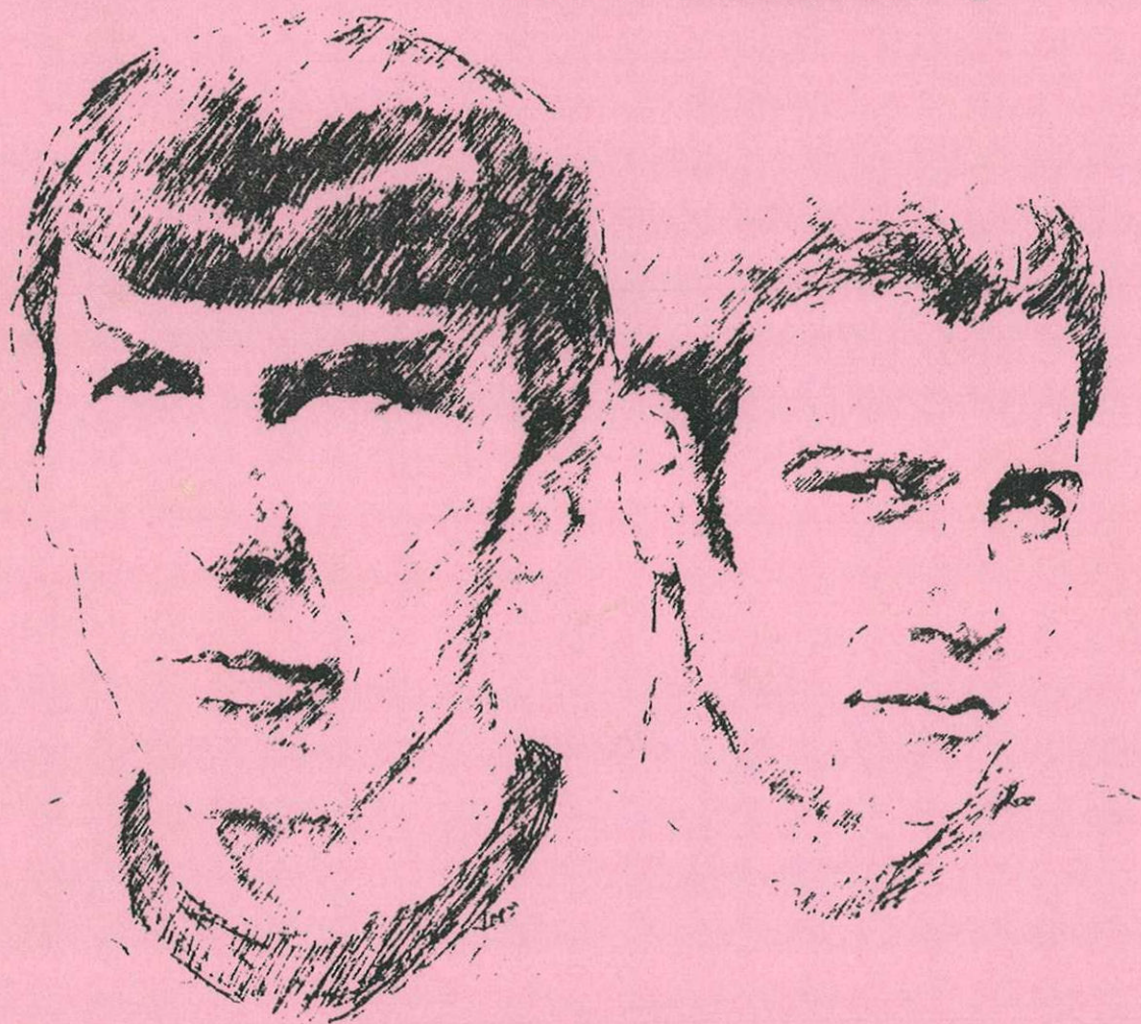


VARIATIONS

ON A THEME 7



Valerie Piacentini

& Sheila Clark

a
STAR TREK
fanzine

VARIATIONS ON A THEME 7

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A Scottpress publication

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Variations on a Theme 7 is put out by Scottpress and is available from

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6 Craigmill Cottages

Strathmartine

by Dundee

Scotland

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Scottpress -- Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona.

In Kraith Collected, we met Commodore Spock, from another universe. His Kirk had been killed, and Spock, confused and unhappy, having discovered the existence of other universes, attempted to find a replacement for his lost friend. However, he misinterpreted half-understood data transmitted to him through his sensor equipment, and Kirk resented his attempt to 'rescue' him; when his own Spock arrived, he returned with him, leaving the Commodore doubly alone.

We were concerned over the plight of the Commodore, and wondered how he might continue his search. The Variations on a Theme universe arose from our discussions on how he might do so. We must stress, however, that our universe is in no way related to the Kraith universe. (Anyone wanting to read the story from which we took our 'inspiration', it is 'Spock's Pilgrimage' in Kraith Collected IV; contact Margaret Draper, The Lodge, Wantage Road, Rowstock, Didcot, OXON, who acts as U.K. agent for it, or Debbie Goldstein, 11524 Nashville, Detroit, MI 48205, U.S.A.)

The story of Variations so far is as follows. His equipment improved, Spock detected the existence of a Kirk who did need to be rescued from an untenable situation; young, shy and sensitive, he was First Officer to a Spock who had never adjusted to his Human blood and who had taken Kirk as a sexual partner in spite of the young Human's horror at being treated so.

Spock set out to rescue him. In the process, the Captain was killed, and Spock remained in that universe, taking his counterpart's place, and returning the body to his own original universe. He then set out to rehabilitate Kirk.

Unfortunately, the Captain had accidentally left a private tape behind on his last visit to Vulcan, and Sarek had heard it. He believed that Spock was illtreating Kirk, and when the Vulcan went 'home' to visit 'his' family, Sarek tried to kill him. They were forced to tell Sarek the truth, and to their surprise, found him most understanding.

Shortly after that, Kirk's brother Sam, who had deserted him as a child, came aboard the Enterprise as a crewman. Once again he deserted his brother, but this time Spock was there to help him.

When Spock's family council decreed that he must marry, McCoy came up with the suggestion that he and Kirk bond; a relationship legal on Vulcan although rarely entered into. However, they only formed a partial bond at that time.

When McCoy developed xenopolycythemia, Spock returned to his original universe to obtain the cure. When he failed to return, Kirk followed him and with the help of that universe's McCoy, rescued him.

The Enterprise's next few missions were all politically orientated, with analogues of Paradise Syndrome, Elaan of Troyius, Galileo Seven, and Journey to Babel. And on one of their missions, Kirk was tricked into taking a wife.

Variations 7 also consists of episode analogues, this time Plato's Step-children and Alternative Factor. However, we have an idea for No. 8 which will return to 'original' plotting, unrelated to any episode. Part of it will be set in Scotland, and we are planning a short holiday in the area involved in order to research the geography of the place. We owe our ideas for No. 8 to comments made by several readers - thanks, girls - we think!



What is it that has drawn me to you
In love and friendship true?
I, an emotionless Vulcan,
You a searching, feeling Human.
No-one knows how much I need
You, how deep the greed
Flows to have you near me.
I've never told you, but you must see
How much my life depends on you.
Before, my loneliness grew;
The pain of having no-one cut like a knife
But my heritage made me hide my strife.
Were you lonely, like me?
Was it that which drew you to see
If this cold, unfeeling being could
And would,
With your gentle goading and teasing
Show a glimmer of emotion? Your breezing
Laughter and customs intrigue my senses;
They have broken down the fences
Hiding my heart
From the world I long to be a part
Of. James Kirk, I thank you
For everything wonderful and new.
You have brought me happiness before unknown -
A life and a friend of my own.

Elaine Wood

* * * * *

TAVARA

When I plotted with my menfolk
To trap the Human into marriage
It was to escape a fearful destiny.
I had no liking for wifhood to any man,
But it seemed to me this one called Kirk
Would be preferable to any mate
I would find among my own.
Then I discovered my mistake.
I had violated a true bond!
Even though unwittingly,
And my fear of a too well-known future was feeble
Compared to the guilt I felt because
My manipulations should come to this.
For I never intended any harm
To the gentle man I wed.
I only craved that freedom of choice
I did not have.

Gene Delapenia

* * * * *

ETERNAL TRUTH

I was
A small piece of myself
Pretending to be whole
A shell of loneliness
Protecting a flicker of pain.
Now...I am (almost) whole.
Your golden laughter
Compassion, bright courage,
Minds' delight joined in need
Half-bond hints fulfillment, completion.
I need you.
Could you risk so much,
Overcome past terrors,
Chance hard-won gains
For an unknown prize?
I could learn to accept, rejoice in,
The knowledge that another - the woman -
Loves you, brings you the joy of a child.
Even my jealousy has not driven you away.
You have brought so much happiness.
Forgiven so many things
Done in love, in necessity,
But still painful.
I have one sure comfort
For you always return to me.
In the moment of your triumph
We are together - by your choice -
Confronting the world with our reality.
Surely one day I shall have my dream:
A true bond of your initiation,
Touching and touched, never and always,
Parted from me and yet a part of me.
I need you. You are my life.

D. Boöker

* * * * *

DOUBT

Am I ungrateful, yearning
For yet more, the final gift,
Exchange of self for self?
You have given me so much,
Freed me from hideous slavery
And taught me to trust myself.
You are my safety, my joy,
Comfort and warmth, strength
Against even the soul's ghosts.
True bondmate - irrevocable.
Total commitment to life's end:
Will I ever be worthy?

D. Booker

* * * * *

UHURA

You have given me peace;
Your dark eyes saw so clearly
Where mine were clouded by remembered pain.
My fears prevented me from seeing the truth,
And my insecurities found me guilty.
But you are right;
'The only crime is selfishness,'
And of that I am innocent.
Uhura...I thank you,
Even though I will never tell you why.

Gene Delapenia

* * * * *

ANALYSIS AND REVIEW

I Fragment
 Silent shriek of pain
 Dumbshow of existence.

You Plaything
 Victim of a madman's lust
 Clinging to shards of sanity.

We United
 Scars fading as journey ends
 Safe harboured in each other's soul.

D. Booker

"Madam, can you specify the nature of the problem?" Spock leaned forward in the command chair, focusing his attention on the wavering image on the screen.

"Alas, Commodore, there is so much... Our equipment is wearing out...but our most urgent need is for a doctor. My husband's condition worsens by the hour, and..."

"Sorry, sir, I've lost it." Uhura's hands flew over her board. "Their transmitter seems to be giving out. I'm having to boost their signal to the limit to maintain even this much contact. Try it now, sir."

"Commodore?" The blurred image re-formed. "Thank the Gods! Can you help us?"

"My Chief Medical Officer is standing by, and perhaps my Communications Officer can be of assistance?"

"We would be grateful."

"The Enterprise will reach your planet within the hour. I will beam down -- " Spock hesitated. Across the link he sensed his bondmate's amused reproof. He sighed resignedly. "My First Officer, Captain Kirk, will beam down -- with your permission -- to assess your situation and prepare a report. Any assistance we can render will be given."

"We will await your arrival, Commodore. Forgive me, I must go -- my husband calls."

The signal faded again. Uhura turned from her board. "Contact lost, sir."

Spock rose. "Have Dr. McCoy meet us in the briefing room, Miss Uhura. Give him what information we have, then join us there. Mr. Sulu, you have the con. Captain Kirk, a word with you."

Kirk followed his bondmate into the turbolift, smiling slightly as he did so. Spock never seemed to lose that note of quiet satisfaction when addressing him as 'Captain Kirk'. He had long since forgotten his early jealousy of his counterpart; the title was Spock's gift to him, not an attempt to create a replacement for his long-dead friend.

He knew what he was to Spock; once, during one of their melds, Kirk had been shown a truth that had shaken him to the soul; if at a word Spock could restore his former Captain and lose his present companion, that word would not be spoken.

Gradually, he had become...not used to the thought, exactly, but accepting of it, a reaction made possible because for him his Vulcan bondmate was the single most important factor in his life; his loyalty to Spock far outweighed any commitment he felt to Starfleet or to Earth.

The lift slowed, stopped, and the doors slid open to admit two crewmembers. Assistant Engineer MacLeod murmured an absent-minded greeting, and immediately buried her nose in the sheaf of specifications she carried; Gary Mitchell nodded respectfully to Spock, grinned broadly at Kirk, and settled down to study his two seniors with all the tactful discretion of a child eyeing a jar of sweets.

There was no malice in the scrutiny, only an intense curiosity. The formal announcement of the bonding between Kirk and Spock, occasioned by their joint promotion and subsequent dependency posting, had come as something of a surprise to the crew. They had all known that their shy, popular First Officer never became involved with any of the women on the ship who made their interest plain; when he had let it be known that he was bonded to a Vulcan they had all assumed that his wife was a member of Spock's family, an assumption apparently borne out by the closeness between the two men.



The declaration of the true state of affairs, made by Spock at his most impassive, had for the most part produced one of three reactions. The majority of the crew had been surprised, slightly curious, had wished them well but clearly considered their private lives not to be their business; the few same-sex couples on board had been openly envious of their legally recognised status -- although there were no regulations against homosexual liaisons, and requests for dependency postings on those grounds were treated sympathetically, it was still not possible under Terran law for such couples to form a legal union; and a few -- a very few -- of the crew were openly disapproving.

Gary Mitchell -- typically, Kirk thought wryly -- fell into none of those categories. He had not dared to say anything to Spock, but had waited for a moment when he was alone with Kirk to offer joking but sincere congratulations -- and had immediately passed on to outrageous speculations as to what form the ceremony had taken, and how they had spent what he referred to slyly as their honeymoon.

Despite his embarrassment, Kirk couldn't help being amused. Gary might have learned respect for his senior officers, but he certainly wasn't about to carry that respect to extremes. Teasing was as natural to him as breathing, the only difference now being that he had learned also when to stop. He was still curious and irreverent, but Kirk and Spock had won his loyalty, and he was as fervent in his support of the First Officer as he had once been in his domination of the shy, eager-to-please young cadet.

Kirk remembered one evening, not long after Spock's announcement, when, passing through the shuttle bay, he had overheard Mitchell in conversation with one of the new shuttle pilots, a man who openly and loudly condemned the relationship between the Captain and the First Officer.

"It's disgusting!" the man declared. "We ought to lodge a complaint with Starfleet."

"Come off it, Jennings," Mitchell grinned. "You've never complained about Hal and Tom, or those two girls in life science."

"But they're all Human," Jennings argued. "The Commodore's a Vulcan. How do we know Kirk's willing? You know what they say about Vulcans -- he could be forcing the First, making him submit. A Human and an alien -- it's not natural."

Kirk had shivered, remembering -- as he rarely did now -- a Vulcan who had raped his mind and body for his own pleasure, forcing him into a life of servitude that disgusted him. So vivid was the memory that Mitchell's laughter startled him.

"Not natural, huh? How do you know what's natural for Vulcans? And the Commodore's half Human, remember -- his mother was from Earth. And you've only got to look at Captain Kirk to see that he's happy. Leave them alone, Jennings -- it's no business of ours, anyway."

"But still, the Commodore and the Captain..." Jennings was unwilling to let the subject rest. "Why should Kirk get preferential treatment just because he sleeps with the Commodore?"

"What preferential treatment?" Mitchell's voice took on a note of real anger. "Mr. Kirk takes his share of risks -- more than his share. Just ask Security, and see if they think Kirk abuses his position."

"Anyway, what do you want to do? Forbid married couples serving together? Captain April had his wife under his command, so I've heard, and Shevas of the Potemkin -- his wife is his Chief Medical Officer. Nobody accuses them of playing favourites -- why assume Spock does? Kirk's the best First Officer in the Fleet; that was said of him even before he was bonded, and nothing's changed. He's damned good, and don't you forget it."

"Fancy him yourself, do you?" Jennings sneered. "Amazing the effect a pretty face can have. You should try your luck with him...or maybe you already

have. You knew him at the Academy, didn't you?"

"God, you've got a filthy mind!" Mitchell snorted. "Not everyone's as promiscuous as you are - Kirk certainly isn't. And if I did fancy him - which I don't - I have the sense to know that fooling around with a Vulcan's bondmate is the surest route to a broken neck. Speaking of which, that's what you'll get if Spock hears you talking like this - that is, if Kirk doesn't take you apart first. If you don't like the set-up, Jennings, transfer off, that's my advice. You won't find many on the Enterprise who'll agree with you - and even fewer who'll listen to that kind of talk about the Captain and First Officer."

Kirk had smiled a little, warmed by Mitchell's unexpectedly spirited defence. The man had not known he was there, and could have taken the easy way of agreeing with Jennings; instead he had gone out of his way to defend Kirk and Spock. His loyalty, once won, was real and dependable.

Now, remembering that defence, Kirk's smile was warm as he shook his head in mild reproof. Mitchell grinned broadly, ruefully acknowledging his curiosity and apologising for it.

The turbolift halted again, and Kirk and Spock emerged, heading for the briefing room. They were the first arrivals, and Spock allowed himself to relax slightly as the door closed behind them.

"Remain behind after the briefing, Jim," the Vulcan requested. "There may be extra safeguards we can employ."

"I'll wait," Kirk nodded, adding in an undertone as the door opened, "You don't think I want to say goodbye in the transporter room, do you?"

McCoy came in, closely followed by Uhura and Charlene Masters. The group took their places round the table, and Kirk slid into his accustomed place at Spock's side.

"What do we know about this planet?" was Spock's first question.

"Sensor readings are uncertain, Commodore," Kirk replied crisply. "I'm not sure whether the distorted readings are the result of a natural phenomenon, or if they have been deliberately caused - I'd suspect the former. There are energy readings, but very localised, as if there's only one centre of population on the planet. In my judgement, I'd say it's either a group of non-native life forms, perhaps a small colony, or the residue of an indigenous culture in a state of decline."

"Thank you, Captain. Dr. McCoy?"

"The distortion of the sensors hasn't helped me any," the doctor reported, "but my observations tend to confirm Captain Kirk's. The sentient life-form readings are concentrated into a very small area - a village, say - and I'm reasonably certain that they are humanoid in more than just appearance. Some of the readings are strange, but I've based my medikit on a humanoid strain until I can get more information on what I'm dealing with."

"Transporter coordinates tally, Captain," Charlene Masters contributed. "The energy and life form readings correspond to the source of the transmission from Platonius."

"Do you have any observations on the transmission, Miss Uhura?" Spock turned to the Communications Officer.

"The distortion of the sensor scans does not seem to be affecting communications, sir. The interference there is certainly due to equipment failure. I foresee no difficulty in repairing the transmitter."

"I see. Miss Masters, will the distortion affect the use of the transporter?"

"No, sir. It's safe to beam down."

"Very well. Captain, you will beam down with Miss Uhura and Dr. McCoy."

This is primarily a medical emergency at this stage, but while the Lieutenant is engaged in repairing their transmitter, you may be able to learn something of the planet's culture. Stay in regular contact with the Enterprise, and Miss Masters, maintain a fix on the landing party at all times."

"That could be a problem, sir. I think we'll need communicator confirmation for safe beam-up. However, I should be able to keep track of their location."

"Do the best you can."

Spock rose, bringing the briefing to an end. As the rest of the group filed out, Kirk came to perch on the edge of the table, eyeing his bondmate wryly.

"I'll take care," he promised, forestalling the Vulcan's warning.

Spock smiled briefly. "I wish I could believe that. Jim...I am concerned about this distortion. It may be natural...it may not." His hand lifted to the Human's temple. "Will you leave the bond-link open? I would feel...easier, so."

"I never close it off," Kirk replied simply. "Spock - is everything all right? You look...tired."

"It is nothing - do not be concerned. And before you ask, t'hy'la, I have already consulted Dr. McCoy. I am merely a little 'run down' as he puts it. If it were anything more serious, do you think he would have left me in command?"

"I suppose not." Kirk grinned. "What you need is a good long leave. Perhaps after this mission we'll get one. It's strange to think that our children are nearly a year old, and we haven't seen them yet."

"Would you wish to return to Vulcan?" Spock asked idly.

"Well, I'd like to go home for a while, but you know, I'd really like to visit Earth again. It's been years since I've been there."

"We will talk of it later." Spock rose, extending his hand in the gesture of affection he often used with Kirk. "Come, Dr. McCoy and Miss Uhura will be waiting."

They walked together to the transporter room, and Spock watched as the three figures shimmered and were gone. He was becoming almost as accomplished a liar as Kirk, he thought guiltily, and under much the same circumstances - when it came to someone else's welfare. He had spoken to McCoy, but as a friend, not as a doctor; and he could not bring himself to tell Kirk the real reason. As time passed the half-formed bond ached more and more for completion - the Commander had warned him it would be so should he ever bond. Kirk had offered the full bond more than once, but Spock felt instinctively that it was not yet time to allow such a total commitment. For his own part he was ready - more than ready - but he still wondered if he had the right to permit himself such a final and absolute hold on Kirk. The bond-to-death was a great deal for the Human to give, when he had already had so much stolen from him.

McCoy's advice had been brief and sensible. "Let Jim decide." Kirk knew all that was involved, had considered all the implications. If he offered the full bond again it would be because he wanted it.

Spock had agreed. He would wait until Jim was ready. But, as he watched his bondmate beam down yet again into an unknown situation, he wished, illogical though he knew it to be, that they were fully linked.

* * * * *

"Isn't this beautiful, Doctor?" Uhura glanced round appreciatively as the landing party materialised at the given coordinates.

"Very much so," McCoy nodded in agreement. "There's an aura of tranquillity here...it certainly seems peaceful."

Kirk glanced sharply at his two companions, but made no comment. The cool marble hall in which they found themselves did indeed have a certain austere

beauty, but to him it seemed cold, sterile. As for the tranquillity that had impressed McCoy, he could not sense it; rather it seemed to him that there was tension in the atmosphere - no direct menace, but...something that raised the hairs on the back of his neck. Spock had told him that their repeated melds had sensitised the Human so that he was far more aware than was usual of nuances in the atmosphere, as though he picked up mental emanations from others without really being aware of it, but it was an awareness of feeling and emotion, not of thought - he knew instinctively if his companions were sad, happy, depressed or nervous, but not what had caused those feelings. This place produced in him a negative reaction; beautiful though it was, it was cold, with no sense of life or joy about it. Automatically he raised his shields in an instinctive gesture of defence.

"Welcome to Platonius, star-travellers. I am Alexander, here to serve you."

A young man, dressed in a tunic and sandals vaguely reminiscent of Earth's ancient Greece, appeared through the towering doors at the end of the room and came quickly towards them. Uhura's eyes widened, and Kirk had to suppress an understanding chuckle - Alexander was one of the handsomest humanoid males he had ever seen, and Uhura obviously agreed with the assessment.

"Thank you, Alexander. I am Captain James Kirk of the - "

Kirk's voice faded as Alexander reached them, and for a moment he could not continue. Everything about the man seemed normal, even his unusual good looks being a matter of degree, but to Kirk it was as though all his mental alarms began ringing at once. He met the wide blue eyes, and could not restrain a shudder - the clear depths of those eyes held an expression of shame and terror that was all too familiar to him, for he had seen it in the mirror many times during the years of his possession by the Captain.

" - U.S.S. Enterprise," he continued at last, after a pause that was in reality very short. "May I introduce my companions, Dr. Leonard McCoy and Lt. Uhura."

"You are all most welcome, but do not think me discourteous if I beg you to hurry. Parmen grows worse, and the Lady Philana bade me bring you to her at once."

"Doctor?" Kirk was willing to defer to McCoy in a medical emergency, and the pause gave him time to bring his sense of revulsion under control. He had no evidence that anything was wrong here, only his own impressions, and he did not want to worry Spock until he had some positive facts to offer.

Alexander led them along a wide corridor lined with towering statues of pure white marble, until they came to an ornate door that swung open as the party approached. Their guide ushered them in, and bowed.

"The physician is here, my lady."

"Thank the Gods! You must help my husband, I beg you. I think he is dying."

It was the woman they had seen on the viewscreen, but as she rose and came towards them they saw what the screen had hidden; beautiful, stately, with an innate look of command, she was almost eight feet tall, and built in graceful proportion to her height. Beside her, Kirk, McCoy, Uhura and Alexander had the appearance of being midgets.

For McCoy, this was a mere detail. "May I examine your husband, Ma'am?" he asked.

"Of course. Come with me." She led them through into another room, where a man lay tossing in delirium on a bed. "This is Parmen, my husband."

McCoy carefully drew back the bedcover, and his scanner whirred as he passed it over the huge frame. "How long has he been like this?"

"He has been ill for several days now, but the sickness grows worse. We can do nothing."

"But it's incredible!" McCoy straightened with a look of disbelief on his face. "Your husband is gravely ill, but it all stems from a simple cut on his leg. A course of antibiotics would have cleared the infection in hours. Surely your doctors --"

"There are no doctors here," Philana answered. "There has been no illness on Platonius for centuries, and any minor injuries we heal ourselves. In Parmen's case, it seems that the fever destroyed his control, and so he grew worse. Can you save him, Doctor?"

"I should think so," McCoy grunted, opening his medikit. "His metabolism is similar enough to Human for this to work... Let's see, a larger dose, I think..."

As McCoy leaned over his patient the man surged frantically on the bed. A flailing arm caught the doctor, knocking him aside, and suddenly it seemed that every loose object in the room was hurtling through the air to smash against the walls -- even a heavy stone bench lurched from its base to crash to the floor.

"He does not understand -- he thinks you mean to harm him." Philana darted forward, to catch the tossing head in her hands. "It is I, my husband," she murmured. "There is nothing to fear -- this man will help you. Let him approach."

Slowly the storm subsided and Philana nodded to McCoy. "He understands now -- it is safe for you to approach him."

McCoy came forward warily, but there was no further violent demonstration. The hypo hissed against Parmen's shoulder, and the doctor sighed in relief.

"That should do it. Perhaps, Ma'am, we should leave him to rest. He will sleep now for several hours, but when he wakes you will find him greatly improved. Can you arrange for someone to sit with him?"

"That will not be necessary." Philana touched her forehead. "I am...aware of my husband -- I will know when he wakes. Come, let me welcome you properly to Platonius."

They followed their hostess back into the other room, where two men dressed in long robes were waiting for them. There was no sign of Alexander. Philana seated herself on a throne-like chair and waved a hand; at her gesture a tray of wine cups rose from a table and floated across to hover before each in turn.

Telekinetic powers, and possibly some form of telepathy, Kirk noted as he took one of the cups. I'd better watch my step until I find out just what their range is, and what their capabilities are.

He responded courteously to Philana's formal speech of welcome, then smiled at her. "Is there any other way in which we can help you?" he asked. "You mentioned a problem with your communications equipment -- Lt. Uhura has a great deal of experience in these matters, and she will be only too pleased to do what she can. Then if you wish to let me inspect the rest of your equipment, I can prepare a report for your Chief Engineer as to what further work is required."

"We would be most grateful. Dionyd will conduct you round our settlement," Philana indicated the younger man, "and Eraclitus will show the Lieutenant our communications centre."

"Perhaps you would begin at once, Miss Uhura." As he spoke Kirk caught McCoy's eye and glanced quickly at the woman.

Taking the hint, McCoy set down his wine cup. "If you have no objection, Captain, I'll go with Uhura. Looks like you're going to be busy for a while, and I don't want to be too far from my patient."

"Let me know if you need any further assistance, Miss Uhura, and report to me when you have finished." Kirk watched as Eraclitus escorted his companions out, then turned to smile again at Philana. "I should report to the Commodore," he said evenly. "Will you excuse me?"

"Of course, Captain."

Kirk pulled out his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise -- Spock here."

"A preliminary report, Commodore. We have made contact, and have been received with great courtesy." As he spoke, Kirk opened the tight channel of the bond-link fully, making sure that the rest of his mind was fully shielded. No known telepathic race could monitor the bond-link, or even detect its use - he hoped that the Platonians could not, either, but it was a risk he had to take.

//Spock?//

"That is well, Captain. How is the Doctor's patient?"

//Jim, is something wrong?//

"McCoy has begun treatment, and expects a full recovery."

//I'm not sure, Spock. I could be jumping at shadows, but I don't think so. Look, this is going to sound crazy, but is there any way you can shield the Enterprise from any telekinetic interference from the planet? And can you shield the crew from any telepathic influence?//

"I am pleased to hear it. What progress are you making with the technical assistance?"

//I can alter the frequency of the hull shields, and take the ship out to maximum orbit. That will minimize any telekinetic effects. Countering telepathic influence directed against the crew will be more difficult, but I can shield them, for a time at least. Do you suspect treachery Jim?//

"Lt. Uhura has begun work on the communications equipment, and I am about to begin compiling my report on what further assistance is needed."

//I'm not ready to go that far - yet. But there's definitely something... wrong here. I can feel it. Be careful, Spock - and don't let anyone else beam down.//

"When you have completed your report we will begin talks with the Platonians and institute normal first contact procedures. Please emphasize to them that our assistance now is unconditional, but they may wish to know more of the Federation before we leave."

//Jim, you must also take care. Mr. Kyle reports that he cannot maintain a transporter fix on you, and although I can monitor your position through the bond, I cannot do it for Miss Uhura or for McCoy. Also, the concentration needed to shield the crew will weaken my control of the bond-link. I suggest that you close it down from your end, unless and until you need me; I will remain open to you so that no time is lost in establishing the link.//

"Very well, Commodore. Kirk out."

//I'll be careful, t'hy'la.//

Kirk replaced his communicator and turned back to Philana. "Would it be convenient for me to begin at once?"

"Of course, Captain. Dionyd, see that our guest has whatever he requires. I will make arrangements for your accomodation, Captain Kirk - I hope you and your companions will be our guests."

"We'd be honoured, Ma'am." Kirk bowed slightly and followed Dionyd from the room, unslinging his tricorder as he went.

"I don't know where to start," the Platonian said as they headed down the corridor; as they walked he shortened his stride to accomodate the smaller Human. "Perhaps in our generating station?"

"That will do," Kirk agreed.

As they continued on their way, several Platonians, both male and female, greeted them. Kirk noted that all were as tall as those he had already met -- by the standards of his society, Alexander was indeed a midget. Now he knew, too, one of the things that had bothered him when he had first beamed down -- the proportions of the buildings, the doors and decorations, were all on a scale suitable to his hosts, which had made him realise that something was odd, although he had not realised that until now.

"Your people aren't natives of this planet, are you?" he asked casually as he scanned the machinery displayed to him, noting that although it was alien in construction he was familiar with its operation.

"No. Our people came originally from Sandara. When our sun went nova, it was necessary for us to find new homes. Earth was one of the planets we considered, but rejected to avoid a clash with its superstitious natives. During our survey, Parmen, our leader, was impressed by the teachings of the philosopher Plato; he determined to found the perfect Platonic republic. We settled here almost a thousand years ago, and our society has remained secret and peaceful ever since. Unfortunately, we did not take into account that although we were perfect, our equipment was not; as you know, we now need assistance, since all our technical knowledge has been forgotten -- we depend totally on the technology we brought with us, but have lost the ability to maintain that technology."

"Surely your ancestors made provision for eventual breakdown?" Kirk asked.

"Our ancestors? Captain, we are the original settlers. I was...let me see...116 when I left Sandara, and that, as I said, was about a thousand years ago. We are a perfect society -- we do not age, we do not stagnate. For millenia our race has been bred for intelligence, longevity; the mistake we made was to forget that our machines are not as advanced as we."

"And yet you required a doctor," Kirk said absently, concentrating on his tricorder as he spoke. "You have none of your own."

"They have not been needed. Our eugenics programme gave us perfect health, but with no illness we lost our resistance to infection. Parmen's injury was the result of a scratch sustained in a fall -- a simple matter, but the infection was beyond our control. Now we realise that we have need of --" Dionyd broke off suddenly, glancing at Kirk, but seeing the Human apparently absorbed in the readings of his tricorder, he relaxed.

"All this is out of date, but repairable," Kirk said thoughtfully. "Of course, our engineers will need to manufacture some of the replacement parts... I'm sorry, Dionyd, you were saying?"

"Nothing of importance, Captain. Have you finished here?"

"Yes, I have all I need. It will take me a little time to study these results -- is there somewhere I can work?"

"Allow me to show you to your quarters. Your companions will join you when they have finished."

The rooms to which Kirk was shown were large and ornate, decorated in the same semi-classical style as the rest of the buildings he had seen. To his relief the furnishings had been scaled down to suit Human dimensions. Kirk wondered who had thought of it -- not Philana, he was sure.

There was no sign of McCoy or Uhura, so he settled down to prepare his report.

As he worked part of his mind was busy with the little he had learned. It could simply be that an enclosed society like the Platonians' was wary of strangers, even when they came to help, but that did not explain the look of terror in Alexander's eyes. Had McCoy seen it? he wondered. Of course, the doctor had been busy with his patient.

Once he had worn that look of terror, and there had been no-one to help him; whatever the rights and wrongs of Platonian society, no man should be compelled to live with that fear, and Kirk's own experience made him determine to do whatever he could to help, to bring Alexander the comfort he had longed for, but had not received...until Spock came to him. The first thing was to find Alexander, talk to him alone, persuade the man that he was to be trusted...

"Hi, Jim."

Kirk's thoughts were interrupted as McCoy and Uhura entered. He turned with a smile. "Hi, Bones. How did it go, Uhura?"

The woman shrugged. "I've patched up the equipment as best I can, and we can communicate clearly with the Enterprise now, but the whole console really needs to be stripped down and rebuilt. It'll take me a couple of days, but it really should be done if the transmitter is to work properly - I don't guarantee my repair for very long."

"I see. How about Parmen, Bones?"

"I looked in on him just before I came back here. He's resting well, and making a remarkable recovery. Jim, I learned something which could be interesting. I took readings from Parmen, and also from Heraclitus - well, I needed the readings from a healthy Platonian to know what the results should be. Both of them have a very high concentration of kironide in their bodies."

"Kironide! That could be what's affecting the sensor readings. I wonder..." He broke off as a quiet voice came from behind him.

"Excuse me, Captain Kirk. Is there anything you need? Are you comfortable here?"

"This is fine, Alexander." Kirk turned with a reassuring smile.

"I was to tell you that it will soon be time for the evening meal - you are to dine with the Lady Philana and the Platonians." His message delivered, Alexander lingered. "If there is anything you need, you have only to ask," he said with the air of someone searching for a reason to remain.

Acting on instinct, Kirk sat down on one of the benches and smiled again. "I expect you're curious about us," he said easily. "We don't mind answering questions, you know."

Alexander subjected Kirk to a long, searching scrutiny, then turned to study McCoy and Uhura. "You take it all so calmly," he said at last.

"Take what calmly?" Kirk was puzzled.

"That you are freaks...midgets...like me. And yet your master must trust you, to allow you to come here."

"Freaks? Master? I don't understand... Alexander, do you mean because we are smaller than the Platonians?"

"Of course. You must be deformed, like me - but you don't seem to mind."

"There are many races in the Federation," Kirk said. "Some are as tall as the Platonians, others are to us as we are to them. Size is no indication of intelligence - the wisest man I ever heard of is an Andorian who would scarcely reach my waist. By the standards of his own race, he is a midget - but he is the most revered of his people."

"But Parmen told me that because I did not grow...because my mind cannot contain the gift of power, I am useless - a fool and a slave."

"They're lying," Kirk said flatly. "And I can prove it. Bones, scan Alexander."

McCoy moved forward, his tricorder whirring. "Actually, your intelligence level is a couple of points higher than Parmen's," he said, studying the screen. "He has certain brainwave patterns that you don't... What you said about power -- do you have the telekinetic ability too?"

"No, I don't."

"Then that's it -- the only difference."

"I am as intelligent as Parmen?" Alexander sounded disbelieving.

"Slightly more so -- and a lot more intelligent than Heraclitus, I might add."

"But Parmen said... He lied?"

At McCoy's nod the alien drew a shuddering breath. "Yet I am a fool, for I believed him." His face hardened with resolution, and he turned to Kirk, grasping the Human's shoulders. "Captain, you must leave. Take your people and return to your ship at once."

"Are we in danger here?" Kirk asked.

"More than you know. Please, Captain, you must..." Alexander broke off abruptly, his body stiffening. Then, as though at some unspoken command, he turned and began to move jerkily towards the door.

"What...?" McCoy started forward, then he too suddenly stiffened and began to follow the alien; Uhura opened her mouth as though to speak, then she also, held in some unseen control, began to move with the others.

Kirk watched for a few seconds in bewilderment, then he gasped aloud as something touched his sensitive shields, a mental command to go with his companions. Outraged, he gathered his defences to resist, then instinct made him pause. His best defence would be in fact to pretend that he had no defence, to obey the commands. To someone trained by Spock the compulsion was easy to break, though to McCoy and Uhura it must be irresistible; he would learn just how strong the Platonians were before he allowed them to know that he could defy them.

The decision occupied only a split second. Without relaxing his shields he allowed the sense of the command to reach him, and obeyed it, walking out into the corridor as though he was as deeply enthralled as the others.

The compulsion led them into a large hall. The Platonians sat on benches around the walls as though preparing to watch an entertainment -- and perhaps they were. Parmen, Philana by his side, sat enthroned on a dais at one end of the room; though a little pale he seemed to have recovered fully from the illness that had prostrated him only a few hours earlier.

As Kirk halted beside his companions, Parmen's attention was already fixed on the cowering Alexander.

"You talk too much, slave. Are you simply a thoughtless, chattering fool, or do you mean to betray those who gave you life? No matter; we will keep you out of the way while we speak with our...guests."

Parmen waved his hand negligently, and Alexander flew through the air, to hang as though pinned by unseen hands against the far wall. The spectacle seemed to amuse the Platonians, for Parmen had to call for silence and wait for the laughter to die down before he began to address the Enterprise officers.

"Dr. McCoy, we of Platonius owe you a debt of gratitude, not only for my life but for showing us that we are vulnerable. We must have a healer, and I have chosen you to remain with us."

McCoy frowned. "I am pleased to see you recovered, Parmen, but it is impossible for me to remain here."

About to echo McCoy's refusal, Kirk realised that he and Uhura were still being held by the compulsion that had brought them here. He could have broken it easily, but remained silent for the moment.

"You can't keep me here," McCoy said flatly. "Our ship will not leave without us."

"Ah, but it will; you see..." Parmen broke off as a muffled explosion echoed through the room. "A trifle early, but no matter. You are now dead, Doctor, you and your companions. We sacrificed an unused building in a good cause. Soon I will contact your ship on our restored transmitter and inform your commander - with every appearance of regret - of the unfortunate explosion in our engineering section that killed our most gallant saviours. There will be no bodies, of course... Have no fear - your stay will be comfortable and pleasant, and there will be much for you to do. Although we need little medical attention, a healer may perhaps solve the curse of sterility that plagues us...

"As for your companions..." Parmen gazed thoughtfully at Kirk and Uhura. "We had intended to keep only you, but when Commodore Spock so obligingly sent us a male and a female, how could we refuse such a handsome gift? As a Science Officer, Captain Kirk will be of use to us, and from such a handsome couple we can breed a new race of servants - Alexander is a fool, and bores us all."

"You're crazy!" McCoy took a step forward, but came to an abrupt halt as Parmen held up his hand. "What makes you think I'll cooperate? Or that Jim and Uhura will?"

"They will cooperate because they must, in the same way that they were forced to come here now. You we cannot coerce, for your mind must be free to serve us, but they will be the hostages for your obedience. Dionyd, show our friend."

The Platonian rose to his feet and moved forward, facing Uhura. He raised his hand as though throwing something, and from thin air a knife flashed past her head, to clatter against the wall behind her. Another followed, and another, faster than the eye could follow, a rain of lethal steel that missed Uhura by a hair's-breadth each time.

"Enough." Parmen raised his hand again and Dionyd returned to his place. "An effective demonstration, but perhaps a little...final, if concentration should waver. It is possible, however, to inflict the most severe punishment with no harm. Watch again."

He nodded towards Kirk, and instantly a sheet of fire rose up round the Human's feet, enfolding him in flames. McCoy could feel the heat from where he stood, and he watched in horror as the slender figure was alternately revealed and concealed by the hungry flames. It had to be an illusion, he told himself; Parmen would not destroy one of his valuable hostages merely as a demonstration...

And then Kirk screamed.

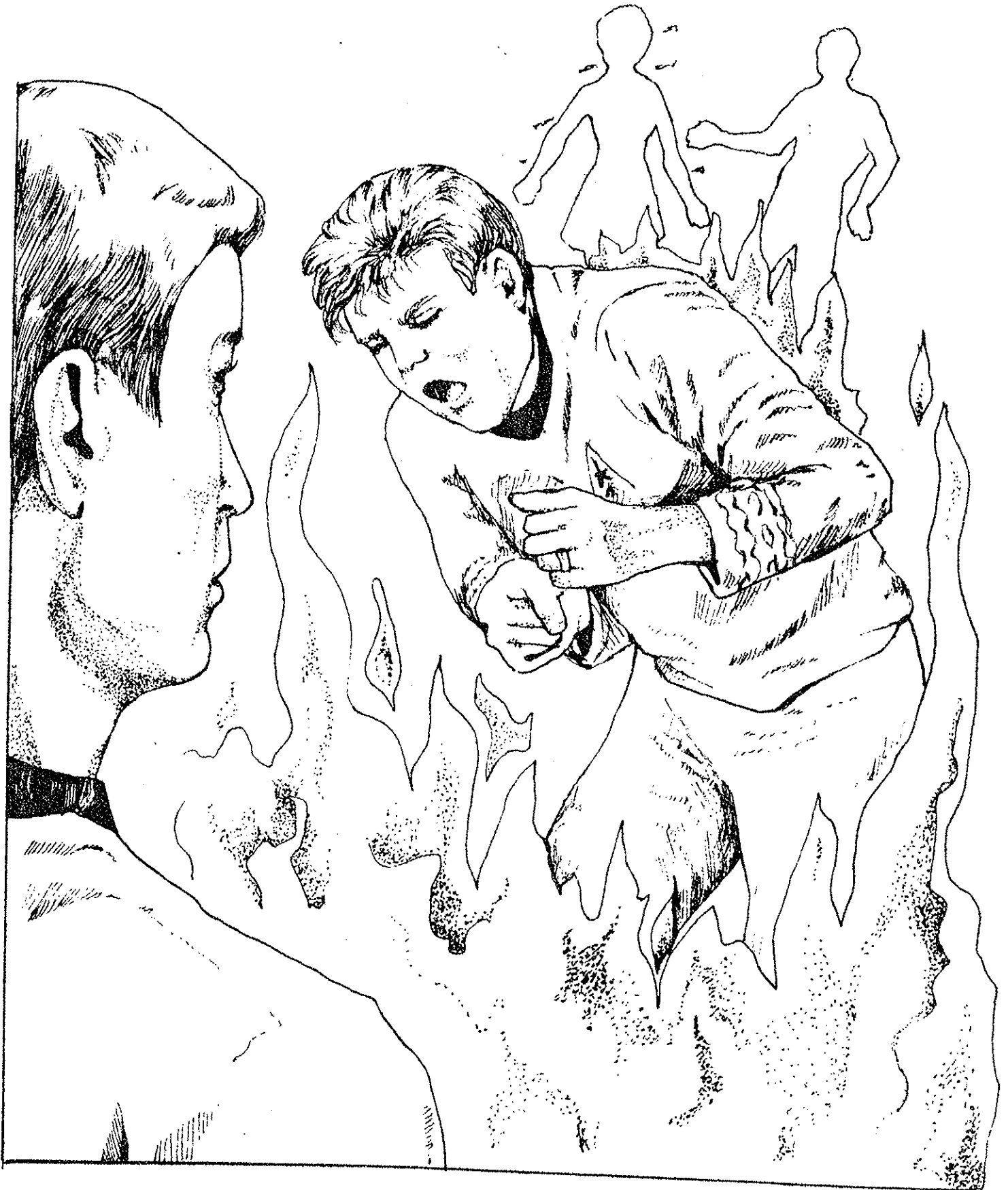
"Stop it! Stop it, damn you!" McCoy cursed the power that held him still as he fought to go to his friend. He could see Uhura's eyes wide with shock as she too stared in anguish at the tortured man.

"But of course." Parmen waved his hand, and instantly the fire died; Kirk sank to his knees, sobbing, hugging himself as though against some unendurable pain, but he was unmarked by the fire - not even his clothes were scorched.

"Go to him," Parmen said indulgently. "Satisfy yourself that he is unharmed - physically. The flames were an illusion, of course - the pain was not. Then think to yourself, Doctor, how often such torment can be repeated without any damage to the victim. This and more is what your friends will suffer if you refuse me. Kirk!"

At the command Kirk's head jerked up, and he watched Parmen blankly.

"You wish to serve me, do you not?" the Platonian asked smoothly.



Instantly the golden head was bowed. "I am your slave, my lord," he whispered. "Command me, and I will obey in all things."

McCoy's heart sank. For a moment he had dared to hope that Kirk had somehow managed to resist Parmen's control; knowing the man as he did, he had been sure that Kirk's mind was his own...but knowing also what Kirk had suffered in the past, he was also certain that Kirk could never have submitted himself willingly to such a gesture of humiliation.

"Return to your quarters," Parmen said. "Talk with Alexander - he will be able to tell you more of what it means to defy me. I give you this night, while my friends and I celebrate my recovery, to consider what I have said to you. But before you go..." He gestured, and their communicators and phasers slipped from their belts to float through the air and land at Parmen's feet. "It would not do for you to attempt to contact your ship, would it? Go, and consider what I have said."

Parmen returned to his place, and as he did so the invisible supports holding Alexander were removed; the man crumpled heavily to the floor, but after a moment he rose to his feet and limped over.

"Let me help you," he whispered as McCoy lifted a trembling Kirk to his feet. "Come, let's get out of here." He put his arm round Uhura's shoulder and led her to the door, following McCoy and Kirk; he was leaning on her as much as leading her, for his leg clearly was hurting.

As the heavy door swung closed behind them, they could hear the light, mocking laughter of the Platonians, and Parmen's voice raised in a toast. "To our new slaves, my friends!"

* * * * *

On the Enterprise, Lt. Palmer turned from the Communications console. "A transmission from Platonius, sir. It's King Parmen."

"On audio, Lieutenant." Spock turned to face the screen. "I am pleased to see that you have recovered, sir," he said formally.

"I am indeed recovered, thanks to your doctor." Parmen's voice was grave. "However, I bring unhappy news, Commodore. Your officers are dead."

There was a sharp intake of breath from someone on the bridge, but Spock only bowed his head over his steepled fingers. "May I ask how, sir?" he said quietly.

"They were inspecting one of our generating stations. The equipment was more dangerous than we knew - we have lost all our understanding of such things. There was an explosion... We were unable to recover the bodies.

"Commodore, I am desolate. They came to aid us, and died in our service. They will long be remembered and honoured on Platonius. If there is anything I can do..."

"There is nothing. I ask you to excuse me, sir - I must inform the crew, and we must mourn our dead."

"Of course. I understand. When you are ready to talk again I will be here."

Palmer cut the screen as the transmission ended, and swung round in her chair to gaze at the Commodore; everyone on the bridge was looking in the same direction, but only Charlene Masters left her post to stand by the command chair.

"Commodore..."

"Miss Masters, if you are about to express your sympathy or condolences, please do not." The quiet voice was very calm. "Captain Kirk is alive." The dark eyes lifted to her troubled face, then passed on to Palmer, to Chekov who had taken over Kirk's monitors, to Sulu at the helm and Mitchell at navigation - and surely there were tears on more than one face? He smiled slightly, and when

he spoke his voice was filled with assurance.

"Every Vulcan knows beyond doubt the moment of his bondmate's death. Parmen says that he is dead - and Parmen lies. I wonder why?"

"Sir..." Charlene hesitated. "You can only be sure of Captain Kirk. What about Uhura and McCoy?"

"The Captain and I are not in direct contact at the moment, but the aura of the link is undisturbed. He could not hide his grief from me if they were dead. Miss Masters, you have the con. I will be in my quarters." He paused, then conceding that the circumstances allowed and required an explanation he would not normally have given, added shyly, "It is easiest for us to communicate in private. As soon as it is safe to do so, the Captain will contact me with an explanation - I wish to be ready to respond." He paused again, then continued, "I sensed your grief for the Captain, and for me. Thank you, my friends."

The turbolift door had closed behind the Vulcan before Gary Mitchell gave an appreciative chuckle. "Sounds like a handy thing, that bond-link." He winked outrageously at Lt. Palmer. "Better watch out, Caroline - you and Uhura could find yourselves out of a job if it catches on."

* * * * *

Deliberately, Kirk hung back a little, allowing McCoy and Uhura to move ahead - he sensed that Alexander would talk more freely in a direct exchange, rather than to an audience.

"Parmen said you'd explain what it means to defy him," he prompted.

Alexander halted, studied Kirk for a moment, then indicated a low door they were just passing. "Shall we go to my room, Captain? We can talk more freely there."

Kirk nodded. "Of course. And Alexander - my friends call me Jim." He turned to call to McCoy. "Bones, see if Uhura's all right - I'll be along soon."

McCoy nodded and continued along the corridor; Kirk watched him leave, then turned to follow Alexander through the doorway.

The room in which he found himself was of normal Human proportions - even the furniture had been scaled down. Kirk sighed with relief as he sank into a chair. "That's better," he grinned. "I was beginning to feel overwhelmed."

Alexander nodded. "That's partly why I decided to live here," he confessed. "The others never come here - it's too cramped for them. I built all the furniture myself," he added proudly. "May I offer you some wine...Jim?"

"No wine, thanks, but perhaps some fruit juice, if you have it?"

Alexander busied himself at a side table, and returned holding two cups. Handing one to Kirk, he sat down opposite him. "They drink a lot, and sometimes they force me to become drunk with them, so I never touch alcohol when I'm on my own."

Kirk nodded sympathetically. "It's an unpleasant feeling, isn't it? Alexander, we may not have much time, so I'll get right down to business. Parmen and the others - can they read minds?"

"No," Alexander replied positively. "They can control people like you and me, and they can move objects around pretty much at will, but they can't read our thoughts."

"That's a relief, at any rate." Kirk sipped his juice. "But Parmen knew you'd warned me."

"There are monitors all round the palace, relics of the old days. Only Parmen knows how to use them - that's how he's hung onto power for so long. He knows if any of the others try to plot against him. It's all right," he added, observing Kirk's sudden nervous glance at the walls. "There aren't any in here."

After all, who'd plot with me?"

"So it's wiser to assume that anywhere else we could be overheard," Kirk said, thoughtfully. "Hmm, that could complicate matters... Still, tell me what you can for now. Have they always had these powers, for instance?"

"Not originally, except in very rare cases, but when they began their programme of genetic engineering, that was one of the characteristics that was bred for, until by the time of the destruction of Sandara it was a universal talent. As you know, this group settled on Platonius. At first they amused themselves playing at setting up their so-called ideal state - Parmen had made a hobby of studying your planet's ancient Greece."

"Not very good at it, was he?" Kirk grinned.

Alexander stared as though Kirk had uttered rank heresy. "What do you mean, Jim? Parmen is an acknowledged expert - "

"No." Kirk shook his head firmly. "He's a dabbler, that's all. Take those statues out there - even a rank amateur knows that the Greeks painted their statues in vivid colours - it's only the passage of time that has left those surviving specimens as white. And no serious student would dream of setting up this perversion of Plato's republic."

"So he doesn't know everything..." Alexander looked thoughtful, considering this new idea. "But to get back to the history of Platonius, after a while Parmen decided to increase the size of the colony, and they began a breeding programme. It was a disaster. Every child born was...like me; weak, undersized, sickly, and with no trace of mental ability. Parmen declared that he would not permit such ugliness to exist in his perfect world, and so all the children were killed... I've often thought that they were the fortunate ones."

"It's Parmen and the others who are ugly," Kirk said with quiet anger. "Their bodies are perfect, but their minds and hearts are hideous. I once knew someone like that - he was beautiful to look at, but he had no heart. But - if the Platonians killed all the children, Alexander, how did you escape?"

"I was allowed to live - they wanted a sample to study. A specimen. Each time they thought they'd solved the problem they'd try again, and each time they failed. The...faulty children were destroyed. At last they simply stopped trying. Parmen was going to get rid of me then, but Praclitus persuaded him to keep me...for my 'entertainment value', he said. I became Court Jester, servant, the butt of their humour. I play their games, and I lose...oh yes, I lose." He looked at Kirk, misery in his eyes. "And now they'll do that to you, make you their slave. I'm sorry, Jim. If I'd warned you at once, you might have been able to escape...but I was too afraid. This is all I've known, all my life... There's no escape from Parmen - for any of us."

"What about your parents? Didn't they at least try to protect you?"

"Protect me?" Alexander laughed bitterly. "Jim, Parmen and Philana are my parents."

There was nothing Kirk could think of to say. He had known misery in his own life, but at least the Captain had come to him as a stranger; his shyly-offered friendship had been used and betrayed, but there had been no blood-tie between them. His memories of his own parents, though few and distant, were filled with warmth and love. He tried to imagine how it must have been for Alexander to endure such torment at the hands of the very people who should have cared for him, and recoiled from the thought with revulsion. At last he realised that Alexander was still speaking.

"You must remember that I've never seen any other people. I thought Parmen was right, that everyone was like him and the others, beautiful, clever and cruel. I used to be grateful that they allowed me to live at all, monster that I was...and that I was permitted to serve them. It was only as I grew older, and turned to the old tapes for company, that I learned to understand what they

were really like.

"Time passed, and over the centuries much knowledge was lost. Oh, it's there in the old records, if you know where to look for it, but I don't think any of them even remember that, now. The machinery decayed, broke down, and they began to speak of contacting other races to seek help, but they were afraid of what would happen to their private playground, and so they did nothing. Then Parmen became ill, and Philana called for help. Your ship answered. While they waited for you to reach Platonius, Dionyd suggested this plan to obtain the help they wanted and to avoid interference. When you appeared as well, and with a woman of your own race, Heraclitus saw the chance to breed slaves, more victims for their amusement. They can make you obey, as I do."

"They won't win, Alexander," Kirk said firmly. "We'll get out of here - and you'll come with us. That's a promise."

"That's what I'm trying to make you understand, Jim - there is no escape. Your ship is safe only because Parmen can't break through its shields, and he can't reach the minds of your crew - perhaps it's just too far away. But the minute your Commodore lowers the shields, Parmen will have the ship - he'll make it crash into the atmosphere, or take other people from her...he can do as he likes. Even if you could signal your comrades, they'd have to lower the shields to take you aboard, wouldn't they? Unless you want to see more of your friends in this position, you'd better hope that they leave quickly. After all, they think you're dead.

"And even if by some miracle you did escape, how can I go with you? You've seen only a small part of what Parmen has made me. There's no place for me in your world, Jim...nowhere to run to..."

Alexander's voice faded and he bowed his head, covering his face with shaking hands. Kirk hesitated, then moved to sit on the couch beside him, slipping his arm round the slumped shoulders.

"Alexander, listen to me." Kirk's voice was very quiet. "You think I'd despise you for what you did to stay alive? I've done worse - much worse."

"You?" Alexander looked up, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"Yes, me. I was young, shy and very lonely; I was good at my job, but I was nervous with other people, had no friends. When friendship was offered to me I reached out for it, only to find that I'd been tricked. I spent years in the power of a sadist who used my mind and body for his pleasure, controlling me as Parmen controls you. Then Commodore Spock found me, and freed me. He taught me, helped me, until I was fit to be his companion. I owe him my life and my sanity...and a debt I can never repay. You can be helped, as I was helped - and you will be."

Alexander smiled sadly. "I almost believe you, Jim. But you'll never get away from here, so..."

He broke off abruptly and sprang to his feet, his body rigid. "I am called," he said stiffly, forcing the words out as he began to move towards the door. "I have no choice - and neither will you."

Kirk sat for a moment as the door closed behind Alexander. He should get back to McCoy and Uhura as quickly as possible, but first he would take advantage of the privacy here to contact Spock. He knew that sometimes his face revealed his emotions when they communicated through the bond, and while he could tolerate McCoy seeing him then, it was too personal a thing to reveal even to someone as discreet as Uhura. Leaning back in his seat he readied his mind, and then opened the channel of the bond-link.

* * * * *

As he made his way to his cabin, hurrying without seeming to hurry, Spock found himself reflecting on what he had said on the bridge. 'My friends' he had

called them, and had felt no embarrassment at doing so. In the other universe only Kirk and McCoy had come close to being friends - the crew of the Enterprise had respected him, but there had been none of the very real affection and personal loyalty he sensed from this crew. Jim had given him that. In reaching out to the desperate young Human he had released a caring that had refused to be buried again; the crew had felt his concern for their welfare, and responded to it. He would never have the first Kirk's easy charm, but in his own quiet way he had won the same respect from his crew that his dead friend had done.

It had been surprisingly easy, too, to show an interest - no open displays of emotion or feeling, which would have been both painful and difficult with anyone but Jim, but a quiet word of appreciation, praise for a job well done, concerned advice when needed, had all won a response that made so much easier that task with which, in the other universe, he had never felt comfortable, the command of Kirk's ship. Here he had moved slowly at first, so as not to create too great a contrast between his methods and those of his sadistic counterpart, but he was confident now and sure that no-one remembered the cold, aloof man who had once held the command.

Jim had taught him so much, had given him so much... Spock frowned as he let himself into his cabin and activated the privacy lock. It seemed...selfish to wish for more. The longing for a full bond was almost a physical ache now, a nagging hunger that usually was eased by his brother's physical presence. This parting, with its added burden of worry for Jim's safety, made it much more difficult to bear.

Slowly, Spock sank down to sit cross-legged before the flickering flame of the fire shrine. He opened his mind fully, ready for his bondmate's call, and quickly brought the need to reach out under strict control - Jim must not sense that hunger in him, for the bond - if and when it came - must come only from the Human's need, not his.

Then, suddenly, Kirk was there, a warm presence. He clung to his brother's mind in a quick, welcoming embrace.

//T'hy'la?// There was affectionate concern in Kirk's thought. //Is all well with you?//

//All is well - now,// Spock responded contentedly.

* * * * *

McCoy was alone when Kirk returned to the room they had been given. "Where's Thura?" he asked anxiously, afraid that Parmen might have summoned her.

"Fixing some food - we found a kitchen through there." McCoy indicated one of the inner doors. "Somehow Parmen got sidetracked on the dinner invitation, remember. Still, it seems we're not supposed to starve. As prisons go, this one's pretty luxurious."

"It's still a prison," Kirk commented. "Hey, what are you doing?" he added as McCoy came forward with his scanner at the ready.

"Just making sure, after that little display of Parmen's," McCoy grunted. "Hmm, no physical damage. Those flames looked real enough to me. How do you feel?"

"I'm okay, but would you mind taking another look at my ankle? It's a bit sore after that twist I gave it just before we beamed down." Kirk spoke casually, but he held his breath, praying that McCoy wouldn't ask him what he was talking about.

The doctor merely shot him a suspicious look, however, and knelt down to draw off his boot, carefully manipulating the ankle. "How's that?" he asked.

"Sore." Kirk allowed his hand to rest on McCoy's head, hoping as he did so that Spock was right and that his mind was now strong enough to reach out to another. He had told himself that he would never contact anyone but his bondmate,

but given the existence of Parmen's monitors, this was the only way to communicate safely with McCoy. As soon as he gained entrance to his friend's mind he took control of the speech centre, then made his presence known.

//Bones!//

//Jim!// Without the power of speech McCoy's thought was the mental equivalent of a shout. //What's going on?//

//Sorry I couldn't ask permission - Parmen has monitors all over this place and I don't want him to know I can do this. I just wanted to warn you to be careful what you say, and to tell you not to give up hope - he doesn't control me. I can block his commands and suggestions, but it's safer if he doesn't realise that until I'm ready. Just try not to worry too much, huh? Sorry, I've got to get out now - I'm not really used to this.//

//Jim...// At the anxiety in McCoy's mind Kirk lingered reluctantly, reflecting as he did so how unlike a contact with Spock this was. It was a considerable effort to leave his bondmate's mind, but McCoy, good friend though he was, held none of the open welcome he was used to - though it might simply have been because contact on this level was extremely limited, being more silent conversation than the exchange of thought and feeling he shared with Spock.

Unaware of his friend's train of thought, McCoy asked hesitantly, //I suppose you couldn't...contact Uhura like this? She's as scared as I am, though she'll not show it. If you could just reassure her...?//

//I'll try,// Kirk promised. //Just remember the monitors, Bones, and if you really need to 'talk' to me again like this, try to find some excuse for me to put my hands on your head. Now I really must go.//

Kirk allowed his hand to slip from McCoy's head. As he did so the doctor looked up and grinned. "No damage, just a nasty wrench. The manipulation should help, but let me know if it still troubles you." He rose, and stretched. "Wonder where Uhura's got to with that food?"

"Coming right up." As if on cue, Uhura entered with a laden tray. "It's a cold meal, but that's probably just as well - I don't guarantee my cooking."

"Looks great to me," McCoy said appreciatively as Uhura set the tray down on a table and joined the men. "How about you, Jim?"

"This is fine, Uhura. Thanks." Kirk smiled at her, noting with approval that despite the trace of fear in her eyes, her voice was calm, her hands steady.

McCoy and Uhura carried on an idle conversation as they ate. Kirk was grateful for that, since it gave him time to think how best to reach Uhura as McCoy had asked. He had considered telling both his companions about his recent contact with Spock, but decided against it - should Parmen become suspicious, and order them to tell him what they knew of any escape attempt, they would not be able to refuse. He was sorry about that, realising that for all McCoy knew they were isolated here - the doctor was not aware that the bond-link now functioned over ship-to-planet distance.

It was going to be difficult, he reflected. Without communicators, McCoy and Uhura could not be located by the transporter, and while Spock could trace him through the bond-link, it would be necessary for them all to be together if all three were to be rescued. All four, he corrected himself; he would not leave Platonius without Alexander.

Then there was the problem of the Enterprise. Parmen might not have abandoned his intention of stealing other subjects from the ship. While the transporter could normally operate through the shields, the distortion caused by the kironide made that a hazardous gamble; yet if the shields were lowered, their protection was lost.

Kirk sighed. It looked as though he'd have to play a waiting game, and try to pick his moment to move. Spock was fully alert, and ready for his signal,

but Kirk hoped he would not have to wait too long; he was already concerned about his bondmate's health, and this additional strain must be affecting him, even though he denied it.

Seeing that the others had finished eating, Kirk rose. "Looks like you've got lauded with the washing up. Bones. Care for a walk, Uhura? We haven't seen the garden yet."

Uhura glanced up, surprised at Kirk's suggestion, but she quickly realised that he had his reasons. She took his hand as she rose. "That'll be nice, Jim. Heraclitus told me they're lit to be beautiful by night as well as by day."

Kirk took her arm as they walked out into the garden. "The generators are on their last legs," he remarked, nodding towards the ornamental lights. "It shouldn't take us long to overhaul them, though."

"You're resigned to staying here, Jim?"

"We'd better face it, Uhura, we may not have any choice. As far as the Enterprise is concerned, we're dead, and Spock is too practical to waste time looking for bodies that've been blown to pieces. It wouldn't be logical - now, would it?"

Uhura glanced at him uncertainly. Was that a hint? Spock had already shown himself to be anything but logical where his bondmate's welfare was concerned. "You think we should cooperate with Parmen?" she asked.

"It does seem the sensible thing to do. We know he can make us obey - what's the point in suffering for nothing? It's no use fighting when you know you can't win." He paused beside a recessed seat, and slipped an arm round her waist. "Let's sit down for a moment."

Uhura nodded to herself as she went with him. Jim was trying to tell her something. She'd known that a passive acceptance was not typical of the young First Officer she had learned to respect.

Alerted by that, she showed no surprise when he drew her close, and bent his head to kiss her. Her arms slid round his neck, holding him in a close embrace. If proof were needed, this was it - Jim rarely touched any of his companions, he never made advances to any member of the crew, and absolutely would not behave like this in such a hazardous situation...unless of course he was being controlled...

Even as the thought occurred to her, she felt the touch of Kirk's mind.
//Uhura?//

//Jim? What...// Her lips trapped by his kiss, she could only formulate the thought.

//I ask forgiveness,// he said formally. //Under the circumstances it was impossible to ask consent. Now attend, for I have little time. Parmen does not control me. There's got to be a way out of this, and I'll find it somehow. Just be careful when you say - this whole place is bugged. If you need to 'talk' to me, get me alone and...and...//

//And kiss you?// Uhura chuckled.

Kirk was already withdrawing his mind, but he caught her final thought. //That'll be no hardship.// He drew back, looking down into her face, feeling slightly dizzy at the realisation that he had enjoyed kissing Uhura. Unconsciously his arms tightened, pulling her soft warmth even closer, colouring as he felt the first flush of arousal. Pandom thoughts tumbled through his mind; with Tavera he had learned that he could function as a normal male; Uhura had more than once indicated discreetly that if he was interested, she was willing; despite the monitors they could have privacy - Alexander wouldn't mind them using his room; it would be...pleasant to make love to Uhura, and she would seek no commitment from him; it would be fun to make love with a willing, responsive partner - and he would prove himself fully a man at last...

His thoughts came to an abrupt halt. No commitment? But he had already made one - his bonding vow to Spock. The Vulcan would never hold him to his vow of fidelity, but he had made it, meaning every word. With Tavera he had not known what he was doing; was his word worth so little that he would break a solemn vow at the first temptation? Spock might not demand fidelity of him, but he demanded it of himself. He was Spock's bondmate; they had never shared a physical relationship, and the Vulcan's impotence ensured that they never would, but he would not dishonour his mate. It was all so simple that he almost chuckled - he didn't want to. He could have affairs if he wished, but to protect his privacy Spock would withdraw a little. It just wasn't worth it.

Kirk smiled faintly and stood, pulling Uhura to her feet. "Let's get back and see how Bones is getting on," he said cheerfully.

Uhura, sensing that her chance had come and gone, gave a faint sigh of acceptance. She had been aware of Kirk's arousal, and had wondered... Disappointed, but not really surprised, she grinned back at Kirk. "I don't know about you, but I could use some sleep," she said.

* * * * *

The following morning, none of the Platonians came near them - perhaps they were being given a chance to consider Parmen's warning. Kirk decided to use the time to learn as much as he could of the state of the Platonians' technology - the knowledge would prove useful whichever way things turned out. He departed after breakfast, taking Uhura with him; McCoy elected to remain behind to begin a preliminary study of the readings he had taken of Parmen, Philana and the others.

No-one hindered their work, although Kirk became aware that Dionyd began to shadow them at a discreet distance, intervening only to shepherd them carefully away from the communications centre. He made no attempt to interfere with their use of the tricorders, from which Kirk deduced that the Platonian was aware of their function.

They were so absorbed in their task that it was early afternoon before Kirk turned to Uhura with a grin of apology.

"Sorry - you must be ready for something to drink. Let's go back and have lunch with Bones - we can finish this later."

McCoy was pacing the room anxiously. He swung round as they came in. "Jim! Thank God! I didn't know where you'd gone, and none of these people would tell me."

"What's wrong, Bones?"

Too upset to consider the effect of his words, or to attempt to soften the blow, McCoy blurted out, "If you were hoping for any last-minute rescue from the Enterprise, forget it. She's gone."

"No! I don't believe it!" Kirk sat down heavily on the couch, staring at the doctor.

"It's true. I saw Spock myself."

"You saw him? But..."

"About an hour after you left, Parmen called me. Spock was already on screen. He told Parmen the Enterprise had been urgently called away - some sort of emergency. Parmen asked if he'd be back, and Spock said no - they'd already transmitted full details of the Federation, and if the Platonians ever wanted to talk about joining, they could contact the Federation Council direct. An ambassador would be sent, but it would probably be some other ship. I tried as hard as I could to call out, to let Spock know I was there, but Parmen had me frozen. I'm sorry, Jim."

"There was nothing you could have done," Kirk said dully. He buried his face in his hands. "You're sure she's gone?"

"I watched her leave. The Platonians' sensors aren't all that powerful, but they were able to track her out of orbit."

"Anything else? How was Spock?"

McCoy considered lying, but knew Kirk would not believe him. "He looked like hell," he said frankly. "Even Parmen noticed it - he asked me why, later - couldn't understand why a commander should be so distressed by the deaths of three underlings. I'm afraid I told him that you were Spock's adopted brother."

"I understand." Kirk realised that by telling part of the truth, McCoy had managed to hide a more valuable secret, that of the bond-link.

"So what happens now?" McCoy asked.

"Now? Nothing." Kirk laughed bitterly. "Parmen's won. All we can do is make the best of it. Welcome to slavery, Bones."

McCoy shook his head doubtfully. This was not the Kirk he had come to know, but it was, he suddenly realised, the passive, obedient Kirk of a few years ago. Perhaps it was only the shock...maybe when he had absorbed the full implications of the departure of the Enterprise, his courage and obstinacy would return...

Remembering what Kirk had said the previous day, McCoy knelt down. "Let me have a look at that ankle again," he said gruffly. "It certainly won't help if you lame yourself."

Understanding what McCoy wanted, Kirk rested his hand on the doctor's head and opened his mind. Unused to mental contact, his friend was already in full flow.

//...can't give up yet - there must be something we can do! I know you were relying on the bond; if Spock had beamed down you might have been able to reach him. But we've got to fend for ourselves now. He really does believe you dead. We'll make it, Jim - somehow. Just don't give up."

Kirk fought down the longing to reassure his friend. McCoy had managed to avoid mention of the bond by mere chance - in response to a direct question he might betray it, and it was better to assume that Parmen would understand the meaning of such a link. Better for McCoy to suffer a few hours of uncertainty, rather than allow him to betray their one hope...

//I'll try, Bones,// he began, then suddenly exclaimed aloud, "Where's Uhura?"

"What?" McCoy sprang to his feet. "Parmen must have called her while we were talking. Come on, Jim - we've got to find her..." He started across the room, only to stop short as though he had hit an invisible barrier.

"What's wrong?" Kirk followed, and was careful to halt at the same distance.

"A barrier - looks like they don't want us to find her."

"There's no use fighting them - I told you." Kirk allowed his shoulders to slump. "Bones, I'm sure they won't harm her - she's too valuable to them."

"I hope you're right," McCoy grunted as he allowed Kirk to lead him back into the room. "I sure hope you're right."

* * * * *

For several hours the two men remained imprisoned in their quarters, each alone with his thoughts. McCoy, despite his encouragement of Kirk, was almost in despair. He had been relying so much on the bond-link between his friends, had been so certain that Spock would know that Kirk was still alive...but that hope was gone with the Enterprise - she would not return, had no reason to, and there would be no miraculous rescue this time. His heart ached for Kirk, rescued once from a life of degradation, and about to face once more the whims of a tyrant; it worried him that Kirk seemed so passive, as though already resigned to his fate, and he feared for his gentle friend's sanity.

Kirk was aware of McCoy's mood and longed to reassure him, but did not dare. Their one hope was his link with Spock - that, he must conceal from Parmen whatever the cost. He was certain, as he had said, that Uhura was safe - she was far too valuable to the Platonians for them to risk harming her - and this separation was probably only intended to play on their nerves, make them more vulnerable. For her sake, as well as McCoy's, he wished he could end this fiasco now, but he dared not act until Spock was ready.

At last the uneasy silence was broken as McCoy got slowly to his feet. "Jim..." he said unsteadily.

"A summons?"

"Yes..."

"You'd better go - don't try and fight it."

With a despairing look at his friend, McCoy felt himself drawn from the room.

* * * * *

The summons faded as he entered a room surrounded on three sides by raised alcoves resembling boxes at a theatre. They were empty as he halted in the centre of the floor, but gradually filled up with laughing, chattering Platonians.

After what seemed an eternity, Parmen and Philana entered, to take their seats on a raised dais at one end of the room. Parmen bowed to him mockingly.

"Greetings, Healer. Soon the entertainment begins. Will you not welcome our leading man?"

All eyes were fixed on the doorway behind him. McCoy turned reluctantly, his eyes widening as Kirk came slowly into the room.

He was...beautiful. No other word fitted. He might have been one of the classic statues brought to life as he walked across the floor, dressed in a short, Grecian-style tunic, thonged sandals on his feet, vine-leaves in his hair. Slowly, his eyes lowered, he walked across to stand at McCoy's side.

The chattering Platonians fell silent, their eyes watching the two men with avid anticipation. Parmen leaned forward in his chair.

"My friends, tonight we celebrate the arrival of our new servants, a fresh source of entertainment after years of boredom. They are not yet resigned to serving, but they will be... Healer, come and sit here. Watch and learn." Parmen indicated a stool at his feet.

McCoy shook his head stubbornly, remaining beside Kirk. "We're not your slaves, Parmen. We never will be." But even as he spoke he felt the futility of his words.

"You think not?" Philana's voice was sweetly malicious. "You will learn, foolish one." She gestured, and an ornate long-bladed dagger flew through the air to land at McCoy's feet. "Pick up the knife."

Helplessly, McCoy obeyed, unable to resist even when Philana commanded him to turn and lift the knife to Kirk's face. His friend's hazel eyes looked back at him, wide with apprehension, but incredibly he was smiling.

"It's all right, Bones," he said softly. "I know she's making you do this."

"Will you be so forgiving if I command him to rip out your eyes?" Philana mocked. "Choose, McCoy. Serve us, or learn just how much suffering your friend can endure - at your hands. Choose!"

"Mistress, I beg you, do not do this!" Unseen until now, Alexander appeared from behind Parmen and threw himself at Philana's feet. "They came to help... they do not deserve such cruelty."

"Be silent, you misbegotten freak! To think that you were born of my flesh ...must I teach you again that I am not to be defied?" Philana's lip curled

in disgust.

Alexander rose slowly to his feet. "I worshipped you," he said quietly. "You were beautiful, and wise, and powerful...I was not worthy to live among you. It was enough for me to be allowed to serve you. But now I see you for what you are, and I am ashamed that there is any part of you in me. How can you..."

Alexander's words died into a choking moan as his body convulsed, twisting in agony, writhing to the movement of Philana's hand. Kirk, sensing that his control had been relaxed for the moment, rushed forward to catch the swaying figure in his arms. As soon as he touched the Platonian he felt the waves of pain searing through his own flesh, and bit back a cry of agony.

"Hold on," he murmured, blocking as best he could for both of them. "Hold on, Alexander!"

"Enough!" Parmen, who had been watching with interest, took control again. "Philana, do not be too hasty. It is true they have much to learn, but first let us enjoy the entertainment. To your places, slaves!"

As he spoke, McCoy was drawn away to the stool Parmen had originally indicated, Alexander to an empty seat at the side of the room. A harp floated through the air into his hands, and he began to play it, a slow, haunting tune that reminded Kirk so vividly of Spock that his longing for his bondmate found expression in an urgent, irresistible mental cry that produced an instant response.

//I am here, t'hy'la.//

//Spock, I'm sorry.// Kirk's thought was tinged with guilt. //I didn't mean to do that. It's just...these people are vile!//

//Have you changed your mind, Jim? You have only to call me when you are all together, and I will beam you up.//

//No,// Kirk replied slowly. //We'll give them their chance - I don't think I could live with myself if we didn't.//

//I know.// The affection in Spock's mind shaded into determination. //I require a few more minutes, Jim, but I will be ready when you summon me. Leave the link open, and allow Parmen to direct your actions as much as you think safe. Through your mind I can judge the strength of his, and make the final adjustments.//

//I will,// Kirk promised. //Spock, are you sure you're all right? You feel...different.//

//I am merely a little tired,// Spock reassured his bondmate.

//Okay, I'll accept that for now, but when this is over you and I are going to have a talk,// Kirk told him. Then he added urgently, //Back off for now -- something's about to happen.//

Parmen had risen to address the Platonians. "My friends, our company is not yet complete. Let us welcome the mother of our new race of servants." As he spoke he indicated the arched doorway, and the woman who had just crossed the threshold.

Uhura was wearing a long, flowing gown of richly-embroidered silk. Her hair was piled high on her head; gems flashed at her throat, on her hands, in her hair, and as she crossed the room she walked like a queen.

Kirk had been so used to looking on Uhura as a friend and colleague that he had almost forgotten what a beautiful woman she was. He gazed in frank admiration, and even the Platonians paid silent tribute to her loveliness and grace.

The respite lasted only a moment. A low couch slid across the floor, and in obedience to Parmen's will she sank down to recline against the soft cushions.



"Behold your bride, James Kirk," said Parmen mockingly. "A prize for any man to value. Will you not greet her fittingly?"

With an effort Kirk allowed his shields to fall just enough to experience the Platonian's command. He walked across to stand looking down into her eyes, then slowly bent his head to kiss her lips. Uhura's arms rose to encircle him, and at the touch of her mouth he knew that in another place, under different circumstances, he could indeed enjoy making love with this warm, lovely woman... but he knew also that he never would. Now fidelity to his bonding was no longer a physical necessity but a conscious, willing choice. He would remain faithful to Spock not because he must, but because he wished to do so...and triumph filled him as he raised his head to smile reassuringly into Uhura's anxious eyes.

"Very pretty," Parmen applauded. "But you must not keep the lady waiting, Captain. Show us how a Terran makes love."

The Platonians laughed expectantly, and Kirk waited until silence fell again before he took a step away from the couch and lifted his head to look Parmen in the eye.

"No," he said quietly.

Parmen's face darkened with anger and surprise. "Obey me!" he snarled, launching a mental command which Kirk parried easily.

"You do not command me, Parmen," Kirk said without raising his voice, but allowing a note of mockery to enter his tone. "You think yourself all-powerful; try to bend me to your will."

He had barely finished speaking when Parmen launched his attack, a flurry of commands that rebounded easily from the Human's shield. Unable to believe that such resistance was possible, he switched his approach from the mental to the physical, using his telekinetic powers to hurl an ornate vase at this defiant upstart. For the first time Kirk retaliated, reaching out to jar Parmen's mental patterns so that his control was lost, and the vase fell to shatter harmlessly on the floor. A second nudge from Kirk sent the Platonian backwards so that he sat down clumsily in his chair.

//Spock, now!// Kirk raised his voice, speaking rapidly to keep Parmen's attention. "You think yourselves so powerful," he said with contempt. "There are races in the galaxy whose powers make you seem like ineffectual children. Like all children, you must be taught. The lesson begins now."

The low hum of the transporter filled the room, and Parmen leaned forward in his chair as Spock materialised beside Kirk. "Commodore Spock! But your ship left..."

An eyebrow arched sardonically. "You should not believe all that you are told, Parmen." Spock moved closer to Kirk, his hand outstretched in the ritual greeting. "I have missed you, t'hy'la," he added softly for his bondmate's ears alone.

Kirk smiled as the touch of their hands opened the link fully, but there was no time for any further greeting. "Bones, Uhura, come here, and stay close!" he snapped, taking advantage of the fact that Parmen's bewilderment had lost him control of the Humans.

Responding to the tone of command McCoy and Uhura obeyed; as they drew closer the combined shield of the two bondmates expanded to cover their minds also, protecting them from any outside influence.

"Well, Platonians?" Kirk said challengingly. "Surely such powerful beings can overcome a mere two opponents? Or will you admit that you are but children, helpless in the presence of adults?"

Angered by his patronising tone, the Platonians responded to the challenge, directing the full force of their minds against the two who defied them.

Kirk smiled as he and Spock parried the attack; the one thing he had been afraid of was that the Platonians would unite to overcome them, but as he had suspected, they were too individual, too jealous of each other, to cooperate even when it would best serve their ends. Had he been alone, sheer weight of numbers would eventually have defeated him, but with Spock at his side it was necessary only to block and deflect the direct attacks, to jam the brainwave patterns that controlled their kinetic ability.

Parmen, watching the struggle, frowned worriedly. Incredible as it seemed, his people were losing. The two aliens seemed able to sense each attack on them and counter it before it was launched. Each attack? Yes - each direct attack... As he gazed frantically around, Parmen's eyes fell on his last weapon...

Alexander, crouched beside the wall, sobbed aloud as he felt the familiar tug of his master's mind. He began to move forward slowly, cautiously, picking up a long jagged shard of the shattered vase as he passed. Parmen's orders were hideously clear in his mind. Intent on their struggle, the aliens had forgotten him. Kill one of them, break their concentration; allow Parmen one last chance at the other. Kill one? Jim was nearest... Jim, who had been his friend... who had been kind... But the habit of a lifetime was hard to break...

From somewhere, Alexander found the strength to do what he must. Trembling with the effort of holding back, he somehow choked out the one word, "Jim!"

It was enough. Kirk glanced at him, saw the agonised face, the improvised dagger clutched in one shaking hand - and smiled.

"Bones," he said softly, and before anyone could realise what was happening, before Parmen could think to prevent it, McCoy had darted forward and pulled the helpless Alexander into the shelter of the mind shield.

Kirk and Spock exchanged a thought, and reached their decision. It was time. Their linked minds struck out, impacting on the undefended minds of the Platonians with stunning force. Alive, but helpless, they all dropped where they stood, unable to move a muscle as they waited for the death they were sure would follow.

Spock lifted his communicator. "Energise, Mr. Kyle," he said calmly.

McCoy and Uhura watched as a security team, led by Chekov, materialised in the room. Without waiting for orders the guards began to move among the Platonians, fastening a metal band to the wrist of each.

Spock took a tricorder from Chekov and studied the readings. As the guards finished their task and stepped back, the Vulcan nodded in satisfaction.

"That has drawn their fangs for the moment," he observed with a vindictiveness the doctor had never heard before in the quiet voice. With eyes only for his bondmate, the Vulcan continued, "I trust you are unharmed, Miss Uhura? And you, Doctor?"

"No harm done, except to my pride," McCoy said ruefully. "I don't like being a puppet. Spock, what did you do to them?" He indicated the semi-conscious Platonians.

"The mental equivalent of a phaser stun - they will recover shortly. The bands contain a transmitter to jam their brainwaves. There will be no interference with their normal thought processes, but they will be unable to affect any of our people. We have yet to decide what to do about Parmen and his friends, and I do not intend to expose my crew to any further risk. The bands can only be released by me, and I do not believe the Platonians have the technology to remove them."

Spock's voice was as quiet and even as usual, but Kirk looked at him sharply.

"Spock, we're going back to the Enterprise. No more nonsense about just being tired - you're on the verge of collapse."

Spock made no attempt to argue. In a tone so low that only Kirk and McCoy heard, he replied teasingly, "Yes, Captain."

Kirk turned to the landing party. "Mr. Chekov, you're in charge down here. Uhura, would you show Chekov around? I'm sorry -- I know you must be tired, but I want this area secured before the Platonians have a chance to start planning anything."

"I'll be all right," Uhura assured him.

"Then, when you do beam up, bring Alexander with you -- he'll be leaving with us. Ask Sulu to find him quarters, show him around...you know the thing."

"I'll be glad to," Uhura smiled.

"Alexander..." Kirk smiled reassuringly. "You heard what I told Uhura. I'm sorry I can't take you aboard myself, but I have...things to do. You'll like Sulu, though, and I'll see you later."

"I understand, Jim." For the first time there was hope in the sad eyes. "Thank you for remembering your promise."

Kirk smiled again, then turned to McCoy. "Come on, Bones. Let's get back before this Vulcan passes out on me."

* * * * *

They made it -- just. As the three men materialised on the transporter platform, Spock swayed, and would have fallen but for Kirk's arm round his waist. Without pausing to argue, the Human lifted his friend into his arms, and with a wry smile of acknowledgement for Kyle's bemused stare, led the way out of the transporter room to sickbay.

The Vulcan was fully conscious, however, when Kirk placed him gently on the diagnostic bed, and a lifted hand halted McCoy's advance.

"A moment, Bones," he requested, eyeing the scanner resignedly. "Jim, since our friend will keep me fully occupied here for some time, do you feel well enough to take over?"

"I'm fine," Kirk assured him. "What do you want me to do?"

"Contact Starfleet Command, and advise them of the latest developments on Platonius. If they agree with my recommendations, implement the instructions you will find on the tape in my desk viewer. Would you also schedule a debriefing session for the landing party in three hours time."

Kirk eyed him warily. "You're not fit..." he began.

"I will make you a promise, Jim, to ease your mind. I am confident that McCoy will agree that I am fully capable of completing our task here. If he does, you will cease to worry about me, and we will postpone discussion of our... personal concerns until the matter of Platonius has been settled."

"And if Bones doesn't agree with you?" Kirk asked suspiciously.

"Then I will submit myself to his ministrations, and leave the matter to my First Officer."

"That's a fair offer, Jim," McCoy grinned. "And I'll promise you that he won't fool me -- if he walks out of here, it'll be because he's fit enough to do so."

"That's good enough for me." Kirk turned for the door. "I'll be on the bridge if you want me."

"Jim..."

At the teasing note in the Vulcan's voice Kirk swung back, his eyes wary. "Yes?"

"Might I suggest a detour via your cabin? Your present attire, although

interesting, is scarcely acceptable Starfleet uniform."

Kirk glanced down at his bare legs. "I'd forgotten about that. I've got a reputation for eccentricity at Starfleet Command as it is - no point in giving them anything more to talk about. Thanks for reminding me, Spock. I'll be back as soon as I can."

He turned for the door again, missing the quickly-masked flash of pain in the dark eyes. A slight tremor in the link almost made him hesitate, but he carried on. He knew the cause, and everything would be settled as soon as they had the time and the privacy to talk.

* * * * *

Carrying a fresh uniform for Spock, Kirk emerged from the Vulcan's cabin, mentally ticking off the list of instructions Spock had given him. The contact with Starfleet Command had been satisfactory; Admiral Broome had had time to consider Spock's assessment, and on hearing Kirk's final report had declared himself satisfied to leave the solution of the Platonians in the Vulcan's hands.

From the bridge Kirk had gone to the Commodore's quarters to view the log tape; with a chuckle of approval for the elegantly simple solution his bondmate had found, he had used the intercom to issue the necessary orders to the medical, engineering, communications, science and security sections - the arrangements were complicated, but well within the capability of the Enterprise crew.

His orders given and the debriefing called, he had risen intending to return to sickbay; taking along a clean uniform had been a last-minute inspiration, prompted by the untroubled vibration of the link, indicating that Spock had not found it necessary to argue with the determined doctor.

In the corridor Kirk paused, glancing undecidedly at a door halfway along. As he waited, trying to decide, it opened and Uhura, back in uniform, emerged.

"Hi, Jim. Everything all right?"

"Fine, Uhura." Making up his mind, he added quickly, "May I speak to you for a few moments - privately?"

"Sure - come on in." She turned back, the door opening at her approach.

Once inside, a trace of his old diffidence returned. "If you're busy, I could come back later," he offered.

"No, it's okay." Uhura indicated the tape she was carrying. "I'd just finished my report, and was on my way to have a cup of coffee before the debriefing. What can I do for you, Jim?"

"It's about what happened on Platonius." He paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts, then continued, "When we were...together down there, our minds touched. You must have seen that I was...attracted to you. Uhura, you are very beautiful - more than that, you are warm, generous, and loving. To...share with you would be a marvellous experience for any man. It's...please forgive me if I'm presuming, I don't know how you feel about it... I don't want you to think that what I...felt might lead to something more... It won't...because I won't let it."

"Because of Spock?" Uhura asked quietly; he could not judge her reaction.

"Yes, because of Spock. Although there's no divorce on Vulcan as Terrans understand it, he'd give me my freedom if I asked him. But I won't ask - I don't want to ask. I made promises to him on Vulcan...and more than anything in life I want to keep those promises, no matter how great the temptation to break them. And you are a great temptation, Uhura."

"Jim, Jim." Uhura shook her head, half smiling. "I never met a man as painfully honest as you. I wonder if I can be as honest in return. Look, I'll admit that I find you attractive, that it'd be the easiest thing in the world to want an affair with you. In fact, I do want one. But...it'd cost us both

too much. What you and Spock have is...it's something I don't completely understand, but it's too beautiful to be spoiled. I know where your heart really lies. You'd be a marvellous lover - but I'd risk losing your friendship and trust. That's too important to me."

"You have Spock's trust too, did you know that?" Kirk asked softly. "Spock closed down the bonding link while we were together - he didn't want to risk your privacy. Usually a Vulcan will monitor any mental contact his bondmate has - he was there when I linked with Bones, for instance.

"The other thing I wanted to say is that I'll be telling Spock what I... felt - I don't have any secrets from him - but neither of us will know what you felt... I promise you, when I was in your mind I didn't allow myself to look. It was a...a communications link only."

"Just as well," Uhura commented lightly. "I doubt either of you would appreciate my emotions intruding..." More seriously, she added, "Jim, I'm very fond of you, and I think of you as a good friend. I'm not going to promise that I won't speculate about you as a lover, but I'm certainly not eating my heart out with unrequited love! That good enough?"

"More than I deserve, I think. Thank you, Uhura." Kirk smiled and indicated the bundle of clothing he was carrying. "Well, I'd better be on my way - if I know anything, there's an impatient Commodore fretting to get out of sickbay."

"I'll walk part of the way with you," said Uhura as they left the cabin together. "I'm still dying for that cup of coffee - have I got time before the debriefing?"

"Plenty," Kirk assured her. "I'm still not completely certain that Bones will let him out, you know."

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"Yeah, take him away and stop cluttering up my sickbay!" McCoy growled as Kirk poked an enquiring head around his office door. "Give that uniform to one of the nurses, and come in for a minute - let the man get dressed in decent privacy."

"You're sure he's all right to be out?" Kirk asked as he obeyed the instructions and perched on the edge of McCoy's desk.

"Honestly, he's fine. For the moment. Just having you back on board will help. Oh, I've prescribed a stimulant, and as soon as this is over I'm taking you both off duty for a few days, but he can see this Platonius affair through quite safely. Go on - pick up your Vulcan and get on with it - the sooner we're away from here, the better I'll like it."

* * * * *

Alexander's Diary

Sulu has told me about this custom of keeping a record of day-to-day events. I have decided to adopt it; so much has happened to me that I am afraid that otherwise I shall forget - and I have so much now that I wish to remember.

From being an outcast and a freak, I find myself treated as normal, fully accepted by these friendly people. They do not know my full story - Jim has said that I must decide how much I reveal, and to whom; they do know that I was rejected by my own kindred, and quietly, unobtrusively, but sincerely, they have begun to teach me the joy of living.

I have talked with the Vulcan Commodore, Spock. He is a wise, compassionate man, and he has spoken with me at length, telling me much of this new life I have entered, and the opportunities that will be open to me. So many worlds, so much that I can do, I who was once spurned as useless! He has promised to help me decide my future, and I know that I can trust him. It was strange for

me to learn that he and Jim are life-mates -- such a joining is unknown on Platonius, but then we were a small community -- but as I watched them together it puzzled me no longer, for they are perfectly attuned. It is clear that he adores Jim -- (is that the right word, I wonder? I must ask) -- and Jim smiles most often when the Vulcan is near.

I have spent considerable time with Dr. McCoy, answering questions, cooperating in tests, but most often simply talking. I was greatly surprised when I learned that they still wish to aid the Platonians, but McCoy has made me understand that they must have their chance, one last chance to learn, as I am learning, to enter this new and wonderful galaxy.

More and more I find myself drawn to the craft of healing. I nerved myself to ask McCoy if I could learn this art. He seems to think it possible, for while it is true that I am much older than is usual for a medical student, my life-span is such that although I do not have Platonian longevity my life expectation is much greater than a Human's, and I could still undertake the courses of study. I will read the books he has lent me, talk further with him, with Spock, and with Jim.

Spock has just told me that his preparations are complete, and we are about to leave Platonius. There is to be one last communication with Parmen, and he has asked if I wish to be present. I have refused. My new friends have taught me not to hate, but I cannot yet forgive. I take nothing from Platonius but many years of bitter memories; it is too soon to forget the past. The future beckons me, and for now it is all that I can see.

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On Platonius Parmen fretted impotently as he paced the marble halls of his palace. How much longer did these Starfleet vermin intend to remain? And what were they doing, anyway? All that cargo that had appeared, boxes and crates and cylinders; all the technicians, all the crewmen -- above all the red-shirted security guards he was coming to loathe to the point of madness. Large areas of his domain were now out of bounds; the power plants, the communications centre, the long-disused medical wing crawled with the intruders -- even unused rooms had been taken over. No-one would answer his questions. The scientists and technicians were seen only at a distance, hurrying about their duties, while the security guards politely but firmly refused to discuss what was going on.

If only he had the use of his mental powers -- then he'd make them regret this humiliation -- but the insufferably polite Chekov had deigned to explain that the mysterious bands each of his people now wore rendered that impossible, and even the simplest use of power was unsuccessful.

It was all Kirk's fault! Somehow the Human had been able to withstand the mental domination. How how was that possible? His companions had been vulnerable.

"Parmen, if you will join the others in the assembly room, Commodore Spock is ready to speak to you."

"And if I do not choose to go?" Parmen eyed Chekov insolently. "I am no slave, to run at his bidding."

Chekov shrugged. "Suit yourself. Your people have already gathered; if you do not wish to hear what the Commodore has to say..."

With a muffled curse Parmen swung on his heel and stormed into the room, from which the Platonians had been barred a few hours previously. All was as it had been, save that a large viewing screen now dominated one wall. His people were all in their accustomed places; as he took his seat beside Philana he noted that Eraclitus was looking a little ruffled -- the fool had attempted to attack one of the red-shirted guards, and had been quickly and efficiently rendered helpless... No-one else had made the same mistake.

As soon as Parmen was seated, as though at a signal the screen sprang into life. Commodore Spock appeared, sitting at a table, Kirk to his right, the

healer on his left.

"Platonians, the Enterprise will soon leave your planet, and we will not return. This is my parting message to you.

"We came in good faith, in answer to a plea for help; your response was to abduct and abuse three of my officers. However, the need for our help still remains, and we have given it - though it is for you to decide what use you will make of it. Captain Kirk?"

The young Human leaned forward. "We have inspected and repaired all your generators and power plants," he said. "A sub-space radio has been installed, and you will now be able to contact our nearest Starbase. In the east wing we have installed a tape library which will teach you how best to use all that we have given you. Now Dr. McCoy has some vital information for you."

"You wished me to investigate and rectify the abnormal births among your people since you came to Platonius. I have done so." There was an intense sadness in the blue eyes. "Those children were not freaks; not mutants. The kironide on this planet over-rode the genetic engineering you relied on for centuries - those unfortunate children whom you wantonly destroyed were the original form of your race. The choice rests with you; either remain as you are, a small, sterile group, or raise children who will all revert to the form of your ancestors. I can help you no further; there is no cure, for there is nothing to cure. However, we have provided you with medical equipment and drugs to treat any future injuries."

"We do not interfere with other cultures." The Vulcan now leaned forward. "We have given you the means to survive by repairing all your equipment, but the future of your people is in your own hands. The tapes we left will tell you of the civilisations that lie beyond Platonius; one day, if it is your wish, you may join us. It will be a completely free choice. Before we leave, I will remove the transmitters which are inhibiting your mental powers - they are only there for the protection of my people. When we have gone you will be free to study and discuss what we have told you, and decide what you wish to do with your future.

"However..." The deep voice took on a note of warning. "Do not think that you will trap others as you did us. This world has been quarantined, and a warning beacon placed in orbit so that no ships will come here innocently as we did. Should you wish contact with the Federation, you need only use the sub-space radio, and an ambassador will be sent - but he will be a Vulcan, one of my people, and so invulnerable to your control.

"I have no more to say to you. You will not be contacted again unless and until you yourselves express a wish to talk. It is now for you to decide. Enterprise out."

The screen darkened, and with an audible click the bands fell from their wrists. Parmen looked around blankly, noting for the first time that the red-shirts had vanished. The Enterprise had truly gone; they were alone.

* * * * *

"Think they'll make a go of it, Jim?" McCoy asked as they rose from the table.

Kirk shrugged. "Who knows? I hope so, because I hate waste, but as far as Parmen is concerned... Well, let's say I don't care too much."

"Can't say I blame you. And where do you think you're going?" he demanded, catching Spock's elbow as the Vulcan rose.

"To the bridge, of course. I must..."

"...go to your quarters and get some rest - you and Jim are off duty for the next three days, remember? Off you go, both of you - or do you want me to come and put you to bed?"

"We're going, we're going!" Kirk said hastily. "Might as well give in, Spock - he means it."

"I am aware of that." The Vulcan nodded, accepting defeat.

They walked along in silence, parting at their respective doors. Kirk looked up at his bondmate. "Go and get ready for bed. I'll get us some wine, and we'll have a few quiet moments together before you get some sleep," he said with a smile.

"That would be pleasant," the Vulcan agreed.

In his cabin Spock showered and changed into a sleeping robe, then sank down before the fire shrine to compose his mind with a short period of meditation. When he rose to his feet again Kirk was just appearing through the connecting door between their quarters. He too had changed into a Vulcan robe, and was carrying two glasses of the light wine they both enjoyed.

"Here - come and sit down while you drink it." Kirk perched on the edge of Spock's bed and patted the cover beside him. "In fact, get into bed - I'll stay until you fall asleep."

Spock obeyed willingly, and for a moment or two they sipped their wine in silence. Then Kirk turned to look his bondmate in the eyes.

"Spock, we're going to establish the full bonding as soon as possible," he said quietly.

"No, Jim. It is not necessary..."

"But it is necessary, t'hy'la. You need it - you've needed it all along, haven't you?"

"It is becoming...more and more necessary," Spock admitted reluctantly - he could not lie to his bondmate. "But I can control the need."

"And make yourself ill, like now?" Kirk countered gently. "I won't allow it. I'm not going to see you suffer for the need of something I can give."

"And I cannot accept something you would find painful," Spock burst out desperately. "I will not take this from you. I will not strip you of your last defence."

"So that's it!" Kirk said with relief. "I have been wondering, you know, whether it was because you didn't want...the ultimate intimacy. I thought that perhaps you wanted to keep that last bit of privacy. Spock, didn't you know that I want this, for both of us? We have so much...but I'm greedy. I've always known that there's just that little bit more we've been denying ourselves. Besides, look at it this way." His tone grew thoughtful. "Platonius has taught us that we'll one day need to take that last step, to complete the bond. Wouldn't it be better if we both knew that it was our own free choice, that we wanted it?"

"Yes..." Spock's hand rose, fingers spread for the mind touch as he silently asked permission. "But I must know that this is truly what you want."

"See for yourself, t'hy'la." Kirk leaned forward, copying the gesture, his mind opening in welcome.

At last Spock leaned back, joy lighting the dark eyes. "When shall it be?" he asked.

"I thought...when we go back to Vulcan. I'd like it to be at home, somehow..." He paused hopefully. "Will it be...all right...if we wait till then? Strictly speaking, we should have official Witnesses since we held back last time, and we wouldn't have to explain anything to Sarek and T'Pol. Besides, I would like our parents to be there."

"Of course." Spock extended his hand to Kirk, closing about the cool fingers as they touched his. "You are here, and now that I am certain that you wish to complete the bond, the strain is eased. It was only...wishing for it..."

and wondering...if we would ever share..."

"We will," Kirk promised. He took away Spock's empty glass with his free hand, then pushed the Vulcan back against the pillows. "Now get some sleep."

He sat quietly watching the tranquil face until the deep, relaxed breathing told him that Spock was asleep, then gently began to withdraw his hand from the Vulcan's clasp. Spock stirred restlessly, his fingers tightening, and Kirk paused, a smile of understanding crossing his face.

Well, the cabin was warm enough...and their bonding was well enough established that none of the crew would be surprised if they learend that he had spent the night in his bondmate's bed - although the more prurient-minded among them would be surprised to learn how he had passed the time!

Carefully, moving quietly so as not to disturb his sleeping bondmate, Kirk stretched out on the bed, resting his head on Spock's shoulder. He was still smiling at that last thought as he fell asleep.

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Personal Log - Captain James T. Kirk

I'm glad that we've decided to complete the bonding link at last, and that it's because we both want it, not because we have been forced into it. It seems strange now when I look back and remember how terrified I once was of mental contact - and how much I hunger for it now. On the day of our bonding I offered the full link, and Spock refused; I wasn't ready, and he knew it. Now I am ready, and it will be all the more glorious because I have lost all trace of fear.

Actually, it will be very difficult to wait for Vulcan. Still, it won't be long now - even if Starfleet sidetracks us again on our way, they can't deny us home leave much longer. It will be good to see Sarek and T'Pol again - and this time there will also be T'Pol and the children. Quite a family I'm collecting!

But most important, there will be time for Spock and me. We'll complete the bonding - then I'll take him to Earth. I really must decide soon where I want to go. Spock has left the choice to me, and I must admit, I've an idea at the back of my mind... I must remember to have a word with Assistant Engineer MacLeod...

* * * * *

Megafor

The planet was barely suitable for colonisation, but it was eminently suitable for research.

It had passed through flourishing Devonian, Carboniferous, Permian, Triassic and Jurassic eras, an equally flourishing Cretaceous era. Relatively advanced plant life had once covered the entire land surface, abundant animal life had enjoyed a relatively carefree environment. 'Civilisation' had never arisen to spoil the environment...but evolution had, it appeared, reached a peak, then devolution had set in. Mass - massive - extinctions had occurred, with the higher animals and plants dying first, until finally only a few hardy grasses and lichens were left, and only a few simple animal forms. Even the sea was empty now save for a few tiny creatures that fed from the scanty vegetable detritus washed into the brackish shallows by flood water.

The ground was rich in fossils.

There was no obvious reason for life to have died out - the soil was fertile, the climate world-wide was still very comfortable, ranging as it did from mild temperate to warm temperate.

Federation scientists felt that if they could discover why life had become almost extinct here, on a world that looked so ideally suited for life, it could

be helpful to prevent anything similar happening on any well-populated Federation world - quite apart from solving the sixty-five-million-year-old mystery of what killed off Earth's dinosaurs. But on Earth, other species had immediately filled the gaps left by the dinosaurs; here, nothing had.

A research station was sited here, manned by top scientists drawn from all over the Federation. The base was commanded by Stonn of Vulcan.

The position suited Stonn admirably. It was a prestigious position for an ambitious scientist - and it was also a long way from Vulcan. Far enough from the hostile Klingon Empire to be relatively safe from attack, it was near enough to Romulus to be patrolled - on the rare occasions it was patrolled - by a Romulan scoutship; there was little chance of their ever being visited by Captain Spock.

Stonn had never quite understood his secondary wife's dread of her ex-betrothed. It seemed unlikely to him that Captain Spock would seek vengeance for being refused by a wife he had not himself chosen, and with whom he had had little contact, but T'Pring certainly feared him, and had not seemed to think Stonn's position as a top scientist - not that he had been that then, of course, but he had been well in line for promotion - would be any protection should the Captain turn nasty.

Stonn was given a completely free hand in the deployment of his personnel, and decided almost immediately to spread them over the entire world, reasoning that in any given site, half a dozen men could well discover as much as two dozen, for the greater number could well end up getting in each other's way.

The main base was sited in a relatively fertile part of the southern hemisphere, the scattered others where scans had shown a potentially heavy concentration of fossils.

The scientists settled down to what they expected to be a rewarding, and knew would be an extended, period of research. Since the Vulcans, of necessity, had taken their wives, many of the other races also applied for their wives - or, in a few cases, husbands - to join them; from there it was only a short step to requesting that their children, too, be allowed to leave the custody of grandparents or uncles and aunts, and rejoin their parents. Supplies were initially ferried in at regular intervals, but a couple of non-scientific husbands and a wife at one base, all of whom were interested in gardening and finding time hanging heavy on their hands, experimented with planting some easily-grown vegetables. Whatever had killed off the higher plants in the past was certainly no longer affecting such plants now - unless the different genetic strain protected them - for they grew rapidly and yielded good results. Other bases also tried, seeing in this a useful source of fresh vegetables as well as a more palatable preventive for scurvy than the vitamin pills supplied.

Time passed; children were born to some of the scientists. The births were reported. When the Federation did not object - which they could have done since this was a research planet, not a colony - more of the personnel forgot about contraception.

Soon they had what amounted to a scientific colony, with the planted areas expanding while still being kept as gardens rather than farms. Some of the wives who were not interested in gardening developed their own interests, and in time a 'barter store' was set up at each base where the non-scientific personnel traded things they made or grew. When the supply of made articles - embroidery, knitwear, artwork, even woodwork - the wood brought in by the regular supply ships - exceeded local demand, Stonn arranged for the supply ships to take these back to Federation bases where they were sold, the resulting income enabling the 'colony' to become more and more self-sufficient and provide itself with luxuries not included in regulation requisition lists. Federation High Command was pleased at the initiative shown by Stonn's group; when the research project terminated, there would already be a strong nucleus that regarded the place as home for the agricultural/scientific colony that would

undoubtedly continue on Omega Fornacis now that they knew the place was fertile and would grow plants from other worlds.

But that day was still far in the future.

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The ground shook violently, suddenly and without warning. The research personnel dropped to their knees where they were, unable to remain upright -- one or two, caught particularly off balance, measured their length on the floor. Flame shot upwards, spreading rapidly as volatile fumes were ignited by the naked flame of a test burner. Kodar, a scientist from an experimentally colonised ocean planet where all the population lived on boats and whose sense of balance was therefore excellent, managed to reach a fire extinguisher, while his compatriot Veran lunged towards the burner; swearing in his own language as the hot fuel tap scorched his fingers, he turned it off. The flames lied down as the ground steadied.

While the lab orderlies began to tidy things up, the scientists studied instruments, seeking information on the quake.

"I can make no sense of these readings, husband," T'Pring told Stonn. "Whatever it was, it was not a standard earthquake. It appears to be a completely unknown phenomenon."

Stonn thought for a moment. "We must report this to the Vulcan Science Academy; we may require further assistance."

Within moments reports began coming in from the other bases. All had experienced the same inexplicable conditions.

"World wide," Stonn muttered, looking round his top men. "World wide. Could we be experiencing a repeat of the conditions that led to the destruction of life on this planet?"

"It seems unlikely," the Andorian Cheral commented. "Earthquakes alone should not cause widespread destruction of both animal and vegetable life."

"Not all of the world has bases," Wenitok of Earth put in. "There are vast stretches of ocean... On Earth we are still, as you know, studying why many species dies out suddenly millions of years ago, mostly animal -- though many plant species suffered too. Earth scientists have been studying for over two hundred years the theory postulated in the twentieth century that a very large meteor impacted with Earth, causing harmful radiation. There was no surface mark to show where such an impact might have occurred, but the most likely possibility has been suggested to be a point in the ocean. Might something similar not have happened here? This is an asteroid-rich system, and a small asteroid coming down over the ocean might well be unobserved."

"Unlikely," snapped Bex of Tellar in his abrupt manner.

His colleagues all knew by now that Bex did not intend rudeness; the Tellarites had a wholly undeserved reputation for irritability that was due solely to their physical makeup. Their mouths were not designed to cope with the intricacies of speech common to most other races. As in all species, some individuals were more shorttempered than others, but Bex was known throughout Megafor for the evenness of his temper. "There was no epicentre. An asteroid making contact would provide an epicentre."

Wenitok, whose interests were biological rather than geological, shrugged. "You're right, of course. I was just putting an idea into the pot, so to speak."

"It is a suggestion that could apply to the past," Stonn put in, "although as I understand it, for such an impact to have much effect, a vast amount of dust would require to be thrown into the atmosphere. That alone makes such a suggestion inapplicable to the present phenomenon." He looked round. "Yes, Kodar?"

"Has no base reported increased vulcanism?"

"None. In spite of the violence of the occurrence, not one active volcano - within the scanning area or any base - has erupted."

"Not even Stromboli?" Wenitok asked disbelievingly, referring to a volcano named for the Terran one by a homesick Italian who had been in the first group to reach Megafor. His stay had been short; he had returned home within a few months, accepting what amounted to demotion rather than remain any longer away from his beloved Italy, and swearing that never again would he accept a position away from it. But although he was gone, the name he had given the mountain had lasted. Stromboli spat out ash and dribbled lava almost non-stop.

"Not even Stromboli," the Romulan Decius, whose base was closest to it, replied. "Quite the opposite, in fact. Stromboli has 'dried up', and emitted no lava at all since this happened." It was practically equivalent to saying that the sun had risen in the west.

"Then has something happened deep inside the planet?" Cheral asked. "A magma chamber under Stromboli perhaps drained into a deeper level?"

"That too would show an epicentre," Bex, the acknowledged expert on earthquakes, put in.

"Then nobody can suggest anything positive to explain this?" Storm asked. "We have only negatives - things it could not have been?"

There were reluctant nods from around the table.

"Then I suggest that each base assigns someone to examining all data pertinent to the occurrence in the hope of finding something, however small, that appears positive. I will inform the Science Academy of our findings meanwhile; and if we have a recurrence... If we still have not discovered anything, I will have no option but to inform Starfleet and ask for additional help."

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The shock that hit the Enterprise was totally unexpected. It was almost as though the ship had been struck by an enormous tidal wave that tossed her wildly, throwing everyone out of their seats into a confused pile of arms and legs on the port side of the bridge. Even Spock's lightning-fast reflexes failed to react quickly enough, and he too joined the tumble of bodies. The ship swayed, listing badly to starboard, and the helpless crew rolled 'downhill'. Spock caught at the command chair and stopped himself, his mind screaming, //JIM!//

Kirk's answering thought felt vaguely breathless. //O.K., Spock. I'm wedged. You all right?// Anxiously.

//Yes.//

The ship continued to toss for a minute. Once she was still, the crew began to pick themselves up. One or two remained prone; mostly unconscious. Several of those who were able to rise had broken bones.

Spock punched the intercom. "Damage reports!" //Jim?//

//On my way.// The three young ensigns Kirk had been testing could wait, hard though it was on their nerves; the ship came first. He walked onto the bridge before the first of the damage reports came in.

Carstairs, as Kirk's senior assistant, on duty on the bridge while Kirk carried out the routine testing of young crewmen, and slightly nervous of the responsibility - Kirk usually took the science post himself when Spock was on duty - relinquished the position with a silent sigh of relief, and Kirk bent over the viewer.

Spock waited silently. Finally Kirk straightened, a look of complete bafflement on his face. "There's nothing out there to account for this effect, Commodore."

The Vulcan stared at him. A Human would almost certainly have repeated 'Nothing?' in a disbelieving voice; Spock was not even tempted to do so as Kirk returned to the viewer.

Uhura looked round. "All departments except engineering report no major damage, sir. Sickbay reports thirty five casualties, mostly fractures. No report yet from engineering."

The chair intercom buzzed. Spock punched it, knowing that this must be engineering, knowing that it meant something wrong.

"Spock here."

"Engineering," came Masters' calm voice. "One of the dilithium crystals is badly cracked. We'll have to replace it."

"The other crystals?" Spock asked.

"One shows a hairline fracture that could split off no more than a sliver and shouldn't affect performance more than one percent. The other two are fine."

"Replace both the cracked ones. You can keep the second for a reserve if you're certain it's inside tolerance variability."

"It's that, sir. I'll tool it down once we get it out and get rid of the crack. We'll be about ten minutes." There was a click as the channel closed.

"Mr. Sulu - sublight speed."

"Aye, sir."

Spock glanced back at Kirk, waiting patiently. His bondmate would be aware of the scrutiny; he did not need to speak.

After a minute, Kirk straightened again. "There are indications of a magnetic surge," he said, almost hesitantly, as if - unlikely as it seemed to the Vulcan - he was unsure of his facts. "There's nothing to indicate where it came from. But a surge of that intensity...even the Murasaki Effect wasn't that violent." He bent over the viewer once more.

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"Message from Starfleet Command, Commodore," Uhura reported.

Things were now back to normal and had been for several hours.

"On the main screen, Lieutenant."

It was Admiral Sentor. "Commodore - you are aware of the magnetic surge that affected this quadrant a few hours ago."

"Yes, Admiral."

"Reports now indicate that it may be centred on Megafor, a small planet in the Omega Fornacis system where we have had a small research station for the past fifteen years. The planet has suffered several of these magnetic surges over the past year, but this is the first one whose effect has been felt outwith the planet's gravitational field. The surges have been accompanied by earthquakes on Megafor, but Scientist Stonn and his men have been able to make no sense of the readings they are obtaining. He has now asked for additional scientific assistance.

"As the nearest Starship with a highly qualified Science Officer, you will proceed to Megafor at top warp speed and place your scientific staff at Stonn's disposal."

"Acknowledged," Spock said automatically. This diversion would delay their arrival at Vulcan and their bonding by...far too long. But duty always came first.

"Sentor out."

The familiar yet ever-changing starfield reappeared on the screen. Spock

sat watching it for some moments before saying, "Mr. Chekov, compute course to Omega Fornacis."

Chekov had already started work, knowing that the order would be coming. His fingers danced over the controls. "Laid in, sir."

"Mr. Sulu - warp factor six."

"Aye, sir."

Sentor had specified top warp speed; but with only one flawed dilithium crystal in reserve, Spock knew that warp six was the fastest they dared go and retain a safety factor.

The Enterprise swung onto her new course; Spock swung his chair round to face his Science Officer. "Mr. Kirk - a word with you, please." He rose and headed for the turbolift, Kirk at his heels.

Even in the privacy of the car, Spock maintained his formal, expressionless mask, and Kirk, respecting his silence, also said nothing, realising that Spock preferred to wait for the additional privacy of his quarters before revealing what was on his mind. Even the half bond was closed, and the Human did not attempt to force it open, guessing that Spock was troubled - as indeed he also was - by the realisation that the completion of their bond must wait.

Once in Spock's cabin, however, Kirk abandoned restraint. "What's wrong, Spock? This will delay our bonding, of course - but..." as he saw the -- yes -- worry in Spock's eyes, "...there's more to it than that, isn't there?"

"Our orders, Jim. I am to put my scientific staff at Stom's disposal."

"So?" Then memory connected. "Oh."

Spock smiled slightly at the flat non-comment. "Is that all you can say, Jim?"

"Thank God you're you, and not the Captain."

"It is certain that she should," Spock agreed. "My betrothal was broken amicably; from what you told me, hers was not."

No, Kirk thought. The Captain had not cared for T'Pring; only his pride was hurt when she rejected him, repudiating the childhood betrothal when, at twenty and considered to have reached years of discretion, she was asked if she agreed to the match arranged by her parents, saying that she wished instead to become the secondary wife of Stom.

Unfortunately, 'only' was not the applicable word.

The insecure Captain's pride was his most vulnerable part. Mortally insulted by the slight, he had vowed vengeance, and the years had not lessened his hatred for the woman who had, he believed, so belittled him. The fact that he had not wanted her, that his sexual preference, even then, was for other males, was unimportant. He had not forgotten, could not, that she had dared reciprocate his dislike with revulsion.

He had been intelligent enough - or cunning enough - to realise that he dared not actively pursue her in vengeance; as long as she - and her husband - kept out of his way, he was willing to let his hatred fester; no-one more patient than he when he considered it necessary. But if he had been sent to Megafor, it was certain that he would have seized his chance for revenge.

"Is T'Pring likely to be on Megafor?" Kirk asked.

"She is," Spock replied. "I made a point of discovering where she was, quite some time ago - her knowledge of the Captain's character could have been a danger to us."

"Do you suppose they know yet which ship has been ordered to their assistance?"

"They might - but will they know that Spock is on board the Enterprise?"

"If they do...I wonder how apprehensive they are," Kirk said softly. "And we can't even reassure them without betraying ourselves..."

* * * * *

For a year, Stonn had been sending increasingly desperate messages to Starfleet, warning of some possible but unpredictable disaster stemming from the untraceable but violent magnetic surges that were gaining in frequency. He had received nothing but routine acknowledgements of his messages, and suspected that those messages had been dismissed as the panic reaction of a mere civilian. However, in this he did Starfleet High Command an injustice; note had been taken of the reports, of their increasing frequency, but Starfleet was in the middle of one of its periodic disagreements with the Federation High Council about funding, with the Council taking the view that Starfleet costs were soaring unnecessarily and that cuts and savings would have to be made.

("How can those cloth-headed idealists at Federation Offices justify telling us to cut back our expenses?" one harassed Starfleet Admiral had exclaimed in a moment of exasperation. "They'll spend a fortune putting fitted carpets into a waiting room but they won't authorise ten credits to repair a faulty warning light that will save lives at a road crossing. They expect us to keep off the Klingons with ships patched up with string and sticky tape, but they'd be the first to scream if the Klingons actually managed to get through to anywhere important. As for these reports from Megafor - they'll tell us to ignore them until it's too late, then they'll wonder why we didn't act sooner. Politicians!")

The Admiral's prediction had come true. The magnetic surge had affected even the well-protected planetoid where the High Council met, and these august personages had promptly panicked. Starfleet was given instant permission to spend whatever was necessary to save the Federation - for that read 'them' - from instant destruction.)

Not Stonn stared at the message that had just come through in response to his last desperate communication.

'Starship Enterprise diverted to Omega Fornacis. Commodore Spock has been instructed to place his scientific staff at your disposal.'

Commodore Spock.

How would T'Pring react to this news? If only it had been any other ship!

* * * * *

"Spock?" T'Pring gasped, her face white.

"T'Pring, if as you fear Spock wished to harm you, he would surely have done so long ago. It is eighteen years since you refused him..."

"We have been on Megafor most of that time. He hasn't been near here. But now... Husband, I beg of you, send T'Su and the children to one of the other bases, at least. Send them out of reach of his possible vengeance." She shuddered. "He does not forget. When he was a child, one of my pet gr'avath's bit him. He was handling it, but clumsily, and it was afraid, so it gripped his finger with its teeth to support itself, nothing more - but it drew blood. There were adults present, and he said nothing, but on his next visit, a month later, he caught the gr'avath and wrung its neck, and nothing I could say would stop him. He said, 'I permit nothing to injure me with impunity.' If he could do that for a bite from an unintelligent pet, as a child, what might he do now, as an adult, to someone who rejected marriage with him? Or to the person whom she chose instead? He might well choose to strike at us through the children. He has no compassion, Stonn. He doesn't care what he does - and that is why I knew I could never marry him."

"T'Pring, I am not exactly a person of no importance. He could not treat me - or my family - as if we were...nonentities. He must know that if he were to attempt to harm me or my family, he could not escape suspicion."



"He could. He would. To him, what he does is right because he does it. I could have told my father that Spock killed my gr'avath, but I realised that if I did, and had him punished for it, he would find some way to be revenged on me -- and on my father. So I just said it had died in the night. It would be the same here. If I had married him, and tried to be a faithful wife to him, he might not have been cruel to me...but I couldn't risk it. I would never have known... An unwary word, Stonn -- even that was enough to anger him. I know he will find some way to hit back at me -- through you, or T'Su, or most likely the children."

"My wife, you are repeating yourself. Calm your thoughts. He would not dare attempt to injure the head of this planet."

"He would dare anything, Stonn. Anything."

But Stonn refused to give way. As he saw it, a confident approach was more likely to disarm any malice Spock might feel than a cowardly one. Spock had most probably got away with a great deal as a child -- incidents like T'Pring's gr'avath -- because he had bullied his victims into letting him get away with it. But it was hardly likely that Spock, a Vulcan in a position of prestige, should still, after eighteen years, be harbouring feelings of resentment towards a woman who had rejected him in order to become the secondary wife of someone else.

* * * * *

On reaching Megafon, Kirk set his staff to monitoring the planet twenty-four hours a day. If these magnetic surges were coming from here, he wanted to know what part of the planet was causing them. Readings from the surface were clearly useless; perhaps ones from space would be more informative.

Spock contacted Stonn, and arranged a meeting, then punched the intercom. "Mr. Kirk, report to me in briefing room one in five minutes. Dr. McCoy, I wish you also to be present." He closed the channel. "Mr. Chekov, you have the con. If there is a magnetic surge while the landing party is on the surface, hold position as long as possible so that the scientific staff may gather as many readings as possible. Break orbit only if it becomes necessary to ensure the safety of the ship."

"Aye, sir." If Chekov was unhappy with the responsibility placed so apparently nonchalantly on his shoulders, he did not show it, and Spock registered a mental note in his favour. Mr. Chekov would make a good Captain one day.

Spock reached the briefing room first, but only a few seconds before McCoy. The doctor was looking slightly worried, and Spock raised an enquiring eyebrow. "What's the problem, McCoy?"

McCoy shook his head. "There isn't one...not really. Yet."

"Yet?"

"Well, it isn't anything that I can put a finger on, but there's something wrong. Or rather, something not quite right. Since that magnetic surge hit the ship... I could be imagining things -- you know how I am about the possibility of radiation affecting personnel..."

"You think there might be some inimical radiation linked to the magnetic surge?"

"Let's just say that I'm seeing...not signs, but the beginning of signs... of mental..." He shook his head. "Mental unsteadiness isn't going to explain what I mean properly. It's more like the way Jim was when you came back from Vulcan -- your Vulcan. Not as marked -- just indications. Shadows of a disturbance, or a lack of equilibrium...though just in one or two people."

Spock frowned. "You think the surges might be coming through somehow from another universe?"

McCoy shrugged. "Doesn't seem likely, does it?"

"On the face of it, no. But stranger things have happened. We know that passage between universes is possible." He glanced towards the door as it slid open to admit Kirk.

"Sorry I'm late," Kirk apologised easily. "It took slightly longer than I expected to link up the monitors. We kept getting some odd readings, but we finally got them balanced."

Spock glanced from him to McCoy. "Odd readings," he repeated. "Jim, McCoy has come up with a tentative possibility - " He explained quickly.

Kirk thought about it. "As to the medical aspect, I don't know," he said frankly. "I was very cold, I remember - "

"Yet you were running a high temperature," Spock put in. "You had pneumonia."

"Yes...but I had a job to think straight, too. I felt confused..."

Spock nodded. "I, too, experienced some confusion, but not as markedly as you did." His lips set resolutely. "We must consider a cross-universe 'door' here as a possibility, based on our special knowledge. But for the moment, we should say nothing of this to anyone else. Doctor; you will remain on the Enterprise. Keep your staff on full alert status; I have ordered Mr. Chekov to remain in orbit, even in the face of further magnetic surges, and injuries are a definite possibility. Also - in view of what you have just said - keep an eye on members of the crew who have been affected by this incipient confusion. If there is any aggravation of their condition, let me know. Jim, you and I will beam down to visit Scientist Stonn - our orders are to assist, after all. We will see what he has to say, and if he can add any further information to what we already know."

"Yes, of course." Kirk hesitated, then went on. "Did he seem...worried, at all, when you spoke to him?"

"Almost pugnaciously normal, I would say."

"He was worried," Kirk decided.

McCoy frowned. "Worried?"

"It's a long story, Bones, and even I don't know all of it. Apparently the Captain was engaged to a girl called T'Pring; it was an arranged betrothal, and when she was twenty, she broke it off and married this Stonn instead. The Captain was pretty bitter about it."

"I get the picture," McCoy said. "Is this T'Pring here too?"

"Yes," Spock said.

"Be careful," McCoy warned. "If she knew the Captain well..."

"I know," Spock replied. "I intend to be...very careful."

* * * * *

Stonn met his two visitors just outside the main lab at his base. "Commodore Spock," he acknowledged.

"Scientist Stonn," Spock replied evenly, a trace of indifference in his tone. "This is my First Officer and Science Officer - and my bondmate. James Kirk."

He was aware of a touch of amusement in Kirk's thoughts. //Neatly done, Spock - but I don't guarantee it'll reassure them - not if T'Pring knew the Captain as well as she must have done.//

Stonn nodded in acceptance of the introduction. "Captain Kirk," he said in greeting. He glanced back at Spock. "To be honest, Commodore, I don't know if there's very much that any of us can do. These surges have been occurring for fully a year, but until now Starfleet has done nothing but acknowledge receipt

of our reports. None of the readings make any sort of sense - I've had personnel studying them ever since the first one, and I have on my staff some of the top men in their fields in the Federation."

"I realise it is difficult," Spock agreed smoothly. "But perhaps all it requires is a fresh approach. Human illogic can often reach conclusions that more disciplined minds fail to realise."

Stonn shook his head. "I have several Humans on my staff," he said gloomily. "They are as baffled as the rest of us."

"Perhaps if we may see some of your work?" Kirk put in.

"Yes, of course. This way, gentlemen." Stonn turned and led them inside the lab.

Inside, both visitors glanced round quickly. Spock noticed T'Pring immediately, and gave his bondmate a mental nudge. //The woman at the fourth table,, Jim.//

Kirk gave her his full attention for a moment. //She's quite a beauty.// Then, as Stonn led them to the first table, he added, //She's like a perfect crystal. Beautiful...and cold.//

//She could easily be hiding fear, Jim. She knew the Captain.//

//I know. I didn't forget - how could I? But she is...almost too controlled.//

Spock shot her a quick glance. Before he could reply, Stonn said, "This is Ster Cheral, Commodore. Cheral, Commodore Spock, Captain Kirk, Science Officer of the Enterprise. Will you explain your work to them."

Cheral's quick look at them was almost resentful, and Kirk thought he could guess why. Although Stonn had requested additional aid, many of his staff undoubtedly felt that, given time, they could solve the problem of the magnetic surges. Cheral obeyed immediately, however, and Kirk gave Stonn full marks for discipline.

"These are the magnetic readings for the planet," Cheral began. "We started taking these as soon as we arrived here - our assignment was to discover why life became practically extinct, and we began by studying all aspects of the ecological conditions. We also made a study of magnetic fluctuations in the past," he added, almost as an afterthought - that had not been his work. "We discovered that the magnetic field was steady, within the normal limits of fluctuation that occur through the action of sunspots, ion storms and so on. Then - a year ago - the planet suffered considerable seismic disturbance. This was accompanied by these first massive fluctuations in the magnetic field. There have been several other such disturbances since, and each was marked by a similar magnetic fluctuation, although the intensity varied. The last such disturbance...the readings went off the scale."

Kirk examined the readout of the magnetic field and its fluctuations for some moments, then said, "I've never seen anything like it either, Commodore." He looked back at Cheral. "Will you make a copy of this to be sent to the Enterprise for analysis? I do not dispute your findings, and I do not intend to denigrate your ability, but the Enterprise has at her disposal the most advanced computers available. If there should be any sort of pattern to these fluctuations, our computers will find it."

"Very well, Captain," Cheral agreed. Stonn led them to the fourth table.

"I believe you know my wife, Commodore," Stonn said quietly, and Kirk shivered. How stupid could the man be? No man, no matter how even-tempered, would accept this reminder that the woman had once been betrothed to him with equanimity. He noticed a faint shadow cross T'Pring's face also, and knew for certain that she, at least, did fully realise her possible danger.



Spock stiffened deliberately, and knew that Stonn had seen and realised that he should have been slightly more circumspect. However, Spock said nothing to him, but inclined his head slightly. "T'Pring," he said stiffly.

"Spock," she said quietly, but there was the faintest quiver in her voice, and Kirk knew that she was indeed terrified; her control was forced.

Pointedly, he held out his hand, fingers outstretched in the ritual bondmate embrace; Spock touched his fingers, allowing himself to relax. "This is my bondmate, James Kirk of Earth."

T'Pring lowered her head in acknowledgement, her tension barely eased. Kirk smiled at her, trying to let her see that he was in no fear of Spock. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Ma'am," he said.

The Vulcan woman glanced quickly at Spock as if trying to assess his reaction to his bondmate's remark. Logically, the Spock she remembered would react with jealousy; would be extremely possessive of his bondmate. Striving for a middle course - one that would combine possessiveness with trust - Spock knew that he had totally failed to reassure the woman. She saw only the possessiveness, and he was forced to admit to himself that she was probably justified. Vulcans did not make good actors...which was probably the main reason why Vulcan had no thespian tradition. There were singers and musicians in plenty, even dancers...but no actors.

The scenario was broken by the tremor of yet another earthquake, less violent this time than many that had preceded it. Spock moved instinctively to protect Kirk, who was moving to protect him; they rolled together on the floor, their arms round each other, and as the ground steadied again, Kirk sat up, grimacing broadly. "We'll have to stop meeting like this," he murmured mischievously to his bondmate, who threw him an indulgent glance.

The byplay did not go unnoticed by T'Pring, alert as she was to every nuance of her one-time betrothed's actions, even as she too picked herself up.

She did not allow herself to relax...but she found herself breathing a little easier. This Human did seem to possess a sort of...calming effect on the unpredictable Spock, and Spock, it seemed, did have some care for his bondmate's welfare.

If she had married him...would he have been like this with her?

No. She was sure he would not. He had killed her gr'avath, in spite of everything she could say to dissuade him; children though they had been, it was obvious even then that her wishes were of no importance to him. She could not expect him to change just because they were adult; a boy was normally expected to behave towards his betrothed, even as a child, as he would do once they were truly bonded. This Human had some sort of alchemy, or perhaps it was just that Spock had chosen him himself rather than having him chosen for him. No parents would be so lost to common sense as to bond their child to another male! She could not recall ever hearing of another case, although she knew from her studies that male bonding, once relatively common in the days of their warrior past, had never been declared illegal, undesirable as it was now considered.

Meanwhile, Kirk was deep in study of the readings the instruments were showing on this latest quake; Spock stood by, waiting apparently patiently.

Finally, Kirk shook his head. "There's nothing new," he said gloomily. "There's a magnetic surge coming from somewhere; its force is, quite literally, shaking the whole fabric of space. But there's absolutely nothing to indicate where the surge is coming from; no directional bias, nothing. It's just... happening."

His eyes met Spock's. The Vulcan shook his head. "There has to be an explanation, Mr. Kirk."

T'Pring shivered at his formality. This was his bondmate, yet he was speaking to him as if he was a mere junior officer. She was inexperienced enough in Starfleet procedure to realise that the formality meant only that

Spock was speaking thus because it was a duty situation.

"Agreed, sir - but so far we lack the data to track down the source."

He was interrupted by the bleep of Spock's communicator. The Vulcan flicked it open. "Spock here."

"Masters, Commodore. Sensors have picked up a life form reading some ten kilometres due north-west of your current position. The life reading appeared after the last disturbance."

Spock glanced at Stonn. "Have you any personnel at the designated place?" he asked.

Slowly, Stonn shook his head. "This has happened before," he said, half reluctantly. "Twice already we have detected a life form reading after one of these disturbances, but each time, when we investigated, there was nobody there. I think you will find the same thing happening this time."

"I wonder. Miss Masters - lock transporter onto the life form and beam it up to the ship. I want to know who it is - and where it came from."

"Aye, sir." There was a brief pause, during which they heard Masters' distant voice giving orders. Finally - "We have him, sir. A humanoid male."

"Keep him there. Mr. Kirk and I will be returning immediately. Lock onto us and beam up when ready."

"Aye, sir... Energising."

T'Pring watched the sparkles vanishing, her teeth playing with her upper lip. Stonn looked at her.

"There, now," he said with all the self-assurance of a dominant male who felt himself proved right in the face of female illogic. "You can't say that Spock showed any great hostility, did he?"

She shook her head, and her voice trembled as she replied. "No...and that worries me. He was just like that when he killed my gr'avath. Pleasant, even smiling...even when he killed it. I don't trust him, Stonn. I don't trust him."

"His bondmate seemed to have a calming influence over him," Stonn commented.

"Seemed," T'Pring repeated. "I concede that he did not appear to be afraid, but I wonder how great is his influence over Spock? Spock was clearly displeased when the Human could give him no information on the magnetic effect. 'Mr. Kirk...' and Kirk knew it. Since when did anyone ever call his bondmate 'sir', if everything between them was as it should be?"

Stonn looked at her, a trace of worry in his eyes. What she said was true; Spock had shown coldness the moment his bondmate had proved unable to provide him with positive information on observed data. For the first time, he began to think that perhaps T'Pring's dread of Spock was at least to some degree justified.

* * * * *

Spock and Kirk materialised to find two security guards watching a nervous-looking male who looked completely Human. As they stepped down from the pads, the door opened and McCoy strode in. "Where's this person I've to check out?" he demanded abruptly.

Kirk grinned to himself. Truly, Masters was a competent officer; he doubted that he would have thought to have the stranger medically checked. Masters, on duty beside the transporter chief, nodded towards the shrinking humanoid. "There, Doctor."

McCoy grunted, and ran his scanner over the man. He glanced back at her. "What, specifically, do you want to know, Miss Masters?"

"Specifically, is he Human, and if not, what is he?" she asked grimly, with an apologetic look at Spock.

"Oh, he's Human all right," McCoy confirmed. "Though there's something about the readings..." He glanced over towards Spock. "Something that tallies with what we were discussing earlier, Commodore. He's disorientated...body temperature rather low..."

Kirk and Spock glanced at each other as McCoy looked from one to the other. "You understand what I'm trying to say, Commodore?" McCoy asked with a glance at Kyle and the guards. Masters didn't matter; she already knew about the alternate universes, though not as much as there was to know.

Spock nodded. "Yes, Doctor. It appears that our previous hypothesis was correct."

"Yes. The question is, what do we do about it?"

Spock glanced at the nervous Human. "Who are you?" he asked abruptly. "Where do you come from?"

The Human looked, if anything, even more nervous. "I'm Robert Brown," he said, his voice trembling. "I'm a computer technician currently working at the new computer centre being constructed on Omega Fornacis to correlate all the data pertaining to the magnetic surges we've been experiencing for the past year."

Spock's eyebrows lifted. There was no new computer centre being constructed - here - so that Starfleet, or the Federation Council, or both, in the other universe being affected were being more realistic about the problem than they were in this universe.

"Where am I?" Brown went on. "And how did I get here? One minute I'm hard at work, the next I'm in the middle of nowhere...and then I'm beamed aboard a Starship..."

"I'm afraid we can't answer your questions at the moment, Mr. Brown," Spock said smoothly. "These magnetic surges are...responsible for many things that we cannot explain." He looked at the guards. "Escort Mr. Brown to a guest cabin; see that he is well looked after."

"Yes, sir." The guards knew perfectly well what Spock meant; ostensibly a guest, Brown would be carefully and unobtrusively guarded.

As they left the transporter room, Spock looked round his senior officers. "I want to see you all in my quarters immediately," he said.

Masters nodded to Kyle and she moved to join the others as they headed for the door. By mutual consent they remained silent until the door of Spock's office closed behind them. Spock looked round at them. "I'm including you in this conference, Miss Masters, because you do know something about the theory of alternate universes. It seems fairly obvious to me that Mr. Brown has come from another universe - one where the Federation has paid more attention to the situation than ours has. He has possibly come through to the same place on our Magafor that he was on his...though how the surge could carry him is a mystery to me."

Masters nodded. "A natural phenomenon similar to the one you created when you built that 'transporter' you used?" she asked.

Spock nodded. "Yes...and the power involved to do it must be staggering. We have suspected - " he indicated Kirk and McCoy - "that this was the cause of the surges, but we lacked proof. Now we have proof of a sort. The question is, what do we do about it?"

The intercom bleeped. "Uhura to Commodore Spock."

Spock reached out. "Spock here."

"I have a contact from Scientist Stonn, sir."

"Pipe it down here, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir."

Stonn's face appeared. Even with his Vulcan control it was obvious to all of them that he was deeply concerned, even shocked, about something. "Commodore Spock, one of my men has vanished."

"Under what circumstances?" Spock asked.

"One moment he was working at his computer...the next, he had completely disappeared. There was nothing like a transporter effect; apparently, one moment he was there, and the next...he had simply gone."

"What is his name?" Kirk put in.

"Brown - Robert Brown. He is one of the Humans working on Megafor - possibly our most skilled computer operator."

"I see," Spock said, his even voice giving no indication of the excitement he felt. "Thank you for the information. May we come down again and see the place from where he vanished?"

"If you think it will do any good - but I assure you, his colleagues know what they saw - "

"I don't doubt it," Spock replied quietly. "Expect us down in five minutes." He flicked the intercom off.

"Robert Brown," Kirk whispered. "One Robert Brown disappears...another appears..."

"It is almost certain that 'our' Robert Brown is at this moment in his counterpart's universe, wondering what has happened to him," Spock agreed. He sighed. "We had hoped to keep the knowledge that there are other universes to ourselves," he told Masters. "Events appear to have 'forced our hand'. The knowledge is potentially quite dangerous, I feel..."

Masters nodded in agreement. "Yes, I realise that," she said. "But now the powers that be of two universes seem to be likely to discover the fact, and that transfer between them is possible. What will they make of it?"

"I shudder to think," McCoy told her.

"If they can be convinced of how dangerous it is, they might decide to suppress all knowledge of it," Kirk said optimistically.

"Yes - but can they be convinced?" McCoy asked.

"It is up to us to convince them," Spock said. "We already know that the transfer between two universes has an adverse effect on the Human body - this man Brown is cold, disorientated...when Jim went through twice in close succession, he ended up with pneumonia, and nearly died. I myself suffered confusion, my thought processes were slowed appreciably, and I too was aware of a certain bodily chill. I travelled between universes more than twice, and the effect does appear to be cumulative. Yet how to convince Starfleet of that without betraying the fact that we already know how to pass between universes?"

"Bones had better see our 'visitor' again," Kirk suggested, "and make a full medical tape of his condition. That would be at least some evidence."

Spock nodded. "Yes. Do that, Doctor... Meanwhile, Jim, you and I must return to the planet. I want to know more about the disappearance of this universe's Robert Brown."

* * * * *

Brown was one of the staff at Stonn's base, and Stonn himself was waiting for them when they beamed down. The laboratory had a haunted look; the Human scientist in the room gave the impression of looking over his shoulder all the time, as if waiting for something to leap out at him...or as if he was going to disappear himself. The Andorian, on the other hand, was so obviously not looking over his shoulder that it was clear that he too was very aware of his colleague's disappearance but was quite determined not to show it.

Stonn introduced them. "Ster Cheral you already know, Commodore, Captain. This is Dr. Voden."

Spock nodded acknowledgement. "Gentlemen."

Spock studied them thoughtfully. Nervous -- oh, so nervous! "Scientist Stonn has told me what happened, gentlemen. While I have no doubt that his report is accurate, I would be interested in hearing the details directly from you."

The two men looked at each other. Voden answered.

"Technician Brown was feeding data into the computer," he said, pointing to a small console, "and he simply disappeared. Winked out, suddenly."

"No transporter effect?" Kirk asked. Stonn had said not, but...

"No. More like...well, a movie special effect. There one frame, gone the next."

Spock nodded. //Not quite the same as my 'transporter', then,// he thought over the bond-link. "And that was all?" he asked aloud.

"Yes, Commodore."

Stonn glanced at Spock's thoughtful face. "Do you know what caused this, Commodore?" he asked, struck by the understanding he saw there.

"We have an idea," Spock replied carefully, "but without more data we have no confirmation. It remains speculation."

"May I know it?"

Spock gave a negative gesture that to the Vulcan expressed his regret as well as his inability to comply with the request. "Without more data, I prefer to say nothing as yet. As soon as we have any additional information, we will give you the facts -- such as they are."

Stonn granted, feeling no sight. A Vulcan himself, he understood perfectly well the Vulcan preference for certainty before committing themselves. He nodded to the two scientists to continue with their work, and followed Kirk and Spock out of the room.

Outside, Spock said quietly, "Stonn, we are not trying to be awkward -- but if what we suspect is true, the fewer people who know about it the better. I intend no insult to your men, but what they do not know..."

"You believe it to be something -- " Stonn cut himself off in mid-sentence, and gave an embarrassed half-laugh. "But of course it is something serious."

"It could destroy us all," Spock said seriously. "It has -- "

He broke off as the ground beneath them shook again, throwing them all to the floor. As everything steadied, there came a startled exclamation, audible even through the closed door.

"Bob!"

Kirk recognised the abbreviation before either Vulcan, scrambled to his feet and fumbled the door open.

The room now contained three men. Voden was bending over a second Human who lay in front of the computer console; Cheral was gaping at them, fear predominant in his eyes.

Kirk strode over to the kneeling Voden. "This is Brown?" he asked harshly as he went.

"Yes, sir." Voden's voice was shaking.

Kirk knelt beside the unconscious man, checking his pulse, as Spock joined him. The Vulcan was already reaching for his communicator.

"He's very cold and his pulse is weak," Kirk reported briskly.

Spock nodded, understanding what Kirk was saying. "Spock to Enterprise - three to beam up, Miss Uhura. Dr. McCoy to meet us in the transporter room with a medical team. And...ask security to check our 'guest's' cabin."

"Aye, sir."

Spock glanced apologetically towards Stonn. "My apologies, sir, but I believe Dr. McCoy to be the best person to deal with Mr. Brown's condition. I expect to obtain the additional data I require when he regains consciousness. I will be in touch." Kirk had already motioned Voden away. "Energize."

The scientists watched, puzzled, confused, frightened, as the transporter beam carried the three men away.

* * * * *

McCoy bent over Brown, muttering to himself as he checked the readings. "Thoroughly chilled," he finally said aloud. "Hypothermia and pneumonia." He straightened, with a glance at his orderly. "Intensive care immediately, Mako. Tell Nurse Tamura to prepare an intravenous drip solution, 15% salhydrate, 15% renamycin."

"Yes, sir."

McCoy glanced at Spock, who turned to accompany him with a glance, in his turn, at Kirk. Kirk nodded. "I'll see about the other Brown," he said quietly and left briskly.

In the corridor, McCoy delayed, allowing Mako to enter the turbolift with the med. trolley. As the turbolift doors slid shut, McCoy said, softly although there was nobody to overhear, "The readings are close to Jim's when you got back that time."

But not quite the same?"

"Not quite. This man is more severely affected. I should be able to save him - but it'll be a close thing. He's in shock as well as everything else."

"The effect of a round trip made in so short a time?" Spock asked.

"It seems probable. Jim had several days between what we might call the outward and return journeys; Brown had - how long? An hour?"

"At the most."

"In addition, Brown had the shock of a sudden, unexpected transfer to somewhere - well, strange. The other Brown showed signs of shock, although they were pretty well overlaid by confusion." He frowned. "Jim went to check... you think the other Brown might have disappeared again?"

"I think it very likely, Doctor." He moved forward towards the turbolift, and the doors opened for him. "The other one appeared when 'our' Brown disappeared; it is only logical to assume that the event has been reversed."

"Um. Well, in that case I hope to hell his people have a medic nearby, or I wouldn't like to answer for his life."

"The interesting thing, Doctor, is that the two Browns did change universes, and at presumably the same moment. When I first came here, the Captain was still alive...and he remained here. He was not drawn into 'my' universe; we met. The conclusion I am forced to consider is that this interchange is occurring, not between this universe and one similar to the one I initially came from, but from yet another kind of alternate universe - one in which two similar beings cannot co-exist."

"An anti-matter universe?"

"It is possible. Except that to them, we would be the anti-matter universe."

McCoy was still considering that when the lift doors slid open. They continued their journey to sickbay in silence.

Brown, in Intensive Care, was already attached to an intravenous drip. McCoy bent over him, checking the readings, and grunted his satisfaction. "Stabilising."

"How soon before he regains consciousness?" Spock asked.

McCoy looked irritably at him. "Spock, a man isn't an automaton you can switch on and off," he growled. "He'll come round when he comes round - it would kill him to try to bring him round prematurely with a stimulant - and I can't predict how long that'll be. I'm a doctor, dammit, not a fortune teller!"

"McCoy, we must learn what he saw, where he went, as quickly as possible," Spock said urgently. "The disturbances are becoming more frequent; as must act to halt them, and soon."

"How?" McCoy asked bluntly. "This isn't something like that damn' transporter of yours, to be switched off when it's not needed! It's a natural thing, like a...an earthquake - only it's more like a galaxyquake - and who can control an earthquake?"

"Earthquakes can be controlled, Doctor - to some extent. And this, whatever it is, is not a natural event. If a door is opened permanently between two universes, universal chaos would ensue; there was never meant to be a gateway between the universes. Yes, I know, it has happened - briefly - in the past, and because of that I learned how to make such a doorway - and it is just possible that I can make use of my knowledge of how to open such a doorway to force this one closed. But - if possible - I must speak to Brown first, discover what he knows."

Behind them the door slid open, and Spock glanced round, knowing even before he did who had entered. "Jim?"

"The other Brown has vanished," he said simply. "The guards swore that he hadn't even tried to open the door, let alone tried to get past them - but his cabin was empty, and every airvent was firmly screwed; he didn't sneak out that way. No, he's gone back to where he came from - just as this one did." He indicated the unconscious Brown.

"A doorway to another universe," Spock said thoughtfully.

"No," Kirk said.

"No!"

"Not a doorway, Spock - two at least. Assuming he was found at the same place that he had been in the other universe... The other Brown was working in a computer centre and ended up in the middle of nowhere...while ours vanished from a computer centre in a different place. If there was just one doorway, the two Browns would just have changed places, and all we would have known was that suddenly a technician called Brown had shown signs of disorientation, dizziness, and so on, with no obvious reason for it." He hesitated. "I hope to hell he materialised back on the planet...and not in orbit." The other two looked at him, horror dawning in their eyes.

Spock's lips tightened. "Both doorways will have to be closed...and, if possible, locked." He deliberately ignored Kirk's final comment, knowing that they could do nothing about it, could not even have foreseen it.

"How?" Kirk asked.

"I know how to open a doorway. That knowledge could be put to use...to close one." He hesitated. "At both ends."

"That means going through," Kirk said sharply. "You could be trapped there." He hesitated. "And when you go through...might another Spock not arrive here?"

"You reached that conclusion too," Spock said softly. "It is not inevitable, however. Perhaps it was just the coincidence of both Browns being at the two doorways that transported them both through the barrier. If the Spock of that other universe is nowhere near, then he might remain unaffected."

"There's another thing," Kirk said. "We know the two places here -- go through one, it'll take you to its exit at the other end...but how will you find the other entrance? Buildings can change the appearance of the ground,; you can't just depend on recognising where it is."

"I know." Spock looked seriously at his bondmate. "Jim, you must be my lifeline."

"But... Spock, without the full bonding link, I could never remain in touch with you through the barrier."

Spock nodded. "Yes. Jim. I know we planned to wait until we reached home, planned to have Mother and Father as Witnesses since our official bonding was incomplete...but now we cannot wait. And...I must admit, I cannot regret the fact. We can claim that it was an unselfish decision, reached for the sake of two universes..."

"And know that it is for us, as well," Kirk finished softly, his eyes alight with trust and affection.

McCoy cleared his throat, judging it time to remind them of his presence. "Assuming you do form a full bond - " The look on Kirk's face reminded him of the sun coming out from behind a cloud, reassuring him that Kirk did indeed want to form the full mental and emotional link - "can you guarantee that Jim will be able to remain in contact with you? He isn't a telepath, remember - even though he was able to communicate with Uhura and me on Platonius. He had to touch us."

"Even now, without the full bond, we can communicate over a fair distance," Spock said. "How else do you think we were able to plan your escape from Parmen? It is quite tiring - making contact without first melding - but we can do it. Given the full bond, I have no doubts of our ability to stay in touch."

"Jim couldn't sense you through the barrier last time - " McCoy began.

Spock half smiled. "We have far more experience of communicating now than we did then. In addition, this barrier is disintegrating, or so it seems. And - as I said - we will have the full bond." He looked at McCoy, almost shyly. "Will you be our Witness?" he asked diffidently. Kirk nodded his agreement.

Touched, instinctively aware of how important it was to them to have a Witness, even though as far as Vulcan was concerned they were already fully bonded, McCoy said quietly, "I would be honoured."

"Thank you," Spock murmured.

After an infinitesimal pause, Kirk half changed the subject, realising that before they did anything more they had to have their plan fully worked out. "What exactly do you want me to do?" he asked.

"First I must reconstruct certain of my equipment for making a 'doorway'. When I go through at one place, you must close that door. I will close the other end. Give me some minutes to do so - although I expect to be able to inform you when I have closed it. Then return to the other doorway, and I will follow, using your mind to guide me. It must be on foot, however, as I think it unlikely that I will be able to acquire transport, and if you travel too fast I may not be able to follow exactly where you guide me. Then I will return through the second doorway. I will try to close it as I pass through, though I may not have the time - it all depends on how rapidly a traveller passes through the barrier. Once I am back, you must close the second door. The one doorway in the other universe might remain open - but alone, will probably be harmless."

Kirk thought it over for a moment. "We'll have to tell Storm," he said. "At least about the other universe. Get him to keep his men out of the way, and

swear Voden, Cheral and Brown to silence."

"If Brown survives," McCoy said bluntly. "Yes, his condition is relatively stable, but he could still die. He's very ill."

Spock nodded acceptance of the comment. "Jim, will you speak to Stonn? I must concentrate on building the necessary equipment."

"Yes, of course."

"And...Jim?" He held out his hand, fingers ready for a meld. "Now? It will give us a little time to adjust to the full bond."

"Now," Kirk agreed gladly.

Spock's hand touched the Human's face, fingers falling easily into the contact points. Kirk reached out, duplicating the gesture.

//Jim...give me your mind.//

//My mind is yours.//

Warmth washed through the Human. He had learned how important he was to Spock; he had sensed in their melds, in their half-formed bond, the unwavering affection the Vulcan felt for him. Now, the wave of pure love that flowed into his receptive mind almost overwhelmed him. He allowed himself to be carried away in the flood, floating unresisting for some seconds before he summoned up the strength to penetrate his bondmate's mind.

//I love you, t'hy'la - my chosen brother.//

He felt the Vulcan's thoughts eddy, drawing the Human mind deep into his own while at the same time the mainstream of his thoughts continued to pour through Kirk's mind. If only I was telepathic too, Kirk thought regretfully. This utter belonging was so...wonderful, so reassuring, so filling and fulfilling - and that was with only one partner telepathic.

He became aware of gentle mind laughter.

"Spock?//

//It does not matter that you are not a telepath, Jim. The bond is made; our minds are one. There are no longer any barriers save those we maintain to permit us to function independently.//

There was a sense of triumph, almost, in the Vulcan's thoughts, mingled with an ephemeral fear that was already dissipating, an apologetic hunger that sought for relief; and Kirk, feeling it, fed it willingly. //I love you, Spock. I love you. I trust you. How could you deny us this for so long:// Almost accusing. //To feel with you...// His arms slid easily around Spock, holding his bondmate close. Spock relaxed against him; Kirk felt the restraint the Vulcan had been exercising for so long vanish as he gave himself up to the physical and mental embrace.

Now he knew what it had been like for Spock for so long; why Spock had been...not unwell, exactly, but not well either. The half bond must have been torture, tantalising the Vulcan with its hints of what could be...like a hungry man sitting at a table laden with his favourite food, but unable to eat anything because a barrier existed between him and it.

Well, the barrier existed no more, would not have existed as long as this but for Spock's misplaced - but understandable - consideration.

They stood for some seconds, no longer trying to communicate but simply allowing their affection for each other to reach out and reaffirm their total commitment.

At last Spock dropped his hand, and Kirk copied him. Their minds were still locked. //Shield your mind, Jim.//

It was hardly a shield, more like a veil, Kirk thought. His awareness of



Spock was as great, now, as it had ever been in a full meld, and that was with a mental shield in place. It showed him just how much had been missing before -- how much he, as a non-telepath, had not known was missing from their previous contact. He knew that Spock was aware of his realisation, and feared his reaction even yet.

He smiled again. Maintaining the shield, he tried to project a feeling of reassurance, knew he had failed, and dropped the shield in order to comfort Spock. //It's all right, Spock. It feels wonderful.//

//Try to shield again, Jim -- remember what I taught you. You should be able to form a better shield than that, even though it isn't as complete as before...// "Yes, that is excellent."

McCoy watched, strangely unembarrassed, realising that the words were the last part of a telepathic exchange, glad that his friends took his presence so much for granted that they wanted his presence now, in what had to be such an important moment for them both, but not sure whether to envy them their closeness or be relieved that he did not have that sort of complete rapport with anyone. Good old Human friendship was enough for him.

Spock broke the contact as he remembered the task at hand. "Let me know if Brown recovers consciousness," he said. "I will be in my quarters, constructing the necessary apparatus."

"When do you want me to speak to Stonn?" Kirk asked.

"As soon as possible," Kirk decided. "The sooner everything is done, the better. If these shocks get any worse, the fabric of the barrier might be so damaged that we would be unable to repair it."

"Then I'll go immediately." He touched his fingers to Spock's, then strode out. Spock followed, leaving McCoy slightly puzzled at the totality of their return to 'normal' from the emotional 'high' he had witnessed...and feeling ever so slightly bereft of something unidentified and unidentifiable.

* * * * *

It was late now on the planet. The research complex had not closed down for the night - a skeleton staff remained on duty in case of any disturbances then - but Stonn himself had gone home.

"Kirk here," the Human said briskly. "I'm sorry to disturb you so late, but it's important that I speak to you as soon as possible. May I beam down?"

"Yes, of course," Stonn replied. He was slightly puzzled, then decided that since Kirk was Science Officer, he must want a possibly more detailed discussion of events than had been possible with his non-scientific Commanding Officer around. He gave Kirk the co-ordinates of his house, and the Human materialised seconds later.

Kirk moved forward, hand held up in greeting. "Live long and prosper," he said, and Stonn was forced to concede his good manners.

"Peace and long life," he replied. "You have met T'Pring - this is T'Su, my primary wife; my children, S'gath, T'Rasi, Spandel, Su'lar and T'zel." He indicated them in strict order of age. The first four were well-grown, nearly adult; T'zel was much younger, only six or seven, Kirk decided. There was nothing to indicate which woman had mothered each child.

Kirk lowered his head in a half bow directed at all Stonn's family. "May you live long and productive lives," the standard greeting for the young. The formalities were sometimes tedious, but once over they ensured a permanent acquaintanceship which might, Kirk thought, serve to dull T'Pring's obvious fear of his bondmate. At least this time they had all been got over with in one go; he had not had to meet Stonn's family one at a time.

He turned his attention to the scientist. "May I speak with you alone, sir? This is a matter of some...delicacy, and seriously, the fewer people who know about it, the better - for the security of the Federation. I do not doubt the discretion of your family, and I know well the utter reliability of the Vulcan race - but what is not known cannot be repeated, even by accident."

Stonn's eyes opened wide; he nodded, and the women ushered the children out. Only T'Pring, the scientist, seemed to hesitate for a moment, looking at Kirk, then she too went out.

Stonn waited, watching Kirk. Now that the time had come, the Human was hesitant to begin. Finally he said, with Vulcan directness,

"Some time ago, Commodore Spock formulated a theory that this was not the only universe in existence. It is a theory that had been speculated about on Earth centuries ago, but had been forgotten about due to the impossibility of proving it. The theory was that several universes co-existed with this one, and that barriers existed between them. He is not a scientist - " he spoke the lie convincingly enough - "but he is interested in the subject, and - well, he had a flash of insight; he was able to develop an apparatus that did indeed prove the existence of other universes. His investigations, however, indicated to him that positive knowledge of these other universes, together with an

apparatus for penetrating them, could be incredibly dangerous if it fell into the wrong hands. After considerable thought, he destroyed his apparatus, all his notes, and suppressed the discovery. Before doing so, however, he went into at least two other universes for a brief time. Later, he rebuilt his apparatus for one visit to one of those universes - it held certain medical knowledge that he knew would be of value here. He and I both went through, and although we returned safely, we had proof of the dangers of the transfer; I was very ill on my return. He destroyed his apparatus once more, and faked research into the medication we had brought back.

"We suspected that the disturbances here were due to a flaw in the barrier between this universe and another; we are now sure of it. Your technician Brown is very ill, unconscious in fact, with the same readings that I showed on my return through the barrier, but more marked; and while he was away...the life form that we found in the desert was another Brown, who had come from a laboratory somewhere that had been built specially to investigate the disturbances in his universe."

Stonn went pale. "If the barrier between two universes were to crumble, surely there would be widespread devastation," he said.

"There could be almost complete annihilation, at least in the area close to the breach," Kirk said flatly. "Spock believes it might be possible to repair the flaws if we move quickly. He is rebuilding certain of his apparatus - again! It is fortunate that Vulcans have such excellent memories." He saw Stonn flinch slightly, and realised that the scientist was remembering a young woman who had chosen not to marry the younger Spock but had instead become the secondary wife of an at that time unimportant, although ambitious, scientist. "I'm sorry, sir - I had not intended to revive your memories - yes, I know about T'Pring. Perhaps I might have a word with her before I leave - I may be able to reassure her on certain points."

"She is afraid of Spock," Stonn admitted.

Kirk nodded. "I realised that. And that you, also, were somewhat apprehensive."

"Her fears were infectious."

"Understandably so. But Spock has...mellowed...since our bonding. However, as I was saying - once his equipment is rebuilt, Spock plans to go through one doorway, so that we can close it from both sides; then we will use the bond-link to lead him to the other door, through which he will return. Then we will close it as well. Whereafter, we will simply...not know what caused the disturbances to cease, any more than we know what caused them to begin. Only you, Spock, Dr. McCoy and I will know the whole truth, although our Chief Engineer knows some of it. Your three men - Dr. Voden, Ster Cheral and Brown - will know something, but I'm sure you can persuade them that nobody would believe such an unlikely story..."

"Why are you telling me all this?" Stonn asked. "Surely it would be safer - in your own words - if even I did not know."

"We need you to keep the laboratory empty while Spock goes through, and keep your people out of the way while McCoy and I leave for the other doorway. We could have concocted some tale to satisfy you, but we felt you deserved to know the truth."

"I thank you for your trust." Stonn thought for a moment. "This will be very dangerous for Spock, will it not?"

"Yes. If it were possible for me to go instead... But we know that Vulcans are more resistant to the debilitating effects of transfer than Humans. The trip through and back almost killed Brown, while Spock made such a transfer a couple of times with little ill effect; a temporary disorientation, nothing more."

They discussed the situation for a little longer, then Kirk said, "I should return to the Enterprise soon; Spock - " He broke off, unwilling to let Stonn know how much Spock needed - wanted - his bondmate's comforting presence near him. In time the raw ache, caused by Spock's long-denied need for the full bond, would fade, but for now, in spite of the shield, he had been aware as he had never been before of Spock wanting him close. "May I see T'Pring?"

"Of course." Stonn went to the door and opened it; a minute later, T'Pring arrived. Stonn nodded to Kirk. "Peace and long life," he said again, and left.

"You wanted to see me?" T'Pring asked. Her voice was quite controlled, but there was a tremor in it that she could not completely disguise.

"Yes. You don't have to worry, you know - about Spock, I mean. He's quite grateful to you now. He always did prefer male partners... His family council was quite startled when he announced that I was his chosen bondmate, but there was nothing they could do about it; male bonding may be rare, but nobody had ever thought to remove the provision from the legislation." He grinned suddenly. "You'd be surprised what you can get away with sometimes, perfectly legally, just because a law has fallen into disuse and been forgotten. Of course, a lot of the time, legislation is immediately passed to prevent anyone else getting away with the same thing, depending on how public it's been. Nobody seems to care though that one pair of males of the present day decided to bond; the provision for male bonding is still in the statute books for any others who want to use it. I imagine because it was such a time-honoured custom in the past."

T'Pring looked intently at him. "You are...content?"

"Very," Kirk assured her.

"But..."

"But..."

"As a child...he was very cruel..."

"As a child, he was very unhappy. He didn't know who he was - or what to do with himself. He had Human emotions that he could not cope with - his mother was dead, she couldn't teach him. But once exposed to Humans, he began to learn."

"I see...I think."

"He no longer feels resentment, T'Pring. He is bonded to me, and we have a secondary wife who has given us two children. He is happy - as, forgive me, he would not have been had you married him. I can give him the emotional response he needs because of his Human blood; you could not have done so, for Vulcan emotions are not the same as Human ones."

"It is true I never understood him; I feared him, what I knew of him."

Kirk could well understand that. And T'Pring had not been the Captain's helpless slave, forced to submit to his every whim.

//Jim!//

Kirk raised his head. "I must go now, T'Pring. Spock wants me. We wish you every happiness for the future." He pulled out his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise. Ready to beam up."

As he shimmered away, Stonn came back into the room. T'Pring watched the space where Kirk had been, her face a confused mixture of emotions that were obvious to Stonn, a mixture in which pity was predominant.

"He said I wasn't to worry about Spock any more. But Stonn - I'm sure he is afraid of Spock, although he denies it. He said Spock wanted him; he left immediately, and I could see that he was worried."

Stonn was less sure. It could be that the Commodore needed his Science Officer's assistance in the work in which he was currently occupied. But of course he could not tell T'Pring that. He could only be grateful that the Human

had taken the time to try to reassure T'Pring...and amazed at the depth of Kirk's understanding. He himself had thought T'Pring to be betraying little of her terror, at least to Human eyes.

As he walked the corridors to give the order to vacate the laboratory Kirk's theoretical 'doorway' was in, Stonn decided that Humans did, perhaps, have more depth to their minds than he had previously thought. Certainly this one did.

Voden and Cheral, the two men who used this laboratory most, were still both there, working busily but without the whole-hearted concentration that usually characterised most of the research staff on Megafor, and Stonn knew that the mystery of Brown's disappearance and reappearance must be weighing heavily on them. They accepted his order with no more than a token protest, instantly silenced when Stonn said, "We don't want to risk anyone else disappearing the way Brown did. Until we know what happened - or have some assurance that it will not happen again - I want this room kept empty. Mr. Kirk will be coming down to conduct some sort of test in it - they have a theory to explain what happened but require more proof before announcing it."

"Do you know how Brown is, sir?" Voden asked.

"I understand he is still unconscious," Stonn replied.

"Will he be all right?"

"He is very ill - that is all I know." He waited until the two scientists had begun to gather up their notes preparatory to leaving the room, before adding, "There is just one more thing, gentlemen - we know what happened to technician Brown, how he vanished and then reappeared a short time later...but it would not do for that information to be too widely discussed."

"Unless we could explain it, sir, nobody would believe us anyway," Voden said drily. "I for one have no intention of speaking about it. I'd just as soon forget it ever happened."

Cheral nodded agreement. "I wouldn't even care to speculate on what could have caused Brown's...vanishing act. I'm just glad we're not the ones who have to come up with an answer for it."

"Have you any idea what their theory is, sir?" Voden asked curiously.

"Only a general outline," Stonn replied cautiously. "Some sort of transporter effect caused by freak solar conditions," he lied with an ease that surprised himself. His subconscious mind, he realised, must have been considering what to say if he was asked.

Cheral frowned. "If so, and if those conditions were to recur on a heavily populated planet..."

"That, I believe, is one of the things Mr. Kirk wishes to test - the possibility of any recurrence." He ushered the two scientists to the door. "While this room remains empty, you can share Dr. Bex's laboratory."

"Yes, sir." Behind Stonn's back, the two men exchanged a rueful glance. Not that they disliked Bex; but the Tellarite's abrupt manner was hard to live with for more than a short period at a time, which was why he had a laboratory to himself. The station personnel had an unofficial rota for socialising with Bex which gave the Tellarite plenty of company without being too great a strain on any of the others - even the most imperturbable of them occasionally found himself getting irritated at Bex's abrupt manner of speaking.

Stonn opened the door of Bex's laboratory and entered, closely followed by the others. Bex looked up. "Well?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to share your accommodation with Ster Cheral and Dr. Voden for a little while. Captain Kirk wants the use of a laboratory down here to carry out some tests and theirs seemed the most suitable for his purpose. They could, of course, use the main laboratory, but the equipment .. there is too general, there is so much coming and going..."

"Very well." It sounded ungracious, but Bex's ears twitched in what, to the Tellarites, was a smile. He moved to a long bench and swept some papers off it with what was almost a flourish. "There is a selection of equipment in this cupboard - if you require anything else, just ask." He pressed a switch, and a unit slid from the wall. "A computer you can use freely - I prefer that one." He indicated a small computer terminal where he had been working.

"Thanks," Voden said. He was well aware that most of the scientists on the station - including himself - would have been at least mildly annoyed at having other scientists billeted on them at no notice at all, but Bex gave the impression, through his actions, of being positively delighted to have them there.

Stonn nodded to them, and left. He went back to his room and activated the radio. "Enterprise."

The pleasant female voice that answered him was something of a surprise. "Enterprise. Lt. Uhura."

"Can I speak with either Captain Kirk or Commodore Spock, please. This is Stonn."

"One moment, sir. I'll put you through." There was a brief silence, then,

"Kirk here."

"The laboratory is ready for you, Captain."

"Thanks. We'll be down shortly - I can't be precise, the instruments we need are having to be adjusted and it's delicate work."

"I understand. Contact me when you're ready. Stonn out."

* * * * *

Even expecting it, Spock was startled by the suddenness with which his surroundings changed. There was an abruptness that had not been there when he transferred using his 'transporter'; it was no wonder that the two Browns had been shaken by it, especially since they had no reason - no reason at all - to expect such a thing to happen.

He recovered his wits relatively quickly, glad to find that there was not the same sense of disorientation that he had experienced - albeit mildly - on his last transfer. Yes, it was probably the shock rather than the transfer that had so affected the two Humans. He sent a hasty reassurance over the bond-link to his anxious friend before carefully operating the mechanism designed to close the 'doorway'. His awareness of Kirk's mind diminished slightly and he realised that the mechanism had worked. This doorway at least was blocked.

He looked around. This part of the planet - in this universe - was a rich, fertile area, long lush grass with a few scattered trees. He could feel the tug of Kirk's mind moving away, and began to follow, taking careful note of his surroundings as he went. Not that he would be able to report on this, but he knew that Kirk would be interested...Stonn, too, could be told. In this universe, the disaster that had overtaken their Megafor had not happened.

He had feared it might be difficult to follow where Kirk led, but it was easier than he had expected, and he moved easily through the long grass.

Strange, though - this planet looked highly suitable for colonisation... why was it not colonised? The animals he noticed all looked to be completely wild... Or perhaps it was colonised, but only sparsely. This region might be outwith the settled region.

It was equally strange how events could differ in the same universes even when people and places were the same.

The second doorway, he knew, was some ten kilometres from the first one, and inside a building. He had chosen not to arrive at that one in case he materialised inside an occupied room; it would be easier to slip into the

place, hide, find the appropriate room once the staff had left for the night... It would lengthen the time he spent in this alien universe, but that might lessen the shock of return - which he was sure he would feel. The first Brown had been merely disorientated; the second one, on his return, was unconscious...

He made good time for fully an hour. Ahead of him, perhaps a mile away, he could see buildings, and he sent a message over the bond-link. //Slower, Jim - I'm coming to habitation. I imagine it's the first Brown's research station.//

//Right.// The pull of his bondmate's mind slowed noticeably.

He walked on for a few hundred yards before slowing even more. //It's a fairly extensive station,// he reported. //All prefabricated buildings. It appears to be designed to have a large staff; fully threequarters of the buildings give the appearance of being living quarters. No sign of anyone around.//

He paused on a low rise overlooking the station and surveyed the base, crouching low and peering through the long grass. He could feel Kirk's mind touch still pulling him forward, and he checked the route he would have to take.

It definitely gave the appearance of being deserted. He moved forward again, every sense alert. Provided all random factors ran in his favour, even if he was seen he would not be identified - at first - as an intruder, as long as he walked unhurriedly and as if he had every right to be there. But he could not begin to walk confidently forward until he was at the very edge of the complex -- what would one of their men be doing wandering in the open countryside?

Everything remained quiet. He glanced up at the sky. The sun was still high - at latest it was mid afternoon, local time. There should be people here... He thought back. The Brown of this universe said the place was 'being constructed', and now that he came to look closer, there was an...unfinished...look to everything.

It didn't make sense. Even if construction was not yet finished, there should be building workers around; construction crew, technicians. Unless... unless Brown's sudden disappearance and equally sudden and mysterious reappearance had frightened them all away.

"No - surely not! The construction teams assigned to work on undeveloped planets were always Starfleet-employed - at least, it was so in both the universes he had lived in. He could not think it would be different here. Starfleet would never employ men who would jump at even robust shadows.

The windlink tugged him onwards. He was close, now, to the building he was being drawn to; he could sense in Kirk's mind the awareness that here was where Brown had been found.

This building looked to be completed, but even so it had a strangely derelict look about it...

Once inside the building he realised why. This research station had either been badly sited or they had been fantastically unlucky. Earthquake damage showed clearly in the cracked internal walls, the broken plaster underneath the hole where a jagged end of broken rafter poked through the ceiling.

He grunted to himself. This damage must be very recent - probably caused by the...whatever it was that swapped the two Browns back to their own universes, for this universe's Brown had been working at a console when he was transferred in the first place.

Through this door...

Sure that he was alone in this deserted place, he opened the door confidently - and even as he opened it he heard voices. A split second of indecision, then he decided to bluff it out. I've been sent to investigate the damage! he thought, and walked in...and froze.

The two men standing beside a twisted console looked round as the door opened and stared at him open-mouthed. "Spock?"

What universe was this?

He had assumed from the available evidence that the disturbance was with an anti-matter universe and that the earthquakes and magnetic surges were caused by the meeting and mutual annihilation of matter and antimatter particles. Now it seemed that he was wrong. Were the variations simply caused by the differences between a natural, extensive 'gateway' and the temporary and limited passageway he had created for himself? Could this - could this possibly be - his own original universe?

"Dr. McCoy. Mr. Scott."

They stared at him for a moment longer, speechless. Then -

"Did...did you get home all right - you and Jim?" McCoy's voice was very quiet.

He nodded. "Yes. Jim was...far from well, as a result of the transfer - but he recovered. He is...at home, monitoring me now. You guessed what happened - when Brown disappeared?"

"Not when he disappeared - but when he came back, we thought it possible that he'd...slid into another universe."

"How is he?"

"Dead. The shock was too much for his heart."

Spock's lips tightened slightly. "I am sorry. 'Our' Brown lives, but he is unconscious and very ill."

"Spock - is this a natural doorway between the universes? There wasn't any disturbance when you - well - travelled."

"We believe so. But not just one doorway...Bones. We surmise two, approximately ten kilometres apart. I have come through to close them, otherwise both universes could easily be destroyed. When we didn't realise that it could be - would be - this one that was interacting with ours."

"There's no chance that...that your experiments helped create the doorway?" McCoy asked.

"I would doubt it. My method of transfer - I either travelled from, or to, Vulcan in this universe. If I had been responsible, surely Vulcan would have been the focal point of the disturbances."

Scott spoke for the first time. "How do you propose to close these doorways?"

"By using a mechanism similar to the one that permitted me to penetrate the barrier before. I had thought that I might have to leave this doorway open at this end - however, since you both are here, you can close it for me once I go through."

"Aye," Scott said. "Tell us what to do, and we can do it."

Spock indicated the mechanism he held. "Press this button," he said. "I need to retain it until the doorway is opened again - once I press the return button I will drop the unit - and hope that I drop it in time! Transfer is very precipitate."

"Spock..." McCoy said. "You are...still happy?"

"Yes," Spock said quietly. "Jim and I now have a full mental bond - and while we have not had the opportunity to explore it fully yet, I know we will both find it very rewarding. We have a secondary wife who has given us two children - twins. Jim is the biological father, of course. We haven't seen them yet, but T'Pol assures us that the girl looks like T'Pol and the boy has

a certain resemblance to Jim...though how she can tell when they are so young, I do not profess to understand. In my experience, children all look very much alike for the first months of their lives."

McCoy chuckled. "Ah, but your experience is pretty limited, isn't it?"

Spock smiled. "Yes, I believe it is."

Scott was looking at Spock's sleeve. "And you're a Commodore again?"

"Yes. Jim is a Captain - and still my First Officer. As a bonded pair, we cannot be separated either - not since we registered our bonding with Starfleet." He glanced across the room. "Jim is beginning to worry because I have not returned," he said quietly. "And indeed, the doorway should be closed as soon as possible, for the sake of both our universes. I am pleased that I have seen you both again, Bones, Scotty."

"Amen to that," McCoy said. "And Spock - give our love to Jim."

"I will do so. Live long, my friends - and prosper."

The unit clattered to the ground as he vanished. McCoy bent and retrieved it, then thrust it at Scott. "You do it, Scotty - I might press the wrong button." He blinked hard, determined not to cry. Spock was happy, he was with Jim...and that was all that mattered. It wasn't as if he was alone, anyway - he and Scotty had always been friends, and since Spock's last 'visit' they had become very close.

Scott pressed the button. "We'd better find a deep hole to bury this, Leonard."

McCoy nodded. "Yes...and then forget where."

"And - we have no idea why the disturbances have stopped."

"None," McCoy agreed. "Let's get away from here." He pulled out his communicator. "Enterprise - we're ready to beam up."

"Energising."

Moments later, the ruined room was empty.

* * * * *

Spock staggered as he materialised. Arms caught him, steadying him. "Spock!"

He clutched at the supporting arms. "Jim?"

"Who else did you think it would be?"

"McCoy..."

"Yes, Spock, I'm here." His voice was brusque as he ran a scanner over the Vulcan. "Damn it, man, sit down before you fall down!"

Kirk lowered his bondmate carefully, and crouched beside him. "The doorway," Spock said hoarsely. "Have you closed it?"

Kirk grunted. He turned, looking at the spot where the Vulcan had materialised, then said, "Not until we move you a little way. We're too close."

"They should have closed it at the other side," Spock muttered.

"They? Who?" Kirk asked sharply.

"McCoy...and Scotty..."

McCoy and Scotty? Spock had to know what he was talking about, but Kirk was not sure he could follow his bondmate's line of thought, even with the bond linking their minds.

"They both send you their love."

"Huh?"

"Jim, do you know what universe we were linked to?"

"The one...the one you came from originally?"

"Yes." Spock fell silent for a moment, then said, "I always did know that there was some reason why we were brought together. Was this why, Jim? So that, bonded, we could remove something that was a danger to both our universes?"

"Perhaps," Kirk said. "Or perhaps it was just that we needed each other so much that nothing could keep us apart."

* * * * *

Stonn had been on edge all evening. His wives were fully aware of it, his children hardly less so.

As they finished the meal that Stonn had barely touched, T'Su and T'Hasi began clearing the table, and T'Pring indicated that S'gath should take the other children away; when they were alone, she turned to Stonn.

"What is wrong, husband? Does Spock...?"

"They have an idea of what might be causing the disturbances," Stonn replied. "I have been waiting to hear from them about it - that is all. As far as you are concerned - did Captain Kirk not tell you that you have nothing to fear from Spock?"

"Yes...."

"Did you not believe him?"

"I believe that he believed what he said."

"And do you not believe that if Spock had been lying to him, he would not have seen it in their bond?"

"He is Human; we cannot know if they are as sensitive to the bond as we Vulcans."

"I believe Captain Kirk is fully sensitive to the bond - and that he has considerable influence over Spock."

T'Pring shook her head. "You may be right - but I will not breathe peacefully until Spock has left."

"And if he does, without attempting to harm any of us?"

"I must concede that the Human's influence over him is greater than I would have considered possible."

"Then let us leave it at that. Meanwhile...I wish they would contact me!"

"Wish, husband?"

Stonn allowed a rueful expression to show. "Yes, my wife. Some Human habits are quite...contagious." He was interrupted by a brisk knock on the door. "See who that is, my wife."

T'Pring went to the door, and instinctively shrank back as Spock stepped forward.. "I would speak with your husband," he said evenly.

She shivered. "Yes, Commodore."

As she stood aside to let him pass, Kirk gripped her arm. "Don't worry!" he said softly.

Stonn nodded for her to leave, and she went gratefully. As soon as the door was closed, he turned almost eagerly. "Well?"

"As far as we can tell, we have successfully closed the doorways linking the two universes," Spock said. "We cannot be certain, however, but if there is no recurrence of the disturbances in the immediate future, I think we can assume

that we have been successful."

Stonn looked closely at him. "You look tired."

"It is -- quite draining," Spock admitted. "Our Chief Medical Officer wants me back on board and confined to bed for twenty-four hours...and I confess, I do not resist his prescription. Rest will be welcome."

"Will you report what you have done?" Stonn asked.

"No -- and I beg that you also do not. We will simply say that we have no more idea of why the disturbances stopped than we do of how they started."

"You deserve the credit -- "

"No!" Spock snapped. "Stonn -- think. My bondmate told you -- the fewer people who know of this, the better. Contact between the universes is dangerous -- more dangerous than you can guess. The Brown of the other universe died as a result of it."

"What? I thought -- I thought he transferred back..."

"He died, Stonn -- heart failure. The shock of transfer was too much for his system." No need to admit that it was the second transfer that killed him.

"And our Brown?"

"Has a reasonable chance, although he will need intensive care for some days yet."

"I wonder what they think, in the other universe?" Stonn said thoughtfully.

"Who knows?" Spock replied quietly and not quite truthfully. He did not know...but he could easily guess, as far as those who mattered were concerned. He was quite sure that they, too, would claim ignorance...

* * * * *

McCoy's Log

So we have met again, Spock and I.

I think he is truly happy -- he has Jim again. If only I could have gone through, too -- but I would not condemn that other McCoy to the sorrow I have known. At least I have become accustomed...

He implied that it was the bond between himself and Jim that enabled him to come through and close these 'doors'. Seems quite...ironic that it should be this universe they saved as well as the one they live in.

I don't forget them -- I never can; these two men that I loved. 'Even across time and space, you are our friend', Spock said to me once. I believe it.

It is unlikely that our paths will cross again. I wish you luck, my friends...and all the happiness in the universe -- in two universes. But I think you have that already.

Scotty destroyed the mechanism Spock left with us, and we have made no report. Officially, we -- the only ones to know about the other universes -- know nothing. In this, nothing seems to be the wisest thing to know. Let Starfleet scientists waste time trying to work it out -- they will not, I am sure.

And that is an outcome devoutly to be wished.

* * * * *

There had been no disturbances for almost a week.

During that time, Kirk had gone through the motions of examining data in the interests of blurring the positive action that they had taken, using the laboratory vacated by Voden and Cheral for part of the time. At last, after a brief discussion with Spock, he decided that they had wasted enough time, and suggested reporting to Starfleet that the disturbances appeared to have ceased as inexplicably as they had started.

Spock duly compiled a report for Starfleet in which he and Kirk put their heads together to produce a verbose style that - with luck - all but the most dedicated scientist would find totally unreadable - which would be just as well, for it said nothing to the point. Stonn, after discussion with them, merely admitted his total ignorance of what had caused both the disturbances and the cessation of them, and directed any further enquiries to Spock's report.

The reports sent off, Stonn invited Spock and his senior officers to a semi-formal 'party' on what would probably be their last evening at Megafor; new orders were almost certain to come for the Enterprise by the following morning. The commanders of the other bases were present, as were most of Stonn's staff.

In recognition of the fact that many of those present were either Human or of Human extraction, the evening was arranged on mostly Human lines. Quiet background music provided a tuneful distraction for anyone who cared to dance; the meal was in the form of a buffet, with dishes from all the planets who had representatives on Megafor.

Spock had discussed with Kirk what would be the best way for him to behave, both to try to reassure T'Pring - it would have been cruel to have left her believing that Spock still planned revenge at some future date - yet keep her from suspecting that the man present at the dinner was not the Captain that she so feared. They decided that he should not try to speak to T'Pring himself, but that it would do no harm for him to seek out her co-wife T'Su; Kirk's assessment of Stonn's primary wife was that she was a pleasant woman but that - for a Vulcan - she was not very intelligent; she had no professional training, nor, apparently, did she have any interests apart from the care of Stonn's children - and T'Pring, the scientist, was perfectly willing to leave the upbringing of her children to her co-wife. T'Su would take Spock at face value, even if she knew T'Pring's dread of her former betrothed, and would probably, they hoped, end up telling T'Pring that Spock was not the monster she had thought her.

A few minutes with T'Su confirmed Kirk's assessment in Spock's mind. T'Su was a pleasant woman who could respond to an intelligent conversation and keep it going, but only by encouraging her guests to talk about their own interests; how much she actually understood of what was said was doubtful. She could not be called stupid by any standards, but she was not clever, either. T'Pring, on the other hand, was undoubtedly brilliant...but lacked T'Su's placid acceptance of life. The family was probably very happy, being well-balanced, the two wives complementing each other.

Spock was half aware of T'Pring watching him intently as he spoke to T'Su. Did she think that he would attempt to harm the older woman? Then with a shock he realised that she probably did, that it was exactly what she would expect of his original in this universe...and what he would have expected of that Spock too, come to think of it. Memory of an entry in the Captain's long-destroyed personal log surfaced - 'I permit no-one to harm me.' And another entry - 'Anyone foolish enough to feel affection for another can be harmed through that affection. I do not permit myself to feel anything.'

If only that had been true! Jim would have been saved so much agony - and yet, if it had been true, Jim would not have been there to need him...

As T'Su turned away from him to speak to another guest - Decius, the Romulan commander of one of the lesser bases - Spock found Kirk at his side. "Something troubles you," Kirk murmured.

"A memory...and a thought," Spock said softly. "If the Captain had not been as he was, you would not have needed me - and I would not be here today."

Kirk nodded. "Does it sound terribly masochistic if I say that I'm glad - now - that he was so cruel? Because you are here today?" He held out his hand, fingers extended, to the Vulcan, and Spock responded instantly.

"Let's find a quiet corner for a moment," Spock said. "We've hardly had a moment to ourselves since we completed the bond...and I find myself longing for my bondmate's company."

Kirk smiled. "In a way it's been a wasted week," he admitted. "Occupied with make-work -- but it's been necessary." He glanced round. "There are some chairs in the hall. We could go out there."

Spock followed him. Neither saw T'Pring watching them, carefully moving to where she could still see them without appearing to be spying.

In the hall, their eyes were attracted upwards by a movement. Kirk grinned, recognising the sturdy form of T'zel, the youngest of Stonn's children. Vulcan or no, in a fashion typical of the young of any planet, she had been attracted from her room by curiosity, probably slightly annoyed that her older siblings, S'gath and T'Basi, were permitted to be present at the party; Spandel and Su'lar, while not quite old enough to attend, would be old enough to overcome their curiosity. She could see nothing, but her ears were certainly busy enough as she leaned over the railing, encouraged by Kirk's smile and the failure of either man to indicate displeasure.

They sat, relaxing silently, content.

From the room, T'Pring could no longer see them for other guests standing between her and the door, now that their heads were at a lower level. She moved slowly through the room, intending to find a new position from which she could watch them, when Bex spoke to her and manners compelled her to stop and respond to him.

The two men relaxing in the hallway stiffened as an ominous cracking sound came from above them. They moved almost as one as a white shape fell towards them, then Kirk realised that his bondmate was nearer and drew back so as not to hamper him as he caught the falling child.

T'zel stared up at her rescuer, her face almost as white as her gown. Spock glanced at Kirk, unsure of what best to do.

"Take her back to bed, Spock - I'll get one of her parents," Kirk said. The Vulcan nodded and began to mount the stair; Kirk went back into the room, glancing round. He saw T'Pring almost immediately, and crossed to her.

"Excuse me, sir," he apologised to Bex, and turned to her. "Can you come, T'Pring," he went on. "T'zel has had a slight accident -- we don't think she's hurt, but she has had a fright. Spock is with her -- "

"Spock?" T'Pring's eyes widened in fear. "Alone with T'zel?" She hurried towards the door.

From the doorway she saw the broken railing, and spared the time to glance at Kirk. "We really should have chased her away," he admitted, "but she was enjoying listening to the music and the voices..."

"She fell through the railing?"

"Yes. Spock caught her." He followed the hurrying woman up the stair.

T'Pring burst into the child's room in time to see Spock tucking the sheet round T'zel's shoulders, and hear the quiet "Thank you," the child said.

Spock looked down at her. "One does not need to thank a logical action," he said quietly. He straightened as T'Pring reached them.

"Are you all right, T'zel?" T'Pring asked, her eyes bright with worry.

"Yes, mother."

"A fright only, I think," Spock said, still quietly.

"So Captain Kirk said, but I had to be sure." She looked at him. "It was...the perfect chance for revenge."

"I...no longer seek revenge," Spock replied. "I think that we are both happier than we would have been together, T'Pring." He looked at Kirk, his eyes content. "It has been a most enjoyable evening, T'Pring... Come, my bondmate," he continued. "Let us return to the ship."

Kirk pulled out his communicator.

* * * * *

T'Pring's Log

It seems as if Captain Kirk was telling the truth. Spock was very pleasant to me, and I confess that Stonn might have been right - perhaps it was only the mystery of the situation that made him appear to threatening before. I am no longer afraid of him - because...

Spock does seem...changed. Gentler, more understanding. His eyes are no longer shuttered, hiding his every thought, but shine with what appears to be a very deep affection when he looks at his bondmate. There seems to be a great rapport between them that I can almost envy.

Oh, I have a good husband, I do not deny it, a co-wife who is my good friend, and children to be proud of. But what they have...

Could I have had that kind of rapport with Spock, if I had had the courage to bond with him? I will never know. I made my choice, and I do not really regret it.

But now I find myself wondering...was it the right choice?

I will never know.

* * * * *

Spock's Log

I am glad T'Pring no longer fears. If I had realised just how much she had dreaded the Captain's vengeance, I think I would have tried to reassure her before this...but perhaps it is as well that I did not. She believes my change of character to be due to Jim's influence; she has no suspicion that I am not the person I...yes, pretend to be.

I am tired, though - tired as no Vulcan ought to be. Perhaps I am getting old... No. It is just the effect of going once more through the barrier, coupled with the strain of the last weeks, the strain of...needing...the bond so much, yet having to control my wish for it...and the joy of having it at last. Strange how joy can be so tiring.

Jim seems more than happy, though he too is tired; McCoy has recommended a medical leave for both of us. We will visit Vulcan, of course, but Jim wants to go to Earth - it is a long time since he was last there, and while he is not homesick, the time always comes when one feels a longing for the familiar sky of childhood, the familiar smell of one's native planet. He does not want to visit his childhood home, and that I can understand; his memories of those days are mostly unhappy. So we will travel; visit those parts of Earth that call to us. Not necessarily the standard tourist attractions, but rather quiet, remote spots where we can relax for a few days, enjoy the scenery...and then we will come back to the Enterprise...our real home.

* * * * *

//Sp:ck//

//Come in, Jim.// Spock flicked off the recorder.

Kirk entered, crossed to Spock's side, and sank into his favourite position, curled up on the floor, leaning against his bondmate's knees.
