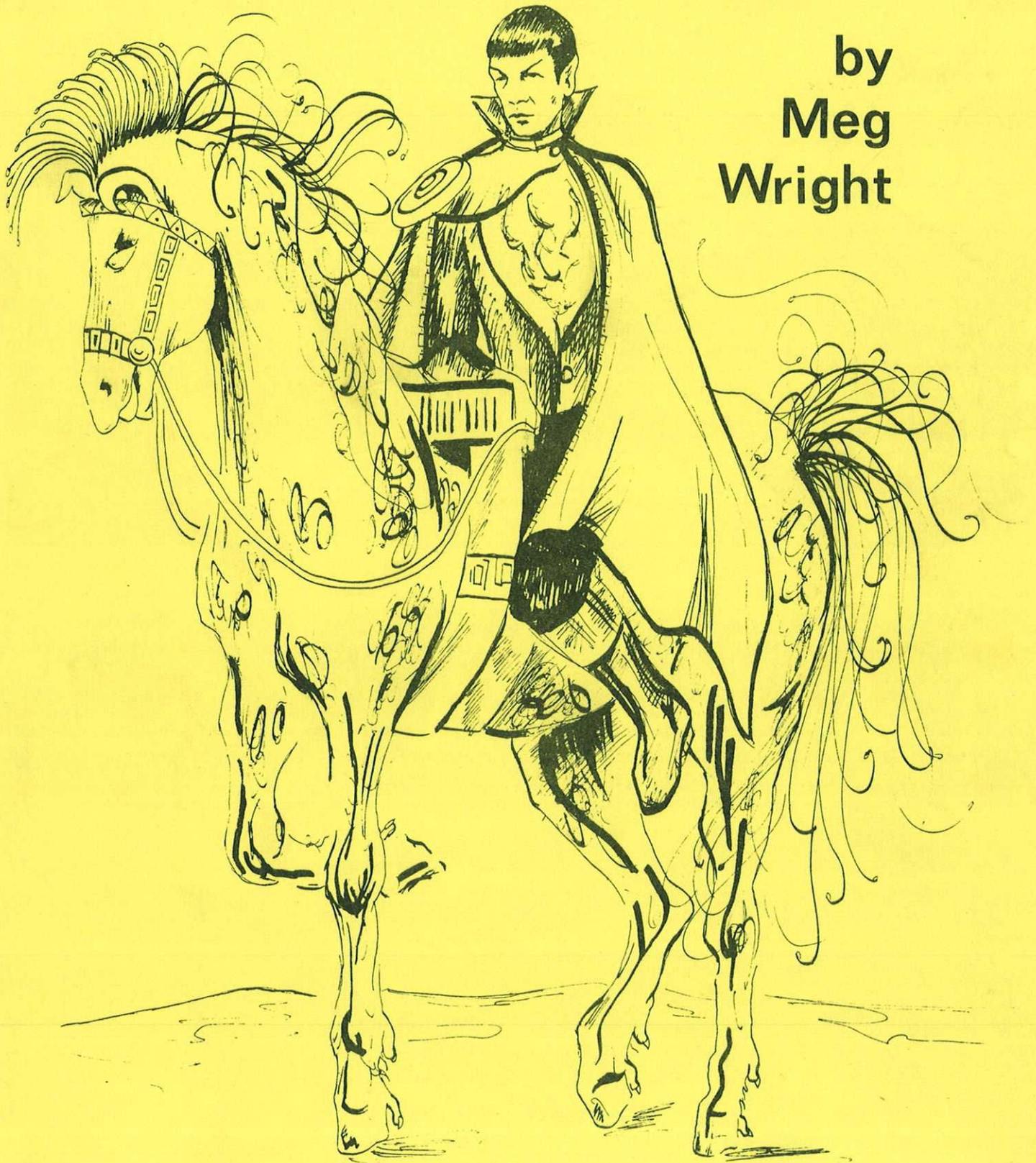


# AS NEW WINE

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A new friend is as new wine - Ecclesiasticus IX, 10

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AS NEW WINE

James T. Kirk, just three months into his first deep-space mission as Captain of the Enterprise, subsided into the empty chair and crossed his legs, studying the bent head behind the desk. Torven did not look up from the spool he was reading and Kirk wondered idly whether his lack of common courtesy was intended to add a seeming urgency to the job on hand, or whether he considered himself above normal politeness. Either way Kirk was not impressed. Eventually the Commander looked up.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Captain Kirk. You know how it is." The conventional smile did not touch his eyes and Kirk remained unresponsive. Torven allowed the smile to fade and went on. "I asked you to report here personally because I have some orders for you which you may find rather annoying, but I'm afraid the Vulcan Council has issued a request in this matter, and we have no option but to accede to it."

Kirk raised an eyebrow, partly at the tone of petulance and partly in curiosity, but he made no comment. Torven fiddled with the spools in front of him, rearranging them in linear patterns.

"They have requested your First Officer be seconded to preliminary survey work for a month of two. A scout has recently discovered a vulcanoid race on a planet in the Beta Pegasi system and they want it checked out. Why they can't wait until one of their own teams is in the quadrant I don't know, but they insist that Lt. Commander Spock carries out the work."

"Vulcanoids?" Kirk was interested. "That's unusual."

"The first to be found," Torven agreed. "Apart from the rumours about the Romulans, of course, but those have yet to be substantiated."

"Where do we collect the other half of the team?" Kirk asked. "Is he here at the Station?"

Torven shook his head. "There is no other Vulcan in the quadrant at this time and they want the job done right away."

"But there are always two in a survey team," Kirk said, startled. "They can't be serious about wanting Spock to do this alone?"

"No-one has specifically ordered that he do the job alone, Captain, but as I said, there's no other Vulcan in the area, and you can't order a Human to go with him."

"Why not? Humans and Vulcans are sufficiently alike provided the ears are covered. Spock has been on many humanoid planets and remained undetected."

Torven made a grimace of distaste. "I wasn't thinking of physical appearance problems, there wouldn't be much difficulty there, but who in hell wants to spend two months working that close to a Vulcan?"

Kirk had met this kind of outlook before. He never had liked it. "Plenty of my crew would be glad of the opportunity to undertake this survey," he said coldly. "With Mr. Spock - or any other Vulcan you care to name."

"From what I hear he's more than capable of doing the work alone," Torven sneered. "All the reports indicate he's quite a wonder boy."

"That's not the point." Kirk refused the bait. "Survey teams always work in pairs. I'm not prepared to ask my First Officer to undertake this alone. I insist he is accompanied."

"There are no other ships at this station at the present time and you've no-one on board the Enterprise qualified to go." Torven was clearly angry. "Survey work requires Command Psycho Training and only the senior officers on Starship have that."

Kirk was about to give it as his opinion that any of the senior officers

would offer to accompany Spock when he caught a malicious gleam in the Commander's eye. What was it Torven thought he had missed? After brief consideration he realised that Sulu and Uhura were physically unsuited, equally Patterson the present Security Chief was Jamaican, and that Piper, although a possible candidate, for the Chief Surgeon of a Starship was necessarily put through psycho-training, was leaving them at the end of another month and was probably too old for the job anyway. That left Scott and himself. Since he couldn't very well suggest leaving the Enterprise with neither Captain nor First Officer, he felt confident in suggesting Scotty as Spock's companion. He had, after all, known the Vulcan considerably longer than the three months Kirk had known him and the two seemed to respect each other professionally.

"I'm sure Mr. Scott - "

"Will be needed aboard the Enterprise for Captain Owen's trial trip," Torven interrupted. "That's the other part of the orders I have for you, Captain Kirk. It's unusual to use a ship so soon after a new Captain has taken command, I know, but with the death of Captain Hartzog it has become necessary to put forward Owen's testing. You, of course, will be given the opportunity to take a period of leave."

"In that case," Kirk said silkily, "since the Enterprise can spare me, I will accompany Mr. Spock."

"You! But you are the Captain."

"You have just told me that Captain Owen will be taking over. There will be plenty of officials from Starfleet to look after my ship." He rose. "Take my request as official."

Torven's eyes glittered. "I will certainly do so, Captain Kirk, and shall look forward to hearing your superior officer's report when your survey duty is over."

Kirk caught the sting in the tail of the remark. "Obviously Mr. Spock will have to take the leading part among vulcanoids. I've made my request, Commander."

"I hope you appreciate the position you have put yourself in, Captain. Because of their system of slavery, you will have to act in a subordinate role to Lt. Commander Spock at all times," Torven snapped. "Besides which, the Vulcans have requested he lead this expedition."

"He is fully capable of doing so," Kirk said coldly. "He has had Command Training."

Torven snorted. "He spent four months at the Academy, at the end of which time he was declared to have completed the course. Now you know as well as I do that no-one completes that course in under nine months. It clearly pays to have friends in high places."

Kirk caught his rising eyebrows, but declined to believe in any influence that could get one through Command Training until they were certain of results.

"I too have attended the Command Academy, Commander Torven," he said smoothly. "It did not strike me as an establishment that paid any attention to outside influence, but maybe your own experience tells you differently."

Torven's brick red flush answered the challenge. He had taken a desk job after failing the course twice, a fact of which Kirk was well aware and would not normally have referred to - the failure rate was high, and it was not a matter for shame, but for pride that one had been selected at all.

"For the record," he said, "I formally request to join Mr. Spock for the duration of the survey should Starfleet so permit, and I also protest at any decision to allow Mr. Spock to undertake the task alone."

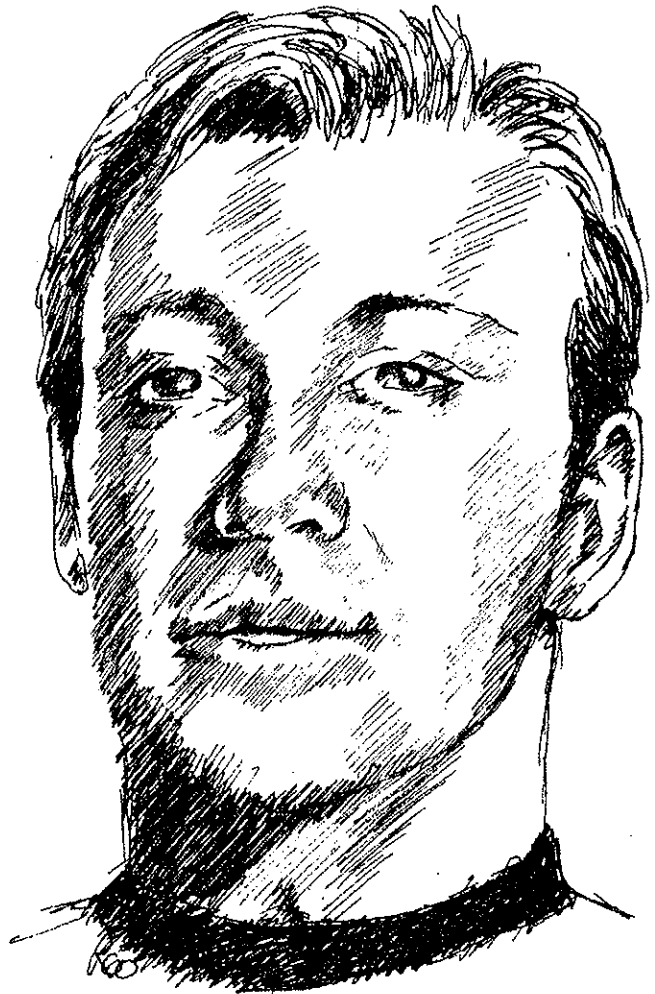
"Very well," Torven answered, his anger well under control. "I will pass

on your request and your comments. You will hear Starfleet's decision tomorrow morning. The matter is urgent. Good morning, Captain."

Kirk turned to go, but paused at the opening door and looked back over his shoulder. "By the way, it is not impossible to complete the Command Course in under nine months," he said softly. "I completed it in seven!"

\* \* \*

Anger still uppermost, Kirk swung down the corridor to the transporter point. Maybe once he had cooled down he would regret his request. Spock was not the easiest of men to work with despite Pike's glowing reports on him. Apart from the all-Vulcan crew of the Intrepid there were few Vulcans in Starfleet, and many people who had a little experience of them considered this to be no bad thing. Spock was the first Vulcan he had spent more than an hour or two with, and although his work was impeccable and Kirk could not complain of the support he received in his difficult task of command, he was no nearer to understanding him than he had been at their first brief meeting in his quarters. The Vulcan was always where he was needed, always had the information required at his fingertips, was unfailingly punctual, precise almost to the point of irritation, he was calm under conditions of extreme stress - and a total stranger to them all.



As Kirk thumbed open his communicator, he sighed. The next month or two might well make or break his relationship with his First Officer, it would remain to him to break through that formal reserve and come at the real person Pike had been so sure lay hidden within the icy exterior. He could only hope that Pike had not been mistaken about the Human half of Spock's parentage. He certainly looked purebred Vulcan and checked out so physically, according to Piper, although there was evidence of Human factors in his blood, but it could be there was nothing to seek beneath the coldly logical front Spock presented to the world.

"Beam me up, Scotty." As the beam took him he grinned suddenly, remembering Janice Lester's last furious words to him as she stormed out of his life. "You may turn on the charm too easily, Jim Kirk, one day you may meet someone who'll be immune to it, and then you'll find out how hard it is to make a relationship work. You think you only have to smile and everyone will run to your bidding - I hope someday you'll get hurt when it doesn't work for you."

While Janice had obviously not had a Vulcan male in mind, it looked as though she was getting her wish, Kirk thought wryly as he stepped off the transporter platform.

Scott's eyes crinkled in response to the Captain's smile. "Good news, sir?"

"Just a private joke, Scotty." He stepped to the intercom. "Mr. Spock."

"In Lab five, Captain."

"Come to my quarters as soon as you're free."

"I'll be there in ten minutes, sir."

\* \* \*

"It seems we're due for a change in routine, Mr. Spock," he said as the Vulcan sat down. "The Vulcan Council have requested that you undertake a survey mission for them, and I hope to be coming along with you as the other member of the team." He paused a moment, reflecting that he might have been announcing there would be coffee for breakfast for all the sign of interest the Vulcan gave. "I don't know any details as yet, I've no doubt they will be sent to you, as you will be in charge of the survey, but I have been told that the people are vulcanoid, which is why your presence has been requested. As there are no other Vulcans in the quadrant I have asked Starfleet that I be sent with you. We shall hear their reply in the morning."

Spock's face remained impassive. "I believe there will be some question as to the advisability of leaving the Enterprise with neither Captain nor First Officer aboard, sir," he said calmly. "Do you expect them to agree to your request?"

"Yes," Kirk nodded. "Captain Owen will be taking over the Enterprise for his final Command testing, and I am offered leave while he is on board. As far as I can see there are only two difficulties, one is whether or not I shall be sufficiently inconspicuous in a vulcanoid society, and Starfleet will certainly take that into account when they consider my request. The other is a personal matter." He paused again, studying the calm face across his desk. "It concerns you, Mr. Spock, and whether you are willing to have me along."

There was a brief silence. "Well, does the idea fill you with dread, give you the heebie-jeebies?" Kirk grinned.

One eyebrow did flicker a little at that. "I neither welcome nor oppose the idea of a companion," Spock said coldly. "The work would be done more quickly by two; however there is little point in discussing the matter until Starfleet have given you their answer."

"But I want to know if I'm welcome," Kirk said softly, "and to let you know that I understand you will be in charge of the work. I'm coming as second member, not leader. Do you foresee any difficulties?"

"None on my part, Captain," Spock said slowly.

"But you have your doubts about me?" Kirk said, deadpan.

"I think you could well find the reversal of our roles difficult, Captain."

"I've obeyed orders before, Mr. Spock." He smiled. "I'd like to come - if you'll have me." He held up a hand. "I don't suppose you'll take my feelings into account, but I'd like you to know that it will be a sop to my conscience if you agree to have me join you. I'd hardly enjoy leave if I knew you were doing the work on your own."

"I believe I am capable of doing the work alone."

"I'd be the first to agree on that," Kirk told him. "From what I've seen of you in the past three months, your ability isn't in question. However, two pairs of eyes see more than one, even if one pair doesn't miss much. Besides which, I've only recently had a long leave and this will make a pleasant change. Provided Starfleet agree, will you have me?"

There was a long silence. At last the Vulcan lifted his gaze. "Very well, sir, if you wish it."

Kirk watched the lean figure leave the room and passed a ruminative hand across his chin. Had he done the right thing? It was putting one hell of a test to a relationship that had not even begun as yet. Surely he'd live to regret allowing some desk-bound clerk anger him into hasty action. Abruptly he stood up, rasping back his chair. So, Spock was unresponsive to charm...there'd be some other way to get through that thick skin at last. He'd make the thing come

out right in the end, or he'd never make a Captain like Garrovick - as he'd promised himself.

\* \* \*

The formal permission from Starfleet arrived early the following morning, brought in person by Commander Torven. He arrived in Kirk's quarters, an ill-concealed smirk on his face.

"As you see, Captain, permission has been granted on the clear understanding that you take the subsidiary role. I warned you that the Vulcans were most adamant that Lt. Commander Spock lead this survey, didn't I?"

"You warned me," Kirk said curtly.

"Very well then. I need to hand the orders over to Mr. Spock in person."

Kirk pressed the intercom. "Kirk here. Mr. Spock to my quarters, please." Almost at once the door opened to admit the Vulcan. Torven placed the tape on the desk.

"Your orders from the Vulcan Council, Lt. Commander," he said evenly. "You are commanded by Starfleet to undertake this survey on their behalf. The details are on the tape for you. Captain Kirk has asked to accompany you, although the final decision has been left to you." His tone clearly indicated that he thought very little of Starfleet's attitude in the case. He looked at Kirk and added, sneeringly, "Doubtless the survey will be improved by having a Human in the team."

The stone face did not alter as far as Kirk could see, but he knew that his own had. He rose to his feet. "Commander, as long as you are on my ship you will speak respectfully to any member of my crew. You may begin by apologising to Lt. Commander Spock."

Torven shot him a blaeful glance. "No disrespect was intended, Mr. Spock," he said coolly.

Kirk had heard better apologies, but reckoned it safer to leave it at that. "Have you any further orders for us, Commander?" he said, his voice dripping ice.

"Captain Owen will be aboard in three hours, Captain Kirk, and the Enterprise will take you to Beta Pegasi Two and collect you in two months. Please remember that it would be most...unfortunate should anything go wrong."

Kirk swallowed his anger. "It would indeed, Commander," he said quietly. "I don't anticipate any difficulty. Good morning."

Torven glared at his abrupt dismissal and left without taking leave of either of them, Kirk let out a long breath, allowing his shoulders to relax. "Seeing too much of him would be bad for my blood pressure," he complained. "I wish you could lend me a little of your Vulcan lack of emotion when dealing with people like that."

"Indeed, Captain," Spock said quietly, "even I could sense that the atmosphere was...not relaxed."

Kirk let out a snort of laughter. "You could put it that way, Mr. Spock. I'd have said 'explosive', myself. Now, about those orders of yours." He picked up the tape. "You'd better view them in your own quarters, they may contain matters I should not see."

Spock took the spool and went to the door. As it opened he turned, one eyebrow raised. "No Human curiosity, Captain?"

Through his surprise, Kirk managed to grin at him. "A great deal, Mister, so you'd better get out before I start to indulge it!" He surveyed the closing door blankly. If it had been anyone else he would have said they were teasing him - but not the Vulcan, not Spock. Or was he?

\* \* \*

Ten minutes later, Spock was back. "I have viewed the tape, Captain, and

think it advisable I discuss certain aspects of it with you before you make a final decision to accompany me."

"What's the problem? My appearance? Maybe Piper can do something about that..."

"No, sir." He studied Kirk's face. "Provided some alteration is made in the line of the eyebrows I believe your appearance could well be ideal."

"Then what's the problem?"

Spock slotted the spool into the viewer. Kirk studied the shot and spoke calmly. "The slaves wear hoods and have lighter colouring - yes, I would call that ideal. Where's your problem, Mr. Spock?"

The dark eyes watched his face expressionlessly. "You know there was a system of slavery?"

"Torven mentioned it. Is that's what's bothering you - that I shall be your 'slave'?" He smiled. "Nice of you to consider my feelings, but it isn't necessary. I don't say I should care for the role permanently, but I daresay two months of faking it won't damage my ego. Is that the only visual you have?"

"There are a few others." He flicked over them, watching Kirk's face to gauge when he had absorbed them fully.

"It's an attractive place in many ways," Kirk commented cheerfully. "There seems to be sufficient trade and movement of goods for us to travel about without making ourselves conspicuous. Those animals look a little uncomfortable to ride, but I daresay I've met worse."

"Indeed," Spock said impassively. "I believe your Earth camel would be more uncomfortable." Kirk tried to picture Spock on a camel, and failed.

"These buildings seem to be an inn of some kind. Once we can establish their system of trading we should manage to live comfortably enough. Hold on a minute, let's have that last shot back." He studied the picture carefully; it showed a colourful market scene with goods piled indiscriminately about a large open space surrounded by low buildings. The long range tricorder shots inevitably lost some detail on magnification even with the most modern techniques, but the many necklaces worn by the slaves surely had some significance. Yes, deep among the crowd one was kneeling while his master removed the string from his neck, the slave holding the cloth had begun to put out a hand. "Those necklaces seem to be their equivalent of purses, Spock."

"Yes, Captain." The tone was neutral, but Kirk looked up at the Vulcan. There seemed to be a shadow of something on that immobile face.

"Have I got it wrong, Mr. Spock?"

"No, sir. I believe you are right."

"What's the matter, then? Is it in order to accuse you of being surprised?"

"I did not expect you to notice such a tiny detail, Captain," Spock admitted. "Your powers of observation are excellent for a Human."

"Compliments, Mr. Spock?"

The expression did not alter. "A statement of fact, sir."

Kirk grinned. "I'll read that as a compliment," he said softly.

The intercom beeped. "Captain Owen requesting permission to come aboard," Kyle told him.

"We'll be right there," Kirk said. "We'll have two days to prepare in, Mr. Spock. Will that be enough time?"

"It will suffice." He stood back to let Kirk precede him through the door.

"After you, Mr. Spock," Kirk told him. "I'd better get used to being a pace



or two behind you."

One eyebrow lifted. Kirk had never seen so much movement of the Vulcan's face before. "Is that wise while we are still on board, sir? The crew..."

"The crew will know where we're going and who's in charge," Kirk told him. "I'm not too worried about my image, Mr. Spock; it doesn't do for a Captain to get swollen-headed!"

\* \* \* \* \*

There followed two days of intensive study and discussion of the few pictures the scouts had provided. Since the Vulcan Council wished to send a large party to live on the planet for some years, the report handed in by Spock would have to be as comprehensive as possible to enable a large team to avoid detection.

"It seems to me," Kirk said, studying the massive list of requests, "that the Vulcans are as excited over this as a child at a birthday party."

Spock looked up from his viewer, his voice repressive. "Since this is the first vulcanoid race to be discovered, Captain, it is inevitable that there should be widespread curiosity about them. I do not find any evidence of emotion in their requests."

Kirk winked at the Yeoman beside him. "What about you, Yeoman?"

The girl hid a smile. "The lists certainly don't seem to leave anything out, sir," she answered noncommittally. "These costumes will be easy enough to reproduce. I only wish we could be more precise about the exact texture of that cloth, though."

"We can't expect to get everything right at first," Kirk told her. "That's why we send in preliminary teams. Just do the best you can. We haven't got any details on those money necklaces, have we, Mr. Spock?"

"Unfortunately not, sir. We will have to acquire one by some means. The sensor scans show large deposits of precious stones are being mined; it would seem reasonable to use those for our initial outlay."

The basic details were finally amassed and costumes produced which would allow them to blend with the natives. Kirk submitted himself to Cosmetics for the minor work on his eyebrows, and at last they were in the transporter room ready for beamdown.

"I'll set ye doon aboot a mile outside the small town," Scott told them. "Ye'll have the place tae yourselves. Are ye both all set?"

Spock looked at Kirk who nodded his readiness. "I'm in your hands, Mr. Spock. Give the order when you're ready."

"Very well. Energise, Mr. Scott." The transporter room faded to a chorus of 'Good luck!'.

\* \* \*

The trees about them were blue-green and thickly leaved, shielding them from the fierce heat of the sun, for which Kirk could only be grateful. The dryness of the air rasped in his lungs as he turned to look around him. They were in a small, wooded area, the ground underfoot thick with dead and dying leaves, their heavy acidic smell stinging his nostrils. Beyond the narrow belt of trees the ground stretched level and arid, the red sandy soil bright in the sunlight. Kirk could feel the thin material of the hooded tunic he wore sticking to his back already. He eased the material away.

"I hope it's not always as hot as this," he murmured.

"It is pleasantly warm," Spock answered him.

"Pleasantly warm! You have a genius for understatement, Mr. Spock."

The Vulcan looked up from his miniature tricorder - standard survey issue - a faint line creasing his brow. "The planet is similar to Vulcan in its gravity

and temperature, therefore I do not find it hot," he explained. "I trust it will not prove too much of a trial to you, Captain."

"Not 'Captain', Mr Spock," Kirk warned. "You had better call me 'Jim' unless we find that to be totally unsuitable."

"Yes, you are right." Spock tucked his tricorder away inside the pocket of his slim-fitting coat. "It is still early in the morning. There will be plenty of time to make our way to the town and see if we can obtain enough of their money to satisfy our needs for the moment."

They set off through the trees in the direction of the town. Kirk found himself dreading the moment when they must leave the shade of the trees and move along the sun-scorched dirt of the road into town. His bare feet were already sticky with the heat and he envied the high boots the Vulcan wore - not that he envied the high-necked frilled shirt nor the tight-fitting coat, nor the skin-hugging trousers. The loose short trousers and tunic of his own costume were more comfortable to wear in such heat. He held the end of the chain dangling from his waist in one hand and followed behind Spock.

As they stepped out from the shelter of the trees the heat hit him almost as a tangible thing, the ground burning his feet. He winced, wishing he had had the sense to foresee this and get Piper to cover his soles with some of the clear plastiskin used for wound coverings. What with the heat and the one-third extra weight he carried due to the higher gravity he was going to be but a shadow of his former self in two months' time!

He found himself cannoning into Spock who had stopped abruptly.

"Something wrong?"

"A movement. Over there. Someone hiding behind the rock. We are being watched."

"Let's go see." He started to move off. A steely hand grabbed his arm.

"Wait a moment. You must not move ahead of me."

Inwardly cursing himself for having forgotten his role so soon, Kirk fell back behind the Vulcan and muttered, "Put the end of the chain over your wrist, Spock."

The Vulcan took the intricate loop and slipped it over his hand, leading Kirk towards the large rock he had indicated. As they drew near, a tiny figure stepped out from behind the boulder; a dark-haired, pointed-eared boy clad in the slim trousers, boots and ruffled shirt of the upper-caste race, but his clothes were torn and filthy. A dark bruise disfigured his cheek, and dirty hands had left grimy smears on his face where he had wiped away tears.

"Your churl is under control?" His voice wavered, thin and tired.

"He is under control," Spock said gravely. "Why do you ask?"

"You were not holding the chain, and I feared..." He paused, lips trembling. "I feared he might be evil as my father's churl. He struck my father down and I ran from him." He paused again, fighting his tears. "I ran all night. Where am I now?"

"Near the town." Spock hoped he would not ask the name. "Have you friends there?"

The boy shook his head. "No. We travelled many weeks to join my uncle, but he is dead. When Haldu learned of this and knew my father to have no friends to seek revenge, he slew him, and would have slain me too, but that I played the coward's part and ran." He sniffed hard, drawing the back of his hand across his eyes.

"There is nothing to be ashamed of in seeking safety," Spock told him calmly. "You need not distress yourself for such a matter."

Hardly comforting, thought Kirk, but the very calmness of the deep voice seemed to reassure the child and he ran to them, casting himself at Spock and clutching tightly. Spock laid his hand on the dark head. "No tears now," he said quietly. "Leave grief until the anger dies."

Behind them Kirk raised his eyebrows. For one who claimed not to understand emotions his First Officer seemed to be coping with the situation extremely well. He watched them closely. The boy was growing calm now, sobs dying. At last he lifted his head.

"I wanted to kill HalDu," he confessed. "But that would not have brought my father back."

"No," Spock told him. "It would only have brought you fresh grief for your own guilt."

The boy straightened up. "Thank you. Lord... I do not know your name to thank you properly."

Kirk wondered how Spock would deal with that -- names were often a pitfall if one did not understand the system an unknown race employed.

"My name is unimportant," Spock began. The shock on the boy's face showed him that he had blundered.

"The naming of a name is all that shows me we are friends," he said doubtfully. "Will you not stand my friend, Lord...?"

"Spock!" Mentally, Kirk crossed his fingers.

"Lord Spocklan." The child's face broke into a smile. "Your name is strange but it becomes you. My name is Tanar." His face clouded again and grew pale. "Lord Spocklan, I am weary." As his knees buckled, Spock caught him, lifting him in his arms.

"Passed out, poor little scrap?" Kirk asked softly.

"Asleep only, I believe," Spock replied. "Most fortuitous."

"I guess he needs to sleep," Kirk agreed.

"Not only that," Spock said slowly, "but it will give me an opportunity to learn a little of their society from him."

Puzzled, Kirk frowned.

"I have some telepathic ability," Spock said quietly. "If I probe gently while he is asleep I may learn enough to get us through the first hours here without too many important mistakes." He walked to the shadow of the rock and laid the boy down; drawn by the chain, Kirk followed. Spock steepled his fingers momentarily and then laid them gently on the child's face. After a moment he looked up to find Kirk's eyes on him. He dropped his own eyes and almost hurried into speech.

"The child is young, only six of their years, eight point four six Earth years," he said calmly, "but I have learned some things that will be of use to us. He has been travelling several days with his father and has experienced the pattern of living we wish to follow, which will be useful. I have also learned that we would do well to follow their formal speech patterns -- we would have experienced some difficulties had we not gained this knowledge. To have refused to give our names would be tantamount to a challenge, and to use the caste titles incorrectly would have betrayed us as total strangers to their world."

"Useful," Kirk interrupted. "Mr Spock, you can tell me all that in a minute. Why didn't you tell me you were a telepath?"

"Humans find the idea distasteful," Spock said flatly.

"Not distasteful," Kirk said swiftly. "I've encountered telepaths before." He thought painfully of the way some people spoke of the Vulcan, many did not



like or trust him, to be constantly reminded of this must be uncomfortable, even for a non-emotional Vulcan. "Is this why you avoid people?"

The dark eyes met his. "I am basically only a touch telepath. Others' thoughts can reach mine only if my mind is open, but you learn to keep the way guarded. You need not be afraid that I will read your mind unbidden, Captain."

"I'm not afraid of it, Mr. Spock." His eyes caught the flutter of the child's lashes. "Careful, he's waking."

The boy's eyes opened. "You slept, TanarLanRu," Spock told him, "but not for long enough. We will take you to an inn where you may rest properly. JimDu will carry you." The boy shrank towards him, eyes full of fear. Spock pushed him gently away. "Do not be foolish, boy. Not every churl is faithless to his Lord, you may trust JimDu. Do I not hold the chain?"

The boy swallowed and eyed Kirk. Something in the smiling hazel eyes must have given him confidence because he nodded. Kirk bent to pick him up and fell to his knees at the touch of Spock's boot high on his calf. He grabbed at the rock to keep his balance and caught a warning gleam in the Vulcan's eye. Spock bent his head as if in supplication and Kirk hopefully imitated the gesture, receiving a slight nod of approval.

"You may lift me, JimDu," the boy said politely.

Kirk lifted the slight body - in this gravity the child must weigh at least a hundred and twelve pounds, he thought ruefully - and followed the tall Vulcan towards the town.

The child chattered away to Spock at first, but eventually his eyelids drooped again and he slept once more. Kirk quietly relayed the information to Spock.

"You must continue to carry him," Spock told him. "It would appear most strange if I were seen performing such a menial task."

"Any more warnings for me?" Kirk asked. "I gather I don't touch without permission."

"No, never - and always kneel when addressing me, or any other member of the Lan."

"My own class being Du?"

"Affirmative. We will take the child where he can rest and then go to the Market. Tanar's father sold jewels in a Market three days ago, the transaction will be simple enough."

"Lucky we found the little beggar," Kirk looked down at the sleeping face. "He's a cute kid."

"Do not express such opinions before him," Spock warned, "and be sure you address him by his title, TanarLanRu, Master Child. Someone is coming, keep silent."

Kirk's ears had also caught the sound of clawed feet approaching along the road, and soon two pack animals drew level with them, followed closely by several

more with riders mounted. They waved a complicated greeting to Spock, but one of them aimed a vicious blow at Kirk's shoulders with the whip he carried.

"Teach your churl not to raise his eyes to the Lan," the man said harshly. "Let him be thankful he carries the LanRu or I would beat him for you."

Spock tugged at the chain and drew Kirk to his knees. "Tonight I will beat him myself," he promised coldly. "May the water of your house be ever cool."

The riders clattered past, waking the child once more; he rubbed his eyes and looked about him.

"Soon there will be water and soft furs to rest on, Tanar," Spock told him. "Come, JimDu, hurry a little. The LanRu needs rest."

\* \* \*

Having seen the child to sleep under the clucking, motherly care of the inn-keeper's wife, Kirk hurried to join Spock in a shady room overlooking the courtyard. A cool fountain splashed its gentle rhythm in the peace of the afternoon. Spock looked up as he entered.

"You need food," he said quietly, "and rest, but you must get the food for us. Order fruit and water; if they are unsafe to eat, we have our packs."

Kirk nodded and went out again, wishing his blistered feet were not so sore. In a short while he returned, carrying a loaded tray. He set it down on the wooden table and went to close the door.

"There is no-one in the courtyard," Spock said, "but you had better sit on the floor in case someone enters."

Kirk eased his aching bones to the floor and leaned back against the cold stone wall. Spock handed him a cup of water. "It is safe," he told him. "And these fruits here, the green ones, will not harm you."

"I should be serving you, shouldn't I?" Kirk said numbly.

"Drink!"

Obediently Kirk drank. The water refreshed him, clearing his mind, and he accepted the fruit Spock gave him, but found he did not want to eat. He started to rise, but Spock's hand on his shoulder prevented him.

"There is no need for you to serve me when others are not present," Spock said harshly.

Kirk shook off his hand and stared him in the eye. "Don't you like it?" he murmured. "Don't worry, Mr. Spock. Slavery is part of my history, and many other people's."

"It is part of my history too," Spock said soberly. "Vulcan had a history of barbaric cruelty at one time. It is salutary to be reminded of the reasons for our present way of life."

"Some day I'd like to hear about it," Kirk said tiredly, "but I don't think I could take it all in just at the moment. I daresay I'll get used to the heat and the feeling that my pockets are full of lead in time."

Spock nodded. "Tanar is sleeping?"

"Yes, the inn-keeper's wife is watching him."

"Woman, not wife," Spock explained. "Marriage is unheard of among the Du, who are not permitted to form lasting bonds as are the Lan. That is why Tanar's father's churl turned on his master," he went on. "The child had not fully understood the experience, but the facts were there within his mind."

Kirk let out a long breath. "We've got a lot to learn about these people," he commented grimly.

"The Thulya, they call themselves," Spock said, stretching out his long legs

below the table. "Their world is called Thul."

"You were only linked to that child for a short time," Kirk exclaimed. "You seem to have learned plenty."

"The process is swift," Spock agreed, "and has proved invaluable. We should go to the Market before trading ends for the day. Try not to touch any Lan, and if you should, bow deeply but don't look at any of them directly."

"I'm not likely to forget that!" Kirk eased his sore shoulders. "I learned it the hard way."

Their transaction completed, Kirk followed Spock back to the inn, now with two money strings round his neck. The inn-keeper's woman met them in the doorway, bowing deeply.

"The little LanRu is awake and asking for Lord SpockLan," she told Kirk.

"Very well, we will attend him," Spock said. "JimDu, give the Da one leta for her trouble."

Kirk slipped one coin from the string and handed it to the woman, then followed Spock up the stairs. Tanar was awake, but still tired. Spock sent Kirk to fetch food for him and Kirk served it, hoping he was too sleepy to notice any mistakes. At last the weary child lay down again and, leaving him to sleep, they went to their own room. It was furnished with a massive couch covered with animal skins and soft pillows; in one corner lay another skin and one small cushion. Kirk gave a long sigh.

"I've never seen the floor look so attractive, Mr. Spock," he said. "I shall sleep like a top."

"Why should you wish to spin in your sleep?" the Vulcan asked, puzzled.

Kirk gave a weary chuckle. "I don't know," he answered. "It's one of those Earth expressions I don't understand myself." He crossed to the wooden stand by the window. "There's water here, and rags for washing." He picked one up, eyes glinting mischievously. "Do I bath you too, Lord?" he asked.

Spock took the rag. "In pravate, no," he said impassively. "Attend to your own toilet, and leave me to make mine."

The water was heaven on his sweat-soaked body and Kirk lay naked on his bed, revelling in the cool night air.

"The temperature will drop drastically at night, you had better cover yourself," Spock warned him.

"Mmm. Later," Kirk agreed sleepily.

Much later, struggling to waken from a dream of a bare, snow-covered hillside, he felt warm fur being wrapped around him and slept again.

Wakening in the dawn to hear small feet pattering on the bare wooden boards, he shrank down under the skins, remembering his exposed ears.

"Your Du sleeps late," the high voice said censoriously. "Shall I wake him for you, SpockLan?"

"No. Let him sleep on."

"But you are awake and may need him!" Tanar sounded shocked.

"He has not been well and needs rest," Spock said quietly. "I require nothing for the present. You are up too early, Tanar, you should not have left your bed yet."

"I was...lonely. My father..." The voice was shaky. "My father would hold me in his arms if I woke early."

"May I so hold you?"

Under the skins, Kirk's new eyebrows were crawling to his hairline. He had

never heard such gentleness in the cold Vulcan voice before; clearly there was more to this Vulcan than he had ever supposed.

"A story, please," Tanar demanded. To Kirk's amazement, Spock began to tell the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, punctuated by sleepy questions from Tanar.

"I never heard this tale before, SpockLan," he said as Goldilocks made her escape. "I thank you for telling it to me. I hope I never meet a bear in the woods."

"They are mythical beasts."

"Missical?"

"Mythical. I made them up. Now go and dress, Tanar. I will see you at breakfast."

The small feet pattered away and the door closed. Kirk gave an artistic start as the latch clicked and emerged from his warm lair to grab at his hooded tunic. Dragging it over his head, he said in muffled tones, "You should have waked me, Lord SpockLan. I am ready to serve you." He stood up, pulling on the short trousers, uncertain whether to admit to having been awake. He found Spock half dressed and went to help.

"You may hold the clothes in case Tanar returns," Spock said steadily, "but unless he does, I require no further help."

Kirk grinned at him. "And I was thinking I could get a job as valet if they ever kicked me out of Starfleet," he said, hurt. "I might need the practice."

Spock tied his shirt-strings, ignoring him. "We must get out into the town today," he said, "and make recordings."

"What about Tanar?"

"The child is an added complication," Spock agreed, shrugging himself into the tight-fitting coat, "but we must buy him clothes. His own are too ragged for him to walk about in. I believe we must take him with us, and hope to find someone we can leave him with in a day or two."

"We can hardly keep him with us permanently," Kirk agreed.

"A logical solution will present itself," Spock said calmly.

The door clicked open and a small face looked accusingly at them. "Lord SpockLan, I am hungry," Tanar said plaintively.

"Then we will eat, TanarLanRu. Lead us downstairs."

\* \* \* \* \*

The Market was a hurly-burly of sound and movement in the cool of the early morning. Kirk found the constant noise and bustle especially confusing since he must keep his eyes down and avoid touching the Lan. Several times he was unable to avoid contact and had to bow deeply, glad to escape with only angry looks and a kick or two. Once he actually heard a gentler voice telling him the owner of an almost-stepped-on toe was not hurt. He had to exercise control not to look up in his astonishment, but he was glad to find the Thulya were not exclusively cruel in their relationship with their slaves.

Tanar danced along beside Spock, holding tightly to the Vulcan's hand - that too Kirk found an unreal spectacle - chattering constantly until a quiet word of reproof from Spock silenced him temporarily.

"TanarLanRu, it was my intention to find new garments for you, to replace those disgraceful objects you wear, but if you do not set a watch on your tongue, I shall take you back to the inn and leave you there while I conduct my business in peace."

The child peeped up at his stern face and said meekly, "Father said I

I talked too much. I am sorry, SpockLan."

He managed to restrain his excitement to a few squeaks of joy over his new clothing and strutted and preened himself before the burnished metal mirror with many gleaming looks of gratitude towards Spock. As they left the vendor gleefully counting the coins Kirk had given him from his money strings, Kirk wondered if Spock had driven a sufficiently hard bargain. News seemed to travel fast among the Du, and many of them spread their wares ingratiatingly before the Vulcan, as though beseeching him to cast a little extra money their way, too. Spock resisted their blandishments, merely purchasing sweetmeats for Tanar before seeking out a stable where they could buy vlar, the animal used for transport. Kirk looked at their sloping shoulders and hoped it wasn't as difficult to stay on as it looked. To be constantly sliding over the animal's crested head would be ignominious as well as uncomfortable. However, the clumsily stitched saddles provided with the vlar afforded hand and knee grips, and he was able to view the prospect of travelling with less gloom than his still painful feet had engendered. At this moment he was more than willing to exchange sore feet for a sore backside. Having arranged, at what seemed an exorbitant price, for the Du to stable his two newly-acquired vlar for another sunrise, Spock led Kirk from the yard and out into the Market once more.

The day was growing hotter now, and the young water-maids were trading briskly, drawing cups of water from the fountains for the thirsty Lan. Water being as scarce on Thul as it was on Vulcan, it was probably a precious commodity and they certainly seemed to treat it with reverence and ceremonial. Kirk passed his tongue over his dry lips, wondering whether the Du were allowed to drink; at first he could see no evidence that they were, but eventually one Lan gave the dregs of his cup to his Du, who knelt and drank thirstily. He caught Spock's eye on him, the brow slightly raised and gave him the tiniest of nods in reply. Spock approached the well, bought a cup of water and drank deeply.

Leave some for me, you greedy devil! Kirk thought, taking the cup carefully and kneeling before Spock to drink. There was much more left than he had supposed from the way Spock had tilted the cup and he drank every last drop, savouring the coolness within his heated body. He returned it, bowing deeply and stepped back, narrowly missing a Lan as he did so. The Lan raised his hand in anger at such temerity, knocking a cup held out by one of the young girls. As it fell from her hands, she screamed, dropping to her knees before the Lan who had been deprived of her drink.

"Wretch! Blasphemer!" The Lan's voice rose shrill above the hubbub of the Market. Around the fountain, people drew back leaving the wailing water girl cowering alone by the spilt liquid, the red dust of the ground stained wine-dark by the scattered drops. "Waste not!" the Lan shouted. "Drink it and waste not!"

Before Kirk's horrified eyes the girl crouched, licking the mud from the ground. The Lan waited until she had finished and then grabbed her by the hair, lifting her filthy face to smash the back of her hand across the Du's mouth.

Unconsciously, Kirk stepped forward, to be brought up sharply by the chain round his waist. He glared at Spock, who stared impassively back, his face unreadable. The Vulcan was right, he must not interfere. He forced himself to relax, eyes dropping; satisfied that he had regained control, Spock led him quietly away. Kirk found Tanar watching him doubtfully and gave him the tiniest of smiles; it was not returned and Tanar slipped to Spock's side, sliding his hand into the Vulcan's. He was strangely subdued as they completed their stroll around the Market and greeted Spock's suggestion that he might be tired and wish to return to the inn with obvious pleasure.

Once inside the cooler shade of the courtyard Spock sent Kirk for refreshment and Tanar breathed a sigh of relief as the broad shoulders disappeared from view.



"Lord SpockLan, you should sell your Du," he said solemnly.

Spock sat down by the fountain and studied the troubled face. "Your reason, Tanar?"

"He is not safe. I saw anger on his face. If you had not held him he would have attacked the Lan - I know it."

Spock nodded slowly. "That is true, Tanar, I saw his anger also, but I understood the reason for it. Did not you, also, feel pity for the girl?"

The eyes grew round. "But, SpockLan, she spilt the Water. It is forbidden. Water is sacred."

"Tanar, have you never been at fault through no fault of your own? The cup was knocked from her hand. A Lan made her spill the water by his anger - whose was the fault?"

"But he is Lan."

"And can a Lan never be at fault?"

Returning quietly on bare feet, Kirk paused with the laden tray, unwilling to interrupt. Tanar's eyes were fixed steadily on Spock's, his face troubled.

"Lord, a Lan rules, he may not be at fault," he said at last.

"When one rules, one must have pity for those weaker ones who do not rule," Spock said gravely. "JimDu's anger came from his pity for the girl; there is no need to be afraid. I would trust him with my life. Will you not trust him with yours?"

The small booted foot scraped the dust a moment, and then Tanar looked back at Spock once more, the tiny frown gone. "SpockLan has said it. I will trust his Du."

Kirk moved forward and kneeling, presented the tray to Spock. On an impulse he said, "May I speak, Lord SpockLan?" Receiving a nod of permission, he turned to Tanar. "I will serve TanarLanRu as I serve the Lord SpockLan, will he accept my service?"

The child giggled suddenly. "I may not have a Du of my own until I am grown, JimDu, but I thank you." He inclined his head formally and with an abrupt change of mood demanded to take his meal out into the street with him. "There will be galdi - dolls with strings - in the Market this afternoon. May I go?"

Receiving permission he snatched up meat and fruit and ran. Watching him go, Spock said curtly, "Serve me and be seated."

Thankful to take the excess weight from his throbbing feet, Kirk sank down cross-legged. Spock pushed the tray towards him. "Eat, I have finished."

The simple meal over, Spock led the way to the privacy of their bedroom and Kirk closed the door behind him with a sigh of relief. "It feels good to relax a little. I'm sorry about this morning, Spock. I nearly blew it."

"Your reaction was impulsive," the Vulcan agreed matter-of-factly. "However, it went unnoticed by the crowd."

"But not by Tanar," Kirk said ruefully.

"No." The Vulcan's eyes would not meet Kirk's. "He told me I should sell you." He watched Kirk's mouth hang open, and turned away.

"He seems to have...forgiven me now," Kirk said carefully. "You, too?"

"Without offence there is no need for forgiveness."

"I nearly wrecked your mission." Kirk was glad to be able to say it. "If they had found the tricorder in my tunic..."

"You were recording?"

"Of course." Kirk was surprised.

"Good." Spock took out his own tricorder and touched the tiny controls.

"What are you doing?" Kirk asked, puzzled. "Erasing? There's no need for that, Spock. As long as the mistake had no serious consequences it is unimportant."

"A Human error is only that to a Human, Captain. These tapes are for the Vulcan Council."

"Saving my face, Mr. Spock? Thank you."

"A second tape would be redundant," the Vulcan said, dismissing the subject.

A knock on the door startled Kirk, and he went to open it. The smiling face of LeaDa, the innkeeper's woman, greeted him.

"A message from Lord RodeLan to Lord SpockLan," she said. "His Du is below."

Kirk followed her down the stairs. The Du was dressed more richly than others he had seen, clearly his Lan was someone of importance in the town.

"My Lord RodeLan asks your Lord to attend him this evening," the Du explained. "He wishes to welcome the stranger in our midst."

"I will inform my Lord."

The invitation accepted, Kirk made discreet enquiries of Lea, and found that, as he thought, Rode was one of the town's leaders.

"He will be glad to welcome one so wealthy as the Lord SpockLan," Lea told Kirk, her round face suffused in smiles at the honour done to a guest in her inn. "Praise to the Lord RodeLan, may his fountain ever flow."

"May the waters run deep," Kirk responded. "LaeDa, have you one who can look to the needs of TanarLanDu while we are gone?"

She clucked sympathetically. "I would see to him myself, but I shall be too busy. I will send my niece, RiaDa, to you. She is a good girl and will serve the Lan well."

Kirk entered the bedroom again, closing the door carefully. "I've found us a nursemaid, Spock. She'll look after Tanar for us."

"Good. The child is an encumbrance we could well do without," Spock said.

Kirk had to agree with the sentiment, although he felt he would not have expressed it quite so coldly - but, remembering the gentle voice in the dawn light, he refrained from comment.

Tanar returned late, grubby and tired and full of the puppets he had seen. He dismissed the idea of a female attendant with every evidence of loathing but Ria had young brothers and coaxed him out of the sullenness with promises of stories.

"You shall tell me the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears," he said imperiously.

"Indeed, little Lord, I know it not. What are...bears?"

"They are miss - no, mythical beasts; my Lord SpockLan told me of them," he told her kindly. "I will tell you the story first and then you will tell me many stories." He turned to Spock. "You will be here in the morning, SpockLan. I may come to you then for more tales?"

Kirk had never seen Spock at a loss before and grinned inwardly.

"I will be here," Spock told him at last, "but you must sleep long at your age."

"You promise to be here?"

"I have said I will be."

"But you haven't promised. A Lan keeps his word."

"Then there is no need for a promise. Sleep well, Tanar."

Kirk quirked an eyebrow once they were alone. "Goldilocks?" he questioned softly.

The bony face did not even quiver in response. "I'm sure you know the story," Spock said placidly. "Indeed, I was under the impression you heard it this morning."

Caught out, Kirk reddened. "Yes...but I didn't think you knew I was awake."

One eyebrow lifted. "You hid yourself when Tanar arrived. I knew you were awake."

"And you didn't mind?"

"What should I mind?"

"That I heard?"

The dark eyes held his. "Did you think I would be embarrassed, Captain? I am a Vulcan."

"So you are - and that leads me to another question. What is a Vulcan doing telling the story of Goldilocks?"

"My mother used to tell it to me when I was Tanar's age. I remembered it as one of my favourites." He saw the puzzled look on Kirk's face and - unusually for him - explained further. "My mother is Human. Did you not know I am a half-breed?" The term fell coldly in the still room.

"I knew you had Human blood," Kirk said, "but not that it was your mother. Thank you for telling me."

"It is not a secret."

Maybe not, Kirk thought, but he'd never heard Spock admit it openly before. It was a matter of rumour and speculation among the crew, some of whom had used the emotive term 'half-breed' as if it were a matter for contempt. As he took his tired limbs to the washstand, Kirk found himself wondering when humanity would end its hostility to the strange and alien. Even now, when most people had come to live in harmony with different peoples there was still prejudice. He wondered if it was so on Vulcan, if there, too, the half-breed was held to be inferior. Somehow he would have to get through to this creature of logic that here was a friend for the asking, a friend who also knew the meaning of loneliness and of being alone in a crowd.

\* \* \*

He found his duties easy enough that evening. Once the Lan had dined, the Du were able to draw back the table and take what scraps there were left by their Lan. Those whose Masters had been ungenerous were quietly given extra by those who had been left more and while the conversation was loud from the far end of the room the Du talked quietly among themselves. Kirk spoke little, but strained his ears to hear how Spock was faring.

Rode, a gross man with eyes bulging from the tightness of his collar and a paunch straining his tight trousers almost beyond their limit, was loudly jovial and expansive.

"Your son, SpockLan, is a well-grown child. He should do well," he said, pouring more drink with an unsteady hand. "His mother was Lan, I take it, or you would not have the child with you so constantly."

"Do not insult the man," another Lan said coldly. "We do not flaunt the children of our Da in public. Of course the child is Lan. You must forgive our worthy elder, Lord SpockLan, he is careful for the purity of our town."

"The child is Lan," Spock said placidly, "but he is not mine. I found him on the outskirts of the town and have befriended him. I hope to find some Lan to

care for him as I must travel on myself."

A cup crashed to the floor as Rode struggled upright, his face darkening in anger. "You speak strangely, Lord," he said icily, "to evade your responsibility in such a way. If you have taken the child he is yours to maintain, not to find some other Lan to pay out good leta for your stupidity. You should have left him where you found him if you were not prepared to keep him."

There was a brief silence; Kirk sat tensely, wondering if there was going to be a scene they could not cope with.

"I do not seek to evade my obligations in the matter," Spock said mildly. "I merely wish to do what is best for the child of a Lan. He may stay with me if he wishes." Rode eyed him, rage still suffusing his face.

A hand touched Kirk's arm and he found a gentle-eyed Du watching him sympathetically. "You are concerned for your Lord?"

"Yes," Kirk said a little grimly.

"Then persuade him to leave the town tonight," the Du said softly. "RodeLan will see that none of you leave here alive if you do not. If your Lord wishes to abandon the child he must leave him in the desert to die. It is often done, though none admit to it openly. Your Lord has been unwise in this matter."

Kirk nodded, wanting to probe more deeply but not daring to precipitate further trouble, and wondering how to get Spock away quickly before he said something else to arouse suspicion. He rose quietly and left the room, going out into the cool night air. The coolness soothed him and lent inspiration. He waited a moment and then returned, approaching Spock and kneeling, head bowed.

"You may speak, JimDu."

"Lord SpockLan, RiaDa has sent word the little Lord TanarLanRu is sick and calls for you."

Spock rose to his feet, bowing to Rode. "You will excuse me if I go to the child," he said calmly, and led Kirk from the room. A babble of voices broke out as they got outside.

"Palming the child off on others!"

"This town will take in no beggars!"

"Does he expect charity?"

Kirk caught a glimpse of raised eyebrows before the Vulcan face regained its customary immobility. He set out with his long stride and Kirk followed a pace behind.

"Spock!" he hissed. "Take the chain. We're being watched."

Spock turned, murmuring, "Watch yourself," and jerked it roughly as other Lan did. Prepared, Kirk gave a realistic stumble and quickened his steps to a humble trot.

Once in their room, Spock dropped the chain as if it were some disagreeably textured creature he had touched. Kirk looked at his stiff back with gentle eyes.

"That time, I nearly...blew it!"

The colloquialism came oddly from the Vulcan and Kirk smiled. "I won't tell if you don't," he promised. "We've still got a lot to learn about them."

"Indeed. It would seem that Tanar is to be our problem for a little longer." He swung round, studying the tiredness in Kirk's face. "This planet is not an easy place for you to work in, Captain. You must get some rest."

"Not tonight, Mr. Spock. One of the Du told me that Rode will kill us if we stay. We've evidently offended badly by wanting to leave Tanar with someone. We should go tonight - and take him with us."

"Very well. Go and rouse him."

Kirk crept softly to the child's room on his bare feet and leaned over the bed to rouse him. In the dim light he could see the child cradled in Ria's arms, both faces flushed with sleep. A glimmer of hope shone; could they leave the child with Ria? He touched her temple gently, rousing her. She opened her eyes and looked at him in surprise.

"RiaDa, the Lord SpockLan and I have to travel on tonight."

"I will rouse the LanRu for you."

"No, wait. If we were to leave the child with you..." He stopped. Her eyes were filling with tears. "What's the matter?"

"Have I offended the Lord SpockLan?" she whispered.

"You haven't offended him. We wish to travel tonight, that is all, and the child is tired."

The tears ran down her cheeks, her face white even in the dim light. "But they will kill me and the little Lord," she sobbed. "Oh, why do you wish to leave him in my care? Take him with you! I do not wish to die."

Baffled, Kirk sat on the bed and took her hand. "Don't cry, RiaDa. The Lord SpockLan is not unkind and we will take him. There now," he smiled at her. "There's no need for any more tears. Slip away and leave the child to me."

She sat up gently, still snivelling a little, and handed the sleeping child to Kirk. Tamar stirred in his sleep but did not awaken. Poor little devil, Kirk thought, looking down at him. No-one seems to want you, but we seem to have got you, for our sins... He carried the sleeping child to Spock.

"I hoped we might leave him with Ria as he seemed to like her," he said, "but she said they would both be killed so I didn't push the idea. Can we get at the vlar without making a noise?"

"The lock will be simple enough to open," Spock said evenly. "We had better made sure the child will not wake."

Kirk raised one eyebrow. "Drug him? We've got no drugs suitable."

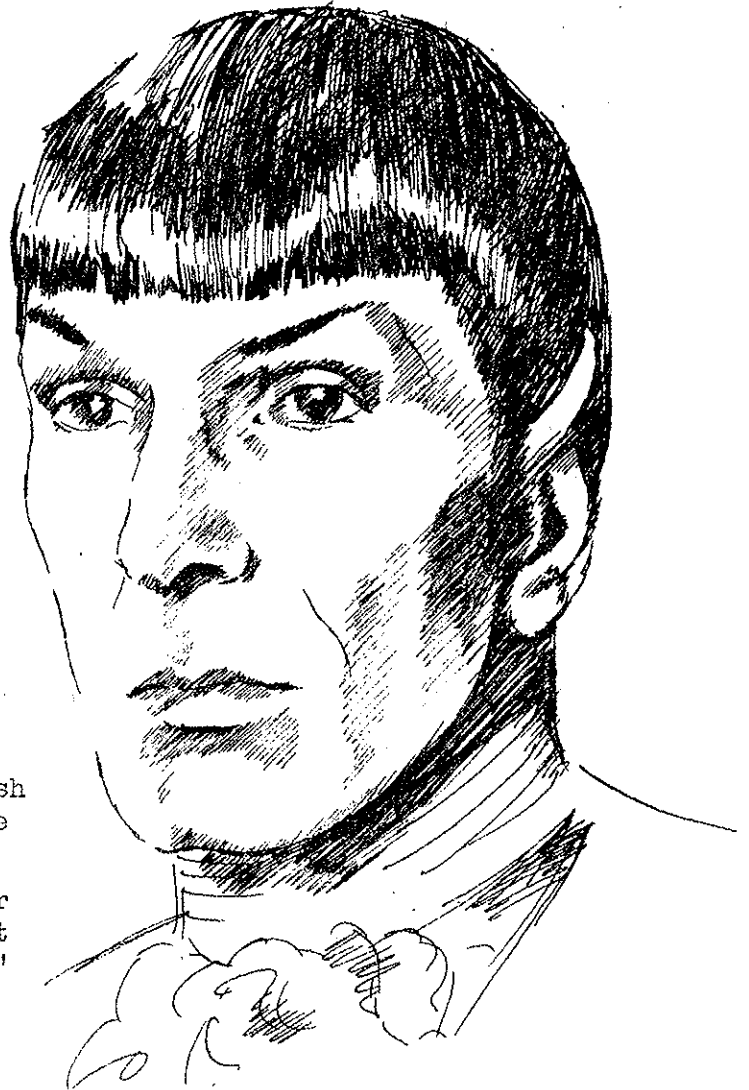
"No." The monosyllable was flatly uttered. Spock came over and laid his fingers to the child's shoulder, close by the neck.

"Is that the famous Vulcan neck pinch? How long will it keep him out?"

"Long enough," Spock said succinctly. "We had better be on our way."

\* \* \*

The wooden stairs creaked badly as they crept down them and Kirk was sure they would be heard, but they came safely out into the dark street. The smaller of Thul's twin moons was high in the sky and half full, shedding enough light for them to find their way without stumbling. Later, when the other moon rose, it would be brighter still, even though that was only a crescent. The stars were thick here, Thul was closer to the centre of the galaxy than Earth, and, for those



with time to look, the sky was beautiful. Neither of the two men from the Enterprise had time for stargazing, however, and hurried down the quiet streets to the stable. Spock handed Tanar to Kirk and opened the lock with quiet proficiency.

"Quite a burglar you'd make," Kirk complimented him as they slipped inside.

The vlar snickered sleepily as they opened the stable door, uttering protesting belches when prodded into movement. Kirk wondered how they were going to manage the saddles, he'd no idea how they went on. A horse saddle and bridle was complicated enough, but he'd learned enough of Spock over the last three months to have faith in his ability to work the problem out. Spock lifted the saddles down and studied the tangled straps. Kirk laid the boy down on a food bale and went to help. After a while he shook his head.

"I'm darned if I see how it goes. How are you doing, Mr. Spock?"

"Any problem will yield to the application of logical methods," Spock said evenly. "Some may take a little longer than others." He passed a small strap over one curling ear - the vlar promptly flicked out the curl and the strap slipped off again. The Vulcan calmly made the movement again with the same result.

"I'm not sure whether it doesn't go like that, or whether he doesn't want it to," Kirk chuckled.

"I fail to see," Spock tightened a ring on the strap, "why you find the situation so amusing." The ear straightened once more. Spock breathed just a fraction more heavily than usual, and Kirk, watching his face, wondered whether the mouth had quivered. He felt laughter rise in him and quelled it sternly. This was no time to get the giggles. Suddenly Spock held up a hand.

"Movement," he breathed. "Out in the yard." Slipping like shadows they went to the door, which was slowly swinging open.

"Ria! What are you doing here?"

She clung to him, "JimDu, beg Lord SpockLan to take me with you. I dare not stay here. They will question me and I am afraid of the whips."

Spock came to her side and she shrank against Kirk. "They will beat you?" She nodded, afraid to speak to him. "You may come if you will make yourself useful," Spock said. "You can help look after the little Lord, and you can start by showing my fool of a Du how to saddle a vlar, his wits have gone begging today." He left them and seated himself beside Tanar. "Hurry," he said curtly. "I would be away before dawn."

With Ria's help the animals were soon ready. Kirk looked at them doubtfully, wondering if they would carry two. "Have you ridden these before?" he asked.

"Many times." She stared at him.

"Can we both use one?"

"Of course." She stared again and then laughed. "Anyone would think you had not ridden before, JimDu."

"Well, I haven't." He caught the amazement in her eyes and quickly qualified the statement. "Not with one hand that doesn't work, at least. I hurt it earlier on."

"Let me look." She tried to take his hand, but he hid it swiftly behind his back.

"No. It is painful when touched."

"It does not matter," she said. "Since you are heavier than I you must ride behind and hold on to me. Can you climb up without help?"

"I expect so. Take the vlar into the yard and I will ask Lord SpockLan to let me hand him the child."

"But he will not carry him," she protested. "I must do so."

Kirk remembered that one gentle Lan voice in the Market and said hopefully, "He is a kind Master, RiaDa, he will take the child for us."

She opened her eyes wide at that, but mounted the vlar without further protest, guiding it out of the stable with the straps near the curling ears. Kirk led the other up to Spock.

"Put your left foot into the lower rest," he said softly, "and mount as if it were a horse." Before he had time to worry whether Spock knew how to mount a horse, even, the Vulcan was in the saddle. "Good man," Kirk breathed. "Hold the two grips by the ears and use the upper foot rest with your left foot, the lower one is just for mounting. Can you manage Tanar if I lift him up to you?"

Spock nodded, and raised a questioning eyebrow. "Can you mount behind me? Will the animals carry two?"

Kirk managed to look shocked. "Ride with a Lan? You'll give Ria heart failure if you talk like that. She already thinks it strange that you're prepared to carry Tanar. I'm riding with her - I had to tell her I'd hurt my hand so I could watch her mount the thing."

He bowed low and crossed to the other vlar, accounting for the clumsiness of his mounting by cursing his hand; he was up at last and set his arms about Ria's trim waist. The soft footed vlar were set in motion; they crossed the stable yard and went out the gate, along the narrow roads of the small town and so out into the rolling resort lands.

The second moon had risen now, lighting their way with its brilliance. Kirk found the rolling gait of the vlar trying, the creature's shoulders, on which he and Ria sat, made balancing difficult, and each leg movement pinched his inadequately protected thigh between shoulder and saddle - it would not take long before both legs were rubbed raw. The multiple shadows were confusing and the night was cold now; he held Ria tightly, grateful for the warmth of her body close to his, and closed his eyes. Maybe a quick catnap... He jerked awake as the vlar stumbled and regained its regular pacing. Kirk shifted uncomfortably and looked about him. The smaller moon had set now, only the brilliant crescent gleamed away to his right; he must have been asleep for an hour or two. He yawned largely and heard a stifled giggle from Ria.

"JimDu sleeps well."

"Mmm. Your shoulder makes a comfortable pillow." He resisted the temptation to plant a kiss on that elegant ear so near his lips; this was hardly the time or the place. He straightened up, wincing at the ache in his back and the raw flesh on his inner thighs. "How much longer till dawn?"

"Not long. The sky lightens behind us now. Where will the Lord SpockLan rest?"

Kirk was wondering the same thing. In their hurried flight they had not had time to discuss their route, but he knew a much larger town, almost a city, lay not more than three days' journey away, even at this slow pace. Water would be their problem - his particularly, he knew the Vulcan metabolism permitted them to go long hours without water, but sooner or later he would have to drink.

"Is there water anywhere near?"

"Yes. We should reach it by midday."

Kirk almost groaned at the prospect of many more hours of this rolling, jerking motion. He could only hope he didn't get seasick - or vlar-sick! The murmur of voices up ahead told him that Tanar had wakened.

"SpockLan, why am I riding a vlar in the night? I went to sleep in my bed."

"We wish to reach the city before two more sunrises and so we started early. There was no need to wake you."

"Why must we go to Rath?"

"I have business there, Tanar."

"Where is JimDu?" Tanar strained himself to look over Spock's shoulder. "You have brought RiaDa. Why have you brought her?"

"To care for a small Lan who asks too many questions. Be silent, Tanar, I wish to think as I ride."

The vlar plodded on, unheeding of the increasing heat of the day. Spock scanned the horizon carefully, looking for signs of water. Fool to have left without waterskins. He gave a sudden exclamation of disgust, remembering the pouch beneath the high front of the saddle. He put one hand down to feel it - yes, it buckled on to the side and was surely a water container. He prodded it gently; it was empty. At the first chance they must fill it; he knew that Kirk could not last long without water in the heat of the day. He scanned the horizon once more and was relieved to see a darker smudge away to his left; he turned the vlar's head towards it and plodded on.

Kirk heard Ria give a murmur of relief.

"What is it, RiaDa?"

"I thought the Lord SpockLan was not going to the water-hole and the water-skin is empty, but he has turned the vlar's head now."

"Why didn't you tell us we were going to miss it?"

She turned a shocked face to him. "I could not tell the Lan, it is forbidden."

"You could have told me, and I could have told him we were heading the wrong way."

"Speak to your Lan so?" She seemed overwhelmed by the idea. "JimDu, your Lan must indeed be gentle if you may tell him when he is wrong."

"RiaDa, the Lord SpockLan would not wish to bring us all to our deaths if a simple word from us can help. Does that surprise you?" There was silence. "It would be his death too, RiaDa, and I am pledged to serve him. Remember, we are strangers in this area; why should we not accept the advice of those who know it?"

She sighed. "I would that all Lan were as kind as your Master."

Kirk could only echo the sentiment silently. His head was beginning to spin with the heat and his legs felt as though they were two masses of raw meat above the knee; he eased one away from the saddle and saw a trickle of blood run down his calf. He watched it idly, almost uncaring. The heat was sapping his energy and will and the permanent ache in his muscles drained him of rational thought. A little blood seemed unimportant, the drops would only add to the bright redness surrounding him.

Red! The word hit his tired mind like an explosion. Vulcan blood was green. Ria must not see the wounds on his legs. Surreptitiously, he rubbed his leg against the blue-grey flank of the vlar, praying no more would trickle down to betray him. He glanced at the other leg. It seemed to be all right. Once he stood up the short loose trousers would cover the raw patches; provided he did not bleed any more he could keep the wounds from showing. He looked up as a shadow crossed his face and found they were walking under trees, the vlar's pace quickening as they scented water ahead.

The pool was deep and shady, the water clear. Kirk slid ungracefully down from the vlar and felt his legs buckle beneath him. Instinctively he curled up, hoping to hide the raw flesh, not daring to move carelessly while Ria was so close. She gave a low cry of distress and slipped from the saddle; frightened to touch Kirk without Spock's permission she watched him with nervous eyes.

"Come here, girl," Spock said calmly, "and take the child. Leave the lazy Du where he lies." Unhurriedly he walked to the pool and, turning his back on Ria,



pulled the tiny tricorder from his pocket to scan the water swiftly. It was not as pure as he could have wished but it would not hurt him. However, Kirk must not drink it until he had added a purifying capsule. He walked back to the vlar and unbuckled the waterskin.

"Deal with the child, RiaDa," he told her. "I will attend to my Du when I have drunk."

Satisfied that her attention was given to Tanar he cupped his hands and drank deeply, then he filled the skin and slipped the tiny capsule in, carrying it to Kirk. His placid face did not betray his concern as he knelt beside the inert form, nor his relief as Kirk sat up slowly.

"I have brought water. Drink it slowly." He handed the skin to Kirk and watched him drink; when it was empty he took it back. "What is wrong? Is it the heat?"

"Partly - and partly my aching muscles," Kirk said ruefully. "But mostly because my legs are bleeding and I couldn't let Ria see them. That darn saddle was pinching me and there was nothing I could do about it."

Spock looked at the raw skin. "The spray in the medikit will stop the bleeding," he said, taking it from his pocket. He cast a swift glance at Ria and Tanar who were lying face down by the pool splashing happily. He slipped the loose trousers up and sprayed the area carefully. The disinfectant stung, making Kirk bite his lip.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock."

Spock shot him a warning look and stood up. "We should rest here during the heat of the day," he said, "and continue later when it is cooler. You need sleep and so does Ria."

Kirk nodded his agreement and stood up. "What about food?" he asked. "We can't use the emergency concentrates."

"The problem would seem to be solved." Spock pointed. Tanar was plucking fruit from a tree and stuffing it eagerly into his mouth.

"Come, SpockLan," he called. "I have found trall, my favourite, come and eat. There is plenty for us all."

Spock recognised the fruit as one he had eaten the previous day; it was safe for him to eat but not for Kirk. He took some and ate it, and then signed for Ria to come and take some. "Eat, RiaDa," he said, "but not you, JimDu. There is no food for lazy churls who lie on the ground. Since you are tired you may go to the other side of the pool and sleep."

Kirk understood and walked away, sitting under a tree to chew the small, tasty cube of concentrate he carried in an inner pocket. He heard the rustle of clothing and swallowed hastily. Ria looked at him with accusing eyes.

"You said the Lord SpockLan is kind, but he will not let you eat," she said. "I have brought you fruit, eat it quickly before he sees."

Kirk put out a hand and then drew it back. "No, RiaDa. The Lord SpockLan does not punish without reason, and if I take that he may be angry with you. I am all right, don't worry about me. What I really need is sleep, and if you can keep Tanar quiet long enough, sleep is what I am going to do."

He woke again when the shadows were long and the sky deep red with the coming of evening. Ria lay sleeping not far away, and Spock sat with Tanar by the pool. Kirk stretched and got up.

Tanar watched his approach with disapproval. "I'm tired of staying here, but Lord SpockLan would not leave until you woke and would not let me wake you."

"I am sorry, TanarLanRu," Kirk apologised. "Wouldn't the Lord SpockLan entertain you with more stories?"

Tanar pouted. "He made me rest," he complained. "He said my chatter pained his ears."

Kirk smothered a grin. Spock as a nurse-maid was a spectacle he was thoroughly enjoying.

When he mounted the vlar again behind Ria, he found that the saddle had been adjusted and no longer trapped his leg with each swaying step. He shot a grateful look at Spock as they set out once more. Less tired this time, he chatted softly to Ria as they rode, hoping to pick up some useful information from her.

"Why did you come to find us, RiaDa?" he asked her.

"I told you." She shivered a little. "I did not wish to be whipped."

"But why would they beat you, what had you done?"

"You asked me to care for the child," she said, surprised, "and then you took him away. They would know I had displeased the Lord SpockLan and they would beat me."

"But you hadn't displeased him."

She turned her head to look at him. "Then why did he not wish to take me with him once he had taken me to tend the child? And why did he wish to leave the child with me? Your Lord cannot be kind if he would act so."

Baffled, Kirk risked a direct question. "RiaDa, why can't we leave the child with someone? He is not ours, we found him wandering in the desert, running from the Du who had killed his father and would have killed him too if he had not run away. No-one else seems willing to help the poor little scrap and behaves as if we were monsters to suggest such a thing."

"But your Lan had taken him," she said, "and now he is his own son. One does not leave one's own son to the care of others. A LanDu costs much, much money to raise and if he has no father to pay for all then he must be slain. He cannot live as do the Du. The slaying of a Lan brings sorrow to all, for many Du must be sacrificed with him to attend to his needs in the dark world. It would have brought suffering and hardship to all the people of the town. You must see this."

"I didn't understand," Kirk said grimly.

She twisted herself in the saddle, studying his face. "But it is so with all, why do you not understand?"

"We are strangers to your town," he pointed out.

"You must come from far away if your ways are not as ours."

He smiled at her. "Very far away, RiaDa."

She smiled back, eyes lingering over his face. "Your eyes are golden in the sunlight," she murmured provocatively, "and they glitter with green lights. I have never seen eyes such as yours before. And your hair is lighter brown even than mine. Truly, you are good to look upon, JimDu." She put up a hand to touch the lock of hair that fell across his forehead. He accepted the caress, tempted again to kiss her, but when she slipped a hand under the folds of his hood he took her wrist.

"Not now," he said softly. "The Lord SpockLan sees us." But he felt an inner regret that it must also be 'not ever'. Vulcan women were often beautiful but unattainable, and unfortunately this one must remain unattainable unless the night was very dark! He caught his thoughts, this was no time to be thinking of warm arms and velvet skin and soaring, delicate eartips under his seeking mouth. He pushed her shoulders, turning her away from him.

"I've no wish to fall off this animal when it stumbles," he told her, laughing. "Keep your hands on the straps or we shall both end up in the sand."

At the second water hole they found fruit in abundance, but while he was

grateful for the sensation of a full stomach, Kirk found himself thinking of a good steak to satisfy his hunger. He pushed the thought down; that was another desire that must remain unsatisfied until he was back on the Enterprise. Any meat on this planet would curl him up into a ball of agony; not that he was likely to be tempted by it, the green blood gave it a most unpleasant appearance of putrefaction to a Human eye. He slept heavily throughout the hot afternoon, waking to find the damp folds of his hood sticking to his neck. His muscles were acclimatizing to the extra work demanded of them, but there was no answer to the problem of the endless heat. He longed for a deep, cool bath and wished he could immerse himself in the inviting water of the pool, but guessing that might be considered irreligious, did not attempt it. He mentioned the thought to Ria as they rode again that night and found that she shrank from him in dismay.

"But the Lord SpockLan would kill you if you did such a thing," she protested, horrified. "JimDu, do not utter such dreadful thoughts, I know you cannot mean them. There is only one place here where the Du may cover themselves in Water, in the river at Rath if your Lord SpockLan permits it."

"I was only joking," he said humbly.

"Then do not joke again on such a subject," she said severely, and would not speak to him again throughout the night.

With the dawn they saw the walls of the city in the distance, a city of white stone flushed pink by wind-blown sand. Kirk greeted the sight with relief. If he never rode a vlar again it would be too soon. He watched the straight slim back of the Vulcan as he rode the swaying animal with ease and envied him, believing he sat the creature with all the grace of a sack of potatoes.

The city streets were paved with stone, unlike the hard baked mud of the small town, and the clawed feet of the vlar scraped loudly on them in the quiet of the early morning as they rode in through the wide wooden gates. There were trees in plenty and purple vines which covered the walls in sheets of colour; clearly there was water enough for all here. Maybe he'd get that bath yet - even if it had to be in the river as Ria had suggested. A cold bath and a cool beer, he thought, miserably realising that his tunic was already soaking although the sun was not yet high; he'd willingly settle for a damp rag and a glass of tepid water.

He dropped tiredly from the vlar's back and went to help Tanar down. "Your permission, TanarLanRu?" he remembered to ask, just in time.

"You may lift me down, JimDu." The child was pale and inclined to be fretful. "The Lord SpockLan rode straight by the first inn," he complained, "and I am tired. Why did you do so, SpockLan? You did not even see the sign until I showed you. It was a nicer inn than this one." He looked disdainfully at the courtyard where a tiny fountain bubbled. "There were gardens there and here there is only one small pool and nowhere for me to play."

"There will be time enough for play when we are rested," Spock told him calmly. "Jimdu, see to our rooms."

Kirk walked into the inn and looked about him. There was no-one in sight and he wondered whether he should call out. He heard the sound of voices down a passageway and walked down it, opening the door at the end. A hooded Du was tending a roaring fire while two Da hurried to and fro with cooking pots. They did not hear the door open, so he decided to take the initiative.

"Must my Lord SpockLan wait on your convenience?" he asked reprovingly. "He and the little Lord TanarLanRu need a place to rest, for we have journeyed far only to find no Du to attend us."

"That wicked FalDu!" one woman gasped. "If he has been told once to watch the door he has been told a thousand times. The Lan may see him beaten for this, I promise you."

"As long as we have rooms within the minute for my Lan and the little LanRu

and his Da, then we need not trouble the Lan with the misdeeds of the Du." Unemotional the Vulcan might be, but Kirk was pretty sure he'd not want to watch some defenceless Du being punished.

The Da nodded gratefully, and hurried out to lead them upstairs, apologising over and over again that she only had rooms on the street for them. "The courtyard rooms are full," she told Kirk. "May the Lan forgive me, but the city is full for the festival of the New Water."

"The rooms are well enough," Spock said indifferently, looking round his. "Serve the child and his maid with food and let them sleep."

Ria touched Kirk's arm timidly. "Will the Lan tell me when he wishes TanarLanRu to rise?" she asked.

"Just let him have his sleep out," he told her quietly. "Lord SpockLan will want you both to rest properly."

"But you must ask him when the LanRu may rise," she persisted. "If you do not I may not forbid the LanRu to disturb the Lord SpockLan."

So the orders all had to come from the Lan, even for the children, Kirk realised. He went to Spock and gave him a muttered explanation. Spock nodded and crossed to Tanar.

"Tanar, you are to go with RiaDa and stay with her until I send for you," he told him.

Tanar showed him an innocent face. "As SpockLan says," he said.

"And moreover, you are to do as RiaDa tells you," Spock added. "If I hear you have not behaved yourself I shall not be pleased."

The slanting brows drew together in a frown of discontent. "To be ordered by a Da is not fitting for a LanRu," he said crossly. "The Lord SpockLan is my friend, may I not seek his company?"

"I have spoken," Spock said, unmoved. "You will obey RiaDa."

Tanar put on a pleading expression and Spock took his shoulders. His own expression did not visibly alter, but something in the bony face clearly told Tanar that further protests would be useless. He trailed out of the room with a hangdog look and Kirk found himself controlling an urge to laugh.

"Do not let him be a nuisance, RiaDa," Spock told her. "See that he obeys you, and tell him that he must explain himself to me if he does not."

As she bowed and followed the child, Kirk closed the door with relief, pushing back his hood. "You're going to make a wonderful father some day!" he grinned.

"I do not anticipate such an event," the Vulcan said placidly. "Bar the door behind me if you are going to sleep."

"Surely you're not going out? You've been travelling for hours!"

"I do not need rest yet," Spock replied, "and there is little point in my staying here to watch you sleep."

"No, I don't need a nursemaid," Kirk agreed. "Pity, though, I wouldn't mind getting my head down with Ria for an hour or two."

Spock's eyebrows rose at that, and Kirk wondered briefly if he'd offended some Vulcan ethic, but there was no way of telling whether or not Spock was shocked. The Vulcan paused at the door.

"The Human capacity for allowing themselves to be distracted by the opposite sex never fails to amaze me," he commented, and Kirk was left wondering whether or not he had just been politely reprimanded.

\* \* \* \* \*

As he stirred again in the early hours of the afternoon, Kirk realised why the innkeeper had been so apologetic about the rooms not being on the courtyard; the noise of the wheeled carts on the stone streets would have been enough to keep anyone less exhausted than himself awake. He lay on the soft fur, the sweat puddling under his back, grateful that at least his muscular aches and pains were beginning to ease up. He sat up, looking round the empty room. Spock must have been gone for hours; it was to be hoped that he'd not run into any trouble he couldn't handle. He slipped his tunic over his head once more. At least it had dried out in the heat of the day, but it didn't smell any too pleasant and he crinkled his nose as he went to the window and looked out.

The street was full of hurrying people, mostly Du, although an occasional Lan sauntered past with his attendant Du. The Lan did not seem to walk out in the city streets but travelled in the clumsy wheeled carts that passed to and fro beneath the window. There was an occasional burst of laughter from the Du, hastily quelled if a Lan passed near. If only it were not for the chains the Du wore, Kirk thought, the scene would be most attractive. The Thulya were good builders, their stone houses beautifully carved and decorated, solidly built too. Their clothes were bright and clean, and even the Du were well-nourished and healthy looking, although many of the Lan were bulky in appearance. Somehow, after knowing Spock, a fat vulcanoid was an offence to the eye. His roving eye paused; the tall lean figure on the other side of the street was unmistakable. He leaned out of the window intending to wave, but checked the gesture in time to prevent himself committing a mistake - probably shock them out of years' growth if they saw me waving like a lunatic at one of their precious Lan he thought as he drew back. He slipped the bar from the latch and a minute or two later Spock came into the room. The Vulcan looked cool and unruffled and Kirk, who found himself more offensive to his own nose every moment, wondered why it was that Spock always managed to look so neat while he, himself, seemed to have retained a fifteen-year-old's ability to make a new shirt look like an unmade bed in ten minutes flat.

"Some day you're going to have to tell me how you manage to look so cool," Kirk groaned. "I'd give a year's pay for a cool bath at the moment."

"I'm afraid you will be unable to indulge yourself," Spock said, sitting down on the bed and making a few checks on his tricorder. "There are baths in the city, but they are for the Lan - the Du bathe in the river." Kirk brightened. "It will be impractical for you to do so, I am afraid, since they bathe naked."

Kirk groaned again. "They don't provide water for washing here, either," he said.

"No; since there is water in plenty in the river, all go there." Spock held the tricorder up for a final check and put it back in his pocket. "Doubtless I can order water for us, and it is time we had some food. Will you go and deal with it?"

Kirk did so, and found Tanar in the kitchen with Ria, his face sticky with sweetmeats. He leaped up as Kirk entered. "JimDu, is the Lord SpockLan rested yet? I want to see him and ask him if he will take me out to see the Festival tonight."

"I am taking food and water to Lord SpockLan, suppose you come up with me and ask him," Kirk suggested.

"Let me take the Water for you, JimDu," Ria said, casting a worried eye at the precariously balanced jug.

Kirk let her take it and followed Tanar up the stairs. The child burst in unceremoniously. "SpockLan, RiaDa tells me it is the Festival of the New Water and I have always wanted to see the procession to the River, please take me this evening. Say you will, please."

"Gently, Tanar." Spock held up his hand. "First I must hear from RiaDa

how you have behaved." He looked at the girl. "Well, has he done as he was told?"

She hung her head. "Oh yes, Lord SpockLan, he was very good."

Spock inspected the sticky mouth. "Too many sweetmeats will spoil your teeth," he said. "Where did you get them from?"

"PerDa gave them me in the kitchen," he said happily. "You haven't said you will take me out yet, SpockLan."

"You are very persistent," Spock told him. "Very well, but not until after I have eaten, and not unless you wash your face first. Go with RiaDa again and be patient until I come for you."

Tanar pouted. "I have been with RiaDa all the afternoon and I am tired of the company of women." He caught Spock's eye on him and sighed. "Oh, very well. Come, RiaDa."

Kirk barred the door behind them. "Do I come too?" he asked. "And must I wash first as well?"

Spock looked him up and down without expression. "I would say it was essential."

Kirk laughed. "For everyone's comfort," he agreed, stripping. "And clean clothes too, before too long. We shall have quite a household soon, if we're not careful," he added, splashing himself vigorously.

"Yes. It is an additional problem we could well do without. Sooner or later we must find some way of getting rid of the child."

"You could ingratiate yourself into the favours of some wealthy LanA," Kirk suggested. "Charm her into thinking it a privilege to take care of him for you." He finished rubbing his wet hair and saw Spock's glacial glance. "No? Pity. I wouldn't mind trying it myself, if only it were feasible."

"I daresay not," Spock said coldly, "but we all have our limitations and I know my own too well to think your suggestion practical."

Kirk laughed and grimaced as he pulled his offensive clothes back on. "I'm sorry, Mr. Spock. I still tend to forget that logical solutions are the only sort to appeal to you. The trouble is, I can't think of a single logical solution to this problem."

"I can only think of one," Spock said, soberly. Kirk cocked a questioning eyebrow. "I believe it would be better if I did not mention it," Spock said slowly. "Were you the leader at this time it would be my duty to present things as I see them to you, even though your reaction would be emotional. Since you are not, I will keep my thoughts to myself for the moment. Some plan may present itself as we learn more of these people."

He went to the door. Kirk beat him to it by an inch, presenting the looped chain to him. "You don't open the door for yourself when I'm around," he reminded him, putting his hand to the latch.

Spock held him back and said, very quietly, "You are a most surprising person, for a Human, Captain." Kirk looked at him blankly. "You do not ask unnecessary questions - among other things."

His mind bursting with a thousand question, all of which the Vulcan would have certainly considered unnecessary, Kirk followed him down the stairs.

\* \* \*

They found a place on a small hill overlooking the river, with stone seats where the Lan could sit comfortably to watch the Festival unfold before them. The river sparkled in the setting sun, widening here into a shallow lake, spanned at each narrow end by an arched stone bridge. The sides were stepped with stones and many Du were entering the water, with much splashing and subdued

laughter. Most carried offerings of flowers, which they placed reverently on the surface, to float away into the deeper water at the centre of the lake, making the scene rich with colour. Ria touched Kirk's arm timidly.

"Will the Lord SpockLan permit us to bathe in the New Water also," she asked him.

"Would you like to?"

"I have never been here at the New Water," she answered, eyes shining. "I would dearly like to make my own promises for the future, especially if you were with me. The River is full now and much grace will be gained when the two moons rise together."

"I think Lord SpockLan will permit you to go," Kirk told her. "I will ask him."

She caught his arm. "Will  
Disappointment showed in her  
I not pleasing to you?"

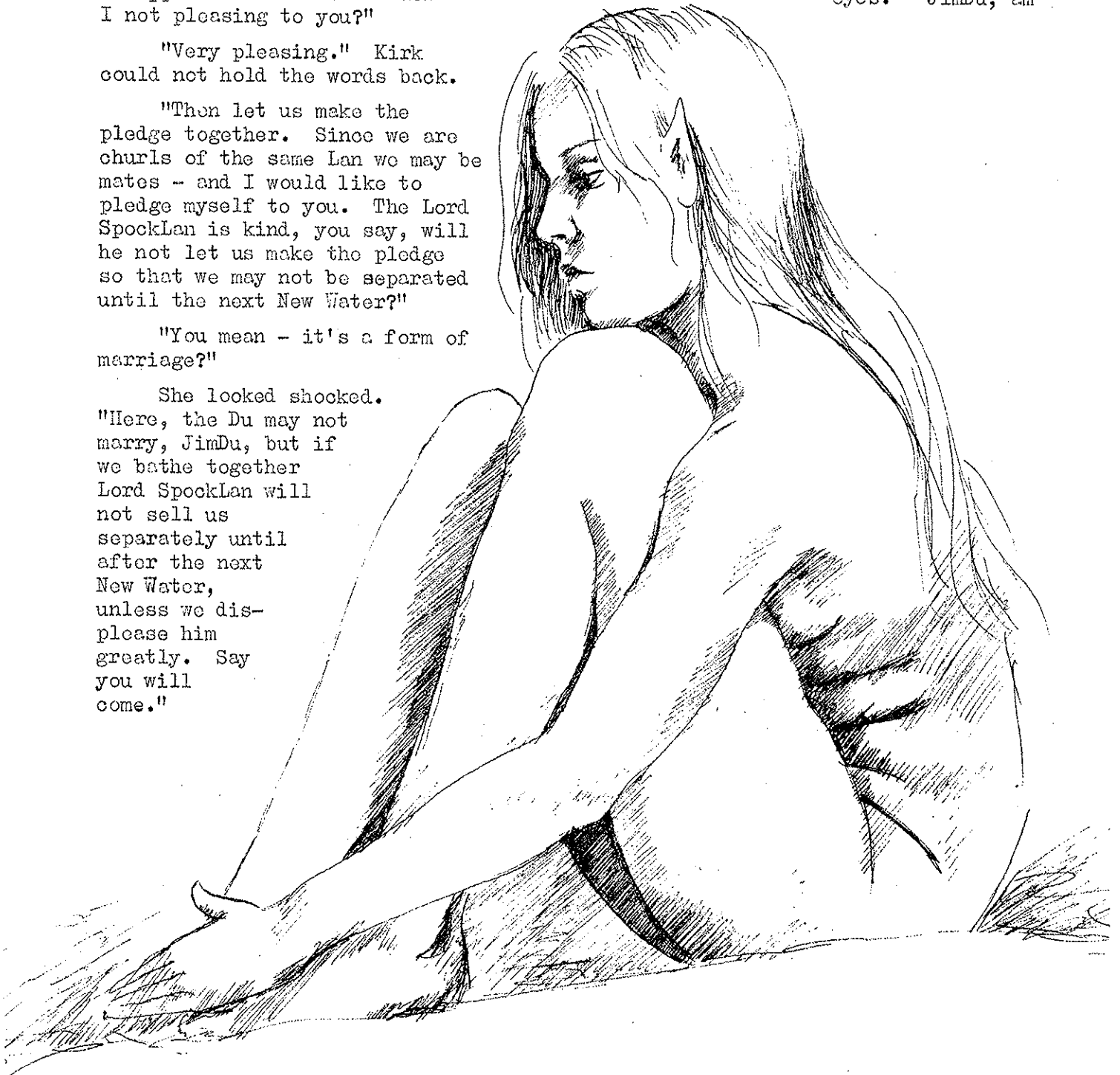
you not come too?"  
eyes. "JimDu, am

"Very pleasing." Kirk  
could not hold the words back.

"Then let us make the  
pledge together. Since we are  
churls of the same Lan we may be  
mates - and I would like to  
pledge myself to you. The Lord  
SpockLan is kind, you say, will  
he not let us make the pledge  
so that we may not be separated  
until the next New Water?"

"You mean - it's a form of  
marriage?"

She looked shocked.  
"Here, the Du may not  
marry, JimDu, but if  
we bathe together  
Lord SpockLan will  
not sell us  
separately until  
after the next  
New Water,  
unless we dis-  
please him  
greatly. Say  
you will  
come."



"The decision is not mine." Kirk could only be glad that it was so. He knelt before Spock. "Lord, your churls beg leave to bathe together. Will you permit it?"

"I wish JimDu to remain at my side," Spock said. "RiaDa may bathe, if it is her wish." He looked at her. "Go now, RiaDa, JimDu will stay with me."

Conditioned against protest, RiaDa went slowly down the hill. Tanar watched her go. "I'm glad you wouldn't let JimDu go," he said complacently. "RiaDa is silly. JimDu wouldn't want to be bothered with a silly girl like that for a mate. Look, SpockLan, look! The torches!"

A glimmer of lights was showing in the distance, coming gradually nearer. The line of flaming brands moved down the road beside them, carried by Du and Da, hands entwined. Each wore garlands and crowns of flowers and very little else. They circled the lake, standing two or three deep on the stone steps and bridges and the noise and laughter died away. Into the silence one voice rang out in song, joined by other voices until the whole area rang with sound. High and triumphant it swelled and rolled about them, dying away until one voice again sang alone, sweet and piercing in the cool night until it too died away. The great crowd remained hushed and waiting, eyes fixed on the water. The sky gleamed silver-pink; Thul's two moons were about to rise simultaneously, as they did only once each Thul year. As the silver beams appeared, the rays reflected in the water, a great shout went up and the torches were thrown into the lake, flames hissing as they went out. As the last flame died the crowd broke into frenzied shouting and laughter and the Du plunged into the lake, careless of bodies beneath them - clearly many were going to be hurt and injured before the night was out.

Kirk stood behind Spock's shoulder watching the scene, while Tanar laughed and pointed, chattering away, but eventually weariness began to fight a winning battle over his excitement and he snuggled closer to Spock, eyelids drooping over tired eyes.

Just as well, Kirk thought, eyeing some of the Du entwined on the steps. Time for all respectable people to go home.

The Lan were rising, some of them leaving quietly, others going down towards the river. Spock rose and indicated Tanar. "Take him back to the inn, JimDu. I will search for RiaDa and bring her with me."

Kirk nodded, lifting the boy gently. He opened his eyes and smiled. Kirk smiled back.

"You said you would be my Du, JimDu," Tanar said sleepily. "May I hold your chain if SpockLan permits?"

Kirk nodded, looking at Spock. The Vulcan's eyes were unfathomable, and Kirk's hazel eyes met his in a question.

"If JimDu wishes to serve you, TanarLanRu, he may give you the chain." He turned away abruptly and walked into the crowd.

"Have I made him angry?" Tanar asked in a small voice. "What have I done? You did say you wished to serve me, JimDu, why will he not allow it?"

"He will allow it," Kirk said softly, moving the boy onto one arm and passing the intricate hand-grip to him. "But he will not make me serve you unless I wish to."

"The Lord SpockLan is strange," Tanar said after thinking it over. "But he is kind."

Not a bad summing-up, Kirk thought.

He attended to the child's needs and saw him settled into his bed, then, after ordering food and water, went into his own room to wait. He occupied the time by rinsing his tunic and trousers, hoping they would dry in the cold night air, and, pulling the fur from his bed on the floor around him sat by



the window, The street was empty save for an occasional couple returning from the Festival, too engrossed in each other to notice the lonely watcher at the window. Kirk shivered, pulling his fur closer, yawning hugely as sleep threatened to engulf him, and wondering idly whether Spock had found a pair of willing arms to warm him. The light of the twin moons was bright on the white stone of the houses and he shut his eyes against its brilliance.

The clicking of the latch brought him awake as Spock closed the door behind him.

"You should be asleep," he said reprovingly.

"I was," Kirk yawned.

The slanting brows rose. "Sitting at the window? It is as well that Ria's eyes are not as sharp as mine, your head is uncovered."

Kirk left the window quickly. "You found her, then?"

"Obviously."

"Was she...all right? I mean, was she alone?"

The Vulcan noted the worry in Kirk's voice. He took off his coat and placed it neatly on the window seat. "Is this the Earth emotion known as 'jealousy', Captain? I saw that she seemed to take a great interest in you."

You don't miss much, Kirk thought, half amused, half annoyed. "I don't think I'm jealous, Mr. Spock," he said aloud, "but I wouldn't want her to get hurt; there was quite a bit of fighting going on down there."

"Yes, an interesting display of primitive behaviour," Spock agreed.

"But was she all right?" Kirk persisted.

"I extricated her from trouble satisfactorily," Spock told him calmly, "and I brought her straight back to the inn. Does that answer your question, Captain?"

"Damnit!" Kirk was angry. "I wasn't enquiring into your morals, Mr. Spock, and kindly don't keep calling me 'Captain'. I told you to make it Jim. I'll call you by your first name if it will help you to be less formal!"

"You already do," Spock said placidly.

Kirk stared at him. "You mean that Spock is your given name, not your family name?"

"Yes."

"But...why?"

"No Human can pronounce it," Spock explained. "Even my mother can only manage an approximation of our family name."

"Try me," Kirk challenged.

Spock uttered a word - at least, Kirk hoped it was a word. It sounded more like the dying cry of a Rigellian glow-rat. He laughed.

"I'll give you best on that, Spock," he said. "I'm not even going to try. I might give my tongue a hernia."

Spock looked at him blankly. "I fail to see how even the Human tongue can suffer from such a condition," he commented.

"Never mind." Kirk spread the fur on the floor and lay down. "I seem to have done nothing but sleep since we got here," he said. "What with the heat and the ache in my feet, I feel about a hundred!"

"Are you regretting your decision to come with me?"

"There would be no logic in regretting a situation I can't change,"

Kirk said teasingly. "No, Mr. Spock," he relented. "I'm not regretting it at all. They are an interesting people with tremendous potential."

"Indeed," Spock agreed. "Once this period of slavery is over, their culture should develop rapidly. From what I saw in the city this afternoon a more mechanised era is close at hand."

Kirk heard the large couch creak as Spock lay down. "You don't like slavery, do you?" he asked gently.

"I do not suffer from the need to like or dislike," Spock told him coldly. "It is a phase frequently observed in primitive cultures."

Kirk thought the Vulcan might give him credit for some powers of observation. He was certain that his position bothered Spock more than it bothered him. He tucked his fur under his shoulders, shivering. Spock's couch creaked again, and soft footsteps approached him. Spock laid another fur over him without speaking and went back to his own couch.

"Well, at least you don't like me to be cold," Kirk remarked sleepily.

"Lack of emotion does not blind me to the physical needs of other creatures," Spock retorted.

Kirk smiled in the darkness, but refrained from teasing the Vulcan further. He looked at the shadows on the ceiling, wondering about his ship out there in the hands of another man. Owen had seemed competent enough, the little he'd seen of him, but he still wasn't too happy about leaving the Enterprise in unknown hands. He smiled at himself. Probably Farmer had felt the same way about Kirk's trial period aboard the Defiant. He might have been right, too, Kirk remembered, shuddering at the memory of a manoeuvre that had almost gone wrong. Only a helpful cough from the experienced navigator had pulled him out of a tight situation in time. He stirred restlessly.

"Something wrong, Jim?"

Kirk heard his name with surprising pleasure. "No, Spock. Just thinking about the Enterprise."

"Captain Owen has an excellent record," Spock said quietly. "He was First Officer of the Constellation under Captain Decker, and took over as temporary Captain for four weeks on one occasion when Captain Decker was on sick leave. He is older than you and very experienced. I believe the Enterprise is in safe hands with him."

"Safer than mine?" Kirk couldn't resist the dig -- or was he fishing for a compliment? He wasn't sure. He was unlikely to get one from Vulcan lips anyway. The Vulcan surprised him.

"That is unlikely, Jim, you are the most competent Captain I have ever served under."

Kirk sat up to look at him, regardless of the cold air on his bare shoulders. "Why, thank you, Spock. You're the last person I'd have expected to be handing out polite comments."

"That was not a polite comment." The voice almost verged on the indignant. "I merely stated what I see to be the truth. There is no need to thank me for that."

Kirk lay down again, laughing. "And I daresay you'll be as outspoken when your comments are not so polite, eh?"

"You are the Captain." The voice was even again. "I should endeavour to keep any such comments private if possible, unless the situation required otherwise."

"I see. Do I take that as a warning?"

"A warning?"

"To watch my step!"

Spock did not bother to reply to the teasing challenge. Lost in his own thoughts again, Kirk suddenly wondered how Spock knew so much about Owen. "Have you known Owen long?"

"I had not met him before."

"Then how did you know so much about him?"

"I ran a check on his record."

"So I'm not the only one who's worried about the Enterprise?"

"A Starship is a very valuable piece of machinery," Spock said calmly. "I see no illogic in checking to see that she would be handled safely."

She? Kirk smiled at the pronoun. The Vulcan usually referred to the ship impersonally, unlike the Human crew. "I don't know that either of us could have done anything about it if she was not going to be handled well," he commented. "Are you sure it was logical to check out information that might have worried you? And when did you find the time to do it?" he added, remembering the two hectic days of preparation.

"I need less sleep than Humans," Spock said, repressively, "but I do need some sleep. I suggest you allow us both to get some before it is daylight."

Crushed again, Kirk thought, and slept.

\* \* \* \* \*

Being tired after his late night on top of the long journey, Tanar did not protest at being left with only Ria for company the next day, and Kirk accompanied Spock to see some more of the city. Not far from the arena round the lake they found another area with stone seats rising round three sides of a flat rectangular platform.

"A theatre?" Kirk guessed.

"It is possible," Spock conceded, "but not likely, I think. There is no place behind for actors, only these two small paths beneath the seats."

There was no sign of activity there for the moment, so they left the area and walked on. There were several market places and Spock took the opportunity to sell some more of their stock of uncut gems and to buy more clothes for himself and Kirk. Kirk carried them gratefully, murmuring, "It's going to be good to feel clean again. Thanks, Spock."

One eyebrow lifted. "It would be illogical to allow you to become unwell from putting on wet clothes each morning," he said equitably.

Kirk had not realised the Vulcan had noticed the dampness of his tunic. It had dried swiftly enough in Thul's dry heat, but was soaking again now and he wriggled his shoulders uncomfortably as they walked, recording the daily lives of the Thulya. Many of the Du bore obvious bruises this morning, reminders of the orgy and violence of the previous night. Kirk noticed several Da with eyes puffy from weeping and wondered whether one night of freedom each year was better or worse than no freedom at all. They were coming to the outskirts of the city now, the houses giving way to long, low buildings from which came the murmur of voices.

They paused by one small window and looked in. The large room was filled with long tables heaped with cloth, and the Da sat on benches sewing busily and chattering away amongst themselves. Two or three Du stood by with sticks and when the talk grew too loud used them to prod or even strike the Da. A Lan sat at a table at the far end with papers piled around him.

"It's a clothing factory," Kirk said, surprised. "I hadn't realised their society was as far advanced as this. You're right, Spock. They aren't far away from realising the necessity for mechanisation, they may even be working towards it already."

Spock finished his swift, unobtrusive recording and they walked on to some of the other buildings in the area, finding a smithy, leather workers, shoemakers, potters and several other crafts. Most of the Du seemed happy enough in their work and were not ill-treated, but one or two of the overseers were harsh and cruel in their discipline. They turned back at the city wall, retracing their steps.

"It would be interesting to find out more about how the workers are organized," Kirk said reflectively. "I wonder if they are all the slaves of the individual factory owners or if they come from a common pool, so to speak."

"I imagine the former," Spock said. "The inns are owned by the Lan and run by the Du. They would be less controllable if they were not individually owned."

"So they would have very little choice of job," Kirk commented.

"None at all, I imagine. Fortunately, the precise details of the society are not within our terms of reference, since we have many other things with which to concern ourselves. We will find somewhere to eat and drink, Jim. It is almost noon and you must be thirsty."

"Always!" Kirk laughed. "Being on a lead makes me feel like a dog... If only I could pant like one I'd be a lot happier."

"I have never taken a dog for a walk," Spock said thoughtfully. "My mother used to tell me about the dog she owned as a child, but I could never quite understand the pleasure she obviously gained from taking it out for a walk." He looked at the chain in his hand. "If it comes to that, I still don't understand."

Kirk took a long look at the Vulcan's face, half turned towards him. He'd never seen Spock look so relaxed before, the stern line of the mouth softer and a glint in the dark eyes that might almost have been the beginning of a smile. He smiled back. The mobile brow lifted fractionally and dropped again. Kirk felt a warm surge of affection for his companion and wondered how he could ever have thought him 'stone-faced'. If you watched him carefully enough the tiny changes of expression were enough to let you know that there was a potential friend beneath the formal reserve.

He brought food and water to Spock, dropping to one knee. The inn they had chosen had a garden and Spock had selected a shady seat beneath a trellis of feathery pink flowers.

"Sit down," Spock said suddenly. "No, not on the ground, on the seat."

"Don't be daft." Kirk sank to the ground. "I'll use the seat for a backrest and sit up if anyone comes by." He grinned up at the Vulcan. "You'll find yourself black-balled by the Lan if you're not careful."

Spock allowed a look of utter confusion to cross his face. "That cannot mean what I can only think it means, Jim!"

Kirk broke into muffled hoots of laughter, stifling the sound in the garments he carried as best he could. The expression and the remark coming from Spock of all people was more than he could take. He buried his face in his arms and laughed until he cried.

"The Du seated in the presence of his Lan," a voice said, harsh with disapproval. "Your laxity, sir, will set a bad example to all our Du."

"The Du has been punished," Spock replied indifferently. "You can hear that he is weeping." Kirk felt another crazy surge of laughter grip his diaphragm and doubled up in an effort to control it. At last the spasms ceased, but he still did not dare look up.

"It's all right," Spock said softly. "He's gone."

Kirk lifted his head. "You crazy idiot!" He grinned affectionately.

The stone face looked back at him. "I believe that is not meant to be

insulting." It was a statement, not a question.

"I thought Vulcans didn't tell white lies," Kirk accused him. "You told the Lan I was crying."

Spock looked thoughtfully at his reddened eyes. "I have never understood why Humans cry with laughter, but it is a phenomenon I have frequently observed. I made the logical deduction that that was what you were doing and simply provided him with incomplete data. No untruth was needed. However, the experiment had better not be repeated in public." He stood up. "If you have rested sufficiently we will continue with our work for the day. I think it would be desirable to return via the small arena we found this morning. We may discover its purpose if we visit it frequently."

\* \* \*

"Second time lucky," Kirk murmured, as they walked along the narrow gangway. Many Lan were seated there, talking among themselves; their Du were gathered together outside. Spock slipped the chain from his wrist, signalling Kirk to join them. He sat close by the entrance, hoping to see and hear something of what went on inside.

After a minute or two an imposing vehicle deposited a richly dressed Lan, jewels gleaming in the ruffles of his shirt. He walked slowly up the narrow pathway, the Du falling back to make room for him. Kirk stood up hurriedly, bowing low in company with the rest of the Du. The man paused, and for a moment Kirk thought he was going to speak to him but he addressed the Du beside Kirk.

"KerDu, I hear you lost your sister last night."

The Du lifted his head, rage on his face. "Her Lan killed her, Lord Verde-Lan, because she resisted him." He dropped his eyes again.

Verde's eyes were sad. "It is ever so at the Festival of the New Water, KerDu, and yet the Du mutter if we seek to restrict their freedom on this one night. What would you have me say to the Council of Lan?"

The Du shook his head. "It is not for a Du to speak, Lord."

"But yet you have thoughts on this matter."

KerDu lifted his head. "Though I die for it, Lord Verde-Lan, yes, I have thoughts on this matter."

"Speak them." The Du was silent. "Come, there are only Du to hear what you have to say and they will not betray you. Speak out and fear not."

"I would have the Du free to make a choice in these matters," the man said quietly.

"Free only in that, or do you seek your freedom in all matters?" Verde asked sternly.

"For the beginning, free in matters that concern them closely," the Du said bravely. "Freedom would be a great gift and the Du would have to learn to use it wisely. But to make our own choice of partners, and to be allowed to stay with those we love instead of being parted at the whim of the Lan would fill the Du with hope, and with reverence for the wisdom of the Lan."

"But in the end you would be free?" the Lan persisted.

The Du met his eyes. "Freedom for my children's children, at the least, Lord Verdolan."

Most of the Du had fallen back, leaving only two or three beside Kirk and KerDu. Verde ran his eyes over the small group.

"Are there others who agree?" he asked them.

"Aye!" "Aye." Kirk added an "Aye" of his own, suppressing the thought that he might be instantly haled to a Thulyan prison, posing Spock an impossibly difficult problem.

Verde sighed. "My good Du, there are Lan who are sympathetic to these ideas," he said softly, "but the city of Rath was not built in a moment, all things take time. Follow me to the entry and listen to the debate of the Lan. You will see that you may hope, and hope will help to heal the sorrows of the day."

Kirk followed KerDu to the entry and leaned against the stone wall. He could see Spock one or two rows away. The Vulcan raised an eyebrow at him, almost imperceptibly, and Kirk tried to look reassuringly confident without attracting attention. He must have succeeded in getting the message across, for the Vulcan's shoulders relaxed visibly. Kirk felt the new warmth within him increase. So the Vulcan had been concerned; logically, of course, because he would not wish Kirk to imperil their mission, but Kirk was suddenly certain that the concern had been a more personal one. He shifted the pile of garments he held to the other arm and watched the scene with interest.

Verde walked to the small platform and held up his hand for silence. "My fellow Lan, the Council meet this day to consider the problems that beset us yet again this year. Many of you will have lost churls in last night's Festival, and even more will find your Du incapable of work for some time to come. We must find an answer to this problem, which increases every year."

A grey-haired Lan in the row in front of Spock rose to his feet. "The Du are but children," he said harshly. "We should treat them so and lock them away on the Night of the New Water."

"Not so." Kirk could not see the Lan who spoke. "The Du are children only if they are treated like children. My Du returned unharmed because they knew there would be more enjoyment for them soon. If the Lord MerLan would treat his Du less brutally they would not allow their passions to rage unchecked on the one night they have their freedom. Give them respect, my Lord, and they will return it hundredfold."

Several voices were raised at this and Verde again held up his hand. "My Lords, many voices together cannot be heard. The Lan pay each other respect in this at least."

The hubbub died. One Lan remained on his feet. "The Lord SenLan is right. The Du are Thulyan as are the Lan. They work well for us for the most part, and I have found some Du loathe to quit my service when I have had occasion to reduce my household. I have found them faithful and loyal, sharing in both my joys and sorrows. They are not children, Lords, they think and feel as we do."

He sat down; the grey-haired MerLan rose again. "My Lords, I never thought to hear such words of treason spoken in the Council." He glared about him. "My Du will do my bidding because they fear me. That is the only weapon with which we hold them in their place."

"Do you not fear them also, MerLan?" SenLan's voice asked. "Do you not fear to walk down a dark road lest your Du slit your throat? It is not unheard of, Lords. Many churls have escaped bondage and wander in the desert, masterless. What will we do if they attack us? How many of our Du will remain loyal and protect us, and how many will flee to join their brothers in freedom?"

"Freedom? You call it freedom to wander homeless in the desert?"

"The anger of the desert sun is less hot than the wrath of some Lan. Maybe they think it better to risk possible death in the desert than certain death at the hands of their Master?"

The argument raged on for several hours and Kirk forgot the heat and the pain in his feet in his fascination. At last, one Lan who had sat, unspeaking, at the very front, rose to his feet.

"Lords, I have been listening patiently to your words and I think the time has come to give you news that may alter some of the opinions you express." He walked up onto the platform and faced them all. "Some of us, as you know, have

many Du, some many tens of them, who work in our craft houses to supply the wants of Lan and Du. This has brought prosperity and peace to Rath, where all Du have their rightful place and no beggars lie dying by the roadside as they did in the days of my childhood. You would agree, I think, that this has been for the good of all, both Lan and Du." There was a murmur of assent. He looked round, studying the faces closer to him. "Lords, I have found a way to speed the work of the Du, to produce more that we may sell to other cities and bring us greater wealth. You greet my words with pleasure, but I must warn you that this way of working not only makes the work speedier, but fewer Du are needed. One Du may do a task where ten are needed now. I ask you to consider whether the greater wealth we may all enjoy together will compensate for the beggars you will find barring your way about the city streets, or whether we should lead the Du into the paths of freedom and so allow them to lead useful lives without our watchful eyes."

There was another burst of loud voices. Looking round, Kirk saw that the speech had not come as a surprise to many of the younger Lan and that some of them were watching the speaker warily. He wondered what they knew, or guessed, was coming that worried them so much. Eventually the grey-haired MerLan managed to make his voice heard above the rest.

"What is this miracle the Lord HaseLan seeks to bring about? May the Lan not be told how he proposes to heap new wealth upon us so generously?"

Hase left Verde's side and came to the front of the platform. The Lan reseated themselves and grew silent. Hase paused a moment before speaking.

"Lords, even the Lan have seen the work of the Da in their kitchens." He paused again, waiting until the laughter and comment stopped. "When water is boiled for cooking it gives off a white gas. The white gas is strong; contained and controlled it may drive wheels and rods at great speed. In this way, the work of the Du may be helped."

To Kirk's surprise there was a deathly hush among the Lan. It lasted several seconds and was broken by MerLan.

"Blasphemer!" The word rang out harshly. "I did not come to the Council Meet to listen to blasphemy. The Water of Thul is sacred, and death should be the fate of those who seek to use it thus."

For a moment Kirk thought there was going to be a riot in the tiny arena, but Verde held up his hand and the angry Lan sat down again and waited.

"I have heard the words of Lord HaseLan before," he told them quietly, "and I have thought long and hard about them before I consented to allow him to speak to you all. The Water is not changed for ever when it changes to the white gas, but changes back to Water when it cools. The Water of Thul is sacred, but we have long known how to use its power to make the mills turn for us. I ask you to consider now, whether we may not use the Water in this new form. We will not speak of it today, it is close to the hour of the last meal, but we will meet again in Council on the day of the Red Flower. Lan, I thank you for your patience."

He left the platform and paused by KerDu. "I cannot bring your sister back, KerDu," he said gently, "but have I given you hope that better times may come?"

The Du bowed. "May the Water of your Fountain ever flow, Lord VerdeLan."

"May the Waters of the Fountain flow one day for your children's children, KerDu!"

Kirk slipped out of the arena and waited for Spock near the entrance.

"That's going to make quite a report for the Vulcan Council," he commented as he fell in behind the Vulcan. "The main survey will be done at a very interesting time in the development of this area of the planet at least."

"Affirmative." Spock did not elaborate further, but the bony face was clearly absorbed in thought. Kirk stepped aside to let a Lan pass him and came

to Spock's shoulder once more.

"Don't tell me they won't get excited over this," he pleaded softly, teasingly.

"I must do so, if you are under that impression," Spock returned, equally softly. "But I will admit that they will feel a lively curiosity about these people. Will that satisfy you, Jim?"

"If we weren't in public, I'd shake your hand, at least," Kirk told him.

"Knowing your propensity for undue exuberance, I can only be grateful that we are in public," Spock replied.

\* \* \*

Tanar greeted Spock's return with delight. "I have had enough of the company of women," he said loftily, "and will spend the evening with you, SpockLan."

"Thank you," Spock said politely. "And have you thanked RiaDa for her care of you during the day?"

The boy scowled. "She would not let me play with PelDa," he complained, "and so I punished her."

"Punished her?" Spock's voice was icy. "I do not remember giving you permission to punish RiaDa, Tanar. Doubtless RiaDa had good reason for not allowing you to play." He looked across at Ria, who slid close to Kirk with frightened face. "Come, RiaDa, tell me what happened."

She knelt. "Lord SpockLan, the LanRu is right, I would not let him play; therefore he punished me."

"That is no explanation. Tell me your reason for not letting him play."

"PelDa had work to do," she whispered, "and she would have been whipped when it was not done."

Spock turned to Tanar. "You knew PelDa had work to do?"

"But I wanted her to play with me, SpockLan. I am a Lan and the Du are here to serve."

"PelDa is not your Da, Tanar, and you should not have asked her to play when she should be working." Spock's voice was calm as ever, his face immobile. "How did you punish RiaDa?"

Tanar hung his head. "I struck her with my fist, Lord SpockLan."

"Would RiaDa serve you so?"

The child looked up in astonishment. "The Du do not strike the Lan, Lord SpockLan."

"Then you should not strike them, TanarLanRu. RiaDa shows you much kindness and you should not repay her with blows. Will you not tell her that you are sorry?"

Tanar looked steadily at Spock, but his lower lip was trembling. "If you tell me I should, I will say so."

"I cannot tell you what to do, it is your own mistake and you must be your own judge."

The boy gazed up at him a moment longer, then turned to the kneeling RiaDa. "I am sorry if I hurt you, RiaDa. You have been very good to me."

"The blow was very soft, TanarLanRu," she comforted him.

He flung his arms round her neck and put his cheek to hers. "I do love you, RiaDa," he sobbed. She held him tightly.

"Take him to wash for the last meal," Spock told her gently.

As she lifted him the boy held out a hand to Spock. "I love you, too, Lord



SpockLan," he said, catching his breath in a small sob. Spock did not take his hand, but the look in his eyes must have satisfied the child, for he smiled brilliantly over Ria's shoulder as she carried him away.

Kirk swallowed the lump in his throat and quelled the teasing comment he had intended. "He's quite a kid."

Spock turned away without replying.

"Are all Vulcan children so cute?" Kirk continued, smiling, picturing a small Spock taking his punishment like a man.

"Tanar is not Vulcan," Spock reminded him. "The resemblance is only physical."

"No," Kirk sighed. "I forgot your race is...unemotional." He pushed the picture of the young Spock away with regret. "A pity. I'd just managed to imagine what you must have been like as a child, but I suppose Vulcan childhood is very different from this."

"I merely said that Tanar is not Vulcan," Spock said. "Whether or not Vulcan children are 'cute' as you call it, I do not know. It is not something I have ever thought about. They are as the young of any species, and find it hard to learn the ways of the adult world around them."

Kirk frowned. "You mean a Vulcan child has to learn to be unemotional? But that's...impossible!"

Spock raised his eyebrows. "No, I assure you it is not," he said seriously.

"You mean you, too..." Kirk was not sure how to put the question without insulting Spock, who had always behaved as though an emotion was not only totally alien but also repulsive.

"I, too," Spock nodded, "had to learn to control my emotions as a child."

"But I'd always thought that you were all so different," Kirk began, "that you didn't know what a feeling was if it leaped up and hit you in the eye."

The dark eyes met the hazel ones squarely. "Childhood is long past, Jim. Can you remember when you could not read?"

Kirk shook his head. "I can't, no, but many Humans can, Spock."

"It is so with Vulcans. Most learn control so young that they...forget." He turned away. "Emotion is best forgotten in childhood. Will you fetch food for us?"

Kirk started. "I'm sorry, Spock. I'd forgotten all about it." But as he went downstairs he found himself wondering -

Was it possible that Spock of Vulcan had been...a late reader?

\* \* \* \* \*

"Lord SpockLan, will you take me out with you today?"

"You have a reason, Tanar?"

Tanar peeped up at him. "RiaDa said the blow I gave her was soft, SpockLan, but I was angry and meant to hurt her. Will you let me buy her a small necklace such as the Da wear to show her that I am sorry."

"That is well thought of," Spock approved. "Yes, I will take you to the Market with me."

The child jumped up and down. "You will not tell her, SpockLan? I want it to be a surprise for her."

"Then you must control your excitement, Tanar, or RiaDa will guess you have a secret."

"I will be as grave as you yourself," Tanar promised and fell into an

imitation of Spock's sober demeanour that almost rendered Kirk hysterical with suppressed laughter.

He spent a long time poring over the wide choice of necklaces spread out on display, finally choosing one of tiny blue flowers. "It is pretty, like RiaDa." He put his head on one side. "Do you not think so?"

"I have never considered the subject, Tanar."

"But all men like to look on pretty women," Tanar told him, putting on a wordly-wise air. "My father loved a pretty Da, don't you, Lord SpockLan? I know JimDu finds her pretty, don't you, JimDu?"

Kirk suppressed a grin, and gazed at Spock with innocent eyes. Spock ignored him. "A pretty face may hide an unkind heart, Tanar. RiaDa is kind and that is more important than her outward appearance."

Tanar was unconvinced, but tucked the necklace into his pocket importantly. "I will give it to her at the last meal," he said, "and she will cry a little and kiss me." He wandered off to inspect a stall of brightly painted toys.

Kirk hoped his shaking shoulders weren't too obvious to anyone but Spock. The Vulcan gave him a repressive glance, murmuring, "I believe you are better fitted than I to give the child the advice he needs."

"He doesn't need advice," Kirk spluttered. "He's working things out very nicely for himself."

Spock raised an eyebrow and set off to follow Tanar, pausing to study some tiny wooden vlar laid out on a stall. Each animal was carved in minute detail, down to the three sharp claws on the feet. Spock beckoned the stall keeper and bargained, more adroitly now, and when Kirk had knelt for him to take the necessary leta from his money-strings, he pointed one particular animal out to Kirk.

"That one, JimDu." As Kirk lifted the carving, he added, "There is something about the curl of that ear...do you not think so?"

Kirk studied it, and saw what Spock was referring to. One ear was just beginning to come uncurled, as if the vlar was flicking it straight. He grinned reminiscently and turned to follow Spock, when he heard Tanar's shrill voice above the crowd.

"SpockLan. Oh, Lord SpockLan, where are you?"

"He's frightened of something," Kirk said urgently. "Over there, Spock!"

They pushed their way through the crowds to the edge of the Market. "That way." Spock pointed. Tanar was speeding down the street, dodging amongst the wheeled carts, followed by a Du.

"SpockLan, where are you?"

"Here, Tanar," Spock called. "I am here."

Tanar heard the cry and turned, his foot slipping on the stones and he fell, rolling beneath the wheels of a cart piled high with building stones.

"No!" Kirk said tightly. "Spock, no. It went right over him." Forgetful of his role, he pushed past Spock, wrenching the chain from his wrist. The terrified Du in the cart whipped up his vlar and disappeared swiftly round the corner. Other Du also ran from the scene. The street was empty by the time Kirk reached the small body that lay so still.

He knelt beside Tanar, cradling the tiny head in gentle hands. "Tanar," he whispered.

The eyelids fluttered. "I ran from HalDu," he said, his voice a tiny thread. "I was a coward." He coughed, green blood trickling from his mouth. "Tell Lord SpockLan I thank him for the love he gave me." His head fell back.

"Not a coward," Kirk's voice broke. "You had a brave heart, TanarLanRu."

He lifted the battered body in his arms, unashamed of the tears on his face. Spock came to stand beside him, his face a mask.

"It was his father's murderer chasing him," Kirk said.

"So I deduced." The Vulcan's voice was even. "He escaped me down the alleyways. Is the child dead?"

Kirk looked at the blank eyes and felt a surge of hatred rise in him. "Yes, Mr. Spock, he's dead."

"I wonder what we should do next."

"Grieve for him a little," Kirk said furiously.

"We all have our own way of grief," Spock told him distantly. "Logically..."

"Damn your logic," Kirk snarled. "Was this the logical solution you hoped might present itself?"

"I did not express a hope, I stated - "

"Don't bother to explain yourself," Kirk interrupted. "I understand, Mr. Spock, the child is dead, the problem solved, and now we can get on with our work in peace."

The dark eyes dropped before his. "Give me your chain, JimDu." The voice was icy.

"Take it yourself and go to the devil." The world blurred to Kirk. "Just give me a little time."

"There is no time," Spock said sharply, taking the chain. "Someone is coming."

"Is the child hurt?" a gentle voice enquired. "Can I help you?"

"The child is dead, Lord VerdeLan," Spock said quietly. "He fell beneath a laden cart."

"Poor boy." Verde touched the small head tenderly. "It is ever sad to lose a son."

"He was not my son, but I am responsible for him. I am a stranger in the city, what should I do with his body?"

"My Du will show yours where to lay him," Verde said. "Come to my house, Lord, and we will drink Water together that his memory may be ever fresh and growing."

\* \* \*

Kirk laid Tanar on the stone slab and knelt beside him, lightly touching the white face. "Goodbye, little one," he whispered. "I am glad I knew you and I shan't forget you."

Verde's Du laid a hand on his shoulder. "Your Lan must be good if you grieve so for the child."

Choking down his bitterness, Kirk nodded, and remembering the blue necklace, took it from Tanar's pocket. "The child had bought a gift for his Da," he said. "I must take it to her."

He followed the Du through the streets to Lord VerdeLan's house, a magnificent building with many inner courtyards, each with their own fountain; a place of peace and shade, soothing to Kirk's sore heart. The Du had heard of Tanar's death and came to console him as he sat waiting, glad of a chance to get himself under some control before he had to meet Spock again, shutting out of his mind the blankness on that stone face. He leaned against the cool stone wall, closing his eyes. They'd only been here a few days and somehow he'd have to get through several more weeks in that cold-hearted icicle's company.

He forced himself to relax, swallowing the ache in his throat, and with a

little stab of pain realised that his grief was not only for the loss of the child, but also for the growing fondness he had felt for Spock. The realisation shamed him. Spock was Vulcan, different, he'd known that all along, he couldn't expect him to share a Human outlook. He had to make this thing work, the good of the Enterprise demanded that for the sake of the ship he must make himself understand the Vulcan's point of view. If logic was the criterion then they had had their problem solved for them, whether he liked the solution or not, and Spock had at least realised that his reaction would be emotional. It had certainly been that. A sudden horrible thought struck him. Had Spock's solution been the thought that such an event might happen, or had it been his intention to kill the child himself - the Lan were said to abandon children secretly in the desert if they could not maintain them. Had that been Spock's logical solution? He could not, would not, believe it. Spock was renowned for his reluctance to kill, his beliefs were less ambiguous even than Kirk's own, for the Vulcan was a vegetarian. He opened his eyes again, remembering what Tanar had said - 'The Lord SpockLan is strange, but he is kind'. Hold on to that thought, forget the hard, unfeeling statue that had stood beside him an hour ago, until his own torment would let him see the situation logically, through the Vulcan's eyes. His eyes fell to the blue necklace held tightly in his hand; he did not look forward to telling Ria.

The sound of booted feet on the stones brought him upright. Verde smiled kindly at him.

"It is good to find that the Du share the sorrows of the Lan," he said. "The little Lord will be honoured by my household also. If there is anything else I can do for you, Lord SpockLan, you have only to let me know."

"The child's Da," Spock said. "I have no further use for her now, for my Du and I must be on our travels again soon. What would be the best thing to do for her? I would not wish her to go where she may be ill-treated."

"I will buy her from you," Verde promised. "A good Da is worth many leta."

Spock hesitated. "I do not need to sell her," he said slowly. "If you will take her in, she shall be yours."

"Gladly," Verde smiled. "Let the Du bring her here tomorrow."

In the street, Spock hesitated once again, watching Kirk's face. "It may be better if you tell Ria what has happened, Captain, I do not think I am suited to such a task."

Kirk nodded. "I'll tell her." He didn't trust himself to say more.

\* \* \*

She held the little necklace to her cheek. "I've never had a gift before," she said pathetically, "and now the little Lord is dead and I cannot thank him."

Kirk stroked her bent head. "You helped to make him happy, Ria. Remember only the good things."

Taking her to a seat by the window he drew her close. She put her arms about him, sobbing bitterly. He let her have her cry out, murmuring softly to her as to a child, petting her gently. At last, tears exhausted, she lay against him.

"What will happen to me now, JimDu?" she asked him sadly. "The Lord SpockLan will not need a Da and will sell me. I hope my new Lan will be kind also."

"The Lord SpockLan has thought kindly of you," Kirk told her tenderly. "The Lord VerdeLan is to take you into his household. You will be happy there."

"He may not be kind," she said mournfully. "Oh JimDu, I do not want to leave you and the Lord SpockLan." She clung to him. "Will he not keep me as his Da? It is often done, and I will try to please him, and I will see you every day, JimDu."

"We shall be travelling on again," Kirk said. "I promise you the Lord VerdeLan will be kind to you, and the Du in his house will be kind too. Be a brave girl, RiaDa. I will take you there tomorrow, and you will see how kind they are."



If you are not happy to stay, I will bring you back here and we will find another Lan for you." Just let Spock try and tell him he couldn't do it!

"I may not stay with you?"

"No. You must leave us, but we will see that you find a Lan you wish to serve." He let go of her, turning her chin to look in her eyes. "I shall remember you, RiaDa."

"I shall never forget you, JimDu."

\* \* \*

He avoided the Vulcan's company after the last meal, devoting himself to Ria. When at last tiredness took him to his room, he found Spock sitting silently by the window. The Vulcan seemed deep in thought and Kirk did not wish to interrupt him. He undressed quietly and lay down, watching the still figure. Eventually, Spock stirred, stretched like a cat, and left the window. He moved on quiet feet, preparing for bed. The silence suddenly became unbearable to Kirk, grating on raw nerves. He wanted to lash out at Spock, goad him until that stone face told him that the Vulcan loathed him, anything but the silent indifference that filled the room.

"I've told Ria that I'll bring her back here if she does not like her new Lan," he said abruptly.

"Was that wise?" Spock asked calmly. "The girl must leave us, and we know she will be well-treated there."

"If she's unhappy I'll bring her back," Kirk retorted, "and I'll go on bringing her back until I find someone she is happy to stay with."

The couch creaked. "Then it is to be hoped that you find somewhere that pleases her soon, for we still have much work to do."

"The work will be done."

"Yes."

The monosyllable infuriated Kirk. "Spock, there's more to life than just work. You're not dealing with a Vulcan, but a feeling person. You may not understand it, but she needs to be happy."

"I do not wish to see her unhappy," Spock said mildly, "but I do not see the logic in wasting time. We know Verde does not illtreat his Du. Surely it did not strike you as an unhappy household?"

"What would you know about whether or not it was happy?" Kirk asked savagely.

"It is because I do not trust myself in such matters that I sought your opinion," Spock explained, "as you might come to me with a problem in logic."

Kirk sat up and looked at Spock. The Vulcan was not lying down, but leaned against the wall watching him. "I have a problem, Spock," Kirk said, anger suddenly obbing away. "I have a problem that I don't understand, but that I want to try to understand." Spock waited. "The trouble is that only you can help me, and I'm not sure you'll want to."

"Let me know what it is." Spock's eyes looked steadily at him.

"I thought I had found a friend," Kirk said slowly, "but friendship can't grow out of misunderstanding, and I don't understand you, Spock."

The Vulcan's eyes still held his, but he did not speak for a long time. "I am pleased you thought you had found a friend, Captain," Spock said at last.

"Captain again? You called me Jim yesterday."

"I...angered you," Spock said with difficulty. "I thought that a return to formality might be preferred."

"By me? No. I was angry, Spock, but I had no right to be angry with you

because you didn't feel as I did over what happened."

"I regret the child's death."

Kirk sighed. "I'm sorry, Spock. I guess I needed to hear you say that."

"Then I also regret that I did not say it before, but I am not sure that it would have satisfied you earlier."

"You're probably right." Somehow the simple statement was enough now, but while his own emotion had blinded him he knew it would have enraged him. "I'll try to remember that we don't think alike, Spock, but you'll have to be patient with me."

"Patience is something a Vulcan can understand. And also the value of difference."

"You don't regret that I am not also a creature of logic?"

"There is no logic in regretting a situation one cannot change," Spock quoted Kirk's earlier words. "If you were a logical creature you would no longer be Jim Kirk."

Suddenly the thing seemed easy again. "I'm sorry, Spock," Kirk repeated. "I've thought some hard things about you today, but I guess you didn't deserve them."

"Be careful," Spock warned him. "The next time you are angry you will think that I do deserve them. I shall not change, any more than you will."

"I'll try to remember," Kirk said softly, "that even though my emotional response changes you in my eyes, you are still the same man I see when I am not angry."

He lay down, pulling up the furs, and heard the couch creak as Spock settled down. Kirk could think of Tanar's death now with sorrow, without the rage that had consumed him earlier. He remembered the child's face as he died, and knew the healing process of grief had begun.

"Spock," he said softly. "I think Tanar saw deeper than I do."

"What makes you say so?"

"As he died he told me to tell you that he thanked you for the love you gave him." There was a long silence. "Doesn't that please you, Spock?"

Another long silence, and at last Spock said quietly, "Jim, I am a Vulcan. What would you expect me to say?"

Kirk pondered that. Eventually, "Nothing, Spock."

"Thank you."

"What for?" Kirk asked, startled.

"For not demanding what I cannot give. If you will remember that I cannot respond as you would like, then we may reach an understanding of each other."

"I hope so. Sleep well, Spock."

"I always do. Vulcans do not suffer from the problem of insomnia."

"Only from talkative companions!"

"If you need to talk, I am here."

"I'll remember that." Sleep was beginning to engulf Kirk at last. Before it closed over him he managed to say, "And I'll be around if you need me, too."

There was a long silence. The Vulcan listened to the steady breathing and at last said softly to the still room, "I need you, Jim Kirk...but you will never know."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kirk slept late the next morning and woke to find Spock up and dressed. He scrambled up, rubbing his eyes. "You should have wakened me up."

"You will work more efficiently if you are properly rested." The Vulcan spoke stiffly. He had studied Kirk's face as he slept, noting the dark shadows under the eyes. Working in higher gravity than you were used to was always tiring, and he was concerned that Kirk, fit though he was, should not get over-tired; but in spite of his growing ease in his Captain's company, he knew he could not express that concern. It was, after all, logical that Kirk should rest sufficiently. He knew, too, that he must blame himself for Kirk's outburst against him the previous day. The Captain had never demanded an emotional response from him before, had seemed content to accept him as he was; had he not allowed himself to relax so much, to give a little of the Human part of him that was buried so deeply, then the need for reassurance would never have arisen.

An hour of meditation in the grey light of dawn had succeeded in building up his defences, so unexpectedly broken by the smile deep in those compelling eyes. It was not safe, it never had been safe, to let himself be other than wholly, totally Vulcan. The blocks were up now, the mental disciplines fully in control. Above all, the temptation to see if he could make Kirk smile, or even laugh, had been subdued. There was no logic in laughter.

"I will work alone today," he said abruptly. "You must take Ria to Verde's house and see that she is content to stay. I believe you will know how to persuade her. I will return here for the evening meal. One more day will suffice to complete our study of this area and then we must move on."

Kirk studied his ramrod back thoughtfully; since he's agreed to take Spock as he found him, he would keep his side of the bargain. If the Vulcan was not prepared to return to his former relaxed manner, then he wasn't going to argue.

"I'll persuade her," he agreed, "and then I'll go and do some research on my own as well. What part of the city would you like me to cover?"

"The part above the Lake where the Du collect water. The Lan do not seem to go there, and it would be as well to see if there are any rituals or taboos that we have missed."

"Very well, and you?"

"Verde has invited me to visit the workshop where Hase has been doing his experiments with steam."

"Don't go giving any good advice," Kirk warned.

"I am unlikely to make such an elementary slip," Spock said coldly.

"No. I don't suppose you are." Kirk managed to keep his voice light. "Very well, I'll see you at the evening meal."

\* \* \*

Ria slipped her hand in Kirk's, seeking comfort. He squeezed it reassuringly. "Don't worry, RiaDa. All the Du I met treated me as a friend," he told her as they walked through the streets. "I'm sure they will make you welcome. And I have seen Lord VerdeLan speak kindly to the Du as well. You'll be in good hands."

"I have never worked in a large household," she said plaintively. "I have only known the ways of a small town. What service can I give them?"

"You have a loving heart, RiaDa," Kirk said. "Just do your best and they will learn to value you as we have."

He led her to the wooden gate in the wall that led to the back of the house. A smiling Da opened it for them, greeting Ria warmly.

"You are the Da of Lord SpockLan? Tell me your name, my dear."

"RiaDa."

"Come in, then, RiaDa, and meet your fellow churls. The Lady PhillLanA has



said that I need not work today, and we will make holiday together."

Ria turned her face to Kirk, two big tears on her cheeks. "Goodbye, JimDu. Remember me!"

He gave her a swift hug, watched the gate close and walked quickly away. The streets were filling now with hurrying Thulya, and he threaded his way among them carefully, remembering to keep his eyes down. He crossed the bridge over the upper end of the lake, following the Du with their water-skins, and found a shady spot to sit and watch. Each Du knelt before filling the skin, then drank deeply and knelt again. This done, many of them filled the skin again and left, but others fell to gossiping with friends. A tiny Du, barely half Kirk's height, caught his eye and smiled at him.

"I have not seen you at the Place of Water before." He seated himself by Kirk and drank. "Thirsty?" He handed over his skin. "Drink, my friend."

Kirk took the skin. Pointing to the crowd, he asked, "Is that the Du of Lord Merlan?" While the Du looked round, frowning, Kirk slipped a purifying capsule in the skin, then drank and returned it, smiling. "No, I was mistaken. Thank you, friend."

"You keep holiday today?"

"Yes."

"I too." The little man sighed. "We are fortunate. Many are not so lucky, but times are changing."

"So I have seen within the city. The Du here are well cared for."

"Indeed. My Lan did not sell me when I was sick," the small Du said, proudly, "but let me rest till I was well enough to serve him once more." He got up. I must refill the skin and take it back, then I am free to do what I will until the last meal."

"What will you do?" Kirk asked.

"You will never guess." The Du's eyes gleamed.

"No, I don't suppose I will," Kirk agreed, "but I can see that it gives you great pleasure, whatever it is."

"I go to see my sister," the Du said triumphantly. "My Lord has spoken with the Lady AllaLanA and I am to spend my day with her. There, is not that a great pleasure?"

"It is indeed." Kirk smiled. "Do you see her often?"

"I have not seen her since she was a child. What will you do, stranger, with your day?"

"Sit here and rest awhile, and then walk about the city," Kirk said. "I do not know it well and find it fascinating."

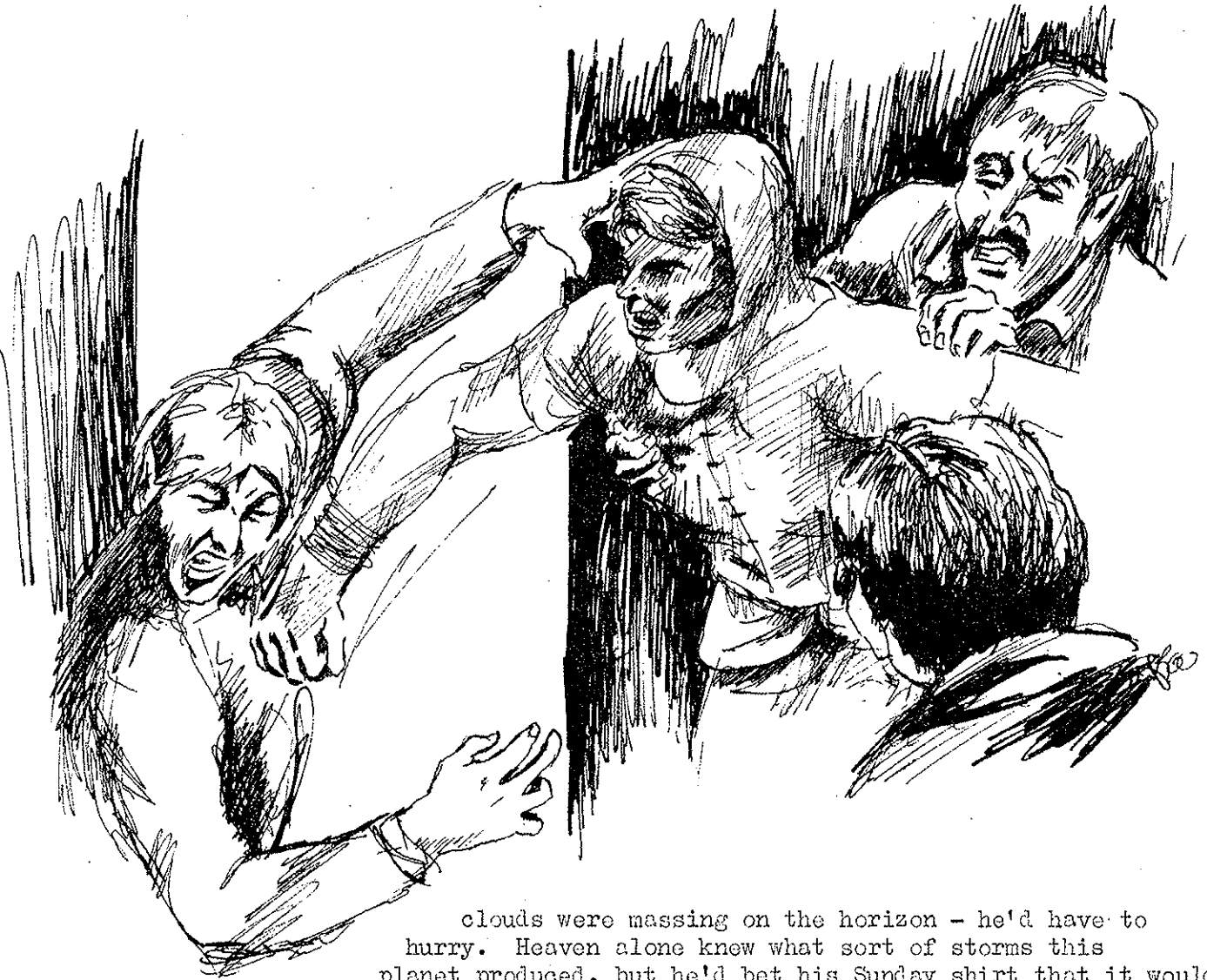
"You come from far away?"

"Three days' journey, and we move on again soon. My Lord is restless."

The Du smiled. "The ways of the Lan are strange. Now you and I would be content to let the world drift by us, but the Lan will be up and doing, and we churlis must follow where they lead, even when it leads to partings." His face saddened. "But today brings meeting, not parting, for me, and I must be on my way. May your Lan prosper, stranger."

"May yours be ever kindly." Kirk watched him return to the river to fill the water skin and wandered on himself.

There was much to see and evening was coming on when he turned his steps towards the inn, tired and hot. Although the sun was nearly down, the air was stuffy, as though a storm was coming. He looked up at the sky. Purple-black



clouds were massing on the horizon - he'd have to hurry. Heaven alone knew what sort of storms this planet produced, but he'd bet his Sunday shirt that it would be heavy from the look of those clouds. He quickened his steps, feeling the sweat trickling down his back. Tempting to consider being caught in a little rain - at least he'd feel cool and clean for a while - but with night coming on it would be foolish to say the least to get soaking wet unnecessarily, certainly in Vulcan eyes! A narrow alley-way opening out on his left promised a short cut and he turned down it. Up ahead there was a sound of bare feet fleeing along the stones, and a Da came too fast round the corner, almost knocking him off his feet. He staggered and clutched at her, bringing her to a halt.

"I'm sorry - "

"Please, don't stop me, please let go. Oh..." Three Du surrounded them.

"The Lan will only beat you if you do not return."

"I won't go to him, I won't!"

They grabbed her arms ungently and swung her round to face the Lan who'd followed more slowly.

"Do not mark her," he said. "I would prefer her unblemished."

"TeDu, do not let him touch me!" The girl was sobbing.

"Foolish Da." He tipped her chin, his fingers gripping cruelly. "Would you prefer I left you in the street to perish in the storm that approaches? Come, bring her."

"No...Please!"

Kirk moved. "The lady said 'No'!"

"Stand out of my way, Du, or I will have you beaten."

"The girl is unwilling. Let her go."

The Lan's eyes blazed. "Beat me this Du!" he raged, "and teach him to speak to his Masters thus."

Kirk dodged the first few blows - but the heavier gravity was hampering in hand-to-hand combat, expert though he was. He had the minor satisfaction of realising he was fighting all three Du, and as the last blow struck him, exploding fire in his brain, he hoped she'd had the chance - and the sense - to run. It was the last thing he thought for a long time.

\* \* \*

Spock watched the rain lashing down, suppressing the worry that would rise. How much longer would Kirk be? The night was well advanced now, and it was logical to suppose he had found shelter somewhere. The obvious thing to do was to go to bed; standing at the window would not stop the rain nor bring Kirk back any quicker. He started to strip, his brows drawn together, lips tight - then with a muttered, "Illogical fool!" replaced his coat and went out into the night.

He was wet to the skin within seconds. The streets were pitch black save for the blinding flashes of lightning. He searched methodically, down one street, up another, passing like a silent shadow, the sound of his boots drowned in the crashing thunder and beating drops. "Illogical fool," he told himself again. "He is almost certainly warm and dry somewhere, probably with some Da he has charmed into giving him hospitality while you pace the streets like a...Human!" He crossed the end of a narrow alley, noting its direction. He'd be able to return that way once he'd searched the area round the lake. Each flash of lightning showed the streets empty - as they should be. Only a fool would be out on a night like this, a fool or...someone in trouble. He had little logic left now, worry consuming him, battering down his defences; two thirds of the city searched - surely he must find him soon, and if he did not, if he still had not returned to the inn...then what? He paused, irresolute; to his right was the alley-way that would take him back, ahead the way to the city wall.

"Fool," he said aloud. "Go back!" But his feet took him on.

The rain was easing now, the thunder rolling away into the distance. He came to the wall and turned, eyes still searching the darkness in case he had missed him. At the alley he turned left, saw a darker shadow at the foot of the wall...and ran.

\* \* \*

Kirk stirred and immediately groaned. Every muscle, every bone, ached and throbbed. He felt like he'd been run down by a herd of stampeding scopolamanders. He opened his eyes. He was lying on Spock's couch and the light was bright, too bright for his aching head. He closed his eyes and groaned again.

"Drink this." Long fingers held his head gently, supporting him, the hard rim of a cup pressed his lips. He gulped the cool liquid gratefully, bliss to feel it soothing his parched mouth. He lay back on the fur and tentatively opened his eyes again. This time a shadow lay between him and the brightness of the window.

"Spock?"

"Of course."

"What hit me?"

"I was hoping you could tell me that. I found you lying in an alley-way and brought you back here."

Memory returned. "I got into a fight."

"So I had deduced. There is food for you if you wish to eat."

"No. Thanks all the same, but my insides feel as they they've been stirred up with a whisk!"

"Sleep, then."

When he woke again, the room was dark and his body felt on fire. He reached out an arm and threw off the heavy fur that covered him, revelling in the cold air on his skin. Water - a drink, he desperately needed a drink. He pushed himself upright, gritting his teeth against the agony in his gut, and swung his legs over the side of the couch. His head was swimming, dancing beads of light flickering in and out of his vision.

"Lie down."

"Just going...get water."

"Lie down, I will bring it."

He wasn't sure he could lie down, any movement was agony. Spock lifted his legs back onto the couch and gave him the cup. He drained it, passed it back, and lowered himself onto the fur.

"Tired," he said weakly.

"Then sleep again."

"I do nothing but sleep."

"You...fight, now you need rest. Go back to sleep."

This time the light was grey, the air cool and fresh. Kirk managed to roll over and sit up. Spock was still asleep, stretched out on Kirk's fur on the floor, but pulled up close to the couch. His eyes opened.

"You are better." The tone was flat.

"Yes, much better - but how I ache!"

"You are badly bruised - I do not know if there are internal injuries. The scanner seems to indicate some bleeding, but not too serious. You had better rest for a day or two." He got up in one smooth movement, and fetched water. Kirk sipped it slowly.

"I don't think I'm  
"There can't be much  
do. Did I hear you

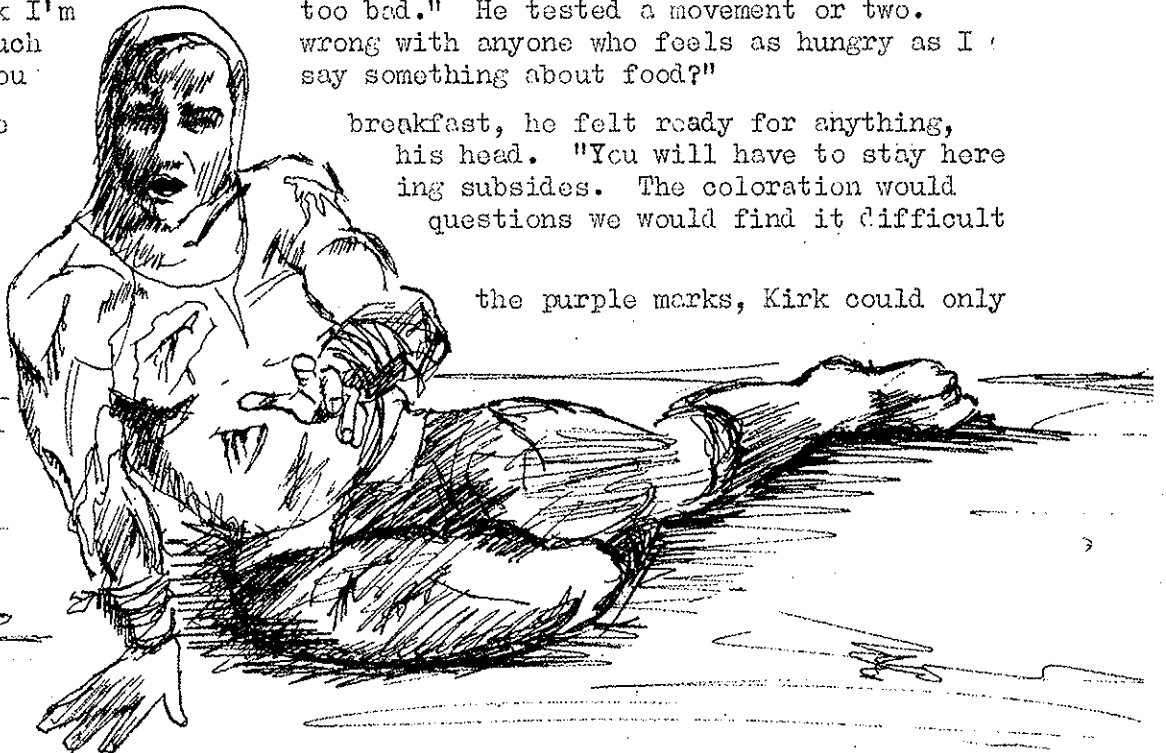
After a simple  
but Spock shook  
until the bruise-  
give rise to  
to satisfy."

Looking at

too bad." He tested a movement or two.  
wrong with anyone who feels as hungry as I  
say something about food?"

breakfast, he felt ready for anything,  
his head. "You will have to stay here  
ing subsides. The coloration would  
questions we would find it difficult

the purple marks, Kirk could only



agree. "They'll go green in a day or so," he soothed. "If Vulcans bruise green I'll be all right." He lay back on the soft cushions, glad of their comfort. "That must have been some beating-up I got."

"They kicked you," Spock said neutrally. "But you may be glad to hear that the girl got away."

"I hope she had someplace to go," Kirk worried. "It was no night to be out in. I'm sure there was a storm brewing up, wasn't there?"

"Yes. It was considerable. It had one advantage, it washed away any red bloodstains from the path. Your nose bled profusely."

"Very undignified." Kirk grinned, then, worriedly, "They didn't see, did they?"

"No. It was too dark."

Realisation hit Kirk. "Spock how do you know what happened? When did you turn up?"

"Not until several hours later."

"Then how...?"

"Your tricorder was on 'record'. I ran it through yesterday."

Kirk managed to raise a stiff eyebrow. "More erasures?"

"Contraindicated. The incident portrays an aspect of the Thulya not previously recorded - and a good record of the storm, which is an uncommon occurrence." Spock half turned away, then looked back swiftly. "I have..."

"Spit it out, man." Kirk had never seen him so hesitant.

"I have studied the tape carefully. It contains no violent show of emotion on your part."

"No?" Kirk said, wondering what point the Vulcan was trying to make. It wasn't like Spock not to come straight out with anything he felt needed saying. "Spock, you're trying to tell me something, but my brain is still addled. Just tell me what it is in words of one syllable."

"I do not know if I can!"

"Try me. You're the boss around here. Say it."

"There are...not enough one syllabled words."

"Spock!" Kirk warned, grinning. "Just say what you have to say any way you want to say it."

"It was not a question of 'saving face' this time," Spock explained. "There was nothing in your behaviour that betrayed you as not Thulyan; had they wished - or been brave enough - they might have done what you did, and indeed a Vulcan might well have been tempted to act so."

"Yes." Kirk was still puzzled. "But I still don't see what's making you skirt round the subject like a...a virgin at a necking-party." He frowned. "Spock, did you think I might be worried about my image?"

"The thought did cross my mind," Spock admitted.

"Nice of you to consider my feelings." Kirk grinned at him. "But I'm a little bit thicker-skinned than that. However, I appreciate the thought." He eyed the Vulcan consideringly. "Tanar summed you up well," he said. "Strange but kind. I'll miss that child, I believe he could have taught me a lot about my Vulcan friend."

Spock collected the used dishes together on a tray. "I, too, will miss him," he said from the doorway.

It took more than a couple of days for the bruising to fade sufficiently

to satisfy Spock's eagle eye, and Kirk, after first finding the enforced rest pleasant enough, indeed necessary, was soon chafing with impatience and prepared to take his ill-temper out on the handiest person around. The Vulcan listened to his outburst with unimpaired calm and held out the tricorder.

"I believe we may usefully employ the time with a little work," he said. "Perhaps if we study the recordings I have made together we may see something my eye has missed."

"Slave-driver!" The thoughtless words were out before he knew it. The hand holding the tricorder was withdrawn. Kirk looked up at the shuttered face. "That was a stupid thing to say."

"It is a phrase too lightly used," the Vulcan agreed, his eyes blank.

Kirk was beginning to know that look. It wasn't non-emotion, he was sure, it was a cover, a control. "Spock, the system has its good points here in the city," he said softly. "At least the Du here are well fed and mostly well looked after."

"True," the Vulcan conceded. "It is only a matter of time before a freer society emerges here in Rath at least. Elsewhere on the planet - we do not know as yet. Only the main survey will be able to give full answers."

"Then why are you so up-tight about it?" Kirk demanded.

"I was not aware..." Spock began.

"Spock you behave as if you've been dipped in liquid nitrogen and then think I won't ask you why you're trying to freeze me, too. Give me credit for a little penetration!"

Spock thought he could give him credit for too much. Those hazel eyes, sometimes so lazy, saw deeper than most Humans; penetrated too far into his closely guarded heart. How many times do I give myself away to him? he wondered. Never since the days of his childhood, when he could not, would not accept the sympathy his mother couldn't help showing, had he had to fight down his response so fiercely. Then, his pride in his father and in his heritage had helped to build the barriers high. Now it was only his own...fear, if he was honest...that made him hold back, but Kirk had made their altered relationship so easy, slipping so naturally into the secondary role, it was hard not to give a little in return.

"Captain..." he said, uncertainly. "You remind me I am the 'boss' here on Thul, but you are the Captain of the Enterprise."

"Yes." Kirk waited, watching him.

"I, too, have not forgotten that you are my Captain."

"I never thought you had, Spock. Did you think the position we find ourselves in is bothering me? I believe I told you two months of it wouldn't damage my ego."

"Did it not occur to you that we may find some difficulty when the roles have to be reversed once more?"

"Yes." Kirk snapped out the monosyllable and lay back on his cushions, wincing as a brief stab of pain cut through his belly. Spock put a hand under his shoulders, easing him up until he was comfortable.

"It occurred to me," Kirk told him, more gently. "But I let some desk-bound, groundside clerk needle me into showing that Humans and Vulcans can get along fine together."

"You are very honest." Spock seated himself on the end of the couch.

"I'm returning the compliment you made me." Kirk let a smile lighten his eyes. "I have great faith in you, Spock. I couldn't wish for a more competent First Officer, I've only wished that I could get to know you better. I thought

the risk was worth taking, and now I'm certain of it. In any case logic would have dictated that you did not bring me along if you were afraid of difficulties in the future, wouldn't it?"

"I did not anticipate any problems on my part," Spock admitted, "but you have not long had your own command. It was a great risk to take."

"Justified, however." Kirk held out his hand. "Pass that tricorder over and let your...partner...do some work. It's not good for me to be lying here idle, I shall develop lazy habits."

"It may not be wise for you to work, you are still in pain."

"I ache a lot," Kirk admitted.

Spock took the medikit from his inner pocket and ran the scanner over Kirk, frowning slightly. "There is evidence of internal damage, but it is slight," He put the tube away and sat down again. "I believe it would be as well if you rested another day yet."

Kirk groaned. "I shall die of boredom," he declared.

"An unlikely outcome, I believe." Spock hesitated a moment. "Captain, do you play chess?"

"Yes."

"It would be simple enough to construct a two-dimensional board and pieces," Spock said, "if you would care for a game."

"Get me some wood and a knife," and I'll show you a nifty bit of carving," Kirk told him. "Or if we can't get wood, we can make do with makeshift pieces of some kind."

"I will see if I can obtain some of the type of wood the vlar were carved in."

"I'd forgotten that." Kirk remembered that straightening ear and smiled. "I'd put it in my pocket when Tanar called us." He paused briefly, for the memory still hurt. "I'd forgotten all about it, I suppose it must still be in there. Hand me my tunic, Spock." He dug deep into the pocket. "Yes, here it is. The wood must be quite hard, it's still intact, in spite of the battering I got."

"I hope that will not make it difficult to carve."

"I'm not planning on anything fancy," he was assured. "It's a long time since I used a knife, but I used to do a lot of it when I was a kid - I wonder if I'll still be able to produce anything at all. Tell you what, these vlar would make excellent knights. Pity we haven't got four of them."

Spock got up. "I will go and see what I can do."

\* \* \*

"You make a capital nurse, Spock," Kirk said absently, as the Vulcan brushed away wood shavings from the fur.

"It is not an occupation I have ever attempted before."

"You do it it very well." Kirk held up a somewhat lopsided rock. "Better than I carve."

Spock took the piece and inspected it. "Fortunately its centre of gravity is sufficiently low." He handed it back. "I believe it will do very well. How have you decided to make the pawns?"

"Simple tetrahedrons. I'll have them finished by this evening - then I'll challenge you to a game."

"How are the bruises healing?"

"Well enough." Kirk looked up at him. "You've succeeded in occupying my mind very well, Spock. Even you must agree the colour will have faded sufficiently by the day after tomorrow."

"I believe you are right. It is just as well, we must be travelling on again soon."

Kirk thought of the nagging little pain in his gut and gave an inward grimace. The swaying gait of the vlar was not going to be the most comfortable mode of travel.

Watching him closely, Spock said, "We will purchase one of their carts to travel in. If we go down river there is a road to the city beyond the mountains; it passes several villages and also through a fertile valley where there are farms. It will take several weeks and it will be a useful area to survey. The journey will be less tiring."

"That sounds like a good idea. I wonder what the vlar are like to drive. I'll put in an hour or so at the window tomorrow and try and pick up a few tips." Spock nodded. "There." Kirk put the knife down, flexing his fingers. "Just the pawns to make and it's done."

"I will order the meal for us."

"Spock, how are you managing without me? Haven't they thought it strange that you're waiting on me?"

"The Du do not question the ways of the Lan."

"But how about the Lan? Hasn't the fellow who owns this place asked any questions?"

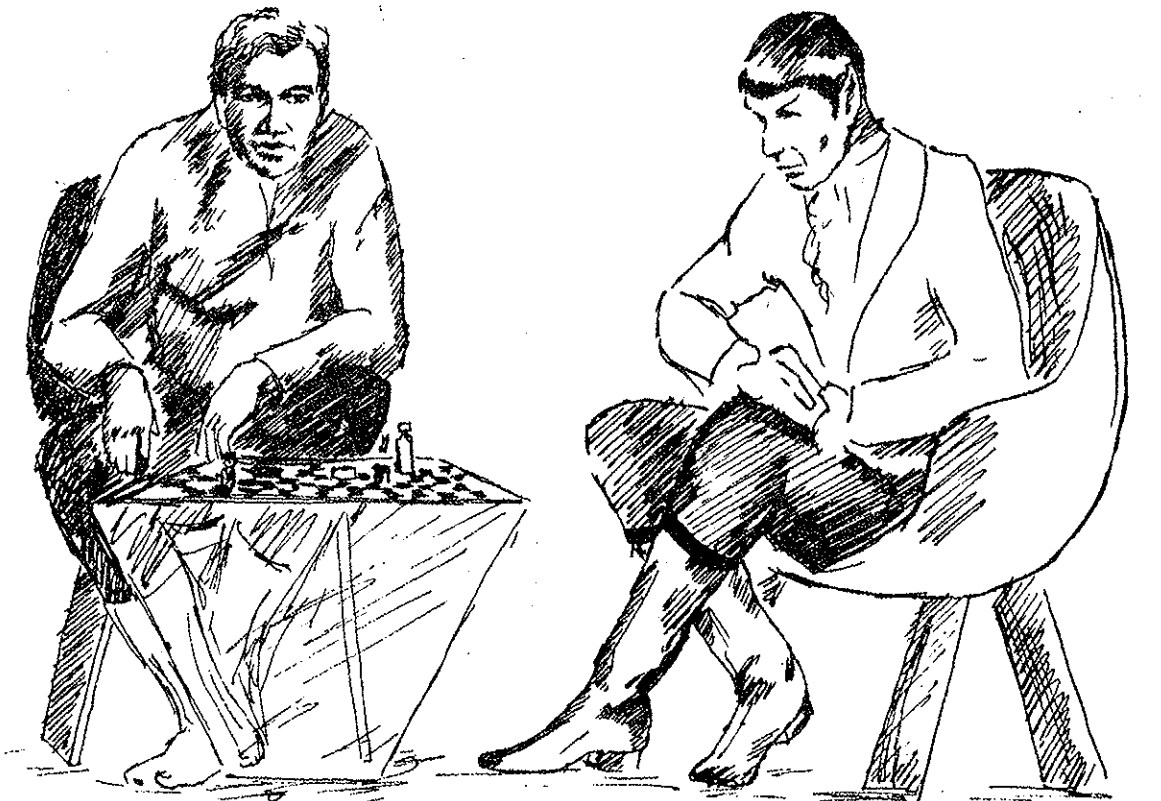
"Yes,"

"Well?" Spock remained silent. "What are you keeping from me?"

"He believes you are being punished."

"What - by doing nothing but lie around?"

"He believes you are not being fed."





"Starving me into good behaviour?"

"It was his own suggestion," Spock said calmly. "He told me I would not get a good price for a sick Du and that I had best not waste good leta on food for you."

"I'm glad you're not! I've seldom been so well-fed and cared for."

"I do not see any logic in attempting to starve you into health," Spock said placidly, "but I have not attempted to change his views on the subject. The story does well enough."

"It's to be hoped he doesn't see us leaving. I don't look half starved."

Privately, Spock thought that Kirk might well pass as undernourished. The gaunt look that illness and heat and given him was another worry the Vulcan could do without, but all he said was, "If we leave at an early hour he will be sleeping. However, you will have one more day of rest before we move on."

"And tomorrow I'll do some work," Kirk threatened.

"There is not much that needs to be done, I believe an hour or two will suffice. For tonight, we will eat, and then a game of chess before we sleep."

After one crushing defeat, Kirk abandoned any idea of playing his usual solid, tactical game, and attempted a few moves of such illogicality that he was certain he'd be beaten in five moves. He was delighted to find the game ending in a draw. Spock set the board to one side.

"You need sleep, Jim."

"Frightened I might beat you next time?" Kirk smiled, yawning enormously.

"I do not view the prospect of defeat with fear," Spock said calmly. "Indeed, it is pleasant to find so unpredictable an opponent."

Kirk laughed. "I can't play you at your own game - I thought I'd do better to alter my own style of play. I'll get my revenge on you for that first game, yet."

"I'm sure you will," Spock said politely, pulling furs up over him.

\* \* \* \* \*

The unsprung cart jolted horribly, wrenching an involuntary grunt from Kirk. He shook his head, trying to flick back the irritating lock of hair that persistently fell forward, but the sweat on his forehead had glued it damply in place. He brushed an arm quickly across his face, and tugged his hood forward to shade his eyes from the glare. The nagging little pain in his belly subsided again and he gave a sigh of relief as he steered the two wiar round yet another pothole. Every jolt avoided was another stab of pain he didn't have to endure. The next village was a full day's journey away and, although the cart was considerably more comfortable than riding would have been, the persistent ache in his gut was bothering him more than he cared to admit. There were plenty of travellers on this road, unfortunately, or he might have been able to let Spock share some of the work of driving and lie at his ease in the back of the cart as the Vulcan was doing. He shot a glance over his shoulder and found Spock watching him.

"In pain, Jim?" The tone was flat, flatter than usual. Kirk wondered if it were a sign of a concern that could not be expressed.

"Just hot," he lied cheerfully.

"There are pain-killing drugs in the medikit should you need them."

"If I need them I'll take them," he promised.

"It is illogical to allow yourself to become incapacitated through a desire to display stoicism," Spock said severely. "If you think the drugs will help, then you should take them."

"Very well, nurse!"

Spock extracted a capsule from the container in the tiny kit, sat up, gave a quick look up and down the road to see that no-one was near, and passed it and the water container across. Kirk slipped the rein over one arm and took them. The drink was more than welcome. He passed the skin behind him and turned his attention back to the plodding vlar, making their patient way towards the hills ahead of them.

"We should be at the village before nightfall," he said thankfully. "How long are we planning to stay there?"

"Not more than a day or two, unless we note anything particularly useful. There is a large fertile area around the River here - it passes through a wide valley in the hills ahead - and there will be plenty to record. Is the drug taking effect?"

"Yes, thank goodness." Kirk wriggled experimentally. "It's going to be much easier to sit still without a red-hot poker prodding me."

The coming of evening brought a cool breeze which made him feel more like his usual healthy self, and he would not take a second capsule. "I prefer to manage if I can," he said. "I'm not keen to fill myself full of drugs unless I need to. The pain isn't going to keep me awake. Stop fussing like a mother hen, Spock."

The austere expression managed to convey that Spock had been insulted. Kirk grinned at him amiably. "I'll take one again tomorrow if I need to, will that make you feel better?"

Spock looked at him thoughtfully. "As long as you do not allow your efficiency to become impaired," he said slowly, "I would agree that it is foolish to take the drugs unless you need. Pain has a purpose, and will prevent you from making the injury worse." He ran the scanner briefly over Kirk. "The damage does not seem to be worsening," he conceded, "but we will not try and travel too fast. The jolting of the cart cannot help the pain."

"We can't afford to lie around for days doing nothing."

"No." Spock stowed the small tube away. "But you can rest each evening, and you should."

"And let you do all the work?"

"I have not been injured. You must drive the cart, since the Lan do not do so, and I can rest during the day while we are travelling. In the evenings you will rest and I will work."

"A sop to my Human pride?"

"If you wish to call it so. I would call it a logical distribution of our duties."

Kirk accepted the correction, but was not wholly convinced that the logical reason was the only one. However, he didn't think he was likely to get Spock to admit to any other.

\* \* \*

They passed the next four weeks in reasonably leisurely style, spending several nights at each village they came to, recording the agricultural methods and the crops with meticulous care. Kirk was sad to find the Du in this poorer community were more brutally treated than their counterparts in the city; they seemed to be of less value than the ubiquitous vlar, and the signs of neglect were many. The children in particular were pale and undersized; many were crippled and begged a meagre living by the roadside.

"No-one seems to care about them," Kirk said harshly as one tiny waif grabbed at the food he threw her, gulping it wolfishly before her companions could limp to her side and grab it from her.

"It would not be in the interests of economy to feed those who cannot work," Spock said, watching the other children. Before Kirk had time to express his outrage at the cold statement, the Vulcan added, "You had better give them all food, Jim, or she is likely to be hurt."

He tossed their day's supplies to the tiny crowd and drove the vlar on. It was but one scene among many, and many times only Spock's warning eye kept Kirk's feelings from boiling over into action. However, towards the end of the four weeks, he was uncertain whether he was growing accustomed to the prevailing brutality or whether his growing pain was making him self-absorbed. He took the capsules without protest now, grateful for the relief they brought, and for the fact that another couple of weeks would bring the Enterprise and expert medical help.

On what should have been their last night in the area, Spock suggested an alteration in their previous plans. "The road follows the river and winds round the end of the mountains, then doubles back on itself before reaching the city by the salt lake. It will take us six days to go that way, and I believe we would do better to go by the mountain route. It reduces the journey by four days and will allow you to rest completely for that length of time before we leave."

Kirk lowered himself onto his furs with a grunt of pain. "We can't stay here for four days doing nothing, Spock," he protested. "Let's go that way if you think it a good plan, but we can take the rest in the city."

Spock studied Kirk's face, not liking the lines of pain etching themselves about his mouth. He was uncertain of Kirk's capacity to bear pain - certainly the Human was stoical enough, but Spock thought his silence probably hid an agony pride would not let him admit openly. They had plenty of tapes for the Vulcan Council to study and there was no need to drive themselves unduly hard.

"The track will not take the cart," he said. "Therefore you must rest and allow some healing to take place. We will stay here."

Kirk was only too willing not to argue further.

\* \* \*

Four days of bedrest brought considerable relief and Kirk was almost his old self once again when they eventually set out. Sufficiently so to tease Spock as they rode side by side in the cooler air of the high pass.

"I feel much better, Spock," he said happily. "Particularly for having managed to win that last game of chess so satisfactorily yesterday. I don't know when anything has given me greater pleasure!"

"The sacrifice of your bishop was most illogical," Spock complained.

"Ah, but it got you sufficiently worried to forget to guard your knight," Kirk reminded him. "We must have some games together when we get back aboard - no doubt you're thirsting to get your revenge."

"It would be agreeable to play," the Vulcan replied placidly, "but a 'thirst for revenge' is no longer one of my people's characteristics."

Kirk laughed at him. "For a moment last night, I thought I detected a touch of annoyance, Spock," he challenged. "Are you sure you're not longing to get your own back?"

The dark eyes met his steadily. "Annoyance? I cannot understand what should have made you consider such a possibility. It is most unlikely."

"But not impossible?" Kirk pounced.

"I seem to remember as a child..." Spock paused. "The memory is very vague, Captain, and I cannot be certain of details, but I do have some recollection of an emotion on receiving a punishment for an offence I had not committed. A temptation to state my case with defiance, I recall. Would that be

this 'annoyance' of which you speak?"

Kirk looked at him, a lurking smile deep in his eyes. "I have a shrewd suspicion you are pulling my leg!"

"What purpose would be served by my doing such a thing, Captain?"

"I also have a shrewd suspicion that you are as well acquainted with Earth idioms as I am myself," Kirk told him. "You speak our language perfectly - it makes me ashamed of my meagre grasp of Vulcan."

"It is, after all, an international language and used throughout the Federation," Spock said indifferently. "And I was brought up to be quadri-lingual. But there are some idioms that I do not recognise. I am still trying to understand your phrase 'black-balled'."

Kirk broke into a bellow of laughter at the memory. "It's a very old idiom," he gasped out eventually, "based on a method of election to a London club back in the nineteenth century. They used white balls to signify yes, and black for no."

"I see."

"But I still maintain that you were pulling my leg, and don't tell me you don't know what that means!"

"I am acquainted with the phrase," Spock admitted.

"Then why pretend you're not? Unless you're joking. But I thought Vulcans didn't make jokes."

"It serves a useful purpose," Spock said, apologetically. "I am very literal-minded, sometimes too much so, and I find it helpful to remind others that my thought patterns differ."

"Yes," Kirk agreed thoughtfully. "We all need reminding again and again, I'm afraid - even those of us who encounter aliens as frequently as Starfleet crews do. You know," he added abruptly, "the next time we call in at Starbase 8 I'm going to go and shake Torven by the hand." Spock raised an enquiring eyebrow. "I can't help but be glad that I let him needle me into requesting to accompany you, Mr. Spock. It has been a most interesting and valuable experience - for us both, I think." Again he looked at the Vulcan challengingly, certain that he had made a friend, but unsure Spock would, or could, admit it.

Spock looked back at him and swiftly away. "Most interesting," he replied, as coldly as he knew how.

Kirk sighed, neither repelled not rebuffed by the coldness, but regretful that he had once more made Spock erect that wall between them. So many times in the last few weeks he had seen it lowered just a little, and one day, he hoped, it would drop completely and he would come at the real Spock beneath the shuttered face. Spock heard the sigh and felt yet another surge of regret that he must not allow his resolve to weaken. A sense of shame stole over him that he, a Vulcan, should feel such friendship for another, but he remembered also his brief friendship with Leila when he had allowed his barriers to drop and had been unable to cope with the emotional response she demanded of him. The demands from Kirk would not be the same, even a Vulcan could understand that much of Human emotions, but even so he supposed that most Humans would seek to see him as an extension of themselves, and he knew it would not work. He was all Vulcan now, hard though the struggle had been throughout his childhood; he had won through and could survive, did not need to permit Kirk to see more deeply into him than the practical business of working well together demanded. Over the last few weeks they had slipped into an easy familiarity that augured well for their future together aboard the Enterprise; no more was needed or desirable. The smooth running of the ship was all that he need consider; there would be others that Kirk could turn to when more was wanted. He fought down the strange, empty sensation that threatened him.

"We shall be at a convenient resting-place soon," he said curtly. "About half a mile ahead there is a spring where we can give the vlar water."

"It's going to be cold tonight," Kirk commented. "It's cold enough at night down on the plains. A good thing we brought plenty of furs along."

"We were hardly likely to have overlooked such a thing," Spock replied soberly.

The dying sun was washing the rocks with a tangerine glow as they made their camp, the vlar snickering gently to each other as they lowered their bulky bodies to the ground. They shared a meal, neither much inclined for talk, Kirk because of weariness and Spock because he had his tongue well under guard now. After the meal, Spock took their tricorders and made a few brief checks. He looked up to find Kirk sleeping soundly and covered him with the furs. He stowed the tiny instruments away in his own pockets along with that valuable medikit, glad that Kirk had managed to fall asleep without the aid of the drug. He pulled his own furs about him and slept.

\* \* \*

Kirk came out of a delicious dream to find a steely hand holding his shoulder. "What is it, Spock?"

"People coming - at least eight," Spock breathed. "They are coming quietly - I deduce that their intentions may be unfriendly."

Kirk could hear the stealthy footsteps now, the sudden rattle of a pebble. He tensed, waiting.

A yell brought them both to their feet; the moonlight showed shadowy figures leaping down the surrounding rocks. It was a hard fight, and before they were finally held, Spock had downed three, Kirk two. Arms forced up behind their backs, they were led off down the mountainside, the two vlar belching their protestations as they were trampled on and kicked into movement. Their captors did not speak and they progressed for some mile or so in silence, until a scuffle of feet came, and muffled shouts, as Spock suddenly broke loose, running swiftly down a break in the rocks.

"Follow the Lan!" Kirk's captor gripped him tightly. "Don't let him get away!"

Spock was recaptured so quickly Kirk wondered at it. He had worked out in the gym with the Vulcan and knew how lethal he could be at close quarters. Clearly the Thulya were a match even for Vulcan muscles strengthened by modern in-fighting techniques. It didn't seem to hold out much hope for his own escape. He bided his time, awaiting an opportunity. He had not found one before they reached an encampment in a steep-sided gorge, the rocks rising sheer on all sides, and entered only by one narrow winding pathway. He was led into a cave, pushed roughly to the ground, followed by Spock. Two of the men remained as guards and a large rock was levered into the entrance. Kirk began to rise, but Spock put out a hand in the near-darkness, pulling him towards him.

Kirk felt firm fingertips on his face, and before he had time to wonder what Spock was doing, a light tendril of thought pierced his mind.

\*May I? The contact will be light and brief.\*

"Spock?"

\*Silently, I will hear you. I have dumped out equipment back up in the rocks; if you have a chance to get away you will find it easily enough under a rock shaped like a sand-ray.\* He projected a vivid picture of the area.

\*Yes, I could find that all right. I still have my communicator but not my tricorder.\*

\*I was using it, it is safe. Jim, I'm sorry - I had to dump the medikit as well.\*

The fingers slipped from his face and a blinding sense of loss welled up in Kirk. He longed to call that ordered mind back into his, where it had lain so pleasantly. The contact had been too brief, too light. He had felt the touch of a telepathic mind before, but never experienced such a desire to try and reach more deeply into the hidden thoughts.

Spock pulled away abruptly and sat up, cradling his knees in his arms and dropping his head to them. The brief contact had shaken him, as it always did, but not for the usual reasons. The mind link was unpleasant to him because, unless at a very shallow level such as this had been, he had to reveal much of his hidden emotional life that others must not normally see. This brief contact had shown him a warm, strong mind, a will as strong as his own, a level of caring that welcomed him gladly and begged him to stay, to sink deeper and lie, warm and comfortable, unafraid. The sense of loss he had felt as he had broken contact had almost overpowered him with its intensity. He erected his barriers yet again, sheilding his mind with impenetrable ice.

As light began to filter in, the rock was hauled aside, the sun's rays framing a gigantic figure in the entrance.

"Bring out the Du," he said harshly. "Let the Lan lie and rot a while longer."

Kirk was dragged to his feet and taken outside, the rock replaced. He blinked in the low sunlight, studying his captors. They were all Du, but at the far end of the gorge, two Da were gathered round a fire.

"Take off your hood," the giant ordered. "There is no need to wear a sign of slavery here, we are free Du, owned by none but ourselves." As Kirk hesitated, he put out a huge hand and ripped the hood back. There was a low gasp from the crowd, and the massive fingers took Kirk's head, turning it. "A mark of the Lan, I see," the Du said slowly. "Truly your thoughts must be bitter against he who did this thing to you. Well, you shall see him slain for it, I promise you."

"Not this Lan," Kirk said swiftly. "The damage was done when I was a child."

The Du gave a low growl of anger. "All the more reason to take revenge on a race that can disfigure our children so," one of the group said.

"My Lan is gentle," Kirk told him. "He has never ill-treated me, he cared for me when I was sick, tended me with his own hands. Not all the Lan are cruel."

The giant Du laughed. "I see you are one to be won by fair words," he sneered. "For my part, I believe a good Lan is one whose spirit is broken to my will; if it cannot be broken then I would prefer to see him dead at my feet! We will see how your Lan fares. Are you hungry? The Da prepare our morning meal."

Kirk followed him to the fire where he was made welcome. "Your name?" the giant Du asked, crouching to take a dripping hunk of meat from the flames.

"JimDu."

"Jim will do. We do not use the name of slave here. Mine is Gal. Here, eat and welcome."

"I am not hungry."

Gal bit ravenously into the meat, khaki-green blood smearing his chin. "Suit yourself. The food is there if you desire it. What were you and the Lan doing in the mountains? Few Lan have passed this way since we began releasing their churls for them." There was a shout of laughter from the group.

"Releasing them how?" Kirk asked grimly.

Gal grinned. "A churl is always released on the death of his Lan, isn't

he? Do you know a better way?" Kirk watched him silently. Gal finished his meal and then drank deeply, tossing the skin across to Kirk when he had finished. There was no opportunity to purify it, and he drank, hoping the effects would not be unpleasant.

"I will sleep now," Gal said. "When I am rested we will question the Lan. Sleep now yourself, your night was but short."

He lay beside the fire, pillowing his head on one enormous hand. The Da gathered up the uneaten meat, what scraps there were, and slipped silently away with the other Du. Two walked to the end of the gorge and stood guard. There seemed little point in attempting anything at present, so Kirk lay down, staring up at the bright sky, grateful for the ability, engrained into him in midshipman days, to sleep when he needed to.

It was past noon when he came awake with a start to find Gal stirring.

"There will be good feasting today," the Du grunted. "We took much food from the farm we raided two days ago. Eat well, my friend. Tomorrow, times may be hard again."

Kirk recognised some of the fruit and made a meal from it, but was forced to accept some meat from Gal. He had to avoid swallowing the mouthful he took, for even the taste made him heave.

When he had eaten his fill, Gal signed to the Du to release Spock, and the Vulcan was dragged towards the fire. Gal looked him up and down.

"Well, Lan, your name?"

"Spock."

Gal grinned unpleasantly. "You need not seek to curry favour by not using your title, Lan," he sneered. "We would not call you by it, whatever your wish in the matter." Spock remained impassive. "You were unwise to take the mountain path," Gal continued. "Your churl is now released into our care, he no longer serves you. Well, have you nothing to say?"

"The churl is free to go if he wishes," Spock said tonelessly. "I do not seek to hold him against his will."

He reeled under a blow from the huge arm. Kirk winced, knowing the force it took to rock the Vulcan. "You will not hold him at all," Gal bellowed, "for you are going to die!"

"No." Kirk moved beside Spock. The Du moved angrily, but Gal waved them back.

"Speak, Jim. Would you plead for his life?"

"I would prefer you not to kill him," Kirk said. "If I have a choice in this matter, let him serve me as I have served him. That may prove the greater punishment."

Gal grinned his approval. "I see the soft ways you spoke of have not made you love him."

"The Lan has not been cruel," Kirk said curtly, "but slavery is slavery and it is right that he should understand what I have suffered."

"If we can break him to our will," Gal agreed, "he shall be your churl." He swung back to Spock. "Understand that your life is forfeit if you do not serve him well." Spock nodded calmly. "Put him back in the cave," Gal ordered. "He can make no escape from there." As they left he said softly, "Had you asked for his life for any other reason I would have killed him before your eyes and then slain you. The Du who love their Lan make me sick to my stomach." He spat viciously. "I shall be watching you both," he added coolly. "Do not give me cause to suspect that he has your love, or I will kill you both."

Kirk met his eyes, his own grim. "I treasure my freedom. I have no love

for the owners of slaves, however kindly."

"Good. See that it remains so."

For six days Kirk chafed in idleness, seeing Spock only at mealtimes when he was brought out to wait on him. Kirk made a great show of refusing to allow him scraps of meat, but saw that he got some of the meagre ration of fruit. He watched the fruit supply with a sharp eye, knowing that when that was gone, he too must go hungry, or risk eating the meat. At least the enforced rest was strengthening him, the pain in his belly was only a dull ache, for which he could be grateful. By the seventh day there was only unfamiliar fruit left, and he decided to take the risk and eat it. The decision proved disastrous.

He woke in the night, shivering and sick, waves of nausea flooding him. By morning, fierce pains stabbed his gut and he vomited helplessly; by evening he could only wish to die. At Gal's command Spock tended him wordlessly, bathing his face, giving him tiny sips of water to cool his burning throat. The ninth day passed in a dim haze of pain, he dozed intermittently, waking as yet another spasm of sickness gripped him. However, by evening the pain subsided again and he fell into a refreshing sleep to wake as the larger moon stole over the clifftop, its bright beams directly on his eyes. They were suddenly cut out as a figure passed in front, and then another. The Du were leaving the camp, probably on another raid - their food supplies were low.

He sat up. The Da were sleeping by the fire, well away from his position. He pushed the furs aside and knelt; the guards were at their usual posts by the gully and the stone had been rolled in front of the cave. Presumably Spock had been shut in there for the night as he was sleeping and did not need him. He slipped silently to the rock and pushed it unavailingly. He doubted whether he could have moved it even on Earth; here on Thul it was impossible. He put his mouth close to the crack between rock and cliff-face.

"Spock," he breathed, hoping against hope the Vulcan might be awake; should he not be he would have to risk a louder call.

There was a scrabbling sound, a thud, and Spock's welcome voice. "Jim?"

"Yes. Are you guarded, or are they asleep?"

"There is a guard. He is incapacitated."

"I can't shift the rock. You'll have to help me from in there."

They heaved together. Kirk felt a sudden tearing pain in his gut as the rock rolled aside.

"Quick," he muttered. "Two guards at the gully. The Du are gone."

One guard slumped swiftly as Spock applied pressure to his neck, but the other avoided Kirk's blow; his arms felt stiff and clumsy, the pain in his belly making him sick again. He could hear the women shouting, felt blackness stealing over his mind, another searing agony in his belly as he was lifted - then nothing.

\* \* \*

He surfaced again in impenetrable darkness, blinking; he wondered dully if anything had happened to his sight. He tried to put up a hand and found his movement restricted by rock all around him. There was not even room to lift an arm. He raised his head and found there were stones above him also. The pain in his belly was sending fire throughout his body. He lay, fighting sickness. Had he been buried alive? Terror gripped him, and he forced himself to lie still, praying for unconsciousness to take him again.

There was a sound, a scraping of rock on rock - someone was there. The stones were lifted rapidly, thrown violently aside, grey light filtered through to him and Spock's welcome face bent over his grave, the dark eyes alight with concern.

"Jim!" The mask came back in place. "I was afraid you would regain



consciousness before I returned. I'm sorry, I had to hide you."

"I'm all right," Kirk whispered through stiff lips, "but get me out of here if you can. I thought I'd been buried alive."

Strong arms lifted him, causing him to gasp with pain. He was laid down again on soft dry sand.

"We are safe now," Spock said quietly, hands busy with the scanner. "But the internal bleeding has begun again, much worse this time." He handed Kirk a capsule. Kirk swallowed it gratefully, and accepted a sip of water, wondering how long he would be able to keep it down - all too soon he disgorged it. Spock wiped his face gently, clearing away the fouled sand by his head.

"Try to sleep," he said softly.

Obediently Kirk closed his eyes. Spock sat beside him lips one tight line of worry. There were still two days to wait before the Enterprise would return for them, and Kirk was badly injured. The strain of lifting the rock from his prison had aggravated the healing injury, and the sickness had weakened him shockingly. There was water in the deep cave he had found to hide them, and since they had food concentrates in plenty, they would be able to stay hidden until they were picked up - but could Kirk endure such pain for two more days? He looked at the still figure, tautly immobile in the dim light. Clearly there was no healing sleep to overcome what Kirk was suffering. There was only one thing he could do to help him, if he was permitted to do so; and he would do it, whatever the cost to himself. The decision made, he spoke tentatively.

"Jim."

The pain-filled eyes fluttered open. "Sorry to be such a nuisance, Spock," Kirk said weakly.

"The pain is bad?"

"Yes. Don't worry."

"Jim...may I help you?" The hazel eyes looked a question. "Vulcans are able to control their own pain," Spock said softly. "If you will allow me to use the mind meld, I may be able to help you."

Hope flooded Kirk. "Spock, if only you could," he said quietly, "I shouldn't know how to thank you."

"Very well." Spock took a deep breath, steeping his fingers momentarily before he touched Kirk's face with warm fingertips. The pressure grew, the tiny tendril stole into Kirk's consciousness. He groaned as pain thrust through his body.

\*Relax.\* The inner voice was compelling. \*Do not fight me, be one with me.\* The ordered mind grew into his, flowing, surging. A deep, shy caring enveloped him and suddenly the thing was easy.

\*Spock, my friend?\*

\*Jim. I fear...\*

\*Me?\*

\*Myself, to show myself. You may not like what you see of me, but it will help the pain. Can you accept me as I am?\*

\*You are my friend. Whatever you are, I accept it gladly.\*

\*We are one mind. There is no pain. I am ashamed...\*

\*Pain fading. You see me as I am, Spock. Do you dislike what you find?\*

\*I see love, warmth, understanding. I give response. I am ashamed. Not Vulcan...\*

\*I see cool logic and a deep compassion. Loneliness that hurts my soul. Never lonely again. I am here...\*

\*Loneliness of my Human half, hidden, suppressed. I cannot show it outwardly. The meld reveals me as I am. You do not mind?\*

\*You are as you are. Vulcan, alien, and my friend. You see me as I am also, the surging emotions that sway and torment me, Does it repulse you?\*

\*You do not fear emotion as I do. Nor does it rule you.\*

\*I need you, Spock, your ordered mind, your calm. Will you remain my friend?\*

\*I will walk at your shoulder. Follow where you lead. The pain is gone.\*

\*The pain is gone. Quiet. Peace.\*

\*I withdraw.\*

\*No...no...\*

\*You must release me, the link will strengthen too far. The pain will not return. I beg release.\*

\*Leave, then, my friend. My Vulcan friend.\*

Spock drew his hand away, a shudder wracking his lean frame. "Spock! Are you all right?"

"Are you?" The Vulcan would not look up.

"I feel at peace," Kirk said gently. "Spock, you never fail to surprise me." A long silence. "Spock, look at me." He turned then, face blank. "Don't shut me out again, Spock. Never again."

\*Never again.\* The face was still shuttered, immobile.

"We are still linked?" Kirk was startled.

"I must maintain a tenuous link to control the pain. Jim, try to sleep. We can talk later if you must."

"I still do nothing but sleep," Kirk half laughed, half sighed.

"You do much more, Jim." There was a feather-touch of warmth in the even voice. "Go to sleep."

\* \* \*

He woke again to a peaceful lassitude.

"Don't try to move." The Vulcan seated himself beside the still form. "Any movement will make the bleeding worse."

"How long until the Enterprise gets here?" Kirk asked.

"36.27 hours to rendezvous time."

"Where are we?"

"Deep in a cave. I have blocked the entrance. There is water here which will serve since we can purify it."

"How did I get here? I remember trying to deal with a Du and then nothing. I had a dream I was buried."

"That was not a dream. I am sorry, but I had to hide you, Jim. I could not block the cave from the outside and I had to pick up our equipment. I needed the medikit for you. I hoped you would not regain consciousness until I returned. The experience must have been unpleasant."

"You could say that," Kirk said wryly, remembering the terror of that waking.

"You have great courage," Spock said softly. "It will be an honour to

serve under your command."

"It's been quite an experience working under yours." Kirk allowed himself the luxury of a small chuckle, revelling in the freedom from pain.

"I should not have agreed to it." The voice was icy cold. "The greater gravity of the planet has caused you harm."

"Rubbish!" Kirk spoke forcefully. "I've worked on high-grav planets before and doubtless I shall do so again."

"Your injuries might not have been so severe under easier conditions."

"Are you blaming yourself for my injuries? Spock, that isn't logical. I didn't have to pick that fight!"

"Nor did you have to aggravate the injury releasing me."

"I don't claim to be logical, Spock. You couldn't have stopped me trying to set us free. We had to get away or we'd have been stuck here for good."

"You still had your communicator. You could have made your escape alone and collected the tricorders."

"A logical plan," Kirk agreed, then softly, "would you have left me?"

The lips formed "No," but - \*I would go through fire to find you.\* The thought came explosively into Kirk's mind.

He smiled at the shuttered face. "Your Human half is showing, Spock," he said gently. "I shall miss your mind when you release the link."

\*You heard? I am ashamed...\*

\*I heard. There is no need for shame. Whatever you are, I accept you. Don't you believe that?\*

\*I believe you. And I trust you.\*

\*That...awes me. To find such loyalty...\*

\*It will remain hidden. I cannot reveal...\*

\*No need. Let it remain unspoken.\*

The minds parted again. Kirk let his eyes wander over that bone-hard face that hid the inner warmth from a prying world. The eyebrow lifted, a light glinting in the dark eye.

"I was afraid there for a moment," Kirk said.

"Afraid? Of what?"

"Of having spoken too openly. Should I have ignored what I heard?"

"What is...is. I was afraid also when I began the meld."

"And yet you did it."

"You were in great pain."

"Greater love hath no Vulcan," Kirk adapted the quotation. "You are such private people."

"We do not all have so much to reveal," Spock said slowly. "Most Vulcans do learn control so early that they forget, Jim. The mind link has never been easy for me."

"And yet you chose the Vulcan way? That can't have been easy either."

"I always thought of myself as a Vulcan; the decision was easy enough."

Kirk wondered whether the path had been harder than his friend had anticipated, but paused, not liking to pose a direct question.

"Please ask whatever you wish," Spock said tranquilly. "You may as well

take advantage of the moment. Once we are back aboard and you are under proper medical care there will be no further need for the link and I will find it hard to speak freely then."

"How did you know I wanted to ask you a question?"

"You are not a Vulcan, Jim. Your face might have told me even without my present inner knowledge of what you are feeling."

"I never knew I was so transparent," Kirk teased him, "but I don't mind you reading me like a book." More seriously. "If you were not...repelled by what you must have seen of me, then either your Vulcan half is greatly understanding of your Human half is stronger than you thought."

"I have had problems with that part of my nature," Spock admitted, "but I am a Vulcan by upbringing as well as by blood, and although I have found my Human traits a trial on occasion, the Vulcan in my will always have the victory in any inner battle" \*gave over one who has shattered my barriers with his warmth.\*

\*I feel a warmth from you also.\*

\*It is there, but it will be deeply buried once again.\*

\*I'll still know it's there.\*

\*Yes. I shall not care that you know.\*

\*Spock, withdraw.\*

\*No...Yes, I withdraw\* "- your mind is very strong, Jim. You seek deeper into me than any other non-telepath I have encountered. I needed your help then."

"I guessed you did. I didn't want to lose contact."

\*I am still here.\*

\*Take care\*

"I don't believe I care any more," Spock said suddenly. "It is good to have found a friend."

"For me, too, but I take pride in my Vulcan friend; you needn't try to change on my account."

"I could not, but I thank you for saying it. Do not demand too much of me, Jim, in the future. I will not wish to hurt you, but you will find me outwardly insensitive once more when the link is wholly broken."

"Friendship can take a little hurting."

Spock got up and fetched the water-skin. "A drink?"

"Please."

"Sip it slowly. Are you hungry?"

"No...yes...I'm not sure. It's several days since I last ate."

"I will mix some concentrate with the water."

Kirk eyed the skin warily. "I hope it will stay down," he said pessimistically. "I should think you've had enough of me spewing all over you."

"You are very neat about it."

"Don't...make me laugh!"

"Laughter would be unwise. It was not my intention to make you laugh."

"But what a compliment," Kirk grinned. "You are the most long-suffering man I know, Spock."

"And you mind less about the little indignities of life than any Human I

have encountered. It is most refreshing."

"Little indignities, indeed!"

"They are often harder to endure than the greater."

"True. I don't have to worry this time, it seems to be staying down."

"Good. You must sleep again soon."

"I thought it was getting colder, and it's getting dark. You need rest, too, Spock."

"You are cold. I will lie close and warm you."

The lean body shed a pleasant heat, but Kirk was wriggling uncomfortably cold toes. Spock slipped off his boots and placed Kirk's feet inside them, but they would not slide over his broader feet.

"They aren't doing either of us any good that way, Spock. How about piling sand over me?"

"A logical solution."

"That's better. Are you warm enough?"

"Yes."

"Pleasant dreams. Do Vulcans dream?"

"This Vulcan does. Tonight they will be pleasant."

\* \* \*

\*Blackness. Hard, cold stone. Trapped. I can't get out...get out...  
getoutgetout.\*

\*Sleep in peace. A silver sky shot with stars. Liquid birdsong borne on a cool night breeze. Peace. Sleep.\*

\* \* \*

"Spock."

"I am here."

"My dreams were not all pleasant." Kirk smiled. "But you were there to help. I never shared a dream before."

"Nor I. The sun is high now, are you warmer?"

"My toes are hot." Spock brushed the sand from them with careful hands. "That's better. How am I this morning?"

"The bleeding has stopped again."

"I thought I heard you using the scanner. How much sleep did you get?"

"Enough."

"How many hours now?"

"21.23"

"In a way I shall be sorry."

"I, too, shall miss your companionship, but there will be compensations, and it is essential that you have treatment soon." He moved away to prepare a drink for Kirk.

"Piper will be gone. I'm sorry not to have been there to greet the new surgeon."

"Doubtless Captain Owen will have provided the necessary welcome for Dr. McCoy."

"Did you check his record too?" Kirk teased.

"Unnecessary. The medical section is not my concern."

"He's from Earth too," Kirk remembered. "From my part, though down in the southern states. I met him briefly before I took command. He seemed a little brusque, but no doubt we'll rub along."

"No doubt you will."

\*Something suppressed?\*

\*You know very well, Jim, that you could charm the birds out of the trees if you wished.\*

Kirk groaned aloud. "Not you too, Spock."

The eyebrow climbed. "Is it not true?"

"I have been told so. I didn't see it having any effect on Commander Torven."

"I did not see you making the attempt."

\*With one who could be rude about my friend?\*

\*I was not your friend then.\*

"One of my officers, then. A very exceptional officer, too. I was proud of that seven-month record of mine at the Academy, but you broke it."

"Your record stands, Jim. Vulcans do not need psycho-training and conditioning."

"Now you've caught me boasting."

"It is not boasting to state a fact about oneself. Now that I know the strength of your will, I am no longer surprised by your record."

"You'll be making me blush in a minute."

Spock looked at him calmly. "You do not blush easily, Captain. Drink this." He lifted Kirk's head. Kirk swallowed the liquid down, even cold the concentrate made it tasty enough, and at least his stomach was no longer greeting food with revulsion. He closed his eyes; the cave was warming up and he felt pleasantly tired. Without his knowing it, sleep took him softly once more.

Spock watched him as he slept. The lines of pain were eased, but they would return if he had to relinquish the control he held so firmly. He would regret the loss of that friendly touch, but the comfortable memory would always be a part of him, would always linger to fill the lonely hours of solitude that would be his once routine was re-established. He could regret nothing of the past few hours, even though the pain of newly awakened caring would now be a part of him. Vulcan he was and would remain, but this Human had reached out and sought him through the barriers; the pain was unimportant. It would do Kirk good to sleep away the time until the Enterprise returned, but he was conscious of a selfish sorrow that it would deprive him of that gentle teasing that had come to mean so much. He moved quietly about the cave, piling their equipment together ready for the beam-up, then sat down beside Kirk to wait, his communicator open.

"I've been asleep again."

"It can only do you good."

"I shall begin to think the whole thing was a dream soon. No, I didn't dream Tanar."

\*Grief.\*

"I'm sorry, Spock. I shouldn't have reminded you."

"I have not forgotten him. He was an attractive child."

"Like you. He made me see what you must have been like."

"I believe I was a trial sometimes, but I was helped."

"As you helped him. You were very good to him, Spock. You managed him more easily than I could have done. That was what made me suspect you understood him better than I would have expected. He knew you loved him."

"Even a Vulcan may feel pity for those who are in need of help. It was not my humanity that responded to Tanar."

"How long now?"

"I have the channel open. The Enterprise should be within range at any time. We will remain linked until you have received medication."

\*I shall miss your presence.\*

\*I, yours, but it must be done.\*

\*I regret, but understand. Thank you, Spock.\*

\*There is no need for gratitude.\*

"Enterprise to Lt. Commander Spock."

"Spock here. We are ready to beam up. Have a medical team standing by, the Captain has been injured." He lifted Kirk in his arms.

\*It's been a good two months, Spock.\*

The transporter room formed around them, Kirk felt himself laid on a wheeled stretcher, saw a pair of vivid blue eyes full of concern, heard the hiss of a hypo.

\*I withdraw.\*

\*Goodbye, my friend.\*

\* \* \* \* \*

The worried blue eyes now held a smile. "You'll do, Captain. Two or three days bed-rest, and you'll be back on your feet. That must have been quite a thumping you took!"

"I believe it was. Welcome aboard, Dr. McCoy. I'm sorry to provide you with a patient instead of being able to welcome you properly."

McCoy turned away from the couch. "It's not such a bad idea to see how someone reacts to sickness," he said cynically. "You learn a lot about a person that way."

Kirk grinned at his back. "Since I don't intend to do more of this than I can help, maybe it's just as well you arrived when you did! How long have I been in sickbay?"

"Two days. I had to do some pretty major repairs. I've had more enquiries about you in two days than I usually get in a week!"

"Gratifying - if a little tiresome for you."

"Feel up to a visitor?"

"I daresay I could cope. Who is it?"

"Captain Owen. He wants to say goodbye."

"Certainly, wheel him in."

Owne entered, followed by the First Officer. Kirk chatted to Owen for a while, catching up on news; pleased to hear that all had gone well during the trial. He caught Spock's eye once or twice, but the shuttered look was on the Vulcan's face, and he didn't want to embarrass him by too effusive a welcome. McCoy returned soon to shoo the visitors away, and Kirk lay back, finding himself more tired than he'd anticipated. As the Vulcan followed Owen out, McCoy stopped him.

"You'll be pleased to hear the Captain's getting along fine."

"Obviously, Doctor, or you would not have permitted him to tire himself with unnecessary social visits."

As the door hissed to, McCoy swung round. "Of all the surly devils... I thought he'd been on that survey with you."

"I've been with him, actually. He was in charge of things."

"Then how come he's the only one around here who doesn't seem to care how you're getting on?"

Kirk smiled at the annoyed doctor. "Not had much to do with Vulcans, have you?"

"Not a lot. Are they all like that?"

"Most of them. You'll get used to it."

"I may get used to it, but I don't have to like it. I've been going through the medical records. He's part Human, isn't he?"

"Yes." Kirk hid a smile. "But it doesn't show, and he considers himself Vulcan."

"I can't treat what he thinks he is, I have to treat what's there. I can see I'll have to study my text-books and hope they can give me a few answers before I need them."

Kirk shifted restlessly. "How long before I'm out of here?"

"Three days -- if you co-operate."

"What makes you think I won't co-operate?"

McCoy smiled suddenly, the lines of cynicism about his mouth relaxing. "Your kind never does! Get some sleep, I'll see you in the morning."

\* \* \*

Since the Enterprise was on routine work, Kirk was able to relax in sickbay without worrying about his ship, sure it was in safe hands with Spock. But he missed the Vulcan's company, and each time a fresh head came round the door, hoped that it was his new-found friend. At last he heard the deep-toned voice in McCoy's office and found himself brightening perceptibly. He heard McCoy's voice raised irascibly.

"Do you have to worry him with that now, Mr. Spock?"

"It is customary to present such reports to the Captain."

"Well, all right, but be quick about it."

Spock entered and came to the bedside. "I have the day's records, Captain."

"All signed and correct, Mr. Spock?"

"Of course, sir."

"Then I don't need to read them. Sit down a minute."

Spock, acutely conscious of the open office door, replied formally, "I have some work to do on the survey reports, Captain, if you will excuse me."

Disappointed but not surprised, Kirk let him leave. He lay studying the lines on the bulkhead, deep in thought.

"Bothering you with reports, indeed."

Kirk opened an eye. "Starfleet regulations, Doctor."

"Why can't he stop by for a chat, like anyone else?"

"Vulcan's don't chat. You must know that much about them."

"Huh!" McCoy snorted sarcastically, "They're quick enough with back-chat. I've noticed."

Back-chat? Spock? Kirk raised his eyebrows. "What's he been saying to you?"



"I ran a physical on him this morning, just for my own professional satisfaction - I do like to know what I'm treating. I'll admit it wasn't the fastest physical I've ever done, but I needed to make sure of the normal readings. The records were right, but they sure looked wrong, and I wanted to see for myself. You could see he thought the whole thing was a waste of his time and mine."

"But what did he say?"

"He asked me if Earth medicine has progressed since the eighteenth century!"

Kirk broke into delighted laughter. Little though McCoy realised it, the remark showed a newly-relaxed Spock; it was going to be good having him around.

"Don't laugh," McCoy growled at him. "You'll set the healing back days, and I can't see anything funny in being compared to a sawbones."

"What's a 'sawbones'?"

"Don't you remember your Pickwick, Captain? A sawbones is a surgeon."

Kirk grinned. "Well, I'm glad you didn't have to deal with me without an anaesthetic."

"I'm pleased to hear I give someone satisfaction around here." McCoy studied the panel over Kirk's head, then ran a scanner over him. "You're healing well. You can get up tomorrow for an hour or two."

\* \* \*

McCoy put his head round the door. "More reports, Captain," he said, disgusted. "Do I let him in?"

Kirk pushed aside the viewer. "Yes, show him in and then leave us alone. We have some ship's business we must discuss."

McCoy went back to his office. "You can go in, Mr. Spock. The Captain says he has something to discuss with you, but don't let him tire himself out. Can't he forget routine matters for another day?"

"I am unaware that the Medical Section has any jurisdiction over the Captain of the ship in such matters, Doctor," Spock said stiffly. "If the Captain wishes to discuss something with me, then he must be permitted to do so."

McCoy looked at the blank face with irritation. "In case you hadn't realised it, Mr. Spock, my word is final in sickbay. You can have five minutes, no longer."

"Had you not permitted other, purely social, visits, then there would be no need for this restriction."

"I'll be the judge of what's best for my patients. He needs a little Human contact occasionally."

From behind his mask, Spock said, "There is little point in discussing the matter while the Captain is waiting. I will go and see what he wants and then he can be left to rest."

"Five minutes," McCoy reminded him.

"My hearing and memory are both excellent," Spock said icily.

He stood beside Kirk's bed, all Vulcan. Kirk saw the stiffness with regret. "Something the matter, Spock?" he asked sympathetically.

"Everything is running smoothly, Captain."

"Then put down those damn reports and talk for a while."

"I believe you had something to discuss with me."

Kirk grinned. "No, but I thought you'd like an excuse to stay."

"The Doctor says that you need rest. I am to stay no more than five minutes."

Surprised, Kirk did not comment openly. He'd had plenty of visitors during

the day, and there was no-one more restful to be with than the Vulcan. He let the conversation remain formal, seeing that Spock preferred it that way; once out of sickbay he'd get things on an easier footing again. When Spock had gone he lay back, puzzling over McCoy's attitude. After his next hypo shot, he asked McCoy pointblank. "What have you got against my First Officer, Doctor?"

"Got against him? Nothing. What makes you ask?"

"You don't seem very keen to let him in to see me."

"He's been in a couple of times."

"You restricted him to five minutes. Why? I've had visitors here for longer."

"They come to cheer you up, not bother you with official matters."

"Spock doesn't bother me," Kirk told him gently. "In fact, tomorrow I intend to play chess with him if he's got time."

McCoy made a grimace. "Not my idea of a relaxing evening, but if it suits you, carry on."

"I'd like you to pass the message on personally. He won't come if he doesn't think he's welcome."

McCoy looked at him carefully. "Have I put my foot in it?"

"You just may have, Sawbones!"

The surgeon smiled. "I've given you a stick to beat me with, but my shoulders are broad. I'll pass your message on to your walking computer to come and addle your brains with chess tomorrow evening."

He left Chapel to settle Kirk for the night, and went off to a recreation room, where he knew he would find the Chief Engineer. Maybe his old friend could shed some light for him.

"Chess? Well, the Captain plays, and so does Spock," Scott said. "I've not seen them play together, but that disna' mean they don't. I don't play much myself. What's puzzling you, Leonard?"

"Is that Vulcan always so gosh-darned formal?"

Scott laughed. "Aye. Ye'll get used to him in time, we all have. It takes a wee while, but there's no-one I'd rather have wi' me in a tight corner - and any time ye've a problem that has any scientific background at all, he's your man."

"He's good, is he?"

"The best."

"That's quite a recommendation, Scotty. I'll remember it."

Encountering Spock going on duty the next morning, he button-holed him. "Oh, Mr. Spock, the Captain would like you to come and see him this evening for a game of chess."

Spock paused in his stride. "Please tell him I will come, Doctor."

\* \* \*

"You'll get your game of chess tonight, Captain."

"Thanks, 'Bones. Did he seem pleased?"

McCoy gave that careful consideration. "I couldn't say he seemed pleased, but he said to tell you he'd come."

"He was pleased," Kirk grinned.

"Well, I'm glad someone can tell!" McCoy retorted.

"You'll learn to tell, Doctor."

"It's going to be fun learning," McCoy commented sarcastically.

"It's worth the bother," Kirk assured him.

\* \* \*

Spock arrived carrying a small box under one arm. McCoy raised an eyebrow at it.

"Not work?" he said, trying to keep annoyance out of his voice.

"No, Doctor."

"I'm glad to hear it. You may be glad to hear he'll be back on light duties tomorrow."

"The Enterprise will benefit from having her Captain in charge once more," Spock replied formally.

McCoy watched Kirk's welcoming face through the open doorway. If he could give that cold alien such a glad smile, there must be more to him than met the eye. Well, time would tell.

Kirk waved a hand. "Thanks, Bones. Isn't it time you were off duty?"

"If my patients are giving the orders I guess I'm no longer needed. You can spend three hours on duty tomorrow, Captain - no longer or I'll have you back in sickbay instead of releasing you to your quarters."

"I'll behave myself. Goodnight, Bones."

"'Bones'?" Spock raised an enquiring eyebrow as the door closed.

"Well, you compared him to an eighteenth century surgeon, I hear."

"I merely commented that his methods seemed a little archaic."

Kirk smiled at him. "I gather he put you through it yesterday morning. It's only logical he should want to know what makes you tick. Extra-terrestrial biology is one thing in theory, another in practice."

"I am well aware of that fact, Captain." Spock laid down the box he carried and drew up a chair. "I understood you would welcome a game of chess. Are you sure it will not be too tiring?"

"I'm not that ill, Spock. Didn't McCoy say I'll be back on duty tomorrow?"

"He mentioned it."

"Then it must be the mother hen in you again," Kirk teased.

Spock permitted a glacial expression to spread over his face. "I can only extrapolate from the facts I am given," he said distantly. "If I am constantly warned that you are not to be bothered by official duties, I can only assume that you are still unfit."

"Needled you, did he?" Kirk said sympathetically. "Spock, I realised that you needed an excuse to come and see me. I'll explain it to McCoy."

"I would prefer that you did not."

"Now give me a logical reason, because I can't see one."

Spock sat silent for several seconds, while Kirk watched him closely. The Vulcan seemed to be considering the situation with such care that it must be important to him.

"You would not have wished to make such an explanation before we went to Thul, Captain. It is not necessary now."

"But if it will help to ease the situation between the two of you... "

"It is not necessary on my account. I was aware the Doctor was attempting to preserve you from what he felt were duties you did not need to perform. The lack lay within me." He paused again. "It is difficult for me to speak on a

personal level, Captain, but although you have reached out to me and made me your friend, I so not wish you to fight my battles."

"I'm sorry, Spock. I was too ready to leap to your defence," Kirk agreed. "I'll behave myself in future." Catching Spock's eye he amended ruefully, "Well, at least I'll try not to interfere, but I do reserve the right to defend you from bigotry should it arise. Before you argue, I'll do the same for anyone else. There's no room for intolerance in Starfleet, and most of all, not on my ship!" His eye fell on the wooden box, and he cocked an enquiring eyebrow. Spock handed it to him. Opening it, Kirk saw the wooden chess pieces he had made on Thul.

"I thought those got left behind when the Du jumped us!" he said, pleased. He picked out the vlar, running his fingers along the ear. "It's a pity the other ones you got aren't a perfect match. How did you manage to pick them up in the middle of that fight?"

"I went back for them when I got the tricorders. It was not far to go."

"You took a hell of a risk. Suppose they had recaptured you!"

"There was no-one about. I would not have taken any risk since I had left you in so unpleasant a situation."

Kirk shuddered. "Not a pleasant experience, but there wasn't anything else you could have done. If I had to die on Thul, I had to do it where I couldn't be found. You did the right thing, Spock."

"I know." Spock's face was stony.

"It can't have been easy for you," Kirk said gently. "I wouldn't have wanted to do it to you, Spock, but I would have done it if I had to."

"It was logical," Spock agreed, "but even for a Vulcan, the logical way is not always the easier."

"I'm glad you got the pieces, anyway," Kirk said. "I put a lot of hard work into those. Talking of hard work, how are you doing with the survey reports? Is there anything I can do to help?"

"The tapes are all prepared, Captain. I should like you to assist with the final section on our capture by the Du, when the tricorders were not used."

"Very well, I'll have time tomorrow. For now, chess?"

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When the report was finished, Kirk suggested a cup of coffee in the recreation room. Guessing that Spock would refuse, he added, "I've asked McCoy and Scott to join us as well. It doesn't do any harm for the senior officers to relax together sometimes, and I want you to come along."

"Are you sure it is wise, Captain? I have very little to offer on a social occasion."

"It will do you good," Kirk told him firmly. "We should present a united front to the world at large. For the good of the ship."

"You present a logical argument," Spock remarked blandly.

"Damnit, I want you to join us!" Kirk said explosively. "I'm just trying to keep things on a Vulcan level."

Spock's stone face did not betray his pleasure at having forced the sentiment from his Captain. Relieved that his outward demeanour would not give him away, he followed Kirk to the recreation room. Scott was surprised to see him, but shifted his chair over to make room. He'd known the Vulcan long enough to realise this was a historic occasion, and he was not going to spoil it by making any untoward comment. Unfortunately, the guard he was keeping on his tongue inhibited his usual flow of easy conversation, and for a while there were more

strained silences than were usual round a rec room table. A lucky question from McCoy about the recent survey made the going easier, and for half-an-hour or so the talk flowed back and forth comfortably.

"No, we had no real problems until the end," Kirk agreed with Spock. "Getting captured by the Du did complicate things though, and Spock had to get me out of there in a hurry before they developed a thirst for my blood and got the shock of their lives."

"Captain," protested Spock, "I believe you have an Earth idiom, 'the boot is on the other foot'. It was you who pushed aside the rock to release me from imprisonment at considerable pain to yourself."

Kirk gave a grimace at the memory. "Well, you must have carried me out of there when I blacked out, and carried me for quite a distance too. I was out for several hours."

"Just a minute," McCoy put in, frowning. "You said this happened two days before beam-up?"

Kirk kept the worry off his face, guessing what McCoy would question. "That's right."

McCoy looked from one to the other. "You agree with that statement, Mr. Spock?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"Were you unconscious too, part of the time?"

"No, Doctor, at no time other than when I was asleep."

McCoy's face cleared. "I suppose being in a cave and both of you asleep or unconscious part of the time, you managed to lose track of time. It couldn't have been two days before beam-up."

"I was pretty well shaken up," Kirk admitted, hoping Spock would let pass the aspersion on his impeccable sense of the passage of time go without comment, or they would have to face enquiries into a situation he could not explain to McCoy without the Vulcan's permission. Thankfully he realised the Vulcan was alert to the danger and kept silent.

"Leonard!" Scotty exploded his bombshell with well-meaning humour. "Ye can't go saying things like that about our Mr. Spock. Vulcans have a perfect sense of time, and always know what day it is - down to the nearest second. It's a useful trick," he added enviously, "I wish I had it myself."

McCoy looked back at Kirk. "You started that bleeding again two days before beam-up? But that's flatly impossible."

Kirk stood up. "Yes," he said lightly. "It happened that way. Time for me to retire, gentlemen."

McCoy rasped back his chair. "There's something I don't understand here," he said quietly, "and if you don't mind, Captain, I'd like to hear the full explanation before you go to your bed."

"That important?"

"I like to have the full facts about my cases," McCoy said expressionlessly.

Kirk shot a quick glance at the rigid Vulcan. This was not the place for explanations. "We'll go to my quarters," he said softly. "If you'll excuse us, Mr. Scott?"

"Aye." The engineer was clearly puzzled, but good manners prohibited questions. "I'll bid ye all goodnight, gentlemen. I'd like fine to see those tapes on the early steam experiments some time, Mr. Spock."

The Vulcan nodded agreement as he followed Kirk and McCoy from the room.

Kirk waved them both to chairs and sat down himself. "You have some questions, Dr. McCoy."

"You're strong, fit and healthy," McCoy told him bluntly, "but you're not superhuman. Your inside was in a bad way, and two days of the sort of pain you must have been suffering would have caused your system to show signs of severe shock - would certainly have caused me some problems during the operation; but there was no such problem. I want an explanation."

"What makes you think your own explanation isn't the one you're looking for?" Kirk asked, playing for time.

"I've been a doctor longer than you've been a Starship Captain," McCoy said sourly. "I don't know either you or Mr. Spock at all well, but I do know Scotty, I've known him for years. If he says Mr. Spock has a perfect time sense, then that's good enough for me. You two are holding something back. If the pair of you broke some Starfleet regulation down there getting help, I don't care, but I must know what it was."

"There was no medication, and no regulation broken, Bones. I give you my word on that."

"You were unconscious," McCoy said sharply. He rounded on the Vulcan. "You are very quiet, Lt. Commander Spock, but you did state that you were not unconscious, so I want the whole story, if you please."

"May I give him the facts, Mr. Spock?" Kirk asked, sensing the Vulcan would not wish to talk about it himself.

"It is logical that he should know what occurred," Spock agreed, face immobile.

"Vulcans are capable of controlling their own pain, and they are also telepathic," Kirk said succinctly.

McCoy looked at him, eyes blank. "That's an explanation?"

"I was able to link my mind to his and help him to control the pain," Spock said evenly. "That is all there is to explain."

McCoy flung up his hands. "That's all? The most incredible piece of information I've heard in a lifetime, and you say 'that's all'. How do you do it? Can you give me a demonstration some time? Why isn't this used freely? You're a scientist, you know the harm the most beneficial drugs do. Why have your race kept this a secret?"

"Steady, Bones," Kirk attempted to stem the flow. "It's not that simple. Having experienced it, I can understand why Vulcans don't use it as a general thing except possibly for other Vulcans, I don't know about that."

"There is no need, Vulcans can control their own pain," Spock reminded them.

"But... Why?" McCoy began.

"We've given you an explanation, Doctor," Kirk said firmly. "You will have to take it from me that there is a very good reason why the process should not be used more widely."

"Captain, I can't let it go... "

Kirk got up. "Doctor, you'll have to. I know in some matters you can overrule me, but I'm telling you now, as Captain, that we have nothing further to say."

"Jim." Spock came over to his side. "As the Doctor pointed out, I too am a scientist, and can appreciate that he will not be satisfied unless he has a fuller explanation."

Kirk drew him aside. "Are you sure?" he asked. "It's a very personal thing for you, Spock. You don't have to say any more if you don't want to."

"I am willing," Spock said, his face carved from ice.

"Well, you'd better do the talking. I don't want to say anything I shouldn't."

"Very well."

McCoy waited for them to turn, eyes impatient. Spock paused a moment before speaking.

"All Vulcans have telepathic ability in some degree, Dr. McCoy, and we are trained to use it from infancy; to block out the thoughts of others, and to seek only that which is relevant to the purpose of each meld. The link for such a purpose as the control of pain in a non-telepath has to be almost total, a complete giving of everything that each person has. It is a great invasion of privacy, and is only done at times of vital importance. In addition, the non-telepath has to be willing to submit himself; if he is not, the process is ineffective. It could not be done often without damage to the personality of the individual. To use it as a constant form of therapy would eventually destroy the telepath."

"I...see," McCoy said slowly. "Thank you for explaining it, Mr. Spock. I guess you'd rather I kept the information to myself?" Spock nodded. McCoy looked keenly from the Captain to the First Officer, studying their faces. The Vulcan was as cold, as aloof as ever, but there was a lurking warmth in Kirk's expression as he looked at him. There was definitely more to this Vulcan than met the eye, and McCoy made a resolution, there and then, to seek out just what there was to be found behind the formal behaviour. A little gentle needling at the right time might serve his purpose, he'd have to see. For the moment, he felt he'd enough to mull over.

"It's time you got some rest, Captain," he said roughly, "You're not to arrive back in sickbay, I've enough to do without adding you to my worries."

As the door closed, Spock said, "He is right, Jim."

"I know." Kirk sank down on a chair. "Just a word or two before you go." Spock waited. "Sit down, man, I can't talk with you hovering up there."

"My feet were both in contact with the deck," Spock said, sitting down.

"Thanks for telling McCoy," Kirk said abruptly.

"It was necessary," Spock agreed. "He should know a little of what is involved should I ever be able to help you again."

"I hope it won't be needed," Kirk said with feeling. "I didn't realise what an effect it had on you. You shouldn't have done it."

"Do you regret...?"

"NO! Only that it might have done you some harm."

"No harm was done," Spock said, "although the link had to be maintained for longer than would normally be considered desirable. It was much simpler for me than other attempts I have made. You were neither afraid nor repelled." He closed his mouth firmly, as though covering words he would not say, but his eyes met Kirk's steadily.

"We said it all then," Kirk reminded him. "I haven't forgotten any of it, and I never will. These next five years are going to be good years for us both!"

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