reply: I am here to observe the unfortunate inferiors, like you, and where possible to show them The Way.

The bridge doors opened and closed behind him. He felt, rather than saw, the presence of the commanding and executive officer on the bridge.

"Status report, Mr. Offer."

"We are 22.07 minutes from attaining orbit, Captain."

Captain Kirk settled himself in his chair, and regarded the approaching planet on the screen. Most planets looked tranquil and calm from space, regardless what was happening on their surface, but this planet looked different. Spaceships of varying designs, colours and sizes were in orbit round the planet, in a rather disorderly manner.

"Mr. Spock?" Jim looked towards the science station.

"There are 34,..." Spock's eyebrow rose, he hesitated then turned round to face his Captain "point-36 ships in orbit, Captain, and two approaching, including the Enterprise."

Jim looked with consternation at his Science Officer.

"Point 36 ships!?! Mr. Spock, is that a joke?"

"Captain, there is no need to be insulting." Spock said levelly. "Sensor analysis shows that the mass of orbiting debris is equivalent to .36 of an average space-ship."

"You could have said so in the first place." Jim Kirk looked at Spock, frowning, until he recognised a humourous twinkle in Spock's eye.

"Captain, I believe I just did."

"So what happened to the other 0.64 of the ship?"

"Unknown."

Jim looked pensive, then shrugged his shoulders and turned to his communications officer.

"Uhura, communications?"

After a few seconds in which Lt Uhura depressed and flicked a large number of switches on her console with a musician's precision, she answered; "Incoming, Captain." And before Kirk could ask to relay it, she continued, "They are giving us co-ordinates for orbit, Captain." She turned to look inquiringly at the Captain.

"Acknowledge and relay to navigation, please."

"Yes sir."

"I have them, Lieutenant." acknowledged LaPierre.

"Sir," Uhura looked startled at her Captain.

"Yes Uhura, what is it?"

"The K'S'vaits, that's what they call themselves, have informed us that it will cost us 4589 mofeds, or the equivalent thereof per planet rotation, for our parking space!" Uhura looked confused as she relayed that information.

"Interesting," commented Spock.

"Sir, what is a Parking-space, and how can they charge us for orbiting their planet?" asked a somewhat irked ensign LaPierre.

Jim heard a soft chuckle behind him. He turned round to see that McCoy had arrived on the bridge and had taken up his usual position.

"Clever people," commented McCoy and continued to explain to the ensign what a 'parking space' meant and the ancient use of 'parking meters, clamps, tickets' and so on.

"I never knew you were such an historian, Bones," commented Kirk somewhat dryly. Then turned to Spock. "There must be something worthwhile on that planet if they can charge for orbit and their parking lot is so full."

"Uhura, can you raise someone to communicate with?"

"Just a moment, Sir....."

The view of the busy planet changed to show two humanoid but radically different beings.

"Welcome to our humble world. We, K'S'vaits greet you. I am K'L'sak and this is my secretary, K'L'trok. What can we trade?" K'L'sak ended in a particularly non-grammatical form of Standard.

"Greetings, I am Captain James T. Kirk of the USS Enterprise, we inde...." He was cut short at a strange

sound origination from K'L'trok.

"You are of the Federation Police force?" demanded K'L'trok.

"We are of Starfleet, which is not a police force, although we do help in enforcing Federation Law."

"You are, then, here to stop traders coming to our world?"

"No, not at all, that resolution is not applicable any longer. We are here to trade." Jim said somewhat impatiently.

"Aah, then greetings once more, what is it that you wish?"

"We need some dilithium crystals."

"That will be no problem. Tell us the quantity. Beam down to following co-ordinates and we will tell you our price," finished a satisfied K'L'trok, abruptly ending the communications.

"Well...that seemed relatively straight forward," drawled McCoy from behind Jim.

"Hmmm, yes, but...no, never mind," Jim half mused.

"Captain, the two beings said - we the K'S'vaits - yet they seemed of different origins," Spock said as he stepped down to Kirk's side.

"Yes, peculiar, but we do not have time to spend in idle speculation. Let's get the crystals and get to Vulcan."

"Hardly idle, Captain," Spock protested gently as he followed Kirk and McCoy to the turbolift.

"Mr. Sulu you have the...." Jim stopped in mid track. Damn! He thought, looked round the bridge and his steady gaze settled on Uhura. "Lieutenant Uhura, you have the conn." He said and escaped into the waiting lift.

CHAPTER 2

They materialised into a glass-like, icositrahedral, dome. The clear material allowed a full view of their immediate surroundings. McCoy gave a gasp in amazement, while Spock's eyebrow climbed up and under his fringe. Their dome was surrounded by other similar domes, translucent, but each a different shade or colour. In and around the domes were peoples of all different colours, sizes, shapes and features.

"Welcome," the voice of K'L'trok interrupted their observations.

"K'L'trok, excuse my curiosity, but are all these people from your planet?" asked a fascinated McCoy, ignoring Kirk's warning look.

"You are?" K'L'trok stared at him.

"Leonard McCoy, Chief Medical Officer of the Enterprise."

" You and Kirk are humans, yes?" queried their host.

Jim inclined his head and the K'S'vait looked puzzled.

"You are not humans?" he said disbelievingly.

"Captain Kirk and Doctor McCoy are both from Earth, they are indeed humans. The forward inclination of the head indicates an affirmative state," the Vulcan officer elaborated.

"Yes, of course, forgive me, I had forgotten." K'L'trok looked excited, " Humans, we indeed have Crystals and we now know you have what we want." He turned to address McCoy: "Yes, most of the people you see around you are K'S'vaits. We relish diversity."

At this Spock's eyebrow again performed a rapid ascent, while K'L'trok now turned his attention to the Vulcan, with what looked like a mischievous grin.

"Come to my chamber, and I shall explain. That will make our request also possible."

He led them through a maze of corridors, passing large numbers of various humanoids. They came to a smaller and opaque dome that provided total privacy from the outside world. In the dome was a round table-like structure around which were arranged a variety of chairs taken from many different cultures. Spock instantly recognised a typical Vulcan chair, with its high straight back, and flat seat, yet decorated with pleasing simple ornaments. When K'L'trok indicated that they should be seated, Spock seated himself on the Vulcan chair with (he admitted wryly to himself) some pleasure. Kirk and McCoy found chairs that resembled those of earth-type seats. The K'S'vait sat on a four-legged parabolic structure.

When all were seated, offered and declined refreshment, K'L'trok began his explanation.

"Many years ago our world was divided into numerous states, each with their own laws, beliefs and culture. Each state thinking that it was most important, and the others somehow inferior to it. There was little if any contact between the states. Misconceptions about each other thus arose. This state of affairs culminated into a global war in which we nearly became extinct. One man, who had travelled off-World, before the war started, -oh yes, some of us ventured out of our system in visiting ships - spent some time on Vulcan." K'L'trok inclined his head towards Spock, who listened with interest. "He returned, during the fiercest most destructive era of the war years. This man, whom we call Master, started teaching the way of peace and most importantly the pleasure in diversity. Our world was war-weary and he quickly had a large following. War ended and it was decided that the Master would become chieftain of all the nations."

K'L'trok paused, looked at each of his listeners, and then with pride shining through his orange eyes continued.

"The Master postulated a brilliant solution to our problem, one that ensured that no more war would be fought in the name of difference. He made a Law: that no person was allowed to mate with another from the same nation. We, subsequently, built on the Master's Law, and now we must increase diversity by mating with off-worlders whenever possible," Finished K'L'trok with a triumphant sweep of his hand.

The officers of the Enterprise sat in stunned silence. After a few moments Dr. McCoy muttered "This is taking IDIC a bit too far," then cleared his throat and asked:

"But surely, not all beings can produce viable offspring?"

"We have the most advanced genetic labs in the whole Universe. We can produce offspring from any type of paired peoples," boasted K'L'trok, while Spock's eyebrow rose sceptically and he murmured softly: "Indeed."

"How do you get the variety of beings, when you yourself are not yet space travellers?" asked Jim, still trying to digest the concept.

The K'S'vait produced a noise resembling a cough, his mouth was open, showing light-blue sharp teeth.

'He is laughing', Jim realised.

When K'L'trok calmed down somewhat, he blurted out:

"Oh, Captain, we do not need to go anywhere, we have people coming to us. We trade!"

"Trade?!?!" McCoy asked

"Yes, gentle-human. We trade our resources for Beings, often for those that others refer to as Slaves. We find these Beings are happy to stay, mate, and rear their offspring here. But we also get ships who bring volunteers who stay, and we reward them, or their ships commanders with gifts of their desires." A light pause. "That will be the category you fall in my gentle-captain. You need dilithium crystals. We need Humans."

"WHAT?" McCoy spluttered, "We do not deal with lives! This is ridi.."

"Bones!" snapped Jim, enforcing his command with a look.

"Is there no other way we can pay you?" Kirk asked.

"No. We will not accept any other form of payment for the dilithium, and for your parking space."

"I was under the impression that you asked for 4589 mofeds, or the equivalent thereof and not humans," stated Spock calmly.

"Well, yes, but do you have mofeds, gentle-Vulcan?" When Spock declined to answer, K'L'trok continued with a rueful grin: "Our equivalent consists of beings."

"Beings ain't got price-tags on them!" fumed McCoy before Jim could stop him.

"How do you propose to prevent us from leaving your orbit?" queried an annoyed and worried Captain Kirk.

"We have our ways, Captain, rest assured. No vessel leaves without paying their parking fees."

"Does that account for the large number of vessels in your orbit then?" Jim asked soberly, remembering Spock's 0.36 of a vessel. He stood up ready to leave.

Again the K'S'vait laughed.

"No, it is not necessary, most ships find that there is a price-tag as you called it, Doctor, on most beings,

and a relatively cheap one. We offer a good life. I myself am the product of a K'S'vait and Vulcan."

At this two pair of eyebrows rose, Spock's and Dr. McCoy's.

"You do not seem to possess any characteristics of a Vulcan, sir," stated Spock.

K'L'trok merely shrugged, "Obviously Vulcan characteristics must be coded for by recessive genes. I do however possess limited telepathic abilities."

McCoy was forced to smile at this statement, knowing that Spock, although it was not apparent, was irked.

"We must go back to our ship, and consider your terms," Jim said whipping out his communicator.

"Two humans will be enough to cover six dilithium crystals and all your parking fees," K'L'trok stated with finality in his voice.

Silently the three Starfleet officers dematerialised from the opaque dome, leaving a thoughtful K'L'trok behind and rematerialised on the Enterprise a few micro-seconds later.

"Call a general meeting in 30 minutes of all current bridge officers, including Mr. Chekov, Mr. Scott, and the xenopsychologist, what's her name?" Jim ordered Spock.

"Lieutenant Kronika, Sir."

"Yes, her," and Jim Kirk strode out of the transporter room indicating to McCoy that he was to accompany him.

McCoy started to follow Jim, but then stopped and gave Spock a mischievous look.

"Something wrong, Doctor?" Spock asked, although he suspected that it would have been more prudent to remain silent.

"There does not seem to be anything recessive about those pointed ears of yours, Spock."

"Why, thank you, Doctor," Spock answered levelly.

CHAPTER 3

The soft humming and clicking of the life support systems and an occasional quiet beep from the overhead diagnostic control was the only noise breaking the silence of Sulu's room in sickbay. Spock rose from the edge of the bed. He had quickly and efficiently passed the current state of ship-affairs on to Sulu, and ordered the lieutenant to consider the problems. He knew that this would keep the helmsman's mind occupied, thus helping to prevent mental imbalance from setting in.

Only ten minutes left to the briefing, he noted as he left Sulu's room. Passing the door to McCoy's office, he saw that the doctor was sitting, bent over his desk with his head in his hands. Spock paused.

"Sulu has indicated to me that his medications are making him ill. Obviously it is not only my recessive genes that are affected by your potions, Doctor," Spock said trying to sound argumentative.

When McCoy only lifted his head and nodded, Spock became concerned. This emotion - desperation - was obviously critical in McCoy. He stepped into the doctor's office.

"Doctor, we have the meeting...soon," he said gently.

"What's the use Spock, we can't trade people, so now on top of everything, we are stuck here, in this God damn hell hole! While I can't do anything for Sulu!" McCoy banged his fist against his desk. A pile of stacked data-chips quivered and spilt onto the floor.

Spock stooped down to retrieve them.

"Doctor, there are always alternatives. And you should know that the Captain will formulate a plan. As for the parking fee, our replicators can produce enough mofeds for a life time of parking."

McCoy only glowered at him.

"Yeah, but we still need Dilithium, and even then it may well be TOO LATE for Sulu," he growled.

Spock realised that there was nothing more he could do to alleviate McCoy's desperation at not being able to help his patient. Therefore, as he put the neatly stacked data-chips back on McCoy's desk and started for the door, he said:

"We will be TOO LATE for the briefing if we do not go now, Doctor."

Captain Kirk looked round at the people present in the briefing room. Spock was seated at his usual place, beside the computer's main controls. Next to him a withdrawn Chekov, then McCoy, looking totally despondent, Scotty, and two people that normally would not be there, Mr. Offer and the beautiful ensign LaPierre who seemed to be keeping a hold on her obvious anger. Uhura was minding the bridge.

They were silently digesting Spock's concisely delivered report of what had happened planet side.

"Well, gentlemen, any suggestions?"

"It's utterly disgusting! This should not be allowed to go on!" Ensign LaPierre was outraged.

"Why? For you everything that is not your personal religion is disgusting." Lt. Offer exploded before he remembered where and with whom he was. "It seems to me that the very idea of what we say we seek, in other words, Infinite Diversity, is on trial here. What is so wrong with what these people are doing?" he finished with a gesture of exasperation.

"Mr. Offer, the actual concept is, if strange, not condemned. It is rather the trade in living-sentient beings that concerns us," Captain Kirk answered, although to himself he silently admitted that the idea of so much forced inter-species breeding unsettled him thoroughly.

"There are a number of issues that have to be analysed, before we can accept or reject their definition of Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations."

Spock steeped his fingers thoughtfully, and when he noticed that there was a marked interest in his statement he continued.

"First of all, whether increasing Diversity in this artificial manner is not in effect contributing to Chaos, and ultimately diminishing the appreciation of Infinite Diversity in its Infinite Combinations - as these combinations are blurring the line of diversity. Surak's formulated IDIC does not necessarily mean embracing other cultures to the detriment of one's own. Rather, the purpose is to experience intellectual satisfaction in, and learn from, The Diversity. It does not imply either, to go and create Diversity, although that can be a natural result in some instances." He added wryly: "Secondly, and I think you too have noticed it, Captain, these people say they have embraced IDIC to prevent war originating from the belief that one Way is better than another." As Spock said this, his gaze travelled and settled on ensign LaPierre. "But the K'S'vaits still have a superiority complex towards non-K'S'vaits, discernible by some of K'L'trok's statements. And thirdly," he quickly continued before McCoy could interrupt with some new comment about recessive genes, "there is the manner of obtaining out-world material for creating this Diversity."

"Whether we accept their IDIC concept or not is irrelevant at this moment. We must have those dilithium crystals. But we will not trade in human or any other beings," stated the Captain in a no-nonsense tone.

"Keptin, permission to go and exchange myself for the crystals."

"Permission denied. Mr Chekov." Jim had expected something like that from Chekov; what he had not, however, was the persistency of his navigator.

"But, Keptin, I must go. Sulu will die. I must.." Chekov rose from his seat.

"Mr. Chekov! You will sit down and be quiet, or I will have you confined to your quarters," the Captain's voice sliced through Chekov's protests.

"But, Sir,.. I cannot stand by and do nothing, I volunteer to..." Chekov faltered when he met the Captain's furious stare.

"Mr Chekov, either you will promise me that you will do nothing against my direct orders, or I will have you put into the brig! Is that understood?" the Captain stressed the last three words.

"Yes Sir," Chekov reluctantly sat down.

"Captain, I assume the K'S'vaits only want Humans to produce diverse offspring. We could give them human genetic material instead of Humans." The calm steady voice of Spock made a welcome contrast to Chekov's emotional outburst.

"Bones..?"

"It is feasible, Jim. In the 21th century it was done on Earth all the time, to enable some parents to have children when otherwise they could not," McCoy added.

"Until, if my memory serves me correctly, Doctor, the production via this route led to couples not wanting to have children of their own, but those that had genetic material from exceptionally gifted individuals only. Especially in what was then referred to as the USA, Japan and Western Europe. A high price was paid to these individuals to donate their spermatozoids or ova. Unwanted children were abandoned and a lucrative market arose in the reproductive material until it was scientifically proven that a gifted child did not necessarily arise from gifted parentage. And to combat the increase of the orphans, the respective governments prohibited the use of this technique to all but a few couples which had been medically

proven incapable of conception."

"Your memory never fails you, Spock, especially when it comes down to reminding us of human failings," hurred McCoy.

Only Jim noticed the fleeting satisfaction in Spock's eyes when McCoy rose to the bait. A clear indication that the Doctor was becoming less despondent.

"Any further comments on this proposal?"

"Aye, we should try and convince them quickly, Sair, we need tha dilithium." Scotty sounded worried.

"I concur, Captain," added Spock soberly.

"Very well. Dr. McCoy and I will beam down to discuss the matter with K'L'trok. Mr Spock, take care of my ship." Jim turned to face his rebellious navigator. "Mr. Chekov, you are to report to Sickbay and keep an eye on Mr. Sulu, until we return, is that clear?"

"Yes, Keptin"

"Dismissed." As Jim rose about to leave he caught sight of Lieutenant Offer, and made up his mind to include the enigmatic helmsman in the landing party. He seemed more openminded than all of them. It was also curiosity about the helmsman that made him decide to have him come along.

"Mr. Offer, you will accompany us," he said to the retreating back of the young officer.

"Thank you, sir," Offer answered, pleasantly surprised. He was intensely curious about these IDIC-people.

In the relatively deserted corridors, one human female, with a set goal in her mind, made her way, silently and unobserved, to the nearest auxiliary transporter room. It was empty. She had found out the code that would unlock the computer and allow her to operate the transporter a few months ago. Quickly she keyed in the code, worried for a moment that it might have recently been changed. But the red-lit "Locked" box flickered and dimmed, as, at the same time, the blue box indicating "READY" lit up. She gave a quiet sigh of relief, and keyed in the coordinates that she had memorised from the communications on the bridge. Quickly she pulled the correct set of levers and jumped onto the transporter pad. In milliseconds the familiar shimmering enveloped her body as she dissolved into her component atoms and energies, only to be rematerialised seconds later on the planet. There, the young woman went in search of the nearest large gathering of humanoids that she could find.

A lone light marked with the letters TransAux2 flicked on and off, on the helm's console. The momentary flicker went unnoticed by the helmsman on duty.

CHAPTER 4

The Captain, Dr. McCoy and Lieutenant Offer materialised in to what seemed to be the waiting dome of K'L'troks office. There they were asked by a humanoid woman of unrecognisable origins, to wait for K'L'trok who was detained by a trading delegation from the artisan-colony of the planet named Havel, after a 20th century Earth play-wright who had successfully led a peaceful revolution to free his country

from the iron grip of dictatorship. These Havelians, all descendants from that small Earth- country, relied heavily on trade for all their necessary nano-technological provisions. It bothered Captain Kirk, who always had held an admiration for the actual president Havel, to realise that these people were now obviously trading themselves to satisfy their basic needs. Suddenly a thought hit him - "But Havelians were pure humans. Surely then the K'S'vaits had no need for further Humans! Or have the Havelians deviated so far from their original ideologies that they would engage in SLAVE- trading!" He would have to find out. Jim put his hand on his stomach. The whole situation was giving him a large dose of indigestion. An ulcer was just waiting to happen.

Restlessly Jim wondered round the dome, oblivious to McCoys pursuing concerned gaze. Jim's own eyes were drawn over to where Lieutenant Offer was leaning against the table-like structure. The lieutenant seemed totally relaxed. He was observing the multitude of beings, visible through the dome walls. A look of wonderment, inspired by a child-like curiosity played across his face. A thin but satisfied smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. One hand played thoughtlessly with the non-regulation kippa pinned on top of his curly hair.

"Mr. Offer, you seem to find this situation interesting and it does not seem to bother you at all - I find THAT interesting. Especially with respect to the fact that you profess yourself to practice your religious belief," Jim said suddenly and indicated the kippa. McCoy now strolled over to join them.

Lieutenant Offer grinned. He unpinned the non-regulation piece of clothing and stuffed it irreverently into a pocket.

"Sorry, Captain," and when Jim started to say that he didn't mind people's religious accessories as long as they did not interfere with their duty, Lieutenant Offer hastened to explain.

"Captain, when I came aboard the Enterprise, I never wore the Kippa, except during prayer-gatherings. But when I met LaPierre, I took to wearing it....just to annoy her," he finished sheepishly.

"That still doesn't explain to me your near approval of this culture."

"Captain, although I was brought up in MY religion and culture, that doesn't mean that I think it is the ONLY way to follow. I was taught to rejoice in Diversity as well. We even have a blessing which is recited upon encountering diversity; 'Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melech haolam. mishane ha'brijot.' Which means; 'Blessed are you, the lord our God, King of the Universe, who varies the forms of his creatures.' And personally I see tolerance for other beings and ideas as immensely important. That is my credo. I would not hesitate to mate outside my belief or culture, and respect my partner's differences. I would expect she would respect mine. Then our children could be taught both ways which I hope would enrich them and enlarge their perspective about this Galaxy," finished a now somewhat embarrassed Offer.

"Bravo!" the unexpected exclamation came from the entrance to the dome. K'L'trok stood there in a dazzling robe created by a multitude of shades of radiant colours. He slowly came towards them, a self-assured and content look on his face.

"Is this one of the Humans you bring us, Captain? I like your choice - this is a prime candidate." He added inspecting Lieutenant Offer from top to bottom.

"K'L'trok, we need to talk," said Jim Kirk, trying to hold on to his temper. Just the thought of considering someone like lieutenant Offer as a tradeable commodity, made him see red.

K'L'trok sighed and shook his head from one shoulder to the other and back again several times. "Very well, gentle-captain, please come this way," and led them to the same room they had their first meeting in.

Nobody took any notice of the human female, as she made her way towards the group of young K'S'vaits, who were chatting idly. These K'S'vaits happened to be a group of students from the college of Genotechnical-philosophy and Xenobioecology.

They had just finished a class on the Master's Law, and were debating the advantages and disadvantages of said Law. From some of the threads of conversation, that the universal translator started to decode, the young woman got the impression that not all these K'S'vaits agreed with the Law.

LaPierre was overjoyed. Obviously it was her destiny that she should be able to come here at this time and show these poor beings the True and Only Way. The way of Unity, the Reality, The way of One.

As the quality of the translation improved, she tried to engage some of the more promising students in conversation, slowly introducing ideas inherent in her belief. They seemed to consider these ideas, discuss them, even accept them, but then they would end the discussion by a fool-proof argument against them. This debate between the students and the unsuspecting woman went on until it dawned on her that these beings were considering all her arguments purely as a form of intellectual exercise. She was so engrossed in her discussions that she did not notice one K'S'vait observing her with great interest. He now made his way towards her.

"Pardon, but you are a stranger here, are you not?"

She spun round and faced a tall being with handsome Romulan-like facial features.

"Come with me," he said taking her by the arm.

She twisted free of his hold: "Why should I?"

"Because you seem to have similar ideas to mine and my friends. Because you are from the Federation ship, currently in orbit round this prison. You could help us enormously. But we cannot talk here." he finished while propelling her to a ground-vehicle.

There were few people on the bridge. Spock was at his science station analysing complete spectral scans of the planet rotating leisurely below. It was indeed a planet rich in numerous raw materials in demand by many space-faring cultures for their potentially high energy output, dilithium being only one of them.

"Sickbay to bridge," Christine Chapel's disembodied voice broke the calm of the bridge.

Spock took a few long strides to the Captain's chair, pressed the desired switch: "Spock here."

"Mr. Spock, we must get Dr. McCoy back. Sulu seems to be deteriorating. His vital signs are fluctuating alarmingly." The urgency in her voice stressed the exigency of the situation.

"Acknowledged, Spock out. Uhura contact the Captain and Dr. McCoy."

"Yes Sir."

Spock waited calmly as Uhura's fingers danced over the comm. board. A minute passed, then another.

"Sir, I can't raise them. There is too much interference from the other ships and also from the planet itself to be able to penetrate to where they are." Uhura turned apologetically towards Spock.

"I was afraid of that. My recent analysis indicated that the Main Dome is made of a high energy single crystal of Urascium. Keep trying, Lieutenant."

Spock did not like the way this situation was developing. Logically he should stay on the bridge, while the Captain was unavailable and out of contact. Logically he should not submit himself, as the senior officer, to a potentially disrupting experience such as the mind meld. But Mr. Sulu's chance of living may depend on the only contact he had with the outside world: Spock. It was extraordinary, in fact, that Mr. Sulu had not reached this withdrawal state earlier. Total sensory deprivation was known to drive people mad in a very short time, and had been used on many worlds as a form of torture. Should he disregard his duties and try to help Mr. Sulu? After all, the well-being of the crew was also his responsibility. In this it did differ from the last time he was faced with this kind of decision, when only his blood could save his father's life. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. But in this instance there was, at present, only the pressing need of Mr. Sulu.

"Anything, Lieutenant?"

"No, Sir, I'm trying to cross-circuit and redirect the nano-waves with the pico-hertz frequency, to penetrate the anisotropic vibrational molecular energies of the dome. That should enable me to make contact soon."

"Very well, Lieutenant. I will be in Sickbay. Notify Mr. Scott of the situation."

"Yes Sir, and...Sir..?"

"Yes Lieutenant?"

"Nothing, Sir."

Sulu's room was filled with alarms bleeping for attention, and flashing lights warning that his condition was rapidly becoming worse.

Christine Chapel was attempting to stabilise her patient with injections of digoxinglycoside to stimulate the heart and anapertofin to increase brain-wave activity. Chekov hovered nervously round Sulu's bed.

"Condition?" enquired Mr. Spock upon entering.

"Deteriorating fast. Did you contact Dr. McCoy?" asked an anxious Chapel.

"Lieutenant Uhura is doing that. Nurse, allow me some privacy - I shall use the mind meld on Mr. Sulu."

"Mr. Spock, are you sure? It could be very dangerous in his current state."

"His current state is the very reason for attempting the mind-meld. Please, leave us alone, if medically possible." Chapel nodded. Chekov looked somewhat reluctant. "Now Mr. Chekov." Spock said quietly but with such force of command that the ensign obeyed immediately.

Before Chapel left she had redirected the life support indicator alarms and diagnostic computer readings to McCoy's office, where she could keep an eye on them. A blessed silence descended on the room.

Spock sat on Sulu's bed and composed himself. Long fingers touched Sulu's face, positioning themselves with precision over the cranial nerve centres. He entered carefully. Then reached down deeper into Sulu's mind. He met no resistance. In fact, he met nothing at all. He reached deeper, allowing his own shields to slip so that he could search for Sulu's self. At last he felt Sulu's tenuous consciousness, weak - about to give up life, to depart, to embrace the mysteries of death.

"SULU! - Open to me, Hikaru. Let me in...closer now." Spock felt feeble resistance. Again he reached, deeper and deeper, through the enveloping darkness. He touched Sulu's consciousness, took hold of it and held it. He let Sulu know that he wasn't alone, he debated, argued with the thin-thread that was left of Sulu. Telling him that the Captain, Chekov, Uhura needed him. He allowed Sulu to breach his own privacy, showing him part of his mind. Suddenly Sulu's mind came alive. Unwittingly it violated the innermost-self of Spock, intruding unbearably. Spock blocked, but his considerable Vulcan discipline allowed him to do it gently. He withdrew slowly and carefully from the deep meld, alleviating Sulu's feeling of non-existence.

The readings on the life-support and diagnostic systems had stabilised. Chapel gave a deep sigh of relief and allowed herself a small smile.

Dr. McCoy burst into Sickbay just in time to see a grey- faced Vulcan staggering, trying to get up from Sulu's bed and managing at last to stand.

"What the hell is going on? What are you up to, Spock?" he exploded, concern making him angry.

"Up to, Doctor?" Spock managed, in a hoarse voice, much to his consternation. "I shall leave you now with your patient."

"You are not going anywhere in your state, Spock, except to lie down on the bed next to Sulu's." McCoy barred his way.

"Doctor, I do not have the time to argue at present," Spock said in a stronger voice.

"Spock.....," McCoy warned dangerously.

"Thank you for your professional concern, but now I must return to the bridge," Spock said dispassionately, then neatly side-stepped the doctor and slipped out before the good doctor could gather his breath for an appropriate reply.

"Damn that green-blooded, pointy-eared Vulcan!" he exclaimed instead, concern for both Sulu and Spock gnawing at him. He turned towards nurse Chapel, who was once again attending to the Lieutenant's needs.

"In the name of Great Galaxies, what happened here, Christine?" he snapped.

Captain Kirk strode onto the bridge angry. Angry because the meeting with K'L'trok was fruitless. Angry because he felt unable to do anything about the situation. Angry because he was worried about Sulu, about the best helmsman he had ever had, and a loyal friend. He recalled the many times that Hikaru's fast responses had saved them from becoming energy waves spread out in space. He remembered the time that Sulu's preoccupation with playing tank-games had saved them from attack by 7 Klingon ships, who badly wanted to prevent the Enterprise from testing out K'tlk's inversion drive(2). Still deep in thought, he called on Mr. Spock to report the status of the ship, as the preliminary to a discussion about the present problem. When no immediate acknowledgement came, he realised that his first officer was absent. He was about to turn to Uhura for an explanation, when Mr Spock walked onto the bridge, looking decidedly unwell for a Vulcan. In his pent up anger, frustration and an added worry upon seeing the Vulcan in this state, Jim snapped furiously:

"What the devil have you been doing off the bridge at a time like this!?!"

Spock flinched inwardly. The full force of his Captain's mixed emotions penetrated his weakened mind-shields and physically assaulting his senses. He mustered all his energy to reply stiffly while making his way back to his station:

"The logic of the situation dictated a mind-meld with Mr. Sulu, to circumvent his death. Sir."

The anger that had gripped the Captain, upon not finding Spock on the bridge, was now replaced immediately by guilt. Venting anger and frustration on his most trustworthy officer, just because he wasn't there when Jim wanted to talk to him, was bad indeed. He should have known that Spock would have had a very good reason to abandon his duties on the bridge. Captain Kirk punched his communication toggle, contacted sickbay and quietly got the whole story out of Chapel and McCoy.

"Thanks, keep me informed, Bones," he ended.

He looked towards where Spock, still grey and withdrawn, had resumed his analysis of the Planet's ionosphere. Jim rose and approached Spock.

"Are you feeling alright, Mr. Spock?" he asked quietly

"I am well, Captain."

'And they say Vulcans never lie,' Jim thought and said:

"Thank you for what you did for Mr. Sulu."

"One does not thank logic, Captain."

"Spock, I am sorry if I offended you, but...," Jim tried to find the right words.

"There is no offence, where none is taken," Spock quoted.

"Spock!" Jim looked at his friend in consternation. This was Spock at his most unapproachable - more Vulcan than Vulcan. And it was his fault, Jim thought, self-guilt washing over him.

Spock felt Kirk's emotions, again, much more acutely than normally. He looked at his Captain, and saw the worry in the Captain's eyes. His own features softened slightly.

"Jim, I am fine. I just need to have some time to recover from the mind-meld." He said it so quietly that even Jim, standing next to him had to strain to hear.

Jim nodded once, then in a loud voice said:

"Uhura, notify Doctor McCoy that there will be a meeting in my quarters in 15 minutes to discuss the situation. Lieutenant Offer, your presence will be required as well. I am going to be in my cabin. Spock, please join me."

Nobody noticed the absence of ensign LaPierre. A navigator was not obliged to stay on the bridge the whole time, while a ship was in orbit. The navigator was only required to be on-call.

CHAPTER 5

Ensign LaPierre was not afraid. After all, to meet people who would listen to her ideas was the reason she had come to this planet. Indeed, it was what she had been trained for at home. To become an emissary of The Way. To convince as many people as she could that this was the only Way. She had been chosen from all the children in her school, mainly for her steadfast belief and conviction in THE WAY from a very young age. She had as a young child, taught herself all the 96 narrative poems that described the history of her people finding The Way, and all the commandments one had to follow. Hers was a strict belief and culture, born out of fear and harsh living conditions. Fear of the unknown, of others-from-the-sky that could come and conquer her world, as had happened many thousands of years ago.

At first her planet was teeming with life, and many cultural beliefs. Open-minded people, eager to encompass the new. So when others from outer space arrived, they were greeted with friendliness and warm hospitality. But their hospitality was not appreciated. These others were masters at sowing discontent and disharmony - they thrived on it. And when the hatred that they caused between the endogenous populations was at its peak, they attacked from the skies. They destroyed most of the world, most of the inhabitants, and then left. There was no reason, they took nothing, but left destruction. Her people, those that were left, withdrew into themselves, and the only way - The Way - was born. When the reasons for the birth of The Way were forgotten, and the planet reached out for contact, it was not for company. It was to teach. To preach The Way.

The Way was strict. One obeyed the Elders without question. So when she was chosen for special instruction she did not resist. She was to become the first of her people to be accepted by Starfleet, shortly after her home planet had been admitted to an unsuspecting Federation. Although, at that time she was afraid. Afraid to leave her home, to go out among strangers, amongst unbelievers. But after her long and arduous training, she was ready to take on the whole galaxy. She entered Starfleet academy.

Her first weeks, at the academy, were difficult. The place was full of strange "aliens". The only interest most of the other students had, was to do their best to get into space as fast as possible. So she too, pretended, that that was her sole aim. It made it easier for her not to have to socialise and she could hide her true intentions. Her natural quick intelligence and the fact that she was one of the first from a new Federation planet, enabled her to get assigned to a Starship, soon after her Academy graduation. She was assigned to the Enterprise.

At first she was thrilled. At last she would get to travel to the outer-reaches of the Galaxy, and make it

possible to find a world that was ready to be taught her Way. But a starship is not like the Academy. There are only 400-odd beings enclosed within the ship, with nowhere else to go. A small compact community, often facing the unknown and manifold dangers together, depending one upon the other for survival. It's as if 430 single units (each having its own personality and varied background) became one. Interdependent on each other to serve the ship that was their home and safe-haven in an effectively hostile environment, space.

When one of these members failed so utterly to fit in, to be trusted, to truly join this somewhat exclusive community, it soon became apparent. At first, it was colleagues and the direct superior officer who became aware that something was amiss. They tried to deal with it, often with surprising sensitivity. When this failed, the problem was elevated to the crew-administrator. He or she would often confer with the Chief Medical Officer, who also had access to personnel records others did not. If needed, they would call in the acting religious-care officer (who had a very demanding job considering the ships complement of not only different religions from one planet, but also beliefs from many varied worlds).

If still no solution was found and the situation had not improved the matter was slowly brought to the attention of the Captain, via his First Officer and Medical Officer. So it had been with Ensign LaPierre. It was a surprise to all when her intolerance, racism and disregard for other sentient beings surfaced. No such tendencies had been observed during her training at the Academy. None had been observed during her long entrance interview. However, she was the first to join from a new Federation planet, and often leeway was given to those applicants. Such intolerance would not have been acceptable, had it been perceived early enough. Now as a trainee navigator, on the Enterprise, her true feelings were difficult to hide. Her determined self-aggrandization came to light partly due to the presence of Lieutenant Offer. He presented a striking opposite in character to her, secure in his belief but open to new experiences. A man who had grown up in a loving secure family environment. One that taught him tradition as well as the ability and courage to question, to think for oneself, to see and to grow.

When he met LaPierre he could not comprehend her. In his hunger for philosophical knowledge he had questioned her. Interrogated her, till he managed to break down the protective field of placating lies, and the truth came out in an angry torrent of accusations, followed by a joyous expounding of the so long suppressed dogma of her True Belief.

Looking out at the different humanoids passing her by as they drove out of the Dome-city, her eyes flashed in anger as she remembered that day, when Offer tricked her into revealing her purpose, her aim too soon. To his credit he did not betray her to others. He had shrugged it off as a passing folly. From that day on, however, periodically he would try and lead her from her chosen path by discussions that would often end in heated arguments.

They had left the dome-city, and were moving through unbuilt country side. Soon the cultivated fields, growing some unrecognisable crop, gave way to steep and barren mountains. The majesty of the mountain-range, however, was often broken by technological desecration on a grandiose scale. Large mining works would unexpectedly loom up. Metal-like monsters, towering over the gaping holes that they had torn in the mountain, reducing a once proud peak to a simpering hillock dotted with mechanical protruberences.

She watched silently in an unsettled awe, as they made their way further into this ravaged landscape. Her guide was silent and she too felt no need to break the silence in this oppressive environment.

Suddenly, the road stopped. They had arrived at a particularly large and menacing looking mining works.

"Come, let me introduce you to my friends."

LaPierre, was some what reluctant to leave the apparent safety of the ground vehicle. But she had no choice now that she had come too far.

"I can't stay too long, if I want to get to back aboard the Enterprise undetected." she said, partly as a safety net, partly because it was true.

"It won't take long. Come."

He led her to a low building, made of the same crystal- like structure as the large dome in the city. But this was no dome. It was a low elongated building with no steps, that seemed to join and enter the mountain rising behind it.

She entered, followed by her guide. She was then led through a short corridor, to an entrance that opened into a large low ceilinged room. Hushed voices could be discerned. LaPierre was led firmly into this room. She went in and stopped dead in her tracks. A strangled gasp escaped her lips. She felt nauseous. Her head started to spin and for a moment she thought she would lose consciousness.

The room housed over a hundred different beings. But their differences were not in anyway similar to what she had observed in the city. There the difference seemed more cosmetic and definitely not detrimental. The beings in this room were malformed. The horrific deformations had made these beings at best semi-functional. She noticed people with no legs, no arms, no eyes, heads with hands protruding from where other humanoids would have a nose. Beings with unrecognisable protuberances that made mobility and any dexterity very difficult. Many had also open wounds, untreated, neglected and infected.

"These are the lucky ones." The voice of her guide startled her. She wanted to lash out at him for bringing her to this place. Instead she said.

"What are these?"

"These too are genetic offspring of different races. These too are children of diversity. But for these the superior genetic engineering has not worked quite as planned. They are the unmentionable failures. These children of The Master's Law are hidden away, so none know about them and they are used as cheap labour."

"Why did you say the lucky ones?" whispered LaPierre as hundreds of eyes stared at her, all other conversation now stopped.

"Because they are alive. Maybe I should have said un- lucky, for who would want a life such as theirs. Those that are found to be incapable of any work are killed."

"Life must always be preserved. The killing must stop." LaPierre felt a righteous anger burning through her whole body and invade her mind. She did not notice the triumphant smile light up the handsome face of her guide.

All she could think about was how correct her Way must be! How it can wipe out abominations such as these. They were beyond her help. But the procreation of others like these must be stopped. The Way could not be polluted with such as these!

"What do you want me to do?" She asked turning to her guide, and shutting out the sight of the room.

"I have a holographic message I have prepared. This you must broadcast to the whole world from your starship. Only you can do this. There are many people who are not happy with the Master's Law and when they see these hidden unfortunates ones, they will rebel against the practices."

"What about teaching them my philosophy of The Way?" she asked.

"When the current government is overthrown, as it must. When the Master's Law is torn down, there will be a gap, and you can start to teach your Way." He quickly placated her. He knew that her Way would never be accepted by the people of this planet, they were too free thinking. But he didn't care. He needed her now, her access to the starship orbiting this sseikea(3) world! He would get his satisfaction, when he would give this world to the Romulan Empire. As a proper son of the Empire, he would do his duty. And this world rich in the crystal and metal resources, would be his to give, with above all the weapon that destroyed the orbiting ships so efficiently.

"Very, well. Give me the chip. And how will I contact you? I don't even know your name".

"I will contact you. You can call me Ra'kholh(4)" he said satisfaction seeping into his voice.

CHAPTER 6

The untouched glass of cognac still stood on Jim's desk. He felt as if it had been days since Spock, sitting opposite him, had briefed him on the planet they were now orbiting. Jim Kirk entered his cabin, and indicated for Spock to sit. He noted with some satisfaction that the Vulcan had relaxed to a certain extent since they had left the bridge. He sat down, and touched the hand-cut crystal containing the amber liquid. Although he did not feel like a drink, he took pleasure in rotating the glass in his hand and feeling the work of art that the glass itself represented.

"Is Sulu stable now, Spock?" he asked at last, somewhat reluctant to break the companionable silence that had settled comfortably between him and his friend.

"Psychologically he will be able to cope with his situation for a short time."

"Short time? That's not very precise, Spock."

"Jim, the emotional part of a human mind is not a precise instrument. I cannot predict the unknown," Spock stated mildly annoyed.

Jim regarded his First Officer for a long while. Spock looked back, calmly returning the steady gaze.

"Spock, I'd rather you didn't mind-meld or -touch with Sulu anymore."

"Captain, I too would rather not participate in another mind meld with Lieutenant Sulu. I hope that it will not be necessary."

Before Jim could make up his mind whether to order Spock not to mind-meld with Sulu anymore, the door chime sounded.

"Enter."

The doors opened silently and McCoy entered, holding one of his small medical scanners. He proceeded, without a word, to run the scanner over Spock.

"That is unnecessary, Doctor," snapped Spock.

"Temper, temper," McCoy taunted.

Spock looked up bemused. He was surprised at his reaction to McCoy's natural and commendable concern. The unusually deep mind meld must have affected him more than he realised. He would have to take care not to let this influence his efficiency.

McCoy had finished scanning Spock and also, surreptitiously, Jim. He grunted and sat down, worried about the readings he picked up from the Captain. Spock was physically in good health.

"How is Sulu, Bones?" queried Jim.

"Well, thanks to that crazy mind-meld he is stable. For the moment. But I don't give him more than at most four days. After that, I will have to put Sulu in stasis otherwise he could go into another total withdrawal," McCoy turned a glare at Spock before he continued, "And I don't want Spock to risk his life mind-melding with him again!"

"Hardly my life, Doctor," Spock answered, but to himself he added, 'only my mind'.

The door chimed again, it was exactly 15 minutes since they had left the bridge. Jim Kirk wondered if Lieutenant Offer had been waiting outside the door following anxiously the chronometer display on his wrist computer.

"Enter."

Lieutenant Offer had only been in the Captain's quarters once before: When he was recently assigned to the Enterprise and the Captain had made a point of speaking to the new recruits individually in the privacy of his cabin. He entered the Commanding Officer's cabin with some unease but also with great curiosity. The Captain indicated he should sit down in a chair facing the desk. He didn't really know why he was invited to join this meeting, usually reserved only for the two other men, Commander Spock and Dr. McCoy.

As if reading his mind the Captain addressed the young officer:

"Mr. Offer, you were asked to join this informal meeting, because you seem to look at this situation with impartiality. Also during our meeting with K'L'trok you showed great restraint, and laudable diplomacy."

Lieutenant Offer felt the colour rising in his cheeks. He was quite embarrassed by the Captain's praise.

"Thank you," he stammered as he took his place at the desk.

Kirk proceeded to offer everyone the exceptional cognac from the Gascogne region on Earth, where it was still distilled in copper stills and mellowed in old oak casks. Even Spock, much to Lieutenant Offer's surprise accepted a small amount. He had never seen the Vulcan drink any form of alcohol before.

"To business, Gentlemen. I have outlined to Mr. Spock what has happened planet-side, but only very briefly. Let's go over it again and I would appreciate any suggestions," Kirk looked round at each man in turn then continued, "Mr. Offer, why don't you summarise our situation."

Yehudy Offer nearly spilt his drink from surprise at that request.

"Sir...uh..yes sir," he stammered as he tried to gather his thoughts. "Where would you like me to start, sir?"

"From the time we beamed down."

"Right. When we beamed down, we were asked to wait, because K'L'trok was dealing with some peoples called 'The Havelians' which did...," the Captain interrupted the young officer.

"Sorry to interrupt, Lieutenant, but let me just add something here. The Havelians, as you may know, are an artisan colony of humans descendent from a small Earth country that used to be known, in the 20th century, as the Czech Republic. These Havelians practice mainly art and culture. Therefore they are heavily dependent on trade for all their technological necessities. I, therefore, wondered why the K'S'vaits still needed humans, if these colonists trade with them. Then a worse thought came to my mind; that the Havelians were trading in other beings. But after continued questioning K'L'trok admitted that they value the art-forms of the Havelians enough to trade in these. The chairs, for example, -even the Vulcan one- are all products of the Havel-colony." Jim finished and let the unspoken fact that the K'S'vaiths do trade in other things than just beings hang in the air.

"Interesting," murmured Spock quietly.

"Please continue, Mr. Offer," Jim invited.

The Lieutenant cleared his throat and continued:

"Well, at last K'L'trok joined us, and Captain Kirk asked to discuss the matter further."

Again Jim interrupted:

"He thought that Mr. Offer was a prime candidate for the breeding program, and was ready to exchange a few crystals for him." He turned to look at Yehudy Offer, "Now you know your price," he added with a smile.

Lieutenant Offer shrugged his shoulders and, at a nod from Jim, continued:

"K'L'trok, consented to further discussions, in which we asked whether they would accept genetic material instead of actual humans. At first K'L'trok dismissed this out of hand. After some persuasion from the Captain he promised that he would put the proposal to his committee and that they would consider it, but that it may take time. Captain Kirk thought it unwise, at the moment, to let the K'S'vaits know that we are pressed for time. We, therefore, gave the impression that time for us was not of the essence. Any further information that we requested, such as how they stop ships from leaving orbit, was only met with smiles and evasive answers. He warned us, however, not to seek a demonstration. As there was little left to discuss we took our leave and returned to the Enterprise," Offer finished and looked at his Captain.

"Thank you, Mr. Offer," Jim turned the still full glass in his hand and then held it against the light as if seeking inspiration from the golden reflection of light in the amber liquid.

"Comments, please."

The cabin lights flickered suddenly and at the same time the computer screen on the desk whistled, startling McCoy who was about to give his piece of mind about the mess they found themselves in.

"Screen on," Jim said calmly although he felt apprehension gripping his insides.

The screen obeyed, came on, revealing the agitated face of his Chief engineer.

"What's up, Scotty?" Jim asked and braced himself.

"Captain, ye are not gonna like this... we now have only one dilithium crystal left, and that is damaged like the rest of them. All the other crystals have totally disintegrated. The only one left is na going to last long. We are already running most of the ship on auxiliary power. When the last one goes....," Scotty's face said it all.

"How long can we maintain orbit when that happens?" Jim asked

"Well, saving all kinda power, maybe 72 hours, Captain," Scotty added something in Gaelic that Jim rather didn't want translated.

"73 hours 34 minutes, if we conserve maximum energy," Spock added in a matter of fact voice.

"Scotty, start saving all the power you can now. Kirk out. Screen off."

"Well that doesn't leave us much time or choice," he added looking at the blank screen.

"What do you mean by that, Jim?" Bones looked suspiciously at Kirk, "I hope that didn't mean trading one or two of your crew for some crystals."

"No, Bones, it doesn't," Jim stood up, and turned his back to the Doctor, "at least not yet."

"Jim, you can't be serious!" McCoy made as if to go and confront James Kirk.

The Captain turned round, however, and faced his friend, often his second conscience.

"What would you have me do, Bones, destroy my ship and let 430 people die? Let it plummet to that blasted planet below? To burn up? Well, what would you have me do?"

"Sorry, Jim. I just find the idea so abhorrent," McCoy sat down again.

"I know, Bones," Jim said softly, "so do I. Only those that volunteer would stay behind. I'll go myself in order to save this ship!" Jim exclaimed.

"That would be unwise, Captain," Spock said calmly.

The Captain glowered at his First Officer, but he knew that Spock was right. As captain his duty, in this case, was to stay on the ship and not volunteer to procreate.

"Captain, if I may be so bold. If it comes to leaving someone behind, I wouldn't mind more opportunity to study this culture." Lieutenant Offer spoke up.

"If it comes to that I will consider your request, Mr. Offer," Jim said sounding and looking tired. He

dismissed the young and promising helmsman. "You can return to your post now, Lieutenant Offer."

When Lieutenant Offer left, Jim turned to Spock:

"Mr. Spock, please find out where the K'S'vaits keep their stocks of dilithium."

Spock's eyebrow rose. He said nothing for a moment, then:

"There are two main storage holds for the dilithium, Captain, one is approximately 34 kilometres due north of the city, in a mountainous landscape. The other is further due east of this city, near a smaller but densely populated area," he finished without any inflection in his voice.

Jim was not unduly surprised that Spock had the requested information at hand - it had happened too often that his First Officer had anticipated his requests to really astonish him now.

"Protected?"

"Affirmative."

"How strongly?"

"Breachable."

"Theft, Jim?" McCoy's eyes took on a wicked gleam.

"Just covering all possible venues." Jim replied smoothly, then seriously, "But first we must try and convince the K'S'vaits, either with rewards or threats. Bones you and...Offer will go back and try to talk some sense into these people. Use persuasion, inducement, or coercion to convince them that it would be in their best interest to have the Federation on their side. Tell them we can give them a lot of genetic material, anything but humans."

"The Federation ain't gona be happy dealing with a planet that deals in any kind of sentient life, Jim," McCoy commented.

"When we get out of here, we can deal with that problem," Jim dismissed the objection. McCoy nodded then asked:

"What are you going to be up to?"

"Up to, Doctor," Jim said, innocence incarnate, and in good imitation of his First Officer, "that depends, on how successful you are."

McCoy gave Jim a hard look but then left saying on his way out:

"Good luck, Jim."

"Well, Spock?"

"Captain?"

"Have you considered a career as a thief?"

"Never, Captain," came the dry answer.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that, but I want you and Scotty to plan and prepare for a raid on that storage plant nearest to the city. If all else fails, we will have to help ourselves."

"Captain, with all due respect, you seem to have forgotten K'L'trok's threat if we attempt to leave orbit."

"No, Spock, I haven't forgotten, I am working on that. Any ideas are welcome."

"Moreover, Captain, are you planning to go on this raid?" Spock asked noncommittally.

"Affirmative, Mr. Spock, any objections?"

"Yes, sir. Numerous. First of all, you as Capta....."

"Spock, you may as well save your breath. If we have to steal those crystals, I will go. No arguments will change my mind."

Spock pursed his lips and a look of stubbornness crept into his eyes. He said nothing, however. Stood up, looked at his Captain for dismissal, then with a: "Good night, Sir," left his Captain sitting at his desk. Captain James Kirk was once again rotating his crystal glass, now empty, deep in thought as the doors closed after the departing Spock.

Jim sank down onto his bed. It was well past midnight, ship's time, and he had gone 28 hours without sleep. He was tired and frustrated that there was so little he could actually do. He did not want to revert to theft to obtain those life-saving crystals. But even less did he like the idea of asking any of his crew to stay behind, although he knew that many would volunteer, and Mr. Chekov, and Mr. Offer would head the line. He was bone-tired, a few hours of sleep would be welcome, but unpleasant thoughts kept him from relaxing. This situation was too messy. And there were unexplainable things that worried him about the K'S'vaits, apart from their interpretation of the Vulcan IDIC. The Vulcan - that brought him to Spock, who had behaved quite uncharacteristically a number of times since they got back. And that stubborn look on Spock's face as he left. 'What was his First Officer up to?'

At last his eyelids slid over his tired and smarting eyes. Jim fell into a restless sleep. Sleep that would be far too short. The near future had other plans than a night's sleep for the Commander of the Enterprise.

CHAPTER 7

LaPierre had been set down in the same place, within the city, to which she had beamed down. She now only hoped that the second part of her plan would be successful. She looked at her chronometer. The starship should be on night shift. Young Larry was supposed to be on duty in the main transporter room. It should not be too difficult to convince him to beam her up and not tell anyone about it. She smiled to herself. Her good looks did come in handy sometime. Then even if the records showed that an unauthorised transportation took place, it would be difficult to trace it back to her. As she checked her chronometer one last time, she felt a cold soft feather-like substance settle on her hand. She withdrew her hand in startled shock. 'What was this?' She looked up, all around her big flakes of white fluffy crystal-like droplets were falling from the sky. The soft crystals, that melted upon contact with her skin, were as large as the palm of her hand. She held out her hand and looked at the large star-like structure

softly resting on her palm, reflecting the bright colours of the two moons shining brightly in the night sky. Then the star-flake vanished and a small trickle of water trickled from her hand onto the ground below. "So this was snow.' She had read about it, but never seen it. Reluctant to leave this wondrous display of sparkling multicoloured flakes, she whipped out her communicator:

"LaPierre to transporter room," she held her breath.

"Larry here, what are you doing on the planet, Aureali?"

"The Captain sent me down on some business, before your shift. Beam me up now, Larry."

"Oh....okay, energising."

Within the softly falling, sparkling snow-flakes, another kind of sparkling took place. Where once the form of a slim female had stood, collecting large snow flakes in her hands, snow flakes now reached to the ground and melted instantly.

On the bridge, Spock was observing the nightly snow-fall with interest. The spectral and crystallographic readings of the unusually large and complex flakes were impressive. Even more interesting was their low melting-point. Upon contact with the ground they would dissolve. In the morning there would be no indication that any snow had fallen during the much colder nights. Spock leaned back in the command chair, steepling his fingers in his preferred gesture. The bridge was quiet. Only Scotty was at his station, muttering away in Gaelic. It was also unusually cold on the bridge - energy saving measures had come into full effect. Their need for undamaged dilithium crystals was becoming critical. A ghost of a frown was evident on Spock's face. Even if they helped themselves to the K'S'vaits crystals, how could they avoid whatever destructive weapons the K'S'vaits proposed to use? He was beginning to have a putative theory concerning the weapon. His extensive analysis of the planet's spectra and the energies being used gave him preliminary data to work from. But he didn't want to mention his theory to the Captain yet - not enough evidence. If he was right, however, no dilithium crystal would be safe on their ship. Not long enough to get them safely out of orbit. He got up, crossed to his library-science terminal and immersed himself in the vast amount of data that a new orbital scan had provided.

At the helm, the Transp1 warning light lit up and died down, unnoticed. Only the ever vigilant computer stored the fact in its nearly infinitely large databanks.

LaPierre made her way to the Auxiliary Control room. Although the auxiliary bridge was locked at all times, and the lock-code was changed every alpha-shift (the main shift) LaPierre, as navigator-on-duty, had been given the code. It was still 4 ship-units till all alpha-shift personnel would be back on full duty and a new code would be given out. Because the next 4 units were the delta-shift, which corresponded to early morning ship's-cycle, and the energy-saving measures were in operation, there was very little activity in many parts of the ship; the long corridors of the Enterprise were deserted. Occasionally, as LaPierre passed some rooms, she would hear the sound of muted voices talking, chirping, whistling and otherwise communicating with each other. She felt a pang of nostalgia for the sound of her own language. All she had spoken since leaving her planet was Basic. The language that all personnel, that were physically capable of it, had to learn. Those that could not, for lack of suitable orifices or vocal organs, were provided with a specially adapted permanent sub-cutaneous translator.

LaPierre reached the yellow-coloured doors of the Auxiliary Control room. She looked around her, no-being was in sight. Quickly she tapped out the memorised code. For a few tense seconds the computer thought about the code, then soundlessly the doors slid open and LaPierre quickly went in. The doors closed silently shut after her.

She looked around her. The Auxiliary Control room was a scaled-down version of the main bridge, lacking only a few non-vital stations. She made her way to the communications unit. As with all bridge-personnel, she had basic training in all bridge duties, communication being one she excelled in. She sat down, and quickly scanned the control board. She would have to override the communication console on the main bridge before she could send her message. Quickly and efficiently she set to work programming the secondary comm-unit. Making sure that when she entered the pre-recorded chip, one push on the control button would send its message planet-wide. For a fraction of a second, doubt assailed her mind, after all she didn't even know what was exactly in the message. Then she looked at her chronometer: one unit left before alpha-shift and already 20 minutes into the planet's day-cycle, time to send the message - or not, and leave quickly before she was discovered. Her finger hovered above the crucial button, after some seconds, she closed her eyes, held her breath and pressed.

On the bridge Spock was checking the energy utilisation of the Enterprise. He had noticed some energy fluctuations and unexpected localised power surges. After examination of the computer records he saw that the transporter had been used repeatedly. Suddenly a new power surge, localised in Auxiliary Control, showed up on his screen. First the use of an Auxiliary transporter, now someone seemed to be using power in the Auxiliary Control room, for unauthorised purposes. This situation needed rapid attention.

"Computer, is someone in Auxiliary Control?"

"Affirmative," answered the softly mechanical female voice.

He was about to call security and the Captain, when an all-wide subspace announcement light flashed on, followed by an immediate audio-visual message. The message was destined for an all-frequency broadcast to the planet, but as was usual with such a message, it was also broadcast automatically on the main viewing screen of the bridge.

"Captain to the bridge, please." Spock switched the all-ship toggle off and pressed the switch that connected him to security.

"Lieutenant Mep'sto, here," came the disembodied voice of the Chief of Security.

"Spock here. There is an unauthorised broadcast from Auxiliary Control. Apprehend the perpetrator, immediately. Spock out." Before he finished lifting his finger of the communications switch, the lift doors opened and Captain Kirk strode on the bridge.

"Report, Mr. Spock."

Spock pointed, to the main screen. The rest of the bridge crew were mesmerised by the terribly distressing pictures shown on the screen and the hypnotic voice that commented calmly on each visual representation of the most painfully deformed peoples that any had ever seen.

"This is being broadcast from Auxiliary, directly to the planet, Captain." Spock stated soberly.

"Can we terminate it from here?" Jim asked as he watched the Vulcan already busy at the main communications unit.

"Negative, sir."

"Mr. Offer, get Lieutenant Uhura up here. Spock, come with me," the Captain said on his way to the turbo lift.

In the lift Spock quickly told his Captain about the unidentified power surges that were recorded also within the transporter rooms.

"Someone transporting to and back from the planet. But how and why?" Jim mused while they made their way to the ship's second command centre. As they approached they heard several voices talking agitatedly.

"Report," Jim Kirk snapped, while Spock went to the auxiliary communications unit and began to terminate manually, the planet wide broadcast.

"Sir, we found Ensign LaPierre leaving the Auxiliary Control, when we were sent down by Mr. Spock to investigate an unauthorised broadcast. She denies that she was in the room, Sir."

Captain Kirk turned his steady gaze at the ensign held firmly by one of the security guards.

"Ensign LaPierre, are you responsible for sending the broadcast?" he asked softly.

LaPierre didn't know how to answer. She didn't know if her lie would be accepted, or if she should stand her ground now, let all know what higher purpose she was intended to serve. Before she could make up her mind, however, the Captain spoke again, very gently:

"Ensign, you must be aware that the computer records will, in the end, identify the perpetrator. It would be much better, if you indeed did send the message, to tell me now."

Something snapped in LaPierre at that tone of voice. 'How dare that inferior human be condescending to her!' She lifted her head proudly and with a look full of arrogant contempt gazed at the Captain and the Vulcan who now stood beside him, having successfully and efficiently terminated the broadcast. But it didn't matter to her anymore, at least three quarters of the message got through.

The ensign reminded Jim of an untamed, young filly he once owned. The filly's head would swing wildly, with the mane falling loosely round the proud eyes. But he suspected that this filly was beyond taming. His eyes bore into hers, willing her to speak.

LaPierre did, proudly and haughtily:

"Yes, Captain, I did send the broadcast."

"Why?" still gently

"Although I need not explain my actions to you," Jim's face hardened at that, "I will. I sent the broadcast to prevent further creation of those abominations you saw on the tape, and I saw in the flesh. I sent the broadcast to put a stop to this infestation of the pure. To put a stop to that disgusting concept of Infinite

Diversity in Infinite Combinations. There is only The One Way!" She ended with another proud swing of her head.

Jim looked at her silently for a few moments. He felt an unreasonable sadness for the young ensign standing so proudly before him. Sadness and disquiet that such narrow minded perceptions still existed so strongly in someone, especially someone so young. Powerful disquiet that such a person managed to get as far as the Enterprise, a ship usually reserved for a crew of raving xenophiles, a crew that itself rejoiced in every possible diversity.

The ensign started to squirm slightly under the powerful steady gaze.

Jim glanced at Spock. The First Officer's face was totally impassive, but in the eyes Jim detected a hint of compassion mixed with something he very rarely saw - anger.

"Ensign, you may have started something much larger than you could have imagined," Jim again turned his intense gaze on the young woman, his voice hardened but was still tinged with an underlying sadness. "You have broken a number of Starfleet and Federation rules. The major one, of course - the Prime Directive. I will have all the details from you. For now I am obliged to place you under arrest. You will be confined in the ship's brig. When we have more details and especially time, your case will be brought before a board of inquiry of the senior officers. Before that you will be made aware of all your legal rights. Is that clear?"

A not so disdainful nod was all the affirmation the Captain got.

"Take her to the brig, Lieutenant," Jim turned to the Chief of security, "Mr. Spock will question the prisoner, then confine her to cell A." Cell A was reserved for the less dangerous prisoners, it was large and relatively comfortable. "I will be on the bridge." He turned to Spock as LaPierre was led away: "When you have finished questioning her, please call me. We need to discuss this new complication."

"Yes, Sir," Spock was about to leave when the Captain's voice stopped him.

"Spock! Have McCoy and Offer already beamed down to the planet?"

"Affirmative, Captain," Spock said quietly.

"Damn!" Jim regarded Spock for a moment, then said:

"I want to know why she did all this, if she was alone, if there are others on board who are involved. She could have conceivably beamed down herself, but she must have had help to beam back up. Everything, Spock."

Spock inclined his head and then left to join the little group making their way down to the deeper reaches of the starship.

CHAPTER 8

The sun which warmed and gave light to this planet, appeared lazily on the edge of the horizon, bathing the glass-like domed structures of Ka'rakram in a golden light. The multi-coloured domes reflected the sun's rays, painting a varied array of jagged lines crossing each other in the air. Even the inhabitants, used to this wondrous display, stopped and enjoyed the glory of the multi-coloured spectacle. In the various domes, the multitude of beings were getting ready to start a new day.

It was an organised mess around the table with five youngsters of the Klingon/Eredith-K'S'vait mixture boisterously eating their first meal of the day. The eldest were getting ready to leave for their respective educational facilities. K'Kraith looked with maternal pride at her offspring.

Once a lowly servant of a Klingon Starship commander, she could not thank the powers above enough for her good fortune in being exchanged for a few rocks. She would do anything Klingonly possible to protect her children, husband and this - her new home.

Srak, her oldest, switched the vid-comm on, and was flicking absentmindedly through the many broadcasting channels.

Various images invaded the centre of their main living place. To amuse himself Srak moved the images to the middle of the table. The other children started to poke their knives into the life-like image of a newscaster. The utensils would shimmer and half-disappear into the newscaster's form. Then the otherwise perfect image of the humanoid K'S'vait was decorated with coruscating ripples that emanated from where ever a particular tool was stabbed. The favourite target of the children was the K'S'vaits rather handsome face. Squeals and chortles of laughter resonated through the room. K'Kraith smiled indulgently and felt happiness and pride welling up in her.

As she was about to turn back to her duties a number of heart-stopping screams reverberated round her. Not all the screams came from her children.

She spun round. Where, once the upper part of the K'S'vait newscaster had been subjected to the children's "attacks", writhing misformed beings were moving in an agonisingly slow way, crawling along the floor, which was in this case the table top. The differently coloured life-sustaining liquids that oozed out of their bodies onto the table looked too real. The images of blood overflowed and moulded themselves onto the terrified children.

"Switch it off!" she screamed at her oldest son, her heart beating painfully against her side.

"Mother, who are they?" asked Srak, trying to hide the shaking in his adolescent voice and the trembling of his hands as he guided the images off the table and diminished them in size, ultimately banishing them to a small corner of the room.

"I don't know," she answered, her own blood freezing in her veins. She started to listen to the calm commentary behind those terrifying images: "...behold the results of the genetic manipulation that each one of you has been submitted to. The debate whether this is right or wrong has been going on for a long time. It has escalated recently culminating in the formation of The Federation of All Sentients. The FAS have had already major successes in leading a large number of people, of YOU, to choose freedom. Others have asked for evidence of the charges we have made that malformed children, YOUR children, are born, CREATED, and used as slave labour. Here IS your evidence! Here are YOUR children! There is no more time to waste. SAVE these K'S'vaits. Rise up NOW! Choose free Choice! Before it is too..."

K'Kraith stopped listening and noticed that the children were now looking at her rather than at the vid-com. 'This could not be true - these had to be lies by those few malcontents she had heard about,' She thought and said:

"These images have been made deliberately to scare us by a few who are against our way of life, against all that your father works for," and she started to worry about her husband, already at work in one of the

xeno-gentech labs.

"But we will not be scared! We are of the Klingon warrior race and Klingons are never scared! We will fight against these lies!" she continued in a harsh hard voice, one that her children have never heard before. They nodded and then, one by one, some in a stronger voice than the others, her five sons loudly echoed the one Klingon word their mother had taught them early - "Quapla!"

K'Fron, chief of police and planetary security, was sitting in his favourite chair and enjoying his bowl of hot vreak half listening to the early morning news.

The vid-comm displayed the newscaster as sitting in one of the chairs positioned near a large domed window. K'Fron liked to pretend that the newscaster was present in his own room and reporting to him personally. He watched the seated image reading the news that had been censored by his office only a short while ago. He didn't need to listen to the news, as he would have read the summary of what was to be broadcast. Listening to the news, however, gave him a sense of well-being. Knowing that things were going his way.

His gaze was unfocused and he dreamily thought of last night and the Orion female he had invited to dinner. Followed by their leisurely and long walk in the central park, where under the benign light of the two moons circling the planet in close formation, they had discussed the finer points of the contract that would bond them to each other for the rest of their respective lives. One part dealt with the number of offspring and K'Fron felt deep satisfaction when he thought of the number they had, at last, agreed upon: at least three sons and a minimum of six children in total. Not a bad size for a K'S'vait family.

Suddenly he tensed. The vid-display shimmered and holograms of terribly malformed bodies replaced the newscaster on his chair. The images were made even more bizarre by the fact that the vid-computer tried to mould the images of multiple beings as seated on the chair. K'Fron switched the automatic moulding off. Now the images invaded his room which had suddenly been transformed into a crystal mining and growing factory. K'Fron found himself in the middle of the holographic image. All around him the images were trying to perform tasks that were well above their physical ability. Then the holograph changed, showing individual close-ups of the malformed K'S'vairs, making evident the suffering, the pain and indignities of those that were diseased. Again the holographic vid changed and showed the unfortunate-ones dying in sheer agonies, writhing on K'Fron's gleaming crystal floor. After the initial shock, K'Fron started to take in the calm commentary behind the terrifying images. The vid-holograms were accompanied by a dispassionate report accusing the government of genetic experimentation, of allowing the frequent genetic malfunctions to live and of using them as cheap labour, as virtual slaves. It accused the lab technicians of cold-bloodedly allowing the extremely malformed to die. It gave statistics that implied a genetic failure of non-compatible couples of 3 in 4. It called the Master's Law a coercion, an abomination to all life. It encouraged people to speak out, to raise and march on the government buildings, to demand free choice of mates and an end of the importation of "alien" beings. This message was repeated nearly three times before it was suddenly cut off midway. K'Fron had recognised the voice. He had had dealings with the owner of that voice before. 'It was that young Romulan halfling!' he thought furiously. The half-empty bowl of vreak now forgotten, K'Fron left his home quickly to head into the centre of the city, where his offices were located. 'It would be a long time before he would be able to return home,' were his thoughts as he started the ground-car and took off at a brisk speed.

K'Tanu sat around the table with his two young children. He smiled gently at his beautiful daughter. Her

face bore discernible marks of the Vulcanoid race. A perfectly formed oval face, large black eyes and the elegantly pointed ears that were framed by equally black slightly curly hair. She allowed a small smile to part her lips. Having also inherited the Vulcan intelligence, she had insisted from the tender age of three that she be allowed to follow the teachings of Vulcan and Surak. K'Tanu, who believed that if IDIC was to be followed, it meant also the interbreeding of ideas and not only of "blood", had arranged for Vulcan education tapes to be smuggled to him by the few Vulcan traders that visited this planet. He had even managed, recently, to arrange for an old Vulcan that resided on this planet to be her Master in the art of emotional control.

A single, slightly mischievous, eyebrow was cocked at him as his daughter noticed his thoughtful observation of her. Again she smiled slightly and with a nod of her head reminded her father of his morning duty to feed the second of his children.

His son, two years younger than his daughter, was patiently waiting to be fed. At the age of eight he could not feed himself. Blind and disabled from the neck down the child was totally dependent upon others for his physical needs. More physically structured as a K'S'vait than his sister, his birth posed a problem for the slim Vulcan woman that had been his mother.

Although genetics had been developed on the planet to a high degree, other areas of medical care were lacking far behind other cultures in the galaxy. K'Tanu was well aware of that and as a government official was trying hard to change that. Especially since the lack of advanced medical knowledge had cost the life of the woman he loved and had been the reason for his only son to have his neck broken at birth.

They had offered to put his son to sleep at birth or to take him into care but K'Tanu had refused both. He had too much respect for any life to allow his own child to die and he knew that a K'S'vait in care was not cared for very well. He never regretted his decision. His son had always provided him and his sister with cheerful company, for although blind and trapped in an useless body he possessed a keen intelligence and great wit.

"Father, you are preoccupied today," he now stated after having patiently waited for his next bite of food for over five minutes.

"Sorry, Sakim," K'Tanu said and fed him.

Meanwhile his daughter T'Charu, had put on the Vid-com, expecting to hear the daily news. What greeted her, however, upon switching on the vid-com was not the news, but Rakholt's message and the images of the "unfortunate-ones".

She listened and watched quietly as distress clouded her lovely features. Sakim moved his head, cocked it and listened intently. T'Kanu could not believe his ears or eyes. At first rage overtook him, denying the possibility of such atrocities in his home-world. Then doubts began to gnaw at him uncomfortably. They all watched in silence until the broadcast was cut-off in mid image.

T'Charu switched the vid-comm off and looked at her father enquiringly.

"Is this true, father?" she asked.

"I don't know, my child," he answered honestly.

"If it is, then something should be done," stated Sakim in a voice filled with emotion.

"If it is, something will be done, but not by overthrowing the government," remarked his father but pondered where he could find the truth. He knew one thing, however, there would be trouble before the day was over.

"T'Charu, you will stay in with Sakim today." he said and looked at his daughter, when she started to protest he continued: "Listen to me, there may be unrest in the city. This is a serious situation. I must go to work and find out what is happening, but I must be sure you two are safe, otherwise I will worry too much. Will you do as I say?"

T'Charu looked at him, then nodded. He bend down and touched the head of both his children, then without another word left the relative safety of their dwelling.

T'Charu, with her hand cradling that of her brother, looked after her departing father, uncertain whether she would see him again.

"Kaidith" she whispered for both of them, 'What is is.'

The "Avenger" stood in the middle of his small, but most loyal, group of followers. He watched the Vid-recording in silence and with internal satisfaction. The inhumane representations did not bother him. It had not bothered him to "fashion" some of the physical atrocities that were displayed by the unmentionable-ones. If one looked closely and carefully one would observe the fear in the eyes of many of these people, at least of those that had any sort of eyes. One might have expected anger, dejection, but not naked fear. However, Rakholt was not worried about that. He knew that by the time the shock of seeing these Vids would wear-off enough for anyone to notice the fear it would be too late. As it was already too late to do anything for those unfortunate beings displayed by the vid. They were all dead. It was better that way. More dignified. He had to kill them. The suffering displayed on the recording was all the more exquisitely horrific by the use of the drug he had fed them. Death was an unfortunate side-effect. The advantage to him would come when he showed those Federation people the dead and blamed the ruling party. Portraying the current government as ruthless killers. The Federation would not interfere then.

A tight satisfied smile tugged at the lips of the handsome Romulan face. The first step of his scheme was proceeding according to plan. He pressed a touch-sensitive patch on the remote Vid-controller that he had been holding in his hand. Slid it non-chalantly across on to a tabletop at the corner of the room and calmly turned to face his closest entourage and friends. Each of the fourteen beings in the room bore close resemblance to one of the identifiable species in the known galaxy. There were four which could have passed for pure Klingons, two Orions, three Tellerites, one Gorn and four Mentory. All were first generation mix, where the original dominant genes had been allowed to express themselves due to the fact that these species were able to have viable offspring with the indigenous K'S'vairs without any genetic manipulation. The offspring only came to term if the unborn child was a male. All female foetuses had, so far, aborted before birth.

All fourteen members were fanatically against the inter-breeding being forced upon them, for reasons different yet tragically similar. Some had seen their mothers suffer giving birth to babies that nature never intended for them to have. Some had seen their brothers die due to illnesses that occurred because of blood incompatibility so common between some species. But most felt they did not belong on this planet. They felt that they belonged to the world their fathers or mothers had come from and to which they were not allowed to return. They felt betrayed. Angry, alone and resentful. This mixture of uncontrolled, unbalanced emotions was turned into focused rage and eventual action by the ever-resourceful and highly

intelligent Rakholt. He surveyed the face of each one of them, lingering on those he felt in need of more support. They all stood silently and rigidly to attention. Raw energy surging through every nerve in their bodies. Muscles tense as a the strings on Vulcan Ka'athyra, waiting for the word to be given, for action. Waiting to start the next phase of their plan. Each of these chosen fourteen was a leader of groups of over hundred strong, ready to lead their individual detachments to battle and victory.

Away from the raising panic in the grand capital city, in one of the small crystal producing factories the forgotten-ones were having their breakfast in a large communal hall. For a room filled with so many people there was a relative silence in the hall. Most of the beings were intent on feeding themselves and out of a common decency-code that they had developed among the small community, they ignored each others' attempts to eat in any way that their physicality allowed them.

In the middle of the room was a large vid-com that was informing them of their duties for that particular day, and imparting information that would be useful for them such as the time of the monthly medical team visit. Most of the information had been already repeated five times and most had ceased to listen to the monotonous voice of their bored company director whose duty included preparing the daily vid-com program. It took a while before, one by one, the disinterested forgotten-ones noticed that the message and visual had changed - that there in the three-dimensional glory of the holographic vid-com they were seeing beings such as they. Only these unfortunate ones looked in worse health than most of them. They all recognised two things at once: The voice of Rakholt, the man who had pledged to save them and to stop further disabled K'S'vaits from being born but also they immediately saw the unaccustomed emotion of fear in the eyes of their fellow-sufferers. Not many of them had been frightened before. They had little to loose and as such fear seemed superfluous. They were not full citizens of this planet, most people did not know they existed at all, but they got food and adequate medication to make their physical discomfort bearable. They lived waiting to die. But the naked terror in those eyes staring at them in condemnation, the untreated wounds, and other obvious maltreatment made each one and all shiver inside. For the first time in their life they felt threatened. They feared betrayal by the one they had entrusted with all their hopes and dreams. They feared reprisals of those that had kept them alive so far, and they felt an illogical shame in their own existence.

In absolute silence they stared at the images and listened to the voice of their so-called saviour, till the images suddenly disappeared and the vid-com itself fell into reproachful silence.

No one, nothing moved, the stillness was absolute. The past revealed, the present changed and the future dangerously uncertain.

CHAPTER 9

In K'L'trok's office McCoy was having difficulty keeping his temper down. Lieutenant Offer was doing most of the talking now, after McCoy's last outburst. McCoy was very glad that Lieutenant Offer was present. He seemed a born diplomat and looked as calm as Spock, any time

"Please, K'L'trok, your explanations are not conclusive as to why the council has rejected Human genetic material." Offer calmly and patiently repeated his argument.

K'L'trok looked somewhat petulantly at the Lieutenant who insisted that a full explanation would be forthcoming. He had been advised by the council not to alienate the Federation people but to insist on a couple of humans for the breeding program. He gave a loud sigh. "Although we have the best genetic technology in the whole galaxy, " he began, looking defensive, " if we only use genetic material we do not

get the desired results as often as when we let nature take its course for most of the process." He hoped that would be enough.

"What are the undesirable results?" asked McCoy, suspicion gnawing at him.

Again K'L'trok gave a sigh, then tried to look properly saddened, his customarily bright orange eyes dimmed as he explained: "Sometimes, very rarely, the combination of two different species gives either un-viable offspring or a disabled child. But this is very rare and we are perfecting our techniques continuously."

'Best genetic engineering in the galaxy! Ha!', McCoy thought to himself; aloud he asked: "What happens to the disabled K'S'vaits? We have not seen any."

"There are very few, and those are taken care of outside the city in specially adapted environments that suite them best." K'L'trok glibly gave the same answer he gave respective parents when they enquired about their child.

McCoy and Offer looked at each other. Both felt unease, both thought that K'L'trok was not telling them the whole truth, and both knew that they were at an impasse.

"K'L'trok, you must understand, we do not deal in live beings. Our Captain cannot order us to stay here in exchange for dilithium crystals. The Federation would hardly look kindly on that." Lieutenant Offer tried again.

K'L'trok regarded Offer shrewdly, the colour of his eyes rapidly alternating between bright orange, yellow and red. McCoy wondered what kind of particular gene was responsible for these remarkable eyes and wished he could discern the meaning behind the colour changes. He pulled his thoughts back from genetics to the present situation and heard K'L'trok addressing Offer. "Lieutenant, can you tell me honestly, that you would not stay here if your gentle-Captain asked you? That you might not even enjoy the diversity found here? Don't forget, I heard what you said yesterday."

Lieutenant Offer looked uncomfortable. He knew that he would stay if Captain Kirk asked him. He also knew that he would not want to spend the rest of his life here or on any one planet for that matter. Not even on Earth where all his family were. He needed to be in space. He took a long breath and prepared to explain some of this to K'L'trok as well as intending to ask him if he would accept that he would stay for a certain period of time, when K'L'trok's aide rushed in, and without any preliminaries started to speak with K'L'trok in an agitated manner. The foreign words rushed out in a rapid staccato fashion. K'L'trok may have had Vulcan genes, but that definitely did not include controlling emotions or even hiding them as his facial expressions changed from surprise, through anger to something between anger and fear. His remarkable eyes were blazing a fierce dark red.

'Hmmm...that colour must mean anger, fear or both.' McCoy forgot to be worried in his fascination with K'L'trok's eyes.

After a short silence, when his aide had finished speaking, K'L'trok turned to the two now somewhat apprehensive Starfleet officers.

"There is some unrest in the city," he said while pushing a semi-hidden button on his desk. "You will be taken to a safe place, while we deal with it," he continued.

"We would rather beam back to the ship," McCoy stated as calmly as he could.

Four armed K'S'vairs entered the room, K'L'trok said something to them in K'S'vairan. As two of them came close to McCoy and Offer, he said: "I am sorry but that will not be possible, our defence systems will not allow that." Although this was a lie, he continued: "We also require your communication devices and any weapons you may have."

"Are we being held captive?" asked McCoy angrily unaware that his own eyes were changing hue to a darker blue.

"Of course not, but the situation demands that you cooperate."

"We have no weapons and we will not give you our communicators. We have to notify the Captain," said McCoy firmly.

"We will notify your Captain of the situation. I am sorry you will not cooperate willingly." K'L'trok said and gestured to the two K'S'vair guards. They then moved in, and grabbed the communicators from McCoy and Lieutenant Offer. When Lieutenant Offer attempted to resist, he was roughly pinned down by the other two guards. Then with no further words exchanged between K'L'trok and them, they were led out of the domed office into a waiting lift by the guards. The lift took them downward, and soon they found themselves being led to what could not be mistaken for anything else but a prison cell. Nothing but bare walls, made of solid crystalline rock, jutting out round the room so that it was possible to sit. McCoy and Offer were pushed, none too gently, into the round cell and with a flick of one of his hands the guard turned on a dangerously pulsating field that cut them effectively off from the outside world.

"I feel like in the Tower of London," murmured McCoy who had once visited that old and famous bastion, "I hope that axe is REAL sharp!"

The Starfleet officers were unaware of the mayhem that had erupted within the city high above them. Rakholt's groups were preparing for attack on the main administrative dome and the weapons' installations. Ordinary people in the streets were beginning to argue and clash, as dissatisfaction and differing opinions, suppressed for so long, were unleashed. The planetary security forces were trying to restore order and protect the vital installations. Not since the end of the "Great Wars", had there been so much open violence on the planet. Recently there had been small local unrests but the police had been able to deal with these quickly and efficiently - the execution rate had also increased recently. This outburst of all the suppressed anger, fear, hatred, and dissatisfaction was totally unexpected, however, for a police-force that was used to having everyone fully under their control. A police force where each officer had the power of detention, prosecution and execution. In the frenzied release of this suppressed anger all fear for the world's security forces seemed to vanish into thin air. The violence was spilling in to the houses from the streets all too rapidly. Nobody was safe from the insanity that gripped the vast number of different individuals with their personal ideas, forced so long to only believe in the one - the Master's Law.

CHAPTER 10

In the main office of the large governmental dome were gathered the council which included K'L'trok and security chief K'Fron. The room was under heavy guard. A heated discussion was in process. Various council members accusing others for the development of this unsavoury situation. However, in the end K'Fron and his security force got the most blame.

While the barrage of accusations was raining on his head, K'Fron had an idle thought that the council should not alienate his security force at a time like this. After all he could take control. He was in charge

of all forces planet wide. Then he could show this clown council how to really run this planet. He shook his head to clear such thoughts of treason from his mind.

Suddenly the president of the council and thus the presiding ruler of the united world banged the table and proclaimed in a loud voice.

"Enough!"

He turned his pure K'S'vaith face towards K'Fron.

"Securion K'Fron, how are your forces dealing with this unrest?"

K'Fron sprung to attention when he was addressed by the president. The president being one of the select few who had only K'S'vaith blood flowing through him was over two meters tall, with a voice that matched his imposing size. Only pure K'S'vaits were ever elected for the presidency and the only pure K'S'vaits left on the planet were all, ironically, original descendants of the Master.

"My lord. My forces are deployed all over the city with isotropic phasers persuading everyone to go to their dwellings. They are also guarding all important installations. A number of groups have, as a precautionary measure, been sent to smaller urban cities where the disturbance has not yet started," answered K'Fron hating his submissiveness to this pure-bred.

"Good. I expect this uprising to be over by the day's end," his deep voice, made all the more imposing by the slight echo created by the microscopic vibrations of the crystalline wall, reverberated round the room.

The slightly furred head of the president then turned towards K'L'trok. He pierced the interplanetary-trade officer with his gaze.

"You have not been very successful in obtaining any humans yet," he stated.

When K'L'trok only managed to shake his head in agreement, the voice continued.

"The Federation ship sent that message. The Federation ship is responsible. It will, therefore, have to compensate for this in addition to payment of the crystals. Make that clear to them. We hold this Federation fully responsible," he ended and settled back into the seat specially made for his physique.

"Yes, my Lord," answered K'L'trok.

When he was dismissed with a regal wave of the president's hand he hurried to his own office wondering how to approach this new situation, wondering also if he would live long enough to see another day.

When Captain Kirk entered his bridge, Lieutenant Uhura was already at her station, correcting the over-ride from Auxiliary control.

Kirk settled into the centre seat and swivelled round to face Uhura.

"Lieuten....."

"Captain."

They addressed each other at the same time.

Jim smiled and indicated that Uhura precede him.

"Thank you, Captain. I only want to report that all systems are back to normal," she said trying for a smile of her own, but failing miserably, the worry about Sulu, McCoy and Offer clearly written on her face.

"Good. Can you contact someone down on the planet for me, Uhura? And get McCoy as well."

"Yes, sir." Uhura swivelled back to her station.

"Captain to engineering. Mr. Scott, report, please"

A few moments of silence went by, then the Scottish brogue of his chief engineer came through.

"Still holdin' out, Captain. Just."

"Do we have weapons capability?" asked Kirk

"Aye, but that's goin' to put an awful lot of stress on the wee crystal we have left, Sir"

"Thank you, Scotty, do your best."

Kirk hit another toggle and got Christine Chapel answering his call to sickbay. The pain in his stomach became worse when the voice of Chapel reminded him that Dr. McCoy was somewhere planet-side, and he had not yet heard from him.

"How is Sulu?" he asked.

"Still stable, Captain."

"Is Mr. Chekov with him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have him report to the bridge immediately. Kirk out." Jim turned to look at Uhura again.

"Uhura?"

"Nothing yet, Captain." Uhura sounded apologetic, "Neither Dr. McCoy nor Lieutenant Offer are responding to their communicators. However, both communicators are functioning. No one is responding to our hails on the planetary frequency we used earlier."

"Keep trying, Lieutenant."

Jim faced the view of the planet with its multitude of orbiting ships. 'Should he lock on the communicators and beam them up? Would McCoy and Offer be with the communicators, however? Should he go down and take some crystals? Time was running out! They had to obtain dilithium or the Enterprise would soon start plummeting towards the planet and 430 of his people would burn up. How was LaPierre involved?

How badly had she disrupted the negotiations between them and K'L'trok? Were McCoy and Offer still safe? How stable was the government on that planet? Could things get any worse? These thoughts kept running through his mind in unceasing circles while he wished for his luck to change and for Spock to return to the bridge.

The bridge doors opened, and Jim looked up expectantly, hoping that one of his wishes was coming true.

Chekov entered the bridge at a near run.

"Reporting for duty, sir."

"Good, I want you to man the weapons station and navigation for now, ensign."

"Yes, sir." Chekov was glad that he had something to do again. The silent vigil he had kept at Sulu's side was wearing him down. He slid behind his empty navigation station and started going through all the necessary checks of the ballistics and navigation systems. The helm was occupied by Ensign Natasha Taravitch, a trainee. They were running out of seasoned and highly trained helms-people, he reflected. He leaned over and whispered something in Russian to his neighbour. She laughed nervously.

"Belay that chatter, ensigns" ordered the Captain curtly, while tapping his finger on the nav-com.

Chekov cringed, and Taravitch nearly jumped out of her seat. Normally the Captain didn't mind quiet conversation between the bridge crew. 'Things must really be bad,' Chekov concluded and put his full attention into his work. Uhura looked up suddenly.

"Captain, we are being hailed."

"On screen then, Uhura, and notify Mr. Spock."

In the deep bowls of the Enterprise, Spock was performing a task he found distasteful. Interrogating another sentient being. Trying to discover the truth when he continually met with evasions at best and outright lies at worst. He was also surprised to find that he had a headache. He could not remember ever having a worse one in his life. Now his temples were pounding in rhythm with his heartbeat, and sharp pangs of pain cut across his forehead. If this was what the Captain felt every time he complained of a headache (and Spock knew Kirk only mentioned the worst ones) Spock understood why he went to see McCoy; it was decidedly an unpleasant sensation. He then called upon his Vulcan training and banished both the thoughts and the pain to the back of his mind, to enable him to concentrate fully upon his task.

He looked at the ensign sitting at the opposite end of a table. She looked defiant yet apprehensive. Spock had already been aware of her views and the effect it had had on the other crew members. She did not have many if any friends among the ships community. Her constant assertion that her Believe was the only correct philosophy and that all sentient beings had to accept her believe of The Way had driven away even crew members that usually managed to befriend the most difficult beings. Indeed, no one wanted to share duty with her apart from lieutenant Offer, who, Spock knew, would try and debate the issue with LaPierre. He knew that the Captain was already considering an application for reassessment of her suitability in Starfleet when the current situation arose.

"Please continue, ensign. You beamed down to the planet surface, alone, and was approached by a local man. Proceed, please."

"He forced me to accompany him, and showed me the horrible results of your IDIC," she stressed the word 'your' and nearly spat the word 'IDIC', her eyes momentary ablaze in anger.

"And then....," Spock asked, refusing to be baited.

"Then I had to cooperate. In all conscience. The Way must to be spread throughout the universe. And if that means helping the local population to defy authority then that's what I had to do."

"Tell me more about this man who approached you."

There was a stubborn silence

"He gave you the tape?"

A slight nod.

"His name?"

Silence.

"How did you get back on the ship?"

"Larry Dee beamed me up."

"Willingly?"

"Yes."

"Did he know what you were planning?"

"Yes."

Spock's eyebrow rose as he felt the lie hanging in the air.

"Mr. Dee was aware that you were going to send the tape?" he rephrased his question.

LaPierre had heard that you could not lie to Vulcans. 'Was the fact that Spock had asked the same question twice a sign that he knew that she was lying?' She disliked Larry, but maybe it was unwise to lie at this stage just to get him into trouble; on the other hand she had nothing to lose.

"Yes," she could not help herself.

"You are not telling the truth, ensign," Spock said gravely.

"So what are you going to do about it?" she said impudently.

"I am not going to do anything about it, ensign. But you are not helping yourself. Your situation is grave as it is, but understandable. Your prevailing attitude is inexcusable. This interview is being recorded. Your non-cooperation will not help you at your forthcoming hearing," Spock answered her impertinence with total imperturbability, although he could sense acutely the ensign's dislike of him.

He wondered how to continue this unproductive interview. There was no way he could force any information out of the recalcitrant ensign. Thankfully, all known techniques of forcing the truth from a prisoner, either by drugs, or the use of the neural neutralizer were banned by the Federation. These techniques were only used in medical emergencies and rarely at that. The thought of using the Vulcan mind-meld on a non-willing participant never even entered his mind.

Spock regarded the ensign, and was about to restart his interrogation, when Uhura's voice cut through his thoughts.

"Mr. Spock to the Bridge, please."

Spock stood up, went to the wall comm-unit and acknowledged the call.

"This interview is over for now, ensign. Perhaps you should reflect upon your statements. If you wish to add or change anything I will be available to you. I will send Mr. Karlos to guide you through the legalities of your hearing and your legal rights."

Then Spock motioned one of the guards to lead ensign LaPierre to her new quarters. The other he ordered to find Lieutenant Dee and to detain him until further notice.

When Spock arrived on the bridge, he saw his Captain arguing, though diplomatically, with the K'S'vait K'L'trok.

K'L'trok had a worried, nervous manner about him.

The Captain, Spock noted, was furious but managing to mask it.

"K'L'trok, the Federation does not deal in hostages. Does not trade in humans. And... does not take kindly to threats," Jim said as calmly as he could while Spock made his way down to stand beside him. Jim acknowledged him with a quick look.

"Captain, but you did start this unrest." K'L'trok's voice had a frightened edge to it.

"I acknowledge that one of my crew sent a tape given to her by one of your citizens. She did not know what was on the tape."

"Can you prove that?" K'L'trok nearly shouted.

Jim looked again at Spock, who shook his head ever so slightly. "We can, and we will. Meanwhile if anything happens to my officers you will be held responsible by the Federation." Jim's fists tightened.

"We have nothi..." The communication was suddenly cut off and the screen went blank.

"Uhura, what happened?" Jim looked at his communications officer.

"That was cut off from the planet, Sir," Uhura said somewhat mystified.

Jim Kirk looked at Spock again.

"Well...?"

"The statement that we can prove LaPierre obtained the tape from a K'S'vait and from whom was rather premature, Captain."

"You mean she didn't tell you who gave it to her."

"She was, indeed, rather uncooperative."

"Did she implicate any one else on board my ship?" Jim's voice hardened.

"Affirmative. She has implicated lieutenant Larry Dee, but she was not telling the whole truth. However, I have had him detained."

"Maybe he can tell us something," Jim felt like grinding his teeth. He was getting nowhere and he was not getting any answers.

"Have you found anything more about their weapons' system, Spock?" asked Jim not really expecting a positive answer.

"Affirmative, Captain," said Spock while clasping his hands behind his back.

"And..."

"From the incomplete data gathered I theorize that they have a system capable of disrupting any specific crystalline structure by changing the crystal lattice. They generate an energy beam that can break the very gluons that are, so to speak, the strong forces that hold matter together. Jim, that requires an incredible amount of very precisely focused energy, measured in electron volts it would amount to..." Spock would have liked to continue but Jim interrupted him gently:

"Give me the details later, Spock. Is this the same thing which the ship that attacked us used?"

Spock looked uncomfortable at having to extrapolate further, with so little data.

"Captain, there is insufficient data to answer that question. The probability that we would encounter two different weapons that could cause such similar damage is...very low," he said somewhat reluctantly, wishing he could have time to go into the details.

"Later, Spock." Jim felt the discomfort of his science officer at having to give incomplete answers.

"But this is interesting and makes our situation also more serious. However, can we destroy the weapons with our phasers once we have dilithium?"

"No Captain, the weapons are situated within a similar single Urascium crystal structure as the one we met K'L'trok in. These buildings are impenetrable by conventional weapons."

The Captain was quiet for a few moments, then he asked even more hopefully: "Can we come up with anything to counter it?"

"Affirmative, Captain." Spock waited for a beat.

Just as Kirk was about to urge him on he continued:

"Mr. Scott and I have already discussed the necessary changes to our shields. I have taken the liberty of telling him to proceed with the specific changes. These readjustments will prevent the penetration of the beam by diffusing the energy within the shields. However, the reinforced shields will provide protection for only a very limited period and will use a large amount of our own energy." Spock again fell silent, then continued thoughtfully: "The K'S'vaits have only two weapon installations on the whole planet. These are situated so that each synchronous orbiting ship is within range of at least one of the systems at any one time. The weapons cover a large surface to area ratio but they are not designed for deep-space range. This also explains why all ships are allocated specific parking orbits upon their arrival. If we could disable one weapon, it would give us a half-orbital period in which to leave this orbit safely after new crystals have been implemented."

"And I suppose you have the exact location of these installations?" Jim asked somewhat surprised.

"Of course, Captain," Spock replied serenely.

A companionable silence fell between the two officers.

"Spock."

"Captain?"

"We need dilithium."

"Indeed."

"We will have to... help ourselves."

"Indeed."

Jim looked at Spock. But did not see any sign of humour in his eyes. "Is that all you have to say - Indeed?"

Spock was tempted to answer in the manner indicated, but refrained. "Negative, Captain. I am intrigued as to who you will send to help ourselves."

"The landing party will consist of myself, Scotty and four security guards. You will have the conn, Mr. Spock." Kirk said in a voice that normally would book no argument from any one. He felt Spock stiffen and knew that he would not get off without opposition from his first officer. Suddenly Uhura interrupted the silent battle of the wills.

"Captain, we are being hailed from the planet again. It is someone who calls himself Rakholt and wishes to speak to the commander of this ship."

"Acknowledge and wait," ordered Kirk.

Spock looked at Jim, with a You belong here on the Bridge look and a I ought to go but remained silent. He cocked his head to one side, raised one eyebrow slightly and waited for Kirk to speak. The Captain gave him a scouring look, but then relented and smiled ever so slightly.

"You win, Spock. You go. But don't do anything dangerous, I repeat, anything dangerous, like trying to disable any weapon systems. Just get the crystals and get back here. Understood?"

"Affirmative, Captain," answered Spock looking decidedly uncomfortable for a Vulcan.

Jim continued to stare at him severely before reluctantly dismissing him. He then made his way to the centre seat and indicated to Uhura to open communications.

CHAPTER 11

Lieutenant Offer paced the cell like a wild Sadachbian amarrain in a small cage. Dr. McCoy followed his movements for a little while, before suggesting to the young lieutenant that he sat down.

"Doctor, we have got to get out of here!" exclaimed Offer restlessly.

"And how do you propose to do that exactly?" asked McCoy still observing the pacing Offer. "The walls are made of the same strong single-crystal structure the main building is. We are deep underground and if you get an inclination to walk through that field I'll have to pump you full of cordrazine just to get your heart beating again. So sit down!"

Reluctantly Offer obeyed and slumped down onto the cold crystal seat.

"That's better. I was getting mighty dizzy there. Now, let's think," McCoy drawled in his best southern accent. "We can't count on the Captain coming to our rescue, not with the ship disabled as it is. I want to get back to my patient, so as you rightly pointed out, lieutenant, we have to get out. The question is how do we trick that guard outside to, switch that deadly field off?" As Dr. McCoy was talking he rummaged in his medical emergency kit that had not been removed by their captors. Lieutenant Offer was now the one who regarded McCoy.

"Hmm...Aha! Here we may have the key to the door, so to speak, and the solution to the guard," he quietly exclaimed, while laying three hypos on the bench next to him, after changing the settings on each one of them. "Of course, I'll have to be pretty good at juggling with these and not get them confused," he went on, half to himself.

Offer gazed at the hypos with a mixture of hope and distrust. He got the unpleasant feeling that he was about to play a role in this escape that he would not enjoy very much. He hated hypos, even though they were supposed to be painless. Well, they were not.

"Come here, lieutenant," McCoy said.

"Why?" asked Offer suspiciously.

McCoy now looked up from studying his arrangement of hypos and noticed the lieutenant's reticence.

"Because I am going to give you something that will make it look as if you have gone utterly mad." He saw the panic on the other man's face. "Now, don't you worry, son. You won't be aware of anything and as soon as the guard is anaesthetised, I'll give you the antidote." McCoy did not mention the somewhat unpleasant side effects of this drug when given in excess: the very same side effects that would make lieutenant Offer indeed look like a dangerous raving lunatic. Uncomfortable, but relatively harmless, and rapidly reversible with the antidote he had already prepared.

He looked at the lieutenant, who had stubbornly stayed where he was. McCoy put his best "country doctor" face on, crooked his finger and with a beckoning motion gestured Offer to come and sit next to him. "Do I have to chase you round the cell? That might look a bit suspicious to the guard. Believe me it is the only chance we have of getting out," he coaxed him. "Unless you've got a better idea...hmm...?"

Offer gave a deep sigh and muttered something about the suffering inflicted upon the lower ranks by the senior officers, but moved to sit next to McCoy.

"Now just relax, this won't hurt a bit." said McCoy with practised ease and quickly pushed one of the three hypos against Offer's shoulder. There was a long hiss, while the lieutenant grimaced.

"Now what?" Offer asked massaging his shoulder.

"Just relax and wait a bit." McCoy cleaned the hypo and stuck it back into his kit. Then he looked at Offer, whose pupils were beginning to dilate, his breathing was becoming rapid and there was frothing at the mouth. McCoy felt sorry for what he had to inflict upon the young lieutenant, but he got ready for the next phase of his plan. Suddenly Offer got up and started shouting like mad for water. His howls intensified in volume. McCoy's heart constricted, knowing the discomfort the lieutenant was feeling. But it was having the desired effect. The startled K'S'vait guard looked into the cell.

"He needs water! Quickly! He is suffering from Hyperaquapsycosis and will die if he does not get water!" McCoy shouted at the guard, the Latin name of a fabricated disease rolling easily off his tongue. For a while the guard was indecisive, but another ear-splitting yell from Offer, who was now rolling on the floor, at last impressed the guard.

"Stand away!" he ordered McCoy. He took a jug of what looked like water from a nearby table. McCoy moved into position, hypo hidden but ready. The guard hesitated, but the groaning intermingled with shouts and cries were starting to worry the K'S'vait guard considerably, who was under strict orders to keep the valuable hostages alive and well. Normally, there would have been at least another guard on duty with him, but the unrest on the streets meant that he was alone. Lieutenant Offer let out another ear-splitting scream and the guard was at the controls, shutting off the energy field. The moment he stepped through, McCoy jumped at the guard and stuck the hissing instrument against the taller man's neck with all his might. A look of utter surprise crossed the face of the guard before he swayed and fell heavily to the ground. 'That was quick, have I given him too much?' thought McCoy as he rushed to Offer with his third hypo. He took hold of the panicked lieutenant and injected him with the antidote. Offer relaxed immediately and fell into McCoy's waiting arms. His breathing calmed down. McCoy wiped the face of the lieutenant clean with an antiseptic wipe and waited. A few moments later Offer opened his eyes and looked with surprise at the face bending over him.

"How do you feel?"

"Uh...OK...I think... bit disorientated. What happened?"

McCoy pointed to the guard on the floor and the open entrance. "It worked," he said and continued: "If you are up to it we better leave."

Offer got up shakily. "Let's go." and walked to the exit on wobbly feet. 'What had McCoy given him?' he wondered as he tugged at his sweat-drenched uniform.

They made their way carefully to the lift. There were no other guards visible. Only row upon row of cells,

all empty. The lift was still at their floor, the open doors inviting them in.

"Where do we ask it to go?" inquired Offer.

"Let's try and hit the top button," McCoy suggested.

"Right."

Lieutenant Offer lightly touched the top most finger-pad. The lift door closed with a fast snap and the lift itself proceeded to shoot upwards at such a speed that McCoy thought he would be pushed though the floor of the lift.

At last it stopped, and the doors flew open. Gingerly the two men stepped out. "I do believe I am a few centimeters shorter after that ride," murmured McCoy.

They found themselves in a little translucent dome that sat on top of the main building. The view from this place was stunning. For the first time they could see the full beauty of the domed citadel spread before them. All the transparent domed structures were connected with colourful glass-like domed walk-ways located some way from the ground. It gave an impression of a city of glass floating in space, reflecting the sunshine in a splendid display of coloured rays.

"It is beautiful!" gasped Offer.

"It is. But look at the streets, that is not very beautiful," said McCoy grimly and pointed below, where the violence that had began earlier was still spreading. Suddenly lieutenant Offer gasped. McCoy turned round and followed Offer's gaze. There, in a small fully transparent dome, sat a large K'S'vait. McCoy cautiously approached the dome. In the dome, within a barely perceptible stasis-field, was a fully clothed preserved body. The dome was adorned with a glittering plaque with text engraved on it in a number of languages. One was Basic.

"Here sits the Master, watching our every move," McCoy read aloud. "Charming," he then commented dryly.

"There is no way out of here," said Offer, who had been examining the room. "Only the lift."

"Well, let's try one floor down."

When McCoy and Offer returned to the lift, however, they found the door firmly shut and the lift gone. "Damn!" exclaimed the doctor, angry with himself for allowing this to happen. Quite unexpectedly the lift returned and the door opened to deposit a Romulan looking humanoid accompanied by four very Klingon-like men. "Welcome, Dr. McCoy and Lieutenant Offer," the Romulan said pleasantly and extended his hand in a formal greeting. "Allow me to introduce myself - I am called Rakholt, and for the time being I am in command of this area," he smiled a thin tight smile. "Please do be my guests."

"Guests or hostages?" asked McCoy directly.

"We are freedom fighters, doctor, we do not take hostages," Rakholt said trying to sound shocked at the very idea and quickly continued: "You are a medical man, I would very much appreciate if you would accompany my men to one of the factories that are inhabited by the 'Unfortunate-ones' and gave them some relief from their suffering."

"Unfortunate-ones?" McCoy, who had not seen the transmission, inquired.

"The ones who are malformed at birth and are used as cheap labour in the crystal mines and factories. They are in dire need of medical help and protection," explained Rakholt when he realized that both McCoy and Offer were among the few who had missed seeing his vid-recording.

A silence descended upon the small gathering. McCoy found it always hard to refuse a request for medical help. He had suspected that the genetically diseased K'S'vaits, which K'L'trok unwillingly mentioned, would not be well cared for. But he did not trust the Romulan. He saw that lieutenant Offer would have liked to decline Rakholt's request. "Can we have our communicators back, if we go?" he asked at last.

"Communicators? But of course." Rakholt turned to one of his men and said something very quickly in K'S'vathese. "Kiron will get them for you. If you would be so kind as to accompany Ktah, Klas, and Kratin now." He indicated each of the remaining men with his hand.

McCoy and Offer exchanged glances. They really didn't have much choice. The Klingon-like K'S'vaits were well armed and there was no other way out of the little dome.

"We would be delighted," remarked McCoy sarcastically.

On the Bridge of the Enterprise Kirk waited impatiently for the screen to clear for communications with the being that called himself Rakholt. The Captain had been informed by Uhura of the meaning of Rakholt in the Rihansu language. He had strong suspicions that this was the man behind the tape that his navigator had sent planet-wide. He had ordered security to bring LaPierre to the Bridge and hoped that she would arrive before transmission began. He wanted to observe her closely when this Rakholt came in view. The lift doors hissed open and LaPiere, flanked by two security guards, was brought to the Bridge at the same time the screen cleared and a handsome Romulan face appeared. Jim couldn't have hoped for better timing and an even better reaction from LaPierre.

"Rakholt!" she gasped before she could stop herself.

The Romulan seemed not to have heard.

"I am Captain James T. Kirk of the Federation starship Enterprise. You wanted to speak to me?" Jim started the conversation.

"My name is Rakholt, and I am the ruler pro-temp of this planet."

"If you are the 'Ruler' of the planet, then can you return my two missing officers?" Kirk opted for the direct approach.

"Your officers are safe and well. Your doctor has volunteered to help the sick and the wounded. He has requested me to ask you for more medical personnel."

"Such request must come directly from my Chief Medical officer."

"He is very busy and communications are not fully restored, however, I will inform him of your answer," Rakholt looked sideways of the screen for a moment, then continued: "I gather you have need of dilithium

crystals. I will have some delivered to you along with your officers. I would then appreciate if you could leave with all speed and notify your Federation of the atrocities that have been committed by the last ruling party. I would also appreciate if this planet was returned to an interdict status so that we may have time to normalise the situation here." Rakholt finished, prepared to wait for an answer. The next phase of his plan depended on what this starship, orbiting the planet, would do.

The Captain was very surprised to hear what Rakholt proposed and requested. It all seemed so sensible and legitimate. He didn't trust it. Furthermore, the situation was now complicated since Spock and his team had beamed down to the planet a few minutes ago. "Is there any way I can have proof of your sincerity?" he hedged.

Rakholt actually smiled.

"Captain Kirk, will it not be proof enough that I return to you your officers and make you a gift of dilithium?" His look hardened before continuing: "There is also the fact, Captain, that this planet is not part of the Federation, and as such you have no legal authority here. You have no right to interfere with intra-planetary matters."

'Damn that Romulan!' Jim thought half admiringly and said: "You are of course correct in stating that, upon the return of my two officers, I have no further business with the intra-planetary situation, unless I am asked. However, the planet is in Federation space, and as such I have a duty to protect the Federation ships currently in orbit. I also have a duty to the Federation citizens living on the planet, especially those that have been detained unwillingly. And lastly, but by far not least, I have a duty to protect the Federation space this planet finds itself in from any outside intervention, like, shall we say, from the Romulan Empire or even the Klingons," he stressed "Romulan Empire".

"We appreciate your safeguarding our planet," said Rakholt trying not to grind his teeth in frustration. "I will await your answer, Captain, once you have had time to speak to your officers. Good-bye for now," he ended and cut off the transmission.

"Uhura, try and contact Mr. Spock. Chekov, I want a full visual scan and analysis of what's happening on that planet," the Captain turned round to face ensign LaPierre, who was still on the Bridge.

"This was the man who gave you the tape?" he snapped out at her.

"Yes," whispered the bemused ensign. She had realised during the transmission that she and her Way were not included in Rakholt's plans. Her glorious conversion of a planet was not to be.

"Did lieutenant Larry Dee know that you were going to transmit the tape?" asked Kirk in a hard voice, taking advantage of the ensign's confusion. She shook her head. "Very well. Take her down to the brig and release Mr. Dee. Tell him that he is, however, for the time being confined to quarters," Kirk ordered the guards and returned his attention to Uhura.

"I cannot raise Mr. Spock or his landing party, sir," she said and then continued: "Dr. McCoy's and lieutenant Offer's communicators have ceased to function, Captain."

Jim's hands curled into tight fists. He hated this feeling of helplessness that any Captain had at a time like this. Now he could only wait. He had no control. "Captain, I am also intercepting a transmission from Rakholt to an unidentified vessel, but it is in pure Rihansu, uncoded." Uhura's announcement sparked a warning in him that more danger was imminent

"Record it and have it translated, Uhura."

"Yes, sir."

Rakholt switched off the transmission with the Enterprise. He was unsatisfied and angry. He knew that the human captain suspected something. But maybe not all was lost. If Kirk needed dilithium crystals, perhaps his ship was disabled enough not to pose a major threat. And if his forces were successful with obtaining the weapon installations he could always, if necessary, get rid of the Federation starship. Well, he would have to notify the Romulan commander of that. He had dismissed all his guards and was alone in what used to be K'L'trok's office. This was the moment he had waited for all those long years. The moment that his father had hoped for. Slowly and methodically he manually entered in the transmission code for the Rihansu ship, Kklaha, that his father had made him memorize from an early age. It was the ship commanded by his uncle and the only family member that had not cursed his father's name when misfortune had befallen him and he was branded a traitor. Now the moment for revenge and glory to both him and his uncle had come. He would be accepted as Rihansu by the Empire and allowed to return to his rightful home; Ch'Rihan. He waited patiently for the communications with Kklaha. He knew that the Kklaha patrolled the Neutral zone and he knew that his uncle was waiting for this call - his father had promised him that.

Forty six light years away a Romulan commander received an unexpected but intriguing call from someone who claimed to be his lost brother's son. Some one offering him a whole planet rich in crystal deposits. Some one who also promised him a Federation Starship for easy conquest. Not any starship but that belonging to the most wanted Federation Captain by the Romulan empire. Was this a trick? Whichever, it was worth investigating with caution. "Navigator set course for the planet Kavayak, in the alpha-Shaula system. Warp 5." The Romulan commander sat back in his seat and imagined the pleasure it would be to meet Kirk under the circumstances described by Rakholt, a person claiming to be his brother's son.

CHAPTER 12

Six shimmering figures materialised on the surface of the planet Kavayak.

As the world returned after the transporter's sparkling ceased, Spock saw in the distance the reinforced building which, according to his readings, housed one of the menacing weapons. Spock had calculated their transporter co-ordinates such that they materialised within the defensive energy field but far enough from the building so as not to be observed. He motioned for the others to crouch down as he himself did, approaching Mr. Scott.

"Readings, Mr. Scott?"

Scotty adjusted a number of controls on the specially adapted tricorder and scanned the area ahead of them before answering.

"These P/β-units indicate a high concentration of the anti-gluon energy localised deep underground that construction. The ordnance computers seem to be in the centre of the building, Mr. Spock."

Spock nodded and added looking at his own tricorder.

"There is also a large concentration of beings who are armed with small phaser weapons. The phasers

are in use."

"Aye. Do you think that it's the rebels fightin' with the planet's leadership?"

"It would be in agreement with the situation as we know it. We will take advantage of the consequent confusion," Spock said and with a wave of his hand indicated that the security squad should follow him.

"Is this where the crystals are kept?" queried ensign Chatham with a bewildered look on his face. An uncomfortable silence ensued. Only Scott knew that Spock had disobeyed the Captains order, and by agreeing with Spock he himself was in infringement thereof. By keeping the security personnel in ignorance Spock and Scotty had taken full responsibility.

"Ensign, you will follow my orders without further questions. Is that clear?" Spock said coldly.

The ensign wanted to say more but the look his direct superior gave him silenced any further protests.

They made their way slowly and carefully closer to the building. They could hear shouts, yells and an occasional scream that followed the sound of a phaser. When they approached more closely, the fighting became all too conspicuous. Uniformed guards were trying to keep at bay the frenzied attacks from a large number of enraged K'S'vaits. It seemed as though the guards were losing.

Spock attracted Scott's attention. "There," he whispered, although he could have probably shouted and not have been heard above the din of the battle. He pointed to a semi-hidden side-entrance, guarded by only two guards.

"Aye."

Spock took two security men and crept up to the guards, whose attention was occupied by the encroaching battle. When Spock and the two security people were about two hundred meters from the entrance, they stood up and quickly fired their phasers, stunning the unsuspecting guards. Spock stood still for a few seconds, waiting to see if their attack had been observed. Then he indicated for Scotty and the other two to join him. They arrived, unhindered, at the door. Locked. Scotty reset his phaser and was about to fire when Spock held him back.

"The entrance may be fitted with an alarm," he said and set his tricorder to search for possible alarm circuits. A few moments later he shook his head and Scotty, using his phaser set on a narrow high-energy beam, cut a neat round hole in the door.

"They have poor security, Spock," he commented appalled.

"It is as we surmised, Mr. Scott, and in our favour," Spock agreed dryly and continued while dragging the stunned K'S'vait guards inside. "Logically, in a rigid society, such as the K'S'vaits seem to have, they never expect an attack from within their world and any attacks from without are dealt with the fascinating crystal-disruption technique."

"It was a good idea after all to disable the weapon first, while the fightin' is still goin' on. And then goin' after the crystals," Scotty added half to himself.

"Which way, Mr. Scott?" Spock asked Scotty who was studying the specially adapted tricorder.

"Straight down this corridor."

They followed Mr. Scott who heeded the tricorder readings. Initially they went along a straight corridor that first dipped down and then proceeded to climb steeply. There were a few side-doors, which the Enterprise team passed by silently. There were no windows. The lighting in the corridor was dim. The only light came from sparsely spread light-globes. Suddenly the corridor veered sharply to the left. Spock tried to prevent Scotty, who was engrossed in his tricorder readings, from heedlessly turning into the bend. Before he could seize Mr. Scott's arm, however, Scotty had turned. Instantly a phaser beam hit Mr. Scott, who fell to the ground, the tricorder clattering loudly as it bounced on the crystal floor, coming to a stop at Spock's feet. Mr. Spock picked up the tricorder and handed it back to ensign Kaku from security. He then carefully peered round the corner. To his surprise there was no one in sight. After a quick scan, he noticed two electronic devices mounted in the corners alongside a reinforced door. Spock crept along the floor until he reached Mr. Scott. He pulled Scotty back round the corner to relative safety. The engineer was starting to come round. Spock had a medical scanner, which he had appropriated from sick bay, in his hand and moved it over Scott's body. It seemed that the phaser beam had not hit any vital body parts. But it had made contact with Scott's left arm. There was an ugly deep burn in his left biceps. Scotty groaned and tried to sit up.

"Keep still, Mr. Scott," Spock said pushing him back down.

"Wha' happened?"

"You were hit by an automatic phaser-beam. Fortunately, it was set for the generally taller K'S'vait population," Spock told him while he sprayed an antiseptic and antibiotic sealer onto the wound.

"Otherwise the Captain might be minus his Chief engineer. Now try and sit," he said and helped Scotty up.

"It smarts a wee bit, but I'll be fine."

"You should return to the ship, Mr. Scott."

"Och, nay! You need me to disable that wee beastie. And anyway, I canna beam from within this contraption, can I now?" Scotty protested. He wanted to see that weapon-control far too much to allow a little phaser burn to prevent him.

"Very well, Mr. Scott." Spock capitulated, understanding Scott's curiosity all too well. He helped him to stand.

"Sir, shall I blast those phasers out?" asked lieutenant T'la'ct, a large Wantabian whose name was pronounced as T followed by two throaty clicks, "la" - click - "t". Most other species called him "Teelaat" or sometimes "Toolate".

"Negative, Mr. T'la'ct (except Vulcans!). We do not want to set off any alarms."

"Then how are we going to approach the door?"

"We will have to slide along the floor, as I did to retrieve Mr. Scott." Spock answered firmly, then without wasting any further time on debates he lowered himself and cautiously made his way round the bend.

The others waited, with abated breath, for the sound of a phaser. Silence. Slowly they all rounded the corner and followed Mr. Spock who was already by the door, studying this new obstacle with his

tricorder. Scotty sat next to him, warily regarding the scanning automatic phasers above him. Spock put a finger to his lips warning him to be silent.

"The door is made of simple aluminium-radium alloy. It will pose no problems for our phasers. But I read four life-forms within," Spock said quietly.

"That's a wee problem, but not unexpected," whispered Mr. Scott.

"No, not unexpected," agreed Spock.

He indicated for Lieutenant T'Pol to come closer.

"The Loceryl-gas canister, please," he requested.

Lieutenant T'Pol extracted a tiny capsule-like canister from his side-bag and gingerly presented it to the waiting Spock. Then, with a surgeon's precision, Spock made a tiny hole in the door near the floor with his phaser, while the rest of the team stood by with their phasers drawn, ready for action should the K'S'vaths notice anything and make an appearance. Within a minute a hole only half a centimeter in size appeared in the door. Spock dropped the Loceryl-gas canister through the hole. As the canister hit the ground, it exploded with a small "Plop" and released an odourless gas. Spock sealed the tiny hole with a piece of medical tape.

"Well, Mr. Scott, now we will find out how good the doctor is at weapons design," commented Spock as he leaned against the door, to wait patiently for the required time for the gas to take effect. He had calculated that for the size of that room it would be approximately 10.35 earth minutes. Mr. Scott managed a wicked grin, when he remembered the discussion which ensued after Captain Kirk had asked the good doctor to design a small sleeping-bomb. Dr. McCoy had answered that he was a doctor not "a damned weapons-engineer". He had argued that ethically he could not contribute to such designs. He said that he would not be another doctor Guillot. Scotty also recalled Mr. Spock's imperturbable answer: "Dr. McCoy, the Captain is not precisely asking you to design the guillotine. As for your arguments based on ethical grounds, is it not better to put a few beings to sleep than to have an ensuing battle where far more may be harmed or even killed?" Eventually McCoy had capitulated and along with Scotty they had designed this canister-capsule.

He was pulled out of his reverie by a light tap on his good shoulder. Spock indicated to him to have a look through the tiny hole. Scotty obliged. He saw that all four K'S'vaths were sprawled on the floor, fast asleep.

"We go in," he said, half questioning, half stating.

"Affirmative, Mr. Scott, move back,"

Spock first blasted the two overhead automatic weapons. As they glowed and disappeared, an alarm sounded within the other room. Spock and Scotty looked at each other.

"Lieutenant, please," said Spock and indicated, for lieutenant T'Pol to blast the door open. A few moments passed while the door, under the barrage of two phasers set on full, glowed first dark red, subsequently changing from white to blue, then it suddenly disappeared. The sides where the door stood, once protecting the chamber containing the weapon-controls, were still glowing hot. Carefully Spock stepped through followed by Scotty and the security detail. In the middle of the room stood an impressive computer console. Its large screen displayed graphically each orbiting ship that was a target

for the weapons. Ships that were just coming in or going out of range were blinking. Scotty looked aghast at the tiny but recognisable image of the Enterprise, while Spock removed the protective covering of the computer system.

"Fascinating," commented Spock.

Scotty convinced himself that the guards were tying up the unconscious K'S'vaits and then joined Spock underneath the console.

"Can we sabotage it, Mr Spock?" he queried.

"It is quite simple, Mr Scott. Just change this wafer to that memory board, then remove this circuit pathway, demodulating the power..."

Scotty ceased to listen and watched as Spock quickly changed the minuscule components of the precision mechanism. He knew that the K'S'vaits would have trouble locating all these changes and then repairing the extensive but microscopic damage that Spock was inflicting upon the unfortunate computer. In considerable pain he hoisted himself up but his pain was diverted by examining the actual ballistics system. He scanned everything he could into the tricorder, concentrating on the production of the anti-gluon energy. At last Spock withdrew from the computer's recesses and came to stand next to Scott.

"I have finished. Have you satisfied your curiosity, Mr. Scott?" enquired Spock.

"Aye. As much as I can at such a short notice," sighed Scott.

"Then I propose that we leave here and you beam back aboard the Enterprise. Beam lieutenant T'la'ct, ensign Kaku and myself to the coordinates of the small crystal factory we found. Then notify the Captain of our alternative plan and the results thereof," Spock said gravely while leaving the room.

"Mr Spock, I'd rather accompany you..." Scott trailed off when Spock shook his head.

"Mr. Scott, your courage is admirable, however, you are wounded. I also need your expertise in beaming me from this set of co-ordinates to the other set without first beaming me to the ship."

"Very well, I'll go and face the Captain. And the subsequent firing squad," sighed a downhearted Scott.

"Mr. Scott, you exaggerate," Spock stated seriously.

"I am not too sure about that, Mr. Spock."

"If anyone will face the so-called firing squad, I will be the one. You followed my orders, Mr. Scott."

"Aye, but willingly and would do the same again," Scotty said and grinned. He knew that Kirk would be thoroughly annoyed but he believed that the Captain would not court martial either him or Spock. At least he hoped that the Captain would not go as far as a court martial. Then again...

They arrived outside the building, cautiously leaving the entrance. The battle was still in process, but it seemed that there were less rebel K'S'vaits and more of the security troops. The Enterprise crew were not noticed.

Scotty switched his communicator on; as he did so it beeped at him incessantly. He looked at Spock, who gave a small nod with his head. Upon flicking the communicator open, Uhura's voice came clearly across.

"Enterprise to landing party, come in please."

"Scott here."

"Where is Mr. Spock?" came the peremptory voice of the Captain.

Spock shook his head at Scott.

"Mr. Spock is about to obtain the crystals, sir." Scotty answered truthfully, knowing how Spock hated equivocating.

"What's taking so long, and why were you incommunicado?" the Captain's voice sounded exasperated, and Spock felt unusually uneasy.

"Sir, if I beam back aboard, I can explain everything. Mr. Spock has everything under control," said Scotty sounding a little worried, imagining his decommission to an ensign at best.

"Very well, Mr. Scott. Report to the bridge as soon as possible. That explanation better be good. Captain out."

"Thank you Mr. Scott," said Spock, sotto voce.

"Good luck, sir," Scotty said and called the Enterprise transporter room to beam him and two of the security guards aboard.

Soon after they disappeared Spock, T'Pol, and Kaku shimmered out of existence only to be rematerialised elsewhere on the planet. An elsewhere, where desolation penetrated to the core of the three new arrivals. Mr. Spock felt a cold forlorn aura surround him.

CHAPTER 13

"Red alert, red alert, this is no drill, all hands to battle stations," the automated alarm blared throughout the ship just as Scotty finished the re-materialisation of Spock and his party.

'Oh my god!' Scotty thought as he realised that had the red alert sounded a few moments earlier Spock and the security men would be scattered across the universe as the ship's shields came on. He left and hurried to the Bridge. Upon arriving he heard Chekov announcing:

"Proximity alarms have been activated, Keptin. A Romulan warbird dropping out of warp, and assuming orbit."

Kirk turned round when Scott entered.

"What happened to your arm, Scotty?" Jim asked, concerned, but in a loud voice to override the alarms, seeing the burned sleeve and the taped-up arm.

"It's a long story, sir."

"Then shorten it, Mr. Scott," Jim ordered as he turned his attention back to the screen and Chekov's readings.

When Scotty hesitated he turned his head slightly and snapped:

"Well?"

"Well, sir, Mr. Spock and I thought that it would be a good idea to disable the weapon and then..." Scott started.

"You what?!?!!" Kirk looked at Scott unbelievably.

"We, uhm..."

"Keptin, the warbird has attained orbit."

"Captain, the Romulan commander is hailing us," added Uhura.

"On screen, on my command," Kirk said, still glowering at Scott.

"We will have the whole story out later, Mr. Scott," he promised, the threat of reprimand implied in the tone of his voice, then continued, more gently:

"If you are up to it can you make sure that we have weapons if needed."

"Aye, sir," Scott said, relieved that the wrath of the Captain had been averted for a while. For a moment he nearly felt thankful to the Romulans. He then remembered how his Enterprise would suffer if she had to use any energy for the weapons with her one cracked dilithium crystal and hurried to engineering, all else forgotten.

"Stand down to yellow alert," Kirk ordered and a blissful silence descended on the Bridge.

Jim braced himself for the verbal tap-dance he would have to perform to save his ship. 'So Spock had disabled one of the K'S'vait weapons,' he thought. He didn't know whether to be angry at Spock for disobeying an order, pleased that Spock had succeeded, worried that Spock wasn't back yet, or furious that they, therefore, had no crystals as yet. As he composed himself he decided that he would be all those when, if (he corrected himself) Spock got back. 'If they were still all alive.'

He turned to Uhura and nodded.

The screen shimmered and the view changed from the menacing-looking Romulan ship to an equally menacing face of an older Romulan commander.

"Captain Kirk, I presume," the cold voice of the commander sounded on the bridge.

No translator, Kirk realised.

"And whom do I have the pleasure of addressing," Jim said equally politely and coldly.

"I am commander tr'Aihan of the Rihansu Imperial force. I have arrived here to answer a distress call."

"Indeed, and may I ask from whom?"

"From the inhabitants of the planet that you are currently orbiting and which you call Kavayak, Captain."

"Was the distress call, perchance, from a man calling himself Rakholt, Commander?" Kirk tried to goad the Romulan. He had read the translated message that his Communications officer had intercepted. Thus he was well aware what the Romulan Commander wanted: The planet and the current Captain of the Enterprise; himself.

"The name is immaterial, Captain. However, I am planning to provide the assistance requested. The planet is not aligned to the Federation, therefore you cannot object."

"The planet may not be a member of the Federation, but it is in Federation space, and so are you and your ship, Commander. That in itself could be construed as a distinctly provocative action." Kirk's voice got even colder and harder.

"Captain, we are only answering a distress call. Surely that is not an unfriendly act," the commander said in an unconvincingly soothing manner.

"Very well. But we will keep a sharp eye on you and your movements. Any violent actions will be dealt with immediately, Kirk out," answered Kirk with cool composure. He was glad that the Romulan, or any one else for that matter, could not see his hands sweating. He did not want to try and fight with the so crippled Enterprise, and bereft of his best helmsman and science officer, who also happened to be the best first officer in the fleet.

"Chekov, report any changes in their weapon status and any movement between that ship and the surface," he swivelled round.

"Lieutenant Uhura, monitor and report any important communications. You also have the conn. I'll be in my quarters. Notify me if there is any change whatsoever."

"Yes, sir," was the crisp reply.

Before leaving his chair, Jim called engineering.

"Scott here."

"Mr. Scott, I want to see you in my quarters. Now," Kirk said and cut of the communication.

tr'Aihan leaned back in his command chair and took a slow deep breath. So far so good. He had managed to place his ship in orbit round this planet without incidents that could lead to a Rihansu-Federation war. He would have to be very careful. The Romulan Empire could not afford a war at this time. He also wanted to bring back home a living Captain Kirk. 'A very much alive Kirk to stand trial along with that Vulcan-human crossbreed.' tr'Aihan's eyebrows descended in a thoughtful frown. He went back over the conversation with Kirk in his mind. Word for word, looking for all the hidden meanings. And there were a number, he realized. He also believed, now, that Rakholt had spoken the truth, for the Federation Captain, had been also very careful not to escalate further hostilities. 'So maybe his ship is disabled in some manner', thought tr'Aihan with a degree of anticipation, 'patience!' he ordered

himself. The honour would be his soon. His family name would be restored and he would not have to patrol the Neutral zone as a punishment for being a brother to a Dishonoured one. How his brother had ended up on Kavayak he did not know. However, that too would become clear when he talked to his brother's son.

As Kirk arrived at his cabin he found Scotty already waiting by his door. He noticed that Mr. Scott was very pale and trying to inconspicuously support his wounded arm.

"Come in, Mr. Scott."

Kirk indicated for Scotty to precede him. As Jim sat down, Scott stayed standing rigidly to attention.

"Oh, do sit down!" Kirk said irritated.

Scotty sat on the edge of a chair facing the Captain.

"Well, Mr. Scott, please explain your and Mr. Spock's actions. But briefly, as I may be called to the bridge at any time," Kirk said calmly but curtly.

Succinctly Mr. Scott outlined their plan, their reasons and what had happened on the planet's surface.

"We take full responsibility for our actions, Sir. I would like to add that I agreed with Mr. Spock's plan and accompanied him willingly. However, the security guards knew nothing of this," Scotty ended and waited for the end of his career as Chief engineer.

James Kirk was angry. He was angry that Spock had defied his orders, although he admitted to himself that he would have probably done the same. He was also angry that Spock had not at least tried to discuss the plan with him. But again he had to admit that there had not been the opportunity for such a discussion. While these thoughts were occupying his mind Kirk kept staring at Mr. Scott with a rigid expression.

"You have willingly agreed to disobey my orders to Spock. Mr. Scott, are you aware that that is a court martial offence?" queried Kirk in an ice-cold tone of voice.

"Yes, sir."

'Not "Aye",' Kirk thought somewhat amused.

"And you would do the same again?" he continued inexorably.

Scott looked uncomfortable. "Yes, Sir," he whispered.

"I see," Kirk said with finality. A forbidding silence occupied the room. Scotty had seen the Captain angry many times before, but never such cold calculated anger. He really began to fear that this time he and Spock had stretched the Captain's tolerance too far. Sweat broke out on his forehead and he felt faint from more than just the wound on his arm.

Jim shook his head in exasperation. "Report to Sickbay, Mr. Scott," he ordered.

"Sir?"

"You heard me. Off to Sickbay with you! Have that arm treated."

"What about the engin....," Scott tried tentatively.

"Mr. Scott, are you disobeying my orders again?" Jim asked quietly, the threat unspoken.

"No, Sir, " Scott capitulated hastily.

"Then report to sickbay. NOW. That's a direct order!" Kirk saw the mixed emotions of relief at being let off and worry for the well-being of the ship cloud his Chief engineer's face.

"When and IF you are allowed to leave the doctor's ministrations," Kirk's stomach constricted at the thought that he knew nothing of McCoy's whereabouts, "you may return to engineering. Dismissed."

"Aye, Sir," Scott said relieved.

Just as he was about to go through the door Kirk's voice stopped him.

"Mr. Scott, never disobey my orders in such a manner again," he said very seriously.

"Yes, Sir," Scotty said quietly and escaped. He wondered if Spock would get off as lightly as he did.

The landscape that lay before the three officers of the Enterprise was bleak, desolate and savagely ravaged by unnatural causes.

'Here's neither bush nor shrub, to bear off any weather at all,' the quote from Shakespeare's Tempest came unbidden to Spock's mind.

They stood atop a small hillock. Black scree crunched under their feet. Not one blade of grass, let alone a plant or tree adorned the ground. Not even any low scrub. There was absolutely no growth anywhere. No sound of birds or insects broke the oppressive atmosphere, apart from a dull mechanical thudding noise emanating from a hollowed mountain-side a few meters in front of them.

Frequent gusts of strong wind, however, masked even the thudding sound. The loose black scree lifted in the wind and swirled round their feet. Half of the mountain which they were facing was hidden by a low dark cloud. The lower half had a gaping black-hole that served as an entrance into the silent darkness. Metal tracks twisted their way into the blackness.

Spock felt an unaccustomed sensation of heaviness settle upon him. It seemed as if, everywhere, desperate voices were trying to reach him, to claim him for their own purposes. He tightened his mental shields with considerable and disquieting difficulty, glanced at the lieutenant and ensign standing behind him. Both looked alert and concerned but calmly composed.

Without any words spoken between them, Spock led his team, as silently as possible, down towards the ominous entrance to the mine.

CHAPTER 14

The streets of Ka'rakam were filled with the sounds of fighting as T'Charu tried to get near the building where her father worked. She had stayed at home as he had requested, but the fighting had spilled from the streets into the homes.

Her home had been invaded by an angry mob of people, who knew that her father worked as a health-official. They had started by breaking everything they could.

Then they found her brother. Logic would have dictated that enraged as they were at the atrocities they had seen on the vid-com, they would have left her brother alone. But instead they got even angrier, for reasons T'Charu could not fathom. They had beaten and kicked her defenseless young brother, who had not uttered a single word during the whole ordeal. Then when five young Klingonese K'S'vairs had stormed into her house and fought off the original invaders, she had managed to drag her beaten brother to a hiding place they had found years ago, in the garden. There, in the relative quiet of the beautiful surroundings, listening to the sound of the fountain, her brother had died in her arms, saying only one single word. She now repeated that word over and over again, softly, to herself: "Surak."

She ducked in and out of various entrances, avoiding the violence around her. The fighting that she saw sickened her. These people had been living with each other for a long time and now they were fighting, killing each other. Illogical. She did not comprehend and she wanted to understand.

Then she saw two of the Klingonese K'S'vait boys that had been in her house. They were bleeding and shouting a word which she did not understand.

She slipped into an entrance and ran through a deserted domed corridor, out one exit, into another corridor and arrived at her destination. The back entrance to the government building was unlocked. Quickly she made her way, using the dilapidated old stairway instead of the lift to her father's office. The door to the office was open, and she was reluctant to enter, knowing what she would find. But T'Charu had to know. She entered cautiously and stopped almost immediately. Her father was slumped across his desk, an ornate knife handle just visible behind his head. For a long while T'Charu stared at the scene in front of her, memorising every detail. She felt anger and hate welling up in her, and hated herself for that.

"Surak. Surak," she repeated now more loudly and desperately.

Suddenly she heard footsteps. Quickly she hid behind the door and peered out onto the corridor. She saw two men, she recognised as humans from her xenobiology classes and three Klingon-K'S'vait first generation mixtures. She had heard that there was a Federation starship orbiting the planet, full of humans. It had been the gossip round her school only yesterday. 'These men must be from the Starship,' she reasoned. 'If they weren't...' Impulsively, she stepped out in front of the advancing men.

"Help me, please," she said in fluent Basic to the two humans.

McCoy and Offer stopped in their tracks. They stared at the young girl. She was obviously terrified yet had managed to control it. Their K'S'vait escort looked unhappy at the interruption but did not interfere.

"How can we help you?" asked McCoy gently.

The child asked: "You are from the Federation starship?"

"Yes."

"My family have been killed. I am Vulcan. I am therefore a member of the Federation. You must help me. Take me with you," she said in some desperation.

"There is truth in what she says," said lieutenant Offer softly to McCoy, his heart nearly breaking at the sight of the small, frightened yet so controlled child.

"Of course I speak the truth," she said gazing up at Offer, somewhat indignant.

"You forgot the Vulcan ears, lieutenant," McCoy said with a gentle grin. Then he looked at the young girl again.

"What is your name?"

"I am called T'Charu."

"Very well, T'Charu, you can come with us, although for the moment we are not going back to the starship," McCoy looked up at their escort who had silently and contemptuously regarded the whole exchange. "Do you mind if we call the Enterprise and ask them to beam the child aboard?" McCoy asked overpolitely.

"You can try," answered one of the Klingonese K'S'vait mockingly.

McCoy took out his communicator which had been returned to him and flipped it open. The expected bleep of an activated communicator was noticeably absent. McCoy repeated his action with the same result. He saw that Offer was also unsuccessful in contacting the ship with his own communicator.

"What have you done to our communicators?" he snapped at the three escorts.

"Why nothing," one of them snorted

"Then why isn't it working?"

"Must be inferior Federation material," another said scornfully.

McCoy saw that this conversation would not get any results. He turned back to T'Charu, who in her own way reminded him so much of Spock.

"Well, you can see, T'Charu, that we are not currently masters of our destiny. Do you still wish to come with us?"

"Yes, I do," she answered with vehemence.

"Then be it so," McCoy said and offered his hand. Somewhat to his surprise she did not pull back at the physical contact. 'Not fully Vulcan,' he thought as they resumed their journey into the unknown.

CHAPTER 15

Spock and his team descended quickly but quietly, the constant wind masking any noise they made. The dark entrance loomed larger and larger as they approached. It dwarfed the three men. The peak of the mountain now completely enveloped within a grey cloud. Even the top of the entrance began to disappear in the thick cold and damp mist.

Cautiously the men entered into the darkness. Anguished voices, full of wretched bewilderment and suffering, were invading Spock's mind. He tried to block them out, but as the intensity of the voices increased as they went further into the dimly illuminated tunnel, he was only partially successful.

Slowly they made their way through the unevenly surfaced, convoluted stone corridors. Abruptly, the corridor opened out. They were standing at the entrance of a large, well-lit cave. The onslaught of the pained voices became so strong that Spock stumbled. Ensign Kaku rushed to help Spock but tripped and fell. He started to rise when he noticed the corpse curled up in agony at his side. He could not help himself and screamed. The scream echoed round the stone walls of the cavern. Before the echo could subside, the sound of a phaser intermingled with another surprised shout from Kaku. His form glowed briefly in a blue light before he dissolved into nothingness. Spock pulled lieutenant T"la'ct quickly down to the floor beside him. As their eyes adjusted to the brightness of the cave, they saw three Klingon-like men who were looking carefully round them. Spock and T"la'ct were hidden from view by a part of the wall jutting out. In front of them they saw the body that Kaku had tripped over. It had obviously died in torment, a look of incomprehension written all over its face.

There were more bodies strewn around the cave. In one corner additional bodies were neatly laid out in rows. At the opposite end of the stacked corpses Spock recognized Doctor McCoy and lieutenant Offer, who had obviously been helping the K'S'vaits still left alive. Now they were staring at the Klingon-K'S'vaits.

The incessant invasion of the distressed cries had become so strong that Spock could no longer ignore them. He let them fill his mind, and realized that they were the death-cries of many K'S'vaits who had been mercilessly slaughtered. They had been killed by someone they had trusted. He felt the anguish of betrayal and heard the call for revenge in the energy that is left after the body dies. Now that he had identified the source of the persistent thought-invasion, he was puzzled that the voices of the dead had penetrated his mind with such facility, but was able to banish any further breach of his mental shields. As he returned from the meditative state he had been in, he was aware that the lieutenant was calling him softly.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Look, sir."

Spock looked to where T"la'ct was pointing.

The three Klingon-K'S'vaits were now standing near McCoy and lieutenant Offer. McCoy was gesticulating fiercely and his voice had an angry touch to it. Unfortunately, due to the acoustics of the cave, the actual words were distorted by the time they reached Spock and T"la'ct. One of the K'S'vaits laughed. The sound of laughter among the lifeless bodies was incongruous. The echo of the laughter took a long time to die away. It was followed by absolute silence. A small but clear voice broke the profound silence with words that startled Spock.

"It is totally illogical."

He shifted his position and tried to identify the speaker of the last sentence. Next to Offer, seated cross-legged on the floor, was a young Vulcan-looking girl. The Klingon-K'S'vait who had laughed raised slowly his phaser and pointed it at the child, saying something that Spock could not discern. Spock ordered T"la'ct to stay put till he gave a signal. Then, silently as a cat, Spock crept in the shadows round the cave towards McCoy and the K'S'vaits. While the K'S'vait holding the phaser was deciding whether

to kill the annoying child, a shadowy figure raised itself from the darkness. the K'S'vait felt his neck go numb, as an electric-like shock travelled up and down his spine and then lost consciousness.

"Spock!" thought McCoy, pleased, but remained silent as the K'S'vait slid to the floor. At the same time lieutenant Offer hit the other K'S'vait with as much force he could muster. Concurrently, T"la'ct fired his phaser, and the third K'S'vait dropped heavily to the floor. Offer was still fighting with his K'S'vaitese opponent. Spock applied the Vulcan nerve-pinch once more and gently lowered the unconscious man next to his companion.

"Spock!" McCoy now said in relief.

"Doctor," acknowledged Spock, "this is indeed an opportune meeting."

"You mean we are lucky!" grinned McCoy.

"Perhaps the random factors were in your favour, Doctor," Spock conceded. Then he looked inquiringly at the Vulcan child who was staring at the third Vulcan she had ever known in her short life.

"That is a stray we picked up. Half-Vulcan. She has asked for asylum from the Federation. Her name is T'Charu." said McCoy with some relish as he noticed the slight surprise and considerable interest alight in Spock's eyes.

T'Charu stood up, greeted Spock with the proper Vulcan salute and said in slightly accented Vulcan: "Mehe nakkhet ur-seveh."(5)

Spock's eyebrow ascended slightly as he gravely returned the greeting. Then he turned towards Offer and T"la'ct.

"According to my tricorder-readings the dilithium crystals are kept in a chamber to the left of this cavern. Please go and get six, preferably trihedrally-cleaved crystals."

"Yes, Sir, " they both answered and left.

Spock turned towards McCoy: "Report."

Briefly, McCoy outlined what had happened to them since leaving the ship. He then proceeded to describe, in a rather shaken voice, what had occurred since they arrived at the crystal-mine: "We arrived here expecting K'S'vaits in need of medical help. But there are only five left alive, Spock," he said, his voice filled with sorrow and anger, "The rest...well you can see for yourself. They did not die pleasantly."

Spock did not tell McCoy what he had learned from the telepathic contact with the lingering essence of those who had lived and died there.

McCoy continued: "I tried to help the five survivors, while Offer and our K'S'vathese escort started gathering the dead over there," he waved his hand distractedly. "At first, the K'S'vaits told us that it was the planet's government that killed these poor souls as punishment for appearing on some kind of Vid-film that the Romulan, Rakholt, had made. But then one of the surviving wounded K'S'vaits told Offer that the blasted Romulan himself had them all killed. These Klingon-K'S'vaits heard him and wanted to kill him. That was when the argument started and we were told that we would also be killed and the government blamed. After that you appeared as the devil himself." McCoy ended in a tired voice. Spock raised an eyebrow at the reference to the devil but said nothing. He went to the five surviving K'S'vaits.

McCoy followed him saying quietly: "They will not survive long. Only one speaks any Basic." and led Spock to him. Spock saw a wretchedly malformed and fatally wounded being lying on a narrow cot. He saw that McCoy had made him as comfortable as was possible. He sat down on the floor next to the cot.

"Can you tell me what happened?" he asked.

Very slowly and with considerable difficulty the wounded K'S'vait told him everything. Starting with how they were really treated by the ruling K'S'vaits, to the promises made by Rakholt, and ultimately how they were betrayed by him. While he told his story, Offer and T'la'ct had returned with the six dilithium crystals. Now they were also listening, aghast, to the tragic tale. After he finished his account the K'S'vait closed his eyes in exhaustion and pain. Spock would have preferred to alleviate the K'S'vait pain with a mind-touch, but he doubted the weakened state of his own ability to shield. McCoy pressed a hypo to the K'S'vait's arm.

"He will sleep now," said McCoy soberly.

Spock got up from the floor. He was aware that T'Charu had been watching him without cessation.

"We must beam back to the ship. Dr. McCoy, can we safely transport the wounded outside?"

After checking on each of the five K'S'vait survivors McCoy turned to Spock, shaking his head in frustrated disbelief.

"Not necessary, Spock," said McCoy quietly, while putting all his medical tools back into his medi-kit. "They are dead."

"I do not understand the logic of this!" said T'Charu abruptly, in a pained voice.

Spock went to her and knelt beside her. "There is none. T'Charu, the universe and its inhabitants do not follow a logical path. Neither did Vulcans for a long time, and chaos and destruction was rife on Vulcan. That is why we chose to follow logic and master our emotions. But most beings live their lives neither fully controlling nor being fully controlled by their emotions. What you have seen today is when people are uncontrollably possessed by their emotions, and that is never logical," he said gently.

"I wish to master my emotions," stated T'Charu.

"That is a long process, T'Charu. Part of the process is accepting the concept of: What is, is. and: the truth of the situation. Therefore, try and accept what you have seen, and we will meditate on it when time allows."

"You mean Kaidith and C'Thia?" asked T'Charu.

"Yes. Come," answered Spock and got up. T'Charu hesitated, then being only half-Vulcan and brought up on a planet where touching was an important part of life, tried to take Spock's hand. Spock recoiled as if a high-voltage electric shock had been passed through him. T'Charu, unaware of her strong telepathic ability, had, when touching Spock, unwittingly and suddenly transferred all her emotional turmoil to him. T'Charu sprung back like a frightened gazelle. Concerned she looked up at Spock. "Would this real Vulcan turn away from her now?" The only other Vulcan she knew was her mother, but she had died when T'Charu was two. Her Vulcan teacher was an old man who had to some extent

abandoned the way of Surak. But this tall quiet man seemed to follow Surak's philosophy and be able to control his emotions. She did not want to antagonize him.

"I am sorry," she said in a small voice eyes downcast.

"T'Charu, have you ever been tested for your telepathic ability?" asked Spock, his usual calm self again.

"No, sir," still unwilling to look up.

"Well, T'Charu, when you touched me, you unexpectedly invaded my thoughts. That is unacceptable among Vulcans and many other telepathic races." Spock saw from the corner of his eye that McCoy was getting upset at his severe words addressed to the child. But she was half-Vulcan wanting to be Vulcan: it was necessary.

"I am sorry," she repeated meeting his level gaze with her own.

"Do not be. It is important to learn from our mistakes. You may, now, if you wish, hold my hand." Spock prepared himself mentally and held out his long slim hand. Tentatively T'Charu put her small thin hand in his. He gripped it tightly. The older Vulcan, well able to master his emotions, led the younger Vulcan who was still at the beginning of her path of learning.

The subdued and exhausted Starfleet officers left the oppressive crystal mine filled with anguish and pain to find that night had fallen. The two moons of Kavayak were barely visible through the fog. The wind had died down and thick silence enveloped them. 'No snowfall here,' Spock thought idly as he flipped open his communicator with his free hand. It chirped twice:

"Spock to Enterprise, come in please."

"Spock!" the Captain's voice cut through the oppressive silence, "where the devil have you been?"

'Second reference to the devil,' thought Spock wryly but said formally: "Dr. McCoy, Lieutenants Offer and T'la'ct, a young guest and I are requesting beam up, sir. "

There was a short but profound silence from the other end. Both McCoy and Spock could almost feel Jim's relief that they were alive and well, and also his frustration at having had to wait on the ship without any action or knowledge of their whereabouts. Both were unaware that a Romulan warbird had arrived during their absence.

"It's about time," they heard Jim say softly, then more severely: "We have to lower our shields to beam you aboard, stand by."

Spock and McCoy looked at each other, Spock's eyebrow did a rapid ascent.

"They must be very low on energy if they have been using the shields," he said to McCoy.

"How much time will we have left?" asked McCoy with concern.

"At best 4 hours, 28 and a half minutes, at worst 1 hour 15 minutes." Spock calculated the energy utilization function of the Enterprise shields with respect to her other energy requirements and the residual energy as easily as adding two and two. McCoy hurrumphed and glowered at him.

T'Charu, her hand still clasped in Spock's, observed the exchange between McCoy and Spock with great interest.

The communicator beeped again.

Kirk's voice came through: "Ready for beam-up. Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy report to my cabin immediately upon return. Along with the... guest."

"Jim, I need to check up on Sulu first," McCoy shouted down Spock's communicator before he could sign off.

"Very well, Bones. Please, see me as soon as you can. Spock, immediately!"

"Yes, sir," Spock managed to say as the desolate planet started to shimmer and they dissolved into their atomic particles and waves. Just before the real world disappeared for the few seconds it would take for the transporter to dematerialize and rematerialize them, Spock heard an astonished gasp originating from T'Charu.

CHAPTER 16

When Kirk cut off the communications with Spock he belatedly realized that Spock had not mentioned ensign Kaku. He had, therefore, to assume that the ensign had been killed or lost in action. Jim hated losing any of his crew, but in some way especially those that had joined the Enterprise only recently, like ensign Kaku. Only two months out and already dead. He would have to wait and get the report from Spock.

When Uhura had notified him that Spock was hailing the Enterprise he had just reached the relative sanctuary of his cabin. He had just finished another gruelling battle of words and wills with the Romulan Commander tr'Aihan. The commander had not been able to communicate with Rakholt since their first contact and was preparing to send down a landing party. When Chekov's constant monitoring of the Romulan ship had indicated that a large transporter activation was about to occur, Kirk had immediately requested Ship to Ship communication with tr'Aihan. After the swap of threats, lies and deceptions Jim was told that tr'Aihan was preparing to send down a small number of Romulan aid-workers. Which Jim translated as a large number of Romulan soldiers. He had managed to convince tr'Aihan that it would be in his best interest to wait for the outcome of the conflict between the rebels and the ruling party, and not waste the lives of his brave aid-workers unnecessarily. In between the verbal arguments the Romulan ship had charged and subsequently deactivated her phaser and photon torpedoes. Kirk had to answer in like fashion, and the drain on the ship's nearly exhausted energy supply was driving him crazy not to mention Scotty. As the Captain, he could not show his very real concern to his crew. Now he slumped in his chair, as drained of energy as the Enterprise.

He wondered in what fashion to reprimand Spock, as he must, for his infringement. And he wondered who this guest was that Spock had mentioned. He also fervently hoped that Spock had managed to obtain some crystals. Jim stood up and paced through his cabin; 'Too small to comfortably move around in,' he thought for the hundredth time.

The chime to his cabin announced the arrival of Spock.

"Enter," he said and the doors slid open to reveal not one but two Vulcans silhouetted in the doorway.

Silently Spock and a young Vulcan girl entered the Captain's cabin.

The first thing that Jim could not help but notice was how unwell Spock looked. Jim stared at Spock speculatively for a long moment. Spock matched the expression look for look. A series of thoughts and feelings were communicated between them in that moment.

Jim thought: 'Down to business,' and asked:

"Did you obtain the crystals?"

"Yes, sir. They are in Mr. Scott's capable hands."

"Then introduce me, please, to our guest."

Briefly Spock outlined what he had learned from McCoy and T'Charu. "T'Charu is formally asking you for asylum on the Enterprise. She intends to apply for Vulcan citizenship when we arrive there," Spock ended.

"Alone?" Jim looked at the child who had not yet spoken a single word.

T'Charu was studying him intently, but he could read no expression on her face.

T'Charu felt disorientated. First her experiences down on Kavayak, then her first encounter with the transporter, followed by her walk through the gigantic starship to stand now before the man who would decide her imminent future. And she could discern some doubt in his voice with that one word: 'Alone?' She felt fear creeping into her mind with the thought that the Captain may return her to Kavayak. She wanted so much to go to Vulcan. To leave all that had happened behind. She suppressed the fear and continued to regard the Captain with quiet calm.

"I intend to ask my parents to accept her as a legal ward."

"Very well, Spock. You will keep me informed as to the progress on that matter, then." Jim turned his steady gaze on T'Charu.

"Welcome aboard the starship Enterprise. You are officially granted asylum on this ship by me as the Federation representative. We will do everything possible to help you," he said gravely.

"Thank you, Captain Kirk," answered T'Charu equally gravely, although she felt all the fear drain away and heavy tiredness settle over her.

Jim looked back at Spock and addressed him: "Now, I would like a private word with you, please."

Spock nodded and led T'Charu to the door. As the doors opened Jim saw that lieutenant Offer was waiting outside. Offer now took the child and led her away. Spock returned to face his Captain saying: "Captain, I am at your disposal."

"That's a change," said Jim sarcastically, walking away from Spock.

Spock remained standing quietly.

Jim turned to face Spock eyes blazing.

"Just what the hell did you think you were doing?" he asked with barely controlled anger.

Again Spock felt all the Captain's emotions. 'I can no longer shield properly!' he realized while also discerning, threaded through the fury directed at him, the enormous worry that his Captain had felt. He composed himself and managed to say with absolute equanimity:

"I was gathering dilithium crystals and I thought it wise to disable at least one weapon-system while on Kavayak, sir."

"Against my direct orders, Spock?" snapped Kirk.

"I am sorry to have disregarded your orders, Captain. At the time it seemed the logical thing to do."

"My first officer going against my orders. What next, Spock?" asked Jim rhetorically. "Mutiny?"

"I sincerely trust that that will never be necessary, Captain."

"I could have you court martialed and decommissioned to a cleaning drone!" exclaimed Kirk, and banged his hand in frustration on his desk.

"I concur, Captain, that you can have me court martialed and decommissioned. Perhaps you should, even though I have successfully completed both your mission and my unauthorised mission, while also finding the doctor and lieutenant Offer. However, I cannot be decommissioned to a cleaning drone. The drone is a machine. I, however, am not," Spock said in a most sober tone.

A ghost of a smile stretched the Captain's lips. But no smile reached his eyes.

"Spock, I cannot allow my most senior officers to disregard my orders. It is bad for discipline."

"I agree, Captain."

"Then you also agree that I must severely reprimand you?"

"Indeed, Captain, I would expect nothing less."

"Fine. Consider yourself severely reprimanded. And don't ever do that again, Spock, or I'll throw you out through the garbage-dump into empty space, understood?"

"Yes, Captain. Through the garbage-dump into empty space. I will remember, sir."

"Good. Now give me a full report, " ordered Jim, not the least bit amused. Nevertheless he prepared his chessboard for a game. 'Would this be the last game he ever played?' he thought and reprimanded himself for such defeatist notions.

Spock, in his weakened state picked up Jim's thoughts as if the Captain had spoken them aloud.

"We have been in worse situations, Captain."

"Not much worse. But now that we have dilithium, things are definitely looking up. And as I remember you once said: 'There are always alternatives.'" Jim smiled and indicated for Spock to sit at the opposite side of the chessboard.

"Now report, please," he said as he made his opening move.

'A very bold move,' Spock noted, 'leaving the queen open to attack.' Spock thought about his counter-move while reporting what had happened on Kavayak.

Four moves later, Spock had finished his rather disturbing report. Jim shuddered as he imagined the mine filled with poisoned corpses of the K'S'vuits. He felt sorrow at the senseless way ensign Kaku had died. His hand hovered holding a pawn above a level-two white square, when his thoughts and the game were interrupted by the penetrating ships-alarm signal.

CHAPTER 17

"RED ALERT RED ALERT THIS IS NOT A.."

"What the..." Kirk snapped the communications on. "Report!"

The calm face of Lieutenant Uhura, sitting centre seat, addressed the Captain: "Chekov has monitored the targeting of weapons on us from Kavayak, Captain. We seem to be under attack."

"On my way." Jim let the communication screen go blank.

"Well, Spock, the 'fun' has started."

"Captain, we will be out of range of the functioning weapon in 11 minutes and 24 seconds." Spock informed his commanding officer as they made their way to the bridge.

All around them the crew of the Enterprise were hurrying, in an orderly manner, to their respective stations. Stations that had to be manned during yet another red alert.

"Eleven and a half minutes before we enter the orbit controlled by the weapon you managed to disable, Spock?"

Spock nodded: "Ten minutes and 54 seconds" as they reached the bridge.

"Uhura try and get whoever is in control on the planet."

Uhura did not answer as she quickly vacated the Captain's chair and slid behind her familiar communications board. Kirk looked around the Bridge. Scotty was busy at his station.

"Mr. Scott, do we have full power capacity?" asked Kirk hoping for some good news.

"We have 80% of power back, Captain, includin' full shields but limited weapons. The Enterprise is capable of full impulse and a wee bit of warp."

"Wee bit?"

"Well, she can give warp 5."

"That will do." said Kirk and looked at the navigation station. 'Damn! He missed Sulu!' "Status, Mr. Chekov."

"Their weapon is locked on to us and power building up. Now at 54%, Keptin."

"Spock, can we escape this weapon, before it's at full power?"

"Negative, Captain. Fifty five percent is enough to disrupt all our dilithium crystals."

"Captain, I have K'L'trok. Coming on screen now." Uhura touched a toggle and the screen filled with the now familiar face of the K'S'vait.

"K'L'trok, why have you targeted our ship?" Kirk did not beat about the bush.

"Just a small precautionary measure, Captain. As you see we have your uprising under control." K'L'trok looked pleased with himself.

"Not my upr..." Jim started to protest when he was interrupted by the self-assured K'S'vait:

"You, Captain, have a number of charges to answer to: Firstly the transmission of the inflammatory tape. We have also received news that a certain mine has been broken into by your officers and not only have they stolen our dilithium but massacred all the poor defenceless people working there."

The relief that K'L'trok did not mention a weapons installation, and the slight unease, that Jim felt at the mention of the dilithium evaporated with the absurd charge of mass-murder, to be replaced by real anger. "You are wrong on a number of accounts, K'L'trok, and we have evidence to prove it." he said trying to stay calm. He knew he had to play for time. All their lives depended on keeping the K'S'vaits from firing too soon with the fully functional weapon.

"We cannot believe any evidence you have - it could have been manufactured - like that transmission of the Romulan half-breed."

Spock raised his eyebrow at the use of that particular term. He had made his way down to stand next to the Captain's chair. "Two minutes, 23 seconds. 89% charged." He said under his breath.

"K'L'trok continued: "We will give you an example of our power, if you do not pay reparation for your serious crimes against this planet. The price for your safe departure, the dilithium and the life that you have taken will be 12 humans, six male and six female specimens. We think that that is a very fair price. You will give me an affirmative answer now."

The captain glanced at Spock. A few seconds passed in tense silence, then Spock gave a nearly imperceptible shake of his head.

"K'L'trok, please let us..."

"NOW, Captain!" K'L'trok suddenly shouted.

K'Fron, who had been waiting at the weapons control centre, ready to fire, tensed. This ship would be a pleasure to destroy. The destruction would be recorded and replayed on his screen via the recording satellites orbiting the planet. He took pleasure in the sweet anticipation of good things to come.

On the bridge of the Enterprise Kirk had had enough. "Out of the question. We do not deal in beings, human or otherwise. We will speak to you, later, about charges against your government by your

population, Federation- origen and otherwise."

"Your later will not come. Salutations, Captain." K'L'trok stated as his eyes changed colour to a deep deep red. Kirk saw him gesture at someone off-screen.

K'Fron did not hesitate. He touched with an almost loving caress, a dark-blue pulsating pad. On the ballistic-display surface the weapons countdown started: "10,9,8,..." The countdown was audible on the Enterprise bridge, as the translator changed the mechanical computer-voiced K'S'vait numbers to Federation equivalents.

Kirk held his breath. The atmosphere was tense. Chekov and Uhura exchanged a glance.

"Captain..." Spock began calmly but softly , "we still need forty tw..."

The ship shuddered. A high pitched sound ran through the Enterprise, seemingly shaking the very fabric of her structure apart. Reality wavered. Kirk held tight onto his command chair. He felt Spock trying to keep his balance next to him. Chekov was on the floor, curled up in a foetal position. He wanted to curl up himself. Too many sensations hammered at his brain. Suddenly, he was the ship, being dismembered atom by atom. Now he was Spock, the crystal-clear thought processes being twisted into a muddy barbed coil. He was the fear, confusion and hope of all his crew drowning in hopeless knowledge of the End. He was Sulu, empty yet still so full. He was McCoy fighting for all life with death looming above, dark and infinitely insistent. "Spock..." he whispered beseechingly.

"Three, four, two, one. All systems ready...firing." The computer's sybthetic voice announced, in the little crystalline dome where K'Fron and now also K'L'trok watched the monitor in anticipation, like small children waiting for their favourite vid-com program.

The curve on the display peaked. A continuous ascent of energy, provided first by a single weapon. As the still, at least partially, intact starship entered the other half of the orbit, the second weapon took over the deadly battering of the ship. The display showedthe disruptive isotropic-beam exiting the weapons and streaking through the planet's atmosphere to space and the orbiting helpless starship.

K'Fron watched as, on the screen, the structure that was the Enterprise shimmered, changed into a cloudy wave-like shape and disappeared.

"She has been eliminated." announced K'Fron. "Pity about the human merchandise, though."

K'Fron looked at K'L'trok when he did not answer his barb about K'L'trok's failure to obtain human stock. K'L'trok was now looking towards the communications screen. K'Fron looked at that display as well and froze.

CHAPTER 18

Sudden calm and reality returned to the Enterprise. Kirk was Kirk and everything seemed normal. The ship was still intact.

"Spock?"

In that one word were at least three questions. Spock answered them in his preferred order.

"We were within the reach of the functional weapon for 10 seconds, before entering the zone covered by the disabled weapon. The changes that we had implemented to our shielding have prevented our immediate destruction, but probably caused the somewhat...interesting sensory effects." He surmised that the first two answers would also answer the final question that the Captain's "Spock?" had implied.

Jim allowed the small smile that had began to form at Spock's report (and Spock's avoidance of answering the Captain's concern for Spock's well being) to reach a full relieved smile as the reports coming in from Scotty and Uhura confirmed that the Enterprise was undamaged and that his crew had not sustained any serious injuries. He was suddenly aware that they still had open communications with the planet and indicated for Uhura to close them immediately.

"Captain we have full power to all systems." Scotty announced not bothering to hide the satisfaction and relief in his voice.

"Good. Mr. Chekov, lay in an orbit ten kilometres higher than our current one. That should put us well out of reach of any other nasty surprises from the K'S'vaitans. Mr. Offer, please implement the change as soon as Mr. Chekov has finished."

"Yes, sir." came the double reply.

"Spock, the likelihood that similarities to the attack that brought us here in the first place are coincidental are..."

"Approximately 1544589.3032 to one, Captain."

Jim could not help but suspect that Spock made those numbers up sometimes - his way of saying 'improbable'. "Astronomical, indeed. Then we must act upon this opportunity. We cannot afford to fail in preventing any further weapons-technology from leaving this planet."

"To fail in the disposing of those chances/ which he was lord of," Spock said suddenly.

Kirk looked at his science officer with a bit of concern. "What?"

"Shakespeare, Captain." Spock did not elaborate.

"Aah!" Captain James Kirk leaned back in his seat and contemplated his next move. How to proceed, and quickly. He wanted to leave for Vulcan as soon as he possibly could, but first he had to secure this quadrant of space. A nearly imperceptible sigh escaped his lips. Spock was back at his station looking for the same answers as his commanding officer.

"Sickbay to bridge," the irate and somewhat strained voice of Dr. Leonard McCoy demanded the Captain's immediate attention.

Jim Kirk had no illusions about what had irritated the good doctor and the complaint about to be voiced. Nevertheless, he punched the pad that would connect him to sickbay. "Kirk here..." he said pleasantly as 'Here it comes...' flashed through his mind.

"Are you quite through shaking this ship about, not to mention turning us all inside out?"

"Oh, yes. Quite, Bones," he answered placatingly, a smile tugging at his lips.

"Right. Then Jim can you set course to Vulcan full, speed ahead?"

At this request the soft chatter on the bridge ceased. Chekov tensed. Both Lieutenants Offer and Uhura looked at the Captain. Spock winced slightly as if in pain.

"Not just yet, Bones", said Jim gently, "Sulu...?"

"I've had to place him in stasis, Jim. He began to withdraw again and his vital signs were dangerously low after that last attack," McCoy's voice sounded very tired. "And I won't allow another of Spock's unauthorised medical interventions." he continued with an added touch of querulousness.

Spock said nothing. He had to agree with the doctor. Something was not quite right with his ability to control his telepathic capabilities since his last mind-meld with the lieutenant. He doubted that in his current state he could be of any assistance to the helmsman.

Jim looked at Spock, expecting some reply and was surprised when none came.

"Very well, Doctor. I will try and expedite things here. Now that we have all our power back why don't you contact healer Sorel or Corrigan and notify them of their new patient?"

"Yes, well it may be helpful, but what Sulu really needs is the regeneration treatment and fast, Jim. There's nothing more I can do for him here."

"I know, and I am doing my best. But there are certain things that have to be finished here."

"Can't we take Sulu to Vulcan and then come back?" asked McCoy although he knew the answer to that.

"No, Bones. We're going to make certain that no more ships are caught in the K'S'vait's trap, with the consequent marketing of lives."

There was an audible grunt of assent at the other end of the transmission.

"And," Jim continued, "there is the weapon-technology. It seems that that too has been used in trading and that must definitely be stopped. Spock's comparative analysis of the latest attack from Kavayak and the one that caused our initial damage shows far too many similarities to be accidental."

"Well, sort it out then. ASAP! McCoy out."

"Yes, Sir" Kirk said under his breath. 'Sort it out indeed!'

He needed some time to think and would have liked to leave the bridge for the quietness of his cabin. But he already had his rest, and Spock had not had one moment off duty since coming back from the planet. It was time for Kirk to put his foot down and send Spock off. He took one deep breath, got up, tugged his shirt straight and stepped up to the science station. Spock glanced up partially as the Captain approached. The blue light from the viewer shining on his face, accentuating the austerity of his features.

"Captain, we can further improve shielding against this kind of weapon, but, currently, not enough to

withstand long periods of attack. It is not the intensity of the beam that is important but the length of time a substance is exposed. The length of exposure to the beam is directly proportional to the oscillation produced within the matter which consequently disrupts it. Crystalline matter is more susceptible by its very nature of being in an ordered state. That is why, in the initial attack, only our dilithium crystals were severely damaged and the Enterprise did not disintegrate. I surmise, that the K'S'vants do not sell their whole knowledge, just parts of it."

"But even this partial knowledge can be very destructive and dangerous."

"Indeed."

"Why was Sulu so badly affected, then?"

"If you will recall, Captain, Mr. Sulu was in the process of examining the navigation board. It contains small but highly ordered monoclonal crystals. If Mr. Sulu was in contact with one of those crystals the energy of a toned-down beam would be sufficient to affect him as well."

"As it did..."

"Yes, Captain, as it did."

"Spock?"

"Captain?"

"I would like you to go off active duty for the next few hours."

Kirk was already preparing the counter-argument to Spock's protest, when Spock said calmly.

"Very well, Captain. I shall be in my quarters." He indicated for his acting science officer to take over and made his way to the lift leaving the Captain non plussed.

The lift doors shut behind Spock. He felt relief at leaving the bridge. Although they had escaped the attack, the atmosphere on the bridge was charged with emotion. Both joy at overcoming one danger, and worry about Sulu. Normally he would not even be aware of the atmosphere (unless he purposely wanted to), but for the last few days he could not keep the emotions of the others from invading his peace of mind. 'What had happened since his mind-meld with Sulu?' He had been in such deep mind-melds before with no lasting aftereffects. 'So why now?' The lift came to a smooth halt at deck 5. He would contact his parents, meditate for an hour and a half and then talk to T'Charu again he decided as he entered his Vulcan-warm cabin.

CHAPTER 19

Rakholt had narrowly escaped the advancing Special Security forces that had been deployed to re-capture the governmental dome.

Since he had learned of the escape of the Federation men from the mine, the situation for him had gone from bad to worse. His attempt at capturing and taking control of the weapons installations had failed catastrophically. All his people had been either killed in action or captured and then immediately executed. The military had wasted no time in showing the executions over the world vidcom network. Two of his other battalions, upon seeing this transmission, and having had only limited success in their

own missions, had disbanded and fled. Only his ever-faithful officers had the courage to come and report to him. Then they performed The Ritual that all had previously agreed upon, in case of failure. They took their small, mainly ornamental dagger and cut first their left wrist to the bone, then their right ankle and finally plunged the sharp hooked point into their throat.

Three out of the four Klingon officers who were in charge of the Federation men had been captured by the government army. Only Kiron had managed to escape and to report the events to his commander, before completing The Ritual.

Rakholt needed now to get to his uncle's starship. There was still time to destroy the Star Fleet vessel and then take Kavayak by force. The general unrest was still in progress, keeping most of the security forces too busy on the planet to be bothered about what was going on in the skies above. If he could convince the Commander of the Rihansu battle-cruiser to destroy the government building containing the weapons control computer then the planet would be an easy conquest.

Rakholt blended into the multitude of angry crowds and headed for his safe-place in an old, long deserted, genetic lab. It was, in fact, the very same lab in which he had been 'created'. Before escaping the advancing security forces, he had managed to obtain a portable transmitter. Unobtrusively he slipped from the street into the old and cracked crystal dome. The once proud sign announcing "Procreation Centre" was chipped and hung so crookedly that it partially obstructed the old entrance. Rakholt slipped silently past the sign and quickly went into a room at the end of the corridor, passing, en route, the once pristine labs. Now these rooms contained dusty and dirty equipment, loosely hanging plastic tubing and a few outdated, discarded incubation cribs.

In his safe-room there were only the bare essentials; a chair, a desk and a cot. He set the transmitter on the desk. After a number of failed attempts, Rakholt at last managed to get through to the Rihansu ship, and convince the communications officer to allow him to speak to the Commander.

After clarifying the situation on Kavayak and his further plans, Rakholt waited for tr'Aihan's answer. It was some time in coming. The silence seemed to stretch into an eternity and consequently stretched Rakholt's nerves to breaking point. At last tr'Aihan's voice crackled through the small transmitter.

"You have failed." then silence again.

"But tr'Strek I have..."

"Do not call me that! You have not proven to me to have the honour to be called 'a Son of my Brother'. You are not even full Rihansu!" There was such disgust in the last pronouncement that Rakholt recoiled involuntarily.

"Nevertheless, my brother, your father, obviously believed that I should consider you as my kin and come to your aid. Therefore, mnhei'sahe(6) dictates that it will be so. Prepare for beam-up to Kklaha. Then, from here we will deal with this planet as I see fit. You will at all times follow my orders. Is that clear?"

Rakholt bristled at the haughty and arrogant tone, but according to mnhei'sahe he had to show respect and obey his father's brother - and at the moment it seemed expedient he do so - for the time being anyway.

"Yes, Rekkhai(7)."

"Good."

A few moments later he felt a totally new sensation as his body dissolved into its component parts and almost immediately rematerialised on a starship orbiting the planet several thousand kilometres above its surface.

It seemed strange to Rakholt to be among so many other Rihansu. Only Rihansu. No others. Almost instantly, however, he saw that there were indeed subtle differences between these Rihansu and himself. Their ears were slightly more pointed, the facial structure was generally more angular and most were taller than he. Suddenly Rakholt felt inadequate, and he wanted even more to prove himself to be a true Rihansu.

They arrived on the bridge of the ship. It seemed crowded and cramped, but a quiet efficiency was prevalent. tr'Aihan sat in the command seat at the centre of the bridge. As they entered he slowly swivelled the seat to face the newcomer. tr'Aihan regarded Rakholt, flanked by the two guards who had accompanied him from the transporter-room, for a long moment. Rakholt felt uneasy underneath that steady gaze. He felt stripped down to his very soul. He also noted the strong resemblance to his father. And the commander was aware that, even if not fully Rihansu, this young man was definitely the son of his late brother.

The story that Rakholt told him of his brother's escape from Ch'Rihan to finally end on Kavayak did not ring true. He suspected that his brother was more likely to have been exiled to this planet by the Imperial court when he did not choose honourable death. But then his brother had been innocent of the charges brought against him and hoped, unreasonably, to prove his innocence. That was why he, tr'Aihan, never publicly denounced his brother and was now patrolling these outreaches of the Neutral Zone.

Now the offspring of his brother stood before him. 'No, not offspring - a genetic mutant', he reminded himself. Nevertheless, a part of his brother. He beckoned for Rakholt to approach. As Rakholt came closer he addressed the Commander.

"If we want to do anything, we have to act with speed before the K'S'vaits can use their weapons."

tr'Aihan snorted disdainfully. "We monitored their feeble attempt to use this so-called weapon on the Enterprise," and he indicated for Rakholt to look at the main screen.

There, in an orbit higher than theirs and the other smaller ships dotted round the planet, was the Enterprise. Relative to the other ships, her size dominated the space near Kavayak. Rakholt gasped. He had never imagined that a starship could be so large and, he had to admit, so beautiful.

"Is Kklaha as big as that? Can you destroy it?" he asked.

It was not the right question to ask he saw as soon as the words had left his lips. tr'Aihan's expression hardened. "Size is not an issue! In any battleship it is the Commander, crew, weapons, manoeuvrability and speed that count. You have a lot to learn," he said not hiding his contempt. He swivelled round again, turning his back on the young Rakholt who was incensed with this contemptuous treatment. tr'Aihan was either unaware of the younger man's mounting anger or chose to ignore it, and continued in an ostentatious tone: "But do not under-estimate the commander of that Federation ship, nor for that matter his Vulcan first officer. Both are wanted by the Empire to stand trial and subsequent punishment for the many wrongs they have perpetrated against Ch'Rihan. As such they are wanted alive!" He turned to face Rakholt again and asked: "You said that they are in dire need of dilithium crystals?"

"Yes."

"Hmmm...yet they broke their last orbit to assume a new one..."

He turned to face his communications officer.

"tr'Eihal, get me someone in charge on that planet and shield the communications from the Enterprise".

"Yes Khre'riov (8)."

"Why don't you blow up the weapons control systems?" enquired Rakholt in a worried tone.

Patiently tr'Aihan explained: "That would bring the Enterprise running, and I am not ready for her yet. Those weapons did not seem to cause any damage. Probably they have been inactivated during all that mayhem you described. Threats and subsequent action will be more effective in this case."

"Khre'riov ,I have someone from the planet."

"Engage communication view."

CHAPTER 20

K'L'trok looked in absolute shock and incredulity at K'Fron, who himself did not understand what had just occurred. All the data displayed on the control computer, to which only he and a few select others had access, indicated that fully charged disrupter-beams had been emitted and had contacted their target. Subsequent readings showed the total destruction of the target verified by its disappearance from the satellite-controlled panel. Yet, there was the Federation commander's face smiling at them from the communications-screen. 'How could that be? Unless...that communication had been a recording. That must be it!' he concluded.

"It must be an earlier recording," he stated facing K'L'trok.

For a moment K'L'trok's hopes raised as he considered this possibility, then he examined the communication control panel and shook his head from side to side. "No, the transmission was real. Look! It's ended now. Your weapons have failed!"

"That is not possible!" hissed K'Fron as he got up and went to communications. He pushed K'L'trok aside none too gently. "I will contact the installations and prove to you that the weapons have fired. Maybe the Star Fleet ship has extra shielding."

Swiftly he entered the code in for Installation A. It did not take long to verify that indeed the weapon had fired, but only at 80% intensity, as the emitter had not been fully charged prior to the order to fire had been received from the command-center.

K'Fron gave an "I told you so" look to K'L'trok as he keyed in the code for the second installation. It took some time before this call was answered, and it was a panicked voice that replied. Before K'Fron could ask his questions the disembodied voice told him the unpleasant news.

"Sir, Our security has been breached while we were fighting of the 'Rakholtians' and now the ballistics computer is not working properly. When it received the order to fire nothing happened. Not exactly nothing, but the beam was not emitted."

"So what did happen?" K'Fron asked impatiently.

"Uhm...well..a message appeared."

"What message and in what language?"

"In K'S'vaithese."

"And the message" K'Fron's anger increased by the second.

"The message?"

"Yes, the message!"

"It says - 'Universal law: All actions have equal and opposite reactions. Including violent ones - leading to chaos.'"

"What?"

"That is the message, Sir."

"Have you found out yet where the damage is?"

There was a prolonged silence interspersed with some muted whispering.

"We are checking, Sir. There seems to be nothing obviously wrong or out of place. None of the diagnostic programs show anything wrong. We are running them again. Sir, it's like nothing we have seen before! The computer acts as if it were alive."

"What about the back-up system?"

There was a pained sigh and: "It is similarly affected, Sir."

K'Fron felt his blood boiling. 'How could anyone penetrate their safe-guards, let alone destroy his beloved weapons?' The security and strength of the whole planet was compromised. Someone would pay dearly for this, before he would be made accountable as he knew would happen. Failure by the security chief was not tolerated.

He was aware that K'L'trok was watching him, and not with sympathy. There was no love lost between them and K'L'trok knew that K'Fron would at the very least lose his position for this failure.

"We have to apprise the council immediately of this dangerous situation. One weapon totally ineffective and the Federation ship out of range of the other. And even then it seems to be able to withstand an attack." K'L'trok announced.

K'Fron was about to reply scathingly when the communications board beeped and the voice of K'L'trok's secretary, now back in his own office - although it was in total disarray, demanded their attention.

"Yes, what is it?" K'L'trok snapped.

"The Romulan commander demands to speak to someone in charge. I am informed by Council-Chairman that you will deal with him. I am also to inform you and Officer K'Fron that the council will convene in 15 b'teits in safe-room two."

"Very well, we will be there. Put the Romulan on."

K'L'trok was not pleased with this added complication. Although, K'Fron's failure to destroy the Federation ship and his failure to guard the weapon in the first place would be the main focus of the president and council, his own incapability to obtain humans would not go unnoticed. He had to handle this new situation more carefully.

His sombre thoughts were interrupted by the Romulan Commander's gratingly harsh demand, reverberating off the crystalline walls.

"We demand your immediate surrender to the Rihansu Imperial Force. You have and are committing acts of aggression against the Rihansu, which is an act of war." he said while pointing at Rakholt. "If you do not wish to be destroyed surrender now."

K'Fron jumped up and started to demand the return of Rakholt when K'L'trok bid him to silence. K'Fron obliged grudgingly. This was after all, at least initially, K'L'trok's business. They had to be careful when dealing with the Romulans. 'But why was this Romulan so openly hostile?'

"I cannot surrender Kavayak - that is simply not in my power. Allow me to call a council meeting." K'L'trok asked politely, although he knew that, this ship at least, they could destroy easily. 'Was the commander not aware of this?' Surely Rakholt would have informed him of that. Or was the Romulan somehow responsible for the destruction of one weapon? But his ship was now within the area covered by the functioning weapon.' K'L'trok did not understand. He never considered that the Rihansu commander might have monitored their attempt to destroy the Enterprise. Ordinarily, the disrupter beams were not detected by conventional scanning systems. This made the weapon seem even more powerful as the element of total surprise added to the intimidation of their enemies. But K'Fron, chief of security, realised that somehow the Romulans must have witnessed their earlier failure and therefore believed that Kavayak was unprotected.

"You are granted two Rihansu time units, which I am told are equivalent to 3.5 of your time measurements called b'fads. If we do not receive confirmation of your surrender by that time - I will destroy your city. And...," tr'Aihan paused for effect, "do not expect any help from Star Fleet for the Captain of the Enterprise has covertly approved our benevolent intervention. They may be bound by their laws not to intervene with any internal affairs, but they are understandably annoyed at your attempt to obliterate them...and so..." tr'Aihan smiled, all innocence and gestured in an apologetic manner, "...it is up to me to punish you for acts of violence and aggression against Rihansu, Klingon and even Federation persons." he ended in a voice as cold as space.

K'L'trok knew very little of Federation laws, but from what he had heard from other ships he was aware that Star Fleet did, in actual fact, intervene in internal affairs, even if it was by not taking any action. After all, wasn't placing a planet on interdict status intervention in itself? However, he was in no doubt that Captain Kirk wished them ill after their attack. However, he tried to look grateful and scared as he promised the commander an answer in less than the imposed time limit.

After the communication ended, both K'S'vaits hurried through the extensively damaged dome to meet with the council. As they passed open spaces they could discern the occasional shouts of continuing

pockets of unrest, often followed by the high-pitched sound of a hand-held disrupter. 'Things were under control.' thought K'Fron as he heard another whine characteristic of the military disrupter.

"You have failed badly, K'Fron." the president spoke but surprisingly there was no anger in his voice. K'Fron looked at him in astonishment. "But you will remain, at least for now, Chief of security. Do not let us down again."

"I won't, my Lord." K'Fron said in great relief and vowed silently to always be loyal to this president. The President was aware that now K'Fron was in his debt for ever. He could have had him executed. Instead he had granted him absolution. K'Fron would be useful later. He then turned his concentration on K'L'trok.

"This Romulan commander cannot be aware of our agreement with the Empire. As K'Trek has outlined earlier, not every one in the Imperial force has knowledge about our special relationship with the Imperial council."

K'Trek, chief of extra-planetary information, added: "Very few on Ch'Rihan actually know about our trade/development agreement. Thus it is not surprising that a lowly commander would be uninformed."

"Can we safely destroy this threat?" asked the President.

"K'Fron is of the opinion that the Rihansu are under the impression that we cannot harm them?" K'Trek looked inquiringly at K'Fron who turned his head in assent, then continued: "It would, perhaps be more wise to show them what we can do. Although a number of ships have fled, there is currently an Orion-pirate ship still in orbit. If we destroy that, we will have demonstrated our force to both the Federation ship and the Rihansu. The Federation commander should not be too upset at the destruction of a pirate ship. If he is, we can always justify it with statements such as the Orions caused us harm before and had to be stopped. Anyway what can Star Fleet do to us? Put us on interdict status again? It didn't work before?" K'Trek sat back satisfied.

"Very well. K'Fron, let K'L'trok communicate our intent to that Romulan commander and then promptly clean our space of that Orion pirate. K'L'trok, let the commander know how benevolent we are to allow him to leave and to give him Rakholt as a sign of good will."

"Yes, my Lord." both K'Fron and K'L'trok said.

"What about the Star Fleet vessel?" asked K'Fron. He was worried about this ship and its Captain.

"They will probably leave as soon as the Romulan leaves. There is nothing to worry about!" the President dismissed the issue with a wave of his hand. "This session is closed. Go! Get rid of the Romulans."

CHAPTER 21

Spock got up from his lkz'fru(9) and prepared to make K'kali, the special Vulcan drink that was both refreshing and soothing. His door-chime sounded.

"Come in T'Charu."

He had called her earlier and asked her to come to his cabin.

When she entered he offered her the drink. They drank for a while in companionable silence, then discussed her past and future. Spock told her about Vulcan; its history, culture and some of the behaviour that she would be expected, at her age, to abide by.

Spock got up to pour them more K'kali.

"T'Kahr(10), may I ask a question?"

"If you call me T'Kahr, then it is my role to answer any questions you may have." he said seriously.

"Can you not teach me the mental techniques that every Vulcan child my age already knows?"

Spock continued with the elaborate preparation of the K'kali. Under normal circumstance he could teach, as could any Vulcan adult, the rudimentary mental controls. At the moment he felt an unusually strong aversion to enter into any mental contact, and mental contact would be necessary to teach even the most elementary technique.

As he refilled T'Charu's glass, he saw that she was waiting patiently for an answer. She had already learned, from her few conversations with Spock, that an answer to what seemed to her a simple question could occasionally be long in coming. But an answer she would always receive.

"You will soon be on Vulcan, where a qualified master is being arranged for you. It is best that you come with a fresh mind." Spock answered at last and continued: "Now, may I ask you a question, T'Charu?"

"Yes of course," surprised.

"What was your mother's full Vulcan name?"

"Her name was T'Peal-krhst'nk'krakroy'ththaya." she answered the true-Vulcan name rolling off her tongue with ease.

Spock went into deep thought for a moment, then: "You are family, T'Charu."

"What?" She gasped, all Vulcan calm and decorum forgotten.

Not quite a smile graced Spock's lips. He knew the pain that T'Charu was suffering from the violent loss of all the family she had ever known. Even if Doctor McCoy had not informed him of this after his examination of T'Charu, Spock was acutely aware of her very real anguish. It had been passed to him in that one brief unexpected contact of their minds on Kavayak.

"Yes. T'Peal was the daughter of the sister of my father's uncle's son. She went missing 13 years ago during her research on the T'Pau along with five other Vulcan scientists."

"Mother told me that their ship had been attacked. She and one other survived. They were found by a trader who was on his way to Kavayak and took both mother and Stark with him. During the voyage Stark died from his injuries, but mother arrived and was left on Kavayak. She accepted her situation and married father, although initially she had tried to get a message to Vulcan to let her family know. However, no one was prepared to send a message that would implicate them in breaking a Star Fleet directive." T'Charu looked at Spock. "If I have family, will I still be with your parents?" she asked.

"Do you wish it so?"

"Yes."

"My parents are your family. It is for the best if you stay with them rather than any of the other family members. Your mother's parents are both dead and her brother is off-world, too young and unmarried."

T'Charu digested this, then: "So you are my...?"

"In Vulcan I am th'alkar."

When T'Charu said that she was unfamiliar with the term Spock searched for the equivalent expression in Federation basic but found none that was suitable. No single locution existed in that tongue that would describe both the genealogical distance and the closeness in Vulcan families which was implied by the one single Vulcan word.

He steepled his fingers in his characteristic gesture and said: "Consider me as your 'older-uncle/brother', as my parents will become legal parents from 'grandparents/Aunt-Uncle'."

T'Charu's felt a bit dizzy at this explanation.

"What do I call you?" she said at last.

"You may call me either Spock, th'atlkar Spock, or just th'alkar if you wish."

"Every one calls you Spock or Mr. Spock. I will call you th'atth'alkar -my th'alkar."

Spock nearly smiled. T'Charu did not seem to realize that the possessive pronoun was already implied by the original Vulcan word. T'Charu had just duplicated it - 'my-my older-uncle/brother'. Spock was tempted not to correct her as he found that he, illogically, appreciated that expression.

"Th'atth'alkar is unnecessary, th'akum."

"Unnecessary? Th'akum?" The dark eyes demanded answers.

Patently Spock explained the possessive pronoun inherent in such words describing family. "Th'akum means something like younger niece/sister," he ended.

"I understand, th'alkar."

"Good. Have you finished your K'kali?"

Yes, th'alkar," carefully handing the beautiful Vulcan glass back to Spock.

"Very well. I must return to the bridge." Spock said as he folded his black meditation-robe away. "You may stay here if you wish."

"May I use your screen to read the writings you have recommended?"

"You may. I must go now."

"See you later, th'alkar," T'Charu inclined her head politely, as she had been taught at home.

Spock's eyebrow ascended at that particular human expression mixed with the more formal Vulcan term. 'It will be good when T'Charu left the Enterprise for a Vulcan environment,' he thought as he made his way to the bridge. 'Though I shall miss her.' he realised wryly, with some surprise at the feeling of affection that had developed so rapidly for this strange young child.

Uhura hurried down the corridor after being ordered to stand down from active duty for the next two hours. "The calm before the storm." the Captain had said and insisted that all crew members who had been on duty well over their normal shift take at least two hours rest. "But Sulu..." Uhura had dared to voice her objections at the loss of time in which something could be done. Kirk had put his hand on her shoulder and guided her towards the lift saying: "Uhura, you yourself have relayed to me that Kavayak's council will not talk to me before 0.98 hours ships-time. I cannot go charging in, even after they tried to shoot us out of existence, to take over the planet, or blow them all up, can I? I will reason with them first." He had not specified what 'reasoning' he had in mind and Uhura dared not ask. At least some of the trader-ships had left, taking courage from the fact that the Enterprise managed to leave orbit undamaged. The Captain had tried to provide protection to each ship leaving orbit.

She entered the hairdresser, and was greeted with great enthusiasm by the Taikan barber. The Taikani excelled in this profession, partly due to having four arms, and an artistic flair very suited to creating galaxy-renowned hairstyles.

SaTali led her to a suitable chair while trying to persuade her to try the new extra-gentle method for perming hair: "Selective partial transportation, change of template and back again - curly, straight, wavy anything you want..." he tempted her.

"Not today, SaTali. Another time maybe. Just a wash, a cut and a relaxing thermal scalp massage, " Uhura's mouth nearly watered with the anticipation of that particular treat. She always relaxed totally with the thermal massage.

Deftly SaTali cut her dark hair into her usual style. Then he washed her hair, manually, massaging the scalp tenderly. That was what made him so special - no automated hair washes; SaTali cut and washed personally. When he finished he led her to the massage unit.

She settled in fully prepared to relax and let all the stress of the last few days flow away. After a few minutes Uhura realized that this time she would not enjoy the massage as usual. Worry about how they were going to impose a ban on the selling of Kavayak's weapon-technology and the buying of sentient beings occupied her mind. She felt it was her duty to come up with something that may add to a satisfactory solution. Then they could leave for Vulcan and help Sulu. 'Would they be able to help Sulu on Vulcan?' The last time the method was tried on a Star Fleet officer, there had been sabotage and the officer had died as a result(1). But that was unlikely to happen again. Since then the techniques had been used on other humans. But could the regeneration techniques work after Sulu had been stasis for so long? Uhura shook herself mentally. McCoy would never allow Hikaru to die. He always came up with miraculous cures when needed. He had saved them already so many times, when everyone was affected by the many unknown diseases that unexplored space and planets could plague them with. He also managed to put back together, so many who had been terribly wounded in an accident or attack, both by using his considerable skills and knowledge, and with the stubbornness that came of a lifetime spent fighting his biggest enemy, death. 'Leonard will not allow death to win...' Uhura thought as her eyelids closed and she drifted into a light sleep.

"Lieutenant Uhura to the bridge, please. To the bridge immediately."

The Captain's voice sliced through her half-asleep state of mind. She came to with a start. The massage unit had long been removed. She looked at her wrist chrono-comp. "Oh, no!" she gasped, she was already twenty minutes late. Uhura jumped up and with a "pay you later" to SaTali rushed to the bridge.

When he had sent off all personnel in need of rest, James Kirk settled into his seat to think. The bridge was unusually quiet. The replacement crew, not used to working alone with the Captain in command, were too tense to indulge in idle chatter. Kirk's thoughts were occupied with the problem of Kavayak and the Romulan battle cruiser. He had just finished talking to Scotty about the possibility of using 'persuasion' to enforce his arguments with the K'S'vairs if necessary. Scotty had suggested that they could target one of the badly damaged buildings near the governmental dome. He thought that with some small changes to the phaser beams he could vaporize out of existence only non-biological matter. "Just a wee calculation, and we can discern beasties from stones - it'll be done, Captain, ha' no fear."

The Captain hoped that Scotty would finish his 'wee' calculation and 'wee' adjustments in time.

A sudden light tap on his shoulder brought him out of his ruminations.

"Shouldn't you be resting?" McCoy was standing in his usual spot, behind and slightly left of the conn.

"I am, Bones. Or I was."

"Hrmph!" 'Since when does a Captain rest on the bridge,' he thought.

"And you, Doctor, have you taken time off to recover from your gallivanting all over Kavayak?"

"I have patients to look after."

"And I have a ship to look after. Anyway you have capable staff who can do some of your work, you know."

"And you don't?" McCoy said pointedly.

"Spock needed the rest more than I, Bones," Jim said quietly, "I'm worried about him."

"Well, he does seem a bit greener than usual..."

"Bones!?!?" Kirk swivelled the chair slightly to face the doctor. 'What's that supposed to mean?' written all over his face.

McCoy shrugged and smiled. "I have noticed his somewhat erratic behaviour, but don't you worry, Jim, I am keeping a scanner on Spock. And..." he continued, putting on his best professional expression, "I am also keeping an eye on you, Jimmy-boy. After we are on our way to lovely Vulcan, I want you down in Sickbay for some tests. Pronto. That is a medical order, Captain."

"Okay, okay..." Kirk raised his hands in a 'giving-up' gesture. He Paused and his face took on a mock 'concerned' expression. "Did I just hear you say 'lovely Vulcan'? Maybe you should undergo a medical

yourself, Bones." He jabbed a finger at McCoy's chest.

"Lovely Vulcan, Jim. Beautiful Vulcan. I just spoke to Daniel Corrigan. Daniel assures me that their much improved regen-treatment will have Sulu up and about within three weeks. The best news is that unlike the earlier treatment no mind-meld is necessary to bring the patient back, as the brain is encouraged to go on working. They induce periods of mental rest and activity. The patient thinks he is normally active - it's like a vivid dream. But when the patient is released from treatment he can't remember anything about it. Daniel said that this method was fool-proof on non-telepathic beings. With Vulcans the mind-meld is still used." McCoy explained in a voice filled with hope while rocking to and fro on the balls of his feet.

"That is great news indeed." Kirk smiled. "Have you told Chekov?"

"Yep - I stopped at his cabin on my way here, but he wasn't there. I found him in Sulu's quarters tending to Hikaru's botanical jungle. He had such a glum face too. When I told him he cheered up somewhat, but then mumbled something about 'not counting the chickens before the eggs were hatched', and informed me that it was an old Russian proverb best not forgotten."

"We'll all be pleased to have Sulu back," Jim said as the lift doors opened and Spock, Chekov and Offer stepped out.

When they were about to take up their stations, Kirk stopped them saying: "I propose we speak to Kavayak's council from the briefing room not the bridge. Chekov, you have the conn. Mr. Offer, Spock, Bones come with me. Uhura page Mr. Scott and ask him to join us, if he's finished with the adjustments."

Spock's eyebrow rose. 'Adjustments?' he thought.

"Yes Captain," said a voice that was not Uhura's. Jim looked round. Uhura was not on the bridge yet. Her replacement was calling Scotty.

'First can't get them off the bridge then can't get them back,' Kirk thought irately as he paged Uhura himself.

The Captain was about to turn from the main viewer towards the lift, when a bright flash illuminated their main screen, followed by a total darkness where once a ship had occupied a small fraction of space.

"That was the Orion cruiser, sir." gasped Uhura who moments ago had relieved her replacement, apologetic for being so late.

"Uhura, place a call to that council, now! Mr. Chekov I want you to precision-target the phasers on these coordinates," ordered Kirk giving him a computer-disk. "Uhura, join us in the briefing room." Kirk said striding off the bridge angrily.

CHAPTER 22

tr'Aihan was not satisfied. These K'S' vaits were not going to give in easily. Did they not realize that a starship like his could cause considerable damage? Under any other circumstances he would give them a small demonstration, but there was the Enterprise to consider. Rakholt had admitted that the Star Fleet people could have obtained crystals while being held in one of the mines. As tr'Aihan looked at the Enterprise, serenely keeping orbit, her running lights blazing. He suspected that indeed they had helped themselves to dilithium. As he would have done in a similar situation. The Enterprise did not behave like a ship trying to conserve her last vestiges of energy.

He looked back at the face of the K'S'vait who had just announced that if he did not start leaving orbit immediately he would get a first-hand demonstration of what could happen to his ship.

"Focus your viewers on to the Orion ship orbiting close to you," the K'S'vait was saying, eyes changing colour again.

'Creatures whose eyes keep changing colour all the time are not to be trusted,' thought tr'Aihan with disgust. He felt Rakholt fidgeting nervously behind his command chair. tr'Aihan glanced at the screen which now showed the Orion ship, peacefully keeping their orbit close company. Too close for tr'Aihan's liking. It was a relatively large starship. One of the OR-5A/B class tr'Aihan recognised. A ship that was used equally well both as a transport of mainly live cargo and in battle situations. His science officer had informed him earlier, after a scan of all the ships in the vicinity, that its cargo-hold was full of humanoid beings. tr'Aihan had shuddered at the thought of the dishonour in being sold like some flock of hlai(11).

As he glanced at the ship trying to construct an appropriate answer to the K'S'vait's threats, the Orion ship was suddenly bathed in iridescent radiation, then disappeared, seemingly without as much as causing a ripple in the surrounding space. However the energy released from all the disintegrated matter, both alive and dead, expanded in all directions with frightening intensity. The Kklaha, so close to the destroyed ship, was caught in the full force of the onslaught.

Space rippled all around them. On the ship itself all electronic devices went berserk causing computer overload and damage to some of the precision instruments. The smell of burning reached tr'Aihan. One of his officers was nursing a burned hand, smoke coming out of the ballistics-control board.

"Khre'Riov, we have no control of our weapons." he managed to say in a steady voice, as deeply green blood oozed from his wounded hands.

"Report to healer tr'Kel and get t'Lai to replace you," snapped tr'Aihan. His officer obeyed immediately.

A sound like something between a cough and a hiccup came from the communications channel. tr'Aihan looked at the K'S'vait who seemed to be laughing. The commander's blood boiled.

"How dare you attack a ship of the Imperial force?" he demanded furiously.

"We did not attack you at all," K'L'trok smiled. "We merely cleaned up our space of some rubbish. You just happened to be too close. Now, I suggest that you leave...before we decid to do more extensive cleansing."

"The Empire will not tolerate this, we..."

"Before you make any more threats I suggest that you contact senator Hiran and ask him about documents 65D/G regarding trade and development of planets with the Praetor's most favoured status. Look under your equivalent letter 'K'." said K'L'trok with a sinister look. "But to demonstrate to you that we do not 'carry acts of aggression' against Romulan citizens, you are free to leave. With the Romulan Rakholt. Salutations." K'L'trok ended the communication.

K'L'trok turned towards the screens that tracked all orbiting ships via the hundreds of satellites. "Now we wait," he said to K'Fron, settling somewhat uneasily into a seat.

There was a deadly silence on the bridge of the Kklaha. Even the occasional spluttering of an overloaded control board had ceased. Everyone waited to see what the Commander would do. No one who had ever had the audacity to speak to him in such a tone, and damage his ship, had lived for long.

Suddenly the communications demanded attention. "Khre'riov, it is the Enterprise. They are enquiring if we need assistance." tr'Eihal informed his commander tentatively.

"Tell them we are undamaged and require no assistance. Inform them also that we have what we came for and are preparing to leave orbit. And that, by the way, the Orion ship was full of humanoid cargo," he smiled thinly as he imagined the reaction that particular reminder (he was sure that the Enterprise had done their own scan) would cause the Captain. tr'Aihan had overcome the shock of the latter part of what the K'S'vait had told him. He knew very well what the Praetor's 'most favoured' status meant to a planet. He was angry that the list of these planets was secret and not available to every starship commander in the imperial force. Good commanders had lost their commands because they were ignorant of the Praetor's favoured planets.

He felt dismay intermingled with relief from his officers, when he announced that they were going to leave orbit. No glory for them this time. At least there would be other occasions when they would have honour and success. His crew were good noble Rihansu who had chosen to serve with him because of Mnhei'Sahe. Not one of his officers were assigned to him. All had chosen to come to his ship because of loyalty to his House and Name.

'Name?! Rakholt, the cause of all this mess. ' tr' Aihan turned his attention to Rakholt, who had not said a word or made a single movement since the attack. He saw that Rakholt was bleeding from a cut above his eye. 'Green blood, at least!' He discerned shock, disappointment and despair in the young man's eye, but also quiet acceptance of what ever was to befall him now.

"Rakholt," he said, his expression impenetrable. The young man stiffened to attention. "You wish to become Rihansu?" asked tr'Aihan taking pity on this youngster - although he could not say why.

"Yes, Khre'Riov," was the quiet but determined answer.

"You know the meaning of Mnhei-Sahe?"

"Yes, Khre'Riov."

"And what would Mnhei-Sahe require of you now?"

"That I take responsibility for all that happened, as it was at my bidding and promises that you came here. To atone, I will take my life. Join my followers and take The Ritual."

'What Ritual?' thought tr'Aihan intrigued but decided that now was not the time to ask. "You will indeed atone. To me. But I do not wish that you take you life."

"Khre'Riov?" there was a glint of hope mixed with apprehension in his eyes.

"No. You will become a member of this ship's crew. You will start at the lowest level. I expect you to learn quickly. If you prove your worth you may be promoted. Do you take that responsibility and honour?" tr'Aihan's gaze was unwavering.

"Yes, Khre'Riov." Rakholt looked down, to hide his relief.

"You do understand that it will not be easy. You are not to regard yourself as related to me. You will not be accepted as a Rihansu by many for a long time. Do you still wish to follow this path?"

Rakholt's eyes met the Commander's again. Although there was a flicker of emotion across his face when tr'Aihan denied him the family connection, he resolutely answered in the affirmative. He would yet show his worthiness to the brother of his father.

"Good. Then you will accompany t'Leah who will take you to your first task and superior officer." tr'Aihan waved both Rakholt and the security guards off the bridge.

"We are ready to leave orbit, Khre'Riov."

"Very well. Set course to Ch'Rihan. We have business there." tr'Aihan said, intent on not only getting his ship repaired but also examining the 'most-favoured' status list.

Neither, K'L'trok or K'Fron had the pleasure of witnessing the Romulan departure. The screens showing this were unattended. The departure was only logged into the computer. Both K'S'vaits were called away to an emergency meeting almost immediately after the disintegrated Orion ship had disappeared from the screen, its orbital path logged as unoccupied. The Captain of the Enterprise was threatening them - and this time they had no weapons only words.

CHAPTER 23

The atmosphere in the briefing room was tense and angry. McCoy barely kept his outrage in check when he heard that not only a ship's complement of Orions had been destroyed, but an entire cargo hold of other beings as well. All those people slaughtered for no reason what so ever. 'If Jim was is going to target some of those dammed K'S'vaits then I'll push the button!' he thought angrily until he realized what he was actually considering. Appalled, he calmed himself. 'Why do so-called intelligent beings keep killing each other?' and for a few seconds he envied the Vulcans.

Captain Kirk and Mr. Scott exchanged a glance. Scotty nodded and formed an old fashioned 'OK' sign with his fingers. Kirk acknowledged with a slight nod. The mini-screens in front each one of them filled with a view of a domed room with a large rectangular table. On each side of the table sat four K'S'vaits, all vastly different in their physical forms. At the head of the table sat the largest K'S'vait that Kirk had seen. It was an imposing figure. 'That must be the President.' Flashed through Kirk's mind.

Spock leaned over to him and explained, sotto voce, that the President was always of pure K'S'vait blood. 'So this is what those people looked like before all this enforced so-called IDIC came into being. Impressive and ironical,' thought Jim.

"You want to speak to us, Captain? And you threaten us. Why?" The imposingly deep voice of the president underlined the computerized translation.

Kirk sat up straight and said: "You have just destroyed a ship in orbit around your planet, killing over four hundred beings aboard. It was in Federation space, and not a threat to you. Why?" The Captain opened and did not allow any time for an answer before continuing: "You have attacked us, which is unacceptable. You deal in living intelligent beings, many of whom are Federation citizens who have been

captured and enslaved. That too is unacceptable, and must be stopped. You sell very dangerous technology within the Federation to both Federation members and non-aligned worlds. That too must stop." Kirk said in a duranium-hard voice, looking directly at the President.

There was a moment of silence. One of the other K'S'vaits started to say something but was interrupted by the President.

"Let us take your grievances one by one," he said in a patronising voice.

James Kirk tried to keep calm. He saw Scotty's complexion turn a darker shade of red. McCoy was near boiling point. Uhura was busy with keeping all the communication-channels and translations working smoothly, but even she had an angry frown on her face. Only Spock and, surprisingly, Lieutenant Offer, looked calm. That was not unexpected from Spock, but that the only expression on Offer's face was interest intrigued Kirk.

The President's voice continued. "We had to destroy the Orion ship to protect our planet. We mourn the loss of life."

Unfortunately Kirk could not dispute the fact that an Orion ship might be a threat to a planet.

"Their weapons were not charged - how were they a threat to you?" asked Spock calmly.

"The living cargo you refer to were, in fact, captured K'S'vaits. If we had allowed The Pirates to leave unpunished they would have returned. This was a preventative strike as much as a punitive measure. You as a military man, Captain, must understand that."

"So you just kill your own people - if it's convenient." snapped McCoy.

"Bones..." Jim warned, although he agreed with the doctor's sympathies.

The President did not deign to reply to the outburst. He ignored it and continued to answer Kirk's next accusation, taking it for granted that they were satisfied with the explanation for the destruction of the Orion vessel. "As for attacking you...we apologise. That was a mistake on behalf of my former," and he stressed the word former, " extra-Kavayakian commerce officer. He will be punished for such an act of aggression."

Almost immediately K'L'trok was hoisted from his seat and led away by two large security guards.

'These people are totally illogical,' thought Jim, 'One moment they condone aggression, the next they punish someone for it...they will be hard to reason with.', he shook his head in disbelief.

"Now let us address your misconception that we deal in living intelligent beings. We offer a choice to people to come and live on our planet. We invite them to come and practise the Vulcan concept of Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations at its fullest realization. The only beings we trade for are slaves, prisoners and war-captives. Beings who otherwise have no or much worse life than we can offer them here. We save these people." The President stressed the last sentence and paused as if overcome. Kirk wondered if the President actually believed all that. If so things were looking grimmer than before. The President continued in a less emotional fashion. " All newcomers are made aware of the rare dangers that can occur within our hospitals when producing offspring with other species. But all choose to take the risk and to add to the concept of IDIC. Your Vulcan officer should understand that and agree with it." The President invited Spock to comment.

All through the President's speech Spock's eyebrow had been ascending as high as Vulcanly possible. Now he lowered it and steepled his finger in front of him, lightly tapping the tips of his index fingers against his chin.

"First of all, the concept of Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations, although a central part of Surak's philosophy, is not a uniquely Vulcan creation. For example on earth in their 20th century, the scientist Albert Einstein stated that: 'The life of peaceful nations with reciprocal respect for one another and toleration of each other's differences was civilised and just.' The operative words, in this apt description of IDIC are Respect and Toleration of differences. Neither the destruction, nor artificial and forced creation, of differences is implied. Your way - the forced interbreeding, is not IDIC but against IDIC, and it is, in fact, tyrannical." Spock paused but was not yet finished and continued before anyone could speak. "On Ecobeta, their great philosopher, Davdks, stated some four thousand years ago that, 'The pursuit of knowledge in toleration for those unlike us must be one of our highest ideals.' The celebration of Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations means just that. It does not indicate the Creation of Diversity. Neither does it imply the assimilation of different cultures. It simply means learning from one another and thus increasing knowledge and understanding. The awareness of C'thia, translating roughly as 'truth-reality' or if one prefers, logic, is the result, not the creation of chaos and tyranny." Spock ended in a almost perceptibly louder voice and a glint of angry impatience in his eyes. For him, a highly emotional state.

Only Kirk and McCoy noticed, however. Both looked at him in surprise and some concern. The rest of the Enterprise people listened in fascination at his unusually lengthy explanation. Offer looked satisfied, since Spock quoted one of his favourite humans, Einstein, in relation to IDIC. When Kirk turned back to the K'S'vaits he saw that Spock's logical and, for him emotional, appeal had had no effect. Their expressions, if he read them correctly, looked extremely bored and their eyes were filled with incomprehension.

The President spoke again: "As I said, the Vulcan agrees."

There was an audible irate sigh originating from Spock himself. All looked at him in astonishment. Spock tried to hide his own surprise at this slip and loss of control.

The President continued, unaware of anything untoward. "As to what we sell and to whom we sell it, that is our own business." He ended, implying that the whole matter was closed to any further discussion.

Kirk returned his gaze to the council chamber. He leaned forward slightly as he spoke: "As to what you sell and to whom being none of my business, that is true only in so far as it does not leave your planet. Any inter-planetary commerce is and must be regulated by the FCIPCF: Federation Council of Inter-Planetary Commerce and Finance. This is to safe guard worlds against extortion and illegal dealings in dangerous substances, under which your weapons technology is classifiable." He was actually surprised that the K'S'vaits had not tried to deny the trade in their weapons. "The matter of interbreeding too, ultimately, is your own business, but the buying of extra-planetary life is mine and it must stop. That also applies to luring ships into orbit and then targeting them with your weapons." Kirk said adamantly, his expression hardening further.

"Just how do you propose to stop us, Captain?" a new K'S'vait voice said. "Place us on another interdict status?" it mocked.

"That will, indeed, be one of my recommendations to Star Fleet. But this time I will recommend a total no-contact order due to the danger to approaching ships. Such an order will be controlled and the

transgression thereof will not be tolerated. You will be cut off economically as well as culturally," he paused to let that sink in, then continued: "Nor will we tolerate other incursions into this Federation space by non-Federation aligned species, including Romulans." Again a short pause. "Unless, ofcourse, you agree to some changes and allow a party of Star Fleet officers from this ship to oversee that these changes proceed accordingly." Kirk did not allow his features to relax in the slightest.

"We do not believe you can stop ships coming to us or stop them trading with us. You do not have such power." It was that same scornful voice again, a K'S'vait unknown to Kirk.

The Captain looked at the President hoping that he would say something that could lead them towards an agreement. But the President sat in his chair, his large body and face totally immobile, his eyes half-closed. Kirk wondered whether he was listening at all.

'So it comes to the show of force,' the Captain thought sadly. "To show you we mean business, I suggest you look out of your east-facing wall," he said and indicated for Uhura to cut off the audio channels but to keep the visual ones. He saw that the K'S'vait did indeed gather to look out of the east-facing part of the dome. He wondered why. They'd seemed so confident and contemptous. 'Why bother?' The President, merely turned his head in that direction.

"Jim, what are you up to?" asked McCoy, concerned.

Kirk ignored him. Instead he contacted the bridge after once more receiving an affirmative signal from Mr. Scott.

"Mr. Chekov, are the phasers locked on to those coordinates and ready?"

"Yes, Keptin."

"Good, fire on my order."

"Jim, you can't," McCoy objected loudly.

"Captain, the prime directive...", Spock tried calmly.

Uhura just sat silently, aghast. Offer didn't know what to think.

"Gentlemen!" Kirk sliced through any further protests. He verified that the K'S'vaits attention was still directed at the right place and said calmly: "Now, Mr. Chekov."

Chekov felt sweat drops form on his forehead when the Captain had asked if all was ready. It was very rare that the Enterprise used phasers against a planet. Now, with a rapidly beating heart, he touched the appropriate pad on his control board. He felt the slight increase in usually gentle vibration of the Enterprise as she released her deadly powers. The visible red light given off by the phaser-beam carved a straight path towards the planet's atmosphere where it disappeared from view.

"Uhura, audio on, please." The Captain's face was stone.

As the audio communications were re-established they heard gasps of amazement and fear: "It's all gone!" "But the people are still there and alive!" "It's so precise. Look...none the other buildings has been touched!"

On the main-view screen, Jim had shown the people in the briefing room what was happening. Where once a crew of K'S'vaits were trying to remove an almost totally demolished building and clean up the site, only an entirely empty space was left along with a bewildered clean-up crew. Their job was suddenly done for them by some unseen and seemingly omnipotent power. Not one bit of crystal, stone, beam or other matter was left in the space where all the rubble had still been a mere second ago. The buildings that were attached to either side of the destroyed dome were intact, pristine.

Kirk felt intense relief that it had worked. He gave Scotty a quick mischievous grin.

'Clean and precise, fascinating,' Spock thought.

"Well, I'll be damned," said McCoy grinning, "you son of a..."

Kirk gave him a warning look.

Suddenly the voice of the President brought their attention back to the matter at hand. "Enough! Captain we see you speak wisely. We do not wish to be cut off from cultural and economic contacts with other worlds. What are your proposals?"

Jim smiled inwardly, 'Nothing like a few fireworks to get someone's attention,' he thought. Outwardly he assumed his 'centre seat' expression. "You will refrain from dealing in any sentient life and stop the enforced inter-breeding generally. You will help those that are malformed due to their genetic and physiological incompatibility. All inter-worlds commercial arrangements must go through the FCIPCP. I suggest that you apply, in due course, for Federation membership if you think you can abide by Federation rules. Membership would however, provide you with many positive things. I will send down a party to monitor these changes. They will keep Star Fleet informed at all times. The party will include a medical officer to oversee provision of aid to the afore mentioned unfortunate ones. I want your personal assurance that my officers will be safe and unhindered in their observations. Will you abide by this restrictions?"

"Yes, we will," the President agreed.

Kirk noticed some surprise among the other K'S'vaits. 'Could he trust this man? Did he have a choice?' he wondered wryly.

"We will be back to obtain a full report from our landing party," he stressed.

"You have absolutely nothing to fear. All will be as you have said."

"Very well..." Jim still wanted some more assurance but the President spoke again: "We will now close communications with you, to start implementing your directives. When your landing party is ready to beam down, inform K'Trek, who will meet them and arrange for their well-being and anything they will need to carry out their duties. Salutations, Captain." The screens went blank.

"Can we trust them, Jim?" McCoy asked.

"I don't know, Bones, but we have to take that risk, at least for now."

"It is the only logical way we can proceed, Doctor," Spock added.

"Lieutenant Offer." Kirk turned toward the young officer.

"Yes, Captain?"

"I would like you to lead that landing party."

"Thank you, sir. I would love to get the chance to study these people more."

"Good. I am including two security guards into your landing party apart from the medical officer, who will be assigned by Dr. McCoy. The other two are up to you."

"Yes, Sir." Offer very nearly saluted, in his pride and gratitude.

"And we will be back for you soon." Kirk promised.

In the K'S'vait meeting-dome the President was being bombarded with questions from all sides.

"ENOUGH!" he bellowed. Some of the other K'S'vaits put their hands over their ears. "We have agreed to the Captain's demands simply to get that ship out of here. When they leave we can contact our allies on Ch'Rihan and proceed from there." He ended, stood and walked in a brisk but flowing manner out of the room.

CHAPTER 24

The landing party, led by Offer, had arrived safely on the planet. Offer had reported that the K'S'vaits with whom they dealt were very co-operative, and that they had settled in. All seemed to be under control. It was time to leave orbit and head for Vulcan, yet Jim felt uneasy at leaving.

He looked round the bridge and noted McCoy hovering impatiently. 'It is time to go or McCoy will have a nervous breakdown,' Jim grinned inwardly.

"Mr. Chekov, lay in an orbit to Vulcan."

"Already laid in, Sir."

"Very well. Ensign Taravitch take us out gently. Once we are free of the gravity well goto warp two. Then slowly increase to warp seven." James Kirk was not certain about the proficiency of the new ensign and was going to make sure that they left without any further mishaps. The ensign cringed in embarrassment as the Captain detailed the specific steps for a standard orbit-departure.

"At last!" sighed McCoy when they were clear of Kavayak and cruising in other-space at a steady warp-seven. "Now, Jim. That trip to sickbay..."

"Not now, Bones," he put up his hand to halt McCoy's protests, "we still have one, rather unpleasant, duty to perform."

"Which is?" asked McCoy with suspicion.

Spock, who had joined them, said: "Ensign LaPierre?"

"Yes, Spock. We will convene a hearing in half an hour. Arrange for LaPierre to be there, Spock."

"Yes, Captain, and although she did not ask I have arranged for Mr. Hedgworth to be present at the hearing. If there is a court martial, then he would be best suited to act as her defence."

"Very good, Spock. I am afraid it will have to come to a court martial."

"Indeed."

"Lieutenant Uhura, you have the conn. Can you also call Mr. Scott and pry him from his engines and ask him to join us in briefing room three, in his dress uniform."

Jim heard a pained groan from Bones behind him. "Yes, gentlemen, dress uniform. These things are recorded and must be done properly."

"This hearing is in session." Captain Kirk said gravely after he struck the antique ship-bell in front of him three times. Ensign LaPierre sat alone facing the table at which were seated the Captain and his three most senior officers, all resplendent in their dress uniforms, but looking very sombre.

She felt nervous flutters in her stomach. 'What had she let herself in for?' she wondered. Would she spend long years in a re-education colony? She hoped not. The thought of being confined with so many 'inferior' beings increased her discomfort.

"Ensign LaPierre, you have been briefed as to the charges brought against you?" the Captain asked.

"Yes, Sir." she answered as calmly as possible. Her legal advisor had listed them, item by item. They made an impressively long list, starting with leaving the ship without permission to breaking the prime directive and including the aiding and abetting the incitement of civil unrest.

"Good. Would you like to tell the hearing anything in your defence?"

She shook her head. They couldn't possibly understand.

"Captain, may I?" asked Lieutenant Hedgworth.

Kirk gave a short nod.

"The ensign is young and comes from a planet where the Elders have full control of the society. She has been indoctrinated from early childhood to believe that only one way of life is correct. Even as a child she had been chosen and trained to infiltrate Star Fleet with the sole purpose of spreading The Way. She knew nothing else and followed the only path she could. I propose that Star Fleet is, in a small way, partly to blame for what has occurred. The entrance interview and psychological examinations should have picked up on her xenophobia."

"Thank you Mr. Hedgworth. We shall take that into consideration when writing our report." Kirk said and thought that Spock had chosen LaPierre's defense counsel well.

"Gentleman, do you wish to ask the defendant any questions, or make additional comments?" Kirk asked his officers. They looked at LaPierre, then at each other, Spock shook his head slightly as he

replied:

"Negative, Captain."

"Ms. LaPierre, it is our opinion that you be detained pending court martial, probably on Earth. Mr. Hedgworth will accompany you."

LaPeirre looked scared, yet even now she held her head high and gave the Captain a challenging look.

"Under the authority invested in me by Star Fleet I adjourn this hearing till the court martial, where our reports and Mr. Hedgworth will accompany the accused. This hearing is closed." He said.

LaPierre and Hedgworth rose. Kirk rang the bell three times, slowly. The panel remained silent.

As LaPierre was being led away McCoy turned to Kirk.

"Jim, what's going to happen to her?"

"Well... she has done a lot of wrong, Bones. But she did them under extenuating circumstances. With Mr. Hedgworth as her defence lawyer and our reports she should get off very lightly. At most, a year in a Rehab. centre, then probably returned to her home planet. We will recommend however, stricter entrance examinations before admittance to the Academy, and an interview with a senior officer of the ship the cadet is initially assigned to, especially if the new candidate is from a world that has only recently been admitted to the Federation. Mr. Hedgworth is right, Star Fleet must take some blame for what has happened on Kavayak."

"Good, I would hate to see her waste her life in a rehabilitation center, " McCoy said.

"So would I, Bones. I actually like her," admitted Kirk with a self-deprecatory smile.

"Illogical," Spock commented.

"Let's get out of these and back to normal business," Jim tugged at the collar of his dress uniform. The Doctor smiled at this unconscious reflection of his usual gesture.

"Yep, and you," McCoy pointed a finger at Jim, " down to sickbay."

"Okay, Bones, " Kirk chuckled, "Mind the store for a while longer, Spock?"

"Acknowledged," Spock said and headed to the bridge via his cabin to change.

"Well, Jim, you are one lucky man," McCoy smiled.

"Lucky?" Kirk tried hard to find the connection between luck and his present state of being flat on his back on a diagnostic bed. He sat up and put on his uniform-top.

"Yes, you are on the verge of developing a beauty of a peptic ulcer."

'That's luck?' Kirk thought

"With the new treatment we have we can get rid of both the pain and the pre-ulcer in a day, or two at most."

"What is the treatment?" asked Kirk eyeing McCoy suspiciously.

McCoy laughed. He remembered the time that he had confined the Captain to prolonged bed-rest to cure a previous ulcer. The truth of the matter was, that at the time he also had to cure an all consuming exhaustion and the ulcer just proved a good excuse.

"Just a couple a hypos and you can be on your way back to the bridge in five minutes," he assured the Captain, who clearly had also remembered that episode.

With a mixture of resignation and relief, Jim offered up an arm. McCoy was careful not to look too mischievous as he duly administered the drugs. "Had you worried there for a minute, didn't I?" he smirked to himself.

The bridge was full of mildly excited discussion about the now popularly named "IDIC" planet. Captain Kirk let the chatter continue - it was a safe way to release any residual tension.

"I cannot think with all this noise on the bridge," Spock snapped suddenly.

The ensuing silence was more deafening than the chatter that preceded it.

'Now why doesn't that have the same effect when I say it?' was Kirk's first thought. Then he realised what had just happened and turned, as did everyone else, to stare at Spock. Remembering their manners, they quickly all managed to be extremely occupied with their duties. Captain Kirk modified his gaze, which was still locked on Spock's now very expressive face.

Spock stood still, with annoyance still on his face, which turned instantly to shock followed by an extremely imperturbable mask. He turned stiffly back to his science console. In his turn Captain Kirk also swivelled the conn back to face the main screen. 'Just what was that all about?' he pondered.

The only other time Kirk remembered such strange behaviour from Spock, was during his Ponn-farr. 'Oh no!' he thought to himself, 'Not again.' the cuts made by the fearsome lirpa fresh in his mind. He also realised suddenly, that this was not the first time since they had left the "IDIC" planet that Spock had nearly lost his Vulcan equanimity. Kirk got up and walked to the lift saying:

"Mr. Spock, come with me please."

"Captain?"

"Please," the Captain repeated his tone suggesting it wasn't really a request. He indicated the open lift doors.

Bemused, Spock acquiesced and joined the Captain in the lift.

"Sickbay," Kirk said, then turned to face his First Officer.

"Spock, it's all right. We'll arrive on Vulcan within 49 hours."

"49 hours, 13 minutes. I am well aware of that fact, Captain." Spock did not meet the Captain's eyes. He maintained his usual elegantly correct stance. Something shifted in the shoulders though.

Kirk looked at his friend with concern. Surely he wasn't going to deny it all again. Then to the utter astonishment of both, Spock laughed quietly.

"Spock! Spock?" Had the Vulcan gone utterly space-happy?

"Laughing is not prohibited by Vulcans, Captain, if the situation warrants it." Spock put the lift on manual and stopped it before it could reach its destination.

"Spock?" Reassured slightly, but still baffled.

"You have, prematurely, arrived at an erroneous conclusion, Jim." Spock returned the Captain's scrutiny, with the full force of his own. There was a warmth in it that most had never seen, and Kirk only rarely.

"Oh?" not convinced.

"I am not entering Pon farr." He leaned back against the lift bulkhead, crossing his arms in front of him.

Kirk looked relieved but puzzled. Spock continued, still smiling slightly.

"However, I believe my essential mind-meld with Lieutenant Sulu has affected me more than I first..." Spock stopped as he sensed Kirk's intense new concern for him. He realised suddenly what the problem really was. "It seems, Captain, that my normal unconscious ability to shield myself from the emotions of others has diminished significantly."

By composing his facial expression, Kirk tried to suppress his feelings in order to protect his friend.

"Captain....Jim. You do not have the training to successfully control your emotions fully. It is unnecessary in any case," he said not quite hiding his smile. "However, while you and Dr. McCoy are staying with my parents, I trust you will not be disappointed if I do not join you for the entire time."

Kirk's face fell slightly in disappointment. "Of course not, Mr. Spock. What do you have in mind, if one might ask?"

"One might," Spock sighed. "I mean no offence but...a period of solitude and contemplation is what is urgently required."

Captain Kirk realised just how difficult and wearing this must be on his friend. "Would you like to be relieved of duty until we arrive?" he asked, certain of the answer.

"Unnecessary, Captain."

"Well, Spock, I hope you'll be able to recharge your batteries when we get to Vulcan."

"Batteries, Captain?" Spock could not resist replying.

Kirk grinned and released the auto stop. The lift resumed the downward journey. Upon reaching its

destination, the doors opened to:

"Damn it! Who's the idiot that's been holding up this....Uhhh..Captain...Mr.Spock...Sirs...I don't really need this lift anyway...." Uhura stammered, red faced.

Kirk hid a smile and said, inviting poor Uhura into the lift: "It's nice to see you too, Lieutenant. Are you on your way to the bridge? Do join us."

Uhura sidled in, not daring to look at either officer. During the return journey, the atmosphere in the lift was interesting to say the least.

Epilogue

Sulu stretched and sighed. This must truly be the most spectacular shore leave he'd ever had or ever will have. First, that amazing hike through the rainforest. He wanted to take a cutting of everything. Only the consciousness of his mass allowance restrained him.

Then the three day white water jaunt. The bruises were fading nicely, thank you. Now...he was lying on the most beautiful pink sanded beach he'd ever seen, with a gorgeous female at his side. A cloudless sky, superbly coloured sea...he didn't really think he'd died and gone to Heaven. Heaven probably didn't have all the 'mod.cons'. He reached for his drink.

"Come for a swim," his companion touched his arm. The events of the night before replayed in Sulu's mind. Oh yes!

"Mmm...not yet. Start without me," he murmured, smiling at her. He really was just too comfortable to get up. She rose, and trickled a handful of warm, soft sand onto Hikaru's middle. Laughing, she ran to the water's edge, expecting him to follow, in their usual game.

He closed his eyes and stretched again. 'In a minute,' he thought. How different this was from the nightmares he'd been having aboard the Enterprise. They were all nearly the same: It was cold...space cold. Utterly dark, as though light had never existed. He was falling endlessly. He was inconceivably alone.

Sulu woke up with a start. Everything around him was unfamiliar, the sounds and the smell. This was not the Sickbay of the Enterprise. Where was he? He felt panic set in.

"Hey! He is awake!" the cheerful voice of Chekov stopped the rise of panic.

"Oh...Hikaru, we missed you," Uhura was there, taking his hand into hers and squeezing it, while Chekov was slapping him on his shoulder. He looked from the one to the other. Uhura had tears in her eyes. Chekov was grinning like a Argelian crocodile.

"What happened?" he croaked in a weak voice as fragments of memories swam through his mind.

"The Captain and Spock will come and tell you everything. We mustn't stay too long or the doctors here will string us up in the desert." Uhura smiled.

"At least tell me, where am I?" pleaded Sulu.

"On Vulcan, at the Academy hospital." Chekov said laughing softly at Sulu's surprise. Just then a nurse came bringing medicine for her patient. She allowed both Uhura and Chekov to stay as long as they promised not to tire the patient. Soon they were joined by the Captain, and McCoy. Spock was on a special retreat, Sulu was informed, as they told him exactly what happened.

Three weeks later Uhura rushed into Sulu's room at the convalescent's hostel (for out-worlders) where Sulu was being pampered back to absolute health.

"Sulu, hurry up - we're leaving. New Star Fleet orders to pick up Offer. You can finish you 'vacation' back in the Sickbay of the Enterprise."

Sulu hurriedly got his things together, with the help of Uhura, and hoped that any further convalescing would be done back at his helm.

Lieutenant Offer sat dejected and angry in a small cabin of the Vulcan trade ship. He was, as far as he knew, the sole survivor of his landing party. 'What had gone wrong? Why?' These questions occupied his mind as he prepared a report for Star Fleet and his Captain.

The End

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