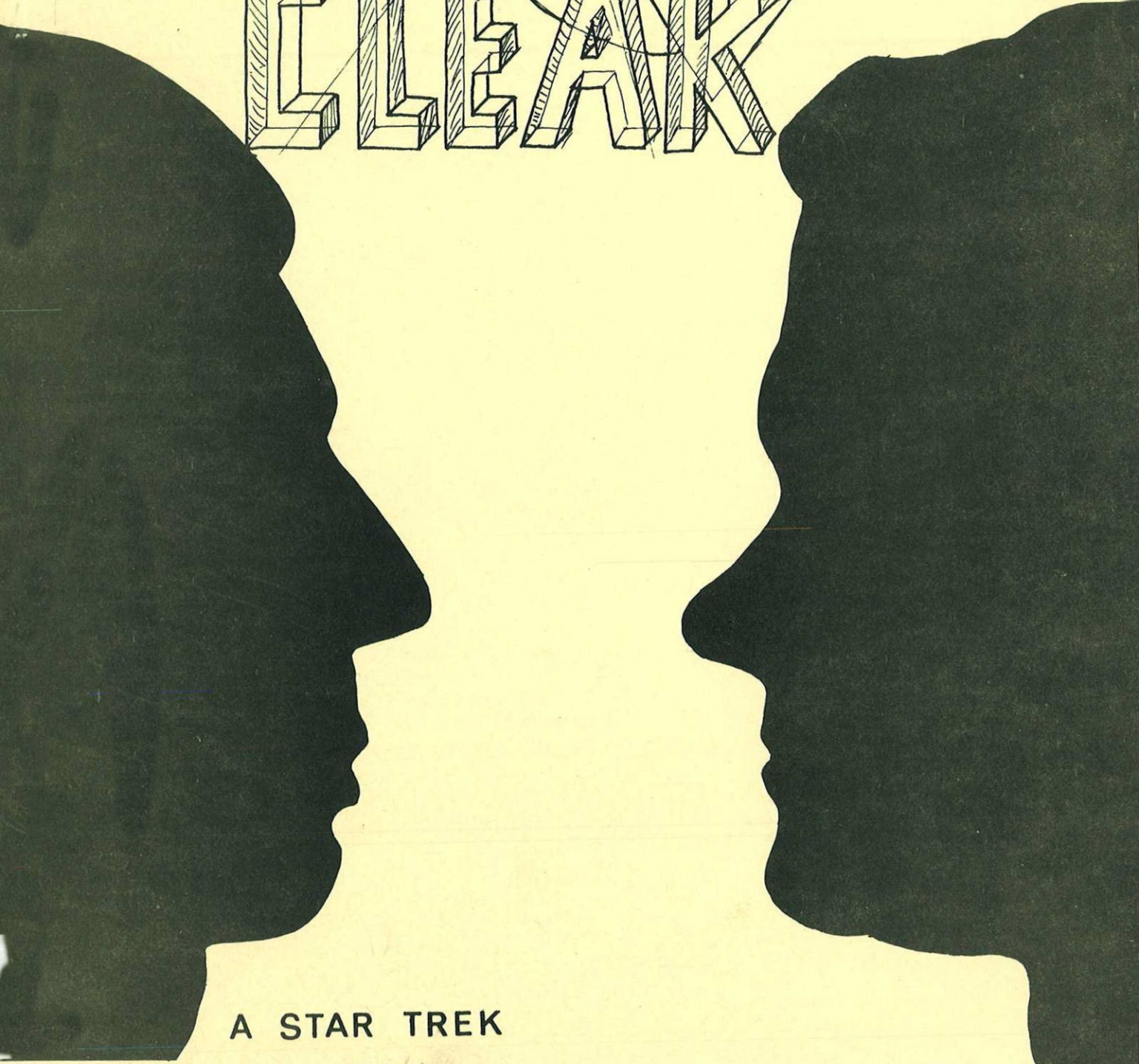


CLEAR



A STAR TREK
FANZINE

SCOTPRESS

Hello, everyone, welcome to CRYSTAL CLEAR. Doris is already known to many of you through her earlier story, FRIENDSHIP AND DUTY; Irene is a new writer and artist that we welcome to our pages. We hope to see more work from these two writers soon. Their work is particularly noteworthy because they are both German, writing in what is, to them, a foreign language.

We don't often start a novel with an editorial; however, not everyone who gets the novels also gets Enterprise - Log Entries, and as well as the first paragraph I want to repeat something that was originally mentioned in the editorial of E-LE 78.

Most of the British clubs now put out newsletters quarterly; only one of the larger clubs still puts out a bi-monthly one. We feel that there's a place for another newsletter that comes out every two months, and with this in mind we are considering starting a new club, IDIC. At the moment we are investigating printing costs, etc, and we have some ideas for it that we think are new.

If you would like more information, please send an SAE (foreign, addressed envelope and 2 IRCs, obtainable from any main post office, or one loose airmail stamp) to -

Janet Quarton
15 Letter Daill
Cairnbaan
Lochgilphead
Argyll
Scotland

As always, we are also soliciting submissions for Scotpress zines; novels; short stories for inclusion in E-LOG ENTRIES; and also Next Generation stories for inclusion in MAKE IT SO, a proposed zine devoted to TNG. Our general guidelines are - no death of main characters (although obviously TNG must take Tasha Yar's death into consideration as a given fact), no movie-based stories, no K/S, no stories about other ships; these, after all, are "... the voyages of the Starship Enterprise..." whether that Enterprise is NCC-1701 or NCC-1701-D.

Submissions can be sent to either

Sheila Clark
6 Craigmill Cottages
Strathmartine
by Dundee
Scotland

or

Valerie Piacentini
20 Ardrossan Road
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Ayrshire
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CRYSTAL CLEAR

by

Irene Wohlfahrt and Doris Schulze

GREEN HAZE

"You were right, Spock, this does indeed seem to be a valuable study."

Captain James T. Kirk shifted his position behind the mossy rock that was serving as cover to look at his First Officer. Commander Spock, intent on his own observations of the natives, nodded without turning his head.

"Very valuable indeed, Captain," he confirmed. "It will be very interesting to observe this culture without the interference of some planetary parallel of your so-called 'white man'."

Kirk smiled. He'd had to endure a lot of lectures recently on the subject of his ancestors' 'acts of irresponsibility' towards the native Americans. Giving his companion another overt glance, he noted that Spock was about as fascinated as he'd ever seen him. The prospect of studying a culture so similar to the Mayas and Incas of Kirk's home planet clearly excited him. The only difference was that the inhabitants of Beta Cygni III had developed a firearm of their own, which made them an interesting hybrid between these ancient Earth cultures and the European settlers in the New World.

"Care to have a closer look?" the Captain asked his friend, already knowing the answer. Spock's catlike curiosity had always been a source of amusement for him.

"Increased proximity would certainly improve the quality of my observations," Spock said, deadpan, yet Kirk did not miss the twinkle in his dark eyes.

He smiled. "Well, far be it from me to be a hindrance to your scientific pursuits!" He got up, followed by Spock, and together they scurried for a cover closer to the fight between two tribes of the natives, from where the Science Officer would be able to catch more details as to weapons technology and behaviour.

Yet before they could reach the small group of rocks they were headed for, something totally unexpected happened. Kirk slipped on a pebble, and although he regained his footing almost immediately, the loosened stone sent off a small cascade of rocks down the hillside. The next moment, he heard Spock's voice coming from behind him over the sound of crackling shots.

"Jim, watch out!" At the same moment a steely hand gripped him, hurling him to the side and sending him unceremoniously to the ground. Surprised and a little dazed from the fall, he scrambled back to his feet to find Spock standing where Kirk had been only moments before, looking at his Captain with a strange look of relief on his face. Then, horrified, Kirk watched his friend's dark eyes lose their deep clearness. The relief on Spock's face gave way to an expression of surprise as his hands went to his chest, where a dark stain was beginning to spread. His mouth opened in a soundless



scream, and then, still looking at Kirk, he slowly sank to the ground.

"Spock!"

Kirk was there beside him before his mind had fully taken in the situation, and he caught his friend just in time to prevent his head hitting the hard stone ground. He eased him down carefully and whipped out his communicator.

"Bones! Come in! Bones!"

For a few seconds he got no answer, and he felt the first dull shock of panic, quickly smothered by years of training. *Keep calm, he told himself. Just keep calm. It'll take Bones a few seconds to answer. No need to panic. Spock needs clear thinking now. Don't let him down.*

"Yes, Jim, what is it?" came McCoy's voice from the communicator, interrupting Kirk's thoughts.

"Spock's been injured. A bullet wound." Surprising how calm and rational his voice sounded. "Looks bad, Bones. Come here, on the double!"

"On my way, Jim."

Putting away the device, Kirk turned back to his First Officer, who was still lying as he had fallen. His eyes were closed, lips compressed. That and the deadly pallor of his face spoke eloquently of the pain he was feeling, though no trace had found its way to his features. Hot green blood flowed freely from his chest where the primitive lead projectile had torn into his body. Then his eyes opened.

"Captain... "

"Don't talk, Spock. McCoy's on his way. Just lie still - don't move."

His voice seemed to belong to someone else. The whole situation had more than a touch of unreality. Nightmarish. He could feel panic inside, trying to take control of him and destroy his ability to keep the clear head his long and arduous training had lent him, for he did not have to be a doctor to realise that even McCoy's superb medical skills might be useless here.

Looking into his friend's eyes, he wondered dully why Spock wasn't unconscious; why he must bear the pain with a Vulcan's acute perceptions without the blanketing of merciful oblivion. Spock's eyes alone showed his agony; the stony features remained immobile.

"Jim, we must leave this... immediate area," he said, ignoring Kirk's gesture that he should remain silent. "It would be most unfortunate... if the natives found us."

"You're right, Mr. Spock, but you can't walk," Kirk replied, having noted the agonised sound in the Vulcan's voice.

"Yes, I can," Spock said stubbornly, sitting up slowly and carefully. Kirk, too, got reluctantly to his feet, helping his friend up.

Suddenly, a bullet hit the ground just beside Kirk. The natives had seen them. "Come on, Spock!" Kirk urged him on. "We've got to get out of here!"

They made for a wooded area further uphill, where they would be able to take cover until they could leave safely. But slowly though they were going, Spock did not get very far. The pain in his chest increased with every step he took, while the unhindered flow of blood made him progressively more dizzy. Twenty yards in front of the undergrowth, he collapsed into Kirk's arms.

The Captain had expected this. However boundless the Vulcan's energies had seemed on other occasions, this was too much even for Spock. Realising at once that his friend would not make it any further on his own, Kirk scooped him up to carry him the rest of the way to shelter.

Again there was the sound of guns; Kirk could feel a sharp pain shoot through his shoulder as the projectile hit a tree somewhere in front of him. A graze. No serious damage done; it did not make him release his hold on his precious burden. A moment later he had reached the undergrowth, and what little pain the wound caused was forgotten in his efforts to keep going while avoiding the most densely wooded parts so that Spock wouldn't be hit by whipping branches.

At last, when he found he could not get any further, he fell to his knees, carefully laying the Vulcan down, trying to get his breath back.

Spock was still conscious. "I am sorry, Captain," he said weakly to the panting Human. "I tried to... keep walking... My legs gave out... "

Kirk looked at him. "Oh, Spock, that's not your fault!" *Not yours, but mine.* "Not even you can walk with a bullet in your chest." He noticed the mask-like expression on his friend's face. "Don't worry, it won't be long before McCoy gets here. Everything will be all right; he'll be able to help you." He spoke with a confidence he did not feel.

Spock nodded, and a painful half smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I must confess that... for once I would be... grateful for the Doctor's presence... "

Kirk could hear the pain in his voice. "I told you not to talk, Spock. Stop being so stubborn and for once do as you're told." At the Vulcan's look of protest, he continued, "No, you don't. Remember Gamma Trianguli VI? I told you there just to yell the next time. And here you go again, trying to get yourself killed... Oh, Spock, what am I supposed to do with you?"

"Captain, I assure you... "

Kirk put a finger to his friend's lips. "Yes, I know," he said. "It was a completely logical decision, just like all the other times. Don't you realise, dammit, that one day you may not have the hand to play your game? Has no one ever told you that Vulcans make lousy gamblers?"

The Vulcan did not respond. He gasped, pressing one hand to the wound. Alarmed, Kirk snapped open his communicator. "Bones, what's keeping you?"

For an instant only static responded, then the surgeon's voice was there. "Hold on, Jim, I'll be there as quickly as I can."

"Hurry, Bones!"

Kirk did not know how long he sat there at Spock's side, waiting for McCoy, while below the fighting continued, an unusual phenomenon on this otherwise peaceful planet, and one that, for precisely that reason, had fascinated Spock so.

Curiosity... He did not complete the proverb. It was inappropriate, at that. *If I hadn't been here, he would never have been wounded...* He had not even realised that one of the natives had taken aim in the direction of the unexpected sound. Spock's sharp eyes had seen, however, and his lightning Vulcan perception had saved his Captain... again. Memories of other occasions like this drifted through Kirk's mind, times when his friend's life had been in the balance because of him, and he had survived only because fate, or some hidden Vulcan ace, had acted in their favour. Spock's present plight reminded Kirk painfully of another incident so strikingly similar to this... *Gamma Trianguli VI, Spock collapsing with a dozen poison thorns in his chest...* It had been close then. Only the Vulcan's physiology had saved him, but Spock had not known it would and stepped in front of Kirk anyway... *Just like this time. Only this time it won't be that easy.*

Suddenly McCoy was there. Taking scanner and protoplaser out of his pouch, he knelt down next to Spock, all in one smooth motion. Then he ripped open the blue, blood-soaked tunic, exposing the wound, took some fast readings, and used the protoplaser. Kirk remained close to Spock, watching McCoy's movements anxiously.

"Oh my God!" the surgeon whispered as he realised how serious the damage was. Large parts of the left lung torn... *A Human would be dead.* The protoplaser hummed, sealing the torn tissue - but too much had been destroyed. McCoy concentrated his efforts on the main blood vessels. His hands had long since been covered with light green blood; still more came seeping from the wound, in spite of all his efforts to stop the haemorrhaging. *He's bleeding to death!* Desperately, McCoy adjusted the protoplaser to the highest setting.

While McCoy was working on Spock, Kirk sat beside the Vulcan, watching his face. His friend was still conscious; still his countenance was expressionless, an immobile mask hiding his vulnerability. And yet, the pain was there. Despite his iron control, he could not keep his body from jerking slightly whenever the surgeon's hands touched the wound.

Finally, Kirk looked away from the agony in Spock's eyes, turned to McCoy instead, hoping to find some consolation there. But McCoy was wearing a mask of his own, a mask of professionalism that kept his face carefully expressionless, showing nothing of his feelings. Kirk observed his every movement, waiting for some clue, for the sudden relaxation in McCoy's posture that always preceded his announcement that his patient would make it.

My gods, Kirk thought, please let Spock live. Don't let it happen that he dies for me. Don't let it happen; I couldn't bear it...

But then he saw all hope fade away into nothingness. McCoy didn't say a word. He swallowed hard, bit his lip and then looked at Kirk. The Captain could feel a cold hand groping for his heart and

beginning to squeeze.

Then McCoy slowly shook his head.

For an interminable moment the meaning of the gesture failed to register. "Bones?" he whispered, hoping to hear something - anything - that would give him reason to deny what he had just learned. The surgeon, however, avoided his gaze.

Spock, oblivious of everything but pain, managed to look into McCoy's eyes at that moment, a questioning expression in his.

"It's not too bad, Spock," the surgeon replied, a falsely reassuring expression on his craggy features. "You're gonna be all right."

Kirk felt like crying out his despair as McCoy, for once, succeeded in deceiving Spock. The Vulcan nodded weakly, and, closing his eyes, finally lost consciousness.

McCoy buried his face in his hands. "I'm sorry, Jim," came his muffled voice. "Oh, God, I'm so sorry!"

Kirk began to feel a familiar upsurge of stubbornness inside, the kind that had served him to achieve his ends so often before. "Bones, there has to be something you can do! He can't die - not like this!"

"There's nothing, Jim," McCoy said tiredly, his face still covered with his hands. "The bullet's destroyed half his left lung and I can't even get it out now, with what's available here. All I can do is give him pain-killing injections, and even that's risky."

Kirk said nothing. He lowered his head, a trace of doubt beginning to creep in. McCoy, he knew, would never give him a diagnosis like that if there was a chance. Looking at Spock's pale face as he lay unconscious before him he felt a sharp stab of pain.

Spock... dying...

McCoy raised his head again to look at him. "How did it happen, Jim? You were too far away from the battle to be directly involved."

"It was my fault." Anger welled up suddenly, fury at the circumstances that conspired against him to successfully. "I took one wrong step, and of course the natives just had to hear us. That bullet was meant for me. Just one idiotic piece of lead! He saw the danger, though, and stepped in front... "

"Damn Vulcan..." McCoy whispered. *So now it's happened, he thought. You knew it had to happen some time... I just hope Jim'll be able to accept it without too much pain...*

Kirk was again studying Spock's face, taking in all the familiar, beloved features one by one. So pale, so vulnerable...

Taking a deep breath, he raised his head again. "Come on, Bones. Let's get him to the cave."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" The sharp tone of McCoy's voice let him snap back to reality. "You had better let me make sure I've stopped the bleeding. The way up to the cave is stony so that we won't normally leave any traces on the ground, but it wouldn't be

any good if we left a nice bright green trail to tell which way we've taken, would it?"

Anxiety to get his friend to the relative safety of their cave still dominated Kirk's thinking. "I don't think the natives have really seen us. Not to identify us as what we are. Bones, let's go... "

"Where are your senses, Jim?" McCoy asked while once again running his sensor over Spock's body. "You *think* they didn't see you. Now, even if they didn't, don't you think they might try to find out what caused the disturbance? Really, Captain, your ability to make command decisions based on facts and rational thinking seems to be slipping."

The unusual formality in McCoy's voice finally penetrated the worry and pain clouding Kirk's mind. "You're right, of course, Bones. It's just that I... " He choked, unable to continue.

McCoy's tone softened immediately, and when he reached out to touch his friend's shoulder, he once again was the compassionate and protecting friend Kirk needed so much. "No need to tell me, Jim. I know how you feel... C'mon, it should be safe to move him now."

Once back to reality, command training finally reasserted itself, and Kirk looked doubtfully at his friend. "Do you really think the cave is safe?"

"Well, it should be, just as long as we're careful not to leave any traces when we venture outside it, which shouldn't be necessary too often, anyway."

"Thanks, Bones," Kirk said quietly. Then, lifting Spock into his arms once more while McCoy cleared the way, he added, "Well, then, better let's get a move on."

* * * * *

The cave was some three miles away, situated in the slope of a stony hill; a geological phenomenon in itself. It was serving as a base and starting point of exploration for the landing party, being equipped with all that was necessary during a one-week planet assignment. But as they had not planned to make direct contact with the natives and therefore had not anticipated the kind of emergency they were faced with now, they did not have enough medical equipment to treat Spock's injury adequately. They otherwise had everything to survive this week in something that even resembled luxury, the Enterprise being away on another assignment.

Such thoughts, however, were furthest from the minds of Kirk and McCoy who were both trying to cope with the situation in their different ways. Kirk was in turn pacing restlessly within the narrow confines of the cave and hovering over McCoy's shoulder; McCoy sat beside Spock, checking and rechecking readings in an attempt to find something to gain hope from.

Kirk had fetched water from a nearby spring, and the surgeon was using the cool liquid to bathe Spock's face. The Vulcan was still unconscious and beginning to show signs of fever. Whatever the cause, it was going to make matters even worse than they were already, sapping further his strength, which was already half gone due to loss of blood.

"Bones?" Once more Kirk was kneeling next to him. "Bones, why did you lie to him? He has a right to know!"

McCoy looked at him out of weary eyes. "I did not dare tell him because..." He smiled ruefully. "Well, I guess out of force of habit." The smile vanished again, to be replaced by that look of defeat he'd been wearing ever since his diagnosis. "I never tell a terminal patient he's going to die unless it's a direct question, because that knowledge usually only hastens the end. I just didn't think of the fact that he's a Vulcan..."

Kirk had winced at his use of the words 'terminal patient' in reference to his best friend and realised that his subconscious had not accepted the truth. It led him to another question, though, one he wished he did not have to ask.

"How long does he have?"

McCoy looked down again. "I'm not sure. A Human would long since be dead, but then, his heart's not where a Human's would be... His Vulcan stamina may keep him alive for another day or two, but I doubt if he could survive any longer than that. Depending on blood loss and the extent of the damage, all he may have left could be just hours. I simply can't tell."

Hours? So soon? Only hours. Got to make the most of them...
"Do you think I can tell him?"

McCoy hesitated. "I don't think it's wise, Jim. He's half Human, after all. It could still be a shock. On the other hand..." His voice trailed off as he thought it through. "No, I wouldn't recommend it."

They sat in silence while the implications slowly sank in, each trying to appear reasonably calm so as not to impose their desperation onto each other.

Then Spock opened his eyes, focussing on McCoy who was still sitting next to him.

"Doctor, where...?"

"Don't try to talk, Spock," McCoy said gently. "Just lie still, and you'll be all right soon."

Kirk could not help but admire McCoy's self control. Nothing in the Doctor's face or voice hinted at the desperation he must be feeling over the knowledge that Spock's end was near. The Captain could only hope the Vulcan would not look at *him* so closely, for he was certain his face could be read as easily as a book.

Then Spock did look at him.

His eyes were not as clear and deep as before - the pain and loss of blood had already taken their toll on him. Yet evidently he still could see clearly enough to realise, from his friend's expression, that something was wrong.

"Jim..." he whispered. And then he noticed the blood on Kirk's shoulder.

"Doctor," Spock said. "The Captain... is injured... pain..."
He had seen the look of desperation on Kirk's face and was

interpreting it as physical pain.

"Don't talk, Spock," McCoy repeated. The surgeon had noticed the slight contraction of his facial muscles as the Vulcan took in breath to speak. The pain was increasing.

He took a hypo, holding it against Spock's chest to give him a local anaesthetic.

"Not me," he gasped. "Jim... "

"It's just a scratch, Spock," Kirk said reassuringly, touched by the Vulcan's concern for him even now that he himself was so badly injured. "It's nothing."

"But there is pain... " The hypo hissed. "Jim... "

"Who's the doctor around here, Spock, you or me?" McCoy grumbled, putting the hypo away.

"Doctor... "

Seeing that the Vulcan felt strongly enough about this to become agitated, McCoy did turn to Kirk to give him a quick once-over with the scanner.

"Stop that, Bones," Kirk hissed. "I told you it's nothing. Take care of *him*, dammit!"

McCoy held the furious hazel eyes for a moment, then threw a meaningful glance at the agitated Vulcan, continuing his examination of Kirk's wound, if only for Spock's benefit, since he already knew what he would find. Kirk understood, and submitted to it.

"Well, Jim, for once your diagnosis is correct," McCoy said then, loud enough for Spock to hear. "A mere scratch." He turned back to the impassively relieved Vulcan. "And now that that's settled, Mr. Spock, I bring it to your attention that it would be medically advisable if you quit fretting and got some rest."

"Acknowledged... " Spock whispered and obediently closed his eyes.

Kirk remained next to him after McCoy got up, trying to calm Spock with his presence, it was obvious to the Human that his friend wouldn't be able to sleep; he could tell just from the tense lids that the pain would not permit it.

There are only hours left to him... to both of us. And he'll be in pain till the end. Even Bones' painkiller isn't helping. He gazed long and earnestly into Spock's face, lingering over the dear, familiar features, noticing new lines around the eyes. He's dying, for me. He sacrificed his life to save my unworthy ass. And he would do it again. Our friendship is killing him.

McCoy looked up from his inventory of his medical pouch. There was something in Kirk's expression that he didn't quite know how to interpret. Sympathy, compassion, deep affection... and something else. Guilt?

Yes, of course. He feels guilty because Spock took the bullet that was meant for him. Wanting to rouse Kirk from his depressing thoughts, McCoy walked over and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Jim," he said softly, "we'll need some more wood for that fire. According to the scouts' reports, it'll get pretty cold here once the sun's down."

Kirk slowly raised his head, looking at McCoy without really seeing him. Nodding once, he got up. For a moment he just stood there, looking down at his wounded friend. Finally he left the cave, moving like a sleepwalker.

McCoy's gaze followed him until he was out of sight. Then he sat down again, pulling up his legs and resting his head against his knees. "Damn."

He had not noticed Spock's eyes opening the moment Kirk got up. Now the Vulcan was looking at the spot where Kirk had disappeared, an unidentifiable look in his eyes. His lips moved, mouthing the name of the one being in all the universe he could call friend.

* * * * *

When Kirk returned almost an hour later, McCoy was sitting at Spock's side, cooling the Vulcan's face.

"Bones?"

The surgeon looked up, and for a moment Kirk thought there was an expression of intense worry in his eyes. Then it was gone as habit made him mask it just like any other feeling towards the Vulcan that went deeper than cynicism.

"Fever, Jim, and it's rising. I still have no idea why... God knows what might happen."

"It will happen, Bones." Kirk's voice was toneless. "What difference does it make except the only difference that really matters?"

McCoy bit his lip. Obviously his tactic hadn't worked, and Kirk's thoughts outside had been even blacker than his in here. But what could he say or do about it? The only thing he knew was that he didn't like the look in Kirk's eyes at all.

"You could save him aboard ship, couldn't you?" The toneless voice interrupted his thoughts. "Maybe if she gets back in time..."

"Jim, stop tormenting yourself. We both know what the chances are, even if they did know something was wrong. And they won't be within range for at least three more days."

And then it will be too late. Looking into Spock's pale, pain-etched features, Kirk knew it was true. He knelt down next to Spock and silently took the wet cloth from the surgeon's hand, running it over the Vulcan's face. With a painful twinge deep inside, he noticed the tense muscles along the strong jawline, the slanted brows drawn slightly together. Then dark, fevered eyes opened, meeting his. As they gazed into each other's eyes, the world around them disappeared.

McCoy saw the contact. He seemed to sense an almost electrical current of rapport and empathy between the two men. He had felt it often before, though never as strong as now. As he watched Kirk take Spock's hand in his own without breaking eye contact, the surgeon began to feel like an intruder and got up. Grabbing his thermal

blanket, he went over to the other side of the fire.

I can remember a time when he would have pulled away his hand in protest. McCoy felt a wave of pain and despair wash over him as he saw how Kirk cared for the Vulcan, cooling his face, holding his hand. There was no trace of revulsion at the physical contact in Spock's expression now.

He simply accepted the affection and love the gesture embodied, even showing his appreciation through his special little half smile as he continued to look at his Captain.

They have come so far, building their friendship into something so beautiful, so honest, and then a piece of lead smashes it all to pieces. In his entire career as a physician, McCoy had never felt so immensely guilty at his inability to save a patient. He knew that this would not only kill Spock, it would destroy Kirk inside as well. What kind of a doctor am I that I can't do something now, the one time that it really matters?

After sunset, nothing inside the cave had changed. Kirk was still sitting beside his First Officer, his thermal blanket drawn around his shoulders. McCoy, his own blanket clutched tightly about himself, was leaning against the stone wall.

The Captain still looked down at his friend, whose eyes were now closed. At last, when he could no longer keep his face expressionless, the Vulcan had looked away, trying to hide his pain from the world. The thought of Spock in such agony because of him was enough to preclude any attempt at sleep, although Kirk felt quite exhausted after the day's exertions.

Again he felt the Vulcan's forehead. The fever was rising.

At his touch, Spock opened his eyes, glassy and unfocused. "Jim?" he whispered.

"Yes, Spock, I'm here. Don't talk." Then, denying his own words, he went on. "Do you need anything? Water? A painkiller?"

"I am cold..." His white lips were trembling. "I'm so cold..."

"I know, Spock," Kirk said softly. "I know." He could feel the cold penetrating his own body as the temperature continued to sink. Suppressing a shiver, he couldn't help wondering how Spock must be feeling now, the desert-bred Vulcan whose metabolism was geared for life in a hot and arid environment, where a Human would be hard put to survive without air conditioning. And now his friend was exposed to this humid cold, helpless under the influence of planetary conditions alien to him.

This whole damn planet is doing its best to make it as hard on him as possible. Once again, Kirk reflected grimly how things could hardly get any worse.

He took the blanket from his shoulders, spreading it over Spock's shivering body, carefully so as not to hurt him. Again the Vulcan's eyes opened, and he looked at him gratefully. Smiling back, Kirk settled down again at his friend's side. He could hear Spock's uneven, shallow breathing as the Vulcan fought for every breath he

took, holding out against pain and the bullet which was still in his body, killing him even now. Kirk began to hate the small piece of lead that was slowly taking his best friend away while he was sitting next to him, helpless to prevent the inevitable outcome.

He suddenly felt an almost overwhelming need to share his Vulcan friend's pain, cold and all. He reached out to touch Spock's face gently.

"Spock," he said as the brown eyes opened. "Tell me when you need my help. Whatever it is, I'll do whatever I can."

Almost as soon as he'd said it, he regretted the impulse that had prompted him to put it the way he had. He had sounded far too desperate to be adequate for the condition they had led Spock to believe he was in. Hoping that the Vulcan would fail to see the truth, he looked away.

Then Spock whispered his name.

Looking at him again, Kirk saw immediately that something had changed. The mask that held the Vulcan's face expressionless was gone now, leaving a look that the Captain had hardly ever seen before; it had showed only at rare and cherished moments that Kirk would remember for as long as he lived, for these were moments when Spock relaxed his guard to let his friend touch his true being.

The expression that was there now was one of deep understanding and affection, a look that said, *I know what you are feeling, my friend. I understand what you are going through and I regret causing you such pain - although I would do it again, for it is what I had to do.* Then another wave of pain washed over him and he winced, turning his head to the side. The moment was destroyed.

Spock closed his eyes, and, taking a deep, careful breath, reopened them. "Jim," he whispered. "What is the... nature of the injury? There is more pain... than should be expected..." The rest of his sentence was drowned as the effort to speak stoked the flames of pain once more.

"The bullet is close to your spine," came McCoy's voice from behind Kirk, just as the Captain was motioning for Spock not to talk. "There are a couple of nerve ends close by, and the bullet rubs against them when you breathe. It's painful, but not dangerous."

Kirk felt like screaming. It was almost unbearable lying to his best friend; he did not know how much longer he would be able to keep up the charade, to pretend that Spock would be all right, while he kept getting worse, minute by minute slipping closer to death.

He watched the Vulcan's efforts to control his uneven breathing, efforts that were thwarted by the fever and by his own body's instinct to fight for breath that had already taken over. Kirk watched the fight, knowing that Spock would not make it.

He can't succeed. He's already past the point of even controlling his own body, and he'll blame himself for it. And all because of me. Oh, God, why do I torture him like this?

Finally, Spock opened his eyes again. "It does not work," he whispered, anguished. "I cannot concentrate... don't understand..." His voice failed.

"The healing trance?" Kirk asked gently.

He nodded weakly.

The Captain took his hand. "It's all right, Spock. Just relax - try to relax." He could feel the feverish heat radiating from the pain-racked body.

"Jim, you don't understand," Spock insisted. "I cannot even... control the pain... "

There was a very real touch of panic in his trembling voice. Kirk held his hand tighter, trying to calm him. "Don't think of it," he said, masking his own despair and grief to give his friend the reassurance he needed now. "Everything will be all right, you'll see. Relax. Close your eyes. Try to get some rest."

At last Spock's eyes drifted shut. Kirk held on to his hand, warming it between both of his.

* * * * *

When McCoy entered the cave, carrying a fresh bowl of water, he saw Kirk sitting immobile, staring at the fire, the Vulcan's head cradled in his arms. He must have made some small noise, scraping his boots over the stone ground or inadvertently kicking a small pebble against the wall, for the Captain jerked up his head, motioning for him to be silent.

"He's asleep," Kirk whispered, looking down at his friend again as McCoy knelt next to them.

It was sleep, McCoy noted, but a restless sleep. Unable to control his reactions now, the Vulcan could not keep his face from twitching with pain. McCoy even heard him moan softly as the agony in his body forced its way past his sleeping lips. At the sound, Kirk gently brushed his hand over Spock's hair, his own expression reflecting his empathy and compassion. The reaction was not lost on McCoy, and the surgeon reached out to lay a gentle hand on the younger man's shoulder.

Words were not necessary.

After a time, Kirk raised his head to look at McCoy. "Bones," he said, with an effort keeping his voice steady. "Can't you give him something to ease his pain?"

McCoy looked away, unable to bear the look of the pleading eyes. He shook his head, refusing to meet Kirk's gaze.

"Not even a light sedative?"

"No, Jim. A light sedative would be ineffective here, and a strong painkiller would be too much for him."

Kirk swallowed, looking down again at the sleeping Vulcan in his arms. Spock's face was hot, and he moved his head restlessly, trying to escape whatever nightmare was haunting him. And now there wouldn't even be relief from the physical agony he was feeling.

He raised his head again, desperate. "Bones, there must be *something* I... we can do!" His emotions made him raise his voice, and Spock's head fell to the other side. Kirk froze, fearing that he

had wakened him, but when the Vulcan's eyes remained closed, he continued, whispering, "Bones, the pain is killing him! We've got to do something!"

McCoy had had the same thoughts, and he had found no answer. "I know how you're feeling, Jim. But try to remember that he's a Vulcan. When he's awake, he's still able to control the pain. A sedative, though, will kill him almost certainly."

Kirk's voice was toneless, his expression empty. "He's going to die, anyway. The least we can do is let him go with dignity, without suffering." His voice broke. "Why... why did I bring him down here with me? I knew there could be danger! Why didn't I take another scientist? I should have anticipated this!" He fell silent, lowering his head.

"Jim, it wasn't your fault he's been hit," McCoy said gently, trying to reassure him.

"Not my fault? Who else's? That bullet was meant for me! It should have hit me, and it would have were it not for his pushing me aside to take it himself."

"But he did it deliberately, and that makes it even less your fault."

"That's what I'm saying! He did it deliberately, and for me. He would have done it for no-one else. That does make it my fault. I should have taken that damn bullet! Not him! He could have lived on for maybe another two hundred years! And now he's dying, and only because I didn't react fast enough to prevent him giving his life for me. If only I had realised..." His hand was brushing gently over Spock's temple.

"Poppycock," McCoy said, still gently. "And you know it. You're not responsible for his actions, and if he chooses to step in front of somebody to take a bullet, that's his decision. After all, we've been through it before. And wouldn't you do the same for him?"

"Yes," Kirk whispered. "I would. Why *didn't* I?"

McCoy had no reply to that. He did understand Kirk's feelings; they were, after all, very similar to his own. He, too, was blaming himself. The knowledge that he had the skill necessary to save the Vulcan was enough to make him want to smash something with impotent rage. The fact that the equipment and instruments he needed were simply not available here did nothing to relieve his feelings. All he knew was that it was *his* fault, and his alone, that Spock was dying. After all, had he not sworn an oath to save lives? He was a traitor to his oath and to Kirk, who would have to suffer for it as long as he lived... not to mention Spock, who he was failing now that the Vulcan really needed him.

I'm sorry, Spock. I wish I could do something. But I really am just a witch doctor who doesn't remember the correct spell... and I wish I could tell you that you really are my friend... Please let there be time enough at least for that!

* * * * *

Time passed. The dim light of dusk had long since given way to complete blackness. The temperature continued to sink as the two friends sat in silence, each lost in his own thoughts, while Spock

lay in uneasy sleep, hurting and shuddering with fever. Kirk remained next to him, watching his face closely, noting all the small expressions of pain on the pale features. He drew closer to him to keep him warm, constantly aware of the tremor shaking the lean body.

Spock's consciousness dived up through the cocoon of sleep his mind had woven around it to waken to hissing and pounding sounds close to his ears. But the sensation dissipated rapidly as he felt a new onslaught of the ever-present pain that seemed to have lain waiting to attack him in those first moments of renewed awareness when he was helpless.

Automatic defences against all physical discomfort snapped up instantaneously, and a gasp was all that escaped him as the last remnants of sleep were brushed aside. He opened his eyes to stare into a wavering green mist.

"Spock?"

He could feel his hand being lifted, and then something cold and hard and wet touched his lips.

"Drink this, Spock. Water."

The cool liquid moistened his lips. He drank thirstily.

"Easy, Spock, take your time. There's plenty." Kirk's voice came from behind the wall of pain and nausea as the fresh coolness slowly penetrated his fevered body, quenching a burning thirst he had not realised he'd been feeling. Finally he turned his head aside. Then he felt a cool, soft cloth on his forehead. The last thing he was aware of before his consciousness returned to painless blackness was the warm, immensely comforting sense of Kirk's presence. He was not afraid any more.

Kirk was with him.

Infinitely carefully, Kirk settled down next to Spock again, cradling the Vulcan's head in his arms. It was now so cold that he himself was shivering and did not dare think about what effect it must have on his friend. He wanted to be close to him now, to give him warmth, and if it had another, more subtle effect on the Vulcan - or maybe both of them - so be it. All he wanted was to help Spock, make things easier for him. He did not care what it entailed. Whatever the price, he would pay it.

Yet there was nothing he could do, except watch helplessly, while Spock was slowly slipping closer and closer to death. He could sense it, could almost see the life force draining from the lean body. The sunken cheeks, the new lines around eyes and mouth, the greenish tinge that had come to replace the familiar colour of the too-hot face... It hurt him just to look at it. If only there was something...

McCoy threw another branch into the fire, cursing under his breath as a flying spark touched his hand. The reaction was automatic. He wasn't really thinking of the pain as he absently rubbed his finger against his pants. His thoughts were still where they'd been almost continuously for the last... how long had it been? Six or seven hours since Spock had been wounded, four since darkness...



How much time does he have left? A day? A few hours? Will he ever see the sunlight again?

Wrapping his thermo-blanket around his shoulders, he returned to his place, leaning against the wall where he could watch the others across the fire.

The silence in the cave was oppressive. Spock's condition weighed on them, forestalling the merest attempt at conversation. Not that he felt much like talking himself. He wouldn't even know how to begin to find the words to express what he was feeling, nor if any such confession would be welcome if he did. Kirk was having enough unvoiceable feelings of his own to deal with, as the merest glance at him would tell even the most casual observer. So McCoy just kept silent.

Kirk's quiet, thoughtful voice at last broke the silence.

"Only three hundred years ago, hardly anyone believed there could be life on other planets." He managed a sad smile. McCoy wasn't sure whether he was being spoken to or whether Kirk was just talking to himself. "And today..." the Captain continued. "Today we work together with aliens, side by side. They are our friends... We learn from them, and they from us." He reached out a gentle hand to touch the tip of Spock's ear. "And supposedly unemotional Vulcans... one unemotional Vulcan sacrifices his life for an emotional, illogical Human... He has learned what the word 'love' means... giving him friendship, a Vulcan's friendship..." His voice broke; he couldn't speak any further.

Through the veil of tears he no longer had the strength to hold back he saw Spock's eyes open. He lifted the Vulcan's head again to give him water when the dark eyes directed their unfocused gaze on him. It was obvious that his vision was still not as clear as it had been, yet it was enough. The slanted brows drew together at what he saw.

"Jim... ?"

Kirk could feel a sole tear roll down his cheek. "Yes, Spock?" he whispered, making no attempt to hide what the evidence on his face was revealing.

The Vulcan eyes were following the tear, then darted back to Kirk's eyes. For a moment it was as though they were able to touch his innermost soul.

"Jim... For me?"

A nod was all he could manage.

The Vulcan's gaze assumed that faraway expression as he at last acknowledged the truth he had begun to surmise.

"I knew there was something wrong," he said in a weak voice. "I am sorry." He said it with all the sincerity a Human/Vulcan hybrid was capable of expressing, with no attempt to conceal his feelings behind his mask of logic. The time to pretend was long past.

This openness sliced through Kirk's own control like a razor. "Oh, please, Spock - don't die! Try to hold on!"

"I will... I have a logical interest... in survival..."

"Please, don't talk, Spock - that takes away too much of your strength. Just tell me what you need. Are you lying uncomfortably, or are you cold?" He laid his hand on the Vulcan's forehead, feeling his hot skin, the fever burning.

"Jim... do not be so concerned.... It is illogical... in addition to being... unproductive... "

Spock was trying to play his game of having no emotions in order to raise Kirk's spirits, as he had done so often before. But this time, the typical expression of his voice was missing, and his right eyebrow did not rise. He was already closer to death than he himself realised. This attempt to cheer Kirk up hurt him instead, in his deepest being. He turned away, unable to keep a new rush of tears from falling.

"Jim... " came Spock's weak voice again, now tinged with distress. "Please, don't cry for me... I had to do it... "

Yes, you stubborn, pigheaded Vulcan, of course you think my life is more important than yours, don't you? He took a deep breath to ease the pain in his chest and throat. "Now you've really done it," he said, trying to keep his voice steady. "I knew that some day you'd succeed. After I don't know how many attempts to save my life by giving yours, today you finally did it. And I suppose there was no other way, was there?"

"No," said Spock softly. "There was not."

A look of perfect understanding passed between them. "I understand," Kirk said, and his voice did not waver. He did understand. He would have done the same thing for Spock, without hesitation. A gentle smile on his lips, he reached out to brush the Vulcan's hair in a silent gesture of support. Spock returned the smile without shame as they both, for the first time, openly acknowledged the depth of mutual commitment that had always been there.

Exhausted from the effort to talk, Spock closed his eyes again, a slight trace of the smile still lingering on his lips.

Kirk's eyes remained fixed on his until long after Spock had slipped into a fitful sleep. *At least there was time enough to teach him that... But still, it could have been so much more...*

* * * * *

For the second time, McCoy offered the silver package with food concentrate to Kirk - finding himself unable to deal with the situation any longer, the doctor had diverted his attention to bare necessities. "Please, Jim, try at least a few bites. I understand how you feel, but if you keep going like this... "

"I told you, I can't eat now, Bones." There was almost no life in his voice.

McCoy hesitated before he continued. "Jim, you know you aren't helping Spock by punishing yourself," he said then, his voice very gentle.

But Kirk had not heard him.

"He's dying, Bones," he said in the same tone of voice. "I can

see it still eating away at him." His eyes travelled slowly over the face of the Vulcan, who was still asleep, his head cradled in Kirk's arms. Now and again his features would twitch slightly, or he would moan softly, moving his head from side to side. "I just wish he didn't have to be in pain like that..." "

McCoy lowered his head. He knew that it would be a lot worse towards the end. He suspected that the wound had become infected, which would mean rising fever, delirium, maybe hallucinations... and no easy way to spare him. He did not have the medication to treat a wound infected with alien germs.

Maybe it won't make a difference; maybe he won't have to live through it... He suppressed the thought with a sudden outburst of defiance. *No! No, there's got to be some way! I just can't let it end now. There's too much ahead for them for it to end now!*

He took out his scanner, running it over the Vulcan's body, hoping for something... anything... to turn up which might sustain his just-revived hope.

Kirk was watching him, his eyes showing the same feelings. But McCoy didn't even need to look at the display on his tricorder. The acoustic signal had told him enough, more than he had wanted to know. He opened the lid of the tricorder anyway, busying his hands, if not his mind, avoiding Kirk's eyes although he could still feel them watching him. *It's a bloody shame! Why now? And why Spock? If anyone did have to die, why did it have to be the one person in the galaxy who isn't expendable?*

Looking away at last from his chief surgeon's bowed head, Kirk again felt a painful stab at his chest where a building ache had become his constant companion. He could feel Spock's fever-hot body shivering and moving restlessly in his arms, heard another sound of pain that the sleeping Vulcan could not hold back, and a cold fist seemed to reach for his heart.

Was this the end? Could this really be the final chapter of their shared life, of their legendary friendship that had been the one constant in his existence? Whenever he had needed support, trust, understanding, or just honest advice in a difficult situation, Spock had been there, quiet, unobtrusive, just being Spock, and it had helped him through. It had first become habit, then instinct, for Kirk to turn to the Vulcan, but more often Spock had offered his help and given it before the Captain even knew he needed it.

It had taken a while for this friendship to develop, but when Kirk took the first step to ease the Vulcan out of his self-made prison so many years ago, he had not even dreamed of what he had ultimately gained. Long, patient months of giving had ultimately resulted in a unique giving and receiving, almost unprecedented among Humans, and certainly unique between Vulcan and Human. A legend, and Kirk had always been awed by it.

And now, in the culmination of that friendship, one last act of giving that could never be returned. A nightmare come true.

Like in a movie, Kirk saw the birth and growth of their friendship played back before his mind's eye, the cornerstone of their relationship. Beautiful, happy moments, moments of joy and utter contentment, but also painful moments, a necessary, hurtful truth or a hard word that had finally led to a deeper understanding of each other.

The moments came and went as the progression of their relationship continued in Kirk's mind, and as he sat there, lost in the recesses of his memories, a small smile found its way to his lips.

McCoy, watching him covertly, tricorder still in hand, swallowed hard as he saw the blank smile on Kirk's face, knowing that it might be the last he would see for a very long time. How often had he privately compared their friendship to a symbiosis? *What's the definition of a biological symbiosis again? Two beings of different species living together in mutual dependence, both benefitting from it and each unable to live without the other...* And how often had one of them haunted Sickbay when the other was ill or injured, not resting until the other was well again? They had suffered with each other, sharing physical and emotional pain with their own special kind of empathy, just as they had shared the joy and happiness of life aboard a starship...

Would there ever be that kind of fulfilment for Kirk again, after Spock was gone? Would he be able to adjust to a life without the Vulcan, without the quiet companion who had come to be his best friend?

A small sound of pain left the Vulcan's mouth, snapping McCoy out of his reverie and bringing Kirk back to the present. Spock's head fell from side to side, sharp, agonized breaths escaping his half-open mouth, and Kirk immediately tried to soothe him, gently running his hand over the Vulcan's face. And it had the desired effect. Spock slowly calmed down, his breathing returning to normal as the gentle ministrations reached his fever-blurred mind, if only unconsciously.

No-one else could do that for him, McCoy thought fondly. A real symbiosis. And it would be just the same the other way round... Even in his sleep, the Vulcan was demonstrating his friendship with Kirk, and he, McCoy, was unable to save that friendship. He watched Kirk continuing the slight stroking of his fingertips, softly, so as not to waken Spock. *It won't make any difference. He'll die, and no-one, not even Jim, can do a bloody thing.* He rose and left the cave, unable to bear any longer the sight of that beautiful friendship being slowly destroyed by a mindless piece of lead.

Again Spock's breathing became laboured, and he moved his lips, uttering incoherent sounds. Kirk watched the Vulcan's fevered brow becoming creased with expressions of uneasiness, even... even fear. Then Spock threw his head to the side, crying out softly in his sleep. The Captain intensified his efforts to soothe him and put his hand against the side of the Vulcan's head, hoping to reach him.

But this time Spock's mind was lost too far in the feverish nightmare. He cried out again, and now Kirk was able to make out the name he was calling.

Carefully, he gathered the Vulcan up in his arms, cradling him, holding him close. He started talking to him in a soft voice, gentle, soothing, meaningless words, until Spock suddenly jerked half upright, his hands clutching Kirk's shoulders, eyes wide open with a look of pure terror in them. For a moment he remained motionless, clinging to Kirk, completely disorientated, still staring at him... then he relaxed, closing his eyes in relief.

Kirk eased him back down, gently covering him with the blanket, while Spock fought to regain his lapsed control. Then he opened his



eyes to look at the Captain.

"My temperature would appear to be... slightly elevated, would it not?" he enquired weakly.

"Yes, Spock. You're running a fever." Kirk hesitated, unsure of how to ask his next question without embarrassing his friend. "Was it a nightmare, Spock?" he finally asked simply.

"Yes," Spock said softly. "A nightmare."

He closed his eyes, trying to erase the picture in his mind. *Jim, covered with blood, dying... McCoy screaming at him why he hadn't done something, he could have saved him... He himself standing there, staring down at his t'hy'la, knowing he had betrayed Jim's trust in him and broken an oath he had sworn long ago - to save Jim's life whatever the cost to himself... Jim's hazel eyes, breaking as death came... and then the terrible, excruciating pain in his mind as he felt that death deep inside, like something tearing apart within him...*

The memory clouded over his thoughts, and it was all he could do to turn his head aside, hiding his face and his reactions, to maintain at least the last shreds of Vulcan dignity left to him.

"No, don't be ashamed, Spock," Kirk said softly. "You have absolutely no reason to be ashamed; not of a dream." He reached out to turn the Vulcan's face gently back towards him. "I know what it was you dreamed. I've had that same nightmare myself." *Only for me it has come true*, he added silently.

Spock shuddered as Kirk's gentle voice slowly dissipated that horrifying vision in his mind. With the clearing of his reason he also regained his senses, and then the pain was there again, too. He gasped at a sharp jolt of searing agony that stabbed through him. For a moment his chest was on fire. He held his breath, his mind frantically erecting walls around the pain, trying to block it. But the mind rules were beyond his reach, weakened as he already was. So he just clamped down on it hard, suppressing it by sheer force of will. He did not feel his teeth biting though his lower lip as he clenched his jaws.

Kirk watched the silent fight helplessly, unable just to stand by and watch yet at a loss to know what else to do. Taking the cloth, he tenderly wiped the green trickle of blood from the Vulcan's mouth, painfully aware of the uselessness of the gesture.

Spock again jerked sharply, catching his breath. His fists clenched; otherwise he remained almost motionless, save for an agonised trembling of his tense body.

"Spock," he said urgently, "stop fighting it. Don't torture yourself. Just go with it. Do you hear me? You can't control it; it'll kill you!"

"No!" Spock gasped. "I'm a Vulcan! I control! I can - " He couldn't continue as the pain took his breath away.

Kirk took both his shoulders, squeezing gently. "Spock, please. There's nothing shameful about giving in to such pain. I know exactly how you feel; even for a Human it would be hard. But believe me, it'll be easier!"

"No," Spock whispered, eyes tightly shut. "I can't!" He gasped, jerking his head to the side.

"Dammit, you stubborn Vulcan! It's not your dignity that's at stake here, it's your life!"

The Vulcan did not respond to the outburst. He was motionless again, holding his breath. Kirk could see veins and tendons protruding on his neck with the effort to keep from screaming. Then Spock moaned, and again he turned his head away.

The sound frightened Kirk more than anything. Never before had he heard an expression of such agony from any living being. It scared him as he had never been scared in his life.

Sick with worry, he took the Vulcan's trembling hand in his. "Hold on, Spock, I'll get Bones. Just hold on a few minutes longer." He got up, frantic, and left the cave at a run.

As soon as Kirk was gone, Spock felt the last remnants of his will-power ebb away from him, and his control broke. "I'm sorry," he whispered into the uncaring, enveloping cold around him. It took the rest of his waning strength to pull up the blanket to hide his face.

Kirk found McCoy outside, sitting in front of the low entrance, his blanket wrapped around him.

"Bones, you've got to give him something for the pain! It's killing him! He can't stand much more of it!"

McCoy hesitated, but it took him just a moment to consider the danger and one look into Kirk's panic-stricken face to made his decision. Getting up, he followed the Captain inside.

Upon entering, Kirk saw the Vulcan lying near the fire, his face covered with the blanket, his body shaking with spasmodic trembling. Kneeling down next to him, he tried to pull the blanket away from his face, when he was stopped by Spock's choking voice.

"Don't touch me!"

"Spock, I've got a painkiller for you," McCoy said gently from behind Kirk. "But I can't give it to you through the blanket. You'll have to -"

"Bones," Kirk interrupted, motioning for him to be silent. Ignoring the surgeon's confused look, he turned back to Spock.

Attuned as he was to his friend's suffering, Kirk had realised what had happened while he was gone from Spock's side, withdrawing the silent support of his presence. The pain had broken the Vulcan, smashing his self control and splitting him wide open.

He was crying.

Kirk reached out to lay a hand on the Vulcan's shoulder, stroking it softly. All the while he tried to brush away his own misery at the sight of his friend broken because of him, furiously thinking past it and towards a solution. What should he do? He'd never been in a situation before when he'd ached to give comfort but didn't know whether it would be welcome. Should he ignore Spock's

plight, hoping that the Vulcan would be able to regain control more easily if no-one noticed? Or should he act as all his instincts told him to, do what any man would if his best friend suffered like this, even at the risk of embarrassing Spock by showing him he had noticed his horribly humiliating situation?

He looked up helplessly at McCoy. By now, the surgeon, too, had realised what was happening, but he, at least, had no doubts what to do. As much as he longed to offer help, he knew it was impossible. If Spock ever realised he had seen him like this, he would be too embarrassed to look at him again - ever. No, Kirk had said that the least they could do was let him die in dignity, and to force his help on him now would mean that Spock would never again be able to hold up his head again in his presence. If there was anyone whose comfort Spock would accept it was Kirk, and knowing that there was no place for him with them now, McCoy just left the cave again, the unused painkiller still in his hand.

Kirk watched him leave, biting his lower lip. McCoy was right, of course, but that didn't solve his problem. But then he remembered what he himself had told Spock just a few minutes earlier; that it was not Spock's dignity that mattered, it was his life.

He could feel the lean shoulder shaking with suppressed sobs as he continued to stroke him. "Spock," he said softly, "it's all right. Just let it go. There's no-one here who can see you, and you don't have to be ashamed in front of me. Just get it out of your system..." He gently pulled away the blanket to reveal the Vulcan's tear-stained face. Spock closed his burning eyes as the firelight stabbed them, and turned his face away, savagely fighting down the sobs.

Kirk put a hand to his cheek, turning him back. "No, Spock, don't be ashamed. There's nothing to be ashamed of. It's not your fault..."

The Vulcan opened pain-filled eyes to look at him miserably. "I'm sorry, Jim," he choked out. "The pain... I couldn't..."

The sound of that rasping, agonised voice was more than Kirk could bear. He gathered his friend up in his arms, supporting him as Spock hid his face against his shoulder, sobbing freely. "It's all right. Everything's all right. I know. I know it hurts. But you don't have to be ashamed. I won't hold it against you. I understand..." He continued his soothing monologue while Spock clung to him, pressing his face against his neck, crying and sobbing. Kirk was awed by Spock's vulnerability, now that all control was gone. The smallest hard word would hurt him deeply, would penetrate all the way to his inmost being. The Captain was grateful that no-one else was here to witness this exposure, no-one who could say or do the wrong thing now. He concentrated on radiating a warm glow of love and acceptance so that the touch-telepath could pick it up and cool the inner wound.

Kirk lost all sense of time as he sat there, holding his friend in his arms, talking to him softly, while Spock calmed down slowly, ever so slowly, his painful sobs fading more and more. At last he was quiet, but Kirk could still feel him holding on to his shoulder, instinctively seeking comfort and understanding, so he kept on talking until Spock lifted his head to look at him out of swollen and bloodshot eyes.

"Jim," he whispered, sounding like a small child. "Please

don't... despise me... "

Kirk felt something contract painfully in his chest as he heard that naked pleading in the Vulcan's voice. Tears welled up in his own eyes, and he hugged Spock close, stroking him. "Why in space should I do that, you silly Vulcan? You're my friend, the best friend I've ever had!" His voice didn't sound too steady either.

"They always do," Spock said, almost inaudibly, against his shoulder. "I can feel it..." He looked up again. "But you don't, do you, Jim? Please don't..."

"No, I don't, Spock. I never will, you know that!" Then, suddenly, he understood. "Something like that happened to you before, didn't it? You lost control..."

"And they all hated me," Spock finished, almost sobbing again.

"But I won't, Spock. I won't hate you for anything you do. I know you well enough to be certain that you would never do anything anyone could hate you for. And don't you ever even *think* I could hate you for anything."

Spock's expression, as he said those words, was as open as he'd ever seen it before, and it gave him an impression of how deeply the Vulcan's feelings for him truly ran. He felt a warm wave well up inside, paired with the now ever-present dull pain in his chest, combining to an almost frightening upsurge of emotion. For a moment he fought it, not wanting to expose Spock to his feelings while he was still so vulnerable. But then, without knowing who had made the first move, they clung to each other, both crying, though for vastly different reasons this time, deeply in the grip of feelings that had remained unexpressed for too long, and yet could still not be put into words.

It was not until much later that they were able to look at each other again, uncertain whether or not to be ashamed of this uninhibited impulse, but still both aware that it had felt right and had helped them immeasurably to cope with the present unbearable situation. Then Spock closed his eyes, overwhelmed by weariness as the past strain began to have its effect on him. Kirk eased him back down into the warm layers of cloth, covering him again.

"Jim," Spock whispered as exhausted sleep claimed him, "please stay with me..."

He did not hear any more the Captain's soft reassurance. "Of course, my friend, I won't leave you. You'll never be alone again. I'll stay here with you until you don't need me any more..." He lowered his head into his arms to let flow the tears of grief that he could hold back no longer.

At some point he dimly felt someone take him into his arms, and looking up he saw a pair of misty blue eyes swimming before his vision before he submitted himself to the comfort of the warm embrace.

* * * * *

Hours later, Kirk was still sitting next to the Vulcan, his red and swollen eyes bearing mute witness to the unexpected storm of emotion that had caught him full force. Otherwise, he appeared quite calm, which McCoy, watching him from his familiar post across the

fire, found more disquieting than the earlier outburst, for that had at least managed to release some of the emotional pressure Kirk was under, however temporarily. But now that he had regained his control, the pressure was building up again, and, if the Captain's set jaw was any indication, he was determined not to let it happen again if he could help it.

Kirk was completely unaware of the Doctor's scrutiny; he only had eyes for his injured friend. Spock was now in a peculiar state of semi-consciousness, eyes half open, head moving restlessly, shivering and burning hot. In an attempt to ease the feverish heat, Kirk passed the wet cloth over the Vulcan's face or gave him water in little sips, all the while thinking back to all the events and experiences of their shared life, and how Spock had again and again put his life at stake for his Human friend, somehow always managing to come out of it alive. Kirk, too, had always been ready to give up his life and career for the Vulcan who had come to mean so much to him. Their willingness to die for each other had made them the best team in Starfleet and had created the legend of their indestructible friendship, with the death of one of them the only thing that could come between them. They functioned like one being with two minds, two bodies, each profiting from and rejoicing in the differences between them. Spock's death would mean the death of that being, and the end of the most meaningful relationship Kirk had had in his entire life.

He did not hear the crackling fire, nor feel the warmth emanating from it. Neither did he realise that the sun had risen for another day. All he knew was that Spock needed him; all he saw was his friend's pale and sunken face. He listened to the Vulcan's jagged, agonised gasps as he fought to breathe with damaged lungs, moaning softly with exhausted pain. Kirk gathered him closer to give him more warmth and stroked him, passing his hand over the silky, dark hair. Spock shifted again, pressing his face against the stroking hand. Kirk thought he saw him try to say something, but it came out as a soft, helpless moan.

"Yes, I know," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I know it hurts, Spock. It must be terrible... But just keep breathing - as long as you keep breathing it's all right... Yes, that's good... that's good, Spock. Just don't die on me now..." He kept talking softly to the trembling Vulcan in his arms, disquieted by the sight of his unseeing, half-open eyes.

"It hurts, doesn't it?" McCoy had witnessed his reaction to the Vulcan's pain.

Kirk nodded wordlessly. His compassion, his empathy with the Vulcan had grown so strong that he seemed to feel Spock's pain in his own body, as in the mind meld.

Mind meld? Wait a minute...

He looked down at his friend. If he could make him accept his help... The pale face was tense with pain; the white lips still forming unuttered words as the fever rose. Would he be able to find the strength to concentrate long enough... ?

"Bones - do you think his condition would improve if he were stronger? All he needs is just strength to fall into his healing trance, isn't it?" Kirk looked at the Doctor, a shimmer of new-found hope in his eyes.

McCoy was staring into empty space. "Jim, he doesn't have that strength. It's just a big 'if'."

"Totally hypothetically, Bones, what do you think?"

McCoy looked up. He knew Jim Kirk, and now Jim Kirk was up to something. "How do you mean, Jim?" he asked suspiciously.

"Well, just... wouldn't it be possible for him to receive the necessary strength from outside? From someone else? Like... in a mind meld?"

"Jim, do you have any idea what's happening in his mind right now? Pain, fever, maybe even hallucinations! He wouldn't have the strength to initiate a mind meld, and even if he did it could have the most horrible consequences for whoever is foolish enough to agree to it! You could be killed, Jim, or be left permanently insane if he wasn't able to concentrate properly!"

Kirk looked calmly into his eyes. "It is his only chance."

"Jim, for God's sake listen to reason! As soon as the strain gets too much for him, he'll draw you with him into his death!" He paused, fumbling for words, then, very softly, "Please, Jim, don't do that to me. I don't want to lose both of you."

Kirk looked at his old friend, at the emotions in his eyes. He knew what McCoy felt, but his mind was made up. *Even if it's not possible, I'll make it possible!*

He was aware of the danger. Spock really was in no shape for a mind meld, and Kirk knew from past experience just how great his concentration had to be for a proper initiation of one.

No matter. Even if it's either his life or my sanity, that's a choice that leaves no choice.

He was certain that McCoy would try to prevent it if he got half a chance. "You're right, Bones," he said slowly, as if reluctantly changing his mind. "The risk would be too great." He didn't like deceiving his friend, but it was necessary. Taking a deep breath, he said, "I won't do it, Bones."

He did not trust himself to say any more.

* * * * *

The hours crept by. Kirk did not budge from his friend's side, holding him, giving him water, talking to him although he was not sure Spock was aware of his presence. Now and then the Vulcan muttered incomprehensible words, slurred and barely audible, yet Kirk recognised some of them. They were Vulcan. His friend was falling deeper and deeper into the abyss of fever, and Kirk knew he could not wait much longer.

"Jim?" McCoy's voice penetrated his thoughts. "Our wood supply is almost gone." He hesitated.

Kirk looked up, wanting to tell him he couldn't leave Spock now; but McCoy understood the silent plea in his eyes.

"It's all right, Jim. I'm going." He went out, leaving the two friends alone.

McCoy had barely disappeared from view when one single thought shot through Kirk's mind. *Now! Do it now! There'll be no second chance.*

"Spock... "

There was no reaction.

He bent down to him, taking his face in his hands. "Spock, please, come out of it! Spock!"

After a long pause, the dark eyes opened slowly, unfocused and glassy with fever. *Oh my God, what if I've waited too long? Spock!*

"Jim... " It was only a weak whisper. "Jim, vrou er s'llirpu on t'ha... "

"Not Vulcan, Spock, English!"

The Vulcan looked at him, frowning slightly as though he didn't understand. The Captain took his hand.

"Spock," he said slowly and clearly. "Mind meld."

A tremor coursed through Spock's wasted body. "Jim... ?" He saw his friend's familiar face before him but the sounds coming from his lips were alien. Fear crept into his eyes and he averted his face, confused and frightened.

Too late, Kirk thought, desperate. The fever's too high. He doesn't understand me any more... Squeezing the hand he was still holding in his own, he closed his eyes in despair. Too late...

Suddenly a warm hand touched his temple. "Levra tal or t'hy'la Jim fror?" Spock whispered. Looking at him, Kirk saw worry in the Vulcan's eyes. He seemed to have picked up the Human's emotions through the physical contact they shared. Kirk continued to look at him helplessly, not daring to say anything for fear of frightening Spock again. How was he supposed to get through to him what he planned to do?

He took Spock's other hand, guiding it to his right temple, and placed the fingers in the positions he remembered from their previous melds. Meanwhile he held the Vulcan's gaze, looking deeply into the dark brown eyes. Somewhere behind that wall of fever there was the sharp, clear Vulcan intellect that he had to reach somehow. It had to work. He would not accept anything else.

Spock must not die, therefore he will not die!

Somehow, part of Kirk's steely will seemed to be communicating to the Vulcan. It was not yet the meld, and yet Spock suddenly sensed his Captain's intention, understood what it was he wanted to do. A mind meld would give him the strength to... He could hardly concentrate on the nebulous, elusive thoughts. His mind seemed to be paralysed. But... Jim would meld with him to give him strength... and Jim...

From somewhere in his mind he heard a voice calling, *No!* It must not happen. But why not?

Suddenly an image appeared before his mind's eye, blurred, out of focus, partially unrecognisable, and yet one thing was clear; Jim

was dead.

Spock felt something race through his mind, a feeling, a forbidden feeling.

Jim is dead!

He snapped open his eyes, hadn't even noticed they'd been closed - the image faded, and he saw... Jim, next to him, holding him. He blinked.

Then he understood. It was a warning. Jim wanted something of him, but he couldn't give it, for otherwise Jim would...

Kirk opened his mouth, and again he heard sounds, strange, incomprehensible sounds. And yet somehow they seemed familiar. He knew this language. It was Jim's language, his mother's language...

"The meld," Kirk was saying again, insistently. *Bones may be back any minute now...* He looked hard at Spock, pressing the fingertips against the points of contact on his face. "Spock, meld with me!"

Slowly, comprehension dawned in the Vulcan's eyes. Then he weakly shook his head. "No," he whispered. "No... meld... trelve 'lli d'reakh..." He hesitated. "Danger... Jim..." His eyes closed again. He hardly had the strength to speak.

Kirk let go of the Vulcan's hands, resting his own on his friend's shoulders. "It's necessary, Spock. I have to do it. If I don't, you'll die." Again the Vulcan opened his mouth to protest, yet Kirk anticipated him. "What would you do, Spock, if it was me lying there dying? Would you just let it happen? Would you want to live on alone?"

Spock didn't answer. He looked at Kirk for a long time, then lowered his eyes.

"There you are. Neither could I. I *can't*." He took a deep breath. "I'm ready to risk it, Spock, no matter what it is I'm risking. It's better than having to live on alone without having tried."

The Vulcan's eyes opened once more, focusing on Kirk. The Human knew he was fighting, struggling to reach a decision. It was true; Spock would initiate the meld with Kirk if their positions were reversed, regardless of Kirk's condition. He would risk life and sanity for him, even gladly meet death together with him, much rather preferring death to a life without Kirk and the knowledge that he could have done something, if only make it easier for him. How could he now condemn Kirk to this life?

He nodded slightly in silent agreement, correcting the position of his fingers on Kirk's face. The Captain held his wrists, supporting them, trying to think of nothing and relax his mind completely. Even the slightest resistance would make it harder on Spock. He recalled other melds they had shared, how easy and natural it had felt to be part of the Vulcan's thoughts. *His life is at stake*, he told himself, *and no price is too high for that...*

"My mind to your mind..." The familiar words were drifting to him from somewhere.

Kirk steeled himself, readying himself for anything he might find in Spock's mind.

"We are moving closer... closer... closer... "

He could sense the Vulcan's presence, the probing tendrils of thought. He signalled his readiness to open himself to him... but somewhere in the dark recesses of his subconscious, he felt mounting protest against the meld, a withdrawal from the probing tendrils.

Pain, fever and maybe even hallucinations... Those had been McCoy's words. Something within him did not want to share that, was afraid of the meld. When they made contact with this something, Kirk could feel Spock's current of thought pull back from it. The feeble, superficial contact was threatening to break.

Kirk tried to fight down the fear, using his will power and stubbornness against it, recalled one image that would never lose its horror for him.

Spock, standing where Kirk had been just seconds previously; the spreading stain of blood on his chest where the bullet had hit him, the bullet that had been meant for the Human...

In his mind, he threw himself towards where he sensed the Vulcan; Spock met him half way, driven by similar motives that were giving Kirk the strength to overcome his own fears.

"We are one."

He was suddenly overwhelmed by a terrible onslaught of pain. He wanted to scream, at the same time feeling the urge to control the pain. For now he was one with the Vulcan who was not allowed to scream.

Memories of moments of shame, when the pain broke the Vulcan control... Feelings of gratefulness towards the Human who did not condemn him when he shamed his heritage... And deeper, the reassuring knowledge that Jim was safe, that he would live... almost blotted out by mortal fear and rebellion...

Kirk could feel the fever raging in his own mind. He could feel Spock's pain as well as the attempt to hide it from the Human. He also had his own thoughts...

Spock?

Yes, Jim?

Draw as much strength from me as you need. Don't concern yourself with me.

He found he was thinking in Vulcan. And in some unnamed way he knew that no time was passing while he put his thoughts into words; that he was not even thinking in words, for his thoughts were also Spock's.

He was aware of Spock's efforts to overcome pain and fever in order to concentrate.

Jim... for that I will have to deepen the meld... I must penetrate even into your subconscious, must initiate the

healing trance for you so that I may have total control over all your body functions... I do not know if I will be able to achieve it. It is astonishing that I could even meld with you...

I will help you, Spock. Just tell me what to do.

Open your mind... You must not resist, not even subconsciously. We will become one, every memory, every thought, every dream, every wish. For a short moment, that, for us, will feel like eternity... Open yourself, Jim...

Kirk did. He was ready to reveal everything, any memory he had wanted to keep secret, for Spock was no stranger to him. He turned against all the barriers in his mind, helping the Vulcan to destroy them, for any resistance would drain him. He could feel Spock's efforts on his own barriers, steel-tempered walls of Vulcan privacy, that now had to be brought down to achieve the deep meld, and Kirk knew that he was the only being in the universe Spock would open himself to to that extent. A wave of affection washed over their combined minds, and neither could tell in whose it had originated.

The unique affinity of their two minds drew them together, and sheer necessity and stubbornness initiated the deep meld.

For an instant, they were one. There were no barriers any more, no secrets. The gulf between two worlds was bridged.

Time lost meaning. They explored each other, gently, infinitely gently, each opening to the other every door to any memory of actual events, of dreams, of wishes. Each knew everything about the other. There could be no more misunderstandings, nothing that could not be explained.

It was the completion of a Being.

And then, suddenly, a searing pain raced through the double consciousness like a flame of burning gas that scorched everything it touched. It filled the delicate corridors of the Mind with black smoke, distorting the memories. Everything started to turn, spiralling down into a dark abyss, pulling the Mind down with it, and then there was only blackness.

* * * * *

McCoy picked up one last piece of branch and, deciding that he had gathered enough wood to last through the day, began to retrace his steps towards the cave, slowly, almost reluctantly.

He was afraid to go back, afraid of what he might find. The last sight he'd caught of Spock had shown him beyond any doubt that the Vulcan's end was just a few steps away.

But then he quickened his pace again. Maybe it had not happened yet, and he wanted to be there when it did. While he had been working out here in the sun, picking up logs and twigs, he had acknowledged to himself that he really did feel friendship for his

favourite sparring partner; although he knew that Spock knew, he needed to voice it nevertheless, if there was still time.

And if there wasn't... Then he would have to be there all the more, for Jim would need him then.

Suddenly he found himself in the cave entrance. So immersed had he been in his thoughts that he hadn't realised he'd already reached it. He went inside.

Then he saw them. At first he didn't even realise that anything was wrong. They were lying close together, as they had before, sharing comfort and body warmth.

But then the total immobility of their two forms struck him with full force, as well as the position of Spock's fingers on Kirk's face. McCoy dropped the wood and scrambled over to them, nearly losing his balance as a particularly strong branch got caught between his legs.

"Oh, my God... "

He reached them, and even as he tried to pry Spock's cold hands away from Kirk's face, he realised that it was too late. They were both lifeless, not breathing, with no pulse in either of them. Both their faces were contorted with identical pain, two frozen masks that left no hope.

McCoy let go of the Vulcan's stiff fingers, sitting back on his heels.

"Jim, you damned fool," he whispered, a searing emptiness choking the grief inside. *No - not both his friends!* "No, Jim, not you too... "

For a long time he remained motionless, empty eyes fixed on the bodies of both his friends. And, as a new upsurge of grief began to replace the numbness of shock, he buried his face in his hands to give in to the tears that welled up in his eyes.

He did not notice Spock's hands slowly slipping from Kirk's face and a deep relaxation coming over both their bodies. Then a shiver ran over Kirk's body, and his eyes opened, closed, opened again to focus on the Vulcan next to him. A white, trembling hand touched the waxen face, and an expression of enormous relief came into his own. Only then did he realise that there was someone else in the cave, and the hazel eyes slowly wandered over to where McCoy was sitting.

"Bones?"

McCoy jerked up his head and stared. Then he jumped to his feet, running towards Kirk, his blue eyes brimming with tears but with a broad grin on his face.

"JIM!!"

Reaching him, he gripped Kirk's shoulders and practically lifted him to his feet to catch him in a bear hug.

"My God, Jim, but you did give me a fright! I thought you were dead! How could you do this to me? Why don't you ever listen when your doctor gives you his good, free advice? This was just the damndest stupid thing you've ever done!" He didn't even slow down

during his cursory examination of the subject of his tirade. "Could you just tell me what you thought you were doing? This thing could have backfired so badly that not even your kindly family doctor could have done a bloody thing! Just take a look at those readings! There's almost not a single ATP molecule left in your entire body! Hardly any energy left!" He paused to breathe.

Kirk raised a hand to stem another verbal outburst. "Bones! Its all right. It worked."

McCoy let go of him as the reality of his surroundings penetrated his euphoria. Kirk sank to his knees, still weak from his ordeal. McCoy, too, sat down as Kirk again turned to Spock, gently brushing his hand over the Vulcan's face.

"Everything's all right, Bones."

"Did you really meld with him?"

Kirk looked at him. "Yes." His voice still betrayed an immense relief. "He's in the healing trance now."

A quick once-over with the scanner confirmed it. McCoy looked at the device in his hand, then at Kirk, shaking his head. "It may have worked, Jim, but I still say that it was an awful chance you took. It could have gone wrong so easily... "

"It almost did." Kirk snuggled down next to Spock, closing his eyes. "And I would do it again..." He yawned. "He'll live, Bones..." His breathing slowed, and he was asleep.

McCoy remained where he was, watching both his friends. Their faces were peaceful now; the terrible weight that had pressed down on them had lifted from their souls.

He settled down comfortably to wait for their ship to return.

BONDMATES

Kirk winced as he shrugged into his uniform top. His shoulder wound, where a ricochet had hit, scraping his collarbone, still had not mended. It was a reminder of an incident during their last planetside assignment, when Spock had so nearly died. The healing trace he had eventually entered with Kirk's help had kept him alive - though just barely - until the Enterprise returned for them.

Both he and Spock had been in sickbay for two weeks. Kirk went back to light duty at his own request, but for once even being on the bridge of his ship did not really get his mind off his worries. He was preoccupied and he knew it. Ever since the incident on that planet, Kirk had been plagued by worries he himself could not really define. The possibility of losing his Vulcan friend had been too close for comfort that time.

Thanks to McCoy's skilled surgery and the Vulcan's stamina, Spock had pulled through, and there wouldn't even be any permanent damage although he was still rather weak. It had been touch and go for several days, however, and Kirk wondered if the risk Spock had taken to save his life hadn't been one time too many. Yet Kirk knew that Spock would do it again, just as he had been willing to risk his

life by melding with Spock so that he could initiate the healing trance.

The Captain remembered painfully that when Spock finally came to in sickbay his first enquiry had been about Kirk's condition. This time Spock hadn't been able to turn down the medical leave McCoy had prescribed for both of them. The surgeon would accompany them as medical supervisor, though Kirk doubted that that was his major motive. In spite of the reason for their leave, Kirk had to admit to himself that he was looking forward to it. It had been months since he and McCoy had been on leave, and the last of the rare occasions when he had been able to persuade Spock to join him dated back even further.

For the moment, however, Spock was not yet in shape to get any - even a Vulcan - kind of enjoyment out of their scheduled leave. Although he had been released from sickbay the same day as Kirk, he was far from recovered. His road to recovery was painful and slow. In the many off-duty hours that they spent over the chess board in Spock's quarters, to which McCoy had finally, grudgingly, released him, Kirk could tell that his friend was still in pain although Spock's Vulcan mask was firmly in place. It wasn't usual for the Vulcan's concentration to slip. Sometimes he had even had Spock apologising on account of it.

Kirk squared his shoulders when he had finished dressing. Maybe tonight the Vulcan would feel better, though he would probably never put it in those words. Ever since the accident, Kirk had, in fact, wondered if his friend was becoming moody. At times the evenings spent over the chess board were not as relaxing as they usually were. Spock was trying to be "two hundred percent Vulcan again", as McCoy had put it, and sometimes Kirk could sense an underlying tenseness in his friend that had not been there before. It was at those times that Kirk almost loathed joining the Vulcan for their customary game of chess.

For Kirk himself, the planetside experience had taken on a nightmarish quality. He knew that he was blaming himself for what had happened to Spock, but then, there was nothing he could have done about it.

That night Spock was again as reticent as always since the accident, although Kirk found that the Vulcan's concentration was not failing him any more. Instead, his own mind began to wander. He was brought out of his reverie when he sensed the Vulcan's eyes upon him. He glanced up from the chess board, but Spock's face was expressionless again before Kirk could be sure what he had read there.

Kirk reached to move his rook and then set it down heavily. "What's wrong, Spock?" he asked. "Aren't you feeling well?"

"My physical condition is satisfactory. I should be able to resume my duties within a few days."

"McCoy doesn't think so, Spock. Besides, that wasn't really what I was referring to. I can see that something is bothering you. Why won't you tell me what it is?"

"Captain, I assure you there is no reason for concern on your part."

Kirk felt rejected, but in spite of the hurt he tried again.

"Spock, please - let me help."

"I do not require assistance, Captain," Spock intoned. With a movement slightly less swift than usual, Spock pushed back his chair, straightened, and rose. "If you will excuse me, Captain. I suggest that we adjourn our game as I wish to meditate before retiring for the night."

Kirk could barely control his rising anger. "Dammit, Spock, you don't have to sweet-talk me out of your quarters. I'm glad to leave, and I won't come back unless..." Fuming, he broke off and stormed from the room.

Outside in the corridor, Kirk halted and reconsidered his action. Of course he shouldn't have behaved as he had just done. Instead of reaching the Vulcan, he had acted like an imbecile, perhaps creating an unbreachable gulf between himself and his First Officer. For a moment Kirk contemplated returning to Spock's quarters to apologise and attempt again to reach him, but Spock obviously did not wish to open up to him, and even if he did, Kirk doubted that in his present state of mind he would be much of a help to the Vulcan.

For a while, Kirk wandered the corridors aimlessly, knowing that he would not be able to sleep. *It would not be the first night he went without sleep*, Kirk thought bitterly. The past few nights he had wakened from a nightmare, beaded with sweat, and had been unable to go back to sleep. He never could recall the nature of his bad dreams. So far he had resisted the temptation of asking McCoy for a stronger soporific, for he knew that if he did, the Doctor was going to question him or even run psychological tests on him, a prospect he was not particularly keen to face.

Kirk's hand went up to his temple. The headache he had been able to push to the back of his mind during the day had started pounding again. The medication McCoy had given him for it was not helping. Resignedly, Kirk turned and headed for sickbay. If he got something to get rid of his headache and help him to sleep he would even be willing to listen to another one of McCoy's lectures. Besides, at that time of night, there was a fair chance that the good Doctor had retired to his quarters.

When the doors to sickbay hissed open in front of him, Kirk saw immediately that his wish was not to be. The Doctor was sitting at a computer terminal amidst a mass of forms and computer printouts. He looked up when he heard the doors opening.

"Well, Jim, have you come to rescue me from all this paperwork? Can't you put in a word at Starfleet Command that - " A second look at Kirk made him break off. "Jim, you look terrible. What's wrong?"

"Headache."

"Didn't you take that stuff I gave you last night?"

"I did, but it didn't work. Can't you give me something else?"

"Not before I have a closer look at you."

He led Kirk to one of the diagnostic beds. After busying himself with the instruments for a while, McCoy looked up. "How long has it been since you last got a decent night's sleep, Jim?"

"I... I don't know. Why?"

"Well, you come down here with dark rings under your eyes, complaining about a constant headache. Believe me, your kindly doctor knows the symptoms of lack of sleep when he sees them. Maybe it was a mistake to put you back on duty so soon. Is your shoulder giving you any trouble?"

"No!" Kirk snapped. Then, sitting on the diagnostic couch, he lowered his eyes. "I'm sorry, Bones."

"That's all right." McCoy pointed towards his office. "We can talk in there."

Once they were seated comfortably inside McCoy's office over some brandy, Kirk took a deep breath. "It's Spock, Bones."

"Oh? So what's new?"

"No, Bones, I'm serious. I don't know how to put this, or if there is, in fact, any reason for it, but I'm worried about Spock. He's been acting so... strangely."

"What gave you reason to worry, and what exactly is 'strange'?"

"First I put it down to his injuries, but... I don't know... Spock seems to be... preoccupied at times, and I can't really reach him. - Do you think it might be... another bout of... a Vulcan biological need?"

McCoy grinned. "I can tell you have been around Spock quite a lot recently. Some of his speech patterns must have rubbed off on you. To answer your question, though, I don't think we have to worry about that. The Vulcan mating cycle occurs every seven years as you know. Spock's Human heritage may be an uncertainty factor, but it wouldn't recur after only a few months. Besides, signs would have showed up during all those tests I ran on him, and you know I'm still keeping a constant check on him."

"But then why is he so... "

"Vulcan? Come on, Jim, that shouldn't worry you. I don't think you need me to explain it to you. We've both seen it happen before. Down on that planet, Spock lost control due to that injury, and now he thinks he has to make up for it by acting twice as Vulcan as before."

Kirk considered that for a moment. "I guess you're right, Bones. But it hurts, it really does. You know, we're right back where we started. And yet, there is something... something I can't quite put my finger on."

"Don't worry, Jim. He'll snap out of it eventually."

"But then, why does he keep looking at me so... oddly... at times?"

"Look, Jim, this isn't getting us anywhere. You get some sleep, and maybe tomorrow when we talk it over we'll come up with something."

"I won't be able to sleep, Bones. That's why I came here in the first place."

"All right, I'll give you something to help you sleep, but you have to promise me that you'll go straight to bed when you've taken it, for the stuff is very powerful."

McCoy went over to a cabinet, took out a bottle from which he shook two pills, and handed them to the Captain. Kirk took them, nodded his thanks, and rose to leave.

McCoy remained seated, staring at the door which had closed after Kirk. Maybe he would be better to have Spock checked over once again. Kirk was incredibly perceptive to any change in his Vulcan friend. On a few occasions, Kirk had ordered the Vulcan down to Sickbay when he sensed that something was wrong, even if it was only a minor ailment that the Vulcan himself would never have complained about. McCoy smiled at the memory of having a rather grumpy Vulcan with a cold and tonsillitis in Sickbay for three days. Yet on that occasion, Spock had been on the brink of pneumonia after getting drenched to the bones on a planetside assignment. Manning his post in an emergency, the Vulcan had successfully disguised the symptoms from all but Kirk, who had immediately ordered him down to Sickbay.

Afterwards, McCoy had argued with the Vulcan about the irrationality of his behaviour. McCoy knew that the Vulcan was convinced that he could handle any 'discomforts' by mental disciplines and would report to Sickbay only in the case of something akin to Rigellian Fever.

For a moment McCoy pondered looking in on the Vulcan immediately, but then decided against it. He had checked him over only that morning, and although Spock's injuries would take time to mend fully and still caused him considerable discomfort, he was slowly but surely recovering. It would be sufficient if he examined the Vulcan the next day. Besides, he *had* been thorough, and it was just as likely that the strain was finally catching up on Kirk, making him see dangers where there were none. McCoy was determined to keep a close eye on *both* his friends. It was high time that they reached the planet where the two were to spend their medical leave.

* * * * *

Ten more days had passed before they had reached the planet of their destination. During that time, Spock's health had improved to such a degree that once in an ion storm, he was even able to man his post on the bridge. Afterwards, he had spent a few hours each day in the science lab studying the data collected during the storm, with McCoy's reluctant agreement.

Yet McCoy had to admit to himself that he had hoped the partial return to duty would draw the Vulcan out of the self-imposed isolation he had been in ever since the accident. The thorough physical he had subjected the Vulcan to the day after his talk with Kirk had shown nothing wrong with him aside from his injuries, which were healing as well as could be expected. Kirk seemed to have accepted the change in the Vulcan for the time being, but McCoy was worried about Kirk, nevertheless. For once, the Captain did not have a weight problem, but had lost a considerable amount. McCoy had hoped that the medical leave would put the matter right, although he grew increasingly sure that there was more to it than Spock's recent injury and Kirk's resultant concern.

The planet McCoy had selected for their leave while Scott was taking the Enterprise on some test trials after a major overhaul was an earthlike colony which had both the wild beauty of a frontier

planet and the comforts and facilities only a Federation Outpost could offer.

They were staying in a three-bedroom log cabin which was equipped with a modern telecom unit as well as with an open fireplace. McCoy had hoped that the evenings spent in the cosy den in front of the fireplace would ease the tension between his two friends and would give each of them a chance to simply relax in each other's company. Instead, he found that he had come to dread those evenings.

During the day, each of them usually found something to keep himself busy. Spock insisted he had to catch up on some scientific works he studied over the computer outlet in his room. Kirk went on long hikes, and McCoy either busied himself around the house or studied the surrounding flora.

After five days spent planetside, McCoy found himself growing increasingly bored. The evenings spent together were anything but relaxing. The first two nights, Kirk and Spock had feigned to be silently absorbed in their game of chess, but when neither of them seemed to get any enjoyment out of it, they finally aborted it. McCoy had then determinedly tried to get a conversation going, but in the few cases when he did get a response from one of his friends, it usually was a monosyllable only.

Spock pretended to be exhausted and retired early. Kirk, on the other hand, that morning had finally done what McCoy had expected him to all along. After getting drunk in the solitude of his bedroom the previous night, this evening he had set out to hit the town. Although he was a bit worried about his friend's getting drunk again, McCoy hoped that the change in his surroundings and the chance of meeting a pretty woman would drag Kirk out of his brooding. Kirk had announced that he was probably not returning that night, and McCoy silently wished with all his might that his friend would indeed find the relaxation and distraction he needed so much.

He pottered around the kitchen, fixing dinner for himself and his Vulcan companion while watching Spock through the open kitchen door. The Vulcan was sitting silently with his fingers steeped in front of the open fireplace. To all who did not know him well enough, he would have been a perfect study of Vulcan calmness, but over the years McCoy had come to know him well enough to sense an underlying tenseness in the stern bearing of his friend. It was as if his two friends were falling slowly to pieces, and, dammit, both really were his friends. McCoy could not completely pinpoint what was wrong, but he instinctively felt that something was amiss between the two, something that seriously endangered that unique friendship of theirs.

McCoy threw another glance at the silent silhouette of the Vulcan outlined against the fireplace in the dim twilight of the sitting room, and decided it was time that he and the Vulcan had a talk.

* * * * *

Kirk eyed his female companion somewhat warily. She certainly wasn't unattractive; a petite redhead whose slanted green eyes and long sideburns gave her a certain exotic, feline appearance. Though Kirk wasn't exactly sure which cradle she had sprung from, he didn't think there would be any irreconcilable anatomical differences... Yet he began to wonder if sex really was what he wanted that night.

His mind was becoming fuddled although he had not intended to get drunk again that night. Either his tolerance level wasn't up to his usual standards or he had lost track in spite of himself.

He looked again at his companion. He realised that they hadn't done much talking the whole evening, and suddenly he also became aware of the fact that he didn't even know his companion's name. If he was going to take her to bed - and he had promised himself that he was going to enjoy himself that night - he should at least know her name. Feeling slightly awkward, he leaned over to her. "I'm sorry, but I seem to have forgotten your name... "

"Does it really matter, cherie?" she purred. "Besides, you haven't told me yours, either. But if it pleases you, I will tell you... "

She snuggled up closer to him and trailed her fingers along his neck. Kirk began to feel slightly uncomfortable. He hadn't realised that he was that far gone. He had come to the bar to get a bit of diversion, but not to take advantage of a girl without even giving his name. Kirk felt himself blush. Managing a half smile, he said apologetically, "It's Jim. Jim Kirk. I didn't mean to... I'm sorry. I'm not making a lot of sense, am I?"

Suddenly he felt panic rising within him. He had to get out. As he tried to untangle himself from her arms, she drew him even closer.

"Hush, don't let it worry you. Just relax, Jim. That's what we are here for. And you call me Burry... "

In his befuddled state, it took the words a moment to sink in. So his companion wasn't a lucky chance acquaintance but a professional... This certainly wasn't what he had had in mind. In vain he tried again to get away from her. When she covered his mouth with a long, wet kiss, however, he felt his resistance melt away and a warmth of desire began to fill him instead. After returning her kiss, he ordered them another drink.

Later, Kirk never remembered how many drinks they had had or how they ended up in the cheap windout that presumably was called a hotel. The small portion of his mind that had retained a certain degree of sanity felt vaguely embarrassed when Burry had to help him undress, but his body did not mind her attention in the least. When she had at last manoeuvred him into bed and began to make love to him, he let go the last of his reserve. He didn't care any more if she was expecting to be paid for her service or not, even though he could not remember her making any such statement. This was his night - his chance to get away from all his worries for awhile. He had not even told her he was a Starfleet officer. For tonight, all he wanted to do was forget. He felt her hands gently stroking his chest, moving upwards to his neck, and then reaching for his face, blurrily touching a half-buried memory at the back of his mind. Eagerly, he turned his face to meet her hands.

Then suddenly, as her fingertips reached his temples, he felt white-hot searing pain shooting into his mind, and he screamed.

* * * * *

McCoy pushed back his barely touched plate and glared at the Vulcan seated silently across from him. "I've had enough of this, Spock! We've got to talk!"

"As you seem to have already made up your mind about it, that seems unavoidable, Doctor," the Vulcan replied evenly.

McCoy felt anger rising, but, realising that that would not help the situation in any way, fought it down. He studied the Vulcan closely.

Despite Spock's outward calm, McCoy recognised the lines of worry etched around the Vulcan's mouth, the mask he usually wore only when Kirk was in trouble. He had no right to be hard on his Vulcan friend. He probably was under as much inner tension as Kirk, only he did not have any outlet for it.

"I'm sorry, Spock. I shouldn't have snapped at you like I just did," he apologised quietly. "Look, I have watched this going on ever since you came to in Sickbay after that accident back on that darn planet. What's wrong, Spock?"

"Doctor, there is nothing 'wrong' that we have to discuss."

"Well, bull! There definitely *is* something wrong between you and Jim. Even the most casual observer would have noticed that you and Jim have hardly spoken a word to each other ever since we came here. No, don't interrupt me! Dammit, I'm your friend, and I have a right to know why you are doing this to yourself - and Jim. Can't you see Jim is fretting his heart out?"

McCoy's words were met only with silence, and for a moment he thought the Vulcan would give him no answer. Yet when he looked at him closely, he could see him swallow hard - that involuntary gesture that indicated that the Vulcan was tense or troubled. At the same time, it seemed that the dark eyes which not looked at him contemplatively were even more penetrating than before. When the Vulcan finally spoke, it was in such a low voice that McCoy had to strain to hear what he was saying.

"You are very perceptive, Doctor, and yet you do not seem to see the obvious. You were down on that planet with us and saw what happened, but you fail to realise... When he melded with me, the Captain risked his life. Such must never happen again."

"Poppycock!" McCoy snorted. "Wouldn't you do the same for him? Haven't you, in fact, done just that for him - several times? Or how do you explain taking that bullet instead of Jim down there?"

"I did what logic prescribed. I saved a senior officer's life and prevented our mission from becoming endangered. Had the Captain been injured, chances would have been that we were discovered by the natives as strangers. As you know, observance of the Prime Directive under such circumstances is of cardinal importance. The Captain, on the other hand, risked his life needlessly. In the cave, we were safe from discovery. An officer as valuable as the Captain must not sacrifice his life out of what I believe to be some sort of personal attachment. Therefore, a professional kind of detachment is necessary to prevent this from happening again."

"Dammit, Spock, Jim is your friend! Just a few months ago, you called both of us friends. Don't you realise that it is this special affinity between you and Jim that has made you into the best team in Starfleet? And even if you leave out the friendship aspect, your logic is more than flawed. When you took that slug meant for Jim, you took an even greater risk of violating the Prime Directive than if Jim had been injured. Remember that cold stuff in your veins

masquerading as blood is green? Well, you should have remembered that the natives checked out 98.7% humanlike in their physical makeup on the ship's sensors. One of the likenesses is that their blood is iron based, which means that in all probability it is red. Now think of what might have happened had the natives decided to follow that nice little green trail you left trickling from your wound! Not only would we all have been discovered, but you would have given away that we were different, off-worlders. As for Jim's action, back then I didn't approve of it, but I was simply too scared about losing both of you to see the logic and necessity of it. Didn't it occur to you that you are just as valuable a Starfleet officer as Jim himself? And without the other, each of you is only half as valuable. Besides, there is the Human quality called loyalty and responsibility towards others. If Jim had not tried to save you, he would have blamed himself for not trying - as I would have, for that matter!"

McCoy broke off when he noticed Spock suddenly sitting boldly upright. His anger finally spilled over. "Have you bothered to listen at all? I think I could just as well be talking to the wall!"

Spock looked at him, blank-faced. "Something is wrong with Jim."

"Now he notices! That's what I've been trying to tell you all along. If you just cared to listen - "

"No, Doctor." Spock's voice became urgent. "It's more serious. Jim is... "

Suddenly Spock swayed and reached out a hand to the table to steady himself. Then his hands went up to his temples.

His anger forgotten, McCoy rushed to his side immediately. "What is it, Spock? What's wrong?"

The Vulcan was in no fit state to answer any questions, however. Even without a medical scanner, McCoy recognised shock symptoms. Spock's normally dry, hot skin felt damp and cold. Reaching for the Vulcan's pulse, only to realise that he could make no sense out of the almost non-existent flicker under his fingers, McCoy placed a hand on Spock's shoulder.

"Don't move - I'm just getting my kit."

The Vulcan would not have been able to move even if he had wanted to. When McCoy returned with his medical pouch, he immediately ran his scanner over the Vulcan's form. Just as he did so the readings stabilised. The Vulcan straightened and tried to stand. McCoy immediately placed a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Just where do you think you're going, Mister? You just passed out on me, and you're certainly not going anywhere before I've had a chance to check you over." Without waiting for a reply, he pressed a hypo to the Vulcan's shoulder.

"No, Doctor... Jim..." The Vulcan struggled to speak. "I need to..." Again he attempted to get up. Swaying, he managed to shake off McCoy's hand, only to feel his legs almost buckling under him.

"Stubborn Vulcan. Can't you at least ask for help?" Placing a supporting arm around the Vulcan, he led him over to the sofa.

At last Spock managed to focus on McCoy, and although forming

the words was still difficult, he was able to communicate his need. "Jim... is in danger. Where did he go, Doctor? We need to find him immediately."

"Now just a minute, Spock. Jim went down town for an evening out. It's you I'm worried about, not him. Besides, what makes you so sure that Jim's in trouble? He's a big boy and can very well take care of himself."

"No time... got to find him... Doctor, what was in that injection? I cannot seem to think clearly."

"I've given you a sedative. You were on the verge of shock, my friend."

"Please, Doctor, a stimulant... "

"All right, on one condition," McCoy relented, giving the Vulcan another shot. "You promise me you'll take things easy and tell me what's bothering you. If Jim is indeed in trouble, we shall notify the authorities."

As the shot was beginning to take effect, Spock straightened, but made no move to stand. "You are right, Doctor. We must talk."

"You asked me how I know Jim is in trouble. I have reason to believe that the Captain and I are mindlinked."

When the news hit home, McCoy did not know which question to ask first. "How? I mean... over such a long distance... When did you find out? Why didn't you... ? Never mind, what has happened to Jim and what do you propose we do?"

Now that he felt his strength and logic returning, Spock was again able to contemplate the situation calmly. "I do not know exactly what happened to the Captain. He seemed to call out to me, but his thoughts were not ordered. He seemed to be drugged... or intoxicated. As to the question of what course of action to take, I suggest we follow your earlier proposal and notify the local authorities. It would, of course, help if you knew what kind of entertainment the Captain intended to seek out."

"Gee, he didn't tell me, but knowing him and judging from the mental state he was in, I think it's a safe bet that he went for the nearest bar and some pretty woman."

Without letting on what he thought about that revelation, the Vulcan nodded. "That should indeed narrow the search down considerably. I will now - "

"Oh, no, Spock, you won't do anything. I will call the police, and then we'll talk this out."

When the surgeon returned from making the call, colour had returned to Spock's features. When he noted the expectant look on McCoy's face, he resigned himself to the inevitable and started to speak.

"Although I am not sure about all the factors myself, I will try to answer your questions as well as I can, Doctor. You asked how I know we are linked, and when I found out. That first question is easy enough to answer. Since the Captain and I have not had any mind contact since the accident, the link must have been established

during the meld the Captain initiated with me down on that planet. I was not aware of the fact that we were linked until this last hour, however." There was a slight pause before the Vulcan continued speaking in an even lower voice. "What I have just said is not entirely true. I sometimes sensed... a presence in the back of my mind. I supposed it to be an after-effect of the deep meld the Captain and I shared, and... ignored it. I... may very well have aggravated the situation. I should have sought help... "

Sensing the distress this was causing the Vulcan, McCoy interrupted him. "Oh, come off it, Spock. How were you to know something you had not experienced before? Besides, if Jim really is in trouble, this link you say you have to him might even be helpful. The police said they would initiate a search for him, but it might take a while till they find him. Can you home in on Jim?"

For an instant the Vulcan seemed to look deeply within himself. Then he shook his head. "Negative, Doctor. I can still sense... Jim's presence, but he doesn't seem to be emitting any thoughts nor can I reach him. As I said, Doctor, I have no knowledge of the actual strength and nature of the link. For all the past weeks we never had any actual contact. Therefore, I presume the Captain must have been in acute distress when he was able to reach out to me. Shouldn't we therefore start searching for him as well?"

"In the middle of the night in an unknown territory? Where's your logic, Spock? Jim is probably only sleeping off his booze somewhere and called out to you when a particularly nasty bottle genie was haunting his dreams. Moreover, you are in no fit state to go searching for anyone, especially after this little breakdown you just had. The police promised that they would contact us as soon as they found a trace of Jim. So I suggest that we get some sleep before they call us to pick Jim up."

For a long moment McCoy thought the Vulcan was going to argue with him. Then, however, he inclined his head in acknowledgement. "Very well, Doctor. I shall wait here."

"You're as tense as a bowstring, Spock. I prescribed rest. Let me give you something to help you relax."

"Unnecessary, Doctor. A light meditative trance will accomplish the same purpose."

"The hell it will. You are going to get some rest." Before the Vulcan had a chance to protest, McCoy had prepared a hypo and pressed it to the Vulcan's shoulder.

When Spock had sunk back on the sofa, McCoy lifted up his feet and went in search of a blanket to cover him. Then settling himself comfortably in a chair, he tried to get the whole situation into perspective.

So his two friends were linked. McCoy didn't really find that idea particularly extraordinary as the two had always had a very special kind of rapport. In a way, this was the only logical outcome of a whole line of events that had led up to this point.

What McCoy was worried about was the reaction of the Vulcan. As a trained telepath, he should have suspected a lot earlier that the "presence in his mind" as he had called it was more than a residual memory of the meld he had experienced. Although he felt it hard to use the label for a Vulcan, the psychologist in McCoy recognised the

denial symptoms. The Vulcan wasn't ready to accept that close a relationship with anyone, and from what he had learned about the nature of the meld, he knew it involved a stripping of all the shields Spock had so carefully built up, and he strongly suspected that it was this emotional openness towards another that the Vulcan dreaded most.

He knew that over the past few years Spock had gradually come to accept the friendship he felt for Kirk and also for McCoy, as he had discovered at that time when it was time for the Vulcan to "swim upstream". Realising that this time it was his Vulcan friend who was facing the unknown, he decided that he would do all he could to help his friend - both his friends - through the difficulty. There had to be some good in the mess they were in!

Over the last few months, his friends had had more than their share of trouble, and together they would be able to make it turn out to their benefit. McCoy desperately wished that his reassurance to the Vulcan turned out to be the truth. Kirk just had to be all right. McCoy sent a silent prayer to whatever gods there were while watching the Vulcan, now at rest in his drug-enforced sleep. He felt Morpheus' shadows closing in on him, and made an effort to keep his eyes open. He wanted to stay awake... watch his friend's slumber... be ready when the authorities called. But then, he could do that later... just a little sleep wouldn't hurt... Nothing they could do at the moment, anyway...

And at last, the Enterprise's surgeon was asleep.

* * * * *

The object of his friends' concern lay sprawled unconscious across the bed. His female companion unsuccessfully tried to rouse him. Finally, when not even her slapping his face produced any response, she got out of bed, cursing under her breath. Not that she minded getting paid without rendering her full services, though she had to admit that ministering to this attractive stranger had not been an unpleasant prospect.

Out cold as he was, however, he was not able to give or appreciate any pleasantries, not was she going to get her pay from him, for that matter. She should have insisted on being paid in advance as her manager always told her to. That would have ruined the romantic part of it, though, which she still enjoyed despite her experience in her profession. Besides, her client looked a bit like the shy kind who had trouble getting with it if they knew she only did it for money.

Suddenly she realised that she had never told this particular client that she wasn't spending the evening with him just for the enjoyment of it. But surely he had suspected... ? Then, glancing at his unconscious form on the bed and taking in the somehow boyish and innocent expression on his face, she decided that he had *not* known what was going on, particularly when she took into consideration his earlier unease and occasional embarrassment. Those guys only out for the one thing certainly didn't get embarrassed when they discovered they hadn't told you their name!

Still, she had to get her pay, as her 'manager' expected his share. Determined, she began to pick up his discarded clothes from the floor and search them systematically. She would only take minimum charge from him and then leave him to sleep off whatever he had indulged in.

When her thorough search of his clothes produced nothing except a small plastic card giving not even the name of its owner but only a number, Burry began to get angry. How did that buster think he was going to pay for his drinks and the hotel bill? That wasn't her problem, but her boss would want his money, and the prospect of having to face his anger made her shudder. She would have to call him and somehow try to explain her way out of this mess. She threw another glance at Kirk, who had not moved at all while she bustled about with his clothes. He was hardly going to argue when she told Barnie that he had invited her and now turned out to be dead broke.

She made the call from the old-fashioned audiophone sitting on the single three-legged table in the room. Less than half an hour later, Barnie arrived. Taking in the scene at one glance, he grumbled,

"So sleeping beauty there ain't got no money, huh? But sure he has something; cheques, banker's card, ain't he?"

Without waiting for a reply he began to shake out Kirk's clothes. When his efforts brought forth nothing, he turned to Burry. "All right, bitch. Where have you hidden it?"

Frightened, she shrank back against the wall. "He didn't have anything on him except that plastic card," she said, pointing to the card she had put on the table. "Honest, Barnie, I didn't take anything - "

"Oh shit!" Barnie had taken one look at the innocent-looking plastic card. "Where have you been, sister? That's a standard Starfleet credit card that's issued to the officers. What the hell rode you to take a Starfleet officer to bed? You know you're supposed to stay clear of them. You could lose your licence for this!"

"He didn't tell me he was Fed! How was I supposed to know?" She began to cry, shrinking even further into her corner.

"Quit bawling!" he shouted. "You should know that don't work with me! The problem is how we get rid of him without alarming the Fed cops. So he didn't tell you he was Starfleet, did he. Did you tell him anything, like who you work for?"

Burry only shook her head between sobs.

"Well, good. It's a good thing he's pissed out of his mind. As for the pay, we'll keep the card. We'll see if we can't get it to work for us. He'll think he's lost it somewhere. For now, we'll see that your friend stays asleep until we can dump him somewhere. Gimme a hand with him."

Wordlessly, Burry obeyed and moved over to Kirk's bedside. When she saw Barnie produce a hypodermic needle from his pocket, however, she became alarmed.

"What are you going to do?"

"Worried about your super stud, ain't you. Bet he was a good lay... Don't worry, I'm just making sure he won't wake up and cause trouble. I'm shooting him full of halo so he won't remember nothing. Then we'll simply load him into the truck and dump him somewhere along the road. If he's lucky, a patrol will find him. Otherwise, he will have a bit of walking to do in the morning."

Kirk stirred, but did not wake when the needle was inserted into his vein. Burry stood by awkwardly. "Are you sure this won't do him any harm?"

"Hey, you've really taken a fancy to him, haven't you? Now how is a little shot like that going to harm him? He's strong as a young bull. But you better help me getting him dressed, or he might catch his death of cold." With a dirty laugh he tossed her Kirk's clothes. "All right - you get your champ dressed while I get the car round the back," he ordered before leaving the room.

Obediently, Burry picked up the clothes and proceeded to dress the unconscious man on the bed. Yet she could not but worry when she looked at his face, which had turned considerably paler after he had received the shot. Maybe she shouldn't have called *Barnie*... But it was too late to worry about that now, and *Barnie* was probably right anyway. The stranger sure looked healthy enough to withstand a dose of halo and a night on the street. To reassure herself, she reached for his pulse, which was rapid but strong. *He should be all right*, she thought, wishing for a dose of halo herself.

She had just finished dressing her charge when *Barnie* returned. Picking Kirk up like a rag doll, he carried him out the back door and unceremoniously dumped him into the back of the truck. Noting that Burry still seemed uncertain, he passed her a small pill box. "Here - take one for chrissakes to quit worrying and then get going!"

After a moment of hesitation, Burry popped one of the tiny pills, got into the passenger seat of the truck, and leaned back with a sigh. Neither of them spoke in the half hour of driving that followed.

When they had reached a particularly dark stretch of the dirt road they were following, *Barnie* stopped the truck, went round to the rear, and unloaded their burden. Crossing the few yards to the edge of the road, he simply dropped Kirk into the ditch.

Upon returning to the truck, he found Burry lost in a private dream world of her own. He gave a mental shrug and started the engine. The next village was no more than half a day's walk away, so that *Starfleet* creep should be able to reach it all right. Not that he worried too much about what happened to him, but with his credit card - which *Barnie* was sure he could rig to give *him* a few benefits - he had paid his debt and therefore deserved at least a chance.

Then he turned the truck and disappeared in the direction from which they had come.

* * * * *

When Kirk finally regained consciousness, all he could make out around him was a gray haze. His head was throbbing and his body seemed to be aflame, yet he couldn't move. He found he could not form one clear thought. He had no idea how he had reached... wherever he was. His throat was parched and he desperately wished for a drink, but there was nobody around who could have given him one, and then he doubted that he would have been able to voice his need. He felt terribly lonely. His friends... Where were his friends? The one person he longed for most was not there. Why had they left him? Then he tried to reach down within himself for what little strength he had left to call out for help. He let out one voiceless scream. Then blackness and emptiness engulfed him again.

* * * * *

The new day stretched endlessly. When it drew dark again, McCoy began to wonder if maybe he shouldn't have given in to the Vulcan's urging and begun a search on their own the previous night. The Vulcan was silent and withdrawn, but McCoy could sense that he was tense and worried. Several times during the day Spock had tried to probe the tenuous link he believed he had with Kirk, but without any feedback. Once McCoy had ventured to ask if he thought something bad might have happened to Kirk. He had been able to allay that particular fear of the Doctor's, however, as he still felt the "presence" in the back of his mind.

McCoy was restlessly pacing the room when he suddenly saw the Vulcan stiffen. Alarmed, he crossed over to the Vulcan, half expecting him to pass out again. This time, however, Spock regained his composure almost instantly. Yet when he spoke, it was with a note of urgency in his voice. "Jim. For an instant his mind reached mine. He is in great pain. Doctor, we have got to get to him immediately."

All presence of calm was gone. The dark eyes that looked at McCoy were filled with despair. Responding in the only way he knew, McCoy gave the Vulcan's slim shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

"Don't worry, Spock. We'll find him. Were you able to draw any conclusions as to Jim's whereabouts from the contact?"

"I cannot be sure, but his call seemed to come from somewhere south of the city. I wish I could be more certain, but the contact was very short, and I have not had much previous experience in this area... "

"It's all right, Spock. A general direction is better than none at all. I'll get on the com and pass your information on to the police so that they can concentrate their search in that direction. Then I'll get myself a map and call for an aircar and start looking for him on my own."

"Doctor... " The Vulcan got to his feet hurriedly, swaying slightly. For only a moment, he considered arguing the Vulcan's fitness to accompany him on his search for Kirk. Then he wordlessly reached for his medikit and producing a hypo from it, pressed it to the Vulcan's shoulder. When Spock felt new energy flooding, he looked at the Doctor in silent gratitude.

After less than half an hour, they set out in the aircar with Spock at the controls in spite of the Doctor's protest. They were flying in southward circles at the lowest possible altitude. McCoy could do nothing but sit by idly and pray that they, or one of the patrols, found their friend soon. Finally, they reached the outer line of the radius Spock had calculated for their search.

The Vulcan lowered the aircar and let it hover over the ground. They peered out into the dark.

Only a narrow gravel road lay ahead of them.

"It's no use, Spock," McCoy said with a sigh. "We've done all we could. Let's turn back. Maybe one of the search parties was more lucky."

The Vulcan did not answer him. Instead, he was staring into the

distance. When McCoy was just about to take the controls from the Vulcan's hands, Spock spoke in a low and strained voice.

"I believe I have been able to make contact with the Captain. He is off in that direction," he said, indicating the road ahead of them.

"You sure, Spock? What would he be doing here? It's hardly more than a stretch of dirt and - "

"Hurry, Doctor. Can't breathe... About six point eight kilometres... So cold... "

Sweat was beginning to bead Spock's brow. Fumbling to pry the controls from the Vulcan's cramped fingers, and turning the aircar into the indicated direction, McCoy swore under his breath.

"Why for Christ's sake does something like this always have to happen when we're on leave? Damn, Spock, don't black out on me now!"

Albeit pale, the Vulcan was staying conscious, though. He even seemed to regain some of this strength as they approached their destination. Huskily, he announced, "Slow down, Doctor. We're almost there."

When the Doctor had landed the aircar at the side of the road, Spock opened the door on his side of the car, and shrugging off the Doctor's restraining hand, got out of the car, although he was slightly unsteady on his feet. With an uncanny sense of direction, he turned towards the slope leading down to the ditch. McCoy followed on his heels, medikit in hand. After only a few steps, they found Kirk.

He was barely conscious, his skin clammy, and his breathing laboured and shallow. Paying no attention to the Doctor, who was getting to work with the medical tricorder, Spock knelt and, gathering Kirk's head in his arms, raised him to ease his breathing. Kirk managed to open his eyes, and when he recognised the face bending over him, a weak smile appeared on his lips.

"Spock... "

Now that their roles were reversed, the Vulcan seemed to have forgotten his earlier objections to showing personal concern. Gently wiping the sweat from Kirk's face, he whispered, "Don't talk, Jim. I'm here, and McCoy is taking care of you." Then, looking at McCoy, he added an enquiring, "Doctor?"

McCoy was preparing a hypo for Kirk. Without looking up from his task, he replied, "He's gonna be all right. He's got some dope in his system - and I don't think voluntarily - which he is allergic to. I'm giving him something to counteract the allergic reaction, which is responsible for his breathing problems. Still, we should get him to hospital as fast as possible so that the stuff is properly flushed from his system. - Damn, Spock - I forgot to bring along a communicator, and the car doesn't have a radio either."

"I should be able to carry - "

"And upset that half-knitted spine injury of yours? No, Spock. Besides, I don't really want to risk moving Jim without the proper equipment. His condition is stable for the moment, so you can stay here with him while I get help. I shouldn't be too long, and I'll

leave you the medikit."

"Doctor, don't you think you would be better to stay with him and let me go for help?"

Before McCoy had a chance to answer, Kirk, who up to that point had seemed oblivious of the conversation, suddenly opened his eyes and weakly extended a hand, reaching for the Vulcan. "NO! Spock, don't leave... Bones, don't let him... "

Exhausted, his hand fell back. McCoy and Spock exchanged a silent glance. Then McCoy turned and climbed up the slope to the aircar, which the Vulcan drew Kirk closer. "Hush, Jim. I won't leave you. McCoy will be back with help soon. Rest now."

But Kirk was restless and struggled to speak. "Spock... so glad... you came... but not... like this... I... "

"Jim, please - don't talk."

"No, let me... Must... So much... to be said... "

"Talking is exhausting you too much, but if you'll permit... " Spock placed his fingers in the familiar position of the meld. For once he did not experience the immediate sense of warm welcome, but hesitancy and doubt - and beyond, a deep longing. Gently sending a thought probe into his friend's mind, he asked,

\\Jim, why are you withdrawing?\\

\\Don't want to hurt you. You seemed to want your privacy again. And... Hurt.\\

Spock received mental pictures of Kirk trying in vain to reach him, and then trying to accept his friend's obvious wishes. Spock then saw the events of the previous night unfold before Kirk's mental eye; his hitting the nearest bar, meeting Burry, their love-making, her reaching for his face and the agony following it. PAIN. EMBARRASSMENT.

Spock sent calming thoughts down their link. \\No embarrassment is necessary. No pretence is needed in the link. We both see and accept each other as we are. That female must have had some telepathic ability, and her touching you tapped our half-open link, thus causing you pain.\\

\\You mean we were linked?\\

\\Yes. I only recognised it when you called out for me in your pain. The healing meld we shared must have been unusually deep, and has left the trace of a link between us.\\

\\I'm sorry, Spock.\\

\\Don't be. I am grateful, for it enabled me to find you. I'm only sorry that I didn't recognise it sooner. Bones was right; I could have saved both of us a lot of hurt.\\

\\Spock... \\ Warmth and happiness reaching out to him at last, Spock responded by letting his own gladness and relief spill over. Then, sensing pain and exhaustion nagging at the edge of Kirk's consciousness, he withdrew slightly. \\McCoy will be back soon. You should rest now. All that is necessary has been said.\\

\\Don't leave, Spock.\\ FEAR.

\\I won't.\\ CALM. CONTENTMENT.

\\No regrets?\\

\\None.\\ JOY. \\Sleep now.\\

RELIEF. \\I will.\\

As Spock sent calming thoughts through the link and eased Kirk's discomfort, he soon felt Kirk's thoughts becoming drowsy. When Kirk was asleep, he withdrew from the meld, maintaining only a light touch in order to control Kirk's pain. While guarding Kirk's sleep, he pondered the situation.

It had been illogical trying to fight the inevitable. As he had realised before, their two minds were often drawn together. The worrying agony of the past twenty four hours had taught him that he himself was not beyond the personal attachment he had accused Kirk of, and the thought of losing Kirk without knowing what had happened to him had made him realise that he cherished his friendship with Kirk above anything else. And McCoy was right - their special friendship made them the unique team that they were. He must never let his logic and unemotional detachment interfere with their friendship again. Logic fell short where his friendship with Jim Kirk was concerned; or maybe their friendship was logical. They were really like two halves making up a whole. His only regret was that it had taken his friend's being hurt to make him realise the value of their very special friendship.

Now that he contemplated it, he perceived that the past weeks had been hell for himself as well. How often during those weeks, when he saw Kirk's hurt and sensed his confusion and loneliness, he had longed to reach out across the chessboard and assure the Human that his care and concern were reciprocated. At that time, however, his belief of what was best for him and his friend had made him withdraw behind his Vulcan defences. If only...

But regrets and self-blame were illogical and counter-productive.

Shaking himself out of his reverie, he carefully checked that Kirk was settled comfortably. Taking the scanner from McCoy's kit, he ran it along the Captain's body as far as he could without disturbing him. Kirk was sleeping peacefully, however, and the readings from the scanner reassured him that Kirk would be all right once they had got the drug out of his system. Therefore his worry was needless - but still...

Presently, he could make out the sound of aircars approaching from the distance, and before long a police patrol and an ambulance glider had landed. McCoy got out of the ambulance and supervised as Kirk was strapped onto a stretcher and lifted into the rear of the ambulance. All the while, Spock stayed at his side. When McCoy saw the Vulcan hesitate as Kirk was loaded into the ambulance, he said quietly,

"Come on, you're riding in the back with us."

The Vulcan gave him a grateful look before climbing in after Kirk's stretcher. On the ride to the hospital, he sat next to Kirk while McCoy busied himself over his medical instruments.

Once, Kirk woke. "Spock... ?" he whispered.

"I'm right here," the Vulcan replied, taking Kirk's hand and sending additional reassurance through the light mind touch he still maintained.

Kirk relaxed with a sigh. "Good." Then, catching sight of the Doctor hovering at the foot of the stretcher, he added sleepily, "Bones... You're here, too. What's up... ?"

McCoy joined the Vulcan at Kirk's side, and giving Kirk's shoulder a gentle squeeze, smiled. "We're getting you to a decent bed. How do you feel, Jim?"

"Tired."

"No pain?"

"No... Spock's taking care of me... "

Looking at the Vulcan, McCoy felt the quiet empathy flow between the two. So Spock was using the link to help Kirk. The Vulcan's face was relaxed, and he seemed to be... happy. And he could make out no sign of embarrassment in the dark eyes, even in front of him. Somehow he felt sure that now everything was going to be all right between the two.

"Bones... ?"

McCoy felt a pair of expectant, yet sleepy, eyes upon himself. Giving Kirk's shoulder another squeeze, he said, "Sorry, Jim. I guess your good old Doctor was daydreaming. Glad to have you safe. Now go to sleep."

Kirk returned the Doctor's smile, then obediently closed his eyes. And soon his even breathing indicated that he was asleep.

* * * * *

A few hours later, McCoy emerged from the local hospital's emergency room, tired but relieved. He crossed to the Vulcan sitting upright and tense on one of the benches lining the hallway.

The Vulcan's dark eyes looked up at him questioningly. "Doctor?"

That one word contained all the worry and hope that the Vulcan could not voice aloud. McCoy felt a wave of sympathy and affection for the Vulcan wash over him and longed to reach out and give him a warm and reassuring hug - as he would any Human friend. But knowing that such extensive physical contact and open display of emotion would not be appreciated, the only gesture he allowed himself was a light pat on the Vulcan's tense shoulder.

"Relax. Jim's fine. They have filtered the drug out of his blood. The equipment on the Enterprise or Starbase hospital may be more fancy and impressive, but for this purpose at least theirs is just as effective. Jim'll be out of here in a day or two."

"Can I see him?"

"Sure, but he is sedated. Come on, they've moved him over there to an IC cubicle."

Alarmed, the Vulcan looked at him. "But you've just said - "

"Hey, easy. I asked them to. Unlike in Sickbay, they don't have monitors on all the beds here, and I want Jim under observation just to be on the safe side."

An eerie glow from the instrument lights filled the intensive care cubicle. McCoy checked the instruments and then gave a satisfied nod in Spock's direction. "Everything's fine. This drip feed is just about finished, so I can take it off, then it's about time we got some shut-eye too. You coming, Spock? Spock!"

The Vulcan was obviously not listening to him. For a long moment he just stood looking down at Kirk. Then he pulled the single chair in the cubicle up to Kirk's bedside, seating himself.

"You aren't going to tell me you're intending to spend the night in that chair, are you?"

"Doctor... "

"Oh, never mind answering that one. It was a rhetorical question. It's just that you look like death thrice warmed over yourself. You need some sleep, Spock."

"Doctor... Bones. Please. I have a promise to keep."

McCoy weighed the merits of further arguing with the Vulcan before he gave a resigned shrug. "I should have known, and reserved a double for you. - Sorry. I'll just get a blanket for you."

Soon McCoy returned with a blanket, which the Vulcan took silently. Clearing his throat, McCoy said, "Well, I'll be just four doors down the hall in the room normally reserved for the Doctor on call. Wake me if either of you need anything, and try to get some rest yourself, you hear?"

"I will, and... Thanks, Bones."

* * * * *

They had been able to take Kirk home the next day. Though still weak from his ordeal, Kirk was restless and eager to be out of the confinement of the hospital. Once McCoy had been sure that there were indeed no after-effects of the drug, he had been only too ready to agree with Kirk's wishes. Knowing Kirk as well as he did, he was well aware that Kirk would relax more easily in an informal and homy environment, and there basically wasn't anything wrong with him that a sufficient amount of rest wouldn't cure.

Returning to the cabin had also made it easier for him to see that the Vulcan got the rest he needed, for the Vulcan had seemed determined not to leave Kirk's side as long as he was in hospital. Kirk's trials had definitely taken their toll on Spock as well. The Vulcan looked haggard and pale, but as Kirk recovered over the days that followed, Spock also got better. At first, their activities had been restricted to playing chess in front of the fireplace or sitting on the patio if the weather permitted it. Soon, however, they were able to go for walks, and McCoy finally began to enjoy their leave.

As his friends were recuperating, he himself was able to relax in the simple joy of companionship. The tension between the two had disappeared completely. A lot of the evenings were still spent

quietly in front of the fireplace with the two friends bent over the chessboard. Now, however, the silence was companionable.

Somehow he never felt left out. Kirk usually managed to draw him into the conversation quite easily, and as he spent more and more time with his two friends, he came to sense that the Vulcan also appreciated his company in his own quiet way.

Occasionally, however, McCoy chose to leave his two friends alone when he sensed that they longed to talk in private. The two certainly had a lot to talk over after the events of the last few weeks. It was on the last evening of their leave before the Enterprise was scheduled to pick them up that when he rose to leave his friends to themselves that they begged him to stay.

"Bones, please stay," Kirk said.

"Yes, Doctor," Spock added quietly. "We need your assistance. It concerns the link that was established between Jim and myself."

The Vulcan fell silent. McCoy sensed his unease and cast a look in Kirk's direction, only to see that no explanation would come forth from that quarter, for Kirk seemed to be at least as ill at ease as his Vulcan friend. Hoping that direct questions would make it easier for his friends, he turned back to Spock.

"Well, you know I'll give you any help I can, but it would help me if I knew a bit more about this whole affair. Look I don't want to pry, but what does that link of yours spell out exactly? Does it mean you can read each other's minds, or what?"

"Oh, no, Bones. I don't even really feel it. It's... it's just like... like a thread. I can't really describe it, Bones. The danger is that something like what happened with that girl might happen again."

"Danger?" There was alarm in McCoy's voice. "How can a link as light as Jim described it be dangerous? Spock?!"

"Although the contact we have over it is minimal, the link itself is very deep. The danger lies in the nature of the link. I cannot really be sure how it could happen. After the meld, our minds did not become completely separated; there was a... breach left open. As it was not intended, I have no control over it, although I can shield thought exchanges between Jim and myself. The danger is that it leaves Jim vulnerable to any telepathic interference such as with that female. I will therefore have to attempt another deep meld with Jim, in order to try to sever the link, once we are back aboard the Enterprise."

McCoy considered that information for a while, before asking, "All right, and where do I fit in there?"

"The meld required will be very deep. We therefore need you to monitor it, and interfere if necessary."

"Your faith in my abilities flatters me, but wouldn't it be better - and safer - for you if you consulted a Vulcan healer? I'm not exactly experienced in dealing with mind melds, you know."

"It would take several weeks to reach an outpost where a healer is available, and time is of the essence as it will become more and more difficult to close the breach the more time elapses. It was not

possible to do it sooner, as you need the equipment aboard ship. I will instruct you exactly what you have to watch for and what to do."

Kirk leaned slightly forward in his chair. "There is one other factor, Bones. We want to have you there - as our friend." He looked at the Vulcan. "Both of us."

Spock nodded ever so slightly. "Affirmative... Bones."

"All right. Just one more question, then," McCoy said. "If this is as vital as you say, then what if you fail?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Kirk said, trying to keep his tone light. "I guess Vulcan with all its healers and specialists will still be there. For now, I could use a drink."

McCoy leaned back heavily in his chair. "Make that two."

It was Spock who went to his room, soon to return carrying three richly decorated goblets and a matching flask tucked under his arm. Quietly, he set out the goblets, filling them with the dark green liquid from the flask that glowed eerily in the firelight.

"Kandruru. Brewed according to recipes passed on orally from the clans from generation to generation since prehistoric times. It is said to return strength after a tiring battle and rejuvenate the spirit to face trying difficulties ahead." Raising one of the goblets, Spock allowed himself a small smile. "I believe 'sante' is the appropriate idiom for such occasions."

"Thanks, Spock." Kirk returned the Vulcan's smile warmly and reached for another goblet. "Here's to yours."

McCoy took the remaining goblet and sniffed at it cautiously. Then, seeing that Kirk took a deep swig from his, he did the same.

A moment later he regretted it. "Whoa!" he managed after a half-suppressed cough. "Let me remind you, Mr. Spock, that Vulcans don't drink! This stuff could stand up even against Romulan Ale! What's in it and why haven't I heard of it before?"

Spock slowly drank from his own goblet before answering McCoy's questions. "I do not think you would know very many of the ingredients, Doctor. Rest assured, however, none of them is harmful to Humans. As for the availability of the beverage, it is normally used only in rituals or at traditional gatherings of the family or chosen companions. As you know, the alcohol content does not affect it. Its main purpose is to conserve the strengthening herb components."

After the Vulcan had finished, Kirk smiled at McCoy. "All really shrouded in mystery, isn't it, Bones? It does make an excellent drink, though. Once you get used to the rather strong taste, you'll like it, Bones."

"Oh, I don't doubt that." Relaxing, McCoy took another, more careful sip from his goblet. "Jim's right, Spock. This stuff is very good. Thanks for sharing it with us."

"I am only consecrating it to its intended purpose," Spock replied, then adding before the Doctor had time to contemplate this, "would you like a refill?"

Sensing that the Vulcan did not want to discuss this further, McCoy gave in to the effect of the beverage which was rapidly beginning to cloud his worries concerning the planned course of action ahead in a pleasant haze. Idly wondering whether he was going to have a hangover the next morning, he gladly accepted the offered refill.

* * * * *

It was mid-afternoon by the time the three friends met in Sickbay for the planned attempt to break the involuntary link between Kirk and Spock. After the Enterprise had collected them there had been the inevitable debriefings as well as a small social gathering to welcome them back aboard.

Kirk felt tired, but also ill at ease about the undertaking ahead of them. All the certainty and confidence he had felt after his discussions with Spock had left him. When he stopped at the Vulcan's cabin to pick him up on the way to Sickbay, he looked at his friend.

"Spock, do we have to do this? Is there really no other way?"

"We have discussed this before, Jim. Are you afraid? There is one... "

Realising that he was giving too much away, the Vulcan halted his speech. As much as he desired it, he could not suggest the alternative, which was establishing a traditional bonding between himself and the Human. He had no right to bind a spirit as free and independent as Kirk's to himself. He had to try everything he could to release Kirk from the confines of this involuntary link. Therefore he said reassuringly, "Jim, McCoy will be monitoring the meld. The danger to you will be minimal."

Kirk took hold of the Vulcan's arm impulsively. "It's not my own safety I'm worried about. Spock, you said yourself that the meld would have to be very deep, deeper than any we've ever shared before. What if something like Kolos happens? You almost lost your life then."

"Unlikely, Jim. Kolos was a telepath many times more powerful than I. This time, I, as the only telepath, will be in control."

Kirk's anxiety was still not entirely eliminated, but he gave his friend a smile. "Oh, all right. I guess I'm really just stalling. Better let's get going before Bones starts thinking that we've been lost on the way."

* * * * *

In Sickbay, McCoy had all the equipment set up and was nervously waiting for them. After the Doctor had given Kirk a light sedative and settled him on one of the diagnostic couches, Spock explained the monitoring technique to him. It really sounded all quite easy. All he would have to do was watch two screens monitoring Kirk's and Spock's brain waves.

"As the meld deepens," the Vulcan proceeded with his explanation, "our brain wave patterns will change. When we reach the point deep enough for me to close the breach, our brain waves will become synchronised for an instant before separating again. It is this moment you have to watch for, Doctor. If our brain waves do not

disengage after an instant, you will have to break the meld physically. After breaking the physical contact between Jim and me, you must slap my face as if to wake me from a healing trance. There shouldn't be any complications. Any questions, Doctor?"

"No, there's nothing to it," McCoy said as he began to attach electrodes to Spock's temples as he had already done to Kirk. "I just have to watch for the right moment to save my friends' sanity, possibly even their lives. I'm all happy and relaxed."

"Bones." The Vulcan caught hold of his hand and held it for a moment in a reassuring clasp. "I realise the pressure on you is enormous, but... "

"Oh, it's all right, Spock. I'm really just grumbling to myself. You know," he said, attaching the last of the electrodes to the Vulcan seated on a chair next to Kirk's diagnostic couch, "this all looks like one of those old horror movies they made back in the twentieth century. All we need is a bit of thunder and some lightning coming down from the ceiling."

Catching the Doctor's mood, the Vulcan raised an eyebrow at him. "What purpose would that serve, Doctor?"

"Have you never heard of Frankenstein, Spock?"

"You're referring to the classic gothic novel by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, published in 1818, I presume? I am familiar with the contents although I have not read it in its entirety. No, Doctor, I merely consider our sources of energy more reliable than that collected from electric discharges in a thunderstorm."

"Oh, hell, Spock..." McCoy had to grin. Realising that he was feeling calmer, he crossed over to Kirk, who was dozing on the couch. After rechecking that all the monitor hookups were attached correctly, he placed his hand lightly on Kirk's shoulder. "All right, we're just about ready. Good luck, huh?"

Kirk opened his eyes, and reaching for McCoy's hand, clasped it in his own. "Bones... we trust you."

"I know, Jim. I won't let you down. Spock... ? Good luck."

He stepped to his position at the monitors and watched as Spock placed his hands on Kirk's face in the position of the meld. Then his eyes became glued to the monitors.

The next few minutes seemed to stretch into eternity. All was proceeding as Spock had described it, and he had to admit that he would have given a fortune to know what was happening in the meld. Then abruptly the two wave patterns on the monitor screen became one, but instead of separating again as Spock had predicted, the one curve began to soar higher and higher. For just one second, McCoy was paralysed with panic. Then he rushed over to his friends, sitting motionlessly lost in the meld, and yanking the Vulcan away from Kirk began to slap his face quickly and hard.

For a few long, fearful seconds this seemed to have no effect. Then, however, Spock's face regained some of its composure, and finally he opened his eyes.

"Doctor... Jim? I'll... manage."

McCoy let go of the Vulcan and rushed to Kirk's side. The Captain's face was ashen, but when McCoy looked up at Spock it was with relief in his eyes.

"He's unconscious, but otherwise he seems to be all right."

Spock had followed the Doctor to Kirk's bedside and was standing there unsteadily. When he was about to sit in the chair again, McCoy shook his head.

"Oh no, Mister. You're getting onto that other couch. First I want to make sure that you are all right as well, and then you can tell me what happened."

Once he was convinced that the Vulcan was unharmed, McCoy allowed him to sit up. "All right, Spock. Now that you've scared the wits out of me, tell me what happened. After your brain wave patterns joined, as you predicted, they went haywire. I thought for a moment that I had lost you both. A mental burnout - that's what it looked like."

"That term, Doctor, might very well have been appropriate, had you not separated us in time. The Captain's mind is unusually powerful. When we reached a deep enough level, instead of severing the link, I was drawn down into his, beyond my control. We will need expert help - and fast."

Before McCoy had a chance to ask further question, Kirk moaned and began to stir. McCoy returned to his bedside, and when Kirk opened his eyes, he found himself looking into a pair of anxious blue ones.

"How do you feel, Jim?"

"Lousy." Kirk's hand went to his temple while he struggled to sit up. Instinctively turning in the right direction, he asked, "Spock, did you...?"

The Vulcan silently shook his head. Kirk swung his legs over the edge of the couch and got to his feet.

"Hey Jim, wait a minute! You look as if you could do with some rest - both of you!"

"Later, Bones." Kirk waved him aside.

Sensing that his friends needed to talk, McCoy offered no further protest. "Oh, all right then. Go to your quarters, but you're off duty for the next two days, both of you. And make sure you do get some rest!"

McCoy looked after them as the Sickbay doors closed behind his friends. What could he do to help them? If nothing else, he would write a medical report and make sure they got to a Vulcan healer as soon as possible. There just had to be a way to make this turn out positive.

* * * * *

They went to Kirk's quarters at the Vulcan's insistence that Kirk lie down immediately. While Kirk undressed and got into bed, Spock went to his quarters and retrieved a flask of the kandruru that Kirk had come to value. He pulled up a chair to Kirk's bedside and

then filled a glass with kandruru for each of them.

Kirk drank deeply from his glass before looking at the Vulcan. "All right, what do we do now?"

"I will ask McCoy to put in a request for us to see a Vulcan healer as soon as possible."

"You still don't mention it. Spock, I thought we had agreed that there would be no more pretence between us."

"Jim, I don't understand... "

"Look, Spock. I hoped as much as you that you would be able to close this breach between us, since you obviously don't even want to talk about the other option, but now that you've failed, I have to bring it up - though I had hoped you would do it yourself. You said this breach occurred because our minds are particularly attuned to each other. Now these last couple of days during our leave I did some reading on Vulcan melds and such. Spock, wouldn't a... what you refer to as a 'bond' be the solution to our problem?"

"Jim, you mean you want to - " Spock broke off. Then, after collecting his composure, he continued in a toneless voice. "Jim, you do not understand what this entails. A bond is - "

"A complete and permanent link between two minds. I've done my homework. Spock... I had thought that as my friend, you would have come to understand my emotions well enough that it wouldn't be that much of an embarrassment any more. I realise that a bond would render you open to a constant bombardment of my emotions, but... " Kirk broke off, turning his face away.

"Since when," Spock said slowly, "have you known of the existence of bonding?"

"I don't really know," came Kirk's slightly unsteady reply. "Working closely with a Vulcan for the first time, I was curious and read as much as I could about your culture." he hesitated a moment before adding, "Especially when I began to think of you as a friend." Kirk fell silent and turned towards the wall.

Spock sat regarding him in silence. Learning that Jim Kirk had known of the existence of bonding all along had come as quite a shock to him. The experience of the last few weeks had but increased his desire to share a permanent bond with Kirk, if only for the sake of knowing that he was well when they were separated. Yet he had to admit to himself that his caring for Kirk went far beyond that. For the first time in his life he had found total acceptance. He was no longer afraid to show his... feelings... to Jim Kirk... Well, almost all of them. If they were to bond, even those last barriers would be removed, revealing those innermost feelings he would never be able to put into words. That aspect did not frighten him any more, though. He should have known his friend better and should have brought up the topic himself. He felt ashamed that he had not been completely open with Kirk, as he had resolved he would be - a long time ago.

A silent shudder passing through Kirk's body caused the Vulcan to abandon his train of thought. "Jim?" he asked with alarm in his voice. "JIM?"

When his exclamation produced no response but a muffled sound, he reached out and gently touched his friend's arm. Spock felt

muscles tense under his touch. For a moment he lowered his metal shields and felt a wave of hurt wash over him. Since Kirk still made no sign of response, the Vulcan reached for his shoulder and gently rolled him over so that he could see Kirk's face. Kirk did not attempt to hide the tears that were running freely down his cheeks.

"Jim... What is wrong?" the Vulcan asked.

"Oh, Spock, I'm sorry. I'm so damned selfish."

"No, Jim, don't. I... "

After searching unsuccessfully for a way to find the right words to tell Kirk that it was he who had desired a bond with him for quite a long time, Spock reached for Kirk's face, placing his fingers in the familiar position for the meld. For one fleeting moment, Kirk seemed to shrink away from him, but then welcomed him in a glow of warmth. For an instant allowing himself to bask in the aura of warmth and affection, Spock lowered his mental shields.

\\Jim. Do not be ashamed. It is I who have desired a bonding for a long time.\\

\\Is that true, Spock?\\ *DISBELIEF*

\\Jim, you know I wouldn't lie to you. Besides, in the meld I wouldn't be able to hide it from you.\\

JOY. RELIEF. \\But then, why didn't you ever mention it?\\

\\A bond, Jim, is the highest form of commitment, and as you know it is permanent, maybe lasting even beyond death. Jim, your mind is so free, so independent. I thought it unfair even to suggest it. Our minds are drawn to each other, but... \\

\\Spock, I felt drawn towards you since I first stepped aboard. Wouldn't a bond be the culmination, the completion of our friendship?\\ Kirk gave a mental smile. \\Wouldn't it be the *logical* thing to do?\\

\\There would be certain advantages to being bonded, such as knowing when the other was in difficulty, in case of separation. What also made me hesitate to suggest a bonding is the fact that in Starfleet service, we are often exposed to danger - as you well know - and there is a certain probability that should one of us die, the other one would be drawn into death with him.\\

\\Good.\\

\\Jim? I do not understand.\\

\\You don't know how much I wished for something like this on Beta Cygni III. But I'm being unfair. The Human life span is so much shorter than that of a Vulcan. And if my death would mean death to you, I could never ask that you bond with me.\\

Spock withdrew slightly from the meld. This was a perspective he had not foreseen. How often in the past, when Kirk had faced death, had he wished that he could have been in his place or join him in death, should it come to that. Their friendship had come to mean more to him than everything else. Yet he had no desire to draw Kirk into death should something happen to him. As Kirk was a non-telepath, there was a fair chance that Spock would be able to

sever the bond before he died. It would not be possible the other way round, but that was something he was grateful for. As Kirk seemed to desire a bonding at least as much as he, a half truth would have to serve to allay that one fear of his.

\\As only I am a telepath, there is the possibility that the bond could be severed in time, although I will admit that there certainly is some risk that death would claim us together. Does that frighten you?\\

\\Frighten me? Spock, I always prayed that death would claim us together, but it would be unfair to you since your lifespan is twice as long as mine. - When can we get bonded? Do we have to go to Vulcan for it?\\ EAGERNESS. EXCITEMENT.

\\Jim, be patient.\\ AFFECTION \\The bonding does not require any specific location. It is a simple ritual, conducted according to ancient tradition.\\

\\Then what are we waiting for?\\

\\Jim - the ritual does require certain preparations. And as I pointed out earlier, you... we... need rest. After the strain of our earlier meld, I do not dare attempt another deep level meld for a few days. Bonding will indeed solve our problem. In this case, a few days will not make any difference. Rest now.\\

Kirk still was not satisfied, however. \\There is one more thing I want to know, Spock. When we melded down on Beta Cygni II, it was as if we had merged completely, each seeking out the other, and discovering his innermost self. What I don't understand is why we didn't find out that both of us wished, more than anything else, to bond with the other.\\

\\This thought also occurred to me, but I must admit I do not really have an answer, Jim. Having no experience with such a deep level meld between two highly attuned minds, I can only... estimate. The only possible explanation I have is that our mutual desire to protect each other from what we thought to be a dangerous and selfish wish was so great that both our minds erected a barrier around it that was impossible to penetrate even in the meld. It certainly shows that your mind is very powerful, Jim.\\

\\I'm just glad we did acknowledge our wishes at last. I'm so stupid, I should have come to you... I...\\

The turmoil of Kirk's emotions started to boil again. \\Jim. Please. All is well now. Do not torment yourself any further. You must rest now.\\

As he slowly withdrew from the meld, Spock sent calming thoughts meant to induce sleep through the remnants of the link. Then he sat back and watched Kirk's features relax.

Though he had to fight to keep open heavy eyelids, Kirk struggled to stay awake. "Spock, when we're bonded, will we be able to 'mind talk' as we just did? Mutually, I mean? I... relished the experience."

"Certainly, Jim. Once properly linked, we will be able to use the link both ways to communicate, though you will also have to learn how to shield. But we can talk of all that later. You should sleep now."

"I don't want to... shield. In the meld, we could talk... without restrictions..." Kirk was becoming drowsier, but still fought to continue. "Spock... I am... happy. Thank you. Sleep... tight... my friend..."

At last, sleep had claimed the Captain of the Enterprise. Spock rose and drew the blanket up to Kirk's shoulder. Then, once again touching his fingers to Kirk's forehead, he projected "The same holds true for me, t'hy'la."

* * * * *

Finally the day of the bonding had come. Kirk still could not believe that at last their friendship would find this fulfilment. Although he had not enjoyed the events of the past weeks, now that they had led to their fully acknowledging their feelings for each other, he was almost grateful for them, in a way. Now that he thought of it, it seemed silly that both he and Spock had longed for a bond for such a long time without daring to mention it to the other.

Over the last few days, Spock had thoroughly filled him in on all he needed to know about the bonding ritual. The previous night he had taken a long relaxing bath in hot water scented with sweet Vulcan herbs after a long and strenuous workout in the gym and a long stay in the ship's sauna, which was meant to cleanse both body and spirit. For the bonding itself, Kirk was now dressed in a richly decorated Vulcan robe which Spock had given him. The robe was made of light white silk with blue embroidered symbols running down the front. Kirk wondered what Spock would be wearing for the occasion.

Kirk once more pulled his robe straight before leaving for Spock's cabin where the ceremony would take place. He had to admit to himself that he did have some butterflies going wild in his stomach, even though this was what he wanted most in his life. Well, you didn't get bonded to your First Officer and best friend every day. Later, when the bonding was completed, they would meet with McCoy.

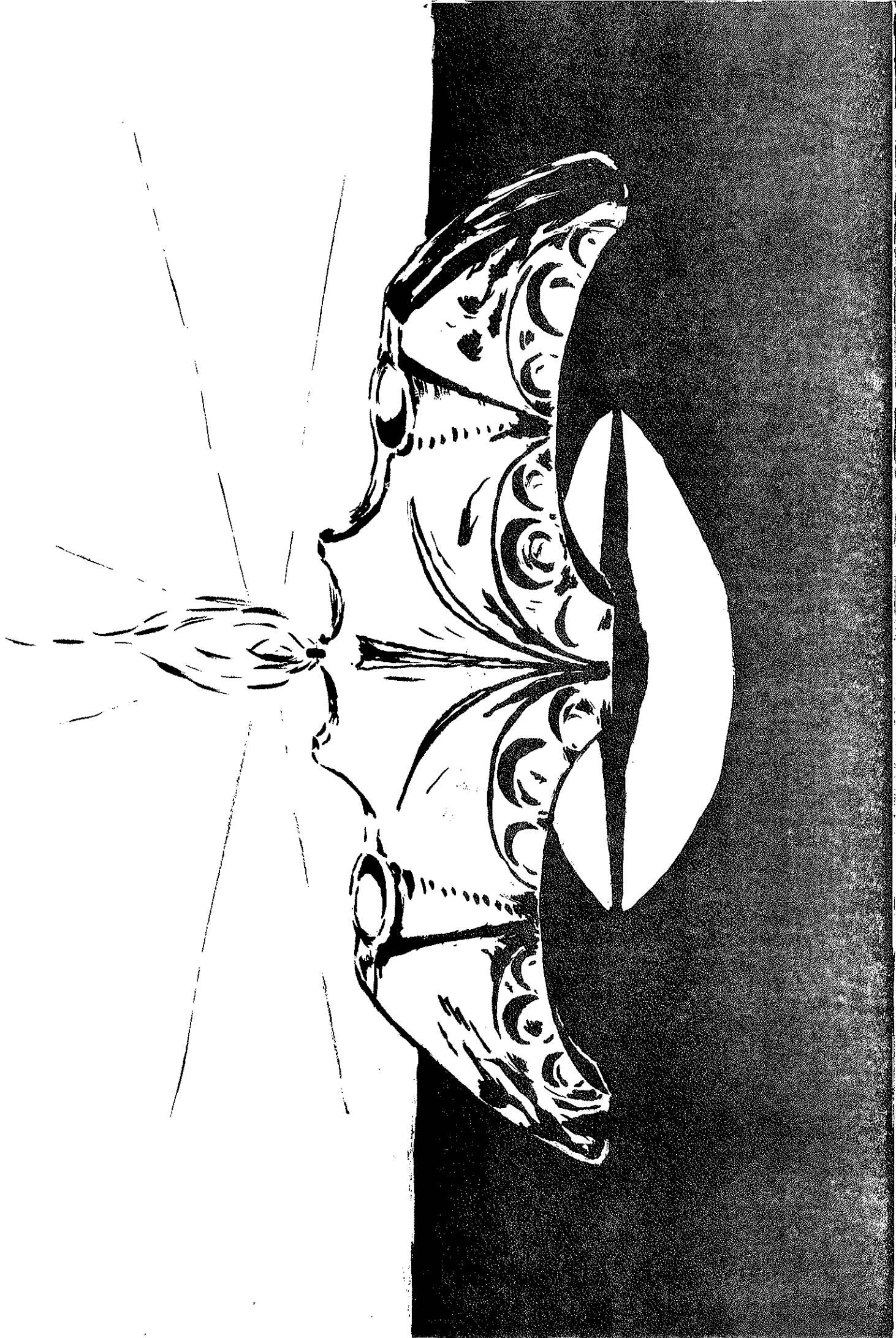
McCoy. He had been delighted when he learned of their intentions. Kirk remembered he had been worried about how the Doctor would react to that revelation. He had feared that their mutual friend would feel hurt and left out. Instead, he had encountered only deep understanding and delight; even something like I've-tried-to-tell-you-to-for-a-long-time. Could it be possible that McCoy had seen this for the two of them even before they themselves did... ?

Kirk took a deep breath and sounded the buzzer at his friend's door. When the door opened to admit him, Kirk held his breath for a moment. Spock wore a robe matching his own, only the colours being reversed. "Boy," Kirk said, letting out his breath as the door closed behind him. "Anybody ever tell you you look terrific?"

Spock raised an eyebrow at him. "The same could be said for you, Captain."

"Will you stop 'Captaining' me, Spock?" "I ask forgiveness. I presume Vulcans are creatures of habit."

Kirk felt some of the tension he had felt earlier ebb away. He gave the Vulcan a grin. "Well, my Vulcan friend, do we remain standing here at the door?"



"That would prove to be rather inconvenient." The Vulcan led Kirk over to the table where he had laid out a meal.

"Hey, Spock - I thought we were getting bonded tonight, remember?" Eyeing the arrangement of fruit and other dishes, he added, "You said nothing about a feast."

"I did indicate that the bonding required certain preparation. This meal will give strength and help to bring us into the right state of mind."

While Kirk seated himself at the low table, the Vulcan turned down the lights so that the cabin was illuminated only by the Vulcan firepot. He then slipped a tape into the player, and soon the cabin was filled with a strange but oddly relaxing music. They ate in companionable silence. When they had finished, Spock filled their glasses with light green Vulcan wine. Raising his glass, he said sombrely, "To your health and the everlasting kinship of our minds, t'hy'la."

Kirk returned the toast, looking up curiously as the Vulcan got to his feet. As he moved to follow suit, the Vulcan shook his head. "No, Jim. Remain seated. I will be back in a moment."

Spock soon returned with what Kirk recognised as the instrument that was to be the centrepiece of the bonding. For one silly moment it reminded him of the tea-warmer he had seen at his grandmother's house. Then, discarding the thought, Kirk took a closer look.

The centrepiece square was measuring about eight inches on each side and was about two inches thick. It was intricately carved from heavy brass, having a hollow on each side and a slight elevation holding a wick in its centre. The hollows would be filled with the water offering, and the wick was to be ignited with the psychic flame. Kirk felt a shudder run down his back. Although he trusted Spock implicitly, he doubted his own ability as far as contributing to lighting the psychic flame was concerned.

Spock must have read his face, for when he set down the centrepiece on the table, he looked questioningly at Kirk.

"Afraid, Jim?"

Kirk slowly shook his head. "No, I'm not afraid. My only fear is that I might not be able to do my part in this."

"Don't worry, Jim," Spock said, seating himself across from Kirk. "Together, our minds will create the flame easily."

Spock proceeded to clear the table and lay out the things they would need for the ceremony. He placed the centrepiece in the middle of the table, arranging the small flask containing the water offering and a small pipette next to it. Being rare on the desert planet, water played an important part in the bonding ceremony. Spock had explained to him that a few droplets would be placed in the hollows on each side of the wick. The psychic flame was ignited, the water would evaporate, and through the power of the flame, a crystal would form in each of the hollows, which they would then wear on their IDICs as a symbol of their bond.

It had all sounded so easy, but now that they were about to initiate the meld needed for forming the bond and lighting the psychic flame, he felt frightened. What if he let his friend down?

Spock seemed to have infinite confidence in the power of their link, but...

When Spock's fingers gently touched his face in the position of the meld, all his fear and doubts dissipated, however. He felt calm, joy, and the warmth of friendship flood himself, and as they entered deeper and deeper into each other's minds, lowering all shields and mental barriers, he was engulfed in pure, genuine love. Then they became one, and soared higher and higher on the wave of their oneness. Finally, for one moment, there was a red-hot searing flame shooting through his mind. Then his mind regained its independence; but he could clearly hear Spock's voice in his mind.

\\Concentrate on the wick now, Jim.\\

Through his mind's eye he saw a blue flame form and light the wick on the centrepiece, flooding him and his friend with its warmth. For a long moment they basked together in that warmth. Then Spock slowly guided him upwards and finally broke the meld, but Kirk could still feel the warmth within himself.

Tentatively, he sent a \\Spock?\\ through the bond link.

\\Yes, it is done, Jim,\\ he heard the reassuring voice in his mind. \\Look at the flame.\\

Awed, Kirk gazed at the blue flame on the centrepiece. \\It continues to burn because our bond is complete,\\ explained Spock's voice in his mind. Kirk felt a tear of pure happiness running down his cheek. To his amazement, Spock picked up the pipette, and catching the single tear with it, added it to the water offering in the flask. Then he took the flask and poured a little water into one of the hollows.

Kirk did the same, and together they watched the water slowly evaporate and the crystals form in the hollows.

When the last of the liquid had evaporated, they poured the remnant of the water in the flask over the wick, extinguishing the flame. Spock then reached out to take the crystals which had formed in the hollows.

When he held them up against the light of the firepot, he raised an eyebrow in astonishment. "Fascinating."

In his surprise, the Vulcan had spoken aloud before he was even aware of it. Still unsure about using the bond link, Kirk too spoke.

"What is it, Spock?" Kirk could feel alarm rising within himself.

Sensing his friend's unease through the link, Spock immediately sent reassurance through the bond. \\It's just the colour of the crystals. Jim, please turn on the lights.\\

As Kirk touched the light switch, a wave of amazement came over the link. Kirk hurried back to his friend's side to find him peering closely at the crystals. "What about their colour, Spock?"

"You remember I told you the colour of the crystals would indicate the depths of the bond established, ranging from a dark opaque to crystalline white. These are crystal clear..." Spock's voice faded. Instead, Kirk suddenly felt Spock's voice booming in

his mind. *Jim!* Crystalline white means we have achieved the deepest bonding level possible! This has not been accomplished since the time of the ancient legends. In modern history, the deepest level of bonding reached has been light blue. The implications of this... *Jim!*

Kirk then felt the mind voice become unsteady, and when he looked at his friend, he saw that Spock's face had turned pale. Kirk stepped forward and caught his friend in an embrace, leading him to the bed.

We're really something, aren't we? Hell, you're pretty well shook up. You stay right here while I get us a brandy from my cabin.

Spock did not offer any protests. When he had reached his cabin, Kirk experimentally probed the bond link.

Spock, can you hear me?

Affirmative.

Hey, this really works! It's no illusion, is it? AMAZEMENT

What did you expect? AMUSEMENT *It would have to be a mutual illusion, and Vulcans are not prone to fall prey to illusions!*

AWE *I'm so happy! Spock, stay right where you are. I'll be right with you.*

I know.

When Kirk returned to Spock's quarters, he found that the Vulcan's face had recovered some colour, but Kirk still insisted that he accept some of the brandy he had fetched. As they relaxed over the brandy, Kirk looked expectant. "You mentioned something about the implications of the colour of the crystals...?"

"Well, Jim, I am not expert on such matters, but I do know that we have accomplished something thought not possible before. I will eventually consult with one of the Masters. For now, however - " Spock smiled, then, slipping back into the mind voice, *we should finish what we have begun.*

He reached out and took a black leather case from his nightstand. He opened the case to reveal two IDICs. The Vulcan carefully inserted each of the crystals into the corresponding fixture. He then slipped the necklace over Kirk's neck, touching the fingers of his right hand to Kirk's in the Vulcan gesture of affection. Kirk did the same to him, but after a moment moved to hug Spock tight in a warm embrace.

I'm so happy, Spock, I could burst!

I share your happiness, t'hy'la. However, I would not recommend the latter as we have an appointment with Bones. Since he wanted to make sure we have suffered no adverse effects, I do not think he would appreciate it if you ruptured.

Spock, you're pulling my leg.

I am not aware of having done such a thing, Captain. TEASING

\\Oh, to hell. Come on, let's go and see Bones!\\

* * * * *

McCoy felt intense relief when he saw his two friends entering Sickbay side by side. They had told him they intended to perform the bonding ceremony that night, and although he had not let them see it, McCoy had been worried as hell about the outcome, especially after having witnessed the unsuccessful attempt to break the link. McCoy had been delighted when the two had told him they wanted to bond. It seemed so perfect, so right for them, McCoy had wondered why they'd hadn't thought of it before, particularly when Spock had mentioned that bonding earlier would have prevented all the trouble triggered by the deep healing meld between him and Kirk.

The affinity and closeness between his two friends just called out for a bond complete with harmony. McCoy had read up as much as he could on Vulcan bonding, and knew that such a bond as his friends wished to form was rare but highly respected by Vulcan culture. It dated back to the times of old warrior traditions, when two warriors who complemented each other well would become bonded as Brothers of the Sword, making a team it was almost impossible to outguess in battle. Later, when wars were replaced by the teachings of Surak, the tradition had been carried on in case of those selected few whose minds were extraordinarily attuned to each other. Such cases had become more and more rare, but such a bond was considered highly desirable as it symbolised the philosophy of IDIC as two individuals joined to create a more perfect union while retaining the strengths of each individual.

When he had found no information on Human/Vulcan bonding in any of his sources, marriages bonds such as that of Sarek and Amanda being the only exception, McCoy had questioned Spock on the subject. The Vulcan had acknowledged that the bonding between himself and Kirk was indeed unprecedented.

McCoy had seen in the past how well his two friends matched each other and how easy it was for them to form a meld. Yet a Vulcan full bond was something entirely different, and McCoy could not help but worry about what effects it would have on them, especially on Kirk. After having seen how deeply shaken they had been after that other deep meld, he would have preferred to monitor them during the bonding, or better still have it done under the supervision of a Vulcan healer. He understood and respected, however, that it was too private a thing for the two to have witnesses intruding on their very special ceremony. The best compromise he had been able to come up with was asking them to report to Sickbay as soon as the bonding was complete.

Now that they were approaching, McCoy didn't need his instruments to tell that they looked more happy and relaxed than they had in ages. Kirk seemed to be bursting with excitement and happiness, and even the Vulcan was not entirely successful in hiding his pleasure and contentment.

McCoy got up from his desk and went to meet his friends. "Well, you two, you seem happy enough. So no difficulties, I presume?"

Suddenly McCoy found himself clutched in a bear hug by the Captain of the Enterprise. "Oh, Bones, it's wonderful! I can't begin to tell you what it was like. Spock said we accomplished the very deepest form of bond possible! Bones, I..." Kirk's voice failed him, and McCoy felt his eyes becoming suspiciously moist when

he sensed the intense happiness radiating from his friends. It was something that lay beyond words, and McCoy wished for a moment that he could see just a glimpse of what those two shared.

"Well, I'm happy for both of you," he said gruffly, "but you've come down here for me to give you a once-over, so make yourselves comfy on the couches."

For the next half hour, McCoy busied himself running various tests on both Kirk and Spock, including a full electroencephalogram. When he was finally satisfied that there was indeed nothing wrong with his two friends, he shut off the instruments with a flourish. For a moment he tried to retain a businesslike expression on his face, but his emotions got the better of him, and he broke into a happy grin. "Well, this calls for a celebration. I still should have that old brandy bottle hidden somewhere... "

"Is that your diagnosis, Doctor?" Spock raised an eyebrow at him, but there was a new sparkle in his eyes.

"My diagnosis is that both of you are more healthy than I had dared to hope. Spock, your days of idleness are over. You've still got to take it easy, but I'll let you back on light duty. As for the meld, it doesn't seem to have caused any ill effects to either of you. If anything, you're the better for it, as all the signs of strain I previously detected in you - yes, Spock, in you as well - have all disappeared. Now, what about celebrating?"

He looked at his friends expectantly. Although Spock's face was expressionless, an inner battle seemed to take place. Then both his friends' expressions became distant. Undetected by McCoy, the two discussed the subject. It was, in fact, Kirk who felt more uneasy about the suggestion. Knowing that their newly established bond was very special to the Vulcan, he was not sure if Spock would appreciate close contact with the Doctor so soon. Instead, he thought that Spock would want first to savour the bond in private only. He himself wished to become more familiar with the bond before he let anyone else in on it. Although they would register their bond officially on Vulcan, they had not yet decided if they would tell anyone else but the Doctor about it. With McCoy, though, it was very different. He already knew, and Kirk didn't want him to feel left out. The Doctor had, in fact, helped them to find their way, and Kirk wanted to share at least some of his newfound happiness with his old friend.

He finally directed a thought at the Vulcan.

\\Spock, what do you think? If you would rather have your peace and quiet now, we'll simply say we're tired...\\

Sensing Kirk's emotions in addition to his words, Spock answered, \\Bones is our friend, and as such I welcome the opportunity to celebrate our union with him. However, you do require some rest. I would therefore advise that we schedule this event for a later date.\\

\\Thank you, Spock.\\ WARMTH \\When would you like 'later' to be?\\

\\This evening would leave you sufficient time to rest, I believe, and it would still be the day of our bonding.\\

When he did not receive a reply immediately, McCoy almost regretted asking his friends. After all, the bonding was a very

private thing for them, and why would they want to have an old country doctor around to celebrate it? He imagined that Spock, especially, would prefer his privacy. "Hey, look - if you don't really want to, I understand. It was silly of me... "

Just then, his two friends began to speak in unison. "Tonight would be... " Realising that they both had spoken, they stopped, and Kirk began to laugh.

"What we meant to say, Bones," he finally managed to gasp, "is that we would very much like you to join us tonight."

"We? I don't quite get this. Are you sure? Spock?"

The Vulcan inclined his head gravely. "Yes, Doctor. We have discussed this in detail, and we would both be honoured if you came to my quarters to do honour to our bonding, which you, as our closest friend, are entitled to share."

"You *discussed* it? I didn't hear - Oh, boy, I forgot all about that bond of yours. You know, it'll take me a while to get used to it. For an innocent bystander, it sure is spooky... " Suddenly McCoy broke off as the full impact of Spock's words hit home. For the second time that day, McCoy felt his eyes sting. He cleared his throat noisily. "The honour is mine, Spock. Are you really sure you want me around?"

"According to Vulcan tradition, Bones," the Vulcan said with only the slightest hesitation at the use of McCoy's nickname, "a bonding is celebrated in the circle of the immediate family or, in the case of a friendship bond such as ours, in the company of the bonded pair's closest friends. Not to do so would be a breach of tradition. Please come, Doctor."

McCoy helplessly looked from one friend to the other, at a loss for words. Kirk gave him a grin in an attempt to lighten the atmosphere. "Don't forget to bring the bottle, Bones. You promised it, remember?"

"Don't worry, I won't forget it." McCoy returned the grin, but then quickly crossed the few steps that separated him from his friends, and he drew Kirk close into another embrace. Finally, his emotions got the better of him, and his withheld tears spilled over. Kirk returned the hug, and when McCoy looked into the Captain's eyes he saw his own emotions mirrored there. "I'm sorry. This is a happy occasion. You're really right with what you've so often told me, Spock; I should really learn to keep my emotions in check."

Suddenly McCoy felt a third, slightly warmer, hand on his shoulder. "Emotional restraint is not always desirable, Bones. The past events have been strenuous for all of us. We do appreciate your care. For now, however, it would be advisable that we all rest."

Sensing the emotional turmoil in McCoy, he withdrew his hand from the Doctor's shoulder, reaching for his face instead. "If you will permit, Bones... "

McCoy looked incredulously at the Vulcan for the fraction of a second, not really believing that he had given up his dislike of physical contact for him and was offering him a meld - something which in extreme emergency had been reserved only for Kirk. Unable to speak, he only signalled his permission with his eyes.

He then felt a featherlight touch in his mind. He felt all his nervous tension disappear and the turmoil of his emotions ease. From somewhere, he also sensed Kirk's presence, but Spock withdrew the link before he had time to assimilate any of the input. Yet the brief touch had shown him some of the beauty the meld held, and he felt the warm friendship coming from both Kirk and Spock. It was hard to believe that he had once been afraid of the telepathic contact.

It took him a moment to adjust back to reality. Straightening, he simply said, "Thanks, Spock."

Spock gave him a small smile in return. "You are welcome, Bones,"

Kirk felt that he, too, would have a hard time dealing with his emotions and tagged Spock's sleeve. "Come on, my Vulcan friend. You said we should get some rest, and we won't get that hanging around here in Sickbay. Besides, you promised to play me some music on your lyrette before I go to sleep. We'll see you tonight, Bones."

Although he was overjoyed for his two friends, McCoy also felt a sense of relief when the Sickbay doors had closed behind them. McCoy agreed with whoever it was who had said that too much of anything, even happiness, could be too hard to bear. He did not know how he would have managed had the Vulcan not helped him.

Spock. McCoy smiled fondly at the thought. The supposedly unemotional Vulcan had been concerned about the peace of mind of someone who, by strangers, had sometimes been thought to be an enemy. It had taken them a long time to acknowledge their friendship, if only through their mutual bickering, let alone in words. McCoy would always have trusted the Vulcan with his life, but so far had not been sure about the extent of their friendship. He had always considered their shared friendship for Kirk as the one stabilising factor in their relationship. The events of the past weeks had let him reconsider and re-evaluate their relationship.

What passed between Kirk and Spock was more than mere friendship. The two were the closest friends and were what was poetically called 'brothers of the soul'. It seemed that, though Spock would probably never admit it to him, he had learned the meaning of the word 'love'.

McCoy now regretted that he had once accused the Vulcan of not having that word in his vocabulary. Maybe he did not pronounce it, but he lived it all right. Come to think of it, it had been Spock who was around Kirk most of the time in the first few days and weeks after he had lost his android love, and it seemed that Spock had been able to help Kirk come to terms with his loss.

So why did it almost have to cost his friends' lives to make them and him fully realise and acknowledge their feelings for each other?

Dwelling on past mistakes, however, does not help but only wastes precious time and is unproductive.

Now where had that thought come from? His mind was beginning to sound like Spock! Those speech patterns must really rub off.

Tiredly, McCoy stopped his train of thought and rubbed his eyes. Spock had been right; they all needed rest. Knowing about his

friends' planned bonding, McCoy had been unable to sleep the previous night. Wondering if he would be able to settle down to sleep now, McCoy walked over to the medicine cabinet. When he opened it to take out a bottle of sleeping pills, though, he felt a pleasant feeling of tiredness come over him and a yawn escaped him. He put the bottle back in the cabinet. He would be able to sleep without the dubious aid of drugs. That brief mind touch of Spock's must really have done the trick. Maybe Kirk would not need sleeping pills so often...

Closing the cabinet, McCoy stifled another yawn. Never had the thought of his bed - without some pretty company - seemed so attractive. He would have to catch up on his paperwork later. Leaving Sickbay, McCoy made straight for his cabin without even considering visiting one of the rec rooms for an early lunch.

Once he had reached his quarters, McCoy just pulled off his boots before lying down and pulling the cover up to his chin. A wonderful warmth began to spread through him, and within a few minutes, he slept.

* * * * *

Kirk and Spock walked in silence down the corridor to the turbolift. Instead of talking, Kirk was almost constantly testing their communication through the bond. Spock could feel Kirk's excitement bubble, and he was also aware that the mental exchanges were wearing Kirk out as he, as a non-telepath, was not used to them. Yet he knew Kirk would never admit just how tired he was, and knowing how excited he was Spock guessed that he probably did not even feel it at the moment. Spock had been hard put to it to convince Kirk that it was not wise to stop at the mess to eat. Only reminding him of the evening ahead had made him accept the idea that the food dispenser in his quarters would also provide him with a meal and possibly an additional hour of sleep.

Once they had stopped at the door to Kirk's cabin, Spock wondered if he should maybe use the link to help Kirk sleep as he had done for McCoy. Kirk, who was becoming quite good at picking up Spock's thoughts, immediately sent a protest through their bond.

\\No, Spock! You promised you would play me to sleep on your lyrette. You know how much your playing relaxes me. Please.\\

Kirk's wishes were becoming illogical because of his tiredness. Yet he did not want to escalate it through a lengthy discussion, which - knowing Kirk - would probably be fruitless anyway. Also he must not allow Kirk to tire himself any further by continuing to use the mind voice. Without shutting the Human out completely, Spock gently shielded his mind. Shielding would become imperative soon, anyway, since Kirk was learning to read him even faster than he had expected, and an excess of this kind of exchange could be harmful to their individuality.

For the moment, though, the most important thing was to persuade Kirk to get the rest he needed so badly. The easiest course of action would probably be to humour him.

It was not to be easy, however. Kirk had sensed the erection of Spock's shields, and there was hurt in his voice when he spoke.

"Why are you shutting me out, Spock?"

"Jim, please. I am not shutting you out. You should still feel

me in your mind. Both of us will have to learn to shield our thoughts, however. As you are a non-telepath, being in constant contact places great strain on you. It will become easier as your mind becomes accustomed to the bond. Also since both our races use speech as the main means of communication, it is advisable that we maintain it as such, particularly in public."

"You aren't having second thoughts, are you?" Kirk asked in a small voice.

Aware of his friend's need for reassurance, Spock switched back to the mind voice. "Jim, we went through this before we bonded. You are very tired and should rest."

"You're right, of course, Spock. I should be grateful instead of doubting your motives. I'm sorry." He smiled sheepishly before adding mentally, "And I'll be a good boy and get ready for bed."

"While I get my lyrette," Spock flashed back.

When the Vulcan had left, Kirk undressed, carelessly tossing his clothes on the floor. He stepped into the shower, allowing himself the luxury of a hot water shower. As he stood under the running hot water, he slowly felt tight muscles relax and some of the strain disappear. He had not really realized just how tired he was. He just hoped that he hadn't hurt the Vulcan. Spock had told him about the necessity of learning to shield before they bonded.

He had not thought he would get used to the close link so fast or so easily. It had only taken him a few hours to interpret the 'emissions' from the Vulcan. When Spock had shielded some of his output, he had felt something very akin to panic. The closeness was so beautiful, so special, that he did not want to miss any of it. Yet Spock was right, of course. They had to keep functioning as two individuals, and shielding was necessary.

Besides, there might well be some thoughts he himself would rather not let Spock see. Somehow he had the feeling that Spock would not appreciate sharing his fantasies about some pretty women... Kirk smiled and began to hum to himself. They still had a lot of learning to do, but it would sure be rewarding.

By the time Spock returned carrying his lyrette, he could hear Kirk's loud but not too melodious voice singing disharmony with the splashing of the running water. The Vulcan was just considering returning after Kirk had finished his shower when the sounds stopped and Kirk emerged from the bathroom, clad in his bathrobe. On bare feet, he padded over to his bed. Sitting down wearily, he began to rub dry his hair. Then he slipped into bed and pulled the cover up to his shoulders.

Turning onto his side he looked at Spock expectantly. "I'm so glad you're here. I love music." When he noticed Spock's eyebrow rise slightly, he grinned. "You caught me singing in the shower, didn't you? I hope I didn't assault your hearing too much, my friend!"

Spock pulled up a chair and dimmed the lights. He began to play softly, and soon Kirk's eyes began to close. When the Vulcan slowed his play, however, Kirk's eyes opened again. "Please, Spock, don't stop," he begged in a sleepy voice. "Please stay..."

"I'll stay until you're asleep," came the reassuring thought in

return.

After a while, Kirk's even breathing told the Vulcan that he was asleep. He continued to play softly, nevertheless, watching the sleeping features of his friend. The mind union with Kirk was closer than he had dared hope for. In his mind, he could feel Kirk's presence and well-being. At last he would no longer have to worry when they were separated. He would sense it immediately if something was wrong with Kirk. He was not sure over how great a distance the bond would allow them to reach each other; only time would show that. But he would always be aware of Kirk's presence in his mind, and their bond being as close as was indicated by the psychic crystals, no-one could yet tell what they were going to accomplish. Kirk's powerful mind was one of the main contributing factors to the depth of their bond.

Spock could not help but feel amazed at the ease with which Kirk was adapting to it. Already he was beginning to use the link as a natural means of communication, as was indicated by his using it just before he fell asleep.

A happy smile appeared on Kirk's lips, and for a moment Spock wondered what was passing through his sleeping friend's mind. He could have 'listened in' on Kirk's dream, but that was a temptation Spock did not even think about. He sat gazing at Kirk's bedside viewer, which was displaying a view of space - Kirk had turned it on before he lay down, as he usually did.

The stars were beautiful indeed. Among them, he had not only found a home, but also friends. And... love. He had always suspected that it had been the same with Kirk, and maybe that, in part, explained their special affinity.

After touching the lyrette to produce one final note, he laid it aside and got up to pull the cover back up to Kirk's shoulder from where it had slipped when Kirk had moved in his sleep. He bent over and turned off the viewer. Then, picking up his lyrette, he cast one final look at his sleeping friend. He, too, would require a period of meditation before taking care of the preparations for tonight's celebration. He walked over to the door quietly, turned out the lights, and left.

* * * * *

When McCoy woke in the late afternoon, he felt refreshed and relaxed. He was looking forward to the special evening spent with Kirk and Spock, especially as Spock had said that it was to be held according to Vulcan tradition. McCoy was not exactly sure what to expect, considering that Spock did not usually talk too much about Vulcan customs. McCoy briefly wondered if he should wear his dress uniform to honour the occasion, but dismissed the idea. After all, he was spending an evening with his friends, and wearing the hated dress uniform would only make him feel stiff and out of place. Instead, he finally decided to wear not even his standard uniform, but civilian clothes. He simply felt more comfortable in corduroys and a cardigan, and he was sure that the thorough Vulcan would have informed him if any special attire was required. The only thing he was worried about was that a traditional Vulcan meal might include plomeek soup.

The best way to find out would be to get going. Glancing at his wrist chronometer, McCoy saw it was time to leave anyway. He certainly did not want to be late for this, his friends' special



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evening!

When the door to Spock's quarters opened to admit him, he stood in awed silence for a moment. Spock and Kirk were a sight to behold. They wore identical Vulcan robes, the only difference being that the colours were reversed. Then the two stepped forward to welcome him. McCoy found himself clasped in a tight bear hug by Kirk while the Vulcan almost shyly clasped his hand. After extracting himself from Kirk's hug, McCoy cleared his throat and withdrew the brandy bottle from the pocket of his cardigan.

"Well, I'm not sure what to say on such an occasion, but you know you have all my best wishes."

Kirk took the bottle from him and smiled warmly. "We're glad to have you with us tonight, Bones." Not wanting the atmosphere to become over emotional again, he quickly indicated the bottle and grinned. "You know, this alone is well worth it."

"Indeed." Spock gravely inclined his head. "Yet I hope this will not keep you from trying some Vulcan beverages tonight, Doctor."

"Kandruru?" McCoy asked expectantly.

He was rewarded by a slight smile from the Vulcan. "Among other things, yes. Now come."

McCoy was led over to a low table laden with dishes. The meal that followed lasted for over two hours and was shared in companionable silence. To McCoy's great relief there had been no plomeek soup. The Vulcan dishes that had been present were all recipes from Spock's home - except for Kirk's favourite chocolate chunk ice cream and a large butter cream cake - and were delicious. McCoy had never thought he would be able to enjoy strictly vegetarian food to such an extent. Spock told them that he had had the food processor especially programmed for this occasion, and it had been well worth the effort.

When the dishes were all empty at last, McCoy, with a sigh, leaned back on the cushions arranged on the floor. "Spock, that was the greatest meal I've ever had, but I'm so full I think I'm going to die."

"I think not, Doctor. I have recently had the opportunity to study Humans and their eating habits more closely, and if a rich meal were fatal to them, Jim would be dead a hundred times over."

Kirk grinned accusingly in the Vulcan's direction, sending an affectionate, "So you've used me as a guinea pig!" through the bond link before turning to McCoy. "It's true, Bones. Ever since we came back from our medical leave, Spock's been stuffing me with all kinds of different Vulcan treats. If it continues like this, you'll soon put me on a diet again. I've found, however, that a drop of kandruru has helped me in case of indigestion, so I suggest we have some."

"Gladly," McCoy said, studying the Vulcan as he rose, got the flask and the goblets, and filled one for each of them. The Vulcan's features were relaxed, and McCoy was sure he detected a sparkle of amusement at their exchange in the dark eyes. It was hard to believe, but with his guard lowered somewhat, the Vulcan was able to tease and enjoy a teasing in return. Not that it made him any less Vulcan! McCoy had observed the same kind of behaviour between Sarek and his wife. He was happy, though, that Spock had finally relaxed

enough in his presence to allow him to see this trait in his personality, which he normally kept so carefully hidden. Judging from the look in Kirk's eyes and the answering affectionate glow in Spock's darker ones, another amusing thought had just passed between them. If only he could share for just one second... But that was an unfair wish. You didn't pry on the thoughts passed between two who were as close as his friends. He should be - and was - grateful that they were willing to spend the evening of their bonding with him.

McCoy took the goblet holding the kandruru that Kirk offered and drank slowly. He watched his two friends do the same, and when they had finished, both got to their feet in unison and started to clear the table. McCoy made a move to help, but Kirk placed a restraining hand on his shoulder while the Vulcan said, "Don't, Doctor. Tonight you are our guest, therefore you must not bother about such tasks. Jim and I will be back with you in a moment."

McCoy lay back with a contented sigh. In the beginning he had found it strange to eat seated only on cushions on the floor, but soon had begun to appreciate the relaxed atmosphere it created. At informal gatherings such as this, the Vulcans returned to the ways passed on over the centuries, and this sure was to be preferred to a meal spent sitting on those hard, high-backed chairs McCoy had come to know and hate on his few visits to Vulcan.

Presently his two friends returned, with Kirk carrying a beautifully carved chandelier holding incense candles while Spock had brought his lyrette. The Vulcan seated himself in a chair and began to tune the lyrette softly. After lighting the candles, Kirk sat on the floor, leaning against Spock's chair.

Now that he thought of it, McCoy realised that it was the position Kirk almost always chose on the rare occasions when the three friends spent an evening together and Spock decided to play for them. Then Spock began to play, and McCoy became lost in the music. Time ceased to exist as he floated upwards with each note Spock played. Although he had heard the Vulcan play before, and admired his talent, this was the most beautiful music he had ever heard.

McCoy had lost all sense of time when the music finally stopped. He seemed too relaxed even to move an eyelid, but when he finally did open his eyes he found Spock's dark eyes gazing at him with an expression of open warmth. The air had become heady with incense, and McCoy wasn't sure at first if it hadn't clouded his senses. Then Kirk, too, opened his eyes and smiled at his confused expression.

"I see you enjoyed yourself, Bones. We did too, didn't we, Spock?"

Spock broke into one of his rare smiles. "Indeed we did."

Finally McCoy found that he could trust his voice again enough to speak. "Spock, I don't know how to thank you. This was the most beautiful music I have ever heard. But tell me, how did you do it...?"

In response, Spock gave him another almost shy smile. "It seems that since being bonded to Jim, I am more able to appreciate and create... beauty. I am not entirely sure why, but... Jim has been contributing to my playing."

Kirk had risen and refilled their goblets. Then he reached

McCoy, he touched his arm briefly. "Bones, I can sense that there is something you... need. If there is anything we can do, just ask."

McCoy felt that yearning for unity rise again, and had to admit to himself that he did feel left out, just a little. Lost in his thoughts, he had not noticed Spock move with swift grace to stand at his side as well. Then the Vulcan sat on the floor next to him and spoke quietly.

"There is no need to be ashamed of your longing, Bones. And do not feel left out. We are both your friends."

Sensing what the Vulcan intended, Kirk flopped down on the other side of McCoy. Now that he and Spock were so close, they had to take great care not to hurt their mutual friend. McCoy was just as lonely as they had been.

He was amazed that Spock was already willing to share some of their precious closeness with their friend, but it would be the perfect solution to show McCoy that he was still appreciated and needed. Knowing that Spock might be embarrassed to put into words just how much he cared for the Doctor, Kirk spoke for both of them.

"Bones, there is something we would very much like to share with you. If you'll agree, Spock can initiate a three-way meld, a way to affirm our shared gift of friendship."

McCoy had great trouble fighting down the lump that was beginning to form in his throat. When he could speak at last, it was in a rather hoarse voice.

"You can't begin to imagine how much I would like that, but... I... I can't ask that of you. Your bond is so new... so precious and unique... I have no right to pry into it."

"You won't pry, Bones," Kirk said. "We want to share this with you. You belong..." His voice trailed off, at a loss to put into words what he felt and what he thought of their special triad relationship.

Kirk turned to Spock, but before he had time to ask for any assistance, the Vulcan was acting on his own. He reached out a hand and gently turned McCoy's face towards himself.

"Bones, Jim is right," he said softly. "You do belong with us, and you will not 'pry'. The meld I can offer will only help us... acknowledge our feelings for each other. You are our closest friend, and... You know that I have great difficulty..."

When the Vulcan fell silent, McCoy responded in the only way he knew at that moment and drew him into an impulsive and very Human hug. The next moment McCoy regretted his impulsiveness, for he feared that the Vulcan would resent the physical contact.

However, instead of tensing under the embrace as McCoy had expected, he shyly, if slightly awkwardly, briefly returned the hug. Then he moved and gently touched his fingers to Kirk's and McCoy's temples, instructing them to do the same. In the beginning, McCoy only sensed a vague feeling of warmth in his mind. Soon, however, he could make out two presences in his mind, and the two gently guided him on his discovery of the maze of their inner beings.

McCoy saw himself pictured through the eyes of the others; buddy

and confidant for Jim Kirk, respected colleague and trusted friend for Spock. Then Spock showed him how their friendship had developed.

First there had been mild professional curiosity how a Human as eccentric as McCoy had earned such a brilliant reputation in Starfleet. Then, as they worked together, open respect for the other's abilities had arisen. After the first couple of months their mutual friendship and concern for their impetuous Captain had drawn them together. Gradually, friendship and mutual affection had developed out of the respect, turning finally into unspoken but underlying love. Then, as they were at last able to acknowledge their feelings for each other, Kirk's essence joined them, spreading a soft, warm golden glow over his two friends, filling their minds with affectionate laughter.

The part of the mental trinity that was McCoy felt a sense of wonder at the immense closeness and love shared with his friends. This was a gift of pure love. Presently, he felt his thoughts mirrored and reflected back by the other two. Suddenly, the last of his subconscious resistance was gone and he was truly one with his friends. For an eternity, all three drifted, enveloped by the sea of love as they had done before with the music. Only this floating was more intent, and then it was as if music was born out of their mental union, softly at first, becoming more and more intense. It seemed to consist of three different parts, joining together to form a piece even more beautiful than the music Spock had played before.

Finally the music faded slowly, and with it the closeness with his two friends. He felt intense regret at having the unity with his friends broken, but the rational part of his mind told him that closeness such as he had just experienced could not be maintained over any longer period of time.

Gradually the meld diminished in intensity, and at last all McCoy could feel was again just a feather like touch and a gentle warmth caressing him. When the contact was broken, a warm sense of well-being stayed with him, but to his amazement he felt emotionally exhausted and physically so relaxed that he couldn't move. He felt strong hands easing him back against the cushions. Even to speak seemed to much effort, but he felt he had to express his gratitude.

"Jim, Spock," he whispered. "I can hardly... "

Simultaneously, Kirk reached out and placed a gentle finger on his lips, hushing him, while Spock chided mildly, "No need to speak, Bones. This was shared, therefore there is no need to put into words what you felt, as we each felt the same."

"I... " McCoy tried again, but Kirk said softly, "Quit being silly, Bones. You heard what Spock said. Just relax. I know you must feel exhausted. I'm closely attuned to Spock, yet this has drained me."

Kirk stretched out on the cushions next to McCoy, punching the Doctor playfully. "It feels good to be so totally relaxed, doesn't it, Bones. You really feel a bit like a rag doll!"

McCoy felt himself growing rapidly sleepy. Already half asleep, he mumbled, "I don't want to leave... "

"We don't want you to, Bones," said Spock's voice quietly, and McCoy felt a blanket being snugly wrapped around him. The Vulcan then moved over to spread another blanket over Kirk, who smiled his

thanks at him. Kirk too had to battle his tiredness, but he caught the Vulcan's hand, which was tugging the blanket around his shoulders, and squeezed it tightly.

«Spock, I know you'll say I'm not logical, but I want to thank you nevertheless, especially for Bones. I've been so afraid our new found closeness would hurt him... I'm just so glad for all of us.»

«Jim, you are being illogical. Through the melds and our bond, you know that I share your affection and concern for McCoy. But I, too, am grateful... Humans do have that need to have reassurance of how others feel about them, and I... »

«And my unemotional Vulcan couldn't express in words what his heart felt. Just take it from this very illogical Human, I'm so happy we have this, and I felt the Human need to communicate my gratitude.»

«I know and I understand, Jim. However, I also know you were exhausted by this meld and require rest.»

«I don't want this evening to end, Spock. Therefore, although I'm tired, I don't think I want to sleep just yet.»

«I don't think I'll ever be able to follow that particular way of reasoning you employ on occasion.» *AMUSEMENT* «I think I will be able to help, however.»

Spock picked up his lyrette and began to play softly. Soon the awareness of Kirk in his mind became dimmed by a haze of sleep. He continued playing for a while longer. Finally he put his lyrette aside and for one fleeting moment considered retiring to the sleeping section of his cabin; then dismissed the idea and gave in to his illogical desire to stay and watch his friends in their sleep.

Only time would tell how their relationship was going to develop. With time, his bond with Kirk would probably even deepen in strength. When they had learned to use it to its full extent, it could become an enormous help in their work as well. Yet Spock had to admit to himself that that was not the aspect he savoured most. At last the part of his inner being that had always been longing had been filled.

One night when he was a little boy, when he had been heartbroken and on the verge of tears after a particularly sharp taunting from his classmates, his mother had gathered him in her arms, and pointing to the stars she had told him that somewhere out there there were friends for everyone, and Fate would bring him his just as she had met his father.

He had had to wait for a long time, but the reward of his oneness with Kirk and the friendship with the Doctor had been well worth the waiting.

He was content.

