

SCOTPRESS

**A
THOUSAND
KINDRED
SPIRIT**

by

Gloria

Fry

**a
STAR TREK
fanzine**

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A ScoTpress publication

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Proofreading: Janet Quarton, Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini
Printing of Masters: Janet Quarton
Printing: Urban Print, 57 Perth Rd, Dundee
Distracting: Shona, Cindy and Whiskers

A Kindred Spirit, which is a sequel to A Gift Beyond Price, continues to follow Kirk's early days on the Enterprise and Mitchell's jealousy of Spock, is put out by ScoTpress and is available from

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6 Craigmill Cottages
Strathmartine
by Dundee
Scotland

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CHAPTER ONE

Jim Kirk was enjoying the session in the gymnasium with his old friend Gary Mitchell. They went through a variety of unarmed combat techniques, and Kirk found that the moves he had learned from Spock worked miraculously on one who was unprepared for them. Mitchell lay flat on his back, panting from the exertion. He was mortified that all the training he had done with the ship's combat trainer these past few weeks had not been able to prepare him for Jim's extra power. Mitchell used to be able to beat Jim, but he had not been able to overcome him in years. It looked now to be an impossible task, with the unorthodox and unusual Vulcan techniques that Jim was using.

Kirk came over to him and held out his hand. "Had enough?" he asked. Mitchell nodded. He took the hand and, too exhausted to try more, he allowed Kirk to pull him to his feet.

"You're too good," he said.

A wide grin covered Kirk's face. "I have a long way to go. I've been building up slowly since I recovered from my injuries."

"I think you're recovered," Mitchell said, as he wiped the sweat from his face. "I'm dead on my feet... "

Pleased with himself at being able to defeat someone for a change, Kirk laughed. He had had to deal with Vulcan strength for so long now that he was beginning to think of himself as being a weakling.

"Are you coming to shower?" Mitchell asked.

Kirk shook his head. "Spock will be here soon."

The Vulcan stepped out from the doorway, and Kirk's face lit up.

"How long have you been here?" he asked, noting that Spock already wore his black practise clothes.

"Five point five minutes, Captain."

Kirk pulled a face. He had been so caught up in his bout with Gary, he had not been aware that Spock had been watching them.

"I see. Then what is your opinion?"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "There is much to be improved, Captain. I will show you."

Expecting praise, Kirk allowed a look of irritation to cross

his face. He covered it quickly, but not before it had been seen by Mitchell and Spock.

Mitchell grinned in anticipation. He knew Jim would get angry and give the Vulcan a taste of that volatile temper. He knew his friend; he was closer to Kirk than any other. He had known him for years, not a few short months as the First Officer had; he knew that Kirk did not like criticism. He prepared to enjoy the Vulcan's discomfiture, but to his shock, Kirk only accepted Spock's words resignedly and said, "Show me."

Unable to believe what he had just witnessed, Mitchell sat down on a bench, draped a towel over his neck, and watched for several long embarrassing minutes as Kirk tried to argue certain points with the unmoving, silent Vulcan. Finally, Spock answered by picking faults with his Captain's stance, his moves, his falls, until Kirk began to follow his instructions completely and without question.

Amazed and perplexed by Kirk's total obedience to Spock now, Mitchell leaned back against the wall and shook his head slightly. He had never known Jim to commit himself to anyone in the way he was doing with Spock in this training, and he knew from his own recent experience that it was paying off. He looked up as Lt. Joran, the ship's official combat trainer, sat beside him.

"Unbelievable!" Joran said. "Mr. Spock is more suited to my job than I am."

Mitchell laughed a little. "He gives everyone an inferiority complex."

"I wonder if he would show me some of those throws..." Joran mused.

"I doubt it."

Joran stared at him. "It's rumoured that you don't get on with Mr. Spock."

Mitchell shifted in embarrassment, and did not reply. It was true. He had tried to approach the First Officer, but Spock would not permit any personal contact. His friendly overtures had been greeted with coldness and disdain. He looked down. Jim wanted him to get on better with the Vulcan, but how could he? The alienness of the First Officer gave him the creeps, and that upset him. Surely he had learned to accept alien life-forms by now? If Jim knew that he was still xenophobic, Mitchell shuddered to think what he would say.

He was disturbed by a loud yell, and he quickly looked up to see Jim go hurtling across the room. He jumped to his feet in alarm as Jim tumbled onto the mat, rolled over several times and lay still, his shoulders shaking.

"You Vulcan bastard!" he hissed as he rushed over to his fallen friend. He turned him over. "Jim!" he exclaimed.

The eyes which met his were full of amusement. What he had thought was tears had been laughter! He sat back on his heels, unable to understand, as Jim lay on his back, his laughter ringing out through the gymnasium now.

Spock came over to them, and looked down at the Captain. He

was puzzled. Why was Kirk laughing?

"Are you uninjured, sir?" he asked.

"I felt as if I was flying," Kirk said between laughs. "Hey, you threw me quite a distance."

"You should have been able to block such a throw, Captain. You are not concentrating."

The criticism stopped Kirk in his tracks. He closed his eyes for a moment. "Have you no mercy?" he asked.

"If you wish me to go easy on you, sir, I will."

Kirk sat up, struggled to his knees, and looked at Mitchell. "Should I accept that offer?"

"Of course, Jim. What you are doing is dangerous."

Kirk shook his head. "No, Gary. It's my own foolishness which makes it dangerous. I'm not giving myself to it properly."

He staggered to his feet, and was caught at both sides by his two friends as he swayed. After a moment, Spock let go of him.

"I'm all right, Gary," Kirk said. He let out a deep breath, brushed back the lock of hair which had stuck to his forehead with sweat, and gazed at his instructor. "Spock, I have not been a very good pupil today, I am sorry."

Spock raised an eyebrow, surprised by his Captain's words. "Indeed, you have not, Jim," he agreed, covering his surprise with a tone of disapproval.

Mitchell stared at him in annoyance. Since when had the Vulcan had permission to call Jim by his first name?

"Do you mind if we stop now?" Kirk asked. "I promise I will do better tomorrow."

"If you wish, sir," Spock replied and turned away.

Kirk watched as he walked over to one of the exercise machines, and took hold of the grips. He chewed at his lip, somehow knowing that he had displeased Spock, although the Vulcan showed no outward signs. He did not like the feeling that he had disappointed his friend, and that bothered him. He left Gary standing, and quickly followed his First Officer.

"Spock," he asked, "are you annoyed with me?"

The Vulcan let go the grips. "Annoyed, sir? Vulcans do not get annoyed."

"I see. Then why do I get the feeling that you disapprove of me stopping?"

"It is your decision, sir."

"Do you wish me to continue?"

"On Vulcan, we are taught that once committed to a course of

training, we should give our all. We should not let failure be the cause of giving up. We should always make at least one more effort to overcome that failure."

That was it. Mitchell grinned widely. Jim would never stand for that - he would bawl the Vulcan out. He would not tolerate that kind of criticism from anyone! But to his amazement Jim was unable to meet the piercing gaze of his First Officer, and lowered his eyes to stare at the ground. He seemed pensive, contrite, not angered as Mitchell had expected.

Kirk was silent for a few moments, reflecting that he had known when he and Spock had become friends that it would be a different kind of friendship from what he was used to, but he had not realised just how much Spock's opinion of him mattered to him, especially in this.

He braved Spock's gaze. "May I try again?" he asked.

The Vulcan studied him, once more surprised by him. Why had he changed his mind? He could not understand Kirk, but he could not refuse his request. He straightened his shoulders. "Very well, sir."

Kirk nodded gratefully, and both of them moved to the centre of the mat. Spock bent his head down close to Kirk. "Let yourself relax. Gather the power at your disposal, and when I try to throw you, harness that power into blocking it."

Kirk acknowledged that, and tried to follow Spock's instructions. To his surprise it worked - almost. He landed on the floor but he did not mind - he felt Spock's approval, and he was pleased with himself.

Spock knelt by him. "Captain, if you wish, I could show you certain Vulcan relaxation methods. I am sure you would be able to master them, and perhaps they would assist you in this."

"Would you?" Kirk asked enthusiastically. He sat up, his eyes alight.

"It would be difficult for you, even more difficult than these physical exercises," the Vulcan warned.

"I'm willing to try, Spock, if you will teach me."

"I will teach you, Jim."

Kirk smiled delightedly. "When do we start?"

"After you have showered."

"But... what about our meal?"

Spock looked at him silently, trying to maintain a strict expression on his face. It was difficult...

Kirk sighed deeply. "We will eat later," he said with a touch of regret.

CHAPTER TWO

They entered the quiet of a privacy cubicle. There they would not be disturbed except in extreme emergency. These were areas set aside for meditation, religious observation or just the need to be alone and undisturbed. In a closed society such as a starship, the rights of the individual to withdraw for a time, either alone or in company, were strictly set out as something which everyone must respect.

Spock eased himself into a cross-legged position on the floor. "Please sit, Captain," he said, pointing to a place facing him.

Kirk eyed the comfort of the low settee, sighed deeply, and sat where Spock had indicated.

"You must breathe deeply, Captain, as in any relaxation technique, then you must imagine the state of awareness which shuts out all around you, except that which you wish included."

Kirk remembered how Spock had eased his nausea and horror on Athene 2, only weeks before. At that time, he had entered into a state in which only he and Spock existed, even though all around them death and nightmare reigned. He mentioned it to the Vulcan.

"Yes, Captain, that is correct, but there I helped you achieve that state. You must learn to do it for yourself."

"I will try," Kirk said, "but I was never very good at this type of discipline."

After a further hour of guidance from Spock, and fruitless attempts by Kirk, they had got no further forward. Angry with himself, Kirk paced up and down the confines of the small room, trying to ignore the hunger pangs which gnawed at him. This was not the time to think about food - but he had not eaten for hours, and he had burnt up a great deal of energy.

"Damn it!" he muttered. "It's no good... "

Spock watched him calmly as he stormed up and down. He noted that the flush on Kirk's cheeks was steadily deepening, but he did not speak, unsure of what to say to the obviously angry mood of his Captain.

Finally Kirk stopped in front of him, saw his serenity, and that was the final straw. He exploded. "How the hell do you stay so calm all the time? Why do you always make me feel like an inferior being? Why are you always so damn *perfect*?"

He swore, turned away and stared out of the observation port, clenching his fists by his sides.

A wave of insecurity swept through Spock. Why had he ever thought he could have true friendship with this volatile Human? He understood less and less how the bond had formed. Could he have been mistaken? No... that was impossible. There could be no mistake. Then *he* must be to blame. He must remember that Kirk was Human, not Vulcan. Kirk was everything a Vulcan was not; quick tempered, impatient, changeable, impetuous, he...

"Spock," Kirk said softly, contritely.

Spock looked up and met Kirk's eyes. The Human knelt before him.

"I'm sorry I blew my top," Kirk continued. "It was not your fault. You have only been trying to help me. I'm sorry, I've been hopeless today." He sat back on his heels, looked down for a moment, then forced himself to meet the Vulcan's gaze. It was difficult - he felt so guilty. "I *have* tried, Spock, but I just cannot meet your standards, and I get so frustrated with myself."

Spock saw that he was genuine in his apologies, and his doubts about their friendship dissolved. He would have to make further concessions for Jim's humanity, and not judge him too harshly. He must try to teach him by adjusting more to the Human level.

"Spock," Kirk said worriedly on not seeing any response to his apology, "I will try harder, I promise you."

Kirk watched Spock carefully. He hoped he had not offended him - it was still so difficult to understand him, for all they had exchanged the vow of friendship. He knew that Spock treated him very carefully indeed, not to injure him in the training, but even that was often difficult for Kirk to overcome, for the Vulcan was immensely strong, and Kirk had to work hard for even the small victories of the discipline. Spock was so patient with him, more so than any Human instructor Kirk had ever had. Kirk was ashamed of his outburst; Spock did not deserve that.

"That is sufficient, Captain," Spock finally said. "If you try to the best of your ability, I can ask no more." Kirk smiled a little. "But - " Spock continued - "you must not attempt the impossible. You must learn patience with yourself."

"I know," Kirk said with an embarrassed chuckle. "Impatience is one of my worst faults."

"There is much time to learn."

"I know, but I want everything *now*."

"That is illogical."

"Yes, I know."

Spock was fascinated with this Human who was his friend, with his inconsistencies, his complex illogical behaviour; yet he was so eager to learn. It was a challenge for any Vulcan, particularly so for a half-Vulcan who had such difficulty mastering his own Human quirks.

"One day, I think it will be my downfall," Kirk added ruefully.

Spock shook his head slightly. "No, Jim, for I will be there with you."

A powerful feeling of happiness swept through Kirk at the Vulcan's words, and one again he gave thanks for the friendship of his enigmatic, alien First Officer.

"Spock," he said gratefully, "thank you."

The Vulcan felt it too, as he often did when physically close to his Captain. He barricaded himself against it, but it was hard to protect himself especially when Kirk reached out and touched his shoulder.

"I know you will be with me," Kirk said, "and that gives me great confidence."

Spock acknowledged the words with a slight bow, and without consciously having made the decision, he lifted his hand in the paired-finger Vulcan salute.

For a moment Kirk looked at him curiously, but suddenly realising what he was indicating, quickly touched his fingertips to Spock's. The Human caught his breath as the tingle crept through his hand and arm, and although he did not know it, directly to his mind. Slowly a deep inner peace descended upon him and he closed his eyes. Aware that Spock was guiding him in some way, he trusted himself to it, and within seconds he had entered into the curious state of heightened awareness where only the two of them existed. He drew strength and power from the sense of unity he felt with his friend, and once Spock had withdrawn his touch, he was able to hold onto it himself for a short time.

Spock studied him, pleased that Kirk had been able to maintain it. Slowly Kirk focussed on his surroundings, and saw the Vulcan's intense scrutiny. "Thank you," he said softly, wonderingly. "I feel so relaxed." In fact, he felt almost languid, but he knew that he could be alert within seconds. "As if I have slept for hours."

"It is useful if one needs to go without sleep for a time," Spock said. "Now you know what to aim for, Jim, you will learn how to enter into it almost instantaneously. It takes much concentration, and you must allow yourself time. Once you have mastered it, you will use it to concentrate your power, then you will be able to fight using that power."

"I will work at it, Spock, every moment that I can," Kirk said earnestly.

"Good," Spock said, pleased with him. "But now, I believe that you are hungry."

Food!!! Kirk had forgotten about food for a while, but the mention of it brought the pangs back full force.

"Yes," he said wistfully. "I've been hungry for hours. You wouldn't let me eat!" He grinned, wondering how Spock would take that remark.

"You are my Captain," Spock said. "I cannot stop you from eating if you choose to."

Kirk's look was sceptical. "You intimated strongly that I shouldn't eat before these relaxation exercises." He smiled a little. "I am your student in this. I must obey my teacher."

"That is most laudable, Captain."

Kirk's eyes widened. He suddenly realised that Spock had taken him seriously. He *had* meant it, but he had been joking a little. He must not forget that he was dealing with a Vulcan, and Spock would not understand his sense of humour. He sighed deeply. He had

committed himself to the Tzunarr training where he had to obey Spock in all things. If he did not, he was only worked the harder. Occasionally he had, like today, tried to initiate his own ideas; Spock would allow him to try, and then stare at him closely, as if he were a badly behaved schoolboy, when he failed miserably. Kirk decided there and then not to question a discipline where Spock was the expert, not he. And he must do the same in the relaxation technique.

It was not in Jim Kirk's nature to obey another blindly; he questioned things constantly. It had helped his career in many ways, had even saved his life on occasion, but he knew for sure that there were at least two things on which he would have to restrain himself. He made a promise to himself that he would obey Spock in these disciplines; he trusted the Vulcan, and he must learn to give himself completely to that trust. He had done it before, and had not found it difficult. He would do it again.

"I mean it, Spock," he said. "If I fail to do as I'm told, you must remind me that I must. That is an order."

"Very well, Captain," Spock said, a little startled by Kirk's strange mood.

Kirk smiled and stood up. "Let's go eat."

Spock rose. He himself had not the same need for sustenance as his Human friend, but he would accompany him, as was now his habit.

"I feel better, Spock," Kirk said. "I could eat a horse!!! But I feel as if I am really relaxed."

Spock frowned. "Why would you wish to eat an intelligent beast such as a horse, Captain? I did not know that it was used for... "

"Spock - it's only an expression. Humans don't eat horses. Well, not nowadays. It only means..." Kirk trailed off, seeing the puzzled expression on his friend's face. "Forget it."

"Vulcans do not forget anything," Spock replied as they left the privacy cubicle.

Kirk stopped and stared up at him. "You remember *everything*?"

"I have total recall, sir."

As they made their way to the Rec Room, Kirk reflected on the benefits and the curse of having total recall. He wondered how his First Officer could live with such an ability. He hoped that he had not done or said anything offensive to Spock since they had met. He was not proud of his initial reaction to Spock. He had wanted Gary Mitchell as his First Officer, and he had resented the Vulcan. That had certainly changed.

CHAPTER THREE

Lee Kelso had served with Kirk and Mitchell on their last ship. He was now - temporarily - the Enterprise's chief Helmsman, taking Sulu's place while Sulu worked on an important project in the Botany Lab. Kelso sat with Mitchell in the main rec room, talking over old times. Mitchell was pleased at his friend's promotion.

Lee was more to his taste than Sulu, and Mitchell hoped that the botany project would last a long time.

As Kirk and Spock entered the room Mitchell stared at them, wondering what Jim had been learning from the Vulcan. Jim was relaxed, animated, full of confidence...

"It's the talk of the ship," Kelso said.

"What?"

"The Captain and Mr. Spock."

Gary was puzzled. "What, Lee?" he asked irritably.

"The Vulcan allowing a Human to become his friend. He was on this ship for eleven years, and in all that time he had no friends. Then Jim Kirk comes along and suddenly..."

"It wasn't sudden," Mitchell interrupted. "Mr. Spock saved Jim's life on Athene 2. Something happened there, something so meaningful to Jim, so personal between him and the Vulcan, that it has bound them together somehow. He won't tell me what it was."

Kelso knew Gary well. "Your jealousy is showing, old friend."

Mitchell gave a start. He glared at Kelso. "I'm not jealous," he denied.

Kelso smiled. "Come on Gary you've always felt that Jim was your protege. You've guided him over the years, sometimes more than even *he* has realised. He was such an innocent."

Mitchell chuckled. "He was, yes..."

"He has always stayed loyal to you, Gary. He would never put anyone in your place."

Mitchell stared at the Vulcan, noting the intent way he stared at Kirk. How could Jim not flinch from such a gaze? "You think not?" he said after a few moments.

Kelso followed his gaze. "Mr. Spock is his First Officer. He is a Vulcan. To have the loyalty of such an officer is a major coup. To have him as a friend... Well, Vulcans have never entered into such relationships with other species. Jim is intrigued by the uniqueness of it, the novelty. He'll settle down, and you and he will return to your old familiar ways." He leaned forward and added with a touch of malice, "He'll forget his disappointment in you."

Mitchell glared at him but did not answer. He remembered only too clearly how he had let Jim down, how he had angered him. Things had not been the same between them since. He recalled with nostalgia how close he and Jim had been over the years, how Jim had turned to him for advice, how he had leaned on him as a friend should, when burdened by problems and decisions. Mitchell had always recognised and accepted Jim's command abilities as long as Jim welcomed his input. However, since Jim had grown in maturity his decisions were made with less dependence on Gary. Yet - he had still listened to him and considered his opinions valuable. Now all that had changed; Mitchell himself, with his prejudiced outbursts during an alien encounter recently, plus insubordination and disobedience, had all but destroyed Jim's confidence in him.

Kirk had the Vulcan now; a Science Officer of great genius, whom he respected highly, admired deeply, and trusted with a surety which went deeper than he had ever known with Gary.

Kelso liked Gary, he admired and respected Jim, but he had always felt a little left out when Jim and Gary were together. Gary had made it plain from the start that Jim was *his* special friend, and not to get between them. Jim had never made him feel that way though, and Lee had soon learned that Kirk had powerful charisma, and inspired intense devotion in his crew.

In a perverse way, Kelso was enjoying Gary's discomfiture at being left out, although Kirk was not deliberately doing it, perhaps did not even realise that Gary was feeling this way. Jim had changed since he had taken command of the Enterprise. He had matured with the responsibility of Starship command, and he had ventured into unknown territory in the friendship of a Vulcan, a member of possibly the most advanced race of the Federation.

Mitchell was silent. He sipped at his coffee, and tried not to watch Kirk and the Vulcan as they talked; but he caught Kirk's eye and got a smile of recognition. He smiled back, and was about to go over to him, but Kirk's attention was caught by something Spock said, and he turned away. Mitchell looked down and drummed his fingers on the table.

"You are acting like a jealous lover," Kelso said with a grin.

Mitchell flushed. "Shut up!" he hissed. "That isn't funny."

"O.K., O.K.," Kelso protested, "I didn't mean anything by it." But sometimes he wondered if at any time in their long friendship, they *had* been lovers. Their relationship had always been one of love, but in Starfleet, that was not uncommon.

People formed very intense personal relationships, physical or not, when sharing danger, by living so closely confined. It was accepted, even encouraged. Many studies had shown that personal bonds between people meant happier and more efficient ships. There were often married couples serving together, group marriages which covered all types of variations of species and sexes; loving relationships in any form were highly valued.

Kelso knew that Kirk did not form liaisons with his crew. It was a personal rule of his which he had never broken, but perhaps before - at the Academy - or when he had been a junior lieutenant... Kelso did not know - it was only speculation, but regardless of the type of relationship he had had with Gary, there was now much less intensity to it on Kirk's part, and Gary was very unhappy about it. Kirk's laughter reached them, and Kelso could see the tightening of Gary's mouth.

The Vulcan's face, Kirk noted hardly seemed to change, but there was a noticeable relaxation in his posture now. Spock had definitely lost some of his austerity, his stiffness, around him, and Kirk was pleased to see it. He knew that he was responsible for it, that Spock liked his company, but he was sure that his moods and unpredictability must vex the Vulcan at times. He thought over the events of the day, and promised himself that he would not put Spock through that again. Yet Spock had been generous enough to accept his apology, then had helped him achieve the state of relaxation he

had been striving for. He wondered at him. Why had he done it?

"Hi, Jim," Mitchell's voice interrupted.

Kirk looked up at his friend and grinned. "Hi, Gary, will you join us?"

Mitchell needed no further encouragement. He sat by Kirk's side. "You're eating late."

"My teacher is very strict with me," Kirk said with a grin to Spock.

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow. "Indeed I am not, Captain."

"I'm joking," Kirk said patiently.

"That is a Human aberration which I do not understand, sir."

Kirk pulled a face. "I'm not sure I would call it an aberration, Spock; however, you must learn to understand it." He paused and grinned more. "I was only half-joking. You *are* strict with me."

"Indeed, Captain, but if you wish I will attempt to make further allowances for you, as you are but Human."

Kirk tried to stop the indignation he felt at that remark. He flushed slightly. Mitchell covered a grin. Friendship with the tactless Vulcan? It would not last. He waited for the outraged response.

Kirk took a deep calming breath. He knew what Gary was thinking. He was not going to give him the satisfaction, nor was he going to lose his temper again with Spock.

"No, Spock," he said. "I want you to continue in the way you are doing. You know my strengths and weaknesses." He grinned a little. "Mainly my weaknesses. I am placing myself in your hands in these disciplines. I will abide by your decisions."

Spock knew the measure of trust that his Captain had in him, but he was strangely touched, all the same. He quickly brought the feeling under control.

"I am honoured, sir," he said.

Mitchell was amazed and he could not hide it. "Jim, I don't approve of all the risks you are taking with a person who is far stronger than you are."

Kirk turned to stare at him, and slowly Mitchell began to flush deeply.

"Since when have I needed *your* approval?" he asked.

"I... I... Jim..." Mitchell stammered, flustered and embarrassed by Kirk's remark, but to his further amazement, it was the Vulcan who spoke next.

"Mr. Mitchell, I assure you that I know what I am doing, and I would not cause the Captain any injury."

Mitchell looked at him, and for the first time ever was able to meet his gaze. He stared into the strange dark eyes and caught his breath. The Vulcan seemed to see straight through him, as if he could read his very thoughts.

"Your concern for Captain Kirk is most laudable," Spock continued. "But you must remember that he has honoured me by becoming my friend also. Would you cause him harm? I am not Human, I am Vulcan, but I must inform you that to us friendship is highly valued. I would never harm Jim in any way. His health and well-being are of prime importance to me. If training him in certain disciplines will assist him in his duties as Captain, then I am bound to give him that training. In accepting his friendship, I have taken on these responsibilities. I will not shirk them."

Kirk stared at Spock with as much amazement as Mitchell. He felt the warmth of happiness spread through him at those words. What more did friendship mean to his Vulcan First Officer?

Spock looked at him. "If it means that my Captain has to forego his meal for several hours, he will just have to accept it."

Kirk smiled broadly. Was Spock learning how to joke? No - surely not. He was being deadly serious.

"I will accept it," he said. "I promise."

He sat back and looked at Mitchell, who after a moment said. "I was not questioning your friendship, sir. I was just worried. Jim and I have been friends for a long time. I first met him when he was a sixteen year old boy at the Academy. I have felt responsible for him too. I hope I have not offended you, sir, I did not intend that. It's just..." He faced Kirk, seeing the interested look on his face. "If you care for someone, like I do for Jim... you worry..."

Kirk felt a lump form in his throat at Gary's open admission of feeling. He reached out, grabbed him behind the neck and shook him slightly. Mitchell smiled and accepted it gladly as a sign of Jim's affection.

"I could tell you tales about this old friend of mine, Spock," Kirk said.

"Indeed, that would be most interesting, Captain."

Mitchell flushed. "Jim..." he began, but he relaxed when Jim put an arm around his shoulder in the old familiar way.

"On Starbase Three, we..."

"Jim!" Mitchell exclaimed. "No!" He started to laugh.

A mischievous grin covered Kirk's face, as he proceeded to tell Spock a strange tale about Orion exotic dancers and Mitchell, which made no sense at all to a Vulcan. Both Kirk and Mitchell laughed most of the time, making the story even more incomprehensible, but Spock sat silently and listened, because it would have been ill-mannered of him not to. He raised his eyebrow and watched them with curiosity, as their laughter became almost hysterical by the end of the story.

In a strange way he was pleased, for at least Kirk seemed to be

more reconciled to Mitchell now, since Spock had spoken of the responsibilities of friendship. He believed that in his own way he had been able to assist them in the healing of the breach between them, for he had often been painfully aware of Kirk's need for the old familiar friendship with Mitchell. Now he had seen that Mitchell's need for that friendship was even more acute. Once again, he wondered at the illogical emotional needs of Humans.

Kirk looked at him. "That is an example of the kind of person, Gary is, Spock. You have been warned."

"I can assure you, Captain," Spock said primly, "a Vulcan would never get into such a situation."

Kirk burst out laughing. "I am quite sure you would not, Mr. Spock."

"I know he wouldn't, Jim," Mitchell said, suddenly serious. "Mr. Spock is far too sensible."

"You are most perceptive, Mr. Mitchell," Spock said, "even though you are also a trifle impetuous and irresponsible."

Mitchell almost choked; Kirk continued to laugh, but suddenly Mitchell caught a glimmer of what Jim saw in this Vulcan. He realised also that Spock had contributed to the present good feeling between himself and Jim, and his respect for the First Officer grew.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "I think..." He grinned at Kirk.

Delighted that Mitchell was showing respect to Spock, Kirk returned the grin. Mitchell rarely showed anyone any respect, even Admirals of the Fleet. Well, there was much to respect in his First Officer, that was for sure.

"Was Captain Kirk always so quick-tempered?" Spock asked.

"What!" Kirk exclaimed, shocked by the question so openly asked in his presence.

Mitchell tried to control his amusement at Kirk's expression. "Oh yes, he has always been that way." He leaned forward, and added questioningly. "I don't believe I have ever seen him lose his temper with you, though."

Spock shook his head slightly. "He has."

Suddenly aware that he was staring at them open-mouthed, Kirk closed his lips together tightly and tried to swallow his embarrassment. He knew that Gary was teasing him... but was Spock? No, surely not, he had only been requesting information.

"I can't tell you how many times he has lost his temper with me," Mitchell said, "but the most serious times were recently. I deserved it, and more. He reduced me to a quivering wreck, as you saw, desperate for his pardon." He looked down, embarrassed now.

"Mr. Mitchell, if you have done someone a wrong, and if that person is your closest friend, then it is not shameful to ask his forgiveness. It is your obligation to do so, for your sake and his."

Both men stared at him, then at each other.

"The past should be laid aside now," Spock continued. "There should be no recriminations between true friends. It is only hurting both of you."

"Spock!" Kirk said, amazed by him. "I thought you didn't understand Human feelings!"

"I observe, Captain... and... we have 'touched' in the Vulcan way. I know you are pained by the estrangement with Mr. Mitchell."

Kirk smiled slightly. How well the Vulcan understood him.

"And you, Mr. Mitchell," Spock said, turning his attention to the startled Mitchell. "You must stop your immature and pointless jealousy of me. My friendship with Jim is a relationship which has its roots deep in Vulcan tradition; it is quite different from Human friendship and is not based on the emotion of love, which is undoubtedly the basis of your enduring friendship with him. You must understand that."

Deeply embarrassed that the Vulcan had noted his behaviour so closely and with such accuracy, Mitchell did not know which way to turn. His colour deepened and, well aware of it, he felt like a fool. Kirk felt sorry for him. Spock, plainly spoken and honest, did not realise how his observations could affect Humans. He pulled the red-faced Mitchell to him, allowing his friend to hide a little. Mitchell clutched at him, half-laughing, and Kirk ruffled his hair affectionately. He felt better now about Gary, more able to communicate with him, and ready to forget his past failings.

He looked over at Spock and met his eyes. They were unreadable. Kirk wondered at the Vulcan's generosity. A Human would never have tried to reconcile them in such a manner. He smiled at Spock and noticed the very slight change in his expression. Maybe Spock thought that their friendship was not based on feelings; maybe it wasn't on his part, but Kirk knew that for himself it was certainly founded on an ever-growing affection. He wondered what the 'emotionless' Vulcan would feel if he knew that. Surely he must realise that Kirk was very Human, and knew no other kind of friendship.

After a few more minutes of reminiscences, Spock decided to go. He could see that the illogical friendship between the two men was getting decidedly rowdy, and it was not to his quiet, reserved nature.

"If you will excuse me," he said, about to rise.

Kirk became instantly alert. "You are off-duty, are you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then join us in my quarters."

Spock sighed inwardly. He had managed to help in their reconciliation; he had no further wish to join them in whatever Human idiosyncrasies they were about to indulge in. "I have some research I wish to do," he said.

"Don't you ever relax?" Kirk asked.

"I have been relaxing, Captain," Spock protested.

Watching Kirk persuade the Vulcan, Mitchell reflected on the special qualities of his old friend. Jim Kirk could charm the birds out of the trees. As they left the Rec Room Mitchell almost bumped into Spock as the Vulcan courteously allowed the Captain to leave first. By the time they had negotiated the various doorways leading to the Captain's quarters, Mitchell had learned to pause and wait until Kirk and then Spock had gone through. He knew it was the correct procedure, but having had such an easy relationship with Kirk all these years, neither of them had bothered about it. Spock had tightened the military aspect of rank aboard ship, but *perhaps*, Mitchell thought, *it's only the natural courtesy of his Vulcan heritage.*

CHAPTER FOUR

Mitchell waited until he was motioned to a seat by an amused Kirk. He grinned a little. He was not going to make the mistake of sitting down without permission as he once would have done, especially with the Vulcan there. He listened as Spock declined Kirk's offer of Saurian brandy saying that Vulcans did not indulge in drinking alcohol. He exchanged a glance with Kirk then, determined that he too could be courteous, said, "May I pour you some brandy, Captain?"

Kirk's eyes twinkled with delight. "You may. Thank you - and pour yourself a glass."

"Yes, sir, thank you," Mitchell said correctly.

For a moment Kirk wondered how long it would take Gary to forget his manners, but he was pleased at his efforts, and he suddenly realised just how much he had missed the easy banter with him all those months. He knew though that he would have to be careful, for knowing Gary as he did he was aware that it would not take much for his old friend to expect more from him. He had the responsibility of a Starship now; he had to put childish escapades behind him.

"What is your research, Spock?" he asked.

"It has to do with the theory of multiple universes," Spock replied.

"Oh... That's interesting," Kirk said. "Er... would you care to explain it?"

Spock was surprised that the Captain should be interested in such a complex theory, but he was beginning to learn that Kirk was no ordinary Starship commander.

"If you wish it," he replied tonelessly. "May I use your terminal?"

Kirk nodded. He leaned forward and watched as the graphics and equations on the screen accompanying Spock's voice unfolded. After a few minutes, he glanced at Gary in confusion. Mitchell laughed softly at his consternation.

"Spock," Kirk said, "I'm sorry, but I don't understand it at all." He swallowed as the intense Vulcan gaze was turned upon him. "I am... not... a scientific specialist, I have to rely on you and

your department for that."

"Indeed, Captain, that is what we are for. However..." He hesitated.

"Yes, Spock?" Kirk asked, wondering what the First Officer wanted to say. Why he was hesitating, when he had been so forthright earlier?

Checking that there were no signs of anger in Kirk's expression, Spock went straight to the point. "I feel that command training does not include enough grounding in scientific matters. You cannot always rely on me or one of my section to be with you, and perhaps..." He trailed off at Kirk's bemused and intense gaze.

"Spock," Kirk said with disbelief, "you want to train me in something else, don't you? You are a hard taskmaster." He scratched his head, and with a put-upon expression to Mitchell, he sighed deeply.

Spock had difficulty maintaining his composure at his Captain's expression.

"Sir, I do not wish to burden you with too many things."

Kirk faced him. "I think you do," he said with a grin. "You are correct, there is much I should learn, and who better to learn it from? However, Spock, I do not want to suffer alone." He slammed his fist against the desk. Why had he not thought of it before? "Mr. Spock, why don't you set up a series of lectures on subjects you think would be of practical use and interest to the crew. Make them basic at first - you don't want to lose us. It could be broadcast throughout the ship and recorded for reference."

Confusion was all that Spock could feel. "Suffer alone, sir?" he asked. Mitchell spluttered, almost choking on his drink. Kirk closed his eyes for a moment, reminding himself about restraining his sense of humour around Spock.

"A joke," he tried to explain. "A lame one," he added on seeing the incomprehension in the eyes of his Vulcan friend.

"I see," Spock said, not seeing at all.

"Will you do it?"

"You will attend?" Spock said, his tone indicating to Kirk that he was being requested to strongly.

"Certainly," Kirk agreed. "Gary and I will both attend."

Mitchell began to protest, but thought better of it after a warning glance from Kirk. He shuddered inside. He hated lectures, and he did not dare think what the humourless Vulcan's would be like. But he would go to the first one, if Jim wanted him to. Certainly, Jim had volunteered him.

"Very well, Captain," Spock said. "I will prepare a lecture on multiple universes."

"Keep it simple," Kirk said, mindful of his incomprehension before.

"Yes, sir," Spock said. "Now if you will excuse me, I will work on how I am going to simplify it enough for Humans to understand."

Kirk's eyes widened. Mitchell choked on his drink, and it was several moments before he was able to control his coughing. He sat back. That was it... Jim was really going to explode this time! All the signs were there, the flushed cheeks, the outraged expression, the working of his mouth. Mitchell prepared himself to enjoy this.

With great strength of will, Kirk bit back the retort he was going to make. He forced the feeling of having been offended aside. Spock had not intended offence. He had been blunt, as was his way. He *would* have to simplify it for a Human like Kirk to understand. He had been speaking truthfully. Kirk grinned at Mitchell as he rose to his feet, enjoying the look of disbelief on his friend's face. He walked Spock to the door. Quickly, Mitchell stood, remembering his earlier reprimands by Spock about being seated in the Captain's presence. He shook his head. He could not understand how Jim was holding onto his temper!

"Spock," Kirk said, stopping his First Officer by the door. "There is much you can teach me. I hope that I will be able to repay you in some way. Perhaps there is something you will learn from me."

The Vulcan raised his eyebrow. "There is much I wish to learn from you, sir."

Kirk was intrigued. "Like what?" he asked.

"How to command Humans," came the startling reply.

"You know how to command Humans, Spock," Kirk said.

The Vulcan shook his head slightly. "No, sir. I do not understand Humans. It is difficult for me to command them, as their behaviour is so illogical. I appear to antagonise them at times. They do not wish to take orders when they cannot follow the reasoning behind it. I did have grave reservations when given the position of First Officer. I still do. I am a scientist, not a command officer."

Kirk felt a wave of sympathy for him, a lone Vulcan on a ship full of emotional, illogical Humans. How did he cope? He was so honest and forthright, he had not yet learned the diplomacy of dealings with Humans. It was difficult for a Human to command other Humans, even to understand them; how much harder it would be for a Vulcan. Kirk remembered how he, only hours before, had questioned Spock on the exercise training, and had flared up when he had been unable to master the relaxation techniques.

"I will help you in any way I can, Spock," he said. "I have every confidence in you, and your abilities as my First Officer. Be patient with the crew, as you are patient with me. We Humans question everything. We argue, debate, fight, we never accept orders easily. Other species find us impossible to deal with at times, but we are learning, Spock, please believe that. You are highly respected on the Enterprise; you are an enormous asset to me as my Science Officer, my First Officer. I rely on you, Spock. Your support is essential to me."

Kirk's sincerity was plain to see, and Spock stared at his unusual Human Captain with open admiration in his eyes.

"Thank you, sir," he said, bowing his head to cover it, but not before Kirk had noticed.

"Good night, my friend," Kirk said, touching his shoulder.

"Good night, Jim," Spock replied, warmed by his Captain's understanding.

As he left Kirk stared after him thoughtfully, then returned to his seat and stretched out. Mitchell sat down, but did not speak. He waited for Kirk in the companionable silence of old friends.

Finally Kirk looked at him. "Like all of us, Spock is insecure. I hadn't fully realised that until now. I hadn't thought that he would have doubts about his ability to be First Officer - he always appears so calm and efficient. I knew it must be difficult for him to deal with Humans, but..." He trailed off, remembering how he had actively and almost desperately gone out of his way to win the Vulcan's friendship. He had never worked out why, but he knew it was vital, even essential to him. He sighed deeply and continued, "Can you understand now how lucky I am to have his loyalty and friendship?"

Mitchell shrugged. "He *is* unusual, but Jim, if you would only tell me what happened between you on Athene 2, maybe then I would understand." He saw Kirk's hesitation. "I can see his worth. I know he tried to heal the breach between us. I know he's special to you, for why else would you trust him so, with no thought of your safety..." He waited, hoping Kirk would trust him enough to confide in him again. He held his breath.

Kirk shook his head slightly. "It's very personal. I'm sorry, Gary." He leaned forward, his eyes fixed on Mitchell's face. "I can only say that he saved my life, my sanity, in a way which is totally unbelievable. It has forged us together in some way, and it is a lifetime bond. It's as if..." He stopped as it suddenly became clear to him. "It's as if he really is in some inexplicable way... my brother!" He smiled. That was it - it was like a tie of family.

"C'mon Jim... he's an alien!" Mitchell mocked, not liking this at all.

"Alien? Yes and no. That is what makes it so interesting. Vulcan and Human." He sat back. "He lets me touch him now. He would always draw back before. He never allows another that particular privilege."

"I think he has contaminated you," Mitchell said. "You're so much 'The Captain' now."

"I'm still your friend, Gary, the same Jim Kirk, but I *must* be 'The Captain' when on duty and in all matters pertaining to my ship and crew. Is it so difficult for you to give me the respect you owe your commanding officer?"

"No, Jim... It just takes a little getting used to."

Kirk stood, paced about his cabin. Why did Gary always make life so complicated for him? He stopped in front of him.

"You've been aboard long enough. Why can't you get used to it? I've been your commander before."

Mitchell rose to his feet. "Not like this, Jim - not with this type of power, Starship command."

"Why does it make a difference?" Kirk demanded.

"I don't know, but it does. It has changed you."

"Yes," Kirk admitted, "but we all change. I must face my responsibilities. I cannot let down the people who sponsored me - the youngest ever Starship Captain." Then it came to him, what Spock had realised weeks before. "That is why they gave me a Vulcan First Officer - a cautious logical balance for a young, perhaps impetuous Human Captain. Of course... but they were not to know what would happen between us. It was an experiment in inter-species co-operation, for Spock is the only Vulcan left who will work with Humans."

When Nogura had told him that Spock was to be his First Officer, he had not been pleased. It was not due to any personal dislike of Vulcans, for Kirk knew that prejudice had never been one of his faults. It had been purely and simply because he had wanted his friend Gary in the job. It had taken him some time to appreciate Spock, and he now knew that it had been even more difficult for Spock to accept him. Kirk remembered how reluctantly Spock had entered into their friendship, almost against his will. It was the most intriguing and interesting relationship Kirk had ever known, and he was enjoying every minute of it... Well, almost every minute. He rubbed at his most recent wrench, the result of today's exercises.

"The Federation prides itself on the friendship of all races, yet all Vulcans in Starfleet recently opted out of serving on all-worlds ships. All except Spock. I wonder why the Vulcans left? Could it be that they couldn't stand working with Humans any more? Our petty squabbles, our foolishness, our open emotions. Look what we put Spock through, what I have done... Yet, we have forged a bond of friendship - something that no-one would have guessed." He grinned widely. "Who knows, maybe their experiment will work after all."

Mitchell grew angry. Jim kept referring to his bond with the Vulcan, but he would not explain the nature of it, or how it had formed. His own relationship with Jim would never be the same now; the Vulcan was in the way. Kirk's reliance and trust in an alien had changed him. He would never rely on Mitchell as he had done in the past.

Knowing Mitchell well, Kirk could tell that he had upset him. He saw Mitchell's insecurity and unsureness, and he tried to reassure him. He held out his hand. "I'm glad things have improved between us. I missed being able to talk to you."

Mitchell sneered. "You don't need me any more. You can talk to your Vulcan Science Officer about the latest scientific discoveries... "

"Gary!" Kirk exclaimed. "Don't take that attitude."

"What attitude? My oldest friend - some friend! - treats me like dirt once he enters into his mystical bond with his alien

friend." His voice was full of contempt and bitterness.

Furious with him for daring to take that tone, Kirk said angrily, "You may leave, Mister."

"Yes - off this ship!" Mitchell replied hotly.

"Oh! You want transferred?" Kirk retaliated. "That's fine with me. I'll arrange it right now." He moved to his console. "Computer."

"Working," answered the female voice of the Enterprise computer.

"Transfer file."

"Transfer file prepared."

Mitchell stared at Kirk in horror. How was this happening?

"Lt. Commander Gary - "

"JIM!" Mitchell cried, lurching forward to grab his arm. "Jim... please... don't... "

Kirk stared at him. "Changed your mind, Mr. Mitchell? Well, I have not."

Mitchell let out a shaky breath. He was going to have to plead again with this strange and tougher Jim Kirk. He hated himself for bringing on this new crisis with Jim, and for his own weakness which forced him to concede so much to him. Yet... in some perverse way he felt an unusual thrill go through him at what he was doing. He clutched at Kirk's arm, put his other hand on his shoulder.

"Please, Jim..." he pleaded. "I'm sorry... I didn't mean what I said."

Kirk stood unmoving. "Didn't you?" he asked icily.

Mitchell stared into his eyes. "Maybe I did at the time, but it was anger and jealousy talking. I couldn't help it, Jim. I can't help how I feel about you. I thought I had got over you years ago, but recently it has returned full force. I'm sorry, Jim. I try not to be so foolish, so jealous, but for so long I was the one closest to you." He looked down, unable to meet the disappointment in Kirk's eyes.

Slowly Kirk's anger disappeared. He grabbed Mitchell by the arms and shook him. "Gary," he murmured, "I am not your exclusive possession. I never was. Maybe there were times when you thought I was; maybe I leaned on you too much sometimes, making you think I was. You must let go, Gary. It's not healthy for you, nor for me."

Mitchell forced himself to meet Kirk's penetrating gaze. "I know," he whispered.

Kirk did not know what to say, faced with his friend's obvious pain. Whatever he said would hurt him. He chose his words carefully. "I'm sorry this has reared again. You know that I cannot be what you want me to be. I told you that years ago, when we first became friends. I cannot and will not enter into a sexual relationship with you. It's not in my nature to love another man in

that way. It is not the kind of love I have for you, and it never was. You know that."

Mitchell let out a sob, and was reassuringly pulled into Kirk's tight hold. He hugged Kirk hard, relieved at the understanding Jim showed. Who else would be so forgiving? Who else would still accept him as a friend? There was only one Jim Kirk. Mitchell knew he was privileged to have the friendship of such a man. It had taken the Vulcan to make him realise it.

He stood back, and as they looked at one another, time sped back, as they both remembered their Academy days.

CHAPTER FIVE

Kirk was sixteen when he gained admission to Starfleet Academy. He had been put in the charge of the attractive, popular seventeen year old Gary Mitchell, who, having failed his first year examinations, was repeating the year.

They were to share a room. Mitchell was to show Kirk the ropes, and the two boys soon found that they hit it off from the start. Jim Kirk was handsome, almost pretty in his youthful good looks. He was eager to please, innocent, studious and shy; a strange and attractive mix to the brash Mitchell. Jim quickly began to look up to Gary, who was, to him, assured, daring, an older brother figure. His regard for Gary increased when rescued by him from a fight where he was being badly beaten by the upperclassman Finnegan, who was delighting in picking on the young slightly built Kirk.

One night several weeks into their term Mitchell returned from a party more than a little drunk. He saw Jim sprawled out naked on the bunk and, unable to stop himself, he threw off his clothes and lay down beside Jim, giving in to the feelings he had been trying to deny since he had met his room-mate. Jim awoke with a start, fear and horror sweeping through him as he was kissed and fondled.

He tried to struggle, but Mitchell was larger and stronger than Jim then, and he easily held the younger boy down. Tears flowed from Jim's eyes as he realised his situation. He had not the skill nor the strength to throw Mitchell off; he was helpless in the other boy's hold. He tried to fight down his panic enough to speak, and he pleaded as he had never done in his life before.

Gary, in his drunkenness, did not understand; he continued in his attempts to rouse the young boy's passion, and when he could not he decided that he did not care. He would take what he wanted... He looked down into the tear-stained face, and unbearable waves of desire overcame him. He had to have him... Now...

Understanding his expression, Jim once more pleaded with him to stop. Something in his desperation touched Gary. He shook his head, trying to clear it, and this time Jim's words penetrated. He took pity on him and let him go. He watched as Jim curled up into a foetal position and cried into his pillow. After a time, sobered up now by his empathy with the sobbing boy, he gently put a hand on the shaking shoulder and apologised. He went to his own bed and lay down, but he could not sleep for thinking about what he had almost done. He lay there full of self recrimination, trying to control his shaking as he realised that he was still aroused; he did not go

near Jim again.

Jim was quiet after a time, and he too lay awake for the rest of the night. In the early hours he rose, made some coffee, and brought Gary a cup. Gary stared at him in complete astonishment, but he accepted it. Finally Jim gathered his courage, sat on the bed, and thanked him for not doing what he had obviously wanted to. He gazed at Gary with his large hazel eyes full of apprehension, and Gary felt a wave of affection for him, dizzying in its intensity. Gary apologised again, and from then on they had become fast friends.

Never again had Gary tried to force him, but once he had asked. Jim refused him with a tact beyond his years, and continued to trust him as a friend, until Gary finally accepted that Jim would never be his lover. To his surprise, he found himself content with a deep friendship with Jim. The younger boy became the brother Gary had never known, and he was fiercely protective of him.

However, Kirk was determined that he would never be in such a helpless position again. He worked long hours building up muscle and strength. He tried every sport and exercise technique available at the Academy, and by the time he graduated there was no-one who could beat him in combat. Finnegan had left - the one person Jim would have loved to take on and beat - but he was assured now of his own power. He exuded self confidence and a powerful masculinity which made him highly attractive to women. By the time he became Captain of the Enterprise he was used to being the winner in all tests of strength.

The factor of superior alien physical power entered his life in the person of his First Officer, but even from the first he had not been afraid. Kirk, who had always yearned for someone to totally understand him, to be completely and unselfishly loyal to him, had sensed such a one in the Vulcan. His bond with Spock already ran deeper than his years' long friendship with Gary. The spiritual joinings he had experienced in the healing meld and when they touched fingertips in the friendship bond had entered the deepest part of him, and though not consciously aware of them, he only knew with complete surety that he trusted Spock implicitly. The Vulcan could probably break him in half, but Kirk knew that he would never do such a thing.

He knew also that there was more to their friendship. Spock was still so reserved and reticent, still wary of an emotional, illogical Human. One day, they would understand each other in a very special way. He had had a taste of it, when he had lain injured in the Vulcan's arms and had felt his healing power, and when they had 'touched' in the bond of friendship. He would be patient, though. He was thankful for what he had already gained.

CHAPTER SIX

Kirk held Gary away and shook him.

"We're both grown men now, Gary," he said. "I'm not the pretty kid I once was."

Mitchell smiled. "You're more attractive than ever, Jim."

Kirk could not help but laugh. "Am I? Well, it doesn't

matter, nothing has changed."

"I know, Jim. I know. I've got a big mouth, I always did have, and you were always my weak spot."

"Gary, you could have anyone you want."

"Except you," Gary said, his voice full of unhappiness.

"You have me as your friend," Kirk said intently.

"I know, Jim," Mitchell said. "And I'm grateful and thankful for that."

"Just don't pressurise me, Gary, not any more. I am not responsible for your hang-ups over me. I thought you had got over them years ago."

Embarrassment swept through Gary. He could not understand what was happening to him. He had reconciled himself to his relationship with Jim many years ago, or so he had thought.

"So did I, Jim," he said, trying to formulate his words carefully. "I guess it must be that aura of power around you now... and this.. this strange attachment between you and Mr. Spock."

Kirk shook him hard, "I won't be entering into a sexual relationship with him, Gary!"

They both burst out laughing at the thought, and Mitchell's embarrassment fizzled away.

"Do Vulcans have sex?" he asked. "They have no passion, no feelings.."

Kirk shrugged. He was not going to get involved in frivolous discussion; he had to make Gary understand once and for all. He let go of him. "He is no threat to our friendship. Look how he tried to reconcile us. I'm sick of the constant bickering between us. I need your support. I need to be sure of you, as I am of Spock. He is cool and efficient, and I deeply admire him. My old friend Gary Mitchell used to be like that in his own Human way."

Mitchell bent his head. Kirk was right; somewhere along the way the highly trained and efficient Navigator had strayed. He had not been there for Jim when he should have been. The Vulcan had taken his place.

Kirk sat down. "Why me?" he asked, suddenly wanting to know. "Why were you attracted to me? You never were one for boys or men."

Gary sat on the edge of the desk. "Human sexuality is the weirdest thing. I have always loved women. You are the only male who has ever made me feel this way." He grinned, with a touch of impishness. "I guess it must be some deeply hidden homosexual trait. I'm just lucky that you, even after what I did to you, even knowing how I felt, still gave me your friendship. Anyone else would have shunned me." He gazed earnestly at Kirk. "Mr. Spock is right. I *am* privileged to be your friend."

"Gary." Kirk leaned over and gripped his arm. "You could have forced a young defenceless boy, but you didn't. You had the decency and compassion of a civilised being. I can't begin to tell you how

grateful I was to you. If you had done it, I would never have got over it. My life would have been ruined. Listen, Gary - I care for you, you know that, and if it had been in my nature I would have been your lover... but it was not and I still wanted your friendship. I have given you all that I can give. You have accepted that."

"With gratitude, Jim."

"I don't avoid your touch, Gary. I'm not afraid of you. I was, only once, that time you held me down on my bed. I have always trusted you since you took pity on me that night. We have been close friends... good friends."

Mitchell tried to swallow the lump in his throat. "You're so damn noble, Jim," he said finally. "Just like your Vulcan. You make the perfect pair."

Embarrassed, Kirk smiled, then he laughed. There was an element of truth in Gary's words. Playfully, he hauled Mitchell from his perch, and losing his balance, Gary landed on his knees on the floor.

He stared up at Kirk. "See how I worship at your feet."

Kirk frowned. "Stop joking."

"I'm not joking," Mitchell said seriously. "I would do it, if you would allow it."

Kirk swallowed. Why was this happening now, after all those years of their comradeship? He could not understand Gary any more. He held out his hand, "Stand up," he said firmly.

Mitchell caught hold of his hand. He bent and kissed it with a passion he was unable to control.

Kirk stiffened with distaste. "Gary," he warned, but before he could pull away Gary, caught up in an overpowering wave of adoration for him, kissed him again, moaning softly to himself as he did so.

Roughly, Kirk pulled away. "Perhaps you *should* transfer off my ship," he said angrily.

Mitchell stared at him in confusion. He tried to steady his breathing. He could see the anger in the Captain's eyes, the pain there too.

"Please... forgive me," he said softly as remorse for hurting Kirk again hit him. "Please... "

Kirk tried to overcome his agitation and speak calmly. "All right, but leave - now."

Mitchell nodded. He quickly rose to his feet, and left Jim's quarters.

Unable to settle, his thoughts in a turmoil, Kirk paced his room. Why had this come out again, after such a long time? What was wrong with Gary? He tried to deep-breathe, and recalling Spock's instructions for the relaxation technique, he set himself to

achieve the wonderful sense of peace he had gained earlier. It did not work. He became more agitated than ever. He could not rest; he needed help. He needed Spock.

Quickly he made his way to the Vulcan's quarters. The hour was late, but somehow he knew that Spock would not have retired.

Spock rose to greet him. "Captain."

Kirk moved over to him. "Am I disturbing you?" he asked anxiously.

Truthfully, Spock answered him. "Yes, Captain. I am preparing my lecture. It is a difficult task."

"Can it wait?"

"Indeed, sir."

"Jim. Please call me Jim."

Spock was well aware of Kirk's agitation and unrest. It assaulted him in waves. He wondered what was wrong.

"Jim. How may I help you?" he asked.

Kirk let out a shaky breath. "I don't know. I just couldn't bear to be alone. I need... the calmness of your presence." He suddenly felt relief hit him as he spoke. He had not been able to formulate it before, but that was exactly why he was here.

Spock raised an eyebrow. This Human never failed to surprise him. He indicated a chair.

"Please sit down, Jim," he said.

Once Kirk was seated, Spock took his own seat, clasped his hands together against the desk top and waited.

"I cannot find peace," Kirk said, his eyes showing the strain he was under. "You helped me before. Will you do so again?"

For a moment Spock considered chiding him for not trying hard enough, but on seeing his expression something close to pity held his words unsaid. He bowed his head in acknowledgement, then held out his hand. With great relief, Jim touched his fingertips, and with surprising ease, slipped into the peaceful meditative state. A part of Spock watched, detached, as the Human threw himself so eagerly into the fraternal binding he did not even understand. It had only taken the slightest touch, this time. Aware of the turmoil in Kirk's mind, Spock caught the overlap of the whole scene with Mitchell in the split second before Jim had entered into the relaxation.

Shock was all he could feel at Mitchell's behaviour, and consternation at the intricacies of the relationship, of Jim's feelings, his generosity. But, what startled him the most was Jim's need for *him*, the desperation for his company, his advice... Was this Vulcan friendship? Was this what was meant when one took the vow of friendship and brotherhood? Or was it Kirk's Human need for the help and guidance of one who was stronger? Was he getting Jim's need for affection? Something a Vulcan could not give. He floundered in confusion and uncertainty. There was no one he could

ask, he was totally alone in this. He must try to trust his own instincts, but that was an area where he had always found some conflict between Vulcan and Human modes of thought.

He concentrated on Kirk. He kept the light contact with him until he was sure that his friend was deeply in the correct state of calmness, then he carefully drew away. The Human was so receptive to him now, Spock could have slipped into mind link with him, but he resisted that. It would have been the normal Vulcan thing to do, but to a non-telepath it would be a violation, just as serious as the physical one Mitchell had once contemplated.

He watched as his Captain's eyes opened, seeing that they were now calm and clear. Kirk's face lit up in a radiant smile, and Spock tried to barricade himself against the happiness coming from him.

He swallowed. "I trust that has helped you, Jim?"

"Yes, Spock, yes," Kirk murmured. "Thank you, my friend."

"You honour me," Spock said formally.

"You calm my soul," Kirk said, realising how true that was.

"It is my privilege to do so," Spock replied.

Kirk breathed slowly and deeply. He was relaxed now and able to put the incident with Mitchell aside. He resolved however not to allow such a situation again, even if it meant never being alone with him. What a sorry complication to a friendship he once had relied upon!

He stared at the Vulcan. "You are different from anyone I have ever met."

"Each one of us is unique, Jim."

"Yes, but you have unusual qualities, Spock."

The Vulcan did not know how to answer. He had never allowed himself to become so intimate with anyone before, and he could not prevent it. Jim Kirk, without the aid of telepathy, was able to read him in a way no one had ever done. It was extremely disconcerting, and highly disturbing, to one who had spent so many years alone.

"What is your opinion of Gary?" Kirk suddenly asked.

Spock gave a start at the change of subject. He blinked. "He is a capable officer, but his tendencies towards flippancy and irresponsibility and his arrogance are faults which need to be rectified. However, he is your friend, so it is logical to assume that you know his weaknesses."

Kirk nodded. "Yes, I know, Spock." He sighed. "I thought I had got him straightened out. Now I'm not so sure. He worries me."

"He is learning discipline," Spock replied. "I remind him constantly."

Kirk grinned. "I have noticed."

"He does not take kindly to it, nor to me. He resents me, and the friendship between you and me."

"He never took kindly to discipline," Kirk said, looking down. He wondered if he should tell Spock more.

Spock waited patiently, aware of his Captain's uncertainty. Finally, Kirk spoke. "His feelings for me are very complex. Perhaps it was a mistake to get him assigned to the Enterprise, but I thought..." He stared into the calm, black Vulcan eyes, and suddenly, he wanted to tell Spock everything.

Spock listened impassively. Some of it he knew already from Jim's earlier stray thoughts. He tried to understand. Surely, Humans were the strangest creatures in the galaxy.

"I find this difficult to understand, Jim, for as you know, feelings are alien to me."

Kirk did not comment on that. "I just wanted to tell you, for you must be able to comprehend Human behaviour if you are to command them."

"I will try, Captain," Spock said. "I thank you for your trust," he added, suddenly realising that Jim had never told this to any other.

There was a long moment of silence, while Kirk tried to find the rest of what he wanted to say. Spock waited.

"I know I can trust you completely. I have never spoken of this to anyone else." He shuddered a little. "Since that night, I have worked hard to build myself up. I guess I've always been afraid to be in the power of another."

"You are strong for a Human, Jim, but you will meet people who are far stronger than you. You cannot rely on muscle in all situations."

"No, but I need an edge at times. Sometimes diplomacy, bluff, *everything* fails, and it gets down to basics. That is why I wanted to learn Vulcan martial arts from you."

After all he had heard, Spock realised anew just how much trust this Human had in him. Jim, afraid to be helpless in the strength of another, was not afraid with him. He wondered if Jim, knowing just how much strength a Vulcan had, would still not fear him... Yet Jim had struggled against Spock for weeks now in the Tzunarr discipline, and although peeved and annoyed at not yet being able to throw him, he had accepted superior Vulcan strength and had entrusted himself wholeheartedly to him.

Curiosity made him ask. "Captain... why...?"

Kirk grinned, "Why am I not afraid of you? A person much stronger than me! I should be, shouldn't I? That would be logical, given what I have told you." He paused, searching Vulcan eyes, looking for the answer and somehow finding it in the gentle manner of his friend. "I've never been afraid of you, even the first time you threw me onto the mat as if I weighed little more than a child. I can't explain it. Perhaps I knew in my heart that you are non-violent, non-aggressive, despite the obvious physical strength. Now, after what you have done for me... After our vow of

friendship, there is no way I could fear you. Nothing you could do would scare me, even if you held me down and put a knife to my heart. I am that sure of you, Spock."

Hopelessly confused by his Captain's words, and the emotion they evoked in him, Spock tried to exert control. "I... am uncertain, when you speak so."

"It's what you get, when you take *me* on as your friend," Kirk said, sympathy in his voice. "I can't help how I feel, Spock. I try not to burden you with my emotions. It's just - I feel so safe with you by my side. I've never felt so confident in my life before, and I have you to thank for that." He leaned forward, and stretched his hand out. "Let me feel your strength," he said suddenly, taking the Vulcan by surprise.

"But, Captain," Spock protested, "I could break the bones in your hand!"

"You don't have to go that far," Kirk replied with a touch of amusement.

"Very well, Captain," Spock conceded, "but you must stop me before the pain becomes unendurable."

"Ummm, yes of course," Kirk said, wondering for a moment if he was being plain stupid.

After a moment of hesitation, Spock took the outstretched hand. He steeled himself against the waves of emotion which pounded at him through the touch. The scale of the Human's affection for him was increasing at an alarming rate. How was he to deal with such feelings? Was he expected to return them? He could not do so. He was a Vulcan... Yet, he could not reject them either. To do so would be an insult to his Captain. He would have to endure them, accept them. He did not believe that he could be relaxed with them, nor did he think he would ever welcome them, but he knew only that he accepted Kirk with all his Human failings as his friend. That was an awesome responsibility; to protect, guide, defend him, yet also to obey him, his commanding officer. He wondered if he would be able to deal with such conflicts.

The pressure on Kirk's hand increased slowly, carefully, until the pain threatened to overcome him. He attempted to pull away, but Spock's grip was unbreakable. It was impossible.

"Enough," he said finally.

He saw the relief in Spock's eyes as the Vulcan released him. He did not realise that his friend had experienced all his pain. He rubbed at his reddened hand. "You're strong," he said. "Very strong."

"Are you all right?" Spock asked worriedly.

Kirk saw his concern, and smiled. He was learning to read the slight signs with increasing accuracy. Others maybe found Spock to be cold, expressionless, emotionless, but Kirk knew that it was a front, a mask, perhaps to protect him from Humans.

"I'm fine," he said. "McCoy is beginning to complain about all these bruises you're giving me."

He sat back and looked around the cabin, something he had never done before. He noted the red drapes, the weapons on the wall, the strange sculpture and glowing coals in the sleeping area. He decided not to ask the significance of these things at this time, for Spock seemed confused by his little joke about the bruises. His glance fell on the musical instrument which lay propped up against the desk.

"What kind of instrument is this, Spock?" he asked.

Spock had not fully succeeded in recovering from the barrage of Kirk's emotions which had assaulted him during the contact. He struggled to keep his features firm.

"It is a Vulcan lyre, Captain."

"Do you play?"

"Yes, Captain."

Kirk was amazed at the many talents his First Officer had. "Will you play for me?" he asked.

Music, for Spock, was a solitary pastime. It gave him much consolation. He did not play for others. He had not, for many years. He suddenly felt nervous.

"I am not a good musician, Captain," he tried.

"I have no musical talent at all. I can act a little - I played a few leading roles at the Academy Drama festivals."

"Indeed, Captain. That is most interesting. Your speech pattern does indicate dramatic training."

Kirk smiled. "You think so?"

"Certainly, sir, it is obvious."

Kirk was not to be put off. "Will you play for me? I love listening to music."

"If you wish it," Spock replied resignedly. He knew the Captain would persist until he got his way.

He lifted the lyre, tuned it, then placing it on his lap he began to play a Vulcan melody his father had taught him. It was a simple tune and one that Human ears would not find discordant. It had been one of his mother's favourites. As he played it, he remembered sitting in the garden of his home in Shikaar learning it from Sarek as his mother watched with her Human pride and love for them both. *When he had mastered it, and had played it through for them both, he had seen for a moment something in his father's eyes which had not been there before. That had warmed him and had made him determined to improve his skill as a musician. He had enrolled with a teacher, and in a relatively short time had learned to play in a manner which affected the calm of T'Ranna, his elderly and distinguished music teacher. He was ten years old.*

One evening while he was studying in his bedroom, T'Ranna had called on his parents. He had not meant to eavesdrop, but his hearing was very acute, even for a Vulcan.

"His talent is unique," T'Ranna said. "When he plays it stirs the ancient feelings. It is his Human blood. Human musicians have the ability to feel the music. There are few Vulcans who can do this."

"He is not to be a musician," Sarek said. "His future is prepared for him. He will enter the Science Academy."

"His talent is too great. Vulcan has enough scientists, and too few artists."

"The decision has been made. He may continue his lessons as long as they do not interfere with his studies."

"Think on it carefully," T'Ranna persisted. "Your son is musically gifted. He would bring great honour to our world."

Amanda spoke for the first time. "We will consider it."

After that there had been silence, and Spock returned to his work. He had stayed with T'Ranna for five more years, but nothing more was said about a musical career, and he had not dared to ask. He was a Vulcan son, and his parent's decision was final on such matters.

Listening to the rich sounds of the lyre, Jim was truly amazed by the beautiful melody which flowed from it. Spock's talents were never-ending. Who would have thought that the cool, supposedly non-emotional Vulcan could be such a sensitive musician? He watched the long Vulcanoid fingers sweep over the strings, playing them as perfectly as they played the computer console, and once more his fascination with the mysterious Vulcan who had become his friend was intensified.

When the last note faded Spock placed the instrument on his desk. His hand lingered on the ancient wood, and he wondered what his Captain had made of the music; if he had understood its meaning.

"That was beautiful, Spock," Kirk said, his voice soft. "It was like nothing I have ever heard before."

"Thank you, Jim," Spock said, looking at him.

"Do you ever play with the ship's music and drama group?"

"No, sir. I have not played for anyone since I left Vulcan."

Kirk was astonished. "With such talent, why not?"

"I have not been asked," Spock replied, not adding that no-one knew he played.

Kirk shook his head, knowing why Spock had not been asked. "If no-one knows that you are a musician, Spock, how can they ask? Why have you never volunteered the information?"

"Music is a deeply personal thing to me, sir," Spock said. He was perturbed. *How had Kirk known?*

"You played for me."

Spock sighed. Why did Kirk always question him? "You are my friend. If you wish to hear me play, then I am bound to do so."

Unable once more to understand the rules of Vulcan friendship, Kirk could only say, "Surely only if you wish to play for me."

"I did wish to play for you. I am honoured that it brought you..." Spock raised an eyebrow. What had it brought a Human?

"Pleasure, Spock. It brought me great pleasure. Will you play another?"

Kirk sat back, listened to the music and felt himself soak up the sounds in a way he had not done for years. He felt good within himself, and it was Spock, again, who had given him this. He wondered anew at his Vulcan friend. Computer expert, mathematical genius, scientific specialist, the best Science Officer in Starfleet, martial arts expert, and now, musician. What more was there to discover about him?

Spock found himself enjoying playing for his Captain. He felt the contentment coming from him, and he remembered a similar feeling which had emanated from his music teacher. He played several Vulcan melodies, then finally an Earth song, which had been one of his mother's particular favourites. He sensed Kirk's start of recognition and was pleased. He finished the piece and put the lyre down.

He faced his Captain, seeing the enjoyment still on his face. Jim was truly an appreciative audience. He was a rare person, a Human of exceptional qualities; one who had in a strange unpredictable way become his friend. Spock did not yet understand his bond with Kirk, or how it had happened. He accepted that this Human was a kindred spirit, and that they had joined in the tradition of the Vulcan friendship brethren. It had happened spontaneously, mysteriously, as was told in the tales of the ancient days. He wondered what his father would say if they ever spoke to one another again. Would he recognise the friendship with Kirk as valid in the Vulcan way? Sarek disapproved of most Humans, even though he had a Human wife.

"That was exquisite playing," Kirk said, leaning forward. "Such a talent should be shared. Will you allow me to speak to Lt. Uhura? She is organising a concert."

Spock shook his head. "I would not play for anyone but you, Jim."

"Think about it. I would like others to appreciate such lovely music."

Spock felt himself weaken at that request. "I will consider it, Captain."

"Good." Jim replied with a wide grin.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The world Athos was a pleasant sight on the viewscreen. It was a Class M planet, Earthlike in its vast oceans and large land masses. The Captain of the survey ship 'Gillian' had named the world after one of her favourite fictional characters. Kirk smiled as he read the report. The Three Musketeers was a favourite of his, also. The other three planets in the system were named after the

other wonderful characters of the story.

"Have you read it, Spock?" he asked.

"Indeed, Captain," the First Officer replied. "It is most curious. Athos is perfect for humanoid life. There are large cities, but why are they unoccupied? Where did the inhabitants go?"

"No - no, Spock," Kirk said with amusement. "I meant The Three Musketeers."

Spock seemed startled at the misunderstanding. "You were reading the report, Captain. I assumed..." He trailed off, aware that he had amused the Captain, somehow. Would he ever understand the thing called humour? He kept his face expressionless. "Yes, sir. I have. It is an interesting, if highly romanticised, work of fiction."

Kirk, seeing that he would get no more from him, returned his attention to the report. It was on the strength of this that the Enterprise had been diverted to Athos.

He sent down six landing parties, after the sophisticated sensors of his ship confirmed that there was definitely no life on the planet. Each team beamed to a different city, and although he wanted to go himself, mindful of Spock's objections last time he decided to see how his highly trained crew would deal with the challenge.

"Message from landing party 2, sir," Uhura said. "It is garbled, almost incomprehensible."

"Let's hear it," Kirk ordered.

Loud screams penetrated the Bridge for a few moments, then there was total silence. Uhura stared at her Captain, her face showing her shock.

"I've lost them, sir," she said.

"Get them back, Uhura."

The Communications Officer worked at her board. "I can't sir. The transmissions have ceased."

Kirk strode over to her. "That is not good enough, Lt. Uhura," he snapped. "Re-establish at once!"

Uhura jumped at his tone, but she stayed calm. "I am trying, sir."

"Captain," Spock said, "six life signs have ceased to register. It is landing party 2, sir."

Kirk's eyes filled with horror. "Transporter room!" he called from Uhura's console. "Beam our people aboard."

The wait was intolerable for Kirk. He paced the Bridge. What was happening down there to his crew?

"Captain," Spock said, his tone full of tension to the ears of the Captain who was learning to read him with increasing accuracy, "Landing party 5 has disappeared from our scans."

"Damn," Kirk muttered. "Damn!" He moved to the lift. "I'll be in the transporter room. Spock, you have the con."

"Acknowledged, sir," Spock said as Kirk entered the lift. He returned his attention to his console. Kirk had no patience, and Spock found that hard to accept at times. There was so much he would like to teach his Captain - he had already begun, and Kirk was certainly willing; however Jim Kirk had one of the strongest personalities he had ever come across. Having him as commanding officer and friend was a dilemma he found both awkward and stimulating.

"Mr. Spock." Uhura's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Transporter room has beamed aboard twenty-four persons alive. Some are seriously injured."

Spock sighed deeply; that meant twelve persons were dead on Athos. There were no life sign readings from the planet now. Kirk was going to take this very hard.

Gary Mitchell turned to face him. "Sir, the Captain will want to go down there himself, now."

Spock swivelled around. "I am aware of that. It must be investigated."

"Yes, but Jim is not expendable. You must stop him."

Spock walked over to the command seat, and sat down. "Are you telling me my duty, Mr. Mitchell?" he said, staring at the Navigator coldly.

Mitchell swallowed, Spock's gaze unnerving him. "No, sir, but he respects your judgement. He will listen to you."

The bridge crew stared at Mitchell in astonishment, but it was nothing to the amazement Spock felt, knowing at first hand Mitchell's jealousy of him. For the Navigator to say such a thing in front of everyone meant that he was finally putting Jim first. Perhaps there was hope for him after all. Spock did not allow his face to betray him. "I will do my duty by my Captain. You need not remind me of it. But he *is* the Captain, and his decisions must be respected."

"Not if they are the wrong decisions," Mitchell argued.

Spock studied him. *Could Mitchell not make any judgement without it being coloured by his possessive love of his friend?*

"Captain Kirk is an able commander," Spock said. "He will, with the help of his senior officers, make the correct decision."

"Like he did on Athene 2? If you hadn't been there, he would be dead."

"Irrelevant, since he insisted I be there."

Mitchell turned away, defeated. He glanced at Kelso at the helm, then looked down, unable to give further argument.

Two of the landing parties were intact. They had wandered their assigned cities, recording scenes of beautiful buildings made out of a red-hued stone. Immaculate gardens surrounded each

building. Flowers and shrubs grew in lush profusion. Majestic trees spread their greenery. Magnificent birds sang sweetly, insects darted about intent on pollination. There were wide roads, narrow lanes, but no vehicles to be seen.

The buildings were locked. Phaser beams made no impression on the strange arched doors. There were large windows, but the glass-like material was opaque, and also impervious to phaser fire. The eerie silence of these large cities was unsettling to the landing parties.

The remaining teams had been decimated. The survivors were injured and in deep shock. The medical staff could not rouse them, and McCoy reported at the briefing later that he could not risk any more cordrazine in the delicate state his patients were in.

Kirk sat back. "We must know what happened. We will have to risk another landing party."

"No!" McCoy said, before Spock could put his objection in. "You cannot risk more lives. We don't know what killed and injured our people."

"Bones, it's our duty to find out what is down there. What has happened to our personnel? What happened to the civilisation which built those cities? Could whatever killed them leave Athos? Could it threaten the Federation?" He looked at his First Officer for support.

"I concur, Captain, but I would suggest a certain obvious precaution."

Kirk did not like the sound of that. "Such as?"

"I have observed that all the landing parties were made up of Humans. Whatever is down there does not register on our sensors, and it is dangerous to Human life. I would suggest a party of non-Humans, specifically myself, and the three Andorian members of Security."

"That makes sense, Mr. Spock," McCoy said. "I agree, Captain."

Kirk was not pleased at the way it was going. "Yes," he said quickly. "I agree also, but I am going as well, and another Human too. Four is too small a party."

"Captain," Spock argued, "it has proven fatal for Humans. I do not recommend that you go."

"Twelve of my people have already died. It is my responsibility. I will go on the landing party."

Spock could feel Gary Mitchell's eyes on him. "Captain, I cannot force you, but I would advise you that I consider any Human going on this mission a liability to others."

Kirk leaned forward, intent on his First Officer. "Vulcans and Andorians could be equally at risk, Mr. Spock. You don't know if you will be any safer than Humans. There is no evidence to support you." He smiled slightly on seeing Spock's reluctant acceptance of his words.

Spock looked down. The Captain was correct; there was no

proof. Perhaps the differences of non-Humans would not serve to help them on Athos.

"Captain." Mitchell spoke for the first time. "You must give them the chance."

"I will," Kirk said. "But you and I are going with them."

Mitchell's eyes widened. "Jim...!" he began.

"We always worked well together, Gary. I want you with me."

Mitchell smiled. This was the first time Jim had spoken with him since the incident in his quarters, and Mitchell had been afraid he had really lost him this time.

"Thank you, sir," he said gratefully. He would make up for his lapses; Jim was giving him the chance.

Kirk nodded in acceptance. He faced his First Officer again. "And you, Mr. Spock, you must be with me too. I need the security of your presence in such a dangerous, unknown situation."

Spock held his breath. How was he to answer that? It was his duty as a friend to protect and defend, to be with Jim in such circumstances; but should Jim be going into the situation in the first place? He was confused. Regulations were vague about such things. "I am still unconvinced about the Captain going, sir."

Restlessly, Kirk stood up and paced the room, then stood behind the Vulcan's chair. "Spock," he said.

Spock swivelled around, looked up at his Captain, then stood.

"I understand what you are saying," Kirk continued, "and I do respect your opinion. I will heed you in all things, but I am responsible for my crew, and I must be on hand to find out what happened to them. If I get into trouble, you will be there."

Spock met his Captain's intense gaze. They stared at one another for a long moment. Finally, Spock lowered his eyes, and bowed slightly. "Very well, sir," he said.

Kirk sighed with relief. He touched Spock's arm. "We beam down in an hour. Please notify the Andorian security team."

The Vulcan left, followed by the others, except McCoy and Mitchell.

McCoy shook his head. "I don't know how you deal with that Vulcan the way you do. I have never seen anything like it!"

Kirk grinned, but did not answer him. He left the briefing room with Mitchell following him.

McCoy made his way back to Sickbay, his thoughts full of the unusual friendship between the Captain and the Vulcan. He had seen it develop, he had noted how Spock eased Kirk's moods, provided an excellent balance for him. He had even seen Jim laugh with the Vulcan, although Spock's expression had never changed. Also, Jim had told him of the First Officer's strange healing touch. McCoy

knew he would love to examine that phenomenon, but how to approach Spock? His relationship with the Vulcan was cool.

He would find a way. He would somehow find the right way to approach him. He was a fair psychologist...

He paused at the Sickbay door. Spock was a Vulcan... Would normal methods work on such an alien being?

CHAPTER EIGHT

They materialised in the major city on Athos, heavily armed. The Andorians fanned out, surrounding the others, their phasers set to kill. Spock studied his tricorder as the team walked along a large boulevard. Nothing registered. He looked around, surveying the buildings, the gardens with their immaculate tended look.

"Captain, something must tend this greenery," he said. "The lawns are perfect, there are no weeds amongst the flower beds."

"I know, Spock. It's a mystery, and I don't like mysteries."

Spock knelt by a particularly beautiful red flower. He touched the petals carefully. The others came over.

"What are you doing, Spock?" Kirk asked.

Spock looked up at him. "On Y'det Four, there are certain sentient flora. I have determined that these flowers are not intelligent."

Kirk smiled a little at the thought of intelligent flowers. "I have heard of the life on Y'det. Have you been there?"

"I have, Captain."

Mitchell listened sceptically. "Intelligent plants! I don't believe it."

"I have conversed with one," Spock said coolly as he stood up. "It was most interesting."

Kirk laughed softly. He did not ask how Spock had spoken with a flower. He was not sure that he wanted to know. "Let's see if we can gain entry to one of the buildings." He pointed to a particularly impressive one, straight ahead. There were large marble columns, reminiscent of Earth's Grecian style architecture. It would not have looked out of place as a temple in the ancient days.

They walked up the stairs, past the columns to a massive arched doorway.

"Try to open them," he ordered.

They exhausted every method, but still the doors remained closed. Kirk sat down on a step. Mitchell sat next to him.

"How about 'open sesame'?" Mitchell joked.

Kirk laughed. "Yes, and find me a genie as well."

"Your wish is my command."

Kirk raised his eyebrows. "Yes, I know."

Mitchell was unsure what he meant by that, but he grinned with embarrassment.

"Captain!" cried Lt. Thelen, the senior Andorian officer. "Something is happening."

The others rushed over and saw what he was indicating; the door was slowly swinging open.

"Phasers ready," Kirk said, as they all stared into the dark opening. A dark purplish hue was the only light within. "I think we are being invited to enter, gentlemen."

"It could be a trap," Mitchell warned. The strange colour was making him feel decidedly queasy.

"Very likely," Kirk said. "Opinion, Spock?"

"There is still no sign of life, sir. But something must be controlling this; it wants to lure us in, perhaps to kill us as it did the others."

"The others died in the open." Kirk hesitated as a thought struck him. "We beamed down to landing party two's co-ordinates, but there were no bodies there. I wonder what happened to them?"

A chill struck the others at those words.

"Indeed, Captain," Spock said. "Something has removed them."

"That 'something' may be inviting us in. We will accept their invitation, but we will be prepared. We have that advantage. Take extreme care. Go."

Thelen led the way; Kirk, Spock and Mitchell followed, and the remaining two Andorians brought up the rear. Once they were all inside, the door closed noiselessly behind them.

"We are trapped, Captain!" Lt. Dov, the last in line cried. "The door has closed."

Kirk swung around. He had not heard a thing. "Damn," he muttered, as Spock reported after a thorough examination of the door.

"We are at the mercy of unknown forces. We must proceed with extreme caution, sir."

He peered into the large hallway. There was very little light, and he could not see far.

"There is an open doorway twenty metres away," Spock said.

"How can you see it?" Kirk asked. "It is so dark."

"Vulcans have visual capacities beyond the Human range."

Kirk sighed, thinking that he could easily get an inferiority complex around Spock. What other abilities would he find out about? "Well, we have flashlights - maybe that will help us poor Humans. Lt. Thelen, can you see the doorway?"

"No, sir," Thelen answered. "I can only see about five metres ahead. This light, sir, it hurts my eyes."

"Flashlights on," Kirk said.

Thelen took a flashlight out of a pack he held, and switched it on. The beam hit the walls and caused sparkling explosions of light. Kirk closed his eyes, almost blinded. He covered his eyes with his hands. "Turn it off, Thelen."

Gradually, the stinging in his eyes eased. "What happened, Spock?"

"I do not know, Captain, but I suggest that our light is not compatible with that which is within this building. Exposure to such a phenomenon could damage our optic nerves."

Kirk tried to keep calm. "You must lead us, Mr. Spock. We will rely on your vision." He faced the others. "Keep in physical contact at all times. If we lose anyone, we may not be able to find him again. Mr. Spock will lead, I will be next, Mr. Mitchell, then Security at our backs. Keep your phaser hand free. Ready, gentlemen."

He took a firm grip of Spock's shoulder, and felt Gary's hold on his. He took a deep breath as they slowly walked into the unknown. He was unafraid; his two friends were with him, and three of his best Security people; he was confident that they would successfully complete their mission here. He relaxed and trusted himself to Spock's guidance.

"There is nothing beyond this doorway but another chamber," Spock said, as they passed through it. "There are bulky items against the walls, but I cannot define them."

"I can't see a thing," Kirk said. "I think it's even darker in here." He tried to control the slight feeling of alarm which threatened him. It was so quiet here. It was unnerving.

Spock's voice broke the silence. "Directly ahead is a machine of some type." The Vulcan stopped, and Kirk moved to his side.

"I'm totally blind here," he said, "but surely I would be able to hear it?"

"It is very sophisticated, and almost noiseless, but I hear it, sir; Vulcan hearing is more sensitive than Human."

Kirk sighed. "Perhaps Andorian senses will hear it also. Their antennae are highly receptive to sounds." He turned. "Lt. Thelen?"

He felt Gary's grip on him tighten.

"Jim," Mitchell said, shakily. "I've lost contact with Thelen. He was there a few moments ago, I was talking to him.."

"Thelen!... Dov?... Kasran?... Where are you?" Kirk called.

proof. Perhaps the differences of non-Humans would not serve to help them on Athos.

"Captain." Mitchell spoke for the first time. "You must give them the chance."

"I will," Kirk said. "But you and I are going with them."

Mitchell's eyes widened. "Jim...!" he began.

"We always worked well together, Gary. I want you with me."

Mitchell smiled. This was the first time Jim had spoken with him since the incident in his quarters, and Mitchell had been afraid he had really lost him this time.

"Thank you, sir," he said gratefully. He would make up for his lapses; Jim was giving him the chance.

Kirk nodded in acceptance. He faced his First Officer again. "And you, Mr. Spock, you must be with me too. I need the security of your presence in such a dangerous, unknown situation."

Spock held his breath. How was he to answer that? It was his duty as a friend to protect and defend, to be with Jim in such circumstances; but should Jim be going into the situation in the first place? He was confused. Regulations were vague about such things. "I am still unconvinced about the Captain going, sir."

Restlessly, Kirk stood up and paced the room, then stood behind the Vulcan's chair. "Spock," he said.

Spock swivelled around, looked up at his Captain, then stood.

"I understand what you are saying," Kirk continued, "and I do respect your opinion. I will heed you in all things, but I am responsible for my crew, and I must be on hand to find out what happened to them. If I get into trouble, you will be there."

Spock met his Captain's intense gaze. They stared at one another for a long moment. Finally, Spock lowered his eyes, and bowed slightly. "Very well, sir," he said.

Kirk sighed with relief. He touched Spock's arm. "We beam down in an hour. Please notify the Andorian security team."

The Vulcan left, followed by the others, except McCoy and Mitchell.

McCoy shook his head. "I don't know how you deal with that Vulcan the way you do. I have never seen anything like it!"

Kirk grinned, but did not answer him. He left the briefing room with Mitchell following him.

McCoy made his way back to Sickbay, his thoughts full of the unusual friendship between the Captain and the Vulcan. He had seen it develop, he had noted how Spock eased Kirk's moods, provided an excellent balance for him. He had even seen Jim laugh with the Vulcan, although Spock's expression had never changed. Also, Jim had told him of the First Officer's strange healing touch. McCoy

knew he would love to examine that phenomenon, but how to approach Spock? His relationship with the Vulcan was cool.

He would find a way. He would somehow find the right way to approach him. He was a fair psychologist...

He paused at the Sickbay door. Spock was a Vulcan... Would normal methods work on such an alien being?

CHAPTER EIGHT

They materialised in the major city on Athos, heavily armed. The Andorians fanned out, surrounding the others, their phasers set to kill. Spock studied his tricorder as the team walked along a large boulevard. Nothing registered. He looked around, surveying the buildings, the gardens with their immaculate tended look.

"Captain, something must tend this greenery," he said. "The lawns are perfect, there are no weeds amongst the flower beds."

"I know, Spock. It's a mystery, and I don't like mysteries."

Spock knelt by a particularly beautiful red flower. He touched the petals carefully. The others came over.

"What are you doing, Spock?" Kirk asked.

Spock looked up at him. "On Y'det Four, there are certain sentient flora. I have determined that these flowers are not intelligent."

Kirk smiled a little at the thought of intelligent flowers. "I have heard of the life on Y'det. Have you been there?"

"I have, Captain."

Mitchell listened sceptically. "Intelligent plants! I don't believe it."

"I have conversed with one," Spock said coolly as he stood up. "It was most interesting."

Kirk laughed softly. He did not ask how Spock had spoken with a flower. He was not sure that he wanted to know. "Let's see if we can gain entry to one of the buildings." He pointed to a particularly impressive one, straight ahead. There were large marble columns, reminiscent of Earth's Grecian style architecture. It would not have looked out of place as a temple in the ancient days.

They walked up the stairs, past the columns to a massive arched doorway.

"Try to open them," he ordered.

They exhausted every method, but still the doors remained closed. Kirk sat down on a step. Mitchell sat next to him.

"How about 'open sesame'?" Mitchell joked.

Kirk laughed. "Yes, and find me a genie as well."

There was no reply, and Kirk felt chills run down his back. Surely if his men had been attacked they would have heard? Spock would have heard...

"I don't think they are there, sir," Mitchell said. "I request permission to search."

"No," Kirk said. "We stay together."

He turned to the Vulcan. "Can you see them, Spock?"

Spock trained all of his senses on it, then he checked his tricorder. There was no mistake. He forced his voice to be without inflection as he reported his findings. "Sir, three Andorian life forms lie ten metres back in the direction we came. However, they do not register on my tricorder. It is my opinion that they are dead."

"No, Spock... that's impossible!" Kirk said, his voice betraying his shock, and despite his denial, his belief of the Vulcan's words. He bent his head down, almost weeping with the realisation that he had lost more of his crew.

"Jim... " Mitchell said, putting an arm around him.

The Captain's grief forced its way through Spock's senses. He fought to minimise the effect on himself.

"Lead us to them," Kirk said, finding his control, after a few moments.

Kirk knelt by his men. They were warm to touch, but they no longer breathed. Their deaths had been very recent.

"What killed them, Spock?" he asked, as he drew his hand away, sticky with their blood.

"Captain," Spock warned, urgently. "Something approaches which does not register on the tricorder."

"Back to back!" Kirk ordered. "Stay close. Don't lose physical contact!"

Mitchell waved his phaser nervously. He did not sense the presence, but he knew Kirk's trust in the Vulcan, and Jim was never wrong in such matters. He forced himself to stand straight, but he was glad of the support of Jim and Spock at either side. A shiver swept through him, when he heard the shuffling sound near him. He tensed.

"Where are they?" Kirk asked softly.

"All around us, sir," The Vulcan replied.

Mitchell listened in horrified fascination as Kirk tried to communicate.

"Greetings. We come in peace. I am Captain James T. Kirk commanding the U.S.S. Enterprise. We are on a rescue mission. Please show yourselves."

There was total silence, until Spock's strained whisper broke it. "Captain, they are not alive."

"What? That's impossible. Perhaps so alien... "

"No, sir. I am able to determine, that they are not living beings."

"Robots?" Kirk asked.

"No, I would be aware of a machine, Captain. All things alive and mechanical have certain emanations, even the plants and animals outside."

"Jim," Mitchell whispered, his fear threatening to overcome him. "What is it?" His voice shook. "I can't see a thing..."

"I don't know, Gary," Kirk said softly. "Take it easy, old friend," he added reassuringly.

Kirk fought to control his own fears. He stared into the strange purple hue and tried to relax as Spock had taught him. It was difficult... impossible. He felt the small hairs on the back of his neck rising in an uncanny premonition of immediate danger.

"Spock," he murmured, instinctively leaning closer to the Vulcan.

Suddenly the hall blazed into light. The men blinked furiously as their eyes adjusted to the brightness. Kirk felt the stiffening of Spock's arm, and he focussed on what the First Officer had already seen. It was three of his people - ones he had thought were dead on this planet.

"Minelli!" he cried. "Mendoza! Alexov!"

"Captain!" Spock said sharply. "I remind you that these people were killed. They do not register on my tricorder. These are corpses."

Chills ran through Kirk's body. He glanced at the readings, and for a moment would not accept them. "It must be a malfunction... "

"No, Jim," Spock said in a command tone Kirk had never heard him use before. "These people are dead."

Kirk's eyes filled with horror. He stared at the Vulcan for a long moment, then nodded in acknowledgement of his words.

Mitchell looked at Anne Minelli, the lovely yeoman he had recently been romancing. "Anne... " he said. "You *are* all right, aren't you?"

Anne smiled, but it seemed forced, and for the first time, Kirk noted the death-like pallor on the faces of the three people facing them. Mitchell stepped forward, but Kirk caught at his arm, and hauled him back.

"They are zombies - reanimated corpses. Zombies... "

Mitchell stared at him in horror. "No... Jim - it's impossible. They're alive!"

"They are being controlled, Captain," Spock said. "We must not allow their bodies to be used in such an obscene fashion."

"You are correct," Kirk said. He steeled himself. "Fire."

"But, Jim - surely we could stun..." Mitchell protested.

"The stun works on the body's nervous system. These are corpses. Fire."

The three bodies walked towards them, the dead lips smiling. Kirk and Spock opened fire, and after a moment of hesitation, Mitchell took the third one, the once vital and beautiful Anne Minelli. Kirk bent his head. Those had been his crew people he had been forced to destroy.

"You had to do it, Jim," Spock said. "They were being used."

Mitchell touched his shoulder. "Mr. Spock is correct, Jim."

"I know," Kirk said wearily. He straightened up, pulled out his communicator and flipped it open. "Enterprise. Six to beam up. Three alive, three dead."

"Sir..." Scott's voice shook. "There is some fault in the transporter. We are working on it, Captain..."

"All right, Scott. Do your best."

Kirk looked at his two officers. "Why should the transporter malfunction at this particular time?"

"It is most disquieting, sir," Spock commented.

CHAPTER NINE

Kirk looked down at the Andorians. He wondered how they had died, so silently and with such little struggle. Andorians were one of the finest fighting races of the galaxy. He knelt down by one of them. He would have to file a report, the families would have to be notified. He reached out to touch the large bruise on the neck, but the strong fingers of Lt. Thelen grabbed his throat, and pressed his windpipe with a power that no Andorian should possess. He let out a strangled cry.

Spock was there in a moment, and a moan of relief escaped Kirk's lips as he was released. He scrambled to his feet, but was immediately under attack by Kasran. Prepared this time, he fought off the Andorian and, escaping from his grasp, used his phaser on him. He let out a gasp of pain, but on hearing Gary's cry for help, immediately turned around to where his friend lay pinned under Dov, rigid with fear and horror, his face white with shock. Kirk dived over, wrenched the Andorian away from Mitchell, and with grim determination aimed his phaser. He fired.

Gary was breathing harshly. He struggled to sit up.

Kirk helped him to his feet. "Are you all right?" he asked worriedly.

Although badly shaken, Mitchell tried to keep it to himself, but he did not trust himself to speak. He nodded. Kirk smiled a little, grateful for his self control. "Good," he said.

He turned to Spock and saw that the Vulcan held Thelen in a one-handed grip. The other hand was at the temple of the dead officer. He walked over to them, Gary at his side. Spock seemed as if in trance..

"Spock?" he asked in alarm. "Spock...?"

Slowly, the Vulcan's eyes opened. He placed the Andorian's body down gently, then faced his Captain. To Kirk's eyes, he seemed troubled.

"Captain," Spock said. "We must return to the ship. We are in grave danger."

Kirk nodded. "Mr. Scott," he said into his communicator. "Beam us up."

"I'm trying, sir," the strained voice of the engineer said. "But all power is draining. We have picked up an energy source deep within the planet; it has been reaching out and is knocking out all our systems."

"Damn... Move out of orbit, Mr. Scott. Take my ship out of danger."

"I've tried, sir, but we haven't the power to do even that. We're struggling to just stay in orbit."

Spock was checking his tricorder. "Nothing shows here. Mr. Scott, explain the nature of this energy."

There was silence.

"Mr. Scott!" Kirk tried. "Mr. Scott...?"

"Captain," Spock said. "I believe that the energy source has now affected our communications. There is nothing at present we can do about it. I must inform you of what I discovered from my contact with Thelen."

"Spock, I do not understand."

Spock looked at his Captain. He would have to tell him something of the mind-meld. "As you know, Vulcans have certain telepathic abilities. One such ability is to touch the mind of another, even one totally alien. I sensed, through Lt. Thelen, the one who controlled him. It was a fleeting glimpse, for it withdrew quickly when it felt my presence, but I sensed great power." He hesitated on seeing a touch of awe in Kirk's eyes. "Captain, it has not spoken with a living creature in thousands of years. It was astonished when it felt the contact with me."

"You never cease to amaze me, Spock," Kirk said. "You have contacted, without doubt, the one responsible for all that has happened. Perhaps..." He stopped as the lights went out, leaving them in the strange, almost impenetrable darkness as before.

A powerful grip caught his wrist. He heard Mitchell's sharp gasp and he almost smiled. So Spock had grabbed him too. Mitchell had never felt the strength of a Vulcan's hold before.

"What does it do?" he asked. "Kill everyone who lands here, anyone who lives here?"

"Essentially correct, Captain," Spock replied. "I believe that it killed the civilisation which once flourished here, possibly using its technique of corpse control, using terror and malice in its method."

"That is obscene!" Mitchell stated. "What kind of monster would do such a thing? Jim - we must get out of here."

"I would agree, Gary," Kirk said wryly. "Mr. Spock, can you lead us to the doorway we came in? Perhaps we will find a way out. It's pointless to wander in the dark - who knows what obstacles we may come up against."

"Yes, Captain," Spock replied. "I can find the entrance."

"Gary, take hold of my shoulder and don't let go. I don't want to lose you as well."

"I'm not going anywhere, Jim, except with you and Mr. Spock." Mitchell said, taking a tight grip of Jim's muscled shoulder. Only then did Spock release him, and Mitchell let out a sigh of relief.

"Some bruises are worth it," Kirk said, in an effort at lightness.

Mitchell chuckled. "Well, maybe... but this one wasn't much fun."

"I do not understand, Captain," Spock said, not knowing what they were talking about.

"Human humour, Spock," Kirk said. "I'll explain it to you one day."

As they walked through the alien darkness, the Humans blindly following the Vulcan, Kirk wondered if they would ever get out of this alive, if he ever would have the chance to explain humour to Spock. There had to be a way out. Scott would send a shuttlecraft for them, if he could not get the transporters working, but that would put more people in danger here on the planet's surface; yet an energy powerful enough to disrupt the Enterprise equipment would also be able to kill the crew on board her. His skin crawled at the thought. His crew, his ship, at the mercy of an unknown and malicious force.

Behind him he could hear Gary's laboured breathing. Kirk hoped that Gary would be able to take the strain. He could not afford to have him fold at such a critical time. At one time he could have relied on him, but now, after Gary's behaviour since joining the ship, he was unsure. Ahead, he was aware of the even breathing of his First Officer, cool as ever in a dangerous situation. Yet... the tightness of the Vulcan's grip on his wrist gave some inclination that even Spock was under severe pressure.

"The door lies ahead, Captain," Spock reassured him. "I can see it."

Kirk peered into the darkness. "Can't see a thing."

"A few more steps, sir," the Vulcan said, and shortly after, he stopped. "We are here."

Kirk felt the solid material of the door, and he sighed with

relief.

"Thank you, Spock," he said. He tried to move his wrist from Spock's hold. "You can let go of me now."

Spock was silent for a moment. "No, sir. It may not be any safer here. I would suggest that while you cannot see around you, we maintain contact at all times."

Kirk grimaced. "Would you ease off a little then, Spock... before I lose the feeling in my arm!"

The pressure lessened and Kirk smiled a little. Had Spock been afraid that he might lose his Captain?

"Forgive me, sir," Spock said, startled by his Captain's insight. He had been deeply afraid that Kirk would become separated from him. How had the non-telepathic Human known?

"Nothing to forgive," Kirk replied as he manipulated his arm within the Vulcan's hold, his sincerity obvious to Spock's strong telepathy.

Yet it was more than that, Spock realised. He did not understand the receptiveness between them. He did not yet know how it was possible. What kind of bond did he have with Jim Kirk?

Mitchell's voice interrupted his thoughts. "This door is locked, there is no way out." The panic he felt was obvious.

"Easy, Gary," Kirk said. "Stay calm, we have to think clearly. What are our options?"

"We have no options, we're trapped here. We could be attacked at any time." He let out a sob. "Jim, we're going to die here." He let go of Kirk's arm and pounded at the door.

"Gary!" Kirk shook him. "You are a Starfleet officer. Behave like one!"

Mitchell tried to bring his panic under control. "I'm sorry, Jim."

"All right, Gary," Kirk said, keeping a hold on his friend's arm. "Breathe deeply. Spock and I are with you."

They heard the shuffling sounds close to them.

Spock lifted his phaser. "Captain. Straight ahead. Be prepared, these are not our crew members," he warned, his keen senses already having noted what they were facing.

The lights went on. Kirk blinked. This alien intelligence was doing its best to try their nerves. He would not let it defeat him. He stared out ahead of him... and recoiled. These corpses were not newly dead. They were decayed; maggot-ridden; rotted. He turned his head away, unable to face such horror, only Spock's hold on his wrist sustaining his courage. He fought down his nausea and forced himself to face them.

CHAPTER TEN

Jim Kirk braced himself. He glanced at Spock, drew some strength from him, then turned to Gary, who stood, bent over, his hand covering his eyes. "Gary!" he said. "Gary - I need you. You have seen worse than this, my friend." He wished he could do for Gary, what Spock was able to do for his Captain, give strength, ease fears. "Gary... please - try."

One of the corpses came closer. It had once been a lovely young woman. The remains of the mouth opened. "You are most handsome... I like you... I can make love to you. Would you like that?"

"Oh, God!" Kirk whispered, horrified, all his nausea returning to him.

"Jim!" Spock said urgently. "Jim!"

His grip tightened, and Kirk cried out with the pain. Spock released him, and fired his phaser at the corpse. Shocked by the Vulcan's action, Kirk immediately gained control. He aimed his phaser and fired, but they just kept coming. "Gary!" he called. "Help us!"

Mitchell was now pressed up against the door, terrified by the sight of their attackers; his phaser had fallen out of his grasp. Spock quickly scooped it up and used it. The extra weapon made the difference. Once more they were alone in the silence.

Kirk looked up at his First Officer. "Just as well you are ambidextrous."

"Indeed, sir. All Vulcans are."

"I should have known," Kirk said, with a slight grin.

He turned to Mitchell, sighed deeply and placed his hands on his shoulders. "The danger is over for the moment, Gary," he said, unable to be angry with him, knowing that without Spock's help, he would probably have reacted much in the same way, as his shocked and injured crew very likely had.

He turned Mitchell around to face him. His friend's face was ashen. He shook him. "Gary, it's all over now. I need your input. I need your help. Gary!"

Mitchell's shock eased slightly, his eyes filled with tears. "Jim," he whispered brokenly. "I've let you down again... "

"It's all right, Gary, you just reacted in a normal Human fashion. I'm not angry with you. Come on, Gary - we must get out of here. I need your help."

Mitchell nodded. He swallowed, then took a deep breath. "I'm all right, sir." Kirk smiled at him, pulled him into a tight hug for a moment, then let go.

Kirk turned to the Vulcan. "Recommendations, Spock."

Spock checked the door. "Captain," he said after a quick examination. "I suggest we try to find another exit. The alien locked us in by this door, it will not allow us to leave. Perhaps

it is testing us. Its behaviour is highly illogical."

"I don't like to be tested in such a way," Kirk said. "Gary, what is your opinion?"

"It seems to be toying with us, the way it probably did with the landing parties. It is the cat and we are the mice."

"An interesting way of putting it," Kirk said. "Accurate, I believe."

There had to be another way to fight this thing. They could not sit waiting for its next little game. They could not be victims. He had to find a way to contact this being... Of course! That was it!

He grabbed the Vulcan by the arms. "Spock - you contacted it before. Could you do so again?"

Spock stared at him in startlement. "Sir, I am a touch telepath. I do not have the ability."

"Have you ever tried it?" Kirk persisted.

Spock shook his head.

"Will you try? It may be our only chance. Perhaps if you could make it understand that what it is doing is wrong?"

"Captain," Spock murmured, "it lives deep within this world. I cannot touch it." But already he knew he was faltering, under Kirk's intense need for his help.

"Spock, I cannot order you to do this. I know little of telepathy, but I would guess that it must be very distressing to be vulnerable to the mind of another. I would not ask it of you if I could see any other way."

Spock studied him, startled again by his understanding. He saw the logic of his Captain's request. There was no other option at present. The entity would not allow them out of this building, so it had to be contacted again. Perhaps it could be reasoned with. Yet - he did not know if he was capable of such a meld. He had limited experience, and he had never before communicated with a being without touch. He had reached it before because of the presence guiding Lt. Thelen. Could he reach out and contact a mind which lay buried so far beneath them? If he was successful, it would force a terrible price from him. He could be swamped, overtaken, destroyed by the power of such an intelligence. Kirk could not understand the danger he was asking Spock to expose himself to, and Spock knew that he would not burden his Captain by telling him; yet the fact that Kirk had a glimmer of understanding, something most Humans would not begin to have, warmed Spock and gave him the courage.

"I will attempt it, Captain," he said.

"How can I help?" Kirk asked.

Spock shook his head slightly. "There is only one thing you can do. I will place myself under your protection, for once in the mind-meld, I am vulnerable to physical attack."

"I will protect you with my life, my friend," Kirk said intently, his eyes burning with the depth of his feelings.

The Vulcan bowed his head, trying to hide from Kirk the emotions which raged within him as those words penetrated his mental barriers. He knew that the confusion Kirk inspired in him was the price for entering into friendship with a Human. He would have to work harder at repressing the feelings he had held in check for so many years, but it was difficult. Jim was so genuine in his concern.

"Spock?" Kirk inquired, his expression, his tone showing that he knew something bothered Spock.

It was hopeless, Spock conceded. His Captain was too intuitive. There was very little that he missed.

He braved Kirk's concerned gaze. "I will need a few moments to prepare, sir."

Kirk saw the strange expression in his eyes. What was it? He wished that Spock would tell him more about himself; there was so much mystery about him. How was he, a Human, to know if he was saying or doing something wrong or in bad taste according to Vulcan principles?

"I will be with you at all times, Spock. Nothing will harm you."

"Thank you, sir," Spock said. "I would not entrust myself so to another."

Kirk swallowed, tried to speak, and found he could not. He gripped Spock's arms tightly, then released him and stepped back, glancing for a moment at the silent Mitchell.

Mitchell had been watching them closely. He was aware more than ever of the unusual and intense chemistry between them. What was it that bound these two together? What had passed between them? How did Jim reach the strange Vulcan First Officer? Why had a non-Human taken *his* place as Jim Kirk's confidant and adviser? Would he ever be as close to Jim as he had been in the past? Or had he lost the special relationship he had always shared with him?

For several moments, Spock stood, his eyes closed in preparation, his fingertips touching. His breathing became slow and steady. He sank into the correct position on the cold alien floor. He did not allow the chill to penetrate to his body, willing his heat-sense to compensate. He was aware that the two Humans were kneeling beside him, watching him, protecting him, and he relaxed deeply into the state of receptiveness necessary to commune with another.

He raised his hands in front of him and reached. It was there at the edge of his consciousness, though he could barely sense it. He placed his hands on the ground and bent his head low. He sent his thoughts down through the earth with all the power at his disposal, until he tentatively touched the alien mind he had briefly met before. Slowly, their thoughts began to merge...

It was powerful - too powerful. It was drawing him in, encompassing him, turning him inside out. He silently cried out in agony as he struggled, caught in the meld like a fly in the web of a

spider. The more he struggled, the deeper he was trapped in the hold of the planetary consciousness, and he was not strong enough to break free. He tried to make it understand, but it disregarded him, taking what it wanted from him greedily. He attempted to calm himself, and tried to transmit that to the being, but it did not appear to notice as it continued with its study of his mind. He set himself to his own study, but this mind was far superior to his own; he could only absorb a part of it. He had to break free before he lost all sense of his own identity, before it sucked him dry...

Kirk watched his First Officer carefully, seeing his deep trance, listening to his words, unable to understand them.

"Is he speaking the Vulcan language?" Mitchell asked.

"I don't know," Kirk replied frustratedly. He felt uneasy. "I think he's in trouble."

"It may be normal to what he is doing, Jim," Mitchell said, trying to reassure him.

Kirk shook his head. He studied Spock in every detail, seeing how hunched his shoulders were, the stiffness of his neck, the rigidity in his body. He was in trouble. Kirk felt it; he knew it - but what was he to do about it? Could he bring the Vulcan out of it? Should he attempt it? Perhaps disturbing him would be dangerous for both of them. He had to make a decision. He thought of the Vulcan who had placed his trust in him. He could not betray that trust. He had to make the correct decision. With a deep breath he reached out and placed his hand on Spock's bent neck - and for a moment he caught a glimmer of the battle his friend was fighting. Fear swept through him.

"Mr. Spock!" he ordered. "Come out of it! Spock, do you hear me?"

Spock let out a cry, and keeled over onto his side. He curled up into a foetal position, his body trembling violently.

Kirk stared at him in alarm. "It's got him! He must withdraw from it, and I don't know how to help him.."

"Jim... " Mitchell murmured helplessly.

"Stand guard," Kirk said. "I must bring him out of it."

Immediately Mitchell stood, phaser ready. "Aye, Captain," he said.

"Spock!" Kirk said intently. "Spock, come out of it."

He grabbed the Vulcan's shoulders as tightly as he could and shook him hard. Spock's body trembled uncontrollably, sweat poured from his skin. Jim touched Spock's face, drew his hand away, and rubbed the wetness between his fingers. In all the hard exercise in the gymnasium, he had never seen the Vulcan perspire. What kind of effort must he be putting up now, against this unseen opponent?

Guilt consumed him. He had been the one who had asked Spock to try to communicate with the entity; if he had only known the stress involved in the mind-meld, he would never have suggested it. He knew nothing about Vulcan telepathic abilities; he had had no right to ask it of Spock. Yet, why had the Vulcan agreed? Had *he* even

known what he might have to endure? "Spock!" he cried, pulling his First Officer around. "Let him go, damn you!" he shouted into the emptiness of the building. "Release him...!"

He pulled the First Officer up into a sitting position, propped him against the wall, and stared at him, listening to the totally incomprehensible sounds coming from his lips. He shook him again.

"Spock, I am giving you a direct order. *Obey me.* Come out of it at once!" The shaking body under his hands seemed completely unaware of him. He groaned with frustration and worry. "Spock... " he murmured despairingly. "Please, Spock... "

Mitchell glanced down. "Make up your mind, Jim - ordering him one minute, pleading the next... "

"Shut up, Gary," Kirk said angrily. He did not need Gary's snide remarks when Spock's life was in danger.

Gary gave a start at Kirk's tone, and wisely did not speak. He swallowed, berating himself for opening his big mouth. Why did he not know when to keep quiet? Would he never learn? He resolved to try harder to curb his tongue. He would never regain a fraction of Jim's confidence if he continued in this way. He concentrated on watching the emptiness for any signs of activity. Jim was depending on him to guard them; he would do that willingly.

Kirk, determined somehow to get through to the Vulcan, repeated his name over and over again. He did not know how, but he was aware that his voice was reaching him, and that gave him the encouragement to continue. He watched the struggle on Spock's face, and knew that his friend was fighting with all of his will to break free; but it was some time before he could feel a lessening of the tremors in Spock's body.

"Captain," Spock whispered. His eyes were tightly shut, and the lines of his face were rigid with tension. "Jim... "

"Spock," Kirk urged. "You can do it." He shook him once again.

The Vulcan moaned with pain; he slumped, and Kirk caught him. The Human swayed with the dead weight in his arms.

"Jim," Mitchell said, his voice urgent. "The door - it's opening."

Kirk looked up. "Maybe Spock did make the being understand. Perhaps it has agreed to let us go."

"It could be a trap, Jim," Gary warned.

"Maybe," Kirk said. He hefted Spock over his shoulder, and stood up carefully, steadying himself under the weight. "But I'll feel safer out in the open. You go first, phaser ready."

"Yes, sir," Gary replied, and slowly and cautiously walked out into the bright sunlight.

Kirk followed, hampered by the heaviness of the Vulcan, and the worry of what had happened to him during the mind-meld. He had been so confident that everything would work out. Now he had lost fifteen crewmen on this world, others were injured, shocked. How

many more would die?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

All was silent as they made their way across the large well kept lawn. Mitchell stopped when they reached the centre and looked around. "No signs of pursuit, Captain. Surely we're reasonably safe here? We can see all around us."

"All right," Kirk said, lowering Spock to the ground. "Try to contact the ship."

He sat on the ground beside Spock and placed a hand on his forehead. The Vulcan was hot, but he knew that Vulcans had a higher body temperature than Humans. Spock was no longer sweating, and hopefully that was a good sign. He tried to find the wrist pulse spot, but could not. Alarmed, he lowered his head to Spock's chest, to where he knew the heart was. He breathed a sigh of relief. It was beating, but it was slow - too slow for normal. He sat up worriedly, but comforted himself with the knowledge that the heart was beating.

"Can't raise the ship," Mitchell said, kneeling beside him.

Kirk looked at him, his face showing his worry. "Spock contacted something, maybe an entity too powerful for him. He seems to be in some kind of shock. I don't know if this being let him go, or if he broke away... "

"Or if you brought him out of it," Mitchell added.

"I doubt if I could do such a thing."

Mitchell smiled at him with genuine affection. Jim had always been modest about his effect on people. The charisma which was so natural to him had a profound appeal on everyone he came into contact with.

"I think you could do anything, Jim," he said. "I believe that even he, a Vulcan, has in his own alien way fallen under your spell."

Kirk drew him a sharp look. Was Gary being sarcastic again? He had no time to deal with pettiness.

"I mean it, Jim," Mitchell said, on seeing his expression. "I'm giving you my honest opinion. I believe that you did bring him out of it, somehow. Keep trying to reach him."

Kirk sighed. "I don't know if I've done right or not. I know so little about him or this thing he communicated with. Did it let us go? Is it toying with us? Will it send something else to kill us?"

"Or try to terrify us," Mitchell commented. "Maybe it controls Mr. Spock. Have you thought of that possibility? If it can control corpses, perhaps it can control living beings."

Kirk wiped at his sweat covered forehead. He could not believe that. Spock would not allow it. If only there was some way to reach him, but he, a non-telepathic Human, knew no conceivable way

to touch the unconscious mind of another. He looked at the beauty all around him, and barely saw it. This place had claimed too many young lives; too many people had been lost during his short time as Captain of the Enterprise.

Mitchell touched his shoulder. He knew this mood, he had seen it before.

"Jim... " he began."

Kirk looked up at him. "I know, Gary, but I will never get used to death."

"That's what makes you the very special commander you are, Jim; that feeling for your crew, your compassion."

"I sometimes wish that I was cold and unfeeling."

"Like Mr. Spock."

"Spock is not cold and unfeeling," Kirk protested. "He may appear it at times, but I know him better." He smiled a little. The compassion of his Vulcan friend was deeply hidden, but Kirk had seen it, felt it, been healed and comforted by it.

Kirk pulled himself back to the present. He assessed their situation. "We will stay here for the moment. We can do nothing else. Scott will have sent a shuttle for us. They know the general area we're in, if the ship's sensors cannot locate us. It's only a matter of time before they find us."

"Let's hope," added Mitchell, "that whatever is messing up communications and transporter functions will not decide to stop the shuttlecraft, too."

Kirk nodded in agreement. He felt Spock's forehead again. There was no change that he could tell, and he sighed with sheer frustration at his ignorance about the Vulcan mind-meld and the consequences involved. If they ever got out of this, Spock would have to tell him more about it, whether he liked it or not. He beat his fist into his hand; he had to know what Spock had contacted, what he had learned. How could he bring the Vulcan out of this stupor?

A memory suddenly came to him of the strange and wonderful happenings of several weeks ago after Spock had saved his life. He had been lying in Sickbay, seriously wounded, weak, drowsy from McCoy's drugs, hopelessly confused by Spock's cold behaviour, so different from his gentle, compassionate healing touch as he had helped his Captain, eased his pain, and initiated healing in his body, only a short time before on the planet Athene 2. For a split second, his fingertips had caught at the Vulcan's, and a faint tingle had swept through his hand. Later, Spock had admitted that it was the joining of the friendship bond, which had happened spontaneously between them. The Vulcan had at last accepted that he was Kirk's friend, and had touched fingertips with him, setting in motion the true seal on their friendship, never to be broken. That time the tingling sensation had spread through his hand and along his arm, and had reached somewhere deep inside him.

Kirk knew that something very unusual had taken place. He was unsure as to just what, and Spock had not explained, but he wondered. Could it happen again, even with his friend unconscious?

If it was, as he suspected, some type of non-verbal communication, could he reach Spock through it? He decided that he would have to try. He had no other choice. He would trust the link between them - he believed in it. He took hold of Spock's hand in both of his, and touched the fingertips of his right hand to the Vulcan's.

Mitchell frowned. "Jim? What are you...?"

"Quiet," Kirk ordered abruptly. Mitchell raised his eyebrows and fell silent.

Kirk shut him out and concentrated hard for several minutes. Nothing happened. Why???? Did it need the telepathic Vulcan to initiate the effect in the first place? Yet Spock had told him that it had been a spontaneous thing. He let out a shaky breath and tried to hold onto the intense mental effort he knew was required.

Mitchell could not understand what was going on. "Jim - " he began.

Kirk exploded as Gary's voice disturbed his shaky concentration. "I told you to be quiet!" He stared at him angrily, his eyes flashing in that intimidating way which could reduce a strong man to fear and shame. "Don't you know how to obey an order?" Mitchell swallowed and bent his head as Kirk continued, "Why do you question everything I do? Why can't trust me for once? I am trying to bring Spock out of this. Leave me in peace to try. Guard us."

"Yes, sir," Mitchell said quickly. He looked up and scanned the area but, fascinated by what the Captain was doing, he watched out of the corner of his eye.

With great effort, Kirk tried to even his breathing after his outburst. He tried to find even a touch of the deep relaxation Spock had been trying to teach him. He did not succeed. He attempted to concentrate on remembering his own feelings when the tingling had occurred before. He had been receptive to Spock in some way the first time, desperate to know what Spock had done to save his life on the planet; the second time, desperate again for the friendship of a lifetime with the Vulcan. Desperation - was that the key factor? He was certainly feeling that now.

With grim determination, he made a single focussed attempt to call the Vulcan silently. He recalled the tingling sensation and imagined it spreading from his fingertips through his hand. "Spock!" he called. "Spock, I need you with me. Be with me. Spock!" He could almost feel the shock waves in the Vulcan as the sensation of the link forced its way to the stunned and shaken Spock. It was so real now, he could feel the touch of his friend somehow, in a powerful and inexplicable way.

\Jim,\ a voice seemed to say in his mind; Spock's voice.

He felt a movement, and looked down to see the dark alien eyes upon him. He smiled with relief. "Are you all right?" he asked.

When he got no reply, he stared worriedly at his friend. Spock's eyes were blank. There was no recognition in them, no intelligence. "Spock," he murmured, anguished. "Spock!"

There was no response, and Kirk fought to control his feelings

of helplessness. He would have to do something. He would have to take drastic measures.

He knelt over the Vulcan's body, grabbed hold of his shirt and lifted his upper body. With clenched teeth and firm control, he raised his right hand and slapped Spock hard across the face. He steeled himself to repeat the blow, hoping that the Vulcan would forgive him his actions if they ever returned safely to the Enterprise.

Mitchell began to speak, but remembered in time and restrained himself. He was not going to risk that anger again. He did not understand what Jim was doing, but decided to trust him and not interfere. He watched as the Captain hit the Vulcan with blows which would have broken the jaw of a Human. After eight jarring slaps, which had given Mitchell, only watching, sympathetic pain, the Vulcan finally reacted. He grabbed Kirk's wrist in a crushing grip and bore it down.

Kirk did not resist. If he did, he knew he would have broken or fractured bones; as it was he would have yet another nasty bruise for McCoy to deal with.

"Spock," he gasped, as the pain from the hold intensified. "Spock, it's Jim! Let go."

Spock's eyes cleared. "Jim?" he asked, his voice full of puzzlement. "Jim, what has happened?"

Kirk breathed a sigh of relief. "That is just what I want to ask you."

Suddenly aware of his Captain's pain, Spock released him. He tried to sit up, but dizzying waves of weakness passed through him, and he fell back. He felt Jim's arms around him, lifting him, and he tried to protest, but the weakness was so intense that he could barely move. He relaxed and tried to concentrate on strengthening himself. After a time, he was able to open his eyes and take in his situation. He was being supported by his Captain. His head lolled against Jim's shoulder. He fought for control, embarrassed by his dependence on another. Yet a nagging thought intruded - it was no shame to be helped by one who was his friend.

"Spock," Jim's voice said in his ear. "Take it easy. I am with you. Lean on me."

Spock let out a sigh. This voice had recalled him from the depths of his mind, where he had taken refuge from the vast intellect of the planetary consciousness. This man had reached him when he had been in a state of catatonic exhaustion, through the touch of the friendship link. This non-telepathic Human had instinctively found his way to him, and had led him out to awareness. What kind of friendship did he have with Kirk? The more he knew Jim, the less he understood him. How had his friend done it? He shook his head, unable to answer any of these questions.

He became still, and did what Jim had asked. He leaned heavily on the Human's shoulder and calm reached him. "Jim," he said, looking up into the worried eyes of his friend. "This entity lives within the planet. She *is* the planet. She is the Goddess of her world; she created it." He fought the exhaustion which was the price of a meld with such a powerful being. He had been drained in a way he had not thought possible. He tried to continue. He had to

report to his Captain. "She is all-powerful here; she has... she..." He stopped, his exhaustion overwhelming him, his control over it slipping. He felt Jim's grip on him tighten, and concentrated on that.

"Why has she killed, Spock - why?" Kirk asked.

"She... she thought..." Spock tried to explain. "She believed... she..." He was finding it increasingly difficult to speak, although he fought the urge to slide into unconsciousness with all of his will.

"Captain," Mitchell called. "Something is coming."

Kirk looked up and saw it. A small metallic robot-like creature trundled towards them across the grass. He took Spock's tricorder from around his neck, placed the Vulcan gently on the ground, and took some readings.

"Is it a robot?" Mitchell asked, his phaser firmly pointed at the intruder.

Kirk stood up. "Yes, it is a robot of some sort." He stood still, watching it carefully. It did not appear to be dangerous, but Kirk had seen many seemingly harmless things which had suddenly turned nasty. The robot stopped several metres before him and reached out to them with a short antenna-like appendage. A voice emitted from it.

"Who are you?"

Kirk let out a deep breath. At least now he might be able to reason with the planet being, an entity who had killed so many innocent people, and could just as easily kill the landing party and the whole crew of his ship.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Kirk knew that the lives of all his crew depended on his ability to communicate with the creatrix of this world. Spock had already done the groundwork; now he had to continue that dialogue.

"Are you the one who lives within this planet?" he asked.

"I am she. I use this mechanical device to speak with you, for the one who lies at your feet is not functioning as well as before."

Kirk looked down at his First Officer, seeing that he was conscious, but barely. He tried not to show his fear.

"What have you done to him?" he asked.

"Done? Why, nothing. I conversed with him, but it seems that for such a being mind contact is exhausting, and with one more powerful than himself, dangerous. He is interesting, though. He is the first one I have spoken to since before I fell asleep."

Kirk was amazed. "You were asleep? For how long?"

"Many thousands of years. I do not know. I created my world, and it was a momentous and difficult task. I slept, but when I

awakened, I found parasites upon my beautiful creation. I destroyed them."

At her words, the three men felt chills of horror. A being which thought of them as parasites!!!! They all knew what Humans did to such unwanted life. Even Vulcans, with the deepest respect for all life, had had to rid themselves of certain parasites.

"People lived here," Kirk responded. "They created these beautiful buildings, the gardens, the roads. There must be many wonders hidden within the buildings - art, literary works, technology. Could parasites do such things? The ones who created all this were intelligent beings, a natural part of your world. They evolved here, as we evolved on our planets. What gives you the right to kill intelligent life? What manner of being are you? Why did you kill and terrorise my crew? We came here in peace, to make contact, to learn."

Mitchell was horrified at the risk that Jim was taking, but he dared not interrupt. He had to trust Jim in the final command decision. He had not been too good at that lately. Glancing down at the Vulcan, he saw how Spock watched the Captain silently, his face showing expression for once. *Interest, Mitchell noted, but is that also concern I see there?*

Spock became aware of his scrutiny and for a moment their eyes met. Mitchell smiled slightly as the two of them exchanged a glance of mutual apprehension at what Jim was doing. He looked back at Kirk, suddenly glad that there was someone else Jim could rely on, someone strong enough to support him or restrain him if necessary, someone he would listen to, someone he could trust implicitly. Mitchell had the oddest feeling. He tried to ignore it, but he could not shake the sudden premonition that he would not be with Jim for much longer.

There was a short silence, then the alien spoke. "I did not know that they were intelligent. I destroyed them as you would pests. In my contact with Mr. Spock, I learned much about the civilisations of the galaxy. I am ashamed. I have committed mass murder. I have killed millions of intelligent and resourceful life-forms."

Kirk hesitated. How was he to continue? The entity obviously had a conscience, but she could just as easily decide to turn on them too. He had no guarantees, that she felt remorse.

"You killed them, yes - but only you can decide, only you can judge yourself. If you did honestly think that they were pests, then you cannot blame yourself too harshly. However, if you suspected they were intelligent and you deliberately committed genocide, then you must live with that knowledge and guilt. We cannot pass judgement on you for we do not know the facts. Only you have that power."

"Only I have the power," the alien repeated. "Only I can pass judgement on myself."

Kirk watched the robot worriedly. He wondered if he had said the correct thing. He had no way of telling; it was possible that he had made things far worse for them. "Release my ship from your control," he said. "Allow us to leave here in peace."

The robot moved forward until it reached the prone Vulcan.

Quickly, Kirk straddled his First Officer, kneeling over him. He aimed his phaser directly at the robot; he would protect Spock with his life, if necessary.

"You will not harm him," he said sharply.

"I will not harm him," the entity reassured.

Kirk glanced at Gary, who immediately moved closer to them, his phaser ready to fire at the Captain's command.

"I only wish to speak to him," the being said. "He is highly intelligent, and I learned much from him."

Kirk looked down at Spock. "Can you talk?" he asked.

The Vulcan nodded slightly. "Yes, Captain," he said quietly.

"I don't want you to mind-link with her again. It's too dangerous for you."

"Yes, sir," Spock agreed immediately.

"Go ahead," Kirk said, but he kept his phaser aimed. He did not yet trust someone who had murdered so many, even if she did show some regrets now.

"This act of speech is slow and cumbersome," the alien suddenly said. "I must link thoughts with him."

Kirk swallowed; this was getting dangerous. The alien was all-powerful, and often such power brought pettiness and corruption, disregard for other less advanced life-forms. It was what he had been afraid of.

"You will not," he replied.

"He is the superior being," the being argued. "You cannot command him."

"He does command me," Spock said. "He is my Captain. I obey *him* and no-one else. I have given him my loyalty."

Kirk smiled on hearing Spock's words. It was true, he knew it, but there were shades of meaning in the words that an alien would not understand. Spock would not blindly obey him, but she would not know that.

"He will not enter into mind-link with you," he said. "You must converse in words."

"I will not. I will have his thoughts."

Kirk exchanged a glance with his First Officer. "You will not enter into a mind-link with this being, Mr. Spock. That is my order to you."

The alien had to be totally convinced that Spock would do no-one's bidding but his; they would have to put on some kind of show to convince her - but would Spock understand what would have to be done? Could a Vulcan understand play-acting? Could he go along with a bluff? Kirk once again felt the lack of knowledge he had about Spock. How could he be so close to him, so at ease with him,

yet not know him at all? He could only hope that Spock would see what he was doing and help him. If not, he could end up with an enemy instead of a friend.

He hauled Spock up roughly, by grasping at his shirt. "You will obey *me*. Only me. I will not tolerate disloyalty. You are mine to command." Spock's eyes widened in surprise. Surely he had just said that to his Captain. Kirk shook him, his gaze boring intently into Spock's.

"You *will* obey me, Mr. Spock."

The Vulcan was confused. What was Kirk doing? What did he want from him? He was aware that his Captain was trying to get a message across to him, but his expression was at odds with his words and actions, and in his weakened condition the strength of this stronger than average Human was causing him much discomfort.

"I will obey you, sir," he said, and it suddenly came to him that this by-play was for the benefit of the alien. He lowered his eyes in acknowledgement to Kirk, hoping that the Captain would realise that he understood.

"You will not take orders from another," Kirk continued.

"No other," Spock replied, looking at him again with respect and admiration in his eyes. "You are my Captain, I obey *you* only; you are my superior officer. I am yours to command. I will serve no other."

The Vulcan's words were for the alien's benefit, but Kirk knew that they were also for him, an avowal of loyalty which few people - if any - had had before. He pressed Spock's shoulder, trying to show his gratitude, and carefully let him go. Spock held himself up and struggled into a kneeling position. He let out a deep breath and tried to concentrate on keeping his exhaustion at bay. Kirk nodded his understanding, then stood up and faced the robot.

"There will be no mind-link. Mr. Spock is mine to command, and I refuse to allow him to do such a thing."

"Truly you are remarkable beings," the voice said. "You in particular. I glimpsed in the mind-link the loyalty Mr. Spock has given you, but I had not realised its extent. Very well, I will accept this verbal form of communication."

Kirk sighed with relief. He wondered though if he could trust the alien. He could not afford to take any chances.

"You may proceed, Spock, but be careful."

"Yes, sir," Spock replied, but something in his look, his tone, alerted Kirk to his apprehension, his distrust of the being, his extreme tiredness. Kirk moved around and stood at Spock's side, motioning the silent Mitchell to the Vulcan's other side. He hoped that they would appear both protective and menacing to the alien. He pointed his phaser at Spock's head, hoping that the Vulcan would understand this further bluff.

"Any attempt at mind-link with my First Officer and he will be dead. You will be caught up in his death, and the shock of it will seriously harm you."

Mitchell drew in a sharp breath. "Jim... "

Kirk glared at him meaningfully, saw the sudden understanding in Gary's eyes, then the nod of acceptance from his old friend as their years-long camaraderie reasserted itself. He shifted his attention to Spock, and found the Vulcan staring up at him with approval. So he had been correct. Spock did not trust the alien either, and another mind-link, especially a forced one, could cause severe repercussions.

"I did not know that you had the power of life and death over those under your command," said the alien.

Kirk did not reply. He kept perfectly still, his phaser aimed. He fervently hoped that he would not have to use it, for he had come to the realisation that his bluff was no bluff at all. If the being forced a link with Spock, she would destroy him, then he, Gary, all his crew would be her prey. If that happened, they would not stand a chance, for she was immensely powerful - she had damaged his ship by draining its power. Without the ship's phaser banks, they would be helpless. The only way he could perceive that could affect her was through his threat to kill Spock. He knew little of telepathy, but he instinctively knew that he was right. Something in Spock's expression told him he was.

"He has the right to kill me, if he thinks it is necessary," Spock said, his eyes never leaving Kirk's.

Jim swallowed, trying to rid himself of the lump in his throat. Spock was giving him permission to kill him if the entity did not keep her word! He fought to cover his distress, for he did not know if the alien could understand what was going on.

Mitchell was finding it difficult to keep silent. He was horrified at the dangerous game the two were playing. Jim, kill one of his crew! Someone he called friend, someone he was deeply attached to! If forced to kill Spock - and Gary suddenly realised that he might indeed have to - it would destroy Jim. He cried inside for the pain in Jim's eyes, for the decision he might have to make, even for the Vulcan who had given consent to his own death. Mitchell wondered if he, in Spock's position, would show such bravery.

"You would not kill your friend," the alien said.

Kirk gave a start. What more did he have to do to convince her?

"Just try me," he said, grabbing Spock around the throat in a stranglehold. He pulled the unresisting Vulcan against him, placed the phaser tip at his temple, and silently asked Spock's forgiveness at this rough treatment. He knew the Vulcan had been seriously weakened by the mind-link, but he now felt the tremors in his friend's body, and he grew very afraid.

Spock leaned back against his Captain, the tight hold on his neck a needed support. He had understood what Kirk had been playing at, and he was surprised at himself for going along with it so easily; trusting him, following his lead. He had given his consent for his own death at Jim's hand, and he was content to accept his Captain's judgement on the matter. He closed his eyes, allowing himself the luxury of releasing himself from the responsibility of his own life. It was not his any more. He had placed its keeping

in the hands of another, and he was not afraid. He was willing to die to save his ship, his crew-mates, his friend and chosen brother, Jim Kirk. Peace descended upon him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Soft laughter came from the robot. "You are strange creatures. I wonder if the the ones who evolved here were as you are? If so, I have missed a unique opportunity to study the lives of such people. I was foolish, wilful and cruel. I have committed mass murder on an unprecedented scale. There is only one punishment for one as evil as I."

Kirk glanced at Gary, then down at Spock, but he did not release his hold on his First Officer; he could not trust the entity yet, her behaviour was too capricious.

"What will you do?" he asked.

"I will sleep, but this time I will not awaken. It will be death."

"How do we know that in some future time you will not rouse yourself and cause further destruction?" Kirk persisted, anxious for some sort of guarantee from her.

"I give you my word, Captain... I ask you to accept that." There was a moment of silence, then she added. "I bequeath my world to your United Federation of Planets. Perhaps that gift may atone for some of my crimes. It is a lovely world, for I have made it so. Take it, and treat it kindly. Study the civilisation of my murdered ones, honour them by making their name known throughout the galaxy. Farewell, little ones. I admire you greatly - you are honourable beings."

An eerie quietness fell upon the city. No birds sang, no insect hummed, all was still.

A deep shudder coursed through Spock's body; he slumped in Kirk's hold. Jim staggered with the weight. "Spock..." he murmured urgently as he knelt and supported his friend.

"She is no more, Captain. She has ended her life," Spock said weakly. Kirk noted his glazed expression, saw how he was sinking into an unavoidable unconsciousness. The death of the planet-being had forced itself on Vulcan telepathic senses, which were vulnerable due to Spock's weakened condition. Kirk's fears for him intensified.

"Spock - hold on," Kirk commanded.

"Captain," Mitchell said. "I have the ship."

"Tell them to beam us up, and to have a medical team for Spock."

Moments later they were aboard the Enterprise, Spock was being taken to Sickbay, and Kirk and Mitchell were left looking at one another in dismay. Mitchell moved over to his friend. "You're exhausted, you must rest."

Kirk shook his head. "No, I have too much to attend to. The energy drain on the ship, my injured crew, Spock... I don't know what kind of damage has been done to him."

"Would you have been able to kill him?" Gary asked.

Kirk's eyes were strained. "He gave me permission to do so." He looked at Mitchell, searching for help. "What kind of man would do such a thing, Gary, to willingly give his life so, to another?"

"Maybe no man," Mitchell answered. "Jim, he is a Vulcan. I have listened to him speak of his concept of friendship; perhaps it is part of that, or maybe it is the bravery, the nobility of his species."

Kirk smiled. At least now Gary was forming a deep admiration for Spock, something he once had thought impossible with all the resentment Gary had felt for the Vulcan. He turned to leave the transporter room, his own feelings in a turmoil. Spock had put his very life in his hands, and Kirk did not know how to deal with that. Would he have been able to kill him? Spock, to whom he was closer than any other... He gave fervent thanks that he had not had to make the decision.

Mr. Scott's report was gloomy. The alien's power had drained the warp engines and warp one was the fastest they would be able to go until the engines could be re-energised. If they remained in orbit for two solar days, the work could be done. Kirk hesitated, weighing the situation carefully. Not only the engines had been affected by the planet-being's power, but long range communication also. The other systems were slowly returning to normal.

"Start repairs, Mr. Scott," he said finally. "Warp one is too slow at this distance from a Starbase, and I must have Subspace radio. I want this work done round the clock; get everyone who can be spared on it at once."

"Aye, sir," Scott said with a sigh. "But I could do with Mr. Spock's expertise."

Kirk nodded. "I don't know when he'll be fit for duty." He looked down and stared at the floor, his uncertainty and weariness overcoming him. He felt a hand on his shoulder and, startled, he glanced up.

"Mr. Spock will recover, Captain," Scott said, sympathy in his eyes. "He's a fine lad, and resilient. There have been many who have tried to win his friendship. You alone have that, but he and I have been shipmates for years, and I know him a wee bit. He'll fight hard to get well."

Kirk smiled. "Thank you, Mr. Scott."

"Scotty, please."

"Scotty," Kirk said.

McCoy reported on his patients. "All are recovering well, Jim; we've been able to ease the shock with the use of medication, and

the injuries are healing nicely; only Ensign Lee is still in a serious condition, but I'm confident he'll recover."

"I thought I was going to lose more of my crew, Bones. I've lost so many."

"Jim - our life is a dangerous one; you have to accept that."

"I know, Bones," Kirk said wearily. "Spock - how is he?"

They made their way to a private cubicle, where Christine Chapel stood by the Vulcan's bed. McCoy stared at the readings. "I don't know, Jim," he said. "His readings are totally off the Vulcan norm. Now I don't know if that is because he is ill, or if it's because of his uniqueness in being the only Vulcan/Human hybrid in existence. I daren't give him any drugs - I don't know what is wrong with him."

"It isn't physical, Bones," Kirk said. He took a deep breath and proceeded to tell him what had happened on Athos.

McCoy stared at him in amazement. "Well, Jim, all we can do is monitor him and hope he comes out of it himself."

"Surely you can do something for him? The medical library - "

"The medical library," McCoy interrupted, "has nothing whatsoever about the Vulcan mind-meld. Hell, I never even knew there was such a thing. How is a Human doctor meant to treat something he knows nothing about? *Damn* Vulcan privacy."

"Are you a doctor or aren't you?" Kirk asked angrily. "You've treated non-Humans before."

"Plenty of non-Humans, Captain," McCoy replied hotly. "No Vulcans. They don't attend any doctors other than their own."

"Bones," Kirk murmured softly, despairingly.

McCoy softened at the pain in the Captain's eyes. "I'm sorry, Jim. I just don't know what to do for him."

Christine stared down at the prone Vulcan. She studied his face intently, taking in every detail. He was beautiful in his startling alien way; no Human male could come near him. She touched his hot forehead, and her pulse began to race. Vaguely, she was aware that her Captain and the Doctor had moved away and were discussing Mr. Spock, but she stayed by his side, felt for his pulse and finally found it, slow and sluggish but beating against her fingertips. She fantasised that his hand covered hers, his powerful, lean frame pressed her close, his lips touched hers...

"Nurse," a voice intruded. "I want someone to stay with him at all times. I want to know if there is any change in those readings."

"Yes, Doctor," she roused herself to say, then retreated once more into her fantasy.

Spock was still unconscious three days later. Kirk went to Sickbay every free moment he had; he fretted continuously over his friend's state, and McCoy could give him no answers. Kirk had told him to send to Vulcan for advice, to Starfleet - surely there were Vulcan healers on one of the many worlds of the Federation! The only problem was the time factor. They were many light-years away from normal Federation space, and it could take days, even weeks, for an answer.

In the meantime Kirk headed for Starbase 26, the nearest base to them, but even at top speed it would take another eighteen solar days to reach it as the engines, although partially re-energised, were not working at top efficiency. Scott had reluctantly told Kirk that the most he could manage was warp three until they could reach the Starbase for the repair facilities there. Pessimistically, he had added that he could not guarantee being able to hold warp three continually.

Frustrated and angry, Kirk pushed his crew hard until he realised that they were all giving of their best and did not need him to put them under such pressure. They all knew Spock's serious condition, all respected and admired the Vulcan; Enterprise would reach Starbase 26 as soon as was Humanly possible. They would soon be in range of Subspace radio with the base, and if there was a Healer there, perhaps they would be able to find out how to treat Spock. Kirk fervently hoped so; he did not dare to think what would happen if his First Officer did not survive. He did not know how he could cope with such a loss.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Kirk stood by his First Officer's bed. There was still no change in him - the Vulcan lay as if in a coma - and the only advice McCoy could give was to leave him in the hope that he would recover naturally. Instinctively knowing that the Doctor was wrong, Kirk, every time he had come here, had tried the 'touch'. There had been no response, no matter how deeply he had concentrated. He was worried sick. He was sure that he had helped Spock after the mind-meld with the planet-being, and later when the Vulcan had been virtually catatonic. Somehow he had reached him then, but this time was different - nothing would rouse him.

McCoy watched Kirk once more touch fingertips to the Vulcan. Jim had briefly told him what he was trying to do, how he had done it before, but how did Jim really know he had brought Spock out of it? What if it had been some Vulcan ability? What if Jim had only imagined it in his desperation at trying to save the First Officer? McCoy could not understand the deep attachment Kirk had formed with Spock, but he respected Jim Kirk, and he was beginning to learn of the uncanny telepathic powers of the Vulcan. It made him uneasy. He was a Doctor, not a telepathic healer, as Vulcan doctors were reputed to be.

As yet, McCoy had had no reply to his messages. He did not expect one for several days - that was if there was a Vulcan Healer within the vicinity of the Starbase. If his messages had to be re-routed all over the Federation until they reached Vulcan itself, he shuddered to think how long it would take. Spock was in a critical condition. His breathing was virtually non-existent, his heartbeat was slow, and his life-signs were totally incomprehensible by any standard McCoy knew. Why did he not know more about the

medical requirements of the First Officer?

Kirk was sweating with the effort of trying to initiate the link. He could have wept with frustration. He was getting nowhere!

"Spock - where are you? Why are you not responding? What has happened to you? Are you not aware of me? I reached you before, Spock..." His voice broke, and he bent his head trying to gain some control. After a few moments he continued. "Don't you remember me? You must know me. We are bound in friendship, never to be broken. I am and always shall be your friend."

McCoy, caught up in the intensity, the emotion, of Kirk's words, cleared his throat, tried to speak, but found he could not. Christine Chapel, who stood next to him, wept unashamedly. McCoy put an arm around her.

"You healed me. Don't you remember? You saved my life on Athene 2, you gave me your strength there, you protected me, controlled my pain. I need you now, Spock. I am alone without you. Try, Spock... Please try."

The voice intruded again into the deep nothingness in which Spock floated; the compelling voice which had reached him another time. He focussed on it. *'I am and always shall be your friend'* Those words transfixed him, energised him. He listened carefully and knew the one calling him. It was Jim, his chosen brother. He struggled weakly in the darkness, knowing that if he did not respond, if he did not break out, he would surely die. He concentrated intently on the words, and tried to answer. *'I will try'*. He did not want to die, he must not die... He must live for the one who had become his friend. He could not leave him alone and bereft. They had known one another for such a short time.

Kirk sat on the bed. He had to rouse Spock before it was too late. He did not know how he knew that, only that he did. He closed his eyes and concentrated deeply, more deeply than he had ever done before, and faintly the link activated itself. Relief flooded through him. He shut everything out but the two of them, and focussed completely on the tingling contact and his own fervent pleas.

"Spock, come out of it now. Please, I beg you, my friend, my brother, acknowledge me. Spock, come to me, please..."

'Jim,' he heard inwardly.

"Spock?" he asked tentatively, unsure if he had imagined it.

Spock's eyes opened, and Jim grinned with relief and delight.

Christine stared at the two men in awe. What had happened between them? The rapport they shared crackled all around them. She could feel it in the atmosphere of the small room. She breathed deeply, knowing that she was privileged to have witnessed such a phenomenon.

"How the hell did you do that?" McCoy exclaimed.

Spock wanted to communicate with Kirk, but he was too exhausted to speak, and the link, although powerful, was a difficult route to mind speech with a non-telepath. He raised his hand towards Kirk's face, then stopped as he saw the curiosity on his friend's face. He

hesitated, his eyes on Kirk's, silently asking permission. To his surprise, Jim consented with a slight nod, and without further worry, he reached for the contact points on his friend's face, and carefully entered his mind.

Kirk caught his breath. He closed his eyes. So that was what Spock had been asking. He stayed very still, waiting.

\Thank you,\ the voice of his Vulcan friend said, \for bringing me out. In a relatively short time, it would have been impossible for even a Healer to recall me.

\What happened to you, Spock? Kirk tried silently.

\I was caught up in the death of the planet-being. The shock drove me very close to death - only you saved me. You truly are my friend and brother; only such a one could do such a feat. I owe you my life. He paused, and Kirk felt his confusion. *\I do not know how you did it, for you are virtually psi null.*

\Desperation, Spock. Sheer Human desperation.

As exhaustion began to overcome him, Spock's hand slipped from Kirk's face and the mental contact was lost. He was able to raise an eyebrow in response to Kirk's last remark, though, and Jim laughed with happiness to see it.

"Rest now. Sleep," he said. "I need you to be fit and well. I need my First Officer by my side."

He stood up, smiled a little at the Vulcan, then watched as Spock obeyed him, settling into a deep sleep.

McCoy looked at his medi-scanners. "He's sleeping normally now, as far as I can tell." He faced the Captain. "Jim...?"

"Excuse me, Bones," Kirk interrupted quickly. "I have matters to attend to." He left Sickbay speedily, before he could be stopped. He did not want to answer any questions on things he himself did not understand.

He went to his quarters and poured himself a drink. He had been in telepathic communication with Spock and that gave him the strangest feeling. The one private place any Human had was his mind, and that privacy had just been lost. He swallowed his drink, then poured another. He had consented, he had given his permission, and he could not help think that he had been in some kind of non-verbal communion with the Vulcan before. Surely the healing meld, that day on Athene 2; surely also when Spock had eased his terror and horror that same day; surely the tingling of the friendship bond. Was that not a telepathic link? Had Spock not reached his mind that way too?

Friendship with a Vulcan. He had known that the rules of this would be radically different from Human friendship, but he had not realised the intense mental closeness which was forming, which he had so easily slipped into. He lay down on his bed. How would he be able to handle such a closeness? How could the emotion-suppressing Vulcan? There were so many questions, so disturbing, so intimate, that he wondered if he would even be able to ask them, let alone expect the reticent First Officer to answer them. Suddenly he had a glimmer of the dilemma Spock had had to face when first the facts of loyalty and friendship had made themselves apparent. How

to keep one's personal privacy in such a relationship?

Jim Kirk reflected on some of the many relationships he had been a part of in his thirty years. Some good, some rewarding, others destructive. He remembered the rare visits of his star-travelling father, a stranger to him but an influence on his life. His older brother Sam, who had been both father and brother to him, and whom he had hero-worshipped as a boy. His strong, warm and loving mother who had been the prime influence in his years of growing up; she had encouraged his interest in Starfleet, even though it had made her almost like a widow for so many years until it had in truth taken her husband from her. Then there had been Ruth, the lovely girl who had captured his eighteen year old heart, and whose love had given him his first taste of adult passion. Carol Marcus, whom he had loved with his new-found maturity, but could not stay with. He had his Starship, she her own important research. Gary Mitchell, the friend of so many years who had become like a stranger to him now. Bones, whom he had known and respected for years, and was someone he could rely on to tell him the truth, uncomfortable or not.

And Spock... to whom he was already closer than any other. Kirk did not believe in fate but he wondered as he recalled the strange incidents which had befallen himself and the Vulcan, if their life-patterns were not inextricably bound up together. They had been drawn together in the most unusual way, even Spock did not deny it. What was in store for them? How was he to handle a relationship with a telepath? He could not avoid the Vulcan... he did not want to, he wanted close personal friendship with him, but when it strayed into telepathic communication, it disturbed him. *Why?* he wondered; was it that he was afraid that he would not be able to stand up to such close scrutiny? Was he afraid that his faults, his weaknesses, would distress Spock, repel him?

Kirk tried to sort out his own feelings. Had the mindmeld been unpleasant? Had he felt violated in any way? He recalled the sensations he had experienced. A warmth; an awareness of a presence; a togetherness of some sort. No - it had not been unpleasant, nor had he felt any violation, for he had consented after all; yet someone in his mind, knowing his thoughts, his deepest feelings? He shivered, suddenly a little cold.

The sounding of his door chime roused him. "Come," he said with a sigh. He frowned as he saw Gary enter. He sat up, alert and wary.

Mitchell came over. "I came to see if you're all right. I heard that you brought Mr. Spock out of the coma."

Kirk grimaced. "News travels fast."

Mitchell grinned mischievously. "Especially news about the Captain and the mysterious Mr. Spock." He sat on the bed. "Did he really go into a mind link with you?"

Kirk swung his legs from the bed and stood up. He walked to his outer office. Mitchell followed him, curious and interested.

"I'm busy, Gary," he said, picking up a report. The last thing he wanted was anyone prying into such a personal matter.

Mitchell sighed. At one time Jim had told him everything. Now, especially when the Vulcan was concerned, he said so little.

He watched as Kirk called Sickbay to check on Spock, then busied himself with other calls to various parts of the ship. He stood waiting until Kirk had finished.

"Jim," he said, "you used to talk to me."

Kirk looked up at him. "I have nothing to talk about."

"With me," Mitchell finished for him. "That's the difference." He glanced down. "I don't blame you. You can't trust me - I understand that." He met Kirk's eyes. "I want to thank you for allowing me on the landing party."

Kirk nodded, smiled a little, then said gently, "Gary, old friend, don't push me. I have a lot on my mind, and I can't talk about it to anyone right now." He stood up. "I have to sleep. Take over from Mr. Scott; look after my ship for me."

A wave of happiness swept through Mitchell. Jim was trusting him with the ship. He vowed to himself that he would not let his Captain down again. "Yes, Captain, thank you, Captain," he said fervently.

Once Mitchell had left, Kirk returned to his bed. He was weary, so very weary, but his mind was active and he was unable to sleep. His thoughts kept returning to the mind-speech and the intimacy involved in such communication. Always such a private person, his initial reaction was one of having been read at a level he was not sure he wanted known. Yet, he considered Spock. There was no-one more private than the Vulcan. How could such a being deal with such a contact? He jumped up, paced the floor, but could find no answers to these dilemmas. He tried to exercise; meditate; he took a shower - nothing worked. His agitation and confusion persisted.

Finally, he made his way to Sickbay and sat beside the sleeping Vulcan. McCoy began to speak, but was silenced by Kirk's warning glance, and left them alone. For a time Kirk sat there silently until gradually he found himself relaxing. He realised it, and at that moment he decided that he did not care how telepathically close he and Spock became. He had sought out Vulcan friendship and he would abide by its rules no matter how strange, how intimate. Spock would never abuse that friendship in any way - Kirk knew that for certain. If Spock could accept such a friendship, then he would too. He would learn to understand it. Spock would teach him.

The Vulcan woke with a start. He had been drawn into the death of the planet-being; the emanations from her dying mind had caught him. He had struggled, violently, to disassociate himself from it and had only partly succeeded; he had gone into a state of deep shock from which few ever returned. Only the persistent voice and touch had recalled him... Jim...

"Spock. You are safe now," the voice said.

He turned to the direction the voice was coming from, and saw the blurred golden outline of his friend. He blinked, trying to clear his vision. He had been dreaming... Gradually, Jim became clear, and Spock saw the concern on his face.

"Can you talk?" Kirk asked.

Spock suddenly remembered that he had gone into mind-link briefly with Jim. He had asked, Kirk had permitted it, even though he had not known what he had given his permission for. In the short contact Spock had noted the alarm in him at the loss of his personal privacy. Deep shame threatened to overcome Spock. He should never have attempted it, even at the upper levels used for mind-speech. How could Kirk have possibly known that Spock was going to do such a thing?

He searched Kirk's face for signs of anger, disquiet, fear, revulsion. He saw none of those things - there was only concern.

"I am able to talk to you, sir," he said hoarsely. He tried to clear his throat, but to his consternation found he could barely swallow.

"You were out for so long. I feared for your life."

"You drew me back to life, and I repaid you by invading your privacy. I ask your pardon, sir. It will not happen again. I was not myself."

His confusion increased at Kirk's unconcerned smile. "Spock, I was aware that you were asking for my permission."

"You could not have known what for," Spock persisted. "It was an unforgivable breach of -"

"Spock," Kirk interrupted. "I have taken on a Vulcan as my friend. I accept you with all your foibles, abilities, differences, as you have accepted mine. Can I do less than you? You have dealt with my moods and emotions even though they must be painful for you. If you needed to talk to me, and could not vocalise, you were perfectly entitled to communicate in any way you could." He leaned forward, gazing earnestly at Spock. "I must admit that it is quite something to get used to, but I do accept it. I've told you that I accept friendship on your terms, and I am willing to enter into any form of communication you wish. I believe we have communicated in several different ways already. I am correct, am I not?"

Spock tried to stop his startlement from showing. Jim's intuition was uncanny.

"Yes, Captain; we have."

Aware of Spock's near-the-surface emotion, Kirk sat back. If it was anyone else he would have tried to give some kind of physical comfort, but he was unsure if Spock would welcome even *his* touch in the obviously shaken condition he was in. How could he be so close to someone, yet so unsure of him?

He tried to concentrate on his words. "When you healed me, when we touched in the friendship link, through the relaxation... Realisation came upon him as he spoke. An empathic, telepathic union! He shook his head. Was this what Vulcan friendship could offer? Was it possible? How could beings who claimed they had no emotion enter into such a closeness?

"I do not understand it, Captain," Spock said, his voice shaky, "but it is there and must be accepted."

Damn this fear of not knowing the right thing to do; being afraid of upsetting Vulcan sensibilities. He could see how

uncertain Spock was. How was he to help him? The answer came easily. He smiled.

"Spock, touch my mind again," he said softly. This time he would be prepared. He wanted to experience the unusual sensations again. Spock's eyes widened, but he did not speak. Kirk got the impression that he could not. He closed his eyes and waited until after several long seconds, he felt the touch of warm fingertips on his face. He willed himself to relax and accept the now familiar presence.

\Spock?

\Yes, Captain, I am here.

\I'm not afraid of this.

\Indeed, Captain, you are not.

It was true, Kirk knew beyond all doubt. There was nothing to fear in this joining of minds; it was not unpleasant, it was unthreatening, it was like being afloat on a lake on a warm summer's evening, at peace, relaxed, content; but not alone. Never alone.

\You are a dreamer, Jim, Spock said, his mind-voice warm.

\It is one of my faults, Spock.

\A minor one.

\Spock, will you be all right? I want to help you, and I don't know how.

\I will recover, Jim. You reached me when I had withdrawn so deeply that no-one else would have been able to recall me. We are bound together in the ancient way. It is a difficult but rewarding partnership, it is said; it takes many years of learning to understand its full potential, even amongst telepaths.

\I am willing to work at it, if you are.

\Indeed, Captain, but...

Kirk sensed the hesitation and he grew alarmed.

\I must withdraw now. I thank you for your willingness to help me. You are truly a most exceptional being. I will sleep now. You must rest also.

\Spock... Kirk began, suddenly unwilling to withdraw from the mind-meld.

\I ask for your understanding, Jim. Please do not ask more. I am grateful to you, and I honour you above all others.

Unable to refuse that request, and deeply touched by the Vulcan's obvious regard for him, he gave his consent to the withdrawal. Slowly, he opened his eyes. He was alone again, and it felt strange, empty... but he felt Spock's gaze on him and he met it. No, not alone; not fully, not as he had been in the past. With Spock by his side, he would never be alone. He stood up; he felt better now, and he could see that Spock had regained his calmness. Kirk smiled at him, then leaned over to touch his shoulder, aware

that Spock would be able to accept that now.

"As soon as you are recovered, I want to hear that lecture," he said. "I want to be able to understand the theory this time."

"I will endeavour to simplify it further," Spock said.

Kirk caught his breath. Was Spock being insolent? No. That was impossible. Was he attempting humour? No - surely not. Was he teasing? A Vulcan tease!

He grinned. "I will endeavour to understand it then."

Spock watched Jim leave, his thoughts in a turmoil. How had it been possible for Jim, a non-telepath to have reached him on three separate occasions? He searched through his memory for the ancient tales, where it was said that certain ones had entered into a particularly close friendship, ones who were exceptionally attuned to one another. Could he and Jim be such a pair? It was virtually unknown in these times between Vulcans, so how was it possible between Vulcan and Human? He realised that he was getting too close to his Captain. He did not know whether it was because of his Vulcan half or his Human half, but that at this time was unimportant. He had to retreat behind Vulcan restraint, he could not allow himself the luxury of such an open friendship. It was un-Vulcan. Yet he marvelled at the persistence and courage of his Captain. How could he, a Human, accept as he had done that his mind could be entered so easily? How could one who was so afraid of being dominated by others ask for another mind-meld, and even be comfortable with it?

As a Vulcan, Spock was superior to Humans in many ways, but he realised with a little surprise that Kirk was his commander, and not only by his rank as Captain, but by his personality, his willpower, his charisma. There was no-one he respected and admired more. He would never value another in the way he did Kirk. He would be the Captain's right arm, his balance, his advisor, his friend, but he did not know how he would be able to survive in the way he had been doing all these years. Kirk had changed him. He would have to find a way of coping, or else his Human half might begin to dominate his behaviour.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The ship's theatre was full for Spock's first lecture. Mitchell sat next to Kirk. He had only attended because Jim had insisted that he should, but as he looked around he wondered why so many others were there. His eyes lingered on the lovely science officer, Lt. Ben-Levi, then he frowned and glanced around again. The women outnumbered the men! He shook his head; he had not known that so many of them were interested in scientific theories!

"Rachel," he said, turning to Ben-Levi. "You're a science officer, I can understand your interest here, but all these young yeomen and ensigns... "

Ben-Levi smiled. "Mr. Spock is an interesting speaker."

"Interesting!" Gary exclaimed. "As interesting as a block of ice."

"Ice melts," Ben-Levi said with a devastating smile.

Mitchell caught his breath. He wondered what plan of action to take with her.

Kirk chuckled, and Mitchell turned to face him. "What did she mean?" he asked quietly as Spock entered the room and mounted the platform.

Kirk grimaced. "I would imagine that to the opposite sex, Spock would be something of an enigma."

"You mean they find him attractive?" Mitchell said disbelievingly.

"I think that is fairly obvious."

Mitchell stared at the Vulcan, seeing his cold, sharp features. Of all the men on this ship for Human women to find attractive! His gaze travelled the audience again. Jim was right... the eyes of all the women were riveted to the Vulcan. He could almost sense the excitement in the atmosphere.

"Good evening, Captain Kirk, and all attending," Spock said formally. "I welcome you to a lecture on a subject I hope you will find of interest." Spock tried to control the nervousness he was feeling. Had he simplified the theory enough for them? Would he be able to hold their attention? Would he be able to make it interesting enough for them? He had attended many lectures at the Academy, and had never understood why Human lecturers had felt the need to inject 'humour'. Surely the subject being taught was of enough interest to the students. Yet he had also noted that Humans at lectures given by Vulcans often seemed bored and uninterested. Spock vowed to himself that his talk would not be received like that. Jim had asked him to explain the theory, having an interest in it himself; he would speak as if he was talking to Jim personally. He took a deep breath and began.

Mitchell did not listen. He watched the audience, and to his amazement saw that they were listening intently. He studied Jim and saw the genuine enjoyment on his face! He could not believe it! What did they all find so fascinating?

There was a loud burst of applause when Spock finished, something which surprised the First Officer greatly. He attempted to maintain control over his features, and when silence reigned once more he asked if there were any questions. To his further surprise there were, and he answered them as simply as he could.

Kirk came onto the stage. He smiled at Spock with approval, then turned to the audience. "I would like to thank Mr. Spock for his intriguing and illuminating lecture. It will be preserved in the library computer for reference." He faced his First Officer. "I hope you will consider further lectures, Mr. Spock, and will honour us with the sharing of your ideas and knowledge."

Spock bowed elegantly, pleased with the praise he had received, and the reception. "Indeed, sir," he said.

Kirk and Mitchell stayed behind when the others left.

Spock looked at Mitchell. "You found my lecture uninteresting, Mr. Mitchell," he stated.

Mitchell flushed and stood up.

"Gary never did have much patience for lectures," Kirk said. "But he's a fool not to have listened to yours."

"I only came because you wanted me to," Mitchell said, angrily.

"I won't ask you again," Kirk said, going over to him. "You insult our speaker if you don't pay attention to him."

"You must have known how I would be," Mitchell argued. "You just said that I never did like lectures. What made you think I might enjoy this one?"

Kirk's face darkened at Mitchell's insolent tone. "I just thought that you might like to use your brain for a change."

The flush on Mitchell's face deepened as the insinuation behind Kirk's words penetrated. "You're so damn perfect, Captain Kirk. You never used to be."

"Just what are you saying?" Kirk snapped.

"Just because *you* have to be perfect in the eyes of your crew doesn't mean I have to be. I'm not you, I'm not Commander Spock. I'm not perfect..." His tone was full of insult, and Kirk clenched his fists, his body readying itself to lash out.

His arm was caught from behind, in the vice-like grip he now knew well. Slowly, he let out the breath he had been holding, and unclenched his hands. He half-turned to meet the Vulcan's eyes, then he smiled slightly. Spock released him, then turned his penetrating gaze on Mitchell. Mitchell flinched under that stare. He suddenly remembered Spock's words to him once about putting Jim first, about the responsibilities of being the Captain's friend. He swallowed. Insulting Jim, arguing with him like this, was not exactly the friendly thing to do.

"I apologise Captain, to you and Mr. Spock. You're right. I am a fool. I'll listen to the lecture in my quarters." He turned to go.

"Mr. Mitchell," Spock's voice stopped him. "If you have any questions, you may contact me."

Kirk grinned a little, but did not speak.

Mitchell turned around. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate that."

"Gary," Jim said softly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to anger you."

With an embarrassed grin on his face, Mitchell came over to him. "It doesn't take much, Jim - you know that."

Kirk laughed and pulled Mitchell to him. For a long moment Gary hugged him, then he stepped back, nodded to Mr. Spock, and left the room.

Spock shook his head slightly. He had never understood this friendship between Kirk and Mitchell. Why did they always get into arguments? Why were they so fond of one another? Why did Humans always feel the need for physical contact?

Kirk faced him. "You seem confused, Spock."

Spock gave a start. He had not thought that he had revealed any change of expression, but he did not deny Kirk's words.

"Your friendship with Mr. Mitchell is most peculiar, Captain. Why do you always argue?"

"Personality clash, probably. The Human male is still a primitive being. It's difficult for him to accept my new position; and to accept you."

"Me!" Spock exclaimed.

"Yes, you... my friend."

"I do not wish to come between you."

"I know," Kirk said wearily. "And I try not to shut Gary out. The problem is that I have changed and he has not."

"I believe that he is beginning to. I have confidence that he is trying."

Kirk hoped that he was right. He smiled. "I enjoyed your lecture, and... I *could* understand it," he added proudly. "Tell me, how much did you have to simplify it? Was it difficult for you?"

Spock was unsure whether to tell him or not. He sighed. He should be truthful as Vulcans always were, but he had seen how easily and quickly Kirk could be roused to anger, and he did not want it directed at him. The force of Kirk's emotions were too painful to him, and anger was a powerful emotion.

"Well?" Kirk asked. "Don't spare my feelings."

Spock clasped his hands behind his back. He braced himself.

"It took me... many hours to simplify it, sir." He swallowed. "It is a... complex theory, and one only a highly trained scientist could understand fully. Much of it is lost when simplified, but I... " He trailed off at Kirk's amused look.

"I see, Mr. Spock. Well, I assure you I appreciated it, and I believe that the other members of the audience did too. You didn't talk down to us, and who knows, maybe in another year or two we may be able to comprehend some of the more difficult parts of the theory."

Spock cleared his throat. "Indeed, sir."

Kirk laughed softly at the Vulcan's discomfiture, but he could not help but tease him sometimes.

They made their way towards the gymnasium in silence, but once in the changing rooms Kirk asked, "How long until we reach the Aldebaran colony?"

"Four point six hours, Captain," Spock replied immediately.

"Four point six hours," Kirk repeated, amusedly.

"That is what I said, sir. Why do you repeat it?"

Kirk shrugged. How was he to explain the humour he often found in Spock's behaviour? "Oh - it's just a habit... Mr. Spock, after we pick up our personnel at the colony, we're on our way to the most exciting mission of all. The Galactic barrier... "

"Indeed, Captain. It should prove most interesting. I have been fine-tuning all the sensors for maximum efficiency."

"So that's why I have hardly had a civil word out of you for the past few days."

Spock frowned. "Captain, I do not understand... "

Kirk sighed resignedly. "I'm only teasing, Spock."

The Vulcan eyebrow climbed. "Captain, why would you wish to do such a thing? It is illogical."

"I know, I know," Kirk said with a slight grin. He indicated the doorway to the gymnasium. "Shall we, my teacher?"

"If you wish, my student," Spock replied impulsively.

He stopped, shocked at his words. What was happening to him? Where was Vulcan decorum and restraint? Such informality was scandalous! He felt the heat in his cheeks at Jim's delighted laugh. Waves of confusion spread through him. He had to draw back from the closeness of his relationship with Jim; he was now beginning to speak without thinking first. His guard was dropping too much.

He followed Jim into the gymnasium and started on some rigorous warm-up exercises. He noted that they were alone; it was not their usual time for practise, and their audience was not there. He had often wondered why so many people came to watch them, but he had never asked.

"What will your next lecture be about, Spock?" Kirk asked.

"My next lecture?" Spock asked in surprise.

"Yes, surely you will enlighten us on yet another fascinating subject."

"I have not given any thought to it, sir."

"Well, do so," Jim said, as he came to stand in front of him. "You're a very interesting speaker, and I like to see my crew take an interest in further education."

"Very well, sir," Spock said, warmed by the compliment. "But I had not thought that so many would be interested in scientific theories."

Kirk grinned. He didn't think that the majority of the audience had been at first. He was quite aware of Spock's attractiveness to women. He had seen the looks in his crewwomen's eyes many times as they had studied the Vulcan. Kirk was used to the admiration of women, and recognised it easily enough, but Spock had no such awareness; he was, in many ways, such an innocent.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," the Vulcan replied.

Jim tried his best; but again and again, he was tossed onto the floor. He could not move Spock's strength. In an all-out fight, perhaps with a bit of luck it would be possible to bring the Vulcan down using dirty street fighting tactics; Tzunarr however was a highly disciplined martial art, and he had to observe its rules.

He rose to his feet, closed his eyes and sighed deeply. He had been practising the relaxation, but was getting no closer to attaining even a fraction of it. Why was he unable to master it? Why? He breathed deeply, concentrating on himself, imagining the power of his ship all around him; her engines, her warp capabilities; he imagined that suffusing his whole body. After a few moments he opened his eyes, unaware that Spock had been watching him intently.

He grabbed Spock's wrists in an attempt to block the next throw; he held his ground, feeling strength rise within him. With a deft and finely balanced move, he threw the Vulcan onto the mat. For an eternity, he stared down at Spock in astonishment. He had felt the Vulcan strength waver, and had seized the advantage. He had done it, after all this time! He had done it! He had thrown Spock at last!

Sheer delight took hold of him, and like a schoolboy, he jumped into the air, letting out a loud cry of victory.

Spock lay on his back, watching his Captain in total puzzlement. He was pleased that Jim had finally thrown him, but the Human's reaction was completely incomprehensible. Truly, the more he knew him, the less he understood him...

"I did it, Spock, I did it!" Kirk exclaimed, kneeling over the confused Vulcan. He grabbed Spock's shoulders and shook him. "I did it." He slumped back, sitting on top of the bemused and startled First Officer. He started to laugh. "I can't believe it, I finally did it." He closed his eyes, revelling in the achievement he had worked so hard for.

More confused than ever, Spock stared up at this Human who was his friend. Why was Jim sitting on him? Why had he jumped into the air? Were there some strange Human customs he did not know? He frowned; what was *he* meant to do? He had never in all his years in Starfleet had to deal with such a strange situation!

He watched Kirk, seeing the relaxation and happiness on his face; he could feel the delight coming from him in waves. He decided to stay still and quiet, and allow Jim to take the lead in this illogical, Human behaviour. There was much he still had to learn about Humans...

Suddenly Jim came down to earth. He opened his eyes, met Spock's interested gaze, and flushed deeply. What must the dignified Vulcan think of him? He scrambled away, lost his balance and tumbled over, sprawled on his face. He felt the flush spread throughout his body as sheer embarrassment at his behaviour overcame him. He sat up, not knowing where to look, feeling like some immature, gawky adolescent.

A hand came into his field of vision. He swallowed, took a deep breath, and looked up to see the Vulcan standing now, his hand outstretched to him. With an unsure half smile he clasped the hand

and was pulled to his feet with powerful Vulcan strength.

"Well done, Jim," Spock said generously. "But, this jumping, this sitting upon me; what does it mean?"

Kirk started to laugh. "I'm not sure how to explain it, Spock." He sobered himself a little. "I was so happy to be able to throw you after all this time, I was a little over-exuberant. Um - yes, that's it. I'm sorry if I startled you - I mean... if you were shocked." He closed his eyes for a second. His explanation sounded lame even to his own ears!

Spock raised an eyebrow and tried to control the smile which threatened to break out on his face; he barely succeeded. By the time Kirk looked at him again, Spock knew that the momentary lapse had been safely defeated. He wondered at his Captain, so mature and responsible, yet so young and even boyish at times. What an unusual and complex person he was. Spock suspected that the quiet orderly life he had once lived was over for good now. Life under Captain James T. Kirk's command was never going to be ordinary, and Spock knew that he would never regret being his First Officer and friend; but he wondered how he was going to survive in such an unpredictable friendship.

He forced himself back into the role of instructor. He reached for discipline, but found it impossible to achieve. Kirk's strange behaviour had rocked his control, and before he realised it he was being thrown again. He felt the rush of adrenalin through his body as the shock hit him. Quickly he scrambled to his feet, and stared into the laughing face of his Human friend. What had he unleashed in Jim? He smiled inwardly; he had done his duty, he had given Jim a way to survive against opponents much stronger than himself. Now he must improve his capabilities, and toughen him physically beyond the Human norm.

Spock held out his arms. He was prepared this time.

He hoped!!!!!!!