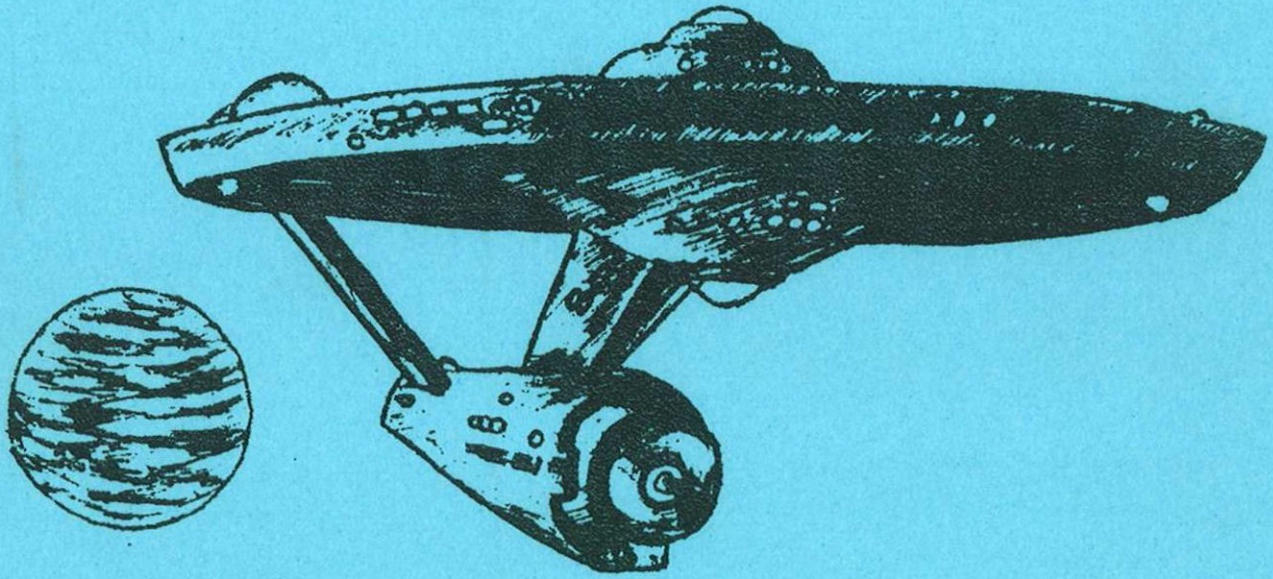


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ENTERPRISE -



PERSONAL LOG 3

a STAR TREK
fanzine

C O N T E N T S

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Artwork -- Paula Mathai P34, 36.

A Scotpress publication

Editors -- Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini

Typing -- Sheila Clark

Proofreading -- Sheila Clark (sorry -- I can't catch my own spelling mistakes!)

Printing -- Janet Quarton & James T.

Collating -- Sheila's Chain Gang -- Cory King, Frances Abernethy, Allison

Rooney, Lorraine Goodison, Hilde McCabe.

Distracting -- Shona (Must you pat that typewriter instead of me?)

Enterprise -- Personal Log 3 is put out by Scotpress and is available from
 Sheila Clark
 6 Craignill Cottages
 Strathmartine
 by Dundee
 Scotland.

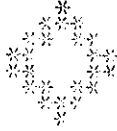
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MINE HONOUR IS MINE ENEMY

by

L A Spencer



"Then it is decided? The Vulcan is to die?" The cold face regarded each member of the family council in turn. "The T'Kau'Kalifee is to be issued?"

Four heads nodded assent.

"And our champion?"

"Our...champion, M'Klionis, is to be the cult of Kalthos. That...black demon...is ever hungry for blood... The Federation knows little more than superstitious myth regarding the cult - the Vulcan will suspect nothing; it is customary for the challenger to name the appointed place. Kalthos is on the borders of the Neutral Zone - a logical selection."

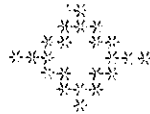
"Then you will repay his...honour...in kind? It is well Lord."

"I am pleased that you approve... But you, S'Tal - you do not approve?"

The recently promoted Commander shifted somewhat uneasily on his feet as he stood at attention. Lord Santul did not turn his head, not did the harsh voice alter too perceptibly...but sufficiently, nonetheless. S'Tal moistened his lips, then straightened, annoyed at the acknowledgement of his fear; but then, only a fool would not fear Santul. He forced himself to reply firmly.

"Naturally I approve, my Lord - who, after all, should hate the Vulcan more than I?"

"Indeed, S'Tal. It is decided. Let it be done."



Captain James T. Kirk stepped down from the transporter pad, attempting with some commendable success to control an irresistible impulse to grin delightedly, contenting himself with a tiny, somewhat secret smile.

"Welcome back, Captain."

"Thank you, Mr. Kyle. Er - I take it Mr. Spock has not yet beamed aboard?"

"No, sir. You're the first back on board - with the exception of Mr. Scott that is; he said he intended studying a new manual in his quarters." Kyle omitted to mention that secreted with the Chief Engineer was a fresh batch of Scotch specially imported from Earth and obtained from Scotty's regular supplier stationed on the engineer's favourite Starbase - from whence Kirk had prematurely returned, cutting short his first shore leave in too long a time.

"Good, good," Kirk murmured absently. As he made to leave, he turned again to the transporter chief. "Oh - I wish to be informed the moment Mr. Spock beams up, Mr. Kyle - immediately, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

Kirk nodded, satisfied, and left, making another valiant effort to control the treacherous quirk of his lips. He had been somewhat surprised at Spock's sudden, rather abrupt request for shore leave to attend to a 'family matter', as Spock had described it; Kirk had been concerned, uneasy, at his friend's vagueness, but the Vulcan had gently reassured him that it was a trifling legal matter.

Still, thought Kirk, it had permitted him to attend to some pressing private business of his own.

Now, within the privacy of his quarters, Kirk at last allowed his face to

break into a wide grin and he laughed softly, delightedly, as he carefully removed the fragile parchment from its protective cover.

He held the exquisitely illuminated scroll aloft to inspect it, unfurling its length with exaggerated care; an ancient Vulcan manuscript, it was an epic poem - the An'kat - dating from the time of Surak and originally penned by one of Spock's many illustrious ancestors.

The archaic High Vulcan script meant nothing to Kirk, who experienced difficulty reading modern Vulcan, but Spock, he knew, had been searching for this contemporary copy of an original preserved in the museum of the Vulcan Academy, for some years. It had been by pure chance that Kirk had encountered a dealer in Vulcan antiques, an attractive Terran girl who had acquired the much coveted masterpiece and was now considering a public auction.

However, due to a little strategic wining and dining, a lot of irresistible charm and a great many credits, Kirk had gained the promise of a private sale. This accomplished, he now finally had acquired a birthday present his beloved Vulcan would appreciate. Whatever Spock's stated attitude towards the illogical Human custom, he had never failed to enchant Kirk with his always appropriate choice of birthday gift for his Captain. A wave of pure contentment suffused him, succeeded by a rush of bubbling child-like joy in life which was so much a hidden part of the supremely self-possessed, confident Captain Kirk. Tonight would be a dual celebration - an occasion marking Spock's birthday, known only to Kirk, and a time to talk together uninterruptedly, a luxury rarely permitted the best partnership in Starfleet.

For some time the Captain had experienced some serious degree of concern for his friend; ever since news of the suicide of their...adversary, the Romulan Commander, had penetrated Federation Intelligence sources, Spock had been...with-
drawn was perhaps the best word, Kirk mused. Natural, of course, he had reasoned, for Kirk knew that Spock had found it difficult to avoid his feelings of self-recrimination for what he regarded as his own contribution to the Commander's suicide.

The latter's career had been brutally terminated by the Praetorship for her failure to protect the cloaking device, and finally, in the face of public condemnation, her strong sense of honour had driven the Romulan to what she perceived to be the only honourable solution. Kirk had registered Spock's abhorrence of his necessary deception and he alone had witnessed the First Officer's sorrow at the results of his actions, despite Kirk's constant gentle reminders of the Federation lives their elaborate scheme had saved.

However, of late the Vulcan had seemed less tense. Whatever other torments had been assailing him seemed to have been subdued and his problems resolved by that meticulous mind. His Captain was therefore looking forward to their traditional quiet birthday dinner together, and his intense anticipation of Spock's pleasure on receiving Kirk's special gift to him caused another expansive grin to form itself anew on the expressive face.

Kirk frowned and contacted the transporter room again. "Has Mr. Spock not yet been beamed back aboard?"

"No, sir...er...sorry, Captain," answered Kyle, feeling a ridiculous surge of guilt for his constant negative answers to that question.

"Very good, Mr. Kyle. Please inform me as soon as he does request beam-up." He snapped off the intercom, looking worriedly across at McCoy sprawled in a nearby chair. "Bones - he's never been this late! It's rare for him to take a shore leave at all...he's certainly never overdue..."

"Stop worrying. Jim. He's probably having a wild time of it in the Computer Records Office."

"Bones, I'm serious." Kirk came to a decision. "I'm alerting Starbase Security."

"Jim, don't you think you're bein' a mite - "

"Bones - when Spock says he'll be back on board for a certain pre-arranged time, he is back on board. He keeps better time than the ship's chronometer. And...he knew I'd...be waiting..." His voice tailed off, Kirk looking a shade embarrassed - he knew he did tend to over-react where Spock's welfare was concerned, but... "Dammit, McCoy - you know I'm right!"

"You really are worried, aren't you, Jim?"

Kirk nodded earnestly. "I mean it, Bones. I've got a bad feeling..."

He was interrupted by Uhura's voice. "Captain, I'm sorry to disturb you, but... A personal communication from Mr. Spock, sir."

"Let's have it then, Lieutenant." Kirk snapped on his viewer, throwing a look of relief at McCoy as he did so. "Maybe now we'll find out just what exactly he has been up to down there..."

Kirk's relieved expression was rapidly superseded by one of tense concern as he noted the stern features of his friend, features set in too-sombre lines; and he sensed McCoy's own sudden worry in the doctor's abrupt movement to his Captain's side.

"Captain, I am..." The Vulcan began smoothly, then hesitated for what was, for him, an uncharacteristically long moment. The dark eyes took on a haunted look as he struggled to overcome the sudden unexpected lapse, whilst Kirk, sensitive to, yet helpless in his friend's obvious distress, unconsciously seized McCoy's arm in an almost bone-snapping grip.

Spock looked down for several moments then, raising slightly calmer eyes, resumed in the formal tones of the First Officer of the Enterprise.

"Captain, I regret that...I shall be unable to join you this evening..." Spock stopped again, then, shaking his sleek head slightly, he looked directly out of the screen into his Captain's eyes, a small, somewhat rueful smile curving the thin lips.

"Ah, Jim...why can I never quite bring myself to lie to you - even when it is for your good...when it is...logical? But - my friend - how could I say farewell with a lie?"

At these words Kirk's grip on McCoy's arm tightened painfully, but the surgeon, now equally perturbed, appeared to remain oblivious of the discomfort.

"Jim - I have received a summons to...T'Kau'Kalifee from the family of the Romulan Commander. T'Kau'Kalifee is a custom, most ancient, common to both Vulcans and Romulans, and is invoked on the rare occasions that the family of a suicide or murder victim consider there to be sufficient grounds for the vengeance ritual in the form of an honourable combat."

At the word 'combat', McCoy gave a heartfelt groan.

"Vulcan outlawed the practice long ago - but this form of combat still persists amongst the Romulan warrior hierarchy, in which the Commander was highly placed.

"Failure to comply with the demand for combat draws dishonour upon one's name, and - more to the point - the vengeance is then aimed at the family of the offending party, and...at his friends; I cannot accept such a risk to my family - and certainly not to you, Jim.

"I therefore go to the appointed place as soon as I have completed this message to you...which I will arrange to have dispatched at least several hours following my departure; so do not attempt to follow me, my friend - it would be a pointless exercise. If I...survive, I shall return before the ship's scheduled departure; should I not return, know this... I...love you, James Kirk. I always have, I always will...and I will be at your side in spirit, forever." There was silence, then - "Do you recall the An-Kat, Jim?"

"My friend, thou hast been my shield,
 Thou hast been my fortress;
 The sharing of the battle has eased its scars
 The sharing of lives gives to both new meaning.
 Yet the sharing of our souls in love
 Is as to standing naked in the heart of God.

"Jim - keep safe - and seek out...Bones; he will help you to face...what you may have to. And Jim - tell him...I valued his friendship greatly; give him my gratitude for his...gentleness when it was...mutely sought...and just as mutely given; and for his...unique, shall we say; his unique wit - in those times when it was...necessary." Spock smiled slightly. "I had thought...I could not say these things; I am glad they have been said. There must be no pretence between us now, Jim - not now. Farewell, my dearest friend. Live long and prosper, Jim." The Vulcan raised a none-too-steady hand in the Vulcan salute and the tape ended abruptly as the dark eyes filled.

McCoy was the first to recover this time; he attempted to ease a shaking Jim Kirk into the nearest chair, but was violently thrust aside.

"No! No! Dammit, no! I'm not... I won't lose him - not like this. I've got to find him - I will find him!" Kirk took a deep, steadying breath. "I know I can find him. I know I can. I know." The deceptively firm voice shuddently trembled. "Bones - I..." It was barely more than a whisper, but McCoy understood immediately.

"I'll be in sickbay when you need me." The doctor left swiftly, quietly, as Kirk's overwhelming unhappiness sought outlet. McCoy knew that Kirk would waste little time on tears while there was still a chance - but the warring emotions suppressed within him needed to be released before Kirk could think with a clear head; and McCoy also knew that Kirk, for too long the model Starship Captain, brave, strong, decisive, always in control, still permitted only one man to see him cry; and if that one man were to be snatched from him... Those two belonged together as though they had been fashioned by the gods as two halves to join as a whole in their immortal purpose. McCoy doubted that either would survive the other's death as an intact personality - if they survived at all, he thought glumly.

On reaching sickbay, he slumped behind his desk, laying a heavy, throbbing head on his hands. "Damn your Vulcan combats, Spock," he muttered, and felt the dull ache in his heart increase.

"Transporter room to Captain Kirk."

The words, repeated twice, gradually penetrated Kirk's fear-numbed mind. He was seized by a sudden wild hope. Had Spock returned?

"Kirk here." God, his voice was shaking.

"Kyle, sir. Mr. Sulu requests beam-up - with a Romulan, sir. Commander S'Tal - he says he must speak with you...about Mr. Spock."

"Have them beamed aboard, Mr. Kyle. I'll be right there - and have a security team sent to the transporter room at the double."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk's alert movement reflected the new purpose in his mind; then, insidiously, the fear returned. What if S'Tal brought news that Spock... No! Spock was alive. In his soul, Kirk knew Spock still lived; his certainty strengthened him. He knew that no distance of time or space could reduce the strength and power of their bond - if Spock died, were they separated by a million light years, a part of him would die too...and he would know.

Kirk strode into the transporter room and appraised the Romulan for a long moment.

"So -- what's your news?" Kirk was in no mood to be courteous to any Romulan.

"You know of the T'Kau'Kalifee issued to your officer Spock?"

Kirk nodded. "Yes. Continue."

"I came, not out of concern for your treacherous officer -- I too would have taken great pleasure in killing him -- but only in honourable combat; the Vulcan acted as a soldier though he blinded the soldier in...her with soft words and... empty promises with as much substance as the desert dreams of his planet." The Romulan paused a moment, his eyes looking into another time; then, sighing, and seeming to shake himself from his sudden lethargy, he resumed.

"Your officer has been tricked, Captain Kirk. He and the acknowledged champion of the Commander's family agreed to meet on the border world of Kalthos. However, the co-ordinates he has been given will ensure that he trespass the sacred grove of the native Kalthites...and for this blasphemy they will certainly kill him. The cult practised on Kalthos is abhorrent and degenerate even to us -- to battle-weary Romulans; but there are those in positions of power who find the threat of death as a victim of the sacrificial cult is a powerful weapon against presumptive enemies, and an...intriguing diversion for those of...primitive tastes.

"I would willingly have fought and defeated the Vulcan...but I will not be party to the dishonouring of our most ancient custom... I am not of the warrior hierarchy, but yet my family is respected; I will not dishonour my name."

Kirk stared at him, then said quietly, "I suppose I should thank you."

"There is no need. I have no desire for your thanks, Human. I have no love for you or your Commander Spock.

"I have a cruiser at my disposal," he continued indifferently. "I am willing to take you to Kalthos."

"Why?" demanded Kirk curiously, a shade suspicious. "You're being... unusually magnanimous."

"I have stated my reasons. The proposed action is dishonourable, and thus dishonours her memory...and -- " a trace of pain threaded the almost whispered words -- "because...she would have wished it of me."

"You loved her," Kirk said suddenly.

The Romulan regarded him icily. "Do you accept my offer?"

"Unreservedly. And...my medical officer; we may...we may need him. Are you willing that he should accompany us?"

The Commander gave a curt nod. "Summon him, then -- and waste no more time."

Kirk reached out impulsively, to grip the Romulan's wrist. "Thank you," he said. "We may yet save his life."

The cold face almost imperceptibly reacted -- then the pain of loss returned and he tore his hand free. "Then in this," he replied harshly, "my honour has been my enemy."



Spock sighed inwardly; he had expected nothing else, of course...but the threat to his family, to Jim... The T'Kau'Kalifee demanded response, even when it was doubtful that one's opponents were men of honour.

Now, he had obviously violated some significant local custom and judging from the reaction of his primitively-dressed, green-tinted captors the violation was of major proportions.

He was already thoroughly beaten and believed he was experiencing some internal bleeding; nonetheless it was quite obvious to the Vulcan that this was merely a whetting of bloodthirsty appetites, an hors d'oeuvre prior to a much more imaginative and probably grossly unpleasant punishment. At least, he consoled himself, he had finally been successful in tuning out the too-perceptive Human... Jim would know something was wrong by now, of course; he might even have received the message. Considering the tape again, Spock uncharacteristically bit his lip. Had he gone too far, as the Terran phrase had it? No; unconsciously he gave an actual shake of his head. He had known he would not return; he could not have borne parting from his friend with those words unsaid.

He spoke them softly now, like a mantra, some form of comforting litany as he was dragged through the remaining knot of his torturers into what he presumed was to be the place of execution.

"Jim...I love you..."

He was now in a small grass-covered arena, surrounded by irregularly-shaped obelisks bearing weird, grotesque carvings depicting graphic scenes of bloodshed and slaughter. Towering above the small circular area was a huge, demonically grinning idol, its talons, superbly executed, noted the ever curious Spock, bearing the writhing bodies of its victims, the massive squat feet crushing the heads of enemies. Spock wondered fleetingly who were the original creators of this bizarre temple; clearly, however, neither they - nor these, presumably their regressed descendants, were of an altruistic inclination.

The Vulcan then noticed the bloodstained slab almost at the feet of the stone monster; a channel slid gracefully away from the slab to lead into a burnished receptacle set into the ground directly beneath the idol. Spock was thrust forward and forced to lie flat on his back on the slab, his arms jerked painfully up and back to be held securely at the elbows by large iron shackles. The purpose of the channel was now only too clear to the intended victim. Spock repressed a shudder at the thought of his death...silently bleeding away his life to feed that...obscenity.

Suddenly, Spock became aware of the silence which had fallen; his captors now formed a semi-circle about him, their repressed excitement evident in the tension of their bodies. Slowly, as one, they began to chant...a deep-throated rumble which slowly climbed to a shrieking crescendo as they fell to their knees, trance-like, at the appearance of their High Priest. The latter was bedecked in priceless jewels and heavy imposing robes, which did not speak of the tribal culture Spock had assumed thus far. However, for once his curiosity was dampened by the sight of the glittering blade reflecting slivers of bright sunlight. Spock felt a sudden and totally illogical anger at having to die on such a beautiful day. Strange, he thought, immediately controlling. Strange how the mind wanders at such moments.

There! It was done. The pain had been surprisingly slight and now the green blood spurted into the finely chiselled grooves of the channel to the accompaniment of wild shrieks. Then they converged; he felt their hands upon him, stroking, frenziedly caressing. He felt the softness of a woman's lips exploring his now naked body, felt her thrust from him by another, then another... His soul cried out to be allowed some vestige of his dignity as a Vulcan, a man, in dying. Then the growing weakness dulled his physical perceptions, slowly spreading through his mind and gradually coherent thought ceased... He called the name through the blackness...



Kirk strode across the bridge, jerking S'Tal round to face his desperate, haunted eyes. The Romulan regarded him questioningly, controlling his anger and somewhat surprised at the strength of this Human.

"What are your people doing? My First Officer is dying down there - I can feel him... He's dying, and I can't..." The voice tailed off for a moment and a lost look crossed his face, to be replaced almost immediately by the same desperate anger as before. "He's down there, you told us...your sensors must have registered him by now..." The voice faded again, this time open suspicion sharpened its pitch as he resumed. "But...maybe that's what you want...you've already said you'd have killed Spock yourself, given the opportunity. Are you taking that opportunity?" There was murder in his eyes now.

"Jim." McCoy moved to join them, positioning himself between the two men as they glared at each other, Kirk barely restraining his need to lash out physically in his sick terror for Spock. "Jim - Vulcan readings are almost identical to Romulan, remember? They're doing their best, I'm sure."

Kirk looked at him blankly, then nodded, flashing a brief look of apology to the Romulan who, to his own intense annoyance, barely controlled a desire to reach out, comfort this alien.

The Captain of the Enterprise swallowed, tried to control his intense grief as the faint cry which had echoed through his mind faded into emptiness.

Then he heard the words he would have given his life for.

"We have a Vulcan life form registering on our sensors," announced S'Tal, turning to face the Enterprise men, succeeding in keeping his tone blandly disinterested.

"Get him up! Now!" yelled Kirk.

S'Tal nodded to Sub-commander LuKtall. "Lock on. Beam the Vulcan aboard."

Kirk and McCoy set off at a run. As they burst into the transporter room the prostrate form of the Vulcan shimmered into existence.

"Spock! Spock!" Kirk's voice broke as he raised the dark head in gentle hands, taking in the Vulcan's intense pallor.

"Alive," said McCoy briefly. "Just."

Kirk's gaze took in the torn wrists as McCoy set about stopping the copious bleeding with calm professionalism.

"God! Oh, God!" Kirk repeated the desperate prayer over and over again as he realised what had been done to Spock. Then a horrifying thought struck him. "Bones - he'll need massive transfusions... Spock's blood - T-Negative...Human factors...unique..." He floundered, panic-stricken.

"Take it easy, Jim," McCoy told him gently, continuing to work on Spock. "I'm a doctor, remember. I had the sense to bring along a supply of compatible blood, just in case... The transfusion unit is all set up in sickbay. Don't worry - he's going to make it. But it was a near-run thing," he added, almost to himself.

Kirk was too relieved to reply; he merely laid a shaking hand upon the well-loved face - the face he had thought never to see again. As they lifted Spock's limp form onto a waiting trolley, Kirk gave thanks in prayer, sincerely for the first time in his life. This time he had had to stand by and hope for a miracle - and the miracle had happened. Spock had been given back to him.

As he rose to follow the little party to sickbay, he paused to look towards a silent S'Tal.

"Whatever your reasons, Commander - I thank you...and I shall remember this service from an...honourable enemy."



"Happy...belated...birthday, Spock." Kirk smiled as he watched his friend unwrap and open his present with deft fingers.

Jim Kirk knew he would never forget the gasp of pure pleasure the Vulcan permitted to escape his lips, nor the sincere gratitude in the dark eyes as Spock unrolled the ancient scroll.

"Yet the sharing of our souls in love
Is as to standing naked in the heart of God,"
Kirk quoted softly. "I love you, too, Spock."

He watched his friend's complexion tint slowly to a deeper green; he smiled his understanding and laid a steadying hand against an over-active muscle in the thin cheek. "I don't want you to change, my friend - I love you as you are, but it is good to know that there is a place where we can both say what tongues are too clumsy to portray in mere words. Link with me, Spock - please."

The Vulcan nodded gravely and laid gentle hands upon Kirk's face. As always in the link, each caught his breath in the depth of commitment he found in the other; Spock saw Kirk's life, his command career - even his beloved ship, seen now as only a backdrop to the joint soul journey upon which he had embarked with Spock so long ago...the Vulcan trembled at Kirk's love and need of him. Their love so expressed suddenly burst from any remaining barriers in both men, and, burning through the meld, forged them together forever, immortal in their bond.

Physically weakened by the power of the meld, their arms went supportively about each other in a close embrace. Finally, after a long silence while they allowed themselves time to register the world beyond, they drew apart.

Kirk spoke first. "I might never have felt...this..." He gestured helplessly, abandoned the search for words; "Thank God for S'Tal... It was so close this time... If only I could have...repaid him - somehow."

Spock silently handed him a refilled glass and raised his own in salute. "To honour," he toasted.

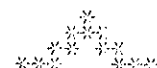
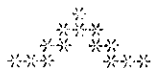
Kirk nodded, his eyes bright, and echoed him softly.

The two regarded each other in open, mutual love for a few moments; then Kirk's irrepressible grin swamped his face. He rubbed his hands together. "Let's eat - I'm starving."

"Indeed? Dr. McCoy and I were only recently considering how very well nourished you have appeared of late."

The Vulcan gracefully dodged the offending cushion and followed his chuckling Captain to a sumptuously laden table.

Spying some of his favourite traditional Vulcan dishes, Spock wondered whether perhaps there was something to be said for this custom of birthdays, after all...



In the months that followed Spock's safe return to the Enterprise, Kirk became increasingly aware of his need of this man, this beloved Vulcan, this other half of his soul. He came to know with a greater certainty than ever before that should his friend be taken from him, he would soon willingly follow him and rejoiced quietly in the comfort of that final solution.

The realisation of the depth of his feeling had, somewhat to his surprise, not shocked him as it once might have done; the mutual acceptance of their bond, their admission of love and above all the soul-trembling memory of his meld with Spock had given Kirk the strength to admit to himself what he had instinctively known from the beginning; he, and indeed Spock, were neither complete without the other; his customary agnosticism was reviewed as he recognised that something

more than Spock's 'random factors' had brought them together across the vastness between the stars, cultures, natures which separated them.

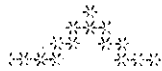
As he permitted himself the luxury of accepting his need, his willing dependence, his overwhelming love, James Kirk's soul grew outwards towards the Vulcan and as its sunlight drenched the arid loneliness surrounding brief oases, the long-denied, long suppressed emotions unfurled, reached back to draw the light in, flooding the inner void; and in their shared moments of quiet privacy they were open to each other; they learned to touch, to smile, to laugh, to exult in their sharing and in the knowledge that their completeness would survive their separate individualities. They knew their love to be rare and special, and accepted it as the most precious gift of the gods whose purpose in their unity they served as they spread their light through the galaxy.

Neither suspected that the cloud of hatred which had darkened their lives once before still hovered upon a distant horizon.

That horizon shimmered blood red above the ochre deserts of Romulus. There, were also two joined by their need...an all-consuming need to advance the cause of their family, the one thread uniting them in the dark conflicts of their souls.

One had conceived a hatred for the Vulcan almost to match Kirk's love for him. He had plotted his death and failed, his dishonour betrayed by the honour of Spock's enemy; thus his hatred grew, his need to stifle, to destroy, a nobility he despised prompted more obsessive plotting. Maddened by his failure to destroy that which he so feared, he turned his anger upon the informer LuKtall who had whispered treacherously of S'Tal in hope of advancement.

Now this apprentice sought out his increasingly soulless master in the hidden alcoves of the Romulan Citadel, and wore the tattered honour of his family like a beggar who would be king...



Part 2 -- Be Duty Thine Honour

Battle hatred looms blacker than the unfurling wings of night;
Still the darkest void is confounded by a single candle's light.

Couplet from the Prelude,
The An'Kat of Suvar

"Sub-commander LuKtall has been satisfactorily...despatched, I presume?"

"Indeed, my Lord... His services merited the attentions of our most... inventive technicians."

"You are well pleased, I see; but you seemed equally pleased with his information, M'Klionis. S'Tal would have gone unsuspected without it."

"A man without honour is not fit to live, my Lord; I may not be accounted a scrupulous man...but to see a man so abase himself, to the point where he will betray his own commander..." M'Klionis sliced a contemptuous hand downwards. "I reserve the right to rid the Empire of such a liability - such a man would not tarry in crossing to the enemy should he see advancement in it. LuKtall is no loss."

"All this talk of honour... I believe you simply enjoy your work." Santul regarded him coolly, a little speculatively. "Such passions can also betray, nephew. Tread softly."

M'Klionis returned the cold gaze with boldness. "Do I have my Lord's permission to deal with S'Tal?"

"Ah... S'Tal... And Spock..."

"The Vulcan still lives...and while he lives, the honour of our family is

the subject of common talk." The fire returned to the dark eyes.

Santul nodded slowly. "In this I must agree with you...our enemies feed on our shame - and our weakness. Yes, the Vulcan must die." He paused, considering.

"You are aware of the approaching discussions between ourselves and the Federation which aim at promoting...greater understanding between us." The resonant voice was cool with sarcasm. "You may not, however, be aware, nephew, that the proposed conference is to take place here - within the walls of the Citadel."

M'Klionis, his quick mind now rife with speculative thoughts, forced himself to wait patiently as his Clanmaster gathered his own thoughts.

"As a diplomatic gesture," Santul resumed, speaking more quickly now, "would it not be fitting that the Federation representatives be escorted by the Pride of Starfleet...the Enterprise?"

"This could be arranged?" M'Klionis demanded, excitedly.

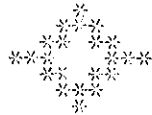
"Do you doubt my abilities, nephew?"

The young man laughed softly, a sinister, mirthless sound, inappropriate for one of his youth. "Who knows better than I that you excel in your craft, my Lord."

Santul nodded, well pleased with himself. "And now the lesser problem of S'Tal... What...bumpkin...did not he have a sister in training as a T'Kyananai...that is so, is it not?"

"True, my Lord. Despite her low birth, her beauty recommended her to the Selectors... She has not as yet been presented to the Praetor...but she is ripe for bedding."

"Good. Then bed her. You, and your guard, and whoever else would know her; she is not yet a full T'Kyananai and is thus beyond the shelter of Praetorian Wardship. Yes, bed this ripe young virgin, M'Klionis - while her bumpkin brother watches. Then, as he dies the death of a peasant, his dishonour will be complete - as was that of your sister."



"Your move, Spock," prompted Kirk, grinning.

"I'm aware of that, Jim," retorted the Vulcan, somewhat stiffly. "I presume however that I am not being timed."

"I've got you, Spock - concede, you pig-headed Vulcan."

"Furthermore, I was not aware of anything porcine in my appearance, sir." The eyebrow lifted challengingly.

The ploy failed. "Don't play for time - you've lost, and you know it," chuckled Kirk, with infuriating smugness.

Spock glared at him severely. "Very well, in the face of such overwhelmingly illogical play - I concede."

"Spock, my friend, only you can make the winner feel he ought to have lost." Kirk rose from the board and stretched luxuriously, then sat back once more, surveying the board with insufferable self-satisfaction. He caught Spock's disgusted glance and grinned, totally unabashed.

"Well, everything seems to be going well so far... Never thought I'd say that, when the Enterprise was in orbit round Romulus. These Romulans aren't too bad once you get to know 'em...except maybe..."

"Santul?"

Kirk was not in the least surprised by his friend's insight; he had long ago accepted that he and Spock sometimes seemed to think with one mind. He cast a quick look at his friend's relaxed face; now was the time to get Spock to open up about what had been on his mind, he thought.

"Mmmm. Now my reservations are purely emotional...I just have a...a..."

"Feeling?" supplied Spock drily, well aware of Kirk's intentions; he considered a moment, then asked, his tone and expression careful, "And what does your...feeling...tell you, Jim?"

"That maybe Santul's not exactly as he presents himself."

"True -- but the same could be said for many politicians."

"But you distrust him too, Spock -- why?"

"Unfortunately, my reasons for distrusting the Praetor's aide are...similarly...subjective -- however, observation does indicate a certain unwarranted and therefore puzzling...insecurity...in the constant company of his kinsman M'Klionis." Spock paused, then closed his mouth a shade too firmly.

"Come on, Spock -- you know you can't keep it from me. What's on your mind? Whatever it is, you've been chewing at it since we arrived. I know you've no reason to love the Romulans for what they did to you -- " for a moment fury flamed in the autumn eyes. "If I ever found who..." He stopped again, knelt swiftly before his friend.

"Don't keep it from me -- not me, Spock."

The First Officer of the Enterprise looked into the eyes -- and knew he was lost.

"Very well...but Jim, you must promise me not to...lose your head, is, I believe, the appropriate term."

"I assure you, Commander, I am thoroughly attached to my head and have no intention of misplacing it." Kirk grinned in gently teasing mimicry of Spock's word games with his Captain.

Spock let it pass, simply assuming a slightly put upon expression.

"Go on, Spock," urged Kirk, serious now.

His friend nodded, reclining in his chair. "You may recall, Jim, that when I received the summons to the T'Kau'Kalifee from the Commander's family, all arrangements, as was proper, were conducted through a third party."

Kirk, tensing visibly at the mention of the challenge, nodded silently.

"Our clan names were ritually exchanged together with the laan'ti -- the ritual dagger of combat, and as custom dictates, the proposed champion was again erred to only by the collective clan name...but the agent of the T'Kau'Kalifee in an absent moment referred to a Lord M'Klionis. I have since verified that this is indeed the same M'Klionis who accompanies Santul so closely...and thus the reason for my disquiet of late."

Kirk's mobile mouth had thinned into a rigid line. "You mean...you mean that the filthy, murdering..." Kirk seized Spock's wrists, tracing the now barely visible scars, his dark memory of that day lit with terrifying clarity...those savage gashes, that rush of blood across the transporter pad, bleeding away a life dearer to him than his own... He gained control of his voice and a whiplash whisper of fury burst through the tightly closed lips.

"The man who did this to you...he's been on my ship?"

The Captain leaped up, to find his body encircled, restrained by arms whose power he rarely felt used against him. "Jim -- you can do nothing."

"Let me go, Spock. I've prayed for this... Let me go!" He struggled

futilely.

"And what will you do, Jim?" The Vulcan's voice was gentle. "They are within their own territory...they are vital to Federation hopes of a lasting peace; would you jeopardise such an opportunity merely to vent your anger?"

"I'm not a fool, Spock." Kirk somehow twisted free. "I'm a Starship Captain, dammit -- I live with compromise every day! Much as I would like to, I'm not going to throttle M'Klionis...but the Praetor must be told, must be made aware of the situation, before M'Klionis takes another shot at my First Officer! Maybe even tries to implicate the Federation in some low-down deal. No, Spock," Kirk said in his command voice. "The Praetor must be told."

Spock sighed inwardly. What was that Earth term...about being cruel to be kind. He tensed himself to feel Kirk's pain, and worse, the onrush of a more intense pain in the knowledge that he had inflicted it. "Then you condemn me to death." He spoke coolly, quietly.

The colour drained from Kirk's face as Spock's physical and emotional withdrawal swept through his soul like an arctic blast. Spock, alarmed, reached out to steady him as he swayed slightly. The Vulcan closed his eyes for a moment, shuddered, then without another word pulled the stunned Human into his arms.

"Forgive me, my friend. I fear for you... To oppose the family of so favoured and highly-placed a Romulan is to invite death." His arms closed tighter. "My fear for you made me hurt you. Forgive me."

Kirk tightened his own grip in comforting reassurance about the rigid shoulders until gradually they relaxed beneath his gentle hands.

When he spoke again, his voice was very soft. "Don't you think I know how you fear for me? That whatever you do, it is done for my sake. But Spock -- " He drew back, holding his friend at arm's length, searching the saddened face with loving, coaxing eyes. "Spock...I fear for you, now." His voice strengthened, regained its customary steady purpose. "Suppose you tell me what you meant -- about your being condemned to death if I go to the Praetor."

Spock lowered himself back into his chair. "It again concerns the T'Kau'Kalifee; by agreeing finally to respond to the challenge on Kalthos, I have since discovered that I was, in ignorance, breaking a prime law of Romulus; recall, the planet of Kalthos is prohibited territory to offworlders and low castes. To plead ignorance is no excuse; the sacrilege was committed, and as you are aware, the sociological development of the Romulan civilisation is unfortunately superseded by their rapid technological progress -- always a dangerous situation for any species. As a result of the increasing pace of change the somewhat barbaric customs nonetheless provide a steady if harsh social framework...contravention of such an important one as the sacred nature of Kalthos and the subsequent obscene cult which has grown from the original significance of that planet...such is punishable by a most unpleasant mode of execution.

"Should it be publicly revealed by my own Captain that I was in fact -- for whatever reason -- guilty of such a transgression, my death would follow swiftly, and fearing to disturb the present delicate balance of peace -- and moreover, in accordance with the Prime Directive, the Federation would be helpless.

"Furthermore, to accuse the highest family of Romulus of dishonour would invite your own death -- and probably death to Federation hopes of peace." The voice of the First Officer pleaded for understanding. "Do you understand now, Jim?"

"Yes. But I still say we watch M'Klionis like a hawk...but otherwise, you're right -- he's got us over a barrel." Kirk tightened his fingers around Spock's. "Sorry, Spock -- I guess I did lose my head."

His friend smiled. "No more than I would lose my logical head were our positions reversed."

"But...thanks for reminding me of my duty, Spock." The golden eyes lingered for a moment on the silent face, then Kirk stood abruptly. "Well - if we're going to make this...er...banquet, or feast, or whatever... Er, Spock..." Kirk opened his mouth, hesitated, then closed it again.

The Vulcan regarded him, amusement in the deep-set eyes. "In answer to your question, Jim - yes, these Romulan...feasts...are just what you've heard. You may even find yourself honoured with the gift of a T'Kyaranaï."

"T'Kyaranaï?"

"Wait and see, Jim. Should you indeed be so...er...favoured, you will be most pleasantly...entertained."

'Entertained', thought Kirk, was not the word; but then, he chuckled to himself, Spock of Vulcan had made a fine art of understatement.

"What amuses my Lord?" asked the emerald-sheen beauty lying sated in his arms.

Kirk looked appreciatively into the purple blackness of her eyes, and thought again; nice custom, this, honouring guests with such personal...entertainment. As good a word as any, he supposed.

"Oh, just remembering what a friend said to me a while back."

Jian raised herself on her elbow to look searchingly into his face. "Your eyes shine with great warmth, with great love, when you speak of this friend. I would I could kindle such a love as this in those eyes." She lay back against the muscular arm with a wistful sigh, which Kirk decided was pure coquetry rather than a genuine statement. He grinned at her.

"You're kindling just fine."

His lightness hurt her somehow; frowning a little, he kissed the frown from her forehead, traced a gentle finger slowly along the delicate line of her jaw, wondering again at the superior vulcanoid strength he knew was possessed by the slender body.

"As a T'kyaranaï, it is my duty, my honour, to please the Praetor and those men to whom he chooses to give me...but never until now...never have I sought for more than pleasure from the men I serve...but I think that I, or indeed anyone, will ever win such a love from you as does this one you speak of with your heart."

Kirk lifted his exploring mouth from the velvet-smooth neck, returned her gaze openly. "No. No-one ever will," he answered with quiet honesty.

Jian nodded, accepting; then, the moment gone, the seductive light back in her playful glance, she drew him to her once more.



"Has the Praetor reached his dotage that he crawls to these soft-bellied Federation fools? I must smile and primp like a woman to that Terran Captain... and share my table with Spock of Vulcan, he who shamed my sister. Why do we support this low-born fool? The seed of our family ruled on Romulus when the Praetor's fathers slept in the mountains!"

"Be still, M'Klionis, and hear me!" There was a sharp edge to Santul's voice which effectively silenced his volatile nephew. "I have no love for the Federation, but in this I must agree with the Praetor." Santul wearily held up a restraining hand. "Our world gains nothing from an alliance with the barren planets of Klingon...but an alliance with the Federation promises rich pickings,

and power to those with swift minds and watchful eyes. There is new thinking on these matters in the Citadel... The old ways are dying, M'Klionis. Our family will not die with them."

"Are we then to see our honour die? And Spock is not to die, is that what you say, Lord Santul?"

"Would I have contrived to bring the treacherous Vulcan to our world? By the Praetor's own consent, he is to die for the shame he brought to the clan; but be discreet, nephew - no blame must stain the Citadel. Follow him, watch him - let darkness be the sole witness to your revenge. I will not lose favour now. Make no mistake, M'Klionis - disobey me in this, be careless in your passions - and you will join your sister." The words rang cold around the ancient room.



As Kirk dressed, he allowed his mind to relive the pleasures of the previous night; it was a rewarding experience and his gaze moved leisurely over the satisfying rounded form still reclining temptingly upon the bed. Firmly, he returned his errant thoughts to the few routine duties to be attended to on his ship, to which Spock had returned with evident relief as soon as courtesy had permitted the previous evening. Kirk grinned at the memory of his very proper First Officer's hurried exit on becoming the focus of several young ladies of obvious attractions; the tall, elegantly handsome Vulcan was regarded as quite a prize, it seemed.

As he prepared to take his reluctant leave, a thought struck him. "Tell me, Jian - have you encountered an officer named S'Tal - a Starship commander. I was hoping to meet up with him - " He stopped suddenly. "What is it? What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I...I was startled. I thought you a...a stranger to our world."

"That's not it. It's something about S'Tal, isn't it? Tell me!" He grasped her wrists firmly, wryly reminding himself that she could most probably lay him out cold. As she twisted free, Kirk decided upon a different strategy to discover the truth.

Pulling her closer, his lips grazed her slim shoulders, moved to the delicately tapering ears. "Look - I owe this man a great deal. I owe him the life of the friend you asked me about. Please - I must know if something has happened to him."

He felt her reluctance melt away as she relaxed against him. "S'Tal is dead," she murmured into his shoulder; raised her head to look into the glorious eyes. "He was executed for treason...on the orders of that...monster M'Klionis; his own Sub-commander had betrayed him, seeking advancement at court - but he who would lie with death paves his own way to destruction... LuKtall also found a traitor's end.

"But it was not enough for M'Klionis and his puppet-master Santul that such an honourable warrior as S'Tal should die a peasant's death; he was forced to watch as his guards raped his sister. Bound as he was, her screams tortured him in his helplessness." She buried her face in her hands. "I pleaded with my Lord the Praetor to prevent it...but custom is strong...and it was a matter of family honour, he said. Indeed, he might have saved Tiva, S'Tal's sister, for she was reaching the completion of her training as a T'Kyaranai...but she had not been presented at court and had not known the Praetor - he was powerless to help her."

"What happened? Is she dead too?"

"Worse. Her one remaining kinsmen rejected her in her shame, even besought her to kill herself; but she is such a child, on the bare threshold of womanhood

- she feared to die, yet could not face her brutal awakening. To save her family further shame, she permitted herself to be banished to the mountains. By then she was heavy with child... We go to her occasionally, although in law we are forbidden to seek out the unclean. She will not survive the birth, I think... but that is for the best. Being of the Old Religion, she would not still the new life within her." Jian sighed. "Her time grows near now."

Kirk thought rapidly. He was too late to repay his debt to S'Tal...but perhaps, with McCoy's help, he could save S'Tal's sister. "You must take me to her," he said briefly.

"No! It is forbidden. I have told you; remember, there are many hidden eyes at court. It is too dangerous, you would attract too much attention. I, alone - we T'Kyaranaï might do such a thing and have it ignored; but with an alien..."

"Will you deny me, after your pledge as I took you for the final time?" He pressed his body closer, as her own trembling form remembered.

"I will take you," came the low voice. "But - " she moulded herself against him - "will you not take me again, just once, before we are summoned... In one night I have learned to love thee, my beautiful one, James of Earth. Lie with me once more."

Feeling an unaccustomed surge of guilt in knowing how he had used his power over her, Kirk brought an extra tenderness to his touch as he bent his head to her lips.

On the accepted pretext of wishing, before their departure, to explore more of their host planet, Kirk and Spock requested and had been granted the use of an aircar; that their request was granted with surprisingly little opposition, Kirk found disturbing; Spock, on discovering independently that the permission had come from Lord Santul's secretary, considered it suspicious - however, since Kirk would not be dissuaded from his intent, the Vulcan kept his own counsel.

They were surreptitiously met at the city gates by a newly-arrived McCoy and Jian. On lifting off, Kirk plotted an erratic course which would eventually lead them into the Forbidden Zone, an area of nuclear-blasted desert surrounded by the brooding, purple-peaked mountains which pierced the fire-painted skies of a Romulan high summer.

At last Jian pointed out a small, partially enclosed valley watered by a small ochre stream and dotted about with the first signs of vegetation, of life of any kind Kirk had registered; short, cactus-like shrubs bearing brightly coloured swollen pods. He brought the aircar to a smooth standstill, raising a swirling, fiery-hued dust cloud. None of them noticed the aircar which sped at ground level through the cliff entrance, although Spock's hearing registered a distant, familiar sound. He moved closer, protectively, to Kirk.

Jian led them towards a cave entrance; stooping, she called out in Romulan, "Tiva... it is Jian. I bring friends to help you."

There was no answer. The girl called out again, then McCoy, moving forward, cautiously entered the cave, waving the others to remain behind with a swift, cutting gesture. They waited several moments, during which time Kirk noticed Spock's wary inspection of the surrounding terrain. When McCoy emerged he wore a tight, grim expression.

"I'll have to beam straight up to the ship, Jim. She's in a bad way...and the baby's imminent."

Kirk nodded briefly. "You go ahead, Pones. We'll take the aircar back to the city."

Waiting to check McCoy's safe beam-up, the three then moved off towards the waiting aircar.

Suddenly they were halted by a hoarse cry. "Spock of Vulcan!"

"M'Klionis?"

"Undoubtedly, Captain. He must have followed us. An ideal location to settle this, one must admit. We must attempt reason, Jim."

"Jian -- get back to the city -- now. Don't argue!" Kirk pushed her roughly into the air-car, then moved away to stand at Spock's side. M'Klionis did not look reasonable -- could they perhaps knock him out?

"Jim -- I cannot -- must not fight to kill. Therefore, return -- "

"Spock -- you're not going to say what I think you're going to say?" Kirk glanced at his friend. "No beam-up; I'm staying."

An eyebrow flickered ruefully. "I...thought better of it." This must be settled, he thought. Perhaps render M'Klionis unconscious -- but keep Jim apart, away from vulcanoid muscles, Spock told himself.

"Glad to hear it, Mister. Besides -- " Kirk nodded towards the figures approaching, their outlines blurring in the heat haze -- "I see he's brought a friend along."

Spock had observed the burly Romulan striding menacingly along at his master's shoulder. A single, careless blow from that massive fist would kill Kirk, he realised. Spock thought rapidly. He could incapacitate Kirk with the neck pinch -- then, as he was unclasping his hands from behind his back, the problem of Kirk's opponent disappeared in an intense flash of energy.

"As the Terrans say -- the odds are now even, butcher!" Jian called as she lifted off, the canopy of the air-car slid back, the laser pistol now aimed unwaveringly at a furious M'Klionis. "Do not fear for me, Kirk -- I am a T'Kyanai. He cannot harm me -- unlike the demented child now on your ship. Kill the blood-letter, Vulcan!" There was a throbbing hum of engines and Jian piloted the air-car gracefully up and around the surrounding mountain peaks. Kirk's eyes followed her admiringly. He must definitely look up that lady again.

"Well, Vulcan?" M'Klionis sauntered into closer view, insolence delineating his every movement. "You know me now?"

"My challenger? Of course."

"Then prepare for combat."

"I see no reason now to accept your challenge. You dishonoured it in your treachery," Spock replied calmly.

"We repaid treachery with treachery."

"I acted as my duty and logic informed me I should -- as would any soldier on active duty. As would she. Can you not see that?"

"We waste time. Prepare, I tell you again."

"And I refuse."

"You are a coward, Vulcan."

"Your insults are ineffective." Spock's voice was imbued with a tone of bored disinterest which served only to enrage further the sneering M'Klionis.

Careful, Spock! thought Kirk.

"And is this ineffective?" M'Klionis moved with the speed typical of a vulcanoid at the peak of physical training, producing a lightweight metal disc edged with razor sharp points. The disc skimmed across the space between them, to sink vicious teeth into Kirk's upper arm; had it not been for Spock's superlatively swift reflexes, Kirk realised, as the Vulcan threw him aside, the lethal weapon would have lodged fatally in his chest.

"I perceive you need a little encouragement," M'Klionis said very softly.

Spock had dropped to Kirk's side; fortunately, his deflection of the vasneer had prevented any serious damage. But it could have been fatal. The knowledge swept all reason from Spock's mind. It was the look of ancient Vulcan which he wore now. Kirk knew there was now murder in Spock's heart...know what that could mean to Federation hopes of an alliance, recalled Spock's own reasoned arguments to him on a similar occasion...knew that now he had to be the reasonable one. As the two closed, with a terrible roar, he removed his communicator. If both returned safely, neither could openly accuse the other; the alliance would be salvaged and their duty, if not their...honour...would be served. He flipped open the communicator. M'Klionis would keep - for now.

"Kirk to Enterprise. Lock on to myself and Mr. Spock and beam us up -- now."

Spock suddenly found himself grappling with thin air on the transporter pad. With a curt nod, Kirk dismissed the transporter technician. His friend faced him, angry comprehension in his eyes.

"Why, Jim? Why? I could have rid the universe of that... Think of the lives he has destroyed! Now he will live to destroy more innocent obstacles to his mad ambition for his family - "

"And consider, Mr. Spock, the lives which this alliance, if successful, will save. The decision was a command one. There's an end to it. Our duty to the Federation is our first consideration." Kirk's jaw tightened and he moved to the intercom. Forgive me, Spock, he prayed. "Kirk to sickbay." How normal his voice was!

"McCoy here."

"How's the patient, Bones?"

"Patients, Jim. Mother and daughter are doing fine. Tiva needs a little time in a rehabilitation centre, I'd say, and I'll see to that personally when we re-enter Federation territory. Naturally, she has no desire to return to Romulus. I gave her my word that we'd take her with us, Jim - was I in order?"

"Quite in order, Doctor. I owe her brother...a great deal." Kirk's voice softened a little. "O.K., Bones, thanks. I'll check with you later."

"Jim."

Kirk turned at the sound of his friend's voice, crossed the space between them swiftly.

"I... Forgive my anger; I saw only how nearly I had lost you...my fear drove from my mind that my honour is my duty...and my duty, Captain, is always to you -- and as you command."

Kirk's throat constricted and he held the Vulcan close, the intensity of their love a tangible force in the stark room.

"Yet the sharing of our souls

Is as to standing naked in the heart of God." He spoke the words in their original Vulcan as he had learned them and smiled at Spock's genuine pleasure at hearing his language from the Human's lips.

"Come," said Spock suddenly. "We must get you to sickbay and have your arm treated. We are due to collect the Federation officials and leave orbit in two point seven hours."

"You're right. Duty calls."

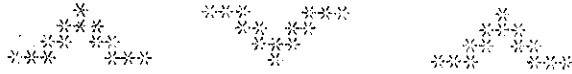
"It is my honour always to answer," Spock replied, smiling gently.

"It is my joy that you do," was the swift, smiling response of his Captain.

The Enterprise left orbit without further incident; behind her she left two enemies -- one who would be an expedient ally for ambition's sake, and another whose enmity grew to madness as rumours of his dishonour echoed hollowly about the

corridors of the Citadel he had once thought to rule.

Thus the shining pride of Starfleet returned from her voyage bearing a precious cargo of hope and peace to unite the galaxy she roamed in search of new life, new civilisations, new futures, powered by the warp drive of Men's dreams.



Part 3 - And Honour is Satisfied?

Kirk rose to his feet a little too rapidly for discretion; the man he been impatiently awaiting, Professor Laurent Van Linden, smiled apologetically, winding a stray lock of his hair round his forefinger in an habitual, nervous gesture which seemed ridiculously juvenile when considering the man's maturity and his standing in the galactic scientific community.

"Sorry to keep you so long, Captain. I have been instructing my staff as to the delicate procedures necessary to the satisfactory continuance of a rather interesting experiment in which I have recently... But of course," he laughed jerkily, "you would not wish to know all this... I forget that others may not... I have a kind of mothering instinct about any experiment in which I become involved." He sighed. "I shall miss this place...and I won't even know how my experiment is concluded."

Kirk nodded, smiling sympathetically but permitting his attention to concentrate on the apparently innocuous activities of a small but busy spaceport; nonetheless he remained on the alert for anything untoward. Van Linden was indeed a nervous, garrulous, somewhat tedious companion, but his value to the Federation, and even more to the point, to an enemy power, was inestimable.

He became aware that Van Linden was still speaking and on hearing his First Officer mentioned, Kirk returned full attention to the rather one-sided conversation.

"...and Mr. Spock's contributions to original research into my field, which is after all still in the embryo stages...we have merely scratched the surface of the possibilities, Captain Kirk, merely scratched the surface...and as I was saying, Mr. Spock's contribution has been most informative, most informative... I look forward to meeting your First Officer, Captain, the clarity and thoroughness, indeed the genius of his research material indicate a mind of the highest scientific quality; I had heard of Mr. Spock's achievements in a variety of fields, naturally, what scientist hasn't? But I had never, until embarking upon Project Chronos, had the pleasure of studying his published findings with the attention that they deserve..." The scientist grinned suddenly, disarmingly, "And require," he concluded in a wry tone. "Your Vulcan officer demands as much as he gives... but it's worth the effort in the end."

"Oh, yes," Kirk replied softly, more to himself than his companion. "It's definitely worth it."

Van Linden looked at him questioningly, a little puzzled by Kirk's tone, but the Captain was already moving away at a much faster pace. "We'd better be on our way if we're going to rendezvous with the Enterprise on time," he threw over his shoulder. "The shuttle's ready and waiting."

The Professor hurried after him, a tall, sparse, middle-aged man with a surprisingly thick mop of curly golden hair; he vaguely resembled an underfed cherub.

Kirk chivvied Van Linden forward, keeping as close as possible to his charge without seeming too protective and attracting unwelcome attention. He would be relieved to see this mission completed; Kirk thought longingly of the usual exploration missions assigned to the Enterprise. Although of vital importance, the mission in which he was now involved was essentially boring...also, it

overlapped the borders of espionage, an area which the naturally open, outspoken Kirk had always avoided whenever possible. His flair for the dramatic and the streak of ruthless cunning which had saved his ship and crew many times would have served him well in Federation Intelligence, but his free spirit and basic trust in the nobler aspects of intelligent life forms were the ruling characteristics which, blended with his charismatic authority, made Kirk an excellent Starship Captain.

Nevertheless the Federation had assigned him to escort Van Linden from his research base to the Enterprise. Kirk had apparently been attending an Academy reunion on I'c'xar while the Enterprise, under Spock's temporary command, was said to be involved in a planetary survey - and Starfleet had discreetly provided a long-range shuttle for the transfer of Van Linden to the starship. They were then to set course for an as yet unrevealed location where a safe house was being prepared. Van Linden's research would then be continued amidst more intensive security.

Not even Kirk was fully aware of the exact nature of Project Chronos and its eventual aims, knowing only that it centred on recent Federation experiments into temporal physics following studies of the Enterprise's Log Entries concerning Kirk's own experiences with temporal phenomena. Van Linden himself, supported by Federation Intelligence, had requested that he be transferred to a more secure location following an attack on him by an as yet unidentified assailant who had fled, badly wounded, when the apparently inoffensive scientist had set his pet oomaak on the attacker.

Following this incident and realising the danger posed by lack of security, Van Linden had subsequently destroyed all his notes, committing the vital information to memory. The man's brain was now both an invaluable store of knowledge and a constant threat to Federation security, should he fall into the wrong hands; hands expert in persuading a man's mind to reveal even his subconscious secrets.

They were passing into the spaceport now, and Kirk, having checked in with Security, led the way to the hangar housing the shuttle which would take him to the Enterprise. As they left the main complex making for the access point along a dimly-lit corridor, the two men were suddenly seized from behind.

Kirk struggled but was powerless; vulcanoids or a related species, he decided, but continued stubbornly resisting until eventually a blow felled him and he dropped, half dazed, to the floor. Through the rush of blackness that threatened to engulf him, Kirk became aware of voices.

"This is the man?"

Kirk frowned, fighting to remain conscious... The voice seemed strangely familiar... There was silence, then the sound of a hand hitting soft flesh, followed by a cry of pain - the cry of a woman.

"Y...yes...yes, that's Professor Van Linden." Words tumbled out breathlessly. "Laurent...I'm so sorry...they threatened my daughter...if...if I didn't lead them to you...they made me, Laurent, I couldn't..."

There was a sudden, chilling, gurgling sound then an ominous thud followed by Van Linden's voice, deadened, lost.

"You...you've killed her...there was no need...how..."

"Bring them," came the curt order.

Kirk was kicked viciously. "Watch this one - he is cunning. But do not harm him...too much; that will be my pleasure... That should bring his precious Vulcan hurrying to the rescue - straight into the trap I've been waiting to spring for so long."

Kirk drew in a quick, anguished breath. Now he recognised that voice. M'Klionis. He hated Spock with a mad fervour; the brother of the Romulan Commander who had been publicly disgraced by her loss to the Federation of the cloaking device, M'Klionis had sworn vengeance of Spock. Twice he had been

frustrated; this time he would be determined. Fury at the man, fear for Spock, suddenly combined, overcoming reason, and Kirk lashed out with killing force; a careless backhander dropped him senseless to the ground. A beam of energy dealt with the broken body of Van Linden's assistant, and the party moved off, dragging their captives to a waiting craft.



"Spock - you can't do it. He says he'll exchange Jim and Van Linden for you - but you surely can't believe him! What reason do you have to trust M'Klionis? None!"

"Neither is there any reason to suppose that an alternative solution will present itself before the deadline imposed expires. There is too much at stake not to take the risk of trusting M'Klionis...not only..." The Vulcan's voice trembled slightly and the rigid features sagged, then the formidable Vulcan training reasserted itself. "Not only the Captain's life," he continued, "but also Professor Van Linden's work is of a highly sensitive nature and judging by our recent discussions, at a most critical stage. Whatever the risks," he concluded firmly, "they must be taken."

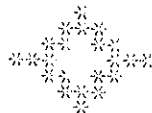
The Vulcan stood awkwardly for a moment then moved to his desk and, picking up the exquisitely hand-engraved box in which he kept his IDIC, handed it to McCoy. "I entrust this to you, Doctor. If...Jim returns, please ensure that he receives it...as it is logical to assume that I shall not be returning. I am sorry." The First Officer winced involuntarily at the new depths of pain in the vivid blue eyes. "I did not mean... Forgive me, this must be...very difficult for you, my friend." He almost sighed. "However, there are things which I must say." Spock paused then continued hesitantly. "I...we...must accept that in all probability neither Jim nor I will return... If this indeed proves to be the case - Jim and I...would wish..." He stopped again, then resumed determinedly. "A place has been prepared for us on Vulcan - a desert place where the remains of the deceased members of my family have been laid to rest for almost two thousand years. There are further instructions as to this and other arrangements which would have to be attended to in my personal safe. I would be deeply grateful if you would do both Jim and me the honour of assuming what I know must be a painful responsibility." The deep voice faltered again and Spock reached out to grip the doctor's shaking shoulders tightly.

"I regret...the distress..I cause you."

"Spock - please, please don't do this. There must be another way," McCoy pleaded desperately.

"No, my friend, there is not." Spock's jaw tightened as he struggled to maintain control, a look of utter weariness and despair frozen on the set mask of his face. "I must go now. It is almost time for the rendezvous. Doctor - Bones - if M'Klionis does keep his word and the Captain is returned safely, as it is unlikely that I shall be able to communicate with him, would you tell him..." The Vulcan looked at McCoy helplessly; he still could only really be open with Jim... only Jim... His heart ached with loss.

"I know, Spock. I'll tell him." McCoy squeezed Spock's shoulders in return; then the tall figure turned smartly on his heel and was gone. The surgeon sank into his chair, and wept.



"Your Federation is as treacherous as your Vulcan, I see," breathed M'Klionis, almost white with anger.

Kirk looked up from his kneeling position by the battered, scarcely-breathing man. "My God - you've beaten him almost to death!"

"An excellent impersonation...I had studied Van Linden well; even I was deceived. Doubtless the real Van Linden is well secreted in some remote corner of Federation territory." M'Klionis' expression changed to one almost of amusement and he laughed, a harsh, dry sound. "But it occurs to me...you also have been deceived, Kirk. I thought it...strange, that Starfleet should permit no less a celebrity than their Captain James T. Kirk to escort such a precious cargo - oh, please - " he raised a hand in mock apology. "Please don't mistake my meaning, Captain; I am not impugning your well-known capabilities - but you must, I am sure, agree that you make a rather...noticeable...duo for a supposedly secret mission. Dear me - " The black eyes glittered appreciatively. "You don't think they could possibly have meant you - you, the Captain Kirk - to be a mere decoy? To use you?"

Kirk was silent. It did look very much as if they had been set up; information purposely leaked to M'Klionis or whoever he worked for, the agent substituted for the real Van Linden...it made sense; Starfleet had used them as decoys. Admittedly, the idea of being used and not even being trusted sufficiently to be told what was going on was not a pleasant thought...but with characteristic pragmatism, he recognised the necessity.

"How does it feel to be the betrayed party, Kirk? Perhaps now you may appreciate the humiliation experienced by my sister...betrayed by false words. There is no honour in the Federation."

"You speak of honour - you do not know the meaning of the word." Kirk's frustration, his anxiety for Spock, burst out in a flood of angry accusation, forgetful of the erratic nature of his captor. "Your mad desire for vengeance does not arise out of anger for your sister...was it not the condemnation of her own family which drove her to suicide?"

"There is no doubt the Commander failed in her mission - but you failed her when she needed you. I would hardly consider you the...loyal, supportive brother. No - your hatred of Spock is not for her; you hate her as much as Spock. Anyone who harms the massive ambition of your family earns your enmity - including your own sister. No - do not speak to me of honour."

M'Klionis raised an amused eyebrow. "Have you finished, Kirk? Such passion! But my dear Captain Kirk, I no longer speak of personal honour - but of something much more fundamental. Need. I speak of need; my need to kill the Vulcan. My...family...honour is no longer the stake. Following the safe departure of your First Officer from our world after the completion of the Peace Conference, my Clanmaster looked upon me with cold eyes. As his favour falls...or no...so goes the rest of the court. I left Romulus some time ago; I am now in the employ of...others."

Kirk regarded him coldly. "These...others...will not be favourably impressed by your performance...you also succumbed to an enemy's deception. Gullible people, aren't you?"

Kirk reeled and staggered to remain upright as a guard struck him. M'Klionis sneered. "Do you think I care for their empty machinations? I offered my services on one condition; that I claim the Vulcan. No other payment, just the death at my hands of the Vulcan. What my employers choose to do with you or Van Linden never concerned me; it still does not. I have only one aim left to me now. I intend to see they receive this one - " he kicked the Federation agent with his foot - " Damaged goods will furthermore prevent premature discovery of my deception...by that time, I will have achieved what I set out to do. Still, it is fortunate that I had assistance to probe this one's mind and discover his true identity."

Kirk stared. "Romulan mental techniques are not so refined as to permit the breaking of Intelligence or Command training. Only Vulcans..." His voice trailed away. . .

"Indeed, Captain, only Vulcans... One Vulcan in particular. Won't you join us, Lady?" M'Klionis kept his eyes fixed on Kirk's face.

"T'Pring!" Kirk aware of M'Klionis' scrutiny made a determined effort to cover his initial shock. "I might have known. Traitors lie with traitors."

T'Pring regarded him coolly. "You attribute Human qualities to me, Captain. I am impervious to the effect you hope your insults might have upon me. I am a true Vulcan, unlike the half-breed Spock."

"A true Vulcan? A Vulcan who betrays her planet's loyalties?"

"Loyalties? To whom? To what? The Federation?" She shook her head dismissively. "An empty dream, an illogical hope of self-deceivers. Vulcan must stand alone -- external influences are destroying our planet's customs, traditions -- and it is a tender betrayal, the most dangerous of all."

"Vulcan is changing -- growing, but only as the majority of Vulcans so choose," Kirk protested.

"Vulcan is indeed growing -- growing in weakness in its increasing dependance -- economic, military...even cultural -- on the mongrel philosophies of the Federation. Even the strength of Tradition is slowly ebbing. (This is something the Romulans understand -- the importance of custom.)"

"Your concern for your planet's future is commendable," commented Kirk drily. "But...that is not the reason for your treachery."

"I would dispute the use of the word 'treachery'... No matter. You are correct, in part, Captain -- how unusually astute of you; there is a reason of more immediate concern to my future. Spock stands between my husband and a seat on the Vulcan High Council. His...removal...is therefore an attractive prospect to me."

"But you must know that Spock has already indicated his desire to be free of such considerations, even in the event of Sarek's death."

"Spock confides most deeply in a Human," T'Pring replied, her face cold with disdain.

"I am his friend," Kirk responded quietly.

T'Pring continued. "Despite his wishes, he will still possess the power of veto against whosoever the Council selects to stand in Sarek's place. In the probable event of Spock's refusing the traditional invitation which is his birth-right, he will then be requested to name a worthy successor. It is my belief that he will not choose Stonn, who would otherwise be expected to assume the position. Remove Spock's opposition...and he will."

Kirk folded his arms and eyed her for a moment. "Do you fear Spock's resentment?" he asked.

"Even Spock is not so prone to Human failings. No; Spock is a symbol of all which now threatens Vulcan from the outside...but he is not a fool and can always be relied upon to behave correctly, despite his dubious breeding. To choose Stonn would be illogical -- my husband is weak and ill-fitted for the position -- but, with me as his consort..."

"You have ambitions to rival M'Klionis'."

"I merely recognise my abilities."

Kirk clenched his fists in an effort to prevent himself from slapping the indifferent face. "And you're willing that Spock should die for your ambition?"

"I am not influenced by emotional considerations. Such is our strength, our way -- the way of Vulcan which, with the power I will acquire through my husband on Sarek's death, I will do my utmost to uphold -- far beyond the weakening effects of your Human interference."

"You're not interested in the Vulcan way! The way of T'Pring dictates your actions." Kirk's voice was low and contemptuous. "You are using your own interpretation of Vulcan philosophy to excuse your own ambition - you are the worst kind of hypocrite."

"I weary of this, M'Klionis. The Human's emotionalism is offensive to me. You will excuse me." Without a backward glance, T'Pring left the room with her customary grace.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" M'Klionis commented. "And...it pleases me to assist an enemy of Spock's. And I must be realistic; my life will not end with the Vulcan's. Her high standing on Vulcan could prove most useful. I seek only my own advancement now, Human."

"What prompted you to contact her?" Kirk asked curiously. "It is not widely known that she rejected Spock."

"I did not contact her. On the contrary, she offered her services to me soon after Spock's return from Romulus...we have been...associates...ever since. She has proved to be most...stimulating. Apparently she had hoped for a more permanent resolution to the T'Kau'Kalifee; she knew I wished to see the Vulcan dead...so did she. Her suggestion of a...pooling of resources was logical."

"My lord - the Enterprise is transmitting the contact signal!"

M'Klionis turned swiftly to the Romulan guard. "You may respond as pre-arranged. Well, Kirk - " He transferred his gaze to the face which could not quite control the sudden fear for Spock's life.

"why? Why are you doing this? Why must you have Spock's life? What is the point now? You are free of family considerations..."

M'Klionis stared at him. "You really do not understand, do you? I must, Kirk... ever since the Vulcan's influence touched my family, my life has been affected - often adversely. But that is not my reason, though it is reason enough. He haunts me like an evil spirit; I will be rid of him. But more even than this; it has become necessary to my honour - not that of my family or my world - but my honour. I will not rest until it is accomplished."

"This obsession has made you insane." Kirk's voice trembled with apprehension and anger.

"Perhaps...perhaps." His face cleared, assuming once more its customary indomitable purpose. "Bring him!" he ordered.



Spock beamed down onto a barren, deserted world, its surface cracked and shrivelled as though the sap of creation had been sucked from it by the angry heat of its amber sun. He had been instructed to wait, unarmed and alone, at these co-ordinates. The Vulcan did so with a growing fear for Kirk's safety. His inner self was aware that Kirk was still alive...but in what kind of physical condition?

He suddenly became aware of figures approaching. M'Klionis and...could it be? Yes... T'Pring. Spock's rising eyebrow was subdued by another consideration - where was Kirk? Then, with an almost painful sense of relief, he saw him. Kirk, alive and able to walk...and Van Linden, although the latter appeared to be in poor condition.

If they had harmed Jim... Spock's hands clenched, although logic had already taken the two burly Romulan guards into consideration. The fact that Jim was alive... Was M'Klionis going to keep his bargain? He doubted it; taunt him with Kirk's life before his own death - that seemed a more probable answer. But at least they would die together.

Spock was given no further time to consider the situation. Disbelievingly, he saw Federation troops, heavily armed, materialise out of nowhere behind the party. Surely they would not risk Van Linden?

"Down!" the commander yelled just as M'Klionis became aware of their presence.

Spock leaped forward, forgetting logic, predictable odds and everything else in his effort to reach Kirk. Distracted as they were, the two Romulan guards were bowled over by the onrushing Vulcan, who seized Kirk, covering his body protectively with his own; he was aware of the two guards disappearing in a bright aura of energy. Glancing up, he saw M'Klionis seize T'Pring, using her as a shield.

"I have the Lady T'Pring!" he cried hoarsely. "Take care! She is of importance on Vulcan!"

Spock took advantage of the slight lull to check on Kirk. "Are you all right?" He grasped the broad shoulders.

Kirk nodded. "We were set up...decoys," he gasped. "Thought Starfleet had given us up... They must have planned this."

They looked at each other, anger at the risk to the other showing on each face, to be replaced, albeit reluctantly, by the acceptance of necessity, of duty.

"Van Linden -- he's an agent. Not the real one," Kirk explained swiftly.

Spock nodded, understanding. He looked up to see M'Klionis still braced behind the stiff figure of T'Pring. The waiting troops were poised in attack position, but were hesitating at the risk to a high-ranking Vulcan.

"Hold your fire!" he ordered, then rising to his feet he reached down to grasp Kirk's hand; for a brief moment everything else was forgotten as their eyes met and exchanged a mutual message of relief and love. The Vulcan smiled slightly and hauled Kirk easily to his feet. Then he turned to face M'Klionis.

"Whatever happens, M'Klionis, there is no escape for you. Must you take yet another life at the end?"

"You beg for this one's life, Spock of Vulcan? She thought to kill you herself."

"T'Pring will be dealt with by my own people. Release her."

"And lose a possible escape route? They will not shoot down a Vulcan aristocrat." M'Klionis tightened his grip about the still icily calm woman.

"Do not be too sure. Very well; I make a bargain with you, M'Klionis. Is it not my life you desire above all else? I challenge you now to combat. I offer T'Kau'Kalifee. I give you my word that these will not interfere." He silenced Kirk's involuntary protest with a glance of absolute command.

"Your word, Vulcan?" The Romulan's tone was mocking.

Spock regarded him coldly and when he spoke again his voice held a stark authority which rang across the desert plain.

"I am Spock, son of Sarek, heir to the seed of Suul of the house of Surak, Lord of K'har-shra, M'h'ut-Kai and Vrek-na-tir; Elect of the T'mu, Protector of the Aransi. In the name of the Stones of Kutaan, sacred to both our peoples, I offer thee fair challenge.

"As it was in the dawn of our days, as it is today, as it will be for all tomorrows, I make my challenge.

"I make my challenge for your life, in forfeit for the life of the honourable S'Fal; I make my challenge for your life in forfeit of thy grievous use of my Captain and my brother; I make my challenge for your life in forfeit of thy treachery on Kalthos.

"Thrice I challenge thee, M'Klionis of Romulus.

"In the name of my fathers; by the blood of my unborn sons; I challenge thee to T'Kau'Ka'ifee."

The Vulcan moved closer and, bending, scooped up a handful of sand, which he permitted to trickle very slowly through his long fingers.

"T'Kau-kanat-ut-Kalifee!"

Throwing T'Pring aside, M'Klionis moved forward, seized the Vulcan's hand, forcing it open, allowing the remainder of the sand to slip into the light breeze.

"Ak'ir g'un toonak-aan Kalifee!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Kirk noticed several of the troops moving cautiously forward. Swiftly, he motioned them back. God, he wanted it stopped too...but Spock had trusted him not to interfere. And if Spock were killed? Then M'Klionis could have his life too.

It had begun. The opponents were equal in skill and ferocity. Kirk looked on tensely as Spock struck with killing force, the blood spattered green on the dry fissured ground staining the arid sand which drank it thirstily. Vice-like fingers tightened about Spock's throat and the Vulcan's knees buckled. Then two hands sliced through the air into muscular shoulders in a chop which would have killed a Human outright. Spock forced M'Klionis relentlessly back until the Romulan's straining legs slithered on the sand, and he tumbled, raising a minor sandstorm about him. M'Klionis' arms were seized and jerked into an unnatural position. Kirk winced as he heard the snap of bones. Spock's fingers went about the neck and squeezed. Awareness began to leave the eyes of his tormentor. Spock knew he had won.

Abruptly he released his grip and staggered back. "I give thee thy life," he said.

"Vulcan - do not do this! Let me die with honour!"

Spock's face contorted. "I...cannot." Kirk was amazed at the depth of shame in his voice.

T'Pring's voice rang out accusingly. "He is become weak as a Human - the half-breed has lost the strength to kill an enemy." She moved over to stand over M'Klionis. "And to hesitate over such an enemy, Spock! A weak fool blinded by his own obsession - a traitor to my interest and a traitor to his world. He has cost me dear. But I understand, Spock. I am a true Vulcan. Even this creature deserves better than your 'mercy'."

Before anyone could prevent her, she knelt and deftly applied tal-shaya.

"You - !" Kirk rushed forward, seized her roughly. "He had information valuable to the Federation, information about enemies of the Federation... Or is that why he died? Are you also in their employ? Is that why he died? Was that the reason for your 'honourable' - " he spat out the word - "gesture? To prevent yourself from being further incriminated? You forget, T'Pring; I am a witness to your treachery. The word of a Starship Captain will not be doubted."

There was no response save a look of cool disinterest. Kirk swore softly, pushing her aside. "Get her away from me!" he ordered the troop commander.

She allowed herself to be taken without as much as a last word or glance.

Spock looked after her for a moment, then he turned to look into the warmth of the hazel eyes. "Take me home," he said with infinite weariness.



When eventually Kirk and Spock were finally certified fit by a fussing McCoy they each exchanged looks of profound relief, much to the indignation of the doctor. "You'd think I was running a mediaeval torture chamber!" he exclaimed crossly.

"Sorry, Bones," Kirk grinned, cunningly changing the subject to an enquiry as to someone else's health. "How's Van Linden - well, at least, the supposed Van Linden?"

"Well, he was in pretty bad shape, Jim. Those Romulans must have worked him over real good...but under that plastic surgery, he's young and strong. He'll make it."

"Good." Kirk nodded. "He's a brave man."

"What about T'Pring?" McCoy asked suddenly.

"She has been returned to Vulcan, where eventually she will face trial by a Federation Council," Spock told him. "If the verdict is guilty, which it doubtless will be, then according to Vulcan custom her punishment will be decided by the Family she disgraced... Her sentence will not be light, I fear."

"But well-deserved, I'd say," commented Kirk. "She's a very dangerous woman."

Spock however remained silent. Vulcan justice still retained harsh and unyielding penalties for charges as serious as treachery. T'Pring indeed faced a grim future, and remembering the woman's glacial dignity as she was led away, Spock could only feel regret that a woman of such determination, intelligence and undoubted courage should have chosen so wrongly...so illogically.

Watching Spock's sombre features, McCoy, with sudden insight, sensed there was a need for the routine, the familiar. He turned his baleful professional eye on his two friends.

"And now, some of us have got work to do...and you two look like you could do with some sleep...make that a lot of sleep...and no smart comments from you, Spock! You need sleep as much as any other person on this Starship. After that, get some decent food inside the pair of you. You too, Spock, even if it's just a bowl of Christine's plomik - what goes into that stuff anyway? No, forget it - I don't want to know. They say ignorance is bliss."

"Doubtless the reason for your perennially sunny disposition, Doctor," Spock remarked calmly as he turned to leave, accompanied by a grinning Kirk.

"One day I'll have the last word again," muttered McCoy, glancing after the straight back.

The two friends made their way to their quarters in companionable silence. Outside Spock's cabin, they paused; Kirk eyed his friend with some concern. The events of the past months had taken their collective toll on both, but Spock in particular had suffered physically, mentally and, perhaps most painful for him, emotionally.

"McCoy's right. You must get some sleep. You look all in, Spock."

Spock nodded. "Yes - I am tired."

Kirk reached out to touch his arm. "And - when you feel you want to talk - I'll be there."

"I know, my friend...you have always been there."

"And I always will." Kirk tightened his grip on Spock's arm. "Spock..." He experienced a sudden, horrifying flood of realisation of how close he had come to losing this man. Their eyes met in mutual acknowledgement. Finally, reluctantly, Kirk released his hold, took a deep, steadying breath, then said in his command tone, "Now get some sleep, Mister - and that's an order!"

"Yes, Captain. Of course, sir." The Vulcan's eyes gleamed. "I will, of

course, sleep as ordered. Shall I sleep for the regulation eight hours, sir, or does the Captain suggest - "

"Spock!"

The First Officer managed to look innocently aggrieved before turning to enter his cabin. Oh the threshold, however, he paused. "Goodnight, Jim - my brother." Then he was gone.

Kirk laid a hand on the door. "Goodnight, Spock," he whispered softly.

He strightened. A shower, followed by the last of that Suarian brandy he'd been saving, and maybe a crisis would hold off for long enough for him even to read a little.

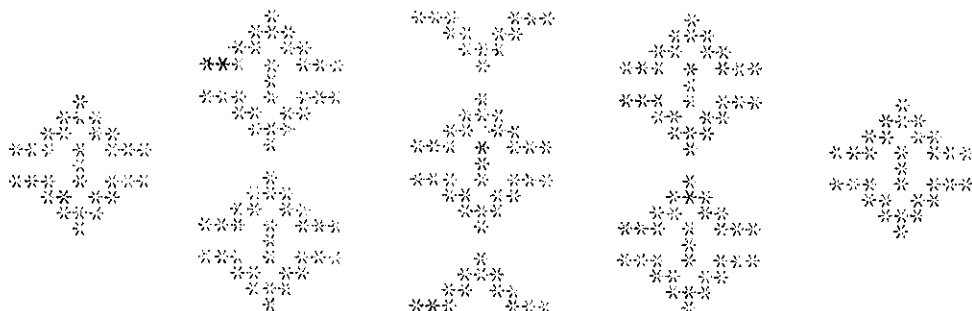
The ship felt good, Spock was safely back on board and it was a very contented Captain who retired that night as the Starship headed for her next port of call, where there would be a well-earned shore leave for the Captain and First Officer of the U.S.S. Enterprise.



INDIVISIBLE

As the star-brilliance muted by my veiled planet,
 Blue-shimmering, your constant love beckons
 My eager spirit 'cross the distance.
 You reach beyond barriers of custom
 To my matter of creation; the night-fire
 In that soul-gaze sees beyond
 The bland strength of command armour
 To the inner void of loneliness; I am
 Accepted; know sadness and joy; resolution.
 We embrace, our unity of being complete.
 As twin suns are we, forever circling,
 Joined; I see blessing now in the aloneness,
 It taught that need of you,
 And my need is as total as your answer.
 As to a prism you are to me, lighting
 Shadowed corners with a myriad facets of your being.
 Thought incarnate you may seem, a chill ecstacy
 In quest; bonded brother you are.
 Oracle, guide who follows my lead,
 Reason to my heart voice, warrior guardian
 In my peril; my very life to me.
 Spock. Not me, yet ever part of me.
 We are become each other, one and indivisible.

L.A.Spencer



THE SOUL OF THE DOVE

by

Jeannie Humphrey

An alternate universe version of the episode, 'The Day of the Dove'.

Kang listened intently to Kirk's desperate spiel about the alleged alien who thrived on violent emotions and actions, and almost believed him. Almost -- until his piercing eyes riveted on Mara's torn tunic. Holding his razor-sharp weapon ready, the savage urge to destroy Kirk grew too powerful to resist. With a vicious, hate-filled hack, Kang chopped into the Human's neck, killing him instantly. As the sword severed tissue, bone and arteries, a geyser of blood shot up, splattering the Klingons standing behind Kirk. The sight of the bright red liquid incited them into a murderous frenzy, and, grabbing weapons, they spilled out into the corridor as Enterprise reinforcements arrived fresh from sickbay. At present, the entire available Enterprise force was there, including the sickbay personnel and bridge crew.

Spock lunged for Kang as he saw the blade make its deadly downward stroke; however, when he reached the Klingon Commander, Kirk was already falling -- already lifeless. The Vulcan no longer resembled his calm, emotion-controlled brothers. For the moment, he was a raging pre-reform Warrior, bent only on revenge for the death of a cherished friend. Coming up behind Kang, Spock grabbed him by the head and with an instant cracking wrench, broke his neck, then tossed him aside like a discarded toy.

McCoy had watched almost frozen as the blade descended on his friend. It appeared to be moving in slow motion; there should have been plenty of time to avoid it, however, Kirk hadn't moved. The doctor thawed as Spock flew towards Kang, and running to Kirk's side, he attempted to move him away from the battle. Spock, after disposing of Kang, assisted McCoy, and both men lifted the bloody corpse and quickly left, under the protection of their own men. They didn't stop until they were in the turbolift, and as the doors shut, cutting off the sound of fighting, McCoy tersely muttered, "Sickbay".

Carefully laying their burden on the floor, both men stooped beside Kirk, staring at the body in disbelief. Spock was smouldering, and as his dark eyes went from the Captain to his own hands, covered with Kirk's blood, a fire burned within those orbs that threatened to become as red as Kirk's draining life-force.

McCoy, unable to bear the sight of Kirk's body, glanced over at Spock and was surprised to see the Vulcan's face clearly displaying the emotions he was experiencing. The doctor knew he had to try to bring Spock out of his violent mood before he was lost completely. Pushing aside his own grief, he called urgently, "Spock!" Receiving no reaction, he gripped the Vulcan's shoulder in a desperate attempt to reach through the seething emotions produced by the creature. "Spock, you've got to hold on. Don't leave me to face this alone."

The turbolift seemed charged with an explosive electric force as the Vulcan clenched his fists until the knuckles on his hands grew white. Then, suddenly, he slumped against the wall, disorientated and visibly shaken. Taking deep gulps of air, he was momentarily free of the alien's control, although it was still present, stealthily tugging at his thinly-held reserve.

As the momentum of the turbolift halted and the soft whine faded away, McCoy forced himself to look back down on Kirk. The handsome, smooth face was covered with blood and his normally golden eyes were open -- cold and dead. McCoy reached out with a trembling hand to close the eyes and gently push the unruly lock of Kirk's hair back into place. A choking, smothering sensation built up in the doctor's chest, and as his blue eyes filled with moisture he felt his own control

slipping. Jim's death was useless. It didn't solve their problems - didn't stop the fighting, and the alien still had the ship under its power. Kirk should never have beamed in among the Klingon force, but it was so typical of his character to jump in with both feet - even into the middle of a blood-thirsty riot. McCoy clamped his eyes shut, wanting to block out the bloody figure before him. Spock's strained voice reached through his anguish.

"Doctor, it may not be too late to save him."

McCoy peered at the First Officer, unable to believe what he heard. "Save him?" he questioned angrily. Then, motioning with a jerk of his arm, "Look at him! His head is half cut off!" McCoy appeared ready to spring on Spock from a combination of frustration, sorrow and the malevolent creeping influence of the nearby alien. "Can't you see he's dead?"

"The alien will not allow him to die. It needs him," Spock answered calmly, attempting to instil the same calm in McCoy. "Think, Doctor. The men you've been treating have recovered from injuries that should have killed them."

"But they weren't already dead," came McCoy's heated reply.

Spock looked from McCoy to the Captain and then raised his pain-filled eyes back to the doctor. "Is it not worth the effort to attempt to bring Jim back?"

It didn't take McCoy long to decide, and oblivious of the tears that had started down his face, he told Spock to help him get Kirk into sickbay. He was caught up in the desperate hope that the alien did need another soldier for battle and he was determined not to think about Kirk returning to seek revenge on Kang's forces. With a careful, yet hurried, effort, they laid Kirk on the examination table and McCoy quickly put him on complete life support and set up the necessary equipment to replace the blood that Kirk had lost. The entire sickbay was strangely quiet and deserted, and Spock attempted several times to contact the crew through the intercom, but all his efforts met with an unnatural silence.

McCoy operated on Kirk, relying on all his medical skills to repair the damage inflicted by the blade. There were times when his concentration was broken by a distracting surge of fury - a deep, violent anger that left him weak and dizzy. The influence of the alien was becoming overpowering, and finally, after McCoy had done all he could, he disgustedly threw the medical scanner against the wall, nearly hitting Spock on the head. Directing his irrational outburst at the First Officer, he stalked menacingly towards him. "What good is it going to do if Jim lives? We've got no way of ever getting home." Clenching and unclenching his fists, he snarled, "Even if we stop the ship and get that thing off, we're stranded here!" He stopped his approach and started looking up around his head frantically, as if there was something there.

"Doctor, there is always a possibility that we could be rescued by Starfleet if we can defeat the alien before we leave the galaxy. For that eventuality, we need the Captain." Spock was talking in an even, smooth voice, and slowly advancing on McCoy, who had begun pacing back and forth wildly, like a caged animal.

Whirling at the sound of the doors dilating, Spock barely dodged in time to avoid an attack as two Klingons rushed in waving bloods swords before them. Retreating behind an empty examination table, the Vulcan attempted to use it as a shield from the warrior bent on killing him. McCoy was the target for the other Klingon's fury. Meeting the attack with a savage relish, the doctor grabbed a tray of medical equipment and threw it at the Klingon as he lunged with flashing blade. The attacker blocked most of the items, however, he was caught in the eye by a small instrument and yelped in pain. While the warrior was temporarily blinded by the injury, McCoy wrested the sword away and with a cold, evil grin, so out of place on the doctor, he thrust the blade through the Klingon's mid-section. As the body fell, McCoy braced his boot against it and pulled the sword back out, delighting in the sensation of the flesh sucking at the blade.

Spinning quickly, the doctor raised the sword and killed the other Klingon in almost a repeat performance of Kirk's death, with the exception that the

Klingon had his back to the doctor. As the warrior dropped, McCoy stood over him cemented to the spot, in a state of shock. For moments, the only sound in the room was his panting and the quiet, steady hum of the sickbay medical equipment. The quiet was shattered by the clattering of the sword as it fell out of McCoy's trembling hand. With an uncontrolled quivering that shook his body, the doctor raised his head to face the Vulcan. "Oh, Lord, Spock, I...I enjoyed that. I actually wanted...to kill." He averted his eyes and stammered, "I...don't want to spend eternity hacking away at people!"

Spock stepped over to McCoy and stood in front of him. "It was the alien controlling you, Doctor, not yourself that did that," he protested as he motioned to the bodies. "None of us can be held responsible for our actions; not even the Klingons." As he glanced from McCoy to the bloody sword at his feet, he admitted, "I also have no desire to revert to savagery or barbarism. The concept of all this bloodshed is completely unacceptable. We must discover a means to defeat the alien before we too are hopelessly under its influence."

"How are we going to do that?" retorted McCoy. "Neither one of us can resist it; not even you with your Vulcan heritage."

The sounds of muffled yelling and continued battle passed by in the corridor and both Spock and McCoy retrieved the Klingons' weapons, quickly preparing for the attack to burst in on them. As the noise receded, they exchanged a relieved look and Spock slowly stepped over to Kirk. Surveying the face of his commander and friend, once more smooth and clean after McCoy's careful ministrations, he whispered huskily, unable to suppress the emotions that Kirk's near death brought to the surface. "Will he recover?"

The doctor joined the Vulcan and answered with a sigh. "I don't know. He's started to regenerate tissue, and the bones I already knit with a laser, but...the brain was deprived of oxygen for a long time. There may be irreversible brain damage. It's possible that he may be totally insane if he should regain consciousness, or even a complete vegetable. It's up to that alien now."

Both men stood gazing down on the man who meant so much to them, and neither willed to face the days ahead without Kirk. Suddenly, McCoy turned to the Vulcan with an idea. "Spock, when we were taken off the ship by the Melkotians to fight the Warp brothers and Doc Holliday, you saved us through the mind meld. Can you use the same procedure now?"

Spock stood with arms folded across his chest and thought carefully before answering. "That would not succeed in this case. These attackers and their weapons are real. It is only the cause for which they fight that is false." He paused, then walked round McCoy slowly. "There is one possibility - however, I am reluctant to mention it."

"Spock, if there's any chance at all, we have to take it," McCoy urged earnestly. "That creature must have a weakness, and we've got to be rational enough to take the opportunity when it's presented."

The Vulcan answered with noticeable reluctance. "Our combined mental energies resulting from a deep meld should protect us from the alien's mind control methods. However, we could not protect ourselves from attack by the Klingons nor stop the alien as long as we were melded. As a result, as soon as the meld was severed, we would again be vulnerable to the alien's influence." Spock was still standing near McCoy, but was glancing around the room as he talked, expecting to see the red glow of the alien as he could sense its closeness. The power and control radiated by the being was almost a physical barrier. It could be felt as a thick cloud of whispers, pin pricks and sparks attempting to enter the thoughts of the victim. Spock shook his head as if to clear it and continued. "If I were able to establish a bond between you and me, Doctor, we conceivably should be able to assist in controlling the violent impulses and emotions that the alien will use to stop us."

"A bond?" McCoy questioned, confused. "Between us? Is that possible?"

The First Officer looked back over to Kirk, almost as if he were nervous. "A bonding between males can be accomplished as easily as between a male and a female. It was relatively common in preReform Vulcan. I must confess that I do not know if a bond can be established between a Human male and a Vulcan, although it was obviously successful with my mother and father. This situation, however, would be quite different." Spock stopped speaking and began to pace back and forth as McCoy had done earlier.

"Spock, what are the risks?" McCoy asked, concerned. He had a feeling that Spock wasn't telling him everything. The little he knew about Vulcan bonding was that it was a stronger tie than marriage and that Vulcans bonded for life.

With an obvious effort to control, Spock stopped pacing in front of the doctor and turned to face him. "Even if we are successful at establishing the bond, I may be able to sever it later. If you were a female it would be impossible, but since you are not, I do not know what the outcome will be."

McCoy didn't want to admit that the idea of being bonded to Spock was a little frightening. But even more than that, he wasn't certain that he wanted anyone to know him that well - to actually get inside his head and know everything about what made Leonard McCoy the person he was. Putting off the decision for a moment, he asked gruffly, "And if we don't try this bonding, what then?"

"Then, Doctor," Spock exploded, "I will quite probably kill you!" He glanced around wildly. "Can you not feel it? Can't you sense its presence?"

McCoy reached out and held Spock's arms. "Yes, I feel it. It's like a constant buzzing in my head; like needles piercing my brain." He gripped Spock firmly and held his eyes, determined to keep both of them in control as long as possible.

"McCoy, you must decide," Spock urged emphatically. "I will not force you into this, but I do not know how much longer I can resist. Either agree or prepare to kill me. Perhaps if you were to dismember me, the - "

"Spock!" McCoy protested, horrified. "Don't even suggest such a thing!"

There was no other recourse; they only had one path to follow out of this nightmare. With resolution, McCoy agreed. "Go ahead and bond us. Two hard heads like us ought to be capable of holding off anything." Whatever worries and trepidations he had about the bonding, the alternative was worse. Even if Spock couldn't break the bond later, if they could save the ship and Jim, the price wasn't too high.

With a relieved sigh, Spock drew his arms away from McCoy. "First we must protect ourselves from attack." Glancing around the room, he considered their options. They would need several minutes of uninterrupted concentration to complete successfully the mental techniques required for a bonding. "Can we move the Captain into your office?" He had turned back to the doctor as he spoke, noticing that McCoy was no longer listening. "McCoy?" Spock asked as the doctor glared at him with an evil glint in his icy blue eyes.

McCoy creased his forehead and grimaced, swaying slightly as thoughts of murdering the Vulcan ran through his mind. The image had suddenly appeared, pushing out all other thoughts, and he could visualize himself slicing through the man before him with a huge knife dripping with green blood. Spock was the enemy. He was the alien threatening to destroy the ship. Looking back into the First Officer's face, McCoy saw that Spock was watching him warily. Suddenly McCoy lunged for the threat that had to be stopped and both men tumbled to the deck. The doctor tried to strangle Spock; however, the Vulcan was holding off the attack carefully, so as not to injure the Human. Quickly gaining the advantage, Spock held McCoy down flat on his back and straddled him, pinning his arms to the deck until McCoy's struggles ceased.

Spock could see the conflicting emotions flow across the Human's face and when he was certain that McCoy was again in control, he relaxed his grip on the doctor's wrists and asked, concerned, "Are you all right?"

McCoy stared up at the First Officer, then averted his eyes and answered testily, "Yes - now get off me!" He was angry with himself for his actions, but also resented the Vulcan for so easily holding off his attack. He was slightly aware that his thoughts were still not completely rational, but for the moment he didn't care. It rankled that Spock's hadn't lost control when he had. "I don't seem to have much resistance, do I?" he fumed as he got to his feet.

Spock didn't answer, as any answer at the moment would probably irritate McCoy, and another attack would push himself over that same precarious cliff that the doctor was scaling. There was very little time left for either of them. Even now an overwhelming bloodlust was threatening to devour every trace of rationality and control which existed within the Vulcan. He went back to his original question before McCoy's attack. "Can we move the Captain into your office?"

"Yes," answered the doctor, while shaking his head to block the whispers and lies that were clawing their way through his thoughts again. "Help me push the table in there, and I can hook him up to the life support unit in the private examination room in the back."

After moving Kirk into the other room, the doctor found it was no longer necessary to have him on life support. The alien was working its incredible healing powers to keep the balance of fighters even. He was beginning to believe that he could have left Jim's body where it was and the end result would have been the same. But he knew that he could never have done that - he'd guard Kirk's lifeless body from further abuse the same as he would if Jim were alive. When he was satisfied that Kirk was in no danger, he and Spock went out into the adjoining office, and as the two men found themselves facing each other, for once they both appeared to be at a loss for words. McCoy self-consciously wiped his sweaty palms on his pants and asked apprehensively, "Well, what do we do?"

Spock was struggling against the propelling drive to crush the life out of the Human, and found it extremely difficult to speak. "There is...normally a short ceremony and...pledge made by both parties during...a male bonding." Breathing deeply to calm his raging emotions, he continued, "With your permission, I believe that we should avoid that part of the procedure...until we are certain that...dissolving the bond is impossible."

McCoy was trembling from the effort of grasping onto that last thread of sanity. Answering impatiently, "Spock, you know more about this than I do. I'll agree to whatever you think best. Just get on with it." Although a small part of his mind was curious about the ceremony and pledging, he hoped he would never have to find out any more about it.

Spock stepped closer and as he rubbed his hands together and took a few deep soothing breaths, he could sense McCoy's nervousness even before he touched him. Spock gently positioned his fingers for the meld and began to span the gap between their consciousnesses. With smooth, easy waves, he entered McCoy's mind, gradually slipping through his thoughts and memories. He had entered the Human's mind before, but never to this depth; never to the core of McCoy's essence, reaching to his soul. Opening his own thoughts to McCoy, he let down the barriers completely to allow the doctor to know him as no other living being had done before. As they flowed into each other's interbeings, there was an immediate, soothing, relaxing current reaching every part of their bodies. The prickling and pain that had been eating away at both of them was blocked, held out by the combined mental energies of Human and Vulcan; a union of unpenetrable tendrils which formed a forcefield within their minds.

As all their old irritations, grievances and arguments were dispersed, their entire lives were laid bare to be examined and accepted. There were no secrets, nor unexplained mysteries to either of them. McCoy understood just how alone and isolated Spock's life had been for him. He was never completely accepted on Vulcan, in the Academy, or even on the Enterprise in the beginning. Not until Chris Pike did Spock ever have anyone he felt at ease with; although his and Kirk's friendship was much stronger, much deeper, Pike had opened up the Vulcan and

prepared him for that special friendship. McCoy wasn't surprised to discover just how deeply Spock loved Kirk, and how his life now revolved around that unique Human. McCoy understood as no other person could, since he felt exactly the same towards Kirk. Even Sarek hadn't accepted Spock until the trip to Babel on board the Enterprise, where he had an opportunity to observe him in his chosen life style. Looming just as important in Spock's life was McCoy - sometimes antagonist, sometimes ruthless debater, sometimes physician, but always supporting, always a friend even if his methods often made it difficult to realise.

Spock was finally given insight into McCoy's life, and similarly to Spock, Leonard McCoy had been a loner much of his life. His mother and father had died while he was a child, and he and his older brother Jeff were raised by their uncle, Trent McCoy. He had developed a close relationship with his uncle only to have it also taken away by a fatal accident when McCoy was fourteen. Once more he found himself alone, as Jeff was away at college. McCoy alternated between relatives until he too was old enough to leave the huge Georgia plantation now owned by himself and Jeff, to enter college. He met Arianna Severson there shortly after his second year there and married her after a whirlwind romance. Things went well until McCoy entered Medical School and spent most of his time on medicine instead of her. That resentment built and festered and finally destroyed their marriage years later when she had turned to other men for the love and attention that she claimed McCoy could never give her. Hurt and disillusioned, he filed for divorce and even before it was final joined Starfleet, vowing to himself that he'd never let himself get close to anyone again. He kept that promise until he met James Kirk and found himself drawn into a strong, intense friendship that had become very important to him.

There was a gradual swirling, flowing pressure beginning to build within the minds of Spock and McCoy. It was not unpleasant and the increasing current seemed to lift them from the physical realities of the ship. At that moment, they were the entire universe - growing, expanding and soaring through space and beyond. As the waves crested in a kaleidoscope of pulsating shapes and designs that changed so quickly, the rush of colours spun by, causing a dizziness that almost overwhelmed their senses. Slowly and carefully, Spock gently brought them back through the swirling, ebbing currents to their own reality.

Even as Spock started withdrawing from the meld, there was no longer any break or hole for the alien to weave through to the other's thoughts. The combined layer of insulation built from within their minds would stand against an attack. Both men were no longer alone or vulnerable, as the other was still there, supporting, aiding and protecting. When Spock finally dropped his hands away, both were considerably shaken and deeply affected.

As the blue eyes surveyed the man who could now be considered his Bondmate, it was almost impossible not to respond to his physical presence. Clearing his throat, McCoy found his voice somewhat dry. "Spock...will we always feel this close...this much a part of the other?"

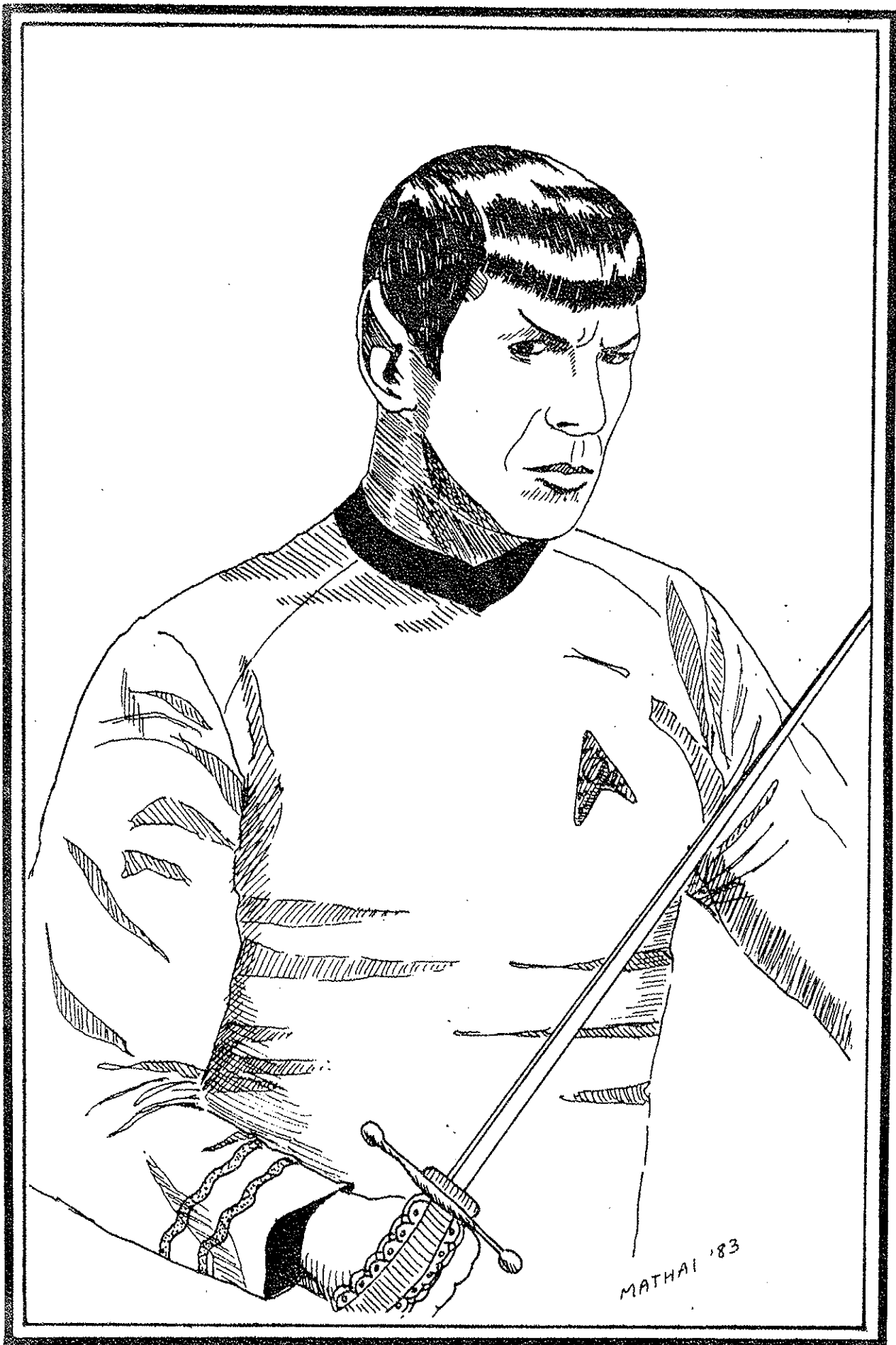
The Vulcan softened his normally impassive expression and although it could not actually be called a smile, McCoy could read through the facade. "Yes, Leonard. As long as the bond is present, we are - I believe the expression is, 'stuck with each other'."

A loud thumping against the office doors startled both of them and they turned towards the noise, watching in case the locks didn't hold. With the alien controlling the ship, anything was possible. Another thump was followed by Mr. Scott's voice filtering through the intercom. "McCoy, are ye in there?"

The doctor glanced over at Spock, then activated his intercom to answer. "Yes, Scotty, what do you want?"

"What do I want?" repeated Scotty incredulously. "Are ye daft, man? I want in, away from those Klingon devils. They've got me trapped in here!"

Scotty sounded excited but rational, and after Spock picked up a weapon and prepared for an attack, McCoy flicked open the lock on the doors. Scotty came in



watching behind him as if Satan himself were on his tail. Turning around with relief as the doors closed behind him, the engineer spotted Spock standing with a weapon ready. "There ye are, ye filthy Vulcan!" he hissed ominously. "I've been looking all over the ship for ye." He approached Spock in a fighting stance, still gasping from his desperate escape from the Klingons.

"Scotty, wait!" McCoy protested. "He's on our side." He didn't know of the confrontation between the two of them earlier on the bridge, before Kirk had been killed.

"So," breathed Scotty suspiciously. "You've fallen in with him, have you?" He turned on the doctor, and as he lunged Spock charged and deftly put him to sleep with a neck pinch.

As the First Officer slowly lowered the engineer to the deck, he stood beside him while he contemplated their next move. "Can you sedate him, Doctor?"

"Sedation doesn't work," McCoy replied grimly. "I gave Lt. Johnson enough trianolyn to knock out a sehlat, and he jumped off the bed, pushed me aside, and ran out of sickbay. Believe me, if trianolyn isn't effective, nothing is."

"In that case, we'll either have to restrain him or put him out in one of the outer rooms."

After a short discussion, they decided that it would be safer to have Mr. Scott isolated from them and the Captain. With McCoy's aid, Spock hid the unconscious engineer in one of the storerooms in the back of sickbay. They felt he would be safe there until he came to.

They returned to McCoy's office where they felt somewhat safer to be behind locked doors. It was hoped that the alien was being kept busy with the bloody battle taking place outside. McCoy was beginning to feel the hours of tension, fear and exhaustion catching up with him. After checking on Kirk, who was healing at an unbelievable rate, he sat down on the couch in the corner, rested his elbows on his knees, and laid his head in his hands.

Spock sat down beside him, feeling McCoy's fatigue himself without needing to have it confirmed. "You need to sleep, Leonard. I will stand guard while you rest."

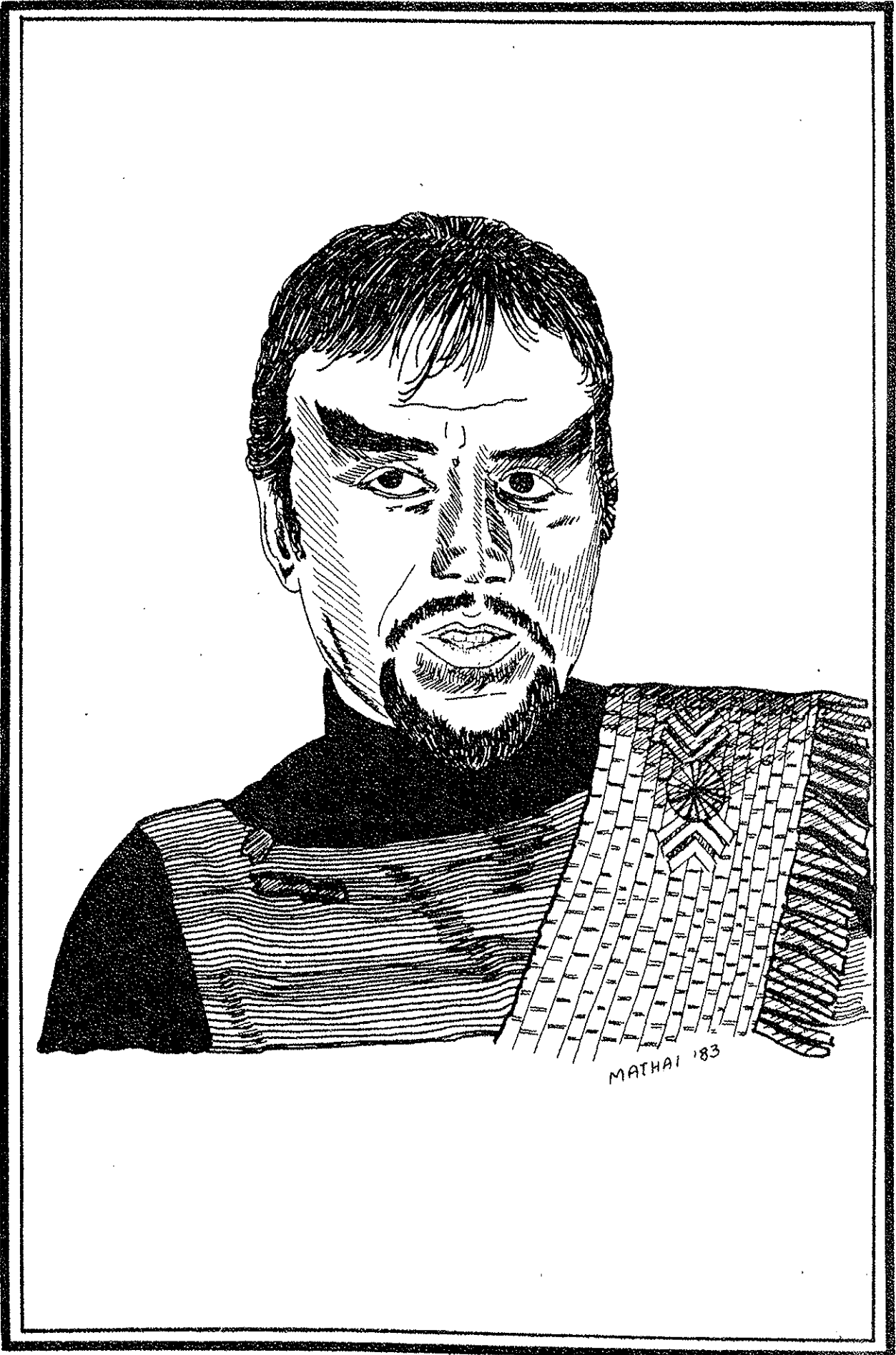
Immediately sitting up, McCoy protested, "No, I'm fine. I've got to keep an eye on Jim." He sensed Spock's amusement and as he glanced over at the Vulcan he realised that Spock knew exactly how he felt and was fully expecting the protest. "I guess there's not much point in trying to deny it, is there? For that matter, I can tell that you're just as tired as I am."

"I won't deny the need for rest, but I can wait until later. You sleep for a while, and I will keep watch over the Captain."

Without waiting for the doctor to argue, Spock rose and stood beside him. "Do you need some assistance?" he asked, almost as a threat.

"Oh, no," McCoy answered quickly. "That's all right. I can manage just fine." He pulled off his boots and lay down on the couch before Spock could 'assist him'. As he lay down on his back, he locked eyes with the man standing before him. He wanted to say something to express how he felt and how much he appreciated what Spock had done, but he knew there was no need. The essence of his feelings had already been relayed to his Bondmate even though the words hadn't been spoken. He closed his eyes with complete trust in the man guarding him, and immediately fell into a deep slumber.

After a couple of hours, the doctor's sleep was disrupted by a violent nightmare. He was in a long, winding, dimly-lit tunnel, and he was running - tearing wildly down through the dark, hot passageways. There was something behind him, pounding and panting and gaining on his escape with every foot. The tunnels were so hot and humid that it was difficult to breathe, and McCoy felt like his lungs were collapsing. Suddenly there appeared an obstacle in front of him, and McCoy



automatically swung the huge, heavy sword he carried, slicing off the head of the creature that blocked his way. As the thick yellowish slimy blood gushed out of the headless demon, an overpowering stench filled the passageway, almost bringing McCoy down. Choking and gasping, the doctor stumbled on as he heard the beast behind him rapidly cutting the distance between them. Down, down, into one passageway after another he fled, while the beast kept gaining on him. He chanced a quick look behind and saw two red glowing eyes growing closer and closer. While his attention was broken, he tripped over a stone block and fell, dropping roughly to his knees and losing his grip on the blade. As he pushed himself up he fumbled, searching for the lost weapon, but it was too late. Feeling the nearness of the thing, McCoy backed over to the wall, pressing his back into the rocky surface, terrified and exhausted. Closer and closer the huge red burning orbs came until the face of the beast was revealed. Contorted with a savage rage and hideously mutilated, it was himself that he saw. His cry of terror brought him upright on the couch, where he was immediately gripped by two strong hands.

"McCoy...Leonard, are you all right?"

As the doctor opened his eyes, he had a moment of confusion as to what had happened, then he slumped against the Vulcan's supporting arms. "Damn, that was... some nightmare," he admitted, trembling.

As they sat on the couch, McCoy's shaking gradually disappeared, and he cast a sideways look at Spock. "Sorry to bother you," he mumbled quietly.

"You didn't disturb me; however, it seems that the alien can still reach us to a degree - if only through our dreams. If you desire to discuss the dream, perhaps it would help."

Before he could reply, the shipwide intercom came to life with a familiar harsh voice. "Kirk! Kirk, this is Kang. I just want you to know, Human, that I'm coming after you. And I will find you no matter where you hide. Be watching for me, Kirk." He paused momentarily before continuing. "Attention, anyone listening - there will be a large reward to anyone who turns Kirk over to me alive. A very large reward."

McCoy shook his head and grumbled bitterly. "Well, that settles the question of whether any of us will stay dead." After slipping on his boots, he rose and walked into the adjoining room to check on his patient. There were no signs that he had ever been cut; all was healed and there were no scars. He ran a medical scan over the Captain and turned to Spock. "You can't even see the wound now."

Spock joined McCoy and also examined Kirk's neck. The only question that remained was whether he had suffered any brain damage. "Can you bring him to?" Spock asked thoughtfully.

"Yes, I should be able to," McCoy replied as he reached for the hypo on the counter.

"One moment, Doctor. First we must decide on a course of action." As McCoy stopped and waited for Spock to go ahead, the Vulcan folded his arms and stood near Kirk. "Even if the Captain has not suffered brain damage, he will no doubt be under the alien's control. For that reason he cannot be trusted. What I propose is to use the Captain's hatred and desire for revenge to defeat the creature. We must direct his determination and indomitable strength to our advantage without provoking him against us."

"That may not be easy, Spock," McCoy pointed out. "He could just as easily turn on us, and I'll tell you right now that I won't kill him; not even to save my life."

"I understand, Doctor. I could never harm him either. I do not want him to know exactly what I have in mind as a weapon against the creature, for it would learn of the plan quickly from his thoughts. I will explain to you later. Now bring him to, but remember - he's not to be trusted."

The doctor gently pressed the hypo against Kirk's shoulder and then intently

studied the indicators on the panel above the bed. A moan from the patient brought his attention back to Kirk.

"Ohhhh, what... Where am I?" Kirk mumbled sleepily.

McCoy realised that he had scarcely been breathing and he gave Spock a relieved smile and looked back at the Captain. "Jim, how do you feel?"

"Ahhh... Like a shuttle hit me. What happened?" Kirk's vision slowly cleared and he appeared to be very disorientated.

"Don't you remember?" asked Spock as he stepped closer to the Captain.

Kirk creased his forehead in concentration and was rewarded by a sharp pain piercing through his head. As the details came back, Kirk suddenly looked at Spock. "Kang! Where is he?"

"We are not certain, Captain. He announced over the intercom earlier that he was looking for you, and that he would reward anyone bringing you to him."

"Oh he did, did he? Well, let's see if we can't find him first." He raised himself and jumped down from the table. Noticing a sword lying on the counter, he started towards it, but Spock stepped in front of him.

"Captain, I have a plan that should enable you to overcome the Klingons quickly." After getting the Captain's attention, he glanced over at the doctor to see if he understood what to do. McCoy appeared to be putting away some equipment, and casually picked up the weapon and went out into his office.

Spock continued talking before Kirk could interrupt. "I propose that we pretend to give in to Kang's demands that we turn you over to him, while at the same time gaining his confidence. However, before searching for him, I have devised a method of constructing a more lethal weapon than swords or knives."

With a slight nod, Kirk agreed. "Sounds reasonable to me. Just remember, when we get Kang, he's mine." While Kirk didn't appear to be under the influence of the alien, the very fact that he hadn't mentioned it spoke for itself. His desire for revenge blocked out all other thoughts.

"We must first reach engineering without alerting the Klingons," Spock said as they walked out to where McCoy waited. "Captain, in case we run into Kang's men, I believe it would be better if you are unarmed. You must appear to be our prisoner."

Kirk turned and gazed over at Spock, frowning slightly, almost as if he suspected something, but agreed without comment. The First Officer motioned for McCoy to go first and then allowed the Captain to go next, so he could bring up the rear and keep a sharp eye on Kirk.

As they left sickbay, the carnage that greeted them in the corridors was enough to turn the stomach of even the most seasoned soldier. Blood had dried in pools on the deck and was splattered on the walls. Occasionally there was a body, some hacked to pieces, with weapons and other objects strewn about carelessly.

Most of the quarters on this deck were torn apart, and items were broken and scattered all over. They had to hide several times while passing groups continued their deadly search for victims. The war was no longer Klingon against Federation since many groups hunting were mixed, with both. It no longer mattered who the enemy was. Any available person was considered fair game for the blade.

As they neared the end of the corridor, they heard the sounds of a scuffle coming from around the corner near the freight turbolift. McCoy chanced a quick glance around the corner while he motioned for Kirk and Spock to wait. The anger that welled in him as he took in the scene ahead didn't need any assistance from the creature. Three of their own crew were attacking Nurse Chapel. Although she was trying desperately to fight them off, the battle was too one-sided to do much more than excite the attackers further. Lt. Valdez, who worked for McCoy in the main lab, brutally backhanded Chapel across the face. Finally, out of exhaustion

and pain, she quit struggling and gave up.

The men had their backs to the three senior officers, which gave the trio the advantage. After McCoy had explained the situation, they crept up softly behind the men. Using the Vulcan neck pinch, Spock quickly dropped one of them before they were even alerted to their presence. Lt. Valdez spun round and attempted to run through Kirk and Spock; however, Kirk tripped him and swiftly dived down upon the young man. McCoy grabbed the remaining rapist and jerked him up and into Spock's grasp where he was also incapacitated by the neck pinch. Spock turned around in time to see Kirk savagely beating Valdez even though he was plainly unconscious. As he stopped Kirk before he killed Valdez, McCoy helped Chapel to her feet.

"Chris, are you all right?" he asked, concerned. She was bleeding from several scratches and had one bad cut on her cheek, but fortunately nothing seemed to be broken.

"Yes, I think so. It's...it's a good thing you,..came along," she stammered. "I tried to fight them off, but...I...well..."

"I know, Chris. You don't have to explain," commented McCoy softly as he helped her adjust her clothing. This incident only strengthened his determination to stop the violence on the ship. He knew two of the crewmen well, and was furious at their actions. As he gave them a glare, he realised that they weren't responsible. They would be horrified to learn what they had done. At least they had been stopped before Chris had been seriously injured. He was puzzled as to why she seemed to be completely rational, although understandably shaken. However as he studied her closely there was an odd glint in her eyes. Almost a hardness, or an evilness seemed to emanate from those beautiful eyes for a moment; then just as suddenly as it appeared, it was gone.

The doctor glanced over at Kirk who had been quietly staring at Chapel, and noticed that he was giving her quite a going over. Most of her clothing had been torn and what was left really didn't do much to cover her shapely body. McCoy almost had to bite his tongue to keep from snapping at Kirk; however, he remained silent as he pulled off his tunic and handed it to Chapel. "Here, Chris, put this on."

As she complied, Kirk looked over at McCoy and realised that he was staring at him. "Something bothering you, McCoy?" he asked harshly.

Instead of answering, the doctor just shook his head. Spock attempted to get Kirk's attention focused on something else. "Captain, I believe we should move these men out of the corridor. Will you assist me?"

Kirk spun round to face his First Officer. "If you want them moved, then you do it!"

"Yes, sir," Spock replied evenly. Although reluctant to leave McCoy, he surmised it best to follow Kirk's orders quickly, and began at once to complete his task.

As Kirk turned back to Chapel, she was telling McCoy that she was going back to sickbay. Before she could walk past Kirk, he grabbed her roughly by the wrist. "There's no need to run off," he said smiling, although there was no warmth in the smile.

"Let go of my arm, Captain," ordered the nurse coldly. She had heard Kang's offer of a reward for Kirk earlier and she intended to collect it. She had seen Kang in the main bio lab not long ago. The alien's control over her was complete - she was convinced that Kirk was responsible for the violence and that by turning him over to Kang, it would all end.

Kirk only tightened his grip in response to her protests. He sensed a danger from her, and for that matter there was a difference in Spock and McCoy too. He couldn't put a finger on it, but they were not the same.

"Jim," McCoy interrupted, "don't you think we'd better help Spock and get

down to engineering?" Although hesitant to provoke Kirk, McCoy wasn't going to stand by and let Chapel get hurt. He wished Spock would hurry up and finish moving the crewmen, and noticed that he was just picking up the last one.

Kirk didn't even acknowledge the doctor as he pulled Chapel over to him. "Why are you in such a hurry, Nurse?"

She struggled to free herself from Kirk's iron hold on her wrist just as McCoy positioned himself between her and the Captain, latching on to Kirk's arms. Kirk broke the doctor's hold with a smashing backarmed swack, knocked the wind out of McCoy by striking him in the chest and back into the wall.

The doctor was momentarily dazed and Kirk took advantage of the situation to retrieve the doctor's sword from where he had laid it while he helped the nurse. By the time McCoy cleared his vision, Kirk was advancing on him with the sword ready. It was almost impossible for the doctor to accept what was happening as reality. He prayed that it was all a nightmare and that he'd wake up before the end came. Of all the horrible imagined and unimagined ways to be killed, dying by Jim Kirk's hand had to be the worst.

"All right, you," Kirk snarled. "What have you done with McCoy?" The alien had him convinced that this wasn't his friend but an imposter that had killed the doctor.

McCoy noticed Spock creeping up softly behind Kirk, so he knew he had to keep his attention. "Jim, don't you recognise me? It's Bones."

"Oh, you're a good copy, but you're not McCoy. What did you do to him?"

Perhaps it was a sixth sense that warned him of Spock's approach, or maybe the alien, but he spun round quickly just as Spock was within range.

McCoy immediately jumped Kirk from the rear and both of them fell with a crash. Between them, Spock and McCoy soon had Kirk pinned to the deck. He struggled and cursed, but there was no way he could escape. During the confusion Chapel slipped away unnoticed.

McCoy glanced over at Spock, and grumbled, "Dammit, Spock, we can't keep this up."

"I am open to suggestions, Doctor," he replied blandly.

As Kirk relaxed under their hold, they turned their attention back to him, and noticed that he was looking from one to the other in confusion.

"Jim," McCoy pressed quickly. "You've got to snap out of it. We're only trying to help you."

"Bones?" Kirk breathed uncertainly. "Spock. It...it really is you."

"Jim," McCoy asked cautiously, "do you understand what's been happening?" He had to be certain before he released Kirk.

"Yes - that alien has been controlling my mind. We've got to stop it before it realises I'm free of its influence."

With relief, both Spock and McCoy got to their feet, pulling Kirk up with them.

"Spock, you said something about a plan to destroy that being. What have you got in mind?" Kirk asked as he picked up the sword, then, considering what had just happened, handed it over to McCoy.

Since Kirk was rational, Spock decided to explain his theory. "Captain, this creature we are fighting moves through solid barriers such as walls and decks with no difficulty at all. In order to accomplish that, it must be capable of altering its molecular structure. Conventional weapons such as our phasers would have no effect on it. In that respect, it is similar to the cloud creature that you destroyed with anti-matter."

"Spock," interrupted McCoy, "we can't use anti-matter on the ship! We'd blow ourselves up with it!"

"Quite correct, Doctor. I have no intention of using anti-matter. I was thinking more in the terms of a sonic molecular scramble net such as the one used on Texana II."

"A what?" asked McCoy, confused.

"It is a defence system used to discourage the lower life forms of Texana from attacking the mining colonies. Any being caught within its screen is immediately dispersed into individual molecules which are scrambled and held with a stasis field."

"Like the transporter?" questioned McCoy.

"Similar - however, anything caught within the net cannot be transported. The net remains around the victims and can hold them indefinitely without harming them. It will not destroy the creature, but it should render it harmless until we can discover a means of destroying it."

"It just might work," agreed Kirk. "Do you think you can construct one of the devices?"

"I believe I should be able to, Captain, by altering one of Mr. Scott's molecular converter units, and provided the creature does not direct the attack against us."

"Then let's hurry," indicated Kirk.

McCoy gazed into Kirk's troubled eyes and laid his hand over Kirk's for a second, and at that moment he knew that the bonding was the right action to have taken. Kirk was with them, mentally and physically, and there was no price too high for that. Speaking with difficulty past the sudden restriction in his throat, he replied gruffly, "Let's get to engineering and put a stop to all this madness."

Luckily, they reached their objective without further incident, and as more good fortune prevailed, the entire section was deserted. Spock immediately started constructing the weapon, with Kirk's assistance. However, after a while, Spock began to notice a change coming over the Captain. He was having more and more difficulty concentrating on the task, and was extremely irritable.

Kirk finally stopped working and instead started pacing back and forth behind the Vulcan. Then suddenly he stalked over to Spock and demanded impatiently, "Aren't you about finished?"

"It is nearly completed, Captain. It would have been a much easier task if Mr. Scott could have assisted me."

Although Spock was referring to Mr. Scott's technical skills, that was not the way Kirk took Spock's comment. Furiously, he spun Spock round by the shirt. "You saying my help's not good enough for you?"

Spock merely replied calmly, "Jim, I assure you that I meant no criticism. You have indeed been of great assistance to me."

Kirk just gave him a dark scowl and marched over to the door where the doctor had been watching both of them.

McCoy knew it had been too much to hope for that Kirk would remain free of the alien's control until it could be stopped. With a sigh, he started to walk over to Spock to see if he could help when he was stopped by Kirk's icy voice. "Give me your sword, McCoy."

The doctor hesitated a moment, then turned back just in time to see a Klingon creeping up to the open door, already in the process of bringing his arm down from a swing that would send his knife flying into Kirk's back. There was no time to warn him; McCoy lunged into Kirk, sending him out of the line of the blade. The movement saved the Captain - however, it left McCoy in the path of the knife, and it entered his shoulder, burying itself to the hilt.

McCoy's mental cry of pain flashed through the bonding link, instantly warning Spock of the attack. He had just finished the weapon - however, it could only be used once, so he first had to join in the battle near the door. Kang and two of his warriors were descending upon Kirk, who just barely managed to grab McCoy's sword without being killed. Kang directed his fury towards Kirk as the remaining two soldiers attacked Spock. McCoy managed to trip one of the Klingons just before he lapsed into unconsciousness. That gave Spock the advantage, and he quickly despatched that warrior with a neck pinch.

As the fight continued, the deep glowing crimson rays of the alien fell over the room after it passed through the wall, casting out waves of hate and evil which increased the violent emotions set loose by its direction.

Spock began retreating, leading the Klingon towards the rear of the room. He had to reach his hastily constructed weapon while the creature was within range. He feinted, parried, and then feinted again, bringing his opponent in close. Then with a swift blow he sliced into the Klingon's arm. As the soldier dropped his weapon, Spock shoved him into the wall with a smashing push. Without wasting a moment, he snatched up the device, aimed it at the creature and activated it. Instead of the low hum normally associated with the instrument, a loud buzz was emitted which instantly immobilised the being. As the buzzing intensified, the alien exploded in a shower of tiny pulsating glitter, then even that disappeared.

With the fiery destruction of the alien, reason once more returned to the minds of the victims. Kang fell to his knees, groaning and holding his head in his hands, and although Kirk was dizzy, he remained standing. He looked over at Spock with a relieved grin. "What the hell happened?"

Spock was obviously surprised himself. "I seem to have miscalculated, Captain." As he answered, he hurried over to McCoy's prone body and knelt down, beside him. He then turned him over. Kirk instantly appeared on the other side of the doctor and both were alarmed at the amount of deep red blood that gushed out around the knife.

"Jim," Spock said gravely, "we must stop the bleeding quickly. The blade must have severed an artery, and we do not know how long before medical aid will be available."

"How are we going to stop it, Spock?" He didn't believe the normal method of applying pressure would have that much effect.

"It will require a deep meld, and I must not be disturbed. I am going to direct his own body functions into a healing trance to slow down the blood flow."

"Spock," Kirk protested, concerned. "You told me once that the procedure you're describing was extremely dangerous to attempt except between Bondmates. As much as I understand you're willing, Bones wouldn't want you to risk your life."

Spock took a deep breath and looked into Kirk's face. "Jim, McCoy and I are bonded." He stopped at the look of surprise on Kirk's face, then continued. "I will explain later, after he is out of danger."

Although Kirk wanted a full explanation, he knew Spock was right. However they had become bonded, it would wait until McCoy was healing. He laid a hand on Spock's arm for a moment. "Take care of him, Spock," he whispered softly before rising.

The intercom interrupted Kirk's intention to talk to Kang, and Mr. Scott's voice came through loud and clear. "Bridge to Captain Kirk."

Wasting no time, he answered quickly. "Kirk here."

"Captain! It's good to hear your voice. Nurse Chapel informed me that you were okay. The emergency bulkheads have opened, and we've got a lot of people wanting to know what's been happening."

"I don't doubt that, Scotty. McCoy is injured, and we need a medical team and gurney down in the engineering department at the double. What's the status on the crystals?"

"One moment, sir." The engineer relayed the message to Uhura to get the medical team down to engineering since she had just reported to the bridge. Although she was dishevelled and shaken, she had been fortunate to avoid serious injury. At present they were the only two on the bridge, so it took him a few minutes to check out their position and status.

"Captain," he reported soon, "ye won't believe this, but we've been going in circles, and not at warp nine but at warp four. Apparently that little beastie put the idea in our heads that the crystals were almost gone, because I can find no damage."

"Scotty, that's the best news I've heard in days." He noticed that Spock was easing McCoy down on the deck. "I'm going to accompany McCoy to sickbay. You take care of things up there."

"Aye, Captain, that I will. Scott out."

Dr. Baugh and two medics arrived breathlessly from sickbay. They had been trapped below and like all the others, they were shocked to see the upper decks. They had no idea what had been happening, as the influence of the creature had not been directed towards them at all. Dr. M'Benga had his hands full in sickbay and had sent his assistant to aid McCoy. After a swift examination, the doctor instructed the medics to take McCoy on to sickbay and reported to the Captain.

"Sir, the knife severed an artery, but he's not in any danger. Fortunately he didn't lose too much blood, which is surprising with that injury. I'll take him right into surgery." Then, shaking his head, he muttered, "I don't know what has been going on, but you should see some of the cases we've got in sickbay." With a shudder, he followed the gurney out.

Spock had joined Kirk and the Human studied him closely for a moment before asking, "Are you all right, Spock?"

"Yes, Captain. Although I'm somewhat drained, the condition is temporary and shall not cause any difficulties."

Although Kirk wanted to ask more concerning the bonding, he respected Spock's and McCoy's privacy and didn't enquire. Instead, he suggested, "Why don't you go and wait in sickbay until McCoy's conscious? I'll join you in a few minutes."

"Yes, Captain," he replied. He started to turn away, then glanced back at Kirk. "Jim, I'd like to talk to you as soon as possible."

Kirk gave him a reassuring smile. "I'll be right up."

As the First Officer left, Kirk walked over to Kang, who was speaking into the intercom, ordering his men to return to the quarters originally assigned to them. As he finished he turned to face Kirk. "I've ordered my men back to their room. There'll be no more trouble." He started to walk to the door, then added with a devilish grin, "At least, not today."

They left together, and Kirk accompanied him to his quarters. Kang was relieved to find Mara there waiting for him. She had received a few cuts and bruises but had managed to avoid most of the fighting.

Damage control and repair teams were already beginning to clear out the shambles while medical teams were still searching for any survivors. The grisly clean-up of some of the bodies was the most difficult aspect of the incident to endure. Several were beyond recognition as they had been dismembered, burned or horribly mutilated.

Upon arriving at sickbay, Kirk went into McCoy's office where Spock had been waiting and listened silently while Spock explained the necessity of the bonding. After Spock had finished speaking, Kirk asked, puzzled, "Spock, just how difficult will it be to sever the bond? I mean, it's not as if you and he...I mean, you..." He trailed off, uncertain how to phrase his question.

Spock understood exactly what he meant and answered, somewhat subdued, "I believe we have a good chance, providing we do not wait too long. In my opinion, we should attempt it as soon as McCoy is recovered from his injury."

He sat across the desk from Kirk quietly for a moment, then continued, "Jim, I would appreciate it if you would be present when we attempt the severing."

"Of course, Spock, I - " He was interrupted by Dr. Baugh as the young physician stuck his head in the office.

"Captain, Dr. McCoy is beginning to come round. You can see him for a few minutes."

They walked into McCoy's room in time to be at his side when he was fully aware of his surroundings. Kirk sat down on the edge of his bed while Spock stood beside him.

"Jim...Spock," acknowledged McCoy, mumbling slightly, still under the effects of the sedation. "That gadget you made must have worked, Spock." He glanced up at the First Officer, although his eyes were still half closed.

"Not exactly as expected, however, the end result was more than I had anticipated."

"What he's trying to say, Bones, is that the creature is destroyed, the ship's in good shape and we're on course for Forme to drop off the Klingons." Kirk smiled at his friend and took McCoy's hand in his. "And you damn near got yourself killed by a knife meant for me," he added softly while gently squeezing McCoy's hand.

As McCoy returned the pressure, he replied, "Ah spend too much time patchin' ya up as it is, Jim." The sedation made his soft southern drawl more apparent.

Spock could sense that Kirk and McCoy would like a few minutes alone. "Captain, I am going to report to the bridge and check on the status of the damage control teams." He started to leave, then hesitated and turned back to the patient. Allowing his voice to carry more concern than usual, "I am pleased that you are still with us, Leonard."

McCoy smiled at the Vulcan, knowing how difficult it was for him to admit caring even to that small degree. "Thanks, Spock."

After he had left, Kirk gave his friend a grin. "You could at least have invited me to the wedding, Bones," he teased.

McCoy returned his gaze, slightly embarrassed by his remark. "You were there, Jim. You just didn't know it."

"You two took a hell of a chance. You...ah...you may not be able to get out of it," Kirk indicated gently.

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. But even if we can't, it was worth it to keep you in one piece."

"I don't know what I ever did to deserve you for a friend, Bones, but I'm sure glad you are." He stood up as he noticed that McCoy was having difficulty keeping his eyes open again. "Bones, if you and Spock can't break the bond, you know that it won't change my feelings towards either of you."

"I know, Jim," McCoy whispered as he finally gave in to the sedation. "I know."



Two days later, after McCoy was released from sickbay, Spock and Kirk met the doctor in his quarters. He had recovered enough to attempt to break the bond. Even though they had only been bonded for a short time, the level had intensified with each passing day, and they could no longer delay.

"Well, Spock, what do you want me to do?" asked Kirk, feeling slightly like the 'third party'.

"We will not require your assistance for the present; however, if this is not successful, then we will need a witness to the formal bonding ceremony to comply with Vulcan laws and traditions."

"I understand, Spock," answered Kirk soberly. He stepped away from his two closest friends and stood watching quietly.

Spock stepped over to face the doctor as they had done a few days earlier to establish the bond. With a deep concentration and gentle penetration, Spock once again entered McCoy's essence, reaching to the depth of the bonding levels, gradually beginning to process of reversing the forming of the bond. Carefully, with Spock's guidance, McCoy helped to dissipate the interlocking tendrils to free them both. It was a much longer process, but even before it was finished, they knew it was working. By the time the bond was severed completely, both men were shaking with exhaustion. It was difficult to tell which one was supporting the other as they both almost dropped from the draining experience on their minds and bodies. Kirk stepped in at once and helped McCoy to a chair. Spock declined the offer of assistance as he recovered much quicker.

"Well?" prompted Kirk impatiently.

"It worked, Jim," answered McCoy. "There's nobody up there - " he indicated by pointing to his head - " but little ole me now." He glanced over at Spock with a twinkle in his blue eyes.

"Indeed, Captain, the bond is severed completely. But I might add that it was a fascinating experience."

Kirk looked from Spock to McCoy, grinning. "Bones, did he just say that you were fascinating?"

"Damn sure sounded like it, didn't it?" he answered, taking Kirk's lead. "I always knew my Southern charm would get to him!"

Instead of rising to the bait so obviously offered, Spock's reply surprised them both. "Yes, Leonard. Your Southern charm has indeed 'got to me' as you put it. Goodnight, gentlemen." With a slight nod he went out the door, leaving McCoy and Kirk exchanging puzzled glances.

It would take them both a while to figure out that remark.



THE NEEDS OF THE ONE

The needs of the one are few;
A position of dignity,
Stimulation for the powerful brain,
Quiet times, meditation, music...
The love of one other.

The needs of the other are many;
To strive for command, to lead;
The restless urge for action,
The quick mind's need for humour,
A warm man's need for friendship...
The love of one other.

The shared needs of both are the same.
To carry themselves with honour.
To respect all life's diversities;
To reach for the limits of space and time...
To share their love with each other.

Janet Stewart



THIS SIMPLE FEELING

by

Janette Burton

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//Spock, please help! Please help me!// pleaded the voice, sounding hazy and distant. //Please, Spock, you are the only one I can reach. Please help me, please!//

He heard his own voice answering, echoing as though across an empty canyon. //Who are you? What do you want?//

//Please, Spock, please help me!// the voice called again.

//Who are you?//

The reply echoed on and on. //Henoch...Henoch...Henoch...Henoch...//



In the morning, the dream was soon forgotten as Spock applied himself to his duty. He had been working even more diligently than usual over the past few days in an effort to put behind him the memory of their previous planetfall, Sarpeidon.

When the dream recurred the following night Spock was mildly surprised, but adjusted quickly enough to probe a little further. //Why does the memory of you haunt my dreams, Henoch?// he asked, determined to discover why this 'person' from the past should be so much in his thoughts as to arouse a dream.

Henoch's voice came to him, loud and clear. //I am no memory. It is I, Henoch, here within your subconscious mind. Search for my presence and you will find me.//

//But Sargon destroyed you. You are dead.//

//Sargon almost destroyed me. Yes, that is true. But my life's spark was not so easily extinguished. I still exist - barely - although I no longer have power of my own. Only in the dreams of your telepathic mind can I communicate with you.//

Even though Spock was aware that he was dreaming, he was curious to find out more. //What do you want of me, Henoch?//

//I need you to help me live again. Only with the aid of your powerful mind can I climb out of this abyss of oblivion. Spock, I need you to help me back to full consciousness. You are the only one I can reach who has the ability to help me. Please, Spock - please give me life again. Please, Spock, please help me... help me...help me...//

The words echoed until Spock willed himself awake, awake to silence.

The chronometer indicated that he had been asleep only an hour or so, and he lay back thinking about the dream.

What had Henoch said? 'Search and you will find me'. Could it possibly be true? Could it possibly have been more than a simple dream? Spock knew he would rest no more until his curiosity was satisfied.

In the red radiance of the firepot, he settled himself and prepared his mind for deep meditation. He would search for any trace of Henoch. Far-fetched though it seemed, Spock felt compelled to look.

At the outer limits of his consciousness, Spock found a presence. He could identify it as no more than that, but undeniably it was there.

Times, of late, had been troubled enough for Spock without further complications, and now this... Spock knew that he had a big decision to make and time

was growing short. Soon the five-year mission would be complete and the crossroads of his destiny reached. But which path was he to follow? The choice was proving exceedingly difficult.

Now he could not apply all his attention to this most critical decision as the presence lodged in his mind had to be dealt with, confronted and expelled. Spock felt alarmed that anything could have entered his mind without his knowing. To Vulcans, the mind was far more important than the body - or anything else, for that matter.

He had decided to face Henoah that night, but events during the day forced a change in his plans.

The Enterprise received a distress call from the planet Camus II and soon Spock found himself up to his proverbial ears in a most bizarre situation. All previous worries were forgotten for the time being as he concentrated his efforts on proving that there was an intruder on board the Enterprise.

That intruder was a female scientist, Janice Lester, who, on discovering a technique of life entity transfer, now inhabited the Captain's body. Spock discovered the truth of the situation when he used his telepathic powers to touch the mind of James T. Kirk where it resided, held captive, within the body of Dr. Lester.

It had been a most unnerving experience for Spock. He had gone to Dr. Lester in an effort to attain some answers; he had not expected the reception he received or the moving plea from his friend. The trapped Kirk had said, "You are closer to the Captain than anyone in the universe. You know his thoughts. What does your telepathic mind tell you now?"

Reaching out to touch the delicate, yet defiant, face and subsequently being flooded by the entity that was undeniably James Kirk had been a stunning experience. He could not avoid seeing the friendship and trust Kirk held for him or the certainty in the Human's mind that Spock would find a way to help.

Spock had been taken aback by the intensity of the revelation and pulling out of the link had to turn away from the penetrating eyes for a moment of self-composure. He realised that what he had seen in James Kirk's mind had been correct. He would do everything in his power to help his Captain and fulfil the unshakable trust Kirk held in him.

Suddenly, Spock had become aware that where this Human was concerned things went beyond the bounds of logic. It troubled him.

Unfortunately - or perhaps fortunately - for Spock matters progressed at a rapid rate and within hours he had been through a court martial and with his fellow officers McCoy and Scott, and the exchanged Kirk, had found himself in the brig.

The emotional strains of the past few hours had begun to build up in Spock, and the memory of that mind meld with Kirk in Janice Lester's body was still very fresh. How was he to fulfil the trust Kirk had in him?

Kirk, for his part, was taking things well. Even though the physical disadvantage of a female body was a distinct drawback in any escape attempt, mentally he was still in full control. Only on one occasion did a strange fit of dizziness cause a momentary disorientation. Spock had felt a surge of concern well up from within and with an instinct free from hesitation immediately went to Kirk's aid.

Gently he had cradled the female head in his sensitive hands. Had Kirk been in his own body Spock believed that such a spontaneous act would have been out of the question, but this female version had stirred feelings and emotions Spock had long held restrained.

Later, Spock sat alone in his quarters. Everything had worked out well for the Captain and crew of the Enterprise. Dr. Lester had been defeated by her own hesitancy in not killing the man she had once loved. The transference had weakened to such an extent that the life entities had reverted back to their own bodies.

Spock was now left with the unsavoury task of assessing his own motivations

and feelings. His thoughts kept returning to that mind meld. Jim's unshakable trust in me is not a thing to be desired. His own abilities go beyond the need to have me in support...I cannot, must not, let him become over reliant on me! I am a Vulcan... Such a dependence might lead to an emotional attachment...

Spock pondered over past adventures, looking for evidence of any such attachment. To his horror he found many occasions when concern for Kirk had taken him beyond the bounds of logic. The search for the horta on Janus VI, the fight with the Tholians, the encounter with Rayna, the discovery of Captain Merik, the skirmish with the Vians of Minara...the list went on and on...

Face the truth, Spock, he thought. James Kirk is more than just your commanding officer. How many times in the past have those penetrating Human eyes pierced your disciplined defences? How often have you been on the brink of responding to the warmth in them? How often have you responded?

Again his thoughts turned to the Kirk in Janice Lester's body. It took the perverted plottings of an emotionally unstable woman to bring the facts out into the open. How long ago did you penetrate my defences, James Kirk? How long has my Human inheritance been deceiving me, deviously channelling me to a friendship with you? You were trapped in a female body, and I responded disgracefully. I am ashamed...not only have I deceived myself, I have deceived you!

I am a Vulcan. It is all that I know... I have no right to your friendship, your trust... You expect too much of me. I cannot give what friendship demands. I cannot let this relationship continue!

Why? I want it to continue... He was shocked by the stunning intensity of his own emotions. See what has happened to you, Spock. Contamination. You want what you know you cannot have... You have no right to his friendship. You are Vulcan!

I feel unhappy... Control. Where is my control? He felt the stirrings of panic. Logic helps! Yes, logic helps. Two times two is four, four times two is eight, eight times two is sixteen...yes. Logic helps. Seven into twenty two is three point one four two eight five...

Logic calms, logic rules. Logic holds my answers. The fear had subsided. The solution is simple. Logic is the only way, my only way. I will meditate... meditate...calm, peaceful, logical meditation...meditation...meditation...

Slowly he drifted into a deep, cool, cleansing meditation and a few hours later he found himself to be in full control once more. The indecisions and fears of the previous hours seemed to have been defeated. His life lay ahead of him in steps of logical progression. Why he had not seen this before he could not fully understand, but now the answer was obvious. All his problems emanated from his troublesome Human inheritance. Expel the Human half and his Vulcan half would be free. The Masters of Gol were the ones to help. Kolinahr was his new challenge, his route to peace of mind.

He knew he still had Henoch to deal with, but now that too was only a matter of applying logic to the problem and carrying out the resulting answer. For the time being, that would have to wait. It was almost time for his next duty shift and with a renewed sense of purpose he made his way to the bridge.

Outwardly there was very little to give away that this was a totally different Spock. He would carry out his duty till the end of his final shift. This was logical. This much was expected. Once his obligations to duty were complete, he would waste no time in fulfilling his obligations to his Vulcan inheritance. In his free moments he prepared plans for his journey to Vulcan and his approach to the Masters of Gol.

When he returned to his quarters that evening he wasted no time in searching out the presence lodged in his mind. He had decided to expel Henoch to float free once again in the infinite depths of near oblivion. He had the power to kill him outright, but that went against all Vulcan morals. Henoch would go back where he had come from, and Spock would ensure that he would never gain entrance to his mind again.

Settling himself before the firepot, Spock began to clear his mind, to search out once again the intruder. He located him easily this time and concentrated all his energy on drawing the presence out from his subconscious to his conscious mind.

Spock knew that this very act would automatically add to Henoch's power. In fact, this was just what Henoch wanted. The manoeuvre was an extremely delicate and tricky one. Spock had to draw out the intruder just enough to be able to deal with him in his conscious mind, under his own control but not as far as to allow Henoch to grow strong enough to be a problem.

Delicately, Spock probed for Henoch's thoughts. No response. He pushed deeper and made the barest of contacts. Slowly, he explored further into the presence, allowing a little of Henoch to filter through into his own conscious mind. This much was necessary.

Almost immediately Henoch's thought/voice began to taunt him. //Spock! I knew you would come. You have not disappointed me. I knew I could rely on your compassion. With your help I will live again!//

//Henoch.// Spock's thought/voice interrupted. //You misjudge my motives.// Spock could not allow Henoch to believe he had come to help him.

//Spock? Misjudged your motives? Surely not. You cannot have come to kill me. You forget, I have explored your subconscious mind. I know you, Spock. My time with your thoughts has not been idly spent. Your ethics forbid you to kill me, Spock. Don't they, Spock?// Henoch was asking questions hoping to draw an answer from his host. If Spock did intend him harm, then Henoch needed to build up enough energy to fight off the Vulcan's attack. By drawing Spock's attention, making Spock speak with him, he could gradually pull out further into a state of full consciousness.

//Spock, please help me. Help me to live again. Please, won't you help me?// he pleaded, hoping for some sort of response, any sort of recognition from the Vulcan.

There was none. Henoch could feel Spock had started to circle about him to encapsulate him, defeat him. Soon the net would be closed. He did not have much time to waste on futile pleas, and changed his approach.

//Spock?// he questioned, temptingly. //Before you cast me out, spare me a moment. Won't you listen to what it is I want, and what I can offer you in return? Will you hear me out, Spock?//

Henoch was rewarded with a brief reply. //Very well. But try no trickery, Henoch. I have had experience of your evil.//

Curiosity had always been one of Spock's two major failings. The other would come in very useful too...

//I want to live again. I know you would never agree to my taking over the body of another, so all I ask is that you help me transfer to the mechanical body that still lies in your ship's store. Please, Spock - I cannot endure this meagre existence any longer. I want to live again, to see, to hear, to feel, to be! Even the android body is better than this!// He paused. //I can offer you much in return,// thus playing on Spock's curiosity and drawing the Vulcan into the inevitable question.

//What have you to offer me, Henoch?// Spock knew that with every reply of his, Henoch's strength grew, but it would do no harm to discover what Henoch thought he could bribe him with.

//What you want most, Spock.//

//What would that be?//

//I have made a detained study of your subconscious. You wish to be able to respond to James Kirk. You want him as your own! You love him, Spock.//

//NO! Stop. Stop now.// The sudden force of Spock's thoughts jolted Henoch severely. Such intensity would soon bring his presence to full consciousness. Henoch was pleased.

//I can give him to you, Spock,// he taunted. //All you have to do is help me. Think, Spock - think.// He paused. //I do not ask a lot, and he will be yours.//

//No! Do not say such a thing! It is not true. You are evil, Henoch. Evil. You lie!//

//Your t'hy'la, Spock...//

Henoch's strength was growing, and Spock knew it. He had to act now before it was too late.

//Death to you, Henoch! Death! Death!//

For some time Spock drifted in a trance-like state of confusion and pain. When he eventually came round he felt awful. Physically and mentally, he was exhausted.

The encounter with Henoch had been an all-too-painful revelation. Not only had he killed in anger, something unworthy of any Vulcan, he had done so because Henoch had spoken the truth. Spock could see that now. He did love Jim Kirk, and had done so for some considerable time...

I must leave before I lose myself completely... Please, Jim, forgive me - but I cannot stay. My only hope of salvation lies in the hands of the Masters of Gol. Brother...friend...t'hy'la, I say my goodbye... Pain engulfed him and a stifled sob escaped past the lump in his throat.

I am Vulcan. I accept what has happened. I am Vulcan. Control. Logic rules... Gradually his pain eased.

The few remaining days aboard the Enterprise were a struggle for Spock. He avoided Kirk and McCoy whenever possible and had to fight with all his Vulcan control not to yield to those Human eyes. Kirk did not understand why Spock was behaving so strangely but being the compassionate person he was, refrained from questioning his friend. The homecoming of the Enterprise was a highly emotionally charged time, and Kirk merely thought that Spock wished to withdraw from the revelry.

On enquiring after Spock's location on the final day, Kirk was deeply disturbed to discover that the Vulcan had already left.

Just how much this influenced him in the decision he made to accept a desk job, Kirk never really knew. Somehow nothing seemed real any more, and he was simply carried away on the wave of euphoria that seemed to have swept everyone up in its path.

His Admiral's stripes were to prove an inadequate substitute for a lost friendship and an unspoken goodbye.



As the Enterprise, and subsequently, Earth, disappeared from view, Spock wept. He hated himself for betraying all he had ever known. He owed Kirk an explanation, but simply could not have faced that. Spock knew Jim Kirk would be hurt.

"I am sorry, my t'hy'la..."

When Sol was no more than a distant speck amid the myriad other distant specks Spock turned from the observation window and began his new life.

More than nine Vulcan seasons passed.

Spock knew he had pleased the Masters, even the ones who had been against admitting him, a mere half-Vulcan, to become an acolyte at Col. However, none of them doubted him any longer.

On this day he was to receive the symbol of total logic. He believed that, finally, he had exorcised his Human half.

That was until the shockingly powerful consciousness imposed itself unexpectedly on his mind. Once more his world was turned upside down and he realised that his Human half had tricked him once again. As T'Sia took his thoughts into her own, he felt ashamed.

"Your answer lies elsewhere, Spock."



When the Enterprise came into view, Spock felt his heart race. He forced composure upon himself. Fate had thrown him back to Kirk, but he must not let his Human half betray him in this final task. The Enterprise was going in search of the strange consciousness and Spock knew he had to go too. Perhaps in those perfectly symmetrical thought patterns he would at long last find his answers. He was certain he had to try.

Even with all the Vulcan control he could muster, Spock's entrance onto the bridge had been wrenchingly painful, but still he believed his Vulcan defences had held. He could not risk yielding one inch. That road, Spock felt certain, led to his downfall.

So desperately did he need to discover if this strange intruder did indeed hold his answers that he decided to go out and face it alone. That decision was to alter the rest of his life - and not in the way he had anticipated!



"Come!" called Kirk in answer to the door buzzer. Spock entered, hands clasped behind his back. The two officers stood face to face, barely two feet between them.

"I had a hunch it would be you."

"Jim..."

Kirk put out a hand. "Welcome home, Spock." Before either was aware, and not knowing who had initiated it, they were locked in a tight embrace; the embrace of old friends newly reunited.

Kirk found himself hugging his friend with unexpected vigour, slapping his back in joyous thankfulness. Spock too was overcome by the intensity of the moment and he clung to Kirk with tight-clenched fists. All the years of pain no longer mattered.

At last they pulled apart, catching each other's hands in the process. Spock smiled and lifted one hand to wipe away a solitary tear from Kirk's face. "Jim." His voice reflected his feelings as sensitive Vulcan fingers caressed the Human face, cupping Kirk's cheek with gentle tenderness.

Kirk reached up and took the warm hand in his own. "This simple feeling?" he questioned, holding Spock's hand up between them.

"Is no longer beyond Spock's comprehension," responded the Vulcan, answering all Kirk's questions in one easy reply.

Again they embraced, and this time Spock cried too.

