

Scotpress

CLOSER than
a BROTHER



a **STAR TREK**
fanzine

Meg
Wright

CLOSER THAN A BROTHER

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(Proverbs XVIII, 24; 'A man that hath friends must show himself friendly; and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother.)

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

Kirk leaned against the door frame of their small camping dome and looked up at the turquoise sky as it faded to mauve, the high cirrus clouds flaring orange with the last rays of the sun.

"No wonder they call Starbase 7 the Sunset Planet," he said at last.

Spock came to join him, handing over a mug of coffee. "The effect of dust in the upper atmosphere..."

"Spock!" Kirk said warningly, grinning like a maniac.

A small surge of amusement came through their bond although the thin face did not change as it looked at him. "I merely sought to prevent one of your more poetic flights of fancy, Captain. Your remarks each evening are becoming astonishingly predictable."

"Meaning I'm becoming a bore," Kirk translated, sipping the coffee gratefully. "I'm sorry if this shore leave has been too...monotonous and undiversified for you, but I thought it would do us both good to pass the time restfully."

"Restfully?" Spock thought of the long hours passed in rock-climbing, walking, swimming. "Hardly that. It is fortunate that my heritage provides sufficient stamina to allow me to keep up such a hectic pace without effort."

Kirk just grinned. "Perhaps you'd rather have visited the fleshpots," he said politely. "Forgive me. Next time I invite you to come ashore with me we'll make it Wrigley's, shall we?"

Spock suppressed a shudder. He had once - just once - gone ashore on that infamous planet. It had almost cured him of curiosity once and for all. "I am quite content," he said hurriedly. "This leave has been most enjoyable."

Serious again, Kirk said, "Yes, it has, hasn't it? Will you be sorry to get back aboard again?"

Spock shook his head. "For once, shore leave was granted at precisely the right moment and four days has provided ample time for the prospect of returning to space to be not unattractive."

"I didn't spend two and a half years flying a desk with nothing to show for it then, did I?"

Spock looked enquiringly at him as he took his mug and turned to set it in the small porta-cleanser on the galley wall.

Kirk pushed himself off the door frame by his shoulders. "If I achieved nothing else I did at least make myself heard on the vital necessity of adequate R & R for deep-space crew. Of course, I had some able back-up by a then ex-Starfleet doctor. Bones didn't mince his words and neither did I."

Spock had no difficulty in believing it, knowing both men as he did. He watched Kirk disappear into the tiny shower compartment, picked up his own mug of tea and drained the last few drops before adding it to the rest of the supper things and setting the machine to work, noting yet again the irritating, high-pitched whine it made; it had bothered him ever since they first used the cleanser and he'd had the unit apart twice in an effort to trace the source of the problem. In the end he'd had to concede defeat; it was most probably caused by a microscopic mote of dust and if so there was nothing he could do about it now. Fortunately the sound was above Kirk's hearing range and hadn't bothered him...but he would be sure to mention it to the manager of the camp-hire firm when they returned to the base tomorrow.

He potted about quietly, tidying up in the compulsive way that made Jim tease him so pleasantly - not that the Captain himself was untidy, but he could - and did - live with a greater degree of...unsymmetry...than Spock found aesthetically tolerable.

Having taken his own sonic shower earlier, he was tucked neatly away in his sleeping bag when Kirk finally emerged, his hair in damp disarray. He grinned down at the Vulcan.

"Everything shipshape and Bristol fashion, Mister?"

Spock looked up at him consideringly. Kirk took a delight in trying to catch him out with old-fashioned idiomatic phrases; for once he was ready for him.

"If you mean to enquire whether everything is tidy, then yes, it is, Captain," he said, politely. "However, since the precise meaning of the phrase implies that everything has been completely organised and made ready for a voyage I feel constrained to point out that this dome is not going anywhere until the end of the summer season in four local months' time, when it will be transported to the northern hemisphere for the duration of summer there, an arrangement which ensures a constant source of income for - " He fielded the thrown cushion neatly and tossed it back.

Kirk got into his own bag, yawning widely. "Goodnight, Spock. Pleasant dreams."

"Vulcans do not..." Spock began automatically.

"Oh yes you do...I once shared one with you, remember?"

Thul - how long ago that seemed. They'd learned a lot about each other in those few short months, begun a friendship that could stand up to anything by now, Kirk thought comfortably as he settled down to sleep.

"Indeed I recall it," Spock murmured softly. "It taught me so much, Jim, that first meld - that I need not fear your condemnation of my...differences, and that I had found what my soul unknowingly craved - a friend."

Silently, Kirk slid a hand out of his sleeping bag and reached across to the hand that was meeting him half-way, and gripped it in silent affirmation of that friendship, allowing the mental equivalent of a rib-cracking hug to slip through their bond.

Soon, both men were asleep.

Back at the Starbase they made their way to the Commodore's office to receive the Enterprise's new orders - a straightforward trip to Beta Draconis, carrying a mixed bunch of businessmen and ecologists to a conference there. The journey time allowed for a short stopover at Delta Australis 2 for a brief check on some 'interesting' ruins noted by the original landing party.

"Just routine stuff, Jim," Parrish assured him.

Kirk groaned. "Just routine, Don. If you'd ever flown anything except that desk, you'd know that's the one thing you never promise a deep-space Captain. It just about guarantees anything from piracy to paratyphoid is about to break loose."

Parrish grinned disbelievingly. Kirk wished his words didn't bear the long imprint of experience. Maybe just this once, just routine would stay just routine.

As Spock followed him out he said, "Before we beam up I would like to have a word with Mr. Zeitzer concerning the porta-cleanser in our dome."

Kirk nodded. He hadn't been able to hear the sound himself but the effect it had had on Spock was almost startlingly noticeable to one who knew him as well as he did. They made their way over the busy concourse towards the elevator on the far side, Kirk eyeing the crowds with a knowledgeable interest as he did so. You could pick up a lot of unintended information about all sorts of things simply by noting carefully precisely which races and individuals were passing through a Starbase at a certain time.

He tapped Spock's arm, nodding unobtrusively towards a small group to their right. "Look, Vulcans. Anyone you know?"

"Indeed." Spock sounded pleased. "Jim, Savon and St'lurik are about to leave for Thul."

"For Thul?"

"Yes - the survey party has requested additional help there now they are safely established. Four members of the original team are to return because of commitments on Vulcan and Savon leads a team of eight to replace them."

"D'you want a word...?"

"It would be interesting, yes."

Spock had come a long way since he'd first known him, Kirk reflected, watching him with his peers and noting not only the respect with which they greeted him, but also the quiet, relaxed dignity of Spock's own pose. He no longer stood ramrod stiff, as though challenging them to deny his right to a place in their midst. All the more surprising, then, to feel Spock's sudden, sharp sense of dismay and indecision through their bond.

/What's wrong?/ Concern rising.

/Nothing. An echo of the past only./ Shields forming.

Kirk frowned. It wasn't like Spock to close him out quite so firmly; still, there didn't seem anything he could do here and now, nor any need to act, either. He could probe later if he thought it was warranted.

They finished their short conversation. Savon could tell them little enough that they had not already heard, which was that the survey party had learned much of interest about Thulyan culture but had come no nearer to the greatest puzzle of all - the presence of a vulcanoid people on a planet which, like Vulcan, had some of its past veiled in mystery.

"I remember Spock once saying there were many enigmas in Vulcan pre-history," Kirk said thoughtfully.

"Indeed." St'lurik inclined his head and appeared almost upon the verge of enthusiasm. "I have a theory which I am eager to test concerning the evolutionary patterns of both planets."

He spoke for several moments, a good deal of what he said being incomprehensible to one of his listeners, but Kirk had long years of practice behind him in hearing out voluble and animated scientists in full flood.

On their way to the camp hire office, he chuckled. "St'lurik got quite carried away, didn't he?"

He glanced at Spock mischievously, expecting his friend to rise to the bait if only to please his Captain, and found him looking pensive.

"Come on," Kirk said persuasively. "You can tell your Uncle Jim. What happened back there?"

Spock looked at him out of the corner of his eye, his expression visibly clearing. "It really was nothing, Jim. It was foolish of me to be even mildly surprised. It was just that I have not experienced such a reaction to my presence since I was very young, and it startled me."

A reaction to his presence? Did he mean...? Kirk's brows drew together in a heavy frown. "What sort of reaction?"

"A withdrawal," Spock said succinctly.

Kirk stopped dead. "Just withdrawal?" he demanded disbelievingly. Something so simple would not surely have caused the sharp reaction he had felt from Spock himself. "That wouldn't have made you jump like a frightened rabbit," he said flatly.

Spock smothered a faint sigh. "I sensed antipathy and fear also," he admitted reluctantly. "Many young Vulcans reacted to me in that way when I was a child. They did not quite know how to deal with me, how I might react to them in turn. It is quite natural for the young to be wary of each other."

And of course you gave them more cause than most, Kirk thought grimly, being half Human. The young could be horribly cruel on occasion, and telepathic young in particular.

Spock saw the sympathy on his face and smiled faintly. "Jim, it is many years since I last experienced such a reaction to me," he said quietly. "That is why it surprised me so. Sadiok is young; it is not really so very surprising that he should be...uncertain how to behave towards me - and he was most respectful afterwards."

As always, the warm amusement within their bond, at such variance with the placidity of the Vulcan mask, warmed Kirk in turn.

"Yes, I've noticed you take kindly to a little respectful flattery," he said blandly. "Come on, let's go and file your complaint. I'm getting hungry and I'd like to eat here on the base before we're due back on board. Have you ever tried the fudge cake with serka-cream they serve at the Tower Buttery? It's out of this world."

* * * * *

Duly arrived at Delta Australis 2, the Enterprise made its appointed stop-over to view the 'interesting' ruins. Since the first landing party had found nothing dangerous in the area and the Enterprisesensors confirmed this, Kirk felt he had no excuse not to leave the investigation in the capable hands of his Science Officer while he reluctantly caught up with mounting paper-work.

After two hours, the landing party beamed back aboard and Spock made his way to Kirk's quarters, accompanied by McCoy. Kirk looked up from his desk and eyed them both in growing surprise; McCoy was positively beaming with excitement, and even his bondbrother, to one who could read him; was wearing an air of suppressed enthusiasm - and yet they both seemed to be eyeing him warily, as if they brought bad news. He laid down his pen and said hopefully, "Don't tell me - you've found Harry Mudd's grave!"

McCoy was still grinning responsively when Spock said, "If you recall, Captain, the surveying ship's report mentioned inscriptions on some of the buildings here." Kirk nodded. "The symbols in one area are known to me - they are identical with those on the obelisk on Planet Amerind."

Amerind! Now he knew why their animation had been overlaid with that odd touch of anxiety...he pushed the memories down - it was a spectacular discovery.

"So we've finally come up with more evidence of the Preservers, have we?"

"It would seem possible, yes."

Typical Spock caution. Kirk found himself frowning. "It ought to be dealt with immediately, of course, but we can't afford the time to hang around. We'll have to leave a team behind and come back to pick them up later."

"It would seem the most practical course," Spock agreed.

Realising McCoy was still big with news Kirk said, "And what are you hopping up and down like a power cat's fleas for, Bones?"

"You remember I told you the other day about the new drug they're testing for Muller's disease...?"

"Mmm, yes. TC-something, wasn't it?"

"Yes. TCU-5. They found it in one of the plants from this planet which they described as rare - but it must be the right time of year for it now or something, it's all over the place. We could take back enough refined TCU-5 to keep half the hospitals in the Federation supplied."

"Refined?"

"Yes. Ideally it should be done straight away - they found it loses potency otherwise. They only got decent stuff from the growing specimens they took away with them."



Kirk leaned his elbows on his desk and grinned. "So the top and bottom of it is, Doctor, you're asking me to leave you behind as well."

"The drug could be valuable," McCoy said persuasively.

"Only could be. The clinical trials haven't been completed yet, have they?"

"No - but the last I heard they were expecting results within weeks...and if it's positive, someone'll have to come here and get supplies. There aren't that many known sources. Besides - " he shot a quick grin Spock's way - "it's only logical if one party has to stop over, to let me stay as well. You'll have to come back and pick up the scientific team, after all."

"Certainly the Enterprise can't stay," Kirk agreed. "We didn't expect more than a brief stop-over here and the conference on Beta Draconis 4 requires our passengers' presence. We should get back to you in twenty-three days."

McCoy grinned. "I knew you'd come round to my way of thinking, Jim."

"You've got three hours to get ready in, Bones, then we've got to be on our way." As Kirk pushed his chair back and got up, McCoy went to the door. Kirk grinned again and called out sweetly, "Oh, and don't think you're going to spend half your time down there acquiring a sun tan - I doubt if your commanding officer will give you a chance!"

When the door had closed on McCoy's indignant face he said, "You are the best man for the job. Pity, though."

Spock raised an eyebrow. I had assumed you would wish me to go with the landing party, Jim. Why should you regret I am the best qualified to do so?"

"I thought you'd conveniently forget I've won the last two chess games," Kirk told him, hiding his laughter. "Trust you to find an excuse to duck out when I'm on a winning streak. Who do you want to take along with you?"

"Dr. McCoy intends to ask Miss Chapel if she will be willing; a medical technician, possibly Lt. Morton; Lt. Collins and Lt. Arana from the science section and Lts. Leslie and Lemli if that will be satisfactory."

"Why specifically those two from security?"

"I should like the use of a shuttlecraft if possible, then we can undertake a much more comprehensive survey to see if we can discover any more areas that were once inhabited. Lt. Leslie is an excellent pilot, and Mr. Lemli's experience in the engineering section could be invaluable."

"That'll be O.K." Kirk paused, eyeing his bondbrother shrewdly. "How good is our link going to be? Will we be able to keep in touch, do you think?"

"Unlikely." Spock pondered the matter. "The ancients found that theirs were sufficient anywhere on the surface of Vulcan, of course, and we know from our own experience on Penthryca that ours is effective from ship to shore; however, I have never heard of any bonded pair being able to contact each other over interstellar distances. One will, of course, immediately know if anything is seriously wrong..."

Kirk nodded almost absently. The memory of that brief contact before V'Ger, the contact he had not even been conscious of at the time, as a non-telepath, was very precious to both of them, and neither of them referred to it lightly. "You say not over interstellar distances," he said, looking away, "but..."

"I know." As always, a faint awe tinged Spock's eyes at the memory. "The circumstances were exceptional then, Jim. Your need of me was very great. It is possible that we may be able to reach each other if we have to, but it will undoubtedly be a strain upon both of us. Do not attempt it except as a last resort."

Kirk smiled. "I'll miss you."

"I, too." Spock's face softened momentarily.

His bondbrother's smile broadened. "Sentimentalist! I'll leave you to get on with the preparations, then, while I go and soothe down our passengers. Uhura tells me they're getting restive at the delay."

The bulk of their equipment, environmental domes for temporary homes and workshops, food supplies, and all the many and varied specialist requirements were beamed down to a spot a mile and a half away from the ruined city and close to the landing co-ordinates of the party from the original survey ship. There was a small river in the area to provide them with water.

"Let's hope you've picked the right place," Kirk said, watching the last load shimmer away. "It'll take you a week to shift that lot if you have to."

"Your estimate seems overly pessimistic. I would calculate it to take less than a day, provided we were not required to move more than fifty kilometers," Spock said solemnly. "Unless of course we were to be so careless as to lose the shuttlecraft."

Kirk grimed and led the way out to the turbo-lift. "Is McCoy going down with you in the shuttle?"

"Affirmative. Also Dr. Chapel. They were carrying the last of their medical supplies down ten minutes ago."

"I never thought Bones'd make it in three hours," Kirk said, smiling. "You must have chased him up a bit."

Spock shook his head. "Negative. I merely suggested I am as well qualified as he to carry out the project he has in mind."

Kirk was still laughing when the hangar doors closed.

The small party settled in quickly and began their work under the minor disadvantage of - for the Humans among them at least - overhigh temperatures and irritating, wind-blown dust.

"I shouldn't think it's rained here in years," McCoy said disgustedly. He dropped his medical tricorder wearily onto a shelf. "I can't think why that river hasn't dried up."

"Its source is high in the mountains. According to Lt. Leslie there is every sign that rainfall in that area is adequate."

"Well, let's hope it rains here soon. Collins is complaining about a sore throat now, and I don't like the way Chris keeps coughing either."

Spock frowned. "We do have filter masks, Doctor, and they have been issued to all personnel."

"I know." McCoy shrugged. "They're not exactly comfortable in this heat, Spock. I don't know that I blame anyone for leaving them off sometimes. That dratted plastic makes you sweat like a horse and it drips over everything you're doing... It's all right for you."

Seeing the Doctor's weariness Spock forebore from commenting on the inefficiency of the Human body and asked instead, "How many of us have been affected?"

"Arana, Collins and Morton all have sore throats, Chris is coughing, so are Arana and Leslie. Lemli seems to be unaffected."

"And you?" Spock looked at him sharply.

"I'm fine." He noticed Spock's intent look and added scathingly, "Don't you mother hen me! Save that for Jim."

"I am merely concerned that our medical officer should remain healthy," Spock said stiffly.

"Well - and so is your medical officer," McCoy grinned. "The minute I'm not, you'll hear me moaning all the way to Eridani! Didn't you know doctors always make the worst patients?"

"I experience no difficulty in believing it either," Spock said smoothly.

They had plenty to occupy them throughout the entire three weeks they were to be there and for the first week they divided up into three groups, Chapel and Morton to collect specimens of the plant for McCoy to analyse and refine, while Leslie and Collins carried out an aerial survey of the large, continental land-mass they were on, and Spock, Lt. Arana and Lt. Lemli explored the ruined town close by.

It was not a large town; they estimated its population at around five or eight thousand at its peak, but it seemed to have lost population rapidly at one time, leaving only a tiny nucleus of dwellings on the northern side which had been occupied for some fifty or so years longer.

"I'd say it was around five or six hundred left, wouldn't you, Mr. Spock?"

"That seems reasonable, Miss Arana."

Lemli looked into one of the small houses, frowning. "But why were they so much more technically advanced? You'd have thought that such a drastic drop in numbers would have had the opposite effect."

"Indeed," Spock agreed. "Unless they had outside help."

Arana digested that. "No-one's seen any sign of a transport system," she pointed out. "No evidence of roads leading anywhere."

"But if it were the Preservers it didn't have to be local help," Lemli said.

"A logical deduction. However, it is only speculation. Miss Arana, record these inscriptions in here and in that building across the way, if you please... and please replace your mask. It is foolish to remove it and aggravate the cough."

She pulled a tiny face but obeyed him reluctantly, hating the sticky feel of the plastic against her skin, the stifling sensation it produced. It made the cough worse too, setting her fighting for breath. If only it would rain and settle some of this dust, possibly even cool the place down, this wouldn't be a bad planet to spend a week or two on. She sighed elaborately but quietly and got on with her work.

The next day Spock returned early to their camp, wanting to spend some time on the translation work. Although some of the symbols were an exact replication of those on the Amerind obelisk, the language was not identical, but he did not anticipate too much difficulty in making it out. He was even more fortunate than he expected for that same evening he came across one symbol that seemed to lead him logically on to the beginnings of comprehension. It was very late before he turned in in the small dome he shared with McCoy, but he was more than content.

McCoy rolled over and opened a sleepy eye. "You go on losing your beauty sleep like this, Spock, and you'll never make Miss Universe!"

Spock turned out his bunk light without replying. In the few seconds it took him to prepare himself for sleep he heard the unmistakable sound of rain beginning to fall on the roof and wondered if the Doctor had heard it. At least it should please the Humans, even if he personally preferred the hot, dusty weather they had had up to now.

But the following evening it seemed even McCoy had begun to feel enough was enough. "If it doesn't stop raining soon we'll have half the landing party down with some infection or other."

Spock looked up from the cat-brain portable computer read-out and said drily, "Two days ago you were complaining about the heat and dust."

"We did have three cases of sore throats after all," McCoy said wearily. "And if you can think of better conditions for bacterial growth than present ones, I don't want to know about them."

"Prevailing weather conditions extend over a considerable area. It is not practical to move camp."

"Move!" McCoy eyed him in horror. "We'd all get soaked to the skin in the process...and no-one'd hate that more than you."

"My preferences are unimportant." Spock was not going to admit to his private (and considerable) relief that common sense determined their continued presence in this area. "It is only logical to remain here since attempting to move would not improve conditions and might even add to our present difficulties in carrying out our missions here."

"You're being tactful for once, aren't you?" McCoy demanded sourly. "You seem to have completed most of what you came for."

"I have been..." Spock paused, reconsidered. "Random factors operated in my favour."

McCoy grinned. "You were going to say 'lucky'," he accused.

"Fortunate," Spock said, dead-pan.

The Doctor's grin widened. "Liar!"

"Not at all," Spock said blandly. "We were fortunate in pin-pointing the key-words of the inscription in the second building so quickly."

"That wasn't what I meant," McCoy protested. He caught the gleam in Spock's eye and stopped himself just in time. "What it is to have a leg-pulling Vulcan around," he said disgustedly. "Still, it is interesting to have found more evidence of the Preservers in this quadrant. It'll make 'em sit up, back at Starfleet Command." He turned his attention back to the dome's tiny window, peering up at the small area of leaden sky he could see above the surrounding trees. "It hasn't let up all day - Chapel and Morton will be soaked by the time they get back."

"It does seem likely," Spock agreed. "How were the samples they brought back yesterday?"

"Hopeless. Negative, negative, and then for a change negative! I can't make out why the original survey shows such a high concentration in this particular area. We've grubbed out just about every specimen of that yellow-leaved plant within a one-mile radius."

"You are quite certain the plant you are seeking is the correct one, of course?"

"It's the right one according to their records," McCoy said tiredly. "If they're not accurate it means testing the whole lot - and that'll take months without the facilities of the Enterprise."

"I can turn Mr. Lemli over to you," Spock offered.

"But that'll leave you with only one assistant."

"I shall retain Lt. Arana, who is the most efficient for the work we have in hand..."

"She's also the cutest thing on two legs," McCoy chuckled, lowering his voice, "but I don't suppose that's got anything to do with your sudden preference." He eyed the frosty expression. "No, I thought not. Just as well! Christine'd have her eyes out."

Spock looked away, wishing, not for the first time, that McCoy did not find Dr. Chapel's obsessive interest in him an occasional source of amusement. For so compassionate a man he was sometimes cruelly blind to her pain. Once or twice, it was true, in times of great stress, she had openly shown the longing

she felt, but in their day to day working relationship she bore herself with a very real dignity that increased his pity and regard for her.

"If you need Mr. Lemli's help I am sure he will give it willingly," he said stiffly.

"Thanks. I'll be grateful. At least we can make a start on collecting samples of everything around even if we can't test it all until the Enterprise gets back."

"We have another fourteendays and 6.32 hours."

"If they don't suddenly decide they want Jim to go off to the Rim and collect somebody's pet poodle."

It seemed an extraordinary suggestion - even for McCoy - and Spock did not think it needed answering.

Altogether, it rained solidly for six days, a steady, heavy downpour that rendered life almost intolerable. It was as well that the dome power packs could go on providing them with heat, light and power for their equipment for several months, Spock reflected. At least it meant they could have a constant supply of clean, dry clothes to replace the sodden and uncomfortable garments they came home in each day. Equally, with the coming of the rain the sore throats and coughs had dissipated and the filter masks were discarded and stowed away again without regrets.

On the fourth day of rain, the eleventh of their stay, Spock found he was constantly having to wait for Lt. Arana as they made their way round the ruined town, still searching and comprehensively recording. He eyed her sharply, noting a listless air to her normally energetic movements and enquired if she was feeling ill.

"Not ill, no. Just tired. Guess I didn't sleep too well last night. I'm sorry."

"There is no need to apologise." He led the way to the next street, head down against the rain that was driving straight into their faces, and heard her stumble as she followed him. He turned sharply, but she waved him on, smiling.

The next building they entered had part of its roof still intact and offered a dry corner. Spock pointed to it and suggested she stay there while he made the recordings he wanted. He was gone longer than he anticipated, not having realised that the building extended considerably further back than most of them, and when he returned she was slumped against the wall, peacefully but uncomfortably asleep.

He shook her arm gently, surprised to find it took some time to wake her, and, not liking the drawn look on her face, decided to make for their camp straight away.

She made a token protest, guiltily aware that they still had a considerable amount of work to get through, but she was not really sorry to go back. It was quite extraordinary how deeply tired she felt.

She finished showering and was changing into dry clothes with a sigh of relief when there was a light tap on the door.

"I hear you're not looking too bright," McCoy said cheerfully.

"I'm fine - really I am."

"I'll be the judge of that, young lady." McCoy eyed the reader tube impassively and then tucked it away. "I'll give you a shot to help you sleep and then I want you to climb into that bunk and not move until tomorrow."

"But I'm only tired..."

"Who's arguing with you?" He smiled. "Don't tell me you haven't been thinking longingly about bed all day, because I shan't believe you."

She gave in, offering her arm for the hypo.

"That's better. I'll send Christine over with some food for you."

It was marvellous to lie down.

Spock raised an enquiring eyebrow as McCoy entered their room. He shrugged expressively.

"There's something wrong, certainly. Indications of incipient anaemia. I've given her a shot that ought to help and see how she gets on tomorrow." He sat down wearily.

Spock studied him suspiciously. "Doctor, you do not appear to be well either."

"Spock, will you quit it? I'm just fed up, that's all. I'm sick of getting negative results."

After so many years in Human company, Spock was well aware that emotional stress often affected them physically, and he was partially reassured, but not wholly so. "You will rest tonight," he said with quiet authority. "No, do not argue, Doctor, it is an order."

McCoy threw him a look of disgust but didn't speak. He was tired, he could not deny it. So many days spent in obsessively chasing rainbows were mentally exhausting; he'd been aware of an odd listlessness all day.

"I'll have a hot shower," he conceded. "It'll do me the world of good."

Privately, Spock considered the environment to be considerably too damp already, but he merely nodded his agreement.

Next morning McCoy was bustling and cheerful, almost obnoxiously so, clattering around Spock so that that patient, unemotional being was thoroughly glad to set off on his morning's work, accompanied by Lt. Arana. The girl looked pale but reasonably chipper and insisted firmly she was quite capable of carrying out her duties.

McCoy watched the pair of them go, supporting his weary shoulders against the door frame. He caught Christine's eye on him and snapped upright.

"Come along, Christine, don't dawdle about like that. I know it's wet but there's still work to be done and young Lemli's waiting for you."

Christine blinked at the unfairness of the accusation and in her astonished resentment forgot the Doctor's sagging and uncharacteristic posture. He went off to the lab section; before he started any more futile testing he might as well tidy up in there a bit. Those Vulcan eyebrows had hit an all-time high the last time Spock had stuck his head round the door - and it wasn't as though he liked working in a mess either, hated it in fact - sloppy and dangerous, just as he always emphasised to new juniors.

It took him over two hours to sort everything out and make sense of his erratic notes, but when it was done he felt a great deal better; ten minutes' pause for a cup of coffee and he'd be ready to put in a good day's work. He touched the activating pad at the side of the dispenser, waited the required few seconds and pressed the lever; the unit opened to reveal a disposable mug. Even as he reached out a hand to it he realised it wasn't full; he picked it up, stared disapprovingly at the puddle of muddy coffee in the bottom, the remains of powder adhering to the steam-dampened sides, and sighed elaborately. It wasn't like Christine to overlook minor details in this way. He grinned, mentally reviewing and rejecting a few choice ways of teasing her when she got back, and decided to brave the discomfort of a dash through the wet and collect a coffee from the dispenser in the living quarters. Having done so, he stood in the doorway of the hut, gloomily watching the falling rain. How many days had it been falling for now without a break of more than five minutes' duration? Four ...or five? Spock would know; he only knew that he was heartily sick of the

whole business, and when he saw Jim Kirk again he'd have a few words to say on the subject of sunbathing as well!

He stuffed the disposa-mug into the reprocessing chamber and remembered he'd forgotten to do that with the one in the lab. Only a minor detail, of course, but if he was going to make the most out of teasing Chris for having forgotten to fill the dispenser with water, his own house had better be in near-perfect order.

He made the quick dash across the rain-soaked grass still chuckling inwardly, grabbed up the cup and opened the unit. Even as he did so, the red warning light caught his eye -- he'd forgotten to shut it down after failing to get his coffee! He just had time to throw his arms up before his face when the world turned to fire and a giant hand bludgeoned him cartwheeling into darkness.

A mile or so away the sound of the explosion brought three heads swinging round.

"It came from the camp," Christine said tightly, whipping out her communicator.

There was no response.

"I'll run on and see," Morton offered. "You two can bring the specimens along."

"Yes. We'll be as quick as we can," Christine agreed.

There was little point in three of them dashing back headlong and abandoning nearly a full morning's work. She signalled to Lemli to pick up the filled bags on his side of the track and started off herself, collecting the sacks with their bright orange marker tags as she went. To cover her worry she turned her thoughts into another, familiar, pattern. Spock would be proud of her, not rushing off impulsively as her instincts demanded but remaining calm and acting logically. Even as the word entered her mind, her spirits drooped again. Act impulsively and you incurred censure, act logically and he didn't even notice, just took it for granted.

Her communicator bleeped. McCoy? She grabbed it so swiftly that it soared away from her hand and landed in the wet grass. She uttered one unladylike word and picked it up.

"I heard an explosion and I cannot raise Dr. McCoy. Do you have any information?"

"Negative as yet, Mr. Spock. Mr. Morton has run back to give assistance if necessary. Mr. Lemli and I are collecting up specimens before following him."

"Understood. Please let me know if my presence is required. Spock out."

So calm, that even voice. She sighed as she tucked the small instrument away. If she hadn't known of the First Officer's very real affection for McCoy she'd never guess it from listening to him, nor did it help to know that that was just what he wanted, either. She quickened her steps.

A short distance from camp, she saw Morton appear in one of the doorways, waving frantically.

She broke into a run and found she was hampered by the wet, swinging bags. Without a second thought she dropped them and ran on.

"He's hurt." Morton was still breathless. "He managed to shield his face from the worst, but his arms and chest are badly lacerated. I think he'll be O.K., though. It doesn't look too bad."

Christine made a swift check and found that he was right. While Morton and Lemli fetched a stretcher to carry McCoy over to the small hospital unit she made a hurried report to Spock.



"Do you require me to return, Doctor?"

"Not at present."

"Very well. I will continue here in that case. Please let me know if there is any change."

"Affirmative."

As she closed the communicator, she smiled. That last sentence hadn't been a logical necessity, Spock knew she would do so, but it was the closest he could get to admitting concern. She went to her patient.

By the time Spock and Arana got back to camp, McCoy was awake and complaining bitterly. Spock surveyed his bandaged eyes with outward calm.

"How serious is it, Dr. Chapel?"

"His eyes are not permanently damaged, just an after-effect of the explosion. They should be back to normal in a day or two. For the rest of it - that looks a great deal worse than it is, too. Severe bruising and cuts, of course; we've removed all the embedded bits and pieces. He took the brunt of it on his forearms and he's been lucky."

"I see. Thank you. Do you recall what happened, McCoy?"

"You mean you haven't been to see yet?" McCoy tried to grin but found his face too painful for such an operation. "Does that mean you've finally admitted that man is more important than machine?"

"I have never understood why Humans always answer questions with questions, Doctor, particularly when they are clearly rhetorical. However, no, I have not yet made any inspection and I have never given credence to the notion of mechanical superiority, merely to its greater reliability and precision. When I ask a computer a question, it gives me an answer."

Christine turned away hurriedly, suppressing a giggle.

McCoy sighed. "I'm only trying to put off admitting it was my own damn fool fault."

"I suspected as much from the report Dr. Chapel gave me. Those dispenser units are perfectly safe unless they are misused."

"Yeah, you're right. It was empty and I forgot to switch it off and then I opened it up to put the mug in."

"Was the warning light on?"

"Yes." McCoy sighed again. "I've got no excuses, Spock."

"No." The Vulcan looked down at him, his face unreadable. "However, it is a fault in the design that it is possible to open the unit under those conditions - some kind of fail-safe switch should be built in. I will look into the matter and must take some blame for not having realised the deficiency before."

"Hey..." Even through his exhaustion McCoy tried to raise his head. "Don't you go trying to blame yourself for my idiocy."

"I am in command here," Spock reminded him. "In the last analysis, everything is my fault."

"What are you trying to do?" McCoy whispered. "Out-do Jim? He won't blame you."

"No." A tiny smile tugged the corner of the severe mouth. "He will find some way to blame himself, of course."

"You're as bad as each other," McCoy said disgustedly.

"He has taught me a great deal," Spock said placidly. McCoy felt a light

whisper-touch on his shoulder. "Sleep now - you need to rest, Doctor."

Spock accepted the meal tray abstractedly. "This has placed an undue burden on you, Dr. Chapel."

She shrugged. "There's always the possibility of accident. If Lemli and Morton can carry on with the collecting, I can take over the testing. I've done a fair bit of it with Dr. McCoy already, and I'm pretty confident I know the procedure. Anything I'm not certain about, I'll check with you."

He raised an eyebrow. "In this field your expertise is greater than mine, and you will have a patient to tend also."

"He'll co-operate," she said cheerfully. "In a couple of days he'll be able to give all the advice I need - along with a lot I don't. We'll cope somehow."

"My own work is progressing well," he said. "Should you feel it necessary, call upon either Lt. Arana or myself for further assistance."

Recalling Arana's weary look as she came out of the shower a while ago, she shot him a quick glance, knowing that in the past he had sometimes tended to overlook Human physical limitations.

"How's she been today?"

"Little better than yesterday, although she made every attempt to hide her exhaustion," he said soberly. He eyed her. "You seem tired also."

She straightened reflexively. "It's been a long day," she said tartly. "What do you expect?"

All the same, she made a mental resolution to make a few tests before she went to bed...and she had some vague recollection of hearing Lemli complain that Morton wasn't taking his fair share of the stretcher-handling. It wouldn't do any harm to test everyone, less worrying too, as it could be hidden under the guise of routine.

What she found worried her considerably. Of the eight of them, six showed every sign of considerable iron deficiency, only Leslie and of course Spock being unaffected. She frowned at the results thoughtfully, recalling that McCoy had noted incipient anaemia in Pat Arana yesterday. Of the six of them she was the worst affected by far and Christine was completely at a loss to understand how her condition could have deteriorated so rapidly. If the rest of them followed the same pattern it could be serious. She prepared the necessary shots and tracked down her patients before they went to bed, warning them to be prepared for further tests tomorrow.

Lt. Arana's eyes were huge and shadowed in a white face. "What is it, Chris? There's something wrong, isn't there?"

"Just simple iron deficiency," she said briskly. "One or two shots and you'll be fine. I'm only testing because I have to find out the cause for the records. Now, into bed with you, you look all in. Has Spock been overworking you?"

Arana shook her head wearily. "No, he's been very kind. I can't think why everyone says he's such a bear."

Christine smiled down at her. "You're efficient, Pat, and neat with it. Try turning out some sloppy work for him and you'll find out what everyone means. He won't lose his temper and won't raise his voice, but by heaven, you'll be looking for a stone to crawl under by the time he's through. Go to sleep now, or tomorrow might be the day you find out."

She prepared further shots next morning, and finding that yesterday's dosage seemed to have made very little difference to any of them, increased the quantity and took blood samples from each of them before they left to begin work. Then

she went to McCoy.

Expecting vociferous complaint from her patient, she was surprised when he submitted calmly and without fuss.

"I've had time to think lying here. Too many of us are feeling too darned tired for my liking, Chris."

"Agreed." She gave him a full report. "Any ideas on possible causes, Doctor?"

After a brief discussion she bore the samples off to the lab for analysis. What she found puzzled her considerably.

McCoy frowned also beneath his bandages. "If Lt. Arana is much the worst affected, then how come her bacterial count is way down? You must have botched the tests, Chris."

"No." She was sure of that. "I checked most carefully. Maybe she was anaemic to begin with, it's a month or two since her last physical."

He shifted restlessly. "I haven't helped matters either. What a time to pick for a few days in bed. Straighten out this damned sheet, will you? It's trying to tie itself into a granny knot in the small of my back."

Resisting the temptation to express a tart opinion of restless patients, she did as she was asked. "Better?"

"Yes, thanks. Has Pat gone with Spock again today?"

"Yes. I wasn't very happy about it but she didn't want to let us down... and Spock promised me he'd see she didn't overdo it."

He nodded sleepily and bit back a yawn. "He'll look after her..."

She looked down at him, glad he couldn't see the revealing expression she was probably wearing. "I thought he was insensitive and unfeeling, Doctor," she said softly.

"That, too," he agreed, turning on his side. As she went out of the room he added, "And you forgot 'inconsiderate'!"

She let the door shut with a distinct snap.

The morning's shot had undoubtedly helped and the standard broad-spectrum antibiotic tested out as effective against the infecting bacteria. Christine was feeling more resilient than she had in several days in spite of there being no let-up in the continued downpour, and she started her work on the plant testing in almost a cheerful mood. Due to yesterday's interrupted schedule she had only five bags of specimens to analyse and each one she worked through proved irritatingly negative.

When she took McCoy a mid-morning cup of coffee she said, "Are you sure it was this planet the original report came from?"

"I know what you mean." McCoy grinned reluctantly. "How many of the darn things have you thrown across the room?"

"None - yet!"

"It gets easier after the first! You'll see. We'll take these bandages off this evening."

"Day after tomorrow." She took his mug.

"Pat lot of help I am, lying here like this."

"You'll be even less help if you start using your eyes too soon," she said acidly. "You're the doctor."

He heaved a sigh, silently conceding she was right. "Go on, back to your work. We can't all sit on our butts all day."

"Shall I put on a music tape for you?"

"No. I'll just lie here and think over my sins."

"Good. You won't get bored doing nothing for a day or two yet, then," she said smartly.

Half-way down the fourth bag of specimens she found a trace of the chemical she was looking for. Hardly able to believe her eyes, she checked the reading again... Yes, the faintest trace only, but undoubtedly there. Mentally crossing every finger she owned, she laid that plant carefully on one side and carried on. Four more plants proved positive. In the fifth bag there were six; in the fresh specimens brought in by Morton later on, there were more still.

She took the good news to McCoy along with his lunch.

"But why just these plants?" McCoy demanded exasperatedly. "If we've got to grub up every damn plant on this planet we'll be here for ever."

"I've provided one miracle for today, that'll have to do you. Ask Spock when he gets back if you want another."

Inevitably it was Spock who came up with the answer that evening.

"There are minute but discernable differences in the arrangement of the leaves," he said, pointing them out. "I believe this may even be a separate form of the species and may account for the problems we have encountered."

Christine studied them carefully; even once it was pointed out the difference was not easy to see. She gave a sudden exclamation of annoyance, as suddenly checked when the familiar eyebrow rose.

"What is it, Dr. Chapel?"

"I've just realised...we've spent the first ten days searching down that way, towards the river. If we'd started looking in the other direction we'd have found these almost at once...within a couple of days, anyway. All that wasted time..."

He contented himself with a nod in reply, sure that any comment he felt applicable to the situation would not provide the required consolation. He had always been uncertain whether Humans wanted sympathy or simple commiseration when random factors operated against them; either way he had long ago discovered that logic was not the answer.

Instead he said, "I think it advisable you check Lt. Arana. She is clearly still most unwell."

She smothered a panicky frown and collected a medikit.

Having helped Arana to undress and prepare for bed she looked in on McCoy before going to bed herself.

"No need, Chris," he said. "Spock here has already done all I want. You get to bed yourself. He says you look all in."

She flashed the First Officer a grateful glance, wishing she could look less self-conscious and act naturally. "I am tired." There was a rush of shaming tears, barely contained.

"How is Lt. Arana?" Spock enquired.

"Thoroughly exhausted. Even if you can't really manage without her, I think she should have two days' complete rest."

"We will pull Mr. Leslie and Mr. Collins off the survey, then Mr. Collins can give you and Mr. Morton some assistance, and Mr. Leslie can come with me."

"We do have another ten days before the Enterprise is due," she said

irrelevantly as she left.

"She's right," McCoy agreed, settling down. "We can still be all finished before Jim gets back, you know."

Spock pulled his covers straight but said nothing.

They awoke to fresh blue skies and a pleasant, drying wind. Spirits, already lifted by renewing vitality and positive results, improved even further.

Listening to Leslie's cheerful whistling as he prepared for the day's tasks, and Morton's tuneless bellow from the lab section, Spock gathered that the landing party was responding favourably to the change in the weather...he was even regarding the blue sky with something very like approval himself.

When they lined up for Christine's inspection before leaving, he found it pleasant, too, to hear them exchanging jokes and friendly insults as they had not done for some time. Although he could not join in and genuinely did not want to, he had been around Humans long enough to feel more comfortable with this odd and illogical childishness than with the unnaturally silent and grave behaviour of the last few days. He could even admit privately that he was also relieved; he knew that in the past his very presence had acted as a damper to high spirits and sometimes even caused open resentment. He had a great deal to thank Jim Kirk for; being accepted and valued for what he was rather than what he should be or for what he had to offer, had made it easier for him to come to terms with himself, and be relaxed. McCoy had once called him the best First Officer in the Fleet and he knew just who should take the credit for making him that.

He could not resist a swift look over in the direction of Beta Draconis, invisible of course in the daytime sky, but lying just above that clump of trees to the west now. It would be good to see his bondbrother again.

He called to Leslie and set out for the city.

With so much extra work now piling up in the laboratory and with two patients to tend as well, Christine looked forward to a hectic day. She put Morton to work on the previous day's specimens while she and Collins set up the refining equipment.

They were in the middle of a particularly delicate set of calibrations and adjustments when there was the sound of a muffled wail, a heavy thud and a crash of something breaking in the small bathroom of the unit she shared with Arana.

"Damn!" Christine caught the slipping screw just in time. "Ed! Ed, can you go and see what's up with Pat, I can't leave this for a minute or two."

"O.K., on my way."

He was back in a moment looking faintly embarrassed. "She won't let me help, Dr. Chapel, in fact she got quite hysterical. I must say I can see why... Look, if you'll clean her up, I'll go and deal with the bathroom when you've got her back into bed."

Chapel sighed, finished what she was doing and left Collins to it.

As soon as she arrived in the doorway of their dome her nose told her what the trouble was. No, Pat wasn't the sort to want anyone around when she was in that kind of state, not even her, but she'd have to put up with that! She made her way in.

Pat was doubled over, sobbing half from fury and half from pain and weakness, ineffectually dabbing at the betraying smears down her legs.

"Chris, no, get out. I'll manage."

"Don't be daft," Christine said kindly. "You're worn out and you'll never

get all this cleaned up. Come on."

In a few moments she had Pat clean, dry and nice-to-know again and led her back to bed. Ed Morton winked at her as he slid unobtrusively in to finish clearing up.

As Christine adjusted the pillows she said, "Next time, if there is a next time, give me a yell and I'll come running. Here, I've put a draw sheet under you and some pads. If the worst comes to the worst, just lie there and let it happen."

"Chris!" Pat looked first horrified then scared. "Oh God, I do feel dreadful. It's like knives cutting into me..."

"How long has it been like that?"

"It started last night...it got really bad about an hour ago."

"Why didn't you tell me, for goodness' sake?"

"I couldn't - you're all so busy and I'm being so much trouble as it is..."

"With the result that you were even more trouble," Christine said gently. She inspected the readings, not liking what she saw, suspecting that if they weren't careful they'd all be infected before long. She selected a hypo and pressured the shot in and then handed Pat a drink. "When you've finished that I'll leave some more with you. You'll need to keep up your fluid intake until this dies down. Right now, snuggle down and go to sleep if you can."

Knowing Morton's usual efficiency she only issued a general reminder on care as she went past him. Sadly, his present unaccustomed lethargy made him just not quite efficient enough...but it was several days before she was to realise this.

She peeled back the bandage with professional dexterity and laid it down with precision. "There, that's the last."

Oh God, she knew her voice was too high, too bright, too damned pretty-pretty; it always was when she really cared, when she wanted to cover the shaking, shrinking idiot that lived inside her.

The silence was stretching into forever. She bent to look into the soft, unfocussed blue stars. "Doctor? Leonard!"

"Waal, I'll be hawg-tied." The drawling southern accent mocked her concern. "Yo'all look plain tuckered out, Miss Christine."

Defence came from an unexpected quarter. "She has every right to, Doctor," Spock said soberly. "The last few days have not been easy."

"No." McCoy nodded. "Where were you most of yesterday, Christine?"

Spock did not appear to have heard him. "I am pleased you are clearly improving, Doctor. If you will excuse me, I will leave and continue with the refining."

"Refining?" McCoy allowed himself to be sidetracked. "You've actually begun?"

"We have little enough to work on as yet. Lt. Leslie and Lt. Lemli have taken the shuttle to search further afield for more specimens. They will return in two days."

Watching him go, McCoy said idly, "If I didn't know him better, I'd swear he was trying to duck out of something."

She laughed. "You do know him better and he was. I knew he wouldn't stay when you asked what I was doing yesterday." She pulled a fresh steri-pack from the cupboard and began to dress his hands.

He fended her off for a moment, inspecting them. "You did a good job."

"Life would have been unbearable if I hadn't."

"So - just what were you doing yesterday to make Spock shy as a rabbit?"

"Dealing with Pat; she's very sick, Leonard. Spock insisted on a full report last night so I gave him the details...and they're not particularly pretty! Acute intestinal irritation seldom is."

"Acute...? Damn these hands!"

"Yes. We need you. Still, you can come with me and look over my shoulder now - I'm not wildly happy about all this and the tests I've made give the weirdest results." She straightened up, bustling about to cover her mingled relief and worry. When everything was put away she stood by his bed. "Feel up to getting dressed?"

"You bet I do...done nothing for three days but sit here growing corns on my butt...just get me my clothes, girl."

He needed help with the awkwardness of zips and fastenings; when it was done she said tentatively, "Leonard - don't go overdoing it. We...we really do need you too badly to risk your doing too much too soon."

He looked at her properly then, seeing the unmistakable signs of strain. Cursing the stupidity that had caused his accident he said, "You've had too much to carry these last few days, Chris. I'm sorry." Then, knowing sympathy could well be the last straw he added bracingly, "So come on. Let's see these tests you've botched and stop wasting any more time."

Even knowing his intention she glared, whisked away the one formed tear and led the way to the lab.

Two days later they seemed to be still floundering in the dark, and it had started raining again.

To everyone's distress, Lt. Arana's condition was steadily worsening despite all McCoy and Chapel could do. Christine had to make nursing care pretty well her prime concern, leaving McCoy and Morton to the laboratory work while Spock and Collins took over the refining, now going apace.

"That's something at least," McCoy growled over supper, "but how about your own work, Spock?"

"I have completed the recordings," Spock said. "I can work on the translations when we are back on board if necessary. Refining the TCU-5 must take priority."

McCoy had to say it. "Jim was right, you know - the clinical trials weren't complete. This may all be a total waste of time."

"It may be as you say," Spock agreed calmly, "but it can never do harm to be prepared."

McCoy smiled tiredly. "Sometimes you're quite a comfort, Spock." He lifted his head. "Is that the shuttle? They've taken their time getting back."

"Yes, they are late." Spock stood up. "Continue your meal, Doctor. I have completed mine and will go and assist them."

He waved Collins and Morton back as well and went out into the rain. Lemli met him at the door of the shuttle.

"I'm sorry we're late, sir. We came across a vast patch of the stuff last thing." He indicated a large pile of sacks.

"Well done, Mr. Lemli. I will carry them over to the lab. I suggest you go and get your evening meal."

Leslie grinned. "We ate on the flight, sir. We were too hungry to wait. Now all we want's a hot shower."

"Very well. I will see you in the morning before you leave again."

"Both Collins and Morton report severe stomach cramps," McCoy said tiredly. "Whatever you do, test those two out thoroughly before you let them leave, Spock. Christine's got her hands full with Pat this morning and these damned hands of mine are worse than useless still."

The Vulcan nodded agreement. "It would seem a wise precaution." He took a careful note of requirements and set out.

Leslie took the news cheerfully but Lemli frowned. "Is there really a risk of infection, Mr. Spock?"

"Clearly there is every reason to be wary of it, Mr. Lemli. It will be as well to take no risks until we are quite sure there is no danger. Please wait here until I have checked these results with Dr. McCoy."

They nodded, exchanging expressive glances behind his back as he left.

McCoy grunted his relief. "They seem healthy enough anyway. Chris!" He raised his voice and went through the lab door.

"Yes, Doctor?" She came to the door across the way.

"I thought you said Lemli was anaemic."

"He was. Leslie was the only one who showed no signs."

"Well, he's all right now. Not a sign of anything wrong with either of them. Seems the standard shot was effective." He went back in and said to Spock, "Let's keep it that way, shall we? I can't see that either of these two little honeys is going to do you much harm; one taste of that pea-soup in your veins and they'll be screaming for mercy...so you'd better be the only one who has anything to do with either Leslie or Lemli until my hands get better."

"Very well." Spock took further instructions and did as he was asked.

When done, he checked the shuttle over with Lemli and discussed plans with them. "The mapping you have done to date is excellent, Mr. Leslie. There is just one restriction from now on - please do not go beyond radio range of the camp. Should any unforeseen problem arise you will need to be able to make contact. Report in tonight at 18:00 hours ship-time and again tomorrow at 09:00. Understood?"

"Affirmative, sir."

"Very well."

As the Vulcan left, Leslie grinned over at his friend. "Just what help does he think he's going to need?"

"Not him, idiot. Us."

"Us?"

Lemli shook his head wonderingly. "If you keel over with some ghastly disease, I shall need to know what to do with you," he said pointedly.

Leslie's eyes widened. "I never thought of that."

"I wish I hadn't! Come on, let's go before he asks what's keeping us."

By evening, every muscle in Christine's body seemed to be trembling with fatigue; she forced herself to eat an unwanted meal knowing that she would most certainly burst into noisy and undignified tears if she received any lecture on the subject from Spock. She hardly dared look at herself in the mirror... it was days since she's done more than drag a comb through her hair and clip it

back tidily. Now that Morton and Collins were also suffering from the same painful and demoralising bouts of diarrhoea as Pat Arana, she seemed to have spent the whole day in clearing up and remaking beds, mopping up and trying to look as though she liked it. Without the sophisticated technology and nursing aids of the Enterprise sickbay, the tasks were unpleasant, to say the least - and if they ran out of disposable bedding... No, she wasn't even going to think of that possibility.

She laid her fork down. It was no good, she couldn't finish eating. She pushed back her chair, intending to dispose of the plate, and gave a sudden, startled gasp when a hand touched her arm.

"My apologies. I did not mean to alarm you. You did not hear me when I spoke."

"I was miles away, Mr. Spock." Too bright...why can't you act naturally around him?

"You are tired. I will take over the care of Mr. Morton and Mr. Collins tonight."

"Oh - but...you can't." She knew she was blushing.

"I assure you I am perfectly capable of simple nursing tasks, Doctor. In any case, your own night is unlikely to be undisturbed. Miss Arana does not improve, does she?"

"No...she's..." There was little point in evading the issue with Spock of all people. "We're not sure she's going to make it."

"I see." Spock deplored the waste of a young life, in such a needless, muddled way too; it offended his sense of order and economy. At a deeper level, it just plain hurt. "In that case...please stay with her, Christine."

She wanted to cry. If you really listened to Spock, accepted there were layers below the surface calm that he would not show to anyone except perhaps James Kirk, then his simple words meant far more than a Human's elaborately emotional reaction.

Respecting his reticence, she claimed a brevity of her own. "Very well."

Next morning, Pat Arana died.

Christine remained dry-eyed. She felt leaden inside, almost cold - as though the long night's caring had stripped her of normal reactions. She performed her duties with sullen proficiency and went to get a few hours' sleep.

McCoy frowned after her. "She'll have to perform the autopsy, Spock. My hands..." He waved them angrily. "It has to be done. I have to have some answers..."

"Agreed." Spock's face showed nothing. "Dr. Chapel is fully capable..."

"Of course she's capable!" McCoy snapped. "I'm not questioning her ability..."

"It is not easy for medical staff in an enclosed society such as a Starship," Spock said quietly. "A patient is always...someone close."

"I thought perhaps you wouldn't understand," McCoy said in gruff relief. "She'll do it, but she'll hate it."

Spock was surprised by the overwhelming surge of relief he experienced when both Lieutenants Leslie and Lemli checked out healthy again that afternoon. He emphasised the importance of their keeping constantly in touch.

Lemli eyed his superior officer with concern. "Something's wrong, sir. What is it?"

"Lt. Arana is dead."

"Dead!" The two young men exchanged horrified glances.

"Is there anything we can do?" asked Leslie.

"I am afraid you may compound our difficulties if you attempt to alleviate them," Spock said soberly. "It will not be easy for you merely to stand by, I know, but it must be done." He looked at the piled sacks, mentally assessing how many hours' work would be involved and deciding it could be managed. "I think one more load like this will suffice. Give plant collection priority over mapping if necessary, but as far as possible complete both."

"Yes, sir."

"And take adequate rest periods also." He allowed his gaze to rest severely on each of them and went away through the persistent rain.

Dividing his time between attending to Morton and Collins and the refining work, he had no time to spare for enquiry into the results of the autopsy until well into the evening.

McCoy looked strained. "Considerable lung damage," he said tiredly.

"Lung damage?" Spock echoed.

McCoy nodded. "At a rough guess those coughs we had when we first got here weren't simply the result of dust irritation... Oh, there was that too, but I don't like the look of it all the same. We'll need a lot more tests..."

Spock interrupted him ruthlessly, covering his concern at McCoy's white look. "Are you telling me Lt. Arana died as a result of damage to her lungs, rather than the later symptoms?"

McCoy shook his head. "No - but I just have a hunch this is more complicated than it looks. I need - "

"You need nothing tonight except sleep," Spock said calmly. Seeing McCoy was about to argue, he said, "Doctor, we need you. Tomorrow will do just as well."

After a few seconds, McCoy glared at him before crumpling into submission. "You win," he said tiredly.

Spock assisted him to bed and went to help Christine Chapel with her duties, not liking her tired and drawn look. He divided his night between the laboratory and attending to Morton and Collins.

The next day followed much the same pattern. Spock noted with concern that their disposable packs of emergency bedding were dangerously low. They would be able to manage without, of course, but it would undoubtedly compound their difficulties. He was also, although he did not speak his concern aloud, increasingly worried about McCoy and Chapel. Neither of them made any complaint, but if they were not about to join the rest of the 'patients' he would be most surprised...and pleased. He was well aware that both Morton and Collins found it embarrassing to be tended by him, although neither of them made any overt fuss about it. If he was totally honest, he would find it singularly humiliating himself under such trying conditions. 'Vulcans are such private people,' Jim had once said to him - but it wasn't easy even for a Human to surrender dignity in this wholehearted fashion. He was not afraid to admit, either, that he frankly quailed from the thought of having to assist Dr. Chapel; merely the thought of such enforced intimacy made him blench.

At midday he went to the laboratory, intending to insist that McCoy and Chapel take a break and have something to eat, being mildly surprised to find his intended lecture was unnecessary. Admittedly, they had not attempted anything more than a bowl of soup and a roll, but at least they were eating. He got some lunch for himself.

McCoy looked up tiredly and nodded towards a sheaf of notes. "If I keel over, Spock, give that little load to M'Benga. There's a lot more work needs to be done, of course, and it's only a hunch in the first place, but that lung damage

looks damn suspicious...as though something hatched out in the lungs and made its way into the bloodstream. That could cause the anaemia we noted if the bacteria had an affinity for iron. My guess is, there's a second metamorphosis after it gets into the liver and kidneys...maybe it's eliminated at that point and re-infects its host in contaminated water or whatever. In its present form the nutrient dependency has changed from iron to mineral and proteins and it's playing havoc with the sodium and digestive levels, inducing diarrhoea and fluid imbalance. I'm not 100% certain it's the same bacteria causing all the symptoms, but as far as I can check it out here with this equipment, that seems to be the case." He glanced briefly at Chris and then at Spock. "Make her go to bed for an hour, will you? She won't listen to me."

"I agree," Spock said gravely. "It is an order. Please do not argue. I have no desire to have to cope with all the bedding by myself tonight. I still have a considerable amount of refining to be carried out. Please go and rest for a couple of hours."

McCoy watched her stiffly retreating back and shrugged. "The less exhausted she is, the better chance she'll have of fighting it. Pat Arana didn't give in soon enough. I don't want anyone around here developing a martyr complex, Spock."

"Agreed," Spock said softly. "So please, Bones, go to bed."

A stabbing pain in her abdomen woke Christine from a restless dream of ceaseless, painful activity. For a moment she lay, disorientated and confused by the thudding pain in her head and the myriad needles in her gut. Luckily she identified the sensations in time to make it to the small bathroom where she sat, shivering and whimpering, for over half an hour before she dared creep back to her bed.

By the time it was fully light, she knew with horrible certainty that sooner or later she wasn't going to make it even over that short distance.

When Spock appeared in the doorway she raised herself on one elbow. "Where's Dr. McCoy?" Her voice came in a croak from her drying throat.

"Confined to bed." Spock's calm eyes had taken the situation in already. "I will fetch you water and medication. Please lie still."

"I'm not aiming to go anywhere." It was a pretty feeble attempt at humour. "Except the bathroom!" She pushed back the covers. "Please, go away."

He disappeared - to her infinite relief. When she emerged, her bed had been straightened and a flask of water lay on the nightstand along with a couple of pills. She swallowed them, drank thirstily and lay down. She spent most of the morning dozing fitfully in the intervals of dashes to the bathroom. Inevitably, at last she didn't make it on time.

Spock appeared in the doorway.

"Have you been hovering out there?" she said furiously.

"My arrival was purely fortuitous," he answered calmly. "Go and attend to yourself, I will clear up in here."

She didn't know whether to laugh or cry when he handed a clean gown through the door. Trust his observant eyes to have noted she'd need one, and trust his reticent mouth not to have mentioned it either. She cleaned herself up and staggered back to bed.

"How's Leonard?"

"Not at all well, I'm afraid." Spock pulled the covers over her. "However, he is more forceful in voicing his feelings than you are."

She smiled faintly. "Doctors make lousy patients."

"As do ex-nurses and Starship Captains."

"Of course, Vulcans are perfect." She achieved just the right note of tartness.

"Of course." Was he actually smiling at her? "Try and rest now. I have placed a glucose drink by your flask of water."

She nodded sleepily, drifting away into a troubled and hazy doze.

By late evening she was feeling worse than ever but she gritted her teeth and swung her legs over the side of the bed, determined not to have to call Spock to help her. Dammitall, he was a Vulcan; he shouldn't have to deal with things like this - it wasn't as though he was a Healer.

After one step she knew she wasn't going to make it. Sharp pain shot through her, crumpling her into a ball of agony and forcing her to her knees. She tried to ride out the spasm, praying for the briefest of respites, but it was not to be. As more pains shot like red-hot knives through her abdomen and lower back, she could hold on no longer and toppled forward into a black haze of pain.

She came to to feel herself being lifted and uttered a moan of protest. She didn't want him to see her like this, didn't want him to be involved. She wished she could crawl away somewhere and die quietly without fuss - anything to avoid the ignominy of having Spock attend to her.

She would even rather it had been Kirk.

She smelt the tang of antiseptic, felt the touch of warm water and soft towels soothing her skin. She kept her eyes firmly closed, willing the moment to be over.

He dealt with her neatly and efficiently, just as she had shown him with Morton and Collins, applying soothing cream to her soreness.

At least he didn't chatter; she couldn't have borne any attempt at conversation. When he had done, she turned her head away to hide her tears and tried to be cheerful. Inevitably, to her own depression, she merely sounded stupidly schoolgirlish. "How are the others?"

"There is a mild improvement in Lt. Collins' condition; however, Mr. Morton is more seriously incapacitated. Dr. McCoy is...fretful."

She gave a watery giggle. "That has to be the understatement of all time, Mr. Spock."

"You could be right." His hand touched her temple briefly. "I will give you your shot, recommended by Dr. McCoy. It will do you good to sleep."

As she dozed off, she remembered happily, "The Enterprise is due back tomorrow."

He paused, looking down at her. "Yes. It is."

"I'm glad. This must be dreadful for you."

Once more the fingers touched her temple fleetingly. "I have had to do worse things in my time, Christine. Don't be so illogical."

She went to sleep smiling.

Spock made his way to the shuttle through a particularly heavy downpour in the early part of the morning. He found Leslie and Lemli both up and looking well. It was not logical to feel such a surge of relief but it would be most illogical to deny that he experienced it. He tried to tell himself that it was logical to prefer them to be healthy rather than sick, but he knew, deep inside him, that his reaction was not caused by anything so rational as a preference for health over sickness, nor even by an understandable reluctance to take on two more patients. An inner conviction stated candidly that it was a positive pleasure to see two smiling and cheerful faces for once, particularly on this

damply miserable morning. Illogical, but nonetheless true.

"What can we do to be most help?" Leslie asked practically. "Take over nursing?"

"Unwise," Spock said drily, acknowledging a certain sympathy with Lemli's faintly appalled expression. "It seems I have a natural immunity to the condition which you have not. There is no need for anyone else to put their lives at risk. No - I will thoroughly decontaminate the laboratory and we will then resite it at a safe distance. After that, I will leave the rest of the refining to you. Your efforts at plant collection have been most effective; I believe we shall have sufficient for our purpose."

Lemli looked at him sharply. "The Enterprise is due back today, sir. Haven't they been in contact yet?"

"Not yet, no. There is some subspace interference due to local conditions, but not enough to account for a breakdown in communication. It seems the Enterprise may be late in arriving."

This time both young men looked appalled, exchanging a flicker of glances. Spock did not think it politic to attempt any mention of his own special link with their Captain, since they had not, as yet, made any formal announcement concerning it, and in addition, at the moment he had no comfort to offer them from it. The distance separating them was clearly still too great to give him anything more than a certainty of Kirk's continued well-being, and while he might be sure in his own mind that this also meant the Enterprise was not in any kind of trouble, he was not prepared to put anything so illogical into words, even with his new-found ease in coping with 'simple feelings'. He said, mildly, "It is not the first time a Starship has been delayed, after all, and at present there is no cause for alarm. We have a little more knowledge of what we are dealing with than we had at first and all the indications are that we shall be successful in treating the symptoms."

"But only the symptoms?"

Spock's eyebrows tilted in acknowledgement of Lemli's acuity. "At present I lack the assistance of both Dr. McCoy and Dr. Chapel in establishing a cure," he said drily. "Even your average miracle-worker might find it hard to produce a result under these conditions and I am merely a Vulcan Science Officer. Broad-spectrum antibiotics are proving helpful in containing the disease, but that is all. As soon as we can relay Dr. McCoy's notes to the Enterprise we shall stand a better chance of discovering an effective remedy."

He left them to prepare for their day's work, gave a quick look-in at his patients, cleaned up for Morton and made him as comfortable as possible again, checked his condition and gave him a shot according to McCoy's instructions and went off to the laboratory. Once he had made sure it was stripped of everything he might need, he sealed its door and set the decontamination process going, signalling to the two young security men that they could move it to the agreed site as soon as they were ready. Then he went back to his patients.

McCoy was awake and in some pain. "Dammit, Spock, I believe you're enjoying this!" he roared.

Spock allowed his honest astonishment to show as he gave him a shot. "Do you not feel your complaint is, perhaps, a little...indelicat for my genuine enjoyment?"

McCoy sighed. "How's Chris? She can't be too keen on having to be nursed by you, of all people."

"She does not find it easy," Spock agreed soberly.

McCoy eyed him a moment, opened his mouth as if to speak and then closed it again.

Spock sat on the side of his bed with an air of resignation. "You had

later say it."

McCoy cleared his throat and said gruffly, "Don't be too uptight with her, Spock. This sort of illness is humiliating enough under normal circumstances, it's doubly hard for Chris seeing how she...how she feels about you. If you can't meet her, say, halfway, she is just going to want to crawl away and die of shame. She'll need...reassurance, to be shown that just because her body's let her down like this, it doesn't mean that she's demeaned in any way."

Spock looked at the plastic floor covering. "I do understand, believe me, Doctor."

McCoy's eyes softened. "Yes, I think you do...now! One time you couldn't have, though." He lay back against his pillows. "How're you coping?"

"Adequately. Supplies should be sufficient."

McCoy frowned. "What do you mean, should be? The Enterprise is due back today."

"I fear she will not arrive on time." Spock noted the Doctor's growing consternation. "There is no need for concern, I do not receive the impression there is anything wrong. This will not be the first time a rendezvous has been delayed."

"We need more drugs," McCoy said savagely. "We're all right for now, but we shall be getting steadily weaker. If the Enterprise takes too long to get here, she'll be too late."

"How long do we have?"

"A few days - less than a week for Morton and Collins, I'd guess. Can't you contact Jim?"

"I will do my best. Sleep now, you need to rest."

McCoy eyed him. "I'm serious, Spock."

"It did not occur to me you might be joking over such a matter," Spock said soberly. "As yet Jim and I have had no opportunity to test our link over very great distances...to do so will undoubtedly be a strain on both of us. I must make some kind of preparation first, arrangements for Lt. Leslie or Lt. Lanli to take over the nursing should I become incapacitated."

"As bad as that?" McCoy was dismayed.

"It will be as well to be prepared. Go back to sleep now, there is no need for you to be worried at present."

"I like that - just switch off the worry button, eh? Well, it may be easy for you Vulcans..." McCoy let the sarcasm fade away, acknowledging with a weary nod that he was well aware it was never easy for Vulcans either.

"There is some local subspace interference," Spock lied easily. "Sunspot activity is high at present." He knew McCoy would neither know nor care if it was so. "I will see what can be done to make radio contact first."

He watched McCoy's eyes close, guessing that much of the doctor's relaxed look had been put on for his benefit, and went to make a further check on the rest of his patients.

Christine wondered dully whether her nose would ever acclimatise itself to the revolting atmosphere in her cramped living space. She had been lying in this state for far too long, but although she knew she only had to call for Spock to come and help her, she was stupidly reluctant to do so. Better to lie here in her own filth until she died quietly and without fuss, than to endure the continued strain of his impersonal touch. Hazy with the effects of illness, drugs and emotional stress, her thoughts squirmed in circular paths, beating out the illogic of her wishes and needs. She had longed to feel his hands on her body, but not like this, she had yearned for closeness but not for this

unendurable intimacy.

Another knife of pain shot through her belly, interrupting her tangled thinking and she fought it savagely, clenching her teeth in layers of bedding to stifle the whimpers she could not prevent escaping.

Cool air touched her body and she realised the covers had been lifted away. She had not heard his quiet arrival and now would not look up, would not meet his indifferent gaze. Why couldn't he leave her alone, let her endure this humiliation in solitude? She knew her body was tensed and unyielding, defiantly resistant to his hands as he turned and rolled her. She did not want those coldly competent hands upon her, wanted the soft caresses she'd dreamed of, hated the cold familiarity with which he handled her and yet, if for one second that touch spilled over into pity her control would break and she would rage and scream at him for being the only one available when she needed someone.

A light dusting of talc, clean draw-sheet under her, the sound of a snapping deoderant capsule and the pleasant tang of pine in the air cutting out her disgusting stench... He was finished and would soon be gone and then she would turn on her face and cry as she needed to, sob until there were no more tears to be wept...

Snapped into immobile rigidity she waited out those last few seconds, desperate for the quiet sound of the door opening and closing behind him. It never came.

Instead, she felt the unmistakable sensation of someone sitting beside her and opened her eyes with a gasp of surprise as two strong arms lifted her into a gentle embrace. He adjusted her head against his shoulder and said quietly, "Cry all you need to, Christine."

No! She would not. Could not. But burning drops were already sliding past her barriered lids. She turned her face, burying it in the smoothness of the gray uniform shirt and unwillingly, but unable to help it, abandoned herself to the luxury of tears.

It felt like hours that she lay against him, accepting the offered comfort of his embrace, the warm pressure of his lean body, the soft murmuring of his deep voice while he rocked her. The words didn't matter; in any case as her sobs slowly subsided she realised she couldn't understand them for he spoke in Vulcan, a gentle litany of soothing sounds accompanying the tiny rhythmic movements.

Once she had wept herself out her innate honesty would not let her luxuriate in his unexpected acceptance and she began to pull away, saying in a muffled voice, "Now I look even more terrible."

He leaned across to retrieve and hand her a tissue. "I would not describe your appearance as terrifying, no."

Blowing her nose firmly she sneaked a look at him and surprised a definite twinkle in his eye. Resigned, she said, "All right, what logical word would you use?"

"Blotchy."

Having expected - even from him - some palliative phrase, she was surprised into an indignant stare.

He smiled slightly. "That's better."

He got to his feet; thinking he was about to leave, she pulled herself together and thanked him, but he went to the work-top where her brush lay and came back with it.

She eyed it dubiously, not sure she felt up to the effort required to take out all the tangles there must be in her hair by now, but he did not hand the brush to her, merely laid it on the nightstand and bent to slip an arm under her shoulders, raising her to a more upright position and propping her with pillows. Then he picked up the brush.

"I do not promise to be particularly expert at this," he said warningly.

Predictably in someone so neat-fingered, he barely pulled at all and the gentle strokes were both soothing and calming.

"How did you guess that would help?" she asked.

"I tried putting myself in your place," he said placidly. "Since I very much dislike to appear...ruffled, it seemed to me the same might apply to you also."

"Ruffled!" The typical understatement half amused, half irritated her. "Here am I looking like something picked out of chaos and you describe it as ruffled."

"Merely a matter of degree. There, is that better?"

"Much." She gave a long sigh of relief. "I feel almost half-Human again." Abruptly realising what she had said, she gulped and opened her mouth to render an apology when he tilted an eyebrow at her and murmured, "A most admirable and enviable condition, don't you find?"

Suddenly, astonishingly, she was laughing in genuine amusement, knowing that beneath his bland exterior he was sharing the joke. She had never felt so close to, nor so comfortable with, him, and as she slid down the bed again her ignominious illness abruptly lost its horrors and she settled almost with a sigh of content as he left her.

Nursing duties temporarily complete, Spock began to prepare himself mentally for the effort he must make to contact his bondbrother. He had little doubt that had the need been a more personal one, a question of his own death perhaps, then Jim would already have experienced some disruption to their subliminal awareness, enough to alert him to the notion that his friend could be in trouble. Unfortunately, however altruistically desirable it was to use their bond for a less selfish reason at present, there was no escaping the fact that it was not formed for such a purpose and was not designed to work at a conscious level except at relatively short distances. Even if the reason for his inability to make radio contact with the Enterprise was solely the slight local interference and the ship was on her way to a rendezvous within the next fourteen hours as scheduled, she was still at a distance of some 2×10^{10} miles away, assuming she was approaching at the relatively slow speed of warp two. If, as seemed likely, her passage had for some reason been delayed, she could at this moment be even as much as a million times more distant than the comparatively cosy closeness of a mere twenty-eight light hours. Paradoxically, in order to reach out into the infinity of space it would be necessary for him to delve deep within himself, possibly to a dangerous depth from which he might never be able to re-emerge.

If he only had himself to consider his decision would have been simple. To give up one's life for one's friends was not hard, nor on a less emotional level was it difficult to prove the logic of the desirability of one tragedy in trade for six or even four deaths, but the true stumbling block lay in the fact that he would not die if he failed, but would simply live out the rest of his days in a catatonic condition, unable to respond to any external stimuli. That would be hard for anyone who wished him well to accept, for his bondbrother... He shied away from the thought, unsure what it would do to that caring and lively mind to endure a deliberately induced withdrawal.

He stifled a sigh, aware that such emotion-based decisions were never easy, but that even a Vulcan could not reduce the complexities of personal relationships to simple, logical equations. All the same, however difficult it might be he must come to a decision in good time and not dither away precious minutes in useless regrets and wishes. He could only move one step at a time, whatever action he ultimately took and either way his first step must be to spend some time in quiet, preparatory meditation.

* * * * *

Once the scheduled hour of arrival had come and gone with no sign of the Enterprise, and further attempts to make contact by radio proved useless, he knew in fact that there was no decision to be made. Neither he nor Jim would want to trade their peace of mind for the lives of others, even if they were not directly responsible as Captain and First Officer for those other lives.

Leaving the cramped living space where he had spent most of the night, he was pleased to find that it had stopped raining once again. He crossed the grass - rapidly drying in a brisk, warm breeze - to the shuttle and laboratory where the two unaffected Humans were now camped out.

He explained succinctly that if he failed to appear for any of his twice-daily checks, they must come and take over the nursing from him; they would find a full list of instructions in the small living area.

He saw Lemli frown and open his mouth to question him further and while he was wondering exactly how to explain, and indeed how much he could explain, Leslie laid a silencing hand on his friend's arm.

"Can I speak to you privately, sir?"

"Of course, Lieutenant," Spock said, mildly surprised.

Crossing the grass, Leslie said, "I'm not trying to pry, Mr. Spock, but isn't what you're planning rather dangerous?"

He could not prevent the lift of his brows. "And precisely what do you believe I am planning, Lieutenant?"

"To contact the Captain." Leslie met his eyes, his own grave and concerned. "I...uh...know that you're bonded, you see, sir."

"Indeed." Spock came to a standstill and said mildly, "May I enquire how you learned of it?"

"I overheard the Captain speak to you one day not long after you both came back from Vulcan. He didn't know I was around for one thing, and when he did see me, I...well, it was quite obvious he's no idea he'd been talking aloud, sir."

Recalling Jim's initial problems, Spock nodded. He thought he could even remember the occasion in question; there certainly had been one time when an attempted conversation had been broken off by the arrival of someone else. He eyed the young man, waiting for the rest of the explanation.

"You see, I knew you were in engineering at the time." Leslie paused and then ploughed on. "I am security, Mr. Spock. The Captain's health is...important. I researched Vulcan customs and it seemed the information fitted. After that, I watched until I was sure of the telepathic link between you - then I stopped worrying...and I stopped watching too."

"I see." Spock silently applauded the lieutenant's discretion; many Humans would have found it a tempting topic for gossip. "We have not planned to keep the matter a secret once we are more used to it ourselves, but for the moment at least, I commend you for your handling of the situation."

Leslie flashed a brief, gratified grin but added, "It doesn't alter the fact that what you're hoping to do is dangerous."

"I am aware of the dangers," Spock told him soberly. "The condition of Lt. Morton in particular warrants the risk. We need to contact the Enterprise as a matter of urgency."

"That bad?" Leslie's eyes widened. "Would it help to have someone with you?"

"No." Spock's head moved in a decided negative. Oh, there were some he could have felt sufficiently at ease with to let them witness this, McCoy for instance - something within him twisted painfully and he looked away.

Simple feeling - had he once been so naive as to use that phrase? Feelings

were seldom simple and he was still so inept at dealing with them and with their consequences. This routine mission had begun so ordinarily, only the inevitable problems that always bedevilled any such work to deal with, but now the whole thing was spiralling down into a nightmare, moving faster and faster as it slid beyond their control into disaster.

He blinked, wondering how long he'd been standing there staring at nothing like an idiot, and turned back to the lieutenant. The young face was carefully neutral and Spock realised his instinctive withdrawal had seemed like a rejection. How would Jim have softened the harshness? With a smile, probably, a light physical touch. He must find a way of his own, since the easy ways of Humans were not his to command.

"Your offer is...most thoughtful, Mr. Leslie," he said quietly, "but I will find it easier to concentrate if I am alone."

The Human's eyes flickered over his face and then his own sternness relaxed. "Understood, sir."

"I must attend to the nursing duties first," Spock said, "so do not expect to see me return for three hours at least."

"Very well... Take care, Mr. Spock."

The blurted comment had sounded lame to Leslie's ears, but Spock found it oddly comforting as he went back to camp.

Morton's condition gave him considerable cause for concern and after a brief consultation with McCoy, increased some medication as instructed.

"Not that it'll do any good," McCoy whispered tiredly when he returned, "but at least we'll feel we're doing something. How's Christine?"

"She was still sleeping when I looked in. I am going to her now."

The blue eyes met his with something of their former fire in them. "You treat her right, you hear me?"

Without thinking, Spock reached over to take his shoulder in a comforting clasp. "I will, Doctor, I give you my word."

McCoy was already slipping into a light doze again when Spock straightened.

He dealt with Christine in the silence that had become customary, pleased to find her less withdrawn and rigid under the touch he kept as impersonal as he could. Once he had made her comfortable, he drew the cover up and stood looking down at her.

She met his eyes calmly, a faintly quizzical look in her own.

"This cannot be easy for you," he said.

She smiled, knowing her lips trembled but knowing it was only physical weakness that made them do so. "It seems ridiculous to go to these lengths to get to know you better."

One eyebrow crept up in faint amazement. "I do not imagine it was an intentional plan on your part, Dr. Chapel."

She was too weak to laugh, but managed a washed-out chuckle. "Hardly. The big romantic bit was what I always had in mind - moonlight, roses, the whole scene."

Unsure of what she meant, he said nothing at first but then remarked tentatively, "Moonlight is...alien to Vulcans."

She heard his uncertainty and felt a rush of tenderness that had nothing to do with the immature, schoolgirl crush she'd nurtured for far too long.

"I know," she told him placidly. "Spock -- if nothing else, at least this has helped me to grow up; to see you as...just another guy, and a pretty damned nice one at that. I guess I've embarrassed you in the past. I'm sorry."

"And I have been foolishly reserved in your presence," he said honestly.

"I gave you enough cause," she said. "I feel thoroughly ashamed of myself."

He laid a hand on the cover by her shoulder. "So do I. Let's...call it quits, shall we?"

The colloquialism made her laugh weakly again. Making a huge effort, she pulled one hand out from under the bedding and held it out to him. "Friends, Mr. Spock?"

He enveloped the hand in his own hot, dry one. "Friends...Christine!"

The little episode warmed him pleasantly as he made his final preparations for the gigantic mental effort he was about to undertake. There had been all too few friends in his life, none at all until Jim Kirk's acceptance and caring had breached the barriers carefully set up during his lonely childhood. Then McCoy had shown him another way to get close, needling his way through those defences with the finely barbed remarks that stung because they were based on truth and made him look at himself with honest eyes - and at Humans, too, so that he began to retaliate with his own brand of dry humour which in its turn had drawn response from others until the Enterprise had begun to feel like home, instead of merely a refuge.

But Human women had always proved a stumbling-block, evoking too many reminders of childhood difficulties, of the buried resentments against his mother for being different, of the love/hate he had felt for her, the way he had grown apart from her, unable to tell her of his very real affection... Christine, too, in particular, once he had learned of the dreams she cherished concerning him, had evoked the same repressed anger that his mother's undemanding love had roused in his formative years and as a result he had been stiff and unnatural, ultra-Vulcan, in her presence. To have found another friend in her was a cause for quiet rejoicing.

Armed with that thought, and his equally pleasant reactions to Lt. Leslie's loyalty, his mind slipped easily into first-level meditation, providing a tranquil base for the deeper probe he must now make.

Turned in upon himself, his mind sought out the area of their bond, his special link with James Kirk, and sent the urgent message of their need winging its way along it.

* * * * *

Kirk frowned. "Admiral, I've left scientific and medical teams on Delta Australis 2. They expect to be picked up in eleven days' time. This trip you're proposing will add an extra week to the journey - and present subspace conditions preclude our getting any message through to them at this distance."

For the moment at least he kept his mouth shut over what he thought of using the Enterprise as some kind of superior horse-box.

Westervliet shrugged impatiently. "You've flown a desk yourself, Kirk, you know we have to keep the local dignitaries sweet. So if the new Governor of Zythos wants her brood tzintal mares shipped in time for her inauguration ceremonies, then we oblige the lady."

Kirk had known from the start he was fighting a lost cause. Zythos occupied an excellent strategic position close to the Neutral Zone, its base facilities were of prime importance to Starfleet and no-one was going to risk offending the Governor. After all, what possible harm could come to his crew? So long as the comforting warmth of the bond-link remained, he knew that Spock at least was safe and sound. Later on the bond would deepen and allow them more contact than this subliminal awareness at such great distances, but until they both grew used to it, it was potentially dangerous to increase the level at a swifter rate.

"The Enterprise is hardly equipped for the handling of bloodstock."

One, token protest he would make; it wouldn't do for Westervliet to get complacent! He was only ashamed he could come up with nothing less feeble. He must be getting old. Years ago he'd surely have found a way to wriggle out of such unwelcome and ill-timed orders - but then, years ago neither the Enterprise nor her crew had carried such prestige and were not in such great demand by those who wished the social and diplomatic kudos of having travelled aboard the most famous of all the Starships. The penalties of success could sometimes be unbearable - he could even begin to sympathise with T'Pring for not wishing to be allied to a legend.

He grinned, smothering the sigh that longed for release. "Very well, Admiral, I'll have engineering prepare a shuttle bay to receive the tzintal."

Westervliet nodded, hiding a knowing smile imperfectly. "The Governor will be travelling with the animals, of course." He leaned forward for the exchange of masculine confidences. "Just between us, she's rumoured to be the hottest thing in this quadrant."

Kirk made a pretty good stab at appearing pained. "What are the ruling classes coming to these days?" A little revenge for the indignity heaped willy-nilly upon the Enterprise would not come amiss. Westervliet's wife was renowned for the jealous eye she kept on her husband. He smiled sweetly. "I quite understand you don't speak from experience, of course."

His temporary amusement at the Admiral's reaction was fading as he made his way down to the transporter section; in its place came a long-familiar tingling anticipation which he greeted with a sense of both pleased and rueful recognition. Maybe he wasn't getting quite as old as he'd feared. He, too, had heard a good deal of the locker-room talk and speculation regarding the lady in question. She sounded most...interesting!

Several of the passengers the Enterprise had brought to Beta Draconis 4 had mentioned her name with the same knowing smile Westervliet had worn, and had eagerly hoped for the chance of a meeting, adding hurriedly that Zythos had much to offer the able entrepreneur. If she'd succeeded in charming the powers-that-be on Beta Draconis 4 into permitting her to import tzintal to Zythos then she was clearly a woman of determination and persuasive into the bargain. Those much-prized animals were rarely sold off-planet, and then only under the most stringent conditions, the intending purchaser being obliged to attend in person for in-depth psychological testing, for the animals were both intelligent and empathic and a correct rapport with their prospective owner, essential to the creatures' well-being, must be properly formed and tried out. It was rumoured that just once, an off-world tzintal, sold in the early days following Beta Draconis 4's entry into the Federation, had died in less than happy circumstances. As to what had happened to its owner, the stories varied considerably in detail, but they all agreed on one thing, he - or she - was most emphatically dead.

Since Governor Dy'liahn was returning with two brood mares in foal (certified female off-spring) and a small quantity of frozen sperm for later use, it would seem she passed the Draconians' tests with flying colours. Guaranteed kind to animals, warm and outgoing.

Kirk sighed fondly as he materialised, twitching his uniform into place with a pleasurable sense of good times ahead, promptly checked himself guiltily and equally promptly relaxed again. It was all right, he didn't need to be so careful at the moment, since his bondbrother was not on board to pick up any stray lustful thoughts. He'd missed Spock's company these last eleven days, which was why he'd protested the delay so vigorously of course, but it seemed there just might be compensation, provided he had not lost his old expertise in such matters.

Entering the turbolift he directed it to engineering and stared thoughtfully at the lights flicking by as the car moved off. It was a hell of a long

time since he'd even wanted to consider indulging in any sort of affair. Depressed at the end of his contract marriage to Lori and bitterly aware that he had made a fatal error in accepting a desk job, he had not been able to rouse an interest in even the most transient of relationships. His normally strong sex-drive had temporarily deserted him, resulting in an even worse lack of inner confidence. Fortunately, V'Ger had solved his problem for him, dragging him out of himself, confronting him with the immediacy and action he had missed so desperately. Equally fortunately, and thanks to the steadying, sustaining support of his returned First Officer and Chief Medical Officer, they'd come through that well and afterwards, he and Spock had gone to Vulcan for a assistance in establishing the bond that had already linked them tenuously without their knowing. In the few months since then, on the rare occasions he'd had the smallest stirring of desire, he had swiftly and firmly pushed the thoughts and sensations aside, not wanting to trouble Spock with his differing, Human needs.

He was beginning to see, though, that he ought to have discussed this problem with T'Yona, the Healer who had supervised their bond. However, it was easy to be wise after the event, and at the time he'd only entertained the idea vaguely and then dismissed it as unimportant. Now he recognised it was his own embarrassment that had prevented a more open discussion and he regretted its omission.

Since their return to the Enterprise he had learned how to hide his thoughts from Spock to the point where he could constantly maintain a perfect shield without voluntary effort - but would that shield survive the annihilation of sexual arousal? He didn't know, and was oddly diffident of applying to the one person around who might be able to tell him. Spock's sexuality was still very much an unknown quantity and while he'd admitted to Kirk that he was fully capable of indulging in sexual activity outside pon farr, that did not mean to say he ever did. Besides that, once Kirk had finally pierced the last barrier to their bond, Spock had as good as shown him it was Kirk's eternal sexual restlessness that had driven him back to Vulcan four years ago; unable to comprehend the Human's constant, casual affairs, he had been confused and dismayed by his own strongly negative reactions. They'd exchanged a few brief words on the topic since then, but looking back to that first conversation by the water-hole outside ShiKahr, Spock had not denied the possibility he would know what was going on should Kirk become involved with a woman - indeed, he had openly stated that he would be unable to hide the onset of his next pon farr from his bondbrother.

Kirk did a little mental arithmetic and breathed a sigh of relief; at least it seemed that problem would not be with them for a couple of years yet. It shouldn't be beyond the bounds of possibility for two grown men to talk the problem out one of these days. Meantime he had the prospect of a week or so to himself and all the old attractions of the chase to occupy his mind without the slightest likelihood of his activities being any embarrassment or trouble to his bondbrother.

A small smile curved his lips as he turned the corner into engineering.

Governor Liahn Dy'liahn stroked the white, arching neck of the nearer tzintal and produced the small piece of hvor for which its soft lips sought with quiet, pleading snuffles. The creature took the offered fruit delicately, closing its long-lashed eyes in an almost Human expression of mingled appreciation and flirtatiousness.

Kirk exchanged a brief grin with his Chief Engineer. After Scott's initial shocked reaction to the suggestion that one of the shuttlebays be converted for the carrying of livestock rather than machinery, the Engineer's dour heart had been slowly but surely won over by the sheer force of the creatures' appeal. Not even the inevitable three-day delay in leaving orbit due to bureaucratic inefficiency had impaired his geniality and readily-expressed admiration for 'the wee beasties'.



Looking at them, it was almost impossible to believe such fine-boned animals were originally bred for use in battle, but their empathic bond with their rider made them a perfect steed for a warrior engaged in hand-to-hand combat, and their fragile appearance was deceptive. They were capable of bearing a fully-armoured man on those narrow shoulders throughout a day's fighting, capable too of acting as pack animals at need. More intelligent than a Terran dog, they were greatly loved and honoured by their owners.

Liahn Dy'liahn certainly loved her new acquisitions dearly, and in the twenty-seven hours since they had come aboard in their specially designed shuttle had spent most of her waking day in their stall, crooning softly over them and patiently brushing their long, white pelts.

They occupied her for far too many hours for Kirk's patience! The Governor lived up to every admiring comment that had been made about her appearance, being slim, long-legged, full-breasted and maturely beautiful - all the things that Kirk appreciated most in a woman - but even more important was the warmth and kindness that surrounded her like an aura. With a nature like hers, she could have been as homely as a dumpling and still have attracted the same eager crowd around her.

Now, glancing quickly from her graceful shape to the Chief's quietly smiling face, Kirk experienced a sudden pang of doubt. Every time he'd come down here he seemed to have bumped into Scotty; was it possible he had a rival in this chase? Once upon a time the idea would not have bothered him, it would have been up to the woman to decide between them, but today he no longer viewed things in such simple terms. He might be certain of his own disinclination for marriage, he could not be sure of Scott's. If the man was genuinely interested maybe he should quietly depart and leave him a clear field.

Suddenly amused and faintly horrified by the implied arrogance behind that thought, he backed off unconsciously, displaying an uncharacteristic diffidence.

Seeing his Captain move aside, Scott pressed forward eagerly, pulling another hvor from the rack overhead.

"May I?"

Liahn looked up, laughing happily at his eagerness. "They are enchanting, aren't they?"

"Aye. I've never seen such beauties," Scott agreed.

"Do feed them, by all means." Liahn tossed the brush she'd been wielding back onto the shelf. "They have an insatiable appetite for hvor and for petting. I've been warned not to spoil them when I get them home, but here on the ship they need a little extra company until they get used to being confined. It does tend to put rather a frost on getting to know people, though." She flicked a warm, merry look Kirk's way, inviting him to share her chagrin.

Intercepting the glance, Scott grinned. He wasn't at all surprised to see Kirk here, and it was an even bet he'd not come to admire the livestock...well, not the four-legged kind, anyway.

"I'll be glad to do the chore for you for a while, Governor," he said cheerfully. "I'm not on duty for the rest of the day and I've never known an animal before that was as restful as a week's shore leave."

A lot more restful than some of Scotty's shore leaves, Kirk thought privately. Aloud, he said, "Are you quite sure, Scotty?"

"Aye, sir, I'm sure." Scott's eyes were definitely twinkling. "Maybe I'll just read them a page or two from the latest up-date reports we collected yesterday. I reckon they'll enjoy that as much as I will."

Kirk grinned. "In that case, Commander... Governor, have you found time to have dinner yet?"

"I've not eaten since breakfast, and I'm ravenous," she admitted.

He'd intended taking her to the main rec room but a look back over his shoulder as they left the hangar deck made him change his mind. Scott was not displaying any sign of feeling slighted by Liahn's departure and had indeed produced a blue-covered journal from somewhere, settling himself comfortably on one end of the piled-up bales of purplish bedding-grass, one hand absently stroking a pleading, upturned nose, while the steady drone of his voice provided a soothing background as he read aloud.

Kirk chuckled as the door slid to behind them, "You'll have the most knowledgeable tzintal in this quadrant by the time you get them home. Any time you want to know about warp engine circuitry, just ask one of those two."

"I'll be sure to remember," she assured him solemnly.

The warm and sweet-as-honey voice sent a tiny thrill through him. He looked down at her. "We'll have a meal in my quarters, shall we? Or would you prefer to join the rest of the crew in the rec room?"

"It would be peaceful in your quarters," she said demurely.

She was delightful company; her mind was as incisive as Spock's and she had the same dry humour, albeit more readily displayed than his friend's. Beyond that, she was outgoing and feminine, responding readily to his expert flirting, and when their meal was over and his Yeoman had carried the trays away, she tilted her head at him enquiringly.

"What does that look mean?" He came round the table and pulled her to her feet and into his arms.

She gave a tiny choke of mirth. "You seem to have understood, so why do you ask?"

"Maybe I need reassurance."

"You? The legendary James T. Kirk?" Feeling his arms slacken, she sobered. "I'm almost as legendary myself, you know," she offered, "and for much the same reason."

Disconcerted, he studied her face without speaking.

"Don't tell me someone hasn't informed you about my reputation, because I shan't believe you."

Honesty compelled him to admit he'd heard of her.

She laughed at him, pulling his arms a little tighter round her. "Thank goodness for that. I went to a great deal of trouble to get that, I'll have you know. And most of it's true! Oh, not the most outrageous stories, but they're often based on truth, just as all the shocking things one hears you've done probably are. Do you mind?"

He quirked an eyebrow towards the sleeping area. "It would be terrible to waste the opportunity to add to the myths, wouldn't it? Besides, we don't want to disappoint our public, do we?"

"I hate waste," she agreed.

Two and a half hours later, she emerged from his bathroom, freshly showered and dressed again, and came to the bedside.

Bending down, she kissed the top of his head as he sat up, cross-legged. "The legends don't lie, Jim. You're fantastic. We must do this again. I could almost wish I didn't have a pair of tzintal to look after so we could spend all your off-duty time here."

"We'll arrange a team of baby-sitters for them...once Scotty gets bored with finishing their education, that is."

"That would cause a scandal." Her eyes sparkled at him though, daring him

to be serious and carry the scheme through.

He laughed, silently making a few raunchy plans for later on. A pity Spock wasn't here to help him dream up some foolproof, watertight scheme for...

He pulled himself up sharply, mentally blushing all the way down to his curling toes and yanked a robe over his nakedness as he stepped into the work area to bid her goodbye. A sudden thought struck him.

"Are you spending the nights down there with them?"

She looked up, laughing. "Well, the first few, at least. I told you - they get lonely and worried when they're shut up."

"In that case..." He reviewed his duty rota swiftly, recalling that he was due for a most convenient shift change tomorrow. He grinned happily. "I'll see you around."

"That'll be very pleasant." Flashing him an engagingly urchin-like smile, she departed.

Wandering back into his bedroom, Kirk did his best to ignore the rumpled bed while he sorted out his thoughts. Illogical, the subject of them would say, but it embarrassed him to be thinking of his bondbrother so soon after... And he really must get himself in hand, or before he knew where he was, he'd be confiding things to Spock that would curl his Vulcan friend's hair. It wasn't that he felt any shame or regret on his own account - lord knew he'd confessed enough to Bones in the course of a long and varied career - but he must at least make Spock understand that it wasn't in him to remain totally celibate for the rest of his life. In any case, there'd been times in the past when his ability to charm the opposite sex into his bed had been the simplest means to ensure the safety of the Enterprise or some of his crew - Deela, for instance. He couldn't guarantee that nothing like that would ever happen again and he didn't for a moment suppose Spock would want him to make any such promise; after all, they were only bonded, not married!

Grinning like a maniac at that thought, he tugged his robe off to take a quick shower, pulling the creased bedding straight with quick, efficient jerks before dropping the garment onto the cover. This was a fine time to be thinking about matrimony, but on the other hand it was always advisable to know what he thought and what he wanted out of life, or, even more importantly, what he didn't want. One monumental error of judgement was enough; he didn't intend to make a second purely from lack of self-knowledge.

Standing under the shower he recalled yet again the bitterness that had flooded him when he realised the part Lori had played; her betrayal had destroyed any desire he'd ever had to place his whole trust in one woman, and three years behind a desk told him beyond question that he wasn't ready to settle down. Besides, his bond with Spock filled the aching loneliness of the past. The quiet, comfortable presence in his mind gave him an inner peace and assurance of a companionship that would last their joint lifetimes. When one of the died, it would be doubly hard for the one left behind, but only a coward would refuse present comfort for fear of future pain.

Should Spock eventually decide to marry, a Vulcan woman would understand their bond, comprehending both its necessity and its rightness; he could not expect a Human woman to understand their deep commitment to each other. Even if she didn't actually suspect that such a closeness must imply a physical relationship between them, their attachment would be deeply threatening to her own security and that was no basis on which to try and build a marriage. No, there was no way you could begin to explain to a non-telepath the beauty and almost spiritual quality of a purely mental bond like theirs.

He shook the water from his hair vigorously, reaching for a towel. He was getting shockingly introspective these days; McCoy would soon have snapped him out of it had he not been away with Spock. It would do him a great deal of good, mentally and physically, to concentrate what energy he had to spare from

running his ship into running after Liahn Dy'liahn!

The bales of bedding grass were as soft as they looked. Lying back, Kirk said pensively, "I was brought up on a farm."

"I thought you seemed at home," she giggled. "What will you do if someone comes in and catches us, Captain?"

He turned his head lazily. "I may be crazy but I haven't completely lost my senses. I locked the door. Short of a red alert, no-one can get in."

She pouted at him. "What, no spice of danger at all?"

"Did you seriously think there was?" Mildly surprised - the idea of being caught by one of his own crew tumbling a passenger in the hay held not the least attraction for him - he propped himself up on one elbow and looked down at her. "I may have something of a reputation, but it isn't for total irresponsibility."

She held the teasing look for a beat longer and then broke up. "Of course I knew you'd locked the door, Jim. What do you think I am?"

"I was beginning to wonder," he said severely and bent his head to hers.

"Is this going to become a habit?" she said hopefully when he released her.

"Mmmm." Abruptly, a flash of total unease shook him.

His abstracted air surprised her. "Jim, what's wrong?"

"Wrong? Nothing. Why?" The sensation faded as quickly as it had come.

"I'm not sure," she said slowly. "You looked...oh, I don't know, as though you were suddenly very far away...almost as though you were listening to someone else."

"Indigestion, I guess," he said lightly, wondering if something were wrong with Spock. Damn it, he was still so unused to handling this! He sat up slowly, probing as delicately as he could at the warm corner in his mind. It was rather like testing an aching tooth with a tongue tip, he thought vaguely. Any moment, you half expected your head to fly apart as a nerve jolted and screamed abuse at you. He could feel nothing, however, and relaxed again with a small sigh of relief.

"There is something wrong, isn't there?" She was sitting up too, eyeing him sympathetically.

He chewed pensively on his lower lips. "I don't think so, but it won't do any harm to try and make sure." He stood up, pulling his tunic back down. "I'm sorry." This was a fine way to treat a lady.

"That's all right. I'm sure Starship Captains have all kinds of things on their minds." She held up a hand to be pulled to her feet. "Thanks. Is there anything I can do?" Her face showed her lively curiosity, but she did not give voice to it.

Grateful for her restraint - he'd feel one hell of a fool trying to explain - he gave her a swift, warm kiss. "Will that do to tide us over for a couple of days, d'you think? Tomorrow the junior crew free-fall wrestling finals are on."

Her face lit eagerly. "Can I come and watch too?"

"You'd be very welcome. I'll pick you up in your quarters at 19.00 hours and escort you down to the gym."

Unlocking the door, he made his way out to the turbo-lift and up to the bridge, pleased to recall that Uhura should be on duty herself now. Not that her second wasn't an efficient young man, but he'd known Uhura a long time and was comfortable with her.

"We've got no direct contact at all with that quadrant still, sir," the

Communications Officer said apologetically. "Subspace interference has been cutting communications all through the area as you know, and conditions are expected to persist for another week or two at least."

He stood for a moment in silent thought. Unless the landing party was actually trying to make radio contact there was little enough they could do anyway; although any incoming message to them would be automatically recorded and checked for each day, they would not expect to receive any. It was generally accepted that a landing party was on its own and could, if the very worst happened and they were never picked up, survive for many years and even for ever, should prevailing conditions permit.

He probed at the bond again. Damn rules and regulations. Things had been known to go horribly wrong before and not even Starfleet's foresightedness could plan ahead for every contingency. There were just too many unknowns out there. One thing at least he could take comfort in, whatever had caused that sudden feeling of almost panic, he was quite sure there was nothing physically wrong with Spock. If his bondbrother was badly hurt he would know it beyond question, for the comfortable, perfectly-matched patterning of their bond would be disturbed by anything more than a mere minor injury, and at present it was not.

He caught Uhura's sympathetic brown gaze and grinned sheepishly. "This is what you get for raising ducklings! I didn't realise the mother hen instinct was so strong in me."

"If there's any message, anything at all, you'll be the first to know," she said.

It hadn't been necessary for her to mention what was, after all, standard practice, but he accepted the offered comfort behind the simple words with a quiet nod and turned to go.

"Uh...Captain!"

He turned back, catching the flare of amusement on her face. "What is it, Uhura?"

"Bend down a moment, sir. No, turn your head that way. There." Solemnly she handed him the object she had removed from his hair.

It was a short, purple strand of dried grass. He kept his expression resolutely neutral. "Uh...thank you, Lieutenant-Commander."

"You're welcome," she told him formally.

As he turned to grasp the control he found she was still watching him through the lift doorway and in the second before it closed, she flashed him a thoroughly impudent wink.

Chuckling to himself and feeling less concerned now that the odd sensation was fading in his memory, he decided to make one of his periodic and unexpected inspections of his ship. It was a job he always had enjoyed; so much so that when he'd first taken over the Enterprise, he'd realised he must ration himself severely if he was not to give the crew the impression he didn't trust them. Not that it did them any harm to know that, at a pinch, he could do their jobs as competently as they could, if not better. In fact, he held a private theory that that was why Sickbay personnel got so uppity with Command crew once they had you in their clutches, because that was one area Command Training did not cover apart from basic first aid which everyone must know. It gave them a sense of power and an undue notion of their own importance. He'd complained of it more than once to Bones, and only received the kind of unsympathetic response that he could declare confirmed his suspicions.

His lips curved in an unconscious smile of affection as his feet took him through the well-known and long-loved corridors of his ship, a deep inner contentment filling him at being back out here in space again, back where he belonged. It was nearly a year now since he'd returned, but the pleasure still sprang fresh in him from time to time and he welcomed it gladly when it did, determined

that he would never again forget the lesson he had learned with such inner pain.

//Soon; Spock, // he promised his bondbrother. //I know we ought to have got to you the day after tomorrow, but we'll only be a week late and in the meantime I'm having one hell of a good time here without you. //

Grinning - it wasn't strictly true but the trip was producing its compensations - he finally sought his bed.

Throughout the next couple of days, Kirk was constantly aware that the time at which the landing party could reasonably have expected their arrival was passing and his impatience at the local subspace interference increased. It wouldn't be the first time a Starship had been late for such a rendezvous but he had a private bet with himself that McCoy was already grumbling at their delay. Bones would never change! It was good to know that both his friends got along so well together these days, both of them prepared to show him their fondness for the other and both equally determined not to admit any such thing to each other.

M'Benga glanced enquiringly at him as he called in at Sickbay for the daily report on the second morning. "Something amusing you, Captain?"

"Just wondering what Dr. McCoy will have to say to us when we finally do arrive to pick them up," he said blandly.

The Doctor laughed. "I imagine it will be generally unprintable. Still, this might cheer him up." He slipped a tape out of the desk viewer, tapping it fondly. "I've been going through the up-date data we received on Beta Draconis. The clinical tests on TCU-5 have been completed and prove positive. The drug works."

Yes. that would please McCoy. "Good, that's excellent news." Kirk smiled. "I think I'll let you welcome him back on board with it, Doctor!"

M'Benga shook his head disapprovingly, a distinct twinkle in his eyes. "It's a terrible thing to suspect a man of being a moral coward. Surely you aren't afraid of your own C.M.O.?"

Kirk eyed him severely. "McCoy's had the most terrible effect on you," he told the unrepentant Doctor. "I'll have to have a word with him about the insubordination within the Medical Section."

Apart from this piece of good news, the rest of his day was full of minor irritations. He seemed to spend all of it in dealing with the kind of petty problems that plague every ship from time to time, ranging today from the havoc caused by a blocked valve in the food processing unit to the outraged sensibilities of a young Ensign crossed in love.

Having finally permitted her to shed a few tears on his august shoulder, he sent her on her way wearing a watery smile and breathed a heartfelt sigh of relief. There was nothing like being without both the Executive and Chief Medical Officer to make a Captain realise just how much work they took off his hands. In fact, he was beginning to think it was time he encouraged them to delegate more; working at peak efficiency as they both did, their staffs got used to going to the top and when neither of them were present, that meant their poor overworked Commanding Officer! He twisted his neck and shoulders, easing the knots the minor tensions of the day had set in his muscles. Half an hour with Liahn and those quietly soothing tzintal and he'd feel considerably better.

Liahn paused in her careful brushing. "You look exhausted, Jim."

"I feel it. Throw me over the spare brush and I'll do this one. It's looking left out."

They worked for long minutes in a silence broken only by the soft swishing of their brushes and the low-pitched, appreciative moans of the tzintal.

Kirk's lips twitched. "That noise is positively indecent."

She sent him a look of laughing agreement, applying her brush carefully to the heavy fall of hair down the creature's chest. "Not for the prudish, certainly. Had a hectic day?"

"Why do you ask? As a matter of fact, yes, I have."

"You had a harrassed look when you walked in here...and I was one of the people privileged to be present when the dispenser in the rec room went crazy. I'd never tried skating in chocolate sauce before. Travel on a Starship certainly widens your horizons."

"You should have gone along to the galley," he told her. "You could have gone swimming in casha-juice in there. I've a depressing suspicion it'll take a year before everything stops feeling sticky."

"I believe you. There, that'll have to do, my lovely. My arm's beginning to ache and I'm ravenous again." She tossed the brush onto its shelf and took a hvoi, breaking it in half and holding a piece out in each hand.

The animal Kirk was brushing trotted over swiftly, tossing a look over its shoulder that said, 'Come on, you can brush me while I'm eating, can't you?'

He gave it a last pat and laid the brush down by Liahn's. "These two are going to miss this VIP treatment."

"What do you mean?"

"When you get home you won't have much time once you take up your duties officially."

"There is always time to do the things you really want to do," she said firmly. Her eyes gleamed up at him naughtily. "Like last night, if you remember, after the wrestling finals."

Allowing his response to gleam right back at her he said regretfully, "You can't do without sleep every night, though."

She paused in the doorway. "Didn't you get any sleep at all? No wonder you looked worn out. A nice early night - that's what you need today."

"Mmmm!"

"That wasn't what I meant," she said severely.

"Wasn't it?"

"Well...maybe."

She led the way out.

Sprawled beside her in total relaxation, he was still in that far-off place beyond reality when the first whispering touch came.

//Jim. Jim. Please hear me. Jim.//

He came bolt upright. "Spock?"

"What?" Liahn rolled sleepily towards him.

"Eush! Don't talk - please." He had to have quiet to concentrate. That couldn't, surely couldn't, have been Spock. He must have been imagining things, developing a guilt complex or something equally ridiculous. All the same, he squeezed his eyes shut, pressing his finger-tips against his temples.

//Spock? Did I hear you?// Tentative.

As he'd thought - nothing. He remained poised for a while, slowly relaxing as his first conviction died. It couldn't have been, he was being damned stupid.

Conscious of Liahn's hand on his arm he opened his eyes again and found hers fixed on him rather anxiously.

"Are you all right, Jim?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm fine. Really."

"What happened?"

"Oh, just a sudden head-pain. It's..."

//Jim, t'hy'la. Please...// Despair and need.

"Jim! Jim, snap out of it!"

Peripherally aware of something shaking distractingly at his arm, he thrust it away angrily. "Don't. I need to concentrate."

"But what the - "

"QUIET! Go on, Spock." Unknowingly, he'd also vocalised the urgent mental call.

Liahn stared at him in bewildered dismay, but the command tone had had its effect and she kept silent rather uneasily.

//Jim. Four of the landing party dying. One already dead. Help us, please come quickly.// Calm Vulcan mind-voice, horribly underlaid with desolation and open fear.

Contact was getting easier all the time, burning into his mind. //We'll be on our way directly.// Calm reassurance.

He snapped on the intercom. "Navigator, lay in a course for Delta Australis 2."

There was the briefest of pauses and then Di Falco's voice replied, "Plotted and laid in, sir."

"Helmsman, divert to new course, ahead warp 5."

"Ahead warp 5, sir."

Up on the bridge, surprised glances were being exchanged all round.

Down in the Captain's quarters, the Governor of Zythos was glaring at the Captain of the Enterprise with an outraged dignity that sat ill on her dishevelled state of undress.

"Jim Kirk, what the devil do you think you're doing?"

"Just a minute, Liahn." //Spock, we're on our way.//

A surging relief, contact failing. //No more, Jim. When we are closer...//

Abruptly, contact was gone and a bright, white-hot pain knifed into the new-born place now empty inside his head.

He rode it out, swallowing down a sudden nausea. Had he gone completely crazy? From the look on Liahn's face she clearly thought so.

"What's all this about Delta Australis?" she demanded furiously.

He climbed off the bed, reaching for his robe. "I'm answering a distress call, Governor. I'm afraid your passage to Zythos will be delayed."

"Delayed?" She stared at him in open-mouthed silence then visibly gathered her thoughts together. "Will you please explain? What distress call?"

He turned away, needing to collect himself as well and wondering just how much he could tell her, how far she'd understand.

Angry at his apparent reluctance she said loudly, "I want an answer, Captain. You know quite well that the reason I was offered passage on a Starship was because the inauguration ceremony takes place in eight days' time and

my presence is required there four days previously to receive my guests."

"I'm aware of that." Spock's message had had time to sink in now. One crewman already dead... Who? Not Bones! The plea was out before he could prevent it. Surely if it was, Spock would have said? But there hadn't been time in that short, blazing contact for more than an extreme need for urgency to be transmitted. He forced himself to calm down and face Liahn with an assurance he was far from feeling.

"Do you know just how many diplomats there will be on Zythos to be offended, Captain?"

A rueful expression lit his eyes. "I do understand, believe me, Governor. However, regulations clearly state that distress calls take precedence in cases like this. It's quite reasonable - and anyway, no-one likes to think that theirs might be the distress call that would get ignored for the sake of someone's ego."

"Are you daring to suggest that my ego...?" Every muscle of her still-naked body tensed with her fury.

Even the pounding headache that had come with the ending of the deep mental contact couldn't spoil his appreciation of her, but he kept his face carefully neutral.

"No, I'm not, and you know it, Liahn." Most politicians at least paid lip-service to the idea that life was more important than protocol, personal dignity or even financial loss. "A rescue missi on takes precedence over any other call upon a Starship. Any other."

"What rescue mission, Captain?" Liahn's eyes were glittering dangerously. "When I inform Starfleet Command at your courtmartial that you suddenly shot out of bed and ordered the ship off on a different course for no apparent reason I hardly think they're going to be impressed, do you?"

"I know it looks as though I've gone crazy, but I can explain."

"Then please do so." She was still spitting fire at him.

"I did get a distress call," he said mildly. "No, you didn't miss it, you couldn't hear it. No-one could, except me. It was my First Officer with the landing party on Delta Australis. He's a Vulcan."

"Is that supposed to be an explanation?" she demanded coldly.

"Vulcans are telepaths. Spock and I..." Dammit, he'd known it wouldn't be easy to talk about this. "Spock and I have a...well, there's a rather special link between us that means if the need is very great, we can get in touch."

"That has to be a lie. Vulcans are touch telepaths."

She wouldn't believe him because she didn't want to. Well, he'd ridden out another's anger before now and he could do so again. He flicked a glance at the chronometer readout giving the stardate for this sector. Spock would know and remember exactly when he'd made the contact - not for the first time Kirk had cause to be grateful for that impeccable Vulcan time sense.

"Liahn, I can prove nothing now. The only other person off-Vulcan who knows about this so far is my Chief Medical Officer and he's with Spock. Make a note of the stardate if you want to, and then after we've picked up my crew, ask Spock exactly what time it was we made contact. If it matches, I have to be telling the truth."

His calmness was making an impression on her, even though she heard his words with continued scepticism. Her rigid pose relaxed but she still stared at him angrily.

"What's the fuss about? What's wrong with them?"

"I don't have details. Just that one crewmember is dead and four dying."

"Dying? But you said your Chief Medical Officer..." Her voice died away as she realised the possible significance of what she had just said. It could be that the dead man was the C.M.O.

"Precisely."

She could read little in the bleakness of his face and guessed that the mask covered a very deep feeling. "Jim, I'm sorry." Her face bore a rueful look. "Now I don't know whether I want your story to be true or not. If it is, then I'm really sorry for what's happened. If not..." She shrugged helplessly. "There won't be any way to cover up what you did."

"Of course not." He wasn't really surprised. He knew how the political mind worked, its deviousness and concern with outward appearance. "I give the orders round here, the ultimate responsibility's mine." A smile crept into his voice over his inner tension. "I'm quite used to it, you know, and I quite enjoy it. I've been a Captain long enough."

"And have been an Admiral." The remark was out before she could stop it. She hadn't meant to make any comment on his loss of rank, but it intrigued her as it did many others who knew of it.

He laughed easily. "I still am in fact, didn't you know?"

She stared at him, mouth agape. "But no-one calls you anything but Captain."

"I put Starfleet in quite a spot when I insisted on giving up a desk job they'd pushed me into before I was ready. Since there's no 'legal' way to demote an Admiral, short of dismissal, that's technically what I still am. Everyone has tacitly agreed to forget my...unfortunate lapse into the higher echelons."

"But...but that's unbelievable. Why do you let them treat you like that?" She spoke sharply, bristling in his defence.

Vaguely disappointed, somehow he'd thought she would understand it was all right, that he wanted things the way they were, he said gently, "I'm quite happy, Liahn."

She studied him intently, seeing it was true but not comprehending it at all. "Yes, I see you are and it's not my place to interfere, but -"

"There's not the slightest reason to do so. I have what I want." His deep content with his present life and his bond with Spock were the bedrock of security beneath the worries and dangers that were inescapably part of that same life.

"And I don't suppose there's any use in my going and making a fuss on the bridge either." Liahn still hadn't completely bowed to the inevitable.

His lips twitched involuntarily. "You could try it," he said blandly. "It'd cause a riot."

Knowing he was teasing her she frowned angrily. "I'm not sure I won't do it all the same - right now! At least it'll make your crew realise I'm not precisely happy about what's going on."

Kirk knew his crew would also be puzzled, but that they would obey his orders come what may. He shook his head, allowing his teasing smile to grow. "You look adorable the way you are, but just a little informal for the bridge, don't you think?"

She gasped, suddenly aware of her nakedness. "Jim Kirk, you...you..."

Solemnly, he took off his robe and handed it to her. "Please, borrow mine."

"And how many of them will recognise it?" she said acidly.

"They won't be looking at the robe," he assured her, overlooking the aspersion on his observance of General Order 43(a).

Abruptly, antagonism was gone. "James Kirk," she said helplessly, "you

are incorrigible."

* * * * *

The dawning hope on McCoy's face was a reward in itself when Spock gave him the news the following morning.

"The Enterprise on its way... You managed to contact Jim?"

Spock nodded and completed his nursing tasks with neat efficiency. "Affirmative. I suggest you try and drink as much of this as you can." He supported McCoy carefully, holding the glass for him.

McCoy drank, sighing as he was laid down again, "I hate being like this - weak as a damned kitten."

"Very understandable," Spock agreed.

"How are the others?"

Looking at the Doctor, Spock knew he was in no condition to be allowed to fret; equally he knew he would not rest until he received a report on his patients.

"Dr. Chapel is holding her own very well, not too weakened as yet. Mr. Collins is in much the same condition as you are. Mr. Morton has virtually lost consciousness. I am about to commence intravenous treatment as per your instructions."

"Yeah..." McCoy's eyes opened again, his eyes searching Spock's face. "And you look terrible as well, Spock."

Spock was unsurprised. Contact with Jim had required a supreme effort and its ending had left him weak and shaking, unable to move for long, long minutes and with a newly awakened headache that threatened to destroy reasoned thought. It was still there, controlled now but pounding remorselessly away behind his eyes and down the left side of his head. Pressure seemed to ease it, but McCoy would hardly be comforted to see his avowedly stoic Vulcan friend holding his head to relieve pain. It would subside in time, he knew that, just as he knew the cause, physical contraction of the blood vessels during that concentrated, incredible contact, followed by excessive dilation and resulting head pain. He patted McCoy's hand in a gesture that sought reassurance as much as offered it.

"Jim will be here in a short while, Doctor. I estimate the time will be sufficient - for all of us."

By the following morning contact with Jim had become wonderfully easy and Spock was absurdly put out to find just how far away the Enterprise still was.

//Another two days' journey?// An astonished echo.

Kirk caught the bemused aura of stupefaction behind the repetition and was promptly concerned. It was not like Spock to fall down on any calculations of times and distances and he said so.

Catching the note of worry in his turn, Spock hastened to explain. //Our initial distance from each other was greater than I thought possible.// Awe and wonder. //We must discuss this, t'hy'la, but not now. The situation here is still grave, however I believe you will arrive in time. Lt. Morton causes us the greatest concern.//

//And Bones?// Affection and foreboding.

//Grows hourly more impatient and irritable now he knows you are coming.// Amusement tinged with relief.

A warm mind-chuckle told Spock that his bondbrother fully understood. Now that rescue was possible, that lives might not be lost after all, McCoy could safely retreat behind the wall of gruff irascibility that hid his own affection as securely as Spock's Vulcan mask did his.

Kirk spent an hour or two that day relaying messages from McCoy to M'Benga, dictating copious notes on the problem the Enterprise would have to deal with once she arrived. With Spock's nursing duties still claiming much of his attention, there was little time for any more personal contact.

Spock was mildly pleased. Without any subsequent sense of shock or surprise, during their initial contact he had unintentionally touched on Kirk's memories of his all-too-recent liaison; indeed, he was beginning to suspect that only such total physical and mental relaxation on Jim's part had made the contact possible at all. Of course, he had swiftly retreated, loth to make his presence felt and cause Kirk any embarrassment - but shielding was difficult at present with so much on his mind and he knew that if there was time for them to indulge in the deeply satisfying comfort of each other's mental presence then he would inevitably give his knowledge away. There would be a chance later for full explanations, mutual acceptance and understanding; for now the soonest possible treatment for the sick members of the landing party was paramount.

The notes McCoy had made on his investigations up to the moment of his own collapse were invaluable. Even restricted as he was by the purely secondhand information, without access to slides and specimens, M'Benga was able to make some preparations towards treatment that could commence directly upon arrival, and to make a start at least on a fuller diagnosis leading to a definite cure.

The pick-up was naturally low-key, the strictest of quarantine precautions had to be observed and never was the retrieval of a landing party attended by so much attention to the details of standard sterilisation and decontamination routines. Not that the Enterprise crew was renowned for carelessness, but checks, double checks and triple checks were the norm on this occasion.

Lieutenants Leslie and Lemli grinned in open relief throughout the entire debriefing session, squirming in mild discomfort at Spock's quiet praise of their conduct during the mission.

"We didn't do anything, sir," Leslie said uncomfortably. "Just got on with our work."

"You didn't compound Mr. Spock's problems by trying to be too much of a help, Mr. Leslie," Kirk summed up succinctly. "Sitting on the sidelines when every instinct yells at you to pitch in and assist is damnably difficult."

"Precisely." Spock acknowledged the Captain's percipience with a quiet nod.

Kirk dismissed the pair of them and looked over the briefing-room table at his friend. "Is there anything else?"

"I will have a full report prepared on my work with the inscriptions," Spock said, collecting scattered tapes and records together. "I regret the work was not completed earlier, as it should have been."

"You might have had a few other things on your mind." Kirk quoted a once-proffered and refused excuse, deadpan.

This time Spock was prepared to concede the possibility. "There is one other thing, Jim."

The informal use of his name told Kirk that this was a more private matter. He arched a questioning eyebrow Spock's way. "What's that?"

"Lt. Leslie is aware of our bonding."

Seeing Kirk's instinctive dismay and startlement, Spock permitted a small smile to touch his mouth. "I did not give us away, Jim," he said smoothly. "You are the culprit there, I am afraid."

"I am?" Kirk protested in surprise. "I haven't said a word to anyone..."

"But that is precisely what you did do." Spock was experiencing a mild sense of enjoyment. It wasn't often one caught the Captain out in any way. "He overheard you speaking aloud to me one day when he knew I was in a different

section of the ship. As a good security officer he made discreet investigations until he was convinced of his Captain's continued health and sanity. I believe he pieced the evidence together very neatly."

"Health and sanity, indeed." Kirk was grinning, remembering those early difficulties. "I guess I must have looked four kinds of fool chattering away to myself."

"It must have been quite worrying for him, indeed," Spock agreed blandly. "I have expressed our gratitude for his discretion, but all the same..."

Kirk inclined his head, his smile fading. "It is high time we owned up," he agreed. "If we don't do it soon, folk are going to start thinking there's a good deal more that we're not admitting when we do get around to explaining." He paused briefly, wondering in faint embarrassment whether Spock would understand what he meant or if he was going to have to put it into blunt words. To his relief, Spock made no open comment, merely agreeing with his bondbrother's suggestion.

He did however add, "Once Dr. McCoy is completely recovered may be a convenient time to make some announcement."

Kirk gave vent to a wicked chuckle, quickly wiping the grin off his face to eye Spock sapiently. "What you mean," he said, translating freely, "is that if McCoy is around, you can probably dodge the issue altogether by referring all enquiries, pertinent or impertinent, to him."

Spock kept his face bland. "I believe that is what, in essence, I did say. I used the term 'convenient' quite intentionally, I assure you. But I would like to relieve your mind of an apparent misapprehension, Captain. No-one aboard this ship - no-one under the rank of Commander, that is - ever addressed impertinent enquiries to me."

Kirk's inner amusement had been steadily growing to alarming proportions. Now he could contain it no further and broke out into a hearty guffaw that almost startled him. It was funny, yes, but it wasn't so damned funny as all that. He was even more startled to find that Spock's face bore a most uncharacteristic grin while his body was shaken by tiny, rhythmic spasms.

Good God! Was it possible Spock was actually laughing? His delight at the prospect seemed out of all proportion to the likelihood and a thread of concern cooled his initial impulse to walk round the table and hug his friend fervently. He had seen Spock laugh before, of course, but only ever under the influence of some external factor, and while he knew that these days, since that fantastic mind-link with V'Ger, Spock was of choice more open and ready to accept, or even act upon, his emotional impulses, that surely did not include giggling like a nine-year-old at his own fairly feeble joke.

Bringing himself under control he was about to question Spock when the intercom broke in, demanding him.

Snapping it on, he said shortly, "What is it, Uhura?"

"Governor Dy'liahn wishes to speak with you at your earliest convenience, Captain."

In the flurry of picking up the landing party, Kirk had quite forgotten to reassure Liahn that they were already on course for Zythos once again. He hadn't really had time to do more than wave at Bones, either. Sickbay first - and then a few minutes (or longer) with the tzintal and Liahn.

"Please assure the Governor we are safely back on our original course and at maximum speed, Lieutenant-Commander. I have one or two things to attend to, but later I shall be pleased to assist with the care of the tzintal as usual."

"Very well, Captain. I will pass your message on. Bridge out."

Uhura's tone was pointedly demure. Kirk smothered a grin and turned his



attention back to Spock, startled to find him pressing his fingers firmly against his temple.

"Headache, Spock?" he demanded sympathetically. It was a chronic condition with him these days as well.

"I can control it." Spock was giving nothing away at present. "If there is nothing else, Jim..."

"No. You go and get your head down; you look all in. It must have been a rough time."

Spock nodded tightly and got to his feet.

As his First Officer went out of the door, Kirk said, "And I don't want to see you again in under eighteen hours. I want you to have a proper rest. Understood?"

"Understood."

If the truth were known, Spock was all but dropping where he stood. Only pride and a determination not to worry Kirk unless it was absolutely necessary kept him upright.

Back in his quarters, Spock stripped off, folded his clothes with less than his usual care, took a quick sonic shower and made for the haven of his bed.

The paraphernalia of intensive life support was always dehumanising to the layman's eye - never more so than when the patient was a friend, and into the bargain the one man you trusted above all others when your own body let you down.

Kirk stood for several minutes, simply staring down at McCoy's horrifyingly inert and wasted form, so intent on his thoughts that he did not hear M'Benga's approach. The shockingly normal voice made him jump.

"He'll be all right, Captain. Thanks to the data Mr. Spock relayed to you we were able to pinpoint precisely the organism involved, both in its original and metamorphosed forms. By tomorrow we'll have all of them - even Ed Morton - sitting up and taking notice...in plenty of time for Leonard to tell me exactly where and how I'm going about it all wrong."

Kirk managed a smile, knowing that he was being jollied out of worrying unduly, but aware also that M'Benga would not attempt to imbue him with a false optimism. Equally, he knew that most doctors tended to be initially optimistic when faced with the unknown. Without that innate blend of optimism and compassion they'd have turned to something more concrete as a profession.

"When's he likely to wake up?"

"Not for some hours. He's heavily sedated. I'll let you know as soon as he does - he's bound to want to see you. He was a little concerned about the effect such prolonged telepathic contact must have had on you."

Kirk nodded thoughtfully. It had occurred to him on the way down here that something of his and Spock's rather (by Human standards) bizarre mental closeness must have leaked out through that superbly efficient, totally unquantifiable communications system, the ship's grapevine. He'd made no attempt at disguise with M'Benga. McCoy's junior knew a fair bit about Vulcans, had interned on a Vulcan ward, which was why McCoy had pulled various strings to get him posted to the Enterprise in the first place all those years ago. He knew M'Benga wouldn't gossip, nor any of the senior medical staff, but there was no way you could keep such a thing secret when you took no specific precautions to do so. Since the basic fact of there being some link between the two of them that could function even when subspace communications were totally out was now generally known, there were plenty of people on board who could add up all the known facts about Vulcan mental techniques and come up with an answer. He wasn't unduly concerned about those who could add two and two together and make four

out of it. It was those more imaginative souls who might come up with five or even more as an answer who worried him. It was only fair to Spock's Vulcan (and for that read highly reticent!) attitude to such attitudes that the plain, unvarnished and - to an outsider - mildly dull truth be fully understood.

Coming to a decision he said, "Well, I've been having headaches like there was no tomorrow but from what I gathered from Spock, that isn't all that unusual."

Certainly the Vulcan had looked to have the mother and father of all headaches when he'd sent him off to get some rest just now. Smiling - he didn't want M'Benga fussing over him unnecessarily - he added, "Apart from that I feel fine. Spock and I were bonded last time we were on Vulcan, you know. It's been long enough for us both to get used to it - but you know McCoy. Never happy unless he's worrying."

Hoping M'Benga would gather from his tone and his calmness that becoming bonded to your Vulcan First Officer was an everyday occurrence that might happen to anybody he decided to leave it like that for now. In a day or two, another few quiet words dropped at some appropriate time before the right audience would provide enough information for everyone to find out for themselves. A general attitude of 'Oh, I thought everybody knew about that' seemed to be the most desirable to create - a suggestion of mild surprise that anyone should find anything so ordinary and commonplace (for Vulcans!) worthy of comment.

With a last look at McCoy's white but peaceful face, he left Sickbay and made for the tzintal's stall down by the hangar deck. He had a strong feeling they'd be good for this persistent and annoying headache.

Having groomed first one, then the other, for twenty minutes he found he was right, the pain slowly but surely subsiding to a minor, bearable discomfort. He greeted Liahn's arrival with open pleasure.

"I'm sorry not to have seen you all day."

"That's all right." She took up a brush. "I guessed it must be pretty hectic for you. How is everyone?"

"Recovering nicely." This was not the moment to mention the young lieutenant back there in her lonely grave. Avoidable deaths like that, the needless annihilation of the young and untried, always hurt, no matter how often you encountered them. The day it stopped hurting, the day you came to terms with it, acknowledged acceptance, would be the day you started to be dangerous in the centre seat. Any person who could talk about an acceptable level of mortality in any situation was a person Kirk distrusted to the very depths of his soul. Death hurt - and it was right that it should - but it was not necessary to inflict the hurt on those not involved.

The tzintal wuffled gently under his hands, turning her mobile neck to nuzzle at him softly, gazing up at him with liquid eyes that offered comfort and understanding. His hands faltered in their steady brushing and a wave of sorrow hit him like a physical blow.

Hearing the tzintal's hollow low of distress, Liahn cast her brush carelessly aside and came over to him, folding him in arms that were at once maternal and enticing. Dropping his own brush, Kirk drew her close, burying himself in her sympathy and care, taking comfort from her there in the purple shadows of the piled bedding grass.

Next morning McCoy was awake and clearly much perkier. Kirk looked over the foot of the bed at him.

"Dr. M'Benga, you were quite right," he said severely, having arrived in time to hear a pithily expressed comment from McCoy on the proposed course of further treatment. "Cantankerous, curmudgeonly, ungrateful... No, Bones, he didn't say any of those things, I just did! I gather you're feeling better."

"A lot better," McCoy agreed.

"Good - then just keep on doing what the doctor tells you, Doctor, and you'll be fine. And what's making you frown like that now?"

"Have you got a headache?" McCoy asked him.

Kirk couldn't prevent a smile. McCoy would be worrying about other people's health when he was knocking on heaven's gate himself. "A minor one," he lied. "Nothing for you to lose sleep over."

McCoy was not fooled. He knew the possible dangers that existed within the bond his two friends shared. T'Yana, the head of the Mental Healing Academy in ShiKahr, had been careful to explain all she could to him during their initiatory melds, which had been made under her supervision. An attempt at contact made at such a distance so comparatively soon after the bond's formation could send the partner involved too deeply into his own mind, so deeply that he could never retrace his steps. T'Yana had described it as being like falling into the gravitational field of a black hole. Once over that crucial, mental 'event' horizon, the mind was trapped for ever, to be released only by death. Not even the most skilled mental healer could reach in to help without falling into the same unending spiral into his own psyche.

Well, Spock had clearly managed without causing anything so frightful, but he hadn't liked the perpetual small frown the Vulcan had so uncharacteristically worn for the next three days and to see it again, reflected on Kirk's face, heightened his concern considerably.

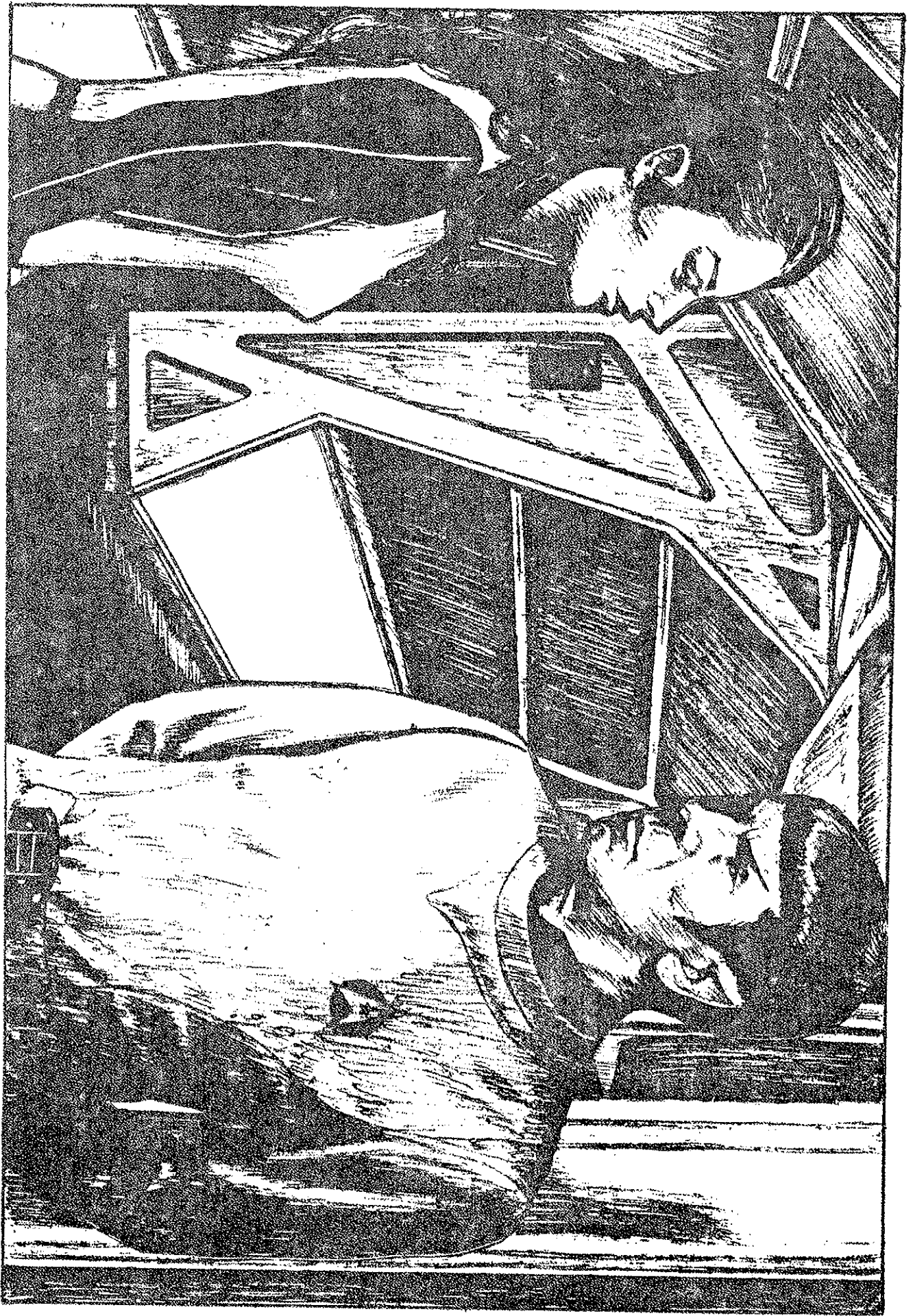
'Too much, too quickly, too soon,' T'Yana had summed up the other, less serious possibility with an unVulcan lack of verbosity, adding comfortingly that since all Vulcans knew the danger of attempting to force a rapport before the two minds had grown sufficiently attuned to take it, Spock would take no unnecessary risks. Opening the channels of contact that were not yet ready to be used caused them to stick open like a damp-swollen door that cannot be forced back into its frame, so leaving an area round the edges through which wind or rain can leak unhindered. When the mind could not be shielded the potential for embarrassment - even between bondmates - was enormous. Between bondbrothers like Kirk and Spock it could cause endless inconvenience...particularly if Kirk wanted to partake of one of his more riotous varieties of shore-leave.

McCoy gave a little chuckle at that. If Spock appeared one day with his neat cap of hair bristled into stand-up curls everyone would immediately know that Jim had been up to something outrageous. It was a beautiful picture and although it wasn't really a laughing matter, it did undeniably have its funny side. He sobered again, intending to warn Kirk to take care, but found the Captain had already gone. McCoy closed his eyes, cursing the weakness that slowed his thought processes as effectively as it slowed his body, and drifted back into sleep.

Late during second watch that day, Spock finally emerged from the quiet privacy of his quarters to take up his duties once again. It was probably too soon yet for him to have been reassigned to a particular duty roster, but a quick word with the Captain would soon sort that out... Privately, Spock anticipated that Jim would exert considerable emotional pressure on him to take a longer period of rest before resuming duty status - he would respond with reasoned arguments in the old, familiar way... It was good to be home.

With something dangerously approaching a smile, Spock walked the few metres down the corridor to Kirk's quarters, pausing in mild surprise on seeing a complete stranger approaching him.

Out of uniform...new crew maybe, off duty...possibly a passenger. The mind-links he had shared with Jim had all been strictly to do with official business; he never had got round to finding out just why the Enterprise had been so late in arriving... Abruptly, another memory filled in missing data. Uhura's voice



breaking into his shocking lapse into open mirth, speaking to the Captain...

As Spock came to a halt his hand lifted in the proper salute. "Governor Dy'liahn, I believe."

She smiled happily back. "And you must of course be Jim's First Officer, Commander Spock. I'm delighted to meet you. Were you looking for him?" A quick tilt of her head indicated the Captain's quarters.

"I was about to do so, yes."

"Well, you won't find him in there." She chuckled. Spock noted in passing that it was a most pleasant sound. "This time of day he's usually to be found down in the shuttlebay with the tzintal. He takes over when Mr. Scott has to leave to go on watch. I tell them that between the pair of them, they'll spoil the poor creatures abominably."

"Tzintal." Spock did not bother to disguise his interest. He had heard of the creatures - who had not? - but had never been privileged to see one.

"Yes. I've two brood mares. Would you like to come down with me and take a look at them? I was just on my way there."

"I would be most interested."

Spock fell into step beside her and waited politely for her to precede him into the turbolift. As he directed the car to their destination he found her eyeing him with an unreadable expression, seemingly compounded of curiosity, eagerness and compassion. He raised an eyebrow quizzically in her direction, wondering if she would proffer an explanation. He found he could term her answering look nothing more nor less than a grin - one, moreover, that one might have seen on the face of the veriest urchin.

"I suppose you realise," she said in mock threat, "that you could just still cause one of the biggest diplomatic rows in this quadrant?"

Governor...of Zythos! Of course. The inauguration ceremony must be due any day now. Spock made polite enquiry of precise times, made the necessary calculations, and said, "The Enterprise should arrive four and a half hours before you are due at the Durbar. How long does the journey from your residence take?"

"Under prevailing conditions, about an hour and a half - there's quite a procession been organised. We go the long way round, not because it's prettier but so more people can see and be seen."

"That leaves a margin of three hours. It should be sufficient, should it not?"

She made a little face and then laughed. "It all depends on how vain I'm feeling, Mr. Spock, but we won't go into that."

Mildly puzzled by her reply but seeing from her manner that she was probably joking, Spock shrugged mentally and followed her into the shuttle bay.

The flood of pleasure that Kirk felt on seeing her seemed out of all proportion to the unwilling eavesdropper sharing it. Spock did his best to slam his shields up, but only succeeded in increasing his residual headache to an uncomfortable level. Kirk gave him a startled look before turning his attention politely back to the Governor. Abruptly, his sometimes still very naif bondmate suddenly realised the precise identity of that nebulous feminine presence he had sensed through their bond. He was inordinately grateful that it was virtually impossible for him to blush, even more so when some of Kirk's memories of last night here in the shuttle bay surfaced unexpectedly and all too vividly.

Summoning up every ounce of will-power he owned, Spock controlled his own desire to utter the mental equivalent of a curt request for Kirk to 'cool it'. Perhaps he could - once his head had stopped offering to split itself open for inspection - raise his own shields adequately and later retrain Jim in how to

raise his. With luck, the Captain need never know just how embarrassingly well-informed Spock had just become about his bondbrother's affairs.

Liahn looked from one man to the other, noting the identical frown lines on each forehead and aware of the empathic tzintals' restlessness in their presence.

"You two look terrible," she said crisply. "For goodness sake, do something about it, the pair of you. For one thing you're bothering the mares and it isn't good for them."

Kirk gave in. The headaches were clearly not going to get better of their own accord. He gave a rueful look, first at Liahn and then at Spock. "She's right, you know."

"Indeed." Spock spoke stiffly, wondering just how much the woman knew.

Catching the tail end of the thought, and too concerned by his own sudden notion that Spock was somehow hating the fact of their relationship becoming generally known to realise just how odd it was that he should be able to pick up any stray thoughts from such an experienced telepath, Kirk said sympathetically, "My fault again, I'm afraid, Spock. Liahn was there when you contacted me. I didn't - couldn't - even try to hide what was going on. I had to divert the ship, make her late arriving at Zythos... I'm sorry..."

Spock nearly shook his head but decided in time that it would be unwise. There was no need for Kirk to offer any apology, he had known there would be some logical explanation.

"The Governor is correct, Captain, we should seek some assistance," he agreed formally. A simple analgesic might be the solution to their problem; if the pain could be persuaded to subside long enough, and if the damage to their forming bond was not too extensive, he might be able to deal with this himself. If not, it might entail putting themselves into the hands of a Healer. He put that thought away resolutely. There was no point in worrying Jim unduly at this stage.

Excusing themselves, they left for Sickbay.

In the lift, Kirk said abruptly, "These headaches...are they anything serious?"

"Unlikely." Spock sincerely hoped so. "A minor rupture has been caused by the intense mental effort required, that is all. It will heal in time."

"In time, eh?" Kirk looked at the shuttered face. "It's not like you to be so non-specific. How long?"

"Impossible to be precise."

Kirk didn't find the curtness particularly reassuring either, but his tentative effort to direct a deeper enquiry through their bond resulted in a pain so sharp, an electrically live wire slicing its way into his brain, that he desisted immediately.

"Good God!" Without realising it, he had clapped both hands to his head simply to keep it firmly stationary. "That was...that felt like..."

Spock didn't need telling. The huge wave of pain had struck him as well, tossing him emptily on its currents, whirling him helplessly in the eddies and finally abandoning him, gasping like a stranded fish, in the shallows.

"I believe," he said, speaking with the utmost care and barely above a whisper, "it would be better if you did not attempt to do that again."

Kirk opened his eyes slowly and unwillingly, realising that the high-speed drill in his skull had ceased its operations at last, but reluctant to do anything that might cause it to start up again. A second later, when he'd had time to drag his mind away from its self-centred preoccupation and allow the

identity of the voice calling his name to penetrate, he shot bolt upright, grinning delightedly.

"Bones! You're better!"

The blue eyes twinkled at him. "Better, yes. O.K., no. Right now a gossamer mouse could beat me nine falls outa ten. How're you feeling, and how's your head holding together?"

Gingerly, as if approaching an explosive device with a trembler detonator, Kirk tested the bond. Spock seemed to be asleep. He probed a little deeper. Nothing, only the fuzzy indistinctness of a dream, a sense of warm comfort, warm fur beneath his body and the rumble of a huge heart-beat close to his ear - E-Chaya! Smiling, Kirk looked up at McCoy.

"It seems to be all right now. Spock's still asleep, I see."

McCoy nodded. "Eavesdropping, were you?"

Kirk wasn't going to be drawn like that. "Come on, Bones, you know perfectly well Spock can shield off anything he wants to. I simply can't 'overhear' anything I shouldn't."

McCoy shook his head. "Uh-uh. Not any more, Jim, so be careful."

"What do you mean?"

McCoy sat down on the edge of his bed and took a long, deep breath. "I guess I'm to blame for all this. One moment's carelessness and there am I, flat on my back and blind into the bargain just when I'm needed most. Because of that, Spock had to use your bond to yell for help and that's caused a... Well, the technical terms nearly defeat me, too, I'm a doctor not a cerebral electrobiologist, but it's as if a door was jammed open and neither of you can get it closed. Information's bound to leak across between you, whether you want it to or not."

"Spock said something about a minor rupture," Kirk recalled soberly.

It wasn't precisely a minor rupture and McCoy was pretty certain Spock had known that all along, but there was no point in worrying Jim unnecessarily. They might be going to find it hard to cope with, despite their natural closeness, without having to concern themselves at this stage as to whether the 'gap' would ever close.

"I want the pair of you to see a Vulcan Healer as soon as possible," he said. "M'Benga and I have done our best, but it's a bit like operating in the dark wearing fur mittens."

"But the headache's better," protested Kirk.

"For the moment." McCoy cocked a knowing eye at him. "You just try shielding and see what happens, that's all! I don't recommend it. I've been watching Spock try, and if it makes him go pale turquoise just think what it'll do to you."

Kirk grinned crookedly. That seemed to put paid to any tender farewells with Liahn - and that reminded him.

"How is our passenger, Bones? Did you get to see her yet?" He knew McCoy would like her - you could hardly help it.

McCoy followed his Captain's train of thought without difficulty. "She's waiting to see you, Jim. That's why I thought I'd better have a word with you first. She wants to say goodbye."

"Goodbye?" Kirk was startled. "What the hell...? What day is it?" How long had he been unconscious, for God's sake?

"9067.21½" McCoy read the figures off the wall chronometer.

"Shit! She's due on Zythos in four hours. What's our E.T.A.?"

"Twenty minutes. We're ahead of schedule. She said if she couldn't see

you to be sure and tell you you have a marvellous ship and a wonderful crew."

"I'll see her." He caught the doctor's admonitory eye. "Don't worry, I'll be perfectly discreet. You can hang around and chaperone us if you like."

McCoy snorted as he rose and went to the door. Discreet! That'd be the day. How did Jim think he knew about Liahn in the first place if it wasn't for that good old reliable - gossip. Still, he supposed you could forgive a man who'd been kept heavily sedated for over sixty hours for being a bit woolly in his thinking when he came round. He beckoned the Governor in and left them to it. He had no intention of playing gooseberry and in any case he could trust Jim where Spock was concerned. He'd turn himself inside out for a friend, just as Spock would - had! He brushed a hand across his eyelids, cursing the physical weakness that still made him shaky and ambled unsteadily into his office.

Liahn's smile was wide and motherly. "You look a little better than you did the last time I saw you."

"I feel it. I'd glad we got you here on time after all."

"So am I!" she said expressively. "As it is, my last and somewhat dramatic arrival adds just a little spice to an otherwise very ordinary occasion. It will give us all something to talk about."

Oh no. Not that. Kirk pushed himself upright. "Liahn, please, not a word about Spock and me..."

She pouted. "That's the best bit of the story." She grinned at him and then relented a little. "If you really don't want me to say anything I suppose I'd better not." She couldn't help a new note of speculation in her voice, seeing the consternation in his eyes. Up to now she hadn't thought...hadn't even considered that there might be something behind this.

Kirk saw the look she gave him and cursed inwardly. Bringing his considerable charm into full play he said, "It's been a bit...painful for both of us. Well, you saw for yourself. This sort of fraternal link isn't as powerful as the type bondmates share - " may he be forgiven for a liar, but it sounded good - "but this strain is going to persist for a day or two yet. Besides that, we shall have to give a full report to Starfleet and until then I'm afraid this must remain totally confidential. For the moment let's just imply that conditions cleared long enough for Spock to get a message through." Well, in essence it was the truth, although anyone hearing would naturally assume the message had been received by subspace radio.

She chuckled. "You have a devious mind, James Kirk. It must be why I like you so much. We'll, I've plenty of things I like to keep private, so..." She bent and kissed him. "I must go. I've two temperamental tzintal to look after. If you're ever on Zythos, though, don't forget to come and see me."

"I won't."

He watched her go, sorry and yet relieved that she wasn't going to be around any longer. If what McCoy said was true then it was just as well she was out of the way or he'd have had to have embarrassed the hell out of Spock or out of her, depending on whether he'd gone on seeing her or tried to explain just exactly why he had to avoid her.

A tiny sensation in his mind told him that Spock was waking. Instinctively, he froze, terrified to move or even breathe in case the agony they had shared before was reawakened.

//The initial time of pain is past.// Sleepy reassurance.

//Are you quite sure of that?// Laughing and yet tentative.

//I recommended sedation until the period was complete. It is quite safe to move.// A gentle mockery.

Kirk relaxed. Spock sounded wonderfully normal, gloriously normal. Everything must surely be all right.

//In time, yes.//

//You heard that?// Doubt and surprise.

//If I am distracted by work or the presence of others around me, I am unlikely to pick up every stray thought.// Spock sounded amused again. //At present I am in my quarters and quite alone.//

//I should hope so too.// Outraged virtue.

Kirk was feeling much better. He pushed back the cover. Where was McCoy? It was high time he got out of here and got back to work.

Kirk very soon realised that it wasn't going to be easy getting used to the wide-open link - and if they hadn't intended to let everyone know what they shared, that would have been too bad. Within two hours of going on watch together the first time, Kirk had shot out of the command chair with a muffled curse, brushing frantically at himself only to discover that it was Spock's lap a blushing Ensign had carelessly spilt coffee into.

He brought himself up short, took a deep breath and said wryly, "Mr. Spock, if that feels as hot, wet and uncomfortable to you as it does to me, then I'd be glad for both our sakes if you'd go and put on a clean pair of pants."

Spock nodded without speaking and made for the turbolift.

Kirk was going to sit down again while he made up his mind whether he'd die of embarrassment straight away or do the decent thing and wait until end of watch, but the sensation of dampness was still uncomfortably real. He settled for wandering a little aimlessly, studying readouts and making checks and finished up leaning as nonchalantly as he could against Uhura's console. He grinned at her.

"It's not every day you get a wet lap by proxy. I should have known that sharing my head with a Vulcan wouldn't be a bed of roses."

Uhura looked up at him, grateful for the opening. As Chief of Communications, she'd long known that there was some way the two of them could pass messages along to each other without benefit of her expertise and she'd quickly enough worked out what it must be. Besides which, she'd had a long, cosy gossip with M'Benga and Chris a couple of nights ago when she'd looked in to see how her friend was doing.

"It will soon revert back to normal," she said comfortingly, intentionally revealing that she knew something was going on. Kirk was realist enough to assume that there must have been a rare amount of speculation recently. "It's bound to be difficult for a while yet."

Kirk stared at her silently, absorbing her comment. Then he grinned. "You've been talking to McCoy," he said accusingly.

"M'Benga, actually - and Chris."

"She'll be out of sickbay today, I hear."

"Yes. She tells me she had excellent nursing."

Kirk had wondered about that, knowing it couldn't have been easy for Chris Chapel, not feeling the way she did about Spock. If it hadn't been for the excellence of her work in every direction and her innate dignity in the way she dealt with the feeling for Spock, he'd long ago have quietly suggested a transfer to her, for her own sake as much as his friend's. When Spock had left the Enterprise for Gol she had plunged herself into work with a gritty determination and her additional qualifications made her a most valued member of the medical staff...but the strain Spock's presence imposed on her was still sometimes all

too obvious. Kirk didn't know what the best solution to the problem was, except that the relationship she wanted with Spock was simply not the answer.

Finding Uhura's eyes on him, he realised he'd been leaning on her console in silent thought for far too long. He brought his attention back to the here and now. "I've no doubt we'll soon learn to cope," he said thoughtfully. "I suppose it'll make me behave myself for a bit anyway."

She gave a wicked little giggle, quickly covered, said, "What a dreadful waste...sir!" and then forced her expression into a chaste neutrality.

He eyed her severely. "I think I'll ignore that, Lieutenant-Commander."

"Very well, sir."

He stood, took one step away, turned and looked back at her broad smile and winked. "Thanks for the compliment, though."

"You're welcome, sir."

It was as well that his crew's acceptance of the odd situation between Kirk and his First Officer was so calm and rational. Getting used to the permanently open link was not easy and for a day or two, Kirk was almost in despair.

"Is this what you went through before I learned to shield?" he demanded wryly of Spock on the evening of the third day, in the privacy of his quarters. "It's utter chaos inside my head. Sometimes I don't know which job I'm supposed to be doing or which way I'm trying to go. I was half-way to the cosmology lab this morning when I was called to engineering."

"Not quite." Spock's eyes were unwontedly expressive. "Then, the flow - though perhaps flood would be an apter word - of information was one way only and I could block it. Under present circumstances the problems tend to multiply geometrically."

"You're telling me! Spock..." Kirk tried to keep the doubt out of his voice even though Spock could see it in his mind, "...are we going to beat this?"

"In time, yes," Spock said comfortingly. "However, a visit to a mental Healer is to be recommended when we reach Beta Draconis in nine days' time."

"Yeah." Kirk pulled a face. "Westervliet will be screaming, of course, wanting a full report as to why the Governor was late in arriving at Zythos." His sombre look lightened. "Still, Liahn's done us proud in the report she's sent in. She left a spare copy for me to look at."

Spock's curiosity spilled over in spite of his best efforts to control it. So far he had kept a tight grip on the information he had gleaned concerning their late passenger's relationship with Jim, but this was treading on dangerous ground.

The sudden surge of effort caught Kirk's attention and he looked up, saw Spock's conscious look and groaned aloud. "I can't keep anything from you, can I?"

"Not at the moment, no. I am sorry."

"You don't have to apologise," Kirk said pointedly. "You're not the one caught with his hand in the cookie jar."

"You were not to know this would happen."

"But I ought to have behaved a bit more circumspectly," Kirk muttered, resisting a temptation to squirm with embarrassment.

Spock looked amused and tilted his head, eyeing his bondbrother consideringly. "Most Vulcans would assume that a separation of some hundred light years was sufficient for mental privacy," he said thoughtfully. "We could not have anticipated that our minds would be somewhat volatile when put together."

Kirk met his eyes bravely. "I know that in the past my...uhm...liaisons have been a source of trouble to you, and I'd hoped to keep things properly under control. I shouldn't have slipped like that the very first chance I had."

"Hardly the first chance," Spock murmured, recalling the disappointed face of Helen Johanssen when Kirk had said goodbye to her, not minding that Kirk would pick up the memory. "Jim - if you had not been so...relaxed when I made contact with you, I doubt if it would have been possible for me to have done so."

Kirk could not help a rather guilty sensation of awed delight. "You mean it actually helped?" he said cautiously.

"I am certain of it, beyond doubt."

Kirk broke into an irrepressible grin. "What a pity I can't tell Bones, he'd die laughing."

"I fail to see why such an effect should be desirable," Spock said automatically, ignoring the fact that Kirk could sense his own wry amusement at the joke.

"Bones has spent half his time since he first arrived on board warning me about the dubious benefits of my life-style, and now it's saved his hide for him!" Kirk chuckled. "That's too much!"

"I see no reason why you should not tell him. He is our friend," Spock said quietly. "Besides which, I am of the impression that he feels somewhat to blame for our present predicament."

"You're right there." Kirk recalled the conversation he'd had with McCoy after he'd come round from his long sedation. "He told me that if he hadn't been careless, you wouldn't have had to contact me."

"Untrue." Spock shook his head. "Dr. Chapel handled things most competently - as you would expect. I do not believe Dr. McCoy would have been able to do any more had he been available."

"I'll have a word with him." Kirk couldn't help an inner laugh at his own expense, meeting Spock's enquiring thought with, "What does my dignity matter in comparison with a friend's peace of mind?"

"Very little, indeed," Spock agreed, getting to his feet. "You are tired, Jim."

"You noticed! - I know, you couldn't help it."

"It does not require telepathic contact with you to be aware of it," Spock said gently. "You look exhausted. Sleep well, my bondbrother."

By the end of the voyage back to Beta Draconis the two of them had finally got their heads under some kind of individual control. Shielding was still very difficult for Spock - and impossible for Kirk without considerable help from his bondbrother - but at least Kirk could now function adequately and without occasionally finding himself unsure which job he had originally set out to do of the two he was simultaneously attempting. It was positively restful after so much chaos - even the ordered mind of his favourite Vulcan was too much working in tandem with his own. It was frightening to realise that something like this might have happened had they not decided to form their bond, only then it would have been uncontrollable and unalterable. Even with such a compatible mind as Spock's, the notion was horrible; this temporary turmoil was nothing compared to the potential insanity there. This even had its lighter moments, such as when both of them had answered questions in precisely the same words at exactly the same moment, disconcerting their audience mightily and themselves hardly less so.

They had avoided company out of working hours for several days, save for McCoy, now totally recovered. However, on the last evening before they arrived

to report to Admiral Westervliet, Kirk felt capable of facing everyone in the rec room and went there to have a cup of coffee, and possibly a quiet chat with Dr. Chapel if she was about.

It took only a moment's looking round before he glimpsed her at the far side of the room behind a largish group of chattering junior crew, but apparently on her own. Kirk collected a coffee and made his way across to her, waving cheerfully at those who greeted him as he passed.

"May I join you, Dr. Chapel?"

Christine looked up, smiling, and indicated a free chair. "Of course. Sit down. We'll be delighted."

Well? Kirk turned to see who occupied the other chair - and found his First Officer seated there, quietly looking back at him.

//Spock?// A welling astonishment and a disquiet he would have preferred to disguise.

Spock said nothing, neither aloud nor mentally, but a wave of amused reassurance bled across their imperfect shielding. Kirk sat down slowly, trying to remain as neutral inwardly as he was outwardly, but after all the long years of watching Spock carefully avoiding Chris Chapel he could not help being astounded at finding him seeking out her company after their recent enforced intimacy.

It was Christine herself who relieved the temporary awkwardness by the light and easy way she drew him into their conversation, recalling the pleasanter memories of Delta Australis 2; even the incessant rain seemed amusing in retrospect - according to the anecdotes Chris recounted at least.

"You make it sound as though it was fun to be consistently wet, frustrated and overworked," Kirk said drily. "It sounds pretty unpleasant to me."

"Oh, well..." She shrugged. "'Into each life a little rain must fall'."

"A little!" The wry comment left Spock's lips with uncharacteristic emphasis. He looked from one surprised face to the other and could not prevent the threatened smile from actually twitching the corners of his mouth.

"Over the years," he said drily, "I have been accused of becoming contaminated by Human influence. Forgive me if I make the comment that the reverse seems to be true also and that my friends appear suddenly addicted to the Vulcan passion for understatement. It was not a little rain, Chris, it was a torrential, unending, unbearable downpour that went on for eleven unending, unbearable days with a brief and tantalising respite of only three days' duration. I never recall being quite so wet and uncomfortable in my entire life."

She grinned back feelingly. "Don't be ungrateful, Spock. Things might have been a lot worse. You could have been in my place."

Kirk could feel the wave of sympathy that shook his friend, although it did not show.

"I would have been glad if our positions could have been reversed," Spock said soberly.

Christine chuckled. "I guess you mean that - now! If they had been, you'd have been an even worse patient than I was."

Spock looked first at her and then across at Kirk. "I am shocked to have to admit it, but she is quite right. I would not have made things as easy for her as she did for me."

Looking from one to the other of them, Kirk could tell that something good had happened between them during Dr. Chapel's illness. He was searching his mind for some suitable comment to make and suppressing his lively curiosity when Spock got to his feet.

"If you will both excuse me, I have a few checks to make on the data from Delta Australis 2. If I may stop by tomorrow morning, Captain, when I may have confirmed my suspicions...?"

"Of course. Found something interesting, have you?"

"I believe so, yes. Provided I have made no major errors, that is."

Watching him walk away, Kirk said idly, "Spock always reminds me of a cat when he's wet - you know what I mean?"

Christine gave a little undignified snort of laughter. "Yes, I know exactly what you mean. He sort of shakes his paws, doesn't he?"

Their eyes met in appreciation of the joke and its cause. Kirk found her expression open and candid, with none of the over-gushing embarrassment of the past. He smiled at her. "It can't have been easy for you, having Spock nurse you."

"It wasn't exactly easy for him either," she agreed. "It could have been a total disaster if he wasn't such a...such a gentleman."

That summed Spock up, Kirk decided. He was an innately gentle man. Tentatively, he said, "It's made things easier between you, hasn't it?"

Her smile deepened. "I fell out of love, if that's what you mean, Captain. There was no way to keep up the sentimental, romantic bit under the circumstances."

He saw through the light-hearted comment and said seriously, "I'm glad he's found another friend."

"You know something?" Christine sounded surprised. "So am I!"

Glad to find that his temporary suspicion of romance in the offing had arisen after any such possibility seemed definitely in the past, Kirk made some comment to this effect when Spock came to his quarters next day, bearing tapes and records in abundance.

Catching the sardonic tenor of Spock's reaction he said defensively, "I knew you'd catch what I was thinking anyway. It's better I came straight out with it."

"Humans do have singularly predictable thoughts," Spock said, shaking his head. "If I was to concern myself with every female in your path, Captain, I would have very little time for my work."

Kirk shook with silent laughter and motioned him to a chair at the desk. Not deigning to reply he said merely, "Have we got to look at all those?"

"No - only three are directly relevant to what I have to say. The rest are back-up references to substantiate the hypothesis I have formed."

Spock's hypotheses had a way of becoming other men's working facts. "Come on, then, what's the big discovery?"

"That the Preservers are directly connected with the inhabitants of Thul, Captain."

"That will make 'em sit up and take notice," Kirk said approvingly. "What do you have to base this theory on?"

"Indications in the language patterns of both communities, evidenced by records taken at Thul, Amerind and Delta Australis 2." Spock slipped the tapes into the viewer, pointing out the relevant sections and elaborating on details where necessary. "Study of the complete records from both Thul and Delta Australis 2 indicate a common cultural background at some stage."

"Like the Vulcans and Romulans share?"

"In some ways, but of an infinitely greater age according to other evidence. It may be that the influence of the Preservers throughout our galaxy is even greater than heretofore suspected."

Kirk surveyed the heaped tapes, picking up a handful to study the inscriptions made in Spock's neat hand. "You had time to do all this while you were still planet-side?" he said in astonishment.

"Hardly all of it, or I would have been able to make my final report to you much earlier."

Knowing the impossibly high standards his First Officer set himself - and nearly always achieved - Kirk made no comment on the note of self-condemnation behind the remark. "You and your team are to be highly commended," he said briskly, "as are all the landing party. I presume you'll be itching to pass this lot on to the Archaeological Section as soon as we make planetfall."

"It will be of interest to them, certainly."

"Mmm." Kirk pursed his lips, only the crinkling of his eyes betraying his not-too-serious assessment of the situation. "This, along with the supplies of TCU5 the Enterprise is carrying, might just get her erring Captain off his own personal hook."

Spock did not underestimate the power of bureaucracy to make life uncomfortable for Starship executive personnel, but as it was his private opinion that Kirk was more than a match for any politician, however devious-minded, he did not waste too much time in overt sympathy and left to go about the day's business free of worry.

The Vulcan Healer listened to Spock's concise presentation of their problem, his eyes flickering keenly over the almost legendary couple before him. All Vulcan had been stunned to hear that Spock, who had proved himself so wholly Vulcan by his near-achievement of the arduous disciplines of Kolinahr, had later entered that most desired of all Vulcan conditions, a full bond, and with an Outworlder at that. He could not help a widening of his eyes when Spock revealed the distance over which they had achieved contact at such an early stage.

"How far?" The even voice was tinged with astonishment, perhaps even awe, Kirk realised. He listened with amusement while Spock recited the figures once more, as precisely as he could, making full allowance for the relative motions of both the Enterprise and the planetary body upon which he had been situated.

Sest r waved these details aside as an irrelevance. The thing should not have been possible at all but there was no disputing established facts. The rapport between these two must be strong indeed.

Taking his place beside Spock on the couch placed before the complex instrumentation, Kirk did his best to keep his more wayward thoughts under control.

Spock noted the mental effort with amusement, recalling Kirk's tension before their initial meld with T'Yana.

//Still scared?// A gentle teasing.

//No. Embarrassed.// A flash of resentment tinged the mind-voice. //Why is it I'm the one who always gets put on the spot?//

//Doubtless something to do with out differing natures.// More than a hint of smugness.

Kirk's face would have expressed the wave of wry indignation quite adequately without the bondlink. He dampened it down, concentrating on the business at hand.

Unfortunately for both bondbrothers, the deep probing required reawakened the head-splitting pain Kirk had optimistically believed to be in the past. When it finally eased once more, and he could focus adequately on his surroundings, he

found himself lying, nauseated and giddy, beside a Spock whose face had gone a most unhealthy shade of greyish-sage.

"What hit us?" he demanded faintly, closing his eyes against the brightness of the overhead light.

Sester pressured a dose of something into Spock's arm, adjusted the hypo and dealt with the Human. "There, a simple analgesic to dull the pain. Lie still, both of you. It will take an hour or two for the most distressing symptoms to subside and you must remain in darkness, without attempting to move about, until I return."

"It'll be a pleasure," muttered Kirk, wishing the Healer had not been endowed with quite such a loud voice. The way things were at present, he could practically hear his own hair growing.

He heard the abominable squeak of soft Vulcan boots across the polished floor, the loud click of a closing door. The fool had forgotten to turn out the light! He risked a quick peek under his eyelids - no, all was well, the room was in total, delicious darkness. He relaxed as far as he could and let his mind wander, aware of the pleasant touch of Spock's hazy mind in his. The Vulcan was clearly more heavily sedated than he was - he'd probably been under greater stress, being the telepath of the pair. Poor devil. He began to doze, welcoming the brief cessation of pain and realising each time he woke that it was steadily decreasing all the while.

Once he could concentrate on something else he wondered exactly what Westervliet would make of all this. He had a shrewd suspicion there would be raised eyebrows all round the Human section of Starfleet Command now their bond had been dragged right under their noses, so to speak. Not that it had ever been any kind of secret; it was a registered fact on Vulcan, and had been astutely used as propoganda by both T'Pol and Sarek when it suited them. That wouldn't stop any prurient-minded member of the Staff having his own ideas about it, though. He drifted off into sleep again.

Westervliet read the report for the third time, frowning over the technical terms and wishing all over again that the medical profession could use plain Standard English for what they had to say. If what he understood was actually so, these two could be invaluable to the Federation in all kinds of ways. He pressed his intercom, demanding his secretary send Healer Sester to him at his earliest convenience.

Hardly waiting for Sester to seat himself, the Admiral tapped the relevant deck. "Do I understand this report of yours correctly? Can these two genuinely make telepathic contact over instellar distances?"

"They can."

Westervliet's eyes gleamed. "That could be damned useful, you know. I don't like to think of how many times we have been let down by prevailing sub-space conditions. Do all Vulcans have this ability? Why haven't we heard about it before? You've been holding out on us."

Sester eyed him gravely. "Vulcans have never tried to hide their telepathic abilities. It is well-known and documented that we are touch telepaths only."

"That's not what you say here." Westervliet tapped the deck again impatiently. "This clearly says 'Over a distance exceeding 132 light years'. That hardly sounds within touching distance to me."

"Between bonded pairs the effect is totally different," Sester agreed.

"That's just what I'm saying." Westervliet looked at the placid face with a touch of annoyance. "Why hasn't such a valuable talent been made available to Starfleet? There have been a hundred cases where it would have been helpful to have two people who could keep in touch and keep us informed as to what's going on."

If anything, Sester's face grew more blank. "Are you suggesting, Admiral, that we Vulcans should use the bondlink for the convenience of Starfleet Intelligence?"

Even a man of Westervliet's comparative insensitivity could see the Vulcan thought poorly of the notion. "It would be of tremendous potential help," he said defensively.

"Except to the Vulcans concerned," Sester said drily. "Admiral, for a telepath, a close mental relationship is an essential part of life. If you recall, the ruling on bonded couples is quite explicit. In the very rare cases where they do not serve together, access must be permitted at regular intervals of R & R."

"Bonded couples, yes." Westervliet brushed that aside. "It's always been understood that married couples must be able to spend time together." He stopped abruptly, a sudden thought rocking him. "Do you mean to say," he spluttered out through his shock and incredulity, "that Kirk...that these two men are...that they...that this is a homosexual relationship?"

Sester stiffened visibly. "I mean to tell you nothing of the kind," he said repressively. "Such information - always supposing I possessed it - would be strictly confidential and no affair of anyone's but the bondmates concerned."

Westervliet had hardly been listening, he'd been running rapidly over what little information they had concerning Vulcan customs and the few Vulcans he knew personally. He frowned worriedly.

"Healer, I'm not trying to pry; just to understand. Such a relationship isn't against Starfleet regulations, you're well aware of that. I just want to know what to do for the best in this case."

"Leave them together," Sester said succinctly.

Westervliet could not help a grimace of disappointment. It had seemed such a bright and superbly simple idea; maybe it wasn't surprising it wasn't practical after all. "Together?"

"When a bond has been put under severe strain by such an enforced long-distance contact, the only way for the 'wound' to heal satisfactorily is to keep the pair together and allow the condition to clear itself naturally by time and proximity."

Westervliet let out a quick, gusty breath. "I wish I understood the half of it," he complained.

Sester permitted a small smile to cross his lips. He knew Westervliet well, had known him for many years and knew that in spite of occasional blunders due to his natural tendency to impetuosity and a genuinely regretted insensitivity, the Human would never intentionally set out to embarrass anyone. Under the circumstances, perhaps it was better he should be more fully informed in case he should later offend anyone through his only partial understanding.

"As I said, I can tell you nothing of the details of the bonding between Captain Kirk and Commander Spock," he said quietly. "In my own case, Admiral, I have a bondbrother as well as a partner who is, in Human terms, a wife."

Stunned at being offered such a private piece of information, Westervliet just stared at him for a second or two before managing to say carefully, "Are Vulcans...? I mean, is single-sex not...?"

Sester emitted a very Human-sounding sigh. "If I may say so, Admiral, the Human mind is singularly concerned with that biological function. Single-sex pairing is of course acceptable within the spirit of IDIC, but not all bonds are mating bonds. The mind is of greater importance than the body."

Aware that he had been mildly reprimanded, Westervliet grinned. "Ninety percent of Humans have sex on the brain," he agreed cheerfully. "Are the Captain

and his First Officer fit for duty?"

"Certainly, I have helped the healing process to commence; this has been painful for them, but once the initial period of pain is over - in about another five hours from now - they will suffer no more ill effects providing they are not asked to separate for any length of time. They should be warned that any duty they undertake must keep them together. If possible, they should not allow more than a very few miles to separate them for a period exceeding three days for the next six months. After that, they can begin judicious testing, say within planetary orbit."

"So at least it shouldn't hinder their work too much," Westervliet said thankfully.

"Save for these precautions, it should not hinder it at all," Sester agreed.

"Good." Westervliet nodded with satisfaction. "In that case, there is nothing to prevent the Enterprise being sent to Thul as I had planned."

"Nothing at all, no. In addition, there is a Healer among the survey team there who will be able to assist them should it be necessary - not that I anticipate they will have any more problems now." Sester paused. "I did not know you had it in mind to send anyone else to Thul, however. Is something wrong there, Admiral?"

"We had a message only today," Westervliet said heavily. "They have a serious problem on their hands and requested we should be prepared for a possible emergency recall. It seems three members of their team have disappeared and a fourth has undergone some unknown experience which has led to his complete mental breakdown." Noting the Healer's raised eyebrow, he added, "The description is Savon's, not mine. I questioned our Communications Officer myself when I was given the message and was informed that there was no mistake. He had double checked himself."

Sester could not hide his horror; Surak knew the cause was sufficient! For a Vulcan to suffer in such a way was well-nigh unheard of.

"I am pleased the Enterprise is available," he said gravely. "This could be most serious."

"I didn't like the sound of it myself," Westervliet agreed.

Kirk liked the sound of it even less when it was explained to him. Vulcans didn't have problems like that - at least, he'd never heard of one that had. He raised a curious eyebrow in Spock's direction while he addressed the Admiral.

"I'm sure you've checked the message wasn't garbled in any way."

"Naturally." Westervliet couldn't help the touch of acidity; it was the obvious question to ask, which was why, after all, it had been the first thing he'd asked himself, but after so many repetitions he was getting tired of hearing it. "The Enterprise is ordered to Thul to offer help if required and to find out just what's going on. However, I don't need to tell you, Jim, that the Historical Section is going to tear its collective hair if you have to remove the survey party altogether...especially in view of the preliminary report they've just handed me of your First Officer's findings on Delta Australis 2."

How in hell's name had he found time to read it? Kirk wondered, realising belatedly that more hours had gone by since beamdown than he actually remembered. That long healing sleep had done wonders for him and it was already difficult to recall how terrible he'd felt beforehand. The lurking pain in Spock's eyes was fast disappearing, too; in fact, if he wasn't careful he'd be acting as though everything was back to normal and start it up all over again; Sester had warned him, Spock had warned him, it didn't hurt to warn himself frequently as well, though - pain like that was something he could cheerfully do without, particularly if the situation on Thul was to prove unduly complicated. With a Prime Directive

planet of vulcanoids to worry about there was no one else he could send down in his place, even if he wanted to. In a way, their present problem would be a help rather than a hindrance there, for it would prevent Spock from producing the time-wasting, logical string of arguments as to why his Captain should remain safely on board and let his First Officer take all the potential risks.

He caught Spock's eye and grinned, knowing that the Vulcan had followed his train of thought from the admonitory look about the set mouth.

"We'll see what we can do," he nodded to Westervliet. "We'll be on our way as soon as provisioning is complete."

The Admiral's voice halted him as he made for the door, and he turned back to find the older man still had something to say but was finding it difficult to put into words. His heart sank - but then it had been too much to hope that their bonding would be accepted quietly and without fuss; even though it was within Starfleet regs., it was startlingly unusual - unique for a Human to be involved.

After two false starts Westervliet said tentatively, "Sester has explained a little of this...this bond you share. Of course I don't really understand fully, I doubt if any uninvolved nontelepath could, but he tells me it is greatly honoured on Vulcan, and in that case, I congratulate you both."

Save for one rising brow, Kirk managed to keep his face quite as immobile as his imperturbable bondbrother's, contenting himself with a murmured thank you and a silent but sincere apology for his quite different expectations based on past experience of Westervliet's tact.

Out in the corridor, he said drily, "The Admiral must be getting sentimental in his old age. I thought he'd chew us out for bringing Starfleet into 'srepute."

Spock shot him a sidelong look. "There is nothing disreputable about our bond, Jim."

Kirk chuckled. "I know that and you know that. Westervliet doesn't know it, though, and I'd've expected him to leap to all the wrong conclusions."

"Sester has always thought highly of him," Spock said reflectively.

"Meaning he can't be all bad in that case?" Kirk bit back a laugh.

Not entirely unaware of the Vulcan tendency to assume that Vulcan ideals and opinions were somehow superior, Spock's mouth quirked upwards in turn. "Naturally," he said blandly. "Our approval is not easily won, and when it is, you can be sure it is deserved."

"In that case, I'm delighted you approve of me," Kirk murmured provocatively - but Spock was not to be drawn.

Back on board, McCoy surveyed them, pleased to see an underlying peace that had been missing for days. The pain seemed to be properly under control now, the cause had even been tackled as well according to Sester's report; it was going to take time, but all in all, the prognosis seemed quite hopeful and maybe he would soon be able to relax his present vigilance, though even as he thought it, he wondered at his own temerity in tempting Providence so rashly.

* * * * *

PART 2

Kirk had liked Savon at their first, brief meeting on Starbase 7; the leader of the Vulcan survey team had the same quiet twinkle in his eyes that Spock so often did - and Sarek also - and even when he was clearly worried, as he was now, his inner serenity shone through his austere mask, providing a steady focal point for the small group he led.

Four of the Vulcans had withdrawn temporarily from the dwelling in the city which they were at the moment settled in for study, and had made camp at an oasis some miles out and well away from normal trading routes, so that the Enterprise team could beam down undetected. Thulyan society being slave-based, there was little privacy to be found within one's own household; what a slave witnessed did not matter for all the Du - the fairer-haired, stockier race enslaved by the Lan - knew their places and were all too well aware of the penalties to be incurred by disloyalty. Little though Vulcans liked the system, they had acquired, Savon reported apologetically, three Du servants against their better judgement, and so could offer Kirk no private room for beam-down where they could be sure they would not attract unwanted attention.

Kirk nodded understandingly; he and Spock had also added extra members to their party within hours of arrival on Thul and without any intention of doing so. These things happened, and had to be dealt with. It was no use for an outsider to state categorically that the man on the spot should have acted in this way or that, you had to be there, experience the problem, know the snags and cope as best you could. However, since Thul was still a Prime Directive planet, that regulation took precedence over any other need and so the Enterprise team beamed down to the designated co-ordinates.

Under their present circumstances, Kirk and Spock had to go together, of course, and somewhat to Kirk's surprise, McCoy actively sought permission to go along, despite his long-term, faithfully maintained offensive against the transporter and his often-professed dislike for hot desert climates.

"Curious?" Kirk teased him as they made their way along the corridor together, remembering that McCoy had never seen Thul, having joined the Enterprise while Kirk and Spock were doing the preliminary survey. It was sometimes difficult to remember that he had known Spock those few months longer than McCoy; the three of them seemed to have been together for ever.

"You don't like to miss out on anything, do you, Bones?"

"I like to know the sort of trouble my patients are likely to get into," McCoy replied with heavy dignity. "And yes, if you must know, I've always wanted to see this place. You and Spock rabbit on about it long enough, one way and another."

"I'm sorry we've bored you," Kirk said sweetly, taking his place on the station next to his waiting First Officer. "Energise, Mr. Kyle."

As planned, McCoy's retort was lost in the whine of transportation.

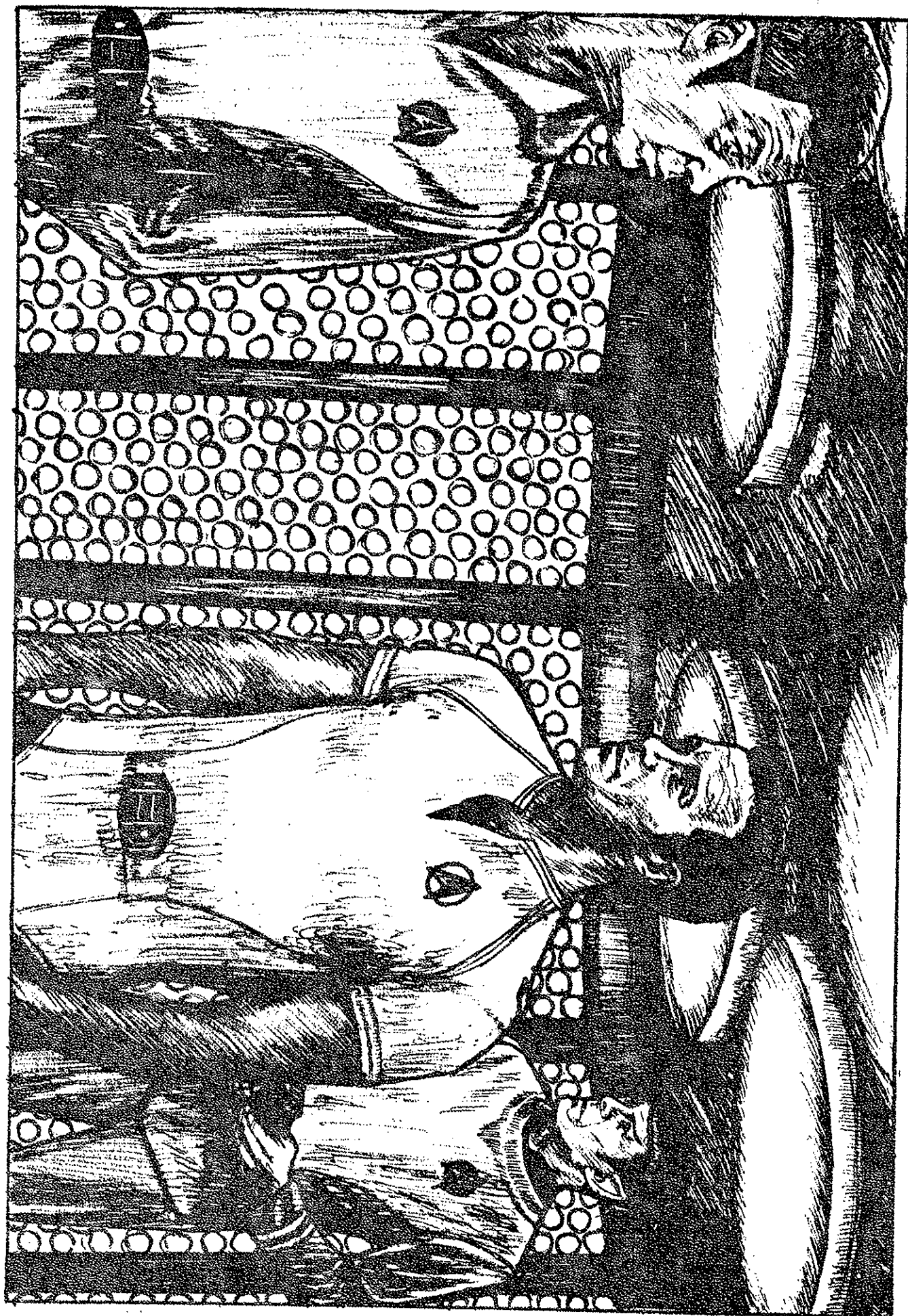
On materialising, Kirk looked round swiftly, sniffing deeply at the remembered acidic scent of the fallen leaves. Behind him, McCoy spluttered, coughing a little until his lungs grew used to the new odour and he was able to ignore it.

Savon was waiting for them, attended by three other Vulcans, a female and two males. He introduced them swiftly, first the female, she-who-is-my-wife, and then S'lana their Healer and Sunam, his bondmate.

Introductions quickly over, Kirk immediately turned to the reason for their presence. "Your sick teammate," he asked. "How is he now?"

Savon's mouth tightened. "Zabri still raves, drools like an infant. No-one can reach him, not even S'lana. We have all tried."

Catching a wave of grave concern from Spock, Kirk said, "Surely that's tremendously dangerous, isn't it, to touch a madman's mind?"



"It had to be done. It is...distressing to us to see another telepath in such mental agony." Not only that, but of course his condition is affecting T'Pria also. However, not even she can make sense of the thought patterns within his brain."

"T'Pria?"

"Zabri's bondmate." Savon shook his head. "Inevitably her sanity is also threatened, and she is finding it increasingly hard to shield herself from him."

Kirk could not help his shudder. This bonding was such a beautiful, fulfilling thing, one tended to overlook the fact that it was also damn' dangerous.

"You'd better give us the full story."

While Savon's wife and Sunam moved about the small camp preparing a meal, the other five sat in a circle while Savon recounted the little they knew of what had happened.

It had started out as a perfectly ordinary day's work.

Since Savon had taken over leadership of the group on his arrival there, three standard months ago, the augmented party of twelve Vulcans had been divided into two teams for the purpose of research - one of eight, led by St'lurik, who had spent most of their time within the confines of the city, first in Rath and now in Parathelmon, conducting their survey primarily in the field of social observation and research into such documented history as was locally available - and a second team of four members, led by Savon, who travelled widely in the area, learning something of life outside the towns and, where they could, studying sites of possible archaeological interest.

The group had only moved into Parathelmon within the last standard month; the first team's survey having been concentrated in the area where Kirk and Spock had worked. However, once they had learned of the very much greater age of the civilisation 'beyond the mountains, beyond the waters', Savon had decided they should move here to continue their studies. It had been practical for them to acquire a house together, where they lived as unobtrusively as they could.

Savon shrugged a little in recounting this. "It is impossible to dwell for any length of time in one area here without attracting attention," he explained. "This region of the planet is not ruled so loosely as that where the preliminary survey was made. There, individual freedom is paramount to the Ian - their supreme ruling family died out and were never replaced, hence their freer way of life and the people's lack of concern with their neighbour's business. Our work was much easier there, but that is of little importance compared with the much greater knowledge to be gained here.

"This territory, however, is ruled by an hereditary leader and bureaucracy reigns supreme. Checks are constantly made, taxes collected, census counts are taken regularly and results recorded; this type of society has prevailed for at least a millenium and consequently, although it has the unfortunate effect of limiting our freedom, it also means that there are more records to be studied which go back for generations and are invaluable to our understanding of the people. It would have been thought extraordinary if we had no slaves at all and would have drawn attention to us at once. As it was, we encountered not a little difficulty until we identified the source of the problem and remedied it."

Eight days previously, he went on, they had all been in residence, the itinerant team temporarily there to reprovision and for a short period of rest and meditation prior to the celebration of the very special Vulcan festival, the Day of Surak.

Two days before the ceremony itself, St'lurik had gone out from the house with Sadiok, Zabri and Sisot. Some ruins in the hills north of the city had been brought to their attention recently and St'lurik was eager to examine the still-

legible inscriptions that had been described to him by one of the Lan, the local ruling caste.

"So old, their meaning has been lost in antiquity', we were told," Savon said. "Since recorded history goes back over eight thousand years, St'lurik hoped they might support some evidence we have found that indicates an early written language similar in some ways to Old High Vulcan."

Spock's interest was caught by this, as was Kirk's, but it was not the moment to enquire further; later, if there was time, perhaps they might get a chance to see some of the data the team had gathered and possibly correlate it with the results of Spock's own research.

"We had expected them to be gone for the greater part of the day," Savon explained. "The journey was some six krel, or so we understood."

"About ten Terran miles," Spock translated for Kirk's and McCoy's benefit.

"When they did not return for evening food, we began to be concerned. In this latitude the nights can be bitterly cold and they were not prepared for a night in the open. T'Pria tried to contact Zabri through their bondlink but the attempt made her nauseous and disoriented and then caused her to lose consciousness, and we could not permit her to continue. T'Luk unfortunately does not share a closebond with her husband Sisot and so could not help me."

In spite of his long talks with T'Yana, McCoy still found the different varieties of bond confusing. "You mean they can't mindlink without physical contact, don't you?"

"That is correct. Theirs is a mating-bond only, such as many husband and wife pairings share. T'Luk is close-bonded to she-who-is-my-wife."

//Vulcan relationships are worse than European royal families,// An irresistible, teasing flash from Kirk.

A damping surge was his only reply and he turned back to Savon. "So what did you do?"

"Since Sadiok and St'lurik are both unbonded and we could not contact them, we did nothing until the next dawn, then I and S'lana here went out to search. There was no sign of any of them at first, no sign of a struggle or indications of any others being present. Tracks of the arrival of four persons were clear enough. Zabri we finally...heard." Savon's eyes were bleak. "It sounded like the cry of a child in despair or a wounded animal, but when we went to look, it was our comrade." A pause, and then a long, hard breath. "If you will see him for yourself, Captain, you may judge, but it is S'lana's opinion - and I fully concur - that he has been cruelly tortured; mentally, not physically. The only marks on his body were those he inflicted on himself in the depths of his own self-hatred and before we learned that we must keep him in restraint for his own sake." A tiny, jerking swallow and another long pause.

"Unfortunately - " the quiet S'lana spoke for the first time - " the restraints only serve to terrify him still further... A circular path, and one we do not know how to break."

There was a further silence, more eloquent than speech. Being unable to think of anything to say that would not sound banal, Kirk let a moment of silent sympathy flow past before bringing Savon gently back to the matter in hand.

"You say you found tracks of all four Vulcans; did you attempt to follow to see where they led?"

"We found marks, yes, but leading into the ruins only. None led away again that we could see. Of course, there are many possible explanations and the terrain round there - particularly towards the north and west - is rocky and anyone moving out that way would not be likely to leave a traceable trail."

"I gather they were all on foot," Kirk commented. "Would it not have been more convenient to use vlar for such an expedition?"

For a second, Savon's face betrayed a mild surprise and then he said, "My apologies, Captain. In my preoccupation I had forgotten you are well acquainted with Thul. You were in charge of the original survey, were you not?"

"Spock was," Kirk corrected firmly. "I was only his assistant."

"His assistant? But surely you were already the Captain of the Enterprise at that time?"

"That's quite correct."

"Captain Kirk was reluctant to permit me to make the survey alone," Spock put in demurely, knowing quite well what Kirk's reaction would be to the remark. The Captain had always been highly sensitive to any suggestion of bigotry or bias directed against his First Officer and Spock was able to judge to a nicety just how quickly Kirk would leap to correct any wrong impression his purposely ambiguous remark might have given. Faving prolonged his pause to the point where Kirk's mouth was hurriedly opening, he added smoothly, "I was most grateful for his generous and typical offer to accompany me when the Council requested I undertake the survey. It was hazardous for him to do so on several counts, being Human and more resembling the Du than the Lan, but there were no other Vulcans in this quadrant at that time and I was glad to take advantage of his offer. He was quite right, of course; survey work should not be undertaken by a solitary observer for obvious and practical reasons."

"No, indeed," Savon agreed. "We benefitted greatly from your report, gentlemen. Comprehensive and clearly set out."

"Ah well, you have Spock to thank for that entirely." Kirk's mental eye was glaring balefully at his bondbrother, in direct contrast with his calm exterior. Spock smothered a smile; it was not often one discomposed James T. Kirk and it gave him great pleasure - just occasionally - to do so.

"Vlar are not readily available at this season." Savon returned to the original question, naturally quite oblivious of the brief by-play that had been enacted. "It is not long past the ripening of the principal local crop and the vlar are in great demand as pack animals. Those in private ownership - and they are not many - are requisitioned so that the merchants and the farmers may have full use of them. It is only possible to hire them for the longest journeys and then the amount of trivial questioning and make-work administration is quite extraordinary, purposely designed of course to discourage the population from any such activity without the most serious of reasons. Naturally, any journey that can be accomplished on foot must be made that way."

Kirk nodded his comprehension. "So this oasis is only a day or so's journey from the city?"

"Affirmative; but not on a normal trade route and so not much used, particularly now when all the traffic is down to the South, to the great granaries of the Thakur, the supreme ruler of the state."

"And the ruins where your companions disappeared," McCoy put in, "are they near here?"

"In the opposite direction, and too close to a trackway to be sure we should not be observed. The site is quite open and affords no privacy."

"And yet three people vanished from there," Kirk mused. "Have you made enquiries locally?"

"Naturally. We are not well-known in the area because of course we have no wish to draw attention to ourselves; however, we have reported the occurrence to the local authorities since the members of our household would have thought it most odd had we not done so. Indeed, at first we were hopeful that some purely local event could account for what had happened but the inhabitants are just as unable to form any explanation as we ourselves."

"No local superstitions about the site, I suppose," Kirk asked.

"None that have been mentioned to us. Thulyans are not a people much given to concern with the supernatural. As you will doubtless recall, their veneration is given to water and its life-giving properties."

"Indeed." Kirk vividly recalled the Festival of the New Water they had witnessed. "So what measures have been taken to find your missing team members?"

"We have searched for them ourselves, of course, and the local people have also undertaken a search - though you will understand that, not having any idea of what may have happened to them, we have not laid too much emphasis on local aid. Not that the Thulyans are inefficient or unco-operative; rather, the opposite is true. This is a highly bureaucratic society, as I mentioned before; everything is documented, recorded, everyone and everything has its due place in the system and they are quick to check on those that do not conform. Should our missing companions' condition be such that our presence as aliens is suspected..." Savon lapsed into silence.

"There's never any satisfactory answer, is there?" Kirk said sympathetically. Poor devil - damned if you acted, damned if you didn't. "If you draw attention to yourselves you risk blowing your cover one way, and if you try and act as though nothing has happened, you risk it another when they come and ask you why you didn't take some, to them, perfectly ordinary course of action."

"You comprehend our predicament precisely." Savon seemed relieved.

"Indeed I do. You need to search and yet you can't do anything out of the ordinary or risk drawing attention to your group in case you set your whole mission in jeopardy."

Spock noted his Captain's musing look and tone. It was not so hard to guess what Kirk was planning even without the bleat-lover from their still imperfectly healed bond-wound.

//Think we could try it again, Spock - the master and slave act?// A hint of mischievous laughter and a surge of pleasurable anticipation at the thought of action. //Too damn' long at a desk...// The thought faded once more.

"Unless we can soon discover some means of alleviating Zabri's condition, our mission is already in jeopardy," Savon said gravely. "I know it is not logical that we should be influenced by it, but his distress - and consequently, T'Pria's also - grow almost hourly and the rest of us cannot help but be affected."

"Would it help if we removed him to the Enterprise?" McCoy asked, looking across at S'lana.

"I fear it might cause his death," the Healer said gravely. "Our presence does soothe him and we all offer ourselves willingly to his need, but the situation has become increasingly stressful for everyone."

"Well, I'm loth to pull you all out without some news of those who're missing," Kirk said slowly.

"We would be equally loth to leave," Savon assured him.

"We need answers." Kirk couldn't help pondering ruefully just how often he'd thought that over the years.

//It is the spice to your life, Jim.// A gentle teasing.

//So you'll come with me?// Laughing.

//You are not safe to be out on your own - besides, at present we have no option but to remain together...// Spock let the thought trail away tantalizingly.

//Otherwise you'll be doing your damndest to make sure I got no share of the fun.// Mock indignation. //I'll thank you to remember who's the Captain around here, Mister!//

Over the mental rapport, Kirk was saying, "Well, one thing we can do - Spock and I will undertake the search while you carry on in the way that's expected of

you. No-one will know of our connection with you, so we'll be free agents."

"Where will you start?" McCoy demanded. "Are there any leads at all to go on, Mr. Savon?"

"None that we have discovered."

"Then for the want of anything better, we'll start in the ruins ourselves," Kirk decided. "If nothing comes of that then we'll have to think again. We'll keep in touch with you, Mr. Savon, either with daily radio contact or, if it seems desirable, we'll come to your residence under some pretext or other. What's our best form of cover, do you think?"

"An itinerant DoscaLan," Savon replied without hesitation.

"A DoscaLan - what's that when it's at home?" McCoy demanded.

"You should say rather, 'Who is that?', Doctor. A DoscaLan is a member of the Lan who travels around, usually with a small group of Du but sometimes just one servant, and who blesses the household water in private homes, and the wells and fountains of the public domain also. In effect, he is a bringer of good luck and as such is made welcome everywhere."

"Blesses the water? Is he some kind of priest then?" Kirk was a little taken aback. It was not like a Vulcan to suggest impersonating a local 'holy man'; the Vulcans might never have developed a theistic religion of their own, but they were totally respectful towards those peoples that had. He could tell by the faint sense of withdrawal in Spock that his bondbrother cared for the idea as little as he did.

"No, no. You are forgetting, Captain, the Thulyans have no god or gods as such; their reverence is given to water, which they believe forms the material basis of the physical world; a theory not unlike that of your own Greek philosopher Thales."

"So if he isn't a priest, what is he exactly?"

"The title Dosca simply denotes that the Lan in question has made the pilgrimage to Rath, specifically to the Festival of the New Water."

Kirk's interest was at once naturally aroused. "We were around for that when we were here before - quite by chance, of course."

"So I understand; and as that is the case, Commander Spock is well qualified to assume such a disguise since that is basically the only requirement. There is a little more to it than that, of course; we can give you all the details we have on it - certainly all you will need to carry off the role without arousing suspicion."

McCoy was frowning. "It seems a little odd, doesn't it, to revere someone just because they've been to some Festival or other?"

"There is a precedent on Earth, Bones," Kirk reminded him. "The Muslim world still honours those who make the pilgrimage to Mecca. They even give them a special title too, Hadji, or something like that."

"It is not simply having attended the Festival that gains one respect," said Savon. "It is having undergone something relatively dangerous and out of the ordinary. The journey to Rath is arduous; it took us over seven standard weeks to make it ourselves when we came here. Added to that, the Thulyans of this region are not much given to journeying far afield. It is not encouraged, for one thing; a preference for the peaceful life of home and hearth is supposed to be instilled in childhood. However, those that do make the journey are honoured and made welcome by everyone on their return and they are secretly admired for having had the courage to set aside the conventions."

"You mean the people are actively encouraged to be stay-at-homes?" McCoy appeared a little disbelieving.

"In a bureaucratic society, those in charge like to know where everyone is. I suspect that is why the Doscalan are honoured on their return."

"I don't quite follow your reasoning, Mr. Savon."

"If they come home to honour, then they will not attempt to hide where they have been; in that way their presence is documented and tabulated."

"But won't they be able to tell Spock and I aren't from this city in the first place in that case?" Kirk asked.

"For the Du, that does not matter; so long as a Lan vouches for them, owns them, they have his protection, but if a Du becomes ownerless he is sent to the pens for sale - providing that his background is known. Any Du who is found to be without an owner and who cannot satisfactorily account for this is summarily put to death."

"And the Lan? How do we account for Spock?"

"He should tell them he is from the city of Gengathal, many many krel to the south of Parathelmon. Doubtless they will make some check on this but by the time an answer has been received, we must hope that our problem has been solved."

"It sounds a very different kind of society from the one in Rath," Kirk said, shaking his head a little. In spite of the slave system, he had liked the free and easy ways of the Thulyans and had hoped that before long the Du there would be freed.

"Rath has been considered dangerously anarchistic," Savon agreed. "Ever since the downfall of their ruling family some hundred and fifty Thul years ago. There are many stories told of bands of Du living in secret in the mountains beyond the Salt Lake. It is even said that they plan the wholesale murder of their late masters."

"Some of the stories are certainly true." Kirk had rueful memories of his and Spock's capture by the massive ex-slave named Gal. He eased his position slightly; sitting on the ground was not the most comfortable way to relax, and he envied Spock's long-legged ease.

"Food is prepared." Savon rose fluidly to his feet, followed by Spock who reached a hand down to McCoy and Kirk in turn.

"We'll have a quick meal, then get back on board to get ready. Have you brought some tapes for us to study, Mr. Savon?"

The Vulcan nodded. "Of course, Captain."

"Good." Kirk was looking forward to a little action. "Then let's eat. Is that collordons I can smell, Mr. Sunam?"

"A vegetable very similar in taste and texture." The young Vulcan looked pleased as he passed the bowl across.

Once back on board the Enterprise, the record tapes Savon had supplied were soon being assimilated into the ship's voracious memory banks while Kirk and Spock made preparations for their assignment.

Kirk submitted himself to sickbay for the necessary cosmetic work and then donned the garments Stores had prepared for him.

McCoy surveyed the chains about Kirk's waist, neck and wrists with distaste. "Are those damn' things really necessary?"

"They're really necessary. You heard what Savon said - a Du found without a master is summarily executed. If I was seen without chains they'd be very suspicious of me and of Spock...that was true even in Rath where we were before, and from these tapes of Savon's I'd say that part of Thul is liberal in its outlook compared with Parathelmon. In Rath I only had to wear the one chain round my waist."

"And it was barely enough to keep him in check." The smooth interruption came from the doorway.

Kirk swung round, eyes laughing. "I didn't hear you come in, Spock. How do I look?"

The hooded tunic and short trousers were very similar to the garments he had worn before, the colour the ubiquitous brown adopted by all the Du. Only the extra chains were different and cosmetic work to Kirk's skin and eyebrows completed the transformation.

"An extra refinement this time," Kirk said solemnly, "courtesy of our talented C.M.O." He pulled the hood back to reveal a pair of elegantly tilted eartips.

Spock's head tipped considerably as he studied Kirk's face then, wordlessly, he walked round him three times.

"Well?" McCoy demanded impatiently.

"A considerable improvement on your last effort, Doctor. I congratulate you. One might almost imagine they were genuine."

"You keep a civil tongue," McCoy told him curtly, "or when you get back I'll bob yours as well."

"A most inartistic notion." Spock handed a massive neck chain of the local currency over to Kirk who weighed it, donned it and adjusted his hood carefully once more.

"How many leta have we got? It weighs a ton!"

"Four thousand in coins of differing worths."

"Riches! Nice to know I don't belong to one of your poverty-stricken noblemen. Are we all ready then?"

"Everything is prepared, yes."

"Good. Coming to see us off, Bones?"

"I wouldn't miss this for the world," McCoy told him firmly; he always enjoyed noting the crew's reaction to some of the outlandish garbs their commanding officers had been forced to don in their time.

Following his two friends along the corridors to the transporter room, he decided privately that he had seldom seen Spock look so elegant as he did at present. The tight-fitting jacket, breeches and knee-high boots suited him admirably - and it appeared from the admiring glances they got from passing female crew that McCoy was not alone in his opinion.

Watching them both take up their positions on the pads he blinked and said gruffly, "Take care, both of you."

"We plan to." Kirk's tone was gentle as he answered. "All clear, Mr. Kyle?"

"Yes, sir. No-one about."

"Very well. Prepare to energise."

While Kyle made the final, fine adjustments, Kirk winked at McCoy, took up his chain's intricate handle and passed it to Spock, saying plaintively,

"Walkies!"

After three hours, even Spock was prepared to admit they had drawn a total blank at the ruins. There was nothing to be seen relevant to the immediate problem, although the inscriptions did turn out to be very interesting to anyone who had seen those others on Delta Australis 2.



"Savon will be pleased by this at least," Spock said soberly, closing the miniaturised survey tricorder at last and tucking it away.

Kirk had finished his own investigations several minutes before and was sitting on a rock half in the shade, the best protection he could find, over-conscious through his thin trousers of the heat stored within the stone but too lazy to move, and watching his bondbrother through eyes narrowed against the bright light. Now he came to his feet.

"That's something, I suppose," he agreed, "but there's nothing else to be found. Savon was right; his men might have disappeared into thin air for all the evidence to the contrary."

Spock quirked an eyebrow his way. "You did not really expect to find evidence Savon had overlooked, did you?"

"Not every Vulcan is quite as perfect as you," Kirk retorted, hiding his smile. "But no, I didn't really expect to find anything. Still, we had to start somewhere, and here was as good a place as any."

"Agreed." Spock looked up at the sun, now well past its zenith; it would take them a good four hours to complete the walk to Parathelmon in this heat - they had better be leaving soon if they were to arrive in time to find somewhere to stay.

They talked little on their journey since they were travelling along a well-used route and could not take the risk of being seen side by side but must maintain their accepted places, Kirk several paces behind his master and firmly held by his chain. Not many travellers overtook them for, as Savon had explained, the ubiquitous vlar - used here as draft animal and carrier as well as saddle-horse and even charger on the rare occasion when war-skirmishes broke out - were at present generally unobtainable due to their usefulness at harvest-time, and most other travellers were on foot also. One fast-moving vehicle did pass them, its Du driver accompanied by a young boy cracking a small leather implement which made a surprisingly loud noise as a warning to other road-users to get out of the way.

Choking a little in the dust of their passing, Kirk called out, "Some local dignitary, d'you reckon?"

His bondbrother looked back, acknowledging Kirk's wry comment with a small nod. "Doubtless some petty official."

"The Nils Baris of Thul," Kirk muttered to himself. "That'd be all we need!"

Some two miles outside Parathelmon, another, much slower-moving vehicle overtook them, the cart loaded down with casks of various sizes. It drew a little ahead of them, then stopped while its driver got out and walked back.

Dropping to his knees, his head correctly down to that his unworthy eyes should not meet a Lan's, the Du said humbly, "My master bids me offer you a place beside him in the cart, should you wish to share it."

Caught in a dilemma, Spock swiftly weighed up the situation. There was no rational reason he could give for refusal, none save the one excuse he could not make, which was that there was nowhere for Kirk to ride - the driver's seat was far too narrow for more than one - and consequently the Captain would be forced to travel beside the cart at a rather faster pace than would be comfortable for a Human in the heat and extra gravity of Thul.

//Go on, you idiot!// Admonishingly. //I'm only grateful that it wasn't that 'charioteer' back there who offered you a lift.//

//You are sure you can manage?// Doubtful.

//Of course. Stop mother-henning, will you, and get on with it.//

Still doubtful, but bowing to necessity, Spock nodded mentally and walked

forward, dropping Kirk's chains as he climbed aboard and saying loudly, "Don't lag behind, churl, or you will be punished."

Kirk's mental answer was unprintable but his outward demeanour was impeccably submissive as he took up a position at the cart's wheel. The pace was rather too great for him to do more than simply concentrate on putting one foot determinedly in front of the other for this last couple of miles, grateful for the fact that the sun had sunk quite low by now and that the approach to the city led first through a shallow and shaded ravine and then alongside a tree-lined canal for the last half mile - and over the last hundred yards or so, when the vlar scented their stable and wanted to hurry, the traffic was fortunately too heavy still to permit them to pick up speed more than a fraction. Even so, Kirk was sweating heavily and concentrating fiercely on controlling his breathing when they finally arrived and he was not sorry to find that they were to spend the night with the owner of the cart so that Spock could bless the family fountain that evening.

"It is many days since my house was honoured with the presence of a DoscaLan," Spock was told. "My wife and family will be pleased to receive you."

Kirk saw little of the actual ceremony, his place being out in the servants' quarters save when he was required to serve Spock's meal and receive his own scraps from his master's plate - a somewhat ignominious arrangement, but which could conveniently cover the fact that there were many local foods Kirk could not eat without at best enduring acute stomach cramps or, at worst, poisoning himself.

When it was time to retire he followed Spock meekly up the stairs carrying their jug of precious water for washing, and closed the bedroom door with relief.

"Tired?" Spock took the jug from him.

"What do you think?" Casting a quick look at the window to make sure they could not be overlooked, Kirk sank onto the one bed with an audible groan, massaging his aching feet tenderly. "And hot and smelly..." he added ruefully. "In fact, I feel as though I've never been away."

"You should be grateful for small mercies," Spock said unsympathetically, removing his tight-fitting jacket and starting to untie the strings of his shirt. "If you had to wear the clothes of a Lan..."

"Don't!" Kirk gave an artistic shudder and began to strip also.

When they were both undressed Kirk went to remove one of the many furs piled on the bed to place it at the foot where he had always slept before, but Spock stopped him.

"Jim, that is quite unnecessary; the bed is fully wide enough for both of us and we have shared before."

"O.K., if you're happy - but won't they think it odd?"

"I doubt it." Spock gave a small smile as he climbed onto the high-framed bed. "From what I gathered last time we were here, it would not be thought odd at all, merely common-place."

Kirk paused, one knee on the side, wondering if Spock really meant... Oh, he'd had comments from the other Du on their last visit, of course, but it hadn't seemed important at the time, particularly as none of them would have had the temerity to make any reference to their possible relationship to Spock himself.

Spock's smile widened. "Really, Jim, for a man of the world you can sometimes be extraordinarily naive. Had it never occurred to you...?"

Not really wanting a lecture on such a potentially embarrassing topic, Kirk interrupted him firmly as he pulled several furs up around his ears - the nights got cold quickly on Thul. "Of course it occurred to me," he said with dignity, "but contrary to your obvious belief, my mind does occasionally run on other lines...and in any case I didn't think anyone'd actually said anything to you."

"Several times," Spock murmured, settling down in his turn. He decided to disconcert his bondbrother further. "And not only on Thul, either."

There was a dead silence for several moments and then a wild hazel eye peered over the edge of the blue-grey vlar skin. "Huh?" said its owner.

Spock suppressed a reactive chuckle. "You heard me."

"You mean people think..." Kirk paused, for once at a loss for words.

"We are very close friends," Spock pointed out, turning his head to watch the myriad expressions he knew would be chasing each other in rapid succession across his bondbrother's mobile face. "Do you mean to say that no-one has ever questioned you regarding the rumours about us?"

Poleaxed, Kirk could only mutter numbly, "I never even heard there were rumours, for God's sake. I thought my reputation lay in quite the opposite direction. You mean some people actually think we are...?"

"Yes."

"And they actually had the nerve to ask you?"

"Yes."

"What did you tell 'em?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"It is hardly a question a Vulcan would answer - even from another Vulcan."

"No, I guess not." Kirk could not help the broad grin that spread across his face at the incredible revelation. Soon he was chuckling out loud and then, goaded by Spock's outer calm and the inner amusement spilling through their bond, he was giggling helplessly, muffling the sound as best he could under layers of stifling fur.

When it was finally safe to emerge he found Spock was still watching him, one eyebrow quirked in the line that indicated amusement.

"Weren't you embarrassed?" Kirk demanded seriously.

"Why should I be?" Spock countered calmly.

"Well..." Kirk floundered momentarily and then decided to be blunt. "Come off it, Spock, you always used to act like a universal maiden aunt over any reference to your...um...personal life."

"It is an excellent way to avoid further such questions," Spock told him blandly. "Most Humans are, I find, sufficiently sensitive to the feelings of others - even those of us who claim not to suffer them - to desist if they believe they are being an embarrassment."

"You devious devil," Kirk said admiringly.

"I have learned a great deal from you." Spock politely inclined his head in gratitude.

"Hmmm." Kirk decided to ignore the remark and lay down again, wondering precisely what his own reaction would have been had anyone ever directed such a question at him. He was still pondering it when he fell asleep.

The city of Parathelmon was not large - something of the size of mediaeval London, Kirk guessed, and with much the same sense of bustling commercialism. Open-air markets abounded and being good places to pick up local gossip they spent most of the next day unhurriedly wandering around the busy stalls, eyes and ears alert for news of anything unusual. Since it was unheard-of for any of the Du to stare boldly at a member of the Lan, Kirk had spent much of his last visit there perfecting the art of taking in a great deal of what reached him through

his peripheral vision whilst ostensibly gazing at something quite different; but as it was perfectly acceptable to look at the goods for sale he concentrated mostly upon those, leaving it to Spock to study the ever-moving crowds. Their bondlink was a most useful tool in such a surveillance and, over and above its practical application, preserved Kirk from the faint sense of isolation and disorientation that had beset him previously.

//I thought at the time you took a great risk.// Spock's mental tone was almost wistful, overlying a tremendous sense of gratitude and the comforting sensation of deep and abiding affection.

//I knew it,// Kirk assured him. //I didn't rush into it blindly even though I did let Torven annoy me into demanding I should come with you, but when I thought it over I knew I was right. I also knew that if we could make the thing work between us then we'd stand every chance of making ours the finest ship in the Fleet - and I was right there, too, wasn't I?// Challenging.

An inner smile, then, //As always, sir.// Humbly.

//Hypocrite!//

Kirk turned away to hide his own smile, his eye falling briefly on a passing, richly-dressed Lana with two attendant Da.

His first thought, that she was an old friend, was at once set aside when he recalled his surroundings, and then a second later with a bright flash of startlement that leaked willy-nilly through their still partially opened bondwound, he knew where he had seen that face before. The Romulan Commander!

Instantly his head came round, before he could check the involuntary movement, to stare openly at her in shocked surprise, only to find that seen full-face, there was little or no resemblance at all to the woman he remembered so well. It had merely been a fleeting impression, one of movement and colouring rather than actual facial likeness that had deceived him.

Fortunately for him, Spock had picked up on every thought and before the woman could see the insolent Du staring at her so blatantly, he had stepped between them, obscuring her view, and sharply reminding Kirk of his place in this society.

//Sorry.// A rueful apology. //I really did think it was her just for a minute there.//

//Understood.//

Right there, along with the vivid memory of that vital and compelling young woman, came also the never-asked question that had always intrigued Kirk but which he had never got up the nerve to ask his friend - just how had they come to beam her aboard along with the Vulcan that time? The transporter beam, unless set deliberately for wide dispersal, was always of necessity finely gauged and did not collect stray objects - or persons - merely near at hand; that fact virtually told him that the two had been close enough to be embracing at the moment of transportation and along with the recollection of Spock's almost cat-like pricking of his ears upon first seeing the woman, had often made him wonder since...

Catching Spock's eye upon him he quickly gulped down his curiosity, sending a sincere if embarrassed apology Spock's way and expecting some typically Spockian comment upon the general trend of Human thoughts. He did not get it.

Instead, a train of thought had been triggered in Spock's mind, the strong attraction he had undeniably felt for the woman, worthy as she was of any man's admiration, possessing a mind of equal quickness to his own along with her formidable qualities as a leader who had compromised none of her femininity in gaining her command. He had never understood the impulse that had made her try and hold onto him as the beam took him, knowing as she did by then the shocking way he had simply used their mutual attraction for his own ends. Uncomfortable with himself for such unaccustomed behaviour and ashamed of its perfidy, he had purposely

avoided any contact with her while she was on board the Enterprise, preferring not to examine his own motives and feelings too closely.

Still, he had never forgotten her, could recall every detail about her even now, down to the timbre of her voice, her superb grasp of the Vulcan tongue they had used when they were alone, only the faint alien intonation betraying that it was not her mother-tongue, a lilt so slight it was barely perceptible and which he had only heard once since then. His brain made the final connection and the second elusive memory clicked into place.

Abruptly, he came to a halt, causing Kirk to cannon off him unexpectedly.

Caught up in his own thoughts, Kirk had not been following Spock's movements as closely as he might; now he fell to his knees in abject apology for his fault, bending his head to the dusty ground as Spock swung round towards him, staring down in a bemused way and apparently at a total loss.

//Well, tell me off then!// A bubble of laughter breaking. //You can't admit it was all your fault, even if it was, you clumsy devil!//

Apologising mentally for his maladroitness, Spock delivered the required tirade, jerked Kirk ruthlessly to his feet, towed him away from the scene as quickly as possible and down a narrow, alley-like street at one side of the market square.

Coming to another, much smaller square, shady with vines and cool, with a small, splashing fountain in the centre, Spock paused and directed Kirk to fetch him water in one of the cups kept by every such public drinking place, knowing that the Human must be desperate for a drink in this drying heat. Guessing that he was also tired by now - they had after all been on their feet most of the day - he sat down on a low stone wall. Kirk served him the water, drank deeply himself and then sat down at Spock's feet, grateful for the rest.

"What happened back there?" he asked quietly. "It's not like you to stop all of a sudden. I know I wasn't watching what I was doing either, but even if I had been, I doubt if I could have stopped in time."

"I had just made a rather interesting connection, Jim. Do you remember our first meeting with Savon and his group on Starbase 7?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Do you recall that I experienced a sense of fear and a momentary withdrawal in one of the younger members of the team?"

Kirk frowned. "I seem to remember your saying something about it. Sadiok, wasn't it? One of the men who are missing."

"Affirmative. Jim, your recollection of the Romulan Commander...I too have been thinking of her since then... Sadiok's manner of speaking was identical with hers, a slightly alien intonation. At the time I made the assumption it was because he came from another part of Vulcan. Now - I am no longer sure."

As there was no-one about, Kirk risked swinging round so that he could look up at his First Officer. "Are you trying to tell me that Sadiok may be a Romulan?"

"It is possible, yes."

"The evidence is very flimsy," Kirk said doubtfully.

"Undeniably so," Spock agreed. "I do not say that he is a Romulan, Captain, merely that it is a possibility we should take into consideration."

"And one Savon should be told about as soon as possible," Kirk said. "Unless you think there isn't really enough to back your ideas. I know you Vulcans don't hold with hunches."

"Indeed we do not. This is not a 'hunch', Jim, merely a possibility arising from observed facts. Savon may be aware of other facts that will disprove my

theory satisfactorily. He should certainly be told."

"Shall we go there tonight - is it that urgent?"

"A radio communication should suffice, once we have found shelter."

"O.K. Want another drink before we move on?"

Spock took the cup, barely touching it to his lips before handing it back. His own need for liquid refreshment was nowhere near so great, but, in public anyway, Kirk must never drink unless his master drank first.

It was late afternoon by now and Spock's mind was already turning to the question of a bed for the night when they entered yet another long street with pottery stalls all down one side, the potters at work in the shops behind them, with the heat of the stone-built kilns challenging the westering sun for supremacy.

//Phew!// A mock plea covering a very real physical distress. //D'you mind if we stick to the shady side, Spock?//

//Not a bit, t'hy'la.// Used for some months again now to the cooler humidity of the Enterprise, the blistering heat pouring forth from the potteries reminded Spock uncomfortably of Gol at its worst and he had no objection to seeking the comparative comfort of the shade.

They wandered along slowly, inspecting the stalls with their bright awnings with apparently casual interest; most of the goods for sale were probably kitchen ware, much of it unknown to both men although one or two items, such as wooden spatulas and spoons, seemed to be a universal constant. Towards the end of the long street, just before it joined a much wider thoroughfare, the stalls on their side no longer sold specifically household goods but here held a miscellany of articles, very few of them new. Their steps slowed, both of them intrigued as always by the mixture of alien and familiar jostling together; no matter how many new worlds one saw it was always fascinating to see the minutiae of life and all the infinite possible variations on the necessities and luxuries of humanoid existence.

//There was a time I'd've spent a fortune here.//

Spock's reply was a mental smile and a projected image of an impossibly young Kirk, his arms piled high with souvenirs.

//Something like that, yes,// Kirk agreed, projecting in his turn a cabin almost too full to enter and an irate roommate tearing his hair in despair. //Of course, I don't suppose Vulcans do anything so illogical as collect souvenirs.//

//Of course not.// Lofty disdain.

//I'll bet you never even bought Amanda an egg whisk.// Disgusted.

//Certainly not - no respectable Vulcan home would have a use for such an implement.// A high fastidiousness.

//You mean there are Vulcan homes that aren't respectable?//

What Spock's reply would have been, Kirk was never to discover, for at that moment his eye lighted on an object on one side of the stall, half-hidden under what looked alike a pile of ancient masons' aprons, something so shockingly familiar that he had almost failed to see it among the alien muddle.

A small, round, enamelled neck-ornament on a chain, similar in style to many worn round local necks, but bearing a smudged and childish picture on its upper face.

Just preventing himself in time from clutching at Spock's arm, he gulped out, "Look... My Lord Spock!an, look there."

Following the easier mental picture rather than the directing finger, Spock looked and at once his hand reached out and took the object up.

//It is a sehlat, isn't it?//

//Indeed, Captain, it would appear to be very like one.//

//Do they have sehlat-type animals here, then? I don't recall hearing about them.//

//Neither do I -- but we only saw one small area. I will make an enquiry.//

Spock beckoned to the stall's attendant with an imperious finger; the Du stepped forward, eyes humbly down, and made a swift obeisance.

"The Lan is pleased to call his servant."

"This medallion..." Spock dangled it on one disdainful finger. "Whence comes it?"

"From the house of Lord Ferrelan, I believe, Lord, when that property was sold on the death of the Lan and his LanA and both their LanRu from the shaking fever. My master could give you further details were he here."

Unsure whether it was common for a Du to be left in sole charge of a stall, Spock did not want to press the point too far. Instead, he tapped the picture.

"This creature...?" He paused enquiringly.

The Du shrugged. "I cannot tell you, Lord. Some mythical beast, maybe, like to the herds of servayen said to run the plains of paradise."

"It looks more like a child's attempt rather than that of a craftsman."

"As the Lord is pleased to say." The Du bobbed respectfully. If he'd had a forelock, Kirk thought irrepressibly, he'd have been tugging it.

"Doubtless my niece would find it pleasing," Spock said loftily. "I will give you half a leta for it."

"My master bid me take no less than five."

"Your master should be here to argue. I will give you one, and that is twice its worth."

Having finally settled amicably for one and a half, Spock threw the medallion to Kirk who caught it, paid up, and slipped it deftly into the hidden inner pocket of his tunic where it would remain safe from prying hands should pick-pockets be about in the crowds, then he fell obediently into place at Spock's heels.

//I think that ought to be shown to Savon, don't you?//

//Agreed. Perhaps we should change our plans and go there this evening after all,// Spock suggested.

//If you say so.//

Such a wave of tender amusement came through their bond that for a moment Kirk genuinely thought Spock had laughed aloud.

//What's so funny all of a sudden?// Puzzled and amused himself.

//Has it occurred to you that ever since we have been here, you have been behaving as though I were in command again?//

It hadn't, but now Spock mentioned it, Kirk knew he was right, he had unconsciously slipped into the secondary role he had had to assume before. It was odd how easy it felt, too; had their positions been reversed, had Spock been Captain and he First Officer when they'd first met, he probably would have been equally happy with the arrangement, content to stay at Spock's side as Spock stayed with him. It was a pleasing thought.

//I suppose it won't do any harm to check there was a Lord Ferrelan, either.// Musingly.

//We can do so tomorrow.// A welling concern for the Human's growing tiredness. //Tonight we will go to Savon's house. If I recall his directions correctly, it is not far from here.//

//Oh, you recall them correctly!// A huge mental yawn nearly deafened Spock, who looked over his shoulder to see Kirk manfully suppressing its physical manifestation. //Yes, take me home and put me to bed, Spock, before I fall asleep here and you have to abandon me in the street.//

With the cool of evening, however, Kirk perked up once again, particularly after partaking of a more satisfying meal than he had eaten the night before. Having seen for himself that Spock would not be unduly put out by any tacit suggestion that there was more to their relationship than master and servant, he was not averse to using that as an excuse to stay beside him when the Du of Savon's household were dismissed for the night. Nothing had to be said, simply a brief look and a shrug in their direction before he docilely tagged on to Spock's heels as the 'lan' made their way into the main room of the house.

Once the door had been closed, Savon made them welcome in Vulcan fashion, adding, "We had not expected you so soon, however. Has something occurred?"

"Two things," Kirk replied, taking up a seat on the floor beside Spock's feet just in case one of the Du had any reason to return. "First of all - this." He pulled the medallion from his tunic and held it out. "It may be just a coincidence, of course, but Spock and I thought this looked like a sehlat."

"A sehlat?" It was T'Luk who spoke, the tall, imposing woman who had been introduced to him as Sisot's wife and bondsister to T'Kea who was Savon's wife. In his preoccupation with identifying her correctly, Kirk almost missed the brief flicker of consternation on her face.

"May I see it, Savon?"

The Vulcan leader's eyes were grave as he handed it across and Kirk felt a small jolt of satisfaction that they had found some kind of clue, but at the same time a sinking feeling that all was most definitely not well.

"It is Sisot's," T'Luk said calmly. "Our son made it many years ago, before his Kahswan. My husband would not willingly have parted with it."

//A sentimental possession, Spock?// Mildly surprised.

//Most Vulcans keep personal mementos of a dead child.//

//Oh.// A welling sympathy. //D'you know what happened?//

//Negative. I suspect...the Kahswan. It is a severe test.//

//You Vulcans.// Helplessly. Would he ever understand them fully?

Carefully, he said aloud, "You have no contact with your husband, I believe." Seeing T'Luk's involuntary look of surprise and withdrawal, he added hastily, "Forgive me, it is not my intention to pry but I need to understand the situation fully."

"The Vulcan bond is not spoken of..."

"...outside the family." Kirk nodded gravely. "During this crisis, T'Luk, we are all family, are we not?" Then, flicking a mental plea to Spock for permission to explain his own position and at once receiving it, he told her, "And I do share a closebond with Spock. You are not speaking to one who does not understand a bond and all that it entails."

He had surprised them all, he could see that, but at the same instant the atmosphere in the room changed abruptly; before, he had been a welcome and respected visitor, now, without any one of them having moved or even smiled, he was a part of the circle, at home and comfortable.

//How the hell do they do that?// Surprised and delighted.

//A lowering of their shields. They have acknowledged you as one with them.//

Having experienced that incredible feeling of acceptance, Kirk suddenly understood not only Spock's desire to follow the Vulcan way, but Amanda's also; once you were known like that, at such a deep level of your being, it must be very difficult to contemplate a return to the isolation of Human society and way of life.

"You understand, then," he said to T'Luk, "why I must question you closely concerning matters not spoken of outside the family."

"I understand, and I will answer you. Sisot and I are not closebonded, no, but I have..." She paused and shook her head ruefully. "A most uneasy suspicion that all is not well with him."

"But no more than that?"

"No more. I am sorry that I cannot be more helpful."

He acknowledged that with a small nod, saying gently, "I regret I must do this, but we must have the medallion back so that we can make enquiries concerning it."

The light compression of her lips told him that she did not like handing it back, but she made no audible protest as she gave it to him. All the same, her bondsister T'Kea came at once to her side, silently offering help.

"I will take the greatest care of it," he promised them both.

"You said there were two matters that had arisen, Captain," Savon reminded him. "What was the second?"

"That's more Spock's province than mine; perhaps I'd better let him explain it."

Leaning back against Spock's chair, Kirk could read little on Savon's face as Spock imparted his suspicion of Sadiok's identity.

When he had finished, Savon was silent for several moments, eventually saying, "That is a most grave imputation, Spock."

"And one I do not make lightly. I would be glad to see it refuted."

"Indeed." Savon lapsed into silence again.

Mildly impatient, Kirk twisted his head to look up at his bondbrother, but the Vulcan's face was as shuttered as Savon's. //What's the problem?//

//No problem, Jim. Savon will give the matter due consideration -- everyone present will do so. They will not want to come to any conclusion without checking all the facts they can, so they will be going over their own knowledge of him in their minds to see if they know anything that will prove or disprove what I have said."

A very thorough race, Vulcans. Kirk relaxed again, awaiting the end of their deliberations.

Having no idea how long these would take, he occupied his time in looking around him at those present and reminding himself once more as to who each of them was.

Only six of the twelve-strong Vulcan team were in the room. Three of the team, Sadiok, St'lurik and Sisot, were of course missing, and of the remaining three not here, T'Pria was with her sick bondmate, Zabri, in his room in the other wing of the sprawling house, attended by Subrel. Savon had explained that there were usually two of them with him, his condition being too distressing for another telepath to bear without help. That fact alone had brought home to Kirk the gravity of the situation.

Of those here, he had met the Healer S'lana and his bondmate Sunam at the

initial briefing outside Parathelmon with Savon and T'Kea; T'Luk he knew to be Sisot's wife, which meant that the other female, the very young, very quiet T'Nuna, must be Subrel's bondmate. He remembered seeing the pair of them that time on Starbase 7 and thinking how unusual it was to meet a Vulcan, male or female, who appeared as shy and retiring as this young woman. She had clung almost resolutely to her husband's arm during the whole of that brief meeting.

Catching her eye now, he gave her the warmest, most reassuring look he could without actually breaking into a smile, and was rewarded with a shy glance in return before her eyes dropped once more to her hands clasped in her lap. As he recalled him, her husband Subrel was young too, but without the aura of almost immaturity that clung about his wife.

T'Luk, now he had seen her, was easy to remember. Tall even for a Vulcan male, she topped Spock's lean form by about an inch, if not more. Next to her bondsister T'Kea - the closest Kirk had ever seen to a 'cuddly' or 'motherly' Vulcan female - they looked like a pair of stand-up comics rather than respected Vulcan scientists in their own right.

//I would not advise you to under-estimate either of them, however, Captain.// Spock's thoughts intruded into his meditation.

//Oh, I don't, believe me.// A flashing amusement overlying a rueful memory of T'Pau and T'Pring. //Vulcan women have a way of making themselves memorable, I've found!//

//Indeed.//

Spock fell silent once more and Kirk hoped his involuntary recollection had not roused uncomfortable memories for his friend; probing gently at their link, though, he sensed only calmness and a shield that was already growing distinctly stronger although he knew that he was still capable of breaking through it easily should that be necessary. Since at the moment it was not, he relaxed again, waiting for them to break their self-imposed silence.

The Healer S'lana was the first to move, shifting from his meditational pose and looking about him to see who else was ready to speak.

Savon sat back next, and having waited until everyone else had signalled their readiness, spoke first.

"You understand, of course, Captain, that there is nothing in Sadiok's background - so far as we know it - to make us suspicious, nor was his introduction into our team anything other than quite normal. He is contemporary to none of us, being of a generation between my own and Subrel's, therefore none of us would expect to have any personal knowledge of him, particularly as he is said to come from a remote part of Southern Vulcan and to have left home only on his entrance into the Science Academy at TesKahr. He speaks little of his past, but that is not uncommon among us, Captain, as you know."

Kirk nodded. Vulcans hated personal questions and guarded their privacy more fiercely than any other race.

"You mention the Science Academy..."

"My own branch of it." Savon nodded. "Of course, since my time the staff has changed and so we have no common point of reference. He has undoubtedly been there at some time, I can vouch for that. He talked of the surrounding area and buildings in terms which leave no doubt in my mind."

"But you think it could have been as a visitor only," Kirk said.

Savon's nod acknowledged his percipience. "I can provide no positive answer either way, I am afraid. Can you add anything, my wife?"

"I know very little of him at all," T'Kea murmured apologetically. "Our fields of research were quite different and we met only at formal meals. Even on our journey across Thul from Rath I saw very little of him."

"Has he needed any medical treatment?" Kirk turned hopefully to S'lana.

The Healer shook his head. "Nothing in particular. Regulation checks show nothing unusual save that he has a very rare blood group, very rare indeed, but not previously unheard of on Vulcan. Otherwise his readings all show within Vulcan norms, albeit some at extremes."

"So he may be either Vulcan or Romulan so far as you know?"

"Yes. There is no present evidence either way. Were he here, of course, I could run tests. As it is, I can offer you no particular help."

"There was the time he mentioned he'd been to Rigel, S'lana, do you remember?" Sunam put in. "I thought he must have met my cousin there; he was the head of the Vulcan diplomatic delegation to the conference Sadiok said he'd attended. I asked him about it but he gave me no answer. At the time, I merely thought his attention had been temporarily distracted elsewhere."

"That could genuinely still be so," Kirk said ruefully.

"Indeed," Sunam agreed. "I have nothing positive to offer either, Captain."

"And nor do I," T'Luk agreed. "Merely a most unworthy suspicion I once had that he resented my being taller than he is. At the time, it seemed such a foolish idea to entertain that I immediately forgot it until now."

It seemed T'Nuna was their last hope and Kirk turned towards her, not expecting there to be much she could add.

A faint green flush tinged her cheeks, but her eyes met his without faltering, a fact which he acknowledged as all the more brave when he heard the embarrassing - for a Vulcan - nature of what she had to say.

Her voice was soft, but clear enough to be heard without trouble as she explained that she had once or twice felt that Sadiok had looked at her in a way no respectable Vulcan should at a bonded woman.

"I am aware," she went on, her hands clasping together in her lap and then deliberately relaxing once more, "that I am unduly concerned with others' reactions to me, that I sometimes feel I am noticed when it is not the case, and I tried to put it out of my mind. Subrel bids me tell you that he had noted my reaction and believed it to be due to my nature. He did his best to support me, but took no particular notice of Sadiok as he had been given no cause to do so."

"All the same, to your mind his reaction was not Vulcan?"

Her eyes met his again, her flush a little deeper. "I am not a very objective observer in this matter, Captain Kirk."

"I understand." He didn't want to press her further and leaned back against Spock, thinking over what he had learned.

"It's all very negative," he said slowly, "but it is interesting that five of you all mention something which may fit with our theory."

Sevon nodded. "Each of our observations - with the exception of T'Nuna's - is unimportant on its own and we would none of us have recalled them had you not asked us to do so. Nothing of course is proved; all the same, we must be on our guard from now on, whatever happens."

"You believe this has some relevance to our colleagues' disappearance, of course," S'lana said abruptly.

"I believe that it could have," Kirk told him. "When we make our report to the Enterprise later this evening, we shall warn them to be on the look-out for possible intruders in this space. It may be that the source of the problem does not lie on Thul at all."

* * * * *

In the privacy of the room allotted to them he duly made his report to the Enterprise, had a quiet word with McCoy who, in his own words, 'just happened to be on the bridge at the right time', reassured him as to his and Spock's well-being and fell into bed beside his bondbrother to sleep long and dreamlessly.

Next morning he woke late, mildly annoyed with Spock for letting him sleep in but seeing the reason for it in the dark shadows under his eyes as he checked his appearance in the burnished metal mirror.

"You'll make us damn' late in getting started, though."

"There is little point in becoming over-tired and consequently inefficient," Spock told him drily.

"How irritating of you to be always right." He adjusted his hood.

"If I were, it would be," Spock agreed blandly, waiting for the door to be opened for him.

For all his good intentions, it was eventually late afternoon before they left Savon's household once more, since several things had to be attended to first. Kirk wished - no, he corrected the word - needed to see Zabri for himself and to have a quiet word with his bondmate, T'Pria. There was also the ceremonial blessing of the water to be done so that the household Du would not become suspicious of a DoscaLan who did not fulfil his obligations.

The ceremonial was simple and dignified and this time Kirk was privileged to watch it for naturally Savon was as lenient a master to his Du as was compatible with Thulyan ways. Spock performed his part to the manner born and Kirk teasingly told him so as they followed S'lane to Zabri's room in the other wing of the sprawling house, to be informed that Vulcans had once had a vaguely similar 'greeting of water' ceremony among the ancient tribes of pre-Reform Vulcan.

"It was a way of demonstrating peaceful intentions for a certain duration, either for the purpose of talks or a temporary truce between two tribes."

"Another interesting interconnection between the two cultures?"

"I gather so. I am not an expert on ancient customs, however, and I report this only at third hand. It was St'lurik who noted the similarities, of course, as this is his sphere of study."

They paused while S'lane opened a wrought-metal doorway leading into a second, tiny inner garden, this one without the fountain that was the focal point of the larger one they had just left.

Kirk frowned at the huge key. "Is it necessary to keep him locked away, S'lane?"

"He is not dangerous, Captain, save to himself. We keep him locked away only so that the Du cannot come close enough to hear him perhaps betray us in his raving."

Sharing a speaking look with his bondbrother, Kirk passed through the gate behind him, deciding that although the effect of the clanging metal lock was purely subjective, it nonetheless produced a most unpleasant sensation that one was being shut away. He knew Spock felt his small shudder of disquiet, for he was sent a private wave of sympathetic warmth that went some way to dispelling the feeling.

//It is partly our closeness to Zabri that you feel also, Jim.// A dread Spock could not hide.

Kirk knew it was hopelessly selfish of him, but just at that moment he could not regret that any telepathic receptivity he had was channelled through Spock.

//I regret I can shield you from very little at present, Jim.// A warning note and a small burst of sorrow.

S'lana_a crossed the small courtyard, entered and went down a long, cool passageway to the door at the end, on which he knocked twice.

A man's voice told them it was safe to enter, and S'lane opened the door for them, ushering them into a tiny lobby. There, Subrel met them, saying, "He is sleeping at the moment. T'Pria also."

Introductions were swiftly made but once the formalities were over, Subrel expressed his disquiet at Kirk's arrival. "I mean no disrespect to you, Captain Kirk, or to you, Healer, but surely it cannot be good to attempt to question Zabri yet again when we know it to be useless and it is a cause of such...anguish to him." The even Vulcan voice retained its formality, but some echo in it spoke of horrors recently endured.

Kirk hastened to reassure him, keeping his own voice down not to disturb the sleepers. "We don't intend to question him, Subrel. His condition has been fully explained to us, and, believe me, we wouldn't do anything that might risk making it worse. I'm afraid it's a purely practical thing - you see, Spock and I have been the victims of various sorts of brain damage and so on...if there is just a chance there is any symptom we recognise, well, it might just help in treating him if we can pinpoint what is wrong, you understand?"

The younger man nodded, albeit reluctantly. "One is not eager to expose either Zabri or Spock to such an ordeal for nothing, Captain. As a non-telepath you cannot understand this..."

"Perhaps I understand more than you think." Kirk did not want to elaborate, it was not necessary and in any case he fully understood Subrel's anxiety. "You have my assurance, Mr. Subrel, that at the very first sign of distress, we will withdraw at once."

Even with this promise, the younger Vulcan looked at S'lana for confirmation that the visit should take place before he stood back and let them into the suite that had been set aside for the sick Vulcan.

Entering the room in which Zabri lay, the first thing that became patently obvious to him was that the poor devil was doubly incontinent. Knowing what it took to make a Vulcan lose control to that extent, Kirk swallowed hard, fighting down his extreme reluctance to proceed, aware that the unwillingness was in part Spock's. He tried to send a wave of understanding back, a consolatory reminder of the fact that neither of them was having to face this alone, and was rewarded by a lifting of the inner tension so that both of them could step forward with an outer calm.

Zabri was sleeping - on his back, both arms flung upwards so that his hands lay on the mattress above his head; this pose, in conjunction with the barred bed on which he lay, and the unmistakable smell in the room, emphasised the macabre return to infancy. His mouth hung slackly open and a heavy drop of spittle dribbled from its corner.

//All bodily functions out of control?// A shocked, sad question.

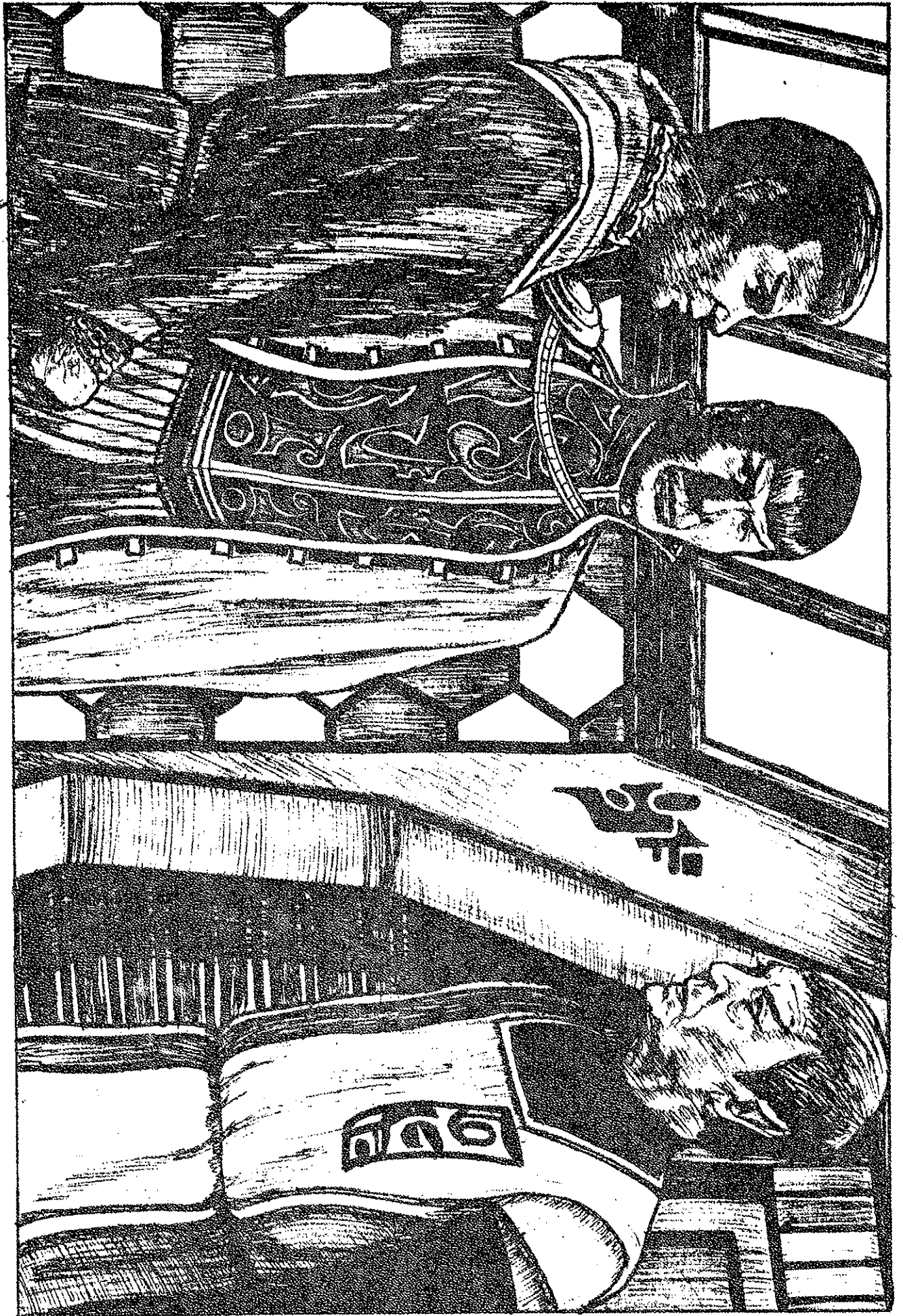
//It would seem so. A mind picked clean.// Spock could not cover the wave of pitying revulsion - the disgust, not for Zabri but for whatever, or whoever, had done this thing to him.

//We ought to see him awake.// Kirk didn't want to, but knew there might be some vital clue to be gleaned. //I hate to have them waken him, though. We'll wait for him to wake naturally.//

A wave of total agreement flooded him, and they turned to leave together.

Back in the outer living room, Kirk said feelingly, "Poor devil. He's like a baby."

"A very new-born baby," S'lana agreed. "One whose knowledge of the world about him is nil, and one who cannot learn."



"You mean he's made no progress at all since you found him?" Kirk was horrified.

"None at all." S'lana shook his head. "At first, of course, we hoped that in time he would come to recognise us, to know who we are, what part we have shared of his life. Now we would be delighted if he could learn to recall just one of us from day to day, greet us as a child greets his nurse, but it seems he cannot even do that. In fact, each time he wakes we have to try and reassure him that we are kindly, that we mean him no harm. He is quite plainly terrified of all contact."

Kirk heard a door behind him open and swung round, realising that the tired-looking woman who entered must be T'Pria. Her expression and obvious state of near collapse brought the horror of Zabri's condition home to Kirk even more plainly.

After S'lana had introduced them T'Pria wasted few words.

"He is terrified, Captain. That I can tell you with authority. He is terrified, utterly alone. He can see but not understand, hear only a meaningless babble when we talk to him. The only thing that soothes him is touch, but it can take many minutes of struggling and trying to get away before he understands that I am not going to harm him. If I had not learned that eventually he will find a little peace when I soothe him then I do not think I would have the moral courage to make the initial approach. His mind is empty. Echoing. Blackness. I dare not try and touch it any more."

Had the words been recorded, Kirk knew the even, controlled tone would have betrayed very little. T'Pria still had some veneer of calm to see her through; but the flickering eyes, the spasmodic movements of her head and the relentless plucking of her fingers in the loose folds of her garments would have been tragically distressing in a Human female. In a Vulcan, it was almost more than Kirk could bear to witness.

Speaking as steadily as he could, he said, "Is it possible his mind has been stripped by some device? The Klingons have something which they claim can pierce the mind and wring any information they wish from it."

S'lana looked doubtful, but seeing the question had been really directed at Spock rather than him, said nothing.

The First Officer considered it for a moment before saying, "Unlikely, Captain. My impression of that device is that it would be more likely to leave the mind passively empty rather than active. The subject would be a vegetable rather than a terrified neonate."

"But that is only a subjective impression."

"Of course. Nevertheless, I am strongly convinced it is correct."

//Spock! A feeling?// A gentle mockery. Affection.

//Certainly.// Calm acceptance.

Kirk nodded slightly and turned back to T'Pria. "I don't know what help we can offer you, if indeed we can do anything at all, but we will do our best -- you have my word on that."

She accepted it, but her eyes told him she thought it hopeless.

"I must go," she said abruptly, a kind of helpless desperation in her voice. "He needs me."

As she entered the bedroom, Kirk thought at first that he could never forget the agony in the wailing cry that greeted her, but then the dreadful impression of the pitiful sound was drowned in a backlash of hysterical terror, of irredeemable despair that washed over him like a tsunami, leaving him gasping and shaking in its eddies.

S'lara was at his side, holding his shoulders, shaking him hard. "Captain! Captain Kirk!"

"It's all right." He gulped hard, frantically bringing himself under control. "My God, that poor, poor bastard!"

S'lana frowned. "I don't understand - it shouldn't affect you. You're not a telepath."

"No." He flicked a look at Spock, knowing what that burst of primitive emotion must have done to him, but seeing Subrel had gone to him, relaxed again. "Our bond...it's been damaged. Just at the moment we can't shield properly."

S'lana was horrified. "We should not have exposed you to this. You should have told us..."

Kirk shook his head. "I knew the risk. Besides, if that was only third-hand for me, it's really very little compared to what Zabri is suffering. Hadn't one of you better go to T'Pria?"

"T'Nuna is coming." Subrel looked over at Kirk. "My apologies, Captain. You understand all too well, I think."

Kirk took a long, calming breath. "I don't say we wouldn't have done our best before," he said shakily, "but after that, we won't rest until we find some answers to all this."

* * * * *

The search for those answers must start at the market stall where they had found the medallion. Thanks to Spock's unerring memory for maps and directions, they found their way back there without difficulty, only to find all the folding tables neatly stacked and the awnings rolled back against the walls of the houses behind the stalls.

//Damn! It must be early closing day,// Kirk exclaimed ruefully. //I thought this nation of shopkeepers never missed a possible opportunity for trading. They never did this in Rath as I recall.//

//It can hardly be so here, either, or Savon would surely have mentioned it.//

"You think something's happened?" Kirk said aloud, worry making him temporarily forgetful. Fortunately for him, the street was virtually empty and his lapse went unnoticed.

//I have no idea, and no data on which to speculate either.//

Kirk fumed silently for a moment, then came to a decision. //We'd better go make some enquiries at the local 'town hall' or whatever they call it round here. Didn't you say it wasn't far away?//

//Not far. Along that way.//

It was indeed not far, but even so they got there just in time to see the large main door close inexorably for the night. Kirk gave vent to an exasperated grunt, quickly covered.

//That would seem to be that for today, then. You'll have to pick us a bed for the night elsewhere.//

Since the large symbolic medallion Spock wore, depicting the simultaneous rising of Thul's twin moons over the waters of Rath had already attracted a fair number of offers from passers-by during their wanderings round Parathelmon over the last two days, Kirk did not anticipate any particular difficulty over this. Nor was there; the only surprise to Kirk was that the person Spock chose was the next one to offer hospitality - logical enough, he supposed, if it were not for the fact that she was female, extremely attractive, and signalled her specific interest in Spock so blatantly that Kirk could not see how even an innocently minded Vulcan could miss it. When, to Kirk's badly disguised astonishment, Spock

accepted with every sign of alacrity, it was all his Captain could do not to let a yelp of dismay filter across their bond. Rapidly, he erected such shielding as he could; if as he suspected the Vulcan had simply not noticed those overt glances then his bondbrother was not about to enlighten him concerning them. He didn't want to have his friend squirming with embarrassment at what he'd unwittingly done.

While Spock walked at the side of the LanA, Kirk found himself with her three Da - the number a sure indication that the woman was wealthy. Since she and Spock were deeply engaged in conversation, he decided to risk a few direct questions of her three slaves, and found, as he'd suspected, the Lady CosaLanA was a wealthy widow and that all three of the women - both the older woman - who said she had fostered the LanA as a suckling babe - and the two younger ones, heartily approved of her decision to invite Spock home.

"My Lady has been alone too long," they told him.

Partly dismayed, partly bursting with hidden laughter, Kirk tagged along, found to his relief that CosaLanA's household was not unrelievedly female, and took refuge in the company of her Du for the evening. Complications like brief affairs he could well do without, he decided. Besides - what did he know of vulcanoid customs and needs?

However, when he was not shown anywhere but the Du quarters for the night, he openly said his place was with his Lan, expecting them to show him where Spock now was. Not a bit of it. A chorus of hearty guffaws greeted his request, and a blunt statement that the Lan and LanA would not be wanting him for the next few hours.

Since he could hardly insist without looking forty kinds of fool, Kirk lay down obediently, wrapped himself in the rough hair blanket they tossed him and ostensibly tried to sleep. Not being alone, though, he could not make the required calls to the Enterprise and to Savon, and opened his mind to Spock once more, intending to remind him to do so in the privacy of his own room.

The flood of impressions that promptly rushed in on him was so unexpected, in spite of everything that had been said by the Du, and so startling that for a few seconds he could not believe the sensory input he was receiving. When his numbed brain finally did hear the message, he raised his meagre shields at once, desperately ashamed of his involuntary 'peeking'. Grateful that the Du's quarters were so badly lit - he just knew his face must have blushed too red for any green-blooded vulcanoid to overlook the oddity - he lay back and concentrated on keeping well out of what was, most emphatically, not his affair.

He was not entirely successful, though, for his own shielding was very weak, and Spock seemed to have forgotten there was any necessity to raise his. Kirk could only sympathise with the reason and wish to hell it didn't exist. Quite how he was going to face his Vulcan friend in the morning he didn't yet know - it promised to be the most embarrassing situation he had ever had to face when Spock realised, as he inevitably must once he was not quite so heavily involved, just how much his bondbrother must know of what was going on. He shifted restlessly, doing his best to keep those fragile shields firmly up, and aware of a wry amusement that events should have fallen out this way. Right from the start of their bonding he'd worried what would happen under circumstances like these, but not unnaturally in view of their normal habits, he had always thought his would be the unlucky privilege of finding his shielding had been inadequate and that he'd caused Spock considerable, avoidable and mortifying annoyance.

He spent some time anxiously endeavouring to drop off to sleep and during it his emotional reaction to his situation ran the gamut from mild hilarity, through tenderness to joy and finally to plain irritation. But sleep at last he did, and woke to a pleasant sense of well-being that was not wholly his own.

Meeting Spock for the first time when he attended him at the morning meal, he did his best to school his face to neutrality but was not perfectly convinced

of his success. His First Officer must be sure that Kirk knew there was some reason they had spent the night separately and must be feeling at the very least selfconscious. When their eyes finally met, however, he could see that Spock was all too well aware of how inadequate his shielding had been.

Kirk sent a rush of affectionate reassurance his way and was astounded to find his friend was not unduly bothered by events, save in that they might have affected Kirk's view of him adversely.

//Hardly.// Amused acceptance and a reminder of Kirk's own nature.

//I assumed that you would have no opportunity to report in to the Enterprise or to Savon yesterday evening, and made the report myself.//

//Good man,// Kirk told him, relieved.

They could make no further exchange for Cosa demanded Spock's attention virtually full time until their departure and so it was not until they were out in the street once more and having checked and found the stall still firmly closed although some of the other ones were now open for trading, and were making their way to the Administration building that Kirk had an opportunity to broach the subject. It was hardly the ideal place or time, but Kirk had decided that he must speak up soon, not wanting Spock to have to try and pretend it had not happened or to feel any shame over it.

//I don't want apologies.// A swift but gentle command. //By the law of averages it ought to have been me making them, we both know that.//

//At least allow me to apologise for shielding so inadequately.//

//Not a bit.// Cheerfully. //I could tell you had other things on your mind!//

//And I have not embarrassed you?// Wonderingly.

//Of course not...well, not much.// Honestly. //Would I have embarrassed you very much had it been me? Well, it was me first, after all.// A sudden, vivid picture of Liahn Dy'Liahn.

//I accept it in IDIC - as part of you.//

//As part of us both!// Surprise and more than a touch of pleasure too.

//Indeed - and Jim, I am sorry to hear you quote such an unscientific principle as 'the law of averages'. You should certainly be aware that no such law, as it is generally understood, exists.//

//Horsefeathers!//

//As they do not, either.//

Kirk fell into a dignified silence.

Trying to get information out of the local administration proved as frustrating and time-consuming as dealing with any of the other local bureaucrats Kirk had met throughout the galaxy. At the end of two hours his inner fury and frustration was such that he could see it was beginning to affect Spock also. At first furious with himself for his lack of self control he was about to send a hearty apology Spock's way when he recalled that quite often a good way to deal with such petty-minded officialdom was to pull rank shamelessly, and at the same time imply that a favour done for you now could have fortunate results in the future for your benefactor. Wondering if the logical and straightforward Vulcan could pull it off with the same success as a devious-minded Human, he sent an explicit enquiry/explanation instead of the intended apology.

//With your expert assistance no doubt I can manage to behave with any degree of illogicality.// Resigned.

In fact, Spock seemed to experience little difficulty in producing a high-

handed arrogance which - to a nicety - gauged the clerk's ability to swallow the unabashed flattery and men-of-distinction-like-you-and-me assumptions, and soon had him eating out of his hand.

//You see - it works. Where would you be without me?// Triumphantly, as they entered the room of the highest 'authority' at present available, Lord TeeghLan.

Dropping patiently to his knees beside the seat Spock was immediately offered, Kirk kept his eyes correctly lowered while Spock made the first enquiries concerning the Lord FerreLan and the possible source of the medallion they had acquired, finishing, "I had every intention of making enquiries of the stallholder, but the stalls in that street were not open yesterday and some are still shut this morning. No-one seems capable of giving me any information at all as to why this should be so."

Lord TeeghLan said nothing for several moments, his eyes raking Spock up and down. Watching him out of the corner of his eye Kirk had an uncomfortable feeling that the Lan was suspicious of them in some way and was about to make some accusation.

He was partially right; Teegh, it seemed, had seen them before - on the road from Rath four days previously.

When Spock admitted he had indeed been travelling that day, Teegh nodded in a pompous, self-important way and said, "I thought so. I never forget a face. My chaise overtook you on the road."

Kirk gave an inner choke of relieved laughter. //I told you, Spock, it's Nils Baris.//

Ignoring his bondbrother's irrepressible and sometimes - to Spock's way of thinking - ill-timed levity, Spock devoted his attention to the matter at hand, that of getting on sufficiently good terms with Teegh to elicit the information he required.

For once a necessarily silent audience, Kirk had time to note and admire Spock's technique - it was not precisely the same as he might have employed but it was nonetheless effective. Kirk's opinion of his friend, always high, went up another notch as Teegh finally threw his cards on the table and admitted that three of the traders in that street - Du who received too little supervision from their Lan - were under suspicion of receiving stolen goods.

"Too little supervision..." Spock's eyebrows rose in his inimitable expression of disdainful amazement.

"Yes, it's shocking, quite shocking." Teegh seemed to be on less sure ground now because he became positively ingratiating - doubtless some minor dereliction of duty was involved which in some way concerned him for Spock thought him anxious to hurry over this point as quickly as possible. Since this resulted in a flood of gratuitous information, some of which, notably the names of Lord FerreLan's executors, was undeniably useful, Spock did not feel inclined to take what he suspected was the more common Thulyan attitude, one of condemnation for those in authority. He contented himself with a few murmurs concerning the proper control of one's property and demanded to be told whether the identity of the thieves had been established.

Scenting a sympathetic ear, Lord TeeghLan leaned forward confidentially. "We do not admit to it generally, of course, but we have had a great deal of trouble from those damned Du up in the hills. Officially we don't admit to their presence, but quite privately they're becoming more than simply a nuisance. I've been telling everyone for months now that something will have to be done, but you know how it is - everyone says yes, yes, yes, but no-one does anything."

Repressing his bondbrother's internal mirth, which was considerable enough for Spock to fear that he might even betray them by an outright laugh, Spock agreed soberly that he did indeed know how difficult it was to get things done,

and had Lord TeeghLan any idea of the precise area these reprehensible villains inhabited? As a travelling DoscaLan, he was naturally interested in avoiding them.

Becoming more expansive every moment under the subtle flattery of Spock's deferential tone and aristocratic hauteur, Teegh told them all he knew -- which was little enough, Kirk conceded, but it would at least give them some idea of the area in which to start looking.

Outside again, he said, //We can get the Enterprise to make a general scan... pinpoint any areas which show concentrations of people. The unlikelier the spot for habitation, the more likely it is to be the people we'd like to interview.//

//Agreed. And do you wish to visit the Lan Teegh mentioned?//

//What -- the one who's dealing with Ferre's affairs? I hardly think it's necessary, do you? T'Luk identified that medallion pretty positively, after all.//

//Conceded.//

Kirk knew that tone. //Come on, Science Officer, spit it out. What have you seen that I've missed?//

//Should we need to return to this area we must not act in any way suspiciously before we leave.//

//You're quite right, of course. We'll have to do everything expected of us first -- not go rushing off into danger like a pair of lunatics. Come on, then -- which way did 'Lord TeeghLan' say the place was?//

They set off across the concourse outside the impressive stone building -- much more impressive in size than anything they had seen in Rath, although nowhere near as beautifully carved.

Rounding a corner, they found themselves in another open space, its centre filled with a huge circular piece of statuary, set about with carved animals. At first, Kirk thought it was one of the many public fountains, but a second look showed him it was not so. The massive central pillar was quite tall, some two and a half metres he guessed, but so large in circumference that it looked somewhat squat; set round it at regular intervals were ornately carved animal heads -- mythical, he guessed, or very exaggeratedly executed if they were real. Each had a huge, protruding tongue, and balanced on the end of each such projection was a metal ball. Directly below this, another, smaller, animal was set, its face craned heavenwards, its mouth gaping widely.

The two men stared at the erection with something resembling awe. Eventually, Kirk was moved to murmur, "Spock, that is just the most hideous piece of statuary I have ever seen."

Since the square was for the moment deserted, Spock handed Kirk the handle of his chains and circled the object, unobtrusively using his tricorder before replying, "I am not sure that it is merely a statue, Jim. It may have a specific purpose. I wonder if Savon or one of the others has seen this."

"Sure to have, I'd say. Why -- is it something special?"

"I believe it is a primitive seismograph."

"A seismograph?" Kirk could not help his incredulous tone. "How does it work, then?"

"These balls are so finely balanced that they will fall when a shock-wave is transmitted. If you note these teeth here, and the cogs; these are probably a locking mechanism that prevents the other balls from falling as well, so that one can tell not only that a quake has taken place, but by noting which receiving animal has the ball in its mouth, the general direction in which the event has occurred."

"That's fiendishly clever," Kirk agreed. He paused, waiting for a group of chattering Da to go by before adding, "But what's the point of it?"

Spock shrugged. "This is a well-run society despite Teegh's rather jaundiced view. Possibly they have teams which can be sent out to help the stricken area. Of course, that is pure speculation - this could well be simply considered interesting but of no practical value, though these are a pragmatic people and I doubt whether they would erect anything so elaborate simply for its aesthetic value." His survey completed, he tucked the tiny tricorder away safely in the inner pocket of his tight-fitting jacket and looked over his shoulder at Kirk with something of a twinkle in his eye. "I am ready to proceed, Jim."

"And about time, too." Kirk passed the chain over with an ostentatious bow. "Let's be getting on then, shall we?"

* * * * *

Recalling their last encounter with 'free' Thulyan Du, Kirk decided to take several precautions before they set out to try and find the group which might know something of the missing Vulcans' whereabouts. It seemed a logical precaution to have transponders implanted at the very least, and so that evening, in the privacy of the chamber allotted them by the Ian who took them in, he called the Enterprise as usual and made arrangements that they should camp at the same oasis outside the town where they had met Savon, so that McCoy could beam down to make the required insertions.

"I could do with an evening off the ship," McCoy agreed cheerfully, "and I daresay things will have cooled off down there once it gets to evening."

"Cooled off!" Kirk's voice held a tinge of laughter. "I'd wear your thermal underwear if I were you - it gets damned cold down here."

A further word with Sulu, in temporary command, told him that no sign of any other ships or intruders had been noted in the vicinity. Knowing it was unnecessary to remind Sulu to remain vigilant, Kirk signed off and snapped the communicator off with a tiny sigh of impatience.

The walk out to the oasis was long and hot and exhausting, particularly for Kirk who had to carry the bulk of the camping gear they had to take with them. Fortunately, they could manage with very little food as they had a good supply of emergency nutri-bars for Kirk's benefit - since much of the local food was poisonous to his system - but it was vital to have something to protect them against the coldness of the Thulyan nights and as Kirk was finding to his cost, furs are both heavy and cumbersome. Wishing wearily that it was permissible to use lightweight Starfleet issue thermal sleeping-bags instead, he hitched his load further up onto his shoulders for the fortieth time.

"At least they'll stop me from getting sunburned shoulders, I guess," he commented gloomily.

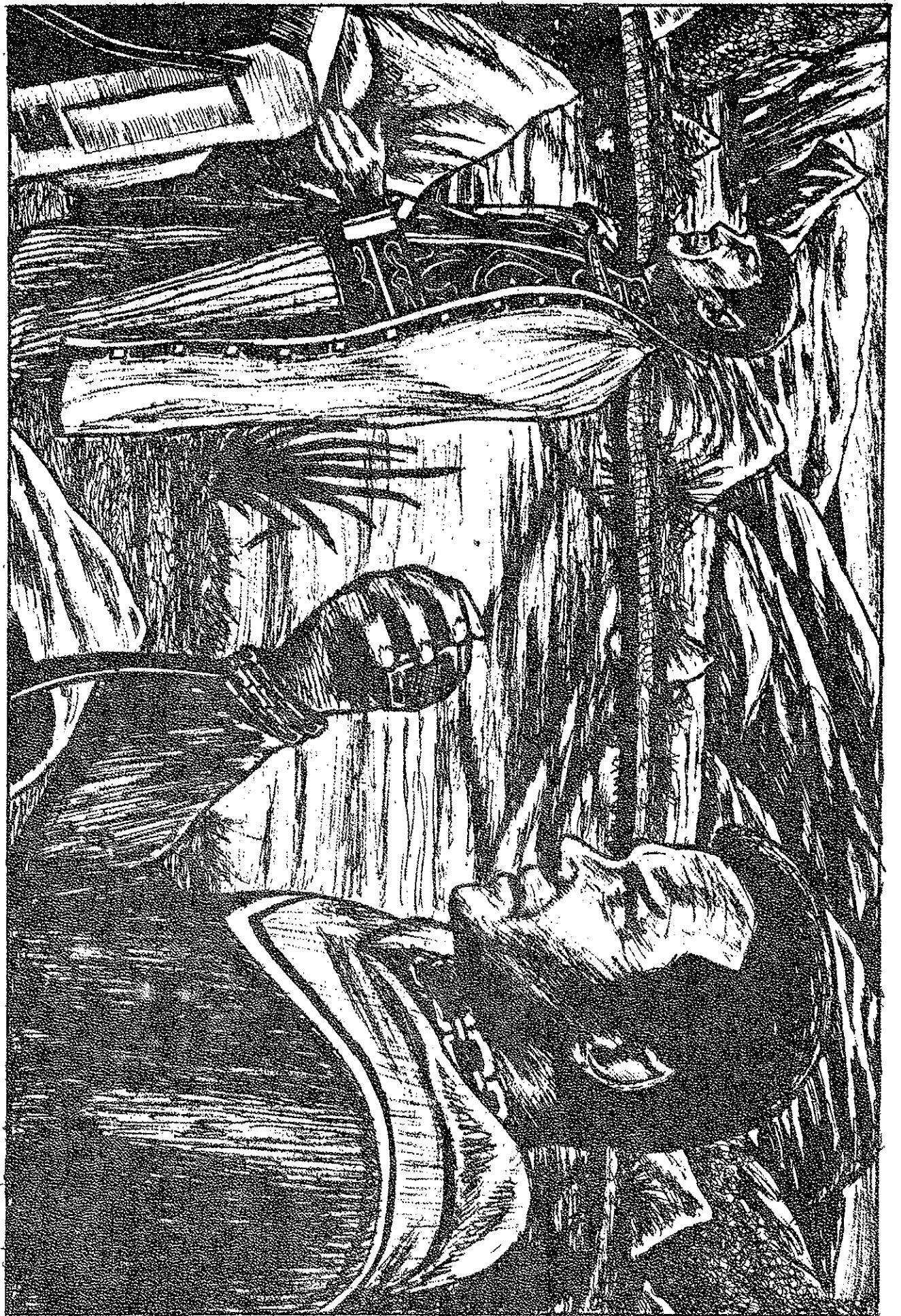
"Once we are over the next hill and out of sight of the road, I will be able to help you," Spock said. "Savon chose that particular spot because it is well away from any inhabited area and off all the normal trade routes."

"Yes, I remember," Kirk said shortly. He didn't exactly feel like talking; he was hot, thirsty, tired and inclined to be snappish as a result.

Spock came to a halt and made him take water and nourishment; Kirk ate reluctantly, able to see the sense in it, but not truly hungry; however, he drank avidly - there would be plenty to replenish the water-skin at the oasis. The pack he refused to set down, knowing how much more it would hurt to take it up again afterwards.

By early afternoon they were well on their way and out of sight of anyone likely to be on legitimate business, and Spock took charge of the bulky furs. Watching his bondbrother swing them onto his back so easily, Kirk was aware of a most unworthy pang of envy for that strength.

"You forget," Spock offered quietly, "how much more massive this load is under Thul's greater gravity. You are judging it by eye, under Terran-normal standards."



He was right, of course, and in any case it was foolish to try and measure his own strength against Spock's; he'd always known that and was ashamed of himself for forgetting it now.

With Spock carrying their pack they made much better time and arrived at the oasis early, but a quick call to the Enterprise told them that McCoy was occupied in surgery at present and would have to stick with their original schedule unless the matter was urgent.

"No, not urgent," Kirk assured his Communications Officer. "Has Chekov completed the sensor scans yet, Uhura?"

"Yes, Captain. Dr. McCoy will have the co-ordinates and descriptions with him when he beams down."

"Very well. Kirk out." He put the communicator safely away in his hidden, inner pocket and added, "In that case, since there's nothing to do for a couple of hours, I shall have a sleep."

Spock knew his bondbrother well, though. Swiftly scanning the area with the miniature tricorder, he said, "There is no-one about if you should care to swim..."

A beatific smile covered Kirk's face. "'The serpent beguiled me'," he quoted, "'and I did eat'. A swim sounds like heaven. Are you coming in as well?"

Spock declined, preferring to set up their small camp and to watch Kirk happily splashing in the shallow, warm water.

When the beep of the communicator announced McCoy's arrival, Kirk was still stretched out asleep on a fur in the nude, having dried himself off on his tunic, washed that and his trousers and left them to dry on a rock in the westering sun.

McCoy viewed the prone figure with a raised eyebrow. "If I'd known it was to be that sort of party I'd've brought a bottle." He handed one over. "Thank goodness someone around here observes the niceties of decorum anyway."

Spock read the label. "Saurian brandy, Doctor?"

"Yes. I suppose you've got glasses."

"No."

"Then we'll have to pass the bottle round."

"What bottle? Oh, hi, Bones." Kirk sat up. "Is it that late? I'd better get dressed; it's starting to get cold."

"Your clothes are quite dry." Spock handed them over.

"Is that Saurian brandy in there?" Kirk demanded appreciatively. "Bones, you're a genius."

The doctor smirked. "Just a natural talent. Oh, and here are the tapes they said you wanted."

Studying them swiftly on Spock's tricorder after McCoy had made the required transponder implantations, it was clear that there were two groups of people living out in the mountains, both quite some distance away and both in what looked like, on the evidence they had, uncomfortable places to inhabit, but not impossible.

"They could both be legitimate villages," Kirk said at last. "There's no way to tell. We'll have to check 'em both out."

"We can save ourselves some inconvenience by beaming over closer to the area," Spock pointed out.

"Agreed. Those hills to the north are reasonably well-wooded for this planet. We may even be able to get a good overview from up there. We'll get the Enterprise to beam us over before dawn."

McCoy had also provided a picnic meal for them, saying slyly that he suspected Jim would be hankering for something good and solid in the junk-food line. Kirk just grinned and tucked heartily into the huge cheese and salad rolls with every evidence of enjoyment. Once they had eaten, though, the night was getting too cold for sitting out to be pleasurable and McCoy declared himself not sorry to be returning to the comfortable heat and lower gravity of the Enterprise.

Once he had gone, Kirk and Spock shook out the furs they had brought with them and laid them out, both gratefully drawing them well up over themselves against the cold and glad of each other's warm presence. However, although it was sensible to take refuge against the cold it was still early and neither man was feeling particularly sleepy for the moment. Yesterday evening they had had little time or opportunity to talk, for Spock had sat late with the Ian who had offered them hospitality and consequently Kirk had sat up late with the Du, waiting until he was called to attend his 'master'. As a result, they'd both tumbled into bed after contacting the Enterprise and almost immediately fallen asleep; consequently, Kirk had had no time to think over the previous night's most surprising occurrence. He had been glad. He really didn't want to think about it, not while his shields were useless so that he could not prevent Spock from knowing just where his thoughts were heading. It was only the unexpectedness of it, Kirk knew, that made his mind want to dwell on it - had it been any other of his acquaintance he'd not have thought twice about it, but being Spock that was involved made it so much more unusual. Unusual? Unheard of! No, that was stupid. He knew there had been women in Spock's life, had met one or two of them for himself come to that, but this occurrence made him wonder just how many women there might have been that he knew nothing of. Vulcans were a discreet and very private race and from what he'd unwittingly been witness to the night before, last, not all that different from Humans save in the sheer speed and directness of...

Stop it!

Shaking with the effort, he brought his wayward thoughts under control, wondering frantically how much he had let slip and embarrassed as he'd never been by anything before at the possibility that he might be caught out speculating about his friend.

For want of some other distraction, he hurried into speech. "Those Thulyans are every bit as attractive a people as we thought eight years ago, don't you agree?"

"Indeed, Captain."

A whisper of movement in the furs told him Spock's head had turned his way, but he could see nothing in the darkness before the rising of the first moon.

"It also seems that the bigger the city, the better the Du are treated, doesn't it?"

Spock agreed gravely that it did.

"The farming areas seem to be the worst - where there's so much poverty around. Remember those kids on the road out of Rath, poor little half-starved brutes. You can hardly blame the Du for rebelling."

"No, indeed. Unfortunately, the Thulyan view of the universe at large is not likely to lead them quickly into the idea that all intelligent species should be free."

Kirk rolled over. "What do you mean? I thought they were maybe on the verge of letting the Du have some sort of freedom last time we were here."

"That was in Rath," Spock reminded him. "It is very different here. Indeed, from all I gather in conversation, were it not for the fact that the sacred Pool of the New Water is in that city, the rest of the surrounding states would have little to do with them."

"Why's that?"

"If you recall, Savon informed us that their ruling family had died out. The rest of the Thulyans in this hemisphere consider them dangerously independent in Rath."

Kirk gave a little choke of mirth. "Whereas here you can't blow your nose without someone gets to hear of it."

"That is because they believe the whole universe to be one vast organism, of which Man is only a part. The Thulyans have never developed a theistic theory; their world is not ruled by a god or gods, but by the effect that actions in one place may have in another."

Kirk puzzled over that for a minute. "You mean like, 'if you drink too much you get a hangover'?" he enquired.

"A simplistic analogy, but reasonably apt."

"So if someone blows their nose they want to know why?"

"Precisely. It could presage an epidemic of some sort, after all!"

"When did you learn all this - last night?"

"Yes. Our host then is one of the 'observers' who are sent out to watch the heavens from all over this continent. They are keen astronomical observers because that is one way to judge whether the administration is affecting the 'universal organism' adversely or well. The Du, of course, are not permitted to know that it is possible to tell from the world about them whether or not their masters are worthy of respect or not."

"I'll never let on I know," Kirk said fervently. "I wouldn't want to see you drummed out of the regiment for revealing state secrets to a humble Du."

"Sooner or later, of course," Spock said reflectively, "their study of the heavens is going to teach them a great deal more. At present, their astronomy is only in its infancy with their present level of technology. I suspect, though, that within five generations they may well be ready for first contact with the Federation."

"Five generations?" At first Kirk was astounded, until he recalled the very much longer Vulcan lifespan. "Yes. I guess that'd be about right. They're a bright lot." He yawned widely, burying his increasingly cold nose in the fur. "We've got to be up early, don't forget. Better get some sleep. Goodnight, Spock. Sleep well."

"Goodnight."

And then, very clearly through their bond, //And I do not consider your thoughts intrusive, my bondbrother. If I did we would not be bonded.//

Kirk reached out a hand in surprised gratitude, apology and affection, but he was asleep before it made contact with Spock's.

* * * * *

They saved themselves a good day and a half's journey next morning by beaming across the desert region to the mountainous area beyond. After the stifling heat of the lower, desert regions, Kirk welcomed the almost chill wind on the tree-covered lower slopes which they had selected as providing the best cover for their arrival. It took them some time, though, to work their way round to a vantage point from which they would see down into the valley they knew to be inhabited.

It was a pleasant spot; a small stream ran through its generous carpeting of ochre-coloured grass and a cluster of five huts was set at the nearer end, where the water widened into a tiny lake. A herd of smallish animals with tangled pelts grazed quietly round it and a lone figure was seated on a rock watching them, something held to its mouth. The plaintive wailing of the primitive instrument floated up to the watchers.

"Looks positively idyllic," Kirk murmured. "Where's the shepherdess to finish the picture?"

"There?" Spock pointed to one of the huts where a door was opening.

Kirk watched the woman emerge and guessed she had called out, for the first figure jumped up from the rock and ran swiftly towards her. When he was near it was plain from the difference in their heights that their first 'shepherd' was in fact only a child.

"Looks like Momma called him in to breakfast," Kirk said.

"Indeed."

"But it doesn't look like a hiding place for escaped slaves, somehow, does it? Still, I guess we'd better go down and investigate all the same."

"What excuse do we have to offer for being in the area?" Spock asked dubiously.

Kirk grinned at him. "Aren't you forgetting? You're a Lan, you don't have to explain yourself. If they're genuine, they'll accept us; if they're not... well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

On the surface, the small community seemed genuine enough; they appeared almost overwhelmed by awed panic at finding a Lan so unexpectedly in their midst and fluttered around, not quite knowing what to do about it.

Spock took charge smoothly, asking for refreshments to be brought for him and his Du.

"We have little fitting for a Lan," one of the elderly men said, bowing his nose nearly to his knees in his efforts to be politely obsequious.

"I shall make allowance for that," Spock answered gravely. "I do not expect to find rich foods in the houses of the Du."

Bread and milk were brought, along with a crumbly yellow cheese thickly veined with blue. Kirk's mouth watered in anticipation of a rare treat as he took his place kneeling before his supposed master to act as go-between so that the Lan's food should not be passed to him by the hands of a stranger.

These Du took little notice of him; Kirk had a shrewd suspicion that living a fairly independent life as they must do up here in the mountains, they tended to despise those who attended their Lan in a more direct manner. Provided they had an adequate food supply - and judging by what had been offered to them today, and the general, healthy appearance of the small community they seemed to have that - it might not be such a bad life.

Spock ate, throwing a few handfuls Kirk's way from time to time and meanwhile making enquiries which elicited the information that the Du worked for a landowner who lived some two days' journey away. They answered him freely with no apparent hesitation; even the child they had noted earlier was not discouraged from hovering near-by, gazing at Spock with eyes full of awed interest but answering the questions put directly to him about the herd animals without shyness. If this community was a cover for a group of escaped slaves in hiding it was a very successful one and Kirk could find no flaw in it.

Eventually Spock rose, saying he must not keep them longer from their work and that he and his Du must be on their way.

One man, the seeming leader of the group, stepped forward, fingering his coarsely woven tunic nervously as he knelt before Spock.

"If the Lan will permit..."

"Speak on."

"The Lan had best take care in the hills. There is great evil about."

"Evil? What kind of evil?"

But the Du was either not brave enough to continue or else knew little, for he would only shuffle from knee to knee and repeat that there was danger beyond the valley and the Lan must be on his guard.

"I am well served," Spock said calmly at last, seeing there was nothing to be gained from further pressure. "Come, JimDu, we must be on our way before the sun begins to descend. We have far to travel still."

The going was difficult between this site and the other they intended to investigate. The narrow trail climbed steeply at times and was hard to pick out for it was clearly little used. They had to negotiate a pass high in the hills, below the snowline but still a cold, windy and dangerous spot. They climbed in silence, Kirk panting more than a little for the air was thinner here and although it was a relief to be out of the debilitating heat, the cold was just as bad; in addition, he was naturally still struggling under the extra gravity and only too glad that they were far enough from civilisation for him to be able to hand much of his load over to Spock.

"In any case," he grinned, "if these guys are anything like Gal and his mob they'll be delighted to see you doing the heavy work."

It was a relief also to find that they had passed the highest point on their march and were on their way down once more. Since they did not expect to come to their objective until the next midmorning at the earliest, they were also on the lookout for a suitably sheltered spot to pass the night when Spock suddenly stopped abruptly, pointing over the edge of the path to the rocks some way below.

"What is it?" Kirk peered down. "Bones?"

"Two vlar, I believe - pack animals at a guess. You can see the remains of their loads also."

"So - people do come this way," Kirk mused. "Not only that, but - Spock, doesn't it strike you that they gave up awfully easily on those two vlar? With ropes one could have got those loads up again if they were important - and you don't carry stuff that isn't up here just for the hell of it. D'you get the feeling they were in a hurry?"

"It is possible, of course," Spock conceded. "On the other hand it could have been just one traveller with two or three animals. It would be a difficult task to undertake singlehanded."

"That's true - even so, I think we'll keep our eyes well peeled, just in case."

They found, not a cave which would have been ideal, but an overhang sheltered on two sides where they decided to bed down. If Kirk had been grateful for the warmth of the furs the previous night he was doubly so now, and glad too for the extra warmth of his friend at his back as he slipped into sleep, exhausted and disinclined for talk.

He wasn't sure what awakened him - possibly the clatter of stones, he thought - but the unmistakable sound of clawed feet on rock brought his head round. Sending a mental injunction to be quiet, he shook Spock carefully awake.

He could see neither of the moons from where he lay, for they were fortunately in deep shadow, but from the dual-shaded patches he could tell that both were well up. He could see a flicker of light, a naked fire-brand held aloft by the first member of the small group that was approaching. There were six or seven of them and a string of vlar, ten in number he thought, but could not be sure. They were all being extraordinarily quiet, though.

//Doesn't look like legitimate business, does it?//

//Indeed not.//

//I think we'll follow them once they're safely past. That torch should

show up well, thank goodness, so we won't have to stick too close. I don't think we'll take the pack, though, it'll slow us down too much. Pack what you can in your pockets.//

//Very well, Captain. However, I advise that you wrap a fur around your shoulders. It is bitterly cold.// An affectionate concern.

//Quack, quack!//

//Your comment is apparently irrelevant.//

//Mother hens get into a panic when their duckling foster-children go into the water.// A ridiculous mental picture of Spock rushing up and down a river bank, clucking in heartfelt agitation.

//Better safe than sorry.// A sententious retort and a retaliatory vision of Kirk in sickbay being fussed over by a team of nurses ably led by Nurse Chapel.

Kirk decided to ignore him. A Vulcan with a warped sense of humour was too much at this hour of the night. Still, his suggestion about the fur was indisputably sensible and he wrapped one firmly round himself after making quite sure that his miniaturised tricorder and communicator were safely stuffed at the very bottom of his hidden inner pocket. He added a couple of nutribars just in case and set off along the track with Spock close on his heels.

The bobbing light was easy enough to see ahead of them most of the time, even though it was occasionally obscured behind rocks or around corners for several seconds at a time; following it however was a different matter for the path was difficult to find in the confusing shadows cast by the two moons. The larger of these was nearly setting when the way took a definite downwards turn into the darkness of a deeper valley. A thread of glinting silver at one side puzzled Kirk at first until he realised he was seeing the effect of the smaller moon shining off a ribbon of water falling some considerable distance down a cliff face. Beneath it the bobbing light was stilled now, but they were too far off to be able to see anything in its feeble flame and presently it was dowsed, leaving the area in total darkness.

//Can you hear anything, Spock?// He didn't speak aloud, knowing that Spock's might not be the only keen Vulcan ears around here.

//No. I believe they are all gone from the immediate area.// A wave of reassurance.

"Good." Kirk let out a tense breath he was unaware he'd been holding and pulled the fur closer round himself. "Do you think that's where they were heading for, or have we lost them?"

Spock studied his tricorder, shading the readouts so that their dim glow could not betray them should he be wrong about their present solitude.

"I suspect this is their destination, Captain. These are certainly the co-ordinates for where we were headed."

"Even better," Kirk said with satisfaction. He paused, thinking things over and realising regretfully that it would be foolish to go rushing in in the dark - on the other hand if they waited for daylight to give them some idea what they were going into, they could have to waste a full day just hiding until it was dark enough to make a move. He sighed, hating inaction but knowing it was the only sensible course.

When told, Spock nodded his agreement and smiled faintly when Kirk added accusingly, "You thought I'd go rushing down there like the cavalry coming over the hill, didn't you?"

"Certainly not. I am well aware that the passing years have lent you considerable discretion, Captain."

"Flattery," Kirk said with commandatorial dignity, "will get you nowhere."

With the growing light they could see that the valley was not unlike that which they had seen yesterday, with the same ochre grass and steep rocky sides. This time though there was no cluster of huts, no grazing animals or tiny lake. The waterfall was high, some seventy-five metres, Kirk estimated, and a tiny, probably deep pool had formed at its base, spilling over and running away down the steep valley floor in a white, foaming flurry. There was no-one to be seen -- not a sign of habitation either by animals or men.

"Caves?" Kirk wondered, his eyes raking the cliff side for a shadowed gap that might indicate such an opening. There were several possibilities, one with a faint line running towards it that could indicate a pathway.

"A fine pair of fools we'd look if that leads to a passageway," he growled, "and we're sitting here waiting while they're calmly getting away the other side of that mountain."

"The sensors did indicate the presence of sentient beings at these co-ordinates," Spock reminded him.

"They could have been just passing through as well," Kirk said pessimistically.

"Indeed. And this tricorder is insufficiently powerful to give us the answers we require," Spock said placidly.

Kirk grinned. "You're a fine comforter."

"I merely expressed my agreement with your speculation," Spock told him blandly.

"One day I'll pin you for rank insubordination." Kirk yawned widely. "I think I'll catch up on some sleep while I can."

"An eminently sensible plan," Spock approved.

Always able to snatch a few minutes sleep when opportunity offered, Kirk readily settled down and closed his eyes, opening them again to find the sun high in the sky and Spock shaking his shoulder while a firm injunction against making a sound flooded his mind.

//Sound may carry further here than we expect.//

//O.K., I'm awake.//

Spock waited while his bondbrother's mind performed the mental equivalent of a strongly catlike stretch and then pointed downwards.

Two figures were standing near the shadowed area on the cliff face and a third was even now emerging into the light, turning round to haul hard upon a leather rope behind him. A vlar came into view, protesting with a sound not unlike that of a disgruntled Terran turkey-cock. Immediately behind it came a second, objecting even more vehemently than the first, tossing its head in affronted irascibility as it was pushed into the daylight by a fourth Thulyan. Altogether, nine of them were brought out, protesting furiously all the while. Kirk's lips twitched in amusement.

//They'd never hear us over that, Spock!// he protested.

//That had not arrived when I made the suggestion.// Spock could not quite help a smile of his own at the animals' outraged sounds.

It took some considerable time to extract the animals but it was achieved at last and they were taken one by one as they emerged to the stream to drink their fill. Two Thulyans went with them while the others went back inside the cave to emerge later with empty packs which they loaded onto the creatures' backs.

//More supplies, d'you think?//

//Possibly. Maybe they simply have to return the vlar. I wonder where they come from. Even at the best, the Du do not normally have the use of them except for their Lan - and at harvest time not even the Lan can have one just when he wants it.//

Suddenly Kirk grabbed Spock's arm. "Look, that one there - by the rock with the red streak in it - isn't that St'lurik?"

The man's hood had been pushed back, affording a proper look at his face.

"I believe you are right, Jim."

"So, they are prisoners," Kirk said slowly. "Well, that's something. Now all we have to do is get them out."

"Agreed."

It was not necessary for Spock to point out there might be a little more difficulty about that than his Captain implied; many years ago he would have done so, unsure whether the Human's laconic understatement really meant he did not appreciate the full ramifications of a complicated situation - but Spock had very soon learned never to under-estimate this particular Human. Indeed, he had long ago come to take it for granted that Kirk would eventually produce the rabbit from the hat with a flourish and the required two-chord blare of trumpets. He saw Kirk eyeing him oddly and realised his foolish thought had been read, quirked an eyebrow and received a teasing smile in return.

After a little more waiting about for which Kirk could see no obvious reason, the animals were tied together and five of the Du set off with them along the steeply twisting path up the side of the valley towards the spot where Kirk and Spock lay hidden.

Watching them idly from behind their rocky cover Kirk knew they could not be seen and was not unduly perturbed when the leader, a massively built Du, paused and turned round at a tap on his shoulder from the figure behind him, someone so small and thin Kirk was not sure whether it was a youth or even possibly a girl. He was certainly unprepared for the sudden, acute jab of mental pain that lashed through his mind, turning him dizzy and sick with a sensation of coldness and a roaring sound in his ears. Even as he wondered crazily if for the first time in his life he was about to faint, he felt Spock's hand touch his shoulder, press firmly, and a familiar, spiralling blackness take him.

Spock watched the trail of vlar out of sight, relief washing over him at the narrowness of their escape. It was the first indication he had had that any of the Thulyans were any more telepathic than the vast majority of Humans; some psi quality he had certainly noted, but it was very minor indeed and only encountered infrequently. This had been a probing mind as sharp as tempered steel and it had seemed about to cut through his weakened shields like a hot knife through polystyrene foam, yet at the same time there had been a hideous emptiness about it that he could not explain - fortunately he had had his wits about him sufficiently to render Kirk unconscious as soon as he had felt that first, searing touch, but what had provided the necessary damper to the phenomenal range and power that had touched them both he had no idea at all. For the moment he was just grateful; curiosity could come later when his mind had again achieved its proper balance.

He turned his attention back to Kirk. The Human was stirring and rubbing at his neck, his face contorted in a grimace of pain.

"What the hell's going on, Mister?" he croaked. "You'd better have some damn' good reason for assaulting your superior officer."

Spock knelt behind him, massaging the induced stiffness from the shoulder muscles. "A very powerful telepath, Captain. One of the Du who have just gone by."

Kirk sat up groggily, his eyes still not quite focusing. "Did they see us?"

"No. Something -- or someone -- damped the field before we were detected."

"Someone? You mean there may be someone else around who knows we're out here?"

"Affirmative, Captain."

Kirk pondered that. The element of surprise was always valuable and he did not relish the notion of committing themselves to the unknown darkness of those caves without it. He thought it unlikely that watch was not being kept in any case and the confirmed presence of St'lurik gave positive proof these Du were not here legally and would be doubly suspicious when Spock appeared in their midst. The most sensible plan was for him to go in -- straight away, and alone.

He turned to speak to Spock and found Spock had been 'eavesdropping', for he received an emphatic headshake before he'd even opened his mouth.

"Jim, that would be most unwise under the circumstances."

Kirk always valued his First Officer's opinion even when he acted in direct contradiction of it. "Why?"

"At present you are vulnerable to telepathic invasion," Spock said succinctly. "Even were we not still suffering from these after-effects I doubt whether you could have maintained a shield against such a powerful telepath without my assistance."

Kirk's mouth set in an obstinate line. "You know what they'll probably do to you as soon as they see one of the 'Ian'..."

"Of course." Only the bondlink showed Kirk the faint impatience Spock experienced at this overprotectiveness. "But if I am found here and alone -- and if that group returns I shall almost certainly be found -- then I am likely to suffer a worse fate than if I am by your side, am I not?"

Kirk emitted an exasperated snort. "Next you're going to suggest I use you as an excuse to get in there."

"Naturally," Spock responded blandly. "With me as your prisoner you will immediately establish your bona fides as a sympathiser with the cause of freedom." Then, seeing Kirk still about to argue, he added, "This is still a Prime Directive planet, Captain. You cannot risk physical injury at this time. Dr. McCoy has done wonders with your external appearance -- internally, however, you are a red-blooded Human."

He was right, of course. Even so, Kirk was ruefully aware that the most powerful argument, as far as he was concerned, was his lack of proper mental shielding. This most recent reminder of the devastating effect one mind could produce on another was still reverberating unpleasantly inside him, raising the short hairs on the back of his neck and making him faintly queasy.

"We'll go in together," he said crisply, gathering the reins of command firmly again.

Spock gave a tiny nod of satisfaction and removed his tight-fitting jacket, then his ruffled shirt, and proceeded to tear the latter into strips.

"A rope," he replied succinctly in reply to Kirk's raised eyebrow. "Plaited, I believe it will prove sufficiently strong to appear to rest rain me."

It was a somewhat fiddly process but it was finally done and Spock's hands were tied behind him in the way illusionists use to obtain instant freedom at the right moment -- an accomplishment taught to every Starfleet officer and which had frequently proved exceptionally useful on those occasions when the technique had been applied.

Kirk stepped back and looked his First Officer up and down. "They've probably been watching us all along anyway," he said resignedly.

"Then they have been remarkably restrained in not coming out to take us prisoner by now."

Spock's tone was disrespectfully tart and Kirk stiffened unconsciously at it, before realising that once again his First Officer had produced the required effect upon his Captain with remarkable ease.

"You may be the perfect Svengali," he said cryptically, "but I'd make a dreadful Trilby." Leaving Spock to puzzle that one out he pointed to the path. "Get moving, Mister." He picked up Spock's jacket, rejected the idea of trying to fit himself into it and instead slung it carelessly round his shoulders.

Getting down into the valley was comparatively easy, but the way up to the gash in the cliff face was considerably steeper than it had looked from their vantage point. If someone was watching and waiting for them they were going to be caught at a definite disadvantage.

Someone was waiting - but to Spock's open astonishment it was St'lurik and a Thulyan Du together.

Eyeing Spock's bound hands with something close to approval the Du said, "I am Sul. Sadiok says I am to bid you welcome."

Sadiok? Kirk's spine tingled with a warning thrill at the name. Why the devil was that particular member of the Vulcan group in charge here? Suspicions thoroughly aroused, he prodded Spock ahead of him.

"I am Jim." Sensibly he did not add the slave tag of Du to his name as he would have done in the city. His eyes slid to St'lurik, noting with surprise the look of extreme tension in the older Vulcan's face and body. Something was going on, and he had better be wary.

"Let the Ian go together," Sul said cheerfully. "We will follow them."

Inside, the rock opened into a wide, bowl-like cave, first dipping down steeply - Kirk could see why they had had such difficulty in getting the vlar out - then rising and narrowing again to climb in a curving path back and up into the hillside. From the smoothness underfoot he guessed that this too had once been a watercourse, that steeply dipping entry bowl a tiny lake dug out by the rushing passage of water. The way swiftly grew dim, but occasional shafts to the outer air let in sufficient light for the path to be visible most of the time. For the rest, Kirk had to trust to luck and the sound of Spock's booted feet up ahead to keep him moving; obviously Vulcan eyes adapted quicker to changes in light intensity than his own did.

Sul chattered cheerfully and unsuspectingly as they made their way along - about the boredom of a life spent mostly in hiding, of his half-formed but never implemented intention to return to a world which, in retrospect, had not been as unpleasant as he had once believed, of his pleasure at seeing new faces in their enclosed and cut-off community - Kirk grew steadily more and more alert, the back of his neck positively bristling with danger signals as they went deeper and deeper into the hill.

The next cave was a surprise and breath-taking vision. Half open to the sky, the massive chimney formation that gaped above them was garlanded with huge feathery-leaved trees down half its depth until, some twenty metres above their heads, the rocks became too steep for anything save stunted trees to grow, their roots diving deeply into the cracks for nourishment and a secure hold. Through this the stream that they had seen in the valley fell in a series of foaming leaps into a deep pool at one side and thence into a deep but narrow trench to the far side where it issued through another, low aperture into the open air and presumably down into the valley. Kirk had seldom seen anywhere so beautiful, and even in his present concern could not resist an awed look round.

Sul caught his eye and laughed. "Everyone reacts so. It is lovely, isn't it?"

"Very lovely," Kirk agreed, dragging his eyes away from it reluctantly. "Where now?"

"Across the stream." Sul pointed. "There is a maze of caves and passages beyond. We will find your friend there."

Friend? Again Kirk stiffened mentally. Was Sul referring to Sadiok as his friend, and, in any case, how had the Vulcan - or Romulan, or whatever he was - known that they were coming?

He was not to have to wait long for answers.

As all four jumped nimbly across the narrow fissure he saw Sadiok approaching along a passageway off to one side. Even in the half light the man looked terrible, gaunt and hollow-cheeked; as he came further into the green light streaming through the lush growth overhead, Kirk could see deep shadows under his eyes and an underlying look that told of a pain long-endured.

He had seen a similar look on Spock's face - and in his own - while their bond-wound was still newly opened.

"Untie the Lan's hands," Sadiok said abruptly. "There is no need for further pretence now." Catching Kirk's eye he must have seen something of the Human's shocked surprise for he added, "Sul, go to your sister now. Fea has been calling for you."

His sister? Clearly the boy had not chattered as freely as Kirk had first thought.

Throwing Spock back his jacket, Kirk stood quite still, feet planted ready for any necessary action, rested his fists lightly on his hips and demanded, "What the hell is going on here?"

Sadiok smiled, but it was not a cheerful expression. "I cannot blame you for being suspicious, Captain, but for the moment there is no immediate need for concern. Dav has taken Teg with him and they will be gone until tomorrow. By that time I hope we will be long gone from here."

"Dav?"

"Did you not see them leave?" Sadiok looked surprised. "Teg nearly 'sensed' you. It was fortunate that I was able to misdirect his attention in time." He cast a quelling look Spock's way. "You were not very adept in hiding your presence."

"I didn't know the Thulyans were telepaths," Kirk put in. There was no need for Spock or him to go into details of their present problems to this comparative stranger.

"Most of them are not," St'lurik said wearily. "Teg is very unusual indeed. No Vulcan has such a powerful range, nor the ability to reach so deeply into another's mind. But he is also of very low intelligence, almost untrainable I would say, and these Du make shameless use of him to learn what they want to know or to force others to do their bidding."

Kirk was appalled. "You mean they use him as some kind of living mind-sifter?"

"I mean precisely that." St'lurik's brows were drawn into a heavy frown, the same look of pain behind his eyes. "But contact with his...lack of intelligence strips the mind of everything."

"What happened to you?" Kirk demanded. "How did you get here?"

"They captured us in the ruins outside Parathelmon."

Kirk nodded. "We searched there."

St'lurik blinked and looked away. "Did they find Zabri?"

"They found him." Kirk realised he was reluctant to talk about that.

St'lurik sighed wearily. "We did not hear them coming - none of us. We believe Teg already had some form of control of us then. They seemed to come

from nowhere. Dav questioned us...asked where were our Du and when we told him we had none with us, told us we were lying. He made Teg take Zabri's mind..." He paused, eyes closing over a hideous memory. "One does not often hear a Vulcan in such agony. Forgive me, Captain..."

"I understand," Kirk said gently. "I've seen Zabri."

St'lurik nodded, visibly pulling himself together. "Fortunately for us, Teg did not understand what he found in Zabri's mind - it did not match what he knows of his world, of course - he grew confused and panicked. Dav tried to make him take Sisot's mind also, but he would not - then!"

"After that," Sadiok put in ruefully, "they did not know what to do with us. Teg would not control us but on the other hand they could not let us go nor kill us there. They did not want to leave our bodies to be found for that would arouse precisely the kind of interest they were trying to avoid, so they decided to bring us here and deal with us when they had time to think what to do. I believe they still hoped Teg would be able to find out more about us for them."

Kirk's suspicions were still not wholly allayed. "It's been three standard weeks since then. You'll forgive me for asking, Mr. Sadiok, but how come you're still alive after all this time?"

"Sadiok has saved our lives," St'lurik interrupted nervously. "He is fully as powerful a telepath as Teg."

Kirk felt Spock's mental shock and sent a questing probe his way.

"No Vulcan is that powerful, Captain.// A flaring suspicion.

Sadiok's mind touched their bond briefly. He seemed almost to be laughing at them. "I 'heard' you outside," he said aloud, "and managed to divert Teg's attention from you, or you would have been captured. Dav is frightened and suspicious - he knows he is trapped now as surely as before, but he does not know what to do about it. He would have no mercy on either of you, I assure you. That is why I blocked off Teg's mind; once I realised who you were I was doubly glad I had done so. We need your help, Captain Kirk. St'lurik was able to tell me much about you and your legendary First Officer once I had told him I had touched the minds of a Human and a Vulcan from Starfleet."

Kirk met his eyes squarely, his expression stern and challenging. "Just exactly who are you?"

Again that mental laugh. "Spock was right, I am not a Vulcan. I am a Romulan. I congratulate you both on your perspicacity. No-one else has suspected me. St'lurik only learned of it because we have linked our minds from time to time since we have been prisoners here. It was necessary for us; together we have been able to withstand Teg...up to now. I do not know how much longer our joint shields can protect us."

"None of this is relevant or important now," St'lurik said impatiently. "Sadiok's race is not the point at issue."

Kirk hardly agreed with that but for the moment there was no need to say so. "We've got to get out of here."

"Agreed," Sadiok said eagerly. "How do you propose to do it?"

"Contact my ship - unless one of yours is round to interfere." Kirk offered the challenge, but Sadiok refused it, smilingly.

"You will get no opposition from me or my people, Captain. I am as keen to get out of here as anyone else, believe me. In any case, I am quite alone here and have no military backing of any kind."

Going to his side, St'lurik said, "If it were not for Sadiok, Captain Kirk, we would all be dead. He has provided a shield not just for me but for us all since they...since they made Teg strip Sisot's mind also."

The brief break in the even Vulcan voice told Kirk a great deal. If St'lurik thought Sadiok was to be trusted then he too would extend a certain wary trust also -- but he would keep his eye on the Romulan all the same and explanations would have to be forthcoming before they finally left Thul. For the moment, though, he had other worries.

"Sisot is like Zabri -- mind-wiped?"

"Sisot is dead," St'lurik said heavily, "by his own hand. We did not understand what he was suffering nor what he intended until it was too late."

Having seen Zabri, Kirk was hardly surprised at this although he heard the news with a brief pang of sorrow. As always though, there was not enough time for grief now, more urgent matters claimed their attention first.

"Then we only have the two of you to concern us," he said, reaching into that inner pocket for his communicator, but he might have known that the situation could not be that easily resolved.

Sadiok put out a hand. "No, you do not understand. If it was just the two of us, we could have been gone long ago...there are more of the Du who are suffering terribly."

"Sadiok's presence calms them when Teg is close," St'lurik explained. "If we leave them here, when Dav and the rest return they will make Teg search their minds to find out where we are gone and I do not think Fea, for one, will survive another such attack."

Kirk's hand, arrested in removing the miniature communicator, patted it regretfully and let it slide back down into the depths of his pocket. "Take things more slowly," he said firmly. "At the moment we're getting this in bits and pieces and it's not making a lot of sense. Just give me a complete report of what's going on."

Since Sadiok was such a powerful telepath he had assimilated many more facts from Dav and the rest than Kirk really needed to know and it was not always easy to keep him to the bare bones of the story, but with occasional sidetracks into unnecessary detail he explained that about a year previously, a group of slaves in the country house whose estates covered a vast area to the south of Parathelmon realised that the kitchen slave there, a pitiful, scrawny idiot-boy (named Teg by them on account of his habit of scuttling sideways from trouble like the tegrosentis -- a lizard-like creature that dwelt in holes in the barn walls) could sometimes read their minds. At first they were wildly angry and threatened to kill him for it...only to find they could not do it, that when they tried, great waves of peace and love swamped their minds instead. It was only when they were away from him that they could even remember what they wanted to do and why.

One of them, Dav, astuter than the rest, saw there might be a way to use this power of Teg's if it could be directed by a greater intelligence, and set out deliberately to win the boy's trust. It was the first time in the years since his mother had been sold away from the estate that Teg had been offered any kindness and before long he was Dav's willing slave in every thing, bound to him by chains of gratitude and devotion. At first Dav took this carelessly, inclined to laugh at the boy on the sly, but then one day their Lan had Dav beaten for some minor fault. Up to now it had not even occurred to Dav to ask Teg for anything more than what would alleviate his daily lot, render his life a little more bearable, but Teg was not immediately there this time to cast his mental net around the Lan and prevent the punishment, and when he finally did arrive, after the beating, the bitter rage in Dav's mind sent the boy crazy with grief and anger and he struck out instinctively with a blinding force that terrified himself with its intensity and left the Lan dead at his feet.

To everyone else it seemed like a natural death, a heart attack. In effect that was what it was, for Teg simply forced the Lan's heart to stop beating. Not even Dav knew what had happened at first until the boy's terror communicated itself to him and he understood its cause. Three days later, he directed Teg

to slay the rest of the household Lan, before they fled together with the remaining Du. Dav did not want to leave, but common sense told him it was foolish to stay, that sooner or later something would go wrong and he and Teg would suffer for what they had done.

"He controls this group by fear, you understand," Sadiok finished. "They are no freer now than they were before, and Dav has become ruthless. He controls this whole area, takes what he wants with Teg's help and is indifferent to who gets hurt in the process. He has to be stopped. At the very least we have to get these Du away from him."

"You don't ask much," Kirk said ruefully. "How the devil do you think I'm going to do that?"

"You have a starship up there. Don't try and deny it," he added, seeing Kirk's withdrawal. "I can see it in your mind."

"If you can see it in my mind," Kirk said curtly, "you can also see that I am bound by a specific regulation, our Prime Directive. We cannot betray our presence nor the existence of space travel to primitive peoples. We cannot interfere..."

"Then you will condemn them to die in agony," Sadiok blazed at him, his mouth tightening ominously.

Kirk felt the hot flush of anger on his weakened shields. He stood his ground. "We cannot interfere," he continued patiently, "with the use of my ship or of any technology unknown on Thul. Any other practical help we can give we will gladly offer."

Sadiok faced him, aggression in every line of his body. St'lurik stirred restlessly and made as if to speak but Spock reached out and touched him lightly, shaking his head, and the older Vulcan subsided again.

The Romulan's eyes dropped first, as Spock had guessed they would. Few men having faced that look of steely determination made the mistake of thinking they could move James Kirk. The young man's shoulders slumped in weary submission.

"I am very tired of fighting, Captain," he said softly. "What suggestions do you have to make?"

"How many Du are there?"

"Six here. He has taken the rest of them with him."

Kirk rubbed his chin reflectively. "Does he often leave you here alone like this?" he asked, staring directly at the Romulan, puzzled as to why they had made no effort to escape before.

St'lurik vented a small breath of annoyance. "You have no reason to suspect Sadiok of an ulterior motive, Captain Kirk," he said firmly. "At least, not in this instance."

"No?" Kirk's tone was studiously polite but disbelieving and his eyes never left the Romulan although he addressed the Vulcan. "Mr. St'lurik, this man is - by his own admission - a Romulan. I have no idea why one of his race should be working here with a group of Vulcans, but I do know that it is not with their informed consent."

The Romulan shrugged. "I don't blame you for your suspicions. Whatever my original brief was, believe me, it has nothing to do with present circumstances. My only desire for now is to free these people from an intolerable situation. I assure you, Captain, that no telepath of my race can view the mental domination of others with anything other than abhorrence. We Romulans may have our differences with our Vulcan kin but we are at least alike in this."

St'lurik stirred again. "I trust him, Captain Kirk, with my life, and, more importantly, with my mind. Perhaps you cannot understand that, but..."

It was unreasonable of Kirk to feel impatience at these constant references to his assumed inability to comprehend the telepathic mind, but the fact remained that it did unduly irritate him.

"I understand very well," he said curtly.

"The Captain and his First Officer are mind-bonded," Sadiok explained matter-of-factly.

If nothing else, that calm, unsolicited reference to such private information would have told Kirk that Sadiok was no Vulcan.

Nodding a brief assent St'lurik's way he said, "I agree to trust him also." He knew the mental reservation 'for now' must be obvious to Sadiok, even though Kirk had his own mental shields up as hard as he could. After that short, shattering experience of Teg's mind, he intended to be as prepared as possible to repel mental invasion from now on.

"We have been wasting time," he went on firmly, "for which I apologise. I presume there is a reason why Dav is content to leave you here apparently unguarded."

"He believes that we are too afraid of Teg finding us for him if we make our escape. Also, the six Du here are either physically incapacitated in some way or, like Sul, they will not leave those who are hurt. His sister Fea has a shattered leg and is in great pain. Normally I would help her by providing mental support, maybe taking some of the pain when I could, but I dare not even try after what she has endured. She did not want to come here but Dav made Teg take over her mind and she is terrified of any kind of mental contact now. I cannot help her except at a very shallow level. Sul is so frightened, for her and for himself, that he shuns reality, chooses to believe that he still has an element of choice, that he could leave if he wished it."

"And the other four here?"

"Two children and their mother -- she came willingly with Dav at first because she knew the Lan was about to take the older child from her and sell him in the city. Now she is terrified of what Dav will do to them if she tries to escape... The boy once tried to protect his mother from Teg and was injured when Dav struck him down. The wound was superficial but it is slow to heal and troubles him. The last Du is an elderly man, infirm from a wasting disease; he cannot travel far or fast without help."

Kirk took a long breath. "We have got problems! I think we'd better contact Savon. At least we can let him know what's going on. There might be something they can do to help. You deal with that, Spock. I'll contact the Enterprise and give them a report as to what's going on."

Sulu sounded distinctly worried. "We could beam down a landing party in disguise, Captain."

"Negative. This telepath is too dangerous for us to risk that, Mr. Sulu. I've seen the results of his activities and they are not pretty. We'll report in hourly -- meanwhile, you keep in touch with Mr. Savon, see if he can come up with anything useful. Spock is briefing him now. Kirk out."

As he stowed his communicator away once more, Kirk turned to his First Officer asking, "Does he...?"

"So -- new 'friends' have come to join us?"

Kirk broke off in mid-question, swinging round at the unfamiliar, sneering voice. "Dav?"

"The same. And who have we here? Teg told me something was happening that I should know about."

"I overpowered my Ian," Kirk said quickly, "brought him here with me. He can be my slave for a change. I want freedom, Dav. I want to join you."

"Do you?" Dav came up to him, staring down at him from insolently close, thereby ensuring Kirk would have to tilt his head uncomfortably and submissively if he wanted to look back at him. Instead, Kirk dropped his eyes in a Du's instinctive reaction to authority and fell to his knees in the accepted gesture of respect.

Dav threw back his head and laughed. "I like to see one who knows his place." He leaned closer, threatening. "You do know your place, do you not?"

"Of course," Kirk let himself stammer, flesh tingling with the sense of evil emanating from this Du. That shepherd's warning was all too understandable now; channelled through Teg, Dav's presence hit you like a cold breath from the tomb; the man had become a ruthless killer, devoid of emotion or pity. Sadiok was right, he had to be stopped.

"Then you will let my friend Teg touch your mind. I would know all about you."

Kirk went cold. There was no way he could prevent Teg, and he knew it. Possibly during those few brief weeks after he had learned to shield his mind even from his new bondbrother and before Spock had been forced to damage their bond so drastically, he might have been able to resist, but he doubted it. If Vulcans could have their minds stripped with such ease, there was no resistance he could put up that would be effective.

His eyes slid to the cowering form clinging half behind Dav, one hand clutching at the rough brown tunic, and inexplicably his fear turned to a melting pity. The boy was terrified out of what little wits he had; couldn't Dav see how horribly cruel he was being, making him touch so many minds? He feigned ignorance.

"...touch my mind? I don't know what you mean."

"It does not matter." Dav moved away irritably. "There is nothing for you to understand, nothing to concern you. Teg!"

The boy looked up at him pleadingly, slack mouth opened; lax, green-tinged tongue protruding; heavy drops of spittle flecked his chin.

"Teg!" Dav spoke his name warningly. "Do as you are told - now!"

Cringing, the boy crept unwillingly forward, his eyes flickering uneasily between mentor and victim.

//Jim - give me your mind.// A quick lash of thought.

//Your shields are weak as well.// Protesting.

//Do it!// A command. Thunderous.

Startled, Kirk obeyed him instinctively, wondering both at himself and Spock. He let his mind go, one part of him still unwilling to expose Spock to this needlessly, but a second thought told him that sooner or later Spock would also be exposed to the mind probe and that together they might, just might, be able to survive.

What he had not expected was to encounter another mind, vibrant, almost tangible. It encased them both, building a wall of steel about them.

//Sadiok?//

//Together we may be able to contain him.// Pulsing excitement, an image of a chase overlaid with compassion and a beat of healthy fear.

//Contain him?// Kirk couldn't even begin to understand what might be required of him. His mind quailed in spite of his willingness to participate.

//Just follow Spock's lead. Your minds are well-tuned. You can do no

harm.// Soothing.

This man would be a dangerous enemy, Kirk realised. Most dangerous in that he liked him on a deep, instinctive level and he could not help recalling another Romulan he had once encountered...

The image was gone again, scattered into a thousand pieces that flew to the four winds, wheeled, spun about him and reformed into a wall, solid and reassuring before them. Nothing and no-one could get through a well-built wall like that. A total security pervaded his being.

Slowly the world began to remould itself about him and his head was his own again. Shaking to clear its woolliness, he blinked rapidly and managed to refocus eventually, in time to see Dav sink to his knees on the floor, whimpering piteously.

Teg gave a single, high-pitched, animal scream and turned away, trying to flee, but Sadiok and Spock were too quick for him. Kirk experienced a brief sensation of his desolation and panic before Spock's fingers gripped the scrawny neck and the boy went limp.

Kirk clutched his head, half expecting it to come apart in his hands, relieved and delighted when it did neither, merely throbbled protestingly at him, but even that was already dying away.

He looked round for Spock. "Are you all right?"

"Perfectly, Captain."

"What happened?" Looking at the wailing Dav, Kirk had a sick feeling that he already knew.

"He pushed Teg too hard at last," St'lurik told them. "The boy turned his anger on him...his mind is gone."

"Oh, no." Kirk could not help his murmur of revulsion. He wouldn't have wished that fate on anyone. He took a long breath, wondering if, with Dav out of the way, they could afford to let things take their own course here.

He opened his mouth to voice the thought but it was never uttered. Deep beneath his feet there was a faint vibration as of some vast engine starting up and then, with a groan so deep it was almost more a sensation of horror rather than a sound, the floor shook, throwing them off balance, then everything was still again.

Earthquake!

//Earthquake.//

As three separate echoes in his mind he could hear himself, Spock and Sadiok. In spite of himself, he grinned.

"We've got to get out of here. Get out into the open."

"Agreed. Captain, if you will take Teg, the rest of us will get the other Du."

It made sense - but Kirk was distinctly reluctant to handle the inert form all the same. Skin crawling in case the boy aroused from his unconsciousness and reached out with that terrifyingly powerful, incoherent mind, he hauled the slack body up, slung him over his shoulder and made for the narrow gap where the stream ran.

Its rushing had slackened considerably; probably a rockfall somewhere higher up had impeded its flow. The thought galvanised him into action. As he passed Dav, he prodded him ferociously.

"Follow me! Follow Teg."

The sobbing gasps paused and Dav looked up, eyes wild and terrified, to find Teg's face hanging upside down before him. He gave a huge, screaming howl

and jumped away, then turned and headed for one of the many passages off at the other side of the main cavern.

Kirk swore, furious with his own ineptitude. He was about to follow when the floor shook again. Cursing the decision that had to be made he crossed the stream and made for the passage they had come in by. At least this way he stood a chance of keeping Teg alive; Dav he could come back for afterwards.

The path seemed even more difficult to follow on the long, downwards journey and he stumbled several times, once taking a crashing fall in one of the darkest stretches. This made him slow to a more cautious pace after he had located and reshouldered his lost bur'en. Unfortunately for Teg, as he found in the next tiny patch of sunlight, the Thulyan had acquired a large graze down the side of his face which was sluggishly welling green blood.

"Sorry," Kirk said aloud, rather sheepishly. It wouldn't help the boy -- but it made him feel better.

Looking round once they were outside he was wondering which was the safest place to pick when he heard Spock's voice in his mind.

//Upwards, Jim. Away from falling rocks.//

That was right, of course, and Kirk ought to have thought it out for himself. If nothing else, the lapse showed him that meld had taken it out of him more than he'd realised; he wasn't thinking clearly even yet.

Moving on he paused, half turned and called out. "Dav went back into the caves..."

"We know." Sadiok's voice. He emerged into the light carrying an elderly man. "We saw him. It's too late to do anything for him. Go further up, Captain. Don't waste time."

As he turned to go, Kirk had quickly counted those present. Sadiok and the old man; St'lurik with a young female held securely in his arms; a woman carrying a small boy; a smaller, female child hard on her heels; Sul looking shocked and dazed, a bruise already showing over one eye, brought up the rear.

"Where's Spock?"

Sul gasped out, "He was just behind me -- told me to go on. There were rocks falling."

//Spock!// A cry he could not contain, even as he struggled upwards; Teg's weight excessive in this higher gravity.

//Go on, Jim. Get them to safety.//

//You're trapped?// Panic.

//A minor rockfall only.// Calmly. //My left arm and leg are caught. I am attempting to extricate myself as quickly as I can, but the way ahead is blocked.//

//Damn, damn, damn!// Kirk raged fruitlessly as he climbed steadily, feeling the occasional shiver of the ground beneath him, hearing the crash of a falling rock.

Over to the left the ground levelled out and he made for it, laying Teg down with a sigh of relief.

"Look after him, Sadiok. I'm going back for Spock."

"Back?" Sul gave a little wail of fear. "You'll get yourself killed, and all for a Ian?"

"I'll risk it," Kirk said curtly, already on the move. //Hang on, Spock. I'm coming.//

//I do not believe I shall be going anywhere in the immediate future.// A flash of wry humour. //My progress is somewhat slow.//

Kirk steadied himself going down the cliff; this was no time to be acquiring a broken ankle and Spock had sounded reassuringly matter-of-fact about his predicament.

Across the deep entrance bowl he half ran, half stumbled up the now-broken pathway, cursing the fresh rocks that littered his way, but grateful for the extra light that one or two wider gaping fissures now afforded him. Round a second turn, the way was blocked completely and he stopped, dismayed.

//Spock, how near the entrance were you?//

//Not far from it.//

//Call out, I'll see if I can hear you.//

He could!

The wave of relief that washed over Kirk startled him by its sheer intensity but he had no time to think over its implications now and set to work, moving the rocks aside one by one; at least the earth tremors seemed to have stopped, which was something.

At last, shifting a rock, he saw a gap behind it and a moving shape.

"Spock?" He gave a sob of gladness, thrusting his arm through the space.

A warm hand took his. "I am here, Jim, and I have managed to free myself."

"Thank God." Once again that intense flood of emotion. Knowing it must have bled over their bond, Kirk said shakily, "Am I ever glad to see you."

He let go, pulling back to widen the gap so that Spock could crawl out, hauling at his shoulders to help pull him through. Then he simply sat back, holding him in a bear hug of joy and trying to say with the simple, primitive gesture what he could not even begin to put into words, for now, not even in the privacy of their bond.

A wordless sensation of acceptance and welling affection rose up round him, assuring him he was not alone in what he felt. Patting Spock gently, Kirk drew away smiling, knowing that whatever the future held it would be good because his bondbrother would be there to share it and that anything they shared would be all right with him.

He got up, saying, "Are you badly hurt anywhere? You must be bruised half to death."

"I believe my left wrist is broken and I have a few minor scratches."

Kirk gave a grimace. "I'm glad I came back for you. You'd never have dug your way out one-handed."

"I am glad you did, too." The heartfelt response was positively Human, and Kirk grinned at him.

"Come on, Mister, let's get out of here."

Back on the crest of the hill, they found Teg beginning to stir.

"He's coming round, Spock," Kirk rapped out.

Sadiok turned towards them. "He must be kept unconscious for the present," he said urgently. "He will be terrified, uncontrollable. None of us could contain him yet, and we have other things on our minds."

"Agreed." Spock looked at Kirk, knowing his Captain would not wish anyone to suffer needlessly but tacitly asking permission for what must be done.

Kirk nodded. He wasn't going to argue with these two and having twice now seen the effect of Teg's unleashed mind for himself, he heartily concurred with Sadiok. For the boy's own sake he must remain unconscious for a while longer.

He knew his own body relaxed when the boy's did, but he was uncertain whether

it was simple relief of reverberations from that powerfully telepathic brain. He looked round the group, noting the young Du's bruised face and asked, "What happened to Sul?"

"Dav tried to get to Fea," St'lurik said quickly. "The boy resisted him... there is a chasm in the lower passage. We were lucky not to lose Sul; Spock was only just in time to prevent his falling down there also."

Kirk gave a brief, commendatory nod Spock's way and turned his attention to other things. Night would be coming all too soon, they had little time to prepare for it either, and even though it was probably not a killing cold for those who were fit and healthy, several of their number were bruised and battered, two were already ill, and he wasn't feeling all that good himself!

He moved away from the group, directing a mental order to Spock to keep the rest of them away and sat down behind a smallish rock just out of their line of vision; he opened first his tricorder to make a couple of readings and then his communicator.

"Captain! You're all right!"

Raising his eyebrows at Uhura's heartfelt cry he said, "Just about - why?"

"That earthquake..."

"Saw it on the sensors, did you?"

"No - at least, yes. The point is, we caused it. We just didn't expect the effect to spread so far. We thought we had it sufficiently localised."

Caused it? Whatever for? Never mind, explanations could wait a second or two. "We're safely out of the caves, Uhura, but we're on an exposed ridge. We can't get to any kind of habitation before nightfall and obviously we can't go back into the caves. We need protection. Spock and I left our bag of supplies and some furs over on the far ridge. Have stores fabricate a few synthetics for us to use - they must look as close to the real furs as they can manage. And ask Dr. McCoy to beam down an emergency splint suitable to use here. We think Spock's broken his left wrist. These are the co-ordinates." He read them off the tricorder before tucking it securely away once more and asking, "Now, what's all this about causing that earthquake?"

"It was Mr. Savon's suggestion, sir. Apparently in Parathelmon they have some device that tells them when there's an earthquake in the region."

"That's right. I've seen the thing. Spock said he thought it was a primitive seismograph. A most impressive edifice. How was that supposed to help?"

"He said they would get teams ready to send out as soon as messages came in. He would leave Parathelmon straight away and then return with a message to send them to your specific area. The quake had to be genuine and in the right direction, you see, or they'd know."

"Yes, I understand that. And in the right area too."

"Yes, sir. We triggered what we calculated would be a tiny quake with the tractor beam of course, but it spread further than we anticipated. There must be an undetected fault line there."

"I see," Kirk said drily. "Well, it was a good idea and I'll probably stop shaking long enough to say thank you one of these days. Who made the calculations - Chekov?"

"Yes, sir."

"You'd better tell him to be ready to explain it all to Mr. Spock. I have a feeling he'll be interested. Kirk out."

He rejoined the group once more, finding the supposed 'Lan' busily occupied in tending the injured Du, who seemed stunned by this evidence of genuine concern for their well-being. There was little they could do for the moment save bathe

their wounds with water from the stream below; tomorrow they would lead them over the mountain to the shepherds where perhaps they could do a little more. The problem of what to do with Sadiok must be shelved for the moment; in any case, he wanted to consult Savon before he came to any definite decisions. Perhaps they might be able to establish just what sort of harm - if any - had been done. It could be, of course, that the Romulan was there purely for research. Kirk hid a wry smile, knowing he wanted it to be that way and that he heartily disliked the idea of condemning the likable young man to life as a prisoner convicted of spying. After all, Thul could hardly be said to be a part of the Federation and it was clearly of interest to Romulans and Vulcans alike. He could only hope that the Federation Council and the higher echelons of Starfleet would see it that way also.

He dismissed the thought for the moment.

"Spock, do you feel up to a walk to the far ridge? I've asked them to beam down extra furs there, where we left ours. There's a splint for your wrist, too, which is why I'd like you to come along. It won't be obvious once we get it on you - that coat sleeve will cover most of it...a pity we had to tear the shirt, though. We'll have to bandage it with mine."

"There were a few strips left," Spock reminded him. "You will need all the protection you can once night falls, Captain."

"That's O.K.," Kirk grinned. "I know a nice warm Vulcan back I can snuggle up to. Come on. St'lurik can come and help carry things."

On the way over, he explained what had happened and the Enterprise's part in events, expecting some minor sign of disapproval from his Science Officer, but all Spock said was, "An admirable scheme."

"Admirable? It nearly got you killed!"

"It is very difficult to control an earthquake," Spock said equally, "and I do not believe that I would have had any other plan to suggest that would bring a great many people to our assistance so quickly. Teg would not have been able to control large numbers at a time...it could have been our only chance of survival."

"Maybe I'll get round to seeing it that way later," Kirk snorted. Spock's close shave was still a little uncomfortably recent for him to be able to view the situation with equal equanimity.

Having made Spock's wrist comfortable in the temporary splint and collected the furs, they returned to their impromptu camp for the night. They had little food to offer apart from the nutri-bars that could not be given to the Du, but what they had they divided round before they settled down.

It was an uncomfortable night and Kirk slept little; beside him Spock shifted in uncharacteristic restlessness also.

"What's the matter?" Kirk whispered. "Bruises painful?" The rocky surface was not the most soft of beds even for someone who was merely tired, starved and half-frozen.

He heard Spock give a mental chuckle and then roll towards him.

//Perhaps...for warmth?// Tentatively. A warm arm draped itself round him, pulling him close.

//Don't hurt that wrist.// Swiftly, an underlying tenderness.

//Precisely why it is practical to place it over you. Besides,// a teasing note, //you provide excellent cushioning for my bruises.//

"Flatterer," Kirk whispered. "Go to sleep."

"Your own need for sleep is as great."

"Maybe. I just don't seem able to drop off though. Too many things to

think about. Sadiok for one."

"Of course, he is a scientist, not a member of their spacefleet either. He was selected for this mission primarily on his telepathic ability - it facilitates the sending of reports."

"It must do. They don't need to send a ship that close, even, since he's so powerful." Kirk paused, startled, suddenly aware of facts in his mind that he had no recollection of acquiring. "Spock, how do we know all this?"

"In the meld we share with him - something of one mind must leak over into another."

Kirk froze, too many command secrets were stored away in his mind. It had been top priority to ensure he could give nothing away even to Spock. T'Yana had formed that small, impenetrable barrier along with the final patterning of their bond, but had it survived the various psychic shocks it had recently been subjected to?

He felt Spock probe the area gently, picking up on his thought. Without hesitation, his shields snapped into place, closing Spock out. Indubitably the area was still untouched.

"Jim!" Spock spoke aloud, a world of astonishment colouring his voice. "Jim - the bondwound. It has healed."

"Sssh." Kirk couldn't help a chuckle at the unexpected enthusiasm, welcome though it was. "Yes. Yes, you're right." Opening his mind again he gave Spock that mental equivalent of a rib-cracking hug and found it reciprocated in physical terms by that draped arm. Even with a damaged wrist, Spock could exert a considerable pressure.

"Oof, you don't know your own strength, Mister," he gasped.

"My apologies," Spock whispered, not sounding wildly contrite.

"How did this happen so quickly? I thought from what Sester told us, it could take months to heal."

"Possibly the meld with Sadiok; it was necessary to erect a perfect shield against Teg and that may have helped to 'knit' the wound."

Kirk sobered again. "Well, that may make us very grateful to him, but it's not going to have much bearing on the way Starfleet's going to react to finding a Romulan in our midst."

"Hardly in 'our' midst, Jim. Of course, Vulcan may have a little explaining to do as to how he slipped so neatly through their screening."

Kirk tilted his head back in an attempt to get a good look at his bond-brother's face. "Don't look now, Mister," he said softly, "but your smugness is showing. Why do I get the feeling you'd just love to see the Vulcan Science Academy with egg all over its collective face?"

"Nothing was further from my mind," Spock assured him mendaciously.

Kirk grinned at him and settled back down, yawning widely. "Go to sleep, my favourite Vulcan."

"Very well, Captain." And he immediately did, to Kirk's distinct irritation.

* * * * *

Leaving the injured Du with the shepherds, St'lurik gave them a few leta for their trouble and promised to direct the earthquake rescue team their way when they encountered them, then the 'Lan' along with Kirk and Teg set off to make their way back towards Parathelmon. The boy had firmly attached himself to Sadiok; now that he was no longer under Dav's influence, they could see that he avidly welcomed the touch of another telepathic mind, finding it soothed and calmed him.

Watching the Romulan set out to capture the boy's trust that first morning, Kirk was sure they were putting him into good hands...which would only compound his own problems should he or Savon decide that Sadiok must be removed from Thul as soon as possible. He did not want to cause the boy present pain by forbidding Sadiok to help him, besides which he had a shrewd suspicion that Sadiok would simply ignore any such order, and one of the arts of being a good Captain was, as far as possible, never to give an order you knew would be instantly disobeyed. In any case, he had no real authority over the Romulan, any more than he had over Savon or St'lurik, Starfleet liaised with scientific research teams, provided transport, supplies, medical checks and in some cases hauled their butts out of trouble in direct opposition to their expressed wishes, but on the whole they were cooperative rather than dictatorial about things, which meant that he could quite properly leave the final decision up to Savon. Facing it squarely, he knew he was just keen to unload the entire thing on to someone else's dish.

Once they were well away from the tiny settlement, Kirk insisted that Spock beam back aboard the Enterprise for treatment to that wrist. To his intense surprise, McCoy dug his heels in firmly and refused to allow Spock back on board without his Captain.

"Dr. McCoy, you're being plain unreasonable," Kirk told him crossly.

"Captain," McCoy said formally, clearly determined to make a stand upon this, "my last report from a Vulcan Healer on your present state of health laid down certain conditions and regulations concerning the pair of you. One of those conditions is reasonably close physical proximity to your bondbrother, and by no stretch of anyone's imagination can planet to ship be considered 'close physical proximity'. If Spock beams back up, you come with him, sir - and that's a medical order."

"Bones, you do like to make my life difficult."

"I also like to keep you alive," McCoy retorted. "Well, are you coming or not?"

"One moment. Stand by." Kirk flipped his communicator shut and turned to St'lurik. Sadiok was sitting with Teg some distance off so that the boy should not see what was going on. "Are you happy to be left with Sadiok and Teg, Mr. St'lurik? I can't very well beam the boy on board, you see, and if necessary Spock and I will remain here."

"Perfectly happy." St'lurik appeared faintly surprised. "I have already trusted Sadiok with my life and sanity. I see no reason to doubt him now and I am surprised that you do, Captain Kirk, now that you have shared a mind-link with him."

"Very well, then." Kirk made the decision. "You should be back in Parathelmon by tomorrow evening at latest. You have enough supplies?"

"Plenty. The shepherds were most generous."

"You paid them well enough," Kirk said drily. He turned and walked over to Sadiok. "We shall meet again."

Sadiok smiled. "Indeed, I expect we will, Captain," he said resignedly.

Kirk nodded, unsmiling, then on a sudden impulse put his hand into an inner pocket. Holding out the sehlat medallion, he said, "Give this to T'Luk. She will want to know about Sisot."

A shadow crossed the Romulan's face. "I could have saved Sisot had I understood in time...protected him as I did the rest of us. I will give this to T'Luk for you. Where did you find it?"

Kirk explained briefly.

Sadiok nodded. "Yes, I heard Dav speak of selling objects in the markets. Some of the Ian are either lazy or careless in carrying out the supervision that

is customarily expected, and there are other places within these hills where escaped Du live in hiding. I've no doubt these stalls provide a useful source of income and places to gather and exchange information as well." His gaze challenged Kirk's. "I would not wish any harm to come to the Du through our interference."

Kirk permitted his surprised indignation to show. "You didn't think I was going to do anything to perpetuate slavery, did you, Mr. Sadiok?"

"One hears many conflicting stories of Humans, Captain Kirk," Sadiok replied provocatively.

Kirk smiled a little mirthlessly but responded amiably, "As do we of Romulans, Mr. Sadiok."

"No doubt."

Liking the clear, untroubled gaze, Kirk nodded imperceptibly, accepting that there were always two sides to an argument.

"I promised to take care of that for T'Iuk," he said abruptly. "Do not lose it."

"I will not," Sadiok said gravely.

Kirk and Spock watched the three of them walk away down the wooded hill slope towards the desert they would cross next day. Kirk inhaled a long breath of relief.

"I can't say I'm sorry not to have to make that walk," he said honestly. "Come on, Spock, let's go get you seen to."

* * * * *

The next evening they beamed down close to a road outside Parathelmon, selecting a spot presently deserted and from which they could reach the highway without difficulty. Kirk had been delighted to take the opportunity for a good, long shower and clean clothes, and had spent the rest of the time catching up on ship's business, reports and sleep in that order.

He also had a brief talk with McCoy.

"We really are healed, Bones. Believe me."

"Oh, I believe you believe it," McCoy said cheerfully. "I want a report from a Vulcan Healer first, though. I can't just take your word for it, much as I'd like to."

"Will you take S'lana's word for it, then?" Kirk asked exasperatedly.

"He's a lot more qualified to judge than I am," McCoy said calmly. "Yes, of course I'd welcome a report from him."

Kirk had hardly seen his bondbrother during the thirty-eight hours they were on board. As always for both of them, work had piled up during their absence - those massive accumulations of record tapes still referred to (usually in somewhat basic terms) as paperwork - and in addition Spock had spent several hours in sickbay for the laser-sealing of his wrist and attention to numerous other minor cuts and bruises and the five cracked ribs he had omitted to mention to his Captain. Kirk was still annoyed about that.

"If I didn't need the escort of a Lan you wouldn't be here with me now," he said severely as they walked up onto the raised roadway. The Thulyans were almost as good at building roads as were the ancient Romans and, like them, tended to build them in straight lines wherever possible.

"I am aware of that, sir," Spock said with suspicious meekness.

Kirk glared at him. "So what were you trying to do, walking around there with broken ribs? I know you're a big, brave boy, you don't have to keep proving it to me."

"No. You would accord yourself a privilege you consistently try to deny me," Spock responded calmly.

"Meaning I'm over-protective?" Thinking it over, Kirk knew he could sometimes be accused of it. It was his way of compensating for those times when he had to order his friends into danger which, for once, he could not tackle first-hand. Spock being his closest friend and the most generally competent person Kirk knew, it followed by a logical progression that he was at risk most frequently, and by an equally logical corollary, that Kirk fussed most over him when the situation allowed it.

"You're right, of course - but I can't promise to do better," he conceded ruefully.

"And neither can I," Spock said firmly.

Kirk hid a smile. "There are times when you verge on down-right mutiny, Mr. Spock."

The Vulcan stopped, turned and looked directly at him, a question in his eyes.

Kirk let the smile show. "And I usually manage to forgive you for it."

Spock nodded, a lurking smile in his own eyes. "I thought so," he said frankly. "Do you know, Jim, I shall miss the certainty of knowing what you are thinking now that we can shield at will once more."

Kirk promptly lowered his shields. He had only been waiting for the flimsiest excuse to do so, for he had been missing that warm, pleasant glow himself. "Is that better?"

"Much." Spock set off again.

"I agree," Kirk said quietly. "I never have feared your mind, Spock, and now that I know it well..."

Another silent throb of unspoken but acknowledged commitment pulsed between them.

* * * * *

Savon welcomed the Doscalan to his house with punctilious formality, privately extending the telepathic welcome common to all Vulcans and which came to Kirk also, channelled through his link with Spock. It warmed and pleased him tremendously.

Once they were alone, Kirk asked, "St'lurik and Sadiok are back safely?"

"Quite safely. They arrived about an hour ago and are resting. They will join us after the evening meal. Sadiok does not want to leave Teg alone just yet, and will bring him."

"You know he is a Romulan, I presume?"

"I have had a full report from St'lurik of all he knows. Later on, Sadiok will report also."

Looking at Savon's expression, Kirk could believe that Sadiok would report fully. He knew even he would find it difficult to resist that stern, black gaze if it was turned on him with full authority behind it...the likeness to Sarek was not only in the underlying humour.

After the evening meal, the 'Lan' gathered in the main room of the house as before; only T'Pria and Sunam were absent, attending on Zabri. Kirk made a swift enquiry as to his condition.

"No change." Kirk could see the lurking concern in Savon's eyes. "I begin to think there may be no cure for him."

"No cure, certainly," S'lane said, "but there is a new hope that we can

alleviate the condition...at least to the point where T'Pria's mind will be unaffected."

Not even Vulcan faces could prevent the general surge of renewed hope from showing on their normally imperturbable faces and the brief sensation of their joy that broke through on his bondlink made Kirk smile broadly. Controlled and channelled it might be, but the emotion was undeniably present although he doubted he would have recognised it for precisely what it was during the early days of his bonding.

"You have not spoken so confidently before, Healer," Savon said, on a note of enquiry.

"I had not then had the opportunity to consult with Sadiok," S'lane told them. "He does not think it is possible to cure Zabri completely, but with Teg's help he believes he can realign some of the damaged neural pathways...enough to restore a mental equilibrium and possibly renew the learning faculty."

Kirk frowned, looking over at where Sadiok sat, Teg close by his side, his hand holding the boy's in a reassuring clasp. Teg's expression was that of an adoring puppy, a far cry from the slobbering, terrified creature that had clung to Dav so fervently only two days before.

"Are you a Healer, then? I thought you were primarily a socio-historian, but my impressions of what I learned in our mind-link are hazy, to say the least. I'm still not very adept at telepathic contact."

"No." Sadiok shook his head. "I am not a Healer, but I am an unusually powerful telepath for my race. Generally speaking, our level of ability is low, less than the Vulcan norm. Those of us that are adept therefore have to learn how to help each other when problems arise. In my boyhood I assisted one of our great Healers to treat a brain-damaged telepath. S'lane will monitor the melds, Captain Kirk. You need not fear I will behave like Teg."

The boy looked up uneasily at the sound of his name and the Romulan drew him close, comforting him wordlessly.

Kirk still found it uncanny to have anyone other than Spock monitor his thoughts so closely, and it was irritating as well, just when he believed his shields were fully functional once more.

Sadiok's face broke into the open smile that betrayed him instantly as a non-Vulcan. "I am not reading your mind, Captain, merely putting myself in your place. I, too, would be suspicious of an 'enemy' encountered under such circumstances as these."

"All right." Kirk leaned back against the arm of Spock's chair, grateful that he'd never precisely stood upon his dignity as a Starship Captain. It wasn't easy to maintain a formal manner when you had to do it half-kneeling, half-sitting on the floor at someone's feet. "Let's have the full story, Mr. Sadiok. Exactly what are you doing on Thul - and how did you get yourself into the survey team?"

Shorn of the details that made this session last long into the night, the Romulan's story revealed that his world also had some knowledge of the Preservers - there was even a deeply held belief that the Vulcans were descended from an ancient and long-lost Romulan tribe, a view that made Spock's eyebrows rise to a positively alarming height.

Kirk couldn't help being amused. //You Vulcans always assumed it was the other way round, didn't you?// A light teasing.

//Naturally. There are various logical reasons for the belief.//

//One day I'd love to hear them. There isn't time now.//

Once the discovery of Thul had become known on Romulus, it had naturally generated enormous interest among historians and archaeologists alike, all of whom were eager to study the place first-hand.

"With the present state of hostilities between our Governments," Sadiok said regretfully, "we knew this would never be permitted. I am here with the private knowledge of the Emperor, although publicly he must and will deny that he knew of my presence."

Kirk felt a quick, external wave of impatience and realised to his surprise that it emanated from Savon.

"This perpetual state of cold war that exists between our people is foolish," the Vulcan leader said aloud. "When will the Federation realise how wasteful it is not to pool our resources whenever and wherever we can?"

Kirk could not hold back a laugh, saying, when Savon turned a curious look his way, "Scientists are always the same; throughout history and all over the galaxy. You all believe that the discovery and verification of facts supersedes all political considerations."

"Politicians distort science for their own ends," Sadiok retorted. "There is no reasoning with them."

To Kirk's increased amusement, he found the Vulcans all firmly aligned on Sadiok's side in this argument. Not that he would have predicted differently had he been asked to, but he certainly wouldn't have expected to find them quite so openly taking Sadiok's part. It seemed he wasn't the only one other than Teg to find the Romulan a most magnetic personality.

"Unfortunately, I find myself in somewhat of a predicament, Mr. Savon," he said. "Since he is an enemy alien within Federation space, my duty requires me to take Mr. Sadiok back to Beta Draconis when the Enterprise leaves tomorrow..." There was a movement beside him as T'Nuna stirred and a quiet sound of protest escaped her. He turned to look, surprised that the retiring young woman should be the one to make any open objection, but she subsided again obediently at Subrel's admonitory headshake and Kirk went on. "On the other hand, I was reluctant to take him from Teg yesterday; I can see for myself that the boy needs him for the present. I could have argued a case for taking the boy away also, but that would have meant virtually sentencing him to perpetual exile from his home world, and that is not a thing I'd undertake lightly. If Sadiok is to heal Zabri as far as he can, I presume the treatment will not be short-term, Mr. S'lane."

"No, indeed," the Healer said hastily. "It will take many weeks to complete."

"In that case..." Kirk swung round to Sadiok once more, making his decision. "On my world, in the days when we still fought wars between ourselves, a prisoner of war would give his parole, his word of honour that he would not escape or would return to custody if he was liberated. I want such a promise from you if I leave you in Savon's care. You will go back to Vulcan with him when the time comes and account for yourself there. I believe they have a greater cause for grievance against you than the Federation has."

"I give you my word...on the heart of Mor."

Kirk had heard of the ancient Romulan oath. It was never made lightly, and on the single occasion it had previously been made to an off-worlder, had been kept to the letter. He nodded his satisfaction.

"Very well. I leave you in Savon's charge. I owe you a debt of personal gratitude also; you understand I could not let that influence my decision concerning you. Were Zabri and Teg not factors to be considered, I would find myself morally bound to take you back to Beta Draconis when we leave tomorrow."

"I understand." Another smile lit the thin face and Kirk was glad to see the lines of pain had gone now; he could guess just what Sadiok had gone through protecting St'lurik and the Du from the attack of a powerful and untrained telepath. It was bad enough when the invading presence was your dearly loved bond-brother; enduring the constant onslaught of a retarded and terror-driven mind must have been unspeakable agony.



He turned to T'luk. The tall, angular woman was seated close to her bond-sister. Kirk's face softened sympathetically. The loss of a marriage partner was painful, but at least Sisot's widow had the comfort of her close-bond with the motherly T'Kaa to sustain her. The sehlat medallion was hanging around her neck and catching his eye on it, she touched it briefly.

"Thank you for returning this, Captain."

"Thank you for letting us take it. We grieve with thee, T'luk."

She bowed her head, accepting his formal words with calm dignity.

Kirk turned back to the leader of the survey team. "Well, Mr. Savon, if you have no other jobs you want us to undertake..."

"No." Savon shook his head, a twinkle of amusement deep in his eyes. "We are grateful to you and your First Officer, Captain Kirk. Without your help we would have lost more of our team than we have."

Kirk would have preferred to have saved them all - he hated the unnecessary waste of life - but Savon would know that for himself.

"If there is anything we can do for you..." Savon was saying.

"There is one thing," Kirk recalled. "If you will permit your Healer to examine my bondbrother and me...my C.M.O. is understandably reluctant to sign us off his sick list. Our bond-wound has been healed - thanks to Mr. Sadiok - but Dr. McCoy can't check on something like that for himself, of course."

"The Captain is always a most reluctant and captious patient," Spock murmured provocatively above him. "Dr. McCoy's wish to be sure that he is cured is quite understandable."

Kirk glared up and over his left shoulder. //And you're just so perfect, Mister.//

//Of course.// A bland surprise.

Kirk suppressed his desire to make some pithy retort and got up to follow Spock and S'lanā from the room.

They spent much of the rest of the night studying the various tapes containing items of special significance or interest that had been found.

"It will be interesting to see if you find any more correlations with the culture Spock was studying on Delta Australis 2," Kirk said reflectively. "I shall look forward to seeing your next report when it is made."

"Indeed, we have much still to occupy us." Savon was looking positively animated.

Kirk valiantly suppressed a yawn, wondered briefly where Spock was and decided not to wait around for him any longer but to go to bed at once. The five hours that he had managed to snatch on board the Enterprise seemed a lifetime ago now. Since they must leave in full sight of the Du in the morning if they were not to leave them wondering why Savon should have mysterious visitors who left in the middle of the night, there was no reason why he shouldn't take advantage of the very few hours of darkness still left to him.

Excusing himself politely, he went to bed.

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McCoy read S'lanā's report through once, and then, without speaking, ran it back to the beginning and read it through again, then pursed his lips silently, nodded slowly a couple of times, switched the viewer off and drummed his fingers softly on the desk top.

The Captain and his bond-brother studied this carefully crafted process,

one dispassionately, and one with growing impatience.

"Well?"

The word pushed itself out without permission. Kirk had intended not to give McCoy the slightest satisfaction by letting him know how irritating the entire performance had been. He knew damn well the Doctor was only needling them, trying to get a reaction.

The blue eyes looked up, full of a bland innocence, and the craggy face was split by a huge smile. "How the hell would I know?" The Doctor shrugged. "I'm only a simple country doctor who shoulda stayed dirtside and not tried to meddle in matters outside my experience. S'lara says you're cured...you're cured!" He shrugged again.

Kirk understood him all too well and the knowledge produced a pang of compassionate sympathy he could not express openly. The wry humour covered McCoy's inner pain that this was one area where he would never be able to help. It must make him feel useless...vulnerable. It wasn't any good trying to put his understanding into words, though. Anything he tried to say would only come out as sentimental mush and neither of them had ever been good at putting their affection into blunt words.

Inevitably, it was Spock who provided the touch of dry humour that defused the suppressed feelings.

Years of verbal sparring with McCoy in response to the Doctor's persistent goading had forced him into mastering the art of expressing emotion obliquely to their mutual satisfaction.

As they got up to leave the small office he turned, raised an eyebrow to a finely judged angle and said, "Never mind, Doctor. Next time we fall down and cut our knees we will cry for you to come and kiss us better," and he ushered his Captain politely from the room before McCoy's mouth had time to realign itself for action.

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Footnote -- The government and system of Parathelmon owes a lot to Colin Ronan's lectures on Ancient China. The primitive seismograph is also based on one invented in China in 132 AD by the astronomer and mathematician Chang Heng. An internal mechanism, activated by even a slight tremor, opened the mouth of a dragon which dropped a ball into the upturned mouth of a toad waiting beneath. The direction of the quake could be determined by the orientation of the empty-mouthed dragon. It could detect earthquakes occurring hundreds of miles away. You can find out all about it in a wonderfully fascinating and very readable book called 'LOST DISCOVERIES' by Colin Ronan, published in London, 1973, by Macdonalds. Details of it are also in 'EARTHQUAKES', a book published by Time Life, but only available through mail order at the moment.

I ; would like to thank Lesley Coles for her invaluable help in thinking of the fiendish disease suffered by the landing party - and for not encouraging me to talk about it at breakfast at Aucon!

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