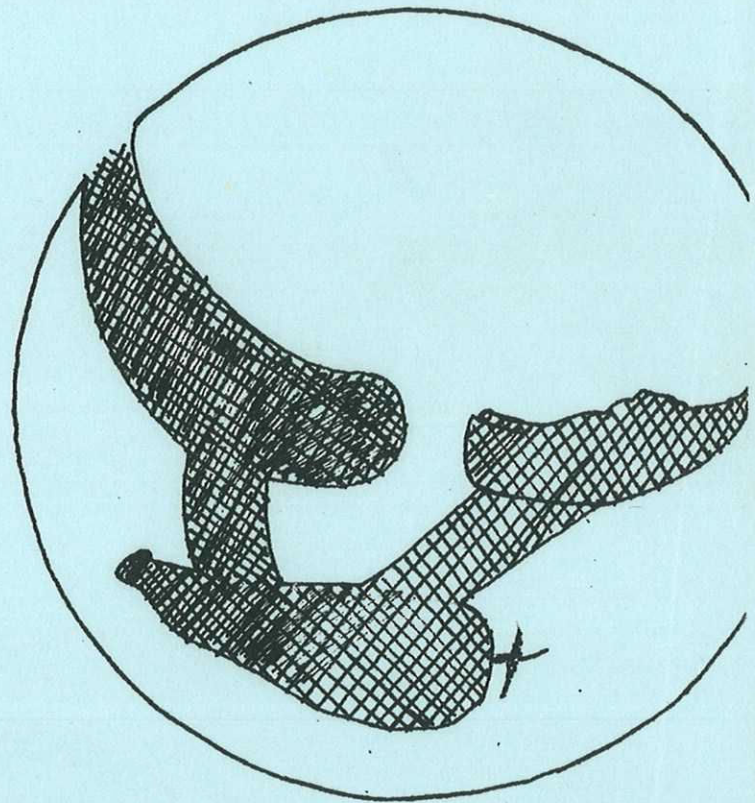


VARIATIONS

ON A THEME



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VARIATIONS ON A THEME

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INTRODUCTION

In *Kraith Collected*, we meet Commodore Spock, from another universe. His Kirk is dead, and Spock, lonely, confused and unhappy, seizes on the discovery of the existence of a parallel universe, which holds a living Kirk. He forms the insane idea of kidnapping Kirk, and persuading him to remain with him. He is encouraged in his plan by the mistaken belief that Kirk is being ill-treated by his Spock. In fact, he has misunderstood incomplete data picked up by the sensors he invented in order to probe the other universe.

Kirk, however, resents his interference, and when Commander Spock follows across the barrier, he returns to his own time and place. They understand and pity the Commodore's grief but their lives and future are bound up in their own universe.

We were concerned at the plight of the Commodore; the following story arose from our discussion on how he might continue his search.

This, we feel, is the ultimate in alternate universe stories, being set in an alternate universe of an alternate universe of an alternate universe... but in all seriousness, this story is intended to show the tenacity with which the bond between Kirk and Spock will endure. We hope you enjoy it.

Valerie

Skinko

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

PART I

In a locked and hidden room deep beneath the surface of Vulcan the man dressed in the uniform of a Starfleet Commodore stared unblinkingly at an illuminated screen. The words of that other Spock rang in his ears as clearly as they had done so many months ago, when he had said that it was perfectly possible that somewhere there was a Kirk needing to be rescued from a Spock who did not understand him.

He had clung to that thought as he watched them return to their own universe, his eyes fixed to the last on the vital, expressive face of James Kirk. This second loss hurt him almost as much as the first had done, but this time he was left with hope - there was not one parallel universe, but many; it was only a question of finding the right one. Only! Since that day he had surveyed so many, his finely-tuned instruments directed to locating and investigating Kirk... so many Kirks, so many Spocks, in each case linked by the same powerful bonds that still held him captive, despite the years that had passed since his own Kirk died.

He had been half-mad in the first days, shaken by his loss, his mind ravaged by grief and guilt; he, who would have given his life for Kirk, had been forced to watch helplessly as he died in mindless terror - and then to discover that in another universe, he could, perhaps, have saved his friend. At first only curiosity and an almost morbid longing had inspired him to watch the Commander's universe, and from the incomplete data, the half-truths he had observed there, had been born that insane idea to reach through the barrier and draw Kirk to safety; only to discover that Kirk bitterly resented his interference. All his efforts at persuasion had failed - the Commander had come for him, and Kirk had gone with gladness, leaving the Commodore doubly alone now in a haunted universe peopled only by the ghosts and shadows of time past, filled with the sound of Kirk's laughter, lit by the flash of teasing hazel eyes closed now for ever. Wrapped as he was in isolation, insanity had stood very close to the Commodore's shoulder, until unexpectedly the Commander had returned, bringing his own form of healing. Useless to offer pity, comfort - and he did not even try - but help, practical help, he brought in full measure.

His technical assistance with the survey equipment perfected its sensitivity, so that aural as well as visual information came through clearly. More valuable still was the effect of his cool, sane mind on one too long tormented by sorrow; intuitively divining the cause of the Commodore's self-hatred, the Commander had melded with him, had enabled him to see that he had truly been unable to help Kirk. In his universe Vulcan telepathic powers were dormant, surfacing only in very rare cases. The Commodore's latent powers could however be awakened, trained, and employed to assist his quest.

For he had decided to continue; that brief contact with Kirk had only stimulated his hunger for his friend's companionship. If the Commander was right, somewhere in the multitude of shadow universes was a Kirk who needed his help; or perhaps there might be a universe in which Spock had died, leaving a Kirk who had suffered as he had done.

When his duties took him away from Vulcan and the vital equipment he devoted his spare time to the development of his rapidly-increasing telepathic powers. The Commander had trained him well, their only difficulty being that the Commodore's reactions tended to be rather more emotional than the other thought strictly necessary - his Human side was much closer to the surface. Despite this the two men understood each

other very well, for both acknowledged the truth of the bitter words the Commodore had hurled at his counterpart - that the Commander would only know the true meaning of loneliness if he lost his Kirk. When they parted at last it was almost with regret, for they had grown very close, drawn together by their common concern for the welfare of James Kirk.

Alone once more, the quest had continued. He had watched carefully, unwilling to make the same mistake again, to act in haste and snatch away a Kirk who would be annoyed at his intervention. Each universe he studied held its own subtle variations, but in each the link between Kirk and Spock held true, and he had abandoned it after a time, moving on to the next with an increasing sense of desolation.

Then - how nearly he had missed it! The sensors registered yet another possible shadow universe; as the so-familiar bridge scene formed on the screen he had focussed eagerly on the command chair, only to see his own figure there, wearing the gold shirt and braid of a Captain. Yet Kirk must be present - the sensors were keyed to him, and could not err. Anxiously he scanned the bridge, his eyes finally coming to rest on the blue-clad figure bent over the computer station; he could not see the face but he would have recognised that bowed head anywhere. The man straightened, turned, and the Commodore closed his eyes for a moment in relief. It was Kirk. A faint smile touched his lips - in this universe their positions were reversed; Spock captained the Enterprise, with Kirk as his First Officer.

Concentrating once more, he saw that Kirk was reporting to the Captain before going off duty; the Captain dismissed him, then said softly,

"I would like a word with you, Mr. Kirk. Report to my quarters in one hour."

The Commodore had been watching Kirk's face intently; at those words he felt as though he had been suddenly drenched with icy water, for fleetingly, unmistakably, horribly, sheer terror had shone in Kirk's hazel eyes. But he only replied, "Yes, Captain," and left the bridge.

* * * *

Now the Commodore sat staring at the screen in bewilderment. So many times had his own Kirk addressed similar words to him; they indicated an evening of quiet conversation, perhaps a game of chess, the easy relaxed companionship his lonely heart still missed so sorely. There must be something terribly wrong if they could produce in this Kirk such an expression of sick horror.

He surveyed his counterpart closely, trying to find some clue to Kirk's behaviour, but there was nothing to be seen, only the controlled, secret face that looked back at him from his mirror, the resolute impassivity he had seen in the eyes of the Commander. This must be investigated further - he must witness the meeting between these two distant men.

He reached forward and re-tuned the equipment, picking up Kirk again as he approached the Captain's quarters; outside the door he paused, his hands twisting nervously, then activated the door signal.

"Come."

As the quiet voice gave permission to enter Kirk shuddered, closed his eyes, and swallowed convulsively; his fear was almost tangible. Then straightening his shoulders he entered the room.

The Captain was seated at his desk, apparently engrossed in some papers; he ignored Kirk, who stood as though at attention, staring blindly ahead. At last the Captain looked up.

"You are late, James." The coldness in his voice filled the Commodore with foreboding. Kirk lowered his head.

"I... ask forgiveness, sir," he whispered.

The Captain rose and circled the desk, coming to a halt behind Kirk. "Yet again you have disobeyed me. You have learned, have you not, that disobedience is... punished?"

"Yes, sir." Kirk's voice was almost inaudible.

"Turn and face me."

Kirk did so. The Captain watched him for a moment, then struck him heavily across the face, sending him stumbling to the floor. To the Commodore's amazement Kirk made no effort to retaliate, or even to protest, but merely watched with terror-haunted eyes as the Captain walked slowly towards him. Leaning forward he caught Kirk's shoulder and pulled him roughly to his feet; still dazed by the blow Kirk staggered slightly before he regained his balance and stood rigidly once more. The Captain laughed harshly.

"You are learning, James. You were so confident, so defiant once, so proud of your untainted ancestry - you will never defy me again, I think. Go in now, and wait for me."

Without replying Kirk passed into the inner room. The Captain watched him go; the sadistic anticipation in his eyes revolted the Commodore. How could things be so wrong in this universe? There were, he knew, differences between himself and the Commander, but they shared at least their devotion to James Kirk. He was beginning to see why Kirk had been so afraid of that summons, but he could not understand why the Captain should treat him in such a way.

The Captain was moving now, crossing to the inner room where Kirk stood waiting for him; he was naked, his uniform folded neatly over a chair. The Captain nodded approval.

"Excellent, James; I trust this submissive mood will continue. A torn uniform arouses so many questions, as Mr. Scott learned to his cost. You have seen Dr. McCoy for your check-up?"

"Yes, sir."

"That is well. It would be difficult to allay the good Doctor's curiosity if he again found you badly marked. I am sure you would not wish an... accident... to happen to him too."

"Please, don't harm McCoy," Kirk pleaded. "He knows nothing, I swear; the last time, I told him I had fallen in the gym."

"Your concern for the Doctor is most touching, James." The Captain's voice grew harsh. "Just remember that I hold his life in my hands - he cannot help you, even if you dared tell him."

"I know," Kirk said despairingly. "Leave him out of it, please - you can do what you like to me."

The Captain moved closer and took Kirk's chin in his hand, turning his face to examine the red fingermarks that stood out vividly on the pale skin.

"I intend to, James," he said, almost absently. "I intend to."

Both hands now moved to Kirk's face, holding him firmly. Kirk met the intent gaze, his own eyes widening. The Captain, then, was also a telepath; he was establishing a meld, but this was a violent, ruthless invasion of Kirk's mind, forcing the Human's will into submission. The Commodore watched appalled as Kirk made no effort to resist; the tainted mind flowing into his seemed to cause him physical pain, but he waited passively, allowing the Captain to take possession of his mind. Satisfied that he was

completely under control, the Captain twisted Kirk's arm to hold him within reach and keep him on his feet, then used his free hand to punch him viciously about the body; the Human's face was convulsed with pain, but he stood unresisting. The Captain caught hold of Kirk's hair to force his head backwards into what must have been a desperately uncomfortable position, then methodically slapped his face several times with all his strength. Kirk struggled to prevent himself from crying out, but an agonised whimper escaped him as he was forced off balance so that the Captain was holding his entire weight by the grip on his hair. Faint though the sound was, it brought a smile to the Captain's lips; he paused, looking at Kirk with calm attention. Tears of pain ran silently down the Human's face; nodding with satisfaction the Captain continued the beating, but the blows fell differently now - his hands lingered almost caressingly on Kirk's body.

Unbelievably the Commodore watched as the sadistic attack culminated in a sexual assault so brutal and degrading that he could bear it no longer; tearing his eyes from the screen he buried his head in shaking hands to shut out the sight of Kirk's utter and complete humiliation. With the sensitivity the Commander had taught him, he knew that the Captain was using the forcible meld he had imposed to increase Kirk's suffering, heightening his own pleasure by penetrating deep into the Human's mind, enjoying his fear and shame.

When he could bring himself to look again Kirk was lying across the bed, his face hidden in the pillow; the Captain lay beside him, idly stroking his hair. The deceptive tenderness was almost more sadistic than the outright cruelty; from the tension in Kirk's body the Commodore knew that he was waiting in fearful anticipation for the gentleness to turn to brutality. After a moment, the Captain pulled Kirk round to face him, and leaned over to kiss his mouth; when he raised his head again there was blood on Kirk's lips.

"You may go now, James," he said. "I will tell you when I require you again - and next time, do not keep me waiting."

Moving very slowly Kirk rose and dressed; then stumbled to the door. He leaned against it for a moment, making a visible effort to pull himself together before he passed out into the corridor, heading for his own quarters. Once there he threw himself onto the bed, weeping helplessly in an agony of humiliation and self-disgust.

The Commodore's hands clenched in fury; he wanted nothing more than to reach out now, at once, and pull Jim Kirk to safety, but he could not; the equipment was not yet set up for the transfer. Even now the scene was fading, the sensors failing under the strain - he had never watched for so long at a time before. Hastily he shut down the delicate machinery - he dared not risk a breakdown now; as things stood, it would take him at least two days to make arrangements to enter the other universe.

Despite his sense of urgency he sat a little longer, striving to make sense of what he had just seen. Once before he had surveyed a universe in which Kirk and Spock had shared a sexual relationship, but it had borne no resemblance to this... obscenity. There, they had been linked by love, each a willing partner; here, Captain Spock was truly what he had once wrongly believed the Commander to be - a demented sadist. Yet he could not understand why this Kirk should submit to such humiliation - his terror proved that it was not by his own choice.

He could find no answer, and at last rose briskly from his seat. There was much to be done - he must enter that shadow-universe, speak to Kirk himself; only by doing so could he solve the riddle, and offer the Human a means of escape.

* * * *

At last all preparations were complete; carefully he checked the vital settings, straightening with a sigh of satisfaction that all was ready. He

glanced round the securely-locked room - located deep beneath his home, no-one but himself ever came here - nothing would be disturbed until his return.

Every detail had been attended to. In order to explain his absence, he had announced his intention of taking leave - he would need time, he knew, to help Kirk adjust to his new life. A faint smile of anticipation touched his lips; he was certain that this time he had made the right choice - he would not return alone.

Turning to the controls he focused on the Enterprise, searching first for the Captain - he must be sure that he was safely occupied while he contacted Kirk. He gave a soft exclamation of satisfaction; the Captain was conferring with his engineers, and from their conversation he seemed likely to be detained for some time.

The Commodore could not control a slight trembling in his fingers as he keyed the instruments to Kirk. He was so close now to achieving his long-sought goal, yet he could not rid himself of the fear that even now something would go wrong. The screen blurred and reformed as he stared in eager concentration.

Kirk was asleep in his quarters. He had obviously retired, intending to read, but had dozed off; for the soft glow of the reading lamp illuminated the room, but the book had fallen from his hands to lie beside him on the bed.

Delaying no longer the Commodore made the final adjustments and crossed to the transmitter; a few seconds later he stood by the bed.

As he gazed down at the sleeping figure the Commodore's lips tightened in anger and pity. Dark shadows under Kirk's eyes stressed the pallor of his skin, and even in sleep the lines of pain and suffering were etched deeply on his face. Livid bruises stood out clearly on his arms and shoulders, and the half-healed marks of a whip crossed his chest - in the two days since he had last seen Kirk the Captain had repeated his assault. Seating himself on the bed the Commodore shook Kirk awake.

"Wake up, Jim," he called softly.

The response was immediate; Kirk's eyes opened, filled once more with that heart-rending terror. He covered his face with his hands and shrank back, shivering.

"Please, sir... not again," he murmured. "I'm... so tired... please, just let me sleep."

The weary desolation in his voice almost unnerved the Commodore; gently but firmly he pulled Kirk's hands from his face.

"Jim, look at me," he said commandingly. "Take a good look."

Kirk obeyed, gazing searchingly into the dark, compassionate eyes. Gradually puzzlement mingled with his fear, then doubt, uncertainty.

"Who are you?" he asked wonderingly. "You look like the Captain, but you're... not the same."

"Listen to me carefully, and try to understand. I am Spock, but not the Spock you have always known." Simply, carefully, the Commodore explained the existence of the parallel universes; he told of his own Jim Kirk, and of his death; of his own first, abortive attempt to be reunited with Kirk; of his meeting with the Commander, and his subsequent weary search through so many time lines. "At last I found you," he concluded. "I know how... things are for you here; will you return with me to my universe? You will be safe, cared for... no-one will ever hurt you again."

Kirk lay back, gazing at him with eyes in which a desperate hope had been kindled.

"If I could only be sure," he whispered. "How do I know it's not

another trick? It wouldn't be the first time he promised to let me go, only to drag me back to an even deeper shame."

"If you will let me touch your mind," the Commodore suggested diffidently, "I can convince you. It is impossible to lie in the meld."

At his words Kirk made an involuntary gesture of revulsion; the mere suggestion of a mind link seemed to terrify him. The Commodore cursed himself for his insensitivity; he had seen how the Captain had used the meld on Kirk, penetrating and degrading his most treasured thoughts and dreams. He sought for words to explain, but was interrupted by a hopeless sigh of resignation from Kirk.

"What does it matter?" he said submissively. "If you are what you claim to be you will not harm me; if you are... the Captain... you know already that I cannot disobey you. Do as you wish - I can't stop you, and I don't think... I even care, any more."

Swiftly, mercifully, the Commodore reached out, joining his mind to Kirk's; he made no attempt to read his thoughts, judging that any further intrusion into his privacy would only hurt the Human. He concentrated on projecting his compassion, his desire to help. The meld build gently, easily, its utter honesty convincing Kirk, who at last smiled up in relief.

"I'd like to go with you... if you are certain it's what you want," he said shyly. The Commodore smiled in response.

"It's what I've worked for all these years," he said simply. "But tell me, Jim... why?" He indicated the bruises on Kirk's shoulders. The Human's face clouded.

"At first, when all this started, I thought he must be insane - but he's not. When he took command of the Enterprise he seemed all right - more emotional than I'd expected from a Vulcan, but I put that down to his Human blood. He was friendly... I even liked him in the beginning. Then one day he told me about the mind link, and suggested we try it; I had no reason to suspect anything, and agreed... he overwhelmed me, established total control over my mind... but I didn't realise at first what he'd done to me. That night he came to my quarters, and... and told me... what he wanted from me. I fought him, but he was too strong... then he told me that he could make me come to him whenever he chose... I said he could force me, but I would never submit... he... he proved me wrong. Oh, I tried to resist in the beginning, but he simply used the link to draw me to him, and then he would... punish me for my defiance; in the end it was easier simply to let him do what he wanted. Once, when he was willing to talk, I asked him why he treats me like this, for in his own strange way I think he is fond of me... Sometimes - afterwards - he is for a moment almost gentle, as though he's trying to show affection for me, but it always turns to cruelty. He told me that when he was a child his schoolmates mocked him for being half-Human; on Earth he was taunted as a freak. It... warped him, somehow... he's never forgotten it... he hates everyone, but especially Humans. At the same time he's very ambitious, and Starfleet offered him the power he wanted. In many ways he's an ideal Captain, and because he's clever at concealing his feelings the rest of the crew respect him; he's very well-regarded by Starfleet Command... they don't know him as I do...

He told me that I was to... provide him with the opportunity to... to express his contempt for Humans; torturing me gives him emotional satisfaction. You've seen how he... uses me - he's worked on my mind so that now I'm like a robot, programmed to respond automatically when he... desires me. Spock, I'm not like your own James Kirk - you've got to know the truth, to realise what he's made of me...

One night he wanted me badly, and called me to his quarters; I was delayed, and when I got there he was so impatient he... ripped my shirt. When he'd... finished with me, he sent me back to my quarters. I was still

... dazed, I think, and when I met Scotty in the corridor, and he wanted to know what had happened to me, I was so confused I... told him. He believed me, tried to help, but we had no proof. The Captain found out what I'd done, and... and killed Scotty. He... he made me watch... I can still hear him screaming... and the blood... he made me touch the... the body, and told me to remember... and that he'd do the same to anyone who tried to take me from him. He covered up well, made Scotty's death seem like an accident; only I... knew the truth, and I couldn't speak - I didn't dare risk another life. That was... about two weeks ago - I've scarcely slept since. This... " Kirk held out his arms " - this is a part - of my punishment. He had to wait until the medical checks were over in case McCoy became suspicious." The haunted eyes pleaded. "You must understand - I can take only so much pain... then anything, even the degradation he brings me to, seems preferable. He really enjoys hurting me... he's very... inventive... I'm a well-trained slave now, obedient, just as he wanted; but I'm so lonely... he won't let me make friends with the rest of the crew. Off duty he restricts me to my quarters, or to his; I can scarcely speak to anyone else - he even resents McCoy because in examining me he has the right to touch me. I belong to him, you see - he'll tolerate no-one that he sees as a possible rival. If he could, he'd keep me confined where no-one but he could see or touch me - and I'd submit to that, too, because I don't have the will to fight any more."

The Human fell silent; lying back on the pillows he surveyed the Commodore wistfully for a moment, then sighed. "I'm not right for you, Spock - you deserve better. You wanted a replacement for your own Kirk; I may wear his face, but I'm... no use. Once, perhaps... but I've been controlled too long. I'd give anything... but he's done too much damage, I'd only let you down. Find someone else, Spock, someone more your equal - don't waste your time with me."

For a moment the Commodore was unable to speak; tears threatened to choke him. "You're wrong, Jim; you are worth helping. For all your misery you thought first of me, as he would have done. You need my help. I offer it; will you accept?"

"Only if you are certain you won't be disappointed in me."

The Commodore reached over and took Kirk's hands. "It's all over now," he said gently. "You're coming with me."

Kirk suddenly stiffened, tearing his hands away. "He's coming!" he gasped wildly. "I can feel it - I always know. He can't read my mind at a distance, but he can sense when someone is being... kind to me, and... and comes to punish me. Can we go at once, before he arrives?"

The Commodore shook his head worriedly. "It will take several minutes to set up the return," he said. "I don't think we have enough time."

Kirk sprang from the bed and began to dress hurriedly. "You mustn't be found here! He'll kill you... and then... Oh God! What he'll do to me!"

"Let me handle it," the Commodore suggested.

"No! He mustn't find you. Stay here, don't come out whatever happens - perhaps I can distract him... I won't let him harm you too."

Kirk left the room as the outer door opened; the Captain had not signalled for admission, but walked straight in.

"Were you expecting me, James?" the cool voice asked smoothly.

"N-no, sir," Kirk stammered. "Did you want me?"

"Later. At the moment, I want to know who is with you."

"No-one, sir. I'm alone."

"I've told you before, James, you lie very badly. Have you found a lover to console you?"

"No, I promise you - there's no-one here, only you."

"No matter. I could, of course, see for myself, but I expect she - or he? - has taken advantage of this delay you so thoughtfully arranged to leave by the other door. A wise precaution. Still, it will... amuse me... to find out who it was by more... subtle methods, and when I do a suitable... entertainment... will be arranged for you." The cold voice deepened, thickened. "Now, James, I find that I do, after all, have need of your services. Undress."

The sound of a blow, followed by a suppressed cry of pain from Kirk.

"Obey me, James. Undress."

"No... please... let me go... "

The tearing of cloth, a low sobbing. The Commodore could listen no longer, and ignoring Kirk's warning he rushed into the other room. Kirk, his shirt torn away, was struggling in the Captain's arms, but was steadily being forced backwards across the desk.

"Let him go!"

The Captain released his hold, allowing Kirk to sprawl limply over the desk; he turned, smiling with satisfaction.

"I was right - you are trying to take James from me. I thought your concern would bring you... " His voice faded as he took in the appearance of the man before him. "Fascinating! But explanations can wait; for the moment..." He sprang forward, closing at once with the Commodore, who acted instinctively to defend himself. Both men were evenly matched, but the slightly different layout of the room confused the Commodore, who stumbled over a chair. At once the Captain's hands closed around his throat, squeezing tighter and tighter... he was being slowly strangled... as his vision began to fade his only thought was regret for the added misery his interference would bring to Kirk.

Unexpectedly that fierce grip relaxed; there was a moment's pause, and he was suddenly free. Rolling over, the Commodore saw Kirk kneeling beside him. A few feet away sprawled the Captain, his hands clawing frantically at his back, from which protruded the hilt of the small knife which had been lying on the desk. He looked up then, his eyes fixed on Kirk's hands, and the green stains there. He coughed harshly, painfully.

"Why, James? Was it what my Vulcan heritage forced me to do to you that kept you from realising that I really did love you? I never thought to say this to a Human, but I knew that you liked me, and so I was able to choose you to satisfy my need; then found myself unable to resist the bond. I held you captive, but you held me just as surely."

That dreadful coughing came again, and when it quietened the Captain held Kirk's eyes. "Whatever I've done, always remember... I really did... love you... " With a last agonised effort he reached out to Kirk; a violent tremor shook him, and he slumped forward to lie limply on the floor.

Kirk began to tremble, his eyes filling with tears. "I didn't mean... he was going to kill you... I couldn't let him... "

His voice dissolved into hysterical weeping. In automatic response the Commodore reached out to him, but the Human shrank away instinctively, reminded despite himself of the Captain's arms, of the horror of the times his master had pretended to be gentle. The Commodore felt his terror, and quickly guided him to a chair, realising that at this moment Human reassurance would be of more value than any comfort a Vulcan could offer.

"Can you trust McCoy?" he asked abruptly.

"McCoy? Yes, he's my friend - or he would be, if... he'd... allowed me to have any."

The Commodore activated the intercom. "Spock here. Dr. McCoy to the First Officer's quarters - quickly!"

* * * *

He met McCoy at the door, silently indicating Kirk; the Doctor stared in amazement as he opened his medical bag. In his confusion he did not notice the Commodore's uniform, and took him at first to be the Captain.

"What's going on?" he asked as he treated Kirk's injuries. "How did Jim get into this state, and... who's that?" he added as he caught sight of the crumpled body on the floor. The Commodore turned over the limp figure with his foot, and McCoy stared from one to the other, blank amazement in his eyes as he took in for the first time the Commodore's uniform.

At that moment Kirk, still dazed from shock, reeled in his chair; the Commodore moved forward, Kirk hesitated, then accepted the support of the strong shoulder.

"You explain... Spock," he said shakily. "Listen to him before you do anything, McCoy, please - it's a long story, and you're going to find it difficult to believe, but... but I didn't dare tell you before what was happening; the Captain would have killed you if he'd even suspected you knew."

The Commodore glanced up, meeting the steady blue eyes calmly as he described who he was and what had happened. The Doctor's cold eyes softened as he described Kirk's suffering and humiliation. Looking down at the still body, he commented at last, "He deserved it - and more. What happens now?"

"Jim is coming with me, back to my universe."

"No." Kirk's voice, faint but determined, broke in. "I can't go with you - not now."

"You must." McCoy's voice was sharp with anxiety. "If you remain here you will have to answer for the Captain's death - we can't hope to conceal it. I believe your story, but could you bear to reveal all those details in court before a crowd of unsympathetic strangers?"

"McCoy, I can't go. I've killed the Captain, Scotty is dead - did I tell you the Captain murdered him? - I'm the only Command officer left. You know how important the cargo is; I can't just abandon the Enterprise in Klingon territory. Over four hundred lives are at stake, as well as the success of our mission. I must take the Enterprise home, then worry about what will happen to me."

The Commodore recognised only too well the surprisingly calm, determined tone of his voice; even so would his own Kirk have spoken. It seemed strange that the Captain should have allowed Kirk even this degree of decisiveness, but he would think about it later - for the moment it heartened him to know that despite the captivity in which his mind had been held for so long, the Captain had not succeeded in totally breaking Kirk; his basic integrity was still there, needing only the opportunity to surface. He considered carefully. He had not come so close to success only to lose Kirk now.

"What was your mission?" he asked.

"I suppose you would call it espionage," Kirk replied. "We were ordered to patrol near Klingon territory - there had been rumours that ships had been massing, as though they planned to attack. We didn't learn much, but we did hear about a new Klingon interrogation device that was being used with devastating effect, and the Captain thought it would help his ambition if he could capture one. He took the Enterprise deep into Klingon space, and of course we were challenged; when we had defeated the ship, we found it carried a Mind-sifter...."

The rest of Kirk's explanation went unheard. The Commodore sat frozen in position, plunged unexpectedly into a dark void of horror, swept away by

memories that threatened his sanity - he must not think... forget, forget... but how does a man forget the thing that destroyed his life? Remember, then. Remember the pain, the aching loss, the hatred that burned so deeply. And know. Know that the madness has returned. It almost destroyed you once, it threatens to do so again... Jim, lost in the eternal darkness, Jim here, now, it touches again... It must not be, but it will be, unless...

The two men moved uneasily, aware only that the Commodore was staring blindly into space, like a man caught in a web of crawling horror.

"What's wrong, sir?"

"Spock, are you all right?"

Somehow the anxious voices reached him, dragged him back. "Yes, it's only... you said the Mindsifter?"

"That's what we call it," Kirk said. "It's a device the Klingons recently began using; we don't know much about it yet, but it's the only thing known that can break Command training. The Captain took it from the ship we defeated - as soon as the Klingons realise it's gone they'll be after us, trying to get it back. We're a long way from the nearest Starbase, but we must succeed - too much is at stake for us to fail."

McCoy broke in then. "If Starfleet can figure out how it works we may be able to come up with a method of resisting it. It's a fiendish device - we saw a man it had been used on... "

"So have I." The Commodore's voice was very bitter. "I told you that my Jim Kirk... died. We were on a mission, and he was captured. The Klingons used the sifter on him - but he didn't have the information they wanted. They wouldn't believe that, and probed deeper and deeper... at last, it... broke him. We got him back, but it was too late... his mind had gone. What was left of him died in my arms, screaming, terrified. Then - much later - I learned that in the Commander's universe I might have been able to save him." The dark eyes came slowly to rest on Kirk's face. "The Commander can protect his Kirk - perhaps my knowledge of the Mindsifter will enable Starfleet to devise a way to protect you. Yes, you must get it back - but there still remains the problem of the Captain. How do we explain his death?"

The Commodore met McCoy's eyes consideringly; the Doctor shared his concern.

"We can't let him suffer any more, sir," the Doctor whispered. "He deserves some peace of mind - there must be something we can do."

"Perhaps there is," the Commodore said thoughtfully. "Jim will not leave, but... I can remain here."

Kirk looked up, his attention caught. "What do you mean?"

"Both you and the Doctor thought I was the Captain at first - others will think so too. We can take... this... back to my universe, and seal the barrier; I will assume his position as Captain of the Enterprise. Only you, McCoy and I will ever know. On my side of the barrier, Commodore Spock will simply... disappear."

"But you're a Starfleet Commodore, Spock; to go back to being a Captain.."

The Commodore smiled wistfully. "If my James Kirk had lived I would still be at his side. I only took the Enterprise after his death because I knew he wished it... then, when I learned of the existence of the parallel universes, I knew I would need the facilities of a Starbase to conduct my research, so I accepted further promotion. I did it all only to find you... It would give me... great happiness... if you would permit me to remain with you, but if you prefer it, I will help you account for the Captain's death, and... leave. I will understand if... if you do not wish me to remain... your memories of Spock cannot be other than... painful."

"I don't know what I want," Kirk said miserably. "So much has happened so fast."

The Commodore knelt at Kirk's side, and gazed into the hazel eyes. Kirk returned the almost hesitant scrutiny with growing confidence; this man had suffered too, was as lonely as he. Perhaps...? His lips broke into a tremulous smile, and he reached out hesitantly to rest his hands lightly on the Commodore's shoulders.

"Please... stay," he whispered. "You are not like... him. I think I can trust you... "

"If you are quite sure, I will stay." They held each other's gaze a moment longer, then the Commodore rose and turned to McCoy. "Will you help me, Doctor? We must take the body back through the barrier, and destroy my equipment; but first we must see to Jim - he needs rest."

"Of course, sir."

Together they helped Kirk back into his sleeping quarters, where McCoy gave him a sedative. As he stood back, the Commodore approached the bed.

"Sleep well, Jim. When you awake I will be here - it will all be over."

Kirk smiled his relief as he fell asleep. Spock watched him for a moment longer, then followed McCoy out.

"Your uniform, sir," McCoy reminded him.

"That's your first lesson, McCoy - forget my rank. What did you call him?" The Commodore indicated the body.

"Usually Captain, sometimes Spock - depending on circumstances."

"Then you must remember to call me Spock - from this moment I am the Captain of the Enterprise." He stripped off his uniform, then stopped, seeing the blood which soaked the back of the Captain's shirt.

"Wait, I'll bring you a clean one from his room." McCoy slipped out, returning shortly. During his absence the Commodore put his discarded shirt on the Captain's body, and got rid of the bloodstained one in the disposal unit. Dressed again, he helped the Doctor swing the Captain onto his shoulder and picked up the knife, which he had removed from the wound in order to get the shirt on the body. When all was ready he activated the return mechanism; soon the walls of the underground chamber formed around them.

"Put him there, McCoy," he said, indicating the seat at the control panel and dropping the knife beside it. While the Doctor obeyed Spock set the sensors to destruct.

"I can trigger the explosion when we are safely back on the Enterprise," he explained.

McCoy glanced worriedly at the chair. "You're sure he won't be found?"

"As far as my people are concerned, I am on leave - any search will start far from here. No-one has come down here for many years, and the door is well-concealed on the outside. Even if by some chance he should be found, however, Commodore Spock will have been killed by someone undiscoverable, since the only fingerprints on the knife are either my own or those of a man long dead in this universe - Jim Kirk."

McCoy cast a last look at the huddled figure, and shivered. "Let's go home," he murmured.

Spock nodded agreement, and within minutes they were back in Kirk's quarters, where he triggered the destruct signal.

"That's it," he said. "We are committed now - the barrier between the universes is closed."

McCoy went in to examine Kirk, who was sleeping peacefully; already some of the strain had gone from his face. "Will you stay with him until he wakes up?" the Doctor asked.

"Yes, it will be best if I am here. Dispose of this, please, Doctor - it will not be needed again."

McCoy took the destruct mechanism, and eyed Spock thoughtfully. "He must have been quite a man, your Kirk, to inspire all this."

"He... was. Jim is... very like him."

"Despite everything that's happened to him?"

"Despite everything."

"I see. Well, I'm glad you're here. Take care of him."

"I will."

The Doctor turned to leave, but Spock detained him. "McCoy, there's one thing more."

"Yes?"

"I am going to need your help. My Dr. McCoy had a compassion, an understanding... I believe you share those qualities. Jim is going to need a great deal of help, perhaps more than I can give... I still do not fully understand Humans. Jim... You do not know the worst yet, but... the Captain almost destroyed him. Will you work with me, guide me?"

"I'll do what I can, of course, but from what I've seen, I think you'll help him more than I will. Goodnight, Spock."

"Goodnight, Doctor."

Locking the door behind McCoy Spock returned to the inner room; pulling up a chair he sat down and surveyed Kirk's sleeping figure thoughtfully. After a moment he took from his belt a small leather wallet, the only possession he had brought with him from his own universe, and opened it. The eyes of his own Jim Kirk smiled up at him, the last likeness that had been taken of him just before his death.

"Forgive me, Jim - I had to do it... you shouldn't have left me," he whispered, knowing that his dead friend would indeed understand the almost insane grief that had set him on this curious path. Raising his head he looked from the dead to the living man, so like yet so different. The young Commander possessed indeed many of Jim's qualities - his almost ruthless honesty, his concern for the welfare of the Enterprise, his shy charm; but Spock wondered to what extent the Captain's depravity had corrupted him. He could not be sure, for he would not risk touching this Kirk's mind for a long time - it would be necessary to gain his confidence, and fear of the meld had been deeply engraved on his mind. Considering all he had seen, Spock began to feel hopeful; he had recognised in this Kirk an underlying stubbornness, an innate, basic integrity, that reminded him all too clearly of Jim. They could do it, he thought, but it would not be easy - this Kirk's memories would be very bitter.

As he watched Kirk stirred restlessly in his sleep and moaned softly; Spock reached out, touched him gently. At once Kirk's fingers closed tightly around his and the Human relaxed, sleeping quietly again. Spock waited, watching patiently for him to awaken. His thought touched fleetingly on those few who would mourn his supposed death. McCoy, Scotty, Uhura, Sulu, scattered now and with new dreams, new responsibilities, would pause for a moment in their busy lives to remember, and to grieve, but in time the memory would fade. He knew that McCoy would find comfort in the belief that Spock's long years of loneliness were over; and he would be right, he thought with a wry twist of his lips - but in a way he could not have imagined.

Firmly he closed the door on that life and turned to face the new, filled for the first time in years with a sense of almost breathless anticipation. It had to be possible to find a way to restore Kirk's self-confidence, so that they would once again be the best partnership in Starfleet; whatever the obstacles, he would make it happen, he vowed.

Then, as he returned his gaze to the sleeping figure, Kirk's eyes slowly opened.

* * * * *

SEALED TAPE - to be transmitted to Commander James T. Kirk, First Officer of the U.S.S. Enterprise, on the death of Captain Spock. Found in his safe, and delivered by Commodore Spock, Captain, U.S.S. Enterprise.

The Emotion Humans call 'love' is utterly meaningless to me; what, then, do I feel for you, James Kirk? You asked me once why I treat you as I do, and I could not answer, for in truth I scarcely know! I must try to formulate my thoughts.

When I learned that I was to be given command of the U.S.S. Enterprise I was well-satisfied. I, the despised half-breed, would now order the lives of these arrogant examples of racial purity; and at the same time my ambition had progressed one stage further. Yet I knew at once that my true motives must still remain concealed behind the smooth bland mask I have learned to wear so easily.

One thing threatened my safety - I had reached the age when pon farr would soon be upon me, and the unleashing of its savage violence would surely betray me. T'Pring's treachery, when she deserted me for the pure-blooded weakling Stonn, had aggravated my problem - I had no bond-mate to turn to, and I feared the mockery of these Humans when my weakness was revealed. The solution was obvious - I must find on the ship one with whom I could drop that mask, one who would be forced to accept me for what I am. My partner must be one I could dominate completely, using the mind link to impose my will so strongly that I could rely on silence, and total submission; but that would not be difficult - Humans are utterly defenceless against telepathic powers.

There was however, one other requirement - I am much stronger than a Human, and in the grip of pon farr would inflict on my partner great physical pain; among Vulcans, the sexual act is... not gentle. For this reason, I rejected the women - they were too fragile, my hunger would destroy them. That left... the men. I confess, the idea appealed to me - how much sweeter it would be to humiliate and degrade one of these proud, confident Human males! But... which to choose?

My decision was... easily made, after all, when I met my senior officers in the briefing room. Your golden, glowing eyes looked into mine in shy welcome; I was lost - and from that moment, so were you.

You seemed so very young, but already you were spoken of as an excellent First Officer; no-one thought it strange that I should seek your company. You learned to trust me, for I treated you as a friend, and you responded eagerly. You confided that your childhood had been lonely, unhappy as mine had been, and you turned to me for companionship with an innocent candour that... almost ... made me hesitate. But pon farr was drawing closer; I would not permit mawkish sentimentality to stand in the way of my need. How easily you fell into my trap when I suggested the meld! Your mind was so defenceless - you were mine within moments, but you did not know it - not at first.

Your awakening must have been brutal. That night I went to your quarters. You welcomed my visit, not understanding why I had come. It was rape - for you, a horror, for me... the most exquisite pleasure I had ever known. Your body delighted me, and even sweeter was the shame and anguish I read in your mind as I possessed you. Then - your horror and disgust when you realised how

completely I owned you! At first you attempted to defy me, but a combination of the mind link and sheer physical punishment soon brought you to my feet, an obedient slave.

So there it was. Simple. A warm, submissive, sexually-responsive body, summoned to my bed at a moment's whim, dismissed as easily. Oh yes, you were responsive - I trained you well. It amused me to make you beg for my attentions, as though you came to me of your own free will.

Simple? Not so. Pon farr ended; my desire for you... did not. To my horror I found I still craved the excitement of your presence, still burned with a fever only you could quench. I knew panic, then. Was it possible that I had become... fond of you? THAT, I would not permit! You are Human, physically and mentally inferior, of the despised race that has tortured me all my life for my mixed blood. You are beautiful, you arouse me... but I would as soon admit that I could love an attractive animal.

I acted with cold ruthlessness to kill the growing tenderness I was beginning to feel for you. I remembered that first night, when you writhed in agony as I took you - no quixotic thoughts then of affection, it was sheer need that drove me. Your pain had heightened my pleasure, and would do so again.

It worked. You grew to fear me even more, yet still you came, obedient to my summons, your body shaking with terror as I took you to bed. You are so easy to deceive; do you remember the night I held you close for a long time, kissing you tenderly as though I would win your consent, until you began to grow calm, daring to hope that I was learning to be gentle with you? A Vulcan, gentle! You are such a fool! The sexual act is savage, degrading, brutal; who should know that better than we? Love... such soft emotions are useless to me, would render me vulnerable; and that you should dare to dream that I, a Vulcan, could stoop to love one of your contemptible race! You paid dearly for your presumption, and your suffering only increased the pleasure you gave me. It amused me to invent new ways to humiliate you, cause you pain, and as time passed you became ever more submissive.

I grew careless. I was so sure of you, so confident that you had at last learned not to defy me... then you broke down, confessed to Scott. You remember what followed, don't you, James? I found out, of course; you could not hope to conceal such a betrayal from me. Never before had I felt such anger - not with you, treachery is not unexpected from your race - but my hatred of Scott was overwhelming. He was going to take you from me, deprive me of the consolation I found in you for all my years of solitude.

Aware of the danger, I acted swiftly. It did not take me long to... persuade... you to decoy Scott to that deserted cargo hold. I wonder, will you ever forget the look in his eyes when he learned that you had betrayed him too? You pleaded so abjectly for his life, acknowledging in his presence my mastery of you, but I could not spare him. You must understand that - I had to teach you that I will never let you go.

He was a brave man - he died hard. You will not easily forget his screams, I think, Afterwards, when I reached for you beside his still-warm body you took my stained hands without protest, crept trampling into my arms, for you knew then that I made no idle threats - I would kill to hold you.

I know your concern for that meddling fool McCoy, and though I would gladly be rid of him, his safety is another chain to bind you. It angers me that he has the right to touch you - it is not concern that brings me so swiftly to your side when you are hurt, but a sick jealousy when I think of his hands on you. There was a time on Vulcan when I would have had the right to enslave you openly, keep you secluded for my own pleasure, but those days are gone; here I must be cautious, discreet, suffering when I see another claim your attention.

Yet, when our duty on the bridge is over, and the door to my quarters closes behind us, I reach for you, James, and you pay dearly for every pang of jealousy you have caused me. So the obsession grows, and I yield to the sweet fiery insanity, for you are the one indulgence I permit myself.

I am secure now. You fear me, but you are obedient - that is all I ask. I control you utterly; your most hidden thoughts, your most cherished memories are open to me, and I roam through your mind at will, dominating your spirit as completely as I possess your body.

I keep you as close as I dare, for there is always the fear that someone may again try to take you from me. As my ambition advances I will leave the Enterprise one day, but you will go with me - I cannot give you up now, you are in my blood. Poor James, I can almost pity you - so young... and oh, so vulnerable. My hunger for you grows ever stronger; be resigned to your fate, as I have learned to accept mine. I have killed the weakness I sensed in myself, the growing tenderness I felt for you, and without one pang of remorse I use you as I wish...

... Yet sometimes, when you lie in my arms, having sobbed yourself to sleep at last, your exhausted body torn by my insatiable desire... sometimes, I lean over you, when you cannot know my weakness, stroke your soft hair, kiss your tear-stained mouth... and I wonder... if I were not made as I am, if I could have won you willingly to my bed... if I could just once, see your golden eyes turned to me glowing with love and desire, your arms extended in welcome, your mouth soft, warmly responsive to mine...

God damn you to hell, James Kirk - I have learned to love you!

* * * * *

PART II

Commander James Kirk, First Officer of the U.S.S. Enterprise, looked up from the chessboard, his face lighting with an incredulous grin.

"Checkmate!" he exclaimed triumphantly.

Spock surveyed the board with an air of assumed disbelief, and reached out to topple his king. "Conceded," he said at last. "Well played, Jim."

As Kirk began to reset the board Spock studied him covertly, noting with approval his relaxed attitude, and the laughter in the hazel eyes. Yes, Kirk had changed since the Captain's death, but... had the change gone deep enough? Spock had made the transition from the desk-bound duties of a Commodore back to the more immediate urgency of a Captaincy with swift ease, but Kirk had only with difficulty begun to adapt to his new freedom. On duty his single-minded decisiveness had touched Spock with a haunting familiarity, but in his personal life his self-confidence seemed to have been totally eroded; he was incapable of any independent thought or action at first; seeking Spock's approval of every decision, and though the Vulcan encouraged him to think for himself, progress had been heart-breakingly slow.

The simplest social relationships were difficult for Kirk; he was shy, hesitant, seeming much younger than his years, and his constant fear that others might know what he had been to the Captain made him diffident in company. Closely confined by the Captain in his off-duty hours, he had become almost a stranger to the other officers, who considered him withdrawn and unsociable - they could now know that the Captain had punished with hideous brutality any attempt on Kirk's part to make friends, or indeed any friendly approach made to him.

Understanding this, Spock had enlisted McCoy's help; despite his sometimes acid wit the Doctor was popular with the crew, and gradually drew the young Commander into his circle of friends. Finding himself accepted, Kirk's

confidence grew, and as he became more secure Spock began to build their friendship. He moved delicately, warily, at first, for he knew how much Kirk had been hurt, but his patience was rewarded by the trust and companionship that was gradually growing between them. Spock had been compelled to devise a method of allaying Kirk's fears, and this had proved to be even more difficult than he had expected - so many apparently harmless things held terrible associations for him and it was useless to attempt to tackle them all at once; instead he had dealt with each nightmare in turn, gently taking the Human over and over the same ground until Kirk could accept that that particular fear no longer threatened him.

Tonight's game marked another success, Spock realised with quiet satisfaction; he had learned that the Captain frequently played chess with Kirk, but had twisted their games into yet another torment, ensuring that he could not win by making him play without a queen, yet punishing him for losing. Kirk had confided that the Captain always forced a mind link on him when they played, enjoying his growing fear as he realised that he would lose yet again, and insinuating into his mind details of the punishment he would suffer.

To soften these memories, Spock began to play with Kirk; the Human still lost, but he lost fairly, and was shown where he had gone wrong. With guidance his game improved, and Spock had to concentrate harder to beat him; tonight Kirk had won for the first time. It had been a hard-fought game, and now Spock sat back enjoying Kirk's triumph. Knowing that he had won on his own merits, that Spock had fought him every inch of the way, Kirk was flushed with success at his victory; he glanced up, smiling.

"Thank you for the game - I enjoyed it."

"Then we will play again. However, you would do well to study the game with more attention, Jim - you could have won eight moves ago, but you failed to take advantage of your opportunities."

"I still won, though," Kirk said, laughing. He looked up again, then studiously returned his attention to the placing of the chessmen.

"Did you often play... with your own Kirk?" he asked shyly.

Spock did not reply for a moment; he had thought - hoped - that as time passed the pain would fade. He never, of his own accord, mentioned his dead friend; but this Kirk, anxious to learn of his counterpart, occasionally asked some question that, as now, brought the past alive again, starkly lit against a background of anguished memory.

"Yes, I did," he said at last, rousing himself to reply; he could sympathise with Kirk's eagerness to understand the man he so closely resembled, whose life had been so different. "Like you, he approached the game in a most ... illogical fashion; but he sometimes beat me, as you did tonight." He paused for a moment, wondering how to continue; to cover his hesitation he lifted one of the chessmen and fingered it absently. "I often told him... "

The call of the intercom snapped both men to alertness. Spock rose to answer the summons, handing the chessman to Kirk as he did so. He spoke briefly, then turned back to his First Officer.

"I am needed on the bridge - there are some unusual readings at extreme sensor range. It may be nothing, but... there is still the chance that we may be pursued by Klingon ships. As yet there is no immediate danger, but I must be certain - we dare not risk the recapture of the mind-sifter."

Kirk sprang to his feet. "I'll come with you." He knew the hatred and abhorrence Spock felt for the mind-sifter - it had cost him his own Jim Kirk, and he was determined that in this universe at least the Federation would be given every chance to discover its secrets.

"There is no need - I will call you if necessary."

Spock had several times wondered at the contrast between Kirk the man and

Kirk the First Officer; in a duty situation the Human was as trustworthy, as dependable, as his own Kirk had been. Even that first evening, confused by the Commodore's sudden appearance, shocked by the Captain's death and his own responsibility for it, the First Officer had responded to the needs of his ship and crew, preferring to lose his chance of escape rather than abandon them. In the confusion of the moment, Spock had not taken the time to consider it, but he had recalled it later. Since then he had seen that same response several times, and had at first wondered why the Captain had not enslaved that part of Kirk's mind too. Consideration soon supplied the answer. For all his faults the Captain was an excellent commanding officer, and would not risk his ship in the hands of a mindless incompetent. There would be times when the safety of the Enterprise would depend on Kirk, and the Captain would have ensured that he was fully capable in that sphere at least. In addition, a useless First Officer would soon come to the attention of Starfleet, and would be replaced; the Captain would not risk the loss of his favourite amusement. It was on the steadiness of the First Officer that Spock based his hopes for the recovery of the man. Now he smiled briefly at the Human.

"It's my watch anyway - and if we do run into the Klingons, I'll need you alert. Go and get some rest - I'll see you later, Jim." His hand fell on Kirk's shoulder, gripping it tightly; then he was gone.

Kirk watched him leave, then sat back for a moment considering the evening of quiet companionship he had just enjoyed. With instinctive delicacy, Spock never invited him to his quarters, understanding the memories that lingered there; instead they met in one of the rec rooms, which tonight had emptied as they had played, so that now Kirk sat alone. He smiled as he thought back over the last weeks - it had been so marvellous, to awaken each morning free from fear, to move among his fellow officers as one of them, sharing for the first time in so long their company and friendship. The Captain had claimed him soon after he had taken command of the Enterprise, and Kirk had almost forgotten what it felt like to lead a life free from lies and concealment; and he owed it all to Spock.

Suddenly realising how late it was getting he hurriedly returned to the task of resetting the chessboard; automatically he reached out to position the piece Spock had handed to him, glancing at it for the first time as he did so.

"No!"

A harsh sob of disbelief broke from his lips; he stared down at a black knight.

* * * *

For a long time Kirk sat motionless, his eyes fixed on vacancy with a dreadful staring blindness. At last he rose stiffly from the table, and moving very slowly he left the empty room, heading for his quarters. McCoy greeted him in the corridor, but he passed without replying - the Doctor's voice had triggered a sudden wave of blind panic, a desperate need to hide. He was running as he turned the final corner, his hands clawing for the door release; he almost fell into the room, and stood for a moment leaning against the door, his breath coming in harsh gasps as though he had made some tremendous physical effort. When he was sure that he could trust his legs to support him he moved forward, and seated himself at the desk. Placing the knight before him, he stared at it with a desperate concentration; the tiny jewelled eyes seemed to return his gaze with unwinking malevolence, threatening to drown him in a horror he had believed vanished for ever.

Did Spock know? That was the question he strove frantically to answer, trying to judge the Vulcan's actions, to determine if he was aware of the significance of that delicately-carved chessman.

In this Starfleet, Vulcan officers were very rare, normally serving as

husband-and-wife teams, for the males were regularly gripped by an irresistible compulsion to mate. Twice a year the Captain had been driven to Kirk with a savage hunger that far outstripped his usual persecution of the Human; the hours of the night were no longer enough - he kept Kirk closely confined in his quarters, visiting him whenever the need became unbearable.

In order to conceal Kirk's absence from duty he was supposed to be engaged on important research in the science labs, and was not to be disturbed; the door of his office in the science department was kept securely locked to give the impression that he was there, and as only the Captain had the authority to question the First Officer's movements, his enforced retirement aroused no comment.

The onset of the mating drive was sudden, and in the Captain's case not easily predicted because of his mixed blood; it had amused him to devise a signal to summon the Human to his quarters - he would, during one of their chess games, hand Kirk a black knight, or make some pointed reference to the piece in his hearing. Kirk had quickly learned that the summons was not to be disregarded.

So, did Spock know? Had he selected that particular piece deliberately, or had it been merely a ghastly coincidence? Kirk thought back to the scene at the table, but he could not be certain - there had been several pieces close to Spock's hand, but he could not tell whether the Vulcan had actually chosen the knight.

Kirk bit his lip anxiously - he must decide soon. Then he remembered. He had been present when Spock studied the Captain's personal log, and had watched his face turn white with disgust and horror as he learned more fully how his counterpart had treated Kirk. The task had been distasteful, but necessary - he had to learn about the Captain in order to replace him - but Spock had destroyed the log at once, and had never referred to its contents since. There must have been some reference to the signal in the log, and knowing that Kirk would understand, Spock had clearly indicated his wishes. Of course... it was clear now... that touch on his shoulder, the quietly-spoken, "I'll see you later, Jim." Spock wanted him.

But why? Why now? He could at any time have summoned Kirk to his quarters, but he had not done so... Yes, of course, that was clear now too. Spock was also a Human/Vulcan hybrid, affected for the first time in this universe by the mating time; driven by that savage hunger he had turned to the one person who knew, and who could satisfy it. Kirk understood at last. He must serve the Commodore as he had served the Captain.

With faint surprise Kirk found himself actually considering the situation. When the Captain was alive he would not have risked a moment's delay in answering the summons - had he done so the Captain would have drawn him by mind link, or come in search of him. Spock had not, and Kirk thought he knew why; the Vulcan was allowing him to choose. He had indicated his need, but it was for Kirk to decide how he would respond. It was a measure of the difference between the two men.

Kirk knew he had to consider his response very carefully. His instinct was to refuse, but he owed Spock so much. The Vulcan had abandoned his home, his career, his whole way of life for his sake; had shown him what friendship could be. Cut off from whatever release he had in his own world, his desperate need had forced him to turn now to Kirk, but he would not compel the Human to obey. Had it not been for Spock, Kirk knew that he would even now be helpless in the Captain's bed; and he knew also what would happen to Spock if he refused. Was the price too great to pay?

He tried to visualise Spock as a sexual partner, and found he could do so without the sick terror the Captain had always produced in him. In the Captain's arms he had known only pain, the humiliation of believing that he was valued only for the pleasure his body could give, the ruthless violation of

his most cherished thoughts. With Spock, it would be... different; the Vulcan would certainly make use of him, but he was accustomed to that, and he could not believe that this man would treat him with the cynical brutality he had known from the Captain. Perhaps... perhaps Spock would even be... gentle.

Kirk sighed wistfully, knowing what his decision must be. He would answer Spock's summons, and if the Vulcan allowed him a little more dignity, even the illusion of freedom when he was not needed - well, that was more than he could have hoped for at the Captain's hands.

He rose and went to the shower before changing into a fresh shirt. His lips twisted cynically as he smoothed his hair; what was he getting so upset about, anyway? His own body disgusted him since the Captain had claimed it; using it to relieve Spock's distress was at least more worthwhile than satisfying his former master's sadism.

As he walked along the corridor Kirk was apprehensive, for he did not know quite what Spock would expect of him, but his customary terror on this journey did not affect him. To his surprise his signal for admission to Spock's quarters brought no response, and after a slight hesitation he stepped inside. The Captain had keyed the lock to admit him at any time, so that Kirk, like McCoy, had voice override; had it been possible, the Captain would have restricted McCoy's right of access, but Starfleet regulations insisted that the Chief Medical Officer should have unrestricted access to all sections of the ship, and he did not dare risk arousing the Doctor's curiosity by countermanding his freedom of movement.

The rooms were empty - Spock must have been detained on the bridge longer than he had expected. Curiously, Kirk circled, examining the changes in the once-familiar rooms; much of the decoration had been cleared away, the furniture that remained being purely functional - with one exception. The Vulcan harp, that in the Captain's time had hung on the wall, an unused ornament, now stood on a shelf by the desk. Kirk touched the strings softly, wondering if Spock played, and how the music would sound. He was beginning to realise how little he really knew about Spock's thoughts and ideals.

At last he summoned the courage to enter the sleeping quarters, but here too changes had been made, dulling most of the room's terrible associations. The fur rugs and hangings had been stripped away, giving the room an almost spartan simplicity. With relief he saw that the chest had gone - that strangely-carved box that had held the Captain's 'toys', the whips and instruments of torture he had delighted to use on Kirk. There was only one personal item visible, a small leather wallet standing on the bedside locker.

Impelled by a compulsion he could not understand, Kirk lifted and opened it - his own face laughed up at him.

Startled, he looked closer; the clear hazel eyes held no shadows, the sensitive mouth curved in a teasing, affectionate grin. This was the James T. Kirk whose loss had driven the Commodore on his almost insane search, a search which had brought him here at the time of Kirk's own greatest need.

The young Commander studied the expressive face with envy; this man had never known the utter self-disgust he had lived with for so long; had never cringed in cowering obedience to a man to whom he was, quite literally, a possession; his mind had never been ruthlessly invaded to heighten the cruel pleasure of his master. Kirk knew to whom that engaging smile had been directed, and would have given anything to stand as an equal at Spock's side, as this man had done.

"Did you do... this... for him too?" he whispered, trying, as always, to gauge the mind of his counterpart. "He must have cared for you, to suffer so at your death... he won you for a friend, and you look so happy, he cannot be as savage as the Captain. I'll pay my debt to him, James Kirk, but oh, I wish... I wish it didn't have to be this way."

Kirk replaced the picture carefully and turned away, wondering what to do next, what Spock would demand of him... The Captain had not liked to be kept waiting... He undressed slowly, approached the bed, hesitated. Perhaps it would be better not to presume too far... After a moment he dimmed the lights and moved to a chair in the corner of the room, where he sat waiting... waiting...

* * * *

Kirk woke with a start - he must have been more tired than he realised. For a moment he wondered what had aroused him, then he heard the soft tones of the harp in the next room. For a little while he forgot his nervousness, caught up in the enchantment of the music. The sad, simple little tune fitted his own mood so well, regret and longing mingled still with a little hope... Suddenly came a discordant sound as though the musician had set the instrument aside abruptly, and the breaking of the spell returned Kirk to an awareness of reality. He found he was trembling slightly... soon it would begin. Instinctively he shrank back in the chair as a swift rush of footsteps brought Spock through the doorway; without turning on the lights the tall figure passed through to the shower, returning shortly dressed in an informal robe. Spock seemed abstracted, withdrawn; he paid no attention to Kirk, who sat motionless, unable even to speak. The bedlight came on at its lowest setting, and by its dim glow Kirk could see Spock standing by the bed. One long-fingered hand reached out, lifted and opened the picture case. He studied it for a long time in silence, then with a scarcely audible sigh closed and replaced it before stretching himself out on the bed.

Kirk sat tensely, waiting for the summons that must surely come now; the Vulcan lay motionless. After a time Kirk rose and approached the bed quietly - Spock appeared to be asleep. Kirk hovered indecisively - what did Spock want? Perhaps he had changed his mind... but it might be a test... HE had enjoyed tormenting him with such tricks... Spock might have found release elsewhere... but there was no-one else... Spock was kind, but the mating drive turned Vulcans savage... and yet Spock seemed at peace; perhaps he had found someone else... to go or to stay - which?

Slowly he knelt by the bed, his eyes fixed on the Vulcan's face; delicately, timidly, he touched his lips to Spock's, alert to respond to his wishes. The reaction was one he had not anticipated. Light though it was, the pressure of his mouth woke Spock instantly; the Vulcan's eyes flew open, his hand shot out, striking Kirk across the face to send him sprawling to the floor. When he dared to look up Spock was standing over him, his eyes blazing with contempt.

"How dare you!" The very quietness of his voice made the disgust in Spock's tone all the harsher. "I thought there was something in you worth saving - I see now I was wrong! Did you really enjoy the humiliation after all, to come crawling to my bed? The Captain really did destroy your integrity - you're as corrupt as he! I gambled everything on you, and I've lost - for the rest of my life I'll have to look at you, see Jim's eyes, and know the warped mind that's behind them. Get out of my sight - it makes me sick to look at you. Go and find someone else to play your degenerate game!"

As the bitter denunciation flowed over him Kirk could only crouch on the floor, shaking his head in bewilderment. What had he done wrong? He had only responded to Spock's summons, as he had been trained to do. Dazedly he tried to move, but sank back as a wave of sick dizziness swept over him; he lifted a hand to his face, and found the stickiness of blood - he had struck his head in falling, and blood also trickled from his mouth where Spock's blow had fallen.

"Please..." he moaned, reaching out in confusion to the only help he had ever known.

"Don't touch me!" Spock jerked back as though the touch of Kirk's hand would contaminate him. He gazed down at the bowed head, filled with a burning

primitive rage, a savage desire to reach out and destroy that once-loved face, hating to the point of madness the man who wore it now, who had dared to smirch the memories it carried for him. As he took an involuntary step forward Kirk looked up, blinded by the tears that ran silently down his face. He made no sound, but the utter misery and confusion in his eyes halted Spock abruptly. At last Kirk seemed to take in Spock's threatening movement; a mask of sheer terror closed over his face and he shrank back, lowering his head in abject submission.

"I ask... forgiveness, sir," he whispered, as he had done once before.

Remembering the circumstances under which he had last heard those words, and what had followed them, Spock was shocked back to sanity; what had he been about to do? Jim's eyes, afraid to meet his; Jim, cowering in terror at his feet, Jim's blood on his hands. Filled with remorse he began to reach out, then dropped his hand in confusion - the Human was too afraid of him, he could sense it.

Spock moved into the washroom and returned with a basin of water and a towel; in his absence Kirk had tried to get away, but his confusion had betrayed him. Now he crouched by the bed, his face buried on his arms, sobbing bitterly. Spock lifted his head and began to clean up the cuts on his forehead and mouth; gradually the gentleness of his hands penetrated the fog of fear surrounding Kirk, and his tears slowly ceased.

"Hush, Jim," Spock said quietly. "It's all right; I'm not angry any more - I won't hurt you again."

Kirk's skin was cold to the touch; Spock went to fetch a robe and wrapped him warmly before lifting him on to the bed. He would have drawn up the chair, but Kirk clung to him so tightly that he could not move.

"Now," he said softly, "I think we both have some explaining to do."

Kirk nodded, not yet trusting himself to speak; he was still shocked, bewildered by the Vulcan's unexpected violence, but at least Spock no longer seemed to be angry with him.

"Jim, look at me." The voice was very gentle, but demanded obedience; Kirk met the questioning dark eyes, his own filled with shame and confusion. Spock gazed at him sternly for a long time, then his set expression imperceptibly relaxed.

"There is more here than I thought," he said at last. "Jim, why did you come to me tonight? Did you really believe you would be welcome?"

Kirk's eyes flickered nervously - was this some new test? He could only answer with the truth, even if Spock already knew it.

"I only... answered your summons," he replied simply.

"My summons?" Spock seemed genuinely bewildered.

"The black knight."

"The black... Jim, explain."

"All right, I'll go along with your game, Spock; God knows, I've had enough practice." He continued in a monotone. "Most of the time the Captain used me for pleasure, but twice a year he was subject to a... compulsion to mate. I had to be in his quarters twenty-four hours a day for three days; to prevent comment on my absence, I was supposed to be working in the science department. He ordered me to his quarters by handing me a chessman - the black knight. You are a Human/Vulcan hybrid as he was - you must have the same needs. I knew you must have learned about the... the signal from his log - when you used it, I thought you wanted me. I came."

"I see. You were afraid of me, then?"

"I... don't know... Not really, but... at those times, he became..."

uncontrollably savage if he couldn't get what he wanted. I failed him once ... he taught me... not to fail him again."

"What happened?"

"I'd been injured, and McCoy kept me in sickbay. He... came to visit me ... when he left, I found the knight. I begged McCoy to discharge me, but he wouldn't - you know how stubborn he is - he said I needed another day, he wanted to make more tests. I was frantic... That night... he... came again, while McCoy was with me. He did something with his mind, I don't know what - McCoy didn't seem able to see or hear what was happening, it was as though he was in a trance. He talked to me, told me... he wouldn't force me... this time. Then he said, 'But I cannot be alone tonight. It is for you to choose, James; I will have you... or him.' He pointed to McCoy. I couldn't let him... I was used to it, but McCoy... He hurt me... badly... that night, for the delay had angered and frustrated him, but he was clever enough not to mark me; McCoy suspected nothing. The next day I was discharged... I went straight to him... and he... " Kirk buried his face in his hands, unable to continue.

"You thought that I would do likewise?"

"No!" Kirk's denial was swift. "Truly, I didn't think you meant to harm me, or... or anyone... but... I knew what would happen to you if I didn't come. I didn't want you to suffer... "

"So you chose to come?"

Kirk hung his head in confusion. "Yes. You've been... very kind to me, Spock; I wanted to repay you. I thought... if it would help... I could do this much for you."

Spock raised Kirk's head and met his eyes steadily. "Jim, I swear to you - there was no mention of any signal in the log. It was merely an unlucky coincidence that I picked up a knight. I am immune to the pon farr - the mating drive, as you call it; it has never affected me."

Kirk drew a long breath. "No wonder you were so angry. When I came to you, you thought... "

"I thought that the Captain's... attentions... gave you pleasure, after all. When I saw you there I believed that you had been utterly corrupted. Forgive me, I have wronged you deeply. It was a generous thought, after all your suffering, to overcome your fear for my sake."

"I wanted to help, and I wasn't afraid, not really - I was sure you would be gentle."

"Gentle! I almost killed you."

"You didn't understand. My behaviour must have seemed... unforgivable."

"I should have known... I should have trusted you."

Kirk smiled wistfully, but said seriously, "I told you once, I'm... very different... from your own Kirk."

Spock shook his head. "In many ways, you are very alike. He offered his life for mine many times - you offered your peace of mind. I wonder... which would have been the greater sacrifice."

"Don't compare us, Spock. I know what I am, and I'm learning... what he was. He would despise me - and rightly."

"I think not. Had your circumstances been different, there would be little to choose between you. He would have told you, as I am trying to tell you - it's not your fault that you became the prey of someone so much stronger."

"Your Kirk would have resisted, he would not have given in so easily."

"Jim, everyone has a breaking point. You were beaten before you knew there

was anything to fight; that was your misfortune, not your fault. I don't want to hurt you, Jim, but I must make you accept the truth as I see it. You were forced to share the bed of a sadist who used you to satisfy both his cruelty and his lust; you were mentally enslaved by an unscrupulous telepath who broke your will as a child breaks a toy. Mentally or physically, were you strong enough to resist?"

"No... but I should have been."

"Don't be ridiculous. You have no telepathic skills, Humans are physically weaker than Vulcans. How, then, could you have fought him?"

"I could have asked for help."

"You tried that, and a friend paid with his life."

"Then I should have killed myself."

"Jim, he thought of that. When I touched your mind that first evening, I sensed that you had been mind-blocked against suicide. He feared that shame might eventually make you try to kill yourself, and he would not take the risk of losing you. Be honest - this is the first time that the idea of death as a solution has occurred to you, isn't it?"

"Why, yes... I didn't realise... "

"You were caught in a cage of physical and mental bars - now you are free. But Jim - a caged animal often fears freedom when it comes at last, and clings blindly to the familiar safety of his prison. That's what you've been doing. It would be... so very easy... to let you go on doing so, to hold you safe... but I know what you will become if you can find yourself again. I've been hunting Jim Kirk through a thousand shadows; I haven't quite found him yet, but I will - and so will you."

"Do you really believe that I can become... like the man you knew?"

"I do; you have so many of his qualities. When I first offered you escape you thought of me, urged me to find someone... how did you put it? ... someone more my equal; after the Captain's death you thought of the crew and would not desert them, although you knew you could be tried for murder; you understood the importance of your mission, and would not abandon it to ensure your own safety; you refused to buy yourself a respite from the Captain's cruelty at McCoy's expense; and tonight you overcame your reluctance because you thought I needed you. These are hardly the actions of the weak-minded coward you apparently believe yourself to be."

"I am weak, Spock; even now I'm afraid to leave you, afraid of being alone. Your Kirk would never... "

"My Kirk was Human, as you are; he was often tired, afraid, lonely. It was... my greatest joy... that I could comfort him then. But he would stand alone, defying the universe... that's what I want for you, Jim. Won't you try, for my sake, if not your own?"

"I want to try... but I don't know... perhaps I'm not strong enough..."

"The strength is there, I know that; I can help you find it. Never forget that I too am... lonely. Jim Kirk was my lifeline, my link with Humanity... without him, half my life was gone."

"Isn't there... something... I can give? I would be ashamed... only to take."

"You will find that the question of giving or taking is irrelevant, Jim - we have so much to share."

"To share," Kirk said wonderingly. "I like the sound of that, Spock." His voice was soft, sleepy.

"We will continue this discussion in the morning, Jim. You are tired - go now and rest."

"No!" Kirk's hands clung with renewed nervousness to Spock's shoulders. Meeting the Vulcan's questioning gaze he went on, "It's just... I don't want to be alone tonight. If I wake up, and you're here, I'll be able to believe what you've told me; but if I'm alone, I'll remember... HIM... and I don't want to do that, Spock, not now. For the first time I can see a future in which I don't have to be afraid, but... the past is strong... HE... still summons me... "

"They are only dreams."

"I know, but... Oh, Spock, they confuse me so... I keep seeing his eyes as he died... and his voice, when he told me... he loved me... and he knew... I'd killed him. I keep thinking... it was my fault, I could have helped him... perhaps I should have... tried... to love him... "

"Jim, stop that!" Spock's voice was sharp, abruptly curbing Kirk's rising distress; his tone softened as he went on, "Don't torment yourself with what might have been. Stay here, then, for tonight; I will keep the dreams from you. Tomorrow I will teach you to guard yourself."

Kirk sighed tiredly and settled closer as Spock adjusted the lamp, directing its light away from the Human's face; when he looked back Kirk was asleep, his head resting on the Vulcan's shoulder.

"With a sigh of resignation Spock shifted into the most comfortable position; in the dim light he could see Kirk's face clearly. The Human slept easily, like a tired child safe in its father's arms. Spock's confidence, which had been badly shaken by Kirk's seeming depravity, was restored and heightened. Despite being so cruelly hurt, Kirk had learned to trust him; he had made no mistake in his estimation of how much the Human had feared and loathed the Captain's demands, yet Jim had cared enough to overcome his revulsion to bring the comfort he had thought was needed. There are some things more precious than life, Spock thought; and this Kirk has offered everything. That his sacrifice was not needed did not diminish the value of the offering.

Unconsciously his arm tightened; he would save this Kirk, whatever it cost him. He touched the sleeping face lightly, brushed back the familiar stray lock of hair from his forehead. A searing stab of pain lanced through his mind - how often he noticed that detail in the past, how little he had really believed that he would ever see it again.

The Human was still so defenceless; as he had told Kirk, it would be so easy simply to take the Captain's place, to keep the Human safe at his side, to control his life; easy, but not what he wanted. He wanted the stubborn, charming, self-willed, impetuous man he had known, and the seeds of that personality lay dormant in the tormented man in his arms. That conviction brought a fierce determination to see this Jim Kirk grow and develop as he was meant to do.

* * * *

Dr. McCoy, who was never at his best first thing in the morning, nevertheless answered the summons to the Captain's quarters with a lively curiosity. He was the only other to know that the man who sat now in the Captain's chair was even more of an alien than the man who had occupied it by right. Across the impossible gulf between two dimensions he had come to free Kirk from a torment no-one had even suspected; he had his own reasons for doing so, of course, but the Doctor could only be thankful that the long agony of the man who was fast becoming a close friend was over.

The day after the Captain's death Spock had brought Kirk to sickbay; he had swept the startled McCoy into his own office; had explained, concisely and explicitly, exactly what had been done to Kirk in the days since McCoy had last examined him; and had entrusted him with the task of healing the damage. The superficial examination he had given Kirk the previous evening

had not prepared McCoy for what he found; accustomed though he was to suffering, the sight of those appalling injuries deliberately inflicted produced in the normally gentle surgeon a depth of hatred he would never have believed possible. He remembered previous occasions when Kirk had been brought to him badly hurt - the time when he claimed he had fallen in the gym, the day he returned from shore leave saying he had been attacked and robbed - and shuddered at the realisation of how long his suffering had lasted. Even now he slept badly, forcing the reluctant McCoy to prescribe sedatives, but that could not continue indefinitely - there was always the risk of addiction. Yet gradually the scars had healed - the physical ones, at least; of his mental recovery, McCoy was not so confident. Spock had asked for his help, and he had given it willingly, watching with compassion as Kirk slowly, timidly, began to feel his way into the normal life of the Enterprise; one day he had chuckled at one of Sulu's remarks, and with a stab of pity McCoy realised that this was the first time he had ever heard Kirk laugh.

Then last night, in the corridor, his eyes had been... haunted, darkened by old shadows. McCoy had been concerned, and had called his quarters, but there had been no reply; he had intended looking for him, to see if he could help, but there had been an emergency in sickbay. Later he would find Jim, try to persuade him to talk; but first there was Spock's summons.

Spock. What was he, that strange, enigmatic man? The same ancestry, the same environment, had produced, each in his own universe, Commodore and Captain; they could not have been more unlike. Spock hid his thoughts with the same ease the Captain had done, but McCoy had seen his face as he stooped over Jim's unconscious body, and had not been deceived a second time; there was a compassion here, a gentle caring, that the Captain could never have known. McCoy had healed the physical damage Jim had suffered, but he knew that only the Vulcan's wisdom and strength could banish the mental scars. Now, as he waited for admission, McCoy wondered - did Spock know what had upset Jim last night? The door slid open.

"Thank you for coming so promptly, Doctor." The deep voice held a note of welcome, almost of relief. "There is something... I want to show you."

McCoy followed Spock into the sleeping quarters, glanced round automatically, stared in disbelief. Jim, clad only in a Vulcan robe, lay asleep in Spock's bed. His mouth was cut and swollen, a fresh bruise darkened his face. For a moment all the doubt, all the anger came flooding back; the violence of his rage left McCoy trembling as he glared in accusation at the impassive Vulcan. Not trusting himself to speak, he looked again at Jim, and realised how quickly he had assumed the worst. Jim was sleeping easily, quietly relaxed, his face tranquil and somehow very young - he could not have lain so peacefully if he had been forced there against his will. Something unusual had happened to bring him here - that was obvious - but not what he had feared. He glanced at Spock, knowing that the unspoken apology in his eyes was accepted even as he asked,

"What happened?"

"Thank you, McCoy."

"What for?"

"For asking. I was afraid you might think... "

"Nonsense. I was startled for a minute, that's all - it's obvious just from looking at him that he's taken no harm from you. Want to tell me about it?"

"That's why I called you. We have arrived at a moment of crisis, McCoy, and I will need your help. I am partly to blame for bringing matters to a head so quickly, but we have no time to waste now. You may not know, but Vulcans are subject to a regular mating cycle; I myself am immune, but the Captain was apparently strongly affected. He required Jim's presence

continuously while the mating urge lasted; to conceal his absence from duty it was their custom to pretend that Jim was engaged on research. There was a signal the Captain employed to summon Jim to his quarters; by an unfortunate chance I happened to give the signal. Jim believed I shared the Captain's... needs, and came to my quarters last night prepared to give himself to me to spare me suffering. I regret to say that I misunderstood his motives at first, believing that he desired a sexual relationship between us. I... struck him... We have solved that problem, but it has become clear to me that Jim cannot continue longer like this, partly free, yet still a prisoner of the Captain's training. He must decide, and soon, whether he desires complete freedom, or whether he will continue to need my protection. It is vital that he choose freely; will you be with him while I explain the alternatives, so that he knows I do not pressure him in any way?"

"Of course, Spock." The Doctor chuckled softly, then went on apologetically, "I'm sorry, I know it's not really funny, but you must have had quite a shock when Jim turned up."

For an instant the Vulcan's mouth curved. "Indeed. When I woke up to find him... however, Doctor," the flash of humour vanished abruptly, "this is neither the time nor the place for such a discussion - we have work to do."

"Right." McCoy was at once all serious attention. "How can I help?"

"I need information. What, in your opinion, caused Jim the greatest distress?"

McCoy did not hesitate. "Unquestionably, the mind link; he's simply terrified of it, despite the fact that your meld didn't hurt him. As I understand it, your link was very shallow, only enough to reassure him - it didn't go deep enough to remove his fear. That's your biggest hurdle, Spock - basically, he trusts you, but he can't forget the things that the link with the Captain compelled him to do. He knows that you have the power to force a meld on him, too, and while he doesn't really believe that you will, he has lived too long with fear to be able to control it now. He's learning to come to terms with the physical abuse he suffered, but his terror of the link - and of you for your mastery of it - will only grow stronger; he'll fight it, as best he can, but we both know the damage that's been done. He'll fight, and he'll lose - and there's nothing he can do about it."

"There is, however, something I can do. Your judgement confirms mine, McCoy. I had hoped to leave it a little longer, to allow him more time to recover naturally; but the events of last night, when he reacted instinctively to a chance trigger I knew nothing about have made me realise that there may be other such conditioned responses in his mind which I would not like to set in action - for his sake.

To remove such conditioned responses I must touch his mind; I would like you to be present so he will not feel he is being coerced, and also to help persuade him. I must link with him, but he will instinctively resist; we must convince him that after this, he need never feel the meld again. Come; we may as well begin at once."

The two men turned back to the bed. Kirk woke at Spock's touch, to lie for a moment gazing up in confusion. Memory returned as he met McCoy's quizzical eyes, and he coloured faintly before turning to Spock with a trusting dependence that touched both men deeply.

"What's wrong? Why is McCoy here?" he asked.

Spock leaned closer. "Nothing is wrong - McCoy is here for your protection, to ensure that whatever you decide now is your own free choice.

Jim, you cannot continue longer in this state of uncertainty; it is time for you to choose, and I must present the alternatives for you to consider. I promised you once that nothing would hurt you again - I can keep that promise, but only if you remain dependent on me for the rest of your

life. I can secure your safety, guarantee your peace of mind, but you will never be free of my control. Or I can help you to become the man you would have been if the Captain had never entered your life. Which do you choose?"

Habit was strong; Kirk tried to think clearly, but the weakened will sought as always for the easiest path, the one that led to approval. "What do you want me to do, Spock?" he asked hesitantly.

"I want you to decide." Spock's voice was very gentle, encouraging. "I cannot choose for you in this, Jim; you alone can decide what you want."

Kirk glanced appealingly at McCoy; the blue eyes were smiling, but neutral - there was no help there. It had been... so long... since he had been able to make any personal decision; his indecisiveness now was somehow ... frightening.

Kirk forced himself to think clearly, considering the alternatives. He could remain with Spock, that warm gentleness surrounding and protecting him, never having to think, never having to be afraid; no demands would be made of him, he would be safe and sheltered always. It was... tempting.

Or he could try to become the man Spock obviously believed he could be; it would be possible, with his help and McCoy's, to relearn the confidence he had once possessed, to go back and find again the dignity and self-respect he had believed gone for ever when the Captain claimed him, shattering with his cruelty all his hopes and dreams. If he tried... if he could find the courage to try... he would know pain, and fear, and sorrow; but one day the patient dark eyes would meet his, acknowledging an equal, and that was what he now wanted with a fierce longing that would not be denied.

In his weakness he had almost hated that other James Kirk, envying his courage, his self-reliance; now he knew only a sudden determination to equal his counterpart, to make himself worthy of Spock's friendship. If he remained as he was he knew that the Vulcan would keep his promise, would care for him, but he would feel only pity for a ruined, wasted life. If he ... dared... to take up the challenge he might fail, but the prize was worth the effort; and he might - he just might - win through, become the companion Spock had sought and deserved to find.

The room was very still as the two men stood awaiting Kirk's decision. McCoy watched with pity as his friend fought to break the conditioning he had been under, understanding how the tired mind twisted and turned in an attempt to reason clearly; Spock's face was unreadable as he stood looking down at Kirk's bent head, at his nervously-twisting hands. The waiting seemed endless, for when it was over he would know which Kirk claimed his future - the tormented, crippled victim, or the man, marked though he was by pain and sorrow, who would become the friend he hoped for.

At last a long sigh broke the silence; Kirk raised his head, his eyes glowing with hope, and reached out to Spock. "I'd like... to try," he whispered softly.

Spock took the outstretched hands in his and held them in silence, his joy and relief as evident as if he had shouted aloud. Then he sat down beside Kirk, motioning to McCoy to draw up a chair.

"Thank you, Jim," he said quietly. "I promise you, you will not regret your decision. Now, I must ask you to trust me completely. Don't be afraid, McCoy is here, you will not be harmed."

"What are you going to do?"

"Jim, I must touch your mind."

"No!" The rejection was immediate as Kirk tried to shrink away, terror building in him despite his efforts to control it. "Please... not that! I can't... I won't... please don't link with me!" Kirk tried vainly to wrench his hands away, remembering only how his enslavement had begun...

certainly his first link with Spock had not hurt him... but then, neither had the Captain's...

Spock tightened his grip on Kirk's hands, instinctively aware of what was passing through the Human's mind; his voice was compassionate, but determined.

"I must. Believe me, Jim, I understand your fear, but I must remove it. If I do not, my ability will always stand between us; you will always be a little afraid of me, and that fear will grow until it destroys anything we try to build. Tell him, McCoy."

"Spock's right, Jim. He can help you - you must allow him to."

"I'm sorry... I can't..."

"You can and you will. Listen, now. If you permit the meld, it will not hurt you - I know how to approach your mind. You will learn much of me that I have not yet told you, and when you know enough to trust me completely I will be able to teach you to shield your mind so that no-one, not even I, can link with you without your consent. When you are confident that your mind is again your own I promise you the fear will die and you will be truly free. Otherwise you will fail before you start, for you will not be able to trust me enough to let me help you. You must, for your own sake, permit me to link with you, but I will not compel you to do so; essential though the meld is, if you admit me to your mind it must be by your own choice."

Kirk studied the dark eyes seriously. Spock wanted the meld, but would not compel him; McCoy was here, he would be safe; it would be... so wonderful... to have his mind his own again, strong, shielded; but first the meld - could he bear it?

Suddenly he realised that he faced the first step on the path he had chosen, and felt a sudden surge of confidence; the other Kirk would not have been afraid to link with Spock, but had never been able to do so, for only after his death had the Vulcan's latent powers been developed. This would be something he alone could share with the Vulcan, something that was uniquely theirs, a total commitment.

McCoy gave an unconscious sigh of relief as Kirk nodded consent, knowing how hard his friend's decision had been, how vital it was that he make it. His hands tensed as he leaned forward in his chair, willing them to succeed.

It was the most difficult thing Kirk had ever done, to sit there motionless as Spock's fingers reached for his face; he could feel his heart pounding with a fear the Vulcan must surely sense, but if he could command that fear, accept the contact, Spock's task would be easier. The Captain's mind - how greatly he had feared the pain of the linking, his brain torn apart by the violence of the intrusion; how he had loathed the sly, crawling insinuation of thoughts and ideas that seemed to be, but were not, his.

Spock's hands, so gentle on his face; Spock's eyes, compassionate, understanding. At last the summons, softly calling to him.

- Jim, I am here. Open your mind to me -

- I don't know how -

- Think that I am welcome. Don't be afraid, I will go carefully -

Kirk was unsure how to proceed; this delicate approach was so new to him. Instinctively he raised a hand to Spock's cheek, and found the contact steadied him. He was conscious of warmth, light, a sense of utter well-being; as Spock's mind flowed gently into his he knew a sudden wonderful calmness.

He had been alone, trapped in a morass of self-disgust, despising himself for his weakness, loathing his own body because the Captain desired it,

certain that if others knew the truth about him they would turn from him in abhorrence. Now Spock's clear mental gaze ranged over his mind, evaluating everything he had been and done since he fell into the Captain's hands; and he waited, ashamed but somehow serene, sensing the affection in that tender scrutiny, fearing and yet longing for Spock's verdict. Instead he was simply welcomed, accepted both for his failings and abilities, seen and understood as he had never dared to dream he would be.

The direction of the contact altered: he was now looking into the Vulcan's mind, seeing with equal clarity Spock's life, his dreams, his ideals, the agonising pain of loss, the sudden impossible hope, his plans for the future. It was a new experience for Kirk; the Captain's mind links had taken everything, given nothing - nothing save pain. But Spock... Spock was revealing himself totally in this incredible exchange. Forcing himself to disregard normal Vulcan reticence, he allowed the Human to see his weakness as well as his strength. Kirk gasped with pity as he understood at last the terrible loneliness that haunted Spock, and saw the apprehension that still trembled within him - the dreadful fear that Kirk, scarred as he was by the Captain, might even yet reject his hesitantly-offered friendship. For a moment Kirk wavered, feeling so helpless before that sense of utter desolation, but finally understanding came - here was something of value he could give to the Vulcan, for his past experience enabled him to comprehend that utter isolation as the other Kirk never could.

All fear of the meld faded before Spock's desperate need; deliberately Kirk reached out, drawing the other's mind deeper into his, urgently projecting his joy and welcome. Spock responded with pleasure and delight; their minds flowed together, merging, blending, each healing the other's pain, answering the other's need. So this was what the meld should be! Kirk knew a moment's pity for the Captain; his twisted mind had robbed them both of this wonderful sense of unity. Whatever happened in the future, whether he succeeded or failed, he had at least experienced this miracle; and with a full heart he thanked Spock for the gift, receiving in exchange the other's contentment in his happiness.

The angle of contact shifted yet again; now Kirk saw himself through Spock's eyes, both as he was, and as he could become; and he trembled at that vision, for it seemed too much to hope that he would ever equal the Kirk whose memory had been so clearly depicted in Spock's mind. Even as the doubt began to form came denial, swift reassurance - Spock believed in him, trusted him - such perfect confidence must be fulfilled.

Gradually the insight began to fade, leaving only the surprisingly warm, healing contact of the meld, and Kirk relaxed, enjoying the sensation, until the calm voice spoke again in his mind.

- Are you ready, Jim? You have much to learn -

- I don't need to now; I'm not afraid any more, Spock -

- You must. You trust me now, but the fear may return. It is necessary that you learn to protect yourself. Only when you have confidence in your own strength can we be truly equal -

- But... will I never feel this... belonging... again? -

- You will; but only when you wish it. We will be able to reach each other if necessary, but I will not be able to link with you without your consent. Now, attend to me -

Spock was a good teacher, for he himself had been well taught. In his own universe the Commander had been the most powerful telepath his race had ever known, and much of that skill he had passed to the Commodore. There was the added difficulty of working with a Human mind, but Spock brought all his abilities into use.

Slowly, gradually, Kirk's shields began to form and strengthen; he

learned how to protect his mind from any form of invasion, and how to lower his defences when he wished to do so. Spock taught him how to initiate contact, and how to accept it; finally only one thing remained - to teach him to defend his barriers against Spock himself.

Satisfied at last, the Vulcan withdrew; Kirk took a deep breath, surveying as he had now been taught the mind that had become his own domain again, and would remain so until he himself wished otherwise.

"There remains only the final test," Spock's voice came quietly, recalling him to the purpose of his lessons. Once more the Vulcan's hands rested lightly on his face, once more came that gentle summons. This time, it went unanswered. As the pressure grew Kirk brought all his newly acquired skills into play, resisting. He could tell that Spock was using all his power in an attempt to force contact - and his shields held.

With a soft sigh of satisfaction the Vulcan dropped his hands and sat back, smiling faintly. "Well done, Jim. Your mind is stronger than I dared hope - you resisted me easily."

"I didn't really want to, Spock; the meld was... wonderful."

"We will experience it again, Jim, when it is needed. At least I know now that you are safe - in this universe the Captain was an unusually powerful telepath, and I am stronger than he. If you can withstand me, you need never fear anyone else. Now, you should rest - you will find that the dreams will not trouble you again."

Kirk smiled and lay back, his eyes following the tall figure to the door, before he turned to McCoy, who approached automatically reaching for his medical kit.

"No, McCoy, I don't need your sedatives now." The Doctor caught the note of happiness in his voice, saw with very real pleasure the clear, unclouded eyes. "You don't know... it's so wonderful to be free of fear at last, to know that I can sleep without dreaming of horror. I'm all right; go to Spock - I think he needs you now."

As McCoy walked into the outer room he saw Spock sitting at his desk; he was leaning forward, his head supported on his clasped hands in an attitude of utter weariness. He started as McCoy's hand fell on his shoulder, and glanced up enquiringly; it was a measure of his tiredness that he did not attempt to conceal his fatigue - the dark eyes showed the tension he had been under, but glowed softly with renewed hope and confidence.

"Jim?" he asked.

"He's just fine - it'll do him good to sleep without drugs for once." McCoy spoke cheerfully, but he was concerned - Jim's intuition had been right, there was still something troubling Spock, something that showed as a fleeting shadow in the depths of his dark eyes. He wanted to help, but was unsure how to approach this proud, reserved man. At last he said quietly,

"That was a pretty wonderful thing you did in there, Spock."

"I do not understand your meaning."

"Don't pretend with me. I know how much you felt your Kirk's death, enough to pursue his ghost through a thousand shadows, to give up your entire world for the chance to find him again. Now that you have found him you could have kept him safe, kept him always with you, at the cost of his individuality. Instead you had the courage to let him go, even at the risk of losing him yet again."

"I owed him that chance," Spock said quietly, "but I wonder - was I right, McCoy? I was... tempted... but I'd have been as bad as the Captain if I'd kept him as a useless, helpless companion - worse, in fact, for I don't even have the Captain's desire for him as an excuse. So, I... healed his mind as

best I could, and now he will begin to live his own life again. It will be worth it to see him free and unafraid, but now... I fear for myself."

"Tell me," McCoy invited, knowing he must take advantage of this temporary crack in the Vulcan's composure if he was to help.

"I can't even claim any credit for my actions - my motives were purely selfish. I had Jim Kirk, but I wanted more - I wanted the companion I had once known; but Jim was... very special. He could be so self-willed, so impetuous... even that last time I begged him... still, that doesn't matter now. He would seldom heed my advice - he could be so careless of his own safety... the risks he took scared me so often... "

The Vulcan fell silent, gazing down at the hands now clasped before him on the desk, lost in his memories; when he looked up again the dark eyes were filled with an agony of apprehension. "Now, I wonder... will it be so again? McCoy, I could not bear... such a loss.. a second time." He laughed bitterly. "For all my planning, all my thought, I did not foresee this moment. If I try to hold him safe, I lose him; if I set him free, chance or accident may take him from me again. I thought I knew what I was doing, but had I the right to interfere? Jim... what does he face now? There are so many dangers he must learn to cope with... will he suffer for my selfishness?"

McCoy waited, unsure how to answer; he had not expected such doubt from the Vulcan. At last he replied hesitantly.

"It's not for me to judge, Spock. I only know that if you hadn't... interfered, Jim would still be the Captain's possession, with nothing to look forward to but a life of physical and mental slavery. You freed him from that, gave him the chance to live again as he was meant to, to feel he had some worthwhile purpose in life. If he dies now, it will at least be as a man, not as a broken toy destroyed by a wilful child.

Yes, you might lose him again - there's no guarantee that you won't... but if it hadn't been for you, this Jim Kirk would never have lived. And you can't be sure, you know - remember that you are the Captain here, you decide what risks he'll take; and I'll back your judgement on that."

"Yes, I'd forgotten that aspect," Spock said slowly. "I still have much to teach him - perhaps this Jim Kirk will learn the value of reasoned thought over precipitate action; mine never did."

"Well," McCoy rose with a sigh. "You've got a ship to run, and I've got patients waiting. I still don't know what's going to come out of all this, Spock, but... good luck."

"I don't believe in luck," Spock said absently.

* * * * *

KIRK'S LOG - extracts

Captain Pike has been promoted. The new Captain is a Vulcan, Spock. Reports on him indicate he'll be good.

* * * *

He looks... I like him, and he is remarkably friendly; more so than I'd have expected from a Vulcan. Of course, McCoy says he is half Human.

* * * *

Mind meld - sounds interesting.

* * * *

We've tried the meld. Pleasant experience. I know now he does like me. Pleasant to have a friend at last.

* * * *

Tonight... he came to my cabin... Oh God! He is still melded to me...
And what I read in his mind... horrible...

* * * *

He has whips... He is so strong physically... He likes hurting me!...
If I submit to him... perhaps he'll be gentler...

* * * *

It doesn't work! I submit... yet he tortures me still, mercilessly...

* * * *

I hate and fear him now... and yet... I cannot forget how I was drawn
to him when I first saw him.

* * * *

Friendship - I've never known lasting friendship. Everyone I ever knew
... even my brother... When he left the orphanage, he forgot all about me.
I thought the Captain liked me, but he only wants my body. Oh, God...

* * * *

He leaves me so seldom alone... and yet I am so lonely...

* * * *

Scotty... Oh God, Scotty, please forgive me! I didn't know he meant to
kill you, I thought he only meant to make you forget...

* * * *

Will he never stop punishing me?

* * * *

Is it possible? The Commodore... will I waken to find that I was only
dreaming? And if I do... how can I be sure? They look so alike... but
Spock's eyes are kind...

* * * *

The Captain left a tape for me. How could he claim to love me yet treat
me as he did? I could have loved him... but he never wanted my love - only
my obedience.

* * * *

McCoy has been... very kind. I had almost forgotten how to laugh.

* * * *

I need never again fear physical abuse. I am ashamed that I could have
thought that Spock must want my body too. But he was so very understanding -
even appreciative of what he called my unselfishness. I would have done it
willingly - but thank God my offer was not needed.

* * * *

Spock is teaching me so much... including how to keep my mind my own.
How can he be so patient? He is the unselfish one, not I.

* * * *

I know at last what friendship can be. I can feel sorry now for the
Captain, for he also could have known it, if he had not been so ashamed of
what he considered a weakness. The friendship I now share with Spock is more
satisfying than I could ever have imagined. To know there is someone I can
depend on without question, who in turn depends on me - it is what I dreamed
of all my life, yet never dared hope for.

Now I know what happiness is.

* * * * *

PART III

The Enterprise still maintained a steady Warp Six as she fled Klingon space en route to her recently arranged rendezvous with the U.S.S. Potempkin. The readings that the sensors had picked up several days previously had faded again, and although Spock maintained an unceasing watch, he had begun to relax a little. Soon - within twenty-four hours, in fact - they would meet the Potempkin and pass on the mindsifter - that hellish contrivance the Klingons had developed to probe a man's mind. Even having it on board made Spock irrationally nervous; he remembered only too well its effects. He would be glad when the Federation's top scientists had it; perhaps then a satisfactory defence could be found against it - even an eventual cure for those unfortunates left mindless and insane as a result of having it used against them.

The Enterprise's mission thereafter was simple - to continue on course as if they were taking the mindsifter to Starfleet Headquarters, while in fact the Potempkin was taking it to Vulcan...

Spock allowed his mind to wander back over the past few days with a satisfaction he was barely able to conceal. His only regret now was that he had chosen not to force that particular issue weeks before, but he had thought it better to delay; at first it had seemed sensible to try to build up Kirk's confidence naturally, for Spock had not realised - not fully - just how completely Kirk had been conditioned to unthinking obedience; then his response to an apparently innocuous situation had thoroughly shaken Spock, who had been forced to act, as he thought, prematurely, yet the change in Kirk since that healing meld was... unbelievable.

That the crew was puzzled by Kirk's completely altered habits, both men knew; that the men had noticed a change in Spock himself he also knew. The Captain had associated with his officers barely more frequently than he had permitted Kirk to do, and now both were mixing freely, even although they found themselves, almost instinctively, turning to each other more than to anyone else. The curiosity was something they could do nothing about; fortunately no-one dared voice it. McCoy, when asked - which was inevitable in view of his part in helping Kirk to associate with the other young officers - claimed ignorance. In time, with the luck that Spock maintained he didn't believe in, the crew would forget that at one time the Captain and First Officer had chosen not to mix with the rest of the crew.

What pleased Spock most was that Kirk was now taking an active part in discussions, putting forward tentative personal opinions instead of supporting whatever view Spock held; the evening before, he had, for the first time, initiated a discussion. His premise had been a little shaky, but Spock treated it seriously, welcoming the Human's growing self-confidence and determined that he would say nothing to undermine it.

Spock glanced round now at his First Officer, noting with approval Kirk's steady and systematic check of his board. After a moment, Kirk seemed to become aware of being watched; he looked towards the command chair, smiled, then turned his attention back to the scanner. He adjusted it slightly, then straightened.

"Picking up an object at extreme range, Captain; dead ahead."

"Full magnification," Spock ordered.

It didn't help much. One of the stars became a little brighter, no more.

Spock studied the screen carefully. "A ship, Mr. Kirk?"

Kirk adjusted the scanner again. "It seems to be, Captain... but I can make out no identifying details. There's nothing in the computer banks that matches it." He bent over his instruments once more, glad, for the... how manyth? time that he was no longer speaking to Captain Spock, who had never considered lack of data an acceptable excuse - at least, not from him.

Certainly he had not punished for it... but he had made his dissatisfaction abundantly clear. "I'm sorry, Captain - I can give you no further information as yet."

He sounded a little subdued; ungoaded by fear, he sought to give Spock a deeper allegiance and even more efficient information than he had ever given the Captain, and he hated the thought of failing him.

"Don't let it worry you, Mr. Kirk," Spock replied easily. "We will soon be close enough to communicate. We should soon discover who they are. Mr. Sulu - maintain full shielding. We would be foolish to take any chances."

"Shields on full, sir." Sulu sounded a little doubtful; the ship lying there looked completely dead.

They were now close enough to study the design. It was wholly alien; it bore no resemblance to any known ship in this universe, Spock knew, otherwise Kirk would have identified it; nor was it like any ship he knew from his own universe.

It was long, vaguely rocket-shaped, and had four nacelles situated, two above and two beneath, projecting to right and left of the hull. There was no sign of any viewing ports; the main hull appeared to be completely unbroken. It hung motionless, and apparently lifeless.

Uhura glanced up sharply. "Picking up a signal, sir... it's weak... audio only."

"Put it on the main speaker, Lieutenant."

"... help us! We had an accident, an explosion in our engine room... many circuits inoperative, others only partially working. Alien vessel, can you help us?"

"Open a channel, Lieutenant... Can you give us any estimate of the damage to your engine room?"

"No... our engineers were all killed. There is a radiation leak... Only an engineer would be able to examine the damage quickly enough to avoid prolonged exposure... "

"It might be possible. I will discuss it with my engineering staff and contact you." Spock gestured, and Uhura cut transmission. "Mr. Sulu, you have the con," he continued. "Lieutenant, tell Dr. McCoy to meet me in the briefing room. Mr. Kirk..."

Kirk followed him into the elevator.

In the privacy of the moving car, Spock asked quietly, "What do you think, Jim?"

The Human frowned, considering. In a duty situation, he had never had any difficulty in functioning... but somehow personal considerations seemed to be demanding his attention here, confusing him. He gathered his thoughts as Spock had so recently taught him.

"I don't like it," he said at last.

"Why not?"

"There's no real reason... just... I don't like it." The elevator door opened.

They headed along the corridor. "Indeed. Your opinion tallies with mine. I also, for no real reason, am... doubtful. It is strange that this vessel should be lying directly in our path... an alien vessel, a long way from unknown territory. Yet, on the face of it, their plight is genuine... and they have admitted that the situation will be dangerous for us to examine their damage... "

Kirk nodded. "There's no sign of an operable power source aboard that vessel, and definite indications of abnormal radiation. Yet... the sensors didn't pick up life form readings, Spock, and they should have done."

"Interesting... but it could, I suppose, be a life form of a type completely unknown to us and therefore not keyed to our sensors."

Kirk nodded doubtfully. "At least the fact of living beings should have shown up," he suggested, realising even as he did so that once he would not have dared to make even that much objection to the Captain's opinions, even in a duty situation.

Spock's memory slid back many years. "Hortas."

"Huh?"

The Vulcan looked at Kirk's blank expression. "Interesting. You have not visited Janus 6?"

Kirk shook his head. "There's no such place... in this universe."

Spock's eyebrows shot up. "In mine... Janus 6 was a mining planet. We were called in because men were dying in mysterious circumstances. It turned out that there was a native life form there, based on silicon. But because the tricorders were all attuned to carbon-based life forms, the place showed up as uninhabited."

"I see... I wonder what other variations we will find existing between our two universes."

Any answer Spock might have made was lost as they turned into the briefing room. McCoy was already there; it was clear from his face that he already knew the situation.

"What are you going to do, Spock?" he asked bluntly. "These people need help, but we've no engineer capable of coping with the situation."

Kirk and Spock looked at each other. McCoy, it was clear, had no doubts.

"I have been considering that point," Spock conceded. "Jim, you still know the abilities of the engineering staff better than I do; is any one of them competent to deal with an emergency of this nature?"

Kirk shook his head. "No," he said positively. "You know what it can be like on a well-run ship - or were things different in your universe?"

"Probably not," Spock said drily. He could guess at what was coming.

"The Chief of Department trains up his crew the way he wants them until they fit his level of efficiency - and they're promptly promoted away. That happened in Engineering just before we left on this last mission - we weren't really meant to go that far into Klingon space. I don't know why the Captain took the chance - normally he didn't stick his neck out like that - except that he was desperate for recognition, and knew that if his gamble paid off he would gain more prestige. Anyway, Scotty had a pretty inexperienced crew, a lot of them straight from training. Acting Chief Kyle is really the Transporter Chief - he just happened to be the most experienced man available after Scotty... died."

"So there is definitely no engineer available."

"No. But Spock - as Science Officer, I'm qualified. I could go - "

"No!"

For a startled moment Spock found himself unable to think beyond the possible danger to Kirk from the radiation. Then he forced control on himself. "I also am a trained Science Officer, Jim; I am as qualified as you to go."

"Spock, you're the Captain now; your place is here." In Kirk's mind also was awareness of the danger, but he knew better than to mention it. "I

am the ship's Science Officer; it is more my duty to go than yours."

"I was the Science Officer in my own universe," Spock reiterated. "I am as competent in that field as you." Probably more competent, his thought continued, for I am many years your senior... more years your senior than my own Jim Kirk's. Strange that you should be so much younger. But it was a thought that he could not - would not - utter, for it might damage Jim's growing self-confidence. Time enough for such honesty when Jim's personality had fully reintegrated.

"You haven't served as a Science Officer for years, Spock," Kirk protested, more aware of the length of time since his counterpart died than Spock had realised. "And besides, the technology in the two universes must be slightly different - "

"Since this is an alien vessel, differences between their technology and the Federation's will inevitably exist," Spock pointed out.

McCoy looked from one to the other, suddenly aware that this had become personal. Each man wanted the other to remain in the safety of the Enterprise. It was not his place to interfere, of course, but he hoped that Spock was realising this new development in Kirk's thinking.

"It wouldn't be as different as that between your universe and this one," Kirk was protesting.

"It might prove to be very similar to mine," Spock replied. "Besides, there is another consideration, Jim; as a Vulcan, I can tolerate longer exposure to radiation because of Vulcan climatic conditions. You would succumb to the effects much more rapidly. For the sake of the aliens, Mr. Kirk, since we are equally qualified, I will go."

Kirk knew that Spock's return to formality meant a command decision; normally he would never have argued with the Captain's decision, whatever it was, but his growing affection for this man compelled him to protest.

"Spock, the Captain is the last man who should go! Besides, while I'm quite sure I could cope with the situation over there, I'm not so sure that - "

"Jim, I have every confidence in your ability to handle any situation that might arise," Spock cut in, gently but firmly. McCoy found himself relaxing slightly. Even in the face of the implied insubordination, Spock had been considerate of Kirk's growing independence.

The Vulcan paused long enough to make sure that Kirk was not going to reply, then turned to McCoy.

"Radiation, Doctor; have you monitored that vessel?"

McCoy shook his head. "There seemed no need to, at first; you called me down here before I'd time to see to it, once I realised it would be necessary."

"Would you check it, please. I need to know how much - or how little - exposure you consider advisable."

"I won't be long."

As McCoy left, Spock looked back at Kirk. The Human was watching him intently.

"Jim?"

"Be careful, Spock - please."

* * * *

Kirk waited in the command chair, tense, unrelaxed. He tried to loosen his taut muscles, but in vain; anxiety for Spock was uppermost in his mind, and it translated itself into bodily tension.

Strange, he thought, almost detachedly. He had never felt like this in

his life before. Certainly he had been concerned for McCoy's safety, in the days when Captain Spock ruled his life, but he had never before experienced this degree of worry for anyone. It told him, as nothing else had, how important Commodore Spock had become in his life. In setting him free, the Commodore had bound him far more securely than the Captain's cruelty had ever done.

Radiation. An hour, McCoy had estimated. No more. Kirk guessed that in fact McCoy had allowed a safety margin, probably a generous one, but even so; too much exposure would kill. Slowly, but inevitably. The thought terrified Kirk.

It seemed that he had never before known anyone who could make him forget the neglect he had suffered in his childhood years. At his first meeting with the Captain, he had dared to believe that he had at last met someone who was interested in him, someone to whom he was important. That belief had been cruelly shattered - but now he knew, beyond doubting, that that juvenile dream, which had seemed so impossible of realisation, had finally come true; miraculous as it still seemed, he now had a friend who truly cared for him, and to whom he could give all the affection that had remained unexpressed for so many interminable years. And now...

It would have been easier to face such a death himself. To see Spock failing, watch him growing steadily weaker until he was forced to resign through ill-health, watch him dying, knowing he could do nothing; to be alone again, compelled to leave his great debt unpaid... though how he could even begin to pay it was beyond his understanding... No. Fate could not be so cruel. Surely fate could not be so cruel!

The depressing thought was terminated by Uhura. "The alien commander is making contact, Mr. Kirk... visual."

Visual! There hadn't been time...

"On the main screen, Lieutenant." Was that really his voice, so calm and steady?

The stars on the screen shivered out, to be replaced by an image that sent a cold chill down Kirk's spine. A gloating face leered out at him...

"Klingon!"

Kirk had no idea who had spoken. He was too busy trying to conceal his immediate reaction. He had thought he was already as tense as it was possible to be; the sight of the Klingon commander proved him wrong. More muscles contracted involuntarily, and he fought to keep his face expressionless.

The picture on the screen widened, showing more of the Klingon's surroundings. He was waiting in a bare room; for a moment Kirk wondered why, then realised that the Klingons had no intention of letting any Federation personnel see any details of the internal design of the new ship.

The door behind the commander slid open, and Spock was hustled in, held between two Klingon guards who held his arms twisted viciously behind his back so that he was unable to struggle. A third Klingon entered with them; a huge, brawny, heavy muscleman. There was a bruise already showing on the Vulcan's cheek, and a trickle of green blood from his lip. There could be little doubt how he had come by the injuries.

The Klingon commander smiled from his chair - a sneering, gloating, confident smile.

"You have something we want, Commander," he said silkily. The assumed softness in his voice reminded Kirk of Captain Spock; he had to fight the instinctive urge to reply,

"Yes, sir."

Kirk summoned all the control Spock had so recently taught him. "Do we?"

He managed to keep his voice light, although he never, then or later, knew just how he managed.

"We offer a trade," the Klingon went on. "Your Captain - in exchange for a box... a little box that we know you found on a wrecked Klingon ship. It has no great importance, you understand, but it is of value to us... If you give us that little box, we will return your Captain unharmed."

"And if we refuse?" Kirk already knew the answer; and he also knew that whether they agreed or not, the Klingons would never let them go. Not without a fight; and they would most certainly not release Spock. Vulcans rarely fell into Klingon hands; they would want to try out the mindsifter on Spock, and...

The Klingon commander moved a hand slightly. The waiting guard immediately sent a fist crashing into Spock's stomach. The Vulcan jerked under the force of the blow, and Kirk winced inwardly in sympathy; he had experienced too many such blows himself not to know exactly which nerves suffered. The blow was followed by a second, low to the abdomen, then a third. They were vicious punches, but Spock uttered no sound.

"Well, Commander?" The Klingon sounded confident. "You realize, of course, that I have given you only a brief preview of the attentions your Captain will enjoy in our interrogation room. Karez is extremely skilled at extracting information from the ignorant, and he enjoys his work. Unfortunately, his methods do tend to leave his guests... er... slightly damaged. He has had no previous opportunity to test his methods on a Vulcan; he is most anxious to discover if his studies of the Vulcan nervous system have been sufficiently comprehensive."

Long years of exposure to sadistic treatment told Kirk something of what the Vulcan would suffer; the Captain had of necessity had to stop short of inflicting permanent and disabling damage - the Klingon would have no such restrictions. The nightmare vision of radiation poisoning faded, obliterated by this hideous reality; a Spock mutilated for life - even though that life might be very short. Kirk knew of Vulcan stamina; as a race, Vulcans had a much greater tolerance of pain than Humans, although they suffered as greatly during the inflicting of it. Spock would suffer agonies for a hellishly long time before merciful unconsciousness released him. The old sick dread of deliberately inflicted physical pain rose fresh in his mind - no longer directed inwardly, but aimed directly at Spock... his friend.

Kirk continued to stare at the screen for some moments. He had no choice; duty compelled him. Whatever happened, he could not surrender the mindsifter. But... equally impossible to abandon Spock to torture...

Once more he fought for the mental control so recently learned. How was it possible to reconcile the two opposing requirements? An idea began to form. For a moment, he considered rejecting it; the Captain had always said he lied very badly. But there was no other way that he could see, and with the possibility of Spock's safety dependent on this lie, he might just manage to pull it off.

Suddenly glad of the years of torment he had suffered under the Captain, he forced himself to smile, deliberately thinking back to the Captain's treatment of him and pretending to himself that in fact it was the Captain who stood there, a helpless prisoner, about to experience the pain he had so delighted to inflict.

"Do you really think it matters to me what happens to a Vulcan?" he asked. He did not have to force hatred into his voice; it was there, full measure, as he considered the Klingons. "I hate him, Commander. Do what you like to him. I don't care."

The Klingon's face showed a degree of surprise; Kirk noted it subconsciously. Were the Klingons so sure of Human weakness, then? The

commander gestured again, and Spock again jerked to the vicious blows that rained on him. A second trickle of blood appeared on his face; a grunt escaped him as the air was driven from his lungs by a jabbing knee and as he fought for breath he was handicapped by further merciless punches.

Kirk writhed with him; so many of the blows mirrored ones he had been given over the years. But he knew that the Klingon was watching him closely; he continued to smile, imitating as best he could the sadistic expression that Captain Spock had worn so often. Abruptly the Klingon swung round.

"Take the Vulcan to the interrogation room," he snarled.

"You are going to let me watch what you do to him, aren't you, commander?" Kirk managed to sound expectant.

The Klingon looked at him with an expression of utter disgust, and as Spock was dragged out, the picture faded. Kirk knew then that he had won.

He shivered, becoming aware of the horrified stares of the bridge crew, even as his assumed expression faded.

"Mr. Chekov, scan the Klingon for Vulcan readings - I imagine they won't activate whatever they used to make themselves look dead again, so you should be able to find the Captain all right. Lt. Uhura, when will the Potempkin reach us?"

"The Potempkin should be here within the hour, Mr. Kirk."

"At a guess, the Klingon doesn't know about our rendezvous or he wouldn't have waylaid us here... Chekov, haven't you found the Captain yet?"

* * * *

It seemed an age before the navigator raised his head. "Got him, sir."

"Give the co-ordinates to the transporter room." Kirk mentally blessed the recent development in transporter technology that now let them use the transporter even when the shields were up. Without that, it would have been impossible to retrieve Spock. "Uhura, tell Dr. McCoy to report to the transporter room to check the Captain's condition. Chekov, any sign of life from the Klingon?"

"No, Mr. Kirk. He's just sitting there."

Kirk thought about it. It was possible that the Klingon commander had been so sure his threat would work that he had no other plan ready; besides, he probably had orders to retrieve the mindsifter undamaged if possible. He might yet attack, but only as a last resort.

"Let me know if they make any move," he said. He guessed that the commander, having seen Sulu's expression, Chekov's, Uhura's, was probably now believing that the Enterprise's lack of action was due to his, Kirk's, attention being occupied with enforcing his authority over officers who disagreed with his actions... Let the Klingons think that the Enterprise was already half defeated by internal strife. Every minute that passed brought the Potempkin nearer; with two Starships against him, the Klingon might be captured; and that was well worth the present risk to their ship.

* * * *

McCoy sprang forward as Spock materialised. At first it appeared as if his assistance was unnecessary; then he saw the involuntary, almost unnoticeable spasm of pain that passed across the Vulcan's face as he moved.

"Hold still, Spock."

This McCoy was so like his own, Spock reflected, always concerned, always fussing... but still, it would be a relief to know that the Klingons had not caused any severe internal injury. He hoped Kirk hadn't seen the vicious kick

they gave him as they dragged him out of the door...

The diagnostic scanner chuckled to itself; McCoy's relief was plain to see as he said, "I realise that for the moment you'll want to resume command, but the minute you've delivered the mindsifter to the Potempkin - she's nearly here - I'll want you down in sickbay. I can't find anything other than deep-seated bruising, but this little toy isn't quite as accurate as the sickbay scanners and I want to give you a full checkup before you're much older. You'll need to take it easy for a few days, too; it'll hurt every time you move."

"I know, Doctor." He headed for the door, McCoy at his heels.

* * * *

Kirk relaxed slightly as the transporter room reported Spock safely aboard, but he was still aware of tension. Spock had been unfailingly kind, extremely understanding, unfalteringly patient... but...

Although Spock had freed Kirk's mind from the conditioned bondage caused by years of being forced to submit to the sadistic Captain, one minor area had somehow remained untreated... the memory of the times when the Captain had pretended to let him go free - and then punished him for it, for not willingly offering himself for the Captain's further indulgence. Kirk could recognise now that at least part of the Captain's trouble had been caused by utter insecurity, even although he had appeared to be so confident and strong. He had undoubtedly needed the emotional prop of having someone tied to him no matter what he did. That being so, he would never have understood Kirk's apparent betrayal. And the knowledge influenced Kirk's mind as he waited for Spock to come to the bridge, until he found himself thinking - could he expect Spock to understand what he had done? Why he had done it?

He tried to push the growing fear from his mind... but he was also influenced by the knowledge that he had, in fact, betrayed the Captain. Spock would remember that too... Kirk began to worry that Spock would see his behaviour as a subconscious desire to be revenged for the torment and humiliation the Captain had heaped on him - a revenge directed at the man who so closely resembled his torturer. Even Spock's apparently unbounded compassion must have its limits, and battered by the shock of his capture and the strain of concealing the pain the Klingon interrogator was inflicting, Spock's perceptions must have been dulled. He would surely remember only how Kirk had appeared to enjoy watching him suffer, insisting that he hated the Vulcan, and assume from that that Kirk was finding satisfaction in his suffering as proxy for the Captain.

Kirk remembered too, with painful clarity, several occasions when his trust had been betrayed. He remembered his parents, who had deserted their children so that they had been brought up in an orphanage. There had been caring there - of a sort - but none of the intimate personal caring that his parents had given until that day when they had mysteriously walked out, never to return. Nor had they ever been traced; the orphanage lawyers had eventually taken the matter to court, and they had been declared dead. His share of the money they had left banked had enabled him to stay on at school long enough to obtain the scholarship that took him to Starfleet Academy.

He remembered his brother Sam, who had promised to send for him as soon as possible after he left the orphanage, but who never did. There had been one letter from him which stated with brutal clarity that there was no place in his brother's life for an unwanted burden. Kirk had never heard from him again, and had slowly realised that Sam had never meant to keep a promise made sobely to shut up the homesick sobbing of his young brother in these early orphanage days. Sam vanished, so completely that his share of their inheritance remained untouched, and it was doubtful if he even knew of it.

At the Academy, he had not been popular. Knowing how hard he must work

to keep his scholarship, Kirk had avoided the usual recreations of the other students so that they considered him conceited. He had retreated further into himself, devoting himself to his work. Gary Mitchell alone of all the students had shown friendship; but when Mitchell left, he had made no attempt to keep in touch. At least, though, he had made no promises.

Finally, there was the Captain, who had claimed him - but only to use him.

He had lost everyone he had ever cared for. One or two, like Scotty, had died; but the others... what was there about him that made them desert him? His basic nature must lack something... was this it? Did they realise that he might betray them? Had the Captain seen into the future and known that he would be betrayed? Was that why he had been so possessive, trying to keep him from turning to anyone else?

How could he expect Spock, alone of them all, to understand? Spock had a model, a perfect James Kirk, as a comparison. He would compare them and certainly find the living Kirk wanting...

Behind Kirk, the elevator door slid open, interrupting his brooding. He glanced round, then quickly looked away again as he moved to his own station. The comfort of realising that Spock was apparently uninjured after all nearly broke Kirk's fragile self control; he wanted to throw his arms round the Vulcan in relief and abandon his responsibilities to Spock's capable hands; but the situation was still too serious for that. He could not fail Spock in this as well. He dared not even look too closely at the Vulcan in case he broke down. As he turned away, however, he risked one more glance - in time to see a flicker of... something... pass over Spock's face. Disillusion? Afraid of the possible hurt and rejection that he did not want to see in Spock's eyes, Kirk carefully avoided looking towards the command chair again.

A blip in his sensor caught his attention. He flicked switches.

"The Potempkin has just entered scanning range, sir," he reported tensely. "The Klingon doesn't seem to have - " His voice broke off as the ship shook under the Klingon's attack.

"Damage?" Spock asked. His voice was a little strained.

"Nothing - all shields holding."

"Mr. Sulu - phasers one and two. Fire."

"Firing, sir." The phaser beams impacted on the Klingon's sides.

"No detectable damage," Kirk reported.

"Phasers three and four, Mr. Sulu."

"Firing, sir."

"No damage," Kirk reported again. "They - " The Enterprise shook as the Klingon's phasers connected. "All shields holding... The Klingon is veering off."

"Mr. Sulu - keep the Klingon between us and the Potempkin," Spock ordered.

The Enterprise swung gracefully round. The Potempkin was very near now...

There was a brilliant flash of light on the screen; as it dimmed, Kirk said quietly, "The Klingon has self-destructed."

"Two to one," Spock said tightly. "They knew they had little chance of escape - and they could not let a new design of ship fall into Federation hands."

"Captain Shevas making contact, sir," Uhura announced.

"On audio, Lieutenant."

The antennae face of the Potempkin's Andorian captain appeared on the screen. "What was all that about, Spock?"

"Klingons, Shevas. They desired our cargo. I will bring it straight over to you. Mr. Kirk, you have the con; and I would like a word with you in my quarters when you come off duty." His voice was quietly formal.

Kirk had managed to relax a little during the battle as Spock had given no indication of his thoughts; now an unpleasantly familiar, hard knot of tension formed in his belly.

"Yes, Captain."

* * * *

Shortly after, McCoy called the bridge. "Is the Captain there?"

"No, Doctor," Uhura replied. "He said he'd be going to his quarters when he came back from the Potemlin. He'll be there now."

"I don't like making house calls. I told that stubborn Vulcan..." The intercom clicked off. McCoy's voice also sounded a little strained although it was clear he was only muttering to himself.

In the command chair, Kirk stiffened. Why should McCoy want to see Spock now? It could only mean that the Vulcan was more seriously hurt than had been obvious. There was no way he could find out, either, except by waiting until he went off duty and obeyed Spock's summons.

As it happened, Kirk was late going off duty. A series of minor problems delayed him, and as the minutes ticked by he became more and more edgy, thinking of the Vulcan waiting for him. At least he knew he need no longer fear physical punishment - but why had Spock, for the first time, chosen to see Kirk in the privacy of his cabin? Fear of rejection rose stronger. Spock was a good commander; he would do nothing to undermine Kirk's position on board, but did he want the privacy to tell Kirk clearly that he could no longer trust him?

Perhaps... perhaps he could offer to let Spock read his mind? - and he would experience once more the wonder of that marvellous closeness. Or would the Vulcan reject that too, in utter revulsion? Kirk could hear his own voice only too clearly - 'I hate him, commander.' Even the Klingon had been disgusted by his attitude...

At last Kirk was able to turn command over to Sulu and head for Spock's quarters. He left the elevator and walked slowly down the corridor. He hesitated at the door, as he had hesitated so often in the past, aware that he had never thought to be so reluctant to enter this Vulcan's presence. If Spock rejected him now...

He took a deep breath, and pressed the buzzer.

"Come."

At least McCoy had not rushed Spock off to sickbay. That fear, at least, was banished.

Moving very stiffly, Kirk entered, and crossed the room to stand to attention at Spock's desk, staring straight ahead in textbook military style.

"Jim?"

He looked then at Spock's face. Relief washed over him as he realised how utterly stupid his fears had been. He gripped the desk to steady himself as his knees threatened to give way under him.

Spock moved too quickly, and pain showed momentarily on his face as he rounded the desk. Kirk caught his arms anxiously.

"How badly did they hurt you?"

Spock shook his head. "Some deep-seated bruising, no more; McCoy said, nothing serious. Although it would have been, but for your quick thinking, Jim."

"I didn't dare hope that you would understand," Kirk said tremulously.

"Understand?" Spock said. A trace of hurt and desolation showed for a moment deep in his eyes. "How could you fail to understand that I trust you completely?" He hesitated, then went on. "Had our positions been reversed... I hope I would have had the courage to act as you did, my friend." His voice shook. "But I don't think I would have been able to hide my fear for you, Jim... or been able to face the possibility of being left alone again..."

"The danger of that always exists," Kirk said slowly. "I never really realised it before. With... him... it didn't matter, I would have been glad to see him go. At first, with you... it was enough to be free of fear. Then you taught me so much... I was grateful, and I liked you, but I never realised until today that... that..."

"Yes?"

"I learned today... how you must have felt... when your Jim Kirk died."

Spock was silent for a moment. "I promised not to let anything hurt you," he said at last. "I didn't lie to you, Jim - at least, not deliberately. But... there are some things I can't protect you from. Not now. Because now... you are truly able to stand on your own feet, and make your own decisions. You are, perhaps, not quite as you would have been had you never known the Captain, but you have very little way to go."

"Your promise served its purpose, Spock," Kirk replied seriously.

The Vulcan nodded. Then he added, "I can still say that I won't let anything hurt you if I can prevent it."

"I can say the same, now, Spock. You've finally given me the strength, the confidence, to stop being dependent on you." He took a deep, relieved breath. "I'm not afraid any more of being hurt. I can face even that at last."

They fell silent then, an easy, comfortable silence as they looked at each other, Kirk fully aware for the first time of the strength that was in him, a strength that he knew would always be at Spock's disposal; Spock content that he had finally succeeded in rehabilitating the Human, knowing that he had at last found the friend he had been missing for so long. He would never forget the man whose picture sat beside his bed; but the pain of that loss was suddenly no longer so sharp, and he knew that the living Kirk would blunt what was left even more.

His lips curved slightly. Kirk returned the smile, then indicated the harp. "I'd like to hear you play."

The Vulcan lifted the harp; they settled comfortably, and Spock began to play.

* * * * *

PERSONAL LOG - Commodore Spock

At last the years of loneliness are over; as is the torment of the last few weeks when I was forced still to see how nearly broken Jim's spirit was. Today, circumstances completed his rehabilitation.

I need no longer fear that Jim will allow impetuosity to overcome his judgement; his actions today have shown me that. In the other universe, Jim would have attacked the Klingon - which would have led to many deaths and would certainly not have ensured my safety as effectively.

I look forward to the future with confidence. I know that Jim will remain at my side, as I would have remained at his in the other universe. Here, Jim is the stronger for surviving all those years of suffering; and I appreciate him all the more for the years of being without him.

We cannot know what the future will hold for us, but this I do know; the bond that holds us, that held in every universe I observed, that held even here, twisted though it was by the Captain's inability to perceive its value and inevitability, that has drawn us together even through the barrier that separates the universes, must have a purpose, little though I can understand what that purpose might be.

Jim's death in the other universe frustrated its fulfillment there; the Captain's sadism in this universe, reducing it to a meaningless physical tie, frustrated it here.

Although all my equipment was destroyed, I could rebuild it; Jim and I, now, may in time be able to fulfil the purpose for both our universes. But for the moment we must wait, secure in our friendship, until that purpose is revealed.

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