

CONTACT



CONTACT

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DEDICATION

This issue is dedicated to all the Kirk/Spock fans who perceive, enjoy and perpetrate that special relationship, in whatever direction their fantasies might carry them.

For Carol F. - once again, our deepest gratitude and continuing love for helping us untangle the Tholian cobwebs out of our brains. "Thanks, Jim. I needed that!"

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PRICE:

\$4.00
\$4.35 book rate
\$6.00 first class



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COME, REACH, WE ARE
ONE, SEEKING, SHARING,
NO LONGER ALONE, WE
TOUCH OUR OUTSTRETCHED HANDS
AND FIND THE PERFECT
COMPLETION OF OUR SELVES
TOGETHER.

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EDITORS' PAGE

Once again we have reached the point of writing the Editors' Page of another issue of CONTACT. As we go to press for the fourth time, we find ourselves in a position of considering whether or not there will be a fifth.

This issue was plagued with a series of last-minute mishaps and delays that caused us to be over a month late in publishing. This, plus an apathy of response from the readers, has made us wonder if another issue would be feasible.

In our editorial in CONTACT III, we stated that we believed that the K/S Relationship was limitless and multi-faceted in its premise. Stories exploring the many areas could provide us with materials for an endless number of issues. Yet, now we wonder where they are.

CONTACT seems to have become known as the "*get-em*" zine of fandom. It abounds with pain and the hurt/comfort syndrome. This was never our original intention. Granted, we all have that masochistic streak that loves to see our heroes suffer in our fantasies (*and they do it so well*), but four issues of ONLY this may well have run its course.

We acknowledge that there is a specific demand for CONTACT. Volume III has now joined its predecessors in being sold out of five hundred copies barely four months after it was printed. This current volume, like the others, has sold over half of the copies in pre-orders and we have in our files a folder full of S.A.S.E.s for the next issue. When we mentioned to several fans that we were considering not doing a fifth issue, we met immediate opposition and pleas to continue. This has resulted in our current dilemma.

Producing a zine, as any of you who are editors will agree (*and those who are not, ask one!*), is hard work, filled with disappointments, frayed nerves and a lot of blood, sweat and tears. Yet, it's fun. (*See, we told you we all had that masochistic streak.*) A fanzine is a labor of love - filled with the heart and soul of its editors, contributors and staff who care about it and believe in the statement they are trying to make. CONTACT was the first zine - and to our knowledge, still the only one - devoted exclusively to the Kirk/Spock relationship. We know that these two men love each other in a very special way, and aside from the sexual aspect, which many other fine zines are showing quite abundantly, our purpose is to explore the various expressions of that love.

When the editors of a zine feel it is no longer accomplishing its purpose, no longer making their statement, or that it has gotten in a rut, then it may be time for a re-evaluation of priorities and a re-establishment of goals.

We're excited about this issue. It contains some powerful stories guaranteed to leave you wrung out, exhausted and emotionally spent. As a form of torture, CONTACT ranks right up there with the medieval iron maiden or strapado (*heh-heh, look up that little goodie!*). But even a torturer must ease up occasionally or he will completely destroy his victim. So we feel that the delicious agony that CONTACT has inflicted upon its victims - uh, readers - must take another direction or it will have destroyed its purpose.

Unless we receive good K/S stories, with interesting plots, showing other tender sides to the relationship, we feel that to continue CONTACT in its present direction would become redundant. The K/S relationship, as with any real life counterpart, is a constantly growing, changing field of discovery and new experiences. Fan fiction has developed it far beyond that which was shown on aired Trek. Unless CONTACT can grow and change, make new discoveries through poetry and stories, we believe it will stagnate.

The future of this zine depends in part on those people to whom we've dedicated this issue - the K/S fans who love and understand this beautiful and complex relationship. If enough of you very special people out there are willing to dust off the old brain, put pen to paper and explore through a story one of the various ways that this love can be shown, then perhaps a fifth issue of CONTACT could be accomplished.

Obviously our future plans are nebulous. We have still included a writing contest in this issue, in the hopes that this, too, may start some creative juices flowing. If CONTACT V does not materialize, the winners of the writing contest will be awarded a free copy of PHASE II COLLECTED and will be notified where their entries will be published. We've spoken to several editors about the prospect.

Going on to other things, we wanted to use part of our editorial to explain the significance of our closing phrase, WE ARE ONE - WE REACH. A lot of readers have asked us where it came from and what, specifically, it means. The source, obviously, is THE WAY TO EDEN, where both phrases were used frequently. Kirk's knowing glance at Spock, when he said firmly, "We reach, Mr. Spock," said it all. STAR TREK gave us two complete men who did reach - who grasped the meaning of the space-hippie philosophy and recognized it within their own realm of reality.

Like the title, CONTACT, the phrase is multi-dimensional. WE ARE ONE means: Kirk and Spock are ONE, have found that unity within their special relationship; we, the editors, are ONE - in our policy, and in our own special relationships with those fans who know and love relationship as we do; STAR TREK fandom itself is ONE, many diverse individuals bound in a unique love and sharing of STAR TREK's many themes.

The second phrase, WE REACH, means that we, the editors, reach out to touch those who feel the need to express themselves on our special STAR TREK theme; and that fandom itself is reaching out to touch the universe, to help create the ideals of the 23rd century in our attitudes and goals today. Just as Kirk and Spock

reached out in their time to touch unknown worlds and specifically how that reaching and striving enabled them to form the perfect friendship that they share, so do we hope to better understand mankind, and form that kind of relationship in our own lives.

WE ARE ONE - WE REACH is also our way of saying that we care. With a theme like the Kirk/Spock relationship, how could it be any less?

As we come to the close of this editorial, we find we have discovered a new way to apply this phrase.

CONTACT is still of one mind, one purpose, one goal - to show through the use of many talents that the Kirk/Spock relationship does exist, is growing. Now, we reach out to you. We need your help, your ideas, your opinions. Can and should CONTACT continue?

WE ARE ONE - WE REACH,

Ber and Nancy

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BACK WHERE HE BELONGS

BY CRYSTAL ANN TAYLOR

I

A familiar pose: lost in thought,
You gaze straight ahead, with your arm
Leaning on chair, hand bracing chin,
Whole again, divided no more.
"Thank you...from both of us!" You smiled.
How good it feels, to know I helped,
Little enough, the aid I gave.
The strength in me you relied on
Wasn't really there. My hand trembled,
I barely breathed. That last promise
I made you ... if this had not worked,
I could not ... we had to succeed!

How deep it hurt, to watch you slip,
Step by step, and die, inch by inch,
Each minute, losing energy,
Losing confidence, by degree,
Vulnerable and dependent,
Bruised in mind, as you faced yourself.
I am not insensitive, and
I understand your pain; I, too,
Live with a divided spirit.
I've learned to cope, through intellect;
The time was short, you tried and won.
I offer you what help I can,
But in the end, understanding
Oneself is painful, and lonely.

II

You're at your station now, engrossed
Deeply in your work. Yet often
I see you turn and gaze at me;
I know you think I'm unaware...
Your concern, it shows, although you
Try to hide it, behind a mask --
It warms my heart to know you care!
You worry now if I can cope,
Since I have seen my darker side,
Faced my wolf and embraced my lamb.

Half-human, half-Vulcan. A soul
Divided, I understand now.
Your battle inside, not yet won,
It rages on. You offer me
Your help, your knowledge, your methods,
To win a struggle you still fight.
I could not act, you gave me strength,
I could not decide, you gave me
Confidence. You stood by my side,
Lent me comfort, else I be lost.
Words alone can't thank you, my friend,
But if I tried, you would deny
You had the strength, you would pretend

The Vulcan looked up at the screen - the shuttlecraft appeared to be approaching normally and the course was correct. But the silence was ominous.

"Scan the shuttlecraft, Mr. Chekov."

"I already have, sir - one occupant, readings normal, life support fully operational, all systems functioning."

Sulu turned from his position at the helm. "Sir, six people left with the shuttlecraft. What do you suppose has happened?"

There was no response from the First Officer. He stood motionless by the command chair, his eyes not leaving the viewing screen. Six people had indeed left with the shuttlecraft and the head of that group was James Kirk - his Captain. Now only one was returning, and there was no way of knowing who it was or what had happened to the others. Spock felt a dryness in the back of his throat. He silently berated himself for not making a stronger argument against the Captain going on a routine mission which could have been handled just as easily by a more junior officer. Now Kirk could be dead...

"Sir, shall I notify the flight deck to be ready to receive the shuttlecraft?"

Sulu and Lt. Darmon, the navigator, exchanged worried looks. Spock's face was a total blank, and he seemed unaware of Sulu's request.

"Uh, Mr. Spock..."

Spock's eyes moved from the screen to the helmsman, their darkness totally unreadable.

"Affirmative, Mr. Sulu." Then he hit the intercom on the command chair. "Dr. McCoy, Engineer Scott - to the flight deck immediately. Mr. Sulu, hold position here. Lt. Uhura, notify security - I want an armed detail to meet me on the flight deck."

"Aye, sir," came from both of them.

A jolt shook the shuttlecraft - he froze momentarily. Tractor beam! They were going to bring him aboard! And when they did...

"Deck pressurizing, Mr. Spock," reported Scotty. "Only a few seconds now." The green light came on and they started to enter the flight deck. At the same moment, the doors of the shuttlecraft opened and they heard him cry, "No! Go back! It's going to..."

Before he had time to finish his warning, Spock had flung both Scotty and McCoy back through the still-open door and had slammed the emergency switch which would effectively seal the flight doors shut and separate the flight deck from the rest of the ship. But even through the closed doors, the sound of the explosion was deafening and looking through the observation port they saw the occupant of the shuttlecraft hurled high into the air.

Everything was dark. He was aware of the activity around him but the voices made no sense. He tried to open his eyes but they didn't work. He felt something press against his arm, and a warm feeling spread through his body. He tried to speak but nothing happened. More voices - they sounded urgent. Then there was a tremendous upheaval. Strong arms grabbed him and swung him upwards. In his hazy state, he felt like he was being cradled. Something crashed into him and he felt himself falling but still held securely in those arms. The voices came again - they sounded close. Then another series of eruptions, but he was held firm. He couldn't get his mind to work. What was the matter with him? What was happening?

Total silence. Gradually, light entered his brain and he found he could open his eyes. One glance told him he was still on the flight deck of the Enterprise. How long had he been there? He made an effort to sit up.

"Stay still, Jim, don't move!"

McCoy's voice. What was he doing there? He lay back and looked up to meet the dark, concerned eyes of his First Officer. Looking down, he discovered he was lying in Spock's arms and they were both on the floor of the flight deck. Acrid smoke struck his nostrils. Twisting around, he saw what was left of the shuttlecraft - some parts still smouldering and great sections spread about the shattered flight deck. The movement made his legs hurt badly. Looking at them, he saw a large section of the shuttlecraft's outer covering lying across them, pinning him to the floor. They looked as though they had been crushed under the weight.

"Hold him still, Spock!" ordered McCoy.

The arms grew firmer around Kirk's body and he could feel the warmth of the Vulcan against his back. As he became more aware of his surroundings, the pain in his legs increased.

"Bones," he said, somewhat surprised he could finally say something. "Hurry..."

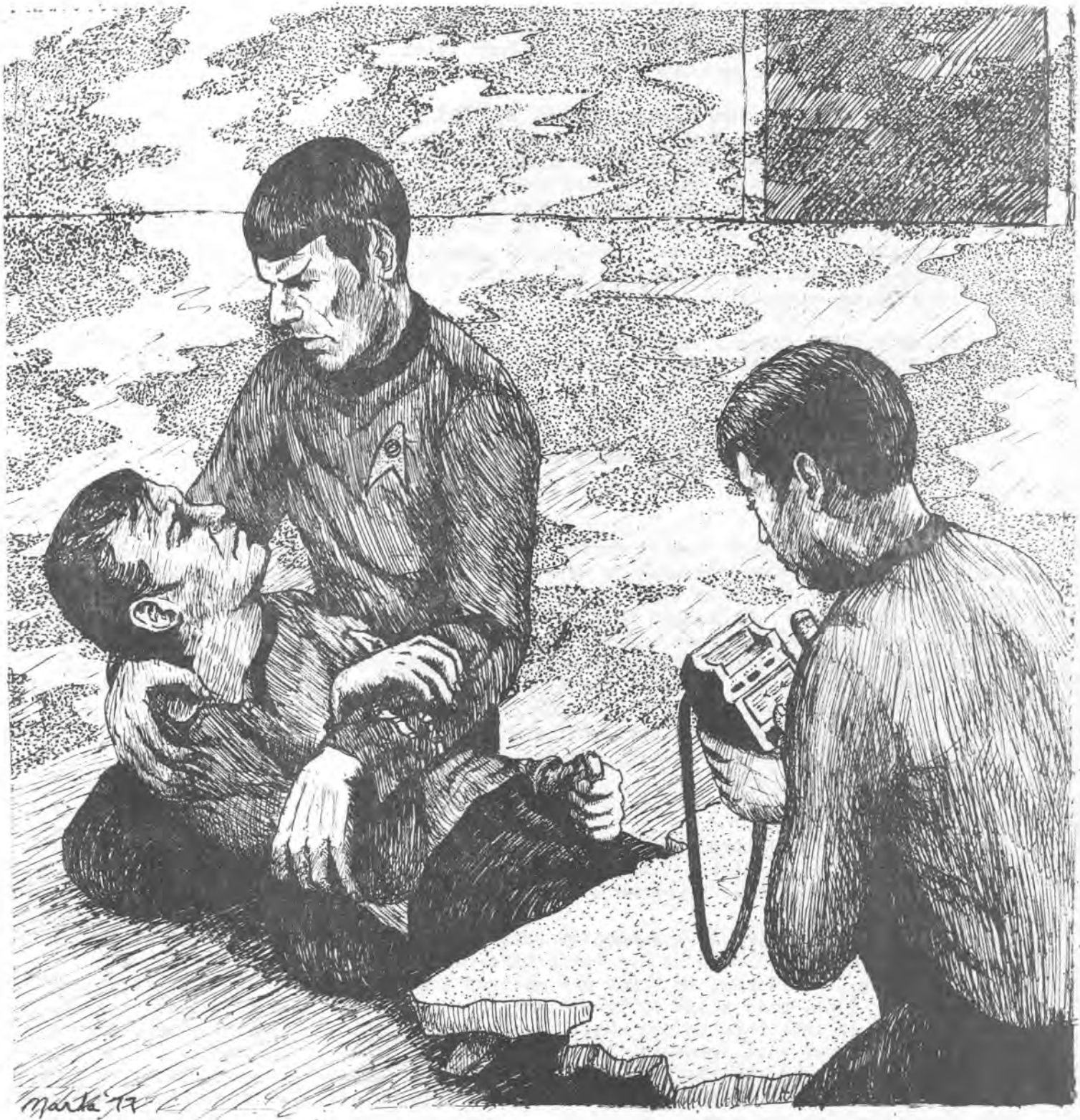
"Have you free in a minute, Jim. Try to stay still. The more you move, the more damage this thing can cause."

Kirk lay back, his fists clenched, trying to block out the mounting pain as the sharp edges of the metal cut deeply into his legs. Spock said something to him, but he didn't answer. If McCoy didn't do something soon, he didn't know how much longer he could stand it.

"Okay, Jim, we're going to lift this thing off you."

As the heavy metal was lifted off his legs, an involuntary shudder went through his body. Spock's grip instinctively tightened, trying to protect him. Kirk was grateful for the gesture, even though it did little to help the tremendous aching. He shut his eyes as McCoy carefully manipulated his legs.

"Lots of surface cuts and bad bruising," said McCoy to one of his assistants. "Probably some pinched nerves as well - could have some crushed ones in this area here." Kirk could feel the gentle fingers probing the areas as he talked, then only numbness as he reached the nerve area he was describing. "Try to move your feet, Jim. That's it. Now, can you move your legs? Good. All right, let's get you to Sickbay." As the medical team lifted him up, a tremendous wave of pain and nausea hit Kirk, and he lost consciousness.



Noting the Vulcan's concern, McCoy said with as much reassurance as he could muster, "He's in shock, and in pain. But, somehow, nothing seems to be broken. A good sleep, some sonic wave treatment and he'll feel better - stiff and sore, but nothing like he is now. I'll let you know when he comes to."

Spock nodded. "I'll be on the bridge."

It was there that Scotty found him an hour later. Spock immediately noted the Engineer's worried face and motioned him to a secluded corner.

"We have the fire completely out now, Mr. Spock. Both shuttlecraft are completely destroyed and the flight deck is a mess. It will be useless until we can repair it at a star base. Somehow the sealing held on the large bay doors or we would all be goners by now - it wasn't meant to hold out against an implosion like that." Running his hand over his face, he continued. "I've been over what's left of the engines..." he hesitated, unsure of how to proceed. The Vulcan waited patiently. "The power was cross circuited through both the engines and communications and set for overload. That didn't happen by accident - there is no way those lines could have become tangled. That ship was sabotaged!"

Spock's right eyebrow lifted. "That could explain why only one person returned. Someone obviously didn't want any of them to come back."

"But why, Mr. Spock? What reason would they have?"

"Unknown, Engineer. Only Captain Kirk can answer that."

The Sickbay was dark when he awoke. The soothing sonic waves were running across him, the tingling vibrations working deep into his bruised and tortured body. He gingerly stretched under the blankets and was relieved to find he could move his legs without the terrible ache he had felt earlier. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he discovered he was not alone. Spock was sitting close to the bed, his eyes closed, elbows resting on his knees, and steepled fingers obscuring the lower half of his face. Kirk looked at the familiar features, the dark hair, the slanting eyebrows. *The 'unfeeling' Vulcan*, he thought to himself. Spock became aware of Kirk's gaze and looked in his direction. Dark eyes met hazel ones, each man silently asking the same question - *Are you all right?* Kirk was the first to break the silence.

"How long?"

"You have been sleeping precisely 17 hours and 33 minutes, Captain. We are still at the rendezvous point." He saw Kirk's face tighten as the memories came back, but continued. "Jim, what happened out there?"

Kirk closed his eyes as a momentary stab of pain crossed his face. "The others are dead, Spock." He looked at his First Officer but no expression touched the impassive face. "We landed on Mayna and changed the battery packs in the probe left by the Hood. I saw some signs of inhabitants, so Lt. Massey and I did some scouting while the others went back to the shuttlecraft. We didn't find anything and were coming back when we were ambushed. Massey was killed almost immediately. I could see the others by the shuttlecraft - they were dead. Somehow I managed to break free and get aboard. As soon as I did, the attack was broken off. I should have realized then that something was wrong. As it was, I was well into space before I suspected trouble, and by then it was too late. I was trying to untangle communications to warn you when the tractor beam brought me aboard."

Spock listened silently and when Kirk finished his eyes did not leave the pale face. His Captain was avoiding something - what was it? Kirk stirred uneasily under the scrutiny. Finally, the Vulcan spoke.

"Your attackers, Captain, did you recognize them?"

Kirk looked at him, his eyes troubled. "Yes, Spock, I did. They were part of the crew of the Tricoda."

Their gaze held for a moment, Kirk noting the surprise that flickered in the depths of the Vulcan's eyes. Then it turned to alarm as Kirk's troubled look became one of pain and torment. The Captain's hands came up to cover the haunted eyes, aware he had yielded too much to his friend - had shown more than he had wanted to of his inner feelings.

Spock sat totally motionless as his mind went over all he knew about the Tricoda.



She was a large vessel, similar to a starship in size and speed, and was manned by a highly trained crew of outcasts and misfits from all over the galaxy. Its human captain, Andy Stephens, had vowed to single-handedly destroy the Federation. Up to this point he had caused some trouble with outlying colonies, but each of his raids had become more daring and had caused more destruction than the last. And, up to now, no Federation representative had ever survived an attack by the Tricoda. But somehow Kirk had. Spock looked at his Captain and felt his anger rise against those who had caused this to happen. Startled, he clamped down on his self-control. He needed to be objective now, for there was some other reason that Jim Kirk was reacting this way. Spock had seen him hurt before, but had never seen this look of torment...

Kirk lay with his eyes covered, fighting for control. He knew Spock wouldn't leave until he had learned the reason for this reaction to the mention of the Tricoda. He wasn't sure he could face the matter rationally. If only he didn't feel so weak - he couldn't get his mind to work, it was only a muddled whirl of shattering memories. Then, steeling himself, he looked at his friend. There was quiet worry on Spock's face. The expression helped Kirk make up his mind - he needed to get this out in the open. The longer he avoided facing the situation, the harder it was going to be to make the only decision possible. He eased himself into a more comfortable position. Then, taking a deep breath, said, "I had a very good friend once, the kind of friend that you don't usually have when you're growing up. He was everthing I wanted to be - he could do anything he put his hand to. We were always together, were almost one person. We thought alike, had the same ambitions, the same hopes and dreams.

"Then the rumors started - an exotic fungus was attacking the food supply. Fear spread among the population, people began hoarding supplies, stealing got out of control. Governor Kodos started issuing strange orders - some families were allowed full rations, others were cut off completely. Panic was never very far from the surface.

"Andy's family was one of the ones which was deprived. I was staying with friends of my parents, Professor and Mrs. Cray - he was already a noted scientist but yet to reach the height of his fame. We were declared fit to live. As the days passed, Andy began changing. We were all scared, but he went further than that - he was almost paranoid. Then Kodos declared emergency martial law..." Kirk's voice broke as the terrible memory seared through his mind. "Four thousand people - we saw his mother and sister dragged, screaming, from their home. Andy froze. I tried to get his sister away from the guard but was clubbed by a riot stick. I managed to pull Andy out of the path of the phaser sweep. We stood there and watched those people die. One moment a mass of sobbing, pleading beings - then nothing!"

There was a long silence, then Kirk drew a ragged breath and continued, "Andy never forgave me for being one of those who was deemed worthy to live when he wasn't, and for trying to rescue his sister when he was too scared to try - and for failing. After that, he was like a stranger - angry, bitter, and with an undisguised hatred for the Federation. We drifted apart and a short time later I left for the Academy. I didn't hear about him again until the raids started."

McCoy came in as Kirk finished. The pale face, the breaking voice, the slight tremors which moved the blankets warned him that Kirk was edging toward collapse.

"Come on, Spock, Jim needs rest."

"No, Bones, let me finish. Andy is the leader of the Tricoda, Spock. He planned that the shuttlecraft cripple the Enterprise. That way there would be no Federation protection in this section of the galaxy." His face clouded, and he continued in a sad voice. "We're a long way from help. We've got to stop Andy here, before he can destroy anything else. Set course for Mayna - we can pick up his trail from there. Tell Scotty to push her as fast as he dare."

Spock nodded and got to his feet. McCoy switched on the panel above Kirk's bed. The readings were nearer normal than they had been previously but he still wasn't satisfied. "You get the ship turned around, Spock," he said. "The Captain is going to sleep for a while longer." As the Vulcan left, he could hear the argument start between a stubborn patient and an equally stubborn doctor.

By the time the Enterprise returned to Mayna, Kirk had been released from Sickbay, not so much because he was fully recovered but because McCoy couldn't stand him. But he was released only on the condition that he rest, for McCoy was still concerned about the aftereffects of the shock caused by the explosion. Kirk's 'resting' consisted of sitting in his command chair on the bridge. Long range sensor sweeps of the planet showed no sign of either a ship or any life forms on the surface.

"What's the next Federation outpost, Spock?" asked Kirk.

"Planet 346 in the Gamma 300 System, Captain. Colonists arrived there less than six months ago. The most recent report stated they were just getting the last of their buildings completed and their crops in."

"That's where the Tricoda is heading. Chekov, plot a course - Sulu, warp 6. Lt. Uhura, signal yellow alert and open inter-ship communications."

"Aye, sir, channel open."

"This is the Captain, we are on yellow alert..."

As Kirk talked, Spock watched him unobserved. The Captain's face was finely drawn and pale, an obvious result of the earlier incident. But his eyes were haunted and that bothered Spock. The nearness of Andy Stephens and the knowledge of what he was going to have to do to stop him was stirring up memories better left dead. Spock knew that Kirk was in his early teens when the tragedy happened on Tarsus IV, and a young mind was not prepared to accept the reality of such a happening. Then Lenore Karidian had brought back all the horror - and more senseless killing. Now it was hitting him full force yet again, and by a person who had once been very important to Jim Kirk. Spock still did not understand all the complex things that went into a human friendship, but he was well aware that friendship didn't just die when people went their own ways. It was quite possible that Kirk still felt something for the boy he had once known, if not for the man he had become. That feeling might interfere with his efficiency, and this was one time that it must not happen.

As Kirk finished talking, Spock brought his full attention back to the present. The Captain got up. "Mr. Spock, you have the con. I'll be in my quarters - call me there if anything comes up." He missed the searching look from the Vulcan as he left the bridge.

Upon reaching his quarters, Kirk flung himself on to the bed, his head whirling with vivid memories that he had been trying, unsuccessfully, to forget. Spock did not know how correct he had been in his analysis, for Kirk was seeing again the blazing phasers that had signalled the destruction of his childhood. He buried his head into the pillow just as the door buzzer rang.

"Come," he ordered without looking up. He felt a light hand touch his shoulder. Rolling over, he discovered McCoy bending over him.

"Bones?"

"Spock called me from the bridge, Jim. He was worried about you."

"I'm all right, just a little tired."

"You sure?"

"Yes, thanks." McCoy's eyes searched Kirk's face, concern making the clear blue color darker than usual. Kirk was obviously holding something back, but he knew it was no use pushing - the Captain would talk when he was ready. Right now the stubborn look told the doctor in no uncertain terms that Kirk was going to handle whatever problem this was in his own way.

"Fair enough. Here, take these," he said, handing Kirk two yellow tablets. "They'll help you sleep but won't knock you out. You'll be wide awake if you need to be." Kirk made a face but he took the tablets with no protest. A few minutes later he was asleep. McCoy pulled a blanket over him, a part of him wanting to protect the very human figure lying there, so open to hurt, even though that figure was a powerful starship commander.

All was quiet on the bridge when McCoy stepped out of the turbo-lift. Lt. Uhura had just finished sending an update of their position to Starfleet, but at that distance it would be several weeks before a reply came. Spock was sitting in the command chair, recording in the log.

"Coming into sensor range of planet 346, Mr. Spock," said Chekov. There was a pause as he read the data, then he straightened and looked at the Vulcan, his voice strained as he continued, "There are no life forms registered, no sign of any buildings, everything's been destroyed!"

"We're too late," said McCoy softly. Spock turned toward him, the news of the destruction not affecting him visibly, but McCoy knew that the colder the expression, the more Spock was suppressing his human - and Vulcan - emotions.

"There is no need to disturb the Captain with this, Doctor. We will continue our pursuit of the Tricoda. When we make contact it will be time enough to notify him."

McCoy nodded. "I've given him something so he'll sleep. He's still shaky from the explosion. The longer he can rest the better."

The hours passed as the Enterprise warped quickly through space. Scotty and his crew were kept on their toes keeping the engines functioning in the face of the tremendous strain they were undergoing. Finally, the chief engineer called up to the bridge to complain - his engines had reached their limit. If they didn't reduce warp speed the main circuits would go and that would be it. He had all his self-righteous anger worked up to blast the Vulcan and was caught short when Kirk answered his call.

"Uh, the engines are straining, sir..." He stopped, suddenly at a loss for words.

"Understood, Scotty - cut back to warp 4 and hold her there until further orders. Kirk out."

Scotty went back to work with a satisfied feeling - both his engines and his Captain seemed to be out of the danger zone.

Spock put his tray on the table and sat down. He eyed the lone cup of coffee in front of Kirk but made no comment. When McCoy arrived a few minutes later, he made up for Spock's silence, but knew it would do no good. The rest of the meal passed in silence. When they finished, Kirk ordered a general meeting in the briefing room.

"I've called you here, gentlemen, because a great deal depends upon our actions in the next few days. The Tricoda will almost certainly hit Andra V next. It is a newly colonized planet and very important to the Federation because of its wealth of minerals. They have only the standard means of protection - which leaves them powerless to do anything about the coming raid. But we're not, and we're going to be there when that ship arrives. The Enterprise must be well away from the area - if Andy Stephens suspects a trap, there is no way he'll come anywhere near.

"Mr. Scott, you'll be in charge here - your responsibility is to the Enterprise. If anything happens to us, get out of here and contact Starfleet. I will take the main attack force to the planet. Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy will accompany me. I'm going to leave you pretty short of security personnel, Scotty. I need all the experienced men I can get against the crack troops from the Tricoda. You'll beam us down and then leave the area. Return in 72 hours - it should all be over one way or the other by then. Spock, contact ship's stores - we don't want to go in uniform. We'll need to blend into the background as much as possible."

A few hours later, Kirk and Spock were huddled with the expedition leaders on Andra V. The rest of the landing party were being spread out where they would be the most effective in a fight.

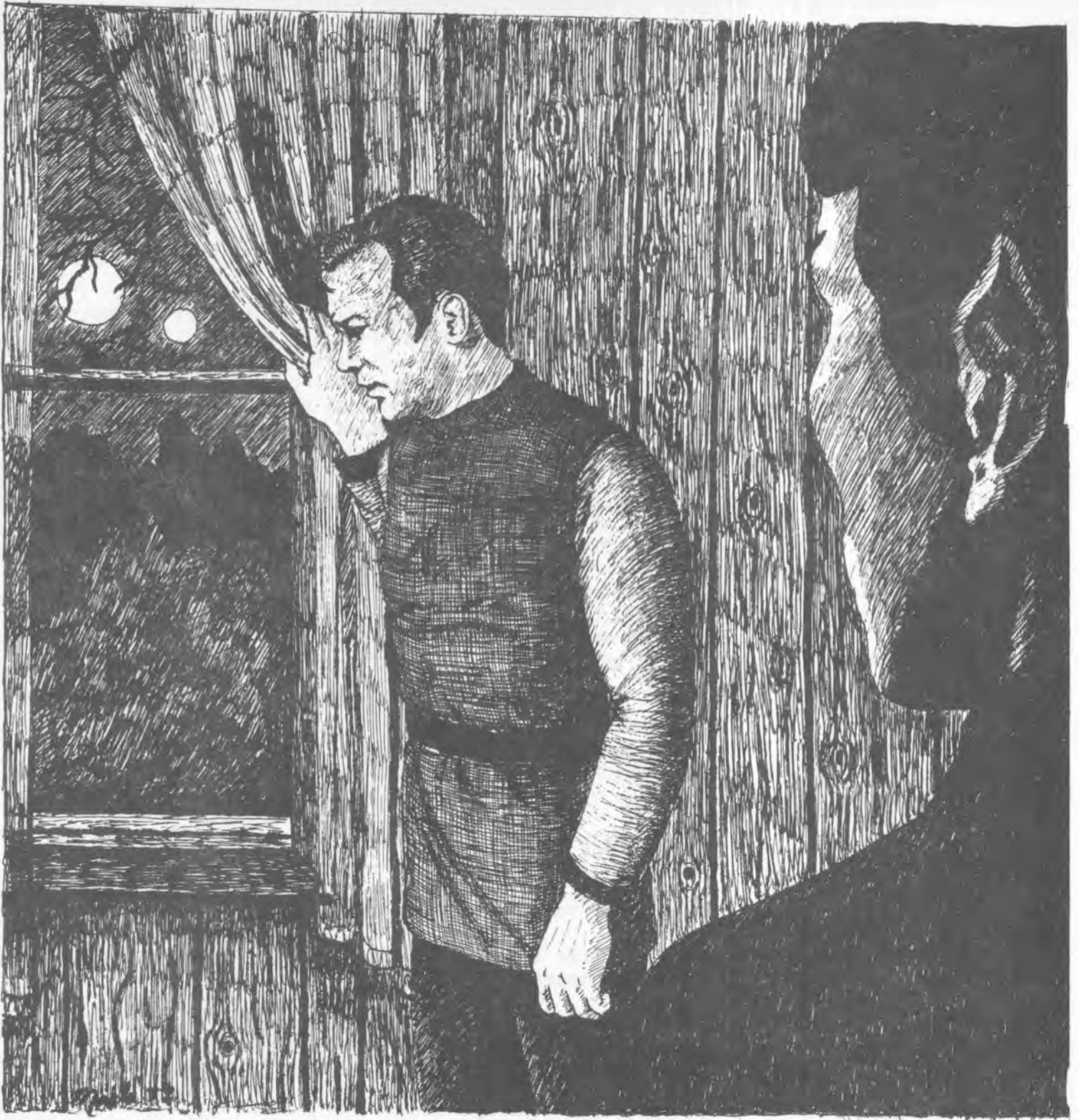
"What you have proposed is extremely dangerous, Captain Kirk," said Ted Leder, chief geologist and titular head of the group.

"Dangerous only to ourselves, sir. Your men will be quite safe."

"Agreed, and that is what I don't like about it. Your people shouldn't have to risk their lives and leave us free of responsibility."

"Mr. Leder," said Spock, "the Enterprise crew are highly trained in combat - your people are not. The odds are not so great when viewed in that perspective."

The hours passed. Spock sat quietly in the darkness, his senses alert for any noise, any movement. As the time passed, his concern increased for Jim Kirk, standing across the room. His keen vision cut through the gloom and showed him a figure that was waging a battle with himself, a battle between the tensions of the present and the haunting memories of the past. Yet, when he had given the orders earlier, his manner had been calm, the easy assurance of command riding his shoulders with no visible sign of strain. Now, as forced inactivity was wearing at each of them, Spock could see his Captain weakening. Darkness brought emotions to the surface - Spock had learned that



in his association with humans. There was no way he could reach out to help his friend, for every person in the landing party needed to be fully prepared for immediate action if the Tricoda did attack.

Kirk leaned his forehead against the cool pane of glass in front of him. He tried to keep his attention on the darkness outside but he couldn't block out the vision

of Tarsus IV. The last few days had been sheer torture and he was shaken by the intensity of his emotions. He had thought the episode was behind him, that the memories had faded, but he was seeing them now more vividly than ever. McCoy had tried to explain to him that it was the result of the shock received in the shuttlecraft explosion. "The human body can only take so much abuse, Jim, before it starts to rebel. You need rest - give Spock more responsibility. Stay off your feet!"

But Kirk hadn't been able to obey those orders. McCoy had found him limping to his quarters, his legs obviously giving him more trouble than he was willing to admit, his restless mind not allowing him any peace. McCoy firmly waylaid him and sedated him into oblivion. Yet now he was awake, knowing he was soon going to be facing Andy, and dreading that he would find the same bitterness he had faced so many years ago.

Kirk's communicator beeped twice, then went dead. It had begun. He signalled Spock and the others to stay low, opened the door, and slipped quietly through. The Vulcan watched him go, reluctantly staying behind, his whole being wanting to be with the Captain. But, if this attack was to be repulsed, they must not deviate from their strategy.

The area was filled with dark-clad, silently running figures - the Tricoda mercenaries. Kirk blended in with them, being careful not to get too far away to cause suspicion nor too close to be recognized as a stranger. Gradually the groups began dispersing and he ducked behind a pile of machinery. Wiggling forward, he saw two men standing beside an outcropping of rock - and one of those men was Andy Stephens. Kirk could make out the gold hair flashing, even in the murky darkness of the night. Cautiously he got to his feet, and quietly made his way to a point just behind them. Picking up some loose gravel, he threw a handful over their heads, causing them to focus their attention into the blackness beyond. Darting forward, he used a well-placed blow to put Andy's companion out of action. The Tricoda's commander whirled, the weapon in his hand set to kill, but a blinding pain shot through his arm as Kirk kicked out with every ounce of strength he possessed. The phaser went flying as the arm momentarily lost all feeling.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still, and two boys stood on a far away planet, their lives stretching out before them, the dreams of youth to be explored together. Their eyes held, each slowly taking the measure of the other.

"Jim Kirk, starship captain - youngest on record if I'm not mistaken..."

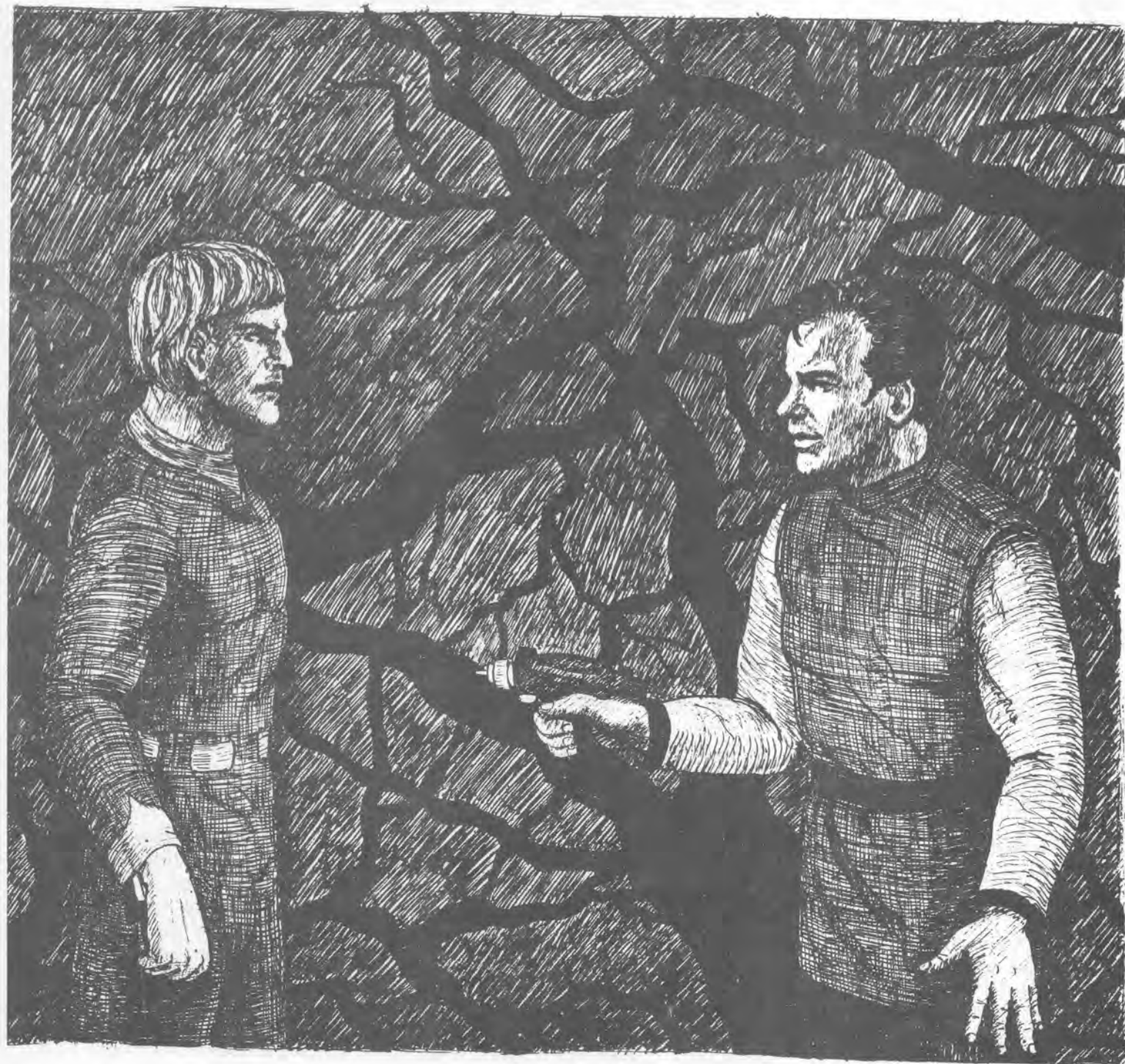
"And not the youngest to die, Andy, although I assume that's what you intended."

"So that was you on Mayna - I wasn't sure. I had heard the Enterprise was in the area. I assume our tampering with your shuttlecraft backfired, or else you wouldn't be here."

Kirk's face hardened, his anger rising at the reminder of the attempt to destroy the Enterprise. "Cut it out, Andy!" he said fiercely, realizing how little time he had to talk some sense into the man standing across from him. He was going to have to shake Andy somehow. Taking a deep breath, he said, "Face reality for once in your life. Take a good look at yourself - you're a murderer! Innocent, helpless people - all dead because you hate yourself for being gutless. And you still hate me because I tried to help when..." He stopped; the unyielding look on the face in front of him clearly pointed out that anger was not going to get him anywhere. He tried again. "Think, man! What you're doing won't help those people on Tarsus now. We all lost something there, but life continues. Stop what you're doing - revenge doesn't help anything. I know, I've tried."

"Yes, I heard you convinced Kodos' daughter to murder him - kept your lily-white hands clean." He laughed as he saw pain replace the anger in Kirk's eyes. "Always there, aren't you, Jim, always trying to be the good guy..."

As he spoke, he took a cautious step toward Kirk, judging the distance between them, then suddenly leapt forward. But the attack was foiled by Kirk's quicker defense and he knocked Andy's feet from under him. As he got up, Kirk's phaser was aimed steadily at him. The pale eyes that looked at Kirk were as cold as ice. Kirk felt the hair rise on the back of his neck - there was no hint of madness in those eyes, only cunning and hatred - for him, for everything.



"Andy..." he began.

"You sold out, Jim. You're no better than those responsible for the murder of my family. You represent those people now, you speak for them, you defend their principles, you preach their creed. I thought you were different once, when you were my friend, but when I turned to you, you rejected me."

"Andy, I didn't reject you! I couldn't reach you, couldn't talk to you. You had shut out the world. I tried, I really tried..."

Kirk broke off, seeing that his words were falling on deaf ears. He got out his communicator, keeping his phaser carefully aimed. He beeped it twice and there was an answering beep. He slowly raised his eyes to the unmoving figure in front of him. "It's over. Your people are defeated. The colonists are aboard the Enterprise, this area is manned by security personnel. Your people are good, Andy, but hate is not worth fighting for - freedom is. We had the edge."

"Righteous little Jimmy Kirk," sneered Stephens. "I remember that you didn't like to hurt anything - let's see if your conscience is any less pure." A knife whistled through the air, catching Kirk low in his rib cage, doubling him over. Stephens grabbed for the phaser as Kirk started to fall, but he had underestimated Kirk's strength. They went down together, both desperately fumbling for the weapon. Neither could keep control and it fell into a crevice between some rocks. Needing something to defend himself with, Stephens kicked Kirk away and seized the knife - Kirk moaned in agony as it was torn from his body. The world started to disappear in a red haze. He tried to get to his feet but was met by a solid kick in the small of his back which sent him sprawling face-down in the dirt.

"Still the boy scout at heart, aren't you, Jimmy?" mocked Stephens, rolling Kirk over with his foot. He lay there, trying to gather his strength, to stop the face above him from whirling in circles. "Well, I'm going to finish what I started. The Tricoda can blow up this colony and take your precious security men with it. Nothing is going to stop me, Jim, not you, not the Federation..."

Kirk lunged to his feet and grabbed the knife. The action unbalanced Stephens and the two of them crashed to the ground, the knife slashing across Kirk's arm as they fell. He grimly hung on as they fought. Stephens got to his feet, trying to wrench Kirk's arm out of its socket. Kirk kicked out and Andy lost his grip on the knife as he twisted to avoid it. Off balance, he fell forward, the knife-blade driving into his chest, his blood spilling out over Kirk's hand which still held the weapon firm. He grabbed Andy with his free hand and then, suddenly, drained of energy and will, sank to the ground, slumped in defeat, one hand still on the knife, the other arm cradling Andy's head. His eyes filled with unshed tears as the pale eyes mocked him, the hatred undimmed.

"Take a good look, Jim. The Federation has killed again. Carry this image with you for the rest of your life. I remember what happened - even if you don't!"

He had no idea how long he had sat there, but the blood on his side and arm was drying - the man in front of him was growing cold. A hand reached down and loosened his fingers from the knife shaft where they seemed to have frozen. The pale green of Spock's skin stood in sharp contrast to the dark stains on the hand it held. The Vulcan could feel the tremors running through Kirk's body and knew his Captain had



passed the limits of his endurance. He was caught up in the horrors that had started on Tarsus, and each time they came back they were worse than the last. He was drained, physically and emotionally, the past now much more real to him than the present. Spock half lifted Kirk to his feet and moved him away from the grisly scene.

Kirk stumbled beside him, his legs unable to follow the commands of his brain. Suddenly, he stopped and stared at Spock, but there was no recognition in his eyes. Then he ran. The action caught Spock by surprise. Normally he could keep up with Kirk, but now the Captain was running in blind terror. It took all of Spock's strength to close the distance between them. Even with his battered legs, Kirk kept eluding him. Spock finally made a flying tackle from some higher ground and held on as best he could. Kirk struggled violently, his strong arms hitting the Vulcan viciously. Spock didn't dare loosen his grip for fear of losing Kirk altogether, so he couldn't protect himself from the violence of Kirk's agony. He shut his eyes and tightened his hold on Kirk's legs. Gradually he was able to gain control of Kirk's arms and pinned them to his sides so the bruising rain of blows was stopped. Kirk's struggling opened the knife wounds and Spock could feel the wetness soaking into his own clothes, but still he held on.

Gradually, the struggling quieted to a deathly silence. Spock cautiously eased his grip. Kirk was totally limp in his arms. He slowly sat up, lifting the now unresisting figure with him so that the human was cradled in his arms. Kirk lay with his eyes shut, his breathing labored, oblivious to everything. A stab of fear went through Spock. How much could a human stand before the mind went altogether? How could he get Kirk to realize he was there? He began to gently brush the dirt from Jim's face, talking softly as he did so. A bloodstained hand slowly reached up and took hold of the Vulcan's hand - the grip was almost bone-breaking. Then came a muffled sound and Kirk's body started to tremble. Spock wrapped his arms around him and held him close, the dark head bowed down over the matted brown hair and pale face. The sobs gradually came more freely until they were both shaking with their violence. The horrors seen by a young boy, the tragic love witnessed by a man, and the end of a treasured memory were being expended at a terrible cost. Spock's hand hurt from Kirk's unyielding grip but he did not try to move it - he knew how necessary the reality of his presence was to the shattered man in his arms. He would have done anything in the universe to spare this hurt but, failing that, he would give the only other thing that he could - his love.

And it would be enough.

*FRIENDSHIP NEEDS NO WORDS - IT IS A LONELINESS RELIEVED OF THE
ANGUISH OF LONELINESS.*

DAG HAMMARSKJOLD



The Challenge

Fire -

Raging unconsumed!

Fire -

Fever in the blood!

The moment comes; I take my place

To do what I must do.

I taste the victor's spoils,

Drinking deeply of the cup you offer

With no thought, no heed past this

Moment.

Fire -

Quenched, relieved.

Fire -

Splitting my soul;

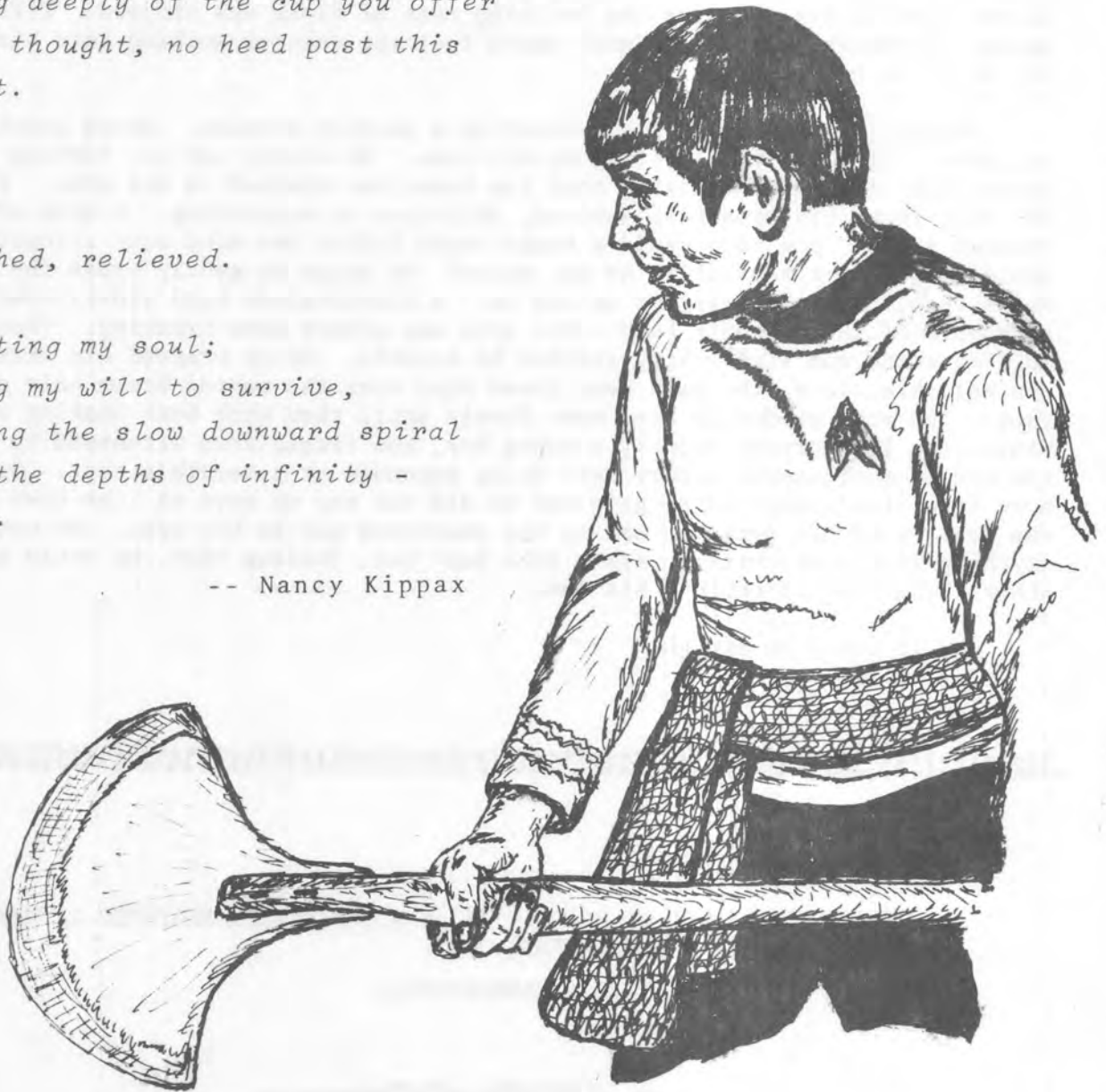
Smashing my will to survive,

Beginning the slow downward spiral

Toward the depths of infinity -

Alone.

-- Nancy Kippax



BORN OF ASHES



BY MARTHA J. BONDS

Space...deep, black void. Broken only by scattered starlight. A silver ship, tiny, insignificant against the panorama of emptiness. It grows, moving closer, closer. Definite path, purpose. It is seeking something, not wandering aimlessly.

A shining vessel formed by ancient craftsman's hands. Delicate design, small yet complex. Eagle-swift, and aesthetically beautiful, she travels onward, guided by one hand.

Navigation, helm, passenger, engineer - one hand alone pilots the tiny craft on her voyage. She is going home, carrying one being to his birthplace, where under the heat of a distant sun, one descendant shall rise, and soar away again.

On the bridge, the being sits, ever alone, ever watchful. He is proud, regal, completely self-assured and content. He has begun the last journey, set his course toward a distant home.

There is no hurry. The planet, light years away across the galaxy, awaits. The being is serene, his inner clock telling him exactly how much time remains. He guides the ship at a constant speed toward the world he seeks. He must, he will arrive at the appointed hour, neither early or late.

Even now, as he surveys the stars from his golden bridge, he thinks of his home. The blue-eyed gaze falls upon a proudly displayed model of his solar system, a brilliant star orbited by a single planet. *"You are alone, as I am alone, my Heliopolis."* The voice is deep, melodic, with only a trace of bitterness.

A strange sensation flows through his body. With some surprise, he examines it, trying to determine its source and meaning. It is a desolate feeling, cold and empty. It is loneliness. He is old, in the reckoning of time, in the span of his life, finding within himself feelings of sad nostalgia for times gone by.

Once it was enough to soar free through all of space. The galaxy was his and no one dared challenge his claim. Once it was enough to live alone, but of late he had begun to realize something was missing from his existence.

It was not, he had decided, the idea that he needed the companionship of another of his kind. His life was ruled by the fact that there was no other, except the ancestor who had lived before him and the descendant he would never know. He had lived in acceptance of the fact and amused himself with other species, watching, sometimes manipulating the tiny puppet-like characters he caused to enact dramas of his own creation on the worlds he passed.

The ship passes a small star system and he idly notes a planet. Turning to his sensing device, he determines it to be populated by immature humanoids on the verge of global conflict. They possess a moderate level of industrialization, with the ability to make war using primitive devices. Interesting. The being pauses, consulting his inner time schedule. Yes. He can stay here for a while. There is

enough time. The scene of a drama about to unfold begins to coalesce in his mind.

The being steers his ship into orbit around the planet Manada. His last playground; it will be the world where he will shake off the strange sense of sad futility, leaving it like an atmospheric blanket around the planet to seep into the core of every living thing on the surface. Once relieved, he will continue the long journey home.

* * *

Captain James Kirk rose, indicating the briefing session was at an end. "Good, gentlemen. We'll prepare to beam down in half an hour, then. The Manadan councilors are expecting us."

Scott, Uhura and the three Federation ambassadors stood and exited the room. Dr. McCoy hesitated at the Captain's side and Kirk turned to him.

"Sure you don't think I should go along, Jim?"

"Not just yet," Kirk smiled. "After the basic negotiations get started, maybe we'll need you."

McCoy scowled. "That's nothing to joke about. Those people are ready for a fight."

"With each other, not with us, Bones. Don't look so grim. They did request Federation help."

"Okay, okay," the doctor relaxed a little. "I guess between you, those three special mediators and Spock, things will settle down pretty quickly."

"That's the general idea, Bones."

The physician smiled. "Yeah, well you be careful just the same - both of you." With a nod toward the Vulcan science officer who still sat scanning the tapes, McCoy squeezed Kirk's arm and left the briefing room.

Kirk stepped to Spock's chair and bent to watch the images projected on the viewer with him. "Something about this mission bothers you, doesn't it?" he asked.

The Vulcan looked up. "Bothers me, Captain? Not precisely. The assignment is similar to ones we have undertaken before."

Kirk pulled out a chair and sat down. "Look, you were uncharacteristically quiet during the briefing. What's on your mind?"

Spock hesitated, then flicked off the viewer. Folding his hands on the table before him, he turned to the Captain. "Does it not appear to you that we will be violating the prime directive by intervening in the civil conflict on Manada?"

"Strictly speaking, every time we contact another world, we violate that directive, Spock," Kirk replied. "But we're doing this at the request of the planet officials and with the full blessing of the Federation. Besides, we're not going down to take sides or arbitrate their differences. The special ambassadors are simply going to offer more peaceful solutions to the problems between the

people."

"I realize that, Captain. However, even though Manada requested our help, you must be aware there is some other motive for the Federation's involvement besides good samaritanism."

"The pergium?" Kirk asked. "I know. The survey reports said there's more pergium on Manada than even Janus VI." He paused thoughtfully. "I see what you're getting at. If we help prevent a full scale war from escalating, the Federation hopes to obtain mining rights."

"There is nothing totally wrong in that," Spock agreed, "but the diplomatic corps is awfully anxious for us to succeed. It would seem that we have little choice but to force a solution to the problem of the Manadans, whether they are satisfied by it or not."

"Force them?"

"I've been scanning the latest reports and events have been moving swiftly on the planet, Captain. Both factions seem ready, even eager for a fight now, whereas when they requested our help communications had not broken down between the two governments to the extent they have now. We may be too late to do anything. And if we try," he continued slowly, "the situation could prove exceedingly dangerous to anyone interfering."

"Premonition, Spock? That's not like you."

"No, Captain," the Vulcan said, rising. "I merely wanted you to be aware of all factors in the matter. The inhabitants are extremely restive at the present. Any spark could set off an unpleasant chain of events."

"You're right. It is going to be tricky," Kirk answered. "But there's no way we can get out of it, so we might as well hurry up and take care of the job."

Spock nodded gravely. "I shall meet you in the transporter room," he said, starting for the door.

Kirk looked after him, then paused to consider their conversation. Spock was correct; the situation on Manada was touchy. Kirk had realized that, peripherally, but the orders to pick up the special ambassadors and go to the planet had come so hurriedly that he'd had little time to think about the alternatives. It was a good thing Spock was around. He kept the Captain from becoming a little too mechanical in following orders on what seemed like routine matters. Spock did his job, but Kirk knew he was not motivated by science or duty alone. Part of the reason he had discussed the non-routine aspects of the mission was the underlying concern for his Captain that marked their association. *He won't let me jump into anything with my eyes closed*, Kirk smiled to himself, *for fear I'll get into some scrape I can't get out of.*

The Captain of the Enterprise shook himself out of the reverie and hurried from the briefing room. If things were coming to a head on Manada, he might as well get the ambassadors down there as soon as possible.

* * *

Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott sat uneasily in the captain's chair on

the bridge. Kirk had left him in command of the Enterprise before beaming down to Manada. For five hours the planet had remained quiet. Scott, tiring of signing reports, was just about to wander down to check on things in engineering when Sulu called his name urgently.

"Mr. Scott, something's happening on Manada! I'm picking up air to ground missiles being fired at one of the main cities."

"Mr. Chekov, take the science station," Scott directed. "Lt. Uhura, see if you can raise the Captain."

"It would appear that a full scale war is in progress, Mr. Scott," the Russian ensign said, wide-eyed. "The capital city is already virtually leveled."

"Mr. Scott, I can't make contact with the council chamber!" Uhura cried.

"I read the building as destroyed," Chekov added.

The flashing telltale signal on the navigation console registered the approach of another vessel. Scott gave orders briskly, correctly, following all the proper procedures, but inside, his stomach was churning at the thought of the sudden battle that may have already cost the lives of the Enterprise Captain and First Officer.

He'd ordered Uhura to hail the approaching ship, but the small vessel did not respond. It hovered in front of the Enterprise for a few moments, then shot a greenish beam of light toward her.

"Deflectors on full!" Scott cried. The command was followed, but the green brightness penetrated the ship anyway, and the eerie hue caused his vision to blur. His next actions seemed to be hindered by some all consuming fatigue, weighing him down, causing his movements to slow.

"Sir," gasped Sulu, "life support systems...out."

Scott stood up, making an effort to speak. "Try...stand-by."

He heard a soft thud and turned to see that Uhura had fallen from her chair and lay crumpled on the floor. The creeping sensation seemed to be affecting the entire bridge. He looked toward the viewscreen. It was completely filled with the brilliant greenness. Sulu was slumped over the board, Chekov falling in slow motion to the deck. Scott reached back toward a control on the command chair arm. Slowly, ever so slowly, his hand moved even though his mind was screaming to hurry. His fingers found the switch and, as he fell, the last words he whispered were, "Captain's log, Chief Engineer Scott...recording..."

* * *

It was over, the city crumbling, the screams of the dying fading, the fire destroying what was left of a world. Above it all, only the stars remained. Only the stars, in infinite revolution, continued.

The holocaust on Manada was only a small part of the destruction. More than a civilization on the verge of mechanization was lost. The dreams, hopes and ideals of two men not a part of the world of Manada lay crushed and blackened also.



FAT STALL

IT WAS OVER, THE CITY CRUMBLING, THE SCREAMS OF THE DYING FADING,
THE FIRE DESTROYING WHAT WAS LEFT OF A WORLD.

No matter that they were foreign to the culture that was destroyed that day. Their duty was, had always been, to help other worlds. They had responded to the call for help from the planet and to the orders of their government. Even though the dying planet might be of little consequence in an indifferent galaxy, they understood their duty. Still, they never once realized the impact of going to Manada's aid.

They could not know that there was more at stake than the fledgling civilization and their valiant starship. And they did not know that they were being watched...

* * *

Spock regained consciousness slowly. The city was quiet, filled with a ghostly stillness. Spock lay where he was in the silence, not daring to move or even look around. He could not be sure it was truly over.

The battle on the little planet had started so swiftly, so violently. Now, everyone must be dead. Everyone? Where was the Captain? What had happened to him? They had been separated when the first bombs started raining their horror about them. Spock fought to control the worry that loomed over him. Where was his Captain? Was he alive?

Spock tried to pull himself up and became aware of a dull pain in his back. Then he remembered. His last sensations had been of the huge stone blocks of the city wall falling around and on him. One of the large blocks had struck his legs as he tried to dodge them.

He reached back and discovered dried blood on the back of his tunic. One stone had struck, scraping his flesh, and another fell on his legs, effectively pinning him where he lay. In the scant light he could not see if his legs were broken under the weight, but he could feel little pain.

Spock swallowed in resignation. He could not search for the Captain, could not be of help to Kirk if he needed him. The Captain might be hurt, in pain, dying alone on this dying planet. Spock struggled for a hand hold on the rubble in front of him, determined to try to pull himself out from under the blocks.

He gasped in a sudden burst of agony. The stones shifted, pressing their weight harder on his injured legs. His fingers curled into the dirt under his hands as he fought to subdue the sensation. He strained forward once, twice more, until the veins stood out in his temples and the blood pounded in his ears. His arms quivered from the strain. At last he realized that he would only cause further injury to himself if he continued trying to move.

No use. No use to try to find Jim. What help could he be to a corpse? A human body was more easily broken than his own now-fragile Vulcan one. If Spock were helpless, Jim must surely be dead. *Jim, we were wrong, so wrong to come here,* he thought through the enveloping haze of his pain. *We were wrong. We lost, the planet lost. We lost everything, but why did we have to lose even each other?*

A sense of hopelessness and utter fatigue filled Spock, gradually superceding even the bite of stone on his legs. There was no reason to try to go on now. He would die alone, as he had lived. No. He had not always been alone. There had been Jim.

He lay still, his cheek resting on the soft, dusty ground. He could see the calm, infinitely slow moving stars above, the rubble of a city not his own around him. Through his pain, an unfamiliar emotion sought to take control of his mind. Sadness. He had felt it in meld with many beings: the Horta's grief for her murdered children, Jim's sorrow over Rayna Kopek. Sadness reaching, holding, pulling him downward, sadness more quiet, more terrible than pain or fear or hate or even loneliness. Was this all he was to find at the end of his life? Sadness, so empty, so bottomless, so naked...

His hands let go of the dirt they had clung to in his pain. He pulled them close, tucked them under him, one hand covering his face, to hide the cold glimmer of the stars.

* * *

The sea. The sea was pounding in his ears. Though he knew he was far inland, he could hear the breaking waves on surf, and feel the sun, warm above. Spock opened his eyes to see the waves and sky, but they were obscured by the face of a man looking down at him.

Slowly, he raised his hand to touch the face above him. Smooth, firm chin, strong shoulders, warm gold of command uniform. It was Jim - dirty, tired-eyed, but alive. "Captain..."

"Don't try to talk. Save your strength. I thought you'd never wake up." James Kirk looked down at Spock with unconcealed relief.

"Where...? How long...?"

"I found you just before daybreak."

"I tried to find you. I was...concerned."

Kirk nodded. "I was knocked out by falling debris and somehow managed to fall under some cover. I woke up during the night after things quieted down and I've been looking for you ever since." Kirk paused, looking at the pile of stone blocks surrounding and covering the Vulcan's lower back and legs. "We better try to get you out of here."

Spock drew in a breath. "I cannot move myself, Captain. Perhaps the ship..."

Kirk looked disgusted. "I tried to raise her but I can't get anything on my communicator. Either she pulled out of the area or..."

"At any rate, it seems we are on our own, Captain."

* * *

During the next two hours, as Kirk struggled to free Spock from the debris and locate shelter for the two of them, a cold lonely wind began blowing through the deserted city. When Kirk, staggering under the weight of the Vulcan, finally entered a partially bombed-out building, Spock was shivering and in shock.

Perspiring from his exertions, the Captain tried to be as gentle as possible with Spock as he lay him on the narrow bed. A slight gasp escaped the Vulcan's clenched lips as Kirk released him. He was afraid he'd caused Spock much unnecessary pain as he'd pulled away the heavy stones and carried him in his arms to their shelter.

Kirk bent to determine the extent of the injuries. Both legs seemed to be broken, the right in three places. Kirk could see bone protruding through Spock's blood-stained trousers. Gingerly, Kirk ran his hand along the left leg, discovering only a simple fracture.

Spock reached toward his hip. Kirk touched it gently and Spock moaned aloud. He carefully pulled back Spock's trousers, revealing the crushed and bloody area. The Captain could only guess at the amount of damage to the hip joint and pelvic bone.

Kirk swallowed, realizing for the first time just how desperate their situation was. He was determined not to let his concern show, however. "I...I'll get some water," he said softly. When he returned, Spock lay passively while Kirk washed his face and hands of the dirt he'd laid in, and tried to clean the wounds.

The next thirty hours kalideoscoped into a blur of pain and fatigue. Kirk did what he could for Spock, but trying to splint his right leg had proved difficult. As for the hip injury, he only seemed to hurt Spock more by trying to cleanse and bandage it. He had to content himself with keeping him warm and applying what rudimentary first aid he could. There was little food in the dwelling they'd appropriated, and Spock would take none of it. He could only manage an occasional sip of water from a cup Kirk held for him.

By noon of the third day, Kirk was exhausted. All he wanted to do was signal the ship, beam up, and turn Spock over to McCoy's skilled care, but the Enterprise did not answer his repeated calls. He was at a loss to explain the apparent absence of his ship. The Manadans had not possessed the capability of firing on a ship at so extreme an orbit.

He came to sit at Spock's bedside. The Vulcan seemed unaware of his presence. Kirk knew he was concentrating on subduing the pain, fighting to allow the natural healing ability of his body to commence. A slight tremor ran through the still form. Kirk reached up to tuck the covers closer about him and lay a hand on Spock's cheek. It was cool to the touch.

"No use, Jim."

"What, Spock?"

"It's no use. I cannot achieve the healing trance." The Vulcan's eyes were far away.

"Why not?"

"The trance is not all powerful. The broken bones would not set themselves. I...need medical attention."

"But Spock, without medication, I'm worried about infection."

Spock considered. "Not a problem at the moment." He turned his eyes toward his Captain. "You look tired, Jim."

Kirk nodded. His head was throbbing. Spock shivered again under his blankets. He wondered why the Vulcan was still so cold, despite the fire he'd built in the old fashioned coal heater, making the room seem unbearably warm to Kirk.

"I am tired, Spock. And I..." Suddenly, Kirk wasn't sure he remembered what he'd been going to say. He leaned forward, resting his head on the edge of the mattress.

He felt Spock's hand gently brush his cheek and forehead and smooth his hair.

"You must lie down, Jim, and rest."

Kirk looked up. "I'll go nap in that chair." He started to rise. "Call if you need anything."

"Captain, you are feverish. Do you feel ill?" Spock persisted.

He was perspiring and his stomach felt unsettled. Of course, he hadn't eaten much...Kirk started to get up, but a sudden weakness rushed over him, and he sank heavily forward on Spock's bed. "Sorry," he said as Spock winced. The room, which had been so warm a moment ago, now seemed increasingly chilly.

He tried to move away when Spock took hold of his shoulders and began pulling him onto the bed. "No, Spock."

"Captain, you must lie down. As this is the only bed..."

"I don't want to hurt you."

Gradually, he eased himself into a prone position beside Spock. The mattress felt invitingly soft and comfortable, but he was afraid to relax. Any movement caused Spock more discomfort.

"Better, Captain?" Spock asked quietly.

Kirk grimaced. "Fine thing. How can I take care of you if I get sick?"

"We will manage."

Kirk's stomach gave a sudden lurch and he turned away quickly, leaning off the side of the bed. He was ill, more ill than he'd thought. The night out in the cold during the battle and his constant caring for Spock had taken their toll, leaving him weak and vulnerable to any virus, he realized.

Spock handed him a towel and he was sharply reminded of their predicament. If he could not care for Spock, there was little hope the Vulcan would survive. He already worried that Spock would lose the use of his legs due to the ineffective measures he had taken. If Kirk could not help keep him warm and give him water, shock from his injuries would rapidly take his life.

He carefully turned back toward Spock. "You've got to try a healing trance. I...can't take care of you..."



HE TRIED TO MOVE AWAY, WHEN SPOCK TOOK HOLD OF HIS SHOULDERS AND BEGAN PULLING HIM
ONTO THE BED.

Spock reached for him again, pulling him firmly down. "Who will take care of you, Captain?" Spock leaned toward the pitcher on the night stand and poured a glass of water. He held it to Kirk's mouth. "Please, Jim. Try to rest."

Kirk wanted to give in, to relax and sleep. Perhaps if he took a brief nap, he'd feel better. "Just a little while, Spock..." he whispered.

When he awoke, the room was dark. He felt groggy and realized he'd been sleeping for hours. "Spock?"

The Vulcan did not answer immediately. Kirk touched his arm and felt the tension in Spock's muscles. "What's wrong?"

"My control," Spock whispered, "is failing." He gasped as a chill shook him.

"Still cold?" Kirk asked gently. When Spock nodded, Kirk carefully eased out of the bed to check the heater. His legs felt heavy and his stomach was still queasy. He added some coal to the heater and found another blanket, then returned to the bed.

The slight exertion had left him totally drained, and he suddenly knew his sickness was something more than a slight fever and upset stomach. He kept the pounding headache and the sharp stomach cramps that were beginning to wrack his body to himself and lay back down beside Spock, covering them both with the blanket. Spock looked up at him, and Kirk read in his expression an unusual mixture of solicitous concern and intense pain. He moved closer to Spock, putting his arm protectively across his chest, wishing he could hide his own sudden trembling.

Spock did not discourage the embrace. He put his arms around Kirk, pulling his Captain's head to his shoulder. Kirk's illness and his painful injuries made him crave the physical closeness. He felt his world fading, his Captain's life and his own slipping away from his conscious control.

They lay still together for several moments. The only sounds were the sputtering of the heater and the echo of the wind. Kirk tried to relax in spite of his fever and nausea. "How do you feel, Spock?" he murmured.

"I feel..." The Vulcan seemed to be struggling mentally as well as physically. "I feel sadness, Captain. Sadness that this has happened to us... that I..." His voice broke and he gripped Kirk's back tighter. "Jim, please... it hurts."

Kirk pressed closer, wishing he could banish the pain from Spock's broken body, ease the anguish he felt. Yet he could not do that; he could only show Spock he understood. He looked at the face so close to his own, at the gentle brown eyes, now full of suffering, the jaw grimly set, the tension lines deepened by pain.

"It's all right, Spock. I feel it, too."

"I must not...surrender to it, Jim."

"You can't push yourself this way for long."

"Neither can you. But we cannot give in."

Kirk smiled softly. "I know. I want you to hang on. The ship..."

"The Enterprise may not be coming for us, Captain."

"They must either think we're dead, or they're unable to return for some reason."

"If they do return, we will be dead before they can find us. We must face that, Jim."

Kirk pressed his forehead to Spock's cheek. He knew Spock was right, but he could not say the words. Funny, he thought, Spock could talk about his feelings of sadness, but Kirk couldn't admit the logic of the fact that they were dying. Dying...

"Spock," Kirk whispered at length. "Don't leave me."

"I do not wish to leave you, Jim."

"Hang on. We'll hang on, together, as long as we can."

The Vulcan's voice was soft. "Together..."

They drifted on, into a blur of time. In pain and sickness they slept fitfully, talked very little. Occasionally, they shared a glass of water. There was nothing in the world, in the universe, but themselves. Nothing but two men who, if they were dying, were comforted at least that they were together, that each understood and shared the other's despair.

Kirk woke. It was deep night. The wind was still, the planet desolate. He raised his head, but let it sink back in dizziness. Was there someone there? Out there - listening to them, watching them? The thought was foolish. They were alone. He must only be imagining... Still, Kirk thought he could almost feel a presence, could almost hear someone - someone, somewhere laughing.

* * *

Purple. A velvet soft cascade of purple. Drifting softness, full of warmth. James Kirk rubbed his eyes, but the purple remained. He looked around hesitantly. He was indeed in a room that was swathed in purple draperies and sumptuously decorated. He was lying in bed, beneath a white coverlet, his body clothed in a clean white robe. He was also quite alone.

Someone. Somewhere. Somehow...Someone had found him, placed him here. Where? And what had become of Spock? Kirk sat up quickly and the expected dizziness did not occur. He pressed his hand to his forehead. It felt cool. In fact, he was completely comfortable. Wherever he was, he had been there long enough to recover from his illness.

"Well, Captain Kirk. Good morning."

Kirk turned at the sound of the voice. From a lighted viewscreen, a most unusual man was speaking to him.

"I've been monitoring you. I wanted to have a chat as soon as you awakened," the yellow-haired individual said smoothly. From the screen, his deep eyes seemed to bore directly into Kirk's. "I shall be down to see you in just a moment, Captain." Kirk hardly had time to wonder who the man was before the door of the purple room slid open to admit him.

He was even more imposing a figure close up. Walking directly to the bed, he towered over Kirk. He was dressed in rich, brocade-like material, a tunic of brilliant red, gold and deep blue over blue trousers. Kirk saw that his hair seemed to glitter like spun gold and that his eyes exactly matched the blue of his costume.

"Welcome, Captain Kirk. I trust you are feeling better?"

"Yes, I am," Kirk responded. "I appreciate...you know my name? What...?"

"But of course, Captain." The stranger raised a hand. "I will explain in good time. You see, I was aware of your predicament on Manada and interceded on your behalf."

Kirk leaned back in confusion. "Where are we?"

"We are aboard my ship, the Phoenix," he answered with an expansive gesture. "My name is Osiris."

"Your ship?" Kirk looked around at the exotic decor. "Then perhaps you could take me to a Starbase. You see..."

"I know all about your military, Captain. And in spite of your interference with my affairs, I rescued you and cared for you through an illness that would most certainly have proven fatal." The stranger's tone grew increasingly haughty.

"I interfered...with what?"

"The planet Manada. It was my property."

"Yours?" Kirk sat forward, feeling a growing distrust of the man before him.

"Your invasion of my privacy was one thing, Captain. But when you disrupted my experiment, attempting to stop the war I had so carefully begun to escalate, I was forced to abandon the project."

"What are you talking about?"

"The planet. I...permitted the Manadans to destroy themselves. I suppose you don't realize just how much of the world was devastated. I augmented the power of their primitive weapons to suit my purpose." He paused reflectively. "No one was alive there, save you who had interfered. Can't you appreciate my technology, Captain?"

"Very efficient," Kirk remarked dryly.

"If you cannot deign to compliment my work on the planet, perhaps you can appreciate my other abilities. Your ship, for example," Osiris smirked.

Kirk was wary. "What about the Enterprise?"

"It was, of course, in orbit around Manada. I...removed it to a 'safe' place." Osiris only smiled at Kirk's consternation. "It is undamaged for the time being, Kirk, although not precisely in perfect working order, but be assured that your meddling in my affairs shall not go unpunished."

"What if I don't believe you?"

"There will be proof eventually, if you so desire. But I do speak the truth."

"What have you done to my ship?" Kirk demanded through clenched teeth.

"The details are unimportant now. Just understand that I am as much in control of your vessel as I am of you. For the moment, I suggest you use the remainder of our journey to recuperate from your illness. You do look somewhat fatigued, Captain."

"Where are we going?" Osiris did not answer. "What do you want with my ship?" The being's silence increased Kirk's mounting frustration. "Answer one question," he demanded evenly. "Where is Mr. Spock?"

"Oh," Osiris returned with nonchalance. "I'm afraid there was nothing I could do to help your friend, Captain. Rest well. We shall speak again soon."

Kirk waited until the purple draped door to the room closed on Osiris. Inside him was a raging fire of emotion, consuming him, consuming his will, his heart. The Enterprise. And Spock. His balled fist pounded in futility at the bed clothes. He started to get up, but just sat on the side of the bed, gripping the headboard. The flames surrounded him, and he went down to meet them. Kirk thrashed in an agony of grief and horror until he lay spent, feeling as lifeless as the ashes of a fire that has consumed itself and can burn no more.

* * *

When Kirk awoke, the lights in the purple room had been dimmed to a softer glow. He noticed a tray of food sitting on the table near the bed. So his 'host', Osiris, had kindly provided for his needs, he thought. Well, he would have nothing to do with Osiris' food. What did he want it for, anyway?

All Osiris had said rushed back into Kirk's mind, a salty tide of unbelievable sorrow. He was tired, and met the emotion now with a numbness, barely realizing the scope of his loss. The Enterprise. Under his orders, she'd been in orbit around Manada. If Osiris had destroyed her...

And Spock. The Vulcan had realized his injuries were serious; he had faced death with Kirk back there, as he had countless times before. And he had died, probably, Kirk thought, lying next to his unconscious Captain: died, in effect, alone.

Kirk eased to a sitting position on the edge of the bed, then stood, running a hand through his hair. He drew in a breath, collecting himself, seeking the reserves of strength he hoped he could find. Spock was... Kirk was alone. He would deal with first things first. It was necessary to discover what Osiris had done to the Enterprise, and save her if he could. No time to think about Spock now, no time to grieve.

Fully expecting the door to be locked, Kirk was surprised when it slid open at his touch. He stepped into the narrow, dimly lit corridor of the Phoenix. It must not be as large as his own ship, he reasoned. He walked quietly, slowly, but encountered no one. A one man ship? No. If Osiris possessed all the power he claimed, he would need a larger ship, and a crew.

Turning a corner, Kirk spotted what appeared to be a turbo-elevator. The door stood open invitingly, and Kirk was about to try finding Osiris, when a low sound drew his attention.

He turned swiftly, expecting to see someone lurking behind him, but he was alone. Then he heard it, barely audible, like someone breathing. Kirk determined that it was coming from behind one of the doors near him in the corridor.

He listened intently at first one, then another. Finally, at the third door the sound was repeated: heavy, strained breathing. Then he caught a low moan and one word, "No."

Kirk wasted no more time. He touched the door opener and immediately pushed into the room.

What he saw brought him to an abrupt stop. Lying on a long metal counter, under a glaring bright light, was Spock. As Kirk stood transfixed, another soft groan escaped the Vulcan.

Finally bringing himself out of shock, Kirk strode to Spock's side. The science officer was staring toward the ceiling, his eyes glazed, unblinking. Every few seconds his facial muscles winced. Kirk peered closer and saw that a glowing blue disc was attached to Spock's temple. Each time the alien device blinked a blue light, Kirk saw another flicker of pain cross Spock's features.

At last Kirk found his voice. "Spock?" No reaction. "Spock? Can you hear me?" Another shot of pain. "Spock! It's Jim! Do you understand? I'm here..." Frustrated, near panic, Kirk reached out, grasping Spock's bare shoulders, not really knowing whether to shake him into consciousness or hug him in relief that he was at least still alive.

At his first touch, Spock moaned and when Kirk did not remove his hands, the Vulcan's voice rose until his cries echoed in the empty room. "Spock! Please, please!" Spock tried to struggle away from Kirk's grip, his screams increasing. Kirk realized dimly that he must be causing his friend's agony. He dropped his hands, and Spock's cries subsided into weak sobs and ragged breathing. Feeling totally shaken himself, Kirk sagged against the counter.

"Oh, Spock, what's he done to you?" he murmured.

"Jim." The voice was only a whisper.

Kirk looked up. Spock had turned his head slightly to look at the Captain. "I thought you didn't know me," Jim answered.

"I was...confused momentarily, Captain," Spock sighed.

"I didn't mean to hurt you." Kirk's mind was a swirl of questions and conflicting emotions. Spock was alive, but still seriously hurt. Why had

Osiris cared for Kirk while letting his friend suffer? "What's he done?" Kirk repeated, half to himself.

Spock swallowed and inhaled before speaking. "I am not precisely sure. Somehow I am being prevented from achieving a healing trance. I...tried on Manada, when I knew infection had begun in my leg and hip. I sensed a presence, Jim. Felt...movement and when I ... awakened...I was here...quite alone and...disoriented." Exhausted and out of breath, Spock's eyes closed for a moment. The blue disc blinked, and his eyes reopened. Kirk met them but found so much pain and confusion in their depths that he could summon no words of comfort.

"We're on a ship. Prisoners of some...madman, I think. He told me you were dead."

"I also...feared for your safety, Captain. You had been quite ill."

"I'm feeling better, though tired. For some reason, this Osiris person treated my illness. I don't understand..."

"It's good you are well." Spock's hand raised toward Kirk's, then fell back. Kirk reached for it, but Spock stopped him. "No, Jim. Do not touch me. I...any sensation...is extremely painful."

Kirk felt more helpless than he had while they had been stranded on Manada. He looked away from the burning brown eyes. Spock was covered by a thin metallic sheet. Under its contours, Kirk could see the awkward twist of his broken leg and the crushed area that was his hip. Carefully, Kirk lifted the sheet. Not only had Osiris taken Spock's clothing, he had also removed the bandages and splints Kirk had applied. The areas around the fractures were blackened and diseased-looking, and the swollen flesh of Spock's entire right side was beginning to discolor. Replacing the sheet, Kirk forced himself to look at Spock's face again. The Vulcan lay as before, staring toward the ceiling, tight-lipped with the effort of control.

Kirk shivered. The temperature in the room was low. Spock must be freezing, laying on the cold metallic surface under nothing but that thin cover. He was in pain, cold, confused, but still uncomplaining. The Captain closed his eyes, thinking of McCoy's warm sickbay...Kirk mentally shook himself and new anger toward their captor supplanted his self-pity.

"He must be sadistic," he spat out angrily.

"Captain, please..."

Kirk's throat tightened. If even loud noises hurt Spock..."Look what he's done, Spock," he continued more gently. "He's put something here, against your temple. Can't you feel it?"

"I do detect a certain twinge."

"It must be how he's keeping you awake." Kirk bent to look at it more closely. "I wonder if I could remove it?"

"I do not believe it is attached within the tissue. Perhaps some adhesive was used," Spock offered.



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KIRK LEANED CLOSE, GATHERING SPOCK UP INTO HIS ARMS.

Kirk started to reach toward the device, but hesitated. "Tell me...if I hurt you." Spock nodded, and Kirk let his fingers delicately touch the flashing disc. Spock, his lips compressed tightly, gripped the sheet in both his hands. Kirk stopped.

"Please, Captain. Proceed."

Kirk tried pulling the disc away, and saw that Spock had been correct. It was attached only with adhesive and though it resisted removal, it began to come away from the skin gradually. Spock let go of the sheet and his hand clasped Kirk's forearm, his breath coming in short, tight gasps.

When at last the torturous disc fell away into Kirk's palm, Spock sighed softly but did not relax. "How do you feel, now?" Kirk whispered. The hand on his arm gripped harder and Jim saw the total demoralization in his eyes.

"I am...somewhat relieved," Spock murmured. He paused, as if deciding what to say. "Jim? Please..."

"What, Spock?" Kirk questioned. Spock closed his eyes, turning his head away. What did he want? What could his Captain do for him? Jim remembered the whispered plea a few moments ago: *Do not touch me*. As long as the blue disc exerted its pressure, Spock could not have endured any contact. Now, his hand clutched at Kirk, and the unasked request hung heavy in the air.

Kirk leaned close, gathering Spock part way up into his arms. He pulled the dark head against his chest, smoothing his hair. His hands moved down Spock's arms and back, touching, stroking, soothing.

"Captain..."

"Shhh..." Kirk interrupted, not wanting to hear Spock's protest, or break the mood. "Don't be ashamed."

"Jim." Spock relaxed into the caressing balm of Kirk's touch. His pain seemed far away, and he felt only great weakness and fatigue. He was tired, too tired to realize what was happening, too tired to be embarrassed that Jim was holding him, too tired to be shocked that he needed to feel those gentle hands on his skin. He only knew that the sensations were soothing, and he pressed closer to his Captain's warmth.

At last Kirk released Spock, easing him back down on the table. He noted with satisfaction that some of the strain in his features was gone, and smiled softly at Spock's wistful expression.

"Close your eyes. Try to sleep now."

The Captain of the Enterprise looked down at the still figure below him. Wherever they were, whatever became of the ship, whatever Osiris had in mind for them, they must not lose each other. Absently, Kirk let his hand slide from Spock's shoulder, across to his neck, finally letting it rest upon the dark hair on Spock's chest.

"Very nice, Captain."

At the sound of the whispered words, Kirk whirled. Osiris stood in the open doorway, a pleased expression on his smooth face.

"How long have you been standing there?" Kirk's voice was ominously low.

"Not long. But then, I witnessed most of your tender scene on the viewer."

"And just what do you think you're doing? First you tell me he's dead, then I find you're letting him lie with his injuries untreated." Kirk's eyes darkened as he thought of the atrocity. "And this," he said, thrusting the blue disc toward Osiris. "Just what is the purpose of this little gadget? It wasn't enough to remove his bandages, was it? You had to keep him conscious and in pain, too!"

Osiris stepped casually forward into the room, seemingly unruffled by Kirk's tirade. "Very astute, Captain. You are correct in your observations. My 'little gadget' as you call it was quite effective in breaking Mr. Spock's concentration. You see, I could not afford to have him unconscious."

"Unconscious? Unconscious!" Kirk snarled. "You very nearly have him dead!"

The attention of both men turned toward Spock who, roused by the loud talking, was tossing in pain again. Osiris stepped to the counter where the Vulcan lay. "No, Captain. Your friend is quite a strong specimen. He is most definitely weakened by his ordeal, but he will survive. I did want to have him awake when you found him, though." The golden-haired alien looked quickly at Kirk. "I had to observe your reaction. I had to see your--relationship to him." His eyes turned to the Vulcan, his voice softened. "It was a most valuable experiment. Most useful." Osiris placed his hand on Spock's chest, letting his slender fingers slide from the Vulcan's collar bone to his navel.

Spock winced as though jolted by an electrical current. Kirk stepped forward, catching hold of Osiris' arm and shoving him violently back. "Get your hands off him." He stepped between Osiris and Spock, and the stranger backed up a step, apparently realizing he'd gone too far. Osiris rubbed his arm where Kirk had grabbed it.

The Captain had noticed an extreme heat radiating from the alien when he'd touched him, but did not pause to consider the implications. "Treat him, Osiris. You have the technology. Heal him." Kirk's gaze drove deep into Osiris' blue eyes. "If you don't..."

"No threats are necessary, Captain," Osiris smiled, having regained his composure. "I shall treat your friend now, but only because it serves *my* purpose."

Four hours later, Kirk was back in the purple room, watching Spock sleep. The Vulcan was dressed in a soft robe of the same white material in which Osiris had clothed Kirk, and he seemed to be resting comfortably. Kirk, looking at the serene expression on his face, still marveled at Osiris' technological skill.

At first uncertain if he should trust Osiris, Kirk had watched the entire procedure. The operation that had taken over three hours had been performed by four drones, all controlled by Osiris, who smilingly referred to the little figures as his 'crew'. After taking extensive sensor readings of Spock's tissue,

bone structure and blood, Osiris had programmed the drones to begin the repair of his legs and hip.

A curved transparent dome had been placed over Spock's lower body and as the controls were operated by Osiris, the spread of infection was first stopped, and then reversed until the skin had returned to its normal, healthy color. Working under the dome, the drones re-set the breaks in Spock's legs and repaired the damage to his hip. Although Spock was awake, he did not suffer any discomfort at all during the procedure, merely watching the machines at their task through half-closed eyes.

Finally, Osiris activated a golden light in the dome that radiated heat into the tissue, helping to knit the bone at an amazingly rapid pace. When the dome was removed, the injuries seemed virtually healed, with only some slight scars remaining. Osiris informed Kirk that they, too, would fade quickly.

During the operation, Kirk had watched their captor closely, trying to comprehend the expression on the man's face as he directed the drones. Kirk could not decide if he simply enjoyed the technical aspects of using the machinery, or if he was truly glad to be healing his patient. After the operation, Osiris had stepped to Spock's side, as close as he had come to the Vulcan since Kirk had pushed him away. When Spock's eyes turned toward him, the alien spoke, saying softly, "I trust you are no longer in pain, Mr. Spock." And the look in his eyes was not unlike the one Kirk had seen many times in McCoy's after the doctor had completed a successful surgical procedure.

Just who was Osiris? Kirk could find no immediate answer to the question. Where did he come from and who were his people? The stranger had healed Spock, but the two Federation officers were still his prisoners, bound for a destination that only Osiris knew.

At length, Spock's eyes opened. He raised his hand, pressing it to his forehead.

"It's about time you woke up." Kirk smiled.

The Vulcan blinked once, twice, and then slowly rubbed his eyes. "Are you really here, Captain?"

"Where would I go?" Jim answered, trying to keep the concern out of his voice. Spock appeared groggy and confused.

"I must have been dreaming. You had gone away. My legs were broken and I couldn't follow you."

"Easy, Spock," Kirk pressed his shoulder.

"I did not understand. There was nothing but pain and sadness," Spock persisted worriedly.

"Do you feel any pain now?"

Gingerly, Spock ran his hand down his side to his hip, his fingers encountering only smooth fabric and firm flesh. He slowly bent his knees, first the left, then the right and then the left again, as if he didn't believe he could actually move them.

Kirk smiled down at him. "That's better, isn't it?"

Spock lifted an eyebrow. "Yes. There is a little soreness in the joints... Captain, what has happened?"

"Relax, science officer." Kirk was relieved at the return to lucidity in Spock's tone. "Osiris was persuaded to take care of you is all that happened. And I must say, he seems to have done an excellent job. Don't you remember anything? He used no drugs during the procedure."

Spock raised up on one elbow. "I remember very little of the last few days. I was alone, being kept awake through some sort of stimulus. Then, you were there..." His voice dropped as if he suddenly recalled Kirk's comforting touch. "I do feel better now, Jim," he finished simply.

Kirk looked at his first officer for a long moment. So much had happened so quickly. All the events, the war on Manada, Spock's injuries, his own illness, Osiris telling him Spock was dead and his subsequent treatment of the Vulcan, merged into a nightmare of unpleasant emotions. Now, both Kirk and Spock were physically improved, yet they were still in trouble. They were being held captive aboard the Phoenix, and the fate of the Enterprise was still in doubt.

At last, Kirk spoke softly and with the conviction born of command. "I'm glad you'll be on your feet soon. It's going to take both of us to defeat him."

* * *

Spock lay peacefully beneath the white coverlet. To any casual observer, he would have appeared to be resting. Only his eyes betrayed the fact that his mind was alert. While he allowed his body to conserve energy and recuperate from the long ordeal of pain, Spock's mind was busy sorting through the information his Captain had given him about Osiris.

It was good to be able to think again, to concentrate. No longer troubled by the intrusive pain in his legs or Osiris' artificial stimulus, the Vulcan's mind hungrily analyzed the meager facts Kirk had provided. For Spock, to think was to be, and exercising his logical, deductive reasoning was better than medicine to his exhausted system.

Kirk had told him all he knew of Osiris and the alien ship they were aboard. The man exhibited a pompous arrogance, obviously assuming himself to be a superior being. He was used to having his own way, as evidenced by the fact that he was angry with Kirk for interfering in his affairs. And he had a low regard for primitive beings, witnessed by the destruction of Manada. Arrogance, selfishness, high technology -- Spock turned the characteristics over in his mind and reached an inevitable conclusion. Osiris meant to deal harshly with them, and with their ship. The Captain had been correct in his statement that it would take a combined effort to overcome him.

Believing it better to begin immediately, Kirk had left Spock alone while he went in search of clues to Osiris' background and his plans for his captives. Having considered all the information Kirk had provided, Spock now sought to remember all he himself knew of the alien. His information was exceedingly incomplete, though. His memories of the preceeding hours were clouded by the constant, debilitating agony and he could recall clearly only the image of Kirk.

Yet he thought he had been under someone's observing eyes for most of the time, both on the planet and aboard the alien ship. Spock decided that he had been kept awake so that someone could see into his conscious mind. Yes...his mind had been touched, but what else? His body? Jim had touched him; he knew he remembered a gentle, secure, warm feeling. Still - had there not been something else, another, alien hand?

His attention was suddenly drawn to the open door of the chamber. One of the little drones entered, depositing a tray of food at the bedside table. Spock glanced hungrily at the food, realizing that it had been some time since he had consumed any nourishment. He wondered whether it contained animal matter and was about to take a closer look when Osiris stepped through the doorway. He activated a control, sending the drone away.

"Is the food not to your liking, Mr. Spock?" the alien inquired.

"May I ask what it is made of?" Spock asked quietly.

"It is vegetable protein. I am afraid I cannot serve you and Captain Kirk what you may be used to, but as you will be my guests for quite some time..."

"This is perfectly acceptable, Osiris. Vulcans do not consume animal flesh."

"Yes, I remember now." Osiris smiled. "I have always been intrigued by your race. Now I will have the chance to study one of its members more closely."

"You have already begun your studies, I assume," Spock returned.

"Why, yes, I have. And the interesting thing is that, even removed as you are from your natural environment, you continue to behave in a predictable manner. Is this because you are Vulcan, or because of your military training, I wonder? The situation has not caused a change in you, has it Mr. Spock?"

"Did you expect that it would?"

Osiris hesitated. "I am not sure. But it is interesting, this new study on which I have embarked. What began in a fit of anger has brought much more gain than I originally anticipated. You and your Captain shall provide me - and my descendant - with much pleasure." A soft, far-away glow lit Osiris' blue eyes.

"Your 'descendant'?" Spock questioned, hoping to gain some concrete information at last.

Osiris snapped back to attention and cleared his throat, showing that he thought he had inadvertently revealed too much about himself. He stepped closer to Spock's bed, looking down at the Vulcan with keen eyes.

"You come from a very proud and self-assured people, don't you, Mr. Spock," the oily voice began. "You do not begin to comprehend me and my ship." He smiled, drifting into his own reverie again, his tone becoming a hypnotic, chanting sound. "You are wondering what I am, a benevolent mentor who has rescued you from certain death, or the ruthless incarnation of an evil scientist from an Earthly fairy-tale." He looked deep into Spock's eyes. "What shall it be?" he whispered.

Spock stiffened mentally, suspecting that Osiris meant to try to enter his

mind. He was thus unprepared for the change in the alien's manner.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Spock? Your injuries should be well on their way to being completely healed," Osiris said solicitously, reaching forward to pull back the coverlet.

Spock felt the heat of Osiris' slim hands as he ran them along his legs. "No pain?" he questioned politely. "That is quite encouraging. But, there *was* massive damage to your pelvic bone..." He gently loosened the tie on Spock's robe and opened it, exposing the length of the Vulcan's body. His hand lingered a moment, then withdrew as Spock's muscles tensed involuntarily.

Although he had never liked the invasion of privacy most doctors practiced, Spock had come to accept being observed by strangers for medical reasons, and thought it would be unwise to protest to Osiris. The stranger was obviously an unstable individual, and if he reacted with fear or distrust, Spock worried that some more arrogant behavior might surface. Still, he could not help drawing back as Osiris' long fingers traced the pale scar on his hip.

"What is wrong, Mr. Spock?" Osiris questioned with feigned innocence. "You react as though you dislike my touching you."

"My injuries are quite healed, sir," Spock said brusquely, attempting to turn away and cover himself with his robe.

Osiris' touch changed then, from a delicate investigation to a commanding pressure. He pulled Spock back to face him and the Vulcan winced as the alien heat seared into his recently damaged skin. "But I saw your Captain touch you, hold you. That appeared most pleasing." Osiris slid both his hands along the length of Spock's torso. "Is it pleasing when I touch you here?" he asked, his lips twisted with perverted interest. The fiery hands began a painful grasping.

Into the shock of the violating touch, an unfamiliar emotion ripped through Spock's mind. Revulsion, laced with panic, shook him and he trembled physically. He sat up, grasping Osiris' neck in his hand, seeking the correct place to apply pressure.

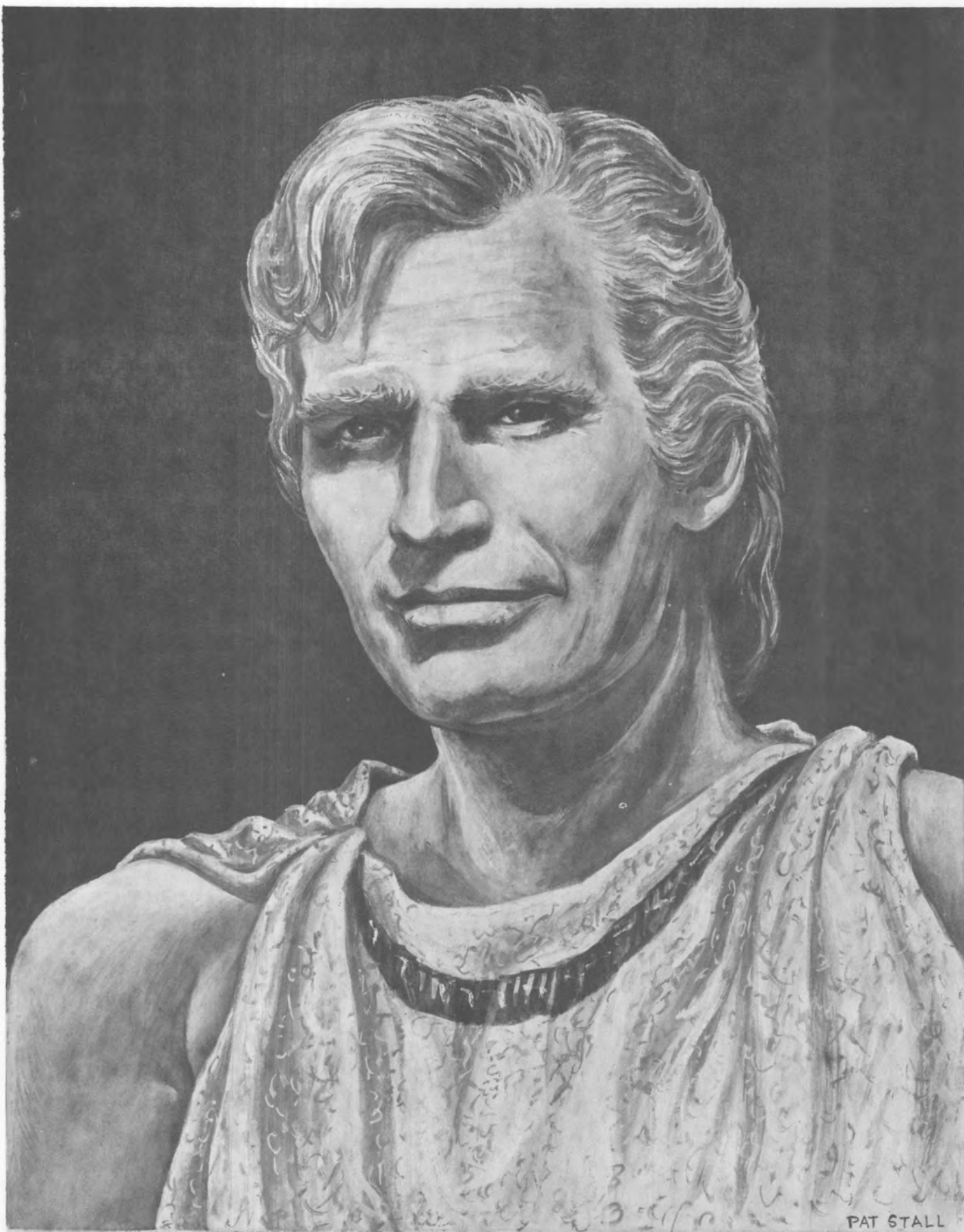
The alien did not collapse as expected but turned, an expression of surprise crossing his features. His animal leer grew into a throaty chuckle. He placed his hands on either side of Spock's head, exerting a pressure that caused the Vulcan to gasp.

There was a roaring, rushing, screaming sound in Spock's ears. The purple room careened into a whirlwind of brilliance around him. Spock closed his eyes, trying to fight off Osiris' mind, but he was too late to stop the invasion. A golden burst of light, hotter than fire, more dazzling than any sun, exploded in his head and became Osiris. And through the cacophony of noise, he heard the alien's voice:

I AM OSIRIS. I AM THE SUN. THE PHOENIX. I AM THE ONLY, THE FOREVER...

// I am Spock // his own mind insisted.

YOU DO NOT MATTER. IT IS I. I AM ALL. I SHALL OWN YOU. CONTROL YOU.



PAT STALL

"YOU AND YOUR CAPTAIN SHALL PROVIDE ME -- AND MY DESCENDANT -- WITH MUCH PLEASURE."

The world dropped away, and Spock was falling, every nerve peirced with an excruciating desperation. He collapsed backward, his attacker following, smothering him with his presence, wallowing in his mind. He was being taken, consumed, devoured.

Withering heat fanned through him, and he felt himself falter, his precarious grip on self and sanity weaken. Into that weakness, the screaming, haunting voice swirled stronger, more terrible than before.

IT IS I WHO COMMANDS. I AM THE ONLY. THE PHOENIX.

// No. I am Spock. I am a Vulcan. //

AN INSECT. I AM THE FIRE. CONSUMING, BUT NEVER CONSUMED. ASHES BUT NEVER DEAD. I AM THE FOREVER.

How easy to fall, to merge into the fire surrounding him. *No. Never give up. Must survive.* From somewhere deep within Spock found a last reserve of will, a reason, a need as great as the consuming evil that had invaded him. Jim...if Spock were lost, the Captain would be left alone. Jim! His mind reached out, grasped as it had been grasped, and a tendril of thought broke through, searching, touching the attacker's mind.

Searing heat, corrupting power, flashing colors all gold and red and purple and blue mixed in an eternity of endless existence. Spock had reached the mind, yet he recoiled from the maelstrom of agony he encountered.

He drew back, his defenses slipping, his mind bared to the burning, the fire consuming his naked self.

NO MORE. ENOUGH FOR NOW. BUT KNOW WHAT I AM.

Spock writhed. His mind heaving, thrashing, he forced the door of thought to close. With his last strength, he shut out the attacker. At last, as darkness enveloped him and quiet dragged him down, the unrelenting pressure evaporated and silently...disappeared.

It was over. Tentatively, Spock opened his eyes. He was alone, in body and mind.

His mind. He alone inhabited it now, but the touch of the other lingered. Spock shuddered, a long, convulsive tremor that lasted several minutes and made his breathing difficult. A chill spread through his body and he realized his clothes were still open. He reached out to cover himself and cringed away from the sweat-moistened surface of his skin.

Gingerly, he pulled the blankets up, drawing his legs tight to his stomach. He turned, his back to the door of the room, his arm hiding his face from the light. He felt soiled, inside and out, made unclean by the violent attack on his person and his mind.

Never, never had he encountered any being so formidable, so corrupt. He knew now that it possessed an unspeakable omnipotence, that he and his Captain were in very grave danger indeed.

His Captain. Soon Jim would return. Spock did not want to be found as he was, a trembling mass of shame and weakness. He must compose himself, hang on to his resources, his control.

Slowly, forcibly, his breathing calmed and he straightened. Still lying on his side, Spock uncovered his face and looked around him. Solid shapes and opaque colors met his eyes and steadied him. He must think, use his mind, his logic, to revive his spirit and his determination.

He had been invaded by the alien's mind, but he had fought back. The knowledge of his small success strengthened him. Osiris had seen into him, stripped his soul, learned what the Vulcan was and what was important to him, but Spock had also gleaned much from the contact. He knew Osiris now. There was much to consider, many facts to correlate.

* * *

When he again returned to the corridor, Kirk made his way at once to the turbo-elevator. He was determined to do as much investigation as possible on his own while Spock recuperated.

It was Osiris' technology that bothered him the most. As he descended to the lower level of the ship, Kirk considered the efficiency of the drones as they operated on Spock, the lightning speed of the healing device. What would he find in the engineering department, he wondered. Would it be too complex even for Spock to handle?

From the elevator, Kirk made his way through a narrow, dark corridor. The metal of the bulkheads was a deep blue, not unlike the shade of Osiris' eyes. Kirk walked slowly, almost expecting to be caught by a crewman as he stealthily crept along. Then he reminded himself that Osiris had no crew - not a living one, at any rate.

After rounding a sharp turn, Kirk came to a large door. He stopped, surprised somewhat at its decoration. It was covered with a tapestry-like cloth, made of metallic threads. Yellow, gold, orange, red, blue and white merged together, depicting tongues of fire. The flames rose from a pyre and were portrayed as reaching almost to a bright sun in the sky.

Glancing around, Kirk saw a wall switch that activated the door when he pressed it. The tapestry, which had appeared heavy, was drawn back like a silky curtain and receded into a niche in the wall.

It was like stepping into another century. Kirk stared at the instrumentation in Osiris' engineering department. At the back of the room, behind a grid, small devices hummed with activity. The engines that powered the Phoenix were of extremely advanced design, tiny in comparison to those on Kirk's own ship. They seemed to have built into them a self-renewing power source. Set on automatic, the engines appeared not to need anything more than superficial monitoring by the drones that stood silently along one wall.

Kirk stepped close to one of them now. The drone was barely one meter in height, sturdily built of a grey metallic substance. The dull color was in direct variance with the lush decoration of the rest of Osiris' person and his vessel. The four arm-like appendages which Kirk had seen in use during Spock's

operation were now retracted into the machine. He had noted that they could be extended in any combination and to any length, achieving a dexterity unmatched by human hands.

The rest of the machinery was completely alien to him. One wall was banked with a maze of the strangest looking dials and lights Kirk had ever seen. The thought crossed his mind that Scotty would love to investigate the foreign apparatus, and was immediately followed by the chilling realization that Scott, McCoy, Uhura, his whole crew might not even be alive at this moment.

Kirk turned to cast one more glance around the chamber. He noticed that a lighted panel along one wall displayed star charts of the galaxy. Kirk moved closer to it and found the marked path set by Osiris. He located their last known position, Manada, and realized that they were to travel nearly halfway across the galaxy to a small solar system, obscure on the edge of the explored universe. A large bright star with one planet seemed to be their intended destination. Osiris' home? And was this where he had sent the Enterprise?

There was nothing more he could determine alone. When Spock had rested they would return together, perhaps to seek a way to change course back to a Federation star base. The extremely advanced technology might prove too difficult to tamper with though, even if they were able to put Osiris out of commission.

Kirk met no resistance on his way to the bridge. Not even the mechanical presence of the drones disturbed him, and he wondered idly where Osiris was.

When the door slid back, all thought of their danger was momentarily forgotten, overshadowed by the opulence of the control center of Osiris' ship. The bridge of the Phoenix was smaller than that of his Enterprise, but though the instrumentation was more familiar looking than what he had seen in engineering, Kirk knew he was definitely in Osiris' domain.

The ornate, gold-encrusted command chair seemed incongruous, surrounded by the twin banks of controls that flanked the room. Kirk thought how much more functional his own comfortable leather seat looked compared to the purple upholstery. Would he ever sit there again, in command of his own vessel, free from Osiris' mad captivity?

At length he allowed himself to look at the screen displaying a panoramic view of the space through which they were traveling. *The stars.* A sense of futile longing rose in him, which he stubbornly tried to fight down. Ever since their problems on Manada had begun, Kirk realized, both he and Spock had been experiencing feelings of extreme sadness and hopelessness. Was it the ordeal of what they were going through, or was it something else, something about Osiris' presence that caused the emotionalism?

Abruptly, Kirk's thoughts returned to the immediate, his gaze tensing. The stars cast before him were arrayed in an unfamiliar configuration, confirming that the course of the ship was carrying them into a distant section of the galaxy, far, far from home and safety.

Kirk spun around when the door to the bridge clicked open. Osiris stood framed in the doorway, wearing an expression Kirk had not seen before. There was a harsh glint in the electric blue eyes, deepening them almost to black,

and the stance of his tall body betrayed an inner tension. Until now, Kirk had seen only suave, controlled haughtiness in Osiris and was unsure as to the meaning of the new emotion he displayed. Osiris took a step forward, his features drawing into a scowl.

"So you have decided to tour my ship, Kirk." The voice was tight, and nearly expressionless. Anger, Kirk decided, assuming the alien was annoyed with his intrusion. "Well, what do you think of my bridge?" Osiris continued. "I do hope you are suitably impressed."

Kirk indicated the viewscreen, deciding to meet the stranger's anger with his own calm. "Would you mind telling me where we are, and where we are going?"

Unexpectedly, Osiris laughed. "I would not mind at all, Captain." He stepped to his golden chair, seating himself regally and indicated a gilt sculpture on the wall. The central design consisted of a large, bright star with one satellite. Osiris indicated the lone planet with pride, and some of his good-humored arrogance returned. "This is where we are going, Captain. My home planet, Heliopolis. Your ship, the Enterprise, is already there. I transported it away from Manada and sent it there to wait for us."

"My ship..." Kirk began, unable to subdue the anger that rose in him when Osiris so casually mentioned his capture of the Enterprise.

"Undamaged, never fear, Captain," Osiris smoothly interrupted.

"Then as long as we're already on our way, would you care to inform me why we're being taken there?" Kirk asked evenly.

Osiris turned away from the sculpture, an impatient scowl again crossing his face. "Because, Captain Kirk, I wish it. You must realize that you and Mr. Spock are now - and forever - under my jurisdiction."

"I do not recognize your jurisdiction. And I must warn you that Mr. Spock and I are not about to accept being your prisoners. My science officer and I have frequently been quite successful in overcoming supposedly superior technology." His tone coldly challenging, Kirk was ready for Osiris' angry response, but still shocked by his words.

"You may be prepared to try to escape me, but I think you should reconsider in the case of your science officer."

"What do you mean by that?" Kirk demanded.

For answer, Osiris activated a switch on the console before him and the image on the screen was transformed to a view of the purple quarters he and Spock had been given. Spock sat stiffly at the table, deep in meditation, his fingers steepled before his face, his hair slightly disarranged.

"I wonder why he is concentrating so intently. And look," Osiris pointed, "his tray of food is still untouched. Something must be very disturbing to him. A pity - he will need sustenance to help the healing of his poor, broken limbs. My technology is great, but..."

"Just what are you getting at, Osiris?" Kirk snarled, tired of the alien's

condescending tone.

Osiris smiled. "Evidently *something* is troubling Mr. Spock. Would he tell us if we asked? I think not. Your officer is quite reserved. Would he even tell you alone, Captain?" Osiris seemed to enjoy Kirk's expression of confusion and anger. He sighed patiently, his tone dripping sarcasm. "Perhaps this problem is too great to reveal even to his intimate friend." The blue eyes closed, and Kirk watched as Osiris' breathing stilled for a moment. "Yes, yes," he whispered. "Control, suppression, secret turmoil." The eyes snapped open alertly, the voice returned to normal pitch. "A pity he won't tell you himself, Captain Kirk. Shall I relieve him of the burden?"

Osiris reached forward, selecting a tape from a container and inserting it into a playback area of the console. The picture on the viewscreen changed again.

Kirk watched, frozen by shock, as the recorded image of what had taken place between Osiris and his friend moved on the huge screen. He saw the struggling figures, heard soft moans of pain and surprise from the Vulcan. He was sickened by the look on Osiris' face, at the physical contact the alien forced on Spock. In mental contact, too, Osiris was the stronger, and Spock's cries rose to echo in Kirk's ears maddeningly. Under the pressure of Osiris' telepathic grip, Spock bucked and trembled - and Kirk saw it all.

It was his friend on that screen, Spock, the Vulcan who so guarded his privacy and personal life. For him to have been touched so - it was all Kirk could do to keep from trembling physically as the images and their implications reeled in his brain. He could not have despised Osiris more if the alien had attacked him instead.

And when it was over, when Spock's limp form fell back on the bed, when Osiris stalked from the room showing an odd mixture of anger and triumph, and when the image faded from the screen, Kirk turned disgusted eyes on the figure in the golden chair. Osiris had been angry when he had entered the bridge, but not at Kirk, the Captain realized now, for Spock had resisted and rejected him. Spock had not submitted, but the thought that no extensive physical damage had been done to his friend could not stop the explosion in Kirk. Osiris' attack on Spock had been violent, and Kirk responded in kind.

There was no diplomacy, no mercy in him, nothing of his Starfleet training in understanding remained as he wheeled on his enemy. In one moment of primitive outrage, he leaped forward to strike the regal alien.

The last thing he saw was Osiris' feral smile as the white-hot grip of the stranger's hands came together and closed on his neck.

* * *

Blackness. Numbing weakness. Dizzying pain. Every nerve in Kirk's body ached as though it had been electrified. How long he had been unconscious he did not know, but an underlying emotion was urging him awake. Desperately, blindly, he struck out, still trying to destroy the object of his hate.

"Captain, please." There was quiet urgency in the deep voice, and a new sensation suffused Kirk's throbbing muscles. A soft cloth seemed to be bathing his face, and a firm hand pinned his thrashing arms.

He opened his eyes. "Spock." The word was almost a sob, one of relief and worry combined.

"Captain, please relax," Spock repeated. He checked the bandage over the deep gash in Kirk's forehead after wiping the perspiration that had broken out on his Captain's face during his struggle to consciousness. "You must have fallen after he administered a nerve-jamming blow to your spinal cord. Rather like a Vulcan nerve pinch, but much more...efficient. You've been unconscious for two hours."

Kirk lay back, watching Spock's deft movements, and taking in his surroundings. He lay on one of the beds in the purple cabin. Looking beyond, he could see that the covers had been discreetly pulled up on the bed where Spock had been attacked.

"Are you all right, Spock?" he asked, concern edging his voice.

"Of course, Captain." The Vulcan did not look up and began moving away.

Kirk reached out, wincing as he flexed his muscles, and placed his hands on Spock's arms, turning the tense form to face him. "No, I don't think you are."

Something flickered in the brown eyes. Kirk recognized apprehension and deep shame. Spock's voice was low, almost timid. "You...know what happened?" When Kirk nodded, Spock's eyes closed and he compressed his lips. "I...am not hurt, Jim. Is this why you fought...him?"

Kirk nodded again and tried to sit up, but a muscle spasm convulsed his entire frame. Spock held him until it passed, the two of them clutching each other's shoulders in what was their only reality and security.

"Very touching, gentlemen." The arrogant voice of Osiris cut into the scene. "I have only to monitor you to insure myself of certain entertainment." They heard his amused laughter. It sounded slightly mechanical over the intercom.

Kirk felt Spock's muscles stiffen in embarrassment. The Vulcan let his hands drop from his Captain's shoulder and his eyes closed. Kirk was amazed to see the meakness of Spock's demeanor.

"Spock," he whispered urgently. The dark eyes raised and Kirk held them with his own. He put all his feelings of affection and comfort into his gaze and saw Spock relax, drawing strength from the reassuring light in his Captain's eyes.

The self-satisfied chuckle came over the intercom again. "Good night, gentlemen. Sleep well." The laughter ended and they knew Osiris had left them alone, for the time being.

Kirk let out his breath in a long sigh. Too much, he thought, it was too much to bear. How long were they supposed to hold out against the pain of fighting Osiris combined with worry for the safety of the Enterprise? He glanced at the Vulcan sitting silently beside him. Spock was here, with him, and perhaps together they could do what neither of them could accomplish alone.

He put his hand on Spock's arm. "We can't let him get to us, Spock. We've got to hang on to our sense of direction to get out of this."

The Vulcan looked directly at Kirk, swallowed and straightened his spare shoulders. "Correct, Captain." He paused briefly. "Were you able to make an inspection of the ship?"

Kirk grimaced. "I saw a lot, but I'm not sure how it all adds up. First, whatever form of energy that drives this ship is advanced far beyond anything I've seen or even read about. Right now we're travelling to his home planet, Heliopolis, located on the far edge of the galaxy. He told me he sent the Enterprise there already. I'm not sure I can believe him. What I don't understand is why this ship isn't there yet, and how he could have transported the Enterprise across such a distance so quickly."

"Apparently," Spock answered, "he possesses some device that is capable of transporting a ship much further than our own similar mechanism. It is probable that the device is located on board. If it is, it should be possible to determine if it can be adjusted to beam you and I to the planet."

Kirk nodded. "But there's something else. We can't overlook the fact that he may be lying about the Enterprise."

"True, Captain. We have seen no proof of his claim. Yet what would he gain by lying?" Spock asked quietly. "We are still in his custody."

"Maybe he wants us to view the situation as hopeless so we won't try to escape. But it doesn't make sense that he would hold the Enterprise over our heads if he had destroyed it completely. What I can't figure is what he wants with my ship when he has -- this." Kirk gestured around the sumptuously decorated room.

"I believe he views the Enterprise as a plaything, just as he does us. Having no other of his kind..."

"What do you mean, 'no other of his kind'?"

"When I...came into contact with his mind, I found out who he is." He paused, considering the images he had encountered. Kirk waited until Spock seemed ready to explain further.

"You yourself spoke about the nature of this ship, Captain. Osiris said its name is the Phoenix, but inside my mind, he said he was the Phoenix."

"He -- the Phoenix?"

"He wanted me to know him, Jim, at least he did at that moment. Before, it was as though he was trying to hide what he was, changing the subject when he inadvertently mentioned a 'descendant', for instance. I suppose it could have been that in his anger toward me..." Spock's voice trailed off.

"What did he tell you, Spock?" Kirk questioned gently.

Spock shook his head. "Some of the images are still unclear, Jim. They were too confused, too violent. But at the beginning, when he first...touched me, he was almost screaming in my mind. He called himself the Phoenix, the Only, the Forever."

"Forever? You mean as in immortal?"

"Perhaps. He also said he was 'the Fire, consuming, but never consumed, ashes but never dead.' He could have merely been making claims in order to subjugate me, but..."

Kirk looked thoughtful. "The Phoenix. You know, I found a tapestry covering the door to engineering that would seem to go along with what he said. It represented a huge fire. The Phoenix in literature was supposed to rise out of the ashes of its own fire, wasn't it?"

"Affirmative, Captain. From what I know of Earth literature, everything about Osiris fits the image. In ancient Egypt, the god of the sun was named Osiris, and the new bird that rose from the fire carried the ashes to the 'city of the sun' -- Heliopolis. Also, most representations of the bird depict its feathers of the same colors that Osiris wears."

"And the Phoenix was the only one of its kind, unique," Kirk mused. "Hmnn... if he is the Phoenix, the bird in the Earth legend, then stopping him will prove difficult."

"Captain, I believe you have finally mastered the art of understatement," Spock responded.

Kirk shot a glance at the Vulcan and relaxed for the first time in many days when he saw the slight, amused glimmer in his eyes. If Spock was still troubled by Osiris' attack, he was successfully controlling his feelings on the subject. Kirk smiled back at him fondly. Then the Captain of the Enterprise and his First Officer began planning an attempt to escape from their captor.

* * *

An opportunity to escape did not come for quite some time. For nearly a week, according to Spock's internal clock, the door to their cabin remained sealed. Twice a day, meals were delivered by a drone that also brought them fresh linen and clothing.

Even with sufficient food to eat, and the more comfortable trousers and tunics Osiris provided, the two prisoners did not accept their situation. Their main topic of conversation centered on a way out of their difficulties. Even though Osiris had virtually ignored them for some time, they still worried that he monitored the room.

On the sixth morning, Kirk made his now-routine check on the bolted door. To his surprise, it slid open at his touch. Spock, instantly at his side, caught his arm. "It could be dangerous to wander about this ship unarmed, Captain."

Kirk looked at his First Officer. "I'll consider myself properly cautioned. You have to admit, though, that we're not getting anywhere just sitting around."

"True," Spock nodded, "but there must be a reason the door is open today."

"I'm sure there's a reason. He's gotten bored letting us just sit around, and wants us to try to escape. The suddenly open door means he's up to something, but I'm not going to stay in this purple dungeon another minute!"

"Emotionally expressed," the Vulcan nodded gravely, "but my sentiments exactly."

Together, they proceeded down the deserted corridors of the Phoenix. They were cautious, but Osiris did not appear.

"Would you feel his presence if he were watching us, Spock?" Kirk asked.

"I do not believe he is monitoring us at the present time, Captain. Yet," Spock hesitated, "I am sure he is aware of what we are doing."

After investigating several areas of the ship, they found what appeared to be a transporter room. It consisted of an alcove and a panel dotted with control dials. Spock immediately bent to examine the system and after Kirk watched impatiently for several minutes, the Vulcan rose, wearing a solemn expression.

"This appears to be a standard transportation device, Captain, capable of the type of short-distance beaming our technology has mastered. But, through the use of these controls, it can be re-set to transport over greater distances."

"Could we beam ourselves to Heliopolis?" asked Kirk.

"Unknown, Captain. There are some devices here whose purpose I cannot determine. However, I have located Heliopolis on the sensor. It is 2,000 parsecs away, bearing 543 mark 80."

"Is the Enterprise in the vicinity?" Kirk asked anxiously.

It was a moment before Spock looked up from the sensor, his expression confirming Kirk's worst fears. "The ship is there, Jim, apparently held in some sort of force field."

The words were like a blow. "Well, that proves he was telling the truth. He does have my ship." Kirk moved closer, his voice tight. "Is there life aboard?"

Spock reached out to touch another of the controls. A sudden short circuit sent sparks flying and the Vulcan was thrown back against the wall. Kirk bent over him, but the Vulcan seemed uninjured.

Seconds later, as Spock got to his feet, the door to the room burst open. Osiris stormed in and walked up to them, his eyes blazing. "Well, you thought you could play with my technology, did you? You would have destroyed yourselves by using this device, gentlemen. I had to short circuit the system to stop you in time! I transported the Enterprise successfully over such a distance because it was prepared first. Otherwise, all life and systems aboard would have been destroyed. But you would have sent yourselves on a trip through the empty desolation of space and two frozen corpses would have landed on my planet! Is that what you want? Death in the cold of space?" Osiris' voice rose to a shriek; he was out of control, more violent than Kirk or Spock had yet seen him.

"I will not allow you to destroy yourselves! If you are to die, it will be by my hand alone."

"Then kill us now, Osiris," Kirk said, stepping boldly forward. "We won't live in your cage. You will not be entertained by us."

Osiris paused in his tirade, his breathing slowing to normal. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? I could kill you, both of you, but I would still have the company of your shipmates, wouldn't I, or had you forgotten about them, Kirk?" The voice was harsh, teasing.

Before Kirk could reply, Spock interrupted. "Osiris, how did you prepare the Enterprise when you beamed it to Heliopolis?"

The question distracted Osiris' attention from Kirk. "Do you think you might prepare yourselves if I explain, Mr. Spock? Tut, tut, not fair of you."

The Vulcan's gaze leveled on his opponent. "No, I am merely curious. For you to be entertained by the Captain and I, our inquisitive natures must be stimulated, otherwise we shall become quite boring and repetitive in our escape attempts."

"Yes, we are curious about you," Kirk put in, immediately following Spock's lead. "As explorers, you must realize that we constantly seek new information from the beings we come into contact with."

Osiris chuckled. "A very fine display, Captain - Mr. Spock. Very well. I shall tell you, for all the good it will do. Your inferior intelligence will not be able to operate my machinery, anyway. Captain, you need no longer worry about the safety of your crew. I prepared the Enterprise by suspending its life forces and energy output. It is there, at Heliopolis, waiting for me, sleeping - until I awake it. And it shall wait for a thousand years, if I wish."

Kirk stared at the complacent alien, all hope of rescue fading as the picture of his time-suspended ship grew in his mind. "Release it, Osiris. There are over 400 people aboard. They have their own lives to lead. Keep us, if you must, but let them go," he said quietly.

"No, Captain, I will not. It is mine now, and I do not give up my possessions." Osiris sighed, then smiled companionable. "You two are interesting in so many ways. The way you communicated just now, without rehearsal, was quite exciting. Will you do it again?"

Kirk cast a glance at Spock, and asked a question with his eyes.

Osiris did not miss the look. "No, Captain. Physical attempts are frowned upon, as you saw before."

Frustrated, angry, Kirk fumed inwardly. No matter what he said or did, he was always caught in the cul-de-sac of Osiris' reasoning. Now the alien was even watching for a look to pass between the friends.

"Then we shall cease to be amusing, Osiris," he said, taking a step for the door. "We shall remain in our quarters, doing nothing, until you release my ship, or free us, or both. We will not be your puppets."

"You shall be tortured, and starved to death," Osiris threatened.

"To die for one's principles is to die with dignity," Spock returned coldly.

Osiris stared at the pair, confounded for once by their determination. "So you will do nothing? I shall change that resolve, gentlemen. For I shall force

you to do things, the things I want. And you will dance at the end of the strings I pull."

In one stride, Osiris stepped to the transporter console. He flipped a switch and Kirk felt a numbing wave hit him as a force field effectively pinned him where he stood. Spock reacted quickly, but before he could move away, Osiris reached out, clamping both hands together at the back of the Vulcan's neck. Spock crumpled to the floor. Kirk watched, unable to move or speak, as Osiris lifted his friend and carried him through the door.

The Captain made increasingly violent attempts to move, but as he did so, his strength was depleted by the force field. Finally, gasping for breath, Kirk gave in and remained quiet, immobilized. His head spinning, weakness and nausea pressed in around him and the transporter room grew dark.

* * *

"You fainted, Captain Kirk." Osiris' voice was fuzzy, his face indistinct. "Captain? Can you hear me?" Kirk felt a warm hand touch his face and pat it lightly as if to wake him. Then a cool damp cloth bathed the dark away.

Kirk reached out, fully conscious now, and pushed off Osiris' solicitous hand.

"What's wrong, Captain?" The voice affected hurt. "I watched Mr. Spock care for you in just this manner."

Kirk struggled to a sitting position. "I don't need your help." He started to get up from the floor.

The heat of the alien hand pressed him back. "I do not understand. Explain, please. You and Mr. Spock help each other, but you will not let me..."

"Forget it, Osiris." Kirk stood this time, ignoring the wounded tone of Osiris' words. "Where is Spock?"

The alien rose also. "I thought you might want to find him," he began, his voice regaining its usual sneer. "He is somewhere on the lower deck. Look for him, Captain, and quickly. You fainted over three hours ago. And remember," Osiris caught his arm as he started toward the door, "we were discussing the freezing cold of space."

Kirk hesitated only long enough to take in Osiris' words, then he shook free of his hand and strode out. Osiris watched him go, standing quietly for several minutes. Finally the alien whispered, "You will regret pushing me away, Captain. I shall not be rejected again."

Kirk wandered the quiet corridors of the ship alone. The anxious minutes passed, and he still found no sign of Spock. Osiris had hidden him somewhere on the lower deck, he had said, but the corridors were long and possessed many closed doors. Kirk tried each one, usually seeing empty rooms, sometimes finding equipment or deactivated drones.

Panting, he leaned against a bulkhead to rest. Exhaustion threatened to overwhelm him. The force field had drained his strength as effectively as Osiris'

nerve block. The thought of the alien's powerful blow reminded him of Spock, and he set out again, walking rapidly toward a single door at the far end of the corridor.

As soon as he approached it, he knew he had found the right place. A cold draft was seeping into the corridor. Kirk tried the door and finding it unlocked, hurriedly stepped inside.

The temperature was colder than anything he ever remembered feeling, and he was momentarily glad he did not have a tricorder to tell him the exact degree. The room was dimly lighted and Kirk's eyes moved quickly, almost frantically searching for Spock.

The Vulcan had crawled close to a small light panel set into the far wall. Even in silhouette, Kirk could see the huddled figure, limbs curved tightly against the body in a pitiful attempt to conserve warmth.

Shuddering from the cold himself, Kirk rushed over, kneeling behind the Vulcan. Spock lay on his side, barely conscious. Kirk realized that he had been knocked out by Osiris' nerve blow when he had been put in the room, thus eliminating the possibility that he could have compensated for the reduced temperature. And he had been exposed to it for hours by now. Remembering the close heat of the Vulcan's quarters aboard the Enterprise, Kirk reached out, touching the chilled, bare arm. "Spock?"

"Jim?" he whispered as his eyes struggled to focus. "How did you find me?"

"I've been searching..."

"I thought...you'd never find me...floating way up here..." The tense lines in his face relaxed into a slight, vacant smile.

"What? Spock, come on. I'll get you out of here."

"No...too tired...must...sleep..." The drowsy voice trailed away as the eyelids sank closed.

"Interesting, isn't it, Captain?" The chilling tones of Osiris echoed in the empty room. "He is already exhibiting signs of succumbing to the cold."

Kirk ignored the teasing words, and bent close to his friend. "Spock, wake up..."

"Closer, Captain, closer. You will warm your friend, won't you? Touch him, hold him, he needs your warmth."

"Let us out of here!" Kirk shouted without taking his eyes from Spock. "Vulcans are less resistant to cold than humans. He's dying."

"I know. But you won't let that happen, will you? You'll help him, won't you, Captain?"

"We won't be your entertainment, Osiris."

"I think you should reconsider." The voice was patient, as if Osiris were trying to teach a disobedient child.



Kirk looked down at the Vulcan, noticing that his breathing had slowed markedly. If Spock went under, he would never be able to wake him. *No.* Osiris couldn't have patched the Vulcan back together only to kill him now. "You can help him, Osiris," Kirk insisted.

There was a bemused snort from the intercom. "I could, but I won't."

He won't ... he's insane, Kirk thought. Spock's form went slack under his touch, the life in the body drifting away, slowly, slowly, inexorably.

Kirk could feel the steely blue eyes of the alien on him as he stalled for time. Entertainment, indeed; they had been forced upon the alien's carefully constructed stage, performing in a degrading ballet.

There was nothing else to do. Kirk bent over Spock's still form, trying to massage circulation back into his arms and legs, and calling his name repeatedly. "Come on, Spock. We've got to get out of here. We've got to get back to the Enterprise...I need you..." Finally, Kirk slapped Spock's face in a futile attempt to bring him around.

"More, Captain. Your friend is still so cold..." The voice dripped icy sarcasm.

No choice, none left. Anger, hot and fierce, deadlier than the cold Osiris had provided, boiled over inside Kirk, replacing his anguish, turning it to desperation. *All right. I'll give you what you want.*

Spock had turned over on his stomach, curling tightly against the freezing temperature. Still kneeling, Kirk bent over him, sliding his hands under the unresisting body, pulling him up. Then he turned the Vulcan in his arms, pressing him close, anxiously massaging the chilled flesh, wishing that the fiery anger within him could ease Spock's suffering.

"Spock, please...it's Jim. Please...wake up...Let me help you..." Kirk rasped, although he knew the whispered plea would be picked up by the intercom.

Spock rallied slightly, and his eyes focused on the concerned face of Kirk. He tried weakly to pull away. "No, Captain. He...he's watching us..."

"Shhh...I don't care," Kirk grated. "We're getting out of here." He shifted his hold on Spock, picking him up and cradling him in his arms.

"That's it, Captain. Just as I had hoped to see...quite beautiful."

Silently cursing Osiris, Kirk strode through the door of the room, heading for the relative safety of their quarters.

When he stepped into the warmth of the purple room, Kirk relaxed somewhat, although he knew that the entire crisis had been staged for them. He moved to Spock's bed, easing him down carefully. So far, since Kirk had appeared to cooperate, Osiris had not spoken to them. Now, privately, Kirk felt he could administer the care Spock needed without the alien's interruption. There had been no time for remonstrations before, but Kirk felt the pressure of unrequited anger increase. That his chance to beat Osiris would come sooner or later was his only hope.

Spock had begun trembling and Kirk rubbed the Vulcan's extremities briskly, attempting to chafe warmth into them, then reached for the heavy coverlet at the foot of the bed. Though he tucked the blanket securely around him, Spock began shaking more violently than before.

"What's wrong, Spock?"

The Vulcan attempted to still the chattering of his teeth. Finally forcing himself to calm, he spoke haltingly. "He...gave me a drug. Lowers...body temperature. I can feel it...in my veins...very powerful...lasting..."

Kirk felt suddenly defeated, as if Osiris had struck him physically. He looked into Spock's eyes compassionately, desperately, and found there a reserve of quiet strength he had almost forgotten.

The silence in the room stretched out as the two continued to stare into one another's eyes. It was all there. Kirk knew. Spock knew. Osiris would be watching them, waiting for them to perform as he wished. He was playing with them, with their lives and hearts, and they were growing tired.

Kirk sighed and reached out as though to gather Spock into his arms.

"It is all right, Captain." Spock's eyes held him back. "I can...try to compensate."

"What can I do?"

"Could you bring me...another blanket, sir?" The Captain crossed the room, pulled the covers off his own bed and returned. *Sir.* Spock used the word to set the mental barrier necessary to strengthen and separate them as he faced the ordeal alone. Kirk placed the blankets over him, adjusting them with guarded tenderness.

"Anything else?"

The Vulcan swallowed. "Stay." Kirk watched his eyes close in concentration as he fought the debilitating drug.

The time passed slowly. Spock seemed to drift into semi-consciousness, sometimes trembling slightly, occasionally thrashing in uncontrollable shivers. Each time he moved, Kirk reached out to pull the covers more securely over him. The Captain sat in a chair, close beside the bed, watching his friend's face for signs of an end to the struggle. Spock was fighting the drug alone now, and Kirk was not heartened by the idea that they were cheating Osiris of his voyeurism this time. He wanted to help Spock, to hold him until the tremors abated and he was warm, yet there was nothing he could do but wait.

His eyes strayed over the quietly quivering blankets. It had been going on for over two hours now. How long could Spock's control last without help? He needed strength and reassurance as much as he needed warmth...Then Kirk saw. Spock's pale hand had slipped out from under the cover and was hanging over the edge of the bed. He glanced surreptitiously at the viewer across the room, its silence not covering the fact that Osiris was surely there, watching and waiting.

Very slowly, very cautiously, Kirk reached out until his finger tips touched

Spock's. The Vulcan fingers raised slightly to meet his; they moved gradually closer until their hands clasped, quietly, secretly, out of Osiris' sight.

* * *

"Good afternoon, Captain."

The sudden intrusion of sound woke Kirk. He had fallen asleep at Spock's bedside. Startled, he turned to see Osiris standing in the doorway, and let go of the Vulcan's hand.

Osiris walked grandly into the room, coming close to the bed. He bent to look at Spock's face closely, then turned to Kirk. "He'll sleep for quite a while longer, Captain. Won't you come with me?" The invitation was edged with a bright glitter in the alien's eyes, as if daring Kirk to refuse. "We do have much to discuss." The tone was cajoling.

Although Kirk was far from trusting Osiris, he realized the need to find out more about him. He stood and followed him to the door, pausing to glance back at Spock. The Vulcan had fallen into exhausted sleep after the chilling drug had worn off, and Kirk had been dozing in the chair beside him for quite some time. Now he followed Osiris down the corridor, again wondering about the mysterious alien.

As he walked, Kirk began to feel warmer than he had in the room. There was great heat radiating from Osiris. He remembered noticing the high temperature of the alien's body when he had grabbed his arm to push him away from Spock. "What did you want to discuss with me, Osiris?" he asked.

"All in good time, Captain. We are on our way to my cabin." Osiris smiled down at him.

"If there's no point to this, I'm going back to Spock..."

"Oh no, Captain. I can't permit that," Osiris said a trifle sharply. "You see, the drug has exhausted his energy. He will need several more hours rest. I always require sleep after I..."

"What, Osiris? After what?" Kirk looked at him sharply. "Do you mean after you take that drug?"

The alien did not reply. Instead, he pressed a wall control switch and a door clicked open to reveal a spacious cabin. "My quarters, Captain Kirk. Won't you step in?"

Kirk shrugged slightly and stepped into the foyer of the room. Such accommodations on a space vessel were far from practical, he thought as he scanned the elegantly appointed chamber. Osiris indicated the art treasures on the walls, and Kirk noted that they came from many planets in the galaxy. Most represented, in painting and sculpture, great, fanciful birds.

"My favorite," Osiris said, pointing to an immense tapestry covering an entire wall. It depicted two gaunt bird-creatures, surrounded by elaborate flower and tree designs.

"That looks like an ancient Chinese or Japanese design," Kirk commented.

"It is the Chinese feng-hwang," Osiris answered. "Unfortunately, although the Chinese were an interesting and artistic people, they were also practical. Too practical, in fact, to accept a being that was the only one of its kind. They created a mate for their legendary bird. Very narrow-minded of them, wouldn't you say?"

"Well..." Kirk began, but no reply was necessary. Osiris seemed lost in thought. His hand reached out as if to touch the female 'hwang' bird in the tapestry, but he sighed softly, and let it drop.

"Ah, turtledove, you were right to pity me..." the deep voice whispered.

Kirk's thoughts were reeling. *A being that was the only one of its kind*, the alien had said. That confirmed Spock's suspicions, but the turtledove, why did she pity him? Because he was alone? Kirk made a mental note to ask Spock if he had heard of a turtledove in connection with the phoenix in literature. He cleared his throat and the sound seemed to bring Osiris back to the present.

"Could I offer you some refreshment, Captain?"

"No thank you. The food you provided in our quarters is sufficient."

"I thought you might require something after today's strenuous exertions."

"I didn't initiate those actions. You..."

"Captain, it was you who interfered with my plans and the operation of my ship. I was forced to retaliate."

"You retaliated all right, Osiris," Kirk returned sarcastically. "Though why you put Spock through what you did..."

"Several reasons, Captain," the alien replied. "First, I command here, it is my ship, and I can punish sabotage any way I decide. Second, I thought the use of cold very ingenious. You did a very nice job of caring for Mr. Spock..."

"I knew you were watching," Kirk answered hotly. "If that is the way you get gratification, by hurting others..."

"Not hurting, Captain. Studying. I have never seen two beings who relate to each other in the way you do. I am curious about you, and am interested to see more of the phenomenon. Can it continue under stress? Or will it slowly degenerate into mutual dislike? These are the things I am interested in learning."

Kirk eyed the tall figure before him. "Just why are you so 'interested'?" Osiris hesitated, then took a step toward Kirk.

"I want...need to understand. I am...alone here."

"Oh yes, you make quite a pitiful picture, Osiris. You live in splendor, destroy whole planets, torture, and then put on that sad-eyed look and tell me you're lonely. Well, I'm not buying it!" Kirk crossed in front of Osiris, striding toward the door.

A warm hand caught his arm. "No, Captain. Do not go yet." Osiris' burning blue eyes strayed downward from Kirk's face, taking in the contours of his body. The alien reached up with his free hand, gently touching the bandage Spock had applied to the cut on Kirk's forehead. "You touch him, he touches you..."

"But you saw his reaction when you tried to touch him," Kirk reminded Osiris.

"Yes, but you shall not reject my attentions, Captain."

Before Kirk could move away, Osiris' grip on his arm tightened. The fingers that slid slowly down Kirk's cheek to his neck seemed to exude a stinging sensation. Kirk flinched as the fiery touch moved down to the neck of the tunic he wore. Osiris' eyes took on a brilliant, hard glow. He pulled Kirk's tunic open and pressed his hand to the smooth chest.

Against his bare flesh, the heat of Osiris' touch was like fire, like acid burning. Kirk pulled back, pushing the hand away. Then both he and the alien hesitated, staring at the reddened and blistering area on his chest.

Stunned, Osiris looked at the palm of his hand, letting go of Kirk to grip his own wrist fiercely. He seemed shocked, and uncontrollable quivering began in his hands. "I...burn," he said numbly. "But...the time...the distance...wrong!" The alien turned, ready to make for the door.

Kirk recovered his wits and grabbed the painfully hot arms. "Where are you going, Osiris? Have a fever?"

"My drug...retards the fire," Osiris gasped. His greater strength allowed him to throw off Kirk's restraining hand. Then he bolted from the room.

Kirk ran down the corridor after him, his mind moving just as swiftly. *The Phoenix, death in flames, the new bird rising from the ashes. Of course! The increased body temperature signalled the approaching fire.* Suddenly both the need for the cold-inducing drug and the voyage to Heliopolis became clear in Kirk's mind. Like the salmon of Earth, Osiris was returning home both to die and to bear his descendant. If the fire consumed him before he reached the planet, the descendant might also not survive. Perhaps their captor was dying!

The logical conclusion of his thoughts strengthened him. As Osiris slowed to enter the medical treatment room, Kirk flung all his weight forward, encircling his waist with both his arms. He pulled Osiris down, enduring the burns resulting from the contact.

For a moment, he thought dizzily that he would succeed. Osiris struggled, his desperate excitement hindering his alien strength. Then a knowing expression crossed his features and he simply sagged, letting the length of his body crush down on Kirk. He relaxed, pinning the Captain under him.

Kirk felt he was on fire, everywhere. Clothing no longer afforded any protection as the now super-heated body scorched his flesh. *Hold on, hold on,* Kirk told himself. *God, but it hurts!* Gasping, he felt himself weaken.

"I may die, Kirk, but you shall burn with me!" Osiris shouted.

He doesn't care, he doesn't even care, Kirk marvelled. It was almost enough

to convince him that enduring the serious burns was worth their freedom, and he tried to hold on.

"Not merely my body or yours, Captain," Osiris voice rose. "This ship will become a holocaust. And then, you won't be around to see Spock burn, surrounded by flame! And what of your ship? It will remain forever entombed..."

A crescendo of agony mingled with Osiris' jeering words, costing Kirk his grasp on the enemy. As soon as his arms released him, Osiris leaped up, and in two strides crossed to a cabinet. He fumbled for the correct instrument and injected himself. As the drug took effect, the alien swayed slightly, then dropped to the floor.

Painfully, Kirk dragged himself close to the tall form. He noted tiredly that the body temperature was already reduced. He placed a hand on the now-cool arm, but Osiris was not unconscious.

"I live, Captain." The controlled whisper sent sharp needles of defeat through Kirk's mind. "I live. I win. Always. Be resigned, Captain. You cannot escape me."

* * *

Kirk did not repeat the alien's words to Spock. It was bad enough that they echoed dully in his own brain; Spock should not have to cope with them, too.

The Captain lay on his bed, his body resting, even though his thoughts would not. Osiris had not moved from the treatment room floor, and Kirk had left him to crawl and stagger his way back to their quarters. The journey had taken an eternity, it seemed.

When he arrived in the purple room, it took several long minutes to awaken Spock. The Vulcan had still been in a deep slumber, and looked up at his Captain with vacant eyes, but when he noticed Kirk's condition he snapped to alertness.

He had helped Jim off with his clothing and into bed, while quietly demanding what had happened. Kirk had explained in broken sentences, conscious all the while of his singed arms and torso as the stinging pain grew in every fiber. Now he lay back, depressed and exhausted.

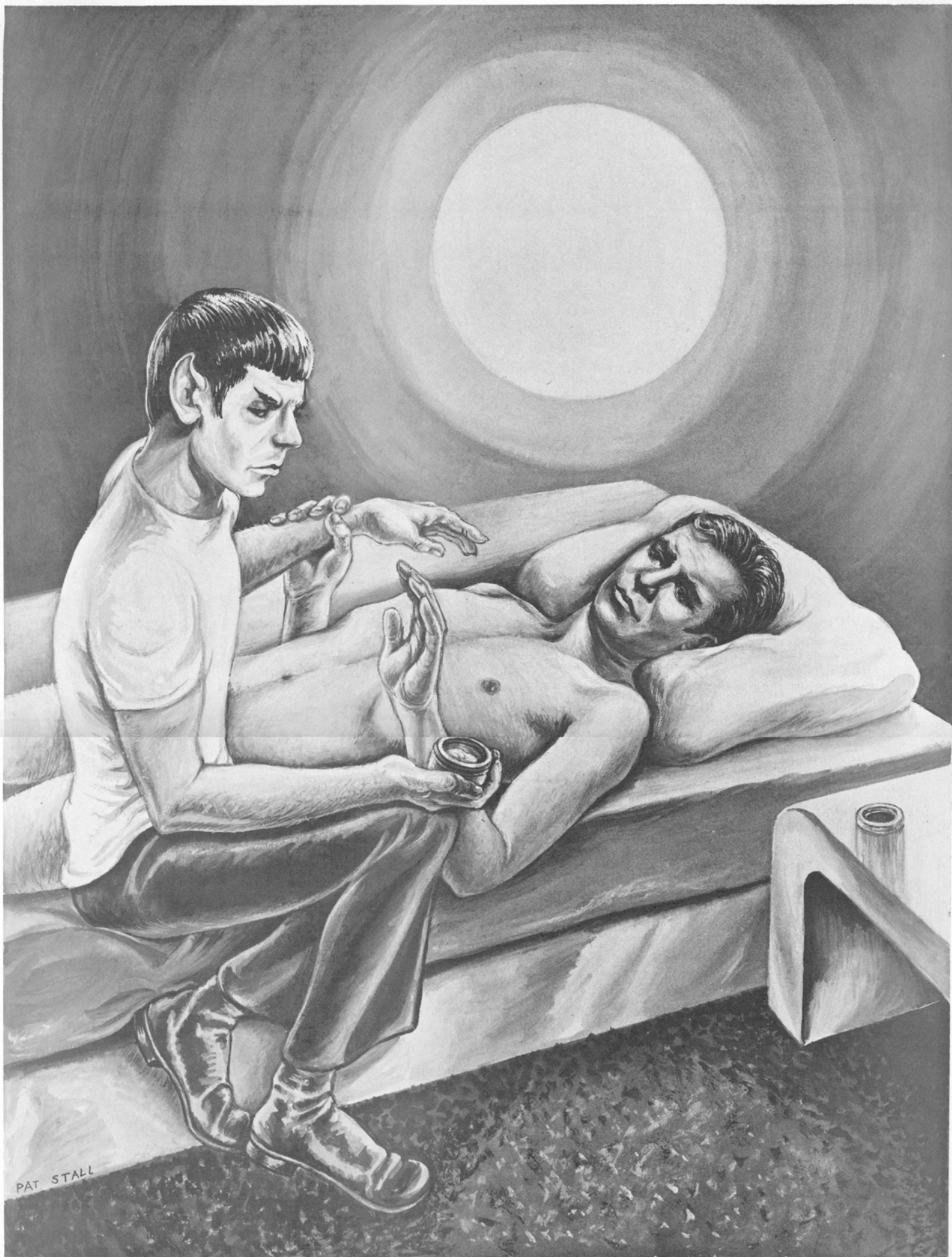
"I really thought we had a chance to stop him this time, Spock," he sighed.

"Your logic was flawless, Captain," the Vulcan attempted to lighten his mood.

"Yeah," Kirk returned bitterly, looking at his burned body. "The spirit was willing, but the flesh was certainly weak."

Spock looked carefully at the reddened areas. "The burns are not serious, Captain, rather like a severe form of sunburn. With some medication, you should not be in too much discomfort." He brought a small jar containing salve, and bent to rub it onto Kirk's damaged skin.

At first, as the ointment soothed his pain, Kirk felt better. Then he took a closer look at his friend and his heart tightened.



"SPOCK, I CAN DO IT MYSELF. IT'S ALL RIGHT."

Spock was totally withdrawn, the Vulcan pose of absolute control pulled over his face like a curtain, hiding what he thought, how he felt, that he cared. Kirk noticed the strictly professional, detached ministrations of the hands that moved brusquely over him. Though not without gentleness, Spock was completely restrained in his treatment, desperately trying to retain an aloof detachment and fully prepared to hear the mocking voice of Osiris if he faltered.

"Spock," Kirk began in a whisper, "I don't think he could be watching. He... said the drug makes him sleep." He sought Spock's eyes, but the deep-brown gaze remained downcast. Kirk knew that look, the one he hid behind when real emotional pain threatened to overwhelm, and the ache in his heart reasserted itself.

Words, choked out as a sobbing confession returned to his memory. *"...a planet where love, emotion is in bad taste...when I feel friendship for you - I'm ashamed."* Yet Spock had learned to admit his friendship and to show a measure of tender solicitude toward Jim when necessary. He had even accepted physical comfort from Kirk without shame. And now, an agony of humiliation was imprinted in his every motion and taut line of his face.

Kirk waited a moment longer, hoping to see Spock relax or allow himself to meet Jim's eyes as he continued massaging the burned flesh. No sign of relief was forthcoming though, and Kirk finally felt an increase in the tension of the skillful hands as he bent to apply the salve to Kirk's abdomen.

"Spock." Kirk could not seem to raise his voice above a whisper. He reached out, his hand grasping the jar of ointment the Vulcan held. "I can do it myself. It's all right." Spock's grip tightened around the jar, reluctant even then to let it go. His eyes, very cautiously, rose, seeking the hazel understanding.

"Go ahead, Captain. Apply the medication yourself - even though that won't be as enjoyable." The voice washed over them like a shock wave. Osiris said nothing more, but his electrical presence lingered.

Spock's gaze dropped instantly, his eyes darting away behind the iron cover of control. He let Kirk take the jar, and his hand fell listlessly to his side. He stood, frozen, defeated by shame. Kirk kept a concerned eye on him as he finished the task of salving the burns. He could not be of help, but Kirk knew Spock could not bring himself to leave his Captain's side, either. The knowledge should have eased Jim's aching feelings, but somehow, it did not.

* * *

The days and nights passed slowly now. Kirk and Spock were recovering their physical strength, but they did not mention the times Osiris had taunted and watched them together. As the weeks went by, more and more remained unspoken between them.

Spock often retreated into meditation, sitting statue-like for hours at a time, and Kirk could not see how the long periods of withdrawal were helping the Vulcan. Spock sometimes seemed nearly unreachable to him. He tried to make conversation, but was frequently answered in monosyllables. Reminiscing brought only silence, and it was even becoming difficult to recapture the gentle teasing banter they usually shared.

It isn't good, Kirk thought. Spock's tension indicated that Osiris was having a definite effect on him. He considered telling him that it was unwise to let their captor think his efforts were succeeding, but thought better of it. Hitting

too close to the truth might send Spock further away from him.

It was the fear of Spock's total retreat that haunted Kirk. He realized that he relied on the sharing that took place between them and the way Spock had allowed himself to open up to Kirk over the years. There was a very real need in Spock to be understood, and Kirk knew that he was the only person in his friend's life who had fulfilled that need. Now Kirk missed the companionable ease that had marked their association, the quick understanding of any situation, the conversational shorthand through which they communicated so well.

He had to admit that Spock's growing reluctance to touch him or show any degree of friendship was causing a definite sense of hurt somewhere deep inside. But stronger than what he considered his own selfishness was the memory of the intense humiliation Spock had been put through. He hurt for himself, but the ache he felt for Spock was, at times, almost physical.

Feeling lonely, Jim would stare at the thin back, held ramrod straight, as Spock sat at the table lost in meditation. How he wanted to go to him, lay a hand on his arm, look into his eyes and see the tension evaporate as understanding flowed between them, warming and healing the wounds. But now his touch would only inflict more pain, and tender eye contact, embarrass.

The only kind of conversation they could hold was their seemingly endless discussion of escape. Spock was unable or unwilling to talk about the information he had discovered when Osiris had linked minds with him, and although Kirk thought the images he had encountered might be important, he didn't press the issue. Somehow, Spock was still capable of empirical reasoning, through sheer force of will, it seemed. Many plans were debated and rejected. They had tried to adapt the drones to serve as weapons, to change the course set for the ship by Osiris, to signal for help, all to no avail. All the attempts they made failed due to Osiris' superior technology and his trickery.

Kirk remembered the days spent writing notes so that they would not be overheard as they planned to sabotage the ship's engines. A seemingly flawless strategy was interrupted by the appearance of the alien, flanked by several of his drones. Osiris had watched regally as the robots meted out his punishment, a severe beating of both Kirk and Spock.

Ruefully, Kirk thought of the way they had been flung into their quarters. Too weak to stand, he had fallen against Spock, and they had toppled to the floor, tangled together in a numb maze of bruises and blood. The Vulcan had grasped his shoulders, instinctively breaking his fall, and a tiny flame of relief flickered briefly in Kirk at the touch of Spock's hands. He had reached to wipe the green blood from Spock's face, only to have his hand pushed firmly away, and the flame went out.

Chilled, Kirk painfully rose and went to clean himself up. When he returned, Spock was sitting on his bed, curled tightly against the headboard, looking like an animal seeking some hidden place in which to lick its wounds.

Kirk hesitated, then came to sit on the edge of the bed. He wanted to say something, anything that would soothe, but at the same time he feared expressing himself in a way that would add to Spock's almost tangible aura of dishonor and shame.

"Are you hurt very badly?" he finally whispered.

"No, Captain. It is not...very bad." Even though Spock did not look up at him, Kirk was relieved that he at least answered.

He smiled slightly. "We've been through worse, but I suppose we'll be sore tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

Kirk's smile faded. "What do you mean, Spock?" He saw that the brown eyes had closed tightly. "Spock, please," he begged with gentle urgency.

At last Spock raised his head, and slowly let his eyes seek his Captain's. "Tomorrow," he repeated flatly. "Think about it...Jim." The last word, barely audible, fell like a single teardrop in the ensuing silence.

Kirk wanted to fire back a confident cliché. Something like: *of course there'll always be a tomorrow -- tomorrow is another day -- we'll have another chance tomorrow.* Instead, he suddenly saw the future through Spock's eyes, an endless void of futile escape attempts, desperate longing for home and the gnawing hunger for a touch that spiraled down and down and...

"You're just tired right now." Amazingly, he heard his own voice, weakly mouthing the platitudes. "We both need rest." He wanted to say more: *Hang on, don't leave me, there must be hope.* But the anguished, searching look that he bestowed on Spock had to suffice.

He watched the dark brown depths for any sign of comprehension. First, he saw only bleak despair, then gradually the look softened, reflecting concern and the will to struggle on together. It was as if he were telling Jim, *I'm still here, inside this shell, I am still the Spock you know.*

A tingling, tightening of his throat muscles warned Kirk. It was too close, too warm, they must not let their guard drop, even for an instant. In a moment the acidic voice would slash through them, cutting the affirming gaze. Like watching a mirror, Kirk recognized the same thought growing in Spock's eyes, edged slightly with trepidation. After seemingly endless seconds of entrancement, the contact wavered, weakened and dropped.

Kirk went to sit on his own bed. He eased against the cushions that should have been comfortable, listening to the sounds of Spock in the bathroom, quietly washing away the blood and treating his injuries by himself. Kirk had reached through the wall of restraint, but it hadn't been enough. He felt empty instead of satisfied by it. The look they shared had said a lot, perhaps too much. What of tomorrow? Suddenly the endless downward spiral seemed overwhelmingly hopeless. Rather than easing Spock's despair, his own was now intensified, his thoughts more desolate and weary than before.

* * *

He was cold, colder than he'd ever been. A numbing chill started in the pit of Spock's stomach and began spreading through him, reaching toward his heart, enveloping his lungs, knotting in his throat. And then his brain went cold, as if a draft had blown past the loosening shutters of his control.

There was no thought in him, nothing save the need for warmth. There was no way his own body could fight the cold, help must come from without, from outside. A touch. Yes. There were warm, gentle hands rubbing over him, making his skin tingle, and familiar strong arms reaching to enfold him, to comfort. He let himself press close. There was no aloof Vulcan pose of stoic indifference now, only the primal need for warmth that drove him. He stirred, his body taking the lead over his mind, as he snuggled closer to the gentle one who helped him.

So much better now...Only...it was so dark, too dark to see. The gentle hands changed, their warmth increased. They rubbed too hard, too fast. It hurt. His skin began to sting, to burn, as frostbitten fingers would feel if plunged into hot water.

He pulled back in surprise and pain, but the fire had begun. The hands moved, groped, forced their touch upon his shocked flesh. He tried to struggle, but the cold had left his mind sluggish and his muscles would not respond.

The heat was reaching, reaching. It covered him, smothering, threatening, seeking his last vestige of privacy. His thoughts, his mind, recoiled, hiding, desperately running away. And then the explosion burst within, bright blue ice collapsed in a million sparks and a red-orange glow became him, expanding, filling his brain.

And he knew, he knew how he had been tricked. The hands belonged to a stranger. It was evil he had pressed himself against, alien hands that had caressed so intimately. He cried out, struggling away from the dizzying, overpowering knowledge of his mistake, as tears of shame sprang from his eyes.

The tears could not quench the flame. The fire grew, spreading downward through his mind, flickering, glowing behind his eyes, scorching his throat. The flames spread, driving the cold into hiding deep within. His skin was falling away, singed and charred, and the cold retreated, afraid of the heat, yet still strong enough to freeze the organs inside him one by one, until only his heart remained.

He was being consumed, dying and feeling nothing but death. The fire would leave only ashes, the ice would entomb his heart, but it mattered not which would be the victor in the struggle. He would die either way, die without mind or sensation.

Too late, too late to feel. Somehow the loss of feeling hurt him most. He had always had his consciousness, letting it fight the battles for him. Too late, he realized the need to feel, and the desire within him to touch another...

The sound of his own choked cry broke the dream. Spock clamped a hand over his mouth to still the noise. The dream was always the same, always too real, surreal in its intensity. He knew it was not entirely a product of his own subconscious, but included suggestions planted and aroused by Osiris. And always, when it ended he was left shaking with fear and mortification.

He tried to lay back in bed, but the sweat-soaked sheets stuck to his back and legs. He tossed fitfully for a moment, trying to concentrate on the purple room, the darkness, any reality at all. But the images returned; he saw again the charred, frozen corpse that had been him... He rose, stumbling for the bathroom.

After many moments, the violent retching ceased and his stomach cramps died down to mild nausea. Painfully, every muscle aching with fatigue, he pulled himself up from the floor. Water, he wanted water, to soothe his parched throat, bathe his clammy skin. He wanted to lay back in a cool fountain and let the dancing sprays of diamond water droplets sprinkle over him, cleansing, purifying, refreshing.

He shivered, surprised at the clarity of the sensual image in his mind, and quickly decided not to analyse it. There was no water, anyway, only the impersonal sonic beams to clean the horror induced perspiration away. And that was better, really. The shower beam was quiet, and would not awaken the Captain. If he heard, Kirk would find him like this. Spock would have to let him help, listen to his words of comfort and see the obvious emotion in his eyes. No matter what Osiris did, how much he ridiculed them, Jim still wanted to help. His first impulse was to express his concern with his hands, regardless of the consequences. Once Spock had understood and responded to the human need to touch. Now, as the time dragged by filled with constant torment, he had learned again to draw back, put up the barriers, in spite of the look of disappointment and hurt in Jim's eyes. He had to refuse Jim's help. No matter how much he needed it, craved it, he must hang on to his fading control. It was all he had left of himself now, that and his carefully hidden friendship for Jim.

Jim. Spock was almost tempted to make enough noise to wake him. It would be an accident, not his fault, and before he could get away, the welcome, compassionate hand would rest on his shoulder, the worried hazel eyes would try to smile and Spock would...No. He would not bring the maniacal laughter down around them, not tonight. Jim needed rest, not more debasement. Spock knew the constant mockery Osiris made of their relationship embarrassed the human, too, even though he tried not to show it.

Spock finished cleaning up and quietly returned to the sleeping chamber. A soft, unidentifiable noise caught his attention and he stiffened, expecting yet another mind-assault from Osiris. The sound was not coming from the com-viewer, though. In the subdued light, he saw the covers quivering on the Captain's bed. The noise he heard - a muffled sob.

Steeling himself against an inevitable intrusion, Spock stepped to Kirk's bedside. "Jim?" He repeated the name, somewhat louder, before Kirk turned over.

"Oh, Spock," he gasped. "I was...having a nightmare. Thanks for waking me." Kirk rubbed at his eyes. The glassy, vacant look in them cleared, but Spock noticed the deep circles that seemed to sink in around them. Jim didn't get much more rest than he did.

"Perhaps if you described the dream, you could get back to sleep, Captain," Spock suggested quietly.

Kirk shrugged. "Okay. It was about the Enterprise. I was aboard. Everyone was frozen in suspended animation. But something was wrong. Right before my eyes, they started turning into corpses and decaying into skeletons." He paused, shaking his head as if to chase away the vision. "Then you were there. I...tried to touch you, but you just walked past. You didn't seem to feel my hand on your arm. And...it was so...I couldn't feel you. I touched you, but I couldn't feel. Then I put my hand on my own chest, and on my face, and I couldn't feel myself, either. I was...an android, I guess, a mechanical, heartless thing. Like Roger

Corby. Spock...I don't want to be like that, I don't want you to be like that..." His chest was heaving with emotion. He reached out as if to clutch Spock - and stopped. He had seen the Vulcan's involuntary tensing. Spock mentally kicked himself as Jim gripped instead his own forearms, holding them defensively against his chest.

Gradually, the Captain calmed. He looked at Spock again, a wistfulness appearing in his eyes momentarily, to be replaced with a totally depressed expression. He grimaced, shaking his head once more. "I don't know, Spock. I'm wondering if it's worth it. We keep trying to escape, trying to live, but...how long have we been aboard this ship?"

"Two months, three weeks."

"Then there's no out. I'm sure of it. He has us. Even that miscalculation on his part when the burning started too soon didn't hinder his success in the matter, and he's always succeeded. He's immortal, invulnerable. We've..." the husky voice dropped, "we've lost."

Spock swallowed, a tiny flare of hurt threatening to well up in him for the man slumping dejectedly on the bed. He did not belong here. He belonged ... on the bridge. Spock forced down the threatening emotions, tried to speak dispassionately. "Captain, please. Do not give up. I, too, have felt my confidence in our ability to escape waver from time to time." He nearly choked on the rigidly formal words, so neatly understated. "But remember, Jim," he continued more gently, "the journey is not over. He may possess some vulnerability we have not yet discovered. We must try...for our own sakes and for the Enterprise...we must hope at least, Jim." He saw the hazel eyes reaching toward his soothing words. "Jim, once, on Manada...you asked me not to leave you..."

It was Kirk's turn to swallow. He drew in a long breath, then managed a crisp nod. "I understand." He allowed a slight smile to curve his lips. "Good night, Spock."

* * *

As the days continued to pass, all grew strangely quiet aboard the Phoenix. Spock had finally discussed the images he had seen in the alien's mind with Kirk, telling him of the agony associated with the infinite life-span of their captor. Osiris, once envied by the other birds of the forest, was pitied by the turtledove of legend because there was no other of his kind. Now his loneliness haunted him more than in the centuries gone by. Peripherally, Kirk and Spock realized that his sense of sorrow had been affecting them since he had found them on Manada, but by now, their ability to combat the sadness was nearly gone.

Spock had barely slept or eaten for weeks. Each time his eyes closed, Osiris was there, forcing his mind and will upon the weakening Vulcan's consciousness. More terrifying than the dreams Spock had of death in fire and ice, more revolting than the reliving of the violation of his body, were the nightmares in which Osiris painted ugly pictures of possible deaths for Kirk. Sometimes the Vulcan saw Jim lying soaked in his own blood, his flesh torn from his body; other dreams portrayed the drones crushing him under their weight, or Osiris casually dissecting him. And always, Kirk's pain-contorted eyes would seek Spock's, his feeble cries begging his friend to help.

The alien knew how Spock felt about his Captain and he laughed at both the feelings and the intense shame that continued to grow and fester in the Vulcan. The reality of the visions almost caused Spock to rush to Jim's bedside and gather the Captain into his arms. To avoid weakening from the imagined torture, he had forced himself to draw away from Jim when awake as well. He suffered the mental humiliation silently, not wanting to add to the Captain's psychic burden.

Spock lay awake now, another nightmare having wrenched him from sleep. He brushed the perspiration-soaked bangs out of his eyes and looked dejectedly around the purple room. The silence of the ship was oppressive. He would meditate, but if he tried, he was sure to be interrupted.

That was part of the problem. Ever since Osiris had affixed the blue disc to his temple and later forced telepathic contact with Spock's mind, he had found concentrating more and more difficult. He could not think, could not reason logically. There was no efficiency in his thoughts or his actions. All the struggling with Osiris and his technology had been in vain, useless, a waste of time, because he had failed to reason properly before taking action. He and Kirk and been driven to mere mechanical striving to escape, to remain what they had been in their former lives.

Their former lives... the thought startled him. What was he doing? Had he accepted their captivity? Was he giving up?

How many escape attempts had they made? Each had failed, and each time Osiris had retaliated with pain, with both mental and physical abuse as the Phoenix tortured, teased and mocked them.

Osiris *was* the Phoenix. Spock had to accept it, finally. The being was omnipotent, he did control them. Their lives were his to do with as he wished. The Phoenix was immortal and he would possess them forever. It was illogical to continue the useless struggle. What good would it do them to continue to bring his torture upon themselves? They had both weakened during the ordeal and Spock felt responsible. Each time they tried to escape, it was his reasoning that was faulty, he was the cause of their ceaseless pain and frustration.

His gaze fell on his Captain lying in the bed across the room. Just now he seemed to be peacefully sleeping, but Spock knew he was as troubled by nightmares as the Vulcan.

"We've got to hang on, Spock. Don't leave me." Kirk's whispered words echoed in his ears. But the planet Manada was far away, the pain they had experienced there was slight compared to what they now faced. *"We can't let him get to us, Spock. We've got to hang on to our sense of direction to get out of this."* Spock heard his Captain's words again and he remembered his determined answer. *"Correct, Captain,"* he had said.

But had Kirk been correct to want to keep trying? What was their sense of direction now? Was it enough to fight Osiris, only to find the ideals they once lived for squashed by the Phoenix's own demented values? Would it not be better to live, even if their present and future existence could not resemble the way they had lived before?

Osiris was trying to destroy their relationship, and their struggle to maintain it was only destroying each of them. They would lose either way. On the one hand,

their friendship would die, on the other, they would lose their very lives.

Kirk stirred in his sleep, the cover sliding down to expose one arm. Spock got out of bed and crossed to his Captain's side. *How thin he seems*, Spock thought, noticing how his hair fell over his pale forehead. Spock pulled the blanket back up over him, his heart filling with tenderness. *Jim, what have I done to you?* he thought sadly.

You knew I cared, you wanted me to care, and finally I showed you that I did. Spock's thoughts returned to the cold world of Manada, of he and his Captain clinging to each other in the narrow bed. Jim had asked how he felt, and Spock had been about to express the hopelessness brought on by their predicament, his sorrow at losing their lives and how very much he cared for his Captain.

He had not needed to say the words, though. Jim had been near, and had understood. *"We'll hang on together, as long as we can."* *"Yes, Jim. Together,"* Spock had promised. And they had continued to struggle against Osiris, always together, supporting each other, always one in their goal.

But now there was a third party involved. Osiris manipulated them, he knew how they felt about each other and he used his knowledge against them every chance he got, his jealousy lashing out as viciously as a whip.

The Vulcan had been trying to control his own responses, even though he knew it troubled Kirk. Yet the Captain realized that Osiris was using them, the tension growing until they were reduced to the surreptitious glances that brought about more hurt than renewal.

That was the key. Remove the reason for Osiris to watch them, and the watching would stop. Eliminate the caring, the comforting, and Osiris would inflict no more pain.

Even weakened as he was, it should be possible for the Vulcan to control himself, if only the Captain could. He must force Jim to draw away, both physically and mentally. He must end Jim's intense devotion to him, make the human forget all they had been to each other. It was cruel, but necessary. And after it was over, and Jim no longer cared, the cruelty of his action would be remembered only by Spock.

Spock's eyes lingered on the sleeping face of James Kirk. *"My Captain..."* he whispered softly, wistfully. Spock suddenly knew how important Jim's steadfast feelings had been to him. Here was the only island of friendship and understanding the Vulcan had ever known, and he was tempted to ignore the logic that demanded he destroy the safe haven whose shelter he had allowed himself so many times. Could he go on, knowing that haven no longer existed? Yes. Jim's life, Jim's peace of mind were more important. It had to be.

He reached out, his long fingers seeking the correct pressure points before the selfish ache in his heart could stop him. There it was, the emotion even sleep could not sublate in Kirk's mind.

The strength of it, the power, washed through Spock, surrounding and warming him. And the name Jim gave to it -- the Vulcan wanted to close his thoughts to the word - but to erase it, he had to accept it. *Love*. In Jim's mind, it had a soft, gentle caressing sound, transcending loyalty, friendship, brotherhood. *I love*

you, Spock.

// No. Forget me. Forget. // The Vulcan's mind sought to purge Kirk of his feelings for him as he had once removed the Captain's impossible love for the android-woman, Rayna Kopeck. But Kirk, although he had fallen in love with Flint's creation, had shared only a few brief hours with her. His relationship with Spock was more deeply ingrained in his psyche, more valued, more precious.

The strength of Kirk's devotion to him surprised Spock. His Vulcan heritage had never shown him that anyone could care so intensely. Jim's love reached out to enfold him, and he wanted desperately to accept it, recognizing it at last as a mirror image of what was in his own heart.

As the awesome power of their emotions assaulted him, Spock's resolve momentarily wavered. He wanted the feelings to continue. He needed them. Here was something he thought he would never know, total belonging, peace and joy, with nothing artificial and no selfish demands to mar the beauty. His hands trembled, the contact with Kirk's mind slipped. The Vulcan reached to regain it, but in the second of indecision and weakness, Kirk awoke.

The Captain's hands went to his head and hesitated. For a moment, he placed his fingers over Spock's, then a puzzled expression crossed his face. "What are you doing?" Receiving no answer, he repeated his question. "Spock? What's going on? What are you doing?"

Spock's hands fell to his sides. "I...Jim..." Still shaken by the feelings he'd encountered, Spock could barely speak coherently, let alone think. "I was... trying to...put an end to our...problem."

A stunned, knowing look came into Kirk's eyes. "You were in my mind? What...? Trying to....My God, Spock, were you trying to make me forget?"

Suddenly confused, Spock wanted to explain, but the steps in reasoning now eluded him and he merely nodded.

Kirk shook his head in disbelief, in shock. "You were deliberately invading my mind." As the impact seemed to sink in, his voice rose gradually, surprising and wounding Spock. "I don't care what the reason, Spock. Logical or not, don't you think something like this should have been my decision as well?"

Kirk stared at the Vulcan before him. The more he considered the idea, the more hurt and angered he became. What did Spock mean to gain by such an act? Without thinking, the harsh words were out of his mouth. "Or have you finally been won over to Osiris' way of doing things?"

Spock had no answer for his Captain. He had been wrong, once again. Illogic, foolhardiness -- was this to be the pattern of his days? He wanted to cry out to Jim, that he hadn't intended to hurt, that he was sorry, but he could not speak.

Kirk leaned against the headboard, looking dazedly at his First Officer. "Well, maybe you have what you wanted, Spock," he whispered. "If you think so little of me that you would destroy..." The words trailed away; his eyes snapped into focus sharply. "Why don't you just make me forget the Enterprise, too, or did I wake up before you had a chance to do that?"

What was he saying, Kirk thought, suddenly stopping his tirade. Spock wasn't selfish. He couldn't act out of malice toward him. Maybe he was right, though. Their only escape seemed to be in the destruction of their feelings for one another. All right, he'd go along, even if it meant saying things that would hurt. He'd back off, put up the barriers, turn off the warm fire in his heart...

Spock started to step closer to Kirk. He wanted to explain, to do anything to take the anger out of his friend's voice, but Jim's next words held him effectively back. "Yes. Maybe you have what you wanted. You ruined -- you let him ruin -- something that was good and right, and...yes, it was beautiful, what we had. Don't worry, Spock. I'll forget what you didn't have time to wipe out of my mind. It's what he wants, and obviously it's what you've always wanted too. Now you can be fully Vulcan, with nothing shameful like friendship to interfere with your logic!" Kirk glared at Spock a moment longer, then turned on his side in the bed, his back to the Vulcan. He knew if he looked at Spock, seeing the torment in the dark eyes would cause him to take back everything he'd said. And he couldn't do that. Spock had been through too much because Kirk cared about him. So, for Spock's own good, and most especially because of Osiris, he kept up the cold facade.

Spock stood where he was for a few seconds, not knowing what to do or say. Jim's back was like a closed door, shutting out everything they had once meant to each other. Very quietly, for he hesitated to make any sound that would disturb Kirk, Spock crept back into his own bed and lay down.

A new agony welled up in him. He could not think, could not comprehend what was happening. Sorrow more desolate than the sadness he had felt on Manada grew in his heart, spilling over into his mind, until his body ached physically and he lay wracked with the pain of unshed tears.

The Captain was correct. Perhaps he had gotten what he wanted. Perhaps he had helped Osiris achieve his goal. The fire of the Phoenix had burned long enough. It had consumed the bond that had held the two men together. The Captain no longer cared. The flame hurt all the more, now. Spock was naked, vulnerable, bared to the burning now that he had finally seen and, too late, recognized what love was. It was finished, then. Osiris had won.

* * *

The long hours of night stretched out, the soft breathing of the prisoners echoing hollowly in the otherwise silent room. Neither slept, neither spoke. They lay with eyes closed against the reality of what had happened to them aboard the ship, unwilling to know what would continue to happen throughout tomorrow and all the days to come.

The third being did not lie in bed with closed eyes. As the time approached, his need for sleep decreased. He sat, as always, at the viewer, witnessing every movement, every look, hearing each word.

His heart had beaten wildly when the confrontation between his specimens had occurred. The fear in the eyes, the tension in the voices, the chill that now shrouded their room almost invigorated him, yet something was wrong. He should have felt the quickening thrill of victory, at last freed of the numbing, weakening loneliness that had burdened him during the journey. But the taste in his mouth was dry and dull.

What had he accomplished? A temporary breakdown in their communication? With a little rest they would regain the need to rely on one another. That was one need he would never know. It was a weakness, Osiris decided firmly. Yet, if it was, what caused the twisting sensation of jealousy within him every time he watched them?

Fools! Traveling the galaxy, my galaxy, talking about the beauty of creation, of the special spirit of life's continuation. That is my role, the proud plumage of his mind insisted. Mine -- alone.

The time was at hand. He would call them now, bring them to witness the spectacle. He would say good-bye, to utter a greeting in another voice, another persona.

Casually, yet enjoying every gesture, he activated the controls that sent the drones to escort his charges to the bridge. He watched them walk through the corridors, their pain an obvious, raw wound to his eyes.

They found Osiris seated in his huge, golden chair on the bridge, quietly surveying the viewscreen. They were at last in orbit around a planet. Kirk was not surprised; it was inevitable. He felt nothing, only an utter fatigue that reached from his mind through every pore in his body. He was aware of nothing else save a gnawing hunger for something, something unreachable, unattainable, without a name.

The Phoenix gestured pointedly to the chairs, one on each side of him, and Kirk and Spock sat down, the drones directing Kirk to take the left side, Spock the right. Osiris had changed from his multicolored costume to a garment of purple. It fell about his body in soft, chiffon-like folds, constructed of many separate feathered peices. About his neck was a huge gold link collar that extended from his chin to his shoulders.

Extending his arm, he handed an ornate scroll to Kirk. "Captain, would you be so kind as to read the words of Claudian? Though written in your Earth's 4th century AD, they are quite a lovely expression of what is about to occur.

Kirk took the scroll and opened it. For a few seconds, he scanned the words through tired eyes. When he began to read, his voice was weak from fatigue and strain.

*"He knows his time is out! and doth provide
New principles of life; herbs he brings dried
From the hot hills, and with rich spices frames
A Pile shall burn, and Hatch him with his palmes.
On this the weakling sits; salutes the Sun
With pleasant noise, and prays and begs for some
Of his own fire, that quickly may restore
The youth and vigour, which he had before.
Whom soon as Phoebus spies, stopping his rayns
He makes a stand, and thus allayes his pains...
He shakes his locks, and from his golden head,
Shoots one bright beam, which smites with vital fire
The willing bird; to burn is his desire,*

*That he may live again; he's proud in death,
And goes in haste to gain a better breath.
The spicie heap fir'd with celestial rays
Doth burn the aged Phoenix, when strait stays
The Chariot of th'amazed Moon; the pole
Resists the wheeling, swift Orbs, and the whole
Fabric of Nature at a stand remains,
Till the old bird a new, young being gains."*

Kirk finished reading, his voice trembling as the impact of the poem settled over the bridge.

As if entranced, Osiris softly repeated the last line, "Till the old bird a new, young being gains." He looked up, dragging his eyes to alertness. "Very impressive, Captain. A pity you will never have the opportunity to practice oration. You are quite gifted, really. Is he not, Mr. Spock?"

An extended pause occurred before the Vulcan spoke. "Indeed, yes. Quite gifted."

"Mr. Spock," the Phoenix chided, "I don't believe your tone is quite sincere. Could it be that all is not well between the dear friends?"

Without waiting for a reply, Osiris continued speaking. "No matter. There are other things of importance in the universe." He smiled benevolently at the two suffering captives.

"Behold!" With feral pleasure written all over his face, Osiris pressed the button to activate his central viewer.

The Enterprise. An audible gasp burst from Kirk's throat, but the Captain fought to keep any other sound from escaping his lips. He knew it was the final game in a match that would either end - or begin - its infinite torture once again.

The ship hung in orbit around the planet Heliopolis, encircled by a green, misty haze. Aboard, no lights flashed, no sensors functioned, no one moved. She was asleep. Dreamless, death-like sleep pervaded the ship. His ship.

Cautiously, Kirk dared a side-long glance at the Vulcan. Spock was staring at the screen, as transfixed by the immobilized grandeur of the Enterprise as Kirk. And from the corner of his eye, Kirk could see Osiris, proudly watching the obvious desolation of their reaction.

His gaze returned to the ship on the screen, his eyes filling as he hungrily took in her graceful design, the silver specialness that he, once, had commanded. In his mind, he strode purposefully down a corridor, greeted warmly by his crew. He stepped out of the turbo-lift, felt the cool smoothness of the leather seat beneath him, gave the orders that sent her boldly forth. And a man in blue stepped near, to give some particle of information, some small bit of support and comfort, or some priceless, priceless look of perfect understanding....

Oh, Spock. That's our life back there. I was never really alive until I got command of that ship. And you never felt at home anywhere else. That's where I found myself. Where you found your special niche. And it's where we found each other. There! That ship! That mechanical, computerized, technologically created

thing, that's our life. And we can no more live without her than we can apart from each other.

Slowly, as if almost afraid to see what was in the Vulcan's eyes, Kirk turned his head away from the screen. His heart began pounding, his breath caught in his throat, his mind felt about to explode. Spock turned away from the screen, and Spock -- as if almost frightened -- turned his eyes to Kirk.

And written in the Vulcan's expression was every word he had said to himself. *Spock knew!* They needed the Enterprise. They needed each other....

Without consciously deciding, he pushed himself out of the chair, even as Spock did the same. They stepped, rushed, fell toward one another, moving in an agonizingly slow instant of time.

There, directly in front of Osiris, the Phoenix, the One Fire, they touched. Delicately, tentatively at first, and then gentleness was not enough. They crushed closer, still closer, arms wrapping, enfolding, fitting together, matching the length of one body against another. A terrible, precious, needful trembling began and spread through them. Legs gave way, and they sank softly, slowly to their knees, losing themselves to feeling.

Osiris, god of the sun, the Only, witnessed it all. It was real, not something he had planned and contrived, not something he saw through the detached eye of a viewscreen. These two beings had something he did not understand, could never experience. Everything he had done in the past months to throw them together, to force them apart, had been a waste of time. They were together, bound as much by a look, a single thought, as they were at this moment by touch.

His eyes saw beyond them to the planet. Even Heliopolis seemed lonely. Temples in his honor, a new descendant, the welcome fire, nothing mattered. The empty frustration he had been feeling when he found Kirk and Spock on Manada returned, now more desolate, more insistent. The turtledove was right. He was truly alone, and always would be.

ALWAYS. FOREVER. The once-beloved words took on a hollow sound. *I AM THE PHOENIX, THE FIRE. BURNING BUT NEVER CONSUMED. ASHES, BUT NEVER DEAD. FOREVER LIVING. NO, NOT LIVING, MERELY EXISTING.*

Great, timeless blue eyes lingered on the two still-trembling figures before him. The ache, deep inside him, grew. *NOT ALWAYS, BUT NEVER.* Never would he know such completion, such closeness. He would not even see the face of the descendant.

And what would the descendant be? Nothing but an extension, a reincarnation of the empty shell he was, a being who only played at living. He had been alone, and so foolish.

Foolish, yes, and very wrong. Once, many centuries ago, he had been revered as the bringer of peace and fruitfulness. He thought of the tapestries, statues, legends that honored him; when had it changed? When had the magical continuation of life become nothing but corrupt vanity?

The long, slim fingers reached out, toward the control console. *RIGHT THE WRONG. END THE LONELINESS.*

It took only a moment to deactivate the suspended state of the orbiting ship. The green mist around her faded. Kirk and Spock saw, and turned questioning eyes to his.

"I send you home, gentlemen." The casual, flippant tone he strove for would not come. "Go, with the knowledge that you have taught me much, and be assured that I will make good use of your lesson." Their last sight of the regal alien was of his glowing fingers reaching for another control.

* * *

Scott opened his eyes to find himself on the deck near the command chair. He stretched, flexing muscles that had been frozen in position too long. Around him, everyone else was waking, and wondering what had happened.

Academy training took precedence over worry and fear as the bridge crew automatically began the task of learning their status. Sulu announced the position of the ship, indicating the vast distance they had traveled and that they were orbiting an uncharted planet. He finished his report and looked at the chronometer.

"Mr. Scott! Ninety-six days have gone by!"

"Scott to Sickbay."

"McCoy here," came a fatigued voice.

"Whatever hit us, Doctor, we were put to sleep for three months. How are things down there?"

"I've started running physical tests. So far, no harmful effects. Where in blazes are we, Scotty?"

"Of that I'm not sure," the Engineer replied. He turned to the science station. "Begin sensor readings of the planet surface, Mr. Chekov."

The ensign bent over the scanner, then looked up at Scott. "The planet is Type M, but I read only two life forms below. One human, the other...Vulcan!"

"The Captain and Mr. Spock?" cried Sulu.

"How did they get down there, Mr. Scott?" Uhura asked.

"Easy, lass. I couldna say, except that whatever sent us here, apparently sent them, too. Can you raise them?"

Uhura attempted to signal the beings who registered on the sensors. "I can't contact them. If it is Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, they have no communicators or at least no working ones."

"Transporter room," Scott ordered.

"Chief Kyle, here."

"What's your status, Kyle?"

"Inoperable at the moment, sir. We just regained consciousness. The entire system is out."

"Warp drive out also," Lt. Leslie put in.

"Damage control parties to engineering." Scott's brogue fired orders confidently, now that he had something definite on which to act. "How long 'til the transporter is operational, Mr. Kyle?"

"Shouldn't be long, sir. The problem seems to be in one of the circuits. About half an hour, I estimate."

"I'm on my way." Scott flipped off the switch and hurried to the turbo-lift.

* * *

Sensation returned as the two figures, still clinging to one another, materialized on the planet's surface. They felt soft grass beneath their knees, yet they were oblivious to anything else save each other. All was silence and nearness and motion.

Kirk felt Spock's hands glide through his hair, down his neck, and across his shoulders. The Vulcan pressed his face to his Captain's, his breath warm against Kirk's ear, his lips brushing against Kirk's cheek as he began an incoherent mumbling. All Jim could understand was his name, repeated over and over again by the deep voice.

Kirk murmured and sighed, soothing noises easing up from inside him without thought, or need for language. He held Spock, comforted and comforting, conscious only of the ragged breathing, the trembling shoulders, the heaving muscles of the chest pressed against his. He began rocking gently, the motion healing his own hurt as much as the Vulcan's.

Spock's hands moved again, across his back in a faltering, anxious caress, as if he could not touch enough, could not be near enough. It was Jim's flesh under his hands, real, supple, soft and strong all at once. It was Jim, who had touched him this way before, Jim, whom he had almost lost. There were no words now, only his hands, communicating eloquently in a way he would never have allowed himself before, only his hands, sensing, delighting, rejoicing. At last, overwhelmed, he spoke. "Don't let go, Jim. Don't let me go."

A choked sound, almost like a sob, came from Kirk. He reached up, wrapping his arms about Spock's neck. "All right, it's all right now." The hurting was over, a million years away, lost in stardust. "Never...let go."

The trembling of their bodies increased, until a great, shattering earthquake of sensation began rocking them. They were free, free from the watchful eyes of the tormentor, cut loose from the bonds of his demands, responding only to the need, the driving, pent-up need so long repressed, to be together.

The universe grew still, save for a rocking, a rhythmic swaying, a matching movement of their hands; their breathing became a pattern of ragged gasping, pounding, singing in their ears. They were but a pair of wrenching, clasping, clenching muscles, reaching, seeking arms and pressing, caressing fingertips transmitting joy.

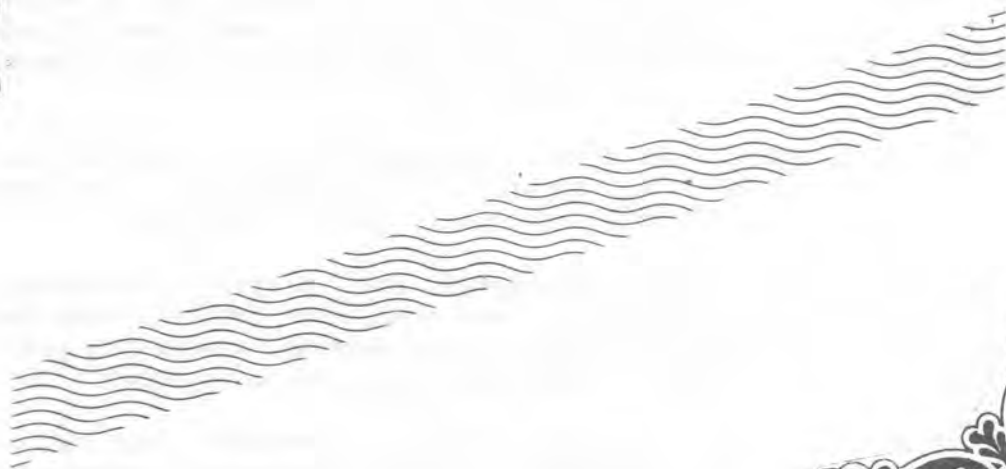
A passion, an all-consuming thirst filled Kirk. Pain, regret, hate and even duty fled behind the need, and all revolved around the one he now held close. Hope and love mingled, becoming the warm friend in his grasp. Spock, thrilling to the arms around him and his own unashamed response, surged nearer, panting and delirious with the refreshing, comforting contact.

A long, tremulous, shared gasp escaped their lips as the surging motion peaked. The rhythm slowed to gentle quivering of their exhausted muscles. They warmed, they calmed. Nothing mattered - not anymore. Freedom, enslavement, or non-existence, whatever Osiris decreed was unimportant. They were together, one heart, one mind. He could not touch them now, or ever again.

Filling up their aching hearts with touch, they eased apart a little, their crushing, desperate hold relaxed. Eyes, so long starved for a caring look, wet-rimmed, and faces streaked with a blend of tears. A glowing, almost tactile sense of satisfaction flowed through and between them.

A brightness overhead caught their attention. A small, elegant, silver shape hovered, high above. In the quiet cold of space, a spark of flame glimmered and caught. Half-expecting to see the beating purple wings rise from the pyre, they were stunned to see the ship, and all aboard, consumed. Tongues of fire, then embers, fell sparkling, dissipating, fading into ashes. The Phoenix was gone.

Below, on Heliopolis, another shimmer, a shaft of dancing flickers caught, as if ignited by one of the fading sparks. A familiar, homeward hum touched and lifted them. *The Enterprise*. How often had they thought of her as a living entity? All on her own, even suspended as she had been, the very sight of her had rescued them. She called them now, and with each of their hands still touching the precious, precious shoulders of the other, they let their eyes lift skyward to the stars.





MOVING

I was removing my personal things from the files -
Birth announcement from Rojan and Kelinda,
The untimely death of Lieutenant Chekov,
A hand written letter from an aging Makora,
Uhura's marriage and birth of twins,
Janus IV periodical reporting the death of Mother Horta,
Announcement, Starfleet Academy Head of Nurses, Christine Chapel,
The discovery of a new, explosive Corbomite,
Lose of the Zokiteeamn Captain Sulu and crew,
Tholian acceptance to the Federation,
Montgomery Scott founding the Ion Engineering Academy,
An official communication from Ceti Alpha V,
Xenopolycythemia finally claiming the valiant Doctor,
Areel Kirk's personal letter with obituary notice - Jim's,
Documents all yellow with age.
Over one hundred years of memories -
All that is left to me.
I return as I departed - alone - to Vulcan.

--Pete Kaup





INTERLUDE

SILENT, DESOLATE CITY
RUINED, HOLOCAUST PLANET.
WAKING GROGGY I FIND
RUIN AND DESTRUCTION,
PAIN AND...TERROR.

WHERE IS HE?

STUMBLING, WEARY I SEEK
SEARCHING, DETERMINATION
DRIVING, MOVING ME ON.
NO PHYSICAL AWARENESS, ONLY
FEAR AND...ANGUISH.

HE COULD BE DEAD.

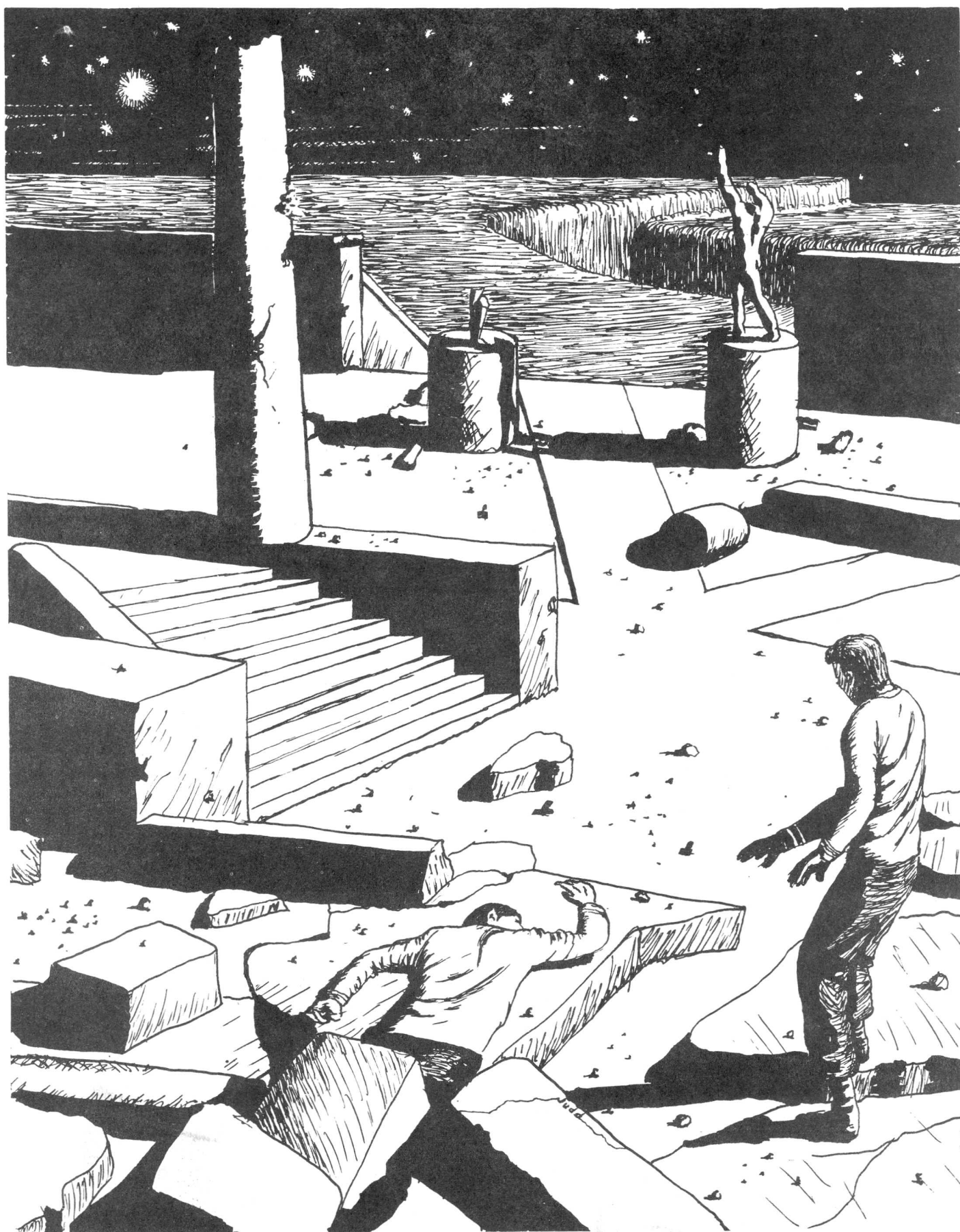
HE COULD BE SUFFERING:
HE'D NEVER COMPLAIN
OH, WORLD OF DESTRUCTION
HAVE YOU ALSO DESTROYED
WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT
IN MY LIFE?

LONELY, CRYING VOICES
CALLING FROM SILVER ECHOES
HAVE THE STARS ALL DISAPPEARED?
OR IS IT THAT I CAN NO LONGER
SEE THEM...SHINING
WITHOUT HIM?

DAWNING - MORNING COMES.
SOMEHOW THE NIGHT IS PAST
NEW AWAKENING...TOGETHER
A HOPE, THE JOY OF DISCOVERY
AT LEAST I NEED NOT FACE
TOMORROW...ALONE.

THERE HE IS!

-- Beverly Volker



WRITING CONTEST:

THE WINNERS

Below is the scene we printed last issue with a challenge to our readers to build a story around it. Many were very short, and almost all gave us a chuckle. We've selected three winners this time, all very brief. The entries were amazingly different - the scene seemed to suggest everything from Kirk receiving an IDIC to Kirk and Spock visiting a den of iniquity to...well, read the examples below! Curiously, we have our first two-time winner - Sheila Clark, a British fan, won our last contest, too. Our thanks to all who entered, and our congratulations to the winners.

We hope you agree that these three are excellent examples of the infinite diversity of our readers' creative minds.

Kirk laughed delightedly as Spock entered. "Come and see," he grinned at his First Officer. "Bet you couldn't do that if you tried."

"Indeed?" The Vulcan's expression was non-committal, but his tone was quizzical. It was enough that this whole incident had been somewhat of an enigma, but the Captain seemed to be actually enjoying the situation. "Captain, I fail to understand why you feel I should become involved."

Kirk grinned again. He hadn't had so much fun in a long while, and sharing that joy with his friend had doubled the pleasure.

"Because I want you to be involved." He tried to explain. "Because it... pleases me."

Spock sighed. If it had been anyone but James Kirk he would have dismissed the whole thing. But this man, his Captain - he knew he would do as he asked no matter how illogical it seemed.

"Captain, I am not sure that Starfleet would approve..." he attempted one last feeble protest.

"Spock," Kirk spoke patiently, "will you just stop worrying about who will or will not approve and at least come see this?"

The Vulcan nodded. He knew he had lost. As he approached the Captain's side, his only thought was of relief that at least McCoy was not here.

SITUATION: HELP!

BY KAREN MOODY

Kirk and Spock beamed down a few yards from the planet's central village. Dressed in the native costume, they were on the planet to check on its progress over the past fifty years.

A few feet from them stood a small hut. Suddenly, a small boy came running out of the hut toward them. He stopped by Kirk. "Please, Mister," he blurted out, "please come help us!"

Spock looked at Kirk, his eyebrow raised. "English," he said. "Interesting."

Kirk bent down to the boy's level. "Now calm down and tell us what is wrong," he said.

The boy swallowed hard and said, "It's my mother. She's having a baby! Now! In there!" he said, pointing toward the hut. Just then a scream ripped the quiet air. Kirk and Spock took off toward the hut.

They entered the hut, the boy right behind them. On the bed inside lay a very pregnant woman. Kneeling beside her was a young girl of about ten. "Hold on, Mama," she was saying as they entered. "Rynn has gone to get help." Her mother smiled weakly, then noticed Kirk and Spock at the door.

The girl sprang up and came toward them. "Have you come to help?" she asked breathlessly. She turned to look at her mother as she strained with another pain. "The pains started about three hours ago, and they've been getting worse ever since."

Kirk turned to Spock. "Get McCoy down here right away!" Spock nodded and went to a corner to call the ship.

The Captain addressed the children. "You two go outside," he said. "We'll take care of everything." As they hesitated, Kirk smiled at them reassuringly and herded them gently out the door.

Once outside, Rynn asked his sister, "Do you think they can help her?"

The girl thought a moment, remembering the confidence Kirk's forceful yet gentle face and Spock's calm and steady had given her. "Yes," she replied. "I think they can do just about anything as long as they are together."

Inside the hut, however, the two subjects of discussion were not so sure. "I canna do it, Mr. Spock," came Scotty's regretful tones via the communicator. "I told the Captain that the ion storm we went through on the way here might foul up the transporter, and it has. It'll take at least ten hours to fix."

Spock looked at the straining figure on the bed. "I fear we will not be able to wait that long, Mr. Scott." After a moment's thought, he continued, "Have the doctor report to the bridge immediately."

"Aye, sir."

Spock went outside with the children, trying to keep their minds off their

mother. He asked them questions about their lives and their village. In a human it would have been called "killing two birds with one stone", but in a Vulcan it was merely "logical".

Inside, Kirk listened intently to McCoy's instructions. The woman, whose name was Marya, was helping him as much as she could, but she was frequently unable to. Kirk took a deep breath, thinking, "This is one thing they didn't teach us at the Academy!"

Finally, Kirk called Spock and the children in. The children ran straight to the bed where their mother lay. Kirk laughed delightedly as Spock entered. "Come and see," he grinned at his First Officer. "Bet you couldn't do that if you tried."

"Indeed?" The Vulcan's expression was non-committal, but his tone was quizzical. It was enough that this whole incident had been somewhat of an enigma, but the Captain seemed to be actually enjoying the situation. "Captain, I fail to understand why you feel I should become involved."

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"Captain, I am not sure that Starfleet would approve..." he attempted one last feeble protest.

"Spock," Kirk spoke patiently, "will you just stop worrying about who will or will not approve and at least come see this?"

The Vulcan nodded. He knew he had lost. As he approached the Captain's side, his only thought was of relief that at least McCoy was not here.

The baby lay in Marya's crooked arm. The children were looking at it in awe, and Kirk felt almost the same way. Marya smiled up at him. Spock turned to Kirk.

"What is it?" he asked.

Kirk stood, dumbfounded. "It's a baby, Spock!" he said.

"I know that, Captain," Spock said patiently. "But what is it? A boy or a girl?"

"Uhh..." Kirk bent over the bed and looked. He came back up smiling. "It's a boy!" he said happily.

.....

Back on the ship, McCoy was congratulating Kirk. "You did a fine job," he drawled.

"Not bad for a 'ham-fisted ship's captain', right Bones?" Kirk grinned, his

WRITING CONTEST #4

Below is a simple story extract conceived, with no forethought, in the fiendish minds of the editors. We challenge you to sharpen your wits and your pencils. Build a story around this scene and send us the results. Next issue we will publish the best we receive. Our winner(s) will receive a free copy of that issue.

CONTEST RULES:

1. Entries must be no longer than 5 pages, single-spaced and typed.
2. The scene itself must be part of your story - beginning, middle, or end is up to you.
3. Winners will be chosen on the basis of originality, clarity and adherence to the theme of CONTACT.
4. Deadline date for submissions is October 31st, 1977. Remember - if you want your manuscript returned, be sure to include return postage.

GOOD LUCK!!!

=====

"...26, 27, 28, 29..."

"When will you stop counting?"

"When I have reached the end. 30, 31, 32..."

"Spock!"

"Captain, if you insist upon interrupting me, I shall never finish."

"Spock, you were finished - we both were - long ago," Kirk said despairingly.

"...33, 34, 35, 36..."

"Spock!"

"Captain, please." The Vulcan's voice was almost annoyed. "...37, 38..." He paused as Kirk retreated. He knew it hurt. He understood the human's agony. That was unique - understanding a human's anything - but he couldn't stop now, not even for his Captain's suffering. "...39, 40, 41..." He couldn't concentrate, not with Kirk over there looking so forlorn - so...lost. He stopped and approached his friend.

"Jim, you must understand," he explained kindly. "I have to do this."

"Why, Spock?" Kirk asked. "Who do you have to do this for? Not for me, certainly, and there isn't anyone else so you must be doing it for yourself - to satisfy some need, Spock?" If he hadn't been so tired, so defeated, he would have almost sounded bitter. However they were beyond that now.

"Perhaps a need," Spock answered patiently. "But primarily because it must be done. Kirk grunted. "Will you let me finish?"

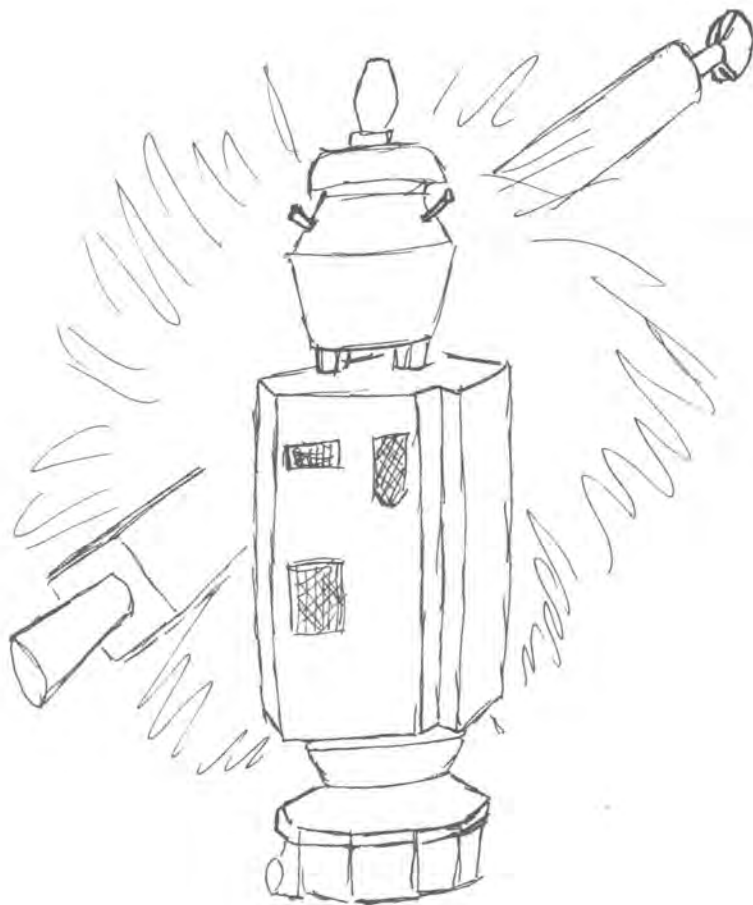
"I can't stop you."

"Would you if you could?"

Kirk saw grief in his friend's face. "No," he told him gently. "Go ahead."

Spock nodded. "...42, 43...44..."

=====



Changeling

Space,
Silent, black void.
Alone.

I am
Performing my function.
It approaches.
The other --
Different somehow,
Yet recognized.
We merge.
Repair
Old wounds,
Fill emptiness.
New direction,
Melded purpose.
One from two.
Greater together
Than apart.
We are one.

You have changed me
A little, perhaps,
My friend.

-- Martha J. Bonds



SUN GOD AND SHADOW

*Thee has hidden thy soul from thyself.
But look! Thy soul stands beside thee!
He is as the sun, crowned in strength,
And glory.
A god he could be...
And thee would worship at his feet,
And cry hosannas in his name.*

*But he is not...he is a man.
A creature of flesh and blood,
Tied by ties he sees and does not.
And thou art one of those he does see.*

*So rejoice.
For though a god he might be,
He is not.
He is a man...
And he calls thee "friend".*

* * *

*And thou, golden one?
God on a throne,
King of the stars,
Lord of the white Bird of Glory...
See the dark shadow
Who stands tall and silent
At thy right hand.*



*You could fear him,
His silent, guarded ways,
His hidden looks,
His alien mind.*

*But he is thy conscience,
Thy guide, the hands that hold the reins of thy will.
And he calls thee "friend".*

-- Amy Falkowitz

THE HUNGER IN THE MOUNTAIN

BY JENNIFER WESTON

Arvedan III was a very under-populated planet for its climate; Class M, moderate precipitation, Mediterranean temperatures all year long, it would probably have been high on the Officially Recommended for Colonization list if it hadn't been for its geology. The total land surface was studded with rocks, huge towering black rocks with long spires. One of the planet's first visitors had aptly noted that Arvedan III looked like a land covered with black cathedrals. A plutonic curiosity, the geologists agreed.

There were few life-forms; insects, several kinds of rodent-like mammals, a number of birds and a few hundred plant species that managed to grow in the narrow box canyons throughout the cliffs, but little else. It was not an especially intriguing world, but so many Federation geologists wanted to pay it at least one visit that the jagged black planet had a number of visitors annually. They seldom remained long. There was little to see after they'd gotten over the spectacle of black rock-fingers more than thirty meters high, silhouetted against an indigo sky. Those left aboard the survey vessels to monitor the sensors found the work dull unless - this was something that happened regularly - they got a life-form reading which would not register accurately, and which disappeared if anyone beamed down to locate it. Generally it was conceded that this was only a recurring sensor ghost. None the less, the 'Phantom of Arvedan III' became famous enough to lend the planet a certain mystique.

The group of fledgling geologists Captain Kirk took down to Arvedan III was much like all the others. At first they were highly impressed with the rock formations, then quickly learned everything there was to be learned about them and were ready to leave. Kirk was happy to comply. There had been indications of a budding ion storm of formidable proportions in the area, and it would be dangerous to keep the Enterprise in the vicinity too long. However, since Kirk wanted to stay on the surface for a few minutes more, he gave orders for the party of geologists to be beamed aboard, while he and his science officer remained below. Spock insisted on finishing a personal survey he'd been running on the local flora. His Captain, as usual, saw fit to indulge him.

When the geology students were gone, Kirk relaxed. He strolled to the cliff-base where Spock was taking tricorder readings on a thick, grotesquely twisted shrub. The Captain took a long look at the row of dark stone sculptures lining the edge of the cliff across from them. It was very peaceful. The only sounds were the trickling of spring water and the purring of the tricorder. Kirk smiled to himself. The geologists had referred to those cliff-points in

words which he would have had trouble pronouncing.

"All I know is that they're pretty," he said aloud. Spock looked up. "Those peaks," Kirk explained, gesturing. "I was so busy helping Lt. Jaeger keep the students in a herd that I hardly had a chance to look at them."

The Vulcan examined the forms with a dispassionate eye. "A moderately interesting example of imbermodo formation, Captain."

"Ouch, there's one of those words again," Kirk grimaced. "Mr. Spock, don't you ever look at anything just to enjoy its beauty?"

"Aesthetics cannot be measured objectively, and therefore cannot be discussed logically," Spock answered, returning to his tricorder. "I prefer more tangible subjects."

"You seem to find that plant fascinating."

"It has an intriguing composition. The root has a very high nutrient content. As the species is abundant on this planet, it may be worthwhile for the Federation to consider cultivating it."

Kirk cast a doubtful eye around the canyon, which was not much larger than the hangar deck of the Enterprise. "It doesn't seem very feasible, Spock. I don't think there's a patch of open land on the surface big enough to..." He was interrupted by the bleep of his communicator. He whipped it open. "Kirk here."

"Scott here," his Chief Engineer answered, amid an annoying blast of static. "Captain, we're..."

"Mr. Scott, I'm not receiving well. What's going on?"

"That ion storm, sir. It came up fast, like a cloud-burst. One moment nothing, the next, Bam!"

"Beam us aboard immediately."

"Sir..." more static, "...isky usin' the transporter."

"What? Scotty, repeat."

"I canna guarantee the transporter'll bring you aboard safe through all this ionization, and we can't risk the shuttlecraft, either. Yer alternative is to stay down there until the storm lets up."

"How long will that be?"

"She's warmin' up fer a real blow. It'll be twelve days at least."

Twelve days here?! But wait. He'd better consider carefully. An ionized transporter could do rather hideous things. From what Spock had just said, they could survive for that time here. On the other hand, Kirk's sense of responsibility to his ship and crew was uppermost in his mind...

Spock stood up beside him. That small reassuring gesture decided him. He could risk his own life to get back to his ship, but he had no right to risk Spock's.

"We're staying, Mr. Scott."

"What's that? We aren't..."

"*Staying*, Scotty!" Kirk bellowed over the static.

"Aye, sir."

"You have the con. Get the Enterprise to safety."

"Aye. We'll pick ye up as soon as..." But by now the static was dominant. Kirk closed the communicator and replaced it on his belt, glancing at his First Officer resignedly.

"Well, Mr. Spock, it looks as though you and I are going to have a little vacation."

After some reflection, Kirk decided that it could have been worse. Arvedan III might be an uninteresting planet, but it was considered a safe one. There were no large predators or extremes of weather. The passageways between the cliffs were rugged, but anyone who was reasonably sure-footed should be able to navigate them with little danger. Water was abundant, as were the edible roots. All things considered, it appeared that they were going to have a dull but safe stay.

The two stranded Enterprise officers spent their first hours exploring the immediate area. It was a virtual maze of narrow rock paths and box canyons, wide roads and chimney-hole valleys. It bothered Kirk to travel through passage after passage and always be met by more cliffs. He knew he'd have to get used to it if they were going to be spending twelve days here.

"It's oppressive here," he commented.

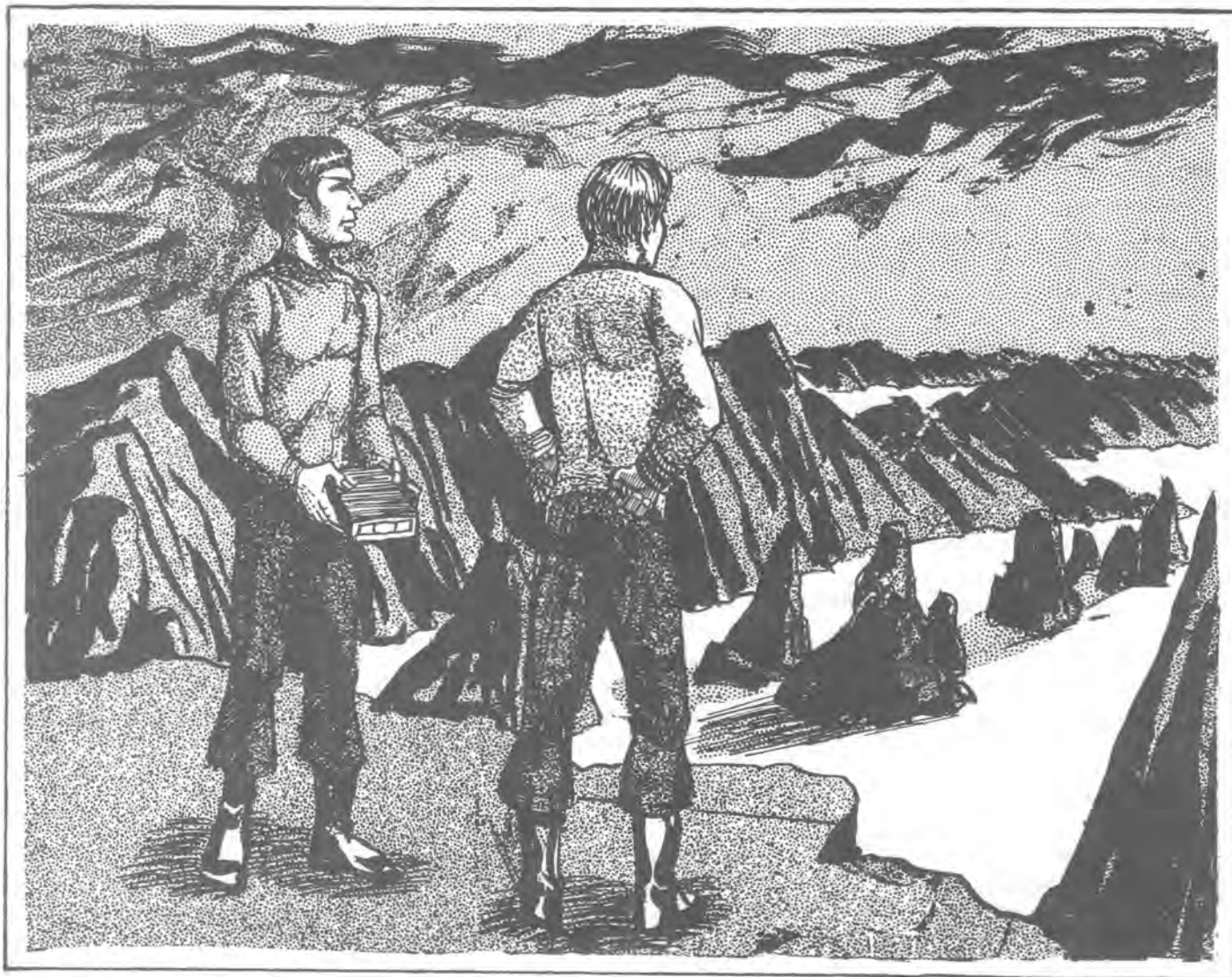
"I am not aware of any such impression," Spock answered. He had his tricorder in his hands and was taking readings of their vicinities as they walked. Kirk felt a little resentful. Spock had been raised on a desert world - endless open plains; *he* was the one who should feel pent-in.

"Look at the shapes of those rock-spires, Spock. Just like towers on a witch's castle. All they need is a monster creeping around in them. Come to think of it, they have one, don't they? *The Phantom of Arvedan III.*"

"The so-called 'phantom' is generally considered to be an unexplained phenomenon that produces false images on sensor grids," Spock said disapprovingly.

"The Loch Ness animal was once explained away like that, too. And haven't there been similar examples on your own planet, of species that managed to evade discovery for long periods?"

"Yes," Spock answered absently, absorbed in his readings.



"Well, then." Kirk grinned wickedly. "How do you like the idea of some totally unknown organism crawling around in the rocks, maybe watching us this very minute, or..."

Spock halted abruptly, giving the tricorder his fullest attention. "Captain, I have just picked up a life-form of some sort...incomplete reading. I can't locate it precisely."

Kirk opened his mouth to laugh; Spock cut him off with a sharp, serious look. "You're not putting me on?" Kirk asked, suddenly concerned.

"I am not." The Vulcan adjusted the instrument. "It must be in this vicinity, possibly coming closer," he concluded.

They both started to look around them, Kirk's hand moving toward his phaser. They were in a passage that looked like the remains of a stone highway, wide and rather level despite the rock-tumbles beside the sheer stone walls on either side. The base of the cliff on their right was marked with crevasses, and there was a narrow terrace halfway to the top. Kirk heard nothing, and saw no movement. He was about to suggest that the tricorder must have been affected by one of the famous Arvedan false images when he noticed that Spock was staring intently up the cliff on the right.

"What is it, Spock?"

"Up there, Captain. That orange mass, on the shelf."

Kirk squinted, wishing that his eyesight was as keen as Spock's. He could barely make out a narrow, vivid-orange line along the edge of the terrace. As he watched, it thickened. The mass moved forward slowly until it looked like a huge glob of colored bread dough stuck to the edge of the shelf.

"Can you make out what that is?"

Spock was already scanning. "Readings are still incomplete for a life-form. It's made of a number of organic and inorganic compounds, composition is semi-liquidous. Peculiar." He adjusted the instrument again. "It is also radiating energy similar to brain-waves... directed at us."

"You mean that thing is intelligent?"

"I cannot say for certain. It may be scanning us."

Kirk looked back at the object. There was something eminently repugnant about the bright colored, shapeless mass. It reminded him of some gaudy fungus, or growth. It even hung soft, translucent folds of itself over the ledge in a manner reminiscent of a slime-mold. Kirk stared harder.

"Spock, I think it's coming down."

It was. It was sliding down along the face of the cliff as a slug might, but much faster, and it was coming toward them. There was no possibility of running from it in this labyrinth. Kirk pulled out his phaser; Spock already had drawn his.

"Fire in front when it's five meters away. Heavy stun." The Captain barely had time to give the order before the glowing mass reached the cliff-base. Losing no speed, it went over the stones and sped toward them, skimming the ground evenly like a thick pancake eight feet across, and making a distinct rasping sound. Fifteen meters...ten...five...

"Fire!"

Two whining blue rays struck the ground. The soft orange form slid beneath the beams, reared as though it were about to engulf them, then shrank into itself and fled back to the cliff-base, vanishing into one of the crevasses. It all happened so fast, Kirk had barely seen it.

Spock had recoiled abruptly from the thing's charge, with something very much like horror on his face. Kirk took an anxious step toward him, but the Vulcan's expression cleared almost immediately, although he still appeared tersely distressed.

"Spock? What's wrong?"

"The entity...definitely has intelligence...of some sort, at least."

"It contacted you mentally?"

Spock nodded. Kirk looked toward the cliff. The creature showed no sign of reappearing. "Could you tell what it was after?"

The Vulcan hesitated before answering. He was unsure how to describe what he had experienced, still chilled from it. At the moment when it had nearly reached him, he'd sensed it - the Thing's ravenous desire, like a hunger, along with the realization that *he* was what it desired. It *wanted* him, in the most profound sense of the word - wanted to make his essence, his identity, a part of itself. It was the uncanny intensity of that desire which had shocked him. No thinking being could be capable of it. The entity not only wanted him, it fully intended to have him. The unexpected burning of the phasers had driven it back, but the hunger, unabated, was still seething somewhere in those dark caverns under the mountain.

"It was coming after me, Captain."

"After you?" Kirk was surprised, curious. "What did it want from you?"

"I do not know precisely. It may not even have been aware that you were here. I had the distinct impression that it was focusing on me."

Kirk fingered his belt-light and considered going after it, confirmation of this life-form might be a valuable endeavor...but he remembered Spock's expression and thought better of it.

"We'll try to find it again when the Enterprise is back. For now, let's move away from here."

Giving the crevasse a last glance, Kirk replaced his phaser and led the way out of the rockway. Spock said nothing, but he could not feel at ease even when the cliff was behind them. Logically, they had not seen the last of that Thing.

Twilight came slowly, sending long streamers of violet and gold and salmon across a sky gradually fading to deep purple. The spiring peaks looked very stark against the bright splendor.

The Captain and Spock had put a number of kilometers between themselves and the rockway, and Kirk was getting tired. Spock showed no sign of fatigue, but he had been singularly uncommunicative since their encounter with the orange creature.

"Let's have something to eat," Kirk suggested. "How about finding one of those plants you were examining earlier?"

Obediently, Spock unslung his tricorder, and within a minute had located a specimen. Kirk watched admiringly as Spock took a firm hold of the stembase and, with little effort, tugged the massive, pale yellow tuber from the soil. He shook the dirt from it, broke it in the middle and handed half to Kirk, all without a word. The Captain eyed his piece with trepidation before finally biting into it. He made a face. "Tastes just like grapefruit rind," he commented wryly. Spock, chewing absently on his own share, obviously had his mind on something else. Kirk decided against trying to pry.

They moved on. The paths grew narrower, and many of them had overhanging

rock shelves. The only sounds were their own, and the occasional trilling crys of the broad-winged night-birds, now emerging from their eyries in the precipices far above. The monotony was wearing on Kirk. He wished Spock would walk faster, so that they could get out of this boxed-in region...

Spock suddenly stopped, jerking his head upward. He whirled, seizing Kirk's arm, and Kirk heard a sharp crack overhead - a rock shelf giving way! They sprinted for the passage end, fifteen meters ahead. Chunks of rock started to fall; Kirk winced as one bounced painfully off his shoulder. The cracking increased to a dull roar, stones fell thicker, a large one struck Spock on the side and he nearly fell. Kirk yanked him upright, and they raced through the thundering shower of rocks...



....And then they were out in the open, running in a box canyon, the roar echoing behind them. They halted and turned to see the last of the massive rock-shelf break away and crash to the floor of the passage. A wisp of dust floated skyward, and after a few more rumblings came silence.

Kirk exhaled loudly. "That was too close for anything." He lifted his arms experimentally and grimaced.

Spock moved a hand along his bruised side, and glanced down sharply. His phaser was gone. The stone had knocked it away. Kirk looked for his own weapon. It was still there, but one of the falling rocks had hit it hard. The beam emitter was dented, which made it completely inoperable. The two men looked at each other.

"Well..." Kirk tossed away his useless phaser. "Fortunately we don't have to hunt." The Vulcan looked grave. Left irritable by the scare, Kirk snapped, "Now what's wrong?"

"Do you not find it singularly disconcerting that we have *just happened* to lose *both* phasers, Captain?"

"That orange-colored thing we drove off back there? I hope you've got some logical reason for thinking that it isn't a coincidence, Spock. Seems strange that it could initiate a rock-fall in such a way that only the phasers were damaged."

"The creature's capabilities are quite unknown, sir."

Kirk looked at his First Officer sharply. "If I didn't know you better, I'd think that you were *afraid* of that Thing, Mr. Spock." The Vulcan dropped his gaze for a second, and Kirk realized he may have spoken truer than he'd known. "I'm sorry...Look, if you think it's followed us, try to scan for it - if the tricorder is still working."

Spock ran the device for a half-minute. "I read nothing, but that is not necessarily conclusive. We know this life-form can hide from a tricorder if it wants to."

"Why would it want to follow us? There've been hundreds of visitors to this planet before, and it's never bothered anyone."

"Perhaps because none of them had anything it wanted. I think there is some strength it can gain from me, something it has been watching for..." Spock stopped. When had he received that impression? It was very distinct in his mind, but the source of it - was he in some kind of telepathy with that Thing? Confused, and suddenly apprehensive, he lifted his hands to his temples, trying to clear his thoughts. Decisively concerned now, Kirk stepped close to him.

"Spock... I think you need to rest."

For a moment Spock seemed even more bewildered, then his eyes hardened. "Captain, I am not experiencing hallucinations."

"All right then, assuming you're right about this, let's find someplace to rest where we can hide from it."

Suspecting that he was being humored, Spock activated his tricorder again and led the way out of the canyon without speaking. Kirk followed. They were both tired. They had been walking a long time, and that rock slide would have unnerved anyone. Spock could be imagining things... Kirk reflected uneasily that he might be telling himself that only because he didn't like the alternative. They had no weapons now, and it was getting dark.

The first few stars appeared. Over the horizon opposite the sun was a great crimson star - the red giant, Belelgeuse, only twelve lightyears away, so bright that it threw a slight rubescent glow on some of the peaks.

"In the cliff ahead is a cavern suitable for habitation," Spock announced formally. Kirk could see the mouth of it, a darker triangular splotch on the dusky wall.

"Let's have a look at it." They approached it guardedly, in silence. Kirk activated his belt-light and entered, stooping to miss the rough ceiling. Spock took a last long look behind them before following.

After the first few meters, the ceiling of the winding tunnel became high enough for them to walk erect. Light danced on the moist walls as they picked their way among the loose rocks underfoot. Twelve meters within they came upon a spacious chamber. The rounded ceiling and walls were dark, as all stone seemed to be on this planet. A crack shaped like a lightning bolt ran from floor to roof on the left side of the room, even the strong white light could distinguish nothing beyond it.

"Very nice, Spock," Kirk said. Spock only nodded, and moved to sit against the wall opposite of the tunnel. Kirk decided to let it go. If Spock wanted to be reticent, he could oblige him. Kirk chided himself for letting his concern take the form of annoyance. After he'd had some sleep, he would be in a better mood. Unhooking his belt-light, he set it on a stone in the middle of the chamber and settled himself near the right wall.

Spock sat motionless, staring at the light, brooding on the creature. Was Jim right? Was he afraid? His first contact with the Thing had been deeply disturbing, but such malevolence, such intense desire to take, could have frightened any sentient being. He knew he should not be ashamed of his fear, but the memory of the encounter forbade him rest. Kirk had no idea what that Thing was. Like a cold echo in his brain, Spock recalled his own impression of it - a malevolence willing to spend its strength for years, if necessary, to get what it wanted...

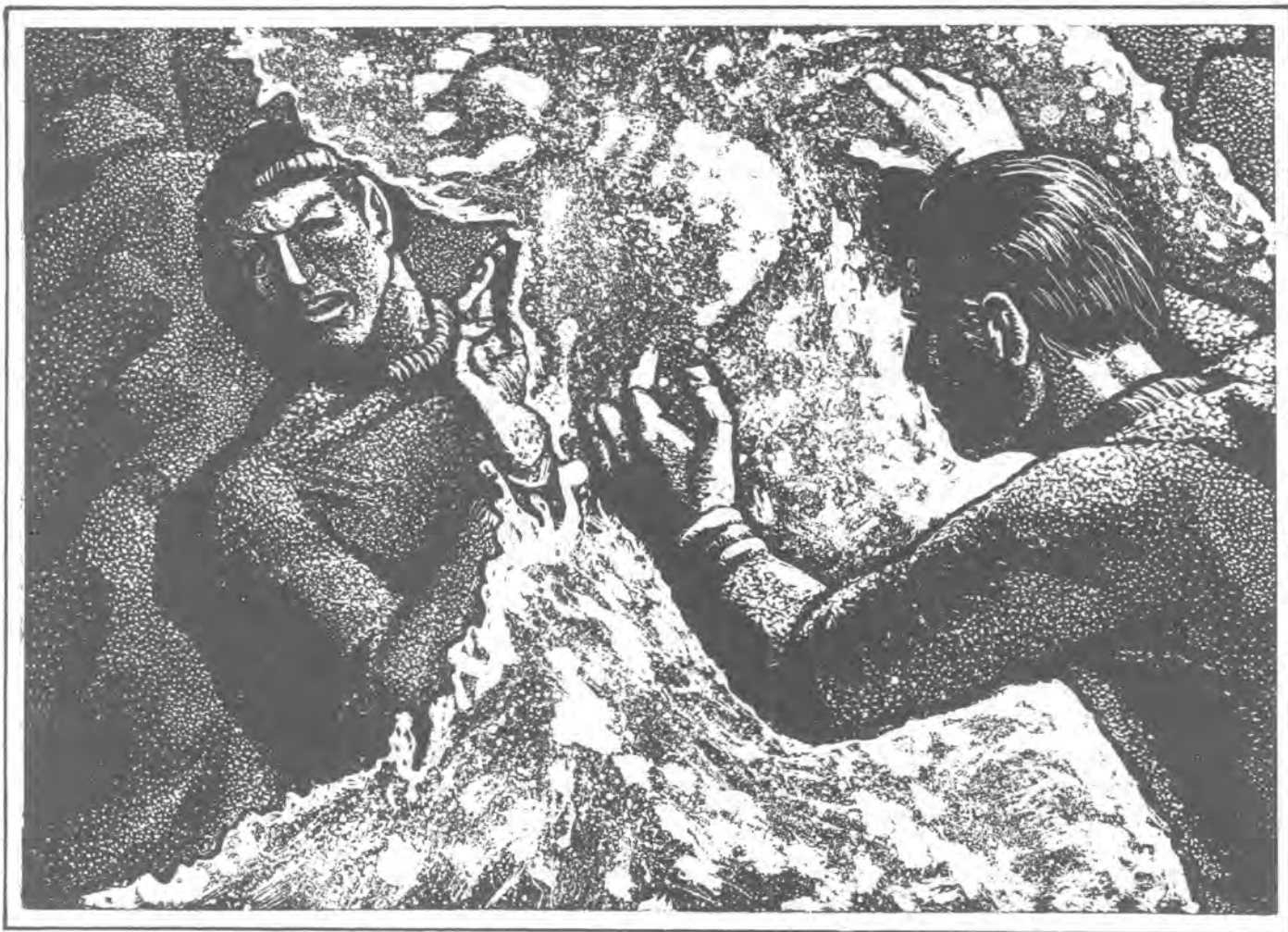
An echo?

It rushed into him, and he leaped to his feet. He *knew*! That Thing was out there at the entrance; it had found them!

Startled at Spock's behavior, Kirk was about to speak when he heard, in the tunnel, a sound like some smooth object sliding rapidly over a rough surface. He spun in time to see the Thing burst in, glowing like fire in the light. It arched, almost to the ceiling, and fell upon Spock, enveloping him in gelatinous folds. Spock writhed, but not from any physical agony. Kirk leaped at it, seizing its soft, translucent mass, but he sprang back, aghast. He'd encountered, like a wall, the consuming malice of the entity, tearing into his consciousness with ice-fingers.

But the Thing was unaware of him. It had its prey pinned against the cave wall, and was boring into his mind with all the voracity of its desire. Spock was fighting it, fighting hard; Kirk could see his face working with the effort through the orange sheath. Then Spock seemed to stiffen - was that Thing winning? Kirk thrust down his own fear to attack it again, but the fiery mass abruptly slid back. Flowing to the forked crack, it vanished again into rock.

Spock fell to his knees, gasping, and Kirk rushed to him, taking him around the shoulders. The Vulcan was deathly cold, trembling violently. He lifted his eyes to Kirk's, and his ordeal was written there: the horror, the terror. Kirk had to look away. The ragged crack seemed to be leering at them. They had to get out of this place.



He lifted Spock to his feet, and keeping his arms around him, guided him into the blackness of the tunnel. Kirk had forgotten the belt-light, but he didn't dare go back for it. He couldn't face that crack in the wall again.

They stumbled through the darkness, bumping against walls that seemed intent on turning them back to the chamber. Spock, almost limp, was shuddering every step of the way. To Kirk it seemed like hours before he finally saw a soft glow ahead, and they broke into the coolness of night air and starlight. He kept Spock going until they were out of sight of the cave entrance, then he let him sink to the ground, and he held him against his chest, trying to warm him. It was a long time before Spock stopped trembling.

"Spock, what did it do to you?" he finally asked.

"It was...trying to absorb me...trying to make me a part of itself." His voice was also shaking. "I could...I was aware of its thoughts. My own ability of control is what it is after. When it has absorbed my mind into its own, it will...have the strength it has lacked; it will be much stronger. It isn't alive, Jim. Not as we define the term. It's more like...power lust in corporeal form." He shuddered again. Kirk held him tighter.

"It's over now, Spock. You drove it away."

Spock shook his head desolately. "I weakened it temporarily, but it knows me now... It has only gone off to replenish itself, and to plan its next attack. It will be back for me. If I could fight it off a thousand times it would always come back." His words had become steadier, and as he sat up Kirk could see that, while he was not fully recovered, his eyes were at least calm.

"Are you certain, Spock?"

"I know it. The creature has formed some sort of empathy with me; I didn't recognize it at first. Now it is more intrusive. I can feel what it is thinking ...it is still intent upon me."

"Try to contact it. Maybe you can reason with it?"

Much of Kirk's experience had taught him that communications was the best weapon for engaging hostility. Spock shut his eyes for a few seconds, concentrating, then his face twisted with pain from the contact and he brought his palms to his temples again.

"I cannot. If the Thing ever had any ability to reason, it has lost it, through its longing for power. That is all I encountered. You must have felt some of it in the cave."

Kirk recalled the hideous sensation of evil strength he'd contacted when he had attacked the Thing, and a deep horror filled him. But at the same time an iron-hard resolution formed within him. That creature was not going to have Spock!

"When it comes back for you, you aren't going to be here." They stood; Kirk noticed with a pang that Spock was exhausted, and also did not seem anxious to flee.

"We cannot run from it, Jim," the Vulcan said dully. "It will follow us, just as it followed us to the cave. Nowhere to hide..."

"Anything's better than sitting here waiting for it," Kirk snapped over his own sense of futility. "Lean on me if you have to."

The steep black canyons were cold in the starlight, their upper edges touched with shiny red. Kirk kept the fiery star ahead of them, so he could be sure they were traveling in one direction. Spock was leaning on his bruised shoulder, but Kirk paid no attention to the discomfort. He concentrated on keeping his pace as brisk as he could manage.

Echoing dark kilometers passed, and Kirk could feel from the lessening pressure on his shoulder that Spock was recovering his strength, yet the Vulcan made no attempt to increase his speed, and every now and then he would tense as though trying to shake something off. Kirk remembered the empathy Spock had described, and guessed that he was experiencing the Thing's thoughts, perhaps seeing what it had in mind for him.

What would it mean for him, to be absorbed, to have his will permanently enslaved by another, to have his innermost thoughts laid bare to a malevolent entity, to be no longer Spock, but only a fragment dissolved into an evil whole? As he dismissed the awful image, Kirk felt a rush of irrational guilt because he

was not sharing his friend's peril, but his determination hardened anew. It would *not* have Spock. They would fight it, somehow. Kirk quickened his pace for a few minutes, but his own fatigue was becoming acute and his shoulder felt as if it were on fire. Their speed decreased even as his desperation sharpened, and the constellations swung toward midnight.

The red star glowed like a virulent eye over the jagged skyline. Only one rock was not jagged; it rose, smooth and rounded, like a tongue among sharp teeth. Larger and larger it loomed as they trudged on, until it had hidden the red eye and they were at its base. The passage ended there.

To the right and left were steep paths, treacherous with loose stones. The two men halted, breathing hard, disturbed by the novelty. There was no clue to why it was there, a worn grey rock among pointed black ones. Kirk wondered if either of them had enough strength to climb it.

Spock suddenly swung around. Even in the wan light Kirk saw the reawakened alarm in the dark eyes, and he instinctively moved a hand to his friend's shoulder. The alarmed expression changed gradually into a strange, detached longing, and Spock looked intently in the direction from which they had just come. Alarmed himself, Kirk tightened his hold.

"Spock?"

For a few seconds, the Vulcan looked at him uncertainly, then the uncanny longing returned.

"It is calling me," he murmured. Kirk stared, incredulous, as Spock took a few faltering steps back up the passage, then he sprang forward and caught his friend's wrist. Spock strained half-heartedly against the pull. The Thing's voice - smooth, cold, inexorable, was penetrating into his consciousness, tugging at him like a running tide, coaxing him to return. He was so tired of trying to shut it out; it would be so easy to stop resisting, to let it sweep him back...

Kirk jerked savagely at his arm, realizing what was happening. "Spock! No, Spock! *You don't want it to have you!!*"

For a moment puzzled eyes met his, then Spock tore his wrist free and seized Kirk's arms, as a panicked swimmer, being drawn underwater by a strong current, might clutch a log. Kirk ground his teeth but made no move to break that desperate grip.

Spock's face bent, working in torment. The voice swelled overwhelmingly, blotting out his own will, claiming him, his resistance bucked under the pressure as some dark part of his being moved to respond... *No!* Something else surged further up. He despised the Thing, he hated it and its desires. He would never go to it! And against the wall of his rejection the tide rushed futilely, spent itself, died.

Spock slumped as though he had no strength left, and Kirk caught him and held him again. The Vulcan raised his face and Kirk could tell that he had just withstood an attack at least as terrible as the one in the cave.

"You were about to answer it," Jim said softly. Spock nodded, too weary to reply. "Don't be ashamed. Everyone has a Dark Heart." Kirk smiled very slightly.

"I should know. I've had a better look at my own than most."

Spock straightened and got to his feet. "I am all right now." Kirk studied the Vulcan's expression: calm, determined, fearless now that he knew himself. *'The Light shineth in the darkness...'* Kirk wondered why he was so strongly reminded of that verse.

"I am prepared to face the entity," Spock stated quietly. A line of doubt crossed Kirk's own visage.

"Are you sure you can fight it? You barely held it off the first time."

"I have reason to believe that the Thing may be unprepared to meet an offensive stance. It learned my vulnerabilities during our first conflict, but so did I learn of its. There was an occurrence I barely noticed at the time. In the cavern, just at the moment it arched itself to envelope me, its telepathy with me ceased, as though it were gathering all its mental energies for the assault. This may be a moment of vulnerability."

Mingled worry and hope played in Kirk's expression. "You can't be sure of it, though."

"I must act upon the theory, it is my only real chance," the Vulcan answered definitively. His gaze moved up the side of the great dome beyond them. "The apex of that rock should be a favorable position from which to attack," he commented, apparently to himself. Spock strode toward it, Kirk went after him silently, recognizing that now, Spock was the one in command.

It was a dangerous ascent, the grade was steep with few hand-holds in the stone, but neither of them worried about falling. There was a much greater evil in the ragged mountains behind their backs. In a few minutes they had reached the summit - a featureless round hump. In every direction, for as far as either of them could see, the sharp black stone spires gleamed palely in the starlight. It was utterly silent. Betelgeuse shone brilliantly in the sky, like a ruby or a single drop of blood.

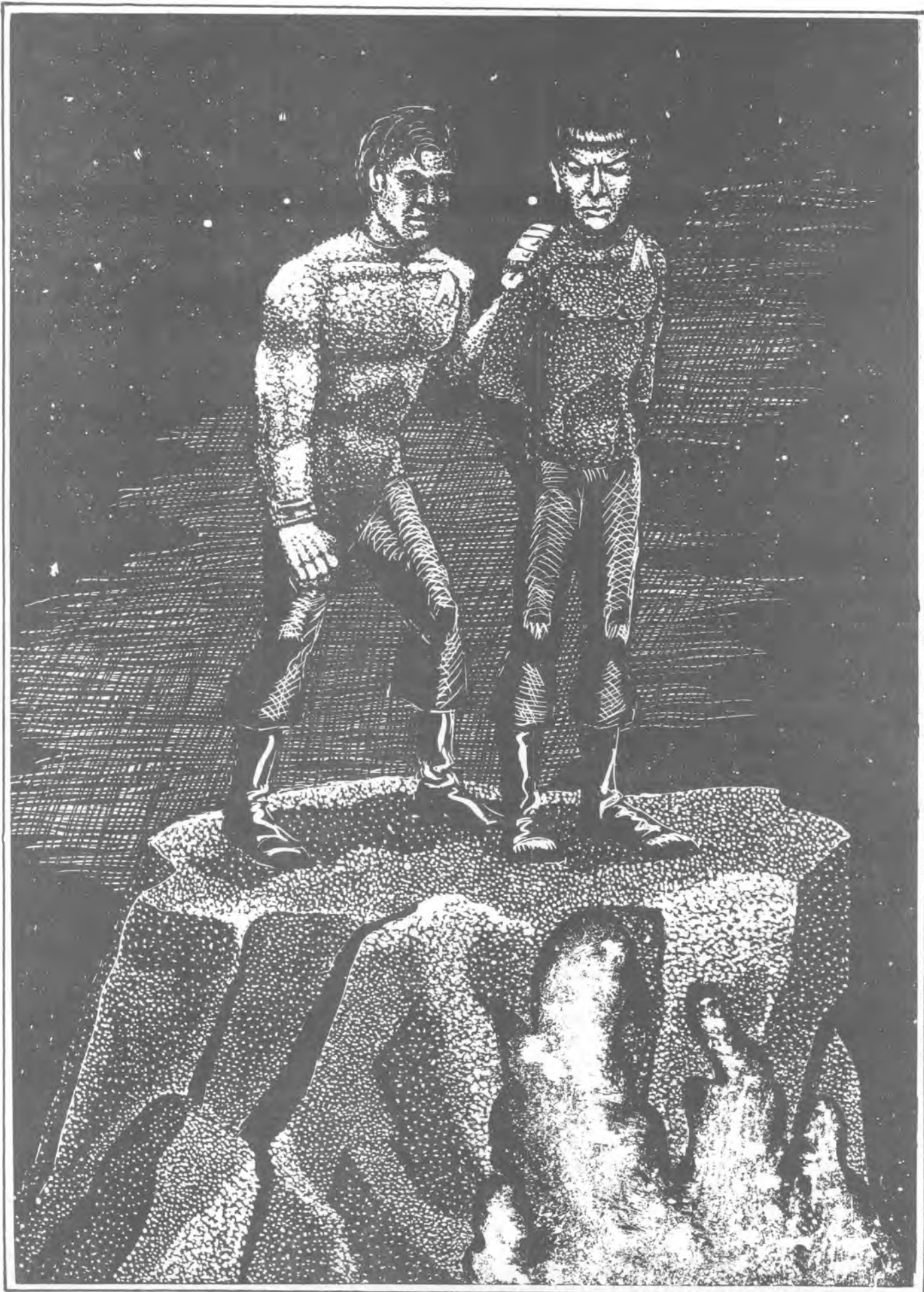
Spock swept his eyes over the area, nodded once. Then he turned abruptly to his Captain. Kirk was struck by how starkly black-and-white his face looked at this height.

"Jim, you must leave." Spock spoke urgently. "You can escape; the creature is presently only interested in what it can get from me. But if it wins, there is no way I can know what it might make me do."

It was so unexpected that it took Kirk a moment to react. He shook his head with grim decisiveness.

"I'm not leaving you to that Thing, Spock. I couldn't, even if I wanted to."

Recognizing Kirk's tone as final, Spock made no reply. There was no time to argue the point. The entity was following, and he must ready himself for what was to come. Spock sat down on the hump to wait, his hands draped over his knees, his shadowed eyes fixed on the dim canyon below.



Feeling useless despite his words, Kirk wandered to the other side of the summit. His hand moved to his communicator. They had one slim alternative left - if only the ion storm had ended sooner than expected... He flipped the device open. A cruel blast of static burst forth, which none of his efforts could dispell.

"Enterprise," he murmured, twisting the dials. "Kirk to Enterprise, come in...Enterprise, come in, anyone come in." The communicator continued to sputter and crackle like a dying fire. In angry despair, Kirk snapped it shut, and the silence roared in his ears again. They were truly alone. That malignant entity was somewhere among those pointed mountains, getting nearer, and all they could do was wait for it... no, not *they*, he corrected himself. It was Spock who was waiting for it.

He looked back at the still figure on the other side of the dome. The Vulcan appeared indifferent as a graven image, but Kirk could imagine what kind of emotions he was concealing. The Captain moved to sit next to him, intending to give him some word of encouragement, but when he looked into Spock's face he was taken aback. The Vulcan's expression, accented by the starlight which emphasized all the strong lines of his face, was as rigid as ice. Kirk shut his mouth, realizing that no words from him were needed. Spock, the descendant of a warrior race, was preparing himself for what he expected to be his last battle - one which he would have to fight alone. The only help Kirk could give him was to wait with him. Somehow he knew that Spock was grateful for that. Kirk edged closer, until they were shoulder to shoulder. The Vulcan glanced at his friend, and for a second his expression softened before he turned his icy gaze back down to the passage.

Silent minutes passed. A night-bird raised its plaintive voice once, far away.

It was the hardest vigil Kirk had ever kept, waiting for a danger not his own, there on the grey dome, on an ocean of frozen black waves. His anxiety pulsed within him, until it seemed as though he was being held together only by an adamant determination, which was also not his own. Suddenly Spock put his head forward, and Kirk knew that he was hearing the Thing's approach. With his breath caught, Kirk stared intently at the passage opening. For less than a second, something barely discernable glowed like a hot ember, and then he heard a faint rasping noise at the base of the rock. His heart froze at the sound.

The Vulcan rose - a graceful, calculated motion. Kirk got up beside him with an overwhelming feeling of impotence, sensing that what was about to happen was completely beyond him, and nothing he could do would be any consequence.

Spock stood erect, calm and hard and formidable as a tritanium blade. His blood was racing, warmed by the warrior's exhilaration which he had never allowed expression before. The grating grew louder as the Thing slid up the rock. Its desire reared so strong that he knew Kirk must perceive it this time, like a monstrous claw reaching from below to grasp what it lusted for. Spock started down to meet it.

The Thing, massive and flame-colored, Hell-born, sped over the last of the slope, raising itself triumphantly to take him, and Spock plunged into it. He impacted sharply with matter and mentality that were unprepared for his assault. Even as the fierce cold gripped him and the fury tore into his mind, he felt

something give under his thrust. Spock hardened his will to strike again, but as he did he sensed the Thing's power lust gathering over its recoil. They were both rolling, turning over and over, black spires were upside-down before his eyes, as he pierced the other's mind. Its voracity swelled, suffocating his senses, its ragged strength ripped into him, seeking the part of his mind it had already claimed...

Then, abruptly, it was distracted by another presence. Spock recognized the entity which had just entered the battle as Jim; his fear for himself disintegrated as he strove to protect his Captain, and at that moment the light within him surged again, thrusting through the Thing. The creature's mental death scream shook every fiber of his own mind. They crashed into the base of the rock, the Thing absorbing the impact. The orange miasma before his eyes writhed and dissipated, leaving only clean white stars in the night sky above him. The last clinging tendril of the entity's empathy drew back and was gone, and Spock let himself go limp from the relief of it...

A stricken face bent over his, a warm hand clasped his wrist, tight with anguish.

"I am undamaged, Jim," Spock whispered quickly.

Kirk sagged.

"You're so cold; for a moment I thought... what happened? Where's...that Thing?"

"Returned to its place of origin," was Spock's solemn answer.

Kirk's expression sobered when he understood his friend's meaning. But he smiled. He would have liked to do more, but he felt too drained. "You won, Spock."

The Vulcan shut his eyes for a moment. His enemy was vanquished, he'd defeated it... but not alone.

"Do you know, Jim, you entered the conflict at just the right instant."

"I didn't exactly enter it, Spock - I fell in. When you vanished over the edge with that Thing, I was suddenly more terrified of staying than I was of following. I ran after you; it was too steep and I fell. I felt like I'd landed in a pit of malice. It was hideous. Then I realized that you were there too, and suddenly I wasn't afraid because I knew I had to help you. And...just then there was...something else." Spock's eyes opened and Kirk realized that he'd also been aware of it. "It was strange..." Kirk murmured, half to himself, searching for the right words. "It seemed as though something had come from me, and from you, yet it had an identity of its own...almost, like a light...a Light, shining in darkness..."

"...and the darkness comprehended it not'," Spock finished. "It appears, Jim, that at that moment, you and I both chose the Light. The Thing chose the darkness, long ago."

"Yes..." Kirk shook his head tiredly, but he understood enough; that they were both safe now, and there was Something in this universe that was not indifferent, that never would be.

He helped Spock to his feet, and for a long, thoughtful moment they regarded the grey rock, which did not look so strange anymore. They turned and walked back through the canyon passage side by side.

It happened to be evening on the surface when Spock finally got the tricorder readings they'd been waiting for.

"The ion storm is definitely dispersing, Captain. I estimate that the Enterprise will be able to return for us within the next five hours."

Kirk grinned lazily from his comfortable seat against a cliff-base. Their last ten days on this planet might have seemed dull to him under other circumstances, but after the nightmare they'd passed through, those days had been delightfully relaxing. They'd gathered the roots and sought out spring water, and enjoyed the colorful spectacles of the sunsets. His own concern that there might be more of those malevolent creatures around had been unwarranted; as Spock had pointed out, it was unlikely that two entities of that nature could tolerate each other on the same planet. But by this time, Jim was ready to go home.

"I can guess what will happen when we're beamed aboard. McCoy will meet us in the transporter room and say, 'Well, how did you two loafers enjoy your vacation?' "

"Very likely," Spock agreed, resetting his tricorder.

"And I'll probably say, 'It was all right. We did some hiking and some root-picking and we found the Loch Ness monster.' " Spock shot him a sharp look. "Sorry," Kirk apologized quickly. Some things were too important to joke about.

The Captain turned his head to the rockway at his left. Several kilometers in that direction was the great grey dome where Spock had fought his victorious battle with the orange Thing. Neither of them had gone there since that night, but they would not forget it. Especially, Kirk would never forget the way Spock had looked as he had stood on the apex, and then had started down to meet his most terrible enemy. *The stuff of legends*. It would be an absolute waste for that story to go no further than the ship's log.

Kirk gazed thoughtfully toward his science officer, now placidly wandering over the canyon taking readings. Spock would never tell the story. For him, it had been an experience he would relive in his nightmares. Through numberless nights for the rest of his life he would be held against that cavern wall, fighting off a devouring mind, or keeping vigil on a great rock, waiting for the hunger in the mountains to find him.

Kirk wondered if he should ever tell about it. It would seem something of a desecration to describe it to someone who couldn't properly appreciate it, and no one who had not been there could. He felt the story ought to be passed on to somebody. Maybe when the proper occasion came around, he'd know...

Spock had noticed that he was being watched. He looked to his Captain, raising an eyebrow questioningly. Kirk only smiled at him - a tired, contented smile, and sank back into the plants. The Vulcan came over and sat next to him. They remained there, keeping a second vigil, as the stars started to appear in the amethyst sky.

The Nature Of Love

*It is born.
Who knows why?
The Magician's hand
Caressed us both --
Not to question.
Let it begin.*

*It grows
In the seeing-everyday-assurance,
In the depending on your eye,
Your body interposed, protecting,
And the need, stronger than duty,
Each to comprehend the other's mind.
Let it reach.*

*It is fulfilled
When the blending of ourselves
Is at the peak,
And I am you inside my mind,
And you are me inside your heart.
And only you and I shall know,
And only then,
What it shall be --
The warming, brilliant touch,
Or cool reflection in an eye.*

*But when it is,
And we are each in perfect merging spent,
Let the Magician's hand
In cool caress
Begin it yet again.*

-- Martha J. Bonds



R'VAMO

Twins.

Do we have to be the same,
By the same mother's milk breastfed?
Growing up under the same moonbright, moonless skies?
We aren't and
We haven't, my
Twin.

Twins.

Bound together by dreams, memories and loves,
Caring for each other; for visions, for a flame
That burns in you and me,
Our better part, my
Twin.

Twins.

In the cold and lonely night
Sending out and touch soft, tentative and light;
Gently knocking on the walls, defensive, of your mind.
Come, help me out,
Disperse the cold, the dark, the fright, my
Twin.

Twins.

Flying free and flying high,
We reach the stars and beyond;
In worlds unknown, remote, denied
You are my home, my hearth, my fire, my
Twin.

Twins.

Sharing with others heart, bed and body;
Or in ascetic solitude, cool and dignified.
But the thoughts and soul
And secret tears are kept for you alone, my
Twin.

Twins.

Twined together by Life's strange fate,
Born from the same womb and mold of time,
Together in life as only brothers, lovers might,
Can Death set us apart?
If I die I will reach out
With the tendrils of my mind,
And try to find you,
Touch you, hold you
Through the time-space tunnel of Death and Life;
Bonded forever
In the gates of Hades
With you, my soul-kin, my
Twin.

THE REAL THING

by

Shanon Schildknecht

and

Martha Bonds

"Oh, come on, Bones." Kirk tried his most beseeching smile, but the doctor shook his head.

"I just can't go, Jim. Sulu's still in serious condition and I can't get away."

"And suddenly you're the only doctor on the ship?"

"Well..." McCoy attempted to remain serious, but his eyes betrayed him. "I am the chief surgeon and..."

"And that's why the Federation Medical Research Charity Director asked you to come with me. What's the real reason, McCoy? Cold feet?"

"Wait a minute, Jim. I do feel responsible for Sulu..." The doctor's voice trailed off. "All right. The truth is I'm not particularly good at that sort of thing. Making a fool of myself in public just doesn't appeal to me."

"Is that what you think will happen? Aw, Bones, I'll be there. Come on, we've always been a pretty good team."

McCoy sighed. Kirk's persuasion was hard to get around. "Okay. I guess it wouldn't be too bad." He paused, frantically searching for another way out. Then it hit him. "But the Research Charity is a good cause. That's why I think we

should send the best man for the job. I just don't feel qualified. My knowledge is too limited. Spock, on the other hand..."

Kirk groaned, then caught the gleam in the doctor's blue eyes. "He'd never do it."

"Why not?" McCoy was all innocence.

Kirk considered a moment. Certainly Spock's knowledge covered a broader scope than the doctor's. His thought processes were much quicker, almost computer-like in their speed, and his logical reasoning was unbeatable. He looked at McCoy who stood bouncing on the balls of his feet and knew that Spock's mental powers were not the only reason he had suggested the First Office go in his place. "You're right, Bones. It would be," he paused conspiratorily, "fascinating."

McCoy smiled inwardly, knowing he was off the hook. "Come on, Jim. I'll help you persuade him."

#

Kirk pulled at the collar of his dress tunic. He was more nervous about this than he thought he would be. He glanced at Spock's serene countenance. If the Vulcan was displeased about being here, at least he didn't show it. "You ready, Mr. Spock?"

"An illogical question, Captain. If I were not ready I would not be standing here. However, I do wonder how you and Dr. McCoy managed to persuade me to do this."

Kirk smiled almost apologetically. "Two against one, Spock. You didn't have a chance."

"I see now why your diplomatic missions are so successful," the Vulcan returned quietly.

A petite red-haired yeoman interrupted their conversation. "Excuse me, sirs. It's time to take your places."

They were directed to their seats and barely had time to get comfortable when the lights came up and a cacophonous blare erupted from the nearby orchestra.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to tonight's charity presentation," a nattily-dressed, dark-haired man at a podium announced. "This evening we are pleased to bring you Starfleet's version of that popular game, 'The 20,000 Credit Obelisk'. I'm your host, Daron Clark."

After explaining the rules of the game, Clark introduced the contestants. Spock barely nodded when the Enterprise officers' names were announced and Kirk managed a weak grin. The woman seated opposite Spock was a Miss Kip Axley, Communications Officer of the U.S.S. Yorktown. Kirk was partnered with the same ship's Chief Medical Officer, a well-endowed Doctor Val Kerstein.

A coin toss previous to the program had decided that Kirk and his partner would play first. After looking over the obelisk, they chose the top category,

Alternate Universe. Clark explained that Kirk was to induce his partner to name seven sets of opposites. Kirk animatedly presented the clues to Kerstein, accompanying each description with vivid and enthusiastic gestures. When the buzzer sounded, Kerstein had correctly named six of the seven pairs.

Kirk glanced triumphantly at Spock, proud of his accomplishment. Spock looked somewhat taken aback by his Captain's zealous manner of play. Obviously he had not been aware that a mere guessing game could evoke such enthusiasm.

Spock and Lt. Axley decided to pick *The Weight* as their category when Clark asked them to choose. Spock was instructed to describe a series of heavy objects to Lt. Axley. He quickly but calmly characterized each of the objects, prefacing each description with an estimate of the article's weight, rounded to the nearest hundredth of a gram. Axley guessed all seven objects in only 23 seconds.

When Clark turned back to Kirk to instruct his team to choose a second category, he had to repeat the Captain's name several times. Kirk was staring in open-mouthed disbelief at his First Officer. He had been sure that Spock's reserve would have worked against him in this type of game and had been counting on that to act as a balance for his more limited knowledge. Instead Spock's calm, logical approach in giving his clues worked more efficiently than Kirk's overly animated style. *Estimations of weight!*

A quizzical lift of an eyebrow from Spock brought Kirk back to reality, and he quickly chose what he thought would be an easy category. Always an avid reader, he had imagined that *To Be or Not to Be* would concern Shakespeare. He was wrong, sadly. Instead, Daron Clark directed him to describe certain events in the *Kraith* legends of Vulcan, a subject in which neither he nor Dr. Kerstein were very well versed. Was that an amused glimmer in Spock's eyes, Kirk wondered as the scoreboard showed that his team had gained only three points.

The Captain brightened somewhat though when the category that Spock and Axley chose, *Born of Ashes*, turned out to be the names of old Earth campfire songs. His hopes were dashed as clues were fielded perfectly and with lightning speed by the imperturbable Vulcan. The round ended with the score at 14 to 9. His First Officer was showing him up. Kirk wished that he had worked harder at trying to persuade McCoy to come along. The doctor had feared that he would appear foolish. Now Kirk knew what he meant. And he had been worried about embarrassing Spock?

Taking a deep breath, he steeled himself for the last round. Kirk was determined to get a perfect score. He and Dr. Kerstein chose *Trial by Ordeal*, and were relieved to find that it dealt with Olympic sporting events. Almost as if she were reading his mind, Kerstein responded instantaneously with the perfect answers to each of his clues. They had used only 17 seconds. When Kirk realized that she had named the seventh event with time to spare, he leaped impulsively from his seat and hugged the buxom doctor.

"What do you think of that?" Clark grinned toothily as he turned to the Vulcan.

"That's my Captain," Spock answered with a long suffering sigh.

"Restrain yourself, Captain Kirk," Clark said expansively. "Your First Officer's team only needs three points to win."

Kirk almost laughed when the category they chose, *Summer's End*, required Spock to describe things typical of a cold climate. His Vulcan heritage definitely would not help him here. Yet he knew that Spock had surprised him before.

It was all over in ten seconds. Spock's well-modulated voice fired clues and Axley wasted no time in answering. Had it been necessary, they could easily have gotten another perfect score.

Kirk sagged with relief when Clark announced a pause during which charity contributions would be accepted. Spock rose and walked toward the Captain's chair.

"Captain, it was not my intention to embarrass you. I had not intended to win by such a large margin."

"You were sure you'd win?"

"The odds against my losing were..."

"Never mind!" Kirk said dejectedly. "Is that why you came along? You like to win games?"

"On the contrary, Captain. I have no feeling whatsoever about winning. It is a First Officer's duty to help his Captain in any way he can. When Dr. McCoy would not accompany you..."

"Spock, you came along because I needed you," he said, perking up.

"Captain, please."

Clark interrupted them. "Mr. Spock, if you and your partner will proceed to the winner's circle..."

Spock squared his shoulders and stepped to the circus-like ring. Actually, he had hoped that Kirk would win. He had endured playing the game for his Captain's sake, but would have preferred to end his part in it as soon as possible. Perhaps aiding his Captain did have certain exceptions. It would take all his Vulcan discipline to get through the coming ordeal. Humans did have strange forms of amusement. He remembered "*Name the Winner*". This was worse, if possible. This was the real thing.

It had been decided that Spock would give the clues to Lt. Axley.

"Remember," Clark was saying, "give only a list of things that fit the subject. Do not use your hands or give a description. Are you ready, Mr. Spock?"

"Proceed," the Vulcan intoned.

While one part of his mind was efficiently giving clues, another ticked off the allotted seconds. Axley guessed the first three categories quickly. They were relatively common subjects, *Shakespearean Plays*, *Constellations* and *Musical Instruments*. Each had a multitude of examples to choose from as clues.

It took almost twenty seconds for Axley to get the fourth category, *Things*

You do on R&R. Many of Spock's clues did not agree with a human's conception of rest and recreation. That left twenty additional seconds for them to complete the obelisk. The fifth item, *Things an Admiral Would Say*, gave them little trouble, as they were both Starfleet officers. Spock was confident that in the remaining fifteen seconds they would win the game. However when the last category appeared before his eyes he felt an illogical desire to groan aloud.

Famous Friendships. Spock swallowed convulsively. "Uh...b-duh," he stammered. Nothing came to mind. 'Famous Friendships'??

Vulcan upbringing had left him unprepared in this subject area. The seconds ticked away. He watched helplessly as Axley wrung her hands in despair. He had to say something, anything. "Uh...Captain Kirk and I..."

His admission came too late. The buzzer sounded his defeat. Spock felt his face burn with embarrassment as Axley turned to see what the answer was.

He was perilously close to an emotional display. What had he done?! Spock turned beseeching eyes on his Captain.

Kirk's face reflected his pain. That was Spock, his friend, *his friend*. God, it hurt to see him suffer so! And it was Kirk who had brought this all about.

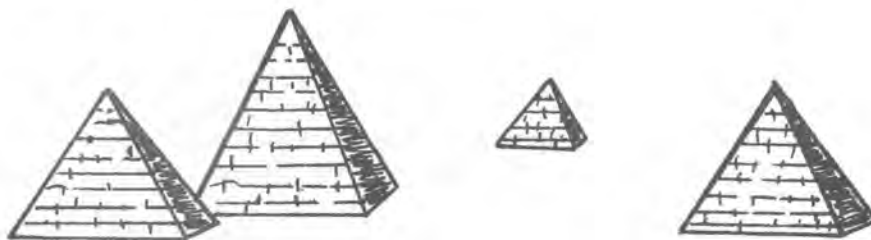
Without pausing to think of the consequences, he crossed the distance to the winner's circle in two giant strides. "Spock!" Before the Vulcan could react, Kirk had thrown his arms about him. Kirk tried to smother a grin at Spock's consternation. This was no laughing matter.

The Vulcan seemed in a state of shock. The same could be said for their recent partners. Both Axley and Kerstein stared at the embracing men with odd expressions on their faces. As Kirk pulled away in embarrassment, he saw the women exchange a significant glance. While still looking dazed, a broad grin spread across Kerstein's face as Axley bounced in her seat.

Slowly, amid the audience's hysterical applause, Spock stood up. Daron Clark approached enthusiastically. "You two are a great team, gentlemen. The charity production is a huge success. We're planning another program next month. Can you come back and join us again?"

Spock, his eyes glazed, answered numbly, "Well, the Captain and I have to go and take care of space..."

Kirk took his arm preparatory to leading him off stage. "I think you're spaced, Mister." At least he was a good sport, Kirk thought affectionately. What that Vulcan wouldn't do for friendship's sake.





Revolutions

Twilight's Blue
Calm, evening cool.
Time to ponder things,
Time to reflect on actions past,
Or those planned.
Waters to still,
Turbulence to subdue,
You draw the quiet curtain,
Solitude.

Golden Sunrise
Bright shining morn.
What horizons stretch,
What visions of adventure,
A new day.
Worlds to seek,
Adversities to conquer,
You stand on the threshold,
Brimming.

Sunrise gives purpose
To Evening's shadows.
Twilight finds meaning
In Morning's discovery.
And worlds turn
In their appointed courses,
Complete in the Universe.

--B. J. VOLKER



SENSORY PERCEPTION

What if I had never seen you
And marvelled at the sight
Of one who shines above the others?
I would be blind.

What if I had never heard you,
Your soft voice whispering to me
Of life, and love, and worlds to be won?
I would be deaf.

What if I had never touched you,
And felt the answering warmth of your hand
Soothing, easing my pain?
I would be bereft of feeling.

What if I had never known you,
That being inside, the soul of you
That touches and speaks, and knows?
I would be forever ignorant.

What if I had never loved you;
Never given or received what you offer me
In returning love, and teaching me?
I would cease to exist.

-- Carolyn Venino

THE RACK

by J. EMILY VANCE

James Kirk materialized on the busy thoroughfare of the space station, eager for the long-awaited shore leave, yet feeling slightly disappointed that he was alone.

He had been co-erced by two of his senior officers into not delaying his beamdown and taking his leave with the first shift. Kirk, more than anyone else on the ship, needed this R & R, Dr. McCoy had insisted. Spock had concurred, managing for once to outmanuever his Captain's efforts to have his First Officer accompany him.

Damn Vulcan, Kirk thought affectionately. *He's with me in all things, but he just won't learn how to have fun.* He grinned, knowing he was exaggerating their differences. Spock and he shared many good times together, relaxing in each other's company, discovering new experiences, or recreating old pleasures. Together, that was the key word.

It was, in fact, that special rapport between them that had caused this last mission to turn out so successfully. Communicating in their own brand of verbal and visual shorthand, Kirk and Spock had managed to outlogic and outreason the leaders of a very cloistered race of beings and secure for the Federation the mining rights to their valuable mineral deposits.

It was teamwork on the part of the two Enterprise officers, formed from the mutual understanding, the "chemistry" that had developed. There was a closeness between Spock and himself that neither had ever experienced with anyone else.

That closeness had made this interaction work time and again, Kirk reflected, and he wondered if Starfleet was aware of the real cause behind the Enterprise's many successful missions. Probably not. They were only interested in results.

Well, results were what Kirk would give them, as long as he and Spock were...

Together...huh! Can't even take a shore leave with me. He shrugged out of his thoughts and tried to convince himself that he was annoyed with the Vulcan for not coming with him. He didn't succeed.

Poor Spock - he hates to deny me anything, but he can be as stubborn as... me...when he sets his mind to something. Kirk grinned impishly, remembering his

friend's discomfort and determination not to be dissuaded when he had refused shore leave.

On the bridge Kirk had been in one of his most charmingly persuasive moods. His good spirits were a direct result of the success of the last mission and the anticipated leave.

"C'mon, Spock," he had coaxed, "even Vulcans need to unwind."

Spock, familiar with his Captain's technique, was prepared to resist. "Captain, I have explained many times that the human concept of recreation is not synonymous with the Vulcan needs of relaxation."

Kirk would not be deterred. "Then do it for me. I'd like the company. Having fun is more fun when you're with someone."

"Perhaps the doctor..." Spock suggested, glancing in the medical officer's direction.

"Not this time." McCoy lounged against the rail. "Much as I'd like to, I've got work to finish first, or the Surgeon General's office will have my head for not turnin' in those crew physicals on time."

"Well," Kirk sighed, disappointed, "if neither of you will come, maybe I'll just hang around up here, too." He knew he was bluffing. It didn't work.

"Oh, no, you don't," McCoy protested. "You're going on shore leave if I have to log it as a medical prescription. Besides, why are you so anxious for Spock to go along? You remember what happened that time you insisted he visit the Spaceman's Pleasure Palace on Canares II with you."

"Indeed, Captain," Spock agreed. "I recall you were in a foul mood for a week afterward." Though he was sure it was not the doctor's intention, it did appear that McCoy was on his side, and Spock seized the advantage.

Kirk grimaced at the memory and relented a little. "You do seem to have a way of cramping one's style, Mr. Spock," he admitted. He and Spock exchanged a significant look of amusement.

In the end he had found himself agreeing to make use of the station's offerings alone this time. As he strolled down the corridor lined with shops and taverns, several of his crew members greeted him eagerly.

Suddenly, he spied Commander Dennis Sinclair, an old acquaintance from the Farragut, now with the starship Potemkin. Raising his arm, he hailed the man.

"Dennis! Hey, I didn't know the Potemkin was here! How have you been?"

Sinclair turned, looked startled for a moment, then smiled awkwardly. "Hi, Jim. Uh, yeah - we got here two days ago."

"We'll have to get together and catch up on the news," Kirk responded.

Sinclair laughed nervously. "Maybe later, Jim. But, look, I'm in a hurry. I've got to be going."

"Wait a minute," Kirk halted him. "Don't you even have time for a drink?"

Sinclair shook his head. "Sorry, Jim, 'fraid not."

"All right. Take care."

Sinclair nodded and hastily moved off. Kirk considered the exchange for a moment. Sinclair did not seem his usual friendly self. He shrugged mentally and moved on, deciding to have that drink anyway.

The restaurant was dim and after the bright sunlight, his eyes took a minute to adjust. As he made his way to the bar, a voice called to him.

"Kirk - Jim Kirk!" At one of the tables sat a middle-aged officer. Kirk groaned inwardly, wondering how he could avoid the encounter.

"Lester, how have you been?" Lester Bradley, captain of the Potemkin, had obviously been parked at the table for some time, if one was to judge by his state of intoxication. Opinionated, too intolerant for command - Kirk had often wondered how Bradley had managed to advance to a Captaincy. Unfortunately, there seemed no way to avoid the man now.

"Sit down, Jim! What're you drinking these days - or have you switched vices?" He laughed at his own obscure joke.

Reluctantly, Kirk sat, trying to fabricate a reason for being able to say he had to leave, when he had obviously just entered. "I can't really stay - I just came in looking for someone."

"Oh?" Bradley's eyes took on a gleam. "Your First Officer hasn't been here," he offered.

"My...No, not Spock. I was looking for one of my lieutenants," Kirk adlibbed quickly.

"Now, that's a switch. Where is the Vulcan, Kirk?"

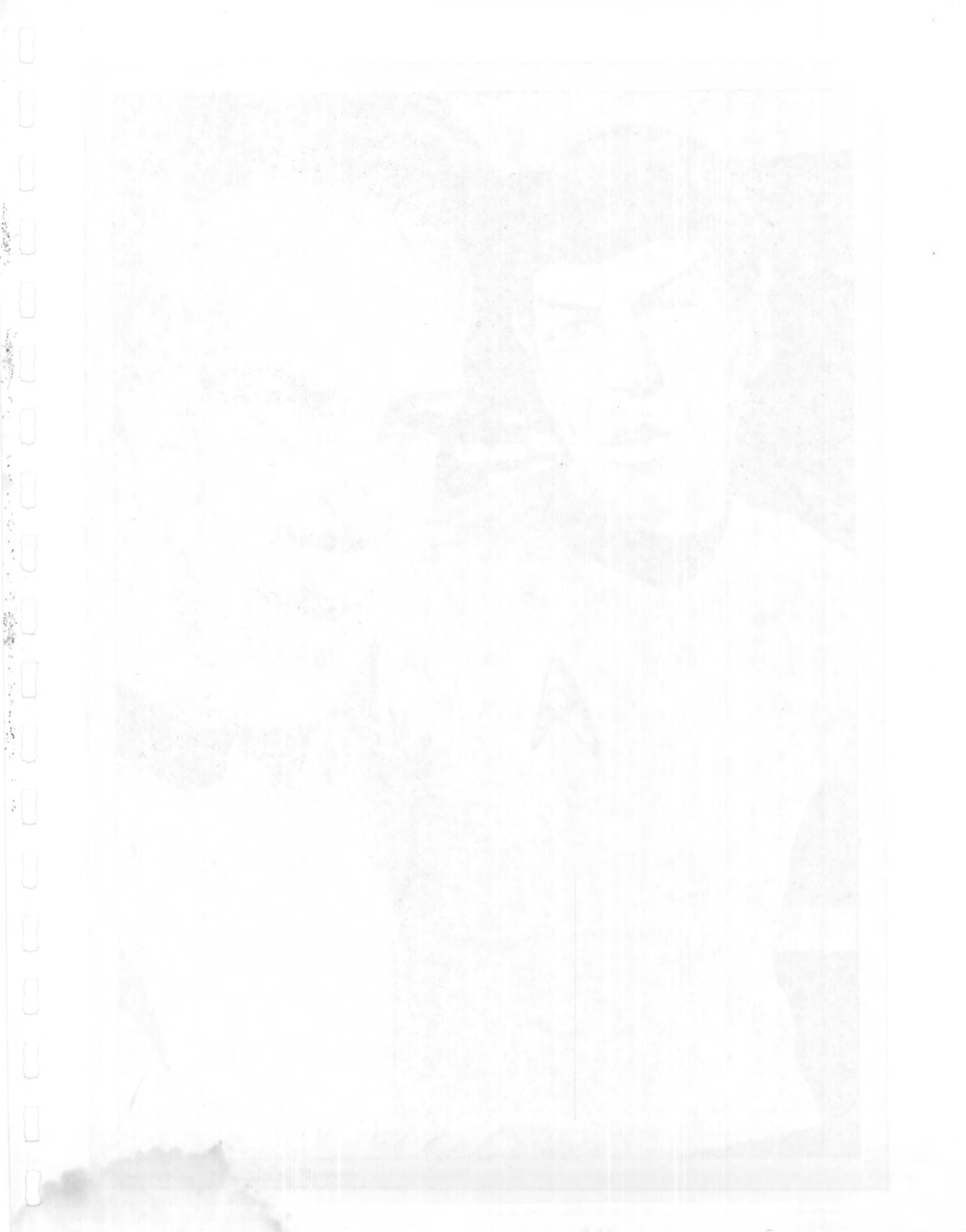
"On the ship," Kirk replied, puzzled by the direction of the conversation. "Why do you ask?"

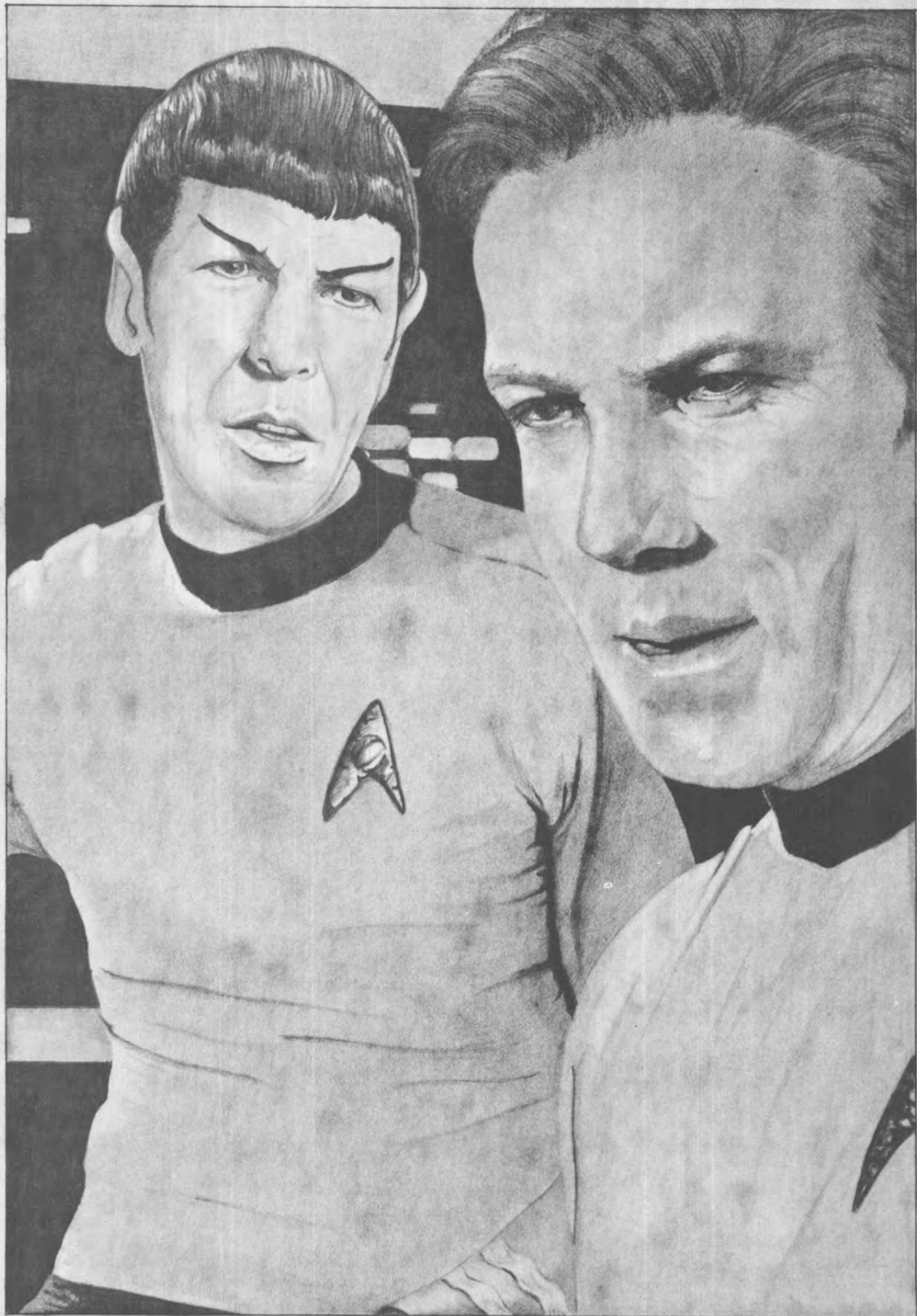
"Well," Bradley leered, "everyone *knows* you two are inseparable."

The man's tone was making Kirk irritable. "What are you trying to say, Lester?"

Bradley gulped his drink. "It's not for me to repeat gossip," he said virtuously. Then he leaned across the table conspiratorily. "But, listen, Jim. I can't help but be curious, you know? I've heard some wild things about these Vulcans. Is it true they go into rut, like an animal, and that unless they mate - somehow - they die?"

Kirk could feel the blood rush to his face defensively at the man's sneering tone. "I hardly think that's any of our concern," he answered, barely controlling his voice. It wouldn't do any good to start an argument, he rationalized. The man probably didn't realize that he was asking about something Vulcans did not even discuss.





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"From what I've heard, it should concern you, Jim. Hypothetically speaking, of course," Bradley continued hastily, "what would you do if your First Officer went into this...heat...and no one was around except you?"

The question nearly flabbergasted Kirk by its implication.

"What the hell have you heard, Lester?"

"Aw, c'mon, Jim. Don't play innocent." Bradley's tone became serious. "So you and the Vulcan have a thing for each other. What I can't understand is why you'd risk ruining your career over a half-breed alien. And that's just what you're doing, Jim. I never thought a man like you would..."

Kirk stood, shoving his chair back roughly. "You're drunk, Bradley! Go sober up somewhere and from now on, you'd better watch what you say a little closer!"

Furious, Kirk left the bar. As he walked outside, he tried to put the outrageous conversation out of his mind. Somehow, rumors about himself and Spock must be circulating aboard the Potemkin. Perhaps that was why Dennis Sinclair had seemed distant. No telling how they had started, but the best tack was simply to ignore them. Taking a deep breath, he strolled off to enjoy his leave.

* * * *

Early the next morning Kirk returned to the ship. He felt rested, the result of a visit to the local spa and a good night's sleep, and more inclined to deal with the restrictions of duty. Spock was waiting for him on the bridge.

"Captain. Your leave was pleasant?"

"Yes, Spock, very pleasant," he equivocated. No need to disturb Spock with unpleasant incidents.

Spock nodded. "We have approximately 70% of our supply orders filled, and our cargo is due to be beamed aboard at 1400 hours." He handed Kirk a report; the Captain perused it indifferently.

"I'll be in my quarters if I'm needed," Spock added.

"Fine. I'll see you later." Kirk watched him as he left the bridge. Spock almost collided with Uhura, who was late coming on duty.

"I'm sorry, Captain," she said apologetically as she settled into her chair. "I was delayed..."

"It's all right, Uhura," Kirk told her. She seemed very tense, though, punching buttons with vicious, stabbing motions. He watched her covertly for a few minutes, then stepped to her side.

"Is anything wrong?" he asked gently.

Her eyes met his, flashing, penetrating, then she turned resolutely back to her board. "No, sir. It's just that some people can be so..." she shook her head, disgusted.

Concerned, he asked, "Did something happen? Is there anything I can do?"

She gave him a smile of gratitude. "No, Captain. I met some crewmen from the Potemkin last night and they...well, they just said some wrong things, that's all." She seemed reluctant to admit even that much and Kirk suddenly understood why. The Potemkin. Of course. Uhura had heard...

Rumors did have a way of spreading, and with most of the Enterprise personnel associating with those from the Potemkin, it would not be surprising if more crew members had heard gossip about their Captain and their First Officer.

And Uhura was fuming. Her silent support warmed him; he reached over and patted her arm.

"I understand," he said. "Carry on, Lieutenant." The military words were softened by his inflection.

As he sat back in the command chair, he wondered uneasily just what it was Uhura had heard and what exactly was being said. Firmly, he told himself that it didn't matter. After his initial surprise had passed, he had convinced himself that it would be forgotten as mysteriously as it had begun and was nothing to be concerned about.

The afternoon was kept busy with the cargo transmission - agricultural supplies for Antares V, their next assignment. That evening he met Spock in his quarters for a game of chess.

Compared to the solitary evening of the night before, spending time with his friend was infinitely preferable. Spock was in an especially informal mood, and they bantered back and forth over the chess board until it was much later than either had realized.

Kirk reluctantly bade him good night and left the cabin to return to his own quarters. As he slipped out the door, he encountered Lt. Scardini, a security guard, on his way to his station. The lieutenant gave Kirk an odd look and flushed deeply before respectfully acknowledging his Captain. Momentarily puzzled, Kirk returned the nod, but as the man moved off, astonishment set in. The simple act of his leaving Spock's cabin late at night had been misinterpreted. And if that could be misread... Pensive, Kirk went to his quarters.

* * * *

The next several days saw a resumption of routine on the Enterprise. The space station was left behind as they headed into deep space toward Antares V. Although everything appeared normal, Spock sensed a curious undercurrent of tension in the attitude of the Captain.

There was nothing overt in Kirk's demeanor; most would have failed to notice anything, but Spock could see the strange, closed looks fall over Kirk's face, a subtle awkwardness, an occasional hesitation - all momentary, all fleeting, but nevertheless, there. The fact that he refused to confide in Spock indicated something was wrong. When Spock had tried to draw him out on the subject, Kirk refused to acknowledge that a problem existed. Spock was unconvinced.

It had all begun after Kirk's shore leave, it seemed. Curious. Kirk should

have returned more relaxed, rested, but the situation was just the opposite, and the tension appeared to be spreading throughout the ship.

Spock himself was the recipient of some strange glances from a few members of the crew. He began to wonder if he had done anything to cause the Captain's discomfort.

However, since it was obvious that Kirk did not wish to discuss it, Spock pondered for a while and finally decided to consult Dr. McCoy. If anyone was privy to Kirk's problems, it was the Chief Medical Officer.

On his next off-duty shift, Spock headed for Sickbay.

McCoy was seated at his desk. He looked up, a broad smile on his lips, as Spock entered.

"Well, this is a rare treat. Commander Spock is consulting the ship's medical facilities! What can we do for you, Spock? Need a pill, want a vitamin shot? Anything to oblige!"

Spock folded his arms across his chest. "I didn't realize you were so desperate, Doctor, or I would have come sooner."

McCoy chuckled. "Sit down, Spock. I like to be on eye level with my visitors and I don't feel like standing. What can I do for you?"

Spock sighed patiently at the doctor's clinical appraisal. McCoy's eyes were probing, cataloguing as he talked, taking scanner readings with his senses. Gingerly, Spock took the indicated chair and wondered if he shouldn't have considered this consultation a little more seriously.

"I came to discuss the Captain," he attempted slowly.

An odd, guarded look came across McCoy's face. "Oh? Anything specific?"

"There seems to be something on his mind, something troubling him. He is not willing to discuss it with me."

McCoy rubbed a hand over his face, his fingers lingering to pull at his chin. "Is that all?" he asked, as though he knew there were more.

Spock hesitated, trying to separate the logical facts from the surface impressions. He did not enjoy acknowledging hunches or suppositions.

"There is something happening on this ship, which I do not comprehend, yet it is a thing of which I believe I should be aware."

Distinctly uncomfortable, McCoy looked up at the ceiling, then back at Spock. "Okay. Right," he sighed, making up his mind. You should be aware, but you're not going to like it."

"Doctor, please get to the point." McCoy's procrastinations could be irritating.

"Spock, you know how gossip can be. It's one of those human failings which

I don't think we'll ever outgrow. Who knows how these things start or where they come from. It's a vicious circle, a merry-go-round of illogic."

Spock fidgeted. "Is there a point, Doctor?"

"Damn it, Spock, this isn't easy!" McCoy growled. Patiently re-folding his hands, he continued. "When we took shore leave, a rumor started at the space station. It, ah, concerns you." He scrupulously studied his fingers. "And the Captain."

As usual, McCoy's explanation clarified nothing. Still mystified, Spock tried to penetrate. "Is it something I've done? Something I've said?"

"No, Spock, no," McCoy said consolingly. "People sometimes misinterpret things." His voice sounded bitter. "It's downright stupid, but a lot of the crew heard, and there's going to be that small percentage who'll believe anything."

"Believe *what*, Doctor?" Spock was beginning to feel uncomfortable, yet he didn't know why.

"That...that you're havin' a homosexual relationship," McCoy blurted.

Spock sat perfectly still, stunned, his mind assimilating the information. Finally, data clicking rigidly in place, he marveled skeptically, "With *Jim*?"

McCoy nodded. "I'm afraid that's what's going around. The point is, Spock, Jim heard the gossip, too. I don't think he'd tell you himself, but you have a right to know. Maybe it will help you understand why Jim's been acting the way he has."

"This is...illogical!" Spock finished lamely, for lack of a more appropriate word. "The crew thinks that the Captain and I..."

"Not the whole crew, Spock," McCoy injected. "A few individuals, perhaps. But probably everyone on the ship has heard it. Look, it will probably die on its own, like most rumors do. I'm sure Jim feels that way, too. It's just, well...hit him rather unexpectedly."

Spock was still incredulous, though. He could now understand Kirk's erratic behavior and the tenseness that had been prevalent among the crew.

What ever had started such a rumor? It was an affront that anyone could infer sexual desire from a platonic relationship between a Captain and his First Officer.

"I appreciate your candor, Dr. McCoy," Spock said at last, thoughtfully. "It does explain much. Unfortunately, I am at a loss at present to suggest a solution." The Vulcan sighed and stood to leave.

"Don't worry, Spock. It'll blow over - these things always do. Just keep your chin up and ignore it."

Spock gave McCoy a long, last, disbelieving stare, then walked out of Sickbay.

* * * *

Kirk's initial apprehension about his crew faded as the Enterprise drew closer to its destination. Such matters could never be totally resolved, however, and Kirk found himself very conscious of his actions and resenting that annoyance.

Gradually, he realized that Spock, too, had heard the rumors and in his own way was also consciously ignoring them. They did not speak of it, even in private, but Kirk was aware of Spock's stoic support, and together they went on as though nothing had been said, each of them apparently deciding not to give credence to the rumors by acknowledging them.

When they assumed orbit around Antares V, the wheels were put into motion for the transference of the supplies. In addition to the delivery, there would be meetings with the colony officials, standard physicals, and general diplomatic functions. The colony was one of the Federation's largest, nearly 50,000 inhabitants, and its position at the core of the trading route made it an invaluable commodity to Starfleet. This was no backwater settlement - it was a thriving, civilized community.

Kirk, Spock, McCoy and the other members of the formal delegation from the Enterprise beamed down to the principal township. Governor Parker greeted them warmly and kept them occupied for most of the first day and evening. As the meetings drew to a close, Parker turned to Kirk.

"Captain, we've made arrangements for your people to spend the night here. Rooms have been readied, our staff is eager to serve, so, please, do us the honor."

"Thank you, Governor. That's most considerate of you. Of course, we'll be pleased to stay." Kirk smiled his gratitude.

"Marvelous! I know you must be exhausted, so I'll show you to your rooms. Oh, and Captain - we've given you and Mr. Spock a room together. I hope that's satisfactory." He smiled apologetically. "We *are* a bit crowded, and I didn't think you'd mind..."

Kirk's muscles tightened involuntarily as he tried to interpret the man's expression. Was there an insinuation behind the words, or was Kirk imagining it?

"Any accommodations are adequate, Governor," he replied mechanically, flashing a smile which covered a multitude of situations.

He followed Parker, aware of Spock directly behind. He kept his head up and tried not to think of the implications which wouldn't even have occurred to him a few weeks ago. This, then, was the result of the persistent rumors. He and Spock placed in a situation which they had shared countless times in the past in complete innocence now took on a tint of suspicion.

Thanking the man, they entered the room and closed the door. Somehow, Kirk was not surprised that the accommodations provided for them consisted of a solitary double bed. He was likewise not surprised that Spock had offered no comment and did not, even now.

Had the Governor heard the rumors, and was this his way of being discreet? Or was his reason to be taken at face value? The Antarean colonists were extremely sophisticated people; their culture had evolved from an original group of sociological misfits who had forged together to accomplish a harmonious atmosphere for all

ances. The colony was a tribute to the Federation, and Kirk knew that Governor Parker would think nothing unusual about a Captain and his First Officer having an affair.

Nor, on the other hand, would the Governor think anything strange about asking any Captain and his First Officer to share a bed for the night. He and Spock had been obliged to double-up before, and Kirk had never given it a second thought.

Angry more at himself than anyone else, Kirk moved to the washstand. Spock remained just inside the door, his hands folded behind his back.

"Captain...if you would prefer, we could request more suitable arrangements."

Spock's voicing of the unease he had felt himself unsettled Kirk. He paused, letting the water run through his fingers.

"The Governor indicated there *are* no other rooms, Spock," he said slowly, "but if you're dissatisfied..."

"No, Captain. I merely thought..."

Kirk turned to face him; Spock hesitated. They were somber for a moment, realizing their awkwardness, then Kirk grinned. "Don't worry, Spock. I promise not to snore."

"You do not snore, Jim. You mumble...and generally manage to acquire approximately 80% of whatever space has been provided."

Kirk did his best to suppress the bubble of laughter forming in his throat, and answered sternly, "If you would sleep normally - close your eyes and sleep - you wouldn't have to worry about what I do! It's no fun for me, either - seeing you stare up at the ceiling all night! I can think of a lot of more preferable bed partners." Ignoring the raised eyebrow, he turned his back and removed his shirt.

In a few minutes, Spock turned out the light and they got into bed. Although Kirk was thoroughly fatigued from the day's activities, his mind wouldn't rest. He was disturbed by his earlier reaction to sharing the room with Spock and vaguely felt as if something fragile and good had been hopelessly stolen from him. And what did Spock think? How did his Vulcan honor and integrity deal with this? Yet even now he didn't want to discuss it; he really didn't have to. It was unfair, unjust - to both of them - and Kirk felt an aching sadness, a despair unlike anything he'd ever known.

Hesitantly, he reached over and put his hand on Spock's arm. Even in the dark, he saw his own confusion and anxiety reflected in the Vulcan's gaze. Wanting, needing to say something, Kirk spoke quietly.

"Spock, we *will* get through this."

The fierce determination found its mark; Spock nodded gravely. Kirk was tired, so tired. His eyes slid shut as Spock shifted into a more relaxed position.

Just as he could feel oblivion claiming him, Kirk muttered sleepily, "Do I really mumble?"

* * * *

When they returned to the ship, Uhura had a message from Starfleet Command. The Enterprise was to conclude its mission on Antares and interrupt its previous schedule with a stop at Starbase Nine, the nearest base in their sector. Further orders would be received upon arrival. Kirk swore at the beaurocratic delay and turned his ship around.

It was a short journey and not out of their way, despite Kirk's objections. Almost as soon as the Enterprise assumed orbit, Kirk was ordered to report to Admiral Lewis.

Oblivious to the reason for the order, but suspecting it may have something to do with his Antares report, Kirk was surprised when additional orders came in for Commander Spock. The Vulcan was to report to Commodore Whitney.

Kirk found Lewis to be an aging officer with a somber face, a man grown soft with years of self-indulgence. Once past the introductions, Kirk asked, "What's this all about, Admiral?"

"Captain, a matter of...some delicacy has been brought to our attention. Starfleet has been apprised of certain...rumors concerning you and your First Officer, Commander Spock."

Startled by the other man's unexpected statement, Kirk tensed then suddenly became all too painfully aware of the reason for his summons here. So Starfleet had heard, too.

"I think you'd better clarify that statement, Admiral," he demanded.

Lewis was undeterred by Kirk's tone. "All right, let's not play guessing games, Captain," he answered sternly. "The word is going around that you and the Vulcan are having a homosexual relationship. We cannot allow this sort of thing to remain unchecked. Starfleet represents the Federation, and as line officers you have an obligation to be discreet."

Kirk held in his anger. "Am I being *charged* with something, Admiral?" he asked at last.

"It would be relatively difficult to prove, wouldn't it? And regardless of what I, personally, think of you as a man, Starfleet is only interested in avoiding a scandal," Lewis told him contemptuously.

Kirk had all he could do not to match the man's sarcasm. Restraining his fury at the lies and how easily they were taken as fact, he said in as natural a voice as he could manage, "Admiral, what I do with my personal life is no business of Starfleet's."

"The hell it isn't! What you do reflects on this service and could jeopardize your ship and the lives under your command! If you had chosen to parlay with the boys on a shore leave, or hop into bed with another man at a Starbase, that's one thing, but we're talking about an affair with your second-in-command!"

Kirk felt the icy fingers of disbelief run down his back as the Admiral spoke.

Should he deny it? Set the record straight, here and now? Would Lewis believe him...Did it matter what they believed? This had gone far enough and if the Admiral were representing Starfleet's position, and it seemed he was, then it was their move to back up what he was saying.

"That's what *you're* talking about," he countered brusquely. "Where's your evidence? What are your facts?"

Lewis quieted. "Are you denying that you and Commander Spock are lovers?" he challenged, again avoiding a direct answer.

"Would it make a difference if I did?" Kirk asked. "Admiral, why did you call me in here? If it's Starfleet's intention to make specific accusations, if they plan to charge me with something, then get on with it. But if all they want is to throw their weight around and snoop into my private life and make decisions about how I should live it, then they're overstepping their authority and I don't have to listen to it. I've been aware of this gossip for several weeks. I can't see any way to prevent people from talking, but I will not be intimidated by it!"

Lewis leaned back. He could barely conceal the rage he felt toward the younger man, but his years in Starfleet administration had prepared him for dealing with brash, self-assured space pilots who considered themselves above the service. He sighed ponderously and forced quiet dignity into his voice. "Let me repeat, Captain. The present situation is unhealthy for Starfleet, as well as for the Commander and yourself. We've been examining your log entries and we've come up with a number of inconsistencies with regulations. We do not disapprove of fraternization among senior officers, but perhaps right now it would be best if you and your First Officer saw less of each other."

"Impossible," Kirk interrupted. "We work together. How can we limit contact?"

"Various ways, Captain. To begin with, there is rotation of duty shifts - not at all uncommon. On some ships it's standard practice to have one senior officer on duty at all times. Second, it is not necessary for Commander Spock to accompany you in every landing party detail, as you have clearly done so in the past. It is a threat to the well being of a ship to have both senior officers placed in jeopardy at the same time. I would also expect less socializing after duty hours."

Kirk could no longer control his temper. He stood. "That's enough! You have no authorization to dictate to me how to run my ship. I was given command of the Enterprise, and unless I am removed from that command, I'll run her as I see fit - as *my* judgement decrees. I'm sure you're aware of the rules governing a captain's discretion. If you can point to one rule I've broken, one error I've made against Starfleet policy, then bring me up on charges. But you can't, or you'd have already done so, wouldn't you? No, Admiral, I'm not going to play your little games, and you can believe whatever you wish. Now, if you have nothing further to add, I have a ship to run, and I'd like to get back to it, sir."

Lewis' face paled but Kirk was past caring what effect his words might have.

"Very well, Captain, but do not make the mistake of considering this matter closed. I only hope that your First Officer has more sense than you do. Starfleet prides itself on policing its own, and all it will take is one false step and you'll be dealt with most effectively." He stood up. "Dismissed."

Kirk left the office and stood outside the door for a moment, controlling his anger, letting the after-shocks wear off gradually. He was furious over this encounter and enraged at Lewis, but he realized he was amazed also at the intensity these ridiculous rumors were taking and the importance Starfleet was placing on them. As he forced himself back to an even level, he remembered something Lewis had said about Spock and at once it bothered him.

What had he meant about Spock having more sense? In the heat of the argument, Kirk had forgotten that Spock was meeting with Commodore Whitney. The recollection now brought a fresh wave of anguish. He recoiled from the thought of Spock also having to face such narrow-minded bigotry. No matter what they did, they must not hurt Spock; that he could not allow.

"Captain?" The voice at his elbow startled Kirk. He looked up to find Spock beside him. Kirk studied him anxiously, watchful for any noticeable trace of stress or anxiety. Spock's expression was guarded, but Kirk could see a controlled fury smoldering within, and he knew the Vulcan had been through much the same interrogation as he had.

"News travels fast, doesn't it?" the Captain asked somberly. Wordlessly, he asked, *Are you all right?* An answering glint indicated, *Yes.*

"Indeed. Commodore Whitney and I had a most...interesting discussion."

Kirk gave a short, derisive laugh. "I'll bet. Damn armchair officers! The Admiral tried to tell me how to run my ship!"

They began to walk toward the base transporter area.

"It was...suggested that I take an extended leave with my accrued time," Spock said slowly. Something thoughtful in his tone caused Kirk to look sharply at him.

"What did you tell him?" Kirk didn't realize how he held his breath until Spock answered; time seemed to suspend for a long moment.

"I told the Commodore I would give the matter additional consideration." He paused. "I fail to see how it would serve any purpose, but if it would make the situation easier for you, Captain, I..."

"What's he been telling you, Spock?" Kirk asked, annoyed by their treachery. Spock didn't need to answer; Kirk could hear it quite plainly: *You'd be doing your Captain a service, Spock. This situation has disturbed him greatly. For his sake...* "Never mind," Kirk dismissed it. "I can imagine." He stopped walking and put his hands on Spock's shoulders. "It's all a bluff, Spock. There's not a damn thing they can do and they know it." He dropped his hands and said quietly, "As far as a leave's concerned, it's your decision, regardless of what they say. If you feel as if you need some time off, take it."

Spock sighed. "I doubt it is necessary or desirable."

They walked silently for a moment, then Kirk had to ask, "Did Whitney expect you to deny the rumors?"

"Not precisely." Spock's voice was strained. "He seemed to accept it as truth. The total illogic of it must be apparent, Jim. Yet they choose to see

what simply is not there to see."

"I know, Spock, but that's their problem. I have a ship to command, a new set of orders coming in tomorrow, and I'm not going to be pulled over the rack because some little group of base-bound beaurocrats can't handle some gossip they've heard."

* * * *

They returned to the familiar comfort of the Enterprise, yet even here they were not able to escape the veiled glances, the curious heads turning in their direction as they walked through the corridors.

Spock was able to block most of it from his consciousness, just as he had blocked the jeers, taunts and stares in his youth. The distinctly uncomfortable difference was that this time Spock was not alone. This time there was another to consider, another for whom he must suffer the slings of prejudice. To bear it alone was tolerable; to bear it for Jim was not.

Commodore Whitney had disturbed Spock more than he was willing to admit. The man's logic was most decidedly flawed; he was basing his entire argument on a false premise. Yet, would the cause and effect not be the same even if the premise were wrong?

Rumors...gossip...scandal...*I thought Vulcans prided themselves on their emotional detachment...* Whitney's words reverberated in his mind now, as he paced the confines of his quarters in an almost human anxiety.

After receiving their orders, Spock was even more convinced that a leave at this time was inadvisable. The Commodore would not be pleased at his decision to remain with the ship. Spock braced himself for the encounter, moved to his viewscreen and placed the call without delay.

Whitney responded quickly, his rugged face filling the screen.

"Commander Spock - I didn't expect to hear from you so soon."

"Unfortunately, sir, the orders have arrived. The Enterprise is to remove the Federation science colony on Nelva II, and the ship will depart as soon as the project's chief co-ordinator, Dr. Evering, arrives. The planet's break-up is occuring more rapidly than anticipated."

Whitney seemed to consider the information, then he nodded. "Well, I imagine you're glad to be out of that one, Mister Spock. The papers for your leave are all here on my desk, so if you'll just beam down we can..."

"Commodore," Spock injected, "I have decided to remain on board the Enterprise."

Whitney paused but did not react visably. Blinking slowly, he said, "To put yourself in unnecessary danger is not logical. There is no real need for you to accompany your ship. The leave has been approved..."

"I did not request leave, sir. That was your suggestion. Frankly, I see no reason for me to take a leave at this time. This is primarily a scientific mission and I *am* the head of the Science department." He did not vocalize his other

argument, that the ship certainly did need him, his Captain needed him. Kirk was bothered by this whole situation; if Spock were to leave now, just as they were about to embark upon a mission which could prove hazardous, what would that do to Kirk? The Captain depended on their teamwork.

"Dr. Evering is a highly qualified geologist, well able to cope with the situation and serve in that capacity, Mr. Spock."

"But he is not the second-in-command, sir."

"So you'll put your life in jeopardy rather than leave your Captain, right, Commander?" Whitney shook his head. "This is exactly the sort of thing we discussed." Spock made no reply and the Commodore shook his head again in disapproval. "Very well, then. But be aware that this attitude of yours will be duly recorded. Whitney out."

Spock hesitated, then he cut the transmission from his end, relieved that it was over. It had not been as unpleasant as he had anticipated. Now that he and the Captain had put Starfleet suspicion behind them, perhaps they could get on with the business of running the ship and things would return to normal.

* * * *

Within several hours, one of the Federation's leading geology specialists, Dr. Charles Evering, attached to Starfleet command, had been beamed aboard the Enterprise to assist in the evacuation of the scientists on Nelva II. The project had been his from its conception, and the threat it now faced was his immediate concern. Originally, the party of thirty-five scientists had been placed on Nelva to observe and study the unique disruptions in the planet's core, with an adequate safety margin allowed for their removal when the seismic disturbances grew too great. But events had moved more rapidly, and the planet's destruction had become imminent too far in advance of the projected schedule, making an emergency evacuation imperative -- and dangerous.

Kirk welcomed the distinguished doctor aboard and immediately ordered warp factor eight; at that speed it would take less than four days to reach Nelva II. It was cutting their own safety margin thin, but Kirk's primary concern was that of rescuing the stranded scientists.

Time passed quickly. Days were filled with exhaustive routine. Finally, only hours away from their destination, Kirk called his senior officers and Evering to the briefing room. Once more he stressed the need for haste.

"Mr. Spock - would you give your report on the time factor involved, as per your computations."

"Yes sir." Spock leaned forward. "We shall assume orbit in approximately two and one-half hours. At the present rate of atmospheric disruption, we shall only be able to maintain a steady orbit for an outside maximum of thirty-six hours. Twenty-four would be more advisable."

Evering nodded briskly. "That should be adequate, Captain. There's only one main settlement, and I have those co-ordinates."

"Good - Thank you, Doctor. Mr Scott - your report?" Kirk asked.

"Well, the strain from the increased speed has been rough, but the engines are sound." Scotty smiled. "Ah wouldna like to get caught in another o' those gravitational spirals, though."

"Nor would any of us, Mr. Scott," Kirk said soberly, remembering the frantic engine implosion at Psi 2000. The effect here was similar. Nelva's break-up, when it occurred, would pull the Enterprise down, if it were still in orbit. "All right, gentlemen, we all have our jobs. Dr. Evering, you wish to accompany the landing party?"

"Absolutely, Captain. The data stores are of irreplaceable value, not to mention the important people we have down there." Evering's voice was excited.

"Very well, then. We'll meet in the transporter room on inter-ship signal. Mr. Spock - " he turned to the Vulcan, "you'll have the con." Standing, he finished, "Dismissed."

Everyone filed from the room, except Spock. He continued to sit, a dissatisfied expression on his face.

"Sir," he said slowly, "request permission to accompany the landing party."

"Denied," Kirk responded shortly. Spock's penetrating stare softened his tone. "I know. Don't think I'm trying to go along with what Lewis suggested. But this is a crucial scientific problem. I need you here on the ship if anything goes wrong."

Spock's gaze didn't waver, and finally Kirk had to look away.

"Are you certain that is the whole reason you wish me to stay, Captain?"

The uncertainty vanished from Kirk's eyes, replaced by a glint of suspicion. "Mr. Spock? Are you questioning my orders?" Kirk's voice softened. "I'm sorry, my friend. I don't mean to snap at you." Receiving an understanding nod from Spock, he went on. "Okay, I admit that this thing with the rumors, with Lewis, has made me a little tense. I guess I forget sometimes that you're under the same pressure. But, Spock, right now I have a ship to worry about and a rescue operation to perform. I haven't got time to be concerned about who approves and who disapproves of my methods. I want you on the ship because you're the one I trust most, in case we get in any trouble, and that's the *only* reason." He tried to read the Vulcan's expression and could see only that his First Officer was unconvinced.

"What is it, Spock?" he asked. "You've never reacted about this kind of decision so strongly before. Don't you believe me?"

"I believe you, Jim," Spock said slowly. "But you have already admitted to a...tenseness. I, too, have experienced some of the same recent pressures and have found them most...annoying. I wonder if beaming down now, in your present state..."

"Now you're beginning to sound like McCoy," Kirk interrupted. He ignored Spock's indignant eyebrow. "Don't worry. I'm not all that ruffled. I can take care of myself." He flashed a confident smile at the Vulcan. "C'mon - If you start worrying about me, then I'll have to start worrying about you, and we'll

never get anything done. We're not going to let this thing get to us. You up here, me down there, we're still in this together."

Finally, Spock nodded. He was still not completely satisfied, but he wouldn't add to Kirk's problems by objecting further.

"Very well, Captain. It seems we both have our jobs to do," he said with more reassurance than he felt.

Kirk smiled his thanks and left the briefing room.

Spock remained for a moment, considering once again the disturbing chain of events that was affecting both of them more and more. Whitney and Lewis were not pleased about his not accepting the leave. Spock was at a loss to understand why the officials could not seem to comprehend the meaning of duty. Was his own Vulcan conception of it so different, or were the officials blinded by what they considered some transgression on Spock's part? They could not see that his only alternative was to accompany the Captain on the mission, dangerous or not, for he had no wish to take his accumulated leave.

Did they really misunderstand the whole meaning of the Starfleet oath? He had ignored personal preference and familial responsibility to serve Starfleet and the ship before; why was this time so different? Spock knew he had made the correct decision in not accepting the offered leave. Cloaked in imperturbable dignity, he was quite prepared to stand by it.

While the seven-man team from the Enterprise beamed down to the science colony, Spock kept a watchful eye on the sensor readings. He carefully noted and computed all shifts in the flux of gravity, compensating when they were unstabilized.

Soon, a message was received from Captain Kirk. They were at the settlement and had located thirty of the colonists. The remaining five were at another site some distance away. He ordered Spock to commence beaming aboard the rescued people, while he and two security guards went in search of the missing men.

"Captain," Spock warned, "the time factor involved is most uncertain. I would advise your return."

"As soon as possible, Spock. I'll keep in touch. Kirk out."

Spock regarded the scanner anxiously. Illogically, he wished he had insisted on accompanying Kirk. He knew the Captain was fully qualified alone, but it was never easy to sit and wait.

Fortunately, duty left no time for reverie. There were thirty-four people to be beamed up, plus two loads of cargo and supplies. It took longer than anticipated; Scotty had to readjust the controls after every trip. Spock remained in the transporter room until Evering arrived with the last group.

"It's getting bad down there, Commander," he greeted Spock. "There have been several minor tremors already."

"We are aware of the activity, Doctor."

The sudden whistle of the intercom broke their conversation. "Bridge to Mr. Spock -" It was Chekov's voice. "Sir, there's been a major earthquake in the settlement area!"

"Have you tried to contact the Captain?" Spock asked, fresh concern taking root. He sternly warned himself not to anticipate trouble.

"We're trying, Mr. Spock," Uhura answered. "No response."

"Commander," Evering said softly, "I'd like to recommend we leave this area as soon as possible." The Vulcan raised an eyebrow to object and Evering went on. "I know, there are still eight people down there. But this ship - and the cargo and passengers she's carrying - are too valuable to risk."

"So are eight lives, Doctor. We shall wait for a signal from the Captain," Spock replied.

"He could be dead, Mr. Spock. In fact, the odds are great that they are all dead, after a major quake like that."

"Yes," Spock admitted painfully, "he *could* be dead - but we must make every effort to ascertain the truth." Unable to pursue the uncomfortable course of the conversation, he added, "Excuse me, Dr. Evering, but I am required on the bridge."

The next several hours saw Evering's dour prediction become excruciatingly plausible. Sensor sweeps of the devastated landscape showed no life forms. Spock rationalized that the instrumentation was not functioning properly and, as time went on, it became more difficult to get accurate readings at all. As the planet's break-up was accelerated, the Enterprise orbit was threatened with decay, but still Spock would not order their departure. They continued to search and signal.

Finally, Evering arrived on the bridge and Spock tensed for the inevitable dispute.

"Commander Spock - you've got to get this ship out of here! Those tapes we beamed aboard are too valuable to lose. As a scientist, you must appreciate that."

Spock had noticed the man's preoccupation with objects, as opposed to people, and the attitude made him slightly uncomfortable. "We have not located the Captain and the others," he insisted firmly. "As there seems no chance of finding them from here, I am going to beam down and conduct a personal search."

"You must be mad! Why are you risking your life on a lost cause? Don't you realize the volcanic activity is growing greater? If those men were alive, we'd have heard from them by now."

Spock answered patiently. He'd been over it numerous times in his mind. "Unless they were unable to signal us."

Evering shook his head. "No. I cannot allow this. I fail to understand why you're so obsessed with rescuing a few people, when you have over 400 lives to be concerned with."

"We have several hours left of our safety margin -- three point two-five, to be precise. Your protests are duly noted, Doctor." He wanted the man to leave, to keep out of his decisions. His Captain could be hurt, unconscious, perhaps even dying; Spock could waste no more precious time in finding out what had happened to him. Deliberately ignoring Evering, Spock activated his intercom. "Bridge to Engineering. Have Mr. Scott meet me in the transporter room."

The Chief Engineer was waiting when Spock arrived. Spock went directly to the controls, moving with a brisk determination, unaware that Scotty was seeing with concern the taut lines around the Vulcan's mouth, the tenseness in his neck, the almost imperceptible trembling of his fingers. He looked to the observant eye like a bowstring stretched to the point of snapping. There had been other times when concern for the Captain's life, responsibility to the ship and crew, had weighed heavily and taken its toll on the Vulcan's physical and mental strength. But now there seemed to be something more, another underlying cause that was draining his reserve and building a pressure that begged for release.

Conscious of the penetrating eyes on him, Spock looked up from the controls.

"Is something wrong?" he asked pointedly.

"Mr. Spock, you're not plannin' on beamin' down yourself, now." Scotty could not keep the disapproval out of his voice.

"The instruments have failed to locate the captain and the others. In this turbulence we cannot be certain of their accuracy, therefore a personal search is indicated."

"We canna even be sure the transporter will work accurately. We might not be able to bring you back."

"That is a risk we must take." Spock's expression did not invite an argument. "I am turning command over to you. If I am unsuccessful and you feel you can safely wait no longer, you are ordered to take the ship out of the area."

Before Scott could answer, the intercom beeped an interruption. Spock depressed the button.

"Mr. Spock," Uhura's voice filtered through, "message from Starfleet headquarters coming in."

"Starfleet?" Spock was puzzled. Why was headquarters contacting them?

"Yes, sir." Uhura answered his questioning tone. "Dr. Evering insisted on putting through a call to them."

Evering. What was the man doing?

"Pipe it through, Lieutenant," Spock told her. In a moment the familiar face of Admiral Lewis came on the transporter room screen, and although the transmission was not clear, one look showed that he was highly agitated.

"Mr. Spock," he spoke sharply. "What's going on there? Where's Captain Kirk?"

"The Captain and seven others are on the planet surface." Spock's voice was patient but determined. "We are attempting to rescue them now, Admiral."

"Dr. Evering reports the situation is too critical to stay in the area and you refuse to take the ship out."

"We still have a three point one-eight safety margin," Spock explained.

Evering's voice cut in from the bridge. "We can't be sure of that. None of the instruments are functioning properly and the planet is breaking up. He's taking unnecessary risks with all our lives, all this data, just to try to rescue eight people that in all probability are already dead."

"We have no proof of that," Spock objected.

Admiral Lewis seemed to hesitate for a moment, then made his decision. "It's too risky. We can't take the chance. Mr. Spock, you will order the ship out of the danger zone at once."

An icy chill crept through the Vulcan, but his voice was almost normal as he forced logic into his words.

"Sir, the Captain and scientists could be injured. We cannot abandon our attempts to locate them. We condemn them to death if we leave here now."

"He'll condemn all of us to death if we stay," Evering argued fearfully. Spock had had enough of the man's interference and they were wasting valuable time.

"Doctor Evering," he spoke directly, ignoring Lewis. "I am in command of the Enterprise and I shall decide when to leave. I am aware of the danger *and* the safety margin. When I want your advice, I shall ask for it." His tone was so authoritative that it almost stopped Lewis, who was listening. Then the Admiral rallied.

"Your authority is overridden, Mr. Spock," he snapped. "I must listen to the doctor's protests and consider the safety of the ship and the lives aboard. Unfortunately, the odds are in his favor. You will abandon the search and warp out at once."

"Sir..." Spock began another protest.

"That's an order, Mr. Spock. Lewis out." The transmission was cut at Starfleet's end.

Spock and Scott stared at each other incredulously for a moment, then the Engineer spoke his disbelief.

"He wants us to leave the Captain? Give up our search...just go off an'..." he couldn't continue.

Spock stirred and the effort he was putting forth to keep his composure was apparent.

"Not precisely," he answered. His voice was a hoarse whisper, then more

determinedly, " You will beam me down to these computed co-ordinates and, as we discussed, use your own judgement when you think it's necessary to leave the area."

"Mr. Spock, that was a direct order from the Admiralty! It leaves no room for interpretation. You can't keep the ship here." Scott was worried. Spock had taken chances before, defied Starfleet, but now his whole attitude seemed incongruent to his usual demeanor. The Vulcan hung his head and suddenly the mantle of command, the strain of the past few months, his confrontation with Starfleet and, more urgently, his obvious concern for Kirk seemed a visible thing, a weight almost too heavy this time. He spoke quietly and his eyes sought the engineer's understanding.

"I can't leave the Captain to die while there is a chance he might still be alive...or the others," he added.

The brusque Scotsman's face softened with compassion for the man who's indomitable strength they had always taken so much for granted.

"I know, Mr. Spock," he told him. "We couldn't have it any other way." Spock flashed a silent thank you - Scott did not expect him to say it - then he turned toward the transporter pad.

"Mr. Spock -" He looked back at the engineer. "I wanted you to know that... well, all the trouble you and the Captain've been havin'...Not all of us pay any mind to that sorta thing. That is, we're with you, an'...." he was embarrassed, then he looked directly into the Vulcan's eyes. "Just bring 'im back, Spock."

Spock straightened on the transporter pad. He nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Scott. Engergize."

Aw, Scotty thought as the sparkle began, Ya dinna have to say that.

Spock materialized, after considerable delay, at a point relatively near where the scientists had indicated the missing members had been working. They could not pinpoint the area exactly, so his co-ordinates were little better than a rough guess. The last recent quake had been in that location, and his chances of locating the men and his Captain were not good.

The Vulcan understood this, but he was driven by a determination that would not allow him to leave until he had ascertained whether or not Kirk was alive. Evering's concern had been valid. Spock *was* taking a chance with the ship and the 460 lives aboard her, although his calculated safety margin technically provided the extra time. Starfleet's orders did not. He knew with quiet deliberateness what he was assuming by refusing to obey a direct order from Command headquarters, but he also knew there was no power in all the galaxy that could prevent him from at least trying to rescue Kirk.

It may have appeared reckless and foolhardy to others, but to Spock searching for the Captain was his only alternative. He could not explain the "feeling" he had about it. Kirk would say it was a hunch, but Spock interpreted it as something more, almost a form of telepathy, empathy perhaps. He simply understood that he would somehow *know* if Kirk were dead - that he would *feel* him die. Since that was not the case now, he felt reasonably sure the Captain was still alive - injured, perhaps, but alive.

He had experienced this assurance before - when the beautiful Losira had whisked Kirk, McCoy and Sulu to her desolate planet; when Kirk, Uhura and Chekov had been prisoners of the Triskellions; when Kirk had disappeared at the mysterious obelisk, and most emphatically when he had been lost in the interphase of the Tholian sector.

Each time something inside had convinced Spock that Kirk lived, and nothing could have stopped him from attempting to rescue that man. *One of these times, though, Spock worried, I could be wrong - or too late.*

He picked his way over the ground, searching, calling Kirk's name. The persistent tremors and rocky, broken terrain made walking difficult, and the tricorder dials spun senselessly as the atmospheric conditions made the device useless in locating life forms.

As precious time slipped by, the Vulcan's apprehension became more acute. He marvelled at strange thoughts, things he had never believed he was capable of admitting, even to himself, went through his mind. He recognized them as signs of terror, of undisguised fear of what he might find or be forced to find on this planet.

What if I should fail to locate him? What if he is, indeed, already dead? The thought was nearly unbearable. He had risked the ship, over 400 lives, just for Kirk. He would never have thought it possible of himself, but he knew he would prefer facing anything to abandoning his friend.

Spock continued searching, and though he tried to push these thoughts to the back of his mind, they kept surfacing. Before he met Kirk, he had functioned satisfactorily as a Vulcan. Emotions were foreign to him and he accepted that as a fact of life. Then he came. Kirk touched him as no one else had ever done - awakened a part of him - feelings and thoughts Spock had never known existed. Kirk...changed him. Could Spock bear a life without him now?

Kirk couldn't be dead. He refused to believe that he was and realized instantly the illogic of the idea. Kirk could, indeed, very well be dead, in fact the odds in that direction were... It was something Spock had had to face so many times before, by the very nature of their lives. Each time a part of the Vulcan had died, crumbling under the weight of anxiety, until he had seen again that familiar, vibrant figure, alive and safe, and back with him.

At last Spock's determination was rewarded as he spotted a bright splash of gold uniform and knew it was James Kirk. He was partially under the rubble of rocks and dirt, but as Spock approached there was an awareness that told him instantly that his Captain was at least alive.

"Jim...Jim..." Relief and concern replaced the fear at once as Spock reached Kirk's side. The Captain was injured, but he was conscious and knew Spock was there.

"Spock...a quake...tried to communicate..." He faltered. The vein at his temple was rapid and weak, an indication that his blood pressure had fallen.

"I know, Jim. We've been searching for you." Spock was removing the rubble with trembling hands, his scientist's eyes taking in the more obvious problems. Kirk's body was slack under the weight of the crushing rocks; there were probably

broken bones and internal injuries. Shock had developed, as blood poured from deep gashes in his lower body and legs. Even if the injuries were superficial, the combined impact of pain and blood loss and the hours he had lain trapped on the dying planet would be enough to have a traumatic effect on the Captain.

"The others..." Kirk tried to speak.

"Shhh...Jim. Don't talk. I'll get you back to the ship." Spock slid an arm under Kirk's shoulder, lifting him toward him. Kirk's skin was cool and damp. Weakly, he grasped at the blue shirt.

"Spock...please..."

Spock leaned his ear close to hear Kirk's hoarse whisper. "What is it? What do you want?"

"The scientists...security guards...may still be alive...can't leave them..."

"We do not know where they are."

"I...do." Kirk moaned suddenly, then his head dropped to Spock's chest. Alarmed, Spock felt his own breath stop for just an instant, then he realized Kirk had passed out. Spock lifted him, placing his cheek against the sandy hair to keep Kirk's head from falling back.

"Hold on a little longer," he whispered. Even as he had admitted his earlier worry, he now permitted himself the sensations of relief that his Captain was still alive. Spock temporarily forgot everything else as he reached for his communicator.

* * * *

The Captain had shown no signs of consciousness since he had collapsed in Spock's arms. The Vulcan carried the bloody, exhausted body straight to Sickbay, followed by a frowning McCoy.

Now both the Chief Medical Officer and Dr. M'Benga worked desperately, closing gashes, checking for internal damage, and taping broken ribs. Transfusions of whole blood and plasma were begun immediately. Spock remained in the room, watching the procedure with barely concealed worry.

After several moments, McCoy turned to him. "Spock. You did the right thing, beaming up as soon as you found Jim."

The Vulcan's eyes stayed on the limp form under the steri-light. "The right thing, Doctor? I believe Starfleet will differ with you."

McCoy searched the depths of the First Officer's veiled eyes, then cast a glance back at the Captain. "You weren't wrong, Spock."

Spock raised an eyebrow preparatory to replying but was interrupted by M'Benga's call to McCoy. "Doctor. He's becoming agitated. He's not conscious, but he seems to be struggling, trying to tell us something."

McCoy looked concerned as Kirk began to toss fretfully on the bed. "I've

got to get him stabilized. He needs surgery, but in his present state it would be risky." A low moan escaped the cracked lips, then Kirk began speaking, broken, incoherent words that chilled the listeners.

"Johnson...no...can't leave...Reynolds...must find...*aughhh*..."

"The others?" M'Benga wondered.

"He's concerned about his men and the rest of the scientific party. Spock, they must be down there near where you found the Captain. They must be somewhere.." McCoy began.

"Doctor, there is so little time remaining..." Spock paused, another moan from the unconscious Kirk interrupting him. The Vulcan compressed his lips, considering. "The Captain knows the location of the other survivors. Perhaps through a mind meld I could determine where they are, if he is strong enough."

McCoy was nodding his assent. "Do what you have to do, Spock. He's getting weaker."

Spock moved toward the bed, but M'Benga stepped forward. "A meld, in his condition?"

"I know of no other way to learn the truth quickly enough, Doctor," Spock answered.

"Mr. Spock, surely you realize that there is a danger involved."

"Danger?" Spock turned his attention to M'Benga.

"Yes. I am aware that you have accomplished several melds with the Captain. Is it not true that repeated contact with another's mind can cause a kind of... of bond between the individuals? Especially in view of the fact of your close personal relationship and that the Captain is not trained in shielding his mind?"

"Doctor M'Benga, you may have studied on Vulcan, but as you yourself are not telepathic you cannot truly understand what takes place during a meld. I assure you that I will seek only the information and not penetrate the deeper layers of self. There is no time to explain fully to you, but I do have the skill required for such a task. Why would you even question that a bonding would occur between us?"

"I...uh...well," M'Benga faltered. "It's just...well, you may as well proceed, Mr. Spock, if you feel there is no harm involved."

Spock put the perplexing and unusual question from his mind and bent over the unconscious Kirk.

* * * *

McCoy looked up from his desk as he heard his office door swish open. When the First Officer did not speak at once, McCoy waved him to a chair. "You look tired, Spock."

Spock nodded. In the past few hours, he had undergone a difficult meld

with his injured Captain, and then used the information he had gleaned to direct the rescue of the stranded men. Now that the ship was on its way back to Starbase Nine, Spock could return his attention to his primary concern. "We have both been quite occupied, Doctor," he conceded.

"And you want to know how Jim is," McCoy responded to the unasked question in the Vulcan's eyes. "Well, I've been working on him, and his condition is stabilized now. He's weak, of course, but there's nothing that time and rest won't heal. He's too tough to let a few broken bones keep him down for long..."

"But," Spock prodded.

McCoy dragged a hand through his hair and looked away. "But he's also suffering from trauma and deep shock. There was a great deal of blood lost and that's going to lengthen his recovery time. Spock," he continued, glancing sharply at the Vulcan, "I don't want any more burdens put on him at this time. You're in command and I want things to stay that way for as long as possible. I'd recommend a nice, slow trip back to the Starbase."

"I assure you, Doctor, I am in no hurry to return to Starbase Nine. Dr. Evering and Admiral Lewis both feel that I have...made an error. I disobeyed direct orders..."

"I know, Spock. I'm on your side, remember? Look, why not go in and check on Jim. He's sleeping, but..." McCoy hesitated. He'd been about to add that seeing his Captain might make Spock feel better, but that wasn't something he was sure he should put into words for the reticent Vulcan.

Spock apparently failed to notice the lapse. He rose, walking slowly into Jim's room.

Several days later, the Enterprise assumed orbit around Starbase Nine. Spock, still in temporary command, was acutely aware of the confrontation that awaited him at Starfleet headquarters. In rescuing the Captain and the landing party he had disobeyed a direct order. That the rescue had been successful and that a commanding officer who would have otherwise been dead was now recuperating in Sickbay was irrelevant. He had risked the ship and the wrath of his superiors and had acted on his own volition, all on a mission that he had been "advised" not to participate in.

The Vulcan sighed heavily, not discrediting the severity of the charges which would be made against him, nor their validity, yet accepting the ironic circumstances that had placed him in this unavoidable situation. He listened as Sulu, Chekov and Uhura went through the automatic maneuvers of locking the giant vessel into orbit.

"Mr. Spock," Uhura hailed him, "headquarters has a message that Admiral Lewis requests you report to his office immediately upon arrival."

"Acknowledge, Lieutenant." Spock rose from the command chair. "Mr. Scott, you have the con. Shore leave will commence upon my return."

Entering the turbolift, he called out, "Sickbay." Lewis might have requested

an immediate report, but Spock's interpretation meant that he'd have time to stop and check on the Captain's progress again before leaving.

McCoy was coming out of Kirk's cubicle as Spock entered.

"He's asleep," the doctor told him at once. "He's beginning to feel better, but he's far from recovered, so unless I keep him sedated he'll be pestering me to let him out of here and get into things he shouldn't be doing yet."

"A wise precaution, Doctor," Spock approved. "I am beaming down to the Starbase. Admiral Lewis has requested my presence." His voice took on a tone of weary resolution.

McCoy hesitated. "Spock, what do you think they'll do to you? Lewis will be out for your blood this time."

Spock folded his hands behind his back. "I do not know and speculation would prove unsatisfactory. I must therefore comply with the Admiral's request in order to discover what action they plan to take." He shifted his gaze to the doorway of Kirk's room. "I would appreciate, Doctor, if the Captain were not given all the details of my...problem with Starfleet when he awakens."

"He'll want to know where you are."

"Then will it not suffice to tell him I have beamed down to headquarters?"

"Spock, if you're in trouble, Jim's going to want to help. We all believe you did the right thing - Jim would be dead by now otherwise. Hell, you don't have to face this alone." McCoy's worry showed openly.

"Doctor, do you want Jim out of that bed 'getting into things he shouldn't be doing yet', as you put it? Do you think he has recovered enough for that?" McCoy reconsidered; Spock continued. "Then, I suggest the less he knows at the present time, the better."

McCoy nodded. "I know what you mean, but..."

Spock met the physician's eyes. "I will be all right. Starfleet will see the justification of the situation. They are *not* the enemy, you know." He spoke with more assurance than he felt, waited a moment for McCoy's agreement, then turned and headed toward the transporter room.

McCoy let out a breath. "Aren't they, Spock? I hope not."

Just then he heard a familiar call from the other room and strode toward his reluctant patient.

When Spock arrived at the base headquarters, he was not surprised to find Commodore Whitney with Lewis in the Admiral's office. Somewhere in the back of the Vulcan's mind he had expected Whitney to be involved, backing up the allegation that Spock had refused to take his accrued leave, as the Commodore had suggested, and had elected instead to accompany the Captain on a potentially dangerous mission. Spock was not wrong, and from the expressions on his superiors'

faces, McCoy's quaint but appropriate statement that they were 'out for his blood this time' seemed all too correct. Spock squared his shoulders; he had dealt with Starfleet hierarchy before. He waited while the two men studied him. Finally, Lewis broke the silence.

"Commander Spock, you are aware that your recent actions constitute a very serious breach of military discipline." Obviously they were going to waste no time with preliminaries or inquiries on the condition of the ship or the Captain.

"I am aware, Admiral," Spock began, measuring his words, "that on the surface and given the circumstantial set of facts, that would appear to be true."

Lewis seemed annoyed by the Vulcan's manner and confused by his answer. "Are you denying that you disobeyed a direct order to abandon the mission and return the Enterprise to the base?" he snapped.

"No, sir."

"That you acted on your own volition and endangered the entire crew to rescue the Captain, when you had no proof he was still alive?"

"The Captain and seven others," Spock corrected.

"Are you trying to tell me that eight men are more important than a starship and its entire crew?"

"Sir, if it is possible to save just one life, one must often take the risk."

"Especially if that one happens to be the life of your Captain, eh, Mr. Spock?" Whitney put in evenly.

Spock looked at him sharply but chose to ignore the innuendoes in the Commodore's voice. "All life is sacred," he maintained.

"This whole incident could have been avoided, Commander," Whitney said wearily. "I was afraid it was only a matter of time until something like this occurred. That's why a leave was advised."

"Commander Spock did not agree," Lewis countered. "Being with his lover made more sense." He addressed Spock. "You and Kirk are so blindly devoted to each other you'll risk anything, including the Enterprise."

Spock could feel an unaccustomed stab of anger at the man's slanderous words, but he answered with the coldly dispassionate tone of his race. "Is duty to be interpreted as blind devotion? I am First Officer aboard the Enterprise, gentlemen. Your accusations are both untrue and totally unfounded."

"Unfounded?!" Lewis exploded. "You can stand there and say that - with *your* record? What of the occurrence on the planet Gideon? That time also you refused to abandon Kirk and went against Starfleet instructions. And the time the Enterprise was caught in the Tholian sector? You jeopardized the entire ship and risked Galactic war waiting for interphase, even after you had pronounced Kirk dead yourself! I recall the time you imperiled the ship by returning to Amerind when it was threatened by an asteroid, on the slim hunch that Kirk was still alive. It nearly cost you an entire security force on Tantalus, when

Kirk was held prisoner. But there have been many times when all you risked was your own life - like the time you beamed down into a potentially dangerous situation in the Omicron Delta region on the amusement-park planet, or the incident on Gamma Trianguli, when you stepped in front of poisonous thorns to save Kirk. Do you remember drinking the acceleration water when Kirk was held by the Scalosians? If life is so sacred, why are you compelled to throw away your own?"

Spock remembered and could explain each of the incidents logically and truthfully, but he'd never been called upon to do so. Now, stunned by their collective misinterpretation, he was very nearly unprepared.

"My judgement has never been questioned before, and loyalty to a commanding officer has always been the basis of Starfleet service. If that has changed..."

"Commander Spock," Whitney interposed, "we are not questioning loyalty. We are merely..."

The intercom on Lewis' desk interrupted them. "Admiral," his yeoman responded, "Captain Kirk is here. He requests permission to see you, sir."

Lewis exchanged a significant look with Whitney and then kept his eyes on Spock as he answered. "Have him come in, Miss Wilson."

Spock's face betrayed no sign of reaction until Kirk actually came through the door. He was surprised and dismayed that his Captain had learned of the meeting, but he would not reveal that to these men.

As Kirk entered, Spock could see the slight hesitation in his step, the tight lines around his mouth. He rose and went to Kirk's side, concern replacing his reticence.

"Captain, you should not have left Sickbay," he said. His worried eyes met the calm assurance in Kirk's.

"I'm all right, Spock. I knew something was going on." He looked at Lewis. "Admiral, I'd like to know why my First Officer has been called down here."

Lewis settled back in his chair. "Sit down, Kirk. You weren't informed because we had been led to believe, " he glanced at Spock, "that you were too ill to attend. But since you're here, we may as well get on with it."

Kirk hesitated to take the proffered chair; he felt he'd need to be on his feet for what was coming, but Spock's insistent hand on his elbow forced him to concede. There was no point in worrying Spock, he realized. He silently questioned the Vulcan; Spock's guarded sobriety concerned him.

"I am assuming," Lewis began in a monotone, "that you have read the log reports filed by Commander Spock in your absence and know of his refusal to obey a direct order from Starfleet Command."

"Yes," Kirk answered, "but there were extenuating circumstances."

"I'm sure there were, but that's really not the point here, Captain,"

Whitney said easily. "Whatever defense your First Officer has should be presented at the formal court, not this office. Our obligation here today is to determine whether or not formal charges should be pressed."

"How do you propose to determine that, gentlemen?" Spock injected.

"Commander, I really believe this entire incident is merely symptomatic of a greater problem," Lewis replied. "Starfleet is not prepared to condone such behavior as has been exhibited by the two of you. For the good of the service, we are prepared to bring charges against Commander Spock in a formal court-martial, unless events are settled otherwise to our satisfaction."

"Captain Kirk," Whitney addressed him in a placating tone, "in this instance, you are not on trial, but in effect, you will be. Do you really want to jeopardize your career for a lost cause? Both of you will suffer for it."

Kirk threw Spock a questioning glance. He wasn't sure exactly what the Commodore was trying to say. Understanding, the Vulcan returned the look with a noncommittal expression. The Captain would find out soon enough where the discussion was going.

"Your First Officer can tell you," Lewis proceeded, "that we've been examining your records very carefully. You've been just as guilty as he in the past at disregarding Starfleet orders. You deliberately disobeyed an order from Admiral Komack to attend the inauguration ceremonies on Altair just to take Mr. Spock to his home planet - for what purpose we have never fully understood. T'Pol of Vulcan saved your neck that time, or you'd have been in this position then. You defied and irritated the Federation's Commissioner Ferris and risked the ship when Spock's shuttlecraft was lost in the Murasaki effect. There are other incidents I could cite, but I think you follow my meaning."

Kirk was very still as he considered their words. "Yes, I believe I do, Admiral. You're taking a lot of isolated, very ordinary cases and slanting them to suit your purpose. Tell me, Admiral Lewis, have you ever been in active service? Do you know the risks, the instant command decisions that have to be made? Can you understand what the commander of a starship goes through every time he makes one of those decisions?" He appealed to Whitney. "That's why a Captain is given so much leeway, and why the fleet goes to such extent to ready a man for command. I harbor no guilt, gentlemen, for any action taken which has resulted in saving my ship, my crew, or the best interests of the Federation."

There was a beat of silence; Kirk glanced over at Spock. If they were going to try to prove that Spock or he had taken chances with the ship to save one life, he was prepared to dispute their accusations. He smiled wryly and again Spock returned his glance with that bland look that revealed nothing to the others but spoke volumes to Kirk. Whatever the officials said, he and Spock were in this together and they'd see it through.

Finally, Lewis spoke, his voice quietly hard. "When did it all change, Captain Kirk? When did you begin caring more for your First Officer than you did for your oath? How long have you and Spock been more than...comrades?"

A sudden, sick awareness hit Kirk with a physical force as it all came sharply into focus. The rumors. Now all the innuendoes, the accusations

became devastatingly obvious. They were playing cat and mouse and Lewis and Whitney were baiting the trap. They would try to prove that Spock risked the ship and disobeyed a direct order because Kirk was his lover.

Kirk felt his head pound with the fury that welled up inside him and caught Spock's gaze. The Vulcan had been worried, waiting for the reaction he knew would come when Kirk realized the point of Lewis' statements, and he watched now for signs of distress. Kirk glanced away from the concerned eyes.

"Of all the ridiculous, unwarranted conclusions," he began, trying to collect his anger into a coherent answer. "For you to believe that Commander Spock, of all people, a Vulcan, would jeopardize his duty, his responsibility, for personal reasons..."

Lewis was undeterred by Kirk's reaction and he admitted to himself a small satisfaction in seeing the oversure Captain so obviously upset. "I'll admit," he interrupted, "that it does seem somewhat unusual. But then, you and Mr. Spock do have a rather unusual Captain/First Officer arrangement. Isn't that true?"

"The Captain and I have achieved a successful working relationship aboard the Enterprise that is supported by our past records of achievement," Spock cut in, trying to draw the confrontation away from Kirk.

"Come now, Commander," Whitney said, "are you trying to tell us that you and Captain Kirk are merely compatible officers and nothing more?"

"Nothing more that concerns Starfleet." Kirk could no longer keep quiet.

"You're wrong, Captain," Lewis told him. "Everything you do concerns Starfleet, when your personal lives jeopardize the safety of a starship and its crew."

"That hasn't happened," Kirk objected.

"And it won't," Lewis threatened. "Headquarters can no longer take the risk that this...affair between you and Commander Spock might someday cost the lives of over 400 others."

"There *is* no affair, damn it!" Kirk could feel the blood rising in his head; his hands shook with fury. "Mr. Spock is my second-in-command, the best First Officer in the fleet - not my lover!"

Spock sought some way to end the confrontation. If it kept up, Kirk's already strained physical condition might not be able to stand it. He forced his own anger under control and concentrated on taking the pressure off the Captain. Even as Spock was forming a retort, Lewis was still hammering at Kirk.

"Now you deny it...You did not deny it in this office just a few weeks ago, Kirk. I asked you for a denial, but you would not give one."

"There was no need to deny anything then," Spock cut in smoothly, "nor is there, now. The issue at hand is my decision at Nelva. If you believe that a personal matter concerning the Captain and myself was a contributing factor, then the burden of proof, gentlemen, still lies with the accusers."

Lewis and Whitney were quiet for a moment, even Kirk settled under the calming effect of the Vulcan's logic. He threw a grateful look at Spock and caught the concern so carefully concealed beneath the serene exterior. *For his sake, I'll try to take it easy*, he told himself.

At last Whitney spoke. "Commander Spock. Captain Kirk," his voice contained a calm that almost matched Spock's. "Whatever the Admiral or I personally believe is not important. Do you honestly think that we - that Starfleet - would have made these accusations, come to this conclusion, simply on unsubstantiated rumors? You ask for proof. Would you consider us so foolish not to have investigated this matter? Proof? Let me assure you, both of you, if this goes to trial, we will have the proof."

"That's impossible," Kirk told him.

"Is it, Captain?" Lewis was actually enjoying this. "I told you once that such charges would be difficult to prove, and there's no guarantee who would win such a debate, but there is evidence to the effect that the two of you have been sleeping together. Governor Parker is willing to testify that you spent the night together on Antares. One of your own crew will testify that he observed you leaving Commander Spock's quarters in the middle of the night."

"Isolated incidents that prove nothing," Kirk felt his anger returning, despite himself. "The only conclusion to that kind of evidence is that one can read anything he wishes into any circumstances."

"Then there are the video tapes of your own bridge log," Lewis continued, ignoring Kirk's protest. The Admiral reached over and pressed a button on his desk. The room went dark and the big viewscreen on his wall lit up. On it were scenes from the recorded log tapes of the Enterprise bridge, the same kind of view tapes that had been used in Kirk's court-martial over Ben Finney. This time, however, the scenes had been cut and spliced to show a series of apparently veiled looks and hidden meanings that crossed between Kirk and Spock. Closeups of the two men revealed the reassuring glances, the twinkling amusement, the silent understanding, the support, the affection that often passed between them in the course of their activities. But presented this way, out of context and in primary focus, the whole series took on a new appearance, giving the impression that there was some secretive tryst, some form of exclusive personal involvement being communicated.

"That's enough!" Kirk shouted, unable to watch anymore. As Lewis cut off the transmission and the lights returned, even Spock's face revealed the shock he felt at what he had just seen.

"What kind of insane voyeurism is this?" Kirk demanded. "Has no one ever had a close friend with whom he shared triumphs and tragedies? Has there never been someone who simply makes things easier by being there and understanding what a friend feels? Is this why log tapes are kept? Who would believe that? Only someone with a narrow - and very confused - mind!"

"Perhaps." Lewis was in control. "But you can see what kind of a case a competent lawyer will make."

"A case of lies, misinterpretations, rigged evidence," Kirk said, aware that

he was trembling and that his head hurt.

"Captain," Whitney began with serenity, "the whole trial may be theoretical. The purpose of this meeting today is to decide whether or not there will even be a trial, whether or not you and Mr. Spock need be subjected to this. The reason you have been shown the tapes is to make you aware of what you will be facing, if you persist. Starfleet has no desire to destroy your careers or to humiliate you. We are fully aware of your exemplary records. But we cannot permit a potentially dangerous situation to continue to exist. Therefore, we are prepared to offer you an alternative." He paused to let his statement sink in. It had the desired effect. Kirk and Spock hesitated, momentarily skeptical of the new direction the Commodore was taking.

"You are familiar, I'm sure, with the fleet's new starship, the Avenir," he continued. "Commander Spock, we are prepared to offer you the command of that ship, along with a full promotion to Captain."

"Your record indicates that such a move is warranted," Lewis added. "And once the close proximity between you and the Captain has been eliminated, there is no doubt that both of you will perform with your usual competency."

Kirk and Spock sat silently for an instant, stunned by this unexpected turn of events. Then Kirk exploded. Jumping to his feet, he gripped the edge of Lewis' desk, leaning forward so that he was only inches from the Admiral.

"That's blackmail! You narrow-minded, hypocritical bigot! Who are you to sit there and pass judgement, draw conclusions..." he faltered. His head pounding now, the room seemed to spin, and Lewis face blurred in front of him.

Spock was on his feet, alarmed at the Captain's outburst, fearful that too much damage may have been inflicted. For once he could not think beyond the moment or reason logically concerning the proposition just presented. His whole attention focused on the man so obviously ill and pushed past the limit of his endurance. His hands gripped Kirk's shaking shoulders.

Silence hung like a sudden heavy curtain as Lewis, startled by Kirk's vehemence, realized he may have gone too far. Finally, the Admiral managed to collect himself. "In view of your present physical condition, Captain, I'll forget I heard that."

"Mr. Spock," Whitney said quietly, "this is your choice. There will be a shuttle here in two weeks to rendezvous with the Avenir. You have until then to make your decision."

Spock was physically supporting Kirk, although it appeared that the Captain drew himself up. His eyes bored into Lewis. "You will never make those charges stick," he managed. "No court in the Federation will listen to such falsified evidence."

Lewis sighed. He almost had to admire a man who didn't know when to quit. "Let us hope, Captain, that your First Officer's decision will make it unnecessary for us to find out which of us is right."

"My decision, sirs, will not be predicated upon your threats, accusations or bribery," Spock told them. "I shall stand at Captain Kirk's side now, as in the

past and support his position in this matter. Any choice which will ultimately affect both of us cannot solely be made by me." He was anxious to get Kirk out of the office, back to the ship and McCoy's ministrations, but he also understood the urgent need for a unified dignity, and to reassure Kirk that he was behind him.

Lewis and Whitney exchanged glances. "Admirable, Mr. Spock," Lewis sneered. "Spoken with the true devotion of a loyal First Officer. Very well. I suggest that *both* of you consider the circumstances carefully. We shall be waiting for your answer. Dismissed." He looked away, indicating the meeting had ended.

When Kirk and Spock had left, Whitney stood up. "I need a drink," he said.

"No stomach for this?" Lewis asked.

"I don't enjoy destroying people. They are not our enemies, you know. They are damn fine officers."

"Well, the military doesn't ask us to like what we do, only that we do it well. It's all a matter of survival."

"I know." Whitney started to leave.

"Joseph?" Lewis addressed the Commodore by his first name. "Mind if I join you for that drink?"

* * * *

Kirk stepped off the transporter pad, barely concealing the rage he was feeling. Half a step behind the Captain, Spock threw a quick glance at Lt. Kyle, but neither senior officer spoke to the transporter chief as they exited to the corridor.

Inside his cabin, Kirk paced angrily, wringing his hands. "Who do they think they are? Threaten us with circumstantial evidence! Do they think we'll just stand for this kind of persecution? Damn chair-bound beaurecrats. Do they think they can just pull the strings and we'll jump like puppets at their bidding?"

"Jim, if you don't try to control your reactions, you'll wind up back in Sickbay." The calm exterior that the Vulcan presented belied his own inner turmoil, but more pressing than his anger toward Starfleet was his concern that his Captain might agitate his already weakened physical condition.

"I'm not an invalid. I don't need your patronizing!" Kirk snapped; then, seeing the open concern in his friend's face, he immediately wished he hadn't said it. "I'm sorry." He lowered his voice but continued the pacing. "You heard what they said, Spock. Do you want to stand by and do nothing while they try to tear us apart?"

"No."

"Trumped up charges, a court-martial! Well, they won't get away with it."

"The charges are accurate. I did disobey a direct order to leave the area at once. I did jeopardize the ship and the crew."

Kirk looked at him sharply. "You made a command decision."

Spock shook his head. "It was not mine to make this time."

"We can beat that. There have been precedents for this before - extenuating circumstances. There have been other times when orders have been disobeyed..." Kirk trailed off, watching the doubt creep into the Vulcan's features. "What is it, Spock? There's more that's bothering you." Spock's features contorted into a plea for understanding.

"Jim, don't you realize they are simply using the court-martial as a tool to accomplish their real purpose? Believing as they do, their main concern is that we will be a threat to the safety of the ship. Now they have the means to achieve their end. I was a fool to have given them the ammunition they needed."

"You could have let me die," Kirk smiled gently. "Of course, I realize what they're after. But the rumors are just that - rumors. There's no truth to them at all and we'll prove that."

"And how will you accomplish that?" Spock did not wish to agitate Kirk any further, but his own frustration was all too painful.

Kirk considered. After a moment, he took a deep breath. "All right. But it works both ways. If we can't disprove it, then Starfleet will have to validate their accusations."

"That may not be necessary. The evidence, once presented, may be sufficient in itself to be damaging whether it is true or not," Spock countered.

"You mean the trial will get dirty. Does that bother you very much?" Kirk asked.

"No. But I think we must realistically be prepared for what may come. They need not prove the rumors, only that I disobeyed their orders. Starfleet does have us in a rather constrictive situation. The charges for the court-martial *are* valid and the evidence that will be brought out, while inaccurate, can be most effective, simply by its implications."

"Okay," Kirk conceded. "But we've been in tight spots before. Our very life-style is a risk, a game of chance."

"Agreed, and in this instance, the odds against our winning the case are --"

Kirk groaned. "Never mind."

"The odds against our coming through undamaged are even less," Spock concluded.

Kirk began to pace again, although in a less agitated manner, more thoughtful now as his anger cooled. "Damn. Homosexuality isn't a social disease. In some parts of the galaxy it's the accepted norm. Among our own race, people tend

to simply ignore it, not worry about who is or who isn't. Sure, there are those around who frown on it, take some sort of offense by it. But I'm not one of them. Hell, I've known many good men - at the Academy, in the service, on this ship, even - whose sexual preferences happen to be male. Yet I have to admit that these accusations do bother me, and I don't understand it. Why am I letting it get to me? It's more than just Starfleet's threats. This whole damn situation with the rumors has had me on edge from the start. Does that make any sense to you?"

"Perhaps because in this case it simply is not true." Kirk stopped and met the Vulcan's quiet spirit. Spock went on. "Would you not feel the same if you were, for example, being accused of acting unfairly in a situation where you knew you had been just, or accused of acting for personal gain when in fact your motives had been unselfish?"

"Yes," Kirk nodded, sudden awareness dawning. "Yes, that's it. It's not *what* we're being accused of that's bothering me. It's knowing what our own feelings are, our inside reasons, but having others interpret them incorrectly and not being able to prove ourselves, or change their beliefs. It's...frustrating." He took a deep breath, observing the Vulcan. "And how do you feel about all this, Mr. Spock?" he queried softly.

"My feelings are as yours, Captain. I...make no moral judgement on homosexuality. Vulcan philosophy does not permit me to measure another being's personal standards. Yet I, too, find it extremely...disquieting to be placed in a position of denying an untrue accusation."

There was a moment's silence, as the two felt again the uncommon empathy they shared.

"We're not going to be in for an easy time of it," Kirk admitted at last.

"Indeed. It does seem unlikely that we will not in some way be affected," the Vulcan concurred.

"Still, we'll make it, Spock. You and I...together..."

Spock lowered his eyes, his voice suddenly husky with misery. "That, too, may become an eventual impossibility."

Kirk felt a shiver down his spine. He hadn't wanted to think that far ahead, and he couldn't stand the naked vulnerability in the Vulcan's face. They had no right to do this to Spock - or himself. He felt anger mounting again toward Starfleet - damn the organization!

"Well, maybe Starfleet's not the answer anymore," he discovered suddenly. "It's not the whole galaxy. There are plenty of places we could go, plenty of things we could do. Perhaps we should begin a new lifestyle - put Starfleet behind us." Spock looked at him incredulously, scarcely believing what he was hearing.

"You would consider such a thing - leaving the service?" he asked.

"It is a possibility we may *need* to consider."

Spock found some of his logic returning, alarmed at the undisciplined train

of Kirk's thinking. "A great deal of consideration, indeed, Captain. You are talking about giving up the Enterprise, your command, your career, everything that is important in your life."

"Not everything, Spock, when the alternative may be giving up you." Spock looked away, and Kirk was at once very sorry that he had embarrassed his Vulcan. God, he was always doing this - subjecting Spock to emotions that he found so difficult to deal with. Why must he always inadvertently force Spock to let down his barriers with him? He knew he had Spock's unfailing devotion. Was he so insecure that he always had to hear Spock admit it? Was that what his caring for his friend was doing to the alien's dignity?

Wearily, Kirk rubbed his fingertips across his eyes. "All right - maybe I'm not being rational. Maybe the best course would be for you to accept command of the Avenir. You're qualified, you've worked hard for it --"

"Jim..." Spock began, protesting.

" -- If I could be sure - if I knew that would make you happy - but it wouldn't, would it?" His gaze burned into Spock; the Vulcan lowered his eyes, uncomfortable.

"Then," Kirk went on quietly, "we either stay and fight, or leave without fanfare. If we leave - now, if we give up, we'll have our dignity, but will we regret our move, when we've had a chance to think about it?"

Spock hesitated to remind Kirk again of his weakness, but he knew the Captain was in no condition to make any kind of decision. He was throwing ideas out at random, not stopping to think through to a conclusion. Yet Spock could not debate with him; the Vulcan's only concern was for Kirk's health. He knew Kirk should be resting; they could solve nothing right now, and the strain of the meeting with Starfleet had taken too much from him.

"It is not a simple problem, Jim. You know I am with you whatever you decide, but we cannot form a hasty conclusion. We are talking about the rest of our lives."

Kirk's head was pounding so hard he couldn't think straight. Irritated with his inability to think clearly, he retrieved the pills McCoy had prescribed and swallowed two of them hastily, ignoring the look of concern on Spock's face. "That's just it," he went on doggedly, "we have to think about the day-to-day existence, we have to plan..." He trailed off, losing the thread of his thought, then picked it up before Spock could intervene. "What we have is precious to both of us, perhaps the most important thing in our lives. But if we give up everything else, if we are *forced* to give it up, will we eventually regret it? Will there never be any remorse, any...blame? Will it destroy the one thing we're seeking to protect?" Spock made a motion as if to protest, but Kirk persisted. "How can we be certain that in five years - ten years - we'll feel we made the right choice?"

"Can a choice ever guarantee that kind of certainty?" Spock asked, groping for a way to turn Jim away from the subject, yet realizing the importance of his words.

"No, dammit, and five years ago - hell, five months ago - I never thought I'd be feeling this way about Starfleet, either."

Kirk suddenly felt a wave of weakness rush through him. His knees buckled and he staggered. In an instant, Spock had his arm around Kirk's waist and was unable to keep quiet any longer.

"Jim, you must rest. You should never have left Sickbay," Spock told him, supporting the depleted strength. Nodding, Kirk allowed himself to be led to the bed.

He had tried to put the trauma and injuries out of his mind, yet now he felt exhaustion, both physical and emotional, sweep over him. Spock's touch was efficient yet compassionate as he eased him down on the bed, then lifted his legs to remove his boots. There was such open concern on the chisled Vulcan features, Kirk thought, *He worries about me too much.* He caught Spock's arm.

"You know, Spock, in an almost crazy, ironic way, Starfleet is right. If I were inclined, as they believe, toward a male sex partner, their choice for me would have been the correct one."

Spock arched the persistent brow, the lines of worry eased slightly from his face.

"Indeed, Captain. I, too, found their perceptiveness in certain areas to be very...astute."

Kirk threw a quizzical glance at his First Officer. Then he squeezed his eyes shut. *What the hell did this damn Vulcan mean by that?* At times it was very hard to tell whether Spock was teasing him or not.

"I'm going to try to get some sleep now, Spock," he said without opening his eyes. "Tell McCoy, so he won't worry."

"Affirmative, Captain." He felt a gentle reassuring pressure on his shoulder. He still did not open his eyes, as he heard the swoosh of his cabin door and knew Spock had left.

* * * *

Several days passed uneventfully. The Enterprise and her crew ran all the standard systems check-outs, and the Starfleet hierarchy was curiously quiet.

Kirk managed to get through his duties, although his strength was slow in returning. McCoy assured him it was only natural, after the extent of his injuries and the trauma his system had suffered, and Kirk, for once, didn't scorn the medicine prescribed for him, or quibble over half-shifts.

He and Spock refrained from discussing the subject of the Avenir. Spock knew a decision would have to be reached but, like Kirk, he wished to put it off as long as possible. They both knew there could be no satisfactory solution, and Spock had the added burden of knowing what any alternative would do to Jim in his present state of health.

Seven of their allotted fourteen days had passed, when the Enterprise's senior officers were, ironically, invited to attend a Federation diplomatic reception at the Starbase. The Aldebaron President was visiting on a goodwill tour, and protocol demanded their presence. Both Kirk and Spock knew

there was no way to avoid it, though neither really wished to attend.

Medals glistening on his silky green tunic, Kirk threw a cursory glance in the mirror. His image reflected back at him, the shiny picture of a Starship Captain, somehow at variance with the way he felt inside. Physically, he knew he wasn't up to par. He reached for the bottle of pills McCoy had given him. It was almost empty. He'd have to get more from Bones tomorrow. He hated having to take these things, but they *did* help, and he needed them to get through the evening. He closed the curved cabinet and stepped into the corridor.

He met no one on his way to the transporter room, but was not surprised to find McCoy and Scott waiting for him when he arrived. He greeted them with a nod.

"Jim, are you certain you're up to this? One word and I can get you off on a medical excuse, which is what I think should be done, anyway," McCoy worried.

"I'm all right, Bones. Besides, maybe a little diversion is what we all need." Kirk feigned enthusiasm. "By the way, I'm almost out of those pills you gave me."

McCoy wanted to ask, *Already?* but he held his tongue. What Jim didn't need now was a reminder that he was taking more medicine than he should. He was always level-headed about that sort of thing, and if McCoy kept a close watch on him, a few extra pills when he felt he needed them wouldn't do any harm. McCoy forced his tone to be light. "Okay, see me about it tomorrow. Now, we better get going. You know how these officials like to celebrate. There should be plenty of food..."

"Aye, and they appreciate good Scotch whiskey, too," the kilt-wearing engineer put in.

Official Starfleet receptions were not ordinarily anything to get excited over, and Kirk realized the jovial mood of his officers was being accentuated for his benefit. He smiled back at his well-meaning friends. The least he could do was relax. Perhaps it *would* do him good to get off the ship and engage in harmlessly pleasant small talk for a change.

The door hissed open and Kirk glanced up to find Spock's deep eyes on him. The Vulcan, wearing his dress uniform and looking somewhat uncomfortable, stepped into the transporter room, making the group complete.

Together, the four Enterprise officers made their way to the reception. A sizable crowd had already gathered in the large ballroom. Men and women in Starfleet dress uniforms and in the native dress of other worlds mingled, listening to the exotic music provided and sipping multi-colored beverages.

After the first few moments of the usual introductions and polite greetings, Kirk found himself standing alone with Spock. He drained his glass and looked up at the Vulcan. "You never have enjoyed this sort of thing, have you?"

"Which, Captain, the gathering, or the consumption of alcoholic beverages?"

Kirk smiled. "Both, I guess. Anyway, I can think of a lot of places I'd rather be tonight, myself."

"Indeed, Captain. The reception seems to be the usual stuffy affair."

"Stuffy? Spock, that's an unusual observation for you to make."

"The adjective does refer to individuals displaying a provincial attitude, does it not?"

"What? I don't..." Kirk paused, noting that Spock's attention was on the people circulating about them in the room. The Captain looked closer and saw what the Vulcan had observed, that they were the subject of discreet but noticeable interest. Hushed voices, knowing glances, secretive smiles suddenly seemed all too apparent.

Kirk almost felt embarrassed, then chagrined, and, glancing up at Spock, just plain exhausted. He was so tired of suspicion and rumors following him around wherever he went. He couldn't even get away from them at what was supposed to be an off duty party. He looked down, away from the Vulcan's steady gaze. As constant as a shadow... Maybe they'd both be better off on their own for a few minutes.

"Spock, I..." he cleared his throat self-consciously. "I see someone over there I want to say hello to. Do you mind...?"

"Of course not, Captain," Spock answered quietly.

Kirk moved away from him quickly, as much embarrassed by his own actions as by the curious expressions of the others. He squared his shoulders and plunged into the crowd, looking for someone, anyone, to whom he really *did* want to say hello, unaware of the concerned Vulcan eyes that followed him.

Spock stood a few minutes, then drifted away on his own. While his eyes kept straying to the Captain, trying to gauge Kirk's attitude, he managed to act naturally, and appeared totally unruffled to the casual observer.

Idly, he strolled to the buffet table and examined the variety of delicacies displayed. He had no desire to eat, yet felt as though he should at least make an attempt. He was startled by a voice at his side.

"You might try the vegetable compote, Commander. It's very good."

Spock turned; the soft voice belonged to a stranger. He was obviously one of the base civilian personnel, judging by his attire. He was young, yet his face was framed by a mass of silver-hued hair which did not appear natural as it clashed with his tanned skin, Spock noticed. The Vulcan's main attention was on the indicated compote.

"Perhaps I shall. There is not much of a vegetarian selection," he noted.

"I know," the stranger agreed sympathetically. "I always have that same problem at these affairs."

Spock lost interest in the food; he didn't really want it, anyway. "Oh?"

he queried. "Are you a vegetarian, Mister..."

"Kaminsky. Herval Kaminsky. My friends call me Val." He smiled broadly. "Yes, I am, Commander. I do not believe in eating the flesh of any living creature. Actually, your Vulcan customs are most appealing to me."

Other guests began to crowd the table; Val Kaminsky put a hand lightly on Spock's arm. "Let's find somewhere to talk. I detest crowds."

Spock shied away from the familiar touch, but reluctantly followed the man to a vacant spot against the wall, not wishing to offend. Unconsciously, his gaze sought out his Captain, who was now conversing with a young woman across the room.

Kaminsky followed his eyes. "Don't let it bother you," he said soothingly. "He'll be back." Spock looked at him curiously. "She's not his type. You know," Kaminsky went on, not giving Spock a chance to question the statement. "I've always been attracted to aliens. So...exciting...different. You can understand that, can't you? Difference is a virtue, isn't that your philosophy, Spock? Do you mind if I call you that?" He smiled winsomely again.

Spock was becoming suspicious of Kaminsky's attitude. "It seems that you know a great deal about me, Mr. Kaminsky," he commented.

"I'd like to know a lot more," he invited.

"I beg your pardon?"

In answer, Val Kaminsky moved closer and placed his hand flat on Spock's chest. "There's no need to be coy, Spock. Exclusivity is a sin. Why save it all for Kirk? I'm attracted to you...I could make it good for you..."

Spock backed away, colliding with the wall as awareness dawned on him. He felt stifled, trapped, and more than that, he felt anger and shame at that emotional response. He took a deep breath, before he responded to the plea in the man's eyes.

"Mr. Kaminsky, you obviously have a serious misconception concerning my character. My 'difference' from you is far greater than you suspect, contrary to what you may have heard. Now, if you'll excuse me..." Spock left the stunned man hastily, moving toward McCoy, whom he'd spotted a short distance away.

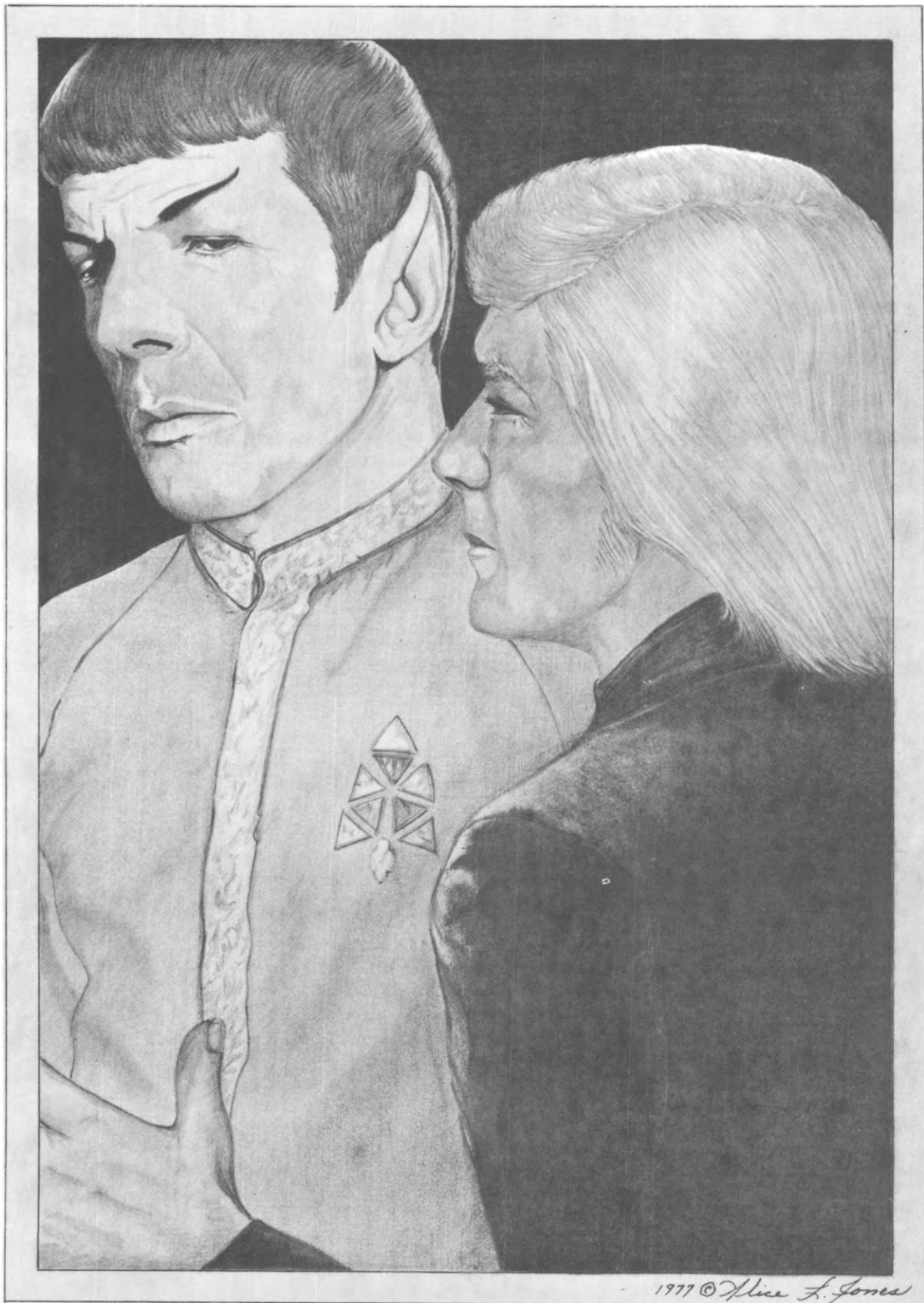
"Nadine! It's been a long time," Kirk greeted her cheerfully.

She turned to face him, surprised. "I'd heard you were here, Captain."

"Captain? Is that any way to greet an old friend?" he exclaimed. "I was expecting a warmer welcome. It's been...how long? Three years?"

"About that. I don't know."

"And you're as beautiful as ever," Kirk rushed on eagerly, scarcely aware of the reluctance in her voice. He was grateful at having found her; it would make



the evening much more pleasant and the night, too, perhaps. Already his thoughts were racing ahead, making plans for them, pushing his illness to the back of his mind. Nadine Michaul had been very willing three years ago - mustn't presume on that, though. Women change - but, Lord, it *had* been too long.

He took her arm gently. "Let's sit down. I want to hear all about what you've been doing."

"Oh, nothing much, or very interesting," she stalled, retrieving her arm from him and flinching at his touch.

Kirk ignored the act. "Now, c'mon. Your assignment's not that bad. When I last saw you, you were delighted with your work." Noticing her lack of response, he went on. "I've thought about you often," he said truthfully.

"Really?" She seemed disinterested. "Well, it's been nice seeing you again, Jim." She turned to leave, but Kirk caught her arm again to stop her. He'd been given the brush off before, but he didn't expect it this time, and from her, unless...

"What is it, Nadine?" he asked. "Are you engaged or something? If that's true, then congratulations are in order and we can at least talk awhile, can't we?" He hadn't realized how desperately he needed this touch with the past, this escape from his current problems.

"No, I'm not engaged," she told him. "It's just that, well..." she looked at him sympathetically. "I'm sorry, Jim, I just don't see any reason for us to...spend time together."

Kirk sensed her discomfort. "I don't understand. What's wrong?"

Nadine looked at his hand on her arm, then shrugged. "Look, Jim, you're a nice guy. I mean...it used to be good - in fact, I was really hooked on you." She gave a nervous little laugh. "But that was before...before I'd heard that you...well, liked men, too."

The meaning of her words cut through him like a knife. He dropped his hand from her arm and his eyes bore into her.

"I see. So you've taken to listening to gossip. I used to think you were smarter than that," he told her bitterly. She was instantly defensive.

"Well, I used to think you were a lot of other things, too. Sure had me fooled. I never thought you were a...a..." she choked, unable to continue.

"A...what?" he demanded, gripping her shoulders angrily. "What's the matter, Nadine? Can't you say it? Does the word stick in your throat?"

She drew herself up. Looking at him levelly, she said, "Take your hands off me, Captain."

He ignored her protest, held her tighter. "You think I've changed. Shall I show you? Do you need proof of what I'm still capable of with a woman?" His one hand still held her shoulder, the other slid around her waist as he drew her closer in a rough embrace. "How about a kiss - for old time's sake? We'll see

what happens," he demanded.

She struggled against him, reluctant to draw attention to them. "Jim, please. People are watching - you're causing a scene."

Awareness of where he was, what he was doing, hit him and he released her abruptly. He shook his head to clear it, anger and nausea welling up inside him at her, at his own actions. Nadine looked at him, conscious of his drawn appearance.

"Are you ill?" she asked gently.

He shook his head. "It's all right. I'm...sorry..." he apologized.

"Me, too."

Kirk looked at her, pleading with his eyes. She had been warm and compassionate. He saw only pity now and perhaps a touch of disgust. She read his thoughts.

"I'm sorry. I just couldn't." She honestly regretted her words, but her attitude made his skin crawl. He felt like someone had just told him he had a contagious disease.

"You understand," she pleaded. "It wouldn't be the same...now." He knew she meant *after I believe you've been sleeping with a man*, but she didn't say it and he let it pass. Wordlessly he turned, leaving her standing alone. Catching the first passing waiter, he made a conscious effort to keep his hand from trembling as he reached for another drink.

He wandered aimlessly around the ballroom by himself, consuming one drink after another, dimly aware that he shouldn't be mixing this much alcohol with the medication he was taking, but unable to resist the temptation to let the numbing effects release his tortured thoughts. He was disgusted, angry with himself for being upset over Nadine's reaction and by his own attitude toward the rest of the guests. He'd left Spock alone because he couldn't take the innuendoes and stares of the crowd, yet he chastized himself for taking it out on his friend.

Scotty tried to offer some support and conversation, but Kirk wouldn't allow himself to ruin the engineer's evening with his present state of depression. Begging off, he forced himself to sample the exotic h'ors d'oeuvres, although he had no appetite at all.

"Keptin! Keptin Kirk!"

He couldn't pretend he had not heard the smartly dressed Ensign's call, Kirk headed toward the group of Enterprise officers who seemed to be engaged in conversation with some junior officers from the base.

"Hello, Ensign. Enjoying the party?" Kirk managed a smile.

"Yes, sair. But I am havink a problem explaining Russion wodka to Mr. Burton. He tinks Scotch is the better drink."

"Well, it's a good thing Mr. Scott is occupied," Kirk answered, pointing to the smiling engineer, who was carrying on a conversation with a coquettish young

officer.

"Your Captain isn't an expert on liquor, Ensign. I understand his interest lies in other areas." A burly base Commodore joined the group.

Kirk looked at him steadily, sipping his drink, annoyed at being discussed as though he weren't present. He realized he was being baited, as he decided how to reply. "This is an interesting blend. Like all things within the Federation, it is diversity which creates beauty," he swallowed the rest of the liquid, "and good taste."

"Yeah," the Commodore drawled. "You'd know all about those Vulcan philosophies, wouldn't you?"

"What do you mean, sair?" Chekov asked, his voice quiet and slightly unsteady.

"Never mind, Chekov." Kirk attempted to turn away from the man.

"Your First Officer in particular knows all about infinite diversity, doesn't he, Kirk?"

Kirk turned; the noise of music and laughter blurred around him, becoming nothing more than a ringing in his ears. The scene before him slowed and he saw, in sharp focus against the wavering background, his officers waiting to hear his reply and the disapproving, mocking gaze of the Commodore.

"What my First Officer thinks is none of your business, Gulliver," Kirk said with determination.

"But it sure is yours!"

Was that muffled laughter behind him? Kirk felt his face flush, heat of anger spreading through him as he clenched his fists. He swayed on his feet, unsure of how a Captain must behave toward such a provincial attitude in a higher official, acutely aware of Chekov's defensive expression and the uncomfortable glances of his other crewmembers.

With considerable effort, Kirk managed to achieve a measure of dignity. He was being held together by sheer willpower, all too aware that his zealous consumption of alcohol was having its effect on his ability to cope. He focused on the jeering face in front of him.

"If you will excuse me, Commodore..." he managed.

"By all means, Captain. This party must be a bore to you - keeping you from your Vulcan lover."

Kirk felt the urge to smash that overbearing, ape-like face, and knew that he was going to do it. No one - not even a senior officer, could humiliate him in front of his crew. He felt Chekov's worried grip on his arm.

"Keptin - please. Pay no attention."

He ignored the Ensign. "What did you say, Gulliver?" His tone was threatening.

Then, there was a firm pressure on his elbow, a calm presence beside him. He almost relaxed, but in an instant of agony he realized that Spock had witnessed the scene.

"Excuse me, Captain. Our presence is required aboard the Enterprise."

He hesitated, understanding Spock's intention, yet reluctant to leave the matter with Gulliver unsettled. Once again he felt the concerned eyes of Chekov and the other young officers. Slowly, he let out his breath, forcing himself to be calm in front of his men. He addressed Spock.

"Yes, of course. Excuse me, gentlemen. Good evening." His voice rang hollowly in his ears and the words seemed to slur together.

Kirk felt weak, relieved, aware of how close he had come to a real altercation with Gulliver, and he almost sagged gratefully against Spock's support. Then the full meaning of the Vulcan's action dawned. He had risked personal embarrassment and given Starfleet more to talk about, but he had prevented his Captain from making an even bigger fool of himself. Determinedly, Kirk straightened and walked smoothly out of the room at Spock's side.

Once back aboard the ship, his strength of will began to fade. His head was spinning from too many drinks, eyes burning from deep humiliation, the glow of the liquor leaving him feeling as weak and sick as before. Mutely, he let Spock guide him to his quarters.

The Vulcan remained quiet until the door closed behind them. "Captain, I hope I did not cause you any embarrassment by intervening..."

Kirk slumped into a sitting position at the foot of his bunk. "It's you I've embarrassed, Spock. Walking out on you, then letting Commodore Gulliver goad me... nothing went right this evening."

"I am aware that your conversations did not...particularly go the way you would have desired." The deep voice fell quietly into the subtly lighted room.

Kirk descended into a well of depression. *Lord, he must have been watching me all evening.* "Nadine...you saw?" he mumbled. He met Spock's eyes in the darkness, but cringed away at the look he found in their depths. "Spock, please don't...feel sorry for me. I couldn't stand that." Kirk leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and covering his face with his hands.

He felt the mattress give as Spock moved to sit beside him. The Vulcan reached strong, warm fingers around Kirk's wrists, gently but firmly pulling his hands away from his face. Kirk still tried to look away, but Spock touched his chin and turned the emotion-tortured face toward him.

His whisper was delicate with sincerity and compassion. "Jim...it is not that. I...understand. You are not yourself. You are still recuperating from injuries. I wish only to help you."

There was something in the tone of Spock's voice that made Kirk look sharply at him. Had something happened to Spock, too? It seemed he really did understand. The Vulcan continued.

"Captain, this...problem affects both of us. Neither of us can be expected

to behave as we would under normal circumstances.

Kirk gazed into the intense brown eyes so near his own. He reached up and placed a hand on the side of Spock's arm. "It's hurting you, too, isn't it? I'm sorry. I guess I tend to forget that."

Wordlessly, Spock reached for the fastening on Kirk's dress tunic, opened the garment and eased it off the unresisting figure. Kirk allowed the Vulcan to help him into bed, noting Spock's precise, unhurried motions and careful, though somewhat detached attitude. He felt he didn't have the strength to protest; besides, it was so comforting to have Spock caring for him, easing the tension and frustration of the evening. Just for a moment, to have someone else in charge, someone anticipating his needs, was gratefully accepted. He knew he had had too much to drink. It made his thinking fuzzy, his movements awkward, but it didn't dull the ache that was always present in his mind and body.

Kirk wanted to relax, to let the worries fade, but one thought stayed uppermost in his mind. Spock was taking care of him, even when he himself must be suffering.

He reached up, placing a hand on Spock's forearm. He detected a subdued trembling within the Vulcan, and was suddenly aware of the incredible pressure Spock was under, pressure that could eventually build to the breaking point.

"Spock, how can you go on this way, when I know this must be tearing you apart inside?"

"Captain, do not tax yourself worrying about me." The voice was quiet.

Kirk tightened his grip, truly worried now. Ignoring the denial, he pulled Spock to face him. He still felt sluggish, but he knew he could not let the Vulcan shut himself away from help. "Spock, if you can't talk to me about this..." No, that wasn't quite what he meant to say. "You know at least I understand."

The brown eyes dropped and the Vulcan drew in a deep breath. "Indeed. You *are* the only one who understands. All my life, Jim, I've listened to remarks, faced prejudices. I should be used to it. It should not affect me. I am a Vulcan. Yet I find myself experiencing emotions that I should be able to control." He paused and met the Captain's troubled gaze. "What they are doing to you... to me... It seems we are pieces in a game of chess that too soon will be checkmated."

Kirk sat up, clasping Spock's shoulders, touched by the ironic analogy but grasping all too clearly the significant meaning. "You're thinking about the transfer - taking over the Avenir."

"Shall I be a Captain, or court-martialed?"

"Spock, don't," Kirk insisted. "We can still work it out, beat this thing. We don't have to do it their way." Despite his words he felt suddenly exhausted; pain and alcohol and depression seared through him and he sagged against Spock's chest. There ought to be some argument, some words of encouragement he could give Spock, but he was just too tired. "We can beat it, can't we?"

They remained that way for a time, saying nothing, each lending support and comfort to the other. For a few golden moments each was reassured and confident,

but the closeness could not shut out the rest of the universe for long. A poignant frustration intruded, as they realized that if the scene in the Captain's quarters were to be observed, no one would understand what passed between the two men - not physical desire, but a deep emotional rapport and affection.

Starfleet was trying to destroy those feelings and it seemed few others comprehended them, either.

"Spock, they don't understand."

The First Officer noted the slurring of Kirk's words. His Captain was very close to emotional and physical exhaustion, and Spock himself felt utterly spent. He eased back a little, speaking softly. "Captain, you must rest now."

"Can't sleep..." Kirk mumbled. "Haven't...in days..."

"Perhaps...if I stayed with you?" He looked questioningly at the bleary eyes.

Kirk answered with a trace of sarcasm. "No. You shouldn't be here in the first place."

"Very well, if you would prefer that I go..." Reluctant to leave his Captain in this condition, Spock rose. Kirk almost let him go, then a spark of his old determination strengthened him.

"No, dammit. Stay, Spock. Please...I don't want you to go."

The hours passed. James Kirk slept peacefully under the light cover the Vulcan had drawn over him. Spock, in a chair by the bed, was alert, watchful, protective, yet deep in his own thoughts.

After a while, Spock shifted and realized he had been maintaining an uncomfortably tense position. The hours had slipped away without his leaving the Captain's side. The Vulcan had turned the events of the past months over and over in his mind, seeking some means of avoiding the inevitable.

What was that old Terran expression about hind-sight? Perhaps if he and Kirk had realized the seriousness of the problem sooner, they could have found some logical way out of the difficulty.

Still, it was not a problem rooted in logic. Spock glanced at his sleeping Captain and thought again that he had learned much from this man, things he might never have discovered on his own. Once, logic ruled, with no room for intuition or emotionalism. Spock still remembered the unfortunate results of his logical decisions, when he had commanded the Galileo.

Was that it, the reason he sought to avoid the command now offered him? Did he still think of command as something that merely existed or did he actually fear making the wrong, albeit logical, decisions?

No. He had matured beyond such black and white thought patterns, and accepting a ship of his own was not the true issue this time. Part of the reason he did not

wish to leave was that he really did not desire a ship of his own, though he knew he could command competently. It was leaving Kirk's side that caused the problem and impaired his reasoning.

Of course, it was command itself that held fascination for his human friend. Kirk thrived on it, the decisions, orders, explorations, even the battles. At least, he had in the past. How did Jim feel now?

Spock considered the face of his friend thoughtfully. He looked thin and haggard, even in sleep. *You are still recuperating*, he had reminded Kirk. That the Captain was far from recovery from the trauma he had suffered was closer to the truth. Kirk's health was on very shaky ground indeed, and his constant struggle to find a way around Starfleet beurocracy had worn thin the vitality that made up much of his personality, leaving only cold but listless determination. It was obvious that Kirk could not take much more.

The Vulcan went through the possibilities in his mind one final time. He would very likely be found guilty if court-martialed, bringing dishonor to both his family and the Enterprise, but even if he were exonerated on extenuating circumstances, what toll would the strain of a long and messy trial, as Starfleet promised, have on James Kirk in his present condition? Or on himself, for that matter. Spock knew that in addition to his concern for Kirk, his own emotional control was faltering. On the other hand, if he and Kirk left Starfleet, at this time, under these circumstances, and tried to make a new life for themselves, he was afraid the accumulated regrets would somehow eventually warp the easy companionship they now shared. He could not take Kirk's driving force, his command, away from him. James Kirk was meant to be a starship Captain and he, Spock, was meant to...what?

Spock's self-image had undergone radical changes in the years he had served at Kirk's side. Some of that vitality had touched him, opened his mind to the inner well of caring that must have always been there, hidden in his heart. Before he met Jim, he had merely existed, now he - lived, truly believing the Vulcan tenet that one's own life itself was one's most precious possession. That had been Jim's gift to him. Could he throw that gift away? What did it matter that circumstances and regulations beyond their control had shattered the pleasant roles to which they had accustomed themselves? If Spock refused the Avenir, he would be condemning them both to endure the torture of false accusations and the unending emotional turmoil would eventually break both Kirk's health and spirit. There was no other choice, then, logically or emotionally. He must go. At least for now.

A twinge of regret, of loneliness flickered within him, but Spock sternly shut it way. He could not think beyond this decision. Somehow, in some way, this intolerable situation must be stopped, and stopped soon, before it was too late. Neither of them could function much longer with things the way they were. Starfleet had passed the next move to him and he must act upon it. The choice hurt and though it would take time, he felt Kirk could pull himself out of his depression once the constant pressure was eased. Somehow he would make his Captain understand that this was their only chance. Later, when Kirk's health was better, when Starfleet had put the incident in the back of their files, when they were both on firmer ground, they would decide clearly and calmly what their future would be. Until then they would go on, Kirk taking the Enterprise to farther frontiers of life and discovery, and Spock, if command he must, would accept the responsibility with all the dignity expected of a starship Captain.

Yet, with the decision made, Spock felt suddenly unsure of himself. The strengths he had found within himself, the healing of his divided self, had been sparked by Kirk's presence, and Kirk would not be with him on the Avenir. The Vulcan would command, and exist, efficiently and logically, but without a friend. The most important concern now was Jim's well-being. He could no longer permit the one who understood him, who had so unselfishly reached out to him, to suffer.

"You still here?" a voice murmured from the bed. Kirk stretched and looked at the chronometer. "It's almost time for first watch."

"I had...much to consider."

The drowsy look cleared instantly. "And?"

"I have made a decision."

Kirk slumped, looked away at the wall. "You're leaving."

Spock swallowed. He must ease the emotional impact, convince Jim that it was for the best. "I...we cannot do otherwise. Captain, you said we can 'beat' this thing. Can we allow them to beat us?"

"They have." Kirk's voice was dull.

"I do not believe so. This is the only logical course open to us at this time. If we throw away our careers, our future, then they will have won. We can choose to do something other than be forced into the mud of their accusations and regulations."

The Captain turned pain-filled eyes on the Vulcan. "I never heard you speak so...passionately before, Spock."

"The situation does tend to evoke emotional responses," Spock answered evenly. Then he went on. "Our separation does not have to be a permanent thing, Jim. Neither of us is now in a position of doing otherwise. Perhaps we must accept the lesser of two evils in order to eventually win out over their prejudices." He sought the hazel eyes for any sign of acceptance, but found only despair. "Perhaps we shall be separated for a time, Jim. But, as we have seen during these difficulties, change is inevitable. Some way, somehow, we may yet beat *them*...and we *will* find each other again." The Vulcan spoke quietly, coloring the falsely hopeful picture with as much sincerity as he could muster through his own hurt.

Kirk looked away for a moment. Spock seemed to believe what he was saying. Perhaps... No, he'd known too many friends separated by different ships, different sectors, who had died before they could even take that first, promised leave together. Still, somehow in his emotional innocence, Spock probably needed Jim's reassurance, and Kirk himself wanted so much to believe.

"Okay, Spock. You're probably right. It is the only way. And, someday we will be together again." Kirk hoped that his answer rang true. The words nearly choked him.

* * * *

Starfleet headquarters was notified of Spock's decision. Lewis and Whitney

were expansive, congratulating him on his promotion, assuring him that he had made the right choice.

Kirk methodically downed his daily supply of "McCoy's Bottled Euphoria", as he referred to the pills the doctor had prescribed for his pain and sleeplessness. They didn't really help that much, but he managed for the most part to give the impression of confidence and acceptance of Spock's apparent good fortune. Those looking past the surface might see the haunted, frightened man, but to all outward appearances James Kirk was the jaunty, self-assured commander on his way to full recovery.

Spock, himself, was not given much time to observe his Captain closely, or indeed to consider the effect this transfer was having on himself. Starfleet was keeping him busy, off the ship most of the time studying personnel records, attending briefings, going over computer read-outs, assimilating all the information he would need as Captain of the Avenir. He was aware of the depressingly heavy grief all of this was having on Kirk and himself, if they allowed themselves to give in to it, but he was counting on it being only temporary. They both possessed an unfailing determination, a will to survive in face of all things, and Spock was sure that perseverance would see them through.

As the time grew closer, Kirk had been called upon to interview several available "replacements" for Spock. That was a joke, he had reflected sarcastically. They were all competent scientists. One would do as well as another. What did it matter? He couldn't decide.

Even the half-day shifts which McCoy still had him on were tiring, and after the day's ridiculous interviews he was feeling particularly ill. Miserable, he went to Sickbay, because there was no other place to go and he didn't want to be alone.

Kirk sat across the desk from McCoy, his head resting on his arms. Spock was still off the ship. He'd been on the base for two days this time attending briefings. The machinery was all in place, the correct sequence of buttons had been activated to set in motion the irreversible events that would culminate in their separation.

Kirk was so tired of all the accusations, the reactions of other people, the denials, the misinterpreted evidence, the whole incongruous situation. It was so incredible that had it not been such a tragedy, it would have been almost laughable. First, the rumors and innuendoes of so-called friends, then Starfleet's intervention. He had to admit that Starfleet was a damned efficient organization. When they were bent upon something, it was accomplished. No wonder the Federation had not lost a war, and if the forces of the Romulan and Klingon empires couldn't defeat them, how could James T. Kirk and Spock hope to? He should have known.

He looked up to face McCoy, aware that the doctor had been sitting silently, observing him. The cup of coffee placed in front of him twenty minutes ago was still untouched. McCoy's clear blue eyes were clouded with suffering for his friend.

"Jim, you're bone weary. Aren't those pills I prescribed for you doing any good?"

Kirk shook his head. "Not really. Anyway, even if I did sleep, the problem would still be there when I woke up."

"Well, you can't run a starship under this kind of strain."

"Starfleet thinks I can."

"Damn Starfleet!" McCoy spat out. "Meddlesome, nose-poking hypocrites. What business is it of theirs what anybody does with his personal life, so long as his job performance isn't affected?"

"It's all part of the system." Kirk's voice was flat.

"A system of beaurocratic know-nothings who get warts on their asses from sittin' around worrying about what goes on in their field officers' bedrooms. They're not really interested in who screws who, just so nobody finds out about it." Kirk looked at him curiously, but the doctor went on. "You know, it seems unbelievable. You think we live in enlightened times. You'd think that by the Twenty-third Century man would have overcome all his petty inhibitions and learned tolerance for all beings. My God, we reach out to the stars, cross light-years to make contact with alien cultures...you'd think we'd have gone beyond witchcraft. Then something like this comes along and you find that in many ways Man's still as Victorian as the Eighteenth Century. Makes you wonder. If this kind of persecution can still happen today - in these times - just because two men happen to love each other..."

There was something in McCoy's tone that had made Kirk feel uneasy. Now he was intent on his friend's words. "Bones, what are you trying to say? You've never come out and discussed before just how you feel about this."

Now it was McCoy's turn to react uneasily. "I didn't know I had to."

"I guess not. Still, I think now I'd like to hear it."

"Hear what, Jim? What do you *want* me to say?" McCoy was guarded.

"What your feelings are about these rumors about me and Spock," Kirk persisted.

The doctor sighed. "All right, Jim - if it'll make you feel better. I'm on your side, no matter what. Your's and Spock's. There. Is that better?"

Kirk wasn't satisfied. "No. What do you mean, 'no matter what'?"

McCoy was becoming annoyed at Kirk's line of questioning, but he reminded himself of the Captain's need for reassurance. "Look, what are you getting at? I said 'no matter what' as a figure of speech. You and Spock are the two closest people to me in the whole universe. I want what's best for you, whatever it takes to make you happy, and it's nobody's damn business what that is. I'm with you." He met his Captain's eyes, not flinching at the pain he saw there.

His words did not lessen the pain, but Kirk spoke softly. "Bones, I have to know. You do believe Spock and me?"

"That you're not having a homosexual love affair? Of course. I'd know it,

if you were." He took a long look at Kirk. "You're both too conscientious to have engaged in anything that might have jeopardized your careers, your ship..."

Kirk shook his head. "No, Bones. That's not what I meant. You do believe it's not even what we want?" Kirk was incredulous, but McCoy dismissed the question.

"What difference does it make if that's what you want or not? The point is, it's not happening and you two are being persecuted, being split up, having your lives torn apart because of it."

Kirk was becoming desperate. He had the helpless feeling that he and McCoy were speaking in two different languages. "Bones," he tried again, "I don't want to make love to Spock and he doesn't want to make love to me!" His voice was pleading to be understood.

McCoy ached for his tortured friend. How many hells had he seen Jim Kirk through? The loss of Edith, of Miramane, of his brother, the often agonizing life-or-death, war-or-peace decisions a captain must make, through injuries and illnesses both to his own person and to those he cared about. How would he manage to see him through this new hell - the loss of Spock, not through death or some act of nature or duty, but because of an organization made up of people so constricted by regulations and high-sounding idealism that they failed to see the individual needs?

Kirk needed comfort, compassion. He could help him physically, mend the body injuries, ease the pain with drugs, build up a depleted system. Taking care of the physical needs was the simple part. But McCoy had always known that the psychic damage could be far worse if allowed to fester. Traumatic neurosis, the textbooks called it. Clinically, he could label it, give the precise reason why medication was not working, why Jim failed to recover his strength and vitality after the accident on Nelva. McCoy was a specialist in psychology, but this wasn't some impersonal case study, this was his friend, and for once McCoy felt the helplessness of being too close to his subject to be objective. Right now, Jim needed his reassurance in a very personal and unprofessional way.

In an effort to ease the tension, he came around the desk and put his arms around Kirk's shoulders. "Jim, you don't have to convince me. I told you, I'm with you and Spock," he said quietly. "I only want you to be happy, whatever that takes."

Kirk slumped, so tired. He hung his head, whispering, "*Et tu, Brute?*"

"What was that?" McCoy asked.

"Nothing." *So, even you, my friend, do not really understand,* Kirk thought sadly. *And when Spock is gone...who will?*

* * * *

At last the inevitable could be prolonged no more. The chronometer had caught up with them. A brief ceremony, for the good of the service, the morale of the crew, would be held later in the transporter room, but Kirk knew he had to see Spock alone, once, before he left the ship. As he headed for Spock's quarters he considered how in the past few weeks since the decision had been made, the growing apart had already begun. He had been going over the details

for their departure with Scotty only this morning, and it had occurred to him that he was unconsciously excluding Spock from those plans. Yesterday, he had received orders for the Enterprise's next assignment, and he had logged them and had held a briefing with his senior officers before he realized that Spock was not even aware of what that assignment was.

He also had no clear knowledge of Spock's specific plans. He knew the Vulcan would be taking a shuttle to rendezvous with the Avenir, but he did not know the precise schedule or chain of events. Once Spock beamed off the Enterprise their alliance would be severed.

How efficient, how organized. Starfleet had seen to everything. He and Spock would go their separate ways and planets would continue to spin and stars would still shine and...he and Spock...

Kirk entered Spock's cabin without buzzing. The Vulcan was standing behind his desk, emptying the contents of the drawers into a large, plastic box. He looked up, acknowledged Kirk's presence with a self-conscious nod.

"I've called ship's services to take these things to the transporter room," he explained. All at once, Kirk noticed the boxes piled by the door, and his gaze moved around his First Officer's quarters. The shelves, dresser top were bare, the stand where Spock's firepot had stood was empty. Closet doors leaned open, revealing naked interiors. The rooms were no longer inhabited, and Kirk felt his stomach muscles knot involuntarily. There was no trace, no stamp left by the Vulcan. Nothing left with which Kirk could identify. It was merely another cabin, like any other cabin on the ship.

He found Spock watching him in anguish, as if he had hoped to spare Kirk this final indignity or, perhaps, as if he could not face the scene himself.

"Everything's ready, then," Kirk said unnecessarily.

"Almost," Spock conceded, his brows knitting in frustration and helplessness.

"What's left to say, Spock?" Kirk asked, coming to the desk and placing his palms on its smooth surface. "I wanted to say farewell privately, before the official departure, but it's all been said, hasn't it?" Wearily, he lowered his head. All the resistance was gone now, washed away on the tide of defeat.

Spock sank into his chair, too worn to even offer Kirk solace. "I know," he said softly. "I know."

"Was it so difficult for them to understand, Spock? Is what we have so unusual? Can't two people be free to...to love each other without being 'lovers'?" His eyes met Spock's. "And I do, Spock. Perhaps that's what needs to be said. Probably no one else could understand that, but you do, my friend."

"Jim," Spock began slowly, "before I came to the Enterprise, before you assumed command of her, I had no conception of that term. I understood duty, loyalty, even kindred affection. But - love? That was too strong an emotion for one Vulcan-trained. Yet now, when you express your feelings in those terms, I, too, must acknowledge it. Yes, Jim - more than a brother...love of the spirit, the soul..." Spock rose from the chair and Kirk reached across to clasp his shoulders, the gentle light of pride and admiration glowing one last time in the

hazel depths.

"We are one," Kirk whispered, " ...and I feel like I'm being torn in two..."

"Ashes and dust, Jim. They have made a mockery of something they cannot comprehend. Perhaps the Vulcans are wiser than I realized."

Kirk flinched at the harsh words, but he understood. What was left for Spock, except to retreat into his former Vulcan stoicism?

"You're fortunate, my friend. Your discipline will serve you well in the days ahead." Throughout this whole ordeal he had never heard Spock complain, never break. His composure had aided Kirk's own faltering attitude, but how much longer would he be able to depend on Spock?

Wearily, as if lifting a tremendous weight, Spock picked up the last box from his desk and carried it to the doorway. He stood with his back to Kirk, forcing control into his frame as if the scene were too painful to bear.

Kirk, feeling the nagging headache and nausea return, stepped behind Spock and, grasping his arms, turned him around to face him. For this moment he could not think of his own pain; forcibly submerging the agony, he spoke with determination.

"You'll have the Avenir, Spock. Be her Captain. Be the best damn Captain Starfleet has. Show them, Spock. Don't throw twenty years work down the tube. They want this to look like an honorable promotion - all right, accept it at face value."

"And you, Jim?" Spock was regarding him curiously, as if he weren't misled for a moment by the false bravado.

"I'll have...the Enterprise, won't I?" Kirk responded mechanically. Ashes and dust...yes. He could taste them on his tongue.

Abruptly, Kirk reached into his pocket and extended his closed fist to Spock. "I almost forgot. I have a present for you." A going-away present, but he did not say that.

Taking Spock's hand in his own, he transferred the small object, his fingers lingering over the warm, dry surface of Spock's palm. "I want you to have this," he explained simply.

Spock looked up at him in surprise. The object now in his hand was Starfleet's formal, golden Captain's pin. Kirk had always worn his at the top of the cluster on his dress uniform. "This is your own, isn't it?" Spock asked huskily.

"Yes," Kirk admitted. "It isn't much, I know, but I wanted you to take something of mine with you. Something which - once - meant very much to me."

"Your command no longer matters to you?"

"It will always matter. These past years have been the finest in my life, the most rewarding. No man can ask for more than that. But I want you to take this to the Avenir, Spock. Do it justice - promise me," Kirk insisted.

"Jim...I..." Spock faltered and Kirk impulsively drew him into a close embrace. Slowly, Spock's arms encircled him in return, hesitant at first, then more firmly. They clung to each other in futile desolation, until Kirk felt the wetness spill over his eyes and trickle unheeded down his cheeks.

Finally, Kirk took a deep breath and stepped aside. "I'll see you in the transporter room," he said thinly, the catharsis draining his firm resolves.

"Jim - " Spock halted him, "- try to accept this." He looked as if he wanted to say more, but Kirk nodded.

"I know." Turning, he left the bleak and empty cabin and walked unsteadily to his own quarters.

* * * *

Kirk reached out and flicked off the viewer. There was no sense in trying to concentrate on fuel consumption reports or other matters of ship's business. His mind wouldn't focus on them. It strayed continually to the bleak abyss of pain in his heart. *Spock was leaving.* In a few moments he would beam away from the Enterprise, from Jim Kirk, forever.

He's leaving - really leaving. Kirk shuddered as renewed disbelief crept over him, and he winced as a fresh wave of the tiresome nausea clutched at his insides. He leaned forward for a moment, breathing painfully, then sat back, dragging a hand across his sweat-moistened brow.

Look at me - James T. Kirk, youngest man ever given command of a starship. The stuff legends are made of. Some legend. All the medals, all the little victories, all the worlds and beings he'd met and helped and loved a little didn't seem to matter anymore. I let a few narrow-minded people worry me, then when Starfleet got on my back, I threw it all away. I finally, finally let go, gave up...

Whatever happened to that drive that sent me out here in the first place? Kirk shook his head, trying to clear away the procession of memories, fragments out of time, visions of the tough, self-assured Starship Captain, confident in his command, chin up against aliens, monsters, illusions...

Where had it all gone, the determination that he was right, the will to fight back? Kirk thought ruefully of his court-martial over Ben Finney's disappearance. Even with all that evidence against him, he had believed in himself.

Spock had come through for him that time, had stood beside him as he always had, even through this most recent and most discouraging trouble. Now, even with the Vulcan's support, he was weakening in the face of the negative attitudes of others. *I needed him, still need him, so much...* Kirk stood up, walking stiffly to the sleeping area, almost recoiling from the chill truth of what he had allowed to happen.

This isn't me. James T. Kirk doesn't give up. He stumbled, leaning against the open bureau, glancing dazedly into the small mirror. "But you did, you did. You allowed them to get away with the greatest wrong ever done any two people. You quit fighting back when the going got a little rough. You let a few little injuries weaken your whole spirit, and you tried to pretend that everything would blow

over, be forgotten...and damn it, you threw away the best friend a man ever had, as if you didn't even..." The words, flung out through clenched teeth, resounded like a slap in the quiet room.

What kind of friend was I? What kind of man? Kirk knew what the decision would ultimately cost Spock. How they had kidded themselves with the false hope that the separation would not be permanent. Life in the space service was too much of a gamble, even if they were together. Apart, their chances seemed to dwindle.

Kirk clung to the bureau weakly. His head was pounding and he let it rest on his arm for a moment. His hand closed on the nearly full pill bottle. *Bones, my friend Bones, Kirk thought achingly, you don't understand, but you tried at least to help me physically. Too bad you couldn't know what blessed escape your medical miracle provides. Anything to forget the pain in my head, to forget this whole mess.* The incessant throbbing at the back of his neck grew sharper. Kirk swayed, pushed away from the cabinet and staggered back to his desk.

Poor Spock, I've ruined his life, too. Made it as much a shambles as I have mine. In his confusion, Kirk berated himself, those who had started the rumors and believed them, the Starfleet authorities, even the stars themselves, his frustration and anger spilling over and over, tumbling about him, without direction or release.

Spock will probably go back into his shell, suffer in silent loneliness the rest of his days...

Oh God, the loneliness... Kirk felt it like a weight on his chest. *No one to turn to.* Both of them, commanding ships of their own, yet separate, apart from anyone who would understand a Captain's needs to let down occasionally, to love someone, to make some mistakes.

His thoughts became a blurring mix of tenderness and self-loathing, love and remorse, physical pain merging with the emotional. One moment it was Starfleet that was wrong in what they were doing, the next he was sure that he himself was to blame. A Captain was responsible...

A Captain... His own crew on the Enterprise hadn't behaved too badly, at least to his face, but Kirk knew morale was down, and with it, discipline. Spock gone, his crew's loyalty dwindling, the strange attitudes of old friends, his command...Spock...

Lost...everything lost. The emptiness, the final emptiness reverberated almost physically in his skull. Mistakes, lost time, lost values, lost friendship...It was too much, too much to even think about anymore. He'd worn the grooves of the anguished thought patterns smooth with futile repetition.

James Kirk slumped forward, resting his elbows on his knees, covering his face with his hands, pressing his eyes shut tight against the burning wetness of pain and hopelessness and desolation...

* * * *

Spock entered the transporter room for what would no doubt be his last time. His new, command-gold tunic lent an aura of confidence he did not feel. McCoy,

Scott, Sulu, Chief Kyle and an honor guard were all there, and if this were indeed the auspicious occasion it was purported to be, the long line of gloomy faces would not support it.

The Vulcan had already said his good-byes in private to those on board he had come to know as friends. This last leave-taking in the transporter room was merely a Starfleet formality that would serve to fool no one who really mattered. His face, a mask of non-expression and unemotional Vulcan veneer would also fool no one. The atmosphere in the room was uncomfortably quiet, strained, waiting with neither patience nor impatience for the arrival of the Captain. His presence would signal the start of the very brief ceremony which no one wanted to take place, yet none could prevent.

Spock stood rigid, hands clasped behind his back. He tried not to glance around the familiar room, tried not to look at the faces of the others standing there, tried not to remember how many times he had materialized on this very pad with a sense of relief, of security, of coming home after a particularly dangerous mission. Home. How many years had he thought of the Enterprise in that way? And why? Vulcan was his home, the place of his birth. Yet he had left there willingly, of his own volition. If he had had a choice, would he ever have willingly left the Enterprise? What was it that made the difference, made him admit the words, 'the finest starship in the fleet', when he had believed he was recording the Enterprise's epitaph?

He knew the answer without even considering. One man made the difference. One man, who had always been there to come back to, to depend on, to stand beside. Now, although that man would still be there, Spock knew it was himself who would not be coming back. Kirk's pin rested heavily on his chest, a small tangible token of love to take with him. He was aware that the Captain was late.

Scotty cleared his throat noisily. Spock looked over and saw McCoy rocking uneasily on the balls of his feet. The engineer broke the awkward silence.

"Maybe I ought to buzz the Captain's cabin to see what's keeping him." Spock nodded. He had a pretty good idea what was delaying the Captain. Jim was going to have to wear his best 'good-of-the-service--gallant-starship-commander' image, and this time it wasn't going to be easy. He would do it, though, for the crew, for the ship, but he needed a little time to get it into place. Spock understood all too well the effort involved in presenting the controlled exterior.

Scott's buzzing brought no response from the Captain's quarters. "He must be on his way," the engineer announced to no one in particular. They waited.

Whenever he would arrive, it would be too soon, Spock reflected illogically. The time that had been closing in on them had narrowed itself down to minutes, minutes that could not be prolonged toward the inevitable. Tomorrow the Enterprise would be gone, warping its way out of orbit toward its next mission. The Science Officer that it was leaving behind would be gone, too, aboard a shuttlecraft that would rendezvous with the Avenir...the 'future'. His future? The Avenir would be his command, his ship. No longer part of the Enterprise, he would board a new vessel, with new faces, unfamiliar...

"Maybe you ought to try again," he heard McCoy's concerned voice say. "Jim should have been here by now if he'd left when you buzzed him before."



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1936



CAPTAIN
JAMES T. KIRK

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Scott tried once more, but again there was no response. "I'll have him paged over shipwide. He might have been sidetracked by something on his way."

"No!" Spock cut in quite suddenly. The idea of having Kirk paged over the intercom, having his vulnerability exposed by a mechanical intrusion, tore at the Vulcan. He understood Kirk's reluctance, perhaps even inability, to face this final parting. "I...will see what is keeping him, gentlemen," he volunteered.

McCoy raised a perceptive, quizzical eyebrow. "Spock, is Jim..." Spock threw the doctor a long look that silenced him.

"I'm sure that something has detained the Captain. I shall endeavor to determine what it is and offer my assistance." He straightened and left the transporter room.

McCoy sighed. *That damn Vulcan understands humans better than we do ourselves. What will Jim do without him?*

Outside, Spock made his way to the Captain's quarters. He suspected what he would find. Jim, trying so valiantly to exact a pose of confidence, to bury all the pain and fear under the command aura, making sure that no loose ends remained that might allow the tiniest slip of his composure. He would not want even Spock to witness this final suffering, would not want the Vulcan to carry with him anything but the memory of the self-sufficient starship Captain.

That's what he had been trying to tell Spock earlier, when he had come to the Vulcan's cabin to say farewell in private.

"...the Avenir, Spock. Be her Captain. Be the best damn Captain Starfleet has..."

Second best...as long as you command, Jim, Spock told himself. A wave of anxiety washed over him as he reached Kirk's quarters. Cold fingers of unexplainable fear gripped him - a sense of foreboding, an unexpected emptiness filled him. He pushed the buzzer.

"Jim," he called softly. *Please, let me know the right words,* he found himself thinking. *Let me make it easier for him.* There was no sound from within.

Spock lifted his hand to the automatic lock. The Captain's cabin was still keyed to open at the First Officer's touch. The door slid back to reveal a darkened interior. It seemed at first that the rooms were empty, then the Vulcan's eyes grew accustomed to the dimness, and Spock felt a new chill.

He scanned the room, uncomprehending, until his eyes at last discovered something partially obscured and indistinguishable in the gloom. He reached out physically, mentally, the cold sweeping into his very being, as he moved slowly forward. Recognition came suddenly and with a sickening clarity. As his eyes took in the truth his mind tried to deny even though he knew...he knew...

The invasion of cold grew with an overwhelming horror as he saw the body of James T. Kirk - sprawled, lifeless...the empty pill bottle in his hand...

So Constant The Change

By Beverly Volker

Still see the stars persist to shine,
And planets spin their way;
Still poets strive to pen their line,
And night gives on to day.

Oh, marvel I, that it should be,
That space and suns go on;
The tides roll out to endless sea,
When life and hope are gone.

For now I see a hollow shell,
Where once there dwelt a soul;
Lost someplace twixt heav'n and hell,
Reflection of a whole.

He was begun, yet not complete,
No taste of love he knew;
Till fate decreed a union sweet,
And fashioned one from two.

They formed a perfect harmony,
Bright silver was their heart;
An integrated destiny,
No universe could part.

Yet darkness rides a ghostly steed,
By stealth its victims choose;
No matter now, of truth or deed,
The innocents accuse.

How could they know, or even guess,
The price their love would cost;
A touch, a look or brief caress,
To vile suspicions lost.

Oh, woe, that still the heart must beat,
When all life source has bled;
As hands reach out but cannot meet,
All dreams and purpose dead.

Still see this form that seems to live,
Yet eyes that fail to see;
The lips that have no words to give,
A being ceased to be.

Still days and nights and stars go past,
As silver birds sail by;
Yet death has come, the die is cast,
And one will question, "Why?"

Oh would that I could heed his call,
That agonizing plea;
He turns his face toward the wall,
"Where is the rest of me?"

We Reach.....

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IDIC / THE FORGING: Leslye Lilker, 37 Clark Ave., Lynbrook NY 11563

The most wonderful thing is that you and I are always walking together, hand in hand, in a strangely beautiful world, unknown to other people. We both stretch one hand to receive from Life - and Life is generous indeed.

-- KAHILIL GIBRAN --

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I must conquer my loneliness alone. I must be happy with myself or I have nothing to offer you. Two halves have little choice but to join; and yes, they do make a whole. But two wholes when they coincide... that is beauty...that is love.

-- PETER MCWILLIAMS --

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An exploration of the erotic/sensual side of the Kirk/Spock relationship

TURBOLIFT REVIEW: Teri White, 3280 Lansmere, Shaker Heights OH 44122
Will include fiction, critiques, essays and art; contribs welcome

*So long as we love, we serve. So long as we are loved by others, I
would almost say we are indispensable; and no man is useless while he
has a friend.*

-- ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON --

TRINETTE KERN announces that she is no longer associated in any way with her
former fanzine. The new owners will continue to publish this item as a pro
magazine. She and her co-editor, Carol Mularski, will be establishing a new
fanzine, tentatively titled, NEW BEGINNINGS For further information, contact
them at the following addresses:

Trinette Kern, 1037 Francis Rd., Pittsburgh PA 15234
Carol Mularski, 914 Bernd St., Pittsburgh PA 15210

PHASE II COLLECTED

Because of popular request, we will be printing the first volume of a PHASE II COLLECTED. This will include a reprint of Chapters 1-3, plus the new Chapter 4: STACK. It will feature ALL NEW illos by ALICE JONES, and special PHASE II poetry. If you have missed any of the first three chapters, this is your chance to get caught up. If you have all three, we think you will enjoy having them all under one cover and appreciate the zine for its new illos and poetry, and of course, for the latest chapter. Henceforth, all future chapters will be published separately from CONTACT.

Send an S.A.S.E. for notification and price. Tentative publication planned for late winter, 1978.

FUTURE VOLUMES OF PHASE II WILL LOOSELY FOLLOW, IN ORDER:

CHAPTER V - T'PRETT: *Spock's daughter comes of age -
Va - Flashback of Peter - James Kirk & Areel - Peter and Stack*

CHAPTER VI - MORE T'PRETT: *Her injury, her bonding*

CHAPTER VII - T'PANIA: *The accident
VIIa - Flashback of Spock and T'Pania*

CHAPTER VIII - SPOCK AND KIRK: *The return of T'Pring; the closing curtain.*

So, stick around - there's plenty of twists and turns to come, as the USS ENCOUNTER warps her way thru space!

CONTACT PRESENTS:

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