

VARIATIONS

on a



THEME 8

a
STAR TREK
fanzine

VARIATIONS ON A THEME 8

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



In Kraith Collected, we met Commodore Spock, from another universe. His Kirk was dead, 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 attempts to 'rescue' him; when his own Spock arrived, he returned with him, leaving the Commodore doubly alone.

We were concerned about 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 connected 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. The Captain kept his behaviour secret, however; and when Scott discovered the truth, he killed him, making it seem like an accident.

Spock set out to rescue Kirk. 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 tape of his personal log behind on his last visit to Vulcan, and Sarek had played it, thinking it a music tape. When Spock went 'home' to visit 'his' family, Sarek, believing that his son was illtreating Kirk in the worst possible way, tried to kill him. They were forced to tell Sarek the truth, and to their surprise found him most understanding.

Shortly after that, Sam Kirk, who had deserted his brother when he was a child, joined the Enterprise as a crewman. Once again he deserted Kirk in a time of need, but this time Spock was there to help him.

When Spock's family council decreed that he must marry, McCoy (the only person other than Sarek and his second wife T'Pol to know the truth) came up with the suggestion that Spock bond with Kirk; a relationship legal on Vulcan, although rarely entered into. However, at that time they formed only a partial bond.

Then McCoy developed xenopolycythemia. In this universe Yonada did not exist, so Spock returned to his original universe to obtain the cure. When he failed to return, Kirk followed him, and with the assistance of that universe's McCoy and Scott, 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. During one of these missions, Kirk was tricked into taking a wife.

Their visit to Platonius saw them decide to complete their bond link, and this was vital to the success of their next mission, an analogue of Alternate Factor, in which Spock for the first time encountered T'Pol, who was terrified of the Captain she had rejected in favour of Stonn. He also met, presumably for the last time, McCoy and Scott from his original universe.

In Variations 8 they go on leave, first to Earth and then to Vulcan. The geography of Scotland as depicted here is all accurate; and we highly recommend the Kintail Lodge Hotel!

If anyone cares to visit the area, they will find that the backgrounds for the illustrations are accurate too - Virginia has done a very good job there, and we thank her very much for her attention to detail.

Will there be a Variations 9? We're not sure. We have the glimmerings of an idea, but at the same time, between them, Variations 7 & 8 have tied up all the loose ends we could find that were left dangling at various points throughout the series - and we always did mean to finish with Variations 7. However, if that glimmer takes shape, we'll certainly write it.

THE MASSACRE OF GLENCOE

Oh cruel was the snow that sweeps Glencoe
And covers the grave o' Donald;
Oh cruel was the foe that raped Glencoe
And murdered the House of MacDonald.

They came in the night and we offered them meat,
A roof o'er their head, dry shoes for their feet;
We wined them and dined them, they ate of our meat
And they slept in the House of MacDonald.

They came from Fort William wi' murder in mind;
The Campbell had orders King William had signed
That all to the sword - these words underlined -
And leave none alive of MacDonald.

They came in the night when the men were asleep,
The Band of Argyll, through snow soft and deep;
Like murdering foxes among herdless sheep
They slaughtered the House of MacDonald.

Some died in their beds at the hand of the foe;
Some fled in the night and were lost in the snow;
Some lived to accuse him who struck the first blow -
But gone was the House of MacDonald.

Words and music by Jim Maclean.

CHESSPIECE by Sheryl Peterson

You turn to leave,
Idly handing me the thing
Your fingers had been toying with
As we spoke,
And I take it automatically,
Without thinking,
Watching you go your way
With wonder...
With gratitude
That you can be so *like* the other
In every move,
In every line of face and form,
And yet be so different...
So incredibly gentle!

For the first time
I begin to feel... safe
And dare to look forward
To a future by your side
As your First Officer,
As your... friend?
My heart swells
Till I feel it must burst
And I clench my fists
To contain myself
Lest I should shout my joy...

Then I feel it.
The thing you handed me
With such seeming carelessness,
Cuts into my palm
And I open my hand curiously,
Casually almost,
Wondering what it is...
And freeze!

A chesspiece.
Surely an innocent thing
This piece of craftsmanship
Made to the pattern
Of an ancient game,
Almost as old as Man -
Yet to me...

To me...
It is the dread symbol
Of an even more ancient game,
Of terror and pain
And even more bitter shame...

It is a black knight
That looks up from my palm,
Its jewelled eyes evil -
An adder coiled to attack
Would strike less terror into me!
That could only give me death
But *THIS*...

This was *HIS* sign;
His mocking summons
To his favourite plaything,
That could be delivered to me
Even in front of others
Without their knowing.
Symbol of my slavery
To *HIS* demands...
To *HIS* vile needs!

Must it now be yours also?
You, Spock of another universe,
Whom I dared to trust
And... like?

Has *HE* reached out to me
Even in death
To mock my helplessness,
Or will you be the same
As *HE* was...
Only kinder?

Either way
I am still a slave.
I have only exchanged masters.
How could I have *dared*
To believe I could be free?

There is no hope after all.
There never was...
I crush the chesspiece
In my clenched fist
And flee the room
As my heart breaks -
This time, forever.

T R I N G by Gene S. Delpenia

I had lived with fear for many years,
And I have known in my innermost being
That he would never forgive...
Or forget.
But now that I have seen him once again,
I wonder.
Perhaps I was wrong about Spock.
Is it conceivable that my youthful impression
of him was faulty?
Could I have allowed myself to be too-much
influenced by fear?
I have never felt such emotion before;
Tightening my throat, squeezing panic
into my mind.
Such wanton violence was foreign to me,
Even as he was foreign.
I find it very difficult to see
That cruel, passionless child
In this calm, kind man of logic.
Yet, he is Spock,
Though he may seem to be a different person.
Yes, he has changed and grown.
I owe him a debt of honour,
For surely I was wrong?

VARIATIONS 8

"Oh cruel was the snow that sweeps Glencoe
And covers the grave o' Donald;
Oh cruel was the foe that raped Glencoe
And murdered the House of MacDonald."

The sad, haunting tune echoed softly in McCoy's ears as he stepped out of the turbolift. Drawn by it, he changed his mind about his destination and followed the sound, to find himself outside Rec Room 3. The door had been secured open to accommodate all the bodies that filled it; the man standing in the entrance turned his head at the doctor's approach.

"Didn't expect to find you here, Spock," McCoy said, taking advantage of the silence that had fallen. "What's going on?"

Spock smiled faintly. "I came to collect Jim, but I did not care to interrupt. It seems that Miss Uhura is rehearsing a new song, and as usual she has gained an audience."

"Can't blame them - you know what it's like whenever Uhura decides to sing. Where is Jim?" he added, gazing in at the tightly packed crewmembers carpeting the floor. "I can't tell if he's even in there."

"I can." There was a hint of amusement in the Vulcan's voice. "He is sitting on the floor in the far corner, too tightly wedged to move - and Mr. Mitchell has just stepped on his hand."

"Now how on earth did you know that?" McCoy demanded. "Or are you making it all up?"

"Not at all. The bonding link is most precise at such close quarters," Spock said gravely.

"You really needed that full link, didn't you?" McCoy said sympathetically. "I know Jim's delighted..." He broke off as Uhura's voice took up the plaintive tune again.

"They came in the night while the men were asleep,
The Band of Argyll, through snow soft and deep;
Like murdering foxes among herdless sheep,
They slaughtered the House of MacDonald."

Spock drew McCoy away from the door. "Jim cannot leave without creating a disturbance, and besides, he is enjoying the music. I was about to go to dinner - would you care to join me? Jim will know where to find us."

"I was on my way to a meal myself," McCoy replied. "I'll be glad to join you, Spock."

Over dinner, McCoy picked up his train of thought again. "About Jim... There's something I wanted to ask you."

"Yes?"

"You've said that Jim has a very powerful mind."

"Indeed. He is fully as strong as many Vulcans in this universe."

"But if that's so, how did..." The doctor hesitated, wondering how

best to phrase the question.

Spock continued eating calmly. "You were wondering how the Captain was able to gain and maintain such control over him."

"Well... yes."

"You must remember that he was cruelly tricked. Jim opened his mind in complete trust to someone he thought a friend. He was... overwhelmed... by the rape of his mind, which was as brutal and complete as the rape of his body. It is proof of his strength that so much of his bedrock integrity survived; although he had no choice but to obey, his heart remained uncorrupted. It was not easy for him to learn to trust again, but he has done so, and you have seen what he has become. It is *his* doing, not mine - I merely provided a safe harbour while he re-made his life."

McCoy nodded silent agreement. "Spock, while I'm asking damn-fool questions anyway... Do you ever compare him with the other Jim Kirk?"

"Compare?" Spock said slowly. "What would you have me say? How could I not? And yet, it is not a comparison in the sense you mean. Captain Kirk was my friend. I respected him, and valued his trust. There was... affection between us. I mourned his death, and in my grief sought to deny it by seeking his alternate in another universe."

"But... I love Jim. Kirk taught me to value and express the emotions my world denied. He was my friend - but Jim is my t'hyla. Does that answer your question, Doctor?"

"I guess so." The doctor grinned, returning to his meal. After a moment he looked up. "So what's all this I've been hearing on the grapevine? I'm told Jim's been seeing a lot of Janet MacLeod lately."

"Indeed? May I ask how you came by this information?"

"Gary Mitchell. And no, he wasn't gossiping," McCoy added hastily as Spock's eyebrows registered disapproval. "He was concerned. It seems some of the younger and less responsible crewmembers have been having a field day."

"And Mr. Mitchell was concerned for Jim's reputation? Gratifying, if somewhat unexpected. However, my bondmate's conduct is my concern, McCoy. If I am satisfied with his behaviour, I see no reason for anyone else to be concerned."

"And you can just get off your high horse with me, *Commodore!*" McCoy snorted. "I didn't say he was getting up to anything he shouldn't have been, you know that. I just wanted you to know what was being said. Suppose someone starts spreading stories off the ship, and that cousin of yours gets to hear them? You know it's practically his life's ambition to disgrace Jim."

"I apologise, my friend." Spock relaxed a little. "It seems so natural to me to be bonded to Jim that I forget that to Humans such a liaison is unusual. Naturally there is talk. They cannot realise that infidelity is impossible for one who is bonded. And you are correct, of course, about Sendak. However, Jim has good reasons for his actions." He nodded towards the door. "No doubt he will be only too eager to tell you."

McCoy followed the direction of his gaze and saw Kirk come in, deep in conversation with Janet MacLeod. Despite his often renewed promise to himself not to be curious, he couldn't resist sneaking a glance at Spock to catch the Vulcan's reactions. There were several bonded Vulcan couples on

the Enterprise, and he was well aware of a certain... he could only call it possessiveness.. in their relationships. It was not simply a male characteristic either, for the women showed the same instinctive watchfulness if another female seemed to be showing interest in their husbands. Spock, though, nodded politely to MacLeod, and greeted Kirk with his faint smile as he approached, coffee cup in hand, and took the empty seat at the table.

"Lord, it was hot in there. Spock, I'm sorry - I was so wedged in I couldn't leave without trampling over half the crew... and besides, Uhura hadn't finished singing." He drained his cup, and grinned. "Won't be long now. Another two days and we'll reach Earth. By the way, confirmation of our bookings came through, so we're all set."

"All set? What have you been up to, Jim Kirk?" McCoy asked.

"Arranging our leave, of course. Spock and I have decided to tour the Scottish Highlands. Ever since the idea came to me I've been picking Janet MacLeod's brains for places to go and things to see."

"It is supposed to be a rest, Jim," Spock reminded his enthusiastic bondmate.

"Well, I know that. What I thought was, we'll have the first few days on the wander, touring about and taking a look at some of the places I've heard about. Then we'll head for Loch Duich, where we'll stay at the Kintail Lodge - Janet recommended it very highly. It's not really as strenuous as it sounds, you know; Scotland's a small country, and nowhere's very far from anywhere else. I'm really looking forward to it." He turned to include McCoy in his enthusiasm. "Most of the country where we'll be was depopulated after the Eugenics Wars, but people are beginning to resettle the remoter areas now. There are still miles of open country, though, and the old wildlife has re-established itself, including several species that had long been extinct in the natural state. Most of them escaped or were released from game parks when there was no possibility of maintaining them, and with no-one to interfere, or even care, their numbers increased. A lot of the farm animals went wild, too, when the people left."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that," McCoy said dubiously. "Wild country, scattered population, possibly dangerous animals roaming around... "

"Just like Vulcan," Kirk said cheerfully.

"Are you sure you don't want somewhere more... lively? New York, or London, say, if you intend to spend some time on Earth?"

"That's just what I don't want," Kirk said quietly. "We'll have all the socialising we need - more than we need - when we get to Vulcan. This break will give us some time by ourselves, plenty of peace and quiet, and lots to explore. We'll have an aircar, Bones, and we'll take our communicators, so we'll be in constant touch with Starfleet, and the Earth Space Station can beam us up at a moment's notice. So what can go wrong?"

"Don't ask me," McCoy grunted. He was not convinced that this was entirely wise. "No doubt you'll enjoy it."

"We will. Oh, Spock, I meant to say... I'm afraid I've committed you."

"In what way, Jim?"

"Well, you know how much help Janet's been. I found out today that she'll be stuck in London for twenty-four hours, and she's desperate to get home to Argyll herself, so I offered her a lift part of the way. She can arrange to be met at a place called Crianlarich - it's on our route - and she'll get home much quicker. It won't interfere with what we want to do, either. The way you drive it's only a five hour run from London. You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not," Spock replied. "I am grateful that she was able to assist you."

"She really did. She loaned me a book too, and I've been making a list of - "

"Jim, I hate to say this, but you're a born tourist." McCoy sighed. "Some rest this is going to be - it makes me tired just listening to you."

Eventually the last lap of the journey was over, and the Enterprise hung in orbit above Earth. Her crew had already begun to beam down for their leave, but the Captain and the Commodore would be the last to go.

Kirk waited with rapidly mounting anticipation. It had been so long since he had last seen Earth. With the Captain always at his side there had been no chance to go - the Vulcan had loathed his blood-mother's world - and since Spock had come to the Enterprise there had always been so much else to do. It wasn't even as if he had any family to draw him home...

Home? No, it was no longer home. The desert planet claimed that place in his life now, giving him parents, a wife, children... and his t'hy'la. They had in fact intended to go to Vulcan first, but a change in orders had altered their itinerary; in many ways he was glad of it, as the new course would give him longer with his family.

Still, Earth was the planet of his birth. It would be pleasant to walk her green fields again, to feel the soft rain on his face, to see the star patterns of his childhood. Yet his memories were such a mixture of pain and happiness that he did not think he could bear to return to Iowa. Janet MacLeod's stories had kindled in him instead a longing to see the wild, ancient land she knew so well, to discover for himself a tradition as proud as that of Vulcan, but which offered all the magic of discovery. His head was full of names, places, legends... new experiences for both himself and Spock, untainted by any harsh memories.

At last the formalities were complete, and they were free to depart. Charlene Masters, who was remaining on board to oversee the engine modifications, beamed them down to the main Transporter Terminal in London. They stepped from the pads and merged with the crowd, no longer Starfleet officers but for a few short weeks merely civilians with no other considerations than their own pleasure.

Janet MacLeod was waiting for them at the exit, as arranged. "I collected the aircar you ordered while I was waiting, Commodore. There's often a queue, and I thought it would save time."

"Thank you, Miss MacLeod. We can leave at once."

The vehicle was more of a hover-car than the high-flying vehicles used on Vulcan. The tradition-minded Terrans still clung to their old road network, although the cars could at need travel over open country, and could achieve a fair height. The controls were similar to those on a

Vulcan machine, so that it took Spock only a few moments' study to familiarise himself with their operation.

With no reason to delay, they were soon on the road. Kirk relaxed in the passenger seat beside Spock, a map spread out on his lap. After a moment he nodded.

"The North Circular Road," he commented. "Funny how the old names stick. We're planning a fast drive up, Janet - there's a lot I'd like to see on the way, but we just don't have time."

"Another occasion, perhaps?" Spock suggested.

"Mmm." Kirk frowned as he caught sight of a signpost. "That's odd."

"What is?"

"I'd never heard of this Crianlarich place until Janet mentioned it, but I've just seen it signposted. Must be a pretty big place to be signed this far south... I do know some of the Scottish cities, Glasgow, Edinburgh, uh, Dundee, Aberdeen... but I've never heard of this one."

A deep chuckle came from the back seat. "I won't let you miss it," Janet promised, a hint of laughter in her voice. "I think you'll be... surprised."

"Sounds interesting." Kirk settled deeper into his seat. "I refuse to tantalise myself with all the places we're passing, so I'm going to get some sleep. I was up half the night with last-minute reports. Wake me when we get there - I'd like to see the city on the way in."

"I'll wake you," Janet said, still with that hint of laughter. "I know the landmarks to look out for."

As Kirk settled back, Janet relaxed in her own seat. She was grateful for the lift, but she had to admit that she felt somewhat of an intruder. It was not something the two men did deliberately - indeed, she was sure they were unaware of it - but as Gary Mitchell had said enviously, there was a rapport between the Commodore and his Human bondmate that made others feel... not unwelcome, exactly, but that they were being excluded from something very real and vital that lay just beyond their understanding.

And yet, when it came down to it, they were much more sociable than they used to be. When he first took command of the Enterprise, Spock had never been seen in the Rec Room. Now he came most evenings, if only for a brief visit, and it was on his instructions that when he did so the crew dispensed with formality, though they still treated him with the respect he had earned.

As for Kirk, the First Officer had always been shy, had for a time seemed almost a recluse in his off-duty hours, rarely mixing on a social level with the crew. Janet thought for a moment, wondering just when it had begun to change. *Perhaps*, she chuckled inwardly, *with their 'courtship'?* Certainly both men had begun to appear more sociable at about the same time. Maybe Spock's self-assurance had given Kirk confidence, while the Vulcan had shared his bondmate's unsatisfied need for Human contact. In common with most of the crew, Janet MacLeod had a thorough - though well-concealed - curiosity about this unusual pairing, but ruefully admitting that it was none of her business, she dismissed the questions that would never be answered even had she dared to voice them, and settled back to enjoy the drive.

Spock's hand on Kirk's shoulder aroused him from his doze. "Miss

MacLeod informs me that we are approaching Crianlarich, Jim."

Kirk stretched, yawned unashamedly, and sat up, peering ahead for his first view of the unknown city. His jaw dropped as the aircar settled to a halt.

"This is it? All of it?" He looked round at the hotel, the cluster of houses, the soaring hills beyond.

Collecting her bag, Janet laughed. "Everyone falls for it, especially if they've driven up from the south, seeing it signposted all the way," she said with satisfaction.

"But why bother?" Kirk scrambled to retrieve Janet's case. "It's barely a village!"

"Crossroads," Janet said briefly. "North to Fort William and then Inverness, south to the Clyde, east to Perth - or east and a little south to Stirling - and west to Oban. It's the starting point for anywhere you want to go. And the hills - climbers have been coming here for centuries." She gestured around her. "Ben More and Stobinian are the highest mountains in Britain south of Strathtay. Over there's Beinn Laoigh, and in front of it, Ben Oss and Dubhchraig. Then forby the climbing and the walking, there's fishing in the summer and skiing in the winter, so it makes sense to let people find it easily." Glancing towards the hotel she added, "There's my transport. Thanks for the lift, Commodore, Captain. Enjoy your leave."

She walked across to a car parked outside the hotel, and Kirk slid back into his seat, glancing at his bondmate.

"I didn't grudge her the lift, but it's good to be on our own at last," he said with satisfaction, moving closer to his companion than he had done before.

"Indeed." Spock set the car in motion.

Spock had been anticipating this leave, unusually for him. He was, in fact, more tired than he or McCoy had allowed Kirk to guess. The longing for the completion of the bond-link had drained his reserves of energy, and there had been no time - until now - for his mind to relax from the strain of maintaining the shields that had kept his need from his brother, a strain aggravated by the need to prevent Kirk from realising that he was shielding anything at all. Moreover, he was not certain that he had as yet fully adjusted to the differences the change of universe had made. The awakening and training of his telepathic potential by Commander Spock had been traumatic enough, and since then life here had been one crisis, one set of problems, after another. It was stimulating, challenging, a *life* rather than the lonely existence he had endured in the other universe, but it *was* tiring, and there had been so little time simply to relax and be at peace. Perhaps this leave would give them the time they needed to allow the bond to complete its work of healing.

It was pleasant to indulge Kirk in this enthusiasm. The Human seemed enchanted by this ancient land, and the Vulcan too found much to intrigue him on this world so different from his own. As the late summer days unfolded leisurely, his faultless memory filled with images and impressions of his beloved bondmate's company.

A glorious sunset delighted them one evening as they headed for the small village of Spean Bridge where they were to spend the night. Against the burning sky a starkly simple outline reared in silhouette. Even before Kirk's soft exclamation was uttered, the car was slowing to a halt, and the two men walked along what had once been a well-trodden path to the stone base of the monument.

It was evident that someone still tended the memorial, for although the path was now greatly overgrown, a clear passage was still possible, no encroaching weeds had taken root between the stones, and the structure itself showed no signs of damage or decay. Three figures cast in bronze gazed out over the moor towards the Ben Nevis massif, and Human though they were, the resolute faces reminded Spock of the long-vanished S'Kanderai of Vulcan - he did not need to read the inscription to know what these men had been.

"United we conquer'," he murmured. "As we have, Jim."

Kirk nodded, tilting his head to look up at the faces. "So long ago," he said quietly. "One of the twentieth century wars. This reminds me of the R'ley'va carvings."

"You feel that too? Indeed, the S'Kanderai would have called them brothers." Spock's gaze ranged over the landscape that the inscription said had been their training ground. "It can have changed little since their day," he observed.

"Maybe we have, though," Kirk said thoughtfully. "Humans, I mean. I don't know much about the period, but combat was more... personal, then. You saw your enemy, not just a shadow on a sensor screen. I wonder, were they more ready to kill, or less? I used to think I could imagine a few things worth dying for, but not a lot that was worth killing for. Oh, I did it when I had to... but it was duty, not conviction. Except once." He turned, his eyes on the Vulcan's face. "You remember?"

"Yes." It was one of his earliest memories of this universe - the beaten, terrified, tormented wretch who had summoned up the resolve to destroy his master.

"I knew nothing about you, I'd barely spoken to you, but even then I knew that I couldn't let Him kill you. If I'd hesitated..." Kirk shuddered. "But in a very strange way, He represented... security, too. In all my life, He was the only person who ever wanted me, and would go to any lengths to keep me at His side. I needed that - it was better than being alone. You must have seen that when you touched my mind."

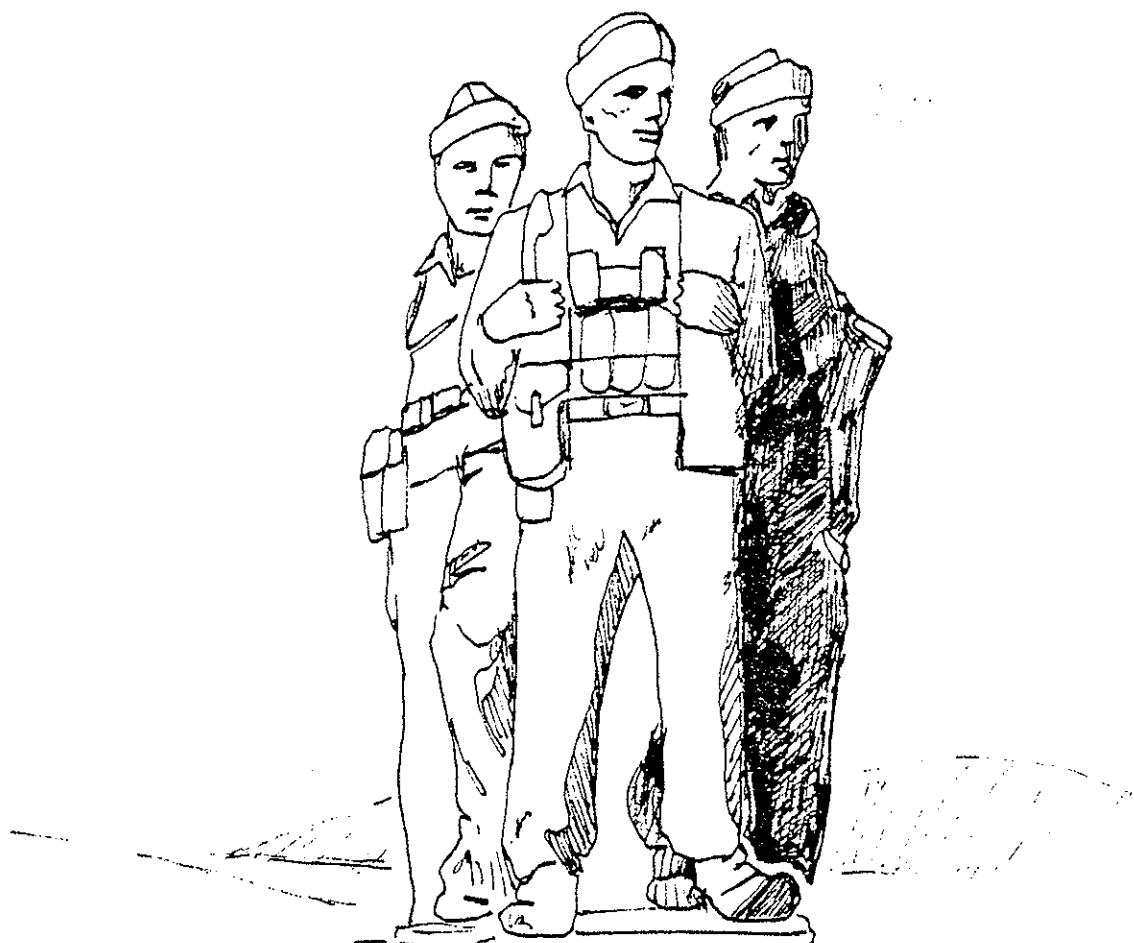
"I saw it... and I understood."

"I've never known how... or why... you chose me. You must have seen others, stronger, better, wiser than I... You'd just seen me kill... And however you look at it, whatever excuses you make, it was murder, Spock - I knifed Him from behind... "

Spock remained silent. There was one last secret he had hidden, a thing he had never spoken of in the other universe, or in this. He had always known, though, that one day he would tell Kirk, and it seemed that the right time had finally come.

"Jim, you know that I loved your alternate. You know how he died."

"The mindsifter. Spock, you don't have to... "



UNITED WE CONQUER



The Vulcan shook his head. "I must. When McCoy and I found him in that Klingon cell, he was a terrified, unreasoning creature who tried to hide from the friends who would help him.

"I caught him, held him while McCoy took his readings. The physical damage, though severe, could be healed; but as he took the brain scans, McCoy wept.

"I would not believe it. I told myself that whatever the mindsifter had done could be undone with time and care. And if not - if all that was left to him was the mind of a child - then I would care for him. There was a place for us on Vulcan... for the first time I was glad that I would outlive him, that he would not be left alone.

"Then McCoy told me. There was no mind left."

Lost in his memories, Spock swallowed convulsively, and Kirk was horrified to see tears in the dark eyes. He slipped an arm around the thin shoulders and pulled the Vulcan down to sit on the stone platform of the memorial, offering silent comfort for this terrible grief.

"I had to accept that I could do nothing," Spock continued dully. "Had I possessed then the abilities that the Commander later gave me, I could perhaps have given him the future that I had planned, but even so little was too much. He would never know anything but pain and terror... The very people who tried to tend him would be merely another threat... The conscientious doctors of Starfleet would keep him alive for another sixty or seventy years... and in all that time, nothing but fear... No life, no dignity... My friend, a helpless, terrified creature, to be tended like an infant...

"I broke his neck...

"McCoy must have known, then or later, but he said nothing. We comforted each other as best we could, and buried him on Vulcan. It was finished... or so I thought.

"But guilt had not ended for me. Not for what I had done - I knew that had he been capable of choice he would have asked it of me - but for what I could not do.

"Then, when I parted from the Commander, I had all the powers of Vulcan in my hand... but they came too late to help the one person I cared for. You I *could* help. You needed me as he had done, and this time I could give what was necessary. Perhaps I saw it as an expiation of sorts... I sought to atone for failing Jim, and found my t'hy'la. But I killed my friend."

Kirk lifted the Vulcan's hand to his lips in an act almost of homage. "You were right," he said roughly. "Don't ever doubt that. When you touched my mind that night, I *knew* you - I felt your gentleness, your compassion, your... goodness. That's why I killed Him, you know. I hadn't dared to dream of freedom for myself... I only knew that nothing must harm you. Then, when you stayed with me... Spock, I feel I know your Jim Kirk. If he could have known how things would turn out, I think he would have been glad for us."

"Yes," Spock said slowly. "He would have been content."

They remained sitting close together until the last of the colour faded from the sky and the evening chill deepened, grateful that no-one else came to disturb them; only when twilight lay across the wild countryside, and Spock began to shiver, did they walk slowly back to the

car, memories flowing with gentle sadness from mind to mind, to be eased and comforted in the acceptance of the other.

In the morning, as they headed for the car, Kirk paused, his head tilted to one side as he surveyed the mountain range dominating the little town. "That's Ben Nevis," he said thoughtfully. "The 'mountain with its head in the clouds'. There's a marvellous climb up the north wall, I believe."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Do you wish to attempt it?" He was perfectly willing to make the effort if his brother was keen.

Kirk shook his head. "We're not equipped for it," he said. "There is a path though... Janet said the 'tourist route' takes you past cliffs that are among the most impressive in the country - two thousand feet high, stretching for two miles. I'm tempted... but no. It'd take us about three and a half hours up plus another two back, and it's cheating to use the path, anyway. Let's do our climbing in the L'Langdons when we get to Vulcan. Anyway," he chuckled, "today, I promised myself a walk along a beach."

"A beach?" Spock slid into the driving seat.

"Just drive," Kirk instructed. "I'll guide you."

Following the Human's directions, Spock began to feel puzzled as the roads climbed higher up the side of the valley a signpost had identified as Glen Roy. "Jim, are you certain of your direction?" he ventured at last. "This does not seem..."

"Okay, this'll do," Kirk broke in as the car swung round a bend into an open area. "A beach, as I promised - and no sand to get into your boots, my fastidious friend."

Spock looked around. There were several other cars parked in what was clearly a prepared viewpoint. People could be seen scrambling over the hillside, but there was no sign of Kirk's beach, with or without sand. Puzzled, he stepped out of the car and followed Kirk up the grassy slope, idly noting that there was no sign here of the ubiquitous heather. When he caught up with Kirk at last, his bondmate was standing on an almost-level terrace which seemed to have been cut into the hillside.

"Well?" Kirk asked. "Like my beach, Spock?"

The Vulcan was beginning to wonder if his brother's sense of humour had got the better of him at last. "Jim... Where?" he asked at last.

Kirk chuckled. "You're standing on it, oh former Science Officer." Then, taking pity on the Vulcan's confusion, he relented. "Look over there," he said, indicating the farther side of the glen.

Traversing the heather-covered side of the hill opposite, three parallel lines of vivid green stood out clearly, forming terraces identical to the one on which they stood. Tracing their path, Spock saw that the lowest would converge with theirs when the Glen bent eastwards.

"They call them the 'Parallel Roads', Kirk was explaining. "They're something of a geological curiosity. Apparently they were formed at the end of the last Ice Age, when a glacier dammed the outlet from the Glen, and the mountain waters formed a deep lake. Those terraces were the

- as the ice retreated, the water level sank, and new beaches were formed at successively lower levels. So this is a beach, Spock - it just doesn't have any water left."

"Jim, you have a weird sense of humour," the Vulcan sighed; but the formation was interesting, nevertheless.

From Glen Roy they retraced their route through Spean Bridge, halting beyond it while Kirk consulted the book he had borrowed from Janet MacLeod.

"Fancy some treasure hunting?" he asked idly. "If we take the road along Loch Arkaig to Murlaggan, Locheil's gold is supposed to be buried somewhere along there."

"If we had brought tricorders, it might be possible," Spock replied drily. "Lacking them, it seems rather a large area to search after all this time."

"Okay," Kirk said equitably. "Take the Invergarry road, then. It runs through the Great Glen, and we can have a look at the Caledonian Canal as we go."

It was a quiet road, and both men enjoyed the scenery as the road followed the eastern side of Loch Lochy. There was a short delay as a swing bridge over the canal opened to allow a procession of boats to go through - a proceeding which both watched with interest, although they could have avoided the delay, had they been so minded, by taking to the air. Then the road continued along the western shore of Loch Dich. About half a mile over the bridge, Kirk leaned forward.

"Stop along here somewhere," he ordered. "There's something I want to see."

The 'something' proved to be a rather curious monument. Spock eyed it resignedly. "There is a story, of course," he remarked. He was secretly amused by the obvious preparation Kirk had made for this trip, and it had to be admitted that the legends he had memorised were both curious and interesting.

"Of course," Kirk replied. "The monument marks the site of the Tobar nan Ceann." He stumbled slightly over the pronunciation. "The well itself was lost when the road was widened back in the twentieth century, but - "

"I suggest you begin at the beginning," Spock interrupted. "The Tobar...?"

"Nan Ceann. The Well of the Heads."

"Aptly named." Spock eyed the tall pyramid set on a square column, which bore a cluster of seven heads on its peak. "It is not an aesthetically pleasing artifact, but it is certainly striking. What does it commemorate?"

"Vengeance," Kirk said ghoulishly. "Back in the middle of the seventeenth century, I think it was, MacDonald of Keppoch and his brothers were murdered in the castle in Glen Spean by guests. The Highlanders used to take a pretty dim view of abuse of hospitality, and the High Chief of the clan of which Keppoch was a sept ordered punishment. The murderers were found, killed and their heads washed in the well here before being presented to the chief in Glengarry Castle. It's a bit weathered now, but originally the column described the incident in Gaelic, English, French and Latin, but since it wasn't erected until 1812, apparently they ascribe the

action to the wrong chief and the wrong century."

"A not uncommon problem where legends are concerned," Spock commented. "It is fascinating how much the clansmen had in common with the Warriors of Vulcan. This legend reminds me of the fate that befell the murderers of Sley'ev and S'Torr."

"I've never heard that story."

"They were slain by members of a rival tribe during a truce. The guilty men were executed by their own Warleader, and their sword hands fixed to the cliff face at the entrance to the Truce Lands as a warning to others."

"Brrr." Kirk shivered. "You're right, though - the Highlanders were as bad as the Vulcans when it came to claiming vengeance."

They had made no real plans for this part of their leave, wandering as the fancy took them, even occasionally retracing their route to inspect something they had missed. It was a confusing but restful method of travel, as they had no deadline to meet except their booking at Kintail Lodge, and until then they could linger or move on as they chose.

One place that Spock remembered clearly was the brooding valley of Glencoe, for it was there that a shadow marred his bondmate's enjoyment. The day began well enough. They had left the car at the head of the Glen, at a place picturesquely called 'The Anvil of the Mist', having passed the equally fancifully named Devil's Staircase, an old military road that cut across the hill to Kinlochleven. Kirk commented that although the four-mile road was easily travelled in fine weather, it was treacherous in winter. He had read that when the Blackwater Dam above Kinlochleven was built in 1905, many workmen died of cold and exposure walking to - or more probably from - the Kingshouse Inn, where they had gone for a drink, and their bodies were only recovered when the snow melted the following spring.

Below their stopping place, the River Coe plunged through a gorge under a high waterfall, carving for itself a series of translucent green pools as it tumbled down to the confluence known as 'The Meeting of the Three Waters'.

Glencoe itself had nothing of the beauty of the other glens they had seen. It was bleak and desolate, with no heather or trees to soften the precipitous slopes except where a thin line of birches followed the tiny stream that trickled from the Hidden Glen. But it had a wild, majestic grandeur that made the more obviously beautiful glens seem tame by comparison.

They had decided to walk through the glen, then return to where they had left the car. A halt became necessary when they passed Loch Achtriochtan where the glen began to widen at the foot of the Aonach Dubh, for Kirk was distracted by the rich variety of bird life - indeed, he was so amused by the antics of a cormorant that Spock had to touch him on the arm to remind him that time was passing.

On the upper face of the great north cliff of the Aonach Dubh was the dark entrance to Ossian's Cave. Kirk looked at it longingly, but as he had been told that the only feasible access was by rope from above, they could not make the attempt to reach it.

They continued their walk, coming at last to the Clachaig, where Kirk

pleaded for a coffee break. Although a designated visitor's centre, it was early enough in the day for them to be the only ones there. As the morning was warm, they carried their cups outside, walking away from the road until they could find a place to sit, looking around as they drank their coffee.

Somewhere far in the distance a piper was playing, and Kirk tilted his head in recognition. "I've heard that before. It's called 'The Battle's O'er'. Now where... Oh, I remember. It was when I was serving on the Farragut. One of the Security Guards, a Scot, was killed, and Captain Garrovick thought it'd be a nice gesture to play a recording of pipe music at his funeral. He went through some tapes the guy had in his quarters, and selected a tune called 'Amazing Grace', I think it was. Well, the Chief Engineer was just about climbing the walls when he heard about it. Said it was about as appropriate as playing Argellian dance music at the funeral of the President of the Vulcan Council. Garrovick was a bit upset - he'd intended it as a tribute - so the Chief said that while the thought would be appreciated, that particular tune 'would remind any properly-brought-up Scot of chucking-out time in a Glasgow pub on Saturday night'. He went through the tapes himself, and that - " Kirk nodded towards the unseen piper - "was the tune he finally chose. It was originally a pipe tune that had been a popular song too, in its day, but the words were still a lament... 'Rest in peace, my soldier laddie, rest in peace now, the battle's o'er...'"

"The music does seem to fit the atmosphere," Spock said hesitantly; it seemed to him that the plaintive notes seemed to grieve for the troubled history of this haunted land.

"Yes, it does," Kirk replied shortly. "Glencoe is sometimes called 'the Glen of Weeping'. That song Uhura was singing - you remember? - is a lament for the massacre. It was a terrible thing - mass murder coldbloodedly planned as a matter of political expediency. No wonder that it has never been forgotten."

"I do not know the story," Spock admitted, "but the song has remained with me. I should like to hear about it."

"Well... " Kirk set down his empty mug. "The Macdonalds of Glencoe held their lands from Stewart of Appin. When King James lost the British throne to William of Orange, William proclaimed a pardon for the rebel clans provided they took an oath of allegiance before January 1st of the following year. That gave them four or five months. However, the chief here wouldn't swear without the permission of the man he considered his true king; he got it, but not until the day before the amnesty ran out. He went immediately to the Governor at Fort William to swear allegiance, only to be told it had to be sworn to Campbell, the Sheriff of Argyll at Inverary."

"But surely he could not reach there in time."

"The governor knew that, and gave the chief a signed certificate stating that he had pledged verbal allegiance within the given time. The chief set off immediately for Inverary, but he was delayed; it took him two days to get there, and then Campbell was away, so the oath was not administered until January 6th, and was sent to Edinburgh with an explanation for the delay."

"Surely that was sufficient?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? It wasn't. The Secretary of State for Scotland had already ordered the destruction of the clan, and although he heard of Glencoe's submission two days later, he was persuaded by the Campbells, who were hereditary enemies of the Macdonalds, not to

countermand the order.

"On the first of February, a hundred and twenty of Argyll's men arrived in Glencoe under the command of Campbell of Glenlyon. He explained that the garrison at Fort William was overcrowded and the men must be billeted in the glen. More, he gave his word of honour that they had no hostile intention.

"They stayed there for almost a fortnight. Glenlyon's niece had married the chief's younger son, and he visited them every day...

"On February thirteenth, in the early hours of the morning, the soldiers had their orders to kill the occupants of the houses where they were billeted. There is some indication that some of the soldiers gave their hosts a clue as to what was to happen, and even turned a blind eye to the escape of some of the women and children, but there was a blizzard - which prevented more soldiers arriving, certainly - and many of those who escaped the actual massacre died of cold and starvation in the hills."

"But surely those responsible were punished?"

"Not so's you'd notice. Parliament denounced the massacre as 'murder under trust', a crime so heinous in Scots law that it carried the quadruple penalties of hanging, disembowelling, beheading and quartering, but all that actually happened was that the Secretary of State temporarily lost his position - with a pension as compensation - and was later reinstated. The Campbells escaped justice, though their name in the West Highlands was execrated for a century."

"Was the glen never resettled?"

"Oh, yes. The MacDonalds came back. They fought twice more for the Stewarts, in 1715 and 1745; their numbers even grew. But... sheep rearing became profitable. Tenants were evicted, cornfields turned to grass, the clachans left derelict. By 1820 the clan that had survived massacre went down before sheep - and this time their own chiefs were responsible."

Spock stirred. "Such ancient griefs, yet still remembered. Will we ever learn? But it is time we were moving on. Wait here, Jim - I will return the cups."

Kirk leaned back against a large boulder, closing his eyes as he heard the footsteps dying away, enjoying the sunshine as he listened to the distant music. The rhythm had changed now, seeming to call to him of ancient battles, of a land red with blood...

"An old and weary tale you told, stranger."

Kirk sat up abruptly, surprised that he had not sensed the approach of a stranger. An old woman was sitting on a rock a few feet away, her sad eyes fixed on his face.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said. "I didn't know you were there."

"How should you, when I did not choose that you should? Aye, there are ghosts yet in the glen, and your gentle heart weeps for their suffering. Those with the Sight can see much, my child, and your eyes are not wholly blind. Ghosts in the Glen... aye, and one new-come, who stands at your shoulder."

"What do you mean?" Something about this harmless old woman filled Kirk with fear. He didn't think she meant to harm him - how could she? - but the way her eyes seemed to follow something just behind him made him



uneasy. He looked quickly over his shoulder, but there was nothing there.

"It is not clear to me. I sense no evil in you... and yet the blood calls out... The ghosts of your past have not done with you. Closer he comes, and closer. You have seen him as you sleep... soon your waking eyes will behold him. Payment is asked, and will be taken. Blood calls for blood. Yours? Another's? I cannot see... The Sight fails... but it will come... Aye, it will come - and soon."

"Stop!" Kirk was on his feet, shaking with a mixture of anger and fear. A cloud passed over the sun, and it was suddenly cold. A moment longer he stood, meeting the old eyes that gazed at him with compassion, and he had the strangest feeling that she was far older than she looked... then his nerve broke and he turned, running blindly down the path Spock had taken, running until he collided with a warm, solid body, and was caught in his bondmate's arms.

"Jim! What's wrong? I sensed..." Spock broke off, aware that his bondmate was not listening, but was lost in terror. Without hesitation he reached out mentally, absorbing the incident and lessening its impact. His brother had always been sensitive, responsive to atmosphere, and in this haunted place the idle words of an old woman had struck a chord of guilt Kirk had not quite been able to forget. The terror lasted only a moment longer, then Kirk pulled away slightly. "I'm sorry - it's been ages since I did that," he said disgustedly. "A few general gloom-and-doom pronouncements, and down I go. She might even have some degree of telepathy - I wasn't expecting it, and so wasn't properly shielded. Do you think she's supposed to be some sort of weird tourist attraction? You did... see... what she said, didn't you?"

"I saw, and I think you are correct. One thing I do know about this part of the world is that some degree of telepathy - what she called 'the Sight' has existed for centuries. No doubt she picked up enough from you to guide her words."

"Well, she certainly goes with the atmosphere." Kirk managed a faint grin as he looked back along the path. "No sign of her now - perhaps she was as scared as I was when she saw the effect she had."

"No doubt." Privately, Spock was surprised that a woman as old as the one he had seen in his bondmate's mind should have vanished so quickly; perhaps she had simply turned off the path? He added, "Shall we go back to the car? We have seen all that we can see here unless we undertake some serious climbing. The owner of the cafe offered to hire us equipment, but I declined gracefully. Actually, that was why I took so long to rejoin you."

"Lazy Vulcan!" Kirk teased, his fears already forgotten in the reassurance of Spock's presence.

At least the old woman's words had no lasting effect on Kirk's spirits, Spock was certain of that. What McCoy had described as his 'fit of tourist fever' showed not the least sign of abating - he wanted to see everything, and was interested in everything he saw. Even Spock's well developed sense of direction began to be confused as they set off on each day's exploration, their destination decided by Kirk's curiosity and his previous night's reading in the guide book that was never far from his hand. It seemed that the only thing troubling the young Human was whether it was physically possible to fit in everything he wanted to see. Spock's tentative suggestion that they plan a more logical itinerary was dismissed

out-of-hand - the impulsive wandering, so different from their ordered life on the Enterprise, was as much part of the holiday as anything else, Kirk declared, and even although they did follow an approximate route round the often narrow Scottish roads, his suggestions for each day often caused them to double back on that route.

"But how do you *know*, Spock?" Kirk picked up the argument they had been pursuing before lunch. As he spoke he stretched out on the sun-warmed grass below the walls of Castle Urquhart, allowing his gaze to roam over the stretch of water in front of him, hoping that he just might see...

But no. It was only a legend, after all. Still, it was fun to tease Spock - and the Vulcan was so very willing to be teased...

"Jim, after - what? Two thousand years? - and in two universes, if there had been anything to discover, it would have *been* discovered by now." Spock took up his side of the discussion with all the seriousness he would have devoted to a briefing on the Enterprise.

"You can't be sure. Loch Ness is deep, and the water's so dark that even today cameras can't penetrate more than a few feet. And if there *are* tunnels down there leading to the sea, who knows what could be hiding? That exhibition was pretty impressive, you must admit."

"Yet each picture is capable of a rational interpretation. Surely you will admit *that*?"

"I'd love to come back with a full Starfleet survey team some day," Kirk mused. "Sensors, the lot. Then we could eliminate currents, dead sheep, floating logs, the wakes of boats. One way or the other, we'd *know*."

"I can visualise Nogura's face if you requested the assignment," Spock said drily.

"So can I." Kirk sat up, hugging his knees. "Still, I wish I could see something myself."

"Is *that* why we have spent so long here?" Spock enquired.

"Well, this is supposed to be the most successful viewpoint for sightings," Kirk said defensively, "so why not? We planned a lazy day, anyway."

"And we have had it, studying a stretch of admittedly aesthetically pleasing scenery for traces of an ancient legend."

"Oh, just because a legend's old, there can't be any truth in it? What about the burial ground of the S'Kanderai? *That* was always thought to be a legend, until S'Tref and his team discovered it last year," Kirk countered with the air of having scored a point.

"Ah, but we had independent evidence of the existence of the Warriors."

"Evidence? What about...?"

The good-humoured argument continued until the sun began to dip towards the west. Spock rose with an air of reluctance, and pulled Kirk to his feet.

"We will agree to differ," he said firmly. "But Jim... I have enjoyed today."

"So have I, Spock."

Shoulder to shoulder, Human and Vulcan turned away from the shimmering waters of the loch and headed up the hill towards the road. Neither looked back. Which was perhaps a pity... for at the moment they turned away... something... broke the surface of the dark water; crystal droplets flashed fire in the setting sun as the sinuous shape coiled and rose and sank again; but by the time they reached the road and cast one lingering glance behind them, the placid surface of the loch stretched unbroken to the far shore.

The change was doing them good, Spock decided as he watched his bondmate lean out from the precarious-looking observation platform that clung to the almost vertical north wall of the Corrieshalloch Gorge. One of their fellow guests at their hotel in Ullapool the night before had mentioned over dinner that the Falls of Measach were worth a visit, and nothing would do but that they must make the trip.

Spock stirred restlessly as Kirk edged forward for an even better view of the spectacular Falls. It was not that the platform was *dangerous*, he told himself firmly, but still...

As though sensing his companion's unease, Kirk glanced round with a faint smile; he said nothing, but returned to solid ground - and if Spock gave a faint sigh of relief, the Human affected not to hear it.

They walked along a wooded path towards the bridge that spanned the Gorge just where the River Droma burst from a chasm to arch into the Falls. Kirk was a few paces ahead, and Spock noticed with some astonishment that he was waving his hands in front of his face, and that the words he hissed under his breath were certainly not comments on the scenery.

"Jim, is something amiss?" he enquired after a few moments.

"Blasted insects. Midgies, I think they call them around here. They're *biting* me!" Kirk said plaintively.

"Indeed?" Spock looked around; the air did seem to be full of tiny flying bodies. "I cannot say they are troubling me."

"It's your green blood," Kirk accused. "It'd probably poison the little... perishers. Serve them right, too," he finished uncomfortably.

"Perhaps we should return to the car?" Spock suggested gravely. Not for worlds would he wish his bondmate even the slightest discomfort, but the flapping hands and the muttered curses were faintly amusing. "Since you do not have the advantage of my superior Vulcan constitution... "

"Superior Vulcan smugness, you mean!" Kirk snarled. "I'll remember this, you know!"

Nevertheless, when they stopped for lunch it was Spock who disappeared into a chemist's shop, and that night he solemnly presented his red-blotched and distinctly uncomfortable companion with a tube of cream - "to take the sting out of the problem," he said sympathetically.

They made one stop that Spock did not wholly enjoy - although he was careful not to spoil his bondmate's pleasure in the visit - when they came to Inverewe Gardens near the village of Poolewe. They had headed south, passing the Corrieshalloch Gorge again, driving from Strath Beg across the desolate moors of Dundonnell Forest, following the aptly-named Destitution Road, built during a time of famine in the nineteenth century to give work to desperate men. Following the coast road, they had paused high up to admire the sweep of Gruinard Bay below them, its pink sand a startling contrast to the turquoise water.

"Another legend, Spock," Kirk said, indicating the island that lay just offshore. "Apparently nobody ever goes there - it's considered unlucky. It's been left alone for at least three hundred years. My guidebook mentions the taboo, but gives no reason."*

"Why should that be?" Spock asked. "It looks pleasant enough."

Kirk shrugged. "The reason - if there ever was one - has been lost. But it was serious enough that even today no-one ever goes there."

"Then we will not attempt it either," Spock said firmly as they made their way back to the car.

The road brought them at last to the gates of Inverewe, and as far as Kirk was concerned anyone and anything else ceased to exist. Spock was mildly interested to hear how the gardens were begun on a barren, rocky headland where only one dwarf willow grew. He could appreciate the love which had created a wild, sub-tropical garden in a rocky desert where all the soil had had to be carried in in baskets, the dedication that had preserved it ever since even through the upheavals of the Genetic Wars and the subsequent depopulation of the area. It had become famous again only some thirty years earlier, but in that time visitors had come in their thousands to marvel at the work of construction and conservation. He even enjoyed the beauty of the landscape, relaxing in the warm sunshine, resignedly aware that for this day at least he had totally lost the attention of his companion.

Kirk, however, was in his element. Within minutes of his arrival he had sought out the head gardener, and Alasdair MacDonald, recognising an enthusiastic and knowledgeable colleague, had taken the visitor firmly in hand, showing him over parts of the estate not normally open to the public.

In one of the experimental greenhouses, Kirk looked around in delight. "My mother would love this," he said enviously. "Alasdair, I was wondering... Would you be interested in trying to grow some Vulcan species? T'Pol is an acknowledged expert, and I know she'd be delighted to write to you, to exchange seeds and cuttings."

"Why, that'd be grand." Highland courtesy did not permit MacDonald to express surprise at an obvious Human who called a Vulcan woman 'mother'.

*Kirk's guidebook was W.H. Murray's *COMPANION GUIDE to the WEST HIGHLANDS of SCOTLAND*, the revised edition of 2123 published by Cameron and MacPherson. Since this edition is not widely available at the moment, we recommend anyone interested to read the 7th edition of 1977, published by Collins.

This edition does mention the reason for the ban on landing on Gruinard island. During the second world war Gruinard was used by the Ministry of Defence for an experiment in germ warfare, and the area was contaminated with anthrax. While one result of the experiment was the development of an effective anthrax vaccine for man and beast, the contamination remains, and we would urge anyone visiting the area not to disregard the warning notices. The reader may care to reflect that this is another circumstance where what was to Kirk merely a puzzling taboo had at one time a solid reason.

"I did try to arrange something a while back, but it fell through."

"It won't this time." Kirk grinned. "Let T'Pol just hear about what you're doing here, and all of Starfleet wouldn't stop her picking your brains. My brother and I are going home in a few weeks - I'll get her to write to you." Guiltily, he looked at the time. "I'd better be getting back to Spock. He's not really interested in gardens, and I left him sitting on the lawn enjoying the sun. We still have quite a way to go."

The two men rejoined the Vulcan, who smiled affectionately at his bondmate's apology. "You were enjoying yourself. That is sufficient reason to linger."

"May I ask where you're heading?" MacDonald enquired as he walked with them to their car."

"We'll be staying at a hotel on Loch Duich," Kirk replied. "We're expected tonight, and we don't want to be too late."

"It won't take you that long - possibly three hours. Mind you, watch out for the wolves."

"Wolves?" Kirk looked up, interested. "Are there some in the area?"

"Aye, at least two packs. They'll no' do ye any harm - there's enough wild game in the area to keep them well fed and content - in the summer, that is. Likely enough ye'll no' even see them, but you'll hear them in the hills of an evening." He chuckled. "It's been known to put the fear of God into travellers who weren't expecting it."

"I can imagine. Thank you for your time, Alasdair. I'll have T'Pol write you as soon as I get back."

"Enjoy your holiday, gentlemen, and I'll be glad to see ye any time. A safe journey to you both."

Kirk settled into his seat as Spock turned the car south. "That'll please T'Pol," he said in a tone of satisfaction. "There are some pretty rare species there, and in return she can help them begin a collection of off-world plants."

To Spock's unadmitted relief he dropped the subject after that, and instead divided his attention between the scenery and the map. As they reached a signpost marked 'Kyle of Lochalsh' he directed Spock to turn that way.

"It's a little off the route, but I'd like to go there," he said.

Soon a sign announced their arrival at Kyle of Lochalsh, and Kirk turned in his seat. "Stop along here, please," he said suddenly, a note of puzzled laughter in his voice.

He was out of the car almost as soon as Spock brought it to a halt in the designated parking area, and was hurrying across to the wall that bounded it. Spock, following him, was startled to find that his bondmate was almost doubled up with suppressed laughter.

"What is so amusing, Jim?" Spock looked round in vain for the cause of such extreme hilarity. The bustling little port below, the narrow stretch of sparkling water, the ferry boats almost at the intersection point of their crossing, seemed to him a pleasant and normal enough scene.

"Oh, Lord!" Kirk wailed. "What a let-down! I mean, *look* at it!" He

gestured vaguely at the scene below.

"I am afraid I do not understand, Jim."

"Sorry..." Kirk mopped his streaming eyes. "It's another of the songs Janet was teaching Uhura, all about how Charles Edward Stuart escaped the Redcoats with the aid of the faithful Flora MacDonald. They fled through a storm, rowed by loyal Highlanders - 'over the sea to Skye'. Romantic, huh?" He chuckled again, pointing to the island scarcely half a mile off shore. "Well, *that's* Skye. Given a favourable wind, practically spitting distance. Sort of spoils the drama, doesn't it? I did wonder, when I saw the map - that's partly why I wanted to come along here now, though the main reason was wanting to see the island the song was all about. We can come back later and have a better look."

Spock surveyed the narrow stretch of water, noting that in the short time they had been there the ferries had already docked. "It does seem to be making rather a fuss about very little," he agreed solemnly, the slight curve of his lips betraying his amusement. "Still, perhaps the crossing took place elsewhere, over a greater distance."

"I should think it must have done," Kirk said, adding with another chuckle, "that's the trouble with legends. Janet says there's some story about a cave one of the old heroes was supposed to have hidden in - well, from what she told me, it was either the first peripatetic cave in history, or the hero had a return-to-the-womb complex and *kept* hiding in them. Apparently there are dozens of sites that claim the honour."

"When the site of a celebrated historical event is unknown, local pride will always provide a candidate," Spock said, adding quietly, "Jim, forgive me, but could we continue this a little later? I confess to feeling somewhat tired, and..."

"Of course. You should have told me." Kirk studied his bondmate anxiously. "I've been letting you do all the driving, too. Would you like me to take over from here?"

"That will not be necessary. You have studied the country, I have not - it is logical for me to drive and you to navigate. We cannot have much further to go, and I become anxious to arrive."

Despite his words, it was Spock who eased the car to a halt on the lochside road a short while later without any request from Kirk, but the Human did not need to ask why as he followed his bondmate's gaze. Arising from the water where three lochs met soared a castle that was a fantasy come to life. The water burned like fire, reflecting the sunset that blazed on the Cuillin of Skye; from the shore, a triple-arched bridge and causeway stretched to the towering battlement walls that stood out black against the vivid colour of the sky.

Kirk studied his map, then looked up. "Eilean Donan," he murmured, answering the unspoken question. Then he touched the Vulcan's shoulder. "We'll come back," he promised. "Let's leave it for now, Spock. We'll reach Invershiel before dark, and tomorrow we can take our time to come back."

Spock nodded, and with the fiery beauty of the loch for company as twilight crept over the water, they came at last to the village of Invershiel, and to the forecourt of the Kintail Lodge Hotel.

Kirk stepped out of the car, stretched, and eyed the warmly-lit windows of the hotel longingly. He was just about to make some comment when a lean grey shadow emerged from the open door and paced majestically towards the new arrivals.

"Dileas, wait!"

The great dog sat obediently as a tall, broad-shouldered man came swiftly forward. "Welcome to Kintail, gentlemen. I hope Dileas didn't startle you? He's inclined to be curious, and not everyone feels confident with an animal this size."

"He's beautiful," Kirk said, extending his hand to be sniffed. Not for worlds would he have said that having a sehlat around the house made even this magnificent creature appear small. "A wolfhound, isn't he?"

"Aye, he is. The Lodge has been in my wife's family nigh on three hundred years now, and there have been wolfhounds here fully as long." He held out his hand. "I'm Douglas MacIntyre. "You will be Captain Kirk? And this is Commodore Spock?"

"Please ignore the rank - we're on leave." Kirk added quietly, "And please don't be offended, Mr. MacIntyre, but Vulcans don't shake hands."

Their host treated Spock to a long, appraising stare. "I'll ask your pardon, Mr. Spock," he said with quiet dignity when the Vulcan lifted an eyebrow at the scrutiny, "but you'll understand that you are the first off-worlder to come here. Our people will be curious."

Spock inclined his head. "Understandable."

"Come away in." MacIntyre lifted their bags and ushered them into the reception area, where a small dark-haired woman was waiting to greet them. "My wife Mhairi."

"You are very welcome, gentlemen." Her voice held the soft lilt of the land. "I hope you will be comfortable here."

"I'm sure we will be." Kirk glanced round the pleasant hall, exchanging a fleeting smile with Spock at the sight of the house plants that climbed and hung and coiled around every available surface.

"An indulgence of mine," Mrs. MacIntyre said, aware of their glances. "Douglas will show you to your rooms. We're serving dinner now, but you have plenty of time to freshen up and have a drink first. If necessary, we will be pleased to wait for you."

The two men followed MacIntyre up a short staircase. As they reached the landing he turned with an air of embarrassment.

"I'm afraid we've had a wee problem with your room," he said. "You specified adjoining rooms, Mr. Kirk, and I'd intended to put one of you in here." He opened a door, ushering them into a comfortably-furnished double bedroom, and indicated another door leading onto a tiny hallway. "The other room I'd intended to give you is next door, a single, and there is a bathroom opposite - with the hall door closed you would have been very private. Unfortunately, we only this morning discovered a wasp's nest outside the window, and I dare not let you use the room until it has been removed. There is no risk, as I sealed the door, so there will be no unwanted visitors for you. The thing is, unless you would be willing to share the double room, the only other I can give you is at the far end of the corridor."

Kirk looked round the large comfortable room with its twin beds. "This will be perfect, thanks. We've frequently had to share a room."

"Aye, service life canna' give you much privacy, I should think. Well, I'll leave you to settle in. You can bolt the door if you wish, and this is the key to your room." Handing the key to Kirk, he left quietly.

"You go first for a shower, Spock," Kirk suggested, returning from bolting the hall door as MacIntyre had suggested,

While the Vulcan was occupied, Kirk busied himself unpacking for them both. He laid out fresh clothing for the evening, and distributed the rest in the wardrobe and the drawers. When he had finished, he drew the curtains, shutting out the half light of the Scottish summer twilight, switched on the lamps, and carefully tested the beds. Finding them both equally comfortable, he chose the one nearer the window and shook out his sleeping robe. He had just finished when Spock returned, looking slightly ruffled.

"No sonic shower?" Kirk hazarded, eyeing the damp fringe with amusement.

"No shower at all," Spock said gloomily. "Only a bathtub."

Kirk bit back a chuckle. "Only to be expected, I suppose, out here. Still, look on the bright side," he added, gathering up his robe and toilet things. "At least you've got warm water. Remember the Fornan Colony, and those bathing huts built over a mountain stream?"

The Vulcan shuddered. "Only too well. I fear I have little taste for the primitive life, Jim."

"Oh!" Kirk looked conscience-stricken. "I didn't think... I'm sorry - I went ahead and arranged all this just assuming you'd enjoy it. I should have thought - "

"Jim." Spock touched his bondmate's shoulder. "Now you are being foolish beyond permission. Does it seem to you that I have not been enjoying this? I meant no criticism of your arrangements, truly. In fact, a bathtub is something of a novelty - and as you said, the water is warm, and there is plenty of it. My only objection would have been to water as cold as it was on Fornan."

"That's okay, then." Kirk grinned. Just before he edged out of the door, he added, "If you're very good, I'll see if I can find you a floating duck for your bath."

"A duck?" Spock frowned at the closing door. "Now why should he believe I would wish to share my cleansing routine with an aquatic fowl?... " Coming - inevitably - to the conclusion that this remark was yet another manifestation of his brother's sometimes deplorable sense of humour, Spock dismissed the ludicrous image and began to dress.

Kirk ran his bathwater with a satisfied expression. No doubt a shower was a more efficient and more sanitary method of cleansing, but he did enjoy a long leisurely soak occasionally. Tonight he was too hungry to linger, but promising himself the indulgence at a future time, he hurried over his bath and went back to dress.

MacIntyre was presiding over a well-stocked bar when the two men

walked into the lounge. Several other guests were sitting over drinks, and Kirk had to stifle a grin at Spock's half amused, half resigned expression as all heads turned towards them. It was, both men agreed, a very discreet and restrained curiosity... but nevertheless, curiosity it was, and directed at both of them, the tall exotic alien and his shy but obviously content companion. In all fairness they could hardly be blamed, Kirk conceded, and after all, he and Spock were used to it by now. In more sophisticated areas, a Vulcan and Human together were no novelty, but two such male bondmates were. Spock, at least, seemed untroubled by the interest showed in them.

"What's your pleasure, gentlemen?"

Kirk became aware that MacIntyre was speaking, and turned his attention to the array of bottles on the gantry. He rarely drank spirits, but he remembered... One night, years ago, before the Captain joined the Enterprise...

"A friend of mine used to say you couldn't beat a good malt whisky," he said, "but I don't know anything about it. What do you suggest, Mr. MacIntyre?"

Their host ran an experienced eye along a shelf, and reached for a bottle. "I must admit to a personal preference for Glen Grant," he admitted, "and this is a particularly fine one, forty-five years old. It's a mite expensive, but it's smooth as silk. You'll do well to try this."

"That'll do fine."

MacIntyre poured two measures and returned the bottle to the shelf. He seemed to be waiting for something. Kirk suddenly realised what, and grinned, shaking his head.

"You'll not catch me like that. My friend told me that there's only two things you put in whisky, and I don't want either of them, thanks."

"What might those be, Jim?" Spock asked curiously.

"One of them's water." Kirk's grin broadened. "The other is - more whisky."

"You've the right of it there," MacIntyre chuckled. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'll away and give Mhairi a hand in the kitchen. Maybe you'd like to look at the menu and the wine list? Morag will come in a wee while to take your order - if you want anything meantime, just ring."

Kirk and Spock moved to armchairs before a log fire. The other guests had gone, presumably to dinner, and the lounge was very quiet. They sipped their drinks, finding the malt as excellent as had been promised, and studied the menu. Kirk was pleased to see an unexpectedly large vegetarian selection - with Spock in mind he had particularly asked about the menu, but had not anticipated such a wide choice. He had sometimes thought that in deference to his bondmate's preference, he should also adopt a vegetarian diet, but Spock had dissuaded him, pointing out that the Human metabolism was geared to an omnivorous diet, whereas the Vulcan system could not cope with large quantities of animal protein. Seeing the logic of that, Kirk ate normally most of the time, only turning to vegetarianism on Vulcan - he certainly would not expect T'Pol to cook meat for him, even if it had been available.

They gave their order to the softly-spoken girl who came to take it, realising from her resemblance to Mrs. MacIntyre that this must be a daughter of the house, and were discussing the wine list when MacIntyre

appeared behind the bar.

"If you'd like a suggestion, Mr. Kirk... "

"You have something to recommend?"

"Morag mentioned that you were trying out local dishes, so I thought you might care to taste a Scottish wine."

"Scottish wine?" Kirk looked puzzled. "I didn't think the climate was suitable for grapes."

MacIntyre laughed. "It is not, Mr. Kirk. This is rather unusual - a wine made from the sap of the silver birch. It's been made at Inverness for centuries, and we've always stocked it at Kintail."

"We'll try it, then." Kirk said, looking to Spock for agreement.

"Fine. Go in when you're ready, gentlemen."

A few minutes later they made their way to the dining room. The first course was served immediately, fresh salmon for Kirk, a clear vegetable broth for Spock.

"Fresh-caught in the loch," Morag commented as she served the fish. "We always supply our own."

"And the venison?" Kirk asked; he had been unable to resist the temptation. "Do you hunt, too?"

"Why, no, sir. Not in these parts. We kill for the pot, not for amusement. The herds must be culled, and the meat isn't wasted, but it seems a cruel sport to kill for fun."

Both men enjoyed the meal. Spock's vegetable casserole was an intriguing combination of flavours and textures, subtly seasoned with herbs; accustomed as he was to bland and unimaginative dishes off-Vulcan, the food was as welcome as it was unexpected. The wine, too, was a pleasure, crisp and clean, surprisingly powerful, unlike anything either man had ever tasted. Spock made a mental note to enquire about obtaining a supply to take back to the Enterprise.

"Meringues, sir?" Morag tempted, appearing to clear their plates. "Filled with Chantilly cream and served with fresh strawberries."

Spock smiled inwardly as he saw Kirk's eyes glisten. His bondmate, he had discovered, was possessed of a sweet tooth. Such small indulgences had been forbidden by the Captain - yet another petty cruelty - and Kirk had the innocent greed of a child for confectionary. Unlike his counterpart, though, he never over-indulged - McCoy had never had to inflict one of his counterpart's infamous diets on *this* Kirk.

"For both of us, I think," Spock told the girl; the Human factors in his metabolism allowed him to digest small quantities of dairy produce, and he would enjoy sharing Kirk's pleasure in the treat.

When they had finished eating they returned to the lounge for a coffee, and another glass of the fine whisky. Some of the other guests were already there, and for a time there was general conversation as they compared notes. Like Kirk and Spock, most of the visitors were interested in the history of the area, and in walking; from their comments, Kirk filed several suggestions for things to see.

As they had been the last to leave the dining room, Kirk and Spock eventually found themselves alone in the lounge as the others retired for the night. MacIntyre had disappeared into the staff quarters of the hotel, suggesting they ring if they wanted anything else; the room was warm and softly lit, and after a time, Kirk found it harder and harder to keep his eyes open.

Spock eyed the drooping head indulgently. He finished his drink, and was just about to suggest that they go upstairs when Kirk suddenly sat up in his chair, staring over Spock's shoulder towards the door.

"Jim? Is something wrong?" Spock turned to follow his bondmate's gaze, but all he could see was the open door and the dimly lit hall beyond.

"N...no," Kirk said slowly. "Just... Last time I looked I was sure that the door was shut. I was almost asleep, then as I looked again I could see that it was open... and I'm sure that there was someone in the hall looking in at us. You know that feeling you get when you're being watched? It was like that... "

"You are tired, and as you said, were half asleep. Besides, if there was someone there, it was probably only one of the hotel staff checking to see if we were still here so that they could clear up."

"You're right, of course," Kirk said with a soft laugh. "It just... startled me for a moment. Come on - let's go up."

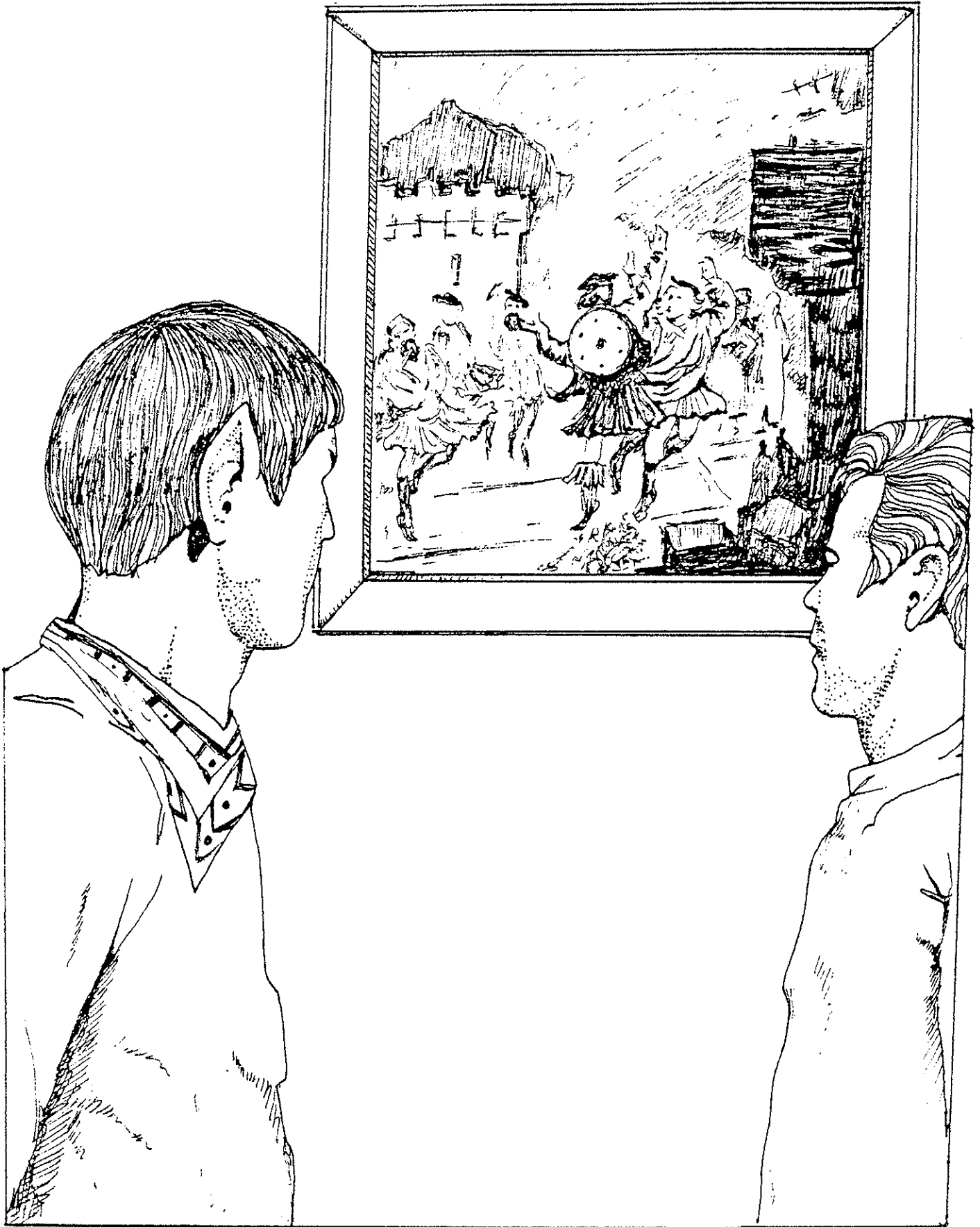
As he lay in bed later listening to Spock's quiet breathing, Kirk found he couldn't quite forget the unease he had felt in that moment of waking. For an instant the face of the old woman in Glencoe flashed into his mind, and he gave a sigh of relief. Her words must have been preying on his mind, and in the disorientation of the moment he had translated an innocent, natural happening into something menacing. He was tired, and his over-active imagination had done the rest. Lord, but he'd better not let Spock know he was still brooding about nothing! Determinedly, he settled down and closed his eyes; within minutes, he was asleep.

In the morning, the uneasiness Kirk had felt was not even a memory. He woke to a bright, fresh day and hurried over breakfast, eager to explore the castle they had glimpsed the evening before.

Eilean Donan. Even the Vulcan fell under its spell. It reminded him of the fairy-tale castles in the picture books Amanda had treasured and shared with her young son until the stern Sarek of the other universe had discovered and forbidden such unbecoming frivolity.

Kirk, of course, was enchanted. There were times when, alone with his bondmate, the quiet, efficient young Captain of the Enterprise showed an endearing, almost childlike quality - the result, Spock knew, of his lonely, loveless childhood in an orphanage where every material need was met but where the emotional needs of one small boy had become lost in the routine application of regulations. Knowing himself only a duty to his guardians, he had learned not to ask for something they could not give, but the longing for affection was still there, and when he had thought it offered to him, he had reached for it eagerly. He had been easy prey indeed... More cautious now, he gave his trust less readily, but when he chose, he captivated everyone.

As for Spock... He was sometimes astonished when he looked back and realised how much he had changed since his first days in Starfleet. It had



been the other Jim Kirk who had taught him first to admit, then to express, his need to love and be loved; he had gone on learning in the lonely years after his Captain's death, so that now he could give his t'hy'la whatever he needed.

And it seemed that now Kirk needed the freedom to play, to enjoy himself without worrying about either his image or his position, a freedom that had been denied him for far too long. His counterpart had also possessed something of the same playful nature; though Spock was well aware that his t'hy'la's pleasures were very unworldly compared with those of the more sophisticated Kirk. It was... unexpected that one who had seen and endured so much should have remained unspoiled; the evil that had surrounded him had never touched him, so that for all his experience he had retained an innocence that was unusual in a Human male of his age.

Still, it was for the best, Spock thought with a tinge of amusement; he couldn't quite see himself sharing some of the amusements that the first Kirk had enjoyed, even to please his bondmate. This form of recreation, as a form of historical study, would have been acceptable even to his own father - though that sternly-controlled Vulcan would certainly never have approved the romantic speculation Kirk brought to his exploration.

Spock followed his eager companion from cellars to battlements, listening as Kirk related the history of the castle; the Human had a retentive memory, and had studied his book carefully. In one of the rooms, the Vulcan paused to examine a painting showing men in Highland dress dancing on the roof of the castle.

Kirk came to peer over his shoulder. "I saw that performed once," he said quietly. "It was at Captain Pike's farewell party - everyone who could gave some sort of performance. Scotty wasn't exactly 100% sober when it came to his turn, but even then I remember thinking how formal the steps were. He tried to teach some of the younger officers to do it, but they got hopelessly mixed up - they just couldn't remember the order of the steps." He grinned as he spoke, remembering, then led the way out onto the battlements of the castle.

For a time both men stood in silence, enjoying the views up Loch Duich to the Five Sisters of Kintail, and down Loch Alsh to where the Cuillin of Skye loomed, cloud-crowned.

"Glorious!" Spock commented, and Kirk nodded agreement.

"What a place to live," he said enthusiastically. "You could shut yourself up here and glower out at the world if you wanted to."

The Vulcan lifted a sceptical eyebrow. "I believe you would find it rather cold and damp in the winter time," he suggested. "All this stone and water... most uncomfortable."

"Sybaritic Vulcan!" Kirk accused. "What happened to all that disregard for personal comfort, then? Still, I daresay you're right. Perhaps people were a lot hardier in those days."

After one last look at the view they descended a flight of stone steps that led to the lower level of the castle. Kirk gave an exclamation of surprise as his foot struck something on the step, sending it skidding across the flagstones.

"What on earth...?" Kirk bent down and picked up a sharp-bladed knife, its black handle bound with silver.

Spock felt a shiver of illogical apprehension. "A knife thrown down

and picked up is the symbol of a challenge offered - and accepted," he said uneasily.

"On Vulcan, perhaps," Kirk grinned. "Not here, surely? One of the other visitors must have dropped it - we didn't come up this way, remember. I'll give it to the custodian on our way out."

Spock said nothing further, but when Kirk handed over the knife he watched the custodian's face.

"It's a sgian dubh - a Highlander's stocking knife," the man said in a puzzled tone. "This one is quite old, and I think valuable. I'd have thought the owner would have missed it at once... Still, I'm sure he'll be back for it."

The knife safely disposed of, the two men returned over the causeway and bridge to where they had left the car. This time Kirk took the controls, and Spock sank into the passenger seat. "Where now?" he enquired.

"Glanelg," Kirk replied briefly. "There are a couple of brochs there I want to have a look at, and - "

"Jim," Spock interrupted patiently, "you may have studied this area, I have not. What is a broch?"

"I'll save the lecture till we get there," Kirk grinned.

The road led high over the hill overlooking Loch Duich, and near the top they stopped at a viewpoint to admire the magnificent panorama exposed to view. At one time much of it had probably been hidden by trees, for the remains of a one-time forest could be clearly seen by eyes that were able to recognise the signs, but the few trees that grew now were relatively small, and only added to the grandeur of the scene. After a few appreciative minutes Kirk drove on.

The road dropped again to sea level, and as they passed a house where two children were gathering peas in the garden, Kirk commented, "They must be totally cut off during the winter - I imagine there must be quite a lot of snow on the high ground, even if there isn't much at sea level."

Spock nodded agreement. "These must be hardy people, to live here so far from civilisation."

Finally Kirk slowed the car to a halt near two stone towers close to the road. "Dun Telve and Dun Trodden," Kirk said. "Come on, Spock - Dun Telve is closer, and one will do to get an idea of the building."

As they approached the tower details became clearer. The unbroken, unmortared concave surface rose in places to a height of some thirty-three feet. They entered through a doorway set in the thickness of the wall; to the right was a chamber just big enough for a man, possibly a guard post. Within the tower was a circular, unroofed courtyard, and here the double construction of the walls could be clearly seen, as could the galleries that spiralled up between them.

"Somewhat cramped, but a safe shelter," Kirk commented. "The brochs date back to the Iron Age, Spock, and none of the experts can agree on their purpose. It's one of Scotland's mysteries - there are about five hundred of them, mostly in the north. One school of thought contends that they were defensive posts used by sea robbers, while another claims that they were built by the Picts as a refuge from Viking raiders. You can see that they'd be easily defended - there's only one way in, and originally

the walls would be even higher, about fifty feet, with no way to climb up the outside. Even if an enemy did win through the gate, he'd be trapped in the courtyard, and the defenders could attack him from the galleries above. These two brochs were partially restored in the twentieth century, but there's another not far from the hotel, at Totaig, that has never been touched - interestingly enough, it was supposed to have belonged to the mother of Telve and Trodden, who owned the ones here. We can walk up to it one afternoon, but I thought these would give us a better idea of what a broch looked like."

They spent some time clambering about the walls and galleries, then sat for a while in the warm sunshine, talking idly, until the setting sun warned them that it was time to return to the hotel.

The evening was spent in general discussion with some of their fellow guests, then they retired to their room, discussing how to spend the following day."

"If you don't mind, I'd like to go back into Inverness - and I'll drive," Kirk suggested. "There's some shopping I'd like to do." They had spent a night in Inverness on the way north, but had arrived late, after the shops closed, and left early, before they opened.

"As you wish," Spock agreed, aware of, but ignoring, the laughter in Kirk's eyes - his bondmate was no doubt planning some sort of surprise, and he would do nothing to spoil it.

"Thanks, Spock." Kirk had no intention of mentioning that one item on his shopping list was a small toy duck...

Their plans for the day were doomed to disappointment, however. Kirk was first down to breakfast, but Spock, who had been almost ready when Kirk left the bedroom, was very late in joining him. He had almost decided to go in search of his bondmate when the Vulcan appeared at last, and at the expression in the dark eyes, Kirk felt his high spirits vanish.

"What's wrong, Spock?"

"I am required at Starfleet Headquarters, Jim. I must be there within the hour."

"What do you mean, 'I'? We'll go together," Kirk said at once.

"It is not necessary for you to interrupt your leave, since you are not required - this is a meeting of senior officers, with nobody below the rank of Commodore attending. I will be gone two days, three at the most. I would prefer to think of you resting here rather than kicking your heels at Fleet headquarters." He smiled faintly. "Half the world away it may be, but you can have yourself beamed over in minutes should the need arise, and fully bonded as we are, you are only a thought from my side. You must admit, it will be more pleasant for you here, t'hy'la."

"Well, yes," Kirk admitted. "I'll miss you, though. Damn Starfleet!"

"Indeed." The Vulcan finished his meal, and rose. "Come and bid me farewell," he asked. "I will beam up from our room. Perhaps it would be as well if you were to inform Mr. MacIntyre that I have gone, but that I will be returning."

"Okay."

Kirk waited as Spock contacted the orbiting transporter station. "We'll have plenty of time still when you get back," he said suddenly. "I think I'll just take it easy till then - I wouldn't enjoy sightseeing without you, anyway."

"As you wish, Jim." Spock seemed about to say more, but the voice of the transporter operator interrupted him.

"Ready to beam you up now, Commodore Spock."

"On my command." He closed his communicator long enough to say simply, "Farewell, t'hy'la." Then he gave the command, "Energise."

Kirk watched the shimmering column fade, fighting back an overwhelming feeling of depression. Lord, he was acting like a spoiled child! He grinned in self-disgust. Whining because he'd been deprived of his friend's company - they'd shared the last few days, and there were more to come - anyone would think he and Spock were Siamese twins, for heaven's sake! Smiling at the thought, he ran downstairs to tell MacIntyre that he would be one guest short for dinner.

That evening, Kirk returned from a walk to the loch just in time to change for dinner. He had a quick bath, dressed, and was halfway downstairs when he realised that he'd left his window open and it had looked like rain. As he turned back, he caught a flicker of movement in the reception area, but was already in his room before the strangeness of what he had seen really registered.

Someone had been leaning over the reception desk; he hadn't been able to see clearly because of the plants reflected in the glass, but he was positive that the figure was familiar - and that it had not been one of his fellow guests...

When he came downstairs again, reception was empty. Mhairi MacIntyre was behind the desk, and he smiled at her.

"Who was that you were talking to?" he asked casually. "I caught a glimpse from the stairs, and I'm sure I should know him, but I can't just place... "

The woman looked faintly surprised. "There's been no-one here, Mr. Kirk. I've been at the desk since you came in - I saw you go up - and I've been alone here ever since."

"But I was sure I saw someone... "

The woman smiled. "The reflections in the glass can be deceptive, Mr. Kirk. Sometimes I've come downstairs sure that there was someone waiting at the desk. Perhaps you were thinking of your friend, saw one of the reflections, and your imagination did the rest."

"Perhaps..." Kirk said doubtfully. The stocky, broad-shouldered figure he had thought he had seen could never have been Spock. Still, the woman had been certain, and there was no reason for her to lie. He was tired, seeing things... Shaking his head ruefully, he went in to dinner.

After dinner Kirk went back upstairs. His fellow guests were pleasant

enough, but he didn't feel like sitting in the lounge without Spock. He was a little tired anyway, and an early night would do him no harm.

Once in bed he spent an interesting half-hour poring over the book he had borrowed from Janet MacLeod, promising himself he would try to obtain a copy before he left Scotland. Then, feeling pleasantly sleepy, his head full of the ancient legends of this land, he switched off the lamp and settled down to sleep.

He woke in the early hours of the morning, disturbed by the sound of the bedroom door opening. About to challenge the intruder, he bit back the words as the light snapped on.

"Spock!"

The Vulcan came into the room, closing the door behind him. "Jim, I... I should not have come, but... Forgive me, t'hyl'a - I could not resist... "

He stumbled as he spoke, clinging to the end of the bed. Kirk took one look at the anguished face, and was on his feet in a moment, his arms reaching out to offer support, comfort. The bond-link was firmly blocked, but the Vulcan's torment seared him like molten lava. Kirk clenched his teeth. Anything - anything - to wipe that expression of shame and agony from his bondmate's face. Instinctively he slid his arms around the thin body, pulling the trembling Vulcan into his embrace.

"Ah, no! Jim, do not touch me! Let me go, I beg thee... "

Kirk tightened his grip, lifting his head to smile reassuringly into the dark eyes. "Spock, it's all right, I promise. Don't look like that - it can't be so bad that we... "

Whatever he had meant to say was lost as a warm mouth closed over his, taking his lips in a kiss that struck terror to his very soul. The hands that had so eagerly held the Vulcan now pushed uselessly against the rigid body as everything in him fought to be free. This was... horror unspeakable, a buried nightmare walking again, the chained demon he had never totally exorcised free once more, ravaging his mind, blinding him with sheer terror as the tremors of revulsion shuddered through outraged mind and flesh, threatening his very reason...

On the verge of madness a clear cold shaft of sanity pierced the turmoil. This was Spock, his friend, his brother, his bondmate. He did not know *why* this was happening, but there was a reason - and a reason that outweighed the breaking of every spoken and unspoken promise between them.

With that certainty, panic ebbed. He would wait, would learn, understand and accept. Deliberately he ceased struggling and stood passively in the Vulcan's embrace, neither avoiding the kiss nor returning it as he waited with perfect trust for his bondmate to regain control.

As though his stillness had been a signal, the Vulcan released him; the eyes that met his own seemed dull with misery.

"Jim, forgive me. I must leave you... "

As Spock turned away, Kirk caught his wrist and pulled him back, his mind registering the higher-than-normal temperature of the alien flesh. "Don't be a fool - you can't leave in this condition. You need something from me... I think we've got to talk about it. Come and sit down, and tell me what's happened."

Unresisting, the Vulcan allowed Kirk to push him down onto the bed. As the Human sat beside him, he took the cool hands in his own.

"T'hy'la, let me tell you quickly, then you will understand why I must leave you. At Starfleet Headquarters I became... disturbed, and sought a Healer. With her aid I shielded, for I thought it a minor affliction, and did not wish you to be concerned. But... it is not. The transfer... too often... too many changes... The imbalance in my body has corrected itself, and my Time is very near. I thought I could control... came to you to sever our bond... but when I saw you... "

"Sever our bond?" A desolate coldness filled Kirk at the thought. "But why? I know it's... difficult... for you, but if we stay apart until it's over... "

Impatiently the Vulcan shook his head. "Fortunately the Healer did not interpret the readings correctly, attributing them to my mixed blood, but I understood their significance. Jim, we are death-bonded... and for me an unconsumated pon farr is fatal."

"We'll... die?"

"Not you! Never you! But you see now why I must sever the bond and leave you. I am... resigned. I have had these years with you, t'hy'la, and I will not take you with me into death." One hand rose to the Human's temple. "Do not fight me, Jim. It may hurt, but you will not be harmed, and when I have... gone... the pain will cease."

"When you've gone? You mean, when you're dead?" Kirk said harshly. "Do you think I'd contemplate that, even for a moment? How little you know me, my bondmate!" He licked his lips nervously. "There's... another way... " He spoke very quietly now, his voice following the train of thought, as he spoke as much to himself as the Vulcan.

"What options do I have, really? To let you die? To go back to Vulcan, to tell Sarek and T'Pol, 'Spock's dead because I was afraid'? Or face Uncle Selek? What's the punishment on Vulcan for a man who fails his mate at his Time?"

"Sarek is aware... "

Kirk gestured impatiently. "But *Selek* isn't. And even if I convinced him, what then? If I took your Enterprise, as you took her from the first Jim Kirk, what d'you think I'd do? I'm a Science Officer, as you were; what you did once, I can do again, especially with the benefit of your knowledge. I'd be the one searching this time... Remember how it was, Spock? All those long lonely years... Would you condemn me to that? Could you?"

He paused for a moment, then answered his own question. "No, I don't think you would. Spock, I was prepared to do this once before, when you were almost a stranger. Now... you are my pledged bondmate. I love you. One last step... it's not so very far, after all..." One deep breath as he formed the words in his mind and spoke them quietly, calmly, with no trace of fear or reluctance, love and trust shining in his eyes.

"T'hy'la, za v'rain ca'hall. Foranna dhu'carman - za l'aran t'meranu."*

It was an offer no bonded Vulcan could resist or refuse from the lips

* 'Bondmate, I serve your need. Take what you must - I offer myself.'

of his mate. Spock nodded once, slowly, his eyes closing in acceptance. The long-fingered hands rose to cradle Kirk's head, seeking the meld points.

Kirk waited patiently, his shields totally lowered. He felt the Vulcan's presence just within his mind, but Spock was still barriered against him. Gently he reached out, all his love and trust offering a welcome, freely, willingly, anticipation rising in him as he waited for a reply...

The fingers pressed firmly against his skull; the lowered head lifted; the dark eyes blazed with savage triumph; and mocking laughter spilled insanely from the suddenly sneering mouth.

You little fool! A few soft words, sentimental promises, and you are charmed again to my hand as a hawk to the lure. Ah, this is truly victory - that you come willingly to serve my need, and feel my chains close once more about you.

S-Spock? Kirk could not believe what his own mind was telling him.

Aye, Spock! Your Captain and your master, little whore! You could not bear to speak my name, but you gave it to the Other.

What have you done with him? Fear for his bondmate overrode all personal considerations. *If you've hurt him...*

Fool, he never existed! Not since that first night in your quarters when he dared to interfere and I slew him for his presumption. Since then your mind has been under my control, even when you thought yourself free.

Why...? Oh why? Kirk's world was crumbling around him; it was better to listen than to think, for insanity hovered very close.

I had intended to force a bond on you - do you remember? - but learned that I could not. A bond can only be freely granted, never forced. I sought a way to deceive you, and that vr'shan gave me the chance. He died, and I allowed you to think it was I, clouding your mind so that you did not question. Your own desires blinded you - wanting me dead, I became so in fact for you. Under the guise of the imposter I set out to win your trust, and you gave to that weakling what you denied to me.

No! Kirk clung desperately to the last fragments of hope. *I saw the other universe...*

Illusion! his tormentor countered brutally. I was superb, was I not? I even delayed the full bonding lest in the moment of realisation you succeeded in denouncing me. Now I have everything. I stand well with the Family and the Clan, I have given through you children to Vulcan, I have advanced my career with Starfleet. And I have you again, my slave, now bound to me with chains nothing can break.

The other? Kirk begged. *Dead? He was never here?*

Never in life. I forced his mind as he died, and took the mask I wore from his pathetic weakness. You thought you had found the courage to kill me, and by setting that illusion in your mind I led you to think yourself fit to be a free man. Captain of the Enterprise? You only hold that rank so that I can keep you by my side at all times as I rise in Starfleet - I may even permit you to become a Commodore, perhaps even Admiral, if I achieve my ambition. But enough of this... I hunger for your surrender. Open your mind to me!

No! Illusion it might all have been, but the Captain had perhaps been too successful. The dream was more precious than reality, and Kirk clung

to the little that remained, fighting with the fury of desperation to rebuild the shields he had learned to raise, resisting his tormentor with every ounce of strength and will he possessed.

It was useless. In that first moment of acceptance he had dropped all his barriers, opened himself completely, and the Vulcan was already over the threshold. An icy blast of hatred, contempt and lust seared deep into his vulnerable mind, and although Kirk fought on he knew himself defeated.

Cruel fingers closed around his arms, forcing him down onto the bed. An impatient hand tugged at his sleeping robe, finding its way inside to paw at the shrinking flesh. Avid lips fastened on his; the heat of an alien tongue filled his mouth; his senses were overwhelmed with the sight, the taste, the feel of the Vulcan; and his mind screamed in outrage and fury at the betrayal. With a desperate strength he did not know he possessed he threw his last effort into the battle and tore himself away, ripping the invader from his mind, knowing as he did so that it could mean his death... but rather that than live with the knowledge that everything he had loved had been a lie.

A dear and familiar presence moved close, and unquestioningly he accepted the offered support, but it was his own determined rejection that dissolved the clutching hands, turning them to phantom bonds that he slipped easily, denying the nightmare that still sought to hold him in its lingering coils.

Kirk opened his eyes. He was lying on his bed, the Vulcan kneeling beside him, one hand resting lightly on his temple. Kirk moved his face against the gentle caress.

"That was some nightmare, Spock," he said, his voice still shaking from the effort he had made.

"Indeed." Spock helped him to sit up, sliding a supporting arm around his shoulders. Kirk leaned gratefully against the Vulcan's strength, amazement filling him as he realised what he had just accomplished.

Reading his thought, Spock smiled. "It was *your* victory, Jim. Yours alone."

"I really thought He was here." Kirk was surprised, now, at how completely he had accepted the dream as reality. "I thought... you... were an illusion, a creation of my own longing... How could I have believed that, even for a moment?"

"There is no logic in dreams, t'hy'la. Do you think *He* would have given you the strength to defeat him even as a trick to win your confidence? It was your own achievement, your strength, as real as the image you destroyed seemed to be. He has gone, and you are free - by your own efforts. You faced your greatest fear, and overcame it."

"Not my *greatest* fear, Spock." Kirk touched the Vulcan's hand. "My greatest fear has always been that I would lose you..." His eyes glowed suddenly as for the first time he gave thought to the reason for his bondmate's presence. "Have you finished at Starfleet already?" he asked eagerly. "You don't have to go back?"

"I fear that I must, Jim." Spock sounded as reluctant as Kirk felt. "In fact, I *have* almost finished with the matter that called me there - it would have been completed tonight, but that I sensed your need of me and left Nogura's office at once. I fear he must have been somewhat puzzled as to the reason for my abrupt departure."

"Then Nogura will..."

"Ste'ron was also present, and could not help but be aware of the nature of the summons I answered. He will have made a suitable explanation to Nogura," Spock replied indifferently. "However, now that I know that you are safe, I must return."

"But you *will* be back tomorrow?"

"If you command it, t'hy'la."

At first delighted with the instant agreement, Kirk hesitated. "There's something else, isn't there? What is it? I have the right to know, I think."

Spock bit back the instinctive denial and reassurance that rose to his lips. He studied his bondmate's face carefully, aware that the bright eyes were watching him with love and concern.

"There *is* something wrong - I knew it," Kirk said quietly.

"Yes, Jim, there is." Now Spock realised that continued concealment would do more harm than the truth - Kirk was strong enough to accept the situation as it was, confident enough that he would not blame himself for the damage neither of them had realised was being inflicted.

"T'Rasa, the Healer, was at Headquarters," the Vulcan continued. "I consulted her. I think you must have been aware of her mind touch, and wove the encounter into your dream. I am *not*," he smiled faintly, "in pon farr, or likely to be so, but I do need the aid only a Healer can give."

"Are you ill?" Kirk's hands framed the thin face. "No, not ill... but there's something..."

"The Commander warned me, when he woke my telepathic powers, that should I ever choose to bond, it must be fully. My mind would demand the completion of a partial bond, and if it was denied there would be great mental and physical stress. Since the day of our bonding I have fought against the instinct to complete our bond, Jim. You know now how greatly I have longed for it."

"Yes, I know. But you waited until I was ready. Now you are suffering because of me?"

"No longer, my brother. But the stress *has* been great. It is T'Rasa's judgement that I should enter a healing trance to ensure my full recovery. She is prepared to remain on Earth a few days longer to monitor me in the trance, should I accept her advice."

"Of course you'll accept it!" Kirk said briskly. "Think how much more we'll both enjoy the rest of our leave when you're fully fit."

"But you do realise we will be out of contact?" Spock said worriedly. "A bond as strong as ours *might* break into the trance, but I cannot be certain. Should you have need of me... Jim, perhaps you should return to Starfleet with me."

"If you wish it, I will," Kirk said slowly, "but I'd really rather not. There's no danger here - and I refuse to cling to you like a whimpering child because of a bad dream."

"The dream itself troubles me, Jim. What triggered it, I wonder?"

"I'm not sure." Kirk thought for a moment of the half-familiar figure he had imagined he had glimpsed from the stairs, but dismissed it as too trivial. "Perhaps... that old woman... I *did* kill Him, after all... I think it must've been on my mind, and surfaced like that. No, go back, finish up with Nogura, let T'Rasa guide you through the trance, then come back to me here. I'd be bored out of my skull hanging around at Headquarters without you, anyway. I'd only get in the way. At least here I can relax. Do you know, I haven't even been for a swim yet?"

"As you wish." Spock took Kirk's hand, and held it. "Jim, you know that I could not avoid knowing of your dream... "

"It doesn't matter," Kirk said, surprised. "How could it?"

"When you thought the dream-Vulcan was I, and that I was in need... you *wished* to give... "

"Of course." Kirk's free hand touched the Vulcan's cheek lightly. "You know that I don't want or need a physical relationship with anyone, but if you needed or wanted it... why, I'd want it too. I wouldn't be afraid, or worried, or ashamed. I love you, and that makes it easy to give you anything you need. You *know* that, don't you?"

"I know it, t'hyla. It is so for me as well. What chance led me to your side, I wonder? When I remember... a fleeting expression on your face... had I missed it... But I did not, and we are here." Spock leaned forward and kissed his brother's cheek. "Now I must leave you. Will you be all right, Jim?"

"Of course. Just come back as soon as you can."

Kirk watched as Spock rose to his feet. Their eyes held, smiling, as the transporter beam sparkled into life, then Kirk turned out the light and settled back into bed.

Kirk slept dreamlessly for the rest of the night and awoke in the morning refreshed and alert. Over breakfast he chatted idly with some of his fellow guests, then wandered out into the warm sunshine planning how to spend the day. A couple at the next table had invited him to accompany them on a walk they had planned, but he had declined. He wanted to be on his own, knowing that sometime in the next few hours Spock would enter the healing trance; he was not too sure how he would react to the cessation of contact with his bondmate, and it seemed better that he adjust to the feeling in privacy.

Perhaps a drive along the lochside, he thought, and headed for the aircar, an inquisitive Dileas at his heels. The hound eyed the vehicle with some curiosity, but retired to the edge of the path as Kirk slid into the driving seat.

"Damn! Now how could that have happened?" Kirk exclaimed as he glanced at the control panel - somehow the engine had been left switched on, and the power cells had been drained. He got out and looked around, scratching his head in bewilderment.

"Mr. Kirk! Mr. Kirk... Oh, I see you found out." Douglas MacIntyre came hurrying over, his face pink with embarrassed apology. "I'm really sorry about this. It was some of the local lads - you'll understand they rarely see a car of this type. I'm afraid some of them got a bit curious

last night, and decided to have a look. I chased them, but I didn't notice till this morning that they'd worked out how to switch on the power. They didn't mean any harm, Mr. Kirk - they're only laddies."

"Yes, but what now?" Kirk asked. "The power cells will need to be replaced."

"That's already in hand. I'm just off the phone to Inverness. A cousin of Mhairi's works in the Transport Garage - he's promised me he'll get replacement cells. They should be here tomorrow or the next day."

"Fair enough," Kirk said, soothed by the apology, the offer of amends - and he could both understand and sympathise with the boys' curiosity. "No harm done, I suppose - I can manage without the car until Spock gets back. I did want to ask - is the loch safe for swimming? Since I can't go any distance, I thought I'd try this afternoon."

"Oh aye, ye'll be safe enough. The beach is stony, though. There's a good place about half a mile along the shore - I'll have one of the boys take a lounger out for you - how does that sound?"

"Just great," Kirk grinned. "I think I'll walk a while this morning - can I take the dog?"

"Aye, he'll like that fine," MacIntyre nodded. "See you later, then, Mr. Kirk."

Kirk spent the morning exploring. The road provided the only easy access to the hotel - while it was possible to go over the hill, he supposed it was very rough walking, and anyone unfamiliar with the ground could quickly become lost. There were boats on the loch, which would indicate access by water; he toyed with the idea of trying to rent a boat when Spock returned - if he could persuade his desert-born Vulcan to venture so close to water.

The walk blew away the last remnants of the dream, and Kirk returned to the hotel, where Mhairi MacIntyre had prepared him a soup-and-sandwich lunch. Given the quality and quantity of the breakfasts and dinners, it was almost more than enough - and besides, a heavy meal was unwise if he intended to swim.

After lunch he went to his room to change into swimming trunks, a robe and sandals. He slipped a book into his pocket, but left his watch behind, confident that the time-sense he had absorbed from Spock would warn him to return at a reasonable hour. Stupid to risk water damage... and after a moment's thought he left his communicator, too, tucking it under the clothes in his drawer.

His preparations complete, he set off in the direction MacIntyre had indicated, the great hound again at his heels. After walking for about the promised half-mile he came to the place, and saw that his host had kept his promise - a lounger had been set up on the shore. A note pinned to it told him that MacIntyre had left a flask of cold drinks at the water's edge, and that he was not to bother about returning the lounger - someone would collect it later. With a soft exclamation of pleasure at the thoughtfulness, Kirk settled down to enjoy the afternoon.

It was a lazy, pleasant time. He swam with Dileas for company, and played for a while with the dog, throwing sticks for the animal to retrieve. When both tired of the game the dog sprawled out in the shade of a bush, while Kirk poured himself a drink and settled down to read.

Several hours passed as he lay soaking up the sun, but at last a

slight breeze got up, the air seemed a little cooler, and he knew it was time to go. Pulling on his robe he called Dileas, then halted as a bright flash across the water called his attention. For a moment he was puzzled, especially as the flash was repeated, then he realised that someone - probably one of the local farmers or keepers - had seen him by the loch and wondered who he was. If it was one of the regulars who came into the hotel bar, they'd probably recognised him by now; if not, he was so obviously a harmless tourist - and the presence of the dog would indicate that he was staying at the Lodge. He waved, in case it was one of the farmers he had seen; there was no answer, but the flash was not repeated, though he kept an eye on the far bank as he headed back to the hotel.

After showering and dressing he went down to the dining room. To his surprise only one table was set. MacIntyre came to serve him as he went into the lounge to order a drink, and Kirk asked where his fellow guests were.

"They left today, Mr. Kirk. I expected a party of a dozen this afternoon, but a phone message came to say they'd have to cancel. You'll be on your own for a couple of days, unless we get some passing tourists."

Kirk tilted his head, listening. "The weather seems to be changing," he remarked. "Sounds like the wind's getting up."

"Aye, there'll be a storm tonight. Don't worry, the house can take it, but things could get a bit rough."

"I don't mind that. Sometimes on Vulcan, when the Khlan'ara blows from the desert, you can't go out at all for days."

"You live on Vulcan, then?" MacIntyre enquired. "I thought you were Terran."

"I am, by birth, but I'm Vulcan by adoption. Of course, I spend most of my time on the ship, but Vulcan is my home now. My family are there."

"You've no kin of your own, then?"

"Not that I know of." Kirk saw no reason not to answer. "My own parents are dead, but Spock's mother and father are very dear to me." He chuckled. "In fact, Spock always maintains that I'm his mother's favourite."

"Family ties are important," MacIntyre observed. "It's not good for a man to be without kinfolk."

"I agree. Did you know, the Vulcan Clan system is very similar in many ways to the old Highland clans?"

"Oh?"

Sensing the man's interest, Kirk arranged to join him in the lounge after dinner, where over drinks they spent the evening discussing the similarities and differences between Earth and Vulcan. So absorbed did they become that Kirk was surprised to find it was nearly midnight when they parted. The wind had risen to a howling gale, and as he climbed the stairs Kirk shivered at the force of the blast, grateful for the stout walls and roof that sheltered him.

Again his sleep was dreamless, although he was roused several times by the force of the wind. When he woke for the last time it was a bright morning; the gale had dropped considerably, although it was still stormy.

Mhairi MacIntyre served Kirk breakfast, lingering to say, "Mr. Kirk, I'm afraid there will be a delay with your car. The road's blocked both ways by fallen trees, and the phone lines are down. Douglas has gone to give a hand clearing the road, but it'll take a couple of days, probably. Even the milk's been unable to get through - it comes from Inverness daily."

"Did the storm do much damage here?"

"Not really. One of the boats was driven aground and smashed, we had a few broken windows, and the garden's a wreck. Still, we can soon put that right. Will you be in to lunch, Mr. Kirk?"

"No, I don't think so. Could you make me some sandwiches, perhaps? I thought I'd go for a good long walk - I feel restless this morning."

"Of course. Still..." She looked doubtful for a moment. "You will be careful? The keeper was saying only a few days ago that some of the trees were dangerous; he told Douglas this morning that some of them came down in the night, but others have been weakened. If one fell on you... Maybe you'd best take Dileas with you - that way if you *did* have an accident..."

"Good idea. I'd planned to ask if I could take him, anyway - he's good company."

"That's settled, then. Enjoy your day, Mr. Kirk. I'll leave your sandwiches in Reception."

Having finished breakfast, Kirk went out into the hall, where the dog was waiting expectantly at the front door. He ran up to his room for a jacket, slipped his lunch into his pocket, and set off briskly.

The fresh, boisterous wind buffeted him as he walked up the hillside. Somehow its vagaries suited his restless mood. Some time during the night Spock had entered the trance; he was very conscious of the fact that for the first time since their bonding he had no mental contact with Spock. The link was still there, assuring him of his bondmate's life and wellbeing, but the warm awareness he had grown used to was missing.

He had walked a good two miles when he suddenly remembered that he had left his communicator behind. Ingrained habit was so strong that he almost turned back for it, then changed his mind. Starfleet knew where he was, and in the unlikely event that he was wanted urgently he could be located with comparative ease. Shrugging, he carried on.

Cresting a rise in the ground, he saw the road below him, blocked at that point by a massive fallen tree. Men were working on it, lopping away the branches, presumably hoping to make it easier to move the main trunk. For a moment he debated going down to help out, then he turned away; quite frankly, he admitted to himself, he was feeling too lazy.

Eventually he stopped to eat, sharing his sandwiches with Dileas, who snuffled eagerly for more. When he had finished he folded the wrapper into his pocket and resumed his walk, heading back towards the hotel at a higher level along the hillside. He was walking simply for exercise, with no definite object in mind, his thoughts wandering idly, when he suddenly realised that he hadn't seen Dileas for some time. He called out, then more urgently as there was no response, but the dog did not appear.

Perhaps he had simply roamed further ahead? Concerned that harm might have come to the animal, Kirk quickened his pace, coming at last to the top of the slope, where his route crossed a path along the crest of the hill.

There were fresh pawprints in the damp ground; Kirk gave a sigh of relief as he turned to follow them.

The path was easy walking, but twisted and turned to follow the lie of the land, so that it was not possible to see far ahead. Gradually it dipped lower, vanishing into a thicket of trees. Emerging on the other side, Kirk rounded a bend, coming unexpectedly on two men who were busily engaged in erecting a signpost; just beyond them a tree-trunk blocked the path.

The men were clearly as surprised as he by the encounter; they swung round, raising the shotguns they had picked up at the sound of his approach.

Kirk took a step back, raising his hands placatingly - he had no intention of being shot by an unexpectedly nervous farmer. The older man, whom he recognised as having been in the hotel, eyed him suspiciously for a moment, then nodded. He spoke to his companion in Gaelic for a moment, countering what was clearly an argument; with ill grace the other lowered his gun.

"Looking for the dog, were you?" the spokesman asked. "He's away home by the quickest route, if I know Dileas. Sorry about this," he indicated his shotgun. "One of the farmers over by reported prowlers the other night, and he's missing some chickens. We have to be careful."

"I can understand that," Kirk agreed.

"It took me a minute to recognise you, that's all. Of course, the dog being with you... Mr. Kirk, isn't it?"

"That's right."

"Well, I'm afraid I'll have to turn you back, Mr. Kirk. The path simply isn't safe. Dugald and I were just setting the signs now. It'd be foolish to risk it."

"Thanks for the warning," Kirk nodded. "Looks like the storm did quite a bit of damage."

"Aye, and more to come," Dugald grunted, joining in the conversation for the first time. Something in his tone made Kirk look at him sharply, uneasily, but he dismissed the feeling as the other man spoke again.

"You just cut straight down the hill, Mr. Kirk, and ye'll come to the road. It's safe enough between here and the Lodge - the trees and the banking have all been checked. Most of the dangerous places have been marked by now, but they're all beyond where you want to go."

"Thanks." Kirk set off, unaware that he was hurrying. He told himself he was anxious to make sure the dog was safe - the MacIntyres were fond of the animal, and he had grown used to the intelligent creature's company himself. He would not be easy until he knew it had reached home safely.

Once he reached the road he made good time back to the Lodge, and was aware of anxiety when Dileas didn't come to greet him. He supposed he should inform MacIntyre that the animal had wandered away, so he rang the bell at Reception. No-one came, and after a few moments hesitation he moved behind the desk. The office was deserted; the kitchen showed no sign of life, although he would have expected Mrs. MacIntyre to be preparing dinner at this hour.

Something in the room struck him as odd; for a moment he could not think what it was, then he saw the crate of milk on the table, and remembered the woman telling him only that morning that it came daily from Inverness - and that the road was closed...

Returning to Reception, he rang the bell, then called loudly; if there was anyone in the building they must have heard him - the hotel was deserted.

Suspicion seemed foolish, but would not be laid to rest. He tried the telephone, and found the line dead. Brought down in the gale as he had been told - or cut? And if so - why? Where was everybody...?

Abruptly he turned, racing up the stairs to his room. It had not been tidied that morning. Pulling open a drawer, he searched for his communicator; it was missing.

There was no point in searching - he knew perfectly well where he had left it - but Kirk did so on the off-chance that someone had simply been curious. Nothing. Nor was it simply the work of an ordinary thief, for the rest of his belongings, including money, remained untouched.

Kirk sank into one of the armchairs, absently twisting his marriage ring on his finger as he considered the situation. He was stranded in a deserted hotel with a useless aircar, blocked roads that might not be blocked at all, and no method of communication with the outside world.

*God, he thought disgustedly, I must be paranoid or something!
There's probably a perfectly innocent explanation...*

He could not convince himself of that. Indeed, for a moment he was tempted to break into his bondmate's healing trance to seek the comfort of Spock's cool, sane mind; then he shook his head decisively. As yet he had no real reason for such a drastic move. Interruption of the trance could harm Spock - he would keep that option in reserve. At least whoever was responsible for the odd happenings - *if* anyone was - did not know about his link with his brother, did not know that Spock could be at his side within moments. And... it *might* be all his imagination...

The sound of an engine outside interrupted his thoughts; it stopped, doors slammed, and he heard voices downstairs. He hurried from the room, wondering what was waiting for him.

"Mr. Kirk, I'm so sorry - were you worried?" Mhairi MacIntyre was the first to see him as he came downstairs; her voice and manner were shockingly normal after his wild imaginings of the last few minutes.

"I did wonder where everyone was," he admitted quietly.

"It's been quite a day. I was that rushed I didn't even think to leave you a note. One of our neighbours - her baby decided to come early, and we weren't sure if the midwife would get through. I'll away into the kitchen and get dinner started - it'll be a bit late, I'm afraid."

She headed into the kitchen. The half-dozen or so men who had crowded into the hall - among them he recognised and nodded to the two he had met on the path - drifted into the bar, leaving Kirk alone with his host.

"We managed to clear the Inverness road," MacIntyre told him. "When we've eaten we'll have a try at the Kyle of Lochalsh side. Join us for a drink, Mr. Kirk?"

"Actually, I was thinking that if the road's open I could drive into

Inverness and pick up the power cells for my aircar," Kirk said evenly, watching to see how the suggestion was received. "Can you lend me a vehicle, Mr. MacIntyre?"

"Aye, for sure. Take the Landrover." Without hesitation the landlord threw over a set of keys. "Of course you'll be feeling the lack of your own transport. Best be carefull, though - the road's open, but the banks are weakened, and there could be a rock fall."

"I'll watch out," Kirk said grimly.

"You'll need the address." MacIntyre scribbled on a piece of paper. "Just give your name and mine. The drive should take you about four hours, there and back."

"Ask Mrs. MacIntyre to save me some dinner, will you?" Kirk tossed over his shoulder as he headed for the door.

He did not see one of the locals, at a signal from MacIntyre, leave the bar and follow him outside, vanishing into the shadows as Kirk opened the door of the Landrover.

Kirk was confused as he drove away a few minutes later. MacIntyre's reponse had seemed natural, unforced. Perhaps it was only his imagination after all, his mind affected by the unaccustomed silence where his awareness of Spock could usually be felt. Still, there was the missing communicator... Should he have mentioned it to the hotel keeper?

About two miles down the road he came to a massive fallen tree lying along the verge. A debris of twigs and leaves showed where it had blocked the road. So they were telling the truth about that - the road *had* been blocked and re-opened.

Kirk remained alert as he drove on, slowing down for each bend, and his caution proved justified when a little further on he came to a tumble of rocks and mud that completely blocked the road.

Stopping the Landrover he got out to examine the barrier. He couldn't dismantle it alone, and the banks were too high to drive around it. The suspicion he could neither justify nor dismiss surfaced again. Had MacIntyre known of the landslip? Was that why had allowed Kirk to borrow the vehicle, knowing that there was no escape from the immediate area of the village? For a moment he debated scrambling up to examine the top of the banking, but it looked unsafe, as though another fall could occur at any moment. Safer not to risk it.

Kirk studied the fall consideringly. He could abandon the attempt and go back to the Lodge... or... Yes, he could climb over and continue on foot. There were houses beyond, he knew, and one of them might have a vehicle he could borrow or hire - or have someone going into Inverness, so that he could perhaps hitch a lift.

He took a step towards the rockfall, his eyes seeking out the safest climb. So intent was he that he didn't hear the faint sound of movement from the bank above him. Something struck him painfully hard on the back of the head, and he slumped to his knees, fighting the waves of darkness and sickness that swept over him. His knees would no longer support him and he rolled onto his side, fighting to remain conscious. Through the roaring in his ears he heard the sound of approaching footsteps on the road; a figure loomed over him, and he struggled to concentrate his

blurring sight. His eyes widened in amazement as a well-known face swam into focus.

"How on earth did you get here?" he managed as he struggled to lift his head.

The effort to move drained the last of his strength, and as hands reached out to touch him he felt the blackness close over his head.

His return to consciousness was slow and painful. Kirk opened his eyes to find himself lying on a couch in the lounge of the Kintail Lodge. Several men were gathered around the bar, and Mhairi MacIntyre was bending over him.

"Just lie quietly, Mr. Kirk," she urged. "Don't try to move - you've had a nasty crack on the head. We've sent for the doctor, and he shouldn't be too long."

"What happened?" Kirk said weakly. "How did I get back here? Last thing I remember... "

"Dugald and Murdo found you on the road, by the block - they said it looked as though you'd been hit by a loose stone."

"How long...?"

"Oh, just a wee while," she assured him. "Still, they didn't want to leave you lying any longer, so they put you in the Landrover and brought you back. Ah, here's the doctor now."

She made way for an elderly man with an air of sympathetic efficiency. "Now, laddie, how do you feel?" he asked; from his accent Kirk deduced that he was not a native of the area.

"Not too bad, but my head hurts," Kirk admitted.

"I'm not surprised." Gentle fingers explored his skull. "You've had a nasty crack there, but nothing's broken. Mhairi, a glass of water, if you please. Take two of these, Mr. Kirk."

Obediently, Kirk swallowed the white pills and gave the glass back to Mrs. MacIntyre. "Now what?" he asked, wincing as the doctor helped him to sit up.

"A good night's sleep. If you can't get off, take two more pills in a couple of hours. I'll look in again in the morning." The doctor rose. "Just take things easy until then. Goodnight, Mr. Kirk."

"Goodnight," Kirk replied absently, his eyes on the two men who had come across from the bar; he recognised them as the men he had spoken to earlier when looking for Dileas. He smiled faintly. "Thank you for your assistance, gentlemen. I could have been lying there still if you hadn't come along."

"Aye, ye could," replied Murdo. "It's lucky we saw you."

"I'd like to buy you both a drink," Kirk continued, "but I'm afraid I don't feel up to joining you. Mrs. MacIntyre, will you... "

"I'll see to it, Mr. Kirk," the woman promised. "You just away up to

your bed. Would you like me to send you up some food?"

"I couldn't eat anything, thanks, but perhaps some coffee?"

"I'll bring it up in a wee while."

Kirk nodded to Murdo and Dugald, and went slowly up to his room. He had a quick bath, and by the time he was dressed in his robe Mrs. MacIntyre had brought his coffee. He drank it, grateful for its warmth, set the tray outside the door, and climbed into bed.

Despite the pain in his head he found himself thinking about what had happened. Surely Dugald and Murdo would have mentioned it if they'd seen anyone else on the road? But he knew he hadn't imagined it - impossible as it seemed, it had been Scotty who had been with him. Yet how could it have been? The Engineer was a universe away...

Of course! Knowing that the cross-universe transfer was possible, Scotty must have experimented for himself, and duplicated Spock's transporter. Something must have gone wrong, and he had become trapped, had been forced to seek out the two men who could help him. But in that case, why had he come here? Why hadn't he contacted the Enterprise?

Or... perhaps he had, and learning that Kirk and Spock were on leave, had sought them out here. That would explain why he hadn't wanted to be seen - there could be too many questions... He'd probably try again later...

Kirk frowned, aware that there was something wrong with that explanation, but his head hurt too much for him to think clearly. In the morning he'd be more alert, he told himself firmly as he settled down to sleep.

But for all his exhaustion, sleep eluded him. Abandoning the attempt, he sat up and switched on the light. As he did so a memory came into focus, and he knew what was wrong with his earlier assumption.

The man he had seen was *too young*.

The Scott of the other universe was a much older man, on the verge of retirement, as that McCoy had been. Spock had commented once that the people he had known were so much younger in this universe - he had been pleased that this would counter his much longer life span, so that he would not outlive his bondmate. But the man on the road had had the face of the Scotty he had known - and Scotty was dead. It had been a hallucination after all, for he didn't believe in ghosts. Without realising it, he must have had the Engineer on his mind, and the blow on the head had done the rest.

Why, though, had he suddenly thought of Scotty? That was easily explained, too. The old woman at Glencoe had spoken of blood on his hands, of his guilt, and he had automatically thought of the Captain. But he was equally responsible for Scotty's death. Not by his own hand, as when he had knifed the Captain, but he had betrayed the man who had promised him help.

When he'd killed the Captain he had been fighting for his sanity and Spock's life; he'd concealed Scotty's murder out of fear for himself, and to escape more pain. He'd never been punished for that, save by his own remorse and guilt. Was *that* what the old woman had meant? Was his conscience making demands at last, insisting that he be called to account for what he had done? Yet there was no atonement that he could make - the man was dead...

Kirk shifted miserably. He couldn't go on like this, blaming himself but accomplishing nothing. He would not forget it, but he would put it out of his mind until he could talk to Spock and McCoy. He felt slightly easier with that decision taken. McCoy was a friend, but was not blinded by loyalty; he would advise him on what was the best thing for him to do, bearing in mind that not only he but Spock would be affected should the truth come out now. There were times when self-blame could be a perverted form of self-indulgence...

At last Kirk got up and shook out two of the pills the doctor had given him. It wouldn't help anyone if he made himself ill now, and a good night's sleep was what he needed. He went into the bathroom for water; when he had swallowed the pills he stood for a few moments gazing into the mirror, very much aware of the pallor of his skin, the dark shadows under his eyes. Spock was going to be worried about him when he returned...

He was not sure how long he had been standing there when a faint sound attracted his attention - it sounded as though his bedroom door had opened and closed. Glad of the chance to *do* something, he slipped into the hallway and listened intently; his room was silent, but in the corridor he heard the sound of someone treading on a loose floorboard.

Quickly he slid back the bolts on the hall door and looked out. The corridor was empty, but he had the impression that someone had just gone down the stairs. His bare feet making no sound, he ran to the top of the stairs and looked down.

Everything was still. One dim light burned over the reception desk. He could hear MacIntyre's voice faintly in the distance, but could not make out what was being said. Suddenly there was movement in the hall; he jumped, then gasped in relief as Dileas gave a small wuff of recognition and lowered his head again.

He *must* have been imagining things, he told himself; if anyone *had* gone downstairs, the dog would surely not have reacted as he did just now. Kirk shivered, aware that he was wearing only his thin sleeping robe; shaking his head, he returned to his room.

Just inside the door he paused, knowing that something was different about the room, but not what. He looked around, alert for any hidden menace, but when he identified the difference it was merely puzzling, not threatening, for lying on his bed was a silver-bound black knife.

He picked it up. It was the one he had found and handed over to the custodian at Eilean Donan. There could be no mistake, for he remembered vividly the small nick on the sheath and the dent in the silver binding.

Now he knew that there was a threat here, a threat that had perhaps been obscured by his dreams and imaginings. The times he had been aware of being watched; the disabling of the aircar; the storm - well, that was natural, at least, but *had* the roads been as dangerous as he had been told, or had it been used to keep him here? The loss - no, he was now sure, the *theft* - of his communicator; the useless telephone, shutting off all contact with outside.

No, not *all* contact, he reminded himself. There was still his link with Spock. But the Vulcan was in a healing trance. Sorely tempted to call to his bondmate, Kirk hesitated. Somehow he was certain that he could break through, but he didn't know what harm it might do. As yet there was no direct danger; safer, perhaps, to keep that option in reserve until he had no other choice but to use it. They - whoever they were who were responsible for what was happening - did not know of his lifeline.

Kirk dressed quickly, choosing his warmest clothes. Instinct told him that something more would happen tonight - why else leave the knife where he would be sure to find it? - and he wanted to be ready. Then he pulled a chair up to the window, and sat down to wait.

There was a full moon, but drifting clouds occasionally veiled its face; when they passed the garden was washed by a cold, pale light. Just below his window a path of lamplight from one of the downstairs rooms stretched onto the lawn; when the moon was hidden the rest of the garden was plunged into impenetrable blackness.

He had not been waiting long when he heard voices from below; he opened his window to listen, but it was only the MacIntyres. The light went out, and he heard footsteps on the stairs - presumably they were retiring for the night.

Silence settled like a great suffocating blanket, broken only by the faint sound of moving water from the loch. Nothing stirred - even the night-prowling birds and animals were silent tonight. Kirk waited, leaning forward in his chair, aware that the room was growing colder, that he was becoming chilled, but he was reluctant to close the window.

Then, faint and far away but growing closer, he heard the sound of someone whistling a half familiar tune. Footsteps sounded on the gravel path; when they halted, he knew that the whistler stood just beneath his window. He glanced up at the sky, and saw the clouds drifting from the moon - when it shone again he would see who was there. Making sure he was concealed by the curtain, he peered eagerly down, waiting.

The moon shone full and unobscured. By its clear cold light Kirk saw the man who stood beneath his window. His shirt would have been vivid red in daylight; above his heart shone the insignia of the Enterprise, surrounding the spiral of the Engineering section; gold braid encircled the cuffs, the parallel complete and broken lines of a Lieutenant Commander. Even the face... Stupid ever to have thought that this was the Montgomery Scott of the other universe! This was indeed the face of the man he had lured to his death, the man whose dying eyes had bitterly accused him of betrayal.

Stunned, Kirk slumped back into his chair. There were no excuses now, no calm, rational explanations. This was a ghost, or he was mad... it didn't really seem to matter which. There was no reason why he should escape the consequences of what he had done. And he had been warned... *'Blood calls for blood...'* He had forgotten that it was the innocent who had the best right to vengeance, and Scotty's only crime had been to try to help him. *'Payment is asked...'* The debt was owed - his own life was forfeit for his treachery - did it really matter whether the payment was made to a phantom born of his own imagination?

Suddenly Kirk stiffened. Not only *his* life was at stake here. That was his to give - Spock's was not. Man or ghost or demon, whatever waited below his window must be confronted - and defeated.

Kirk rose and turned to the door. On an impulse he could not define, he picked up the sgian dubh and tucked it into his belt. As he did so he knocked the remaining sedatives that the doctor had given him to the floor, treading on them as he passed. Quickly he ran down the stairs and out into the garden.

The figure was retreating slowly, and he followed it, guided by the tune that he now remembered Scotty whistling when engrossed in some delicate repair work. He didn't know if the man was aware that he was being followed - not once did he look behind him - but the clear notes

were an infallible guide in the silence of the night.

They turned out onto the road, Kirk instinctively keeping to what shadows there were. For a time they followed the main road, then... Scotty?... turned into a narrow lane greatly overgrown with grass and bracken. The pale forms of sheep gleamed in the light of the moon, with here and there the larger, darker shape of one of the cattle that also roamed, apparently freely, over the hillside.

After some time they passed through a ruined hamlet - 'Letterfearn', said an almost illegible broken signpost. Houses stared blank-eyed, saplings thrusting through the broken roofs as though nature had determined to obliterate all traces of Man's presence.

The black waters of Loch Duich gave back the path of moonlight. They passed a ruined cottage, the remains of a jetty; the skeleton of a small boat was beached high on the rocks, perhaps driven there by a long-forgotten storm.

The path bent slightly to the left, through the remains of a gate, and began to climb through long grass and bracken, barely more than a sheep track now. The loch was hidden by towering trees, and the spicy scent of conifers filled his nostrils. In the depths of the forest unseen creatures moved, disturbed by the Human sound and scent. An owl floated by, silent as a ghost on pale wings; somewhere far off a wolf howled, the loneliness of the sound raising the hairs on the back of Kirk's neck, but he knew that there was no danger from that source - wolves would not attack a fit, active man unless they were starving, and at this time of year there was plenty to be found.

Somewhere close at hand a screaming cry cut through the night, and he started nervously, wondering what it could be. The fact that he could not identify it made it seem much more threatening than the wolves. It came again, a scream as of someone in agony. He glanced up the track; the... man?... he followed was paying no attention. But Kirk could not simply ignore it; it might be someone lying there, another night-wanderer, hunting, perhaps, who had fallen and been hurt. He left the track quickly, heading towards the sound. He went only a few yards when he saw a small dog-like animal that carried something in its jaws; the scream came again, and the animal turned as if in response. Kirk drew a deep, relieved breath. Just an animal calling to its mate...

Still the soft whistling rolled back, guiding him, and he quickly returned to the track. It was further away now - he had fallen behind, both while investigating the scream and because of the rougher ground. Kirk quickened his pace, soon was able to pick out the moving figure again. Scott seemed to be heading for a solid dark shape further up the hillside, and suddenly Kirk realised where he must be. This was the Totaig broch, directly across the loch from Eilean Donan. Within its walls a fire was burning, the glow of flames lighting up the night.

Silhouetted against the light, Scott passed through the small doorway, and Kirk hesitated. If he followed he would surely be seen, but if he lurked outside he might as well have remained at the Lodge. He had to believe that the figure he had seen was as human as himself; that being so, the only way to find out what all this was about was to confront him. Quickly, before he could change his mind, Kirk climbed the last few feet and slipped into the shadows of the tunnel-like doorway.

He had forgotten the guard chamber in the thickness of the wall. Even as he stepped onto the rough grass of the inner courtyard he sensed movement behind him, but before he could turn something solid landed behind his ear and he slumped to the ground.



In the Vulcan ward of the medical centre at Starfleet Headquarters a monitor sounded its low, urgent warning. The Healer T'Rasa moved quickly, aware of a flicker of surprise - her patient was deep in a healing trance, and nothing should have disturbed him. Her fingers sought the meld points, her mind reaching out. All was well with the Commodore, but the powerful thread of his bond was quivering with the after-shock of stress. She hesitated, debating whether further investigation was required, but the link was undamaged, and to undertake such an investigation without permission was an invasion of privacy. Some not-too-serious shock to his bondmate, she judged; all was quiet again, and it could be dangerous to arouse Spock too soon. Slowly she withdrew, and reset the monitors to detect any further stress at an earlier level. Just in case...

Kirk came slowly back to consciousness, berating himself for being so foolish as to walk into such an obvious trap. He could forget any idea of trying to talk himself out of trouble, for he had been gagged as well as bound hand and foot. From where he lay the firelight showed the surrounding walls of the broch, and the darker shadows of the entrances to the chambers within them. The man, now wearing a plaid, was sitting beside him, and try as he would Kirk could only see the incredible likeness to Scotty.

"Funny, you don't look like a killer. That must have made it easier for you, I suppose." The man leaned closer. "I always told him he was too trusting for his own good. You'll not know me, of course. Iain Scott, Montgomery's identical twin. Nor did you know, Captain James Kirk of the Enterprise, that I have one gift my brother did not - if he had possessed it, it might have saved him. I have the Sight. You understand me?"

Kirk could only nod.

"Let me tell you how it was with us." The voice was as calm as that of a judge, the face stern, implacable. "From our earliest memories we had an awareness of each other that cannot be described - it is often so with identical twins. We each knew what the other was thinking, and we thought much alike. Save in this - I loved the land and had no wish to leave it, while he, with his genius for mechanical things, found a place in Starfleet. Neither time nor distance weakened our bond; we kept in touch by the usual methods, of course, but I always knew if he was well or sick, content or unhappy.

"Then one day as I worked on the farm it seemed to me that I stood on his ship and looked out of his eyes. I knew he had called me to witness his death. Such pain as he endured... and the pain of betrayal worst of all. He had thought to aid one who had been sorely wronged, and learned too late that he was but a toy for two wicked men.

"I watched you pleasure your lover beside my brother's body, then I awoke in my own place. Shock and grief struck me down, and when I recovered it was to hear word that Montgomery had died in a shipboard accident. I knew the truth, but who would believe me? I swore to be avenged on you both. It was in my mind to seek you out and destroy you both as you had destroyed him. Then the Sight came upon me, and I knew that one day you would come here, under my hand. I was content to wait. It would be better so; here among my kin, among those who loved him, I would find willing hands to help me. And at last you have come.

"It is a simple thing that I will do. In the morning, Douglas MacIntyre will report you missing, that you wandered from the hotel in the

night. The doctor, who is an incomer and will suspect nothing, will testify that you suffered a severe blow to the head and were sedated. It will be thought that you wandered from your bed in the night and became lost in the hills. We will be most concerned, and we will form and lead search parties. Men I trust implicitly will search this area to ensure that you are not found. It will be assumed that you perished somewhere in the hills - no doubt your body will be found one day. And do not think that your Starfleet will aid you. I know enough from my brother of your technology. The stones of this broch will hide you from Starfleet's sensors. Ruin though it is, the walls are still very thick.

"You do not yet see? This broch will be your tomb. I will place you within one of the chambers, and seal the entrance. In a little while you will suffocate, for I have prepared it well, and the walls are airtight.

"As for your lover - I had thought at first to take you together, but I do not now wish to wait until he returns. He will come soon enough to search for you, but he will not find you - until I guide him. I will have him brought here and imprisoned in your grave. He will have your body for company as he contemplates his own death.

Kirk shook his head violently, struggling to speak, and Scott laughed harshly.

"Save your strength. I do not wish to listen to your pleas and excuses. What mercy did you and your paramour show my brother?" He rose, caught hold of Kirk, and half carried, half dragged him to the wall of the broch. A pile of rocks almost hid the low, narrow entrance to one of the chambers. Scott dropped Kirk to the ground, and leaned over him.

"Perhaps I am more merciful than you. Inside the chamber you will find a torch; by its light you may convince yourself that there is no escape. The sgian dubh I leave with you - use it to end your worthless life if you cannot endure as my brother did. It has shed worthier blood than yours, but I have not your stomach for cruelty."

Bending low over Kirk, Scott backed through the low hole, dragging his captive; he moved back to the tiny entrance, then cut the ropes that bound Kirk. Before the other could react, he backed quickly out, his body blocking the faint grey light of approaching dawn. Kirk squirmed round, trying to decide where the entrance was, but already the stone covered the opening; he could hear the sounds as it was wedged in place; then there was only silence, and the blackness of the grave.

The monitor peaked again, and T'Rasa frowned. This was unprecedented. Perhaps she should violate custom and follow the bond-link? It was a difficult decision, and one she did not feel able to make alone. Coming to a decision, she turned from the bed. She would contact the Commodore's family on Vulcan.

Kirk shifted awkwardly, ripping away the tape that sealed his mouth. There was a little more room in the chamber than he had expected - it was big enough for him to lie down lengthways, though it was not deep enough for him to do so, and when he scrambled to his feet he could touch the roof. The surface of the walls was smoother than he had thought it could be, and his exploring fingers stilled as he remembered that Iain Scott had told him he would die of suffocation.

Was that possible? he wondered. However closely the stones fitted, they were unmortared - there must be air spaces between them. His captor had promised to leave him a light... He dropped to his knees and brushed his hands over the floor until his fingers closed on a torch. Switching it on, he directed the beam at the walls, and groaned as the yellow light revealed the hopelessness of his situation.

With years to plan and prepare his vengeance, Scott had done his work well. The walls and ceiling of the chamber had been lined with a layer of concrete, effectively sealing any possible air space. True, he still had the knife, but even if its blade could make any impression on the concrete, he had no idea where to begin digging - he could use up what little air he had chipping away at the wall only to find that he had been working at the middle of one of the massive blocks.

Defeated, he slumped to the floor, resting his head on his knees. Trusting in his link with Spock, he had been over-confident. He had planned simply to wait until the Vulcan emerged from his healing trance, and then call for help; neither hunger nor thirst would do him any harm in the few hours - thirty six at the most, he had estimated - it would take.

But he didn't have thirty six hours. He was not sure how long the air would last, even if he remained absolutely motionless, but he was horribly certain that if he was not dead by morning, he would certainly be unconscious and unable to make any effort.

His only chance was to break into the trance and awaken Spock. If he failed... If he failed, he would die, and Spock would not know of it until he awoke and felt the torn fragments of the bond in his mind.

Hope stirred, not for himself, but for Spock. Perhaps the trance would protect the Vulcan from the trauma of severance? Or would he die when Kirk did, not knowing what was happening to him? Would he wake to find himself disbonded, but survive the shock? He might do so, then elect to follow his bondmate into death. Or - most horrible of all - would he live, hopelessly insane, his mind destroyed by the tearing of the bond?

So many possibilities, no guarantees. Kirk fought down his instinctive panic at the thought of being buried alive, and with the cold clarity that Spock had taught him, considered his options. He still did not know if an abrupt awakening from trance would harm the Vulcan, or even if it was possible, but it was the only thing he could try. Spock would accept any risk rather than lose him, he knew that. Though he could not think himself deserving of such love, it had been the Vulcan's choice, and he could only honour it.

Carefully Kirk gathered his thoughts, concentrated them into a powerful beam of need aimed directly at his bondmate's mind. Even his fear, admitted and controlled, lent strength to his appeal. When he was ready he lowered his shields and launched the spear of thought directly at its target, knowing there would only be this one chance.

SPOCK... HELP ME!

For a moment there was no response, then the backlash came, a vast rolling wave of pain, fear, grief and searing rage. Overwhelmed by the sheer weight of emotion he fought to maintain the contact, to project a clear image of where he was and what had happened to him. He did not know if he was successful, for as the pressure surged higher and higher he found himself unable to absorb it. His mind was strong, but he was not a telepath - only his acceptance of and familiarity with the bond had enabled him to take so much. As the tide of feeling swept him along in its embrace an instinctive defence mechanism came into play, and with a low whimper of

anguish he felt himself slide into unconsciousness. He had done all that he could - the rest was up to Spock.

The monitors beeped insistently until a clenched fist smashed down onto the panel, shattering it. Spock sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, confused by the abrupt awakening.

The young Vulcan intern who had been left in charge of the ward came hurrying in to investigate the disruption of the monitor. Spock barely glanced at him.

"Fetch my clothes."

"But Commodore - "

"Kroykah!" Spock snarled, furious at the opposition. "My bondmate calls... "

It was the only explanation needed. The intern quickly brought Spock's clothes, being careful to stay out of his way - no sane man attempted to hinder one who answered such a summons. He waited until Spock had left the room, then turned to the intercom. T'Rasa must be informed, but Spock's departure would not be officially reported, for this was a personal matter.

Spock headed for the transporter room, fighting to display his normal air of control. Kirk's desperate call had indeed reached him, but due to the depth of his trance, he had not been able to receive precise information. The Vulcan only knew that his mate was in danger of death, and in response the protective element of the bond had taken full control. He was not thinking, but reacting, responding to the need he had felt in Kirk's mind.

The transporter operator recognised him, and made no difficulty about beaming him down. Lacking the precise co-ordinates Kirk had tried to send him, the Vulcan's instinct was to return to the last place he had seen his bondmate, but when he materialised in their room at the Kintail Lodge, he felt the directional link pulling him towards Kirk.

He passed quickly out of the hotel, moving faster as he realised that Kirk, although alive, was unconscious, so that he had no way of knowing how immediate the threat was. He was half aware of relief at the short Scottish nights; even with his perfect night vision he would have been slowed slightly by darkness, but dawn had now come; already, although he was not consciously aware of the fact, the sun was striking the tops of the hills around the loch. He paid no attention to his surroundings except to compensate automatically for the lie of the land, grimly accepting the pain it caused him to turn aside even for a moment from the direction of the summons. He was functioning on instinct, all his cool logic buried beneath the weight of his need to reach Kirk. Two thousand years of civilisation had vanished without trace as a predatory Warrior from a long-vanished age slipped through the early dawn of an alien world in quest of his mate.

As Spock passed through the ruined hamlet a silent figure emerged from one of the ruined cottages and followed cautiously in his wake. Iain Scott had heard the sound of footsteps on the road, and had ducked into cover to see who else was abroad at this hour. He smiled with satisfaction at the

sight of his second victim walking so obligingly into his trap, but he was puzzled by the way the Vulcan was heading so unerringly towards the broch. *Now what was it about Vulcans?* He'd been out of touch for so long... *Ah, yes - it was said of them that they were touch telepaths. Well, it made sense that they should have a stronger awareness of their... lovers.* Not that it mattered; whatever the reason, the Vulcan would soon be with his partner, and then it would all be over.

Spock was beyond coherent thought as he stumbled through the entrance and gazed wildly around the interior of the broch. It was full daylight now; the fire still burned, but apart from that the tower was empty...

Suddenly Kirk was there in his mind, awake and aware of him. *Spock?*

Jim, where are you? I cannot see you, Spock demanded urgently, for Kirk's thoughts were much weaker than they should have been.

Behind the rocks. I can't move them from the inside. Hurry, Spock - I don't have much air left.

Spock's lips curled in a snarl of fury as he dashed forward, following the link more easily now as Kirk was awake and responding. He realised from the image in his Human's mind that the largest of the rocks was sealing the entrance to a chamber within the walls, but it was securely held in place by smaller stones wedged under and around it, hammered in so securely that his hands were torn and bleeding by the time he managed to prise the first from its place.

With that stone removed he was able to rock the slab to the side just enough to open a small air passage. He *felt* Kirk's gasp of relief as the threat of suffocation passed, but without pausing he worked away at the stones, finally clearing enough to roll the slab sufficiently to allow Kirk to crawl out. A smile of satisfaction lit the dark eyes, and with his bondmate once more within reach, he collapsed as though the strings of a puppet had been cut, lurching forward into the comforting arms that reached out to him.

"Spock!" Kirk's cry of horror was as much for the white, exhausted face as for the torn and bleeding hands. He held the Vulcan close, revelling in the contact, but there was no time to waste.

"Spock, where's your communicator?" he whispered urgently, "We've got to get out of here - fast! Can you sit up? We've got to hurry."

He was reaching for the communicator on Spock's belt when Scott made his move, darting forward to snatch the communicator away before Kirk could reach it.

"You'll not be needing that," he said calmly. "You're going nowhere this night, save back to your grave - and your lover with you." As he spoke he crushed the communicator underfoot and gestured with the phaser he carried, a civilian issue, but effective enough. "Get moving- I'll be glad to hae done with the pair o' ye."

One look at the calm, set face told Kirk that it was useless to plead for mercy, but for Spock's sake he had to try. "Don't hurt Spock," he begged, cradling the dark head on his shoulder. "He never harmed you or yours, I swear it. Your quarrel is with me."

An expression of curiosity flickered over the stern face. "So you do

have loyalty, of a sort. Will you buy his life with yours, then?" Scott was not sure just what linked these two men, but perhaps the loss of his companion would be worse for the Vulcan than death.

Kirk lifted his head, eager agreement written clearly on his face; then his eyes clouded, and he shook his head. "I wish I could," he said quietly, and Iain Scott could not choose but believe him. "But... we are death bonded - if I die, so does he." He met the implacable eyes with sudden hope. "If it's vengeance for your brother you want, will only death satisfy you? I'll pay any price to keep him safe. And no, I don't mean money," he added as he saw the contempt in Scott's eyes. "I know what you must think of me, but I'm not as despicable as that."

His air of quiet dignity made Scott think, regretting that he had not talked to Kirk before. The younger man was not reacting at all as he would have expected.

"Perhaps I will consider it," Scott said at last, eyeing Kirk appraisingly. "For instance... You are very... aye, beautiful. I could change that, give you a face that would send the bairns greeting in fear tae their mothers. Would he want you then, if you were blind, mutilated, crippled?"

Kirk shivered inwardly at the thought of pain and mutilation, but it would be worth it to save Spock. "That will be his decision," he answered. "For myself, if you will only let him live, I will consent to anything."

Iain Scott frowned. He had no intention of torturing his captives, but *would* Kirk go so far to save his lover? And would the Vulcan permit the sacrifice? He would continue the deception a little longer. Allowing nothing of his bewilderment to show on his face, he beckoned to Kirk.

"Come here, then."

Spock had been listening to the conversation, a growing horror filling him. As he felt Kirk's arms loosen around him, he closed his fingers on the Human's arm.

"No. I forbid it."

His voice was the merest breath of sound. Slowly, painfully, he turned his head, seeking their pitiless captor. His closeness to Kirk had opened the link fully, so that he knew who Scott was, why he was doing this. If only he could *think!* There must be some way to reason with the Human, but his mind was too confused. Scott wanted vengeance - he understood that clearly enough. Very well, he should have his victim - but not Kirk.

"I forbid it," he repeated, his voice a little stronger. "I am the one... He is innocent... Take me. It is my right."

"Don't listen to him! You can see he's ill - he doesn't know what he's saying." Kirk's voice held a sharp edge of desperation. "You struck the bargain with *me*, Iain Scott! I hold you to it."

"Now here is a most curious thing." The phaser was lowered, and Scott moved closer. "Each so anxious to protect the other... and each insists that the other is guiltless of my brother's death. I know what the Sight showed me, and yet... "

Suddenly he was on his knees at Kirk's side, his fingers clenched in the younger man's hair, pulling his head up so that he could look deep into the hazel eyes. Kirk gave a low cry of pain, and the sound goaded Spock

into action. Releasing Kirk's hand he struck out blindly at the man who had hurt his bondmate. The blow was uncoordinated, and Scott parried it easily; one massive hand locked on to the Vulcan's throat.

"Be still!" he snarled at Kirk, who had begun to struggle at the threat to Spock. "Be still, or I will strangle him here and now, and be damned to the pair of you.

"That's better," he added as Kirk instantly quietened. "Now, James Kirk, tell me how and why my brother died. I know what I saw, and my Gift will tell me if you are lying. If I am satisfied, you will both go free and unharmed, my word on it."

Rudimentary telepathy? The question flashed from Kirk's mind to Spock's along the bond-link, a form of communication no outsider could overhear or even be aware of.

Possibly.

Then if I tell him, he might understand. It seemed hopeless before - we don't have a shred of proof, and who on Earth would believe such a tale? But if he can feel the truth... Spock, he's not an evil man, though for years he's been eaten up with grief and hatred. I think he'll listen.

You should not have to reveal your misery, Spock protested.

Oh, Spock. Kirk's thought was a caress. You made me see that it was His shame, not mine. And if anyone has a right to know what really happened, Montgomery Scott's brother does.

As you decide, t'hy'la.

Kirk lifted his head, and his eyes were calm as he met Scott's gaze. "I'll tell you what you want to know," he promised.

Scott nodded. "Ye'll need time to prepare," he said gruffly, releasing both men. "Come tae the fire. You've much to argue for, and I'll no' have it said that I didna' give ye every chance." He rose and vanished into another chamber at the far side of the broch.

By the time Kirk had helped Spock to a rock beside the fire, Iain Scott was back, a haversack in his hand. He poured something from a flask, and handed the cup to Kirk.

"Drink this," he ordered.

Kirk obeyed, choking as the whisky-laced coffee hit his empty stomach. The drink warmed him, however, and he persuaded Spock to swallow a few mouthfuls. Scott pulled out some cans of survival rations, which both Kirk and Spock refused; they accepted more coffee, however, as their captor began to eat.

At last the waiting began to affect Kirk's nerves. So much depended on whether Scott believed him. He scrambled to his feet, his head buzzing as he wondered how to tell his story. The whirling thoughts coalesced into calmness as a hand touched his and Spock's fingers curled round his. He could feel the wonderful serenity of the Vulcan's mind fill his, and for a moment he simply immersed himself in the waves of affection that flowed out to him, returning them in full measure. Then, as one, the two men turned to look down at their captor.

"This is something that only three other people in this universe know... but you do have the right to be told," Kirk began quietly. "It all



started when Captain Christopher Pike was transferred from the Enterprise... "

The line of sunlight had crept down the hillside and was touching the broch when the soft voice faltered at last, its pitiful tale ended. Iain Scott rose from his place beside the dead fire and turned away, leaning against the wall of the broch with his face hidden in his hands.

Kirk's sole concern now was for his shivering bondmate. He lowered Spock to the ground, leaning back against the rock, then took him into his arms and tried to warm him with his own body. The Vulcan's eyes were closed, his face pale, and Kirk knew that he was now very weak from the enforced breaking of the trance and the long night in the open, and cold from the early morning chill. There was nothing more that either could do save await Scott's decision; knowing that, Spock had resigned control to Kirk while he conserved his remaining strength for whatever came next. Kirk held his bondmate carefully, murmuring reassurance as he experienced for the first time the strange sensation of being the one to protect, to comfort. It was good to feel how much he was needed by someone so apparently self-sufficient as Spock. He had always *known* it on an abstract level, but now he experienced the protective, possessive instinct that came with the bond. He had wondered if it was purely a Vulcan trait; now he knew that it was not - or perhaps it was simply that he had absorbed enough of his brother's teaching for it to have become a part of himself.

However, he needed no explanations. They were together, and that was enough. Life or death were irrelevancies to the deep union that they shared. Even when he looked up for a moment and saw that Iain Scott had gone, he felt neither surprise nor unease. He was quite prepared to sit here holding the now-sleeping Spock for as long as was necessary - the strengthening sun would soon warm the chilled Vulcan. He felt as though he had no energy left to make any kind of decision, let alone move.

He must have dozed, for the next thing he knew the sun was high in the sky and a hand was gently shaking his shoulder. Even before he looked up he checked on Spock, and was relieved to see that he was still deeply asleep, obviously feeling secure with Kirk and knowing that the Human would waken him at need.

Kirk glanced up. Douglas MacIntyre stood near him, shuffling awkwardly from one foot to the other. Kirk was hard put to it to keep from smiling at the man's evident embarrassment.

"Iain has told us that he wronged you," MacIntyre said abruptly. "He will wish to speak to you himself, no doubt, but I too was at fault. I can only offer my apologies, and whatever recompense you demand."

Kirk shook his head wearily. "I can't blame you for supporting your kinsman," he said honestly. "I'd have done the same thing, given the... circumstances. I just want to see Spock safe, and then to forget the whole thing."

"Will you come back to the Lodge? You both need rest and food. The Landrover is waiting at the foot of the hill. I pledge my word that you and yours will be safe under my roof."

"I accept your word." Kirk rose slowly to his feet, but when MacIntyre would have bent to help him with Spock, his eyes flashed fire.

"Don't touch him!" he snapped. Then, his voice softening, he added,

"It is nothing personal, Mr. MacIntyre - Vulcans do not like to be touched. I'll carry him."

Kirk was glad, though, of MacIntyre's steadying hand as he descended the hill, gradual though the slope was; he was almost at the end of his own endurance. For all his height and strength, Spock seemed curiously fragile in his arms, and he held him carefully, newly aware of just how vulnerable his much-loved bondmate really was.

He supported Spock during the drive back to the Lodge, and when they arrived, he picked him up again to carry him inside, speaking a quiet greeting to Dileas, who came frisking to meet him then suddenly sat down quietly as though the intelligent animal had realised that this was no time for boisterous games.

"Your room is ready, Mr. Kirk." Mhairi MacIntyre met them in the hall. "Do you want me to call the doctor?" she added, looking at Spock.

Kirk sent an exploratory probe along the link. Spock was suffering from shock and exhaustion, but there seemed to be no lasting damage. "No," he answered at last. "There's nothing a Terran doctor can do for him that I can't. Just leave us alone until tomorrow morning, then we'll both require a substantial meal."

"Very well, Mr. Kirk." Mhairi sounded subdued, and Kirk paused to smile at her.

"It'll be all right," he said reassuringly. "Don't worry." Then forgetting her as though she never existed, he carried Spock up to their room and laid him down on one of the freshly-made beds. He decided not to bother undressing his bondmate, though he removed the Vulcan's shoes, then he pulled down the cover of the other bed, and was just settling Spock into it, pulling the covers over the long body, when Spock's eyes opened.

"Jim?" A hand caught at him.

"It's all right, Spock. We're both safe. It seems Scott believed us. Now get some rest, will you. But if you can manage it, I don't think you should try the trance again until we're back on Vulcan."

"Sleep will be sufficient for now." The hand tightened its grip. "Please, t'hy'la, stay with me? Hold me... "

Kirk smoothed the dark hair. "I will," he promised, freeing his hand. He undressed quickly, pulled on his sleeping robe, then slipped into the bed beside the Vulcan, taking the thin figure into his arms again. "I'm here, and I'm staying here," he said softly. "Now go to sleep."

Obediently, Spock closed his eyes, his breathing gradually growing deeper and slower. For a moment Kirk savoured the joy of holding his bondmate close and safe, then his own exhaustion caught up with him, and he too drifted into sleep.

An insistent knocking on the door brought Kirk out of his restful sleep. He glanced at the window - he had forgotten to close the curtains yesterday - and saw from the position of the sunlight that it was morning again, and that he had slept through the rest of the previous day and the night. Spock was still in his arms, stirring now as he began to waken.

As the knocking was repeated, Kirk called, "Who's there?"

"Morag, sir, with your breakfast."

"Just a minute."

Kirk settled the Vulcan back onto the pillows, stretched his cramped arms, then climbed out of bed and pulled on a robe before going to answer the door, smiling as he took the laden tray from the girl. "Thank you, Morag."

"Sir... "

"Was there something else?"

"I was to say... " She frowned for a moment, remembering. "Mr. Iain Scott presents his compliments, and asks if you will be good enough to see him." She smiled triumphantly, proud of having remembered the formally-worded message.

Kirk's eyes twinkled at her as he replied. "My compliments to Mr. Scott, and we would be pleased if he would join us in two hours."

She hurried off down the corridor, and Kirk backed into the room, setting the tray down on the table before going to check on Spock. The Vulcan was awake now, and the dark eyes smiled at him.

"T'hy'la... " Spock held out his hand, and Kirk touched his fingers in the ritual embrace as their thoughts meshed. "You are well and unharmed?" he asked; though the bond gave him the answer, he needed to hear it in words.

"I'm fine, and so are you, it seems. For a while I thought it was all over for us... but it didn't matter, because we were together. I was only terrified of dying alone, of what the breaking of the bond would do to you."

"I know."

They looked at each other in silent communication; then Spock, knowing it was time to lighten the mood, broke their locked gaze.

"Jim, I am hungry," he said mournfully.

Kirk laughed and went to get the tray, settling it between them on the bed. Mhairi MacIntyre had obviously prepared for all contingencies - eggs, porridge, fruit juice, rolls, marmalade, tea and coffee had been piled with a generous hand.

At last Kirk leaned back, grinning broadly. "I'm stuffed!" he declared. "Come on, Spock - time to get up. We've just time to bath and dress. Iain Scott will be here in less than an hour."

Exactly on time, Scott knocked at the door, entering at Kirk's call. The two men were sitting by the window and he walked across the room to stand before them

"Gentlemen, I thank you for agreeing to see me. What I have done is inexcusable. I ask your pardon."

"You have suffered greatly, I think," Spock said quietly. "The Sight is not always a blessing, as my people have cause to know." He indicated a

chair. "Please sit down."

When Scott was settled, the Vulcan continued. "A Vulcan reacts by instinct to any danger to his bondmate. Yesterday, I was aware only that Jim was in danger; I have no memory of the details of what happened. My bondmate has told me who you are and why you have done this thing. He has also told me that you are now aware of the true... circumstances, and that you understand."

Scott nodded.

"That being so, I can only say that had I indeed been the one you thought me, the vengeance you sought was yours by right by the customs of my world. You owe me no debt. As for Jim... You do see now that he had no choice?"

"Aye, I know that." Sombre eyes moved to Kirk's face. "You had begun to forget, and I reopened old wounds. I'm sorry, laddie."

"I've never forgotten." There were tears in Kirk's voice. "How could I? But... If you could forgive me, in his name... " He reached out blindly.

"How could I not? But we must forgive each other." Kirk's hands were clasped for a moment in Scott's powerful fingers. "He liked you fine, you know, and mentioned you in his letters. That was what made it so hard when I thought... "

"He was good to me," Kirk said simply. "He tried to help me. He was kind."

"Aye, that he was," Scott chuckled softly. "Many was the stray pup he brought home to tend... "

Spock's raised eyebrows brought home to him just what he had said, and he coloured. "I didna' mean... " he stammered.

"I know," Kirk grinned. "I suppose that *is* how I must have seemed." His expression sobered, and he continued. "What... What did you tell your people?"

Scott rose. "Only that I had been given sure proof of your innocence. Your secret is safe with me. In fact... " He turned to Spock. "I have heard, sir, that your people have the power to edit one's memories. Would it ease your minds to take this knowledge from me?"

Spock glanced at his bondmate, and received a shake of the head., "That will not be necessary. We accept your word." Then, knowing through the link that he was echoing his bondmate's thoughts, he added, "If I took the memory, even though I left you knowing that we did not kill your brother, you would always wonder exactly what had happened. Be at peace with the truth. We trust you."

"Thank you, gentlemen. You honour me." Bowing his head first to Kirk, then to Spock, Iain Scott left the room and walked out of their lives, leaving behind in Kirk's heart the peace of knowing that his long-ago weakness had been understood - and forgiven.

They had originally intended to stay in this area until the end of their leave, but they remained at the Kintail Lodge for only three more

days, relaxing beside the loch. Everyone, it seemed, knew that they had been falsely accused, and seemed intent on redeeming the honour of Scottish hospitality. It would have been very easy to have stayed there for the rest of their leave - the MacIntyres certainly went out of their way to make it clear how welcome they would be - but both men felt that it would be imposing on the hotel keeper. As it was, they had to argue quite strongly before Douglas MacIntyre would accept payment for their stay. The only thing they would accept as his fault was the battery of their aircar, and they allowed him to pay the expense of replacing it, realising that his pride would be hurt if they did not allow him to do something to repay them for the inconvenience they had suffered.

They turned off the road that would take them back to Loch Ness, heading towards Invergarry, then south again to Spean Bridge. From there they headed east, towards the high plateau of the Cairngorms. Kirk had not studied this part of the country, so they stopped where fancy took them. They walked up the road that led up Cairngorm itself, finally taking the path that took them to the top, fighting the strong wind that, much to Kirk's surprise, was powerful enough to hold him upright when he leaned against it. The wind was too strong to encourage them to linger, and they quickly descended to calmer levels.

They found a road that took them even further east, to Tomintoul, then south to the River Dee, where they lingered for some days.

Their leave on Earth was drawing to an end, however. Kirk and Spock left Scotland with some regret and at the last moment, necessitating a swift drive south to return the aircar and catch their flight to Vulcan. They had not known how long the refitting of the Enterprise would take, and so had arranged to travel privately; as it happened, they learned that the engine modifications were complete, and that she had left two days earlier for Vulcan, where new computer links would be installed.

As things had turned out, Kirk was not sorry. Had they arranged to travel on the Enterprise, he knew that both he and Spock would have become involved in ship's business; as it was, they could treat the voyage as part of their leave.

Kirk, who had arranged their passage, had booked accommodation on one of the most luxurious civilian liners currently in service. It was an indulgence, but as Spock's bondmate and the younger son of Sarek, he had an income in his own right from the Family interests as well as his Starfleet salary, so that he was in the fortunate position of not having to consider expense. Besides, the relaxed comfort of the trip would be more restful for Spock; Kirk was anxious that his bondmate should again attempt the healing trance before any more demands were made on him.

One amenity the ship possessed was a very well stocked shopping arcade. While browsing there one morning, Kirk was reminded of a joke he had made, and in a moment of weakness completed a purchase that caused even the blase assistant who served him a flicker of surprise. Not that Kirk cared - or even noticed.

He was beginning to have doubts, however, by the time he reached their suite. Perhaps it wasn't such a good idea after all? He entered their day cabin, intending to hide the gaily-wrapped package until he'd had a chance to gauge Spock's mood, but was brought up short at the sight of his bondmate busily engaged at the computer terminal.

"Spock!" he said reproachfully. "You're supposed to be resting."

"Jim, I feel perfectly well," Spock said, with only a slight deviation from the truth. He knew he was not functioning with full efficiency, but

he was recovering. In an effort to divert Kirk from his obvious intention to worry about him, Spock considered the Human thoughtfully.

"Astonishing," he said at last.

"What is?"

"That my gentle companion should prove to have so much determination. Only you could have compelled me to rest quite so thoroughly for so long. You are worse than McCoy."

"Not really. Anyway, it's for your own good. I can be very stubborn when your welfare's concerned."

"I had noticed." There was a subtle change in Spock's tone, a note that brought Kirk's eyes to his face warily. "I don't know what you mean."

"I heard your 'bargain' with Iain Scott." Spock stood and touched Kirk's face. "You were so ruthlessly determined to take any punishment on yourself to spare me. I could not but think of a sehlat's defence of her cub."

Kirk choked back laughter at the thought of Spock as a helpless bundle of fur. "You've protected me," he said quietly. "Could I do less for you?"

"No, you could not. And now you realise it, t'hy'la."

"Yes, I do, don't I? The bond isn't one-sided any more."

"I never thought that it was."

Their eyes held, then Kirk, remembering that Spock should have been resting, glanced at the computer terminal. "What were you up to?" he asked accusingly.

"Nothing strenuous, I assure you. Merely catching up on Federation news." He indicated the package in Kirk's hand. "I see that you have been shopping. Is that by any chance for me?" Through the bond, he knew that it was.

Kirk coloured, and held out the gift. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," he said resignedly, "but I just couldn't resist it. It's not exactly... Oh, well, here." He thrust the box into Spock's hands.

The coloured ribbons and paper were removed and folded neatly, then Spock raised the lid of the box and lifted out the contents. He extended his hand, the object balanced on his palm.

"It's a duck," Kirk said helpfully. "Plastic. For your bath, remember?"

"For my bath? What purpose does it serve?"

"Oh... You wind it up, and it swims in little circles."

"Indeed."

"And... er... it quacks."

"Quacks."

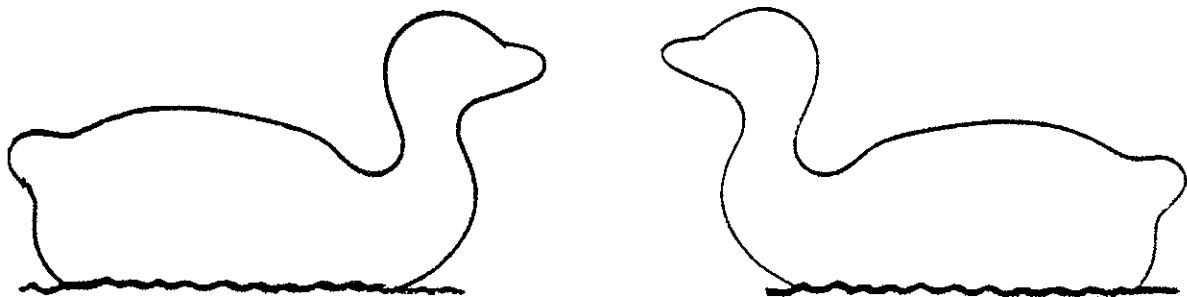
"It's supposed to be fun." Kirk's voice held a wary note and he began

backing towards the door.

The Vulcan set the toy down and pursued him steadily. "Jim, one of us is entering his second childhood, and I have not observed that *I* am guilty of such a lapse."

"Try it - you might like it," Kirk advised, opening the door and noting with glee that the corridor was busy - safety in numbers. Turning back, he delivered his parting shot. "Maybe you'll start a new trend, sitting in your bath blowing bubbles and playing with your duck."

It was then that Kirk discovered that one Vulcan at least was quite prepared to pursue his mischievous bondmate down a crowded corridor with a gleam in his eye that promised certain retribution...



Kirk relaxed with a tired sigh. His bondmate glanced at him, a trace of concern in his eyes. Earth had ended up as less of a rest than they had anticipated, and their leave was coming to an end; Spock hoped that spending the last few days of it on Vulcan, being fussed over by T'Pau, would relax his friend sufficiently to let him return to the Enterprise ready for their next mission. (His own tiredness he could ignore; now that they were home, he could afford to take the time to re-enter the healing trance that had been interrupted, knowing that here there was no potential danger to his bondmate... except, possibly, that of being fussed to death by their womenfolk.) He hoped, too, that it would be a nice routine boring one - like star charting; utterly straightforward, a job that could be left to Kirk's staff with only a minimum of supervision by the Science Officer. Such a mission would give Kirk the time to unwind completely that he had not really had on leave - this far. Oh, the first days on Earth had been very pleasant, he could not deny that; but the strain of coping with Iain Scott, especially when he had had the added difficulty of worrying about Spock's condition, had undone all the good that the trip up till then had done. Jim was tired - very tired; the exhaustion that came with mental tension, that no amount of mere sleep could relax.

The door opened, and T'Pau came in, accompanied by Tavara; both carried trays. Kirk sat up with what, to Spock's anxious eyes, was a positive effort.

"Coffee?" Kirk said, his voice too bright. "And rabaki! T'Pau, you're an angel! You too, Tavara," he added hastily.

"It's a long journey from Earth," T'Pau said, almost indulgently.

Kirk chuckled. "You sound as if you think we did the entire journey without any provision for meals," he accused.

"You can't make me believe that any ship feeds her crew or passengers properly," T'Pau told him firmly. "Oh, I grant you may get plenty on your plate, but it's all reconstituted convenience food - not good nourishing meals."

"Mother, that is all we ever get on the Enterprise," Spock said, as amused as Kirk. "It's all very carefully balanced for vitamin content, protein, bulk - perfectly nourishing. Though I admit," he added, "it doesn't taste half as good as your cooking." He helped himself to a rabaka and bit into it with deliberately exaggerated satisfaction.

"Mmmm." Kirk mumbled his agreement round the last mouthful of his first rabaka as he reached for a second.

Greedy, Spock admonished him, amusement in his thought.

If you waste time talking instead of eating, of course you'll fall behind, Kirk retorted. "How are the children, Tavara?"

"Sleeping just now," Tavara said. "T'var said her first word yesterday. She is more advanced than her brother."

T'Pau nodded. "Much more advanced; I would not look for a child to be talking for some weeks yet."

The two women embarked on the tale of the children's development. They did indeed seem very advanced for their age, even making allowances for the natural pride of their elders - T'var, as her mother kept repeating, rather more so than Samel (after a lengthy discussion they had decided to name the boy for Kirk's grandfather) but that meant little;



girls did tend to be faster developers than boys for the first years, then the boys caught up. They had reached an age, too, where practically every day was seeing a change. Kirk suspected that the little girl was her mother's favourite, proud though she had been to have given her husbands a son.

The men listened, interested enough in the children although not finding the subject as absorbing as the women obviously did, but glad of a topic of conversation that was wholly undemanding - all they had to do was listen. The tale was interrupted by Sarek, who came in, cutting off T'Pol in mid-sentence.

"It is good to see you again, my sons," he said quietly but sincerely. "Wife, our sons are not particularly interested in the minutiae of the children's lives - although they are far too polite to tell you so!" The look he gave the two said clearly, *Women!*, and Kirk's lips curved in an irrepressible grin.

He's as proud of the children as Mother and T'Pol, Spock commented, his amusement better concealed.

Of course, Kirk replied. Grandparents always are as proud of their grandchildren as if they had produced them themselves.

Among Humans, perhaps. Consideringly.

Sarek is proof that Vulcans are just the same. Positively.

Kirk finished his second cup of coffee and stretched luxuriously.

"You are tired, Jim," T'Pol said, anxiety showing briefly in her expression.

"A bit," he admitted, yawning unashamedly.

"You should lie down for an hour," T'Pol told him.

It would be advisable, Spock agreed.

Mother hen! Kirk accused.

You do need a rest, Jim, Spock reminded him.

I know, he conceded. But you do, too. You haven't completely recovered... Will you manage if I'm out of the room? anxiously.

I did not have the mental strain that you did, even though I did have the problem of the interrupted trance, Spock told him. I'm not about to try a cross-country marathon over the Sas-a-Shar, t'hy'la. I intend to do nothing more energetic than sit here, have another cup of coffee and one more rabaka, and talk to Sarek.

Kirk glanced at him suspiciously, and the Vulcan's eyes smiled reassuringly.

"I wouldn't mind a nap," Kirk conceded. He helped himself to the last rabaka on the plate, and grinned mischievously at his bondmate. "Wake me in time for dinner!"

T'Pol will bring me more, Spock told him smugly.

Kirk snorted. T'Pol looked slightly puzzled - she had not really seen enough of her husbands to understand them, but she would probably have

had difficulty doing so anyway; even Vulcan habit, which she was just beginning to understand after a year and a half of observation and instruction, was totally different in so many ways from Vanlan, and showing affection through teasing was no part of the Vanlan way of life. That it was hardly the Vulcan way either did not seem to have occurred to her unpredictable husbands. Sarek and T'Pol both smiled indulgently, obviously understanding something that T'Pol knew she had missed, and T'Pol glanced at the younger woman.

"Go and get some more rabaki for Spock, daughter."

See? Spock demanded.

Smartass! Kirk bit into his rabaka as he walked out of the room, with a smile thrown backwards at his parents.

Once Kirk was safely out of the room, and T'Pol had followed him en route to the kitchen, Sarek looked at Spock, a new and very serious expression on his face. "Spock, Selek wishes to speak with you as soon as convenient."

Spock looked at the older Vulcan, his eyes half accusing. Why the delay in telling him? "Do you know the reason?"

"Yes. It is a matter of Family pride - indeed, it is a matter of Clan pride, Spock. Jim too must know of it, but I could see that the journey has tired him," he explained, a questioning note in his voice. A routine trip from Earth should not have been so arduous for someone accustomed to space travel, especially since they had just taken some leave time on Earth. "Another hour or two makes little difference; enough time for him to be told after he has rested."

Spock nodded. "We had some problems on Earth," he admitted. Then he straightened. "Selek is at home?"

At his father's nod, Spock continued, "I will contact him immediately."

Selek's face shimmered onto the viewscreen. He looked grave, yet at the same time both ashamed and annoyed - a mixture of expressions that at any other time would have fascinated Spock, who would not have considered any Vulcan's face, even in this universe, so much more open than his own, capable of showing such a complex mixture of emotions.

The older Vulcan did not give Spock time to begin, but spoke immediately.

"Spock, it is my unpleasant duty to inform you that the traitor Sher'la has escaped from our custody, and we have been unable to find him again. His escape was not due to any laxity on the part of his jailers, I assure you; the guard at his door was rendered unconscious by a stun grenade. In other words, nephew, Sher'la was rescued.

"His family denies all knowledge of him - indeed, his uncle, the head of his Family, who was his guardian after the death of his mother, publicly disowned him at the time of his trial."

Anger that he was totally unable to control blazed in Spock's eyes. He drew a deep, would-be calming breath, desperately attempting to shield until he could react more rationally. Jim *would* have to be told, of

course, but not until Spock could control this killing rage. "I trusted you," he said coldly, and for a moment Selek knew fear, for he recognised Spock's fury and knew how much more dangerous a cold anger was than a hot flame that burned then died down again. Who could know better than a Vulcan the bloodlust that a Vulcan could suffer if the provocation were sufficient.

"I owe you compensation," he admitted quietly.

Spock gave an impatient gesture. "Unnecessary," he said stiffly. "But the braka'va must be recaptured."

"We have searched, Spock - believe me, we have searched. There has been no sign of him."

"When did this happen?" The discipline of years was reasserting itself, Spock was relieved to realise. He did not enjoy losing control of his reactions even although this universe did not condemn such emotional openness as his own would have done.

"Four days ago."

"He could be off Vulcan by now."

"It is unlikely," Selek replied. "Only two ships have been permitted to leave Vulcan during that time, and then only because all the personnel aboard could be fully accounted for by the authorities. Several other vessels remain in orbit - and will remain in orbit for a thousand years, if necessary, despite the protests of their Captains or owners, because not all of the men aboard have full documentation and so cannot be properly identified - even although the Vulcan authorities have checked them against the records of the traitor. All Vulcan is anxious to recapture him." He hesitated. "You trusted me once with the custody of him, and I have failed that trust. But any assistance I can give you now is yours to command."

"If I require your aid, I will indeed request it," Spock replied formally and with deceptive quietness. Selek, recognising the quietness for the control that it was, merely lowered his head in acknowledgement, saying no more. His image faded.

Spock sat motionless, his lips tightly compressed as he fought to subdue his anger, controlled though it now was. A light mental touch made him jump.

Spock? What's wrong?

He would not lie to his bondmate, even to let him rest for this hour. Sher'la. He's been rescued. The mental tone was vicious.

Oh. There was a brief mental silence. Who would want to rescue him? His family?

Selek says not - that they disowned him.

Sendak, then? Kirk's thought was quietly speculative, and it calmed Spock more than any attempting soothing could have done.

I would hardly think so. Spock frowned slightly as he considered his bondmate's suggestion. He has no love for us, certainly, and he would not break his heart if we were both to die suddenly, but he does fear Selek's anger... he does not yet know mine. It is possible that he might guess how angry I must be at this escape; he does know how angry Selek is. I think he would not risk it.

That leaves the Orions, then.

Surely not. They obviously considered him expendable, and they would have little interest in an agent who failed... and was captured.

The door opened behind Spock and he turned to welcome his bondmate's physical presence. Kirk crossed straight to him and laid a reassuring hand on his shoulder. He raised his own to cover it. "We must find him, Jim. It is a matter of Family honour... he is a traitor to Vulcan; but he injured you, therefore his punishment was left in the hands of our Family. Although he was sentenced and served part of his punishment, we - our entire Clan - will be shamed and disgraced if we simply let him go."

"Was that the case in the other universe, Spock? Can you be sure it is the same here?"

"No, it was not the case in the other universe, although even there a Vulcan had the right to avenge any insult or injury to his bondmate." Spock's voice was grim. "No Vulcan anywhere, in any universe, would be so lost to honour as to ignore, much less forgive, such a deliberately-inflicted injury. It is our honour, as it is our duty, to defend our bondmates. You know that already, Jim; I expect you to continue to defend me as I will always defend you."

Kirk reached out impulsively and gripped Spock's arm. "Never doubt it, t'hy'la," he murmured. "Never doubt it."

Their eyes met, silently reaffirming their total commitment. Finally and firmly, Spock brought their attention back to the matter under present consideration, saying, "Jim - why do you think the Orions should even want to rescue the traitor?"

"I'm not sure," Kirk said slowly. "But if his family disowned him, who else would want to rescue him? *Would* anyone else care?"

"Nobody that I can think of," Spock confessed.

"As for a reason... could he perhaps have known more than we thought?"

Spock shook his head. "He knew nothing worthwhile. He was a spy, nothing more; employed only to pass on such information as might be of advantage to his Orion masters. I imagine there could be a thousand spies like him in the Federation, if we could only find them... not doing any immediate harm, though who knows what harm they might do in the long term."

"*Could* he have mind-shielded? Somehow hidden something important that he knew - even the name of the main Orion spy on Vulcan?"

Spock's lips tightened. "I would not have expected him to be able to hide anything from a mind-probe such as Selek subjected him to when we captured him - at the very least, I would have expected Selek to detect that he was hiding something. But it is not altogether impossible."

"So let's assume that he did know something - something that the Orions considered important," Kirk said.

"Whether he does or not, he must be recaptured." There was no forgiveness in Spock's voice - or in his thoughts, when Kirk touched his mind lightly. "He must be punished."

"For his treachery," Kirk said firmly. "Not for our personal vengeance."

Slowly, Spock capitulated. "You are too forgiving, t'hy'la. So be it. For his treachery. But let Selek think it is for vengeance too. We will require his assistance if we are to obtain an extension to our leave so that we can search for the braka'va."

Kirk looked at his bondmate, slightly startled. "We?" he asked. "Surely the authorities..."

"Oh, yes," Spock agreed. "The authorities will be searching too. But honour demands that we, who were personally injured by his actions, also search."

Of course, Kirk thought. "Where do we begin? What ships have left Vulcan since he escaped?"

Spock smiled. "We think alike, my friend... and the authorities thought of it also. Only two, Selek said, and the crews of both were fully checked. Vulcan is most thorough in matters such as this - where honour is concerned."

"Hmmm." Kirk's grunt held a note of scepticism. "Spock, if I wanted to rescue someone from another planet, I'd have a small ship standing by - a racer, perhaps, hiding just out of sensor range, ready to nip in, pick him up and leave again, fast - though in that case there would be no margin for error and it might be detected beforehand... or, even better, a perfectly legal ship in orbit with full documentation for all the crew, who would be totally loyal to my interests... and documents for one other person - the man to be picked up."

"If either of these ships had been Orion, as you suspect..."

Kirk shook his head. "Too obvious, Spock. If I was rescuing a Human, I'd use... oh, a Vulcan ship with a mixed crew. Not a Human one. Never a Human one."

Their eyes met. "Jim, there are times when your mind is as devious as... that of the Jim Kirk of the other universe..."

"Let's have another word with Selek - now," Kirk suggested.

It was Selek's secretary who answered their call, but as soon as he saw who was calling, he transferred the call to his senior's office with what was almost flattering haste.

The older Vulcan looked strained, Kirk decided as he carefully positioned himself behind Spock, one hand on his bondmate's shoulder.

"Spock... James." Selek acknowledged the Human's right to be involved. Spock thought he could detect slight relief in his 'uncle's' general demeanour, and decided that his own obvious control was probably the cause; the first anger was past without Spock demanding immediate reparation, and Selek clearly knew that now he would not be called to account for his possible laxity in permitting the prisoner to be rescued. There was even a trace of gratitude in the glance that Selek threw at Kirk, as if he knew full well that he had the Human to thank for Spock's present control.

"Selek, Spock has told me your news," Kirk began. "We are agreed that Humans have more devious thought processes than Vulcans; and with that in mind, I've been wondering how I would go about rescuing someone in such a

situation - and it's made me suspicious. You told Spock that two ships were allowed to leave - what was their nationality, and how thorough were the checks on their personnel?"

"One was Tellarite, the other Terran. The check was very thorough, even by Vulcan standards."

"Their crews?"

"The Tellarite had a Human communications officer and chief engineer, both female, and an Andorian medical officer. Since Tellarites lack manual dexterity they usually employ other races for those positions."

Kirk grunted. A Vulcan could not be disguised as any of those races overnight. Selek went on.

"The Terran was a University-owned vessel here to give students experience on a field study - a geological survey of part of the Sas-a-Shar desert." Selek had not, Kirk noted, questioned the way in which he had taken command, and was in fact answering as if the Human had every right to do so. "The ship has been here before - indeed, it is a fairly regular visitor - and the crew is mostly known to the Vulcan authorities, although there is of course the occasional change as someone retires or changes his employment. The lecturers are also known, and the students were all vouched for by them. We did not suspect them at all, but checked their credentials as a matter of course before permitting them to leave. They were most co-operative."

Which could in itself be suspicious, Kirk thought cynically, realising that the Vulcans, themselves a very open race, could easily be hoodwinked by the appearance of honesty and total compliance.

Selek went on. "In addition, the University vessel had been here long enough for the students to be known to the staff of the hostel where they were staying. There were no unknown faces among them when they left."

Kirk nodded, accepting that. "They were returning to Earth?"

"Yes."

"And the Tellarite?"

"Was a Trader. She had cargo for Benecia, and hoped to pick up a further cargo there. She had stopped here to pick up supplies, and her flight plan was declared and countdown begun before the escape. They were not best pleased at the delay; although they co-operated it was under protest, and it is my judgement that guilty men would have protested less."

Kirk nodded. It was a shrewd assessment, and one he would have expected from the experienced Selek, but no longer was he the naive innocent that the Captain had found so easy to trick; his suspicious Human mind said that this was an ideal way to appear innocent - to plan a rescue but wait till the last minute before executing it.

On the other hand, such a rescue would demand split second accuracy, and the Tellarites were not known for split second anything, being as they were a relatively slow-moving, slow-thinking race - intelligent enough, but very deliberate in everything they did.

"So taking everything into consideration, if someone was sneaked on board one of those two ships, it would have to have been the Tellarite?"

"Yes, but I assure you, there was no-one of even vaguely Vulcan

appearance on board."

"Mhm. What about the boxes of supplies? Could anyone have hidden in any of those?"

"All on board before the rescue. We would have detected anything being beamed aboard after they were cleared for departure, anyway."

Kirk nodded, knowing that at one time smugglers had done well out of beaming goods aboard their ships after filing their departure and flight plans, until one had become too ambitious and created suspicion in even the trusting Vulcans. The lesson, once learned, had not been forgotten, and routine scanning for illegal transporter use was carried on now round the clock.

"Then in your opinion, sir, he is still on Vulcan?"

"Yes, James; either on Vulcan or in one of the ships still in orbit. Crewmembers have been transported both up and down from most of them - many of them still had business to attend to on Vulcan, and we had no good reason to deny them the right to pursue it."

"With respect, sir, that could have been a mistake. There was nothing to stop him being beamed up to one of those ships, and once he was there, steps could be taken to alter his appearance. They have had four days already, and each day that passes gives them more time."

Selek shook his head. "Everyone leaving - or, more importantly, joining - one of the ships has had to identify himself. We may be a trusting race, James, but we are not stupid."

"My apologies, sir - I was merely trying to cover all the possibilities."

"I realise that, nephew. When honour is concerned, we all tend to be extremely... over-suspicious," Selek finished.

'Paranoid' is the word you want, Kirk thought wryly, grateful for Selek's understanding. He could so easily have taken offence - except, of course, that he was on the defensive himself, feeling himself at fault for not having Sher'la guarded more securely.

"Why are the other ships still uncleared?" Spock asked, realising that it was time he put in a word.

"There are various reasons. It is not unknown, I gather, for traders to kidnap men for their crews, or to recruit crewmen from among the petty criminals of some planet who, for some reason possibly connected with the law, might wish to leave, to move on. Such men may indeed settle to the life quite contentedly, for it can be a lucrative one - but they have no papers, no official identity. Normally that does not matter; if they leave the ship, it is to rejoin the world of petty crime that abounds around the spaceports of certain planets, or to apply for citizenship of one of the frontier worlds, where men are needed and nobody is going to bother asking where they come from. Others come from home worlds that are somewhat lax about registering births. For example, one of the men up there does not even exist - according to the records of his home planet of Janivar; he is the only reason that *his* ship is still here, so we tried tracing his records on his home world, in an attempt to be helpful." Selek gave a half shrug. "According to the records, there is a total population on Janivar of about six hundred people, all over fifty - it was colonised by a group of anarchists approximately thirty years ago. Records exist only for members of that group. They have resisted all attempts to

persuade them to register births - or deaths - and very few of them ever leave their planet. This one appears to have been outlawed, and we can only guess at his crime if a group of anarchists regard it so seriously.

"Then there's a Human from Heska 3 who is officially a first generation colonist one hundred and eighty six years old. He said that all the first-born males of his family have the same name - he has the same name as his father, grandfather, great-grandfather... need I go on? The family never considered it necessary to travel the hundred miles or so from their home to the nearest registry office just because someone had died or a woman had 'dropped another brat' - I quote. I was left with the impression that they regarded marriage itself as unnecessary, too; that they simply took a woman to live with them; even though she held the position of wife in fact, she was not so in name." He sounded disapproving.

Kirk grinned. "That seems to be fairly typical of many Terran farmers in a colonising situation," he said. "Their sense of priorities is... quite markedly different from that of a long civilised world." He sighed. "Thank you, sir. One last question, if I may. Would it have been possible for a small, fast vessel to have sneaked in and away again, without being detected?"

Selek shook his head. "Impossible," he said positively. "The planet's defence system would have detected such an approach and raised an alarm while the intruder was still... quite some distance away."

Kirk smiled to himself. *He's a cautious old bird, he commented irreverently. We're Starfleet officers, you're a Vulcan and we're both members of his family, and he still won't trust us with details of how sensitive Vulcan's defence system is.*

He is correct, Jim.

Of course he is, Kirk agreed. I'm not criticising him, Spock, I agree with him - but how many men in his position would have slipped up there, considering who he is talking to?

It is because he does not slip up that he holds the position he does, Spock pointed out.

"Then we will assume that he is still on Vulcan," Kirk said, with hardly a pause to let Selek suspect that his nephews had held a private conversation.

"Uncle, can you obtain an extension of our leave?" Spock asked.

Selek nodded. "Of course. But since you remain to look for an Orion spy, a traitor to Vulcan, I can arrange for you to be assigned the task officially - at least for a time. The resources of the Enterprise could prove most useful at this time... "

"We will begin the search immediately," Spock said firmly, and switched off the viewer.

"Tomorrow," Kirk said. He glared down Spock's attempted objection. "Tomorrow, t'hy'la. We're both tired - you know that. We're going sit quietly, relax, you can talk to Sarek about music and I'll talk to T'Pau about the gardens - I haven't told her about Inverewe yet and Alasdair's interest in getting some Vulcan plants, and whatever happens I don't want to forget to put them in touch. If Tavera wants to bring the children down for a while, too, that'll be all the better - we haven't seen anything of them yet. We'll have a nice peaceful dinner and try to forget about

Sher'la for tonight. The most we're going to do about him is contact the Enterprise and tell Charlene to initiate a surface scan for Orion readings."

Spock looked searchingly at his bondmate, seeing and delighting in the instinctive command ability that the Captain would have considered a threat, aware that Kirk himself had not realised how fully he was giving orders to his commanding officer. "Yes, Captain." As always, his voice held that note of subtle satisfaction.

Kirk realised abruptly what he had been doing, flushed, then said firmly, "I won't permit my bondmate to overtire himself."

Spock smiled, his eyes very warm. "As I said, Jim - the bond is mutual; each of us feels the urge, the need, to protect and care for the other."

Aboard one of the orbiting trading vessels, the Captain cursed with a freedom and fluency that startled even his roughnecked and far from squeamish crew. Every member of that crew had fallen foul of his temper in the last four days, and while they knew the reason well enough - the refusal of the Vulcan authorities to let them leave, which would cost them a fine when their cargo was delivered late that would effectively cancel out their profit from this trip, coupled with the disappearance of the Human engineer, who had beamed down five days ago and had not been seen since - that knowledge did little to reconcile them to their Captain's bad temper. One or two were even talking about deserting, and only the fact that this was Vulcan, with its strict regulations and hostile (to Outworlders) climate had kept them from implementing their proposed mutiny. In all, they considered the missing engineer to be a fool. There were better planets than this one to desert to.

Aboard another, the Captain cursed the laxity of Heskan regulations and threatened to abandon the unfortunate Heskan whose identity could not be properly established because his father had failed to register his birth, and who had neglected to register the birth of his own son who bore the same name...

Aboard yet another, the Captain was sending message after message to his employers in an attempt to get them to intervene and persuade Vulcan to let them leave. The Captain of a fourth contacted Vulcan demanding that they be allowed to beam down their cargo of livestock, which was going through the supply of hay provided for its use during the voyage at a frightening rate. (Vulcan agreed, which was not what the Captain wanted - he had hoped that they would be told that they could leave).

Aboard all of the orbiting ships was frustration, anger - and on all but one, puzzlement, for none had been told why they were not permitted to leave, only that unless their entire crew could be properly identified they must remain at Vulcan. Only one Captain knew... and *his* frustration was possibly greater than that of all the others put together, for the alarm had been raised before the fugitive could be brought aboard...

With worried eyes, T'Pau watched Kirk and Spock leave the house, well aware that neither was entirely fit, and entirely disapproving of the masculine obsession with honour that was taking two tired men to a duty that in her opinion could - and should - be carried out by the Vulcan

authorities who were trained for the task.

The traitor Sher'la had tried to kill her younger son, and T'Pau fully agreed that no punishment could be too severe for him because of that; she had not been satisfied with the sentence that the Family had passed (even although, on Vulcan, 'hard labour' meant arduous, exhausting, backbreaking and usually thoroughly unpleasant work of a nature that the logical Vulcans did not consider should be done by anyone other than a criminal paying his debt to the Family he had wronged. Sher'la had been condemned to dig, single-handed and without the aid of any mechanical implements, irrigation channels for an area Selek's Clan had long had it in mind to reclaim from the desert. They had estimated that the work would take one man at least twenty years, provided the digging all went well and the prisoner applied himself to his work. However, should the ground prove to be particularly rocky, hard or otherwise difficult to trench, or the prisoner prove to be recalcitrant or lazy, it might take thirty or more. The sentence was not to cover a period of time, but rather a particular task that must be completed. The work would be particularly unpleasant because of the irritating dust that would be raised by the digging.)

Once recaptured, Sher'la would find his sentence increased, and T'Pau wholly approved of that; but did it really have to be her sons who had the difficult task of recapturing him?

She did not voice her disapproval, however, knowing that her husband would not agree with her, and that even Tavara felt that Sher'la's escape was a further insult to their Clan and that Spock and Jim had every right to pursue the criminal themselves.

So she saw them off, and even refrained from telling them of her disapproval, although she sensed that her Human son at least probably agreed with her. But Humans, of course, had a different view of honour from the Vulcans. They were further removed from the Warrior past that still - as now - refused to lie down and die.

On the ship, Spock and Kirk found Charlene Masters supervising the sensor scan of the planet with an expression of growing annoyance.

"Report, Miss Masters," Spock ordered, knowing even as he spoke that the report would be negative.

Masters shrugged. "There's no sign of Orion readings within a two hundred mile radius of ShiKahr, sir. I have been assuming that the person involved is on foot, and probably trying to leave the area?"

Spock nodded. "It seems probable," he said, knowing that all aircar traffic would have been suspended except for official vehicles as soon as the escape was discovered, all aircars in flight would have been tracked and checked, and that 'road blocks' would have been set up immediately - and maintained. The drivers of any vehicles attempting to travel across country rather than following the defined routes would have been subject to immediate arrest.

Kirk frowned slightly. Their quarry, then, had either managed to get out of the immediate vicinity of ShiKahr... or was not Orion. And if the Orions had recruited an agent of some other race to rescue Sher'la, then the search for him could well be very extended.

"A Vulcan and an alien together shouldn't be that hard to spot," McCoy argued. "That's assuming Sher'la was rescued, of course."

It had been impossible to prevent McCoy from attending what should have been a Family council. He claimed his right to attend as the Doctor who would have to patch up the principal searchers should anything go wrong and either of them be hurt - also as the Doctor who had been present at the time of Sher'la's original attack on Kirk. He had found an answer to every argument that had been advanced to keep him out, and at heart neither Kirk nor Spock was sorry to have him there. T'Pol, too, was glad of his presence - indeed, although neither of them would ever admit it, it was T'Pol who had told McCoy the best arguments to use in persuading the Family that he should attend their deliberations.

Selek, head of the Family, gave a most unVulcan shrug. "There is no other possible explanation for his escape. His guards were lesser members of the Clan, proud to be given the honour of warding the man who had wronged one of their kin; all have offered themselves for disciplining because they failed in their duty." He was looking at Kirk as he spoke, and the Human suddenly realised that he, as the victim of Sher'la's attack, was expected to decree the punishment for the helpless guards who had allowed his assailant to escape.

"Unnecessary," he said quietly. "You said that the guard at Sher'la's door was rendered unconscious by a stun grenade; there was no defence he could have made. I do not consider that they failed in their duty. They were as much the victims of Sher'la's treachery as I was. If you feel that their pride demands some punishment, let it be a token punishment only."

Selek glanced at Spock, who nodded. "I agree," he said. "We who serve in Starfleet know that a man may fail in his duty through no fault of his own, but rather through force of circumstance. It is not just to punish him for that."

"You are both wise, for all you are so young," Selek said quietly.

If he only knew! Kirk thought. *You must be around the same age as he is, t'hy'la?*

Around the same age, Spock agreed.

"I will inform them of your clemency," Selek continued, happily unaware of the rapid, silent exchange. He turned his attention back to McCoy's comment. "They could have separated by now. Sher'la, at least, will know that all Vulcan will be intent on recapturing him. We do not regard treachery lightly. He would certainly suggest that he and his rescuer separate. They will probably have a rendezvous somewhere, possibly even a method of contacting each other, in case they see a chance of escaping the planet."

"Vulcan is a big planet," McCoy said gloomily, "and even although it is not highly populated, finding one Vulcan..."

"It is not impossible," Sarek replied seriously. "The fact that our planet is not heavily populated works in our favour. On Earth it is easy for someone to move to one of the big cities, easy to lose himself in the crowd; nobody notices a stranger, for there are so many people there that almost everyone *is* a stranger. On Vulcan, however, no city is so big that a stranger can suddenly appear without question - on Earth, our biggest cities would be considered as fairly small towns. And even Vulcans can be curious about strangers." His voice held a dry matter-of-factness. "A stranger must have a logical reason for moving to a new city, otherwise he

will be regarded with... " He hesitated, then shook his head. "I am sorry, Doctor - the concept has no adequate translation.

"The authorities in all cities will be especially alert for any strangers entering their jurisdiction until they are informed of the recapture of the traitor," he added. "It will make life somewhat... difficult for anyone going about his lawful business, but everyone knows that when such inconvenience occurs, there is a good reason for it, and they will co-operate without question."

McCoy looked from one Vulcan face to another. All bore the same grimly unforgiving expression, and he had no doubt that it was true. Petty crime was unknown on Vulcan; so anyone that Vulcan considered to be a criminal had indeed done something that all Vulcans would consider unpardonable, and all Vulcans would certainly consider it logical that they should suffer inconvenience if it would assist in the capture - or recapture - of that criminal.

"What about the other man?" T'Pol, attending as Matriarch of the family (as opposed to the Family) involved, asked. "He should surely be punished for assisting the traitor to escape."

Spock shook his head. "We do not even know what race we are looking for," he said, a slightly dispirited note in his voice. "There are too many Outworlders on Vulcan these days - no, no, Doctor, I do not include present company. My bondmate and our Doctor are considered to be Vulcan." He allowed a note of amusement to creep into his voice. "It was not entirely your persuasive manner that won you admittance to this meeting; had we not considered you to be an adopted member of the Family, you would have been restrained, forcibly if necessary, from participating. No - I am referring to the many Outworlders who live in all the main cities - Ambassadors and their staffs, workers at the spaceports, some research personnel working for the Science Academy, employees of a Terran firm mining in the R'Kaal desert, to say nothing of rich Outworlders here on holiday - and unfortunately, they are less willing than Vulcans to co-operate, especially since we have given no explanation for the restrictions. The existence of a traitor is something we are not proud of and will not readily admit.

"It may be, of course, that they are aware of being regarded with *kr'anik* - being unaware that even Vulcans in a strange town are so regarded."

He looked at McCoy. "Vulcans, Doctor, are for the most part very conservative in their attitudes - change is not welcomed even when it is beneficial, and its acceptance is reluctant. We live by Tradition. Few Outworlders realise this... and even fewer make the attempt to understand the Vulcan way." He permitted himself a half smile. "It is, of course, possible that we are also at fault, for we make little, if any, effort to inform others of our customs. Therefore many Outworlders offend, unknowingly... and each offence is regarded by many Vulcans as yet another reason for limiting contact."

McCoy stared at him, his expression one of mild disbelief. "Very conservative?" he asked. "Your family, at least, could hardly be accused of that."

"It is true that some Families - and even some individuals of other Families - are more outward-looking than most, more... tolerant of change. Our Family has long been regarded as... quite untraditional, almost indecently prepared to consider new ideas," Selek admitted, half ruefully. "Yet we have our Traditionalists. Sendak, for example, is extremely traditional in his thinking." He sounded almost disappointed.

"The one reading we have been totally unable to detect is Orion," Kirk told T'Pol quietly, realizing that even these 'unTraditional' Vulcans were being sidetracked into a philosophical discussion that might continue for hours, leaving T'Pol's question unanswered. "Apart from the Ambassadorial staff of all Federation planets, the aliens on Vulcan are mostly Human. There are a few Andorians, two Tellarites and a Catullan that we have pinpointed, as well as one or two readings that we haven't been able to identify exactly - they're probably hybrids. We've been able to check out some of the aliens - several are traders, some are crew from ships that haven't been allowed to leave, getting in a bit of shore time, the Catullan and several of the Humans are engineers employed by the firm working on the irrigation project at Tola'k'a - then there are the miners at R'Kaal, mostly Human. There are a few who are on holiday and a couple who are on a business trip; and a group of students working at the archaeological survey at Sharrasin in the Sas-a-Shar. The ones we can't check out at all are the personnel working at the Shikahr spaceport - that's considered 'international' territory. Vulcan has been able to suspend the use of the spaceport transporters as an emergency measure, but has no right to demand proof of identity from any man working in the port."

T'Pol, who had paid little enough attention to her husband's diplomatic career, being more interested in the smooth running of his household, nodded her understanding of the situation.

"... believe that Outworlder custom is eroding Vulcan Custom," Selek was saying to McCoy. "I believe that any Custom that is eroded is unworthy of being followed. Many of our Traditions have no relevance in the changed circumstances of modern times."

"Agreed, Uncle," Spock put in, catching the *Isn't Selek wasting time?* that Kirk was thinking. "However, this is not helping us to find Sher'la."

"The one positive fact that we have is that he is hiding somewhere... possibly, but not positively known to be, along with whoever helped him to escape."

"That person cannot be a Vulcan," Selek said firmly, repeating the by now well-worn argument that nobody was denying. "Can we be certain that it was an Orion?"

The question, which Kirk had already asked himself, caused a momentary silence.

"That had occurred to me," Kirk said ruefully. "The lack of Orion readings seems to make it fairly certain that it was not. It could have been an Orion-employed outworlder of any race; though Human does seem the most likely - some Humans would sell their grandmothers if the price was right, I'm afraid."

"Humans are expert dissemblers," Selek conceded.

"He means we're damn' good liars," McCoy told Kirk in a muttered aside.

"He's right, too," Kirk agreed drily. "Humans are also the universe's best actors; that's why they make the best spies."

Spock caught his bondmate's words. He picked up the thread of Kirk's comment instantly. "Humans can also be disguised relatively easily as almost any race."

Selek had missed the quiet exchange, and picked up on Spock's point. "So," he said, "the traitor could have been rescued by an 'Orion' who is

now a Human... and probably unidentifiable."

"Does it really matter?" Kirk asked. "To us, that is. Oh, I can see that the presence of an Orion spy on Vulcan needs to be investigated, but does it have to be investigated by us? It's Sher'la that we want to recapture... and make sure that he can never escape again," he finished grimly.

Selek nodded approvingly, blissfully unaware that Kirk was unconcerned with Sher'la's crime against himself but was instead considering the renegade Vulcan's betrayal of his planet - and through it, the Federation.

"Of course," Spock added, seeing that Selek did look somewhat doubtful about the first part of Kirk's comment, "if we *do* discover who helped Sher'la to escape and can thus capture him, so much the better; but I agree with my bondmate, that he is of secondary importance to our Clan."

Selek nodded slowly, thoughtfully. "By rescuing the traitor, he insulted us... but as you say, he is of secondary importance. It is no shame to the Clan if we do not capture him, though it would of course be preferable if we could."

Sarek nodded gravely. The two Humans glanced at each other, a resigned look that spoke volumes concerning their views of the Vulcan attitude that was saying 'Family pride is more important than National pride'. T'Pol alone showed no obvious reaction to Selek's pronouncement.

"We still have the problem of where to begin looking," McCoy reminded them gruffly.

Kirk frowned. "I'd say the spaceport bars," he suggested. "We can get selected members of the crew to visit various of them, in civilian dress, listening - hard." He glanced at Spock. "I'll get that organised as soon as possible."

Spock looked hard at his bondmate. Kirk met his gaze firmly.

I'm perfectly able to do that, t'hy'la.

You intend to be one of those 'selected members of the crew' yourself. It was an accusation.

Spock, Selek will expect it, and you know that even though he accepts us, we still have to be careful. I couldn't survive a month of the sort of punishment Sher'la got!

Unfortunately, you're right; but be careful, t'hy'la. Spock saw no need to remind Kirk that as the actual, rather than the intending killer of a Vulcan, his punishment would have been far worse than that meted out to Sher'la.

I promise, Kirk grinned with a cheerfulness he was not altogether feeling.

Roland Friers sat at the bar table, staring moodily at the half empty glass of what-passed-for-beer-on-Vulcan that sat in front of him. It was not that he was normally a heavy drinker; in his work a taste for strong liquor was a positive disadvantage - indeed, it was a positive danger! But just occasionally - as now - he felt the need for a good strong drink - and good strong drink was something almost totally unobtainable on Vulcan. The

Vulcan Elders might reluctantly concede that Outworlders had a right to their own customs; they might even more reluctantly concede that those customs included the existence of establishments that sold intoxicating liquids; but they made sure that drunkenness would not be a problem, by taxing liquor according to its alcoholic content, so that most spirits were prohibitively expensive and most of the bars carried nothing but beer that was no stronger than the light Vulcan wines. It was not impossible to get drunk on Vulcan, but the potential drunkard had to work at it; it took a long time and was very expensive.

Bloody Vulcans! he thought.

He had planned so carefully. Three agents, minor cogs in the Orion spy network, had watched the prisoner over a period of weeks, establishing the routine. The methodical Vulcans, having formulated an efficient method of working, never changed it. The prisoner, who was kept in solitary confinement in the cellar of Selek's country house a few miles outside ShiKahr, was roused before dawn, fed, then taken from the cellar at first light and driven to the area where he was working. During the worst heat of the day he was permitted to shelter with his guards in the tent that was their base, where the tools were left overnight - if they were satisfied with the quality and quantity of his work. If they were not so satisfied, he was left to work on, suffering the heat. He worked until dusk, when he was driven back to his prison. Half an hour later, having had time to wash, he was given his evening meal, then locked in for the night. Nobody should have gone near him again until shortly before dawn - 'solitary confinement' also meant what it said; nobody ever spoke to a prisoner in solitary confinement, nor answered him if he spoke.

Friers had timed his raid on Selek's house for an hour after the last lights went out, judging that he would have six hours at least to get Sher'la back to his ship and the ship out of orbit before the escape was discovered. The timing was very tight, but it had to be. They could not afford to hang about once the prisoner was rescued; they had to be clear of Vulcan before the alarm was raised, and he had considered that an overnight escape held more chance of success than one during the day; frequently, and with no regular pattern, the guards at the tent were contacted by communicator, and one such contact just after he knocked them out would give the game away too quickly.

He had not expected anything to go wrong. Neither had his Captain.

Who could have expected the methodical, dumb Vulcans to discover the escape almost before captive and rescuer were safely out of the house? Who could have expected them to react so swiftly, so damn' efficiently, to the unforeseen? Logically, they should have wasted hours discussing what to do!

His Orion employers would not be pleased, but at least they could not blame him for the failure of the initial plan. He had removed their Vulcan from his prison efficiently enough.

Unfortunately, the ball was still firmly in his court. As the man on the spot, it was his responsibility to get Sher'la back to the Orions.

Only one thing puzzled him; why did the Orions, who were notoriously intolerant of ultimate failure, want this one agent who, by being captured, had failed? He had no illusions; if he was captured, the Orions would leave him to his fate without a second thought, useful though he had been to them for so many years, high-ranking in the espionage network though he was. At best they would arrange his death with cold competence, if he had not obeyed, or not had the opportunity to obey, the automatic self-destruct order given to all agents, whether native-born Orions or bought

Outworlders. The Orions worked on the principle that a dead man could not talk. After all, a paid agent might very well defect, deciding that he had not been paid to keep his mouth shut. Academically, Friers was in full agreement; subjectively, he could not be sure that even he, who hated Earth and Vulcan with equal fervour, would choose to die... or, living, remain loyal to his Orion employers if given the choice of an extended prison sentence or freedom on condition that he told them what he knew of Orion spies and spying methods.

So - just why were the Orions wanting this one agent back alive?

Placed as he was, Friers knew that Sher'la had known nothing of importance; he had not even been working for a Vulcan of importance. Selek himself was an influential man, but he had palmed Sher'la off on his son, an unimaginative, solid, typical Vulcan. Sher'la's task had simply been to pass on any information that he thought might be useful to Orion that happened to come his way, and he had done so with typically Vulcan unimaginative conscientiousness. Little enough information had come his way, and Friers was unable to think of a single item of positively useful information that he had sent. He was like any one of a thousand other such agents; useful only because they were there - their Orion employers did not have to worry about possibly important information being lost for lack of a spy to report it. Such agents were relatively easily replaced. Well... perhaps not on Vulcan, whose nationals were proverbial for their loyalty, and Friers wondered again about Sher'la. What price had been sufficient to recruit him?

Morosely, he finished the anaemic beer and slouched out of the bar.

Although the bar itself had been reasonably busy, the area outside was relatively quiet. Friers thought he could guess why; this planet was a hell-hole, inhospitable in every way imaginable to most races, and the crews of the ships still in orbit who were being allowed to come down were undoubtedly unwilling to remain out of doors longer than they must. Even sitting drinking the watery beer was better than standing around in this heat.

The surprising thing was that any Captains were willing to let their crews beam down; there might well be inconvenience attached to retrieving them. Friers knew well enough that nobody was being allowed to use the transporter unless his identity could be proved.

Then ahead of him he saw a familiar figure, and he scowled. Captain Othesi would, he knew, ask him questions for which he had no answers, and would not be pleased by his inability to answer.

That was the trouble with these cadet members of the Orion Royal Family; they had no real importance, but even the most junior of them behaved as if he were in direct line of inheritance. The Orions themselves took the view that even one drop of Royal blood made its possessor almost a god; just where, Friers wondered, did they draw the line? Othesi was the son of the youngest daughter of the youngest daughter of the present King's great-grandfather, and he treasured that position as if it was actually important! Why, there must be a couple of hundred claimants to the throne ahead of him!

With a resigned shrug, Friers increased his speed. The meeting would be no less unpleasant for being postponed...

Chekov took a mouthful of his drink, swallowed, and stared at the



glass with horror. "I thought you said you were getting us beer?" he accused.

Sulu grinned sympathetically. "I did. Haven't you ever been on Vulcan before?"

"Not on the planet," Chekov admitted. "We don't usually take leave time at Vulcan - you know that."

The helmsman's grin widened. "Now you know one of the reasons why. Apart from the heat and the general disapproval of strangers."

"Yes... I did get the feeling that the Vulcans were looking at us as if... well... "

"As if they expected us to do something outrageous, like bursting into song in the middle of the street? They're like that. The Commodore is... unusual that way - once he got used to being around Humans," he added thoughtfully, remembering how the Captain had once kept very much to himself. "I never really understood what Jim Kirk saw in him, back then."

Chekov nodded, remembering how neither the Captain nor the First Officer had mixed with even the most senior of the crew for months, and then, quite suddenly, seemed to have decided that the rest of the crew weren't lepers, after all. "Maybe that was when they were... courting?"

Sulu chuckled. "It sounds funny when you put it that way! But you could be right." He glanced round the bar. It was busy, but not excessively so. They had already been speaking quietly; now he dropped his voice even further. "See anyone you think could be acting suspicious?"

Chekov took a deep breath, and then, with an expression that clearly said 'I do this for Czar and country!' - or perhaps 'for Spock and the Enterprise', he took another mouthful of the coloured water that Vulcan called beer. It gave him the opportunity to glance round. "No."

"Me neither."

"Sulu, do you think lurking in bars is really going to be any good?" Chekov asked. "If I'd just rescued a criminal, and hadn't been able to escape from the area, I think I'd stay under cover."

Sulu swallowed half of his drink before replying. "Depends on whether the fellow responsible was known at all. If I'd been here for a while establishing an identity, I'd stick with my usual routine. If I was a complete stranger, I might stay hidden, unless I realised that doing that could make the men hanging around suspicious. Anyone hanging around a spaceport is likely to be someone who likes a drink."

"And that's a good reason to stay away from here!" Chekov muttered.

They fell silent, apparently intent on their drinks, but with eyes and ears busy...

As the door of the disused warehouse creaked open, the man inside crouched back into a corner, watching the door intently. The new arrival could be the bad-tempered Human - on the other hand, it could be a Vulcan come to inspect the place, with a view to deciding on its future. They were fortunate that this building was currently standing empty; but Sher'la knew, if Friers did not, that they could not depend on it remaining

empty indefinitely. Vulcan did not believe in having derelict buildings standing around, unlike some of the planets Sher'la had visited when he was still in Sendak's service.

He relaxed as he recognised the figure entering. Yes, it was Friers... but the Human was not alone! There was someone with him - a heavily-built man, Sher'la registered as the second man stood outlined in the doorway for a moment before he entered and Friers swung the door shut again.

"Sher'la?"

"Here." The Vulcan stepped forward, flicking on the hand torch that Friers found so necessary in this once-warehouse whose only lighting came from the few windows in the roof... and they were half obscured by dust.

The two men moved forward. Sher'la looked at the second man with some suspicion.

"This is Captain Othesi, Sher'la." Friers was careful to keep his voice neutral. No point in letting either man know that he disliked them both.

The Vulcan was unable to see Othesi's face clearly; the man had a scarf wrapped partway round his face. But the name was informative. "Orion?" he asked.

Othesi grunted an affirmative. "Distant cousin of the King."

"Ah."

"Captain Othesi is the commander of the ship that came to pick you up," Friers said.

"Then why don't you?" Sher'la asked almost petulantly.

"Impossible as matters stand," Othesi growled. He explained the situation concisely, then glared at Friers. "Do you have any ideas, Human?"

Friers' dislike swelled into fully-fledged hatred. 'Human', indeed! He might have been born Human, but he had renounced that nationality years ago. "We could try to blackmail the Vulcans into letting us go," he suggested, carefully masking the hatred. *One day*, he promised himself. But not just yet. He needed Othesi if he was to get off this planet.

"Vulcans do not surrender to blackmail," Sher'la said uneasily.

"No?" The idea was taking deeper and deeper root in Friers' mind. He half smiled. "Never? Perhaps... or perhaps not. There are some things that anyone, even a Vulcan, holds more precious than... not surrendering. I think I might just have found one of them... and if I haven't - " his voice became very cold - "I have found... vengeance for something that happened... many years ago."

It was unusual for Tavara to be so late for breakfast, TPau thought. Of course, it was possible that her daughter-in-law had had a disturbed night - the children were of an age when, in common with all known intelligent races, teething was a definite problem. Both of the children had been giving their mother the occasional disturbed night for some weeks

- sometimes one, sometimes the other, though rarely both, for which Tavana was more than grateful. There had been days when Tavana looked quite tired; while she accepted T'Pau's offer of help during the day readily enough, she consistently refused it at night. Concerned, T'Pau made her way to the younger woman's rooms.

Tavana's bedroom was empty, the bed uncharacteristically untidy. Strange. The door to the nursery was open, but there was no sound from it, so it seemed unlikely that Tavana was there, although it was the most logical place for her to be. Certainly, if the children were sleeping Tavana would be quiet, but it did seem unlikely that the children would both be asleep at this time, and if even one of them was awake, Tavana would be speaking to them. Could the younger woman be in the bathroom? T'Pau glanced round. No - her clothes were here; she was in the habit of taking them into the bathroom with her, and dressing there.

Puzzled, but not alarmed as yet, T'Pau crossed to the inner door and went through it. She froze, horrified.

Tavana lay motionless on the floor, a little pool of drying blood beside her head.

The elderly Vulcan recovered her poise almost instantly. Even as she crossed quickly to kneel beside her daughter-in-law, she realised that both cots were empty. The children had vanished.

She checked Tavana's pulse. It was slow, but steady.

Better not to move her, T'pau decided. She returned to Tavana's room, paused beside the bed, stripped a blanket from it, took it back into the nursery and laid it carefully over the unconscious woman, then left the room rapidly, headed for her husband's study.

There was nothing he could do help the search for the traitor Sher'la. For the moment, that search was in the capable hands of his sons. Having seen the expression on Spock's face, Sarek could almost feel sorry for Sher'la, should they recapture him. Of course, Jim's gentler influence might be sufficient to stay his bondmate's hand, but Sarek knew that he would not like to in the traitor's shoes now. Spock would not leave his punishment in the hands of the Family Council this time! The expression on Spock's face had reminded Sarek of his own son, the throw-back to a more violent past who had died five years previously. That Spock had worn just such an expression so often...

With nothing he could usefully do to help in the search, Sarek had decided to carry on as he normally would, albeit alert enough to give his assistance should it become necessary.

Now he sat almost motionless, listening critically to the tape he had recorded almost a year previously, his mind alert for any flaws. Occasionally he nodded to himself in near approval. This was a good piece, he decided; he must have been quite inspired when he wrote it. He thought back. Yes - he had started work on it the day the twins were born. His high spirits of that day showed clearly in the music.

Ah - a fractional discord; he made a brief note on the pad that lay in front of him. It would take very little to correct that...

The door burst open, and he looked up, startled, the automatic reproof on his lips choked back as he remembered that he could easily be

interrupted at any time until the traitor was recaptured. T'Pau came in, not quite running but certainly in haste.

"T'Pau - ?" he began.

"We must contact the Enterprise," T'Pau told him. "The children are missing, and Tavara attacked. She is lying upstairs, unconscious. She has a head injury that should be tended immediately. Dr. McCoy can get here more rapidly than any Vulcan Healer."

Sarek nodded, reaching out to switch off the tape. "Go and tend to our daughter. I will contact Dr. McCoy - and our sons."

McCoy quickly established that Tavara was not seriously hurt. "She was hit by a... blunt instrument." He couldn't help pausing before uttering the words that generations of detective stories had made cliched, but he was totally unable to think of any other way of expressing what had happened. "Concussion," he went on succinctly, knowing that Vulcans did not need a diagnosis wrapped up in meaningless platitudes designed to make it sound less serious than it was, and even Jim Kirk had come to prefer Vulcan directness to Human 'breaking it gently' in this sort of situation. "Otherwise, no serious injury. She'll have a bad headache when she recovers consciousness, but apart from that, there's nothing to worry about."

While McCoy and Kirk carried the still unconscious woman back the bed which T'Pau had quickly remade, Spock looked round the nursery for any indication of who had done this... and why, although he had his suspicions.

It was unheard-of for a family at home not to be safe. It was even more unheard-of for children to be carried off. No Vulcan would do such a thing!

A breeze from the open window set the curtains flapping, and a piece of paper caught in the draught fluttered across the floor a little way before coming to rest again. The movement caught his eye; he picked up the paper.

If you want to regain your children alive, stop the search for Sher'la and permit all the ships currently in orbit to leave unhindered - and unfollowed.

Melodramatic passed through his mind as anger grew.

Even T'pau was thoroughly incensed by this new insult to their Family.

"We cannot surrender to this blackmail," Selek said firmly, but with sympathy in his eyes as he looked at the bereaved fathers. Tavara, who as mother of the missing children, would normally have been present at this meeting even although she had not been included in the previous one, was not there - McCoy was keeping her heavily sedated, and she was still confined to bed. Both men, Selek noted, were holding themselves well in hand, although both looked worried; and Spock's face also held an expression of cold fury that boded ill for the kidnapper. It was an expression he had not seen on his nephew's face since his bonding.

Kirk kept glancing at Spock uneasily, seeing in him for the first time

a shadow of the Captain, and for the first time a little afraid of his bondmate. Anger he could understand, but not a totally uncontrollable, killing anger, and at this moment he had no faith in his ability to keep Spock from doing something that the normally-gentle Vulcan would bitterly regret when he had time to calm down. His own anger worried him, too; he was not even sure that he would make any attempt to influence Spock either, for he too was outraged that helpless children should be made pawns in Sher'la's game. A great deal would depend on whether they found the children uninjured.

It was Kirk who found the words to answer Selek. "Even if we did, there's no guarantee that men so lost to honour that they would kidnap babies would return them unharmed," he replied, a note of resigned hopelessness mixed with the anger in his voice. "On Earth, kidnap victims are rarely recovered alive. Either they're killed to prevent them from identifying their captors, or they're hidden away somewhere 'safe' and die before they're found. That seems to be the most likely eventuality here; we know of only two men involved - Sher'la and whoever rescued him. One of the ships in orbit must be involved too; but I'd make a guess that none of its crew has actually been on Vulcan. There's nobody else to look after the children once those two beam away."

"And by telling us to let all the ships in orbit leave, they've made sure we wouldn't know which one it is," McCoy added unnecessarily.

Spock regarded him thoughtfully for a moment, then smiled slightly, a calculating look in his eye that for the briefest of instants reminded McCoy of the Captain.

"The ships..." he said slowly. "Yes... the ships. Selek - let the ships leave. Indeed, *force them to leave - but do not permit them to beam aboard any crew member who is currently on the surface.* Any crewman still on Vulcan must remain here. Any ship remaining in orbit after... say... noon, Shikar time, to be taken into custody..."

Understanding dawned in the older Vulcan's eyes. "That should strand the traitor here... and whoever helped him as well."

"So I would expect. The Enterprise can watch the departing ships... and see if any remain in the vicinity - it seems to me that a vessel could easily hide behind one of the other planets in the system. If one should do that - that is the ship we want. I would expect it to return in a few days, possibly under a new name... pretending it has just arrived from somewhere else and believing itself unsuspected, it would then endeavour to pick up its passengers. We permit it to do so... and then intercept it."

Selek nodded. "It might work..." he said pensively. "Yes... it might work."

Kirk glanced at his bondmate. *Spock - if that ship is under Orion orders, it will probably self-destruct when it is intercepted.*

Yes. I know. Spock's mental voice was unforgiving.

We would be responsible for all those deaths.

We are not responsible for the orders given by the Orion government.

Unhappily, Kirk broke the contact. He could only hope that something would happen to prevent such a confrontation. If the worst came to the worst, he was not sure what he could do to reconcile Spock to the realisation that his suggestion had been responsible for many deaths. Kirk knew that he would prefer there to be no killing; that in cold blood,

Spock too would feel the same. If they did die, he would not mourn Sher'la or the unknown who had rescued him, or the Captain of the ship who must know what was going on, but what of the crew? How much did they know? Could they be sure that the crew was privy to the plot to rescue Sher'la?

He glanced at T'Pau, hoping to find an ally in her; but she too was looking grimly pleased at Spock's suggestion. Only McCoy looked doubtful; but Kirk knew that McCoy stood even less chance than he did of influencing Spock at this moment.

'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned' - he remembered the old Earth saying, and shook his head. A woman scorned was like a ministering angel compared to a Vulcan enraged to the point of forgetting everything he had ever lived by.

Aboard the R'hw'angu, Othesi received the departure order and swore violently and comprehensively. The plan had worked... in part. They could leave - but Sher'la and Friers were still on Vulcan.

Had the ships been permitted to retrieve crew still on the planet, the two men could have been beamed aboard with the... well, not crowd, exactly, but certainly hidden by numbers. Could he possibly have beamed Sher'la aboard in the beginning to assume the persona of Friers, a good and useful agent whose loss would be regrettable but who was definitely expendable compared to Sher'la? *No*, he decided. It was impossible to disguise someone as Vulcan-looking as Sher'la as a Human.

Strange how the Vulcan genetic contribution in hybrids seemed so dominant. He could think of only one other Vulcan hybrid - and Spock, the half Human, looked as totally Vulcan as Sher'la, the half-Orion.

Slowly gaining control of his always-brittle temper, Othesi began to consider his alternatives.

They were few.

He had to leave orbit, or be arrested. Indeed, the mere fact of wishing to remain would look suspicious after all the complaints he had made to the Vulcan authorities about being kept here. He *could* point out that he needed his chief engineer, who was on the surface... but that would gain him only Friers, for he could not expect the suspicious Vulcans to allow him to beam up anyone he wanted without checking the man personally - despite the threat to the two brats they had kidnapped. Although ostensibly their demands had been met, no one Vulcan family was powerful enough to over-rule standard regulations.

Yet he dared not return to Orion without Sher'la. His eighth cousin twice removed would have his hide - literally - if he did; and he had no wish to be flayed alive... Not even their relationship, distant though it was, would save him from the wrath of his distant cousin Avresti, fifth in line of succession, who had given him his orders - entrusted him with this mission, that should have been relatively easy, because Othesi was the only man of Royal blood who was also Captain of a ship. The reward for success would have been great; Avresti was especially anxious to retrieve Sher'la, bastard though he was, because an accident some years ago had deprived him of his manhood - he could never sire another son, and a bastard one was better than none... even though he *did* look totally Vulcan.

Othesi's mind was drawn back to that trip so many years before.

Avresti, who had been second in line for the throne then, had been serving aboard a pirate vessel, as all possible Kings must, to prove their ability to lead their world. It was the first time Othesi, already a promising officer, had encountered his very distant relative, but their shared Royal blood, well-diluted though Othesi's share of it was, had been sufficient to draw them together into a kind of wary friendship. Avresti had known that Othesi was no threat to his position, and therefore had been willing to relax with him as he would not have done with someone of closer kinship.

The first two ships they encountered had been small merchantmen, one carrying useless ores so common on Orion that they were used as ballast, the other a load of foodstuffs unpalatable to Orions, although they were a saleable item. The third ship, however, was a passenger liner which had held rich pickings... and among the passengers was a young Vulcan woman, widowed in the attack. She was beautiful in the cold Vulcan style, distant, dignified...

Avresti had looked - and lusted. She would have none of him, looking through him in that arrogantly disdainful fashion the Vulcans affected; totally failing to appreciate the honour he did her.

And then she was taken ill, struck down by a fever that lasted fully a psan. Neglected at first - none of the Orions wanted to risk contracting her fever - she had miscarried on the second day. She had been only a few days pregnant - three weeks at most. Avresti had looked thoughtful, then ordered her tended, and when the bleeding stopped, the woman still being unconscious from the drugs they gave her, Avresti took his pleasure of her. By the time he tired of her and she was permitted to regain consciousness, she was again pregnant, not knowing that the child she now carried was half Orion, and because of the faster rate of development of the Orion young, they knew that it should be born at about the time her original child would have arrived.

Avresti had then offered to ransom her. Her family paid the ransom without protest, apparently unsuspecting - most captives were retained for enslavement - and she was returned to them. In due course, a Human in their spy ring, who was working on Vulcan, reported that she had given birth to a son, slightly prematurely by Vulcan standards, who had been named Sher'la.

Avresti had arranged for first that spy, then others, to keep an eye on Sher'la's progress.

A few years later, the boy's mother had died - apparently she had never fully recovered from the effects of the fever - and Sher'la was reared by an uncle who was very correct in his dealings with his nephew but who was clearly merely doing his duty by the boy. His hybrid heritage had never showed up in a medical examination - the blood was the most likely place for the hybrid quality to show, and since the Orions also had copper-based blood, there was not sufficient difference for any Doctor to become suspicious and subject a blood sample to close analysis.

When Sher'la was twenty-five years old, Avresti arranged for him to be contacted. At first half inclined to reject the Orion proposals, he had been won over by the lure of Royal blood, combined with a certain greed born of his Orion heritage; a greed that had been further developed by his uncle's austerity. Sher'la possessed in good measure the Orion lust for material wealth and power - it had not taken much persuasion to... convert him, make him see that his best future lay with the Orions - once he had proved his loyalty to them, of course, by doing a little... patriotic passing on of information.

He had done so - not particularly fruitfully, it was true, but Avresti was convinced of his acceptance of Orion standards, and was now anxious to rescue and claim his son. Othesi, as a distant relative who had been present at the time, was all the witness he would need to prove his paternity of the half-Vulcan.

If Othesi could get Sher'la back to Orion.

The Orion Captain scowled thoughtfully. If they killed one of the brats and left its body at the door... with the promise that the other would certainly die too unless Sher'la was allowed to leave unmolested...

He shook his head.

The kidnapping had been Friers' idea. Sher'la had not liked it, nor had he, Othesi, considered that it would be effective. He had encountered few Vulcans in his career, but most of them had been exactly the same - stubborn, pig-headed... a stiff-necked race. Vulcans rarely, if ever, gave in to a threat. If the price of defiance was death, a Vulcan paid it - and his surviving family in due course sought vengeance. The thing that surprised Othesi, now that he had encountered one or two more Vulcans, was that Sher'la's mother had ever been ransomed. He doubted that he would ever discover why, in that one case, the family had paid up.

Sher'la knew well enough the price that a wronged Vulcan family would exact; the months he had spent labouring on the irrigation channels showed clearly in his posture, the new lines on his face and the calloused hands. He had aged twenty years in those punishing months. If that was the penalty they exacted for the attempted murder of a Human who was married into the family, what price would they demand of someone who actually murdered one of the family?

No, Othesi decided. *He had no option. He must leave... but he could remain relatively close - say the far side of the nearest planet in the system? - for a psan-ra, during which time the ship could be partially disguised, given a new name, her papers changed - fortunate that all Orion vessels routinely carried at least two sets of papers - and his second in command given his instructions as the 'new' Captain. Then they could return, unsuspected... beam some crewmen down, exchange two of the least worth for Sher'la and Friers, and leave before the two men realised themselves abandoned.*

He would have been quite shocked to learn that a logical, unimaginative Vulcan had foreseen that he might do just that.

Kirk, a two-day beard adorning and partially disguising his face, sat in the spaceport bar, an equally disreputable Mitchell opposite him. Both wore the overalls of unskilled engineers. Glasses of the weak Vulcan beer stood at their elbows as they played poker with a pack of grimy cards.

McCoy sat beside the bar, morosely alone, his dress that of a general labourer of lowly rank. He scowled with unconcealed hostility at anyone who passed near him.

In another corner a group of spaceport workers was also playing poker. Every now and then one or another glanced across at the two engineers and Kirk, with only half his attention on the cards he held, guessed that soon they would invite Mitchell and him to join them in what would certainly be a rigged game.

A newcomer came into the bar, bought a drink and settled down, his expression as morose as McCoy's. Something was clearly on his mind, and Kirk allowed more of his attention to slide away from the game. There was something... something not quite *familiar* about the newcomer, yet... Kirk was sure he did not know the man, but something about him stirred a memory.

Kirk finished his beer, and picking up his glass went to the bar, where he stood beside McCoy, ignoring the glare that the older man gave him.

"The fellow who just came in," he breathed. "Two pints!" he growled as the barman turned to him. "Reminds me of someone." He paid for the beer and returned to Mitchell. "Deal 'em, pal! And let's see you shuffle first!" No harm in letting the spaceport workers believe that he was a suspicious player, distrusting even his friend.

Mitchell, knowing full well the reason for the comment, grinned with the vacant amiability of someone not quite right in the head, and obeyed.

The newcomer happened to choose a seat behind Mitchell, so Kirk was able to keep an eye on him as they played. Behind him, he knew that McCoy too would be watching.

Another man entered, bought a drink, and joined the stranger. The conversation was quiet, but it quickly became clear that the first man was angry; it showed in every line of his body, although his voice never lifted. The other one seemed to be trying to placate him.

"Barha!" The single word was clearly audible throughout the bar.

Kirk froze, although his face remained expressionless. *Barha* - the Orion word for a forceful negative.

The speaker - the first of the two to enter - seemed to pull himself together and his voice dropped to inaudibility again. But both Kirk and McCoy had seen the angry expression on his face and both instantly realised why this man seemed somehow familiar.

For that one moment, he had been the image of Commissioner Ferris.

Spock!

Yes, Jim?

There's a man here who looks like Ferris - he's talking to another man in Orion, and he's definitely angry about something. I'll let you know when they leave.

I'll have sensors on them.

It seemed a long time before Kirk contacted his bondmate again, although the infallible Vulcan sense of time told Spock that it was barely half an hour before the mental touch intensified. Part of the reason it seemed so long was undoubtedly the damage that had been caused by Kirk's forceful interruption of his healing trance back on Earth. Kirk had been too far away for too long.

They're leaving.

Spock bent instantly over the sensors, picking up the two readings

almost immediately. Both were Human.

Even as he followed them, Spock reached for the intercom. "Spock to engineering."

"Masters here."

"Scan all the ships in orbit." *Why had he not thought to do that earlier?* "Report any unusual readings on any of these vessels."

"Aye, sir."

The two men were still making their way through the streets beside the spaceport, away from the transporter terminal. Well, that wasn't totally unexpected; the orders were that nobody was to beam up. Perhaps someone had recently beamed down, to tell the fugitives what was planned?

"Captain, one of the ships is very heavily shielded - more heavily than any law-abiding trader should be," Masters reported after a few moments. "I can detect nothing unusual about any of the other vessels."

"Keep watching the shielded one."

On the planet, McCoy hurriedly finished his drink, banged the glass down, and marched out. He paused in the doorway, checking. The two men who were his target were walking quite briskly away, neither of them paying any attention to the street behind them. Keeping his distance, he followed them.

Behind him, Kirk and Mitchell followed, alert to take their turn following directly after the men should it become obvious that they were aware of someone on their heels.

Spock would, Kirk knew, be keeping tabs on these men; but ground surveillance might be useful too.

Friers marched angrily along, fuming, well aware that there was no point in making Hosea the scapegoat for his own ill-temper. Othesi *could* have arranged for him to have beamed up to the R'hw'angu; his papers - Orion in origin, certainly, but indistinguishable from the real thing issued by the Federation - were in order; he had a perfectly reputable identity as chief engineer of the R'hw'angu to take up. Come to that, there had been no real reason for him to have been forced to remain on this blasted planet once Sher'la was hidden in the derelict warehouse; the Vulcan was no longer a child to need a babysitter, dammit! Certainly it wouldn't have been easy for him to have obtained food, but Vulcans made a big thing of their stamina, the length of time they could go without food or rest - a couple of weeks on near-starvation diet wouldn't have hurt him - at least by the Vulcan way of it! It would have been simpler, easier and more efficient - to the Human's mind - if at the end of the day they had only had one man to pick up, not - as they now had - three, for true to the Vulcans' announcement, Hosea had been told when he beamed down that if he left the transporter station he would not be permitted to return to his ship. Not even the truth - that he had a message for a member of the crew who was still on the planet - had sufficed to persuade the inflexible, stubborn phlaryx to change their minds.

Nor could Friers dismiss a faint suspicion that Othesi now considered both Hosea and himself expendable; that if in the long run only one man could be rescued, that one would be the Vulcan. Certainly Hosea would be no real loss - he could be abandoned without a second thought if things got really tough, for he was a slow-thinking, albeit conscientious crewman who knew nothing of importance - though Friers had a feeling that Hosea was, in his slow fashion, wondering why the Captain was sending a message to the chief engineer who had been missing from the ship since the day after they arrived.

Friers' scowl deepened. He quickened his pace slightly, making the other Human half run to keep up. Spock again. Well, he would be avenged, whatever happened. Only the insistence of that weak-bellied, soft-hearted, semi-competent fool Sher'la had kept the two brats alive until now; Friers was determined however that they must die. Without Othesi - another fool - to back him, Sher'la had not the strength of character to defy him.

Spock. *Damn* him and his family! His memory went back...

He had been so sure that Spock was corrupt - or at least corruptible. But the Vulcan had utterly rejected the Human's suggestion, made after the Orions had first contacted him, that both should 'seek their fortunes' by working for the slaver/pirates.

Oh, he'd known that Spock's family was wealthy, but he had been so sure that the Vulcan's tastes were expensive enough to need more than the allowance he was given as well as his pay...

To Friers' surprise, Spock had been outspokenly antagonistic to the suggestion, threatening to denounce his erstwhile friend as a traitor.

Friers had vanished that same night, self-preservation reigning supreme; leaving a message for his father, he committed his first murder, without compunction or regret - a young student of similar height and weight, who had been knocked unconscious and placed in the defecting Friers' aircar, which had been carefully programmed to crash... and sent to his death. The body, he subsequently heard, had been buried as his. Officially, Roland Ferris was dead... and Roland Friers was born.

He had never quite understood the sentimental urge that had led him to take an anagram of his original name for his new identity. He had had no great love for his parents - indeed, he had positively disliked the parsimonious and humourless father who had behaved with such a total lack of understanding of a young man's need to sow a goodly crop of wild oats. He had even less love for the creditors who had taken him to court, insisting on payment for the goods he had received on credit but never got round to paying, and who had been permitted the legal theft of repossessing almost everything he owned, including his flat, without his loving father once offering to come to his assistance, and with nobody as much as caring how he was going to survive.

The Orion offer had come at just the right time... and the offer of a sizeable bonus if he could recruit any of his friends. Spock was the one he considered the surest bet - the one who, he was sure, was greedy enough to consider it a good offer... but Spock had turned him down flat. Gods, how he hated Spock for that! For what the Vulcan, no saint himself, had called him!

Strange - he hadn't thought of any of that for years... it must be his presence on Vulcan, the forcible way that Spock had been brought back to

his attention...

His mind fully occupied in thinking over past wrongs, he was totally unaware of the men who followed him. Hosea, who in other circumstances might also have noticed their pursuers, was too intent on keeping up with the man who was his senior officer, even as he muttered curses under his breath at the selfish bastards of officers who didn't give the crew any chance of exercise during a voyage, yet expected them to remain fit... How could anyone keep up with this long-legged... He could not think of a name sufficiently opprobrious, and let his thoughts tail off.

In the dingy murk of the empty warehouse, Sher'la paced uncontrollably. This was better than the heavy labour of digging irrigation channels, certainly, but the Orions should have been able to get him off Vulcan before this! Avresti - his father - had promised him...

He had been able to hide that one fact from the mind-probing he had received at the hands of his captors, shielding it with thoughts of greed, for he had had the foresight to realise that should the Vulcan authorities learn the truth, escape would be made impossible. There was also his mother's honour to consider; it was not right that they should know that she had fallen in love with her Orion captor. Though... For the first time, he began to wonder - if she had loved Avresti, as he had been told by the agents who contacted him, why had she agreed to be returned to Vulcan? Why had she not chosen rather to remain with her lover? Why had his father been willing to let her go? Strange that he hadn't thought of that before.

Whatever the reason, his father now wanted *him* on Orion, and had already proved to be more generous than Uncle Senla. He put his doubts out of his mind.

Thinking back, he saw now that his mistake had been in not making sure that Kirk was dead. But he had been so certain that the Human was fatally injured, that without immediate treatment he would die, leaving the Captain incapacitated - a mental wreck, even if he lived; and he would have had an alibi for the short time one would have been needed, for with the Captain and the First Officer dead, the ship would have been thrown into disorder long enough for the Orion vessel to have overcome any resistance, and he would have gone to his father with a Federation Starship as proof of his loyalty. But even if the ship had not been thrown into disorder, there was Sendak to consider; an accident, regrettable... but - Sendak would not have inquired too deeply, hating his cousin as he did.

Even the attack on the Enterprise - Avresti had managed to get word to him that it had been ordered by someone who did not know who Sher'la was - a cousin, one of those who stood between Avresti and the Orion throne.

Yes, he told himself. He trusted his father, who had been so much more generous to him than his maternal uncle had been...

But every day that passed increased the risk that he would not, after all, escape; would not attain the life of luxury that was the due of all Orions who were close to the throne.

One of the two infants lying on the mildewing mattress that was the only bed in the warehouse whimpered. Sher'la looked uneasily towards them. Even with the perfect Vulcan night vision, he could barely make out the two tiny shapes lying there. So far, both had been normal, quiet Vulcan babies, but neither had had anything to eat since being brought here. If either - or worse, both - started howling from hunger, they could easily be

heard, and Sher'la doubted his ability to prevent the stronger-willed Friers from killing them if that should happen. He had barely been able to prevent their deaths up till now.

He shuddered at the thought of the punishment that Selek's Family would exact if the children were killed and Friers and himself recaptured. Even his involvement with the kidnapping... Sher'la shuddered.

The hardship he had already suffered would be as nothing compared to the fate that would be his if either child was harmed. Digging irrigation canals in hot, dusty conditions would be paradise compared to the work he could expect to be given then... Selek's Family might even invoke the nearly-obsolete custom of an enforced mind-link, which would remove his ability to think and act independently of direct orders, rendering him a slave; and the link could be used to fill his mind with imagined torment, too, so that his every waking minute would be a nightmare... and his sleep disturbed, unrefreshing; he would know why, but be unable to escape, unable even to think of escaping; and unable to meditate, he would probably go insane.

He heard the door open and close. Half defensively, he turned towards it, only to relax as Friers spoke. He flicked on the torch that the Human liked to have shining, asking eagerly,

"Well?"

"The ships have all been ordered to leave orbit," Friers told him bluntly. "Captain Othesi sent Hosea, here, with a message, for the ships have also been ordered to abandon any crewmembers who are still on Vulcan. He will remain in the area, and return as soon as possible to pick us up." He managed to speak relatively quietly, but anger still tinged his voice.

Sher'la digested the information. "In that case, we must return the children immediately. There is nothing to be gained by keeping them any longer," he said nervously.

"Must we hell!" Friers growled. "I have a personal score to settle with Spock - killing his brats will be a pleasure! Why else do you think I suggested kidnapping one of *his* family? I never had any intention of letting them go again, and you're stupid if you think that I did. Returning kidnap victims is the quickest way I can think of to be caught!"

"No!" Sher'la gasped. "The punishment - "

"Who's to know?" Friers growled.

"A mind probe - " Sher'la muttered unhappily. "It's almost impossible to hide anything from a mind probe - "

"They have to catch us first," Friers pointed out with all the arrogance of a man who has known much success. His one failure was when he was young, inexperienced in the ways of the universe. He looked at Sher'la thoughtfully. This weakling might have a point, however. Perhaps it was time to sever his connection with the Orions and try his luck elsewhere. The Klingons, now - they might well welcome a man with his knowledge of both the Federation and Orion systems. He could kill Sher'la, make it look as if the fool had killed himself after slaughtering the two v'wek - strange how satisfying to the mind were the Orion epithets! His own disappearance - well, he had faked his own death once, he could do so again - he even had a possible body here, in Hosea. The Vulcans didn't know that there were now three of them - did they?

Behind them they heard the sound of the door opening, and realised

instantly that they had been found. Friers snarled, and turned towards the children lying there, pulling out the knife that normally lived in a sheath inside his trousers.

"No!" Sher'la realised his intention, and threw himself against the Human. He felt the knife stick into him; his senses reeling, he continued to cling to Friers as the man he now realised was insane struggled to throw him off in his single-minded attempt to reach the two babies lying there, helpless. The other Human shrank back, not knowing what to do as the knife sank home again in Sher'la's chest.

McCoy waited long enough for Kirk and Mitchell to catch up with him before he tried to enter the warehouse. He used the time to contact the Enterprise; by the time Kirk and Mitchell arrived, half a dozen security guards were materialising, and the Doctor had no doubt that Spock, too, would be arriving within moments - just as soon as he could reach the transporter room.

They rushed the door, pushing it open as quickly as its uncoiled hinges would allow. Inside, the darkness caught them unawares - the light from the dusty roof windows, the light of the torch that had fallen to the floor were together hardly sufficient to let them see what was happening, but they did manage to make out the two struggling figures. The knife rose and sank home yet again as Kirk leaped forward, Mitchell hard at his heels, the security men, not knowing what to expect, reacting a little more slowly while the older McCoy knew that the best thing he could do was to stay out of the way.

Kirk grabbed at the knife arm of the attacker as his victim sank to the floor, still weakly clutching at his assailant, and instantly found himself struggling to hold off a violent and vicious attack. Mitchell grabbed for the fighting man too but missed; Kirk gasped as the knife slashed open his arm.

The security men had realised the situation by now; Leslie, watching his chance, saw the opportunity for a clear shot at the knifeman, and fired his phaser. The man collapsed unconscious.

One of the other guards had grabbed Hosea, who stood unresisting - he still did not fully understand what was going on. McCoy moved forward as Kirk, ignoring his slashed arm, bent over the man who had been so badly knifed, recognising him, as his sight adjusted to the dim light, as Sher'la.

The Vulcan looked up at him. "Kirk," he muttered hopelessly.

"Why?" Kirk asked as McCoy began to examine the deep wounds. "He rescued you - why did he try to kill you?"

"He wanted to kill the children. I have no quarrel with children, Kirk. It was no plan of mine to kidnap them." He drew a shuddering breath, and Kirk glanced up at McCoy, who shook his head.

"Unless I get him to the ship immediately, there's nothing I can do. Only he'll die instantly if we try to beam him up to the ship, and there isn't time to get a shuttle - he'll be dead before it got here."

"It is as well," Sher'la said quietly, and with a strange dignity. "Death is better than living death."



"Where are the children?" Kirk asked.

"On the bed... "

"I've got them, Jim - they're all right," Mitchell called over.

"By stopping him from killing them, you have redeemed your honour," Kirk said. "Your Family will be so informed."

Sher'la nodded weakly. *Strange, he thought. It matters...* Orion was just a dream, after all. "I... thank... you... "

Kirk straightened from the suddenly-limp body as Spock led five more guards into the warehouse.

Jim!

I'm all right, t'hy'la.

Your arm!

McCoy, unaware of the swift, silent exchange, caught at Kirk's arm as he was about to reach for one of the two infants that Mitchell had just brought over to him. "Don't you dare, Jim Kirk! Gary and Spock can take them home, but you're coming back to the Enterprise with me right now - and after I've seen to that arm of yours, *then* you can beam back down."

"He's right, Jim," Spock said. He glanced round, noting that the guards had everything under control - the one Human standing unresisting, the other still unconscious. "Mr. Leslie, take charge of the prisoners. For the moment, take them to the Enterprise and put them in the brig, under maximum security. I will see to them shortly - just as soon as we get the children home." The quickest way to do that would be to beam everyone back to the ship then beam down again, and he lost no time in giving the order. He, Mitchell, Kirk, McCoy and the children disappeared, leaving Leslie glaring at the prisoners. He didn't know what had happened - not properly - but he *did* know that these men had caused his senior officers a lot of grief. They would not be ill-treated, but they would get no soft treatment in the hands of the Enterprise's security guards.

As soon as they materialised in the transporter room, McCoy hustled Kirk towards the door, saying, "Bring the children too, Spock - we'd be better to give them a quick check here before we take them down."

Spock took one of the infants from Mitchell and followed, the navigator at his heels.

Nurse Tamura checked the children while McCoy dealt with the gash in Kirk's arm. It was deep but had missed the major blood vessels and nerves, he was relieved to note. She straightened with a reassuring smile. "They're hungry, of course, and they need changed, but apart from that they're all right."

"Thanks to Sher'la," Kirk said. "Before he died, I told him he'd redeemed his honour, and that we'd tell his Family so."

"Dead?" Spock asked. He had assumed that the Vulcan, too, was unconscious. "What happened?"

"He was trying to prevent one of the Humans from killing the children,

and the man stabbed him," Kirk told him. "Then I joined in - and that was when..." He indicated the arm that McCoy was still bandaging.

Spock nodded. "It was possibly the best thing that could have happened," he said soberly.

"I think he felt that, too," Kirk said quietly. He glanced at Mitchell, who was standing in the background, not quite sure if there was anything he could still do to help, but equally obviously unwilling to walk out in case there was something he could do, and silently congratulated himself on their success in turning the once work-shy, lazy navigator into this cheerfully helpful - yes, friend. There was no longer any calculation in his friendship; it had redeveloped spontaneously as Mitchell's work improved. It was just a pity that Elizabeth Dehner, whom he had loved, had been transferred before he had had time to let her see the improvement in his character. "Gary - thanks."

Mitchell grinned at him cheerfully. "You're welcome, Jim." He looked over to Spock. "Is there anything else I can do, Commodore?"

Spock allowed himself a half smile. "Yes, Mr. Mitchell - you can take yourself off duty for the next forty-eight hours... and tell the others who helped in the search that they also have forty-eight hours off. I will speak to you all later - for the moment, I must take my family home. You have my thanks for your assistance - I will not forget."

"Thank you, sir." With a last look at Kirk, Mitchell strode out.

Tamura laid the second child down and gathered up the soiled nappies. "There, sir - at least they're clean. I can give them a feed here, now, if you want - "

"McCoy?" Spock asked.

"If he promises to do nothing with that arm, Jim can beam down with you. Otherwise he'll stay here overnight."

"I'll be good," Kirk promised.

McCoy grunted. Spock's half smile deepened. "But of course you are coming down with us," he told the surgeon. "You, too, are one of the Family." He turned to the nurse. "Thank you, but we will take them home now; if their mother is still too ill to see to them, their grandmother will be happy to do so." He gathered one of the infants into his arms; McCoy scooped up the other, scowling at Kirk as the Human made a move to lift the child.

"No you don't, Jim - you're not to use that arm," he said firmly.

As they left, Tamura began to gather up the instruments that McCoy had used. A pity that she hadn't been allowed to feed the children - but the Commodore was right, of course; they would be better off at home, with their own elders tending to them...

Selek was not best pleased about Kirk's promise to the dead Sher'la, but Spock supported his bondmate firmly.

"He died saving our children," Spock pointed out. "His crime against our Family is therefore paid in full. His crime against Vulcan is not paid, I admit; but that does not concern our Family's honour."

"Very well," Selek conceded. "You may inform his Family. Now - what of the creature who rescued him?"

"At present, a prisoner on the Enterprise," Spock told him. "We are still endeavouring to discover exactly who he is - I have my suspicions. It remains to be seen whether they are correct."

"And if they are?"

"If they are... we could have a problem on our hands."

When they returned to the Enterprise, the noon deadline was long past. All the ships had gone, leaving the Starship in sole possession of the space over Vulcan. Masters grinned triumphantly at Spock as he entered the bridge for a routine check as soon as he beamed aboard.

"That shielded ship, sir - it moved as far as the next planet, then ducked behind it. I'm quite sure it's hiding there - though we haven't tried to check, of course."

"Good. We can pick it up when it comes back," Spock said with a note of...

Cheerfulness? Masters thought, surprised.

"We'll be in the brig, interrogating the prisoners," Spock said, once he had checked that everything was in order.

They found the chief prisoner awake and glaring angrily at his guard, who was ignoring him completely. The other prisoner was sitting slumped in his cell, some distance from his fellow.

Spock decided to deal with the second one first. He stood at the door, Kirk at his shoulder, studying the man thoughtfully. The Human looked at them uninterestedly.

"Your name?" Spock asked.

"Hosea."

"And what were you doing on Vulcan, Mr. Hosea?"

"Captain Othesi sent me down with a message for Engineer Friers," Hosea told him. "I was to say that the ship had to leave, and that he'd come back as soon as he reckoned he could without anyone realising that he'd already been here. That was because the Vulcans weren't letting no-one beam up. I'd to stay because they wouldn't let me back up, even though they'd seen me come down."

The poor sod was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, Kirk commented.

Indeed, Spock agreed. He was just unfortunate to be caught in the machinations of others.

I thought I said that? Kirk grinned.

"Your ship?" Spock demanded.

"The R'hw'angu, trading from Rigel."

Spock's mobile eyebrow lifted. Rigel was an unsavoury hole, used as a home base by any number of trading vessels whose activities fell short of complete legality - a perfect spot from which an Orion could operate undetected.

"And what did Mr. - er - Friers think of your message?"

"He didn't like it, sir - but there wasn't nothing he could do. The Vulcans weren't going to beam us up, not nohow. He just had to wait, hope that the Captain could get us off later."

"Very well, Mr. Hosea. Do you know why your ship was at Vulcan?"

"No, sir - Captain Othesi never told the crew nothing about what he was selling - we got our pay, kept our mouths shut, did what we was told. It was best that way - he's got a nasty temper, 'n anyone what crossed him once didn't usually risk it again."

"I see. Well, Mr. Hosea, I doubt we can return you to your ship, but we can arrange to have you put ashore somewhere probably more to your liking than Vulcan."

The sly humour of Spock's comment utterly escaped Hosea. "Rigel'd do fine, sir, if you could."

"I think it could be arranged," Spock agreed. He looked at the guard outside Hosea's cell. "Release him - give him quarters on level nine, and keep an eye on him."

"Aye, sir." The guard moved to obey as his senior officers turned back towards the other prisoner. This one was harmless - the other, the guards all agreed, was something else again.

Spock paused beside the guard at Friers' cell. "Any trouble?"

"Nothing that we can't handle, sir. He's a queer cuss, though - seems to think you should be grateful to him for killing a Vulcan?"

Kirk grunted. "You can wait along there, beside Lt. O'Neill," he said. He and Spock entered the cell; Myerson reactivated the forcefield, then moved away. Kirk gave him time to join O'Neill, who was standing further along the corridor, out of sight of the prisoners and out of immediate earshot, before he spoke again. The fewer people who knew about Friers, the better - if the man was indeed who they thought he was. Then he turned to the prisoner. "Who are you?"

The man was glaring now at Spock. "He knows well enough."

Kirk and Spock glanced at each other. *Chance it*, Kirk suggested.

"Your real name is Ferris. You told your father I raped you before you faked your death."

"Bastard wasn't even man enough to do something about it," Friers muttered.

"What makes you say that?" Spock asked.

"You're here, aren't you - *Commodore*?"

"Perhaps your father knew you too well to believe it," Kirk suggested. He watched Friers' face flush angrily.

"I never respected him," the prisoner muttered, "but he was always dead against fairies... I was sure that'd make him angry enough... Why didn't it?" His voice rose almost to a scream, and Kirk glanced towards the corridor, but the guards did not appear, obviously considering that their officers could handle the prisoner. "He had the position - he could have ruined you... "

"But he did not," Spock said evenly, without revealing that the older Ferris had indeed tried to harm him through Kirk. "However, I am curious; what did I do that you should feel yourself so wronged?" He knew that he was taking a chance by asking this - on the other hand, who would believe a traitor against Commodore Spock, whose Family he had already wronged? Any accusations this man made would be dismissed as the spitefulness of an angry and vicious enemy.

"You know what you did," Friers snarled. "I offered you a lucrative job and you refused it - you even said I disgraced my name!" Kirk and Spock looked at each other again. They had been right - in his dealings with the young Ferris, the Captain had not been the guilty party. "You - saying I disgraced my name! It would have been funny if it hadn't been for the money it cost me!" Suddenly his face took on a calculating expression. "How would Commodore Spock like Starfleet to know how he amused himself, fifteen... twenty years ago? All the bearbaiting, and the cockfights we went to - the fighting cocks you owned, even though someone else handled them for you? What about the night we spent hunting the lepkas on Starbase II? The authorities never did find out who scared their precious rarities away, and it wasn't for want of looking either. The species died out a couple of years later, I heard - the shock of being hunted, too many males killed that night... And they only got a few back, and the others weren't equipped to live in the wild - they'd been domesticated too long.

"And what about that leave we spent on Cannak III? You, me, Tal and Devlin? The authorities still have a reward offered for the vandals who despoiled the Sacred Grove in the Park - .

"Are you trying to blackmail me?" Spock's voice held the chill of Space.

"I'm saying that I can easily forget all those things... if you forget to leave a guard here, if you forget about leaving the forcefield switched on when you leave, if you forget to leave anyone on duty in the transporter room... and if you forget to tell them on Vulcan that I escaped from the Enterprise."

"I see. And if I remember all of those things - you also will... remember?"

"Damned right!"

"Do you think anyone would believe you? Tal and Devlin will not support your story - you would be condemning only yourself, for it would be your word against that of three of us. But even without calling on them - do you really believe that the Authorities would believe a traitor, an Orion spy? Especially when the man he is accusing is a Commodore, decorated by Starfleet? Holder of the Vulcan Scientific Legion of Honour for services to the Federation?"

The boast was so uncharacteristic that Kirk glanced quickly at his bondmate, to be startled by the arrogant expression in the normally gentle eyes - and then he realised that, for Friers' benefit, Spock was acting as he believed the Captain would have done in this situation... except that the Captain would undoubtedly have killed Friers by now, making it look like an accident.

The Vulcan was speaking again. "A little... entertainment... on a shore leave - that is one thing. The destruction of a few animals - that is nothing; less than nothing, as are the taboos of a barbaric religion. What are rare animals or 'sacred groves' to me?" He spoke the lie convincingly enough. "But to betray one's home planet - and for payment - that is unforgivable. If your political beliefs are those of another world, then leave - openly - and go there, make your life there... but even then it is unethical to betray the planet of your birth. You may think that I have few scruples, and that those I do possess, I possess through expediency; and that could be true. But I *do* believe in loyalty to one's home planet. Therefore I say again what I said all those years ago; you dishonour your name. It is well that you changed it."

Friers' shoulders slumped. In essence, Spock had said what the traitor knew was true. Friers had chosen to 'die' once, knowing that the Vulcan would certainly denounce him, rather than try to pull Spock down with him by accusing Spock of those crimes, knowing even then that he couldn't make the accusation stick, and that he would only implicate himself and make his own situation worse. And if he made such an accusation now, it *would* be considered sheer spite; he would accuse himself to no purpose. His only possible witnesses were Tal and Devlin - and they would have no reason to support him; they would certainly back Spock, if only to keep themselves in the clear. Besides, he had no real wish to see either of them disgraced. They had been Spock's friends rather than his - which had been the main reason that he had not tried to sound either of them out about working for the Orions until he had first spoken to Spock. If he could have told them that Spock had accepted his offer, it would have given them a decided push to accept the offer as well.

He looked at Spock hopelessly, seeing no mercy in the cold gaze. "What are you going to do to me?"

"I could hand you over to Starfleet," Spock said quietly. "But your father has believed you dead for years - I see no point in letting him know that you are still alive - and a traitor. He does not deserve that shame.

"My Family, however, is another matter. You wronged us when you rescued the traitor Sher'la; you dared to threaten children of the Clan; by Vulcan law, it is our right to punish you as you deserve. Starfleet need never know.

"Sher'la redeemed himself in the eyes of our Family when he saved the lives of our children. But the work that he was condemned to do is still undone. I think you will be able to do it admirably well."

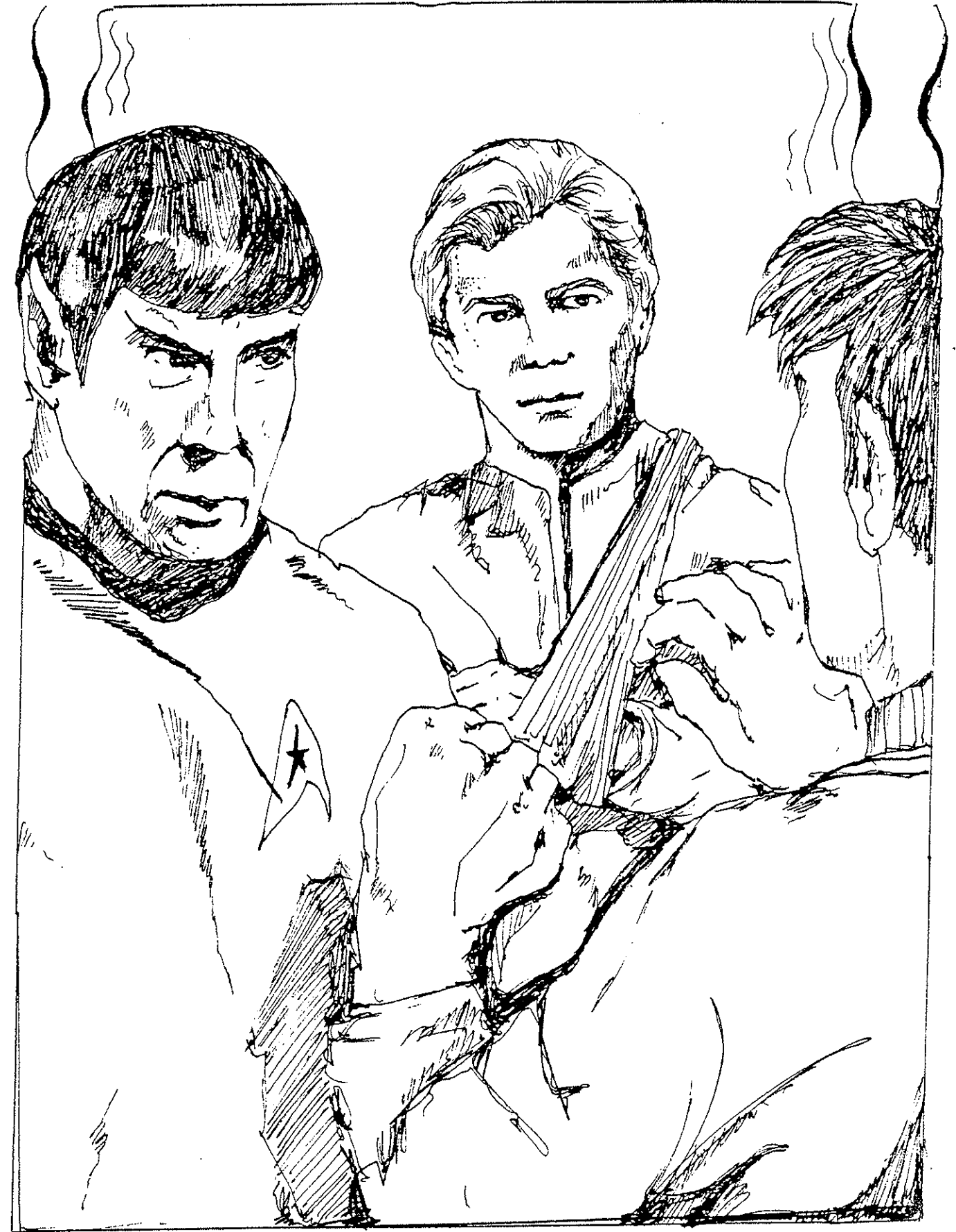
Friers gazed from one to the other hopelessly, seeing no mercy on either face.

He knew how difficult Sher'la had found the labour; it would be that much more difficult for him. And there was no escape. He watched as his nemesis turned towards the doorway, and reached a decision - there was *one* escape... an escape available to all Orion spies... and if he could injure his one-time friend before he went, he would die content.

"Lieutenant!" Spock called.

Friers' strength was no match for the Vulcan's, he knew, but the Human Captain looked more vulnerable; and his death would certainly injure Spock. As Kirk also turned towards the doorway, Friers dived across the call onto Kirk's back, his outstretched hands clutching at Kirk's throat.

His weight carried Kirk to the ground. Face down, the ruthless fingers cutting off the supply of air to his lungs, Kirk was handicapped as



he tried to roll, to throw the dead weight off his back, to get into a position where he could fight back. If he had been alone, he might have found it difficult to escape the treacherous attack.

But he was not alone. Spock knew instantly that his bondmate was in danger, and whirled to defend him. His hands reached out to grasp Kirk's attacker, anger at the treachery of the attack temporarily overwhelming his control, fragile as it already was. In that instant, he wanted nothing more than to break their enemy's neck.

Friers' position made it impossible for Spock to reach his neck in the position necessary for tal-shaya, and it was equally impossible to reach his shoulder properly to render Friers unconscious with a standard neck-pinch. There was only one grip he could apply, the seldom-used 'Vulcan Death Grip' - so named because the pressure on the sides of the head caused a very deep unconsciousness difficult to distinguish from death, and for the second time in his life, Spock used it.

Friers slumped, unconscious, his last awareness as blackness overtook him one of failure.

Everything had happened so fast that Myerson, in the corridor, was just in time to see Spock straightening, helping Kirk to his feet.

Spock nodded to the unconscious prisoner. "When he regains consciousness, bring him to the transporter room. We're taking him down to Vulcan."

"Aye, sir." Myerson deactivated the forcefield, and his senior officers walked out, Kirk rubbing his neck where dark bruise marks were already beginning to show while mentally assuring Spock that he was perfectly all right, that Spock had moved so quickly that he, Kirk, had suffered only momentary discomfort. His shields were up sufficiently that Spock did not altogether believe him, suspecting that his bondmate was hiding considerable continuing discomfort from his bruised neck, but he also knew that Kirk would be distressed if he thought that his brother realised the fact, so he contented himself with a brief rejoinder that Kirk should see McCoy as soon as possible.

Captain and First Officer had just reached the turbolift when Myerson called.

"Commodore!"

Both men swung round at the urgent note in the security guard's voice. They returned at a run, reaching the cell doorway as Myerson straightened from Friers' slumped body.

"Lieutenant?"

Myerson looked at them, shock on his face. "Sir - I think he's dead."

McCoy straightened from the autopsy and turned to his senior officers, who waited silently. "No, Spock, you didn't kill him," he said succinctly. A logical execution, in cold blood, would leave the Vulcan unmoved, but McCoy knew that if the Vulcan killed someone in a moment of uncontrolled anger, he would bitterly regret it afterwards. "He killed himself - poison; an old method - a hollow tooth. He probably bit into it just before he attacked Jim, and the exertion possibly speeded up the action of the poison."

"But why suddenly kill himself now?" Spock asked blankly. "He could have done it as soon as he realised that capture was inevitable."

"I suspect that he was reluctant to suicide while he thought there was any possible way to talk himself out of trouble," Kirk commented, his slightly strained voice showing the effects of his stiffening throat muscles. "He might not even have used the poison if you'd decided to hand him over to Starfleet; but once you decided to have him punished by the Family, he must have realised that there would be no escape but death. He saw the state Sher'la was in; he must have known that no Human could survive more than a few weeks of being worked like that, and decided that there was no point in suffering just to extend his life by a couple of months".

Spock nodded. "Yes," he said. "You could be right. I cannot say that I regret his death - treachery such as his is indeed inexcusable. If it was done from genuine political belief, it would be understandable, but he appears to have been motivated purely by greed, selling his 'services' for payment."

"At least the Captain was loyal to Vulcan and the Federation," Kirk commented. "It could have been from expediency, but - well - it's nice to know that he had that virtue, even if he had no others."

The bondmates returned to Vulcan, and from the house, contacted Selek. The Head of their Family was more than pleased to hear that Spock had chosen to let the man who had rescued Sher'la be punished by their Clan, but he was bitterly disappointed to learn that the culprit had killed himself. However, Vulcan would know that their Family's pride was unblemished.

Spock broke the contact and turned wearily back to face his family. Kirk reached out and put a gentle hand on his shoulder, and he relaxed with a tired sigh.

"You should take time now to complete the healing trance you need," Kirk said quietly. "We still have three days."

Spock looked at him, and he smiled. "I'll take things easy, t'hy'la, I promise. I'll help T'Pau in the garden - now that won't be arduous, will it?"

"As long as you don't do any digging," Spock told him firmly.

"I employ a man to do that," T'Pau said. "I'll make sure Jim doesn't do too much, Spock."

"And I'll keep an eye on him, too," McCoy promised. "And you know you need the healing the trance will give you."

"Yes," Spock admitted. "I know."

Kirk accompanied him to his room, and saw him settled. He waited until Spock relaxed in the trance, and then laid a gentle hand on his bondmate's shoulder.

"Don't worry, t'hy'la," he said, knowing that even in the trance Spock would be aware of what he said. "I'll rest too, I promise."

With a last look at the resting Vulcan, he went downstairs to rejoin

the rest of the family.

The adults of the family sat round, watching the children crawling round. T'var reached McCoy's legs and began to pull herself up, using them to support herself. Tavera watched proudly, but ready to intervene if her daughter annoyed the doctor - who was secretly quite flattered that the little girl had chosen *his* legs to climb up. Samel continued to crawl around, pausing at intervals to examine the various objects he encountered.

Kirk reached for a rabaka - T'pau always made sure that there was a plentiful supply when he and Spock were at home, knowing how much he enjoyed them, and he was not averse to trying to make sure that there were none left by the time their leave was ended. In that he was enthusiastically assisted by his bondmate, who liked rabaki almost as much as Kirk did. They had never yet succeeded.

His mind was only half on the spasmodic conversation, however - Spock was due to come out of the healing trance any time now, and Kirk was alert to respond to the mental call that he knew would come.

Jim!

The mental call was faint - which was only to be expected from someone just coming out of a healing trance. Kirk rose instantly and headed for the door, replying, *On my way!* as he went.

He found Spock tossing restlessly as he strove to pull himself back to consciousness, and administered the hard slaps that were necessary to help his bondmate pull his consciousness back from the depths of his mind.

Spock caught his wrist. "Thank you, Jim," he said quietly. Kirk looked at him, not anxiously but rather with foreknowledge of the answer to his first, automatic question.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

Spock half smiled. "Rested," he replied succinctly.

"I would hope so!" Kirk retorted. "You've been lying there for almost forty-eight hours catching up on your sleep!"

Spock gripped Kirk's wrist. "And you, Jim?" His eyes were on the yellowing marks on his bondmate's neck.

Kirk smiled at him. "The bondlink was reflecting your condition to me far more effectively than either of us realised," he replied. "I could feel the tension easing out of me as the hours passed. I've been feeling quite restless this past few hours. And my neck's almost better now, too."

"And you *have* been resting?"

"Of course I have," Kirk told him. "I promised you I would. But even if I hadn't, T'Pau and Tavera between them have been treating me as if I was as helpless as - I would say a baby, only T'Var and Samel have been proving that babies aren't as helpless as all that. And Sarek has been fussing round, too. As for Bones - he's been as bad as the three others put together.

Spock stood and stretched luxuriously. "Ah, that's better."

"Come on - it's a couple of hours till dinner, but there's coffee and rabaki laid out."

"Will you be ready for dinner?" Spock asked, a mischievous gleam in his eye.

Kirk grinned. "Rabaki aren't that filling," he retorted. "And yes, I *will* be ready for dinner - T'Pau is planning to serve th'laki with marrons, and Tavera spent ages this morning preparing a special Vanlan dish that I remember from the first time I was there - not that I got the chance to eat much of it that time. It takes so long to prepare that the Vanlans only serve it for special occasions. Tavera apparently decided that this was a special occasion. With those to look forward to, I've been limiting the number of rabaki I've eaten with my coffee."

The two left Spock's room and headed for the lounge to join the others. T'Pau hustled Spock to a chair and Tavera brought him coffee and the plate of rabaki.

"All right, Spock?" McCoy asked, watching his senior officer searchingly.

"Yes, Doctor." He glanced down as something tugged at his leg, and discovered that one small child was inspecting it and the other was headed for him as fast as it could crawl.

"Would you believe it!" McCoy exclaimed. "They know that you've just come in!"

"I would doubt that they will find my legs any different from those of anyone else," Spock replied calmly.

Dinner that night was a great success. The men did full justice to the meal that their womenfolk had produced, and afterwards Sarek and T'Pau sat long into the night with McCoy and their sons - Tavera went off to bed fairly early, partly to keep an eye on the children and partly because she had still not fully recovered from the concussion she had suffered when the twins were kidnapped.

The next day, McCoy went back to the ship early, while Kirk and Spock had a final day of leave. They spent it with their parents, Spock discussing music with Sarek, and Kirk having a last day in the garden with T'Pau, helping her to select cuttings and seeds to send to Alasdair MacDonald at Inverewe. That evening, after a final meal with Sarek and T'Pau - Tavera, after a word with T'Pau, had tactfully absented herself, spending the evening with the children - they also returned to the ship, carrying with them a boxful of rabaki and some of the other delicacies that they could only get on Vulcan, and which T'Pau delighted in supplying for them every time they visited.

Their new orders were waiting. For once, they appeared to have been given a simple mission - a straightforward survey mission into a so-far unexplored area on the opposite side of Federation space from the Klingons. There had been no sign of any race with spaceflight capability in that direction, and the Federation Council clearly hoped to be able to expand into this underdeveloped space, if only by means of colonies settled on promising planets, either mining or agricultural.

It should certainly give them plenty opportunity for scientific investigation, and both Kirk and Spock welcomed that.

Both felt refreshed, cheerful and optimistic as the Enterprise swung away from Vulcan and set course for unknown space.

