Promises to Keep

by JennaSinclair

Summary

When Spock is attacked and loses his psychic abilities, the nascent bond between him and Kirk fails. Is it enough to destroy their relationship? A novel in three parts (twenty-one chapters) and an afterword.

Notes

NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR:
I wrote Promises to Keep over twenty-one months in 1993, 1994, and 1995. I wanted to explore several things all at once, and a novel seemed the right place to do it. PTK looks at what happens when James Kirk, the wonder-boy who can accomplish all things, fails; it answers the question of what really constitutes the bedrock of the relationship between Kirk and Spock; and it examines the roles we assume in life and how others’ assumptions about those roles can define us. For the first time in the series, McCoy comes on stage in a major way, and one subplot is how the relationship among Kirk, Spock, and McCoy changes as a result of Kirk and Spock being lovers.

WARNING:
There is some violence in this novel, so I warn you about that. Nothing that I consider too harsh or explicit, but at the same time I don’t like to pull my punches about things like that. (The strong implication of suicide is in the prologue.) I’d like to think none of it is gratuitous. I am aiming throughout to understand Kirk and Spock, and sometimes stress is required to reveal the real person.

REASSURANCE:
I believe in happy endings! There is no way I could put Kirk and Spock through all these adventures if I weren't aiming for a HEA. The ultimate happy ending, of course, occurs at the end of the series, but there is also a happy ending (for now) at the end of this novel.

DEDICATION

Promises to Keep is dedicated to my dear husband, who was as wonderfully supportive of my writing then as he is now, and to my two daughters, whose little, high-pitched voices innocently asked me almost every day how Kirk and Spock were doing.

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The novel Promises to Keep is the ninth entry in my Sharing the Sunlight series. Each work was written so that a reader could catch up with what is going on if they haven’t read the previous stories, but of course you’ll get a bit more if you read the series in order. I use the name Jenna Sinclair for this K/S series. I use Jenna Hilary Sinclair for all other fanfiction and my professional work.

Here's the series in chronological order:

1. Sharing the Sunlight (novel)
2. Reflections on a Lunar Landscape
3. Pursuing Hyacinths (novella)
4. Heart’s Delight (novella)
5. Primal Scream
6. Parallel Courses
7. Double Trouble
8. Son of Sarek (novella)
9. Promises to Keep (novel)
10. Jagged Edges
11. Manna
12. Journey’s End
13. One Night
14. In the Shade (novel)

All stories and novels in the Sharing the Sunlight series will be posted to Archive of Our Own.

See the end of the work for more notes
Chapter 1

PART ONE

PROLOGUE

The first sun was rising. Soon, the darkness would no longer hide her.

Mar shivered in the dampness, and crouched down lower against the rough stone wall inside the laundry house. She could see one-half of the animal yard through the open doorway. If only she couldn't. She didn't want to, she didn't want to. *I'm not seeing this. I'm not hearing this. It isn't happening.*

The new-born sunlight glittered against the blade in Luka's hand as he and the others walked towards where the gowlie waited patiently for her morning feed and milking. Mar knew what they were going to do. The same thing they had done to Dirka, her love, what they would do to her and Sari if they discovered that she and the baby were still here. Slit their throats.

Luka laughed with Marthi as they walked side by side. It was a horrible sound, loud and frantic, abandoned, and soon Saul and Stephanos were laughing with them. Evil. Evil had come to their land, masked in the faces of friends. The shiver that ran down Mar's spine was the devil's touch, reaching to pull her into the insanity that swirled about her.

She prayed then, harder than she'd ever prayed on the Sabbath, prayed that they wouldn't see her and the baby. *Dear Father of All, hear me! Save us! Let this be a dream!* But it wasn't a dream. And even the desperate words her heart flung at heaven could not shut out the sounds of what they did to the gowlie.

Luka raised his hand. For the frozen moment before the knife descended, he looked exactly like the picture of Abraham on the wall of the church, ready to sacrifice his only son Isaac. But surely Abraham had cried, not laughed, at what his God had asked him to do. And in the Book, the voice had called, and the knife never drew Isaac's blood.

The gowlie bellowed as the knife traveled across its throat. Mar closed her eyes, remembering just hours ago in the darkness, and the short surprised sound from Dirka.... She hadn't been able to see him, but her mind supplied each second of pain and astonished betrayal that must have filled the dark eyes she loved so much. She did not know if she could live through the memory. She never knew that she would have knives inside of her, slashing her, cutting her. *If only they could really pierce me and drain my memories as they would drain my blood*....

The bellow ended in a grunt. The gowlie never grunted. Except, perhaps, when she was dying. Not the way Dirka had died. In silence. With dignity. Not cursing the way Mar now cursed in her heart. God forgive her. She cursed. *Let them die. Let them suffer and then die.*

There was the sound of a heavy body falling to the ground, then other thudding sounds as the four of them took turns kicking the heaving animal. Stephanos, the one who had fed the gowlie every morning and evening for the past five seasons. Marthi, who had given Sari a beautiful blanket for a birthing present, with hand-stitched doves and flowers, and the sign of the Lord in the center. Saul, who farmed the field right next to theirs, and who shared fresh honey from his hive.

Mar's heart pounded loud, so loud. They were not the friends and neighbors who worshipped with her in the church. They were possessed! Strangers. If only she had a weapon, a phaser like the four
of them carried, as only the law enforcement officials in the main village should have. She would stand up and shoot, and kill them, and the last one standing would level their weapon and kill her and she would fall into the dirt, crying in delight because she would be where Dirka was now, in the dirt, for the Book said that was where they would all return....

But no.

Mar looked down at the baby she cradled in her arms. Get Sari, Dirka had whispered as the sounds of intruders in their house had awakened them. Take care of her. Make sure she's all right. How could Mar protect Sari if she joined Dirka?

In the animal yard, Luka and the others turned away from the bleeding form on the ground. They looked around, seeking something else to kill.

Mar shrank back into the shadows.

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The team from the Enterprise found seventeen bodies at the church, twelve murders and five suicides.

Captain James T. Kirk stood in the open double doorway and looked out as the rays of the first rising sun caressed the rolling hills. He breathed in the fresh morning air. He couldn't help but remember rural Iowa where he grew up. The bright fields of hay, the peaceful cawing of the birds in the dawn, even the pink-streaked sky was Earth's. There had been a church like this in Riverside, with stained-glass windows of the ancient prophets and saints. On this planet, far from Earth and home, the preoccupation was the same. The building was filled with statues of holy men and women, and the windows cast rainbows of light on the opposite wall.

Without turning to look he knew what his people were doing. Spock was standing before the central window behind the main altar, recording the scene with his tricorder. The picture featured the final battle between a pointy-eared Lucifer, clad entirely in black, and the archangel Michael, white wings unfurled in righteous anger. Lucifer, who like every other representation of the devil Kirk had ever seen looked like a Vulcan, snarled back in rage, and undefeated scorn.

In the long aisle leading to the sanctuary, M'Benga and the security guards were laying out the bodies. There was little else they could do here.

And the captain was still standing in the doorway.

Kirk drew in another deep breath, but even the early morning sweetness could not mask the bitter taste in his mouth. Three days ago, the captain of the Enterprise had made promises he had not kept.

"And your doctors don't have a clue what's causing it?" Kirk asked.

"Nothing. They have taken sample after sample, performed many tests. There is nothing physically different in the people who are violent!" The planetary governor stopped his pacing and faced Kirk with outstretched hands. "Can you imagine what it has been like here? We are a peaceful people. We all live together well, the religious sects have accepted all the other humans, the Timti, even the Danarak who live in the desert wastes. We must accept each other, for this is a frontier world and we depend on our neighbors. But the violence has spread, from one section to another. It takes many forms, some become cunning, others outraged, still others believe they are the subject of religious persecution, or they suffer religious delusions. But they are all irrationally violent, and
nothing we have done has stopped it."

The grey-haired man took a deep breath. "Everyone is living on the razor's edge, never knowing what will provoke a murderous rage, and then the all-encompassing despair that has caused so many of the infected ones to take their own lives. No one is immune, it seems. I could attack you, or Mister Spock, in a moment! Husbands against wives, parents turning against their children.... Can you imagine what it has been like? Can you imagine?" Benelli collapsed into the chair behind his desk and dropped his face into his hands.

Kirk exchanged a glance with his impassive first officer, then went to stand before the slumping figure of the governor. Kirk's spine was ramrod straight. "Governor Benelli, the crew of the Enterprise is not a police force. There is very little we can do to help you control your people. But my personnel are the best in Starfleet. You won't find labs or people better able to help you anywhere in the Federation. We will discover the source of this disease that is infecting your people."

Benelli raised his head. His reddened eyes looked up at the man who promised salvation. "I pray that you will, Captain. Who else can we turn to?"

"The Enterprise is here now. We'll help you. But we'll need your cooperation."

"Anything," Benelli said. "Anything. Michaelan society is being torn apart, do you understand?" Abruptly the man got up and turned to stare out the window behind his desk.

"Captain Kirk, do you know why this planet is called Michaela?"

Spock shifted his weight from one foot to another, but Kirk only shook his head. "No, Governor, I do not."

"My grandfather headed the religious group that first colonized this planet. He named it after the Archangel Michael, the great defender of heaven who cast Lucifer and all his hordes into the fires of hell." Benelli turned to face them. "I am not a religious man, but I cannot help but feel as if that battle is being fought again, here, every day." His eyes grew wide as he looked directly at Kirk. "Help my people, Captain. Please. Help us."

But the labs had found nothing, the scientists had no theories, and the violence raged on. Finally, his own safety became a burden Kirk could no longer bear, and so he set out, with his landing party of trained security personnel, his reliable phaser, and his confidence in his own abilities, to do what he could to gather the information the scientists needed. And to protect the people of Michaela from themselves.

But during the long night, Kirk had been as impotent as M'Benga was now. They'd been too late. Again and again, they'd been too late. Five times in the darkness they'd come across the remains of battles that had been fought for no reason. He was sick of the stench of death.

Kirk sensed rather than heard a presence behind him.

First Officer Spock stood there. He looked at his captain, then wordlessly indicated two bleeping displays on the tricorder.

Kirk straightened. "Let's go."

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They burned the tree next to the woodshed. They chopped the antique rocking chair from the porch
into kindling. They ripped the sign of the Lord from where it hung over the front door and spat upon it.

Then Luka whispered into Marthi's ear and she smiled. She lay upon the hard ground, right next to the watering trough, and pulled her skirts up to her waist. The triple layers of petticoat, worn to protect a woman's purity, billowed about her. Then each of the men, Luka first, pulled their pants down to their knees and pounded into her. They all laughed, Marthi loudest of all.

And then, finally, Saul pulled Marthi up from where she sprawled. They all walked around to the back of the house, out of Mar's sight.

Mar let out her breath in a shuddering sigh and leaned back against the cold wall.

But then she jerked her head up as a sharp sound came from outside, as if metal scraped against rock. Was there someone outside the laundry? Coming for her? How could she have missed their return? Frantically she looked about for a weapon, anything. A bucket, a broom, her two big washtubs, the new agitator Dirka had brought from town. Scissors! Triumphantly Mar grabbed it up in one hand, balanced Sari in the crook of her other arm, then turned to face the open doorway. It wouldn't be so hard to hurt one of them. And if not, then a weapon could be turned in the opposite direction....

But it wasn't one of the crazy ones who rolled inside on the hard-packed dirt floor. A man wearing a gold shirt and carrying a weapon in one hand came to his feet in one easy motion. Mar drew back, confused. She clutched the scissors tightly, holding its point out like a knife.

They stared at one another for a long moment. Mar tried to still her trembling.

The man reached out towards her. "Don't be afraid. I'm here to help you."

His accent was strange. His clothing was strange. She hadn't seen him at the church services. Maybe he was crazy like the others.

But maybe he wasn't.

"Who... who are you?" Her words came out in a whisper. Dirka used to say Your voice is so soft, like your skin. I love it. She brushed the errant thought away with an effort, wondering if she too were succumbing to insanity.

"I'm James Kirk," the man said, his voice soothing. "I'm the captain of the starship Enterprise. We're trying to help your people."

"My...my people? This is happening to others? Attacks?" She hated how she sounded, like an idiot who couldn't form words. The church had a school she had attended, all the way to university level. But her fear choked her so it was all she could force out.

The man named Kirk nodded. "Yes. To many others. The governor of your colony called the Federation in for help. That's why I'm here." Gently. "To help you. Please, put the knife down."

She looked at where she still held the scissors between them. Slowly, she opened her fingers, and the meager weapon fell to the ground. Its point embedded in the dirt, and she heard herself laugh. She was terrified to hear it, yet powerless to stop the strange hiccupping sound. Mar wondered if Sari heard it as she slept, the way she must have heard the laughter coming from the yard. "It's not a knife. Just... just a scissors. For cutting.... Dirka always says..., said you can't do without a good pair of sharp scissors...."
And suddenly she was shaking all over, and her lips were mouthing cries she could not utter, and
Sari was stirring in her arms. I'm hysterical, Mar thought even as she slumped to the ground, but
Kirk was there beside her, holding her in strong arms, cushioning her as she collapsed after hours of
tension and horror.

"Shhh..., shhh..." he murmured, pushing back the hair from her face. "It will be all right." His
embrace encompassed the baby, and he rocked both of them against his hard body.

He smelled of sweat, and of the hay they had begun to harvest yesterday. His hair was the color of
ripe hay too, so unusual on this colony of dark-haired people.

*If the elders saw me, what would they say?* Mar thought. She sniffled into the stranger's shoulder
and tried hard to still her silent weeping. Only Dirka and her mother had ever held Mar in this
intimate way, body against body. Dirka had taken her from her mother before the altar of the Lord,
had said "I will honor this woman." The stranger Kirk touched her, made no such promise, and yet
Mar trusted him. Why? *I cannot help it. Even if this man is one of the crazy ones, what else can I
do? I am at his mercy.*

Sari stirred within her arms, finally coming awake after the long night. She yawned and turned her
little, precious head towards her mother's warmth.

Kirk ran one finger over the feathery-soft curls that Dirka had so loved. "What a beautiful baby,"
he whispered. "She looks like you. What's her name?"

"Sari."

"And your name?"

"Mar."

"Mar, your baby needs you, and we need to keep her quiet. Will you nurse her?"

Mar stayed within the sanctuary of his arms while she put the child to her breast. She holding Sari,
the stranger holding her. The touch and then the sound of Sari sucking made her eyes fill again,
and Mar turned her face against Kirk's shoulder.

His voice was soft. "I know it must be hard for you to talk of this, but I have to ask. Are you..., and
the baby, the only ones not infected? Is there anyone else we need to protect who's... rational?"

The knives inside her stabbed again, bringing the vision of Dirka dying that she had not seen, that
she would always see. "Infected?" She asked so she would not have to answer. She kept her
forehead against his shoulder so he would not see her cowardice.

"Yes. This madness that has swept over your people. Even though we haven't been able to find a
physical cause, it's like a sickness. We have to find out what's causing it so we can stop... all this
violence."

The intensity in his voice caught her. "Have... many been killed?"

Kirk's hand rubbed against the back of her neck. "Yes," he whispered. "Far too many."

Behind the words she caught his own dark visions. She blotted her tears on his shirt and found the
courage to answer his question. "There is no one else here to protect. They... killed Dirka."

"Your husband?" The arm around her back tightened.
So easy for him to say. "Yes. You cannot protect him. Protect me. Us. Please."

"We're going to get you out of here," Kirk promised. "I'll take care of you."

When he said it, the words felt real, and a vision of freedom came to her. All these hours, she had been paralyzed by her fear, had not contemplated escape. But with him, perhaps....

She drew herself up straight within his embrace and gazed him full in the face. He had light eyes, with glints of brown and green flecking the gold. She examined him, in the way the Book said you should examine evil if you encountered it. Evil would always flinch before good. The one called Kirk did not flinch. He smiled at her, and she found that his smile gave her confidence.

"Yes," she whispered. "But how? What can you do?"

"Don't worry." Another caress of her hair, meant to be reassuring, she was sure. The elders could not possibly object. "I'll keep you safe. I promise."

"Yes," she murmured. "I know. You said it before. I trust you."

There was a sound from outside the open stone doorway, the slightest noise that Mar would not have noticed if not for the way Kirk stiffened against her.

He put one finger up to his lips in the universal signal for silence. "Shhhhh." Then he edged forward to look out the door. His weapon was up and ready. She followed him and looked over his shoulder. He was a shield; she would be safe.

Across the yard, by the woodshed, another man crouched. His red shirt stood out against the dull plank wall. His grey hair made him look like an elder.

This other man looked over towards them and caught Kirk's eye. They exchanged a series of signals, their hands gesturing.

The older man nodded, held up a restraining hand, then cautiously stood upright. He paused, eyes darting in all directions, then he ran forward towards the house. He held a phaser before him.

A beam escaped from the house and cut him down.

Before the blood began to flow from the wound in his belly, before his body had settled completely to the ground, Kirk fired at the window. The beam swept across the front of Mar's house, bathing it with brilliant life and searing a whining noise into Mar's eardrums. She covered her mouth with her hand. Sari began to cry in her arms.

The phaser fire stopped. There was a terrible light in Kirk's eyes as he shouted to the fallen man. "Giotto! Giotto! Get away! Move!"

At first Mar thought the older man was dead, but after a few moments of silence Giotto groaned. He lifted one arm, but then it flopped back onto the ground with a puff of yellow dirt. Already, his blood was a dark stain beneath him.

Kirk glanced behind him to where Mar shivered against the rough wall. "Stay here," he said. "I've got to get to him."

Before she could reply, or even think, Kirk was out the laundry doorway and running for the cover of the old tree stumps and some bushes.
She couldn't believe it. No! NO! He had said he would keep them safe. Their nightmare was over, but only if Kirk was here, beside them.

"Stop!" she screamed. "Don't go. Don't!" But he was running so fast and was so far away he couldn't hear her, because he didn't stop. If he had heard her he would have come back, back to protect them and keep them safe. So Mar left the shadows and began running too, awkwardly, holding Sari with both arms against her chest, feeling her three long petticoats swish against the yellow ground. The innocent sunlight fell against her face, into her eyes; it dazzled her so that she stumbled and almost fell. But Kirk was still running in front of her and so Mar caught her balance and kept going. And then the sunlight dazzled her again, only it was more brilliant than before, and a faraway part of her mind wondered if the second sun could have risen so soon. Then the reasoning part of her answered her question even as she heard a masculine voice yelling, "Down! Get down!" and she could see again, and Sari was crying and Kirk was running next to her and pulling them all down to the ground.

They landed with a thud behind the cover of the three old tree stumps Dirka had never managed to pull from the iron ground. Kirk's weight was heavy on top of her, and Mar was just able to avoid falling on Sari. The baby shrieked, and Mar squirmed against Kirk's pressure as she pulled Sari against her side, but he just pushed her further down into the dirt. He hissed, "Why did you do that? I told you to stay put. Their phasers could have killed you, and the baby!"

As if on cue, the bright light shimmered about them again, and Mar could feel the vibration of the stumps as the beam splashed against their only protection. Fear rose in her throat, and she knew that she couldn't answer Kirk's question. Why had she done something so irrational?

"Will you stay down now?" Kirk whispered fiercely in her ear as the phaser whine abruptly stopped. At Mar's nod, he rolled off to one side, popped over the stumps to let loose one blast from his own weapon, then reached behind him for the communicator that hung from his belt.

"Spock here."

"Spock, I need reinforcements. Giotto's been hit and I've got civilians here and--" The rest of what he'd been about to say was drowned out as the phasers whined again. Kirk flattened himself, one arm coming round Mar's shoulders in inadequate protection.

Mar pressed herself as close to the ground as she could and still hold Sari to her side. She could barely breathe, barely think. This was worse than hiding in her own home, worse than the long hours cowering in the laundry. What had she done? Mar looked at Kirk as he turned his head to look at her, and this time she could not name the emotion shining in his fever bright eyes. Kirk squeezed her shoulder. "Don't worry," he said. "Don't worry."

It seemed like hours passed, with the white light flashing all about their meager shield. The wood trembled as if it were alive, she could feel it shake, she could hear it moan from deep within as the light tried to force its way into the dark brown depths. Mar cried into the crook of her arm, and Kirk muttered, "Where are you, damnit?" and she remembered how Dirka had given up after three days of battling the stumps. Give up, she whispered as she cried, give up, and she did not know whether she were talking to herself or to her enemy-friends.

When the barrage stopped she could still hear the whine ringing in her ears. But then there was another sound. They were close enough to Giotto to hear the effort in each breath, the raspy rattle in his lungs. He knew they were there, consciousness had an unshakable hold on him. "Sir..." she heard him gasp out, and the arm that was pressed close against her own stiffened.

"Bastards," Kirk hissed. "They could have killed him. But they won't. They want him to suffer."
His anger propelled Kirk over the stump again, weapon blazing as he fired at the house. But the power just bounced against the front stone wall that Dirka had built so carefully to ward off the winter's bitter wind.

And then Kirk was forced back down again when another phaser whined. Luka's? Saul's?

Across the yard and behind them Mar thought she saw movement out of the corner of her eye. She was afraid to move, afraid to expose herself or Sari to the fire beyond the wood, but this might be another enemy.... She carefully turned her head. Her eyes widened as four people ran through her vegetable garden and crouched behind the cover of the woodshed. Two of them were in the same red as Giotto.... Mar gasped as her eyes focused on the features of one of the beings in blue.

The communicator on Kirk's belt chirped.

"Captain, you are in an untenable position."

Kirk, the side of his face flat on the ground, his cheek and nose smeared with the yellow dirt of Michaela, grimaced at the grid he held in the air between himself and Mar. "I know it. These stumps aren't going to hold out forever. But Giotto's in real trouble...."

"Agreed. We must obtain medical treatment for him as soon as possible. However, a frontal assault is not indicated under these circumstances."

"I know, I know. And the Enterprise's orbit won't bring her into position to beam any of us on board for another half hour. I want you to send Josephs and Prendel't to the back of the house while you and I fire on them, then we can all move up from both directions. It's the only way I can see. Maybe take them by surprise if they're not watching their backs."

There was silence. Mar clutched the sleeping Sari closer to her and looked across the mere inches that separated her from the man in gold. And where would that leave her? Cringing while men fought around her, hearing their bodies fall again and again?

"That is a risky course of action, Captain. I estimate the odds of success without multiple fatalities are less than twenty percent. However, may I suggest another possibility? I have noticed...."

Sari squalled against Mar's clenching fingers. She scrunches up her little face, pulled in her legs and arms, then erupted into spreadeagled outrage as she let loose a loud protest.

And her kicking leg caught the open grid of the communicator where it lay in Kirk's palm and sent it spinning out into space.

Kirk lunged for it, but before he could grab it white light drove him back. Both he and Mar watched the communicator skid across the yard, propelled by the force of the beam.

"Damn. Damn it. Damn it to Orion's hells." Kirk cursed even as he pulled Mar and Sari into the shelter of his arms again. He drew a deep breath. "It's all right," he whispered into Mar's ear. "It's all right. Don't worry."

The silence in the yard now seemed more ominous than the firing had been. Surely the four in the house had seen the new ones. Were they afraid? Were they planning more murder and pain?

"Hail to the house." A strong, deep, assertively masculine voice called from the direction of the woodshed. Kirk went as rigid as the wood. He slowly turned his head so that he could see across to the edge of the yard.
"Hail to those in the house who have unleashed my force and done my bidding."
The voice was loud and penetrating. To Mar's uncomprehending ears, the mysterious accent was forbidding and yet compelling at the same time. She shifted to rest on her side so that she, too, could see what was happening.

"I unveil myself to you. I will come to you and then you will come to me. See me now, Prince of darkness, the powers of black that overwhelm the light."

The blue-garbed being who had crouched around the corner of the woodshed took a deliberate step out into the yard. Only he looked different now, clad only in black trousers, black boots and a black shirt that seemed molded to his thin frame. The rising sun glinted against highlights in his dark hair, which framed the flaring tips of his pointed ears.

"Spock. No," Kirk whispered, and his despair flavored the air all about them. Mar felt it as she felt the pounding of her own heart. "No," he said again. "Don't. They'll kill you."

Kirk moved convulsively, up to his knees in a moment, his phaser clutched between both his hands. Mar watched him as his mouth opened, about to form words to shout across the yard. She saw the effort it cost him to catch the words before they erupted, and the slackening of his body as he slowly slipped down to the ground again, next to her.

The being in black walked across the yard with a deliberate pace. No light from the house splashed against his darkness. Of course not. Luka and Marthi, Saul and Stephanos would not fire against one who might be their own.

The dark one stopped when he came to Giotto. He looked down at the man, who raised one trembling hand as if in supplication. The bloodied legs moved restlessly in the dirt.

The dark one looked back at the house. "Behold, the one you have prepared for me. To show you my power, I will silence him, I will stop his movement. Watch as my strength flows through my touch." He leaned over and touched Giotto. The figure in red stiffened, his arm flopped back over his chest, and he was still.

"Come now," the one with power gestured, beckoning. "I will show you many things, now that you are mine. Come to me here and share in my might."

Mar felt Kirk slowly coming to his knees, aiming his weapon, this time taking care to stay behind the cover of the stumps. The bloodied legs moved restlessly in the dirt.

The door to the house squeaked open. And then they were all there, standing on the wooden porch, the four who had killed the gowlie, who had laughed as they profaned Marthi's purity. The ones who had taken a knife and drained all the life from Dirka, her love. They stood there, looking confused, staring at the dark one who had come to claim them, looking innocent of the blood on their hands.

Three beams of light traveled across the yard, two from the direction of the woodshed, and one from the statue who now stood next to Mar's crouching form. The four figures crumpled to the dust.

The phasers stopped their whine, and silence took over the yard.

Kirk's phaser slowly dropped down to his side. The weapon hung slackly in his grip for a long moment before he heaved a heavy sigh, slapped the phaser onto the back of his belt and moved
briskly out to tend to Giotto. He did not look back at Mar or the child.

And was that all? Mar wondered. After all the hours, her fear for Sari, all the pain that was yet to come as Mar faced a life alone? Were the lifeless bodies and this heavy silence all there was to be?

She slowly got to her feet, settled Sari in the crook of her arm once more, and walked up to the four bodies. No one stopped her. The bodies were guarded by the two other beings in red, a man and a strange woman with blue skin and antennae.

Mar frowned down at the obvious breathing that shook Luka's frame. "They live?"

The man bobbed his head. "Yes, ma'am. We just stunned them. At that distance even the heaviest setting will only produce a stun, just like the lightest setting on a Starfleet phaser could kill at very close range. We're very careful. They'll come around in a little while."

No. Not possibly. It didn't seem right. They should have died. Something inside Mar called for death. Something inside Mar shrieked for it. She could have it now in the morning light, with Kirk here for Sari. She walked back to the stumps. For the first time since she had snatched the baby up from her crib in the awful darkness, Mar relinquished her hold on her child, laying her down on the ground in the small indentation where she had been protected between Mar's and Kirk's bodies. She stood up and shook her hair back from her face, remembering Dirka burying his face in her dark tresses, remembering how he used to say *I love you, Mar.*

She walked over to where Kirk and the dark one and the other man in blue conferred over Giotto.

Kirk was crouched over the silent figure. It was an easy thing to reach out and pluck his weapon from his belt. He never felt it until Mar stepped back, the phaser already pressed to her temple.

Kirk straightened and spun around. "No," he croaked, arms entreating.

She noticed those strong arms. They were what was needed here. For her people. For Sari.

Kirk took a huge step forward.

She took one small step back. She smiled at him. "It's all right," Mar said, echoing him. "Don't worry." Her finger pressed the firing button.

*****

Three days later, Admiral Komack ordered the *U.S.S. Enterprise* to leave their mission on Michaela and come to the aid of a different planet half the quadrant away. The crew left the violence and the sorrow and the crying of a baby girl behind them. It was one of their few failures.

*****

LEONARD McCoy, PERSONAL LOG

I don't have any idea what stardate it is, I'll look it up later. Maybe.

Well, it's all over now, even the reports to starfleet, and we have to live with the results.

I need to put it into some sort of perspective. I can't help thinking that there were so many things I should have known, so many things I should have done over the past few weeks to make things turn out differently. But there weren't, and I know that. At least I know they understand that if I could do something to help them now, I would.
Everybody did what they thought they had to do at the time. I know I did, though I realize now I was a tad misguided. Spock did, that stubborn Vulcan. I never could talk him out of anything. And Jim did too. Yeah, Jim most of all.

Y'know, as a doctor, I had to find out early that I can't force the universe into my mold, and I can't do everything. Jim's had to find that out the hard way.

When did it all begin? Obviously, on Michaela, when I was tied down to a bed in sickbay, recovering from my heart valve surgery. That whole mess on Michaela was a shock. The crew was so used to being successful, and so was its captain. The *Enterprise* had earned a reputation: the best, the brightest, the ship that always came up smelling like a rose.

But not then. I didn't have to be walking the hallways to know what was going on. There was a sort of restless energy, a saddened purpose in every person who came to visit me. They all talked about the extra duty everyone was volunteering for, trying to find a cure. Or even a clue. Everybody took their failure on that planet personally. Really hard.

Especially Jim. It got so he couldn't sit still when he came to see me. I remember, one of the last days before I went back on duty, I asked him what our current mission was, and his jaw tightened so much I thought it would snap. That's a good way to get TMJ disease. How was I supposed to know that Komack had just put us on some useless patrol? And I guess the negative results from the labs were getting him down.

But finally I was released from sickbay. I intended to visit Jim in a day or two, casually, not pushing, just to let him know that if he needed a sounding board, I was there. Seemed to me he was wound up tight as a spring.

I was right. We needed to talk; I just didn't know why.

And I didn't know back then all the things that were going to happen.

CHAPTER ONE

Captain James T. Kirk of the starship *Enterprise* plunged through the curtain that divided slumber from awareness, ready for anything....

But there was no emergency. He was on his side in his own bed and the red alert klaxon was not blaring. How could it be, with the ship placidly sailing through one of the most innocuous areas in the sector, following Admiral Komack's infuriating orders to the letter?

Kirk felt the muscles in his belly tighten, then he forced the tension down. *You took an oath to follow orders, he told himself for the hundredth time. Nobody ever said it would be easy.*

He peered through one eye, the one that was not buried in his pillow. The lights in his cabin were just coming up to one-sixth brightness. Months ago he had programmed them to come alive at 0540, fifty minutes before he needed to get up. The air blowing from the vent against his naked body was a barely tolerable and totally expected 82 degrees Fahrenheit. And a heavy arm was draped from behind him over Kirk's side, restricting his movements.

In the here and now all was well. Curled up against his back, gusting warm air against his captain's neck with every drowsy exhalation, the first officer of the *Enterprise* slept.
Warmth that had nothing to do with the temperature in his quarters prickled his skin, and in the almost-darkness Kirk smiled. He looked down at the long-fingered hand that was splayed against his chest. In the past seven months there had been many times when he and Spock hadn't awakened together in the ship's artificial dawn. Early morning meetings, all-night experiments, different shift scheduling and the myriad responsibilities of command had often driven one or the other of them from the bed they tried to share.

But not lately. For the past nine days, every morning Kirk had awakened with Spock's comforting presence beside him.

They hadn't talked about it. In the one meld they'd shared since Michaela, glorious, sustaining moments snatched from duty, they hadn't exchanged a single thought about frustration, defeat, or the grim determination that now propelled them. And yet still Spock had rearranged experiments and juggled schedules, all to ensure that in the quiet dawning hours he and Kirk would be together.

The lights brightened a fraction more, highlighting the alabaster skin of the fingers pressed to his chest even in sleep, and Kirk's smile softened. Early morning in bed with Spock was definitely his favorite part of the day. It was so, so easy to take the gift that was offered.

He took two deep breaths, just so that he could feel the warm weight rise and fall, and watch how the seeking fingers claimed every centimeter of skin that they possibly could. Spock had done it again. No matter what position they were in when they fell asleep, when they awakened together there was always a Vulcan curled around him, over him, against him. At the beginning of the five year mission, worlds and universes ago, Kirk could never have imagined that this was the way he would want to begin his day, being almost-smothered by the unexpectedly heavy weight of the skinniest scientist on the ship. The skinniest male scientist.

But he did. And he loved it.

He bent down and kissed one hairless knuckle.

The warmth behind and around him stirred, and the breath that was blowing against his neck in an almost-snore suddenly quieted. Kirk licked the knuckle in farewell, and then squirmed around within the curve of the possessive arm. He faced the sleep-softened features of his second-in-command.

"Good morning, Commander," he whispered, and deposited a dainty kiss on lips that were dream-moist and full. When he pulled back, the sleepy eyes were still closed, but he had created the slightest of smiles where their lips had met.

The hand around him drifted slowly up Kirk's back, trailed a forefinger up the ridges and valleys of his spine and over the sensitive skin on the back of his neck. It came to rest with spread fingers tangled through Kirk's disordered dark-blonde hair.

The hand pressed Kirk closer. "Good morning, Captain," Spock breathed. He opened his eyes, and leaned forward three centimeters to return the kiss.

They lay there in drowsy contentment, resting entangled with each other, letting the lights brighten and the duties of the day creep closer. Life was simple in the early morning dimness, elemental, and composed only of two beings, their breathing and their touch. Here next to his lover, in the time suspended between sleep and duty, the captain of the Enterprise didn't make decisions that took people's lives and he didn't make promises he couldn't keep. Kirk needed this.

Heart's delight, Kirk named his lover in his inmost thoughts. Sanctuary. The keeper of, and the
There was the sharp click of botheels in the corridor outside. Some of the crew were hurrying to an early breakfast so they could monitor the experiments in the ship's labs, the ones designed to discover the causative agent for the madness on Michaela. They were the same experiments that Spock had labored over for half the night. But here in the warmth there was still the eternity the first officer offered. Kirk turned over onto his back and Spock came into the welcoming circle of his arms, placing his head upon the broad shoulder.

"Hey," Kirk whispered, and he rubbed up and down along Spock's side, "hey, you feel cold. Let's pull up the covers."

Spock used his long toes to drag up one of the blankets that had been pushed down to the foot of the bed several hours previously. Then he sneezed.

Kirk helped arrange the cover over his lover, and made sure that none of it touched his own already-too-warm body. "Don't tell me that you're catching another cold," he softly accused, his chin brushing against the top of the dark head.

Spock shrugged within their embrace. "Then I will not."

Kirk sighed. "Whether you tell me or not, this isn't funny. I wish you wouldn't be so stubborn."

"I have not been subjected to such nagging medical comments in all the time that Doctor McCoy has been confined to sickbay. Is it your intention to substitute your voice for his until he has resumed his role in tormenting me?"

"Spo-ock." Kirk chanted the name the way his mother had chanted his own when she waved a finger at him. "You and I both know where you caught these colds. Right here in bed with me. I feel responsible. This will be your fourth in three months, and all because you're too stubborn to wear nightclothes."

Spock nodded against his captain's pectoral muscles. "Correct. I see no reason to wear nightclothes if you intend to divest me of them almost immediately."

Kirk made an exasperated sound. "I mean afterwards. At least you could be warm then."

"A most inefficient procedure, for recent experience has shown me that there is a sixty-two point five percent chance that I will be unclothed again during the night-time hours. The sheet and blankets are sufficient to maintain my body temperature if you would only refrain from kicking them off me. To make the effort to clothe myself would be illogical."

Kirk didn't think for a second that there was anything logical about Spock's stubborn insistence on remaining naked whenever they slept together. But he also knew that Spock was a master at rationalizing, and that the first officer was deliberately being obtuse because he knew it amused his captain. "You're advancing logical arguments to cover an emotional situation," Kirk accused.

The Enterprise's Vulcan turned his head so that he could look Kirk in the eye. "Captain, our intimate interaction gives you no right to be insulting."

Kirk swooped forward and pecked his exasperating lover on the tip of his prominent nose. "You're impossible, you know."

Spock returned to his regular morning sanctuary, where he could hear the ponderous thunder of the human heart. "So Doctor McCoy and my mother have occasionally claimed."
Kirk nodded. "Add me to your list. You know, Bones is officially back on duty today."

"Yes, I am aware that the doctor's recuperation is complete."

"And we're still in agreement to tell him about us? Tonight?"

"I have not altered my opinion," the quiet voice said. "We must tell him. He is our friend, is he not?"

"Yes." Kirk's breath escaped in a long, just-heard sigh. "I promised myself we'd tell him as soon as he's up and about. We've waited too long as it is."

"Perhaps. But now is the right time for us. Before, I do not believe that either one of us was willing to share this... change in our status."

At the stilted phrasing, Kirk smiled up at the shadowy bulkhead. It was so typical. "Lovers, Spock, we're lovers. I'm not just a change in status, am I?"

"Indeed not," the deep voice rumbled. "You are -- ."

Kirk completed the sentence for him. " -- the one who kicks off your blankets? The one who you buy books for? The one who's had more arguments with you in the past seven months than anybody you've ever known?"

"Indeed," Spock placidly agreed. "You are all of those things. Is that what you intend to tell the good doctor?"

Kirk chuckled and tightened his embrace. "Damn, you're good for me." He dropped a kiss on the dark hair. "I think I love you, Commander."

Spock rubbed his cheek against the hairless chest. "I know I love you, Captain. And that is what we must tell McCoy, is it not?"

There was silence between them for a while, a comfortable silence that Kirk felt was as expressive as words, or those wonderful times when they shared minds. He and Spock communicated in so many ways now, in word and thought, a look across a room, or those wondrous times when their bodies were speaking their own language....

It was a stimulating image. His arm tightened around his bedmate. "What time is it?" he whispered suggestively. He fingered the sensitive tip of a pointed ear.

Spock inhaled sharply, his version, Kirk was convinced, of the chuckle that would never escape his lips. "It is 0552. Why do you wish to know?"

Kirk twisted out from under Spock's weight and pushed down in the bed until he was face to face with his lover. His open hand caressed a pale cheek, then caught up the same fine-boned hand that had cradled his heart as he slept. He pressed a kiss into its palm. "You know why."

Spock smiled, one of those smiles that was disguised by his Vulcan countenance and the utterly sober lines of his face. But his eyes danced, and because of that Kirk's soul danced too.

They eased together, arms lifting and embracing, and their lips met in an easy closed-mouth kiss. They were two lovers familiar with each other, content to be unhurried, knowing that physical passion would build.
Kirk pulled back, his lips clinging as if reluctant to leave their warm counterparts. His gaze ranged over the gleaming cap of dark hair, the sweep of curved eyebrow, the two deep lines that framed Spock's nose and mouth. "You are so beautiful," he whispered. "All that time serving together and I didn't see. How could I have been so blind?"

Spock shook his head in the human gesture he had adopted years before. "I cannot explain the dynamics that attract one being to another. I am not a poet."

Kirk's fingertips stroked the soft skin in the hollow under a dark eye, then he swept up to caress the fine lines that graced his lover's temple. "Oh, yes, you are. Every time we meld I see your poetry. I do so love your mind, Spock. You have a beautiful mind."

A glimmer of a different desire filtered into Spock's expression. "There are times when I believe that you are even more eager for our mental joinings than I am."

Kirk nodded solemnly. "If that's possible. I never thought I'd want your mind as much as I want your body. You give me such an unexpected, wonderful gift. I want you all the time. All of you."
A blunt thumb drifted from the temple to the exact position on the cheekbone, mimicking. "I wish we could meld right now."

Spock breathed deeply, and suddenly his hand was over Kirk's fingers, pressing them against his face. "As do I," Spock whispered. "You have aroused me past my ability to comprehend. I wish to take your mind far more frequently than our responsibilities allow. Do you know that I want you every day? Every hour?"

A flashfire kindled in Kirk's heart, and he jerked his hips against the magician who opened the golden gates of glory in their minds. "Yes," Kirk hissed. "All the time. You know I want it."

Spock's fingers stroked his lover's face, and there was leashed power in his touch. "I desire you."

And everything that was in Kirk desired Spock, too. The fever racing through his veins, the cock that pulsed with his red blood wanted Spock. But most especially the hunger that was always in his mind called out, the hunger that he had never even known was there until the first time he had felt the indescribable touch of a Vulcan mind, loving the way the people of the desert planet had loved for countless thousands of years, twining their souls, merging their thoughts, dipping into wells of knowledge and intimacy.

Now that he knew the lushness of his beloved's mind, how could he ever return to merely physical love? The wonder that he had discovered in their melds was a narcotic that joined him to Spock more surely than any vows they might take. He wanted to feel the warm rush of Spock's thoughts cascading over him now....

But it was cruel to both of them to tease.

"I love to love you," Kirk whispered, "in every way." He turned his head and again kissed the palm of the seeking hand. "But--."

"I know." The power was banked as the magical touch fell to the curve of shoulder. "But we must not meld this morning. You would not have the time that you require afterwards to rest, to adjust."

"Yeah." Bitterness overflowed the dikes Kirk had set in his mind. It wasn't fair. Everywhere he turned he was met with resistance. He flopped back onto the pillow and flung his arm over his forehead. "That's definite," he sighed. "The ship comes first. But I get so frustrated sometimes. I hate not being able to give you a meld as often as you want. As often as I want, too." His arm
dropped and he peered at Spock with an irrational light of accusation in his eyes. "You wouldn't have this problem if I were Vulcan."

Spock was up on one elbow. He shook his head. "You are correct, but for the wrong reason. If you were Vulcan it is very unlikely that I would have this sexually-induced, emotionally-driven desire to meld with you so compulsively often. Other Vulcans do not stir my mind as you do. It is only your mind that I wish to touch."

Spock eased closer, and his hand curved over well-developed biceps. "Jim, do not be concerned. You are human. You cannot be expected to adjust to mental activity with the same ease as a telepath. I am grateful that our melds are as frequent as they are. And surely you are aware that the quality of our mental joinings has... improved. Deepened over the months." Spock's throat muscles contracted as he swallowed. "That is very satisfying to me."

Kirk couldn't stop the slow curving of his lips that insisted on shouldering its way past his discontent. Spock was so endearing when he tried to express an emotional concept in that controlled tone of voice.

He touched his lover on the chest with one finger. "It's very satisfying to me, too." He watched while his hand searched among the chest hair for a nipple. He knew he had to accept the encouraging words. Spock was right. Kirk tucked his desire for mental contact back behind the wall of his self-control. It hurt to know that Spock was doing the same thing, but it helped in an ironic sort of way that they were sharing the deprivation equally. And there were some things that Kirk could do to make up for it....

Spock's nipple was tightening under his palm. "What do you say we make a date for tonight? To meld? I'll get a good night's sleep afterwards."

"That would be most gratifying. I will look forward to it."

"And in the meantime...." Kirk turned back onto his side and pulled Spock down to face him. He traced the curves of his lover's mouth with one fingertip.

Vulcan lips were so very warm. And soft. That had been unexpected. Before he had felt the incomparable excitement of Spock's lips pressed to his, Kirk had only ever seen the arid, stretched curve of Spock's upper lip. It matched his stoic expression and the logical pronouncements that the captain heard every day on the bridge. Surak would be proud of that Vulcan, upper lip.

Spock's tongue snaked out to lick the caressing digit. Kirk smiled, and even allowed his finger to be sucked into the moistness, but then he shook his head and continued his slow pathway across the sensitive labial surfaces.

Now he was touching what he thought of as the human part of Spock's mouth, the sensuous lower lip that he had never even noticed until it had first moved against him in passion. Like almost everything else that was a part of the marvelous being who shared his life, appearances deceived, and only inner dichotomy revealed truth. The lush, full, lower lip betrayed Spock. That lower lip spoke of all his hidden sensuality. It shouted of his potential to feel and touch and love. Perhaps that was why Spock so often caught his lower lip in his teeth and hid it when he was struggling with emotion. But now Kirk knew its secrets. His lover had whispered them in the night, and in the early morning, with each intimate movement of his body.

Spock reached out and caught Kirk's hand. "In the meantime...." he repeated, and his gaze touched Kirk's eyes, his nose, his mouth, as if he were hungry and the beloved features his only food, "...I detect a need in you, my Captain. Will you allow me to fill it?"
Kirk found his body being pressed back against the pillow as the heavy weight of his Vulcan settled over him. He tensed, still caught in wanting to give physical pleasure in place of the meld. But maybe this was another need that they both had. And what mere human could oppose the strength of a determined Vulcan? He relaxed against the mattress. "Do I have a choice?"

Spock nuzzled up along his jaw line and licked at an earlobe. "None whatsoever," he murmured. He shifted, and they kissed.

Kirk abandoned himself to a body moving against his, to the knowledge that he was wanted and loved, to the desire that lifted his cock and tingled in his chest. He wanted this. He needed this. After the fruitless arguments with Komack, the crew's unsuccessful toiling in the ship's labs, the desperate subspace message from Governor Benelli for which they had no answer, he needed this so much. And Spock was here to give it to him. Kirk opened his mouth to share human passion with a flick of his wet tongue. Ghod, he loved kissing his first officer.

Already there was heat at his lover's groin. He searched for the depressions in the small of Spock's back, that peculiarly Vulcan, male erogenous zone where he knew he could give pleasure. His hands found a home there, fitting naturally, and his fingers skimmed over the sensitive skin.

Spock jerked with the first contact, and made a little moaning sound that vibrated in their joined mouths.

It was a sound that Kirk loved to hear, and it sent sharp arrows of pleasure racing straight to his cock. He arched against the hard masculine body and pushed his tongue even deeper into the moistness. He touched all the inner surfaces he could reach and reveled in the pebbled roughness of the tongue that was desert-drier than his, the smooth buttery feel of the inner cheeks, so like the buttery softness his cock found when he was mounted above.

Their hips pushed against one another in a wonderful, familiar rhythm. The solid warmth of a double-ridged cock pressed against him, and his own organ grew harder with each slick caress in his mouth. He wanted to stay like this always, sealed together with love and sweat and desire, he wanted to come just like this....

But Spock had other ideas. Despite the pressure of Kirk's arms and his best efforts to keep the two of them pinned together, Spock gradually pulled away, his lips lingering, like a man who appreciates where he is but knows there are other places to visit. He tilted his head and panted three times before he had his breathing back under control, then he slowly bent forward and bestowed a loving kiss on first one and then the other of Kirk's eyelids.

"You have been much too tense lately," he said softly. "Relax, and allow me to love you."

Relax? With his cock rock-hard and his willing lover all over him? Kirk managed not to moan while his earlobe was sucked, and his body remained tense but still while Spock kissed his way down his straining neck. But there was no way at all that he could remain silent and still when a seeking mouth fastened on his left nipple.

He jerked up against Spock's belly. Not a single one of his many female lovers had ever paid much attention to his nipples. He'd never given the women the chance to explore his dominating body the way he'd relentlessly explored theirs. It wasn't until Spock had turned on him with masculine, single-minded concentration that Kirk had discovered just how much sensitivity resided in those tiny nubs.

Kirk placed a hand on the back of Spock's head and pushed to keep those lips exactly where they were. A tremor shook his body. That felt so damn good....
But Spock resisted the attempt to pin him to the broad chest. Effortlessly he jerked his head back, and then his passion-clouded face was only centimeters from Kirk's. Something... different sparked in the dark eyes. Something... carnal.

"I will take you in my mouth," his restrained, logical Vulcan lover whispered hoarsely.

A thrill that originated in his heart streaked down Kirk's spine and lodged, quivering, in his cock. Spock wanted... what he wanted.... He willingly spread his legs as Spock crouched between them. He tried to watch, but with the first moist touch he moaned and his head fell back upon the pillow.

"Oh, ghod, yes." All his energy was concentrated between his legs, and his words barely punctuated the air. "Yes. Oh, that feels so good."

He loved being sucked by Spock, he loved it. Loved the sounds as Spock wetly kissed his way up the stiff column, loved the touch of lips as he suctioned around the flared-out head, loved the flick of a tongue as it swirled around his glans. Loved the fact that it was Spock doing this for him, bent over before him, placing those soft, wonderful lips over his most intimate part....

*This is my first officer doing this. This is Spock going down on me. My Vulcan.* His heart pounded and he gulped for air.

He had to look, to see, and opened his eyes to the incredible sight of his cock disappearing through pursed lips. Oh, God! He had no choice but to give himself up to the sensations that were swiftly climbing to their peak. Despite his best efforts, his eyes fluttered closed again; he gave himself up to the heady rush that would culminate in the body's fleeting ecstasy....

It was there, only moments away, and he reached out for it, his fingers tightening into fists.... And unexpectedly, there was something else there too.

...the swelling strength of a human organ in his mouth, the faintest hint of salt tingling against his tongue, promising more, the urgent cry of his mind, millennia old, looking for another connection that matched and yet transcended the physical... he forced the longing down, it could not be.... concentrate on the pleasure, it was there, his penis was pulsing, so good, close, but he needed more, it was trapped now against the mattress, thrust, good, push, feel it, suck and know Jim's quivering, his t'hy'la would find completion soon, push again against the sheets, closer, if only to be encased in the beloved mind, no, not now, then to be encased within the body, to mount and thrust, to go deep into the hidden, forbidden recesses of desire, to plumb the depths of his mother's race, the depths of the one who quenched all his thirsts....

Kirk's eyes popped open. They weren't melded, were they? Spock's hands weren't anywhere near the necessary contact points. But he could perceive every thought, and they were definitely his lover's, the u-nique and beloved flavor glowed in his mind, dimmer than in their usual joinings, as if filtered, or twisted through an odd angle.

Yet here was a purely-masculine appetite that Kirk knew well. He had been consumed with it, the need for possession, the yearning to bury himself in Spock from their very first kiss. It was only after months of intimacy that the same desires had made their appearance in his reticent lover. Next to Spock's deep-seated and genuine requirement to give, the rich soil of their love had eventually nourished a budding need to take as well. And now Kirk perceived that yearning, still so new to their relationship, raw and natural from the source.

Fascinated, his own reaching for climax momentarily forgotten, he watched as Spock's iron control caught the barely expressed thought, judged it ill-timed and inappropriate, wrestled with it for less than an instant, forced it into captivity, and settled back down to Kirk's orgasm and the penis in his
In the next moment Spock's lover was sitting up and reaching for the lubricant that was already on
the nightstand. Their mental communion, whatever it had been, was abruptly severed with the
movement. "No, wait," Kirk gasped, and even as he pushed Spock's seeking lips off his blood-red
organ he wondered where he'd found the self-control to postpone his climax.

Then he looked into the passion-clouded eyes and he knew exactly where that strength had come
from.

Kirk dropped back against the pillow and flipped open the tube. Spock was still kneeling between
the muscular thighs, his eyebrows contracted in uncertainty, and it took but a moment for Kirk to
slather the cream on the verdant-green organ.

"Come on," Kirk urged, and he pulled his knees up to his chest.

Spock looked down at his glistening sex and cradled his testicles in one palm, compulsively rolled
them and pushed the tightened sac upwards against his penis. His other hand gripped his own leg
as if to prevent it from reaching elsewhere. "Jim, this is not necess--,"


And there it was, skipping in and out of his consciousness like a stone thrown along the surface of
water: matching the blood that thrummed through his own cock was a pulsing longing in the
double-ridged penis. The desire to penetrate his lover skittered through Spock's mind, too strong to
stay captive for long, and for an instant Kirk saw it again before that oddly distorted golden world
blanked out.

Kirk pushed forward so that his lover's cock nestled along the welcoming warmth of his crack.
"Come on."

Spock breathed deeply and groped for the tube that the captain still clasped in his hand. "Yes," he
murmured, and coated a finger to lubricate and dilate the inside channel of the receptive ass. Then
he drew back, positioned his penis exactly, and closed his eyes.

Kirk wrapped his hand around his own cock as the very tip of insistent heat pushed against the
tightness of his sphincter. The hardness throbbed its insistent desire against his palm, but he could
deny his own arousal for a few more minutes. His turn to give. With his other hand he pulled up on
one knee, trying to ease the passage by opening wide and slackening his anal muscles. It shouldn't
hurt much, he knew, not if the long, thin penis went slowly, and if he remembered to relax to allow
both of the ridges passage. Still inexpert in loving this way, Kirk concentrated, commanding his
body to yield.

There was a stab of pain and the first penile ridge breached the protective muscle. Kirk inhaled
sharply. More sweat popped out on his brow and his cock lost its rigid steel. But it didn't matter.
He looked up at his lover's face. Eyes tightly closed, mouth half-open, panting, light bouncing off
the clenched cheek muscles, Spock was the most beautiful sight that Kirk had ever seen. How
could he have dreamed that his Vulcan could look this way, or that his own body would be able to
provide such urgent, needful pleasure to the being who denied himself so much? Nobody else, the
chant rose from primal depths. *He takes this from nobody else but me.* Loving Spock made Kirk
feel like a god, humbled by the beauty of his own creation.

Spock thrust again, and there was another small pain as the head of the cock slid into the lubricated
rectum, but Kirk barely noticed the discomfort now. He arched up and forced more of his lover's
hardness into his body, wanting to consume Spock, take all of Spock into his depths. He couldn't
give his lover the meld, but this he could give, deep, soul-deep, life-deep loving with his flesh.
Kirk jerked again, and another five centimeters of the verdant organ disappeared into his ass.

Spock gasped, and followed his cock in its precipitous slide down the welcoming channel. He
pitched forward and groaned helplessly with the sensation Kirk's tightness was giving him. His
clennched, supporting hands came to rest on either side of the broad shoulders. Kirk looked up at the
swept-back bangs and the undisguised desire, and smiled just as Spock opened his eyes and looked
down at him.

"You feel wonderful/extremely satisfying," they each said, their breathless words overlapping. Kirk
cought the wisp of amusement in his lover's eyes, and then the resurgence of passion that would not be
denied.

"Let's go," he gasped, and he arched up into the rod within him.

One stroke, two strokes, three, the short choppy movements that Spock favored in the beginning
changed almost instantly into the deeper strokes that heralded his climax. Kirk released his
stranglehold on his own cock and pulled frantically, allowing those wonderful, dammed-up
feelings to return. His hand on his cock felt so good, and the warm fullness in his ass was reaching
up high, higher.... It pressed against that special spot in the upper reaches of the anal canal that
Kirk had almost forgotten was there to be stimulated. He moaned his sudden pleasure.

"Damn, that feels good. Do it again. Yes. Yes!" His hand slackened, the better to concentrate on
the sensations Spock was giving him. He fought to bring his lover's face in focus as their bodies
heaved against one another. "You feel good inside me, Spock. Good."

The frenetic motion stilled, and their gazes caught again. Light glowed in the Vulcan eyes, a
compound of lust and pride and intense affection that Kirk was sure had never been directed to
anyone else. And then without a word Spock resumed his thrusting, but with a difference, pushing
forward and up, drawing out his strokes for maximum effect, knowing exactly how to rub the tip of
his long penis against the human prostate and give them both pleasure.

Kirk moaned again and flung his head back as more unique tremors swept through him. His eyes
fluttered. This was a different feeling, not sharp like orgasm but diffuse; it encompassed more than
just his erection. His whole lower body felt like it was melting; he was being bombarded by such
sweet trembling that shot through his insides and seemed to make even his skin vibrate. No woman
had ever turned him to jelly like this. This was something only another man could do for him, what
the only man he would ever trust enough was doing to him now. And Spock was making all the
right moves, fucking him as if he'd been doing it for years.

Kirk rocked under the heavy weight and tried to arch up to meet every thrust. "Damn, I wish we
could find your Vulcan prostate," he panted. "I wish you could feel like this when I'm inside you."

He'd never been able to give this to Spock, although Kirk stubbornly insisted that the prostate must
be there. Could hybrid anatomy be that different? His lover had never seemed to care, and entered
into their lovemaking wholeheartedly without this incredible sensation.

But now Spock was making needful moaning sounds in the back of his throat with each thrust. Kirk
recognized the almost-grunts and his eyes flew open. No way he was going to miss the culmination
of the miracle he had wrought; Spock was close to coming.

He reached for his cock again and pulled in time with the more rapid thrusts that were stuffing into
his ass. Ghod, it felt good. His organ was on fire, his whole lower body was tingling and Spock...
Kirk feasted with his eyes. Spock looked incredible. His controlled, ever-precise lover was sweating, his face was contorted, the muscles in his arms were bunching as he pushed into Kirk's willing, wide-open body....

And then suddenly he could sense Spock's mind again.

...anal muscles clenching against his burning penis, the twin ridges were on fire, spread to gather every searing pleasure, his penis was ready to burst, ready to fill his t'hy'la with his love, with his life, with his seminal liquid, but wait, hold back, balance on the very brink, wait for Jim to come too....

No, don't wait, Kirk insisted. Take what I'm giving you. Come, now!

And abruptly all the Vulcan controls came tumbling down. Spock's climax raced through the human mind, coated it with color, spilled over into urgent pleasure in the human body, and broke through the clenching fingers. Kirk's seed erupted just as the last emission pulsed within his body.

It was long moments later when Kirk's convulsing form finally relaxed. When his vision cleared he looked up at his lover, balanced on stiffened arms that were trembling. Spock stared down at him, oblivious of his penis that was still inside his captain's rectum, oblivious of the human semen that dotted his belly. The Vulcan panted noisily, his bangs were in appealingly tousled disarray, and his left eyebrow was raised to startling heights.

But it was something else that captured Kirk's attention. His lover's eyes. Even before he and Spock had become intimate, he'd been an expert at reading the myriad of expressions that barely moved a muscle of Spock's face, but always shone in his eyes.

And now there was something special there. Astonishment flashed in the dark depths. And something else, too, something wonderful that warmed Kirk all the way through his still-tingling body.

Spock was happy. Very, very happy.

Kirk found himself smiling. He reached up and traced the outline of those intriguing lips. As his fingers touched the corners of the mouth he felt them tweak inwards in Spock's version of a genuine smile.

"Would you mind telling me," Kirk said, grinning like a crazy man, "what that was all about?" He accented his question by squeezing the softening organ with his anal muscles.

"I did not suspect this," Spock said, his eyes glowing with every syllable. "I did not know that this was happening to us. But there can be no other explanation. I did not meld us and yet you commanded the moment of my release. It is the Il'safarr. It must be."

"I did not suspect this," Spock said, his eyes glowing with every syllable. "I did not know that this was happening to us. But there can be no other explanation. I did not meld us and yet you commanded the moment of my release. It is the Il'safarr. It must be."

"I was in your mind," Kirk agreed, searching his love's face. "Like a meld, but not quite. What does it mean? What's the Il'safarr?" He heard himself say the unfamiliar syllables with a flawless Shikahr accent, and he realized for the first time that somewhere in the depths of their melds he had learned how to pronounce Vulcan. That thought was enough to start the peculiar warming process in his gut again. What else had they exchanged in their love? There was no doubt in his mind that something momentous had just happened. But what?

Before he answered Spock looked down at where their bodies were still joined and his smile became self-conscious. He pulled back from his sheath, turned over onto his back and reached for the disposable wipes they kept by the bed. Kirk straightened his legs, kneaded his thighs, then
hitched over on the mattress until he could fling his right leg over his lover's hairy left one.

But Spock was not content with this, one of their familiar post-coital positions. He rolled over onto his side and pulled Kirk to him, his arms wrapped around as much of his captain as he could. They faced one another, only centimeters apart, and this time Kirk saw caution mingled with the wonder.

"Perhaps I am being precipitous. It is difficult to be precise and we have meager data. It would be inaccurate to draw broad conclusions based on purely Vulcan experience. You are not a telepath, and I am half-Vulcan."

Kirk waited. He knew how his scientist hated to advance tentative conclusions with little evidence.

"Various interpretations are possible. Perhaps this unusual occurrence was simply another manifestation of the basic compatibility of our minds. You may recall that there have been three other occasions when we have achieved contact without the benefit of a meld or even physical proximity."

A long pause. Kirk waited some more and searched the angular face. Finally, he reached out and touched a dry cheek with the tip of one finger, drew a line down to the jawline. "Science Officer, I need a report. Hypothesize. Tell me."

Spock drew in a deep breath. Determination replaced the caution, and that special glow was back. "Jim," Spock said. His voice reached a low, vibrating register. "This may not be news that you will... like."

Kirk insinuated a knee between two bony legs. "Try me."

Seconds of silence, then... "The Il'safarr is a definite sign that a natural bond is in the process of formation."

Kirk stared at the being he loved, a hundred thoughts racing through his mind at once: his fears of being grounded because of Starfleet’s two-faced, unofficial and very uncertain policy about marriage between officers on a starship; the swell of a woman's breast, her soft moistness taking him in, enfolding him; Spock's face twisted with lust as his steely fingers groped for his bondmate during the unknown violence of pon farr; the final defining step that would announce to everyone, to his crew, his friends, all the officers staffing Starfleet command in San Francisco that James Kirk loved a man, loved to fuck another man's ass, loved to suck cock....

But they were just thoughts. They wrestled with genuine memories: Spock's measured voice, their soul-baring conversations about marriage and bonding, their joint and difficult decision to postpone any formal commitment until the five year mission was over; relinquishing their bodies as they sank into the communion of a meld, sharing their love, sharing their conviction that regardless of anything they would be together forever; Spock throwing his head back and shouting "Jim!" as Kirk's tongue and mouth brought him to ecstasy; touching within the meld the parts of Spock that had always been empty, filling them up with life and love; waking in the early morning to sweet warmth and kisses, and the knowledge that always, always, Spock would be there for him....

There was never really any question which perspective he would choose. He and Spock had been moving towards a lifelong joining from the moment they had first kissed, from the moment they'd set eyes on one another. Who was he to pretend he could stop what had been set in motion when the first atoms of the universe formed?

"A bond," Kirk whispered, saying it slowly, tasting it the way a connoisseur tastes fine wine. He and Spock, joined body and soul, mind and spirit. The concept became real, a living thing he could
touch, it blossomed on his tongue, blossomed in his heart, and he knew that his happiness was showing through his eyes and in his smile.

He searched the sharp-boned features he had come to love. "A natural bond. Of course. What could be more natural than a bond between you and me?"

He eased forward, a seamless motion that took a thousand years and yet only a microsecond before their lips were pressed together in love, in affirmation, in a profound and shared joy.

When Kirk pulled back he had to blink against the wetness in his eyes. "Oh, Ghod. I really wish we could meld now."

Spock tangled his fingers in Kirk's hair. "As do I," he said, his own voice trembling with emotion. "This is... I did not know...."

"I love you."

They stared at one another for long minutes, moving forward for brief kisses, but needing to see more than they needed to touch. Spock's face glowed, all the sharp contours had softened, and Kirk couldn't get enough of the expression. To have made his lover this happy, to feel the happiness springing from his own heart, to know this life-defining moment vibrated between them....

Finally, Kirk pressed his lips to a slanted brow and laughed shakily. "The most important thing that's happened to me in years and I don't even know what it's all about. So, the bond that we were so sure we would wait for is forming all on its own. Tell me about it."

Spock ran his hand down the length of Kirk's right arm and entwined their fingers between their bodies. It felt natural, right, to be holding hands with Spock in their bed while they talked about forever.

"As you know, the bond ensures that the partners will be drawn together during pon farr. It also allows greater access during melding, a greater... intimacy. When it is complete, I am confident that I will have a subliminal awareness of you at all times. Because you are human, and non-telepathic, it is uncertain what you will feel. There is very little information available concerning inter-species bonding, and no certainties. And my hybrid nature complicates matters."

"But I was in your mind when we were making love," Kirk objected. "I felt you then."

"Indeed you did," Spock murmured, squeezing the fingers in his grip. "Which brings me to another subject. Jim, the first manifestations of Il'safarr, which is the ability to control one's partner during intercourse, is an indication of an approaching pon farr."

Kirk drew in a deep breath. Once said, it made sense, and somehow he wasn't surprised. "Tell me more," he whisper-commanded.

"The average time from the first Il'safarr to consummation is fifteen point two months. That will be after the conclusion of our five-year mission, so we should have more than adequate time to prepare ourselves."

Kirk shook his head, already busy accessing probabilities. "It's been fewer than three years since your last one. You've rarely done anything according to schedule."

Spock swallowed, but continued evenly. "That is true. We should be prepared for... all eventualities. But the compulsion to mate is almost always preceded by certain events that prepare the bonded individuals and increase the probability of survival. Couples who are in rapport are able"
to predict the onset of the Time. For example, there are physical and hormonal changes that occur in tandem with mental development. The female experiences a growing ability to command her bondmate's mind; while the male's body responds with certain chang-es, shifts in gland size and position, and of course an increase in hormone production."

Kirk's brow creased as he reached for complete understanding. "That means I'll be able to... control you? Even in plak tow?"

"In a successful bonding there is no plak tow. The whole rationale behind the bonding, the tuning of minds together in harmony, is to provide the female with the ability to control the passions of the male during his time of madness. She soothes him, provides an anchor for his fire and prevents him from slipping into insanity. And she is able to protect her own body from brutality through the same kind of command that you issued to me."

"The female? It should work the same way with us, right?"

"Yes. Although bondings between male Vulcans are rare, almost as rare as formal marriages between human men on Earth---"

"Three point eight percent," Kirk supplied. As a man who was on the verge of such a marriage, he'd felt the need to know. He'd asked the library computer.

"And on Vulcan, four point one percent of all bondings are between two males. The individuals involved are always exceptionally compatible, mentally. Only such compatibility would override the logic of a fertile union. It ensures that the partner in pon farr will not feel threatened by the one who is in his mind, regardless of the fact that he is male."

"But what I felt just now, it was so uncertain. Wavering. You seem to be assuming that my ability will grow. I'm not a telepath, Spock. I'm not a Vulcan. Suppose I can't...."

Spock moved closer, gathering Kirk into his arms once more. "Such doubts are not consistent with your usual attitude. We are exceptionally compatible, Jim. I estimate that there is an eighty-three point seven percent probability that we will have a complete, fully functioning bond within eight months. When pon farr arrives somewhat later, you will know how to protect yourself, and you will be my anchor. Or would you care to dispute my calculations?"

"If I did it's because this is so important. Your life is at stake. But I wouldn't consider implying that we're not compatible, not after experiencing our melds. I'm not that illogical."

"No, you are not. And the success of our mental activities provides further evidence that our bond is growing. You need not fear your current lack of expertise. As couples increase their mental intimacy, their minds become more attuned to one another. It is a self-perpetuating feedback system; the mind affects the body and the body affects the mind." He snuggled down within their embrace until his forehead touched Kirk's chest and his voice was muffled. "In the coming months you will become an expert."

Kirk tightened his arms around his lover and pressed his lips to the dark hair. "That sounds wonderful. I want to become an expert, with you. And now we have an excuse to find ways to give us what we both want anyway, more melds."

"Opportunist," Spock mumbled.

"Of course," Kirk laughed, but then he quieted. "You said that this might be something that I might not like. Why?"
"You are a most independent individual. Yet the bond is forming without our conscious decision. It is basically out of our control. Telling Doctor McCoy, which we have mutually agreed upon, is one thing, but this is... another. My Vulcan physiology is forcing us to act before we had planned to do so."

Kirk sighed. If he probed deeply enough within himself, there was a nagging, macho, imperious voice that was... resentful. After all, he and Spock had decided to wait for a commitment. They had believed that Starfleet’s reaction to an openly acknowledged relationship was too unpredictable to test. Neither of them had been willing to risk being separated by a disapproving bureaucracy, or just as bad, being grounded, even if they were granted a dependency posting. And now the new bond would force them into the acknowledgment they'd been talking about and yet delaying for months.

Spock seemed to follow his thoughts. "Jim. Perhaps it will not be necessary for us to travel to Vulcan and--."

"-- have the bond checked by a healer," Kirk completed for him.

"That is the typical procedure for any new bond, yes. However it is also usually merely a formality, and--."

"-- you wouldn't dare suggest that we skip it."

"Jim, the healer will report our bond. All healers are honor-bound to do so. It will... formalize our situation." Unspoken: announce our unconventional love to the entire Federation.

"And the healer will also check the bond to make sure that it's complete. Safe," Kirk said as sharply as he could, holding his warm lover in their passion-bed. "It's important that any inadequacies in the bond are detected and fixed before the pon farr. Our bond is growing on its own, it hasn't been imposed on us by a healer who knows exactly what neural connections to make, and that's a very compelling reason to have it checked. I'm not going to just take a chance on your eighty-three point seven percent. My humanity might really mess things up for us. If pon farr is on its way, I want us to be prepared in every way." He pulled back from their embrace and hitched up on one elbow. "It's only logical."

Kirk stared down at the heavily masculine features. This was his bondmate-to-be, the one with whom he would live and make love and share his days. This was the man who had given everything Kirk had not expected to find. Welcome at the end of the day, a place where a weary captain could relax, talk to an equal about command decisions, simply be himself. Spock had opened up his mind, and his precious, unknown heart, and there Kirk had found a home.

And especially in the last nine days, Spock's unspoken support after the frustrations of Michaela had been his captain's only haven.

Kirk reached between them and caressed Spock's chin between thumb and forefinger. Such hot skin.... "The last few days have been hell for me," he said. "You know how I've been feeling. It's been really hard, but having you here, being able to... rest... in you, that's made everything easier. We were meant to be together, and whatever problems we face, we'll face them together." His voice was no longer even. "You're my light. Like in our melds when everything is golden. You're my light in the darkness. I want a bond with you. I want it."

They came together in another kiss, which seemed such an inadequate expression of all that Kirk was feeling. Spock's hand strayed up into his hair again as their lips pressed against one another, his fingertips moving quite purposefully over the meld points. Kirk felt the merest wisp of mental
contact, an echo of peacefulness.

"Captain?" Spock murmured, still kissing.

"Yes, Commander?" Kirk mumbled from the corner of his mouth.

Spock pulled back mere centimeters. His breath gently buffeted Kirk's face. "I believe it is my duty, as your first officer, and your bondmate-to-be, to report that it is now 0629 hours."

Kirk groaned. "Precisely?"

"Precisely."

"You know, there are times when your perfect time sense can be a real pain."

Spock looked at him with blatant amusement. "Jim, whether I perceive it or not, time will continue to flow. At any rate, I must vacate this bed, since I require a period of meditation before duty. And I have scheduled a meeting with the science department management team in thirty minutes."

Kirk's eyes brightened. "Have you found something?"

Spock shook his head, like the slow tolling of a mournful bell. "It would please me if I could report in the affirmative, but I cannot. I merely wish to ensure that all involved departments are coordinating their attempts to find an answer to the Michaelan situation. We must avoid duplication of effort."

Kirk grimaced. "And we've got to avoid having this interfere with our assigned duties. I appreciate all these people who've volunteered on their off-shifts, but we can't let the rest of the ship's work get pushed aside. We have other jobs to do. And Komack will probably be watching for something like that."

"I will see that sciences does not give you cause for another altercation with the admiral."

"I didn't mean to imply that you would," Kirk said softly. "Come here."

They brought their lips together again, a kiss that started simply, then blossomed into new urgency. Spock eased closer, and he took two deep, trembling breaths.

Smiling at his love's recuperative powers, Kirk pushed him away. "If we don't stop this right now you'll never make your meeting and I'll never make my breakfast with security."

Spock's lips quirked. "That is indubitably true. And I understand your concern about that department."

Kirk watched, entranced, as the softness in his lover's face and the special light in his eyes were banked behind Vulcan controls. When Spock sat up, dropped his legs over the side of the bed and said, "I expect to be on the bridge by the beginning of alpha shift," he was everything the fleet's best first officer should be. He walked away, a completely naked Vulcan clothed more than adequately in his dignity, and Kirk watched him go: a long flow of chiseled muscle, lean strength, flat butt and beautiful spirit. The automatic door closed on a loud sneeze.

The captain of the Enterprise smiled, pushed back against his pillow and stretched. He thought of the bond forming. Whatever it was between him and Spock that had drawn them together in the first place was sweeping all their doubts, their cautions and reserve away; it was bonding them right now, even as Spock started the shower in the head and his captain stared at the ceiling. It was
so right.

Still stretching, Kirk caught a glimpse of the crystal hyacinths on the headboard-bookcase behind him, and the faint glint of the portable forcefield he'd rigged to protect the delicate tracery of petal and stem. In their very first meld four years ago, he had inhaled the sweet perfume of the springtime flowers in the darkness of a strictly controlled joining. But a first officer intent only on sharing information with his captain had been unable to conceal the trembling of potential from Kirk's nimble intelligence. Kirk had confirmed then what before he had only guessed. There were depths to his almost-friend that were yet unknown.

But unknown no more. The elusive perfume graced all their melds, and hyacinths had come to symbolize the new life they were forging between them. Now, with the bond growing, they would meld even deeper, and more often, and they would share the scent of the flowers as their minds merged.

Kirk reached over his head for the crystal that was finely tinted with blue and pink. He watched his fingers while they slid against the dome of the force field, as if they were caressing the air around the flowers. The hyacinths didn't exactly match the masculine austerity of the rest of his room, the books, the warrior's head, but this sculpture from the artist's colony on Arcturus Four was a gift from his lover. It was his prized possession.

Warmth washed over him, the way sonics were washing now over warm skin. He and Spock, they were so good together. Good for each other. And, Kirk vowed to himself, he'd keep making it good for his lover. He'd try to give Spock everything that wonderful, absolutely unique, irreplaceable Vulcan needed.

His fingers faltered against the tension of the forcefield, and his hand fell to his side. Would he keep that promise the way he'd kept his promise to Mar?

The vision that for the past nine days he hadn't been able to shake assaulted him once more. "Don't worry," he'd told her. "It will be all right." Then Mar had echoed his own words back at him, her confidence living as she pushed the firing button and ended her life.

Why had she done it? He couldn't help but think that the answer was because she trusted Kirk to end the nightmare for her child, for her people. She had escaped into death because she trusted him. And what had he done for her? Nothing.

The muscles in Kirk's belly bunched, and he bounded out of bed in futile escape. So many people trusted him. The crew trusted their captain's judgment, and were willingly spending long hours in the labs after Michaela. Spock trusted his love, enough to ignore the sixteen point three percent chance that they wouldn't have a complete bond in eight months, would never have a complete bond. And Mar....

He paced over to the desk-top computer with long, deliberate steps, pulled the mantle of command over his shoulders with every movement. By the time the routine messages from gamma shift appeared on the screen, he had his tension under control, boxed where he could call upon it for force, for incisive thought, for motivation. His jaw was tightly clenched.

Again, he thought of the bond taking shape. Tonight the hunger in his mind would be temporarily appeased as he and Spock found each other in the meld. And tonight, he and Spock would finally tell Bones that they were lovers. It would be such a relief....
Chapter 2

Quarters for junior officers on a starship were meant to accommodate two narrow, single beds, pushed up against two different walls, two built-in dressers, two desks and not much else. The double bed that dominated the room shared by Lieutenant Brian Dawson and Ensign Irina Hunyady gave the space a lopsided look. It had been a belated wedding gift from the captain on the occasion of the young couple’s marriage just two months earlier.

Theirs had been the first marriage on board the Enterprise since the ill-fated joining of Tomlinson and Martine three years earlier. It wasn't lucky, some of the older crew had said, to formalize a relationship in the ship’s chapel. But the ever-practical Dawson and the ever-enthusiastic Hunyady had ignored the whispered taboo. The Enterprise was where they had met and fallen in love. Captain Kirk had presided over the ceremony, and Mister Spock had actually unbent enough to escort the bride up the short aisle. There'd been a wonderful party afterwards; the crew of this ship knew how to enjoy themselves.

But the young ensign was not remembering her wedding as she examined her reflection in the mirror and prepared for the day's duty. "Brian?" she called. "What do you think of this?" She tilted her head.

Hands snaked around her waist from behind, and her husband rested his chin upon her shoulder. "Non-regulation," he chided. "No, no. If I saw one of my people in engineering looking so alluring, I'd have to put her on report." The brown-haired Dawson was five years older than his wife but seemed older than that. He'd been one of the original crewmembers for the five year mission, had climbed through the ranks and proven his competence at every turn. Now he was second-in-command in Mister Scott's domain. A steady lad, Scotty called him.

"That's what I thought," she sighed, and pulled the blue ribbon from her shoulder-length auburn hair. "I thought it looked nice."

"I do too. Why not wear it when we're off-duty," he suggested, and kissed her on the neck. She snuggled back against him, placed her hands over his at her waist.

But after a moment her smile dropped to a frown. "Lieutenant Tu ordered me out of the lab last night."

"Oh, is that why you came to bed early, is it?"

"Oh one hundred isn't early."

"It's earlier than oh two hundred, which is when you've come home to me for the past week."

She made a face at him in the mirror. "I've just been trying to find --."

"I know, I know. The answer to this Michaelan problem."

"It's important. Mister Spock says so. I think so, too. I don't understand why Tu got nasty and told me to go to bed."

Gently, Dawson turned his bride to face him. "Maybe, just maybe, Tu was thinking of me, abandoned between cold sheets. Or maybe, just maybe, he thought you were overdoing it a bit."

"People died. We had to leave there without an answer and people are still dying. How can you
overdo it under those circumstances? Mister Spock has authorized the extra duty. I don't see --.

"Mister Spock. You know, if I didn't know you positively adored me, I think I could be jealous of your commanding officer."

"Brian! That's ridiculous. I love you, honey." She proved it by wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him.

"I know. And I love you, too. But when Mister Spock gave the okay for extra work on these experiments, he didn't mean that you should immerse yourself day and night in the labs. You need to calm down, sweetheart. Don't push so hard."

She stuck out her sharp chin and looked mulish. "Brian, this is my work. You married it when you married me."

"I know, I know. And I won't interfere in your career just like you promised not to interfere with mine. But this is the sort of thing that people talk about. They don't understand how intense you are. It's easy to misinterpret your seriousness about your work for ambition. People get upset about that."

Hunyady moved away from him and walked to the other side of their quarters. "I'm not on the Enterprise to get people to like me. Lots of people don't anyway, I know."

He walked up behind her. "That's because they don't know you very well. You can be, well, a little abrupt at times."

She shrugged. "That's the way I am."

"I know. And I love the way you are. When people take the time to get to know you, they like you. I know I did. The best day of my life was when you were assigned to the Enterprise."

She turned and gave him a smile. "Me too. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me." She walked into his embrace.

"I know. But be honest and say that the second best thing that's ever happened was having the chance to work with Mister Spock."

"What are you now, a mind reader? Okay, okay, I confess. Second best. But he's so... so..."

"So what?"

She held him at arm's length and said earnestly, "So good. At everything. If some day I can be half the scientist that he is, I'll be happy. And he's giving me so many opportunities. The chance to work on the bridge, go on landing parties --"

"Irina, I think Mister Spock would say he's only being logical. He knows talent when he sees it."

"Maybe. But I'm grateful."

He hugged her hard. "I know you are. That's one of the things that makes me happy. You know what else would make me happy?"

"What?" There was a knowing gleam in her eye that he ignored.

"Lay off the labs for just a little while tonight. Spend some time with me. Let's eat lunch together today, and dinner, and then..."
She laughed. "Oh, I know what happens after that. But then after that, let's go to our physics class. Mister Spock said he's going to conduct it tonight, give everybody a break from the lab work and take some time to consider our findings. Maybe gain a fresh perspective. And maybe we should just push dinner back a little. Give us more time for that."

Dawson smiled at her ruefully. "I have married a woman who will go far."

She tweaked his nose. "And I have married a wonderfully talented man who I will have to work hard to keep up with. You'll be a chief engineer soon."

"Let's not hold our breath. I like it right here on the Enterprise, with you."

She nodded, suddenly serious. "Oh, yes. Brian, I love it here with you. I love you. You do know that, don't you?"

"Yes." He caught her hands, leaned forward and delicately kissed her lips. "I know you love me and I know that I love you. More than anything. And tonight, let me prove it to you."

"Again? I thought we just did that."

He refused to be caught in her smile. "Yes, again. There aren't enough ways for me to prove it to you, Irina. I love you. So much."

They kissed again, and when they drew apart Dawson cleared his throat and tugged on his tunic. "You're turning me into an emotional sort of guy. Come on, let's go eat an early breakfast. Then you can get a head start in the lab and surprise Lieutenant Tu."

*****

"How can you eat that stuff?"

Ensign Tarn's round-round eyes got even wider as he stared up at Lieutenant Prendel't from where he sat at the long table in the mess room on deck six. He continued to chew, then swallowed slowly, the way he did almost everything else, and gave her question serious consideration. His gaze never left her blue face.

The Andorian woman abruptly lifted her right shoulder, a gesture which precariously tilted the items on her breakfast tray, and which even the Rigellian Tarn was able to correctly interpret as exasperation.

"I eat it because I like it," he finally replied, carefully enunciating each word. Obviously, Standard was not his native language.

Prendel't slipped into the seat next to the massive man, the only one available besides the one that was being saved next to Lieutenant Josephs for the captain. She was the last security officer to arrive, completing the nineteen person sea of red that was waiting for Kirk. Next to Tarn's towering bulk, she looked very frail, as if her bones would snap from the sheer mountainous weight next to her. Not so.

"You should know better. Terran sweet rolls do nothing good for your system. You are consuming empty calories that do not provide your body with the energy it needs. How do you expect to stay in shape when you eat like an uninformed adolescent?" Of the twelve Andorians on board, only Prendel't managed to consistently turn the soft sibilants into accusing gutter-snipe. It wasn't what she said, but how she said it... Or maybe it was also what she said.
Tarn looked down at his plate, where only crumbs remained. He touched a clump with a big finger that was twice the size of Prendel't's, then brought the clinging crumbs up to his lips. He licked at them, a carefully executed motion that exposed his blunt tongue. "I like sugar in the morning, Lieutenant." He kept his voice low, so that it didn't boom throughout the room as it could if left unrestricted. And, as always, he was conscious of the deference due to one of higher rank. "But I will think about what you said."

"You ssshould. I ussually know what I'm talking about."

"Come on, Prenny, get off T's case." That was Lieutenant Josephs, seated across from the Rigellian.

She favored the brown-haired, brown-eyed human with a ripple of her left antenna. It was a characteristic gesture, usually accompanied by a caustic remark. "I do not want to be paired on a mission with ssssomeone who is sssluggish becausssse of inadequate diet. Do you?"

Josephs snorted and shoved a piece of toast into his mouth. "Did you see T take down Andre last week? He's big, but he's not sluggissh. I'll take T with me any day."

Tarn responded to the compliment by placing his hands on the table to either side of his empty plate. The skin was slowly turning purple, the Rigellian equivalent of blushing. There was some sort of social taboo on Rigel IV against hiding purple hands.... "I thank you, Lieutenant. I will stand beside you or any of my comrades. But I do not think I will be in security for long."

Prendel't turned in her chair, a green fruit half-way to her mouth. "What?"

"I am going to apply for a transfer. I want to work in Sciences. With Mister Spock."

A faint sound that reminded Josephs of a pig snuffling in the mud looking for garbage emerged from the Andorian lips. "You? You can't possssi...."

"Lieutenant--," Josephs warned. He had the right. He was acting head of security since Commander Giotto had been transferred off the ship via medical shuttle for an extended recuperation. Even though he didn't feel like an acting department head. With Prendel't on the warpath, most of the time he felt like a referee.

The Andorian swallowed her remark and replaced it with, "What makesss you think you can transsssferr? You aren't trained."

The big voice was so deep it often sounded like Tarn was speaking under water. "I am not just a man with muscle. I have a brain too. I have been taking the classes that Mister Spock gives after shift. He is a very good teacher. He explains things well. We are studying physics tonight."

That antenna rippled again. Josephs couldn't exactly blame the reaction. The idea of the Rigellian behind a lab bench was ludicrous. He made a fine junior-level security guard, but he just wasn't cut out for a technical position.

But Josephs wouldn't ever say any of that out loud. The responsibility for morale in security rested on his shoulders now, and Kirk should arrive any minute now. He didn't want an argument going on when the captain walked into the room, it might give him the wrong impression.

But why did Prendel't have to be the last to arrive, and thus get the seat directly across from where Kirk would sit? No matter the months he'd spent by Giotto's side, learning, now Josephs was beginning to realize what the real difficulties in leading a diverse group of people were. And agreeing with Prendel't's scorn wouldn't help Tarn's performance any.
Josephs forestalled any comment from the Andorian. "I'm glad you're taking the classes, T. I've always wanted to do that myself."

Prenny picked up a piece of celery and started to shred strips of green from it. Her elbows were planted on the table in violation of the Terran table manners she did not follow. "Well, I do not. That is not an intelligent thing to say. Physicalss is not for usss. It is important to develop the skillss you have. I am good at what I do. I like sssecurity." She pushed the celery rib into her mouth, then pulled it out, shredding it with her clamped teeth. Then she licked her purple-blue lips. "Where else can you learn about the power of weapons and usse them? Where else can you go on landing partiess? I would not have misssed it when we had to replace the sick Marinesss."

Josephs winced. They'd lost six crewmembers alone on that mission, including the only other Rigellian on the ship, Ensign Purn, not to mention the Marines, human slaves, and enemy Orions who'd perished in the carnage. The floor of the cave where they'd waged a fierce thirty-minute battle had been slippery with blood of all colors. Josephs had fought, that didn't mean he had to like killing. That wasn't why he'd joined security.

But Josephs had seen Prendel't fire point blank at an Orion with a smile on her face. There wasn't any doubt about it. She loved her work.

"Keep an eye on her," the captain had told Josephs during the meeting they'd had when the lieutenant had officially been commissioned to take over for Giotto. She likes what she's doing too much.

But it seemed that Ensign Tarn did not. "That is good for you, Lieutenant, but not for me. Ensign Hunyady says that I have an aptitude for calculus. She helped me with the astrogation section."

"Hunyady. Missster Ssspock's favorite." Prendel't popped a trentipple berry into her mouth.

"Mr. Spock does not have favorites, Lieutenant." Tarn defended mildly. "Irina is talented. She will go far."

"Far with a senior officesser behind her, you mean."

"Mister Spock is not behind her, Lieutenant," Tarn slowly quipped. A smile started to widen. "Her husband would not allow it. I think that Dawson would be jealous."

Again the right shoulder hunched. Prendel't didn't think the Rigellian's attempt at humor was successful. "Then you ssshould be careful. Maybe he will be jealoussss of you and your assstrogation lesssssonss. She leveled one long pointed finger at him. "Ensign Hunyady issss ambitioussss. Ambitioussss people are dangeroussss. They walk over people in their way. Not me. I am sssafe to be with becaussse I know where I belong. Like you sss should know where you belong. In sssecurity."

A stir at the far end of the table announced Kirk's arrival at the mess room. Josephs straightened in his seat and flicked some crumbs off his tunic, aware that the captain would be sitting next to him once he'd made his breakfast selections.

The small motion deflected Prendel't's attention away from the hapless Rigellian. She leaned across the table. "Putting on a ssshow for the captain?"

Josephs frowned down at his lap and brushed off another crumb. She didn't have to remind him that this breakfast meeting, casual though it was, had been called to evaluate how the temporary head was handling his new responsibility. Kirk hadn't had to announce that, it was obvious and
Josephs knew and every one of the red-clad men and women at the table knew. Only Prendel't would be crass enough to say something about it out loud.

He looked up and threw her a warning glance. Whatever her problem was, he wished she would at least calm down while Giotto was away. She'd better not get smart when Kirk sat down or he'd whip her ass next time they drew each other as partners in the unarmed combat drill.... Or maybe he'd try to pull off one of her antenna....

"Good morning, everyone." Kirk pulled out his chair and sat down. As Josephs half rose in greeting, he couldn't help but notice that Kirk's tray held a cup of coffee, a bowl of granola and milk, a banana and a small sweet roll. Dear mother of all. If she said a word, he'd pull off both antenna....

*****

Starfleet's best first officer had showered, dressed, and checked his computer for messages. He had responded to a query from Lieutenant Tu, approved a suggestion from Ensign Hunyady, and issued instructions for an experiment just beginning in the physical sciences lab. Now, his inner time sense told him that there were fourteen point four two minutes before he would be required to leave his quarters to attend the meeting with the science department management team.

He sat cross-legged on the floor before his attunement flame. This period of metitation, no matter how brief, was essential to restore him to equilibrium. Of all the emotions that Kirk and he had experienced during the journey of their relationship, the most difficult for Spock to deal with had been joy. He had so little experience of it; there had been no place for it to fit in his soul. Now within him there was a deep trembling, greater than anything he had ever known before. Despite his months of practice with positive emotions, Spock did not know how to set the feeling free. The smiles and the whispered words in his captain's bed were the limits of his expression.

He could not perform his duties in such a state. Vulcans had methods of coping with excessive emotions, if control failed and the unwanted feelings grew. This feeling was not unwanted, but.... Spock focused on the silence within, and sank into the first level.

A towering wall stretched across ochre colored sands. A red sky hovered above, with streaks of pink and orange that seemed close enough to touch. Its oppressive weight shadowed a very familiar landscape.

Spock took a step backwards in the ankle-deep sand. This was the representation of his inner self that resided deep in his subconscious, that he and Kirk had discovered in the early days of their relationship when Spock was still struggling to open himself to intimacy of body and mind. The slick-sided black wall cut the landscape in two, with hard rock and the sand of Vulcan on the one side, and the swirling winds and tempting complexity of human emotion on the other. This was not the serenity of meditational calm where he could apply the precepts of Surak to give order to his tumultuous feelings. Spock concentrated on re-gaining the familiar weightlessness of the first level, the peace that would spread throughout his thoughts....

The desert landscape began to fade, and yet even as Spock's will asserted itself he hesitated. Perhaps it was appropriate that he deal with his emotions in this metaphor that his subconscious had devised. The images of wall and arid land had initiated a compromise that had made the intimacy between him and his captain possible. Months ago, in the melds they shared, Kirk's insight had transformed the impossible-to-scale edifice into a meter-high garden wall from an Iowa farmstead. And Spock's determination had built a simple wooden gate there, so that he had access to the feelings he had denied himself for so long. Since then he had been able to deal with the emotions Kirk pulled forth from him, and he had even been able to express them. He had learned to
relax within strong arms holding him, and to allow sexual tension to grow, and how to reach for his own pleasure. He could even say "I love you," and truly experience the emotion behind the words.

It was logical to use effective, proven tools. Spock turned his back on serenity, and allowed iron sands to reform instead.

In this reality where Spock existed alone without Kirk, the wall was very Vulcan. The gate was a five meter high construct made of rare ebony lbatha wood, bound by the clinging vines of the kleet plant. It stood guard over his emotions the way the ancient cliffs of the L-Langon mountains guarded the fertile Sashashar plain.

He set his shoulder to the heavy wood and heaved. Vulcan strength was tested as the portal creaked, then slowly opened. Spock stepped over into the other side.

He had walked only a few steps before a small puff! of sand exploded on the desert floor, followed by another. He stared at the strange phenomenon, for a moment unable to comprehend a simple process he had never witnessed on his home planet before. Then realization dawned. Spock lifted his face to the sky, his expression startled from a scientist's dispassionate curiosity into amazement. It was raining. On the Vulcan desert.

He blinked as a drop fell into his eye. He held out his hands and tried to catch the gentle droplets on his palms, and as the water spread upon his fingers a light-hearted happiness spread throughout him. Yes, this was exactly how the thought of the bond was making him feel. Washed clean, prepared for new life, so blessed by fortune and the vagaries of fate. In all the vastness of the universe, he and Jim had found one another, so perfectly matched that the bond was growing without their conscious effort. They were to be entwined forever: lives, minds, bodies. Yes.

The rain was soaking his uniform tunic, and impatiently Spock discarded it, then the rest of his clothing as well. He wanted nothing to stand between himself and the rain. Moisture accumulated on his naked arms and back, then slid down his body to pool about his feet on the sand, and Spock moved his toes upon the new crustiness just to feel the way the consistency had changed. He had changed, was going to change even more, and the new creation would be good. The air had a new-life smell as the heated dunes cooled. He walked upon holy ground. Water in the desert was a miracle.

The bond would give him life amidst the dangers of his Time, but loving Jim had given him life for all time. No body could compare with the compact strength, no hand could ever touch him with such love, no penis could ever penetrate him with so much meaning. How could he ever have survived the passionless servicing that he imagined would be all that the relentlessly logical T'Pring could provide? Jim's spirit within his own spanned the universe, called upon all the gods to witness their coupling. See how my lover loves me. See his shining spirit, see his favored body, see his mind and my mind define joy.

And now to be bonded as well. Joining with Jim, body and mind, was a joyous odyssey that would have no ending.

The rain became a torrent.

Spock looked down at the small river that flowed over his toes and sank into the sand. His conservative Vulcan soul rebelled at the waste; there must be a way to keep the water, and the joy.

A trench appeared with the thought, and his mind dug it deep into the red clay that supported the ochre sand. One meter, two meters, three meters deep and three meters long it grew. With one final clap of thunder, the heavens closed and the rain stopped. All the water that drenched his skin ran
off into the trench. The water filled it to the top, and the surface reflected a red clearing sky.

Spock felt light and clean and filled with energy. Both suns appeared on the horizon; they bathed his face with their light and dried his skin with their welcome heat. The weather and the landscape were Vulcan's again.

He looked over the side of the cut in the land and saw that the water within was moving, as if an invisible hand stirred it. The water flowed like a river towards the black wall that still towered over the land, although the current disappeared as it splashed against the front end of the trench, then looped under itself and reappeared from the back to flow again.

Spock regarded the newborn river with satisfaction. He was becoming adept at manipulating his emotions, and finding ways for their expression, although the process itself was startlingly emotional. With his happiness over the growing bond safely confined within the banks of the river, he had re-stored control; but he had only to stoop closer and touch the water to know it again.

Although it was curious how the current was moving, seeming to cut into the front end of the trench to make it longer. Was it only his imagination, or had the water already crawled closer to the wall?

Deep within the depths a hint of blue flickered. Spock leaned forward and dipped his hand into an azure sky. His whole arm tingled.

"Jim."

*****
Chapter 3

There was nothing like walking down the corridors of the *Enterprise*, McCoy decided, nothing in the galaxy was like it. The recycled air tasted like jasmine and honeysuckle and filled his lungs with exhilaration. Every face he passed was smiling. Kirk walked by his side with wonderfully typical, determined strides. And for the first time in nearly three weeks, he didn't have that blasted pain in his chest.

McCoy took another deep breath, and could have laughed out loud at the results. He felt like thumping himself on the chest and howling. No pain! Terrific! No more of the nightmares that had plagued his sleep during the long hurting nights. Terrific! Despite heart-valve surgery that had gone awry and days of complication and infection, here he was again, chief medical officer of the *Enterprise*, able to take a full shift in sickbay, eat dinner in the mess with his friend and captain, and still walk without pain. McCoy's heart swelled with pride in his own profession.

Kirk paused at the turbolift door and waved his hand over the sensor.

"So," McCoy said, rubbing his hands together as they waited, "where exactly are you taking me? What's the big surprise?"

Kirk pursed his lips and shook his head. "Don't be so impatient. You'll see."

The door swished open and they walked in. "The gym? This is your regular night to play handball with Spock, isn't it?"

"No, not the gym. It seems like we hardly ever have the time to play anymore."

"You should though, you know. It's good for you." Then McCoy stroked his chin, feigning deep thought. "I hope you're not headed for the observation deck. Sometimes I get depressed up there, all that space. I'm not in the mood tonight to be depressed."

Kirk gave him an odd look, then faced forward. "Believe me, Bones, I sincerely hope I don't destroy your cheerful mood."

They exited on deck ten, populated only by a few meeting rooms and the OD. McCoy frowned, then followed his captain. They walked towards the end of the hall where a group of young officers was just leaving a room.

McCoy stopped dead in his tracks. He looked at Kirk with skeptical eyes. "You're not trying to educate me in higher level math, are you? Isn't this where Spock's math class meets? Or maybe his survival skills class?"

"Try his physics class. But don't worry, it's over, and I wouldn't dream of torturing you that way, Bones. We're headed there." The captain pointed towards the OD.

But as they walked by the open door of the classroom, McCoy perversely paused and craned his neck to see inside. Several of the *Enterprise's* younger set surrounded Spock, including the tall Ensign Tarn from security, as well as the *Enterprise's* only married couple.

McCoy's eyes lingered over Hunyady's form. She was half turned away from him, but he still had a great view as his gaze traveled from the top on down. A slightly aquiline nose, a determined mouth, straight, athlete's shoulders, a small but firm bust, and oh, those long, long legs. After all those weeks of just seeing his nurses and technicians, it was a distinct pleasure to feast his eyes on
her youthful, feminine form.

'Course, there was a mind there too. It wasn't any secret around the ship that Hunyady was the science section's bright star. She was getting some plum assignments: bridge duty during alpha shift, more landing parties than the youngsters usually managed. But intelligence had never hampered McCoy's appreciation of women.

As if conscious of the scrutiny from afar, Dawson put out one possessive arm to encircle his young wife's waist, a movement that didn't cause an interruption in the question that she was apparently putting to the first officer. McCoy had noticed that about the woman. Somewhat single-minded.

Both Dawson and Hunyady were carrying on an animated conversation with Spock, and McCoy was glad to see it. Few of the younger officers felt comfortable enough around the forbidding Vulcan to be able to act naturally around him. Nobody engaged the Vulcan in small talk. If they weren't talking about Michaela like everybody else, they were probably discussing N-dimensional shells in hyperspace.

He was right. McCoy clearly heard "... we've compared the mitochondrial abstract for both samples and there isn't anything significant that matches...." He glanced at the display board, where there was a graph labeled "Michaelen samples." He smirked, congratulated himself on his intuition, then got his feet moving and followed Kirk.

By the time he caught up, the captain was standing by the doorway of one of the private cubicles in the OD, his arm extended in a blatant attempt to get the doctor into the room. But McCoy stood his ground and made a deliberate effort to crease his face into a frown. This felt good. After days of excruciating boredom flat on his back in sickbay with nothing to do but breathe and hurt and contemplate his own mortality, it felt really good to be teased with a little mystery. Jim had gone to such trouble to get him here, and so obviously wanted him to take that one step over the threshold.

Kirk cleared his throat and tilted his head. Then he waggled his extended fingers.

McCoy paused, just to tease the captain and see the look of exasperation spring to his eyes. Then he succumbed to the little voice inside that was chirping its curious song. "Okay, okay, I'm going already."

Kirk left the door open as he followed the doctor into the dim light of the room. He paused and punched the intercom by the doorway.

"Physical sciences lab," an unidentified voice sounded.

But Kirk made an effort to know all his crew. "Kirk here, Lieutenant Garzon. Anything yet on that air analysis?"

"No, sir. But we've just completed phase two. We'll know more in a few hours."

"Right. Keep me informed." Kirk clicked off and walked up next to McCoy to gaze out the smooth pane of transparent aluminum. The physician looked at Kirk's reflected image.

Kirk was staring at the stars with quiet and total absorption. The light from a giant white star they were passing softened his features with a smooth, pale glow. It transformed the classic chin with innocent sensitivity, and buffed the lines of experience from beside his eyes so that he looked much younger. His hair seemed blonder than usual in the light, and longer than he usually kept it. The slightest of curls accented the end of one stubborn lock.

McCoy shook his head at the fanciful image that occurred to him. Kirk looked like one of those
angels from a worshipful religious painting, his face caught in the glow that comes from contemplating the Omnipotent. All the innocence, all the glory of beautiful, untainted youth was reflected on the face of a man who had seen just about everything the galaxy had to offer, the evil and the corrupt as well as the good.

And McCoy felt comforted that despite all his experience of reality, Kirk hadn't changed. The captain had seen heaven, and he had seen hell, and he was still able to come to the observation deck and find peace. And purpose. The stars were always there.

But even as McCoy watched the captain's expression changed. Maybe it was the way the ship was turning, so that the hot glare of the unknown star faded off to starboard. The face he knew so well became paneled with shadow.

A planet hove into view, an ordinary, class M planet like hundreds of others, like Earth, and silently McCoy watched Kirk's gaze seek out the new world. The new, dimmer light was reflected off the continents and the seas, diffused by the darkness of space, and it revealed a different man.

Now there were canyons of shadow etched beside Kirk's eyes, fingers of darkness that pushed into his yielding, merely human flesh. Innocence could not survive the bleak tension that stretched the skin over clenched cheek muscles, or the fine lines that appeared on the high forehead. The corners of the sensitive mouth turned down, and McCoy felt his comfort of moments ago dissipate.

Whatever it was that Kirk was now contemplating, it wasn't the brilliance of space that usually eased his soul. He was seeing something else in the star-speckled darkness. And even though McCoy had never set foot on the blasted planet, it wasn't hard to read "Michaela" behind the tightly drawn features.

In the weeks that he'd been confined to a bed, some things had changed. Since when did Kirk insert himself quite so obviously into the scientific turf of his second-in-command? Since when had the theoretical purity of Spock's physics class, a shrine at which the more gifted and adoring young officers worshipped, been sullied by actual facts and figures from a mission from the ship's past? The obsession had gone further than McCoy had guessed.

The silence between them grew. One of them needed to say something. The physician cleared his throat, then quite deliberately and loudly harumph-ed. "I'd like this view a lot better if it were real." There, that was better.

Kirk turned with a slight smile and minor exasperation showing in his eyes. None of his introspection of moments ago was evident; only the starship captain was there. The thought that this strong, confident man had reminded McCoy of a cherub, or of a tormented soul, was ludicrous.

"Bones, if the view were real, we'd be traveling sub-light and it would take years to get anywhere. You know we can't see outside the warp envelope. It's a matter of physics. The computer simulation is a pretty good substitute."

"Computer simulation," McCoy scoffed, and he hunched up one shoulder. It felt good to play his usual role. "I used to look at the stars in Georgia in my own backyard, and... Hey, look it there!" He interrupted himself and pointed. "That comet, see? The tail's wavering. That's not right, even I know that. Something's wrong." He didn't bother to keep the triumph from his voice. It wasn't every day he got one up on the computer.

Kirk examined the blazing fireball, tilted his head to one side and squinted. "Hmmm, I think you're right. I guess the computer isn't compensating for the movement. I'll talk to Fraser about it."
McCoy subsided at the easy acquiescence, and suddenly realized that his legs were aching. He turned and walked to the grey, kobbly-textured couch behind them. "Let's sit down. I've been on my feet too long today." McCoy groaned as he eased down.

"You shouldn't be pushing yourself so hard yet." Kirk settled next to him.

McCoy waved a hand. "Don't worry. That hard-nose M'Benga stood over me like a security guard, watching my every move to make sure I didn't 'strain' myself." He snorted. "You'd think nobody had ever had a heart valve replaced before."

"Not everyone had the complications that you did," Kirk said quietly. "I think I'm lucky to have a CMO at all."

McCoy didn't know how to respond to the quiet concern in his friend's voice. It was his job to dispense understanding, not the captain's. He shifted against the cushions and tried to keep the conversation light.

"Worried about me, Jim? Is that why you asked me here, to make sure I'm on the way to being fit?"

"Worried, Doctor? Of course not. I have every confidence in my entire medical staff." Kirk stretched his legs out in front of him, sighing. He looked out into the darkness. "Did you really look at the stars when you were a kid, Bones? I never thought that was something doctors did."

McCoy slowly nodded. What was on Kirk's mind? "Uh-huh. Whenever I got the chance. Especially in the wintertime. I had this great telescope that my...," But McCoy stopped, for he could tell that Kirk wasn't listening, even though his head was turned McCoy's way. What Kirk was really doing was looking over his shoulder towards the doorway, a curiously frozen expression on his face, as if he were deliberately controlling his features. The way that Spock sometimes looked....

Then McCoy heard the swish of the door closing and footsteps as someone entered the room. He twisted around and said, "Well, hello, Spock. Fancy meeting you here" before the lean figure stepped into the dim pool of light.

The first officer checked his advance, his dark eyes flicking from Kirk to McCoy and then back again. Then he smoothly walked forward. "Good evening, Doctor McCoy, Captain." Spock nodded correctly. "Would you mind if I joined you?" He carried a sheaf of papers from his class.

Kirk waved too casually towards the upholstered chair that was immediately next to him, situated at right angles just touching the couch. "No, go ahead, Spock. Get comfortable."

Spock walked past McCoy, then stepped over Kirk's sprawled-out legs to reach the chair. He lowered himself into it, and neatly tucked his legs in. Otherwise, he would have violated Kirk's already-claimed space.

McCoy watched as Kirk's expression relaxed into a smile he aimed directly at the first officer. Spock matched the gaze and returned the smile with a certain softening around his eyes. That was an expression that hadn't been in Spock's repertoire the first year of their five year mission. Had he been seeing it more often lately?

Before McCoy had a chance to pursue that thought, Kirk asked quietly, "You doing all right tonight, Commander?"

Spock nodded. "I am well. Doctor McCoy, it is gratifying to see you in uniform once again. I regret that my duties in the labs prevented me from joining you for dinner. I trust you are well?"
"Doing fine, Spock. I'm all healed up."

"That is pleasing to hear." The Vulcans voice sounded nasal.

"You coming down with something? Getting a cold?"

"I do not believe so, Doctor."

So. Was that what they were here for, so he could exchange inanities with Spock? He could have done that over the intercom.

There was a pregnant silence. Kirk stood up and walked over to the window. He turned around and leaned back against it, holding the rail behind him with his hands. The starlight framed his body, shining out over his hair, curving along the line of his broad shoulders. "Bones, Spock and I want to talk to you about something. It's why I asked you here tonight."

The frown on McCoy's face was real this time. Concern exploded just under his solar plexus, replacing the last remnants of the silly euphoria he'd carried onto deck ten. He glanced at Spock. The Vulcan looked about the same as he always did, as he had during his visits to sickbay. Composed. But that didn't mean much, a change of expression for Spock required the proclamation of war. McCoy wouldn't discover a thing looking at him.

So he shifted his attention to Kirk. But the captain wasn't any easier to read than his first officer was, he was wearing his practiced poker face.

"Bones, I want you to know that we've planned to have this conversation with you for a while. But you've been sick, and I didn't want to do or say anything that might interfere with your recovery."

Oh, Lord. That bad. What could be so earth-shattering that news of it would send him back to bed? Ten different possibilities leaped to McCoy's mind, each one worse than the one before.

Kirk was still talking, his body curved forward in that intense, characteristic way he had. "But now that M'Benga's let you back to work, it seemed like the right time." He smiled wryly. "I think you're strong enough to take this now."

McCoy's throat was tight. "What's wrong?" It came out in a croak.

"Nothing's wrong, so don't get worried. I just wasn't sure how you'd take this."

"Take what?" McCoy almost shouted. "Would you please tell me what's going on?"

"I am. I think it would be best if we told you by showing --."

Whatever he had been about to say was interrupted by the static of the intercom coming to life. "Sickbay to Doctor McCoy."

"Oh, blast," McCoy grumbled. "No rest for the weary. Now hold on there, Jim. This won't take a second." He walked to the intercom.

Kirk looked over at his first officer. "I am going to tell him tonight if I have to follow him into his quarters to do it."

Spock shook his head. "Perhaps the timing is not the best. We are both preoccupied with other matters."

Kirk shifted from one foot to the other. "I know. But I promised myself we'd talk as soon as he was
back on duty. He's got to be the first to know. First him, and then, well, eventually everybody else. But we've already waited too long. He's going to be hurt. Mad."

"Perhaps."

The conversation was short, and within a minute McCoy was back. He sat back down and said, "Okay, no pussy-footin' around. What's going on?"

Kirk nodded towards his first officer. "I think you'll understand if you look at that."

McCoy looked over at Spock, who reached into the pile of hardcopy papers and extracted an envelope. He opened it, and silently offered the doctor what had been inside.

Puzzled to his very toes, McCoy reached to take a gold-framed, two dimensional photograph of the captain and first officer of the Enterprise. He glanced back up at his expectant friends, then down at the picture again. It might have been taken in a restaurant. The two of them were leaning across a table towards each other, and the look in their eyes....

McCoy swallowed hard. The look was unmistakable, and universal, and seeing it displayed on the faces of his two best, very male friends made him feel acutely uncomfortable, like a naughty boy caught trying to peek through a window that had always before been curtained and shuttered. But the window had unexpectedly been thrown open, light illuminated the scene within, and whether or not the little boy was ready for what he saw, there it was.

The oldest instinct in the universe, and its most abiding emotion, both sizzled in the space between two bodies that he knew so well. But not this way. Had he ever really thought of them this way? Pressure grew in McCoy's throat, and he sat up straighter so he could breathe. But he could still see. Yes, it was all there spread out in front of him, so conspicuously obvious that he wanted to grab the envelope and stuff the picture back inside. Could that really be the Enterprise's Vulcan? Spock never looked like that, never. How was it possible for a stone-faced Vulcan to radiate sheer joy?

And while McCoy had seen expressions of affection, admiration, sometimes lust on the face of his captain, never had he seen the blatant love that vibrated through the air and caressed Spock. Love, and wonder, and an upswelling of dawning happiness, how could you look at this picture and not see them? Kirk looked like the happiest man in the universe, yet it was obvious that the rest of the universe no longer existed for him. Jim and Spock weren't touching, yet in all that was essential, they were.

The picture was suddenly very heavy. McCoy fumbled for the stand on the back, then propped it up on the little table in front of the couch, turned it so that it faced away from him. He looked at Kirk and licked his lips.

"Uh, I think you'd better tell me. I don't want to jump to conclusions. It's only a picture."

Kirk sat down and reached across the cushion, just short of taking the physician's hand. "We're lovers, Bones. Spock and I are lovers. We wanted you to know that."

The words vibrated in McCoy's head and he didn't know what to make of the sound. Lovers. How did they expect him to react? What did they need from him? And what, in all truthfulness, did he actually think?

Eight point three five percent of human Starfleet personnel were homosexual in orientation, said a scholarly voice inside him. Four point seven percent of all human marriages on starships were
between individuals of the same gender, slightly higher than in the general population. The official attitude was one of tolerance and understanding, codified into law for the past one hundred years, decades after the AIDS epidemic had been conquered.

But "official attitudes" couldn't erase centuries of prejudice and hate. McCoy had never been able to treat a gay individual, male or female, without remembering the Great Dallas Riot and the atrocities that had been committed there, all in the name of normality and the God who insisted on it. There were still human religions, even political parties that carried an anti-homosexual banner. The Eternists, for example, who seemed to be gaining more intolerant members every day.

And there were jokes, underlying indicators of the uneasy acceptance of those who were different. Everyone laughed at them, he laughed at them. They didn't mean anything serious. Did they? Especially now, when they applied to...

McCoy blinked, these and a hundred other thoughts jostling for position in his mind. He looked from the piercing hazel gaze of his captain to the brown calmness of the first officer. Spock had his arms folded about his chest, but as he met the physician's eyes he unfolded them and leaned forward.

"To put it more accurately, Jim and I are engaged in an intimate relationship that encompasses both a physical and a mental union."

Kirk abruptly pulled back his outstretched hand and nodded. "The human way and the Vulcan way." His brows contracted. "Come on, Bones, say something. Are you surprised?"

Here at last was a question he could answer. He knew how to slide into this role. "Surprised?" McCoy exploded, suddenly coming to life. He passed a hand over his face. "Hell, yes, I'm surprised. Do you know what you had me imagining?" He couldn't sit still any longer and was up and pacing. He gestured wildly as he walked. "I thought for sure you were going to tell me that you were transferring. Or that Komack finally had enough evidence of insubordination to take away the Enterprise. Or that Sarek or Amanda, or your mother were dying." He stopped in the middle of the room, facing the shadowed wall. "Or, God forbid, that one of you were." Abruptly, he whirled and pointed an accusing finger straight at Kirk. "Don't you dare ever do that to me again. Ever."

Kirk gave a short laugh. "I'm sorry. I did the best I could. It isn't exactly the easiest thing in the world to say."

"It isn't the easiest thing to hear either," McCoy growled. He shook his head, searching for equilibrium. Now that he'd distracted himself with artificial anger, there was still the question of how to respond.... As always, he opted for the truth. "Look, I... don't really know what to say. Congratulations?"

Kirk seemed to find that amusing. The side of his mouth ticked. "That would be fine."

McCoy took a deep breath. "Okay, then, congratulations." Then, realizing he'd directed the word solely to the captain, he looked at the first officer. "To you too, Spock. I guess if you've made this decision--Why did he feel so damn awkward? These were his friends--then it must be the right one for you. The logical one."

Spock inclined his head. "So I believe, Doctor McCoy."

There was an awkward silence. "So, tell me. How long have you two been... together?"

"Seven months and three days," Spock intoned.
"And an odd number of hours," Kirk added, *sotto voce.* "About twenty-two and a half."

McCoy couldn't help it, he felt a flush start to crawl its way up his neck. He really didn't want to hear that soft tone in Kirk's voice, didn't want to know the intimate details of exactly when the two of them had first... Now, he'd always know the exact time and date of it. At twenty-one hundred hours seven months ago, Jim and Spock had....

Slowly McCoy walked back to the couch and sat down again, hard. All those months. A long time. An arrow of hurt feelings knifed through him. Mentally, he tried to cauterize the wound, but he couldn't.

"I noticed it," he said finally, and stared down between his knees. "I really did, but I didn't think I could possibly be right. It was right after that business with the Orions and the Johnson Combine. I convinced myself that it was a ridiculous idea and I haven't really thought about it since." He looked up. "Am I right? About that time?"

Kirk nodded. "Right before. But Bones, you know this was a long time coming. More than three years."

Spock's lips twitched, as if to suppress the instinct to provide Kirk with the exact number of days. Or, McCoy thought, embarrassed with the way his mind was working but totally unable to suppress it, perhaps because of the pun over the word "coming." Kirk had a strong libido, had never wanted or been able to hide that. The austere Vulcan must now have intimate knowledge of the many ways a human could achieve orgasm.... Ghod, it was hard to believe. Suddenly, the physician didn't know where to look.

His gaze dropped to the deck again. "Why," he asked very distinctly, "didn't you tell me before this?" He admired the way the words came out, not a hint of accusation to them, not a hint of how much it hurt that they'd been keeping a secret from him for so long.

But Kirk was not fooled. "I know. We waited too long to tell you. But can't you understand?" The captain hitched himself around so that the two of them were almost facing, forcing McCoy to look up. Kirk's eyes were very, very wide, his body was bowed forward as if to meet McCoy more than half-way, or to forcibly project what he had to say. The doctor interpreted the body language and gave it a name. *Impassioned sincerity.*

"What Spock and I have... it's special, so special. We... I... wanted to keep it to myself for a while. This isn't one of my flings, Bones. This is for real. I know that this is the way I want to spend the rest of my life. With Spock."

"What did you think I would do, laugh at you? I'm not that insensitive, Jim."

Kirk shook his head. "No, but it's going to be hard for most anybody to believe. And I'm not so naive as to think we're not going to run up against problems. Prejudice. Starfleet. Even you're not exactly overjoyed. I just didn't want to have to start fighting those battles so early in our relationship."

McCoy passed a hand over his face. "You're right. There will be problems. It is hard to believe. I mean, you've always been attracted to women. I'd say you and another man just wasn't possible, if it weren't for that extreme flexibility quotient that always shows up in your psyche tests. And Spock," he caught the dark gaze, "it's hard to pinpoint Vulcan sexuality, nobody knows much about it, including the Vulcans, I suspect, but.... And Jim's one hell of an emotional guy. How can you reconcile your Vulcan philosophies with... him?"
Spock steepled his long fingers before answering, but he had no trouble finding the words that McCoy had expected would be elusive. "Vulcan philosophy has always acknowledged the need for a being to achieve some form of closeness with another. And to deny the reality of what already existed between the captain and myself would have been most illogical. Nevertheless, I must admit that I have had many adjustments to make that have had a part in delaying telling you. My expectations of a partner did not prepare me for the specific dynamics of a male mentality. The past few months have been ones of... considerable change."

"I'll say." Kirk indicated Spock with a thumb over his shoulder. "This is not the usual shape that my love interests come in, is it? He's taller than me and he's got hair on his chest."

The captain suddenly sobered, and he gazed sightlessly off to one side. "It has been an adjustment, Bones. I've had lots of... doubts. It hasn't always been easy. I had this image of myself, of the way I lived, of the women I was attracted to. My plans didn't include life with another man, or commitment to anything but my ship and my oath." He spread his hands wide, as if disconcerted with the vision he was seeing. "All the things I thought I'd never want to do, what I thought I'd never be....It just took a while to admit things to myself."

McCoy's rebellious brain instantly provided cocksucker. He was just as instantly repelled by his prurient thoughts, but not enough to be able to prevent an image from materializing. Jim and Spock naked on a bed, kissing, then Jim slowly sliding down to take an erect green penis in his mouth....

With an effort he wrenched his mind back under his control and cursed himself for his weakness. That's not the way I think of them, he thought, appalled. I won't. He forced himself to look again at Kirk, who'd been the truest, best friend McCoy had ever found, a curious amalgam of the brother he'd never had and the son he'd always longed for. He looked past his captain to Spock, the most private man that McCoy had ever known, who valued his friendship with McCoy so much that he was actually participating in this dissection of his most private life.... This took a hell of a lot of courage, for both of them. He turned his attention back to Kirk, who was still talking.

"...I always thought that I was a confirmed heterosexual. Then all of a sudden, here I am, attracted to my first officer. My best friend." He looked over at Spock and his voice softened. "Falling in love."

The words, quiet though they were, seemed to echo throughout the room with Kirk's intensity. McCoy swallowed hard. Kirk had actually used that word.

Jim and Spock were the two most intense people he knew, although in completely different ways. They were intense about their work, the ship, their mission.... about each other. From the moment the two had met, they'd shared a special rapport. He'd seen it, and yet not seen it. How could he, who prided himself on his ability to read a patient's state of mind, have misinterpreted their friendship?

"Well," he said slowly, "I'm glad. I take it that, ah, the adjustments are, ah, working? You're both happy?" He was answered with twin nods. "Good. But..., I feel dumb. How could I have not noticed that the two of you.... I mean, I know you both pretty well."

Kirk leaned back against the cushions. "Because we didn't want you to, not until we'd sorted things out for ourselves. We're not a couple of kids, Bones, and we value our privacy. We've been able to keep our private and professional lives quite separate."

"Indeed," Spock contributed. "With very little effort, I might add."

Abruptly, McCoy got up from the couch again and walked to the middle of the room, needing to
put some space between himself and Kirk's wide eyes, Spock's stoic trust. Despite the fact that he'd been laid up in sickbay for far longer than he cared to think, he was still CMO of the Enterprise. The friend and the physician warred within him. The CMO needed some answers.

"There are good reasons," McCoy said over his shoulder, "why fraternization between the ranks is so highly discouraged in Starfleet. I don't see how you can keep your private and professional lives separate."

Kirk frowned. Spock cupped his hands around his knees and said, "There are no specific regulations against a relationship such as ours, Doctor."

"And we have a married couple on this ship," Kirk added. "Dawson and Hunyady, two of our brightest people."

McCoy turned to face both of them. The fragile trust that had existed among them a few moments ago was already cracking, and he prepared to watch it fall to pieces. Kirk's hot temper wasn't going to like what he had to say. "But they're not in the same section, and one of them is not the captain of this vessel. Listen, I hate to do this to you, but I've got to. As your friend, Leonard McCoy, I wish you two all the best. I'm glad that you've finally decided to tell me about this change in your relationship. But as your chief medical officer, I've got to ask some hard questions. First and foremost, how can you possibly be objective with your first officer now? How can you give him difficult orders, send him into danger, not favor him over your other officers? You're good, Jim, damn good, but you're not superhuman."

He turned to look at Spock. "And you, how can you go on a landing party with Jim and not pay special attention to his protection, maybe at the expense of somebody else, maybe at the expense of the mission? You two have put yourselves in an impossible situation. I sympathize, but I just don't see how you can keep your private relationship from affecting your performance on this ship."

McCoy drew himself up very straight. "The duty of the CMO is to see to the mental and physical well-being of the captain," he quoted from the Starfleet manual. "You two made your first mistake when it took you seven months to tell me about a major change in the captain's life. You had a duty to tell me."

There was a long silence, then Kirk got up and walked slowly across to where McCoy was standing. When he came to a stop, he was standing at attention before his CMO. Every word was hard. "Have you, at any time, observed my first officer or myself behaving in any way that is detrimental to the safety of this ship or its mission? Have you seen favoritism? Have you seen any difference at all in the way I treat Mister Spock?"

Spock was standing too. "Or in the discipline that must be maintained between the ranks? In the way I perform my duties?"

McCoy looked from one to the other. He shook his head. "No. You know I haven't seen a difference or I would have said something. But how long can that go on?" Sorrow softened the edges of his words. He didn't want to be saying any of this. But how could he not? It was so clear before him, all that these two men would have to face. "If another giant amoeba comes our way, will it be Spock who goes out in the shuttlecraft? Will you be able to order him to die?"

Spock took three quick steps forward, his face a forbidding mask. McCoy had only seen Spock genuinely angry a few other times. "Doctor, there is no need to subject the captain to the specter of an event that may never--."

But unexpectedly, McCoy now had an ally. Kirk waved a hand that invaded the space between the three points of their emotion-charged triangle. "No. Let him say it. It has to be said, it may as well
be now." He looked straight at the physician, his friend. "Bones, don't you think we've thought of all this? Don't you think we know how difficult this is going to be? Is? But if in seven months we've managed, there's good reason to think we can do it."

McCoy swallowed hard, but he refused to look away, matching the determined light in Kirk's eyes with his own. "You won't know until it happens, will you? How can you be sure?"

Abruptly, Kirk turned away and walked to the star-filled window. "Because it has happened already. On Michaela."

There was that planet again, McCoy thought. The whole ship was obsessed with it.

Kirk's shoulders rose and fell as he filled his lungs with air. "Spock almost got himself killed with a stupid, hare-brained stunt. And I let him."

Spock's eyes were riveted on his captain's back. "The risks were difficult to compute because of excessive variables, but I judged that my course of action presented far less danger to all personnel involved. Commander Giotto required immediate medical attention."

Slowly Kirk turned, the motion smooth, and controlled by an iron will. Fists clenched by his side, and the muscles of his jaw worked, just once. Enunciating every syllable, he said, "You could have gotten yourself killed and nobody could have done a thing about it. No one could have covered you in time." A pause. "It was too risky. For anybody."

Spock took half a step forward. McCoy had the distinct feeling that he had been completely forgotten. He'd seen the two of them like this before, engaged in an intense conversation, sometimes a disagreement, their attention focused exclusively on one another. Now, armed with the new knowledge of their closeness, he wondered how he could ever have missed the sparking sexuality between them. A tingle streaked down the ridges of his spine.

"Nevertheless," Spock said, and his lips were as tight as his clipped words, "you implicitly accepted the risk. You did not open fire until I had lured the individuals from the house, and you did not order me to retreat."

"No," Kirk said heavily and all the tension in his body seemed to drain out into the deck. "I didn't. What does that prove?"

"That you made the correct command decision, and utilized the resources available to you to the fullest extent."

Kirk gave a short, mirthless laugh. "You mean I let you walk straight into four phasers because I knew it was for the good of the mission. The way any good commander, regardless of his feelings, should do."

There was a beat of silence. "Correct." The first officer addressed McCoy. "As you can see, our personal relationship did not affect the captain's actions on Michaela."

The physician looked at the two of them with pity in his eyes. "But it wasn't easy. Damn you two, why can't you ever do anything the way other people do?"

Kirk sighed. "This conversation isn't getting us anywhere. Even if we never slept together again, never melded again, that wouldn't change the way things stand between us. What do you want us to do? Transfer dirtside?"

McCoy abruptly shook his head, but he was caught by something else the captain had said.
"Melded?" With all of the other thoughts exploding in his mind, he hadn't been able to focus on that one before. This was exactly what those nightmares that had plagued his sleep in sickbay had been about. Long fingers reaching for his face, the pain of an alien, evil influence invading his very thoughts, the rape of the essence of his being. For some reason, the pain of his recovery had triggered the equally painful memory of the Spock from the mirror universe. He'd awakened sweating in the low-level lights of his own sickbay. Sometimes Nurse Bronson had been sitting by his bedside, and wiped the perspiration from his forehead when he'd been too weak to do it for himself. But he'd never told her what the nightmares had been about.

Now he looked at his captain and tried to swallow the lump in his throat. What had happened to him had nothing to do with Jim and Spock. Vulcans were a telepathic race. It made sense that mental contact would be part of their sexuality....

"Jim, are you two melding regularly?"

Kirk jerked as if he had been struck. Spock answered, "McCoy, that question is of a personal and prurient nature. I...."

"No, no it isn't," said McCoy. He searched for a reasonable tone. He didn't want to alienate them any worse than he already had. These were the two men on this ship, in his life, who mattered the most to him. But if they didn't recognize some of the pitfalls, how could they ever make a success of this crazy relationship they were in? "Different humans react differently to telepathic contact, and what the Vulcans have, this melding, that's even another twist on all the other telepathic races. It's an unknown variable, and there's damn little information on it. There aren't enough cross-race telepathic couples to give any statistical significance to the findings, and the Vulcans haven't released any information about it at all." He drew a deep breath. "I don't think it's a good idea."

"You don't know what the hell you're talking about," Kirk said hotly. "Your prejudices are showing."

That one hurt. He was trying hard to subdue his prejudices. "The hell they are. The captain of this ship needs to be operating at top efficiency, and I need to know if somebody mucking about in his mind has affected his abilities."

Kirk advanced until they were nose to nose. His eyebrows were straight lines of indignation. "Damnit," he hissed. "Melding with Spock is the single most beautiful thing I've done in my entire life. Don't you dare try to cheapen it with your own fears."

Before the blazing anger McCoy retreated. He held his hands up, palms out, and pushed against air. "I'm not, Jim. I'm not talking about my fears. But I wouldn't even be able to hazard a guess to your physical or mental reactions as a result of melding regularly. Headaches, vision problems, disorientation, hell, I don't know. Lots of people just can't take telepathic contact. Both times I've had the misfortune to participate in the meld, I had a monster of a headache afterwards. This is normal for Spock, but it's not for you."

Kirk looked his friend straight in the eyes, his gaze and his body language all challenge. Then he abruptly turned and walked once again to stare out the observation deck window.

McCoy regarded the stiffened back morosely. It was a good thing they'd decided to have this little session in the OD. He didn't know what Kirk would have done without the stars to look at as a crutch.

Next to him, Spock stirred. "You have a right to be concerned, Doctor. However, please be assured that I would not continue in any action that would harm the captain. Despite some initial problems,
he has adjusted extraordinarily well to mental contact."

Problems? He'd been right. McCoy looked from the now-silent Vulcan to Kirk.

"I didn't get headaches, Bones." The captain's voice sounded muffled as it bounced against the transparent aluminum, before making its way to where the physician still stood in the middle of the room. "I got tired. Damned exhausted. It was so new, to both of us.... But we made some adjustments. It's all right now. Better than all right. I... don't think you know how good it can be...."

McCoy ignored that last statement, full of wonder he'd seldom heard in his captain's voice. He couldn't cope with it. Instead he mentally pounced on the unknown details of exactly what had gone wrong. He saw the space in his medical log where the information needed to be in the captain's file. The file contained the captain's complete medical history, including the psychological trauma he'd experienced after he killed Gary Mitchell, the depression he'd fought to overcome after Edith's death, the anger and outrage after Parmen had taken over his body and made him a fool.... All of it was outlined with clinical precision, ready to be accessed in case he or any other doctor needed to make a critical medical decision. Now, that file was incomplete.

But he couldn't ask. He'd already pushed too far. He needed to back off, and he did so physically, retreating one more time to sit down with a thump. His legs were really aching now, and he felt like he'd aged five years in the past thirty minutes. He had the feeling that he hadn't handled this conversation very well. If he had been the one making the revelation, wouldn't he have wanted a more accepting friend than he had been?

He rested his elbows on his knees and sighed. "Look, you two. This is all a little difficult to assimilate, but I don't want to leave you with the impression that I disapprove. Not that I have the right to disapprove. Oh, hell." He rubbed his aching forehead. "I'm glad that the two of you have found a relationship that's important to you. It's a little... unconventional, but.... What matters is if it's right for you. You know that I'll support you in any way that I can." He looked straight at the two men, two so different beings silhouetted by the starlight. "You know that?"

Spock nodded gravely. Kirk, less willing to relinquish his emotions, took a long moment before he turned and said, "If you say so, Bones."

"I do. But you have to promise to tell me if you have any problems, physical or mental. I'm concerned about the mental aspects, yes, but believe me, Jim, Spock, I don't want to invade your privacy. Okay?"

Kirk didn't answer, but Spock responded, "That is acceptable, Doctor."

McCoy stood up, feeling more than a bit wobbly. He knew it was a result of his first day back on the job, and the emotional shock he'd just sustained. The three of them still had a lot to sort out, but they weren't going to do it tonight. "All right, then. Look, I'm really beat, and unless there's something else you want to tell me, I'm going to get some rest. I need it." He walked uncertainly over to Kirk, who was still standing by the window, and awkwardly placed his hand on a shoulder. McCoy couldn't read anything in the hazel eyes; the captain was keeping all expression locked away. "A while ago I said 'Congratulations.' I meant it then, and I mean it now. Find happiness."

He dropped his hand to his side and faced Spock, wishing the physical contact that came so naturally to him could be applied to the Vulcan. Instead he tried to put all the sincerity he could into his voice. "I wish you all the best, Spock."

He turned and walked out of the room, carefully closing the door and making sure the privacy lock was still on as he left, feeling incredibly awkward for doing so but knowing it was right. Jim and Spock would need to talk after what he'd just put them through. But, he'd never seen a privacy light
when they'd been alone together in a room before.

*****

Six hundred seconds, or two thousand six hundred and twelve dranaths in Vulcan time, passed in silence. The giant white star that had witnessed the exchange among the three officers slid slowly out of view, along with its attendant planets and the wandering comet with the wavering tail. The officer of the watch on the bridge must have ordered a pre-planned course change, for the *Enterprise* turned towards the Dixler nebula. Interstellar dust obscured the brilliance of stars just being born, and the reflected light from outside the ship, accurately translated by the ship's computer, became dimmer and dimmer.

The light inside private room number two of the observation deck barely illuminated the two still figures that contemplated the void.

Finally, Kirk stirred. "That did not go as well as I had hoped it would."

"Nor as badly as I had feared."

Kirk faced his second-in-command. "Somewhere in the middle, then?"

"Agreed. However, I noticed that you did not mention the presence of an incipient bond." There was no condemnation in the deep voice.

Kirk ran a hand through his hair. "Did you think now was the time to bring that up? We've barely found out about it ourselves. Bones was tired. And upset. He had enough to cope with just realizing that the two of us are sleeping in the same bed. I think we threw him as much today as he could handle."

"Yes." For the first time since he had entered the room, Spock took a step closer to his lover, so that he was close enough to touch him. He felt Kirk's tightly controlled disappointment, and knew his own as well. But he had not expected unconditional support from McCoy. Except from the man in front of him, Spock did not believe he had ever been granted such a gift.

But he knew the illogical patterns of hope that humans were prey to. Whatever Kirk had desired, he had not been granted it from their meeting with McCoy. The fading starlight cast the captain in shadow. Perhaps, a gesture of support from *him*... Spock yielded to temptation and held out two fingers in the air between them.

Kirk looked at him, then down at the long fingers. Slowly he extended his own hand so that first his palm, and then middle and fore-finger slid into the traditional Vulcan sign of intimacy.

The small action sent a thrill through Spock's mind, a thrill totally incomprehensible to anyone who wasn't a telepath. But Jim knew. The pleasures of Spock's sexuality were shared between them now and desired by them both.

Spock reached out with his other hand. He stroked small circles around his captain's temple, one of the access points that granted him entry into the meld. Kirk drew in a long, shuddering breath. Spock saw the fires of desire kindle in his eyes.

Their regular game of handball awaited them in the gym, and its physical activity would be an effective deterrent to the tension that Spock sensed in both his captain and himself. But that wasn't what either of them really needed. No, now Spock was familiar with emotional needs, could even acknowledge them in himself.
They had promised themselves a meld tonight. Why not here? Why not now, when they both required a reaffirmation of their togetherness after the challenge of McCoy's tumultuous emotions? Kirk would never ask; they'd never indulged in this most private of joinings in any place on the ship other than their quarters. But this was something Spock could give.

He shifted his stance, allowed his hand to twist on his lover's face into a familiar position. Kirk went utterly still.

"McCoy has an irrational fear of mental contact," Spock whispered, as if he weren't already seeking Kirk's familiar mental aura.

"Because he was mentally raped by the Spock of the other universe." The captain swayed, pressed the side of his face against the long fingers. They stared into each other's eyes.

"Whatever the cause, I believe he will find it difficult to accept a bond between us, whenever it is fully formed." The strong thumb came up against Kirk's cheekbone, the next step in initiating the meld. They eased closer. Their bodies were only centimeters apart. Spock waited, poised on the threshold, only half of him still perceiving the physical, quivering for the touch he craved....

"He'll accept it." Slowly, Kirk leaned forward, erasing all the final spaces between them. It was the way they'd been melding for months. Spock would touch him with his fingers, ready to ignite the golden sun of their mental life together. Then Kirk would complete their circle with a kiss, a symbol of everything else they shared; their everyday lives, their bodies.

"I want it," Kirk whispered, his lips brushing breath against Spock's. "Give it to me." He closed his eyes....

Their mouths met. They fell into the meld, together....

*****
"How can you eat that stuff?"

Communications expert Lieutenant Tan Res'l't looked up from his ganash and trentipple to his smiling superior officer. "I like it," he said simply, and dipped his spoon into the pasty white mixture that was dotted with spreading green blobs. "It tassstess good."

Lieutenant Penda Uhura took the remark for an invitation, and she slid into the seat opposite Res'l't. "Well," she said as she shook out her napkin, "I suppose so. My guess is that you wouldn't like chili."

Both antenna swiveled sideways, and Res'l't hissed his displeasure. "Definitely not. How can you eat that sssstuff?"

Uhura laughed. She had liked the unassuming Andorian from the first day he had transferred aboard, along with the fifty-one other new crew members that Starfleet had assigned the Enterprise about half a year ago. In addition to their shared passion for language and the complex "airwaves" of interstellar space, she had discovered that Tan had a subtle sense of humor and an unwavering dedication to his duty. He could be counted upon. It hadn't taken him long to climb to the second position in the communications department, directly behind Uhura herself.

She crumbled some corn chips into her bowl. "You're eating late tonight. What's going--?"

But a voice interrupted her. "Mind if we join you?"

Dawson and Hunyady were welcomed at the table, along with Ensigns Tarn and Prendel't from security, who came along five minutes later. Uhura smiled at each in turn, although she didn't know the tall Rigellian Tarn too well and she positively disliked the Andorian Prendel't. Tan Res'l't and Sessalu Prendel't were a perfect argument against racial stereotyping; they were so different. In her mind Uhura ranked the twelve Andorians on the Enterprise. Res'l't was at one end and the sharp-tongued female security officer at the other. But it didn't matter. Uhura still welcomed her.

There were plenty of seats left in the mess hall on deck five at 1930 hours when Lieutenants Sulu and Josephs walked in, but they headed straight to Uhura's table to complete the seating for eight.

Uhura ate silently and listened to the conversations that swirled up and down the table. She felt comfortable, looking at the animated faces, hearing the talk of duty and challenges. She knew a small knot of satisfaction. Uhura understood the reasons why she rarely ate alone, why she attracted a crowd at her table and never lacked for friends. Somehow, on the Enterprise, she had become the mother-officer.

She wasn't the oldest in the group; Sulu gave her two years, and the fresh-faced Josephs three, but she knew without a doubt that they and many others looked upon her to fill a certain gap in their lives. She had assumed the maternal role. Mother-confessor, she-who-would-listen-and-not-speak. She who was assumed to know the inner workings of the heart, and gave good advice when asked.

She was the most senior female officer on the bridge. That gave her a certain status that exceeded her actual years. And she was the woman most likely to have an affair with the "old man," according to the ship's betting pool that had been in continuous operation since the reign of Captain Robert April, although that wasn't a very maternal image. Then neither was their attractive captain an "old man," despite the fact that the term was used by almost every crew member under the rank
of lieutenant when referring to Kirk. Just as well. She wouldn't like to have an affair with a member of the geriatric set, and it was very true that in the beginning years of their mission she had been very interested in the captain....

Uhura pulled her mind away from that daydream. Not too likely. She drank some lime-scented kava juice, the perfect accompaniment for the fiery chili, and surveyed her crewmates with the air of a mother hen counting her chicks.

Tarn, who barely managed to rest his big frame in the suitable-for-most-humanoids chair, was asking Dawson a question about the physics class that they'd just come from, the one taught by Mister Spock on deck ten. Uhura didn't envy Dawson. Tarn was a ponderous conversationalist who took five minutes to make a point that could have been expressed in one. But Dawson listened patiently, the way he did almost everything else. The man was a born teacher, and there were times when he seemed far older than his twenty-eight years.

Which sometimes made his marriage with Irina seem like a mismatch. Uhura glanced to where the young woman -- really, she was barely out of the Academy -- was leaning across the table and pointing a finger at Sulu. Where Dawson was placid Hunyady was fiery. Where he was a monochrome portrait of browns -- brown eyes, brown hair, straight brown brows and an even temperament to match-- she was a splash of colors -- vivid auburn, almost red hair, sparkling green eyes, and a vibrant approach to life. If they ever fought, and Uhura doubted that they had yet, Irina would probably scream and throw things, while Dawson would try to use calm words to explain his position.

Uhura stirred her chili and let the conversations swirl on without her participation. Those two were different all right, almost different species. But nobody could possibly deny the love the two young officers had for one another. From the day they'd met they'd been best of friends. There hadn't been any bright flaring flame because Brian was much too level-headed to be swept off his feet, but instead there'd been an instant settling-in, as if Irina and Brian belonged with one another, as if they'd known one another for years. Off duty they were seldom apart. Together, they were a team. Two halves of one whole?

It was impossible to restrain the little sigh that escaped Uhura's lips. Lately she had been feeling very much like one-half searching for the part of her that was missing. There wasn't anyone on the ship she was interested in. Not even the captain anymore. And it wasn't as if she were jealous of Brian and Irina's happiness, it was just that.... seeing their contentment so obviously displayed reminded Uhura of her own longings.

Someday, she wanted a love like that. She wanted someone who would love her not because of her looks or her bustline, not because of her skill at a communications board or because she seemed to have a knack for being sympathetic and giving good advice. Uhura wanted to be loved for all of that, and for none of it. She wanted to be loved for herself, the way she was.

She stared down at the bowl, realized it was empty and that she'd been daydreaming, and self-consciously patted her lips with the napkin. Her love life wasn't going improve anytime soon, not unless somebody special transferred on for the last year of the mission, and she might as well just get used to the idea. Love wasn't easy to find.

Uhura looked across the table at Irina, who was grinning at a joke Sulu had just told, then to Dawson, who had a more restrained smile but whose gaze was on his wife, enjoying her enjoyment. Uhura felt a small warmth kindle at his obvious devotion. She was glad that somebody on the ship had found love.

"Penda." There was a conversational lull, and predictably, Hunyady filled it. Most of the junior
officers called her Uhura.... "You haven't had the chance to tell me more about your research. How's it coming?"

"It's hard to tell. I've really just started, so there aren't any results yet." She sighed. "And there's so much data.... I'm not sure how to go about sifting through it all. Maybe monitoring other planets in the sector isn't such a good idea. Sort of like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"Or a tiddle in a sssuressshence," Resl't added, and everybody laughed. Nobody in their right minds would go looking for a tiddle, which on Andoria was a very small and potent version of Terra's skunk.

"But it's a good idea," Hunyady insisted when the chuckles died down. "When you get to the compilation stage, I'd like to help. We might find something."

"Okay." Uhura nodded. She was grateful for the offer even if it was a little forward. It wasn't like this was her own, independent project and Irina was butting in. Working on the Michaelan problem was a ship-wide effort, and there were only a few people on board who knew computers better than the young ensign. It occurred to Uhura that Hunyady was aware of that, too. "As a matter of fact, I've got to get back to the bridge in a few minutes to do some more data collection, so maybe we'll have something to work with soon." At Resl't's inquiring look, which for Andorians was the head lowered and antennae straightened, she added, "I traded with Joe Vitek for a few hours. You know it's almost impossible to get extra work done during alpha shift."

There was general agreement, interrupted by the sound of the intercom. "Ensign Hunyady, report to Bio lab number three."

"Back to work," Hunyady declared cheerfully, and stood. "I guess that Michaelan air analysis I was interested in is coming in. I'll see you in a few hours, Brian. Bye."

She had barely exited the room before Sulu leaned across the table and queried Dawson, "Well, do you have it?"

Dawson shook his head. "Not yet. Kim is still working on it."

"On what?" Uhura looked from one to the other.

Sulu answered her. "Dawson's going to give Irina a Sponderi necklace set. Kim Park from ship's services is working on it. You know, the metallurgist who goes to morning exercise with us? It's for a late wedding present."

"And I am going to tune the ssset for them," added Resl't."

"Ohhh," breathed Uhura. A Sponderi necklace set was a traditional wedding present on Andoria. It could be made from just about any metal, steel, gold, radi, in any design, but what made it special was the very rare sponder that was painted on the metal and then "tuned" by the special gifts of the Andorians. The metal would warm and glow whenever the two beings who wore the two necklaces were in close proximity. The Andorians wore the jewelry up high on their chests, so that the warmth nestled against their hearts. Uhura had heard of the sets, but never seen one before.

Dawson seemed uncomfortable under the look of awe on her face. "You know it's just because of Tan, here," he indicated his fellow officer. "I couldn't afford this otherwise."

It wasn't the sponder that the lieutenant couldn't afford, but the services of an Andorian who would be willing to extend his gift for a human. Uhura looked at her blue-skinned friend and smiled. His lips stretched as he returned the gesture.
"Decided when to give it to her?" Josephs wanted to know.

Dawson shrugged, clearly uncomfortable with all the attention at the table focused on him and his private affairs. "Don't know. Whenever it's ready, I guess."

Uhura wanted to stay, was tempted by the dessert of conversation more than anything else, but she was expected on the bridge. She gathered her tray and stood, and took a moment to observe the beings at the table. Human, Andorian, Rigellian. If Spock had been around, or a being from one of the other races that now crewed the ship, they would have been welcome too. It was a very satisfying feeling.

The feeling followed her onto the bridge. The early evening hours there were quiet, as Uhura had expected. Her project required both peace and access to the main communications board. With the placid patrol that Komack had ordered the ship to make, nothing much would be going on, and she would have plenty of time to pursue her ideas about Michaela. It would take a long time, tuning into and then cross-referencing the local planetary broadcasts the way she intended to do, but if she were right, there might be a clue there. It would be worth all this effort if she and Irina got some good information to work on.

She worked steadily for half an hour, isolating first one planet's emissions and then another's. She was only peripherally aware of the low tones around her, of officer-of-the-watch Lieutenant Qaddoumi in the center seat giving a few commands. Even though Uhura had given up her regular evening swim, she felt refreshed, alert. There was something energizing in knowing that she was part of a ship-wide effort, that on every deck people off and on duty were matching her own efforts, following leads and inspiration, even pursuing wild hunches. The captain never shot down an idea that was well thought-out.

A button on the communications board flashed, and Uhura automatically reached for the transponder and inserted it into her ear. She'd have to put the research aside for a while. The daily communications package from starbase twenty-four was about to reach the Enterprise.

She sorted each message, reading most of them directly by their computer code as they squirted their way into the ship's memory banks. But the last one was flagged "communications, immediate review," and Uhura's manicured fingertip tapped the button that opened its contents.

She frowned. There would be a direct transmission from Admiral Frederick Komack, commander sector seven, for Captain James T. Kirk, in one minute.

How absolutely typical of the dear admiral, she thought as she prepared her board for the signal with an emphatic switching of toggles. A whole sixty seconds notice.

Every other admiral, commodore and assorted higher-ups with whom Uhura had ever dealt had extended the courtesy of at least five minutes warning time before live transmissions, except during emergencies of course. It was common sense. After all, the captain didn't serve a twenty-four hour bridge watch, although Komack apparently thought Kirk should. There were times when the captain was in engineering, in a lab, or God forbid, sleeping or eating. Finding the captain and alerting him of a live transmission sometimes took time.

She initiated a ship-wide page. After thirty seconds had elapsed she was ready for a second call. That's unusual. Usually the captain's faster than this. Could he be in the shower?

But before she could call again Kirk responded. "Yes, Uhura?"

"Captain, transmission from starbase twenty-four. Admiral Komack in less than a minute."
An inarticulate sound -- of exasperation? dismay?-- made its way over the intercom. "No way I can make it that fast, Lieutenant. I'm on the observation deck. Stall the admiral if you have to."

Kirk clicked off and turned to Spock. The first officer had a dazed look in his eyes, as if he still resided in another world. Kirk grasped his upper arm. "Are you all right?" he asked softly.

Spock shook his head sharply to one side to cast away the cobwebs that clutched at his awareness. "Affirmative. However, the transition, when we were so... within, was difficult."

"I know. I was there, remember?" Kirk drew in a deep breath. "That's something we should have anticipated though. The likelihood is that it's not the last time we'll be interrupted."

"Agreed. However, I regret.... I, too, wished to stay within the meld. We need--."

"It's all right," Kirk said, his voice suddenly rough. He turned away from the gentle words towards the door, stiff resolution in every angry angle of his body. "I'll live and so will you. Maybe later, or tomorrow. The way things have been going, I suppose I should have expected a four second meld and a call from Komack. It was almost inevitable. Let's go."

Both Kirk and his first officer exited the turbolift before the starbase contacted the Enterprise. Spock relieved Ensign Singh at the science station; Kirk paused by communications and nodded towards Uhura. "Thank you, Lieutenant. Put the admiral on when ready." Then he walked down the steps towards the center seat that Lieutenant Qaddoumi had already vacated in favor of the helmsman's post.

Uhura couldn't help but watch her captain as he took a few decisive steps, swiveled on one heel and lowered himself to the pseudo-leather. Several months ago Kirk had returned to a rigorous exercise program; now his body was once again honed to the same athlete's fitness that it had been at the beginning of their mission. His shoulders and biceps were accentuated and well-muscled, there was an undeniably sexy trimness to his waist that spoke of strength and firm skin.

Perhaps most appealing of all, there was an alert spring to his walk. Sometimes, especially when the ship was in danger, it seemed to her that Kirk walked like a cat, missing nothing, up on his toes, all a part-of-the-world. She liked to watch while he walked, his body's grace and fluid motion, she liked to watch while he faced challenges, his body bending forward slightly in characteristic aggression.

But the captain's body didn't betray that he was preparing for a challenge now. He leaned back in the chair, all business. Uhura admired that in him, the control that he exercised not only over his crew, but over himself as well. Mastery of self was just one element of Kirk's total attractiveness. Not even by the twitch of a jaw muscle did he reveal the slightest hint of anticipation, even though Uhura knew he must be regarding this communication with mixed feelings. The last time admiral and captain had confronted one another across the light years, Kirk had not been happy. He'd let Komack know it too. Yet the admiral was the only one who could release them from their current patrol duty.

The chief communications officer of the Enterprise caught the transmission flung at them so precipitously, cleared static without effort, and leaned back to watch the confrontation on the screen.

"Kirk," the white head barked.

"Admiral Komack." Kirk nodded infinitesimally.
"I've been reviewing this recommendation for commendation you sent me several weeks ago. For...," the admiral consulted a flimsy sheet on the desk in front of him, "...a Lieutenant Brian Dawson. How do you expect me to commend the fellow when he nearly killed himself and your second-in-command, too? What kind of ship are you running? Even your junior officers take unwarranted risks." The brilliant blue eyes flashed.

Uhura sucked in a silent breath. Starfleet's most inflexible admiral had a reputation for being difficult to deal with throughout the 'fleet, but ever since the ship had traveled to Vulcan two years ago he had become a specific obstacle for the Enterprise to hurdle. She dreaded their rotation into the sector of space commanded by Komack, as she knew many of the other bridge crew did; why did he choose to act more like an enemy than a commanding officer?

Kirk's response was milder than Uhura expected. "If you've read the report, Admiral, you'll notice that the lieutenant saved the ship when he detected the cause of the matter-antimatter imbalance in our port pylon. We were minutes away from disaster. I don't call what he did an 'unwarranted risk'. I didn't three months ago, when I filed my recommendation, and I don't now."

Komack snorted and rustled the paper in his hands. "But the injury he incurred afterwards was uncalled for, totally. We've got to teach these young officers to respect what Starfleet's invested in them."

From her vantage point sitting above and behind the command well, Uhura noticed how Kirk's shoulders tightened. She knew of the demands placed on a starship captain. There had been many times when she'd wished that she could massage the tension away.

The captain always believed in the frontal attack. It worked as well with an admiral as it did with Klingons. "Then I assume you've turned my recommendation down?"

Komack raised a hand. "Not so fast, Kirk. We'll see. But while I'm thinking about it, I want you back here on starbase twenty-four." The admiral's mouth pursed as if he were sucking a lemon. "So you can receive your medal."

"Me?" Lines crinkled Kirk's forehead as he frowned.

"Yes." Komack's words were suddenly clipped. "For that Johnson Combine affair. I didn't have a hand in it, but the Federation Council thinks it knows how to interpret that botched mission. They undoubtedly want the publicity, and," Komack's lips curled, "everyone knows that you're pretty enough to photograph well. It's in your communications package for today. Haven't you read it yet?"

Kirk eyes narrowed, otherwise he didn't react to the insult, not veiled at all. "No, Admiral, I have not. I was not on the bridge when it arrived, less than three minutes ago."

That's telling him, Uhura thought. She agreed with her captain that the forthright approach was the only one to take with Komack.

"Well, read it. A command officer must review official Starfleet transmissions within thirty minutes of reception." Komack quoted from the manual. "Representative O'Malley is traveling specially all the way out here from Earth to make the presentation to you. He's the head of the Federation Council committee that's been pushing the total integration of Starfleet, and he's got a vested interest in making a big deal about what you and your crew did, since yours was the first ship to get the non-humans."

"So." Komack leaned back in his chair and it squeaked. "O'Malley's on a tight schedule, and I
know he's notified the press. That Randolph fellow from *The Galactic News* is scheduled to arrive in a few days with a complete holo-crew. They're probably going to make you front page news, Kirk, and you've got five whole days to prepare yourself. That should be plenty of time for your ship to get you here."

Kirk glanced down at the deck, then swiftly back up at the screen. "Admiral, I don't want another medal. With all due respect, this is just a waste of time. The *Enterprise* is needed elsewhere. I would prefer to relieve The Rising Sun in orbit around Michaela. My crew is familiar with that problem and--."

Komack's clenched fist bounced against the desk. "Is this becoming a habit, Kirk? Do you intend to question every order you're given?"

"No, sir." Each carefully enunciated syllable emphasized Kirk's impatience. "I was simply attempting to call to your attention--"

"I don't need your advice, Kirk. And I don't need an insubordinate officer presiding over his own personal fiefdom. The *Enterprise* will go where she is sent. If Starfleet needs you to smile and pretend you're a hero, then you do it. Is that clear?"

Komack's words echoed around the bridge, where members of the crew were inevitable witnesses to the clash of wills. Lieutenant Dillow, manning navigation, made a surprised "O" with silent lips. Uhura sat frozen in her seat, watching the profile of her captain.

Kirk sat in his command chair, his brows contracted, but utterly still, solid. His arms pressed along the armrests, his fingers slightly curved over the edges, and his back was very, very straight. To Uhura's eyes, he looked like everything a commanding officer should be, everything admirable in the man she had come to respect so much. He was a rock, or a mountain whose roots reached down, down into the depths of the ship.

The captain wasn't moving. She risked a glimpse towards the viewscreen, and encountered a sight equally intractable. The admiral was bent forward over his clenched hands, his heavy grey eyebrows were drawn together as he stared at the *Enterprise*'s leader. It seemed that every time these two men faced one another there was a confrontation. The conclusion of this one was inevitable. It took only seconds for Kirk's response, but it seemed much longer before his steady voice said, "Yes, sir, very clear."

The admiral made noises in his throat as he sat back. "Good. The Rising Sun is a research vessel, much more capable of dealing with the Michaelan situation than the *Enterprise*. You have your orders, now follow them. I'll expect you for the presentation ceremony. Data transmission follows. Komack out."

The vision of an angry admiral faded, and the screen reverted to the starfield.

Uhura turned back to her board to set up for the incoming transmission, relieved to have something to do in the heavy silence. She wouldn't know what to say even if given the opportunity.

But someone did. Out of the corner of her eye she saw movement at the science station, and the ship's executive officer made his way down to stand next to Kirk.

"Remarkable. The admiral's mood has not changed in the seven point five years I have known him."

That elicited a short laugh from Kirk. Uhura smiled to herself and turned all her attention to the
board. Spock would be able to handle this.

"And he's not likely to change anytime soon, is he? I guess we're stuck with him, and a trip to starbase twenty-four."

Spock nodded and folded his hands behind his back. "Indeed. Regardless of our personal opinions about it."

Kirk's attention shifted to the two officers seated in front of him. "Lieutenant Dillow, have you established coordinates for the base?"

The information from the admiral was still filtering its way into the ship's memory banks, but the Enterprise's bridge crew, even alpha and gamma shifts, prided themselves on being the best, as they believed their captain was. Dillow would have considered herself disgraced if she hadn't worked out a navigational plan in the minute since the transmission faded.

"Yes, sir, course plotted."

"We can't make it in time at warp four, can we?" Kirk had been a navigator as he climbed the ranks. He still could do lightning-quick nav computations, and usually knew the correct speed for the ship to take on any journey as well as the computer did. Komack hadn't given them much advance notice.

"No, sir. We'll need to increase speed to warp five for sixty hours."

"All right. Mr. Qaddoumi, initiate warp four to start us out, new heading."

The hawk-nosed officer checked a reading from the display before him. "Unable to comply at this time, sir. Recommend we delay for... ninety seconds while we clear the gravitational field of the local star group before accelerating."

Kirk nodded. "Initiate when safety factors are within limits, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk turned back to his first officer as if their conversation had not been interrupted. There was a hard light in his eyes. "It took him ninety-three days to get even to the 'think about it stage' for the commendation for Dawson. My crew is suffering because of his intractability."

"Indeed. There are times when individuals suffer because of the actions of others. It is a most unfortunate occurrence." Spock abruptly shifted the topic of conversation. "I had hoped that the admiral would make some mention of the requested promotion for Ensign Hunyady."

Kirk shook his head. "Your protegé. Mr. Spock, you're asking for too much. I signed off on your request because you know your own personnel best, but if the promotion comes through Hunyady will be one of the youngest lieutenants around. Do you really expect Komack to go along with that?"

Spock looked at the star-dotted screen. "Negative. I nurtured an illogical hope that her obvious competence would argue for itself. However, that is clearly too much to expect under these circumstances. You are correct in your supposition that the admiral is unlikely to deviate from the typical promotional pathways for a crewmember of this ship." His tone became much quieter. "I cannot help but be aware that your unusual activities in my behalf, two years ago, were the precipitating event in your conflict with the admiral. For that, I am most regretful."
"Don't be," Kirk said shortly. "If it hadn't been one thing, it would have been another. I think Komack and I were destined to clash. And if he knows that Dawson and Hunyady are husband and wife, that would explain the delay too. He'd never let so much good fortune fall on just one couple."

Spock cocked one eyebrow. "Although your assessment is distressingly cynical, I must agree with it." Unexpectedly, he sneezed.

Kirk threw him a look that the first officer succeeded in ignoring, so the captain smoothly diverted his attention to the helm. "Ready for warp four and new heading, Mister?"

"Aye, sir. Increasing speed--."

But before Qaddoumi could complete his sentence Lieutenant Uhura put out a restraining hand. "Captain, I'm receiving a distress signal."

"Belay that order, Helmsman," Kirk snapped. He was up the steps and next to the communications officer in a moment. "What are you getting?"

Uhura concentrated hard on the faint signals that were barely perceptible against the ever-present background noise left over from the big bang. She wasn't quite sure....

"An automatic beacon," the lieutenant finally said, still struggling to clear the signal. She had an unfocused look in her eyes as she twisted dials. "It's difficult to read... very faint. A strange configuration. It's using a coordinate system that's decades old.... There. Origin, sector seven, coordinates 27.1 by 43.2 by 22.1. Stardate 7231.4. Just a few hours ago. From a vessel, the Lox'theneth'nar." She looked up at Kirk. "No details, sir. It must have been tripped automatically. It's repeating basic data on location." Without waiting for the command, Uhura transferred the information to the navigation board.

Kirk was already striding over to the science station, where Spock's fingers were coaxing information from the latest computer updates. "The Lox'theneth'nar," he repeated, looking up from his seat to one of the small screens. An image of what seemed to be an irregularly shaped asteroid appeared. An elegant eyebrow rose as the science officer regarded it. He pushed a button and the image changed to provide a revolving schematic of the many decks inside. "A ship of the Loxenen line, made more than one hundred years ago by hollowing out an asteroid. It was originally used to transport criminals from the Loxenen system to... wherever it was they wished to deposit their unacceptable citizens."

"And now?"

"It is currently being used to convey indigent colonists to newly opened planets on the frontier. On Loxenen, such individuals are as undesirable as the criminal element a century ago."

Kirk fingered his lip. "It looks huge. How many...?"

"The Lox'theneth'nar is capable of transporting one thousand five hundred individuals. Crew complement is... a mere fifteen."

"Fifteen? For all those...? How is that possible?"

Spock swiveled in his chair to face Kirk. "Although the ship is antiquated, many of its systems were originally designed to function automatically. Because it was used to transport criminals, there was as little contact between crew and 'cargo' as possible. I anticipate that the living conditions," the Vulcan's lips pursed, "are less than adequate."
"You mean the colonists are probably packed in like sardines."

Spock nodded. He was capable of understanding colloquialisms whenever he wished. "Correct. And considering the less than savory reputation of the Loxenen line, there is a high probability that the number of passengers exceeds the allowable."

"Right." Kirk swung around to Uhura. "Lieutenant, still no response to our hail?"

"None, sir."

"Navigator, ETA at warp four?"

"One hour and forty-two minutes, sir, including standard maneuvering time to match speeds."

Dillow brushed a strand of her white-blonde hair behind her shoulder and sat up straighter. She had joined Starfleet for times like this.

"How long can we delay and still make it in time to starbase twenty-four?"

Dillow was ready with the answer to that question, too. "We can delay ten hours and still make it if we increase our speed all the way to the planet to warp five. Up to twenty-two hours for warp six."

Kirk turned to face the center screen. "All right then. Qaddoumi, new course and heading from the distress call. Initiate warp four."

"Aye, sir."

"Uhura, notify Doctor M'Benga. We'll need a medical team."

"Not Doctor McCoy, sir?" Uhura questioned. "He came back on duty today." The ship's CMO usually went with the captain on missions like this....

"No, Lieutenant, Doctor McCoy needs his rest. We won't take him on this one."

The familiar whine of the ship's engines engaging vibrated through the deck, and the Enterprise turned away from where Komack's orders would have sent her. Uhura kept busy at her board, but she couldn't help feeling a small triumph. So there, she thought, nodding in the direction of starbase twenty-four. So there.

*****

Spock was right. Ship's long-range sensors revealed approximately two thousand eight hundred and fifty beings of six different races on board the Lox'theneth'nar, along with more than three hundred head of cattle and assorted smaller livestock. The animals complicated the readings, and caused the science officer to stress the word "approximately." It was entirely possible there were even more beings stuffed into what must be appalling living conditions.

The asteroid-ship remained silent, drifting at sub-light speed on a course that would eventually take it into the deadly inferno of the local star. Kirk restlessly prowled the upper level of the bridge while he issued orders that matched course and speed. He eyed the apparently benign pock-marked presence on the screen, not liking what he saw. Could this be a trap of some sort? Unlikely. The Loxenens were of the Preserver-seeded human stock, and there were Centaurans, Vegans aboard, races he knew well, as well as those he knew only by name: the Danarakh, Uhka and Gulgas. None of those peoples were enemies of the Federation, and as distasteful as the society on Loxenen was, it was a perfectly respectable non-aligned world, at peace with the Federation and all who cared to trade with it.
Then why the distress call? He didn't like beaming into the silence. He had an itch on the back of his neck that couldn't be scratched.

Qaddoumi spoke. "We're alongside her, Captain. Ten thousand meters distance."

"Full scan, Mister Spock."

A full scan revealed an anomaly. What looked to be the command center, a strangely configured shamrock-shaped bridge with three inter-connected nodes, was vacant. Every other area besides the generating rooms for the engines and the cargo holds were crammed full. Then sensors revealed another anomaly. The three nodes were completely shut off from the rest of the ship: there were solid bulkheads drawn across access routes, and an independent air circulation system in action.

"Analysis, Mister Spock?" Kirk paused by the science station.

The first officer swiveled in his chair to face him. "A remnant from earlier days, Captain, when the passengers were violent individuals. The protective devices have effectively cut off the bridge from the rest of the ship. I cannot determine whether this was a deliberate action or an automatic result of the distress signal."

Kirk glanced up at the screen. "But why isn't anyone there?" He squinted, as if that would provide the answers. "Is it pressurized? Safe?"

"Affirmative. Perhaps the triggering event also caused an evacuation."

"Maybe. I suppose we can presume that there isn't an auxiliary bridge. No back up systems on board? If the crew left the bridge, where would they go?"

"Captain, this vessel is one hundred years old, and even then it was built to minimum specifications. There are very few safety features incorporated into the design."

Kirk pulled at his tunic. He was finished asking questions that couldn't be answered. "All right. Two landing parties. I want twelve security guards to beam over simultaneously from transporters one and two, to that big room on the center deck. It's probably a gathering place of some sort. Followed by a full team from sociology and negotiating. That's another twelve. These people might be in a panic. I want everyone prepared for the worst. I'll brief the ones in number one, you take number two. Have additional security standing by." He walked to the turbolift, gesturing to Qaddoumi to resume command. "Then you and I and a team will beam over to the bridge from transporter one. If we're going to get this ship going again we'll have to start on that weird bridge of theirs. And... let's give Hunyady some experience on this. Two Security and M'Benga too. Issue phasers. We've got to find out what's going on over there."

*****

The largest node of the control room of the Lox'theneth'nar was cramped. The ceiling was low, with overhead conduits from which wires and metal tubing bulged. Screens, levers, dials and buttons covered every square centimeter of panel space. The atmosphere was hot and humid, with a unhealthy smell to it, as if somewhere close there were rotting wood and vegetation. The walls were a sickly green, all the instrumentation a vivid yellow, the deck a splattered mosaic of browns and greens. The Lox'theneth'nar was an offensive mound of decaying hues.

But Kirk didn't see it. He stared down at the body at his feet. If he had materialized another six inches forward he would have been sharing space with a corpse. Mingling atoms with another object, or moving within the beam were two ways you could die while being transported. But no,
the landing party had stood perfectly still on the platform, and transporter tech Kyle's skill had
avoided the other danger; Kirk had been set down precisely in front of a man whose face had been
blasted away by a phaser. The man had had the same red blood that pumped through Kirk's veins;
it had dried in a scarlet stream along the rippled edges of skin that remained on his jaw. He'd been
human.

In a reflex action that he had been forced to employ too many times to remember, Kirk quelled his
nausea by tightening his own jaw. He looked around, automatically imprinting the scene in his
memory, assessing the situation. There were five bodies in the room, all of them showing obvious
signs of phaser fire. One man was still seated, as if he could continue his duty with a hole that had
blasted through both chair and body. The others had fallen, and their blood stained the pattern of
the floor. The green walls were smeared with the ugliness of burnt, brown destruction, a phaser
beam gone wild.

For one awful moment of deja vu, Kirk remembered the scene they'd encountered on Michaela in
the church. There had been bodies there too, distorted by rigor mortis and gaping wounds and the
unmistakable psychic emanations of terror. He had come to believe over the years that he was able
to detect terror; perhaps as a result of the intuition he relied upon, perhaps the result of learning to
love a telepath. It wafted in an acrid odor through his mind and seared his throat. Like the men and
women and children in the church, the people on the Loxtheneth'nar had died in great fear.

But this wasn't Michaela. Kirk shook his head, annoyed with his emotional indulgence. He wasn't
going to see that planet on every mission. He wasn't. He walked away from the body without
looking down at it again.

Ensign Hunyady's soft contralto tones cut through the silence before the captain had gone far.
"How did they die? Who did it?" She had already moved with a smooth athletic stride to one of the
consoles, to try and access the computer memory as Spock had instructed her before beam-over.
Kirk noted that there was strength in her voice, only a little fear as she stood before burnt-out
controls and looked at twisted bodies. She might be young, but this was one indication why Spock
thought so highly of her.

Kirk found the answers to her questions. He crouched down next to the prominent chair where the
captain must have presided, beside a man who stared up at the bulkhead with unseeing eyes. There
was a burnt-edged hole directly in the center of his forehead, and there was a phaser clutched in
one hand. It was how Mar had looked....

Kirk touched the phaser, found that it was locked in a death grip and could not be easily removed.
"This. This killed them. And he pulled the trigger. The captain." Was it possible that this was what
it appeared to be? Like his ever-rational first officer, Kirk did not believe in coincidence. Why
would the captain turn a weapon against his own crew, and then himself? What madness had
infected him? They had encountered strange deaths and mysterious motives in space before.

Spock went down on one knee across from the body. "The automatic distress signal was triggered
when navigational control was destroyed."

Kirk looked across the still form of his counterpart and captured the eyes of his second-in-
command. "Mr. Spock, this looks like.... I can't believe that it could be the same."

The Vulcan compressed his lips. "We do not yet have enough data, Captain. However, I find the
similarities... most disturbing."

The quiet words served to confirm the thoughts Kirk was doubting, and they were enough to break
the strange spell of whispers and soft movements that had been cast upon the rank-smelling control
room. He straightened in one quick movement and turned towards the other two rooms in the command center. "You get to work on opening up the bulkheads to the rest of the ship. Doctor, let's see what else is here."

They didn't have far to go. In the narrow passageway that was the hub of the control area, another member of the Lox'theneth'nar's crew was sitting propped up against a green and yellow striped bulkhead. She was gasping for breath, holding an arm over a wound in her side. She was alive.

M'Benga went down beside her, his medical tricorder whirring, while Kirk crouched on the other side, steadying the woman with a hand on her shoulder. Her eyes, a startling violet color with no whites showing at all, fluttered open. They found first M'Benga, snapping open his medical case and preparing an injection, then settled on Kirk.

"Starfleet?" Her alien-thin lips barely whispered the words.

"Yes," Kirk said strongly, momentarily tightening his fingers in reassurance. He wanted to say "Don't worry." He wanted to say, "It will be all right," but the words died before they were born. He'd said them once before and they hadn't been true. He wouldn't say them again. This woman was seriously injured; she might not make it. He settled instead for, "We answered your distress beacon. What happened?"

The hypo pressed into her arm. She sighed, and her dark head sagged back against the bulkhead. Her mouth worked, forming words that she had no breath for, until a greater effort brought forth a shuddering "Are they dead?"

She must have known. She must have been the first victim, must have then heard the phaser blasts just feet away in the control room, the cries, the thump of bodies. She must have lain here in the passageway, calling out for help, wondering where her shipmates were, and if someone on that insane bridge had been able to get off a distress signal....

"Yes," Kirk said as gently as he could, "they're all dead. Tell us what happened."

M'Benga looked over at him, a medical man intent on saving a life, a member of Starfleet bowing to the will of a superior officer. Kirk knew without words that he disapproved of this questioning, but "Help me get her down flat, Captain," was all he said.

Together they eased her down to the deck, and M'Benga removed her protecting hand so that he could see the wound. Some of the blood had coagulated on her fingers and palm, and the scab broke with the movement. Kirk looked back up from the renewal of blood and the awful exposed tissue to the woman's face. It was stark white, and etched with lines of pain that had impressed themselves over the hours. Kirk wondered if this ravaged body would ever be put back together again.

"What happened?" Kirk asked again. He used his command voice this time, and there was a part of him that hated doing it. But he barely noticed that part, he had had so much practice overcoming it.

"Captain Freneth," the woman said, her voice harsh with suppressed sobs. Those violet eyes were half-closed. "He... shot me. And the others. I heard him." Her legs moved restlessly. "I don't know why. He was always... so good. So easy to work with. But then he went cra---." She gasped and jerked away from M'Benga's probing fingers. She drew in a shuddering breath, and Kirk winced in sympathy. He'd had a gut wound once himself, and remembered well the agony.

But he couldn't let that stop him. "What happened with the captain? He went crazy? Is that what you meant to say?"
"I...I...," Abruptly the woman's arms jerked up to clutch her head. "Ohhhhh," she shuddered, and her head rolled from side to side in sudden pain. Her fingers dug into her skull. "No, don't. Oh, please don't. Leave me alone, leave me alone...." 

Kirk and M’Benga exchanged puzzled glances.

"Don't. Don't," the woman screamed, her body convulsing upwards. "I won't say. Leave me alone, no, no, no... I won't...."

M’Benga fumbled for another hypo, and Kirk pressed down against her heaving shoulders. "What's the matter? What's happening?" he demanded.

The second hypo hissed in. "No brain damage," the doctor muttered. "No head injuries. I don't know...." He tried to run his fingers over her skull, but it was difficult. Despite Kirk's efforts to keep her still, the woman's lower body convulsed in heavy jerks, and the wound in her side spewed forth fresh blood with every movement. But she didn't seem to even be aware of the torn flesh that she'd protected with her hands for so long. Her hands gripped her head instead, tighter and tighter as if there were the far greater pain. M’Benga tried to pry them away, but her frenzied strength was greater than his own.

Kirk sprawled against her body, using all his weight and strength to immobilize her. His mouth was only centimeters from her face, but he still had to shout to be heard over her incoherent screams. "Who do you want to leave you alone? Are you being attacked? Is someone doing this to you?"

"No, No, NOOO!" A final scream, a final shudder, and the woman was still.

Kirk pulled back abruptly, looking down into the slack face. "Is she dead?"

"No. Unconscious. But this isn't good, Captain," the doctor said between gritted teeth. "We can't expose her to the transporter. I need supplies right now...."

"Get them," Kirk snapped. He reached behind him for his communicator, flipped it open and handed it over. His irritation was obvious. McCoy would not have waited to ask, would have called himself for whatever he needed to save a life and damn the protocol.

Kirk stood, feeling the dampness on his tunic where blood had flowed. He looked down at the woman. What had she been about to say? Had the sudden irrationality been a result of pain, or something else? Something attacking her?

The whine of the transporter signaled the arrival of the supplies, and Kirk wondered why the doctor hadn't requested a med tech's assistance. He frowned, irritated with his irritation. Just because M’Benga didn't do things like McCoy didn't make him incompetent. Just different. He obviously would ask for help if he needed it, and notify the captain if the woman regained consciousness. Kirk shook his head and strode back to the garish bridge.

The glaring colors were still there, as was the stultifying heat. A trickle of sweat ran down Kirk's spine. Spock was in one of the other nodes and couldn't be seen. Hunyady had moved the body of one of the dead men from his seat so that she could work with the computer record. Kirk ordered one security guard to join M’Benga, and the other to start beaming the bodies to the Enterprise, using the isolation techniques for communicable diseases. He wasn't going to take any chances. Then he walked over to what must be the science station.

Before Kirk sat down he looked around, frowning. Komorov was pulling one of the bodies into
position for easy beam-up, Hunyady was punching buttons on a chartreuse board. There were no shadows on this bridge, no consoles behind which to hide. Kirk hunched a shoulder at his sudden unease.

The phaser hadn't sprayed its destructive force here. In just a few seconds he accessed the ship's log. He concentrated hard and tried to draw conclusions from the dry entries, from the tone of the captain's voice. Was there a hint of irrationality there? No. He was reaching.

Behind him Kirk heard a low-voiced command and the hum of the transporter as Komorov carried out his order. Then Captain Freneth's calm voice detailing course and speed was overlaid by sharp footsteps as the security guard walked away down the passageway.

The log came to its conclusion with an innocuous entry made just a few hours earlier, with no hint of what was to come. "Damn it," Kirk whispered to himself, and allowed himself the luxury of slapping the palm of his hand on the console. What had happened here? He got up and made a restless circuit of the unfamiliar bridge.

Spock met him at the doorway. "It will be necessary to make repairs in this room before the bulkheads can be retracted. I estimate repair time at one hour.

Kirk nodded absently, clearly not giving his second-in-command his full attention. But Spock had seen such apparent abstraction in his captain before, and his gaze swept across the room.

"Is there something wrong, Captain?"

Kirk's brow furrowed. The two of them walked together towards the science console. "I don't know. You heard the crew woman we found? She's unconscious now. But right before that.... It was almost like something was.... attacking her. Mentally. She was screaming 'leave me alone.'"

Spock frowned. "You believe she was being attacked by a telepath?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Or maybe she was just crazy with the pain. Asking the pain to leave her. But.... Something just doesn't feel right."

The first time his captain had ever uttered those words, almost four years ago, Spock had neither understood nor believed them. Captain Pike had not been given to such unspecific statements. But time had convinced Spock that Kirk's intuition should not be dismissed lightly. In the months before their intimate interaction had commenced, he had occasionally speculated that Kirk might be telepathic, that his intuition was simply an unconscious application of a skill of which he was unaware. But their experience together in the meld had proven him wrong. Kirk did not have telepathy of even rudimentary dimensions. He was mind blind, as most humans were.

But still, there were so many times when Kirk's undefined itch had been a reliable warning....

Kirk raised his hand and rubbed his neck. "I don't know," he repeated, and looked all about the bridge. "I'm spooked and I don't know why."

Spock looked with him. He saw the blasted-out controls, the jumbled colors, he heard behind him the hiss of a hypo as M'Benga labored over the injured woman, smelled the offensive odor that flavored the air. He could tell that Hunyady was just completing her efforts at the ship's computer, but nothing was unusual for the environment, and he said so.

"I know. It's probably just the similarities...."

Hunyady came up to them, and Kirk was willing to interrupt himself and look at her.
"Sir, I've finished with the record. Should I beam back to the ship with it?"

Kirk nodded a dismissal. "Return to the Enterprise, Ensign. Start analysis right away."

The captain turned back to his first officer. "I'm going to listen to the log one more time, then I'll beam over to join the rest of our group in the other part of the ship. Maybe they've been able to come up with some information. You order personnel that you need to initiate repairs here. I'll want Scotty and Fraser on it."

Spock nodded. He turned and walked back towards the connecting passageway, where transmission of his orders to the Enterprise would be clearest. Behind him he heard Kirk seat himself, he heard Hunyady speak into her communicator as she issued her own request for beam-over. As he reached the doorway he heard the initial discordant hum of the transporter....

Discordant? Spock had heard the transporter latch onto a living being thousands of times, and never had it sounded as it did now. In the higher registers, almost too high for a human but clearly audible to his Vulcan hearing, there was a squeal that tightened the skin on the back of his hands. The sound guaranteed that the mechanism which translated living flesh into transportable energy was malfunctioning....

Spock whirled and shouted. "No, Ensign, no!" He started to run, but he knew even before he took the first step that he was too far away. Hunyady, efficient officer, scientist of promising brilliance, crewman under his command, was already caught in the beam and unable to hear his warning. There was nothing he could do except grope for his communicator to give an order that he already knew would be too late.

But someone else heard his shout. Kirk straightened in the chair, looked at Spock, looked at the shimmering form just feet away from him, and instant comprehension crossed his face. And the moment his mind understood, it translated knowledge into action. He launched himself at the body that was already starting to fade.

For Spock, time abruptly violated Einstein's laws. It shuddered to a stop, then crawled forward with crystal clarity. He wanted to shout again, knew that his brain was sending the message to his vocal chords to say something, anything, that would prevent Jim from doing what he himself had been willing to do only seconds earlier: violate the integrity of the beam in an attempt to push Hunyady out of it.

"Never move when you're being transported. Never try to touch someone until they've completely materialized."

The voice of his instructor from the Academy (his faultless memory supplied: first year, second semester, Senior Cadet Chen, room 1878 in the Harding building)...

Jim was only one meter away from such danger, no, don't,

...blended with the equations that precisely described the way the transporter functioned (breakdown of cellular tissue, each atom precisely remembered and reconstructed on the energy pad, entropy accounted for but macro movement an errant function in the equation)....

the captain's hands broke through the shimmering curtain, his body almost parallel to the deck, no, Jim,

...blended with the memories (clear, treasured, never to be forgotten) of Jim (a cool weight in his arms, cherished face lifted, lips parted, the sweaty feel of human skin in the night, the explosion of
comfort and delight in the mental golden world they made together)....

the captain's body impacted with Hunyady's, hard, the masculine form started to fade as it too was captured by the beam and

Spock knew the overwhelming impulse to

pray to the god of momentum, to take the physical laws governing action and reaction and FORCE them to apply to the compact body (impossible to replace) so that the one form would push the other out of danger

and abruptly time resumed its course as Kirk and Hunyady fell in a tangle next to the fading beam.

Kirk landed in a ball, rolling, but Hunyady fell flat on her back and her head hit the carpeted deck with a resounding Thwack! Spock knelt beside her, his hands on her shoulders, but his eyes were only for his captain getting slowly to his feet.

"Captain, are you unharmed?" he asked, his voice more urgent than he wanted it to be. He looked back down at Hunyady before any answer could be formed. He was being illogical. If they had experienced cellular disruption neither of them would be conscious. Such questions were redundant, and served only to illustrate the emotional state he was in. Spock concentrated on subduing his accelerated heart and breathing.

"I'm fine," Kirk answered as he tugged on his tunic and blinked back his equilibrium. Then, more strongly, "What the hell happened here?"

Before Spock could answer, the communicator bleeped. Kirk massaged the shoulder on which he had landed while reassuring a frantic Kyle that he did not have to tell Dawson that his wife's molecules had been dispersed through the blackness of space. "Nobody else is to beam anywhere until you've checked out all circuits, Lieutenant," Kirk ordered. Then he strode over to where Hunyady was just standing up. His hands were curled into fists.

"Ensign, are you all right?"

"Yes, sir." She rubbed the back of her head. "Just a bump. I think... I think I should thank you for saving my life. There was something wrong with the transporter. I could feel it...."

"I'm glad you're fine, Ensign. But don't thank me for anything. I should have known what was wrong." Kirk drew back his shoulders as if he were facing an enemy. He turned to his first officer and his voice was hard. "The transporter uses sensors to lock on, right? The same system as we have on the bridge."

Spock looked at him, attempting to follow his captain's reasoning but failing. "Correct."

"And our readings showed this bridge deserted, even though we found that woman alive back there."

Spock nodded, thoughtful. "You are suggesting the two are evidence of a single problem, a malfunction in the ship's sensory apparatus."

"I'm not suggesting, I'm sure of it. The last time I was on the observation deck...." Kirk stopped to take a deep breath, an effective technique he'd learned long ago for controlling anger. Then he took another breath; he could barely contain his own self-disgust. He should have realized.... But he'd become distracted by the talk with McCoy. Just when he'd said that he could be captain and lover simultaneously, he'd failed. Kirk looked at Hunyady and saw such a joyous, promising life, almost
snuffed out because of his own negligence. She was standing at Spock's right side, in support, not questioning. So many people full of trust....

"...a few hours ago on the observation deck I saw a comet with a wavering tail."

Realization swept over Spock, as it must have over Kirk moments ago. Once again he noted his commanding officer's ability to synthesize conclusions from disparate elements in very little time. A tendril of pride in his captain escaped his controls, but it was captured and subdued before he spoke. "The observation deck projection program is based on primary bridge scanners. You are correct. Three incidents all point to a sensor problem, possibly occurring only sporadically." He glanced Hunyady. "It is extremely fortunate that we have detected the problem with no loss of life."

Kirk stared at the Vulcan, his eyes narrowed. "Spock, you don't understand." He took a step closer to emphasize his words. "I said, I saw that comet hours ago. No loss of life? Not because of me."

The two of them stood there, unmoving. Hunyady blinked as if doing so would restore the image of the captain she thought she knew. She was appalled. She wanted to say, "Yes, because of you. I'm alive. You saved me," but she remained silent. It wasn't her place to speak.

Kirk had captured Spock's eyes with his own. He radiated defiance; his head was up, his eyes were hard pebbles, his nostrils were actually flaring. What was it, the young woman wondered, that he wanted Spock to admit? That he, the captain whom the entire crew was convinced could lead them to the gates of hell and back, was fallible? He had just handed her back her life; she couldn't give testimony to that belief.

She glanced at Spock. Where Kirk was curved, reaching out and challenging with his rigid stance, the first officer had remained stock still, relaxed where Kirk was intense. He seemed to be open, in a way that Hunyady had never thought of the scientist who ruled the ship's labs, as if he had absorbed each word, and now each unspoken nuance of thought and emotion. She hadn't known that the Vulcan was capable of this pliant response.

Spock matched Kirk's gaze with his own determined one, but his voice was very low. Soft. "Is that what you wish to believe, Captain?"

"It's true, isn't it?" Then Kirk seemed to gather himself, to fall back from whatever confrontation he'd been forcing by a subtle adjustment of posture. Just as abruptly as it had appeared, the charged atmosphere disappeared, and the captain with whom Hunyady was familiar was back. But for a few moments, she had seen something different.... Suddenly, she desperately wanted to see Brian.

Kirk said briskly, "None of that matters. For all intents and purposes we're marooned here on the ship until we get the transporter working again. How did you know there was something wrong?"

The first officer folded his hands behind his back and made a dispassionate report. "Sir, the transporter was not displaying normal auditory emissions. As you know, Vulcan hearing extends into a higher range than human. I drew the conclusion that there was a malfunction, and judged it prudent to remove the ensign."

Kirk frowned. "The sound? I didn't notice anything different."

"Perhaps not consciously, but you were aware of a feeling of unease. You must have heard the bodies beaming aboard, and perhaps subliminally...."

Kirk chopped the air with his hand, dismissing the support. "We've got a lot of work to do. There's
the Enterprise to fix now in addition to this ship. And I want some conclusions about what happened here. Five people dead. Another woman almost dead, and whatever she was talking about. It looks like a murder-suicide, but there isn't a hint of why." He turned on one heel to survey the bridge, the chair with the burnt-out hole. "Analysis, Mr. Spock. Answers. Why did this happen? And... is it the same problem that we ran up against on Michaela?"

*****
Seventeen hours later, Kirk finally beamed back aboard the Enterprise with the dankness of the fetid ship clinging to his uniform. He stood while the decontamination beam flashed, then nodded to transporter tech Sanchez. He briskly walked from the raised platform to the intercom on the console. "This is the captain," he told the lieutenant who answered his hail to engineering. "Tell Mister Scott I want a briefing on the sensor repairs in thirty minutes. Briefing room one."

His cabin was oddly quiet after the hours of concentrated activity. As the door swished shut behind him, Kirk stopped, adjusting to the peace. He closed his eyes and took in a deep breath of blissfully clean air.

But just for a moment. He slowly moved towards the bedroom, tugging off his shirt and wincing as he went. Hours in the cramped confines under the Lox's consoles had left their mark on his muscles. He hadn't had to perform so much delicate rewiring work in years. It hadn't been safe to beam over any technicians, and the antique craft's shuttle bay was too small to receive modern shuttlecraft. That had left an out-of-practice captain, Spock and Hunyady to do the job that twenty of Scotty's people could have accomplished in short order. Kirk had willingly crawled under the panels, but he'd counted every second that kept him from getting to the colonists and crew and asking questions as quickly as he wanted to.

Kirk sat on his bunk. The chronometer on the nightstand glowed 1600 hours in bright figures; he'd been awake for thirty-four hours. Not unknown, and never easy, but the leaden fingers of fatigue did not pull at him now. Lingering energy still tingled through his veins. Emergencies often required that he stay on duty for long hours; he had trained himself to find whatever strength he needed years ago, and except for those few weeks when the melds had been so debilitating, he'd always been able to give his ship and his crew whatever they needed.

Kirk bent over to remove his boots. But instead of fumbling with the synthleather he remained hunched over; he frowned down at the deck covering. He hadn't been very effective the past twenty-four hours, maybe for even longer than that. A tendril of fatigue flowed down his arms, and he easily rejected it. But his mind was filled with shadowy images: a comet that flickered in the night, Mar's raven hair, the sightless eyes of a captain who had killed, and died, for no apparent reason.

Death was stalking him.

Kirk straightened abruptly, throwing off the thought while squaring his shoulders. He couldn't afford this fanciful, defeatist attitude, no captain could and be an effective leader. He'd always based his command persona on confidence, and the conviction that problems could be solved with enough effort and cooperation. Concentrate on that, he commanded himself as he yanked off each boot. They'd get to the bottom of the problem they'd been forced to leave on Michaela, even if the road didn't lead through whatever it was that had happened on the Lox'theneth'nar.

But the black anxiety at the back of his mind followed him into the shower. He stepped under the sting of hot water, and images unrolled in his mind. The hours on the Lox'theneth'nar had been a revelation....

****

Finally the preliminary bridge repairs on the Lox'theneth'nar were completed. Kirk flexed the cramped muscles in his shoulders, wiped the sweat from his eyes and watched with satisfaction as
the confining bulkhead doors finally slid open. "Stay here and supervise the rest of the repairs," he ordered his second-in-command, then he strode into the fetid air and crowded spaces of the colony ship, propelled by his determination to get to the bottom of the murder-suicide.

Lieutenant Britt, senior sociological officer, and her people had already interviewed the crew, but Kirk took the time to do it again. The group filed into a room she'd appropriated and hastily outfitted with mismatched chairs and a table that sagged at one end. Kirk didn't bother to sit.

"Do you have any idea at all why Captain Freneth would want to kill his people? Was there a grudge, an argument?"

The first mate, a man named Wimberly with a two day growth of beard and dirtier than any being should be, answered for the remaining six men and four women. "Naw, no argument. He just went crazy." The man shrugged his shoulders. "Does there have to be a reason for that?"

The second engineer, a man with a disfiguring cleft in his lip and an eager-to-please attitude, spoke up. "He locked himself in his quarters for two days, remember? Somethin' musta been bothering 'im."


Kirk looked from one dissipated face to another. He wasn't going to get any help here. It was amazing that the ship had managed to make it so close to its ultimate destination, the newly-opened Beta Armstrong colonies, with this group in charge. Josephs had already whispered in his ear that the crew quarters were stuffed with euphorics and intoxicants.

"How about the passengers? Did Captain Freneth have any argument with one of them, maybe have a relationship with one of them that went sour?"

The engineer guffawed, there were frowns of disgust on the rest of the crew's faces. First officer Wimberly said, 'Cap'n. With those dregs? We don't have anythin' to do with 'em. Nothin'. They stink up the ship and we'll be glad when they're gone. Freneth wouldn't even talk with 'em."

Kirk caught his rising temper and forced it down.

"To your knowledge, are any of your passengers telepaths?"

"What? Mind readers? They'd better not be. Wouldn't want any of that sort on this ship." Wimberly displayed an attitude too common in the Federation.

Kirk dismissed the men and women and wondered what he could do to get the Lox'theneth'nar going again. There was no way the ship could function, even automated as she was, with just ten crew members. They'd have to recruit others from the passengers. He could do that when he talked to the leaders of the six races on board.

But first he went on a tour.

Lieutenant Josephs walked in front, with a phaser showing in his hand. Lieutenant Britt, her dark face glowering with suppressed anger, accompanied her captain. "You're not going to believe this, sir," was all she would say.

They walked through a long narrow passageway. The way was lit by tiny light strips that did almost nothing to illuminate the gloom, merely emphasized it by throwing out inadequate pools of light. Phosphorescent fungus smeared on the green and yellow walls showed them the way almost as well.
The hallway widened, and now there were rooms branching off to either side. Some of the rooms were no larger than junior officer's quarters on the Enterprise, but when Kirk paused in the doorway of one and looked in, he saw fifteen, twenty beings inside, sitting on mattresses that were spread upon the floor, eating near a small cookstove in one corner. A woman read to four children from a tattered book. At least one quarter of the space was taken up by boxes, piled to the low ceiling and roughly packaged with twine, and probably holding every material possession of every being in the room. Everyone turned and stared at him in silence. These were humans, probably Loxenens.

Two of the men rose and came towards them. They brandished clubs made of wood from the packing boxes. "You're not Gulgas? Or Danarakh? We don't want those kind around here. Get out!"

There wasn't any reason not to, so Kirk raised his hands to show his innocence and backed down the hall. The men stood at the doorway and watched them go.

"We've told them to stay inside and out of the common areas," Josephs reported, "at least until we can make repairs and get the ship going again. Only some of the people are listening to us. Over on the other side of the ship, there's still some real problems. The Gulga and the Vegans are fighting. It's like a guerrilla war. And we had to break up a riot between the Loxenens and Uhka. So far the Danarakh have been quiet. There aren't too many of them aboard. It's been crazy here, Captain. Everybody hates everybody else. When we first beamed over there was a lot of panic, and each group blamed the other groups."

Kirk nodded. He'd already heard the report.

They walked on. The smell of urine and human waste became overpowering, and they passed a dark room that was the obvious source. "One sanitary facility for this entire section of the deck," Britt reported grimly. "Totally inadequate. I don't even know that the ship is processing the waste anymore."

They walked up a rampway to another deck. At the top they were met by two tall men armed with long knives and scowls. "No Loxenens here!" one of them warned. "And no Vegans!"

"We're neither," Kirk said through gritted teeth. Josephs hefted his phaser where it could be seen and they passed on.

On this deck the Uhka were quartered. They were humanoid but not human. The walls of the passageway were green and blue, and wider than the deck below. The stench of urine was just as strong. Apparently, the odor of body excrement was one of the few characteristics these beings shared.

The corridor widened to a large open space, at least as open as it could be when the top of a tall man's head would scrape the ceiling. This was obviously meant as a common area for people to gather in. It had been turned into a trash pit.

"See what I mean, Captain?" Britt asked rhetorically as they picked their way through the decay. "There are so many of them stuffed in here, there isn't any way for ship's facilities to cope. There isn't any way for them to recycle or even store refuse."

Kirk sniffed. There was something else here besides rotting food.....

At the far side of the room a wisp of smoke made its way to the low ceiling and hung there like a shroud. It came from a cook-fire tended by three women. They were up to their elbows in red blood as they cut up the carcass of an animal, possibly a bovine, that must have been freshly killed. When
they heard the approach of the people from the *Enterprise*, they looked up with fear mixed with defiance in their eyes. Each of them kept their knives in their hands.

"We've got the right," one of them called. "It's ours, and she wouldn't do us any good on Armstrong if we're all dead before we get there. We've got to eat."

But Kirk was more interested in the awful odor wafting from the fire. "What are you burning?"

Another woman shrugged. "Stripped it off the seats in the meeting room. There isn't anything else to burn."

That explained it. Plasti-form was never meant to be fuel for a fire.

They walked on. "Is it all like this, Lieutenant?" Kirk asked.

Britt nodded. "Some of it is worse."

When they came upon two scrawny, half-naked children sitting in the middle of the hall, sharing a hunk of moldy bread, and when Britt said, "Some of their food's gone bad, too," Kirk had had enough. He stopped where he was, pulled out his communicator, and asked Uhura for the *Enterprise's* quartermaster.

"Lieutenant LeCoeur here, sir."

LeCoeur was young and always eager to perform in his newly-appointed job. Good. Here was a project he could sink his teeth into.

Kirk explained the conditions on the Lox, then ordered, "I know we have some extras in the hold. Food. Some portable sanitary processors. Some blankets. Not what we need, only what we can spare. I want it beamed over here to the Lox'thenneth'nar."

Kirk heard a distinct swallow over the open line. "But sir, how will I account...? We can resupply at the starbase, but giving Starfleet supplies to individuals...."

"That's my problem, Lieutenant. And we have a very generous crew. Ask our people if they'd like to help. You might be surprised."

There was a pregnant pause. "Yes, sir. I'll do what I can, sir. Uh, sir, I thought the transporter was out."

"Not for much longer. Get whatever we can spare ready for beam over."

It wouldn't change conditions in any fundamental way, Kirk told himself. And he could already hear Komack's lecture about the misuse of Starfleet supplies. But he couldn't stand by and do nothing at all.

He slapped his communicator back on his belt. "I've seen enough."

"But Captain, there are eighteen decks. You've only seen a fraction of two of them," Britt objected.

"Lieutenant, it would take me a week to tour this ship completely. I don't need to do that. Let's get the leaders of each of the groups together so I can talk to them."

Going back to the central common room took them longer than leaving it. There were men now guarding the women cooking meat by the trash room, and a knife was thrown and quivered in the wall next to Britt's head as they silently walked by. The knife had not been meant to kill, only to
warn, but Kirk still grabbed the lieutenant, pushed her behind him, and walked backwards next to Josephs as they retreated. He had been a fool to go on this tour unarmed.

Only Josephs' phaser dispersed a stand-off between the Loxenen and the Uhka men who guarded their artificial frontier.

One hour later, the five men and one woman who faced Kirk were not interested in the demise of the unknown and unseen Captain Freneth, nor did they care about the fate of those who had died with him. They were intent on survival, and Kirk could not blame them.

"We go to find a new home," said the slight, dark-haired man who was the leader of the two hundred Danarakh on board. "We will have to struggle for what we deserve, for what is our right, but we are willing to do that. Why should we have to struggle here as well? When will the Lox'theneth'nar reach Beta Armstrong?"

Montin's impatience was the only thing that united the six beings. Although the other five seemed united in their distrust of the small man. When Kirk asked for trained volunteers to fill in for the crew who had died, Montin stepped forward eagerly. "My people will do it. We can learn quickly."

The others shouted his offer down. "Your people?" the Centauran woman scoffed. "As well ask an uneducated child. The Danarakh know nothing. Captain, they are backwards and stupid. Take some of my people."

In the end two Centauran, a Loxenen, a Vegan, a Gulga and one Uhka were decided on for the supplementary crew. Kirk wanted to add a Danarakh as well, but it was clear that none of the others would consent to work with one of them. Why they felt that way, Kirk had no idea. Prejudices were difficult to understand. Montin stared at the captain enigmatically, then turned and walked away while the meeting was still in progress.

And no, the leaders had told him, there were no telepaths on board the Lox'theneth'nar.

*****

Kirk turned under the spray of the shower, and groaned as the water ran over the hard knot of tension at the base of his neck. He could retreat to the Enterprise and her creature comforts, such as a hot shower, but the colonists had no such choice. They were stuck on the Lox'theneth'nar, but at least their journey should be ending soon. With any luck, the ship would ponderously reach its reach its destination within five days.

But the Enterprise would have to fly. Kirk hated to stress the engines when he was in no particular hurry for the unwanted medal ceremony, Federation politics and the press, but he'd given the order to stay by the Lox'theneth'nar, and that meant there wouldn't be much time for the journey to starbase twenty-four. Lieutenant Britt had urgently requested that the Enterprise and her restraining crew stay by the asteroid ship, in an effort to ensure that more violence didn't mark Starfleet's departure. She'd asked for another twelve hours, and Kirk had seen for himself that it was needed. He'd felt the tension in the dark, dank hallways of the Lox'theneth'nar; the air was dry tinder, and the smallest spark would set it off.

But when the Lox'theneth'nar finally did turn towards Beta Armstrong, it looked like it would take its mystery with it. Kirk vigorously pumped shampoo and lathered his hair, feeling the tension that bunched his muscles, wishing it would wash away with the water that was sluicing off his body. He hated mysteries even more than he hated the thought of another damned medal. He didn't like the way mysteries looked in his log. "Received distress call and rendered assistance. Beamed five bodies and one injured crew woman aboard. At this time, we have no explanation." He was too
pragmatic to say an official word about the similarities to Michaela, or mention a suspected telepathic presence. Komack would laugh him out of the service. Even though he kept remembering the crew woman, Sherily Nego, who'd said, "he went crazy." There'd been other people on a planet a hundred light years away whose personalities had changed and gone crazy, too, but if that was the only connection, it was laughably slim. All of that was just a feeble suspicion in his mind, an itch that he couldn't scratch, an image of Mar's trusting face that wouldn't go away. Wasn't it?

Suddenly his frustration escaped his control. He banged his fist against the shower wall, hard enough to hurt, sending suds flying back into his eyes and mouth.

*Now that was stupid,* he told himself grimly, still facing the wall, his fingers spread out wide on the slippery surface. *Really dumb. What is breaking your hand going to accomplish?*

Kirk stared at his fingers, then flexed them to assure himself nothing was truly broken. No, only bruised, just like his pride. He stepped under the flow to rinse his hair, and thought about what his forgiving lover would say in answer to his question. *You are typically human, Jim. You need an outlet for your frustrations. Emotional expression, for your species, is very logical.*

Logical. Right. Even when he wasn't around, Spock gave good advice.

Ah, Spock. Suddenly the water felt even warmer. As he'd said two mornings ago, Spock was the light shining in his darkness. With everything that had gone wrong lately, he and Spock together were the one bright certainty.

Except that their comfort was marred now. He and Spock had deliberately shattered their own private world last night by telling McCoy, and the doctor's reaction hadn't exactly been what Kirk had hoped for. He wished he'd never said a thing. First Michaela, then the damn mystery on the Lox, trying to tie the two together and failing.... And now the self-imposed pressures of dealing with McCoy.

He'd have to visit the sickbay and check on the autopsy results more closely, check on the injured woman and see if she were well enough for questioning. The last thing Kirk wanted to do was go over the conversation from last night. But he knew McCoy. As persistent as a bug in a swamp. He'd buzz and buzz, sometimes not verbally, but those blue eyes would stare at a man, and he'd know that some time or other McCoy would let loose. He was like a child picking at a scab, Kirk thought resentfully. Their talk last night had just been a beginning.

Hair completely rinsed, Kirk stayed under the spray and opened his eyes. He looked down at his half-erect cock and grimaced. Anger did that to him sometimes. There had been a time when he would have grabbed his cock and roughly brought himself to orgasm right there in the shower. He was tempted to do it now. At least a quick release would be better than this empty feeling that was settling in his guts.

But he really didn't want the touch of his own hand. He ignored his erection.

Kirk turned off the flow of water, stepped out and reached for a towel. He had a busy night in front of him. First that talk with Scotty about the *Enterprise's* repairs. Then a trip to communications to see if they'd reconstructed the *Loxtheneth'nar's* com package and knew who the ship had communicated with, if they made any stops along the way. Then a tour of the labs to see if there were any new information from the air, food, and water samples that had come over from the Lox.

And finally, to sickbay. Kirk had a feeling that the woman was the key. If only he could talk with her, and find out exactly what had happened before she lost consciousness....
The entire stasis process was computerized. The last time human, or rather sentient hands needed to touch the body was when it was put upon a low slab-like bed that reminded McCoy too much of the ship's morgue. The physician made sure that the woman was handled gently, her limbs arranged with reverence. Even though none of them here in sickbay had ever known Sherily Nego, the crew woman from the Lox'theneth'nar, she deserved dignity, respect. If she survived stasis and could be helped at the starbase, that would be wonderful, if unlikely. But if she didn't, then his hands, and the hands of Nurse Bronson and Tech Harless would be the last she would ever experience in this mortal life.

McCoy hated stasis.

Bronson flipped the switch on the side of the bed. A hum filled the small room that was isolated in the back of the sickbay, and a green glow sparked over the naked form of the woman. It started over her chest, but within seconds had spread to cover her completely. The computer had taken over, and would now slowly lower all her bodily functions. Some physicians called it suspended animation. McCoy scoffed at the technical term; he preferred "hibernation." So what if bears and rodents and Rigellian karnikaks hibernated? All sentient beings had their roots in the animal world.

He wondered what world, the eternal or the physical, Sherily Nego would wake up to find. Looking down at the slack face, distorted by the green glow, McCoy felt a surge of anger that someone, some being with a phaser in his or her hand, had forced him to this desperate effort. The emotion came out in a small grunt deep in his throat.

He moved past Harless to examine the dials built into the diagnostic panel at the side of the bed. Pulse, blood pressure, temperature were all dropping already.

So now he had nothing to do. He couldn't reach into the sterile field without dangerously disrupting the process and probably losing the patient. McCoy was proud to say that the damn-fool machine had only been used four times during his tenure on the Enterprise, but he also knew exactly what to do. He'd been to the seminars and read the journal articles. Don't touch! The initial procedure either worked or it didn't, and a physician and his skills just didn't come into it.

But McCoy was not the kind of man to allow any being to make that long, slow, sliding journey into darkness alone. He pulled the only chair in the room to the head of the bed, where he could see the patient's pale face growing paler, and the splash of dark hair against the white slab. Bronson and Harless left the room silently, understanding the acerbic, cynical doctor who was the CMO.

The first few minutes he spent fruitlessly monitoring vital data, and watching the slow, ever slower rise and fall of Nego's chest. But her condition seemed perfect, the computerized stasis was descending exactly as it should. Eventually McCoy leaned back in the chair, folded his arms across his chest, and allowed his mind to wander.

His second day back on the job had been hectic. Without M'Benga to man sickbay, and without his hovering, solicitous presence, McCoy had thrown himself back into his own domain with a vengeance, ignoring the little voice that told him to go slow because he was still so recently out of a sick bed himself. He'd immersed himself in all the details he'd missed during his illness, and delighted in re-establishing his sometimes scratchy professional relationship with nurses and technicians.

At lunch he'd taken a walk through the science labs, Spock's domain. It had been weeks since he'd been able to take the collective pulse of the crew.
Seven blue-uniformed techs congregated in the botany lab. Lieutenant Tu, Spock's trusted second, held a green frond in one hand. The quiet Oriental, who held a black belt in martial arts and was probably the fittest person on the ship, actually yawned and swayed as the physician looked. Then he snapped to a technician, "Don't be an idiot, Mister! Do it again!" McCoy's eyes had widened.

In geology it wasn't any different. Ensign Montoya, usually all smiles, argued fiercely that a Michaelan rock needed to be tested again. In every lab it was the same. Lights were bright, nerves were brittle, bodies were fatigued. Computations were projected on screens and disputed, human and non-human heads bent in contentious consultation.

He'd seen it before, emergencies when every lab had been fully staffed for days on end, every minute. Sometimes the captain was forced to drive his crew hard.

During emergencies, yes. But on routine patrol? Days after they'd been ordered away from an insignificant planet that was now more than one hundred light years away?

He'd frowned as he completed his personal inspection. He didn't like what he'd seen. It wasn't healthy for body or spirit.

He'd carried his disquiet with him back to sickbay, where he faced his third autopsy of the day. Of all his duties, the one he detested the most was autopsies, and he and Doctor Sheridan had performed five in all. Stasis for was a desperate effort to prevent a sixth. The wounds that Nego had sustained.... McCoy shook his head. She must have been in agony, waiting alone on the ship all those hours. He and M'Benga had labored over her once the transporter was operational and she'd beamed aboard, but nothing had prevented the disintegration of her vital signs. Finally he'd convinced M'Ben-ga that he should go for dinner and rest while McCoy handled the duty until midnight. He caught a quick sandwich while standing in his office, and then made the reluctant decision that stasis was their only chance.

The fact that all this feverish activity had prevented him from thinking about the startling news he'd learned the night before did not escape him.

Nothing was preventing him now.

He needed to do some thinking about Jim and Spock. The last thing he wanted was for one of them to come walking in and start a conversation before he had everything sorted in his mind. He'd better pull out those subconscious ruminations that had been roiling about all day and get his thoughts straight.

Jim and Spock, together sexually. For the past seven months, they had secretly shared their minds and their bodies. McCoy stirred in the hard plastic chair, shifted his weight from one bony hip to the other. He could accept it, he really could. At least the physical aspects. Homosexuality was perfectly legal, even if not generally socially condoned among the human-dominated cultures of the Federation. Even though he'd never been attracted to a man himself, even though homosexuality had never entered his life in a personal way, he could get over his vague uneasiness. He was a doctor, after all, not some arm-waving conservative like that white-haired fanatic who used to preach on Sundays when he was a boy. He could imagine his two friends naked in bed together and not even flinch.

But what he couldn't accept was how they'd completely ignored his role in their lives. Damn it, they'd taken seven long months to tell him. His professional pride was blistered, and he questioned his role as their friend. They'd set out to keep their little secret until they were good and ready to tell him, and they'd succeeded where he had totally failed to discover they had a secret at all. They'd made such a fool of him.
Now that he knew the truth of it, he couldn't believe all the clues he'd missed. That ten day shore leave the captain and first officer had taken together, for example. Spock never took an extended shore leave, and Jim always found a gorgeous woman to share his time with. But off they'd gone together, and McCoy hadn't even questioned. It must have been a sort of honeymoon. How could he not even have suspected?

And then there were the double beds that Kirk had recently ordered installed for the four senior officers of the ship, plus Hunyady and Dawson. McCoy had thought it a kind gesture for the newly married couple, and he'd happily accepted the bigger bed for himself. Now he saw the ulterior motive, and flushed with the thought. Guess they'd gotten tired of balancing on those narrow little bunks.

Not to mention the lubricant. Just a few months ago, he'd been scanning the printout of pharmaceutical supplies they'd needed to pick up on their next re-supply. He'd noticed the increased use of lubricant for anal intercourse, the generic fleet issue that crew members could obtain for themselves from the automated pharmaceutical dispensing machine on deck seven. The crew had gone through a six months supply in just three.

*Look's like we've got another homosexual couple humping in the throes of new love,* he'd sniggered to Paul M'Benga. *I wonder who it is.*

The echo of his own nasty voice lingered in his mind. Sniggered? Had he really sounded like that? When had the hint of prejudice found its way into how he talked?

McCoy shifted uncomfortably. Maybe he wasn't as accepting of Jim and Spock naked in bed together as he believed he was. A flush of embarrassment traveled over his honest face. He felt just like he'd felt almost forty years ago, when he was a little boy and had been spanked by his mama for making fun of the crippled girl down the street.

McCoy never thought that it would happen to him, who prided himself on his empathy, but it had. It had been so easy to fall into the habit of jocular insensitivity; he'd assumed the common attitude of scorn shared by the many for the few. The scorn of the straight man for the man who was a cocksucker.

A memory awakened.

He'd been dating Brenda on starbase eleven. A wonderful, nurturing woman, with one of the clearest, most non-judgmental hearts he'd ever encountered. Brenda had been just what he'd needed after the trauma of his divorce, accepting him and his foibles, demanding nothing but honesty. And they'd been good for one another in bed, too.

They'd been walking along a green pathway arm in arm, maybe in a park, and they'd overheard a disparaging comment from a passer-by. "Bob's just a fag. A cocksucker."

Brenda had stopped, looked after the young man, then turned back to McCoy. "I am too, you know. I'm a cocksucker. Just about every woman I know is. It's all right for us to do it, but not for another man. I've never been able to understand it."

McCoy wasn't sure that he understood either. He might harbor some unknowing, residual prejudices, but he didn't really have anything against same-sexers. He didn't. It was just that.... He had never dreamed that the one standing in front of the dispensing machine, pushing buttons for toothpaste, depilatory, and oh-by-the-way-some-anal-lubricant was the captain. Or the first officer.

They'd lied to him. They'd lied with each late night "we're just friends" drink, with the
unquestioned shoreleave and those damn double beds. They'd lied when Kirk had taken the giant step that changed his sexuality without a hint that his CMO had been able to pick up on, and when Spock had entered the perilous waters of emotion without changing a muscle of his granite face.

But the lies were over. Now he knew exactly who that humping homosexual couple was. And he wished he didn't.

McCoy lunged out of the chair and started walking. From one side of the little room to the next, around the bed where the silent woman lay, then back the same way. He clenched his hands into fists behind his back.

How could he continue to call himself a perceptive physician? He'd misinterpreted the rapport between his two best friends as simple friendship. Simple? Hah! Nothing about Jim or Spock was simple, and when you put them together they were complexity squared.

He felt like an idiot.

A foolish idiot who'd been put in an impossible situation, that's what he was. He was squeezed in an insoluble conflict between his duty as a friend and his duty to Starfleet. Now that they'd told him about those "problems" Jim had experienced with the meld, he'd have to be on the lookout for more, monitoring and intruding where the captain had made perfectly clear he wasn't wanted. When it was possible he might have wanted to give support in a difficult situation, to find a way to continue their old, casual closeness, he'd also have to be watching to ensure their personal ties didn't intrude on their official roles.

The little bubble of emotion that he'd carried with him from the observation deck last night had grown, and finally assumed a form he could recognize. It popped inside his chest and expanded to fill his whole body. He was so angry he wasn't even sure he could talk reasonably to either of them.

He stopped by the foot of the bed and stared down at the woman's toes. Damn it, they should have told me. Am I worth anything as chief medical officer or am I not? I thought I'd earned Jim's trust, and his respect.

But maybe he hadn't. All those months hiding this most important change in the captain's life. And the first officer's life, too. Even sharing each other's minds....

In the warmth of the stasis chamber, McCoy shivered. He could still remember the icy pain of the bearded Spock's thoughts knifing into his mind. Vulcans always felt warm to the touch, but not in that other universe, not when those long fingers had attached themselves to his face, not when he'd been forced back against the wall and stared into eyes that saw right into the core of his being.

What kind of a joke was this, that he should be plagued by nightmares about that painful years-old event, now, when his friends were merging their minds as well as their bodies?

God almighty, how could Jim do it? Back there in the mirror universe, McCoy would have screamed if he could have, but even that ability had been totally controlled by the ruthless Vulcan. It had felt like his brain had been peeled like the layers of an onion. The mirror Spock had stripped away his thoughts, his feelings, his inhibitions, his deepest fears and desires, he'd taken them and discarded them like they were so much trash. He'd been after information about the four who'd beamed up from Halka, information about his captain, and he had not allowed McCoy's mental agony to stop him.

It had been a rape. Mental, not physical, but a rape nevertheless. Over the months McCoy had managed to cope with the memory. He had not wallowed in it, had attempted to put it into
perspective. What was done was done. He'd even been able to engage in a meld with Spock, the Spock he knew, his friendly antagonist, on Melkotia. Not that he'd had any choice, their lives had been at stake. But he'd been able to experience the whisper touch of mental contact without flinching, had even been able to step back and view it dispassionately, like a third party. He'd been pleased, and thought that he'd conquered the queasy feeling of invasion and dishonor that had accompanied every thought of a meld before. He'd been able to talk about melds like a reasonable man.

But then had come his heart valve surgery and the long nights in sickbay. He'd suffered, physically, and he'd suffered, mentally, in the dreams.

It was a cosmic joke. He felt that he could accept Jim and Spock kissing each other, touching each other, even sucking each other's cocks, but he could not accept the image of the two of them with hands raised to temples, linked on a level he had once horribly perceived....

He wiped his mouth with the back of a trembling hand. Tarnation! This wasn't producing the state of mind he was aiming at. He wanted to be like a cool glass of iced tea, with all his emotions tucked away where they couldn't hurt his friends, and where his resentments wouldn't injure their professional relationships either. Instead he felt like a bottle of cheap whiskey, raw and explosive. But how could he help it when they'd insulted him with seven months of play-acting, and when every time he thought of the two of them together he was reminded of the worst experience of his life?

Okay, this private talk wasn't working. Better not to torture himself. Better to go get a cup of coffee and calm down.

He turned to find Kirk standing in the doorway.

For one totally embarrassed moment McCoy wondered if everything that had been flashing through his mind was showing on his face. He swallowed hard, willed himself to look perfectly natural. He really didn't want to alienate Jim.

But Kirk ignored McCoy's uneasiness. He strode into the room to the foot of the low bed and stared down at the woman. His forehead was creased with a frown. "Did you have to do this? I really need to talk with her.

"I didn't have a choice. She was dying." McCoy punched one of the buttons on the side of the bed that brought up a new set of readouts. "See that?" He pointed. "Brain function. Some of the strangest readings I've ever seen. But she's a Gulga, which might explain it. I'm not sure she can regain consciousness, and if she did, I don't think she'd be able to communicate."

Kirk looked up at him with needle-sharp eyes. "But she was rational on the ship. I talked to her."

"But she wouldn't be now, Captain. I'm the doctor and I know." That came out sounding more defiant than McCoy intended. Kirk wasn't challenging him, he told himself. "Look, the blood flow to the temporal and occipital lobes was interrupted, that's clear. And the neuron system is scrambled, as if she sustained an electrical shock that short-circuited her perceptual abilities. Her brain is massively traumatized."
"Perceptual?"

McCoy sighed. They were talking at cross purposes. Usually Kirk wasn't this dense. "Yes. My guess is that if she were conscious, she'd be overperceptualizing, with hallucinations as a result. She wouldn't be able to organize sensory stimuli in a way her brain is used to. Normally the temporal lobe processes auditory data, even in the Gulga, the occipital lobe takes care of the visual, but now the pathways are mixed up. It would be like seeing colors but not knowing what they are. Or thinking they're sounds instead and trying to hear purple. She'd be on overload. It's a blessing that she shut down."

"Or maybe she was shut down by somebody else." Kirk's voice was very soft, as if he were talking to himself. "Could this confusion be the result of a telepathic attack, Doctor?"

Inwardly McCoy flinched, although he was too proud to allow any hint of his reaction to show. Normally, Kirk didn't call him "doctor." For years, it had been "Bones," even on duty, even in a crisis. Damnit, he'd tried to be as understanding as he could back on the OD. What had Jim expected of him?

He forced himself away from his emotions and to the question he'd been asked instead. "Maybe. I don't know. The Gulga physiology is radically different from humans; it's a safe assumption that her mental problems stemmed from the physical. That's what I logged. On the humanoid scale Gulgas are all the way over on R-17."

"Then you don't think there was any telepathic attack?"

"I'm a doctor, not a soothsayer. Who knows? Is it possible? I suppose so. There's not much in this universe that's impossible. I've found that out. But I'm not an expert on telepathy." A perverse demon made him add, "Maybe we should ask Spock."

Kirk cast him a level glance. "Mister Spock is still on the Lox'theneth'nar, along with twenty-four other crew members. And if there's even a small chance that someone over there can do this, they need to be reminded about the danger."

The captain swiveled on one heel and was gone. McCoy double-checked Nego's readings and then hurried out after him.

Kirk was speaking into the wall intercom by the CMO's office door. "....That's good," Kirk said. "Has Britt reported whether there have there been any more fights among the colonists?"

McCoy listened to the first officer's calm, disembodied voice with only half an ear. There was something about the way Kirk was standing that caught his attention.... Nothing obvious, but there was a certain rigidity to the shoulders, and in the way the captain's legs were wider set than usual. Like a weary sailor who stood facing the rising wind.

"All right," Kirk said into the grid. "I said we'd stay until 0600 tomorrow, and we will, just in case we're needed. But make sure everyone reports anything suspicious. I don't care if they imagine Jacob Marley and the Ghost of Christmas Past in their minds, I want to know about it."

There was a pause while Spock processed the reference. "I will relay the order, Captain."

"Good. And I want fresh personnel rotated over there every four hours." Kirk shifted his weight, leaned towards McCoy for just a moment, and the physician's intuition told him that Kirk was self-consciously aware of his presence. "And there's no need for you to push yourself, Mister Spock, the crisis is over, especially with the colonists calming down so much. You need rest too. There's
no reason for you to stay on the Lox'theneth'nar's bridge until we leave. Other people can finish up the final repairs."

"I will evaluate the situation, Captain, and weigh it against my requirements for repose."

McCoy snorted. The Vulcan continued, "Have the labs drawn any conclusions from the samples we beamed over for testing?"

It didn't take a trained physician to see the sudden dullness in Kirk's eyes. "No, Mister Spock. Nothing. No connection at all."

"I see."


There was a moment of silence before McCoy said, "You could follow some of your own advice." Silently, he added "Jim," but if they were playing a game.... Still, he could overcome their prickly conversation in the stasis room. He was the ship's doctor. "You should get some rest, too. There's no emergency, and no need for you to push yourself. It's almost twenty-two hundred and you've been on your feet for two days straight."

"I'm all right," Kirk said. "I want you to go over the autopsy results again. You might have missed something."

McCoy's eyes narrowed. This time he didn't believe it when he tried to convince himself that the captain wasn't challenging him despite McCoy's efforts to meet Kirk halfway. He might have been too dense to figure out when the captain took the first officer to his bed, but he still ran the sickbay efficiently.

He drew himself up to his full height. "Did you think we might have found something important and not reported it? The members of this medical department are not obtuse, although there has been one notable exception over the past seven months. But we are aware of the captain's desire for answers. The reports were analyzed three times already." The physician's words could sting like shards of ice when he wanted them to. "The autopsies, Captain, revealed nothing. Five people who were killed by phaser fire and that's it. What were you expecting, a simple solution to the problem that's been haunting this ship ever since we left Michaela?"

Kirk clenched his jaw. McCoy could see the muscles working before the captain caught his temper and asked, "Then they didn't show any sign of being attacked mentally, like the crew woman?"

McCoy took a step closer. He didn't want the entire sickbay staff overhearing this discussion; he waited until Bronson over by the drug cabinet on the other side of the room walked away. "No, they didn't, and I doubt that she was attacked either. You've got telepathy on the brain. Let it go, for God's sake."

"Sherily Nego was an important witness to Captain Freneth's behavior. What she said provided a connection --."

McCoy cut him off with a quick chop in the air. "Has it ever occurred to you that we haven't found any answers about Michaela because there aren't any to be found? Not everything has to give up its mysteries because James Kirk wants to know. Have you even thought that you might not be able to make a connection between that damned planet and the Lox-whatever-it-is because there isn't any connection? No, you haven't thought that, have you? It's about time you re-entered reality, Captain. You can't bend the universe to suit yourself. This Michaelan thing is getting to be an obsession."

Start thinking about your crew. You've been pushing yourself and your people too hard."

There was steely glint in Kirk’s eye. McCoy had seen it before on the bridge, during landing parties, but it was so rarely directed at him. "I'll be the judge of that, Doctor. I know how far this ship's mission requires any of us--."

McCoy laughed, an ugly sound. "Like hell you do. Look at you, you're dead on your feet and hiding it. Your judgment is shot to hell. You're haunting the labs like some overanxious greenhorn commander who doesn't trust his own people, then you're indulging in those damned melds.... Face it, Captain, this ship was assigned a mission and we failed. We've done it before and we'll do it again. I don't know what happened down on Michaela that set you off and it doesn't matter. We failed. Accept it, and let this ship get back to normal. Are you going to be looking for connections that don't exist in every assignment?"

McCoy wondered if he'd pushed too hard. How had the personal reference to melds slipped in? Kirk's fingers bunched into fists, and there was so much tension in his upper arms that it looked like he was ready to pull back and take a swing.

"Is that your official assessment, McCoy?"

"I'm not so sure what you think of my official assessment anymore, Captain, it didn't seem to matter to you for quite a while. But am I strongly suggesting that you take a good look at yourself and what you've been doing? Yes. Am I making this conversation an official part of my medical log? No. Not yet."

Kirk looked at him, hard speculation in his eyes. Then he quoted, very slowly, "'Look at what I've been doing?' Why do I get the feeling that you mean more than just my official actions? Why don't you just come out and say what you really mean?"

For a moment McCoy didn't understand what Kirk had said, then realization dawned and he felt like rolling his eyes. He hadn't really meant.... But then again, the subconscious worked in mysterious ways.

"All right. I will. But not here." McCoy whirled around and stalked into his office, then whirled back when the door swished shut. Kirk's face was set in lines of resolve that McCoy knew well, but he didn't let that stop him. "Don't you dare think that anything I just said has anything to do with how I feel about your relationship with Spock. I'm not uncomfortable about it. I'm not, and I'll be damned if it affects my relationship with you."

"Me thinks the doctor doth protest too much," Kirk scoffed.

"Like hell! I don't give a damn what the two of you do in bed together. You can talk cutesy with him over the communicator or blow in his ear on the bridge for all I care. It's just...." Words failed him.

"Just what?"

"Just...." McCoy took a deep calming breath. Somehow he was in the middle of exactly the conversation he'd wanted to avoid. He tried to sound reasonable, but his words came out petulantly, even to his own ears. "I don't understand about the melds. How can you let him...," he could barely choke the words out, "into your mind? When it's not an emergency? How could you?"

For the space of twenty heartbeats Kirk stared at his CMO, then he ran a hand through his hair and turned abruptly away.
"I don't have to justify myself to you," he said, staring at a medical diploma on the wall. "But totally apart from my own feelings, have you ever stopped to consider Spock and what his needs are?

"I've noticed something, McCoy, and I don't like it." The captain turned in a smooth, cat-like motion. His anger was well-controlled, the way a panther controls its aggression because silence aids the hunt. "Last night on the observation deck and now here, you seem to be almighty concerned about me, and my position as captain. In the past four years, I've somehow convinced myself that you harbored at least some friendly feelings for Spock. Was I so wrong? Why haven't I heard a single objection about how our relationship might be hurting him? Or don't you care enough about him to even think of it?"

The question took McCoy aback. It was true. He hadn't consciously considered anything from Spock's point of view.

"It's because you're the captain," he defended himself. "I have a duty specifically to you, to your mental and physical well-being."

Kirk shook his head. "But that's not all of it, is there?"

Kirk had always had the incomparable ability to put himself in another man's place. "Walk in the Indian's moccasins," as McCoy's grandfather used to say. Kirk could walk in the footgear of any being in the galaxy; his empathic flexibility was one of the reasons why he was such an extraordinary leader.

But now his insight was making McCoy confront a truth he hadn't realized before.

"No," he answered slowly, "It's not all. I'm not so sure that Spock is being hurt. Not like you are. I can't say much against you two together from his side of it."

The physician walked around his desk and sat down behind it with a plop. Kirk leaned his stiffened arms on the surface and faced him, an aggressive posture that McCoy easily ignored. He was too busy thinking.

He finally sorted his thoughts to a conclusion and pointed a finger at his captain. "I think that you are the best thing that's ever happened to that Vulcan. And a love affair between you two --."

"A commitment," Kirk hissed.

"A romantic involvement, possibly permanent," McCoy amended, not willing to be pushed, "is just what Spock needs. Look at all that he's gaining. You and I both know the man's had a hard life, being the first Vulcan/human hybrid and not particularly suited by temperament to be that trailblazer. All his life he's been an outcast, and he's felt it too, though he tries not to let it show. Oh," McCoy waved a hand in the air, warming to his theme and aware of the softening in Kirk's stance as the "Spock discourse" went on, "he's made some great adjustments, he's really handled the stress in a remarkable way. But the fact remains that if that Vulcan had to use one word to define himself, he'd force himself to be honest and say 'different'."

"Now you come along and offer him everything he's never had before: the chance for genuine friendship, a normal give and take relationship, even the chance at something the man probably doesn't even understand, love. What so many others around him have always had, what he probably never thought was possible for him, suddenly he has it. He's included, where before he was always excluded. It's got to be good for him, for his mental health especially."
He pointed another sudden finger at Kirk. "You, on the other hand, are just the opposite. The only way you've ever been different is by being good. Early admission to the Academy, jumping over older men in rising through the ranks, youngest captain of a starship ever. T'Pring couldn't get rid of Spock fast enough, but you snap your fingers," he illustrated under Kirk's nose, "and most women jump. Other men envy you, admire you. Even Nogura recognizes your talent. 'Bout the only officer who doesn't is Komack."

Intrigued despite himself, Kirk eased down into a chair. "So what's the point?"

"For the pleasure of sharing your Vulcan's bed, and his...." McCoy couldn't help it, he had to take a deep breath before he forced the word out. "...his mind, you're risking all that. How are you going to feel when the ensigns on junior deck aren't whispering 'cause they're impressed by your exploits, but because they know, " he deliberately used crude words, "you're fucking another man? Face it, Jim, the prejudices still live, and you're going to be subjected to them if you make this thing with Spock permanent. You're going to be risking easy advancement in your career, the perception your friends have of you--"

"You're exaggerating. This isn't the eighteenth century."

McCoy pulled on his chin. "Maybe. Maybe not. It's not a perfect galaxy either. I just want you to be going into this with your eyes wide open. You're going to be different now in a way that Spock's lived with all his life, but that you've never faced before."

"You keep forgetting, we 'went into this thing' seven months ago. I've had all these thoughts. Spock and I have talked it all out."

"Well, that's good," McCoy doggedly continued. "As long as you understand exactly what position you're putting yourself into. You stand to lose a lot, you know."

Kirk was up and out of his chair before McCoy had finished the last word. "I don't focus on what I'm losing. I don't even see it most of the time. I focus on what I'm gaining." He walked over to the wall, stared again at the diploma that announced McCoy's graduation from Emory University School of Medicine.

"You're guilty of underestimating Spock. You always have been. And now you're guilty of overestimating me. You seem to think I don't need anything, that with all my achievements there's nothing more I could want. Well, I do."

He turned to face the physician. "You don't want to hear this, and I don't especially want to tell you, but I think it's got to be said, once, to convince you that I'm serious about this relationship. You've got to understand that Spock isn't like any of the women I've had affairs with in the past and left without a second thought. Or even the ones I've loved. He gives me so much more."

"Do you have any idea at all what it's like to love Spock in his mind? Our melds are... indescribable. They're better than sex, better than anything I can think of. I really know Spock in the melds, McCoy, and he knows me, the way I really am. Not just my thoughts and memories, like what most people think melds are, but... essences. It's about tearing away all our pretences, our false perceptions, getting down to the basics of what a person is about. That's what I see in my melds with Spock, and that's what I show him. And it is so damn beautiful. Nothing, no other relationship I could possibly have with anyone, man or woman, could possibly compare with it. It's the closest to heaven I'll ever get."

Kirk took a step closer. "He has the most powerful intellect of any person I know, and the most beautiful soul. You've never understood that part of him, but I've seen it from the first day I set
eyes on him. How do you think I feel when I experience the emotions that are kept so totally under control at every other time, unleashed just for me? It's a gift, and the only way I can match it is by doing the same for him. It's the way we've always been together, on the bridge, on a mission, taken to its logical conclusion. We're together," Kirk brought his hands together in the gesture of Nome. "We're one."

Kirk had been right, McCoy didn't want to hear this. The captain's words painted an idyllic picture, the shaking intensity in his voice proved that he was entranced by his own vision, but to get there.... McCoy swallowed. To get there, Kirk had to share his mind. He couldn't understand how Kirk didn't see that as an invasion. The captain could talk the hind end off a mule, but that didn't change the fact that he was opening his innermost self to the probe of another mind, just like McCoy had been forced to do in that other universe. It just didn't work for humans.

Kirk wasn't finished. He was pacing in front of the desk now. "You've said yourself that I'm a born explorer, that being on a starship is perfect for me because I'd never be satisfied with the routine of a ground posting. You're right. And now I've found the perfect complement in my personal life. Unconventional, yes, but right for me, and worth the effort of keeping our private and professional lives separate. Spock gives me a whole new universe to explore. It's endless, because it's internal, and we keep inventing more of it as we go along. As our minds get closer, we open up more and more.... Even in the short time that we've been together, the melds have changed, become richer...."

He stopped, frustrated. "I can't find the words to say any more. It's just not an experience that translates very well. But now you know how I feel. Spock is my perfect companion. Mentally and physically and emotionally too. I would be a fool not to recognize it, and want to keep him by my side. Always."

There was a long silence, so deep that the distant thrumming of the ship's engines filled the room. McCoy concentrated on the grain of the simu-wood on the desktop. He hadn't asked for this unveiling of Kirk's soul, and just because Kirk had spoken didn't mean that McCoy would be charmed like all the women and all the other beings who had been captured by the captain's golden tongue. Like Spock. McCoy had heard the overt sincerity one too many times.

"So." He caught Kirk staring at him, and realized he'd been quiet when the captain had expected a reply. "Now you've told me how you feel. Do you expect me to want a meld now too?"

"McCoy...." Anger prevented Kirk was saying anything more. McCoy couldn't blame him, he was being deliberately provocative. But he felt too raw inside to want to do anything else.

The physician rose, leaned on his knuckles and confronted Kirk across the desk. "My medical opinion of the melds stands. My personal opinion of them stands. I don't understand how you can do it. But what the hell, it's your life, and you've made it very clear that I'm not to interfere. Just be careful, and don't forget that this ship deserves a captain with all his faculties."

"I won't." Kirk barely got the words out through clenched teeth.

"Good. Now, about this other matter. Michaela. It isn't logical," he was revved up, good and angry now, and his sarcasm was flying, "for you to carry the whole weight of a world around on your shoulders. It isn't healthy, and health is one thing I know about. Well-balanced people know how to accept failures as well as successes, something you need to look into. Well-balanced people are not arrogant, and think that they can cure the ills of the universe on their own. I see the signs of an obsession I don't like. As your chief medical officer I highly suggest you take a break and get some rest. Leave the labs and this problem with the other ship alone. Consider yourself off duty."

"The captain's never off duty," Kirk shot back.
"Well, then, go as much off duty as it's possible for you to go. Go sniff the roses in the herbarium. Go to sleep. And then do some thinking in the morning."

Kirk challenged him with a lifted chin. "Or you'll make it a medical order."

"I'm giving advice, not orders. You're the captain."

"Yes, I am." Kirk turned to go, but stopped in the doorway. "You might want to add to your medical log," he flung over his shoulder, "that there's a mental bond forming between the captain and first officer. Not that I want to disgust you, McCoy, but I don't want to keep any secrets from my CMO."

Then he was gone.

McCoy stared at the closed door for fifty pounding heartbeats before he slid back into his chair. All he'd wanted was a cup of coffee and a chance to think, and instead....

Three weeks in a sickbay bed and look at what had happened. Everything had changed. Everything.

*****
Chapter 6

Ship's corridors were quiet just past midnight. Lighting in secondary halls was dimmed to simulate planetary darkness, and crew activities were not scheduled in the belly of the night. Spock walked through the corridors without meeting anyone other than technician Nwanu who had beamed him aboard, and metallurgist tech first class Kim Park, who scurried through the corridors with a package in his hands. They nodded to one another, then Park disappeared towards junior officers quarters.

Which allowed him to concentrate on business rather than pleasantries. From the transporter to the turbolift he mentally composed his first officer's log, detailing the experiences on the Lox'theneth'nar. During the turbolift ride Spock extracted relevant portions of his log for review by the sciences department, then wrote a memo recommending that Starfleet investigate the safety of ships used by the Loxenens. As he walked from the lift to his quarters, he developed an outline for a journal article on the impact of excessively close living conditions during months-long space journeys. He had spent his entire time on the asteroid-ship in the triple-lobed bridge making and supervising repairs, but he had been in touch with the officers who had to deal with the volatile colonists, and he knew of the horrific conditions in the body of the ship. Spock did not intend to write the paper himself, which was somewhat outside his fields of expertise, but the outline might serve to encourage Lieutenant Britt to do so.

And all the while the unoccupied portion of his brain examined the data concerning the deaths. Spock did not believe in the inevitable hands of fate or coincidence; he was not convinced that the events on the colony ship and Michaela were linked. Kirk's initial intuitive leap had not been substantiated by other similarities. But it would be fortuitous if there were connections. One part of Spock's attention worried the data, looking for them.

When he arrived in his quarters he sat down at his desk and read Engineer Scott's report on the repairs to the Enterprise's sensors. The malfunctioning segment of the scanner web had been difficult to trace because its effects were intermittent, but eventually the demanding Scot had been satisfied and transporter usage authorized. The lines between the Vulcan's eyes deepened as he pondered causes and consequences; he made a mental note to visually inspect the faulty circuits as they journeyed to starbase twenty-four.

Then Spock checked in with gamma shift, just settling in for their duty on the bridge, and consulted with Lieutenant Tu, who was currently supervising lab results. He switched off the intercom and finally prepared to dictate the reports that he had composed.

But before he spoke aloud he pressed the palms of his hands to the desk top and stopped himself. He was not being entirely logical; he was allowing himself to be ruled by the emotional pressure of events, and by the ties of affection to his captain, who so desperately sought answers.

Although his Vulcan constitution was capable of sustained effort much longer than two days, it was not logical to stress body and mind when there was no need, especially when his throat was scratchy and other symptoms of a minor respiratory infection were manifesting themselves. The outline could wait. The log would be more complete once final reports from sociology and security were filed. And the labs were already working on relevant data. It was his scheduled sleep shift. It was logical that Spock should rest.

Spock turned and looked at the double mattress through the grill that separated office from sleeping area. Although he was weary, he had no real need to sleep, especially alone. He and Jim rested together as often as duties allowed. Even the followers of Surak acknowledged that physical
proximity enhanced the mental connections of bondmates. Perhaps he could enter the captain's quarters without disturbing his repose. He had done so several times already in the past week.

But first, cleansing was necessary. Spock stripped and stood under the sonics, his Vulcan time sense ticking down the two minutes, forty-five seconds that were the recommended stay under the waterless shower. He allowed his thoughts to range where they would, a refreshing corollary to true meditation that utilized the entropy of chaos to define underlying patterns. Spock thought about the Lox'theneth'nar, he thought about Michaela, he thought about Ensign Hunyady, he thought about Jim and their bond....

Three minutes had passed before he exited the stall, a lapse that Spock charitably allowed. He had learned that his creativity quotient was enhanced if he permitted himself occasional moments of abstraction. He brushed his teeth, then turned towards the door that led to the captain's cabin.

But in the milli-second before the door swished open he knew that Kirk was not in his quarters.

The sudden certitude made him blink. He had no physical information on which to base his opinion, for even Vulcan hearing could not reach through two rooms to hear the quiet sounds of sleep. The captain did not snore, although he had frequently made that complaint about Spock. There was only one explanation.

It was the bond uncurling in his mind.

He stepped forward into an empty room. The ghostly awareness of Kirk was suddenly heavy here, so weighty that Spock leaned his naked back and buttocks against the cold metal door for support. His eyelids dropped with the psychic pressure, but his senses seemed to expand so that he saw in other ways.

The air in the cabin remembered Kirk's scent, masculine and salt-sharp. It filtered through Spock's nostrils, redolent with memories of the captain's torso slick with sweat: after a wrestling match in the gym, after fighting Captain Tracy for his first officer's life, after mating.

The air remembered the flow of Kirk's movements through space, where he had stood and pondered, where he had sat and smiled, where they had lain together and loved. The furniture retained traces of Kirk's skin, his honey hair and the impression of his body, and the bed shimmered with ease and rest and passion. Jim was not here, yet he would always be here, and Spock would always know him.

Drops of water fell from the red sky, filling a growing river that stretched across the desert sands....

Standing in his captain's military-neat cabin that nevertheless reeked of his psychic presence, Spock felt a stirring in his mind, and a matching stirring in the unnamed place where his emotions lived. It was easy to recognize the feeling now. Happiness. Joy. Exultation. The humans had many words for different nuances of the same emotion, and he was being taught them all now.

The bond. He had not expected to feel the connection so soon. This feathery touch was totally unlike the chilling reality of the bond he had shared with T'Pring. That had been rigid and encased in stone, a wrinkled protrusion in the back of his mind like the stump of an unhealthy plant unwilling to grow. This feeling of Jim flowed in easy liquid ripples, it darted about and would not stand still, it was motion and life and light cutting through darkness. It sheeted him with coolness, and pooled into deep crevasses that were suddenly teeming with life.

The current of the river was slicing towards the black wall that towered between his separate
selves. For the first time, Spock was conscious of the bond defining itself, rippling from bank to red-clayed bank and inexorably cutting through the soil. When it was fully formed, the bond would flow through two different landscapes, and create a new foundation for Spock's contradictory mixture of being. It would be a watershed for both the human and the Vulcan. The bond would join the two in a way that neither an Iowa gate nor a Vulcan gate ever could.

If his bondmate-to-be were Vulcan, Spock would not be alone in his awareness. But Kirk was psi-null; his consciousness was not in the ticklings of the bond, merely his essence. He had no awareness of what was happening. Spock felt a stab of sadness; even this moment was not perfect, or even completely Vulcan, for their union of true minds would always be impaired by Kirk's humanity. But without the humanity, would the bond exist in this way, creating sensations for which no Vulcan word even existed?

If Spock had wanted to seek out his captain before, now he urgently required to see his lover. He cast out through inner space, in a way he had never been able to do before, in a way that was instinctive for bonded Vulcans and should have been common between him and T'Pring, and caught the thread that now surely connected him to Jim. There was a moment of shock as they rubbed together, and Spock realized that Vulcan did indeed have a word for this experience. **Bahsen:** to use a talent or ability logically, to its full extent. Human corollary: fulfillment. Using the growing bond carried the flavor of bahsen, it was like flexing muscle and feeling vibrant and strong. Kirk was below decks, aft. Spock would follow the bah and find him.

It took but one minute and thirteen seconds to don clothing again. Then Spock's steps took him through the quiet corridors, down in a turbolift and over to the gym on deck nine. As he walked he maintained contact with that elusive feeling deep in his mind, caressing the newly created place of connection the way he would handle the finest crystal. No thoughts of duty, of journal articles or mysterious deaths occupied him; he was focused within. It was the first journey that he had ever taken with the vibrant feel of a bondmate springing forth from his mind. This was the way it might have been, should have been with T'Pring. But she had never shared with him like this. Spock had never felt her presence, except for that one time....

Spock was thirteen years old on the day it happened. He was walking home from a session with Schel, his tutor in computer hardware design, when a sudden pain lanced through his head. The red sky rolled as he combatted dizziness. This was an unfamiliar sensation. He did not know what was happening.

He was alone, as he was almost always alone when outside the classroom, but that did not matter as he would never ask for help even from an acquaintance. Sarek had recently stressed T'Par's fourth dictum, the desirable independence of emotional aloofness, as one of the benefits of the control of feelings, and Spock had incorporated the lesson well. He attempted to mask his awareness of his solitary state by substituting other, more logical words for "loneliness."

But suddenly he was not alone. From within the barely perceptible bump of the bond, T'Pring's presence was emerging. She came from the place that Sarek had told him would bring coolness amidst the flames, life from the edge of death. But the rock encrusted root of the link that bound them was not strengthening, it was cracking to pieces even as the female presence grew stronger. Panic was not logical, but Spock fought panic as he felt T'Pring attempting to strip away his guarantee of life.

He forced himself to walk on for appearance's sake despite the turmoil that assaulted him, and he was almost home before he found a low wall to sit upon. He took the three deep breaths as he had been taught, concentrated and met his bride-to-be within, where she had never condescended to enter before, where he had yearned to feel a presence matching his own. It was his right to know
her reassurance in his mind, but it was a right she had never granted, because he was not a pure Vulcan, not a real Vulcan, not a Vulcan whom she wished to touch in the intimacy of thought.

But Spock was Vulcan enough to be able to reach her now, and grab the unraveling strands that she so fiercely was attempting to cut. His mental skills had always been haphazard, sometimes equalling those of boys his age, sometimes lagging far behind, but on this day sitting in the sun light with people walking to and fro in front of him, a stone-faced Spock used his indignation to fuel his strength. He would not be so shamed! He would not present his parents with the inadequacy of a bond that would not hold. There was no logic in destroying a mental artifact that proclaimed to all that Spock, Sarek's son, was Vulcan.

T'Pring was no match for his determination and desperate desires. She slowly relinquished her hold, clawing as she left, inflicting pain and taunting, telling him that the very passion with which he defended their bond marked him as an outworlder. The second sun set, and T'Khut rose, and Spock sat on the wall until finally there was no awareness of her left. He had so often wished to experience what the others experienced, his bondmate-to-be in his mind, and now he could not escape the irony that he had fought with all his will to remove her the one time she had truly been there.

He probed, too desperately for him to be comfortable with the emotion, and was both relieved and disappointed that her only legacy was the empty space she left behind. He was used to the void, as he would never grow used to the taunting, but he consoled himself with the victory. The link, meager though it was, still existed. Some day, after the pon farr burned them together in its flames, it would grow into a full bond, and Spock would be like the others.

But he never had been. Nothing grew between the haughty T'Pring and the half-breed Spock. She never attempted to touch the life in her keeping again, and Spock cared so little for his future with her that he withdrew halfway across Federation space to Starfleet Academy without informing her of his actions. And in the end, T'Pring won the battle that had begun on a dusty Vulcan road. The link withered even as Spock fought his captain, so that it was easy to release the woman to Stonn.

For a while, after the debacle of Koon-ut-kalif-fee, Spock had despaired of ever achieving the mental birthright for which he yearned. The emptiness of the not-bonded weighted him down for months. Until he had become aware of a steady presence beside him, a kindred spirit that sought him out, and eyes that looked at him with a question in their hazel depths. He and Kirk had turned to one another without doubts....

Spock stood outside the ship's handball court, where the steady thump, thump of a ball striking the walls betrayed its solitary occupant. Despite the fact that the room was a self-contained box and had no windows in its door, he was certain it was Kirk. The bah was strongest here, and he recognized the rhythm of the steps, the hard thwack as hand hit ball. But it was an unlikely location to be at thirty minutes after midnight. Kirk detested solitary exercise. Why was he here?

The locker room was populated by only a few crew men and women just off beta shift, and they respected Spock's silence as he changed into the red gym shorts and long-sleeved white t-shirt he wore when he and the captain found the time to indulge in their handball games. No one spoke to him as he made his way through the main gym and paused outside the court door.

It was an unwritten rule that players were never interrupted during a game. Not only could interlopers who opened the door at the wrong time be faced with a charging body intent only on a return, or a ball flying at high speed towards a vulnerable face, but within the small community of a starship, privacy and the rules that guarded it were strictly observed.

But there was a rippling in his soul that Spock needed to share. He knocked once sharply, then
palmed the door lock and walked into the court's hot yellow glare.

The interruption threw off Kirk's return. He lunged to his right, but his gloved hand fanned air as the ball cannoned by him and bounced against the back wall. The captain bounced in turn upon the wooden floor.

"Great, just great," he muttered as he picked himself up and wiped his beaded forehead on a wristband. He glanced at Spock as if he were an irritating sparring partner who had been there for an hour. "We've got to start playing again. My timing is way off. Are you ready?"

Spock pulled the black padded glove onto his right hand and flung his towel into the back corner where Kirk's gear was also stowed. "Affirmative." Link or no link, he'd always been perceptive of his captain's moods. Now was not the time....

Kirk permitted him no warm-up and Spock did not ask for one. He assumed his ready-to-receive stance, up on the balls of his feet, slightly behind and to Kirk's left. He expanded his senses, ready for sudden action, yet what he was most aware of was a *ping!* of the physical tingling along his right side. Spock had passed the point when he could be with his half-naked captain and not feel at least an awareness of desire. He allowed his gaze to drift to the side. The white tank top Kirk wore clung to his body with sweat. That familiar salt-scent cut the air, and Spock found it pleasing. His eyes ranged over the swell of upper arm muscle, the way the blue athletic shorts defined the hemispheres of buttocks, and the glistening of tanned skin. Vulcans did not tan, and the browned skin was an exotic element that he suddenly found intensely attractive.

Kirk's strongly muscled legs tensed, and Spock's attention returned to the game. The captain's lips pursed, he bounced the ball twice, then he sent it towards the wall.

They played in silence punctuated only by grunts of effort and the sounds of Kirk's harsh breathing. They were not evenly matched. Spock's strength and his quicker reflexes in a gravity field lighter than his home world's gave him a decided advantage. During the past two years, the Vulcan had won seventy-eight point four percent of their contests, and yet Kirk never grew tired of challenging him. Their games were often close, and it often seemed as if the captain's determined spirit was just short of a breakthrough.

"Uhh." Kirk leaped into the air to reach a ball that arched over his head. His palm connected solidly and the ball hit the front wall in a patented Kirk-move, so low and with spin so tight that it bounced immediately down to the floor, making a return impossible despite Spock's quick rush to the front of the court.

"Your point," he conceded. There had been few enough of them. The captain was losing badly.

Kirk nodded tightly. Sweat dripped in his eyes and he wiped his face on his forearm. That salt-scent assailed Spock's nostrils again; he associated it with other activities and felt a corresponding stirring in his genitals that startled him. It would be a simple matter to suppress the physical urge, but he found that he did not want to. The memory of spine-arching orgasm in Kirk's arms had been imprinted in his body; the оргiastic touch of their minds sliding together was a part of him now. It did not seem to be an appropriate time nor place, but Spock was impatient to share the awareness of the growing bond with his bondmate-to-be. And he wanted to feel Kirk's hard, sweat-tacky body pressed to his.... He did not really want to play handball.

"Nineteen - five." Kirk bounced the ball preparatory to serving.

Spock forestalled him. "I did not expect to find you engaged in exercise. I expected to encounter you in your quarters, sleeping." The hint was unsubtle; the criticism, as direct as he would allow
himself.

Kirk noisily pushed air through his nose. "You sound like McCoy. I saw him after I beamed back aboard. He told me to consider myself off-duty." He resumed bouncing the ball, and looked down at the motion against the floor. "Well, I don't have to sleep. Isn't this something we do off-duty?" Abruptly he sent the ball spinning.

Spock caught it on the fly. Frustration slammed the ball into the precise corner of front and side walls, killing its momentum. Kirk, who had back-pedaled in expectation of a huge return, was caught flat-footed in the back of the court.

"Damn. Your serve." He side-stepped to his right to be in position to receive, but before Spock could move he said, "I'm playing just like I've been doing everything else. Lousy." Kirk was up on his toes and crouched for the ball. He chopped with his left hand. "Come on."

This time the volley lasted longer. The captain caught a serve that should have been out of reach with just the tips of his fingers, and Spock reached the fluttering ball just before its second bounce. Kirk pounced on it and sent it spinning first to the side wall and then to the front, but Spock was in position to slam it forward. The ball bounced, zoomed towards the back wall, bounced there and then headed forward. Normally the maneuver challenged Kirk’s reflexes, but he pulled his hand back and slapped at it as it whizzed by his head. This time it was Spock who was caught flat-footed.

Kirk picked the ball out of the air when Spock threw it to him for the change of serve. "You know," he said, bouncing the ball on the top of his foot, then flicking it up with a quick motion of his toes, "I hate it when you slaughter me like this."

Spock straightened. "The game is not yet over. And I have just lost my serve."

The ball was still bouncing; Kirk still watched as it hit his foot and reconnected with his hand. "But you're going to win."

Spock's eyes narrowed. "That has not been a consideration in our contests before."

"No. It hasn't." The captain shook his head. He grabbed the rising ball out of the air without looking and kept his head down.

Neither Kirk's attitude nor his downcast expression were familiar. Spock was puzzled. There was a suddenly weary set to the broad shoulders, and bleakness clung to him like an aura. The appearance was so atypical that for a moment Kirk looked like a totally unfamiliar being.

Spock stepped towards his captain. "There are many other diversions that occupy us when off-duty. This is not the only one. I would like to suggest another now." It was a self-serving idea, exactly what Spock wanted and had intended to do from the instant of revelation in his captain's cabin. But he refused to consider himself selfish. Jim's subdued mood could only be helped by melding and sharing the happiness of the bond growing. And later, when they retired, perhaps physical congress would be possible. Jim achieved much gratification from their sexual interactions.....

Kirk glanced up at him from under lowered eyelashes and a glint of humor flickered from the sad darkness. His mouth quirked to one side. "I can't exactly imagine us involved in a 'diversion' here. That door might have a lock, but there's plenty of keys. I wouldn't want to shock anyone out of their minds."
Spock allowed an indulgent look to pass over his face. "I do not suggest carnal activity at this time." He stripped off the glove and brought his hand up halfway between them, the fingers curved. "Something else."


"Affirmative. There is something I wish to show you."

"You can't want to meld with me now. I'm all sweaty. I smell like a horse. I'm a mess."

"You are well aware that the physical need not be perceived when we are within. I have no objection to any aspect of your appearance. And," he took two steps closer, "I must confess that you currently possess a somewhat illogical appeal."

Kirk glanced around, at the narrow planks of wooden floor, the rubber-marked white walls, the harsh yellow light. Then he looked at the door. "We might be interrupted again."

Spock's hand fell to his side. "If you do not wish...."

Kirk grabbed the long fingers. "I didn't say that. You know I want it." His voice softened. "I always want it. It's just that.... I've got some things I'm trying to sort out."

Spock examined the fine lines that tension had etched next to his lover's eyes. "Tell me."

With a sigh, Kirk dropped the warm hand and walked to where their gear was stowed in the corner. He leaned his back against the wall and slowly slid down until he was seated on the floor. He rested his hands on his drawn-up knees.

"Before I came here I went up to the observation deck. Before that I had a conversation with Bones. I know I should be sleeping right now, but I couldn't...." He reached for a towel and mopped at the sweat that lingered on his brow. "And now the stars won't let me...."

Spock allowed his face to tighten into a frown; he attempted to make some sense from the disjointed sentences. Usually Kirk was among the most rational of men. What had occurred to so disturb the confident assurance that was as much a part of the captain as his hazel eyes and his distinctive walk?

Kirk tilted his head up to examine the bulkhead overhead, but as soon as he started to speak again Spock knew he was really seeing an inner vision. "Do you ever wonder if what you're doing... makes any sense? If everything you believe in and have lived your life by is really just self-deception?"

Startled, Spock took three quick steps forward. "If you are referring to our intimate relationship--."

Kirk waved one hand. "No. Not that. I mean, everything else." The captain took a deep breath. "Bones and I had an... argument. He told me that I needed to take a good look at how I've been acting. I was angry, but I guess I'm too used to taking his advice to ignore it. So I went up to the OD to do some thinking."

Silence. "And have you reached any conclusions?"

"I don't know. All of a sudden I looked at the stars, and it took me back years. I remembered how Sam and I used to look at the stars together. We would sneak out of our room at night and shinny down an old tree next to our window. I always wondered if my mom heard us, and knew what we were doing. I think she must have. She would have had to be deaf not to hear us telling each other
"We never got into any trouble. Too young. We usually went out to the back pasture, by the wall."
His gaze shifted down to meet his companion's. "You know the wall I mean."

He had seen that simple stone structure in their melds, had touched it. "Yes," Spock answered quietly. "I know."

Kirk's eyes sought the ceiling again. "Back when I was eight or nine, I loved it. I couldn't get enough of the stars. But every once in a while, it would make me sad. The sky, it was so incredibly immense. All that darkness, and just those tiny specks of light trying so hard to shine. It made me shiver, sometimes, even in the summer."

"Then my Dad died, and everything changed. I couldn't look at the stars anymore. They made me feel so lonely, so... insignificant. Who could possibly care about a lonely little boy living in such an obscure place? The stars were so small and the sky seemed so black. For a long time I stayed in bed when Sam climbed down the tree from our window at night. And then one day, I looked up and decided... that maybe I could help bring more light to the darkness."

He laughed a mirthless laugh that held a hint of embarrassment. "A fine and lofty ambition, worthy of a twelve-year-old. I was so sure that I would be a hero, spreading the forces of good and justice throughout the known universe. I promised myself that was the way my life would be."

"And now, here I am, one tiny man in a tiny starship, doing my damn-dest in the only way I know how." He looked at Spock, an appeal in his liquid eyes. "But I can't keep that promise anymore. It's idealistic. Unrealistic. I'm so insignificant. Even against one star the whole ship is insignificant. Against the galaxy, or the mysteries we keep running up against... I wonder what I'm expecting to accomplish. Do I really think that I'm omnipotent, me and you and the crew and the Enterprise? Does Starfleet really think it can solve the problems of the universe with twelve tiny starships? Galactic explorers, galactic..." his voice was very bitter, and he almost spat out the word, "... heroes. Damn it to hell."

Spock could not remain silent. "Jim, what transpired on Michaela was not your fault. We simply were not granted enough time--."

"Right. I know that. I know." He passed a hand over his face in quick, jerky movements. "But I've got this vision in my head of what's going on back there, Spock, and it's not pretty. Are they still killing one another? Is Governor Benelli fighting a senseless war where he doesn't even know who the enemy is? Is he even still alive? Is Sari?"

An answer darted into Spock's mind, one he quickly categorized as a platitude. He did not voice it.

"We're so damned arrogant. I'm arrogant. Bones is right. I think I can shape the universe. I think I can win every game I play." Slowly Kirk's spine settled back against the unyielding wall; he pushed his head against its hardness and closed his eyes.

In the silence Spock could clearly hear his own heartbeat. What could he say that would help? The captain of the Enterprise would never take defeat calmly, and it appeared that Jim was finally acknowledging their defeat on Michaela. Any explanation that Spock advanced would have already been examined and understood by the agile mind that drove Kirk's intensity.

Everything that Kirk had uttered made perfect logical sense; each man and circumstance had limitations. But how many times had Kirk beaten the odds against his success by defying those limitations, because the need to spread light in the darkness was as true for him now as it had been to be quiet."
when he was twelve years old? There was the truth of logic, of hard facts, and then there was the truth of the soul, of one's self-perceptions.

Spock looked at the silent figure in the corner. His lover radiated bitterness. Something new was required to divert self-recrimination, but Spock was unsure what. Years of observing humans did not always grant him the tools he needed in dealing with this man who experienced his emotions so deeply. Too often, Spock believed, he was inadequate. But now was not the time for silence. Perhaps a fresh perspective would help. The vision of a young Jimmy Kirk and his brother looking up a light-speckled Iowa sky prompted reciprocation.

Spock walked over to the wall and sat down on the floor, cross-legged, facing the motionless form. If what he had to say was insufficient, so be it. These words were what he had to offer. He leaned forward to place his elbows on his knees and began to speak.

"I find it interesting that the stars have inspired you to express these frustrating and melancholy thoughts of yours. When I was a child, I had a quite different reaction to the night sky."

Kirk opened his eyes. They locked gazes for a moment, then Spock pulled back to examine his hands clasped in his lap.

"My parents provided me with an excellent telescope when I was but nine years of age. It is doubtful that Sarek would have agreed to do so if he had been able to foresee where it would lead me."

Spock took a deep breath. "I was able to observe the many details of our planetary system. I came to a conclusion that was the opposite of yours. I believed that the stars were not lonely. Everywhere I looked, there were groups. Clusters, planets with their satellites and rings. A swarm of comets. The system of five planets that are sister to Vulcan. Even our suns, two, together."

Spock's voice was dispassionate, but his fingers tensed and pressed upon one another. He and Kirk had exchanged so much within their melds, had whispered love words in the darkness, but it was still difficult for him to verbalize events that were laden with emotion. "I observed that physical objects in space did not mirror my own situation within my father's house, where I was... alone. Necessarily, as a condition of my hybrid ancestry. Yet the stars, they were never alone. They shone with brilliant light, they filled up the darkness of space with their brilliance."

Finally, Spock looked at his companion. "There was a time," he said, his voice whisper quiet, softer than moonlight, "when I would watch the stars and yearn for what they had. They belonged in a way that I did not. I know that these thoughts were a part of what drove me to leave my home planet, and to join Starfleet."

"Where you discovered what the stars had," Kirk breathed.

"In a way. My career has been most satisfying. Yet it cannot be denied that a far more personal interaction is part of what I was seeking. It took me considerably longer to discover that." And he extended one hand, palm up, into the air between them.

Kirk looked at the long fingers. He painstakingly placed his own hand over his lover's, threading his square fingers with the long aristocratic ones.

"We are two bright comets in the night, Spock," Kirk said softly. "Not stars. We travel free. But somehow, now I have a companion in my travels. I have been caught in endless orbit about you."

Spock nodded. "And I about you. It is an apt analogy, but I would modify it. Your light is
frequently as bright as a star's. You attempt to bring it to others. It is not your fault that starlight can
only travel so far without diffusion."

Kirk gave him a sad smile. "Don't give me too much credit."

"I speak the truth as I perceive it."

"I think you have an agenda. You're very good at it." Kirk squeezed the fingers clasped within his
own; Spock squeezed back. "You feel so good. So warm." The captain leaned forward, met Spock
in the space between their seated bodies. Their lips touched.

The kiss was sweet and innocent, just their outer labial surfaces skimming against one another. But
the simple contact made Spock's world spin. He was intensely aware of the coolness of Jim's lips,
the caress of breath upon his face, the strength in the hand that grasped his own. His senses
spiraled inward to touch the root of the bond growing. The mere perception of their joining set it
free, and the feeling of Jim rose up and up until he was surrounded by the whirling essence of his
lover.

Spock gave a strangled moan from deep in his throat just as Kirk hitched forward. The captain
wrapped his arms around the narrow back and rose up on his knees, so that he was pressing Spock
backwards within the curve of his possessive support. His mouth opened and demanded contact
with his lover's tongue, and Spock gave it willingly. He leaned his weight back, trusted in the
loving hold, secure in the knowledge that Kirk's strength would always support him.

Abruptly Kirk broke their kiss. He pulled back fractionally, his breathing already deep. "Just
exactly what I said we shouldn't be doing here, isn't it?" he whispered, gazing down at the beloved
face. "I'm tired and I've just dumped an emotional load on you that I shouldn't have, and all I really
want to do is love you right here on the floor. How's that for being illogical?" His grip tightened.

Spock placed two fingers on the velvet skin of his lover's throat, where he could feel the
tumultuous beat of Kirk's confusion and passion. "There is nothing illogical about your desires. I
share them. And I have observed this condition in humans before; the expression of intense
emotion often is accompanied by an increase in the libido."

Shadow flickered into Kirk's eyes. "This doesn't have anything to do with that. It's just that.... I
want you, every way I can get you and as often as I can. Nothing else is going right. Not telling
Bones, not the mission, not Komack. Just us." He disengaged one hand and trailed fingertips along
temple and the line of angular cheekbone. "We'll always be right."

Finally, now was the time to share. "Join with me. Now. I have something to show you."

"My impatient Vulcan," Kirk murmured, planting a chaste kiss on the point of a chin. "I'm
corrupting you. First the OD, now the gym.... All right. If we can't make love here with our bodies,
let's do it with our minds. Wait just a minute."

Kirk disengaged from their embrace and sat back on his heels. He pulled his shirt from the
waistband of the blue shorts and wiped at his face with the hem, scrubbing where Spock's fingers
would touch. "They say that love is blind...." He tucked in his shirt and faced Spock, kneeling.
Spock rose to his knees also so that their chests were almost touching. Kirk gripped the points of
angular shoulders. "Show me. Show me everything."

... And the first image they shared was a startlingly sexual one. Kirk mounted above, his rampant
penis plunging into the upthrust Vulcan ass, Spock gripping the bedclothes and thrusting back in
wild abandon, then both their mouths opening as together they reached soundless oblivion....
The scene blinked out, to be replaced by the familiar golden glow of their mental joinings. Spock did not know whose mind had supplied the image.

At this level of the meld, they still retained a semblance of their physical shapes, transformed by a radiant glow that danced with all the colors of the spectrum, electrified by life and vigor. Kirk's astral presence floated before him. It was unmistakably the vibrant captain, projecting the white and gilded power that was far more than what he showed the world; it shot through all of him.

_Ah, Spock_, Kirk sighed, and reached for his lover. Spock felt the profound satisfaction in the words, knew them as if they emanated from his own self. He surged forward to meet Kirk halfway, moving from here to there simply by willing to be closer. Their hands touched.

A shiver of delight trembled through him as the brightness that was Kirk stroked down the length of Spock's light. Hungrily Kirk touched the actual structure of his lover's mind, loving it just as his hand had caressed the flesh of the physical body. Spock opened under the touch, needing it the way a flower needed sunlight, and perceived Kirk's desperate desire to give him this pleasure.

The sensation that was uniquely his lover pressed up against him, fulfilling the elemental requirement for mental contact that every Vulcan experienced from before the moment of birth. Spock had gone so long wanting....

And Kirk hadn't even known that this exaltation was there to want....

Spock intertwined the radiance that was their fingers and pulled Kirk towards him, hard. They flowed together, shining hands gripping one another, then sliding upwards, caressing insubstantial forearm and elbow. With every movement they came closer, merging their light, losing the unreal physical substance, seeking the oneness of the _ah-drital_. They were vibrantly alive within one another, in this place where the great connection of one mind and one soul existed.

It would have been easy for Spock to stay exactly where he was, losing himself in the marriage of their psyches, exposing himself to happiness in a way that was now familiar. It was obviously what Kirk wanted; Jim was open in the meld to an extent he rarely achieved, finding what he was looking for and reveling in it. Spock knew the bliss Kirk felt from their union as surely as he knew his own. They could do this for one another, simply by touching the inner essence of self.... Far different from the melds Spock had ever employed during duty, when he sought only facts for the mission, this joining of spirit mimicked the merging of bodies, and it was no less addictive.

But from the days of his first instruction with Sarek, he had learned that the great danger in melding was the seductive siren call that must always be denied. There was a part of the _katra_ that yearned for the ultimate and irreversible merging of two into one. Spock could feel the tug now; at this level of the meld between soul-mates, it was difficult to think independently. It would be so easy to lose himself in the bright conduits that seemed to stretch towards infinity; to forever explore the new creature that was the two of them together....

But the enticement was a contradiction; it promised knowledge, but resulted in oblivion of the unique personality. Always there must be a core of self set apart from the _ah-drital_ to guide the way back into individuality. The _zhisen_ was on duty now, a part of Spock that had never joined fully in the joy. Perhaps it never would, for unlike a Vulcan bondmate, Kirk might never master the ability to guard them so that Spock could indulge, unfettered....

The _zhisen_ remembered the purpose.... Together they turned....

But the river no longer sliced through the arid desert landscape that was slashed by the black wall. Here in the world where the two of them were one, the bond that would eventually unite them...
meandered in slow looping curves through a high country plain. Sagebrush and low bushes dotted the hard-packed ground, while small trees gathered by the red-clay banks of the river. The water reflected a sky that was pink, not crimson, and the air was warm, not roasting. Soft groundcover in greyish-green flowed to the horizon, where the shadows of two walls, Vulcan and Terran, stood guard over it all.

And incongruously, blossoming along the river, hyacinths grew. Their heavy sweet scent permeated the air.

Spock retreated enough from the meld so that independent communication could take place. Kirk still needed words.

Now you know my depths. You know me, Spock murmured, utterly satisfied that the riverbank was littered with the swaying blossoms of white, blue and pink. The scent of springtime lived always in him, but only Kirk was able to conjure the reality of the flowers that bobbed in the gentle breeze. Spock wrapped spectral arms of happiness about his lover.

The river. It's us.

You are the cool water that quenches my thirst, t'hy'la. Our bond is here, growing. I can feel the changes that are taking place within me, physically and mentally. We will be fully bonded soon, possibly within a few months. We are so attuned....

You see how I feel about it now? You know how I want this for you? For us? My head tells me we still should wait, but I can't be sorry this is happening.

Yes. It is so much more than I have ever had before.... Only you. Never could T'Pring have given him this, never had he ever trusted any of his few former lovers enough to want to indulge in this most profound intimacy. Only Jim. Ever. The end of the search for belonging that should have been grounded in the mind of a seven-year-old Vulcan girl.

The pervasive scent of the flowers was overlaid by an acrid smell, and in an instant T'Pring's attack on the bond was re-lived by them both.

All that was Kirk flowed around his lover in a fierce protective gesture. Never, he vowed, sensing the insecurities that persisted. I'll never leave you.

And with the words came a wisp of the same emotion expressed not long ago, as a rigidly controlled captain confronted his CMO in sickbay.... Kirk opened his memory, and the entire scene with McCoy played back for Spock to know.

"You can blow in his ear on the bridge for all I care."

"Our melds are indescribable."

"You stand to lose a lot."

"It's the closest to heaven I'll ever get."

"I don't understand how you can do it."

"Spock is my perfect companion."

McCoy was their friend, Jim's confidant and trusted adviser, and yet even he had reacted in such a way.... Spock attempted to step back from the emotional scene, to place the confrontation within a
logical context. But McCoy was such an irrational being at times; Spock had never understood all that motivated him. Was this the first evidence of a permanent breach between the friends? Was this just the first of many times when Jim would be hurt because of their relationship?

The answer was projected with all the force that Kirk could bring to the words. "I don't focus on what I'm losing. I don't even see it most of the time. I focus on what I'm gaining." The conviction that the captain had been groping for just minutes before had returned. If Kirk had been uncertain about other aspects of his life and command, here there was confidence. Spock saw it, heard it, felt it, knew it. They belonged together.

He searched for a suitable response to the singing light, the sweet sounds of love that Kirk was generating and that gushed through their joined essences. Spock was so new to unleashed emotion; he still struggled to select the responses that would not only be an accurate reflection of what he himself was experiencing, but that would be the suitable support for his emotional lover. Such expression was not instinctive, and might not ever be. He floundered, overwhelmed by Kirk's determined passion, not knowing how to match it.

"Yes, you do, his bondmate-to-be whispered. You know how I feel about you, about us. Show me how you feel.

And suddenly the pink sky blanked out, the river disappeared. The glowing connection of their ethereal beings evaporated. Spock had a body again, and so did Kirk, and they were separate. Their naked forms floated in a black void, lit by stars and asteroids and the reflected glow of planets. A comet flashed by, radiating hot white sparks. Spock reached for Kirk and pulled him close.

"You have truly corrupted me, Jim. I find that the most adequate translation of how I feel is quite... carnal. I wish to make love with you."

A tender smile formed on Kirk's lips, and he ran his hands down the curve of his lover's waist to grip his hipbones. "You are so beautiful. You know I want to make love too, but we can't in the meld, remember? The last time we tried--."

"-- the sexual sensations could not be sustained and the meld broke. That will not happen this time. There are differences now that the bond is growing."

"But what about.... Spock, I value our privacy."

"Time is subjective within. Only eight point five seconds have elapsed since I initiated the joining. I estimate that we will conclude this encounter in thirty-two seconds. The odds are two thousand, one hundred and thirty to one that no one will attempt to unlock the door to the court, and if they do, I will hear the attempt and we will have the time to break the meld. Nor will there be physical evidence of our activities."

"You sound very determined. Why not just wait until we can get to our quarters?"

It was a teasing question. Spock responded by allowing both hands to drift up the muscled contours of Kirk's back. Starlight glittered on the smooth skin of his lover's shoulders as he paused and reinforced his knowledge of all the physical sensations that would erupt between them. Their bodies were not participating, but they would make love with their bodies' sensations nevertheless....

Spock slowly brought his hands down, skimming the bumps of vertebrae with just the tips of his fingers. The finger pads tingled, the way they did when minds joined.... His palms settled over the swelling buttocks, cradled the pliant flesh and pulled their bodies together even closer, so that he
could feel the soft bulk of Kirk's genitals press against his own already eager erection. "Because I do not wish to wait. You asked for an expression of what I was feeling. This is it. Will you accept it?"

In answer, Kirk stared into his lover's eyes. Their faces were only centimeters apart, and Spock could see himself reflected in the warm hazel glow, as he knew that Kirk was reflected in his own eyes. When they looked at one another, they were already within each other.... A yellow star off to the left glittered in Kirk's depths too, accenting the golden flecks that so fascinated Spock.

Kirk's lips brushed against his lover's. "Where are we, Spock?" he murmured.

Spock returned the kiss, pressed harder, opened his awareness to the feel of the cool lips that yielded to him, then spoke from the corner of his mouth. "Sector 7, quadrant 3, coordinates 37.1 by 56.2 by 14.2. The Dixler nebula."

The hands on his hips tightened, just short of being painful. "No, Spock. I mean, where are we?"

A stellar cloud bright with primordial dust swirled beneath them. It bulged with colorful motes, heavy with the elements that could combine and produce life. All that was needed was the spark of creation.... "We are two bright comets in the night, Jim. We are where we belong."

"Yes." The breathless sigh was muffled as Kirk's mouth descended to suck on the yielding flesh at the base of his lover's neck. Spock stretched his head back, eager to give the lips all that they sought. He clutched at the broad shoulders.

Kirk slid his hands around to that special place in the small of Spock's back, where there was that erogenous zone peculiar to male Vulcans. He rubbed his palms over the twin indentations, and Spock shivered as raw pleasure raced tingling up his spine.

"Jim," he gasped, and pushed back into the touch. Jim almost always touched him there, but never had it felt like this, like fire injected straight into his veins.

Kirk noticed. "Here's one of your differences because of the bond," he whispered, nip kissing his way across the prominent collar bone. "The hollows, they're deeper." He rubbed harder.

Spock moaned. He half-closed his eyes, the better to experience the sparks that flew from Kirk's fingers to his sensitized flesh. "My internal testicular system," he gasped. "Stimulated by hormonal development in... preparation for...." He gave up.

The lips upon his chest shifted, moved between his nipples, down across his contracting stomach muscles.... If not for the support of the strong arms wrapped around him, Spock thought he must have fallen, straight through the dark of space to merge with the nebular dust.... He knew where Kirk was heading.

"I'm exploring you," Kirk murmured, his mouth centimeters from flesh. "I've got to find out what else is new. Let me be your explorer." Moist coolness wrapped about his penis.

He had to look. Engaging all the senses in a sensual encounter enhanced the experience.... Kirk knelt before him. His captain knelt there. The sight carried an erotic thrill all its own, for he had the power to bring the most charismatic man he had ever met to his knees. And what Kirk had never done with any other man, he would do for Spock.

Kirk held the long erection in one hand; he pushed it up so that he could lap at the base with the smooth human tongue. A pulse of pleasure sweeter than his t'hy'la's laughter flowed up Spock's hard length, pushed along by the tongue that slowly, so slowly licked at the shiny flesh. He panted,
and resisted the urge to throw back his head and thrust immediately to completion.

There was so much power in him, the Dixler nebula was nothing. His arms could encompass all of space, his breath pulled in the building blocks of the universe. And all because the bond sang within him and Jim's lips engulfed his penis. The lips contracted, his penis thrilled, the bond pulsed and stars shot out flares whose light reached for parsecs. One plus one did not equal two, not in this cosmos. With Jim, Spock could be so much more....

The mouth pulled back and a cool tongue lapped at the slit where fire sparked again. His knees felt weak, he had to have support, his lover's shoulders were there.... Hazel eyes looked up at him, peered so intently from beneath long eyelashes. "I love you," Jim said.

The golden eyes glittered in the whirling starlight. When had the galaxy begun to spin? "I want you," Kirk added hoarsely. "Lie back for me."

Yes.

He reached for Kirk, pulled him up, twined one hand in the star-streaked hair and ground their erections together even as their bodies slowly twisted in the stellar wind. It felt good, so good, to be pressed together. A stream of rainbow dust trailed from their legs and feet as, entwined, they slowly reclined on the sparkling cloud that would be their bed.

He kissed the lips that had the power to transform him. Jim inside him, always mentally, physically for such fleeting moments.... It was a balance he needed.

"Yes," he said.

Kirk straddled him, and Spock gave support with loving hands curled around buttocks. He pushed, to bring the penis closer. It was engorged with desire just for him. He took the swollen crown between his lips, then slid it between his tongue and the roof of his mouth. Now the penis lay passively, but Spock could feel its strength. This part of Jim would flow within him, as another part of Jim watered an arid land.... To give his lover pleasure, Spock sucked.

The cock seemed to leap in his mouth; a pulse of heat suffused the head as more blood rushed in and stiffened it to hardest steel. Spock stroked the flat of his tongue against the soft skin of the shaft, because Jim especially responded to that caress. The captain groaned, and shifted forward so that his knees were jammed into his lover's armpits.

"Oh, lover, I love the way that feels. Yes, just like that. You have the sweetest mouth. Suck me. Suck me in your sweet mouth."

For long moments the only sound was human flesh being worshiped, and the small exclamations of delight that the captain could not help but utter. Spock detected the first bitter foretaste of emission, and he sucked even harder. But Kirk shook his head, and slowly pulled his penis from its moist home, with Spock still suctioning strongly, so that it finally emerged with a wet plopping sound.

"Watch," the captain said.

He reached down to touch himself, wrapped four fingers around his length, and placed his thumb along the corona that was slick with thick Vulcan saliva. The cock hovered over a green-leafed nipple nestled among chest hair. Kirk's other hand pushed the hair back, careful fingers smoothing until a dark sunburst framed the aureole. The blunt fingertip of flesh surged upwards, like a mountain peak trying to brush against the foundation of the heavens.

Kirk milked his penis, one long stroke, two strokes, and then a glistening drop of pre-cum dangled
from the tip. Spock watched, as he had been commanded, as one more stroke released the liquid bead to fall on his sensitized nipple.

"You rain upon me," he whispered.

Kirk nodded, then leaned forward and rubbed the drop into the skin with the tip of his tongue, tasting himself. "That's for our river," he said. "I have more. Will you take it?"

Spock shivered as Kirk moved down to crouch between his legs, then he pulled his knees up to hug them against his chest. He watched Kirk while he exposed his most intimate part, but Jim only had eyes for the dark pucked opening that slowly yielded to the starlight.

Kirk reached forward. His fingers delved between the sensitive skin of the ass cheeks. Spock felt the lightest pressure against his sphincter muscle. "We're in a meld," Kirk whispered, finally meeting the dark eyes. "I know we don't have to use lubricant, I don't have to dilate you because I can't hurt you. I'm doing this because I want to." A finger pushed inside, past the strength of the muscle, into the softness of his rectum. It pressed against the side of the anal canal, then withdrew. Then more bulk pushed against his sphincter, two fingers sought entrance, slid past the muscle and took possession of the warm darkness inside. Jim touched him, swirling around the pliant flesh, going higher and higher to where only he had ever been....

The thought brought with it an intense erotic thrill that raced down Spock's spine and quivered in his penis. Everything was exposed to Jim.... He arch-ed in sudden abandon, drove himself onto the seeking fingers in three quick, spine-bending thrusts. Sweat broke out on his face.

Kirk's hand rode with the thrusts, then twisted and scissored in the channel, emphasizing his possession even more.

"Love," Kirk murmured, "look at me."

Spock opened the eyes he had not realized he had closed. His lover's face hovered above him. His eyes glittered with passion, his chest heaved as if they were actually engaged in coitus. He was suspended on one stiffened arm, his other hand's fingers pushed up into Spock's ass.

"I'm doing this because I love to touch you. Every part of you I can. I want to touch you everywhere." Kirk's voice trembled. "If I could, I'd pour myself all through you...."

Spock touched the face sheened with love and perspiration. "It is your version of the meld, t'hy'la. Touch me wherever you can. We are in each other."

Kirk groaned. In a flurry of movement he removed his hand and positioned his cock to probe at the yielding asshole. Spock pushed back and gasped at the exact moment that his lover pushed forward, and a penis filled the space that only fingers had claimed before.

How to explain how this felt? Jim's body was always so pleasingly cool, but the excitement of mating increased the temperature of his genitals so that his flushed organ seemed to exactly match Spock's own temperature. Result: the human penis felt like a part of his own body when it slid into the channel that nature had never intended for it. There was no jolt of cold or hot, no pain of assaulted muscles, no outraged psyche that resented invasion. Jim's penis fit him, exactly.

Kirk paused when he was but halfway sheathed. His hands slid slowly up the wiry legs, over bent knees, down hard muscled thighs and then up the skin that stretched over ribs, until his palms found the star-streaked surface upon which they reclined. He leaned over the curled-up body on stiffened arms.
Spock stared up at his lover. He saw the honey hair that swept across the broad forehead, the lips that were flushed passion-red, the so-soft skin that made Kirk look so young.

And he saw the eyes that were alight with passion, and so much more: the steady control that kept the captain from moving yet, the starlight that flickered forever in the hazel depths. And Spock saw love. A year ago, he would not have known how to respond to the emotion, nor would he have known how to give and receive the pleasure that seemed to be so natural now. There was a sudden wrench within his chest. Like Kirk, he was filled with a need to touch even more....

It was easy to reach around and carefully probe just beneath where Kirk's penis entered his body. Spock watched his lover's face as his fingertips made contact with drawn-up testicles. He pressed in delicately, then cupped the puckered orbs in the palm of his right hand.

"Yessss," Kirk hissed. He threw back his head with overwhelming delight and squeezed his eyes shut. "Oh, Ghod Almighty. Yes. Touch my balls. Both hands. Oh, Ghod, use both hands."

Overcome by sensation, he began to thrust, just as Spock took each testicle in one hand and caressed them with his thumbs.

Spock rocked with the force of each plunge. Then he added to the fierce motion; his head curved forward off the nebular pillow, neck muscles strained, his fingers spread over both ass and balls. He stretched to keep the position, and pushed to encourage Kirk to go in deeper and deeper....

The rampant cock was buried almost to the hilt when a sudden thrill burst from high up his anal canal. His head snapped back in shock as the tremor flew through his own penis and then sharply defined the twin organs in the small of his back. Despite the weight pounding upon him and his cramped position, Spock arched up off their starry mattress.

"Jim!" he gasped. "Do that again." And with Vulcan strength his fingers pushed to jam the cock back up inside him, as far as it would go. Kirk's bulk pressed against that just-awakened special spot, and Spock heard his own voice emit an uncontrolled ecstatic moan.

Fierce exultation settled over Kirk's features as he mastered the urge to continue thrusting. "Your prostate! I knew we'd find it someday. How does this feel?" He kept his cock in deep, and twisted it from side to side.

It felt... indescribable. As if every nerve ending in his lower body sparkled with electricity that sizzled and raced straight to his penis. The swollen testicular system that nestled next to his kidneys had come alive with a fierce cry for stimulation.

It was his turn to demand. "Touch me," he managed to gasp, although he knew the command was not specific enough to be meaningful. "Touch me...."

But Kirk knew. One hand tried to force its way under his lover, but their position restricted his movement. "Over," he commanded. "Let's turn over. It's what we both wanted in the beginning. And I'll be able to touch you that way...."

They were in a meld, so in the blink of an eye Spock was on his hands and knees and Kirk's strength was still inside him. The captain was mounted behind, and his hands pressed down exactly where Spock wanted them to be.

Spock had waited all his life to feel this way. His newly swollen prostate was caught between the penis that surged in his body and the hands that pressed down on the quickening organs in his back. Sparkling liquid danced in his veins and careened across every synapse.... And behind it all, deeper even than Jim's penis could ever claim, the nascent bond flowed, completing everything.
At exactly the same moment Kirk moved forward and Spock pushed back. He felt the slow slide of the thick cock through his anal canal in vivid detail. He felt the flared head press against his sensitive inner walls; it pushed through the springy tissue that was closed-in upon itself, forced it open and gave it new shape and purpose. Then the warmth retreated, and allowed the clinging sheath to find its natural contours. And yet, always the strength that was Jim would find its way inside him again, in every way.

It was not supposed to be this way. Nature had not intended it. His sphincter was never meant to be stretched by another male's organ, it was inconceivable that he could so desire the sharp thrusts of a penis pounding within his rectum. How could he find such satisfaction in the heavy sweetness of Jim's body curled over and around him, within him?

How could he not? Nature had never intended a Vulcan-human hybrid either. He defied nature to find his own happiness.

Again Kirk thrust, grunting his pleasure as he moved, and again Spock met his motion with an equal push back. Kirk imposed a rhythm that Spock followed as easily as he breathed; long sliding motion in, quick withdrawal, long sliding motion in..... They surged together, and Spock reveled in the slick sound of flesh moving against flesh. Their flesh. His flesh and Jim's, together. He shivered.

It was so good, so... bahsen to be moving together in such harmony. This was right. This was fulfillment. With every driving stroke that pushed inside him he felt more firmly grounded; in the bond, within himself. He was no longer a desert creature, confined to the lonely night-time hours, conserving water because there was so little happiness in his world. That life was over, for the torrent of his bond with Jim flowed freely inside him, ever growing stronger, and his physical body was about to be anointed with life-giving liquid. He overflowed with water, with life.

The hands on his back twisted and pressed, the new angle of penetration provided a whole new stimulus to his prostate. It was almost too much....

Kirk leaned over him, mouth close enough to gust into his sensitive ear. "I love you, my t'hy'la, my almost-bondmate. I love you and I am going to plant my seed so high up in you.... Part of you, Spock. I'm going to be part of you...."

Spock groaned because he could find no other form of expression.

Kirk pulled back and the rhythm of their movement changed to new urgency: demanding strokes that were accented by the sharp snap of the pelvis. The strong fingers abandoned their place on his back and gripped his hips instead. Spock became aware of his own penis, rigid and wanting; it had not been touched since the long ago caress of Jim's lips....

Kirk lunged forward and went completely still, although not with the intensity of orgasm. For eight seconds, nine, his breath hushed and all was silence and stillness and two comets streaking away in the distance.... Then a sudden, exasperated exhalation from Kirk, another, and then a demanding fist closed about Spock's hardness, pumping his arousal. Jim moved again, pounded into him in cadence with the insistent pull of his hand, bringing completion closer, closer.... Then Kirk took the three quick strokes that always heralded his climax.

Bond and body surged together in one spine-cracking moment. Semen squirted within him just as he was claimed by the first ecstatic instant of his own orgasm. "Jim!" he tried to cry, as he knew Kirk was trying to say his own name. But neither of them could. Their mouths opened soundlessly. They acted out the tableau that had started their meld.
The nebular cloud beneath them was sprinkled with thick droplets of his semen that sparkled in the starlight, but Spock was too enervated to be curious about the unlikely display. He slumped forward flat on his stomach, pillowed his head on his arms, and Kirk collapsed upon his back. The weight felt eminently satisfying. Jim could never be a burden.

They lay together on the softest of beds, drifted in body and spirit, let the stellar winds take them where they would. Stars burned, planets rotated, asteroids tumbled in the void. It was their world.

Finally, the softest of kisses caressed the side of his neck, and Spock allowed his lips to curl into an almost perceptible smile.

"I don't know why the Creator of the universe gave us to each other," Kirk whispered. "But I'm yours now and you're mine. I'm never going to let you go. Never."

Never and always. Touching and touched. The words of the bonding ceremony that had never been honored between himself and T'Pring found their greatest expression with this being who was not telepathic, was not even Vulcan. He and Jim would never be apart. They would always touch. It was pleasing to contemplate.

But fatigue interfered with their peace. The strain of holding the meld in post-coital lassitude was suddenly too great. The comets disappeared; Kirk saw, and he rolled off Spock onto his side. The stars blinked out, and Spock shifted so that they were holding hands between their bodies, their warmth crossing the empty void. Then slowly, slowly, the sparkling nebula beneath them began to fade, and there was only darkness.

Spock blinked as harsh light assaulted his eyes. Jim knelt across from him in the Enterprise’s handball court; they were no longer touching. Spock took a deep breath; the worlds of the meld were far away.

The captain glanced down at himself, at the blue gym shorts that did not show a drop of stain and were not tented from the intense arousal that had existed only in their minds. He looked at Spock's shorts too, then over to the still-closed door.

"How long...?"

"Thirty-five seconds."

Kirk drew a ragged breath and slumped back onto his heels. "It felt like forever." He reached out and touched the side of Spock's face. His hand felt cool as it lingered there in a soft caress. "All the universe in thirty-five seconds. That was... wonderful. Only you could do that. You are so, so special. Thank you for showing me our bond."

Spock took the hand and held it in his own. He was aware of a great desire to kiss Kirk, but he would not push the bounds of propriety any further. They had already tempted fate. "We are special together."

Kirk squeezed his fingers. "Yes, we are, aren't we? I love being in your mind. I love making love with you."


Spock cocked his head, asking.
"The bond growing. It felt so wonderful in the meld. But if you hadn't shown it to me, I would never have known it was there. It's one of the reasons this time was so good for you, isn't it?" Spock nodded, and Kirk continued. "It doesn't seem right that I can't feel it too. But I couldn't before and I can't now. I wonder if I'll ever be able to?"

Their connection trembled deep in his soul. He was sure that he would always feel Jim in him, and he ached that this they did not yet share. But he would not stoop to false reassurance. "Perhaps," he whispered. "Someday. And you know you will always feel our joining in the meld."

Kirk drew his hand away. "Yes. At least we'll have that. You know, I tried to reach you with the Il'safarr again. I tried to tell you to come. But it didn't work and I knew it. I had to touch you instead."

"Do not be concerned. The bond is still immature, and we are unpracticed."

Kirk abruptly got to his feet. "And I'm a human and you're half-human and we might not ever have anything more than what we had the other morning. How will you manage in pon farr if that happens? I won't be any good to you."

His human's melancholy attitude had not been banished after all. Kirk was such a stubborn individual. "It will not happen. The fact that these changes are occurring between us without the conscious establishment of a bond is proof of that. My body and mind are responding to my mate; the fact that physical changes are currently outpacing the mental development between us has no bearing on the eventual outcome."

Kirk stared down at him, hands clenched at his sides. "I've never known you to be an optimist before, Spock."

Spock gracefully unfolded his long limbs so that he too was standing. "And I have never known you to succumb to irrational despair."

Kirk held his gaze for the space of thirty rapid Vulcan heartbeats. Spock could see the mantle of "the captain" being donned with each passing second. Finally, "Touche', Mr. Spock." Abruptly Kirk turned to collect their gear. When he straightened his agile mind had jumped to another subject. Spock was not surprised when he said, "Bones is right. I've let myself get off balance about Michaela. It's time to move on."

Spock was unwilling to agree completely. The resolve that had spurred Kirk had touched him along with the rest of the crew. "And if the labs find evidence connecting the violence on the Lox'theneth'nar with the planet?"

Kirk gave him a weary smile. "They won't. We both know that. No, it's time to stop the extra shifts in the labs. Time for me to... accept things the way they are."

Spock took a step closer. "Your decision is proof of how well balanced you are. May current experiments be continued? Some of the crew have become emotionally involved in their projects."

"Like their captain, eh?" Kirk ran fingers through his hair. The long hours awake seemed to suddenly catch up with him. His shoulders slumped. "I'm a hell of an example sometimes, aren't I? Yes, Mister Spock, current experiments may be continued. But not to such... excess. It's got to be reasonable." He walked towards the locked door. "See to it."

"Yes, sir."

Spock followed his captain, but nearly bumped into him when Kirk paused, his hand on the lock.
"But..." He turned, and dropped a kiss on Spock's surprised mouth. "Not right now. In a few hours, after we break off from the Lox'theneth'nar. We both need to rest. Sleep with me?"

Jim was such a fascinating mixture. Any logical being could not help but be transfixed by his contradictions. "Yes."

"Good. Because I always want you in my bed, Mister, or me in yours."

Spock allowed the briefest smile to grace his lips. "That is a most logical place for us to be, considering the hour of the night and our need for repose. We have four hours and thirty-seven minutes until we are due on the bridge, assuming you wish to be in the command chair when we separate from the Lox'theneth'nar."

Kirk rolled his eyes. "Four hours and thirty-seven minutes. Precisely?"

"Precisely."

"You and your time sense. Have I ever told you what a pain it is?"

"Many times, Captain."

"Good." Kirk's expression softened. "But you realize I wouldn't know what to do without it, don't you? I find your time sense to be.... almost indispensable. Almost as much as you are."

Never and always. Touching and touched. Drops of water fell from the red sky, into a river that stretched across desert sands....

Spock followed Kirk as he led the way out of the gym.

*****
The equipment was a collection of tubes and coils and conduits. Until eight hours ago, it had been an unobtrusive addition to the hydroponics lab, where it blended in nicely with standard starship machinery, and where the steady drip drip of liquid condensing was not at all unusual. For the past six months the captain, first officer and engineer of the Enterprise had been able to feign ignorance of the equipment's existence with straight faces.

But the still was not standard equipment. It was actually personal property, and all crew members had been encouraged to donate what they could of their own to the colonists who had so little to take with them to a new world. So the two engineering ensigns who were the still's primary designers had decreed that it would admirably serve the beings from the Lox'theneth'nar as a water purification system, given a tweak here and an adjustment there. Besides, a new design for more efficient distilling had occurred to one of them the previous week. But that did not stop either of the young men from congratulating themselves on their altruism.

The problem had been in releasing the tubes and coils from their hiding place, behind the soybeans and right next to the quadrotriticale. It had taken hours longer than expected, so that when the ensigns finally had the equipment packed and labelled, with all the instructions anyone could want included, the Enterprise was only minutes away from warping its way to starbase twenty-four.

They met the first officer as they maneuvered the box marked "Fragile," in Standard and six other languages, to transporter room four. It did not take Spock long to determine their purpose. Although the last donated items had been beamed to the asteroid-ship more than two hours previously, it was true that a water purification system would be most useful. And there had been considerable effort put forth in altering the equipment for a new purpose. It would be logical to allow the colonists to benefit.

The ship's fresh-faced quartermaster, Lieutenant Randall LeCoeur, was the logical individual to beam over with the system and see it stowed properly in the cavernous cargo hold of the Lox'theneth'nar. He had overseen all the other donations. The delicate equipment did indeed require the special handling that was stencilled so sincerely all over the box; ideally it required a portable force field to prevent breakage, but undoubtedly none would be available. It would need to be placed most carefully.

But LeCoeur had gone off duty only two hours previously and was sleeping. His deputy would need to be found, instructed.... Stowage would only take a few minutes, fifteen at most. Spock decided to secure the box himself.

"All right, Mister Spock," the captain sighed from the bridge, where he was working on his second cup of coffee. "But hurry up and get it done fast. We're going to have to push it to get to Komack's party as it is."

The ensigns watched him mount the transporter platform with the box and anti-grav paddles attached to each side. The first officer faded away before they clapped one another on the back and left to celebrate their good deed with an early breakfast.

Spock materialized in the cargo hold. Contact with any of the ship's crew or passengers was unnecessary, although he was sure that communications officer Resl't was notifying the Loxenen command center of his presence on board their ship. Spock was relieved that no one was present to question his purpose; it would only delay their departure. Given the crowded living conditions, it was possible that only the ship's sub-standard and an-tique reactor was similarly uninhabited.
The hold was merely a bubble in the asteroid-ship's interior. Predictably, the walls were bare rock and the several-acres-large area was lit by only a lighting strip every thirty meters. His long shadow followed him and preceded him, and his footsteps echoed eerily on the duro-plast grey floor as he pushed the box down the long aisle.

The Loxenen line had not spent unnecessary funds on auxiliary equipment. Spock was forced to wedge the box between two larger ones. He cannibalized the securing line from the anti-grav unit and was in the process of hooking the three boxes together when he heard a sudden sound.

Footsteps, he instantly categorized. He would be required to make explanations after all. He twisted the coil tightly and prepared to stand and identify himself. A harsh voice speaking in heavily accented Standard stopped him.

"We're going to be early. Do you think somebody might see us?"

"Shut up. Nobody saw us except our own people." There were two of them.

"I want the others to see us. I'll kill them." Spock instantly stilled his breathing.

"Not yet. We'll hurt whoever gets in our way, but at the right time. You know that's the rules. I'll kill you if you kill anybody else now."

A guttural, frustrated groan. "It's hard to wait."

"I know. I want to do it too. The gergs!" Obviously, a curse. "We'll get them. But first we've got to go through with this change. Here, let's wait for the rest to catch up."

The footsteps stopped; the two individuals, males by the sound of their voices, came to a halt mere meters away. If Spock had stood, he might have been visible. He remained crouched in shadow, and tried unsuccessfully to see between cargo.

"It's a bad time to change. After what happened to Freneth, after what our two had to do to the woman. A bad time."

The other was harsh. "And if we had thought that when you changed? You'd be a weakling, stupid coward. When you change you change, you don't have a choice. You sound like a neo-meta. Maybe you didn't make the transition the way you should have. Maybe you should do it again."

Unmistakable threat.

"No! I'm just as committed to the cause as you are. If we need to baln somebody, then we baln. But the Feds have Freneth now, and the woman. What if they....?"

A raucous laugh. "Suspect us? Hah! Come on, let's go. At least Sed waited ...til the .... ip was ...."

Vulcan ears could detect no other words, although Spock strained to hear the last fading syl-lables. But then other noises and rustlings came from the two entrances to the hold. More individuals were following the first two, making their way to the cleared space that surrounded the air circulation shaft in the center.

At least fifty beings passed his hiding spot, and more entered the hold from the other entrance. Spock waited until the last being was twenty meters away. Then very cautiously he reached behind him for his communicator. There was a great temptation to inch his way forward to observe the surreptitious gathering that was clearly taking place here. It was what the captain would do. But Spock had spent too much time contemplating Kirk's impulsiveness to easily display it himself now. It was logical to return to the ship.
But was there enough time to beam back aboard the *Enterprise*, delay its departure, use sensors to track the group in the cargo hold, and obtain permission from the Lox'theneth'nar to further investigate the gathering? The animals in the hold next to this one had already obscured readings from the ship; the density of asteroid rock also impaired data collection. The sound of beam-out might alert the individuals, and scatter them.

The decision tree was not difficult to construct. Spock eased the communicator back onto his belt and crept forward.

*****

Kirk swiveled his chair towards communications. "Isn't he back yet?"

Lieutenant Resl't hunched his left shoulder, then hastily followed that with the human-norm shake of the head. "No, sssir. No transsporter activity reported in the passst twenty-five minutes."

Kirk frowned. "Try contacting him. We've got to get going."

The captain sat and watched, lines pinching into his forehead while Resl't called. There was no response. The first wisps of a headache began to infiltrate his consciousness.

Kirk punched one of the buttons on his console. "Transporter room."

"Nwanu here."

"Ensign, are you certain that Mr. Spock took a communicator with him when he beamed aboard the Lox'theneth'nar?"

"Yes, sir. I handed it to him myself."

"Kirk out." The captain stared at the center screen, chin in hand. "How long since he beamed over?"

"Twenty-eight minutesss now," Resl't replied. "Ssir, thiss is not like Mister Sspock. He isss meticulousss about check-inssss."

"Yes, he is, isn't he?" Kirk was up and out of his chair in one fluid motion. "Call the command center of the Lox'theneth'nar," he said as he strode to the upper deck. "Give my respects to Captain Wimberly and ask him if Mister Spock has contacted them." Kirk waved Ensign Singh from the seat in front of the science console, and sank into it himself. He stared at the multi-colored displays.

He felt.... nothing. Exactly what he'd felt the first day he'd met Spock and exactly what he'd felt yesterday. Nothing. If there were something seriously wrong, would he know it?

Irritated at his abstraction, Kirk jerked upright and leaned over the scanners. Reliance on a connection he couldn't even perceive would get them nowhere. The *Enterprise's* technology would find Spock.

A Vulcan reading should be easy to detect, he told himself, but it wasn't. There were too many other races on board the ship, and too much interference presented by other conditions. Either that, or other possibilities.... Gracelessly, Kirk relinquished the scanners to Singh with instructions to continue, and paced over to communications. His headache was getting worse.

Fifteen minutes later the new Loxenen captain, puffed up by his new authority, grudgingly agreed.
to initiate a search starting with the cargo hold, although he held out little hope for success on the huge ship. No, he did not require help from the starship. It was bad enough that one Enterprise officer had become lost just as they were ready to resume their journey; Starfleet did not need to risk another of their valuable people. Kirk ground his teeth at the insult, but remained silent. He needed Wimberly's cooperation.

On the Enterprise, shift was due to change within the hour, and Kirk had no hesitation in calling Hunyady from her breakfast to the bridge to replace the timid Singh. He needed someone who could read the sensors expertly. The captain paced along the upper deck.

Sulu slid into his helm seat, relieving third shift a full fifty minutes early. Somehow the word had spread. Uhura arrived five minutes later.

"Transmission from starbase twenty-four, sir," she announced as soon as she twisted the transponder into her ear. "They're asking for our ETA."

A not-so-subtle reminder from Komack that they were definitely expected. Kirk descended to the center well and sat. He rubbed at his aching temples; he had a very, very bad feeling growing inside.... "Sulu. If we're forced to delay... two hours?"

"If we increase speed to warp seven for half the trip, sir, we can still make it with thirty minutes to spare."

That gave them some leeway. Scotty would be wincing but they could push the ship all the way at warp seven if they needed to. Kirk nodded to Uhura. "Let them know we'll be coming, Lieutenant."

The asteroid-ship hovered on the viewscreen. Hunyady remained bent over the sensors; occasionally she twisted a dial or murmured a low-voiced command to the computer. Kirk tried not to look at her. That ship was big. Too big. It would be so easy to hide... anything on it. And Komack was perfectly capable of ordering them to abandon the search just so they could impress some swarmy politicians....

His worries were groundless. What could happen to the most alert officer on the Enterprise on a colony ship? Spock knew all about the conflicts among the races. He would be careful.

"Message from the Lox'theneth'nar, sir. They've searched the cargo hold and have found nothing."

"Acknowledged, Lieutenant. Extend our compliments and ask them to continue."

Another ten minutes passed. Spock had said that when the bond was complete he would always have a subliminal awareness of Kirk. But two, no three times in the past seven months they had achieved contact with one another outside the meld. Kirk concentrated and received nothing for his efforts but a greater appreciation for how much his head was pounding.

Even so, he instantly noticed when Hunyady's body stiffened. He was waiting expectantly by the rail that separated lower from upper deck before she completed turning away from the scanners. "I'm not perfectly sure, sir, but there's something that might be a Vulcan reading. In the hold where they've got the animals."

He hadn't been aware of the incredible tension in his solar plexus until he felt it release. "Clear enough to try beaming him over?"

"No, sir, the signal's not strong enough. I wouldn't recommend it."

"All right then." He turned, rubbed his hands together, orders on the tip of his tongue. But he didn't
have the time to issue them before both Sulu and Uhura were before him.

"Volunteer to beam over and search for Mister Spock, sir," the helmsman said. Uhura nodded her agreement.

Kirk looked at them. Good officers, both of them, and he knew Spock was comfortable with them. "All right. Get your reliefs. And let's take two security guards too. Phasers for everybody. Hunyady." He whirled about. "We'll need somebody who knows how to read a tricorder. Get your equipment. And Uhura.... Make sure that captain doesn't know we're coming until we're already there."

The animal hold was crowded with sheep, Centauran cattle, a few striped animals that were tall enough for riding. It stank, just like the rest of the ship had, and the lighting was dim. The animals gave no indication that six beings materializing in their midst was anything out of the ordinary.

Kirk took two steps forward. Besides the stock, the area appeared to be deserted. "Spock," he called out. He cupped his hands around his mouth. "Spock, can you hear me?"

The tricorder whirred. "That way," Hunyady pointed with the machine.

Kirk led the way, walking over the sawdust-covered floor that was slick with animal droppings and urine. The stock on the ship existed in even worse conditions than the sentient beings.

The ensign stopped, reoriented the tricorder, then pointed to a towering stack of straw. "There," she said.

Kirk looked at the bales thrown haphazardly one on top of the other in the corner of the room. There were probably.... at least a hundred of them, each about a meter square, and the top of the pyramid was surely six or seven meters high. It was the best estimating he could do, without his Vulcan computer to provide him with the precise dimensions. Spock would have specified them down to the last centimeter. But Spock might be under all that.... "Where, exactly?" he snapped out.

"Up and to the left." Hunyady squinted, and there was a new, desperate sound in her voice. "Captain, the readings are fluctuating. He's in difficulty."

But Kirk and Sulu were already three-quarters of the way up the precarious mountain, followed quickly by everyone else. "Here?" Kirk demanded, pointing down from where he balanced on the straw. "How far down?"

Hunyady shook her head, almost in tears, but already discarding her machine for a grip on the hay. "At least a few meters."

The bales were heavy; it took two of them to roll one off the stack and down to the floor. And it was dusty. The straw dust hung in the air and got in their eyes and noses. Kirk's eyes watered and his head throbbed even harder, though he barely noticed. He bent down to grab the end of another bale, Sulu took the other side, and they both heaved. He sneezed, and remembered how Spock had been coming down with a cold, and reached for more straw....

Under it, Spock sprawled on his back. His head hung back, wedged in a crevice between two bales; one leg was flung out to the side, the other was crooked beneath him. His blue-clad arms were curled upon his chest. The uniform tunic was wrinkled and crushed, the stretched skin of his neck was fissured with the imprint of straw. He looked insubstantial, like a rag doll that had been carelessly thrown away. He looked as if he had been crushed to death.

Except that his chest was heaving, gulping in suddenly available air. How could he have breathed,
Kirk wondered as he reached to gently pull the head up from the crevice. Somehow he was on his knees beside the crooked form, and he slipped one leg under Spock's neck as he eased the dark head onto his lap. They must have removed at least two thousand pounds of straw from over his body. Only his Vulcan strength had kept him alive.

Translucent eyelids were fluttering already. Kirk bent over him. "Spock," he whispered, then cleared his throat and said more strongly, "Spock."

The brown eyes opened. They traveled over Kirk's face, touching his eyes, his nose, down to his mouth. Kirk felt a smile threatening that he did not attempt to restrain. Spock was all....

But he wasn't. Consternation sprung into the gaze fastened on the captain's face. Then alarm. The eyes darted to the side, sliding over Uhura's hovering form, then to the right, where security woman Prendel't crouched. A moment later only the whites of the eyes showed as the pupils rolled under the eyelids before returning to that disoriented seeking....

Spock's right arm lifted off his chest. His movements were as jerky and uncontrolled as his gaze. He flailed about as if he were trying to touch something, but Kirk couldn't imagine what.

He grabbed for the long fingers, and became even more alarmed when they curled about his with undisguised desperation. "Jim?" Spock rasped. The dust must have settled deep in his lungs. "J-Jim?"

"I'm here, Spock."

The first officer blinked rapidly, seeming to stare at the far corner of the ceiling over Uhura's head. "Wha...?"

Spock always had the most precise articulation. Had he heard what Kirk said? "What's wrong? Who hurt you?"

"I...I..." Finally the brown gaze settled on his face again and held. Spock reached out with his other hand and shakily touched Kirk's cheek.

Kirk held steady under the touch of those trembling fingers, uncomfortably aware of their audience but unwilling to withdraw when Spock so obviously needed him. Everyone knew of their deep friendship....

"I... don't know." Speaking was difficult. Could lack of oxygen have caused brain damage? The thin lips seemed to draw exaggerated shapes for the words. "I... d-don't know wh-wh-who..." The fingers pressed flat against the side of Kirk's face, and that physical reassurance seemed to send strength flowing between them. Spock became calmer. He almost visibly pulled himself together. "I do not r-remember."

"Well, whatever happened, we're getting you out of here. You need sickbay." He looked down at where Hunyady was perched by the first officer's feet.

"No broken bones, Captain," Hunyady reported, consulting the tricorder. "No obvious signs of internal bleeding. It should be safe to transport him."

They tried to pull Spock up into a sitting position and only half succeeded. He sagged back against Kirk's chest, unable to hold himself up, closing his eyes and wincing as if in pain. His hands started to aimlessly wander again, like a blind man trying to touch.... Kirk exchanged an alarmed glance with Uhura, then defiantly wrapped his arms around the thin shoulders and grabbed the fingers in his own. He hugged tight. Spock immediately calmed, and turned his head to nestle it in the crook
of Kirk's neck. It was a startlingly intimate gesture, one Spock would never have contemplated if he were even halfway aware of his surroundings. But Kirk didn't care. If this was what his lover needed, than that's what Kirk would give him.

A brown-skinned hand patted him on the arm. "Just a minute, Captain. We'll be home soon. Doctor McCoy is being called to the transporter room now." Kirk nodded tightly, felt his chin brush against Spock's cap of dark hair, and pushed down the seeds of panic that were threatening to blossom in his gut. What the hell was wrong?

Abruptly Kirk jerked his head upright. Anyone would think that he was disoriented. He should have been the one to order the beam-over. And why hadn't he even thought to include McCoy in their party? Then there was basic transporter safety combined with their recent fiasco with Hunyady, plus two of them using the same pad.... "Just four of us," he ordered. "Let's not overload the beam. And Josephs, look around. See if there are any clues as to who did this."

"Right, Captain." Without further consultation, Sulu, Josephs and Prendel retreated, leaving Uhura and Hunyady kneeling to either side.

The tingle of the beam took them. The Enterprise formed. Only Kyle presided over the console; neither McCoy nor any of his medical staff had yet arrived.

The form in his arms started to struggle and tried to stand upright. Without any words being spoken, Kirk knew that the Vulcan's pride had kicked in. He knew how Spock would hate to be seen so helpless, especially in front of McCoy. It was an encouraging sign. Kirk pulled back and tried to help.

Spock stood and swayed. Kirk removed his steadying arms from the shoulders and Spock did not topple over. Good.

The first officer took one halting step forward, then another. Then another, but he shuffled, walking with his hands extended in front of him as if searching for obstacles, as if he were trying to feel something in the air.... Kirk watched him from only centimeters away. He was totally perplexed. Spock was definitely not blind, but he was acting like a man deprived of his sight.

Another step brought him to the edge of the platform. One foot extended, but before his knees buckled Kirk knew that Spock had misjudged the motion necessary to step down. The captain darted forward to catch him as he toppled forward across the steps. He would have fallen flat on his face if Kirk hadn't been there to ease him to the floor as gently as he could. Spock turned over onto his side, curled his legs up, and pulled his arms in. He assumed a fetal position right on the transporter room floor. And McCoy was still missing.

Kirk leaned over, one arm gripped a sharp shoulder. "Spock, what's wrong? What's wrong?"

But Spock didn't answer.

*****
Now. Where was I? Oh, yeah. That day when Spock got blasted on the Lox-theneth'nar. Now there's a tongue-twister.

I don't think Jim will ever forgive me for not being in the transporter room when they beamed over. But he should. Damn it, I tried my best. Could he really think that I was deliberately delaying when I knew there was a medical emergency?

No. I know he doesn't think that. I've got to calm down and try to be sensible. That's what this log is for, to try to make sense out of everything that happened over the past few weeks. Best tool in the galaxy, this little recorder here. That, and the glass of brandy in my hand. Talk it out, that's what my daddy used to say, God bless him. Talk it out. A fair psychologist, my daddy.

Jim knows I have standing orders with the sickbay staff to be called in for anything involving Spock. It doesn't matter that M'Benga interned in a Vulcan ward, he still doesn't know that weird hybrid body the way I do. And Spock's always so damned uncomfortable around doctors and in sickbay, as if we were trying to get him to reveal all the secrets he's been spending his life keeping. Even though we've been fighting forever, I still think he's more comfortable with me, trading nasty cracks, than he is with anybody else.

Even so, M'Benga probably would have let me sleep and answered the call to the transporter himself, if it hadn't been for the stasis alarm going off right after word came in about Spock. When Paul relieved me at midnight, I guess I looked about as exhausted as a man could look. I was lucky he didn't try to order me to stay in sickbay as a patient instead of letting me go to my quarters. I could see him thinking it, wondering if I'd let him get away with ordering me around. But he didn't, and I went to my own bed, gratefully, I might add. Maybe I came back a little too soon from that operation. Hell, I know I did. But what could I have done? People needed me.

Damn it, Jim needed me, though he didn't realize it. I wish I could forget the look on his face when I raced in with the stat crew. I don't know what I'd expected. All I'd been told was that Spock had been crushed. I didn't have any information on the condition he was in, whether he was conscious, what his vital signs were. Like so many times before, I was wondering if he was going to live. One of my nightmares, made worse because of what they'd told me.

'Cause in another part of my mind I was worrying about how the captain would react. I mean, now that I knew they were lovers....

Jim looked like... well, now, how am I gonna describe him? I can write a technical paper with the best of them, but I don't know that I have the right words to paint the picture that's always going to be in my mind. Jim looked like... more like a captain, I suppose, than I've ever seen him. He was kneeling down on the floor next to Spock, one hand on his shoulder, the way I suppose I was uneasily expecting to see him, like a lover, and yet he was still all captain. He was made of steel, or neutronium, or whatever the big brains are telling us the hardest substance in the galaxy is this week. I don't know how else to explain it. Still all captain.

He looked up at me.... Every doctor is familiar with that look. One week into internship, I lost my first patient and I saw the accusation in the eyes of the people who'd loved him. As a father, a
husband, a friend, not just a patient. Every doctor learns to cope, but it's never easy. They all think "if only the doctor had been able to..." then their lives wouldn't have been shattered.

I need another drink. I'm not making sense. Or maybe I'm making too much sense. Shake hands with death, that's what they should have said when they handed me my diploma. You two'll become right well acquainted soon.

Well, Spock wasn't dead. He was breathing. Traumatized as hell, but breathing.

The captain stood up when I knelt down and started my examination. "Take care of him, Doctor," he said, and then he beamed back where he'd come from. Just like a captain taking care of business in difficult times.

Not really. He left like he was afraid to stay.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Enterprise was stretching her wings.

The newest tech in maintenance finished a check of the electrical system on the shuttlecraft Galileo, jumped down to the hanger floor and felt vibration through the soles of his shoes. He shrugged at the odd sensation, then went to stow his tools. He thought nothing more of the vague hum. Senior officers knew what they were doing.

Ensign Shinswani was called from her bed to monitor the anti-matter flux in engineering. She was first dismayed, then proud that she'd been assigned such an important post. A few months ago there had been an imbalance in the engines, and though it had been corrected, barely before disaster struck, Engineer Scott was taking no chances now. His lads and lassies were put on their own red alert.

Lieutenant Dawson paused by Shinswani's station, quietly took her report and moved on. Shinswani's blunt fingers rested on the flux panel. She felt the trembling of the ship, like a live thing breathing, giving comfort. The engines would take the strain with no trouble. She was proud to wear the red uniform.

On the bridge Lieutenant Uhura twisted dials in an attempt to keep a clear line to starbase twenty-four through the distortion of high warp speed. The faster the Enterprise traveled, the more difficult it was to maintain communication. Tan Resl't could have done it, and probably Joe Vitek, the second shift com officer, but neither of them could have accomplished the task as easily as the Bantu woman with the com link in her ear. She rode the airwaves like a confident swimmer, slicing through interference, bobbing in the electromagnetic current. Her graceful body flexed to the left as the signal began to fade, then straightened as she made the adjustments to keep it on line. Her fingers rested lightly on one dial, and through it she could feel the ship singing.

She glanced up at the white-haired figure on the screen. We're coming, she thought. As fast as a cheetah racing after a gazelle, the ship was whipping through space at warp seven, trying to make a five day journey in less than three. Komack didn't need to be so... They would arrive at the appointed time; the crew of the Enterprise knew how to follow orders, even if it meant taking the engines to their limit.

But that, according to Admiral Komack, was the problem.
"You're showboating, Kirk," the admiral barked. "Why can't you ever do anything simple? Haven't you ever heard of a fuel consumption report? Did you plan to come roaring into orbit with smoke coming out of your nacelles?"

Kirk stood next to his command chair. Uhura had noticed that he hadn't sat down since he'd arrived back on the bridge from the Lox'theneth'nar. Now he answered Komack with one hand resting on the arm console. She saw his fingers curl and tighten.

"Admiral, as I've already explained, we could not ignore the distress signal and--."

"--I've heard all that, you don't have to quote regulations to me. I've sat on my own bridge and answered more distress calls than you ever will. But I gave you orders. I don't want representative O'Malley to wait on you."

"He won't. The Enterprise will arrive at starbase twenty-four at the time you specified, Admiral. Although my better judgment tells me we should have stayed and investigated what's happening on the Lox'theneth'nar."

"Then starfleet should be grateful that it's not your judgment that prevails, Kirk. A little friction between races, that's all you and your first officer ran into. And next time you decide to turn Good Samaritan, remember that the private lines have their own crews to take care of ships in trouble. You render immediate assistance, then call them in to take care of the rest. We don't need to be spending Federation credits on private Enterprises. It's not your job to take care of every misfit you come across."

Kirk's lips tightened. Uhura wondered how he could tolerate the very public dressing down. Kirk never did that. Mistakes on the Enterprise were corrected promptly, but always fairly. But any comprehensive criticisms took place behind closed doors.

"I hear you, Admiral."

It was as close to insubordination as Kirk had allowed himself so far, and Komack caught every nuance of disrespectful intention. His eyes narrowed.

"You'd better, Mister. Now, on to other matters." The Admiral planted both elbows on the surface in front of him. "It seems that you're not the only youngster with talent who's going to rise through the ranks quickly. You've got one on your ship. An...." He consulted a small screen built into his desk. "...Irina Hunyady. She's promoted to lieutenant, effective immediately. Confirmation to be transmitted." He looked hard at Kirk, but the captain only nodded.

"All right, then," the admiral harumphed. "I'll expect to see you at the private lunch I'm hosting for O'Malley at thirteen hundred hours on Thursday. The medal presentation ceremony will take place after that, with a press conference scheduled for sixteen thirty. I want a full honor guard from the Enterprise. Do I have to tell you who to put in that detail?"

For a moment Uhura, inevitably eavesdropping along with every other member of the bridge crew, didn't understand. What did Komack mean? Then she noticed the disgusted look on Kirk's face and comprehension dawned.

O'Malley was making a big deal of the medal ceremony because the Enterprise was the first fully integrated ship in starfleet. Komack wanted Kirk to pick a disproportionate number of non-humans for the honor guard. For show. So they could have their picture taken.

Uhura thought of Tan Resl't. Competent, talented, dependable. It wasn't just a promotional gesture
that had made him second in communications. And Ensign Tarn. Somewhat irritating, but from all accounts a good security officer. They’d both earned their ranks and places on the ship. How would she herself feel if she were being singled out because her skin color was different from the admiral’s, asked to have her holo spread on the first page of The Galactic News just to make a point? She’d hate it. Tan would hate it too. Using all the races in the Federation for starship duty made sense, it had been long overdue. But making a spectacle of the beings involved.... It wasn’t right. It smacked of tokenism.

"No, sir," Kirk replied. "I understand the need for public relations. You will not be disappointed with my people."

"Good. See to it. And do whatever you can to get Commander Spock back on his feet. We've got to have him there. He's become the most visible symbol of the non-human presence in starfleet that we've got."

Uhura sucked in a soundless breath. That heartless so-and-so.... In the hours since Spock had been taken to sickbay, there'd only been one update on his condition. It had said, "Guarded" and that was it. Uhura was worried. The first officer had looked so helpless, curled up on the floor like an infant. The memory made her squirm, as if it were slightly obscene.

Kirk took one quick step towards the screen. "I cannot guarantee Mister Spock will be well enough. We haven't even established what's wrong with him yet."

Komack waved a hand. "If he can walk, bring him with you. I imagine he'll recover from a bump on the head quickly enough. It's not going to strain him too much to watch you get a medal. I'll expect him, and you," the admiral pointed, "in dress uniforms, and on time. Komack out."

Kirk turned and was up beside Uhura before the image of the admiral faded completely from the screen. "Get engineering for me, Lieutenant."

A moment later Scotty was on the line. "Aye, sir?"

"Condition of the engines, Mister Scott?"

"We're in fine shape, sir. If we hitch down to warp six for a few hours every now and then, I doona see any problems."

"Current ETA brings us to the 'base two hours too late, Mister Scott. The admiral is out for my hide. Care to save it?"

A rich chuckle drifted from the intercom grid, and Uhura had to smile in turn. Who could deny such an honest request? Not the chief engineer, for whom the reputations of his engines, the ship, and his captain were inextricably entwined.

"Aye, sir, that we can. The bairns will get you there a wee bit faster if we ask nicely."

"Good. Kirk out." He swung around to face the helm. "Mister Sulu, Mister Chekov, re-calculate speed so we arrive at seven hundred hours on the day of the big event." His voice was rich with irony. "Coordinate with Mister Scott."

A chorus of "aye-ayes" answered him, seemingly strictly military, but Uhura caught the satisfaction behind their response. The admiral was worried that the Enterprise wouldn't be there on time. Kirk would bring his ship in early to make a point.

"Mr. Sulu, you have the con. Lieutenant," he addressed Uhura. "Please confirm with department
heads that the meeting Mister Spock scheduled for 1200 hours will be held at 1500. I'll be taking it."

Uhura nodded, but looked at him with a question in her eye. Kirk didn't have to respond to that unspoken query, but he'd always treated his subordinate officers with respect. She wasn't surprised when he added, "Tell them to bring all the results from the Michaelan projects with them. We're making one final review and then putting the subject to bed."

She stifled her protest. Just when her own research had begun to look promising....

Kirk was still speaking. "Notify Lieutenant Tu that I want to talk with him in my office immediately." Tu was Spock's second-in-command in sciences. He'd need to be briefed.

"Aye, sir."

"And then get Ensign Hunyady for me. Send her to my office after Tu. I don't want her hearing about her promotion from the grapevine."

Again, "Yes, sir." Uhura watched Kirk walk to the turbo. Odd that he hadn't asked her to contact sickbay. She almost called out with the offer, but his whole demeanor had changed now that he wasn't giving orders. His face was set in steely lines of concentration, and she stopped herself because she knew her words wouldn't be welcome. No one interrupted the captain when he looked like that. Undoubtedly, he'd find the time between meetings to check on Mister Spock.

When Kirk entered the lift and turned to face forward, he pressed the heels of his palms to his forehead right before the doors closed.

Sagging against the back of the lift, Kirk reviewed what was before him. Interview Tu. Meet with Hunyady; congratulate her. Lead the departmental meeting, balance the objections of intent scientists with the decision he had made. Contact the research vessel in orbit around Michaela to transmit data. Walk to where Scotty presided over engineering and receive reports on the engines. Evaluate the strain of warp seven and make another decision on whether to continue at the breakneck speed or miss Komack's deadline for the good of the ship. He would do all of it this afternoon. All of it, captain's duties.

Kirk had fulfilled his role a hundred times before feeling even worse than he did now, with a headache slicing through his thoughts. And he was damned if he would allow anything to interfere with the performance of his duties today, and he was damned if he would go to sickbay to ask for something for his pounding head. It would look like he couldn't bear to be away from his lover. It would look like he didn't trust McCoy's professional expertise.

And so when he reached his office he continued to perform as a captain was expected to perform. Tu was dismayed at the dismantling of the Michaelan projects; Kirk had to struggle to find the patience to deal with his protests.

Hunyady hid a blinding joy at her promotion behind a solemn professional demeanor. She reminded Kirk of when he'd been promoted to lieutenant; he'd been so determined to maintain the gravity expected of an officer and a gentlemen, to reward the trust that had been given to him. He'd been young, but not quite as young as the woman saluting him with the sharpest of salutes. He stood up and returned the gesture. So long ago....

He sat down heavily when she left, but did not allow himself a moment to think. He would do his duty, damn it. He commanded the computer to pull up the records for the departmental meeting. His voice sounded dull in the quiet air, the walls seemed to absorb each syllable so there was no
resonance left. He stared at the computer screen. Just words.

He felt... numb. Like he couldn't feel the objects he touched and guided his movements by sight alone. Or as if he didn't know what emotions he should have, and so he felt only because his intellect guided his heart. Nothing was genuine.

Except this irrational feeling that McCoy was standing behind him, just out of sight. He was weighing Kirk's every word, every decision, judging him. Could he send Spock into death? Could he be a lover and a captain?

Yes.

No.

Yes.

Kirk resisted the temptation to drop his aching head into his arms, resisted the temptation to pound his fist on the desk. He stared at the intercom instead, willed it to come to life and tell him Spock was all right. And if it did, he would answer in calm, measured tones, the way a captain did, the way he'd been trained to do, the way he'd done already so many times before they were lovers.

But there was no call for the captain, and he returned his attention to the computer. But the intercom was within his field of vision, and he couldn't help but be aware of it. It was like a black hole, reaching out into space and sucking him in... He cursed himself for being so conscious of the cross-hatched piece of metal and the news it might bring. He wasn't passing this self-imposed test. A captain couldn't be preoccupied with the life of a single crew member. The good of the entire crew came first, starfleet's mission must always take priority. And they did. They would.

He glanced at the chronometer display on the upper left corner of the screen. Twenty minutes to the meeting in briefing room two. He couldn't face his people with his head swimming and spots before his eyes.

Kirk stood and made his way into the bathroom, tore open the package of standard issue analgesic and washed the tablets down with a tumbler of water. He leaned heavily over the sink and stared at himself in the mirror.

How had he come to this? Life was unreal. He was a career starfleet officer, committed to his oath and his ship and one skinny Vulcan male. It couldn't be. So much had changed. Until just a few months ago, he had loved only women, his independence, and being the captain of the Enterprise. He hadn't needed anyone or anything else.

But God, he needed Spock. Happy, healthy. He needed to see the light in those dark eyes, now and forever. Not anybody else. Just... the first officer of the Enterprise. Sanctuary.

He loved Spock so much it hurt. Why hadn't McCoy contacted him? His head throbbed in time to the staccato heartbeat he imagined pumping in sickbay.

The tablets took the edge off the pain. The meeting went smoothly. Tu was a model of support and efficiency, and schedules were developed to allow the completion of most experiments on a low priority basis. Kirk left the briefing room convinced he'd done the right thing. He passed an intercom on the hallway wall without glancing at it, then turned back.

"Uhura? Any word from sickbay?"

"Another update, sir. Mister Spock's condition is still listed as 'Guarded'."
"Thank you, lieutenant." He clicked off and made his way to engineering.

Finally it was 1800 hours. Time for dinner because he hadn't had any lunch, but his stomach rebelled at the thought. Two cups of coffee on the bridge this morning were all he wanted this day. But that wasn't smart. He'd order any crewman who wouldn't eat straight into the mess hall and a meal, or order him to McCoy's domain. Kirk turned his steps to one more duty.

And at last the intercom sounded for the captain.

He punched the button outside the rec room on deck five. "Kirk here."

"McCoy here, Captain. I'd like to see you in sickbay. Now."

The lover couldn't ask, but the captain could. "How is Mister Spock, Doctor?"

"He's conscious, and out of danger. But there are a few things we need to discuss."

He should feel something because of that, right? Why didn't the heaviness lift? "I'll be right there."

The antiseptic sickbay smell assaulted him as he walked in the always-open doorway. The lights, on day and night, were too bright for his eyes that had been scorched by the pain radiating behind each temple. He put his head down and plowed towards where he thought McCoy would be, his office.

A hand grabbed him about the upper arm before he got halfway across the ward. "Whoa, there."

There was pressure to turn him in the opposite direction, propelling him. "Hop on up here." A diagnostic bed. "I need to have a look at you."

"I'm fine," Kirk protested, but in truth the bed felt wonderful and he sank back onto it. A medical scanner whirred, and his eyes half-closed.

"A textbook case," McCoy muttered to himself. "Here, this should make you feel better." A hypo hissed into his arm.

Kirk opened his mouth to object, but the physician forestalled him. "Don't talk. This shouldn't take long to have an effect. Lie still."

It took five minutes, with Kirk stretched out on the bed with his eyes squinted shut and McCoy standing silently beside him, but then the pain started to recede. And the emptiness in the pit of his stomach began to fade away too. He opened his eyes and the lights were bearable. The world looked real again. He looked into McCoy's shuttered face. "What did you give me?"

"The name isn't important. The purpose is. I gave you...." McCoy stopped, examined the readings on the overhead panel, then glanced back down at his captain. "Come on. You're doing better now. Let's have a talk in my office."

Kirk levered himself up carefully and followed McCoy. The door to the room towards the back of sickbay where McCoy always put Spock, "so we can turn up the heat" was closed. Kirk sat down in the chair before the doctor's desk.

"All right. What's happened? Tell me how Spock is."

McCoy planted his elbows on the desk and leaned forward. "Spock regained rationality only a few hours ago, and it's taken us a while to piece this together. Captain, your first officer's mind was attacked telepathically on the Lox'theneth'nar. He has no memory of what happened. He shows
severe trauma in what for humans would be the occipital and temporal lobes of the brain--.

Kirk interrupted. "The same areas that were traumatized in the crew woman from the Lox'theneth'nar."

"Right, although Vulcans use that brain tissue for slightly different things. Among them, their telepathic abilities." McCoy paused, took a deep breath, then plunged on. "Everything that's connected to Spock's telepathy, his time sense, his ability to meld, to control pain, to heal himself has been affected. And that's why I had to give you that shot. It's a drug developed by a Deltan pharmaceutical firm to counteract the effects of a traumatic break in telepathic contact. In your case, and Spock's, a broken bond. I don't know how you managed to function today. Didn't you realize something was wrong?"

Kirk couldn't get past the words: broken bond. He mouthed them, discovered that they filled the emptiness in the center of his chest with a fresher, sharper pain than had been there before. Oh, dear God. After the happiness in Spock's eyes when they'd first discovered the Il'safarr, the way Spock had found ecstasy making love within the fledgling bond. Broken.

But what was broken might be fixed. Maybe....

"Affected? You said Spock's abilities are affected?" Kirk asked, grasping at straws.

McCoy visibly steeled himself. "Wiped out," he said gruffly. "Like they were lifted right out of his mind. There's not much of Vulcan left in Spock right now."

Kirk's mouth went dry. "For how long?" He could barely get the words out.

The lines in McCoy's forehead got deeper. He'd never been good at this.... "Look. This situation is way beyond me. We'll get him to a Vulcan healer as soon as we can. But... it doesn't look too good. I've checked the case histories. There are only a few, and it's hard to tell which ones apply in this situation." He was delaying, putting off the inevitable moment. He didn't want to hurt Jim. Bad enough this had happened to Spock, but now to have the captain all tangled up in the same devastation.... "And Vulcans have more than just telepathy, it's overlaid by this melding and bonding business. But even telepathic burnout alone is not something that's fixed easily. I hate to say this, but we've got to face facts. Not many recover. The prognosis is not good."

There was a long silence while McCoy stared at the top of Kirk's bowed head and the captain stared at the top of the desk. Kirk fought against the tightness in his chest and in his throat. He would not break down in front of McCoy. He wouldn't. Not when he imagined the despair Spock must be feeling at the thought of a life without Vulcan abilities, and not when he touched the raw wound that throbbed with the promise that he might never feel Spock's mind in his again. No. He was the captain. A captain was in control of his ship and in control of himself. A captain sought alternatives, and answers.

Kirk stood up abruptly, almost but not quite losing his balance as the chair scraped back behind him. "I've got to see him."

McCoy held up a restraining hand. "All right. Soon. But there's more to talk about first."

Kirk whirled away; he couldn't stand to see his friend's face anymore. "What more could you say, McCoy?" Kirk spoke to the closed door in front of him. He didn't know where the flood of bitterness was coming from, but it spewed from his lips. "Isn't this exactly what you wanted to happen? You couldn't stand the thought of our minds touching, you were probably disgusted when I told you about the bond forming between us. So now you don't have to worry about any of it. All
you have to do is treat two cases of a broken bond and get on with your life."

He paused for breath and denied the prickling behind his eyes that threatened tears. Damn it, no. He wouldn't.

Behind him, he heard McCoy stir. "Jim--." His name was all softness, all sympathy.

But he wouldn't let McCoy speak. He wanted to be angry with him. "A broken bond. You say it so
damn calmly. You probably think it's like a broken arm or a broken leg. God Almighty, you don't
even know what you're saying, what it means. Not many recover? Do you know what that will do
to him? Do you know what that will do to me?"

It was all he could do to drag air into his lungs and not let the despair inside him escape. Kirk
pressed his chin into his chest, screwed his eyes shut. He couldn't go out into sickbay like this, and
he didn't want to stay in McCoy's presence. He moved to his left and pressed his forearm up
against the unyielding wall. He dropped his face into his arm and concentrated on breathing.

After a few moments McCoy stood. Every movement seemed hyper-loud to Kirk's ears, almost
painful, as if the sounds were broadcast straight to his eardrums to vibrate there. He heard McCoy
tug on his sickbay tunic, take a breath and walk towards him. The footsteps fell into a rhythm. Bro-
ken-bond. Bro-ken-bond. It echoed in Kirk's head. A hand rose to rest on his shoulder, and he
flinched.

"Jim. You're understandably upset, but I'm not really the selfish bastard you think I am. I'm guilty
of not realizing that you were also affected until just a little while ago, I'll admit that. I'm just not
used to thinking of you and Spock as a couple, and maybe I don't know as much as I should about
telepathically linked couples. But I do have some idea of what this must mean to you. I...."

"Spare me your sympathy, McCoy. I don't want it." It was so much easier to hold on to the anger
than to acknowledge McCoy's understanding touch. He couldn't take it now.

The doctor's voice was still soft. "You've got my sympathy whether you want it or not, Jim. And
Spock does too. I do understand how you're feeling."

"How could you?" Kirk threw back, his face still muffled against his arm. "I don't understand it
myself. Look at me. Some captain I am. I can't function like this."

The hand on his shoulder tightened. "You're human, Jim, capable of love and disappointment and
feelings of loss. When they gave you your stripes they didn't take any of that away from you.
Thank God they didn't. And besides, I know something that you don't know, and you should."

This time Kirk lifted his head and turned just enough so he could see McCoy standing next to him.
"What?"

"Part of your emotional upset is caused by the abrupt severing of the contact you had with Spock.
It's a documented symptom, even for the Vulcans. This wouldn't have been easy, not even for one
of them. I don't know how you managed to act like nothing was happening."

Kirk took a deep clearing breath; his arm dropped to his side and he turned to face McCoy all the
way. "Probably because I never felt the bond. I saw it in our last meld and Spock said he could feel
it. But I never did." He didn't want the bleakness in his soul to leech out into his voice, it revealed
too much of how he was feeling.

McCoy nodded, all understanding physician. "It might be that. Or it might be that your bond was
just beginning to form. Right? Spock told me it was different than one that was instituted by a
"Yes. We did it... on our own. How is he?"

McCoy walked back around his desk and sat down before he answered. "I don't know. Mentally, he's got all his faculties, still has that razor-sharp intellect. His brain hasn't been affected in that way. Emotionally, he's probably a wreck inside, but he sure isn't going to let me see that. You maybe. The habit of controlling his emotions... well, I don't think that's linked to what's happened. That's a matter of will and training. And right now he's calling on every ounce of will he's got. But physically..." McCoy paused.

Kirk's head went up, like a lion that suddenly scents danger on the wind. "I thought he was all right physically. You said that he was attacked telepathically."

"Right. If you consider massive bruising and almost having your chest crushed all right. He's in a fair amount of pain. Not to mention a respiratory infection he's managed to pick up. But that's not what I meant. Jim, telepathy, and whatever else it is that Vulcans have, it's not something isolated in one corner of their minds. It permeates their whole being, it affects all their perceptions. It is literally a sixth sense, standing alone but also mingled with all the others. Now Spock doesn't have that. And it's very disorienting."

Understanding dawned. "That's why he acted like he couldn't see, couldn't walk."

"Uh-huh. Remember how I said the woman from the Lox'theneth'nar probably would be hallucinating if she had regained consciousness? That she wouldn't be able to organize the input from her senses? That's what's going on with Spock, except that his case is so much more complicated because of his mental abilities. His telepathic sense has always been there for him, helped him interpret the way he interacts with the world. It's the same with all telepaths, the nerve centers for sight and hearing, balance and spatial perception, it all snakes through the occipital and temporal lobes, entwined with the neurologic basis for telepathy. Now, not only has the Vulcan part of him been short-circuited, but every other sense has been traumatized too. In addition to all the other implications this has for him, and God alone knows there are some mighty big ones here, he literally has to learn to walk all over again. To see with only his own eyes and hear with only his own ears."

His own eyes and his own ears, and now, only his own mind. Never to feel the touch of another mind in love and desire.... Spock had fallen off the transporter pad, had curled up like a fetus on the floor, because the trauma of being truly alone had been so great....

It was almost too much for him to bear. Kirk sagged, and sat down with a boneless lack of grace that betrayed his utter weariness. He leaned his elbows on the desk and rubbed at his eyes, effectively shielding his devastation. "Oh, God. What can we do for him?"

McCoy stared at his captain for a long moment. Then he leaned back in his chair and rapped his teeth meditatively, for all the world giving the impression of a man thinking deeply. But he wasn't. He was allowing the "significant other" in his patient's life the opportunity to gain some composure. It was a technique he had learned years ago. He waited until he heard Kirk take four deep, shuddering breaths, and until his shoulders were still.

"Do for him? We get him to some expert somewhere and hope he or she tells us something encouraging. Until then, I pump him full of drugs from the Vulcan pharmacological lexicon, and pray that time and some random molecule does something to bring him back to normal."

Kirk lifted his head. His face was pale, but there was a sudden calmness about him that McCoy had
seen before in times of crisis. "Is there a Vulcan healer on starbase twenty-four? It's a big facility. There might be."

"I don't know. I haven't had the time to check yet."

Kirk pointed to the intercom. "Then check. And if there isn't somebody there we'll find somebody and get them to the 'base by the time we reach orbit. We've got two and a half days."

"Jim, don't get your hopes up. There isn't much of a chance...."

The captain rose and leaned on the desk, his chin thrust forward. "Don't quote odds to me, McCoy, I don't want to hear them. You say Spock needs a healer. We'll get him one."

"For evaluation purposes," McCoy said, almost desperately. "Not for a cure. There isn't a cure. Any improvement that's ever occurred in this kind of burn-out has been spontaneous, like giving a bruise time to heal. And that hasn't happened very often."

"We don't know how this happened to him, we don't know why, and we can't make assumptions about whether he'll ever recover. Or how." Kirk's voice strengthened with every word. His posture was military straight now. "I order you not to make assumptions. You've got to try--."

"Damn it, Captain," McCoy's fist thumped on the desk, then he jerked onto his feet. The chair banged against the wall, but neither man noticed. "I'm not giving up. Don't you think I'll do everything I can for him? And for you? But you've got to face facts. Not many recover."

Captain and chief medical officer stared at one another for a long ten seconds, then Kirk drew in a deep breath. "I don't know what your definition of 'not many' is. But it's going to include Spock. It's going to."

*****

Fifteen minutes later Kirk stood outside the closed door in the back of sickbay. The stasis room, ominously silent, was to his left. He squared his shoulders and walked forward.

Med Tech Harless, the ship's part-time physical therapist, glanced up as the door swished open. He had one hand on the metal walker in the center of the room, and one hand under Spock's elbow. The first officer, clad in a white t-shirt and blue draw-string pajama pants, leaned heavily upon the walker. His back was to Kirk, but it wasn't difficult to see the sudden tension that swept up muscles and spine, stiffening shoulders.

Kirk had expected Harless; McCoy'd told him that Spock had insisted on starting p.t. immediately.

"Mister Harless." Kirk nodded towards the middle-aged man who'd been an unobtrusive part of sickbay for as long as he could remember. But he couldn't take his eyes off that rigid back. "Spock."

Harless nodded in return. "Captain. If you just wait a minute while I help Mister Spock back to the bed...."

"No. That's all right. I can do it." Kirk jerked his head in the direction of the door.

Harless glanced at the bowed face of his patient, back to his captain, then eased his supporting hand away. "Yes, sir." He left.

Before Kirk could move Spock jerked the walker forward and followed it with an agonizingly
uncertain step. Then another. And another. Kirk walked up beside him, ready to aid. But the first officer needed no assistance. The steady progress he made and the unrelenting lines of concentration on his downcast face proved that.

Until the artificial support bumped against the side of the bed. Spock's head went up, as if he were startled and hadn't realized his steps actually had a goal. He'd have to maneuver himself around the walker in order to slide into the bed, and Kirk wasn't sure that he was capable of it yet.

"Let me help you."

"No. I c-can--." The deep voice was hoarse, an aftereffect from the straw dust that McCoy had mentioned. Kirk ignored the protest. He slipped one arm around his lover's slender waist, pulled Spock's weight against his own body, picked up the walker with his other hand and placed it to one side. Then he supported the shuffling footsteps that Spock was making to turn himself.

Spock eased down so that he was sitting on the side of the mattress, and Kirk bent forward with him, his hands now resting on sharp hipbones. Their faces were close. Lines of strain were etched deep across forehead and radiated from the corner of each eye; the skin across the high cheekbones was stretched tight with exhaustion. The pupils were dilated, ebon pools of mystery.

Kirk leaned forward and gently placed his lips against desert dryness.

For a moment there was a response. The lips against his softened. And then Spock pulled back, and the captain let him.

It seemed very important not to be standing, towering over one of the proudest beings that Kirk had ever known. He looked around, spotted a molded plastic sickbay chair, and brought it over to the bed. He sat.

"How are you feeling?" What an inane question. But what else could he say? Spock, would you like to cry in my arms? Love of my life, would you like to tell me how badly you feel and we can compare our pain? Will I ever feel the touch of your mind in mine again?

No. He couldn't expose either himself or his lover to that.

Spock wouldn't meet his eyes. Or perhaps he couldn't. Kirk remembered the wild seeking, the rolled-up pupils in the animal hold. Spock looked at the folded hands in his blue cloth-covered lap.

"I am alrea---dy exhibit-innn-g some p-p-progress in locomotive abilities. Gross muscular coor-or-ination is also imp-p-roved. Although fine coor---ination is still af-f-ected. I canno-- spea-kkk p-p-precisely."

Every hard consonant sound was a struggle. Having McCoy tell him about it was one thing. Having someone he loved suffer through this humiliation was.... Kirk felt a deep trembling in his soul.

"We're on our way to starbase twenty-four. We'll be there in two and a half days. McCoy's managed to contact a Vulcan healer." Kirk hitched forward, and thought for a moment about placing a hand upon one bony knee. No. He couldn't do that either.

"He'll be able to help you, Spock."

"Tha--- is not lik-k-ely."

"I disagree. Remember after the melds on Melkotia? It took you weeks to recover. Remember
when you joined with Kolos? Both times your ability to meld was severely affected, but you got better. Why shouldn't it be that way now?"

"Those were dif-f-ferent events, caused-d-d by known factors. My symptoms are wid-d-der in scope. And we have insufficien---t da-da-data as to what caus---ed this."

**Insufficient data.** How many times had Kirk heard that phrase on the bridge, in a briefing room? But they weren't there now. They were in sickbay, and Spock was wearing the sickbay pajamas he hated and he couldn't talk and he couldn't walk and someone or something had just ripped his life away from him, and they were sitting here talking about fucking insufficient data.

Kirk kept the thoughts running through his head totally separate from the words issuing from his mouth. He couldn't let Spock know what he was thinking. "Yes, we do. At least we have more data. Whatever or whoever attacked you also attacked Sherily Nego. McCoy says that the same portions of your brains were affected."

"Then I shall consi-d-der myself fortun-n-nate that I am n-n-not in stasis."

He had to be honest. "Neither is she. At the same time you were over on the Lox'theneth'nar, she went critical. She died a few hours ago. But McCoy says you're not in any danger."

Slowly the dark head rose and Spock's gaze fastened on the door. "That is mos-t in-terest-t-ting. A bleed-over effec-t at the time I was... atta--ed?"

It was as if Spock were talking about somebody else. No, Kirk mentally shook his head, if Spock had been discussing another member of the crew, he'd be exhibiting more sympathy than he was currently granting himself. But now there was just that dry, utterly controlled voice saying *interesting. Isn't it interesting that I don't seem to be a Vulcan anymore. Isn't it interesting that our bond is gone. Isn't it interesting that captain and first officer, who have said they love each other passionately, think this is interesting.*

Kirk nodded tightly, the way he felt inside, with his heart pounding and no way to express his misery. "That's what McCoy thinks. But we know that whatever it is or they are, they're on the Lox'theneth'nar. We know where the ship is making planetfall. If the healer needs some more information, I'll get it. The colonists aren't going anywhere I can't reach them."

"Vulcans do no-t cond-d-one violence. Nor revenge."

Kirk frowned. He didn't need a lecture on Vulcan philosophy. He needed.... "I don't want revenge, Spock. I just want you to get well."

Slowly, centimeter by centimeter, the dark gaze travelled across the room, from the door, over the wall, and finally to the captain's face. Kirk watched as the brown irises were obscured by expanding pupils that desperately tried to focus. Finally, after long moments of silent effort, it seemed that Spock was truly seeing him, perhaps for the first time since Kirk had entered the room.

"Cap-tain." It was excruciating to watch Spock's lips work, the way he slowly enunciated each syl-\-lable. "The odds are ag-g-gainst it."

A long pause, during which Kirk's breath ached in his lungs; he caught the boulder that was rising in his throat. He couldn't look in those dark, fathomless eyes anymore. Despite the effort that Spock had made to lock their gazes, he looked down at the hands clasped between his knees.

*Never again to feel the touch....*
Spock's voice came from very far away. The Vulcan who had no Vulcan abilities said, "However, I expec--t to be cap-p-pable of duty within a week. My dis-s-sability should not affect my f-f-functioning on the b-b-bridge."

"Do you think that's what I care about?" His voice was barely a whisper.

"You m-m-must. You are the captain."

And until this morning he had also been lover, beloved, bondmate-to-be. He understood Spock's instinctive retreat back into what he knew best, the rigid control of a Vulcan trained and trained and trained not to show his feelings. With everything else he had ever identified with stripped from him, what else did Spock have? When Kirk had walked into this sickbay room, he had been fully prepared to grant his lover all the emotional distance he needed.

But not at this cost. Allowing the retreat reduced Kirk, reduced Spock back to what they used to be. Allowing Spock to hug his pain to his own breast denied everything they'd been to one another. And Kirk couldn't allow that. More than anything else, that he could not allow.

Slowly, Kirk rose. He stood close to the seated figure on the bed, almost but not quite touching. He looked down at the dark cap of hair, but Spock made no effort to look up to meet his gaze. He sat straight-backed, with eyes forward boring into the gold command shirt.

"I'm more than just the captain to you," Kirk whispered. "And you're more than just a science officer on the bridge to me. Let's not play this game. We're beyond this. Aren't we?"

Outside the warp envelope in which the Enterprise traveled, a red dwarf star flickered in the last stages of its existence. Five barren planets revolved in lifeless orbit about it, and a scattering of asteroids pockmarked the vast expanse of empty space. And far, far away, straining against the gravitational bonds that had held them for millennia, two comets trembled on the verge of freedom.

For long moments all was silent in the sickbay room. No sound. No movement. Only expectation, and hope, mingled with despair denied.

Then the smallest of shudders shook tense, narrow shoulders. It was like a fault line on a planet shifting to find new equilibrium. A sudden wrench, and then --- balance. Slowly, ever so slowly, Spock's head bowed down. He leaned forward until his forehead rested against Kirk's chest.

Kirk looked down at the precious sight and he could barely contain the pride that burst from his soul. This was a proud capitulation that gave and yet gained, that maintained dignity in the midst of chaos. Only Spock. And they shared the same universe. They shared the same love.


His hand rose to press the dark weariness to the meager comfort of his aching heart. "We'll find a way," he whispered. "I promise you, we'll find a way."

They stayed like that for a long time, pressed together, Kirk's thundering heart pounding out the moments of this new, undefined life between them. Finally, he captured his voice and ordered it to remain steady. "Want to talk about it?" he whispered. "Want to talk about... us? The... the bond?"

A convulsive movement of the head against him. "No." The barest sound. "I c-c-cannot. N-n-not now. I m-must m-m-meditate...."

Kirk threaded his fingers through the silky hair. "All right. I understand. Later."
"Later. Y-y-yes."

The captain swallowed his reassurances, his explanation of his plan to somehow get back to the Lox'theneth'nar and its colonists, his determination to seek out the finest Vulcan medicine that existed. Spock didn't need his emotional impatience. Wasn't love giving someone what they needed? Even if it wasn't what you needed?

Kirk trapped the words *I love you* before they emerged. They wouldn't help Spock now.

By unspoken mutual consent, he and Spock drew back from one another. Kirk took a step away from the bed. "Want me to call Harless back?"

Another moment as Spock struggled with the eye focusing that should have been automatic. Kirk watched as the spine stiffened, the jaw muscles clenched, as stoicism was drawn over the face his lover presented to the world.

Their gazes met. "Y-y-yes," said the Vulcan whose mind had been cauterized and sealed. "Y-y-yes. It is l-l-logical to continue physical therapy."

Logical.

Kirk managed an expressionless face as he left the room and nodded Harless back into it. The captain walked past his chief medical officer, who was waiting expectantly in the middle of the ward, without a glance in his direction.
Kirk slept soundly that night; emotional exhaustion ensured that. When he awakened he slid from the bed before his eyes were fully open and headed for the shower, carefully not thinking about anything.

The reports from gamma shift included a personal message for him from sickbay. Report to McCoy twice a day for a shot of the same Deltan substance that had helped him yesterday. Continue treatment for two days. End of message. No word on how Spock had spent the night.

The captain walked the early morning corridors of his ship with a determined stride. He didn't believe that Spock wouldn't get better, and he allowed his plans to buoy him up. They'd visit the healer and get a more expert prognosis. Time sense, the ability to meld, it would all come back, although it might take time. The Vulcans knew their own people best; McCoy had admitted he was out of his depth. Only a healer could really tell what Spock's condition was, and Kirk could not bring himself to believe that his lover wouldn't bounce back from this attack as he had bounced back from so many others. History was on their side. McCoy had to be wrong.

His early breakfast could have been a solitary affair, but Kirk sat down with two security guards on one side of the room and ended up having an enlightening conversation about, of all things, modern architecture. The officer of the watch on the bridge did not demur at being relieved an hour early, and vacated the center seat with speed. Kirk settled down with satisfaction.

The morning passed swiftly. Lieutenant Tu had taken over science department duties, and Lieutenant Sulu assumed the first officer's post, yet Kirk was frequently called upon for help. Two men tried to fill the void that the loss of one man created, and still they could not adequately perform the duties Spock executed with ease. Kirk was never more impressed with the volume and quality of work his first officer produced than when he was unavailable.

Lieutenant Agnewskia Turwell from recreational services hailed the captain, and he punched her in from the arm of his command chair. In her blunt, no-nonsense way, she asked if he would permit her to organize a party in recognition of the promotion of Lieutenant Hunyady, tomorrow evening in the rec room on deck six. The captain, or perhaps Mister Spock if he were well enough, could officially present the young lieutenant with the stripes she'd earned.

It was standard procedure on board the Enterprise to mark a promotion in some way. And maybe the crew did need a diversion. There wouldn't be any liberty on the starbase. Kirk had rarely felt less like okaying a party, but he gave Turwell permission to proceed.

Kirk signed off and felt the need to move. A consultation with Scotty brought him to engineering, and their talk broadened to include the amount of fuel warp seven demanded. The ship's fuel consumption report would not look good this quarter, and they spent more than ninety minutes discussing methods to compensate. On the way back from the lower hull Kirk finally gave in to what he'd wanted to do since he'd awakened that morning, visit sickbay.

McCoy caught him before he was halfway across the open ward. "There you are. Wait just a minute while I get the shot." But Kirk followed him instead over to the drug cabinet, stood silently while the hypo hissed into his arm, then turned without a word towards the back room.

But Spock wasn't there. "Gone for ultrasound treatment down the hall," McCoy called as Kirk backed out of the empty room. The physician sounded determinedly normal, as if Spock simply had a cold and he and Kirk had never exchanged harsh words. "He'll be back in thirty minutes."
Kirk was a busy man. He didn't have the time or the inclination to ask McCoy any questions. There was lots to do.

Back on the bridge he evicted blue-shirted Ensign Grenatier from the science station, called up some medical files for a name and location, and ordered Uhura to compose a transmission to starbase twenty-four. Unofficial. He'd have to wait for a reply.

While he waited he asked the computer for a synopsis of information on each of the races that inhabited the Lox'theneth'nar, and spent an absorbing forty-five minutes just skimming the surface of what was available.

Then he called up McCoy's official log and the report on Spock's condition with no compunction. All records on the ship were open for his inspection; he was the captain. But the dry words didn't tell him anything new, and the living color photos of sections of his lover's brain he didn't understand.

Finally he examined the library computer's information on Representative O'Malley of the Federation Council. Lunch was a sandwich and coffee brought by his yeoman while he studied a two-dimensional portrait and vital statistics, and wondered why a busy, influential man such as Earth's EEC representative would waste his time giving out medals.

Kirk checked with Scotty again, then ordered a breather for the Enterprise; they scaled their speed back to warp six.

Uhura called to him quietly. A taped reply to his unofficial message to the starbase. This time Kirk went to the computer in the small briefing room he liked to use on deck two. Before he activated the screen he used the intercom to call sickbay. When Nurse Bronson answered he asked to speak to "Mister Spock."

"I'm sorry, Captain. Mister Spock asked not to be disturbed for an hour. I believe he's... meditating?" Her commonsense voice rose in question. Bronson lived in a nuts and bolts world; she added black and white, never multiplied them to get grey.

But Kirk had once joined with his lover in the precise world of his meditations. If Spock could achieve that inner universe, it had to help his unsettled state of mind. The captain wouldn't interrupt the effort that might bring his Vulcan back to him sooner.

But Kirk hesitated over leaving a message. It felt so... adolescent. "Tell the first officer I called to check on his condition," he finally said as briskly as he could, and switched off.

He activated the computer screen. The unsmiling visage of a male Vulcan peered at him, a man with heavy eyebrows slanted higher than Spock's, and full lips. Kirk ran an eye over the summarized information that headed the report and stopped when he got to line four. Healer Sultarin had studied at the Vulcan Academy of Medicine forty-five years ago. Kirk frowned. Forty-five years ago? He wanted the very best for Spock. How many advances had been made since that time? He didn't want to depend on the expertise of a hide-bound dinosaur.

But Sultarin, like every other Vulcan healer, spent six months out of every five years re-training at the Academy, a fact that Kirk had not known but which somehow did not surprise him when he read it further down the report. It was logical that healers do so, although it must wreak havoc with their personal practices, not to mention personal relationships. He was glad Spock wasn't a healer.

The more he read of the resumé that had been forwarded from the starbase, the more satisfied Kirk became. This Vulcan wasn't your average healer. Twenty years ago, Sultarin had been appointed to
the faculty of the Vulcan Academy, and had advanced to the equivalent of chairman in the diagnostic department. Diagnostic... exactly what Spock needed, a being with an expertise in ferreting out the unknown. The appointment had been for ten years, another factor that predisposed Kirk in Sultarin's favor. The man hadn't been satisfied to stay in the academic atmosphere, but had gone off-world and into private practice. As seemed logical for a Vulcan who now made his home on a planet that was the site of a busy starbase, he specialized in treating not only Vulcans in this far-flung section of the Federation, but other telepathic beings as well.

And he'd returned from his last refresher course eighteen months ago. Perfect. Kirk couldn't have asked for a better doctor at a better time and location; maybe "random factors" were finally operating in his favor. He looked at the stern face on the screen one last time. This Vulcan would be able to help Spock. He knew it. Kirk closed down the file.

And so it went. Every minute was filled with work, and it was evening, two hours after his usual dinner hour before Kirk found the time to visit sickbay again. This time McCoy was nowhere in sight, and the captain headed straight for the back room without being stopped.

But again Spock wasn't there. Frustrated, Kirk whirled about, intent on getting some information on his elusive lover, when he was arrested by the low drone of voices. One of them was unmistakably Spock's.

The office next to the supply room had a desk and two chairs, arranged side-by-side. When he looked through the small window set in the closed door, he saw that Spock, still in sickbay pajamas, sat in one and Doctor Sheridan sat in the other. She was bent over a book opened on the desk's surface. Sheridan was a slight, middle-aged woman with bobbed red hair, and she doubled as the ship's dentist. And, his mind clicked through personnel files, there was something about speech therapy in her educational background. Of course. She'd be the logical person to help with a language dysfunction.

Normally Spock would have noticed his presence as soon as he paused by the window, but not now. Spock sat ramrod straight in his chair, and his face was cast in strict lines of control, with eyes relentlessly trained forward. Kirk had never seen his lover look more Vulcan.

It's all right, he told himself. If that's what he needs.... Damnit, he is Vulcan. It's because he hurts so much....

The first officer cautiously took the book that was offered by Sheridan and read from it in a flat, expressionless voice that Kirk hadn't heard in years. Spock read at half his usual speed, and stumbled over words. Better than he had spoken last night. Yes, definitely better. But Kirk still winced to hear him.

He wouldn't interrupt a therapy session that Spock obviously needed.

He left as Spock placed the book on the desk and leaned over it. He worried that the position might hurt the strained muscles in the narrow chest, and wondered if he should come back in an hour. But then he caught a glimpse of the schedule board on the far wall of the ward, and the notation "Cdr. Spock, physical therapy at 2100. M'Benga."

Wasn't this overdoing it? He knew Spock had greater strength and stamina than humans, but even the super-Vulcan he had glimpsed with Sheridan needed to sleep too. Kirk set his shoulders and realized a visit this evening would either interrupt the sickbay's schedule for their prize patient, or it wouldn't be made at all. Okay. He wouldn't interfere.

And then, much to his aggravation, Bronson caught him with a hypo before he made it out to the
corridor. "Doctor McCoy said you needed this, Captain."

His sleep was troubled. He stood before the black wall that lived in Spock and knew his lover was trapped on the other side. No gate, no ladder, just slick rock and no way to climb. He shouted, and heard unintelligible cries of pain from the other side. A *Vulcan would not cry out so*, Abraham Lincoln said sagely before the tall man disappeared and McCoy took his place. *I'm a doctor, not a healer*, the well-known voice echoed before it too faded away. But that didn't matter. Kirk attacked the wall with scrabbling feet and clenched fists.

Then the wall split, and brackish, stinking water came pouring out. The river that had been their bond washed over him and he was caught in its stinking current. He tried to move forward towards where he knew Spock must be, but he wasn't strong enough. He was knocked down, and he tumbled over and over, panted for air and swallowed foul water instead. He choked, and gagged, and his lungs bloated with filth. He knew that he was going to drown; the certainty of death enshrouded him.

And then, with the perversity of dreams, he was standing in the current, and the level of the water was going down, down, draining into the soil, swirling about his waist, his hips, his knees, his ankles....

The last drop of moisture rolled off his leg and disappeared into the desert sand. All that was left was a merciless sun in a red sky, and the bone-dry landscape of red and yellow, stretching towards forever....

****

He was falling, falling through the darkness. The wind roared in his ears and tore at his skin. His limbs flailed. He would always fall, fall and never come to rest or to peace....

Abruptly Spock awakened. The dimness of his sickbay room spun crazily, and his stomach lurched. Vertigo had followed him from the dream into waking time.

"Huh. Huh. Huh." He panted out loud and searched for equilibrium that would not come. His mouth flooded with saliva and he swallowed heavily. If he did not achieve stability soon, his digestive system would rebel and then a member of the sickbay staff would invade this room's essential isolation....

Groaning, Spock rolled over onto his stomach and pushed his face into the pillow. The sickly odor of disinfectant assaulted his nostrils but he forced himself to breathe deeply anyway. In, out. In, out. The world would settle in a moment. In a few more moments.

But it didn't. Sweat popped out on his forehead, and his legs trembled.... He flung his arms out wide and gripped the edge of the mattress on each side. *Imagine you are floating in the ship's pool,* he told himself. *You will not fall. You can float.*

Mercifully, the dizziness began to recede. After a minute had passed and he had not fallen out of the bed nor emptied the contents of his stomach, Spock cautiously lifted his face from the pillow's suffocating folds. The room remained stable. The disorientation had passed, as it had before.

He pressed his lips over the sigh that wished to escape, released his grasp on the mattress and rolled over onto his right side.

The room was as peaceful as his tumultuous thoughts were not. A dim light glowed over the closed door. Air, warmed for a Vulcan's comfort, whispered from the vent. The diagnostic unit over his
bed whirred softly; it measured his heartbeat and his respiration and his response to the drugs that McCoy had pumped into his veins. It had also undoubtedly measured the physiological response to his nightmare of falling, and this most recent episode of vertigo.

The door opened and a shaft of light fell upon him. He squinted against it and tensed. Less stimuli than that had triggered the dizziness....

A form came up to the bed. Spock knew he was being observed but he did not even attempt to look up.

"Are you all right, Mister Spock?"

"I am w-well, D-D-Doctor M'Benga."

"Feeling a little dizzy?" By the direction from which the voice came, Spock knew that the physician was observing the readings on the panel.

The sickbay staff had a right to information about his symptoms. They were not intruding, and they had a genuine desire to promote his physical well-being. Spock swallowed his resentment and replied, "M-M-Momentarily. It has p-passed."

"Let me know if it gets too bad. That's your, what, sixth episode in twenty-four hours?"

It was a rhetorical question. Spock did not expend the effort to answer.

A hand rested on the pillow next to his head and Spock stared at the brown skin, the short, blunt nails. M'Benga knew better than to touch him, but the human need to offer comfort through touch still resided in the doctor.

"I don't think this is anything to worry about. It's short-term, while your body's adjusting. It will pass."

With an effort, Spock nodded against the white fabric, an abrupt motion, up, then down.

"All right then, I'll leave you to your rest. Try to sleep." M'Benga retreated, the shaft of light disappeared and his room was enveloped in darkness again.

Sleep. If he slept he might dream again. What he needed was the calm surety of meditation. Perhaps, when he tried tomorrow, he would be able to achieve that state. His efforts today had failed.

Someone out in the ward spoke, then walked with clicking heels across the big room. Spock listened while his eyes once again adapted to the darkness.

How much longer would he remain here in sickbay, enveloped in darkness? How much longer would he be a stranger to his own body, groping to achieve simple acts like standing and walking, looking at a person, bringing a fork to his mouth? Speaking?

It was illogical to succumb to despair. M'Benga was correct. McCoy was correct. He was undergoing a period of adjustment. Already progress was quite evident. He would regain his physical abilities, he was sure, within days. A few weeks at most. He would be able to do what every other human crew member on the ship could do.

But not what Vulcans could do.
Spock rolled over onto his back and stared at the shadows overhead. When he had been a child growing up in Shikahr, he had been taken to the hospital frequently. Every few months he and Amanda, and sometimes Sarek too, would travel in their ground car to the complex in the heart of the city. There a group of healers were intensely interested in his development. They sought answers to questions about their planet's first Vulcan-human hybrid. Would the protective inner eyelid, defective at birth, develop? When would Sarek be able to initiate a parental bond? Would the child develop a Vulcan's unique ability to sense time passing? Would his mind be receptive to a childhood bonding?

Each journey Spock silently sat and watched the landscape of low desert buildings, paved streets, and an occasional tree flash by. And he would wonder what the healers would say at the conclusion of the visit.

*Lady Amanda, your son is four months behind the developmental curve.*

*Your son shows signs of developing time sense within normal parameters.*

*Your son's telepathy is erratic.*

*Sarek, you may pursue a bonding for your son.*

Always there was the question that was asked, and asked again, with every movement of the healers' fingers towards his face, with every test given and with every year that passed. *Is Spock Vulcan ... or is he human?* The question had echoed everywhere, had followed his footsteps through every day that he lived. Sarek had wondered it, Amanda had feared it, his classmates had shouted it, T'Pring had stabbed it.

*Art thee Vulcan, or art thee human?* At the ceremony that was the Vulcan heart and soul, thirty-six years after he had been born, the question was still being asked at the place of Koon-ut-kali-fee.

Spock had answered it. He was a Vulcan.

Restlessly, he rolled over onto his left side, shoved his hands under the pillow, and blinked. It was a technique taught to him by Sarek long ago, a physical action that triggered control.

He was a mind-blind Vulcan who could not monitor his body, could not sense time, could not impose a healing trance, could not touch another's mind....

*Oh, Jim.*

Once, when he was a very small child, Amanda had lifted him from a fall down the central stairway and cradled him in her arms. "It's all right," she'd crooned as she carried him to the kitchen. "You can cry, if you want to. I know it must hurt."

He had stared up into her face. He could remember her bright blue eyes, the network of wrinkles in her forehead, and he remembered wondering what Sarek would say if he gave in to his mother's prompting and actually released this ache inside him that wanted to wail in childish pain and the need for comfort.

He had not cried then. Vulcans did not succumb to their emotions. Vulcans controlled their emotions.

Occasionally, when he and Jim turned out the light and settled into their shared bed for sleep, Jim would lean over him and press a kiss upon his cheek. "Good night," the captain would whisper. "Sleep tight."
Jim had never asked him the question that had defined Spock's existence. He had accepted Spock, as he was.

But could Spock accept himself? Without the time sense the healers had anxiously looked for, without the ability to bond that had so pleased Sarek, without the ability to meld that had brought such pleasure and rightness in his relationship with Jim....

Who was he now?

*****

Kirk rocketed awake gasping. His dream of the river sinking into the desert sand was still vivid in his mind. He listened to the utter silence in his quarters for a long minute, then rolled over and clutched the unused pillow to his chest.

Never again to feel the touch....

He bounded up to start his day with relentless vigor.

Before alpha shift started, in the tail-end of gamma shift, seemed a logical hour to find Spock unoccupied. But this time he was in the whirlpool treatment room, said Nurse Olajuwon.

Kirk stormed into McCoy's office, and found the physician seated at his desk, wearing a weary early-morning face, sipping coffee and looking over a medical record on the screen. "What the hell is going on with Spock?" Kirk demanded, arms akimbo. "You know he hates baths. Why did you drag him into a whirlpool? Can't you give the man some peace? I've tried to visit him three times and he's always involved with some stupid therapy."

McCoy looked up at his captain, looked down at the screen, considered, then flicked the computer off. He leaned back in his chair with deliberate motion, drawing out the action for effect. He stared up at the man in front of him. Finally he spoke, ticking items off on his fingers.

"Number one. Commander Spock is undergoing the finest treatment this sickbay can provide. That includes hydro therapy and ultrasound therapy and any other therapy that will help him. I make the judgment and order the treatment. Number two, he can't heal himself anymore. Maybe that's something you've forgotten about. So we're using the old tried and true methods round the clock, antibiotics for that respiratory infection, anti-inflammatory for the muscle strain. And painkillers, which your first officer has never had to resort to before, and which Bronson practically had to wrestle him to take. All of it will work."

"Number three. Spock's the one who's requested the intensive schedule. He wants to become functional as quickly as possible. I can't say that I blame him."

"Is that all?"

McCoy shook his head and ticked off another finger. "Nope. Number four. There's the little matter of dealing with an emotional upset that's turned his life on its head. Some people I know, present company included, tend to approach emotional problems by denying them. It's occurred to me that our resident Vulcan is keeping himself almighty busy because he doesn't want to think. Or feel. Does that sound familiar, Captain?"

McCoy's words filled Kirk with resentment. He clenched his fists and took a deep breath in an effort to control his budding anger. He hated being understood so easily, especially when he hadn't taken the time to understand himself.
Deliberately, Kirk released the air in his lungs, lifted his head and stared at an upper corner of the room. He would not make his relationship with his CMO any worse than it was.

"How is Mister Spock?" he asked, addressing the cream-colored wall.

"Improving," McCoy answered promptly, as if he had been waiting for an opening that would allow him to speak without rancor. "Being stubborn helps with physical therapy. Coordination is coming back, but not as fast as he wants it to. He's speaking better though. The chest muscles are responding to treatment, and I plan to take him off analgesics this afternoon. Another two, three days, and he should be able to walk without assistance. But--

"But what?"

"He's as stiff-necked as ever. More so. Pulling a Vulcan act that you wouldn't believe."

"You know why he's doing that."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean I have to like it."

"Then don't," Kirk said shortly. "How about the rest of it?"

McCoy didn't take his eyes off the stubbornly upthrust chin of his captain. "No change." The physician's voice was flat. "I'll test him again this afternoon, but like I told you, I don't expect any improvement. Especially this soon."

"We'll see what the healer thinks."

A beat of silence. "Yes, I guess we will."

Another moment passed, then Kirk was startled by the sound of a medical scanner whirring. His gaze fell to where McCoy was aiming a portable model at him.

"And you, Captain. How are you feeling?"

"I'm all right."

"That's not good enough. Get specific. Any headaches?"

His teeth ground against each other and pain shot through the captain's jaw. He vividly remembered Spock in his arms in the animal hold, and being so confused that he hadn't even ordered beam-over himself. Uhura had had to do it. That wouldn't, wouldn't happen again. "I said, I'm all right."

"Any feelings of disorientation? Anything like when you two were, uh, in contact? When you were... melding?"

Kirk stared at the CMO in exasperation. "Contact? In case you've forgotten, Spock has to be touching somebody to initiate a meld. We haven't exactly been touching lately."

McCoy shifted self-consciously in his chair. "I know how a normal meld is supposed to be," he said testily. "I just thought that since the two of you.... I mean, maybe you didn't need to... touch."

"We did. We do," Kirk said shortly.

"Okay, okay. I just thought that there might be some resonances going on. Some echoes."
"Well, there aren't. And even if there were, I wouldn't be able to tell. Like I told you before, I never felt the bond."

"I heard you the first time."

"Then why are you bothering to ask questions when you already know the answers? Don't push it, McCoy."

"I'm not pushing it. I'm concerned about your health, too, you know. I need to know how this thing in your head --"

"You mean what used to be in my head."

"Yeah. I need to know how the severed bond is affecting you. I'm not trying to invade your privacy, Captain. Just doing my job as your doctor."

McCoy was right, and that only made Kirk's resentment worse. He hunched a shoulder. "Privacy? How can you be private about something that doesn't exist any more? I'll let you know if I have any problems."

McCoy grunted, and put the scanner down. "You do that." He cleared his throat. "I noticed that you've ordered the effort on Michaela scaled back."

Kirk simply nodded. What did McCoy want to say? *I told you so?* The physician continued. "I think that was a wise decision."

Kirk turned to go. "Obviously, I think it was a wise decision as well, or I wouldn't have issued those orders."

Behind him, McCoy harumphed, then got up and followed him out into the ward. Kirk stood stoically while yet another shot hissed into his arm, then silently left for the bridge. Breakfast could wait until lunch.

The science research vessel that was in orbit about Michaela, *The Rising Sun*, had received the transmission from the *Enterprise* on their experimental results, and now there was a return query. Or rather, several return queries, many of a complex nature. Tu came up to the bridge and showed Kirk the handful of hardcopy requests. There were more than one man could handle in merely a day, and Kirk made the instant decision to help. He appropriated a briefing room on deck four and sat with Lieutenant Tu for several hours, assigning priority to some information, preparing summaries, occasionally calling upon a scientist to confirm a scribbled notation. Not a task that the captain of the vessel would ordinarily perform, but one Kirk knew how to do well.

It wasn't as if he were attempting to hold onto the Michaelan project. No. He wanted the requests answered and everything Michaelan-related off his ship as quickly as possible. So that the ship could go on to other business, whatever business Komack would assign after tomorrow.

Kirk ordered up another report, knew that his thoughts were self-deceiving, and ignored his own inner knowledge. He pushed the memory of Mar falling out of his mind. *Right in front of him. He'd been helpless. She'd done it with his own phaser.*

*It will be all right,* Mar's voice whispered.

His fist slapped against the table. How could it be all right when Mar was dead and her child lived among uncertain violence that Kirk could do nothing about? How could the galaxy go on spinning when everything that had ever given Spock an identity had been ripped from him? How could
anything be all right if he and Spock weren't ever able to meld again?

Fiercely, he dragged his attention back to the information glowing on the screen. He would not think about it. And he wasn't injecting himself into this scientific process unnecessarily. He simply wanted to efficiently answer The Rising Sun's questions.

The party in honor of Ensign, no, now Lieutenant Hunyady was scheduled for that evening, and as soon as Kirk stepped into the rec room for his dinner he could feel the excitement of the crew. Hunyady was just an excuse, of course. More than half of the crew on the ship probably didn't even know who she was, and half of those who did probably didn't care. But the men and women on the Enterprise had gained a certain reputation under Kirk's command. They were efficient and disciplined, and they produced results time after time, but they also knew how to have a very good time. Mirroring their captain, perhaps.

Kirk returned to his quarters for a change of uniform. Although he encouraged his people to wear the red and gold and blue even off-duty, most of the crew tonight would be in casual clothing. But the captain would present Hunyady's new braid to her, so civvies for him wouldn't be appropriate. Besides, he didn't feel like it. He felt more... centered... in his uniform. He was the captain, after all.

One more brush to his hair, a tug to his fresh tunic, and Kirk headed for the door. But then he stopped, and backtracked to the intercom on his desk. He'd head for sickbay for another try after he'd made his appearance at the party, but he hadn't heard from Spock all day....

"No, he can't talk with you right now," McCoy groused. "I'm in the middle of an argument with him, and I'm the one who's going to win." The line went dead, and Kirk went to the rec room on deck six.

Lieutenant Turwell had done a good job on short notice. She nodded at Kirk as he walked past the table in the back of the room. It was loaded with finger food from five different planets spread out across a blue and gold tablecloth, the one with the symbol of the Enterprise over-stitched on each of the four corners.

But Kirk ignored the food and the tablecloth and walked on. He wanted a drink.

The bar was set up in one corner. Other ships might have a live bartender, a rec services officer specifically appointed to stay sober and limit the intoxicants consumed by the crew. That's how it had been done on the Farragut, and on the Hood where Kirk had served as first officer. But that's not how things were done on the Enterprise. If a crew member didn't know how to sensibly limit their alcohol and drug intake, they didn't belong on his ship. Kirk walked up to the bar and examined the pre-made drinks. He didn't want a pina colada or a redward tello from Titan. He wanted his one drink of the night to be something simple that tasted like the alcohol that was in it. He told the auto-server "scotch, no ice," and waited just two seconds before his drink materialized in the servo-slot. He picked it up and gulped a healthy swallow. Then he turned around to survey the room.

The lighting was at one-half setting, and the noise level was still low. Later, there would be music, and dancing, and the smoke from the stim-sticks that Kirk only allowed on such occasions would fog the air. More than a few couples would drift off to quarters and finish the evening together in bed.

There'd been times when he'd done that. Years ago, before the responsibilities of a command rank, that was how every shipboard party had ended for him. A slow, close dance in the dark, a woman's pliant body pressed close to his. A whispered invitation, and sex through the night.
Kirk frowned and stared down into his drink. If scotch were going to make him even more morose he’d ditch it in the recycler and switch to beer.

He hitched a shoulder and walked purposefully across the room, like a man with a mission who shouldn’t be stopped for mere conversation. But the direction he took was random. He stopped at the holo-stage that was set up in one front corner. It was the most crowded spot in the room. The first game of the new air hockey season was unfolding, and enthusiastic supporters of the Alpha Nu Kings, the team that had been robbed of their title three months before, were cheering their heroes on.

Kirk turned around and located Turwell's stubby form across the room. They locked gazes and he gestured towards the stage, an appreciative look on his face. She smiled, and nodded. It could not have been easy, snagging the live broadcast and fine-tuning it so the holo-projection was possible. Usually they were too far away from the regular galactic airwaves. And for the timing to be so perfect... He wondered if she had planned the party just for the game, or if the game were a coincidence.

There were two rows of long benches on three sides of the stage, and they were filled, mostly with men. Scotty was there, holding court in the center of the first row. He'd lost twenty credits to Kirk when the Kings had been defeated by the Tornadoes in the finals a few months ago. Air hockey was one sport Kirk tried to follow. Its definitive action appealed to him. He stood behind the second bench, a part of the watching group and yet detached, and tried to lose himself in the rhythm of the game.

It was only the first period. There was at least two more hours of hockey to go. And games so early in the long season didn't really mean much. It was hard to muster up enthusiasm to match those around him. He exchanged comments with Lieutenant Tu about the goalies, half-shouted over heads to make a one credit bet with Scotty that he knew he'd lose, smiled when security guard Smith told the old joke about the goalie's stick and the Amazon woman. It wouldn't do to have the crew see an abstracted captain. Bad for morale.

There was a break in the action, and Kirk turned to see if the guest of honor had arrived for her own party yet. He needed to circulate some more, let the crew see him, but he couldn't leave until he’d made the official presentation. If Spock had been able to be present, he would have let the first officer do the honors. After all, it was the Vulcan who had first pinpointed the woman's abilities, and given her the opportunity to prove herself. But Spock wasn't here and neither was Hunyady. She was conspicuous by her absence, which was odd, especially since Dawson was there, talking with Sulu.

Kirk stared over the helmsman's head and made a conscious decision to think about tomorrow, when they would be on starbase twenty-four. There was almost a "click" in his head as his perspective shifted, another gear was engaged and he faced the future. A little bit of the future first.

He supposed that Komack would want Sulu in the honor guard. Of all the junior officers, Sulu probably showed the greatest promise of advancing through the ranks. It would be good for his career to be noticed. And the admiral would be happy.

At least somebody would be. There were some medals that Kirk wore on his dress uniform that he was proud of. This wouldn't be one of them. A pawn in starfleet's publicity maneuvering, that's what he would be tomorrow. But it was part of the game, and he knew how to play it. For the good of the 'fleet, he understood that publicity and public ceremonies were necessary. He could even see, in the smallest way, the thinking behind Komack's request for the honor guard. And the request that Spock be there.
Spock. Tomorrow morning he would see that healer, Sultarin. And with the thought Kirk felt a sudden desire to go with his lover for the appointment. It felt odd, like a new pair of shoes that were the right size but were too stiff to be comfortable yet. Spock was a mature being who desired privacy and was perfectly capable of seeing the healer on his own. Especially since, Kirk was sure, McCoy would be along too, with the results of every test the Enterprise had taken.

But Kirk had rights now. Spock was part of him. And one-half of the broken bond had resided in his own soul.

Yes, he definitely wanted to go along to hear what the healer had to say.

Behind him the air hockey game had resumed again. The Arcturan Astros scored a goal ten seconds later, and a loud groan erupted from the Kings' supporters. But Kirk couldn't muster the interest to turn around. Instead he watched as Lieutenant Turwell walked past him to a control box set in the wall, swinging her muscled arms as she went. She punched in a few buttons, then spoke quietly to the computer hook-up. Immediately he felt a change in the air around him, a deadening quality. He stepped forward experimentally, and the enthusiasm of those behind him dropped to a whisper. He stepped back, "felt" himself push through a wall of sludgey resistance, and then was part of the sports crowd again. Turwell had dropped a sonic curtain between the noise of the game and the rest of the room.

Kirk moved forward, just slightly, experimenting with how it felt to be part of the invisible wall, half-in, half-out of each part of the room. Sounds were indistinct, like being under water; pressure in his ears grew as they threatened to pop. Not a place that a prudent man would stand. He took another step, and the music that he had barely been able to hear was considerably louder now. Turwell commented as she walked past him, "Now maybe we can think about some dancing."

He watched her go, then some instinct caused him to look towards the open doorway.

Spock stood there. McCoy was there, too, scowling behind the Vulcan's shoulder, but Kirk barely noticed him. He forgot the people and the party around him; he saw only a figure in blue.

The bright light from the corridor outlined the precise angles of the spare body. Over the sloping bone of shoulder, around the slender torso and the narrow waist. Down over the hips, and the straight line of the strong legs. Such a small waist for such a powerful man. Such an unlikely body to serve as repository for a captain's dreams.

The dim light from the room cast shadows on Spock's face, but Kirk didn't have to strain to read the familiar upswept brows, the curve of a determined lip. Spock looked exactly as he had always looked on duty, immaculate, calm, self-possessed, and very, very Vulcan. He stood in the doorway and surveyed the crowd until his eyes met his captain's.

Kirk actually felt a physical jolt in his solar plexus as their gazes matched. Could any other man possibly feel this way? he wondered. Did anyone else in the galaxy feel their soul expand outwards to include their lover, know this heady rush of oneness that transcended all the noise about them and all the other people in the room? Could anyone feel this same mingled anguish and love, and the overwhelming desire to protect that he felt at this moment? He would have given anything to prevent pain from overtaking the one he loved, especially this pain. He felt helpless and insignificant because there was nothing he could do or had done for Spock, and yet....

And yet Spock was walking across the room towards him, betraying by his stiffened arms and the pauses between steps how fiercely he was concentrating on the simple act of moving. But he was strong enough to expose his not-yet-normal actions to the scrutiny of others. Strong enough to have won the battle with McCoy so that he could honor Hunyady. Strong enough to keep his eyes
locked with Kirk's, and to make no secret that his hesitant steps, so different from his usual smooth stride, had only one goal.

Twenty paces across the room, and Kirk fell in love all over again.

Spock nodded to his captain as they came face to face. Not a smooth, seamless motion but a jerky bobbing that the captain would have noticed even if he hadn't been looking for it. Then the first officer took up position by Kirk's side, as he always did. As he always would.

Neither of them spoke. Words simply were not needed.

McCoy stepped to his captain's other side. "Twenty minutes," he said tersely. "That's all I'm giving him."

Most of the crew knew that Spock had been in sickbay, and it couldn't be expected that their circle of silent peace would last for long. Not a minute later Sulu, Dawson and Tan Resl't joined them and expressed their pleasure that the first officer was up and around once again. "Not for long," growled McCoy. "Where's that wife of yours, Dawson? Mister Spock won't be back where he belongs in sickbay until she gets her braid."

Sulu was the one who answered. "Wherever she is, isn't anywhere nearby. Probably not even on this deck."

"Huh?" McCoy seemed to enjoy being the one doing all the talking. "What are you now, a mind reader?"

"Nope," the Oriental explained. "Just look at Brian's necklace." He pointed towards the dull, hammerd strand of gold that the engineer wore over his casual printed shirt.

"It's activated when Irina is near," Dawson explained. "The sponder gets warm and glows when the other necklace is within about fifty meters."

Spock put out a rock-steady hand and asked, "May I, Lieutenant?" He scrutinized the jewelry, and hefted the loop in the palm of his hand. "Fascinating." Kirk had the impression that he wanted to say more, but did not trust his speech yet in the presence of others.

A strip of the necklace about five centimeters long suddenly turned a bright yellow. "Your wife approaches," the first officer told Dawson gently.

A minute later Hunyady walked in with Uhura. They were both still in their uniforms and they headed straight for the group about Kirk. They moved quickly, and Uhura carried something in her hand.

"Lieutenant Uhura. Lieutenant Hunyady," Kirk greeted them.

"Hello, Captain. Doctor McCoy. Mister Spock, it's good to see you out of sickbay," Hunyady said.

"Thank you, L-l-lieutenant. I wished to r-r-recog-nize your achievement." The words came out slowly, but not one of Kirk's well-trained crew even blinked at this alteration in the first officer's customary precision with words.

"He's not out of sickbay for long, young lady." McCoy was still being protective. "Just long enough to see you get officially promoted."

The woman waved a hand in the air. "That can wait. We have something more important." Her
face glowed with excitement as she turned to her companion. "Tell them, Penda," she commanded.

Uhura's dark eyes were sparkling. "Captain, Mister Spock, I think we've discovered something that you will find very interesting." She held out the computer disk in her palm. "What's happening on Michaela isn't an isolated incident. It's part of an epidemic."

*****

Half an hour later, the party was noisier. Four couples swayed on the dance floor; one of them was security officer Sessalu Prendel't and a human lab tech named Hamishi. Her antennae curled into tight spirals as she pressed against the man. Ensign Tarn looked on from the side of the room, frowning. Prendel't maneuvered her partner so that she could see the Rigellian from over Hamishi's shoulder. She cocked her head to one side and stared at him until he turned away.

The hockey game was in full swing in one of the best contests the early season had seen in years. But when Scotty diverted his attention from the game long enough to encourage Kirk to increase the size of his bet, he couldn't find the captain in the room.

The command team, the two women, and the audience of interested onlookers had moved down the hallway into a small briefing room, their pace slow as they accommodated themselves to the first officer's limited locomotion. Spock carefully kept about twenty-five centimeters from the right-hand wall, as if he were using the wall as a reference for equilibrium.

McCoy hovered behind the Vulcan, but at least knew enough not to offer a helping hand in front of so many others. Once they reached the room, Kirk pulled out the chair before the computer monitor and nodded Spock into it, then held out his hand for the tape from Uhura. He leaned forward and fed it into the table slot. He looked at everyone else standing clustered about where Spock sat, then hooked his foot around another chair to drag it close to the monitor. He sat down next to his first officer and watched the data flowing down the screen.

"Computer, stop," Hunyady commanded. She leaned over Kirk's shoulder and pointed to a graph labeled Gamma Proxima IV. "This was our first clue. See the number of arrests in this northern hemisphere town? Look while it spreads."

City after city, planet after planet, a pattern emerged. The two women had monitored the broadcasts of one hundred and twenty-seven inhabited planets in sector seven that had technologies sophisticated enough to have some form of radio. They had then sifted through all the minutia and come to an astonishing conclusion. Nineteen exhibited some increased level of violence over the past six months. Four of those planets were engaged in civil war, two in the same system were involved in skirmishes over mining rights. But the others....

As the last planet's data scrolled up the screen, the computer proclaimed in its flat voice, "the data has been tested and is statistically significant with a plus/minus percentage of two point five."

Kirk could barely contain himself. He whooped, jumped up and grabbed an astonished Uhura by the shoulders. "Penda!" he exclaimed. "I could kiss you for this."

Her eyes flew to where Spock had swiveled about to face them. His arms were folded, and he looked up at her from just behind and to the left of the captain. She saw his quiet scrutiny, then she smiled back up at her captain. "Go right ahead, Captain. Our intentions are pure."

He hugged her instead.

"We haven't been able to isolate why, of course." Uhura was still smiling as she emerged from their
embrace. "We're trying to run a similarities test, but it's difficult. There are so many common
variables. So far the computer can tell us that all the planets have trees and air and sentient beings
and about ten thousand other shared features. About half of them seem to be planets with actively
expanding frontiers; that might be important. We're having to sift through the data by hand. And of
course some of the six planets where it's obvious what's causing the fatalities might be affected too.
That could confuse the data a bit."

"Nevertheless," Spock intoned as he turned back to the screen, "this information m-must be
brought to the attention of Admiral Komack. I c-commend you both."

Kirk too was re-examining the summarizing graphs. "Computer, locate positions of affected
planetary systems on star map." Immediately a chart glowed on the screen. Kirk's finger traced the
red markers of violence as he eased himself back down into the seat. "Most of these planets are
more than one hundred light years from Michaela. I don't see an obvious pattern in their location.
And none of these outbreaks are as extensive as Michaela's."

"It is p-p-possible the difference is one of quantity and not of k-k-k-kind." Spock could barely get
the word out. "We w-will not know unt-t-til the phenomenon is investig-g-g-g-g-gated."

Kirk looked at his first officer sharply, then smoothly addressed everybody in the briefing room.
"We won't be doing any more investigating tonight. You've already done an excellent job with
minimal information. I'll try to arrange a time for us to present this evidence to the admiral
tomorrow, so both of you," he looked first at Hunyady, who was standing next to her husband, both
their necklaces glowing, then at Uhura, "be ready to be called to the starbase at any time. And now,
don't you think it's time to get back to your party?"

He ushered them from the room, everyone except McCoy, who paused by the end of the table and
scrutinized his patient. "Ready to get back where you belong? Your star pupil doesn't need to show
off in front of you anymore."

Spock rose and placed his hands behind his back, to cover the loss of balance that made him sway
before finding equilibrium again. "I am c-capable of returning to sickb-b-bay on my own, Doctor."

"I'm not so sure of that. C'mon, Spock, be logical. It's been a hard day and you need to be in bed."

The first officer stared at the floor and slowly nodded. "You are correct. I am consc-sc-scious of
fatigue." It was an unprecedented admission from the proud Vulcan. He addressed his captain. "It
would be logical for me to r-r-return with McCoy at this time."

Kirk couldn't help but agree, even though his offer to walk Spock back to sickbay himself while
McCoy visited the party for a few minutes was almost formed on his lips. But one look at the pale,
stiffly standing Vulcan killed his words. Spock didn't need a conversation with his lover. He'd
already pushed the bounds of his physical abilities tonight, and Kirk wasn't about to test his
emotional boundaries as well.

He didn't know what McCoy had expected from him. From the wary look on the craggy face,
probably a protest. But the captain knew Spock needed rest. That's what he'd been arguing about
this morning, hadn't it?

Although, he would have liked to... just touch Spock before he went. Get some sort of...
reassurance. Give it, if he could. The healer tomorrow would have good news. He was sure of it.

Instead, he watched the two men leave the room and the doors shut behind them. Five minutes
later in the rec room the captain presented Lieutenant Hunyady with her braid.
Chapter 10

The *Enterprise* slid smoothly into orbit at exactly 0657 hours. By a coincidence that rarely occurred in space travel, ship's time varied from local planetary time by only thirty minutes. It was early morning both on the eastern edge of the southern continent, where the starbase was located, and in orbit.

Sultarin would make room in his busy schedule to see an affected Vulcan at 0900, plenty of time, Kirk thought, to allow him to beam down with his first officer and CMO, and then attend the lunch Komack had set up with O'Malley four hours later. Perhaps even go with Uhura and Hunyady to present their findings.

But the captain hadn't counted on the representatives of the Loxenen transport line, who had a major presence on the 'base. They wanted to talk with Kirk, right away, and they wanted copies of his log, and they wanted detailed schematics of all the repairs that had been made to the Lox'theneth'nar's bridge and engine, and they wanted....

Figuratively, they had Komack standing behind them, and Kirk had no choice but to order McCoy and Spock to beam down without him. Kirk consented to the immediate meeting with the Loxenens that was requested by Komack's aide, but first he ensured that Uhura and Hunyady would meet with Komack's sciences rep. If he could manipulate events his way, he could talk with the admiral over lunch about going back to the Lox'theneth'nar and Michaela....

Then he arranged to bring Lieutenant Britt with him to meet the Loxenen people, along with the tapes she'd made of the crowded living conditions on the colony ship. With a sense of righteous defiance, he had Uhura invite the Federation attaché for Sentient Beings' Rights to the meeting; there was always an SBR diplomat stationed at the major starbases. The move was more than a little irregular; he should have submitted a request through the 'base cultural affairs office and waited for a reply. But this was a calculated risk he didn't think would backfire; once the SBR caught the fetid scent of the Lox'theneth'nar, they wouldn't let mere protocol get in the way.

The attaché was unavailable, but her assistant, a large human male with a florid complexion and an aggressive manner, took her place. He arrived with a bulging briefcase and a frown. Kirk made some introductory remarks, ran the tapes Britt had made, sat back and watched the fireworks explode.

The Loxenen reps were not happy with him. They made that clear as the meeting finally broke up past noon. They believed the presence of the SBR was inappropriate. And Kirk had no right to leave the crippled ship to continue on its journey. Didn't he know that he had endangered a thousand people --- more than two thousand, the captain had gently corrected --- to an uncertain fate? Admiral Komack would be receiving a formal protest.

Kirk didn't care. It had been more than three hours since the healer had seen Spock, and he had just a few minutes to change into his dress uniform for the damn lunch. He ordered beam-up and cast the oily profiteers out of his mind.

Yes, Lieutenant Kyle said, Mister Spock and Doctor McCoy had already come back aboard. Kirk nodded and walked briskly to his quarters, determined to speak to Spock even if it made him late for O'Malley and his highness the admiral. No way he could sit through the afternoon without knowing.

His yeoman had laid out his dress uniform, and the medals he usually wore were already in place.
Kirk shrugged into the tunic as he reached for the intercom. He didn't have the time to search the ship on his own....

But the sound of voices coming from the cabin next to his stayed his hand. He fastened the high collar as he walked through the bathroom and the connecting door.

McCoy paused long enough in his tirade to glance at Kirk, but that didn't stop his mouth. "You've got a misplaced sense of loyalty, you overgrown elf. The galaxy is not going to stop spinning if you don't show up to eat with an admiral and watch Jim get a pat on the back."

The physician was resplendent in his blue dress uniform; Spock turned away from the closet holding his own formal uniform. McCoy moved forward smoothly and plucked it from the Vulcan's hand, then placed the material on the bed. "You tell him, Captain," he said over his shoulder, as he untangled the tunic from the hanger. "You've got to have more influence than I have."

Spock turned and favored Kirk with a raised eyebrow, a maneuver he'd been incapable of the night before. He looked perfectly normal, and the sound of banter was a balm to Kirk's anxious spirit. Kirk's heart, and his expectations, surged.

He took a step into the room and the bathroom door shut behind him. "Tell him what?"

"That he shouldn't beam down. This thing is going to take forever. He's been through a lot and he's got a cold. I don't want it to get worse and have to treat Vulcan pneumonia. I think he should stay on the ship and rest."

Spock pulled his workaday blue shirt over his head, folded it as he walked and placed it on the foot of the bed. "I do not require rest at this time. Admiral Komack has specifically requested my presence." He added to Kirk. "A communication has been received. It appears that I am indispensable."

Good as Spock looked, Kirk was familiar with the way the Vulcan attempted to escape medical restrictions and the uncomfortable emotional solicitude that usually accompanied them. Spock had not quite lied about his condition many times before.

He addressed McCoy. "Is he really well enough? Last night I didn't think---"

"That was before we saw Sultarin. I've got to admit it, there's something to what the healers can do, especially for Vulcans. He accomplished five days of p.t. in just fifteen minutes."

His smile growing, Kirk looked at Spock, who took up the explanation. "Sultarin melded with me, and stimulated certain areas of my brain governing both fine and gross motor skills. I have now achieved ninety-five percent mobility, and ninety-two percent co-ordination. And as you can hear, my speech patterns are much improved."

"Improved! You sound great."

"Indeed. There are no longer any medical grounds for confining me to sickbay."

"I'm not confining you anywhere, Spock," the physician said. "You're discharged. I just think that you should exercise some sense and rest in your cabin, not go hobnobbing with the admiral all afternoon."

Left to their own deives, these two were capable of arguing indefinitely. Kirk cut through it. "Can you do it?"
"Of course. My Vulcan stamina has returned. The good doctor is being overly cautious, and as illogical as he usually is. I have been ordered to at-t-tend and I shall." The last statement, said in as calm and certain a voice as only Spock could use, was directed at McCoy as a blatant challenge. Then the Vulcan sneezed, as if to put an exclamation point to his words. The physician snorted, and held out the tunic for Spock's arms. The first officer turned and slipped into it.

It appeared that the matter was settled. Kirk allowed a smile to fully form on his lips, and tension fell from his shoulders. He leaned back against the wall and watched the unique sight of McCoy playing valet to his unrelenting lover.

"How many medals do you have anyway?" the physician mumbled as he fastened the fifth one to the shiny fabric. "Don't answer that," he quickly added. "I don't want to know. Too many heroes around here. There, that's enough, isn't it?"

Spock looked down at his left chest, where a cluster of color marked some of his past accomplishments. "It is sufficient. If you will excuse me." He walked past Kirk and disappeared into the bathroom.

McCoy picked up the discarded but neatly folded blue top. "Heck, he isn't going to wear this again. Just put on a fresh one when he gets back. That Vulcan is a compulsive neat-freak. Anal-retentive if I ever saw one." He walked over to the recycler and stuffed the shirt down. "There." He turned and, eyes to the floor, walked back to Spock's dresser and picked up a hairbrush. "One swipe with this and we'll be ready to go."

Red alert signals were going off in Kirk's head. Without Spock to act as foil, McCoy's shallow act was suddenly revealed. Slowly the captain straightened.

"Bones...."

Standing in front of the mirror, the physician's back stiffened. He turned around and met Kirk's eyes, for the first time, the captain realized, since he had entered the room.

But before he could ask anything, Spock emerged from the bathroom. Kirk whirled about to face him. "Spock.... Tell me what the healer said."

Much more than a command, a heartfelt plea. And with it, the ease that had existed among the three of them vanished. For a moment Spock simply stood there. Then, in the even Vulcan tone that Kirk had come to expect from his first officer, Spock reported.

"Captain. Sultarin took several tests. The results will not be available until later this afternoon. We are scheduled to meet with him again at seventeen hundred hours."

"But it must be good news. He's already helped you so much, you're so much better--"

"Physically." The brown eyes had no difficulty capturing the captain's gaze and holding it. "Jim, I did not perceive the meld when Sultarin initiated it. I felt nothing at all." A muscle along the dry skin of the jaw line twitched. "The implications are not encouraging."

Memory washed over Kirk; how it had felt to welcome Spock's mind into his own, the slow sliding goodness of one consciousness fitting snugly into another.... Even he, a mind-blind human, had always known when their minds touched....

"But the results of the tests might be encouraging," he said doggedly. "We don't know yet. I think this is a good sign, that he was able to help you at all. Doesn't that show that there was something there for him to work with?"
"You refer to the t'lishtin, the net of consciousness upon which the meld and the bond are based."

He hadn't known the name, but he'd seen it, the backdrop of the stage on which they had played out their love. "Yes."

"It is possible that you are correct."

Kirk turned to McCoy. "What's your medical opinion?"

The doctor stirred from where he had been standing with his arms folded. "I think I'm not qualified to give an opinion. But if I were forced to, I'd say things look better than I thought they would. Responding to the therapeutic meld is a good sign. 'Course, not perceiving it at all, that's not so good. But overall, I'm encouraged. Cautiously."

"Nevertheless, I do not believe it would be w-w-wise to allow hope to grow from such a supposition. We will know more in a few hours. That is not so very long a time to wait." Spock glanced at the nightstand next to the bed. "I observe that we are due planetside in five minutes. We should repair to the transporter room." He turned and took a step towards the door.

Kirk stopped him with a hand that tightened on his lover's upper arm. "Spock...."

The Enterprise's first officer turned again to face his captain. "Yes, sir?" he inquired, his voice suddenly toneless. Spock might be stopped, but he would not be pushed.

Before the implacable control on his lover's face, Kirk inwardly flinched. He understood why Spock was preventing himself from hoping too much, he'd probably do the same if it had happened to him, but it still hurt to be frozen out. He loosened his grip and took a half-step back, but he kept his hand on Spock's arm. "I want to come with you this afternoon. Everything with Komack should be over by then."

Slowly Spock nodded. "You have that right."

"Yes. I do. And I know that Sultarin will have good news."

"Forgive me if I do not succumb to your optimism."

"Of course. You're forgiven. Everything."

They looked at one another for one beat, two beats, three beats of silence, then Spock abruptly turned away. "I do not wish to be the cause of further problems between yourself and the admiral. We must leave now."

The first officer walked out the door. Four deep breaths later Kirk followed him, and glanced at the physician who paced him down the hallway. "Are you coming too? I didn't know Komack had invited you."

McCoy ignored the sarcasm. "He didn't. But I have a patient I'm a little concerned about so I called the 'base and invited myself."

They had argued. They had said things to one another that had hurt, and Kirk still wasn't sure whether McCoy accepted his relationship with Spock. He was uncomfortable with his physician friend, and the anger and resentment hadn't faded much.

But McCoy cared. He was doing everything he could for Spock. The least the captain could offer him was silence.
Kirk took his place on the transporter between his first officer and his chief medical officer. They beamed down to starbase twenty-four.

*****

"There, Kirk. I told you your first officer would be able to attend." Komack greeted them in characteristically blunt fashion. They had been escorted to the lushly carpeted anteroom of the admiral's private dining room on the twenty-fifth floor of the starfleet administration building. A long table covered with a damask cloth and set with formal dinnerware could be seen through an open archway in one wall of the dark paneled room; ugly green tapestries and two dimensional oil portraits adorned the other walls. In the foyer, waiters offered trays of drinks to the assembled guests. Starfleet officers in dress uniform and civilians in formal wear stood and watched as the admiral advanced from the crowd of more than a dozen people to greet the late arrivals.

Komack held a goblet of wine in one hand, and he extended the other to the captain of the Enterprise in a feigned gesture of goodwill. Not a muscle of the granite face twitched. Kirk took the hand and kept his expression equally bland. They shook, two adversaries meeting in the ring before the match. But Kirk had no intention of fighting. Not now. He needed Komack for Michaela and for Spock.

"Good afternoon, Admiral," he said correctly. It was easy to do. He hadn't even materialized completely before he had assumed the public face he would need for the day.

Komack turned his attention to Spock. "You are looking fit, Commander. Better than I thought you would," he barked in his sharp voice. Again he extended his hand.

Spock smoothly took it, knowing as Kirk and McCoy knew that the friendly gesture was meant as an insult. Komack was well aware of the Vulcan dislike for casual touch.

"Admiral." The Vulcan nodded.

"I believe you know my chief medical officer, Leonard McCoy." Kirk gestured to his left.

"Ah, yes." Komack knew that McCoy had played some role on the burning sands of Vulcan that day more than two years ago. That was clear from the tightening of his lips, and the way the crease between his eyes, the result of frowning deeply and often, deepened even more. "The good doctor. Here to keep an eye on your patient, are you?"

McCoy barely touched the admiral's hand, then withdrew. "Yes, sir."

"You needn't have bothered. Kirk here keeps a very close eye on Commander Spock, don't you, Captain?"

Captain and admiral locked gazes for a long five seconds. The admiral implied the relationship that already existed, while believing his veiled accusation was an insult of the worst kind. "A captain is responsible for the ship and for the crew." Kirk softly quoted section one, paragraph one of the command manual. No one could fault him for that.

"Of course, Kirk, of course. And we all know what a very responsible captain you are. That's why you're here today, our guest of honor." Komack swung around to include the rest of the people there. "You need to meet Representative O'Malley and his wife...."

To his surprise, Kirk liked O'Malley. A small man with a long sharp nose and quick movements, he and his wife spoke with a rich lilt that was like especially rhythmic music cutting through the air. He was sensible, if more than a bit forceful in his opinions, and didn't seem at all like many
other politicians Kirk had met in his travels. Not artificially suave, as Kirk had accused him of being earlier. It was easy to talk with the man who represented so many of Earth's billions in the council.

And O'Malley and Komack disagreed on the most recent use of force by starfleet in sector two on the other side of the Federation. "I don't like to see authority abused," the small man said bluntly as they stood drinking cocktails. He stabbed the air with a finger. "Not by anybody. We've got to respect the Prime Directive in its spirit as well as in the letter of the law. Everybody deserves a chance to be heard. Other cultures, other people. Our own people. If that's not how we think, we're just as much bullies as the Klingons."

Komack's eyes narrowed, and he said something about needing a military mind to understand how starfleet operated.

"Military minds can be open minds, Admiral. I know that. I've met many fine military men in my travels. Like Captain Kirk here. That's why he's getting a medal today. Am I not right?"

Komack wanted to disagree, but it was clear he couldn't. He stared down at the floor, and Kirk cast about for something to say in the awkward silence. He was saved from speaking by a uniformed waiter announcing that lunch was served.

Through salad and soup and entree, the lunch went well. But as dessert was presented Captain Langley leaned forward from where he was seated two chairs to the right of Kirk, and addressed the captain. Langley was a tight-faced man with thinning blond hair who had never commanded a ship and never would; he was the science coordinator for the sector. He'd been promoted the same year that Kirk had achieved the captaincy, although he was at least fifteen years older.

"I talked with your two people this morning, Kirk. Interesting theory they've got there." He spoke in a reasonable tone of voice.

Kirk nodded. "But I think it's more than interesting. I think it's vital information that we've got to act upon. And the Enterprise has more experience dealing with this situation that any other ship."

"Maybe. But I'd definitely like to check the facts. I've got two men assigned to it right now."

Kirk patted his lips with a white linen napkin. "I'm sure their findings will corroborate our results."

Langley shook his blond head. "I'm not sure I buy the interpretation of the raw data. Too many incomplete broadcasts that your ladies inferred from. And there were fifty-seven languages involved. My guess is that the translation of some of them got a little broad."

Kirk opened his mouth to defend a methodology he knew little about when another Enterprise voice entered the conversation.

"Lieutenant Uhura," said Spock from directly across the table from Langley, "is a linguistics expert. Her translations were precise."

"Oh?" Langley sounded skeptical and more than a little patronizing, and Kirk found that he didn't like that tone directed to his first officer. Langley might be stationed on a large, influential starbase under an admiral, but Kirk would bet his life on the validity of Spock's scientific evaluations. He had, several times.

"Indeed. And of the fifty-nine languages involved," the stress on the word was subtle but definite, "seventeen share common roots."
"Ah, right." Langley's mild confusion shifted to sympathy. "I'd heard that you've been confined to sickbay, Commander Spock. I'm sure you haven't had the opportunity to read the complete report yet. When you do you'll have the same questions I do."

"Negative. I have perused the report in detail. I have no quarrels with methodology, and I b-believe its conclusions should be brought to the admiral's attention."

Kirk threw his friend a swift look. When had Spock read through the data?

Komack, seated across from the Enterprise captain, was engaged in conversation with O'Malley's petite wife. But Kirk sensed that half the attention of the white-haired admiral was directed his way, listening in, and Kirk made the obvious conclusion. So. Langley was part of the team. As Spock had entered the fray in support of his captain and the findings, so the planetbound captain was the stalking horse for the admiral.

O'Malley, next to Komack, sat back in his chair and smiled gently. He toyed with the stem of his wine glass, and his pebbly eyes darted among the three verbal combatants.

"Yes, that's what that youngster said. She was quite, ah..., insistent. What's her name? The really young one." Langley smiled at Kirk without showing any teeth. "You know your own people, Captain, but it's hard for me to put much credence in the work of someone as inexperienced as that one obviously is. And, ah..., shall we say a bit pushy for her age and very recent rank? But I suppose you saw some promise in that aggressive type."

It was obvious what the man wasn't saying. She's just like you, Kirk. I don't have much respect for her and I don't have much respect for you. Komack had communicated his opinions to Langley.

"Not every personality we come across is going to meet our standards," Kirk said smoothly. "I've discovered that as we've traveled among many different worlds." As you haven't. "We have to adjust, look beyond the superficial to what's really important."

"Of course," Langley agreed, matching Kirk's graciousness. "And since this sector administers the Federation contacts with more than two hundred cultures, and since we're on the frontier of unexplored space as well, there's always a question of determining priorities. So we act on what's truly important."

"Naturally. But I tend to put lives at the top of every list I make, Captain. A luxury that I understand not everyone can afford. But if one were to assume that being's lives are top priority, I'm sure you'll agree with me that my officers' conclusions are..., shall we saw pivotal? People are dying in a very strange pattern in this sector. Not obviously, not yet. You've got to dig to see it. But wouldn't it be better for us to step in and try to stop this situation before it becomes worse?"

Langley leaned forward to inspect the cream-topped confection that had just been placed in front of him. "I don't believe we've established that there is a situation. As yet."

Kirk hitched around in his chair, ignoring the busy waiter and the hapless security commander who had the misfortune to be seated between himself and the science rep. "But if there were, if my people are right, and Commander Spock," he nodded across the table, "and I think they are, then it would look very, very bad indeed if the violence grew to epidemic proportions. Suppose it could be said that starfleet knew about it from the beginning and never even tried to investigate? Accusations like that would overshadow all the good done by an event," he looked around the room, "like this. I would like that report to be taken seriously, Captain. I would like it to be brought to the attention of Admiral Komack, so that I can discuss it with him later."
Langley didn't miss a beat. He nodded sagely. "It may surprise you to hear that sciences here on the base operate almost...," he drew the word out for effect, "...as efficiently as those on the Enterprise. I talked with the admiral this morning already. Your report, or rather that of your two very fine officers, is on his desk." Langley picked up his fork and began to eat.

Across the table, O'Malley silently toasted Kirk with his wine glass.

But Kirk seethed. What had they been doing, testing his commitment to the report's findings, to his own people? Or just playing a game of "yank the captain's string?"

Kirk looked up from the over-rich dessert to find that the admiral had abandoned Dympna O'Malley as a conversational companion. Komack's blue, blue eyes pierced through him. "Trust you to come up with something like this, Kirk. You never give up, do you?"

"No, sir."

"Sometimes you should."

"So I've been told on occasion. Sir."

"It appears to me," finally O'Malley had something to say, "that a stubborn commander in the field could be an asset to starfleet, don't you agree, Admiral?"

"And there are times when intransigence can be taken too far," Komack answered shortly. "What's the status of your first officer, Kirk? Is he fit enough to stay on board? You must be very concerned about him."

Kirk looked at him, startled. He'd assumed that Komack neither knew nor cared about the extent of Spock's disability. "Commander Spock has been discharged from sickbay," he answered carefully.

"Yes. But maybe he needs more than what your CMO can give him." Komack spoke as if Spock could not hear every word that was uttered. "It might be better for the commander to take a little time, spend a few weeks at the base hospital. Or travel to starbase eleven. We have the best doctors in the galaxy there, they say, even for Vulcans. Starfleet must protect its investment by keeping him as fit as possible."

The threat was definite, even covered with solicitude, and Kirk didn't know what to say. What was he being asked to trade for the privilege of keeping the best first officer in the fleet on his ship? He looked at Komack's challenging stare, the hard lines in his face, and suddenly understood. Komack wanted capitulation from him, the deference that Kirk had denied him during Spock's pon farr and which had been noticeably absent during the relationship of commanding officer to subordinate ever since. Especially, Komack needed to emphasize his power in front of the Federation representative.

Kirk sucked in a soundless breath. He understood the man's pride, he had it himself. And it wasn't so much to grant the admiral, especially if deference now meant keeping Spock on board, and the assignment back to Michaela later. Michaela, and further on an interception course with the Lox'theneth'nar, and then on to Beta Armstrong where the colonists would be. But he hated using Spock as a pawn. This was a dangerous game they played. If Kirk made a wrong move, would Komack really ground the 'fleet's most visible sign of integration?

"Of course," Kirk said into the silence. "As the admiral says. I join with you in wanting the best possible care for every member of my crew."

"But especially someone so valuable to you as Commander Spock, eh, Kirk? I've been told he's the
best. But what about now? Is he fit to resume his duties?"

The admiral hadn't lowered his voice. This conversation was being witnessed up and down the table, regardless of the polite rules of society that respected Vulcan reticence and the common sense rules that said starfleet affairs were not bandied about in public.

"Very close to it, sir."

"But really, Kirk. A... disability of this magnitude? I don't know how your man can function. I've read McCoy's report and my own CMO's comments on it. He said the closest analogy in humans would be castration. I don't think that would be easy to recover from. Whether it's cutting off a vital part of your mind or your body. And your first officer has had just.... what? Two days? Three days to adjust? Could that possibly be enough time?"

Kirk wouldn't let himself look at Spock, nor anyone else. The admiral had found a neat way to punish them both for a years-old slight, and Kirk could do nothing but co-operate. He carefully placed one hand flat on the table next to his plate. It wouldn't do for anyone to see it curl into the fist he wanted to smash into the admiral's face. He could do it-- he could exercise control equal to a Vulcan's if he needed to. "I am not a doctor," he said quietly. "I of course defer to their judgment. I would not deprive anyone of the treatment they need."

"Especially Commander Spock. In the forefront, shall we say, of what representative O'Malley here," a broad gesture to include the Irishman, "is trying to accomplish. Political realities must always be taken into consideration."

"Yes, I understand that. It must be difficult to balance... different priorities."

The admiral seemed to find that amusing. "Ha!" he barked. He subsided back into the chair. "You don't know the half of it, Kirk. Although I expect you think you do."

Kirk ignored the insult and chanced an advance. "The doctors on this base are excellent, I have heard. There is even a Vulcan healer here, whom my first officer has already seen. Perhaps, the skills under your command would be sufficient...?"

Komack grunted. "Might be. We'll see. Commander Spock has a reputation as a problem solver, not a problem maker, and it might be a good idea to have him on board if the Enterprise undertakes an important mission. Assuming he can function, of course. We'll just have to see."

Before they could exchange any further words, an aide walked up to the admiral's side and whispered in his ear. It was time to move on to the medal ceremony. The silence that had descended upon the table broke as everyone rose to leave. Kirk reached out and twitched his plate into exact alignment with his cutlery, then he got up and very precisely placed his chair back in its place. Assuming he can function. Castration. The bastard.

Just two and a half hours until the appointment with Sultarin.

As they walked along a carpeted hallway to the turbolift that would take them to the auditorium, Kirk felt more on display than he ever would on a stage. No one spoke to him as they walked. When they entered the generously-sized lift, he allowed himself one, just one glance at his lover. But how much could a man read in another's eyes from less than a second of contact? Nothing. Spock had frozen his hopes and was just living one minute to the next.

The hall reflected the architecture of the planet: low-ceilinged, stuffy, with the ubiquitous green tapestries lining the walls. The room was carpeted, and the sounds of more than five hundred
beings inside was muffled. Humans predominated, but there were many non-human races present as well. As he walked down the center aisle to a rising swell of applause, Kirk spotted twelve, thirteen, fourteen different species, and he knew he must have missed some others.

The reason why O'Malley had chosen to travel all the way out to the starbase to make this presentation became clear. He had a built-in audience for his message here. This planet had been chosen to host the starbase in part because it was a populous world that was a commercial crossroads for the sector. Everyone who had business in sector seven eventually found their way here, and it seemed that almost everyone of any importance had been invited today. Kirk didn't know anyone in the audience. Why were they there? To see a hero? They'd have to go somewhere else for that.

The honor guard from the Enterprise stood stiffly at attention in front of the stage area. Sulu, Resl't, Josephs, Tarn towering above them all, Prendel't next to him looking like an Andorian doll, Dawson and Smith. Kirk heard Spock and McCoy behind him fall out to the first row of seats; Komack, O'Malley and he walked up to seats on the stage. Kirk faced the audience, head held high, and prepared to endure for the sake of the 'fleet.

According to the official citation, Kirk received the Starfleet Distinguished Service medal for his actions on the Johnson Combine Agricultural Colony number seven in discovering and freeing Federation citizens who were being unlawfully held by the Orions. It was a mission that normally would have received little attention except within starfleet. But it had taken place shortly after starfleet had bowed to the political pressure being exerted by members of the Federation Council to appoint more non-humans to the twelve starships. Because of Spock's long-time and very successful presence on the Enterprise, Kirk's ship was the first to receive a transfer of more than fifty non-humans.

But only a series of coincidental circumstances had led Kirk to replace half the Marine contingent with his own security personnel. Reporters had made much of the fact that a Rigellian had died in the name of duty, that it had been two Andorian security guards newly appointed to the Enterprise, with their sense of "aura," who had found the hidden base of the Orions.

Naturally, the fact that Kirk and four others had been taken hostage by the Orions and force-marched through the mountains wasn't mentioned in the proclamation of the citation. The fact that two of those hostages had been blasted out of existence in front of Kirk's impotent eyes wasn't mentioned. The fact that the entire base, along with Orions, former slaves and starfleet personnel had almost been blown to kingdom come because it had taken Kirk an unconscionably long time to realize the Orions were bent on suicide wasn't mentioned either.

O'Malley was a man with a mission, sincerely dedicated to the idealistic principals espoused by the Federation, and his presentation address, which lasted more than forty minutes, amply illustrated his oratory skills. It was clear that he had a genuine admiration for the captain who had orchestrated the mission, but he didn't talk much about Kirk, and for that Kirk was grateful.

The captain had a lot to think about as O'Malley spoke, but each topic had emotional pitfalls that he was determined to avoid. He wouldn't allow himself to dwell on whether the admiral would send the Enterprise back to Michaela and unfinished business, or on the chance that the news this afternoon with the healer would be good, or on the possibilities of getting the Enterprise back to the Lox'theneth'nar if the news... wasn't so good. Kirk frowned. Possibilities didn't enter into it. He would do it, if that's what was needed. Whoever or whatever had stripped Spock's mind had been on that ship, and there was no way that Kirk would be prevented from pursuing it. Not even if he had to take leave and hire a private ship to intercept the Lox or go on to Beta Armstrong. If he had to, he'd do it.
There was a polite scattering of applause at something that O'Malley had said, and Kirk came back to himself to realize his fists were clenched and his jaw tightened. He consciously tried to relax, and diverted his mind by looking out over the crowd.

Protocol had given the first few rows to the guests at the luncheon and top staff from the base. The media had holocams stationed at each side of the stage, and Ralph Randolph, a reporter whom Kirk knew from *The Galactic News*, stood next to one of the cams that was floating on an anti-grav pad. Randolph caught the captain's eye and nodded in greeting. *The Galactic* was the most prestigious news organ in the Federation, and Randolph would probably lead the questioning at the press conference after the ceremony. Kirk didn't mind the young reporter. As a matter of fact, he owed Randolph a favor. A big one. The picture that now rested in Spock's personal safe, that he and Spock had used to tell McCoy of their relationship, had been taken by Randolph.

Kirk's eyes ranged further. Among those in starfleet uniform there was the expected number of non-humans seated with their human comrades. Once past the red, blue, and gold uniforms though, the civilian population segregated itself. Humans in tight clusters. A group of Vegans here. A row of Andorians. There were even three Vulcans, seated side by side, wearing the close-fitting grey garb of the Vulcan Commercial Combine, and apparently following every syllable O'Malley uttered with complete fascination. Fakes, Kirk uncharitably thought. They were probably calculating profit margins in their heads. Vulcans were astute traders.

On the far right side, seated directly across a side aisle from where Spock and McCoy were on the first row, there was an elderly lady with placid eyes and white hair regarding him. She looked like a child in a chair meant for an adult; her feet did not connect with the floor. Kirk noticed her, his attention skipped over her, then he realized that in a room that was actually quite crowded, she was seated with empty chairs all about her. An island. He looked more closely. Their gazes connected and held, beyond the boundaries of what was polite, until she smiled indulgently and returned her attention to O'Malley and what he was saying.

Kirk almost smiled back. She wasn't human, he didn't think; her head was perhaps a bit too large for her body; she had that unmistakably alien look simply in the way she sat. But she nevertheless reminded him of his own grandmother, his father's mother, a determined woman of ample bosom and ample voice. Although this woman in the audience wasn't built like Grandmother Kirk, but thin as a stick. He wondered what a grandmotherly type was doing here. Probably she knew someone on the base. Or perhaps a ceremony like this broke up the monotony of her day.

Finally O'Malley had said all he had to say. The honor guard marched onto the stage and Kirk stepped in front of them. Komack approached with a box in his hand. The Federation representative took the ribbon and pressed it onto the only open space on the left side of the captain's tunic. "Congratulations, Captain," O'Malley murmured. "One more recognition of your extraordinary achievements."

Komack cleared his throat.

The one redeeming feature of the whole gathering was that Kirk was not expected to make a speech. He advanced three steps towards the crowd, confident that the hovering mikes would pick up his words from wherever he stood. "I accept this medal in memory of those who gave their lives on that day. Let us not forget them." He then turned and saluted Komack, and O'Malley too, for good measure. The audience erupted into applause. The Vegans stamped their feet. A contingent of purple-skinned beings with four arms whistled.

All on the stage marched sharply down the center aisle. Kirk made to move on through the foyer, but Komack caught his attention. "Kirk," he barked, "over here. You're not finished yet. There's a
Those in the audience, it seemed, were anxious to exchange greetings with the hero of the hour, to admire his medals, touch his hand, look into his eyes. Kirk stood next to the admiral and tried to be as hospitable as he could as one being after another filed by. But it stretched his patience, and made this already interminable day even longer. O'Malley, a politician skilled at pressing the flesh, stood to Kirk's left and greeted each individual by the name whispered into his ear by an aide. Komack, who seemed to know quite a few people but declined to introduce any of them to Kirk, was on the captain's right.

One of the first through the line was Randolph, without his camera or recorder. His long yellow hair didn't disguise his heavily masculine features; the hair was swept away from his face with a leather thong. He shook Kirk's hand in a firm grasp, but instead of the already oft-repeated words of congratulations, he said, "Ever get that picture I sent you? Galactic mail isn't everything it's cracked up to be, and starfleet can lose any package it wants to."

Kirk nodded, suddenly wary. What did this man want? "I should have thanked you before this. Yes, I got it."

"Good. It was a nice picture. One of the better character studies I've taken, if I do say so. Reminds me of one I've got on my desk at home."

"It does?"

"Yeah. John's a scientist too. A chemist, though, and not nearly as famous as your... as Mister Spock. Or am I wrong? I've discovered that pictures rarely lie."

Kirk had always been able to think quickly on his feet. "Reporter's instincts are often correct, Mister Randolph," he acknowledged, without truly acknowledging anything.

The man nodded in satisfaction. "Thought so. Well, just thought you might like to know that you and I have something in common. Appreciating scientists, that is. Maybe you'll think about an exclusive interview some day. Maybe when they promote you to commodore you'll remember me." Randolph didn't give him a chance to react, just smiled, said, "See you at the press conference," and moved on to Komack. Kirk automatically took the offered hand of the next well-wisher, in this case a purple-scaled one, and silently assimilated his surprise.

He couldn't count the beings who came to stand before him. It felt like everyone in the hall filed by. An hour passed in slow motion. And the press conference was still to come, the last obstacle before the meeting with the healer. Kirk reined in his impatience with an effort. There were still a few stragglers waiting for their turn with the hero.

And then the white-haired woman he'd noticed in the crowd was before him. She barely came up to his breastbone; he had to reach down to grasp the bony hand she held out for his touch.

"Captain Kirk." Her voice was melodious. The gnarled fingers rested lightly in his, and she smiled a simple smile, totally at odds with their self-important surroundings. "I am interested, quite, in the life you lead in Starfleet. Could you tell me what your ship did before it, immediately, to this planet came? Everything about the Enterprise I would like to know."

She spoke Standard without an accent despite her misplacement of words. It was easy to understand what she asked. Kirk frowned. All the Enterprise’s missions, even the routine ones, were classified until specifically cleared and released. He wouldn't be talking casually about the Lox'theneth'nar and the events that occurred there to anyone.
Suddenly, the woman laughed. A charming, genuine laugh, sounding so much like Gram Kirk that the captain found himself smiling down at the little woman. The disturbing thought that he was holding the hand of a spy dissipated. This woman was harmless. No spy would ask outright for the information she sought.

"I see I should not that have asked you." The wrinkles around her eyes deepened as the smile lingered on her face. Her weathered skin looked soft, as if the skin of a much younger person had simply been bunched up and laid over her angular cheekbones.

"No, ma'am, I'm afraid not. I'm not at liberty to discuss the ship's missions. But thank you for coming to the starbase."

"It is my pleasure, Captain Kirk."

Her voice was rich, warm, and Kirk believed in her utter sincerity; she had indeed found pleasure in seeing him get another medal. Extraordinary.

She continued, "You, I believe, are a capable man, very. Have you seen many worlds?"

It wasn't an idle question. She wanted to know the answer. But he couldn't count the number of planets on which he'd walked. He thought of them spinning in space, one multi-colored ball after another, all with his footprints on their soil. "Very many."

She sighed. "Ah, yes. This Federation of yours is large."

"And there are still so many worlds to see." A vision sparked in his mind: the Enterprise and her captain and crew, escaping from the military precision of the base, ranging out into the unexplored reaches of the galaxy. Seeking out new worlds, and new civilizations....

"But as many as we need? Enough for all? I wonder every day. But, those answers easy are not to find." She paused. "I will go on. You will not want to, here, be seen with me."

"No, ma'am, not at all," he protested, not quite understanding her move to withdraw.

She patted their joined hands maternally. "You have a phrase--persona non grata? Me that is. I see you that disturbs. But you should worry not. About me or about yourself. The universe unfolds. We all have our place, do we not? Perhaps, we will have the chance to, later, talk?" Her head tilted to one side, like a little bird cocking its head on a scrawny neck.

"That would be my pleasure, ma'am," he gallantly replied. What was this interesting little woman talking about?

"Until again we meet. Good-bye, Captain Kirk."

The woman then shook Komack's hand and stared up into his face as the admiral murmured "pleased you could attend," but she didn't say anything to him. Then she passed down the hallway to the turbolift, paused to bow and nod to Randolph, and was out of sight.

Both the admiral and Kirk watched her walk away while O'Malley monopolized the attention of the last being in line. "One of the leaders of the gypsy settlement outside the city," Komack growled, too quietly for anyone else but Kirk to hear. "You don't see many of them; they keep strictly to themselves. Just as well. They're scum of the earth. But we had to invite her."

Kirk frowned. He didn't think "scum of the earth" characterized the person with whom he'd just spoken. She seemed like... well, a very normal person, despite her odd questions and phrasing. She
was someone who would make Thanksgiving dinner in Iowa on a blustery November day, who
would scold an eleven-year-old boy about slamming the door and hug him in the same moment,
who would accept what the boy said whether he bragged or cried. In short, a grandmother. Or at
least, the idealized version of one that distance and time allowed Kirk to superimpose on his own
memories.

He followed Komack into a small room filled with reporters, their equipment and their questions.
Lieutenant Wright, press officer from the Enterprise, tried to organize the chaos, but Kirk stood in
the center of a whirlwind, with questions and comments hurled his way from every direction. He
felt like ducking, but stood instead on the small stage, with Komack seated to one side ready to
pounce on any inappropriate question or answer. At the admiral's insistence before the proceedings
began, Spock also assumed a seat on display, so he could serve as Komack's "visible symbol" of
starfleet's magnanimous attitude towards non-humans. Defiantly, McCoy also marched up to the
stage, carrying his own chair with him, and sat down with a plop next to the first officer.

Almost all of the queries had to do with the expedition against the Orions seven months ago, the
final details of which had just been declassified and released specifically for the medal ceremony.
Inevitably, Kirk was asked about how the non-human members of the Enterprise crew were fitting
in, and whether they had contributed in any significant way since the Orion event. The captain
answered as honestly as he could, which wasn't always to Komack's satisfaction. Komack
interjected additional commentary a few times, emphasizing the party line of goodwill and
cooperation among all the species of the Federation.

At last the final question had been asked and answered, and Lieutenant Wright formally thanked
the reporters and promised them the official transcript in just a few minutes. The members of the
media began to pack up their equipment, and Kirk gave orders for the honor guard to beam back
aboard the ship. Then he walked over to the side of the stage where his friends were waiting. The
three officers from the Enterprise were finally free.

"How much time until the appointment, Spock?" The question was fully formed and out of his
mouth before Kirk could stop it. Four years of habit were behind it; whenever he wanted to know
the time, the captain asked his first officer, whose internal clock always ticked. But not now. The
perfect time sense, at least temporarily, was gone.

But Vulcans weren't capable of being non-plussed or embarrassed, at least not when they were in
the stiffly controlled mode that Spock had exercised all day. With a perfectly expressionless face
he looked over at the wall-mounted digital display that had been hidden until a moment ago by
recording equipment. "Ten minutes, Captain."

Kirk swallowed his chagrin. "All right, then. Let's go."

But Komack had different ideas. He came up behind the Enterprise group and barked, "Come with
me to my office, Kirk. We need to discuss something."

Yes, Kirk thought, his nervous tension erupting in a savage thought that he threw at the man who'd
humiliated him and Spock, however subtly, in front of others. Like how to cut off your balls and
feed them to the Kzinti for lunch. Except that even those cannibalistic barbarians would spit the
damn things out. "Admiral, there is a meeting that I--"

Komack took satisfaction in interrupting him. "New orders, Kirk."

That wasn't something with which the captain could argue. He swallowed his frustration and
turned to his companions. "I'll... you can brief me when I get back to the ship." He wanted to add
"good luck," but he didn't. He couldn't say it in front of the admiral, and he didn't think that Spock
would appreciate the sentiment anyway. His lover wasn't ready to admit that "fortuitous circumstances" existed. Kirk silently followed the admiral to the turbolift that would take them back to twenty-fifth floor.

He stood opposite Komack in the admiral's office. He'd seen the place often enough the past several months from the bridge of the Enterprise; it was odd experiencing the lucite-topped desk and the heavy blue curtains in person. Kirk had never noticed the gold-framed picture of a woman on the shelves to the side.

Komack saw Kirk looking at the portrait. He sank back into the heavily upholstered black chair behind the desk. "That's my wife," he volunteered. "Director of the hydroponics plant in town."

The woman was small and grey-haired, with a thin smile and faded blue eyes. She looked tired, but content. Tired Kirk could understand, having to live with the admiral, but content? Hard to believe. He'd never even thought of the admiral being married. If the thought had ever occurred to Kirk, he would have guessed that the man would have insisted upon a young, attractive woman, someone to be seen with and boost his ego. It would have been in character with the admiral Kirk thought he knew. There were enough such trophy marriages in the upper echelons of starfleet. But the Mrs. Komack in the picture had lines of experience on her face and had made no effort to hide her age. Kirk was genuinely puzzled. He wasn't prepared to see the different Komack that the picture prompted him to visualize.

The captain realized he'd been studying the picture longer than politeness allowed and hastily turned his attention away. He felt the need to say something, but the usual platitude of she's very attractive or some variation was inappropriate. He settled for "That's a very responsible position."

"Uh-huh. She's good at it. But I'm no good at small talk, so let's get down to business. Kirk, I know what you want me to say. I'm not saying it. The Enterprise is being sent to the planet of Gabriela. It's a scientific mission."

Komack expected the protest, so Kirk gave it to him. He remained standing. "I request that we be sent back to Michaela instead, admiral. If you've read the report my officers submitted this morning, you know--"

Komack cut him off. "Yes, yes. I've read it and my people have made some initial observations. Because it's from you, I'd like to say that it's just a pig-headed captain trying to have his own way. You really want to be promoted, Kirk, don't you? You really want to be able to take your ship exactly where you want it to go."

"Sir, I--"

"Don't give me any self-serving bullshit. I think we understand each other. The Enterprise is going to Gabriela."

"My ship is best equipped to further investigate the violence that's erupting in this sector. We can--"

"I know the argument. I'll admit, it makes some sense, and I was considering sending you where you want to go, even earlier this morning. But I've had a chance to think about it some more since then, and what I want from you is to go where you are sent without question. Do you think that you and your people are the only competent officers under my command? They're not. Just the most troublesome. Your report is being carefully scrutinized. If, in my judgment, its findings are valid, then starfleet will act upon them. Starfleet, not James Kirk and his private group of scientists. Is that understood?"
He had no choice. Of course he understood. If he'd ever had a chance of convincing the admiral to let them go, it had disappeared during the long afternoon while Komack had been forced to play his host and hear his praises sung. "Yes, sir."

"And speaking of your own scientists...." Komack paused for effect. "...Is Commander Spock truly fit to remain on your ship?"

Kirk didn't hesitate. "Yes, sir, I believe he is. However, he may need some additional treatment from a Vulcan healer. We might have to leave him here for that--."

The admiral grunted. It seemed to be a favorite expression of his. "Only if you have to. I want him with you when you go to Gabriela. Sit down."

The admiral leaned forward, touched a glowing dot on the surface of his desk and said, "Computer, project location of Gabriela." A holo of sector seven leapt into being between the two men. The starbase was bright green, one-third out from the center of the roughly elliptical area of space. Another planet on the very edge of the sector, furthest away from the starbase, glowed yellow. It was not too far from where they had intercepted the Lox'theneth'nar.

"Gabriela is just outside our sphere of influence. But close to Tholian space. Computer, augment Tholian sector." A pyramid of blue appeared. One tip was aimed like an arrow towards the Federation. Gabriela stood between the two. "I don't have to explain to you the strategic importance of this system. We've expanded so that we need a buffer between our heavily settled planets and the Tholians. Gabriela would be ideal."

Komack leaned back in his chair. "But when we first made contact with them twenty years ago, they rejected us. Completely. Requested a ban on further Federation visits."

Kirk didn't enjoy the game the admiral was playing with him, so he let the silence between them grow, just long enough to be noticeable. Then he placed his elbows on the arms of his chair, folded his hands and asked the logical question, "So why are we going now?"

Komack's fiery gaze heated his skin, but Kirk couldn't find it in himself to be sorry. The state of uneasy equilibrium in which his relationship with this superior officer had existed was now irretrievably disrupted. Komack could never be impartial with Kirk or the Enterprise again.

"They've asked us to," he said shortly. "Seems they're having some sort of environmental problem, and they want some Federation scientists to attend a planetary conference on it. I think your science staff should be up to that, don't you, Kirk?"

Without Spock, maybe not. All of Komack's veiled threats had been without teeth. He'd never intended taking Spock off the ship.

Kirk concentrated on staring at the deep crease between the admiral's eyes. "Yes, sir, they are. But isn't sending the Enterprise a waste of resources? Isn't this a more suitable mission for a science research vessel --" a pause long enough to tighten the air between them, "-- such as The Rising Sun?"

A direct hit. Komack frowned. "No, Captain Kirk, I do not think this is a waste of resources. Do I need to point out how helping this planet with their problem will gain us their goodwill? I know you have diplomatic skills, Kirk. I expect you to use them to the Federation's advantage. We want that planet on our side. This isn't a mission that should tax your, ah-- what would O'Malley call them? --extraordinary abilities. Think you can do it?" Komack's voice taunted him.
Kirk had never had problems acknowledging starfleet's chain of command. There were leaders and there were followers, and if you wanted to be a leader someday you submitted yourself to the authority of those above you. He had saluted people he didn't respect, he'd followed orders he thought ill-advised. But it was one of the hardest things Kirk had ever had to do to say "Yes, sir," one more time to Komack.

The admiral stared at him, daring him to break eye contact. When it became clear that a belligerent captain could not allow himself that final capitulation, Komack barked, "Expect data transmission in a few hours. I want you to leave orbit by midnight. You are dismissed."
During the endless autumn and winter while he waited for the all-important acceptance letter from Starfleet Academy, young Jim Kirk took long walks. He'd shrug on a jacket and, leaving it unzipped, bound down the porch steps and across the back pasture. The cold whipping through his flannel shirt never bothered him. He was born for the cold, and for grey clouds that scuttled across the late afternoon sky. He loved Iowa's sunlit summer days, but he loved the blustery days of threatening weather even more.

Once under the trees where no one could observe him, not even his mother who wordlessly watched him as he left, he would lift his face to the sky. Sometimes the wind blew so hard that it made his eyes sting. Sometimes snow fell, and every movement he made left an imprint on a transformed world. The flakes stuck to his long lashes, and the crunch, crunch of his footsteps followed him everywhere.

The weather energized him. It was bold, and strong, and unexpected; for all man's technology and ability to fly to the stars, he could still not control the weather on his home planet. It helped Jim to remember that, so that he could muster the patience for the letter from the Academy that he longed to receive.

When the telegram finally arrived, he took it outside to read, alone, under a new spring sky where white clouds streaked in the jet stream high above. He stared for a long time at the unopened envelope, long enough for the March dampness to penetrate under his collar and make his bones shiver. That was the reason his fingers trembled when he finally slipped the message free. He read what had been written, and his whoop of celebration merged with the groan of the trees.

He left the seasons of Earth for a life in space. But he never lost his desire to feel dirt under his feet and the hypnotic weaving of tree branches over his head, especially when it seemed that all he was doing was waiting....

Kirk consulted the chronometer on the hallway wall as he stood before the turbolift on the twenty-fifth floor. The meeting with Komack hadn't lasted that long, just long enough to prevent him from seeing Sultarin. It was too soon for Spock to be back on board, and Kirk certainly wasn't going to barge in on the consultation now. He would have to wait.

But not, he decided as the lift doors opened, on the Enterprise. He wasn't any good at waiting, at standing still. He needed something that even his Silver Lady couldn't provide now, something that had vibrated in his bones from the time he was a child. When the ship hurled herself against the blackness of the cosmos, this need in him was satisfied. But when she was tied in desultory orbit about the planet where Komack presided.... He needed the space to move.

He took the turbo all the way to the basement of the building where the local transporter station was located. There was a large map of the city surrounding the starbase on one wall, and it took all of ten seconds for the captain to find what he wanted.

"There," he stabbed at a swath of green. "That's a park, right?"

"Yes, sir," said the attendant, who wondered at the tightened urgency in this unknown officer's posture.

"Beam me there," the captain ordered.
He materialized on a dirt path surrounded by trees, with the red rays of a setting sun filtering through the branches. The air was cold, with a hint of moisture rising on the breeze. But Kirk ignored the sudden chill that flowed through the inadequate protection of his dress tunic. With clenched hands and a determined stride, he set off down the pathway.

He walked, hard and fast, his footsteps counting out the seconds that passed, his mind counting down the time until he could return to the ship and get the answer he needed.

And in the meantime, he burned inside at the thought of Komack.

He hadn't handled Komack very well. Or rather, the admiral had handled him expertly, even insisting that the first officer of theEnterprise be present as a symbol of what the 'fleet was accomplishing with its non-human members. Like hell! He must have relished the opportunity to make the Enterprise team pay back, at least in a small way, for the incident over Vulcan. Revenge would not have been as sweet without Spock there to be part of the lesson in the deference due to superior officers. He hoped Komack felt good about it now, sitting alone in his office, he hoped the admiral was satisfied. Because the captain remembered every fawning word that had been forced from his lips, and every word of the admiral's. Castrated. The bastard.

The last rays of the alien sun were finding their way through the treetops; dusk draped its shadows through the little forest of the park. No one else was there to witness Kirk's frustration. The wind picked up, but still Kirk didn't notice the growing cold. Instead he picked his way through the feelings that were blasting at him, finding a kernel of truth that he couldn't ignore. Because if Kirk were honest, part of his anger was also directed at himself.

He must have been insane to think that he could convince the admiral to send them back to Michaela. Rationally access the possibilities, the instructors at command school had taught. Don't expect what is not likely to be. He was guilty of ignoring both pieces of advice. Given his relationship with his superior officer, the chances going in had been slim, though he'd convinced himself that they were great. That he was invincible, and couldn't possibly fail to convince the admiral with the sheer force of his... his what? His charisma, his charm, the incisive reasoning behind him?

Alone under the trees, Kirk had to laugh out loud at himself. It was an ugly, self-deprecating sound that intruded on nature. Was he beginning to be impressed by his own medals, believe in his own press? When had the knowledge that he was a good commander blossomed into a conviction of his own omnipotence?

What was it that Komack had said? Do you think that you and your people are the only competent officers under my command?

No. Of course he didn't think that. Then why this feeling deep in his gut that only he and theEnterprise could answer the pleas of a desperate governor Benelli? He was guilty of arrogance. He was presumptuous. Bones was right, in a deeper, more fundamental way than Kirk had realized before. He really did think he could twist the universe to suit himself.

He stopped again and lifted his face, in the confused, yearning way he had in Iowa when it seemed that the telegram would never arrive. It was too overcast for stars to be visible, but clouds were highlighted across the twilight, streaked purple and pink and dark grey. Spock would know what kind of clouds they were, would be able to provide their exact scientific name....

...The way Sultarin was probably using exact scientific terms to explain the inner workings of Spock's brain right now. And that explanation might not be the good news that Kirk had been telling and telling and telling himself it would be. It was time to face that, what he'd always known
beneath the denial and the reassurances to his lover. McCoy might be right. There might not be the comfort of Spock's mind for him ever again.

He started to walk, this time more slowly. The first drops of a misty rain started to fall. The wind blew faded leaves across the walkway.

He'd tried to do something about the violence on Michaela, and been denied. Tried to include McCoy in the most wondrous, most important change in his life, and failed to reach understanding. Tried to do the right thing, made the only possible decision two years ago as Spock had burned in the pon farr, and now Komack was irrevocably turned against him. Without the support of the sector commander, how could he accomplish all that a good captain and a good ship could do?

Every move he'd made had been thwarted. He wanted to scream and kick and punch, he wanted to howl at the sky. He wanted to shake Komack. He wanted to force the universe to give back what he and Spock had lost. But he couldn't. He was just one man under the stars, a comet flying alone beyond the familiar boundaries of a solar system. Into darkness. When he thought of Sultarin, the emptiness in his mind where he had been joined to Spock was very dark.

He kept walking. There was nothing more he could do.

After more than a kilometer the trees began to thin out, and the path crested a small hill. The park ended here, and the lights of the city cut through the darkness. He'd emerged into a retail district. The advertising displays of several establishments flashed just across a paved road on which ground cars traveled. Right across the street was what looked to be a substantial store. A multi-colored holographic sign, one of the more expensive types, proclaimed "Clothing for Humanoids. Entertainment Goods for all Species."

A drop of rain fell from a leaf overhead and splattered down the back of Kirk's neck, and he shivered. Finally he felt the cold. And with the thought came an idea. He was going to buy a gift....

      
"Captain Kirk. A pleasure it is again to see you. Help you I may?"

He hadn't taken three steps inside the lushly appointed interior of the shop before he was approached by an employee.

He looked down and she smiled at him, that simple smile that he recognized. Once again she was at odds with her surroundings. This little, white-haired woman carried her own peace with her.

"Ma'am," he half-bowed in acknowledgment even as his brow creased in confusion. He didn't believe in coincidence. "I didn't expect---"

"One rarely expects what happens, found have I."

"But what are you doing here?"

"Most of my people to themselves keep. We make our own living, among ourselves. But a few, members of the Council such as I am, the outside world face. Here I work, at Gimshire's. You a customer are, are you not?" The wrinkled skin around her faded blue eyes crinkled in amusement.

"Yes, but...."

"Then allow me to help you."
She walked forward, drawing him with her with one glance backwards and a gentle wave of her hand. He followed. There was something about this grandmotherly woman that he liked. But that didn't stop his mind from working overtime. It was definitely odd, meeting her here like this....

She asked, "What came you to buy?" They were walking through a section of the store that displayed upscale camping supplies.

That question brought his conjectures to a screeching halt. He just couldn't bring himself to tell her what he actually wanted to purchase. This was an elderly woman, for the galaxy's sake. And he didn't really know her. He'd envisioned doing his selecting by himself, not.... Casting about, he came out with the first thought that popped into his head. "A gift. For my friend. He's a doctor, and recently he's been ill...."

It was true. Before he and Bones had argued, he'd thought about getting him something at their next stop, something to ease the idle hours of convalescence from the heart valve surgery. But the stop had never materialized, and McCoy had come back on duty before the well-intentioned thought had ever found expression. But why had he said it now? He was damned angry with McCoy.

The woman's smile grew wide, showing her outsized teeth. "Of course. A wide selection of entertainment products have we. Was your friend very ill?" she asked maternally.

"Yes." Kirk found himself looking down to her understanding gaze. "He had a heart valve replaced and there were complications." He'd been so worried. For a while M'Benga hadn't known if McCoy would survive the infection, and Kirk had wondered what life on the Enterprise would be like without the gruff affection and good advice he'd grown to depend upon. Life without Bones.... It didn't bear thinking of.

"That a serious operation for humans is, I believe," she tut-tutted. "You must have worried been, were you not?" Genuine sympathy resonated in her tone.

Surprising himself, Kirk admitted the truth. "I was. I really was." He didn't immediately understand his reaction to this woman, why he was willing to talk of private matters, but he somehow found it easy to admit what had been hidden. He hadn't expected to react as strongly as he had, but seeing McCoy so still and pale in his own sickbay....

The woman stopped in a large, wood-paneled room, tastefully appointed with holo-projectors, the latest portable stages, several game tables with three-dimensional capabilities. She lead the way to a bookcase in one corner, reached up, and pulled out what appeared to be an ordinary, bound book. Kirk shook his head. If he were really going to go through with this and actually buy something for McCoy, then a book was too simple for what he had in mind. But before protesting words could emerge from his mouth, the woman placed a finger over her lips in the universal gesture for silence. Kirk subsided, and waited to see what she would say.

"Your friend this will like, Captain, believe I. To more than just one of the senses it appeals. Here," she opened one page with thin, misshapen fingers, then handed the volume over. "Read the first paragraph."

Willing to humor her, he scanned the words. An ancient tale from the Iberian Peninsula on Earth, words that would lead to contemplations about reality and truth, and each man's place in the cosmos. Don Quixote. But as his eyes traced each line he became aware of a background noise. Music, that stopped when his eyes flew to the woman's, and then started again when they sought the book.
"The book a computer is, that provides musical accompaniment that appropriate is, depending on the line of the book you read. The angle of your eyesight it computes, and the speed at which you read it compensates for. An ingenious device, is it not? Will your friend this like?"

How could she have known? If Kirk ever found himself in a position where he wanted to give this to McCoy, the physician would like nothing better. Three different editions of this work already sat in an over-crowded bookcase in his quarters, and any form of the old legend would please him no end. Before everything had started to fall down around Kirk's head, he used to like to tease the old softie who hid behind a crusty exterior about his "romantic inclinations."

Carefully the captain closed the book, and noted the price hovering in holographic projection from the binding. He gave a silent whistle. "I don't know...."

"Yes, do you, Captain," the woman encouraged. "What price on friendship can be put?"

But were they still friends? Professional colleagues, yes. But did he ever intend to reach out to Bones again, try to bridge the gap that had somehow opened between them?

"He'll like it," Kirk said, relieved at the purpose in his own voice. "Thank you for your help."

"You most welcome are," she smiled. "And now, with the other present you wish to buy, may I help you?"

Enough. He was able to assimilate evidence when it smacked him in the face. "Are you telepathic, madame?" The suspicions he'd had of her in the receiving line on the base jumped back to his mind. And yet, this little lady was so obviously inoffensive.... He was off balance, caught between his intuition's trust and the doubt supplied by his intellect.

She shrugged an expressive if bony shoulder, and cast a modest gaze to the expensive purple plush carpeting. "My people cannot strictly the thoughts of others read, Captain. That proper would not be. Prohibitions there are in most societies against such things. But intentions to me frequently obvious are."

"Merely intentions?" he asked, and searched his memory of the last few minutes, of the time he'd spent talking to her earlier. Had he felt the touch of another mind on his? He knew what it felt like, knew it intimately. Besides, every command-grade officer was made thoroughly familiar with telepathic intrusion before stripes were issued.

"Captain Kirk." She regarded him gravely. "I merely skim what you project outwards. The... what would you say? The aura. The... froth on the top."

He wanted to believe her, and yet there was still something not quite right.... "You ask me to give you trust, without much evidence."

"Trust," she sighed. "What we most of all need, and what we too often lack. Trust a leap of faith requires, at times, that all will as it should unfold. As it has today, that we two should meet."


"Yes," she nodded. "Pleased I am that we have met."

And, to tell the truth, so was he. This woman was certainly more intriguing than any of the people he'd met in their official capacity on the 'base.

"So, Captain," she was still looking up at him with those pale eyes, "do I your trust have?"
He took a firm hold on his own thoughts. He would definitely be aware of an intrusion. "For now, madame."

"Good. Who can tell what tomorrow brings? Now, to your next purchase. To buy an item for someone dear you wish to do. What size is he?"

She began walking again, ushering him along with an outstretched arm. He felt very foolish, both for feeling foolish in the first place, and for having his hesitancy over buying something for Spock so obvious to this woman. Continuing to protest would only make it worse. It was obvious that the "froth" of his thoughts had revealed more than he wanted it to.

"I don't know what size he is. About this much taller than me," his fingers illustrated, "but a lot thinner."

"And you wish to purchase?" she encouraged.

"Pajamas. Or maybe a nightshirt." That last thought appealed to him more. Sexier, and more accessible. Spock would argue that nakedness was the most accessible state of all, and Kirk couldn't disagree with that. The feeling of Spock's warm skin pressed next to his in bed was a wonderful sensation, but it wasn't worth risking his lover's health for. What Spock would not don for himself, perhaps he would wear if it were a gift from his lover. And if... if they weren't able to restore Spock's Vulcan self immediately, he'd be more susceptible to the cold. Until he regained his controls, he'd shiver in the nighttime, naked.

"Something really nice. Silky, maybe?" he added hopefully, and then immediately felt supremely self-conscious.

But the woman seemed sublimely oblivious to the explicit nature of his thoughts. Or was able to hide her reaction. She nodded with understanding. "Yes, many of our nightwear materials in that way can be described. Something you will be happy with we will find."

He gave her a sharp look, which she returned with another of her disarming smiles. They walked through one wood-paneled room after another, until finally they stood before a highly polished display case.

"Nightshirts easier to fit will be, since uncertain of size we are," she explained, and shook out one for his inspection.

It didn't take him long to pick out two of them, one a gorgeous shimmering blue that fell through his fingers like a gossamer web of color, the other a sturdier, rusty hue that reminded him of autumn on Earth. He passed his palm caressingly over the lightweight fabric of the first, liking the way it felt as if it were barely touching his skin. Spock could hardly complain that his lover was trying to bundle him up in this one. But it would look great on him, a lighter, airier version of his blue Science tunic that would accent his dark eyes and darker hair.

Decisions made, Kirk turned his attention back to the little woman. "My... uh, my friend," he gestured to the nightshirts that had been placed on a counter, "has often said he doesn't believe in coincidence. That things happen for reasons. Don't you think it is rather odd that the two of us should meet like this?"

She was locking the display case, and stood on her toes to reach the top latch before answering. "No, odd I do not think it. My people also believe that things for a purpose happen. The Great Spirit who us made, She who encompasses all within Her, life She gave us, and roles to fill. Our greatest belief this is. Find we must the essence of what we are, and then live that life so our
reward when we join the All will be great. Meeting here, it simply part of what was meant to be is, part of my role. Yours as well."

It sounded like other doctrines and dogma he'd heard the galaxy-over. Many religions espoused similar beliefs, no matter the planet on which they'd developed. Fatalism, a lack of will before the pre-destined power of the almighty, meekness, were part of so many systems of belief. But those were elements he'd never been able to accept for himself. If there were a God, he, or she, had given James Kirk a restless nature that defied the boundaries that faith imposed.

She saw it. "You have difficulty with what is, what must be. Accepting."

"I'm stubborn," he said shortly. "Your people. Who are they? What do you call yourselves?"

A cloud crossed the sunshine of her lined face. "The people of this planet Gypsies call us. To be called that not a very nice thing is, I have learned. We call ourselves the Krohderkhin," the syllables were harsh, guttural, an incongruity coming from her gentle lips, "not that it matters. There so few of us are. And to ourselves we keep, Captain Kirk, on this and every other planet on which we live."

"Then that is everyone else's loss," he said, meaning it. Komack knew this woman, but Kirk was sure he'd never had a conversation like this with her.

"Ah, but reasons there are for everything, upon that have we not already agreed? What race of beings another understands? No one the Krohderkhin understands. And no one wants us. Too much fear there is, not enough trust. Even on this planet barely tolerated are we."

"Then the Krohderkhin aren't native here? This isn't your home planet?"

"No." She stood before the counter and folded each of the nightshirts into precise creases. "No. We have no home. Again, for a reason. Although, not all accept it."

The cryptic remark hung in the air between them. Their conversation had flowed freely, and yet Kirk did not understand much of what the woman implied. Undoubtedly due to his lack of knowledge of her culture.

Abruptly, he asked, "What is your name?"

She smiled up at him. "Wondering I was if you would ask. My name I give you. It is Gri-Ta Danarkoon. Before I transsed I was Gri, but I found my essence, and it was Ta. And Danar, because the Ta guide our people in the Council."

"Gri-Ta Danarkoon," Kirk repeated, placing equal emphasis on each syllable. "I will remember your name."

"And I yours, James Kirk. Do you think we will again meet?"

That was the part that still bothered him. "Do you think we will, Gri-Ta?" he asked smoothly. "I don't think that I have much say in the matter."

She laughed, that beguiling, honest laugh that had attracted him back at the medal presentation. "See, already some of your role you accept, that which must be. But on this planet meet we will not. Tomorrow, I leave." She handed him the nightshirts and the book wrapped in the same package.

He handed her his credit disk. "You're going away?"
"Yes. Fortunate am I that on this, my last day on this planet, you I see. I go for my people, as the rest of the Council gathers. We must..." for the first time she seemed hesitant to speak, and paused for a long moment, "... we must guide others back to their path. Some of my people... have left their path. They seek other roles and disrupt the All. Go I must. My role it is to find them and help them. We all responsibilities have, Captain Kirk. Better than most that you understand."

And by now, the responsibility of his heart must be waiting for him back on the ship. Kirk felt the insubstantial weight of the gift he brought with him; it wouldn't weigh against bad news. Dear God, dear Great Spirit of the All, let it not be bad news.

Gri-Ta was staring at him. She held out his credit disk. He took it. "Good-bye, Gri-Ta. May your trip be successful."

"Good-bye, Captain Kirk. May She who encompasses the All go with you, and help you accept what must be."

*****

McCoy was not in sickbay when Kirk walked in.

"I've sent him to bed," said M'Benga, a touch of defiance in his tone. "He's been working way too hard, concentrating on Mister Spock's rehabilitation. He looked awful when I found him, just sitting at his desk. We've got to remember, sir, Leonard is barely out of a sickbed himself. I got him through that infection, and I don't want to see a relapse. I told him to stay off duty tomorrow too."

Spock wasn't in sickbay either, but the official report from Sultarin was. Kirk sat down in McCoy's office, in the chair that the CMO had recently vacated, and read.

The technical jargon eluded him, he didn't want to look at the pictures again. He skipped past the section that explained why Spock was capable of responding to the therapeutic meld, and focused on the summarization on the last page. It said everything that he needed to know.

Prognosis: No recovery expected.

Gri-Ta's Great Spirit of the All hadn't listened to his prayer. Neither had any other god.

Spock wasn't in his own quarters, and when Kirk stepped hopefully through their shared bathroom into his own, there was no one waiting for him. With an inarticulate snarl he leaned over his desk. "Computer, on."

"Working."

"Tie in with ship's sensors. Determine location of first officer Spock."

"Working. First officer Spock is currently in the ship's gymnasium complex."

Of course. Kirk understood instantly.

He was beyond caring what the crew thought. He strode into the locker room and donned his jock strap and gym shorts and t-shirt in black silence. The place was busy since it was right after alpha shift, and usually he at least exchanged words with his crew in the leveling intimacy of the changing room. But not now. He grabbed a towel and slung it around his neck, then he left almost at a run, and practically bumped into Lieutenant Turwell.

"Mister Spock's in the handball court?"
"Yes, sir. Number two." Worried. "He's got the medical clearance, sir, I checked."

"It's all right." He had enough composure left to reassure her. "Just make sure we're not disturbed." He was moving again, and flung the rest over his shoulder. "Not for anything. Only if there's a red alert."

"Yes, sir." Her words trailed behind him.

A hand slapped on the keypad, a quick movement through the doorway, making sure the door slid shut behind him. He was in the same bright-lit room with Spock, and they were alone. Kirk stayed where he was, and slowly leaned back against the door.

Spock did not acknowledge his presence. He was clad in the red shorts and long-sleeved white t-shirt he always wore in the gym, the white socks and white athletic shoes that made his feet look too big. He stood behind the service line and bounced a ball before him. Around him, the margins of the court were littered with black balls, each one of them dented, exploded, twisted out of shape. At least twenty of them, Kirk estimated, his widened eyes ranging over the debris. He'd always known Spock pulled his punches when they played, but he'd never imagined what full Vulcan strength could do to something as simple as a handball. His gaze returned to the tense figure, assessing anew the violence of which the body of this gentle being was capable.

Spock pulled back his hand and hit towards the wall. The sound of the heavy impact of hand against rubber filled the room.

The ball survived three encounters with Vulcan strength. Then it fell to the floor, exhausted like its counterparts, smacked out of usefulness forever. Spock kicked it to the side, then pulled another from the pocket of his gym shorts.

This time the first officer bounced the ball against the wooden planks of the floor. Down, up, down, up, he watched its hypnotic motion, seemed to concentrate fiercely. On the tenth circuit, his hand faltered as he reached out to catch the ball. He missed, the ball traveled further up in the air, then fell against the back of his hand, and down to the floor. Spock stood there, head down, and watched it as it fluttered off to the side of the room.

"That is what I offer to you. That is what I have to give to the ship." The deep voice echoed against the unyielding walls of the court. "Inadequate coordination. Inadequacies."

The control of the past few days was crumbling now; bitterness laced every word. Emotion seethed between ceiling and floor, from black-streaked wall to black-streaked wall. Spock's despair filled up the box in which they were trapped together, and tightened Kirk's throat.

The captain straightened, but he stayed where he was, five meters away from his lover. Closeness wouldn't help Spock now. In the state Spock was in, closeness might not even be safe. Hating himself for it, Kirk added wariness to the mix of emotions that were roiling about in his stomach. "I've read the report from Sultarin."

A quick twist of the head, away from the captain. "You have read it," the ragged voice grated. "I will live it."

He'd never seen Spock like this. Not when he was blinded, not any time. It was an axiom of life aboard the Enterprise that Spock was the one who was strong, who was always in control. Even through all the questions that the contradictions of their relationship had raised, he had been able to struggle through to his own solutions, to find peace. It was inconceivable that he could give in to personal bitterness. And yet now, who had greater cause? Kirk extended one arm into the air
between them. "Spock...." He couldn't find any other words.

The Vulcan turned and looked at him. "Do you know how much a ball used in this game weighs?" Abruptly he strode to one corner, bent and hefted a collapsed hunk of rubber he had destroyed. He held it out in his palm for the captain to see. "My memory tells me this weighs ninety point seven two grams. But I cannot feel it. I no l-l-longer have the perception of my body I had before. It is gone." Fiercely he flung the ball back into the corner, using all his strength. It rocketed into the plasti-form with a thick plop! that revealed its limpness, then rebounded over their heads to land on the other side of the room. Spock ignored the evidence of his inner rage. He remained standing in the corner, his head hung low, his arms loosely dangling from the suddenly slack muscles of his shoulders.

"I do not even hear in the same way. It is as if every sound is vibrating through water. Everything is changed. Even..." He looked up, his features twisted in the contrary struggle to both express and deny what was boiling inside of him. "Even your voice. It sounds different. Jim...."

The Vulcan's voice almost broke as he uttered his lover's name. Kirk's heart skipped a beat. What could he do?

Spock would let him do nothing. He had heard the emotion in his own words, and his face stiffened into control again as he abruptly walked to the other back corner of the court, where they usually stowed their gear. He bent over and picked up three balls from a cannister, stuffed two of them into his pockets and carried the other to the serving square in the center. Once again, he began to bounce the ball against the floor.

The Vulcan's expression was set, cast into rigid angles and unyielding sharp edges. It was like a diamond, the second hardest substance known to space-faring man. But diamonds had fault lines; a well-aimed blow could explode the strength into pieces.

"Do you know what would have happened to Lieutenant Hunyady if the sensor net had malfunctioned after this happened to me? She would be dead. I would not have heard the resonances in the beam in the same way. I could not have uttered a w-w-warning, and you would not have saved her. She would be dead."

Kirk couldn't let Spock descend into this self-accusing world. "No. Maybe not. I might have---"

"Do not belittle me, Captain." Sharp words cut through the air as Spock caught the ball and squeezed it. His eyes bored into the lintel of the doorway over Kirk's head. "I have been reduced enough as it is. I do not have any of what you have come to depend upon. It is all gone. You do not have the first officer that you have relied upon in the past. How many times have you used my Vulcan mental abilities to save lives? I cannot implant suggestions in a guard's mind anymore. I cannot control my body so that it appears to be ill. I cannot meld with any being and communicate our intentions to it. I cannot even...." finally his gaze dropped to match Kirk's, ",...tell you what time it is."

Kirk swallowed hard, and desperately wished that he had confronted the possibilities of this meeting beforehand. He didn't know what to say, what to do to help this man who meant everything to him. Maybe McCoy, a trained psychologist, would know the right moves, but he didn't. He had only his instincts to follow, and the understanding he had gained in the months of loving, of moving joyfully through the bright light of their melds.

"You're right. It's all going to be different now."

Without moving a muscle, Spock seemed to flinch. To draw into himself. "Yes. Different."
"I don't know if you're going to be the best first officer in the fleet anymore."

"Correct. I cannot offer you that. I do not know how efficiently I can function."

Kirk moved five paces closer. "I might have to relieve you from heading the science department. With all that's happened, you might not be competent to be both science officer and first officer."

"Yes."

"You might not be the best selection for a landing party anymore."

Stillness in the center of the room. Spock's hands fell to his sides and clenched; he closed his eyes. "That is logical. I cannot protect my crewmates as I have done before." The eyes opened. Bleak. Stared at a fixed point on the floor. "I cannot protect you in the same way."

"I understand that. I'll have to be more careful now, won't I? It's what you've always wanted." Another five steps closer to the statue that was his lover. "You'll have to tell Sarek and Amanda, let them know that their son can't function as a normal Vulcan."

An indrawn breath that was more like a hiss. "Y-y-yes."

"Because you don't have any telepathy left."

"Yes."

"And you don't have any internal time sense left." Another three steps. Seeing the tension grow in the bowed shoulders. Hearing the creak of the ball in Spock's hand as he crushed it in his frustration. But Kirk was relentless. "And you can't tell me what your heart rate is."

"No. I cannot."

The final five steps that separated them. He was close enough now to see the straight, spare eyelashes that shadowed his lover's cheeks. "And you can't meld with me. Not ever again."

Silence stalked into the room with them, stood between them like a wall. Kirk heard his heartbeat pound in his ears, the sound of his own irregular breathing, and nothing else. An eternity passed.

Slowly the dark head rose. Spock's eyes glittered strangely, and for a sickening moment Kirk was afraid of him. Where was his gentle lover, the brother-in-arms for whom he would give his life? Buried beneath an avalanche of emotions that Spock had so little experience dealing with. Maybe Kirk's instincts, like everything else in his life lately, had played him false.

In the blink of an eye Spock moved. He threw himself forward; his body impacted against Kirk's with a thud. Kirk made no effort to defend himself, and allowed himself to be shoved backwards until he was jammed up against the wall. Pain shot up his backbone and down his legs and he gasped for air; the whole length of Spock's not inconsiderable weight ground into him. Vulcan-strong hands grabbed his shoulders, the vise-like grip sent shards of hurt deep into his muscles.

But he didn't struggle. He'd asked for this, because he thought Spock needed it. He stared into the anguished face of his lover.

"No," Spock panted. "No." He bent his head and pressed his lips with bruising force against Kirk's.

The kiss hurt, and it went on for a long thirty seconds. Spock twisted his mouth against his captain's, forced Kirk's head back against the unyielding plasti-form. This wasn't any expression of
affection, it was an assault.

When Spock pulled back, Kirk tasted blood in his mouth. Iron-rich, salty.

The grip on his shoulders didn't slacken. Dull-eyed, the Vulcan stared at the redness that stained the corner of the captain's lips. "See what I do to you," he whispered. "I have so wanted to touch you, to know the comfort of your coolness. Even without the meld. But I have feared it as well... how different it would be to touch you without always feeling your essence somehow within me. Even before we touched, I always felt you, you always penetrated my shields. On the bridge. On a planet. The first time you invited me to your cabin to play chess. I have always felt you. And now, along with everything else, you are gone."

Abruptly the supporting hands left Kirk, and he almost overbalanced and fell as Spock turned and walked away. Not far. Just a few feet further down, where he slowly turned towards the wall, put out one arm to support himself, and slumped all his body weight against it.

Kirk licked the blood from his lip and forced his aching body to move. His heart ached more than his body did. He couldn't let Spock live in this purgatory alone.

He walked over to his lover and put a tentative hand on an upper arm that felt as rigid as the hull of the Enterprise.

"I'm not gone. And you're feeling me now," he whispered. "It's not the same, no. We both have to accept that. But I'm here, and we're touching, and we're always going to touch."

The anger was still there, just controlled a little better. "Do not attempt to simplify matters," Spock hissed as he whipped about to face Kirk. "Our relationship was based on the meld. On our mental closeness. You have desired the meld even more than I, you have admitted it. Remember your argument with McCoy, that you shared with me the last time we were j-j-j-joined? You told him that our relationship was right for you because I gave you a whole new universe to explore. That universe is closed, Jim. It has imploded. Komack was right. He used a most appropriate term, one that bears directly on our interaction. Effectively, my mind has been castrated. You cannot make love with a castrate."

Rage flooded every corpuscle. "Don't say that," Kirk roared. He ruthlessly gripped his lover's shoulders and shook the body that he only wanted to protect. "It isn't true."

Spock's eyes flashed. He grabbed Kirk's upper arms and effortlessly held him still. "It is," he insisted. "Face the truth. I am crippled."

Kirk struggled within the grip, not even knowing what he would do if he gained the freedom to move, knowing only that he couldn't submit to the way Spock was thinking. "No. We haven't even begun to find help for you. How can you give up so easily? We can go back to the Lox'theneth'nar, to the colonists. We can go to Vulcan. We can see if the Deltans can help you. Damn it, Spock, let me go!"

Abruptly, Spock did. They faced each other, the Vulcan glittering with the ice of self-imposed calm, the human's chest heaving. "I release you," Spock said flatly.

Blood drained from Kirk's flushed face as he realized what his lover was saying. "No! I don't want to be released."

"You are being illogical. While I... for me, logic is all that I have left of my heritage. I use it now. I have seen the brain scans, Captain. There is nothing on Vulcan, on Delta, or anywhere else that
will change the reality of what has happened to me."

"How can you say that?" Kirk asked desperately. "We don't even know why this happened to you. How it happened. Who or what did it. If we find that out, understand the process, we might be able to reverse it somehow."

"And I should live on borrowed hope in the meantime? Against the clear facts? Against all logic? That is not possible. I am not capable of the groundless optimism you humans exhibit time and again. I will not inflict such pain on myself. I must accept what has happened."

"I'll never accept it," Kirk vowed.

"Which is why we must cease our intimate relationship. You cannot accept me the way I now am. I do not blame you. Without the mental interaction, our intimacy would be quite different. Not what you need."

Appalled, Kirk could only stare at the expressionless features. "You can't believe that."

That ironic eyebrow climbed. Spock could do that now, look like his old self, even when that self had been tragically transformed. "Your very insistence on pursuing a hopeless cure is evidence. You need the meld. I cannot give it to you."

This was ridiculous. This was a farce from a theater. It couldn't be real. Abruptly, Kirk turned away and walked to the center of the court. His mind was whirling.

If Spock had been whole, he would have insisted on a meld so that his true feelings would be laid bare. But they couldn't....

And if they could, what would be revealed? Could he honestly deny what Spock had said? What was it that he had told McCoy? Not "I love him." Not "I want to spend the rest of my life with him." But "Our melds are indescribable. They're better than sex." Was it possible that Spock was right? Was it only the meld?

Slowly, Kirk turned to face his lover. With every word he groped for the truth. "You have given me more joy in the past seven months than I have ever known." His words were a whisper that barely bridged the space between them. "I'll admit that a big part of that was our melds. They are... they were such a gift. Maybe I got... lost in them, I don't know. If I did, it was because I wanted... I want so desperately to know you. Every part of you. And for you to know me."

"Yes," Spock said, his face shuttered although there was the slightest of tremors in his voice. "I am aware of that. That is why--."

Kirk interrupted, stepping forward and holding up one hand. "No. Let me finish." He took a deep breath. "The melds were something you had to offer our relationship. It was only logical for us to take advantage of them, to build our closeness on them. But they aren't everything. At least for me they aren't. A meld... it was a way to express how I feel about you. A tool. A wonderful, joyful tool. But only that. Not the important part. It's not the most important part for you, is it?"

In one explosive movement Spock pushed away from the wall. "N-negative." He took two steps forward, threw away the crushed ball that he somehow had been holding all this time in his clenched hand. Unnoticed, it went splat! against the floor. In a voice too loud, awkward with tension, Spock demanded, "Tell me what the most important part for you is."

_The command was almost logical. Floundering in an unfamiliar world, with his pride lacerated by Komack's public humiliation, Spock was reduced to the very fundamentals of his life on which to_
stand. Those fundamentals had to be rock-solid, able to support everything that was left of him. It was logical to test the foundations.

But how to express all the strong and sometimes contradictory emotions of the human heart? Kirk couldn't apply logic to a love affair that, in the context of the rest of his life, wasn't logical at all. He, with a lifetime of heterosexual activity, loved another man. He, one of the most emotional of men, was joined to a being who wouldn't even laugh. He, a starship captain for whom his career was everything, ran the risk of blunting his career for... how had McCoy put it? The pleasure of sharing your Vulcan's bed, and his mind.

"The pleasure of waking up next to you in the morning," he said softly, and knew it was true. "Knowing that you're there because you want to be. Your gift of self. And you?"

The tension flowed out of Spock's body as he released his breath in a sigh. "Seeing you relax in my cabin after a stressful day. Knowing that you are comfortable with me, and that I please you. That you go against both experience and convention in choosing me."

Kirk took a step closer. "Because we've always understood one another. It's never mattered that you're a Vulcan and I'm a human. Sometimes, when you look at me on the bridge, I know what you're thinking before you say it."

Shadow crossed the Vulcan countenance. "Perhaps a consequence of the bond forming. It is gone now, Jim."

Softly. With all the sorrow in his heart. "I wanted the bond. You know that."

"Yes, I know."

"And I won't stop trying to find a way to give you back all that you've lost. Don't ask that of me, Spock, I can't do it. And don't ask me to stop wanting you either. I want you every way and any way I can get you. It isn't the meld I need, it's you. You're that universe I told Bones about, you and me together. Before we became lovers, I hadn't even thought of the mental aspects of a relationship with you. I just wanted to be close. And if the only closeness we can have is living the rest of our lives together in just the human way, than that's what I want. What I need. To be with you. That's my own brand of logic. Can you accept that?"

"If you are certain."

"I'm certain that there's nothing you can say or do that will make me give you up. Nothing."

"Nothing?" For the first time in too many days, the ghost of a smile formed on the austere face. "It is quite illogical to make such sweeping statements."

Impossible not to cross the distance between them. The captain started towards his love, and Spock matched his steps only a half-second later. They met half-way, stopped when only a few centimeters of air separated their bodies. "You've reduced me to sweeping statements, Mister," Kirk growled. "Make sure you listen to this one: I'll never give you up."

The smile had faded, but it lingered in the dark eyes, like a faraway light in the night. "You comfort me."

Their kiss was bittersweet, a settling in to an unexplored home that neither of them knew. Kirk wondered how different the simple act felt to Spock now. As good as it felt to have Spock's arms slip around his back, pulling them close to one another? Or as right as the way Kirk's hands found their resting place on his lover's slender hips?
"I love you." They said it simultaneously, the moment their lips parted. "Always," Kirk added.

"T'hy'la," Spock breathed.

"Tell me how you're feeling. Really."

They didn't move from their embrace as Spock took a perceptively deeper breath before he answered. Kirk could feel the rise and fall of the injured chest against his own solidness.

"I feel... angry. An elemental emotion that almost destroyed my people. I cannot allow it to destroy me, and yet I cannot deny that... I am angry. Why has this happened to me? My life has not been easy. I am already different enough, and now... this. I have only wanted to be Vulcan. And yet, time and again, it appears that I am prevented from fulfilling that simplest of desires. To be Vulcan."

A difficult childhood. Sarek's rejection. T'Pring's rejection. And now this.

And, Kirk realized, himself. A bond with a human male would have been one more difference.

He pulled back to look in Spock's face. "You are... who you are. Spock. Who you've always been. What's happened... doesn't change anything about you that's really important." His words were inadequate, and Kirk knew it. Spock understood that his captain valued and accepted him. The problem was to help his lover accept himself, in this new, thwarted, and in his eyes, lesser role.

"I am not sure of that."

"I am."

"More of your boundless human optimism." But this time, Spock criticized with a gentle tone. "I do not need any for myself when you have such an abundance to share."

"Of course," Kirk whispered. "What's mine is yours. Anything I can give you."

"I would wish to have some of your... emotional resiliency. I am still... obviously, disoriented. Accepting the emotional consequences is... difficult. Sultarin assisted in restoring most of my physical functioning to its new maximum levels, but so much has been lost. So much has changed. Jim, the pon farr,..."

He'd wondered. "Yes? Did Sultarin talk to you about it?"

Still in the circle of his arms, Spock nodded. "Of course. It was necessary to do so. Although my mind is no longer Vulcan, my body is, and it will undergo the imperative of the Time. Except...." He drew in a deep breath. "Except that, because there is no possibility of a mental connection, there will not be the need of a specific bondmate. There are some unfortunates on Vulcan who are born psychically blind. They have no telepathy at all, and they experience a purely physical pon farr without the restraint of the Il'safarr. It is very violent, uncontrolled. It is the worst of what my people are." He addressed Kirk earnestly. "I would not expect you to succumb to that when the Time arrives. I will find another partner. A woman, perhaps another Vulcan, who will not be --."

Roughly, Kirk pulled him closer. "Oh, no you won't," he interrupted. "When the pon farr comes, I'm the one for you."

"Jim, that is not necessary. I may injure you."

"No, you won't, I'm not made of glass. And if you do McCoy will patch me back up again."
"But our minds will not require that we seek each other as partners."

Kirk pulled back and searched his lover's face. "But our hearts do," he said softly. "Don't they?"

Defeated in mere seconds, Spock bit his lower lip and choked, "Yes. I do not wish to engage in sexual congress with anyone but you."

"And I don't ever want to wake up in the morning with anyone else but you," Kirk whispered. "So let's not talk about that again. Remember what I said? I'll never give you up. I mean it. Talking about taking another partner, that's illogical. Talking about releasing me. That's very illogical."

"Yes," the Vulcan sighed. "I have desired your... help. Your support and affection. It is not very logical to repudiate what I desire. A result, I am sure, of my emotional condition."

Kirk kissed the pulse that fluttered on the side of his lover's neck. "You can't blame it just on that. I've known you to be illogical before."

"Yes." Spock rested his cheek against Kirk's golden hair. "You do that to me."

They stood together, swaying as they exerted pressure on hips, on arms that encircled, reacquainting their bodies with touch and scent. Finally, Kirk stirred, and in a soft voice because his mouth was so close to the sensitive Vulcan ear, said, "We have new orders. A diplomatic mission to a planet named Gabriela, of all places. Just what I need, another angel. I have to get up to the bridge and order the course change. How about if I get us both something to eat after that and bring it to your cabin? I'd... like to spend the rest of the evening with you. If you want to."

"That would be pleasing. Although I do not know if I will be good company. The day has been tiring."

Strong emotions could be debilitating even for humans who were used to their unfettered expression. Spock must be exhausted.

"All right. We'll have a quiet night. There's something I dropped off for you on your bunk. You might want to take a look at it."

Lieutenant Turwell was hovering outside the court door when they exited. Kirk looked at her, startled that she'd taken his order not to be disturbed so literally. All the time he and Spock had been thrashing out their intimate life together, this strongly-built, athletic woman had been standing just outside.... She smiled as she relinquished her watch on their privacy, and despite his discomfort at how obvious he and Spock had been, he felt a sudden surge of appreciation for his crew. Sometimes, they showed that they cared for him in the same way that he cared for them.

On the bridge, Kirk glanced only cursorily at the pages-long orders from Komack, with all the supporting documents that explained the mission. Right now, he was only interested in coordinates and how fast the ship would have to travel to reach them. He could go over the details tomorrow. It didn't take long to order the Enterprise out of orbit, almost retracing their steps to the far border of the sector. Then Kirk gave the center seat back to the officer of the watch and headed for some food.

There were still plenty of people in the mess on deck five. Kirk went through the line and selected meatloaf, mashed potatoes with brown gravy, corn, a roll and a big slice of chocolate cake for himself before he thought about what to order for Spock. Turwitum, he decided, remembering his lover's pleasure in consuming the Vulcan dish that looked like orange mashed potatoes. Nice and substantial. It would stick to those skinny ribs. And a big chitwithering salad. Or maybe plomeek...
soup? How would it taste to Spock now? Perhaps both, to be on the safe side. And the ultra-dry Andorian bread sticks that puffed dust when they were broken. They made the captain sneeze, but Spock loved them. Then another piece of cake joined the first. He added hot tea and decaffeinated coffee in insulated cups, and struggled to pick up the unbalanced tray.

"You've really got an appetite tonight, Captain," Uhura commented as she walked up with the remains of her own meal and dumped it in the recycler.

Kirk flushed and looked down at the immense quantity of comfort foods he'd selected. "It's not all for me, Penda. I'm taking this back to Spock's quarters."

"Oh." She paused for a moment, and he sensed her momentary confusion. But then she seemed to come to a decision. "Well, if you don't want that all over the deck, you'd better let me help you. I'm walking that way."

First Turwell, now Uhura. If they hadn't already suspected that the captain and first officer were more than just friends, they might after this night. But, strangely enough, Kirk found that he didn't care. He didn't see any condemnation in Uhura's dark eyes, just the offer of one understanding friend to another.

Kirk nodded easily, and she picked up an empty tray and deftly switched a few plates to it.

They made their way down the hall in silence, then paused outside Spock's cabin. "How is Mister Spock, sir? I've heard the healer was able to help him."

"Better. Much better. He'll be back on duty soon, I'm sure. But...." How much to tell this caring woman? He felt uncomfortable saying much, but sooner or later the crew was going to become aware of the first officer's diminished capacities. Especially the bridge crew, and those who so often went on landing parties. "He's not the same, Penda. He's lost so much of what makes him a Vulcan.... And we're not headed for the Lox'theneth'nar, or where the colonists disembarked."

She understood without further explanations. "But you'll find a way to get us there, sir, and find Mister Spock's solution."

"I'm going to try, Penda."

She stacked the plates back on his tray again. "Please tell him that I'm thinking of him, sir. And...." Her eyes glanced at the closed door of the first officer's quarters, then back to the captain. She turned to go. "Take good care of him. Have a good night. Sleep well."

He found Spock standing in their shared bathroom, wearing the new blue nightshirt that had been in the package that Kirk had flung earlier onto his lover's bed. Spock was staring at himself in the mirror. He held The History of Don Quixote de la Mancha in his hand, open.

"It does not work," he said too evenly, addressing Kirk's image in the mirror. "This book employs the new McLaren computer chip that utilizes the concept of the universal translator on a simple level. It accesses the perceptual centers of the brain as one reads. Mine have been... altered."

Damnit. Were they going to come upon reminders of loss everywhere they turned? "Uh, I bought that as a gift for McCoy."

"Oh." A simple exclamation that Kirk had rarely heard from his precise second-in-command. "Not for me."

"No. The nightshirts are for you."
"I see." Spock looked down at the volume in his hands. "Did you test the book before purchase?"

"It was fine in the store. Let me have it." Kirk took the volume and read a paragraph to himself. Music filled the small room. "It works."

"Yes." A lower lip was caught and held between teeth, then released. "Why for McCoy?"

The awkwardly put question was just a way for them to cover up the emotions of the moment. Kirk went along with the charade. "I don't know. It was impulsive. There was this saleswoman there... I'll tell you about her later. But I thought... Maybe there will be a time when I'll want to give that to him. Not now."

"McCoy has dedicated himself to my rehabilitation."

"Because he feels guilty. He doesn't understand about us."

"Perhaps not. I am not sure that I understand about us. We are most contradictory."

Kirk didn't want to get into another deep discussion. He didn't want to talk about McCoy and he didn't want to probe why the hell he loved this man. He just wanted a simple evening. If that were possible. "How do you like the nightshirts?"

Spock's gaze returned to the mirror. "Most logical. Under these new conditions, nightwear would seem to be imperative if we are to spend our nights together in any comfort. I cannot control my body's temperature as I did before."

Yes. They were going to come upon reminders of loss everywhere they turned. Kirk set his shoulders and resolved to accept it. It was better that they speak openly of the changes they'd need. "This one seems to fit."

"Yes. This purchase was most considerate."

"I'm glad you like it. Come on, dinner's getting cold."

They ate seated across from one another, the food spread out upon the starkly neat surface of the first officer's desk. Under other circumstances, Kirk might have suggested getting down on the floor and eating picnic style. They'd done that several times before, and the informality of the setting had really helped in relaxing them both after difficult shifts. Once they'd shared a bottle of wine. Spock had tickled him, Kirk had laughed, and they'd rolled into a fantastic, unfettered expression of love right there on the floor.

But not tonight. Spock looked different, wearing the nightshirt. The light blue that Kirk had thought would be so attractive instead seemed to highlight the pallor of his lover's complexion. And Kirk felt different. Stiff and uncertain.

The intercom squawked, interrupting the silence. The captain frowned. Spock wasn't even back on duty; who the hell would be calling him now? The first officer ignored Kirk's obvious displeasure, carefully finished chewing his mouthful of salad, then reached over and activated the unit, keeping it on audio only. A subtle hint for unwelcome intruders.

"Spock here."

"En- Lieutenant Hunyady here, sir. I'd heard that you were discharged from sickbay so I thought.... I hope I'm not disturbing you."
Spock wouldn't lie. That hadn't changed. He raised a weary eyebrow. "How may I help you, Lieutenant?"

"I wondered if you knew what the admiral thought of the study Penda and I had done. Is anything going to be done about it?"

"The admiral has taken the study under advisement. I am sure action will be taken at the appropriate time."

"Oh." She was clearly disappointed. "Then we haven't been assigned to investigate further."

"Although I am not in the habit of discussing fleet disposition with junior officers, I believe I can reply, not at this time."

She took the rebuff easily. "There won't be a problem, though, if we continue to pursue it? I'm had a few ideas about how we can get more data, sift through the variables--."

The first officer picked up his fork and interrupted her. "You are free to pursue your ideas on your own time, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, sir, I will. And I'm glad you're feeling better, sir."

Apparently, Spock found that impossible to reply to. He merely said, "Spock out," and returned to his salad.

But Kirk was rolling his eyes. "Somehow, I don't remember calling my senior officers in the middle of the night just for a chat when I was a junior lieutenant. She is impossible."

"No. Merely eager, and not yet seasoned."

"Yes, but this...." He gestured towards the intercom with his half-eaten roll. "If she weren't married I'd think I had reason to be jealous."

"Then it is fortunate that she is married, for I would not wish to raise doubts in your mind concerning my fidelity. And she was concerned about the study. Surely you cannot deny that you were in similar situations as a young officer, working on a project and not knowing the outcome?"

Kirk shrugged. "A few times."

"But Irina had the courage--."

"You mean the audacity."

"--to inquire about its status. Something I expect a young James Kirk might have done."

Unwelcome as the call had been, at least it had started them talking again, and their conversation, though a bit awkward, continued as they made their way through the rest of the meal. Kirk remembered to ask, "When did you have the chance to go through Uhura's and Hunyady's findings?" He didn't know what to say when Spock replied, "There was a forty minute wait in Sultanin's consulting room. Adequate time for a thorough perusal." The words conjured up an image that he didn't want to see; a nervous Spock reaching for distraction. He didn't pursue the subject.

As he tackled dessert Kirk felt a trickle of sweat form on the back of his neck. The room was hotter than Spock usually kept it when the captain spent the night, closer if not quite up to the Vulcan
Kirk couldn't imagine sleeping in the heat, but he wasn't going to leave. No way. He'd better get used to it.

Spock took a shower while Kirk cleaned up the dishes from the desk. He heard the hissing of the sonics going in the bathroom; no human-preferred water for the first officer tonight. Precisely four minutes later the Vulcan emerged and headed straight for the bed. He lay down on his back and pulled the covers over his body without a word.

So. An early bedtime. Kirk found his way into the bathroom for his own clean-up and pondered his nightwear. Usually he slept naked with his lover. But it didn't seem right when Spock was so bundled up, and he didn't want to appear to be expecting sex either. Kirk pulled a towel across the droplets that dotted his chest and swore silently. He would be more than grateful when this day was over. None of it had been easy, and the prospect of releasing his cares in sleep was suddenly very attractive. He went to his own quarters for a pair of clean briefs.

He waved the lights off as he crawled in and shoved the blankets to the foot of the bed, being careful not to dislodge them from over his lover. "Sleep tight," he often said before they fell asleep, a phrase he knew amused his first officer because they'd shared in the melds its youthful connotations of security and love. But the words died before he could utter them. He didn't think Spock would smile tonight just because of some facile expression, no matter the affection behind it. In this world where only the two of them lived, night had fallen.

It was so damned hot. The cold shower he'd taken just seemed to make his skin steam. It was like trying to sleep in the Enterprise's sauna. Kirk shifted restlessly, freed his toes from the sheet and flung his left foot out over the edge of the mattress.

But after two, three minutes of silence, Spock eased out of his cocoon and turned onto his side to face Kirk, and a moment later Kirk rolled over to match his wordless companion. The shiny fabric of the nightshirt glinted in the red light from the fire-shrine which glowed in the corner of the bedroom. The light molded the shadowy form's long line of strength, down to the trim indentation of waist and bony protrusion of hip. No sensuous curves on this lover.

Kirk waited. Even... before, Spock sometimes had trouble finding the words to express what he wanted. Needed. Kirk had learned to interpret Vulcan body language, and the subtle shifting of expression. Now, he held himself open.

A hot hand untangled itself from the last of the blankets and took possession of Kirk's hip. It rubbed a slow circle over the brief-covered skin, then slipped up to the waist and under the elastic. Spock spread his fingers and pressed skin to skin against Kirk's yielding left asscheek. Just a little more pressure and he would know that Spock was asking him to move forward, to press his awakening cock against the Vulcan groin. But there was no additional pressure, just this unmistakable possession of an intimate part of Kirk's body. It was where Spock's touch had given him pleasure in the past, awakening nerve endings the human had long ignored were there. How he loved it when Spock lightly ran his fingertips all over his ass, until he trembled, and when his lover kissed him there... Tentatively, Kirk rested his splayed hand against the fabric that covered his lover's chest. Then he remembered that this was where Spock had been most injured, and he hastily jerked his hand back.


Their bodies pressed together, chest to hip. It was strange not to feel the hair on Spock's chest against his own nakedness. It was strange to slide his fingers against cloth and not skin. Not like it
used to be.... Emotion stung behind Kirk's eyes. Why had he bought the damned nightshirts anyway? Spock lifted his right leg and slid it over the captain, pinning him with sudden strength, as if to keep a captive in place. Kirk didn't resist the weight, felt his body pushed further into the mattress.

And then Spock leaned forward and captured his mouth in a very definite open-mouthed kiss.

None of this was happening the way Kirk had imagined it might. There was silence between them when there should have been words. Strength and anger, peculiarly mixed with fatalism, when he had expected despair. Maybe he didn't know Spock as well as he thought he did. Or maybe that understanding had just evaporated, like the tears that dried behind his eyes before they laced his cheeks, or the sweat that pricked his skin before it floated into the air. A demanding hot tongue caressed his mouth, and Kirk moaned. He didn't know why. The sound vibrated between them.

Slowly Spock pulled away, kissed him on the cheekbones, up to each eye. The Vulcan's breath was hot, hotter than the air. It brushed against Kirk's skin. He imagined paper igniting, shriveling in the flame.

"I need to know how it is when we are together now." A hoarse whisper. A rustle of cloth as briefs were discarded, as the blue silkiness was pushed up. "Tonight, the simplest things.... Touch me." A feverish hand guided his fingers to a double-ridged penis, rising like a newborn volcano from a sizzling sea.

Kirk gasped with the touch of that heated column against his palm, gasped again as his lover reached to push Kirk's briefs to his knees and took the human's organ in a steady hold. Caressed. Stroked. Yes. If this was what Spock wanted, that's what he would give.

In this position, with both of them on their sides curled around the open space between them, he was reduced to using his left hand at his lover's groin. It was awkward, like everything else this night. Kirk always used his right hand to pleasure himself, and the few times that he and Spock had merely masturbated each other to orgasm, he'd done it from the right. He wasn't ambidextrous like his lover. He fumbled for the proper pressure as he stripped the long cock from base to tip, knew that he'd stumbled too lightly over the special spot between the ridges. When his thumb lingered over the soft mushroom head, his fingernail skipped along the sensitive skin, and Spock drew his hips back in reflex.

But where Kirk knew he was failing to give his love what he'd asked for, Spock had no such problems. He commanded Kirk's cock the way he always had. He had not forgotten how to arouse, how to show love through touch, how to gradually quicken the slow stroking into a frenzied motion that demanded response.

Like dry tinder crackling to the fire, Kirk's body arched into his lover's heat. Already, he was lost. No. No. Too soon. His own hand on Spock's organ faltered, opened, dropped away as he was consumed by blazing sensation. He fell onto his back, and Spock followed him, the outline of his face in the darkness only centimeters away, his breath flame, his hand on Kirk's weeping cock inexorably moving.

Another minute. Sweat broke out on his chest, gathered in the creases of his neck. Just another few strokes and he would.... Kirk cursed his body even as his hips rose and fell to the rhythm Spock imposed. Not... like... this. So alone. Solitary, in silence. They almost always came together. The union of two minds and souls on the bridge of the Enterprise was reflected in their shared bed. But not anymore. Never again....

Never again to feel the touch of Spock's mind.
Never again, a fiery voice thundered, as the blood pounded in his cock and in his ears, coursing through his brain and split it open in sorrow. The body was enough. It had to be enough.

His head pounded. His brain pulsed, bounded up in agony against the bony case that prevented the merging of all that he was with all that he wanted.... He curled up into the air in quivered seeking, gasped for air, his body shivered into what should have been ecstasy....

And all he felt as he shuddered and poured forth into his lover's hand was... alone.


Air rasped in and out of his lungs as he remembered to breathe. His pounding heart eased. There was the touch of the sheets against his back, the rustle of the pillow as he collapsed against it. Spock's hand was still wrapped around his shriveling cock, held him the way he always did against post-orgasmic sensitivity. With love.

Hot breath against his face as a shadow came closer. Lips against his own, furnace-hot, familiar lips. Spock kissed him.

And then suddenly the hand released his cock and Spock fell back upon the mattress. The red light of the fireshrine lingered over the folds of cloth that hid him, and bathed a crimson glow over his stiff organ standing in the air.

Spock needed him, wanted him.... The last echoes of his orgasm were still tingling in his spine and Kirk was up on his side, leaning on his right elbow and reaching.... But no. They'd discovered early in their love affair that Spock's penis was very sensitive to touch. He always needed lubrication if the manual stimulation lasted very long.

An eternity as Kirk reached behind him for the cream, guided in the darkness only by touch. It was tucked neatly away in the top drawer of the nightstand. So... prosaic. He wiped the sweat that had gathered on his palm against the sheet, uncapped the tube, squirted some soundlessly into his palm, and reached again.

But first... There were splatters of his coming on his own groin. He smeared his hand over it, merged it with the white lubricant already there, and returned to the heavy weight of Spock's arousal. With this cream I thee anoint. I give thee all that I have.

He felt Spock quiver as his hand moved over the slick velvet of the Vulcan cock. He felt as much as heard the indrawn breath, and the restless moving of legs against the mattress. But in the darkness, Kirk couldn't see....

"Lights up," he whispered, so low that the syllables couldn't be heard by the computer standing guard over their love-making. "Lights up, one quarter," he demanded harshly, too loud, his words breaking this otherwise silent ceremony of renewal.

The light flooded on, bathed the face of his lover in clarity. The heavily masculine features he had come to love. Those long, flaring eyebrows that arched off to an infinity of possibilities. The deep brown eyes that spoke their own language, that he didn't always understand.

"I want to see you," he explained brokenly. He'd said that many times before. Now it meant something different, and he didn't know if he wanted Spock to realize the anguished loss behind the words. His hand pumped the living hardness, his heart pumped crazily in his chest, his head still ached from the orgasm that hadn't freed his longings.
"I need to know you." Impossible to recapture the desperate, choking words once uttered. He didn't even recognize his own voice. Why had he said it? To hurt Spock more with his own pain? Wasn't there already enough between them?

No. There could never be enough of anything between them, including the pain that they shared. It blossomed into the space that might have been filled by the bond. It vibrated between them, anguish and loss. In the dim light, Kirk leaned forward and saw it in his lover's aching, lonely eyes.

He couldn't leave those eyes. Deep, dark as the night. Fathomless, now, in the silence. Their eyes clung to one another, even as Kirk's hand possessed Spock's penis, stroked and stroked. But it wasn't enough. Spock's body heaved into the tightening fist with desperate lunges, his cock swelled and stiffened. His hips pistonned hard, his heels dug into mattress and fingers clutched the bedding, but it wasn't enough.

Spock moaned in unfulfilled desire. The sound split the air into crimson pieces; red heat settled over Kirk's skin, burning him.

"This is all I have," Spock panted, and he thrust helplessly, uselessly. "It is all I can feel. But I want you. Jim, I want you so much...."

With a groan, Spock turned and reached for him, and, uncaring of his own sensitive, recently-spent cock, Kirk flung himself into the strong arms, followed them as they settled him over the heaving body.

Chest matched chest, flaccid cock met rampant cock, their bodies pressed sparks between them as they pounded together in the struggle for Spock's orgasm.... And their faces were close, so close....

Kirk reached for the meld points even as he felt Spock's fingers settling against his own face in the same configuration. His fingertips brushed the dry, hot skin of temple and cheekbones, pressed inward towards the living tissue that cradled Spock's thoughts. I want to know you, he screamed inside. Let me know you. Know me!

And far away, was Spock crying the same thing? Kirk didn't know. He couldn't hear.

With one titanic lurch that drove their bodies upwards towards the heavens, Spock opened his mouth, contorted his eyes shut, and came with a cry that was stripped of hope. One wave of pulsing liquid, another, another, he sealed their bodies together with his semen as Kirk sealed their bodies together with his sweat....

Slowly their breathing normalized, slowly hands slipped from faces, slowly Kirk slid from the slick body to lay beside his lover. He felt the fingers of the oblivion he'd wished for earlier plucking at his consciousness. It would be so easy to succumb to sleep....

He turned on his side. Touched his lover's shoulder. Extended his arms.

Kirk fell asleep with his arms wrapped around his love, with a Vulcan's dark head pressed against his chest.

And Spock?

Spock had spent thirty-nine years learning the Vulcan disciplines that allowed him to precisely command the workings of his mind and body. He had no such control now. All he could do was love and hurt. He listened to Kirk breathing in the darkness, and yearned for sleep to take him.
PART THREE

LEONARD McCOY - PERSONAL LOG, in progress

Okay, McCoy, let's get on with this. It's getting late, and I'm due on first shift tomorrow morning. Alpha shift, they call it in Starfleet. Never have gotten used to that. Why use the Greek alphabet when Standard is just as good? Alpha, beta, gamma.... Plain speaking, that's what I'm for.

All right. We left starbase twenty-four and it was a quiet trip to Gabriela. The whole ship had heard about Uhura's and Hunyady's triumph, so there'd been some celebrating when we were still in orbit around the 'base. You know, "the crew of the Enterprise comes through again." I guess they deserve the inflated opinion they have of themselves. They work hard enough for it. Anyway, everyone'd expected to get the assignment to follow through on the findings. To redeem their honor and their reputation. And when they didn't....

So, there was a subdued air of, well, angry resignation aboard. Is that possible? Angry resignation? I'm a doctor, not a writer. What I mean is, like a child who's been spanked by his daddy because of something his brother did. Nothing the little fellow can do about it except hang his head, be mad inside and know he didn't really do anything wrong. I got a little concerned for morale, since this happened right after our failure on Michaela. But this crew is savvy; Komack became even more of a cuss word on the Enterprise than he'd been before.

Jim was quiet. Spock was even quieter. I don't think the crew noticed, except to assume their senior officers were reflecting the general mood on the ship. If I hadn't been a part of this whole mess, I never would have known that our captain had the ends of a severed bond echoing in his head, that he was grieving, and that our resident Vulcan had just had half his life ripped away. But I couldn't tell. And it wasn't just that they were trying to prove something to me, that's just the way they are. Even Komack couldn't have faulted them.

But I found myself wondering what they were like off-shift, when they were alone together. Had either one of them allowed themselves the luxury of crying? Was Spock able to unbend enough to be able to seek any comfort from Jim? And if he couldn't, then was Jim able to reach Spock anyway, and give him the support he must have needed? I didn't know the answers to any of those questions. I didn't know much about their relationship; hell, I didn't know anything about it.

We weren't talking. Professional communication, yes, minor and stilted conversation when I came upon one of them in the public light of the rec room, yes. But real honest sharing, the way it had always been between Jim and me, especially... No.

I was nice and confused. Everything that had happened to Spock hadn't erased the memory of the angry words that Jim and I had exchanged. I mean, I was sorrier than I can tell that Spock had been hurt, but I still meant a lot of what I'd said to Jim. I was hurt, and angry, too, and worried about what their relationship would mean to the ship and their careers. But then I would remember Jim's face when I had to tell him about the broken bond. Pain like that comes from the soul.

So, I didn't know whether I felt more like slugging our illustrious leader when we met or suggesting we go have a good cry over a brandy. It was better that we stayed away from each other.

I saw more of Spock. I called him down to sickbay for an exam twice that week, though he didn't like it one bit. Well, that's typical. I was concerned about his state of mind, but it was pretty
obvious that was Jim's responsibility now. Maybe, some other time, I would have consulted with Jim about it, but not now. But I still had a responsibility to care for that mixed-up Vulcan body.

Anyway, as I've said before, Spock's physical self is much more dependent on his brain than most other beings. Now that the telepathic center was non-functional, I worried that the body would start to go haywire. I looked for tumors, imbalances in electrolytes, loss of bone mass, hormonal changes, you name it. I pored over his charts. I knew it was a substitute for a bunch of other emotions, but damned if I was going to miss anything like I'd missed those subtle hormonal shifts indicating sexual activity seven months ago. I looked at every line, personally, since I sure wasn't going to depend on the computer. Computers don't have intuition, and they don't know my patients the way I do.

It kept me busy, I'll admit that. I put in extra hours going over Spock's work-ups, trying to find something, anything that would hint at some solution. But I understand myself too well. Part of my motivation was guilt. Guilt because they didn't have what they both must have wanted so much, and what I hadn't been able to tolerate: the meld.

Logic would have said I couldn't feel so soul-deep sorry for the two of them, wanting to help, and be so angry with them at the same time. Spock would have told me I was being illogical, because my aversion to their melding didn't have anything to do with the attack on him. But who ever said I was logical?

But during that week, when I had some time to think, I came up with an explanation for their relationship that sounded logical to me.

I asked myself, how had Jim Kirk, that most obvious of woman-chasing heterosexuals, changed so much? The captain is, or was, so fixated on the fairer sex that he's even personified the Enterprise into the image of a beautiful woman. He's always calling her "My Silver Lady."

And that, I thought, might be the answer to the question. Of all the women who our bigger-than-life captain has chased, bedded, or even loved, not one had been a serious threat to the monogamous relationship between captain and ship. Jim would never have allowed the rivalry. Even though he was lonely, even though I recognized that his obsessive womanizing only thinly shielded a genuine need for an intimate relationship, even though his strong libido matched his drive to succeed, Kirk was faithful to the Enterprise.

And so was Spock. And Spock was not a woman.

I told myself that somewhere in Jim's subconcious mind there was the rationalization that he could have Spock, and that relationship would be acceptable to the mythical image of the ship that our captain is wedded to.

Pretty stupid, huh? I was sort of like the man dying of thirst who won't drink the wine right in front of him because he's looking for water. It was all plain as can be, once I took the blinkers off. Or once circumstances ripped them off my face. Even this old country doctor knows love when it kicks him in the teeth.

Yeah. That's what happened after we left starbase twenty-four. I got a big lesson in what love is all about.
It was a difficult, and a very silent, week.

-- Each night, Spock had nightmares. He dreamed of falling through the darkness of an Orion hell, forever surrounded by night. He dreamed of falling into the heart of a star, burning and burning and never consumed. His arms flailed, his hands pushed against the mountain of blankets that now guarded his slumber, but he could not pull himself from the spiral of fear. Kirk would awaken to whimpering he’d never heard from his Vulcan before. He wrapped his arms around the wire-tight form, made soothing sounds, and slowly Spock opened his leaden eyes. The two of them lay together in the darkness, not finding words, gradually separating until only their fingers were touching. The human sweated in the heat and worried, the Vulcan stared at the ceiling and attempted not to think at all.

-- Always before, Spock had had complete control of his Vulcan body. He could command his hand to hit a ball with precisely so much force, could instruct his heart to beat so many times per minute, he could tell his muscles to flex to lift 50 kilograms or 300. But now his body was a mystery to him, and on the second morning when Kirk was poised above and attempting to penetrate him, the habitual command to the sphincter muscle to relax was useless. Kirk pushed and Spock felt a flash of unexpected pain. He groaned and pulled away in reflex. Their erections wilted; Kirk whispered and caressed the side of his face. "It's all right. We'll learn again." But Spock was left with unvoiced guilt and Kirk was left with unspoken frustration. That evening they used their hands and mouths and each reached a violent climax too soon.

-- The ugly dreams that night were unceasing. Spock's arms flailed over his head and knocked against the forcefield that protected the crystal hyacinths on the bedboard/bookcase. The field sparked and rocked, but it protected the flowers from the unconscious assault. In the morning, Kirk removed the sculpture, packed it carefully and placed it in his safe.

-- On the third day, Spock was cleared for half-shifts and bridge duty. He stepped off the turbolift to discover himself suffocated by smiles and solicitude. Sulu brightly presented him with the day's roster already checked, Chekov had already performed the daily calibration of instruments the first officer insisted upon, Uhura brought him Catallan half-berry tea at mid-morning, and Kirk quietly re-routed all but the most mundane of tasks. The pressure of the emotions from the humans had never been so strong even when his telepathic senses were intact. Twelve hundred hours and the ending of his half-duty could not come soon enough. He fled, feeling as if he could not breathe. When Kirk left the bridge at sixteen hundred hours and quietly entered his lover's quarters, he found Spock sitting cross-legged on the floor before his attunement flame, just emerging from the calming mediation he’d so desperately needed. Kirk understood at once. "I'm sorry," he said, kneeling and wrapping the stiff body in his arms. "But they love you too."

-- On the fifth day the Enterprise received a recorded message from starbase 24. A team of statisticians was attempting to gather more evidence to substantiate the results of Report ENT78931. Captain Ian Langley would oversee the study personally, and enough data would be collected for analysis within sixty days. A final report to the admiral was expected within six months. The dispatch was personally signed by Brian Komack. Kirk was very quiet on the bridge the rest of the day, and that night it was Spock who gently undressed his lover, rubbed his lover's back, and held his lover in supportive arms. "Damn him," he heard Kirk whisper. "Damn him." Neither of them said anything more.

-- The next day, still forty-two hours out from Gabriela, Uhura handed the captain a print-out from
the week’s dispatches just received. Michaela had been placed on the "Yellow" list by the Federation Bureau of Immigration and Travel. "Yellow" meant that the planet was considered too dangerous for Federation citizens and was closed to all but official traffic. The captain stared at the flimsy white sheet while Uhura waited; she was upset, and wanted to share the emotion with someone who cared as she did. But all Kirk said was "Transmit this to Mister Spock's terminal in his office. Flag it for his attention," and then he fixed his eyes on the starfield.

Turning their attention to the impersonal problem of the environmental crisis on the planet of Gabriela was almost a relief to captain and first officer.

It had been a difficult week.

*****

"The planet we know as Gabriela has some interesting properties. The atmosphere in its natural condition has an unusual one point two percent concentration of watinium, which is a free-floating catalyst for the destruction of ozone. The substance can also be found in the soil of the only two inhabited land masses, which I have here labeled the southern and northern continents, connected by this land bridge." Spock's long finger pointed to the blue shapes hovering in holographic projection twenty centimeters from the wall of the briefing room. "Within the soil the substance is harmless. However watinium is ingested in a somewhat complicated process by the local flora, and it is particularly present in the forests of the south. It composes up to ten point five percent of the living tissue of the _spuast_ tree."

The first officer walked towards his seat in front of the computer console, consciously controlling his movements and putting one foot in front of the other carefully. He had no desire to stumble in front of those assembled in briefing room four. Thankfully, only the captain was aware of his occasional difficulty with spatial perception; Spock had not found it necessary to report it to Doctor McCoy. But the problems with his troublesome equilibrium were fading, and he had estimated that they would be gone completely in two days. Perhaps two point five days.

As he made his way the short distance to the table, he was aware of a sensation of gratitude that he was able to conduct this briefing at all. As well as a sensation that the lights in the completely familiar briefing room were much brighter than they normally were, and that his feet moving against the floor covering produced a louder sound than he was used to. So be it. He must function in this new world his altered senses showed him.

Spock made it to his chair without mishap, and ruthlessly suppressed the elation that he felt at this so small indication of his ability to function within normal parameters. He knew the source of the strong emotion. The past week had seen more than wavering control over his equilibrium; neither could he control his emotions the way he wished to.

Three days ago, he had awakened with sobs rolling up from his impossibly constricted chest, with tears streaking down his face, and with Kirk's arms tightening around him. He had been bitterly ashamed at this sign of the unacknowledged despair that ate at his soul, and then further mortified at his shame. A Vulcan would not cry. A Vulcan did not despair. A Vulcan did not need the physical contact that was the only sanity he could find in this crazy, whirling world....

Spock had forced himself to loosen the hold he had on the strong arms, forced himself away from the comfort of cool skin, and had buried his wet face in his pillow. But Kirk had not allowed the retreat. Kirk had pulled him back, touched him, kissed him, had stroked his face and whispered, "The cause is sufficient."

Possibly. Spock was not certain. But of one thing he was sure. He could not give in to self-pity.
That way lay loss of self-respect, and he suspected, madness. It was much more difficult than it had been before, even more difficult than when he had been a youth, but he attempted to control the unpredictable, unsettling emotions that beset him now. He subdued his satisfaction that he should be able to do so simple a thing as conduct a briefing.

He looked at the attentive faces turned towards him. Uhura, Sulu, Hunyady, all seated across from him, were accustomed to briefings of this sort. However, Lieutenant Josephs from Security was also present with four of his people, Prendel't, Tarn, Konstantinov and Bhatt, seated to Spock's right along the curve of the oval table, and for them the discussion was a novelty. The captain had only recently begun to include security personnel in all landing party briefings, and Spock approved of the move. Just as the medical staff such as Doctor M'Benga needed to be aware of the planetary conditions, so did security.

Although why Doctor McCoy had chosen to accompany M'Benga to the meeting, Spock did not know. His presence was not necessary, since the junior doctor was assigned to this landing party. The room was already crowded.

But McCoy had not spoken as of yet, and so had not revealed his purpose for being there. Spock allowed his gaze to return to the activated screen in the middle of the table, and continued his discourse.

"From the meager information which has been transmitted to us, I surmise that it is the spuast that is the problem. The trees are being burned to clear land for agriculture, thus releasing the watinium into the atmosphere in an altered, much more interactive state. The atmospheric content of w-watinium has reached two point eight percent, and this is the cause of the planet's current environmental problems. The inhabitants are showing all the physical symptoms which are common on ozone-depleted planets, including a wide incidence of a deadly cancer that appears to be peculiar to the Gabrielans."

"If they know the source of their problems, why don't they take the first step by stopping the burning of the trees?" Sulu asked reasonably. "On Earth in the early twenty-first century, that was part of the solution."

"The obvious solution, Mister Sulu, is not always so obvious to those involved. The Gabrielans who are in power on the planet reside on the northern continent, which has large areas of urban population. A total of perhaps fifty million. The smaller southern land mass is inhabited by a smaller number of a different species of humanoid, who for several hundred years were restricted by the ruling powers to what could most accurately be called "reservations," for want of a better term. The Derkheen, on whom we have very little data, are not indigenous to this planet, although it is unclear when they arrived. At least four hundred years ago. They are treated as outcasts, pariahs, similar to the "unclean" caste from the Terran subcontinent of India several centuries ago, with very little, almost no interaction between the two races."

Uhura made a soundless grimace of distaste. Josephs shifted uncomfortably in his chair, but they and everyone else remained silent. In the Enterprise’s travels, the crew had seen injustice against the weak or the different played out time and time again, and often they had been able to do very little about it.

Spock continued. "However, more than twenty years ago an insurrection occurred. The reservation borders were overcome, apparently from sheer force of numbers, and the Derkheen population moved further south to the unsettled forested lands. The Gabrielans, perhaps from altruistic motivations, perhaps because their attention was taken by a domestic isolationist movement, did not attempt to reinstate the reservations, content instead with the distance that separated the two
races. However, the border between the two continents is patrolled vigilantly, and very little contact between Gabrielan and Derkheen is officially permitted. Conditions in the south are suitable only for a subsistence level of existence for the population there, even for the few million Derkheen." The Vulcan's face did not change from its calm expression, but a certain tightening in his voice revealed his disapproval of that information.

"The Derkheen, once they were freed, pursued a primitive form of agriculture and began burning the trees to clear land. Given the lack of fertility of other areas they were forced into this activity for survival. The deliberately-set fires have increased over the years and have now reached critical levels. Because of the unusual composition of the atmosphere, the deforestation has consequences out of proportion to the activity."

"And what do the Gabrielans expect from the Federation, sir? What's our mission?" Hunyady, as always, did not hesitate to speak up.

"Officially, Lieutenant, to participate in the environmental conference the government has called and offer solutions. Most of the Gabrielian technology is 257.7 on the new Richter scale; mid-twentieth century Terran. For example, the Gabrielsans do not possess subspace radio capability, and can only communicate with planets in close proximity. These people do not have the ability to deal with their environmental problems themselves, not scientifically, technically, nor medically, and they have realized that. The Gabrielsans have always been quite wary of outsiders since they first experienced visitors from other worlds, and it was not totally unexpected when official contact with the Federation ceased altogether with the social upheaval that occurred twenty years ago. However, this situation has caused them to emerge from their self-imposed isolation from the galactic community."

"Seems to me we'll be talking to the wrong people," Sulu contributed. "What we really need to do is talk with the Derkheen. They're the ones who have to change their behavior."

"An interesting point of view, Mr. Sulu," the captain provided. Kirk was seated at the far end of the oval table. "The Gabrielsans can't seem to bring themselves to initiate contact with their neighbors to the south, except of course to patrol the border."

"Indeed." Spock folded his arms. "Their attitude is quite illogical. I fail to see how we can offer a technical solution as they ask, when watinium continues to pour into their atmosphere unabated."

"Which means that any real solution must include a reordering of their society, at least an attempt to get the two races talking and cooperating with one another."

Spock turned his head to meet his captain's open gaze. After four years of serving with this man, he was still consistently impressed at how his captain was able to cut to the heart of any matter. That was one of Kirk's strengths. As was the way he approached seemingly insurmountable problems with an optimistic attitude.

The probability that a delegation from the Enterprise would be able to initiate cultural change in the seven days they were scheduled to be on the planet approached zero, as Spock had not hesitated to point out to his captain the previous evening when they had discussed this mission privately in Spock's quarters. And yet, Kirk had not relinquished his determination to "do something" for the Derkheen, just as he refused to relinquish his belief that his lover's Vulcan abilities would one day be restored. Spock calculated the probability of that event at zero, "less than zero" he had illogically stated last night in a regrettable display of heated emotion.

And yet, despite all evidence to the contrary, Kirk continued to believe in a future where the two of them would be able to join minds again. Aside from the undeniably warm satisfaction that this
evidence of Kirk's love produced, the attitude was remarkable. Possibly, not a positive state of affairs for the human's mental health. But there was something inside the Vulcan that was comforted because Kirk held an illogical hope that he himself had abandoned.

"Until we evaluate conditions on the planet's surface, it is difficult to judge whether a reconciliation between the races will be possible." The first officer spoke quietly, not directly opposing the captain's suggestion, yet subtly pointing out the difficulties involved.

Kirk leaned forward and folded his hands upon the table. His sweeping glance took in everyone present. "It's obvious that this is a diplomatic mission with political consequences to the Federation, despite the scientific nature of the conference. The Federation would benefit from an alliance with the Gabrielans, even better would be if they could eventually be convinced to become a member planet. The Tholian border is just five parsecs away." Kirk pointed up and over Prendel't's antennae, precisely towards the heart of the Tholian empire. "Even though this planet doesn't currently have space flight capability, and previously didn't want to have much to do with the Federation, their attitude is obviously changing since they've requested our assistance. It's possible that the Gabrielans realize their planet would be an ideal location for a Starfleet facility. Keep that in mind during the time we'll be spending on the planet. We want the Gabrielans to like us, or at the very least be willing to deal with us, even if we don't like them or some of the things they do."

"And the Derkheen, Captain?" Uhura queried softly.

"The Derkheen, Lieutenant," Kirk said, "are part of the equation. If there's any way we can lay the groundwork for their condition to be improved, we do it. But we can't forget our primary goal. It will simply be fortunate if the welfare of the Gabrielans and the Derkheen are linked." The captain sat back in his chair, discourse completed.

The first officer drew the meeting to a close. He spoke softly to the computer and a document appeared on the table's built-in screen. "Specifications are available in the computer. Access them before the landing party gathers in transporter room four tomorrow. I call your attention to Section Two: part of this mission will be supplementing our understanding of this culture, which is minimal. Initial reports from more than twenty years ago state that the Gabrielans are a uniquely empathic race, but details of that empathy are sketchy. The Gabrielans regard this part of their culture as highly private. If it can be discreetly obtained, information would supplement our understanding."

"I will conduct a secondary briefing for the rest of the science team at 1700 hours. Are there questions? Dismissed."

The security crew were the first to leave, moving together as a team even on the ship, followed swiftly by the others. Spock remained seated, as was his custom after a briefing, checking the computer log of the event. He was satisfied that he was able to adequately temper his feeling of relief now that the briefing had been successfully concluded. He was truly able to resume his place as first officer.

As he directed his attention to the log, he was aware that Kirk remained where he was seated. Although the captain frequently stayed after official briefings to discuss some detail with his first officer, Spock knew that Kirk was not present for that purpose now. This silent action was another gesture of support, one of many that had come to life between the two of them over the past week: the shared nights that Kirk had not allowed anything to interrupt, the times of solitary meditation that Kirk had fiercely guarded, the professional respect unwaveringly maintained while they were on duty.

When he looked up from his task, only Kirk remained in the room. And Doctor McCoy, who was
Spock swallowed heavily. He had not realized that there was anyone else in the room. He had not processed the sounds of the doctor's breathing, the sounds of his small body movements, nor had he subliminally counted, as he always had before, while the other nine individuals left the room. There were three in this room, not two, and he had not known it. Another stinging reminder of his inadequacies.

The silence lengthened. This was the first occasion since before the lunch with Admiral Komack that the three of them had been together, alone, in the same room. The doctor's body language conveyed contradictory messages; he shifted his weight from one foot to another, seemingly uncomfortable, and yet his fists were clenched in a way that Spock had learned to interpret as aggressive in humans.

He did not want to participate in the conversation which was to come. He felt.... He searched for an appropriate word to describe his mental and emotional condition and settled upon "stretched." He was already stretched to his limits. He would not appreciate McCoy imposing on his overburdened psyche, or on Kirk's patience.

Spock blinked once, twice, for control, as he had been taught to do as a child, and sat up straighter in his seat. The touch of a finger sent the log to main records, then he swiveled to face McCoy.

McCoy cleared his throat noisily and said, "Captain..." at the same time that Kirk pronounced, "Doctor...."

The blend of the two voices together sounded discordant, unfamiliar, and Spock was unwillingly reminded that it was McCoy's voice, as well as Kirk's, which sounded different to him now. He caught his lower lip in his teeth and looked down at the table's surface. Removing visual stimuli often aided control.... He had always been interested in following the peculiar cadences of McCoy's speech, the rhythms that distinctively branded the CMO as a son of the American South. There had been two occasions when he had been unable to open his eyes upon regaining consciousness in Sickbay. Disoriented, beset by pain not yet controlled, Spock had searched for solidity and found it each time in McCoy's reassuring, softly drawled words. But now McCoy did not... quite... sound as he had always sounded, and Spock would never awaken to that voice again.

Not his fault, Spock reminded himself. The change was in him; the doctor was as he had always been. Sarek's son rejected the heavy emotion that threatened to uncurl within his chest. It was not Vulcan. It was illogical to regret the past. He must, it was essential for him to accept the present.

He released his lower lip, looked up to captain and chief medical officer confronting one another in a briefing room. In a polite gesture that should have been unnecessary between friends, Kirk nodded for McCoy to continue.

The doctor leaned forward and splayed his fingertips on the tabletop as he spoke. "It is not a good idea for Spock to be going on this assignment."

A Vulcan eyebrow arched, and Spock forestalled whatever Kirk had been about to say. "Indeed, Doctor? On what do you base that statement? You discharged me from sickbay seven days ago."

"For shipboard duty, not for some conference where you'll be away for several days. I want to keep you under observation."

The captain hitched forward in his seat, precisely folded his hands upon the table and frowned. "Have you found something in those exams of yours that we need to be worried about? That you
haven't told us about?"

McCoy drew himself up straight, looking for all the world like an indignant rooster. "If I'd had something to say, Spock would have heard it from me already. I don't withhold information from patients."

With an effort, Spock ignored the physician's aggrieved reaction. He, at least, would not react in an emotional manner, although he understood the physician's attempt to defend his professional honor. That was typical of the doctor the past week, since he and the captain had argued.

Spock attempted to speak in a dispassionate voice. "Then since we have not had such a conversation, I presume you consider me physically fit."

"Technically, yes. Realistically...." McCoy hesitated, and Kirk filled the small silence.

"You don't have anything specific."

"No. Nothing I can put my finger on. But his electrolytes have been doing a tap dance all over his chart from the beginning. And there was a hormonal blip two days ago the size of Mount Seleya, then a dip like the Marianas trench. Not to mention that the last Quazinheim test I ran showed all the tau perceptual areas were deader than a doornail, and I really expected to see some improvement there at least."

At another time Spock might have been amused by the aptly descriptive metaphors, might even have made one of his deadpan comments that he knew diverted his companions, but he had no resiliency for humor now. He contented himself with, "Doctor, there is much in my hybrid nature that is unpredictable."

McCoy nodded. "That's right. That's just what I'm talking about; I don't know what to expect from you. You seem to be functioning fine now, but if something does crop up while you're away, I won't be there to catch it."

"Your concern for my well-being is laudatory, Doctor, however, I do believe it is excessive."

"No, it's not. I want---"

"Are you making this an official recommendation?" Kirk's question cut through the explanation.

McCoy thought for a long moment, then reluctantly shook his head. "No. If it were, I would have put it on record. But I really want to keep him under observation on the ship."

Kirk stood and walked around to the other end of the table. He hitched one hip upon the corner and turned so that he was facing McCoy, not two meters away. Under other circumstances, at another time, his action would have appeared casual, friendly. How many times had these three conferred in this conference room over the past four years? Twenty times? Fifty? But circumstances were not as they had been. Now the action appeared stilted.

"This is an environmental conference. Not an unexplored planet with unknown dangers and not an encampment of Klingons." Kirk spoke patiently. "It's just a group of humanoids whose environment has gone to hell and who have asked for our help. Which, of course, the Federation is more than pleased to provide in hopes of receiving some political return for our altruism. We're going to play angel on a planet we've named after an angel."

McCoy frowned and Spock glanced at his captain, attempting to interpret that last remark. Usually Kirk laced his cynicism with humor. But the captain appeared to be serious.
"And now you suggest that I keep the head of the science department and the most capable scientist on this ship away from this innocuous, totally safe conference." Kirk shook his head slowly. "Admiral Komack would not be pleased, Doctor."

McCoy hunched an impatient shoulder. "So what? You've never cared what he thought before. This is for Spock's own good. I'm worried."

"Just worry isn't enough. I'm sorry. Unless you have some reason to officially restrict Mister Spock's activities, he will beam down to the planet as planned tomorrow." Kirk slid off his perch and turned his back.

McCoy bit his lip and stared down at the surface of the table. "Are you sure," he asked slowly, "that this is a wise decision? If I were asking this about Ensign Shinswani, or Tech Molater in bio-engineering, or anybody else, wouldn't you go along with me?"

Kirk stopped his progress across the room and swung about. "What are you trying to say, McCoy?"

The doctor spread his hands, placating. "I'm not trying to say anything, I'm saying it. Are you sure personal considerations aren't clouding your judgment here? How many other times have I asked you to restrict someone's duties, and you've gone along with my evaluation without a second thought? Are you trying to pretend that nothing has changed with your first officer? You're not doing Spock a favor if you are."

"Don't lecture me, Doctor," Kirk said between gritted teeth. "I know that things have changed. You're the one who doesn't understand what you're saying. You're tempting me to give in to the exact behavior you counseled against. Favoritism. Don't you think I would prefer to restrict Mister Spock's activities, keep him safely on the ship? Let you haul him down to sickbay for a check-up every day that I'm gone? But I can't do that, no matter how much I might want to, not unless there's a good reason for it. Mister Spock is the first officer of the Enterprise, you've certified him capable of full duty, and in my judgment as captain, he is required on Gabriela. He's going."

Before the implacable words, McCoy fell silent, closing his eyes in defeat. But they were open a moment later. "All right. Then I want to be included in the delegation."

Kirk heaved an exasperated sigh. "I can make a medical argument for your exclusion at least as strong as the one you've made for Mister Spock. M'Benga put you on half shifts for a few days, didn't he? You're not a hundred percent after your surgery."

McCoy took a firm step forward. "Who needs to be a hundred percent for a conference?" he argued. "You're assigning Spock, so assign me. I can do the medical evaluation of the Gabrielan problem instead of M'Benga. And I can keep up with what's going on in Spock's crazy hybrid body."

"Doctor," Spock added from where he was still seated, arms folded, in front of the computer console, "you are contradicting the argument you just made to restrict me to the Enterprise."

"I can contradict myself if I darn well want to," McCoy shot back, "especially if it means that I get to keep my eye on you."

"You are behaving in an illogical fashion."

"I can be illogical if I want to be, too."

Kirk brought the argument back on track. "M'Benga can monitor Spock just as well as you can."
McCoy swung around to look his captain in the eye. "Oh, come on, Jim, you know that's not true. Sure, M'Benga's a good doctor and he knows how to read a scanner as well as anybody, but medicine's a lot more than that. A physician cares for the whole person, and nobody knows Spock's mixed-up physiology like I do. Nobody knows him as well as I do. Except you. And...." He took a deep breath. "And M'Benga doesn't know about your... uh, personal relationship, and unless you tell him, he sure won't understand the magnitude of Spock's loss. How it affects both of you, and how there are additional ramifications here. Let me come with you. I think you need me."

For a long ten seconds Kirk stared at his CMO, then he nodded abruptly. "All right. Consider yourself assigned. I'll let M'Benga know."

McCoy blinked before the unexpected capitulation. "Uh, okay." He rubbed his hands together. "I'll, uh, look over those specifications Spock mentioned in the computer." Awkwardly, he turned and retreated from the room. The tension that had been accumulating between Spock's shoulders eased.

There was another small silence before Kirk, apparently addressing the floor at his feet, said, "I hope he's happy."

"It is doubtful." Spock stood up. He was relieved that the conversation with McCoy was over. But was it possible that the usually perceptive Kirk had missed what was obvious to him? "Unless I am much mistaken, that was an attempt at reconciliation."

The captain snorted. "It was? You could have fooled me."

"While McCoy is more often straight-forward in his approach," Spock said, "he is also capable of subtlety. And I am capable of interpreting it, as I have not lost my reasoning faculties along with everything else. I do not understand why there is continuing tension between you."

That comment brought Kirk's head up. "Stop looking for logic everywhere." A half-smile softened his words. "I think you've already figured out that you're not going to find it in humans."

"That conclusion is distressingly true. However, I have found a modicum of logic in you. I have even found it in McCoy, of a sort. What I do not understand is your apparent willingness to allow the unresolved situation between yourself and McCoy to continue. It is apparent to me that you each wish to ultimately resume your friendship, and yet you do not."

Kirk passed a weary hand over his eyes. "I'm not sure I understand it either. Well, maybe I do. If none of this had happened to you, I'm not sure that McCoy would ever have been able to accept our relationship. I really don't know. He's so prejudiced against mental contact, more than I had thought. Now, you can't meld us anymore, he doesn't have to deal with it, and I guess you could say that there's something inside me that's angry with him that he's been let off the hook. Until I can get over that feeling, not think of what he said about our melds every time I look at him...." The captain shook his head.

The Vulcan didn't even pretend to misunderstand "let off the hook." He asked, with a note of incredulity, "You are deliberately allowing yourself to cultivate the negative feelings that you believe might have existed if circumstances had been different?"

Kirk cocked his head to one side. "Not consciously. But you asked why we couldn't be comfortable with each other yet, and I think that's the most likely answer."

"That is exceedingly illogical," Spock said flatly.

"But very human," Kirk said with a weary grin. "I never said we were logical."
For some reason Spock could not immediately identify, the open, trusting expression caused a pang! to resound in the middle of his chest. He advanced until he stood directly in front of his captain. Kirk's scent was very strong to his newly sensitive nostrils. Salt and sweat and fresh, moisture-laden breezes mingled to unmistakably identify a son of Earth. But his lover was more, for he was the chosen of a son of Vulcan. He was the desert watered by the mountain rains, the tsorgas bush coming into red and golden bloom. Perhaps Spock's senses were adjusting, becoming sharper now that they were no longer supplemented by any telepathic perceptions. He could not perceive Kirk the way he wanted to, the way he needed to, but at least this purely physical perception was strong.

But Spock shook the thoughts away. They, along with the faint physical stirrings that accompanied them, had no place in a briefing room. "You are tired," he said softly, his gaze ranging over the weariness. "It has been a difficult time for you."

Pain shone from the hazel eyes. "And for you."

Spock could not deny it. Even now he felt unaccustomed fatigue pulling at him, and knew its source as the effort he had to expend to adjust to so many aspects of his new half-life. But Jim already knew it all. Jim lay awake in the darkness now as often as Spock did, as they both suffered the residual pain and psychic echoing of the broken bond.

With an effort he had expended too many times in the past week, Spock pulled himself away from the abyss: contemplation of what he had lost. It served no purpose. It invited self-pity. He reminded himself of Surak's seventeenth precept. *Acceptance of that which is.*

But there was also S'Mon's corollary. *Action to improve conditions is logical.* And there was also an executive officer's duty to his captain, to provide him with a smoothly operating ship and crew. Functioning on the *Enterprise* would not be optimal until ease was restored between captain and chief medical officer.

And there was a personal motivation for him to speak as well. Spock did not wish his intimate relationship with Kirk to detract in any way from his human's happiness. And though Jim would undoubtedly deny his need for McCoy at this time, Spock would rest easier if the two were friends again. It would be one less emotional worry with which he had to contend.

He allowed air to exit his lungs, then filled them again. He was weary, and did not really wish to expend the emotional energy to speak, did not want to challenge Kirk. But if, in the long run, good could come from his words.... Duty had always ruled Spock's life, and duty to his lover guided his words now. "Let us not waste time comparing the depletion of our emotional reserves," he said. "Instead, I encourage you to meet McCoy, as you would put it, 'half-way'."

Kirk looked away. He shook his head. "Spock. Sometimes you just have to let these things work themselves out. You can't force it." A small silence as Kirk inspected the deck. "That doesn't sound like me, does it? I'm the one who's always forcing the issue. But it's true. Sometimes you can't force it."

Restlessly, the captain swung about, began to pace around the long oval table, his hands clenched tightly behind his back. "I'm uncomfortable with McCoy now. I wasn't before we told him about us. And he's so damn sympathetic about what's happened to you. You know, like what he said about M'Benga not understanding the 'magnitude' of our loss. I suppose he thinks talking like that helps us somehow, but it seems so... two-faced. I'd rather have honest disagreement from him instead of what feels like... pity. I can't stand that. I wish we'd postponed telling him. Then he wouldn't know, wouldn't be between us like this. I feel as if he's watching."
Kirk's reaction was not unexpected. For all that he had been a wellspring of support, a fountain of the softer, gentler emotions the past several days, Spock understood that Kirk was not a soft and yielding sehlat sitting by the hearth who could be leaned upon forever. No, the man who had earned Spock's loyalty and love was a restless le-matya prowling in the desert, howling at the shadow of T'Khut. And much as Spock had valued the companionship of his sehlat I-Chiya, it was the le-matya that had drawn him to his open bedroom window at night, drawn him to the wild desert resounding with the fierce cries of life and death, laced with starlight and possibilities. It was actually a relief to see this sign of defiance in the quiet Kirk he had leaned upon for days.

And it was time for him to cease to lean on Kirk so heavily. He must resume his own strength.

"In a way," Spock said, drawing himself up as straight as he could, and placing his hands behind his back, "when we agreed to tell McCoy about our relationship, we placed him between us voluntarily. We were aware of the possible consequences and of his potential reaction. I still cannot believe we made the wrong decision. Circumstances have simply acted against us."

"Circumstances?" Kirk queried, coming to a halt in front of him with both eyebrows raised. "You mean like the forces of God, the universe, and Almighty Admiral Komack?" A shadow crossed his face, and he massaged his temples with his palms. His eyes closed. "Would you listen to me? I sound like a cynic, and I refuse to become one. I guess I am tired." His eyes opened, his hands fell to his side and he tugged his tunic back into place. "Okay. My first officer suggests that I give my CMO the benefit of the doubt. I suppose that any captain who ignored such excellent advice would be negligent. And...," the captain drew in a long breath, "to tell you the truth, I really don't like being at odds with Bones. It isn't good for morale, is it?"

Spock agreed gravely. "Not the crew's, and not yours, I do not believe. To say nothing of the doctor's morale."

Perceptively, Kirk added, "And yours too, right? Look, don't blame yourself for this...," he searched for the right word, "...problem between Bones and me. It'll work itself out if he wants it to."

Spock nodded. He would receive no more from his strong-willed lover, and was surprised that Kirk had bent as far as he had. Kirk would indeed meet McCoy half-way, but no further. The captain was a proud man.

"So," The captain took a deep breath and rubbed his hands together, with the air of a man who has confronted a problem and come up with a course of action that might be distasteful. Then he turned towards the door and asked over his shoulder, "Are you coming back to the bridge?"

He could not. There was the briefing with the rest of the landing party science team, so he must stay in this room, alone, after Kirk left, as was necessary. He could not continue to require excessive emotional support from Kirk, like a clinging and highly distasteful immature human.

If only he could find the time for a period of meditation. But that too, could become a crutch, and at any rate was impossible while fulfilling his first officer's duties. "Negative. I am conducting the briefing for the six other science personnel who will accompany us to Gabriela in...," he glanced at the chronometer glowing from the computer console, "...twenty-two minutes. I would prefer to remain here and review the relevant information."

"All right. See you later."

Spock watched the captain walk towards the door, watched him pause before he reached it and look back. Then Kirk swung about.
Kirk looked at him.

If they had been truly bonded, Spock would have felt the river of understanding rise within him. A torrent of comprehension would have flowed between him and the one to whom he had bound his life. He would have reached forward, compelled by the unmistakable invitation in hazel eyes, and his fingers would have settled on temple and cheekbone. He would have spiralled in and in, and their minds would have touched in the meld....

Kirk stood before him, two fingers of one hand outstretched. Spock matched them with his own.

Such a simple touch, the only sign of affection between bonded mates that was ever seen in public. And yet, even this action was inappropriate while they were in an unlocked room, while on duty. It was an indulgence that his captain offered him, and Spock could not reject it.

"One more night until we have to beam down to Gabriela." Kirk's voice was low, and he stared at their joined fingers as he spoke. "We'll have to sleep apart on the planet. You're going to be busy at the conference, with a lot of pressure on you to solve a problem that doesn't look like it can be solved easily. Are you sure... are you sure you're up to it? Maybe we should listen to McCoy."

Worry flavored his voice.

"I will be able to discharge my duties. Do not be concerned."

A shaky laugh. "Don't be concerned? How can you ask that? Don't you know that I'm nothing but concerned?" Their gazes slid into contact.

Jim's eyes.... almost as soft as his lips, sensual, yielding. Or his soul, a resting place, a safe harbor.

Jim's eyes... almost as hard as his lips, demanding, taking. Or his soul, with its determined purpose, and uncompromising will.

As much a contradiction as sehlat and le-matya. Eyes and lips, lips and soul. Soft and hard, and filled with promise.

Moments of silent communion, and then Kirk uttered a deep sigh. "I've got to go. And your briefing is in," he glanced at the chronometer, "eighteen minutes."

Before his reluctance to do so could manifest itself, Spock stepped back. "Yes. It would be uncomfortable to be found in a locked room with my captain."

Kirk half-laughed as he tugged at his tunic. "Yeah. People might begin to talk. So, off I go to the bridge." Again he walked towards the door, and again he turned before he reached it. "You know," he said, his voice conversational, as if he were talking to anyone, "I meant what I said before. After this mission, somehow I'm going to get you back to the Lox'theneth'nar and the colonists, and if Komack doesn't like it then we'll take leave to do it. We're going to find out exactly what happened to you. And then we're going to find a cure."

"If that is what you require."

"Oh, no." Jim's voice was infinitely soft. "That's not what I require. I require... you." With a swish of the door closing, he was gone.

Spock sat down and attempted to focus on the glowing words on the screen, to prepare for the briefing. He knew that it took him at least fifteen seconds, or 67 Vulcan dranaths, to bring his mind from stark emotion to concentration for data assimilation, but he logically ascribed that problem to the human who was even now in the turbolift heading for the bridge.
As Jim had said, the cause was sufficient.
Chapter 13

The view from seventy-five meters up in the air promised to be exhilarating. Kirk planted his feet more firmly within the netting, stood up carefully, and looked his fill. On the Enterprise he never felt claustrophobic, but his heart sang now with the faraway horizon.

Every direction Kirk looked there were the tall tree tops of one of the two remaining Gabrielan rainforests. Lush green and grey serrated leaves waved with the gentle breeze, or possibly with the motion of hidden animals. A bright blue-green sky, dominated by a white-yellow sun bigger than Earth's, arched over the undulations of hidden hills and valleys thickly covered with vegetation. In the distance there was the faint whirring of the air transport that had brought them here, but as it faded the sounds of the forest began again. Birds sounded the same here as they sounded in the Amazon, or the few remaining strips of African jungle on Earth, with their "caw-caw" claiming territory, with their "chi-wip, chi-wip" calling for a mate.

Chuman si Chuman, the Gabrielan botanist whom Kirk had now known for five days, called from where he crouched and clung to a support strap to the captain's right. "Be careful how you step, Captain. The Great God may not be watching over you." The new universal translator implant was working perfectly, even capturing the perfectly annoying tone of voice.

Kirk responded with a scornful snort he barely managed to keep quiet, and a few decisive steps forward. The artificial surface on which he, five Gabrielans and three other Enterprise people were perched was like a man-made island floating on a sea of verdant creation. The platform took on the gentle motion of the green life beneath it, and pitched and rolled just like a ship in calm waters. Kirk stopped when he reached the edge and widened his stance a bit further for balance.

The specially-designed, heavy-duty aircar had dropped the platform and its living cargo over the top canopy of the forest, gently setting it down on the uppermost branches. Then there had been a loud *sprong!* as the cable attaching them to the underside of the 'car sprang free, and the sounds of civilization had retreated. After what he had endured of the Gabrielan's wintry society the past five days, Kirk was more than happy to see it go.

The platform itself was made up of thick woven fibers in a crosshatched design, with its rectangular boundary defined by an inflated wall of clear plastic about a meter and a half high. The fibers, as wide as a large man's hand, intersected every half-meter or so, leaving plenty of room for the very top of the rainforest environment to peek through for everyone to see. Even as he glanced down, Kirk noticed a caterpillar-like insect emerge from its hiding place under a leaf and crawl over his boot.

Spock and Hunyady were already on their hands and knees, peering between branch and stem. Uhura, who had expressed quick delight at the opportunity to see "a real, unspoiled jungle," had positioned herself near the balloon-like wall and peered over the edge, showing that she was as unaffected by heights as her captain was. She flashed him a quick smile. "Isn't this spectacular?"

He smiled a small smile in return, happy with her happiness. His own emotions were harder to define. Pleasure at the sheer beauty of nature spread out about them, relief that for at least a few hours they had escaped the depressing monochromatic Gabrielan cities, the lack of progress at the conference, and the most obvious indicators of the Gabrielan society that so infuriated him. And worry, of course, because against his better judgment he hadn't said a word when Spock had elected to come along on this expedition.

*He deserves a break too,* Kirk told himself. The conference had adjourned at mid-day, so the first
The distance in the tone had hurt, even if their words had been exchanged in front of others. Still, Kirk had understood his lover's need to reassert his independence. And perhaps he had miscalculated, and Spock possessed a greater tolerance to the cold than Kirk had thought. For whatever reason, Spock never wore any of the outer clothing, and the captain could only guess at the underwear. They hadn't shared a bed in four nights, had not exchanged two words in privacy. The first officer hadn't given him one overt reason for official concern, he'd performed his duties flawlessly, but that hadn't stopped Kirk from waking in the middle of the Gabrielan night and automatically reaching for someone whom he knew still needed him.

And each time he'd awakened in the solitary darkness, he'd rolled over on the air mattress favored by the Gabrielans and buried his face in the folded-up sheets used in this culture as pillows. He'd breathed in, remembering how Spock-scent lingered on his sheets on the ship. He'd breathed out, and tried to stop himself from wanting so much. It was so much worse for Spock than it was for him. Spock had lost almost everything that made him a Vulcan. Kirk had only lost... the touch of his bondmate's mind.

They hadn't melded as frequently as either of them had wanted. Kirk's humanity and the need he had to rest after each deep mental encounter had prevented them from indulging in the golden light every day. Sometimes, they had gone weeks without the meld. Now Kirk cursed his weakness and thought of all the times they hadn't had together.

He felt as if he had lost everything. It was a persistent sorrow that wouldn't ever go away. It was an ache in his soul. But that was fanciful language that any scientist would dismiss. All right then, the ends of the broken bond hurt. They vibrated in his mind. The Deltan drug that Bones had given him had only done half the job, he supposed, because he still felt so... disconnected. Hungry.

On the second night he'd abandoned the pillow and looked for a long time at the shadows that engulfed the ceiling. Who was he trying to kid? Even if the Deltan drug had worked perfectly, he'd still have this ache. He missed Spock, and he worried about him. The Vulcan was just down the curved hallway, just two walls away, hopefully sleeping, but to Kirk it felt like he was a hundred parsecs removed.

Damn this assignment that kept them apart when they needed to be together. Damn Komack for sending them out on this insignificant, useless mission doomed to failure, and damn himself for failing to acknowledge how essential it was to get back to the colony-ship. He'd spent so much time denying, and focusing on Michaela instead. Somehow, he should have found a way to force the admiral to send them back to the Lox'theneth'nar. That was where all the answers were. He was sure of it.

But they weren't warping towards the asteroid-ship, they were on Gabriela, and that was that. Kirk only entertained the thought of creeping down the hall to his lover's room for a moment. Just so he could check on the Vulcan, make sure he was enduring the raw weather and the colder scientists all right. Not for anything else.

So Kirk slept restlessly each night, and tried to be as controlled as the best Vulcan. He substituted
worry for yearning.

He was probably being overprotective. That included his worry that Spock's equilibrium problems would return to cause trouble here in the jungle, seventy-five meters and a long fall from the ground. Surely his executive officer would never have come along if there was a potential danger for him. Not even Spock's vaunted curiosity would....

Remembering just how wrapped up in a project his scientist-friend could become, Kirk anxiously looked over at where Spock was standing, serenely taking readings with his tricorder and riding the swell of jungle-waves with equanimity.

"It is a beautiful location, is it not, Captain?" Chuman si Chuman asked gravely, his typically long Gabrielan face seeming even longer because of the black goatee he affected. Of all the Gabrielans they had met, Kirk found the razor-thin Chuman to be the most tolerable, and even he often set the captain's nerves on edge. "You understand why we must do everything we can to ensure its continued existence. If the Derkheen continue with their clearing efforts, the forest in the south will be gone within a decade, and this will be the only one left on the planet. We must learn all we can of its secrets, so we can help this rainforest to grow. It is clear that the Great God would wish us to do so."

It had been said the first day of the conference, and the next day and the next, and this morning, and in the aircar on the way, and now here in the tree tops. Kirk thought he got the message. The Gabrielans had to be one of the most consistently annoying species he had ever met; they were all either as didactic and precise as Chuman or as argumentative as the Tellerites.

"Yes, honored Chuman." The correct form of address, he had learned, for the "twos" with a red triangular tattoo on the left side of their foreheads, and with embroidery on the left side of the sleeveless brown tunics that almost everyone from the higher castes wore. "However, it seems imperative that both rainforests be maintained for the sake of your planet's climate. Don't you think efforts should be made to save the southern forest? Don't you think your people and the Derkheen need to talk?"

He'd been asking that question in one form or another since the first day of the conference, when he'd been introduced to the group of politically powerful men who ruled this planet. The chairman of the ruling committee, Hivlen fa Hivlen, a "One" with a green circular tattoo in the center of his forehead, had tried to explain to Kirk about the Derkheen.

The leader was a tall, powerfully built man, ten centimeters taller than Spock, with a slightly fleshy look about his cheeks that suggested only an iron will held off obesity. He was dark-haired as all Gabrielans were, and he had startlingly green eyes. Most would have said he was a handsome man with a forceful personality and strength in his voice; Kirk had taken an instant dislike to him, and had had to strain to be diplomatic before the man's abrasive surety.

Now, five days later, the captain's dislike had solidified into a suspicion that Hivlen's political group had voted against seeking help from the Federation, and that he was conducting the negotiations with the hopes that they would fail. It seemed that a large minority of the ruling committee would have preferred that the twenty year ban on official contact with the Federation had remained in place, and Kirk was never sure how genuine was the information he was given, or how reliable the cooperation.

But one thing about the Gabrielans was certain; one political party or another, high caste or low, they wouldn't consider demeaning themselves by speaking with the other race that inhabited their planet.
"Captain, you are ignorant. Don't you think I would negotiate with the Derkheen if I could?" Hivlen had asked brusquely, displaying his typically condescending attitude, and making Kirk want to grind his teeth with the effort to remain properly diplomatic in return. "We tried that once before, more than four hundred years ago, and we learned that it is impossible to deal with them. Impossible! They do not know the Great God. They do not share the same values as we do, and yet they contaminated us with their own ways. Every caste was influenced, even the twos and the threes. The nines I could understand, but even the twos! So we banished them, and with good reason. How else to keep our society the way it is, clean of contamination? If I grant the Derkheen leaders legitimacy by negotiating with them, that will be the wedge they need. There will be no more Gabriela. No. I will not consider it. You will not speak of it again."

It had sounded like justification of the status quo to Kirk, typical of an entrenched politician, but he hadn't said it. And despite Hivlen's prohibition, he hadn't stopped trying to find a way to bring the two races together, either.

"There must always be a chasm between ourselves and those who are always apart," intoned one of the junior botanists, a "four" who attended the second day's lunch. "How can our society continue with them as unclean influences? We would not be ourselves."

That sounded like a well-indoctrinated man who believed the party-line

"The Derks?" asked the woman who swept their rooms each day. She was one of the very few women they met, and all of those were of the lowest castes. The crew speculated that the rest, unseen, were kept in harem-like conditions with the children. "Those scum. They're worse than the nines. When they got loose twenty years ago," (the universal translator easily converted "six ra'il" to a Federation time frame) "we lost my great aunt and uncle to them. Course, they were so far away we hardly felt it. They lived on the frontier, down by the border, though we told them not to. Too many nines and eights down there. No place for a self-respecting seven to live. They should have listened to my grandfather. Nobody can live near the Derks without being lost, not even a two, so the stories go. That's why we have the closed zone now. It's enough space to keep us safe, the Good God willing."

That sounded like a woman who allowed fear and prejudice to guide her thinking.

No, the Gabrielans wouldn't consider talking with the Derkheen, and that frustrated the captain of the Enterprise, who saw it as the only solution to a problem that didn't look as if it could be solved by the scientists alone. It wasn't science that had saved Earth and Andoria and other worlds from their environmental crises, it had been an understanding of the planet's ecology, and an adjustment of behavior to match the needs of the planet. Why couldn't the Gabrielans understand that?

As Kirk looked out over the lushness of the rainforest tree tops all about him, he wondered what the southern continent looked like. From orbit, there had been vast expanses of parched-looking yellow and burnt brown in the interior, with close-up views showing the green of the forest that dominated the southernmost reaches. Not as fertile, not as hospitable, not as comfortable a place to call home as the resource-rich northern continent.

Not that the northern cities where most of the Gabrielan people lived were attractive. Not a hint of green space among the urban, concrete sprawl. And deep shadows were cast everywhere by the tall buildings, creating canyons of the walkways where the wind swirled and the sun rarely touched.

And the people matched their environment. Grey, rigid like the skyscrapers that held against the northern winds, and controlled. Everyone knew their place in Gabrielan society, rank was dictated by the marks on the forehead and the clothing the people were "permitted" to wear.
It wasn't a society that Kirk especially wanted to save; injustice and inequality seemed built-in to this culture where a man's caste determined his ability to work, how he was spoken to, the home he lived in and the dreams he was permitted to have. And the worst part of it was that the lower castes seemed to accept their situation with equanimity, as part of some hell they were required by their religion to endure. Almost every mistreatment of the helpless was accompanied by the intonation of a religious phrase. "It is God's will." Even in just the short time they'd been on this planet, Kirk had heard that too often.

Kirk couldn't understand it, but he knew well the dangers of transmitting human values onto a non-human culture. Just because he saw injustice and raged against it didn't mean that others would. Almost every day, it seemed, he had to force himself to think of IDIC.

On the first day, while Spock and the science staff consulted with the local scientists, Kirk had been invited to tour local hospitals with McCoy. He didn't let his unease in spending hours in the physician's company prevent him from agreeing and doing his duty.

"You will see what the Derkheen have done to us," Hivlen had pronounced. "Then when we speak of the Federation and what you offer, you will understand why we were forced to ask for help."

Kirk saw too much. The ravages of the cancer that afflicted the Gabrielans without regard for caste were not pretty. It ate away at the skin like leprosy, a disease that had resisted all human attempts to cure it completely until the twenty-second century. The mortality rate, Kirk was told by the doctor who hovered over the bed of a "Two" whose tattoo was sliced by tatters of skin, was sixty-two percent within four years, even given the application of the newly-formulated drug, amershen.

The tour continued, and their guide, a doctor who was a high-ranking "One," led the captain and McCoy away from the brightly lit private rooms, with their array of medical machinery and the solicitous attention of attendants, to another section of the hospital. This one, on the fourth and not the eighth floor, held open wards of about twenty beds each.

The cases here were even worse. Even McCoy, seasoned through death and injury as only a Starfleet doctor could see them, found it difficult to walk up to a bed and witness the suffering of a man obviously dying. His limbs were hidden by the sheet drawn up to his neck, but his face was so disfigured that he was almost unrecognizable as a Gabrielan. "He is not expected to live long," the doctor explained, "so I thought you should see one near the edge of the great dividing. His circle has already prepared for the separation."

Another mention of a "circle." The Enterprise delegation had already learned that each circle was similar to a family unit, and that from nine to twenty-seven beings, all male, were part of the circle. Spock speculated that this was also the expression of the purported empathy, but the crew could not ask directly.

McCoy's medical tricorder whirled as he took readings of the patient's condition. "How long since he's contracted the disease?"

"Just two years," the doctor replied.

"Then his resistance was lower than the man we saw before?"

"No," the doctor shook his head. "He is a five. See?" He stepped forward and touched the faint markings of where the caste tattoo used to be on the man's forehead.

McCoy's forehead wrinkled as he frowned. "So? What's being a five got to do with it? Is there some physical difference among the castes that I'm not familiar with?"
The doctor was puzzled, but was not about to brook any implied criticism. "Of course there is no
difference," he said impatiently. "He is a five. Not of the first trine, a One, a two or a three. So
naturally he doesn't receive the same care. It is God's will."

It took a moment for that to sink in. Predictably, Kirk stepped in before McCoy had a chance to
explode. "You mean you don't use the same treatments here in the ward as you do," his finger
pointed skyward towards where they'd just been, "for the patients in the private rooms?" He tried
hard to keep the incredulity out of his voice.

"Of course not." The man implied they were idiots for asking. "Only the first trine receive the
amershens. It is too costly to produce to allow the entire population access to it. Surely the
Federation has similar ways to determine the distribution of expensive medicine?"

With a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, Kirk realized that the man had neatly skewered the
Terran, and therefore a large part of the Federation system that was primarily based on free
Enterprise and capitalism. Those with money received. Those without suffered. Ideals of free
access to medical care for all were still only that on many planets; ideals.

But McCoy did not match his captain's silence. "We don't hand out life and death according to
some arbitrary ranking!" McCoy exclaimed. "What's the mortality rate here," his outraged eyes
swept the beds around them, "in this ward?"

The doctor was taken aback. "I don't know. Of course I don't care for the second trine. I will ask."
He consulted with another man who was not wearing the double-embroidered tunic of the highest
rank, but who still seemed to be in charge. He showed obvious respect for his betters, with a bowed
head and a subservient tug to his ear. This man had the "four" marking on his forehead.

Their guide reported back to them. "The aide says eighty-five percent in three years."

"Impossible! How could you allow that? You could save these people, at least ease their suffering
and give them a fighting chance for life. Why don't you...."

Kirk stepped between them before McCoy's growing belligerence provoked an equally
impassioned reaction. "This is the Gabrielan society, Doctor, and it's right according to the way
these people see it." It was almost impossible for him to say the words, but he wasn't going to
jeopardize the entire mission on the very first day. They had to learn more, understand better.
IDIC, Kirk told himself.

"Right!" McCoy exclaimed, and he swung to face his captain. "That's not the way I heard you
talking about the Derkheen and their situ--."

"That is enough." Command steel was in Kirk's voice. He didn't want to use it, not when he and
McCoy were still without their personal rapport, but he had no choice. Though McCoy glared at
him, he visibly calmed.

"All right," McCoy growled. "But this isn't what I expected to see. Is there more?" he asked the
Gabrielan. "I suppose next we have to visit the ward with the last trine, where the patients will be
on the floor on pallets."

"No," the doctor answered shortly. "Of course not. The last trine is permitted to remain in their
dwellings, to find final peace in the arms of their circle."

Now Captain and CMO found unity. Together they stared at the man, equally horrified. "You
mean they aren't given any formal medical care at all?" Kirk found his voice.
"They are prepared for the journey," he was answered. "The rest of the circle bids good-bye and adjusts for the separation. Thankfully it is not a great separation because they are last trine." A shrug of the shoulder. "What more is needed?"

There wasn't any answer, so Kirk asked a question instead. "Do you know if the Derkheen are also suffering from the ozone depletion? Do they also get this terrible cancer?"

The man actually smiled. "I hope so." Then, "Come. Let us go."

How to respond to such callousness? There was nothing he could say, so Kirk turned back and prepared to follow the doctor. But not before catching his companion's eye and sharing a long moment of equally-distressed communion. Meeting McCoy's blue gaze was a surprise; it felt as if they hadn't looked at one another, really looked, in a long time. There hadn't been much they had agreed upon lately, and it seemed quite odd to feel the first moment of equilibrium in their relationship on this alien world.

They turned back the way they had come, and passed a bed where an attendant was just turning back the sheets over a patient. He held a tube of ointment in his hand, and was probably preparing to rub it into the man's skin. As the *Enterprise* officers walked by, the attendant dropped the medicine.

It skittered by Kirk's feet, and he bent down to pick it up, then walked over to the bed and handed it to the astonished worker. "Here," he said, and then he couldn't help but look down into the face of the patient. This man wasn't nearly as bad off as the other one. There were just a few streaks of red running down one cheek. Death was probably still months away for him.

He wanted to say *We may find a way to help you*, to give some hope. Federation medicine could probably find a way to at least prolong the life-span of the victims of the cancer, could certainly ease their symptoms and their pain. But even if a treaty were enacted, would the benefits of the contact trickle down past the first three castes? He doubted it.

The attendant was looking over his shoulder to the "One." Consternation was in his eyes. Kirk turned to find the doctor regarding him angrily. "You should not have done that!" he growled. "You are a One. They are to help you, not you to help them!"

"He only picked up the tube," McCoy protested.

"A One never serves outside his trine. And the eights and nines are the ones who pick up and clean, who carry and labor. It is not fitting for a One to demean himself so. He has other talents, and to usurp the talents of the eights and nines is putting himself outside the natural order of things."

Kirk clenched his fists. "You mean it's natural for the lowest castes to... to... mop a floor? To act as a servant?"

"Of course. Just as it is natural for a One to lead and study and know. Are the Federation worlds so different? I think I begin to understand why we closed our skies to you before. I was in favor of your coming here, because I have seen too many of my patients suffer and die. We cannot afford to lose so many of our leaders. But perhaps I understand the arguments against your coming better now."

IDIC, Kirk reminded himself. IDIC.

The reminder didn't help much. As the days went on Kirk discovered that he could not force
himself to think well of the Gabrielans. Maybe the Derkheen were better off where they were, 
sequestered from the casual cruelty and the slavery of rank, free to develop their own society. That 
night, before he slept, he stared at the ceiling of the solitary room he'd been given to honor his 
"One" status, and he wondered what kind of lives the Derkheen were leading. Better, he imagined, 
even in the harsher land of the south. Especially since they had escaped the reservations twenty 
years ago. They must have chafed against the injustice. He could understand that.

Kirk found himself wishing he were negotiating with the Derkheen and not the Gabrielans.

But he wasn't. He was standing on a most unusual jungle boat atop a rainforest, and there was only 
a day and a half to reach some sort of beginning compromise with the Gabrielans before the 
Enterprise was scheduled to leave orbit. Kirk forced his attention back to Chuman si Chuman, the 
Gabrielan by his side.

Kirk had almost forgotten his remark about negotiating with the Derkheen by the time the botanist 
broke the silence between them. "If you were a Gabrielan, Captain, perhaps you would understand. 
Even the guards by the border, who are all fours, they cannot tolerate being near the Derkheen. 
They are truly the lowest of the low. We must rotate those personnel who come in contact with the 
unclean. Three months is as long as we can stand to be near them."

Kirk felt like rolling his eyes. Prejudice of this sort had its basis in misunderstanding, in his 
experience. If only he could get the two races talking, everyone would benefit....

But he couldn't, and it was wise to concentrate on what could be accomplished in the rest of their 
stay here. At least they would have plenty of data to transmit to the next Federation team who 
would come to the planet, far more than the Enterprise people had initially had to work with.

It was a beautiful day and a beautiful setting. Kirk made a conscious attempt to relax, and 
appreciate the moment for what it was. The white-yellow sun warmed him, banishing the lingering 
cold from the Gabrielan city, a light breeze blew against his cheek, carrying the humid smells of 
life and the sounds of living. It was all so unique, serene, interesting. Better to gain some serenity 
of his own before he went back to the conference table with the annoying Gabrielans.

Before he could focus on anything else up in their artificial aerie, Kirk's attention was captured by 
Lieutenant Hunyady, who was crouched over something she'd found poking up from the living 
carpet of green beneath them. "Mister Spock," she called. "Come look at this."

Curious, Kirk slowly picked his way across the woven mat. Before he arrived, his first officer was 
already down on one knee and reaching for whatever exotic specimen Hunyady had discovered.

"It's got to be another case of Roddenberry's Principal of Parallel Evolution," the young officer 
expounded with enthusiasm. "See, it looks just like a cultivated hyacinth from Earth. Look at these 
sword-like leaves, and the multiple blossoms on these long spikes. It's from the family--." 

"Liliaceae," Spock concluded. "Yes, I am familiar with the Terran flower." Hunyady didn't know 
enough to interpret the clipped tone and slightly pursed lips, but Kirk did. He moved to his first 
officer's side and knelt down next to him. Why did their special reminder of the mental union they 
no longer shared have to grow on this obscure planet, and why had they somehow come to the 
extact spot to find it?

"Except for the fact that it's growing on a vine and not from a bulb, they look the same." Hunyady 
went on, oblivious. "Isn't it interesting that we should find a Terran flower that's been modified by 
centuries of deliberate breeding halfway across the galaxy?"
The lieutenant bent over and sniffed at the flower. "It even smells like an Earth hyacinth. Beautiful." With a bright smile, she lifted the vine and pushed a blossom towards the first officer, obviously hoping to share a pleasurable experience with him. After a moment's hesitation, Spock obliged. He bent over and inhaled audibly.

Kirk knew that the flower couldn't have the same aromatic, wonderful pungency as it did in the melds. That had been one of the things he had found difficult to understand, that the Vulcan's sensory perceptions could be so tied in to the telepathy he'd lost. But it was obviously true. He didn't think he'd ever forget the way Spock had revealed that even Kirk's voice had changed. Such heavy, hopeless sorrow....

But here in the treetops Spock's reaction was well-concealed. Hunyady didn't have a clue as to the pain her find must be causing, and Kirk stirred restlessly, resenting her, resenting her well-intentioned attempts on behalf of his lover, resenting every over-confident young officer....

He looked about even as he heard Spock say, "Indeed. The blossom's aroma is memorable. And your find is most peculiar. One would have thought the n-natural flower from Asia Minor would be the p-parallel, not the cultivated specimen. A unique discovery, Lieutenant."

"Not so unique. Look at this," Kirk said triumphantly, and he pushed aside a broad leaf that was concealing a red and yellow beauty. "This looks just like another flower that I know."

"A columbine," Hunyady almost squealed with delight. Apparently, botany was a subject that she favored. "I can't believe it. Look at how both the sepals and the petals are colored. And the tube-like spurs on the side."

"Come now, Lieutenant," Kirk chided. "'Tube-like spurs?' You're not writing a report now. When I was growing up, we called this the eagle's flower. See how those red spurs look like the claws of an eagle? They're red because they've drawn blood."

"A somewhat bloodthirsty image for a young boy, Captain," Spock said dryly. Regardless of what he was feeling, the Vulcan maintained composure and dignity before the young woman.

"Yes, it was, wasn't it?" Kirk said, directing a bland look at his first officer. "But I wasn't always so bloodthirsty as a child, Mister Spock. Sometimes I was positively... considerate."

"Indeed?" An eyebrow accented the Vulcan's skepticism.

"Uh-huh. There's a legend associated with the columbine, at least one that my mother told me. Part of it is that lions would eat the flower in the spring to gain extra strength and courage. But that wouldn't work if they went off looking for a flower to eat themselves. It had to be brought to them by a friend. Only then could the strength be transferred."

Kirk looked down at the flower in his hand, and kept his voice carefully even, non-committal. He wouldn't have chosen to speak like this in front of Hunyady, but neither could he ignore the opportunity to give support when support was needed. "When I was about, oh, nine or ten years old, I gave my friend Len three of these. Nothing happened, of course, but at the time I thought that was his fault, that he wasn't worthy of the legend. I haven't given anyone else a columbine to eat."

He looked up and gazed into the eyes of the friend who bore invisible wounds. "Although I'd like to."

There was a short silence, filled only by the sound of leaves moving in the wind, and a solitary bird cawing in the distance. Hunyady looked from one to the other of her senior officers, suddenly comprehending that there were undercurrents of meaning flowing between them. The friendship
between these two, it was so intense.

"It would not be proper to remove the flower from its natural environment, Captain," Spock finally said. "It deserves to live."

Kirk released the bloom and stood up. "As do we all, Mister Spock."

"Indeed." Spock stood as well and addressed Hunyady. "Take tricorder readings and physical measurements, but do not disturb the flora." Then he turned to his captain and the two of them walked off a few steps, just enough to be almost out of earshot of the young lieutenant. "Are you aware of the Terran legend of Hyacinthus, sir?"

Kirk shook his head, and questioned with a glance.

Spock tucked the tricorder and his hands behind his back and looked out over the tree-tops. "I do not subscribe to superstition. However, it has been impossible for me not to contemplate the applicability of this legend to our own situation. Hyacinthus was a youth who was beloved by the god of the sun. One day when they were playing with a discus, the god miscalculated, and accidentally killed him. The god created the flower from the blood of the youth, as a sign of his eternal lamentation."

The captain frowned. He didn't understand this response to his own attempt at comfort. All this time with the symbol of the flower between them, representing to Kirk the eternal spring-time wonder of the mental communication they had shared, and now Spock chose to tell him the pessimistic legend. He opened his mouth to protest ---

---when a strangled scream cut through the air.

Everyone rushed to one side of the web to see who had fallen off. Through the mass of crushed and broken foliage, Chuman's assistant who had helped with menial chores was barely visible. A glimpse of skin here, a movement there provided enough clues to reveal that he must be dangling by his arms from a tree branch some twenty-five meters below them, still far, far above the forest floor.

"It is Turtrata ba Turtrata," Chuman said, breathlessly. He leaned over further, his neat beard brushing against the colorless plastic of the balloon-boundary. "Turtrata," he called. "Can you climb back up?"

There was a wild rustling from below as the young man must have made an attempt to bring his legs up around the branch. "I can't," he called out. His voice echoed eerily in the silence, as all the sounds of the jungle had disappeared. "I can't do it. My leg is hurt. Help me."

N'raun si N'raun, another scientist with the embroidered vest and the red mark that denoted his high "two" status, turned away in disgust. "These nines. They aren't good for anything. He won't help himself because he's afraid like a child. Leave him to fall or climb back up as he can."

"You know I can't do that." Chuman caught N'raun's arm and swung him around. "Even though he is the least worthy, still he is of my group; he has served me for many years. I will feel his pain if he falls all the way."

N'raun hissed, "Chuman, you should not speak of it," while glancing sideways at Kirk. "We are not in the temple."

"Don't be a fool, N'raun," grated back the botanist, undeterred. "Surely you have been able to tell that these are all of the first trine, even their lowliest member? The way their One speaks to them?
It is surely allowed. I say that if Turtrata falls and dies, my group back in the city will feel it, and they are engaged in important work and should not be disturbed."

"Oh, all right," N'raun's consent was grudging. "If you want to go down there and get him, fine. But don't ask me to do it."

"Then I must." Chuman, suddenly nervous, glanced over the edge. "But I'm not sure I can. It will be a long climb down, and an even longer climb back up. And suppose he cannot move because of his leg?"

"Fine. Then leave him be. It does not matter to me."

"But it must matter to me. My group members should not be disturbed, and we would all feel the echoes of his death since I am so close to him and there has been no preparation at the temple. But then again...."

Exasperated, Kirk hitched one leg over the inflated wall. "By the time you decide he'll let go and fall. I'll go after him."

"As will I." Predictably, Spock stepped forward.

"No, you don't."

"And how do you propose to carry the man back to the net? He weighs at least 100 kilograms. That will not be a burden to my Vulcan strength."

Kirk's "I can do it" was interrupted by the frightened man's wail. "Help! I can't hold on much longer."

Utter frustration crossed the captain's face, and with the first indication of indecision, Spock hitched himself up onto the plastic and disappeared down into the jungle. Kirk's jaw tightened, but he moved fast to follow his first officer.

This far up in the canopy, the trees were spread in small branches greedily seeking the sun; each carried lush foliage but they were insubstantial when compared to a man's, or a Vulcan's weight. Kirk had not traveled two meters down from the platform before the foothold he'd been depending upon broke.

But there was another, stronger branch further down, so Kirk lithely directed his fall towards it. That limb held for five seconds, long enough for him to spot another possible perch two meters below him. He reached it, clinging with both arms and legs like a monkey, and looked for another stronger branch even as he felt the one he was depending upon breaking.

His descent for the first fifteen meters was almost as fast as Turtrata's must have been, before finally, gasping, he grabbed hold of a heftier limb. He grasped the wood as he fell past it with both hands and executed a perfect swing up and over and finally onto the branch, with both legs drawn up to take the force of his impact. He crouched, breathing hard and peripherally noticing how the leaves shook with each inhalation. He looked for Spock.

The first officer was lower than he was by only a short distance, but Kirk could barely see him for all the vegetation between him. "Spock," he called. "You all right?"

"Affirmative. We seem to have miscalculated the rate of our descent."

Kirk sent his gaze to the heavens. Vulcan understatement.
"Can you see Turtrata?"

"Negative. However, I estimate that we will reach a less vegetated portion of the jungle growth in a few more meters. I believe that is where he is."

Kirk tried calling, and was immediately answered. A timorous voice sounded from below them. "Over here. I've fallen down to another limb, but I'm not hanging from my arms any more. I don't think I'll fall. But my leg hurts. It might be broken."

"Okay," the captain said half to himself as he loosened his grip and prepared to climb further down. "Let's g---."

The last word was ripped from his mouth as he fell far sooner, and faster, than he had intended.

But he didn't fall far. No sooner did Kirk realize that he was out of control than he banged with an "Oomphf!" directly onto the soft, heated flesh of his first officer.

Miraculously, the branch Spock was on held their combined weights. Kirk quickly slid off the thin form and onto the other end of the limb, leaving the two men facing one another like two startled possums nose to nose, clinging with their arms, and with their legs wrapped around the wood.

"Sorry," Kirk panted. "Lost my hold."

Spock regarded him from just centimeters away with a glint in his eye. "I believe an appropriate response might be 'You must stop dropping in like this'."

The captain gaped at his lover, and a grin slowly spread across his face. "You're crazy," he chuckled. "First you're talking about hyacinths and death and now you're making jokes hanging from a tree. I'm tangled up with a crazy Vulcan."

Spock reached out and plucked a leaf from his hair. "You are tangled with Gabrielan vegetation." He raised up cautiously and looked over Kirk's shoulder. "That way appears to be a safe route."

"Okay. But first...." Kirk leaned forward and dropped a quick peck on the Vulcan's nose. "I love you. Did you know that? This is the first time we've been alone together since we beamed down."

"Indeed. You seem to have gone to quite drastic lengths to arrange an assignation, Captain."

Still chuckling, Kirk swung around and started a careful descent.

The trees were stronger at this level, and it wasn't long before they broke through most of the obscuring vegetation. They looked down and saw Turtrata safely seated on a sturdy branch.

And six men standing far below at the base of a tree looking up at them. Unmistakably, the men carried firearms, long, metal tubes whose purpose was almost universal among sentient races in the galaxy. Projectile weapons almost always looked the same when invented by humanoids.

"Captain, do you--."

"I see them. Maybe they're just hunting. I thought Chuman said there weren't any Gabrielans living in this jungle besides a few scientists?"

"That is true. However, notice what the men are wearing. Unless I am mistaken, only two of them have on Gabrielan clothing."

The four were shorter than their two companions, and they wore brightly colored shirts and
trousers, not the tunic and flowing pants favored by the Gabrielans. "The Derkheen?" Kirk questioned.

"Possible. Likely."

"A chance for contact," Kirk breathed. "Maybe we can talk to them--." But even as he spoke one of the Derkheen raised the long weapon he carried and aimed it into the air. A muffled bang and the whipping of something traveling very fast through the leaves made both officers duck.

"Stop!" Kirk called out. "Stop! We won't hurt you. We want to talk."

"Kerzeen san!" Spock shouted. Predictably, he had learned the rudiments of the language. But they didn't stop. A few of them let loose with a whoop. It sounded like exclamations of excitement, maybe of delight, and a moment later all six of them were shooting. Only a few of the shots reached as high as where the two officers were perched, but Turtrata cringed as gunshot hailed all about him.

"We've got to get him out of there," Kirk panted, and started forward. But before he could move to even one more limb, Turtrata of the ninth caste stiffened, and fell soundlessly to the floor of the forest. The thump! when he landed was clearly audible even forty meters up in the tree. There was a wail from far overhead: Chuman. The gunshots stopped as the six, laughing, went over to inspect their catch.

"He has broken his neck," Spock reported, his tone expressionless. "We cannot help him."

Kirk twisted on his branch. "But we can damn well find out what's going on." He made as if to climb down, but Spock's strong arm shot out and stopped him.

"Jim, that would not be wise. We are not armed, and they have already shown their hostile intent."

Kirk shook off the restraint, but he didn't move. He said heatedly, "Those people have just killed someone. I thought there was strict separation between the Derkheen and the Gabrielans. That's what we've been told, anyway. And we've been told other things, like this is a peaceful society. But those people down there killed. And they liked it. They were laughing. What's going on here?"

"I would also like the answers to those questions, but we are not likely to receive them by offering ourselves up for target practice."

As if to accent his words, a bullet whizzed by Spock's head and he flinched in involuntary reflex. Apparently, the six had adjusted for the further distance.

Kirk didn't wait for the second shot. "Let's get out of here." The two of them scrambled back up the way they had come. Climbing up wasn't as easy as climbing down, but in just seconds they were out of range and the shooting stopped. Soon Kirk could see glimpses of the underside of the platform, which he used to keep moving in the right direction. It would have been easy to lose themselves in the lushness. But at least without urgency dogging their efforts, they were able to pick their way up carefully using the sturdiest branches.

Kirk paused as he grabbed hard around a limb and looked down to the ground. Through dappled
sunlight and swaying vegetation, he could barely make out the fallen form of the man they'd tried to save. But he couldn't see Turtrata's murderers.

"Spock," he called. The Vulcan was just above him. "Have they left? Can you see them?"

Obligingly the Vulcan turned his head to look down. But the muscles around his eyes tightened as he squinted, and he drew in a deep, ragged breath. His head swayed first to the right, then to the left; then his body started to sway as well.

Kirk witnessed it all, and just as those long fingers began to loosen their grip he shimmied upwards like a suddenly purposeful and very agile monkey. He grabbed for his Vulcan even as Spock began to fall away from the supporting limb, wrapped his arms around the slender torso and jerked them both back against the "v" of branch and tree trunk. They came to rest spoon-fashion, chest against rigid spine, safe for the moment. Kirk ignored the pain of a twig pressed into his side, and blessed the solid wood behind his back.

Spock panted heavily in his arms. "I...I..."

"You're dizzy," Kirk accused. "Damn it, I thought you said you were all right."

"I... thought..."

Kirk tightened his hold around hot flesh, and tightened his hold on his temper as well. He knew he shouldn't have let Spock come to the jungle.... "Shhh, it's all right. Relax a little. Take a minute. See if you feel any better."

All of Spock's weight sagged back against him, and Kirk braced himself more securely against the tree. One minute, two minutes passed. At least the panting breathlessness was easing. Probably Uhura and Hunyady were peering over the platform, trying to spot them. Kirk didn't care if they did. He leaned forward and rubbed his cheek against the glossy dark hair as a shiver ran over his shoulders. Damn fool Vulcan. A junior officer would have had more sense. Hunyady would have had more sense. He almost hadn't gotten there in time, before Spock fell. If it had taken him just a little longer to find a handhold, if his foot had slipped, if it had taken another two seconds to propel himself upwards, he could have been staring through the leaves at Spock's inert form on the jungle floor. It could have happened.

His arms tightened even more around his love, and wordlessly Spock shifted backwards in their embrace, pressing even closer together. Maybe Spock too was thinking.... He could feel the hummingbird thrumming of the Vulcan heart against his clasping palm. So different from the frightened pounding of his own heart as he contemplated what might have been.

He sucked in air through clenched teeth. No. It never would happen. Never. There was not a universe where he would waste those two seconds, there was no time when he would not be there when Spock needed him. The way Spock was always there for him. He would never lose his Vulcan. They would never lose each other.

Check against hair wasn't enough. He needed more, needed closeness and contact to reaffirm this vow.... Spock turned his head just enough, just as Kirk's lips were seeking.... "I'll never lose you," Kirk whispered against the life of his love's warm breathing.

They sat on a jungle limb, fifty-five meters from the ground, in a silence that stretched into minutes. All the words they hadn't exchanged for days, and now Kirk found no need of them. This was enough.
Then far off an animal chittered. Then a bird cawed, and another. After the disturbance of gunfire and death, the jungle was coming back to life.

Even the fluttering of the Vulcan heart seemed slower now, and Spock was breathing easily. Experimentally, he eased away from Kirk and sat upright. Turned his head one way, then the other, up, then carefully down. A scientist always. "It appears that I am much recovered," a very subdued-sounding Spock said.

"But will the dizziness come back?" Kirk grimly asked. "We've still got some climbing to do."

Spock hitched around in his lap, half turned towards him. "Please believe me. I had thought that the symptoms of disorientation that I had been experiencing had ceased days ago. I would not have endangered you, or myself, otherwise."

"Which means you don't know if or when you'll be dizzy again. Is there anything else I should know?" Kirk asked shrewdly. "What else haven't you been telling me?"

A weighty silence. "I have only now begun to realize the import... Perhaps now is not the appropriate time for that conversation."

Kirk skewered him with a fierce look, equal parts protective and exasperated. "You're right, First Officer. Later. A full report. Now, do you feel up to climbing again?"

This time they went together, with Kirk immediately behind the Vulcan, always in contact, asking frequently, "You okay?"

It seemed like a long time, but was actually only a few minutes before they reached the platform and the anxious, helping hands of Uhura and Hunyady. When they half-fell/ half were pulled over the plastic barrier, they were met by Chuman's ashen face and the far away sound of the aircar coming nearer. The other Gabrielans were quiet as they packed up the gear.

"It was the Derkheen, wasn't it? They were so far away, I wasn't sure." The botanist pleaded, wanting to be told he was wrong.

Kirk nodded abruptly. "We think so. And some of your own people, too. They were laughing."

Chuman seemed to have lost all his composure. He wrung his hands. "I do not know what could be happening. Were they nines? Eights? Who was it who was with them? We will have to re-condition them, perhaps even punish them. Tell me who it was."

Kirk wanted to sit down wearily exactly where he stood, but he didn't. The weight of Chuman's words was even heavier than his leaden legs. "I don't know. I couldn't tell from so far away. Does it matter? Your... servant was just killed. You said he was part of your group. Don't you care that he's dead?"

"Of course! I felt his fear when he passed. I have never gone with anyone to their death before. It was horrible." The pale-faced man closed his eyes and swallowed. "Even though it was just a nine, still it was very difficult to feel his fear."

"Just a nine!" Kirk exploded. "People are people. It doesn't matter what caste they are."

The Gabrielan stared at him. "Yes, it does, Captain Kirk. It does. It is important that we all keep our place, for order, and for fulfillment. We all must accept what the Great God has given us. You don't understand."
For a tired, discouraged moment Kirk pondered how much that sounded like what a little old lady with white hair had told him, what seemed like a long time ago. At the time, Gri-Ta had sounded almost wise, and in the heavy necessity of accepting what had happened to Spock he had found himself reaching for some of her surety in the ways the universe unfolded. But almost the same words that Gri-Ta had uttered sounded ridiculous coming from the mouth of a man he didn't respect, supporting a society that seemed manifestly unjust.

He looked towards the horizon. The aircar was a growing silhouette in the sky and would be there in less than a minute. He wanted to say, "I don't understand your society and I'm not sure I want to," but diplomatic necessity forced him to fold his lips over the words.

*****

The delegation from the Enterprise had been given a suite of rooms for their stay during the conference in the northern capital city. Like almost every other structure in the city of a million, the building where they were housed was a depressingly grey, rectangular column twenty-two stories high. The Gabrielans allowed their higher castes to live closer to the clouds. Only the nines were consigned to ground level accommodations.

The visitors had been honored with nine carefully labeled bedrooms arranged about a common room: the signs said "one," "two," "three," all the way down to nine. On the first day a young man, a three, had pointedly escorted Kirk to the largest room with a single but luxuriously appointed bed and reminded the captain that the castes from the Enterprise were not to mix accommodations. He had looked at Prendel't and Spock, the two obvious non-humans, and directed them to small, barren rooms as far away from the luxury of the One's quarters as possible. Then he'd asked Kirk if Uhura too were a nine and they needed another room made over to suit her station.

"Thank you," Kirk had replied, as calmly as he possibly could. "I'll take care of assigning rooms."

In the end everyone but Kirk shared quarters with one or two others, and the rooms that were so obviously meant for the poorly-regarded lower castes remained empty by unspoken consent. But the Federation delegation spent little time in their beds anyway; they hadn't come to Gabriela to sleep. It was to the common room that they gravitated for briefings and exchange of information, even though it was furnished with unyielding chairs and stiff tables that stood like sentinels over conversations. The furniture was sans cushions or comfort. There was also an audio-only communications system.

When Kirk and Spock returned to their depressingly somber rooms no one else was there. Everyone was out and about in the city, perhaps taking atmospheric samples. Probably McCoy was still touring the hospitals in the area. Hunyady had suggested that she and Uhura help process whatever results they'd been able to obtain from their sojourn atop the jungle, and they'd been dropped off perhaps a kilometer away in the Gabrielan equivalent of a lab. Although not a scientist, Uhura went along, perhaps because of the growing friendship between herself and the young woman, or perhaps because she sensed that her commanding officer, who had kept his lips tightly compressed during the two hour trip back to the city, needed some space.

Spock had been as quiet as Kirk had been. The first officer appeared to be thinking deeply. If she had been asked to interpret that solemn Vulcan visage, Uhura would have said he seemed to be deeply troubled. But with Spock, you never knew.

The two senior officers from the Enterprise were filthy from their attempt to save a lowly ninth caste member, and they needed cleansing before anything else. Kirk swept through the common room and headed for his private bath that was connected to his bedroom, the only private bath in the suite of rooms. He didn't bother to look to see whether Spock was following him; he knew the
Vulcan was headed for the other, communal bathroom. That was fine; Kirk was too charged up and angry to have a rational conversation right now, and he wasn't quite sure what he would do if they confronted one another in privacy.

There was no one else around, and no one would know if he grabbed his Vulcan in a fierce hug, threw him down on the cold, stone floor and made anxious love to him. Kirk's balls felt heavy and his cock lengthened at the thought of what he wanted to do. He cursed his reaction and tried to banish the vision. Now wasn't the time or the place, and Spock surely wouldn't appreciate the combination of anger, possessiveness, worry and frustration that was fueling his lust.

He pulled off his shirt in one fierce motion and bent over the ugly mottled-brown tub to turn on the tap. At least the Gabrielans used hot water in their bathrooms; Kirk had visited plenty of cultures that didn't. Although he would have preferred a shower to the shallow basin that almost wasn't big enough for a grown man.

He kicked off boots and socks, pants and briefs and eased down; the sides were barely high enough to hold enough water for him to sit in. And the tub wasn't long enough to stretch out his legs, so he sat with them pulled up almost to his chest. It wasn't comfortable, but that didn't matter because Kirk wasn't going to let himself relax anyway. The combination soap/cleansing brush provided by their hosts was handy and he grabbed it. It was coarse; all the better. Kirk tried to release his emotions through an assault on his skin. He studiously ignored his half-erect penis, floating in the water, its tip peeking into the air.

A montage of images and emotions flowed with the water he splashed over his body: first, anger at Spock for his lapse in judgment, and anger at himself for allowing the first officer's determination to override his own better judgment. Then that emotion segued into anger at the caste system, and frustration that the Gabrielans wouldn't consider talking with the Derkheen. There was a very small and fleeting concern over what Komack would say when the Enterprise left the planet unsuccessful; that disappeared as a familiar, sinking sensation grew in the pit of his stomach. Once again he had witnessed death, had been unable to prevent it. Death had almost overtaken them; Spock could so easily have fallen. Worry. What else was wrong with his first officer? And self-pity. What he wouldn't give for the reassuring touch of Spock's mind right now. Sympathy for the Derkheen, banished because they were different, the way Spock had always been different. But Kirk's sympathy was confused by anger, too. What if that had been the Derkheen who had killed today? Certainly, they had the motivation to hate the Gabrielans. He would if he were in their shoes. But he didn't know for sure who those men in the jungle had been.

Damn. Too damn confusing. Suddenly the warm water and his whirling thoughts were too much for him to sustain his determination to feed his anger. Kirk leaned his forehead upon his drawn-up knees as imagined weight came crashing in on him. All he had were questions. Answers had eluded him for weeks.

A sound by the doorway made him look up. Spock stood there, immaculate in a clean uniform.

"So, come to make your report?" Kirk growled. The effect was spoiled by the suds that were clinging to his knees and chin.

"Negative. I have come to... rub your back." Spock suited actions to words and knelt on the cold, hard floor, behind and to one side of his captain. His large hand began to press circles over muscles that Kirk hadn't known were so tense.

Kirk tried to empty his mind of his worries, to just sit there and feel the warm water tickle his body, feel the warm flesh push against his own. Mistake. The shallow water lapped against his balls, and
he couldn't feel this particular warm flesh without associating it with carnal pleasure. In only
seconds his cock was rising in earnest.

He made no attempt to hide it, and Spock must have seen his arousal. "I made an error in judgment
today," the Vulcan admitted, his deep voice echoing against the hard surfaces of the bathroom. "I
could have been a burden instead of a help to you."

"Damn right," Kirk agreed. He bowed his head over his knees and squirmed against the fingers
working on his shoulders. "A little higher. Over to the right."

Spock's hand dug deeper into the muscle, and Kirk grunted. The water moved noisily against the
brown walls of the tub, propelled by the small movements of the human's body, pushed back and
forth by Vulcan strength. Kirk couldn't help it, he took a deep, shuddering breath, caught between a
conviction that he should restrain his desire and a hope that he wouldn't have to. They really
shouldn't do this. But then why was Spock here? And the touch of his lover's hand felt so good....

As always, Spock read him expertly. Even before the kisses and the life-altering penetrations and
the melds and the newborn bond, when they were only fellow officers on the bridge, Spock had
read him expertly. A warm hand reached down and cradled his balls.

Kirk leaned back. The low wall of the tub wasn't high enough to support him, but his lover's strong
arm was there. He let his legs fall open at the knees, looked into brown eyes and said, half-
heartedly, "You don't have to. You'll get your uniform wet."

"You desire this. I wish to give you this pleasure." The hand moved up from tightening testicles to
penis, wrapped around it and squeezed.

Kirk shut his eyes. "Oh, that feels so good." He pushed up with his hips, a little thrust that provided
better access for the now-pumping fist. A moment later there was breath against his face, and the
arm around his back slid up to his shoulders. Then Spock's lips were on his.

It was the antithesis of what Kirk had imagined before, the two of them rutting on the floor, his
own body dominating, his own cock stabbing fiercely, Spock's mouth contorted wide in desire. But
what he had imagined wasn't what he really wanted, he discovered. He wanted to sink into the
gentle feelings that Spock breathed into his mouth, to fall back bonelessly into the support offered
by the cradling arm and the smoothly pumping fist. To accept the gift that his lover could give
him. To know that Spock would do this for him.

Kirk opened leaden eyes and looked up into the dear, familiar face as their lips parted. There was a
light glowing in the brown eyes, and Kirk couldn't help but translate it into the emotions they'd
shared in the meld: warm affection, hot desire, the tangible pleasure of being together, the impact
as the implacable force of Spock's searching intellect met the consuming wind of Kirk's directed
purpose, passion pulled from the depths of two so-different beings, loyalty, love, from Spock to
him, from him to Spock, merged into one. He remembered it all.

"I miss you," he whispered, and raised a hand to touch a pale cheek. There was such a vast expanse
of Spock he wanted to touch, to know, and there was so little he could actually feel. "I miss you so
much."

Spock did not pretend to misunderstand. He turned his head and pressed a kiss into his lover's
palm. "And I you."

There wasn't anything else to say. Silence, but for the sound of a hand moving against flesh, and
the water swirling.
And then despite his growing arousal, Kirk frowned. The ache to join minds with his lover was almost tangible, he wanted to pour himself all over Spock, but what was he doing instead? He was alone in his physical desire. He was sitting in the tub with his legs spread like a two credit hooker, letting Spock pleasure him. Letting his anger get the best of him. Not sharing anything, even the exchange of touch that was all that was left to him and Spock now. Dear God, was he really that selfish?

"Come here," he growled, and his demanding arms pulled the Vulcan down into an awkward hug.

Spock lost his hold on the human penis, and his arm crept up from Kirk's groin to encircle his shoulders instead, but Kirk didn't care. This was much better.

"There's a very comfortable, very large Gabrielan bed right through that doorway," he whispered in a pointed ear. "And the door has a lock. Let's... go there? I want to share with you. I want you."

A moment later and he was up in Spock's arms, water dripping from his body as he was cradled under knees and shoulders like a baby. Kirk's arms were still wrapped around his Vulcan's neck, and he was startled. Spock very rarely displayed his natural strength, never in the bedroom, and Kirk wasn't sure he liked it.

But then he saw uncertainty in the brown eyes. Spock was reassessing his impulsive move. But why should he? This position did nothing for Kirk's startled dignity, and nothing for the ache in his cock, but that could be remedied. A quick scramble, a gymnastic move that broke the grasp his lover had under his knees, a cooperative swing aided by Vulcan muscles, and Kirk was still in his lover's arms. But now his legs were wrapped around Spock's waist, his tumescence was pressed against the warm body, and their lips pressed hungrily together.

Spock's tongue in his mouth.... What for so long he had never allowed himself to even imagine, what now was so essential to him. A man's kiss. His Vulcan's lips and tongue sliding against his lips and tongue.... The pebbled texture, the warmth, the assertive, mutual plundering of the inner surfaces of lips and cheek -- it felt wonderful. It even felt wonderful, if distinctly odd, to be carried into the bedroom.

Spock detoured with his armful to close and lock the door, then bent in an obvious attempt to deposit him reverently on the springy mattress, but Kirk would have none of it. He refused to unlock his legs, and with an "Oompf" pulled his lover down on top of him.

A moment later and Spock slithered down his torso, tongued the tip of his cock, engulfed it in wet heat.

"No, love, no." Kirk plucked ineffectually at his lover's hair. "Let's do this together. Turn around. And take off your clothes."

The working mouth paused, and dark eyes regarded him, oh-so-seriously. "This is what I desire, Jim. Allow me to have this... it is what I need to give to you."

How much of that request had to do with the problems they'd had in bed recently? Sex had been so difficult on board the ship -- they'd never found a rhythm -- and non-existent on the planet. But Spock's pleasure was as important to Kirk as his own was; more important now, because the only substitute he had to offer for their mental closeness was physical intimacy. He didn't want to lie passively while his fully-clothed lover performed on him. That was why he'd suggested the bed.

But who was he to define for his lover what he needed? Spock had his own wisdom. Perhaps the best thing Kirk could give his lover now was the confidence that he could still arouse his captain,
that a hearty orgasm would be joyously, lovingly unleashed. And how could Kirk resist such loving purpose? He bunched the bedding up behind him so that it supported him while he watched, and gave himself up to sensation.

All the erotic stimulus he required was in the sight of those pursed lips as they went down over his column, fluttered at the base, tightened and pulled back to linger on his sensitive glans. Would he ever get over the sensual thrill that accompanied even the thought that his correct, controlled first officer had Kirk's rampant penis in his mouth?

He groaned, threw back his head as Spock sucked, then forced his sight back down to his groin. He never wanted his lover to go down on him in the dark. Then he wouldn't be able to see that green-tinged tongue licking, wouldn't see how Spock handled his cock like a precious thing to be worshiped, wouldn't see Spock pause long enough to thoroughly spread saliva over one of his fingers and send that digit down and around Kirk’s buttocks....

"Oh, Ghod," he gasped as warmth teased at his anus. "Go ahead. Go ahead. Put it in." He arched up, spread his legs wider, and felt the tip insinuate itself into his body. "Ohhhhh," he groaned, and released the tension that kept him up, bowed. His body straightened itself back onto the mattress, and forced the finger in deeper and deeper....

His balls tightened in a spasmodic, almost painful clenching. He couldn't stop now. "Gonna come," he croaked, then half-sat up in the bed, enough so that he could clearly see Spock's distended cheeks, see the spare eyelashes fanned out against the pale cheeks, could bury his fingers in the dark hair and watch himself come.

Was there anything in this galaxy more beautiful than the sight of his emission being swallowed by the most precious being there was?

Kirk blinked, surprised that there was moisture in his eyes, and refused to give in to the post-coital weakness that told him to lay back and succumb to sleep. For the second time that day he growled, "Come here," and tugged under Spock's arms until his lover joined him on the pillow, and they turned to one another with a kiss.

There was a swelling against his upper leg; it was Spock's penis, not as hard and demanding as it usually was. Half-erect, he guessed. But when Kirk reached down between them to encourage his lover's arousal, Spock's hand was there first, covering his trousers, and blocking Kirk with spread fingers.

"No," Spock said, his voice unusually deep. "That is not necessary."

Baffled, Kirk looked at the determined expression. He patted the hand that stood guard between their bodies. "It's all right. It's only me. Come on, Spock. Let me." Even in the very earliest days, Spock hadn't been shy.

The Vulcan addressed the far corner of the room. "I do not wish to experience an orgasm at this time."

Kirk considered. He'd never forced his attentions on any of his sexual partners, and he certainly didn't want to engage Spock in action that he would find distasteful. But they'd been lovers for months. This wasn't like Spock. It wasn't even like him since the Lox'theneth'nar; they'd mourned together, fumbled together, even cried together. All right, the few times they'd tried it sex hadn't been perfect, but they both knew that sooner or later they'd find the new balance they needed.

Kirk frowned. He wouldn't let their relationship degenerate into a one-sided physical affair, with
him doing all the taking and Spock doing all the giving. He couldn't think of anything worse.

He squeezed their still-joined hands, pressed down strongly, felt the erection through the Vulcan flesh cupped around it. "This seems to want to experience an orgasm."

He'd forgotten how quickly his first officer could move when he wanted to. Before he could blink Spock was out of the bed and standing on the far side of the room. Kirk watched as his lover took two deep breaths and placed his hands behind his back. There wasn't any sign of arousal now.

"Captain," Spock said in his flattest first officer's voice, "I do not wish to engage in further sexual activity at this time."

"All right," Kirk agreed, though he didn't understand Spock's reactions at all. He swung his legs over the side of the bed. "But I --.

Spock interrupted him. Almost unprecedented. "I wish to make my report. For the past several days I have --"

Kirk waved a hand to stop him. "Wait a minute. Don't.... This is ridiculous."

An eyebrow soared. "Ridiculous?"

"Yes, ridiculous," Kirk insisted. "You're standing there looking like you're ready for an admiral's inspection, and I'm sitting here," he looked down at his naked self, at his half-deflated penis, "very out of uniform."

"That has not concerned you before. I can recall several occasions when we have discussed ship's business while neither of us was clothed."

"Spock," Kirk said, exasperated not just at the current feigned obtuseness but by everything that had gone before. "I need my clothes, okay? I'll just be a minute."

His uniform and the rest of his clothing was scattered all over the bathroom; the sock on the windowsill, the briefs thrown behind the door were an indication of the anger he'd been incubating. But as he went for a fresh uniform Kirk realized he didn't feel angry any longer, just confused.

Spock was seated on a black, straight-backed chair in the common area, surely the most uncomfortable piece of furniture in the room. Kirk found a place on a wooden-slatted divan directly across from his first officer, leaned forward, placed his elbows on his knees. But before he could speak, Spock said, "I believe you wished to speak to me about my actions in the rainforest."

Kirk was taken aback. First the atypical behavior in the bedroom, then the retreat into the ultra-Vulcan role, now an emphasis on their roles as captain and first officer. Spock was seriously upset about something.

"All right," Kirk said slowly. "We'll talk about that first, if you want to." Whatever the reasoning, he was willing to follow his lover in this digression. At least for now. He straightened. If he was going to speak as the captain, he needed to be sitting like one. After what they'd just shared, after what he'd wanted to share with his lover, it wasn't easy to make the transition from lover back to commanding officer, but he accomplished it. As captain, he needed to speak.

"You can't ever do what you did today again. You have got to put into practice what we talked about on the ship, namely that you must realize that you may not be able to do everything you could do before." He held up a restraining hand as Spock moved to speak. "I know what you're going to say, that you didn't think you would get dizzy, but you simply can't take that chance. Not
until some time has passed and your condition has stabilized. Or until we find a cure for what's happened."

"Yes, sir. However, given the data I had at the time, I believed that I was still the most logical --"

"That's not the way we can think anymore. You can't take that chance. Especially not times like today, with all those other people up on the platform. We had other options. Hunyady's a strong young woman, and she could have gone with me. Or Penda. She's not afraid of heights, either. They're both trained officers, capable of acting as you or I would act, and it's about time I learned to depend on their abilities. Or I could have gone myself. I could have handled that fellow."

Spock pursed his lips and looked down at the triangular pattern of ugly tile on the floor. "I... agree."

The captain swiftly replied, "I don't care if you agree with me or not, I will not have my second-in-command risking himself unnecessarily. I need to depend on you to take only rational risks, the ones you must take. I need you and the ship needs you. Don't do what you did again. That's an order."

Soft brown eyes lifted to meet implacable hazel eyes. "Yes, Captain."

Kirk didn't break their visual connection. "Captain. Damn. This hasn't gotten any easier, has it?"

"No. But perhaps life was not meant to be easy." The heavy weight of the burden Spock now carried was in the grating voice. "I have rarely found it to be so."

The bleakness in his lover's tone tightened Kirk's throat. What could he say? They were beyond sympathetic words.

Spock regained his normal voice. "I understand your position. Perhaps it is I who have created the difficulty. I believe that I have mis-interpreted physical symptoms which I have experienced in the past several days, and convinced myself that my condition was improving. As today is evidence, that is not the case. I believe that I am guilty of self-delusion. Or misplaced pride."

"Misplaced pride? Oh, Spock, I don't think so." But the somber Vulcan simply looked at him, refusing the support, so Kirk said, "All right. So now's the time for the report. What symptoms?"

If it were possible, Spock sat up straighter in the straight-backed chair, entirely assuming the attitude of first officer relaying requested information. "I have experienced increased sensitivity in my lower back, in the area of the secondary testicular system. The chenessi. It is unlikely that this is the result of our sleeping arrangements here, or the lingering effects of the injuries to my torso from being crushed under the hay, as I had assumed. Also, it occurs to me now that I have experienced mood swings, as you so aptly pointed out while we were climbing through the jungle canopy. And the spell of dizziness which I experienced in the jungle you witnessed yourself."

"Could all that be," Kirk asked carefully, "the result of... whatever it was that happened to you?"

"So I had thought before. However, the incident in the jungle has caused me to reassess. The vertigo was quite dissimilar from what occurred immediately after my disability. It was sharper, and unaccompanied by nausea. I have also not been uncomfortable during the conference when you made the assumption that I would be cold. Perhaps my body has simply made adjustments automatically that I would have made consciously before. Or perhaps not."

Kirk blinked, and tried to suppress a hot wave of concern as his racing mind put two and two together. He asked slowly, "What do you think these symptoms mean?"
"I am uncertain. With what has happened to me, there is no precedent. However, these are some of the indications of...." One quick glance at Kirk's face told him that the captain already knew what he was going to say. "You agree that they could be precursors of the pon farr, do you not?"

Kirk found it difficult to nod, but forced his tightened neck muscles into action. "It seems a possibility. That's why... you wouldn't let me love you."

Abruptly Spock stood and walked over to the unadorned window that admitted the light of an alien sun, the only brightness in the dismal room. "Yes. I cannot control my emotional reaction to this possibility. My Time may well be dangerous for us. Before, with the bond, with you, I did not fear pon farr. But now.... It seemed important to maintain as much control as possible."

"However, such a response on my part is emotionally based, and therefore quite illogical. It is only possible that the incident on the Lox'theneth'nar has triggered an acceleration of the pon farr. It is not likely. I do not have the data, nor the proper perspective, to calculate the odds. But McCoy has required me to submit to examinations twice while on this planet. Surely he would have noticed. He is familiar with the readings."

Kirk looked down at his hands, fisted between his knees. "Maybe this isn't.... Remember what you told me about the Il'safarr?"

A sigh from the other side of the room. "Of course I remember. It is not my memory that has been affected."

The comment was so unlike his patient partner, who endured the idiosyncrasies of humans with endless fortitude. But Kirk didn't allow the abruptly-spoken words to affect him and forged ahead. "You said that the Il'safarr meant that there would be changes in both your mind and your body, preparing you for the time of mating in about a year. That the changes in me, being able to control your reactions through the bond, were transmitted to you. That the changes in each of us were supposed to occur in concert, like a system in feedback."

He looked up then, stared at the straight, strong lines of his lover's lean back. "Two things in you were supposed to grow and change together. Now one of those elements, the mental, is gone. And I'm gone from the system that used to be the two of us together, so whatever control I might have been able to provide is also missing." He stopped. The conclusion was obvious.

But his precise Vulcan stated it anyway and addressed the pane of glass before him. "You suggest that the physical alterations leading to a time of fertility are continuing, but that they are doing so in an uncontrolled, erratic fashion."

"Yes."

A short silence. Spock's shoulders rose and fell soundlessly. "It is a logical conclusion. One that, despite my impaired condition," it was said with an unaccustomed bitterness, "I also was able to deduce."

Kirk was still staring, but his gaze was turned inward. What kind of pon farr would it be, without the mental connections that ensured safety, that were a natural part of this pinnacle of Vulcan mating? Kirk had already witnessed the uncontrolled violence that T'Pring's withdrawal and challenge had produced in his friend. Something like that in a pon farr.... It would be so difficult for Spock to live through that, especially knowing how beautiful it would have been if only they had the bond and the Il'safarr between them.

And if, in the frenzy of a rutting Vulcan body, if Spock were to hurt his captain.... How would
Spock cope with that?

Spock was thinking along similar lines. "Jim...." The Vulcan turned around. "I do not know what to expect. I do not know how this will affect you."

Kirk rose and walked swiftly across the room. "And you don't know how it will affect you either. The fact that McCoy hasn't caught anything might mean that the changes are very slight, and they'll settle down soon. Or it simply might mean that your symptoms are erratic. You're right, we don't know what to expect, but that might be good news, you know."

They were close now. Kirk noticed the lines of strain around the stern mouth, the dryness of lips and skin. Since the Lox'theneth'nar, that stretched, arid look had become commonplace.

Spock shook his head. "Always so optimistic. That could become... most annoying."

"And I'm going to keep annoying you. I want you to go back to the ship with McCoy. He needs to give you a complete examination. Just to make sure."

Spock bowed his head. "I regret the necessity. I had thought I would be able to function on this mission as I always have."

Kirk rested his hand on an angular shoulder. "I know. Remember, I fought McCoy to get you here. But we've got to be realistic about this."

Spock straightened and stepped away from his captain's touch. "Yes. Shall I beam up immediately?"

Kirk considered. "It might be a good idea."

"But unnecessary. There is really no need for me to return because of these symptoms. If they are indeed the precursors of my Time, it is still many weeks, perhaps months away, even assuming a continued escalation. At this time, the symptoms are annoying but far from disabling."

Kirk easily translated the understatement. "Your back's really bothering you."

"It is marginally uncomfortable. But there should be no problem in remaining."

The captain paused a moment to consider. "There's that religious ceremony the Gabrielans wanted us to attend tonight, remember? They've been so reticent about their religion, I know they consider it an honor to be asked. It might not be the most diplomatic thing for you to miss that. Regardless of how we feel about the Gabrielans, we are trying to get them to look favorably towards relations with us."

"And at this time Doctor McCoy is undoubtedly still engrossed in his hospital survey. The data he is collecting is important."

"All right. How about if you and Bones go back tonight after the ceremony? If everything checks out you can beam down in the morning again."

Spock nodded. "That seems an efficient plan."

The captain examined his first officer. The strain was clearly evident. It must have been so difficult for Spock to speak of all this....

But before Kirk could offer it, Spock said, "If it is possible at this time, I believe I would benefit
from a period of meditation."

"Of course. We don't leave for the temple for a few hours. Take the time you need. I'll notify McCoy, and tell the ship to be expecting the two of you tonight."

After a stiff nod, Spock disappeared into the bedroom that had been allotted to him. Kirk was left alone amidst the stiff furniture, fighting an urgent desire to pace. What more could happen to them?
Spock estimated that there were three hundred and seventeen individuals gathered in the square before the huge grey rectangular building called the Temple of Unity. Everyone was waiting for the last rays of the sun to disappear behind the horizon. Or perhaps, there were three hundred and twenty-four beings present. Yes, definitely the latter number, including *Enterprise* personnel, now that he had noticed the seven persons, robed in grey as were all the others in the courtyard, who were half-hidden by the plain stuccoed columns on the building's porch. Perhaps they were functionaries with a role to play in the upcoming ceremony.

His period of meditation had benefitted Spock greatly. He felt stable, at an equilibrium point with what was, and what might be. He had confronted the possibility that within the next few months he might share a premature pon farr with Jim without the restraint of the Il'safarr, without any mental connection at all. The thought was an almost-obscenity; it was the bond, the completion of one mind within another, that robbed the Time of its shame and gave it redeeming credibility. They would not have that. Only his body would ride the flames, and any other body would be sufficient to cool his need.... An indecency. But it would be Jim who would share with him, shield him, and bear what the fever would compel him to do....

Logic applied during the cool order of meditation had allowed him to see the folly of emotional worry. Spock had achieved *acknowledgment of possibilities* and enhanced it with *strength to maintain existence*. And as his captain had pointed out just hours ago, they did not know what to expect. When McCoy had examined him immediately before leaving for the temple, there had been no hormonal upset.

Although.... Before the events on the *Lox’theneth’nar*, he would have known. He would have been able to monitor his bodily systems himself, not rely upon the beads and rattles of the ship's CMO, and each symptom would have been obvious. It was most unfortunate that he no longer had that ability.

Spock again surveyed the crowd, and increased his estimate of the number of beings there to three hundred and twenty-six. He knew that he had been estimating to an excessive degree since his injury: the number of steps from his quarters to transporter number four, the pages in a draft document presented by the Gabrielans, the seconds until this religious ceremony was to start. He also understood why he was doing it. At least this was one faculty he retained.

He drew the knee-length grey cloak that covered him closer. Cumulonimbus clouds were building in the sky opposite the sunset, and a fresh, moisture-laden wind reached cool fingers through the square. An early spring thunderstorm was imminent; Spock suppressed his desire to estimate the number of minutes until it arrived.

Much better to concentrate on other things, to be more aware of all that he still possessed and not mourn that which had been lost. Spock shifted his weight from left leg to right leg, then he arched his back, he hoped unobtrusively, in an attempt to relieve the pain there. He cast about for other stimulus to divert his attention.

His gaze settled on his captain's face. The handsome features were drawn, with lines of strain that Spock knew he had etched there himself. His gaze lingered over bright eyes, that defiant chin. A self-indulgence, he feared. Was he allowing himself to look at Jim too often lately? It was possible to exploit that which was freely offered. He knew he had disappointed Jim when he had declined to fully participate in their sexual activity, but now that he had managed to integrate his emotional reactions with his logic he could rectify that problem. Mature relationships were mutually
beneficial. He must not become a burden in any way, Spock vowed for the -- this time he could not prevent himself, he estimated the number -- the thirty-second time.

Jim was conversing with Hivlen fa Hivlen, chairman of the ruling committee. Their talk was hushed, obviously meant not to be overheard, but Spock was only three meters away and could not help but perceive what was being said.

"I am concerned that your government did not inform us of the unrest in the south, honored Hivlen. If Gabriela and the Federation are going to work together, we must learn to trust one another." For one who knew him, Kirk's controlled anger was easy to read; there was tightness in his voice, and tension in the set of his shoulders. Jim's basic dislike of the Gabrielans had escalated with each passing day, and every callous treatment of the lower castes.

Hivlen was deliberately provocative in his reply. He stood close to the captain, forced Kirk to look up to his greater height. Spock had no doubt it was deliberate. "If we had wanted you to know about it, Kirk, we would have told you. Who wished to interfere with these talks with the Federation? But it isn't important. Since they broke from our protective care, every few years there is trouble from a very few, and we always manage to convince the Derkheen to stay where they belong. This is just another time. Are you frightened?" The arrogance of the completely closed mind spoke; Hivlen saw no other course but his own.

A younger Kirk, the man that Spock had known during the first years of their voyage, might have responded to the thinly veiled taunting. But Kirk had learned much as he traveled through the stars. He might not relish the role of diplomat, but he could play it well. Spock allowed himself to feel a flicker of pride as he watched his captain do a remarkable job concealing his reaction.

"No, I'm not frightened. But I would like to hear the official explanation of why there were also Gabrielans in the group that attacked us," he said mildly. "You have told us that yours is a united society. It didn't look that way to me in the jungle this afternoon."

A shadow of doubt shaded Hivlen's arrogance. "Over the past year there have been a few... dissidents. Merely sevens and eights and nines who do not know any better. They take the part of the Derkheen. Our police have captured many of the criminals, and they have been severely punished for their crimes."

"Crimes?" Kirk asked.

"You are safe here in the city, Captain, but along the border things are different. The incidence of murder, rape, arson there is disgraceful. And you notice, the proximity to the Derkheen? They are the cause. Something will have to be done about them soon. It is astonishing that they penetrated as far as the rainforest this afternoon, they and their traitorous low-caste friends." Hivlen seemed to realize he was conceding too much, and gathered back his pugnacity. "But none of that is important. We will deal with it. The border is very far away, and the Derkheen and the traitors will never come to the cities to give us any problems."

"The Derkheen are already causing your people trouble," Kirk said evenly, "this little insurrection that you're trying to hide, and the destruction of the spuast tree. It's because they are an isolated society, and they don't have any other options. If you would only contact them...."

The chairman was jerking his head to the side in his race's gesture of negation. Spock had heard this conversation twice before already; why should he be surprised at the captain's persistence?

The two men, locked in low-voiced conversation, moved away. Spock contemplated following them, but discarded that action based on the captain's dislike of being treated with excessive
concern. So Spock stayed where he was and once again allowed his vision to range the crowd. Three hundred and forty-one now, all of them wearing grey overcloaks, all of them tall and lean like every Gabrielan they had met so far. None of them short, and all dressed like Gabrielans. No apparent threat. Hivlen was undoubtedly correct.

Uhura and Hunyady stood quietly to the left. Before their group had traveled to the square, and before she had requested permission of her superior officers, Hunyady had asked Annana if she could record the ceremony on her tricorder. Spock had admired her desire for knowledge and forthright attitude at the same time that he had deplored her inability to follow appropriate military protocol. Kirk had frowned even as Annana had acquiesced. The tricorder was tucked unobtrusively under the young lieutenant's cloak.

Spock's attention shifted to the right, where Sulu and Josephs stood, with Josephs closest to the captain. The acting security chief had insisted upon coming to the ceremony. "You never know when you might need me, sir." Last night Spock had agreed with the captain that the presence of security at the temple would be superfluous, but after the unexplained attack in the rainforest he took comfort from the man's presence. Josephs was calm and competent and he did not need a weapon to be effective protection for the captain.

The last member of the _Enterprise_ party was Doctor McCoy, who seemed oblivious to those around him or the coming storm. He stood facing the temple, with his eyes closed and his lined face uplifted, as if he sought some guidance from the divine. Spock shook the fanciful thought away. McCoy, as far as he knew, was not religious.

For the five days they had been on the planet, the captain and chief medical officer had been circling one another. McCoy had made tentative attempts to find some new balance to their relationship; Kirk had responded, exploring, and the two had shared stilted conversations each evening the landing party had gathered in the common room.

But despite the fragile air of reconciliation between them, each man possessed a healthy dose of an emotion with which Spock was too familiar, stubborn pride. Each had a barrier to hurdle. Kirk would not soon forget McCoy's recoiling from the most precious part of the relationship he had shared with Spock; McCoy might not ever forgive their seven months silence. But Spock was convinced that the genuine friendship that had existed between the two men would eventually bring them back together.

It was ironic that Spock was now cast in the role of peacemaker, despite his intimate part in the disagreement and his inherent disinclination to become involved in emotional matters. It was also quite wearing. However, he would continue to urge Kirk to whatever forgiveness he could find to bestowed upon McCoy, and he would continue to withhold judgment over McCoy's aversion to telepathic contact.

As if he felt a gaze upon him, McCoy abruptly opened his eyes and turned to look at the first officer. They locked gazes; Spock saw concern written on the physician's open face. He held the blue eyes for just a moment, knowing his own impassive expression was not responsive, and then turned away.

McCoy now knew about the symptoms he had been experiencing. After this ceremony the two of them would beam back to the ship and Spock would be required to undergo an examination, and answer personal questions when he would prefer to remain silent. McCoy was undoubtedly speculating about Spock's physical condition, weighing the possibilities of a premature and aberrant pon farr. Spock felt distinctly uncomfortable with the thought that McCoy was to be so involved in such an intensely private matter, knew that his sexual partner would be the captain. The
Time should be between bondmates only. Now he understood Jim’s comment about the doctor standing between them.

But it was not McCoy's fault, Spock reminded himself. McCoy had not asked to be informed about the sexual relationship between his commanding officers. It had simply seemed the correct thing to do. Both he and Jim had desired it.

While Spock thought, the sun finally slipped out of sight, and left behind a sky ablaze with yellows and oranges. The opposite bank of thunderclouds was ominously dark. A streak of cloud-to-cloud lightening flashed and a hush fell over the crowd. The doors to the porticoed building swung open.

"Come," said Hivlen fa Hivlen. "We must lead the procession."

Already a path was clearing down the center of the square, and Hivlen and several other high caste members led the Enterprise crew through the throng. The chairman and Kirk went first. The first officer fell into step with Annana and followed his captain. Chuman, several other "twos" and the rest of the Enterprise crew who were present came behind them.

As they walked a cold gust of wind blew through the square, plastered the cloaks to backs and legs and brought with it the first few drops of rain. One, two drops fell upon Spock's head as he climbed the steps and reached the sheltering porch; another fell annoyingly upon the tip of his nose. He reached up to wipe it away, and a loud clap of thunder escorted them inside the candle-lit recesses of the building.

The interior of the temple was as unadorned as the exterior had been. There were no pictures of religious legends and no statues of revered personages; not even color nor abstract designs meant to honor the deity. The Gabrielan religion, apparently, did not require such overt expressions of devotion. Interesting.

The ubiquitous grey masonry slabs covered the walls, and the windows were long narrow slits set well overhead. Even on sunny days the windows would admit meager sunlight; with the thunderstorm gathering outside they displayed only darkness. There were candelabra on plain brass stands every five meters along the hundred meter long central aisle, and a few hung from the ceiling. But the light thrown out by the branched candlesticks could not begin to adequately illuminate the huge room, whose ceiling was so high that darkness engulfed it. The tiny dots of flame provided only flickering dim light and shadows.

As he walked up the first few meters of the aisle, Spock could smell the odor of the candlewax burning. It hung heavily in the air, and seemed to coat his throat and lungs as he breathed. He choked, and his nostrils wrinkled as he recoiled from the odor. The air smelled of... death. The Gabrielans must still incorporate animal flesh in their manufacture of the candles used in the Temple.

But he must endure it. Without hesitation, he continued in the procession, but a heaviness settled over him, a dampening of spirit which might be labeled depression. Or if he were a more imaginative man, a foreboding. He rejected the thought; it was most illogical. Still, he could not ignore the fact that the conditions inside the temple had provoked an emotional reaction. Spock lowered his eyes and watched the shadows he cast as he walked past one set of candelabra after another.

It was logical to compare this place of worship with another church he had visited. The small building on Michaela had also smelled of death. Seventeen bodies and their blood had blended with the colored shadows made by stained glass windows admitting the early morning sunlight. Something in Spock's soul had rebelled at the carnage, over and above the illogic of precious life
wasted. The church had been a sanctuary for the little farming community that Mar and her husband Dirka and their child Sari had been a part of. It had been so wrong that it had witnessed the ultimate perversion: murder and suicide.

This temple on Gabriela was so different, in size, in decoration. But the people who gathered here had the same motivation as those who had worshiped on a planet the Federation settlers had named for another angel. The common element was belief in a deity.

Vulcans did not pray. Miracles had rational explanations. Spock estimated the number of steps to the altar and began to count his slow footfalls.

At the measured pace set by the priest leading them, it took almost three minutes to reach the end of the long aisle. Their footsteps echoed against the stone tiles as they slowly put one foot in front of the other and a lone Vulcan attempted to breathe shallowly. Finally they reached the other end of the building and Spock abandoned his contemplation of the floor. Here there was a raised dais, large enough to accommodate perhaps twenty people standing shoulder to shoulder. The dais was entirely featureless, with not even an altar, but it was carpeted from wall to wall with a plush red rug.

Along each side of the temple were raised tiers of built-in stone seats, punctuated by exit ramps, so that the members of the congregation faced not the front platform but each other across the aisle. Perhaps an indication, Spock thought, that the religious ceremonies conducted here emphasized the participation of the people rather than the leadership of the religious elite. He found that his interest was piqued, and he rose above the remnants of the uneasy emotion that had accompanied him up the aisle. Again, this aspect of Gabrielan society was interesting. It would be beneficial to learn more about the religion and make the report on this culture more complete. He had been so engrossed in the environmental conference and... other matters, that he had gathered relatively little other data. Here was a unique opportunity.

Because it would be part of the report that he would eventually make on this ceremony, Spock allowed himself to estimate that the seven rows along each side of the Temple would easily accommodate two thousand people. That was far more than the dampened crowd that was filing in behind them. This was a small service, then. Perhaps only selected individuals had been invited to consort with the aliens from the Federation. Considering the general aversion to contamination evident throughout this culture, it was probable that not everyone would be trusted.

When they reached the dais the Enterprise people were directed to the seats in the first row of the raised tier on the right side. Kirk took the seat closest to the front, Spock sat in the seat to his left, careful of aggravating his back. There was a branched candlestick emitting its noxious fumes less than a meter in front of him; he stifled a cough. McCoy settled next to the first officer.

Hivlen and his assistant, Chuman and several others stood to one side of the stage and faced the crowd. The priest, another "One," was flanked on the other side by two assistants. They waited while the people filed in, as slowly as had their leaders, and seated themselves closest to the front. Fewer than one-quarter of the seats on either side of the temple were filled.

The big double doors through which they had walked closed with a shuddering moan.

"Friends," the priest addressed the people. There must have been a built-in amplifying system, for his words resounded clearly throughout the dimly lit hall. "Tonight is a night for renewal, for our monthly dedication to the Great God who made us what we are. Each with a role to play, and yet each able to touch the other. Tonight is the night to touch within your group, to enforce the boundaries that keep us apart, and to acknowledge the role that we all play in honoring He who made us. We will know what the other is feeling, and offer that feeling to almighty God."
Spock turned and exchanged a look with his captain. Perhaps they were about to witness a ceremony that would confirm and illustrate the empathic abilities of their hosts.

The man was still speaking. "But first, before the renewal, we must have realignment." A huge clap of prolonged thunder punctuated his words, and he paused until it rumbled away before he continued. "Chuman's group has suffered a loss. It is a small loss, not needing the full parting ceremony, since Turtrata ba Turtrata was but a nine. But still the group must find a new balance."

New balance. What Spock had been thinking minutes ago was needed between the captain and McCoy. Next to him, the doctor stirred.

The priest turned towards Chuman, but the goateed man came towards him and whispered in his ear. The priest appeared to ask a question, received a satisfactory answer, and then they walked to the other side of the stage to consult in quiet tones with the chairman. Hivlen first jerked his head to the side in negation, then seemed to reconsider when the priest appeared to speak persuasively. They all looked in Kirk's direction, Chuman with a look of hope, Hivlen with a distinct frown, the priest speculatively. Then the three walked over to the Enterprise delegation. It was clear that the priest had won the argument. Kirk and his officers stood as the three men came near.

It was the priest who spoke. "Honored Kirk, Chuman si Chuman and his group would like to honor the efforts you made to save the serenity of the group-mates. Before they realign this evening, would you be one with them as they join?"

Spock allowed his brow to wrinkle in a frown. The offer was unexpected. This "joining" was unknown and could be dangerous. He turned to Kirk and said urgently, "I do not believe that would be wise, Captain. In light of recent developments, mental contact could be painful for you." With the resonances of their broken bond still ringing in both their minds, Spock did not know what joining with the Gabrielans would do to Kirk.

McCoy was quick to speak after him. "I agree with Spock, Captain, this isn't a good idea."

"Well, that was before and this is now!" McCoy huffed.

"And strictly speaking, this isn't mental contact anyway, is it?" Kirk spoke to the priest. "This joining of yours, could you ex --."

He was interrupted by Hivlen, as the leader used his bulk to slip in front of the religious leader and directly confront Kirk. With the captain elevated by the step up to the first row of seats, the big man stood eye to eye with him, and Spock could clearly discern the leader's thinly veiled antagonism. "If you fear you do not need to participate. We would understand. Honored Chuman spoke when he should have kept quiet. Perhaps it would be best if we reserved this ceremony for ourselves, and did not share with outworlders."

It was another piece of evidence that Hivlen preferred that the Federation's mission fail. And it was also the most effective method for guaranteeing Kirk's acceptance, although the chairman didn't know that. The captain smiled at him, in a way that Spock had seen many times before in a crisis, a smile that Hivlen fa Hivlen should have been wary of. Kirk said, "I would not dream of insulting your people in such a way. I would be pleased to join with Chuman's group. Tell me what I should do to participate."
McCoy protested, "Captain, I really don't think --."

"That will be all, Doctor. There isn't going to be a problem; let's not forget the purpose of our mission. Now, honored One, if you could explain what I should do."

The priest nodded regally, as if accepting due homage. "Of course. We do you a great honor to allow even this momentary joining; we seldom touch outside our circle. Honored Chuman's group will join hands, you among them, and they will use the mrona...." He paused, as the translator had been unable to find an equivalent for the Gabrielan word and so had issued the term unchanged. "The mrona," the man continued. "It is what we have that allows us to ... connect. Do you from the Federation know what I mean? Do you have the mrona? That which enables you to touch?"

Oddly enough, it was McCoy who jumped in to fill the silence with an answer. "No, honored sir, humans do not. Each race of beings is different, we have found, and the mrona must be one of your special gifts."

"I see. But it will not harm you, honored Kirk. You will simply become aware of each one in the group, and they will see your own power."

Kirk leaned forward in sudden eagerness, and Spock read his intention as if he shouted it aloud. "You're aware of all the others in the group?" the captain asked. "Do you exchange thoughts, too?"

"Not precisely the words of the mind. Of that we are not capable. But there is an awareness, yes, of all in the circle, of what they are. The ones and twos who lead and govern, the fives and sixes who follow, the eights and nines who serve. Our ancestors joined in this way thousands of years ago. It is natural for our people."

Kirk hadn't looked at him, and yet Spock was intensely aware of his captain, of his breathing and his pleasing body scent, the way he was canted forward in tense excitement. To be aware of even more, the way bondmates should be, if only for moments.... A ripple of desire swept through him that had nothing to do with the physical. Automatically, he tempered it, not allowing the wild fire of hope to burn uncontrolled. It might not be possible.... But he willed Kirk to say the words.

Kirk's expression glowed with animation, overlaid by determination. "Would it be permitted for anyone else to join along with me?"

The chairman regarded him shrewdly. The exchange of one favor for another was something he could understand, and would at least allow him to salvage something from his capitulation. "This is something you wish?"

It was difficult for Kirk to admit the need for anything to this arrogant man, but not even a breath could be drawn before the captain said, "Yes."

The chairman looked at the priest, who returned with a note of surprise, "Of course, Honored Chuman's group would easily expand to include another. Or two or three more. So long as you all leave the circle before the final realignment."

"And," Hivlen said, "so long as you remember this Gabrielan courtesy."

Finally Kirk turned to him; Spock found it necessary to take another breath. The equilibrium of the afternoon's meditation had evaporated in the smoky air, and he was reduced to but a precarious hold on his emotions. But surely even Surak would say that the cause was sufficient. That such an opportunity should be presented to them, when he had thought he would never again touch the part of Jim that he craved, that he longed for in the sleepless nights....
"Spock," Jim said, his face uplifted, his eyes sparking. Though everyone who was seated near could hear, including the entire Enterprise group, his words were spoken just for the Vulcan who was always by his side. "Join with me?"

A caress. An invitation. An almost-open declaration of what they were to each other. Impossible not to respond.

But Spock struggled not to display openly the turmoil inside him. He would not create an unseemly emotional display in front of others.

A moment, and he was capable of answering. "I will." Spock was surprised by the deep timbre his voice had assumed, and by the last micro-second thought that had adjusted his "Yes" to a more traditional echoing-of-vows phrasing.

But he was still science officer, and still required to provide information to his captain when there were decisions to be made. "It is possible, however, even likely, that due to my... disability, I will not be able to be drawn into Chuman's group. You should be prepared for that eventuality."

Kirk's voice was very soft. "Let's take that chance."

"Agreed. However, if I am somehow able to join with the others, there is a ninety-eight percent probability that it will... not be the same as you are accustomed to."

"I know." Still softly. "But let's take what circumstance offers. Unless...," Sudden worry wrinkled the high brow. "Unless the whole idea of joining empathically isn't a good one for you. As a Vulcan. This is an emotional exchange, and that might not be healthy--."

"Captain." Spock stopped the flow of words. "There is no need for you to be concerned. I am not altogether unfamiliar with emotions. And I am capable of adjusting if there is the need. Let us proceed."

A pause, during which Jim continued to look at him with those unique sea-colored eyes, and a smile that barely curved the corners of his mouth. Spock reached for his leaping emotions, forced them back under his will.

"All right," Kirk breathed.

Spock attempted to salvage a modicum of equilibrium by focusing on the more official aspects of the ceremony. The tone of his voice when he spoke was almost ordinary. "This should be a unique opportunity to observe an important aspect of Gabrielan society."

A slow smile transformed Kirk's face. "Always the scientist."

Kirk looked away towards Hivlen and nodded. Spock refused to look at anyone as he followed his captain down from the seats and across to the central dais, but he could imagine the curious gazes that were focused on him and on the captain. Except for McCoy, who already knew of their relationship....

Spock stopped before stepping up to the stage, and considered. He knew reluctance to pursue the thought that had occurred to him, and yet.... Perhaps, this was something he could do for Jim. "Captain," he called softly. Kirk turned, brows raised in question, then he moved back to stand next to his first officer.

One word would supply all that Spock wished to convey. He nodded to where the crew was sitting and said, "McCoy."
Kirk sucked in a deep breath, and for a moment his face hardened in denial. But Spock's confidence in his lover was not misplaced, for as he watched the deep lines softened, and a barely-heard sigh parted the determined lips. Kirk could go beyond the abrupt words he'd just exchanged with the physician. The captain lifted his eyes to meet his lover's, and stepped close, close enough to invade the personal space between them, close enough to appear almost but not quite improper.

"You, Commander, have the most generous soul in this galaxy. I can't believe you've thought of it. And... it is absolutely right. I don't want Bones out of my life, I want him in it. Come on, let's ask him."

With the priest and the other Gabrielans up on the dais looking after them, captain and first officer walked back the way they had come, their footsteps echoing against the hard stone floor, their candle-created shadows preceding them and following them, until they were standing directly in front of the chief medical officer of the Enterprise.

"Bones," Kirk said. It was the first time he had used the nickname in McCoy's presence since their argument, and the surprised look on the doctor's face showed that he realized it. "This empathic group will expand for another person, the priest said. Would you join with us?"

The physician's expression was a study in consternation as a train of conflicting thoughts showed clearly on his face. Spock read the familiar features easily. Gratitude showed first. Then a guarded light blossomed in the blue eyes, a light that turned into concern; the concern melted into fear. And finally, there was nothing on that craggy face but denial.

"I... can't. I mean... I appreciate the offer, but I don't really want...." McCoy broke off in confusion. Kirk looked at him sadly. "They're not telepaths, Bones, just empaths."

"I know." Nervously, the doctor licked dry lips, and his eyes darted from his captain's face to the floor and back again. "And you know I'd do it if it were in the line of duty. If you needed me to. But it's... joining minds. I just don't.... It's not that I don't appreciate the offer. I understand what you're trying to do. But.... You two go ahead. You don't want me."

"All right. It was a mistake to ask." Abruptly, Kirk swung around and walked away, his shoulders tensed and his arms hanging in unnatural stillness.

Spock stayed where he was for a moment, watching McCoy watching Kirk, and thus he saw sadness drape itself over stooped shoulders. He did not stay to see anything more.

On the dais, Chuman's group of fifteen men were already arranged in a circle, holding hands. Kirk moved in next to Chuman, and held out an open palm to his lover. Spock slipped his warmth into the captain's coolness, and their fingers intertwined. Then the Vulcan took the hand of the "three" next to him, and the circle was complete.

The Gabrielans closed their eyes, and then the two representatives from the Enterprise did as well.

For a long minute Spock felt nothing, saw nothing but the darkness behind his closed eyelids, and heard only the vocalization of his thoughts. Perhaps this mrona of which the priest spoke was already activated, and all the others were in an empathic communion. Perhaps Jim, whose hand rested so naturally within his, was already joined with all the others, and was knowing disappointment because Spock was not there.

But then there was a subtle change. The darkness brightened, so minutely at first that Spock was unsure whether the change was real or merely wishful thinking. But no, there was a difference. A
rosy pink filtered through the black, and came to dominate the edges of vision, bleeding over so that there was the impression that if only he could turn quickly enough, he would be able to see a vast expanse of color.

Something was definitely flickering on the edges of his awareness, and Spock was surprised. Apparently, the way the Gabrielans touched used different areas of the brain than what had been destroyed in him. Or some part of his telepathic abilities was coming back to life.... He did not allow himself to pursue that hopeful thought, and turned his attention back to what was happening.

He must be prepared for whatever happened. He had never experienced the touch of an empath other than the voiceless communication he had shared with Gem, and each race that developed this special gift expressed it in a different way. The Gabrielans did not appear to be any more emotional than humans. He had melded with his mother's people many times and had always maintained his sense of self. He had only released those controls he wished to release. Could an empathic touch be so different? Spock felt his curiosity stir. Yes, he desired this joining with his mate, but there was so much to learn here as well.

The darkness ringed with pink seemed to pulse, expand and contract, and then there was-- it was as difficult to find words for this experience as it had been to describe reality within a meld-- a deadening applied to his thoughts, as if a layer of cotton wool were being draped over his mind. An imprecise image that was yet most apt. Yes,-- it--was-- difficult-- to think.

Pressure began, radiating out from the center of whatever this experience was that had overtaken his consciousness. It grew stronger as the waves of it expanded outward, outward, getting closer to the pink edge.... The pressure was painful now, and the lines that marked the passage of the pressure grew thick and strong. Was this the mrona, or was this a distortion of it caused by his disability? Surely this pain was not part of the typical Gabrielan experience. It... hurt.... Spock felt the impulse to retreat from the pain, to protect himself, but if he did not endure he would never know what the joining would be....

The pressing wave reached the edges of his vision, and there was a pop!-- from somewhere, Spock was unsure where--and the pain disappeared.

Instantly he felt a presence, although it was very far away, and muffled through the cotton that still seemed to wrap around him. Or rather, he perceived presences. They were clustered in groups, and each group was different from the others. He discovered that he could examine them with dispassionate curiosity, and was relieved that no overt emotional response was immediately drawn from him. Perhaps this empathic joining would not violate his Vulcan nature after all.

The groups were interesting; each was stamped with a distinct characteristic, readily apparent. Strength and capability emanated from a few. Dedication and perseverance from some. Loyalty and willingness to serve from still others. Not visible, not a color or a shape, not like in a meld, but in this other-worldly perception, still there.

It was impossible for Spock not to analyze data, not to draw logical conclusions. This then, was the origin of the Gabrielan caste system. A qualitative difference in the empathic essences of each individual. Literally, a pre-determined inner being that pointed inexorably to a person's ability to perform in the physical world.

The castes were not the harshly inflicted, unfair imposition of the strong upon the weak that the crew of the Enterprise had assumed. The castes were the recognition of real differences found within the empathic joining.

Quite logical, actually. Spock wondered how his captain would react to this refutation of the basic
equality of beings that he so fiercely believed in.

For there was nothing of what he perceived that hinted of Kirk, and even the presences that Spock could discern were faint. He strained to somehow come closer to them, but there was no physical body here, and the skills he had learned within the melds appeared to be useless in this alien setting. Something else was required, but he did not know what. Despite his efforts, he could not find the way to move beyond the cloudy curtain that stood before him, separating him from everyone else. It must be his injury.

He attempted to limit his response to that thought, as a Vulcan should, but now this universe showed its power. Here the building blocks of existence were literally emotions, and Spock found that he could not stop nor even control his feelings. A wave of regret, more tinged with bitterness than was seemly, was pulled from within the core of him. He watched it go.

That wave traveled out from where he stood, entrapped and trying not to yearn, and in a few moments reached the far shores of where Chuman's group clustered. The wave broke upon them, and seemed to impart its own motion to them. There was a rippling of movement. The weaker members fell to each side, gave way to those who were stronger, who in turn parted to allow the center space to the strongest of all. Then they separated also to give way to....

Jim.

Spock surged forward, only to be thrown back when he impacted against the milk-white cloud that had seemed so insubstantial. He was still trapped. He could not move, only stay and watch while the hazy yet unmistakable figure of his lover came closer, no, was pushed closer by the force of the Gabrielans behind him.

Spock's eyes-- or what passed for a visual perception in this world-- devoured the image of his lover. Impossible to describe how different Jim was from the others. How to tell a blind man the difference between grey and yellow, except to describe the properties of their wave lengths and know that even that does not convey meaning? How to tell the Horta about the differences between a blade of grass and a towering redwood tree, when the rock-like creature had never seen growing vegetative matter before? Incomprehensible.

But Jim was... magnificent. Not like he was in their melds, glowing with light and his own unmistakable essence, his thoughts and his love pouring over Spock. The meld revealed everything. This world focused on a single aspect of a person, the emotional core of them. But even so, Jim was more solid, more real than any of the others about him. To Spock's eyes, the Gabrielans were but pale imitations of his lover, experiments in creation that had been discarded by a Creator who knew he could do better.

And the better creation was Jim, the Supreme Being's expression of all that was needed to complete one lonely Vulcan. And Jim was consumed by the desire to cross the space between them.

For now they were close enough for Spock to feel the first tickling of the empathic force of the group. He felt the determination of the Gabrielans, the resentment of a few, the resignation of some others. Curiosity, boredom, so many emotions mixed together. He stilled himself, he knew not how, as he struggled to hear more, know more clearly, to come in contact, to touch.... And there, just a whisper, again, a determination that he would have recognized in any form. Jim desired to reach him as much he himself desired to move.

But now it seemed the group could come no closer, and they were still far, far away. The cloud hovered between them. He ached for them to be nearer, tried to move, once more was stopped. It was as it had been for all his life; he was on the outside looking in, separated from the rest of the
universe. Different.

Again he tried to capture his emotional reaction to that bitter thought, and again he failed. A Vulcan's controls were useless here, the entire fabric of the space in which he existed was designed to ferret out every feeling. And so Spock watched as his deeply hidden emotions came bobbing up from his rigid center.

For the empathic joining to bring them this close, and yet to be unable to bridge that final gap.... He burned in the irony. Better not to have been so tantalized. Better never to have hoped. It was like a single drop of water falling in a desert parched for rain; like a lover aching to be filled and doomed to be content with a faraway glance. It was... he and Jim, destined never to touch again....

Each despairing emotion dropped from Spock like water sheeting from his body, pooled at his feet and then went rippling out as it was caught in the empathic tide. One wave, two, three surged forward, and broke against Jim.

With a wrench and his own huge tide of despair, Kirk broke away from the Gabrielans. In an instant he had bridged half the distance to his lover and was reaching forward. Spock watched him, tried to control his hope and failed utterly to do so. Be it unVulcan, be it shamefully emotional, he could not deny that he wanted so much to touch Jim, even in this hazy, nebulous world. He must move for that touch! He reached forward, he knew not how, felt himself passing through the cloud, stretched, strained with everything that he was, almost touched, almost joined....

Something inside him snapped, something very deep and very Vulcan and very connected to the physical world. He became aware of his body again, far away. It pulled him back behind the cloud. Green coated his vision. Disconnected memories swelled up, of heat prickling his skin, of a pounding behind his eyes, of the urgent need to complete himself.... Spock knew a moment of intense disorientation, struggled to find empathic reality again, knew that if he could just hold on for one more moment he and Jim would be together....

He failed.

Kirk's cool fingers were suddenly in his again, and far away there was the sound of metal against wood, and a long creaking moan, as if a door were opening. Spock opened his eyes. His heart pounded in his side and his lungs heaved for air.

Behind him, from the main entrance to the temple more than one hundred meters away, there was the sound of slapping feet. People moving with purpose up the central aisle? He whirled about, hands held wide to meet an unknown threat. He shook his head to clear his still blurry, green-dripped vision, and tried to still his panting breaths. There were individuals moving rapidly up the long center aisle in efficient silence, heading straight for him, the captain and the other people on the raised dais. They were shorter than the average Gabrielan. They did not wear grey robes. They were armed with the long rifle-like weapons Spock had seen in the forest.

It took a second and a half for Spock to assimilate the evidence of his senses, and in the next moment Kirk took five quick steps forward. Spock followed him, half a step behind, and quickly scanned the rest of the building. There was no place to seek cover, and no escape except for the main door. The starkness of the temple presented everything and everyone out in the open, a perfect ambush location for terrorists. There were approximately fifty of the Derkheen; they were all armed. The only sound in the otherwise eerily silent temple was the slap! slap! slap! of running feet. Spock estimated that if they were not stopped in their determined jog up the aisle the armed men would reach the stage in another twenty-five seconds.

Kirk half-turned to the Gabrielans behind him. "Get back!" he shouted. "Back!" Spock, following
Kirk's unvoiced order to him, turned and ran with outstretched arms towards the startled group, attempting to herd them into a corner. Hivlen and the priest, Chuman and the others took frightened, disorganized steps backwards, but there was no place for them to go except to press against the rear wall of the temple. They, and the two officers from the Enterprise, were effectively boxed in by the walls and the rest of the congregation.

Spock whirled about again, caught between remaining before the stunned Gabrielans and returning to his captain's side. Kirk stood at the front of the dais; he confronted the onrushing Derkheen alone. Spock spared a quick glance to his left, to where Uhura and Hunyady, McCoy, Sulu and Josephs stood in the first row. The insubstantial rail before them would provide no protection. There was nowhere to tell them to take cover from a possible bloodbath. But even as he watched, Lieutenant Josephs said something to his comrades, then swung on one arm over the railing, landed lightly, and ran towards the stage.

But the lieutenant was not the only one in the Temple with the desire to defend and protect. As if Kirk's shout had broken the stunned silence of the congregation, someone screamed, "It's the Derks!" The voice echoed clearly throughout the stone hall. "They're after our Ones!"

"Protect the Ones!" came another voice. "Save them!"

In a moment every voice took up the call and every grey garbed body in the temple seemed to move at the same time. Spock had never seen a mob mentality develop so quickly. Echoing off the walls, down from the stone ceiling came the cry "Save the Ones! Save the Ones!" The Derkheen were only half-way up the aisle; a swarm of Gabrielans jumped down from the first few rows of seats to stand before the advancing group, heedless of their own lack of weapons, blocking the advance of the despised untouchables with their own bodies. Others jammed the exit rampways in an attempt to join their fellows.

And a sizable group of men ran towards the stage, intent only on saving the life of their leaders.

Spock stepped forward as he realized what was going to happen, but he had no time at all to reach Kirk. But Kirk was not knocked down and trampled by the frenzied rush to the stage. Instead someone shouted, "The Federation One! Save him too!" Spock could barely hear Kirk's frantic "No! Wait!" before Kirk was caught by many hands and urging bodies, and swept backwards.

Another second and Spock would be caught as well, but he would be of no benefit to anyone if he were trapped along with Hivlen and Kirk when the Derkheen came upon them. He sidestepped to his left as quickly as he could, and the main force of the Gabrielans by-passed him. A grey-haired older man tried to push him to the corner with a hand on his arm, but Spock shook it off easily.

At that moment there was an unmistakable sound. Even if Spock had not encountered it on numberless planets before, he had heard it in the rainforest just that afternoon when Turtrata ba Turtrata fell to the ground. One of the Derkheen fired his weapon.

And then another, and another, until the temple echoed with the percussion of projectile bullets being forced through the air, and the screams of the Gabrielans. The Derkheen were attempting to fight their way forward by slaughtering unarmed civilians.

Spock could not prevent it, his first instinct was to turn and ensure himself of Kirk's immediate safety. But the group protecting the Ones on the stage had pushed Hivlen, the priest, and Kirk down flat on the floor, and thrown their bodies over their leaders, heedless of the weight and their own exposure to a shot in the back. Kirk might be struggling, he might be straining for breath, but for the moment he was safe. Spock would have to force his way through many resistant bodies to reach him.
Which meant that Spock's duty was clear. He must ensure the safety of the crew. A second later he was running across the stage towards where he hoped his crewmates still were.

The floor of the temple was chaos. Most of the free-standing candlesticks had been knocked over, so the only light was what came from the few overhead candelabra. But in the dimness Spock saw that beings were everywhere, jammed together in the center aisle, climbing up and down the stone tiers, jumping into the mass of bodies from above. But the Gabrielans were limited by space. They could not effectively overwhelm the Derkheen by force of numbers because there was no room for them all in the only open area, the aisle. Many were fighting the Derkheen with their bare hands, but many were still in the stands, with no weapons other than their voices. The din was almost painful to his acute hearing. He couldn't see through the mass of bodies and so it was difficult to assess the situation. Was it possible for three hundred unarmed, desperate beings to overcome fifty armed men?

At the top of the aisle, almost to the stage, a Gabrielan struggled with a slighter Derkheen for possession of a weapon. Even as Spock watched, the Derkheen jerked it back into his control, leveled it and fired it point blank into the man's face. The grey-garbed "four" toppled backwards, but the soldier didn't watch him fall. He turned to look for other prey, saw Spock, and aimed for the Vulcan.

Spock dived for the floor and the protection of two bodies already there. He heard the bullet go whizzing by his head, saw a flash of red and felt the impact of someone falling on top of him almost in the same instant.

Pain shot through his back and into his groin; he bit into his lip to stop from crying out. The body pressing over him had landed flat on Spock's kidneys and the recently-sensitized sexual organs that nestled next to them.

"Sorry, sir," a familiar voice panted in his ear. Lieutenant Josephs planted his elbows directly into the hollows of his commanding officer's secondary testicular system and shoved himself off to one side. He was unaware of the agony he caused and his merely human ears didn't hear the gasp forced from the Vulcan's mouth over the shouts and screams and gunshots. Josephs dropped behind the protection of a dead Gabrielan's blood-drenched shoulder.

Spock struggled to catch his breath; he commanded himself to ignore the pain throbbing in his back. It felt like a thousand needles were stuck in his kidneys, but he could waste no time. "Where are the others?" he asked urgently if raggedly, and peered over the body. The Derkheen who had shot towards him had been tackled by another Gabrielan, and the two were rolling on the floor.

"I'm not sure. I lost track."

"We must find our way out of here. See if you can procure a weapon--" with a grim smile Josephs displayed a squat rifle of unmistakable origin. "I see. Use it to p-p-protect yourself and the captain. He is still on the stage with Hivlen. I will attempt to locate the others."

Spock did not wait for Josephs' acknowledgment. With difficulty he rolled to his right, got awkwardly to his feet. He ran towards where the stone tiers of seats ended abruptly in a sheer wall, right before the stage.

First he whipped off the grey cloak so that the crew would be able to easily see him. Then he took a deep breath and jumped up to catch the edge of the sixth row with his fingertips. Slowly, he pulled himself up, felt the shrieking protest of the muscles anchored around his aching kidneys. But this at least he had, Vulcan strength. And a will that allowed him to function despite the fact that the nerve endings in his lower back were on fire, that the synapses and neurons were screaming at him...
to stop.

Once at the top row he crouched down low to present as small a target as possible, and allowed himself thirty seconds while he closed his eyes and breathed deeply. It was the only form of pain control possible to him now, and he discovered that it was almost completely ineffective. So be it.

He opened his eyes and scanned urgently for the rest of the crew. The dim lighting made that difficult. There were still many Gabrielans in the seats, but most of them were down in the first and second rows nearest to the fighting. The frenzied action in the aisle continued unabated, concentrated in the middle. No Derkheen had yet made it to the open area of the stage, where the Ones, Spock could see, were still buried beneath their protectors. But there was no sign of Uhura, Sulu, Hunyady. The grey robes they and everyone else wore would make it almost impossible to find them.

A flash of blue to the far left, almost by the big heavy doors, caught his eye. McCoy was down on one knee in the center of the aisle by a fallen Gabrielan, using the contents of the medical pouch he never was without. How had McCoy and his patient managed to find their way behind the main force of the Derkheen?

Spock began to run along the length of the upper row, at half the speed of which he should have been capable, bent almost double as pain forced him down. But still he ignored it. Exasperation swept over him. Had McCoy never listened to basic operating procedures for landing party duty? The doctor should not have put himself in such danger. The doctor should not have left the others. The doctor did not value his own worth seriously enough. This action was so typical of him. If McCoy were killed Jim would never be able to forgive the exasperating human....

Even as Spock passed above the tangled knot of combat in the center of the aisle the tide of battle shifted. "Watan bi!" he clearly heard shouted. The words were not Gabrielan, and not Standard. Derkheen? "Watan bi!"

The Derkheen were well trained. In just seconds they were falling back towards the door, acknowledging defeat and their inability to reach the stage that had been so obviously their objective.

They were headed straight for an oblivious McCoy.

Spock was not the only one who saw. Behind him, perhaps forty meters away, his Vulcan ears caught an anxious shout through all the other noise. "McCoy! Bones! Get away. Get away!"

Kirk was no longer protected by the Gabrielans. He was undoubtedly also headed for the CMO.

Spock forced himself upright and ran as fast as the narrow footing along the row allowed. He ignored the jarring pain that shot through his lower body with each pounding step. He had to reach McCoy before the retreating Derkheen or they would shoot the physician down. Or if the gods of fate and circumstance, in whom Spock did not believe, favored them, McCoy would be shoved aside. Or possibly run over. There was neither time nor reason to estimate the likelihood of each occurrence.

But the Derkheen, with the Gabrielans in pursuit of them, were faster on the ground floor of the temple than Spock could be half-limping above them. The first five soldiers reached the startled McCoy.

And they did not shove him aside, run him over, or shoot him.
They grabbed him by the arms and took him with them as they swept out of the temple.

Quite obviously, a hostage.

"No," Spock shouted, and he was echoed by another "No, no, don't!" coming from Kirk who was still many meters behind.

Spock ran down to the first row and paused at the railing before he jumped down into the aisle. The Derkheen were leaving the temple in organized ranks, with those in the rear stopping to fire back towards any Gabrielans who might be considering pursuit. It was impossible to predict the situation outside in the square, perhaps there were more soldiers, but if he managed to get outside at least he would be able to follow the retreat, possibly identify where McCoy was being taken, perhaps even effect a rescue.

Spock estimated the chances of his success under such circumstances. The knowledge that Kirk was rapidly approaching propelled and influenced his calculation; he would continue, knowing that his captain would see his actions and provide adequate assistance if it were needed. He had but to follow the last of the Derkheen as they ran through the main door. He waited, then jumped down into the aisle.

Two things happened at the same time. Agony shot through the small of his back as his feet impacted the floor, and a searing brand scorched the left side of his head. His first incoherent thought was that his hair was on fire. But then he realized -- a bullet. He had been shot. He fell to his knees as his will finally gave way to the weakness of his body.

One of the last Derkheen turned to fire another shot into the temple. The soldier saw a blue-garbed Starfleet officer and shouted to his comrades.

Seconds later a Derkheen stood over the Vulcan, a rifle in his hands. Spock looked at him through half-closed eyes, and expected to feel the hot fire of a lead projectile ending his life. But the man quickly reversed his weapon, and efficiently brought the stock down against the side of Spock's already bleeding head.

He didn't lose consciousness. He lost his sight as green exploded behind his eyes and he collapsed, but he was still aware of everything that was happening. Four hands grabbed his feet and legs, then began to drag him, stomach down, along the floor. The strain of his face grating against the hard surface was matched by the pain that exploded just over his temple and the throbbing agony of his back.

*Jim is just behind us,* he thought, surprised that he could think at all under the circumstances. *He will follow us.* But was that favorable or not?

The feeling of a rough texture against his skin, the pebbled flooring of the portico, penetrated Spock's pain-clouded mind enough to warn him. They were going to pull him down the front steps of the temple out into the square.

He had no strength to lift his head, and the soldiers were interested only in speed, not the condition of their prisoner. Spock's lips, his nose and forehead scraped against the top step, then banged with an explosion of fiery torment into the next. He was helpless to protect himself. He clearly heard the cartilage of his nose crunch, felt the pain radiate out to his eyes and up into his head. He knew the medical texts too well. It was possible that shards of bone might be pushed up into his brain.... He fought the urge to vomit. Or to surrender to the pain. But he could not let go. Jim was following....

Two steps! Three! he forced himself to count and hold onto the tatters of consciousness despite the
hot agony of skin being ripped away, despite the lances that were being driven into his skull. How many more...? Four! Five! Six....

He awakened only seconds later; he was now being dragged in the open air of night. He tasted blood; there was a peculiar coolness on his back. Of course, the rain....

And then the logic that always lived in Spock no matter what the circumstances asked a question that had teased for his attention from the moment he had emerged from the aborted empathic sharing. How had the Derkheen traversed the hundreds of kilometers from the closed zone to the south? How had the Derkheen come to the temple?

The dragging mercifully stopped, and more hands were on him now, pulling him into an upright position, pushing him forward, urging him to climb steep, difficult steps. He was forced to open his eyes to prevent falling. Images of grey and white swam before his eyes as they stabilized into a metallic wall, a white fold-down stairway and the dark interior of... something. He stumbled like a drunken man, was caught by other hands, was pushed forward. Spock was barely able to see, felt the cold wind blow against his sodden clothing and more rain pound down upon his head. Where were they taking him?

Then he was inside away from the weather, and being urged to sit on the floor against a hard, artificial surface. The floor was vibrating. There was a roaring sound that suddenly became much louder as the door through which he had just stumbled clanged shut.

Then a peculiar odor assaulted his nostrils. Of course. The answer to both his questions.

He had just entered a space transport. A vehicle similar to the Enterprise’s shuttlecraft, but propelled by some variation of chemical rockets; thus the noise and the trembling floor and the smell of liquid rocket fuel. The Derkheen had crossed the distance to the capital city not on foot, but through the air. They had timed their arrival to coincide with the storm. The sound of thunder had masked their landing.

Blood dripped down into his eyes and he did not have the strength to wipe it away. A heavy weight pressed down upon him, crushed his shoulders, his chest. The ship he was in would leave Gabriela in just seconds. The noise was deafening, it was difficult to breathe, and Spock suddenly knew that during the multiple gravities they would experience upon take-off there was no possibility that he would maintain consciousness. Not to contemplate his lover left far behind, and not to respond to the urgent whisper in his ear, in a voice he recognized.

"Spock. Spock-boy. Are you all right?"

No. It was not necessary to estimate the possibility. There was none.

*****

Halfway across the square, James Kirk stood in the driving rain of the Gabrielan night and stared up at the fire in the sky. He felt the heat of the rockets against his cheeks and knew that if he had been much closer he would have been singed. His chief medical officer and his second-in-command, friend and lover, were being propelled into the atmosphere faster with every second, and there was nothing that Kirk could do about it.

For the third time since he had managed to fight his way out from the pile of protecting Gabrielan bodies he brought his communicator to his lips.

"Kirk to Enterprise. Kirk to Enterprise!"
And for the third time there was no answer.
Chapter 15

On the first day of captivity, he awakened vomiting. The acid bile from his stomach lurched through his scalded throat, scorched his mouth and erupted from his parted, gasping lips.

Gentle hands supported him as he retched where he lay, jack-knifed on his side. A familiar touch rubbed between his shoulder blades. "It's all right. Just get it all out. That's all right. It's okay."

It was not "okay." He choked on his own bile. The smell of it sickened him and made him want to heave again, but there was nothing left within him to expel. Exhausted, Spock rested, his battered, aching face only centimeters from his own vomit, and breathed through his sour mouth.

But the hands would not let him be. Gently, persistently, they pulled at his shoulders until Spock had no choice but to roll over onto his back. He suppressed a groan as fire flared in his lower back. Warily, he stared up into the concerned blue eyes of Leonard McCoy, blinked, then closed his eyes.

"Oh, no you don't. Open up; look at me."

Slowly Spock obeyed the implacable command, and the lined face came into focus again.

"Good. Now, take a breath and tell me who you are."

This was the annoying human medical procedure for determining the presence of a serious injury to the brain. He had encountered it before. A Vulcan healer would simply initiate a light meld that would not tax the patient, but human doctors resorted to words.

He licked his lips. Amazing how much effort the simple action cost him, and how painful just the slight movement could be. His lips were sore and swollen; where they had been split open there were crusts of dried blood that pulled at his abraded tissue. His mouth tasted foul. "Spo--."

"Good. And do you know who I am?"

"Mc--Coy." The hard consonant sound pinched the raw lining of his throat.

"Right again."

A firm hand rested for a moment on his forehead, then dropped to frame his right eye and pull the eyelid wide. The innocent stretching of skin accentuated the pounding that suddenly came alive in his nose and spread fire around and especially below his left eye. Spock wanted to roll away from the touch, but for the moment at least he could not resist McCoy's examination. The doctor looked dispassionately into the pupil. "Hmmmm. I'm not going to ask you where we are, 'cause I don't know the answer to that one. I think you've got a nasty concussion. And your good looks have been spoiled by a broken nose. How do you feel?"

A question whose answer served no purpose. It did not matter how he felt, and a cataloging of his pains would gain them nothing. It was necessary for him to be mobile to deal with whatever situation they were in. He ignored the doctor and attempted to lever himself up on his elbows.

McCoy caught him by the shoulders and easily pushed him down flat; the darkness spun with floating motes of light. "Whoa there. You're not going anywhere."

"I m-must -- assess--"
"There's nothing to assess, Spock. We're in a cell of some sort, it's dark and it's cold, at least they've left us some water, and nobody's been by since we were dumped here."

McCoy was right. It was cold. Spock's damp uniform tunic clung uncomfortably to his body. And it was also dark. Slowly he turned his pounding head from one side to the other, surveying the cell, and all he could see were four walls of some man-made, smooth material and an entryway that glowed very dimly with a force field. There was no window. The only light came from the meager wattage of the field; approximately twenty watts, Spock estimated. The cell itself was no more than three meters square, and besides a bowl of water squatting innocently by the door, it was completely bare. Beyond the doorway was the blank wall of an empty, dark corridor. Other than the words he and McCoy had exchanged, there was no sound.

His gaze returned to the man looking down at him. The doctor's hands were still upon his shoulders; cool as a human's touch normally was to Spock, they provided the only warmth there was.

"How long?" he asked. His lips and tongue would not cooperate; the words came out slurred.

McCoy looked about him, as if he were seeking a timepiece, or judging the time passed by the quality of the air. "I'd say about five hours. Maybe six."

"Where... where...."

Spock didn't have to finish the question before McCoy answered. "I don't know. I never saw anything outside, they hustled us straight from that ship through a tube to this building. Maybe down on the southern continent. Maybe a moon? Does Gabriela have a moon? We were in the air maybe... half an hour. That's not long enough to get to another planet, is it? I don't know. I'm a doctor, not a navigator." Abruptly, McCoy pivoted on his knee and sat down heavily next to Spock's shoulder.

If he had maintained consciousness, Spock would have been able to estimate the gravities at lift-off, the minutes elapsed in flight, perhaps the angle of trajectory, and he would have been able to make a reasonable approximation of their location.

Or perhaps not. With his time sense gone and his perception of his body disrupted, perhaps he would have been as confused as McCoy obviously was.

There was a ripping sound, and Spock carefully turned his head to see the doctor tugging at the black undershirt he wore under his blue tunic. Apparently he had moved beyond the depressed emotion he had manifested just moments ago.

"Damn those fabric replicators," he muttered. "You'd think they made these shirts out of chain-mail.... Ah. There we go." He held up a strip of cloth in triumph. "Now, we're going to get you cleaned up. Don't you move by yourself. I just want to get you away from this mess. I'll do all the work."

"I am capable -- of m-movement, McCoy," Spock protested as the doctor went to his knees, obviously in preparation for shoving the Vulcan across the floor away from the vomit. This time Spock made it up onto his elbows, then exerted an enormous effort to sit up. The invisible hand that clutched at his back almost made the maneuver impossible. The dark room was enlivened by the spinning sparks again.

"Course you are," McCoy agreed. "I insist that every one of my patients who has a gunshot wound to the head, lacerated kidneys, broken cheekbones and a concussion get up and take forty laps in
the gym as soon as he's conscious. Come on, Spock, yield to some logic for a change."

"My injuries should-- m-make no-- difference. I am --Vulcan." This Vulcan was already breathless, but it was impossible to succumb to his weakness, and equally impossible to allow McCoy to treat him with such solicitude. Spock's pride flared, and that along with the doctor's helping hands allowed him to move the two meters to the other side of the room under, almost, his own power. His progress was not dignified, but at least he moved.

Once there McCoy held the bowl up to his lips so that he could rinse out his mouth -- "Don't drink much of this" the physician cautioned -- and then Spock gratefully slipped back down onto the hard floor. It required much too much effort to remain seated. It would be an illogical expenditure of energy. Even though his kidneys and *chenesi*, the secondary testicles, throbbed with the pressure as he lay upon his back, he could not consider another position; he simply did not have the strength.

Sight was still affected by his injuries, and equilibrium as well; the room tilted, and it was considerably easier to close his eyes than to attempt to focus on... anything. Spock lay there and listened to the sounds McCoy made.

It occurred to Spock that the design of the bowl might provide a clue to their location. It took him a long five seconds to gather the energy to open his eyes again, then he watched, almost dreamily, as McCoy poured a small amount of water on the slip of black fabric. His focus narrowed to the cloth. Black, black.... Drip, drip.... The sound of the water falling.... Spock pulled himself away from the darkness that threatened.

The bowl was not of Gabrielan design, of that he was sure. It was decorated with an abstract pattern. In the dim light it was difficult to tell, but perhaps the colors involved were green and brown and yellow. Nothing like the plain symmetry and subdued hues favored by the Gabrielans.

But Derkheen? Possibly. Probably. He had seen no Derkheen artifacts. Although... the bowl did remind him of something. Some similarity to some other object he had encountered before.... The thought teased him for a moment, but the effort to hold onto it was too great, and it slipped away.

There was the touch of coolness on his face as the cloth wiped his mouth, and Spock closed his eyes again. The sensation of helplessness was most disquieting. That was one reason he disliked sickbay, disliked being on display and at the mercy of others when he had no control. But here in the darkness, there was just McCoy.... It was not logical to deny it. He was currently... somewhat incapacitated, and McCoy could help him.

The cloth moved up to the side of his face, gently wiped at the crusts of green there. "You took one hell of a blow to the temple," a quiet voice said. "Good thing you have a hard head. They could have killed you."

The sight of the soldier's face over him, the expectation of death, then the sudden reversal of the gun and pain exploding in his head....

"They w-wanted hostages."

"Uh-huh. That's what I figure too. Guess they were going after Hivlen. I don't know what they think holding us is going to do for them." McCoy was as aware as he was of Starfleet's policy on hostages. They were always expendable.

The cloth skimmed over his nose as lightly as a feather. McCoy was attempting to minimize his discomfort, but still Spock inhaled through his mouth raggedly as the slightest brush from the cloth set the dislocated cartilage of his nose to throbbing. He knew it was highly unlikely, but it felt as if
his nose was not merely broken, but shattered. And his left orbital bone, under his eyes, was definitely fractured. The doctor wiped the skin there with the merest touch, and it erupted into agony.

He moved his legs restlessly against the cold floor, but he could not escape the pain. He should be able to control it. Pain was a thing of the mind. There is no pain.... There is no pain.... The mind controls....

Not his mind. He had not been able to control anything, not the swirling that had sucked him into unconsciousness, not the embarrassing urge to empty the contents of his stomach, and certainly not the pain now, pounding through not just his face, but the side of his head and his back as well. He could not do what a Vulcan child of seven could do. He was like a human, stripped of strength and exposed to the attack of his own body.

McCoy's hand was on his forehead now, rested there lightly. "You feel warm to me. Warmer than you usually do. I think you have a fever."

There was a moment of clarity as Spock remembered the ending of the empathic joining, the moment that the biological imperative of his Vulcan forefathers, the imperative that none of his people could escape, had leaped to take control of his body. Of course. He and Jim had yearned together for whatever union they could achieve, and this was the body's answer. Had it not been inevitable?

McCoy poured a little more water on the cloth, wrung it out in the corner of the room and spread it to dry. Then he came back and seated himself at the Vulcan's hip, looked at his patient for a long moment. "I'm... I'm sorry about this, Spock. If I hadn't been dumb enough to get myself captured, I know you wouldn't be in this mess. But... thanks for coming after me."

It was difficult to decide which would be less painful, a nod or a verbal acknowledgment. Finally, Spock moved his head down, then up, as little as he possibly could. McCoy saw it.

The physician's fist pounded once into his palm. "Damn it, at least they could have left my medical kit. There's nothing in it that we could use to get out of this place, but at least I could give you something...." He stopped abruptly, as if aware that his tirade might cause more pain to his patient. "Look, there's nothing going on now. I'll hold down the fort and you try to get some rest. I'll be waking you up every two hours or so."

McCoy must be joking. It was inconceivable that he sleep at this time. There was too much they needed to discuss....

"McCoy." His voice was raspy. "Have you tested... the force f-field?"

The physician drew up his knees and hugged them to his chest. To conserve body heat, no doubt. He nodded. "First thing. Singed this." He held up a blackened little finger. "So forget what you're thinking, that I can try to escape and go for help. I can't leave here any more than you can."

"There may be a chance--"

"Spock, I don't even know where we are. How can I go for help?"

The first officer took a deep breath through his mouth, to force concentration as well as for air. "We do not know... when we are questioned...." Another deep breath. "If there is an opportunity..., you must take it."

The physician looked over Spock to the wall. "Forget it."
If only he were able to control the pounding in his head. "...An order."

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir. I'll leave you as soon as I can. Damn fool Vulcan."

McCoy had always been illogical. Why should Spock expect him to show any sense at this time? The physician was a stubborn, illogical human who was committed to his Hippocratic oath more than he was to self-preservation and more than he was to common sense. If it would not have involved increasing his level of pain, Spock would have allowed himself to sigh.

There was silence for a time. Spock attempted to concentrate on their situation, where they might be, what their captors might request, how he could respond. How he could engineer an escape, if not for both of them then for McCoy. How to react if a rescue attempt were made. All were questions that should have been simple to consider, as it should have been simple for him as a Vulcan to rise above the discomfort he was feeling.

But that was impossible. He could not subdue any of his pain. It was stronger than his concentration and his will, and he could not stop it. The pain covered him in malignant shadows that moved like waves upon his body, threatening him, receding only to come again. The shadows crept up his legs to make his chenesi throb, then shot up his neck and covered his face, the touch agony as the nerve endings of abraded skin and twisted cartilage flared into life, then the darkness reached fingers deep into his head, where his brain pounded.

And it was hot. So hot. And cold. He shivered with a sudden chill at the same time that he felt sweat break out on his forehead.

McCoy noticed his movement. "Floor's hard, isn't it? Here, let's get you a pillow." The physician shifted so that he leaned against the wall and a moment later Spock's head was being lifted into McCoy's lap. The physician was careful, but he had no idea how much his solicitude cost in bright pain. "There. Now try to get some rest." For just a moment, a hand rested on dark hair. "You know that Jim will do everything he can to get you out of here, wherever here is. He'll use the Enterprise's sensors and pick up your crazy Vulcan readings in no time. So don't worry."

"Us," Spock croaked. From his new position looking directly up into the physician's bent face, it was easy to see the twisted, doubtful expression. Better to concentrate on that than the traitorous reactions of his body.

"Yeah. Us. Well, maybe."

"Yes," Spock insisted. Surely McCoy knew that the captain would expend every effort for any crewman. And surely McCoy knew of Kirk's affection for his CMO, despite their recent rift.

"Okay, okay. So shut up and go to sleep."

McCoy was not convinced, it was obvious. But discussing or explaining any of this was beyond Spock at this time. He closed his eyes.

He did not sleep. At least, he did not believe he slept. He was still well aware of McCoy's breathing, the throbbing in his back, the gathering fire in his veins. But he also became aware of a voice, not McCoy's, not his own, not any dream voice that occasionally visited a Vulcan's dreams.

The voice said You are Kirk's.

Yes. It produced pleasure to acknowledge it. He and Jim belonged together. But it was a puzzle. How do you know?
**Within you a part of him I can sense. His... signature is within yours.**

Not possible. The bond was gone. This voice must be part of a dream, a wish-fulfillment from his subconscious. Spock only wished that Jim were still within him.

The voice continued. **An honorable man is James Kirk. A good man. Although what must be he cannot always accept. Still, a good man.**


**Yes, a very good man.** Illogical, to have this conversation with himself. And yet it was compelling. **I have found my place in him.** It seemed important to assert that, as it was equally essential to remind himself -- **I have lost that place. The bond is gone. And we can no longer touch minds.**

**Yes. By my people you have been hurt. Here.** A distinct caress of the occipital lobe of his brain. **And here.** The temporal lobe. **Would that I could help you now. But alone strong enough I am not. Perhaps, if it is part of my role, later I will help you.**

Was he attempting to convince himself that he would find reserves of strength when they were needed? Was his subconscious creating a fantasy to cling to in a time of stress? Spock rejected both hypotheses within a second of their birth. No matter the changes within him, he retained mental and emotional integrity. He knew it. That left an alternative hypothesis....

**Who are you? Do I know you?** This conversation was --perhaps-- real.

**Never have we met, except through Kirk. The part of you that Kirk holds I have seen. Your captain I know. As to who I am....**

The sensation of a door opening. The perception of a dynamic, very alien personality, and yet a personality that immediately molded itself to Spock's own needs, wanted to give him exactly what he required. The one who communicated with him was calm beyond the calmest soul, competent beyond the most capable hands, caring beyond the most loving heart. All this, and a simplicity of spirit that hid nothing, gave everything. This being... touched... him. Loved... him. Accepted him.

Highly unlikely. Illogical. Surely the figment of a dream. And yet.... Acceptance washed over him. He felt the being's true regret for the injuries that had been perpetrated upon him, body and mind, experienced its calm knowledge that something must be done to right those wrongs, knew its love and concern for him.

He drew the mental equivalent of a shaky breath. **You cannot be real. You are the embodiment of a tale told to children on Earth. A guardian angel.**

Rich laughter rolled through the angel. So much I prefer to be called an angel, rather than other things. But to know who I am you wanted to see. Now the rest of me see.

**Beyond the being, many, many other alien personalities, all linked together to form one seamless creature, and yet all separate, too. There were a few, a very few, that were like the one who spoke to him. And then others, who expressed themselves in different ways, existed for different reasons. These beings were very similar, he realized, to the Gabrielans he had perceived within the empathic joining, in that there were groups that shared the same... essence. Similar to the Gabrielans, and yet not the same.**

**Here were the ones who loved passionately. There the ones who nurtured. Here the ones who built.**
There the ones who served, who created with their hands, who thought, who figured, who possessed the drive to succeed. Each of them was ruled by a single characteristic, and yet each strength was available for use by the whole. All of them, together and separately, stretched far, far, farther away, until the proof of their existence faded in the distance.

He turned to the one who spoke to him, and there were no others. But others were not needed. This one, within itself, was a combination of every other being it had just shown him. The caring, the ability to act, the need to serve and every other quality of its people were within its personal boundaries.

Yes, the being said, and he knew then that the term female suited the being in a way male never could. What I have become this is. And you have seen me, the voice stated gently. All that I am alone and together. But an angel I am not, and heaven this is not. If it were, how could there be hell within it?

Hell?

Where you are now. What has happened to you. See? The cause is here.

Again she opened to him, and he saw that within the throng of her/not her a cancer grew, a disjointed, aberrant part of the fold that did not fit with the rest. The urge to action lay heavily upon this dark growth, and the action was violent, rejoiced in domination, disregarded others’ pain. It was completely at odds with the rest of the corporate host, and scraped against she who held it within her. It caused her pain.

See. This some of my people have -- chosen -- to become. And when they do, those about them they poison, one unspeakable act upon another builds, others to their way do bend, until all is darkness.

He experienced her righteous anger; Good had come face to face with the ugliness of Evil. Lucifer dared to fight against the archangel Michael. She felt such sorrow at these changes in her, and she was absolutely, completely certain that the differences were utterly wrong. Like Michael, she held the certainty of the divinely sanctioned.

This my sisters and I must change, so no more harm to you or to others like you can come. Help me.

He was confused. How could he help anyone, either this being who may or may not be real, or himself, hallucinating in a bare, cold cell?

She answered his question. Think of Kirk.

Out of his control, he did, his memory unscrolled like a holofilm. He remembered Kirk holding him in the darkness after a nightmare, talking with Hivlen ja Hivlen in the government square, kissing the tip of Spock’s nose in the treetops in the Gabrieland rainforest, facing without fear the armed Derkheen who rushed up the aisle of the temple....

Enough. What I need I have. I will do what I can now, what I am permitted to do.

Will you help us?

For my people what I must I will do, and for you what I can I will do. But alone am I, my sisters are not yet here, and what I can accomplish know I do not. To find help I go. I go to Kirk. Although my way will be long and uncertain, do not lose hope. The universe may yet have a role for you to play.
But he and McCoy were prisoners, he was injured, and the fires had been lit within him. I do not know if there is time for me. I burn.

Gently. For him. I see that. None other will you accept.

Again, confusion. The bond is gone. My burning cannot be focused on him.

Compassion washed over him, and love. It was so different from the love he shared with Jim, different from the emotion he had always felt from Amanda. As rich, as strong, but of a different tenor. The human description of this most varied feeling was so limited.

And after the love lavished itself on him, he heard the voice again. That which joined you to Kirk, completely erased it is not. A fragment of that bridge still is within, unperceived and deep, broken almost at the root. An echo of him there lingers, and to the part of you that you have always denied it clings. And it is here, where the human entwines with the Vulcan, that you may yet recover from the attack of my people. That is why for him only do you burn.

No. He would not allow the hope to explode. This was exactly what he had illogically wished for, that somehow his hybrid make-up would help him.... It could not be true. This was merely wishful thinking. Or dreaming.

But dream or not, whether he spoke to himself or to some impossible being, he said Jim must be far away. My condition is unnatural, accelerated, caused when I came so close to him with the Gabrielans. I do not know if I will live until....

True that is. So perhaps, for you, this life is not to be. But to hope cling. Trust. Trust that events will unfold as they should. Above all, accept what will be.

I will fight for life. But telling you means nothing. You are nothing but a dream, produced by the religious connections to the place of my injury.

You do not believe I am your guardian angel? Forgiving affection washed over him again, and a rich chuckle. Do not then. But I wish you well.

...Well. ...Well. Well. WELL.

He opened his eyes, and the echoes of the word faded away. The cell was quiet and dark, and it was rank with his vomit. McCoy slumped against the wall, asleep, and Spock's blue tunic was damp not with raindrops but with sweat that defied the biting cold.

So, he thought grimly, a detailed hallucination that indicates my desire for miracles and safety, for a mind touch that I am not capable of. I reject those thoughts. I must be realistic, and prepare for possible contingencies, not depend upon a whispering, imaginary voice from the void.

And if the voice had been real? Then help may or may not come. Illogical to depend upon it. He would not give McCoy possibly false hope by referring to it.

He lay in the dark, he breathed shallowly through his mouth, he tried to ignore his discomfort. He attempted, fruitlessly, to implement the calming meditation that would produce sleep.

He thought of a severed root deep in his mind. He thought of Jim.

A realist would perhaps say that their union was simply not destined to be. Would not an impartial observer find their relationship highly unlikely? McCoy had. Two beings alien to one another. Two beings of the same gender. Two Starfleet officers, with the weight of public opinion and official
displeasure to prevent their joining.

And yet despite all that, he and Jim had come together. It had been good. There had been such fulfillment in Jim's touch upon his body, and exquisite pleasure in touching in turn. And each time their minds had merged.... He remembered the brightness, the sensation of all his empty spaces being illuminated by his lover's golden sun, the almost orgasmic feeling of Jim flowing over him....

He loved Jim.

He allowed himself to linger over the thought, knew that he might be accelerating the hormonal pressures in his body but did not care. He remembered Jim awakening in the morning, sleepy-eyed and tousle-headed, smiling through kisses. Jim had said those mornings were most important to him, and those languid minutes were precious to Spock as well. To simply take the moment and fill it with love.... Kirk had taught him that.

He remembered Jim standing on the bridge, issuing commands in crisis. Was that when he had first felt the stirrings of a unique kinship, when he recognized what a superb commander Kirk was? Or was it in the quiet times during the first three years, when Jim had turned to him with an unrestrained smile, when they had mutually lingered over meals or a chess board, exploring their affinity, finding finally that it had no boundaries?

He remembered Jim stubborn, worried, happy, sad, determined, subdued, depressed, glowing.... gone.

For some reason his shattered nose began throbbing again, burning, and the burning slid down his throat and pressed against his chest, tightened his air passages....

He half-raised up from the pillow of McCoy's legs and wheezed quietly for long moments. He did not want to awaken McCoy.... But his body needed oxygen; he could only pull it in through his strangled throat and mouth....

At last he could breathe easily again, and he carefully dropped his head back against the physician. Even that cautious movement sent pain rocketing through his nose and left cheek, but he only gasped with the stabbing. He could cope with the physical discomfort. If McCoy had access to his medical kit, it would be alleviated. But nothing could alleviate the pain that was deeper inside.

He had walked through the halls of the Enterprise with the touch of a beloved bondmate in his mind, and he would never forget the feeling, never stop yearning for it again. It was so unfair. He who had never been accepted, to finally find acceptance and have it ripped from him for no reason.... He who had gone without the mental fulfillment each member of his race craved, to finally have all that he wanted only to have it disintegrate....

The voice in his mind had said that Kirk was far away. There had only been a chance she would find the captain, and the hope she had encouraged Spock to hold onto had been slender. He had felt the sad truth in her words. So now, he must face another truth: the chance of dying alone in the agony of the unconsummated pon farr....

"Jim," he whispered through cracked lips. The sound was very loud in the silent cell, and he did not allow himself the indulgence of repeating his lover's name. He would not succumb to despair. There were always possibilities....

He froze when the sound of voices came from the corridor.

"McCoy!" He struggled to sit upright.
Three Derkheen soldiers appeared outside the cell as McCoy helped Spock to his feet. They were shorter than the average human, and stockier. Their heads appeared to be slightly too large for their torsos; they were dressed in dark trousers that were almost tights and brightly-patterned knit pullover shirts. Spock reached for the equilibrium to stand as two of the men leveled their weapons with the no-nonsense ease of soldiers who knew exactly how to pull the trigger. The other soldier reached beside the door and appeared to pull something, possibly a switch of some sort. There was a distinct "click" and the shimmering field disappeared.

"Outside." One of the men with short black hair motioned to them with his gun. He spoke in accented Standard.

Spock shook off McCoy's supporting hand and walked as steadily as he could through the door. He paused there, not knowing where the soldiers wanted them to go, not knowing which direction to turn.

"Go!" Without warning the butt end of a rifle impacted between his shoulder blades. There was an audible crack! as metal hit skin and bone and then Spock stumbled forward, barely able to keep to his feet. "That way!" A rough hand grabbed him by his shirt until he found his balance again, then pushed him forward. "Walk!"

An easy command to issue, but it was not simple for Spock to follow it. The effort of placing one foot in front of the other without falling.... They walked. The corridor was empty, and still dark. The footsteps of McCoy beside him and the three soldiers behind echoed everywhere, before them, after them, around them. Each step drove electric jolts through Spock's back that flew straight up into his pounding head. He did not know if he could....

The impact of the floor against his chest drove all the breath from his body. The floor was aged duro-plast, a faraway part of him noticed. He could see the minute dust particles along its length, driven by his heaving breaths. And he could hear, seemingly at a distance, a struggle behind him, and McCoy demanding, "Let me help him!"

The business end of a rifle jabbed into his ribs. That, he thought as he rolled away from the pain, was not helpful. More physical abuse would not assist him in walking.

A surprisingly strong hand reached down and grabbed his upper arm. "Get up. We're not going to carry you."

Then he was on his feet again, swaying drunkenly.

He blinked. McCoy was backed up against a wall, a gun pressed to his throat, and yet still the doctor managed to look at him with worry. Spock wanted to be able to answer the unspoken question and say I will be all right, but it would be a lie. He had never been subject to pain without the ability to control it, and he had always known before the exact parameters of his pain, known its origin and how best to cope with it. Now, with all that was Vulcan stripped away from him, he knew nothing. Except that he must somehow find a way to continue.

The soldier released McCoy, and shoved them both forward. Again, they walked.

Spock took deep breaths. It was essential for him to remain conscious, to observe everything that he could about this journey and the area through which they traveled. They had no idea where they were, and they must discover their location if they had any chance of a successful escape. Spock did not think they were on Gabriela's only moon. The gravity here was.... He attempted to estimate it, and admitted defeat. It appeared to be close to one standard gravity, as it was on Gabriela and most of the inhabited planets of the sector.
The corridor seemed endless, although he knew his sense of time was hopelessly distorted, measured only by each painful footstep. He attempted to apply reason to the situation, but his thought processes were clouded. Instead, he thought about how their slow, steady pace reminded him of another walk he had taken, up the center aisle of the Gabrielan temple, when foreboding, a dampening of spirit had traveled with him. The same heaviness hung on him now. What were they walking towards?

He attempted to combat the sapping of his spirit and his strength. Concentrate on something positive, on something, anything else. There were weak lighting strips approximately every ten meters, high up on the wall, but they illuminated only blank walls and empty, dark doorways. But they were at least light, bridging the darkness. One lighting strip, two lighting strips, three.... Concentrate. The world was spinning again. Look at the light they were approaching. See it separate itself into constituent colors of the spectrum: red, orange, yellow....

Green. The world was green, it coated his vision, and he was falling again....

This time the guard was not so gentle. A heavily booted foot kicked him in the side once, twice. "Get up! Or I'll blow your head off."

An image of his headless corpse lying in green blood on the floor of some forgotten building on the forgotten planet of Gabriela. Jim, coming upon his body, and weeping.

It was not easy, but he stood. He took a deep breath and his head suddenly cleared with the sharp pain that rocketed through his side. At least one rib affected. But his head was still intact.

That was not quite... rational, he realized, as McCoy took his arm and steered him forward. His disorientation and dizziness was the result not only of his concussion but of his advancing hormonal condition as well. But he must maintain a grip on reality, or McCoy would surely... would surely... would surely what?

He glanced at the physician. Unusual. There was not a mark upon the lined, worried face, and locomotion was not a problem. And yet Spock knew that his own face showed his injuries, and the guards seemed intent on adding to them, despite the clear possibility that he would become so debilitated that he would indeed need to be carried to wherever it was they were taking him. Interesting. Why was he being singled out for such treatment?

The question felt... comfortable, it called upon a familiar reasoning process, and for a few minutes Spock walked with more of his old confidence. He was able to observe more of their surroundings. The corridors were even colder than the cell had been, and there was still barely enough light to see. Whatever this building was, very little energy was being expended to heat or light it. Spock added that observation to the few others he had, but the data were still insufficient for any conclusions.

Turn to the right, to the left, to the right again. The hallway was pierced by an occasional dark doorway, but in the dim light most of what was inside the rooms remained a mystery. The corridors were even colder than the cell had been, and there was still barely enough light to see. Whatever this building was, very little energy was being expended to heat or light it. Spock added that observation to the few others he had, but the data were still insufficient for any conclusions.

It was impossible not to remember the words of his dream conversation, the blackened image of a people who embraced violence and disregarded another's pain. From what he had seen of the Derkheen so far, they fit that profile. But had his subconscious made those connections as he slept,
or had someone actually spoken to him?

Useless to speculate. Instead Spock observed as much as he could, and memorized their route with an effort. This journey should have provided an opportunity for escape, but such a thought was ludicrous. If Kirk had been with him, perhaps he could have functioned as support for whatever his captain devised. Kirk would have whirled about, knocked one weapon from a soldier's hands while reaching for the second, and Spock would have done his utmost to incapacitate the third with a neck pinch. Such a plan would have been automatic between them, needing only a glance for its implementation. But in his current physical condition, and with McCoy.... It was necessary to assess their possibilities logically. Escape at this time was not possible.

Nor was it possible, it seemed, for him to finish this journey with any dignity. Perhaps there was a minute flaw in the floor, a sudden tilt in the pathway, or a seam in the duro-plast, but whatever the cause Spock found himself pitching forward once again, trying to turn his head as he fell to protect his face and knowing that he failed....

He awoke to sharp knives sticking straight through his brain and McCoy arguing angrily, "This man is injured. He can't go any further. Either let me carry him or let him rest. What kind of people are you?"

And this is what uncontrolled humans endured each time they were injured. Spock could barely breathe. He was Prometheus, bound to the rock, an alien condemned to eternal suffering because of his compassion towards humans. He was raw flesh exposed on a stone altar. Eagles tore at him, plucked at his gaping wounds....

Desperately, he reached for the controls that had always helped him through any pain he experienced, but all he had learned since childhood was like sand slipping through his fingers. Endure. This was what Jim endured, what the human security guards endured when they were injured. Endure, for Jim would surely come for him....

Spock slitted his eyes open with an effort. Once again his head was being supported in McCoy's lap. He could see the physician's dark expression, the outraged tension in the stiff body, but he could also feel the gentle hands that rested on his shoulders. McCoy had always had a healer's hands.... Then the dark-haired soldier suddenly loomed into view. Malevolent, eager to inflict suffering. Like the dark cancer that spread throughout the mystical body of his dream.

"We are the people who can do anything we want to you," the man snarled, "and you cannot do anything to stop us. Get him up. He will walk or I will make him walk with this." He shook the rifle in unmistakable threat.

"He can't," McCoy almost shouted. "Do you want to kill him?"

"I can do it," Spock said, and was surprised at the strength he managed to put in his voice when he barely had the ability to keep his eyes open to see. McCoy must not know the effort behind his words. "I can walk."

The soldier smiled cruelly. "See? He won't die. Help him up. We are almost there."

A minute later and their destination became obvious. The air was warmer, and there was the murmur of voices. The corridor spilled out into a large, well-lit hall crowded with Derkheen. Spock pulled away from McCoy's supporting hand as they walked in and everyone in the hall turned to look at them. Was this gathering a tribunal? A Derkheen trial? Whatever, he would represent himself and Starfleet with as much dignity as he could muster.
The soldiers urged them forward through the crowd towards the only empty space, in the center of the room. The hall appeared smaller than it was because of the low ceiling and the garish colors that were splashed upon the walls. They passed row upon row of Derkheen; some of them cried out, "The Feds!" and reached for them with ungentle, poking hands. Many of them were dressed as soldiers and carried weapons, others must not have participated in the raid. There were, Spock estimated as he blinked at the bright light and demanded that his equilibrium allow him to stay on his feet, approximately one hundred and ninety men and women present; most of them were seated cross-legged on the floor in a large circle. In the center of the circle stood a man. He and McCoy were pushed through the throng to him.

The man was dressed completely in black; his head was shaven, leaving a shadow of dark hair. The man looked up into his face as Spock came to a halt, then a gun prodded into the small of the Vulcan's back, as if the soldier knew and deliberately sought out his most vulnerable part. Spock gasped and fell to his knees at the leader's feet. He fought to keep the world from blanking out.

The man grabbed at his hair and pulled until they were eye to eye. The resultant arch to his lower back was agony. "You are Commander Spock from the Enterprise." It was not a question.

"Yes." It was easier to speak, even through his crusted, swollen lips, than to nod.

"And do you know who I am?"

Spock fought for the concentration to see, and the vision that swam before him came into focus. A narrow face with a sharp chin, dark, almost black eyes, an aristocratic curve of dark eyebrows, a face slashed by full, red lips. Deep lines in the forehead that came from scowling. A light in the intelligent eyes that said the man thoroughly enjoyed his domination of the Vulcan.

A face that would have perfectly fit the stereotype of Lucifer found on a church wall in a small farming community on Michaela, but not a familiar face. "No."

The man's smile broadened. "I didn't think you would."

The man released Spock, and he sank back on his haunches, gasping and ashamed at the lack of control he had over his body. But the leader ignored him and swung to look at McCoy, who was still standing, and whose arms were restrained by one of the guards behind his back. "And who are you?"

"Leonard McCoy, chief medical officer of the Enterprise. Give me back my medical kit. Let me help --."

Casually, the man stepped forward and backhanded McCoy across the face. "Be silent. You are in no position to make demands. We do not need you. It is only fortunate circumstance that we let you live."

Spock lurched forward in a vain attempt to go to McCoy's aid, but there was nothing he could do. To think otherwise would be illogical.

He watched as blood trickled from the corner of the physician's mouth. McCoy wiped it away against the point of his shoulder and gave the leader a venomous look. Such provocative emotion would not help them.

A question would divert the leader's attention to him. "W-will you tell us who you are? And where this place is?"

Satisfaction settled over the narrow features. "You mean you do not even know that? We did the
baln even better than I had imagined. And then we only had two Ta's." He lifted up his arms and addressed all the people gathered in the room. "See what only two Ta's did?" he called. "This one does not know where he is. He does not remember!"

The crowd shouted their approval. To Spock, they sounded like dogs growling. Or like the gueristin, foul scavengers of the desert, fighting over carrion meat.

But an emotional reaction to the threatening crowd would not gain him anything. Spock subdued his reaction, and frantically tried to think instead of what it was he was supposed to remember. Something during the flight from the Gabrielian temple when he had been unconscious? Something during the memory lapse that had occurred because of the events on the Lox’ttheneth’nar? He remembered almost nothing of the events on that ship. And what was a baln, and a Ta? He did not have enough data, but life with James Kirk had often forced Spock into speculation, or as Jim put it, the application of intuition. Somehow, these people were connected with the attack that had robbed him of half of what he was.

The leader waved his hands in the air for silence, and the crowd obeyed him instantly. "The prisoner wants to know who I am. What should our prisoners call me? What is my name?"

"Montin," the crowd roared. "Montin! Montin! Montin! Montin!"

The chant went on for a full minute, growing louder and louder as each voice in the hall took up the name. "Montin! Montin!" But this was not the simple, enthusiastic recitation of a leader's name. Spock had been in many dangerous situations before, had witnessed mobs intent on destruction, on looting, he had witnessed the blood lust of hysterical people bent on death. This crowd was sounding the call to battle, was already worked up to fever pitch, and it would take very little to change their words into action. He could not control a shiver of reaction.

Finally the chant died down. Montin walked to where Spock still knelt back on his heels; he pulled the Vulcan onto his knees again by grabbing his hair. He addressed Spock and the people at the same time. "You have heard my name now. I who was Mon am now Montin. The best Tin. The Tin who leads a new people. The Tin who will bring my people home."


Everyone in the hall chanted. Montin released Spock and strode up and down before the crowd, accenting each word with a fist punched into a palm. The pace of the chanting picked up, as if the people were running a race and straining for the finish. The palm slapping changed to fists pounding on the floor, and the room rumbled as if with thunder.

"Home." Crash.

"Home." Crash.

"Give us a HOME!" Crash.

"Give us a HOME!" Crash.

In the small space the noise was deafening to Vulcan ears. Even without telepathy, the psychic emanations from the people washed over him, threatening, unrestrained, even a human could feel them, or a mentally-castrated Vulcan. The air was charged with virulent enthusiasm. These people were indeed like the wild gueristin circling a wounded hava, toying with it, waiting for the final
moments of weakness before moving in for the kill. Once, when he was thirteen, Spock had discovered the half-eaten corpse of a Vulcan who had wandered too far into the desert. The images of limbs torn away, of skin stripped by scavengers had always stayed with him, and now his own skin crawled as he saw that ravaged body in his mind’s eye and heard the ferocious enthusiasm of the crowd grow wilder and wilder.

These people were... frightening. Rabid. Only Montin, standing in front of the crowd and encouraging every moment of adulation, restrained them from attacking the two Enterprise officers, tearing them apart. These people, united in a frenzy, led by Montin, seemed capable of anything.

It was difficult to remain on his knees as the sound pounded against him. Spock drew in a deep breath and concentrated on the bare floor. He must not allow physiological responses to the psychological battering of the spirit. Fear had no place here, and neither could physical weakness. Breathe, breathe, breathe; he did not know what the crowd would do if he lost consciousness again, if his slack body displayed that much weakness. McCoy would not be able to help him.

He felt a modicum of strength return, straightened and instead of looking at the screaming crowd, he looked at McCoy. Awe and not a little fear resided on the honest features, and a stark resolution that Spock had seen many times before. Sometimes he had seen that look in times of danger, but most often when McCoy struggled with death over the body of a patient. McCoy, like Jim, was an honorable man, but he did not have the training or the skills to get them out of this situation. The physician was relying on him.

Spock forced himself to turn back to the crowd, although it was difficult to face the contorted faces, the stark hate as so many stared at him, screamed, waved their arms. Such wild, primitive emotion....

Montin raised his hands into the air and slowly the chant died away. He whirled about and addressed Spock with a pointed finger. "Where is your home?"

The answer that sprang to his lips, the Enterprise, was not what the leader wanted to hear, Spock instinctively knew that. Not with the conditions as they existed on Gabriela, and this rebellion a response to the poor living conditions that had been forced for centuries on the Derkheen. So he answered a half-truth. "Vulcan." At one time, that had been the only truth he had.

"See," Montin gestured towards Spock but addressed the crowd. "This one has a home. Everyone has a home but us. Their own planet, land to call their own. This we also deserve, and this we will obtain if we must fight to get it. We deserve a home of our own, where we can live free."

Riotous approval from the crowd, who shouted as if there were two thousand and not two hundred in the room. And all the while Spock thought of Montin's words with puzzlement. This was not logical. Although conditions were harsh, the Derkheen did indeed have a home, had lived on Gabriela for at least four hundred years. Spock had assumed that this fight was for a better home, fertile land and natural resources. It was possible that Montin was speaking imprecisely, but Spock did not think so.

And despite his injuries, despite the probability of more violence to be perpetrated upon his person by these violent people, Spock could not help thinking -- Did not everyone deserve a home? Freedom?

The people were silent upon a wave of Montin's hand, and McCoy's voice rode upon the silence. "What do you want from us, Montin? We can't help you get a home."
Abruptly the leader turned towards the two Starfleet officers. "But the Enterprise can. Will you, Commander Spock, teach us how to operate your ship?"

Montin did not expect him to agree, that much was obvious. The question was rhetorical. "No," Spock answered.

"But we must know how to operate your ship," Montin explained in a patient voice. "To help with the resettlement, to monitor it, and to warn off anyone who wants to interfere with our plan. To convince the Gabrielans when they attempt to resist us. Even Starfleet will hesitate before the power of one of her best, and I do not think the Federation will allow anyone to interfere in the internal affairs of a non-aligned planet with such a ship guarding it. We may even accomplish everything we need to by the time anyone else from the Federation arrives. Then we will be in control of Gabriela, we will return the ship to the Federation with our abject apologies, and can offer what the Feds want, an alliance and a buffer against the Tholians."

Spock could see the reasoning behind Montin's plan, and acknowledged the possibility that it would work. Perhaps, a one in five chance. Political necessity at times excused much. But could Starfleet possibly ignore the hijacking of one of its vessels, and its use to kill Gabrielans, force them into submission? Doubtful. But the choice would never have to be made. "I will not help you," Spock said flatly. "Neither will any other officer. You will not have the Enterprise."

Montin took three steps closer, looked down at the Vulcan who knelt before him. "Oh, but there you are wrong. Why do you think you have not been rescued by your loyal comrades? Because we already have the Enterprise."

There was an inarticulate protest from McCoy, and Spock found that he could not prevent swaying on his knees as a moment of shock overtook him. His body was weak, the cause was sufficient. The claim must be an untruthful boast, but there had been the ring of certainty in Montin's voice."

"If you have the ship already, then you do not need me," he tested.

"But we do. We have your ship, but we also need you. I do not fool myself that we can operate such a ship without special training. The Enterprise is a complex machine, and none of us here have technical training. That has been denied us. For years, for centuries, never has the outcast been permitted the luxury of anything but the most minimal education wherever we go. For the elite, yes, everything. But for the dregs? For us? Almost nothing! We have lived forever on the edges of every society, do you understand? Many of us do not know how to read or write in your Standard language. Written instructions on how to operate your Enterprise would mean nothing to us. So we must take our training from you. From your mind."

Spock stared at him stonily, but his thoughts were racing. Montin's words did not quite describe the situation on Gabriela. The Derkheen lived apart from the Gabrielans, not on the edges of their society. And with the separation of the races, there had been no education for the Derkheen at all. Not even minimally. Spock's data base was growing, but he found it impossible to fit the disparate facts together. Who was Montin, exactly? And who were the people gathered together in the hall, listening raptly to Montin's every word? He had assumed they were the Derkheen, but was that the complete truth?

The leader allowed his captive audience a moment of thought, then he continued. "At this moment, our three Ta's are stretched to their limit. They sit," he waved behind McCoy, as if to indicate a place far away, "and they concentrate, and blanket the thoughts of everyone on the Enterprise with their control. It is the only way we have to prevent the ship from acting against us. If we only had two more Ta's... Then the five of them would have the power to lift every thought from every mind on your ship... But we do not have five, we have three. We need more, but only fate can tell if a
"And that is where you, Commander Spock, come into my plans. Finding you in the temple was the next best thing to capturing your captain. Oh, yes," he said, although Spock knew he had managed to subdue his surprise before it showed on his face, "we intended to capture your captain, and that spineless Hivlen as well. But what we have," he backed off and surveyed both officers with satisfaction," is almost as well. The first officer of the ship knows everything we will need to know. You are all we need."

"I will not help you," Spock said flatly.

"Not now. If we could re-direct the Ta's away from controlling the rest of your crew, then it is possible that I could have what I need from you in minutes. Even with just three Ta's, I believe they would be able to enter your mind and squeeze you.... But there is another way, requiring some patience, but it will work." Montin stepped even closer, leaned forward so that Spock could see the veins that throbbed beneath the skin of his forehead, could see the lush eyelashes that framed his eyes. He smiled a malicious smile; the leader was enjoying every threatening word. "In a short while you will witness a transition. Watch carefully, for within a few days it will be your fate. Once you are forced through the transition, once you surrender your mind and will to our cause and become one of us, then, then I think you will help us."

A moment of deadly silence. No one in the room stirred. Montin was a statue staring into Spock's eyes. Spock did not allow himself to react to the threat of a Vulcan's worst nightmare: the rape and plunder of his mind.

"Never." He would kill himself before that happened. If the pon farr did not accomplish the job for him first.

"We shall see." A promise and a threat.

Beyond Montin, there was a stirring in the crowd as someone forced their way forward. The leader turned and Spock saw a soldier run up to Montin and stand, quivering and afraid.

"Well?" the leader demanded impatiently.

"She... is g-g-gone," the man stammered. "She escaped. A... life-slip."

"Escaped?" Montin roared. "Escaped? How could you let her go? Didn't you give her the drugs? Didn't you keep watch over her?"

"I did," the man said, backing away from the slowly advancing leader. "I swear it. But she is.... Ta. She must have...."

With an inarticulate cry of rage Montin reached for the soldier's neck and squeezed his fingers around it. The terrified man did nothing to defend himself, but shook with the force of Montin's fury.

"You are.... gerg! You are... nothing! You are not fit to be one of us! Would that I had never helped you through the transition!"

The soldier's eyes bulged, his face turned purple. Montin gave the neck one last brutal squeeze, then he flung the half-conscious body away from him towards the crowd. "Take him," he cried. "Take him and punish him."

At last the people were freed from their restraint. With a roar the Derkheen rose up with blood lust
in their minds; Spock averted his eyes from the sure brutality. But he thought of the voice he had heard in his dream, and he wondered if it were possible that a guardian angel had taken wing.

*****

McCoy looked down at the red splotches on his blue uniform tunic and grimaced. He hadn't been that close when it happened, but when the crowd had killed the guard blood had splattered a long way.

At least he was used to the sight of blood. It came with his profession. But it had been torture to sit and do nothing as the peaceful Vulcan was covered with it. The gleeful Derkheen had smeared it in the dark hair, had marked Spock's face with it, so that rusty streaks now coursed down the gaunt cheeks like the furrows of soul tears. Even worse, one of the soldiers who was guarding them had brandished a long knife, and with a sharp downward blow that broke bone, he'd cut off one of the corpse's fingers. Then he'd dangled the bloody appendage in front of the Vulcan's face. McCoy had fought hard to choke down his own sickened reaction. Spock had just sat there, a sphinx contemplating infinity, until the soldier had forced his head up and back, and commanded that he focus on what was displayed so obscenely before him.

It was as if they knew exactly how best to break the spirit of one of the finest, gentlest men McCoy had ever known. As if they had looked into Spock's mind and seen every weak point. McCoy could have wept. If only they had directed some of their attention to him. He could have taken it. But he was unmarked.

At least now the people were relatively calm, and Spock was seated next to him on the floor in the middle of the room. The spare shoulders were straight, the spine was rigid, the face was cast in stone, but McCoy was not fooled by the outward show of calm. Nobody could be untouched when their clothing stank of violently-spilled blood, when they had just witnessed another being almost literally torn limb from limb. Least of all Spock. McCoy had recognized the sensitive spirit within the discipline years before. Now, behind the expressionless facade, Spock was hiding, the same way he had learned to hide when he was a boy on Vulcan, and the way he had hidden all those lonely early years in Starfleet. Until Jim had taken command....

McCoy refused to allow himself to think about Kirk. He knew the captain must be frantically working to find a way to rescue them, but wherever they were, it was a long way from where they had been. Even a chemically propelled rocket could go a long way in half an hour. And what could Kirk do without the Enterprise? No, better not to think of rescue from that direction.

McCoy realized that no one was paying any attention to them, not even Montin. Everyone was looking towards the doorway, waiting for something, and so McCoy edged closer to his companion. Then closer, so that their shoulders and upper arms touched.

"Lean on me," he said quietly. He was careful not to make it obvious he was offering aid; he kept his eyes forward.

A stiffening in the thin frame, and then an audible sigh and weight sagged against the physician. He'd been right; Spock must be close to collapse to allow such weakness to show, and McCoy felt a sorrowful pride that he was one of the few permitted to give the Vulcan aid.

Heat radiated from the flesh pressed against his, even through two layers of cloth. McCoy risked a glance at Spock's face, saw the fever-bright gaze trained steadfastly on the floor, the shallow breaths taken through the mouth, saw the edema and the black-green bruises under the eyes and around the twisted, broken nose. The normally immaculate hair was matted with stiffening blood.
His own mouth thinned to a grim line. If only the Derkheen would let him have his medical kit back. He had analgesics that would work even on a Vulcan's pain, that would ease Spock's suffering. But he knew it was useless to ask. Damn those Derkheen!

He'd never seen anything like what they'd witnessed these hours in the bright-lit hall. The Derkheen had seemed less like people and more like animals. And the way they acted, as if violence and degradation were the first actions that occurred to them, as if the easiest ways to express themselves were through blood, the imposition of their strength against another, brutality. They weren't like any other race McCoy had ever encountered. Not even the Klingons. The Klingons were brutal, but they could be reasonable. He remembered Mara and Kang.

Certainly the Derkheen were united in a common purpose. The echoes of "Home, Home" still rang in his ears. The way they chanted together, listened to Montin together, moved in sudden violence together made each individual seem like manifestations of the same creature. A group race, like the troglodyte Turgles were. Or like those hideous creatures that had infected Spock's nervous system on Deneva.

No, McCoy admonished himself. Don't think of the Derkheen as "creatures." He might have slipped into some prejudicial thinking in the past few months, but he refused to allow himself to become so rigid that he couldn't even grant the Derkheen their purpose. And he would never understand them, have a chance of reasoning with them, if he didn't give them their due. He might disagree with this race's purpose, he might die in its expression, but the Derkheen weren't "creatures," and they weren't "things." They were sentient beings, "people" in McCoy's book, and this quest for a "Home" must be a powerful motivation for them.

He wondered what would happen if Kirk were here, with his unique insights and ability to empathize with just about any race in the galaxy. The captain had been very sympathetic towards the Derkheen's cause when they were all calmly attending a scientific conference; guess Jim didn't feel so kindly towards them now.

He felt as much as saw Spock's head turn; he followed the first officer's gaze and saw four people enter the hall.

They were three men and a woman who hadn't been there previously. One of the men and the woman wore white albs over their clothing; their steps were hesitant, their expressions studies in uncertainty. They were totally unlike every other person in the room, like children as compared with adults, and McCoy realized that was an apt analogy. These two did look younger than all the other Derkheen, certainly much younger than the two soldiers with lined faces who walked behind, determined, almost herding the others forward. The four walked up to Montin, two by two.

The ones in white stepped forward, the other two stepped back, but placed hands from behind on each shoulder. A ritual motion. Were they keeping the two in place, preventing them from running away?

"Sli and Nar, are you ready to join us?" Montin addressed the two candidates. "The transition will be difficult, but we are all here to help you."

Both those in white swallowed hard. Damn, the nervous gesture reminded McCoy of the first officer, who was now very still and very quiet beside him. Where they touched, Spock's shoulder and arm were hard as a rock.

"We are ready," the two replied in unison. The man's voice trembled.

"Whom do you reject?"
The woman stepped forward, licked her lips and with an effort, said, "I reject Sliban, and all she would have built."

The man stepped forward, tilted his head up in defiance and in a rush said, "I reject Narman and all he would have loved."

"Whom will you become?"

"I hope to become Slita and lead. If that is not my role, then I will become Slitin, and join in the fight for a home."

"I will become Nartin, and join in the fight for a home."

Montin nodded, then he turned to look at the Enterprise officers. McCoy stiffened, but he didn't move away from Spock. He glared at the leader, knowing that Montin had the power to do anything he wanted to with them, but daring him to order McCoy to withdraw what little support he was giving the Vulcan. Montin returned the stare, his eyes considered retaliation, but then he addressed the candidates and went on with the ceremony.

"Would Sli kill this one for a home?" he asked, and pointed at Spock. McCoy tensed even more. Was this the time when....

"No," the woman answered, her voice timorous, barely audible. The physician relaxed a fraction. Not yet.

Montin nodded, as if he had expected the answer. "Nor would Sliban if we allowed the transition to proceed in its natural course. But with our help, you will become Slitin, and Slitin will be able to kill."

He repeated the questions with the man, asked if Nar would kill McCoy this time. The man sounded just as hesitant as the woman had, and McCoy knew that whatever rabid enthusiasm infected the rest of the Derkheen in the hall, neither of these two people had it now. Neither of them, in his opinion, would have been capable of participating in the murder of the guard. But maybe in a few minutes they would.

Montin and the two joined hands, and everyone else in the room joined hands and closed their eyes. Now might be a good time to consider escape....

Except that the three soldiers who had originally escorted McCoy and Spock from their cell stood with their weapons ready, their gazes trained on their prisoners.

McCoy lifted one impatient shoulder and noisily expelled air through his nose. The sound was unnaturally loud in the quiet room, and worriedly he looked around. He didn't want to call attention to himself and Spock. But they were all intent on some inner world. After all the noise and the violence they had witnessed here, it felt very strange, this stillness that had come over everyone. If it weren't for the three soldiers, escape would have been easy; the Derkheen were concentrating so intently that he probably could have run with Spock from the room and no one would have noticed.

He jumped as a shriek from the woman broke the silence. Her head jerked backwards, and her mouth opened in pain.

"Agghh! Arghh!" Her voice gurgled eerily in her throat, as if another creature struggled to use her body, as if she were possessed, and she tried to jerk her hands from Montin's grasp.
For the first time in minutes, a sound from the crowd. "Tin..." they all chanted softly. "Tin...." It didn't seem to calm the woman. She continued to twist and pull, and it wasn't until the sponsor who stood with his hands on her shoulders slapped her face that she subsided.

Then it was Nar's turn. He too went through a brief period of pain, struggled against it, was encouraged by the crowd and then quieted.

McCoy watched intently. If this was some ceremony that they expected to put Spock through, he wanted to know everything he could about it. It was obvious that there was some form of mental control going on. Damn. Before the Lox'theneth'nar, McCoy would have bet even money that Spock would have at least been able to struggle against whatever they tried to do with him. Spock's telepathic skills were erratic, but they could be very strong when they needed to be, and he had a strength of will matched only by the captain of the Enterprise. But now? With all the Vulcan circuits in his mind fused? He glanced at Spock again, saw the thin veneer of calm and strength that overlaid deep pain and weariness. He didn't think Spock stood much of a chance.

And then suddenly McCoy's attention was yanked back to the Derkheen. Nar bellowed a deep, astonished bellow, screamed "No! No!" and easily escaped the hold his sponsor had on him. But instead of running away, he threw himself on the floor, began to pull at his hair with trembling fingers, began to roll from side to side and back again.

Everyone in the hall got to their feet now, the period of concentration was broken. "Tin!" they shouted. "You are Tin!" The words weren't encouragement; they were threat. The woman in white, Sli or whatever her name was, shouted with everyone else. She didn't seem to be affected by whatever possessed the man.

Nar stopped his frenzied thrashing, lay on the floor absolutely still. Montin walked over to him and looked down. Casually he pulled his leg back and kicked the man with all his strength.

"Who are you?" the leader asked.

Nar stared upwards. Defeat draped itself over his body. "I am Narman."

McCoy flinched with the deafening sound of a projectile weapon being fired from directly over his head, from the soldier guarding him. When he looked at Narman again, he had to swallow hard. A wound blossomed in the dead man's chest.

Montin dismissed the body and strode over to the woman. He came up nose to nose with her and asked, "Who are you?"

She had been transformed. The hesitation had vanished. Her eyes were bright, her stance filled with confidence. The woman stepped back, jerked off the white alb and threw both arms up into the air. "I am Slitin!!"

The crowd roared. Montin smiled a wide smile.

While the people were still shouting, the leader grabbed her shoulders and turned her to look at Spock, pointed at him. "Now will you kill for a home?"

The woman didn't have a weapon, McCoy told himself frantically, she didn't have a weapon and even a body as filled with purpose as hers now was couldn't tear a Vulcan apart with her bare hands.

"Yes," she cried, exultant. "Yes!" She half-ran to where they sat, stooped in front of the first officer, screamed into his face. "I could kill you!"
Spock was a rock with eyes. He did not recoil.

"You should not have to, he will be our brother soon," Montin said, right behind her. "But I understand your need. Go ahead."

Slitin pulled her hand back and slapped Spock's face with all her strength. McCoy surged forward, he didn't know what he intended to do, but the guard behind him jabbed his rifle into the physician's back, then wrapped a strong arm around his neck and held him still.

The force of the blow whipped Spock to his side and down to the floor. Normally, McCoy knew, that Vulcan body would barely have moved with the impact, but Slitin had aimed directly for the crusted-over wound on the temple, had ground her open palm across the twisted, swollen nose. McCoy hated her. He couldn't help it.

Spock took in deep, ragged breaths, clearly audible to the doctor. Then, slowly, the Vulcan rolled back over onto his back and stared up at his tormentors. Even if there hadn't been blood streaming down his face, no one could have read expression on his features. If he hated, it didn't show.

"Your turn next, Commander Spock. I send you back to your cell now, with time to think, to grow weak. Remember what you have seen, and know that whether you cooperate or not, you will join us, as soon as we have regathered our strength. Unless, that is," Montin added as an afterthought, "you would agree to help us now?"

Spock mouthed the word, but very little air came with it to give it life. "No." A whisper.

Montin stepped back, gestured to the guards. "Take them away."

And so the first day with the Derkheen ended.
Chapter 16

Commander Montgomery Scott sat in the center seat on the bridge of the *Enterprise*. Ensign Chekov manned navigation, and Lieutenant Tan Resl't monitored the communications board. The normal hum and click of machinery filled the air. The image of the planet of Gabriela stretched across the viewscreen.

The turbolift doors opened, and Lieutenant Brian Dawson entered. He paused at the top of the steps to the center well, and a frown played over his face as he surveyed the bridge. From left to right: engineering, environmental, security, the viewscreen, science, communi.....

His head swiveled back to science, where Ensign Singh was seated. Dawson stared at the back of the slender woman and his brow furrowed with concentration. His mind insisted on substituting rounded curves where there was only angular straightness. And why should he be looking at Singh anyway? She meant nothing to him. No one in science meant anything to him. His heart was in engineering. He shook his head and resumed his walk down to the center seat.

In silence, he offered the board with the fuel consumption report. The engineer took it, read it, and tsk-tsked.

"Ach, the admiral will have our heads at the end of the quarter," he said to no one in particular. "That run to the starbase ate into our reserves." He signed the board, and handed it back to Dawson.

But Dawson seemed reluctant to leave, and Scott noticed his hesitation. "Something on your mind, laddie?"

The lieutenant thought for a moment, as if unsure. "No," he said slowly, "no. I don't think so. It's just... something's not right. Is something... missing?"

"Ach, you're just concerned about the sensors. They're fine. The repairs we made are first class."

"I know, sir," Dawson replied. "But.... I can't quite put my finger on it...."

"Engineering isn't fingers and feelings, lad. Everything's fine with the *Enterprise*, or we would know it."

The younger man straightened with the gentle reprimand. He didn't want to insult his commanding officer's beloved engines. "Of course, sir. I'll be getting back to my post." He left the bridge.

For a while there was silence. Then Scott got up from his seat and sauntered over to the science station.

"Lassie, run a check on sensors, just to please me."

A minute passed as Singh bent over the scanner hood. Then she straightened, and tugged on her short blue skirt, a characteristic nervous gesture that the crew would not have been able to recognize Singh without. "They check out, sir. No problems."

Scott scratched his chin. "Dawson's wrong then. Still.... we should be getting the order to break orbit soon. Word from the starbase is overdue. Mr. Resl't," he swung around and addressed the Andorian, "have ya heard anything on subspace channels? We canna be keeping the *Enterprise* in orbit doing nothing forever."
The Andorian shook his head in the human gesture of negation. "No, Mr. Scott. I've received nothing at all in the last twenty-four hours."

"Odd," the Scot said. "But I canna divine the will of the Almighty Komack. He'll call us when he wants us."

He shrugged and walked slowly, arms swinging, past communications and past Resl't and back down to the command well. As the engineer settled into the center seat, the Andorian resumed his work on the rotation scheduling for the ship's next shore leave. His antennae were canted straight back, a sign of contentment in his race.

And then the speaker crackled into life. "Uhura to Enterprise, Uhura to Enterprise, are you receiving me? Enterprise, please answer."

Resl't continued to work on his list and Scott stared at the viewscreen, the hint of a vacuous smile on his lips. They ignored the transmission, and the note of desperation in the voice of the woman they would have called friend.

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On the second full night since the attack on the temple, Uhura snapped the transtater circuit into place and critically gazed up at the undercarriage of the aircar. The mixture of Gabrielan and Federation technology looked ridiculous, like the head of a Gorn on the body of an Andorian, but it should work. This should be right.... And if it weren't, they wouldn't live to know about it.

As she coaxed the next component into place, a micro-feedback loop she'd scavenged from one of the universal translators, she heard the rumbling of the hanger doors opening. The heavy sound made the floor on which she lay shake. She pushed herself out from under the aircar and sat up.

The doors admitted the darkness of the Gabrielan night, the far-away glare of other lights at this air terminal on the outskirts of the city, the heavy smell of gasoline and one long-range aircar, similar to what she'd been working on. The vehicle rolled into the hanger and came to a stop precisely on the coordinates printed on the floor.

She didn't have to look into the passenger bubble to see who the driver was. Sulu wasn't scheduled for return from the south for several more hours, and there was only one other pilot as good as the helmsman. The captain had returned.

If there had been good news, she would have heard it already through the communicator. She stood anyway and stretched before walking over to where Kirk was lithely climbing down to the floor, as if he hadn't just spent hours cramped in the cockpit during transcontinental flight.

The lights in the hanger were harsh white, unforgiving. They didn't hide the captain's rumpled clothing, the dark smudges under his eyes, his filthy, matted hair. But the lights also couldn't hide the determined set to his shoulders as he skipped the last three steps of the ladder, jumped to the floor and turned towards her.

My God, she wondered, how can he do it? She'd had to fight despair as the mantle of the dark night fell heavily on her shoulders, as the hours had passed and the Enterprise remained silent, as no word had come from the others. Kirk had flown alone through the shadows of the inky darkness, long hours in the air with only his thoughts to accompany him. But despair hadn't even entered his consciousness yet.

As he came closer, his expression dropped into a frown. They were still three meters apart when he
snapped, "Lieutenant, I told you to keep trying to contact the Enterprise, not work on the aircar modifications."

"I've done all that I can with the communicators, Captain." It had been sixty-two hours since the attack at the temple, two nights and two days in the twenty-eight Gabrielan rotational cycle. Now the third night was half over. Surely even Kirk couldn't expect her to sit by her equipment staring at it, trying to open hailing frequencies for all that time. She would have gone mad. She pointed to the make-shift console set up in a corner of the cavernous building. "I've got the call-in on automatic. Every thirty seconds. And I'll be alerted to any response." Uhura tapped the com-link in her ear. "Plus I've set up another unit to scan for messages on other frequencies. And I monitor it myself every hour." It seemed ridiculous to justify herself like this.

"All right." The assent was begrudging, as if he wanted to argue with her but couldn't find a reason to. Or could it be, he hadn't the energy? "Why aren't the others working on the 'car?"

Usually the captain had confidence in his people, let them do their jobs with minimal supervision. But this wasn't usually.... She didn't really blame him for the grilling. "They're exhausted, Captain. I told all three of them to get some sleep." She gestured to the little room in the corner that was equipped with air mattresses. "Irina's in there too, still working on the tricorder."

He nodded abstractedly, his mind already on other things. "I guess... no response to the hail?"

She shook her head quickly, not allowing herself to show any of the emotion she felt at the revealing hope in his voice, or the fact that the Enterprise was silent. The ship was their home.... "No, sir. Is there any word on the rebels? Or about Doctor McCoy and Mister Spock?" Why was she asking? She already knew the answer.

"Nothing," he said flatly. He walked over to stare at the sleek lines of the vehicle they hoped would take them into space. "But Sulu and the others went to different parts of the border and they're staying longer. They'll turn something up. Have you heard anything from the Gabrielans?"

She shook her head wearily, at the same time watching him walk around the aircar as he inspected the modifications they'd made to the exterior so far. "The government finally released information about the attack about six hours ago. It was carefully worded to stir up support for the military expedition south. They're not making it a secret that they intend to attack the Derkheen, force them back into the reservations."

"Of course," Kirk said wryly. "Incarcerate eight million people. Or exterminate them. Easy. Have you been in regular touch with Hivlen's office, reminded them that we want to be told if there's a ransom demand?" He bent down to look at the undercarriage, then swung himself onto his back and scooted under the car.

She walked slowly across the hanger and stood at the captain's booted feet sticking out from under the 'car, as if she were keeping guard over him. To her certain knowledge Kirk had managed a total of five hours sleep since they'd left to visit the rainforest -- could it be only three days ago? It felt like an eternity.

He'd been in a flurry of activity every minute since she'd come upon him staring up at the thundering sky in the temple square. He'd been making demands of the uncooperative Gabrielans, helping Hunyady in her attempt to modify the tricorders so that they could determine whether the Enterprise was still in orbit about them, coming up with the plan to convert a long-range aircar into a spacesworthy vehicle, and leading reconnaissance flights into Derkheen territory. Not to mention the time she and the captain had spent laboring over the communicators, combining parts in an attempt to boost the gain.
There was the sound of a heavy ground truck lumbering along the road outside the hanger, but other than that there was silence in the building. This was a nearly abandoned facility, a paramilitary airport with runways for the long-range 'cars that were used for extended flights. Until a new facility had been opened across the city half a year ago, the supplies and reliefs for the border patrol hadroared down the runway outside and taken off for the south.

It was quiet here, except for her own breathing, and the occasional scrape of metal against metal as the captain worked under the vehicle. The air had an early spring nip to it, and after too many hours in the cavernous space, it was very lonely. She wondered where Spock and McCoy were, what was happening to them. Wondered if they were still alive. She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself, and resolutely pushed the thought away. Better, much better, not to allow her imagination to paint images she couldn't tolerate.

She heard Kirk shift position under the 'car, and she looked down, grateful for something, anything to focus upon in the depths of this hope-sapping night. She watched as little movements of his lower legs showed how he reached for one of the tools she'd left on the floor, how he stretched to hold a part in place.

But gradually another thought took shape. The captain's feet were rigidly held straight; they didn't slacken and fall to the side as she expected them to, as they would have naturally if this were some ordinary repair performed under ordinary circumstances.

Her brow puckered and without knowing it she frowned. Those straight, rigidly-held feet bothered her. He couldn't even relax enough to allow his body the small comfort as he worked, out of sight, with no one to see his face or any of his body except for two Starfleet-issue boots sticking out from a machine. And she thought Spock had control.

What must the captain be thinking, feeling? She'd thought he'd rejected despair, but she must be wrong. Kirk was only human. The Enterprise was Uhura's home, but it was Kirk's in a more elemental, deeper way, and the ship's refusal to answer when he called to her for help must be like a wound inflicted on him ever deeper with each passing hour. The silence was a betrayal that he would feel as keenly as a knife.

And what must he feel, deep where he wouldn't let anyone else see, about the kidnapping of McCoy and Spock, and the long silence? To her they were valued superior officers, in their own way her friends. She admired and respected them. She was desperately worried about them. But to Kirk.... Well, she didn't really know what they were to Kirk, did she? The intimacy that she had at one time hoped for between herself and the captain had never blossomed, and she had no special insights into the man she so admired.

But one thing she did know. The despair that she had thought he wasn't feeling was there, it was right before her in those rigidly held feet. He couldn't let them slacken, she realized. If he did, everything else would slacken, including the control and energy that was propelling him through the nights, and the thoughts, like hers, that were too horrible to contemplate.

If he kept on pushing like this, collapse, not success was the inevitable result. Kirk needed to eat and to sleep, but there wasn't any Doctor McCoy around to cajole him, and there wasn't any Mister Spock to lift his brow at him until the captain complied. In the quiet of the hanger building, there was just one communications officer.

She squatted down so that she could see him under the 'car. He had already taken up where she had left off, and was attaching a cover over the feedback circuit.

"Well?" he said as he worked. "What did Hivlen's office say? Have they heard anything? Do they
"No, sir," she said. "Captain, why don't you take a break? Get some rest?"

An "Oompff" as he pushed a piece of metal into place. "Not now, Uhura." His voice was muffled. "This contraption is going to take a lot of work before it will take us into space."

She grabbed at his trouser leg and tugged. "Sir, you need to get something to eat and then you need to rest for a while." She tugged again, suddenly angry.

"Lieutenant, not now!"

"Yes, now," she insisted, amazed at her own audacity. "You're not going to be any good to Mister Spock and Doctor McCoy if you fall asleep while you're pilotin. Can you imagine how angry they'll be when they manage to escape and find that you've killed yourself trying to find them?"

A stillness, and then she could actually feel the tension flowing out of the rock-hard flesh under her hand. She moved to the side as he pushed himself out from under the 'car. He stayed on his back and looked up at her.

"It's illogical, isn't it?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," she nodded. "Mister Spock would say that you're being very illogical."

He sat up and pressed the bridge of his nose between two fingers. "I wouldn't want him to have to say that to me." His hands fell away and he took a deep breath. "Although it would be good to hear him say anything right now."

He didn't look like the dynamic captain of the Enterprise on whom so many people depended, he looked like a very mortal, very weary man with drooping shoulders. Uhura felt compelled to offer some support. "Sir, if there is anybody who is most likely to get back to us in one piece, it's Mister Spock. He teaches survival training, and he's so much stronger than a human. And he'll take care of Doctor McCoy."

He smiled a sad smile. "Yes, I know that." He rested his elbows on his drawn-up knees, and looked down at where his hands were loosely folded. "I don't understand the Derkheen."

She eased into a more comfortable position on the cold, oil-streaked floor. It didn't matter, her uniform and the coverall she'd donned over it were already filthy. "What don't you understand?"

He pursed his lips, thinking. "I don't think so. The Derkheen are quiet, inoffensive people. Interesting. I liked them. They weren't anything like the people who attacked the temple."

"A good acting job?" she offered.
"I'd like to think I could see through that. I've met enough cultures on enough planets to tell the difference. There is something wrong here... Some missing clue. I can't quite put it together...."

Abruptly he skewered her with a look. "Why did the soldiers in the temple use a chemically propelled rocket? I can't stop asking myself that question. Any one of the big aircars would have done the job more safely, been less obvious."

Uhura closed her eyes in frustration. "How much can we discover in such a short investigation? Even the most minimal survey on a new planet takes five days."

"And everything I just said is completely subjective." He scratched behind his neck. "Nothing concrete. Noth --." 

A loud crackling from the com unit set up in the corner of the hanger interrupted him. In a moment Kirk and Uhura were on their feet and standing before the patched-together communicators. She reached for the unit and began to fine tune whatever transmission was coming in.

"Come on...," Kirk urged under his breath. "Come on...."

"It's not a Gabrielan transmission," she reported. One hand pushed the comlink more firmly into her ear, the other played with dials and levers.

"The Enterprise?"

Another thirty seconds of static, and then "I'm not sure. But definitely off-planet in origin. The frequency is shifting. Whoever is sending this doesn't know what they're doing."

Behind them, the door to the little room where the crew were sleeping opened, and Hunyady rushed out, a tricorder in her hands. "Captain! I've got it working! There's --."

He waved her silent impatiently. "Not now."

The crackling static rose to an ear-splitting crescendo. Hunyady winced, and Uhura bent her head almost to her shoulder, but then as suddenly as it started it stopped. Uhura continued to listen for another minute, her head still bent to the com-link, before her hand dropped away and she reported, "Nothing. They're not transmitting anymore."

As if he couldn't stand still for another second, Kirk swung around and started pacing. His fist pounded into his palm once, twice, three times. "Could it have been someone on the Enterprise trying to contact us outside of regular channels? With a jury-rigged system?"

"It's possible. Not too likely. It was a very unusual signature."

"Then it was the other ship. It's got to be."

Kirk swung around and stared at Hunyady. "What other ship?"

She held out her tricorder. "I finally got it modified so I could take readings up to orbit. She's definitely there, sir, or at least, there are two ships up there, just five hundred kilometers apart. The Enterprise has got to be one of them."

The captain strode over to her, looked down at the activated instrument she held out for his inspection. "You can't tell anything from this read-out," he protested. "Not size, not configuration, not energy pattern."

The young lieutenant shrugged her shoulders apologetically. "I'm sorry, sir. That's the best I can do
right now. Just enough information to know that at least she's there. That the ship hasn't been... blown up or anything."

Uhura frowned at what nobody else had had the courage, or audacity to say, especially to the captain. But Kirk put an understanding hand on Hunyady's shoulder. "She's still there. Which means that Brian is still there. He's probably worried about you." The captain touched the gleam of gold that just showed under the young woman's tunic at her neck; she was wearing the sponder necklace under her uniform. "He and Scotty will be working hard to get out of whatever fix they're in."

She looked up at him, fatigue and emotion filling her eyes. "Yes, sir."

A moment later Kirk was pacing again, his upper body bent tensely forward. Back and forth, back and forth, like a caged animal defining the confines of its imprisonment, plotting the best way of escape. The first six months Uhura had served aboard the Enterprise, the captain's way of thinking while he walked had unnerved her. Now she felt better in every crisis when he moved.

"Why doesn't she answer us? It can't be the Tholians. It just isn't their style. They're upfront, confrontational. So who would benefit from keeping the Enterprise from helping us? Obvious answer, the Derkheen who attacked us in the temple. But why haven't they contacted us? And were they really Derkheen? They don't --."

The com unit crackled into life again, and the captain was left frozen in the middle of his thinking-out-loud. Uhura scrambled to find the frequency and after a tense twenty seconds, suddenly there was a thready voice issuing from the three communicator speakers she had lined up on the console.

" --sage is for the Gabrielan people. For their leader, Hivlen fa Hivlen. And for Captain Kirk of the Enterprise. I speak for the people who are always oppressed, who have no home. You have always treated us as scum to your riches. We require land. We deserve land. We demand that you open up the eastern half of the northern continent for colonization by those you have imprisoned for so long. No more barriers. No more contempt. We will have what we deserve!"

A pause, as the speaker gathered breath and composure. The speaker was undoubtedly a male who passionately believed what he was saying.

"But you are not likely to grant us our due without persuasion. Captain Kirk, my people hold your Commander Spock and Doctor McCoy prisoner. Do not attempt to find them; they are well hidden. The commander will die in eighteen hours if you do not agree to turn the Enterprise over to us, and agree to instruct my people in its operation. We must convince the Gabrielans that we are serious. The Enterprise will do that."

"Hivlen fa Hivlen, show your people how you value them. Agree to colonization, show us the first movements of people off the land which will be ours, or in eighteen hours there will be a large explosion on your planet, at the same time that the Enterprise officer loses his life. The explosion will kill many, many people. You will hear your spineless people screaming, Hivlen, and you will regret not dealing with us. We will continue to persuade you until you agree with us. There will be other locations to destroy, and we will still have the doctor to kill."

"Give us the land we need, give us the Enterprise, for just a while, to supervise the Gabrielans. That is all we need. We must hear from both of you."

*****

--- The hours passed. The big windows of Hivlen fa Hivlen's office framed the purple-tinged
darkness of the pre-dawn. The leader refused to even consider negotiating with the Derkheen, and the political necessity of cooperating with the Federation no longer existed. "Our only solution is obvious," Hivlen snarled. "The army marches in four days. That will take care of the problem you came to help us to solve. In the reservations, the Derkheen will no longer have spuast trees to burn."

Kirk stood before the big man, hands clenched, spirit seething, and knew he could do nothing. Nothing. He had no power left; not the Enterprise, not the force of the Federation behind him, and no energy or time for the hours-consuming task of persuasion. He was lucky the leader had offered the use of the aircars and the hanger. And worst of all was that he didn't want to cooperate with Hivlen, who didn't seem to care that his people would be sacrificed to the threatened bombing of the Derkheen, who didn't care about the sure bloodbath that was to come.... Well, he cared, even about the damned Gabrielans and their castes. And he would die trying to stop that bloodbath, and the murder of his lover and his friend by a people he thought he could understand far better than he understood the rigidity of the Gabrielans. The seconds ticked by while the two men stared at one another. He wanted nothing so much as to smash his fist into Hivlen's disgusting, fleshy mouth....

Then Kirk whirled about and left. He didn't have the luxury of time.

--- In the large empty spaces of the hanger, Uhura's voice became a soul-ripping monotony. "Captain Kirk to unknown ship. Captain Kirk to unknown ship representing the Derkheen. Come in please." There was no answer. Kirk pushed himself harder, past his fatigue, and tried not to think of the Enterprise in control of another hand, her weapons raining fire from the sky, murdering thousands of innocent beings....

--- The dawn brightened the sky. The heavy cloud cover that had shrouded the city since the thunderstorm lifted, and sunshine streamed into the canyons of concrete and steel. Sulu and the others returned from the south, refueled, slept for a few hours, and then Kirk had a decision to make. Should he send his people out again, have them continue to scour the south for signs of the hostages or the rebels, or should he concentrate all his efforts here, in the hanger and the chance of making it into orbit to the Enterprise? My people hold Commander Spock and Doctor McCoy prisoner, was what that voice from space had said. My people. Where were the people? Were the seemingly peaceful Derkheen on Gabriela a dead end?

Kirk couldn't risk the chance that they weren't. Damn it, those had been Derkheen attacking in the temple, and the Derkheen did not have the technology to take them into space. The source of the transmission, the threats, they must be... someone else. Mustn't they? Someone who somehow held the Enterprise in impotence without having her in control. He sent all but Uhura, Hunyady, Josephs, Tarn and Prendel't to the border. If -- when -- they made it to the Enterprise, he would need the back-up of trained security. There was an itch at the back of his neck that told him all his answers were in orbit.

--- Kirk stood outside the open hanger doors and watched the last of his crew's aircars take off from the airstrip's only runway. Then he raised his eyes to the green-blue sky. If the Enterprise were in the same orbit, she'd be... about there now. Just to the side of the halo of the sun. Spock would have been able to give him the exact coordinates. He could see the long, straight finger pointing out the precise position of their Silver Lady. Spock. They'd come so close to touching in the empathic joining.... He shivered in the sunlight, and turned back into the hanger, allowing himself to think only of a machine and the ways it would take him into space.

--- Mid-morning, the most glorious morning they'd encountered on Gabriela, with a fresh breeze carrying the promise of spring. But in the oil-laden air of the hanger, the six from the Enterprise hardly noticed. Eleven more hours to go. They'd reinforced the exterior structure of the aircar, hoping they were creating a pressurized cabin. They'd added the extra fuel tanks to take them
thousands of kilometers. But now they needed an inertial guidance system and sensors that would allow them to maneuver in the weightlessness and lack of atmosphere in space. The Gabrielan aircars never went outside the atmospheric envelope of their planet, and Kirk would have to take this 'car there if he were to reach the Enterprise. Unless they could come up with an answer to this suddenly insurmountable problem, a trip into space would be suicide.

---

Eight and a half hours to go. Hunyady and the captain labored over schematics spread upon the floor. The lieutenant's eyes were red-rimmed, her mouth was a thin line of determination. She had almost as much energy as Kirk, who was a coiled weapon of frustration. "There." The lieutenant speared a circuit with her pointing finger. "We cannibalize the tricorder, double up on this and she'll go." Kirk shook his head. "It'll overload the engine." They looked at one another for a long moment. "It might not," she said. "Any other approach will take days to implement. The chances that this will work are--" "Don't quote me the odds, Lieutenant," Kirk said sharply. "We'll try it."

---

Seven hours to go. The inertial guidance modification was complete. All they needed was a test and they'd be ready to fly. Josephs climbed up into the cockpit/cabin and started the engine. Five seconds later the extra energy running through the circuit burned the primitive wiring, hundreds of years behind Federation technology, and fused it into an unusable molten mess. "Cut the engines! Cut the engines!" Kirk shouted. For an eternal ten seconds there was the silence of failure. Tears streamed down Hunyady's face; Kirk's shoulders faltered from their rigid straightness. But then the young lieutenant marched up to the burnt-out circuitry and ripped it out, unheeding of the heat against her hands. She angrily wiped the tears on her blue tunic sleeve. "I'll find something else in time. I'm not giving up. I will find something else and we will launch in time." The captain was over by the schematics already. "Plan B," he said quietly. "We try again."

---

Half an hour later, Kirk found himself staring stupidly at a disassembled communicator that he'd dropped on the concrete floor. It was spinning crazily, the impact of metal against floor still rung in the sudden stillness. How had he dropped it...? Uhura, concerned. "If you don't lie down now you'll fall asleep on your feet. Don't worry, the rest of us will come up with a new approach for the guidance system." Her reassurance was hollow. They both knew there wasn't another approach that they could finish in time. "No," he croaked. How could he leave? There might be something.... "Sleep," Uhura insisted. "You're going to pilot us into the sun if you don't get some rest." "Never," he wanted to protest although he couldn't force the words out. "I take care of my people better than that. Except for Spock. Except for McCoy." She led him to the little corner room and pushed him down onto the mattress. He was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

---

And he dreamed.

He was in a filthy cell with metal bars, like the ones in Sarpeidon's past. It stank of rotted food and vomit; it was slippery with stale urine. Uhura was there with him, and he knew with complete certainty that soon, very soon, he was going to die. "Painless, we believe," said Admiral Nogura, who appeared in the cell with them. "A quick shot through the heart with a lead projectile, the same way Turtrata ba Turtrata died. You were born to go before the firing squad, James Kirk. You've defied Starfleet once too often."

Nogura disappeared, and Komack laughed, and then he disappeared as well. Kirk turned to Uhura, took her hands, looked into her caring dark eyes. "Please tell Spock that I love him," he said as clearly as he could, though it was difficult to speak because of the pounding of his heart. "He's got to remember. Will you tell him?" He didn't need to say he loved his Silver Lady. Knowing that he was to leave her was an ache he couldn't swallow. As bad as the thought of leaving his Vulcan alone. So very alone. Uhura would understand.

But she didn't. She jerked her hands away from him, her mouth opened in an "Oh" of distaste. "Tsk-
"Tsk," she said. "Tsk-tsk. You can't love him. He's a Vulcan. He's a man. And you can't love the Enterprise. It's just an inanimate hunk of metal and circuits. What do you think, she's real? Tsk-tsk." She began to back away from him, and without surprise he watched her fade through the wall of the cell. Then he was alone.

But not for long. Clump, clump went the boots of the stormtroopers who came for him. Clank, clank went the big key in the lock to the door. Boom! went the hinges as they swung open abruptly with an explosive sound, like the whole world had just detonated and was going up in flames. He lurched as he walked forward, for the floor was unsteady. Somehow his legs carried him outside the cell, and he marched between soldiers -- twentieth century Nazis? Echosians? -- towards his death.

The wall was made of brick. It was hard against his back. If only he could fade through it the way Uhura had.... But he couldn't. One of the soldiers offered him a blindfold. He refused. To his left there was a thief. The man had bloody hands and mocked him. To his right there was another thief. The thief smiled, said, "See you on the Enterprise."

The line of soldiers raised their guns. This was it, it was going to happen. There wasn't going to be a last minute rescue. Someone he couldn't see said, "Get ready." The voice was very deep and very sure. It said, "Get set. This is the price you pay for caring." He drew in a shaky breath, his last he was certain. How could anyone get set for death? Always he and Spock had managed to turn their backs on death. They'd lived in the light. But he couldn't ignore death's darkness anymore. It was coming towards him, aimed straight for his heart. His heart was going to be torn in two, it was going to bleed and he would never, ever recover from the loss. How could he live without his heart?

"Go."

He closed his eyes and the soldiers fired their guns. Blast. Blast. Blast. Blast. A bullet ripped through his stomach and lodged in the small of his back. His back hurt. It was fire. So hot. Then another bullet blasted through his chest. He felt it, knew there was a neat round hole in the left ventricle. Even McCoy couldn't mend it. The doctor would cry if he saw. But he would never have to, because Captain Kirk was dead.

Or was he? He opened his eyes. The good thief was on the ground in front of him. Dead. The mocking thief was on his back, his open eyes staring at the sky. Dead.

But James Kirk wasn't dead. James Kirk could never die, he could only witness death. God never called for him. The Great Spirit of the All would never take him until he was willing to accept his role. Wasn't that what Grita had said?

He lifted his eyes to the horizon. The firing squad was gone, but there were others in a line where they had stood, staring at him, their fingers lifted like guns point. Ensigns Sanders, Obju, Chu, Lieutenants Mubitu, Kawasaki, Cox. A Starfleet Marine named O'Shea. An Enterprise redshirt from Rigel, Purn. Karidian, the Romulan commander who could have been Kirk's friend, a man whose name was Dirka, Mar. McCoy. "Accept," they chanted. "Accept."

He looked down at his body. The blood from his heart was pouring down his shirt front, soaking his pants. He could feel the wetness in his back, felt the air blow against the skin exposed in the small of his back. The wounds should have taken him away, he should be down on the ground like the other two. He should be dead.

He lifted his eyes to the sky, raised both his clenched hands. "What do you want from me?" he screamed. "I don't have anything left to give you. You have it all already! You have the Enterprise!
You have Spock! What do you want? What is it that I'm supposed to accept? Tell me. Tell me! I'll accept it!" He fell to his knees, felt the jarring pain that rattled through his back with the movement, gasped. The gasp filled his lungs with air and when he pushed it out, the air emerged in a long, shaky sob. Crying. He was crying. The tears burnt their way down his face and he doubled up, his forehead touched the ground where he should have died, as if in benediction before an almighty deity. "Why can't I die?" he sobbed. "Why is it always somebody else who dies?"

He rocketed awake in the blink of an eye. He was on his side, not kneeling in emotional agony before an unyielding god. He clutched a sheet against his mid-section, and his face was dry. But his heart ached, as he had not allowed it to ache from the moment he'd seen a faltering Vulcan body manhandled into a rocketship and known that Spock was being taken from him. Ripped from him, as they had been ripped apart in the Gabriellan empathy and as their souls had been ripped apart in the bond.

"Will you be able to let Spock die?" McCoy had asked, it seemed like years ago. He'd known the answer then and he knew it now. He could do anything for his ship and for his oath, for the life that he knew he was meant to lead, for the people who followed him. But that didn't mean he would ever, ever accept the necessity of death.

Kirk rolled over onto his back and stared at the bare girders that defined the hanger's ceiling. He remembered the promise he'd made in the handball court. I'll never give you up. And the vow he had whispered while holding Spock against him in the treetops. I'll never lose you.

They were promises made in vain. His dream was trying to tell him what he hadn't had the emotional strength to accept in waking time. His heart was about to be broken. They weren't going to get the aircar into space in time, and Spock was going to be killed. In the treetops he'd promised he'd always find the two seconds that he'd need for Spock. But those seconds were gone. They'd slipped through his fingers.

Fiercely he rolled over again and buried his face in the mattress, pounded his fists against the sheet. They'd had so little time. Seven months. Nothing. Nothing.

It was as if the cosmic gods were laughing at him, tantalizing him. Giving him everything, and then taking it away, little by little. Want some success as a starship captain? Fine, but you'll have to watch Mar and her people die. Want the respect of your peers, and the knowledge that you can accomplish some good for the Federation? You'll have to kowtow to idiots like Komack and endure being sent on senseless missions. Want the command of the finest ship in the fleet, and the loyalty of the best crew? Okay, but she'll orbit above you in silence and you'll bleed inside.

Want the fulfillment of all your personal dreams in one unlikely, wonderful Vulcan package? Fine, but you'll have to watch while the one you love is mutilated, scarred, and finally ripped from you by the ultimate avenger.

Is this what he was supposed to accomplish with his life? Had he been born to stand and wait, to watch and accept while his universe fell to pieces around him? How could that be, when every molecule of his being wanted to fight for Spock, for his crew, for the bond, when he knew that he existed to accomplish?

"Spock," he whispered, so choked he could barely speak. "Oh, God, Spock."

No, no, he wouldn't allow the moisture that gathered in his eyes to fall. And he would not give up hope. There were always possibilities. They would find a way. Probably he'd get up and Hunyady would tell him of a brilliant new method to fix the aircar and they'd be in orbit in thirty minutes. That would be just like Spock's protege'. Spock would be so proud of her.
He could see the beloved face before him now. Those slanted, infinite eyebrows. Those steady eyes that had found the courage to explore love. Those parted lips, Vulcan and human, rational and sensuous.

Kirk swallowed hard, turned over onto his side so he could breathe. What he wouldn't give to see that face again. He didn't care if they never shared a meld again, he'd be happy just knowing that Spock was still with him, still alive.

He heard the door to the little room open and Uhura entered the room. Her face was in shadow as she slowly walked towards him, but he saw enough to paralyze him where he lay.

She sat down on the bed next to his hip. This wasn't the Uhura from his dream. Her dark eyes were huge, liquid, if he let himself he could lose himself in their sympathetic softness....

She reached forward and took his slack hands in hers. Her fingers were ice cold.

"Oh, Jim," she said. She couldn't meet his eyes, and her voice was strangled, choked. "I'm so sorry. You don't know how sorry I am."

He stared at her, searching for other words, demanding other words, one part of him knowing exactly what she meant and the other part refusing to believe. "What?"

Tears glistened in her eyes. She nodded towards the window. In slow motion he turned towards it, saw the smoke billowing up from somewhere in the city. He remembered the threat. There will be a large explosion at the same time that the Enterprise officer loses his life.

Uhura bent over their clasped hands. "They didn't wait for the deadline," she shuddered. "They didn't wait."

*****

On the Enterprise, beta shift followed alpha shift. The rec rooms were filled with people, and if the atmosphere was more subdued than it normally was, no one seemed to notice the difference. The Enterprise Players presented Waiting for Godot on deck six, and Ensign El-Behan stepped up from his understudy's role to play the character that... someone else... had rehearsed for weeks. There was polite applause at the end; no one remarked on the coincidence that the ship was in orbit waiting for... something. Orders, perhaps? Yes, of course, orders.

Lieutenant Brian Dawson walked from the play towards his quarters. He knew that the engines were functioning perfectly. The matter/antimatter conversation rate was at optimum levels, and he was proud of that. The Enterprise consistently turned in conversion rates above ninety-two percent, among the highest that could be expected of a heavy cruiser. No, the problem was not in the engines.

He walked further along the busy corridor. The play had been well attended but now people were intent on other projects. A snack before bed, or a dalliance that would result in company in bed. But he wasn't interested in either. There was something wrong....

Dawson knew that the sensors had been repaired. When he'd returned from the bridge earlier in the day, he'd checked them himself. Not normally a function within the responsibilities of an engineering officer, but he knew his actions would be approved, that initiative and independent thinking were rewarded aboard the Enterprise. Not by Commander Scott. But by.... By.... Who was it who would look at him and say "Good work, Lieutenant?" He didn't know. But shouldn't he?

The door to his quarters closed behind him, and he moved into the room, troubled. He hadn't felt
an emptiness like this since his mother had died when he was fourteen. Why should he feel like that? Why should this room seem so empty?

He paused before the dresser and stared at himself in the mirror. He saw an ordinary man in an ordinary Starfleet uniform. He knew that the red tunic flattered him; someone had once told him that. But his face fell into a frown as he tried to remember who....

He didn't feel like taking a shower. Tomorrow he'd get up ten minutes earlier and take care of it. "Computer," he commanded as he pulled off his tunic. "Set alarm for 0620." He carefully unlatched the necklace that was under the shirt and laid it reverently on the dresser surface. Then he finished undressing, visited the bathroom, shut off the lights and went to lay down in the big double bed. In the middle of the night he rolled over and clutched the second pillow to his breast. "Irina," he murmured. "Irina." But he didn't hear himself.
The sun rose over the northern continent for the fourth time since the Enterprise officers had been taken captive. But inside the featureless cell, McCoy did not know whether it was night or day. Without a chronometer it was impossible to measure how much time had passed. His pinched stomach told him it had missed several meals. He'd fallen asleep for extended periods twice; his body was imposing a rhythm of its own. But he wanted to know what time it was. He thought about it a lot. Strange, that numbers on a clock had become so important to him.

Used to be, Spock would have been able to tell him the time down to the second, and used to be, it had driven McCoy wild. Spock had a tendency to spout the exact hour and minute when McCoy was late. He'd never thought he'd miss that irritating Vulcan ability.

He looked down at the restlessly sleeping first officer. There wasn't anything else to see in the cell, so he spent a lot of time observing his patient in the barely adequate light. Just in the few days they'd been imprisoned, the angles in the gaunt face had grown sharp as knives. He could cut himself on the jutting cheekbones.

Spock moaned softly in his sleep, as he'd been doing a lot in the past hours, and he licked his lips. They were crusted with scabs and infected on the left upper side with streaks of green that ran up into the cheek. They looked awful, swollen and dry. There was a perfect shiner around the Vulcan's left eye, and more green-black bruises than McCoy could count about his swollen, misshapen nose. If they'd been back on the ship after a difficult mission, he would have diffused some of the left-over tension by teasing Spock about his appearance as he treated him. *Walk into a wall, boy? What back alley did you crawl out of?*

McCoy got up and walked over to where he kept the water bowl on the far side of the small room, away from the designated latrine area in one corner. Twice, each time while both he and Spock were sleeping, the water had been replenished. The first time there'd been some food, too, a meaty stew that must have been made from concentrates and tasted awful but at least fed him for a while. Spock had refused to eat it and McCoy hadn't pressed the matter.

But there hadn't been any food since that first delivery, and McCoy was getting decidedly hungry. More important than filling his stomach, though, was the water, and he was grateful that at least their captors didn't want them to die of dehydration. It was essential that Spock get enough fluids right now. That, he'd insisted on.

He dribbled some liquid on the well-used strip of shirt, carried it back and dabbed at the parched lips. Used to be, Spock would have awakened at the slightest movement, but he slept through McCoy's ministrations.

The doctor didn't need to examine his patient again, he knew what his injuries were. He was concerned about the lacerated kidneys, and the probable trauma to the Vulcan gonadal system that nestled right over them. In Vulcans the urinary tract worked double-time purifying waste from a race that didn't consume much in the way of liquids.

There'd been some blood in Spock's urine, the two times an insistent McCoy had walked with him to the corner, and it had been much cloudier than even a Vulcan's concentrated urine should be. Spock had tried to walk normally and stand straight, but the effort that required hadn't escaped McCoy's eagle eye. None of those things were good signs, and the doctor worried about kidney failure, and looked for signs of swelling that would indicate fluid retention. If only he had his medical tricorder... But he didn't. A good prescription for kidney trauma was complete bed rest.
Well, at least his patient was resting.

The concussion, the bloody gash over the left ear caused by the gunshot wound, the broken nose, the fractured cheekbone, the probably cracked rib; none of it was life-threatening, all of it was causing a lot of discomfort. If they ever got out of this mess and back to the Enterprise, he could fix all those problems in one hour-long session and a few days of rest. And even the lower back problem could be taken care of, assuming he got his patient to medical care before kidney failure set in. No, it wasn't any of Spock's obvious injuries that had McCoy worried.

He rested his palm against the Vulcan's forehead. He'd never been one of those doctors who relied only on modern instruments. If you couldn't diagnose with your hands and eyes and heart, than you weren't much of a physician in his book. Now his hand told him Spock was running a fever. A high one, about 108 degrees, he'd guess, about five degrees over the Vulcan norm. It was no wonder his patient had slept through most of their captivity.

McCoy looked down at the long legs stretched out against the barren floor, then his gaze traveled up to the prominent bulge straining against the black pants. That relentless erection had been there for... well, he didn't know exactly how long, did he? Too long. Neither one of them had mentioned it. McCoy couldn't imagine how it must feel to be that aroused and go unsatisfied for hours, days.

He felt suddenly self-conscious, staring at his patient's sexual need, and he knew he flushed despite the cold. He was a doctor, damnit, not a voyeur. His fingers pressed against the side of the neck where an atypically strong pulse battered against his fingers. He'd felt a racing pulse like this once before in the first officer. That six-chambered heart was beating 80% harder and faster than it should be, and it had been pounding like this for days.

McCoy pulled his hand away and Spock opened his eyes. Instant lucidity was there as the first officer looked at the doctor, surveyed the cell, then regarded McCoy again.

"Good morning," McCoy said. "Or good evening. Don't suppose you know what time of day it is, do you?"

The Vulcan licked his lips. "Negative."

"Didn't think so. Want some water?"

"Yes." Most of their conversations had been equally sparse.

He got the water bowl while Spock slowly sat up, then handed it to him while he tried not to obviously notice the betraying tremor in the normally steady hands. Spock returned the bowl without a thank you, then leaned against the cold grey wall as if he welcomed the support. McCoy noted that he folded his hands tightly in his lap. The small patches of skin on his face that weren't either bruised or scabbed were showing the effects of the fever. There might be barely enough light to see in the cell, but there was enough to show that the alabaster-tinged-with-green surfaces were thin and shiny, stretched over sharp bone.

The two men regarded one another in silence.

"I do not believe we will be left alone m-much longer." McCoy could ignore the hint of shakiness if he wanted to, the shallow breaths. Spock's voice sounded almost as normal as it had that evening -- was it less than three weeks ago? -- when he and Jim had talked to McCoy on the observation deck.

McCoy looked away. He couldn't disagree with what Spock said. He'd been having the same
thoughts any time the past six hours, and dreading them.

"When they come to take us, there is at least an eighty percent chance that they will want only me. It is likely that you w-will be left here."

McCoy's gaze flew up to meet the first officer's. "No!"

A tiny, abortive movement showed that Spock had almost cocked his head to one side, as he normally would when he quizzically regarded the doctor. "You will have little say in the m-matter. If the soldiers want only me, then you will stay. If that is the case, you must make an attempt to escape."

"How can I do that? I don't imagine they'll conveniently forget to reactivate the forcefield," he pointed to the dim glow that guarded the doorway.

"Agreed. However, you will recall that the mechanism that controls the field is directly outside the door. It is primarily mechanical." A pause while Spock drew in air. A little pinch appeared between his eyes, as if he were annoyed with the necessity of breathing. "I intend to attempt to disable it when I leave. If it is the d-design I suspect, the field will fail approximately fifteen minutes later. That will give you an opportunity."

"I'm not leaving you."

"You must. If you do not, then I believe that there is very little chance that I will survive the experience."

He really didn't want to hear the first officer's calm, logical tone accessing the probabilities of his death. The first time in days that Spock had felt inclined to conversation, and this was what they were forced to talk about. "You really don't think you can withstand that transsing thing?"

"In my current state of psychic disability, no. Even before, perhaps not. The united efforts of our captors appear to be...." Pause. Breath. "...quite strong. So I will be relying on you."

The physician swallowed hard; unconsciously his spine straightened. "What do you want me to do?"

Spock looked over his head. "I am sure that our crewmates are attempting to find us. You m-must find a way to provide them with a signal they can follow so they can render assistance."

Disbelief and anger flooded McCoy's chest. The Vulcan had never been a good liar, and he lied when he said that McCoy might be able to help him. He exploded. "And what are the chances of that happening, of them getting to you in time? You don't want me to help you, you just want me out of the way. You just want me distracted so I can't see the ceremony, where I can't --."

"-- where you will at least have a chance of rescue and freedom," the Vulcan cut in, his voice hard stone. "You will have none if you remain in the cell."

The physician went up on his knees, stuck his pugnacious nose forward, accused with a pointing finger. "And you won't have a chance if we don't make an attempt to get out of here the next time the soldiers come."

The only reaction Spock granted McCoy's display was a slow blink. Heat radiated from the lean body, McCoy could feel it against his own skin.

Then the Vulcan pushed his hurting lips together in a gesture McCoy had seen hundreds of times
before. The stubborn first officer would not waver. "Negative. That will result only in one or both of us being shot and disabled, most likely you. I will not sanction such a risk. We must minimize the risk against you, and direct it against myself, since at any rate I have no chance at all. I must not survive to betray the *Enterprise*.

That comment struck McCoy like a piledriver planted directly into his stomach. He stared at his antagonist --his friend -- and rejected the empty ache that came with the thought of the first officer... dead. He couldn't believe he hadn't thought the situation through. All these hours alone in the dimness, and he hadn't confronted the obvious question. What could they do to prevent Montin from gaining control of the ship? But Spock.... What was it that he'd once told Jim? That Spock thought even when he was unconscious? Here was ample evidence, and Spock's blunt answer to the obvious question.

The doctor slumped back down onto his heels. "What are you planning to do?"

The Vulcan looked down at where he still had his hands clasped tightly together. They would tremble if he released them. "I believe I am correct in assuming that you would find it impossible to kill me now."

McCoy closed his eyes. His first impulse was to grab Spock by the shoulders, shake him until he made sense. But the doctor didn't move. In the grand scheme of things, Spock was making sense. "That's right," McCoy grated. "That's something I couldn't do."

"So I surmised. Unfortunately, I no longer have the ability to terminate my own life. However, it should not be difficult to provoke the soldiers on our journey back to the hall to exercise sufficient violence to cause my death. They appear to be so inclined."

The physician swallowed the saliva that flooded his mouth. He remembered the attack against the guard, the way the crowd had killed.... "And... and suppose they don't kill you?"

Spock regarded him steadily. "They m-must. I cannot allow myself to be used to control the *Enterprise*. I will not allow my knowledge to be used as an instrument of destruction against the Gabriels. At any rate, I do not anticipate a problem. Even if the guards do not cooperate, the people will be..." the Vulcan blinked deliberately again, "...easily provoked."

"Spock..." McCoy said, and then couldn't find the words to complete his sentence. He couldn't tolerate the thought of the Vulcan being torn apart by a murderous mob. He licked his lips and tried again. "Spock, there's got to be another way."

The Vulcan actually sighed. "If there is, I am not aware of it. McCoy," there was compassion in his voice, "it is of little consequence. Surely you have realized I am in my T-time. I will die in the fever. A few hours, a day will make little difference."

A hundred thoughts jostled for prominence in McCoy's mind. He wanted to argue that the pon farr wouldn't kill Spock, that Kirk would arrive in time, that the Vulcan's peculiar hybrid physiology would allow him to ride out the hormonal pressures. And if he were wrong, then he himself would serve as an adequate substitute if push came to shove and Spock had to take a sexual partner. That last sudden thought astonished him, but he didn't question his own sincerity. He could do that for Spock. Especially since there wasn't a question of the mind touch....

But he looked at the fever-bright, intelligent eyes and he knew that he would never have the chance. Spock did not have a death wish. He had a lot to live for even if he never got his telepathic senses back. A fulfilling career, a home on the *Enterprise*, friends who cared about him, a niche. A... mate... who loved him. Spock would have evaluated every possibility, examined each scenario...
from every angle, and he would have logically, rigidly followed the train of thought to its proper conclusion. That was the way Spock's mind worked. It wasn't quicksilver and intuitive like Kirk's was. It was brilliant, but methodical. He was capable of startling insight, but not, McCoy didn't think, in such an emotional matter as his own life or death. No, Spock would not have chosen death if he thought there was any other rational option.

But the problem was that to McCoy death was never an option. Never. He and death were shaking-hands enemies, he knew it too well. To just sit here in the cell and wait for the soldiers to come for them, to know that Spock would interrupt the walk to his own execution to do everything he could for McCoy's escape, to run away and try to save his own skin even as he knew the Vulcan was deliberately provoking his own murder.... He just couldn't do it.

But at this particular moment he couldn't think of anything else to offer. He'd need something damned convincing to change Spock's mind, something that would definitely work. Right now all he had was a conviction that he wouldn't go running off if he ever got out of this cell, he'd go after Spock and try to help him. He didn't know how, but.... The thought of taking a weapon to the crowd of Derkheen sickened him. He didn't know if he could shoot.... But neither could he just stand by and wait for Spock to die.

Okay. Okay. McCoy realized he'd been staring at his patient long enough for the magnolias to blossom. He had to say something to fill the defeated silence.

"How do you feel?" A physician's cliche, but he honestly wanted to know.

The Vulcan turned his face away to contemplate the floor. "I am... somewhat uncomfortable."

With an effort McCoy kept his gaze from straying to the first officer's crotch. Uncomfortable? Hell, any ordinary man would be out of his mind by now. If McCoy had his medical tricorder, he knew he'd find that the hormone levels were tremendously elevated, flooding the bloodstream with urgency. The whole Vulcan body must be afame with the demand to mate. That was how Vulcan sexuality worked.

McCoy ran a practiced eye over his patient and tried to consolidate what he'd learned about the pon farr the first time with what he saw now. He didn't think Spock was... quite... to the crisis stage yet. Another twenty percent to go? Fifteen? A manual examination of the gonadal organs in the small of the Vulcan's back would tell him more exactly, but what did it matter? The bottom line was that there was still some suffering to come. Before either the heart or internal sexual organs burst with the pressure and killed him, or before his body somehow managed to come to an accommodation with what was happening to it, Spock had more to endure.

But it was possible that endurance alone would carry him through this pon farr to life on the other side. This Vulcan/human hybrid had already proven once that he could survive the mating fever. That thought prompted McCoy to ask, quietly, "What about the mental aspects? The last time you weren't so... rational."

Spock still wouldn't look at the physician. The muscles on his right, least-injured cheekbone twitched, like cords of steel rippling. "The mental aspects are... the primary problem. It is not as Sultarin said it would be."

He stopped there, leaving McCoy's mind a jumble of conjecture. "What do you mean?"

"I am being drawn. I know the sensation from... before."

"Spock, that's impossible. With the way your telepathic centers are short-circuited, how could you
still be linked to Jim? Sultarin said you weren't."

The sharpness of the fever answered him. "Sultarin is not here, and he does not know what I feel....
I do not know if I am being drawn specifically to the captain. But I am experiencing a..." the word
was dragged up with a sigh, "...a great need, mentally. But it has no focus. Before, I was linked,
and being called. Now, there is nothing but the need, and no answer. I reach to hold, to touch, and
there is nothing there. There is no anchor to my searching.... I have dreamed of falling endlessly...."

He sucked in a deep breath. "I will attempt to be more precise. There is a perception of an
emptiness that should be full. The river that once flowed in the desert is dry." He shook his head
and the fingers in his lap twisted once, then were still. "Forgive me. A lapse into poetry is not
informative. To someone who is not a Vulcan, there is no meaningful way to describe my
condition. It is most disconcerting."

Damn. Thoughts of trying to save the first officer with his own body evaporated. There was only
one person who had the chance of filling Spock's empty riverbed. Whatever Sultarin might have
said, Spock needed his almost-bondmate. Somehow, Kirk had to reach them, or they had to find a
way to escape and get to the captain. They needed more time, but time was an enemy, too, for with
every minute Spock came closer to succumbing to the inexorable pressures of pon farr. Damn.

He eased down next to his patient and settled his spine against the dura-plast wall. It gave with the
springiness of advanced age. "You can't let Montin's people kill you, Spock, you can't just throw
your life away. Think about me. What will Jim say if I have to tell him I let you die?"

McCoy counted off ten silent seconds while he waited for the rigid Vulcan to answer. "The captain
will understand. He will not blame you."

But would McCoy ever stop blaming himself?

"Maybe the captain will understand about his first officer, but I'm not so sure Jim will understand
about you. He... he really loves you, Spock."

Spock jerked his head up, his nostrils flared, an irrational light bloomed in his eyes. McCoy sucked
in breath; he was genuinely frightened. This was the fever taking control. The sickbay
measurements of the first officer's strength popped into his mind; a Vulcan could kill a human with
the swipe of an arm.

He was up on one knee in a moment, prepared to flee. It was an instinctive but ridiculous reaction,
since there was no place to run and his ability to defend himself was laughable. But after that first
aggressive action Spock had frozen. He was staring at a fixed point in space before him and
drawing in deep draughts of air. McCoy could see the battered lips forming the numbers: two, four,
six, eight.... The Vulcan was counting by two's in an attempt to maintain control.

This wasn't some anonymous textbook case, this was Spock, his friendly antagonist who was hurt
and suffering. McCoy eased back down into his former position against the wall even as the fire
flickered in the dark eyes and then went out.

The rigidity left the first officer's body and Spock stared down at his fingers. McCoy wondered
how he could fill this silence. The Vulcan who found refuge behind a facade of sternness would try
to ignore what had just almost happened. The Vulcan whose relationship with the CMO was based
on argument and cutting remarks would not find any words.

But the Vulcan who had sat in the quiet light of the observation deck with his lover at his side
could speak.
"Yes," Spock said, and there was more emotion in that one word than McCoy had ever heard from his companion before. Such sorrow. "I know that the captain loves me."

It occurred to McCoy that he could press his advantage over Spock, that he could talk about how devastated Jim would be to lose him, that the captain had already endured too many losses in his life and he wouldn't be the same man after Spock was gone. He could try to paint a picture of the grieving lover in an attempt to make Spock reconsider his planned suicide.

But he couldn't do it, emotional blackmail would be too cruel, especially if he didn't have an alternative plan to offer. And Spock had no defenses against it. The first officer's head was bowed, his hands were clasped together so tightly the tendons strained out. As he watched, Spock swallowed heavily once, twice, and clamped down hard on his lower lip. Given the infection, that must have hurt like hell. But McCoy had seen his friend use pain as a controlling mechanism before.

He turned away. Damn it to hell. It just wasn't fair. He didn't want to expose Spock's raw emotions, didn't want to break him down.... McCoy closed his eyes so he couldn't see the struggle.

What he saw in his mind's eye was worse. Spock going down beneath the weight of a swarm of angry bodies, green blood spattering.... Jim, never being able to look at his doctor friend without remembering the loss of his lover.... The Enterprise, filled with people and yet exposing a gaping, empty space because McCoy's treasured adversary would not be there....

Dear God in heaven. If there was a God in heaven. Don't let this be. Let them find another way....

Another way. That's what Jim and Spock had been finding, a difficult way that was nevertheless right for them. Any fool could have seen how right a close personal relationship was for this particular captain and first officer. So why had McCoy sat back and allowed this estrangement among them to continue? He hadn't said word one of support or about how he felt to Spock, not after that night on the observation deck. Compared to what Spock faced now, the issue of who slept with whom, who touched whose mind seemed astonishingly trivial.

A minute passed. McCoy counted his own heartbeat another sixty times before he spoke again. He cleared his throat.

"You know, I... ah, I... meant what I said that night on the observation deck. About wishing the two of you well. I might have acted a little like an ass with Jim, but, ah, I never...." He didn't know exactly what he wanted to say, only that he wanted to make some sort of connection here and the words weren't coming.

"I understand," Spock said too quickly. "It must have been difficult to... adjust to the thought of us-..."

"No, no," the physician interrupted. He risked a glance at his companion, found Spock had recovered his equilibrium and was regarding him evenly. "It wasn't that. It was... just me. I was hurt you hadn't told me before. Scared by what you must have shared, mentally. And... I guess, worried about how you two were going to work things out."

"Yes," Spock said quietly. "You feared a situation such as this."

McCoy looked about him, at the four blank walls, the dim glow of the forcefield. "Yeah. I suppose I thought I'd be the one to have to pick up the pieces if... well, you know. I didn't want to put myself through that. Didn't think I'd be strong enough."
"I, too, find it difficult to contemplate." The words were calm, but there was no mistaking the quiet desperation in the deep voice. "I do not wish to leave him, McCoy. But I must. You understand that, do you not?"

McCoy drew in a deep breath, pushed it out in a loud exhalation. "Maybe. I don't know. We've got to think of something different, Spock. How about if we both try to jump the guards? We've done it before."

"When there were three of us," the first officer gently reminded him. "And when I was not so affected by a plethora of injuries. As the captain has pointed out to me, I must realistically access what I can and cannot do. I will not participate in what is not a viable scenario. We must arrange an escape for you."

"You're basing this decision on your conviction that you would die anyway in the pon farr. Suppose you wouldn't? Suppose Jim is being drawn to you somehow, that you're a homing beacon for him?"

Spock squeezed his eyes shut. "Do not make it worse that it already is, McCoy!" he hissed. "Yes, yes if we were still bonded, even as minimally as we were, we would be pulled together. I would be able to tell you precisely where he was. We would join our minds together and.... The Time would not be a burden. It would be a joy."

There wasn't any joy when the Vulcan opened his eyes. McCoy winced at the raw, hopeless pain that Spock either couldn't or didn't want to control. "But we are not bonded. I will never feel the touch of anyone's mind again and I will die soon. Those are the facts. It is folly to succumb to wish-fulfillment. And it is more painful than acknowledging the truth."

He hadn't wanted to cause Spock more pain.... An emotion-filled but silent minute passed. Tentatively, McCoy extended a hand, let it drop on the first officer's upper arm. Spock didn't move, and the doctor curled his fingers around the hot flesh. "I'm sorry, Spock," he whispered. "For everything. You and Jim, you've always been good together. It would have worked out. I know you two would have managed to stay together."

"Yes," Spock agreed, with the merest tremor in his voice. As quickly as he had lost it, he had recaptured control. That was another symptom of his condition that McCoy filed away without conscious thought. "I do believe that we would have stayed together, even without the ability to meld and to create a bond. The captain is quite stubborn. And he requires the stability of a commitment at this time."

"With you. Not just with anybody, but with you."

Abruptly Spock looked up, as if he had heard something in the distance. But the doctor heard nothing.

"McCoy." The first officer swung about and looked him in the face. There was new urgency and purpose in the deep voice. "You will tell Jim that I kept the Enterprise as safe as I could for him. That I did what I had to do. Tell him.... that he was always t'hy'la to me. He will understand. Will you do that, McCoy?"

"Wha--?"

Spock was getting to his feet, aided by a hand on the wall. "I assume you will accomplish an escape. Be strong for the captain if you do. He will require your support in the face of my demise. And do not attempt to follow me."
McCoy was up in a flash, stood before Spock who'd started to rise seconds before him. "The hell I won't."

"Then you leave me no alternative--." 

McCoy slumped to the floor. Spock looked down at his awkwardly placed body. The limbs would surely be cramped when the doctor awakened. But it did not matter. By then the forcefield would have dimmed, the doctor could escape, and... all would have been fulfilled, as it must be.

"You asked what time of day it is," he roughly said to the unconscious form. "Surely even you know, McCoy, that somewhere on every planet, night is falling."

The three soldiers marched to the cell. The one they'd been ordered to leave behind was sleeping, and didn't awaken when they de-activated the forcefield and gestured the pointed-eared one out. That one was weak; he staggered and fell against the wall and took a long time getting up despite encouragement from their booted feet. Finally he stood, with a mingled look of pain and accomplishment that the guards did not read. The prisoner walked down the hall.

*****

The permanent communicator set-up in the hanger crackled into life. "This is a message for the Gabrielan people from the Council of Ones. We urge you to remain calm in the face of the current emergency. The priests of the Temple of Unity recommend that circles remain together if possible. Schooling is suspended for the day and only essential commercial centers will open."

"The Derkheen menace is responsible for the explosion which yesterday afternoon claimed the lives of four hundred and thirty-seven of our people. Two hundred and two of these were of the upper trine. We will return the unclean to the areas in which they lived before the exodus, so they can be controlled and further violence prevented. All men and women ages twenty to forty, from castes seven, eight and nine are ordered to prepare for military service so the Derkheen can be convinced such a move is necessary. Caste nine is to report tomorrow at...." There followed a long list of neighborhood centers where the newly impressed soldiers would begin their duty.

Kirk flinched as he heard the number of people who'd been killed, but he didn't stop working. They didn't have time.... So many grieving lovers, parents, children. How could the Derkheen be so savage that they took the lives of innocent victims, first in the temple, now in the city? Although none of the broadcasts had said so, he was sure children had been caught in the blast. But typically, the Gabrielans seemed more concerned with the higher caste victims.

He reached a recalcitrant bolt and ordered, "Give me that spanner." Instantly Josephs slapped it into his hand, the way a nurse would in a surgical arena.

That's how all his people had been treating him in the long hours since the building had blown up, as if only whole-hearted cooperation would keep him emotionally intact. No one, besides Uhura when she'd awakened him, had even hinted that the explosion had any connection with the two men they were frantically working to try to find. But emotion hung heavier in the hanger than smoke hung over the twisted building the Derkheen had destroyed. When he'd emerged from the little room, Hunyady had been crying in Prendel't's arms. Josephs and Tarn had stood awkwardly to one side, their arms loose, like they didn't know what to do with them. Kirk had ignored everyone's reaction, since his own control was tenuous. "Let's get to work," the captain had commanded, and so they did.

He stood on his tip-toes and reached for the bolt on the side of the 'car. The spanner whirled and the side panel popped open. Now, to trace this circuit to its source....
He had himself well in hand. He'd even managed another five hours of sleep in the night, and this time he hadn't dreamed. His brain acknowledged the possibility that Spock was dead. But he hadn't seen the body. And until he'd seen the body, his heart wouldn't lose hope. They hadn't seen the Enterprise all those hours that she wouldn't answer, had they? And then she'd appeared on Hunyady's tricorder and he'd known she was still faithfully in orbit. It could be the same with Spock.

_I cannot allow the sacrifice of one so close to you,_ Sargon had said on another day when he'd thought that his first officer was lost to him forever. On that day, he'd actually touched the cold arm and felt its lifelessness. How many seconds had passed while his heart struggled with the alien concept of Spock's death? Not long enough for the sorrow to penetrate very far. Sargon had spoken, and then warm life reanimated his other half and Spock was standing.

No, he hadn't allowed the possibility of Spock's death to touch him yet. He'd grabbed his sorrow even while Uhura sat crying next to him, and he hadn't permitted it to go any further than just the surface of his heart. He still had McCoy to think of. He still had over four hundred people on the Enterprise to think of. He had that unknown ship to think of. If Spock were dead.... Well, he'd somehow manage to deal with that when he saw his body. But until then he was the captain of the Enterprise and he had a job to do.

And there was still a chance that, like the Enterprise, Spock was still there....

He wiped the sweat from his eyes with the sleeve of his filthy shirt. This circuit would need reinforcing before they could even consider letting it carry the sensor load. Another five, six hours work at least.

Too much. Too long. Kirk stared at the gun-metal grey and suddenly knew he needed a break. He turned to whoever it was who was the self-appointed nursemaid for the current hour. Still Josephs. "I'm going outside for a minute." The security lieutenant watched him go, but didn't follow.

Kirk squinted as he emerged into the cool sunlight of the very early morning; the spring-time air felt good against his overheated skin. He leaned back against the wall next to the open hanger doorway, let the sun fall upon his face and breathed in deeply. The air smelled of grease and gasoline, but still it was fresher than what he'd been breathing.

He wanted to take a brisk walk, maybe even jog, but he stayed where he was, conserving his energy. That was the smart thing to do, even if he did feel coiled up like a runner at the start of a race. Any second, his energy could explode into action.... But the starter's gun had already gone off and he'd been left in the block. He couldn't run like hell to catch up because now he was forced to compete in a different race altogether. The waiting game, the patience game, the game of fine detail work that he wasn't suited to at all. It didn't matter that he felt like sprinting across the planet, the only race in town was right here behind him in the hanger. It represented the only chance he had to get to the Enterprise.

They were at the far end of the transportation facility; all the buildings near them had been abandoned, although he knew that there was still one hanger being used by the government on the far side of the airport, perhaps three kilometers away.

A big truck with an open bed in the back rumbled by. Wooden boxes were piled high, carrying... what? Weapons? Ammunition? Food? Did the Gabrielans have any idea what they were getting into with their plan to march south? He wondered if the Derkheen he'd met on his recon flights would even resist. Somehow, he didn't think so.

He was still troubled by the Derkheen. The people he'd seen in the temple and the people he'd met...
in the agricultural villages to the south just didn't seem to belong to the same culture. Every time he tried to reconcile the differences he got a headache, as if he were trying to look directly into a sun. There was so much light that he couldn't see anything. They were the same people, Uhura had implied, everybody else seemed to believe, but Kirk couldn't accept that. There was something else going on. More than just a dissident group. This was something qualitative, basic.

He rubbed the back of his neck and contemplated the sudden rise in violence along the Gabrielan border, the involvement that Hivlen had told him of the lower castes with the Derkheen uprising. There was a similarity there that he hesitated to acknowledge. On Michaela, there'd been unexplained violence, too. Could there actually be a connection? Kirk didn't see how. The Derkheen had been settled on Gabriela for four hundred years, and there'd been no contact with the rest of the galaxy to speak of since then. How could whatever had happened on Michaela spread so far across the sector? The only other similarity between the two planets was that the Federation explorers had named them both for angels.

Kirk shook his head and looked down at his boots, felt the beginnings of a small smile threaten to curve his lips. Spock would tell him he was being illogical.

Spock. He had promised himself he wasn't going to think of his lover. It hurt too much. He looked up to divert his attention.

A big cargo carrier circled overhead and then came in right to left against the breeze. It landed and taxied to the far end of the strip before turning out of his sight. Then there was silence. The truck was long gone, there was no other traffic. No one was in sight. They were alone....

Then a different sound caught his attention, thin, barely perceptible. It didn't sound like a Gabrielan aircar. The pitch was higher, the engine noise smoother. He pushed away from the wall and looked for the aircar above the airstrip but couldn't find it. Then what was making that noise? Could somebody be in trouble? Could it be one of his people coming in from the south?

The noise grew louder and finally Kirk located its source as he shaded his eyes against the rising sun. It was a tiny dot in the air, coming in the wrong way, left to right. It didn't look like any air vehicle Kirk had seen on Gabriela, and it didn't look like anything he'd seen on another planet either. Flat and small, the object had minimal aerodynamic capability and was falling to the ground too quickly.

He started out towards the landing strip at a run, trying to keep the vehicle in sight. Whoever was piloting it didn't know what they were doing. They were going to overshoot the end of the runway.

Abruptly the engine above him cut off, and the vehicle went into a steep, silent, deadly glide. Kirk stopped running, stood and winced, convinced he was going to see someone crash, possibly die.... But at the last minute there was a roar and a reapplication of force, and the crash turned into a barely safe, barely powered and abrupt landing. The vehicle skidded forward and finally came to a stop in the tall grass not forty meters in front of him.

No wonder he hadn't recognized the vehicle. It wasn't made for travel in a planet's atmosphere at all. This wasn't an aircar, it was a one-person escape pod from a spacecraft.

Kirk raised his eyes to the blue-green sky as he ran forward, as if he could see the other vessel orbiting the planet, so close to the Enterprise. It was the only explanation. This pod had come from that ship. His heart beat faster. Who was in it?

There was a scorched furrow in the ground where the emergency vehicle had plowed along the surface; the grass was smoking. The pod had landed nose forward, and the hatch was high up on
the side. There was a recessed handle there, and it slowly turned as whoever was inside struggled to get out. But that small movement wasn't what caught Kirk's astonished attention, even as he grabbed a handful of grass and weeds to protect his hand when he reached for the hot metal. Instead, his eyes took in the word *Lox’teneth’nar* etched into the side of the pod.

Somehow, after that, he wasn't even disappointed when the door came abruptly open with his first tug and the being who peeked out was a familiar, little old lady with white hair. He grabbed her under the arms to pull her out of the cockpit and encountered her warm smile up close.

"Gri-Ta," he said. "Gri-Ta --" His mind was racing. What was it she'd said her other name was?

"Captain Kirk," she acknowledged. She nimbly jumped down to the ground within the circle of his arms, and efficiently pulled her clothing back into place. Her short hair was still curled in a bob, even if it was in a bit of disarray. Her parchment skin was still luminous, and the plain brown shirt and trousers she wore, while rumpled, were impeccably clean. "Glad I am that I have found you. We have much to do. First there is --"

"The first thing we need to do," he interrupted her, "is get out of here. Your fuel might be unstable. Are you all right?" She nodded, so he grabbed her hand and started to run back to the hanger.

But she refused to go very far. Gri-Ta pulled away from him and stood still as soon as they were twenty meters away. "That enough is. Talk we must."

The others from the hanger were fast approaching, but he ignored them and swung around, ignored the little woman's urgency to give in to his own. "You came from the *Lox’teneth’nar*," he half-demanded, half-questioned. "Do you know anything about the *Enterprise*? Or my crewmen? Two of them have been taken prisoner. Are they up there?" He pointed urgently, skyward.

"Yes to all questions," she nodded. "Your ship for the moment is safe. No one there has yet been harmed. As for your crewmen, prisoners they are, but when I left hours ago alive they were. And believe do I that I would know if one at least were harmed."

Kirk closed his eyes in silent thanksgiving to whatever deity was watching. He'd *known* that Spock was up there in orbit, somehow he'd known.

He let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, and as the air escaped realization rushed in to take its place. It was as if, now that he finally had some reassurance of Spock's, and McCoy's, safety, there was room in his brain for other things. He remembered Gri-Ta's name. There was an almost audible click in his head, and the separate pieces of the puzzle that had been whirling about in his mind for days suddenly fell into place.

"Danarkoon," he said, amazement in his voice. "You told me your last name was Danarkoon and that your people were called the Krohderkhin. You said that you were going to find some of your people who had strayed."

"Yes, yes," she agreed. "True that is. Tell that to you I did. But there is no --"

He interrupted her. "I am an idiot. All this time I've had the clues and I didn't put them together. All these people we've met from so many planets. Penda was right." Uhura, Hunyady and Josephs, Prendel't and Tarn had arrived and were grouped about their captain and the strange woman who'd just dropped from the sky. Kirk grabbed his communications officer's arm and squeezed, his face a peculiar picture of jubilation and self-recrimination. "You were right! They are the same race, but not just here on Gabriela. It's the same people all across this sector."
"Captain, never a secret have we kept it," Gri-Ta said, chiding. "My people have been scattered by time and circumstance."

Kirk released Uhura. Static energy seemed to tremble just beneath the surface of his skin, and it grew with each moment as his excited words came tumbling out. Finally, he understood. "The people on the Lox'theneth'nar, called the Danarakh. The people on the starbase, called the Krohderkhin. And finally the people here on Gabriela, the Derkheen, they're all the same people. And each are outcasts. When the Enterprise helped the Lox'theneth'nar, the Danarakh said they were going to a new home where they'd have to struggle for what they needed. Were they coming here to Gabriela?"

"Yes," she sighed. "To add their force to the rebellion of the Derkheen here. With the rest of the colonists on Beta Armstrong they did not leave, and before they killed took from the mind of the crew how to come to Gabriela. A mistake I made at that time, of allowing them to detect me. Prisoner I was taken."

But Kirk was too involved in his own frantic reasoning to react to that revelation. "Danarkoon, Danarakh. Krohderkhin, Derkheen. It's so obvious, how could I have missed it? Your people are the ones responsible for the violence in this sector, aren't they?"

"What?" Uhura and Hunyady exclaimed, simultaneously.

Kirk swung to them, his arms gesturing already in excited explanation. "How many of the planets in your study had transient or isolated populations? How many "gypsy" encampments were there?"

Hunyady's brow wrinkled in thought. "I -- I don't know. It's hard to say over the surface of an entire planet. Maybe four, five?"

"No, more," Uhura put in quickly. "That cluster of three planets near the nebula, remember? And the megacity on Yaccatunin. That brings it up to at least nine. Captain, nine out of nineteen. And I bet there's more."

"Me too," Kirk said in determined enthusiasm. He turned back to Gri-Ta. "Am I right?"

She smiled at him like his grandmother had smiled years ago when he'd proudly declared he could ride his bicycle by himself. "You know you are," she said. "Thought had I much persuasion necessary would be. You precede me, Captain."

He shook his head. "No, because I still don't understand why this has happened, and what we can do to stop it. But you do. Tell us."

"Tell you I will. But time important is." Her attention narrowed to include only the captain. "On the Lox'theneth'nar is Commander Spock. The ones who call themselves Danarakh hold him, along with a few Derkheen who the way showed during his capture. All followers of Montin are. Your friend in great danger is, and through him, your ship also in danger is. The ship will a mighty weapon be with the wrong minds to guide it. We must find a way to return above, her gnarled hand pointed, "and stop what is to happen, and do it we must quickly before Montin and his people overcome Commander Spock's will."

For a moment it seemed as if Kirk didn't understand. He stared at her with a blank face, his eyes unfocused. Then he abruptly turned around and looked out at the airstrip.

Uhura knew that her captain was thinking furiously, but Hunyady didn't. "We can't," the young lieutenant broke into the silence with a betraying catch in her voice. "We can't go anytime soon."
There's still hours and hours of work to be done, maybe even days. And we don't even know if this idea will work. It might be like the other times when I didn't get it right..." Angrily she wiped at the moisture that threatened.

But Kirk was suddenly there, and the look in his eyes checked her tears. He smiled at her, an understanding smile that silently acknowledged how much she cared. He took her shoulders in his hands. "Lieutenant. Lieutenant. It's all right." He turned her away from him, so she was facing the angry swipe in the earth made by the landing, and the still smoldering escape pod. "See that? One hundred years old, Mr. Spock told us back on the Enterprise. But it's still way in advance of what we have to work with here on Gabriela. Think we can find a way to launch with those circuits and systems?"

The story of Gri-Ta's people was told in fits and starts, while the pod was attacked by determined hands and its components frantically scavenged.

"My people a grievous error have made," Gri-Ta explained as she helped carry the first load of metal and plastic to the hanger. The captain, Tarn and Josephs pulled a flat piece of sheet metal on which they'd piled the heaviest pieces. "Others with their blood have paid for that mistake. The balance of the Whole is upset, and She who encompasses the All demands it be put right."

"Comprehend the situation, Captain; our outcast status imposed upon us it is not. It is chosen." Kirk managed a look of surprise through the sweat and dirt that streaked his face. "Chosen," she emphasized. "We are not like other races. We are, how do you say it, within." Because her hands were full, she gestured with a little motion of her white head. "Linked, one to the other. Our strengths and our weaknesses we draw from one another. We are each complete in ourselves only because we are also everyone else. Do you understand?"

He nodded, and so did the rest of his crew. Hunyady asked, "Do you mean a modified group consciousness?"

Kirk added, "We've come across that before. Although it's very unusual in humanoids."

"Yes, but still we the Krohderkhin are different. We cannot keep our -- I will use your word personality -- our personalities to ourselves. All those around us we influence, draw them into our net so that they lose their own psychic integrity. Through hard experience, learned did we that we could not associate with any other races for more than a few months, and that when we did, we were resented because of the changes we caused, even when benign those changes were. We were hated. Very strong among all the other races is the drive to be psychically independent. Most races do not know the Great Spirit of the All, and understand us they do not."

"Many hundreds of years ago, when we lost our home planet, the Krohderkhin the decision made that always apart we must live, wherever we lived. It was that, or be hounded and destroyed by others who did not understand that what we did deliberate was not. Part of our natures it simply is."

"What Hivlen told us about the Derkheen," Uhura breathed. "He said the unclean influenced even the second caste. The contamination he talked about, it's real. That's why the Gabrielans won't have anything to do with them."

The captain regarded Gri-Ta's lined face intently. "But there's more. Your people have changed, you said. Why?"

That question wasn't answered right away because they'd reached the hanger and had to start unloading their improvised carry-alls. But when they were ready to go for a second load, Gri-Ta began the story again.
"In the transition the problem is. When our people reach maturity, we... in your language there is no word. We discover that part within us that we will contribute to the Whole. Whether we are primarily growers, builders, thinkers, lovers, movers. That we become, and it pleases She who is All, because it is our destiny, and it makes us Whole."

"But in every generation, there are a few who are called to... assertive action. Violence they are capable of. Change they often initiate. Even they, few that they are, are beloved, for even they have a place, and a role to play."

"But in the last generation, one who went through the transition received this gift in double measure. Mon became Montin. He also received another gift, much more dangerous and never among us used before. He could assist others in resisting the change. With his gift, acceptance of destiny necessary was not. You recall, Captain Kirk, we talked of acceptance before."

He almost smiled at her. Now that there was something to do that promised real hope, the first layer of his heart was melting, giving up its sorrow. "I remember, Gri-Ta. But I don't know that I've learned acceptance yet. I'm not sure I ever will."

"So I see. However, among my people disastrous it has proven. She who is All grieves. It is not possible balance to maintain when one can reject what should be. With Montin's influence, people who should have become a ban became a tin instead, they rejected the loving or the building or the moving, and the ways of force embraced instead. There have always been some among us who our enforced isolation resented, who opportunity wished, but unless they transsed into a tin, they did not the basic nature have to do anything about it. And there so few tins were. But now that changed. Many followed Montin have."

She shrugged her bony shoulders. "There lay our error. We nothing did, although spread the group did, planet to planet, through the psychic net that connects us. Even here, to this planet you call Gabriela. But the Council of Elders did not move. There were arguments that this too, must accepted be. She who is All was not clear to us, had not made herself known. And so many asked in Council, was it not destiny, the way things should be? Montin's gift was real, perhaps this the way the Krohderkhin should evolve. Others argued that we so very small in number are. What are a few tens of millions against the many more who inhabit this galaxy? And what a few thousand tins are?"

Her thin lips folded to a tight line. "Our hesitation many lives cost. The influence of the psychic net on others we neglected to consider. After a time Montin and his followers dared to live openly with other races, as we have not done in hundreds of years. They colonized planets as one of many groups, and their natural... personality began to affect the others with whom they lived."

Kirk closed his eyes. He'd seen the results of that influence when he'd spent the torturous days and nights on Michaela, when he'd watched Mar kill herself. He couldn't reconcile the horror that filled him with the genuine sympathy he'd felt towards the Derkheen. Wasn't everyone, he'd asked himself, entitled to a homeland? He'd hated the way the Gabrielans had regarded the other race on their planet, he'd been impatient with Hivlen and dismissed his explanations with labels like prejudice and self-serving. And now he knew that it was a runaway faction of the Derkheen, the people he'd felt a kinship with, that was responsible for so much evil: the conflict and deaths on Michaela, on Gabriela, and so many other worlds.

Hunyady, too, was thinking of other worlds. "Freneth," she whispered. "The captain of the Loxtheneth'nar who went berserk and killed those people. He'd taken home leave on his planet for five months before the voyage. It was on McCullough's Planet. Are your people on McCullough's? That wasn't one of the planets in our study."
Gri-Ta bowed her head. "Yes. And five months long enough for him to be influenced would be. Most of the humanoids, the touch of Montin's people they cannot tolerate. It too much for them is. They become, what the word is, unstable? Crazy?"

"Yes," Kirk said grimly, remembering the alternate periods of calm and violence that had beset Mar's people, the suicides in the little church when the violent ones realized what they had done. "Yes."

"But what about here on Gabriela?" Josephs asked. "Some of the Gabrielans seem to be working with the Derkheen rationally enough."

Gri-Ta nodded. "The Gabrielans are much like us. They too have a net connecting them, do they not? They are more readily absorbed by Montin's followers. That is why he chose to come here."

By now their little group had reached the pod, and before they all went to work again she turned to Kirk. "I promise that we will our error attempt to correct. My sisters, the other Ta's who are members of the Council, they are coming. We will our people gather back to the fold and have them fill the niches they were meant to fill. And Montin himself.... The Council will deal with him as well. But first --."

"But first we get the ship back," Kirk promised, his mind on the Enterprise as a weapon of destruction. "And we rescue Spock and McCoy. Gri-Ta, when we do.... It must have been your people who hurt him. My first officer. Will you be able to help him?"

"Know that I do not. Certainly, alone nothing I can do to heal his wounds. See him better I must, and perhaps all the Council.... Know more I do not."

It wasn't much of an answer, but he had to be satisfied with the uncertainty. But Kirk couldn't be satisfied without the answer to one more question. "You read my mind back on starbase twenty-four, and influenced Komack to send us here, didn't you? None of this has been coincidence."

Her chin tucked in, she gazed at him through lowered eyelashes, looking like a child caught in a misdeed. "Just the froth read I, Captain. I sensed you had been near Montin; his essence clung to you. I asked you where your ship had been, and your thoughts told me."

"And Komack?"

She looked even more ashamed. "Blessed with this power I am one of the few on the Council.... Yes. Encouraged him I to send you here. Help I might need, thought I, and you I knew. And you already Montin had encountered, and so would understand.... It was.... an evil perpetrated in the name of good. Apologize I do to you. Mislead you I did."

He didn't know what to say to that. He turned back to the work.

It was mid-morning, two hours and forty minutes later that the work on the Gabrielan aircar was complete. Kirk contacted Sulu to the south and turned command of the remaining ground-based Enterprise crew to him. "Success," the helmsman wished them.

Kirk didn't want to talk to Hivlen fa Hivlen, but he had to think of Sulu and the others. If this trip to space didn't work, it was possible the rest of them would be stranded on Gabriela indefinitely, and Hivlen needed to be on their side. But the leader refused to respond to Kirk's calls, so eventually he left a message explaining what they were doing with Annana si Annana. Whatever they accomplished on the Lox'theneth'nar, the captain had the sinking sensation that it wouldn't affect the planned action against the Derkheen. The inoffensive people on the other side of the border
would suffer because of what Montin and his followers had done.

He climbed up into the cockpit; Uhura was in the co-pilot's seat. Between them was Gri-Ta, the smallest in the group. Into the back climbed Hunyady and Josephs, Prendel't and Tarn, who had to sit shoulder to shoulder. It was too tight a fit.

"Ensign Tarn." He hated to say it. "There isn't enough room. You'll have to stay behind." If... when they rescued Spock and McCoy, there had to be enough space to get them into the 'car.

The big man's face fell. "But Captain," he protested, his deep voice rumbling. "I can help. I can help you find Mister Spock."

"Captain," Josephs added, "T is the best there is with a phaser, and he's quick. We need him."

Kirk started to shake his head, but then Prendel't gave a twitch to her antenna and an impatient shake to her shoulders. "Ssstupid," she hissed. In one swift movement she was up and onto Tarn's lap. Startled, the big man's arms came around her; his huge hands settled delicately over her arms.

She ignored him. "Ssstsee?" she asked her captain. "Now there isss room. And the young married one can ssstsit on the illussstrious Josephs to make more."

They all looked at him expectantly, waiting for his decision, all of them wanting to go. He nodded wordlessly and turned back to the controls. Tarn gave Prendel't a gentle squeeze and whispered, "Thank you." She shrugged and stared straight ahead.

They were seven people. They had two phasers, one stolen rifle and a single intact communicator among them. The vehicle they were in had been patched together with sweat and prayer in the hopes it would take them into orbit. If there was one pop in a seam, their air would rush out and they'd be dead. If the extra tanks of fuels didn't flow one to the other and give them enough power, they'd be stranded in orbit. If the Loxenen guidance system couldn't communicate with the Gabrielan vehicle, they'd tumble and roll into oblivion.

But they were going.

With no hesitation and not a question, his crew was following him once again into the unknown. A knot of pride stuck in Kirk's throat as he released the brake and eased the throttle forward just a bit. They were such good people. The 'car began to roll forward and he concentrated on getting it into position at the end of the runway. They'd take off, and then he'd coax the vehicle into the upper atmosphere and then into orbit. He'd use every trick he'd ever learned as a hotshot young pilot to make their way to the Lox'theneth'nar without detection, and give all of them the best possible chance.

He glanced at Gri-Ta, as he had frequently, as if to reassure himself that his answers were still with him. "Definitely not to the Enterprise?" he asked once again. It would be hard to pilot away from her.

"Not. Do you wish to be caught by their Ta's? To the Lox'theneth'nar." She gestured forward imperiously, even though they'd covered over the transparent bubble so that their take-off and the rest of their journey would be blind.

"To the Lox'theneth'nar," he repeated, and settled himself more firmly in a seat that hadn't been made for humans. Gri-Ta's conviction relieved him of the conflict: choosing between the contrary tugs to his heart that wanted to take him both to his ship and to Spock. He double-checked the heading provided by the bits and pieces of Hunyady's tricorder and the parts from the escape pod
that they'd molded together into a guidance system. He'd have to alter his trajectory once past the orbit of the satellite; it would be a good idea to hug the sensor shadow of the *Enterprise* as he approached the asteroid-ship.

Uhura leaned forward and touched his knee with a graceful if begrimed hand. She gifted him with a small smile. "Here we go," she said. "We'll make it."

Kirk answered her with a determined nod. He opened the throttle, and the 'car rushed down the runway.
Chapter 18

It was early morning on the *Enterprise*. Four times a week Lieutenant Brian Dawson rose early and attended an exercise class before alpha shift breakfast. Tan Resl't was usually there, and the metallurgist Kim Park, too. It seemed to Dawson that getting up in the morning used to be easier than it had been lately, and going to the gym had been --well, if it hadn't been fun, at least it had been something he had wanted to do. Now he groaned when the alarm went off and he found it difficult to leave the bed. But he pulled himself off the mattress and stood, swaying slightly by its side. He looked down at the rumpled sheets and frowned. He needed an attitude adjustment. Nothing seemed very interesting lately. That ache in the center of his chest had taken up permanent residence.

With sluggish movements Dawson dressed for duty and walked slowly to the gym, where he changed into shorts and t-shirt in the locker room. He carelessly hung up his uniform pants and tunic on the hook provided, his thoughts dark and unfocused, but then he deliberately removed the necklace that he donned every morning and took off every night. With this he would be careful. It was very valuable to him. He held the necklace in his palm and admired its beauty. Not everybody had a friend like Tan, willing to tune the sponder. He was grateful he'd met the Andorian and they were friends. Although, friends weren't always enough in a man's life. Sometimes a man needed more....

He laid the chain on the shelf. Was it a trick of the lighting or was there a flicker of light on the gold? Dawson tilted his head and stepped closer.

The flat woven chain came to life, and for some reason Dawson couldn't explain his heart jumped at the sight. Joy coursed through him, and a fierce expectation. Wildly, he looked around. There was Kim getting dressed in the corner, and Lieutenant Tu just going out. Other than that the room was empty. He looked back down at the necklace. Fire licked at the very center, then spread out in a lightning ripple so that a six inch strip glowed white tinged with orange. He touched it with the tip of his index finger. It felt cool, but that empty space in his chest was burning.

And then in an instant the glow went out, and all he had left was an ordinary gold necklace again. His heart pounded. What did it mean?

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Damn it. Damn it! Had that been two left turns and a right, or two right turns and a left? McCoy paused at an intersection and doubled over while he panted, clutching at the stitch in his side. He hadn't run this fast since he was a teenager.

Groaning, he straightened. No time now. He didn't know how long he'd been unconscious on the floor, a victim of the Vulcan nerve pinch and Spock's determination. Couldn't have been more than fifteen, twenty minutes. Then that blasted forcefield had taken more precious minutes to weaken. His blackened fingertips testified to his impatience, but finally he'd been able to force his whole hand through the field. He'd dashed to the back wall of the cell, then run full speed through the glowing curtain and slammed into the other side of the corridor. Knocked all the breath out of him and set his nerve endings afire, but at least he was through.

Since then he'd run as fast as he could through the dark, featureless hallways of wherever the heck they were. He had to get to Spock. He prayed as he ran that the soldiers had been frightened of their own people, that there wasn't any way that they'd bring a lifeless body to Montin. He prayed
that Spock was just too important to them to kill him, despite the temptation.

And then he prayed that somehow that traumatized mind would be able to withstand the pressures of the transition.

Lungering forward like an awkward, raw-boned colt, he started to run again. This was the way, wasn't it? If only he had a memory like Spock's. All these darkened rooms looked the same to him and he wasn't sure he was on track. How long had it taken them to walk through these halls the first time? Wait, here was... Yes, he was sure he'd seen that room with the rotting food spilling over the doorstep. This was it. That meant there was another turn up ahead.

He skidded around the sharp angle and a gold-shirted body jumped out at him, grabbed his arm in a cruel, breath-stealing grip, twisted him around and down to the floor and raised a hand to strike....

"Bones!"

"Jim!"

The two friends stared at one another, but then Kirk hauled the doctor to his feet and wrapped his arms around the lean shoulders. "Bones, you make as much noise as a herd of elephants. I thought an army was running towards us."

McCoy didn't respond to that enthusiastic greeting, he just hung on hard to the solid frame of the friend he'd never thought to see again.

They pulled back simultaneously. There was no mistaking the honest joy on Kirk's face. Abashed, McCoy turned to look at the smiling faces of the rest of the people in the hallway. He never thought he'd see anyone again, he really had expected to fail in whatever he'd try to do to save Spock....

He swung back to Kirk. "We've got to get to Spock," he urged. "If he's still alive, Montin's probably trying to put him through the transition right now. That's the Derkheen leader who --."

"Still alive?" Kirk grabbed his shoulders again, this time hard enough to bruise. "What do you mean, if he's still alive?"

McCoy's mouth went dry, but he forced himself to look the captain in the eye. Spock had asked him to be strong, and it looked like that duty was starting right now. "He was going to try to kill himself, Jim. He didn't think he'd be able to resist the Derkheen, and he couldn't let them get control of the Enterprise through him."

Color drained from Kirk's face. He released McCoy and rounded on the unfamiliar old lady who was with the rest of the Starfleet crew. "Can you tell? Is he...?" He couldn't seem to force out the word.

"Know that I do not. But why else would Montin prepare for the transition?"

"He's alive," Kirk said fiercely, as if the force of his will was needed to supplement what reasoning suggested. "Bones, how do we get to this place? Gri-Ta's been trying to lead us, but we keep running into dead ends."

McCoy surged forward. "I know the way. Come on, follow me."

Kirk easily caught up with him, and the two of them ran with the others behind. "They're not Derkheen, Bones," Kirk called above their footsteps. "These people are mainly Danarakh from the
"Lox’theneth’nar."

"The Lox? You're kidding!"

"That's where we are, didn't you know? Now, tell me the layout of this room." McCoy kept running and fought for the breath to give his report.

In just a few minutes they were forced to slow down to approach the gathering hall silently. They crept forward, hugging the wall, and Kirk measured every second that ticked by with his pounding heartbeats. It was so, so difficult to go slowly when even now the Danarakh might be assaulting.... His jaw muscles rippled as he clamped down hard. Gri-Ta had to be right, Spock must be still alive. But suppose the transition were over and Spock was already...? His stomach lurched. He didn't want to think of what he might be forced to do. No, no, Spock was still alive and the transition hadn't started yet. It had to be that way.

He heard Josephs breathing behind him, sensed the presence of all his people following, following. The light was starting to brighten, as McCoy had said it would, and it was warmer here. They must be close. One step, two steps. Be quiet, move carefully. Nearly impossible, but he could do it, even though his body was quivering with the urge to go charging forward. Seconds might count.

Seconds. Those two seconds he’d promised to always have for Spock, now was the time to find them. To use them. Almost there. Almost there.

The corridor branched in a "T," and to their right was a big set of double doors, flung open, from which light spilled. The gathering hall. Kirk sneaked just one peek, had the impression of a large crowd, then motioned his people meters back into the shadows.

His voice was a whisper. "Tarn and Prendel't, you keep the phasers. Set them on stun. Attack option seven. Josephs, the two of us will use these." He hefted one of the rifles they’d confiscated from the two armed soldiers they’d encountered right after the aircar had docked. "The rest of you, stay here. Lieutenant," he addressed Hunyady, "you take the other rifle. Keep your eyes and ears open."

"Yes, sir."

"Right, Captain." Josephs slapped his phaser in Tarn's massive, open palm. The sound echoed off the bare walls, and the captain threw the security lieutenant a warning glance.

Kirk swung about to their guide. "Gri-Ta, anything?"

"Difficult to say it is. Montin's group," a look of distaste formed on her wrinkled face, "they are an aberration, and the sensations different are. However, soon it will be, I believe. They prepare for the transition."

"Then go!" McCoy cried, and he moved forward heedless of his weaponless hands.

"Be quiet!" Kirk commanded, and grabbed the doctor's arm. McCoy was stopped in mid-step by an iron grip. "We've got to wait."

McCoy turned an incredulous gaze upon his captain, but he kept his voice low. "Wait!? You don't know what that means. If we wait they're likely to smash into Spock's mind like a.... like a hammer crushing an egg!"

"I know that," Kirk hissed. His eyes stared into McCoy's from only centimeters away. "Don't you think I know that? But we can't take the chance. Four against two hundred. We've got to wait for
the transition so their attention will be focused on Spock."

McCoy was aghast. "That's an awfully big risk you're taking, Jim."

Kirk's gaze never wavered, but he released McCoy. "It's the only decision I can make. I won't send anyone else into certain death. That's not an order I can give, not even for Spock. And Spock of all people wouldn't ask it of me." There was strength in his voice, and a compound of misery and irony in his eyes. "I'm the captain, McCoy. Even now. Does this answer all your questions?"

The two men faced one another, the others from the crew unavoidably were witnesses to every word.

"Calm yourselves," Gri-Ta advanced and placed a hand on each of their arms. "I have touched his mind and know that resist he will, for a short time at least. You will the time to save him have. Now concentrate I must to tell you when to go." She turned away and closed her eyes.

McCoy looked at her, then at his captain. "Sorry," he mumbled. "I know you don't...."

Kirk nodded, then abruptly addressed the rest of the group, as if he were embarrassed at his impassioned outburst and wanted to gloss over it. "Remember," he whispered, "we still have to see if we can find the Ta's. If we can stop them, the Enterprise will be free. Uhura, investigate around here while we're inside the hall. There might be a clue for where the Ta's are. We'll need all the help we can get if Gri-Ta can't pinpoint them."

"Aye, sir," she responded.

"Captain," McCoy pushed himself forward again. "Let me go in with you. Spock's hurt. They were trying to weaken him for the transition and he's not in good shape. There might be something I can do ---."

Kirk shook his head. "No. You don't even have your medical kit. I won't risk you."

Lines furrowed McCoy's brow. "Then I'll find my kit. They must have it around here somewhere." He turned away and melted into the darkness of one of the rooms behind them.

"Prepare yourselves," Gri-Ta intoned. "It will be soon."

Kirk tightened his grip on the rifle and edged his way forward. Without looking he knew that Prendel't was behind him, Josephs and Tarn behind her. The gun felt heavy in his hands. It was a semi-automatic, with a full clip. He could use it. He knew he'd have to.

Sweat trickled down his spine. The light was bright here at the intersection, they were just a ninety-degree turn and three meters from the door to the gathering hall. Behind him was silence, he couldn't even hear Prendel't breathing. Before him was silence, as if there weren't two hundred beings right around the corner. Two hundred beings and Spock, locked in a struggle over the Enterprise....

A few more seconds. There was sweat on his palms, but he didn't dare stop and wipe them dry on his pants. He might need to spring forward any time now. Spock would need him.


"We're coming. We're coming for you."

"Now."
He lunged forward into the light. He had the fleeting impression of people sitting shoulder-to-shoulder on the floor in concentric circles. But his attention riveted on the center. A man with a shaven head stood there, backed by three soldiers with rifles in their hands. On the floor before them lay a huddled figure in blue.

Kirk's heart thudded up into his mouth and he pulled his weapon up to aim in the same moment. Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! The rifle recoiled in his hand, and the soldiers fell.

A phaser buzzed behind him, and Montin, astonishment written upon his face, slowly collapsed. Kirk didn't wait to see him hit the floor. Holding the gun ready before him, he nimbly dashed through the crowd.

Prendel't followed him, just behind and to one side of the captain. The position gave her a perfect angle to cut a swath with her phaser before him. Within seconds Kirk was running over and among unconscious bodies, not active resistance.

"Don't anybody move," shouted Josephs. He stood among the Danarakh, halfway through the crowd. Whether his words were understood or not, his gun's message was unmistakable to the beings gradually emerging from their concentration on an inner world. Tarn stood by the doorway and aimed his phaser at those who were clustered about the security lieutenant. He stopped when the collapsed pile reached four deep in every direction around Josephs.

Kirk planted his foot solidly on the back of the last slumped Danarakh, propelled himself forward and was finally in the center circle. A second later he tossed his weapon to Prendel't, who caught it with her free hand. She brandished phaser and rifle with gleeful menace. Then he went down on one knee next to his first officer.

McCoy hadn't prepared him for the awful condition of his lover's face. Kirk rolled Spock onto his back and sucked in breath. "Oh, my God," he breathed.

Frantically he checked for a pulse at the neck. His own heart pounded so loudly it rang in his ears, and he wasn't sure he could feel.... But it was there, that fluttering Vulcan heartbeat that meant everything to him.

The side of Spock's head was matted with blood that still oozed from a long, jagged wound that cut from temple over pointed ear and down to neck. Somebody had dealt his lover a massive blow not too long ago; it could have killed him. Maybe, as Spock slipped into unconsciousness, he thought it had.

Kirk touched a cheek with his fingertip, one of the few patches of skin not marred by blood or bruises, then his hands fell to the angular shoulders. He needed the reassurance of touch, to feel Spock breathing. Spock felt so hot, he must be burning up with infection. But his chest was moving, his heart was beating, and now.... Now those dark eyes were fluttering open.

For a moment all Kirk could see was fever-bright pain and the hope of death. But then comprehension blossomed. Vulcan hands lunged for him more swiftly than he had thought possible. Steel fingers dug into his arms, and for a fleeting second Kirk thought that Spock was going to pull him down into a full-body embrace.

"Jim?" A hoarse croak.

"Yes," Kirk choked. He could barely talk through the lump in his throat. "You look like hell, Mister. But I am so damned glad you didn't manage to get yourself killed."

Kirk had to deny the urge to laugh. Instead he said, gently, "You expect me to be angry? I'll put you on report later. But now we have to get out of here. Can you walk?"

Spock made an effort to sit. "I do not know." Kirk pulled him to his feet with hands under his armpits, then the first officer straightened and said, "I believe I can...."

Spock took three hesitant steps, stumbled, and fell onto one of the Danarakh who'd escaped Prendel't's phaser. With a shout the man wrapped his arms and legs around the Vulcan and rolled him over on his back onto the floor, but Kirk was there in an instant. Finally all the built-up adrenalin and banked frustration had an outlet; the man never had a chance. One quick chop to the kidneys and a roundhouse blow with his right fist, and the attacker went limp.

Prendel't wasted no words warning the other Danarakh who were trying to get to their feet. Her phaser sent them to the floor.

Kirk pulled his first officer upright again and wrapped a supporting arm around the narrow waist. Spock stiffened and gasped when Kirk's forearm pressed against the small of his back. The captain winced, understanding that he'd just caused more pain, and readjusted his grip upwards.

They picked their way through the slumped bodies, and Spock leaned heavily upon him. The Vulcan's breath came in audible, harsh shudders. Prendel't came behind them. They managed only a fraction of the speed that Kirk had when he'd rocketed forward, but still they made steady progress. They were almost to the door when McCoy appeared, medical tricorder in hand. His kit was already on his belt. Without a word he went to the first officer's other side and drew an arm over his shoulder.

Hunyady stood before Kirk, her arms extended. "Be careful of his back," the captain said, and then he relinquished his precious burden.

He turned back to the hall where Tarn and Prendel't stood just inside the door, holding the crowd at bay with their phasers. Already the Danarakh who hadn't been stunned were standing with their fists cutting the air and hatred contorting their faces. They began to shout. They did not pay any attention to their fallen comrades, not even to Montin; their attention was fixed single-mindedly at the door. They did not, quite, look rational. Kirk realized that the crowd would surely charge after them as soon as they left the hall.

Josephs was at this side. "A wide beam stun?" he suggested.

Wide beam drained energy faster than any other setting; stunning this many beings would leave them with almost no charge in the phasers and would only gain them a few minutes. Kirk had an uneasy feeling that they might need every last drop of energy in their weapons. It was a long way back to where they'd docked the aircar and they still had to find the Ta's. He cast about for another option. Continuing the narrow beam stun wouldn't work, since that would take time and the crowd would almost certainly attack in the meanwhile. And there was no way that he would leave any of his people here as guards. They'd be overwhelmed.

"No," he said, and stepped back to eye the doors. "These are metal. We'll seal the doors shut." It was impossible to estimate how long the doors would hold out against the determined crowd, maybe for a long time, but at least as long as a stun would have lasted. And their phasers would remain charged.

He swung about and called to the doctor. McCoy was running his medical tricorder over a
swaying, heavy-lidded Spock who was being held upright between Uhura and Hunyady. "Bones? Is there another exit from this hall?"

McCoy shook his head without looking away from the readout. "I don't think so. I didn't see any. Captain, we've got to get Spock out of here." He snapped his med kit open, selected a hypo and grimly sprayed it into the Vulcan's arm.

"We will, Bones, as soon as we can. Gri-Ta, do you have any idea where the Ta's might be?"

She nodded down a corridor in the opposite direction from the way they had come. "Large this ship is. They a long way are. In that direction, near the surface of the ship so they can close to the Enterprise be. But they are disguising themselves because they know I am here. How far they are say I cannot."

McCoy closed up his kit and straightened. He looked at Kirk. "We've got to get Spock, to get you, Captain, someplace quiet and secure."

Lines appeared in Kirk's brow. "I hear you, Bones. But first we've got to find the Ta's. That's the only way to release the Enterprise."

Utter frustration crossed the physician's face. He took four quick steps forward, so that he was close enough to the captain for a whisper to bridge the distance between them. "You don't understand the situation, Jim. Spock is --."

A shout and the angry sound of a phaser interrupted him. "Look out!" Josephs cried as a wall of Danarakh surged towards the open door.

"Get the doors shut," Kirk shouted. He pushed McCoy away from the attack, punched a man in the stomach, then shoved him backwards, doubled-over. It cleared a path for him, enough so he was able to leap to the right door. On the other side, Josephs was already leaning all his strength into the left door, pushing it shut....

Uhura was beside Kirk a moment later, and together they shoved and heaved while the wild shouts of attack and the whirling phasers continued. Bodies piled up in the way, and they had to be pushed back to get the doors shut.... There was the crack of a more primitive weapon, and Kirk, with his legs braced and his cheek pressed against dura-plast, thought that Hunyady had finally relinquished her support of Spock and fired her rifle....

Crash! the doors resounded as they slid home. Prendel't stood in the center of the hallway, phaser in her blue hand, surrounded by fallen Danarakh who had managed to get through. She aimed for the seam between the doors to seal them shut. But before she could complete the job, a woman jumped up from the pile at her feet with a snarl, and knocked her arm to the side.

The phaser burned a brown path across the lock, the center of the door, the dura-plast doorjamb and the wall before the Andorian managed to raise her left arm and cuff the woman back into unconsciousness. Then the security guard resumed sealing the door.

Finally there was silence. Kirk dragged breath into his lungs and surveyed the damage. "Let's get out of here," he ordered, and before they moved away he heard the sounds of the Danarakh within pounding.

McCoy and Hunyady with Spock between them were already far ahead, moving down the hall from which they'd come. Kirk caught up with Gri-Ta and panted, "Which way to the Ta's?"

"Turn there," she pointed. "But find them I am not sure I can."
"We've got to." He glanced behind him, where the three security guards, with weapons at the ready, were guarding their retreat. "Keep your ears open. We don't know when they'll be coming out," he ordered. "Josephs, come with me. I want you up front." There was no guarantee that all the Danarakh had been in the hall. He'd leave the phasers behind them, take the rifles to the front.

The nightmare was only beginning.

*****

Ten minutes after they left the hall they jogged through darkened corridors, away from the light. There was abundant moss growing on the walls here, the air was heavy with humidity, and it stank like a water-logged, filthy sewer. Kirk tried to breathe through his mouth. It was quiet; he could only hear the sounds of their own footsteps, and their breathing. He didn't like it. How long of a head start would they have? Spock was quick-walking without support now, whatever McCoy had injected was helping, but how long could they keep up this pace?

Then, without warning, shots rang out from ahead, whizzed by his ear and connected with some body behind him. He heard Oommph!, knew it wasn't Spock, and ran forward with his rifle blazing. He watched as two soldiers jerked backwards and fell.

Chest heaving with the sudden adrenalin flow, Kirk looked down at his victims. They were both dead; he was a good shot with a projectile weapon. There was just enough light in the dimness to show that their blood was pinkish. Rosy pink, like the flowers in a garden, or the healthy bloom on a child's cheek. The color burned into his eyes.

He picked up a rifle so he could arm Uhura. It was useless to think of giving one to McCoy.

Prendel't had been hit in the upper arm, a flesh wound that she dismissed with a shrug. "It is not my killing arm, Captain." Kirk frowned, McCoy sprayed plasti-skin on the gash of blue-purple, said, "She'll do," and they were ready to walk again. Kirk motioned everyone forward.

*****

They traveled through the ship's corridors more cautiously, following where Gri-Ta led. Thirty minutes passed. Forty minutes. Gri-Ta said they must be getting close to the Ta's. Kirk tried to expand his senses, to see and feel every possible attack. From what direction would they come? The rear? From ahead? The Danarakh knew the Lox'theneth'nar, his crew did not. They could be ambushed anywhere. Surely the crowd must have broken through the sutured door by now. His skin prickled, he whirled about just in time to see Spock slump to the floor from where he'd been walking between McCoy and Hunyady.

Kirk was there almost before the Vulcan's limp form hit the floor. McCoy had at least caught and protected his head. "We can't stop," the captain said grimly. He motioned Hunyady to the front where Josephs and Uhura had already assumed defensive postures, mirrored by Tarn and Prendel't behind them. Then he reached down and pulled his lover up into a sitting position with the obvious intention of slinging him over his shoulder.

But Spock was reaching for consciousness already, murmuring, "No, I can walk."

McCoy had pulled out his tricorder again. "I don't know how much farther he can go," the physician reported. McCoy looked directly at the captain, with meaning in his eyes. "Jim, Spock can't last much longer. He needs to stop. You both need to stop."

"No, I can go on," the Vulcan insisted. He'd pulled upright within Kirk's grasp, although his head
hung low, and he was heaving in huge breaths. "However far is n-necessary."

But Spock couldn't hide the shudder that shook his frame even as he spoke, or the convulsive trembling that moved skin and muscle under Kirk's hands. The captain could feel the heat of the flesh even through the blue tunic, and he reached forward to wipe away a trickle of sweat that had gathered along his first officer's jawline. And with the simple caring motion, sudden understanding raced up his spine. He knew what the heat and the sweating and the fever-bright eyes meant. My God, now he knew. They'd rescued the first officer, but for what?

"Spock," he whispered, his fingers tightening on the bony shoulders. "Oh, Spock."

Slowly dark eyes rose to meet hazel eyes. Even with all the danger around them, still there was a moment of infinity that swept through Kirk's soul as their gazes locked. Such bittersweet communion. Spock's wounded, bruise-rimmed eyes were glassy with pain and longing, and with the steely resolve that kept him from succumbing to the forces that urged him to Kirk for life.

And what did Kirk's gaze show? He hoped everything that was in his heart: love -- you're everything to me -- resolve -- somehow I'll find a way to help you -- bitter regret -- there's nothing I can do for you now.

"It is all r-right," the Vulcan panted. "I understand. We m-must go on."

Kirk had no choice. Not when they were fleeing from danger all around, not when they were racing against the clock to free the Enterprise. He hated saying the words that he forced from his mouth. "Can you hang on?"

Spock shook within the grasp Kirk had on his shoulders as his surging hormones tried to take control of his body and he fought them. Kirk rode with the tremor, unafraid, and didn't slacken his hold.

"It does not m-matter," Spock gasped. As if he had no strength at all, his battered face sagged between his bent knees. "There is an... an eighty-one percent chance that I will not s-survive even if we do stop. The mental...." Breath. Breath. "... connection is not there. There is n-no way to give me what I need.... I will f-fall f-forever...." Roughly Spock shook his head, as if to force lucidity to return. "Do not stop for me. It is not logical."

A cry from the heart, a catch in a lover's voice. "It isn't logical to let you die without even trying to save you! Damn the universe! How could this happen to us?"

Dark eyes cleared, and for a moment it was the old Spock who lifted his face to Kirk's. "Do not regret... anything that has happened between us. I do not. Please... " Shaking fingers lifted and brushed against the captain's cheek. "Remember always that I did not regret."

The fingertips branded Kirk. He was Spock's, always would be. More than anything he wanted to stay where he was, to let the heat of those fingers expand to encompass his whole body, to burn with Spock, and if necessary to die with him in the flames.... But that was a fantasy world where he wasn't the captain and Spock was not his loyal first officer, and where the lives of more than four hundred people didn't depend on what he decided right now. He had to let Spock go....

Fiercely Kirk turned his lips into the palm that lingered against his face. "I won't have to remember anything," he vowed. "You'll be there to tell me."

"Perhaps not," Spock whispered.

A moment of silence as Kirk breathed in his lover's scent. Hot and dry, with not a hint of moisture
for a son of Earth.... But he had forgotten that McCoy was there. An insistent arm pulled him away from what might be his last moments with beloved flesh.

"Captain, you can't go on, you've got to stop. Let Josephs and the others go after these people you're trying to find. You've got to stay here with Spock."

Kirk turned on the doctor with the desperation of the man who is committed to a course of action that eats at his soul. "And when the Danarakh find us? They'll take from my mind, from his, everything they need to control the Enterprise. We can't take that risk unless I know we can neutralize the Ta's."

McCoy roared back at him. "Then leave somebody behind to guard you. Me and Uhura. Hunyady."

Kirk laughed a mirthless, death's head laugh. "Didn't you see what happened back in the hall, McCoy? We barely escaped. Do you really think you could withstand another attack like that? No, we need every hand we have, and we need to stay together. It's our only hope."

"Then stop now," McCoy urged. "Have everyone stop."

"No." It was Spock's hoarse voice. "We must not. We must take this opportunity to find the Ta's who control the Enterprise. It is the only l-l-logical action."

Without breaking his stare with McCoy, Kirk reached out and unerringly entwined his fingers with his lover's. Spock's heat blazed against his coolness, but they were united, and together they confronted McCoy.

The doctor looked from one resolute face to the other. He knew when he was defeated, but he had to make sure that they both understood.... He swallowed hard. There was no easy way to say this. "Then Spock will die."

Kirk's fingers tightened convulsively. "No," he whispered, and turned to look again into the burning dark eyes. "Hold on for me." Resolve strengthened his voice. "You've got to hold on."

A convulsive swallow, another trickle of sweat rolled down the bruise that defined Spock's cheek. "I will try."

After that there was nothing to do but rise and order everyone forward.

*****

In the next fifteen minutes they were attacked from behind twice. It was impossible to tell if these soldiers were the vanguard of a larger force, or isolated guards who hadn't attended the attempted transition. Tarn and Prendel't, alert from their positions guarding the rear, made sure that the phasers were effective each time, but not before Josephs sustained a flesh wound in his upper thigh, and Hunyady twisted her ankle while scrambling for a cover position from which to fire her unfamiliar weapon. Slowly, they were succumbing to each little assault.

McCoy ripped open Josephs' pants leg and sprayed the wound. Kirk looked down at the security lieutenant. If he'd had any questions about the man weeks ago when he'd taken over for Giotto, they had been banished. "Ready to go, Captain," Josephs said, white-faced but calm. He hopped up on one foot, gingerly put the other to the floor, tested it by putting weight on it. "I'm fine. See, not even a limp."

That was untrue, but Kirk needed the man. Who else could he put walking point? No one else had his experience with the rifle. "Let's go."
But first Prendel't had to finish binding the stunned and twitching bodies with their own clothing. Her own wound didn't seem to bother her, and the Andorian took special delight in pulling the bonds tight. "Done, Captain." She rose from the side of the naked, unconscious Danarakh with a flourish, her hands raised high, and took her phaser back from Tarn with a purple-lipped grin. Then they limped on.

Uhura frowned at the pleasure the Andorian took in subjugating others. Then she looked at the first officer and her frown softened to pity. Spock walked stiff-legged, his swollen lips were compressed painfully. In every tense attitude of his body there was such tight control that she thought his fisted fingers would surely snap with the strain. She didn't dare talk to him; it looked like he was using every scrap of concentration just to continue his rigid progress forward. She could feel the tension rolling off him in waves. Once before, she had seen Spock like this, when the dark uniform pants couldn't hide his persistent erection.

How much longer could he continue? No being, not even a Vulcan, could go on under such obviously enormous strain. The captain would have to call a stop soon. Wouldn't he?

*****

Another forty-five minutes passed. Gri-Ta led them through green hallways, through a huge room that was three times the size of the gathering place used by the Danarakh, and where their quickening paces echoed. She led them through empty cargo space where they hugged the walls, and living quarters that stank of refuse and waste. Kirk strode in the lead, carried his rifle, consulted with Gri-Ta and Josephs, acted the captain.

But he was more than that, wasn't he? His life had been enriched by love, by a pair of steadfast brown eyes, by a heart given into his keeping.

Stop! Help him.

A captain's duty is to his ship and its crew.

How confident they had been, telling McCoy in the observation deck that they could merge their professional and personal lives. Always there'd been the knowledge between him and Spock that the ship came first, their duty always came first. They each were prepared to give up their lives for the ship and her crew.

But he wasn't prepared to give up Spock's life. Impossible. I'll never lose you.

And he wasn't prepared to give up the Enterprise and his duty to her. Equally impossible. It had been a solemn oath. A captain's duty is to his ship and his crew. As solemn as the one he'd breathed in his lover's ear.

Kirk didn't need to turn to know where his first officer was. His labored breathing identified him. How much longer before the heart that was pumping so furiously simply gave out?

Reach an intersection. Ease forward, check that the pathways are clear, jog across, gun held ready, guard the rest of the group as they pass. Move forward again.

Damn this universe! How could he distinguish his love from his life, his heart's desire from his heart's ease? Spock was an integral part of his love of the Enterprise, the Enterprise was a indistinguishable part of his love of Spock.

Hold on.
Can't help Mar. Can't help the Michaelans. Can't find a balance with McCoy. Can't reach his lover's mind.

Finally, he'd found something he could do. Sacrifice Spock's life on this stinking, rotting altar called the *Lox'theneth'nar*.

Can't. Can't.

Must.

See, Bones? Think I'm arrogant now? Let me get down on my knees and pray. Dear God, Mar's God, Gri-Ta's God, the God who gave me Spock. Take this choice away from me.

Where was the peace and joy of their melds, the stretching promise of their bond? Where was the life-giving river that mingled both their waters, the hyacinth blossoms that nodded along the banks? All gone, dried up with the water sinking down, down into the sand, dried up like a flower's desiccated husk.

Hold on, Spock.

*Lovely Lady, and all the souls she shelters. Hold on.*

Spock had been right, up in the Gabrielan tree-tops. The god of the sun had killed Hyacinthus, the youth he loved. Kirk was killing Spock with every step he took towards the Ta's.

****

Ten minutes later a shot exploded up ahead and ricocheted off the wall just to Kirk's right. He threw himself down onto the floor, heard the others behind him do the same, and wriggled towards where Josephs was flattened against the green and blue wall.

He stopped when he was opposite the lieutenant. *Where?* Kirk signaled in security code.

Josephs indicated the two dark doorways that flanked the hallway just ahead.

Kirk nodded, flashed instructions. He twisted around and caught Tarn's eye, signaled him to stay with Prendel't and guard their rear. Better to conserve the phasers in case they encountered an all-out attack. Then he slowly got to his knees and waited.

The seconds lengthened to a minute and his palms started to sweat again. He didn't move, the rifle was cocked and ready, he had dead aim at the shadows leading to the room. It would be folly to go forward where they'd be easy targets. He didn't think the Danarakh would be able to just stay where they were. It wasn't in their nature to be calm and patient....

*Crack!* *Crack!* *Crack!* *Crack!* There were two Danarakh in each room and they came out shooting. Bullets whizzed past Kirk's body, a searing heat swept along his right side, but he'd reacted by instinct and already let loose a volley of shots. He saw one soldier stiffen and fall, he rose to his feet to shoot again, but a moment later a second was upon him.

The man was strong. He impacted with Kirk, their weapons clashed against one another noisily, metal against metal as they struggled. Kirk collapsed backwards, pulled the man with him and attempted to use momentum to throw him free over his head so he could jump up and use his rifle. But the soldier held on, and landed with a *thump!* on the captain's chest instead. He pushed their mated weapons upwards so they banged against Kirk's chin. Pain exploded through Kirk's jaw, his vision dimmed and he held on to consciousness grimly....
Another body slammed into them. Kirk knew it was Spock before he felt the heat or heard the panting breaths. The Vulcan's heavy weight pressed the soldier full length against Kirk, pressed the gunmetal cruelly into the captain's throat before he heard *Thwack!* as Spock slapped the soldier's head to the right and *Thwack!* to the left, hard enough to break the man's neck.... Kirk felt the man stiffen and die upon him.

And a little part of Kirk died too, knowing how later Spock would grieve over what he'd done. But not now.

Now Spock shoved the body to the side and fell upon his captain, pushed the weapons to the side with careless Vulcan strength. They clattered on the floor.

"Jim," came the impassioned whisper as Spock buried his face in the human's neck. Furnace-hot breath brushed against his skin. Then Spock breathed in deeply, a swift, shuddering inhalation that matched the shaking arms that wrapped around Kirk's shoulders, capturing him. A moan was born between mouth and skin; the Vulcan's hips rose and fell, just once.

Spock's penis was alive between them. It was heavy and hot, fully engorged and needful. It scorched Kirk's belly; he could feel his lover's yearning life. Spock sought the sanctuary he must deny. He had to deny it or he'd spread his legs right there, give them both what they wanted while the *Enterprise* remained in thrall....

"Spock." He pushed against the wasted shoulders and, after just a moment of resistance, the first officer pulled back on stiffened arms, looked down with eyes that were dying flame.

He was the captain. "Let me go." *Let me go into the future without you, alone, lost and lonely, let me forever reach for you and never find you there*....

"No," Spock insisted. He dropped back down and ground his pelvis into Kirk's.

Had he ever said any other words that tortured his mouth like these words did? Kirk turned his head and whispered into the pointed ear. "T'hy'la. I love you. I'll always love you. But you have to let me go."

Kirk had fallen in love with a man of strength, the only man who could match him, will for will. He'd fallen in love with the first officer of the *Enterprise.*

In silence Spock breathed, pulled back, sat up, stood and walked away.

****

Gri-Ta led them to a steep stairwell hidden behind a door. "Up this way." She scurried up, her energy seemingly inexhaustible. The others followed more slowly. The landing party had been working day and night on Gabriela, McCoy had been imprisoned without food. Not even the fear of the Danarakh behind them, or the spur of releasing the *Enterprise* before them could give them energy that they simply did not have.

Hunyady was behind Spock. She felt awkward about the necessity of touching her revered commanding officer, didn't understand the grim determination that propelled his stiff, aching movements, or the anxiety that shimmered around Kirk. There was something wrong over and above the first officer's obvious injuries. It had been impossible to miss the heat radiating from the Vulcan's skin, and even in the dim light of the halls his erection was occasionally prominent. But everyone else ignored it. Doctor McCoy ignored it. What was happening?

The first officer's foot faltered as he climbed the steps. Hunyady was there in a moment to help
him, supporting with an arm around his shoulders, her hip and thigh pressed against his regardless of the soreness in her ankle. He jerked as they made contact, then abruptly sagged against her. He was pliable flesh without strength. His weakness startled her, his helplessness released strong protective feelings. She wanted to wrap her arms around him, to smooth her hand over the disordered, sweat-slicked bangs, to reassure him. But that was impossible. Mister Spock? Impossible. That wasn't her place. Although, she would do anything for him.

She contented herself with tightening the grip she had across his shoulders. From somewhere the Vulcan found the energy to stand up straight and move away. "I can p-proceed, Lieutenant," he murmured.

With anxious eyes she watched him put one foot in front of the other and make his way up the stairs, then she turned and met Uhura's gaze. "What's wrong?" she whispered. Uhura pursed her lips and shook her head. Penda, Hunyady realized, was as worried as she was.

*****

Fifteen minutes later Gri-Ta motioned them all to silence and pointed down an intersecting hall that was colored in nauseating combinations of blue, green and yellow. The lights were brighter than in the surrounding halls, and it was warmer again. Signs of life.

Kirk's heart pounded. The Danarakh weren't stupid, he felt sure that there were soldiers guarding the Ta's. But he also had no doubt that phasers would prevail over rifles again, and that soon they would overwhelm them. The Enterprise would be free.

He allowed himself one swift glance at his first officer. Spock's eyes were clenched shut as he leaned against the wall, there was fresh green on his lip where he'd bitten it for control, his legs were splayed wide to support his faltering body. The bruises on his face stood out in stark contrast to the pale, sweaty skin. But he'd followed his captain as he always had, and he was still alive.

A chance for the Enterprise and a chance for Spock. Maybe there was somebody listening to his prayers after all.

Kirk eased himself straight; his side where the bullet had nicked him was stinging. Josephs' limp had gotten worse, there was fresh blue-purple blood showing around the edges of the plasti-skin McCoy had sprayed on Prendel't's arm. So the captain silently appropriated a scowling Prendel't's phaser, and gestured to Tarn to come with him. The Rigellian was the only one he trusted to be proficient with a weapon who was uninjured.

They flattened themselves against the wall, inched their way forward. One step, two, three. Almost there. Strange, that there weren't any guards around the entrance to the room. If Kirk had been trying to protect the Ta's, he would have posted people down the hall, at intersections, he would have guarded the entrance to the room....

Uneasily, he paused. Could this be a trap? He risked a quick glance behind, to where the rest of his group were waiting in the Starfleet-prescribed defensive position. No sign of trouble. Josephs was down on one knee with the rifle to his shoulder. Gri-Ta met his gaze. Her brow was knit, her body was curved and questioning.

They wouldn't know unless he went forward. The Enterprise was through that door. Another step, another. The phaser was so light in his hand compared to the rifle. He wouldn't have to shoot to kill, either. A blessing. Heavy stun would be more than enough.

Almost... there.
Phaser up, jump out, lunge forward, sweep to shoot....

But there was no one in the room.

Kirk jumped forward and overturned the ragged, overstuffed chair in the corner, grabbed the mattress on the floor and jerked it up and away. Nothing. His gaze swept the rest of the room. There was nowhere else to hide.

Tarn was already in the connecting room, where he was methodically turning over the bare mattresses that were laid almost end to end on the floor. Kirk jerked open the door to the closet in the corner and found what his sinking heart expected. Nothing. This must have been Spartan living quarters for several families on the crowded colony ship, but now only echoes lived here. Empty space expanded in his chest. The Enterprise faded.

Kirk made his way back to the first room, the rifle slack in his hands. Gri-Ta had entered, Hunyady and Uhura came behind her. The communications officer looked around with dismay as she realized their long twisting journey through the Lox'theneth'nar had been in vain.

McCoy walked in next to Spock, his hand barely touching the Vulcan's elbow. They moved with short, choppy steps to the side of the room, one frowning anxiously, the other staring straight ahead with a fiercely determined gaze. They came face to face with the wall; like a poorly manufactured robot, Spock went down to the floor with jerky movements, twisted to allow the wall to support him. The physician hunkered down next to him, but his patient didn't seem to notice he was there. He pulled out his tricorder and set it whirring.

Kirk's attention was focused on Gri-Ta. She stood in the center of the room, and for the first time defeat slumped her shoulders. The white hair that had survived even the wild ride through the atmosphere in the escape pod was slicked back against her head, dirty and lifeless. Her skin seemed to sag.

"Well, where are they?" he demanded. "I thought you said they'd be here."

"They sensed me," she said sadly. "I followed their residue and knew it not. Gone they are." She gestured in the air, almost aimlessly. "Sorry I am, Captain Kirk."

For too long he'd been propelled through the corridors of this hellhole by the vision of his ship flying free. He couldn't let the Enterprise go so easily. His crew was depending on him.... "Can we try again? Do you know where they are now?"

She looked down at her shoes, squinted, then shook her head. "No. There are ways to fool me, and discover them they have. They have not been here for a long time. Days. I realize now this is only one of many false trails. Find them I cannot. Anywhere they could be."

"Are you sure? Do you need some more time to concentrate? Gri-Ta, we've got to find the Ta's. It's the only way we can get to the Enterprise."

Her head came up, she spoke sharply. "Know that I do. Wish I do not to Gabriela return, mission undone. But find them I cannot. Believe me."

He did, and all the muscles leading to his solar plexus tightened. The Enterprise. All his people.

"Jim." The fearful intensity in McCoy's voice jerked Kirk around faster than any red alert could have. A wild, dreadful look crossed his face in the micro-second before his eyes made contact with the doctor and his patient, then the panic abated as he saw that Spock still breathed.
Four urgent strides and he was down on one knee by the panting Vulcan. He abandoned the gun on the floor with a clatter and not a look. He took the trembling hand in his; his other hand reached up and swept the matted bangs away to reveal the droplets of sweat that beaded the brow. Spock didn't move; he breathed hard and stared straight ahead. His pupils were dilated. He was concentrating on control so fiercely that he didn't even know that he was being touched.

McCoy's voice was an insistent hiss. "You've got to do something. Now. There's tremendous strain being exerted on his internal organs by the hormonal flow. His heart.... I don't know how he's lasted this long. He's gonna blow apart if... if...."

"If what, Doctor? I don't understand." Hunyady, and Uhura too, were squatting on the other side of the Vulcan. Josephs stood lopsidedly behind him, his gun cradled in his arms, with Gri-Ta beside him. The other two security officers were by the door, well within earshot. Tarn's eyes were trained down the hallway, but his head was cocked, listening. The crew was crowded around Spock, literally and figuratively, a wall of concern that was finally being unleashed.

No one answered Hunyady, and so another question exploded from the young lieutenant. "What's wrong with Mister Spock?" Her demand held none of the respect due to senior officers. She looked at the battered face of her mentor, and then to McCoy. Her eyes were pleading.

It was Uhura who answered before anyone else could. "Irina, it's something that Vulcans go through." Her eyes sought McCoy's for confirmation. "Am I right?" At his nod she continued. "It's not something they talk about. But this..." she drew a deep breath, "... this is the Vulcan mating drive. Mister Spock has to mate, or die."

"Die?" The word was barely audible.

McCoy nodded.

A soundless "O" appeared to shape Hunyady's mouth, but it quickly faded and resolution took its place. The lieutenant had been compared to a young James Kirk, and now she showed why in the swift decision she came to. She squared her shoulders and addressed her captain.

"Captain, I can do this for Mister Spock. Let me."

Kirk didn't have a chance to respond before Uhura gripped the younger woman's arm. "Irina, no! You don't know what.... Listen, you're married. What would Brian say?"

Hunyady smiled wistfully. "Don't worry, I know Brian. He'd say that I was saving the life of someone very important to me. He'd understand."

Uhura was resolute. "But it shouldn't be you if there are other alternatives. I don't have any attachments, I can do it. Captain, I volunteer."

Kirk still held the hand of the oblivious Vulcan as he regarded the two women. He was deeply moved. Hunyady, willing to go beyond her exclusive love of her husband for Spock's life. Uhura, so much more than a skilled communications officer. She was courageous enough to care deeply. He understood that her offer was as much a gift to him as it was to Spock. She was a friend, and that's how he answered her. "Penda, you know that's not something you need to do."

She returned his look steadily. "Frankly, Jim, I'm not sure whether it is or not."

Kirk looked down at the hand in his and smiled a sad smile. All their preparation to tell McCoy, his own careful planning about where and when and how to eventually reveal this relationship to his crew, to Starfleet. It seemed so stupid now. He was going to take Spock into his body and try to
give him life, and it didn't matter if these kind people stood outside in the hall guarding them or stood inside the same room witnessing the most intense act of love that their captain could dredge from his soul. He wasn't ashamed.

His thumb rubbed the heated skin, stretched now over fine bone. Spock's hand stirred in his, and surprised, Kirk looked up to see that lucidity had returned to the dark eyes. "No," Spock grated. "You m-must not s-stop... The Enterprise...." More was beyond him.

"Yes," Kirk gently insisted. "We've done everything we can to get to the Ta's. Now we don't have a clue to where they might be. It might be hours. You don't have hours. Understand?"

This is the way his prayer had been answered. All his choices had been taken away from him, and there was just one promise left that he had any chance of fulfilling.

"Jim," Spock strained to speak again. "You must not... give up."

"I'm not giving up, Spock." Again his thumb caressed warm flesh. "I'll never do that. But I'm accepting what I can do, and I'm going to do it."

The silence lengthened, but eventually Spock's burning gaze capitulated before his captain's determined one. The first officer answered him with a tight nod; then his gaze shifted, to focus tightly on Uhura's face.

Kirk understood. Spock had heard every word exchanged over his heated body, and this was his way of telling him to proceed. It was absolutely right that they make this announcement together.

"Penda, this isn't something you need to do." He included them all in his glance. "I'm going to take care of Mister Spock. We've been lovers for months."

Hunyady was surprised. Josephs gave him a speculative glance, then hid the rest of his reaction by turning away and looking at the two by the door. Tarn was openly astonished, Prendel't expressionless. Gri-Ta smiled, as if she witnessed a star pupil fulfilling her expectations. And Uhura nodded her head jerkily, determined to go on.

"I... thought maybe that was the way it was. But... look, I hate to be crude but.... A woman's body is made for this. The last time, Mister Spock seemed.... I don't want you to be hurt. I don't think he could hurt me nearly as much."

"No," Gri-Ta stepped forward. "The captain it must be." She looked at Kirk. "He keeps part of what you shared. When I touched his mind when we imprisoned were, felt it, I did. You must find a way to reach in."

"I will," Kirk said grimly. Somehow he would find a way.

His mind should be linked with Spock's, he should be there in the flames, helping his bondmate, directing the fire to his own coolness, opening his mind and his body to feed his lover's need, giving him life....

But there was no life inside him to give. There was no bond. He might be able to give Spock his body, but could he offer his mind? That was locked away behind the wreckage of their bond. Wasn't it?

But he would try. An eighty-one percent chance of failure, Spock had said. They'd triumphed over greater odds.
There were arrangements to be made before he could do anything. He stood. "We'll use the inner room," he said, as authoritatively as he could, denying any trace of embarrassment. At least there was a door that could be closed. "Ensign Tarn, get the mattresses back together." Kirk reached down towards Spock, helped him to his feet, wrapped his arm around the trembling back and braced himself, propping the length of his leg against the swaying form. But he kept giving orders.

"Lieutenant Josephs, post a guard at either end of the hall. Take it in short shifts. If the Danarakh come after us, you'll need some warning to improve our defensive position." He and Spock took a few faltering steps, then stopped; McCoy was there at the Vulcan's other side, supporting. "If we're attacked, use the phasers. For everybody else, this is a good time for some rest. Look around and see if you can find some water. And some food for Doctor McCoy. Uhura."

She stood before the three of them. "Yes, sir." She met his gaze with clear eyes and a lifted, determined chin. The blue coverall that she still wore was filthy with grease, there was a streak of black dirt that showed against her dark cheek. Her hair hung about her face in tangles and knots, but to Kirk she had never looked more beautiful. He knew he could depend on her.

He would never forget her offer, but there wasn't the time to even say thank you. Within the circle of his arm, Spock was straightening, stirring restlessly.

"I'm turning over command to you. I don't know how long this will take." For Spock to live or for Spock to die. No, don't even think it. He had to find a way.

The physician shook his head. "I'm not sure. The last time it took three weeks for the hormones to progress to where they are now after just four days. If we're lucky, that means that the overload will disappear as quickly as it's come. Hours maybe. But I don't really know."

"All right. Lieutenant, use your judgment. Your primary responsibility is to the Enterprise, do you understand? Not to us. You do everything you can think of to pinpoint the location of the Ta's, and if there's a reasonable chance of success, you leave the two of us to go and neutralize them. It won't matter if the Danarakh capture us, because they won't have control of the ship without the Ta's. Understand?"

Her frown showed what she thought of her orders. "Yes, sir."

Spock spoke. His voice was very thin, as if he projected it from light years away. "Lieutenant Hunyady."

She had been hanging back, watching them and wanting to help but not knowing if she had a place in the bizarre tableau being played out before her eyes.

"Yes, sir." Hurriedly, she stepped forward.

Spock drew in a deep breath and did not look directly at anyone. His gaze was fixed on a spot on the floor three meters in front of him. The entrance to the other room. "The m-medical t-t-tricorder. It could be m-modified.... for the Ta's...."

The young lieutenant slapped a hand to her head. "Of course. Don't worry, sir. I'll do it. Captain, we could try to alter Doctor McCoy's equipment to pick up the Ta's. I should be able to fix it in a few hours. And that way we'll have warning if we're about to be attacked, too."

"Good. Do it," Kirk said through a tightened throat. He couldn't believe that Spock had maintained the rationality to come up with that idea. But it was so typical, exactly what he should have
expected. Spock had struggled through the plak tow on Vulcan to speak for his captain years ago, and now he was still thinking of how to save the Enterprise.

Kirk's gaze swept the room. He couldn't think of anything else to say or do. "Okay, let's go."

Uhura's hand on his arm delayed him. "All my hopes, Captain." She turned to Spock, didn't touch him. "Good luck, sir."

What could he say to that? They walked forward.
Chapter 19

The room had pale green walls and was bare except for the mattresses that too many beings had slept on for too many months. The air stank with the lingering odor of unwashed bodies. Tarn had stacked four of the mattresses two deep next to one another, and he must have picked the ones in the best shape, but even so the white and blue striped surfaces were stained and torn. And two together weren't even half a meter high. They were strictly utilitarian, flat and hard and filthy.

Kirk and McCoy eased Spock down. He sat on the edge, his knees bent up to hide his erection, his head hung low, his body shook. He grabbed Kirk's leg with both hands, then slowly, with great control and deliberation, pressed his downcast face against his captain's hip. His eyes closed. He breathed and waited.

"Time to go, Bones."

"In a minute. I want to give you a shot." McCoy reached for his med kit.

Kirk looked down at the dark hair, dirty and blood-matted from days of captivity and pain. His unusual disheveled appearance more than his injuries seemed to give Spock an air of fragility, but Kirk wasn't deceived. He remembered the solid rubber handballs that his lover had destroyed in the Enterprise's gym. He remembered that Spock had been so relieved at the appearance of the Il'safarr between them because it would protect his captain from being hurt in the pon farr. There wasn't any Il'safarr now, and though Vulcan strength might be muted by injury and fatigue, it was still there.

He threaded his fingers through the dark hair, felt the crusts of blood break and flake away, and he shivered. He wasn't a superstitious man, and the shedding of blood was not symbolic. He wasn't afraid for himself, but for Spock. Reach the stump of their bond, that's basically what Gri-Ta had said. He had to find that nineteen percent chance and make it real.

"Jim...."

Kirk looked up to meet McCoy's gaze. There was a strange expression in the physician's eyes that he didn't know how to interpret. Maybe embarrassment? But it didn't matter. He didn't care that McCoy was there, didn't care that the physician should see his fingers entangled in the dark hair or the face pressed against his waist. This was the way things were now between him and Spock, and McCoy had to accept it.

A huge tremor wracked the Vulcan body, and Kirk wrapped his arms even more securely about his first officer's head and shoulders. "Just another minute," he whispered, and pressed a kiss on the side of Spock's head, just above an ear tip. In another minute, there would be no time for kisses. The pon farr's urgency would see to that. But for now.... He breathed in the scent of Spock's arousal and kissed again.

But McCoy tugged on one of his hands and slapped a tube smaller than a man's little finger into his palm. Gruffly, he said, "Take this. It's an antibiotic ointment and I normally wouldn't recommend it for lubricant. But he'll split you apart if he goes in dry, so use it. Any port in a storm."

"All right."

Spock shifted, pulled Kirk closer, and the captain had to brace himself to prevent from overbalancing and falling onto his lover and the mattress. "Time to go," he repeated. He dropped
the tube on the ugly striped surface and cradled Spock's head against him again.

But McCoy wasn't finished. He pressed a hypo into Kirk's arm "It's a stimulant. Look, Captain.... Jim. Maybe I should stay. I might be able to help. You've got to be careful with anal penetration, and Spock isn't in any condition to be careful. Let me help you. This isn't the time for false modesty."

Spock moved convulsively, and his hands slid up from knee to encircle the swell of cloth that covered the captain's buttocks. The spread palms seared into Kirk's flesh. Against his waist he felt the unmistakable shake of negation.

"No, Bones." Kirk repeated his lover's movement and shook his head, trying to be kind but definite. From where McCoy stood, the offer made sense, but he didn't have a chance of reaching that lost, seeking mind with the distraction of a witness. "We'll be all right. Just... go."

"Okay. You can... ah, call if you need me."

He heard the doctor's reluctant footsteps, heard the door open and close. Then there was silence.

"Jim," Spock moaned.

Spock pulled and Kirk pushed at the same time; they toppled over together onto the makeshift bed. Spock rolled his captain over onto his back and fell onto him with a growl. All trace of the controlled first officer vanished in the second before their bodies impacted; Spock succumbed to the ancient drives that had been tearing at him for days, and which he had somehow managed to deny and deny. But no longer. Instinct heated his veins, coursed through his brain, told him relief was at hand. He could mate. The primal imperative to reproduce swept away his weakness and the impact of his injuries. He pushed against his chosen with single-minded ferocity.

Kirk winced as his lover's erection poked into his flaccidness, grabbed at the heaving shoulders and fought the instinct to pull away. This was just the first of many pains, and every single one would be worth it if Spock fought his way through the flames and emerged alive.... He struggled to pull heated air into his compressed lungs. A furnace covered him, and the hot spot was the iron prod that jabbed against his groin.

Then the weight pulled back. Hands were at the waistband to his pants. "Off!" the Vulcan commanded harshly.

Kirk had his pants open in a second, and yanked them and his briefs down to his knees. Spock slid back and grabbed at his boots. One jerk for each of them -- Kirk inhaled sharply as his feet were twisted without warning --and they were off, thrown across the room to land in the corner with a Thump! Two more Thumps! as the Vulcan tore off his own boots and dropped them to the floor. Then a heavy weight was on top of him again as Kirk struggled to free his legs of his clothing. He knew what was needed, and he couldn't give it unless he got rid of these damn pants.

With a final shake he was free, and he extended the movement by wrapping his right leg around Spock's frantically pumping ass. He ground the heel of his foot, still sock-covered, into the uniform that stretched over spare muscle, found and matched his lover's driving rhythm.

"Go, Spock. Go on," he encouraged, and undulated against the heat.

"Yes," Spock hissed. He dropped his head and teeth bit hard into neck. Kirk jerked as skin broke and blood began to well.

A moment later and hot hands were behind his legs, forcing them to bend and propelling them in a
rush up to his chest. Kirk didn't have any choice, stronger-than-human muscles forced him to ride with the movement or break a bone resisting. He destroyed the budding resentment he felt, that any human male would have felt at such overwhelming strength that was impossible to oppose. But he didn't want to oppose it. There wasn't room in him for anything but acceptance. He wanted to accept everything Spock had to give, and in turn give everything that he could: his body, his will, his masculine ego, even his mind, if he could somehow find the way.

With a deep breath, Kirk grabbed his knees and held them. This was Spock over him, panting and insistent, the being he loved and was trying to save. This was a Vulcan with a Vulcan's strength and a Vulcan's need. Relax, he chanted to himself. Relax. Initial penetration had always hurt before, he'd never found it easy even when his lover had taken gentle care to prepare him. But at least he knew what to expect. Breathe deeply, slacken the sphincter muscle, open up.... He stared up at the beloved face, was unexpectedly shocked by the swollen, twisted nose, the bruises and the scabs that were black and ugly. But Spock wasn't looking at him, he was intent on opening his pants and shoving them down to his knees....

Almost too late, Kirk remembered McCoy's tube. He groped for it, found it, and squirted out the entire contents into his palm without looking. His hand was there, ready, when the angry green cock, as long as it had ever been but grotesquely swollen to twice its normal thickness, emerged from the folds of clothing.

Kirk's mouth flooded with saliva, and for the first time fear came alive in his bones. Spock was going to put that inside him? It didn't even seem possible. How could he possibly accommodate... He just had time for an inadequate swipe before Spock lunged forward, stabbed impatiently at his anal opening and sought to impale him.

They groaned together -- one in desperate need, one in pain -- as the insistent penis fought against and finally broke through the tight, unprepared muscle. God! Kirk arched his back in agony, and sweat broke out on his brow. If sandpaper had been shoved inside him it couldn't have hurt more. It felt like a spiked, clenched fist stretched him. Always before he'd been able to adjust to penetration, even found pleasure in it after a while, but there could not possibly be pleasure in this huge fist about to be shoved up into his body.

Abruptly Spock shifted, and his hands and his weight came down on the broad shoulders to hold his lover in place. His hips pulled back, he thrust forward, but the tight channel denied his swollen organ any more than a few centimeters. He grunted in frustration, reached behind to tug and kick at the pants and briefs that restricted his movement until they came free. Then he turned back, filled his lungs, pressed down and jerked his cock forward, half-centimeter by half-centimeter....

Kirk bit down hard on his lip to capture the scream that welled in his throat. He would not.... McCoy was probably listening for every sound of distress. He might come barging in, and God only knew what that would do to Spock.... Spock's life could depend on how silent he could be. He would not....

Forever can be measured in seconds. Sweat dripped into Kirk's eyes, merged with the tears that were leaking out from his squeezed-tight lids. This was not rape. It wasn't rape. He was giving his body willingly, with love, but dear God it felt like rape, with a rapist's eagerness to inflict pain. No. No. Spock didn't want to hurt him, he just had such urgent need. His Vulcan needed him so much.

Another grunt and a shove forward, agony streaked up Kirk's spine and he knew he must have been torn inside, nothing else could account for the pain. Stop! Stop! he wanted to shout, you're killing me, but he knew he never would. He wouldn't die of this. Bones was in the other room, with a med kit that had a laser suture that would stop the bleeding and in the meantime blood might make an
adequate lubricant....

He was being stretched apart, surely he would be torn in two, oh God, he gasped in air, it was hot, the insistent Vulcan pushed, he tried to open up and he relinquished another centimeter of his body, a second passed, another, that was two seconds, time when Spock might have fallen and died on the jungle floor, time when they might have melded and known one another in the golden light, two seconds when Spock was alive and not dead....

Alive, alive. Each moment of pain meant that Spock was still alive....

With a triumphant grunt Spock jerked forward the final centimeter and ground against the sphincter muscle, as if trying to insert even more of his penis that was already buried to the hilt. The muscle shrieked agony from the abuse, and even worse was the pressing weight on Kirk's slack testicles. If he had been able he would have doubled up and tried to vomit, but trapped beneath his lover he merely trembled as nausea possessed him as surely as Spock did. He panted in quick short breaths, breathed out with audible *huh, huh, huh* exhalations to drive the queasiness away. He felt the quivering of the flared ridges deep within him. It felt like Spock was up in his stomach, vibrating, it felt like the Vulcan was deeper inside him than he'd ever been before.

Deeper. They used to merge into each other, Kirk used to dive into the golden light that was his shining lover and surround himself with that precious essence, just as Spock had eagerly pulled everything that was Kirk around himself, so that they were draped with each other, drowned in each other, surrounded by love and logic and an infinity of pathways to explore.

They hadn't been able to go deep enough. But this was too deep, his body wasn't meant to take this penetration, unprepared, not lubricated.

It didn't matter. Spock needed this.

"Sha, Sha," Spock moaned, and his bruise-rimmed eyes closed. "Y'chtena s'lectan. Tena. Tena." He pulled back and began to thrust, and the movements were punctuated by unknown, Vulcan words.

One fire-filled thrust. Two. Three.... Grimly Kirk counted, and allowed his body to rock back and forth with the pressure. It was better, he told himself. It was better. It didn't feel as bad. He grabbed tense arms to anchor himself, and more hot tears squeezed out from under his eyelids. God, it hurt.

But it didn't matter. Damnit, he was here to save his loved one's life, not cry like a child. And this was good. Spock was going after physical release without reaching for the mental. There was hope in the swollen cock that had been stuffed so forcibly up his ass, and there would be even more hope if his lover could reach a climax. Besides, he could take more pain than this, he could take ten times more than this and still be there to fight for their lives. What was he here for, anyway?

"My body," he gasped, "to your body." He jerked his hips up just as Spock thrust down, and their bodies met with a *Slap!*

Brown eyes flew open. Kirk didn't recognize the gaze that met his, there was just a male animal consumed with passion that would not be denied, but that was a part of his lover too....

Kirk surged forward and up, then he forced himself to initiate the next thrust, too, and then met the next and the next and the next.... Spock abandoned his shoulders, grabbed the rising hips with unyielding fingers that ground into skin and muscle, lunged forward at the same time that he pulled Kirk up to him and held him there....

A deep and throaty moan vibrated in the Vulcan's chest, then came bursting through his lips.
"mmmmMMMMMAhhhhHHHH." Spock's mouth stretched and thinned, and with enormous relief Kirk felt the first squirting of orgasm go flowing up his rectum.

"Good, Spock, good," he gasped, and tried to hold himself still and open. His body was limp and powerless in the grip of that superior strength, but he didn't feel powerless. He'd just given his lover a fighting chance for life, what no one else could give him, and a growing sense of elation filled him as surely as hot semen did.

Tension flowed from the jerking body with each streaming ejaculation, and with a final twist and another groan the Vulcan collapsed full length on his captain's body. Elation was pushed aside as Kirk scrambled to get his bent legs out of the way. Awkwardly he wrapped them around the heated torso. His pelvic muscles stretched with the effort; masculine contours weren't meant for this position.

They lay like that for long moments, with Kirk's arms and legs wrapped protectively about his lover and Spock's face buried against his neck. The long fingers of one hand crept up and tangled themselves in the honey hair, a characteristic caress that made the human's heart ache. That was the way it used to be between them. As none of his other lovers ever had, Spock loved his hair, often rested hands and face against it. He hadn't anticipated moments of stillness like this in the midst of the Time.

But the penis that commanded them both was still buried in him, defining the ache in his sphincter muscle and the fire in his ass, and it hadn't softened at all. But then Kirk didn't expect it to, not yet. The pon farr was only beginning.

Tentatively, his hand went up cradle the dark head. His fingers rested on a pointed ear tip. "Spock?"

No answer. He wondered whether Vulcans were capable of communicating at this time at all. What he didn't know about pon farr would fill a computer.

But nobody knew anything about this particular pon farr. Like Spock himself, it was unique. There were no answers yet to any questions.

His hand dropped around the curve of Spock's neck, felt the fine sheen of sweat there. His own command tunic was soaked through.

Then his hand strayed down to his lover's waist, up under the blue shirt to the chenesi in the small of the Vulcan back. It was an automatic action, one he didn't even think about, the emotional twin to the caress of his hair. Spock loved to be petted there, and when they rested against one another in peace and silence the captain's fingers almost always found their way to his lover's back.

But he encountered something different now. On either side of the spine were masses of pebbly hardness, like small marbles just under the skin. Kirk touched tentatively and Spock gasped and pulled away, but almost immediately he pushed back against the fingers, like a cat brushing itself against a favored human's legs.

The message was clear: rub. Kirk brushed his fingertips over the dimpled skin, back and forth, experimenting with the pressure, and soon Spock sighed in relief. Good. Kirk intended to count every single goal achieved. Physical orgasm was possible without mental contact, and now he'd relieved some of his lover's pain. What could he do next?

The penis within him twitched, batted against raw tissue. Kirk winced. Spock gasped with the movement, as if it were inflicted upon him from somewhere outside himself. He moaned, and
gathered his legs under him, forced the human's lower body and spread legs up onto and around his thighs. He was crouched above his lover like a le-matya over its prey. His elbows pressed painfully into Kirk's chest and they were still connected by the rampant, now throbbing penis.

"Jim?" he breathed into Kirk's face.

"I'm here, Spock."

But the Vulcan didn't hear him. Fingers from both hands slid into position, and with a sinking heart Kirk realized that Spock was reaching for the meld. He tried to turn his face to the side, but effortlessly Spock forced him back, and pressed harder. Kirk winced as fingernails broke his skin.

"Jim?" Spock asked plaintively. His eyes were open, the pupils dilated, and he looked directly at his captain. "J-Jim?" Whatever it was he saw, it wasn't what he needed.

Kirk drew in a deep breath, spoke louder, rested his hand on the uniformed shoulders. "Right here, love. I'm here for you."

"Jim? Where are you?"

"Don't worry," he soothed. His heart was pounding, his mind racing. He'd hoped he'd have more time before confronting the need he didn't know if he could fill. "I won't leave you. You have me."

"Where are you? D-Do not hide from me."

Kirk's fingers squeezed with all his strength. "Here, Spock! I'm right here!"

The dark eyes were glazed and unseeing. They were turned inward. "Ne b-bahsen h'ran. S'chlectan? T'hy'la?"

"Damnit, Spock, listen to me! See me? I'm here! Here with you!"

But a willing body beneath him wasn't what Spock was looking for. He needed his mate's mind. Again Spock called, again Kirk answered and was not heard.

Suddenly all the braced weight above him fell on Kirk again, and the air whooshed out of his lungs. What...? The Vulcan was still murmuring words Kirk didn't understand, one hand was still firmly attached to the side of his face, but all the tension was leaving Spock, draining from his body like blood that flowed from a gaping wound. He could actually feel the muscles slacken as the weight on him grew heavier and heavier, and the words murmured in his ear became fainter and fainter.... "Ke bahsen. Ke t'hy'la il'sasena karintson. Ke Jim...." Then the words stopped, and the body over his became still.

For an unbelievably long moment Kirk thought that Spock was dead. Then he heard a drawn-out, rasping breath, the shoulders heaved up, then down, and then they were still again.

Another eternity passed. The captain fumbled for a pulse at the side of the neck, couldn't find it, cursed out loud, then his fingers connected and the frantic rumbling of the heart battered against his skin. Was it beating more slowly than it should be?

"Spock! Spock!" He shook the heated arms, but there was no response.

Okay. Okay. Spock needed what he wasn't getting, he needed the meld. Give it to him. Try!

Kirk closed his eyes and frantically concentrated. He groped for the sensation when Spock's mind
first touched his, it had been like a curtain parting to flood his solitary darkness with light. He could remember it, but could he recreate it?

Thoughts, thoughts, only his thoughts, and no hint of his lover's, not even the wispy, unfamiliar presence he'd felt in the Gabriellan joining. Their heads were pressed together, cheek to cheek, he could still feel the touch of Spock's hand at his temple, that hot penis was inside him and their bodies were molded together with sweat and semen. They were as close as it was physically possible to be, and yet they were an infinity apart.

Spock moaned, a wispy, far-off sound. Kirk felt it vibrate through his jawbone. Think! Think! Kirk commanded himself. Reach out to him, find him!

It was no use. He wasn't a telepath. He wasn't empathic. He was just a human in love with a Vulcan. Thinking hard wouldn't gain him entry to the mind that the Danarakh had blasted, and wishing was a child's game. He needed something else....

Like the calm, rational advice he'd always received from his first officer. They'd always been a team. But now the captain was alone, and the life he valued above his own was in his hands. An evil voice inside him whispered There is no answer. You will never find a way to reach a mind that has been castrated. There are no possibilities. He will die.

"No," he insisted aloud through clenched teeth. "No."

But will alone wasn't enough. Spock covered him like a blanket now. Except for the penis and the seeking hand his body was totally limp. Like someone who was deeply asleep, or someone who had died.

The awful image of the soldier whom Spock had killed leaped to Kirk's mind. No! He'd already had one person die over him and he wasn't going to let that happen again. Think! Think!

This was a Vulcan in pon farr. His body needed even if his mind was lost. Wildly Kirk reached down, forced his hand between them to where his lover's penis was embedded in his ass. His fingers encountered the damp testicles first, wrapped around them, then moved on to the base of the slick cock. With the balls in his palm and his fingers encircling the iron rod, he squeezed. Hard.

Spock jerked. Kirk squeezed again, Spock abruptly pushed himself back on stiffened arms. Kirk clenched down, forced his hand between them to where his lover's penis was embedded in his ass. His fingers encountered the damp testicles first, wrapped around them, then moved on to the base of the slick cock. With the balls in his palm and his fingers encircling the iron rod, he squeezed. Hard.

"Yes," Spock gasped, and he thrust abruptly. Kirk felt a searing sensation as the penis pushed against the abraded tissue that had torn, but the pain couldn't erase the triumph he felt. Spock was back, and there was even a rational light in his eyes.

"Jim?" This time when Spock looked down at him, Kirk knew he saw.

"Spock. Are you all right?"

"I... I..." pant, thrust, pant, thrust, "...do not know. I --" the slender hips pulled back, the penis came completely out of his body with a wet, sucking sound, Kirk could feel the long sweep of semen following it, coating his anal canal, -- "cannot --" the cock pushed back inside, stretched his sphincter again, the twin ridges caught him once, twice, -- "stop."
The captain pulled his knees up and grabbed them. He felt more open that way, the passageway was easier for them both. "That's all right. Fuck me, Spock. Go ahead." Anything other than that awful, vacant staring, the descent into stillness. He couldn't fight against that, but this he could give, vigorous, whole-hearted completion with his body. "Fuck me."

Spock growled like an animal, an animal in heat, and rationality fled. "Say -- that -- a -- gain," he commanded, each syllable emphasized with a ruthless snap of his hips.

Kirk gasped, his head arched back as his lower body became one aching flame. "Fuck me!" he forced out.

"A -- gain!"

"Fuck me!" Anything to keep Spock alive.

Spock moved upon him with ruthless intent, grabbed his hips and dug fingers into flesh with relentless strength, thrust. Such wild, uncoordinated thrusts, desperate efforts each one, as if he were trying to force all of himself up into Kirk's body. But only his unnaturally swollen penis would enter, despite the way he ground into the dilated sphincter muscle each time. With each thrust forward hope blossomed that he had found what he sought, then with withdrawal he admitted defeat with a groan of dismay. But he kept trying, over and over, faster and faster, his hips snapping in a flurry of movement, his penis diving in and out of the still tight channel, seeking, seeking....

It was like trying to ride the wind. Spock was as lost within this wild frenzy to plant his seed as he had been lost seeking his mate's mind. Kirk rocked back and forth, tried to accommodate each movement, sweated and grunted and squeezed his eyes shut when he couldn't control how much he hurt. The semen already inside wasn't enough to lubricate him, the sandpaper was back, and it scraped at his insides.... He didn't have the body that nature had evolved to handle a Vulcan in pon farr. He just had his ass and his voice and his mind and an absolute determination to see this through....

Another lunge, off balance this time, and Kirk bit down as new areas of pain ignited. Huh! Huh! Huh! he resorted to heavy exhalations again to try to impose some sort of control, but there wasn't any control, just this frantic body moving into him....

Suddenly the force of the thrusts was pushing him up along the mattress towards the wall. He tried to brace himself, flung his arms out to hold onto the sides of the bedding, but his lover was moving even faster now, shoving his body up and up and then Bang! Kirk's head hit the wall behind him, and he was forced to twist head and neck to prevent himself from being knocked unconscious with the next thrusts.

"No!" Spock roared. He grabbed Kirk's waist to pull him down with a jerk, but his movements were awkward with passion abruptly denied, and he only succeeded in pulling his captain more firmly onto his fiery cock. Kirk twisted again, hoping to turn them to lie diagonally on the mattress, but Spock would not follow him. "No!" again he roared. Kirk saw the hand raised in the air, the open palm that with Vulcan strength behind it could snap his neck and kill, knew he had no chance of avoiding it....

He rode with the blow and pulled his head to the side even as his vision sparked. Spock didn't mean it, he told himself as he grimly hung on to consciousness. His lover would never hurt him. This was just a Vulcan in heat without the Il'safarr.

Spock pulled back, and as the penis withdrew from its sheath it felt like it was bringing all of Kirk's
insides with it. He groaned, flopped his weary legs down on the mattress, and the stretched and abraded tissue of his anus screamed its protest. Any movement hurt; he wondered how long he could just lie still.... For no more than a moment. Hard hands were on his legs, pulled him roughly down to the bottom of the mattress as if he had no will of his own. His ass scraped against the rough ticking, and his gold tunic bunched uncomfortably under his armpits.

Kirk opened his eyes. Spock loomed over him on his knees, and he was looking down at where he cradled his penis in the palm of his right hand. There were smears of red running up and down its length.... human blood. Kirk drew in a deep breath. He'd better not be badly hurt. That had better be from just superficial scrapes and tears, because his lover didn't stand a chance of surviving without him.

A moment later and Spock pushed his legs back to his chest again, fumbled while he searched for the hole, then inserted his penis again with an audible sigh. The thrusting began, more insistent, more co-ordinated and just as painful, but definitely following the pattern that his lover usually took right before orgasm, hard and fast and rhythmic, with a little jerk up at the end of each thrust. There shouldn't be much more of this to bear... Kirk closed his eyes, took a deep breath, held it for five seconds, then took another, held it, counting down, then another, five, four, three.... Relief swamped him as Spock stiffened into climax.

But this time there was no respite. The thrusting began again the moment the flow of semen stopped, and despite himself Kirk groaned. But he stifled the sound before it was even half expressed.

Then insistent hands were on his knees, pushed them apart, and Spock dropped down full length upon the captain. Air whooshed from Kirk's lungs and his stomach cramped as his balls were momentarily pinched by the heavy weight. But Spock didn't seem to notice or care. He propped his elbows up on Kirk's chest, unheeding of how they bruised flesh, and his fingers sought the meld points again.

He didn't wait for a hopeless collapse this time, Kirk tried to reach between them to catch his lover's penis and testicles, but Spock growled, grabbed his arm hard enough to bruise bone and forced it back up beside his head. The captain gasped but he squeezed down upon the bulk within him anyway, anything to distract. But whatever stimulation his clenched anus provided was easily ignored. Spock was intent on something else....

"Come to me!" This wasn't a plaintive seeking, this was an imperious command, the voice harsh and deep. The fingers on his face pressed deeper. "Come to me!"

"Spock," Kirk whispered. His gaze roamed the face suspended above him, took in the bruises, the new flow of blood from wounds torn open on lips and cheeks, the bright eyes that even lost in the fever were still innocent and true, and he wanted to weep. All that Spock had endured, physically and mentally, and now Kirk could not give him the one thing he needed.

But he would keep trying. He closed his eyes, concentrated, reached for that unique sensation of melding again. *Falling into the welcoming mind, the light blossoming all around them, that unique signature of strength and wonder and curiosity that was his Vulcan....*

Nothing. Only the echo of his own thoughts. He tried again. *The first time they'd ever melded in the line of duty, the empty echoing cavern that he couldn't believe was the interior life of his first officer, the sweet smell of hyacinths that coated the air, promised new life and an infinity of spring-time possibilities, the rumbling of thunderstorms across the inner landscape that signaled the coming of Kirk and the acceptance of emotion....*
Nothing. Try again. The first time they'd joined together in love....

Smash! A heavy hand slapped across his cheek and rocked his head to the side, driving teeth into tongue. He tasted blood. "Answer me! Give me your mind!" Another blow, this time on the other side of his face, so hard that it drove his head and shoulders half a meter across the mattress. "Give me your mind!"

A sob welled up in his throat as he blinked and tried to see past the crazy lights spinning before his gaze. God, he was trying. If there were a God in heaven, let him somehow find a way to reach Spock....

Kirk pushed up and clenched, tried to re-interest his lover in the physical even as his mind wildly searched through and discarded possibilities. What else could he try?

With a snarl Spock drove Kirk's hips down to the mattress, pressed and held him there. "Do not move!" he commanded. "Open your mind to me." Elbows ground into Kirk's chest, and the fingers against his face shook with intensity.

"Take my body," Kirk gasped. "Fuck me again. Fuck me." But the words that had so incited Spock just minutes earlier had no effect now.

"No! No! I need you. Jim, I need you!" The desperate voice broke on a sob, and suddenly Spock was moving upon him, undulating like a boat on storm-tossed waters. His hips pushed, his chest heaved, his mouth opened and his lips suck-kissed Kirk's cheeks, his mouth, his eyes, always keeping the fingers curved against his face. Then it wasn't lips upon him but teeth, and hard, hurting bites on his neck and across his shoulder, breaking the skin and shedding blood....

"Come to me! Come to me! Why do you hold yourself apart? I need you! Jim. JIM! JIM!" One last desperate cry, almost a shriek, and then the Vulcan collapsed.

A breathless moment, another moment, and Spock did not move. He did not pull in a slow, shaking breath. He did not breathe. Kirk lay under him, crushed and almost suffocating under the weight, and horror crept upon his soul. On Gabriela, he hadn't believed that the other half of him was dead even though the Danarakh had said the first officer would be executed. He hadn't seen the body, he'd told himself, and so there was still hope.

But now Spock's body was here, and it was --lifeless.... Had the pon farr exacted its final punishment?

Numbly, Kirk touched the dark, silken head. No. No. NO.

Then the limp form shuddered. Shuddered again. A twitch made its way down the long body, shaking shoulders, buttocks, legs and feet, then back up again to shoulders, where they moved in uncoordinated bursts of motion like an epileptic in the grip of a seizure. The convulsions went on and on, hopelessly. It felt like the throes of death.

Even as he grabbed his lover's arms, even as he heaved upwards again in an attempt at sexual stimulation, even as he called out the beloved name, Kirk thought harder than he had ever thought in his life. He tried to impose calm upon himself and to order his reasoning despite his mind-numbing fear and the frantic actions of his body. Think!

Basic. State the problem. He had to find a way to blend his mind with Spock's, to satisfy that gene-deep need a Vulcan had to merge psychic identities, or Spock would die, probably within a very few minutes. They didn't have the hours that Kirk had expected, the pon farr had come to a crisis
almost immediately. But how to merge with a mind that had been irreparably injured, whose telepathic circuits had been blasted into traumatized uselessness? That mind had been locked away behind an unscalable wall.

Think flexibly. Examine alternatives, no matter how unlikely. Wait a minute. There was another way into a mind besides telepathy, besides the melding ability that Kirk simply didn't have. On Gabriela, he and Spock had come so close to touching each other, even if it had just been within the fuzzy empathic joining. The Gabrielans had been able to reach inside!

He had no such empathic ability. But.... What was it that Gri-Ta had said? That she had felt part of their bond trapped within Spock. Gri-Ta had touched Spock's mind, and her people were similar to the Gabrielans, a group consciousness, accustomed to collecting many minds and merging them together....

He cursed himself for his stupidity, and the suffering Spock had already endured. His lover might die because he simply hadn't thought.... Kirk pushed against the moving weight that pinned him down, suddenly frantic to be free. Spock was still convulsing, twitching as if his body were being electrocuted, but Kirk forced himself to ignore the distress, and the rolled-back eyes that showed only white. He grabbed the thin shoulders and shoved, managed to get the upper body off him and down to the mattress.

But they were still joined by the Vulcan penis. Awkwardly Kirk jerked his hips back, but there wasn't enough give to the mattress for the cock to spring free, and the heavy body just pushed it back further into him.... He reached down and grabbed hold of the slippery base, jerked back again and pushed cruelly against the groin as he literally pulled the sucking penis out of him with his hand.

A moment later and he stood next to the makeshift bed with spread legs, swaying like a drunken sailor. He took an experimental step, almost fell as dizziness overtook him, but he could ignore that, he could ignore the blood that he felt oozing down his thighs and the wet feeling of an ass full of semen, because he was going to get Gri-Ta and she was going to help him save Spock....

He staggered towards the door, fuzzily aware of what a sight he must make with his sweat-soaked gold command shirt still on, and the socks that had never been removed. He lurched past his discarded pants and briefs, considered stopping to put them on, heard a moan from behind him and decided that his dignity could suffer because he didn't have much time....

"NO!"

A primal roar as much as a word. Kirk whirled around to see his lover's face twisted by all-consuming rage into an unrecognizable mask. Spock lunged for him, his hands outstretched, his eyes ablaze. His arm raised for a killing blow. There would be no mercy for the mate who was leaving him to die alone....

Kirk waited the micro-second until Spock was right over him, ready to strike, and then he threw himself to the side. As he fell to the floor he brought his joined fists down squarely on the secondary testicular system that throbbed in the small of his lover's back.

Spock dropped like a stone. Kirk pulled himself up from the floor and knelt next to him, his trembling fingers reached for a pulse. If he'd killed his lover he didn't think he could find a way to live....

But the Vulcan heart still pounded and breath rattled in the heaving Vulcan lungs. Kirk didn't even have the time for relief to take shape before the door behind him opened.
The captain whirled about and shouted as McCoy skidded to a halt beside the first officer. "Get Gri-Ta! I need her, now! Gri-Ta!"

The next second he demanded, "How is he?"

"Not good," McCoy grimaced. He grabbed a hypo from his kit and sprayed it into Spock's neck, then he looked up and for the first time surveyed the captain. His eyes widened. "Jim! Are you okay?"

"It doesn't matter. Get Gri-Ta!"

The woman walked in, took one look at the captain and closed the door behind her. She settled down on her knees with Spock's limp form between them. "What do you wish?" she asked calmly, as if she addressed a half-naked, blood-streaked man every day.

He grabbed her hand. "I couldn't do it," he said. "I couldn't find a way to touch his mind and if I don't he's going to die. But you can. You said you'd felt his mind before. Please, do it again, but take me with you. Connect us the way you connect your people."

Gri-Ta regarded him with sympathy. "About Vulcans I know nothing. The way within I do not know. And our contact superficial was. The part of you I felt in him was buried deep, and if you cannot reach it, then I think that neither can I."

"Maybe it doesn't matter if we reach whatever is left of our bond," he argued. "Maybe all he has to do is feel some part of me and know that I'm there for him. Please. He's dying. You've got to help us."

She looked at him for a long moment, looked down at where Spock lay, twitching and gasping. His still erect penis stood straight in the air, just under where her hand and Kirk's were joined.

"Willingly I would help, but question do I whether my help will sufficient be. But, he suffers because of what Montin and his followers did to him. My people responsible for his condition are, and for your sorrow. So help I will try to give."

She released his hand, got up, stepped over Spock's body and settled herself by his head. She placed one hand on the Vulcan's shoulder, and the other on Kirk's. She closed her eyes.

He was flying, rushing through the dark infinity of space, past planets and satellites, huge red suns and pulsing yellow stars, zooming in towards the solar furnaces and then whipping around them towards the empty reaches again....

And next to him as he searched the universe was a companion with huge wings and feathers.

He felt as much as heard a chuckle. Yes. That is how your love perceived me too. Hope I do that I fulfill your impressions. I will guard you and guide you if I can.

She was dressed in white -- it is what you expect to see -- but he burned with purpose and with light -- it is how you see yourself -- and a huge swath of luminosity stretched out behind him. He was the comet that he and Spock had talked about so long ago, but he was only one, and he searched for his brother.

Where is he? I can't see him. A planet loomed ahead, and he swooped down upon it, entered its atmosphere, became aware that along with Gri-Ta there traveled other shadowy figures far off in the distance, her own feathery figure repeated over and over again. But he had no time nor thought for them. The stars twinkled overhead, he could see the speckled sky of a winter evening in Iowa.
with Orion riding high, felt the rush of wind against his burning skin as they flew onward. But there was nothing of Spock in this wonderful night-time flight.

_Not here. We must look further._

Escape from the planet, the freedom of no gravity and no pain as light years fell beneath their purpose, then they came upon another planet, this one accompanied by a huge companion and bathed in the glow of a red sun.

_Closer we come._

They skimmed over the atmospheric envelope, dipped down close enough to see ochre sands stretching forever. Light began to suffuse the sky, a hesitant dawn that carried the faint but unmistakable sensation of Spock. _He's here,_ Kirk said wildly, and somehow he flew faster, outpacing the angel with him, so anxious to fuel the weak light with his own strength....

_Slap!_ 

banged into an unseen barrier that had him reeling backwards from the impact. Gri-Ta caught him in her arms, gathered him up like a child and flew forward, but then _Slap!_ 

they both were repelled, and then they fell....

In the physical world Kirk would have feared death, but here he heard the wings beating, felt the feathery touch against his naked skin and knew that they would find safety.

They landed on their feet, and sand made its way between Kirk's toes.

_Where is he?_

Gri-Ta pointed to the towering black wall that dominated the desert landscape. _As you I told, of Vulcans I know little. The part of him that needs you is behind that, and I do not know how to break through, so strong it is._

This wall was as familiar to him as the pathways of his lover's mind. He knew this place, the red sky streaked with pink and orange, the ochre colored sands and the wall. This was the same barrier that had stood between the cutting sand of Vulcan logic and the temptations of human emotion at the beginning of his relationship with Spock, and the same landscape that together they had ultimately transformed into the high country plains of their newborn bond....

Kirk laughed aloud. With all the walls that he had encountered over the past months, finally, finally fate was favoring him. The wall looked unscalable, as had the barriers of Komack's disdain, the mystery on Michaela, the lack of understanding from McCoy that he hadn't been able to go around or over or through. But this black edifice, the most massively forbidding wall of all, this one had already been conquered. Love and determination had forged a way beyond it many months ago.

_I know what to do. You don't go over it and you don't try to destroy it. You go through it...._

As he spoke a five meter wide width dissolved into thin air, and was replaced by a gate made of rare ebony Ibatha wood, bound by the clinging vines of the kleet plant. Kirk strode up to the structure, set his shoulder to the heavy wood and heaved. The gate was meant to test the strength of ancient warriors, but it also yielded before human determination. It creaked open.

The landscape on the other side wasn't what he expected. It was not the winding river and peace of the fledgling bond; perhaps that had been irrevocably destroyed. Here there was the challenge of
sere desert, swirling winds and blinding light. And ahead, a dark smudge on the horizon.

It was difficult to run in the sand. His feet slipped, he sank ankle-deep, the sand sucked at him and fought to hold on. He yanked one foot up, planted it down, yanked the other foot up and ignored the burning on the soles that felt like a brand being pressed to his skin.

He was closer now, he could see that Spock lay on his side, naked, his head cradled on his shoulder. He was totally limp, as he had been in the room back on the Lox’theneth’nar, he looked like a corpse. The unrelenting sunlight bathed the pale skin, made it glow like an ethereal being’s who has passed beyond mortal life. Kirk ran faster, got closer, saw that his lover's arm was extended, as if he were reaching for something....

Run, pant, force his way through the clinging sand, blink against the light and focus on that motionless body that he had to reach....

There was a depression in the sand right next to Spock's body, and in that channel ran a stream of water no more than a meter wide and a few centimeters deep. It had no place in this dry-bones wasteland, but it defiantly flowed sparkling and clean, appearing out of nowhere from the depths of the desert aridity, and then disappearing into the sand again. It was all that was left of the river that had rushed through and defined their bond, the sparkling cascades of water that had sheeted through his lover's being. The seeking hand reached for the water like a man who has wandered in the wilderness for too long. Spock would die without it, but he had not -- quite -- been able to touch the stream. His desperate fingertips were dry.

Kirk knelt beside his lover. The spare eyelashes lay upon pale cheeks, the lips were slack. There was no trace of pain or injury on the angular face, no blood or bruises. But Spock was lifeless, unmoving, even his penis was flaccid, and Kirk had to do something to revive him.

He picked up the outstretched hand, held its warmth for a moment, placed it by Spock's side. Then he shoved against the lax body until it scraped against the sand and finally rolled down into the channel of water.

The water flowed around the body that lay on its back, moistened the dark hair, the curve of shoulder and the long line of masculine strength. But Spock did not stir.

*The connection between the two of you the water is,* a familiar voice confirmed what he already knew, and crystallized the idea forming in his brain. Kirk scrambled to where the stream flowed past his lover's feet, threw himself down in the water and tried to immerse himself in it. But it wasn't deep enough, and so he splashed it up into his face, over his hair and arms, he squirmed his body down into the soaked sand and made sure every part of him was wet.

Then he scooped up a handful of the water, crawled to where his lover lay, and looked down into the beloved face. "Spock. Know how much I love you," he whispered, and baptized forehead with a trickle of water. Another cupped handful fell over eyes and nose and mouth. "I'm here now. Come back to me."

The eyelids fluttered, the lips moved. "Jim," they formed, barely audible, but Kirk heard.

He couldn't contain the tears that flowed and dropped upon the dry, stretched skin. "Yes. It's me. Come back to me, t'hy'la."

Eyelids fluttered again, and then they opened. Kirk looked down into the dark depths, saw rationality and logic and courage and the only love that had ever made him whole....
Spock reached up, touched Kirk's cheek as if he couldn't believe they were truly with one another. "Jim."

Kirk caught one hand, brought it to his mouth and kissed hot skin. "Spock."

The rest of the world faded as the two of them spiraled in upon one another. Spock's eyes became larger and larger, they filled his world, he was drowning in the brown depths....

Far away he was conscious of the presence of wings and feathers, of a form that loomed over them and shadowed them from the fierce sun that still burned on their desert landscape. Behind there was movement from the other side of the wall, only now it wasn't the forbidding black Vulcan barrier but the familiar Iowa garden wall. McCoy was there, and the physician was talking to Gri-Ta, and there were hands on his body and he knew he was being moved but it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that Spock was looking at him and he was looking at Spock and the water flowed over and around their bodies, they touched one another in a new creation and it was good....
Chapter 20

Dawson stood before the dresser in his quarters and frowned. He looked down at the sponder necklace that he had placed in its case. Since the necklace had come alive this morning, he had walked the halls of the Enterprise with expectation looking over his shoulder. He had supervised the engine room with curt efficiency, taken breakfast and lunch and dinner alone, had refused to talk with the people he would have called his friends. He wanted to brush them and their inconsequential talk away. Something was about to happen, wasn't it? Something important, life-defining and joyful. There should be no time for talk.

But nothing had happened, and he had retreated to his solitary quarters to stand and stare at the necklace that, somehow, meant something -- everything -- to him.

He ran an impatient hand over his face, tugged at his chin. This was ridiculous. Just because he was a little bored with the endless orbits they were making above this lifeless planet, just because his arms ached because they were empty and he wanted to fill them didn't mean that he should let his imagination run away with him.

He hunched a shoulder and turned away from the dresser only to confront the bed. A big double bed in the small room that was meant for two. None of the other quarters for junior officers had double beds, he knew that. So why did his? And why had he so adamantly refused to satisfy his physical longings in the way a single man easily could?

His eyes narrowed as he stared at the blue spread. If he concentrated hard enough, was there a flash of auburn hair against the pillow, a warm smile, a lithe body snuggled under the blankets?

Time for a cold shower. If he didn't feel better in the morning then he would go to see Doctor... M'Benga.

The shower didn't help. Restlessly he soaped his body, angrily he rinsed his hair, impatiently he stuffed his clothing down the recycling chute and pulled on a new pair of briefs. What was wrong with him? he asked the image in the mirror as he brushed his teeth. Was he losing his mind?

He stumped about the room picking up and putting away a tape, his slippers, the hairbrush that he'd flung on the bed this morning. There was something on the floor just peeking out from under the bed. He bent to pick it up and found a long blue ribbon. The echo of laughter filtered through his mind.

Brian? What do you think of this?

Dumbstruck, he stared at the ribbon his wife had wanted to wear in her hair.

"Irina," he breathed.

*****

Kirk rocketed through the curtain that separated sleep from wakefulness and was up on one elbow searching before his eyes fully opened.

"Spock!!" His first officer slept next to him on the tattered mattress from the Lox'theneth'nar, curled up and facing his captain as if he were in their own bed. The bruises and scabs on his face were as vividly black and green as ever, but the lines of strain were gone, and the narrow chest rose and fell easily. The trousers that somehow were back on the thin form revealed no sign of arousal.
Peace rested upon the Vulcan, and so it entered Kirk's soul as well.

"Spock." The name came out in a sigh. All the times he'd awakened over the past months and found this wonderful being next to him, all the peace they'd discovered and the wonder they'd created -- none of those mornings could compare with this new dawning. Spock was alive.

Kirk indulged himself by leaning over, sliding his fingers under the matted bangs and kissing his lover's forehead. "We did it," he murmured.

The sound of someone deliberately and loudly clearing their throat brought his head up. McCoy sat cross-legged on the floor beside the Vulcan.

The physician opened his mouth to speak but Kirk beat him to it. "What's our status?" the captain snapped as he bolted upright. All his other responsibilities came flooding back with a vengeance, along with a throbbing in his ass that literally took his breath away. He gasped, then pushed his lips together. It had just been the shock of moving too quickly, of awakening. It didn't hurt that badly. It couldn't. He had things to do. "Have we been attacked? Have we located the Ta's?"

McCoy pushed against air with his hand. "Hold on there. First things first. How's the pain? Need more painkiller?"

Kirk knew the contents of a med kit; they weren't inexhaustible. Better to wait until he really needed the help. "No, I'm okay. Now answer my questions."

"All right," the doctor said affably. "Our status. It's exactly the same as it was two hours ago. Everything's fine."

"Two hours ago? You can't be serious."

"Uh-huh. You and Spock, uh, didn't take very long. Hunyady hasn't even finished making mincemeat out of my tricorder yet." A finger pointed. "You should be asleep after all you've been through, but I doubt that the stimulant I injected will let you. Here, let me at least get you some water. Josephs found this."

McCoy walked over with a cup in his hand. Kirk discovered he was desperately thirsty and drank noisily. McCoy stood over him and complained. "It's impossible for a doctor to practice medicine around here. Seems like all I've been doing lately is giving water to sick people. Even now that I've got my 'corder back, Spock's pet has to be fooling around with its innards. There, that's enough, you don't want to cramp up. You wanna lie down before you fall down, Captain?"

More than anything else, McCoy's pointed comments reassured Kirk that, at least for the moment, all was well. It wasn't difficult to follow doctor's orders and he sank back on the mattress with a grateful sigh. He ached all over and it was pure pleasure to be clothed again and able to stretch his legs out straight.

But he couldn't just lie there doing nothing. "You're sure there hasn't been any sight of the Danarakh?"

McCoy settled back down on the floor. "Not a whisper. Everybody but Hunyady is out right now, either on guard duty down the hall or scouting out the rooms right 'round here, just waiting to get some pinpoint on the Ta's. You want me to interrupt our young lieutenant and get you a report?"

There wasn't any sense to it. "No, if she's still working on the tricorder, that's more important. Let her be. I can wait."
He had good people. They deserved to be trusted. Even if it was hard not to be in the middle of things, right now he needed to rest. Spock would say it was logical... He turned his head so he could observe his sleeping lover. "Is he all right?" He needed to hear McCoy say it.

The doctor knew when to drop the pose and provide serious information. "He's fine, at least as far as the pon farr is concerned. But I am worried about his kidneys and those internal testicles of his. Kidneys are the worse off. But looks like it's not gonna lead to renal failure right away, anyway. Spock's a tough customer. It, ah, looks like you must have given him quite a whack in the back on top of his other damage --." 

Kirk interrupted. "I had to, Bones. God knows I didn't want to hurt him, but if I hadn't I'd never have gotten to Gri-Ta."

The physician looked at him kindly. "Don't you think I know that? You don't have to explain to me. After what you went through for him, you don't have to justify yourself to me or anybody else."

Kirk stared at the blank green walls and spoke slowly. "Maybe I need to justify things to myself. I almost lost him, Bones. I should have realized that there wasn't any way that I could reach him myself. I'm not the telepath." Suddenly he was very tired. He looked up at McCoy. "It's like what you told me that day on the Enterprise. Sometimes my arrogance gets in the way of my thinking. I really do assume that I can accomplish everything myself. If I'd been thinking, really thinking, I would have realized that Gri-Ta was the only solution right away."

McCoy digested this self-accusation in silence. He pursed his lips, looked down at his sleeping charge, then over at his captain. Then with an air of deliberation he re-seated himself on the floor. "Can this old country doctor add some advice to what he said that day? Maybe there was some truth in what I said then; I seem to remember being pretty hot-headed at the time. But I wouldn't want you to take what I said to extremes, because one thing I do know. You didn't lose Spock. You did think of Gri-Ta. I know the last thing you wanted was for me and her to come in on the two of you, to see you like you were.... But you didn't let that stop you and you did what you needed to do in order to save Spock's life. I don't call that arrogance, Jim. I call that a man who's determined to do what's right, and who will try his damndest no matter what. Oh, you're darned ruthless on occasion, and you have a pretty good opinion of your own abilities. Not to mention that you don't always make the best judgments in personal matters, like waiting to tell me about you and Spock. But what's important...," he tapped the captain on the chest, "...is in there mixed up with all the rest. So don't go wearing sackcloth and ashes because you made a mistake. Just keep on being Jim Kirk."

Over their years on the Enterprise McCoy had made other little speeches to his captain, but none of them meant as much to Kirk as this one did. There was forgiveness in the words, and acceptance. It was easy to direct a slow but heartfelt smile to his chief medical officer, and after a moment McCoy smiled back, a lop-sided, quirky grin that showed he was a bit embarrassed at his sincerity.

The doctor bridged the awkward little silence by resuming his professional pose. "How are you feeling? You're pretty banged up, you know."

Without thinking about it, Kirk's hand went up to cover the place on his neck where Spock had first bit him. There must be bite marks all over his neck and shoulders.

McCoy was watching him. "Those aren't too bad," he said, his voice carefully professional. "The worst was the rectal tearing. You lost some blood from just one tear near the entrance, but I sutured you up. As well as I could, anyway, without a steri-field. Looked worse than it was, those internal
cuts always tend to bleed a lot. But the sphincter muscle's intact. That's good. Without the tricorder I can't be sure, but I'd say your blood pressure is stable."

Kirk shifted carefully, just to test how his body would respond. Not too bad. Bones must have done what he could. Now that McCoy mentioned it, he could tell that some of the area was numb from medication, and a tingle on his arm spoke of a recent injection. Probably the painkiller.

"'Course," the doctor continued, "if we were back on the ship, there's a few procedures I'd like to do. In private. We need to clean you out or there's gonna be an infection for sure. And I've got to check for more tears. There might be some smaller ones higher up. And I'd like to hook you up to a precautionary IV, just to be on the safe side."

Kirk made a face. "I suppose no steaks for a while, right?"

McCoy nodded. "Soft diet only, Captain. If there was a diet in this premiere establishment, that is. 'Fraid that water is it for now. Now, you didn't answer my question. How're you feeling?"

It was a moment before Kirk answered. The question covered a lot of territory. His body ached and he had a feeling he wasn't going to be sitting with any comfort for a week. But inside, he was singing. His last ditch effort with Gri-Ta to reach his lover had worked. Bones had just told him he was conceited and ruthless, but he'd done it in the same old comfortable way that reaffirmed their friendship. The Danarakh hadn't attacked and the Enterprise was still out there, waiting to be released from the Ta's. He felt terrific.

But there wasn't any way to express that without sounding ridiculous. "I'm okay, Bones. Thanks for patching me up."

"Any time."

So, now he knew all about his physical condition, but nothing about what had happened after he'd found Spock in the desert. He recalled falling into Spock's soul, being surrounded by love and desire. It hadn't been a meld, Gri-Ta's far-off presence had flavored the contact, but it had been so close. He remembered how he and Spock had surged together, satisfying a desperate thirst. "Uh, I don't suppose you'd care to fill me in on the details of what happened after Gri-Ta...? I don't really remember...." He had the vague impression of hands on his body and knew that Spock had penetrated him and ejaculated at least one more time. Maybe twice. Just how much of that had McCoy witnessed?

The physician had the grace to look embarrassed. "Ah, I don't really know what happened from her point of view, but I could tell when you and Spock made contact. It was pretty obvious, ah, what Spock needed. So I just, um, gave a little helping hand, getting you two back on the mattress, and then let nature take its course."

Well, he supposed it had been inevitable. Kirk swallowed his reaction and swore that he wouldn't blush. He accomplished that by taking the offensive and teasing the physician. "Sorry we shocked you, Bones," he murmured, looking up from under calculatedly lowered eyelashes.

"Shocked!" McCoy drew back in mock affront. "I'm a doctor, not a prude. You can't shock me. Besides," his voice and expression softened, "since when is an act of love offensive? And even though this was the pon farr and Spock was pretty, uh, insistent, don't tell me that what you two do with one another under normal circumstances isn't an act of love. Couldn't be any other way." He cleared his throat. "You two are damned lucky to have each other, you know?"

A deep voice, rusty from disuse, came from next to Kirk. "Indeed. And w-we are also fortunate to
have you as our friend, Leonard McCoy."

"Spock! You're awake!"

The Vulcan awkwardly rolled over to his back, winced, and rolled back to his side. But he managed to raise an eyebrow. "That is obvious, Doctor."

"You're supposed to be asleep," the physician accused. "You need the rest."

"Agreed. However, it is difficult to maintain slumber when conversations are taking place in such close p-proximity."

McCoy turned to Kirk and jerked his thumb in the first officer's direction. "If he can talk like that I'd say he's okay." His attention returned to the Vulcan. "Want some water?" Kirk stifled a laugh and the doctor rounded on him. "No comments from the peanut gallery, if you please. I've already done what I could for you two while you were snoring like twin possums, and now I'm going to make sure that you're sufficiently hydrated. So, drink already."

Not understanding the humor in the comment but knowing what to do when a cup was thrust in his direction, Spock raised up on an elbow and drank.

"There. Now, how're you feeling? How's your back?"

The Vulcan eased back down on his side again, curled his hands under his head like a child and regarded Kirk. Kirk carefully rolled over to return the gaze, and remembered how it had been to fall into his lover's eyes. He was so blessed that his Vulcan was even there to look at him. He'd come so close to losing him....

The seconds stretched to half a minute and Kirk felt a smile tugging at his lips. He just couldn't stay solemn and melancholy when his lover was well and breathing before him. "Answer the doctor, Spock," Kirk ordered softly.

"He is asking for a self-diagnosis," Spock replied just as quietly, and without breaking eye contact. "That is surely not recommended within the m-medical community. He is the doctor, not I."

McCoy sputtered. "Why, you --."

The first officer sighed. "Very well. I presume your intrusive questions are necessary because Lieutenant Hunyady has confiscated your t-tricorder. I can tell you that the urgency of the pon farr is gone. Otherwise, I am well."

McCoy snorted. "Oh, yeah, I've heard that before. Starving, banged up and bruised and who knows what else, but you're well, all right. And I suppose you're going to pretend that your lower back isn't sore as hell."

The first officer ignored him; the dark eyes were fastened again on Kirk. "I have questions of my own. Captain, I p-presume from our location and the lack of urgency that the s-status of our group has not changed?"

Kirk smiled at the easy way Spock slipped into his official role. He understood every bit of that safeguard. "Yes, Mister Spock, so I've been informed. It's only been two hours, and there hasn't been any sign of the Danarakh."

"Then perhaps, when I have rested for a short p-period of time, I will be able to assist Lieutenant Hunyady with the alterations to the tricorder."
"Maybe." Kirk knew they'd have to be up and about soon, either to find the Ta's or to make their way back to the aircar and Gabriela, but for now, just for another few minutes, he wanted to luxuriate here on the same mattress with Spock.

"Not if I have anything to say about it," McCoy averred. "I'm prescribing as much bed rest as possible. But it probably would be a good idea, Captain, if I got Uhura and she gave you a firsthand report. I'll go get her. You two just stay there and rest. Be back in a few minutes." Diplomatically, the doctor closed the door behind him.

Kirk followed the doctor's instructions to the letter, and so did his first officer. Neither of them moved, they stayed on their sides with the distance of less than half a meter between them, and just looked at one another. Kirk felt all the empty spaces that had grown like cancer during the anxious days of Spock's captivity being filled up, with two tired brown eyes, a twisted nose, bruises and soaring eyebrows that led to bangs that were disgracefully matted and dirty. Spock looked wonderful. Better than he had looked within Gri-Ta's joining, because then would never be replicated, and now the world that stretched before them like a shimmering, beckoning road. And Spock lived to travel along it with his captain. Kirk took in a deep breath, felt an accompanying twinge as the rest of his body moved, and knew that what he had thought two hours ago was absolutely true. Every pain had been worth it.

Not long ago the stained mattress they shared had been a battleground, and neither of them had been certain that they would survive. But now it was a place of healing, and with every second that his lover's gaze rested upon him, Kirk felt balm applied to all his psychic wounds.

The silence in the room stretched, but it was a comfortable silence, and Kirk rode upon its rocking waves. Little lines appeared and deepened next to his lover's eyes, and Kirk's lips curled as he returned his Vulcan's version of a smile. But the captain knew that his lips were trembling. What they had between them, it was so good, and they had come so close to losing it.

"Hey," he said huskily, "have I told you lately that I love you?"

Hot fingertips touched his cheek, like feathers softly falling. "Yes. You have, t'hy'la."

A whisper. "I'm sorry I had to hurt your back."

"And I regret hurting you."

"I'm all right."

"And so I will be. You are here."

Such a simple statement. It meant everything. They were meant to be together.

Kirk sighed with contentment. He stretched carefully against the mattress, easing aching muscles, then regained eye contact with his lover. "You know, for the first time in what seems a long while, the universe makes sense to me again."

"In what way?"

"I'm just one man. Bones was right, I'm just one man and I can't carry the weight of the universe around on my shoulders. There are things that I can't do, like stop Hivlen from attacking the Derkheen. But then, there are things that I can do, too." He stopped, and his eyes caressed the face of this being who meant so much to him. "I can keep the promise I made to you. To myself."

A raised eyebrow, question in the brown eyes.
"I'll never lose you. Never."

The God of the universe worked in unfathomable ways. Another fifteen minutes while Montin attempted to force his lover through the transition, a guard whose gun came down upon Spock's head hard enough to take life, a bullet that found its mark while they were fleeing, a wrong turn while they looked for the Ta's. Any of those things or a hundred others and Kirk would indeed have lost the other half of his soul.

But he hadn't. For some glorious, mysterious reason, he hadn't, and in this time and in this awful place, he had fulfilled at least one promise. For now, it was enough. The future was not dark and joyless. With Spock by his side, the possibilities were endless.

Wordlessly, Kirk extended two fingers, and Spock's fingers were there to meet his in the space between them. His coolness slid against his lover's warmth in that familiar dichotomy that defined what they were to one another, now and always. Despite everything that the galaxy could throw at them, despite the stripping of Spock's mind and the raping of Kirk's body, despite Komack and Michaela and all the doubts that sentient beings were heir to, they would stay together. Their joined fingers said all of it perfectly.

The door opened, and they drew apart, not startled and trying to hide, but easily, two lovers who made no secret of their love but who must resume the responsibilities of command. Kirk rolled over onto his back and saw Uhura advancing. He sat up, not without some effort, nodded at her and said, "How are things going?"

It was obvious that she'd been prepared with some more personal remark, but his return to official business relieved her of that obligation. "No problems, Captain. Irina's almost ready with the tricorder, so we'll be able to look for the Ta's with it soon. Will you and Mister Spock be able to --?" She left the question delicately hanging in the air.

"We will be m-mobile, Lieutenant," Spock supplied from where he still lay curled up on the bed. "However, do --."

The sentence was never completed. There was a shout from outside and down the hall, and then the unmistakable sound of a phaser firing.

Kirk forced his body up and was on his feet even before Uhura ran from the room. He commanded himself to stand upright and took two experimental steps. He wasn't quite steady, but he could move and that was enough. The pain and aches he felt receded into the background, a dull throb that would slow him but not make him a burden. He turned and reached to help Spock up. The Vulcan gasped as he came completely upright, and hunched over immediately, leaning most of his weight on his captain. Kirk knew that McCoy's fears about his kidneys were accurate. Spock wouldn't be able to run.

Together the two of them quick-walked into the outer room. McCoy was peering out the door. Hunyady was just picking up her weapon; McCoy's tricorder was slung over her shoulder. Josephs dashed in.

"Quick, everybody. Down the hall where it's safer. There's more than a hundred Danarakh coming this way."

As he'd done in the early part of this nightmare, Kirk relinquished the care of his lover to McCoy, but not before the doctor flourished a hypo-spray and applied it to the captain's arm. "More painkiller," he explained, and Kirk was grateful. Anything so he'd be more effective. Josephs threw a rifle into his hands and turned to lead the way. Kirk, moving wide-legged, as if he trod on
eggshells, motioned Hunyady and the others before him and followed.

In the short time he'd had, Josephs had tried to erect a defensive position. Thirty meters away the hallway expanded at an intersection. Chairs and tables, more of the filthy mattresses, even parts of the ceiling and walls had been pulled down and piled up to form a defensible position in all four directions. There was a clear line of view for phaser fire down the unobstructed corridors, and no potential ambush locations anywhere close. All of that was good, along with the fact that there was a chance for retreat in three directions. What Kirk didn't like as he hobbled down the hall was the chance for attack from four different ways. That wasn't so good, and definitely not what he would have chosen. But this was still considerably better than being trapped in one of the rooms, or being ambushed out in the open while running down the hall.

He went down on one knee and cautiously peered over a dura-plast sheet that at one time must have been part of a wall. He ignored the way his body ached, the gathering fire in his ass and the slight cramping in his stomach. He was grateful that he was mobile and able to lead his people. That's what was important right now. Tarn and Prendel't were on either side of him, wielding their phasers, the others held rifles at the ready. McCoy and Spock were behind the line of fire. The doctor had lowered the Vulcan to the floor where he leaned against an overturned stuffed chair, but the first officer's eyes were alert and surveying the other potential areas of attack. Neither of them were armed.

"Considerate of the Danarakh to wait," McCoy muttered. "Just wish they'd waited a little bit longer."

No sign of them yet, but Kirk had no doubt they were coming. He considered other options, but they were few. He wasn't even sure how far they were from the aircar, and on short notice they couldn't devise a better spot to turn and confront their attackers. Besides, Spock would probably have to be carried to make any sort of time and would slow them dangerously. No, better to use the phasers and the rifles now.

"How many are there?" he asked Josephs.

"Estimate one hundred and forty, sir." Hunyady was the one who answered him. She nodded towards the functioning tricorder in her hand.

Damn. Too many. If they used wide beam and stunned their attackers, they would gain only minutes, maybe twenty, before the Danarakh were conscious again and following them. And even so the charge on the phasers would run out before all the soldiers were stunned even the first time, and they would be defenseless for the second onslaught.

So, narrow beam it would have to be, set on heavy stun, with all the careful aiming and time that would take, along with the rifles that caused far more damage than the more humane weapon of the Federation. One hundred and forty angry people against his little group of nine. The odds were not good, phasers alone couldn't tip that impossible imbalance. The muscles in the captain's jaw rippled, and he gave the only orders he could. "Tight beam, heavy stun. The rest of you, shoot to kill."

The first line of soldiers turned a faraway corner and came running down the hall. Kirk rose to his knees. "Here they come," he warned, and pulled his rifle into position.

The Danarakh fired on the run before the Enterprise crew took a shot. Kirk heard and felt bullets impact the protective barricade before him as he took steady aim and pulled the trigger. The phasers to either side of him whirred. The man in his gunsights fell, and so did three other soldiers. He pulled the trigger again, saw his victim jerk, grab her chest and fall. Again. And again. By the
time he called "Hold your fire," there had to be fifteen bodies piled up thirty meters away.

The rest of the first charge took cover behind their fallen comrades. Movement captured Kirk's attention before he'd had the chance to relax his vigilance. What was that...? A slack body was being moved on top of another.... He popped up and let off a shot, knew he had missed because his target was carefully hidden. The Danarakh were building their own barricade, using their dead and wounded fellows.

"Damn them." McCoy's whisper pierced the air.

"Stop they will not," Gri-Ta said, her eyes riveted on the incredibly callous sight. "Waited I should have for my sisters. The soldiers will all come and prevent them we cannot."

The wall of the living and the dead was three bodies high when it literally surged towards them. The soldiers crouched behind were pushing it forward. The Enterprise crew had no choice but to fire directly into the wall of flesh. The phasers at least should have some effect even as they passed through bodies, but now they would have to fire twice as long and at a higher setting. In just the first moments of attack, the Danarakh had effectively neutralized the rifles and reduced them to two effective weapons.

The wall stopped. Kirk couldn't see, but he guessed that some of those directly behind had been caught by the phaser beam and stunned. They'd have to be replaced by one of the shadowy mass that followed behind....

This wasn't going to work. Their only chance had been to keep the Danarakh pinned up far down the hall, and not give their overwhelming numbers a chance. Their only recourse was retreat....

Kirk spun around to find that Spock had crept forward to crouch behind him. "Negative, Captain," the Vulcan said. He held the modified tricorder in his hand. "There are sizable numbers of D-Danarakh in every direction." He nodded down each of the three branching corridors. "They took their time to plan the attack w-well. We are trapped."

Trapped? Not after surviving the aircar ride to the Lox’theneth’nar, rescuing Spock just in time, running for hours through the long halls of the colony ship, pulling his Vulcan through the pon farr. Not after making some sense of a senseless universe.

"No," Kirk snapped. "There are always options. Find me some options, Mister Spock."

At that moment the air was filled with a peculiarly familiar beep! beep! that they hadn't heard in days.

Kirk lunged for the communicator and grabbed it from Uhura's hands, snapped it open in a second. "Kirk here," he nearly shouted. "Enterprise?"

"I want Irina." The disembodied voice of Lieutenant Brian Dawson filtered tinnily through the instrument. "Get me Irina. Is she all right?"

"Dawson, this is Captain Kirk. Put Mister Scott on. Hurry."

"No." The lieutenant sounded mulish. "Mister Scott doesn't even remember that Irina exists. Or that you're the captain. Nobody does but me. Let me talk with my wife."

Kirk stared down at the communicator in disbelief. "Lieutenant...."

But Spock was there to forestall him. "S-suggest you relay your orders through Hunyady to Mister
D-Dawson, Captain. We do not know how he has escaped the influence of the Ta's, and how long he will remain free. Time is of the essence."

Kirk slapped the open com unit in the young woman's palm just as Tarn and Prendel't opened fire again with their phasers. The Danarakhe must be getting closer.

Hunyady held the communicator up close to her lips. Tears streamed down her face. "Brian, Brian, it's Irina, honey. I'm all right but we're in terrible trouble. We want you to...." She looked up at her captain.

Kirk had his orders ready. "Turn ship's phasers on heavy stun, wide beam on the Lox'theneth'nar, these coordinates. Stun everything and everybody. Then send a landing party over here."

Hunyady relayed the message word for word even as McCoy, hunched down next to Spock, hissed, "Jim, have you forgotten that this is an asteroid ship? Even the Enterprise's phasers can't penetrate this deep."

"Maybe not, Doctor. But Gri-Ta said that the Ta's would be near the surface of the ship, to be closer to the Enterprise. My guess is," he eyed the walls and ceiling, "that we aren't more than twenty meters within the shell of the Lox'theneth'nar, and that the Ta's are too. Stun them, and everybody on the Enterprise will realize what's happened and be free to help us."

Spock favored him with a raised eyebrow. "A guess, Captain?"

"Perhaps I should call it inspired intuition, Mister Spock. Besides, I trust Scotty's quick thinking."

"Perhaps it is also necessary to trust Lieutenant Dawson's devotion to his wife. If he is truly the only one aware of our existence, then he faces a difficult task."

"He'll do it. He loves Irina. He'll do it for her." He favored his own love with a quiet smile. "Love can be very powerful, Mister Spock, did you know that?"

McCoy was intense. "I pray to God you're right, Captain."

Phaser fire sounded again, and for the first time since the initial barrage, a single rifle shot came from the Danarakhe. Tarn jerked back with a loud cry, and his phaser fell from his lax hand. Then, with a wild, despairing look in his eyes, he stood and pressed both hands to his chest. He took one staggering step forward and toppled over a table that had been draped with a mattress. He presented a clear target for the soldiers.

Before anyone else could move, Prendel't tossed her phaser to Josephs and was up and at the Rigellian's side. "Ssstupid!" she screamed as she tugged on the massive man's arm. It didn't seem as if her frail-looking body could possibly have the strength to move him. "Do you want to die?" She ducked her shoulder under his limp frame and heaved, and efficiently shoved him up and back behind the barricade.

He landed on the floor with a thump! and his arms sprawled out wide. He looked dead.

The Andorian stood over his body even as another rifle shot whizzed by her head. "Ssstupid," she whispered. Then she scooped up his fallen phaser and turned away.

McCoy was at Tarn's side an instant later, Kirk, moving more slowly, a moment after him. The doctor's hand lingered against the carotid artery, then frantically reached for his med kit. There was a spreading wet patch on the red-shirted man's chest.
More shots rang out. Kirk lunged forward and pushed McCoy down across his patient. "No," McCoy insisted, and pushed back up. "I might be able to save him." There was nothing Kirk could do to help, and no order he could give that would stop McCoy. He crawled to the barricade and returned fire.

Minutes passed. The Danarakh shot sporadically, enough to keep the crew pinned behind their barrier, but there was no more movement from the wall of bodies twenty meters away. Kirk ordered his people to hold their fire; there was no sense expending the phaser charge when it might be needed later. Spock sat, legs straight out before him, pale, shoulders and head drooping, as if the brief spurt of energy when he'd given the captain calm advice had exhausted the last of his reserves. But the modified medical tricorder was in his lap, and his gaze did not leave the screen while he monitored the movement of the rest of the attacking force.

Hunyady turned her tear-streaked face to the captain and said, "I don't know if Brian'll do it, sir. He seemed awfully confused. But I told him I wouldn't love him anymore if he didn't turn phasers on these coordinates right away, and he said he'd try." She looked down at where the open communicator sat silently, their only lifeline.

"Dawson is a good man, Lieutenant, I'm sure he'll find a way to help us."

She nodded. "I know. But if he doesn't, I mean, if this doesn't work, then the last thing I'll have said to him is...," she sniffed, "that I don't love him. It seems so awful."

Uhura's arm appeared around her shoulders. "Honey, this is gonna work, don't worry. We just have to hold on for a few more minutes."

Kirk looked over at Spock, who lifted his head and met his gaze. The Vulcan tilted his head significantly.

The captain looked down the intersecting corridor to his right, knew that Spock had read indications that there would be an attack from that direction soon. Probably from the other two directions too. Josephs' defensive scheme really didn't look too bright now, but it was done.

Casually, as if this were an ordinary day on the Enterprise, Kirk scooted over to kneel next to his first officer. He would be in better position there to counter an attack from the side, and besides, at least for the moment, this was where he wanted to be. He leaned his forearm on an angular shoulder as he double-checked the ammunition cartridge in his weapon. Maybe one-quarter full. It would have to do.

He turned and smiled at the rest of his crew. His wonderful crew, who'd worked so hard and were so brave. "This is the first time in my life that I'm happily anticipating being shot with a starship's phasers. Bones, I hope your sickbay is up to treating all of us."

McCoy looked up from his efforts at Tarn's side. He knew exactly what Kirk was doing, and readily joined in, "The Enterprise’s sickbay? No problem, Captain. You'll get the best of care. You know there's none better in Starfleet."

Hunyady made a little, watery sound that was a cross between a hiccup and a giggle. Spock stiffened, met Kirk's eyes and then nodded down the corridor to the right.

Damn! How long would it take Dawson to order the phasers into play, to convince Scotty that it was necessary, or even go against authority and fire the massive weapons himself? How long could this little group hold out against an all-out attack? Long enough for the Enterprise to fire, or would a landing party from the ship find only their lifeless bodies?
Kirk peered down the empty hallway. No sign of the Danarakh yet, but if Spock said they were coming, then they were. He glanced down at the Vulcan, not knowing if this would be their last silent communication, wanting to say with a look what he couldn't possibly say in words.

But even as their gazes met, he heard the high-pitched whine that meant only one thing. His Lovely Lady had come to bathe them in her light and save them all.

The captain toppled forward with a smile on his face.
"Is there anything you wish to tell the Council?"

The voice of the chief Ta of the Council of Elders of the Krohderkhin barely reached across the largest gathering room on the Lox’teneth’nar, to where Kirk, Spock and McCoy were standing in the shadows that snaked around the perimeter. But the prisoner who stood in the center spotlight with his arms bound behind him heard. Montin threw his head back in snarling defiance and spit out, "You have no authority over me!"

Two days had changed the rebel's status irretrievably. The ship with Gri-Ta's sister Ta's now orbited Gabriela. The forty-nine women had brought with them almost a hundred solemn-faced Din's and Ban's and Man's, and each one was dedicated to righting the wrongs caused by their own people. The Federation had a grievance against Montin's followers, as did the Gabrielans, but Kirk had exercised his authority and turned custody over to the Krohderkhin Council, regardless of Komack's opinion on the matter. Now the captain, and his two officers who had suffered the most at the rebels' hands, had been invited by the Ta's to witness their version of justice.

Gri-Ta moved forward from the semi-circle of accusers. She wore a long black dress and an air of serenity that nothing could disrupt. But it seemed to Kirk that there were more deep wrinkles of experience that defined her face; she had not escaped from the Danarakh untouched. Now that he knew her better, knew some portion of her inner life, he could also detect the aura of power in her slow but confident footsteps. That he could ever have thought of her as a grandmother or a shopkeeper and nothing more seemed ludicrous. Gri-Ta, like those arranged in stately array behind her, was a Krohderkhin leader, and the psychic lifeblood of millions flowed through her mind and rested in her hands.

Kirk shifted his weight from one foot to another. He still ached, and everyone who'd been on the Lox’teneth’nar was suffering from the lingering effects of a strong stun from the Enterprise's phasers.

Except for Ensign Tarn. Despite everything the medical staff could do, the Rigellian security officer had died. Like so many other beings in this sector, Tarn had been a victim of the man who stood in the spotlight before them.

Kirk glanced at where Spock stood next to him. The first officer's carefully schooled expression, the hands behind his back told no story, but Kirk could guess at the turmoil he must be feeling. His peaceful lover confronted the perpetrator of all his suffering. Spock had been stripped of everything that made him Vulcan, had been the object of hate and violent blows, had been threatened with the loss of his mind and will, had even faced the darkest specter when he'd decided he must take his own life. How was he to reconcile the violent emotion he must feel inside with the teachings of his Vulcan forebears?

Kirk didn't know, but he was determined to give his lover every support he could, even if it meant just standing next to him in silence. The past two days had prevented any other kind of personal contact between them. Even before McCoy had released the captain from sickbay, Kirk had been on the com line for hours negotiating and finally arguing with Hivlen fa Hivlen, directing operations through Scotty on the asteroid-ship, trying to explain events clearly to a disbelieving Komack. He'd tolerated Bones' embarrassing ministrations, slept the sleep of the truly exhausted, then rose to stiffly assume his responsibilities again.

And Spock had been the object of McCoy's unrelenting medical solicitude. The bruises on his
angular face were finally just fading shadows, the swelling about nose and cheekbones was gone, and sickbay therapy had treated the worst of the kidney dysfunction. It would still be days before he was truly well, but Spock walked almost without hesitation now. He was on the road to sure physical recovery, but his mind....

"There's no improvement," McCoy had flatly told his hopeful captain just an hour ago, when Kirk had stopped by the sickbay before the three of them beamed over to the *Lox'thenuheth'nar*. Through the open door of the back room behind him, Kirk could see that Spock was just sealing the seam to his dress tunic, and Kirk knew that his lover had heard McCoy's diagnosis. But then, Spock would have known anyway. The contact with Gri-Ta had done nothing to heal the wounds that couldn't be seen.

"Ready, Captain." The first officer had stepped into the open ward and reported, and for the first time in what felt like forever they'd walked shoulder to shoulder through the familiar halls of the *Enterprise* to the transporter room, with Bones trailing half a step behind.

Kirk returned his gaze to the prisoner. It was hard to reconcile all the evil that had been done with the slight figure before them. He did not know Montin. They had spoken briefly when the *Enterprise* had rescued the *Lox'thenuheth'nar*, and from later he had a fleeting memory of a dark-haired man going down in the white light of phaser fire.

And yet he felt as if he knew this man well. Montin had branded his signature in Spock's brain, had wiped out all the beauty that two lovers had created, had seared a Vulcan's most precious gift into ashes. No matter that it had actually been the rebel Ta's who had attacked both Spock and Sherily Nego on the *Lox'thenuheth'nar*, Montin had been the force behind the destruction of the bond.

Kirk took a deep breath, clenched his hands into fists. He didn't want to put a name to the emotion that uncurled in his chest, almost choking him with its virulence. He would not succumb to the same disease that had infected the prisoner. Montin stood defiant, his legs spread wide, his narrow face lifted as he arrogantly confronted the certain judgment of the Ta's. Kirk knew that he'd never be able to forget the full pouting lips or the black eyes that sparked even now, but it was a different vision that haunted him. Montin, nameless, faceless, had appeared in the tears his lover had shed in his arms, in the long and sleepless nights, in the time of mating that had almost ended in disaster. Would he and Spock ever be rid of the man? Montin shaped their past, defined their present, colored the future.

Kirk had a double grievance. Spock's dispassionate debriefing from sickbay hadn't been able to hide the horror of the hours when he and McCoy had been helpless victims before the screaming crowd. And then there was the ultimate threat that had almost been carried out, the rape of his lover's mind.

He was only human. What was he supposed to do with this burning feeling inside?

Now Gri-Ta advanced until she stood just a few meters before the rebel leader. This man's dream of independence from the yoke of the Ta's, his vision of a home for a perpetually homeless race had stolen people's minds and wills, had turned parent against child, had claimed Mar's life on faraway Michaela.

Gri-Ta touched Montin on the chest with the tip of one finger. "Over you our authority is absolute. You a part of me are; infect me you do with your disease."

"Disease?" Montin shouted. Every straining muscle in his body looked as if he wanted to surge forward, to attack her, and yet he remained in place. "Is taking what is rightfully ours a disease? Is wanting what every other race in this galaxy has a disease?"
"The harm you have caused is known to us." She gestured behind her to include all of the Ta's, then behind Montin to where hundreds of other Krohderkhin were assembled. "Hide you cannot, for each life you have taken we know, each life changed because of you we know. Many still suffer on planets we have not yet reached. Before we can right all your wrongs it will be months."

"Not wrongs!" he shouted. "Justice! They rejected us, forced us into ghettos, denied us jobs and education! On every planet it was the same. We were never good enough to be with others. We never had the life we deserved! You want to go back to that?"

"We were forced nowhere. To live apart is the choice of the Whole." Again her aged, twisted hand swept to include everyone present. "Any other possibility there is not."

"Yes, there is!" Montin said eagerly, as if here were another potential convert. "We can take what is ours. Compel the gergs to accept us by force. It's the only language they understand."

Gri-Ta regarded him sadly. "That is a language the Krohderkhin will not use."

"But I used it, and it was working. The gergs who died on the frontiers of each planet, who do you think has their land now? My people. Our people. Will you take their hope away from them?"

"Another's destruction is their hope. It cannot be. Change them back we will and return the land."

The rebel drew back. "You cannot change me back. I was meant to be a Tin from the beginning."

"But to change others out of their time and season you used your gift, and to bring into the fold one who is not Krohderkhin you even sought."

"Yes, I did. If you had let me alone I would have succeeded and all of Gabriela would be ours! And now you want me to become one of your disgusting cowards, when I almost took a whole planet for our people? Never! Others despise us, don't you understand? Ask them, ask the Starfleet officers." Montin's hand stabbed the air towards Kirk. "Do they respect the poor gypsies at starbase twenty-four? Do they work to change the condition of the Danarakh on Michaela, who live on the desert land and almost starve as a result? The Federation heart does not bleed because of our plight, Gri-Ta. They despise us because we are weak and they ignore us because we make no noise."

"To accept one's destiny is not weakness. Within one another strength we have." "You have no strength," Montin scoffed. "I was on the verge of leading our people to a new age. My gift is strength. Why do you not accept it?"

She regarded him quizzically. "Think do you that you would have succeeded? Think do you that the Federation and planetary officials would not have realized what you did and stopped you? Precede them we simply do."

Doubt never crossed his face. "They would never have known! Suspect the weakest in their midst? As likely to blame the insects under their feet."

"Enough." She crossed her hands before her in what must have been a ritual gesture. "What you are condemns you, as it condemns me and everyone here. We are Krohderkhin and we know you as we know ourselves. You must be stopped. We will change you. You cannot be Tin any longer. It is the will of the Whole propelled by the judgment of the Ta's, who encompass the Whole. You will be Monlan, one who serves." She turned her back to the prisoner with a rustle of her black dress, and took her place with her sisters in the semi-circle.

A stooped woman, shorter than Gri-Ta and with only thin wisps of white hair on her ancient head,
hobbled forward. She was the leader whose tremulous voice had sounded through the room before. "Before sentence we do execute, any member of the Whole may speak for him."

There was a long, pregnant silence. Kirk looked about and saw that no one in the crowd of hundreds was willing to speak for the accused. Montin stood in the spotlight, his face twisted into a scowl, his bearing straight and strong. He was still defiant. His scheme of trying to find a home for his people had not worked, and now he was going to pay the price.

We will change you, Gri-Ta had said. Kirk thought he understood what that meant. The Ta's were going to attempt to force Montin into a different archetype, as the rebel had used his special gift to assist his own followers to change into Tin's who were capable of the violent acts he needed to propel his dream. Only in this case the Ta's would take the haughty spirit, the drive to succeed, the ruthless cunning and the urge to violence, and attempt to force it to exist within the shell of a tame, meek package. Montin would be trapped within a living hell. He would become Monlan, a servant type, and though his spirit might burn, he would be capable of rebelling no more.

Kirk suppressed a shudder. He could think of no worse fate. It would be the destruction of everything that he was, everything he believed in and stood for. Yes, the one who was Mon would still live, but in a form repugnant to him. It was rape of the soul.

He looked at Montin with new respect. He stood the way that Kirk himself wished that he would stand under similar circumstances, he showed no fear before the ultimate sentence that would destroy all his dreams. Dreams, Kirk suddenly remembered, that he had initially sympathized with....

The silent moments piled one upon the other. Finally the Ta leader said, "If speaks no one does, then sentence --"

Two sets of Starfleet-issue boots trod upon the dura-plast floor at the same time, as two Starfleet officers stepped forward. Kirk and Spock walked in perfect unison across the polished floor and into the light until they came to a halt five meters before the leader of the Council, to Montin's right. Kirk kept his eyes trained forward, but he was so aware of the determined presence beside him that his whole right side tingled. His peaceful Vulcan.... Somehow, he wasn't surprised that Spock was standing there next to him.

"Captain Kirk. Commander Spock. Of the Whole you are not a part."

"Trin-Ta." It was Gri-Ta who spoke to the leader. "These two have been within the Whole, and have been most grievously hurt by the part of us who was Mon. I wish to hear what they say."

There was a stir along the long, curved line of women, and then a stillness. "Very well. We wish to hear. Captain Kirk, for the prisoner do you speak?"

Kirk spread his hands before him and searched for the right words to describe his contradictory feelings. "Ma'am, Trin-Ta, I cannot defend the prisoner. What he has done deserves punishment. But the reason why he did it.... He's right. Everyone deserves a home. No group of people deserves to live in permanent hardship and exile with no chance of hope, or to be forced into an underclass simply because they are misunderstood, or feared. The one who was Mon used the wrong methods, but his goal is one I support."

Trin-Ta's pebbly black eyes skewered him with a glance. "With others we cannot live. Witnessed the results you have."

"Yes. I understand that you cannot live with other races. But if your people have a desire to leave
the ghettos and encampments where you have hidden yourselves, I'm sure a place could be found for you. There are many planets that can be colonized. This galaxy is full of beautiful worlds that you could call your own. The Enterprise has visited many of them. Simply to protect itself from something like this happening again, the Federation would be motivated to help your people find one of these planets, and make it your home."

There was sudden movement from the prisoner. Montin shouted, "We do not need your charity! We can take what we deserve!"

"Silence!" Every Ta spoke at the same time; the command reverberated through each corner of the hall and Kirk felt an invisible -- something -- push against his chest. He swayed backwards. Next to him, Spock looked at him with concern; apparently he felt nothing. Montin fell to his knees, white-faced and gasping.

The first officer placed a hand under his captain's elbow. "Are you all right?" he asked quietly. Kirk nodded and straightened his spine. He had the feeling he'd just had the smallest demonstration of the power of the Ta's, and his respect for them blossomed. These women apparently had the power to take what they wanted, even a planet of their own; three of them, under Montin's influence, had almost been enough to control a starship. And yet the Council was restrained by its own code of ethics, the same code that had kept their people submerged and in hiding for hundreds of years.

Trin-Ta ignored the prisoner's plight and the murmuring from the crowd; she kept her narrowed eyes fixed on Kirk and met his gaze when he turned back to her. "The past no sympathy has shown us. Together within the Whole we are free, but by other races standard's no status we have. How can I expect understanding and gifts from the Federation? A planet of our own? After what the one who was Mon has done, retribution I expect."

Kirk pursed his lips. He was as aware as anyone that the ideals espoused by the Federation were not always achieved in practice. What Trin-Ta said was possible. Even now, on Gabriela, Hivlen fa Hivlen sent his army south despite Kirk's most insistent persuasion not to. Most of the innocent Derkheen would be confined to barren, patrolled reservations within weeks.

On Federation planets, how could he guarantee that the same would not happen? After all the people on Michaela had suffered, for example, how could he expect them not to exact vengeance once they knew the Danarakh were to blame?

He couldn't guarantee it, but if he had no hope then what was he doing wearing a Starfleet uniform? He put his innermost belief into words. "People hurt one another because of fear and ignorance, when we don't understand one another." He thought of how deep inside he had feared telling McCoy about his relationship with Spock, and so had delayed saying anything. Of how the doctor had not known how to react to a situation he did not completely understand, and so had reacted by striking out. They had hurt one another. But that didn't mean that the hurt would go on forever, not for individuals or for races.

Kirk continued, "Now we know your people, the Krohderkhin, and we understand your problems. We can help you. At least, let us try. It was a promise he would try to keep.

The woman tilted her wrinkled head as she considered what he said, her gaze seemed to measure the truthfulness of his words. He felt the eyes of each of the Ta's upon him. Then, "Upon your suggestion we will reflect. Consult with you later we shall. Now --"

He stepped forward and held up a hand to forestall the dismissal. "Wait. There's something else I want to say."
"Say it then. The right have you."

He paused and tried to marshal his thoughts. He couldn't help it, there was a part of him that hated Montin and wanted to see him punished. There was a part of him that wanted to see the man suffer. But there was also a soul-deep revulsion against what the Ta's planned to do... Finally, all he could force out was, "Must you rob Montin of his identity?"

Trin-Ta regarded him sadly. "Hear you we do, Captain Kirk, and saddened we are, for your words show the misunderstandings that separate your kind from ours. Your concept of the term 'identity' and ours differs. Each of you are separate and apart, but together my kind are entwined about one another to make a unity. A part of the Whole Mon still will be, and it is from the Whole that he draws what he is. He is Krohderkhin, we are Krohderkhin. When we change him, of his 'identity' we will not rob him."

For the first time Spock spoke up. He smoothly stepped forward next to his captain and his strong, deep voice filled the room. "Our definitions do not differ so much, Trin-Ta. Although I am a psychically discrete individual, my people also know what it is to have union with another being. I have known that unity. It was most important to me."

Kirk stared at the strong profile. He couldn't believe that Spock spoke of their melds and their bond before so many.

Spock did not meet his gaze, but Kirk knew he was aware of his scrutiny. The first officer took a single bold step towards his lover, so their shoulders almost brushed, and together the two of them faced the Council.

"The one who was Mon destroyed my union with my chosen one, and I am now a different being than I was before. In a way similar to how you propose to change Mon, I have already been transformed into something I was not meant to be. It is not good. I would not wish such a state upon anyone, not even upon the one who did me harm. Retribution is not logical; it serves no purpose but the heightening of negative emotions."

"I know I am not a part of the Whole, but I would ask you to weigh my request carefully. You fear retribution from various planetary societies, and justly so. I ask you if it is right to exact this final retribution yourselves. Yes, prevent Mon from acting again, punish him if you must as a deterrent, but do not rob him of what he is, as I have been robbed. Do not destroy that which makes him what he is. There has been enough destruction already."

Again, silence filled the hall. But pride filled Kirk's heart. He couldn't look at his lover, not unless all the emotion he felt inside came bursting out. He studied the toes of his boots instead, and held himself still. God, he loved Spock! No one in the galaxy had a mate like he did. Back in the temple on Gabriela, he'd told Spock he had the most generous soul in the galaxy. Generous? The breadth and depth of his Vulcan's soul could not be measured.

The Ta's turned one towards the other, as if in the movement of their bodies they were communing. Kirk had a sudden memory of Gri-Ta's feathered wings sheltering him and Spock from the fierce Vulcan suns; he imagined the tips of each Ta's invisible wings touching their sister's, forming arches in a circle halfway around the room.

"Heard you we have," Trin-Ta suddenly announced, and each Ta faced the prisoner. "You who were Mon, these beings say transformed you should not be, that another punishment be sought. Agree do you?"

Kirk exchanged a puzzled look with his companion. Since when did a court ask the accused if he
agreed with the sentence? The Krohderkhin did things differently.

"Yes!" Montin shouted. His fist punched through the air over his head. "Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!"

There was a moment of intense disorientation, Kirk stumbled but caught himself before he fell. When he could focus again, Montin had collapsed on the floor.

"Done it is," Trin-Ta pronounced. "Montin's essence returns to join the All as he was. He was not transformed."

Kirk stared at the fallen body. He felt numb. As many times as he'd seen death, it always chilled him, and he was sure that Montin was dead. This was the mercy for which Spock had asked?

Kirk looked up at Trin-Ta, who stared at him as if expecting protest. But it was Spock who voiced outrage. "What have you done?"

"What you asked."

Kirk gestured to the body. "But we never wanted you to execute him. That's so much worse --"

She interrupted him. "Is it? Montin with the Great Spirit of the All is. He knew that to Her he would go, as we all do. She accept him will, and find a place within all She is for everything that he is. He welcomed the journey." She cocked her almost-bald head to the side. "This but another misunderstanding is. You asked that the one named Mon not be changed. He was not, in any essential way. It is simply that he no longer lives. Surely, the mercy for which you asked."

Kirk met his lover's eyes, saw the same frustration he felt there. There wasn't anything they could do.

There were hurried footsteps behind him, and Kirk turned to see McCoy rushing towards the body.

"Do not touch him, Doctor McCoy," called Gri-Ta. "All is as it should be."

McCoy, with a grim expression on his face, nevertheless ran his tricorder over the dead man, and then joined his captain in facing the Council.

Trin-Ta raised her gnarled hands as if in benediction over all present. "Go we now to bring the others back to the community of the Whole. Here on this ship, and then within the hour we leave for every planet on which harm has fallen. Each of our fallen brethren will find the place that he or she was destined for, not Montin's perversion of the Tin's. We will be Whole again. To our visitors, good-bye. You will know where we are if your offer of help genuine is."

The Krohderkhin in the back of the hall began to disperse. The spotlight that burned on Montin's body went off. The Ta's began to talk among themselves, and moved towards the two exits behind them.

But Kirk couldn't let them go yet. There was unfinished business to complete. He couldn't forget the hope that had erupted in his heart from the first moments he had realized that it had been Gri-Ta's renegade people who had hurt Spock.... "Wait!" Kirk shouted. "Don't go. There's something more. Trin-Ta, listen to me!"

His words were like stones cast upon water; the ripples spread, brought silence with them. Every woman on the Council turned back, took her place with neat economy of motion, and stared at him.

Kirk stole a glance at Spock, saw swift comprehension dawn. How long ago had it been that he had
vowed that he would bring Spock back to the Lox’theneth’nar and find the answers his lover needed? Fate had been cruel, and the asteroid-ship had been brought to them instead. But still, he had promises to keep....

"Trin-Ta, you know the harm that was done to my first officer by Montin's orders."

"Yes," she said. "Commander Spock has said that he is not what he once was."

"He had been hurt beyond my people's ability to heal him. His mind has been..." He struggled to find the right word, knew nothing could convey the extent of the Vulcan's loss and so settled for "...injured. And if he is injured, then so am I. Neither of us is whole. I ask you, for both of us, is there anything you can do to help him?" His voice broke, but he forced himself to go on. "To help us?"

The aged woman regarded him, then focused on Spock for long moments. Without removing her gaze from him, she said, "Gri-Ta. You have taken these two Within. What have you seen?"

A rustle of a black skirt, and Gri-Ta advanced. She took those calm, self-confident steps that hinted of her hidden strengths until she stood directly before the captain and his first officer, where they towered over her frail body and insubstantial height. Kirk looked down at her, and almost feared what she would have to say. Whatever she said was the final sentence, he knew that. No one could understand what had been done to Spock better than the Krohderkhin could. In Gri-Ta's silence, hope still lived. He could hope that someday, maybe today, he would feel Spock's mind in his again, that his lover would have everything that he needed to be himself, that Spock could find union with Vulcan again. Once she spoke, that hope might die.

She reached forward and took one of their hands in each of her twisted ones, and her bright blue eyes looked up at them. Kirk's fingers curled around hers, hard, and he willed her to say what he wanted to hear. Say that you can make him well!

"I have seen the remains of what once joined you. In you," she looked at Spock, "is the part of him and your joining that you kept when you attacked were. Strong you were, and fought for that which was most precious. Where there should nothing be, there is a remnant."

"I cannot feel it," Spock whispered.

"Yes, know I that. Your perceptions destroyed have been. But even if you could, sure I am not that you would perceive what you seek. What little remains is encased by him, and he is fully human, as a part of you is. It is buried deep."

"But we touched the bond before," Kirk protested. "You took me there and I found a way to reach it. The water.... Wasn't that the bond?"

Her aged shoulders rose and fell. "An image of what little is left of it, yes. Filtered through your perceptions and the requirements for contact of my people."

"Then find it again. Join us."

"Not so simple it is. Gri-Ta finding an image of your joining is not what required is. It must grow. Spock's desperate need brought what he had to the surface, but now receded it has. Where it is now, buried so deep, shrunk so small, reach it I cannot. In the world you saw before, a drop of water it is, not a river. And sand covers it."

"Then how about the rest of him?" Kirk pleaded. He refused to let his sick disappointment stop him from pushing for everything he could. There was more to Spock than the bond.... "All Spock's
telepathy, his Vulcan abilities?"

"They gone completely are, burned away. Montin's people most thorough were. I cannot reach what is not there."

"But could they be restored?" Kirk pressed. "Could it all somehow grow back--"

"James." It was the first time that Gri-Ta had called him by name, and Kirk felt all the warmth and caring that she put into her voice, and all the sorrow too. "You ask for what cannot be. That part of him," she looked back to Spock, "of you, is gone. I cannot help you. We cannot help you, and for that sorry I am. But --" She looked down at the floor.

Spock might hesitate to speak, but Kirk did not. "But what? What?" He knew he was pleading before hundreds of people, he knew that all his love for Spock was obviously displayed. But he didn't care.

Her bowed, white head came up. "It such a small chance is. There is hope in what Spock managed to retain. All that he was, was in the connection he had with you. Narrowed, concentrated, but there, taking his essence and flowing into you, as you into him flowed. The part that remains has everything he needs in it."

For a moment Kirk wouldn't let himself believe it. Was there really hope?

Suddenly Spock's hand in Gri-Ta's spasmed, tightening until Kirk could see the pain his lover caused in the flash of her eyes. But she did not pull back. "Do you m-mean," Spock asked hoarsely, "that if somehow the bond were to be re-animated, then I could be... Vulcan again?"

Oh, God, yes, Kirk prayed, closing his eyes at the longing that filled his lover's voice. God, please. Say yes.

"In a way." Gri-Ta replied. "Know I do not if what remains ever strong enough to join you will be. There is so little there. But if to grow it attempts, then perhaps, the parts of you it holds in trust will be released. Whether this happen will, I do not know."

For the first time McCoy spoke. He stood just over Kirk's left shoulder, hovering as close as he could be. Now he said excitedly, "Let me get this straight. What you're saying is that there's a part of Jim that Spock managed to keep, and that part is all wrapped up around the bond. Right?"

Gri-Ta nodded. "Yes. Recognized I did the captain's signature in Spock when he imprisoned was."

"Okay. Then since the bond was everything that was Spock, then all that he's missing is there, just... not accessible right now. But you don't know how to make it accessible. Right?"

"Correct you are. What Montin's people have almost destroyed, I know not how to put right. But there is a chance that on its own--"

The doctor snapped his fingers. "Spontaneous healing! Just like I said when it first happened. If there's some spontaneous healing, if what's left of Jim's and Spock's bond starts to, uh, unfurl, then it might release all of Spock's attributes."

The little woman cocked her head to one side. "Perhaps not all. Know I do not how much will surface. Perhaps all. Perhaps none. In small segments over years, perhaps. Hesitated I to speak of this, for such a little hope it is."

"But it's there," Kirk breathed. He remembered the nineteen percent chance at life that they had
grabbed and made real. They could do it... He straightened in sudden excitement. "How about me? Is there anything left in me that we can use to help Spock?"

She regarded him with a wisp of amusement. "Disappointed in this you will be, my determined Captain Kirk, but in you, the connection ashes is. Nothing but the empty place where it once resided remains, and your sorrow. Regret I feel that this the way it is. You cannot help him."

He wouldn't let that deter the song that was singing inside him. "It's all right. As long as there's a chance." For the first time since Gri-Ta had begun to speak, Kirk allowed himself to turn to look at his lover. He untangled his hand from Gri-Ta's grasp and couldn't capture Spock's fast enough. "Spock, there's a chance."

Hot fingers curled about his cool fingers, and Spock pulled him close, so that their hands were pressed between their chests and their faces were centimeters apart. "T'hy'la," Spock whispered, and for Kirk the whole universe narrowed to that one precious word, a pair of dark eyes and soaring eyebrows that tapered to an infinity of possibilities. "If there is a chance to regain myself, it is you who will be my salvation. I find that... most appropriate."

Kirk swallowed hard. He wanted to kiss Spock more than he wanted to breathe, but they couldn't, not here. He contented himself with vowing, "Our bond will grow, I know it will. I love you too much for any part of that love to stay locked away."

A gleam in the dark eyes. "More of your human optimism."

Kirk shook his head, short side-to-side motions that kept the union of their gazes intact. "No. Not optimism. A promise. I promise you that the bond will grow again."

The fine network of wrinkles at the side of Spock's eyes deepened. There was the smallest of indentations at each corner of his mouth as well. Spock was smiling at him. With everything inside him singing a song of hope, Kirk smiled back.

"Gri-Ta." A tilt of the Vulcan head was all the attention Spock removed from his captain. "I have a request."

"Listen will I."

"You leave in less than an hour. Two days ago you saved my life by allowing my captain and myself access to the psychic net that unites your people. Could you join us again, one last time before you go?" A long-fingered hand came up and brushed against Kirk's temple, swept through the captain's honey hair. It was a sad smile that curved Spock's lips now. "Despite his promises, it may still be a very long time before I feel the touch of my beloved's mind again."

It was impossible to feel more than he was feeling now. Kirk squeezed his lover's hand hard, thanked him and loved him with his eyes.

Gri-Ta exchanged a look with Trin-Ta, then nodded. "Very well. Conserve energy for the transition of Montin's followers I must. But for a brief moment, into the Whole with me you I will take."

Keeping their hands between them joined, the two Starfleet officers turned and faced the little old woman who on the surface seemed so simple and innocent, and who had been their salvation. Spock would never have survived the pon farr without her, and Kirk's debt of gratitude could not be paid.

She reached up to place her hands on their shoulders, but before she could complete the action they were interrupted by the distinct clearing of a human throat.
It was McCoy, looking abashed but determined. "Uh, listen, I'm sorry to interrupt, but... Look, the last time, down on Gabriela, in the temple, you asked me to go with you, and I was fool enough to say no. Would you mind, if this time, just for a little while, I, uh, joined with you too? I promise I won't interfere. I'd just like to once, to, uh...." He bogged down without finding any other words.

Kirk knew without asking what Spock's answer was. The Vulcan's hand in his tightened in encouragement as he asked Gri-Ta, "Is it possible? Can he?"

Her answer was to touch McCoy's shoulder. The doctor gave Kirk a quick grin and reached for the captain's fingers. "Looks like we should all be connected, right?"

Spock grasping one hand, McCoy grasping the other, Gri-Ta encircling them all with her arms.... As it should be.

His body was barely substantial. The outline of his hand, his hip and feet was blurred as the physical gave way to golden light. He glowed; the light was dazzling and Kirk had to blink as he looked down at himself.

But satisfaction settled over him. He knew this world. This was the universe of their melds, Spock's echoing internal cavern filled up with the golden radiance that was the two of them together. Somehow, Gri-Ta had managed to re-create it. Bless her.

He floated free of gravity, for here he was only partially of the body. The light of love, of total sharing counted for more than the physical. And he was naked. Between lovers in the meld, there were no impediments.

Next to him, Bones floated too. The physician surveyed his unclothed, ethereal body with blank astonishment, then looked up and caught his captain's attention.

Kirk smiled, and the yellow in the light that surrounded them intensified. Don't worry. This is the way it should be.

Fine. The doctor sounded as practical as he always had. But where's Gri-Ta and Spock?

As he spoke the very quality of the air about them changed, became heavier, thicker. Kirk knew what that meant, and he whipped around with heart-in-mouth anticipation. On the horizon two beings came into sight. Gri-Ta, with skin pure white and half-opened wings that towered over her slight body. And....

Kirk surged forward, leaving McCoy far behind. But then he stopped himself, quivering half-way to his lover. No. He would wait here, hovering, and feast upon the sight of his Spock coming to him.

How do I love thee? I cannot count the ways. His mind paraphrased that piece of old Earth poetry as he grappled to find the words to express how he felt. How he loved this light-filled being, whose radiance glowed for no one else but him. How could he do anything else but love him?

Kirk shivered as Spock's longing reached him, almost overwhelmed him. Soon. Very soon they would touch. He waited in delicious torment as the Vulcan and his angelic escort came closer, and closer. Kirk spread his arms wide and laughed, perceived with senses that transcended sight that Spock smiled and was as joy-filled as he. Their happiness welled up in the space between them, ricocheted from his shining body to Spock and back again, echoing over and over again their song of joy....

Spock paused before him, trembling. Th'yla. Come to me.
Now was the time. Kirk willed himself forward.

A tremor of ecstasy deeper than physical orgasm could ever be shook through them both as they touched. Kirk wrapped his spectral arms around his lover, felt the physical completely melt away as he fell into Spock's transforming body, as Spock melted into him. Gri-Ta fell back, McCoy was far away, and Kirk knew only that he had found completion....

Everything that was Spock spread through him, merged with everything that Kirk offered in return. He saw himself as Spock saw him:

a joyous, unsullied soul, who sought good in the face of evil;

an open heart, willing to meet the unknown without fear or rancor;

a will-to-do-good, allied with a fierce determination to accomplish all that he could in one lifetime;

a spirit that needed its mate....

All that was Spock thought to all that was Kirk.I am here for you.

Yes. His spirit’s mate was here, over and around and shooting through him. Like

a flower whose blossom followed the sun, Kirk basked in the rays of light that were his Vulcan;

his innate goodness, his gentleness;

his strength of purpose and purity of will;

his generous heart, that had not been bowed down by hatred, but that was deep enough to forgive the most grievous wrong;

his seeking mind, and the soul that needed its mate....

I'm here for you, Kirk poured forth. His lover accepted the words, knew them as they took shape in the infinitesimal line of shadow between them that was all that kept them as separate beings. I'll always be here for you.

A promise that was impossible to keep, but if only they could always be here like this for one another....

It had been forever since he had known Spock. The frantic merging of the pon farr didn't count. That had been haste and desperation, and the memory was dim. This was comfort and ease and yearning fulfilled.... You are my Sanctuary. You are my Heart's Delight. You are the keeper of and the gateway to my soul.

And you are everything to me. T'hy'la. Kirk knew it, felt the rightness of the words settle into his core. Yes. They were everything to each other.

Within his lover's shining embrace, Kirk twisted around. McCoy and Gri-Ta were not far away. They were a part of this world, as others could never be, but they could never come closer. Much as he loved McCoy, and love him Kirk realized he did, he could never enter into the fullness of this sharing with the physician.

Look at us, Kirk called to his doctor friend. These words could never have found life in the physical world, but something inside him, and inside Spock too, needed to have McCoy realize what it was he witnessed.
His voice and Spock's voice, both transformed, merged and spoke together. *Do you understand now? See how he loves me. See how I cherish him. There is no better way to love than this....*

The seconds ticked away, Gri-Ta's heartbeats measured them. Kirk saw the angelic form move, knew what she was about to express before it formed in her hollow bones and her feathers. Frantically he twisted around to his lover again, found Spock's body before him already taking on solidity amidst the light. And the communion that had made them one was dying....

*No!*

His protest was useless. They had to part. But they had barely joined at all. Such a short time, to last them for who knew how many months or years? *Please -- just a few more moments....*

But his own body was now relentlessly re-forming, and there were streaks of purple cutting through the gold in their sky....

Kirk wrapped his arms around his love and buried his face against warm flesh. Strong Vulcan arms held him tight, he could feel the heat of each long finger against his back. What could he say? Words were so inadequate when their souls had just been singing. Kirk pressed closer, was met by his lover's surging body, but it was not enough, how could just the physical ever be enough? It was a mimicry of what they really needed.

*No. No. Not yet. I need you.*

From far away, behind him, Kirk heard Gri-Ta's voice. They must separate.

And then there was another voice. McCoy's. Their second guardian angel.

*For God's sake, woman, don't you have any compassion? You can't just rip them apart like this without even giving them a chance to say good-bye! Give them a little more time!*  

The purple disappeared. A tingle ran down Kirk's spine; the physical retreated, his fingers turned to shafts of light, and his spectral body blended itself with his love one final time....

Spock's anguish shook him. *I cannot leave you. Not again.* Memory shuddered from Vulcan to human. In a moment Kirk lived through the torture of Spock's decision to die to save the *Enterprise* from Montin, the torment of leaving this life without ever completing the bond's connection with the one he loved, the awful irony of how good their love had been, and the knowledge that their passion for each other led only to greater loss for Kirk when he was gone....

Kirk tried to catch his sob, but it came out in the words that flowed between them the instant their thoughts formed. *Then don't. Don't ever leave me. Stay with me here.*

Fiercely. *Know that if it were possible, I would. Forever.*

*Forever, with you. It wouldn't be long enough.*

A trembling. A tendril of thought that caressed his soul, the faraway sensation of a hand threading itself in his hair, and the unique psychic signature that was his Vulcan lover. *You are such an illogical human. I do not wish to leave you. But --* the sensation of tumbling in darkness, falling endlessly -- *We must part.*

*We've had so little time! I don't know if I can say good-bye to you. Where do I find that strength? I love you so much, Spock.*
And I love you. Know it. Insistence. Shaking. Know it!

I do.

A rustle behind them. A shot of purple in the gold. Emptiness beckoned. They had just another moment to share themselves....

Logic mixed with determination. I do not know if what is left within me will grow again. But if it does, I will come to you.

A pledge. I'll wait for you. No matter how long it takes for you to come back to me, I'll wait. I promise.

The golden light was almost gone. Reality beckoned.

Good-bye, t'hy'la.

Good-bye, my love.
Chapter 22

LEONARD McCOY -- PERSONAL LOG, in progress

Seeing them say good-bye was a little hard to take. Damn! Wait a second while I blow my nose.

There. That's better. Where was I? Oh, yeah. Jim and Spock in Gri-Ta's joining. Seeing them together like that, that was something I don't think I'll ever forget. Takes a lot of courage to open up to another person the way those two did. I'm not sure I'm made of the same stuff. Got too many secrets to hide, too many parts of myself that I'm not all that proud of. But those two.... Well, what can I say? Courage comes in many different forms.

But I'm still glad they took me in, let me share, at least a little. Kinda shook me up, to tell you the truth, which is why it's taken almost a month for me to sit down and record this log about all that happened. I had a lot of deep thinking to do, and it just took me a while to do it. I guess all three of us have been pretty quiet. But I really am glad I was there. I sure have a different version of what mental contact can be like now.

Well. What else to say? I still don't understand why the healer didn't detect any of what Gri-Ta saw in Spock. Probably because what was left of the bond had faded back into our first officer's human part. Gri-Ta did say it's got Jim wrapped all over it. I suppose the esteemed Sultarin didn't waste any time looking for what's obviously Vulcan in a human place. Maybe he didn't approve of Sarek's son getting involved with a human. I don't know. Vulcans are capable of prejudice too, they're just like the rest of us and put on their pants one leg at a time. I wonder if he just saw that the telepathic abilities were gone and assumed the bond had been blasted too. Huh! Hell of a way to practice medicine, poking around inside a person's head. It obviously didn't work this time. Last time I trust a healer without getting a second opinion.

At least things are back to normal, or what passes for normal on this tub. Oh, pardon me, lovely lady, the Enterprise. We've got another ten months left on the five year mission, and we just got our marching orders from starfleet command. Jim was ecstatic. We've been set loose on a mission of exploration, just like what we did to start off four years ago. New stars, new worlds, pushing back the frontier. Can't say I'm as happy as everybody else seems to be, 'cause sometimes the fatalities mount up on these first contact situations, but at least the distance will get the bureaucrats off our backs. No more Admiral Komack.

Naturally, before we left settled Federation space, Jim insisted on dragging Spock to another healer. And a Deltan exchanger, an Andorian doctor and a human neurologist. I'll say this for him, he's persistent. And Spock's patient. Nobody found anything, which is pretty much what we all expected. But we had to try.

As for me and Jim and Spock.... Well, I guess things between us are back to normal too. I look back on how we all reacted when they first told me they were lovers, and it seems like a bad dream. Jim and me, snarling at each other in my office, and me digging up all the irrational prejudices against homosexual contact. Really, I think I was a little crazy. Scared, probably, because the rug was being pulled out from under me and I wasn't prepared for it. All that business about their melding.... Well, I think part of that was genuine concern for Jim, but part of it was plain, old fashioned fear of the unknown, and those silly nightmares I'd had about the other universe's Spock.

Strange, those nightmares, that I should all of a sudden have them just as Jim and Spock are getting together mentally. Seems like a little bit of a coincidence there. Anyway, they sure affected my
reaction to my friends' big revelation, made me... kinda irrational about it. And maybe there was a little bit of jealousy there, too. I'm not gonna examine that one too closely. It would take another month of thinking.

But I don't have to think about the conflict between my duty to starfleet command and my duty to my friends any more. Back when they first told me, that sure worried me. I felt so awkward, and resentful of the position they'd put me in. Now it seems pretty simple. I can do both at the same time, the way I thought was impossible before. When I think of how concerned I was about invading their privacy, the way I tried to reassure them, and myself, that I'd leave their relationship alone as much as I could -- Hah! I was there for the pon farr. Heck, I helped it along. And I was there in that last mental joining. You can't get much closer than that.

Had dinner with them just last night. We sat with Hunyady and Dawson, our resident love-birds. You couldn't pry those two apart with a tool these days, they're always going around with those damn necklaces glowing like fireflies. Jim says that Dawson's going to get a medal for saving everybody, but I say that's silly. Dawson didn't really save us, you know? Love saved us.

Love. That's what it's all about, isn't it? Is it really so different, Brian loving Irina so much that he broke through the hold the Ta's had on his mind, and Jim loving Spock so much that he found a way to get him through the pon farr?

Or me, finally getting it through my thick skull that love is a gift, in whatever form it takes. I mean, okay, I had a right to be angry when it took them so long to tell me, but the important thing is that they wanted to tell me, and wanted to share that part of their lives with me. Yeah. That's what's important.

The mental contact is important to Jim and Spock, too, and I understand why now. I pray that they get it back. Really, Gri-Ta wasn't all that encouraging. The way I look at it, it might be years before anything happens, and even then it might not come back all the way. It's almost crueler to have this little ray of hope than not to have any at all.

But if anybody can cope with it, Jim and Spock can. The captain of the Enterprise and his first officer. Who woulda thought it? But really, there's almost no way they couldn't be committed lovers. When two people fit together like those two do.... They're quite a team. Quite a couple.

And I'm not the only one who knows they're a couple now, either. Besides me and Gri-Ta, there were, four, well five people who were there, if you count Ensign Tarn. You can't keep secrets on a ship this size, but I haven't heard even a whisper of gossip about them yet. Instead, Uhura's been going round here singing like a songbird, and even that sour-puss Prendel't was almost civil during her physical last week. I think Tarn's death hit her hard. Didn't know the ensign too well, but Spock did. He even spoke at Tarn's memorial service.

’Course, I don't expect the silence to continue. Sooner or later, somebody's gonna put two and two together.

There isn't any change on the bridge, not that I expected there to be one. Our illustrious captain still has his chin stuck out against all the ills of the universe, including admirals like Komack, and Spock still looks like... well, Spock.

Speaking of Komack, the admiral sure wasn't happy during our debriefing at the starbase. From an official viewpoint, our mission to Gabriela wasn't exactly a howling success. The Gabrielans have put out a big "Not Welcome" sign again, and there's no telling when the Federation will be invited back. And not that the admiral cared, but nothing Jim could say or do could prevent the Gabrielans from incarcerating the Derkheen back in those reservations. I know that bothered Jim, a lot.
I told Jim he deserved a medal for what happened on Gabriela, too. But he says that everything was just coincidence, that he didn't have much to do with it, it was Gri-Ta's and Dawson's doings. Hah! I say, was it just coincidence that Jim didn't let himself or anybody else lose hope when that building on Gabriela exploded? Was it coincidence that the Enterprise’s captain and her crew kept working on that aircar, so they were ready for it when Gri-Ta showed up with the technology they needed? Was it me who managed to pilot that 'car where it had no business being? Was it Gri-Ta who really led us through those endless corridors on the Lox'theneth'nar, or who thought of the only possible way to save the fleet's best first officer?

Nope to all of the above.

My daddy used to say that you can't keep a good man down. That sure does apply to Jim.

I don't know what the future holds for our captain and his first officer. I've got to admit I'm worried. I'm ashamed to think of the hard time I gave them, and I'm their friend. No telling what they'll face when starfleet command figures it out. Jim doesn't think about this, but he's a public figure. So's Spock, for that matter. There's a certain image that 'fleet wants to uphold, and I don't think that includes the kind of love that I saw when Jim and Spock were all glowing light, merging into one another with more joy than I've experienced in a month of Sundays.

I'll never forget what they shared with me in Gri-Ta's joining. Love like that, well, it's special. I'm a doctor, not a poet, and I don't have any other words for it. Special, just like my friends. They deserve to get their melds back, and to have their bond grow again.

Hope they get it all back. Hope they don't have to wait too long.

EPILOGUE

It was five weeks after Gabriela, and two weeks since the Enterprise had been set free to seek and explore. Beta shift personnel were just seeking their beds. Gamma shift personnel had two more hours of duty. And alpha shift personnel....

In Doctor McCoy's quarters, the physician snored loudly. His alarm wasn't set to go off for another hour. On his cluttered desktop there rested several books. One of them was a dog-eared text entitled Vulcan Physiology for the non-Vulcan Medical Practitioner. Another was a volume he'd found in the ship's small hard-copy library: Telepathy: No Rhyme nor Reason. Another was the new McLaren version of The History of Don Quixote de la Mancha.

In junior officer's country, there was a room with a double bed. Lieutenant Brian Dawson and Lieutenant Irina Hunyady shared it. She slept peacefully on her stomach, with her hand curled up beside her face, and her auburn hair cascading across the pillow. He was awake. He was propped up on one elbow, leaning over his wife, and thinking of how much he loved her.

On deck five, the lights in the captain's cabin had brightened twenty minutes ago. They shone upon the captain's desk, which was bare except for a stack of computer tapes. The tape on top was labeled Krohderkhin Resettlement: First Proposal. The second said Revitalization of the Michaelan Economy.

On the headboard behind the bed a forcefield glimmered, where it captured the delicate tracery of white and pink and blue crystal hyacinths. But there was no one to admire the sculpture's beauty.
The bed was empty.

One cabin over, the thermostat had been set for eighty-four degrees, cool for a Vulcan but tolerable. In the back of the safe that sheltered a duplicate of ship's orders and a collection of medals and honors, an old-style two-dimensional photograph was carefully stored in an acid-free envelope. In the picture, two men looked at one another across a table in a restaurant.

Just inside the sleeping alcove there was a low storage credenza that hugged the wall. On it, a gold tunic, black pants, black briefs and socks were folded with military precision. A blue silk nightshirt was draped over the clothing.

In a heap on the floor next to the double bed there was a bedspread, two quilted blankets, and a sheet. On the bed were the two men from the photograph.

With a deep, satisfied sigh, Kirk pulled back until a green-tinged penis emerged from his mouth. At the same time he felt the air brush against his own cock as it was freed from its moist haven. A kiss for the depleted organ before him, and then the captain moved up and away. But he didn't go far. He settled down within the circle of his lover's arms.

"Ummmm." He nuzzled along the side of Spock's neck. "That was fantastic. I feel like a wet noodle. You've taken it all out of me, lover."

"A wet noodle? You have been talking too much with Doctor McCoy." Spock took his captain's chin between thumb and forefinger. "You do not look like a wet noodle to me. More like a sexually-satisfied human."

Kirk's hand snaked down between them to capture the double-ridged penis. "And you are a sexually-satisfied Vulcan. Nice, isn't it, how that works out?"

"Indeed. An eminently pleasing arrangement." They leaned together into an easy kiss.

When they parted, Kirk looked into dark eyes and smiled a small smile. "I mean it," he said, "that was wonderful. The way it used to be. Think we're getting back to normal?"

Spock answered as any good philosopher-scientist would. "What is normal? The definition changes. I believe that our physical relationship has become as satisfying as it previously was. Especially now that the injuries I inflicted upon your person are completely healed." His hand drifted down to cradle a lush buttock.

"And since your chenesi have settled back down." Kirk's fingers kneaded smooth flesh where before there had been pebbly hardness. "You know, you haven't had a bad dream in a few nights."

"That is true. However, I cannot guarantee that they will not reoccur."

"That's all right. No problem." Like metal irresistibly drawn to a magnet, again Kirk pressed his lips to his lover's. "Ummmm," he vibrated into Spock's mouth. "This is very nice. Let's stay right here. I can tell Josephs to forget about the security department breakfast."

The first officer's eyes crinkled with amusement. "And I will inform Lieutenant Tu that in addition to the other duties he has recently assumed, he must now also conduct the monthly science department meeting, as I will be otherwise occupied with my captain."

Kirk threw a leg over his lover's hip and hitched their groins closer together. "Sounds good to me."

Spock rolled his captain onto his back, then he got up on his knees. He looked down into twinkling
eyes and said severely. "It sounds like conduct that is most unprofessional. We must vacate this bed."

"Oh, what a killjoy. You're just like Komack."

"Insults will gain you nothing, sir." But instead of following his own advice and leaving, the first officer lowered himself full-length upon his captain and kissed him.

"I am interested," Spock said, murmuring against the silken softness of his lover's lips, "in the preliminary data from the nebula we are approaching. There is a possibility that a Graves gravitational mass is present."

"I saw that in your report yesterday." Kirk scratched along his lover's upper back as Spock moved down to lay his head upon his captain's chest. It was his regular morning refuge, where he could hear the ponderous thunder of his human's heartbeat.

Kirk resettled his arms about his Vulcan, yawned, then asked, "Want to divert for a closer reading?"

"That is not necessary at this time. I would not wish to delay our investigations of the planetary system in which you are interested. The Graves phenomenon will remain where it is until that survey is completed."

Kirk's chin brushed against the top of the dark head in a definite caress. "Oh, you romantic Vulcan, you."

"I deny that accusation."

The smile that had been trembling on Kirk's lips escaped. It was sweet, and meant only for the incredible being in his arms whom he loved so much. "It's all right. I won't tell anybody," he said softly. "Your secret is safe with me."

They lay wrapped up in one another while the seconds ticked away. Outside in the corridor, there was an occasional click of bootheels as some enthusiastic soul hurried to an early breakfast. But inside the red-draped quarters, captain and first officer were savoring every moment of their life within each other's arms. There was so much that they had lost, and so much that they still had. Early morning in bed, with the rest of the galaxy far away, was sanctuary.

Spock rubbed the flat of his hand against his captain's smooth pectoral muscle. He whispered, "This time is most pleasing."

Not as pleasing as the meld, not as satisfying as a bond, but what they had. Kirk rested his hand over his lover's.

Finally the everyday world intruded with the chime of the alarm. Duty called. Spock rolled out of his captain's embrace and stood by the side of the bed. He bent down to pick up the bedding that had been flung to the floor the night before while Kirk reached over his head with both arms and stretched. The captain's toes straightened and his heels dug into the mattress as he wriggled and yawned.

"I will shower first," the first officer said matter-of-factly. "But do not fall asleep. You have but...."

Atypically, Spock paused. He stared at the grill that separated bedroom from office and swayed. A peculiar expression passed over the angular features.
Kirk's jaw snapped shut as he finished his yawn and his arms came back down to his side. "What was that you said? I couldn't hear you."

Spock took a deep, audible breath. His back straightened as he turned to face his commanding officer. With a look of perfect Vulcan impassivity on his face, he placed his hands behind his back and reported to his captain.

"I said, do not fall asleep. You have but twenty-six point seven five minutes until your meeting with security."

Stillness captured Kirk, and he stared up at his lover. "Precisely?" he whispered.

*Drops of water fell from the red sky, into a moist depression that stretched across desert sands....*

"Precisely."

THE END

A FINAL NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR: Thank you so very much for following me on this journey with Kirk and Spock. Please remember that Promises to Keep is part of a series, so there is a lot more of Kirk and Spock’s story to read. Four stories follow Promises to Keep (Jagged Edges, Manna, Journey’s End, and One Night), as well as the culminating novel, In the Shade.

I would love to hear what you think of Promises to Keep and/or any of the stories in the Sharing the Sunlight series. You can write to me at Hilary54@aol.com or leave a comment/review on the archive. Thank you for reading!

End Notes

*Promises to Keep* was published in 1995 by Kathleen Resch, who did a wonderful job with editing and encouragement. Thank you, Kathleen!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://www.archiveofourown.org/) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!