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ALL

LOSS

RESTORED

by

Janet Stewart

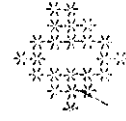
a STAR TREK
fanzine



ALL LOSS RESTORED

by

JANET STEWART



But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restored, and sorrows end.

Shakespeare sonnet.

A Scotpress publication.

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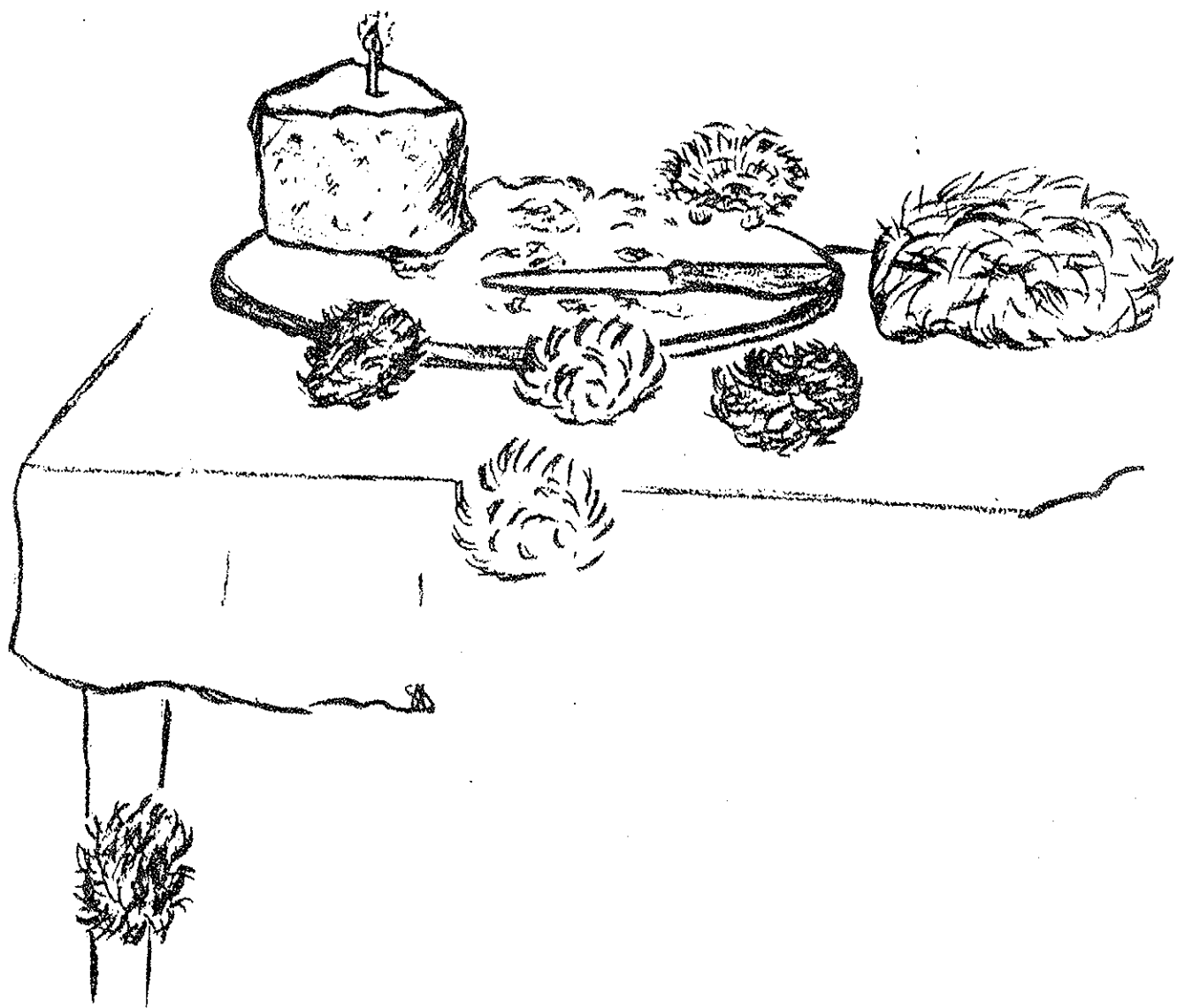
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Scotpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona.



ALL LOSS RESTORED

Amanda went into the store-room and stood looking around her.

Where to start? So many cases and boxes lying here forgotten for years. Briskly, she went to the window and opened it wide. This was going to be a dusty job - better let some air into the room.

For a long time now she had intended sorting through all these boxes, filled with heaven alone knew what treasures - old letters, mementoes, discarded 'toys' - all the sentimental bits and pieces which every family accumulates over the years. At last she had got round to it.

Looking in her mirror that morning, she thought the brilliant sunshine had accentuated all the lines, some tiny, some more marked, that she knew were there but had not really thought about before. It had not taken long for this to lead to a mood of nostalgia, of thinking about the days when she and Sarek had been young and Spock a solemn, serious, lovable little boy. Not one to sit around indulging such thoughts, she had realised that the best medicine for her mild depression was work.

The house was spotless, though, and somehow her beloved garden, usually such a solace, did not call to her today.

Suddenly, she remembered the store-room. For years, she had been meaning to sort through all the boxes hidden away there. True, it might not be the best sort of job to suit her need, but it would certainly keep her busy.

Crouching now beside one of the big cases, she opened it resolutely, took out some bundles of letters and began to sort them into piles. Determinedly, she put most of them on one side to be thrown out. No point in keeping old cards from relatives long since dead...and what was in this bundle? Old letters from Sarek's Great-aunt T'Lia, written to her family when she had been living on Thetia Major, so many years ago - surely no need to keep these? Thumbing through them she wondered why they had bothered to keep them in the first place; mainly concerned as they were with T'Lia's rheumatism and complaints about the deplorable weather.

Ruthlessly she went through box after box, discarding letters, old clothes - had she really worn that dreadful skirt? - cups without saucers, old bits of chipped pottery...

She was so engrossed she completely lost track of the time and was surprised, looking through the window, to notice the sun had moved right across the garden. She must have missed the mid-day meal. Well, that would do her figure no harm. She had pre-set dinner. By the look of the shadows in the garden, Sarek would soon be home, ready for it. Perhaps she had better leave the rest until another day. There were still quite a lot of boxes untouched, though. She would have time to sort through just one more.

Choosing a small one, she opened it, peered into its depths. There was not much in this one. Smiling, she lifted out a jar of shells which Spock had collected whilst on holiday with his Human grandparents, on Earth. This was one thing she could not throw out. She must remember to show them to him on his return. Looking again into the box, she took out an old faded velvet bag, fastened at the neck with a leather draw-string. Opening the bag, she shook out the contents into her hand and gasped in sudden amazement, staring at what lay in her hand. Wherever had it come from? Not from her side of the family, certainly. She would have remembered it. Looking at it, she smiled a little as an idea began to form.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw a shadow move between her and the door, and looked up to see her husband standing by her side, looking down at her.

"Amanda, my wife. You seem busy. Will there be any chance of a meal tonight?"

Smiling, she got up and kissed him. "Have you ever come home to no meal?"

It is all in hand. Sarek - look at this." She showed him her find. "Where did it come from? Why have I never seen it before?"

He took the small object from her and, one eyebrow raised, scrutinised it carefully. "It belonged to my Great-grandmother. I remember it as a boy. I suppose it was put away when she died with some of her other things. I remember her telling me it had been in the family since time out of mind. Come, my dear, had you not better wash some of the dust off yourself before dinner?"

Linking her arm through his, she led him to the door. "Sarek, I have an idea. I will tell you about it while we get ready..."



"It's no use, Spock, you won't talk me out of it. My mind is quite made up."

"And we all know what a stubborn cuss you are." McCoy took his place at the canteen table and began to apply himself to his meal with clinical efficiency.

"Morning, Bones. I see your ears are in good working order this morning."

"Morning, Jim - Spock... The bacon's a bit hard this morning." The Chief Medical Officer of the Enterprise chewed solidly for a while, then turned his attention to his Captain and First Officer. "What is it you want to talk him out of, Spock? Be warned, as I said, he's a stubborn cuss once his mind is made up."

The Vulcan calmly poured himself another cup of coffee before replying. "I have no wish to dissuade the Captain from following his inclinations. I merely suggested an alternative idea to his intention."

Pushing his empty plate from him, McCoy helped himself to toast. "I suppose I deserve that answer for butting in on your conversation. Never mind, let's change the subject, whatever it was. Have you heard about Christine's tribble?"

Kirk grinned from one to the other of his two good friends. "It's all right, Bones. No secrecy. I was just telling Spock that I intend to throw a party in two weeks' time, to celebrate my birthday. Give the crew a well-earned rest."

"Well now, that sounds like a good suggestion. It's some time since we had a party. If you need any help, Jim..."

"Yes, I will, thanks. It will be for all the crew, of course." He ignored Spock's slight shudder. "I'll be grateful for a little help. I thought I'd ask a couple of the women - they're always good at these things - and with the three of us, we should just about manage."

Spock's shudder gathered momentum. "Did you say 'three', Captain?"

Stony-faced, Kirk turned to him, ignoring the pained expression. "Yes, Spock, I did. I expect support in all things from my bondmate." He winked at McCoy. "As Science Officer, I thought you could arrange the music for the evening, patch it through the ship..."

Spock got to his feet, his face lightening. "Well, why did you not say that in the first place, Jim? I have long awaited an opportunity to share the pleasure of listening to my tape of early Vulcan plainsong chants. It should sound good shipwide. Now if you will excuse me, Captain, Doctor, I must check some readings before I go on duty." He turned to go; at the last moment, turned back to Kirk. His face completely expressionless, he closed one eye for a second, then moved elegantly, unhurriedly, to the door.

Kirk watched him go with affectionate amusement. Reaching for a piece of toast, he found the plate was empty.

"Really, Bones. Talk about me going on a diet. You must have eaten six pieces of toast!"

"Who's counting? Anyway, Jim, I'm lucky, never put on an ounce. What was it Spock suggested instead of your party?"

Kirk had risen too, paused in the act of pushing in his chair, a slow grin crossing his face. "Oh, he thought that instead of going to all the trouble and expense of a party, I could mark the occasion equally well by a subscription to half a dozen learned journals, to go in the library."

"He wasn't serious?"

"I'm not sure. He looked serious."

"He always looks serious." Wiping his mouth on his napkin, McCoy stood up. "Must go, Jim. Promised to look in on that lad from engineering before I start today's list. See you tonight, if not before. Oh - and remind me to tell you about the tribble." Grinning mysteriously he left the canteen. Kirk followed leisurely, humming rather tunelessly as he walked back to his quarters. Not on duty himself that morning, he planned to finish the small amount of packing necessary for his forthcoming visit to stay with Spock's parents. No need to take much. Most of what he would require was already in his room in Sarek's house on Vulcan. Just one or two personal belongings, and a present for Spock's mother Amanda.

The U.S.S. Enterprise, pride and joy of the United Federation of Planets' Deep Space Starships, was at present resting in the safe harbour of Vulcan Space Central on her way to give impressive backing to the Independence Ceremonies of Anthyga, she was first making a scheduled stop at Vulcan in order to service and replace some engine equipment which had originally been made in Vulcan workshops. Lt-Commander Scott, the ship's Chief Engineer, had told the Captain that a week should be enough time for the work in hand, and Kirk had gladly accepted Spock's invitation to spend a week's vacation with him, making his parents' house their base.

Neither Captain nor First Officer would be required for the work on the engines. It was routine and straightforward. Indeed, very few of the crew in general would be required during the coming week; knowing this the Captain had made arrangements for the crew to take a well-earned, much needed break; had given permission for as many as possible to take shore leave. Those few for whom this was not possible he had promised would be the next to be allowed R & R facilities, as soon as these could be arranged.

Kirk padded round his cabin, neatly packing the few necessities. Once again, he could not resist looking at his present for Amanda. He had seen it some time before, on Saris Minor, and had immediately known it would be exactly right for Spock's mother - who was also something of a mother to him. Opening the box, he gazed at the silver flower inside. A rare Saris moonflower, it lay preserved for all time in the crystal. He sighed at the total beauty and perfection of the little plant, then, closing the lid, placed it carefully on top of his kitbag, zipping the bag up safely.

He was looking forward to seeing his bondmate's parents again. It was some time since he had last seen them. Carefully, he stowed his bag at the foot of his bed, then, crossing to his desk, he pulled his small computer towards him. Smiling to himself, he began to push buttons. Better start working out details for his forthcoming party.

Later the same day, leaving the Enterprise in the capable hands of Mr. Scott, Kirk and Spock beamed down to Sarek's town house. Dr. McCoy had reluctantly declined the invitation to join them. He felt a few days in the safe harbour of the Vulcan port too good to miss; for some time he had looked for an opportunity to catch up on recent developments in laser neurology. These few days' peace and quiet would enable him to do just that.

Sarek and Amanda met their son and his friend as they shimmered into existence in the cool hallway of their home. Spock gave his father the formal Vulcan salute, but his mother he kissed, holding her close for a moment. She returned his kiss warmly, winding her arms round his lean frame, then greeted their other guest in the same way and with the same warmth. Drawn from the first by the compelling charm of her son's closest friend, she also felt a great deal of gratitude to this young man. Until Kirk had befriended him, Spock's manner with everyone, including his mother, had been very reserved. She had known he cared for her, but until Jim had shown him how to accept his Human emotions and even to express them, he had rarely shown that affection. The change in her beloved son since his friendship with this man began warmed her mother's heart, and her greeting to Kirk was very warm.

After exchanging pleasantries and some bits of news, Spock and Kirk went to their rooms to prepare for dinner. Their suite was situated at the back of the house, overlooking the foothills of the Satek mountains, and consisted of two large bedrooms, large enough and comfortable enough to double as sitting rooms, which connected with each other through a shared bathroom.

After showering and changing into one of the Vulcan robes he often wore when a guest in this house, Kirk took out the little silver flower, and was looking at it when Spock walked in from the bathroom, towelling his still damp hair. He came over to stand by Kirk's side, his tousled, half dry hair making him look younger and very Human. For a moment they both stood looking in silence at the delicately beautiful flower, their faces relaxed and gentle.

"Jim, I don't think you will be able to part with that flower after all."

Kirk looked up sideways at his friend, and smiled. "I will, because it is going to someone who will appreciate it."

"Indeed. You could not have found a better gift for my mother. She will think even higher of you than she does now when you give it to her."

"No, Spock, when we give it to her. It is from both of us."

"Jim, it is your gift."

"Don't argue, Spock, it's from both of us." Then, as Spock opened his mouth, snapped quickly, "That's an order, Commander."

Spock sighed in mock resignation. "Very well...Captain. I know better by now than to argue with you."

"I should think so. For heaven's sake, Spock!" as the gong sounded, announcing the evening meal. "You'd better hurry if you want to make yourself respectable. Go and comb your hair, you look like a Vulcan hedgehog." As he waited for his friend, he absently put the small box in the pocket of his robe.

Five minutes later, both men joined Sarek and his wife in their dining room, Spock once more his normal elegant self, if slightly damp around the ears.

The meal was pleasantly informal. All four had much to discuss. Sarek asked Kirk's advice on how to deal with a brilliant, though eccentric Human member of the Science Academy Faculty, who, although a top authority on his subject and an outstanding teacher, was totally opposed to Vulcan restraint and was causing some alarm amongst the female students by his informal approach.

While they discussed this problem, Amanda took the opportunity to fuss happily over Spock. Every so often, Kirk caught a snatch of their conversation, and smiled a little over such phrases as 'not eating enough' and 'catch a chill if you don't dry your hair properly on the Enterprise'. Occasionally he fingered the small box in his pocket. He and Spock would give it to Amanda after dinner when they were all relaxing.

When the meal was over, they left the table to move to an adjoining sitting room for coffee and brandy, specially ordered in Kirk's honour. As the two

younger men reached the door, Kirk stood back politely, to allow his friend to pass through first. As he came close to Spock, Kirk was suddenly overwhelmed by a chill of fear and apprehension coming to him directly from the Vulcan. Waves of misery and depression flowed over him from Spock, coming through the bonding link. He stood, too shocked to move. Whatever could be wrong with his dear friend to cause such strong currents of misery?

As he was about to speak, the intense, troubled waves suddenly disappeared as abruptly as they had come, leaving Kirk confused and shaken. He realised he was holding his breath, let it out slowly, frowned concernedly at his friend. "Spock... Spock, are you all right?"

"Yes, Jim - why do you ask? You have gone very pale... Are you all right?"

The tense moment was broken by Amanda calling to them through the door. "Spock, Jim, do come and sit down. I've poured your coffee."

Far too polite to keep his hostess waiting, Kirk gave Spock another sharp look. He seemed fine, and he, Kirk, could not sense any of the earlier mood of brooding worry. Shrugging a little, he led the way through the door.

"Oh, there you are, dear." Amanda handed Kirk a cup of coffee. "It's so lovely to have an opportunity to serve coffee like this - brandy, too."

Sarek lifted an eyebrow. "Amanda, since when have I ever stopped you drinking coffee?"

His wife smiled at him. "I didn't say you did, my dear. Only it is rare that we ever serve it socially, like this. Come and sit down, Spock, your coffee is going cold."

The rest of the evening passed in a pleasant mood of genial conversation and reminiscences. Eventually, as yawns became apparent, they decided, reluctantly, it was time for bed. Bidding their host and hostess a warm goodnight, Spock and Kirk walked slowly to their rooms. Neither alluded to the small incident earlier in the evening. The slight nagging worry Kirk still felt was driven out by the discovery, as they reached their rooms, that he had forgotten to give their present to Amanda.

"Look at this, Spock." Disgustedly, he took the small box from his pocket. "I meant to give this to Amanda after dinner. I suppose it's too late now?"

"Better wait until tomorrow, Jim. I think she will have retired for the night. Don't worry - " as he saw his friend's miserable expression. "It has waited several months. One more day will not matter."

Kirk smiled warmly at his bondmate. "Spock, you are so sensible. Why don't you tell me I'm a fool?"

"Because you are not. But you are tired. Get to bed, Jim. You'll need a good sleep if you're to keep up with me tomorrow."

"Heavens, yes. I'd forgotten we're going on one of your famous rambles." He yawned as Spock crossed the room to go through the bathroom to his own bedroom. "Night, Spock. Good to be here again."

"Indeed, yes. Goodnight, Jim."

Halfway through the night, Kirk woke in a cold sweat. He lay staring into the darkness, his heart pounding, his breathing rapid. Relief washed over him as he realised he must have had a nightmare. He could remember little of the dream, save that Spock had been in trouble and calling to him for help. Sweat began to pour from him again as he remembered that in the nightmare, some deep, nameless gulf had prevented him from going to his friend.

The vividness of the dream and his strange experience earlier in the evening merged into deep unease. No use trying to get back to sleep. He must check this out.

Leaving his bed, he made his way through the bathroom to Spock's room. Both connecting doors stood open and he moved very quietly, but he must have made some slight noise, for as he reached Spock's bed, the Vulcan sat up quickly.

"Who is there?"

"Spock, it's all right, it's only me."

"Jim? Is something wrong?" Reaching, Spock turned on the dim bedside light and exclaimed at the sight of his friend. Bathed in sweat, Kirk was shivering slightly with reaction. Swiftly, Spock got out of bed, brought a robe and draped it round Kirk, then, sitting on the edge of the bed, he pulled Kirk down to sit beside him, his arm reassuringly round his shoulders.

"Whatever is wrong, Jim?"

Turning within the comforting circle of Spock's arm, Kirk gripped his elbow. "Spock, are you all right? Are you?"

His bondmate looked deep into his eyes, his own full of trouble. "That is the second time you have asked me that tonight, Jim. What is this? Yes, I am all right. Why do you ask?"

Slowly, as though reluctant to re-live it, Kirk told him of his nightmare and of his feeling earlier that something was very wrong with Spock. His companion listened quietly, his arm still around him. When he had finished, Spock smiled reassuringly into the troubled face, and gave Kirk a gentle shake.

"It was only a dream, Jim. A nightmare. You must have worried subconsciously about your earlier fears. That could prey on your mind, resulting in this bad dream."

Pulling away, Kirk got to his feet. Wrapping Spock's robe round him, he paced the room, restlessly. "Yes - but Spock, what caused my apprehension earlier? You know me; I'm not given to neurotic imaginings." Shivering a little, he pulled the robe closer. He felt chilly with nervous reaction now, and suddenly very tired.

Spock got up and went to him. "Do not worry, Elandir. I cannot tell what caused your concern, but I assure you there is nothing wrong with me. Come, you are cold and tired. You will sleep now, and in the morning you will laugh at your fears." He led Kirk gently through to his own room, saw him into bed and covered him warmly. Worn out, Kirk fell asleep almost instantly. Spock waited until Kirk's breathing became soft and regular, then returned to his own room, a worried frown on his face.

Next morning, Kirk was calmer, though in no mood to laugh at his fears as Spock had said. In fact, both men were rather quiet as, rising early, they prepared for their day's hike. Amanda had left provisions for them, and they were away from the house and the town before anyone else was up and about. Spock wanted to take Kirk to see a small hidden valley set high up in the mountains, some ten miles south of the city. Neither mentioned the events of the previous night, except that, seeing Kirk's rather tense expression, Spock asked him if he felt refreshed enough for a long day's hike.

Kirk grinned at him then. "Do me good, I should think. Blow the cobwebs away."

The day promised to be very hot, but the Vulcan knew his country and kept them in the shade as much as possible. By mid-morning, when they stood at the entrance to the hidden valley, Kirk's spirits had risen to as near normal as made no difference. They decided to have a break before exploring, and sat thankfully in the shade of the tall trees. Accepting a cool drink, Kirk smiled his thanks and said, rather shame-facedly, "I'm sorry about last night, Spock. Can't think what came over me. I don't feel at all worried about you now. Everything's back to normal... Must be going neurotic after all!"

Relieved by Kirk's words, Spock still felt some nagging concern. Sensitive his friend certainly was, with all the shading and subtlety that that gave rise to, but neurotic? Jim was the least neurotic man he had ever met. He kept his unease to himself, however, only smiled warmly at Kirk, and changed the subject.

The rest of the day was very pleasant. Kirk was amazed by the shaded, deliciously cool valley, hidden as it was between the brooding, treeless hills; he followed, enthralled, as Spock showed him all the various features of it, special to him since his boyhood. At last they set off, reluctantly, for home, rather later than they had intended, both regretting not telling Sarek and Amanda that they might spend the night in the open.

By the time they reached the town, the evening was well advanced. Although Vulcan had no moon, its night sky was lit by myriad large jewel-like stars, glowing like fire in the cloudless sky. Both men were very tired, very relaxed, when they took their place once more in the dining room. Both apologized to Amanda for keeping the meal waiting, and were rewarded with the sweetest smile. No-one lingered over the meal, as last night; Sarek had a busy day ahead of him, and Kirk and Spock, half asleep already through the fresh air and the interruption of the previous night, were thankful when Amanda suggested an early night for them all. Both fell asleep as soon as their heads touched their pillows.

Some time during the night, Spock was dragged up from a deep, dreamless sleep by the sound of Kirk's voice calling his name, a note of such desolation in his voice that struck chill into the Vulcan's soul. He was in Kirk's room in an instant, and turning on the light, saw that Kirk had cried out in his sleep, was tossing restlessly in the grip of another nightmare.

Carefully, so as not to startle him, Spock put a hand on Kirk's shoulder and called his name, his voice low and quiet. "Jim, wake up. It's all right, it is only a dream. I am here."

Kirk woke instantly. At sight of the Vulcan he sat up, clutching him convulsively. "Spock, what is it? What are you keeping from me? I know you are in trouble, surely you can share it with me." He pulled Spock to him, speaking into his shoulder. "Don't try to tell me it is a dream. I've had the same dream twice now. It must mean something. Besides, I feel your trouble even when I'm awake. I felt it again, this evening at dinner. I feel it now, and I'm not dreaming now." Pulling away, he gripped Spock's arms and shook him quite roughly. "How dare you keep things from me!"

Spock submitted to Kirk's anger, realising it gave him some release for his worry and misery, and waited until he had quietened before speaking again, calmly, comfortingly. "Jim, my friend - my friend of friends - I give you my word, I am in no trouble. I have nothing on my mind, no worries, save what is causing you such unhappiness."

"But Spock, I can't be imagining this. You must - "

"Did you not hear me, Jim? I gave you my word. Would I lie to you?"

"You might. To protect me."

"No. We have gone beyond that. You know that as well as I do."

Quieter now, Kirk sighed, his eyes searching his friend's face. "Yes," he said at last. "I'm sorry. You're right. But Spock, what is this? What is happening to me?"

"I am not sure, but I think I could hazard a guess."

"You, guessing, Spock? Goodness, things must be bad." He tried to smile, to lessen the painful tension.

Spock returned his smile warmly. "That's better... Jim, will you permit me to link with you? I think that may provide the answer. I have a theory about these feelings of yours. Linking would test that theory."

"Yes, of course. I'm ready now, if you wish."

Gently, Spock placed his hands on Kirk's face, and without further words their minds moved, each to the other, sharing the warmth, the welcome they always experienced on such occasions. This time also they shared the fear, the worry; gradually, the reason for these emotions, and, finally, the understanding.

There was a long, charged moment after Spock had withdrawn from Kirk's mind; a long moment when both looked at each other, quietly, rather warily. Kirk spoke first.

"Is that what you expected to find?"

The Vulcan nodded. "Yes. It would not have taken you long to reach the same conclusion."

"No. What are we going to do about it?"

"Return tomorrow to the Enterprise. Forget this vacation."

"No, Spock."

"Yes, Jim."

"No, Spock." Again their eyes held, Kirk's determined, commanding, Spock's worried and angry.

At last Kirk's eyes softened. "Please. Spock. We can't..."

Spock took a deep breath. "Jim, I am not prepared to discuss this any further tonight. We are both tired. Tomorrow, I suppose we will have to make a decision. Lie down now - try to sleep. I will stay with you until you do." Moving, he half sat, half lay on the edge of the bed.

Kirk obeyed, realising how weary he was, how weary his friend must be. He stretched out an arm and let it lie over Spock's recumbent form. "No need, I'm all right now. You get back to bed."

Smothering a yawn, Spock settled himself more comfortably. "I said...I will stay...until...you...are...asleep," he replied - and promptly fell asleep himself.

Smiling, Kirk got up. Gently easing his bondmate into the middle of the narrow bed, covering him lightly, he stood a moment looking down at him, affection and relief in his eyes. "Thank God it is not you, Spock," he whispered, then, turning off the light, padded across to Spock's room and, climbing into Spock's bed, was asleep in seconds.

Spock woke to the sound of the shower running and to Kirk's rather tuneless singing. For a fraction of a second he was surprised at finding himself in Kirk's bed, then raised a disgusted eyebrow at himself, remembering. He sat up as Kirk, glowing and refreshed, came into the room.

"Good morning, bondmate. Sleep well?"

Spock pulled a face. "Better than I intended, obviously," he replied ruefully.

Kirk grinned and began to dress. "Hadn't you better get up? We'll be keeping breakfast waiting as well as last night's meal, if we're not careful."

"Come here, Jim. We have to talk."

Turning his back, Kirk pulled on his shirt. "Later, Spock. Not enough time now."

Sighing, Spock sat up straighter. "Come here, Jim, to me," he repeated. "Do you think I cannot tell the time?" nodding at the antique chronometer on the wall. "We have plenty of time. No point trying to delay. We must talk now."

Fully dressed, Kirk had no excuse to offer. Reluctantly, he crossed to the bed, stood by it looking down at Spock hesitantly but determinedly. Gravely, calmly, Spock returned the look.

"Jim, what did you read in my mind last night when we linked?"

"You know that as well as I do. I realised it is not you that is in trouble, as I thought...thank God...but your ancestor, my sometime 'master', Lord Spock. How did you manage to uncover that from my mind, Spock? And how do I manage to pick up his trouble from nine hundred years ago?"

Leaning back, the Vulcan thought for a moment before replying. "Jim, when we travelled through Compton's Hazard a year ago and you were affected by the time warp, going back nine hundred years to Vulcan to become my ancestor's slave ...he grew very close to you."

"Yes. And I became fond of him, too; Spock, I must go to him, help him..."

Holding up a hand, Spock continued. "Wait. Did he ever touch your face, as I do, in the mind link?"

Frowning, Kirk thought. "Only when he...struck me, that one time." His voice dropped, remembering... "Oh, and afterwards, when I was sick, I remember him sponging my face to try to cool the fever." He smiled softly. "I thought it was you, Elandir. What are you trying to tell me?"

"He was a very strong telepath, Jim, though he had no idea of it. The power was there, dormant. When he struck you, and later, when his hand came in contact with your face, the physical touch combined with strong emotion...first of anger, later of remorse...must have established some link. While you are here, in this house, so near to where he lived, that link is enabling you to pick up another of his strong emotions...this time, worry and misery."

"And, of course, you picked this up from my mind."

"Yes, I recognised him. Remember, I too had some contact with his mind. A most powerful mind - I will never forget the experience."

Kirk smiled rather nervously. "Then all is clear. I must go back, see if I can help."

"I have no such understanding. We must return to the ship, forget about this."

"You don't mean that, Spock."

"Jim, I do... He will have to sort out his own troubles. You cannot go to him every time he has a problem."

"He is your ancestor, Spock. Your double. That is why I cared for him."

"I know, t'hy'la, but he is dead. Has been dead for hundreds of years."

"What is death? Since I went back that time, realised that time has so little meaning, death has little meaning also. It seems we go on all the time, somewhere, as Lord Spock is doing. This fear I had, Spock - this strong feeling that you were in trouble. He must have been calling to me. I have to try to help. You kept the co-ordinates, Spock, when you brought me back - kept them on my request."

Trapped, Spock looked into the candid hazel eyes, wondered if he could, in fact, lie to his friend and get away with it. Knew he could not at sight of the faint smile which crept into Kirk's eyes.

"Don't try, my friend; waste of time."

Spock sighed. "Yes. As you say, I have the co-ordinates."

"Then I must go as soon as possible. I have almost a week. You must bring me back when the time is up. I should be able to do something in a week; last time, five days our time was nine months there."

"No need for me to bring you back. I can pre-set the mini-transporter, take it with us. Do you really think I will let you go alone? If you insist on going, I go with you."

Kirk's eyes hardened with determination. He took up his Captain's stance. "No, Spock. No need for you to take the risk. You will stay here. Don't argue. That is an order."

"I do not intend to argue. I am stating a fact. We are not on duty now. You cannot give me orders. If you go, I go also. I have the co-ordinates, as you said. You may try to get them from me, if you wish - I do assure you, however, you will not succeed."

Each watched the other, measuring the strength of the other's determination. The normally gentle Vulcan's eyes were as hard as Vulcan granite.

Kirk knew when he was beaten. "Very well," he replied grimly, then, eyes alight, "Oh, Spock, it will be good to have you with me. What of the risk to you, though? It does not seem fair. You do not approve of going in the first place! And what shall we tell your parents?"

Spock's eyes were suddenly warm with affection. "I am old enough to take my own risks, Jim. Besides, I would far rather share in any risk than sit here, worrying about you." He lifted an insolent eyebrow. "At least you will have someone to keep an eye on you, keep you under control." Moving quickly, he dodged Kirk's threatened attack, leaped out of bed and rushed into the shower, slamming the door on his bondmate's laughing face.

Leonard McCoy smiled a little to himself as he gently gave the ship's pet tribble a tiny injection. "Easy now, girl. There, that didn't hurt, did it? Got to build your strength up. You've not been too well just lately." Soothing the little creature, he waited until it started to purr contentedly before replacing it carefully in its fur-lined box.

The small creature had been with the Enterprise for about two years now, and was a great favourite with all the crew. Discovered one day in the ship's library, it had been adopted by Nurse Chapel. She had begged a very reluctant Captain Kirk to be allowed to keep it, and had finally got his permission after she had assured him, rather tearfully, that as it had been so long alone, it must be sterile. He had found this hard to believe, but was fond of Christine, and could not bear to see a woman in tears.

It was completely ruined by the crew, but seemed to have a very amiable nature, and was quite capable of coping with all the attention. Kirk, after treating it with suspicion for several weeks, finally succumbed to its charms, and nowadays, whenever he was in sickbay, paid it a brief but pleasant visit, and had even been known to stroke it a little if he were in a particularly good humour.

He did so now, crossing over to it as the doctor looked up in surprise at the sight of Kirk - and, good heavens, Spock, too, walking into the room.

"Ambassador and his wife throw you out?" he leered unpleasantly. "Thought they wouldn't be able to put up with you two for a week. What happened to the hiking?" He prodded the back of his hand none too gently into Kirk's midriff. "Pity. You need the exercise, Jim. Couple of days walking in the Vulcan heat would work wonders for your waistline."

"Shut up, Bones." Kirk's voice was placid as he made way for the unemotional First Officer to stroke the tribble. Spock leaned over the box, carefully ran one gentle finger over the wild-looking fur. Watching, McCoy wondered if now might be the right time to break the news to them; coughed exaggeratedly.

"Now I know why you came back. You needn't worry, Christine is looking after it all right in your absence."

Captain and First Officer straightened and turned to face him. They exchanged loaded glances. "Er - Bones," began Kirk, "can we talk some place? Spock and I have something to discuss with you."

"What's wrong with here? Some of us have work to do, you know. We can't all take a holiday at the drop of a hat."

"You do not appear to be particularly busy, Doctor." The Vulcan spoke for the first time. "What we have to say is rather private. We could be interrupted here."

"Goodness, Spock, you do look solemn. If it's that important, come into my office. We won't be disturbed there, unless it's an emergency." Leading the way to his office, he pushed chairs out for them. "Sit down, gentlemen. I am intrigued by this need for secrecy. Well, come on - " as the other two exchanged a further glance. "Something's up, I can see. Don't keep me in suspense any longer."

Between them, Kirk and Spock explained the situation to him, noticing, as they did so, his flippant manner rapidly disappearing. When they had finished, he looked them over for a few seconds, unusually silent, then, getting up, began to rearrange his already tidy desk. Both watched him quietly until eventually he turned back to them, his face grim and set.

"You must be mad. I know whose idea this is. It's yours, Jim. Spock would never have agreed to this unless you talked him round." He turned angrily on the Vulcan. "Why did you agree to this, Spock? For God's sake, you must see the danger involved. Heaven knows you're stubborn enough when you want to be. Why in the galaxy can you never be stubborn with him? You're not on duty now. Tell him, tell him you'll not be a party to this...this hare-brained scheme."

"That's enough, Bones. How dare you speak to Spock in that way! He does what he thinks..."

"Oh, yeah?" snorted McCoy, but he had the grace to look slightly ashamed at hitting below the belt as he had done.

Spock stretched out his long legs, looked from one to the other. "If you two have quite finished discussing me, perhaps I might speak. Your outburst, Doctor, though understandable, is useless and illogical. We are...what we are, you included. Jim feels, by the strength and frequency of his troubled feelings, that my ancestor's situation may in some way be connected to him, he may in some way be responsible, may be able to help. He feels he has to go. I will not allow him to go alone. You are worried, anxious about the outcome, about Jim's safety. We are what we are..."

"You, too, you Vulcan idiot. I'll be worried about you as well, Spock..." He glared at them both. "Do you ever spare a thought for an idiot doctor, who's fool enough to gallop round the universe trying to prevent you both from killing yourselves every five minutes?"

Kirk and Spock looked at him guiltily. It was obvious that he was very angry. Kirk got up and went to him. "I'm truly sorry, Leonard," he said gently, then half turned to Spock. "If either of you gives the word, I will accept it and not go. God knows you've both been more than loyal to me, in every way. As you say, Doctor, this is not a command decision. We are all of us off duty. You may command me, gentlemen. I will abide by your decision."

They looked at him. His face was calm, but both saw the sadness in his eyes. Both knew he had come very close to Spock's ancestor on his previous, involuntary visit to Ancient Vulcan, knew the strength of the bond that held him and Spock - any Spock - willing captives, each to the other. Neither could deny him.

"Thank you," he said softly, though no-one had spoken. "We will be very careful, Bones. Now, we had better work out our plan of action."

Drawing their chairs close, the three friends put their heads together, and for the next half hour, worked on what they hoped would be a fail-safe plan for taking Kirk and Spock nine hundred years into Vulcan's past, and, more important still, for bringing them back again when their mission was complete.

When Spock told his parents that he and Kirk were going away for a few days, they asked no questions. Both assumed they were going for another hike, this time a long one. At one time, Amanda would have offered to prepare food and provisions for them, but now knew by experience that they preferred to travel light, buying what little they needed from the hardy mountain farmers and seeing to their own needs.

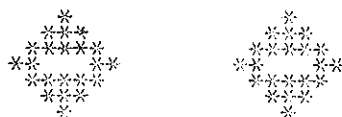
Although understanding and approving the love both men had for the outdoor life after the narrow confines of the Enterprise, the Ambassador and his wife each felt some emotion at their leaving again so soon after their arrival. Naturally, neither of them allowed that emotion to show. Sarek, after years of separation from his only son over that son's decision to order his own life, now felt the times when Spock was able to be with him were very precious. He would, of course, have died rather than admit to this.

Amanda won yet another battle with herself. After years of acquiring a vast amount of resignation - which passed well enough for Vulcan control - she managed to hide her disappointment when they told her of their plan. She even managed to smile and tell them to enjoy themselves - and she meant it - but she wept a little, later, when safely away from Vulcan eyes.

They were very special, these two. Even allowing for the biased eye of a mother, she knew that. Very special - and very vulnerable. Strong men, both of them, she feared for them. If either should lose the other... She rarely allowed herself to dwell on this thought. To do so brought her a darkness of soul so absolute as to be unbearable. What had Dr. McCoy once said to her? That he doubted whether even death was capable of separating these two... She pulled herself up sharply. Whatever was she doing, thinking of such things? She washed her face and put on fresh make-up, went to join the family, determined to enjoy every minute left to her before the two friends departed.

Rising very early the next morning, Spock and Kirk dressed in Vulcan robes and made their way quietly to the sunken room built where, in much earlier days, Lord Spock had made a sunken garden. Spock had fastened the belt with the pre-set mini-transporter attached round his waist and stood for a moment checking the co-ordinates which he had worked out a year ago, in order to bring Kirk back from Ancient Vulcan. Which they would use again today to take them back there.

After satisfying himself that they were correct, he gestured to Kirk to join him. Kirk went to stand by him, next to the couch that Amanda had arranged by the natural fountain which made the room so distinctive. He knew what to do; they had rehearsed every detail of their plan. Despite this, he hesitated for a moment. It was not only his own life he was risking but also that of his dearest friend. What right had he to take such a risk? The Vulcan stood patiently waiting, his eyes calm and steady. Looking into them, Kirk felt the moment pass. Risk was no stranger to Spock any more than it was to him. They had signed on for the risk business the moment they enrolled at the Academy. He moved closer to his friend, put his arms round him. Spock activated the tiny, pre-set transporter, then wrapped his own arms round Kirk as they shimmered into space/time.



The fountain sparkled in the sunlight. The flowers spilled their exotic colours over the cobbled stones. The old, weathered bench stood, its original bright red faded by years of exposure to the merciless Vulcan sun. It was all the same. He might never have left it. Surprised, Kirk felt the sting of tears as he looked round him - then he turned to Spock, standing quietly by his side, a look of fascination on his face as he took in the details of the small garden,

recognising it as the forerunner of his parents' sunken room.

"Welcome to your heritage," Kirk said softly, and again both stood silently, allowing their minds to catch up with the new situation.

Spock moved over to the shadow of the high hedge. "Jim, come over here. The sun strikes so fiercely, we must have arrived in the middle of the hottest season."

Obeying, Kirk joined him, both enjoying the pleasant shade. As they stood, a figure appeared at the top of the steps, moved down a couple, and looked towards the bench, obviously expecting to find someone there. Seeing it empty and not noticing the silent watchers by the hedge, he turned to go. Kirk caught his breath, put a warning hand on Spock's arm, and moved quickly out of the shadows.

"My Lord," he called softly.

The man stopped, froze, then slowly turned to face him, slowly descending the steps to stand face to face with him.

"You cannot be real." The man spoke softly, wonderingly. "I am imagining you. Perhaps I always imagined you."

Laughing, Kirk held out a hand. "I'm real enough. Take my hand."

Lord Spock looked silently into his face for a moment, then moved quickly to embrace him. Kirk brought his own arms up and briefly returned the embrace, then pulled away, laughing softly. Deep in shadow, Spock watched, his face expressionless.

"You are real, Jim. Jim. What are you doing here? How did you come? Will you now tell me that I summoned you again?"

"Yes, my Lord - I think you did. I have been staying on Vulcan and these last two days have been very troubled by a feeling that something is very wrong with you. At first, I thought that my Spock was in trouble, but he showed me it was you."

"Jim...you take my breath away. What magic do you possess, that you can feel my trouble so many centuries away? Come, sit down with me... Oh, it is good to see you!" Taking Kirk's arm, he motioned to the bench. "Come and sit where we sat last year, the day you left us. See, it is still the same."

Resisting the gentle pressure on his arm, Kirk replied quietly, "My Lord, one moment. This time I have not come alone. Someone is with me."

"Someone? Who? Where is he?" Then, as Spock stepped out from the cover of the tall hedge, stood once more speechless, staring in amazement at what could have been his twin.

Spock inclined his head slightly. "My Lord. I believe we have met before, though not in the flesh."

"Spock." The voice was a long-drawn-out whisper. Then, turning to Kirk, "Your Spock."

"And yours. Your great, great, oh so many greats I couldn't tell, grandson."

Still shaken, Lord Spock looked for a long time at his distant kinsman. Spock returned his look calmly. Kirk could not help smiling as he watched. The two were so alike. Even their voices, too, he realised as Lord Spock spoke.

"I bid you welcome, Child of our family's future. Welcome to your past. Never did I think to see you like this."

Again Spock inclined his head. "Thank you for your welcome. My Captain has sensed that you are in deep trouble, feels that it may in some way be connected with him. He has come to see if he can help...as he once did before."

"And you? Why have you come?"

"I would not allow him to come alone."

For a startled moment, Kirk felt a slight atmosphere between the two identical men. Not animosity, but the feeling of something that needed to be settled between them. It was gone in an instant, though, and 'Spock's' glance at Kirk was very warm as he continued to speak.

"Your Captain is right, there is trouble in our family. Though even he cannot help us this time." He drew in his breath in sudden amazement. "But you could..." His eyes, fixed on Spock, lit with hope. "You could, perhaps." He reached out a hand to his kinsman, then hesitated, drew it back, looked at Spock almost shyly. "It would be a great deal to ask, though. And I have no right to ask anything of you...except perhaps forgiveness."

For a long while, Spock searched his ancestor's face. When he spoke, his voice was gentle. "You do have a right, my Lord. The right of kinship."

"Besides," broke in Kirk, "surely we can help. Otherwise we will have come for nothing." He felt it was a foolish remark, but felt he had to say something to lighten the mood. He knew exactly what was the cause of the tension between the two; knew better, also, than to try to do anything directly about it. "My Lord, you say Spock could help. Anywhere Spock goes, I go too. It is through me that he has come. If he can in some way help you, the plan must include me as well."

"Well, yes, it could." 'Spock's' words were slow, halting, realisation dawning in his mind. "It would be even better if you went with him. But we cannot speak here - if anyone sees us... Kirk - Jim - will you take my..." he smiled slightly at the tall, dignified Vulcan... "my double to my study. I think you know the way." His smile deepened. "If anyone sees you, he will only think it is myself, and that you have come to visit me. I kept my pledge to you, my friend. When you left, I freed my slaves, gave them the choice of staying as paid workers, or of setting out on their own. All chose to stay. I told them I had freed you first, and you had gone back to your home... I will wait here a while, then join you in the study. That way, we avoid being seen together ... I still think I must be dreaming. How did you get here? Surely not the same way as last time?"

"Spock will explain that later. As you say, we had better not be seen together. Besides, my Lord, this sun is beginning to get to me. I'm sure it's hotter than Vulcan of our time. See you in the house...my Lord Spock - Spock, my friend."

Kirk led the way out of the garden. Spock followed, deep in thought, silent. Well, mused Kirk, he certainly has a lot to think about as he wondered which philosophical thought was occupying his friend's mind at that moment. He was soon enlightened.

"You are right, Jim." Spock broke into his thoughts.

"Um? What do you mean? Right about what?"

"Vulcan's star of nine hundred years ago would have given 27328 more heat than it does in our time...approximately."

Kirk smiled. "Spock, sometimes you can still amaze me. Do you know, you have just out-Spocked yourself. Here I was, wondering which aspect of all this was fascinating you most, and there you are working out an equation as though it was the most normal thing in the universe to travel back nine hundred years into your own history."

The Vulcan lifted an insulted eyebrow. "I thought you would be pleased to learn that you were correct, Captain." He sounded hurt and Kirk was just about to tell him he was joking when he caught his eye, saw the wicked gleam in it. They smiled at each other.

"Jim, I cannot tell you how fascinating - why do you use that word so much? - all this is to me. This must be the house."

Still smiling, Kirk turned, looked at the beautiful old house. "Yes. Not

bad, he, your family seat? Come in - my Lord Spock - it's cooler inside, thank goodness." Leading Spock along the cool empty corridors, he was jerked back twelve months. It might never have passed. He knew every inch of these corridors. Had travelled them hundreds of times during his stay on Vulcan as Lord Spock's slave. Glancing at Spock, he thought it might have been a year ago, and this Spock his former master. Except, of course, than when they had walked down corridors, it had been his master who had led the way, he following respectfully behind.

They reached the study without meeting a soul. By the feel of the sun's heat, Kirk judged the time to be hottest part of the day, the time when family and staff alike rested, waiting for the slightly cooler late afternoon to resume their activities. He showed Spock into the study, closed the door behind them. Both were silent as they waited for Lord Spock to join them, thinking their own thoughts. As before, Kirk sensed a small barrier being raised. He sighed to himself. He knew the barrier was not against him, but felt slightly uneasy all the same at its presence.

They were not kept waiting long. Shortly after they had arrived, the door opened and Lord Spock came in. He shut the door and bolted it. He halted in front of Spock as though he too sensed again the slight atmosphere that had been present in the garden, then, shrugging slightly at his fellow Vulcan's stony face, motioned them both to sit and turned to Kirk with a smile.

"I called in to see T'Kai, and told her of your arrival. She is very excited...thought I was mad at first. She and Serek will be going into the garden soon and asked if you could join them when we are finished. They both long to see you again." Pausing, his expression became both proud and worried. "She expects our second child any day. It has been a hard pregnancy, and we have had much trouble lately. Your presence will greatly cheer her... If you did agree to my plan, her mind would be considerably eased." He stopped, hesitated, then continued slowly. "I fear to propose my plan to you. It would be a great deal to ask." His words were directed at both his companions, but his look was for the other Spock, who sat immobile, his face in shadow.

"Why not try us?" Kirk's voice was soft. "We came for a purpose, you know."

"Yes." The other sighed, eyes still on his distant kinsman. Then, pulling himself up, a look of resolution on his face, turned to Kirk, his eyes warm with affection. "First, tell me, how are things with you...Starship Captain? Is all well with your world?"

"All is well - or was, until I sensed your trouble. Tell us what is wrong - 'Spock'...how we may help."

It was a sad little tale. After Kirk had left to return to his own time, 'Spock' had, as he had pledged, set mind and energies to freeing Vulcan from the evils of slavery, of setting all slaves free. After giving freedom to his own slaves, he had set about the task of winning others to his campaign. He had met with considerable success - his own town was now emancipated and several others with it - but had also known some failure.

A few months back, he had failed to move one of the most influential Councils of all Vulcan, belonging to the town of T'Rena. As T'Rena's Council voted, so would many of the surrounding towns. Until it was won over, a large section of Vulcan was lost to the cause. After much pleading, the Councillors of T'Rena had agreed to give him another chance and he was due to address them in a week's time. After spending much time and effort on his speech, he thought he had a slight chance of swaying a majority vote. It would not be easy, and was absolutely vital, or the whole emancipation movement would be at a standstill. However - and here he paused, deep shadow crossing his face - there was a complication.

Serek, their son, had been complaining for some time of pains in his head and trouble with his vision. Deeply worried, he and T'Kai consulted with all the

leading eye specialists, who had all agreed that the best plan would be to take the boy to be examined by the renowned Sehlak, who lived on the other side of the Satelk mountains. Sehlak was very old, very wise, and quite brilliant, but refused to travel. Anyone wishing to consult him had first to approach him and then wait until he was ready to see them. 'Spock' and T'Kai had done this - and of course, with one of fate's unpleasant little twists, the famous doctor had sent word that he would be able to examine Serek the next week - the exact day that 'Spock' was due to address the Council in T'Rena, some five hundred miles from where Sehlak lived.

Lord Spock spread his hands in despair. "So you see our dilemma," he said. "Either his mother or I must go with him. Apart from the fact that he is distressed by his complaint, needs our support, Sehlak refuses to treat children unless a parent is present. T'Kai cannot go, she could have the child any time now, and I...how can I go? I must address the Council at T'Rena. Yet how can I not go with my dear son at such a time?"

As he came to the end of his sad explanation, Lord Spock got up, began pacing the room restlessly. Stopping, he found himself opposite Spock. Looked helplessly at the Vulcan. "I do not need to tell you what crossed my mind in the garden when I looked at you and felt as though I was looking into a mirror."

Spock rose and faced him. His face had lost its stony look. Kirk rose too, came to stand at his bondmate's side, put a hand on his shoulder.

"You say your speech is prepared, my Lord?" Spock's voice was gentle, his eyes concerned.

"Yes. All that you would need to do would be to read it. Possibly answer questions. I could easily brief you, and - " he smiled at Kirk, "if your Captain went with you, your 'former slave' now your freed companion and assistant, that would carry weight for our cause... Oh, but it is too much to ask of you both. You, my friend have already done so much for me, and you..." He turned to Spock "As I said, I have no right to ask anything of you."

Kirk waited for Spock to answer. He had sensed his friend's softening mood as he listened to Lord Spock's take, yet still felt some apprehension as he waited.

"As I said, you do have some right, my Lord, and as we told you, we came to help if we could. For myself, I will be happy to do what I can to assist. For my Captain - and friend - " he raised an eyebrow at Kirk - "I think you would have some difficulty if you tried to stop him helping you."

Relieved by Spock's reply, Kirk spoke for the first time. "It is the least we can do. If it had not been for my suggesting you set about freeing all the slaves, you would not be in this dilemma. When do we leave? You will need to give us instructions on how to get there, my Lord."

Taking his hands, Lord Spock held them tightly a moment, unable to speak. "I cannot thank you enough. Both of you," he said at last. "It will be necessary for you to leave in the morning, to reach T'Rena in time. Until then, we must conceal your presence, kinsman. You can both sleep in my room; I will spend the night in my wife's room. I do so frequently, now," he added softly, smiling a little at Kirk, then his eyes moved to Spock.

Kirk had the sudden feeling that his presence would be better elsewhere. "Well, now that's settled, I'll go and pay my respects to Lady T'Kai. You two will have much to arrange and discuss. I'll come back in a while, show Spock to your bedroom, my Lord." He looked from one to the other of them, then crossed to the door. Pausing as he reached it, he looked back and sighed, wanting to go back to them, put an arm round both of them. Knew he must not. He could not protect them from each other. Even with his bondmate there were a few areas - not many, but a few - where he dared not enter.

After he had left, both men were silent for some time. Both uneasy. Lord

Spock glanced at his descendant, then looked away. Walked over to the window, stood looking out for a while, then, squaring his shoulders, returned to Spock, stood in front of him, looked directly at him.

"Can you forgive me, if I ask it of you?"

"You have had much trouble. Have suffered greatly. I see that. Yes - I forgive you. I did not think I ever could, but now that I have met you, I see that you must have regretted it."

"I never cease to do so. He forgave me, understood."

"He is not one to bear a grudge. Besides, he has affection for you."

"We are fortunate to know him."

"Yes."

"Did he tell you? He must have told you everything that happened while he was here."

Spock turned from him, as if seeing some other scene than the one confronting him, looked back at his companion. "He did not need to tell me. I saw for myself. He came back briefly at the beginning of his sickness. I saw the bruises on his face."

"Came back? To his own time?"

"Yes, briefly. I am not sure how. He was in great distress - I have never seen him so distressed."

"You must have hated me."

"No - not hate. I could not understand how one with my name, who - he said - was so like me, could have ill-treated him. But he told me more later, when he returned permanently. Told me what had caused you to act as you did. Told me of your care and kindness when he was ill, of your remorse. Also, my Lord, you told me yourself that you had come to love him - do you remember? I came to terms, after a while, with my anger. Meeting you, seeing this room, brought it back a little."

He paused, looked round the room, then back to his kinsman. "Now I have been with you a while, heard of your trouble, I see that your life has not been easy, before or after Jim came. And also - " His eyes now, as he looked into the other's, were gentle - "I see by your manner with him that you do in truth care for him."

Lord Spock returned his look silently for some time. Impulsively, he held out his hand, his face quiet with relief, with gratitude. Spock took the offered hand, held it a moment, then moved to the desk. "Come, my Lord, there is not much time left; we had better work out our plan."

The meeting between Kirk, T'Kai and Serek was both joyful and poignant. Kirk thought Lady T'Kai's advanced pregnancy added to her special qualities of warmth and understanding. She glowed with a sort of inner fulfilment. Her glance, though, when it rested on her son was strained and anxious.

He was not surprised. Serek, as he remembered him, had been a carefree, sturdy little boy. Now he found a tall slim youth, his face pale with the tension that comes from frequent pain, constant expectation of pain. Being himself prone to headaches, Kirk knew how disabling they could be. Serek's headaches were more complex, more worrying than was usual. There was the sinister complication of the disturbed vision.

Despite the situation, the meeting was very warm, and it was not long before Kirk had Serek laughing. By the time he left them, arranging to meet again at the Sunfall meal, the boy had relaxed into something like the cheerful youngster Kirk remembered.

It did not take long for word to travel that Kirk, Lord Spock's one-time slave, had arrived on a visit. On his way back to 'Spock's' study, he encountered, as if by chance, quite a few of his former fellow slaves. All greeted him gladly. During his stay in this house, he had made many friends. All had missed him when he left. Missed his cheerfulness, his ease of manner and his good humour. Freed now from slavery, they served the Spock household as paid employees. There was much for Kirk to listen to, a few awkward questions for him to parry, before he at last arrived and knocked at 'Spock's' door.

Careful to check who it was, 'Spock' let him in, bolted the door behind him. His own Spock's eyes, as they met his, were clear and trouble-free, and he was relieved to note that the slight atmosphere present when he had left was now quite gone. Spock came over to meet him.

"Jim, Lord Spock has been going over his speech with me and explaining a little of what we need to know about T'Rena. It appears to be a most influential town, a leader in change and culture."

Kirk grinned. "You mean, what T'Rena does today, Vulcan does tomorrow? Then it is up to us to see that it does what we want it to."

Lord Spock showed Kirk a map he proposed to give them. T'Rena was a large town some hundred or so miles to the east, lying in a fertile valley between high mountain ranges. The central town of a large, densely populated area of Vulcan, it enjoyed considerable prosperity and influence.

The journey by horse-drawn carriage would take three days, and once arrived, Lord Spock had accepted the invitation to stay with the head of the High Council for the length of the visit.

"I met him, of course, last year," he told them, "but at that time, stayed in a hostelry. You will not be expected to know your way around his house. He is a small, rather insignificant figure, not at all what you would expect, but be warned - his brain is formidable."

"No more formidable than my friend's. I'll bet he couldn't work out how much hotter your star is now than it will be in nine hundred years." Kirk grinned up at Spock, answering the Vulcan's raised eyebrow with a wink. Their companion watched them both in some slight puzzlement, then at the sound of a light knock on the door, moved swiftly over to answer it.

His wife's voice came through the door. "Spock, Selek is here with the meal. I asked him to serve it in your study as you are so busy."

Hastily waving Spock into a small library beyond the study, Lord Spock opened the door. T'Kai came in, followed by Serek and Saleek, who was pushing a laden trolley. The fat steward left the trolley and waddled over to Kirk. "Kirk!" he said with satisfaction, slapping him painfully on the back. "They told me in the kitchen you were here. How are you? You look well. We missed you when you left...without saying farewell." He looked accusingly at the Human, then his gaze relaxed into a slow grin. "What are you doing nowadays? We are all free men now, Lord Spock pays us wages and - "

"And sometimes wonders why. Saleek, if that is a hot meal, do you think we could have it while it remains so?"

"Forgive me, my Lord." Winking at Kirk, Saleek began to remove the contents of the trolley, placing them on a small table, which he moved into position. Listening, and parrying once again, Kirk realised how hungry he was. The steward finished unloading the trolley and turned to go. As he passed Kirk, he gave him a small pat on the arm. Kirk smiled at him warmly, watching as he left the room, then turned to join the group at the table just as the absent member of the party left his hiding place and came towards them.

Serek stared in amazement. His father had warned him, but it still did little to cushion the shock he felt. He looked from one to the other, then grinned delightedly. "If I did not know it from the fact that you were hiding, sir, I

would be unable to tell which of you is my father."

The boy's remark broke through the slight constraint. Smiling, T'Kai went to Spock, hands outstretched. "I know, of course, which of you is my husband, but I too am amazed at your likeness. It is in my mind that you could be twins. Welcome...Spock. Welcome to the house of your forefathers."

Taking her hands, Spock bowed gravely. "Madame, I am honoured to be here. You know why we came?"

"Yes, your friend has told me." Shyly she smiled at this man who wore her husband's face. "I do not know how to thank you both."

"We have done nothing to deserve your thanks. If we are able to help, I will count it a privilege."

Kirk watched and listened in some amusement. Obviously his friend was impressed by his many times great grandmother. Sitting at the table, he felt a slight worry. At the time they were now, Vulcans were still meat-eaters. His bondmate was a determined vegetarian. What if there were nothing for his poor friend to eat? If Spock were anything like as hungry as he was, that could prove unpleasant. He need not have worried, the dishes were many and varied. Spock was able to make an adequate meal without suffering any embarrassment.

It was a pleasant meal. Lord Spock and Lady T'Kai were clearly delighted to make the acquaintance of their kinsman from the future, and he, basking in their approval, unbent to a degree unprecedented in almost any company except Kirk's.

At one point during the meal, Serek leaned across to Spock and asked in a confidential whisper, "Sir, do you realise that I am your great, great, several times great, grandfather?"

Spock allowed a smile to break through. "Indeed I do. It crosses my mind every time I look at you."

After they had all finished, it was decided that Kirk, his friend and Lord Spock should move to 'Spock's' bedroom in order for the host to finish his instruction. They bade goodnight, and for the time being farewell, to T'Kai and Serek, wishing them both well and being wished well in return. All hoped that when they met again, it would be in happier, more settled circumstances.

'Spock' stayed for some time with his guests in his bedroom. Saleek had already packed for him, and it did not take long for them to add the few things necessary for Kirk. They did not need much; staying as they were at the home of the High Councillor, most of their needs would be provided for.

The three talked far into the night. Lord Spock gave them all the information he could, and two copies of his speech, explained that Saleek would wake them at dawn...and that from that moment, his kinsman would be Lord Spock. When he could think of nothing further to tell them, he rose to leave.

"I wish you a safe journey and success," he said. "May all good fortune attend you. The thoughts of all of us will be with you until we meet again." Pausing, he looked from one to the other. "Oh..." He smiled, "but it is in my heart to wish that I were going with you."

They were both very tired. Had only a few hours left in which to sleep. Smiling 'Goodnight' to Spock, Kirk crossed the room to go through to the small cramped alcove where he had slept when he had been Lord Spock's slave. He heard swift footsteps behind him, felt a light hand on his shoulder, turned to look questioningly into his bondmate's eyes. "Where are you going?"

"To bed, of course. I'm whacked. Aren't you tired?"

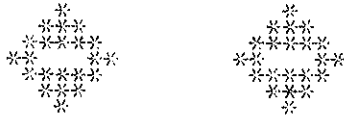
Spock led him back into the major bedroom. "Yes." He gestured towards the big, beautifully covered bed. "You will sleep there. I will sleep in the little room."

"But Spock, it used to be my room. I slept there when I was your ancestor's slave."

"You are not a slave now. Do not argue. You will sleep here."

"Oh, Spock... Spock..."

"Get to bed. You are 'whacked', remember?" Smiling, he crossed the room to the alcove. "Goodnight, Elandir."



"Come in." McCoy looked up, watched Lt-Commander Scott as he bristled into his office and up to the desk. He seemed about ready to explode.

"Scotty? Something troubling you?"

"Aye, Doctor, ye might say there is." Scott dumped himself on McCoy's best chair, drummed fitful blunt-tipped fingers on his desk.

"Well, what seems to be the trouble? Headache? Sluggishness, ringing in the ears?"

The burly Scotsman shot him a malevolent sideways glance. "It's not me, Doctor. I'm no' sick. It's those...those...women! They won't leave a fella alone until they get their own way."

McCoy laughed his 'dirty old man' laugh. "I rather thought it was the other way round, Scotty. Why complain? You should be so lucky."

Scott grinned reluctantly. "Ye're twisting ma words, Doctor. It's that nurse o' yours and Uhura. They've been all mornin' messin' wi' ma engines."

"I thought they'd gone down to Vulcan, shopping."

"Aye, they did. But they came back, and they've been pestering me ever since. How can I be expected tae service ma engines wi' those two measuring out flour and butter all over the place? Serve them right if Captain Kirk comes back and finds I've no' been able tae complete ma work. Then they'll be in trouble."

"Then you'd be in trouble, more like, Scotty," grinned McCoy. "Suppose you start at the beginning and tell me just what Christine and Uhura have done to upset you like this."

The Chief Engineer looked gloomily over the desk. "They've decided tae make a cake."

"A cake? In your engine room? Oh, come on, Scotty."

"Ye can mock, but it's the truth I'm telling ye. They're making a birthday cake for Jim's party."

McCoy looked thoughtful. After Jim and Spock had gone off on their damnfool mission, he had been rather at a loss. He couldn't read learned medical journals all day, and the crew, as always while enjoying the freedom of shore leave, was singularly healthy. More as a diversion for himself than anything, he had decided to organise Jim's party. After all, by the time they both arrived back, it could be too late to do anything much before his birthday.

Christine and Uhura had been delighted with the idea, and Scotty, with his fine Celtic ear for music, had agreed to arrange this part of the procedure - a much better plan than to have the erudite and aesthetic music of Spock's choice - McCoy thought.

The plans for the party were well in hand, and only that morning the two women had announced their intention of going shopping for supplies on Vulcan.



They hadn't said what they needed, and he hadn't asked, but he did remember, now that he came to think about it, there had been a great deal of 'girlish giggling' as they made up their shopping list.

He glanced rather guiltily at Scott, who seemed to have gone into a silence as deep and brooding as the lochs of his homeland.

"I don't think I understand you, Mr. Scott. If the girls want a cake, all they have to do is process the food synthesizer."

"Ye'd think so, wouldn't ye? But no, that won't do. What they want is an old fashioned fruit cake...baked in a slow oven." The volatile Scot's face became ever sourer as he repeated what was obviously a quotation.

A grin of understanding spread across McCoy's face. "A slow oven, Mr. Scott?"

"Ye heard me. They pestered and pestered until they got their own way... jist like women. I've allowed them tae use one of the dilithium chambers, and now I canna even go intae ma own engine room...in case I lower the temperature as I go in...and ruin their cake."

He caught McCoy's eye. Looked quickly away, then looked at him again. Both men suddenly burst out laughing.

"Never mind, Scotty, I'm sure they'll give you a good big piece... How's the music coming along?"

If he had thought to divert Scott's mind from his troubles, he did not succeed. The Engineer's face resumed its former miserable expression. "I'm having trouble there, too. I thought tae pipe some fine reels and ballads and such-like over the ship, but everywhere I go that young tearaway from Life Sciences follows me, haggging me tae play his music instead."

"Blake? Good God, you've not agreed?"

"No, of course not, but it's gettin' on ma nerves. He jumps out at me all over the place. I'm afraid it'll end in violence."

Going to the drinks dispenser, McCoy poured two strong coffees, added a good measure of brandy to one, and handed it to Scott. "Here, drink this." He shook his head at Scott's half-heard protest. "Drink it, man - doctor's orders. Don't worry, next time you see him, just tell him Mr. Spock said he would deal with the music and he'll have to see him. How does Blake know about it, anyway? It's supposed to be a secret."

Scott looked at him pityingly. "Surely ye know by now, ye canna keep a secret on this ship? Everyone knows." He grinned. "The whole crew's arranging something or other."

"Humm. Looks like it's going to be some party. Excuse me." He crossed to answer the knock on his door. A young man stood there, his tow-coloured hair staring on end as though he had just had a severe shock.

"Excuse me, Doctor, but is Mr. Scott here? I thought I saw him come in a while ago."

McCoy grinned, opened the door wide. "Why yes, Mr. Blake, he's here. Come right in."



The fierce Vulcan sun was just beginning to throw its rays over the horizon when the two men set out next day. As well as their few provisions, they carried a small medikit provided by T'Kai, a doctor's daughter and herself a person of

much medical knowledge and skill.

Just before they started, Kirk remembered something. Feeling in the pocket of the robe he had worn when they arrived, he took out the small box containing Amanda's present. He had forgotten to take it out of his pocket when they came through the transporter. What to do with it now?

Frowning, he looked round the room then crossed to the alcove where Spock had slept. Spock was gathering up his few personal belongings.

"Spock, I've done it again. Look." He held out the little box. "Amanda's present. It was in my pocket. What shall I do with it?"

"Leave it here, Jim. It should be safe in that cupboard. I'm leaving the things I don't need in there."

Kirk opened the cupboard, the one he had kept his clothes in last time he had been here. He reached and placed it carefully at the back of the top shelf. "I wonder if Amanda will ever get it," he murmured to himself, then followed his friend out of the room, down the silent corridors to the waiting carriage.

Lord Spock had provided his lightest and fastest carriage for their journey, and his best team of horses. Despite this, and the comfort of the well-sprung carriage, it soon proved rather slow and cumbersome for men accustomed to warp speeds.

Kirk slept for much of the morning. For all his weariness the night before, he had taken quite a while to get to sleep in his former master's comfortable bed. Memories had kept flooding back. Memories of the time he had last been in this house as a slave. Excitement, too, and some apprehension over their present mission had kept sleep at bay.

When he awoke in the carriage, Spock was lowering a screen to keep the bright light off his face.

"Spock." He stretched. "Have I been asleep long? Where are we?" Raising a slat in the blind, he peered through. They were climbing rapidly, well up now in the foothills of the Sateleks. Lowering his feet from where Spock had lifted them onto the seat, he stood up, stretched again. Spock watched him. He knew the next three days could be rather trying for his active friend. Fortunately, Kirk's brain was active as well as his body. Taking out a cloth bag, he emptied its contents onto the seat beside him.

"What are these, Spock? Not chessmen, surely?"

"Not quite, but not dissimilar." He smiled across at Kirk. "I asked my kinsman if he had a game we could bring, a game which would tax our minds. We will be three days in this carriage, Jim."

"You truly are a genius, my Vulcan friend." Fascinated, Kirk picked up one of the small, beautifully carved wooden figures. "How do we play?"

Spock took out a folding board. "With this. Here, let me show you." Heads close together, they bent over the game.

They were to be very glad of it during the following days. There was little else they could do. For some of the time, and for exercise, they walked beside the carriage, talking to the driver. They were high up now, in the main range, the air rarified, the sun very fierce. Kirk could not stay out of the carriage for long.

Early on the third day they began to descend, the road leading between the hills to a long, fertile plain. By the time the sun was overhead, they could see T'Rena in the distance, its buildings shimmering in the heat mist. Gradually they began to pass large houses, sparsely dotted along the road at first, then more and more thickly until, eventually, they lined the road as the carriage travelled through the suburbs.

Lord Seker, their host, as head of the High Council in T'Rena had a large house right in the centre of the town. Spock had marked it on the map. It appeared to stand in a large square, fronting onto formal gardens. There should

be no trouble finding it. Once through the City's gate, the road led straight to the central square.

As they drew nearer to the town, Kirk went to sit on the narrow seat beside the driver. It was very hot, but he was too restless to stay inside the carriage. Besides, he was not feeling the heat as much this day. The previous night, ignoring Spock's warning, he had thrown off almost all his clothes and in a desperate bid to get a little cooler, had walked beside the coach until the night turned cooler. He had not told his bondmate, but he was feeling slightly chilly now, as Spock had warned.

Rounding the bend, the driver suddenly cursed and swerved to avoid a small wagon blocking their way. A fat, swarthy man, sweating profusely, was vainly trying to mend a broken wheel with strips torn from his brightly coloured robe. He looked up hopefully as Lord Spock's elegant coach swayed towards him and, on Kirk's command, ground to a halt. Spock jumped down, assessing the situation immediately.

"That wheel will never hold with these." Bending, he inspected the broken wheel, taking it from the man's grimy hands. "Where is your spare wheel?"

The man swore in ancient Vulcan. "I don't have it with me. Wait till I get my hands on that lazy hound I pay to look after this wagon. I do not usually drive it myself, only there is sickness in my house and I had to collect provisions from my cousin's farm. I own an inn at T'Rena." He looked pleadingly at Kirk and Spock. "My Lords, if you could give me a lift, I would be eternally grateful."

"We can do better than that." Crossing to their carriage, Spock ordered the reluctant driver to bring their spare wheel and fix it to the stranger's wagon. Grumbling under his breath, the man obeyed. It was not a difficult job. While he worked, Kirk and Spock talked to the inn-keeper, asking questions about the town they were approaching. Grateful to them, he volunteered much valuable information. When the job was finished, he climbed up into the driving seat, and calling up his horse, smiled down at them, his teeth a white flash in his bronzed face.

"May all the travellers' gods go with you, my Lords. You are real gents. I'll see your wheel is delivered to Lord Seker's house tomorrow. If ever you have need of an inn in T'Rena you will be more than welcome at the Split Reed. By the river, near the South Gate...ask for Surak," he called as he drove off.

"Surak?" Kirk grinned at Spock. "A high-flown name for an inn-keeper?"

"No, there were many Suraks, I believe, in this period of his early influence. By our time he has become too revered, far too removed from the ordinary people for them to call their sons after him, as once they did."

The rest of the journey proved uneventful. Driving through the big North Gate, they soon became part of the stream of traffic travelling the city. The broad, clean streets were thronged with people and vehicles. The horses, seeming to sense they were near their destination, trotted smartly along the highway, came to a halt in front of a square, imposing villa built in the usual Vulcan red marble.

Even as they climbed down the door of the house opened and a small thin man, flanked by two broad attendants, came down the polished steps to greet them.

"Lord Spock." Smiling, he bowed deeply. "You do us great honour, my Lord. How was your journey? You must be weary. Come, my slaves will show you to your rooms." Turning, he glanced at Kirk, standing quietly at Spock's side. "And your man and coach-driver to the servant's quarters."

Spock bowed in return. "I thank you for your welcome, Lord Seker, and your hospitality. Allow me to correct a slight misunderstanding. May I present Mr. Kirk. He is not, as you supposed, a servant but a friend. He comes on this visit to assist me in my mission."

Their host bowed to Kirk. "Please forgive me, sir. I had not expected

Lord Spock to bring a companion. You are most welcome. I will arrange for a room to be prepared for you near to your friend. Now, you must both be tired; please go with my attendant. I have arranged for a small dinner party tonight, in your honour, my Lord. Nothing you will not enjoy, just a few close friends. First, though, I am sure you will wish to rest and refresh yourselves."

Arrangements were quickly put in hand for a room to be prepared for Kirk, fortunately adjoining Spock's. Seker apologised that they would have to share a bath-chamber. As in Lord Spock's home, this consisted of a small room with a natural hot stream running through it.

Explaining the time of the Sunfall meal to them, Seker said he would send a slave to show them to the dining hall. Smiling at them both, he bowed again, hoped they would be comfortable, and left.

Alone, Spock and Kirk stood looking at each other in sudden realisation of what they had taken on. "I'm sorry, Spock." Kirk's voice was soft. "This is going to be something of an ordeal for you. I've really landed you in it, haven't I?"

Spock took his hands. "I knew what I was doing, Jim. Do not worry, we can only do our best."

They gripped hands for a moment longer, giving - and receiving - support.

The dining hall was large and cool. Too cool, thought Kirk as he pulled his robe a little closer. He was rather surprised by the room's decor. The furnishings looked very expensive - and very garish. Not at all what he would have thought to be Seker's taste. He soon realised who had chosen them when their host introduced his wife. Hard as it was to tell the age of Vulcans, it was apparent, nevertheless, that Lady T'Lal was quite a bit older than her husband. Apparent, also, that she tried to hide the fact by dressing in a style much too young for her - and, to his mind, far too bizarre for anyone. Her welcome was warm, though, perhaps a little too warm. She made no bones of showing her appreciation of Kirk, smiling into his eyes as she told him he was to sit next to her, in an intimate and slightly startling way.

The meal was all anyone could have asked, though for once he did not feel hungry. Spock, on the other hand, seated three places away from his own, on Seker's right, seemed to be enjoying it, once more finding plenty of dishes to suit his taste.

As the meal progressed, their hostess became more and more friendly. Too friendly for Kirk's liking. She seemed to get nearer and nearer to him, her conversation more and more confidential. He was beginning to wish the evening were over and he could get to bed. Apart from his hostess's unwelcome and slightly ridiculous advances, he was feeling more chilled by the minute. Not for the first time in his life, he began to wish he had paid more attention to his friend's warning the night before.

When the formal part of the meal was over, Seker and T'Lal ushered their guests into a small, comfortable anteroom leading from the dining hall. There were only about a dozen Vulcans present, all members of the High Council, and, Seker said, close friends. When all were in the anteroom, a slave appeared carrying a tray of what Seker told them was their famous - and potent - T'Rena mead. With the appearance of the drink, as if by some ungiven signal, all the men removed their long, formal outer robes, the atmosphere immediately becoming more relaxed as they sat, or walked about the room in their tunics. This was obviously a custom which had passed by Spock's time; Kirk never remembered it happening at any formal gathering he had attended on Modern Vulcan.

Spock, never one to lag behind on any uptake, relinquished his robe to a waiting slave, but Kirk, chilly to start with, kept his on. Seker raised an eyebrow at him.

"Sir, you may remove your robe, as is the custom. We always remove outer garments in the heat of a gathering. I see - you must excuse my mentioning it - that you are somewhat different in appearance from people of these parts, so you may not be acquainted with our ways. It is quite permissible to remove your robe."

T'Lal put her hand on Kirk's arm. "Yes, indeed," she smilingly agreed with her husband. "Please let me help you with it."

Returning her smile courteously, Kirk inclined his head. "Thank you, my Lady, my Lord, but I will keep my robe on. As you say, I am a stranger to these parts; to me, the evening air feels rather cooler than what I am accustomed to." He was aware as he spoke of a small tendril of incredulity in his mind and smiled to himself, realising that he was picking up his bondmate's surprise from across the room. Well, he could explain later. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw T'Lal, who had left him for a moment to order some more mead, fast approaching once more. He wandered as quickly as was polite to the far side of the room, giving Spock a rather desperate look as he passed. Spock did not notice. Deep in conversation with a small, grey-haired Vulcan, he was bending slightly to catch what the smaller man was saying. Kirk noticed, with a deep, satisfying affection, that the chain he had given to his dear friend at their bonding ceremony was hanging from his neck as he leaned, showing over his tunic. He knew Spock never removed it, any more than he would ever remove its twin, which Spock had given him. He felt it now, its presence seeming to glow against his chest.

Distracted as he had been by Spock's medallion, he noticed now that T'Lal had somehow edged them both into a small alcove. It was not possible to escape with any semblance of good manners. Sensing triumph, she leaned towards him.

"Lord Seker and I once visited Lord Spock's town," she was saying, "and went to many social functions there, including one at Lord Spock's household. I do not remember seeing you there; I am sure I would have remembered you, if I had seen you before."

"My Lady, you would not have seen me in Lord Spock's house, not at a social gathering. I would not have been with the guests. I would have been in the slaves' quarters."

Laughing, she ran a light hand up her arm. "Whatever would you have been doing there?" she questioned.

"Living there, my Lady. Before I was Lord Spock's friend, I was his slave."

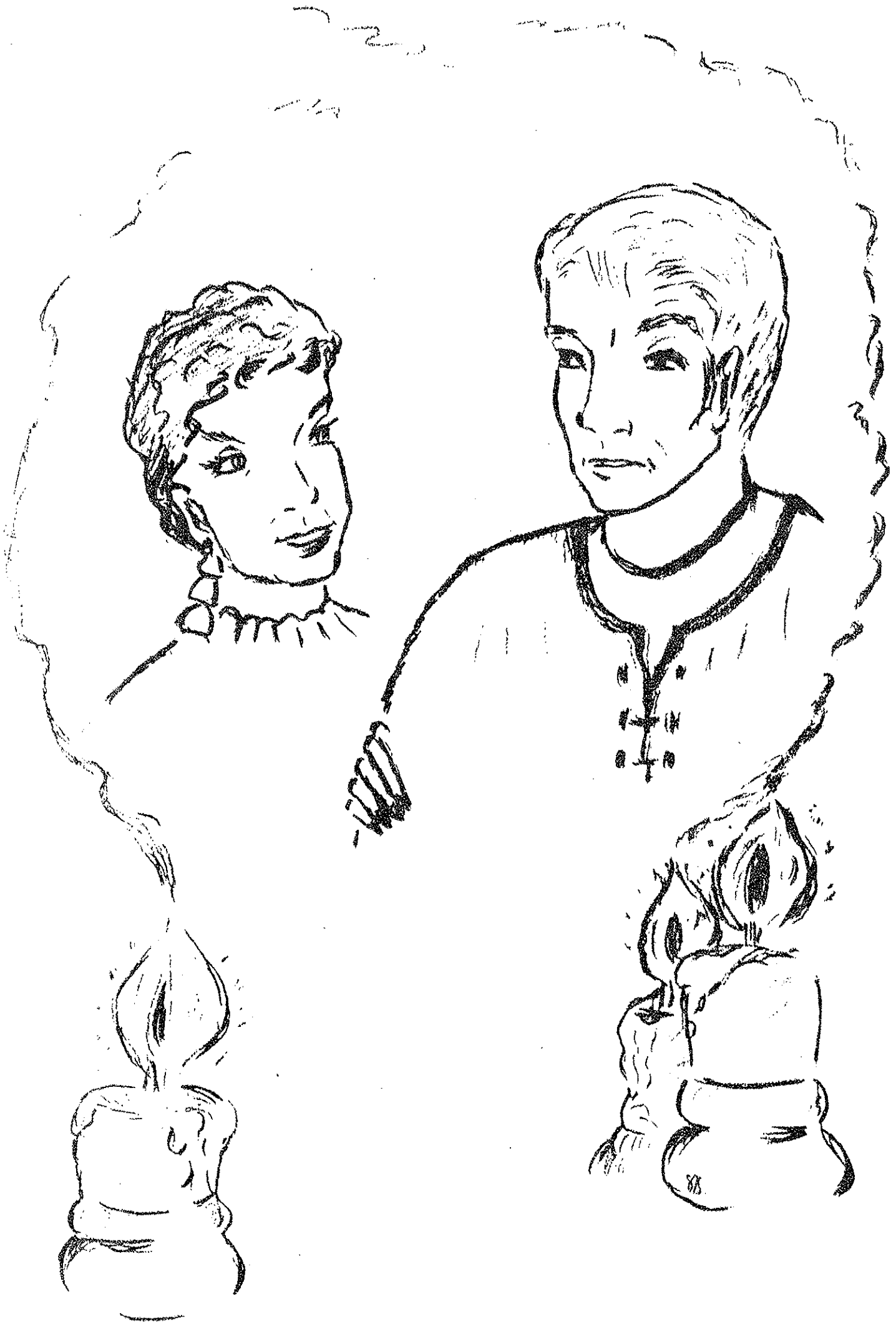
He felt sorry for her then. She seemed to shrink a little, her flamboyance faded. "A slave? You were his slave?"

"Yes. He has freed all his slaves. As you know, that is why he came to your city, to persuade you to do likewise."

His plan was certainly successful. Turning her back on him, she spoke no more, looked no more at him, all evening. He felt the chill gain hold of him, joined by a deep depression. When he had last been on this planet, in this time, he had been appalled by the cruelty shown to some of his fellow slaves. Lord Spock had never been a cruel master, but he had by no means been the order of the day. Now, back again in these times, he was only more appalled - this time, by the magnitude of the task before them. He feared that even the combined efforts of Lord Spock's brilliant speech and his own Spock's powerful personality could not prevail against the prejudice, the customs of years, in this city.

He felt a light touch on his arm and turned quickly, wondering if his hostess had overcome her prejudice already, but it was only Spock. Only Spock? He smiled his gentlest smile at him.

"Jim." Spock did not smile, but his look, too, was gentle. "I have made our excuses to our host and hostess, told them that we are tired after our long journey. Come, you look far from well. The slave is waiting to show us to our rooms."



Thankfully, Kirk made his goodnights and followed Spock as the slave led them through the corridors, lit now by the light from hundreds of red candles. In the privacy of their rooms, the Vulcan turned, alarmed, to his friend. "Jim, you are ill - see, you are shivering!"

Kirk grinned. "Go on - say it."

"Well, I did warn you. How bad do you feel?"

"I'm O.K., truly. Just a little chilly, nothing a warm bed won't cure."

Spock looked doubtful. "You will call me if you need me?"

"Yes, of course, t'hy'la. You get to bed. Don't worry, I really am all right."

T'Lal sat in front of her bedroom mirror. Her slave was unpinning her long black hair, brushing each strand as she uncoiled it.

Through the mirror, T'Lal saw her husband standing in the doorway, watched as, slowly, he entered the room.

Without looking at the slave girl, he dismissed her with a jerk of his head. Still T'Lal watched him.

His eyes met hers in the mirror, smiled a little. "My dear, don't you think your behaviour tonight a little...extreme?" he questioned mildly. "Not quite what would be expected from someone in your position."

She did not answer. Not looking at him now, she picked up the brush the slave had left, began to undo the remaining coils of her hair. Her hands shook slightly.

Taking hold of one of the strands of fine, dark hair, he curled it gently round his fingers. She froze, like a trapped animal, her hand gripping the brush with painful tension.

"Sometimes I am surprised at you, my dear." Still mild, still smiling, he continued. "Will you never learn? Perhaps I am to blame. It may be that I have not given you enough lessons. Well, that is easy to rectify. I must give you some more... Shall I start now?"

"No." Convulsively, she turned to face him, clutched his wrist. "Please, I beg you. I am sorry. I only meant to be friendly - oh, please!"

"My dear, I think you were a little too friendly. I am sorry, but I really think I shall have to do something about it." His smile deepened as, trying desperately to escape, she pulled against the hand still twisted in her hair.

"It is foolish to struggle," he chided gently. "You will only hurt yourself. Surely you know by now you cannot escape?"

"My Lord, Please listen to me. I swear I was only trying to be friendly. Do you think I would consider anything more with a slave?"

Frowning, he released her. "A slave? You must be mistaken. He is Lord Spock's friend and assistant."

She rubbed her head, edged as far away from him as possible. "Yes - now he is. Until recently, though, he was Spock's slave. He told me himself."

He regarded her thoughtfully. "Really? My dear, that is interesting. Most interesting." He smiled at her. "Well, perhaps you had better go to bed. It has been a long day. Just this once, I will overlook your...foolishness." Turning, he left her, forgot her very existence before he reached the door. His mind mulled over the information she had given him, working furiously.

When Kirk woke next morning, the sun was streaming through the bedroom

window. He jumped out of bed, feeling as fit as a flea, the chill quite gone. Putting on a bath robe, he went to Spock's room, found it empty. On Spock's pillow, he noticed a large piece of the writing paper this house thoughtfully provided for guests, picked it up. Spock's writing, elegant as ever, though rather spidery from the quill pen, met his eyes.

'Jim, I have gone for a walk round the gardens, at my host's request.. Did not wish to disturb you. S.'

Smiling a little, Kirk went through to their bath chamber, took off his robe and jumped into the water. Hot, of course. Could have done with this last night, he thought as he scrubbed himself with the oil provided. This would have warmed me up. Refreshed and invigorated, he climbed out, sat at the edge of the hot, running stream, allowing himself to steam dry.

A slight shiver down his spine warned him he was no longer alone.

Turning his head sharply, he found himself looking into the mild, pleasant face of his host. Seker bowed and smiled. "Forgive my intrusion, I wished to see if you were well. You seemed somewhat chilled last night."

Kirk regarded him in steely silence for a while, a look on his face that would have made any one of his crew quake a little in his shoes. Seker only smiled more. Reaching for his robe, Kirk got to his feet. He stood for a moment in all the proud, unselfconscious glory of his beauty and strength, then slowly, unhurriedly, put on the robe and belted it.

"I am quite well. Your concern is most touching."

Inclining his head a little, Seker leaned against the door jamb. "I had not known you used to be Lord Spock's slave," he said conversationally.

Kirk smiled. "Perhaps if you had still not known you would have knocked on the door just now?"

The Vulcan made a small, self-deprecating gesture. "Forgive me," he said again. "I have no wish to intrude on your privacy. The gong will sound shortly for Firstmeal. I look forward to the...honour...of your company." Still smiling, he withdrew, closing the door behind him.

Dressing quickly, Kirk was brushing his hair when Spock came through the door.

"You didn't knock!" he snapped.

Spock lifted an eyebrow. "Good morning, Jim. I see you are quite recovered. What are you talking about now? Since when have you ever required me to knock at your door?"

Grinning up at him, Kirk finished his hair, laid the brush down on the marble dressing table. "A little joke, Spock. What I was just saying to our host a few minutes back."

Spock sighed. "Sometimes I find it difficult to keep up with your 'little jokes'. Seker has been here, then? What did he want?"

"I don't know. That is what I am asking myself." He told Spock of the incident, frowning a little. "I thought at first he was letting me know he knew I had been a slave, disapproved of my being a guest in his house, but I have a strange feeling it was more than that."

Quietly, Spock watched his bondmate. A shaft of sunlight coming through the window shone full on Kirk's face. He looked glowing, vibrant with health and vitality.

"Jim..." Spock hesitated. "Do you mean...do you think he was...making advances to you?"

Kirk stared at him. "Making advances? Making... Oh, Spock!" Throwing

his head back, he roared with laughter.

Spock waited until Kirk became calm, until the hazel eyes were once more looking at him. "These things do happen, Jim; no use pretending they don't. Why, it has even been suggested that you and I..."

Kirk felt his jaw sag, quickly clamped it tightly. "Yes, Spock...I had heard," He looked away from Spock, then, still laughing, looked back.

Eyes still fixed on Kirk's, Spock allowed an answering gleam to show. "Come on," he said. "Let's go and eat. My walk has made me hungry."

Breakfast proved rather an awkward meal. Lady T'Pol was not present. Her husband explained that she never rose for Firstmeal. He, however, made up for her absence. Throughout the meal, he kept up a constant commentary on T'Rena in general and the High Council in particular. Any questions as to the reason for Spock's visit, though, he skirted carefully until, at length, Kirk asked him outright what his feelings were on the issue. Seker spread wide his hands.

"Well, of course," he answered, "as Chairman of the Council I cannot vote, unless the voting is evenly divided. Then I would cast my deciding vote."

Kirk's smile was as bland as their host's. "Am I permitted to ask which way you would vote under those circumstances?"

For once Seker's face lost its smile. "I have not yet decided," he replied coolly, but his eyes gave the answer plainly enough.

Back in their rooms, Spock warned Kirk about needling their host. "There is no point in antagonising him, Jim," he chided. "It will serve no purpose."

Accepting the reprimand, Kirk shrugged. "My Lord and I don't hit it off, Spock," he said. "I think the less we see of each other the better." Then he smiled. "But seeing you ask it, I will make an effort. I'll try not to annoy him again. In future, I'll confine my conversation to remarks about the weather and enquiries about his wife's...oh. Better not mention his wife to him."

"No, Jim, you had better not. I noticed she seemed much taken with you last night."

"Oh, you did, did you. Why didn't you come to my assistance then?"

"I knew you were perfectly capable of dealing with her yourself."

"Emmm. Someone needs to deal with her. Obviously Seker can't. She seems to be the boss in this house."

"Jim." Spock came and stood in front of him. "Do not underestimate Lord Seker. You heard my kinsman tell us he has a formidable brain."

"O.K., O.K., I get the message. I told you I'd behave myself in future. Anyway, I don't underestimate him. I don't trust him either. Spock - don't go out with him this morning. Come swimming with me instead."

Spock tied the belt of his outdoor robe. "Better not. I've said I'll go now. It will be useful to discover a little of the layout of T'Rena firstmeal, as he has promised to show me."

"Rather you than me." Picking up his towelling bathrobe, Kirk went to the door. "See you later, then."

The swim was good. T'Rena had enlarged a natural pool in the river, and - although still warm - the width of the pool allowed much of the heat to escape. It was an invigorated and relaxed Kirk who strolled, damp and hungry, back to Seker's villa at mid-day.

Rounding the bend leading to the house, he met his host about to go up the steps to his front door. Remembering Spock's admonition, he smiled pleasantly.

"Did you show Spock all the sights, my Lord?"

Seker frowned a little. "Some of them. Unfortunately, we lost each other in the crowd in the market place."

Kirk stifled a grin. Spock must have had as much as he could take of their host. He must remember to ask him 'if Seker had made any advances'.

The mid-day meal was substantial, and Kirk hungry after his swim. Again, T'Lal was absent. This time, Seker made no excuses for her. Indeed, he appeared rather tired and preoccupied. Unlike Firstmeal, he made little conversation. Again, in deference to Spock, Kirk made an effort to be pleasant, but as the meal progressed and Spock still had not arrived, he began to feel a little uneasy. He decided that as soon as the meal was over, he would operate the directional link that he and Spock shared, and go to find him.

His mind made up, he did not linger over the rest of the meal. Excusing himself to his companion, he left the table, and the house, blinking a little at the dazzling light that met his eyes outdoors.

Tuning his mind to bring the directional link to the surface was no trouble. Immediately he felt the awareness of its presence in his own mind. As it left him to join with the similar effect in Spock's mind, he was suddenly overwhelmed with fear. Where he should feel the pull from Spock, there was a complete void. He felt nothing. For a few moments his fear completely engulfed him. Sickness and dizziness swept over him. He leaned against the pillar of the door for support. This absence of any awareness of his bondmate's presence could surely only mean one thing?

Spock must be dead.

Quickly he pulled himself together, forced his numbed brain to function rationally. The link had not worked once before, when the unstable Hazard had separated them. There could possibly be something preventing its working now. Something told him too, that he would know instinctively if his bondmate were dead. Well, standing around like this would do no good. Better start looking for his missing friend...in the conventional way, seeing the bond link was no use. How best to go about his search? He was not on Earth now. To enquire of people if they had seen a tall, dark Vulcan, in this city would only result in ridicule. His best bet was to ask Seker where he had taken his guest, whether Spock had shown any special interest in any of the places they had visited.

He felt a marked reluctance to do this which, impatient with himself, he forced himself to overcome. Lord Seker could not have been more helpful. He wrote a list of all the places they had visited that morning, then pushed it away.

"No," he said. "Far better that I should accompany you, show you, myself."

Kirk accepted his host's offer gratefully. All afternoon, he followed Seker on what proved to be a fruitless and tiring tour of T'Rena. Although Seker retraced his steps of the morning almost exactly, it was to no avail. There was no sign of Spock anywhere.

As the brilliance of the afternoon light began to lessen a little, heralding the sunfall, Seker suggested that they had better return home.

"I am sure we will find Lord Spock there when we get back," he said. Reluctantly, Kirk agreed, hoping the other was correct, hoping against hope that when they arrived, Spock would be waiting for him, one eyebrow raised in surprise that his friend had made such an issue of his being late for lunch. He was not to be so greeted. No tall, reassuring figure was waiting. He had not returned. No-one in the household had seen or heard anything of him since morning.

Kirk was really worried by now. All the earlier fears came flooding back. Seker too was concerned. "I hope he has not met with an accident," he told Kirk. "He must be well for his speech tomorrow morning."

Kirk could have hit him. Right now it could not matter less to him if Spock gave the speech or not. All he wanted was to see his friend again, safe and well.

"Come." Leading him by the arm, Seker took him through to an anteroom. "It is time for our meal. While we eat, I will send round to all the hospices to see if they have anyone answering to Lord Spock's description."

Staring at him, Kirk just managed to keep his wits enough to tell his host he would eat later. He could not have eaten then to save his life. "Your idea is good, my Lord," he said. "If you will enquire at the hospitals, I will take another look round while the light lasts."

Leaving the house once more, Kirk wandered desolately round the deserted streets. Almost everyone was now eating the main social meal of the day. He did not know how long he walked, but he found nothing. No trace, no clue as to what had happened to his friend. Wandering down to the river, he stood a while watching it rushing past. The light was rapidly fading now. Trying to control the rising panic, he turned at last to retrace his steps to Seker's house. As he did so, a figure came out from a near-by street, almost bumping into him. The man apologised and made to pass him. As he did so, Kirk glanced at him briefly. Instantly he recognised him, with some surprise, as the slave whom he had once tried to help, the last time he had been back in time. Although surprised to see him in this town, if the man had not acted so strangely, he would not have given it much thought, preoccupied as he was.

The slave, however, acted in a most peculiar manner. His expression as his eyes met Kirk's was of extreme shock. Pushing quickly past him, he began to move, half running away down the street, glancing guiltily over his shoulder at Kirk.

Instantly, alarm bells went off in Kirk's head. Turning rapidly, he followed the man, first walking quickly, then running to match the other's speed. The slave increased his pace. It was obvious he was trying to escape. For some time the two raced across the deserted town, but Kirk's training and condition paid off. He began to gain on the other.

Eventually the man took a wrong turning into a blind alley and Kirk cornered him. Desperately he tried to dodge, to rush past, but Kirk was too quick for him. Reaching, he grabbed him, pinned him against the wall. The slave fought furiously then to escape, but he was no match for Kirk's strength. It was not long before Kirk had him in a stranglehold, one arm round his neck, the other pinning his arm round his back.

"Let me go!" panted his captive. "I have done you no harm. Why are you attacking me like this?"--

Breathing heavily, Kirk tightened his grip. "Why were you running away? You know where he is, don't you? Tell me... Tell me!"

The other cried out in pain as Kirk twisted his arm further up his back. "Stop, oh stop, you are hurting me!"

"Tell me, then. Better still, take me to him!"

"I don't know what you are talking about."

Kirk turned his captive to face him, gripped his arms tightly. His eyes bored into the man's in the dim light.

"You know, all right. What are you doing in T'Rena? Is your master here?" His mind worked rapidly. "He would hardly want Lord Spock to succeed, would he? I bet he is behind this. Where is he? What has he done with Lord Spock?" Mercilessly, he shook the man until he sagged beneath his hands. "If you have hurt him..."

"No! No, I swear he is not hurt..." Stopping, the slave clamped his mouth shut, realising what he had said.

Kirk's voice was very soft. "So you do have him. Where is he? Where is he?"

The man shuddered. "I dare not tell you," he whispered. "My master will kill me if I do."

"I will kill you if you do not." Then, seeing the other's desperate misery, Kirk tried to make his own voice less harsh. "Take me to him. Your master need never know... I tried to help you once. You owe me."

To his surprise, the slave laughed bitterly. "Am I supposed to be grateful to you?" he asked. "What do you think happened to me after you had 'helped' me, when you left? He almost killed me. I still bear the marks of the whipping he gave me."

Kirk's face changed, his hands slackening their cruel grip. He looked at the unfortunate man in front of him. "I am sorry," he said. "Truly sorry."

"Are you? You are all right, you are a free man now. Yet even when you were a slave, you had a good master. I know Lord Spock freed all his slaves and all the slaves in his city; my master could not accept it. He moved to T'Rena, became one of the High Council. He was certain T'Rena would never abolish slavery. He was very pleased when Lord Spock failed to move the Council...then he heard he was to try again. He knows Lord Spock, how clever he is, what a fine speaker... He was leaving nothing to chance this time."

"And you have helped him?"

"What else could I do? I did not want to - I admire Lord Spock. But I dare not oppose my master."

"Listen to me. Take me to Lord Spock. He will speak tomorrow to the Council. As you say, he is a brilliant man. This time he will sway the Council. T'Rena will abolish slavery. You will be free. Doesn't that make sense to you? Surely you want to be a free man?"

"Of course I do, you fool. But I would not be. My master would just move again to somewhere else. He will never accept any law that frees slaves."

"He will have to, one day. If that is what you fear, then trust me. I give you my word, if you take me now to Lord Spock, I promise your master will be forced to free you."

"How? How can you promise that?"

"Never mind how. I promise. That will have to be enough. We have wasted too much time talking. Take me now to Lord Spock - I will not wait any longer."

The slave winced as once more his captor gripped his bruised arms. "Very well, I will take you to him. I did not want to help kidnap him. I know he is trying to help us. Come - follow me. It is not far."

Following the man, Kirk held tightly to one arm. He did not think the slave would try any tricks, but he was taking no chances. It was a tortuous route, in and out of winding alleys. At last they halted. The slave pointed to a door high up at the top of a flight of stairs.

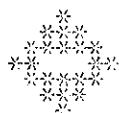
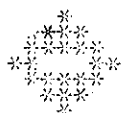
"He is up there. The door is bolted on the outside. My master sent me to check he was all right; I must return now, or he will suspect something."

Ignoring him, Kirk pushed him up the stairs in front of him. "You will stay with me until I'm sure you are telling the truth," he said. They reached the door, unbolted it and stepped into the darkness inside. Fumbling, the slave brought out a candle and flint. Striking the flint he lit the candle, thrust it into Kirk's hand and dashed past him to the door.

"Remember your promise!" he called as he shot down the steps.

Narrowing his eyes against the candle's dim light, Kirk moved carefully round the room. In one corner a deeper darkness stood out in the shadows. Moving swiftly, he bent over to inspect it. The candle light threw long shadows and patches of light over a figure huddled on a rough bed of sacks.

It was Spock.



Lt.-Commander Scott wiped an oily hand over his forehead and stopped himself, just in time, from cursing.

The cause of his self-control, a young Vulcan technician, watched him, face expressionless.

"Well, lad, we've checked all the other fittings, they're all right; there's only this one left. I canna understand. Everything seems in place, yet it willna work." Bending, he tapped morosely at a joint in the convoluted piece of machinery, annoyed and impatient. This particular piece of equipment had taken all afternoon to fit, and now, after all their trouble, was somehow faulty.

"I canna understand it," he muttered again, more to himself than his assistant. "I've never had trouble wi' these parts before."

The young Vulcan shrugged, said some sharp-sounding words which Scott's translator gave as "Don't blame me, mate, I only fit 'em. I don't make 'em."

Scott gave him a dour glance. "Aye, but are ye sure ye've fitted it properly - mate? Well, the only way tae find out is tae tak' it apart again." He sighed. Lads these days...couldn't care less whether they did a job well or not. Now, in his young days...

The technician bent over the joint, then lifted his head, sniffing. "Funny smell in here," came from the translator. "Noticed it before - sort of...fruity. Smells like you've got a cake in the oven." He threw his head back, laughing loudly at his own wit. It was a good job he could not see his companion's face.

The Vulcan equivalent of a foreman strolled over to them, a big, burly man whose eyebrows met in the middle of his forehead making a dark V, and at whose appearance the younger Vulcan promptly stopped laughing, straightening his face with almost ludicrous haste.

"Everything shipshape now, Mr. Scott!" he said. "Having a bit of trouble here, are you?"

Scott straightened. "Ye could say that. We're just about tae check this part. There's got tae be something wrong with it. We've checked the rest, that's all right, but the whole thing willna work."

While he spoke, the boy had unscrewed the joint. All three saw at once where the error lay. The big Vulcan pushed the boy aside none too gently, said a few words which the universal translator refused to render. The youngster's face turned a dull green, took on a sullen cast.

"The young fool's fitted this the wrong way round," apologised the foreman, squinting up at Scotty. "No wonder you were having trouble. Lads these days, they don't care whether they do a job properly or not. Now, when I was learning the trade..."

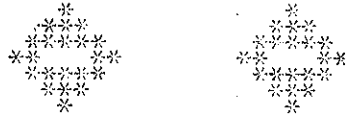
Scotty warmed to him. "Aye, things were very different," he agreed.

"Well - " The big Vulcan gave the corrected joint a final twist - "you shouldn't have any more trouble with that." Raising his head, he sniffed audibly. "Nice smell you've got in here." He sniffed again. "Hmm, very pleasant. Reminds me of when my wife does her baking. Well, that's about it then for today." Standing, he stretched, beckoned to his assistant. "Come on, lad. We'll be back in the morning, Mr. Scott." He bowed a little, formally, politely.

Scott decided he liked this capable, polite Vulcan...a man after his own heart. Drawing him aside a little, he jerked his head towards the waiting boy. "Why don't you send the lad on ahead," he suggested. "I'd like it fine if ye'd stay a while, join me in a wee dram."

The Vulcan thought for a moment, weighing the pros and cons in typical Vulcan fashion, then inclined his head. "Don't mind if I do - thanks," supplied the translator. "S'Dal!" He turned to the boy, who was gathering up their tools. "You go on ahead. I've something further to discuss with Mr. Scott."

"Aye," Scotty grinned approvingly, wiping his greasy hands on his overalls. "We'll discuss half a bottle o' the best malt." And why not? he asked himself. He'd had a hard day, deserved a break. Look at Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock now, they were having a fine time, living it up in style on Vulcan, enjoying themselves...



Kirk felt as though he were sweating blood. Half carrying, half supporting Spock, he staggered along the river bank. If they followed the river, he knew, they would eventually reach Seker's house. To attempt to return the way the slave had shown him would, he knew, be impossible in the darkness. They would become hopelessly lost.

Once more Spock's knees gave way under him. Once more he sank to the ground, retching helplessly. Kirk knelt beside him, holding him until the spasm passed.

The Vulcan raised his head a little. "I'm sorry, Jim. I must have been drugged."

Relief that Spock was well enough to speak caused Kirk's power of speech to desert him. Tearing a piece off his robe, he dipped it into the river, wiped his friend's face with it. Spock leaned against him, his breathing ragged, his body limp. Tenderly, Kirk stroked the sweat-soaked hair. After a while, Spock gathered himself together, tried to get up.

"Ready?" questioned Kirk gently. "Come on, my friend. Lean on me. We'll make it together."

Eventually, after what seemed an age, he recognised the formal park opposite their host's villa. Thankfully they crossed it, arriving at last in front of Seker's house. The slave guarding the door admitted them, barely recognising the Vulcan.

Halfway to their rooms, Spock's legs gave way again. Gathering up the last remnants of his strength, Kirk lifted him in his arms, carried him down the candle-lit corridors, and lowered him gently onto his bed.

Spock opened his eyes, tried to smile up at his faithful friend. "Thank you, Jim. I'll be all right now. You rest - you must be exhausted."

"Hush. Don't move. I'll get you a drink." Moving to the bedside table, he poured some of the water provided into a cup, brought it to Spock.

Putting a restraining hand on Kirk's wrist, Spock struggled to speak. "Wait, Jim. I do not think our host is to be trusted." He paused to draw breath. "This morning he took me to a hostelry, introduced me to some more of his friends...we had a drink... I remember nothing after that."

"But Spock, it was not Seker who drugged you." Briefly, not wanting to tire him, Kirk told him of his encounter with the slave. "Lord Seker spent all afternoon looking for you, with me," he finished.

Spock's eyes turned longingly to the cup of water in Kirk's hand. "Very well, Jim, I will drink it - you are probably right."

Lifting Spock's shoulder with his free hand, Kirk stopped, the hand carrying the cup half way to Spock's lips. "No. You may be right. They could be in this together. I'm taking no chances. Don't touch this - I'll get some fresh water. I won't be long."

When he returned with a jug of water he had drawn himself, he found their host standing by the bed. "I am thankful that you found Lord Spock," he said. Giving him a quick nod, Kirk again lifted his friend, held the cup to his lips. Gratefully, Spock drained it. Swiftly Kirk re-filled it, helped him again to

drink. Behind them, Seker's voice broke the silence. "One can see that you are accustomed to attending to your 'friend'."

So he's back on that line, thought Kirk grimly. Ignoring the uncalled-for taunt, he smiled at Spock, lowered his head carefully onto the pillows. Soundlessly, Seker came to stand at his side.

"He does not look too good to me. I will send for my physician. We must have him recovered by morning."

Spock struggled to sit up. "No... I thank you, that will not be necessary. All I need is a good night's sleep."

The other Vulcan regarded him for a while longer in silence, bowed slightly. "If you say so, my Lord. You can call me should you change your mind." He crossed to the door. "I will bid you goodnight, then," he called over his shoulder. "Don't worry. It is not the first time one of our visitors has had too much of the local mead."

Kirk could not let that pass. He made to stop Seker, demand an apology. Spock's hand, still strong, gripped his arm, halting him. "No, Jim."

"Spock, he thinks you're drunk!"

"Let him -- if he does so think. He may have said that as a blind. Despite his words, I do not think he wishes our mission tomorrow to succeed."

"He could be right about the doctor. Shouldn't you let him call his physician?"

"No. It would be his personal physician. Who knows what he could give me? I'm all right, t'hy'la. Now go to bed. You must be...whacked."

Getting off the bed, Kirk removed Spock's sandals, then his dusty, sweat-stained robe, gave him another drink and covered him with the bedclothes. "Try to sleep. I'll make sure no-one comes near you..."

He was talking to himself. Totally exhausted, still influenced by the drug, Spock was asleep. Kirk watched him for some time, making sure he was all right. He was not really reassured. The Vulcan's breathing was very heavy.

Spock had been right when he said Kirk was 'whacked'. After a while, he knew he must have some sleep. Looking round the room, he pushed a large, heavy couch against the door. Satisfied that no-one could enter the room without first moving the couch, he lay down on it, sinking immediately into an exhausted sleep.

Despite his weariness, Kirk woke early next day; stiff and aching from his night on the couch. Stretching, he went to inspect the still-sleeping Vulcan. Spock's breathing was lighter, his colour a little better in the early morning light. Quietly, Kirk replaced the couch, and, carefully closing the door behind him, made his way to the kitchens.

No-one was about. Foraging, he found a bowl of milk, some bread and some fruit. Balancing these precariously, he returned to Spock's room. Gently, he shook his friend's shoulder. Spock's brown eyes opened, looked with trust into his.

"Spock, how are you? See, I have found us some breakfast. It cannot have been tampered with, I got it myself."

The shadow of a smile crossed Spock's face. "Elandir, you are very versatile. I am better, thank you...and I should very much like a bath."

Sitting up, he swung his legs to the floor and got up. He swayed alarmingly as he stood, and Kirk caught him. "You are still not well."

"Do not fuss, Jim. I said I was better. A bath will restore me."

Sighing, Kirk helped him to the bathroom, helped him to bath and dress.

Despite Spock's words, he was very weak. Kirk dared not remonstrate further, though. The Vulcan's face was set in such lines of determination that he knew all argument would be futile.

Settling him in a chair, Kirk made him eat a little. He could tell it took Spock all his time to do so. Although very worried, Kirk managed to keep his concern to himself, made himself eat the sparse breakfast. When they had finished, he smiled warmly, trying to act as though all was well.

"I'll go take a dip myself now, Spock, make myself presentable."

When he returned, Spock was leaning back in the chair, eyes closed, one hand trailing on the floor, holding the speech he was to give that morning. He appeared to be asleep, but at Kirk's approach opened his eyes.

"Jim, would you read this speech to me again, please."

"Yes, of course." Still trying to act normally, he took the speech from Spock's limp hand, began to read. His concern had increased still more with his friend's request. Spock had almost total recall, knew the speech by heart, must be feeling really bad to need to have it read to him. This was ridiculous. Stopping abruptly, Kirk put the speech on the table.

"Spock, you can stop this pretence right now. You are not feeling well. It's obvious you can't go through with this - you'll never make it. We - "

"Be quiet. I must go through with it."

"No. You must - "

"Did you not hear me? I told you to be quiet... Continue with the speech. Why must you always argue with me?"

Shocked, Kirk stared at him, his fears increasing. The drug must be affecting him even worse than he had thought for Spock to be so angry with him. Worried and miserable, he continued to read, was just finishing, when a light tap sounded on the door and Seker came in.

"Good morning, Lord Spock...er...Mr. Kirk. Are you recovered, my Lord? Will you be fit enough to address the Council, or shall we cancel your speech?"

Before Spock could answer, Kirk jumped to his feet. "Lord Seker, when I found Lord Spock last night, he had been drugged and abducted, not drunk as you suggested. I demand that you put the Council meeting off for a day or two, allow him to recover."

Their host's eyebrows climbed up his forehead, disappeared behind his shaped fringe. "Demand...Mr. Kirk? Are you in a position to make demands?" He turned to Spock. "My Lord, your sl - friend has just made a somewhat startling pronouncement. You were abducted? And...drugged? Can he prove his statement?"

"I should not think so; I would think that whoever carried out my abduction would see to it that he could not."

"What then will you do? It is true you look far from well...whatever the cause. I am afraid it would prove impossible to postpone your speech. The Council has a full schedule. Shall we cancel it? After all, your health must be our first concern."

"No. I will carry out my mission as planned. I am all right."

"Then I am afraid it is time we were going. The Council will be assembling shortly. I will order my carriage to the door. Do you require any assistance to get to it?"

"No - I thank you. My friend will help me."

Looking back, Kirk could not think the journey to the Council Hall one of his happiest memories. Spock was silent, his face drawn and pale; the depth of

Kirk's concern increased yet further when, still unsteady, his friend allowed Seker to assist him up the steps to the building.

Kirk was not allowed to sit with Spock in the hall, nor indeed even near to him. Despite his protests, he was ushered to a seat at the back of the long hall. The members of T'Rena's High Council, about forty in number, sat in front of him facing a raised platform from which Spock would give the all-important speech.

Tense and nervous, Kirk listened as his friend began. It was a fine and moving speech, conscientiously researched and brilliantly written. Both he and Spock had been most impressed by it, thinking it could not fail to move even the most hide-bound of Councils.

Listening, Kirk relaxed a little. Spock appeared better, more his normal self. He began to deliver the speech with power and authority; Lord Spock's and his own. Leaning back in his chair, Kirk began to hope that in spite of his fears all would be well, when suddenly Spock faltered. His voice dropped slightly. Even from his distant seat, Kirk saw him clench his fists in a desperate bid to continue, did in fact say a few more sentences, then, voice failing, clutch at the small table in front of him, swaying dangerously.

Out of his seat before anyone else was aware of anything being wrong, Kirk raced to try to catch his friend before he fell. Knew as he ran that he would never make it in time.

Someone else could, though. As he rushed forward, he saw a young Councillor rise from his seat at the front of the hall and jump up onto the platform in time to catch the falling speaker, just before he would have hit the ground. Gratefully, Kirk joined him, looking anxiously into Spock's unconscious face.

Above them, a voice sounded, breaking his concentration with harsh impact. "Drunk, I'm afraid. Brought home intoxicated last night..."

In a moment's total clarity of mind, Kirk knew that now, of all times, he must keep his head, not allow his fury to show. Leaving Spock to the care of the young man, he rose slowly to his feet, faced the gathering circle of Councillors.

"Gentlemen," he said with quiet authority, "Lord Seker is mistaken. I regret having to correct him, in his Council, but Lord Spock is not drunk. He is drugged. Yesterday, someone of your city, someone wishing to impede his mission, abducted him. I found him after a long search, drugged and locked away in a disused building."

"Drugged...abducted?" A grey-haired, distinguished-looking man scrutinised Kirk sharply. "This is a very serious charge to make, young man. Can you substantiate your accusation? Lord Seker thinks him to be suffering from the after-effects of drink..."

"Quite understandable," broke in Seker, spreading his hands in his deprecating manner. "We do not condemn Lord Spock. Which of us has not suffered in the same way at some time or other? Our local mead is very potent."

A ripple of amusement greeted this remark. Several of the learned company looked at each other, smiling. Looking into Kirk's eyes, Seker smiled the widest. Yes, thought Kirk. This man is indeed formidable. He looked round the circle desperately. "Please - my Lords. I beg you to believe me. Lord Spock is drugged."

"Who is this man? By what authority does he speak?" enquired another Vulcan.

Seker shrugged. "He is - I beg your pardon, was - Lord Spock's slave. Now he is his assistant. A most loyal assistant too, I'm sure you'll all agree. Most commendable. Unfortunately, loyalty is not enough, Mr. Kirk - you do not submit any evidence to support your wild claim. I'm very much afraid we must conclude that you do not have any."

"But I have."

The young Councillor who had caught Spock stood up, first laying Spock's head carefully on a cushion someone had provided. "What you - " he nodded at Kirk - "Mr. Kirk, is it? What you claim is quite true. Gentlemen - " he turned to his fellow Councillors - "there is no doubt that this man has been drugged. His breath smells strongly of aloemint. He has been given the hypnotic drug Alortin. A sleep-inducing, brain-distorting drug. The smell is quite distinctive."

Shocked now, the others stared at him. "Are you sure, Palin?"

"Quite sure. I often prescribe it in a mild form for sleeplessness. This man has had a large dose."

"Will he be all right?" Kirk questioned anxiously.

The young doctor regarded him kindly. "Yes, he only needs to sleep off the effects. It is a strange drug; the effects tend to come and go for a while. Obviously that happened here; Lord Spock seemed all right when he began his speech. Take him home and keep him quiet for a day or so. He will be recovered then."

Smiling thankfully, Kirk knelt and put an arm round Spock's shoulders. From his kneeling position, he looked round the Councillors. "My Lords, you have heard what the doctor said. You cannot deny that Lord Spock has been badly treated by someone in your city. It is only fair that he has the chance to address you again when he is better."

The grey-haired man looked sullen. "You are very confident for a slave," he remarked sourly. "Who are you, to tell us what is fair?"

"Senel, he is no longer a slave. You heard what Seker told us," answered the doctor. "He is in fact quite right. Lord Spock appears to have received poor hospitality from our city. The least we can do is to hear him when he is well. Lord Seker - the Council meets again in three days. Do you agree we could hear Lord Spock then?"

Seker's face was bland and mild still; but the smile had gone. He looked round the company. "If it is what we are all agreed on."

Ashamed now, regretting their earlier amusement, outraged that a guest of T'Rena should have met with such treatment, the Councillors agreed.

"Then so be it." Turning to Kirk, who was busy helping a now conscious, though dazed, Spock to stand, Seker continued, "My carriage is outside. Take Lord Spock home, see that he is made comfortable. I will come on later. I will send my physician to attend to him."

Kirk nodded acknowledgement. Helped by the doctor, he guided Spock to the door and down the passageway to the main entrance.

"Which is Seker's carriage?" asked the doctor. "I will help you get Lord Spock into it."

"Thank you, but I can manage now. I will look after him and see he has plenty of rest. Thank you again for what you did in there. God knows what would have happened if you had not been there. Doctor..." Kirk hesitated. "Whatever happens, I promise Lord Spock will arrive for the Council meeting in three days."

The other looked into Kirk's eyes, his own puzzled. Then Kirk saw understanding and shock in the other's eyes. "I see you understand me," he said.

For some time Palin scrutinised the hazel eyes, still shocked by the revelation he had received. "Yes," he said at last. "My friend, I will not ask you to trust me. I see you cannot really trust any of us. Gladly would I offer to help, if you could accept. My thoughts will be with you at least. If you do need help, you can truly count on me... Meanwhile, I will pass on your message to Lord Seker - after a suitable delay."

Both smiled then in complete understanding. As the doctor turned and went back through the Council Hall doors, Kirk guided the still dazed Spock down the steps and, ignoring Seker's carriage, hailed a passing hire carriage. "Take us to the river," he ordered the driver. "The South Gate."

The fresher air by the river revived Spock. They sat for a while in the sunshine, after the cab had left. Not caring who saw, or what construction anyone put on it, Kirk had an arm firmly round his friend's shoulders, supporting him.

At last the Vulcan spoke. "Tell me what happened, Jim."

Briefly, Kirk told him. When he had finished, Spock sighed. "So I have not failed completely."

Kirk shook him gently. "You have not failed at all." Looking into his friend's white, drawn face, he was suddenly smitten with guilt. "Elandir, forgive me. I should never have allowed you to come to this God-forsaken place. You have suffered all this through me."

Spock turned, his eyes gentle. "What foolishness are you speaking now? You could not have stopped me if you had tried. And Jim - this 'God-forsaken place' is my home planet. If I have suffered, you have also; you have had to drag me round T'Rena for the past several hours." Pausing, he looked about him. "All round T'Rena, by the looks of things."

Kirk smiled. "You must be wondering what we are doing here, Spock?"

"No, my brain is working again, now. You are very sensible, my friend. Shall we set off and find our destination?"

"If you're ready. Don't exercise your brain too much, the doctor said you must rest."

Slowly, the two walked along the river bank towards the big City Gate they could see in the distance. It was not long before, rounding a bend in the river, they saw that luck, at last, seemed to be on their side. A small, square hostelry, white paint shimmering in the heat, stood immediately in front of them, its sign-board swinging gently in the breeze. Kirk read its message with satisfaction.

"The Split Reed," he said.

Surak the inn-keeper greeted them like old friends. Thinking it best to tell him nothing of their real reason for coming to the Split Reed, they told him only that Kirk, being a stranger to these parts, wished to experience a couple of days in a hostelry before going home.

The big Vulcan was delighted. Pleased also that his best guest-chamber was vacant. "If you don't mind sharing a room, that is," he explained. "It's a large sunny room at the back of the house overlooking the river; and as a bath-chamber attached," he added proudly.

"Is it quiet?" Kirk asked. "My friend has not been too well. He needs a day or two of peace and quiet."

Surak was genuinely concerned. "I thought you looked a bit peaky, sir," he told Spock. "Yes, it's the quietest room in the house, right away from the drinking-room. You'll be able to rest there. No-one will disturb you - I'll see to that."

He showed them the room with justifiable pride. A large airy room on the first floor of the building, it looked out directly onto the river, as he had said. Though plainly painted in fresh pastel colours, its walls were hung with bright tapestries, and the floor was covered with woven-rush carpeting.

"See, my Lords." Surak pulled at one of the wall hangings. "At night you can draw this across the window. Keep out the bright light if you wish to sleep after sunrise." Crossing to one of the beds, he turned down the orange cover, revealing spotless bedclothes. "As you can see, we pride ourselves here on our cleanliness. No unwanted bed-fellows here."

Spock immediately felt a maddening itch at the back of his neck. Determined not to scratch, he saw Kirk, out of the corner of his eye, surreptitiously rubbing his arm, raised a mocking eyebrow. Glaring at him, Kirk turned to the inn-keeper.

"You mentioned a bathroom?"

"Ah, yes - through here." Opening a door in the far wall, he stood back to show them a small room almost completely filled with an enormous round copper bath. Proudly, he reached into the bath, pulling out a large plug. "Here is something I wager you have not seen before," he told them. "The bath is set over a small hole in the floor, specially connected to the house drains by this copper pipe. No need for the servants to be forever emptying and lifting this bath."

"Perhaps as well," murmured Kirk, thinking of its weight. Spock peered admiringly at the primitive plumbing.

"Something of an innovation, indeed," he agreed. His voice sounded suddenly weary, and Surak must have noticed it as well as Kirk, for he glanced at him with concern.

"Well, Lords, if it suits, I'll leave you to it. You can rest as much as you like. If you need anything, I will be below stairs, working. Just ring the bell at the foot of the stairs, and I will come immediately."

Thanking him, they assured him that the room was exactly what they wanted. Spock lay down on one of the beds as soon as the door closed behind their host. Kirk came to sit beside him, anxiously noting his pallor, and the deep smudges beneath his closed eyes.

Opening them, Spock looked into Kirk's. "Do not be concerned, Jim, I'm all right. I just feel the need for sleep. The doctor told you I would sleep off the effects of the drug within a day or so."

"Yes, I know. You sleep, Spock. Would you like something to eat or drink first?"

"Not just now, thank you." Yawning, Spock stretched and settled himself. "This bed is most comfortable." He yawned again. "Why don't you rest too? You must be exhausted after last night."

Smiling, Kirk crossed to the door and bolted it. "I might just do that," he told his sleeping friend, and stretched out on the other bed.

It was very peaceful. Through the open window he could hear the river flowing ceaselessly past, and in the distance, children's voices, high and clear in the still air. For the first time in almost two days he felt relaxed. There were plenty of problems still facing him and Spock. He was fully aware of that, but right now it didn't seem to matter. His beloved friend was safe, sleeping peacefully. Soon the drug would have worn off. They could face the problems together. For the moment, he could relax at last and...sleep.

Spock sat, chin in hand, watching the river rush past beneath him. A slight movement behind him made him turn, come over to Kirk's bed as the Human sat up. "You look so much better--have you been awake long? What time is it?"

"I feel well; much better. By the look of the sun, it is early evening. We have slept the afternoon away."

"Do us good, Spock. I'm starving. You must be worse - you've not eaten all day."

"You made me eat some breakfast, Jim."

"Not much. Took me all my time to get anything down you. All my diplomacy, too. The drug did nothing for your temper."

Spock smiled. "I'm sorry I snapped at you, t'hy'la. Not at all what you deserved after all your trouble. As you say, I am hungry. While you slept, I asked Surak to send us up some dinner. It should arrive shortly."

"I see. You were going to eat it all while I slept."

Spock sighed. "You are so perceptive, Jim. Unfortunately, you have thwarted my plan, waking like this. Now I must share it with you."

Getting off the bed, Kirk put his hands on Spock's shoulders. "You really are better, my friend - thank God. Well, where is it?"

Spock pulled Kirk to him in a sudden, brief, hard hug, then moved quickly to open the door at Surak's knock. "Curb your impatience, Jim. I think this will be it," he smiled.

It was their host himself, carrying a loaded tray. "Good evening, sirs," he greeted them cheerfully. "Come and eat this while it's hot." He put the tray down on a small table, drew up two chairs. "There. Will there be anything else you require?"

"Not just now, thanks. This looks good, Surak."

The Vulcan beamed. "My wife does all the cooking. She is an excellent cook, as you can see." Complacently, he patted his ample stomach. "Well, I'll leave you to eat. You know where to find me if you need anything."

After the meal, they sat and talked. There was a lot to talk about, to catch up on. Although Kirk had brought all their money with him and Spock's belt with the mini-transporter was still round his waist, they had been able to bring nothing else with them.

Kirk passed a hand over his face. "I wonder if I could return after dark Spock; collect our things from Seker's house?"

"No, Jim - too risky. You could be followed."

"Hmm. Tell you what. I'll go to the market tomorrow, first thing, buy us some clothes. Pity we had to leave that game - we could have played it here."

Spock yawned. "I'm sorry, Jim - I'm not much company at the moment."

"What foolishness are you speaking now?" quoted Kirk, grinning at him. "You're the best possible company. You've no idea how good it is to have you back. At one time I thought you lost for ever. Spock, why did the directional link fail? Can you imagine how I felt, when I reached for you and found nothing?"

The Vulcan sat for a moment, frowning a little. "I do not remember much. After I had finished my drink, I felt most strange - light-headed. I did wonder if I had been drugged. Just before I blacked out, I cut off all my telepathic functions. I feared they might be able to form a contact, discover our deception. I'm sorry, Jim - I must have cut off our link as well." As he spoke, his voice became slower. He was tiring visibly.

Kirk got up. "Never mind, Elandir. No harm's done. Thanks to that slave, I found you. We must do something about that man. His life is hell with that brute of a master. When you talk the Council round, the day after tomorrow, you could add some clause - give the slaves freedom as from that moment. I told him Lord Spock would employ him. That's you in his eyes. We must take him back with us."

"When', Jim? Don't you mean 'if'?"

"I mean what I say. You know how good your kinsman's speeck is. That and your powers...can't fail to win them over."

Smiling, Spock joined him. "You are very encouraging, t'hy'la." He yawned again. "I shall have to sleep again, I'm afraid. Let's hope this drug has really worn off by morning."

Having slept most of the previous afternoon, Kirk woke early next morning. Getting up, he dressed (with some distaste) in his crumpled clothes. Spock was still sleeping, but his colour and breathing were normal. Deciding that they could trust their host, Kirk went to find him, came across him by the river drawing bucket after bucket of hot water which waiting men carried to the house.

"Very useful, having the river so close," he greeted Kirk. "No need to dig a well for our water supply. Did you want me, sir?"

"Surak, I have to go to buy some things we need. If my friend wakes and calls, tell him I won't be long. Oh, and how do I reach the market from here?"

Surak stood up, rubbing his back. "There is a small local market not an arrow's flight away. Go round that bend in the river and through the trees. You'll see it as you get nearer. I'll have firstmeal ready for you when you return, my Lord."

"And a bath?"

"Certainly, if you require it. Perhaps a shave also, sir?"

Kirk grinned, rubbed a hand over his rough chin. "That would be very welcome."

It did not take him long to find the small market and buy the items needed. On his return, he passed a small, neat man on the stairs, carrying a towel. Suspicious for a moment, Kirk soon recognised him for what he was. "Would you tell Surak we are ready to eat now, please. And afterwards, I too would like a shave."

Spock rose to meet him as he entered their room. Clad only in a strategic towel, he nevertheless looked refreshed and elegant, making Kirk even more aware of his own crumpled, stubbly appearance.

"Morning, bondmate. I see you have tasted the joys of Surak's modern bath."

"Indeed. Good morning, Jim. I see you have purchased some clothes. Most commendable. I gave my old ones to Surak for his wife to launder. I could not put them on again... You, obviously, had no such scruples."

Ignoring the gleam in Spock's eye, Kirk put the clothes he had bought on the bed, grinning at Spock. "Hope they fit all right. Sorry about the colour. Not much choice, I'm afraid. Here, these are yours." Carefully, he watched for his bondmate's reaction. The thought of it had kept him smiling all the way back from market.

"Well, of course I am grateful for anything...but purple, Jim? Rather garish. Had they no quieter colours?"

"No, they had not. There's gratitude for you! Anyway, what's wrong with purple? The royal colour - suitable for - " he bowed - " my Lord Spock."

Spock cuffed him gently. "I see you have not bought purple for yourself."

"No, red and yellow stripes. Would you prefer them?"

"Perhaps not...though purple..."

"Spock, if you did not have two already, I would be strongly tempted to give you a thick ear. Stop grumbling and get dressed. Breakfast will be here any minute."

They spent a lazy morning. After Kirk had bathed and been shaved, they sat in the airy room, their colourful clothes adding greatly to its decor, going over, yet again, the proposed speech. Both felt calmly confident now. Spock, fully recovered, eager to do justice to his ancestor's speech; Kirk with the memories of the scene in the Council Chamber, certain the Councillors would listen to Spock next day with a sympathetic ear.

After the mid-day meal, Spock urged Kirk to go for a walk and a swim. His

friend's active nature was beginning to become too much for the restrictions of their room. Kirk had taken to pacing; a sure sign to one who knew him so well that he needed some action, and besides...

Kirk turned the suggestion over in his mind, eventually agreeing. "I'll not be long, Spock, only about an hour or so. Bolt the door behind me."

"Jim, we are among friends here. No need for such precautions."

"Well, perhaps not - but don't go accepting any more drinks from strangers."

Smiling, Spock watched him go, eyes following him as, towel slung over his shoulder, he walked along the river bank and disappeared round the bend.

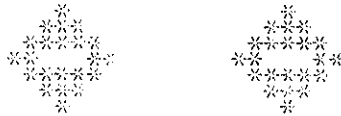
On his morning sortie, Kirk had noticed a swimming pool cut in the river not far from the local market. Unlike the pool in the town's centre, its water was hotter - its being deeper and narrower - making it uncomfortable for him to stay in it for any length of time. He lay for a while by the side of the pool in the shade of a clump of tall trees, watching the local children, used to the heat of the water, enjoying themselves. This must have been where the children's voices had come from yesterday, he realised.

He could not really relax. Did not feel happy at leaving his friend for long, after the events they had experienced since arriving in T'Rena. It was not long before he decided to call it a day, and got up to return to the inn sooner than he had intended.

As he walked back he glanced at the sky, shading his eyes against its brilliance. The same sky, he thought; the same planet. He wondered what his friends were doing now, aboard the Enterprise - his lovely lady. Longing to return, to see them again, swept over him. Not long now, he told himself briskly. A few more days, and he and Spock would be back up there; back home. With a jolt that brought him out in goose-pimples, he realised that it would be over nine hundred years yet before his beloved Enterprise arrived up there in that brilliant alien sky.

Sobered by the thought, the sight of the Split Reed was welcome to him - familiar. Climbing the stairs he felt a pang for his friend, stuck in that room for two days now, almost a prisoner. Throwing off his own depression, he opened their door; ready to provide support and cheer for his patient friend.

No, he thought dully as his eyes scanned the empty room. Oh no - not again...please...not again.



The tall, distinguished-looking Vulcan paced the room, turning again to his motionless, petrified slave.

"If I thought you were lying..." he said softly, eyes raking the young man's face, one hand gripping his shoulders with savagely hard fingers.

Stupid with fear, the slave tried to return his look. "My Lord, I swear to you I know nothing of it. When I left him, Lord Spock was still unconscious."

From the other side of the room, a voice made itself heard. "You did, of course, remember to bolt the door?" it enquired mildly.

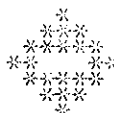
Trembling, the slave turned to the speaker. "Yes, Lord Seker. I swear on my life."

"Your life?" Contemptuously his master released him, flinging him casually to the ground. "Your life will not be worth that much - " he snapped his fingers - "if I found you to be false."

Seker went to him, glanced down at the slave. "You could, of course, 'question' him."

"Do you think I have not already done so? No - he speaks the truth. He would never dare oppose me."

"No matter." Leading him to the other side of the room, out of the wretched slave's hearing, Seker put his head close to his companion's. "I have had the perspicacity not to put all my wine in one pitcher, my friend. I have a reserve plan. Listen..."



Despondantly, Spock limped back to the inn. He did not know how long he had been away, but Jim was sure to be back by now. What his poor friend must be imagining, perhaps even doing, did not bear thinking of. Resolutely he quickened his pace. When at last he came within sight of the Split Reed, he viewed it with mixed feelings. If Jim were back - and he must be - Spock did not look forward to the coming scene.

Sighing, he brushed the purple tunic, so fresh and vivid this morning, now dusty and torn, climbed the narrow stairs and opened their door.

Kirk was standing with his back to the window. After searching all the parts of the inn within reach, he had returned with a sinking heart to their room; had been just about to approach Surak when the door opened and Spock walked in. He had obviously been in a fight. Shocked, incredulous, Kirk stared at him.

"Are you badly hurt? Have you been followed?"

"No. It is not what you think, Jim."

"Did you go out of your own accord?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe it." Kirk's voice was suddenly very soft, his eyes hard as nails. Recognising the danger signals, the Vulcan tried to deflect his friend with a little humour. "You would believe it if you had this," he replied, fingering the ugly bruise on his cheek. "It hurts."

"I hope it does!" Kirk's voice was softer than ever. "I hope it hurts like hell. I would like to give you another to match it. You fool. You bloody fool!"

Spock felt as though Kirk had indeed struck him. He retreated into himself. /Elandir!/ he cried in his mind. /Please...not now, not now.../ He said, "I had expected to be back before you."

"I see; you had this planned then? You wait until I go out, then sneak out yourself?"

The Vulcan drew himself up. "I do not care for your choice of words. I do not 'sneak'."

"And I do not care for your choice of actions, my 'logical' friend. Did you not realise that this could happen? Why do you think we have lain low here for two days?"

"I told you, it is not what you think."

"What is it then? What happened?"

"I...needed to go out. On the way back I was set upon by a bunch of thugs. They incapacitated me with the neck pinch, stole my money and...once they had it, they left me."

"After beating you up."

"No, they attacked from behind. I got these bruises when I fell to the ground."

Kirk found his hands were clenched into fists. Opening them, he looked down at them, noticed they were shaking. Leaving Spock, he went into the bathroom, waited until his hands were steady, then picking up one of the jugs of water there and a small towel, returned to the bedroom, put them on the small table. Slumped wearily in a chair, Spock watched him.

"Come here. I cannot clean you up in that position."

"No need. I can attend to myself."

"Without a mirror? You should see your face... Come and sit on the bed."

Obediently, Spock settled on the bed, looked up at his friend's set face.

"Elandir, I am sorry. I did not intend to cause you further anxiety."

"Shut up. You should not have gone out. You knew you were at risk." Grim-faced, Kirk began to clean the bruises. Feeling Spock's eyes on him, he glared down at the Vulcan. "Did you not stop to think? You of all people - the logical, far-seeing Vulcan. Surely your experience two days ago warned you. What if you had been abducted again?"

Moving slightly to see Kirk's face better, Spock looked contrite. "Jim, I told you it was not linked to that. Besides, you have a saying - 'Lightning never strikes in the same place twice'."

"Shut up. And keep still. How can I fix your face with you leaping around like this?"

Spock sighed, his eyes still on his friend. Kirk's face was as grim, as white as before, but his hands as they cleaned and dried Spock's face were gentle. Careful not to move, he tried again. "I am not much hurt, Jim. A bruise on the cheek will not trouble me."

"And the one on your head? How will that affect your performance tomorrow?"

"It is nothing. Now if I had suffered a blow to the back of my head, that might have proved more serious. Concussion could have resulted. As it is - "

Wiping his hands on the towel, Kirk stared at him. "My God - you have an answer for everything, don't you? Well, here's a question I'd like answered. Why did you go out? - and you'd better have a good answer."

"I have."

"Well?"

Getting up, Spock dug into the pocket of his ragged new tunic, brought out a small package and handed it to Kirk.

"What's this?"

"It is for you; open it."

Kirk opened the package, took out a miniature travelling version of the game they had been forced to leave at Seker's house, glanced silently, enquiringly, at his bondmate.

"I saw them two days back in the town market, but had no money with me at the time. I wanted to get you one for today. You have forgotten, Jim, but today is your birthday."

"My birthday?"

"Yes. Work it out; the number of days we have been here would bring the time to your birthday...back in our own time."

Kirk found his hands were unsteady again. "Oh, Spock..."

Spock smiled. "Happy birthday, Jim."

After Sunfall, they sat and played the game. Both gave it full attention. Neither spoke much. Spock seemed preoccupied, and Kirk was quiet too, regretting his earlier anger. Both were beginning to realise just how shaken they had been by the past few days' experiences. When their second game ended, Spock stretched out his long legs, said he thought he would go to bed. Leaning over the table, Kirk touched the Vulcan's arm briefly. "You are very quiet - is your face hurting? I wish we could have brought T'Kai's medikit."

"Do not worry. It does not bother me."

Kirk could stand it no longer. "Something's bothering you, my friend... Spock, is it my blowing my top before? I'm sorry - it was just..."

"Jim," Spock smiled, "I can take your anger. I know what lies beneath it. I'm only sorry I caused you more worry. I'm a little tired - that is all."

Kirk knew there was more to Spock's preoccupation than mere tiredness. He lay for some time staring into the darkness after Spock was asleep. When he fell into a restless sleep himself, he was not allowed to stay that way for long. Awakened in the middle of the night, it did not take long for him to realise what had wakened him. From across the room, he could hear Spock turning and tossing restlessly, caught a few words in Vulcan, muffled and distressed.

Lighting a candle, he crossed to Spock's bed. The Vulcan seemed to be tossing in the grip of nightmare. Putting a hand out, Kirk prepared to waken him. Before he could do so, Spock turned with a low cry to face him. Still asleep, he began to talk again in Vulcan, his voice low and anguished.

"My brother, oh, my brother!"

"I'm here, Spock. It's all right."

At the sound of his voice, Spock opened his eyes, stared at him dully for a moment in the candlelight, then pulled him close; held him tightly, painfully.

"Oh my dear brother!"

"There now - it's all right." Kirk waited until Spock was calmer, until the fierce grip slackened, then pulled away to look at him. Shocked, he saw that his friend's eyes were full of tears.

"What is it?" he whispered. "What has upset you like this?"

Fully awake now, Spock pulled himself sharply together. "Forgive me, Jim. I was having a bad dream. It is nothing - go back to bed." His voice was calm, steady as usual, but his eyes searched Kirk's face as though he could not see enough of him.

"Some dream, to bring you to tears. Tell me; you made me tell you my nightmare."

Spock looked down, silent for some time. Reaching, he took hold of Kirk's bond-token. Gently he lifted it in his hand until Kirk could feel it tighten at the back of his neck.

"When the thieves attacked me, this afternoon, they took my money...and also the chain that you gave me at our bonding. When I came round, I hoped at first that the chain had merely broken. I looked all round for it - that is why I was so late - but I could not find it. They must have taken it, thinking it to be of great value...and to me, it was...is...of great value."

"Oh, Spock - you should have told me. I would not have been angry with you then. Don't let it upset you. When we get back, I will give you another - cast in white gold from Elyssia, if you wish."

As intended, Spock smiled at the mention of the legendary Elyssian gold. No-one had ever found it, though many had searched over the centuries.

"I would prefer the original, Jim. It was my most precious possession."

Kirk fingered his own chain. "Yes - as is mine to me. Is that what you

were dreaming about?"

"No." The Vulcan's face set, remembering. "Though that must have led to my dream... I was dreaming that I had lost you, Elandir."

"Only a dream, Spock; I'm still here."

"Yes." Spock let out his breath in a soft sigh.

"Spock, the chains are only tokens. Tokens of our bonding, of our closeness. It is the bonding, the affinity, which are important. No-one - nothing - can ever take those away."

"Jim, you told me once I was sensible. Now it is you who are the sensible one."

For a moment the expression in the dark Vulcan eyes took Kirk's speech. He felt his own eyes fill with tears. Bending his head, he took the chain from his own neck.

"Friend of friends, brother of my heart." Speaking in Vulcan, he repeated part of the bonding ceremony. "When you put this round my neck at our bonding, I told myself that I would never, under any circumstances, remove it." Gently he guided it over Spock's head, letting it rest round his bondmate's neck. "Please wear it now for me, until I am able to replace yours."

"Jim - "

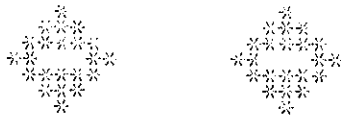
"Please, Spock. That way we can share it. Now that's enough - no arguing. That is an order, Mr. Spock!"

"Yes, Captain." Spock tried to match Kirk's tone, but did not make a very good job of it.

"Spock - " Kirk cast round in his mind for something to lighten his friend's mood. "How come those thugs didn't get my present?"

Spock's eyes lightened. "I had it in my hand, and held on to it. In fact, I remember hitting one of them with it."

"Oh Spock, I can just see you!" Grinning, Kirk imagined the scene. The more he thought about it... Throwing his head back, he laughed in deep appreciation. Watching him, Spock began to see the humour too. That and his friend's amusement proved too much. Sympathetically, he too began to laugh.



Increasing her speed to match the Chief Engineer's quick pace, Christine Chapel smiled up at him. "Please, Scotty. Just one song."

"I havena time for such things. Some of us on this ship are still working."

"Yes, I know how hard you've been working, but this wouldn't be work. You know you like singing...and you have such a fine voice."

Scotty slowed suddenly, causing her to bump into him. "Careful, lassie." He steadied her. "Ye're just trying tae butter me up, aren't ye?"

She smiled at him. "Aye."

McCoy came leisurely round the bend. Stopped amazed at the sight of the Chief Engineer and his head nurse in what appeared to be a clinch.

"My goodness, Scotty; I see what you mean about the women not leaving you alone."

Releasing Christine, Scotty reddened. "Doctor, Nurse Chapel happened to bump into me. We are just arranging for me tae sing a wee piece at Jim's party."



"Oh, yeah? Duet, is it?" He leered at them. "Well, can't stop. Some of us on this ship are still working."

Christine smiled again at Scotty. "You will sing then?"

"Aye, just the one, mind...and keep that tribble c' yours locked away this time."

Nurse Chapel's smile widened, remembering the time the little tribble had run up Scotty's leg while he was singing. "Oh, Mr. Scott, you know she's in no mood for running about at the moment."

He looked at her, a twinkle in his eye. "Have ye thought what the Captain's going to say when he finds out?"

"Yes. He'll say she has to go, but then I'll cry and he'll let me keep her."

Shocked, he stared at her. "Ye'd never play a trick like that on Captain Kirk?"

"No, of course not. What do you take me for? I'd not dream of playing on the Captain's good nature. Besides, I couldn't. He'd soon see through a trick. I'm just being realistic. It won't be a trick. He will say I can't keep her, and I will cry. I shan't be able to help myself. I'll be so upset... See you in the music room." Smiling, she sauntered off. Scotty stared after her. "Women!" he muttered to himself.

"No, not like that. Stick your chest out, hold your head up. Remember you're the Captain. Right, that's better; now start again." Once more Uhura played the introduction to Captain Corcoran's song from H.M.S. Pinafore.

Obligingly, Ensign Blake stuck out his chest, held his head high. "I am the Captain of the Pinafore," he sang in a heart-rendingly pure tenor.

Much to everyone's surprise, when Uhura had suggested doing a couple of scenes from the old but still hilariously funny Gilbert and Sullivan opera, it had been discovered that Nick Blake had a fine voice. Mooching round the music room one day, hoping to try once again to persuade Mr. Scott to play his own ultra-futuristic music at the Captain's party, he had half-heartedly joined the group at the piano, listened as Uhura played the tune to them.

Suddenly, as much to his own surprise as anyone else's, he had burst into song, silencing even that light-hearted group with the beauty of his voice. From then on, Uhura had completely taken him over. Insisted that he take the part of Captain Corcoran -- which she had changed to Captain Kirk.

Now, sighing, Uhura wondered if after all she had done the right thing. The boy seemed excessively stupid. How he had ever managed to get on the Enterprise in the first place amazed her. Still, he could sing... She sighed again.

"No, Nick -- Captain of the Enterprise, not Pinafore. Try to remember you're supposed to be Captain Kirk."

"Doesn't look much like him to me," grinned Sulu, waiting with half a dozen others, to join in the chorus. "Too skinny."

"Listen who's talking," chimed in a yeoman from the science department. "Anyway, the Captain was probably thinner at Nick's age."

"Hmm, maybe, though I should think Captain Kirk has always had to watch his figure." Chekov joined in the conversation.

"Like you, you mean!" grinned Sulu, dodging his friend's ensuing attack.

"Hmm," said the yeoman dreamily. "I'd watch the Captain's figure any time."

"Oh, come on," pleaded Uhura. "We'll be here all night at this rate. Let's try again. Captain and crew. Ready? Right -- one, two -- "

CAPTAIN: 'I am the Captain of the Enterprise.

CREW: And a very good Captain too.

This time, at last, all went well. Although there were a few doubtful moments in the middle. Uhura steered them gallantly through. Looking up as she played the last bar, she saw Christine and Scotty standing at the door, and smiled at them.

"Very good," applauded Christine. "That's really coming along."

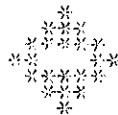
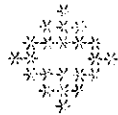
"Yes, it's better now," agreed Uhura. She smiled round at the singers. "Thanks, boys and girls. That should do for tonight. See you all tomorrow, same time, same place." Rummaging through the music, she smiled at Scotty. "We're doing a few pieces from 'Pinafore', Mr. Scott. It's so suitable for making a skit on the Enterprise, and so funny. The Captain will love it. Now I've a song here that is ideal for you. Ah, here it is. If you'll just read through the words, I'll play the tune for you."

Taking the score from Uhura's hands, Scott studied it; his face as he read became more and more baffled. "'I am an Englishman'?" he quoted from the book. "Uhura, ye canna be serious. Me - singing 'I am an Englishman'? My ancestors wouldna rest in their graves!"

"Oh, sorry." She snatched the score from him, made a few rapid alterations. "I thought I'd changed it. The original is 'I am an Englishman'. Of course when you sing it it will be 'I am a Scottish man'. There." She returned the book to him.

"Aye, that's better," he agreed, going through the words again. As he read, his face broke into a grin which grew wider and wider, became a low laugh and eventually a loud guffaw. "Oh, lassie, I wouldna be able tae sing this for laughing."

"Yes you would," she replied firmly. "It's the audience that will be laughing. You'll be as straight faced as...as Mr. Spock. Right - shall we try it with the music?"



Surak bade farewell next morning to his quality guests with genuine regret. He would not accept payment for their stay, saying it had been his privilege, but Spock got round this problem by giving him generous presents for his wife and children.

Soberly dressed now in their original clothes - carefully washed and pressed by Surak's wife, whom they met for the first time as they were leaving - the two friends climbed into the hired carriage and rolled down the narrow road, closely followed, until the main highway was reached, by the local children, to whom a carriage in these parts was something of a novelty.

Both were keyed up. Neither allowed this to show. Each, nevertheless, was fully aware of the other's apprehension. As they entered the city centre, Kirk felt the nerves in his stomach tighten into an uncomfortable knot. He could not remember ever feeling such apprehension over a mission. The next couple of hours would show either success for Lord Spock's long, hard struggle to win over this town...or final failure. He would not get another chance - not for a long time, at any rate...

The carriage drew up at the foot of the steps leading to the Council Chamber. The two got out and paid the driver; began to climb the steps.

A small reception committee was waiting at the top. Palin, the young doctor who had helped them, moved forward to greet them with the formal Vulcan salute,

then smiled. "Good day, gentlemen. You look quite recovered, Lord Spock."

"Yes indeed." Seker, accompanied by the owner of the slave who had led Kirk to Spock, moved towards them. "We are pleased to see you, my Lord. We wondered whether perhaps you had decided not to address us again when you disappeared." He bowed low.

"Lord Seker." Spock inclined his head slightly. "I apologise for leaving your house so abruptly. We have been staying at a riverside hostelry. My friend thought - correctly - that the air near the river would revive me."

"Ah yes, your 'friend'." Turning to Kirk, Seker looked him over insolently, making no attempt to show him any courtesy, then, eyes moving back to Spock, waved an elegant hand at his companion. "I believe you are acquainted with Lord Stonn? He came originally from your home town."

"My Lord." Both Vulcans bowed. Spock's mind raced. Of course it was his ancestor who knew Stonn, not he. The name, though... He had to control his eyebrows, dared not look at Kirk, knew that it must be as much a shock to his friend as to him. Kirk could never have known Stonn's name, or he surely would have told him.

"Well." Moving briskly, Seker managed to usher the three nobles in front of him, excluding Kirk from the group. "Shall we go in? The Councillors are all assembled."

They moved along the corridor to the great polished doors of the Assembly Hall. Just as the attendants moved to open them for the important little group, Spock stopped.

"One moment," he told them quietly. Politely but firmly, he moved back past them until he stood directly in front of Kirk. As if they were alone together, he took Kirk's hand, holding it tightly. "You cannot go with me any further, my friend. But I know your spirit will go with me, closer than breathing." His voice was so low, no-one but Kirk could hear him. Kirk clasped his bondmate's hand in return. He had no words for him, but his look shone in Spock's mind, sustaining him all the way across the crowded hall and onto the lonely platform.

The speech, they knew, was of the highest quality. It rang with reason and integrity. This time there was no hesitation, no interruption. The Councillors too were inclined to be sympathetic. Ashamed of the treatment their guest had received from their city, they were now more than willing to give him a fair hearing.

Both Spock, on the platform, and Kirk, at the back of the hall, felt the sympathy, the shifting attitudes of the Council as they listened to, began to agree with, Lord Spock's impassioned speech.

There were many nods, one or two exclamations of agreement as Spock progressed, and his eyes, as they met Kirk's across the gratifyingly responsive applause at the end, were hopeful, Kirk's warmly congratulatory. As Spock sat down to the subsiding applause, Seker, head of the High Council, rose to inaugurate the vote. Holding up his hands, he waited until all were silent before beginning to speak.

"Gentlemen, I am sure you will all join me in thanking Lord Spock for a most impressive, and convincing, speech." He paused, and suddenly Kirk went cold. Seker did not want Spock to succeed. If they were correct, he was behind Spock's drugging and kidnapping. Yet here he was, warmly congratulating him, relaxed and confident. Surely not the attitude of a disappointed man? Premonition sent shivers up and down his spine. Something was very wrong. Spock felt it too. Catching his eye, Kirk saw the questions, the apprehension, identical to his own, in his bondmate's face. Seker was continuing. Carefully, Kirk and Spock watched and listened.

"As you all know, the correct procedure following Lord Spock's speech is a vote from all present. That is what will shortly take place. First, though..."

there is a rather grave matter which I feel must be settled. I greatly fear, gentlemen, I have to bring something highly unpleasant to your notice. It gives me pain to do so. Indeed, I have battled with myself as to whether, perhaps, I could ignore it, but...I feel I should be failing in my duty as your leader were I to do so."

He certainly had their attention. To a man, his fellow Councillors hung on his words, wondering what on Vulcan he was about to reveal to them.

Stepping to the edge of the platform, Seker's eyes sought and found Kirk's. He beckoned to him. "Mr. Kirk, will you be so good as to come to the front of the hall?"

Hesitating, mind racing, Kirk complied, wondering what the devious Vulcan was up to now. As they drew level, Seker smiled for the benefit of his fellows. Seen only by Kirk, his eyes held such animosity, such insolence, as to cause Kirk's to narrow in preparation for battle. Lord Spock's voice, before they set out for T'Rena, warning them...'His mind is formidable...' Well, he thought, mine's not too bad, and as for Spock's...

Seker had come down from the platform. Now, in full view of the hushed gathering, he turned him to face the audience. "My Lords, when Lord Spock was taken...ill, during the first attempt to deliver his fine speech, you may recall its being mentioned that Mr. Kirk had been Lord Spock's slave. Now to many of you, including myself, the fact that Lord Spock has as his assistant - his right-hand man - a former slave, will add much weight to the arguments in his speech. It is a fine and moving thing to do, is it not, gentlemen, to raise a former slave to such a position...to give hope to all slaves and to add substance to his own integrity of purpose. However...much to my distress, I have discovered that all is not what it appears to be. I hereby lay down a challenge to Lord Spock, that far from setting us an example, as we thought, he is, in fact, totally deceiving us. This man is no free assistant - this man is still a slave."

Turning to the platform, he looked at Spock for the first time. "Your slave, my Lord."

A gasp went round the hall. Seker would not have made such an accusation lightly. To make a statement like this, he must be very sure of his facts.

Spock left the platform, joined the two men at the front of the hall. He threw one brief, supporting glance at Kirk, then met Seker's eyes, shocked at the malice, the triumph, he saw there.

"Lord Seker, you have made a most grave accusation. I do not stoop to deny it. Even if I were to refute what you have said, I could not prove you false. I will not try. You, however, my Lord, are in no such position. Having made such a statement, you are now forced to prove it."

Seker smiled. "Yes," he agreed softly. "I know."

Again Kirk felt his nerves tingle. He tried to move nearer to Spock, but Seker moved between them, gently manoeuvring him nearer to the audience.

"As Lord Spock says, an accusation of deception, of false pretence, such as I have made, demands proof. Well, gentlemen, I am distressed to tell you that I have that proof. It will need the co-operation of this poor ill-used slave here -" he nodded at Kirk - "He will not wish to assist. He shows a touching loyalty, devotion to his master, which I noted when Lord Spock was...'ill'. I think we may persuade him to co-operate, though. Whatever his faults, Lord Spock does not seem to be a man of violence. I do not think he would punish his slave for assisting us.

"But I will digress no further. As we all know, we slave-owners, it is the law of Vulcan that each slave wears round his neck a token of ownership. To remove such a token is, as we know, punishable by death. Now I ask you, gentlemen, which man, being freed from slavery, would still continue to wear such a token? A token of his former slavery? There is only one answer to that. No man would.

Yet this man - " again he touched Kirk's arm - "continues to wear just such a token. His slave's chain, my Lords. He is still a slave. I will ask him now to remove his outer garments, show you himself. When you see it, I think you will agree that that is all the proof we need. Mr. Kirk..."

Kirk was not listening. As Seker's explanation began, he turned to Spock. Incredulous, the Vulcan met his eyes. Slowly they shared a smile which deepened with every word Seker uttered. Amazement and understanding they shared as well; but the smile was uppermost.

Seker could not miss that shared smile. Startled, suddenly very worried, his eyes darted from one to the other of them. "Mr. Kirk?"

Kirk turned the smile on him. "Why, yes, of course I will oblige you, Lord Seker - though I hope you are right, and Lord Spock will not beat me later."

He took off, first his robe, then undoing his belt unfastened his tunic and took that off too, standing before them all clad only in his brief shorts.

The audience's murmur rose to an ugly pitch. All present saw quite plainly that there was no sign of any slave's chain on the man in front of them. Once again Lord Spock had been shamefully insulted.

Unable to believe his eyes, Seker gasped, open-mouthed. "But I saw it!" he stammered. "With my own eyes I saw it in the bath chamber not three days since!"

Kirk smiled in mock sympathy. His turn now to hold up a hand for attention, he faced the angry Councillors. "My Lords, may I explain to you Lord Seker's...er...unfortunate mistake. It is true, he did see a token." He turned to Seker. "Not in the bath chamber, when you walked in on me unannounced, my Lord, but the night before, when all your guests removed their outer robes after dinner."

Walking over to Spock, he smiled into his eyes. Spock returned his smile in total understanding. Again Kirk faced the Councillors. "Lord Spock is not, as you have been told, my master. I am not his slave. I am, in truth, his friend, proud beyond telling in the certain knowledge that he is mine. Gentlemen, it is not I who wears the token of bondage, but my friend. Such is the measure of his devotion to his cause, he now wears my chain and token. Lord Seker was mistaken." Lifting his hand, he gently pulled out his bonding token which Spock was wearing. "It was Lord Spock he saw it on, not me. A mistake I suppose one could make, if one were, perhaps, a little under the influence of your very potent local drink."

Seker was finished. The Councillors, recalling their position, controlled their anger against him. It would not do to denounce him in front of guests, much as they wished to. From now on, though, they would take no orders from him. His days of influence in T'Rena were over. Some of the more astute of them were beginning to wonder if he might have had something to do with Lord Spock's abduction. In all events, none of them would ever trust him with anything important again.

Palin brought matters back to as near normal as possible by proposing that they put this unfortunate incident to one side, and took a vote on the issue in hand. Voting was by means of a show of hands, and it was immediately obvious that this time Spock had won the Council to his proposal. Palin begged Spock to accept the apologies of the whole company, and promised on their behalf to set the machinery into action for abolition of slavery in T'Rena.

Remembering Kirk's request, Spock asked if the slaves could be counted as officially free from that moment, and was granted his request. Most slaves would stay with their masters at least until they had a chance to make other arrangements. Many would stay, as Lord Spock's had, as paid employees. Those, however, who wished would be at liberty to pack their possessions and leave right away.

After the historic meeting was dismissed, Palin asked Spock and Kirk if they would return with him to his house as guests - "For as long as you wish to stay,"

he added warmly.

Thanking him for both of them, Spock told him it could only be for one night; tomorrow they must set out for home. As he said the words, he looked at Kirk. Both knew what he really meant by 'home'.

Seker sat in his study, his world in ruins about him. No fool, he realised his career in T'Rena was over. No-one of any standing would ever trust his judgement again. At best they would think him a bungling fool. At worst...

All round him he could hear the excited slaves preparing to leave. Word had reached them that they were free before he had even got home. None of his slaves held him in regard. All would go. They would not even wish to stay on as free wage earners.

Ah, well. Lifting his head from his hand, he looked around him. No good would come of brooding. Tomorrow he would find replacements for them. He should not have much trouble. His wife's money would see to that. He might even move... Yes, the more he thought of that, the better he liked it. He could move to another city. With his brains and T'Lal's money, he should soon prosper. Life was looking brighter every minute.

The door opened, and a tall dark man came in. Startled, Seker watched as, carefully closing the door, Lord Spock came to stand in front of his desk.

"Lord Spock? I did not expect you to visit me. I sincerely apologise for -"

"Be quiet. I have come for one reason only. You have something of mine. You will now return it to me."

Getting up, Seker moved round the desk. "I do not know what you mean."

"Then I must remind you. You have the chain and token which your hired thugs took from me yesterday."

"You have your chain. It is round your neck - we all know that."

Spock sighed. "Seker, I almost feel regret for you. All your careful plans come to nothing. You are surely finished in this town. I would not wish to add to your misery by occasioning you physical injury. This one -" he pulled out Kirk's token - "you will not be too surprised to find belongs to my friend; the one you noticed when you paid him your unwelcome visit."

"Your friend - pah! Your slave, you mean. Oh, you are very clever, Spock, you and your 'friend'. But you don't fool me. I was not imagining things. I saw his slave's chain as you say. That gave me the whole idea. God knows why you wear one also. Unless it is because in truth he gave it to you. Yes - that's it, isn't it? God, what a fool I've been. You are his slave too, aren't you? Do you get my meaning, Spock?" He sneered at Spock. "What's it like, Spock, to have a slave for a lover? Rather degrading, I should think. Still, I suppose one can understand you, even if he is a slave. He certainly has his attractions - both of face and body."

Spock's backhanded blow rocked him on his feet. With one hand he clutched the desk behind him, steadying himself. The other he lifted to his rapidly swelling mouth, wiped away a trickle of blood. Warily, he watched the other's furious eyes.

"That is for all the many and varied insults you have paid my friend since we arrived in your city. I will not waste any more time with you." He held out his hand. "You will give me my chain - now."

Edging round his desk, Seker fumbled in one of the drawers. Bringing out Spock's bonding token he thrust it across the desk into the other's outstretched hand.

"There - take it and get out. I hope I never see either you or your friend again."

When he was alone again he felt round his mouth with careful fingers. Blasted do-gooder, he thought. Never mind. Tomorrow he would begin to fashion a new life. Now T'Lette might be a good place to move to. He had relatives there...

The bright Vulcan sun had not risen far above the horizon when they left T'Rena next day. Neither felt anything but relief that, their mission accomplished, they could turn their backs on this city for ever. True, they had found kindness here, and help; from Doctor Palin and the good-natured Surak; but the memories of both, as they looked back, were predominantly unpleasant.

Each sat quietly, thinking his own thoughts as Lord Spock's elegant carriage swayed along the main South route from the city, driven this time by a different hand. Their original driver had asked Spock - Lord Spock as he thought - if he could stay in T'Rena. It appeared that in their absence he had met a local girl, and, having little to do, had spent all his time with her. He had become more involved than he had at first intended, and now was reluctant to leave. Informing Spock that he could easily find work in the town, and had a mind to marry the girl and settle down. He requested that Spock release him from his employment.

Remembering Kirk's promise to Stonn's slave, Spock readily agreed, and with a little manoeuvring the former slave was installed in his place. It was he who now drove their carriage. He was good with horses - before his family had fallen on hard times, his father had owned a farm. Also, he knew the homewards route well; before settling in T'Rena, Stonn had visited the town often.

Sitting high up on the driver's seat, he felt like a man reborn. Kirk and Spock heard his cheerful whistling floating in to them through the open windows. Smiling, Kirk jerked his head in the direction of the whistling. "Someone's happy. Mind you, it must be a tremendous relief to escape from that unspeakable Stonn...; Spock, that name; do you think he is the ancestor of...er...the Stonn you...er... we..."

Spock returned the embarrassed glance calmly. "Possibly. It is not a common name, and the family has been around these parts for a long time."

"Yet he looks nothing like the Stonn you...er... Whereas you and Lord Spock are like twins."

"True. Well, we shall never know. You need not be embarrassed, Jim. I am not."

"No." Kirk smiled at him. "A lot of water, eh, Spock?" Both sat quietly again, thinking.

"Spock?"

"Yes."

"Soker must have seen your chain that first evening, when you all took your robes off."

"Yes, I expect he did."

"Um. He must have wondered why you wore it. Perhaps he thought it a symbol of your campaign - Lord Spock's campaign."

"Possibly."

"Then next morning, when he walked in on me, he would have seen mine, and that gave him the idea for his plan." Kirk spoke slowly, thinking aloud. "I wonder why he came to the bath chamber that morning."

"Perhaps to offer you a bribe to sabotage my speech."

"Yes, I thought of that. When he saw my token, he realised he need not bother, he could work on that instead." He laughed. "Lucky for him he didn't try to bribe me. He'd have ended up in the bath - fully clothed."

Spock did not smile. Looking at him thoughtfully, Kirk continued. "Quite fortunate, really, that you went out that day at the inn. That incident after the speech confirmed the Councillors in your support. I'm sorry I called you a fool."

"As I remember, Jim, you called me a 'bloody fool'."

"Don't look so aggrieved. Anyway, I apologised afterwards. I wonder what Seker will do now, Spock? He cannot have much influence with the Council after that little episode."

Turning from looking through the window, Spock came to sit beside him. "Jim, would you mind if we did not discuss Seker any further? And...do you think we could have a game?"

Kirk glanced quickly at him. "Yes, of course, Spock." Taking out the miniature game, he set it on the seat between them. As he did so, he wondered again if his friend had had some sort of showdown with Seker after the speech. He had been absent for some time shortly after arriving at Palin's house; had returned, looking grim but satisfied. Also he had been surrounded by a 'don't question me now' aura. There were so few times that Spock wore that look in his presence that when he did, Kirk respected it utterly, knowing that his bondmate would tell him, if he so wished, in his own good time.

They played in silence for some time, then, moving one of the tiny pieces, Kirk spoke again. "We won't be able to stay long when we get back to Lord Spock's house, will we?"

"No, I'm afraid not. My abduction, and subsequent postponement of the speech, has pushed us to our limits."

Kirk sighed. "Yes, I know. Could we risk staying one night?"

"Not really, t'hy'la. I know McCoy has not sent our arranged emergency call, but we cannot be absolutely certain it would work. Better to return as soon as possible."

"Yes. You are right, of course."

Spock watched him, his face troubled. Hesitantly, he approached the subject which had been troubling him ever since the night they had discovered the cause of Kirk's nightmare. "Jim, there is something we must discuss."

Kirk understood him at once. "Yes, I suppose there is."

"If we fail to settle this, you will never again be able to visit my parents' house with any peace of mind."

Moving restlessly, Kirk's gaze went through the window to the distant hills, returned reluctantly to Spock. "Very well. You must destroy the co-ordinates once we are back home. I understand, Spock."

"That too. But Jim, we also have to sever the link between you and my kinsman. Otherwise you could still pick up his troubles, yet be unable to do anything about them." He looked with sympathy at his friend. "I am sorry, Jim. I know you are fond of him and his family."

Looking into the concerned brown eyes, Kirk was overwhelmed with sudden guilt. "Spock, it is I who am sorry. Through me, you have risked your life, been subjected to all sorts of ordeals, when you should have been spending a relaxing holiday on your home planet. Don't worry - I know you are right. Whatever you say, I'll go along with it."

"It will be quite simple. We will establish a link between the three of us, then I will close down the link joining the two of you."

"If you say it will be simple, Spock, I will take your word for it. Even after all these years your powerful mind still amazes me."

"You are not lacking in telepathic powers yourself, Jim. If you developed

them, you could be quite formidable."

"Formidable? Not to you, my friend, surely?"

"Not to me, Elandir...never to me."

They had carefully arranged the details of their arrival. Sending the driver with the carriage to the coach-house, Kirk had arranged to meet with Lord Spock. Spock was to leave the carriage quietly, unknown to the driver, and make his way to the sunken garden, there to wait until Kirk came to bring him to the house when the way was safe.

As he watched the carriage disappear round the side of the house, Kirk saw Saleek come through the big main door to greet him, turned to him with a smile.

"Welcome again, Kirk. Lord Spock is expecting you. He thought you would be back three days since. He is in his study. Did you have a good trip? Who is the new driver? What happened to the other one?"

Wondering what explanation Lord Spock had made to his steward, Kirk again parried the questions Saleek threw at him. It was with a sense of relief that he at last managed to escape and was free to go to report to 'Spock'.

Obviously, Lord Spock had become aware of their arrival, for Kirk met him in the corridor, on his way to meet him. Drawing him into the study, he carefully closed the doors, then took his hands, holding them in a firm clasp. "Jim, it is good to see you again. You look thinner. Has all gone well with you?"

Once again Kirk marvelled at the likeness between the two Spocks. It was as though his own friend, whom he had just left at the outskirts of the town, had suddenly materialised in front of him. He returned the hand clasp warmly. "Good to see you, too, my Lord. All is well... Spock, your speech was brilliant! T'Rena is now in the process of freeing all its slaves."

"You were successful? I hardly dared to ask. I cannot tell you how grateful I am... To win over T'Rena is a very important step."

"Well, it is yours now, my Lord. There is quite a tale attached, but first, tell me, how are things with you? How is Serak, and Lady T'Kai?"

"They are well." The Vulcan spoke softly. "Sehlak diagnosed a rare eye disease, most unusual in this part of Vulcan. Fortunately it was taken in time, and he was able to give the boy a course of treatment which will put an end to the trouble. Already he is greatly improved. And T'Kai..." His voice flattened, and Kirk could see that he could hardly speak for pride. "T'Kai gave birth to our daughter two days after you left...now you return with your wonderful news... It seems our fortunes have been completely reversed since last we met... But I forget myself. Where is your friend? I guessed that you would part company before entering the house."

While Kirk explained, Lord Spock set arrangements into action for them to join together for the Sunfall meal in his study as they had done the night before their departure for T'Rena. T'Kai did not join them for the meal. Though well, she was still convalescing after the birth of her child. It had been arranged that they would go to visit her in her rooms, after the meal.

During their meal, the four exchanged all the news, all the events which each had encountered since the last time they were gathered here. Lord Spock was deeply troubled when he heard of the trials the two travellers had shared in T'Rena.

"If I had known what would befall you, I would never have suggested your going," he told them. "I knew Seker was very clever, and had heard that he was devious, but had no knowledge that he was so corrupt. It is in my mind that I owe you both far more than I ever dreamed."

"All is well, my Lord," replied Spock. "We are both glad that our mission

proved successful, and that your family's fortunes are so much improved."

As the meal was ending, Spock explained to his kinsman the necessity of their returning to their own time without delay. Though saddened by the news that they were to leave almost as soon as they had arrived, he understood the urgency. "Do you have time to pay a short visit to T'Kai?" he begged. "She will be heartbroken if you leave without seeing our daughter."

Kirk had been rather quiet for some time. At mention of T'Kai, he got up. "We wouldn't dream of leaving without seeing them," he told Lord Spock. "First, though, will you excuse me; I have just remembered something I left in my room."

Walking quickly through the corridors, he arrived at 'Spock's' bedroom. Going through the archway to the small adjoining room where he had slept as Lord Spock's slave, he opened the tall cupboard, felt in the darkness for the small box he had left there. Relieved, his fingers encountered its edge, and he took it out, looked a while at the perfectly preserved flower in the crystal, then, sighing, put it in his pocket, returned to join the others.

T'Kai's welcome was as warm and joyful as her husband's had been. She was sad to hear that they were to leave almost at once, but when mention was made of the baby, her face relaxed as though it were impossible for her to be sad about anything for long at this time.

"Come and see her. She is sleeping now." Quietly she led them over to a crib elaborately decorated with ruffles of creamy lace.

The two strong men looked down awkwardly, shyly, at the sleeping child. "Why, she's beautiful!" exclaimed Kirk in some surprise.

"Of course she is beautiful. She is like her mother." To Kirk's amazement, Spock bowed to T'Kai, who blushed a little.

There was a small silence. "What is her name to be?" asked Spock. T'Kai and her husband exchanged glances. T'Kai burst out laughing. "That is rather a sore point," she replied. "Spock wishes her to be called T'Pau after his mother, but I would rather have something more modern."

"My dear, T'Pau is a name of some honour. There has been a T'Pau in each generation since time out of mind."

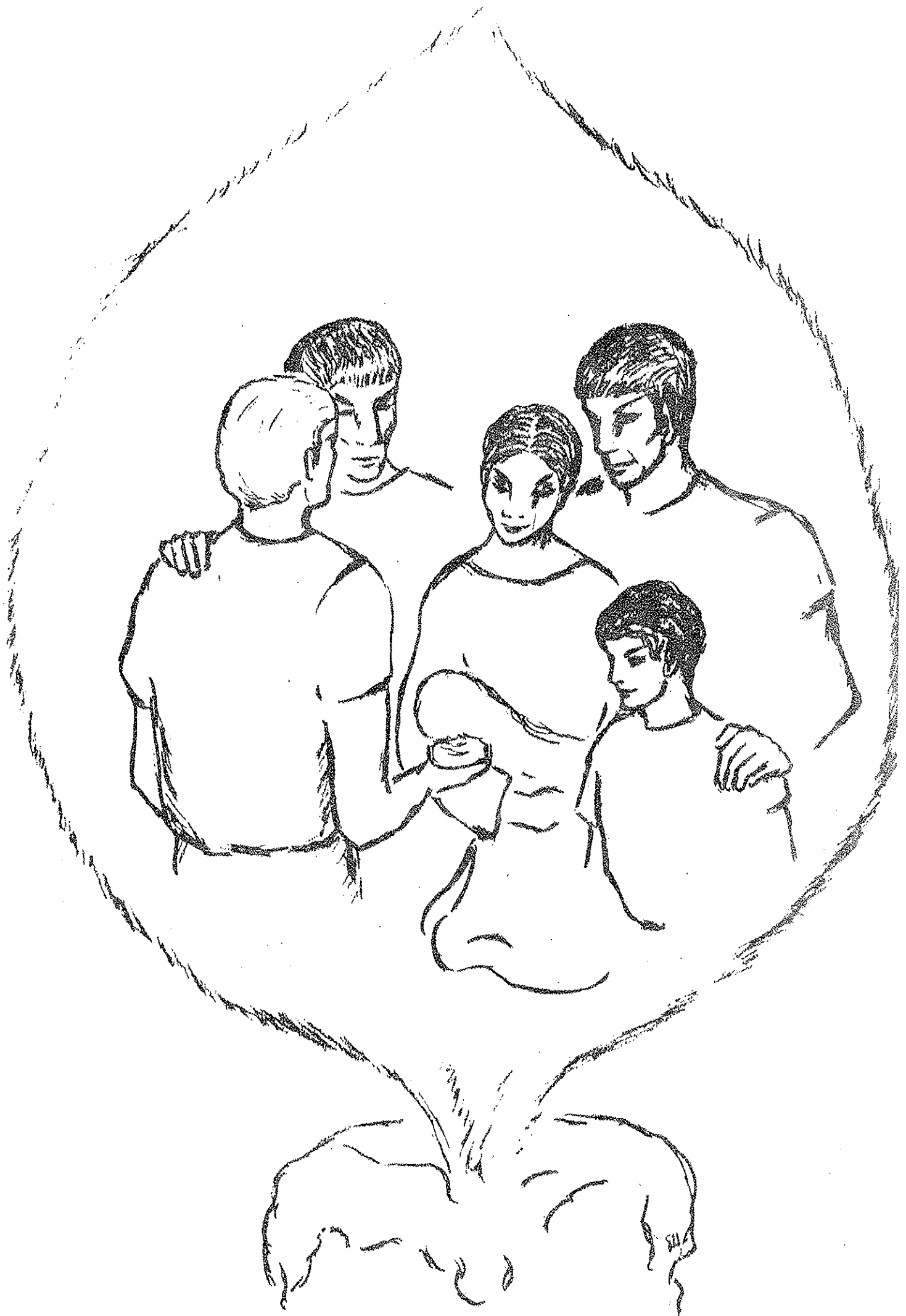
"Then perhaps it is time for a change." Seeing his hurt expression, she took his hand. "I am only joking. Of course she shall be T'Pau, but I would like her to have another name too, her own name, not one that everyone before her has shared. She is special." Pending, she lifted the sleeping child into her arms. "A pretty name...for a pretty girl. My Lord - " she turned to Spock - "what sort of names do girls have in your time? What is your mother's name?"

To Kirk's amusement, Spock looked completely stumped. "Madame..." Helplessly his eyes sought Kirk's assistance. Kirk raised an unhelpful eyebrow, was rewarded with a baleful glare. "Madame, I do not know many names. T'Pau is still a name of great honour in the family. Perhaps you should just call her that. My mother's name is Amanda, but that is hardly suitable for a Vulcan child. My mother is a Human," he explained.

"Really? How interesting...like Jim. Amanda... Now that is a very pretty name. Do you not think so, Spock?"

"Yes, yes, I suppose so." Like his descendant, he looked as though it was much the same as any other name to him. Then he smiled down at her, put his arm tenderly round his wife and child. "I can see you have set your heart on it, so I shall just have to accustom myself to it... T'Kai, we must not delay our friends any longer. We must bid them farewell."

Serek - the old Serek now, that Kirk remembered - shook hands with them. Approaching T'Kai and the baby again, Kirk took the little box from his pocket.



"T'Kai, all babies should have a gift from visitors. Spock and I have a present for your baby." Glancing at Spock, who smiled in agreement. "A present for T'Pau Amanda." Opening the box, he revealed the delicate Saris moonflower. "It is from a place many light years from here, but it was old long before your time."

The small company gathered round to look with wonder at the flower. The candles flickered in their holders. There was no sound at all in the room. The faces of the five friends from the two far distant time lines were gentle, reflective. The small room was filled with a moment of shared, timeless closeness.

"It is beautiful." T'Kai's voice was soft through her tears. "She will treasure it always, T'Pau Amanda."

Taking her hand, Kirk smiled his farewell, but Spock bent and kissed T'Kai, then the baby, before following his bondmate from the room and from the house of his ancestors for ever.

They were joined in the sunken garden by Lord Spock. The night was dark, but the stars lit the jets from the fountain, giving the scene a fairy-like quality.

Both Spocks faced each other. "You understand we will never return, my Lord."

"Yes. I realise Jim cannot continue to come to our aid, as he has the habit of doing."

"You know, then, what we must do?"

"Yes, I think so. I do not know how you will do it, but you seem to have great powers, kinsman."

"The power of mind-linking was not developed in your time, my Lord, though the ability is in your own mind also. If you will permit?...Jim - " Drawing them close, he placed a hand on each of their faces. Immediately, he was once more aware of the strength of mind of his forefather. Once again was shaken by its power. Feeling it also, Kirk smiled to himself. It did not shake or startle him; he welcomed it with love. He recognised it for what it was - identical in almost every detail to the well-known, well-loved mind of his dear bondmate.

Gently, Spock found the link between Kirk and Lord Spock. Very carefully, he ended it. Sighing, he withdrew from their minds and brought his hands from their faces.

"It is done?"

"Yes, my Lord. Did it cause you pain?"

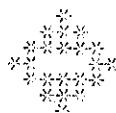
"Great sadness for a moment."

"I am sorry."

"No. It had to be done." Turning, he put his hands on Kirk's shoulders. "My thoughts will no longer trouble you, my friend. I bid you farewell. The day will not come that I do not think of you... It is in my heart to wish I could travel with you; to visit your world, as you have visited ours."

"You would not wish to leave your family and your life, Spock."

"No, of course not. I am being foolish. Live long, and prosper, my dear friend...my dear friends."



There were still flowers giving off sweet scents; still the fountain playing, sending its spikes of clear water high into the air, but the hedges were replaced by walls, the cobbled paving by ceramic tiles and deep rugs.

As when they had changed before, they stood silently while their minds caught up with their bodies, then turned to each other, relief evident in both pairs of eyes.

Before they could speak, they heard a light step in the hallway. The door opened and Amanda came quickly down the steps - no longer fashioned from old red stone but from polished wood covered in soft honey shaded carpet.

"Goodness! Where have you two come from?" She stopped in surprise. "I didn't see you come home. How long have you been here?"

Stepping forward, Spock kissed her. "We have only just arrived, mother... I am afraid we rather lost track of time while we were away. Could you...that is ...would you please tell us what day this is?"

She looked them both over, eyebrows raised. "Spock, my dear," she said after a long pause, "I am not yet into my dotage. If you want to know the date, you have only to ask. No need to try to fool me into thinking you have lost track of time. You have only been away four days. I don't think, somehow, that either of you would hold the positions in Starfleet that you do if you were unable to keep track of four days."

Looking at his mother's amused face, Spock had the grace to blush a little. Kirk grinned, bent to kiss her also. "You are too sharp for him, Amanda. Four days, hmmm?" Their relief was so evident that she scrutinised them again, wondering what they had been up to this time.

"I suppose you've been doing something dangerous again? Interfering with things best left alone? Well, I know better than to question you." Smiling warmly she linked her arms, each with one of theirs, and led them up the stairs. "Jim, dear, how fortunate that you are returned in time for your birthday...tomorrow, in case you have lost track of time again. We have had constant calls from the Enterprise asking us to make sure you return to the ship tomorrow, at the latest - so off you'll be going again... Never mind, we have all of today left - you might like to know it is only 1000 hours - we can make the most of that."

In the event, they did not leave until after the mid-day meal on Kirk's birthday. After contacting the Enterprise and reassuring Dr. McCoy that all was well, being assured by him that the ship had functioned perfectly in their absence, they spent a relaxing day, doing nothing much at all, and a most pleasant evening with Spock's parents.

Towards the end of the evening, Sarek raised an enquiring eyebrow at his wife who, nodding slightly, left the room for a short time. When she returned, she was carrying a small parcel wrapped in exotic red and black striped paper. Going to where Kirk was sitting, she smiled down at him.

"I know it is not your birthday until tomorrow, but Sarek has to leave early in the morning, and in any case, I cannot wait much longer to give this to you. As soon as I saw it, knowing your love of antiques, I knew it would be just the thing for your birthday." She embraced him, as he stood up to join her. "Happy birthday, Jim, from both of us."

"Why, thank you." Curiously, he undid the parcel, took out a small box, and opened its lid.

The room swam around him. He saw again the furnishings and occupants of another room, another time. The light changed, blurred from its muted present to the brilliant yet mysterious light given by dozens of red candles. He looked down at the silver flower set in its crystal surround.

He was aware of voices, but they were the voices of people long dead. Tears stung his eyes and he raised a hand to brush them away. When his eyes cleared, they looked once more into the eyes of his own time; the room was as it should be, and he felt the strong arm of his friend round his shoulders, giving all sorts of support.

Still he could not speak. Turning the piece of crystal in his hands, he noticed markings scratched underneath. Peering closer, he made out two words written in a round, unformed, childish hand...T'Pau Amanda.

The room swam again through his tears. Still speechless, he turned to Spock.

Concerned, Amanda laid her hand on his arm. "Jim. What is the matter?"

Sarek's face, calm but showing concern, looked into his. At last he found his voice. "I'm so sorry, please forgive me. It is just... Oh, it reminded me of something long ago."

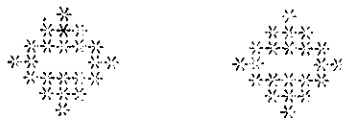
Spock took the box from Kirk's fingers. "Mother - where did you get this?"

"Spock!" Amanda laughed shakily, glad to release some of the tension. "You have no manners. Now I am forced to tell Jim that I did not buy his present, and he will think me mean. I found it one day while you were away, when I was sorting through the boxes in the store room. Your father said it belonged to his grandmother, but that it has been in the family for much longer than that."

"Yes. For nine hundred years."

"How can you know that, Spock?" Sarek looked curious. "Your great grandmother was dead before your birth, and it has lain in the store room ever since her death."

Spock lifted an eyebrow at Kirk, who nodded in return. "Sit down, mother, father. Jim and I will tell you how I know. First, perhaps we could have some more coffee? It is quite a long story..."



Kirk was looking forward to returning to his ship on his birthday. He imagined the welcome that would be his from his loyal, affectionate crew.

He was a little surprised as they stepped down from the transporter platform, to find no-one there except the operator on duty, but soon forgot his disappointment when he saw McCoy's back ahead of them as they rounded a bend in the curving corridor.

"Hi, Bones!" he called. "We're back!"

The doctor turned slowly. "Hello, there. You made it then? Scotty will be relieved. He was beginning to think he would have to take the ship to Anthyga himself." Then his face lit up. "My, but it's good to see you!" Professional eyes raked them over, noting all sorts of details other eyes would have missed. "Spock, you're looking thinner! I wouldn't have thought it possible, but you do. What have you been up to? Hmmmm, you're thinner too, Jim. Won't hurt you though." Peering closer, he became concerned. "You look older, Jim..."

Kirk grinned. "Well, it is my birthday!"

"So it is. Trust you to get back for that."

"I heard you wanted me to, Bones."

"Oh did you? Well now, you don't want to believe everything you hear." His face lit suddenly. Catching hold of Kirk's arms, he swung him round. "You wait, Jim. See what we've got on today's list. Oh, boy - you should just see what we've got cooked up for you!"

'Cooked up' was the right word. Christine and Uhura, despite all their precautions, had been horrified when taking their cake out of Scotty's dilithium unit, to find it had sunk in the middle. Neither had got where she had by faint-heartedness, though. After scooping out the soggy middle, they iced the cake in gold, gave it silver spray-icing decorations, and labelled it 'a black hole birthday cake'.

It was a great success. So was the rest of the party. Touched by everyone's efforts at taking over his own original idea, Kirk thoroughly enjoyed himself.

He was certainly a rewarding person to entertain, laughing enormously at the presentation of 'U.S.S. Enterprise' and all the other diversions arranged for his benefit.

Catching him helping himself to another piece of black hole cake, McCoy rapped his fingers with a bundle of cheese straws. "It's Spock who should be fattening himself up - not you, birthday boy."

Grinning, Kirk turned to his second-in-command. "Well, he can have this if he wants."

"I think not, thank you." Spock averted his eyes a little. "I have already eaten more than is wise. Not --" he added hastily, noting Uhura and Christine standing right behind him - "that I have found it anything but excellent. The cake in particular was most --"

Christine eyed him suspiciously, stroking the tribble she was carrying. "Have you had a piece of our cake, Mr. Spock?" she asked bluntly.

"Well, no - not yet. It certainly looks..." He fought desperately for some compromise between truth and tact... "most impressive!" was the best he could manage.

More to help Spock than anything else, Kirk turned to Christine, stroking one finger over the tribble. "Wasn't there something you were going to tell me about this little creature?" he enquired.

McCoy and his chief nurse eyed each other in questioning silence. As it became obvious that Christine was not going to oblige, the doctor took a deep breath. "Well, Jim...I'm afraid she had us all fooled."

"She? What do you mean, 'she'? How do you know it's a 'she'? It was an 'it' last time I heard... I know - it's produced, hasn't it? It - I mean she - has given birth. Oh my God, I knew this would happen one day! Well, it - she - will have to go. I'm not having these creatures all over my ship again." Rounding on Nurse Chapel to deliver a few sharp words, he saw she was in tears. "Oh, come on, Christine! Don't cry on my birthday!" His words had no effect, seemed in fact to make her worse. Desperately he looked round at Spock...McCoy...Scotty...for support; found none. Looked back into Christine's blue eyes swimming with tears. "Well, don't cry. Perhaps we can find a way to keep her. But not her family!" he added hastily as Christine's tears vanished as quickly as they had appeared. "I absolutely draw the line at a tribble nursery in sickbay."

"Perhaps we could find homes for them on Anthyga," suggested Spock. "If there were not too many of them," he added hastily, noting Kirk's expression.

Some bondmate you are, thought Kirk, glaring at him. He had long suspected Spock of forming a secret attachment to this furry nuisance. "Well, never mind, we'll just wait and see. I'm sure we can come up with some solution." Patting Christine's arm, he was relieved to see her tears had dried. "That's right, dry your eyes. Here - have a piece of cake."

Christine looked at Scotty. Scotty looked at Christine. She shrugged slightly, and smiled at him.

"Women!" he muttered beneath his breath. She was not sure whether he referred to her, or to the tribble...or both.

Sitting alone in his quarters very late that evening, Kirk leaned back in his comfortable chair. Eyes closed, happy to be back on his beloved Enterprise, his mind went over the events of the last few days.

Half asleep, he was jerked back to wakefulness by the buzzer sounding at his door. Flipping the switch on his viewer, he saw that it was Spock. Surprised that he had not just walked in, he told him to do just that.

"Since when have I required you to knock?" he asked, sitting up.

"I didn't knock, I buzzed," replied Spock, maddeningly. "I thought you might have retired for the night, Jim. If you had not answered, I would not have come in. I have something for you, and did not really want to delay giving it to you any longer."

"Spock," Kirk smiled. "You gave me my birthday present on Vulcan, nine hundred years ago. Sit down." He nodded to the other chair by his desk; ignoring the chair, the Vulcan settled himself on the floor beside Kirk's chair. Leaning against it, he bent his long legs, turned his head to look up at his friend.

"This is not a birthday present, Jim." Feeling in the pocket of his long Vulcan robe, he took out his bonding chain, weighed it in the palm of his hand. Kirk leaned over his shoulder.

"So you did go to see Seker that day, after we had gone to Palin's house? I wondered, but did not like to ask you. You had rather an unapproachable look about you when you returned."

"T'hy'la! Unapproachable? To you?"

"Oh, I knew that if I had asked, you would have told me. You seemed a little withdrawn, that's all. Besides - " he grinned - "I thought you might beat me if I wasn't careful, after I had co-operated with Seker. I know he assured me you would not, but he doesn't know you as I do."

Spock smiled at Kirk's joke. "It was not you I wished to chastise, Jim."

"Spock, do you mean... So that's why you looked so grim - and satisfied! Did he survive your attack?"

"I only struck him once...and then only because he dared to insult you - yet again. I had swallowed too many such insults. That time, I could not let it pass."

"What did he say?"

Spock turned and looked up at him for a long time. Kirk returned the gentle gaze with affection. At last Spock looked away and got to his feet. "Never mind," he said. "Come, Elandir; let me give you this."

"But that is yours, Spock. You are wearing mine."

"Would you mind if I kept it, and you wear this one...mine? Dear Jim, after you gave me yours that night at the inn, I am reluctant to part with it. If we wear each other's, I think they will mean even more than they did originally."

"Yes." Kirk's voice was soft. "You are right." Leaving his chair, he stood in front of Spock, bent his head a little as his bondmate carefully put the chain round his neck.

"Friend of friends, brother of my heart..." Spock's voice was low, speaking the words, not in their original Vulcan but in English - Jim's language. "Wear this for me, as a token of our bonding. The outward sign of our deep inner commitment."

Both stood silently for a while, then moved together. Kirk sat back in his chair, Spock settled once more on the floor beside him. Neither spoke for some time, then Spock said quietly, "There is something else that we must do."

Opening his robe, he took out the belt with the built-in mini-transporter from his waist. "I could not do it without your permission. Do you agree that I destroy these co-ordinates now?"

Putting a hand on Spock's shoulder, Kirk smiled down into the concerned eyes. "Yes, my friend. I agree."

It was done in a second. Taking the little transporter, Spock wiped it clear of all trace of the co-ordinates from his ancestor's time, then slipped it back round his waist. Leaning against Kirk's chair, he lifted his hand to cover Kirk's.

"It is done, t'hy'la. There is no going back now."

"No." Kirk turned his hand beneath Spock's, to clasp it. "No going back. Now we can only go forward; forward, together."

