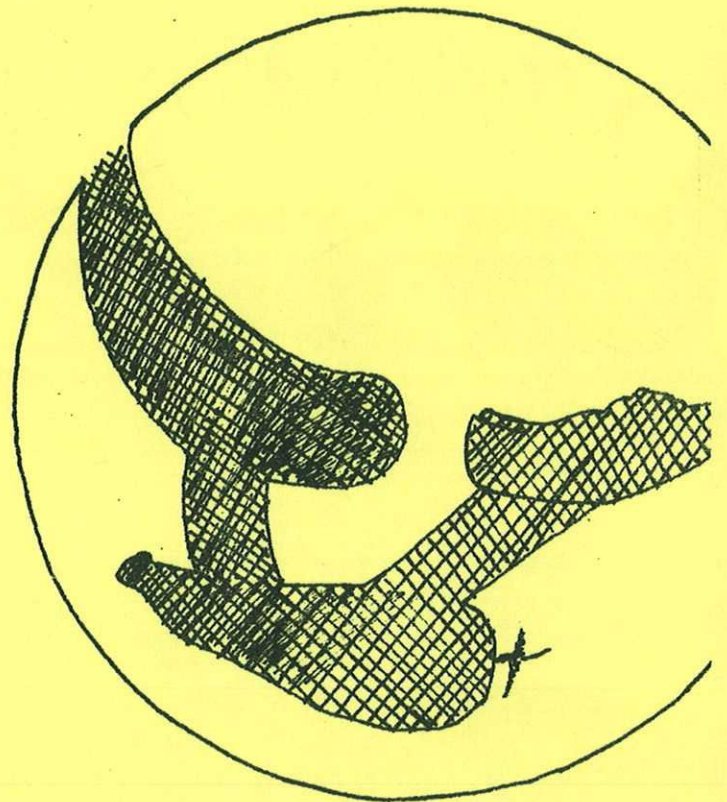


VARIATIONS

ON A THEME 2



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VARIATIONS ON A THEME 2

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June 1978

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 this 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; and feeling that he would probably continue his search, outlined our speculations as to the course of that quest in 'Variations on a Theme'.

This presented a universe in which Captain Spock was a probably insane sadist who failed to adjust to his Human heritage, and who shows his contempt for Humans by his vicious treatment of his First Officer, Commander James T. Kirk.

During Commodore Spock's attempt to rescue the Human the Captain is killed, and to conceal this the Commodore assumes the Captain's place. The rest of the story concerns the rehabilitation of the almost broken-spirited Kirk.

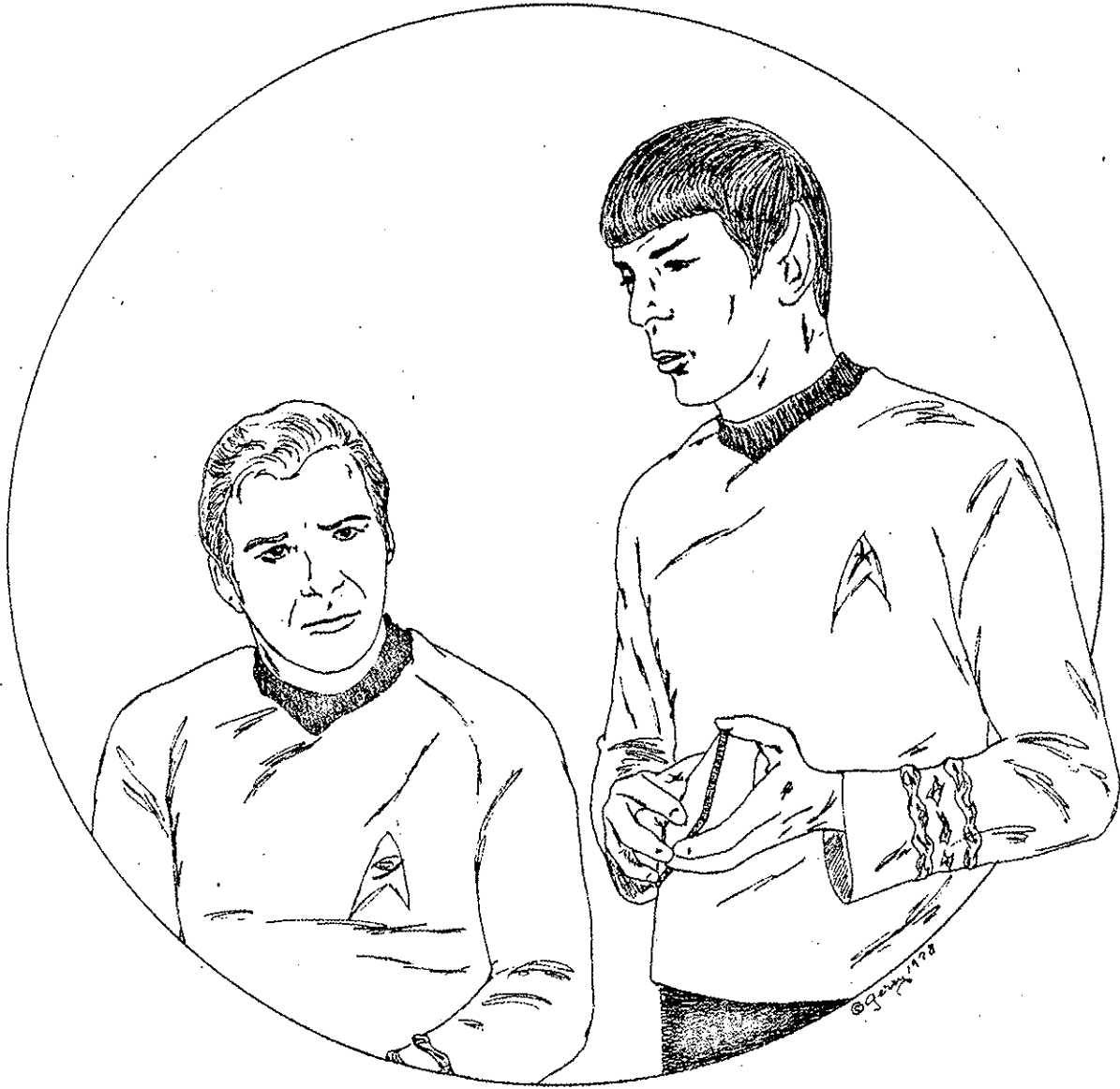
The world of the Enterprise has accepted the Commodore without suspicion, but we realised that there would be other problems for Spock and Kirk to overcome. This story deals with two of those problems.

We wish to repeat that this is very much an Alternate Universe story.

We would like to thank Gerry Downes for taking time from the production of her own new current zine, *stardate Unknown 4*, to do the illustrations for *Variations on a Theme 2*.

Valerie

Sheld



VARIATIONS ON A THEME 2

PART I - VULCAN

Commander James Kirk, First Officer of the U.S.S. Enterprise, sat in his cabin half reading a book. The other half of his mind was occupied in considering just why this best-selling novel by one of Earth's most popular authors was failing to hold his attention.

It lacked depth, he decided; it lacked originality. He had read dozens of books that followed much the same plot, demanding nothing of the reader's intellect; currently, he was wading through the statutory syrupy love-scene that left him unmoved... No. Not quite unmoved - puzzled. He knew that sex was supposed to be enjoyable, although his own experience of it had not been in any way pleasant - he had known discomfort at best, acute pain at worst, and felt no desire to indulge vicariously in the pastime. He gave up on the repetitive description that left nothing to the imagination and scanned rapidly on, hoping to come to some decent action. The buzz at the door was a welcome interruption.

"Come."

Kirk smiled a still shy welcome as Spock entered. Despite the security and peace of mind that the Vulcan had given him, he still found it impossible to take for granted the friendship that this man from another universe lavished on him.

Spock's rigidly calm expression lightened for a moment in response; Kirk stiffened, his smile fading. "What's wrong, Spock?"

The Vulcan smiled ruefully. "Is it so obvious?"

"It is to me. What is it?"

Wordlessly, Spock held out a tape. Kirk took it, and with a further concerned glance at the Vulcan, slipped it into the viewer. Admiral Fitzgerald's face appeared on the screen.

At first it seemed to be merely a commendation for a mission successfully completed, and Kirk's disquiet grew; if such a commendation was worrying Spock - and then his attention was caught fully.

"... and so the Enterprise is ordered to Vulcan, where the Vulcan Scientific Legion of Honour will be awarded to you. Shore leave for the crew will follow, and your new crew members will join the ship. Fitzgerald, Admiral Starfleet, out."

"Congratulations, Spock!"

"I didn't earn that award, Jim - the Captain did."

"You deserve it - you got the Mindsifter back safely. And you gave them the added information on it that you said we researched."

Spock smiled again, an odd expression in his eyes. "Whether I deserve it or not, Jim, you've missed the point of that message."

"Missed... " Kirk frowned. "Oh lord, of course - Vulcan!"

"Exactly, Jim. How many casual acquaintances did the Captain have there, whose names were not even in his personal log? What was his relationship with his parents? Was his home even the same as mine? Each universe has its differences, but so far these differences have not caused me too many problems. This time, however... Do you know how the Captain and his parents related to each other, Jim? Must I visit them, or will they not expect it of me?"

Kirk considered. "Well, for a start, there's only Sarek and T'Pol. Amanda - the Captain's blood-mother - died in childbirth - a very difficult second pregnancy, I gathered, from the little the Captain said. The child died too."

Spock frowned. "Partly consistent with my universe - my mother's second pregnancy had to be terminated to save her life - there was no way the unborn child

could have been saved - and she was then unable to conceive again. The genetic differences between the two races... there were antibodies in her blood as a result of the first pregnancy."

"But your blood-mother lived."

"Yes. Amanda's death in this universe may have contributed to the Captain's ... maladjustment."

"It's possible," Kirk admitted. Time had enabled him to consider the Captain's behaviour with reasonable objectivity. "With no-one Human around to help his developing Human side... yes, it's possible."

"Jim, twice now you referred to Amanda as his 'blood-mother'," Spock went on. "Is there any particular reason for this? It is a term I do not know."

"Well, that was what the Captain called her, and he always referred to T'Pau as his mother," Kirk said. "Though of course, she'd actually be his foster mother."

"Not 'grandmother'?" Spock asked.

"No - T'Pau is married to Sarek. The Captain was a little vague about it, but as far as I can tell, Vulcans are allowed two wives because of the violence of the mating fever. The first wife is the main one, and the husband only marries the second wife once the main one is pregnant because... well, she wouldn't be in a fit state to... to satisfy him without endangering the unborn child."

"Fascinating. In my universe, the mating fever comes only once in several years - the time varies from individual to individual. T'Pau... was my grandmother. And what of Sarek, Jim? What do you know of him?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. I've met him, of course - the Captain took me to Vulcan with him on leave once. I hoped he'd leave me on the ship, but he didn't ... although he didn't touch me while we were there. When we got back to the ship... he made up for it." The memory of pain and humiliation showed deep in his eyes for a moment, and Spock realised afresh that the memory would never really fade. Kirk could control the recollection, prevent it from disturbing him for most of the time, but the horror was something he would never quite forget.

Kirk shook his head abruptly, as if to force the memory from his consciousness. "Sarek had not approved of the Captain joining Starfleet, but he did become reconciled; success and rapid promotion were contributing factors, I think."

"Ah. My father did not speak to me for eighteen years."

"There wasn't that much breach here, if any - just the disapproval and an attitude of 'Well, it's your life - if you want to join Starfleet do, but don't come looking for sympathy if it's the wrong choice', followed by 'Well, it seems you chose right after all'."

"Did Sarek give any indication of wondering what the Captain did about the mating urge?"

"Not in front of me."

Spock frowned slightly in thought. "I wonder what - if anything - he told his father? It would not do for me to be inconsistent... What of siblings? Is there an older half-sister?"

"Not that I know of."

"Interesting. I have one; so did the Commander. No younger ones?"

"No. At least - there might be," Kirk said unhappily. "I don't know of any, but that doesn't automatically mean that there are none."

Spock sighed. "This visit which it seems I must make... will not be easy. Jim, will you accompany me? I would not ask it of you, but your presence, since you were there before, might help to disarm any suspicion. You may be able to warn me of impending pitfalls, and if Sarek and his acquaintances see the Enterprise's First Officer accepting me, it might close their eyes to any minor... inconsistencies."

"Of course I will, Spock." Kirk smiled gratefully at the Vulcan.

* * * *

Sarek frowned as he finished checking the music tapes in their containers. There was certainly one missing, and he puzzled over its whereabouts. It was one he had deliberately put out of his mind since taping it - an arrangement for Vulcan harp that he had composed a little over a year previously, and having taped it he had put it aside for a while. Now, tonight, he had planned to play it through, listening with the critical ear of an impartial judge, with a view to correcting it, developing it, improving it... and it was not there. He still had the manuscript, of course, but that was not the same; and if he was forced to re-tape it he knew he would have to leave it for some months before doing more work to it. While he would do this if he had to, he did not particularly want to.

It had to be somewhere in the house. Although it had not been marked it was impossible to re-record the tape by accident. He must have left it somewhere... but where? He thought back.

He had recorded the tune just before his son's last visit, he remembered. Yes, of course - although Spock neglected his own music, he had expressed interest in the new composition... and he had taken it up to his room to listen to it! He had obviously forgotten to return it; it must still be in Spock's room.

Sarek moved, a little stiffly, towards the stair, aware of his age. He was getting old. It was illogical to feel regret for the lost agility of his youth - he had other things now to compensate for the reduction of his physical faculties - many memories, experience to give him wisdom...

The old Vulcan looked thoughtfully around his son's room, wondering where Spock might have put the missing tape. In truth, there were few possibilities; the desk beside the window seemed the most probable place, for it was on the desk that the recorder sat. Sarek hesitated before approaching, and hesitated again, hand outstretched to grip the handle of the first drawer; the Vulcan passion for privacy was such that to open it, even in search of a missing item, was considered highly unethical. However, it was unlikely that Spock had left anything of a personal nature behind; his home was now the U.S.S. Enterprise, and it was in his cabin there that his personal possessions, few though they probably were, would be. Sarek opened the first drawer firmly. It was empty. The second held a container for tapes. In it was one tape, with no title marked on it. Relieved, for now he would have to invade Spock's privacy no further, Sarek retrieved it and retreated, feeling acutely uncomfortable. This he thought to himself, must be how criminals on planets that actually have such people must feel.

He was half way down the stair when T'Pau walked out of the domestic quarters.

"Dinner is ready, Sarek."

"Very well, my wife." He put the tape on a table in the hall and preceded her into the dining room.

T'Pau was a good cook, he reflected as he sat. Oh, Amanda had been adequate, but she had lacked the knowledge of Vulcan cooking that came with growing up on Vulcan, knowledge that a Vulcan mother passed on to her daughters; although she had initially been disturbed when Sarek brought his second wife home, Amanda had made no protest, realising why a secondary wife was necessary in a Vulcan household, and had quickly accepted T'Pau's offer to do all the cooking. In time the two women had developed, if not a close friendship, at least an easy acceptance of each other.

It was a pity that T'Pau had never had a child, Sarek thought. Still, as he got older, the thought of finding a new secondary wife became increasingly unwelcome. It was not as if he did not have an heir, and one, moreover, who had brought honour to his name. Unfortunate that T'Pring had rejected him... she would have been an ideal wife for Spock, for she had been given training to fit her for life on a Starship. Though from all accounts she was fully content as Storn's secondary wife, and was already the mother of two children.

Yes, Spock was definitely a son to be proud of. Already a Captain in Starfleet, and well respected by his crew, too, Human though they were. Why, his First Officer - what was his name again? Oh yes, Kirk - had even come home with Spock on his last leave. Not much character, of course - he had seemed nervous, very nervous, very much in awe of everyone, continually watching Spock as if looking for guidance; and his loyalty to his Captain had been almost embarrassing, even by Vulcan standards. Sarek wondered if Spock would bring the Human again on his forthcoming leave - if so, it was to be hoped that Kirk had outgrown his slavish dependence on his Captain. Loyalty was all very well, but...

Sarek frowned slightly at this point. Spock was getting older; and since T'Pring's defection he was still single. Medical examinations had shown conclusively that his sexual development was typical of the Vulcan male. However, his Human blood was making a difference, and so it was impossible to predict just when he would attain full maturity. So far he had been fortunate; but he could not expect the onset of the mating fever to be much longer delayed. He must find a wife; if not this leave, then he must delegate his father the task of selecting one for him. No Captain could command respect if he proved incapable of running his ship for three days every six months!

T'Pau, seeing her husband's abstraction, respected it. She could guess at the subject of his thoughts; she knew Sarek had been in his son's room.

Her own opinion of Spock was... ambivalent. Her co-wife's son had always been a little difficult; as a young boy he had shown signs of bad temper, a trait uncommon in full-blooded Vulcans though not unknown. With maturity he had learned to control his temper, but T'Pau had little doubt that it was still as violent as it had ever been. For herself, she would not have cared to be an inferior who crossed Spock... His First Officer, whom she had found to be a pleasant and polite young man, was undoubtedly the ideal subordinate for him; young, a trifle unsure of himself, very clearly following his Captain's lead in all things. It would be interesting to see if he still did. She would normally expect a Captain to train his immediate subordinate to be fully capable of taking the ultimate responsibility, just as her mother had trained her for her responsibility to the children she had never had. Certainly Amanda's death had left her as Spock's sole maternal parent, and she had done her best for the child; but at times she had the uncomfortable suspicion that she had failed. On the surface Spock was an obedient Vulcan son, apart from the one instance of rebellion that took him into Starfleet, and circumstances had proved that his decision had been the correct one. He had advanced quickly to a responsible position; his behaviour was everything that could be expected from a well-brought-up Vulcan. And yet...

T'Pau did not trust Spock. Not wholly. She had no logical reason for her attitude - it was an instinctive response for which she could find no justification. Although... Normally, within the family, there was a degree of emotional relaxation. With Spock there was none. Even when he looked directly at anyone his eyes were veiled, shielded, giving no clue to his thoughts.

They had recently been informed that the Enterprise had been diverted to Vulcan and that home leave had been granted. T'Pau found herself wishing that it had not been. Life was much more... comfortable, when the half-Human Spock was absent.

The older Vulcan finished his meal in silence, then nodded to his wife.

"An excellent meal, T'Pau. You have excelled yourself tonight. I will be in the music room for the remainder of the evening; I do not wish to be disturbed."

T'Pau bent her head in acceptance, and when Sarek had left the room she in turn moved to her own pursuits, leaving the servants to clear the dining room.

In the music room Sarek, having slipped the tape into an audio player, pressed the playback switch. Instead of the music he had expected, however, his son's voice issued from the speaker.

"I should, no doubt, be gratified to be home, receiving the respect from my family that is my due. Instead, I find that my relatives bore me. My father was ambitious once, but now he cannot understand what takes me to the stars. I think he truly believes that I enjoy my life as a Starship Captain. Not so! It is only a stepping stone on the way to my ultimate goal. I fully intend to have a seat on the Federation High Council one day - I, Spock, the half-breed!

Not only do my relatives bore me; here, I have an additional frustration. It is not easy to summon James to my bed. These rooms are not soundproofed; should he cry out in pain, as he so often does, my father would hear, and wonder - and demand an explanation. James lies very badly; I could not hope that my father would be fooled.

And yet I hunger for James. I hunger to hear him crying out, begging for mercy; I hunger to hold his submissive body, to enjoy him... I long to feel his abject surrender to my strength, and his disgust in my possession of him only sharpens my pleasure.

Here, at least, I need not be jealous, for there is no-one here to take James from me. And he knows so little of a Vulcan household, he must watch me for guidance, stay close to my side. For once, he needs me, and I revel in it...

I was correct, too, in my assumption that James would not turn to my father for help. He does not know how unusual my desire for him is; he suspects that if my father knew the truth he would be expected to share my room and my bed, and he dare not risk that.

But you will pay for these nights when I have slept alone, James, when I use the mind link to draw you to me, and you are forced to surrender to my will...

If you had come to me here, James, simply because you knew I wanted you... I would have had to be gentle, as you would wish, to keep my secret... and it would have made your subsequent humiliation, back on the Enterprise, that much sweeter for me as you learned yet again that Vulcans are not gentle, tender lovers. And yet... if you were to come to me, offering yourself... and satisfying my hunger... would your willingness change anything? I do not know. It would not alter the urgency of the mating time, but for the rest? I do not know. You make me jealous so easily, James... "

Sarek finally recovered from his shock sufficiently to switch off the recorder, stunned by what he had heard. To realise that Spock despised his family had been bad enough; the knowledge that he was also a sexual deviant of the worst kind filled his father with shame.

The fact that he had formed a homosexual partnership did not, in itself, trouble Sarek. Such alliances were not unknown, although they were far from

common. But that he should use that relationship to impose his will on an unwilling partner, and worse, enjoy making him suffer, was the most disgraceful behaviour possible.

No wonder the young officer had been so attentive to Spock's wishes! He undoubtedly knew that if he was not, he would suffer for it. It would be easy to despise the man as a weakling, but if he was forcibly melded to Spock... If he was forcibly melded to Spock, who was an unusually strong telepath, then there was little he could do to resist. Sarek recognised that, considered it, and accepted it. He also considered and accepted Spock's assessment of Kirk's silence on that last occasion when they had been here. Kirk probably did believe that Spock's behaviour was perfectly acceptable to his people. Vulcans spoke so little about themselves, especially on sexual matters, that he would have no reason to realise that such assured sexual behaviour on the part of a Vulcan was not common.

And to think that he had once been proud of his son's telepathic ability! Considering it proof that the Human part of his heritage had not weakened the Vulcan in him. For Kirk's welfare Sarek cared little; but Spock was a disgrace and a shame to his family. That could not be permitted to continue...

* * * *

The Enterprise swung into standard orbit around Vulcan, and Spock ordered her into standby mode. This meant that all but the minimum crew were off duty, and even those who were still at their posts could relax and let the machinery do the work. Chekov was left in command, while all the senior officers beamed down to the Vulcan Starbase.

As he gazed around after materialising, Spock was conscious of an unexpected nostalgia. It was here - in another universe - that he had perfected his equipment; the equipment that had brought him here, to this universe, and restored him to being a complete person again. He had the strangest feeling that if he were to go to the hidden cellar he would find the machinery waiting for him... guarded by the dead body of the Captain. Resolutely he closed his mind to such thoughts. This was reality; a world in which Jim Kirk walked by his side, no longer one where he was only a memory.

They reported to the Starbase Commander's office. Spock was mildly surprised to find the position filled by Commodore Decker - a man long dead in the other universe. He would have expected the position to be filled by a Vulcan - in his previous universe it always had been. He shut off the thought. That way mistakes could be made.

The official ceremony giving Spock the Legion of Honour was held immediately. The presentation was made by the Director of the Science Academy, since the award was given for scientific discoveries which had military uses. The Director, to Spock's relief, said very little about just what the medal was for; too many of the personnel present knew that Captain Spock had not been a scientist, although he had had some knowledge of the subject. Spock's own report, when he handed in the information on the Mindsifter that he had obtained in his own universe, had given Kirk, as Science Officer, a great deal of credit for the technical part of it. In honesty, they had gone over much of the material together, and Kirk had made some valid observations, although Spock was a little unsure of just how much of it Kirk had actually understood; it had been during the period before the Human had come fully to terms with his new freedom, and there had been times when he had still not had the courage to say that he didn't quite understand something.

Much to Kirk's surprise he also received a citation for his part in the research of the Mindsifter. He was gratified, if a little guilty at being recognised for something he had not done; even although he knew that he had reached some of the conclusions independently of Spock, Spock knew them already, and his mention of Kirk's contribution had not really been necessary to the compilation

of the report. Kirk obtained more satisfaction from knowing that Spock was pleased with him; and startled by the sincere congratulations of his colleagues. In the past, he had never been popular - now, he realised for the first time that he was genuinely liked by the men who worked beside him, and his shy acceptance of their congratulations only served to underline his new popularity.

At last the fuss and the ceremony were over, and the senior crew could disperse to enjoy the shore leave that the rank and file had begun several hours previously. For most of them, shore leave on Vulcan meant the recreational facilities of the Starbase; Vulcan's own recreational centres did not offer much scope for Humans. Spock was not particularly attracted by Human ideas of recreation, but for once he found himself wishing it were possible to remain here instead of going 'home'. He was very, very aware that this was the most difficult part yet of the exchange which he had effected; how little he knew of his dead counterpart's father - how little of this Vulcan's marriage customs! The woman who had been his grandmother in the other universe, here was his foster mother, his father's second wife - it would be very, very easy to make a mistake... and how could he expect sympathy or understanding from Sarek if the truth became known? Any man would want vengeance for the death of his only son... It was a pity that he could not leave Jim on the Enterprise, safe from Sarek's wrath should a slip be made - but if he did, the chances of a mistake were multiplied tenfold.

In keeping with his counterpart's last visit home, Spock hired a private aircar, which he piloted himself. Once on their way he glanced aside at Kirk, noting how tensely the Human sat.

"Worried, Jim?"

"Yes."

"So am I," Spock confessed. "We know so little - but without you to guide me, I would have no chance of carrying this off."

* * * *

It seemed that they were not expected, for there was no-one to meet them when the aircar landed. Kirk frowned.

"That's odd - you did send a message, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Last time, Sarek met us here."

"Perhaps he's busy."

"He could be... he's retired, but spends a lot of time studying music - Spock, remember that the Captain didn't play. He could play, and seemed to like listening to music, but he didn't play."

Spock nodded. As they left the aircar, he glanced around. "Very similar to my own parents' home... Which way?"

They made their way through the gardens. As they approached the house, Sarek emerged and stood waiting for them.

Spock raised his hand in salute. "Greetings, father."

Sarek responded automatically. "Greetings." He glanced at the Human who walked at his son's side. The man seemed tense, nervous; well, that was hardly to be wondered at, now that he knew how Spock treated him. On an impulse, he looked straight at Kirk, surprising the Human.

"You are well, Mr. Kirk?"

"Thank you, sir - very well. Any yourself and your wife?"

Sarek lowered his head. Let the Human take the gesture for assent; it would not do for Spock to see the contempt in his eyes, the contempt that not all his

willpower could hide; contempt for his son's behaviour - and the Human's apparent willingness to tolerate it.

"Where is my... mother?" Spock hesitated for an instant over the title. Jim said that the Captain had called T'Pol 'mother' - but this was a relationship entirely new to him.

"She is preparing dinner," Sarek replied evenly. If he was surprised at Spock's unprecedented mention of T'Pol, he gave no sign of it. "Mr. Kirk, you are in the room you had before. Dinner will be ready in half an hour." He turned abruptly away, knowing that he would betray his knowledge if he waited longer; and he must not do that. Not yet.

Kirk looked after him. "I don't think he approves of his son's friendship with a Human," he said wryly.

"Even although he married one?"

"Even although he married one. He was just as abrupt with me last time."

"Don't let it worry you."

Kirk smiled. "I don't. Last time, I hoped he might use his influence to persuade the Captain that his... friendship... for me was ill-advised. He didn't. This time - this time, nothing he says can influence you."

Spock's eyes smiled back, but all he said was, "We'd better find our rooms and get ready for dinner."

* * * *

It was obvious that T'Pol had made a considerable effort to prepare a special meal; it was a pity that neither Spock nor Kirk felt relaxed enough to do it full justice, although both enjoyed the food.

As was customary the meal was eaten in near silence, the only comments being polite requests for some item on the table out of reach of whoever wanted it. Once they were finished, however, Spock looked directly at T'Pol.

"An excellent dinner, mother; thank you."

T'Pol looked sharply at him as Kirk nodded agreement. "Spock's right; I enjoyed it very much too."

The Vulcan woman's gaze shifted to him, sensing something different about him. She inclined her head in acceptance of the compliment, her mind working furiously. Amanda's son had never before spoken in that manner.

Sarek, however, did not appear to have noticed anything strange. "How long do you intend staying?" he asked abruptly. He looked at Kirk as he spoke.

The Human glanced at Spock, who answered. "The Enterprise leaves Vulcan ten days from now. We should be aboard for pre-flight checks and to attend to routine matters at least forty-eight standard hours before our departure time. I think we will stay for a week, if that is acceptable to you, father."

Sarek was still watching Kirk, noting the tension in him despite his efforts to relax. "Have you made any plans to fill your days?"

"We plan only to relax," Spock replied. "We have had a difficult time these last weeks; I require a period of peace and meditation, and James also would benefit from a few days of complete rest. I thought to sit in the garden tonight."

"And you, Mr. Kirk?" Sarek asked.

"I'll go with the Captain, I think... unless he'd rather be alone."

"You will be welcome, James."

Sarek turned away. Kirk, then, was still as tied to Spock as he had been ... and still could not find the strength to break free. He did not deserve

sympathy or help. Sarek overlooked the fact that he had already recognised that if Kirk was melded to Spock, he could not break free, no matter how much he might want to.

* * * *

It was very peaceful in the garden. The cool of the evening provided a temperature comfortable for Kirk and that Spock, living as he did among Humans, had become accustomed to. Somewhere among the drought-tolerant bushes a bird sang as the night-flowering blossoms opened, scenting the air with their delicate perfume. A large, mothlike insect paused for a moment as it fluttered past, to investigate the yellow of Spock's uniform shirt before flying off with an almost disgusted air. Kirk chuckled softly.

"I can imagine what it's thinking," he murmured lazily.

Spock smiled slightly, completely relaxed. "It can think what it likes," he said. "I was thinking... how long it's been... since I was last at peace like this. We had a garden like this... a good place to meditate. It was the one thing I regretted leaving when I went to the Academy... I rarely visited after that, for we were seldom near Vulcan... and besides, my father did not approve of my choice of career. When I became Commander of the Vulcan Starbase I had my own home there, at the Base... there was no space for a garden, but even if there had been, I think I would have chosen not to plant one."

"Did you ever take your Kirk home on leave?"

"No. Although I once visited his home."

"His home?"

"Yes. His father was dead, but his mother still lived. She was very proud of him."

Kirk sighed. "I wish I had a home to take you to. They were declared dead years later, but the truth is, my parents abandoned me." He had never mentioned the fact before.

Spock was silent for a moment. He knew, of course; he had learned through the mind link of how first Kirk's parents, then his brother, had disappeared, leaving him alone. He had waited, unsure of how best to approach the subject, hoping that one day Kirk would mention it himself, knowing that when that day came it would be a further sign of the Human's growing acceptance that the past was past; a sign of his friend's growing emotional security. Spock had considered the point, and knew what to say.

"Have you ever thought, Jim, that perhaps they were killed that day?"

"I've... tried to hope that they were, but if they were killed, why were their bodies never found?"

Spock shook his head. "Murder - a quiet grave in a spot so secluded that no-one ever passed that way. It's possible."

"Yes," Kirk agreed. They fell silent, each occupied with his own thoughts; Kirk deeply immersed in memories of his childhood, the happy with his parents, the unhappy in the children's home; and Spock remembering the bitter grief, the regret that he had never shared the peace of his garden with his friend.

He was sharing the peace of a garden now, but it was not his, and this was not the same Kirk. Yet... this Kirk could appreciate the garden in a way that honesty compelled him to admit that the other Kirk could not have done. The other Kirk might have enjoyed the garden... but he would not have sat, peacefully silent, absorbing the scents and the soft bird and animal noises, the rustling of the plants in the evening breeze. He would already have been fidgetting restlessly, eager to go on down the path and see more, instead of savouring every aspect of the one place.

For the first time Spock found himself actively comparing the two Kirks in a

subjective fashion. He had loved his own Kirk dearly, and at first he had only sought a replacement for him; and he had merely pitied this Kirk at first. Now he realised that in fact this Kirk was more congenial company than his original; he was more sensitive, more thoughtful, more responsive to others' wishes and even to their moods. Spock would never forget his own Kirk, would always think of him with affection - and for this Kirk, Spock realised now, his feelings had passed from pity through genuine affection to a deep love that surpassed even his devotion to the Kirk who had taught him the meaning of the word.

He looked towards the Human, to find Kirk watching him intently.

"What are you thinking about, Jim?" he asked.

"Nothing much... just how peaceful it is here... I never thought it could be so peaceful."

"The Captain brought you here?"

"Yes. When I admired the garden... he thought I was soft, weak... T'Pol tends a lot of it herself, instead of the gardener - when I told her I thought it beautiful, he congratulated me on finding the right way to win T'Pol's friendship. I'd had no thought of that, I meant what I said, and he turned it into something cheap and shabby, selfish... He would never have sat here like this, quietly thinking. He would have spoken all the time, mocking me, demanding answers, spoiling it all. This place was meant for quiet."

"Yes," Spock agreed. "Do you know, Jim, that in my universe Jim Kirk would not have remained sitting at peace for so long? He'd have liked it here, but he'd have preferred to explore the whole place... You are more restful company than he ever was."

Kirk was aware of a sudden glow of pleasure, mingled with some embarrassment. He had never expected that Spock would ever find anything in him that did not compare unfavourably with that other Kirk. To cover it he looked up at the sky, and gasped.

"What is it?" Spock asked, immediately concerned.

"Look."

The sun had dropped down in the western sky and now hung poised just above the horizon. The clouds near it were shot through with the shades of a brilliant purple sunset.

"It's so beautiful," Kirk murmured.

"Beautiful indeed," Spock agreed. "I never saw such a sunset on my own Vulcan."

"I can't even tell you if sunsets like it are common here," Kirk said. "The Captain would never have done anything so pointless as watch a sunset... and I can't ask because you should know."

"Surely a sunset of that brilliance cannot be of frequent occurrence," Spock exclaimed.

"I don't know," Kirk replied. "One of the cadets at the Academy with me said once that what he missed most were the sunsets of his home region. It seemed that his home district was renowned for the brilliance of its sunsets - a real tourist attraction. I envied him for having something he missed," he finished softly. It was a simple statement of fact, with nothing of self-pity in his voice; and there was nothing Spock could think of to say in reply.

They watched the changing pattern of mauves and purples as the sun sank below the horizon, the light in the sky faded, and the evening cool became night chill. Spock shivered.

Although he said nothing, unwilling to take Kirk from his enjoyment of the last tints in the sky, the Human was immediately aware of Spock's discomfort.

"Cold?" he asked.

"Not unbearably so," Spock replied, not wholly truthfully.

"You should have told me," Kirk said guiltily. "I forgot you feel the cold more than I do... and I've kept you out here."

"Not really," Spock answered. "I was enjoying the sunset too. And I have to admit... I am apprehensive about spending more time with my 'parents' than I must."

"I don't think they suspect anything," Kirk said as they headed back towards the house. "After all, who could imagine such an unlikely exchange?"

"I know, Jim, but a change in basic personality reactions could be a sign of mental illness - we don't want them to begin wondering if I'm ill, mentally disturbed... there was plenty of speculation on the ship for a while, but no-one there knew the Captain as well as his parents would. They would not be... satisfied... that all was well, so easily."

* * * *

T'Pau stood at the window, looking out over the garden, watching the sunset. She saw the two men sitting there, and wondered at the restful attitude Spock was displaying. She had never known him to sit in the garden before.

The Human too, although showing signs of tenseness, seemed more relaxed than on his previous visit. It was of course possible that he simply felt more 'at home' this time, but T'Pau sensed that it was something more than that. There was a subtle difference in the way that he spoke, especially to Spock. She was sure that Sarek had not seen it, and wondered if she should mention it; her husband was very lacking in perception, and could not understand anything but a completely direct approach. And yet, what could she say to him? Perhaps the young man had simply gained in maturity and self-confidence - a fact for which Sarek would evince the utmost indifference.

It was getting quite dark now, the colours almost gone. The two men in the garden had long since merged into the background. She was about to turn away when the two shadows appeared, moving towards the house. They stopped, facing each other; then one raised a hand briefly to the other's shoulder before they moved on. T'Pau drew back quickly, aware that neither man would care to have a witness to such a display of rapport. She went quickly to the sitting room.

Sarek was already there, his face an unreadable mask, and T'Pau nodded to herself. Her husband still did not approve of Spock's choice of friend. For herself, T'Pau considered that Kirk had clearly been good for Spock.

The subjects of her thoughts came in, Kirk's face alight with unconcealed pleasure.

"You stayed out very late," Sarek commented.

"My fault, sir," Kirk said. "I was watching the sunset and forgot how cold it was getting."

"We were both watching the sunset," Spock said.

Sarek looked slightly impatient - his appreciation of beauty was purely aural, not visual - so T'Pau cut in smoothly. "Indeed, it was particularly spectacular tonight."

"Merely the sun's rays reflected from dust and water vapour," Sarek said, dismissing the phenomenon.

"Yes, but knowing what causes it doesn't lessen its beauty," Kirk murmured. Before Sarek could answer, Spock indicated the chess board sitting on a table beside the fire.

"A game of chess, James?"

"Yes, I'd like that."

Had she possessed the requisite muscles, T'Pau's ears would have pricked. On his previous visit Kirk had played chess with Spock, but he was clearly unwilling - and she had noticed that he was not only badly outclassed, but handicapped, too; he played without a queen, and she was sure not of his own choice. Spock had always been a bad loser. But tonight Kirk seemed willing - even eager - to play.

They set out the board. Both queens were in place. Now that was interesting. T'Pau watched the play.

She realised within seconds that something had indeed changed. Kirk's play was much improved, and the game was very even. There would be no quick end, such as there had always been before; indeed, they would be unlikely to finish it that night.

She was right. After struggling to control his yawns for some time, Kirk said ruefully, "I'm sorry, Spock - do you mind if we finish the game tomorrow? I'm getting terribly sleepy."

"Of course we can finish it tomorrow. I'm tired myself. I think I'll go to bed too." He looked at T'Pau. "Is it all right to leave the board, mother?"

"Certainly, Spock."

"Goodnight, then, mother. Goodnight, father."

"Goodnight, Spock," T'Pau said. Sarek merely grunted.

"Goodnight," Kirk said, with a shy smile to T'Pau. They left the room.

* * * *

Spock paused at Kirk's door. "Goodnight, Jim. Sleep well."

"And you, Spock." He smiled. "You made it possible for me to sleep well - you know that, don't you?"

Spock's face lightened. "My motives were purely selfish, Jim - you know that, don't you?"

Kirk's smile gained in affection. "Yes... of course. Goodnight, Spock." The door closed behind him, and the Vulcan moved on.

Kirk went across the dimly-lit bedroom towards the shower unit, blinking sleepily. He undressed quickly and showered, rubbed himself dry, and moved back into the bedroom, sliding the door shut behind him. Unused to it, half asleep, he misjudged the angle of it and caught his fingers.

The sudden, stinging pain was so unexpected that he was unable to suppress a sharp cry; then, annoyed with himself for his carelessness, he reached with his other hand to push the door open again. He had just managed to do this when the bedroom door opened unceremoniously, and Spock rushed in.

"What's wrong, Jim?" Spock caught his shoulders urgently. "I heard you... "

Kirk managed a rueful smile. "Nothing much, Spock; I caught my fingers in the door, that's all."

"Let me see." Spock examined the hand carefully. The skin had not been broken, but he felt the slight flinch as he touched a sensitive spot. He urged Kirk over to the wash-hand basin, and ran cold water over the fingers for a minute. "Can you move your fingers all right?" he asked as he gently dabbed them dry.

For answer, Kirk flexed his fingers two or three times. "It'll be all right," he said lightly. "Don't worry... this is nothing, compared to..." He broke off, a muscle jerking momentarily in his cheek. Then he took a deep breath, and smiled. "Thanks, Spock."

"You will tell me if it gives you any bother," Spock said anxiously.

"Yes, Spock; I'll tell you," Kirk promised. He watched Spock leave, then

crossed to the bed. He was asleep almost before his head touched the pillow.

Kirk woke early, and lay for a while comparing his two visits to Vulcan. Although it was as impossible to relax properly this time as last the reason was different, and he admitted to himself that but for the danger of discovery he would be quite enjoying himself. He liked T'Pau, he decided - last time he had been unable to consider whether he liked her or not. About Sarek, he was still unsure.

He got up, and moved over to the window. Pulling aside the curtain, he looked out over the gardens. It looked most inviting in the early morning light, and he decided to dress quickly and go and see if Spock was awake; it would be pleasant out there before the heat of the day. Again, he couldn't help but compare his two visits here - before, the last thing he wanted to do was see the Captain before he must.

As he washed, he realised that he had bruised his fingers badly; although they were not paining him too much, the dark marking of a bruise showed clearly. Unconcerned, he quickly forgot about it as he completed dressing. He was half-way to the door when there was a knock on it.

"Come."

It was Spock. "How's your hand?" the Vulcan asked immediately.

"It's all right, Spock. It looks worse than it is. I can move all my fingers O.K. - look." He wiggled his fingers actively. "I couldn't do that if I'd damaged anything."

"No," Spock admitted, though he didn't look convinced. The bruise looked nasty. He realised however that it would only worry Kirk if he didn't accept the reassurance, and changed the subject. "I wondered if you'd like to go out before it gets too hot," he said.

Kirk chuckled. "I had the same idea," he replied. "Shall we go?"

* * * *

Sarek spent much of the night in thought. He cared little for Kirk or his welfare, he admitted frankly to himself, but Spock's behaviour, as outlined in that tape he had so carelessly left behind, could reflect badly on the family name if it became public knowledge. Besides, to be a senior officer the Human must be quite capable, despite his youth - and one did not wilfully damage a good guard-sehlat or a pedigree lahrat. He decided that he must speak to his son about Kirk.

That it might prove difficult to do so, he understood; Spock kept the man close to his side. Sarek realised that he might even have to tell Spock directly that he wanted to speak to him privately.

However, it proved less difficult than he had anticipated. Over breakfast - a meal to which the two younger men arrived together - Sarek watched Spock, wondering how to broach the subject without raising his son's suspicions - he knew that he must catch Spock off his guard. Kirk noticed this; guessing that Sarek must certainly want an opportunity to congratulate his son on his latest achievement without outsiders being present, the Human decided to absent himself for a while. He looked over at T'Pau as the meal ended.

"Would you have time to tell me about the plants in the garden, Ma'am?" he asked. "Spock doesn't seem to know much about them." He cast a teasing, laughing glance at his friend as he spoke, knowing that his comment had been a very accurate one. Captain Spock had known very little about the plants in the garden - and had cared less. T'Pau noticed the glance, and registered yet another change - on his last visit the Human had been much more subdued - he looked much happier now. Sarek, intent on his own thoughts, missed the exchange.

"Yes, of course, James," T'Pau said. "Now, if you like." She also had realised that Sarek wished to talk to Spock alone, and mentally applauded the Human's quiet tact.

Spock opened his mouth, then changed his mind about what he had meant to say.

What logical reason could he have for wanting to avoid being left alone with his father?

"Don't stay out too long, James," he said. "Remember, the sun here is stronger than Earth's - you don't want to get sunburned."

Sarek led Spock into his study. The younger Vulcan glanced quickly around, mentally comparing it with his own father's study, identifying the differences. A big desk dominated the room; a desk still clearly in use despite Sarek's retirement. For a moment, Spock wondered what it was that occupied his 'father's' time - was it only the music that Jim had mentioned? Then his attention moved on. Chairs... a bookcase... even at this distance Spock could identify familiar friends. Sarek, then, valued his dead wife's books sufficiently to keep them here, in his study. Spock wondered if his counterpart had ever read them. Somehow, it seemed unlikely.

A big French window opened onto the garden. Spock recognised Amanda's touch again; French windows were unknown in Vulcan architecture. Spock had never understood why; they seemed eminently practical for a hot climate. They stood open, allowing the last traces of perfume from the night-flowering bushes to drift in before the scent faded in the burning heat of the day, and Spock wondered if Sarek really appreciated the scents, or if he merely retained a habit his dead wife must have originated. The resemblances were legion; the differences, very few.

Sarek lifted a tape from the desk and put it in the player. He ran it forward for some moments, then activated the playback.

"... for James. I hunger to hear him crying out, begging for mercy; I hunger to hold his submissive body, to enjoy him... I long to feel his abject surrender to my strength, and his disgust in my possession of him only sharpens my pleasure.

Here, at least, I... "

The voice clicked off. Sarek looked straight at Spock, noting the expression on his face.

Spock's main reaction was an incredulous 'NO!' How many tapes had his counterpart left lying around? It was mingled with horror that anyone else should know of the humiliation Kirk had suffered. Bad enough that he and McCoy both knew...

Sarek watched grimly, interpreting the reaction. Guilt... horror that his father should know... possibly outrage that his privacy had been breached, but that was not important now.

"Well, Spock?" Sarek asked harshly. "What excuse have you to offer for your behaviour?"

Spock swallowed nervously. He had anticipated problems, but not this one. "I... have nothing to say, sir."

"Nothing? No reason? No explanation?"

"Whatever my relationship with James Kirk, surely it concerns only he and I," Spock said quietly.

"Normally, I might agree, but this tape makes it clear that you ill-use him disgracefully. No wonder the man is nervous! Is there ever a day passes that you do not ill-use him?" Sarek demanded.

An old Human paradox came to mind - 'Have you stopped beating your wife yet?' Whether he answered yes or no... "Does he really seem to you to be unhappy, sir?" he asked.

"He is clearly afraid of something," Sarek replied harshly. "This tape indicates as clearly that it is you he fears."

"Why not ask James if he is afraid of me?" Spock asked reasonably. "I could

assure you that I do not ill-treat him, that I have never ill-treated him, but I think you would not believe me."

"And have him say he is not because he is too afraid of you to admit it? Besides, the tape tells me that you control his mind. You could force him to deny fear."

"Sir, he is my friend. He has no cause to fear me, I promise you."

"This tape, then, means nothing? Perhaps you have forgotten all that it says - will I play it completely through to remind you?"

"That... will not be necessary." Spock had no wish to hear his counterpart rehearsing the tale of his sadism. "Whatever it says... whatever truth it might once have held - is no longer applicable."

"Then you do admit that you have ill-treated Kirk?"

There was no answer that Spock could give. The truth was the only thing that would declare his innocence - but for Kirk's sake the truth must remain hidden, for if Sarek learned that Kirk had killed his son, what might he do to the Human?

"I admit nothing, sir."

"That you are his lover is not in itself shameful; if he is the partner to whom you are drawn I realise that you could not resist when the blood fever came upon you. But that you should wilfully give him pain... I saw his hand this morning. What did you do to him last night?"

"I did nothing. He caught it in the door."

"Is that what you told him to say? Why, Spock? Why do you use him so, and still pretend concern when he goes out into the sun?"

"I did not injure him, sir."

"Spock, I am trying to understand," Sarek said. His voice, still harsh, was trying to be reasonable and patient. "In the past, when slavery was still the normal fate of the weak, the defeated, our people were often as cruel as this tape indicates you are. Is that what it is? Do you see him as a slave, subject to your whim?"

"No, sir."

"Then why? You must have some reason."

"I do not ill-treat James Kirk, sir," Spock repeated helplessly.

"Perhaps you have another word for it. I see your behaviour as wanton cruelty, for which there can be no excuse. That you do not attempt to give me one shows that you also know your behaviour to be inexcusable. I am ashamed that my son could be so unVulcan. If it were possible, I would disown you."

Spock's lips closed on the answer he must not give. "I regret that you should wish to take such an extreme step, sir," he said stiffly. "I can only repeat that I have done nothing to warrant it. Perhaps if you watch us together, you will realise it. Whatever happened in the past is past; and you have no need to feel shame for my behaviour. I regret that it would give rise to unfortunate speculation should we leave before the week is up, and that we are therefore compelled to remain under your roof to prevent it; you would undoubtedly prefer not to have to see me again. Now, if you will excuse me, I think that this interview no longer serves any useful purpose." He turned towards the door.

Lies, thought Sarek. All lies. Sadism was an almost incurable form of insanity, and the failure to recognise his behaviour as such indicated that Spock had passed the stage where he could be cured. Only one thing mattered - the family's shame must be stopped, and stopped now, before Spock did something that would make his insanity common knowledge. There was only one way.

Sarek would have preferred to do it openly, but he was getting old; Spock was younger, stronger, more agile - and clearly cared nothing for anyone but

himself and the gratification of his own whims. Moving quietly, Sarek lifted an ornate and very sharp paperknife from the desk, and moved after his son.

* * * *

The early morning scents were, if anything, even more appealing than those of the evening, and for the second time that morning Kirk breathed deeply in appreciation. Used though he was to living in a completely closed environment he enjoyed the rare opportunities to breathe fresh air - although he knew that many Starfleet crewmen suffered from a mild degree of agoraphobia. These men could look out at space through a viewscreen, but became mildly anxious unless they were surrounded by walls. It was particularly prevalent among engineering crew, who rarely had the opportunity to participate in landing party duties.

Kirk really was interested in the biological data of the garden, although he had not dared to ask about it last time. T'Pol knew her subject well, and they were soon deep in a discussion of botanical adaptations to drought conditions. But all the time the Vulcan woman watched Kirk more closely than he realised, noting that as they spoke, his tension had eased only fractionally. After a while he glanced back at the house.

"What is it, James?"

"I was just wondering how long Spock would be."

"You enjoy his company?"

"Yes. He's been really good to me, Ma'am. Before... with... " Kirk stopped abruptly, realising that he had nearly allowed his tongue to betray them. "Before I knew him, I had no-one. No friends, nothing. Then he came... it was like waking from a nightmare."

What had he been about to say? T'Pol wondered. "I think perhaps you have been good for him also," she said. "He has changed; he is more... mature, somehow... "

Kirk glanced quickly at her. T'Pol was the danger, then, rather than Sarek? She was the perceptive one in this household.

"We would, perhaps, be better to return to the house," T'Pol went on. "The sun will soon be too hot for you, unused to it as you are."

Kirk grinned slightly. "Yes, Ma'am. Especially since Spock warned me about getting sunburned. It would worry him if I did."

Spock, worried about someone else? T'Pol thought. Well, perhaps. She directed Kirk back towards the house. Ahead of them was the open French window; through it they could see the two figures facing each other. Spock's voice sounded clearly. "... think that this interview no longer serves any useful purpose."

Spock turned towards the door. Kirk bit his lip, wondering just what had been said. And then Sarek picked up something from the desk - it looked like a knife - and followed Spock. His intention was obvious.

"No!" Kirk gasped. He sprang forward, running desperately. He threw himself through the open window and flung himself between Spock and Sarek. The older Vulcan, already poised, was unable to stop himself; and the knife sank deep into Kirk's chest.

"Jim!" The requirements of his role were forgotten; Spock dropped to his knees at Kirk's side, sliding one arm under the Human's shoulder to support him, and with the other, trying desperately to stem the flow of blood from the wound. Bright red blood...

Time for questions later. He looked up at Sarek, no longer the possibly erring son but the Starbase Commander faced with a full emergency.

"Contact the Starbase. Get them to find Dr. McCoy and get him here - tell them it's an emergency. Hurry!" He looked down. "Jim... "



Kirk smiled weakly up at him. "He was going to kill you. I couldn't let him... "

Sarek still stood, stunned into immobility by the speed of events. It was T'Pol who went to the videophone and contacted the Starbase, then returned to where Spock held Kirk close.

"We should get him up to bed, Spock - he will be more comfortable there."

"I can't move," Spock replied. "I need both arms to carry him, but I also need one hand for the wound. I daren't let it bleed freely for even the short time it would take to get him upstairs. Could you bring a blanket down? It would help keep him warm until McCoy comes."

* * * *

McCoy had been looking forward to this leave. Granted, the heat and the slightly increased gravity were inconveniences, but he knew from experience that within twenty-four hours he would have adjusted to the gravity at least, and as long as he remained indoors during the heat of the day, in the Base's air-conditioned lounges, he would suffer no ill-effects.

He had seriously considered accepting Spock's invitation to go with them, realising that another friend might be a good thing to help the Vulcan get safely through the next week. However, the Captain had never extended such an invitation and he finally decided that his presence, without precedent as it was, might actually complicate matters. Spock saw his point, and accepted it reluctantly.

Now McCoy lay in bed, enjoying the luxury of not having to get up until he wanted to. He was wide awake, however, and his mind was active.

How were Spock and Jim getting on? Their main advantage lay in the unlikely nature of the exchange; no-one, surely, would dream of an exchange of Spocks between two universes. Even although he had actually visited the other universe - albeit briefly - he still found it hard to believe.

His thoughts were interrupted by the insistent buzzing of the videophone at his bedside. He flicked it on. "McCoy here."

A Vulcan woman appeared on the small screen. "Dr. McCoy, I am T'Pau, mother to Spock. We require your presence here immediately; James Kirk has been injured."

"How badly?"

"Severely. There is arterial bleeding."

"Give me the house co-ordinates." Even as he spoke McCoy was moving, starting to dress, ignoring the fact that his caller could see him. He noted the co-ordinates, and said, "I'll be there within ten minutes, McCoy out." He punched the videophone off and on again. "Operator, put me on to the U.S.S. Enterprise."

He had just finished dressing when the 'phone buzzed.

"McCoy."

"Uhura here, Doctor."

"Beam me aboard. Urgent!"

On the Enterprise he took some minutes to collect a comprehensive medikit, and to alert M'Benga. "Anything else I need, I'll contact you - get it down to me immediately. Oh, and you'd better stand by, M'Benga - just in case I need you."

"Yes, Doctor."

McCoy hurried back to the transporter room. "Co-ordinates set?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"Energise."

He materialised in a garden, barely yards from the house. An open French window beckoned; he went in.

Spock was kneeling, supporting Kirk. T'Pau knelt beside him, tucking a blanket around the Human. An elderly Vulcan, presumably Sarek, stood watching, a bloodstained knife in one hand, his face a mask of stunned disbelief. McCoy hurried forward.

T'Pau made way for him.

"Where's he hurt?" McCoy already had his pouch open.

"His chest." Spock raised the hand that had been clamping the wound, and blood spurted. McCoy moved fast.

After a minute he looked up, and saw the anguish in Spock's eyes. "He should be all right, Spock - you kept him from losing too much blood. I won't try to pretend it isn't serious, but he has a very good chance."

Spock let his head droop for a moment in relief. McCoy gave him the moment, before he added, "We should get him up to bed now."

"Yes, of course. Here, or the Enterprise?"

"Here. I'd rather not beam him up until the wound has had a chance to close, at least."

Spock swung the Human up into his arms. T'Pol led the way, opening the doors, and McCoy followed after Spock, leaving Sarek still standing, stunned by what he had done, stunned by Spock's evident deep concern, while he struggled to make sense out of the conflicting data.

Between them, Spock and McCoy undressed Kirk, and put him to bed. McCoy then gave the injured Human another check, more carefully this time, and an injection.

"Right," he told them at last. "You'll do, Jim - but you'll be off duty for a full week after we get back to the Enterprise. Now - suppose you tell me what happened?"

Spock and Kirk looked at each other. It was T'Pol who answered.

"My husband tried to kill Spock. James jumped between and was stabbed instead," she said simply.

"But... why should he want to kill Spock?" McCoy asked blankly.

Spock thought quickly. A modified truth would serve. "He believed I was ill-treating James, and would not accept my assurance that I was not. He spoke of disowning me. I repeated my assurance, and told him there was nothing further to be discussed. Then I turned to leave."

McCoy looked sharply at Spock; Kirk, becoming drowsy from the drugs McCoy had given him, didn't realise the significance of Spock's words.

T'Pol said slowly, "When you were here last, I would have agreed with Sarek. This time... this time, you've changed. You've grown up, Spock. Last time I would have agreed that James was... tense, unsure, even nervous. This time... he is still nervous about something, but he's happy. From what he told me in the garden, Spock, I cannot believe that you would ever harm him."

"No," Spock said quietly. "I would never harm him. He is... the brother I never had, and there is nothing I would not do to give him happiness. He knew so very little happiness before I found him... "

"You have changed," T'Pol said. "You were always very self-centred, Spock. I never trusted you. But now... yes, I think I trust you now."

* * * *

Alone, Sarek slowly regained control of himself. He had had little respect for Kirk, and he was not sure whether he respected him now or not. Kirk could have been free of Spock's cruelty, yet he had saved his master. Was he so dependent, then, on that mastery?

Yet Spock's behaviour had not fitted a pattern of cruelty. He had reacted as though he truly cared. And the Doctor had not been surprised at Spock's apparent concern. Could it have been genuine? Was it that Spock would hurt Kirk himself, but be concerned if someone else did? No. That was not logical. Either he cared for Kirk's well-being or he did not. His behaviour now indicated that he did...

So what was the explanation for the tape?

Slowly, Sarek wiped the paperknife clean and replaced it on the desk. Perhaps the Doctor might be able to advise him. Meanwhile, he should inquire about Kirk; although he had not intended harming the Human he had done so, and had done nothing to succour him; he should at least indicate his contrition and concern.

In Kirk's room he found Spock sitting beside the bed watching Kirk. The Human was sleeping, apparently peacefully. The Doctor stood there too, one hand resting, as it might be casually, on Spock's shoulder, and the simple fact that Spock let it lie there said more clearly than any words that he was obtaining comfort or reassurance, perhaps both, from the touch. T'Pol was gathering the Human's bloodstained clothes.

Only she acknowledged Sarek's appearance; the other two were too intent on the injured Human.

"How is he?" Sarek asked hoarsely.

"He will recover," T'Pau replied evenly.

"I did not intend to harm him," Sarek said.

"It was your son you meant to kill," T'Pau said. There was no accusation in her tone.

"I had evidence of primitive, savage violence existing in his nature," Sarek answered the unspoken charge. "His behaviour is a disgrace to our name."

T'Pau looked directly at the bed. "Does he look savage or violent?"

"It seems not. T'Pau, now I do not know what to think." He swallowed, and went to the bed. "Doctor..."

McCoy glanced at him. "Yes, sir?" He sounded polite but unenthusiastic.

"How is Mr. Kirk? You must know... I meant no harm to him..."

"I realise that. But did you not stop to think that by killing Spock, you would harm Jim Kirk?"

"I believed that Spock's death might help Mr. Kirk."

"No," said McCoy bluntly. "It wouldn't."

Sarek hesitated. "Doctor, may I speak with you privately?"

"Very well. Spock, call me if there's any change in Jim's condition."

Without taking his eyes from the sleeping Human Spock nodded, and McCoy followed Sarek out. Behind them, T'Pau also left the room, taking with her the bloodstained clothes.

Sarek took McCoy to his study. "Sit down, Doctor." As McCoy obeyed, Sarek paced across the floor in a fashion that would have been called nervous had he been Human.

"Doctor, in your position, you have occasion to examine Mr. Kirk regularly?"

"Yes."

"Would you say he frequently suffers... minor injuries? Bruises, or...?"

"No."

"Has he ever suffered... unexplained injuries?"

"Nnoo... He was... attacked and robbed once, I remember, and he's misjudged in the gym and fallen once or twice, but that was all long ago."

"Would you say my son is... concerned, when Mr. Kirk is hurt?"

"Yes," McCoy replied promptly. "Very concerned."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

Sarek paced across the room again. "Doctor, what I have to say is... not easy for me; it concerns my family's honour. I found a recorded tape in Spock's room after his last visit here. I thought it a music tape he had borrowed from me; in fact it was a personal one. In it... in it, he spoke of... of deliberately hurting Mr. Kirk, as if he enjoyed doing it. Doctor, are you sure that he is not abusing Mr. Kirk?"

So that was how he knew! Somehow McCoy controlled his instinctive response and answered calmly. "Quite sure, sir, but surely Jim's response today must prove that? He saw Spock's danger and moved to save him. Would he do that if Spock was cruel to him?"

"I do not know. My understanding of Humans leads me to suspect that in many cases of cruelty there are often willing victims. How can I be sure that Kirk is not one such willing victim, unable to face life without his... master?"

"I admit you do often get that," McCoy replied. "But anyone that psychotic would never get through Starfleet's psychology tests. Sadists occasionally slip through, because they are usually astute enough to hide the truth, but masochists aren't. There's nothing in Jim Kirk's psychology profile to indicate masochism."

"What if... telepathic control were exerted?"

"That could provide complications." That tape must have been very detailed! "However, I know for a fact that Spock taught Jim Kirk how to shield his mind against telepathic influence. I was present when he did."

"How could he do that?" Sarek asked. "Telepathy is an instinctive ability; there is no way that a non-telepath can be taught even the most elementary shielding."

"Spock found a way." Damn! How far have I put my foot in it? Must warn Spock.

"Doctor - Spock denied illtreating Mr. Kirk. You say he does not. But that tape exists and must mean something."

"I can't explain it," McCoy answered. At least I can, but I won't. "All I can tell you is that Spock and Jim Kirk have a good, close, sincerely affectionate relationship... and each of them, as you saw today, would willingly give his life for the other."

* * * *

Kirk was confined to bed for two days. Spock never left him, even sleeping on a couch in his bedroom, alert to waken instantly should Kirk call out, or even if his regular breathing altered. Their days were spent playing chess, or simply sitting quietly, exchanging infrequent comments. But Kirk was becoming increasingly restless, and on the third day McCoy finally allowed him to get up, provided he remained indoors during the heat of the day. Kirk agreed, but as the evening cool began to replace the breathless heat he looked outside longingly.

"O.K., Jim," McCoy growled at last. "Half an hour, no more."

"I'll see it's no longer," Spock promised. They went out and disappeared among the bushes.

-* * * *

Sarek's mind was in a complete turmoil. Never had he expected to be so confused! Not all of his logic, his years of reasoned thought, were sufficient to help him make sense out of this paradoxical situation.

He paced the garden, seeking in its peaceful atmosphere some answer. What should he do - what could he do - to resolve things? His son could not be permitted to behave unVulcanly... but was he? All the immediate evidence said he was a true Vulcan. Only that tape...

Spock walked into sight, intent on an evening moth. Sarek was slightly surprised that he was alone - it was the first time for three days - but supposed that his son had decided to stretch his legs for a few minutes. Sarek strode over to him.

"Spock!"

"Yes, sir?" His son's voice was quietly respectful, he noticed, despite the events of three days previously. It was a tone Spock had not used for many years.

"I have been considering the events of the past days, Your... relationship with Mr. Kirk is your own affair, and I accept that you are not now ill-using him - but I warn you, Spock, that should I ever again discover evidence that you are,

that you have lied and forced Mr. Kirk to lie, then I will have no mercy on you.

You consider you own him; or so it would seem - just as in the past, strong leaders owned the weak. You are drawn to him as your sexual partner. Of that I make no criticism. I told you already, I realise that you could not resist the urge that drew you to him.

However, both as your First Officer, and as the mate who stands between you and the agony of pon farr, he is a valuable possession, and it is foolish and wasteful to harm him - quite apart from the shame of such atavistic behaviour.

Deliberate sadism is a voluntary return to Vulcan's violent past; and anyone who would wish to return to those days is exhibiting a form of insanity that I cannot and will not condone.

I will rather preserve the honour of our family name by informing Vulcan of your disgraceful and vindictive treatment of one whose welfare should be important... "

"No! Sarek, no! Spock's never hurt me! It was the Captain... " Kirk sprang into sight from where he had been sitting, unable to bear any longer Sarek's bitter denunciation of Spock.

"Jim!"

At the warning, Kirk broke off his urgent defence, realising that he had betrayed them.

"So something is being kept from me?" Sarek asked.

Kirk took a deep breath. "I... don't deny I was ill-used for a while," he said slowly. "But it wasn't by Spock. It was... the Captain before Spock."

"How, then, do you explain a tape, made by Spock, describing... what he wanted to do to you?"

Kirk and Spock looked at each other. They had been driven into a corner - only the truth would serve now, whatever the consequences. Imperceptibly, Spock moved closer to Kirk, alert to defend him should Sarek react violently.

At last, Kirk said reluctantly, "Spock - this Spock - is not your son, sir."

"Not... Explain."

Hesitantly, Kirk obeyed. Without going into detail, he told of the humiliation he had suffered at the Captain's hands; how Spock, in his own universe, deprived by death of his James Kirk, had learned how to penetrate the barriers between the universes, searching for a replacement Kirk, and found him; and in pity and outrage had crossed through the barrier to rescue him. He told how the two Spocks had fought, and how, when the Captain seemed to be winning, he had acted.

"There was a knife on the desk. Just as you did, I picked it up... and I killed the Captain. Spock was going to take me with him, but there was the Mindsifter... it was too important... I couldn't leave the Enterprise; so Spock took the body back into his own universe, and returned to take the Captain's place."

Sarek drew a deep breath. "I see," he said quietly. "I... cannot blame you. How many others know of this?"

"Only Dr. McCoy," Spock said. "Jim was... confused, unhappy... and in poor physical condition. I needed a Human to help reassure him... and who better than a doctor? In the other universe, McCoy was our friend; I thought it probable that he would be so here, also. We decided to keep you in ignorance of the truth - what good would it have done to tell you that your son was a throwback to Vulcan's savage past?" He hesitated. "And although she does not know, T'Pol has seen... a difference in me. She does know that something has happened to... Spock."

"When did this happen?"

"During the mission that resulted in the capture of the Mindsifter, and the award of the Scientific Legion of Honour. Your son performed that part of the mission that earned it; all I did was complete the mission," Spock told him.

"He was a good officer," Kirk said quietly. "He ran the ship well. It was only... he didn't know how to handle affection. He was ashamed of feeling it, and because he was ashamed he acted to prove that he felt nothing of such weakness. We think that if his mother had lived, she might have taught him how to handle his Human reactions. As it was... when he lay dying, he told me he loved me. But until then, all he ever wanted of me was obedience... and he enforced it. He was even jealous of McCoy... he wanted to keep me entirely to himself."

"The disgrace... " Sarek whispered.

"Is known to no-one. McCoy will not speak for Jim's sake. Jim and I... " Spock glanced at the Human "... we have no need to talk of the past. I am Captain Spock now, and I have been accepted as such by the crew without hesitation. Coming here has been the most difficult part of the... imposture; but you did not guess, and had it not been for that tape, you need never have known. To the world, to the Federation, Sarek of Vulcan still has a worthy son in the Captain of the Enterprise, who has brought honour to his name."

"Yes," Sarek said quietly at last. "I think that is true. I do indeed have a son who brings honour to our name. Spock, this is your home; I am proud to acknowledge you as my son."

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T'PAU'S JOURNAL

My assessment of Spock's character was correct, although I was far from guessing the full truth. Perhaps this Spock is justified in believing that his counterpart was warped by the Human emotions no-one could teach him how to handle - we can never be certain.

However, this Spock is our son now, and I am glad of it - for all our sakes.

Poor James! I think that not even Spock can know just how much James suffered. But I can guess, when I remember his last visit here, and compare it with this one. Now that we have been told the truth, and he is no longer afraid that their imposture will be discovered, James has lost his nervousness, and his joy in their friendship is clear to see. And so is our son's.

Spock - the original Spock - could have known that joy, and threw it away. The joy, the trust... and the trustworthiness; he threw them all away. Sarek despises his memory... but now, I can feel sorry for him. He could have had so much... but he never learned how to give. He could only take; whereas this man who is now our son gave up everything in order to help James Kirk... he gave, and did not even know if he would be given anything at all in return.

They will have problems still to overcome, and they both know it. Even although Sarek and I both acknowledge Spock, his altered behaviour cannot but arouse suspicion in any who know the original well. Fortunately, few did; he kept his own counsel and had no close acquaintances that I know of.

Meanwhile, I look across the garden to the west; there will be another brilliant sunset tonight - the clouds are right for it. In the garden I can again see them, also watching the western sky, and through the open window I hear James laughing. The garden has never heard such a sound before, and yet it blends naturally with the birdsong. Confident, trusting, affectionate Human laughter... a sound the original Spock never heard.

With all my heart, I pity him.

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PART II - THE ENTERPRISE

In the transporter room of Starbase Vulcan, Lt. Sam Kirk of Starfleet Security waited impatiently for permission to board his new ship, the U.S.S. Enterprise. He had reported early, hoping for a glimpse of his fellow-crewmen, but his chief curiosity remained unsatisfied - the transporter officer told him that the Captain and the First Officer had already gone on board with the Chief Medical Officer.

The other officers were also of interest, however, and Sam paid careful attention as the heads of department and the bridge crew were identified for him. The transporter chief, Kyle; Sulu, the helmsman; Chekov, the navigator, seeming impossibly young. Dr. M'Benga of the medical staff beamed up with a vibrantly beautiful young woman who proved to be Lt. Marlana Moreau, chief assistant to the Science Officer. Sam exchanged an approving nod with Taylor, the transporter officer - the Enterprise seemingly lived up to its reputation for having the most beautiful women in Starfleet. This impression was confirmed by the next two arrivals, African women glowingly radiant in the red uniforms of the Engineering section.

"The Lieutenant's your Communications Officer, Uhura," Taylor volunteered. "The other's Lt-Commander Charlene Masters, the new Chief Engineer."

"Oh, I thought Mr. Scott was Chief Engineer on the Enterprise?" Sam asked.

"Haven't you heard? He was killed during their last mission - an accident in one of the cargo holds, I believe. Miss Masters is the replacement - she took over when the Enterprise reported back to Vulcan."

"I've heard of her... but what do you know about the Captain?"

"Spock?" Taylor lowered his voice confidentially. "Well... "

"Hi, Sam, sorry to keep you waiting!"

The two men turned as a new voice broke in. "Martin! I didn't know you were on the Enterprise! And Aurelan - it's great to see you again."

Sam greeted these two old friends eagerly. Martin Evans he had known in basic training, and Aurelan Walters had caused him considerable heart-searching when they had served together aboard the Defiant.

"We saw the duty roster, and asked the Chief to let us meet you," Martin grinned. "If you've got all your gear, we'll beam up, see you settled - I've wangled it so that you're rooming with me - and there should be time to catch up on the news before Aurelan and I go on duty."

Talking eagerly the three said goodbye to Taylor, took their places on the transporter pads, and dissolved in a sparkle of light.

* * * *

Sam dropped his gear off in his quarters and reported to the Security Chief, who told him to settle in to the ship, and report for duty next day. Martin and Aurelan were waiting to take him to the rec room that by tacit agreement was reserved for the use of the Security Section, who tended to be a rather clammy group when off duty. He was introduced to his fellow officers, some of whom he already knew, and quickly became involved in the excited babble of shop-talk that made him feel at home.

At last, taking advantage of a momentary lull in the conversation, Sam leaned forward eagerly. "Come on, then," he invited, "fill me in. What's the Captain like - and the First Officer?"

Martin laughed. "That's always the first question, isn't it?" he said. "The Captain - well, he's a strange one; Vulcan, you know - Spock. He's very efficient, scrupulously fair... but he's a bad one to cross. Like most Vulcans, he's very aloof, though he does mix now more than he used to, or so Mr.

Sulu was telling me. For a longtime the only one he was at all friendly with was the First Officer."

"And Kirk's just as odd," Aurelan broke in.

"Kirk?" Sam asked interestedly, his attention caught by the coincidence of names.

"The First. I remember when I was posted to the Enterprise, it was about three months before I even laid eyes on him - really stuck-up he was then, kept to himself all the time; he's come out of his shell a bit lately, though - he was at the ship's dance a few weeks ago, and he's never done that before."

"Admit it, Aurelan - you've got a bit of a crush on him," Martin teased.

"I used to have," Aurelan conceded. "And I'm not the only one; a young, good-looking First Officer is bound to arouse interest. But I gave up hope long ago - he's never so much as looked at any of us."

"Probably doesn't believe in getting involved with someone on board ship," Sam said easily. "I had a Captain like that once - off duty he was a real devil for women, but he never touched a member of his crew. Anyway, to get back to Kirk - is he any good at his job?"

"They call him the best First Officer in Starfleet," Martin said seriously. "And he lives up to his reputation."

"He's very young," Aurelan added, "but I've seen him in a duty situation, and I'd trust him with my life. Did you know, he's also the Science Officer? I believe it's quite common on Vulcan ships, but I've never heard of a Human holding both posts before."

"So you see, that proves it. Hey, that's odd," Martin interrupted himself suddenly. "Look, Aurelan, can you see the resemblance?"

"Why, yes - it's quite remarkable." Both were now staring at him intently, and Sam felt uneasy.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I never noticed it before," Martin said, "but you do look quite like the First - older, of course, and taller, but the likeness is there. Are you related?"

"I shouldn't think so. What's his full name?"

"James T. Kirk. Hey, we'll be late for our watch - come on, Aurelan. See you later, Sam."

"See you," Sam replied absently, as Aurelan and Martin left. Picking up a magazine to discourage conversation he pretended to read, but he was thinking furiously.

It must be a coincidence; it couldn't be - not little Jimmy! A memory buried for years surfaced to show him a young, anguished, tear-stained face, wide hazel eyes raised imploringly as arms clung frantically around his neck.

"You won't forget me?" that grief-stricken child had begged so long ago; and Sam, impatient with his tearful young brother, and longing to escape, had muttered some meaningless lie about sending for him when he was settled. Resigned to the inevitability of the separation, Jimmy had released him at last and Sam had departed gratefully, quickly forgetting both his promise and the lonely child to whom it had been made.

Now, it seemed, that long-forgotten betrayal had caught up with him; if Jimmy was here, First Officer of the Enterprise, life could become very difficult. It would be wise, perhaps, to find out for certain, and he wondered how he could catch a glimpse of the First Officer without being seen himself.

A conversation at the next table caught his attention, and suggested a

possibility. There was a concert in the main rec room that night, at which all ranks were welcome; Uhura would be singing, and as a rare event, the Captain had been persuaded to play for the crew.

As his neighbours left Sam rose and followed them - it was quite possible that the other Kirk would attend the concert, and if so Sam would be able to get a look at him while remaining himself hidden in the crowd.

* * * *

The rec room was full, so many people that there were not enough seats for all. Sam found himself a place at the back of the room, well hidden among some of the junior officers, yet in a position that afforded him a good view of the attentive audience.

His appreciation of music was very limited, and as he had feared, he found the concert to be extremely boring. Despite a careful study, he could see no sign of anyone who might be the First Officer. He was just beginning to consider postponing his search when a newcomer took the stage, and he settled back interestedly. Sam might be tone-deaf, but there was nothing wrong with his appreciation of feminine beauty; and the lovely Uhura made even the boredom of the music endurable. To his surprise he even enjoyed her singing, the haunting quality of her voice evoking an unaccustomed response from him; so much so, in fact, that he gave an unconscious sigh of disappointment when the music faded into silence at last, and she yielded her place to the next performer.

As the man took his seat, Sam sat up alertly. So this was the Vulcan Captain of the Enterprise! Martin's judgement had been right, he thought; this Spock would be an excellent Captain, scrupulously fair, but intolerant of anything less than one's best.

The audience fell silent as the first notes came rippling from the harp, and Sam winced, immediately losing interest - this music certainly did not appeal to him. It would be tactless, however, to walk out in the middle of the Captain's performance so, seeking a more interesting diversion, Sam resumed his scrutiny of his companions.

Almost at once his attention was arrested at the sight of a man who sat on the floor near the Captain's feet. He had certainly not been there before, so he must have entered with him and taken the only vacant place on the low stage. At first all that Sam could see was the blue shirt of the Science section; then someone in front of him changed position, and he noticed the Commander's rings on the man's sleeve. Sam knew already that the First Officer was the only full Commander in the Science section - this must be the man he had looked for.

To his annoyance, however, he could not see his face; his attention remained fixed on the Captain throughout his performance. Only when the music ended and the Captain rose from his seat did the Commander move, turning slightly to look up and make some smiling comment.

Although he had been half expecting it the moment of recognition came as a shock to Sam - it was his brother. Instinctively remaining concealed, Sam watched as he rose to his feet and stood talking quietly to the group of senior officers that gathered around the Vulcan's tall figure. Suddenly he turned pale, swayed, and began to collapse. Only because he was watching so intently did Sam see what followed; the Captain, who had appeared to be deep in conversation with the Chief Medical Officer, abruptly turned and caught his First Officer, saving him from what could have been a very unpleasant fall from the stage. To anyone else it might have seemed only an unusually swift reflex action, but Sam could not rid himself of the conviction that the Vulcan had known what was happening, and had begun to respond even before the emergency had occurred.

Now he stood supporting the half-conscious Commander while McCoy made a

quick check; there was a brief consultation between the two men, then the Captain lifted the protesting Kirk into his arms, and followed McCoy from the rec room.

The incident had attracted considerable attention, and was discussed in worried tones. Sam turned to his neighbour, whom he recognised as the helmsman, Sulu.

"What's wrong with the First Officer?" he asked.

"Haven't you heard? Oh, of course, you're the new Security man. Well, Mr. Kirk had an accident on leave - strictly speaking he should still be in sickbay, but he wanted to attend the concert, so..." Sulu broke off as McCoy re-entered the room and gestured for silence.

"No cause for alarm," he said reassuringly. "Mr. Kirk is all right - just a little over-tired - but he'll be back on duty in a few days. In the meantime, the Captain asks you to go on with the concert."

As the audience settled back into their seats Sam took the opportunity to slip out and return to his quarters. He had been granted a few days' respite before he need face his brother, and he wanted to consider the best method of approach.

He had a problem, he realised as he lay on his bed; he had hoped that this transfer to the Enterprise would eventually lead him to the coveted position of Security Chief, but this unexpected encounter could upset all his plans. As First Officer, Jimmy's influence would be vital - and he was certain that his brother could not have forgiven or forgotten that traumatic experience of being suddenly cut off from everything he had believed in.

At least, though, he was forewarned - Jimmy was not; he must try to think out some method of approach before Jimmy realised who he was.

* * * *

A few days later Sam was in the duty room when the Security Chief beckoned to him, and to Martin Evans.

"Transporter Room," he ordered. "A package to be collected and delivered to the Security Hold - Mr. Kirk will be waiting for you there."

As they left the duty room Sam was aware of intense excitement - this was his opportunity. Turning to Evans, he said, "Martin, do me a favour, will you?"

"What's that?"

"You remember what you said the other day, that I looked like the First Officer? Well, it's a long story, and I'll tell you later, but... he is my brother. I haven't seen him in years, and it might be awkward... he doesn't know yet that I'm on board. When we've delivered this package to him, go quickly, will you, and give me a chance to talk to him alone. I'd like to set things straight with him before anyone else finds out."

"Sure, Sam; I understand."

"Thanks - and keep quiet about this for now, will you?"

"I'll not say a word," Martin promised.

Outside the Security Hold the Commander was waiting; he took the package without looking at them, keyed the door release, and entered the hold. In response to a signal from Sam, Martin nodded and slipped away so that when the Commander emerged they were alone. Sam waited while he re-sealed the door, then said very quietly,

"Hello, Jimmy."

The Commander whirled, astonishment flaring in his eyes; for a moment he stared blankly at the man before him, then recognition dawned.

"Sam!" he exclaimed. "But how... why... what are you doing here?"

"It's a long story and one I'm not very proud of," Sam replied. "I know what you must think of me, and I don't blame you... but at least let me explain. Is there somewhere we can talk?"

"Yes, of course," Kirk seemed stunned. "We can... "

At that moment, Uhura's voice came from the intercom. "Commander Kirk to the bridge."

With a visible effort Jim looked away and crossed to the speaker. "Acknowledged," he said. Turning back to Sam he said hurriedly, "Come to my quarters tonight. I have to go with Sp... with the Captain... there's a reception the Admiral's giving... but we can talk while I'm getting ready. I must go now."

With a sigh of relief Sam watched him leave - the first hurdle had been overcome, and at least his brother had reacted quietly; of course, he had been taken by surprise, as Sam had intended. Now it only remained to convince his brother that he fully regretted his actions so long ago, but that should be easy - Jimmy had always been a trusting child. Yet it would be as well to be careful ... his position as a Starfleet Commander at so young an age indicated that perhaps he might not be as easy to dominate now as he had been then...

* * * *

Later that evening Sam signalled at the First Officer's door, and obeyed the customary summons, "Come!"

As he entered Jim turned from the mirror where he had been smoothing his hair, and the two men studied each other in silence, assimilating the changes the years had made.

Sam narrowed his eyes thoughtfully - little Jimmy had certainly grown up! He was still slightly smaller, but stockily built now; his hazel eyes held an unfamiliar quiet serenity, and in the impressive dress uniform he wore he radiated an air of confident authority. It was he who broke the silence.

"Why, Sam?" he asked levelly.

Useless to pretend he didn't understand. Sam hesitated a moment, then replied at last, "I meant to keep my promise, Jimmy, please believe that, at least, I thought, if I could get a start, make a home for us somewhere... I found a job, and applied for custody, but it was refused - they said you were too young, I couldn't look after you properly. Then I lost my job, and drifted for a while... I told myself it would be better to wait until you were old enough to leave the orphanage, that they could give you more than I could... I let them persuade me not to take you away... and I'd sunk pretty low by then - nothing criminal, but the life I was leading wasn't right for a kid, you were better off where you were."

"But the letter - that was cruel," Kirk said quietly. "You were all I had - and you didn't want me."

"I know - but at the time it seemed... I had nothing to offer you, you'd have been ashamed of me; I thought... he'll be better off if he forgets all about me, makes his own way in life. So I sent that letter. It seemed right at the time, but I've never ceased to regret it. Soon after that I took a good look at myself, and didn't like what I saw; so I started to pull myself together. I joined Starfleet Security. When I was on my feet again I realised what I'd done to you, but I was too ashamed to face you, so I kept out of your life. When I got this posting to the Enterprise, I didn't know you were First Officer - if I had, I'd have refused it. Now it's too late; I'm here, and we'll have to make the best of things. You don't have to acknowledge me as your brother - if anyone comments on the resemblance, we can always say we're distant cousins. I'll do whatever you want; but believe this, Jimmy." Sam took a deep breath and held his brother's eyes, almost believing he meant what he said. "I've never ceased

to regret what I did to you; I'll understand if you can't forgive me... but now that we've found each other again... please try?"

For a moment there was silence, then Jim's face softened, his lips parted in a grin of delight, and he moved forward to hug his brother fiercely.

"Oh Sam, I'm so glad to see you," he choked.

Sam returned the hug, holding his brother close. Over Jim's head he smiled in satisfaction - it was going to be all right, Jimmy hadn't changed after all, he was still as sentimental as ever; but mingled with the satisfaction he experienced a stirring of a long-forgotten tenderness for his young brother that he had not felt since they were children, before their parents vanished. Involuntarily, his smile broadened to one of pleasure.

"So it's all right?" he asked.

"Let's forget it." Jim's hands tightened for a moment, then he stepped back. "Let me look at you."

"Thank you, Jimmy. Well, I see that you made out all right."

"Yes, in the end. Our parents left a little money, and I won a scholarship to Starfleet Academy."

"You always did have the brains. First Officer at your age - and for a Vulcan Captain; you must be good."

"Spock helped me a lot," Kirk said. "He's been a good friend - you'll like him."

"Will I?" Sam asked wryly - a Vulcan seemed a strange choice of companion for his impulsive, emotional brother. He was about to say so when the door buzzer sounded.

"Come!"

It was the Captain, also in dress uniform; an idic medallion hung around his neck, twin to the one Sam now noticed his brother was wearing.

"Jim, are you ready? We should leave... " The Vulcan broke off as he noticed the visitor.

"Spock, you'll never guess what's happened!" In his excitement Jim caught at the Captain's arm; noticing this, the fact that the Vulcan did not at once move away, and the fleeting, indulgent glance he gave the Human, Sam was intrigued - Vulcans, he knew, did not like to be touched, but this one was accepting it with every appearance of equanimity.

"Tell me, then," the quiet voice said calmly.

"It's Sam, my brother - here on the Enterprise! Isn't it wonderful?"

"Indeed." The impassive eyes turned to Sam, studying him with penetrating intensity before the Vulcan glanced back at Jim. "Shall I make your excuses to the Admiral? You and your brother will have much to discuss."

"Excuses? Oh, the reception... I'd almost forgotten. No, I'll go with you - I want to. Sam and I will have plenty of time to catch up."

"As you wish. If you will excuse us, Lieutenant?"

"Of course, sir. Goodnight, Jim... er... Commander."

"Commander on duty, Jim when we're alone," his brother laughed, escorting him to the door. As it slid shut Sam caught a final glimpse of the two figures, his brother's face radiant with excitement and pleasure, the enquiring tilt of one slanting eyebrow as the Vulcan moved forward; then Sam was alone in the corridor, staring blankly at a closed door.

Sam Kirk quickly found his relationship to the First Officer made little difference to his position on board. There was considerable interested discussion when it first became known, but when it became clear that the Commander was not inclined to favouritism, the fact was quickly accepted and forgotten.

For his own part Sam was perfectly content as he settled into the routine of the Enterprise; he had achieved his aim, to regain his brother's confidence, and as a bonus he now had the friendship of a serene, self-possessed man he could respond to as he could not have done to the dependent child Jimmy had once been. Later, perhaps, he might be persuaded to use his influence on Sam's behalf, but for the moment it was enough simply to enjoy their new relationship.

Jim - he could no longer think of him as Jimmy - was indeed an excellent First Officer, liked and respected by the crew, and possessing in full the confidence of the exacting Vulcan Captain.

That friendship continued to puzzle Sam; although he was now a regular visitor to his brother's quarters, in off-duty hours much of Jim's free time seemed to be spent with Spock. In a duty situation that was to be expected, for being Vulcan-trained Jim had adopted the habit of shadowing his commander closely at all times; but even his leisure hours were mostly spent in the company of the impassive alien, either playing chess in the rec room, or in the Captain's quarters.

On their first shore leave Sam invited Jim to go with him, and was disappointed when he refused, saying that he had promised to go with Spock and McCoy. Instead, Sam made up a foursome with Aurelan, Martin and Sylvia Bradshaw, Martin's latest girl. In the relaxed atmosphere of the pleasure planet his feelings for Aurelan awakened again, and their affair was resumed. Despite the fact that he had given her little thought while they were apart she still had the power to arouse him, and once more he found himself thinking seriously of a future for them. Aurelan returned his feelings, but they both still had a year of their tour of duty to run, so they decided to postpone any decision until it was over; in the meantime, they could enjoy a discreet affair.

On his return to the Enterprise Sam resumed his duties with earnest dedication, keen to make a good impression; but he could not rid himself of the uncomfortable feeling that the Captain, while not appearing to take much notice, was actually extremely aware of him. Often, as he went about his duties, he would look up to find those dark, inscrutable eyes fixed on him thoughtfully; and while unable to give a reason, he had the distinct impression that the Captain distrusted him.

In that, he was right. Spock was privately certain that Jim's parents were indeed dead; that being so, Sam's had been a particularly cruel betrayal of Jim's trust. With his brother's support Jim might have found the strength to resist the sadistic Captain who had enslaved him; but totally alone, his self-confidence already shaken, hungry for approval and affection, he had fallen easy prey to the man who had pretended to befriend him only to use him with such appalling brutality.

It might be, Spock conceded, that Sam's regret was genuine, but his affection for his First Officer made him cautious. He said nothing, for the radiant joy in Jim's eyes at the reunion with his brother was too precious to mar, but all Spock's protective instincts were roused - Sam must never again have the opportunity to betray Jim's trust.

So Spock watched and waited, ready to interfere at the first sign that his friend was being used; and it was the intensity of his vigilance that betrayed him, warning Sam not to presume too far in his relationship with the First Officer.

Even to himself, Sam's feelings were not too clear. He had thoughtlessly abandoned his heart-broken young brother rather than be saddled with any responsibilities; now he was aware of a very real pride at how much Jim had achieved so quickly. He knew already how much the crew liked and respected their young

First Officer, for although exacting, he was always just; and for a Human to have earned so completely the confidence of a Vulcan was a remarkable occurrence.

Yet mingled with this pride was an undercurrent of resentment and envy - Jim had achieved so much, must surely be offered his own command one day; while he was still only a security lieutenant. It was an almost unconscious reaction, and he did try to fight it, but he could not bring himself to admit that the weakness of his own nature had held him back. Now it seemed to him that he only had to wait, and he would be assured of eventual promotion to Security Chief - Jim was growing daily fonder of him, and would undoubtedly be easily persuaded to use his influence with the Vulcan when the time came.

In truth, his motives were a curious mixture which not even he understood fully. On the one hand, Jim would be useful; but he rapidly found himself succumbing, as so many did, to his brother's shy charm, and often wondered, with a tinge of regret, how it would have been if they had remained together.

* * * *

In an attempt to get to know Jim more fully Sam studied him closely when they worked together. He was often assigned as Security watch on the First Officer during landing party duty, and so had ample opportunity to watch his brother in action.

He could not help but notice how closely Jim seemed able to work with the Vulcan, the subtle, unspoken understanding that existed between Human and alien; it puzzled him, but he only began to understand the reason during a survey of Lazdon, a newly-discovered, uninhabited planet which showed signs of having large mineral deposits.

The Science Department was working at full stretch, with two teams led respectively by Kirk and Lt. Moreau operating a twenty-four hour rota in order to gather and process information as quickly as possible. As they were in a comparatively peaceful sector of the galaxy the Captain, rather than remain idly on board, beamed down with Kirk's team to lend a hand - he had an unusually thorough grasp of the duties of a Science Officer.

One afternoon Kirk decided to explore further afield, and Sam went with him; his brother was quickly absorbed in studying and recording details of the rock formations; but while he found the seemingly-endless poking around to be extremely boring, Sam dared not relax. Lazdon numbered several dangerous predators among its animal life, and he had to be constantly on the alert - with a shudder he recalled the unholy row there had been a few weeks earlier when a guard's vigilance had relaxed, and Kirk had been slightly injured.

The Captain's wrath had descended on the luckless man's head in a shower of freezing contempt, and the Security Chief had made it plain that the sooner he transferred off the Enterprise, the better for all concerned.

For this reason Sam was doubly on the alert for any danger; he was paying so much attention to the landscape that it took him some moments to notice that Jim had stopped work, and was gazing back anxiously the way they had come. Alarmed at the expression of concern on his brother's face, Sam approached quickly.

"Jim, what's wrong?" he asked.

"Be quiet!" Jim was leaning forward slightly, his head tilted to the side as though he listened to some unheard voice; then without a word of explanation he exploded into action, running back towards the main party some miles distant. Sam took off after him, his heart in his mouth; Jim was running blindly, without any thought for the uneven ground, or the obstacles in his path. At last he overtook his brother and caught his arm to pull him to a halt.

"Where do you think you're going?" he demanded angrily - he did not relish the thought of being blamed if Jim injured himself in his headlong flight.

"Let go of me!"

When Sam did not immediately comply he found that he had a snarling, fighting fury on his hands; Jim's eyes blazed with fear and horror in a white, set face, and he struggled violently to be free. But Sam's superior strength told, and he managed to hold on until Jim calmed down and stood quietly under his hands, although every muscle in his body trembled.

"Now what was all that about?" Sam demanded, torn between relief and anger.

"Spock... he's hurt... I must go to him," Jim panted.

"How can he be? They'd have called you..."

"I tell you, I know! He was coming for me, and something happened... an accident... I'm not sure... but he needs help - I must go to him."

"All right, we'll play it your way," Sam sighed, for he could feel Jim's muscles tense again for action. "Since you seem to know what's happening, you'd better lead the way - but be careful."

Jim nodded and set off again, still hurrying, but this time watching his path more carefully.

At last they reached a point where the path led along the base of a cliff; on the outward journey Sam remembered seeing a dangerous-looking overhang, but it was not there now - in its place a heap of fallen rocks almost blocked the path, and beneath it... beneath it lay a limp, motionless figure wearing a gold shirt.

"Call McCoy," Jim snapped, and ran the last few yards; Sam obeyed, and was told that the doctor was with the main landing party - he would be with them soon. Closing his communicator Sam hurried forward to see if he could help, though privately he doubted that it was any use - the Captain's lower body was almost completely buried, and he was bleeding heavily from a deep gash across his forehead.

Sam, the landing party, the Enterprise, were all forgotten as Kirk approached and hesitated for a moment, afraid of what he might find. Spock looked so pale... there was so much blood... how could even he have lived through such a terrible accident?

As he came closer the Vulcan stirred, gave a low groan, and the dark eyes opened, filled with pain and confusion. With a choked cry Kirk fell to his knees to take Spock's head on his lap, tenderly smoothing back the dusty hair, afraid to do more for fear of causing further injury.

"Spock," he called softly, and the agonised eyes turned to him with an expression of relief. But only for an instant - almost at once the careful mask of control slid into place as the Vulcan fought to keep his pain from the Human who held him.

"Don't shut me out, Spock." Kirk's voice was almost a sob. "Let me help you - I know how, and I'm strong enough."

Spock closed his eyes wearily, trying to think through the pain that confused him. There was an almost irresistible temptation to fall into a healing trance, but he could not - McCoy would have to move him, the trance would be broken... he would have to remain awake until he reached the Enterprise. Kirk could help... but his instinctive reaction was to shield his friend from the pain that consumed him; then a deeper wisdom warned him that this would be wrong.

Kirk depended so much on him still, but he had also earned the right to help and comfort where he could - to deny him that in an effort to protect him would be to reduce him once more to the pitiful, helpless plaything he had been. Kirk did have the knowledge and the strength to do what was necessary - and more than that, he passionately wanted to help. He must be allowed to do so.

With a sigh Spock looked up, his eyes warm with affection and gratitude;



sensing his consent, Kirk managed a tremulous smile in response then leaned closer, gently touching his right hand to Spock's face.

At once the miracle began to happen, the warm, gentle flowing-together of their minds in the exquisite comfort of the meld; reaching out to entwine their thoughts until the mind of one enfolded and was enfolded by that of the other.

Slowly, with delicate care, Spock responded to Kirk's presence, gradually lowering his barriers until the pain began to impact on the Human's mind, to be reflected in the sudden pallor of his face, a sharp intake of breath, the tightening of his lips.

Shared so, the pain seemed to diminish in intensity as each bore it out, giving support and comfort to the other; nothing existed save the circle of their linked minds, and Spock was aware of an almost awed delight in the strength of Kirk's will. The Human felt the pain - it could not be otherwise - but he rode with it, not allowing himself to be overwhelmed; and his compassion, his gentleness, tamed it to an endurable level. It was an unheard-of accomplishment for any Human; but for Kirk, who had been for so long

considered a contemptible slave, it was a marvel indeed. For the hundredth time Spock found himself wondering how his counterpart, even blinded by prejudice, could have failed to recognise the quality of the man he had tortured and despised.

For Kirk himself the meld was a reaffirmation of the loyalty he had pledged to the Vulcan, a dedication of everything worthwhile in him to the man who had rescued him. He delighted in his new-found abilities, not for his own sake but because he was able to help Spock.

Often in the early days, when he had first been freed from his brutal master, his shattered spirit had crept trembling into the shelter of Spock's mind to be healed and strengthened; now here was something he could do, some small repayment he could make, and he welcomed his portion of their shared pain as the proof of his usefulness. It was truly now a meeting of equals for he, who had for so long been the comforted, was now the comforter; and the trusting dependence with which Spock turned to him was the final proof that his timid dream, to live up to Spock's memories of his lost Kirk, had been realised.

For the watching Sam it was an anxious, seemingly endless period of helpless waiting. He had seen the spasm of pain that had crossed Jin's face soon after he took hold of Spock, and was aware that something was happening here that he did not understand; he had moved uneasily, but his brother's face was serene now, his eyes alight with an impossible joy as he held the Vulcan's gaze. They were so still... but he supposed that Jim knew what he was doing...

With an exclamation of relief he turned as the ring of footsteps announced McCoy's arrival at last. The doctor hesitated, then came forward and studied the two men intently for a moment.

"Linked!" he grunted at last. "I might have known - still, perhaps it's for the best."

A hypo hissed at Spock's shoulder, his eyes closed slowly, and with a soft, startled cry Jim looked up.

"It's all right, Jim - I've only sedated him," McCoy said soothingly. "You men - " he gestured to Sam, and the two Security guards who had accompanied him, " - get these rocks off the Captain, and let me see how he is."

It took the three of them to move some of the rocks. Working slowly, afraid of causing any of the rocks to slip, they gently freed the Captain, and McCoy bent over the still body while Kirk watched anxiously, still absently smoothing the Vulcan's hair.

"How is he, Bones?" His voice was not quite steady.

"Bad enough - but it could be worse. His right leg's broken in two places, there's some internal bleeding... but one of the rocks fell at an angle, and kept most of the weight off him. I want him in sickbay as soon as possible, though - I'll be able to tell more when I've had a proper look."

The guards moved forward, but Kirk waved them away. "I'll do it," he said. "You know he hates to be touched." Without waiting for a reply he rose to his feet and carefully lifted the Vulcan into his arms; in response to McCoy's command the transporter pulled the group away.

Aboard the Enterprise Jim - reluctantly, Sam thought - surrendered his burden to the waiting medical team, and followed them to sickbay. It seemed that he would even follow blindly into the operating room, but McCoy's raised hand stopped him at the door.

"Go and get some rest, Jim," the doctor said compassionately. "You can't do any more for now - I'll call you when there's any news."

"I'll wait," Jim said stubbornly, and sat down. McCoy gave a sigh of resignation, flicked a glance at Sam, said, "Stay with him, will you?" and vanished.

So again Sam waited, hovering uneasily, trying to make conversation, but he

was defeated by the lack of response. Jim sat in silence, his face expressionless, only his nervously-twisting hands betraying the tension he felt.

At last McCoy reappeared, looking tired but triumphant; he crossed to Jim, stilling those restless hands with his own warm clasp.

"He's going to be all right, Jim," he said emphatically. "I've set his leg, and repaired the internal damage; he's slipped into a healing trance, so you can go and get some rest - you look awful."

"Can I see him?"

"Best not, for now. Don't worry, I'll call you when he begins to come round. There now!" he interrupted himself as Jim swayed unsteadily. "I knew it - you're feeling the strain of the link."

"It was necessary," Kirk replied wearily. "He told me once... it's dangerous to disturb a healing trance without the proper safeguards; I knew he'd have to be transported up, so I had to link with him to keep him awake."

"Well, you'll pay for it," grumbled McCoy. "Take him away, Sam, and put him to bed - I'll look in later."

Unresisting, Jim allowed himself to be led to his quarters; he was so tired he raised no protest as his brother helped him into bed.

Despite his concern Sam could not restrain his curiosity, and as he settled Jim on the pillow he asked, "How did you do that, Jim?"

"Hmmm?"

"McCoy said you... linked minds... with the Captain."

"Oh, that. Yes, it was necessary."

Sam felt suddenly uneasy. "You're not a telepath, are you?" he asked suspiciously.

"Good Lord, no! It's just something he taught me once... he's the only one I can reach... or want to." The last words were almost inaudible, and when Sam looked down, a further question on his lips, Jim was asleep.

Gently Sam drew the covers up around his brother's shoulders and dimmed the lights; but as he left the room he was frowning in bewilderment.

* * * *

With his Vulcan powers of healing the Captain recovered from his injuries more quickly than a Human would have done, but he was forced to spend several weeks first in sickbay, then confined to his quarters.

During this period Sam Kirk saw very little of his brother; Jim was in command of the Enterprise, and what little time he could spare from his combined duties he spent with Spock.

As a result Sam spent more time in the Security rec room, taking the opportunity to be with Aurolan; she was eager for details of the accident, and he told her what he had witnessed. She was interested, for a rumour had been circulating in the ship that Kirk could employ telepathy when he chose, and this confirmation was eagerly discussed and quoted as another example of the almost uncanny understanding that existed between Captain and First Officer.

As Martin said one evening, "What else can you expect? He's Vulcan-trained, after all. Still, it's nice to know that some Humans can meet a Vulcan on equal terms!"

"Well, I still say the First's an odd one, even if he is your brother, Sam," Aurelan said. "It's not usual for a Human to spend so much time with a Vulcan - it's a wonder all that logic hasn't driven him crazy by now."

"I guess," Sam said slowly, "it's because Jim's always been a loner - we lost touch when he was very young. I think he's just not used to mixing a lot."

"He doesn't mix much," Aurelan agreed. "Remember, Martin, the way it used to be? You'd hardly ever get a glimpse of him off duty... though I will say, we've seen a lot more of him lately."

"Well, look at it this way," Martin laughed, "at least it kept the First off our necks - he's been even more conscientious than usual lately."

"Vulcan influence?" Aurelan chuckled, and the subject was dropped.

Of more interest to Sam was the rumour, unconfirmed but persistent, that the Security Chief was considering applying for a posting to a Starbase.

Although he had served for only a few months on the Enterprise, Sam was senior Security lieutenant, and considered himself sufficiently experienced for the promotion; he had received several commendations, including one from Captain Spock - and Jim's influence would surely clinch the matter.

Nothing could be said officially, of course, until the Chief did apply for a transfer, but Sam considered that the position was as good as his; in the meantime he continued with his assigned duties, his efficiency noted by his colleagues and compared to that of his brother.

* * * *

Captain Spock was back on the bridge of the Enterprise by the time their next shore leave fell due. They were in orbit around Calderon, one of the most famous pleasure planets in the galaxy, and would remain long enough for the entire crew to sample its attractions in turn.

Sam's first disappointment came when he, Martin and Aurelan were assigned to different rotas, and none of them could work an exchange; it was a pity, for they had hoped to visit as a group.

Hoping to use the time instead to get closer to his brother, Sam invited Jim to accompany him, but was again refused - Spock was to visit relatives at the Vulcan embassy, and Jim had already agreed to go with him.

It was vital that he did so. There was no way Spock could avoid the invitation, but these supposed relatives were complete strangers to him - one mistake on his part, and suspicion would certainly be aroused. Although Sarek knew the truth now, and had accepted the Commodore as his son, the secret must still be kept. The Vulcan clan system was very powerful in this universe, and even Sarek would be helpless to protect them if it became known that Captain Spock was in fact dead, murdered by a Human. Kirk would have to face the horrors of a public trial and either confess the shameful truth or remain silent and serve an inevitable prison sentence. Even worse - as Vulcan law permitted, the Captain's clan might insist that Kirk be handed over to them for punishment; and as the Vulcan of this universe was less advanced than the Commodore's, it seemed that whatever penalty was imposed, it would be both savage and cruelly prolonged.

There was one chance - the Captain had kept Kirk always at his side, even on family occasions; Kirk had been here before, and knew everyone they might be likely to meet. He would have to use the mind link to guide Spock in his dealings with his family, and would, he hoped, remember enough to avoid any mistakes. Fortunately the Captain had concealed the dark side of his nature, so that at least he would not have to play the part of the despised but valuable possession - their hosts would accept him, as they had done before, as Spock's First Officer.

None of this could be explained to Sam, of course; he was told only half the truth - that Jim wanted to go with Spock. Sam was disappointed, and for a moment uneasiness troubled him - why did Jim spend so much time with the Vulcan? - but Martin suggested that while he was on his own anyway, he might as well take advantage of the famed attractions of Calderon; so reconciled to the idea he beamed down to Laron, the capital, determined to enjoy his leave in his own way.

* * * *

Calderon was famous for its discretion. It did not enjoy the wild reputation

of other more uninhibited pleasure planets, but in its own quiet way it catered extremely thoroughly for the many and varied tastes of its visitors.

Martin had recommended one establishment, the notorious Star Gardens, and Sam made his way directly to it. Indeed, he had not needed the recommendation.

Star Gardens was, in fact, one of the most famous brothels in the galaxy, and Sam had always slightly regretted that none of his ships had ever stopped at Calderon while he was on board.

The proprietors, experts in psychology, catered for every possible desire. Knowing that Starship men, lonely and far from home, were often desperate for at least the illusion of affection in their lives, they had provided a unique service. While girls could be purchased for the night in the usual manner, it was also possible to hire a companion for the duration of a leave. During that time the girl would be exclusively at her client's disposal, and pairings were arranged by mutual consent so that the client was not entertained by an unwilling companion.

This arrangement appealed to Sam; Lyda, the girl he chose, accepted him enthusiastically, for in comparison to many of her customers he was young and personable - she expected to enjoy herself. So both were content, and Sam's leave passed agreeably in the suite of rooms they shared. Indeed, something of a friendship grew up between them as he took her dancing, or sightseeing, as he might have done with any respectable young girl he met; her profession had not coarsened her, and Sam thought with satisfaction that he would seek her out again when the Enterprise next visited Calderon - that was, he added guiltily, if Aurelan was not with him.

One evening towards the end of Sam's leave he and Lyda were preparing to go out for a meal; Sam had just emerged from the shower when Lyda, who had been standing by the window, gave an exclamation of disgust and shrank back.

"What is it?" Sam asked, hurrying forward.

"It's all right, he's not coming in - for a moment I thought he was."

"Who's not?"

"That devil. Look there - but don't let him see you," Lyda said, pointing. At first Sam could not see who she meant, then he caught sight of two familiar figures strolling slowly along the street, deep in conversation.

"You mean the Vulcan? That's Spock - my Captain, and... "

"He's a fiend!" Lyda said harshly. "I'm sorry for you if you're under his command - he's a vicious, perverted monster."

"Spock?" You must be mistaken."

"I'm not - I know all about him. I wonder what he's done to the boy this time."

"What boy?"

"The one with him now - his First Officer, I think. In my business you can't afford to be soft-hearted, but when I think of what he has to suffer... "

"You'd better tell me what you mean," Sam said quietly.

"No, I dare not - I've said too much already. I'm one of the few who know what he's really like - if he finds out I've talked, he'll kill me."

"Lyda, listen to me." Sam caught her shoulders, and stared intently into her eyes. "You must tell me. I promise I won't give you away, but... that boy he's with is my brother."

"Your brother! All right, I'll take the chance - perhaps you can help him. The Vulcan's been here several times, though I haven't seen him for months. He would book a room for a few days, but he never asked for a... companion. I used to wonder why, then I noticed that your brother always joined him. At first I

thought nothing of it, perhaps they made their own arrangements, but I was curious - it isn't often that you see a Human and a Vulcan together, especially in a place like this. I liked your brother - he was always nice to me - and I asked him once if he'd like to hire me. He seemed terrified, begged me not to speak to him again, but he wouldn't say why... next time they came, I found out. The boss told me I'd been assigned to your brother... but when I got to his room the Vulcan was there too; that's not unusual in this business, two men sharing the same woman, but it turned out that wasn't what he had in mind... He didn't hurt me, but... Gods, your poor brother! I've never accepted a Vulcan client since."

Lyda's story continued, disjointed, halting as she recalled the events of that night; her profession had accustomed her to strange, even perverted behaviour, but her revulsion at the calculated cruelty she had witnessed made her voice shake with loathing as she talked.

When her voice faded into silence at last Sam remained where he stood, staring at her with unseeing eyes; the nightmare vision haunted him - Jimmy, his brother, to be used so! It surely could not be possible. Then he remembered how much time the two spent together - was this the reason? Anger darkened his face, and seeing it, Lyda caught his arm anxiously.

"Be careful, Sam," she warned. "He's dangerous - if he finds out that you know, he'll kill you."

"I must think," Sam muttered. "Thank you for telling me, Lyda - I had to know. I don't know what to do for the best, though - this is so... I'd better speak to Jim first, I suppose; but I'll get him free even if I have to kill that brute."

"I hope you do!" Lyda said viciously.

"Do you mind if we don't go out tonight? It would be best if I talked to Jim as soon as possible - there's not much I can do on the ship, but here on Calderon it'll be easier to get to Spock if I have to."

"And I'll be glad to help you. But can you reach your brother?"

"I think so - he's staying at the Vulcan embassy. There's nothing suspicious about my wanting to talk to him."

"I'll place the call for you," Lyda offered.

* * * *

An hour later Sam Kirk was hurrying through the crowded streets of Laron heading for the public gardens where he had agreed to meet his brother. Lyda had suggested the meeting place, saying that it would be quiet at this hour, and as Sam approached along the path he saw Jim kneeling on the edge of a fountain, playing with the strange, iridescent fish that swam in its waters.

Unseen, Sam studied him carefully, and felt doubt rise in his mind; Jim looked happy, relaxed as he laughed at the antics of the fish, and it reminded Sam of his brother's clearly expressed joy in Spock's company. But he had to know... Jim raised his head at Sam's approach, and his clear, hazel eyes were calm and serene - surely he could not look so content if he spent his nights in the arms of a sadistic madman? And Spock... impossible to think of that dignified man behaving as Lyda had described... yet she had been so certain...

"Hello, Sam - what's the emergency?" Jim called.

"Sit down, Jim," Sam replied, indicating a seat. "This is important."

"So I see," Jim said, taking in his brother's grim expression, and moving aside obediently.

"Where's the Vulcan?" Sam asked abruptly.

"Spock? I left him at the embassy. Why? Has this got something to do with him?"

"It has."

Afraid to delay further Sam launched into a recital of Lyda's story. As he spoke he kept his eyes on his brother's face, and saw it first turn crimson as if with shame, then ashen-pale. When he was done Jim stared at him for a moment, his eyes wet with tears, his lips trembling.

"Jim, I... "

"Oh God!" With a hopeless sigh Jim dropped his head into his hands and sat for a moment trying to calm himself, thinking how best to allay Sam's suspicions. At last he looked up, and held his brother's eyes.

"Sam, listen to me. I don't know where you heard that story - and I don't want to know - but this is the truth." He paused, then continued more calmly. "There are many things in my life you'll never know about, things I'm bitterly ashamed of... but this... isn't one of them. You think that Spock has some hold on me? He has - but not as you imagine. He found me when I was completely broken, with no-one to turn to, and he helped me put my life back together. Without him, I'd be dead or insane long ago. I respect him, honour him - I even love him in a way - but he's never laid a hand on me that way, and never will. It's only because you're my brother, and I know you're concerned for me that I'll tell you this much - even if he... wanted me... in that way... it would be no use - he's never been capable of sexual arousal. Now, you can believe me or not, as you like, but I promise you this - if you ever again say a word against Spock, I'll never forgive you."

Sam relaxed in relief; the passionate sincerity in Jim's voice could only be genuine... but he had to be certain.

"You swear he's never touched you?" he asked.

Jim looked at him steadily. "I swear that Spock has never laid a hand on me," he repeated firmly.

"Thank God! I'm sorry, Jim; she - my informant - must have been mistaken ... but I was so scared for you... I had to know."

"It's... nice to know that you cared," Jim said softly.

"Well, I feel a prize idiot; look, do you have to tell the Captain about this?"

"Don't worry, Sam; now go and enjoy the rest of your leave - I'll see you on board."

"Thanks, Jim; see you." Sam ruffled his brother's hair affectionately and hurried away; it was a relief to know that after all, it had been a mistake - he need take no action.

Lyda was waiting for him anxiously, and her face cleared when he told her of Jim's denial.

"I guess I must have made a mistake," she said. "Vulcans look pretty much alike to me; and your brother - I only saw him at a distance. I'm glad he wasn't the one after all."

"So am I," Sam said fervently. "I wonder who the poor devil is, though."

"I don't suppose we'll ever know," Lyda said sadly. "But from the bottom of my heart, I pity him."

* * * *

Kirk watched his brother's departure, and there was undisguised affection in his eyes, mingled however with the outrage he felt that the Captain's past should have reached out to touch Spock. The Vulcan must be told, of course - for his own protection he must know that there was someone on the planet who knew the truth about his counterpart.

After a few moments he turned his head, smiling a welcome at the Vulcan who

was approaching across the grass. Spock's keen eyes saw the tension in the Human's face; he put aside the question he had intended to ask, and waited instead for the confidence he knew would come in Jim's own way.

"Spock, we may have a problem," Kirk said at last. "Sam's heard about the Captain."

"He challenged you?"

"Yes; that's all right, though - I told him the truth."

"The truth?" Spock looked puzzled; he knew how ashamed Jim was of what he had been and would have expected him to have concealed his past from his brother.

Kirk laughed. "I don't mean I told him you're not the Captain; all I had to do was swear you've never touched me. He knew I wasn't lying. So he won't make any trouble - he thinks it was mistaken identity... but Spock, someone on this planet must have told him, and whoever it was knows what really happened."

Spock frowned in concentration. "Then whoever it was must have seen us together, and remembered seeing you with the Captain. Can you think who it might have been?"

"No, I... " Kirk stopped, then his eyes widened suddenly. "Yes, of course! This afternoon, on our way back to the embassy, we passed the Star Gardens. I didn't think of it at the time, I was so interested in what you were saying, but one of the staff must have seen us."

"The Star Gardens? That's a hotel, isn't it?"

Kirk flushed. "Not quite, though that's its cover. It's a brothel, very discreet, very expensive, with facilities for all tastes. The Captain took me there several times... there was a girl... he - he used her to humiliate me once... if she saw us she might have remembered, and told Sam... she was sorry for me... Yes, I'm sure that's it - he must be staying there. If I'm right, we're safe, she won't spread the story any further - they were all scared of him; and Sam knows I was telling the truth about you - I never could lie convincingly."

"Then as you say, the story should go no further; she would not risk the publicity of denouncing me openly. But may I enquire what action your brother proposed to take had you not convinced him of the error?"

"I think he was going to kill you," Kirk said, his eyes darkening. "But Spock - that proves he must be fond of me, doesn't it, if he was prepared to risk killing you to free me?"

"Yes, Jim," Spock said, smiling down into the hopeful eyes. "His concern on your behalf is indeed an encouraging sign."

But Spock was still not prepared to trust Sam Kirk completely. It could be that affection for his brother had been his motive, that he did sincerely regret his earlier betrayal, and was trying to atone for it; but Spock knew far more about Human psychology than he was prepared to admit, and knew well that his reaction might have been prompted by outraged pride. Until he knew for certain that Sam really had changed, Spock had no intention of entrusting him with Jim's happiness; but he said nothing of his inner misgivings, allowing the Human to enjoy without question his new-found friendship with his brother.

"Come, Jim," he said at last. "They are waiting for us at the embassy." Kirk rose at once, and the two men walked slowly away through the gathering dusk, each deep in thought; but their shared silence was warm with their utter unity.

Sam returned to the Enterprise a little apprehensively, but the warmth of his brother's greeting reassured him - Jim understood why he had confronted him, and appreciated his concern. It seemed too that he had not repeated the story to the Captain, for the dark eyes were as calm as ever when they met Sam's - and surely not even a Vulcan could have heard of such a charge without resentment.

The strength of his feelings had come as something of a shock to Sam. Until now he had been mildly fond of his brother, had seen his potential usefulness; but his outrage on Jim's behalf had been the strongest emotion he had felt for a long time. Though he would never have admitted it Sam too had known loneliness during the years, and this reunion with a brother grown capable and confident in contrast to the clinging, dependent child he had been, was very satisfying.

Gradually they grew closer as the ties of blood drew them together, until even Spock's vigilance relaxed a little, reassured by Sam's open concern. During this period, in fact, the Vulcan withdrew a little, allowing the affection between the brothers to develop. He fought down the instinctive wish to claim all Jim's time and attention, understanding, with a rare wisdom, that the Human must learn to form trusting relationships with others - until now only McCoy and Spock himself had won his complete confidence.

For that reason he sometimes made excuses not to be with Jim, knowing that he would seek his brother's company; but despite that the Vulcan was only too well aware that he still held first place in Jim's thoughts; the knowledge was ... comforting.

There was another on the Enterprise who had reservations about Sam Kirk, and that was McCoy. The doctor had shared every step of the long, bitter struggle to rehabilitate Kirk, and took an affectionate pride in the strong, self-reliant man who now stood so confidently at Spock's side; but long experience had warned him just how precarious that recovery might still be. He understood, perhaps better than they did, just how much Human and Alien, each bearing deep emotional scars, still needed each other. Not wishing to raise questions that perhaps neither could answer, he did not voice his doubts; but one thing he knew - Jim's wounds went very deep. His desperate need for approval, though unconscious, was still an integral part of his character. And McCoy wondered - would that need extend now to Sam, giving Kirk a biased view of his brother's character, so that he was not sufficiently on his guard?

Meanwhile, Sam was considering his own future. There was still no word of the Security Chief's posting, and Jim had dropped no hint that he was being considered for promotion; he felt that it would be unwise to ask directly, but when the opportunity arose for him to find out how the land lay, he took it without hesitation.

Sam was in his brother's quarters one evening when Jim was called to the bridge. "Pour yourself a drink, Sam," he said as he left. "I shouldn't be long."

Sam did so, and holding his glass began the absent-minded tour of inspection people often make when alone in a room not their own.

It was a curiously bare room, Sam thought, considering his brother's years of service on the Enterprise; apart from some books, and a strange, delicate carving he had presumably picked up on some planet - probably Vulcan to judge from its appearance - there were few personal possessions scattered around; it was as though his brother had not cared enough to stamp his personality on the room.

His wandering brought Sam eventually to the desk, and he glanced at it curiously; for a moment he almost passed over the folder bearing the insignia of the Security Section.

It was a temptation Sam could not resist; opening it he found that it was, as he had thought, the service records of the Security personnel. Almost unconsciously he turned the pages until he found his own name, and began to read.

After a time Sam drew a deep breath, closed the folder, and replaced it exactly as he had found it; then picking up his drink he walked back to his chair and sat down, draining his glass with a savage gesture. The words of the report burned before his eyes, and he shook with anger as its implications sank home.

The report set out his career in full detail, a creditable list of achievement, with his numerous commendations listed and detailed. From basic training until his present posting it was a satisfying record; but the final sections destroyed his hopes completely.

The Security Chief, after praising his work, concluded with the assessment, "In my opinion Lt. Kirk, while an extremely able and competent Security Officer, is temperamentally unsuited to the position of Security Chief. He obeys orders with promptness and efficiency, but does not possess the ability to command."

Below that, his medical and psychological profile, and a further blow to his ambition from that interfering McCoy. "Lt. Kirk's psychology is unsuited to command. An inherent instability, while not interfering with his present duties, would make him a liability in any position of greater responsibility."

There it was, the report that would decide his future, prepared for the attention of the Captain; and what protest had his dear brother made, what had he said in his support? Merely four damning words.

"Assessment accepted and confirmed." And signed by Commander James T. Kirk.

So that was it! Little Jimmy had waited a long time for his revenge, and now he had taken it. All pretense, that show of brotherly affection - Jimmy had never forgotten nor forgiven that childhood abandonment.

In his anger and disappointment Sam did not even consider the truth - that Jim, who could face with clear eyes his own limitations, was also able to judge others; that Jim could be fond of him, yet also be aware of his faults, did not occur to Sam - he was convinced that his brother had instigated that report out of spite.

Sam's lips curved in an unpleasant grin as he rose and refilled his glass. Turning, he sketched an ironic salute in the direction of the bridge.

"Two can play at that game, little brother," he promised viciously.

* * * *

But it was not, after all, an easy matter for a Security lieutenant to discredit a First Officer - particularly this First Officer. Jim was too capable, too confident, to make any mistake which could be built up into a court-martial - and that was what Sam wanted. To injure or even kill Jim - that would be comparatively simple, could be made to look like an accident... but it would not be enough. He wanted to see his brother crushed, humiliated, his career in ruins; he wanted to see Jim stripped of all his power and influence, to see men's eyes turn to him with contempt as he passed; to see even the Vulcan withdraw from him in disgust. But there was nothing - nothing that Sam could turn to his advantage.

Sabotage in the science labs; for which Jim would be blamed? No, that wouldn't work - he didn't know enough about the complicated equipment.

Arrange an accident during a landing party? Possible... but so often the Captain was with him, or McCoy... they would be witnesses; and besides, he shrank from the thought of involving his colleagues, some of whom were always on duty to assist and guard the First Officer.

The story Lyda had told? That would destroy Jim's career if he could make it seem that his brother had been a willing partner in his own degradation - and there would be the additional satisfaction of smearing that supercilious Vulcan... but no, again; he had believed Jim when he had denied any involvement

with Spock, and if he was convinced of their innocence, no-one else would accept their guilt.

Every possibility led to a dead end; Jim was too secure, too well-guarded. Still, Sam could wait; sooner or later he would discover his brother's weakness, and when he did, he would show no mercy.

* * * *

For Kirk and Spock, there were no problems. The deep, unspoken understanding between them only strengthened as the months passed. Kirk was happy, secure in his place at Spock's side; he had accepted that he would always to some extent need the Vulcan. It was perhaps a weakness in his character, but he faced with courage the realisation that he would probably never be totally self-sufficient, and set himself to achieve the highest possible standard within his limitations. Trusting Spock so completely, he had no fears about accepting the Vulcan's guidance when he knew he needed it, and to his great joy he found that he could measure up to everything Spock asked of him.

And Spock? Spock was content in a way he had never thought to be again. The years of anguished loneliness had faded, taken on the remote quality of a nightmare, loathsome, but unreal now that he was awake. Jim was back, but a Jim subtly different. The rash, impetuous, sometimes arrogant Starship Captain - that man he would never see again; but his generosity, his compassion, his gentleness, were real and alive in the Kirk who now stood at his side. In everything that mattered, they were equals - Jim needed Spock, and Spock needed to be needed; each fulfilled and was fulfilled by the other.

New orders came from Starfleet. The Enterprise was ordered to Deneva, a planet which had recently applied for membership of the Federation. Negotiations had been proceeding well when suddenly, with no warning, the President had dismissed the Federation ambassadors, and had demanded the presence of a Starship. Starfleet had complied, for Deneva occupied a strategic position near the Romulan sphere of influence, and while a state of peace was maintained between Federation and Empire, rivalry was keen, and it was thought unwise to have a Romulan base so near Federation territory. Spock was ordered to try to reopen negotiations with Deneva, and influence them to follow the original plan, if this could be done without provoking an open breach with the Romulans.

Spock obeyed with interest, and a certain unease - he remembered Deneva from his own universe, though this planet was different from the one he had known, having a native population rather than the Federation colony he had visited with such terrible results.

Their reception at Deneva was formal, but courteous. President Makron himself greeted them, and invited the Captain and his senior officers down for talks. With no choice but to accept, Spock left Charlene Masters in command and beamed down, taking Kirk, McCoy, Sulu and Chekov from the regular crew, together with Stafford and Giles, who had been hastily assigned to the Enterprise from the Diplomatic Service. The landing party also included a security squad, among them Sam Kirk and Aurelan Walters.

They were received by the planetary council in full session, the President at its head. In close attendance was the robed figure of the High Priest of Deneva, and with him a tall, disdainful figure with distinctive pointed ears - a Romulan. Spock was at once on the alert - this alliance promised to be dangerous.

"Captain Spock, a regrettable oversight has been called to my attention," President Makron began when all were seated. "It is our custom, before beginning any new undertaking, to gain the approval of our gods. This has not yet been done, and now the matter has become urgent. We have been invited to join both the Federation and the Romulan Empire, and we are undecided. How are we, who know so little of other races, to judge what is best for our people? Only by letting our gods decide.

This is our proposal; we will choose members of your party to undertake the test of the Valley of Truth. If they succeed we will reopen talks with the Federation, but if they fail we will join the Empire. The Romulan Commander and his crew have already undergone the test; if you accept, we will compare the results, and choose accordingly, knowing that the gods have guided the most worthy to victory."

"And if we refuse to participate?" Spock asked quietly.

"That is your right. You will be free to leave, but the Federation must abandon any interest in Deneva."

"I see. Very well, Your Excellency, we will submit to your test. However, I must participate in it."

"That may not be possible; the High Priest will choose those who are to go. From the moment they are chosen until they enter the Valley, they may withdraw, but once the test has begun, they are committed. Holy One, will you make the selection?"

The Chief Priest moved forward, studying the Enterprise party keenly. Without pausing he walked along the line, eyeing each in turn, then came back to scrutinise Spock closely. After a moment he shook his head and moved on to Kirk; another close examination, then he reached out and touched the Human's shoulder.

Kirk remained completely expressionless; the test would be dangerous, he knew, but Deneva must be kept out of Romulan hands. The Chief Priest moved more quickly now; in turn he touched Sulu, Aurelan Walters, Stafford, Giles, and Sam Kirk before he stepped back.

"Excellent," the President said. "Now - the test. You will be taken to the entrance to the Valley - maps will be provided - and will have to find your way to the other side. During the journey you will be deprived of contact with your ship; you may take no weapons, no communications devices, no supplies - but food and water can be found along the way if you look. As six have been chosen, you may travel in pairs, but each pair will be led into the Valley at a different point. The rest is up to you - and the gods."

"Is there any time limit, sir?" asked Kirk.

"Yes. If you do not complete the journey within two days you will have failed, and will pay the penalty. The border is well-guarded, and all who fail are killed on sight. Captain, you will be given the co-ordinates for the Valley entrance - we will expect your party at mid-day tomorrow. I wish you success - may you fare as well as the Romulans, who completed the test without a single casualty."

Kirk stiffened at that, but said nothing. Taking a formal farewell of the council, the Enterprise party returned to the ship.

In the transporter room, Spock turned to the chosen six. "Get some rest," he advised. "You will be called to the briefing room before you leave. Mr. Kirk?"

"I'll join you later, Captain; there's something I want to check on first."

* * * * *

PERSONAL LOG - Sam Kirk

I find myself much easier in mind now that I've finally accepted Jimmy's attitude - even though he'll never know how much I hated him for a time.

When I found out that he was the First Officer of the Enterprise, I was very apprehensive - if he'd held a grudge he sure could have made things difficult for me. But he hadn't changed - he still had the same affectionate nature I remembered.

It's hard, now, to look back and see us both as we were when our parents

were with us; but they were good days, filled with love, and security,.. and laughter. Oh, yes, he laughed then - funny, I'd almost forgotten.

Then - that day - coming back from school to an empty house, not knowing that the... caring... had gone forever. I waited up all night, and in the morning I called the police, not knowing what else to do - we had no other relatives that I knew of.

It was, I suppose, inevitable that we should finish up in a children's home. I wasn't exactly unhappy there - the staff did their best for us - but Jimmy took it hard. We clung to a forlorn hope, always asking when we could go home, but at heart I knew even then that we never would. At last they told us that our parents had vanished without trace, and that it was up to me to take care of my brother.

Jimmy... Jimmy was heart-broken. He was a shy, trusting child, and he could not understand what had happened to his safe, secure world; his muffled sobbing at night as he tried vainly to control his grief and fear tore through me, and I held him, trying to comfort him as best I could, promising that one day I would make a home for us both, that I would always be there. And I meant to keep that promise... then.

But after I left the home and started work, life was too much fun for me to want any ties; then the final letter from Jimmy reached me, saying that the orphanage had a new director, he was bitterly unhappy, and pleading with me to take him away. As if I had time to coddle a useless child! In the heat of the moment I wrote to him, telling him to stop whining and be grateful for what he had - I couldn't be bothered with a helpless burden. He never wrote again.

Not long after, one of my associates was arrested for dealing in drugs. It gave me a shock, made me realise just how feckless I had allowed myself to become - it was time to make a fresh start. Perhaps that old dream of my brother's influenced me, but I thought of Starfleet Security - there was nothing on my record, so I was accepted and began basic training.

So the years passed, busy, contented, fulfilling. I moved from ship to ship - the Kongo, the Excalibur, the Defiant - reaching at last the rank of Security lieutenant. Then came the prize - a posting to the Enterprise. With that experience behind me, I was certain that one day the post of Security Chief would be mine.

At first it seemed perfect. Martin, an old friend, was serving with me; so too was Aurelan - I'd been fond of her once, but we'd lost touch in the way Service people do; yet as soon as I saw her I knew we both felt the flame had not died.

Then Martin threw a bombshell. The First Officer of the Enterprise was James T. Kirk. And it was Jimmy! I knew him at once, though he looked pale and ill as our Vulcan Captain helped him from the rec room. Sulu told me he'd had an accident while on leave, and as things turned out I didn't see him again for a few days. The interval gave me a chance to prepare to confront him, and when I did I found... acceptance, forgiveness; gradually we took up the threads of our relationship.

But... he had changed. The bubbling exuberance I remembered in the child had grown into a serene dignity - perhaps it was his close association with the Vulcan - but I missed his laughter, which comes seldom now; his eyes, usually tranquil, held shadows at times, and I felt... concern. There was a part of his life he would not let me share - he never spoke of the years we had been apart.

I soon became aware that the Captain did not - does not - quite trust me. Oh, he hides it well, but my new concern for Jimmy sharpened my awareness, and I often feel him watching me. I wonder why - surely my relationship with my brother is our business? - but I cannot ask; impossible to approach a Vulcan on a personal level, at least for me.

Then came Calderon - and Lyda. Her story shocked and horrified me, revealing Jimmy as the docile, tormented slave of a sadistic madman, the slave brand burned on his shoulder marking him for all who knew its significance as the Captain's property. It was only after Jimmy's revolted denial that I remembered that when I had helped him to bed once, his skin had been smooth, unblemished.

I was relieved not to have to take any action; the only sure way to free him would have been to kill his master, and had I been discovered, the Vulcan punishment for murder is said to be savage and prolonged.

Jimmy understood that I was motivated by my family feeling; so I grew even closer to my brother, until it seemed that the years of separation might never have been.

Until I found that Security report on his desk. I suppose I'd almost unconsciously been counting on him using his influence to secure my promotion; to find that he agreed with the Chief's and McCoy's assessments came as quite a shock, especially since I know how much the Captain relies on his judgement.

My anger, which had always been easily roused, turned on him then. Oh, how I wanted to punish him! It was all right for Jimmy - he'd sailed easily through life, helped by his brains and charm; he'd never struggled to make a decent life as I'd done.

I'm ashamed to admit that I even thought of using Lyda's story against him, wanting to see him hurt, humiliated - but thank heaven, my affection for him was too strong to let me hurt him like that. It wasn't his fault he'd had it easy - and after all, to be honest, the report was true - my temper is a dangerous weakness. The disappointment is great, I am still hurt by his attitude - but I no longer desire revenge.

So now, perhaps, we will finally discover each other, and be able to recapture the love we knew as children. I expect nothing from him now, or he from me, except an acknowledgement of our kinship.

Tomorrow we beam down to Deneva, to undergo this 'test' the President spoke of. As senior Security lieutenant I am certain to be assigned to the First Officer - it should be a revealing experience.

Jim is, after all, a superb leader, inspiring confidence in his men - I've never known a First Officer to be so highly regarded, especially by the Security Section.

This time, we'll come through together - my brother and I.

* * * * *

PART III - DENEVA

The following morning the landing party assembled in the briefing room. McCoy was there, fussing impatiently. He had obtained permission from the President for the teams to carry a basic first-aid kit, and was handing these out.

"Remember, now," he scolded, "test the water before you drink it - and make sure you don't eat anything that's not on the list I gave you."

"Don't worry, Doctor," Aurelan grinned. "We have been in landing parties before, you know."

"Yes, I do know!" McCoy snapped worriedly. "But it doesn't do any harm..." He was interrupted by the door sliding open to admit the Captain and the First Officer. Spock was, as usual, completely expressionless; but McCoy, a close observer, saw the shadows in his eyes when he glanced at Kirk, and he tensed involuntarily - Spock knew something he did not. Kirk himself was pale, but composed; he carried a set of tapes which he laid on the table as he took his place at the Captain's side. When all were seated Spock raised his eyes from contemplation of his steepled fingers.

"Miss Walters, gentlemen," he began, "you all know the importance of the test that awaits you. We do have a little information on the so-called Valley of Truth. Mr. Kirk?"

Kirk slotted in his tapes, and all leaned forward for a closer look.

"This is the map we were given of the Valley," he began. "You'll all be given copies, along with information on food sources, before you leave. As you see, the Valley begins with an area of marshland, which gives way to a stretch of forest. After that there's a rocky, desert area where water is scarce, than another, wider, belt of forest before you reach the open ground that leads you out of the Valley. The journey will be arduous, but it is possible to complete it within the time limit. There is, however, one major hazard."

The tape changed, showing a picture of a strange, almost shapeless creature that resembled nothing so much as a large jellyfish, though its flesh was more solid. From the edges of its roughly circular body hung a fringe of long, delicate fronds, each barbed at the tip. Its colour was a dusty greyish-brown, and it appeared to possess no external organs.

"This is the creature the Denevans call a Boran," Kirk resumed. "It inhabits the forest regions, and despite its appearance is an extremely dangerous parasite, preying on any warm-blooded creature that crosses its path. The fronds you see here penetrate the flesh of the victim, and grow inward; even if the main body is destroyed, if the least fragment is left within the body it will continue to grow and burrow until the host's entire system has been taken over. The eggs are carried in the barbs, and are deposited deep in the flesh; when they hatch the young Boran use the body as food. It is... agonizing for the victim, and once infected, there is no cure.

We have one chance, however. The creatures are dormant at night, therefore we must attempt to travel through the forest areas after dark. Of course, that means that to complete the test in time, we will be compelled to cross the desert in the heat of the day." He looked round grimly. "The test begins at noon - I suggest that you cross the marshlands as quickly as possible, and if necessary rest until dark before you enter the forest. Travel as swiftly as you can, and get as far into the desert as possible before sunrise. Remember that for safety you must judge your pace so that you cross the final stretch of forest during the second night."

"I have been told," the Captain broke in, "that the loss of one or more participants will not mean that we have failed the test. You will travel in pairs - Mr. Sulu with Mr. Stafford, Mr. Giles with Miss Walters, Mr. Kirk with the First Officer. If your companion is killed you must go on - remember the deadline."

McCoy stirred restlessly. "One thing," he said. "The Romulans must have been under the same restrictions, and they succeeded without casualties."

Kirk looked up bleakly. "They had an advantage," he said. "Romulans are immune to the Boran - they were in no danger, and could choose their own pace."

"Then it's not a fair test!" McCoy burst out.

"I know, Bones," Kirk sighed. "But we have to conform to the customs of Deneva - and remember, we don't know yet how they will judge success."

McCoy subsided, and Spock smiled inwardly as he ordered the landing party to the transporter room. This was the Kirk he had sought, a man capable of assessing the danger and coping with it, aware that all might not be as it seemed. He now had the ability to reason clearly, guarding himself against the obvious interpretation of data as the lost Kirk had usually been too impatient to do - yet he had regained all the charm and humour his counterpart had possessed in full measure.

For a moment the Vulcan's eyes darkened - the danger was very real, he might again lose this perfect companion - then Kirk, who had lingered until they were

alone, looked up and gazed at him with understanding. Slowly he approached and rested his hands on the Vulcan's shoulders.

"Thank you, Spock."

"What for?"

"For letting me go. I know what it's costing you, for I know what I feel watching you walk into danger... but you're acknowledging that I've earned the right to take my share of the risks. He would have protected me, but his motives would have been selfish; you have enough confidence in me to let me do what I must."

The dark eyes were agonised. "Jim, if I could... I'd hold you here... but you are no longer the useless toy you were when I found you. So... I must wait." His hands caught Kirk's and crushed them tightly. "Take care, my friend - I will not draw an easy breath until I have you safe again."

Kirk smiled. "I'll come back," he promised. "But Spock - if I don't... if anything happens... "

"Don't say that!" The grip on his hands tightened painfully, then relaxed; long fingers touched his face lightly. "Come, Jim - the others are waiting."

In the transporter room their formal farewell was brief, for there was nothing more either could say. To the last Spock kept his gaze fixed on the calm, hazel eyes, and as the six figures faded in a shimmer of light, he murmured,

"Not again, Jim. This time, my life ends with yours."

"I beg your pardon, sir?" The transporter chief started guiltily.

"Nothing, Mr. Kyle, nothing," the Vulcan lied with perfect composure.

* * * *

It seemed that the entire council had assembled to await the Enterprise party. Kirk and his brother were to enter the Valley at this point, the other four were escorted by guards to their starting places. There was a brief ceremony, to which neither of the Humans paid much attention; then a path was opened for them through the watching guards.

Sam Kirk cast a glance sideways at his brother; Jim was walking calmly, his expression as serene as though he was strolling along the corridors of the Enterprise. Soon the undulations of the ground hid them from the watchers, and Jim imperceptibly relaxed, turning to face his brother with a wry grin.

"Well, Sam, make the most of it - this is the easiest part of the journey."

Sam grunted; easy it might be, pleasant it was not. The firm ground gave way to softer going, then to marshland; soon they were wading knee-deep through a swamp. The mud was thick and heavy; there was no danger of sinking, but every step was an effort, like wading through treacle. Clouds of small, stinging insects rose around them, not dangerous, but certainly annoying; even more so were the leeches that fastened on to them - although they were easily pulled off, more took their place, penetrating their clothes to leave red blisters that soon covered their legs.

It was late afternoon, judging by the position of the sun, before the ground began to grow firm under their feet and they emerged at last onto solid earth. Just ahead the menacing line of the forest awaited them, and they eyed it apprehensively, thankfully postponing the moment when they must enter its brooding shadows.

Jim consulted their map, and found a water hole not far away; here they decided to wait until nightfall. Thankfully, both men drank, and washed the encrusted mud from their bodies, picking off the last of the swamp leeches. Sam found some fruit which McCoy had listed as edible, and they made a scanty meal before lying down to rest, gathering strength for the long night's march that lay ahead of them.

As dusk fell the twin moons rose to light their path; they were ready, and set out without hesitation.

They had been forbidden phasers, but nothing had been said about not improvising weapons along the way. With memories of the time he had been stranded with the Captain on Capella IV, unarmed, hunted by Klingons, Kirk broke off two stout branches from the bushes that grew by the water hole, and with sharp stones sharpened rough points to make crude but serviceable spears.

As he worked Jim thought wistfully of Eleen; he had liked her, she had been kind to him... if only McCoy had been with them! Perhaps then she and the child might have lived... He remembered her shocked, pitying gaze in the cave when the Captain... no, forget that! The Vulcan had triumphed then, as he always did, but Eleen's life, and the child's, had been the price of his victory.

Firmly he pushed the memory away, and handed one of the spears to Sam; his brother nodded encouragingly, and together they plunged into the forest.

It was not too difficult to make progress; the tall trees grew far enough apart to allow the moonlight to illuminate their path. The undergrowth was thick, but they were able to skirt the most dense areas, and made good time. Around them the night creatures could be heard, but most kept well out of their way until there suddenly came a loud coughing in the bushes, and something emerged from the shadows, barring their way.

The animal was about the size of a large dog, hairless, with a scaled hide that looked very tough. Moonlight reflected from sharp fangs as it snarled at the intruders, and long, wickedly-curved tusks projected from its snout.

Not the most pleasant of creatures, Sam thought, but the two of them should be able to handle it; then the animal gave a hoarse grunt and was joined by a second, presumably its mate.

Sam glanced at his brother, and saw that Jim was aware of the danger; an exchange of nods confirmed which each would tackle.

Suddenly the creatures charged, and it was all Sam could do to keep track of his opponent - the animals were incredibly swift. He dodged the first rush and waited, trying to choose his target; the skin under the throat looked soft... silently the creature charged again, and he braced himself, holding the spear firmly before him. There was a scream of fury as the crude point penetrated the soft tissue, but the creature's rage drove it forward; the wicked fangs were inches from his hands before it choked hoarsely, the furious eyes glazed and it sagged limply.

With a sigh of relief Sam withdrew his spear and turned to see how his brother had fared. The body of the second creature lay a few yards away; beside it Jim knelt, his head down, breathing harshly.

"Jim, are you all right?"

A white face looked up, and smiled briefly. "It caught me on the first rush," Jim said, indicating a deep gash along his thigh. "It's bleeding - but I can walk."

"Let me see." Sam inspected the wound, and shook his head. "You need proper attention," he said, taking out their medical kit. They had been permitted only the bare essentials; Sam dusted the wound with an antiseptic, and bound it tightly; almost at once blood stained the bandage, but Jim rose unsteadily to his feet as soon as he could.

"Careful," Sam warned. "Those creatures are carnivores - God knows what germs their tusks carried. There could be infection."

"I know - but there's no help here. We have to complete the test. Come on, Sam - we've lost a lot of time, and we have to be out of the forest by sunrise."

Thankfully, they encountered no further delays, and soon left the forest behind them. Sam breathed a sigh of relief - despite Jim's assurance that the Boran were dormant at night, his imagination persisted in translating every rustle of the undergrowth into the approach of one of the deadly parasites.

It was not a true desert they were now crossing, they quickly found, but a bleak, desolate expanse of rocks where sparse vegetation struggled for existence. Loose sharp stones underfoot made the going treacherous; Jim limped along without complaint, although the uneven ground must have hurt his injured leg.

The sun rose at last to reveal that the way ahead grew even more difficult as the ground rose and fell in a series of undulations; they could not spare the time to detour around the higher ground, and at times were reduced to scrambling on hands and knees up the steep slopes.

To add to their discomfort it grew steadily hotter, until both men were suffering from intense thirst. At the top of a steep incline they halted for a brief rest.

"How far to the next water?" Jim asked. Sam consulted his map, and squinted into the distance.

"Quite a way," he said reluctantly.

Jim rose with a weary sigh, and turned to descend the slope.

"Look out!"

Sam's warning shout came too late. A small lizard started up under Jim's feet, and in trying to avoid it he lost his balance, the injured leg gave way, and he fell heavily, rolling down to the base of the slope.

Sam followed anxiously. Jim lay unconscious, bleeding from several cuts on his face where the sharp stones had torn him; more seriously, his ankle was twisted under him at an impossible angle. Praying that Jim would remain unconscious, Sam broke one of the spears he still carried in two - with the strap from the medical kit he could improvise a makeshift splint for the obviously broken ankle. Reluctantly, he bent to the task of straightening the injured leg.

Jim screamed in surprise and pain as the bone clicked into place, but after the first shock lay silent, white-faced and sweating, as Sam positioned the splint.

"Can you walk, do you think?" Sam asked at last.

"I'll have to," was the grim reply. "Give me a minute - perhaps I can subdue the pain a little."

Sam watched *curiously* as Jim withdrew into himself, putting Spock's lessons into practice. He would never achieve the Vulcan's total control of his body, but with satisfaction he felt the sick agony subside into a dull, nagging ache. Using the second spear as a crutch, he struggled to his feet, and hobbled a few experimental steps.

"That's the best I can do," he said, "but it will have to be enough - we can't afford to lose any more time."

* * * *

So the weary trek continued, more slowly this time as Sam was compelled to support his brother. By midday the heat was a torment to them, reflected as it was by the stony ground into a glare that dazzled their eyes, while the light surface dust, stirred up at every step, choked their parched throats.

Sam was miserable, hot and exhausted; Jim's weight was an irritating burden and he fretted silently until it began to seem - ridiculous though he knew it to be - that his brother was deliberately adding to his torment.

Common-sense protested at that, and he cast an apologetic glance at the unheeding man beside him, catching his breath as he realised just how much pain Jim must be suffering.

He had made no sound, struggling on grimly, but his face was grey with exhaustion, his hair soaked with sweat that ran down his face leaving trails in the dust that covered him. His leg was bleeding again despite the bandage, heavily enough to leave a trail of blood to mark their path.

Sam had never before credited his young brother with overmuch courage; but now he was forced to recognise that the child he once patronised so carelessly had somehow developed an indomitable strength of will.

As the afternoon wore on they were forced to rest. Sam lowered Jim carefully to the ground and gazed ahead, shading his eyes from the sun. Far in the distance, beyond the rising ground, he could see the dark line of forest that marked the final stretch to safety - but it was impossible that they could reach it in time. Even if Jim could somehow keep going, dawn would find them still within the forest, at the mercy of the Boran. He shuddered - better to die here in the desert. He was just wondering how the others were faring when a movement at his feet attracted his attention - Jim was struggling to rise. Firmly, Sam pushed him back.

"Jim, according to the map there's a water hole about half a mile from here. You rest, and I'll go and get you a drink - I can carry it in the medical case. You'll feel better when you're not so thirsty."

"Thank you, Sam." Jim subsided with a sigh of relief. "My control isn't too strong - if I rest, perhaps I can improve it."

Sam straightened, the medical case dangling from his hand. "I won't be long," he promised.

* * * *

It was much easier to walk without his brother's dragging weight to slow him down. Sam reached the water hole more quickly than he had expected, and flung himself down full length to enjoy a long, refreshing drink; then rolling over he stretched out on the sparse grass for a brief rest before returning to Jim.

With grim resignation he calculated their chances, and found them poor; alone, he was certain he could reach the forest belt by nightfall, which would give him plenty of time to complete the journey before the deadline. With Jim, though, it was hopeless - even if they could maintain their present pace, dawn would find them still within the forest.

Abruptly Sam turned over, seeking a more comfortable position - and found himself staring into the empty eye-sockets of a skull. For a moment shock held him still, then his training took over and he investigated further.

The entire skeleton was there, humanoid, with the remains of clothing and metal ornaments indicating an intelligent being. He realised that this must be one of those unfortunates who had undertaken this journey before him; he - or she - had run out of time, as he had done, and had obviously chosen to remain in the Valley near water, perhaps in the faint hope of rescue, rather than face the certainty of death at the hands of the border guards. But there had been no rescue... and in those bleached bones Sam read his own fate.

During the past weeks his anger with his brother had cooled. His own shrewdness had told him that Jim was only doing his duty, that he was not motivated by malice; and Sam's initial impulse, to punish his brother for being aware of his inadequacy, had subsided.

Now, goaded by fear, the anger returned. This was all Jim's fault! If he hadn't been so stupidly careless, they would have completed the journey in time... why should he suffer because Jim had been hurt? It would serve him right if...

Horrified, Sam pushed the emerging thought away - he was fond of his brother, he told himself; it was unthinkable to abandon him.

Professional instinct came to his aid - he was the security guard, Jim was the First Officer - it was his duty to care for him.

But, his self-preservation argued slyly, would he expect you to sacrifice yourself for him?

Now, that was a more reasonable viewpoint. Jim was so fond of echoing the Vulcan's logic - surely he could see how needless it was to sacrifice two lives? In fact, if he was thinking clearly, would he not insist that Sam save himself?

The more Sam thought about it, the more he convinced himself that Jim would want him to go on. He glanced back the way he had come... perhaps he should tell Jim... but it was a long way back... why waste time? Jim would soon realise what he had done, why he had done it...

Taking a final drink from the water hole, Sam Kirk rose to his feet, turned to face the shadowy line of the distant forest, and without one backward glance began to walk steadily towards safety.

* * * *

Gradually it began to dawn on Jim Kirk that Sam did not intend to come back. He waited hopefully, long past the time it should have taken his brother to return, at first fearing that some accident had happened to him. Somehow he struggled to his feet and peered anxiously in the direction Sam had taken, but there was no sign of him. Then a movement in the still landscape caught his eye.

Some miles away, in the direction they should have been travelling, the ground rose again in a gentle slope; and there, prominent against the dull-coloured ground, easily seen in the clear, unpolluted air, a flash of brilliant red showed for a moment as someone broke the skyline before dipping down the further slope. Kirk sat down heavily, realising the truth - Sam had gone on without him.

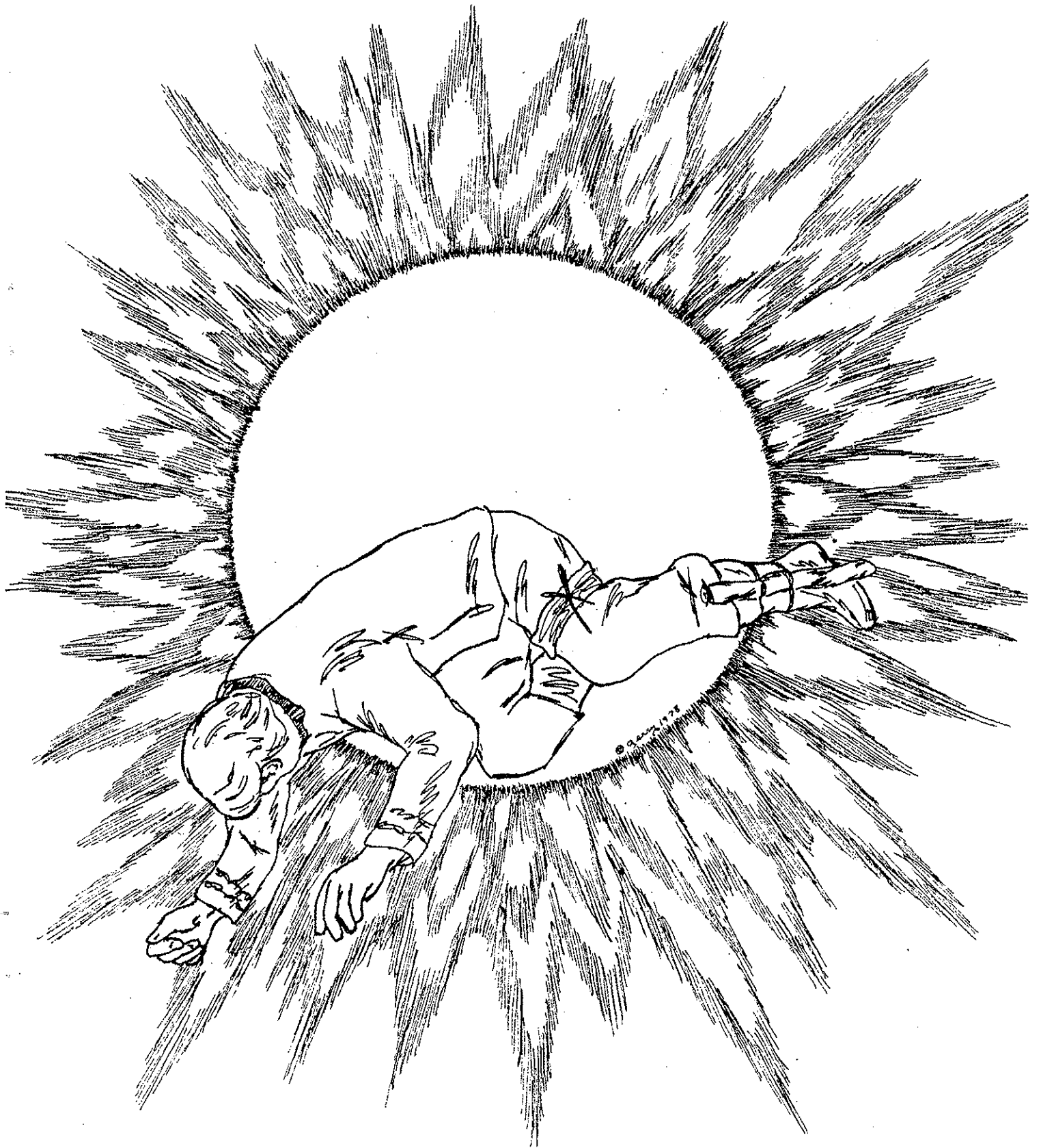
Once, he would have wept; but he was no longer the mindless, passive slave he had been. Still, it took all the control he possessed to hold back the bitterness that flooded him. Sam was right, in a way, he supposed; he must have calculated their chances, and reached the conclusion that, alone, he had a chance of survival; if he was forced to cope with the burden of a crippled companion, both would die. It was... a logical choice.

But if only Sam had come to him, explaining his intentions... anything other than this second desertion... With a sigh Kirk wished his brother well, and turned his attention to his own situation.

As he saw it, he had two alternatives. He could remain here, awaiting the inevitable end - an end not too far distant, for his leg was bleeding heavily now, and a hot, tight feeling warned him that infection had set in. Or he could struggle on, try at least to reach the water, keep fighting until he could no longer move. The end result would be the same, but something within him, a stubborn pride that Spock's trust had rekindled, rebelled at the idea of sitting passively waiting for death. When the test was over Spock would come looking for him; he would be too late, of course, but it suddenly seemed very important that the Vulcan should know that he had not simply given up.

Spock. Yes. That was the thought that hurt Kirk most. He knew, without self-deception or pride, exactly what he meant to the Vulcan, and what his death would do to him. Once before Spock had lost his friend, and although Kirk knew himself to be only a pale reflection of the original, he feared Spock's reaction to this second loss - he would be desolate. For a moment there was a thought for Sam, who would have to face the Vulcan's terrible anger; but in the end, it all came back to Spock.

There was an almost irresistible longing to reach out with his mind, to touch and be enfolded by that incredible compassion, but he subdued it determinedly. Spock could not help him, he would not be permitted to enter the Valley until the test was over - it would be useless, and cruel, to involve him now, to make him share the pain and delirium Kirk knew he would experience before the end. Besides, he did not even know if he could reach Spock over such a distance - until now, their melds had always begun with physical contact.



Setting aside the impossible wish, Kirk began to move with slow, stubborn determination. Unable to stand, he crawled painfully in the direction Sam had taken; the only thing he allowed himself to consider was the fierce resolve to justify Spock's confidence in him, to let the Vulcan know that he had not given up.

Hot... so very hot... so was Vulcan, a blazing, tormenting inferno when the Captain took him there on leave. Wild, savage, its grandeur somehow expressive of the terrible fury its children had known, a savagery that burned in this modern Vulcan beneath the careful mask he wore. The heat had easily tired the Human, and even the cool guest rooms had provided no refuge from it...

The stones, sharp, unyielding, cutting into his flesh as they had done when he had crouched, helpless, at the base of the obelisk, his clouded brain vainly seeking the memory that would save his people. They had named him a god, and he could not remember that he was not... until the skies darkened, and those same people called in vain for aid. Salish had tasted victory then... Miramane who was to have been his bride was there in the crowd, her eyes dark with hurt and disillusion... she at least had not joined in the howling for his blood... then the shimmering column of light, the Captain, his eyes blazing like an avenging angel... but surely an angel from hell, for a phaser beam shot out, and the howls of anger turned to screams of pain and terror... the bodies... Salish, old Goro... Miramane...

Sleep... he longed for sleep. Only since Spock came had he welcomed it... before that his dreams had been hideous. Yet there was one memory... when the Captain had snatched him from the Vians' laboratory. He had been hurt... but McCoy was dying, they said; M'Benga had scarcely left sickbay. There had only been time for basic care for Kirk. Then someone had lifted him from the ward where he lay alone; had carried him to a peaceful, red-lit dimness; had wrapped him close in soft fur. Fingers smoothed his hair, a voice said softly, 'Sleep'. He had awakened in the Captain's quarters where he had lain until his injuries had healed. The Captain himself had tended him, carefully, efficiently... gently; there had been... no demands. Then he was well again, and his agony had resumed. What became of Gem, of the Vians, he never knew... the Captain's vengeance had been swift and thorough, and the nova soon after had wiped out all traces...

Move. Keep moving. Hunted like an animal, the plans stolen from the Klingon base his whole reason for existence; if he lost them his punishment would make capture by the Klingons seem merciful... the Captain was waiting...

No. Must rest. Only a moment... hands, touching, holding; has Sam...? No... different... more gentle... Who, then? Look up, see... eyes, sharp with anxiety.

"Spock?"

"Hush... don't try to talk."

An illusion, of course; death is merciful, after all, granting this last dream.

With a tired sigh he huddled closer, turning his sweating face against the strength of a remembered shoulder. The arms gripped tighter, carrying him... safe... relax. Darkness... sleep... death?

It will not be; a mind reaches deep, calling... it will not be denied.

Jim, come back! You must come back!

Obey. He knows how to obey. But this is not the tormentor... there will be no punishment if...

Let me sleep.

Not now, Jim; wake up, please.

Please? That is not... Ah yes, this is... the friend... Obedience is a duty... and a pleasure.

Kirk sighed, moved restlessly and awoke. He was lying on thin grass, sparse but blissfully soft after the harsh stones he had crossed so painfully. Cool water bathed his flushed face, trickled sweetly into his parched mouth; he swallowed avidly, searching for more.

"Gently - not too much at once."

Spock knelt above him, his body shading the intense heat of the sun.

"Spock! It really is you!"

"Who else would it be?" the familiar voice demanded gently.

"But how... why... the test..." Kirk faltered.

"Later." A flask was placed in his hands. "Drink - but slowly. I must tend your leg - there is infection."

The rough bandage was removed, fingers probed delicately, and he winced at the pain, but made no sound. The dark eyes had seen, however, and Spock glanced up. "Stubborn," he remarked, "to have travelled so far on this."

"I wanted..."

"I know. Now, be still - this will hurt."

It did. Kirk bit his lip, determined not to cry out. The wound was rebandaged and Spock reached out to hold the Human, steadying him until the waves of nausea passed. Kirk rested quietly, his head pillowed on the Vulcan's shoulder, until he could think clearly again.

"What are you doing here?" he managed at last.

"I knew... something was wrong, that you were hurt and alone. I went to Makron; I... begged him to let me help you."

"You begged? For me?"

"Of course. He was reluctant, but agreed in the end, imposing certain... conditions. I could beam down to you, but when I found you I was bound by the rules of the test. I must bring you out within the time limit, or..."

"Or die with me," Kirk finished softly.

"Yes, but... I have turned coward, Jim; I could not lose you again."

"But Spock... I can't walk; we can't reach the forest before dark."

"It does not matter. I will bring you out. Trust me?"

"Yes."

Spock stood, lifted Kirk into his arms, cradling him as easily as a child, and began to walk steadily. His long legs covered the ground with amazing speed, and he seemed untroubled by Kirk's weight in his arms.

Looking up Kirk could see the expressionless face, set, determined, his eyes fixed resolutely ahead. As though conscious of the Human's scrutiny Spock glanced down, and his eyes softened.

"Sam..." Kirk began awkwardly.

"I know; I read it in your mind when I reached for you. Jim - I did not break my word; the meld... you welcomed me, even in your delirium."

"You don't need to tell me that," Kirk said simply. "I know nothing would make you break your word."

* * * *

They continued on in silence. Above Spock's head the sun died, night was born, the moons rose, washing the desert with clear light, touching the Vulcan's



hair with silver. . . Despite the pain in his leg Kirk relaxed, at peace; they were together.

It was full night when they entered the forest; Spock's strength and speed had bought them much time - perhaps even enough; but Kirk, remembering the extent of the forest, shuddered with sudden fear - dawn would still find them well within the trees, easy prey for the Boran. He could almost feel the tendrils piercing his flesh... then he grew calm; Spock had asked for his trust - he would not have to ask twice.

The moons set, followed by the period of deepest darkness that precedes dawn. The first touch of morning was showing palely through the trees when Spock halted and carefully lowered Kirk to the ground; they were in a clearing, the nearest trees some distance away. Perhaps Spock thought they would be safe there during the daylight hours - yet they could not afford the time...

The Vulcan opened the bag at his belt, which had held the medical kit, and drew from it a bundle of fabric which he began to shake out into a light but voluminous garment that Kirk recognised as a desert cloak, worn for protection by travellers during the fierce sandstorms that ravaged the Vulcan desert.

"Can you stand for a moment?"

"I think so."

Spock helped Kirk to his feet, where he balanced awkwardly as the Vulcan carefully wrapped him in the cloak, drawing the hood closely around his face; then he picked the Human up and held him easily again. The cloak was long and full, enshrouding Kirk completely.

"You must lie still," the Vulcan cautioned. "Keep your face pressed to my shoulder - if the cloak slips the Boran will sense your presence, and seek you out; but they should not detect you through the fabric, and if we brush against one accidentally, it will not be able to reach you."

"But Spock - what about you?" Kirk asked anxiously.

A slanting eyebrow lifted in reproof. "Romulans are immune - and so am I."

Of course! The Romulans were an offshoot of the Vulcanoid races... but there were Human elements in Spock's blood... would that make a difference? The Vulcan seemed confident, however.

Obediently, Kirk burrowed his head into Spock's shoulder as the Vulcan began to move again, picking his way through the trees. Time passed slowly; there was only darkness, the warm spicy smell of Spock's body, the movement of muscles under his cheek. Twice Kirk felt the cloak being shaken violently, and shivered in revulsion, knowing that Spock had brushed one of the Boran away; but as the Vulcan had promised, he remained untouched.

An eternity later, Spock's voice came quietly. "Jim, we have left the forest."

Kirk laughed in sheer relief and raised his head, shrugging off the protecting hood. "That's better!" he exclaimed, looking back at the edge of the trees, less menacing now that they were safely through. Curious, he turned his head to look forward. "How much further...?"

"Jim, don't look!"

Allowing Kirk to slip to a standing position Spock held him firmly, pressing his head back into his shoulder, the tension of his hands emphasising the urgency of his command - but Kirk had already seen.

Only a fleeting glimpse, but he stood now clutching at Spock's shoulders, his heart racing as his brain interpreted in full detail that nightmare vision. Directly in their path a red-shirted body writhed and twisted in unimaginable agony, a voice almost unrecognizable moaned and gibbered insanely as two tormented eyes burned into his memory the knowledge of his brother's pain.

Kirk took a deep, steadying breath, and looked up. "It's... all right," he gasped. "We must try... to help him."

Spock nodded, and supported Kirk as they crossed the last few yards to the tormented thing that had been Sam Kirk.

It seemed incredible that he still lived, for one side of his face and neck were completely covered by the pulsating body of the parasite that devoured him. He must have been attacked at the very edge of the trees, he would have been feeling safe, sure that he had passed the danger - perhaps his guard had slipped for just an instant...

Kirk shuddered, knowing that his brother was beyond help; there was only one thing that could be done for him.

"Spock," he said calmly, though horror rasped in his voice, "find me something... a stone... I must..."

"There is a better way, Jim; faster, surer, painless."

The Vulcan knelt, his fingers probing carefully for Sam's neck; the suffering eyes cleared for a moment in understanding and gratitude, then came an

audible snap, and Sam's head fell forward.

"Tal Shaya," Spock explained briefly as he rose. "A merciful form of execution once - and more than he deserved."

"It must seem so to you," Kirk said sadly, "but... he was my brother; long ago... when we were young..." His voice broke on a sob.

Spock's set expression softened. "Then remember those days," he said gently. "Forget the man he became - and I will try to forgive him."

Kirk stood a moment longer, gazing down at his brother's body; then he turned to Spock.

"Take me home," he said tiredly.

* * * *

Kirk was very quiet as they resumed their journey. The realisation that Spock - Spock could kill so matter-of-factly came as something of a shock to him. The Vulcan had become very important to him, the living proof that strength and gentleness could exist in the same man; but gradually he began to understand.

There was no way in which Sam could have been saved - he had known that himself, his own instinctive reaction had been to put him out of his misery. Spock had not killed to punish, rather to put an end to his suffering, and to spare Kirk the horror of taking his brother's life. He could sense the sadness Spock felt, the regret at having been forced to kill, and reached for the Vulcan's mind, trying to express his understanding and gratitude; he received in return the priceless comfort and understanding that from the first had been Spock's gift to him.

But something was wrong; Kirk found his thinking growing muddled, and his senses seemed to be playing tricks on him. His eyesight clouded, grew clear, dimmed again; his hearing was fuzzy, and he felt weightless, as though he floated. Curiously, he felt no pain... then he knew; the infection in his injured leg was spreading, poisoning his system. With renewed tenacity he fought to remain awake, but the fever that burned now in his blood, the weariness he could no longer ignore, the shock of Sam's death, all combined to overwhelm his overtaxed control. He was unconscious when, minutes before the deadline, Spock stepped across the boundary that marked the limits of the test.

President Makron was waiting, alone but for his guards; there was no sign of the Romulans. Spock vaguely wondered why - surely they must have won the decision - but he was not really concerned; a more urgent worry occupied him now.

"Congratulations, Captain - your people completed the test with only one casualty."

So at least the rest of the landing party were safe! Spock spared the President a fleeting glance. "I trust it will not upset your plans if I return immediately to my ship?" he said coldly. "My First Officer has been injured, and requires attention."

"Then I will not detain you. The Council will debate the result, and notify you of our decision."

As he spoke Makron handed over the communicator and phaser Spock had been compelled to leave behind when he went in search of Kirk. Awkwardly, for he would not release his injured friend, Spock called the Enterprise, and the two were beamed up.

* * * *

McCoy was waiting in sickbay; he wasted no time, but had Kirk transferred at once to the operating theatre, pausing only to glance reassuringly at the anxious Vulcan.

Knowing that Kirk was in the best possible hands, Spock could now spare a thought for the others, and went through to the ward where they were being checked over by M'Benga.

Sulu reported that there had been no great difficulties. The other two teams had followed Kirk's instructions, and had passed untouched through the forest. All were suffering from exhaustion, of course, for the going had been difficult, their pace hurried. Sulu had a broken arm, caused by a fall, while Aurelan, hurrying to assist Giles, who had become entangled in a thorn bush, had been badly scratched on the arms and face; Giles himself had fared even worse, but the injuries were all superficial, and would soon heal.

Relieved to find them safe, Spock commended them all, and left for the bridge; his words, though brief, were sincere, and the landing party was left in no doubt that the Captain was pleased.

As he stepped on to the bridge of the Enterprise, Spock experienced a strange sense of disorientation. It was caused by fatigue, of course, by his sternly-repressed worry for Kirk, by the strain of the long hours of waiting; but knowing the cause of it did not diminish its effect. Just for a moment, as the elevator doors parted, he looked for Scotty's anxious face in the command chair, before memory struck a sharp echo - in this universe Scotty was dead, murdered by his counterpart.

Spock listened with his usual attention to Charlene Masters' report, crisp and efficient as she always was; yet he knew an all-too-Human pang of longing for Scotty's relieved, excited tones. Still, he had so much...

"The Denevans remained in contact, reporting on your progress during the test," Masters said. "They notified us at once when our people could be beamed up - you and Mr. Kirk were the last. The Romulan ship has returned, and is in orbit - I put the Enterprise on yellow alert, though they have made no hostile moves... not that I expected any; I considered it wisest to maintain full shielding, however."

"A logical precaution, Miss Masters. You have done well."

"Thank you, sir."

Masters stepped away from the command chair, but Spock waved her back. "Keep the son - I'll be in sickbay if you need me."

"Yes, sir." She resumed her seat, watching thoughtfully as the doors slid shut behind the tall figure; then swung round to catch Uhura's eyes - it seemed the communications officer had some news.

"I thought the landing party was all safe, Uhura?"

"Not all. The First Officer hurt his leg - he's in surgery now. And his brother - you know, Sam Kirk from Security - was killed."

"Oh - a pity." The two African women exchanged glances of concern - although not romantically interested in him, both liked and respected the First Officer.

"Well," Uhura said at last, "I hope Mr. Kirk will be all right - it's really tragic losing his brother when they only met again so recently."

* * * *

McCoy was waiting as Spock entered sickbay, and at once answered the unspoken question.

"He'll be all right. The leg was badly infected, but I caught it in time. He's very tired, and he lost a lot of blood, but plenty of rest should put that right."

"May I see him?"

"Only for a moment - and only because he won't sleep until he's seen you."

With a nod, Spock passed through into the isolation ward; resisting the temptation to follow, McCoy sat down to enter the medical log.

The life indicators were beating steadily, reassuringly; Kirk's pale face turned on the pillow as he sensed the Vulcan's silent approach.

"Spock!" he exclaimed softly, holding out his hand; Spock took it, feeling with satisfaction the eagerness with which the fingers curled round his.

"McCoy will only let me stay a moment," he murmured. "You need rest."

"I know - he told me that too; but I had to see you first, to thank you..."

"Hush." Spock's free hand rested lightly on Kirk's lips. "The little I was able to do... was as much for my own sake as for yours. Remember that."

Beneath his fingers he felt Kirk's lips curve in a smile. "If you say so," the Human murmured, laughter in his voice.

Outside the door someone coughed meaningfully; Spock glanced round, then looked back. "I must go," he said quietly. "We will talk later, Jim, when you are stronger."

"Yes." Kirk's hand tightened on his; within moments he was asleep, and Spock stood looking down at the tranquil face.

Again his too-Human imagination awoke, showing him a nightmare vision of what might have been, of Kirk's dead body lying here, recovered after the test, and he knew that the decision he had made was the only possible one. Humans considered him strong, self-reliant, but he knew his own weakness only too well. Kirk was as essential to him as the air he breathed - to lose him now was unthinkable, the very idea of another search seemed blasphemy. This universe was his now, and if this Kirk was taken from him, there would indeed be nothing to live for. Once more he was vulnerable... and he was content to be so.

Gently he reached down to smooth Kirk's hair from his forehead; then turned to face McCoy's anxious fussing, illogically glad of the doctor's open concern for him.

* * * *

The next two days passed slowly as they awaited further contact from the Denevans. McCoy, succumbing to Kirk's anxious pleas, allowed him to return to his quarters, but not until Spock guaranteed that, until the doctor gave permission, the bridge and the science labs were out-of-bounds to the First Officer. In fact, the Human had the sense not to try and return to duty - although he could walk a few steps, the injured leg still gave him considerable pain.

At last the expected summons came. Captain Spock and the landing party were invited to beam down to the Denevan Council chamber.

That request was the signal for a determined battle between Kirk and McCoy, a battle that was only resolved when the doctor was included in the party, with authority to return his patient to the Enterprise as soon as he thought it necessary.

Once again, the full Council awaited them; they were shown to seats facing a party of Romulans who arrived at the same time, and when all were in place, President Makron arose.

"Captain, Commander, you are both again welcome. We thank you for your patience. The Council has considered the results of the tests, and we now announce our decision. All authorities, civil, military and religious, are agreed - Deneva will join the Federation."

"What?" The Romulan Commander sprang to his feet. "But we won - the Enterprise party lost a man, most sustained injuries, they took far longer than we did to complete the journey. I demand that you explain."

"I will do so." The President turned to the Romulan. "We are not fools;

the test had a deeper purpose than you knew. It should have been obvious that the strongest would win on a purely physical level - but we sought to discover what sort of people you are.

For example, we knew that the Romulans are immune to the Boran; you did not say so, but - or so you thought - allowed us to believe that conditions were equal. Your journey was planned and executed like a military operation in an attempt to impress us with Romulan strength and efficiency. So, we know you, Commander - a strong, disciplined people, relentlessly efficient, for whom the achievement of the goal will always be more important than the welfare of the individual. That is your way, and we do not condemn you for it... but my people could not live happily under such a system.

The Enterprise party, however - " and here Makron turned to Spock, " - were under a severe handicap. Apart from Human vulnerability to the Boran, the climate was difficult for your people, the journey tested their strength. They knew that if they did not complete the journey in time they would die - and what was their response? Instead of saving themselves, the stronger assisted the weaker; with such trust and co-operation all but one were saved."

"How do you know that?" Spock demanded.

The President smiled. "You were monitored during the test. That is the true purpose of the Valley - to show the basic character of those we would test. We saw the help you gave each other... men of different backgrounds able to work together for the common good. Even the woman was treated as an equal, contributing much to your success; from her example our women were convinced that within the Federation there will be a part for them to play."

"But sir... " Kirk broke in.

"Yes, Mr. Kirk?" The President's voice was very gentle.

"If you were watching... you must know that I was... abandoned by my partner. Surely that upset your conclusion?"

"No, my friend, it confirmed it. Your brother - yes, we know that too - your brother left you to die, but your Captain, an alien, with no ties of blood to compel him, insisted on the right to save you. We were most impressed. Differences of sex, of nationality, of colour, may be forgotten in a common heritage; but even the barriers of race did not divide you. We would join such a people, for you have much to teach us."

"I see." Spock rose, anxious to terminate the discussion, for even before McCoy he had seen Kirk's increasing pallor. "I will notify Starfleet of your decision, and no doubt the Federation ambassadors will return. Your Excellency, I cannot approve your methods - a man has died needlessly, others were injured and distressed. However, I wish you well. Now, if you will forgive me, I have duties on my ship."

"Of course, Captain. We regret the harm we have caused, but we had to be sure. My people's future was at stake."

"Then I must hope it will be worth the price. Farewell." Pulling out his communicator, Spock gave the signal to beam up.

* * * * *

Lieutenant George Samuel Kirk, Starfleet Security, U.S.S. Enterprise, killed in action, Deneva, Stardate 2534.7.

Personal log passed to, and completed by, next-of-kin, Commander James T. Kirk, First Officer, U.S.S. Enterprise.

But we didn't come through, Sam, and I'm sorry for that. Yet it comforts me to know that you were trying to understand me at the last, and that you overcame your resentment because I couldn't recommend you for the promotion you wanted. Even that you did not understand fully - your temper was only one

hindrance. Your psychology profile revealed in you a strong - too strong - instinct for self-preservation; McCoy concluded that you could not be relied on not to abandon your men in a tight situation - and he was right, wasn't he?

Yet I do not blame you - you acted according to your nature, as I do; I can see that now, and forgive. Spock granted you a merciful death, and I am grateful - once more he has shouldered a burden that should have been mine.

We would always have been strangers, I think, even if you had lived; for you would never have been able to forget what I once was, had you ever discovered the full truth. I was so afraid when you confronted me with that story about Spock... but what I told you was true. You didn't mention the brand at the time, but when I learned from your log that you knew of it, I remembered all too clearly...

That first night, with the Captain... when he'd... taken me... he wanted to burn his personal insignia into my flesh; however, he knew that if he did so then, it would arouse McCoy's suspicions. When I was captured and tortured during a landing party he seized his opportunity, marking me as his property even as he rescued me. He boasted of it to Lyda - that he owned me as surely as a pedigree lahrat, a slave branded and reserved for his use alone. When I was able to tell McCoy its true significance he removed it at once. I think the Captain must have influenced his mind so that he hadn't thought of doing so before. Had you seen it, it would have confirmed your suspicions, and I would have had to tell you the truth to protect Spock - though it would have shamed me beyond endurance to have you know.

So I found you, Sam, only to lose you again. Once, I would have blamed myself, certain that it must be my fault... but now I am beginning to learn that others can be as weak as I; and I can be grateful to know at least that in your own way you were fond of me.

The first time you abandoned me I was shattered; now I have a solid, secure anchor in life - this time, I am not alone.

He is waiting for me in his quarters, and when I have finished dealing with your effects, I will go to him; we will speak of you, and his wisdom and understanding will help me to accept this too.

Farewell, Sam. I will remember you with affection, but I will not grieve for you. I have a brother, not tied to me by bonds of blood or custom, but by our own choice; and that is truly brotherhood.

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AFTERMATH - ENTERPRISE

Later that night McCoy, intending to call on Spock, paused at the Captain's door, and listened. From within came, very faintly, the soft tones of a harp, and the doctor smiled understandingly as he changed his mind and walked on - an early night would do him good anyway.

He was well-satisfied; concerned about the strain they had both been under, he had removed Spock and Kirk from duty for a few days, turning command over to Lt-Commander Masters for the journey back to Starbase, where it seemed that they were needed for a diplomatic mission of some importance. And those two impossibly stubborn men had obeyed his orders for once, and were relaxing quietly. Life should be very peaceful for the next few days...

In his cabin Spock set down the harp and turned to glance down at Kirk, who sat curled up at his feet; sensing the scrutiny, the Human looked up, and smiled shyly.

"That was lovely, Spock - what was it called?"

"It has no name; it is something I composed... oh, long ago."

When you were alone, Kirk thought, for the wistful sadness of the music had touched him deeply; he wanted to make some gesture of understanding, and reached



up to cover with his own the hand that lay on the arm of Spock's chair, smiling as Spock imperceptibly relaxed. For a little while they sat in silence, then Spock said quietly,

"Do you grieve for your brother, Jim?"

Kirk shook his head. "Not really... after all, I scarcely knew him... I think I've been regretting what we might have had, and remembering... how it was when - when my parents were there... but it was so long ago, I can't really remember... Oh, I thought at first, when I found him again, that we could forget the past... but do people really change, I wonder? I was an inconvenience to him then, as I was on Deneva, so when things became difficult, he abandoned me. But this time... this time, you were waiting."

"Still, I am sorry things did not turn out as you hoped."

Kirk looked up, thought for a moment, then said hesitantly, "Spock?"

"Yes, Jim?"

"In the other universe... your Kirk... did he have a brother?"

"Yes, he did."

"What happened to him?"

"A strange parallel. He was a research biologist, serving at the station on Deneva, which in my universe was a Federation colony. He was married, with a son named Peter. Deneva was attacked by a form of parasite, not too unlike the Boran ... Sam and his wife were killed before the Enterprise could destroy the creature; the child survived, and Jim became his guardian. I remember that Jim was very distressed... they were a close-knit family."

"So in that, too, he was more fortunate than I. It scarcely seems fair that one so much loved should die, while I..." Kirk broke off, fearing that Spock would suspect him of self-pity. He looked up anxiously, to see Spock gazing at him with troubled eyes. Suddenly the Vulcan seemed to come to a decision, for he sat up abruptly, and spoke the word of command that keyed the voice lock on his safe.

"Jim, when we touched minds on Deneva I sensed a thought... it troubles you now. I can, and must, reassure you. Go and look in my safe."

Puzzled, Kirk obeyed; wondering what he was to look for, he ignored the case of medals, the code tapes, Spock's personal log... it could not be any of those...

A small leather wallet caught his eye and he lifted it out, knowing what it was; as he resumed his place at Spock's feet he opened it and looked once more at the face so like his own, the face of the lost Kirk. At last he raised his eyes.

"Why have you locked it away?" he asked wonderingly.

Spock leaned forward, taking the Human's face between his hands, allowing their minds to link so that Kirk might know the truth of his words.

"Jim, you spoke just now of 'my Kirk'; and on Deneva I sensed that you consider yourself as merely a reflection, a substitute. You are not. I put away the picture because now... it is only a memory, although a very precious one.

You are 'my Kirk'. I survived his death - I think I would not... survive yours. So I forbid you ever to think of yourself as a substitute; you have become very dear to me, and I know that without you I would be totally lost."

Kirk listened, awed by Spock's obvious sincerity. At last he said quietly, "Oh Spock, you ask me if I grieve for a brother I never knew! How could I, when I have so much, and all thanks to you? Sarek and T'Pol... they were so kind, like parents to me after we told them the truth... and friends... for the first time I know friendship... but most of all, I have you - you are far more of a brother to me than Sam ever was. I am content with things as they are."

"And so am I."

Spock's quiet admission filled Kirk with an intense happiness and he relaxed, leaning back against Spock's knee as he felt the Vulcan's hand brush his hair in a gesture that was almost a blessing.

But as he sat he gradually became aware of a subtle uneasiness disturbing his contentment, of a tightly-leashed tension in Spock. Looking up he found the Vulcan's eyes fixed on him, filled with a strange mixture of pride and consternation, and his muscles tightened with the instinctive foreknowledge of some new threat.

"What is it, Spock?" he asked.

The Vulcan's shoulders slumped wearily. "I had thought to postpone this a little longer," he said, "but you know me so well. Jim, this is unexpected, and yet... I do not know why it should be... it is a logical development, after all."

With an abrupt movement he rose and crossed to his desk, picking up a tape that lay there. Kirk followed, and leaned over to watch as Spock slotted the tape into the desk viewer and sat down heavily, his eyes on Kirk's face as the image of Admiral Ferson took shape on the screen.

Kirk heard the brief message in silence, stunned by its implications. He was

being offered his own command as a result of his success on Deneva. As the tape ended and Kirk still showed no reaction, Spock leaned forward and switched off the viewer.

"Well, Jim?"

The quiet voice seemed to unlock Kirk's tense muscles. With a swift movement he turned and knelt by Spock's chair, his hands clutching frantically at the Vulcan's arm.

"No! I don't want it!" The words were almost gasped. "They can't make me... Oh Spock, I don't want to go, I don't want to lose you. Don't let them take me!"

"No-one will take you anywhere you do not wish to go," was the calm reply. Spock's gentle hands raised him, guided him once more to a seat.

The Vulcan desperately wanted to accept that anguished refusal, but he could not. Jim's immediate response had been dictated by his self-doubt, by the fear that was still there under the surface, the fear of being again alone and vulnerable. He might soon regret having made it; he must be helped to reach a reasoned decision - whatever the cost.

"Jim, control your thoughts," Spock ordered sternly. "Such undisciplined thinking will serve no useful purpose."

He watched as Kirk withdrew into himself, ordering his mind as he had been taught; at last the Human looked up, his eyes calm.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have acted like that."

"Good. Now that you are thinking clearly, I ask you again - what is your decision?"

"I don't want to go," Kirk said miserably. "I'm happy here with you, for the first time in my life. Surely you understand - you told me once... in your universe you turned down command to remain with... with the other Kirk; I want to stay with you."

"Is that a logical decision, or an emotional one?" Spock asked.

"Both. I'm afraid of being alone again... I need you, we both know that; but I also think... that you need me. Apart, we'd both be lonely. That's the emotional side of it." Kirk paused, and frowned in concentration, trying to put his instinctively-felt beliefs into words. "There's more, though," he continued at last. "The Captain killed something in me, we both know that, too. I'm a good First Officer, Spock, I can back you... but I no longer have what it takes to be a good Captain - if indeed I ever had it. Together we are strong; and you would be strong even alone - you've proved that already - but I... at best I'd be competent, no more." He laughed nervously. "Why break up a good team?"

It was no use, he felt too miserable for laughter. "I want to go on doing the job I know I can do best, here on the Enterprise with you and McCoy. If I have to leave I'll only be unhappy again, you'll be alone - and Starfleet would exchange a good First Officer for a mediocre Captain. Perhaps one day, when you reach Commodore's rank again, I'll accept promotion and go with you... but until then... what I want to do... what I feel I should do... is to remain here."

Kirk looked up then, meeting the warm brown eyes squarely. "Be honest with me, Spock - do you think I'd be as good a Captain as the other Kirk?"

Spock's reply was gentle, but direct and honest. "No, Jim, I do not. If you had wished it, I would have let you go; but... Jim Kirk... had something... an element of ruthlessness, perhaps... that is missing in you. It made him a good Captain; but you... "

"I know, Spock," Kirk replied simply. "It was beaten out of me long ago. So it's settled - I'm staying. We can tell Starfleet that I do not wish for command - that I prefer to continue with my scientific duties."

Spock sighed wistfully. "The same excuse I used," he murmured. "It was a lie then, it is a lie now... but I confess, your decision pleases me. Understand this,

however." His voice grew serious. "If you ever do change your mind, you must tell me so."

"I promise, Spock."

They looked at each other a moment longer, suddenly aware that there were still many dangers that could threaten them. This one had been averted - but for the future, who could tell?

Then reassurance flowed between their linked minds with its healing touch; it mattered little that each in his own way bore deep emotional scars still, that neither was complete, sufficient within himself. Together they were stronger than any force that might seek to part them.

Realising this, they smiled shyly at each other; then Kirk, instinctively knowing that it would be best to return as quickly as possible to their normal routine, turned away and studied the chess board that always stood in readiness.

"Checkmate in four moves," he prophesied confidently.

Taking his cue, Spock sat down across the table. "I think... not," he remarked, bringing his queen into play.

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PERSONAL LOG - Commodore Spock

If my father in my own universe could see me now, I fear he would conclude that his apprehensions as to the effects of my Human blood had been fully justified. My reaction to Jim's adamant refusal to leave me was distinctly unVulcan - I confess, relief almost overwhelmed me.

And yet I wonder... was I right? Should I have encouraged him to accept command? It is the next logical step...

McCoy, when I asked his opinion, was firm - Jim is greatly improved, but he is still very vulnerable; should he again find himself alone his emerging self-confidence could be easily damaged. He has learned to trust me, and still needs a secure haven to which he can return; I believe that in my friendship, in the warm regard Sarek and T'Pol now have for him, he has found that refuge.

I was greatly heartened by his acceptance of his brother's death. He grieved, but not too deeply, for he scarcely knew the man; and the second betrayal of his trust did not shatter his confidence - he did not seek to blame himself, as he would once have done. And I? Yes, I admit that I need Jim, too.

We have both found a home on this Vulcan. T'Pol has all the wisdom and strength of my grandmother, but also a compassion her counterpart would never understand. Her support will be a great help to us both.

Sarek is... not so wise as my own father; he is blind in many ways, but he has accepted us both generously, and will, I think, protect Jim should anything happen to me.

Our narrow escape on Vulcan taught me a valuable lesson; the Captain left one tape, there might be others, apart from the log I destroyed. A careful search of his - my - quarters revealed a second safe, and a further log; it contained more of the same demented gloating over his unfortunate victim.

This too I destroyed, but there was one tape... I preserved it carefully, for one day it might help Jim to hear its contents. For McCoy has consulted me about an aspect of Jim's psychology that troubles him - his utter indifference to sexual matters. McCoy feels that by now Jim should have begun to show a normal interest in women.

I have my doubts - Jim's sexual experience so far has, I fear, destroyed his ability to respond to anyone - but McCoy is surely a better judge than I, for I know nothing of such things.

However, it is a problem which it seems we will have to cope with somehow -

the tape may help Jim to understand the emotions he inspired in my counterpart. But I will not force the issue - it must arise naturally.

For the rest, I have yielded to Jim's pleas, and forwarded his answer to Starfleet; he will remain with me. His decision will not be questioned, for he is an excellent Science Officer, and it is logical that he should wish to remain in that field. Like his counterpart, I think he has little fondness for administration, a fate that would ultimately be his if he transferred to the command section.

His attitude is one I understand, for I remember my own reluctance to leave the other Kirk - had I been forced to go, I would have been miserable indeed. If he feels as I did, I will not inflict such a parting on him - or on myself.

We each still have much to teach, and to learn from the other; perhaps in this universe, we will have many years in which to do so.
