

Scotpress



A Human Kind of Learning

a Star Trek
fanzine

A HUMAN KIND OF LEARNING

by

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Illustrated by

ROO

To all our friends, special people in our lives; and to Star Trek itself, for bringing us all together. To Sheila, Valerie and Janet, for much encouragement over the years; and to Ann, a special kind of friend, for her help, encouragement and understanding - also for typing the manuscript! And from Karen to her one-in-a-million, Mark.

For those who believe in the dream. May we all go forward together.

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

A HUMAN KIND OF LEARNING

Spock was beginning to come round. He was no physician, but Jim Kirk could tell without the aid of scanners or a diagnostic bed that his friend was showing signs of an imminent return to consciousness.

That he was relieved was just about the biggest understatement of the century. The night's long vigil had taken its toll of him, and he was very tired, but he would have sat through a hundred such nights if by doing so he could help the Vulcan.

Perhaps his presence had helped Spock. Certainly he hadn't been able to do much else for him. Since the terrible encounter with the Morian the afternoon before, Kirk had in reality been able to do little else but provide a place of shelter and relative warmth, where he could make Spock comfortable then sit and wait for him to come round. The possibility that the Vulcan might *not* come round had been one he had not dared to contemplate, and now that he was sure Spock was out of danger, he felt quite light-headed with relief.

He had spent much of the night cursing himself for his stupidity in insisting that Spock should come with him on this shore leave. Truly, Spock had been overworking as usual, but that never did seem to have any effect on the Vulcan; if Kirk was honest, he seemed to thrive on it. But he, in his illogical Human way, had believed his friend needed a break, and was determined that, this time, he was personally going to make sure Spock got one.

Spock hadn't actually protested too much, and Kirk had been somewhat surprised at the ease with which he had persuaded the Vulcan to agree to come. Beta IX was highly prized as one of the best Federation shore leave facilities in the quadrant; a beautiful, untamed world, whose inhabitants preferred to live mainly on one continent, thus leaving the other two more than ideal for restoring harassed and overstretched starship personnel to a rested state of mind and body. After all, the vast majority of the Enterprise's crew were not Vulcans, and his announcement that he had managed to get them shore leave there had been greeted with great enthusiasm.

But he had allowed the wild beauty of the planet to lull him into a false sense of security, and he was angry with himself. When the Enterprise had received orders to make a short diversion to the nearby Starbase to collect some cadets for transportation to a deep-space rendezvous with their training vessel, Kirk had had no qualms about sending the ship off under Scott's command. The Enterprise would be back within two days, and the various shore leave parties scattered about the two continents could manage quite well until then; Beta IX was, after all, that rarity of planets, a world with no indigenous plant or animal life which could be considered remotely harmful.

Yet there were always those damned random factors that Spock was always going on about; or, to put it another way, plain bad luck. They had beamed down to the larger of the two almost-deserted continents, at least fifty miles away from any of the other landing parties, with camping equipment and ample supplies for at least five days; the Enterprise would be back with three days of their shore leave to spare, and he intended that this time both he and Spock were going to get a good rest. Then the ship had left, and for a while at least they were on their own.

The afternoon had been pleasant and very peaceful as they had made their way along a meandering river bank, unhurriedly looking for a suitable place to make camp. Their conversation had for once been of other things

than ship's business; they had talked of past times, of aims yet to achieve; many things. Kirk had found he was enjoying himself very much indeed, and had decided that this particular shore leave had been an extremely good idea.

Then Spock had suddenly halted, and stiffened. Kirk, walking ahead, had stopped also, puzzled at his friend's action. The Vulcan had seemed to be listening to something Kirk himself could not hear. Which was quite probable.

"What is it, Spock?" he had asked, a sudden concern falling on him.

"Uncertain, Captain," the Vulcan had replied, still cocking his head to one side as it to listen better. "I detect a telepathic presence, and I can hear the cries of one in pain. Our aid is needed, Jim."

Spock had hurried forward then, Kirk close at his heels, as concerned for the stranger's pain as Spock obviously was, but still unable to keep from wondering if they were ever going to get an uninterrupted shore leave.

Then they distance they had covered made the sounds audible to Human ears, and Kirk had wished that he still could not hear. The terrible cries told of unbearable pain and suffering, and sounded, not merely alien, but not... sane.

Then they had seen it; a tall, wiry alien; humanoid but of a race Kirk had not seen in the flesh before. The way it thrashed uncontrollably on the ground told Kirk that his supposition must surely be correct.

They had halted, and Kirk noticed the look of suppressed pain on his friend's face. Clearly, Spock was still receiving disturbing telepathic impressions from the alien.

"A Morian, Spock?" Kirk had asked quietly. Spock nodded wordlessly, his dark eyes fixed on the pathetic, helpless figure. The Morian people were a non-aligned race; secretive and isolated, although highly intelligent and with advanced telepathic abilities. Kirk knew without asking that Spock was thinking of how it must be for one of such a race to be insane.

Spock had taken a step forward and Kirk had halted him with a hand on his arm. "What are you planning to do, Spock?" He had not needed to add, *Take care - you will be hurt if you do not*; Spock already knew he would be thinking that.

"I must try to help, Jim," Spock had answered gently. "If I can get close enough..."

"You're *not* going to try and meld with him!" It was both an order, and a plea from the heart. "I'm no telepath, but even I can see that that Morian is out of his mind and probably dangerous; you can't risk it, Spock!"

Spock had turned to Kirk and given one of his rare almost-smiles. "That is not my intention, Jim. The danger in such an action is unacceptable when in all probability McCoy can help him far better than I, with no risk to himself. It would be illogical. I merely wish to attempt to apply the nerve pinch. Then we must restrain him until the Enterprise returns; the tranquillisers in the emergency medical kit should be effective."

"Spock - use a phaser; stun him - it'll be safer," Kirk had pleaded, a premonition of disaster making him still hold on to Spock's arm.

"Contra-indicated, Jim; from what I do know of Moriani, phaser-stunning can cause neurological damage. In this one's state we cannot risk it." He had turned then to look at Kirk with those near-black eyes. "Jim, I *will* be careful."

So Kirk had stood and watched helplessly as Spock had quietly, carefully, made his way forward to the place where the stricken alien thrashed in anguish and insanity on the ground.

He had watched in horror as his foreboding came to pass, and stood unable to help as the Morian had leaped without warning at the Vulcan, too quickly either for Kirk to do anything or for the agile Spock even to dodge.

The wild-eyed Morian had taken Spock to the ground with him; that race was reputed to have physical strength at least the equal of Vulcans', and with the added impetus of its affliction, Spock hadn't stood a chance of resisting.

Kirk knew that if Spock had gone down like that, then he stood no chance at all, but the next moment had seen him running forward in desperation, not even considering what that kind of uncontrollable strength was likely to do to him. He *had* to help Spock, at whatever cost.

He saw as he ran that the Morian had hold of Spock's head, and realised that the insane being was in the process of forcibly applying its version of a meld, its expression both unknowing and horrifying. He had to stop it; god knew what that kind of contact could do to his friend's mind.

Even as he was launching himself through the air in a desperate attempt to knock the clinging alien from Spock's back, the Morian suddenly stood and howled wildly. The force of Kirk's lunge uprooted him, and Human and Morian landed in a crumpled heap. But the alien threw Kirk off as if he were a rag doll, stared blindly around him, and began to run.

He had gone no more than a few yards when he had halted and screamed. Such a scream Kirk never wanted to hear again, nor did he ever want to experience again the terror he felt when the Morian immediately fell heavily, dead before he reached the ground, at exactly the same moment as Spock uttered a low, painful cry. Kirk hardly dared look in case the Vulcan was also dead.

But Spock was alive; the ridiculously fast pulse was there, and almost as strong as ever, and Kirk didn't think he would ever forget the sense of relief which came when he made that discovery. Yet the danger was not over, nor was it likely to be for a while. Spock was deeply unconscious; the cry wrought from him had come involuntarily. Kirk could not bring him round, and the Vulcan's comatose state did not seem like a healing trance. He was a starship captain, not a doctor, and he wished, not for the last time, that McCoy had come with them. With a sigh and a lump in his throat he had knelt by his unconscious friend, knowing that there was little he could do for Spock except stay with him, and wait. And hope.

So now he sat within the hastily-erected tent which had been meant to house them both for the duration of a restful shore leave. Instead it had become a shelter for a sick Vulcan, and Kirk had ignored the irony; he had been too thankful that he could provide Spock with shelter, and for the mildness of Beta IX's climate.

Now that Spock was finally showing signs of waking, Kirk was beginning to feel that he could start breathing again; yet he knew he would not be able to relax completely until it was proven to him beyond a

doubt that Spock really was all right. At least his decisions of the day and night past seemed to have been the right ones; yet even of that he could not be completely certain until Spock awoke. *Please let him be all right*, was his silent plea. *Please don't let him have been harmed in any way - especially his mind*. He knew he could not have stopped Spock from attempting to help the Morian; knew he would have tried it himself had he possessed the ability. He knew it was illogical to blame himself for what had happened without Spock having to tell him so. Yet understanding that did nothing to prevent him from doing so.

The nightmare of the day before, and the long vigil of the night, had passed in a hazy dream, as if those events were happening to two others, not to him and Spock. He had quickly blasted a grave with his phaser, and the memory of burying the dead alien under a mound of gathered stones seemed distant, as if it had happened to another. Destroying the body with phaser fire would have been easier, but the chances were that McCoy would need to perform an autopsy; the knowledge he might gain could very well be vital to Spock's recovery. Without bothering to search further, he had hastily erected the tent and had carefully moved the Vulcan inside. Spock was indeed deeply unconscious, and Kirk had not liked the look of it at all. The emergency medikit they had carried at McCoy's insistence was very welcome to him then; the portable scanner had at least told him that the Vulcan's life signs were stable, and not deteriorating. At least, not at that moment; there was nothing to say that they would not do so later. It would be at least forty hours until the Enterprise was in communicator range, and somehow he had to keep Spock alive until the ship, and McCoy, arrived. Faced with the prospect of using a stimulant which might aggravate the Vulcan's condition, with unknown consequences, Kirk had eventually decided to do nothing but keep his friend as comfortable as possible and watch over him for any change which might force him to start taking chances. The stimulant he had then used on himself; it had been one night when he could not risk falling asleep.

So he had sat and kept watch throughout the hours of darkness, checking every few minutes to make sure that Spock was still holding his own. The long night had seemed endless, and when a pale dawn had finally come, the first rays of light found the Vulcan still in a coma, unmoving and silent.

It had been several more long hours before the first small signs of waking had come, and Kirk found that he could hardly believe it. He had begun to think that Spock was never going to wake until McCoy came and found some answer. Maybe not even then... He had not dared to consider the thought that his friend might never come round at all.

Now the unacknowledged fears seemed to be groundless; Spock would surely live, at the very least. He had to. Refusing to believe that his friend was damaged permanently in any way, Kirk nevertheless could not deny the nagging ache he had made himself suppress. Time enough for that if Spock's return to consciousness proved that the Vulcan's brilliant mind was not as it had been. That, for Spock, would surely be the worst fate there could be, and he wasn't at all sure that he could stand to see it.

Then as he watched, the miracle he had been waiting for happened. Spock's dark eyes flickered open, and fastened on Kirk with recognition.

"Jim?" asked Spock quietly. "Where... are we? My memory seems impaired. I... "

The Vulcan sat suddenly upright, before Kirk could say anything about taking it easy. *Same old stubborn Spock*, Kirk thought with infinite thankfulness. Yet there was something; not exactly disorientation, but... Had he imagined that his friend seemed... more confused than he would have

expected?

"I do remember - the Morian. He died - I felt his death in my mind. It was not - pleasant." Spock had turned to look Kirk in the eyes, and this time Kirk was sure. There was *something*; some subtle difference. Spock had never been able to hide from James Kirk the things he concealed from other people. And now Kirk knew, without any doubt, that Spock was hurting, and hurting badly, and he didn't think it was physical.

"What is it, Spock? What's wrong?" he asked without preamble. "Are you in any pain? The medikit's here; I'll get it. There must be something in it that'll help." He moved to get it, knowing already - Spock was going to say that nothing in the medikit could help him. So why did he do it? Was it that he didn't want to see the look in the Vulcan's eyes?

"That won't be necessary, Jim," Spock said as Kirk had expected. "I am in no pain."

The look of naked anguish belied the calm words, and Kirk thought that his friend had been about to say something else but had stopped himself. *Damn you, Spock!* he thought in sorrow. *I want to help you, but I can't if you won't let me in. Let this be one of the times when you do tell me what's wrong!*

Yet it was Spock himself who broke the empty silence; as if he understood only too well the hurt Kirk was feeling.

"Jim - something *has* happened to me," he said gently, almost unwillingly, as if for once he found he could not face the truth. "The mind contact with the Morian; not his fault, his mind was so deranged he could not help it. Morian criminals left him here, Jim. I don't know why they did it to him, only that they did. A forced mind-probe, far worse than the mind-sifter. How they could do such a thing... "

Kirk barely suppressed the urge to reach out and touch the Vulcan's hand. Spock seemed distraught, if such a thing could be possible. Almost as if he was on the verge of breaking down. It was a terrible thing to see, and James Kirk found that he didn't know what to do.

"The contact with the Morian?" he asked as evenly as he could. "You sensed that?" The horror Spock would feel at such an invasion of privacy, Kirk understood very well. Even now, when he was trying to tell Kirk what was wrong with him, first he was talking about the Morian's affliction. Then Kirk noticed a sight which practically made his heart stop; the near-black Vulcan eyes were clouding with moisture. Kirk couldn't believe it.

"There was - some small part of his mind which retained the memory of what he had been. I did feel that. Also the pain as he tried in his madness to steal my sanity for himself. He could not do that..." Spock stopped, desperately trying to control himself, and finding that the techniques he had used all his life were no longer working. He turned quickly away before Kirk realised what was wrong with him, knowing at the same time that his friend already knew, and would understand. But he did not want Kirk to see him like that.

"What *did* he do, Spock?" came the Human's gentle voice from behind him. The pain in James Kirk's tone almost made Spock lose the last shreds of control he had.

"He couldn't steal my mind." He somehow managed to get out the reply. "But he did take something." Spock turned again, this time to face Kirk,

not able to hide what he was feeling any longer.

"Jim - the Vulcan half of me. It is no longer there."

James Kirk just sat and looked at him in disbelief, then realised with absolute insight that everything Spock had said was true. That was the subtle difference all right. Spock still looked the same, and sounded almost the same, but from the instant he had opened his eyes Kirk had *known* there was something different. Whether or not the damage was permanent seemed strangely irrelevant at that moment; what was important was that he find a way to stop Spock hurting like that. So many, many times McCoy, and even himself on occasion, had wished that the Vulcan could be made to open up, just a little, and show at least part of the Human he kept hidden from the outside world. Now it had happened with a vengeance, and Kirk didn't think even McCoy would be glad it had happened. Or maybe it had been something like this that Bones had been afraid of?

"Are you sure, Spock?" This time Kirk *did* reach out and momentarily touched his friend's hand. What else *could* he do? Spock would know already that he would support him in anything, through anything.

"I can - barely maintain control," came the low reply, "and then not in the way I have always done. The Vulcan techniques will no longer work, and I do not know the Human ways. He did not add *Help me, Jim*. He didn't need to. That help would be there without his asking.

"What do you need to maintain control against, Spock? What do you feel?" Kirk asked the inevitable question.

"The emotions I have denied all my life. All closing in on me, Jim. I don't know what to do with them. Jim - how can I function like this? I will be useless to you as First Officer. What if I find there is no longer a place for me on the Enterprise?"

The sorrow in the Vulcan's voice was overpowering. Then Spock turned away again, but not before Kirk had seen his eyes clouding over again.

"Spock," Kirk said gently, trying to sound confident, "has it escaped your notice that many of the officers on the Enterprise are Human already? We *do* manage to function, despite our drawbacks. Besides, you haven't been examined yet. How can you know the damage is permanent? McCoy might be able to - "

"Jim, I *know*!" the Vulcan interrupted with uncharacteristic anguish. "There is nothing McCoy will be able to do at all. You don't understand." He turned again to Kirk and reached out and grasped him by the shoulders, with strength that was still more than Human.

"As a Vulcan," Spock continued painfully, no longer caring that Kirk saw the state he was in, or able to do anything about it, "I was always aware, not only of my thought processes, but of every small corner of my consciousness, and perhaps some parts of my subconscious, too. Believe me when I say that I *know* that that part of me has been destroyed. Perhaps forever. Jim, I do not know *how* to live as a Human."

"I could teach you." The simple answer. *Let me help* - as always.

Spock released Kirk's shoulders then and smiled self-consciously. "I might have expected you to say something like that," he managed to get out. He was still dangerously close to losing the small fragment of control he had found from somewhere.

"You should smile more often," Kirk stated with a grin, knowing with a

sudden insight that the moment of horror for Spock was past - this moment, at least.

"I do not think that the sight of me grinning on the bridge will exactly inspire confidence," Spock answered with a sigh. "The crew will think I have gone mad." He was close to laughter now; hysterical laughter, and he didn't think he was going to have any more success in suppressing it than he had had in dealing with the pain he had felt - was still feeling. He was a mass of previously-denied, seething emotions. How did Humans cope?

"No, they won't," insisted Kirk reasonably. "Not when it has been explained to them. The crew respects you too much, Spock. All it will mean is that they'll have a fully Human First Officer instead of the half-Human one they had before. You may have lost that part which makes you react as a Vulcan, but I'm damned sure you haven't lost any of your abilities. Even if you don't see it yourself yet. But you will; and believe me, Spock, the crew will still accept you for what you are, as they always have done. They will still have the same Spock they have come to know and respect, Vulcan or Human."

Spock nodded, understanding that James Kirk would never tell him anything else but the truth, even when he needed reassuring as badly as he did now. Kirk was too much his friend for that, and for that reason his words had done much to take his worst fears away.

"And you, Jim - what will you have?" The tremor would not - quite - stay out of his voice, no matter how hard he tried not to let Kirk see how important that answer was to him.

"I'll still have the same friend I've always had," Kirk replied simply, sensing the depth of feeling behind his friend's question. He felt mildly surprised that Spock had even felt he had to ask that. It underlined how badly the Vulcan had been affected. And Kirk refused pointblank to think of Spock as anything other than the Vulcan he had been, and wanted to be again; any Spock, Human or Vulcan or both, would be the same to Kirk, and as valued. But at that particular moment, all Kirk wanted was for Spock to be again as *he* wanted - needed - to be.

Spock had turned away again. Kirk's answer, albeit the one he had desperately wanted to hear, had touched him so deeply that he found he could not look his friend in the eye again. Not without breaking down, at least.

"Listen, Spock," said Kirk gently in his most confident tone. "How can I help you when you won't even look me in the face? I'm not *that* bad, am I?"

He was rewarded by a sound that was something between a laugh and a sob.

"Learning to laugh is the first thing, my friend," he added with a smile, his hand reaching out to grasp the Vulcan's shoulder reassuringly. "The rest will come. And there is always hope that it isn't permanent. That's enough for now, Spock, and even if it is permanent, you're still my First Officer and my friend, and that's the way it's going to stay."

The rest of that day proved, if nothing else, that it hadn't been the Vulcan in him who was solely responsible for Spock's determined nature. *Of course*, Kirk had reflected as he had watched his friend doggedly going about the everyday tasks of the campsite, *determination and sheer ordinary*

stubbornness are not purely Vulcan characteristics, although most of them have plenty of it - he knew many Humans with more than their fair share of stubbornness, himself included.

After the first hours of disorientation, Spock had evidently decided that he was not going to let it beat him; and as he went through the day, refusing to allow it to get on top of him, more than once Kirk had to force back a lump forming in his throat, as he saw the way his friend was fighting back. Spock was in many ways the same as he had always been; immovable in his dedication to a task, dependable and thoughtful. Yet there had been moments, many of them throughout the course of the day, when Kirk had seen him stop, and bite his lip against the emotions which threatened to overcome him. At those times Kirk had been there, quietly supportive, but respecting Spock's wish, so typical of him, to find his own way. But Spock accepted the mostly unspoken aid; Kirk's presence and support was enough for him, and their friendship would surely see both of them through.

The next night passed uneventfully; Kirk slept heavily - the vigil of the previous night had caught up on him, and he yielded to Spock's suggestion that he should get a good rest. Early the following afternoon the Enterprise would be within communicator range, and soon after that they would be beaming up to the starship.

As Spock had sat and thought, silently watching his sleeping friend, the unaccustomed fears he felt simply refused to go away. He knew that, as Kirk had said, the crew would accept him for what he was, as they had always done. That was not his chief fear. The thing that preyed the most on his mind, so vulnerable in its new, unprotected Humanness, was the idea that perhaps he might not be able to function successfully as First Officer. It was true, as Kirk had said, that the majority of the Enterprise's officers were Humans, and managed perfectly well to carry out their duties; the ship was widely known as the best in the Fleet, after all. And her very Human Captain was undoubtedly the best starship Captain in the galaxy. The best Captain - and the best friend. If it became clear that he, Spock, could no longer be an efficient and viable member of Kirk's crew, what then? He could not bear to think about it, and would not.

How unlike his former self that was, he mused wryly; refusing to face facts. The irony was, some things about the new self he had become were worth discovering. The emotions he had denied for so long now had full rein, and he could not in all honesty say they were all bad.

And he still had friends, whatever he had become - how many could say that? The crew, and McCoy, and of course Jim. If anything could get him through the trials of the next few days and weeks, their special friendship could. Friendship he could now put a name to without shame.

As he finally lay down to sleep, Spock made a firm decision. When he had finally mastered the flood of emotions assailing him, then he would find the right moment to tell Jim just what his friendship meant to him - had always meant to him.

The following morning dawned bright and clear; a beautiful day on a beautiful planet. Kirk woke to find Spock gone from the tent. Quickly he went outside, then relaxed. There was Spock, cooking the breakfast. He obviously did not notice Kirk watching him, for he stood and turned his face to the distant mountains, a smile of pleasure lighting the Vulcan features. The view was indeed impressive, and if Spock had always appreciated beauty, well, now he had no trouble in showing his appreciation either.

His smile did not fade as he saw Kirk looking at him. "Good morning, Jim. I trust you slept well?"

"Yes, I did, thank you." Kirk smiled a reply. "It's good to see you looking so cheerful."

Spock nodded in acknowledgement. "There are some aspects of my condition which are easier to accept than others. Some are quite beneficial, I must concede. The ability to recognise feelings I have long known, but whose presence I always denied, even to myself."

"You never did need to be ashamed of your feelings, you know," Kirk responded gently. He had a good idea of what Spock was trying to tell him.

"It was never the Vulcan side of my nature that felt shame, Jim." Spock shrugged slightly. "And I always knew there was no reason. But I could not help it. I am still not able to say all I feel. Do you understand?"

"You know I do, my friend," came the simple reply. "I always have done."

One day, Kirk knew, Spock would get round to telling him what he really meant; but it was true, he did understand, and that was enough.

The morning drew on, and early afternoon finally arrived. They had spent most of the morning talking; mainly about things Kirk had thought he would never need to advise the Vulcan about. Yet Kirk was convinced that Spock's worries were unfounded, in the main. The half-Vulcan Spock had never had *that* much difficulty in relating to the Humans aboard the Enterprise - and Kirk had often suspected that his First officer knew a great deal more about Human behaviour and the motives behind it than the Humans usually did themselves.

No - Spock would manage, he was certain of that. He had seen the way his friend had handled the thing that had happened to him, and now he was certain. Human or Vulcan, Spock possessed the will and determination to succeed, and although he no longer had his telepathic abilities, he still had all his other ones. He was more than sure that his friend had no need to doubt his competence; sometimes he thought he knew Spock better than he knew himself.

Finally they heard the small noise they had been waiting for; a beeping communicator. The Enterprise, right on time. Kirk grinned at the anxious Vulcan, and flipped the small machine open, to be greeted by Montgomery Scott's cheerful tones.

"Enterprise to Captain Kirk - are ye there, Captain?"

"We certain are, Scotty, and we're very glad to hear you. How did the mission go?"

"Everything went according to plan, Cap'n, and without a hitch. No problems at all." The Engineer sounded more relieved than pleased with himself and Kirk had to chuckle; Scott's antipathy to sitting in the centre seat was well known.

"Well, don't worry, Scotty," he replied, equally cheerfully. "You'll be able to get back to your engines sooner than you expected. Mr. Spock and I will be beaming up immediately. Have Dr. McCoy standing by."

"Captain?"

"It's okay, Scotty - nobody's at death's door this time - it's not that serious. Kirk out."

He turned to see the Vulcan's eyebrow on the rise; Spock might have lost his Vulcan control, but he hadn't lost his mannerisms. And that look...

"Spock," said Kirk mischievously, "I've just realised something. I've just realised that the Vulcan half of you never was responsible for all your actions. Don't deny it."

"Captain," replied the Vulcan seriously; if he didn't feel serious, he could still fake it. "There is no need to be insulting."

"This does have its advantages, you know," Kirk said, breaking up. "At least now I *know* when you're joking!"

Jim might know when he was joking, Spock reflected soberly as they waited to beam up, but he wasn't sure he knew himself. What was the crew going to think of him, including McCoy? *Especiallly* McCoy. Another chance for him to say things he should have said a long time ago? He still hadn't told Kirk - not properly. And could he really still be the First Officer he had been?

The transporter effect began. It seemed he was about to find out.

As Spock materialised on the transporter platform he felt a certain disappointment at having had to leave the planet, the beauty of which he had only just begun to notice and appreciate. He could still see clearly the rising of the sun in his mind's eye, that same sunrise that he had purposely risen early to witness. He had often shared that early moment with Kirk on prior shore leaves, but he had never been able to appreciate fully the dawning of a new day before. But now? Yes, now he could. There were advantages to his new self. And he was content. The same had applied when he had seen the distant mountains and he remembered the gentle smile which had lit his face at the spectacular sight of them. But apart from all this, there was also something else; it felt... good... to know that whatever occurred around him or to him, Jim Kirk would always be at his side, helping, guiding, supporting...

Spock pulled himself back to awareness and tried desperately to school his features into some kind of 'normality' as he had always been able to do - before, as he saw the blue-clad figure of Dr. Leonard McCoy waiting for them. But he was helpless now, as if controlled by the emotions now rampant within him, and he could not prevent a smile from spreading over his face. As casually as he could, he raised his hand to cover his betraying mouth, but was too late; McCoy had noticed, and *his* mouth was now agape in pure astonishment. *What was happening here?*

Spock remained where he was, unmoving, as if afraid to leave the imagined safe haven of the transporter chamber. Perceptive as always, Kirk took one look at his friend, surreptitiously squeezed his arm in support, and descended the steps, saying, "Lieutenant, you may go," and indicated the door.

The transporter operator nodded and left hurriedly, leaving McCoy still standing, with his hands at his sides and his eyes staring, all thoughts of an emergency having gone from his mind, for it was quite obvious that neither Jim nor Spock was injured. McCoy finally found his voice.



"Jim... What the devil... ? Spock *smiled!*"

"Bones - have any of the other parties beamed aboard yet?"

McCoy managed to shake his head in negation.

"Good. Then let's find somewhere quiet and private to talk, eh?
Somewhere nearby... "

McCoy finally prized his eyes away from the Vulcan who had now left the transporter platform and moved to stand behind his Captain. The Doctor looked at Kirk, a frown on his face. "We could go to the briefing room just down the corridor."

In answer, Kirk took McCoy's arm and steered him from the transporter room, Spock close behind. As soon as they had left, the transporter chief re-entered, trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

Kirk sat opposite McCoy and recounted what had happened on Beta IX, leaving out none of the details, but keeping to the bare facts, as Spock paced the room, unable to relax, fearful of what McCoy's reaction would be. Would there be ridicule - or acceptance? He knew the answer in his heart, but his emotional self was so unfamiliar to him that he felt a great deal of self doubt and fear for the future. *Felt... yes... The word fits now. It is not wrong for I do, now, feel. I can feel pain and guilt and joy... and love - for Jim. And there has not been much time yet to adapt to such feelings. I must give myself time...*

Kirk was speaking, but Spock did not hear him. McCoy reached out and grasped his arm, effectively halting the nervous pacing. The deep, dark eyes looked down at McCoy and the Doctor saw the pain of not knowing within them and his breath caught in his throat. Spock had never before allowed so much to show in those eyes... It was disconcerting to see it now.

"Spock - please sit down." At first McCoy thought that the Vulcan would pull away, but instead Spock moved to sit beside him.

"Dr. McCoy, I seem to have presented you with yet another problem. But at least this time you should have less trouble calibrating your instruments," he added, almost to himself.

McCoy winced. "Spock, I'm going to do my damndest to help, and if there's anything I can do about it we *will* find your Vulcan half again."

"But, Doctor," Spock intoned, with mock severity, "I thought the 'country doctor' in you despaired of my Vulcan heritage; too many problems for your beads and rattles." And Spock smiled openly, widely, directly at McCoy - a smile never to be forgotten. The last time Spock had smiled like that it had been directed at Kirk after their trial on Vulcan during Spock's pon farr. This time it was directed straight at him, and he felt honoured and awed and very humble.

"Spock, I may have joked that I'd rather have you more Human - but I respected and cared for you just the way you were, and I wouldn't want to change you. If, by some chance, I can't help you, you'll still be Spock, still First Officer, still my friend and respected colleague. If you don't find your Vulcan half again it won't be for the lack of trying on my part or my department's."

Spock reached over and placed his hand over McCoy's in thanks. McCoy had said what he'd wanted to hear, just as Kirk had, and with both his friends beside him, supporting him, he was confident that he *could* carry on. He looked over at Kirk, and it was his Captain who saw the tears in the dark eyes. Kirk nodded in understanding, then turned to McCoy and asked what had to be asked.

"What can you do, Bones?"

Uncomfortably, McCoy replied, "To be perfectly honest, Jim, I'm not too sure where to start. There's no precedent to follow. We'll begin by beaming the Morian's body aboard so that I can carry out a full autopsy and begin to run tests." Thoughtfully, he rubbed his chin. "There'll be tests for you, too, Spock, and..."

"Doctor, what will you test *for*? I'm a Human in a Vulcan body. I have Vulcan metabolism, green blood, pointed ears - but I'm a Human... soul, trapped..." This time his emotions did overflow, shouting for release, as the tension, apprehension, pain, fear, all came to a head and

erupted. The tears fell, to be followed by heavy sobs which wracked his whole body. Kirk raced round the table, turning Spock's chair to face him, and enfolded him in gentle, supportive, protective arms. Neither Kirk nor McCoy said anything as Spock cried himself out; it took a long time. Finally, Spock raised his head from Kirk's shoulder and looked directly into the hazel eyes, so understanding, which looked at him.

"Jim - thank you. You too, Bones." There, he'd said it. "It is true what they say - tears do help - sometimes. I do feel... better. But it also hurts."

Kirk looked at his friend and remembered the time they had encountered the Platonians. What had Spock said then? *The healthy release of emotion is often unhealthy for those around them.* He'd been all too right. Kirk knew that he hurt, too. For Spock - and for himself. He squeezed Spock's shoulder.

"Are you going to be okay now? I need you on the bridge."

Spock made a visible effort to pull himself together, and rose to his feet rather unsteadily, pulling his shirt down. His features had calmed, the sobs had subsided.

"If you would allow me a few moments to... change, I shall join you on the bridge in 10.35 minutes."

Kirk nodded. "Of course."

Spock took his leave, his back proudly straight, his head erect.

On their own, Kirk and McCoy exchanged glances. "Jim, I'll have to see him soon. There are tests I can do to determine just how much of a Human he's become."

"Bones, do you really think there's any hope?"

"There's always hope - remember that! His Vulcan half may have been pushed so deeply into his subconscious that he doesn't sense it. That 'invasion' into his mind by that damned Morian... It may have been that his Vulcan half couldn't cope so it ran, escaped, hid away. Luckily for him he had a Human half which *could* cope. A full Vulcan would probably have died."

"You don't think it *has* been fully destroyed, do you? Spock is convinced that it has. He said he *knows* that that part of him was destroyed. 'No chance', he said. He was convinced that you couldn't help him."

McCoy knew that Kirk was looking for a miracle, but he just didn't have one up his sleeve - not this time. Just the truth.

"If he was *that* adamant, then there's a good chance that he's right, Jim. He knows himself better than anyone else does. We may just have to hope that we can help him reconstruct his Vulcan half somehow, some time in the future."

"The future?"

"A body and soul isn't a house, Jim. You can't just stick a few bricks together to repair it. It takes time and patience and support - and a lot of love. We'll help him together." He sighed. "I've got to go. Arrangements to be made, a plan to be worked out... of how to help him..." McCoy hurried out.

Kirk sat still a moment longer then left, wanting to be on the bridge when Spock reported for duty.

As Kirk sat in the command chair waiting for Spock's arrival he couldn't help but rethink what his priorities were, exactly what meant most to him - Starfleet or Spock - for he had to face the fact that Spock might never regain his Vulcan half, might never be able to function fully as First Officer again. In that event, Kirk knew that Spock would force himself to leave the Enterprise rather than let Kirk down. And Kirk knew that if that occurred then he would never let Spock go alone. They belonged together, in whatever capacity was possible, and he knew, in the instant before the turbolift doors opened, somehow sensing that Spock would come through them, that he could never leave Spock's side, not even for the Enterprise.

The turbolift halted and in the split second before the doors opened, Spock used all his willpower to recall the ingrained techniques of mental control. They had worked on suppressed Vulcan emotions; but on Human ones they didn't seem to be so effective. But they were all he had for the moment, and somehow he had to try and carry on as before. Or if not as before, he had at least to make himself function efficiently. The thought of being unable to continue as First Officer was a terrible one, and it made the fear begin to rise even as he thought it.

He did not think he could bear to leave the Enterprise, his home - or Kirk.

And Kirk needed him on the bridge.

When Spock stepped out, the bridge personnel saw the dignified form of their First Officer make his way towards the science station, the same as ever.

Only the man in the command chair knew the full truth of the illness which had made it necessary for McCoy to see Spock on the Vulcan's return from the shore leave planet. The Enterprise's grapevine being what it was, her Captain had no doubt that practically everyone would know soon, if they didn't know already, that their First Officer had been 'unwell'. But James Kirk felt he owed it to his friend not to allow the truth to become commonplace knowledge; certainly not without Spock's consent. It might help to make things easier for him, at least a little; but Spock wouldn't want it that way. He might be Human now, and might well remain that way; but he still had a Vulcan's inherent need for personal privacy, and Kirk would respect that at all costs.

He could almost feel Spock's presence nearby, could almost see the catlike stealth of Spock's walk, but he resisted turning, resisted being the cause of the Vulcan's precarious control breaking, but it was hard, very hard. Instead, he turned as nonchalantly as possible, a good few minutes after Spock had arrived at his station.

What he saw was Spock trying desperately to appear as normal, and almost, almost succeeding. Only anyone who knew him well could have told, could have noticed the increased tension, the too-cold Vulcan facade. Kirk had seen Spock react that way at other times when he'd been hurt, and had refused to admit it even to himself.

But this time was different; this time Spock wasn't drawing on the Vulcan side of his nature for strength; this time Spock was acting.

Kirk's heart went out to him, and he didn't know what he could do to

help.

Uhura sat at her console, handling all the routine work, hardly having to think about it; the communications console was so much a part of her that she really did most of the day to day work at an almost subconscious level. And that was how it was supposed to be.

Look at Spock; look at the way he handled the library computer; now there truly was a perfect working partnership if ever she saw one. But she couldn't quite get out of her mind how he'd looked at the computer when he'd come onto the bridge at the beginning of that shift; he'd touched it with a sense of - awe, almost. Uhura knew Spock was a pretty difficult person to read; but she'd got pretty good at it over the years. When you worked with someone a lot it stood to reason you got to know them pretty well, and she was certain that that was what he'd been feeling when he'd first sat at that computer of his a little while ago.

And look at his reaction when she'd greeted his arrival on the bridge with the customary smile she kept for him. She was sure he'd almost smiled back. Then his face had closed over, and she'd looked after him in surprise, and a certain amount of concern; it hadn't been a closing over as if he'd been offended at her greeting; heavens, when had Spock ever taken offence at her smile? It was more as if he was in danger of breaking down, and couldn't allow even one of his little half-smiles out, for fear of letting go.

She'd watched him at odd times since, and she was sure there really was something wrong. He was *too* Vulcan. And yet, it seemed inexplicably out of place that she should use those words to describe him to herself. Of course she'd heard that he hadn't been well when he and the Captain had been on shore leave, but she'd assumed that his arrival on the bridge meant there was nothing wrong now. Well, looking at him, she wasn't too sure about that. And from the way the Captain kept sneaking glances at him from time to time, he wasn't too sure either. It was an established fact of nature that James Kirk knew his First Officer better than anyone else in the cosmos; if he was worried about Spock, then so was Uhura.

Never one to let another suffer if she could do anything, anything at all, to help, Uhura determined that she was going to take direct action. Ask Spock himself what was wrong. He might deny that there was, of course; but she didn't think so. Spock was never less than honest with anyone, least of all someone he regarded as a friend and colleague, and Uhura was certain that the Vulcan did regard her as that. And whatever was wrong, in all probability it would be something she couldn't do anything about anyway; but if she didn't ask, she'd never find out. Perhaps he just needed someone to talk to; she could certainly provide that.

That thought struck her as odd; if Spock wanted to talk to someone, it would be to the Captain, or, maybe, Leonard McCoy. But she still had to find out if there was something she could do to help; it worried her that she should even think that the calm, collected Spock should need someone to talk to in that way. But there *was* something wrong, unmistakably.

Remembering all the times when Spock had picked her up off the floor after some skirmish or other had thrown them all out of their chairs, she firmed her resolve. He hadn't needed to do it, and they both knew she was perfectly capable of picking herself up. But it was a gesture of friendship and respect she was determined to repay, if she could.

Her opportunity came fairly soon. As it happened, she and Spock were due to go off duty at the same time; he hadn't been on the bridge as long

as she had, but apparently he had some business in the labs to attend to. So when they both handed over their stations to the duty personnel, and Spock passed her on his way to the turbolift with much the same closed expression on his face, Uhura decided that it was time to act. And the privacy of the turbolift was as good a place as any.

"Mr. Spock, is there anything wrong?" she asked bluntly as soon as the turbolift had moved off. No point in beating about the bush.

The Vulcan turned slightly, and looked at her with what appeared to be open astonishment. Whatever mask he'd been wearing, it had slipped badly at her words.

"Spock? What is it?" she asked gently. Now she really was worried.

He paused for a few moments before answering, as if gathering his control together. When he did speak, the pain in his eyes was unmistakable.

"You must forgive me, Lieutenant. I apologise for my distasteful display of emotion. I had not realised that I was that transparent. I hope I have not offended you."

"Offended? What should I be offended about? And your behaviour is *never* distasteful, Mr. Spock. But I've been watching you; I'm sorry, but I was worried. It was the way you walked past when you came onto the bridge. And I can see there's something wrong." Uhura was groping for words, trying to say it in a way which wouldn't make him retreat into his Vulcan armour; she had to get through, so, even if he wouldn't allow her to help, at least she'd be able to find out what was troubling him.

"Lieutenant, I... " Spock seemed to be at a loss for words. Uhura had *never* seen him at a loss for words.

Suppressing a terrible urge to grab hold of his hand, she instead tried to put all the concern she felt into her eyes. She felt cut to the bone at the state he was in. To see Spock like that...

"Mr. Spock, I don't know what's wrong, but something is. If there's anything at all I can do to help, you know you only have to ask. If you really don't want to talk about it, then I won't make you. But I think that maybe you should."

Spock nodded slowly. He didn't know where to begin, but suddenly he found that he did want to tell Uhura.

"It was an accident; when the Captain and I were on shore leave," he started through lips tight with forced control.

"An accident?" Uhura asked gently. She could hardly hear him, he was speaking so quietly.

Spock nodded again. "There was an - inadvertent mental contact with a Morian; the resultant trauma has caused some neurological damage."

The turbolift stopped and Spock got out. Uhura followed him. She couldn't just leave it like that. What neurological damage?

Spock realised that she'd followed him, and turned to her. Somehow he managed a small smile. Uhura's expression became one of utter bewilderment.

"You see, Uhura," the Vulcan said as gently as he could, "the Morian

was insane, and the contact almost killed me. When I came round, I discovered it had actually destroyed part of me; the Vulcan half. I am Human now, mentally though not physically, and I have to learn to function in a different way from that in which I have always done. Perhaps the only way you can help me is by acceptance of my somewhat uncharacteristic behaviour; and your understanding. Your friendship, I have always valued."

Uhura hardly knew what to say. She understood the way he'd been acting perfectly now. It all fitted. Poor Spock, to have to live with this.

"Thank you, Spock," she said when she found the words. "I have always valued your friendship, too. But you know, all of us *will* give you what you ask for; you must know how much the crew respects you. Vulcan or Human, it doesn't matter. You're still the same Commander Spock, and that's what matters."

With a smile, she stepped back into the lift. Spock watched the closed doors with a strange expression. It was most unexpected, but her words really *had* made him feel a little easier. He was glad he'd told her how he felt.

Kirk had forced himself to remain in his command chair throughout the entire watch. He'd desperately wanted to go to Spock's side, talk with him, tell him that he was there, give him support, but he knew that it was the worst thing he could do. Spock was performing his duty as well as any other day. Admittedly, he was quiet, had remained glued to his scanners and monitors and switches and had flatly refused to acknowledge anyone else on the bridge - out of necessity, knowing that if someone else were to smile in kindness, as Uhura had, he would find himself responding, and he would not, could not allow that. Kirk knew that if he broke that concentration of Spock's then... something could happen which neither of them could cope with. He hadn't even made his customary tour of the various bridge stations, and he could tell that the crew had noticed. Sulu and Chekov were exchanging surreptitious glances and whispered words - but what could he do?

When the shift had ended, Spock had left accompanied by Uhura, but Kirk had found himself remaining within the centre seat for several more thought-filled minutes after he needed to, unwilling to face the problem directly himself. He hoped that Uhura would use her uncanny sixth sense and give Spock some cheering and encouraging words - and help that neither he nor McCoy could provide.

Spock spent the next few days trying to act normally in front of the crew, to perform his duties efficiently, and, above all, not to let Kirk down. He often felt that he needed to talk to Kirk, but resisted the impulse on more than one occasion, afraid to use his Captain and friend as a crutch, sure that he had to face it all entirely alone if he could. He knew that both Kirk and McCoy were there if they were needed, and they gave their support in ways other than words; that was all he really needed to know.

He had actually begun to think that he was succeeding in his aims when one day he literally ran into Nurse Chapel. It was so uncharacteristic of Spock not to look where he was going that Chapel at first remained sitting on the floor where she'd fallen, somewhat shocked and not a little surprised. She was even more shocked when Spock gently placed his strong hands beneath her arms and lifted her to her feet, a position which resulted in their faces being scant inches apart. Just as she'd always

imagined in her dreams. Her mind raced onwards, remembering the snippets of information she'd gleaned through the sickbay grapevine. She knew Dr. McCoy was running regular tests on the Vulcan, that he was being constantly monitored, that *no-one*, except McCoy, was allowed to see the results of those tests, that there was... something wrong. But she hadn't been able to discover what, although this occurrence was surely corroboration that something very strange was going on concerning the Vulcan. This was not the Spock she knew who was looking at her with open concern in his eyes, his hands still resting lightly on her arms.

She finally emerged from her reverie and reluctantly pulled away from the welcome grasp, adjusting her crumpled uniform.

"Nurse Chapel, I must apologise for my carelessness. I was not... looking where I was going."

She looked at him again, still acutely conscious of his nearness to her; but she was a professional, and did not stay flustered for long.

"No need to worry, Mr. Spock - there's no harm done."

"I am relieved to hear it, Nurse."

She turned to go, but stopped when Spock stammered, "Would you care to join me for... coffee?" he finally blurted out, subconsciously glancing around the corridor to see that they were unobserved.

Deeply touched, Chapel nodded in affirmation, and Spock, his hands clasped behind his back, walked slowly along beside her.

The rec. room was almost deserted yet they still chose a table away from everyone and, coffee cup in hand, Chapel broached the subject concerning her. "Mr. Spock - there's nothing wrong, is there?"

"Wrong?" His eyebrows rose, and Chapel had to subdue a smile. He never changed.

"Yes. I... um... I know you've been visiting sickbay a lot recently."

Spock clasped his hands on the table and began to study them intently. When he spoke his voice was low. "Dr. McCoy and I have been engaged in some... research." No, he couldn't tell her what was... wrong, not as he had done so openly to Uhura. There was not the same affinity here; feeling from Chapel, yes, even a certain amount of understanding, but no real affinity, and he could not tell her. "I am... well." It was not the whole truth, but... "You have no need to concern yourself." His voice was kind, gentle and Chapel took no offence at the rebuke, but she turned her attention to her coffee and waited for Spock to say more.

"Nurse Chapel, I would like to thank you for all your help, your concern, and your... interest, in the past. I have always admired your skill and dedication - and consider it an honour to have made your acquaintance."

Chapel looked up at that, aghast. After all this time, an admission and an acknowledgement. It meant so much to her. She didn't know why Spock had suddenly found himself able to say what he'd just said, but it meant more to her than anything, and she almost reached over to touch his hand in symbolic gratitude, but instead placed it on the table and pushed herself back into her seat, her eyes meeting the Vulcan's.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock."

The Vulcan nodded, then rose quickly and left the room.

Days later, Spock was on the bridge when an emergency call came in from Starbase 9; a Code One call. He found himself rising from his seat as the shock permeated his system, registered upon his memory. Not again. No...

Kirk had acknowledged the message, given orders as to the course changes necessary, then had turned hurriedly towards Spock, knowing exactly what the message would mean to the Vulcan, knowing the pain it would cause.

Kirk moved to Spock's side, his voice quiet. "I think your research might be completed in your quarters, Mr. Spock."

Spock faced Kirk, gratitude upon his face, in his eyes.

"Would you like me to come with you?" Kirk asked.

"No... no, Jim... Please... I will be all right." His eyes held Kirk's for a long moment, and Kirk managed a weak smile of encouragement; then Spock left the bridge with an erect back. The eyes, which had been so expressive and pain-filled moments before, were empty now, and his steps were hesitant. All Kirk could do was watch helplessly.

Spock stared at the firepot, hardly seeing it; and totally unable to concentrate on the mental techniques for meditation which ought to have worked for Vulcans or Humans. He couldn't get their new orders out of his mind.

Just when he had thought that perhaps in time he might be able to adjust, at least enough to ensure that he was still capable of performing his duties as Science Officer efficiently, this had to happen.

He hadn't expected the shock that followed the communication from Starbase 9. There'd been some kind of an accident on Colony M-284; Starfleet didn't have any details, but medical assistance was required urgently, and the Enterprise was the ship nearest M-284. The planet where they'd left the colonists from Omicron Ceti III. Leila. In all probability she'd be there, and he'd see her again. He wasn't at all sure that he wanted to.

Or did he?

Where had that rock-sure Vulcan certainty gone - or had it ever truly existed? And the colonists had asked for medical assistance; whatever had prompted that plea, it was most likely serious. He didn't like to think of Leila in danger. But did that mean anything?

The firepot's red glow seemed to have no power to bring him peace any more. But perhaps that was hardly surprising. Perhaps he ought to stop trying to deal with it all as if he were still the same as he had been; in all logic, it might be more sensible to try and deal with it as a Human would.

Wasn't that what he was, now?

A Human needed others to talk to; friends to share sorrows with.

Spock knew he really wanted to go and find Jim Kirk - Spock knew that he was only next door, in his cabin. But somehow he couldn't bring himself to burden his friend with the way he felt; Kirk had enough problems; and hadn't he been doing his best to let his mixed-up friend sort out his new feelings - were they really all new? - on his own, as he'd seemed to want?

Nowhere would he find a friend like Jim Kirk; but Spock didn't want to do it on his own any more. Didn't think he could.

Spock wanted to go to Kirk, but he couldn't.

With a heavy sigh, he steepled his fingers in front of him, and tried not to think.

Kirk had left the bridge as soon after Spock as he could, proceeding to his cabin, knowing that Spock, if he couldn't actually accept the help that Kirk wanted so badly to give, would want to know that he was near. Once in his cabin, however, he could settle to nothing, knowing that Spock was agonising over the message about the Omicron settlers, and knowing he couldn't help. He ended up pacing back and forth, trying to figure out just what he could do to help his friend. Spock seemed to have been coping well with his 'problem'; if anything, it had affected Kirk more than Spock, who had adjusted fairly well up to this point, but Kirk feared what the thought of seeing Leila again would do to the Vulcan.

Kirk halted in front of his desk, slapping his hand down on the top of it. *Damn the woman!* Kirk remembered what had happened the last time they'd met Leila Kalomi. The entire episode had been painful for Kirk, not just because of the fact that he'd almost lost his ship, but because of what he'd learned about his friend. Spock had almost begged him to join them in their own 'paradise', as if Spock had found what he'd always wanted but needed Kirk with him to make it complete for him. Kirk had not been able to respond in any way, and that had hurt him badly. The spores had affected Spock immediately - as far as Kirk had surmised, for the Vulcan had never been able to discuss any aspect of it with him afterwards; he had succumbed rather than fight as Kirk himself had done, so it seemed that he had not been as contented on board the Enterprise as Kirk had thought. And had there always been some feeling, hidden deep within that Vulcan breast, for Leila from that time six years before, for him to have responded so quickly and so profoundly to her?

Kirk sank into a chair, his head cradled in one hand, the pain of the fight he had forced upon his friend still vivid in his memory - he'd never been able to forget what he'd said in order to goad Spock into an angry frenzy, even though he had meant none of it. Would Spock remember those words? The pain? And would his Human half be able to forgive the memory? The Vulcan Spock had understood, had accepted the necessity for Kirk's actions - but would the Human Spock accept and understand when he remembered what had happened? Kirk felt a shiver of fear run up his spine...

"Well, Spock; all I can say is that you're physically okay - if those mixed-up readings are telling the truth, that is." McCoy resisted the sudden impulse to help Spock up off the couch; instead, he contented himself with handing him his uniform shirt. Now wasn't the time to play mother hen; Spock wouldn't appreciate it; at least, he might be glad of the concern, but it wouldn't make things any easier. McCoy knew how hard Spock was trying to carry on as normal. If anyone had asked him before how he'd react to this situation, he'd have thought the thing to do would be to

treat Spock as the Human he was now; make him start acting like one. Dammit, he wasn't indestructable; never had been, for that matter. But now that it was real? Spock was still Spock, and wanted to be treated accordingly.

"Your weight's down a little, though," McCoy continued in his usual manner. "Try to do something about it, hm?"

Spock looked at him levelly for a moment, as if there was something he wanted to say. Whatever it was, evidently he couldn't make himself say it.

"Thank you, Doctor," he replied eventually. "I will attempt to follow your instructions."

With that he turned and left. McCoy watched him go, shaking his head sadly. That was not the Spock he knew.

"Doctor?" It was Christine Chapel. Worried about the Vulcan as she had been, she had probed and probed - subtly, it was true - until at last McCoy had given in and told her what was wrong. After all, she was his chief nurse, and the most obvious person to give him the medical assistance that he really did need if he was to help Spock the way he wanted to. Now she had come to find out the results of Spock's latest physical. *Only to be expected*, thought McCoy. *Jim and I aren't the only ones who're worried about him.* He was grateful that she had reacted as a nurse, rather than as a woman in love.

"There's no sign of real deterioration, Christine," McCoy replied as if she had already asked the question. "It's not his physical condition I'm really worried about; it's what's going on inside that bothers me. It's a hell of an adjustment for him to have to make."

"Remember that transporter malfunction, Doctor?" Chapel looked him straight in the eye. "The Captain couldn't live without his 'other half'. What if... "

"I know, Christine." McCoy cut her off. "It worried me, too. But in this case it doesn't seem to be happening. It's not quite the same thing, after all. And you never know how that crazy Vulcan constitution's going to react to anything!" McCoy shook his head worriedly. "No, Chris - physically he *is* okay. I just hope he can find some way to adjust before something cracks."

"Doesn't he need help to adjust?" Chapel asked quietly.

McCoy looked at her. "Maybe. Probably. But I can't just push in where I'm not wanted, Chris. It could do even more damage. Spock knows that if he needs my help, I'll be here. I just wish he'd talk to Jim more; apparently he wasn't so close about it on that damned planet. But once he got here he seemed to feel he had to try and be super-Vulcan again. Poor Spock," McCoy sighed. "What are we going to do with you?"

The doctor left for his office; worries or no worries, starship captains weren't the only ones who had paperwork mount up on their desks.

Chapel watched him go. She stared at his office door for a minute, then she left too. Time for her to go off duty. She wasn't sure she wanted to; at least when she was working, she didn't have to think.

Once in her quarters, she began to read; but there was no way she could concentrate. Her thoughts kept returning to Spock. As always, to Spock and what had happened to him. It was odd, really, the factors, often hidden, that made one person care about another. And she had cared about

the half-Vulcan First Officer for so long, now... She'd always known there wasn't really any hope; knew it could only ever be a dream. But this had brought it all home to her, hard. Chapel wasn't finding it easy to accept. His attitude towards her hadn't changed at all. Oh, he was still polite as always; still as kind. But being Human hadn't, *couldn't* make him have feelings that had never been there.

Chapel had once thought that it was the Vulcan part of him that made him unable to respond to her. Now she knew...

It wasn't the Vulcan - or the Human - half of him; it was just Spock himself.

He couldn't love her, ever; and the knowledge hurt...

But it did help to know that he appreciated her ability as a professional and as a person. He couldn't love her but he could appreciate her. It wasn't what she wanted or what she had hoped and dreamed of, but it was something, and it did help.

Spock sank into a chair behind his desk and steepled his fingers before him. What was he to do now? How could he cope? He knew that he had adjusted quite admirably to his situation and that he was still functioning adequately as First Officer and Science Officer of the Enterprise. He was also beginning actually to enjoy the research that he and McCoy had begun to do together the day after he had returned to the Enterprise after the ill-fated shore leave on Beta IX. But he also knew that he had failed in his friendship towards Kirk even though what he most wanted was to be able to respond to the Human and show him how much his friendship really meant while he could. He hadn't been able to go to Kirk and discuss how he was really *feeling*; instead, he had run away from the offered help and support, had retreated from the outstretched hand of friendship - it was almost as if he was afraid of what Kirk's open and natural emotionalism would do to him.

Now, of all times, he needed Kirk more than ever, and when his Captain had offered his outstretched hand yet again, he had so wanted to take it and hold on tight and never let go - but instead he had retreated once again, leaving the hurt-filled hazel eyes staring out from a pain-filled face. He had known that Kirk would follow, knew instinctively that he would now be next door in his own cabin. Why couldn't he go to him?

Oh, Jim - I need you! He suppressed a sob as his head fell upon the desk top in utter dejection.

Next door, Kirk's head turned sharply, half expecting to see Spock in the doorway - but there was no-one there. He *had* heard something, though - or rather, he had *sensed* something. He could have sworn he'd heard Spock calling for him...

Shaking his head he resumed his pacing but then halted once more, his hands clasped tightly before him. He couldn't leave Spock alone, especially at a time like this. Perhaps his friend wanted to confide in him, but couldn't - or was afraid to... Taking a deep breath he left his cabin and walked the few steps to Spock's, but even then he was afraid, himself, to make his presence known. Just before he was about to return once more to his cabin to resume his restless pacing, Spock's cabin door slid aside and Spock himself stood there, a small smile lighting the usually austere features.



"I knew you were here, Jim. Thank you for coming." He stepped aside, and Kirk entered, making his way to the room divider, hands clasped behind his back.

"I had to do something, Spock. I couldn't leave you alone at a time like this." He turned then and met Spock's eyes. "Please talk, tell me how you f... " He stopped, embarrassed.

"Feel? You want me to tell you how I feel? I don't know... I can't explain. I've never... felt like this before."

Spock collapsed onto the edge of the bed, his head in his hands. Kirk moved close to enable him to hear Spock's muffled words, but he refrained from touching him.

"I'm afraid, Jim. I'm not sure how I can ever face Leila again. She sees too much; she could see through my outer facade even then... What will she be able to see now?"

Kirk couldn't be sure whether Spock meant their first encounter on Earth or their meeting on Omicron Ceti III, but he thought he could see that there was something special about the woman he hardly knew. He could also tell from the little Spock said that meeting Leila couldn't mean so very much to the Vulcan - surely one would never feel fear when meeting again the woman one loved? Somehow Kirk felt relieved to discover that it was only the spores which had dictated Spock's actions and not real love, for he had remembered Spock's pain-filled words as they had left Omicron Ceti III and had felt a certain amount of guilt for depriving Spock of his

happiness.

Kirk knelt down in front of the Vulcan, but still did not touch him. "Spock - you have nothing to fear from her. She loves you... " He took a deep breath. "She wouldn't hurt the man she loves and even if she *does* see that you are not as you used to be, she will do nothing, say little, of that I'm certain."

It was then that Kirk did reach up to pull Spock's hands from in front of his face, to look searchingly into the dark eyes. "My friend, no matter what happens, there is nothing to fear. I will be at your side - I won't let you face this alone."

The silent sobs calmed and Spock took a deep breath, attempting to achieve some measure of control.

"Thank you, Jim. I... I needed to hear that, but was afraid to... to seek you out." He stood then, and Kirk followed, still holding on to Spock's arms. "Obviously I am not as secure as I thought I was... How do you always appear so confident, Jim, with all these emotions constantly tearing at your soul?"

Kirk smiled his special smile. "Time has taught me how to live, my friend; together, time and I will help you to cope, too."

They fell into silent companionship then and the night had slipped by before either had noticed. Morning found them heading for the bridge to face what was to come - together.

The planet loomed large upon the viewscreen, very similar in appearance to Omicron Ceti III. Naturally everything possible had been done to relocate the colonists on another Earth-like planet so that they could start their lives over again, fresh and new and free from any external influences.

Kirk glanced up to see McCoy leaving the turbolift.

"Well, Jim, my medical section is all ready for beamdown. We're all set to face whatever has happened down there. Any news yet?"

"No. Spock's scanning again now, but we've had no success with the communications system yet. It can't have been a Klingon raid this far out, and there've been no reports of renegades or pirates in this sector, so it can only be a natural disaster." He turned towards Spock's station, his gaze becoming softer and more affectionate as he saw the tenseness in the blue-clad back. "Anything, Spock?"

The Vulcan turned towards his Captain, the expression in his own eyes acknowledging Kirk's concern, although he said nothing. "There is some evidence of seismic activity during the last few days, Captain; there seems to have been volcanic activity causing earthquakes, and flooding due to shock wave reaction at sea. I would say that medical help will have to be immediate."

A frown crossed Kirk's face as he realised what that statement must have cost Spock, and he noted the exceptional control that the Vulcan was maintaining - he feared what would happen when that tenuous control failed. He exchanged glances with McCoy as he thought of what had happened between Leila and Spock on Omicron Ceti III; then as he watched, the planet on the screen grew larger as Sulu established a stable orbit.

"Right - let's get going." He patted McCoy's arm, then ascended the stairs, waiting by Uhura's station for Spock to join them. "If you'd rather stay here, Mr. Spock..." He had to make the offer, but he'd known what the Vulcan's answer would be even before he voiced it.

"Thank you, Captain, but I am functional and there is work to be done." His voice lowered as he added, "I need to go, Jim. I want to be at your side."

Kirk smiled and gestured towards the turbolift. "Mr. Sulu, you have the con." Then the triad left the bridge, their destination - the danger below.

The transporter room was full to overflowing with equipment ready to be beamed down, and Nurse Chapel ran in just after Kirk, Spock and McCoy had arrived, her arms full of medical supplies. Kirk glanced quickly around the room, frowning, and then stepped up onto the transporter platform, Spock and McCoy following suit. Seconds later, the command to energise had been given.

As they materialised, Kirk began to cough as the fume-filled air hit his lungs, and Spock caught hold of his arm to drag him away from the fissure in the ground which was emitting the noxious fumes.

"Thanks, Spock." Kirk wiped his mouth as he looked around for McCoy, but the doctor had already walked over to where his team had begun to set up a field hospital. Kirk's gaze swept the scene surrounding them and he inhaled sharply as the devastation registered. Buildings lay in rubble-strewn disarray, smoke rising from some of the burned-out shells. Bodies lay everywhere and blood covered the ground, turning the orange sand into a darker hue in places. Further afield he could see vast chasms which had opened up and attempted to swallow the settlement whole, but which had stopped short of their target as if some hidden force had been its protector. But the 'protector' hadn't helped for long. Evidently the earthquakes had continued. Under his breath, Kirk muttered, "Thank goodness someone could operate their sub-space transmitter this time."

Spock had his tricorder in use and Kirk walked a little way from him, not wanting him to feel that Kirk was acting out his own role of protector. Spock needed all the confidence in himself that he could muster at that moment. A voice behind him caused Kirk to turn, and he lost sight of his First Officer.

"Sir, I have a report for you."

"Yes, Williams?"

Although young, the geologist was experienced and reliable, not the sort to panic, but obviously the sight of devastation, all the deaths, had affected him profoundly and his face was very pale. "This entire area is still very unstable, sir. I estimate that we'll be safe here for another 2.7 hours, but I advise that the injured be moved immediately, sir, if possible."

Kirk nodded. "Any cause for all this?" He gestured around him. "Was it natural? And if so, why wasn't it detected ahead of time?"

Williams shrugged. "We can't be sure, sir. The evidence points to some external influence, but it's doubtful that we'll find the real reason. Already further tremors are threatening and what evidence exists will be destroyed before we can fully research it." He turned to point to the

distant hills. "Instrumentation says that a major seismic explosion took place twenty nine hours ago in that vicinity. That was followed by slight tremors, but they rapidly grew in strength and duration. I doubt if these people had time even to realise what was happening."

Kirk clasped his hands in front of him. "They were helpless, then. There was nothing for them to do...?"

Williams shook his head. "I'm afraid not, sir."

"Where are your men now?"

"I've got ten men here, but six have gone up to those hills to get what readings they can in the time we have left. Don't worry, sir, they know when to get out!"

Kirk smiled slightly. "Thank you, Lieutenant. Carry on."

As the young man moved away, Kirk again found Spock at his elbow.

"Mr. Williams is becoming most proficient at his job, Captain."

"You agree with him, Spock?"

Spock met Kirk's eyes. "I do. But I would be... happier... if you left this area before the 2.7 hours are up."

Kirk grasped Spock's arm briefly, squeezing it in encouragement. "I'll be fine, Spock. And I'll do my best - as long as you leave with me!" As if in mutual, unspoken agreement, they stepped forward together. "Let's get to work, my friend, while we've got time."

McCoy was busy, more busy than he liked to be. He didn't see Kirk's approach but when he sensed his Captain's presence he rose once he'd finished his patient's dressings and had motioned for him to be beamed up. The front of the Doctor's shirt was already stained with blood.

"How are things, Bones?"

The Doctor's face betrayed how he felt but he kept his voice neutral. "Bad, Jim. Most of them died when the building collapsed. The lucky ones must have been out in the fields, and are mostly suffering from broken bones and shock; all treatable. I'm arranging for all those who are still alive to be beamed straight up to the ship; we can't do anything for the others now."

Kirk repeated his gesture of a moment previously and attempted to reassure McCoy by giving him some physical contact. "We got here as fast as we could, Bones."

"Yeah - I guess so. See you later, Jim." With a sigh, he resumed his work.

As Kirk walked on, Spock spoke very quietly. "Believe your own words, Jim - we *did* get here as fast as we could."

Before Kirk could answer, however, a shout went up from a nearby building, and he turned quickly to see some of his crewmen running frantically with spades and picks, retrieved from the adjoining vegetable plots. Others struggled with tractor probes, and both Kirk and Spock realised that a survivor had been found. They, too, ran towards the partly

demolished building, thoughts of their own safety far from their minds.

His men already had one tractor probe set up and some of the debris had been cleared to reveal a gaping hole, inside which was the body of a woman. Many willing hands soon had the minor debris cleared and it was Kirk himself who jumped down into the hole to try to move the woman, together with a medic, who quickly said, "It would be safer to move her than treat her here, sir."

"Okay. Shall we turn her?" Kirk looked to the man for guidance. He, in turn, rapidly ran his tricorder and body scanner over his patient, then said, "Yes. Let's get her out of here."

Kirk gently grasped the shoulders and turned her upper body as the medic ensured her lower body did not convulse. As he saw the woman's face Kirk felt utter helplessness wash over him, and when he heard a sharp intake of breath he knew that Spock felt the same way, for the injured woman was Leila Kalomi.

Between then they lifted her out of the hole, and away from what was left of the building just before it all collapsed. Thankfully, all the rescuers were safe as well as the person they'd rescued. They were about to place Leila on the ground to await beam-up when Spock stepped forward.

"I will hold her." His face was calm, controlled; but Kirk could see the pain in the eyes and the stiffly held arms, stretched out before him, ready to claim his burden.

It was the medic who spoke. "Ah, Mr. Spock... I... ah, don't think... "

Kirk interrupted him. "It won't hurt her to be held?"

Confused, the medic said, "No, sir."

"Then Mr. Spock will take her. Carry on, Doctor."

"Yes, sir." The medic hurried off.

Kirk's gaze met Spock's in a silent message of understanding, an understanding which they had shared during the whole exchange, which had lasted only seconds. Kirk handed Leila over to Spock and reached for his communicator.

"Our time here is almost up, Mr. Spock. It would be best if you co-ordinated things from the ship from now on. I shall beam up shortly."

Spock hugged Leila gently, closely. "Thank you, Captain."

"Energise." Kirk watched the dematerialisation effect, a frown on his face, before turning his attention to other matters.

Minutes later, a red-shirted crewman hurried up to Kirk.

"Captain, there's been another explosion up in the hills. It's only a minor one, that's why we didn't hear or feel anything down here, but the team that Mr. Williams sent up there has been trapped. He... ah... thought you'd want to know, sir."

Kirk immediately glanced up at the hills. "Show me the way, Mister!"

His Captain was already running in the direction indicated before the crewman had even caught his breath.

Spock refused to release his hold of Leila until he reached sickbay and even then he refused to leave her side. Chapel, too busy to help the Vulcan in any other way, could still afford to feel some sympathy for him and wished she could have spared him this pain.

Leila was very badly injured and M'Benga, treating her, determined that there was little chance of survival, but Chapel would not allow Spock to be told the truth. He was simply informed of the extent of her injuries and allowed the time to reach his own conclusions; and as the Vulcan sat rigid at Leila's bedside, he also felt a new understanding grow within him for the Head Nurse.

Time passed during which he kept in touch with the bridge, and deciding that there was little else for him to do up there that he couldn't do where he was, he chose to give in to whatever... feelings... were ruling him at that moment, and stayed where he was. At least he could look at her, even hold her hand when no-one was looking, and... remember.

He was very deep in thought when Dr. McCoy approached. Spock, sensing him near, rose quickly to his feet, embarrassed because of what he knew he was displaying.

"Are things... better... now, Doctor?" Spock avoided the brilliant blue gaze and McCoy couldn't help noticing how much Spock fidgeted.

"I've done what I can, Spock. Most of them are holding their own."

"Good... Good. Is there anything I... can do?"

McCoy drew nearer, but was careful not to touch the Vulcan, knowing how tenuous his control was. "No, thank you. Nothing." McCoy held on to the bottom of the bed and looked at Leila's calmly sleeping face. Despite her injuries, her face was relatively untouched, and McCoy could remember clearly their time on Omicron Ceti III, how she'd looked then, and how Spock had... felt... about her. "Spock - Leila is - "

"Doctor!" The Vulcan's voice was quiet but vehement. "I know what you are about to say... and I already knew." Spock's gaze was now fixed on Leila's face. "I am... all right. Please - leave us."

"Spock - I... " McCoy felt helpless and wished that Kirk were there.

"Please, Bones!"

McCoy drew himself erect. "If you need me, just call. I'll be in my office." He turned to leave, then whispered, "I'll see that you're left alone."

Alone again, Spock sat on the edge of the bed and placed his arms gently about Leila, careful not to move her. The subtle contact, however, was enough to waken the woman and her eyes fluttered open to alight incredulously on Spock's face. Spock had to bend his head to hear her words.

"Mr. Spock... I had not... thought I'd see you again." Her hand found his and he allowed the contact as he said,

"I did not wish to cause you further anguish." His voice caught on a sob.

"Do you mind... if I say I still love you, Mr. Spock?" She winced in pain and took a deep breath.

Spock shook his head, whispering, "No," and bent to place a kiss upon her cheek.

Leila stared into his eyes and smiled. "You have... changed. You can show emotion, and this... time without the influence... of any spores."

"You always could see things others could not. Thank you for your love, Leila. I... "

She placed her fingers against his lips, halting any further speech and whispered, "We could never have anything anywhere else... except where the spores controlled. I know you... do not love me... Mr. Spock... But my love for you has made my life... more special."

"I am... pleased... that you can feel that way... "

"Do you think... I could have... another.. kiss?"

Spock almost hesitated but instead took her face in his hands and kissed her gently, meaningfully, on the lips. During that kiss her breath shuddered from her body and she died.

McCoy waited in his office with as much patience as he could muster. He knew that Spock *had* to be left alone at this time, but he also knew how Leila's death would undoubtedly affect the Vulcan in his present condition. He shook his head as he remembered how concerned Kirk had been about Spock's meeting Leila at all, but this occurrence was something neither of them had anticipated. As serious as the disaster had been, they'd never allowed the thought of Leila's death to enter their heads. Would Spock be able to cope?

McCoy swept his hands through his hair and was just reaching for the bottle of brandy from his cupboard when the intercom sounded. *What now?*

"McCoy here."

"Dr. McCoy, there's been another explosion on the planet, this time in the mountain region."

Yes, I know, Uhura. A minor explosion. Some of my medics are handling it."

"No, Doctor. Another one - and the Captain... "

"Yes?"

"Well, he went to help in the initial rescue attempt, and... He's been injured, Doctor. They'll have him aboard in a minute."

McCoy grabbed his medikit and ran from his office, calling for Chapel as he went. "Stay there, Chris. Don't move. When Spock comes out of there, tell him there's been an accident but for heaven's sake *don't* tell him the Captain's been hurt! Persuade him to go to his quarters. He mustn't find out yet!"

Chapel, dumbfounded, could do nothing but watch the Chief Medical Officer leave, heading for the transporter room.

McCoy skidded into the transporter room at a run just as the Enterprise's Captain materialised, but his body was prone, blood-covered and he was totally unconscious. A gurney was already available and McCoy helped place Kirk onto it as he monitored the life signs with his scanner. What he read there did not fill him with confidence. He turned to the attendants and said, "Sickbay - fast!" *Damn you, Jim! You've always got to go diving in, risking yourself... What the hell will Spock do now? First Leila... now you...*

Hours later, McCoy sat in his office, a drink in his hand, attempting to find the courage he needed to seek out Spock and tell him the condition Kirk was in. His attempt at 'dutch courage' was unnecessary, however, for suddenly Spock appeared in the doorway, his face haggard and openly concerned.

"Dr. McCoy - why was I not told? Why did my yeoman have to be the one to tell me what has happened - and not you?"

McCoy rose slowly, placing his hands on the desk top. "Spock, I - "

The Vulcan raised his hand. "No, Bones - I'm sorry." He took a step forward, his hands now behind his back, tightly clenched. "But tell me *now!* How is he?"

McCoy took a deep breath and sank into his chair once more, indicating the chair opposite - with a shake of his head, Spock declined the offer, schooling his features as best he could to neutral control.

"There was another explosion... He was caught right under it... I've repaired what I could, but... "

"But?" The voice was hard and concerned. Spock's eyes betrayed his very great fear for Kirk's life.

"But he's comatose, and I can do nothing for him. I can't reach him, Spock. He's gone too deep."

Spock swallowed. "He won't die?"

"Die?" The surgeon shook his head in negation. "No, he won't die. But can you call *that* life?" He pointed in the direction of the life support unit.

The next hour seemed to pass as if it was happening to someone else. Leila's death - now this. Spock found he couldn't face it, couldn't cope with it; and if he broke down he knew he might never come out of it. And Kirk needed him now, more than ever.

So did the ship. Jim's ship. To fail the Enterprise now would be to fail Jim, so he had to go on. But how? How could he? He had once admitted to Kirk, a very long time ago, that Vulcans weren't as indestructable as most Humans seemed to think. And now he had lost even the protection his hybrid nature had given him. No Vulcan control to call on; and where was logic in all this? But he *had* to go on somehow - for his Captain's sake, and the sake of four-hundred-plus people who were depending on him.

He forced himself to stand aside from it; not in the Vulcan way, but in a way he had seen Kirk do at times in the past. After Edith, after Miramanee, Kirk had set himself apart from it and hung on until he found the strength to cope again.

Spock wasn't at all sure that he could do that; after all, he had had little practice at using the strengths of his Human half. For much of his life he hadn't even considered them strengths.

Then had come the encounter with the Morian, and he had been forced to change his way of thinking. He had just been beginning to learn, with Kirk's help, when all this had happened. The colony... Leila... now Jim.

His thoughts returned unbidden to the sight of Kirk's inert form lying in sickbay, and he almost lost the battle within himself.

No! He could not afford to think of that now; not yet. He would push it aside, as Jim would do, and at least act like a Vulcan, till the crisis was over. What it would cost him later he did not dare to think about.

Rescue work on the planet's surface still continued. Naturally, much of the work had been concentrated on rescuing survivors and bringing them to the safety of the Enterprise, for the geologists were not yet certain if the planet was completely stable again. Neither had they been able to discover any more about the apparent cause of the disaster. It should have been predicted; modern science should make disasters such as this a thing of the past, and somewhere in the back of his mind it was beginning to bother Spock. After all, the colonists might have been the same people who had been affected by the spores on Omicron Ceti III; but they had embarked on their new life here as perfectly normal Humans; clear-headed and determined to make a success of their new colony, after the years of - as Elias Sandoval had put it after the spores incident - sterility.

They had trained scientists with them, and they had the necessary equipment to detect a coming earthquake of the magnitude this one had clearly been. So why had they not detected it? It didn't make sense. The sensors they had would have detected the coming seismic disturbance in time for a distress signal to be sent out; one of the reasons starships were there, after all, was to answer such calls. And it had been the Enterprise herself, his own science section, who had originally made the checks on this colony world anyway. They would never have left the Omicron colonists on an unstable planet. His science section did *not* make mistakes like that.

Neither had it been an equipment malfunction that failed to provide adequate warning; he had just read a report from one of the teams on the surface. What was left of the computers and the sensor mechanisms showed no sign of there having been a malfunction of any kind. It was all completely illogical. Therefore there had to be another reason.

Without realising that long habit caused him to think as a Vulcan would, without conscious effort, Spock took the next step in the logical sequence of events. There must be another reason, and it was up to him to find it. Examination of the ruined base was almost complete; investigations were now centred on the mountain range where the earthquake had begun. So that was where he must go. All his instincts told him to go to sickbay; to sit at Jim's side in the hope that somehow he might wake up; somehow. And all the time he tried to keep his mind off a subject that threatened to break his fragile control completely; and he could not allow that to happen. He had failed Kirk in other ways these last weeks,

and he could not let himself fail Kirk again by becoming unable to command the Enterprise.

But even as he forced his steps to take him to the transporter room, even as he called Scott and gave him the con, he found his thoughts kept returning to the one fact which threatened to overcome him. If he was still wholly Vulcan, he would surely have been able to help Jim to recover.

McCoy had tried to hide it, but Spock knew. A meld would have the greatest chance of turning Kirk's trapped consciousness outward once more, and only the person he had been could have done it. But he could not do it now, not with his Vulcan abilities gone. So he had failed Jim again, when it most mattered.

He almost faltered then; almost. Yet he went on, the Vulcan mask stoically in place, hiding his heartbreak from all he encountered. He cared not that some of them knew; he just had to keep that mask in place in order to go on.

And as much as it took Spock to keep on going, it was taking McCoy a great deal of willpower to stay in sickbay, desperately worried about how the Vulcan was coping, without rushing off after him. Chapel was perfectly capable of monitoring Kirk's condition; but that wasn't it. McCoy knew that Spock had to see things through on his own. So he stayed in sickbay, and fretted some more.

McCoy found himself pacing the small office back and forth, back and forth, his mind in turmoil. He was so afraid of being left alone; so afraid of failing both Kirk and Spock by being unable to save the Captain's life. Again he damned his friend for taking such risks; for doing what a security detail could have done; for going where many would never dream of going. Again he admitted that if Kirk did not do these things then he would not be Kirk, and McCoy knew deep down, despite his concern, that he would want Kirk no other way. Just as long as he lived!

Spock beamed down and materialised close to the point where the investigative work was presently centred. The mountains were tall and bleak; at this altitude there was little vegetation, and the wind moaned eerily through the rocks.

"Mr. Spock - over here!" Williams had to shout to make himself heard above the wind, although he was no more than ten or twelve feet distant.

"Have you found anything, Mr. Williams?" Spock walked over to where the geologist waited, and found he was extremely glad at that moment for the efficiency of Kirk's senior officers. If there were any clues to the cause of the disaster here, Williams would have a good chance of finding them.

"I'm not sure yet, sir - but all indications point to the earthquake having been artificially instigated."

Despite his sorrow, Spock couldn't help both eyebrows lifting.

Just at that moment, a science team materialised nearby; having rescued all survivors from the colony itself, they were now arriving in the mountains to join the survey team, bringing with them the tricorders which were specially adapted for locating weak life form readings. Up until that moment all those present in the mountains had been surveying nothing more than signs of geological stress.

Their appearance was opportune, for in the light of Williams' information, Spock's next order would have been for an immediate search for life forms in the vicinity.

Spock approached the science team. He hardly needed to ask. They knew how he liked to work, and any relevant information would be passed on to him the moment they had it.

"Mr. Spock," said the Lieutenant leading the team he was now approaching. "There's more than one set of vulcanoid life form readings present here. Yours - and weaker ones. Over there." The Lieutenant pointed her tricorder at small outcrop of rocks some five hundred metres distant across the ridge.

Rescue mission or not, all present had phasers. As he called for the science team and three security men standing by to accompany him, all Spock could think of was, whoever it was, in all likelihood this was the person responsible for what had happened to Jim. And to Leila.

The others couldn't keep up with him. Using the tricorder he had rapidly borrowed, he pinpointed the place from where the readings came within less than two minutes. Across the exposed ridge and behind a rocky outcrop at the other side of it, was the evidence of yet another, though smaller, rockfall. The readings came from beneath it.

By the time the others had arrived, Spock had already exposed the person beneath, using his bare hands to remove the rocks with as much speed as possible. He was never sure afterwards how much of his haste had been in an effort to save the Vulcan's life, and how much had been because he wanted information about those who had caused Jim's injuries, and Leila's death.

Vulcanoid strength was one of the reasons why the person underneath the rockfall was still alive. Though the young male who peered up at him, battered and bloody, was certainly no Vulcan. But he was so confused and weak from his injuries that he thought, in that first instant, that Spock was his own kind.

Moaning, he began to talk, very rapidly, in Romulan. And Spock listened, carefully. The unwitting Romulan was telling him all he wanted to know.

Then the others caught up, and as they came into his line of vision, the Romulan seemed to notice for the first time the Federation uniform Spock wore. Realisation dawned then, and he covered his face with his hands. He was very young; his first deep-space mission, and he had failed the Empire miserably. Firstly he had been injured, and of no further use to his officers, and now... Now he deserved to be killed for his betrayal.

But Spock's stony face had softened; the young Romulan would not have been senior enough to be responsible for the orders which had caused the seismic disturbances here, and he would certainly face death at the hands of his own people should he be returned to them now. Spock could read the anguished thoughts written on the Romulan face, and with his new-found Human feelings, he knew that he was sorry for him.

But sorrier for Kirk. Still he dared not think of that unconscious form in sickbay without coming very close to losing all emotional control, however tenuous. The only possible, momentary refuge was in work to be done. Quickly, he stood and reached for the communicator.

"Spock to Enterprise. Mr. Scott - have a medical team beamed down immediately. Inform Dr. McCoy that we have a seriously injured Romulan on

our hands. Spock out."

Then he saw the faces around him; all were looking silently at the injured enemy lying at their feet. He read their expressions with Human insight, and it sent a pang to his heart.

All of them. All of them thinking of Jim, too. Of a man who was far more to them than just another Captain. Of James Kirk. Before he had a chance to break down in front of them, Spock ordered the transporter room to beam him up.

Old habit saved him, and by the time the transporter beam released him, the Vulcan mask was back in place. No matter that most of them knew now that he could feel like the rest of them. As long as the long-practised facade of non-emotion got him through all this, that counted far more than any remaining shreds of Vulcan dignity. He hardly cared for it any more. All he cared about was not letting his Captain down, and somehow - he found to his surprise that he could not admit to himself the permanence of McCoy's prognosis - and somehow finding a way to bring Jim back to health.

In the middle of striding down the corridor to sickbay, he suddenly halted, considering the new thought. Hope - was there any? Could there be? Surely that, too, was a Human trait. Never to give up hope, even against impossible odds. Spock knew that there had been occasions in the past when even as a Vulcan he had acted out of hope as well as logic. He would have to consider it, and most certainly he must not give up. But that also had never been a part of his nature as a Vulcan - or was that a Human trait as well?

Perhaps he was learning far more about himself, now, and as he had been, than he would have thought possible. But that didn't matter now. All that mattered was Jim, and Jim's ship.

It occurred to him that he was hardly thinking of Leila at all. He did suspect that it was partly because the pain was too raw, too strong for him to risk facing it then. He was far more concerned about Kirk, and the fact that there might be, after all, something that they could do - some small chance for his recovery. Logic dictated that he should care more for the living, and one who might still have a chance, than one who was already beyond all help. Or was that mixing logic with emotion? Something Kirk seemed to have been doing fairly successfully for years. And maybe he had, too, without realising it. Or was it because the newly-admitted feelings he had for Leila were as nothing compared to the long-standing friendship he had with Jim Kirk?

When he had first seen Leila down there, all battered and bloody, the pain had lanced through him like a knife. He should have told her how he felt then - back on Earth, when he had first met her. Or on Omicron, after the spores had left, on their journey to the new colony. Self-deception? Fear? He *had* felt something very real and very deep for Leila Kalomi but he hadn't even been able to tell her on her death-bed, even though he now had the ability to have told her everything, admitted everything. He *should* have told her.

Dr... should he? He hadn't known then that he really did feel anything; long training had kept the emotion well hidden, even from himself. He was coming to the conclusion that he had been practising self-deception for a very long time. Perhaps many Vulcans did.

But it had worked; the path of non-emotion had been a practical and

efficient one. And if he had admitted any of his feelings to himself, or to Leila, would it have meant either that he would not have returned to the Enterprise after taking the course where he had met her, or that after Omicron he would not have been able to leave Leila and would have gone with the colonists?

No! The first would have been a chance of time and fate - the second would have been a choice he would not have made. He would not have left the Enterprise after the spores had left him, even with the feelings he had now. Even when the spores had affected him he had not been able to rest content on Omicron Ceti III without Jim's presence there as well.

He reached sickbay, and entered to find preparations for the imminent arrival of the Romulan prisoner. The medical team arrived close on his heels; on his order, they had used their customary speed to get to the transporter; they had been hurrying to the platform even as he stepped off it.

Now he wondered if he should have stayed and attempted to aid the Romulan. But he knew that his presence would have achieved nothing. Telling himself firmly that this was no time to deal with Human guilt when he had no reason to feel it, Spock went in to look at Kirk, still unconscious as expected. Christine Chapel watched over him, and Spock nodded to her. He was grateful for her care of the Captain, and glad she knew it. Then he went to where McCoy was preparing the young prisoner for surgery.

"He's bad, Spock - but I think we might save him," McCoy replied to Spock's unspoken query. Spock nodded, aware that McCoy would not be optimistic if he didn't think there was a good chance. There was nothing his presence in sickbay could achieve at that moment, so he went back to the bridge, and his duty. Still he had to keep moving, to force himself onwards in an attempt not to let the facade crack; or what was under the facade. He had to cling on to the thought that Jim needed him, as whole and functional and sane as possible. Or else he'd go under.

The duty shift was a nightmare, and oddly the quiet sympathy of the bridge crew made him feel worse. And for that he felt guilty; they were trying to help, and he knew how much they cared for Kirk, too.

And still there was the grief over Leila to be faced. As he sat there in the command chair, amid the quiet efficient activity of the bridge, he found to his horror that he could no longer keep it at bay. He steepled his fingers in the old, characteristic pose of meditation and desperately employed the techniques which had served him so well all his life - until the last few weeks.

And it worked - to the barest extent. He could not quell the fierce, overpowering emotions within, but he found he could at least prevent himself from any distasteful display of them. The bridge crew would understand, he knew - he looked round at them all; Sulu, Chekov, and Uhura behind him. Scott was there, too, at the bridge engineering station. He was amongst friends.

Yet he could not permit himself to break down in front of them. He was still their acting commander, no matter what else affected him personally. And they did need him, in Jim's absence.

He feared breaking down; he knew that emotion too well now. If he allowed himself to break down, even once...

A partially-recalled conversation flooded into his mind. Long-ago words - had it been he or Jim who had spoken them? Saying that it was not

emotions themselves which were wrong - but the misuse of them.

Strangely, it comforted him; helped him to think more clearly. These were all Humans here; all of them had to contend with emotions from the day of their birth. And all of them functioned in as efficient a manner as Vulcans. It might be a different manner, but it was in many ways equally successful; and was certainly within the concept of IDIC. They all managed; therefore so could he. He had to.

Mustering as much inner calm as he could, Spock tried to remember all the words and gestures of comfort and friendship Jim had shown him during the past weeks. Words of help to him now, now that Jim was unable to help him with his presence.

Spock remembered Jim's advice and support, and knew that it helped him. Hoping it would be enough to sustain him, he finally gave in and allowed all those thoughts of Leila to flood into his conscious mind.

Though his Vulcan half was no longer present, still he knew the ways ingrained into him since his childhood by heredity and training. He could still see the logic of any situation in a Vulcan way, whether he was detached emotionally or not.

It was true, when looked at with cold logic, that he had to face his grief over Leila now. In all reality, he knew he would not last through the duty shift on the bridge without the feelings forcing themselves to the front of his mind. He had suppressed them too long, and the uncharacteristic headache he was experiencing was merely a symptom of the fact that he could suppress them for very little longer.

Even now, he knew himself too well for self-deception. He could leave - assign Sulu the conn - go off on his own until he felt - what? Calm?

He was calm. As calm as he would ever be, now, given the circumstances. If he had been Human by birth he would have to face it. If it had been Jim sitting here, if their positions had been reversed... With the example of Jim Kirk before him, he resolved to face the crisis there and then.

Leila. What had he felt for her? Back on Earth, all those years ago? Then on Omicron Ceti III, that time when the spores had nearly caused disaster to the Enterprise? Then there was the present. What had he truly felt when they had been sent to the colony? And when they found her, injured and dying?

He grieved for her, and knew he did; the pain was deep and terrible. But was it for a love which could have been, and had been lost - or was it guilt? Because she had died still loving him, and he still hadn't really been able to respond?

Then there were the other colonists who had perished - those same people who had escaped the effects of the Omicron spores to start - or so they had hoped - a new life on the planet around which the Enterprise was now in orbit. Even Elias Sandoval had gone. The thought struck him as yet another new consideration. He had been so concerned with his reactions to Leila's death and Jim's injury, that he had hardly considered the fate of the other colonists, except in a detached way.

In the way another Human commander would have considered them?

It was illogical to fret over something unchangeable - yet he still did. Spock sighed, and hardly noticed the way all the members of the bridge crew studiously ignored it; even Chekov refrained from giving Sulu

a meaningful glance, when he was quite positive the Vulcan would not have noticed. Spock was right - he was among friends.

But now - now that he had allowed himself to think openly about Leila, he found that the overpowering grief he had feared was not there. Only a numb kind of sadness. Yet he *had* loved her - in a way.

Had it been the Human half of him responding to her even then? Or had his Vulcan half 'felt' something too? He could never be sure - not with true certainty. But could anyone, Human or otherwise, ever really be certain of how they felt about a person or a situation in years gone by? People changed, didn't they? Perhaps on the surface; but surely the inner core remained unchangeable?

He *did* believe that, and if it was true... If it was true, then surely he was still the same person he had always been? The control might have gone, the Vulcanness - but he was still Spock, the essence of that being!

Jim had seen it, and had tried to get through to him. But he had been unable to accept it then.

Jim - lying there in sickbay.

He should not have thought of Jim - not then. The panic welled up inside and he felt his throat tighten.

Why? Why, when he could control his grief over Leila, should he come so close to breaking down when he thought of Jim?

He had truly felt *something* for Leila - he supposed it had been love, in a way. And now he knew that it could not have lasted. Therefore it could not have been a deep involvement. She had awakened certain responses in him he had never felt before meeting her. Responses he had recognised on meeting Zarabeth in the time-locked prison of Sarpeidon's ice-age. Leila had always been able to see through him. He was glad he had been able to be with her at the end.

Jim had always been able to see through him, too. And had found value in what he saw underneath the careful Vulcan facade. Part of the trust of their friendship.

His control was in great danger of breaking again. He should not be sitting here, doing a job that Sulu or Scott could do! He should be in sickbay, searching with McCoy for an answer; for some way of doing the seemingly impossible and helping Jim.

No - McCoy would not have given up yet, no matter what he had said. What was he doing, being so defeatist? Annoyed with himself, Spock gave Sulu the conn and left the bridge.

As the turbolift left, behind him the bridge crew finally got round to exchanging those glances. They were worried about him, certainly. And they had seen the inner struggle he was having with himself. But they had also witnessed that he had come to some decision. It had been with a determination very like that shown by their First Officer in the past that he had left the bridge.

Uhura looked at the closed turbolift door thoughtfully. She was still concerned for him, but it had lessened a little. If only the Captain could recover soon, then she had a feeling that Spock would be all right.

In sickbay, Kirk was still as deeply unconscious as ever, and showed not the slightest indication of any improvement. McCoy had just made the umpteenth pointless check on him - he knew full well that the monitors, and Nurse Chapel, would inform him the instant there was any change - but still he felt it necessary to pop in from time to time and check his friend over personally. As far as McCoy was concerned, machines, however infallible, were still not and never would be any kind of substitute for a real doctor. Somewhere in the corner of his mind he refused to give up that last spark of hope, no matter what the evidence said.

He had performed the tests on Kirk himself; and not just once. There could be no mistake in his diagnosis; unless a miracle happened, James Kirk was doomed to an existence which could hardly be called life. McCoy could hardly bear to think of it - for such a thing to happen to Jim.

If he could be certain that Kirk knew nothing of it, if he could know that he wasn't suffering, then perhaps he could cope with the situation better. He was a doctor, dammit! He was supposed to be able to cope with these things! But when it happened to a friend, and that friend was Jim Kirk...

But he didn't know that, and he suspected that underneath it all, Kirk's consciousness was trapped, and that in all reality Kirk did know what was happening to him. The thought was almost too much; how could he face it? When Spock couldn't even face it? But Spock wasn't himself - at least, not the self he had been.

McCoy wasn't sure if Spock would have been able to cope with both the emotional blows he had been dealt within a matter of hours, even if the encounter with the Morian had never occurred, and he still had the protection of years of Vulcan training and control.

He could have dealt with his grief over Leila then; McCoy was pretty sure of that; but Jim's accident? Oh, sure, he'd maybe have been able to carry on without letting anyone know how he really felt, but inside? McCoy wasn't sure the results would have been too different. Kirk thought that Spock loved Leila, and McCoy guessed that he had done, in a way. But compared to his long friendship with Jim Kirk, it was nothing.

Come on, McCoy, he berated himself mentally. Feeling sorry for yourself isn't doing anyone any good. People need you here - and if you can't do anything to help Jim, Spock still needs you, even if he won't say so.

Then there was the ship to consider. Was Spock able to command effectively under such pressure? His duty as CMO was clear; if Spock became unfit for command, McCoy would have to order him to be relieved. What would that do to him?

The object of McCoy's concern walked into sickbay at that precise moment, interrupting McCoy's thoughts and giving the good doctor quite a start by looking far more like his old self than he had done in a very long while, and certainly not since that ill-fated shore leave. What could have happened to bring about this change?

"The Captain's condition is unchanged, Doctor?" Spock's voice was formal, and if not quite as controlled as of old, still he sounded far better than he had done for quite some time. If McCoy had ever wished in the past for Spock to sound more Human, now the fact that he was sounding more Vulcan was like music to McCoy's ears.

"It is, Spock," McCoy replied carefully, still unsure of this new mood, and not wishing to say or do anything to damage it. "You know I'd call you if there was any change."

Spock nodded, and even managed a small, ironic sort of smile. "I know, McCoy. As I knew his condition would be unchanged. But we cannot give up hope."

McCoy's eyebrows gave a fair imitation of Spock's familiar gesture. Here was Spock, Vulcan by birth and hard discipline, talking to him about something as Human as hope - when he, McCoy, had almost given it up himself. It made him feel ashamed.

"Spock - Spock, I..." McCoy almost choked on the words. And the answering softening of Spock's expression made him feel worse. "Spock, you're right. We've found answers to seemingly impossible situations before. This is no time to start giving up."

"I, too, almost gave up, Doctor. But we cannot. You are right; we have found answers before. If we work together, surely there must be an answer here; we merely have to search until we find it."

McCoy suddenly found he couldn't speak. All he could do was nod in agreement.

"Come, then, McCoy," Spock said as gently as what control he had found would allow. "Let us go through the tests again, together."

Several hours later, and well into the Enterprise's artificial night, an exhausted McCoy and a very tired Science Officer sat in the Doctor's office. The tests had shown nothing new; but Spock had come to a decision. It was time to discuss a subject McCoy had been avoiding.

"His consciousness has withdrawn so deeply - you and I both know that the only hope lies in a meld." Spock had said it now. McCoy raised his eyes to look at him evenly, and Spock could see the weariness in them.

"Spock - Spock, it's only a small chance. I know you understand his condition as well as I do." McCoy was grateful that Spock himself had brought it up; yet the Doctor was still unsure of how to proceed. Spock had done an incredible job in pulling himself together, though really none of them should ever have had any doubt that he would, knowing their First Officer. But a large part of Spock's new-found control was maintained solely by effort of will; maybe all of it; and McCoy wasn't sure if it could stand the knowledge that there was, after all, no hope. McCoy didn't want to see Spock crack up. He wasn't sure if he could take it himself; not with what had happened to Jim as well.

"And? McCoy - do not feel you have to keep anything from me." Spock startled McCoy with his insight, and the Doctor again berated himself for underestimating Spock. No matter what he had gone through, he was still Spock.

McCoy decided to take a chance and speak plainly. Spock deserved no less than the truth. "It would have to be a deep meld, and... You know I've made a point of learning as much about Vulcan medicine as possible these last few years - well, Spock, it's like this; it might work if you could do it. But you can't, not now - and..."

"There is still Vulcan," Spock insisted, refusing to acknowledge the absence of hope. He would not give up - not now. "There are Vulcan

healing techniques you may not have learned about, Doctor. It is a chance we must try. We *must*."

"I admit I've only scratched the surface when it comes to knowing Vulcan healing as thoroughly as you mean," McCoy insisted, "but Spock - even I know that, with the condition Jim's in, a meld would have to be performed by someone who knows his mind, who's already had contact. You're the only candidate."

"Nevertheless, McCoy, we will go to Vulcan," Spock said, and then left, leaving McCoy staring miserably after him. *Perhaps I should have stayed, tried to 'cheer up the good Doctor', as Jim has done in the past when McCoy has been depressed through failing to cure a patient.* But he couldn't. Not then. His fragile control did have its limits, and at that moment all he wanted to do was to get to his cabin so that no-one would witness his breaking down. He'd pick himself up again afterwards, and go on, for Jim's sake. But just at that moment he needed to be on his own.

Then Uhura paged him, and he had no choice but to go to the intercom in the corridor he was walking along, and try to answer in a voice as even and controlled as possible.

"Spock here, Lieutenant."

"Message from Starfleet Command, Mr. Spock. In reply to the information you sent them - we're to proceed to the planet where the Romulans have their secret base; the U.S.S. Excalibur and the U.S.S. Potemkin will rendezvous with us there. Further orders to follow."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. I'll take them in my quarters. Spock 'out.'"

Back in the privacy of his cabin, Spock sat quietly, trying to think logically. Always before these last few weeks logic had been automatic; a known and familiar response. Now...

So there was to be no Vulcan. Not yet, at least. The orders he had just received were specific - and not unexpected. The information the young Romulan had blurted out to him, in those first few seconds before recognition, had precipitated them; he had expected direct action from Starfleet Command when they received his information.

The disaster to the colony had been the result of the Romulans testing a new weapon.

"It worked - to the glory of the Empire - now we have a weapon the Federation cannot withstand!" the Romulan had gasped, seemingly more concerned that the colony should have been successfully destroyed than the fact that he was seriously injured. "When we get back to Outpost 17, our superiors on Romulus will know we have struck a great blow for the Empire - a great victory! They will know they should not have forbidden this testing! To our honour's detriment they forced us to become renegades, but if we had not done this against the Praetor's will, the advantage over the Federation would have been lost! Now they will know we were right."

It hadn't been much, but it had been enough. Indeed, the look on the young alien's face when he realised that Spock was Vulcan, not Romulan, had been enough to testify to the fact.

The survey team had already confirmed that the seismic disturbances had been artificially caused; now they knew the Romulans were behind it - that they had developed another new weapon Federation sources knew nothing

about. But they did know the location of the small planetoid the Romulans called 'Outpost 17'. The Federation clearly had the edge where espionage was concerned; at least for the moment. Gains in that area were naturally transitory.

Now they were ordered to rendezvous with the other two starships near to that planetoid. Clearly, Starfleet hoped the advantage of surprise would work in their favour - the Romulans definitely would not expect the Federation to know they had a base there - and if Spock was right in his guess, that Outpost 17 was the base where the new weapon was being developed, then if random factors were in their favour, they might just be able to capture the weapon before the Romulans could do further damage.

Random factors? What was he thinking about? He meant luck, and knew it. But old habits die hard, and Spock was glad of it. There was still no time for self-pity; perhaps there never should be.

Still with his fragile mask in place, he returned to sickbay.

"Dr. McCoy assures me that you are well enough for interrogation," Spock said in flawless Romulan to the prisoner, "though not yet strong enough for the administering of a truth drug. However, it would be illogical for you to refuse to answer my questions, since we already know so much."

The injured Romulan glared up at the First Officer from the bed where he lay under restraint. Not that he was strong enough to fight, but they were taking no chances.

"I will not speak to you further. I have already damned myself," he virtually spat at the Vulcan. He knew what fate would await him on Romulus. He could never return. But then he would surely be killed anyway. He had heard of Federation tortures.

It was clear that nothing further would be got out of the prisoner for the time being, but Spock had a duty to try. "You may be interested to know that we are on our way to the planet you know as 'Outpost 17', where we will be met by other starships. There really is no point in your remaining silent."

"Go to hell!" snarled the Romulan, but the word did not quite translate. The Romulan concept meant something far worse than the Terran 'hell'.

Spock regarded him placidly, knowing that the prisoner fully expected to be tortured and put to death; Romulan propaganda was very effective within the Empire.

Whatever else the Vulcan intended to say was interrupted by McCoy, who appeared in the door to the small room. One look at his face made Spock's heart sink with a leaden feeling.

Quickly he left the prisoner and followed McCoy out and into his office.

"Spock, Jim is worse," McCoy said without preamble.

"Worse?" was all he could get out. McCoy didn't have to tell him - he already knew.

The Doctor looked at him out of anguished eyes. "He's dying, Spock,

and I don't know what to do to save him."

"But - you said he was stable! You said he wasn't going to... " Spock's voice was practically a whisper, but he couldn't keep the emotion out of it - not now. Not after hearing what McCoy had just said.

"I know, Spock - I know!" McCoy sounded as upset as Spock - and almost as near to breaking. He had the fear of losing Kirk, and the fear of what would then happen to the Vulcan, to face.

"It's as if he's given up. As if somewhere, deep inside his mind, his consciousness has recognised that it's trapped, and Jim has taken the decision to die rather than stay imprisoned inside himself," McCoy continued wearily. He didn't know that for sure, of course; but it was probably what Jim Kirk would do.

But Spock had no doubts. McCoy was right. And it spurred him to action.

"Then his consciousness must still exist, however deeply he has withdrawn." Spock was already on his way through to where Kirk lay; McCoy jumped up to follow him. He arrived there to see Spock sitting at Kirk's bedside, his hands steepled in the old pose of meditation, and he knew instinctively what Spock intended.

"It won't work, Spock - there's no point. You know you can't!" McCoy was really afraid that Spock had finally gone past the point of no return.

"Please do not interrupt me, Doctor - I need to prepare myself." It sounded like the old Spock speaking; the determination was there. But so was the desperation.

"You can't do it any more! Spock - come away, please. It's no use!" It was bad enough that Jim was dying - god, it was bad. And now Spock - McCoy didn't think he could bear it. But he didn't try to stop him again; he just sat and watched miserably as Spock prepared to make the useless attempt. And the one thing that kept repeating itself to the helpless chief surgeon was the fact that if Spock did succeed, by some miracle, in establishing a deep meld, would he have the strength, the tenacity needed to reach Kirk's deeply hidden consciousness? Would he find only emptiness where Kirk's vital mind used to be?

Worse still, if Spock were able to reach Kirk's consciousness, would the Vulcan become entrapped, so deeply held within the webbed tendrils of hopelessness that he'd be unable to escape again, let alone help Kirk to regain his awareness, his consciousness? McCoy felt the fear grip his soul - fear for the death of Kirk, so close now, fear too of losing *both* his friends. Would he be able to cope if the worst occurred? In a rare insight of selfishness he couldn't help fearing the aloneness that would result if they did both die during this last ditch attempt. At least *they* would be together, even in death...

And then he realised anew that that was what Spock wanted. In this one action he was proving, beyond any doubt, that though he'd obviously felt *something* for Leila, his heart held more real love for James Kirk than he could ever have felt for Leila. He was prepared to risk everything in order to save Kirk's life, even his very sanity, for an abortive mind meld might well cost the Vulcan his sanity subsequently because of he realisation that he'd been unable to save Kirk's life, had failed him again. This was Kirk's last chance and Spock knew it; and would not let it pass without making an effort on his behalf.

McCoy saw it all in a split second, and understood - and enviously



wished that it could be he who was making the same effort on Jim's behalf, instead of having to sit, helplessly watching the drama unfold before him. He clenched his hands in his lap, forcing silence and passiveness, and held his breath.

Spock knew how close it was. He didn't even know why he was trying. That part of him was gone forever; he couldn't perform a meld, not even now when it might save Jim's life.

Then why was he trying? It was so illogical. Perhaps he was going over the edge - and if Jim did die, then he probably would. He reached forward, towards the points on Kirk's face.

"My mind to your mind - Jim." He spoke softly, reaching out with his mind in the old way. But there was nothing. Nothing. He couldn't do it.

I have to! his mind screamed. *I have to, or Jim is dead!*

He tried again. Tried to reach the consciousness deep within the sleeping body. Tried to ignore the reading of the monitors on the wall above. Soon it would be too late anyway.

McCoy went to get a hypo. If he couldn't help Kirk or himself, at least he could tranquillise Spock - get him over the first shock - when the moment came. Even if he already knew it was hopeless, Spock was never going to get over this.

"My mind to your mind," the Vulcan chanted. The life-sign readings

were almost at zero. He *had* to get through. But with what? He was no longer Vulcan.

Then something happened. Whether it had been a mind-meld in the true sense at that first instant, or something more intangible, something to do with their bond of friendship, which happened at that instant when it was almost too late, Spock could never be sure.

It didn't matter. What mattered was that he got through.

Voices. He could hear voices, echoing, yet quiet, as if from a great distance. Familiar voices. Reassuring. Hopeful. But who? He should know... Dear voices. Friends. Friends... Spock! McCoy! But why couldn't he answer? Why couldn't he respond to the words being spoken about him? So far away... So far. Can't reach them... Maybe they can reach me... But no - Spock can't meld. It's not possible for him to reach me, so I'll never get back to them... Despair. Fear. Want to live. Want to stay with them. Want to live!

What's that Spock's saying? He's going to prepare himself? Prepare himself! He's going to try and meld, no matter what the risk! No, Spock! I want to come back, but not by risking you...

Too late. Should've known he would try, wouldn't let me down. He's never yet let me down - never will!

Touch. I can feel his fingers on my face. He's searching out the contact points. I can feel him in my mind... Feel him...

Hurts! Oh, it hurts. Pressure, like a knife pressing deep into my mind. He doesn't mean to hurt, doesn't want to hurt, but it does... Pain! Pain! Aaghhhhh!

Searching. Searching. Can't find me. Must call him, help to guide him to me. So dark. So alone. Fear.

Help! Spock!

An answer. He can hear me. He said, "Jim!"

Peace. Comfort. Contentment. No more fear now he's here. I can feel his mind embracing mine, protecting, reassuring, guiding. Must go back now. Up... up... up. Back home. Back to McCoy, my ship, him!

Nearly there. Getting lighter. Brighter. Feel stronger. Nearly back. Light. Light! Up, up, up...

I knew you'd come, my Vulcan friend.

Yes, he is Vulcan again! He's done it! He's reached me and himself. So right. So perfect. Everything!

Up... up... back home. Nearly there...

Goodbye, Death - you lose again.

Light. Everything is so bright. Must open my eyes. So weak. Weary...

Spock! Bones!

Spock, concentrating, feeling the pain of hopelessness and failure biting away at his soul, tearing at his heart, felt a tendril of thought reaching upwards, upwards, as if it were a blind man searching for his

sight again. And in turn, Spock reached downwards, downwards, desperately trying to make contact with that simple thought. A word coalesced in his mind. *Help.* Then another - *Spock!*

Jim. The effort was almost too much, but that one word brought a reaction, an answer.

Always at my side.

Kirk's thought-voice was like water to a thirsty man. It gave Spock the strength, the added will, the belief that he could do it, that he *was* still Vulcan, and he bore deeper, deeper into the mind that made Kirk so unique, so... beloved. Down, down into Kirk's very soul - or so it seemed to the searching Vulcan - and as he went deeper into Kirk so, too, did he go deeper into himself, and without realising it, as he helped to heal Kirk he was also healing himself.

Breaking through the final defences, like a storm breaking a sea-wall, his love, his relief, flooded through and engulfed Kirk's deepest consciousness, holding on tight and rejoicing together in the achievement. Kirk's thought-voice spoke gain. *I knew you'd come. I knew you'd do it, my Vulcan friend.* The reference to the *Vulcan* Spock was deliberate, and Spock knew it. His heart soared in recognition of what he'd done for both of them.

Jim.

Spock.

A simple recognition of togetherness, of how much each meant to the other.

A gentle tug from Spock, and he began to guide Kirk upwards again, further, further up, up, back to their life, to their friendship, to reality. The journey was long, hard, exhausting, but they did succeed, and Death had lost again.

Weakly, wearily, Kirk opened his eyes. Almost unwillingly, Spock broke the meld in the old, instinctive way.

McCoy couldn't believe it. He had sat and watched, numbed, waiting for the inevitable, and it hadn't happened! Instead, the impossible had taken place.

McCoy threw off the shock of disbelief and jumped forwards to check for himself the unbelievable, wonderful readings Kirk's monitors were now giving.

"Jim! Jim, you're okay!" McCoy could hardly get it out, and he realised that he was almost crying.

Kirk nodded weakly; he could barely find the strength to speak, but he did. "It's all okay now, Bones. Spock's all right, too." His eyes met Spock's in that same recognition of feelings and experiences that they'd just shared.

The CMO whirled round to look at the Vulcan. And it was the right description again. There was a subtle difference about Spock; the control no longer seemed forced, and... and Jim had undoubtedly been in a deep meld with Spock, so he would know.

Then there was the Captain, alive and growing stronger each instant. It couldn't have happened, unless...

"Spock - the minute I've finished checking Jim out, you're a candidate for some medical tests, Mister!" McCoy's words were definitely an order, no matter how happy he sounded.

Spock still hadn't moved from Kirk's side. He looked at McCoy and shook his head. "That won't be necessary, Doctor. I can confirm what the Captain has told you. It appears that I too have recovered." Spock still hadn't looked at McCoy, hadn't taken his eyes off Kirk. The voice was that of the Vulcan Spock, but the expression was still that of the Human one, and it elicited a weak smile from Kirk in acknowledgement.

And now, now that Kirk was out of danger, his safety was all that Spock really cared about. All those weeks he had despaired of ever finding his Vulcan half again. Now - and it was really because of Kirk - he had recovered his other half, and he didn't care about it. Didn't want to think about the implications, or anything other than Kirk was back, and he was going to be all right.

"But that's impossible!" McCoy insisted, his smile belying the fact that he said he didn't believe it. "The examinations we ran showed no trace of a Vulcan personality remaining - it can't have happened!"

"Nevertheless, I assure you it has," Spock replied evenly, and his manner was the same as of old. McCoy really looked at him then, and he too believed, even without the medical confirmation. The look in Spock's eyes was enough, quite apart from the calm dignity he exuded.

Yet there was something else, too; something about Spock that he had rarely seen before that disastrous contact with the Morian. His humanity? There was definitely a mellowness there, as if Spock, the Vulcan and the Human Spock, found he could still show his humanity - even as a Vulcan.

Kirk reached out and squeezed McCoy's arm in reassurance, knowing what the doctor thought. "It is all right, Bones. Spock's all right. Like he's never been before."

Could it be true? Was there yet another miracle here? A Spock who was himself again, and who had finally come to terms with that self? McCoy looked at Spock questioningly.

Spock nodded his confirmation. In the Vulcan way. And Kirk smiled.

McCoy sat back in his office chair and sighed. It had been a long few days, full of tests he'd had to make on both Spock and Kirk, but eventually he'd had to concede the fact that Spock was indeed fully Vulcan again, and that fact alone had been a contributory factor in Kirk's swift recovery.

It had to have been some fantastic miracle, but Spock's enforced meld with Kirk had been just what was needed to persuade the buried Vulcan half to show itself, to surface and to make itself known again. McCoy's previous tests had shown the situation to be hopeless because there was just no sign at all of that precious Vulcan half of Spock. Evidently it had retreated so far inside of himself that even Spock had been unaware of its survival. Only Kirk's great need, only the risk that Spock had taken, had been able to force it from hiding and enable the coalition, once more, of the two halves which made the whole Spock.

McCoy cursed himself once more for his helplessness and wished that

life would treat his friends a little less cruelly in future. How many more times could they return from the brink?

And now? Now they were headed into what could undoubtedly be even more danger. Outpost 17 was just three hours away at their present speed and he feared for what could happen there, especially as the new weapon that the Romulans had developed would undoubtedly be there.

He had released Kirk that morning - grudgingly - and had issued a medical order that his Captain was to remain in his cabin until further notice, but he knew that those orders would mean nothing when Kirk discovered that Spock meant to beam down himself to investigate the Outpost. McCoy knew only too well that Kirk would not let Spock go alone.

McCoy reached for a bottle of his favourite brandy, pouring himself a generous measure in an effort to quell his nerves.

Captain James T. Kirk had been more than pleased to be released from sickbay that morning, but he knew that although his physical injuries had healed - and they had been terrible injuries, for even now he wondered himself how Bones had managed to pull him through yet again - he was not fully well enough to be back in full command of his beloved ship. So for now he was willing to follow his doctor's orders and remain in his cabin, resting. But the length of time he spent there would depend on what Spock meant to do when the ship arrived at the Outpost.

Slowly, Kirk walked around his ship, savouring the feel of her, the sight of her, the sound of her. He enjoyed these tours, especially after a spell in sickbay. It reminded him of just how special she was, and just how much power he held in his hands - and how many lives, too. And it felt good when he received welcomes and acknowledgements from his crew. They were as happy to see him out of sickbay as he was to be back on duty again, and it did them good to see that he was indeed recovered. But he tired quickly, and soon, reluctantly, he turned his steps in the direction of his cabin, intent on contemplating just what exactly had occurred to both him and Spock in recent days. So much had happened to them in such a short while.

His cabin welcomed him, a haven, and he sank gratefully onto his bed, his hands clasped behind his head. He'd nearly died. He really had come nearer to that final bridge than he had ever done before, and yet again Spock had risked everything to save him, to bring him back to where he belonged. How could he ever tell Spock how much he meant to him? How could he ever tell him that he would never have returned to full awareness for anyone else? It would have been so easy to let go, to allow himself to float away from reality into the arms of death. But he hadn't - because of Spock. The Vulcan had needed him - *still* needed him - and he had fought, held on, until Spock had come to fetch him. And because of that fight, he had helped Spock, too. Through, and because of, that effort Spock had made to reach Kirk, Spock had reached his Vulcan half, and Kirk rejoiced in that knowledge. Spock was special because he was Spock, not because he was Vulcan or Human - or a mixture of both. But his Vulcan heritage meant so much to Spock, his control was an important part of the Vulcan's life, and Kirk did not want to see Spock go through his life in pain, or confused, or hurt because his Vulcan half was lost to him forever.

It had meant so much to see Spock come to visit him in sickbay during his convalescence, and be able to appreciate his joy in being Vulcan - wholly Vulcan - again. Spock had lost none of his warmth, his new-found emotions; they were simply under control again now. *Subtle* control. He still allowed Kirk to see his smile, and he seemed to smile more often now,

as if he'd discovered more quiet joys that he'd missed before.

What Kirk regretted was not being able to be with him when Leila died. He felt guilty because he was convinced that Spock had needed him and he hadn't been there. Now he wanted to help, but duty stood in their way. Spock was on the bridge, totally in command, and though Kirk had contacted him via the intercom, asked him to join him in his quarters for a talk, he knew that there was still an hour before end of watch. Until Spock could join him he would have to wait, patiently, and work out in his own mind what he thought would be the best way of broaching the subject later on, and how best to help his friend.

Kirk was dozing when Spock finally buzzed for admittance, and when he didn't respond immediately Spock used the over-ride and hurried into the cabin, concern more than evident on his face.

"Jim... Jim!"

As Kirk rose from his slumber Spock could tell straight away that there was nothing wrong, and stood in some embarrassment at the side of the bed as their eyes met.

"When you didn't answer the buzzer I feared there was something wrong... "

Kirk smiled. "Thanks for your concern, my friend. I'm fine." He stretched cramped muscles. "Just tired, that's all." Spock placed his hand beneath his Captain's elbow and helped him into a sitting position. "I guess I'm still stiff after lying in bed for so long," he continued.

"You were in sickbay for only 3.7 days, Jim." Spock's eyes narrowed. "Not long enough."

The smile left Kirk's face. "Who's the doctor around here, anyway?" His eyes darkened, daring Spock to argue. "Bones said it was okay as long as I rested in my cabin." He swung his hand around it. "So I'm resting!"

Spock sighed. "I do not mean to denigrate the Doctor's skill, authority or judgement, but I *do* know you. And you can be too persuasive for your own good at times." But the Vulcan allowed the subject to rest at that as he went to the dispenser and programmed coffee for Kirk and juice for himself. Then he seated himself beside the bed, handing the coffee cup to his captain as he went on, "You mentioned that you wanted to talk... "

Kirk swung his legs off the bed and sat on the edge of it, cradling the cup in his hands as he stared into the depths of the swirling liquid. "I thought you might like to discuss... what happened back there... " He looked up then, in time to see the Vulcan's eyes grow haunted, and he regretted his words. He should have left it up to Spock to make the first move.

"I'm sorry, Spock. I don't want to cause you more pain. Don't say anything if you'd rather not... But I wasn't there. I couldn't help you then, and I *do* want to help you now - if you want me to... if you'll let me." The hazel eyes were wide, earnest, pleading.

"Thank you, Jim. I know you are here. You always are... "

"As you are for me," Kirk interrupted.

The Vulcan allowed himself a smile before continuing, "I have only

recently adjusted to my Vulcan half again, have only just achieved the control I needed to continue with my work and push the memories aside until a more appropriate moment. If you will allow me to maintain that control at least until this mission is over, then I will gratefully seek out your help and your comfort - for I certainly do need it, my friend. But now is not the time."

Kirk understood, and he appreciated Spock's frankness and openness with him. Nodding, he said, "Just say the word. I'll be here."

Companionably, they sat for a few moments, silently grateful to be together again. Then Spock put down his cup and purposefully stood to face his captain. His unerring time sense had told him that the moment had come.

"Captain, we are about to enter orbit around Outpost 17. Our presence here has not yet been detected; I have therefore decided to beam our security forces down before this can happen, although the other ships have not yet arrived. I am going with them, to lead the assault and to carry out whatever investigation is possible into the new weapon. I will report to you every hour."

Kirk rose, allowing the cup to fall to the floor. His eyes were dark, and he was angry, but his voice was characteristically quiet. "Alone? You plan to go without me?"

A nod of affirmation. "Captain, you are not yet fit for duty. I will not risk your life by allowing you to accompany us."

Kirk had stepped closer, and, chin raised, eyes boring into Spock's, he spoke again, quietly. "Do you honestly think I'd let you go alone? Especially after what's happened recently? If I'm fit enough to be out of sickbay, I'm fit enough to go with you."

"Captain, I -"

"Spock!" His voice was no longer quiet. The tone was commandatorial. The intention was all too clear. "Mr. Spock, I am going! I will not be left behind! You will not go without me!"

Besides the command tone however there was a silent *Please* - a plea for understanding and acceptance of what he was, what he had to do. When Spock looked again at his Captain, Kirk's hand was outstretched. Taking a step nearer, Spock allowed his own hand to reach out so that his fingers brushed briefly against Kirk's as he capitulated, knowing that further argument would be pointless.

"Yes, sir. Very well." Beneath the Vulcan's facade of calm acceptance was a very great fear for what could happen on the planetoid, for what could occur to Kirk himself. He had known what Kirk's reaction would be, known that he couldn't have beamed down without telling his captain, but he also knew that although he had capitulated in the argument he still intended to beam down alone to face the Romulan threat. He was nominally in command still, and he was not going to risk Kirk again so soon... But Kirk was still his commanding officer as well as his friend - and he hoped that that friendship would allow Kirk to see the logic in what he had to do.

"If you will excuse me, Captain, I will go and make the final arrangements."

Kirk relaxed and walked to his desk, his back to the Vulcan in an effort to hide the fatigue he felt, and hoped that Spock would not notice

the look in his eyes which admitted that Spock was right. "I'll meet you in the transporter room in fifteen minutes, Mr. Spock."

"Aye, sir."

The door closed between them, to form a barrier which both knew would not be strong enough to keep them apart. Not now. Not at any time.

Kirk took a deep, deep breath, then flexed his muscles, throwing off the fatigue which had suddenly crept upon him as if it had been a light blanket in a storm. He knew that he could not risk the success of this mission by beaming down with the initial task force; knew also that Spock intended to go on ahead of him despite all that had passed between them; but he also knew that he was fit enough to take command of the mission after the fighting had taken place, and Spock fully intended him to follow then.

Donning a clean uniform and swallowing a quick drink, he headed for sickbay, intent on convincing McCoy that a stimulant would be a good idea.

The Starship captain in him still rebelled at the thought of not beaming down until the fighting was over. How could he stand to let Spock go through all that without him? But he would never have attained the position he had if he had not had the ability to think rationally - and his friendship with Spock had taught him much about logic; the things they had been able to show each other was definitely a two-way enrichment. Therefore he could see the sense in not exposing himself to the heaviest of the fighting - not least because he knew his presence at that time might put an extra strain on Spock - Vulcan again or not, his friend would still worry; but also because at heart he knew what his own condition was, despite what he might say to Spock or McCoy - or even himself. The thought also struck him that perhaps he owed it to Spock to allow him this command - maybe his newly-integrated psyche needed it.

Knowing none of those thoughts, logical as they might be, would stop him from fretting while it was all going on down there while he - impatiently and anxiously - waited to beam down also, Kirk continued towards sickbay. He hoped McCoy wasn't going to be as difficult as seemed likely.

Sickbay was practically deserted when Kirk entered, and thankfully he went directly to McCoy's office to await the good doctor, grateful that no-one could see how tired the walk from his cabin had made him. Sinking into a seat, he helped himself to a liberal measure of McCoy's brandy supply. By the time McCoy arrived, Kirk felt more up to the battle of words he expected, having been pleasantly warmed by the amber liquid.

On entering his office, McCoy promptly covered his analytical glance at his friend by brashly stating, "I'm going to start charging for that stuff!"

Kirk grinned as he watched the chief surgeon deposit some files in a drawer, drop his medikit onto the desk, then flop into the seat opposite his captain.

"Wish people would be more careful. Just treated another of Scotty's men for a broken leg after falling down a Jeffries tube ladder." McCoy grinned. "Mind you, after Scotty had had a go at the poor lad, I didn't have to do any lecturing at all."

Kirk began to laugh, and McCoy soon joined in. They were equally

cognisant of Scott's attitude towards carelessness.

After a few moments, McCoy grew serious again and looked straight into Kirk's hazel eyes. "Okay, Jim. Joke's over. What are you here for? You've got your own brandy bottle."

Kirk clasped his hands together upon the desk, his eyes earnest, waiting to get straight to the point. "I'm not going to let Spock go down there alone."

McCoy sighed, and avoided Kirk's gaze. He'd known what was coming, had just hoped he'd be wrong for once. He took in his Captain's pale complexion, the beads of perspiration on the brow; he knew that if Kirk unclasped his hands, they'd be trembling. He was in no condition to go anywhere - yet the fact that he had released Kirk from sickbay undermined any real argument that he might have come up with. And - deep down - he was afraid for Spock, himself. It was the Vulcan's first real mission alone since he'd lost his Vulcan half, and despite the fact that he'd now regained it, that he was fully Vulcan again, McCoy wasn't sure how he'd cope, how he would react to what they were bound to have to face. McCoy didn't even think of pointing out to the Captain that Spock would not be alone down on Outpost 17, that he'd have plenty of security guards at his side. Instead, he moved round the desk and placed his hand on Kirk's shoulder, squeezing it in understanding and acceptance, knowing that this time he couldn't let his own worries for Spock's - and Kirk's - safety get in the way. If Kirk had a good argument, a good solution to how he'd cope down on the Outpost, then McCoy would listen and, he knew, capitulate. His voice was quiet when he spoke.

"Tell me, Jim. Explain to me what you want to do."

Kirk looked up quickly at the Doctor - regretting his haste as a wave of pain swept over him. He grimaced - then a look of thanks brightened his eyes to a deep amber. He'd expected a fight - none had come. He realised anew just how much he had underestimated McCoy.

A little over half an hour had passed, and now Kirk was walking towards the transporter room, absently rubbing his arm where McCoy had administered the stimulant. He felt better already; more alive, more full of energy than he had been in a long time. But he knew full well that it was more a false sense of well-being which had crept over him, knew full well that he would feel ten times worse when he came back, but he would gladly endure any pain for his Vulcan friend; would even risk his life for Spock, and McCoy knew that. McCoy knew it and accepted it as being a part of what made Kirk so special. The Captain was extremely grateful for that acceptance, and he entered the transporter room with a great weight off his mind.

Two security guards were waiting for him. He knew that he would have been foolish to follow Spock alone, even though most of the fighting would probably be over by now. So he had asked for volunteers. All those who were not accompanying Spock had volunteered, and the two that had been chosen counted themselves to be the lucky ones. As they watched their Captain walk through the door they knew that even if their own lives became forfeit they'd make sure that Captain James T. Kirk returned to the ship safely.

Kirk first greeted his waiting men, then walked over to the console where Kyle was making final adjustments to the co-ordinates for beam-down. Scott had wanted to be there himself, but he knew that his concern must be with the ship, not just her Captain and First Officer, and he had remained

on the bridge.

"All ready, Mr. Kyle?"

"Aye, sir." He adjusted a few more dials. "We'll set you down in a different section of the complex, sir..." he hesitated "as Mr. Spock requested. He said there were fewer life-form readings but more mechanical emanations, so you may have a better chance of locating the... ah... weapon first, sir."

Kirk's eyes had narrowed at first, not liking what was happening. But he quickly realised that it was the most sensible and logical course of action, so he nodded in agreement. Then he adjusted the communicator on his belt, holding his phaser in his hand just in case, and ascended the steps, closely followed by the security guards.

"Energise, Mr. Kyle."

"Aye, sir." He transported the Captain down, and then contacted the bridge, carrying out Mr. Scott's orders to the letter by notifying the Chief Engineer of their Captain's safe beamdown. But he also knew that Montgomery Scott would not relax until his Captain and Mr. Spock were safely back on board, and until he could hand command to the man to whom it truly belonged.

Captain Kirk and his companions materialised inside a dismal cavern, lit only by some kind of fluorescent rock high above them. Sounds of phaser fire could be heard echoing in the distance, probably from the next cavern, and Kirk frowned, worry clouding his eyes. He forced himself to stay still and let his eyes adjust to the lack of light before moving on.

The security guards had unobtrusively moved closer to their Captain, phasers at the ready, and Kirk couldn't help smiling, knowing what praise Spock would give the men - in his own Vulcan way - for their solicitous behaviour.

"Okay, formation V. Let's move it." Kirk kept his voice low, as if the situation they in which they found themselves called for *quiet* caution above all. There was nothing the security guards could do to persuade their Captain from taking his place at the apex of the V, leading the way, so they just gripped their phasers more tightly, staying as close as possible, allowing their eyes to wander the area, ever watchful.

Spock had been correct - of course. The whole area was riddled with tunnels, and each tunnel, every inch of wall space, seemed to be crammed full of machinery of every description. The men moved nearer, ever cautious.

Spock's plan had evidently been to meet Kirk here, having defeated the renegades first in their initial show of strength, but fighting was still going on, and Kirk couldn't help stealing glances in the direction from which the sounds came, fearful of what could have happened to his friend. Something had obviously gone wrong.

A sound to their left caused his muscles to tense and he turned towards the sound, crouching low. Without a sound, he gestured the nearer guard, Sanyo, to circle around whilst he crept forward, leaving Collins, the other guard, to cover their rear. Within a few moments a lone Romulan was dead, his almost-fatal aim towards the gold-clad man in front of him countered by the reflexes of the Enterprise guard. Kirk sighed, and waved his hand at Lt. Sanyo, acknowledging a job well done.

Again they moved forward.

Kirk's tricorder readings, already calibrated by Spock, began dancing as they picked up what they were searching for. Kirk stopped, scanning the area, then, with a quick glance at his men, he stepped into the tunnel. Several minutes later they stumbled over a small, clumsy-looking machine, its sides studded with numerous buttons and switches. On top, an antenna of sorts lay at a crazy angle beneath which symbols of the Romulan language had been embossed. Kirk couldn't read the words, but his tricorder told him that they'd found what they'd been seeking.

"This is it." He wiped the sweat off his top lip. "There doesn't seem to be any sort of booby trap, but be careful." He glanced at the men who were still watching the tunnel for movement, their attention far from the contraption before them.

At Kirk's next words, however, they looked at him in concern. "We can't transport up from here, it's too deep. We'll have to carry it back to the main cavern. Can you manage?"

Kirk realised that he was in no condition to handle the weight, but it had to be beamed up as soon as possible.

"We'll manage, sir. If you could keep an eye on the tunnel... just in case... "

Kirk nodded as Sanyo and Collins struggled with the weapon up the stone-covered incline. Before they had reached the mouth of the tunnel, however, there was an explosion which must have been capable of rocking the tiny planetoid to its very core, as the weapon disintegrated, taking the two security guards into oblivion with it.

Back in the tunnel Kirk heard the noise, realised in an instant what was happening, and, pain for the two wasted lives registering, mouthed, "Oh my g - " before the tunnel roof collapsed around him.

The Romulans were dead. They had been unwilling to give up without a fight and the Enterprise forces had had no alternative but to retaliate with all they had. Spock had planned the attack precisely, and the Romulans were hopelessly outnumbered. It had taken longer than Spock had anticipated, but eventually the battle had been theirs.

But Spock felt no sense of victory. He only felt that justice had been done. This time he did not regret the taking of life, for he remembered only too clearly what these renegades had done to Leila - the other colonists - and to Jim. Something inside him told him that he should not be feeling like that, but his Human half, still nearer the surface than he perhaps desired, had taken over the logic, replacing it with revenge. In the moments before he reached the cavern where he expected to find Kirk, he acknowledged that he was unsure of how he could accept the feelings which raged within him. How could he control?

No adjustment was necessary for his eyes, even although this cavern was darker than the one he had just left. Instructing the accompanying security guards to spread out, he allowed himself the time to search for the gold shirt. He could not see it.

The cavern was vast, and he could see numerous darker areas around him, obviously the entrances to tunnels. If Kirk had entered that labyrinth...

The fact that the entire area was covered with machinery, the kind which normally nudged his scientific mind to frenzied activity, mattered little to the Vulcan. All he cared about was that Kirk was in obvious danger... unless wisdom had prevailed, and Kirk had not beamed down after all?

A shout rang out from in front of him, and he went over to the security guard who was gesturing behind a rock.

"Dead, sir." Spock nodded and turned away to hide the satisfaction which had lit his eyes. Kirk had been here, and one more dead Romulan seemed to matter little.

Suddenly he was flung to the ground, his body hailed with debris, and a noise, deafening, terrifying, invaded his auditory senses, as an explosion echoed and re-echoed around the cavern. The guards ran for cover, but luckily the cavern roof survived the impact and the shock waves. As soon as Spock could get to his feet he was running towards the source of the explosion, heedless of a rivulet of blood which etched its way through the dirt on his face from a nasty cut on his forehead. His eyes were wild, not quite sane, as he arrived to find the bloodied, broken bodies on the floor, half covered by rocks from the tunnel's mouth.

The security guards arrived and began digging at the rocks with their bare hands, but Spock stopped them with a single word.

"No."

Their eyes turned to him. "But Mr. Spock -"

"They are dead. You cannot help them now; but... " He pointed to where the tunnel had been with his tricorder. "The Captain is in there... "

Without another word the men turned their attention to the rocks and debris which had turned the tunnel mouth into part of a sheer cliff.

Spock, his hands shaking, moved to one side and drew his communicator from his belt. "Spock to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Scott here. Do you have it, Mr. Spock?"

"No... " For the first time his mind registered the other facts that the tricorder told him. "But we need worry about it no more. The renegades obviously arranged for its destruction, a possibility I had not considered." His voice had grown so quiet that Scott could not hear.

"Sorry, Mr. Spock, I didn't quite get that last sentence."

"No matter. Please beam down specialist equipment for digging. The Captain has been... buried... " His voice caught, and he shut the communicator reluctantly. No need to ask for medical aid, he knew; as soon as he'd uttered the words, he knew that McCoy would be en route to the transporter room.

When McCoy beamed down seconds later, Spock rose to meet him with bloodied hands, for he had joined in the dig, useless as it was without equipment.

"How badly hurt is he, Spock?" McCoy fussed over the Vulcan, treating his hands, hiding his concern a little.

Spock swallowed, then tried to speak. "I... " He coughed to try and rid himself of the lump in his throat. "I cannot locate any life-form readings, Doctor. He is either too far down, or... " He couldn't, wouldn't, voice the last, and turned to watch the technicians rigging up the portable tractor equipment, unable to bear the look of horror, terror, on McCoy's face. Would this be the time when the miracles would run out, when he couldn't put James T. Kirk back together again? He blamed himself, blamed the Universe, blamed Starfleet. It did no good. When it came down to basics, no-one was to blame except whoever had made Jim Kirk in the first place. For Kirk was Kirk. Unique, irreplaceable, one-of-a-kind Kirk...

"Doctor!" Hope? A shout of anguish hit his ears and he saw Spock bend close beside a man-sized hole which the rescue equipment had made.

"Is he down there, Spock? Is he okay?"

"Unknown. And it is too dangerous to risk you in a hopeless foray into the unknown... "

McCoy cut him off. "If you think I'm going to let you go in there alone - "

"And if the Captain is not in here? If he is somewhere else, hurt? No - I go alone. You will wait here. But I'll need a hypo - in case... "

Very reluctantly, McCoy acceded. He reached for his medikit, adjusted the hypo to a broad-spectrum medication which would at least keep Kirk conscious and aware - no matter what his injuries were - until they got to the ship, and handed it to Spock. The Vulcan's eyes met McCoy's and the Doctor nodded, managing a smile, then Spock was gone. The rocks which had been held up by the tractor promptly tumbled back into position.

Spock crawled along what was left of the tunnel, inch by tortuous inch, his hands searching for evidence of Kirk's presence. He had no *proof* that Kirk was here, but he knew. Somehow, he knew.

He wanted to call to him, but, afraid that the sound would bring the rest of the roof down, refrained from doing so. He just kept on crawling, hoping...

McCoy, recovering from the shock of seeing the rocks fall back into place, having been told by a technician that it was safer that way, preserving power, and that they would be removed again after sufficient time had passed, found himself pacing back and forth. The communicator beeped, and he jumped, but flipped it open immediately.

"Yes, Scotty?"

"You've all got to beam up, Doctor. That explosion... Instrument readings show that it affected the planetoid's stability. Breakup is imminent."

Scott's voice was strained, full of worry. McCoy turned to the men around him; they'd heard the message but they all remained totally calm. McCoy wasn't sure what to do or say, but he was saved from having to say anything as one of the lieutenants, his red security shirt streaked with dirt, stepped forward. He looked around quickly, and all present nodded to him, each pulling his shoulders higher with pride, knowing what the

lieutenant would say and all agreeing.

"Doctor, we won't leave here. None of us. The Captain and Mr. Spock are in there and we'll get them out - or we'll die with them."

McCoy felt his heart jump and his stomach tighten as he stepped forward and grasped the man's arms, looking around at the other men and smiling weakly. He shook his head, his blue eyes shining in the semi-darkness. "I appreciate the offer, but we can't risk depriving the ship of so many from your departments. You - and you, and you - " he indicated three men from security and three technicians - "can stay; the rest will beam up now." Again the communicator was flipped open.

"Scotty?"

"Aye, Doctor."

He gave the order to beam up the men he had ordered away. "The rest are staying here. Though everyone volunteered."

"I'm not surprised. Wish I could be there with you." He heard Scott sigh, and a gasp from Uhura. "We'll go out to maximum orbit just in case, but we'll be within communicator and transporter contact as long as possible."

"Okay, Scotty. Be sure you take care of his ship."

"Aye, that I will."

Contact was broken; the departing men were beamed up, and the other men turned back to the business in hand.

The air was getting thin. It was so dark, too. And the dust... Kirk couldn't help coughing, and he cursed as the movement caused yet another dust cloud to envelop him.

A noise! Was that a cough? Spock strained to hear, listening as he forced himself to stop for a moment. Yes! It *was* a cough... He hurried onwards, ignoring the pain in his knees from having crawled for so long.

Rounding a corner he literally bumped into the body of his Captain, also was crouched uncomfortably against the wall.

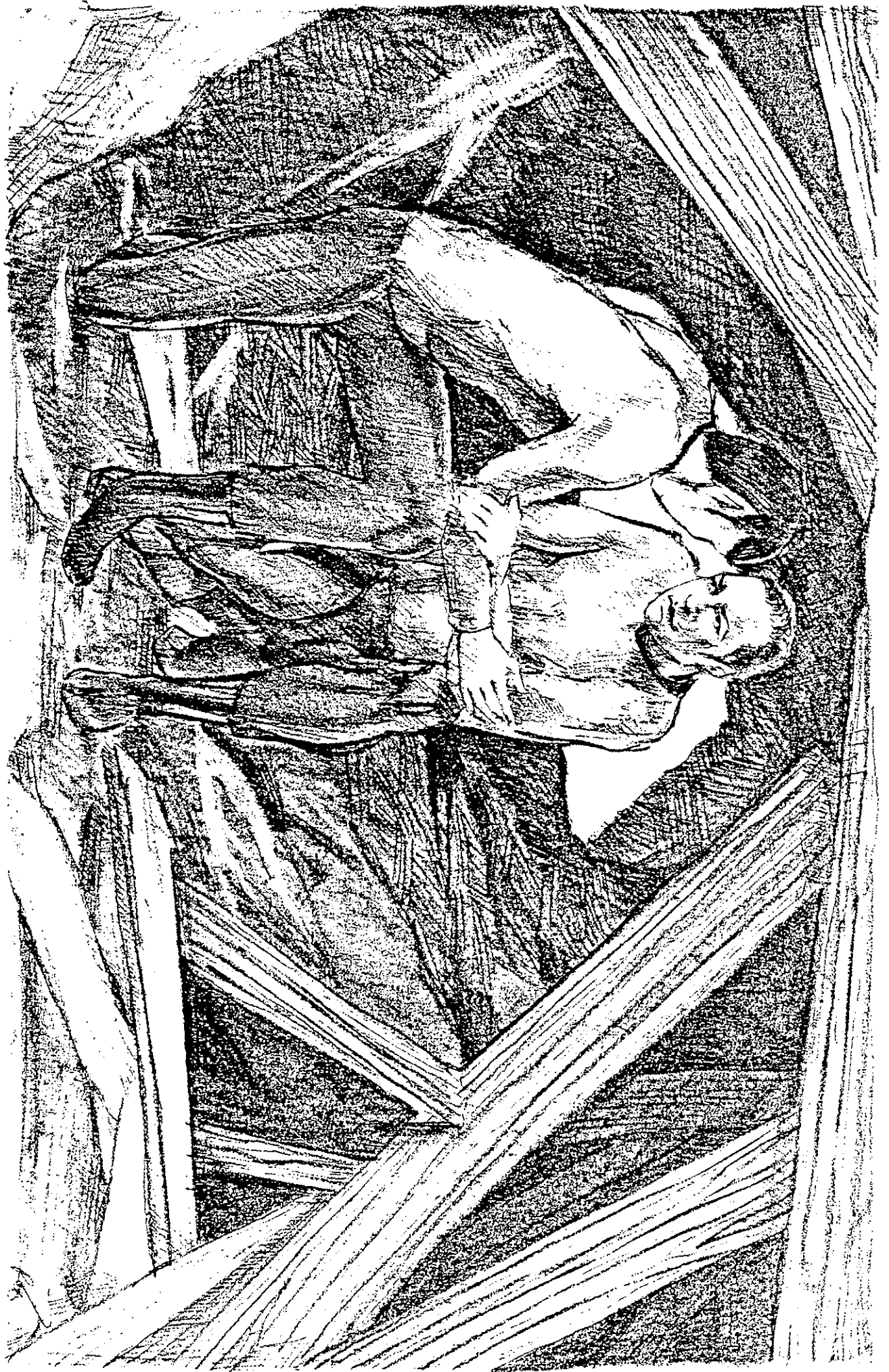
"What the - "

"Captain!"

"Spock."

Voices were quiet, sincere, grateful beyond belief. They embraced unashamedly. Spock hugged his Captain tight within the cramped confines of what could so easily have become Kirk's tomb. He felt tears threaten as he realised that Kirk was alive. Kirk held on tightly in return, happy to have been found, grateful that Spock could now show how he felt, despite everything that had occurred to them - or was it in spite of everything?

"Jim... I was so afraid... So afraid you were... Don't ever want to be alone again... "



"I know... I know... "

Then, as if suddenly realising, Spock pulled away, running his hands up and down Kirk's arms and legs testing for injuries. "You're not hurt?"

"No. I'm fine. The rockfall stunned me for a while, and when I came to I couldn't see a damned thing. Didn't know which way to go, so I figured it'd be best to stay where I was."

"Good. We must go. Quickly." Spock's words were matter-of-fact but the turmoil within the Vulcan, though stilled, told him how close they had been - again - to losing one another. He would have to deal with that... later; but not now. Now they had to get out. He was about to move when Kirk's hand on his arm stopped him.

"Sanyo - and Collins. They - "

No deceit. Kirk deserved the truth.

"They're dead, sir. But the weapon was destroyed. They did not die in vain."

"My fault... Come on, Spock - let's get out of here."

As Spock led the way, he realised that he'd already known what Kirk's reaction would be when he heard of his men's deaths, hence his attempt to reassure the Captain that they hadn't died in vain. It was typical of Kirk...

At the mouth of the tunnel the techs had again removed the rocks and relieved sighs welcomed their exit from the pit, eager hands helping them up, caring eyes meeting theirs - in particular, a pair of piercing blue ones.

It took seconds only for McCoy to realised from Kirk's and Spock's attitude and bearing that neither was hurt, and he gratefully grasped his communicator and ordered immediate beam-up. Two of the transporter rooms had to be put in use in order to beam all the men up at once, and in time; but they made it - just. As Kirk stepped off the platform, Spock and McCoy flanking him, he was just in time to see the planetoid breaking up on the tiny viewing screen. He shook his head, then walked over to the intercom on the top of the console, pushing past the relieved guards who had waited there to find out if he was safe.

"Scotty, Kirk here. We're okay. Thank you."

"Aye, sir." The two words were all Scott needed to express the feelings of the entire crew.

Once more the silver bird sped unhindered on her way. Kirk had been alone on the observation deck for quite a while, gazing at the stars which, somehow, still belonged personally to him. To them. For eons they had been symbols of hope to countless thousands, he knew; symbols of hope and mystery, and a goal to strive for. But that didn't stop him from feeling that they were specially his.

They were his home; the stars and the Enterprise. It seemed it had always been so. And they were Spock's home too. Now, perhaps, more than ever - if that were possible. He had watched his Vulcan friend closely yet unobtrusively during the last few days, and he was beginning to believe that what he had long hoped for had happened.

Spock was finally able to admit how close their friendship was; the years they had spent together, out here in space on the great starship, had gradually shown the Vulcan how he could come to terms with his dual identity. The Vulcan and the Human that made Spock uniquely special. The fears he had felt for his friend since that shore leave encounter with the Morian had finally, thankfully, proved unfounded; instead, his hopes had been realised. Spock was himself again, perhaps more so than he had ever been. His Vulcan half regained, he seemed more able to show the humanity which was his inheritance from his mother as well as the logic of his father's world; his experience in coping with his Human half had taught him so much, and Kirk was glad, to the depths of his soul, to see the new way in which his First Officer and friend was unbending; showing his understanding and his innate compassion without losing an iota of his Vulcan dignity and nobility. Even to McCoy, Spock was able to show openly the friendship that had long existed. Oh, they still had the odd battle of words, but the affection underlying those duels was more apparent, even to those who did not know them well.

Yes, Kirk was glad - and happy. And he knew Spock, in his own way, was happy too. He wasn't sure how much he believed in fate, but truly it seemed that the encounter with the unfortunate alien had almost been meant to happen. He was grateful to that poor deranged soul for what it had unwittingly given them.

With a definite sensation that, all chances of fortune included, all was well with the progress of their particular universe, Kirk left the observation deck and made his way through the comforting, efficiently bustling corridors of his ship, on his way to keep his appointment at the meeting of department heads he had scheduled for Briefing Room 1 at 1600 hours.

"As predicted by the computers, the breakup of Outpost 17 will not cause any long-term hazard to space traffic; however, we have stationed six warning buoys at pre-determined intervals around the area as a precaution, as per Captain Kirk's orders," Spock concluded his report to those present. "The Romulan weapon was completely destroyed in the initial explosion, having apparently been set for self-destruct if it was removed from the level at which it was stored. We believe it was one of a kind, and therefore the Federation will be free from any similar attack for the foreseeable future, especially since the Romulan Praetor apparently did not sanction its use on this occasion. However, logic suggests that, such a weapon having been created once, at some future date it is likely that another will be, and the next Praetor might well be more callous than the present one seems to be."

"So the Federation will have to be on its guard, as always," commented Kirk. "But now we will have the advantage of knowing what we are looking for in any recurrence of such events. Lt. Uhura has prepared a report which will be transmitted to Starfleet Command immediately after this meeting. The Enterprise will proceed to Starbase 6 at Warp 2 for debriefing. You will be glad to know that Starfleet, for once, has no pressing engagements for us for at least eight days, and they have granted my request for a short period of R & R. That is all, ladies and gentlemen; this meeting is concluded."

Spock and McCoy remained behind with him as he watched the others go; Uhura to the bridge to send the detailed report, Scott back to his precious engines, the others back to their various duties. Kirk watched them leave with a smile; he had been more than glad, for once, to be able to end a briefing session by passing on some *good* news. He had been grateful Starfleet had answered his request for R & R, sent along with his initial,

brief report concerning the occurrences at Outpost 17, so promptly; that, too, made a pleasant change - requests for R & R were notoriously slowly answered. But apparently Starfleet had felt that the Enterprise had done her fair share this time. More than her share; for they had gone ahead in the absence of the other two ships, and pulled it off. When they got the detailed report Uhura was about to send off, they'd know that for sure! When he thought about the destructive potential which could still have been on the loose in the galaxy... Suppressing a slight shudder, Kirk turned to his two friends and shrugged.

They'd both been watching his expressions, obviously; both looked more than slightly concerned. McCoy wore a frown, and Spock had his arms folded in a most dissatisfied manner. *In other words, Captain, you'd better own up and tell them what that grimace was all about, or they'll be thinking Starfleet has sent us some very nasty orders I haven't mentioned yet.*

"All right, gentlemen," Kirk said with a laugh. "You can quit frowning - I was only thinking about the Romulan weapon. I'm just glad it's gone."

"Vulcans do not frown," Spock commented automatically.

"The Great Bird save us from a Vulcan with a sense of humour!" McCoy remarked affectionately. He was no longer worried about Spock re-adapting to his previously integrated self. He only wished everybody was as well-adjusted. For so long he'd been afraid that the day would come when Spock wouldn't be able to cope with his separate halves; but those days were gone. Kirk's friendship had seen to that - he'd helped the Vulcan to come to terms with himself in many ways long before the Morian had completed the job. And now his own jokes with Spock were just that; jokes between friends; there was no longer any need for the barbs he'd used to try and get the Human half to show itself more fully. No - he was no longer worried about Spock.

Kirk laughed again. It was good to see the way Spock and McCoy were so openly showing their friendship; perhaps an outsider wouldn't be able to see it, even now; but to someone who knew them well the new understanding between them was obvious.

Spock, too, seemed to understand; the rare half-smile had appeared. "I agree, Captain. The weapon's potential was horrifying. The Romulans no doubt merely wished to prevent us from capturing it when they set it for self-destruct. But that act did us a great favour; I am extremely relieved that the Federation will not have to be the custodians of such knowledge, unwilling or not."

"That's the kind of logic I agree with," put in McCoy. "The galaxy can do without that kind of knowledge - on either side."

"Indeed," agreed Spock, "though there will, of course, be research; the Federation will not be able to afford to ignore the weapon's creation."

"I suppose not," said McCoy gloomily. "But we never did find out how great a potential for destruction that damned weapon had. Anti-matter can accomplish what we saw it do; but I know Spock suspected that it could do far greater damage than even that if they had managed to complete all their tests."

"Then let's be thankful they didn't," said Kirk. "I saw it do enough damage as it was. And we'll just have to hope that Federation research will discover defensive measures which could be used if at any future time an enemy does develop something similar. Me - I'm just glad this little

adventure is all over. A weapon so small that could cause so much damage in its own self-destruction is a frightening thing."

McCoy and Spock nodded. It had been a very close thing indeed for them, and for the Enterprise, when the planetoid had broken up; it was perhaps as well that the other two Starships still hadn't arrived when it happened, (and they still didn't know what had delayed them). Kirk didn't think he would ever forget Spock coming for him down the tunnel. Indeed, he knew he wouldn't.

"Well, at least for now, that seems to be it, gentlemen," said Kirk, easing his position slightly and hoping McCoy wouldn't notice; he did feel a lot better, although for hours after they'd left Outpost 17 - or at least the position in space it had once occupied - he'd been incarcerated in sickbay and had felt too weak to argue. But the stimulants he'd persuaded McCoy to give him had done their job at the time he had needed them to, and he didn't regret the after-effects he'd had to go through, as devastating as they'd been. It would still be a while before he was completely physically fit, but at least he now knew he *would* be all right.

But the good Doctor had noticed his attempt to hide his discomfort, Kirk could see it on his face; McCoy was about to say something. Kirk decided he'd head him off; now he was feeling so much improved, he did not want McCoy trying to haul him off to sickbay again.

"As for me, I'm off to my cabin for some well-earned rest. I'm not officially back on duty for another two days, after all, and I mean to take advantage of it. It's not often I have some time off."

"I don't believe it!" McCoy exclaimed, his admonishment cut off before he'd had a chance to utter it. "Don't tell me you're actually going to show some sense for once?"

"Dr. McCoy," said Spock, a glint appearing in his dark eyes. "Surely you know that the Captain is a logical man - sometimes."

The two days passed, for once uneventfully, and Kirk thankfully returned to full-time duty. The rest, he had to admit, had been welcome, which went to show how low he really had been feeling. But it wasn't that surprising; he didn't need McCoy to tell him how close he'd been to having his luck finally run out. Several times he'd surprised a strange look in Spock's eyes, too. No, not *strange* - he'd seen it before, and he knew what it was. An expression of deep thankfulness that he, Kirk, was really all right.

Now those two days *were* over, though, he was more than glad to be able to take hold of the reins of his ship once more. He took the conn from Spock and sat in his command chair to receive the reports waiting for him, which were - this time - all routine. It seemed that fate had decided that they were all overdue for a rest, and that long-awaited R & R. Fate and Starfleet. The sensation of relief that this particular mission was over, and over successfully, still hadn't left him.

But that success had still had its failures. There had been deaths. and Leila Kalomi's among them. Spock truly did seem to be perfectly all right, and to one who knew him as well as Kirk did, that too was a great relief. Yet Spock was more than an expert at hiding his feelings, and Kirk knew he wouldn't be sure of Spock's peace of mind until he'd had a talk with him about it. He's been thinking of the possibility of approaching him about it for a few days; it was obvious that Spock had coped well with the grief; but he *had* felt something for her, and was probably still

hurting, deep down. Once, Kirk would have been wary of broaching a subject with his friend that might cause the Vulcan embarrassment, if not pain; but now - well, now Spock was far more relaxed, far more at home with himself than he had ever been. Kirk decided such a talk could do no harm; would probably do some good. He remembered the times in the past when Spock had helped him; Edith, Miramane, Rayna. And that had been before Spock's new-found peace with his hybrid self. No, he owed it to his friend to see if there was something he could do, if Spock needed it. That, after all, was what friends were for.

His decision made, Kirk planned on immediate action. It was always the best way. The very next time Spock approached the command chair with a report, Kirk looked up at him with a smile.

"We'll both be off duty soon, Spock," he said, "and it's a while since we've managed to find time for a game of chess. And there are various other things I need to discuss with you."

Spock looked at him as if, as usual, he could see right through the words to the meaning behind. "Very well, Captain," he replied evenly. "I will set up the chess board in my cabin. I, too, would welcome a game; and a discussion."

Kirk watched him consideringly as he returned to the science console. It wasn't that often they played chess in Spock's quarters; was it Spock's way of indicating that he was quite willing to talk about anything? Kirk certainly hoped so.

The duty watch passed without incident, and Kirk found himself walking along the corridor of Deck 5 towards Spock's cabin, and his own next door. He had eaten with McCoy and the Vulcan in the Mess, from where Spock had been the earliest to leave, with the intention of setting up the chessboard. Now he was on the point of it, self-doubt had begun to creep in. Should he have waited until Spock came to him? Intruding on another's grief, especially a privacy-orientated Vulcan's, was always questionable, no matter how good the intention behind it.

But Spock was his best friend, and Kirk knew that despite the surface appearance of contentment, Spock still had to be feeling something over Leila's death. It was quite possible, of course, that Spock himself had deliberately said nothing, not wanting to burden Kirk with his own problems. That would be so like Spock.

Past memories of Spock's concern in his own times of sorrow welled up again, reinforcing his decision and convincing him of its rightness. It had to be done; what were friends for? With steady determination, Kirk keyed the door buzzer.

"Come," said a deep voice from within.

The Human entered; Spock was at his desk, apparently completing some paperwork. Trust Spock not to waste a few spare moments! On a small table, the chess board stood ready, a chair drawn up at either side.

Spock stood and gave Kirk his half-smile, which somehow seemed more in evidence these days, especially when they were alone or with McCoy. "The chess board is ready, Jim - or perhaps you had another reason for making this appointment?" Spock didn't sound at all perturbed.

"A game of chess I always enjoy," said Kirk, taking the chair made ready for him. "But why is it, Spock, that you can always see my real

motives?"

"Not always, Jim - but most times," Spock replied without a trace of smugness as he took the other chair. "We are, after all, friends. And I have heard it said that we are a good team."

"So have I, Spock, so have I," Kirk conceded, rather pleased. Maybe this wasn't going to be as difficult as he had feared it might be. Spock almost seemed to be waiting for him to say it all.

Kirk's expression changed to a more serious one. If he was going to have that talk with Spock at all, he had better make a start.

"You're right - I did want to talk to you about a few things," Kirk said. "If you have no objections."

"Should I object?"

"Once upon a time you might have." Kirk wanted Spock to know that he wouldn't insist on making him talk; not if he really didn't want to.

"I have said that we are friends." Spock knew that there was no subject he would not now be willing to discuss with his friend; and he wanted Kirk to realise that. The time for reticence between them was surely gone for ever.

"Okay then - if you're sure." Kirk smiled. "It's about you; about how you're coping with - well, with what happened after we met the Morian. And about Leila, too. I know you felt something for her, Spock. Grief is never easy. So many times in the past, you've helped me; now it's my turn. If there's anything I can do, anything at all, please let me help."

Spock nodded understandingly; he had thought it would be something like that. But he knew what Kirk meant; and surely it was right that they should talk about it.

Besides, he wanted to.

"I appreciate your concern, Jim," he said evenly, "and I thank you for it, and for your friendship. Without it, I might not have been able to 'cope', as you put it. But I believe I have done so. I will not pretend it was easy; to be suddenly confronted by my Human half after all these years of inward suppression was... unsettling."

"That has to be the understatement of the year."

Spock nodded again. "Indeed. Yet it has taught us much, and now I do not regret the experience. For the first time in my life I believe I truly understood myself, and I now accept myself for what I am. No; do not concern yourself about that. There is no need."

Kirk could see that what Spock was saying was not only the truth; it was true for his Vulcan friend on the deepest levels of his being. And he was glad. At last Spock accepted himself as the unique person he was. At last.

"As for Leila..." Spock hesitated a moment before going on. "You are right; I did feel something for her. Though I am not sure, even now, what exactly it was. And I must tell you - although the grief I felt at her death was real, and still is, the fear I felt for your safety when you were injured, and when you were trapped in the tunnel, was far, far deeper. Your friendship means far more to me than any feeling I had for Leila ever did, Jim."

Those few words were all it took to make Kirk realise he could stop worrying about Spock. He was all right - that was obvious. More than all right - to hear him finally able to put into words just what their friendship meant to the Vulcan was more than good. The last traces of doubt that perhaps he should not have come to broach the subject with Spock disappeared. He had been right to come; and he was very glad.

"You have learned a great deal, my friend," was all he replied. He did not need to tell Spock how much their friendship meant to him, also. Spock knew.

"Indeed I have, Jim," said Spock, his half-smile deepening into something more. "It was... a Human kind of learning, shall we say. But I have long known there were many kinds of things a Vulcan could learn from a Human."

And vice versa, thought Kirk. But he didn't reply; his heart was too full.

Besides, there was no need.