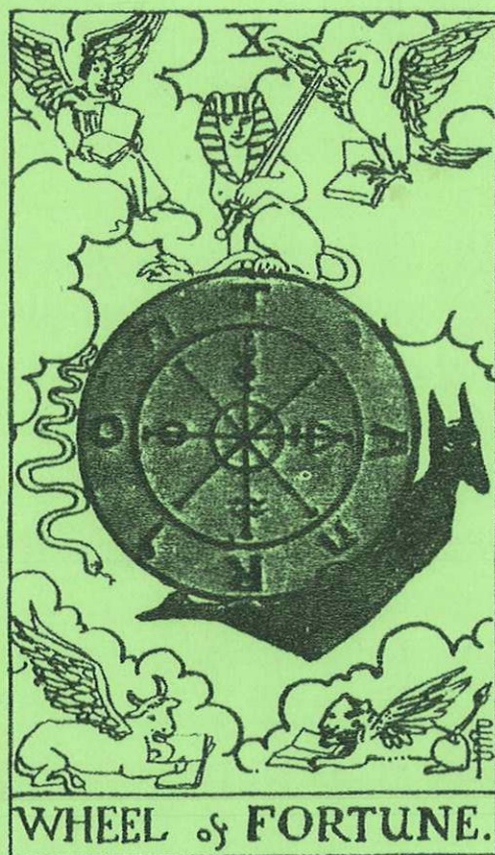
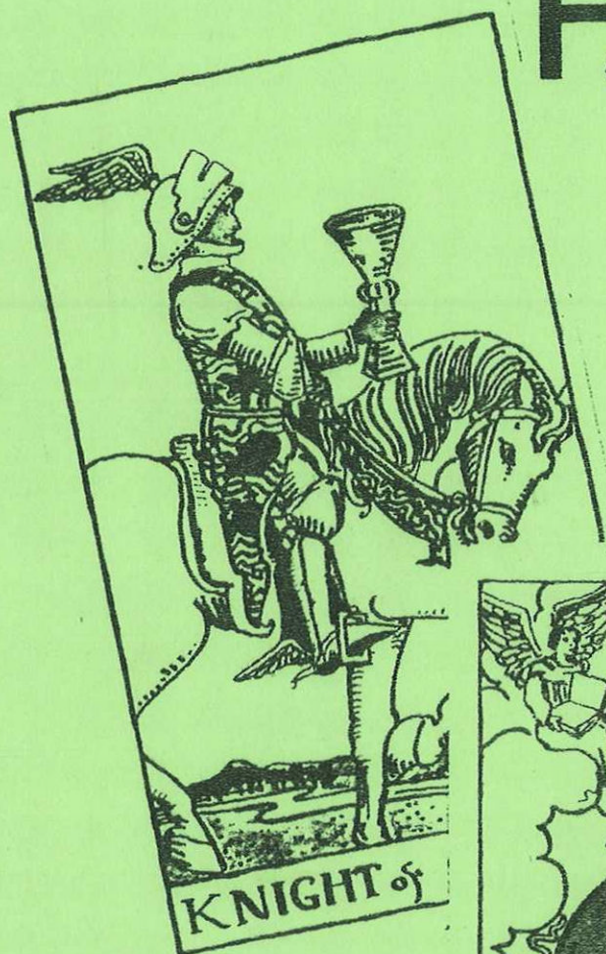


THE WHEEL OF FATE



by

Valerie Piacentini

a *STAR TREK*
fanzine

THE WHEEL OF FATE
by
Valerie Piacentini
with poetry by
Sheila Clark

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Sheila Clark
6 Craigmill Cottages
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Editor - Sheila Clark
Assistant Editor - Valerie Piacentini
Typing - Valerie Piacentini
Proofreading - Sheila Clark
Printing - Janet Quarton (& James T.)
Collating - Sheila's Chain Gang - Frances Abernethy, Lorraine Goodison, Cory King, Hilde McCabe, Allison Rooney.

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THE WHEEL TURNS

As the dying echoes of the crash faded at last a deep silence fell once more over the winter landscape. The stricken shuttlecraft lay half-buried in snow, its hull shattered by the jagged rocks of the hillside. In the pilot's chair Spock stirred and awoke, at once fully aware of what had happened. His first thought was for Captain Kirk, who lay slumped over the controls beside him. A swift check was reassuring; the Captain seemed uninjured, apart from a sluggishly bleeding cut on his forehead. He was still unconscious, and thinking it best to let him come round naturally, Spock turned his attention to the shuttlecraft. The radio was useless, a shattered wreck; the engines were gone too, but some of the navigation instruments were still functioning, so at least it would be possible to work out their position.

He and Kirk had been returning to the Enterprise when they had been caught up in a magnetic storm and swept off course; it had taken all their skill to bring the shuttlecraft down safely, but there had been no time to select a landing place.

The system the Enterprise had been surveying contained seven planets, one of them, Derran, being an Earth-parallel, its civilisation approximating that of 20th century Earth. Very soon now, its people would be contacted by the Federation, but until then the Prime Directive was in force.

The Derrans had begun to take the first steps towards space flight; as yet, they had not even reached the stage of placing a satellite in orbit, but that could not be many years away, and from then on their advance was likely to be swift. The Federation wanted to know as much as possible about the Derrans before contact was established, so this survey was of vital importance.

It had been considered too dangerous to risk a landing party; Kirk and Spock had conducted the survey by shuttlecraft, landing at various points on the planet's surface to gather as much information as they could. At these times secrecy was vital; Spock remained in the concealed shuttlecraft, monitoring radio and television broadcasts, and recording the information supplied by the sensors; also by Kirk, who made several brief visits to small towns and villages to survey them in more detail, and to take a closer look at the day-to-day lives of the people. He enjoyed these brief excursions, and would have liked to take Spock along to see his reaction, but apart from the sheer volume of work the Vulcan already had to deal with, the risk was too great; accidents could happen, and if anyone became suspicious of them Spock was so obviously an alien that they would be in trouble at once. There was no need, anyway - Kirk alone could easily gather the necessary information.

As soon as he had worked out their position, Spock realised that they must leave the wreck as quickly as possible - the crash might have been heard, and if so would be investigated. The self-destruct mechanism would take care of the ship, but the two men must not be found and questioned.

Spock was not concerned about their eventual rescue - that could safely be left in the hands of Scotty and McCoy - but he knew it would take some time. While he and Kirk had been gathering information on Derran, Scotty had taken the Enterprise on to survey the other six planets; as they had shown no sign of intelligent life, they were not considered to be of primary importance at the moment, but it gave the crew something to do.

It had been arranged that the shuttlecraft would rendezvous with the Enterprise when the survey was complete, but Kirk and Spock had collected all the necessary information in less time than had been estimated, so Scotty would not be expecting them for several weeks, and a search would not be made until they were overdue. They had not even been able to warn

the ship that they were returning early; Kirk had intended to send the message only when they had left Derran, in case their signal was picked up on the planet. Now, with their radio out of action, the only way to locate them was to scan for his Vulcan life readings; the need for secrecy was so great that Scotty would not risk attempting to contact them by communicator in case the call reached them at an awkward time and gave them away. Scotty had quite a problem.

As, indeed, did Kirk and Spock; somehow, they must find a way to stay alive and under cover until rescue came.

Meanwhile, the Captain was still unconscious - he should have come round by now. Concerned, Spock leaned over and shook him gently, then more firmly as there was no response. When he did at last come round Kirk seemed dazed, uncomprehending; he was able to follow Spock's lead, though, and the two men left the wreck and moved steadily downhill. They had been walking for ten minutes when an explosion behind them signalled the final destruction of the shuttlecraft.

The snow which was now falling heavily hindered their progress, but would serve to cover their tracks and obliterate all trace of the crash. An hour's steady walking brought them to a narrow road which they followed; the smoother going was easier for Spock, but Kirk stumbled along unsteadily and was at last forced to cling to the Vulcan for support. He was obviously suffering from exposure to the icy wind, and it was with considerable relief that Spock saw a house just ahead; the door was locked and the windows boarded, but it offered shelter at least. Spock tore down the shutters from a window and climbed inside, turning to help Kirk, who still moved in a daze.

The room was comfortably furnished, even down to a fire laid ready in the hearth; from the animal heads adorning the walls, and the rack of firearms beside the door, Spock thought that the house was probably a hunting lodge - he had seen such places during leaves he had spent on Earth with Kirk.

He lit the fire, drew a chair close to the flames for Kirk, then made a quick tour of the rest of the building. A generator supplied electricity, and he soon had it working; in the kitchen was an ample supply of tinned food, while upstairs he found blankets and - most welcome of all - a wardrobe full of clothes. He quickly made up two beds, then taking an armful of clothes went back downstairs.

Despite the fire, Kirk was shivering with cold; Spock helped him off with his wet uniform and dressed him in dry clothes. During all this Kirk stood listlessly, neither helping nor hindering - it was like dressing a rag doll. Spock surveyed him concernedly for a moment, then concluding that he was still shocked from the crash, settled him back in the chair, and went into the kitchen to make some coffee.

As the warmth revived him, he took stock of their position; they had shelter, food, and somewhere to sleep. That was enough for tonight - in the morning they could make plans. As he looked across at Kirk he saw that the Captain was already asleep, the empty mug slipping from his hands. A night's rest would restore them both, he thought; lifting Kirk gently he carried him upstairs and put him to bed. He was tired himself - the crash must have taken more out of him than he had realised. Thankfully, he stretched out on the bed, and was soon asleep.

In the morning their situation, which had seemed only inconvenient, proved to be desperate. Trying to awaken Kirk, Spock experienced the same difficulty he had had the day before. When the hazel eyes opened at last they were dull and lifeless, and met his own with an expression of utter bewilderment. Kirk seemed about to speak, but then covered his face with

his hands and shrank back against the pillow, trembling violently. Startled, Spock reached out to him and established the mind link. He held it for a long moment, then sat back with a faint sigh. It was worse than he could have supposed - Kirk was suffering from total amnesia, probably induced by the blow to the head he had received during the crash. To make matters worse, the injured mind had retreated deep within itself, leaving his mental state equivalent to that of a child; he was confused, terrified, totally incapable of understanding their situation.

Spock considered. Had McCoy been there he could have attempted to reach Kirk's buried memory, but he dared not risk it alone. There was no way of telling how much actual damage had been done to the brain, and to interfere without medical guidance might only make things worse. Yet he could not bear to leave Kirk in this state of fear and bewilderment.

Spock reached for the mind link again; carefully, he built up in the Captain's mind a state of calmness and tranquillity, then, working slowly, he asserted his own absolute authority. He hated to do it, but it was necessary - with all the difficulties that lay ahead of them, it was vital that he should be able to rely on Kirk's total and unquestioning obedience. His next step was to remove Kirk's bewilderment - he was still incapable of understanding what had happened, but he would accept and trust Spock.

When he was satisfied that Kirk's acceptance was complete, the Vulcan re-enforced the mind link more strongly than he had ever done before; if anything should part them, he would be aware of what was happening to Kirk, and be able to find him again.

His last act before he withdrew from the Captain's mind was to send him back to sleep - the injured brain was exhausted, and must rest. Spock himself had much to consider, and knew he would need all his powers of concentration to cope with the unexpected situation in which he now found himself.

Never, in all the years since Captain Kirk took over the Enterprise, had Spock felt so alone. Always, in the dangers they had shared, Kirk had been there, his warm Humanity blending with and tempering Spock's Vulcan rationality. Now, on this Human world, his support had been snatched away; in his place was a terrified child.

Spock looked down at the sleeping figure - impossible to go on thinking of him as 'Captain'. That name belonged to another life - suddenly and strangely their relationship had altered. Spock found it came naturally to think of 'Jim'. He spoke the name aloud, and it fell easily from his lips, a name he rarely used in normal circumstances. Now he was in command; on Spock alone rested the responsibility of providing for them both until the Enterprise could locate them.

And this he must somehow learn to do in a society he instinctively mistrusted. He knew from Earth history of the fear and suspicion with which Humans regarded the strange one, the outsider. His own alien appearance and thought patterns were dangerous enough; fear of insanity - and these people would regard Jim as insane - would make his task doubly difficult.

For a moment, as he faced the responsibility before him, even his high courage faltered. Then his customary cool logic reasserted itself. It must be done, therefore it would be done; Jim's safety depended on it, and he would not permit himself to fail. He began to plan.

They must leave this house soon. It had provided them with a temporary refuge, but at any moment its owners might return. This wild, mountainous area was too isolated, strangers would be noticed and perhaps investigated. It would be safer to make for a city, where they might hope to

mingle unnoticed with the crowds. He could only hope that he had learned enough about Derran customs from his research to pass without comment among the people. He had noticed a television set downstairs - the news broadcasts would be useful. They already had clothes, but would need money; a more thorough search of the house revealed a safe in the bedroom. The idea of theft was distressing to the Vulcan, until he remembered the necklace Kirk had brought back as a gift for his mother. His final trip had been to a small town which seemed to have escaped the rapid industrialisation of the rest of the planet. He had been greatly interested in the small shops where craftsmen still worked in the traditional manner. One of them had been a jeweller, and Kirk had not been able to resist the exquisite, delicate work; his mother would be enchanted, he was sure, and he had chosen a gift for her.

It had taken the last of the Derran currency they had brought from the Enterprise, but at the time that had not mattered; their stay was over, they had thought. They must have money to survive, and it was the only thing of value they possessed; Spock knew that Kirk would understand. Taking the money from the safe he replaced it with the necklace, and a note.

'Forgive me. We were caught in a storm, our equipment lost, and sought shelter here. We have taken clothes, food and money to enable us to travel on. I leave this in payment.'

His next step was to dispose of their uniforms and equipment. He would have liked to retain their communicators to signal the Enterprise, but he could not know when she would reach Derran. If he used them to set up a distress beacon the signal would be picked up by the planet's radio stations, the equipment traced, and recognised as being of alien origin. The risk was too great. Spock made a bundle of their equipment and took it outside, burying it as deeply as he could. Returning to the house, he filled two rucksacks with a change of clothes for himself and Jim, adding some food from the kitchen.

It was by now late afternoon; he prepared a meal and went to waken Jim, seeing with satisfaction that the mind link was working as he had hoped - Jim accepted his presence unquestioningly.

When they had eaten they watched the local news broadcast. There was no mention of the shuttlecraft, so it seemed that at least there would be no search for them. Spock left the set on to keep Jim occupied while he studied maps and timetables of the area. There was a fairly large city about three hundred miles away, and they could catch a bus nearby to take them there in the morning; perhaps there they could find somewhere to stay out of sight.

His decision made, he sat back and looked across at Jim, who was engrossed in a programme he was watching. As though he felt Spock's eyes on him, he turned and smiled at the Vulcan. The childlike innocence and candour of that smile touched Spock with a warning. Jim was so very vulnerable.

That transparent trusting dependence demanded from Spock the most difficult response he had ever had to make. All his life he had striven, at what cost only he knew, to live as a Vulcan, to conceal the Human emotions and responses buried deep within himself. Only to Jim Kirk, and then only fleetingly, had he ever shown that Human side; now, to comfort and reassure his friend, he must allow those emotions to surface.

He returned Kirk's smile, and McCoy, had he been there, would scarcely have recognised Spock at that moment. The warmth and affection that lit the dark eyes were the perfect complement to the gentleness in his voice as he said,

"You should sleep now, Jim. We have far to go tomorrow."

"All right. Goodnight, Spock."

"Goodnight, Jim."

Dawn found them already preparing to leave. The rucksacks stood at the door, together with warm outer clothing for each of them. In the kitchen Jim and Spock were finishing a hasty meal. The skies had cleared, and although it was bitterly cold, the wind had died.

Spock's last act before leaving was to pull on the knitted hat he had taken. One mobile eyebrow lifted in resignation as he settled it over his treacherous ears; he would have to wear it continuously from now on, and he knew from experience how uncomfortable it would become. Once before he had been under the same restriction; he remembered those days when he and Jim had together searched for the demented McCoy, and had striven to preserve the universe they knew. They had succeeded then, but they had been together; this time success or failure rested with him alone. Firmly he pushed the memory away. One last check to make sure they had left no betraying evidence, then they left the house and set out through the crisp, clear morning.

The bus, when it came, was half empty; their fellow passengers displayed no interest in them, and Spock began to feel more confident. However, Jim seemed very subdued during the journey. When they stopped for a meal break he remained close to Spock's side, unwilling to allow the Vulcan out of his sight even for a moment, but as the hours passed weariness took over, and he slept. For a moment Spock hesitated, then slipped an arm around him, settling Jim's head as comfortably as possible on his shoulder. He knew already that to touch Jim did not disturb him as physical contact with Humans usually did.

The nearer the bus drew to the city, the more uneasy Spock became. The Derrans had yet to learn the vital lessons of conservation, and this dark, ugly place was depressing indeed for someone used to the gracious cities of the Federation planets. However, the bustling, unheeding crowds did hold out the promise of anonymity.

When they left the bus Spock made enquiries about somewhere to stay; the driver was brusque but helpful, and directed them to a rather run-down boarding house. The landlady was totally uninterested in her prospective tenants apart from their ability to pay; the room was clean, and they had cooking facilities, which would prevent any comment on Spock's diet.

When they had unpacked their few possessions Spock prepared a meal from the food they had brought with them. As they ate he glanced anxiously at Jim; he had already complained of a headache, now he seemed feverish, and the hazel eyes were too bright. If he was no better in the morning, Spock decided to call a doctor; it might also be as well to see if anything could be done to help his amnesia - perhaps the medical science of this world was advanced enough to deal with it. In any case, it would be best to seek help before their money ran out. In this world, Spock had learned, even medical attention must be paid for.

The fever, born of exposure and the injured brain, took rapid control of Kirk's body. The entity that had been James Kirk, confused and terrified, seemed to crouch helplessly in a circle of flames that came ever closer, too panic-stricken even to move. Faces and voices seemed to swirl around him - his lost memory could not tell him they were figures from his past - he only knew that he was afraid... so afraid, as they appeared, in his delirium, to threaten his precarious safety. There was no pride left, no dignity; he whimpered like a trapped animal - in truth, at that moment, that was all he had become.

From... somewhere... a voice, calm, sure, familiar.

//I am here. Hold on to me.//

//Help me... please, help me.//

//You are safe now. Trust me, and come to me.//

It seemed that strong, gentle hands held him, drawing him away from the pain and fear. Kirk woke at last, and looked up into anxious dark eyes that searched his concernedly. He drew a shuddering sigh of relief. Spock! He was safe now. As reaction set in he buried his head on the Vulcan's shoulder and wept, as a child will on awakening from a nightmare. Spock held him, soothing and comforting, until the storm passed; then laid him back against the pillows, gently brushing the damp hair from his eyes.

"Rest now, Jim. You have been very ill."

"I feel so weak."

"It has been five days; the fever was strong, but it has broken now."

Spock stood up. It had been the longest five days of his life, during which he had scarcely left Jim's side; the frantic worry, and his own utter helplessness, had taken much out of him.

A knock at the door took him across the room to admit an elderly man, who moved quickly over to the bed.

"Jim, this is Dr. Rankine; he has been looking after you."

"Well, young man, so you've wakened up, have you? How do you feel?"

"Very tired; and my head hurts." As he spoke Jim broke into a spasm of coughing.

"Hmm, I don't like the sound of that. Let's have a look at you."

The doctor's methods seemed very primitive to Spock, who was used to McCoy's deft efficiency, but he knew the man was doing his best.

"Well, he seems to be on the mend, all right, but there's still some way to go. It's a pity we're in the worst of the winter - his resistance to infection is very low. I'll send round something for that cough - apart from that, keep him warm and well-fed, he needs building up." He turned to Jim. "Get plenty of sleep, young man, and you should be all right. A word with you, Mr. Spock."

The two men moved over to the door, and continued their conversation in lowered tones.

"There is no improvement in his memory, Doctor."

"Pity... Still, it was rather a lot to hope for. Well, the head wound seems to have healed, but you can expect the headaches to continue - you have the tablets for that. I'd rather not subject him to any further tests for the moment, but when he's a bit stronger bring him round to my office and I'll see what I can do. I'll look in again in a couple of days, but if you need me, you know where to reach me."

"Thank you, Doctor. Your fee." Some notes changed hands, and with a courteous nod, the doctor left.

Spock closed the door and returned to stand looking down at Jim, who had fallen asleep again. The effects of the fever had obviously been severe; Jim's face was drawn and haggard. Even now he frowned in his sleep, and moved restlessly on the pillows. Spock touched him lightly on the forehead, and he quietened at once, sleeping peacefully. The Vulcan drew up a chair, and keeping his watchful gaze on the sleeping figure, sat down to consider his next move.

Their financial position had become very worrying; the doctor's fees, and the medicines he had prescribed, had been very expensive - there was frighteningly little money left. Jim must be sheltered, fed, kept warm - he had no way of knowing for how long. Somehow, he must find work, earn enough to provide these necessities. Yet how to do so, and at the same time care for Jim? Even if he managed to work at night, Jim could not be left alone for hours at a time. Could he perhaps find someone to stay with him?

When the doctor called again, Spock explained his problem; he had nowhere else to turn, and the man seemed willing to help. Rankine considered for a moment.

"The job's not any problem; one of my neighbours is the foreman at a factory near here. It's hard work, but the pay's good, and you can work at night. You'll be reasonably close at hand if you're needed. I'll give you a letter for him if you like - I think he'll accept my recommendation."

"Thank you, Doctor; but I am still uneasy about leaving Jim - I certainly cannot afford a nurse to stay with him."

"I've got an idea about that, too. I've a patient in the next building; she's been through a pretty rough time lately - drugs, you know, but she's off it now, and trying to make a fresh start. I think she'll be glad of the chance to earn a little money sitting with your friend. I'll explain the situation to her, and send her to see you; once you've talked to her, if you think she'll suit, you can make your own arrangements."

"I would be most grateful."

"It's nothing, I'm glad to help; I'll give her the letter for the factory to bring when she comes."

The girl who knocked at the door later that evening might once have been pretty - it was hard to tell; the drugs she had been taking had left their mark. She smiled nervously at Spock.

"I'm Laura. Dr. Rankine sent me - he told me to give you this."

"Come in." Spock took the letter. "Please sit down, Miss...?"

"Call me Laura. Everyone does."

"The Doctor explained Jim's condition to you?"

"Yes; he's... um... mentally ill."

"Not really. He has lost his memory, and as the result of a shock, he is... somewhat childish, that is all. He is not mad."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean..." Her voice trailed off. "Please, give me a chance - I need the money, and I'm sure it'll work out all right once we get used to each other."

Spock studied the girl's face carefully. He was not sure, but the doctor had thought she was suitable. In any case, he intended to maintain his link with Jim at all times, so if anything did go wrong he would know at once, and be able to return.

"Very well, Laura, I am prepared to give you a trial. Will you wait outside for a moment while I explain to Jim?"

Closing the door behind her he crossed to the bed and touched Kirk's shoulder. "Jim, wake up."

Kirk opened his eyes and smiled sleepily. "Hello, Spock. I feel much better now."

"I'm glad. Jim, listen to me. I'm going to have to leave you for

a time."

The hazel eyes widened in panic. Jim caught at Spock's hand frantically. "No! Don't leave me! I'm so afraid when you're not here."

Spock sat down on the bed. "You must try to understand. We need money urgently - I have to find work. There is a girl outside I want you to meet - she will keep you company while I am away. Do not be afraid, I will still be with you. You can feel my mind in yours - it will be so even while we are apart. If you need me, I will know it, and come at once."

"You promise?" The troubled child was begging for reassurance.

"I promise. Trust me."

"I do. It's just that you are the only thing that seems real to me. Why can't I remember?"

"You will, in time. Have patience. I will call Laura now."

He rose, and called the girl in. She came up to the bed and held out her hand to Jim, who smiled shyly.

"Hello, I'm Laura. I hope we are going to be friends."

"I'll try not to be any trouble."

Spock showed Laura where to find everything she might need, then taking a last look at Jim he left for his interview at the factory. As he went out he carried with him the memory of Jim's eyes fixed imploringly on his even as he tried to smile a farewell; and set himself to transmit an aura of tranquillity to his friend.

The arrangement worked satisfactorily for several weeks. The factory was ~~tiring~~, and the work heavy, but Spock's Vulcan strength was able to cope. Jim seemed to have accepted Laura, and although he still watched eagerly for Spock's return, he was no longer so upset at being left. His health, though, was slower to recover; the cough lingered, exhausting him, despite all the doctor could do, and from time to time he experienced torturing headaches, which only Spock's intervention through the mind link seemed able to soothe.

The Vulcan himself was suffering, though he managed to conceal it from Jim. By the time the time the rent was paid, money set aside for the medical bills, and Laura's payment allowed for, there was not much money left for food. Obeying the doctor's instructions that Jim must be well fed and kept warm, most of Spock's share went to him. In normal circumstances he could have managed indefinitely on what he allowed himself, but the physical strain was aggravated by a mental one. Compelled as he was to maintain at all times the link with Jim, Spock's mind was continually open to the emotions radiated by the people around him.

The strain of shielding his mind from those thoughts, while at the same time remaining alert to Jim, began to tell on him; there were times when even his tight control slipped, and he found himself invaded by emotions and thoughts he could never have imagined. At those times he felt unclean, degraded. It was strange; the minds of other Humans he had known - McCoy, Scotty, Kirk himself - often bewildered but never disgusted him. It was an unspeakable relief to return to that room he shared with Jim, where his friend's mind, crippled though it was, by its transparent honesty was able to dispel the clouds of depression that were beginning to haunt the Vulcan.

Nowhere in this world had he found men to equal those he knew. The doctor, though medically he did his best for Jim, did not possess the shining dedication that so characterised McCoy; Spock was under no illusions - if the time came when he could no longer pay, Jim's treatment would stop.

As for Laura - Spock was still unsure of Laura. He had no cause for complaint; she carried out her side of the bargain, sitting with Jim, keeping him company during the long hours of Spock's absence. Yet there was something in her face he could not trust, a way she had of looking at Jim when she thought herself unobserved, as if she could not quite meet his eyes. Spock knew already that although Jim had accepted the need for his absence he was still uneasy at being left, but their safety depended on the money he brought in, so despite his concern he was forced to rely on her.

Then one night as he went about his duties at the factory, Spock was brought to a sudden halt as a scream of pure animal terror from Jim's mind tore through his. There had been no warning, but the intensity of the emotion hurled him into action, and sent him running back through the silent streets.

That evening Jim had suffered one of his headaches; his pain had been much greater than usual, and when he quietened at last, Spock had been reluctant to leave him. In the end Laura had persuaded him to go, promising to send for him if he was needed.

What could have happened? The memory of Jim's imploring eyes haunted him. Influenced by the mind link, Jim's behaviour was so rational most of the time that it was easy to forget just how difficult it was for him to come to terms with the unexpected; things which in his normal state he could take in his stride would confuse and terrify the vulnerable child he now was. As he ran Spock attempted to reach Jim's mind to calm and reassure him, but his terror was too great to be eased in this way.

The noise coming from their room was audible at the foot of the stairs, the blare of music mingled with almost hysterical laughter. Spock's entrance went unnoticed, but when he switched off the radio all eyes turned to him. The group around the bed fell back, and as he realised what had been happening he felt a terrible, primitive anger.

The room was a shambles, broken glass and empty bottles littering the floor. Around the bed a group of young people was watching, laughing as Jim struggled frantically to escape the two men who held him; one sleeve had been pushed up, and a girl held his arm steady while Laura bent over him, a primitive hypodermic syringe in her hand.

Spock lunged forward in a desperate attempt to deflect her aim, but this time he was too late; before his horrified gaze she pressed the plunger and the clear, deadly liquid was injected into Jim's arm.

With a roar of fury that his savage ancestors would have recognised, Spock caught Laura by the back of the neck and threw her across the room. In almost the same moment he dealt similarly with the two men who held Jim; as he stood over their cowering figures he was the living incarnation of the terrible, destructive strength of ancient Vulcan. He fought down the instinctive, primitive urge to move in, to kill, and clung desperately to the remnants of his control.

"Get out!" he spat. "Get out - and take these... animals with you! If you ever try to come near Jim again, I swear I'll kill you!"

One look at his face convinced Laura of her danger. Turning to her friends she said,

"Come on, you lot - I know when we're not wanted. These two aren't much fun anyway."

As the others began to clatter down the stairs she turned at the door to deliver her parting shot. "If you want the truth, I'm glad to be through! Cripples make me sick, and he's the worst kind - an idiot! Don't think I enjoyed being cooped up every night with a madman. It made my skin

crawl to be near him - a grown man with the mind of a child! People like him shouldn't be allowed to live. Well, have fun - in a few hours he'll be screaming. Pity I won't be here to enjoy it."

She turned and ran down the stairs as Spock moved towards her. He paused in the doorway, fighting for composure, knowing he could not help Jim until his savage anger had cooled. He must get the doctor - he did not know what had been in the syringe, or how Jim would react to it. Hurriedly he went to the phone on the landing and called Rankine's number; the doctor was out, but the receptionist promised to contact him as soon as possible.

Spock returned to their room, where a low, desolate sobbing took him back to the bed. At his approach Jim reached for him blindly - there was only one response the Vulcan could make. As though comforting a child he held the Human awkwardly in his arms, whispering quietly, calmly, as Jim's tears came. If only the doctor would come!

At last Jim seemed to fall asleep, but he awakened after about half an hour; the drug, whatever it was, was beginning to take effect. Jim was in a highly euphoric state, laughing and talking nonsense; he was very restless, and it took all Spock's considerable strength to hold him still. Jim's ravings were a confused jumble of events from his past, but it was plain that there was no coherent thought - as the rambling, babbling words poured out Spock could only hold him, trying to speak calmly, to quieten him and persuade him to rest.

After about three hours his voice began to slow; the insane giggling stopped at last, and he lay still. Spock laid him down and stood to stretch his cramped limbs, aching from the hours he had been sitting in the same position. He was almost frantic with worry, not knowing what to expect; Laura had said that Jim would be screaming in a few hours - he had never felt so helpless.

Jim began to move restlessly, his face twisting in pain, then he began to shiver violently. Spock laid a hand on his forehead - despite the shivering his skin was hot to the touch. Even as he watched, Jim's whole body stiffened in a spasm of pure agony, and a scream of pain broke from his lips. The Vulcan took hold of him, reaching for the mind link, but this time it was no use - Jim's pain was too great. Spock could only sit there helplessly, holding his friend while the agonies of cramp racked his body. He pressed Jim's head to his shoulder, trying to muffle the terrible screaming that went on and on until his voice broke at last from sheer exhaustion, and subsided to a low, agonised moaning that the Vulcan knew he would never forget.

He was vaguely aware that at one point the landlady came in to investigate the disturbance; he supposed that he must have explained somehow, for he remembered her saying that she would call Rankine again. Soon after she left Jim was violently sick; Spock held his head, hoping that in this way his body was getting rid of the drug, but the spasms of cramp seemed to be increasing both in frequency and intensity. The nausea returned several times, and Spock brought warm water to clean Jim up, gently bathing the pale face now so twisted with pain as to be almost unrecognisable. He could tell that Jim was rapidly weakening; his reserves of strength were very low, and the agony he was suffering was tearing him apart.

Spock lost all track of time as he sat there, doing the little he could. Then, at last, a knock on the door; he admitted the doctor, who stood staring with horrified eyes at the figure writhing in mindless agony.

"What happened?" he asked, his hands already busy.

"I do not know exactly. I returned from work just as Laura injected

him with a drug - I do not know what she gave him. He seemed very elated at first, then after a few hours he began to suffer as you see him now. Please, Doctor - help him!"

"Possibly something like heroin. Trouble is, addicts often mix it with other things. Still, this should help him."

Spock made an instinctive movement of protest as he saw the syringe in the doctor's hand, but then he stood back; he had no choice but to rely on his judgement. Very gradually, as the injection took effect, the twisting, agonised body grew still, the animal-like moaning died away, and Jim lay deathly still. Rankine checked his pulse, and straightened with a sigh.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to get here - a difficult confinement - I must get back soon. There's nothing more I can do here for the moment."

"But Jim - will he be all right?"

Rankine shook his head worriedly. "It's too early to tell - the drug may have caused further brain damage. If he can speak coherently when he comes round, he should be all right - we'll just have to wait and see. Now, about Laura - I should notify the police."

Spock thought rapidly. Laura should be punished, but there would be questions, an investigation... he dared not risk it.

"Must Jim be involved? If he's... all right, it would worry and confuse him. He's been through so much already - can't we spare him this?"

"Well, yes. She must have been using drugs herself to do this, and that's a breach of her parole. I can have her picked up and charged with that - you needn't appear. Well, I must be going - I'll come back as soon as I can."

Spock closed the door behind Rankine, and returned to sit by the bed. With faint surprise he saw that it was growing dark - nearly twenty-four hours had passed since he had returned to that horrific scene. He leaned over Jim, his hand trembling slightly as he brushed the hair back from the damp forehead - if he should lose Jim now...

The waiting seemed endless, but at last Jim stirred. The heavy eyes opened and surveyed him sleepily.

"How do you feel, Jim?" The Vulcan's voice was very gentle.

"Spock!" Jim reached for his hands, gripping tightly as though to convince himself that Spock was really there. "I'm all right now."

"Can you remember what happened?"

"Yes... I think so... It was Laura... She was all right at first... then those friends of hers came. They gave her something... I don't know what... and she began acting strangely. I was afraid... but they didn't bother with me at first... and I didn't want to call you for nothing... She... she told them about me... and they laughed at me. One of them said, 'Give him a shot - let's see what he's like when he's turned on.' Then I got really scared... I called for you."

"I heard you," Spock said quietly. "You should have called me at once."

"Yes... Well, anyway, two of them grabbed me... the others were all laughing... and Laura brought out this needle... She made quite an act of it... I think she was trying to scare me. I... I don't remember any more."

Spock, am I mad? They said so - they thought it was... funny."

Spock's hand reached for Kirk's face. "No, you are not mad. Trust me, believe in me - I would not lie to you. They cannot understand - you must. You had an accident; your brain was damaged, and you cannot remember your past, that is all. We have friends - good friends - who are even now

searching for us. When they find us, you will be healed, I promise you. Never doubt your sanity, Jim."

"I'll try. I can believe it when you're with me, but when you go away I get so scared and lonely. Don't leave me again, Spock."

"I will not, I swear. Try to sleep now - you will feel better in the morning."

The power of the mind link asserted itself, and Jim drifted into a deep dreamless sleep. Spock settled him comfortably, and began to clear up the wreckage. He felt so desperately tired. The city was no longer a safe refuge - the last hours had taken much of his remaining strength, and he wondered how much longer he could maintain control in this environment. As soon as Jim was well enough to travel they would leave the city and seek a quieter hiding place. Betrayed by his exhaustion, his last conscious thought as he fell asleep was an almost wistful appeal.

//Bones, Scotty - hurry. Please, hurry.//

Two weeks later Spock was sitting in Rankine's office facing the doctor across a desk. As soon as Jim was sufficiently recovered from Laura's attack, he had taken him for the tests that would decide if there was to be any immediate help for him; today they had returned for the results. Jim sat across the room, pale and withdrawn. He had suffered badly as the drug worked its way out of his body, but to Spock's relief the doctor had declared that the dose was not large enough to cause addiction. The agonies of cramp had returned, but gradually lessened day by day until at last they stopped. For several nights he had slept badly, waking in terror until Spock calmed him. At last the nightmares too had stopped, and although he was still weak, Spock judged him fit enough to travel when the time came.

"Physically, Mr. Kirk is in excellent condition," the doctor was saying. "He is much stronger, and the coughing has ceased. As for the headaches - well, that's another matter." He consulted a file that lay on the desk. "The X-rays show some damage to the brain - it's hard to tell exactly how severe it is. We do know there is a large blood clot, but its position is such that we would only make things worse if we operated - our surgical knowledge is not yet advanced enough to take such a risk. There is no chance that his memory can be restored, and the headaches will almost certainly continue. I'm sorry, Mr. Spock - perhaps in a few years..."

Across the room Jim, who was turning the pages of a magazine, lifted his head and gazed at Spock, smiling faintly. He did not really understand what the two men were talking about; he was bored - he wanted to go... home? No, not home, that wasn't the right word. For a moment an image came into his mind, the image of a large, circular room. There were lights, people, voices. He seemed to be sitting in the centre of... No, it was gone again. It didn't matter. All that mattered was the smile of the dark-eyed man across the room. He turned back to his magazine.

"... so you see, we must decide on the arrangements."

"Arrangements?" Spock turned his attention back to the doctor, aware that he had missed part of the conversation.

"Yes, it's the law, I'm afraid. I am obliged to certify that Mr. Kirk cannot be regarded as a responsible adult. Unless you can satisfy me that he can be properly secured and tended, both for his own sake and for public safety I must commit him to a hospital for the insane. From my knowledge of your financial position, I assume you cannot satisfy the legal requirements for his confinement, so we must decide how best to arrange his future."

"I see." Spock thought rapidly. He must play for time; his first instinct, to take Jim and leave, would be most unwise - to openly defy the law would ruin whatever chance of escape they had. "What do you suggest, Doctor?"

"I run a small private Nursing Home - nothing too fancy, you understand, but I should think my fees would be within your reach, and I flatter myself it's better than the public hospitals. Perhaps you would like to see over it? If you are agreeable, I could admit Mr. Kirk as my patient - he knows me, and it would not be such a shock for him."

"When..." To his shame Spock's voice was not quite steady. "When would you want to commit him?"

"Well, there are arrangements to make... but he's not violent, so there's no hurry... Shall we say, in a week?"

"A week? That seems satisfactory. Of course, you understand that I should like to see the place first."

"Of course. As it happens, I'm free for the next hour. We could go now, if you like, and get things settled."

As the two men stood up Kirk moved to Spock's side; he was puzzled by his friend's suddenly rigid expression, and touched his arm anxiously. The cold eyes softened at once, and Spock's voice was calm as he said,

"It's all right, Jim - we are going with Dr. Rankine on a visit."

Jim remained uneasily in the car while Spock toured the nursing home with the doctor. Later the Vulcan was never sure how he had controlled his revulsion and horror and the primitive conditions he witnessed. Logically, he knew that the man was doing his best in the light of the limited medical knowledge of his time; but his emotions, brought very close to the surface by his close contact with Jim, could scarcely cope with what he saw.

The locked cells, the padded rooms, the patients confined in heavy straight-jackets or drugged into mindless automatons, seemed to the sensitive Vulcan to be more the results of deliberate cruelty rather than care. Cautiously he probed the minds of the attendants; at best they were indifferent, at worst brutal to the helpless 'patients' in their charge. Jim could not be allowed to enter such a place even for an instant - the damage even a short stay would do to his already injured mind might be irreparable even if - when - they returned to the Enterprise.

Spock managed to conceal his revulsion from Rankine, and completed the formalities, arranging that Jim would be admitted in a week's time. In seven days he intended to be far away.

That night, after clearing away their meal, he called to Kirk, who sat in the window watching the people passing in the street.

"Jim, come here. I want to talk to you."

Kirk came over and knelt at Spock's feet, resting his arms on the Vulcan's knees and looking up anxiously into his face.

"What is it, Spock? Have I done something wrong?"

"Of course not. Jim, we must leave the city. Because of your illness, the doctor has the power to take you away."

As panic dawned in Jim's eyes Spock touched his hair lightly.

"Don't be afraid, I won't let them take you - you will be quite safe. I'll see to everything, but you must sleep well tonight - we will leave early in the morning."

Jim nodded, and got ready for bed. As Spock leaned over him to send him to sleep, he touched the Vulcan's face gently.

"I'm sorry. I have been... a great trouble to you."

"No, you have not. When you regain your memory you will understand why I value your friendship so highly. Sleep now."

While he packed their few belongings Spock was already considering their next move. They would certainly have to leave the city; apart from the fact that the authorities would be looking for them when Jim did not report to the asylum, the sheer pressure of the mental images Spock was receiving from the people around him was beginning to weaken his control of the mind link. That must be preserved at all costs, for it was the one thing that held Jim to any sense of reality; if it was broken, he would be totally helpless.

It would be safer to keep on the move at first - they could buy some camping equipment and avoid encountering people as long as possible. When their money ran out, he could perhaps find a day's work along the way; luckily the harshness of winter had given way to spring - if they headed for farming country, there was a good chance that he could find work when it was needed.

Spock even prepared a story in case they should be questioned. He would admit Jim's mental condition, which was all too obvious anyway, and explain that he was taking him to his family in a distant city for treatment. The story would not stand up to official investigation, but it should satisfy casual inquiry.

For a moment he considered attempting to recover the communicators, and risking everything on trying to contact the Enterprise, but he dismissed the idea almost at once; there was no guarantee the Enterprise would pick up the signal, and it was almost certain that the transmission would be detected by the planet's radio stations.

His preparations complete, he went to take a last look at Kirk before turning in for the night. The Human lay relaxed, sleeping peacefully. His utter trust in Spock had penetrated the Vulcan's strongest defences almost without his being aware of it. As he looked down at the sleeping figure he could at last admit that he needed Jim's friendship, an admission that did not disturb him as it once would have done. Was he, at last, beginning to come to terms with his Human emotions? An interesting idea, he thought, as he slid into bed. He would consider it - later. Just now, he was too tired.

The following evening found Kirk and Spock making camp in a forest clearing some four hundred miles from the city. Spock had decided on a hover train as the fastest and most anonymous method of putting as much distance as possible between them and any possible pursuit. Leaving the station, they had begun to walk in no particular direction. It didn't much matter where they went - Spock knew enough of Scotty's fierce stubbornness to be sure that he would survey Derran inch by inch before giving up hope of finding them.

As evening drew on they left the road to find a campsite, choosing at last this clearing where a stream provided water, and the trees gave added shelter. At least Kirk had not forgotten how to pitch camp, and set about the task with enthusiasm. The danger of their situation was not very real to him - all he knew or cared about was that Spock seemed more relaxed away from the city, and as long as the Vulcan was at ease, the Human had no fears.

While Spock laid a fire, Jim had been down by the stream; now he returned triumphantly carrying the two fish he had caught. Spock concealed

his distaste and helped Jim prepare their meal, taking his own share from their supplies.

When they had finished eating they sat by the fire, talking idly in the darkness. Spock was telling Jim a story from his own childhood, one he remembered his mother telling him when he was very small; Jim listened intently, his eyes shining in the firelight.

"... so that was how a sehlat first became the pet of a Vulcan child."

"But why did...?"

"No more questions; it's getting late and it has been a long day."

"If I go to sleep now, will you tell me another story tomorrow?" A child's bargain, proposed with a child's cunning. As adults have done since the beginning of things, Spock capitulated.

"If you wish. Goodnight, Jim."

"Goodnight, Spock."

Gradually the succeeding days blended into a tranquil pattern. They would break camp in the morning, travel through the day, and rest at night. Occasionally they met other travellers, but were never stopped or questioned. Twice they turned aside from their path to avoid passing through towns, but from time to time they stopped in small villages to replenish their supplies. No-one took any notice of them - it was the season when migrant workers travelled the roads, and nothing made Kirk and Spock stand out from the others.

Sometimes, if the fancy took them, they rested for several days in one place, but always moved on. Very occasionally Kirk experienced dreams which Spock knew were confused memories of his past, but he had no way of relating them to his conscious mind, and they only confused and frightened him. At these times he turned naturally to the Vulcan for comfort and reassurance; it was natural to him to do so, for he remembered no other existence, but it was painful for Spock, who recalled all too clearly the sharp, decisive mind he had once known. He neither encouraged nor hindered the dreams, knowing that some degree of natural healing was taking place in the injured brain; but he was always there, when the fear and bewilderment became too great, to create an atmosphere of calmness and tranquillity in which his friend could relax.

Jim had an almost insatiable appetite for the stories Spock told, wonderful tales from both Earth and Vulcan which he had learned in his own childhood, and their evenings were passed in the retelling of those tales. Spock found it curiously... peaceful as they sat there in the firelight, Jim's head resting against his knee; differences of rank, of race, even of intelligence now, no longer seemed to matter as for a few hours those enchanted worlds claimed them both, the logical Vulcan no less than the child-like Human.

Then suddenly their fortunes changed again, this time it seemed at first, for the worse. For several days they had been passing through rich farmland. Their supplies were getting low, and Spock decided to seek work at the next farm they came to. It was evening, and storm clouds on the horizon promised a wild night. Perhaps due to the close sultry weather, Jim had been suffering from a headache all day, and was plainly exhausted; he could not go much further, and they had passed no suitable campsite.

There was a farmhouse just ahead, and considering the weather, Spock decided to ask for shelter for the night, but before they could reach the house the storm broke with blinding fury. In seconds both men were soaked to the skin.

The house was locked and empty, but there was a barn close by, which offered shelter from the storm. Kirk was beginning to shiver, and the blinding pain of his headache made him almost delirious; Spock helped him off with his wet clothes, wrapped him warmly in their sleeping bags, and bent his attention to the easing of his pain. When Kirk relaxed at last, Spock looked through their supplies; there was little food left, and they could both do with a hot drink. Explaining his intention to Jim, Spock hurried over to the house. The front was secure, but he managed to pick the lock on the back door, and stepped into the farm kitchen.

There was plenty of food, but he took only some bread and meat for Jim, some fruit for himself, and heated some soup. This he carried over to the barn, returning only for an oil stove he had seen which would give them some warmth, and a little light.

Jim was reluctant to eat, but Spock fed him patiently, making sure he was satisfied before taking his own share. Then in the glow of warmth cast by the stove, they lay down to sleep.

Jim Kirk found it impossible to rest. The howling of the wind, the menacing rumble of the thunder, the glare of lightning, all combined to terrify him. He turned onto his side to look at Spock; the Vulcan was asleep, obviously exhausted. Jim wanted to waken him, to experience again his never-failing comfort, but somehow he could not; it would be selfish, he thought - Spock had done so much already. There was nothing to fear, he told himself firmly; it was only a storm, and would soon pass. It was no use, he could not control his terror. Silent tears trickled from his eyes as he lay biting his lip until the blood came in an effort to control his sobs. He thought he was succeeding, until a particularly vivid bolt of lightning seemed to strike just overhead, and he could not restrain a whimper of fear.

A hand touched his face, and found it wet with tears. The quiet voice came from the darkness.

"You should have wakened me, Jim."

Powerful arms encircled him; he was lifted and held against Spock's body. Gentle hands stroked his hair, tender as a woman's, but strong, protective. At last the tears ceased, and he lay back against Spock's arm, looking up into the veiled eyes.

"Can I stay here... with you, Spock?" he asked softly. "I'm not afraid any more, but please... let me stay."

"You may, but please try to sleep now; you will make yourself ill again if you do not get some rest."

"Yes, I'm... so tired. I can sleep now, I think."

His head relaxed on Spock's shoulder; slowly, the heavy eyelids closed, then opened again. Half-asleep, confused by his tiredness, Jim felt there was something he should do. One arm slid around Spock's neck and drew him closer. Conscious only of his affection for the man who held him, Jim kissed Spock on the cheek.

"Goodnight, Spock," he murmured, and was asleep.

Spock sat staring into the darkness. It had been the spontaneous, affectionate embrace of a tired child, nothing more; but his own reaction confused him utterly. Was this, then, what he had avoided for so long? Vulcans did not like to be touched, and evaded it whenever possible. Now he realised that a friend's touch could bring an unsuspected warmth and comfort; his loneliness, his sense of utter desolation vanished, dispelled by that confiding gesture. Perhaps, after all, there was something to be

said for the satisfaction Humans seemed to derive from physical contact. At last his formidable control reasserted itself. Leaning back against the wall of the barn, Jim's head on his shoulder, Spock finally fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.

He was roused in the morning by a car outside. Jim was still asleep; laying him down gently, Spock went to investigate. A man and a woman were just approaching the front door of the farmhouse. As Spock advanced, their expressions were curious, but not unfriendly. Spock eyed the couple apprehensively - so much depended on their reaction to his story. They were, perhaps, in their middle forties; the man had a pleasant, craggy face, lines of laughter showing around his eyes and mouth. The woman was a few years younger, her dark hair just beginning to turn grey. Her expression was openly friendly, and the warmth of her smile as he approached gave him hope - this woman would understand, he was sure. He turned to the man.

"Excuse me, are you the owner here?"

"I am. What can I do for you?"

"I ask your pardeon," said Spock, "but my friend and I were caught in the storm last night, and took shelter in your barn. Jim has been very ill, and we had no food, so I broke into your kitchen and took some. I have no money to pay you, but I am willing to work for what I took."

The farmer surveyed him from head to foot, then to Spock's astonishment he burst out laughing.

"Well, I've never heard that one before! There are often migrant workers on this road, and they're not above helping themselves to anything that's lying about, but this is the first time anyone's offered to work for it. What do you think, Margaret - shall we take him up on it?"

"I think the young man could do with a good breakfast," said the woman quietly. At the sound of her voice Spock knew he had been right - she would help them, and would ask no questions. Jim would be safe here.

"Go and get your friend," she went on. "I'll make some coffee, and you can talk when you've got a decent meal inside you."

"That's a good idea, Margaret - trust you to think of the most important things first! Oh, I'm John Landers, by the way. This is my wife, Margaret."

Spock inclined his head. "I am called Spock; my friend is Jim Kirk."

An hour later the four of them were sitting around the kitchen table drinking coffee. The Landers had found themselves curiously drawn to this strange, grave young man who was so unlike the casual labourers who usually came their way, and Jim's shy charm had captivated them already; so when Spock explained their financial difficulties, Landers had no hesitation about offering Spock a job for as long as he wanted it. Knowing that they would soon realise Jim's condition, Spock told his prepared story; the couple's reaction was one of compassion, rather than the revulsion he had half expected. With the worst hurdle out of the way, Spock allowed himself to relax a little; if all went well they had found a safe refuge until the Enterprise found them.

Later, Landers walked with them to the quarters where the farmhands slept, to see them settled, and to introduce them to his foreman. Petersen was a giant of a man, respected by the farmhands for his efficiency, feared for his great strength and savage temper. He eyed the Vulcan with some suspicion at first, but when he saw the thoroughness with which Spock

completed the tasks assigned to him, he grunted with satisfaction and became slightly more amiable.

With Jim, it was a different matter - everything he did seemed to annoy the foreman, and although he worked as well as he could, he had neither the mental speed nor the physical strength to complete his work to Petersen's satisfaction. It was a difficult situation - the more irritable Petersen was, the more nervous and clumsy Jim became. Spock watched anxiously, afraid to precipitate an open quarrel by interfering too much; he helped Jim as much as he could, and waited for the confrontation he knew must come.

One afternoon Spock was unloading some supplies that Landers had just brought in; the farmer had lingered to talk, and they were chatting idly when Spock suddenly went rigid.

"Jim!" he exclaimed sharply, and dropping the crate he was holding, ran to the workers' quarters. Puzzled, Landers followed him, and arrived on the scene a few moments later.

In an undertone, one of the men told him what had happened. Petersen, despairing of Jim at last, had assigned him to clearing up the room. He had been doing so when he had accidentally knocked down and broken Petersen's shaving mirror. He was just picking up the pieces when the foreman walked in and completely lost his temper.

"You cretin!" he shouted. "Can't you do even the simplest thing without making a mess of it?"

"I'm s-sorry," Jim stammered. "I d-didn't mean it - it was an... an accident..."

"Accident? You careless, stupid idiot!" Totally enraged, he struck out blindly, and sent Jim sprawling to the floor.

To be fair to Petersen, the blow was harder than he had intended; but Spock, who arrived on the scene at that point, was not interested in intentions, only in results. He saw Jim crouched trembling on the floor, blood on his mouth, bewilderment and terror in his eyes. The sight drove him wild with fury; without pausing for thought he hurled himself at Petersen.

The foreman was taller, and a good deal heavier, but he had never before come up against a really angry Vulcan. He stood no chance. The fight, if it could be called that, was over in minutes. Spock, at once forgetting all about his unconscious opponent, knelt beside Kirk.

"It's all right, Jim, it's all over. I'm here, he can't hurt you any more." Jim gripped the Vulcan's hand tightly, and tried to smile.

Landers hurried over. "Take him up to the house - Margaret will help you patch him up."

As they crossed the yard Jim stumbled; Landers put out a hand to steady him, but he shrank away, clinging to Spock. Seeing his fear, the farmer withdrew his hand.

"I'm sorry about that," he apologised, "and I'm sure Petersen will be. I don't think he meant it."

"Perhaps not," Spock answered coldly. "But Jim has been hurt. You can see how easy it is to frighten him - I can't risk something like this happening again. I'm sorry, but I think we must leave."

As they approached the house Margaret Landers came out; when she saw what had happened she hurried to fetch the first aid chest. It was Spock, however, who bathed the cut on Jim's mouth, while the couple stood talking quietly in the corner. When Spock was at last satisfied that Jim was not badly hurt, Landers came over to him.

"Mr. Spock, I'm very sorry this has happened - I'd like to make amends if I can. To be honest, you're too good a worker to lose, and my wife has taken quite a fancy to Jim. I can understand that you don't want to go back to the men's quarters - why don't you both move into our spare room? That way you can stay on here. Jim will be company for Margaret, and it'll keep him out of Petersen's way. As for you - well, somehow I don't think he'll be too keen to tangle with you again."

Spock looked at Jim questioningly. "What do you think?"

"Please, I'd like to stay. It's... nice here, if I don't have Petersen shouting at me all the time. I'm... so tired of running..."

The Vulcan touched his hand gently. "Very well. Since you wish it, we will stay."

"That's fine," said Margaret, smiling. "I'll go and make up the beds."

So life settled down to a peaceful routine at last. Spock carried on with his work as efficiently as ever; Jim, at ease with the kindly Margaret, quickly forgot his fright. Even the torturing headaches came less frequently now, as nothing was demanded of him. As the days slipped past the question of their leaving was somehow forgotten - even Petersen mumbled a shame-faced apology, and treated Spock with a wary respect. A strange people, thought the Vulcan, who was secretly ashamed of his loss of control, to place so much emphasis on physical strength.

Spock in fact was greatly troubled by his emotional state; his Human reactions had never been so close to the surface. Logically he supposed it was for the best; his normal impassivity would have seemed very strange to these people, and he knew that Jim desperately needed the affection he was able to show him.

No, it was another problem that troubled him; suppose he could not regain control when they returned to the Enterprise? He dreaded the thought of McCoy being able to read his feelings as Jim was now able to do. That did not disturb him as it might once have done - for a long time now he had been able to reveal to Jim Kirk things he would have hidden from anyone else.

He was sitting on the front porch one evening when Jim came out to join him. Taking his favourite position curled up at the Vulcan's feet, he looked up and smiled.

"What's wrong, Spock?"

Knowing how sensitive Jim had become to his every mood, and unwilling to distress him with ideas he could not understand, Spock forced a smile in response. "Nothing, really. I was just thinking - perhaps we will be going home soon."

"Where is home?"

Spock pointed to the glittering night sky. "Out there, Jim. Soon we will be back where we belong, among the stars."

Jim considered this for a moment. He did not understand - how could men live among the stars? But Spock said so, therefore it must be true. Anyway, it didn't really matter; whatever happened, Spock would take care of him. A sudden thought struck him, and he looked up anxiously.

"But we'll still be together, won't we? Just as we are now?"

"Not just as we are; but yes, we will be together."

At Jim's sigh of relief Spock smiled, but made no answer, for a sudden chill fear had come to him. Suppose he was wrong? What if Jim's mind was

damaged beyond McCoy's skill to repair? What was there then for either of them?

He pushed the thought away, and in response to Jim's request, "A story, Spock?", he began,

"There was once a boy named Selah..."

It was a great relief to Spock that Jim responded so quickly to Margaret's fondness for him; he would remain with her quite happily while Spock went about his duties, and she in turn watched over him and kept him from harm.

Warned by the disastrous experience with Laura, Spock had taken precautions before entrusting Jim to her charge. While she slept he had carefully probed her mind. He had to force himself to the action, and for many hours afterwards lay awake torn by guilt, for what he had just done was considered a crime on Vulcan; but the alternative, to risk further harm to Jim's precarious sanity, was not to be considered. He sought only to learn her real feelings for Jim, and having done so he withdrew at once, certain that she was really fond of him, and could be relied on.

One evening, after working late in the fields, he came into the kitchen to find Margaret and Jim bending over something on the table. Wondering what was causing such interest he moved over to see. Jim looked up, and smiled as he always did at Spock's approach.

"Look, Spock! Margaret is telling my fortune."

"So I see."

Spread out on the table were a number of brightly-coloured cards, each painted in a different strange design; he had never seen anything like them.

"And what does she predict?" He did not, of course, believe in such superstitions, but anything that interested Jim pleased him.

Margaret looked up and smiled in turn. "The cards are called the Tarot. They are very ancient, and the art of reading them has been handed down from mother to daughter for generations."

She sounded so sincere that Spock, intrigued in spite of himself, leaned forward for a closer look. Margaret touched the card in the centre of the layout.

"This represents Jim - it's called the Knight of Cups."

The card depicted a young knight in armour, wearing a winged helmet and bearing a chalice in one hand while with the other he guided his horse across a stream.

Margaret touched the next card. "The Wheel of Fate turns, and turns again. At its lowest point now, it will rise again. These cards here represent Jim's current situation - the Two of Wands, sadness and suffering; Nine Pentacles, he has lost home and friends; Ten Wands, he is in exile, bearing an almost intolerable burden. These cards predict the outcome for him - the Five and the Three of Cups, the return of an old friend will bring healing; Six Swords, a journey resumed."

Two cards still remained face down, one to the right of the Knight. The other, at the base of the layout, she turned up, and despite his rationality Spock caught his breath - Death, on a white horse, rode across the card.

Margaret saw his face. "No!" she said quickly. "It does not mean Death; in this context it signifies a transformation, a rebirth. I promise you, what you seek will be found."

Spock reached for the last card. "And this?"

"The Carriot." She shuffled the cards again, and spread them out face down. "Choose one, Spock."

Something in her voice compelled him to obey; without really considering, he touched one of the cards. Margaret turned it over.

"The Chariot again. That is you, Spock. You stand in the Tarot, as you stand in life, at Jim's right hand. You are the Rider in the Chariot, bearing the Rods of Will with which you control the two sphinxes who draw it - the two sides of your nature. But the tension of your will may weaken, the sphinxes pull in different directions, and tear you apart. You must always be on guard - do not let the balance tilt too far; if you do, you will be destroyed."

Her voice faded into silence. Spock stood, his eyes fixed on the strange cards. Only a game to amuse children - but how much they had revealed.

A tug at his hand brought him back to the present. Anxious at his long silence, Jim had reached out to him.

"What is it, Spock?"

"Nothing - it's all right."

Sensing the strain, Margaret swept the cards together. "That's enough of this foolishness! I've got plenty to do. Jim, there's a book over there I think you'll enjoy."

She hurried away, leaving Spock to his own thoughts until Jim, eager to show Spock the book, curled up at his feet and demanded his attention.

A few days later, despite all his care and thought, it was Spock who finally betrayed them. Perhaps it was the strain and worry he had been living with for so long; only a moment's carelessness, but it was enough.

He was cutting wood just outside the house when the saw slipped and cut his hand; it was not serious, but the tell-tale green blood trickled from the wound. Spock glanced round; Landers was some distance away, and could not have seen anything. Spock hurried into the kitchen, which was fortunately empty, got the first aid chest, and attended to the cut. As soon as the wound was covered he began to gather up the stained cotton wool, intending to throw it into the kitchen fire. At that moment John Landers called to him, and he stepped outside the door to reply, forgetting the incriminating evidence.

He was only gone a minute, but that was enough. Margaret returned to the kitchen, noticed the chest, and moved to clear it away. She stood for a moment, staring at the vivid emerald stains, puzzlement and a hint of fear in her eyes. Then suddenly understanding dawned, and the fear vanished.

"Vulcan!" she exclaimed.

She had spoken softly, but Spock had heard. Closing the door he faced her calmly, but his heart was racing.

"You said 'Vulcan'. Not alien - Vulcan. How do you know?"

She did not reply at once, but examined his face carefully. "Yes, I can see it now. The skin colour, the eyes... May I?" She indicated the hat.

Without answering he pulled it off, and her eyes followed the slant of his eyebrows, the shape of his ears.

"Please tell me - how did you know? And what do you mean to do?" His

voice was not quite steady. Had they survived for so long only to be trapped now, and by the one person he had really come to trust on this world? She saw in his eyes the fear he could no longer control, and all her compassion went out to him.

"It's all right," she said softly. "I mean you no harm - sit down, and let me explain."

He obeyed, clasping his hands on the table in an attempt to control their treacherous shaking. Margaret allowed him a few moments to regain his composure before she began her story.

"I was twelve years old when we came to Derran. My parents were part of a scientific expedition from Earth, bound for the Federation colony on Beta Lyra III. Something happened to the ship - an accident - I never quite understood. Anyway, my family and some of the others got away in a lifeboat, and we managed to reach Derran. My father always believed that the ship must have been destroyed before a distress call could be sent, because as far as we could tell, no search was ever made for us. We did the only thing we could, and made our lives here on Derran. Ten years later I married John - he doesn't know about me. I rarely think of that other life now, I am content; but when I realised what you were, it all came back to me for a moment. Please believe me, I will not betray you, and for a very special reason. You must know that I am... very fond of Jim?"

Spock nodded, waiting for her to go on.

"John and I had a family - they're all married now, with children of their own. My youngest son... died in childhood. He was... very like Jim to look at, with the same gentle nature. For Terry's sake, I could not do anything to hurt Jim."

"I believe you. But you should know who we really are. Jim is Captain James Kirk, of the U.S.S. Enterprise; I am Commander Spock, his First Officer. Our shuttlecraft crashed on Derran - Jim suffered severe head injuries, and total amnesia." He talked on, giving her a brief account of their need for secrecy. Margaret listened, aware of a great sympathy for both of them. In her childhood she had learned a little - a very little - about Vulcans, and was able to comprehend, if only dimly, how difficult things had been for Spock.

When the quiet voice fell silent at last she said slowly, "He must mean a great deal to you."

"He is my Captain... but yes, he is also my friend; perhaps the only one."

"He cares for you very deeply."

Spock coloured faintly. "Has he said so?"

"Yes; but it wasn't necessary. It's written in his every word and action - in the way he looks at you when you are with him, and watches for you when you are gone."

"Perhaps; but you must remember, he is very... dependent on me now. When we return to the Enterprise, when Dr. McCoy heals him, he will no longer have the same need of me."

"I wonder. Quick - your ears!"

Footsteps were approaching along the verandah. Spock pulled his hat on while Margaret hastily threw the stained cotton wool onto the fire. She was adjusting the dressing on his hand when Landers came in.

"There you are, John. Spock gave himself a nasty cut - I've just been dressing it."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, thank you; I'll go and finish that wood now."

He nodded gravely and went back to his task, but he could not forget the curious conversation he had just had. Margaret's words 'He cares for you' seemed to echo in his ears. He knew they were true, for the mind link had told him so; what he had not expected was the very real but totally un-Vulcan pleasure he had felt on hearing it put into words.

Resolutely he turned his mind from that thought to Margaret's own story. His carelessness had not been a disaster after all - he could be certain she would not betray them. He, above all others, could understand how difficult it must have been for her, learning to adapt to an alien world; but at least she did not carry her differences openly, for all to see, as he did. She seemed happy in her adopted world; he wondered if he would ever attain the same peace.

Margaret in her turn found her thoughts centering on the Vulcan in the next days. In the beginning most of her concern had been for Jim; his resemblance to her dead son, her pity for his crippled mind, had drawn her to him at once. Now that she knew the truth about Spock her compassion reached out to him too. She watched him with Jim, and marvelled at the tenderness and patience with which he met his responsibility. Vulcans were cold, unfeeling, she had always been told, and saw with wonder how his every thought, every action was directed to ensuring Jim's comfort and happiness. While he was there she had no need to worry about Jim, but she was concerned about Spock himself. She had read more in those ancient cards than she had told them, and believing implicitly in what they foretold, knew that Kirk would one day be healed. By the same token she knew that the Vulcan still had much to overcome before he could finally come to terms with his own dual nature. The fate of the Charioteer was never easy, and this quiet, gentle man still had much pain and bitterness to come.

Alone in her room she spread the cards again, hoping for some indication that life would one day deal kindly with the stranger she had come to love. She had not been mistaken - the sign was there. However the cards fell, the Chariot was always partnered by the Knight, and Margaret was content, believing that whatever life held for them, however far in time and space they travelled, their journey would be made together.

Perhaps it was the knowledge that there was one person from whom he need not hide the truth, but Spock found the strain on him slightly easier now. He was very near the limit of his resources, and the knowledge that should be break at last Jim would be cared for removed his most pressing fear. He still had to conceal his exhaustion from Jim, who despite his fondness for Margaret turned instinctively to the Vulcan for reassurance, approval and companionship. His treacherous Humanity found a strange pleasure in their relationship, for he could respond to this Jim Kirk as he could never allow himself to do to the Captain of the Enterprise. In these weeks it had been for once his Vulcan half that had been suppressed and controlled - he was not altogether sure that he liked the sensation, but he could not regret it.

One evening in late spring, Jim and Spock were relaxing in the garden. John Landers had left on business for a few days. Before he went he had told Spock to take some time off - Margaret had pointed out how tired he was looking, and John had agreed that he needed a rest.

As Margaret sat sewing on the front porch she became aware of a man, a stranger, approaching from the road. She watched him curiously; he seemed strangely tense, and glanced around as he walked as though searching for something. His smile, when he stopped beside her, was the most attractive

she had ever seen, but went oddly with the anxiety in his vivid blue eyes.

"Good evening. I wonder if you can help me?" His voice was soft, with a faint accent she could not quite place.

She smiled in return. "What can I do for you?"

"My name is McCoy - Dr. Leonard McCoy. I'm looking for two friends of mine who may be in this area. Their names are Kirk and Spock - have you seen them?"

She studied his face anxiously. Spock had mentioned a Dr. McCoy, but she could not be sure - it was always possible that the authorities, alerted by that doctor in the city, might be searching for Jim.

"Have you seen them? I'm afraid they may be in some kind of danger; I must find them."

Margaret looked again into the blue eyes, and believed him; his concern could only be genuine.

"They are here, and quite safe. Follow the path round to the back - they are in the garden."

He smiled his thanks, relief flooding like sunlight over the anxious face, and set off, almost running.

McCoy's heart was in his mouth as he rounded the house. They must be all right! He scarcely knew how they had all lived through the last few weeks. Those hours - days - on the Bridge, scanning, checking, searching; Scotty's grim-faced obstinacy, stubbornly refusing to give up the search. Uhura - he grinned at the memory of Uhura calmly sabotaging Communications when it seemed that Starfleet would order them away and hand the search over to a less valuable ship. Chekov and Sulu, red-eyed and exhausted, having to be ordered from their stations. His own quiet haunting of the Bridge, handing out stimulants and tranquillisers at an unheard-of rate, forcing the exhausted crew to rest before they collapsed. And the endless, endless failures, the sensors remaining obstinately blank.

Then finally, Chekov, almost in tears, turning from Spock's station, his face radiant with joy that told them before he spoke that he had found the missing men at last. Then the final frustrating wait until his clothes were ready; Kyle's maddening slowness as he checked and re-checked the coordinates, although in reality the Transporter Chief had broken all records setting up the equipment; beamdown, and wondering where to start the search; seeing the woman - what had he said to her? Only a few moments now, and he would see them at last...

McCoy came through the archway into the garden and paused. Later he could not have said what held him there, when his every instinct was to rush forward. Spock was there, sitting on a bench, his dark head bent over a book.

"Spock! Look what I've found!"

Jim's voice, yet somehow subtly different. The Vulcan raised his head as Jim came to him. He replied, but McCoy could not hear the words. The two carefully examined whatever it was Kirk held, then Jim looked up and grinned, a mischievous, teasing, affectionate grin.

McCoy waited, expecting one of Spock's more caustic remarks. Instead the Vulcan smiled in response, and McCoy caught his breath; he had never seen, or expected to see, such an expression on that cold face. He felt like an intruder - Spock did not know he was there, and his expression at that moment revealed with naked clarity the warm and loving Human heart he had so carefully hidden beneath the Vulcan formality.

Even as McCoy began to turn away Jim saw the movement, and stared.

Spock, following his gaze, looked straight at the doctor, and unmistakeable joy filled his eyes.

"Jim! Spock! You're safe! Thank Heaven!" McCoy moved forward, his hands outstretched; to his utter amazement Jim shrank away, fear in his eyes. Spock rose and caught his arm.

"Do not be afraid, this is Dr. McCoy. He means you no harm - he is a friend."

Jim pressed closer to Spock's side, but his expression now was one of curiosity. "I can't remember."

"You will soon. Go and tell Margaret our friend has come for us - we are going home."

Jim offered McCoy a smile, tentative, unsure. "I'm sorry...I..." Edging past the doctor he ran to the house.

Spock sighed, and sank down onto the bench. "I'm glad you have come. He needs help badly."

"So I see. You don't look any too great yourself. I'm glad to see you, Spock."

"For once, Doctor, I can say the same."

"Tell me."

Margaret's feelings were mixed as she watched the two men come slowly towards the house, deep in conversation. They would go now, as she had known that some day they must. She looked at Jim; for him there would be healing, he would once more take his rightful place in his own world. And Spock? Would he return once more to that shell of frozen Vulcan impassivity? Dr. McCoy looked both kind and competent - she hoped that he also had the wisdom to see that Spock's need of help was in its own way as great as Jim's.

Their farewells were sincere, but brief. McCoy was anxious to get Jim to Sickbay, and Scotty was becoming nervous - the longer the Enterprise remained in orbit, the greater was the chance of its being detected by the Derrans.

Spock turned to Margaret. "I do not know how to thank you - you have done so much for us." He hesitated. "Do you wish to come with us?"

"No, my life is here, and I would chose no other. Farewell, Spock - I hope you find whatever it is you seek out there."

Jim clung to Margaret for a moment, and kissed her. "Goodbye, Margaret. I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too, Jim. Get well... and be happy."

Jim smiled, and moved to Spock's side. She turned to McCoy. "Goodbye, Doctor. He will be all right?"

"Yes, I'm sure of it. Thank you - from all of us." He joined his friends and pulled out his communicator. "McCoy to Enterprise - three to beam up, Scotty."

The three glittering columns of light faded, and were gone. Automatically, Margaret began to tidy the room. Suddenly she stopped; the book Jim had been reading lay open on a chair. She was picking it up to replace it on the shelf when the full realisation of their going came to her; and she wept.

It was some hours later on the Enterprise. McCoy left Sickbay, where Jim lay asleep, and entered his office. Spock was still there, apparently so deep in thought that the doctor's entrance did not disturb him. McCoy eyed him keenly - he had never seen the Vulcan look so Human... or so alone. Intuitively, he realised that if he was ever going to reach Spock, it would be now - he was on the very verge of collapse. He came into the room, and perched on the corner of his desk.

"Well, I've had a good look at Jim, and he's going to be all right. When he's rested, I'll operate to remove the blood clot; the rest of the damage will heal naturally. I'll need your help with the amnesia - thank Heaven for the mind link! It'll make things easier. A few weeks' rest, and he'll be as good as new."

Spock's eyes closed in relief. "You are certain?"

"Who's the doctor around here, anyway? It's all right, Spock!" He hesitated, then went on, "You told me what happened on Derran, but not all of it; I can guess you had a pretty rough time, but I need the details. For your own sake, as well as Jim's, trust me."

McCoy could see the doubt, the hesitation; the agonised eyes seemed to look into his soul.

"Please trust me."

At last Spock began to speak, slowly at first, almost reluctantly, then his voice gradually quickened as it all came pouring out. His fears for Jim's safety; Laura, and his unspeakable revulsion at her actions; the contamination he had felt from the minds around him; his horror in the asylum.

McCoy listened, wondering how best to help. Despite their constant arguments - he had a very real affection for this strange and lonely man; the naked anguish in Spock's voice was almost unbearable.

As the story came to an end he looked down for a moment; when he raised his eyes again Spock was crying. He made no sound, but the silent tears running down his face were sufficient evidence of his agony of mind. For a moment McCoy sat motionless in the face of this utter self-betrayal. What could he say or do? One wrong word now, and he would lose Spock for ever.

Then sheer instinct took over. Leaning closer he took Spock in his arms and simply held him, feeling the scalding tears that soaked through his tunic.

McCoy's reaction broke Spock completely. He had expected some sarcastic comment on his weakness; instead he found warmth and compassion. Always he had been the strong one, controlled and self-reliant; now in McCoy's arms he found that he could give way and not be shamed or mocked.

When the tears ceased he raised his head from McCoy's shoulder and looked steadily into the blue eyes. He read affection there, and understanding.

"Forgive me... I did not mean..."

"I understand, Spock. It was... pretty bad, wasn't it? I always told you that you couldn't deny your Human side for ever."

"It was hard... to let it show. We are taught that... emotion is... embarrassing to others. I have seen you and Jim... but I could not... easily forget my training. I thought you would... despise me if you knew that I... cared."

McCoy shook him gently. "Nobody expects you to change - we'd never recognise you if you did! But try to get it into that stubborn head - you

mean a great deal to all of us. It wasn't only for Jim's sake that we've all been going crazy trying to find you."

They held each other's gaze for a long moment, then McCoy rose. "Right, that's enough for one day," he said briskly. "Off to your quarters and get some sleep."

Spock turned to go, hesitated, and came back. "Dr. McCoy - Bones - thank you." Their hands clasped.

"You've already thanked me - you brought Jim back. We might as well admit it, Spock - the three of us need each other."

The Vulcan nodded in agreement. His hand lingered in McCoy's for a moment, the fingers tightening briefly before they separated.

"I have still much to learn," he said quietly, "but I think I can learn - now."

McCoy restricted Spock to his quarters for several days. The Vulcan was very weak from the strain he had undergone on Derran, and needed rest before he began the task of rebuilding Kirk's mind; but even more than this, the doctor knew he needed time to adjust to their new relationship. They spent many hours together, talking quietly. Spock was shy and hesitant at first, still finding it difficult to believe that McCoy was interested, but he quickly came to appreciate the doctor's warmth and concern. As for McCoy, somewhat to his astonishment he found himself confiding in Spock, telling him the real story of his tragic marriage, details he had hidden even from Jim and Scotty, and finding in the Vulcan a gentle understanding he had never suspected.

When Spock at last returned to duty the rest of the crew saw no difference in him; he was once more the Spock they had always known, cool, rational, detached. In public his relationship with McCoy was not changed, either - the doctor was as sarcastic as ever, and he replied with his usual infuriating calmness. Only now, when their eyes met, it was with a glint of humour that acknowledged their new-found understanding.

At last the day came when McCoy declared that Jim was strong enough for Spock to rebuild his memory. They stood alone in Sickbay, looking down at the silent figure, each knowing how much depended on Spock now. McCoy put his hand on Spock's shoulder, and saw with satisfaction that he did not stiffen and move away as he would once have done, but turned to look at him enquiringly.

"Spock, listen, this is very important. Once you've brought Jim's memory back, you must remind him of everything that happened to him on Derran - and I mean everything. I know you - you'll try to gloss over how much you helped him. For pity's sake, don't. He'll know that you're keeping things from him, he'll worry about it, and that could be dangerous. You must tell him everything, exactly as it happened. You may think you're helping him by keeping the worst things from him, but it would be sheer cruelty - he must have the complete truth. I'll leave you now; call me when you're finished."

Spock touched him reassuringly on the arm and sat down on the bed, watching McCoy as he went out. Strange, he thought; not so long ago he had believed himself to be totally alone, barred by Vulcan custom from friendship with his father's people, set apart by his Vulcan blood from the Humans he worked with. Now both these warm, affectionate men had admitted to caring for him, and with a deep joy he realised that at least he could return their feelings. Pulling himself together, he turned to Jim; this was the most important thing now, to make no mistake in awakening Kirk's memory.

Later he was never sure how long he sat there, probing deeper and deeper into Kirk's mind. The entity that had been James Kirk had hidden itself well, protecting itself from reality. Spock had to use all his considerable strength of will to force the memory to the surface, and he was desperately tired by the time he succeeded. The next stage was to recall to Kirk's mind the events that had occurred on Derran. Mindful of McCoy's warning he left nothing out, softened none of the harsher memories. When he was satisfied that nothing had been missed he rested for a moment, gathering strength for the final step - to awaken Jim and lock him firmly into reality once more. His eyes closed in concentration, and his hands reached for Jim's face. There was a final, unexpected resistance; Kirk's mind, afraid of further pain and still in shock, tried frantically to resist. Protected, sheltered by Spock's mind for so long, it was reluctant to face the responsibility that awaited it.

Spock tightened his grip, and frowned in concentration; if he must use force...

... There was only darkness - black, smothering, impenetrable. An awareness of existence, but no identity. The mind stirred at last, questioned, sought... what? A voice... whose? An awakening memory brought a name - Jim. The mind fastened on to that, it was familiar.

//I am Jim.//

...Faces, sounds, lights, colour... a whirling pattern of senseless shapes and noises. The mind stirred again, moved, was stopped by an impassable wall. Panic.

//I must reach out, I must find...//

One face in that complex of faces, one voice in that clash of sound... A sense of urgency now, growing stronger. The mind moved again, and knew pain, such intense pain that could not last but did not end, scarlet waves of agony mounting higher and higher until the mind screamed in torment.

At last, an answer. A voice, calm, familiar, trusted.

//I am here; come to me.//

//Where are you? I can't find you. The pain...//

//Our minds are one. Let go, do not struggle; we will be drawn together.//

Then the wall was gone and he could move, following the voice that called to him. The faces and voices came back, but were familiar now, they had names - Bones, Scotty, Uhura, Sulu. The pain faded, became a memory, was gone. And Jim Kirk looked up into Spock's eyes. The Vulcan leaned over him, his face wet with perspiration. His hands crushed Jim's fingers in a powerful grip; his eyes blazed with determination.

"Hold on, Jim," he whispered. "I am here - come to me."

The awakening was complete. Jim knew who he was, remembered his past, the crash, the weeks on Derran.

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

The Vulcan drew a long, shuddering breath. Slowly his grip on Jim's hands relaxed, and the look of determination faded from his eyes; in contrast he now looked almost... uncertain, and his voice was very quiet as he asked,

"How do you feel now, Jim?"

"Pretty good, all things considered." He lay silent for a moment, giving his mind time to adjust. "Spock, I don't know how to..."

"Please, Jim, don't..."

"This time I must. You've never let me thank you, have you, Spock? I don't know how many times you've dragged me out of some damn-awful mess; I've tried so often to say it - but there aren't any words... I don't even know where to start." His eyes closed for a moment, then suddenly opened. "Spock, do something for me, will you?"

"If I can."

"The mind link is still holding - I can feel it. Look into my mind. I can't tell you in words, but through the link, perhaps I can."

"Jim, it is not necessary."

Kirk's fingers tightened convulsively on Spock's. "Please, Spock, don't argue - just do it."

He was becoming so agitated that reluctantly, more to calm him than for any other reason, Spock touched his slim fingers to Kirk's face. Jim copied the gesture, instinctively strengthening the bond between them. Gradually a slow tide of colour crept over Spock's face as he allowed himself to read in Jim's mind those feelings the Human could never put into words. In turn he opened his mind to Jim, and for the first time they looked deep into each other's hearts. Words, which had been so difficult, were no longer necessary; the barriers of race, tradition, language, no longer stood between them, and never could again.

Then suddenly Jim was afraid.

//Don't, Spock... Please don't.//

//What is it?//

//I feel you are about to break the mind link.//

//It is time.//

//Must 't be broken? Our minds have been so close... I don't want to lose it.//

//The link no longer frightens you?//

//I don't think it ever did, really. It just took a bit of getting used to the first few times. I've been... lonely too, Spock, but not now... Don't leave me alone again.//

//Is that truly your wish?//

//Look into my mind and see.//

//I too am... glad that you do not wish to break the link. I would... regret its loss. In any case, it is not possible; our minds have been joined for so long that the link has become permanent. We cannot break it even if we wanted to.//

//Strange; the one thing we both wanted, yet never dared ask for, has come about without our seeking it. I am glad.//

//For the present I must weaken the link; as yet you do not fully understand it. I must teach you how to use it safely.//

//I'll learn, gladly.//

As the link dissolved Jim smiled and lay back, seeing with happiness a new softness in the Vulcan's eyes. Suddenly he said, "Bones! We've forgotten about Bones. He should be here."

"I'll call him," said Spock.

When McCoy came in he could see at once that Spock had been successful. He came over to the bed.

"Welcome back, Jim. You certainly gave us all a fright this time."

"I know," Kirk said ruefully. "Thanks, Bones."

"All part of the service. Well, Spock, by some devil's miracle you've pulled it off again."

"We have 'pulled it off', Bones," Spock corrected; his free hand reached out to cover McCoy's.

Kirk stared. He had never heard Spock use McCoy's nickname, and to actually touch him! He intercepted the glance they exchanged, and realised that just as he and Spock had at last been able to recognise the bonds that held them, so Spock and McCoy had also somehow reached a new understanding. It was a strange and wonderful experience, to become aware of what must in fact have existed for a long time - the unique relationship which bound the three of them together.

When Spock left Sickbay at last Kirk was sleeping quietly. He would recover quickly now, McCoy said, and would soon take his place again on the Bridge. Spock himself was very tired, but quietly content. So many of the divided loyalties caused by his mixed blood had been resolved at last. There would be many new problems, and some of the old ones would return; but he was no longer alone - and for that he gave thanks.

As he stepped out of the turbo-lift he came face to face with the Yeoman who looked after his quarters. She was very young, very pretty, and very much in awe of the enigmatic First Officer.

Blushing in confusion she said, "Excuse me, Commander; I was disposing of the clothes you wore on Derran, and I found these - I wondered if they were important."

Absently Spock took the cards she handed him, then stared in concentration.

Painted in exquisite detail, the Knight guided his horse across the stream. He bore the Cup firmly, confidently, his calm eyes fixed on the distant hills. His destination was hidden, but his path was clearly marked, and he faced it resolutely.

His companion, the Rider in the Chariot, stood proudly, crowned with stars. He controlled the Chariot by pure force of will, and only his strength of will kept it on the path. He was always alert, ever on guard.

Somewhere, beyond the hills, their two paths converged and became one, where the confidence of the Knight and the strength of the Rider would blend, and in their united power both would reach the final goal.

"Are they important, sir?" asked the Yeoman again.

"Yes, you could say that they are," Spock answered quietly. "They were meant as a... souvenir."

And the sudden radiance of his smile left the Yeoman staring in utter amazement as the door to his quarters closed behind him.

Sarek, your son has a duty to Vulcan.
 Once, I asked him
 Are thee Vulcan, or are thee Human?
 And he did not reply.
 But now he must.

The time has come for you to marry, Spock.
 It was accepted
 That after your betrayal by T'Pring
 You would require time
 To find again the confidence
 Her actions damaged,
 And so we gave you time. But now
 You have had time enough.
 You have a duty to Vulcan, Spock.
 You must return home and take a wife.
 T'Por is young; strong; fully able
 To give you many children.
 Her mind is clear, decisive,
 And her training
 Befits her for her wifely duties. She
 Has never shown interest
 In politics, or attempted
 To persuade her menfolk
 That she could understand
 A man's responsibilities.
 She will be content
 To run your home, and rear your children,
 While you take up the place
 The Science Academy holds for you.
 If you refuse, and choose to stay in Starfleet,
 You are no Vulcan;
 And Vulcan must reject you.
 Are thee Human, Spock,
 Or are thee Vulcan?
 T'Pau once asked you that.
 She said you did not answer -
 And now you must.

ULTIMATUM

PART 1 - ULTIMATUM PRESENTED

As the Enterprise settled into orbit around the shore leave planet Marnon, Kirk stretched luxuriously in the command chair. It had been a difficult and dangerous mission - leave would be more than usually welcome. Turning in his chair he smiled at Spock, and received in response the barely perceptible narrowing of the eyes that told him the Vulcan shared his anticipation.

Instead of their usual camping trip they had booked in to one of Marnon's most expensive resort hotels. Kirk was looking forward to the change, to the recreational facilities offered, and to sampling the galactically-famed luxury of the hotel.

The stand-by crew came aboard, and as soon as they had handed over, Kirk and Spock made their way to the transporter room and beamed down to the planet. After saying goodbye to McCoy and Scotty, who had made their own arrangements, they set off for the hotel. As they registered the desk clerk handed a packet to Spock.

"A message for you, Commander, sent to await collection."

Kirk could not help noticing that the envelope came from Vulcan, and he recognised the distinctive handwriting of Spock's father. He felt vaguely uneasy - experience had taught him that any communication from Sarek usually meant trouble, and Spock needed this rest as badly as he did.

They had already planned to spend the afternoon sailing, and to Kirk's relief Spock made no reference to the letter when they met again in the hotel foyer. The hours passed pleasantly, and Kirk soon found himself relaxing after the strain of the last few months. He always enjoyed Spock's company, and was delighted when they had the chance to be on their own, away from the demands of their duties.

After dinner Kirk remembered that he had not yet replied to a letter from his nephew, and returned to his room to do so, arranging to call for Spock in an hour's time, when they would go out and explore the town.

His letter despatched, he was about to head for Spock's room when he stopped, and smiled; he had a much better idea. Finding a quiet corner he sat down, closed his eyes, and concentrated.

Some time ago he and Spock had been stranded on the planet Derran; he had suffered from total amnesia, and in order to protect him, Spock had been compelled to establish an unusually close mind link with him. Their rescue had been so long delayed that the link had become permanent, and since then Spock had been training him in its use.

Though he would not have admitted it even to himself, Kirk had been a little afraid when he had learned that the link could not be broken; he had not fully understood its nature, and had believed that he and Spock would always be in contact, fully aware of each other's thoughts and emotions. Gently, patiently, Spock had reassured him, showing him that the link would only operate when one of them wished to contact the other; it required a definite concentration to establish contact, but now either of them could do so easily. During the training they had come to understand each other as they never had before, and as he grew more familiar with the link, Kirk's hesitancy and uncertainty vanished - he could now claim admission to Spock's mind in the certain knowledge that he would be welcome.

This time, however, he met with no response. Instead he came up against a solid, impenetrable barrier; for some reason, Spock was shielding his mind against him. Seriously worried, he made for the lift, and was soon knocking on Spock's door.

"Come!"

The usual permission to enter was a relief; he had begun to fear that Spock would not admit him. The room was lit only by cloudy moonlight, but as his eyes became accustomed to the dimness he could make out the Vulcan's slim figure curled up in the window seat. He crossed the room, and to his surprise Spock reached for his hand, pulling him down beside him. For some moments neither spoke, then,

"What's wrong, Spock?" Jim asked quietly.

"You know that I had a message today from Vulcan - from my father?"

"Yes, I saw it. I hope it's not bad news?"

"That's what I want... what I must explain to you. It is... very difficult." He paused, and turned to look at Kirk; his face was in shadow, his eyes hidden, but Kirk knew that the Vulcan could see his face clearly.

"For some time now I have been under great pressure from my family... my father wishes me to return to Vulcan. He... he intends to arrange a... a new marriage for me."

Kirk made no answer. He felt... he did not know how he felt. Suddenly the two of them were alone in the universe - everything else was somehow unreal. He tried to speak, but no words came; his throat seemed dry and paralysed. Spock **went on**.

"As you know, my family is of some importance on Vulcan. My father writes that T'Pol is...displeased... because I am still unmarried. He has the authority to arrange a match for me, and demands my consent."

"And if you refuse?"

"If I refuse, I can never return to Vulcan; my family will reject me. Sarek presents me with an ultimatum, Jim. Starfleet - or Vulcan."

At that moment full moonlight flooded into the room, lighting Spock's face with a terrible, revealing cruelty. He was unprepared, and the sheer misery in his eyes brought a cry of protest to Kirk's lips. He caught at Spock's hands.

"Don't, Spock! I can't bear to see you like this. Is there nothing you can do to change Sarek's mind?"

"Nothing. He is determined."

"But it doesn't mean you have to leave Starfleet! You can go through with the marriage and return, as you would have done if you'd married T'Pol."

Spock stirred restlessly. "Think, Jim. You know what is involved in a Vulcan marriage. When I was bonded to T'Pol we were children; although the bond held, and drew us together, I was able to erect defences against its going too deep. We never really knew each other - perhaps that is why she rejected me. Now that I know what it is like to be linked to someone who understands and cares about me as a person, I know that I could not tolerate a permanent link with a stranger... who could not even begin to comprehend the... the problems I face as a half-breed. You have never intruded, have always respected my... emotional reticence; I fear that a Vulcan wife might not. In addition, among Humans, I have learned... many things... that a full Vulcan could never understand. You must know... I cannot risk... Forgive me, I can say no more."

Kirk understood. Gently he laid one hand on Spock's cheek, and in response felt the Vulcan's fingers touch his face. The barrier Spock had erected between them fell, and their minds linked.

Between these two lay much that because of Human pride and Vulcan

reticence would never be put into words; only in their linked minds would its existence be acknowledged. Time ceased to have any meaning - they had entered their own world where race, tradition, upbringing no longer existed, and they stood face to face.

When at last they broke the link, nothing had been resolved. Kirk gazed down at their clasped hands, his heart heavy with dread.

"How long do you have to decide?"

"Not long. Sarek is waiting for my answer."

"You... you will tell me, won't you, Spock?"

"I give you my promise - as soon as I decide, I will tell you."

They parted, and Kirk returned to his room, but he did not sleep. He could not forget his last sight of Spock still sitting in the window seat, his dark head tilted against the glass as he stared up into the night sky.

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PART 2 - ULTIMATUM REJECTED

Kirk was called early in the morning with a message from the spaceport commander which required his personal attention. Leaving word for Spock, he went to the base, where to his fury he was detained for most of the day. It was evening when he returned to the hotel, and called Spock's room; there was no reply. Kirk was concerned, but not seriously worried - probably the Vulcan had gone off alone to think. He tried to reach him by mind link, but the barrier was back; obviously Spock wanted no distractions while he reached his decision. Kirk was so tired that despite himself he fell asleep, and did not waken until morning. There was still no reply from Spock's room and, seriously alarmed now, he questioned the desk clerk. The Vulcan had left the hotel early the previous day, and had not yet returned; he had left a letter for Kirk with instructions that it be handed to him only when he inquired about his First Officer. Returning to his room Kirk opened the letter with shaking hands; as he read it the words blurred before his eyes.

"Forgive me, Jim. I have received another message from Sarek - he demands an immediate answer, and I have none to give. Not only is the marriage he proposes impossible for me, he also insists that I return permanently to Vulcan. I cannot give up Starfleet, yet my Vulcan blood is too strong to accept exile. I do as I must.

I will not ~~insult~~ you by telling you not to grieve for me, but it may help you to know that my greatest joy has been in knowing you. May you live long, Jim - and prosper."

He must remain calm; perhaps it was not too late. Returning to the foyer he questioned the desk clerk again. Spock had left the previous morning, hiring one of the hotel's air cars. It had returned some hours later under automatic pilot, so no-one knew where he had gone. After some thought, the man remembered that Spock had been interested in the vast Ardan Desert just outside the city. Mention of the desert struck a responsive chord in Kirk's memory, and increased his fear. There was probably nothing he could do, but he must try. He pulled out his communicator.

"Kirk to Enterprise - beam me up at once."

McCoy, who had spent the previous evening drinking with Scotty, was finally aroused by the frantic knocking on his cabin door. Muttering angrily he stalked across to open it, composing on the way a blistering attack on the idiot who insisted on waking a hard-working doctor at unsocial hours; but the distraught figure that stumbled into the room banished all trace of levity.

As his doctor, McCoy had seen Kirk in many moods he would have hidden from anyone else - angry, apprehensive, indecisive, even afraid. Never until now had he seen him almost incoherent with grief and fear.

Applying an old-fashioned remedy he slapped Kirk hard across the face several times, and was rewarded by seeing the Captain pull himself together.

"Thanks, Bones. I'm sorry - I just couldn't seem to help it."

"Here - drink that; not another word until you do." He watched as Kirk drained the brandy, then took the glass from shaking fingers.

"Now - what's wrong?"

"Bones - it's Spock. He's going to... to kill himself."

"Spock? You must be mad! He'd never..."

"Believe me, Bones, I know." Kirk buried his face in his hands; when he raised his head again his eyes were wet.

"I can't explain all of it, even to you. It was Sarek... he's arranging a new marriage for Spock, and wants him to return to Vulcan. It would mean he had to leave Starfleet... or face perpetual exile from Vulcan. It was... an impossible choice. He told me once... on Vulcan, there's a form of suicide... he's gone into the desert alone... with no water... to die! We've killed him, Sarek and I; between us we... tore him apart."

For a moment McCoy stared uncomprehendingly, then realisation dawned.

"Oh my God! Jim, I understand." He sat down on the bed beside Kirk, holding him as the tears came. "God help you both! Is there nothing you can do?"

"If I find him in time, perhaps. Scotty's scanning the Ardan Desert for him now. I made some enquiries before I left Marnon, but he'd been gone too long."

"And if you do find him?"

"I don't know... but if it's too late... how do I go on, Fones?"

There was no answer to the pitiful question; McCoy could only hold his friend, giving what comfort he could by his presence. At least he could ease the strain of waiting; he reached for the medical pouch he always had with him, and administered a sedative. Making Jim comfortable, he dressed quickly and left for the Bridge, where an unusually grim-faced Scott sat in command. At the sensors Chekov worked busily; the air of tension was electric. Uhura and Sulu were in their usual places, doing what they could. Although none of them knew what had happened they were aware that they worked for Spock's life, and that was all they needed to know - time was their enemy, and they could not afford to fail. Hours passed with no result, and McCoy's sense of foreboding grew stronger - how to tell Jim?

Then at last Chekov turned with a cry of triumph. "Got him! At least, I have a fix on the approximate area."

Returning to his quarters, where Kirk still tossed in uneasy sleep, McCoy stood for several minutes watching his friend, his blue eyes clouded with concern.

Despite his utter confidence in Spock, he had always mistrusted the mind link; it was not natural for Humans, he had always maintained, and had watched with anxiety the subtle changes the establishment of a permanent link had made in his friends. Perhaps, he admitted, that anxiety was tinged with a degree of jealousy that they shared something he could not, but at this moment his concern was purely for Jim. Gently, insidiously, the linking had grown deeper since their return from Derran, until the emotional

state of each man was almost unconsciously reflected in the other. He had seen for himself how the conflict that had driven Spock to suicide had affected Kirk - he was afraid now of the damage that the severance of the link by Spock's death would do to Jim's mind.

There was nothing he could do - it was up to Jim now. With a faint sigh he reached out to waken his friend.

"Shall I beam down with you, Jim?"

McCoy and Kirk stood in the transporter room with Scott at the controls; the doctor wanted no other witnesses when the Captain returned.

"No, Bones. I've got to go alone. If he's still... alive, we have much to say, and not even you have the right to hear. If it's... too late, I... I want to be... alone with him... for the last time."

"I understand; but don't worry, Jim - he's only been gone two days. Vulcans can last a lot longer than that without water, even in the desert."

"I know, but he's very determined. His strength of will has saved us all more than once. He knows I'll be searching for him - he might... make certain... I'm too late."

"I'll wait until I hear from you. If you need me, call, and I'll come."

Kirk touched the doctor's arm lightly. "You always do, don't you, Bones?" He stepped onto the transporter pad. "Energise, Scotty."

The desert sun beat down with almost physical force as Kirk materialised on the sand. He looked round, and sighed. Somewhere in this jumble of rocks and sand was Spock; the sensors reported that he was still alive, but something in the composition of the rocks confused the readings, and this was the closest he had been able to come - the rest of the search must be conducted on foot. Delaying no longer, Kirk began to climb, watching anxiously for the flash of blue he hoped, yet almost feared to see. It was an effort to move in the intense heat but he kept going, pausing only to wipe the sweat from his eyes.

He should have brought water, he realised very quickly; he was getting thirsty already. In his anxiety to leave the ship he had not thought of it. Then as he stepped through a gap in the rocks, sunlight glinted on water - a small pool trapped in a hollow. Kirk hurried forward eagerly and knelt, only to draw back in disgust - the water was stagnant, evil-smelling. He was about to call McCoy to send down a flask when he noticed something that drove all discomfort from his mind. In the mud at the pool's edge was the clear impression of a hand - a hand with long, slender fingers. He scanned the ground eagerly - someone had knelt here at the water's edge; had leaned over the pool; had... drunk of that poisonous water? he prayed not. Beyond the handprint further tracks on the sand showed where someone had retreated among the rocks. Rising to his feet he followed swiftly - every instinct told him to hurry... hurry!

He could have wept with disappointment when the tracks faded at last on stony ground. Kirk looked round frantically - which way now? It was... logical... that the Vulcan would conceal himself to further hinder the search he knew would be made. That low cliff - perhaps there was a cave? He drove himself on, but despair was in his heart as he thought of that poisonous water, and his own words to McCoy - had Spock 'made certain'? It seemed he had been stumbling among those nightmarish rocks for hours when

"Jim."

That so-familiar voice; but the tone was one that of all men only Jim Kirk would recognise.

"Where are you?" And that tone, only the Vulcan had ever heard.

"To your right - between the rocks."

Spock was lying propped up against a boulder; he was pale, but otherwise seemed normal. Kirk felt his heart lift until he noticed the unhealthy sheen of sweat on Spock's face, and the feverish glitter in his eyes. Without knowing how he got there, he was on his knees at Spock's side, pulling out his communicator.

Spock's reaction was as fast as ever; with one hand he caught Kirk's wrist, with the other he took the communicator and tossed it away. It lay well beyond Kirk's reach, and he could not break the grip on his wrist.

"Let me go, Spock. I must call Bones."

"No. I cannot permit you to do so. It will not be long now."

"So you did drink some of that water?"

"Yes... I knew you were following me, and I had to be sure; it seemed ... the only way."

"Please, Spock, don't do this." It was a moan of agony.

"I must. I have... considered carefully. The conflict has become too much for me, Jim. If... what we shared... means anything to you, be merciful. Let me go."

"Is that really what you want?"

"It is what I must do. I can go on no longer, torn between my Human and Vulcan blood. If I could choose one without regret... but I am - as I am. Help me, Jim. Let me go."

"I don't know if I have the courage. How do I go on, without you?"

"You are... the Captain of the Enterprise. You will do as you must, as I do. I have never... asked anything of you, Jim... until now."

"I'll try... to do as you wish. But don't send me away - let me be with you, as long as..."

"That is why I called to you. I confess, I wanted you with me... at the last. Forgive me for that."

"It would be so much harder... to know you were alone."

Deliberately Kirk slipped his arms around the Vulcan, cradling the dark head on his shoulder. He was very calm now, his own decision made. No argument could turn Spock from his chosen course - he accepted that, as he supposed he must have done all along. Well, his own mind was clear at last; the weight of the phaser was suddenly comforting against his hip...

They sat in silence for a long time. Each had considered reaching for the mind link, but had rejected it for his own reasons; Spock, to spare Jim the pain he suffered as the poison crept through his body, Kirk for fear the Vulcan should read his intentions.

Suddenly Spock shivered, and Kirk's arms closed tighter around him.

"Spock! Is it... time?"

"I believe so." The slender fingers brushed Kirk's face lightly.

"Jim, I... I want..."

The slim body shuddered and was still; the dark head was suddenly heavy against Kirk's shoulder; the slanting eyes closed slowly. Kirk made no sound, only gathered the Vulcan closer, burying his face in the silky hair. He remained so for a long moment, then lifted his head and looked down into the still, secret face, at the silent lips, their last words forever unspoken now. With an unsteady hand he clumsily smoothed the dark hair.

"Goodbye, Spock, my..." His voice broke on a sob.

Without taking his eyes from the Vulcan's face, one hand reached purposely for the phaser at his hip.

A few feet behind Kirk, McCoy moved swiftly, silently closer. He had become uneasy when the Captain failed to call in, and all attempts to contact him remained unanswered. He remembered Jim's expression as he left, and his concern grew. There had been something in those eyes...

McCoy had hesitated, wondering how to act for the best. Impossible to break in on what might be Kirk's last meeting with Spock; equally impossible to leave that grief-stricken man alone with the body of his friend. As time crawled by with no word he came to a decision at last, and beamed down to where he believed Kirk to be. There was only the communicator lying on the sand, and he realised what must have happened. From behind the rocks came the low murmur of voices, but he was too far away to hear what was being said. When the voices fell silent he moved forward to find his friends, rounding the rocks in time to see Kirk lay his cheek against Spock's hair.

His heart heavy with unshed tears, McCoy came closer, and watched with horrified understanding that deliberate movement of hand to hip. He moved faster than he had ever done in his life - Kirk's fingers had scarcely closed around the butt of the phaser when the hiss of a hypo against his shoulder sent him sprawling forward across Spock's body. It was better so, McCoy thought, for the effects of the severance were even graver than he had feared - at that moment, Jim Kirk was not quite sane. He turned to the Vulcan, scanner in hand. After a moment,

"Scotty! Three to beam up - fast!" Urgency, and a desperate hope, echoed in his voice.

Slowly, unwillingly, Kirk regained consciousness. He was in Sickbay - McCoy's doing, he supposed wearily. Frantically he fought to cling to the comforting, friendly blackness where this... pain... did not exist. It was impossible; he was forced back into a grey, leaden world from which sunlight, laughter, hope had suddenly vanished.

What now? he thought. How do I go on, without Spock? Never again to look into those dark, alien eyes that had seen so deeply into his soul; never again to share that silent communication that said so much more than mere words; never again to feel that touch on his hand, on his mind, to see that face, expressionless to others, to him the mirror of a thousand changing moods.

He was alone now. Strange... he had never before realised the utter desolation of that word. A low moan of agony broke from his lips and he buried his face in the pillow to shut out a suddenly empty world.

A hand on his shoulder, a voice speaking urgently in his ear. "Jim, wake up! Wake up, damn you!"

He opened reluctant eyes. "Bones. Why did you interfere? You should have left me with... him; we could have been... together."

"Jim, listen to me. He's alive. I don't know how, but he's alive."

A sudden surge of hope. Kirk sat up, his hands gripping McCoy's arms, staring into the vivid blue eyes.

"You're sure? Don't lie to me, Bones - I can't take it."

"See for yourself. He's alive - barely."

Kirk swung his feet to the floor. Clinging to McCoy for support he

moved to the next bed. Spock lay unmoving, pale and silent.

"A healing trance?"

"No. I've never seen him quite like this before - I don't know what's wrong. I got the poison out of his system - he should have come round by now."

"Then why hasn't he?"

"I think - but I can't be certain - that it's a deliberate refusal to respond; he seems to be willing himself to die. I can't reach him, Jim - perhaps you can."

Kirk touched Spock's face with trembling hands. Now, if ever, the link must be made. Closing his eyes he summoned every ounce of concentration, willing Spock to respond. He encountered - blankness. No way to reach him - he would not be recalled. Kirk looked up with agonised eyes.

"He won't let me through. He's determined to die, I know it. I can't reach him, Bones."

"I'm not sure... The indicators rose a little when you touched him... You must be getting through somehow. Keep trying - I don't think he'll let go as long as you stay with him."

Kirk sat down on the bed, holding Spock's hands tightly, every nerve concentrated in the effort to break the barrier; he was not even aware when McCoy left the room.

The surgeon had gone to his office, where he called Uhura. There was one slim chance for Spock's life. Once before Sarek of Vulcan had responded when his son was in danger; if a message could reach him in time, he might come again, and if anyone could break Spock's defences it would be he. Vulcans did not respond to emotional appeals, but his son's life must be of some concern to him - surely he would make an effort to avert the tragedy for which he had been partially responsible?

His message despatched, McCoy returned to Sickbay, where all his skill was needed to sustain Kirk's strength. As long as Jim could hold on, McCoy believed, Spock would live; if that tenuous link was broken, however...

PART 3 - ULTIMATUM RECONSIDERED

On beaming aboard the Enterprise Sarek noted with some surprise that he was received by Lieutenant-Commander Scott. This was unusual - an Ambassador of his status was usually greeted by the Captain. He did not, of course, feel insulted, but it was... strange; Captain Kirk was usually meticulous about such matters.

As he exchanged the usual formalities with Scott, he made no reference to the reason for his visit - he might have been paying the most routine of courtesy calls. Scotty's well-renowned temper was roused by this seeming indifference to the fate of the man he was proud to call a friend, but he held it firmly in check.

As they passed along the corridors to Sickbay Sarek noticed that the ship seemed to be unusually crowded to be in orbit round a shore leave planet. Very few seemed to be actually on duty, but stood talking in small groups wherever he looked. Curiosity was the one emotion Vulcans had totally failed to eliminate; turning to Scotty he said,

"I understand that the crew was granted shore leave, Mr. Scott?"

"Aye, that's right, sir - and a grand planet it is, too."

"Yet I observe that the ship seems to be remarkably well-manned; are you having some technical difficulties?"

Scotty stopped in his tracks, staring at the Ambassador with astonishment.

"Well, wid ye credit that!" he exclaimed at last. "Ambassador, I'm thinking ye could be doing with a few home truths!"

He swept Sarek into the lift, and called it to a halt between floors.

"Right, now we'll no' be disturbed. Listen, man, for years I've had it dinned intae me that Vulcans are supposed tae be intelligent - I'm beginning tae wonder if ye'd ken whit a dug wis if it ran up and bit ye! So ye're wondering why so many of the crew are on board - well, I'll tell ye. As soon as they heard about Mr. Spock they began drifting back, a few at a time - I reckon they're nearly all here now. Oh, they ken fine there's nothing they can do, but they just want to be here. I don't suppose you'd understand, but it so happens that we're all worried sick about that stubborn, pointed-eared son of yours!"

"Please go on, Mr. Scott," Sarek said quietly as the Engineer fell silent, suddenly realising what he had been saying to one of the most influential men in the Federation.

"Aye, well... They tell me emotion disna' mean much to your people - I canna' pass judgement on that. But I know my own crew. They don't feel much like fun and games at the moment - Spock's too important to them. Open your eyes, man... or your mind... or whatever; take a good long look at this ship, and for once in your life, try to realise what Spock is!"

Sarek eyed Scott consideringly; despite himself the appeal had shaken him. On his previous visits to the Enterprise he had recognised with well-concealed pride the respect his son commanded from these Humans. And... he was curious. Closing his eyes in concentration he opened his mind and scanned the Enterprise. It was as Scott had claimed; from every corner of the great Starship, from every man and woman on board, one thought, one prayer, was uppermost - Spock must live. It seemed that a great tidal wave of prayer, hope and - yes - affection flowed through the ship to where his son lay. He had never thought that a Vulcan could inspire such devotion in Humans. Visibly shaken, Sarek opened his eyes.

"I think," he said quietly, "that you had better take me to Captain Kirk."

As Sarek approached his son Kirk released his hands and stood, head bent, in silence. Under Sarek's compelling gaze he looked up at last, and the Vulcan made an involuntary movement of protest. The silent agony in the hazel eyes reminded him of a trapped animal he had once seen, and released out of compassion. No-one should suffer so, he thought, but this man would not accept pity. The tragic gaze demanded positive action - how should he respond?

Kirk stepped forward, his hands held out helplessly. "Sarek, I beg you... help him."

"Tell me what has happened."

He knew already, but wished to hear how the events had appeared to Kirk. The words were unimportant - he listened to the quiet, desperate voice, watched the changing emotions on the expressive face. This was not the James Kirk he had known, vital, decisive, assured; this was a stranger, the haggard face and broken voice eloquent testimony to a grief Sarek would never admit to recognising. As Kirk finished his explanation, Sarek began to speak.

"Captain Kirk, I realise that this is difficult for you to understand, but I cannot do as you wish. My son has made his decision, and we must abide by it. He was presented with a choice between his duty to Vulcan, and his duty to Starfleet. Rather than be compelled to make that choice, he has elected to terminate his existence in the traditional manner. It was a...

logical decision. He has the right to take his own life - I cannot interfere."

Gone now was the grief, the dumb suffering; the hazel eyes blazed with anger, and the voice shook with hatred rather than sorrow.

"Logic! I'm sick to death of that word! Spock's dying, and you dare - you dare stand there and talk to me of logic! You may choose to forget that he's your son... I can only remember that he's my friend. I've always honoured him for his loyalty to Vulcan, never sought to change him. Oh, I don't pretend I've always succeeded, but at least I've tried to understand what he is - have you? You've always rejected his Human side, demanded more of him than you would have done if he'd been fully Vulcan. Couldn't you see what you were doing to him? If he dies, Sarek, we killed him, you and I, as surely as if we'd used a knife. I can accept my share of the blame - can you? We asked too much. Human or Vulcan - we couldn't accept that he is both. We forced him to choose, and he could not. A logical decision? Never! We drove him to his death. Perhaps you can forgive yourself - I know I never will. We both knew - and made sure he knew - what we wanted from him; neither of us bothered to ask what he wanted!"

The anger drained away in the face of that impassive calm. Kirk shook his head helplessly and moved back to Spock's side. As his bitter grief, all the sharper for the loss of the small hope he had allowed himself, closed around him again he took Spock's hands in his, as though trying to infuse some of his own will to live into that silent figure. Totally absorbed in Spock he had almost forgotten about Sarek, and was vaguely surprised when the quiet voice spoke behind him.

"Captain Kirk, that is one error of which you could never be guilty; I believe Spock's wishes have always mattered to you. I confess, you have given me much to consider - your appeal, emotional though it was, contained much truth. I will need time to reflect upon your words. With your permission, I will go now to Spock's quarters; he would have returned there to make... certain preparations... before he left for the desert. There will be letters which I must study before I make my final decision."

Kirk nodded absently; it was doubtful if he had taken in Sarek's words. His whole being was centered on sustaining that frail thread of life. Intuitively, he knew that McCoy was right - somehow his mind was touching Spock's. The Vulcan would not respond, but neither would he permit himself to die while that frail link existed, fearing that the violence of its severance would damage Kirk's mind. And Kirk knew, as McCoy could not, that Spock was waiting; waiting for sheer exhaustion to dull Kirk's watchfulness. He must sleep soon, and the instant his vigilance was relaxed, Spock would be gone.

McCoy met Sarek at the door to Sickbay. "If you permit it, I will come with you."

Sarek inclined his head gravely. As they walked along the corridor he waited for yet another appeal from the surgeon; to his surprise, it was not forthcoming. Only when they stopped at the door to Spock's quarters did the doctor break his silence.

"Sarek, while you're deciding what to do, here's one more thing for you to consider. When I found Jim down on Marnon, he thought that Spock was dead; I was only just in time to stop him blowing his brains out."

Satisfied that he had Sarek's full and somewhat startled attention, McCoy went on bitterly, "That bloody mind link! It's going to be hard enough losing Spock, but this...! They're linked now, even though Spock won't respond, and when he dies, God alone knows what will happen to Jim! It's not one life I'm fighting for back there, but two. How does that square with your Vulcan reverence for life?"

Favouring Sarek with a long stare from those incredibly blue eyes McCoy turned on his heel and left. Sarek watched him go before he entered his son's quarters.

It was as he had anticipated. Spock's preparations had been thorough, methodical, Vulcan; he had expected no less. On the desk lay his formal declaration of intent to take his own life, the cold, traditional phrases written with a steady hand. A neat pile of envelopes contained his personal farewells; to his mother, to Sarek himself, to Captain Kirk, to Dr. McCoy. Sarek touched the last two curiously, wondering what his son could have found to say at such a time to these so-emotional Humans. Not even to himself would he have admitted that he was delaying as long as possible the moment when he would have to open the envelope that bore his own name.

At last he unfolded the letter. He was not quite sure what he had expected, Vulcan formality or Human emotion; like his son, it was a blend of both. Quietly, simply, Spock explained his action, offering no excuses, attaching no blame, accepting the situation as he saw it. His farewell to his father was touched lightly with affection, deeply with respect. As he read his son's words, Sarek felt a sudden fierce pride. He recalled the words Kirk had hurled at him.

'Human or Vulcan... he is both!'

For the first time Sarek understood that what he had feared might be a weakness in Spock had become in fact his greatest strength. He possessed indeed his mother's warm Humanity, but tempered by his father's teaching he was free from all the baser Human motives; his simple, transparent goodness shone out in every word. Now Sarek could admit that perhaps he had been wrong; he must consider carefully.

The Starship seemed to hang suspended in time and space. The entire crew had returned now, and wandered the corridors aimlessly, getting in the way of the maintenance staff. From the Bride personnel down to the rawest crewman they hung about the rec room, gathering in small groups, talking, reforming, waiting, endlessly waiting. Still no word from Sickbay - it was strange how unreal the ship seemed without that quiet presence on the Bridge.

At Spock's bedside Kirk and McCoy still waited. The world had contracted to that pale face, to the barely-flickering glow of the life indicators. McCoy glanced at the Captain; Jim could not hold on much longer - he was plainly exhausted, kept going only by a will-power that in its way was as great as the Vulcan's. He had often wondered idly which of them had the stronger will - now, it seemed, he was about to find out. It was a battle neither could win. If Spock died, McCoy knew without doubt that Jim would surely follow; yet if Kirk succeeded, and somehow drew Spock back, the original problem would remain - Spock would still be faced with that impossible choice. If only he could help...

He looked up as the door opened and Sarek returned. Jim followed his gaze absently - he had forbidden himself to hope for any help from that quarter. This time, as Sarek approached, he did not move away, and the Vulcan saw with no surprise that his son now rested in the Captain's arms. The hazel eyes surveyed him with an unnatural, hopeless calm, and Sarek felt an unaccustomed guilt that Kirk had carried this burden for so long. It was that guilt that lent an unusual gentleness to his voice as he said,

"Captain, I have considered your words very carefully, and although I have no right to interfere with Spock's decision, I am prepared to do so. However, I must warn you that there is no guarantee that I will succeed. Spock's suicide seemed to him a logical solution - even if I succeed in reaching him, I do not know if I can persuade him to reconsider."

Renewed hope flared in Kirk's eyes. "If there's any chance, any chance

at all, we must try. Please, do what you can."

He relinquished his hold and stood up, his hands lingering for a moment on Spock's shoulders before he stepped away from the bed. Taking his place, Sarek reached for his son's mind, and was astounded at the resistance he encountered; he had not thought that Spock's defences were so strong. Nothing he could do broke through his guard.

His eyes moved to the indicators over the bed; they had dropped alarmingly in the short time since Kirk had released his hold. Obviously the Captain's presence made a difference. Was it possible, Sarek wondered, that Kirk could succeed where he had failed? Not alone, of course, his mind was not strong enough, but perhaps with help...

Sarek beckoned McCoy aside. "Doctor, I have failed to break Spock's defences - his mind is shielded from me. The Captain must try to reach his Human side. A Vulcan can be turned from suicide if he is given a logical reason, but we have none to offer - we must rely on emotion. You know more about such things than I - have you any suggestions?"

McCoy thought for a moment, then answered slowly, "Perhaps if he could be made to realise how his death will affect Jim... I told you what happened when I found them - if he knew for certain that his death would mean Jim's, it would bring him back, I'm sure."

"We must try it then. I will lend my power to the Captain's mind, and let him make the link. If you will recall for me how you felt then, I will draw on your memory, and using the Captain's mind as a channel, present the image to Spock. If he reacts as you believe, he will enter a healing trance, and the danger will be over."

McCoy nodded his understanding, and moved to stand beside Sarek, who explained to Kirk what he intended to do.

"I am aware, Captain, that you have some experience with the mind link. Reach for it as you would normally do, and I will supply the power your mind lacks. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

Kirk's lips were white, but his hands were steady as he laid them on Spock's face.

This time, it was easier; his own wistful appeal, strengthened by Sarek's power, enabled him to slip through Spock's defences, deep into his mind.

//Spock, answer me, please.//

//Jim, you should not have done this; it is too late. Leave me.//

//I cannot. I... need you.//

Sarek had been waiting until Spock's attention was fully occupied with Kirk's presence in his mind. While he waited he had been drawing on McCoy's memory and emotions; now he linked them to Kirk's, and with irresistible force sent the image crashing into Spock's unprotected brain. Jim's grief and desolation, McCoy's agony of mind, were shown to him in all their naked cruelty. Most horrifying of all, he was forced to see that despite the barriers Spock had thought sufficient to protect him, Kirk too had been trapped by his conviction that only death would release him from his conflict. The link had gone deeper than either had realised; he saw through McCoy's eyes Jim's attempt on his own life, and understood at last that for his friend's sake he must live - Jim's sanity, if not his life, would not survive the severance of the link. The shock of comprehension was devastating. Spock's cry of anguish snapped the contact instantly; Kirk would have fallen but for McCoy's arm around him, and even Sarek staggered and had to clutch the bed for support.

After that one convulsive shudder Spock again lay unmoving. McCoy helped Kirk to sit on the next bed, then turned back to his patient. He worked busily for a moment, then glanced across at Sarek.

"The healing trance?" he questioned.

"Yes, the Captain has succeeded. Spock will awaken in a few hours. Now, if you will forgive me, I would like to rest."

"Yes, of course. Nurse Chapel! Oh, there you are. Please conduct Ambassador Sarek to the guest quarters. I'll see you later, sir. By the way, Nurse, tell the crew there's no word of Mr. Spock yet - we'll see how he is when he comes round. Jim, I want you in bed - now!"

McCoy was back in top form, issuing orders, comments, instructions on all sides. Within a very short time he had Kirk sedated and asleep; Sickbay was very quiet now, and peaceful after the tension of the last few hours. McCoy sat down, his watchful gaze moving between his two sleeping patients. He was still uneasy about what would happen when Spock awoke, but for the moment it was enough that he had decided to live.

PART 4 - ULTIMATUM WITHDRAWN

"I said no, Ambassador, and I meant no!" McCoy's blue eyes flashed dangerously as he faced Sarek across the desk in his office. "You will be informed when Spock is well enough to be visited. I'm still in charge here, and I won't have my patients..." He broke off as the intercom sounded. "McCoy here. Yes, Nurse?" He listened for a moment. "I'll be right there. Excuse me, sir; I won't be long." Nodding abruptly to Sarek he left the office.

After a moment the Vulcan rose and moved to the door; it was slightly ajar, and he could see into Sickbay. Spock's bed was clearly visible from this position. As he had expected, his son was not alone; Kirk sat with him. Each held the other's face between his hands - obviously their minds were closely linked. Sarek could not bring himself to interrupt that silent communion - indeed, he should not have been witnessing it at all - but he had a decision to make. The question of Spock's future still had to be resolved. He wanted his son to return to Vulcan, but he had now seen for himself the depth of their commitment to each other's interests; he had not thought that so close a link was possible with a Human. He had learned enough to realise that to insist on Spock's obedience would destroy not only his son, but Kirk too - so strong a link could not easily be broken.

As he watched the two men drew apart, their hands resting now on each other's shoulders. Their eyes met, and held; after a moment Spock said very quietly,

"You understand now, Jim?"

"Yes. There's... no way to say it, is there?"

"Only in our thoughts."

"What will you do now?"

A faint sigh, that scarcely reached the unseen listener. "I must go back... to Vulcan. I can't fight any more, Jim; Sarek is... too strong, and I am... Vulcan, after all. The marriage... I will do as best I can." Then, urgently. "But you must live, Jim. Promise me."

"I will - somehow. At least I'll know that you're alive."

"Congratulations, Sarek. You've broken him at last. Quite an achievement, isn't it?"

The Vulcan turned to meet McCoy's accusing stare. "Yes, you've won."

But tell me, is it worth it? I don't know who you'll take back to Vulcan, but it won't be the Spock we all know and - yes - love. You'll have your Vulcan son at last, but you'll have to forgive me if I mourn for the man you've destroyed. Then there's Jim. Oh yes, he'll survive - but he'll be different too. I think I prefer him as he was."

Sarek had intended to protest, to deny the doctor's words, but he could not - they were true. The Spock who returned with him to Vulcan would not be the same man who had written that letter he had read such a short time ago. To survive the future Sarek had planned for him, Spock would have to kill his Human side, finally and completely - it would not be an easy death. He thought of Amanda - what had he been about to do to her, and to the son she had given him? He was fiercely proud of his son - he could admit that now to himself, if to no-one else - yet had been prepared to destroy him, to force him to conform to an artificial ideal. For a moment he visualised a totally Vulcan Spock, and knew that he had deceived himself - he wanted his son as he was.

That knowledge enabled him to meet McCoy's eyes. "You are right, Doctor. Will you permit me to speak to Spock now? I should be glad of your presence - both you and Captain Kirk should hear what I have to say."

McCoy searched his face, then pushed open the door. As their footsteps came closer, the two men looked up; slowly Kirk reached out and laid a reassuring hand on Spock's arm. The gesture was not lost on Sarek. He spoke quickly.

"I ask forgiveness, Spock. I find that I have made a grave error of judgement."

Hope flamed in the hazel eyes; fearful of betraying emotion, the dark eyes were quickly veiled.

"It is not easy to admit to a mistake - I have made one. I sought to make you something you are not. Captain, you spoke the truth - I valued Spock's Humanity, yet almost destroyed it. You are free from all pressures, Spock. It is my wish now that you select your own way in life. T'Pol must learn, as I have learned, that you are not to be judged by wholly Vulcan standards. If you decide to return to Vulcan, you will be welcome; if you prefer to remain with Starfleet, you have my permission and my blessing. It may sound strange to you, Spock, but in this matter - choose as your heart directs you."

There was no need to ask for Spock's decision in words; the quiet joy in the dark eyes said it all.

"I am content. Now I must return to Vulcan. Live long, my son - and prosper."

As he turned to go, two hands detained him.

"Thank you, father."

Sarek inclined his head, and turned to Kirk.

"Sarek... thank you... for everything."

The Vulcan hesitated, then lightly touched the hand that lay on his sleeve.

"Goodbye, Captain. I... wish you well. Doctor, perhaps you will accompany me to the transporter?"

Somehow the news had already spread through the ship. As he walked the corridors with McCoy, Sarek could sense the overwhelming joy and gratitude from the Humans he passed. He could understand now the position Spock held in the hearts of the crew - they had instinctively felt what it had taken him so long to see, Spock's unique and very personal goodness and

honesty.

In the transporter room he exchanged farewells with McCoy.

"Goodbye, Ambassador. And from all of us... thank you."

"I should thank you, Doctor. You have enabled me to correct the wrong I did my son. Farewell."

As the shimmer of the transporter died away, McCoy turned back towards Sickbay. Like Sarek, he too had finally come to realise what the existence of the link meant for Kirk and Spock. It was at once hazard and safeguard, danger and security, rendering them vulnerable, yet granting to both these lonely men the sanctuary of each other's mind where fear, loneliness and pain would be quietly met and healed.

The price of such a friendship was high - few would be prepared to pay it - but they had considered the risks worthwhile, knowing the value of the unity they shared. And in his heart, McCoy could only approve their choice.

I did not understand.
 How could he choose
 When either choice
 Forced him to reject
 A half of what he is?
 Jim Kirk was right -
 I knew - or thought I knew -
 Exactly what I wanted ~~of him~~,
 And I made sure he knew.
 How could I be so foolish as forget
 The Human qualities that attracted me
 And made me go against all custom
 When I chose to marry Amanda?
 Spock has those qualities too,
 Though deeper hidden; so that I,
 Until today, never realised
 How much they are a part of him.
 The Humans knew it, though;
 And I find myself honoured
 That they should hold my son
 In such respect.

T'Pol, I have decided.
 Spock has a duty to Vulcan, yes;
 One day he will fulfill it.
 But that day
 Must come when he so chooses,
 Not when we
 Decree it.
 It is perhaps a new idea
 But now I realise -
I chose my own path in life
 When I selected a Human mate;
 It is only just
 That I permit my son
 To do the same.
 He chooses to remain
 In Starfleet -
 I concur.