

IDIC

IDIC Log 13

THE T'VARON CHRONICLES 2



a
Star Trek
fanzine

by
Gloria Fry

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Gloria Fry

Cover by Raymond D Sless

Part Two

A HAZE OF CONFLICT P 3

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Editor - Sheila Clark

Typing - Maggie Symon

Proofreading - Sheila Clark, Gloria Fry, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton

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Sheila Clark
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THE T'VARON CHRONICLES PART 1 - A RESUME

Story 1 - 'A Touch of Compassion'

In an alternate universe, Vulcans have their own fleet and allow no other species to serve aboard their starships. They deny the accusation of bigotry, stating that their policy is for the protection of other species against superior Vulcan physical and telepathic abilities, but yield to the wishes of the Federation Council and agree to an experiment.

One person chosen by them will be permitted to serve aboard the U.S.S. T'Varon for a solar year. Out of the many candidates they pick the young Human, Lt. Commander James T. Kirk.

Kirk is twenty-eight years old, idealistic, a little brash, charismatic and with exceptional leadership qualities, but most importantly to the Vulcans, he has a deep interest in alien life, and is completely unprejudiced. He is assigned to the T'Varon as Helmsman, and placed in the charge of the Science/Second Officer, Lt. Commander Spock.

Aware of the importance of his mission to the future of interspecies relations, Kirk is determined to be successful. However, he discovers that his charm has no effect on the Vulcans and soon becomes totally isolated. Captain T'Zen is supportive, but the First Officer, Commander Selek, and others are openly hostile. Kirk becomes depressed and disillusioned, his greatest problem being Spock's indifference to him, for he is drawn to the Science Officer and hurt when his friendly overtures are rebuffed. He is amazed to learn of Spock's half-Human heritage.

After a conflict with Selek, Spock defends Kirk. They are accused of insubordination, cleared of the charge, but Selek takes his revenge on Kirk, injuring him. Spock helps Kirk and finally admits to the feelings of friendship he has not understood until now.

Story 2 - 'The First Rule'

Returning from a planetary mission, the shuttle craft carrying T'Varon personnel is attacked by Klingons. It crash lands on an ice-world, and the only survivors are Spock and Kirk. Spock is badly injured and as a Vulcan, more susceptible to cold. Kirk takes control, finds them shelter in a cave and has to keep Spock alive until rescue.

Despite dangerous encounters with Klingons and wild beasts, Kirk brings Spock through by sheer determination and basic survival techniques. During this ordeal their relationship undergoes a dramatic change; they communicate telepathically and merge in an ancient bond of brotherhood which is highly revered amongst even the emotion-suppressing Vulcans. Once rescued, Spock recovers and the two have to adjust to the new relationship they now share.

'A HAZE OF CONFLICT'

MESSAGE

Awakened by the gentle whistle of the intercom I quickly sat up, forced myself to alertness, and pressed the audio-response button. "Kirk here," I said, as my body shook off the last vestiges of sleep.

"Lt Salen, Communications Centre," the voice said. "Mr Kirk, there is a private communication for you from Earth. Shall I transfer it to your quarters?"

I frowned. Who would be going to the expense of sending a private message to this part of the galaxy? A shiver of fear ran down my spine as the many possibilities crowded in on me, but grabbing onto my self-control, I reasoned that it did not necessarily have to be bad news.

"Yes, thank you, Lt Salen," I responded civilly.

Placing a tape into the console, I showered and dressed as the message was transmitted, delaying the moment of listening, almost afraid to hear its contents. Finally I made my way over to the console, lifted out the tape and looked at it, all my apprehension making me churn and quiver inside. What if it was news I could not bear to hear? The sender could only be one of my family.

The buzzing of the door-chime was a welcome relief and I immediately turned my attention away from the tape, placing it down on the desk.

"Enter," I said. Spock - a welcome visitor - entered the room. "Good morning," I said, greeting him with a warm smile.

"Good morning, Jim," he replied, studied me for a moment, then added, "are you well?"

He had noticed my mood. I sought to reassure him. "Fine. I was just about to play this message. It's from Earth."

He stiffened slightly, his expression becoming very reserved as he courteously prepared to withdraw to give me privacy. "If you will excuse me..."

"No," I interrupted. "Please stay." His presence would help me deal with whatever grim news was on the tape. He never failed to support me; I relied on him heavily.

"If you wish it," he replied, somewhat puzzled, "but surely this message is for you alone."

I sighed, not wanting him to know my fears, not wishing him to consider me weak, for I could not bear to have him think less of me because of my all too Human worries and faults.

"Please, Spock... stay," I said. "It would... I would be grateful for your company."

After a moment he gave a slight nod of assent and stood silently as I sat down at my desk, placed the tape in the slot and activated the screen. In trepidation, I gazed at the viewer as it cleared to show the logo of Starfleet's private channel, then the words 'For the attention of Lt-Commander James T. Kirk. U.S.S. T'Varon.'

The written letters dissolved into millions of minute fragments, then reassembled into the familiar figures of my family. My heart skipped a beat as they smiled, greeted me, and wished me Happy Birthday. My mood changed to startlement, then happiness, then an aching, gut-wrenching homesickness for these people I had left behind on Earth. I had forgotten about my birthday. It had come and gone during the time I had been stranded with Spock on that freezing, isolated planet. There had been other, more important, things to think about then; like our survival.

My mother and brother had not forgotten, and eventually their message had caught up with me. My eyes threatened to spill over with tears. The sight of their beloved faces brought back to me just how much I missed them, and what they meant to me. My mother blew me a kiss, and as her image faded I bent my head down onto my hands, suddenly feeling alone and bereft, cut off from the life I had known, the family I adored, the only Human here on a Vulcan ship.

Lost in my own misery, I only faintly heard the hiss of the doors opening and closing again. Jumping to my feet, dashing the wetness from my face with the back of my hand, I realised what a fool I was. My emotions had driven Spock away. My bond-brother, who had given me so much and whom I had repaid by forgetting my lessons in self-restraint, giving him the full force of my powerful, raw emotions. Would I never learn?

Full of self-recriminations, I slumped down in my chair. Why had I allowed my feelings to overcome me? How could I face Spock again? How could I blame him if he did not come near me again after giving him the unrestrained broadcasting of my emotions? Why had I asked him to stay? What a coward I had been; afraid to face the message on my own, like some immature child. Now I had hurt my friend with my selfishness and had shamed myself before him.

He had been teaching me - with a limited success - Vulcan techniques of controlling emotions, essential on this ship of telepaths, imperative to Spock's peace of mind, for he was connected to me too deeply through the mysterious bond of t'hy'la, a relationship closer and binding beyond any other.

I - a Human - had been assigned to the T'Varon for a year in an experiment in interspecies co-operation; the first non-Vulcan to serve with this most civilised of species. At first the difficulties in adapting to their ways had been overwhelming, but in some inexplicable way, Spock and I had been drawn together. He had befriended me, helping with my integration into the strange, alien, Vulcan society. It was very difficult, even terrifying for him to accept my friendship and return it. His half-Human/half-Vulcan heritage had given him deep insecurities, and he had been afraid, not knowing what was happening to him at first; then he had resisted, not willing to succumb to what he perceived as purely Human feelings.

He had learned though, that the bond of t'hy'la was highly honoured - illogical as it was - and had accepted me, despite my many hopeless, Human faults, tolerating my inadequacies with much patience. He had shown me the hidden, generous person behind the Vulcan mask, giving me a friendship so complex, so satisfying, that all others in my life were shallow by comparison.

I checked the time. Three hours until the beginning of my shift. Three long hours to contemplate my irresponsible behaviour, to regain my composure, or else I would bring further shame upon him before the Bridge crew. With a growing despondency I wandered about the cabin for a time, finally forcing myself to settle down cross-legged upon a cushion on the floor, to attempt to find some sort of meditation.

It was hard, perhaps impossible. My family's well-meaning and loving message had turned completely sour. I strained hopelessly for peace and calm but found it unattainable. Facing my failure, feeling alone and miserable, I covered my face with my hands and wept silently.

The warmth on my shoulder persisted until I finally acknowledged it. Looking up, I was startled to find Spock leaning over me. So caught up was I in my grief, his return had gone unnoticed. As he lowered himself to kneel facing me, I attempted to find a shaky control.

"Jim," he began.

I saw the pain in his eyes and remorse overcame me. "Spock - please," I entreated. "I ask forgiveness. I did not mean to hurt you. I do not wish to subject you to anything like that - I have tried so hard to find... to learn control of my emotions. I know how they distress you, I promise to - "

"Jim," he interrupted me. "It is all right, do not apologise. It is unnecessary."

I could not understand. He had left because he was unable to bear my emotions; my powerful feelings had penetrated his shields, causing him intolerable pain.

"It is *I* who should apologise," he continued, as I frowned in puzzlement. "I know the value that Humans place on birthdays. I have been remiss, I should have acknowledged it."

Absurdly my eyes filled again. Where were all these tears coming from? What was wrong with me? I was behaving like a five-year old.

He held out his hand. "I have brought you a gift."

I stared at him wonderingly. My cool, cerebral friend; there was no end to his generosity and understanding. I had been completely mistaken in my assumption about his departure. Certainly he had been affected by my distress, but had not recoiled from it; instead he had blamed himself for not acknowledging a Human custom and had gone to rectify it.

Confused, delighted, intrigued, I glanced down to see the small box sitting on his palm. I sniffed loudly, cleared my throat and attempted to speak, but could only manage a harsh croak. "Spock - "

"Please accept this gift as a token of my esteem for you," he said gently, as if to a child. He placed the box into my hand, then sat upon his heels. Deep down, I am a child. My heart pounded with excitement as I opened the container, my anticipation at fever pitch. What could he have brought me? He had been away for only a short time...

Astonishment was my first reaction on seeing the nugget of Meronite crystal nestling within the dark, velvety lining of the box, but that emotion was quickly replaced by awe. Meronite - the rarest substance in the galaxy. Battles had been fought over possession of even a small crystal, such as the one which sparkled and glistened before my eyes.

I stumbled over my words. "S...Spock... I c...can't - it's worth - "

This piece would be valued at millions of credits. Each crystal was unique unto itself, with its own original properties, and could not be duplicated.

"Jim," he said, his voice sharp with urgency.

I forced my gaze away from the Meronite and stared at him in confusion. Why would he give me something of such rarity and value? Where had he obtained it? What must it mean to him?

"Jim ," he repeated, his eyes holding mine in the compulsive way only a Vulcan could employ. "This crystal is my most valued possession. I wish you to have it."

It was difficult to hold my emotions at bay. "No. I cannot accept this. It is worth a king's ransom." Usage of the Earth term seemed the only way to describe it. There was no equivalent Vulcan phrase known to me.

"Its value is of no consequence in comparison to that of your friendship," he stated, with a slight tremor in his voice which spoke volumes to me. "Please accept it."

His face was lined with worry, and the fear that I might refuse his gift. Realisation hit me that if I did not accept it, he would be deeply wounded - yet how could I take such a thing? If I had not known the depth of his regard for me before, it was plain now. To give me such an unique gift was unprecedented.

"I beg thee to accept it, my brother," he pleaded. "It would please me."

How was it possible to resist that? I nodded, unable to speak, for my throat was totally constricted, and I could barely swallow. He visibly relaxed at my assent, and once more, it was brought home to me just how much my friendship meant to him. It made me feel very humble, yet I was filled with pride.

I lifted the crystal from the box and placed it on my palm. It glittered brilliantly, sending streaks of multi-coloured light cascading along my hand and wrist, as almost inaudibly it began to hum. I had heard of the phenomenon; Meronite, the crystal which sang to the one who possessed it, attuning itself to the pleasure centres of the brain, sending melodies personal and satisfying to the individual's deepest dreams and desires. It sang to me of Starship Command, Spock at my side, exploring the galaxy, meeting new life-forms... my dearest wish - my dream, my goal... My eyes closed as my blood tingled in response, lifting me onto an elevated plane of existence where everything centred around me and my desires, filling me - mind, body and soul - with intoxicating delight.

Gradually the sensations faded, the crystal became silent, and I opened my eyes to meet the intent gaze upon me. Still I could not find my voice to speak to him, and trying to cover my embarrassment I slowly replaced the Meronite in its container, closed the lid, then placed it down. Now I understood why the crystals were so valuable. In the wrong hands they could be highly addictive, giving a high that no drug could match. Abuse of such sensations could be dangerous.

Yet its effects on me - although exquisite - were nothing compared to the joy and satisfaction of the mind-melds I had shared with Spock, and as that realisation filtered through to me it was easier to accept the Meronite from him, for I knew which was the greater gift.

"I thank thee," I finally whispered, using as he had the formal Vulcan mode of speech, the only way to deal with such an emotional moment, the language only used as a special aid in communications of the most personal kind. "You have honoured me greatly."

He shook his head. "Thy friendship is the greater honour."

His courtesy went beyond any I had ever experienced before. It never failed to dismay

and delight me. "I do not know how to thank thee," I said, wanting him to know how much his gesture meant to me.

"Thy acceptance is thanks enough."

I bent my head down, unable to face the intensity of his eyes upon me, suddenly shy of the depth of our friendship. Never had I known such a relationship with any other, and with complete certainty, knew that I never would. The bond between us was special - unique - a brotherhood of spirit and soul which was rich and complex, trying, but eminently fulfilling.

"You are troubled," he said.

Damn! The trying part was that I could hide very little from him. He sensed my thoughts and feelings too well.

"We call it mixed emotions," I replied, looking over at him. "Happy, but sad at the same time."

"You are most illogical," he commented, his voice showing his confusion with me.

I chuckled. "I know. I'm sorry." I became serious as I tried to explain myself to him. "I do not deserve such a valuable gift. I am unworthy of it. I am unable to express my thanks adequately to you." My curiosity was piqued though. "Where did you get it?"

He seemed almost angered as he replied. "You underestimate yourself, Jim. You are he who saved my life from a wrecked shuttle, from hypothermia, from Klingon attack, from the deep shock and injuries I had suffered, infusing me with your will - your strength - your determination - your feelings." His eyes were bright; they held me with hypnotic intensity and I could not break my gaze from him. "Do not belittle yourself, not to me, the one who has known your thoughts." He gripped my shoulders hard and shook me, startling me as his strong fingers dug into me, sending painful jolts into my chest. "Do not doubt yourself so."

He suddenly released me as he caught the touch of my pain. "Forgive me," he murmured, drawing back.

I sighed deeply, smiled a little and reassuring him I was all right with a light touch to his arm, I said, "I concede to your better judgement." His words and the feelings behind them had come straight from the heart, and who was I to refuse them? His face lightened at my acceptance.

"Come - I will show you how I obtained the Meronite," he said.

Happiness swept through me. He was going to take me into the mind-meld, allow me to experience what had happened. I needed no prompting. Quickly and easily, I opened myself to the link and was caught up in his memories.

The Rynami did not live by the strict moral codes of the known telepathic species. They had been abusing their power by oppressing the other races in their star-system for thousands of years. The T'Varon had entered the Rynami domain over two years ago on a routine first contact mission. Vulcan ships were usually the ones used on such delicate missions, due to their unswerving dedication to peace and non-violence, but even the diplomatic Vulcans had had to take drastic action when forced into telepathic battle - the worst type of war for a pacifist, private people.

After many casualties on the Vulcan side, Spock had devised a method which enabled the T'Varon crew to merge into one vast unified mind, allowing them to use its considerable power to subdue and ultimately defeat the Rynami. I could only catch a glimmer of what such a merging had cost the Vulcans, but they had accepted it as the only logical way to overcome the evil oppression and malicious intent of the Rynami. Spock spared me the worst of the horrific mind-battles, but his memories of the condition of the crew after the final victory were graphic. All were at the end of their endurance and it had taken many days for them to recover. Some had not. Spock, however, seemed to have overcome the effects more easily than the others, and I wondered if his Human heritage had been any influence on that.

The Rynami - except for some who had escaped in spacecraft - were broken, their telepathic ability burned out and their power to dominate others ended. The leaders of the oppressed people - the Aveen, a feline race of great beauty and intelligence - had been jubilant and very grateful. They had given Spock the crystal as a token of appreciation for releasing them from slavery.

I opened my eyes and blinked away the moisture which filled them, deeply touched by his desire to give me the Meronite, and even more impressed by his deductive reasoning and the strength of his will.

"What would the Aveen say if they knew that their gift of gratitude had been given to another?" I asked him, unsure again of my right to accept it.

"They would approve, Jim. They have many of your traits, being a fine, upstanding people, with high moral values, bravery and love of life."

I caught my breath, swallowed hard, and bowed my head, humbly accepting his compliment. His generosity overwhelmed me; his support and deep regard for me were a wonder and a delight. I knew how much I needed to lean on him, but *he* needed me also; that was the miracle. This mysterious bond of brotherhood we shared had happened as if fated, but there were some Human elements to it. What I felt for Spock compared with, even surpassed, the love I had for my brother Sam. That made me feel a little guilty, for I adored Sam.

As for Spock - I knew he returned it, although he would never admit it. Nothing can be hidden in the mind-meld; I had sensed his shy brother-love, his warmth towards me when first we had shared thoughts. I was secure and relaxed with him, liking nothing better than to be in his company, working, talking, playing chess; even the exhausting exercise sessions in the Gymnasium were exhilarating. He had been teaching me Vulcan techniques in self-defence. I wanted to teach him the very Human sport of wrestling, but it was proving difficult to persuade him. He was balking at the rough, physical contact of such a sport.

Best of all, though, was the sharing of thoughts. It was the ultimate experience and one we had participated in several times since our ordeal on the ice-world we had been trapped upon, even though it involved the lowering of mental barriers difficult for a Vulcan. Perhaps as we were t'hy'la it was acceptable to Spock, for he was willing to allow me close to him now.

"Jim - have I caused you distress?" he asked, worried.

I grinned at him. "You?" I shook my head. "No. No, my friend, not distress. Confusion, perhaps, delight with this gift of great beauty, awe at the immensity of your answer to the Rynami threat." I clasped my hands tightly together in an effort at maintaining some control. "Happiness at your company, sorrow at being so far from my family."

"You have complex and confusing emotions," he commented, a slight smile on his face,

showing me that he was teasing me a little.

I was embarrassed by his words and his scrutiny, by the openness which existed between us now. I shouldn't have been, it was totally illogical. "I wouldn't deny it, Spock," I finally answered him.

What would my friends think if they saw me? Jim Kirk, brash, confident, charismatic young Starfleet officer - humility and awe in his heart because of the friendship of a Vulcan.

I reached out to him in an attempt to reassure him - and myself - that I was all right. After staring at my hand for a moment, he clasped it in his. I laughed softly and shook his hand vigorously. He would not deny me a touch now, not after what we had been though together. We had come out of our ordeal closer than ever, although for a time I had thought that he would hate me. Our friendship had become a spiritual bonding of brotherhood, straight out of Vulcan legend.

He raised an eyebrow. "You cause me much confusion, Jim. Are all Humans as illogical as you?"

Deciding to take that as an insult, I dived for him, knocked him over and climbed on top of him, holding him down on the ground, his arms above his head; no doubt it was purely his surprise at my actions which gave me the edge, otherwise it was unlikely I could have done it, for he did not resist. There was a frown upon his face. Vulcans only fought when in training, or in the rare instance that actual combat had to be used.

"Jim," he questioned me, "what are you doing?"

"Demonstrating Human illogic," I replied. "We call it paying someone back for an insult."

His expression grew serious, and I wondered what was wrong. What had I done now to offend Vulcan sensibilities?

"I ask thy pardon," he said. "Insult was not intended. I was unaware that I offended thee."

"Spock!" I exclaimed, releasing him. "I didn't mean you insulted me seriously." I scratched my head. This was becoming too complicated, especially as I had not yet eaten this morning. I was beginning to feel a trifle light-headed. "It was just a little..." There was no word in the Vulcan language to describe it, so I used the English one. "*Fun*."

"Fun," he repeated. "What is 'fun'?"

Why had I ever started this? "It is like a mock fight. Humans do that sometimes, not to hurt one another, just to test the other's strength, just to play." It sounded so stupid. How could he understand the concept of fighting not being serious? Vulcans were a species who did not use combat unless severely provoked and then only if there were no other logical alternatives.

"It's like the time you lifted me up, held me helpless upside down. That was 'fun'... I think."

Both his eyebrows rose. "Indeed." He sighed and there was definitely a slight twinkle there in his usually calm eyes. "You have a strange concept of enjoyment, Jim. I did feel the

pleasure emanating from you at that time, but assumed that I was incorrect in my judgement of your feelings."

"Why did you do it, Spock?" I asked, wondering if he would admit his own feelings at the time in question.

"I am unsure," he said, the frown settling on his face.

"You enjoyed it," I persisted.

"Enjoyment is alien to me. I do not understand it. It is a purely Human..."

He was not going to get away with that. "Oh no, you took great pains to show me that you could dangle me upside down... and you were almost smiling."

His innocent look would have convinced anyone but me. I grinned, settled back against my cushions and looked at him. He leaned up on his elbows, returning my gaze. Once again he had helped me through a difficult patch, giving me the support I badly needed. I relaxed and allowed the upsets of the past hour to filter away.

"You like to use your superior strength on me, don't you?" I teased him.

His startlement was most amusing. "Jim - I assure you, I would not take advantage of one who is physically weaker."

He was falling into the trap. "Of course you do, that's why you enjoyed lifting me up, that's why you don't want to learn wrestling, for there I can use any dirty trick I can to bring you down."

"How can you believe that of me, Jim?" he asked.

I grinned at his outraged expression. "Then let's go to the Gymnasium. Allow me to show you some sports where an opponent of lesser strength can win out over one who is stronger."

"It is not an honourable way to fight," he said, stubbornly.

"If you're fighting for your life, honour doesn't come into it. Spock - come on. Let me try. You might even enjoy it."

I could see him weakening, and with a laugh stood up, hauled him to his feet and commented, "It will boost my morale, if I can even get a fall."

"A fall?" he asked.

I was going to enjoy this. In my favour was the advantage of experience and surprise; perhaps those would give me a slight edge. For a second I felt sorry for him, my poor innocent Vulcan friend, but then I tossed such unnecessary nobility aside. I was going to enjoy throwing him all over the Gymnasium.

COMMANDER

I went on duty, carefree, a little bruised, but contented. I had indeed had the advantage -

for a time - much to Spock's chagrin. Then, as he finally cottoned on to my methods and effectively countered them with his own, I had seen the definite signs of Vulcan enjoyment. He had stared in shock at my laughter, then had succumbed to a new attack from me, stunned at the tactics, very dishonourable by Vulcan standards. He soon recovered though and began to give as good as he was getting - carefully, of course. He never forgot to keep Vulcan strength under control.

My duty time passed pleasantly, relaxed as I was in mind and body, and at first I was unaware of the attack. We had encountered a small ship of unknown design. It did not respond to our requests for identification, and although it had not taken any hostile action, Captain T'Zen called a yellow alert. Spock's evaluation came almost immediately, his amazing skill to read the sensors supplying us with instantaneous data.

I watched carefully, my sensors showing no activity from the alien vessel, but there was a sense of wrongness in the atmosphere on the Bridge, and although there were no sounds of distress, I knew that something was happening. Quickly I turned, to see Lt Selek clawing at the navigation control, his face contorting in agony. Horrified, I swivelled right around. Everyone on the Bridge was suffering some violent and unseen attack - everyone but me. The Captain slumped over the arm of the command chair. Spock sat rigid, the stiff set of his shoulders showing me the pain he was in. I could not understand. What was happening to my shipmates?

"Captain!" I called. "What is happening? What is wrong?"

Her hands slowly rose into the air, the agony she suffered showing in every line of her body. My heart pounded in mounting fear. For a Vulcan to show pain - beings who could control pain...

"Spock!" I cried. "Spock!" He did not respond. Fear made me bold. "Spock - answer me!" I commanded him in my sharpest tone. "Report!"

With agonising slowness, he turned towards me, his hand reaching out in my direction. I forced the lump in my throat away. I am no telepath, but even I could now catch a sense of the torment they suffered. The emanations from over 400 Vulcans was like a haze, a fog, in the air. I knew they struggled for control, but they were losing, that was only too obvious - yet, Spock had heard me; he had responded to my call. I had to help them, but could not leave the helm, for someone had to pilot the ship. Yet I must help them somehow - but how? I did not know what was attacking them.

"Captain," I tried again. "I am not affected. How can I help you?"

She slowly moved until her eyes met mine; her lips parted, but no words sounded. I could not understand what she was trying to tell me. Her eyes rolled and settled back into a fixed stare, and my distinct impression was that she was fighting something or someone with all of her Vulcan skills. I glanced over at Spock, desperate to help him; all my instincts, my feelings, told me to go to him, but a greater duty held me at this moment, my duty to the ship.

With extreme difficulty, I turned my attention to my console and studied the sensor readings. My skills are second-rate compared to Spock's expertise and it took me time to decode and analyse. Nothing - I could not pinpoint what was attacking my shipmates.

Fear gave me more speed, horror sharpened my wits. Tying Spock's sensors with mine, I correlated all the data he had gathered with my own. Within minutes, I found what he had isolated just as the attack had begun: an ultrasonic wave at a frequency far above my Human

capacity to hear. Now I knew why I was unaffected. The readings changed to a new pattern, one I had never seen before - yet it was strangely familiar. I struggled to remember what it reminded me of. *Keep calm - remember Spock's lessons. Think. What is there about it that you recognise?* I asked myself silently. *RESONANCE.* The answer came swiftly. The similarity to phaser power - the build up of large amplitude vibrations, but not aimed at the ship...

In a flash of intuition I knew exactly what it was targeted at. The computer's knowledge of the telepathic Vulcan brain confirmed it. Shivers of fear encompassed me as the implications clarified in my mind; what a devious, horrifying weapon it was, intended to match the centres which controlled psi power, perhaps able to negate them, destroy the telepathic ability. No wonder my shipmates were incapacitated, helpless under such an assault; in excruciating agony.

The ultrasonic beam had only been a preliminary, to distract and confuse them, to weaken their shields, prepare them for the real attack on their most vulnerable and sensitive area, the very centre of their being.

With rigid control, I forced myself to think clearly. There had to be a way to counteract it, but I - probably the least scientifically qualified on this ship - needed help... badly. A Starship, even with all stations on automatic, could not be piloted by one person for any length of time. She needed the constant attention of her crew. It would be impossible for me to manage alone - one solitary Human had not the skill; what could I possibly do? I felt the beginnings of panic rise within me and clamped down on it tightly, suppressing all the doubts and fears.

Pressing the log button, I spoke as calmly as possible. "As the only member of the Bridge crew unaffected by the psi attack from the alien vessel, I am now assuming command of the T'Varon. I will do everything in my power to assist my shipmates. Lt-Commander James T. Kirk, Stardate 3925.1."

My next step was to send an intraship message asking for any member of the crew not affected to contact me. I did not expect an answer and got none, but I had to try. Then I readied the phasers, praying that there was no damage to them, for if the Vulcans - in their pain - could be induced into doing anything against their will, like destroying the weapons or life-support, we would have no chance of survival.

Opening communication channels, I spoke in a firm command tone. "This is Commander Kirk of the U.S.S. T'Varon. If you do not cease this unprovoked attack immediately, we will unleash the power of our weapons upon you."

Silence.

I gave them twenty seconds. "Very well. You have been warned. There will be a delay of ten seconds before I fire. If you do not cease you will be destroyed. Kirk out."

Spock's eyes were intent upon me, I could sense them. The tickling impression of his telepathy almost touched me. I opened my mind to him, trying to reach the support of his warm presence, but we failed to connect. After counting down the seconds, I fired - but it was useless. The small vessel's shields were phaser-resistant. What kind of immense power could withstand phasers? I switched to photon torpedoes, but with fearful premonition knew that they would be just as ineffective. Damn! What kind of people were on that ship? How could they know the telepathic frequency of the Vulcan mind? How?

The answer blazed in my mind, in one horrifying moment of insight. The Rynami.

Some had escaped from defeat by this very ship. They were the only telepathic race vicious enough to conceive such a weapon. It had only been a few hours since Spock had shown me their malevolent and brutal treatment of others, their callousness to anyone not of their species. Somehow they had tracked the T'Varon and were out for revenge.

I had to remove my ship from their sphere of influence; it was the only chance we had. "Preparing for warp drive," I said, activating the ship's log. "Warp factor 8."

To my relief, the ship responded to my control and moments later we 'jumped' into the welcome realm of hyperspace. Quickly working, I set a course to the nearest Starbase, checked for signs of pursuit, and continued with my log. Nothing followed us yet - but I could take no chances. I ordered the computer to advise me of any objects following us, set the aft sensors to maximum range, then sent a message to Starbase 21, relating to them the sequence of events, and asking for assistance. At this distance it would take 12 hours to reach them, but it would take us week - at warp eight - to arrive there; unless they could divert a ship to rescue us our chances of survival were very slim.

Placing my station on automatic, I turned my attentions to the others. Would they have any chance to recover now? I hoped and prayed that they would. The silence on the bridge was unnerving; all that could be heard was the gentle hum of the engines deep below my feet. I slipped out of my chair and checked Selek. To my horror, I saw he was completely still. Icy fingers of fear penetrated through my body. He was dead.

Carefully avoiding him, I secured his station, then turned to the Captain. She was unconscious, but still lived; her ashen pallor made her seem like a corpse. What had those bastards done to my colleagues?

"Spock!" I ran to him, my heart thumping with terror. He lay face down upon the floor, so still, so rigid... I fell to my knees beside him and turned him around. "Spock..." I pleaded. His breathing was shallow, but he was alive. My panic eased slightly. For one nightmarish moment, I had thought him to be dead also. I held him in my arms. "Spock... t'hy'la."

My lack of telepathy had saved me from the attack, but it also prevented me from reaching my friend. I could have wept; I did, inside. I closed my eyes, trying to reason it out. Once before, I had reached him. It had taken many hours, but I had done it, somehow touching his mind despite my Humanness. I did not know how it had been achieved. Dr T'Renna had told me that the touch of a bond-brother had the power to help another, but she had not explained how I - a Human - had managed such a feat. Neither had Spock, but he had told me not to doubt myself; he had faith in me and I must find the way to him as I had before.

Spock, I said silently. I need your help. T'hy'la - I need you.

I could not tell if my plea reached him, and could only hold him tightly to me repeating my silent message, praying that the special link between us would activate itself and bring him back to consciousness. I was aware of the others on board, some - like Selek - dead, the others injured, maybe dying; but there was no way to help them unless I was able to help Spock recover. Only his assistance, his vast knowledge and skills, could help me combat the severe problems we faced.

Concentrating deeply, my senses attuned to him in some instinctive way, I recalled the sensation of mind-melding, allowing myself to sink into a state of receptiveness. The sudden sharpness of the pain almost caused me to break my grip on him. I was only receiving a fraction of the torment he and the others were enduring, yet it had been virtually unbearable.

With grim determination, I clung to him. *Spock .. let me help you.*

I bit back a cry of pain as his powerful mind clutched at and filtered through mine, somehow bearing it, knowing that I must give him anything he needed from me even if it killed me. My life was his, just as his was mine. It was what we were - t'hy'la.

Jim, his thought came to me. *You must take command.*

I have done so, I told him, quickly outlining all my actions. *Now you must take over.*

I cannot, he said, his mind-voice shaky. *The shock of the attack... I cannot overcome it. I cannot think properly.*

You must overcome it, I encouraged him. *If they follow us and attack again...*

He shivered deeply within himself. *I will try, but you must guide me. You are the only one unaffected and will be able to judge exactly what is happening. Help me to my feet.*

His eyes opened and looked up at me. I could see and sense his extreme pain, but knew he was keeping the worst of it from me with Vulcan control. We were linked though, and he was leaning on me; I was strongly aware of that.

"Forgive me for drawing upon your strength," he said. "I will withdraw."

I shook him hard. "You will draw all you need from me, do you hear?"

His eyebrow rose at my command, but he nodded in acceptance, a slight touch of amusement on his face. I smiled a little, helped him to sit upon his chair, then stood behind him, my hands upon his shoulders, trying to steady him.

"Can you manage?" I asked.

"Yes. See to the others."

Of the Bridge crew, three were dead, the others unconscious - in trance or in a faint, I did not know. It was then the computer warning sounded. "Alert! Alert! Craft following at warp nine. Craft following at warp nine."

I scrambled over to the helm and worked at the screen controls. At magnification three it could be seen; our enemy, at warp nine, would overtake us. So much power in such a small vessel. What technology!

"Spock?" I whispered.

His voice was raw with pain. "As you correctly surmised, it is the Rynami. They have devised a weapon able to paralyse the Psi centres and destroy them eventually. I suspect from past knowledge of them that they will wish to cause much torment before they decide to kill us. They are a most vicious species."

"How can they be stopped?" I asked, going over to him.

"I do not know," he answered turning to me. "I am unable to analyse the readings. I cannot calculate... I cannot correlate..." He stopped speaking and began to shake violently.

"Spock!" I cried, grabbing his shoulders. "You are half-Human, the only member of this crew functional beside myself. You must analyse the data, find a way to negate this weapon. Dammit, you are the Science Officer, the only one who can do it!" I leaned over him to punch up his earlier sensor readings and my own findings. "Work on this, Mr Spock. Do it now."

"I am functional on a level at which I can barely work my station. I am only aware because of you, Jim. If not for your bond with me, I would be as senseless as the others on this ship."

I swallowed hard, not willing to accept his words, unable to accept his defeat. "As you are severely incapacitated, I will remain in command of the T'Varon. I order you to determine some method of defeating the Rynami."

His gaze wavered under my demands. "Very well... I will try."

He turned back to his station. I breathed a sigh of relief. At least it was a beginning, but what could be done about the others? I returned to the helm and watched the screen, seeing how the Rynami gained on us in relentless pursuit. There was no way we could outrun them. The outlook was hopeless, but I still tried to remain optimistic.

"Mr Spock, how long before they overtake us?"

Once his answer would have been instantaneous, now it took many long seconds. In fact I had the answer before he did, but I did not tell him that.

"Twenty-one solar minutes, Commander."

I grinned slightly at the formality. "At what range can they use their weapon, Mr Spock?" I questioned him as if he were my Science Officer and I were Captain.

"Unknown, Commander," he said.

I opened intraship communication. "All hands, this is Lt-Commander Kirk in temporary command of the T'Varon. If there is anyone capable of responding tend to your duties immediately. This ship must function. We are being followed by a Rynami vessel, its intentions hostile. There will be another attack in twenty minutes. Mr Spock is attempting to find a defence; any valid suggestions are to be immediately relayed to him. Kirk out."

I turned to Spock, hope still in my heart. If anyone had heard me, perhaps my words had given them encouragement. To my surprise the Captain was watching me. I jumped to my feet and went over to her chair, where she sat still slumped, but she was aware - she was trying to communicate.

"Captain," I said, afraid to touch her, knowing it would be unwelcome; then I remembered Selek. Did she know? Would she have sensed his death?

"Continue..." she murmured.

"Is there anything...?"

Her face contorted in agony. "My ship..." she mumbled almost unintelligibly, moaned and fell forward. I caught her and placed her back on the chair. She still breathed, but she looked very ill.

The words from one of the books I had studied on the Vulcan people danced before my eyes. 'The breaking of the marriage-bond, due to the death of one, is often fatal to the surviving partner.' Horror swept through me at the thought of it.

Forcing myself to remain calm, I glanced around the Bridge to see signs of awareness from some of the crew. "Lt T'Pel," I said to the Communications Officer, "check all departments. I want to know how many are still alive." With rigid control she slowly straightened, glanced at me and acknowledged my order with a slight nod. My heart went out to her in her bravery. I turned to the Engineering station. "Lt T'Lar, check status of engines. I want warp nine if possible." The young Engineer clung onto her chair - she was obviously in severe pain - but she responded to my command, for her hand reached out to her console. Such courage and will; my admiration for these two young officers filled me.

"Mr Spock," I said, turning my attention once more to my friend. "Report."

"I regret to inform you that I am unable to find a way to fight the Rynami weapon."

"Keep trying," I encouraged. "There must be an answer."

I studied the helm sensors, but could find nothing. Once again I wished that my scientific ability was better. I had passed all the mandatory courses, but nothing more; my aptitude was in Command, not Science. Well, I had to do what I was best fitted for. The crew was slowly recovering. I demanded - ordered - coaxed their compliance and they did respond... but slowly. They were still in shock and working barely at minimum ability. What would a second assault do to them? Kill them all?

Spock's next words chilled me. He had been improving and now was working near his usual level. "They are launching another attack. It will reach us in approximately two minutes."

"Red alert," I ordered. "All hands prepare for attack." How could I help them? What could I do? "Hailing frequencies, Lt T'Pel."

I waited with frustration as she slowly opened the channel. "This is Commander Kirk. If you do not call off this aggression, you will find the might of the United Federation of Planets against you. Is that what you wish - destruction? Let us talk, come to an arrangement."

Spock swivelled around to face me. "Thirty seconds, Jim."

His eyes searched mine and there was real affection there - and perhaps other emotions too. Respect... resignation... worry... fear. My heart sank, misery engulfing me. I could not help any of them against the coming ordeal. I was useless. Useless!

"No, Jim." His voice penetrated my self-recrimination. "Do not belittle yourself. You have given us respite and have sent for help. You have done all that can be done."

I went over to him as it suddenly became clear to me that perhaps I could help at least one person. "Spock - lean on me. Remember your half-Human heritage. Maybe it can protect you. Perhaps you will be able to find some way to combat the Rynami."

He looked up at me for a moment, then turned his back to me. "I will not cause you pain."

"I am in command," I said firmly, placing my hands upon his shoulders. He was not

going to refuse me; I would not permit it. "Merge with me."

He stiffened and I caught my breath in fear. Had the attack happened already? Had he miscalculated the time factor? His hand touched the audio-control. "This is Spock. The mind-meld may give us limited protection. Implement at once. It may be our only chance."

Relief swept me. He had found something. Leaning back against me, he grasped my hands tightly, his telepathic touch sending shivers along my nerves. Opening myself to it, I was in the familiarity of mind-contact within seconds.

The Psionic frequency alters when in attunement with another, his mind-voice said. If I had been thinking correctly, I would have realised it sooner.

It doesn't matter, I tried to reassure him, for I could clearly sense his shakiness. How had he worked after such a nightmarish ordeal? How had any of them? What a magnificent species were the Vulcans! There was no other to compare with them throughout the breadth of the galaxy.

It was you, Jim, he said, with your selfless willingness to protect me. If not for that, it would not have occurred to me. If each of us can link with another, it may be possible to withstand the next attack.

It was then I felt the stab of agonising pain from him. It had begun and his theory would soon be tested fully. My hope that I could shield him might just be wishful thinking, the alteration of the psionic frequency might not be protection enough. Perhaps I was leaving myself open to assault by the Rynami weapon also, because of the link with Spock.

Come - you must go deeper. I had to take the chance, despite the risk to myself. We normally used the surface-level of mind-contact, but there had been a few desperate times when we had gone deeper. Perhaps there, at the levels of emotions, he could survive. There was a slight hesitation from him. T'hy'la. I used the most meaningful pronunciation of the word, meaning the one who is my other self - a part of me. I will do anything to help you, do not be afraid for me. I do not feel anything, let me shield you.

He shuddered as the weapon increased its intensity upon him. My fear radiated from me, causing the pressure to lessen slightly. It was there though, waiting... readying itself again; I caught a glimmer of its immense power and trembled deeply inside. *Spock - now, I ordered.*

PROTECTOR

The mind-meld is the most intimate of all experiences. There is nothing like it in Human terms of reference. I don't know what he did, only that it was different from previous times in the sense that he hid within my Humanness for protection. I felt as if I surrounded his consciousness, truly like a shield. Somewhere at the edge of my perception, at my own rudimentary Psi centres - the area Spock had once told me that my own intuition sprung from - there was a pain, like a slight headache. I, who had once been miserable at not having telepathy, now was more than happy at the lack. Suddenly aware that Spock was communicating with me, I stilled my own thoughts. *Once we defeated them using the power of a group mind. That is impossible now; there is too much damage done to the crew. It is, however, the only way this weapon can be tackled. We need other telepaths, other Vulcans. You must send a message to Vulcan. The high-priestesses are telepaths of the most formidable power - they may be able to overcome this menace.*

At this distance it will take days!

Two point nine seven five days to be precise, he responded.

Amusement spread through me and into him. He was feeling better; that was certain. *It's too long, Spock. We have to find an answer here, and soon. Otherwise this entire crew will die.*

I am under your protection. With your permission, I will correlate all the data - my capacity for deduction and reasoning is returning to me. I will scan your observations; perhaps there is a fact relevant to our situation which you have overlooked or not understood.

Without hesitation I gave my consent, even though I was unsure of what he would do or how it would feel. Taking deep breaths, I calmly awaited the unknown. There was a probing, ticklish sensation deep inside my head which seemed to turn me inside out for an endless gut-wrenching time, then it was gone, leaving me quivering in an involuntary reaction. With a deep concentrated effort, I stilled myself.

I opened my eyes and looked at the screen. The ship still chased us, gaining rapidly. Would they board us, once they were within range? How could I prevent that from happening?

Jim. Spock's thoughts interrupted me. There is no way in our weakened state that we can overcome them.

Damn the bastards! There had to be some way to save my shipmates. I had been given that responsibility by my Captain and somehow would live up to her expectations of me. Then there was Spock; I would not stand idly by to see him die in agony. It would be impossible to maintain the mind-touch forever; there would be a time when we would be forced to dissolve it and the Rynami would still be waiting. There had to be some way to destroy these evil beings. There *had* to be! Anger and hatred for them engulfed my whole being, my dearest wish to destroy... to *disable* them.

It came to me in a sudden flash of inspiration. My dearest wish - the crystal! Spock's hopeful encouragement boosted my confidence. The crystal attuned itself to the dearest desires of the one who possessed it. Could its power be activated into anything other than dreams? Could it be used as defence? Even as a weapon?

There was something closely resembling excitement coming from my normally calm Vulcan. *It is written in legend that a telepathic species once used Meronite as a weapon... but it is only a tale of fantasy - vague, magical, with no proper explanation of the usage of the crystal.*

It is worth trying, Spock, I encouraged. Anything is worth trying. I must reach my quarters. You must come with me to maintain your contact with me.

Very well, Jim. It is the only logical way at present. I cannot supply an alternative.

Let's go.

He slowly stood. As he did so I felt the gasp of pain from him as the link between us weakened. Instinctively, we both locked our hands about the other's wrist and his mind settled back into place within the safety of mine.

I had to lead him; a strange sensation for me. But he did not balk at literally following me, even though he was senior to me, despite his superior Vulcan abilities. *They are a liability at*

this moment, came his wry comment to my musing. I grinned at him, feeling the tickle of his amusement entering me. I follow you like a pet sehlat, he added.

I laughed. Sehlat's are large furry Vulcan bears with six-inch fangs. They can be tamed and controlled by mind-touch. I had seen a picture of one. They look fierce, but are intensely loyal to the one they accept as their charge. It had been known for a sehlat to defend a Vulcan child, or even an adult, from the dangerous predators of the desert, dying if necessary in selfless devotion.

Did you have a sehlat? I asked as we travelled in the turbo-lift.

Indeed. There was warm affection in Spock's thoughts. He was very old and fat. He was my father's pet, but once I was old enough he attached himself to me. He gave me much comfort when I was a young child,

What happened to him? I asked as we sped along the corridor to my cabin.

He died of old age, Spock said, the ache of grief ringing in his mind. He was the only one I could turn to when I was troubled or sad. I would burrow into his fur and cry. When he died... I had no-one. I was six years old, but still remember his touch vividly. I caught a glimpse of warm fur, a cuddly, comforting touch, a sweet, doting, simple affection and my throat constricted with his pain and my sympathy. How had he survived for so long alone?

We had reached my quarters. I stopped and faced him. You have me now. You can always turn to me for help - for comfort - for friendship -

I know, he said, a warm smile upon his lips.

I hugged him tightly for a moment, then reached for the small box on my desk. As I placed the crystal on my hand, the idea of using it as a weapon seemed ludicrous - far-fetched. It looked so beautiful as it glinted and sparkled in the light, so innocuous.

I am not telepathic, Spock. How am I to use it? Can you not join with me to utilise its power? After all, it was yours.

It may be possible, Jim. Let us return at once to the Bridge.

We passed some of the crew lying in the corridors. Some of them were touching others, so Spock's message must have reached them. I fervently hoped that they could protect one another enough to survive. If they could not, they were condemned to a horrifying, agonising, death.

The Bridge was silent. The dead lay as before; the living huddled together, except for the Captain who still sat on her chair, her body stiff, her face tight with tension. Spock stood beside me as I opened a channel to the alien ship. We kept a firm grip on one another, our minds tightly locked together. The Meronite lay on my palm, vibrating gently, awaiting my full attention before it could sing to me, but it glittered brilliantly and grew warm against my skin.

"Attention Rynami craft, this is Commander Kirk of the Starship T'Varon. Call off your attack at once or your persistent attempts to destroy Starfleet personnel will be severely punished. If you surrender now, your sentence may be a light one. Answer."

Spock looked at me with raised eyebrows, his surprise registering in my mind, but there

was no chance to comment for the return message came swiftly. I switched to visual, and we watched as the screen shimmered then cleared to show the beautiful Humanoid faces which hid such evil. The leader was tall and slender; his perfect features and the long pale hair falling upon his shoulders reminded me of an old painting of angels I had once seen in an art gallery. He looked almost Human, apart from the enlarged forehead.

"What are you that you can resist the Zelan force?" he asked.

I smiled at him with all the contempt I felt for him. "I command this ship."

"You are not a Vulcan."

"No - but the Science Officer is," I goaded. "See, he does not feel the torment of the Zelan force."

The alien eyes darkened as he recognised Spock. "He is the one who defeated our people, directing the force of the others. *He* is responsible for the destruction of the Rynami."

"You are correct. Now you will surrender to us at once or else you will be destroyed."

He studied me carefully. "What manner of being are you?"

"I am a Human," I replied.

"Human... " He sounded it out. "I have never heard of such a species. You are much like the Aveen - weak, feeble..." he sneered, his beautiful features turning cold and ugly. "We will capture you and dissect you, then we will understand how to hurt your species."

Shock and fear filtered through me - not my own, but Spock's. I sent reassurance to him but could hear the thoughts swirling between us. *He can do it, Jim - they are very powerful.*

He'll have to capture me first, I sent. Aloud, I laughed sarcastically and said, "You have two solar minutes to surrender. Kirk out."

Your command style is most unusual, Jim, Spock's bemused thought came to me.

It's called bluff, I replied. I'll explain it one day.

I look forward to learning this "bluff", he replied.

You will learn it, my friend, I vowed. I promise you. Now what must we do with the Meronite?

I have only the legend for reference, he said. *It tells little of use to us, only that the hero used the force of his will to direct the stone's power, using it to destroy his enemy.*

That is not much to go on, Spock, I commented.

His regret welled through me, but I quickly stopped that. *We will find a way,* I assured him.

We waited the two solar minutes, then once again raised the enemy vessel. The Rynami leader said only four words. "We will destroy you," then cut off communications. We now had no choice left but to try to implement an untried and unscientific defence.

Spock placed his hand on mine, covered the crystal then clasped me firmly. Our joined minds slid together in one thought; our dearest wish at this moment, our deepest need, to save our ship by destroying the power of the alien. The crystal hummed and vibrated between us, filling us with energy. Meronite, known throughout the galaxy as the ultimate pleasure, used now in a darker way which only a telepath could tap.

I must open myself to the attack, Spock said. I must leave the protection of your mind; only then will I be able to determine the co-ordinates of the Zelan force. Once that is established, I will send you a signal. At that moment, you must direct the power of the crystal to deflect the energy back to its source.

I shuddered with the worry of what Spock would endure, but his confidence eased my fears a little and I could only comply with his wishes. I sent him all my hopes, all my deep feelings for him; they encircled him in a wave of emotion and he allowed it to filter through him, drawing strength from it.

It is unfortunate, he finally remarked, that you do not have the fur of the sehlat. That apart, you show all the characteristics of his nature - protective - loyal - affectionate - fierce.

To tease me at a time like this... I laughed delightedly. *Cross me, and see how fierce I can be.*

Indeed. Perhaps one day I shall try.

The crystal hummed loudly as it attuned itself to both of us. Its harmony increased with the force of our emotions, filling our minds with the destruction of the enemy. It hungered to return the nightmarish pain to the Rynami, it vibrated eagerly, barely under control, awaiting our command. Spock carefully withdrew from me and I waited, scarcely breathing as I listened, all senses alert for his signal. Searing pain swept along my nerve-endings as the backlash of the attack on him caught me, almost causing me to black out with the agony of it. Then he was back within me and the numbing aftermath of the assault spread throughout my body.

Now! came his curt command. He trembled with shock and pain, but such was his courage, he ignored it as he concentrated on the task we had given ourselves. Together, we directed the crystal's energy to the alien force. With one deep, concentrated effort we blocked its effect on the crew, slowly turning it around and sending it speeding back to its source. I cried out as my body was bathed in unendurable heat. I clung to the stability of my bond-brother's mind. I, who had been protecting him, now needed his strength. *Jim - t'hy'la*, his gentle mind-voice reassured me, *only a few moments more.*

I clenched my teeth, my every muscle tensed as we sustained the pressure on the Rynami weapon. The vibrations from the crystal were becoming more erratic, its glow penetrating though our skin, covering our hands and arms in an eerie glow. Spock's warning came only a second from disaster. He released my hand. I dropped the Meronite in response to his order. He threw me clear across the Bridge, dived after me and flung himself across me, protecting me from the crystal's explosion with his body. Even through my closed eyelids, I saw the glare. Stars exploded behind my eyes and I pressed my face into my arm in an attempt to shield myself, but I could not hold onto consciousness. My mind refused to take any more shocks. Welcome blackness overcame me.

COMMAND

Jim. The familiar voice penetrated. *Jim!*

Rousing myself, I opened my eyes to find myself leaning against Spock's shoulder, drenched in sweat, my tunic sticking to me uncomfortably. *I'm all right*, I responded weakly in mind-speech, unable to talk. I was shivering violently. *The Rynami... what happened?*

Destroyed, Jim. Can you stand? His eyes were full of deep worry, his mind full of fear.

I smiled to reassure him. *If you assist me.*

He supported me under the elbows and pushed me to my feet, where I stood trying to control the weaving sensation of vertigo. The Bridge spun around me; the deck rose up to meet me. Quickly I closed my eyes, concentrating on the steady grip which held me until my sense of balance stabilised and I was able to open my eyes to a Bridge which did not move.

"Jim, you must stay in command until I am able to determine the condition of the ship's personnel," he said.

I sighed. In charge of an automated ship! Well, it was better than nothing. I just hoped that there were not any malfunctions while the crew was incapacitated. That none had happened so far was nothing short of a miracle. Spock stepped over to the Captain, his face becoming very grim as he touched her still form.

"I must take her to Sickbay."

"What about the others?" I asked, glancing around at their slumped forms.

"They are in deep shock. My first duty is to the Captain. She is severely traumatised due to the death of her bond-mate." Scooping her up in his arms he quickly made his way to the lift.

As the doors opened and closed, I sat down in the command chair and pressed ship-wide audio control. "All hands, this is Kirk in temporary command of the T'Varon. The danger is over. I repeat, the danger is over." I did not know if my voice would penetrate to any of them, but it was worth trying. "Sickbay - medical alert. Mr Spock is bringing the Captain to you. Please be prepared. Dr T'Renna, respond."

There was nothing but silence.

"Dr T'Renna, your expertise is required. Respond."

Still silence. Was anyone alive down there?

I slammed my fist against the chair. "All stations report to the Bridge. Damage Control - Life Support - Phaser Crew - Engineering - Auxiliary Control, report to me."

I went through every section on the ship, but there was no response from any of them. Damn! I left the command chair and slipped back to the helm-control, where I began a check of all ship functions, a long tedious task for one person. It was also a near-impossible feat for anyone. I did not let that stop me; it had to be done. Twenty minutes passed before Spock reported that he had roused some of the medical staff and was now proceeding to other vital personnel.

"Return to the Bridge as soon as you can," I told him, trying to mask my concern with a brisk, businesslike tone.

His voice was full of understanding as he replied. "Yes, Jim."

Some time later, the doors hissed open. I turned expectantly and with great pleasure saw Lt. T'Sal and her husband, Lt. Storon.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"We are functional," T'Sal said, but her face showed dark green bruises under her eyes. She looked pale and shaky.

I made no comment. She would not thank me for showing my concern. "Good. I am running a class one check. Please take over the Science station. Check all systems." She nodded and immediately complied. "Lt. Storon," I went on, looking up at the tall Security Officer. "Take over the Engineering station. Complete check."

"Yes, sir," he replied and settled in to work with skill and ease. He looked haggard and drawn, but did not falter.

Grateful for their cool efficiency, I continued with my own checks. Amazingly, everything was still running flawlessly. Vulcan ships were kept at peak proficiency, that was only too obvious. Gradually, other officers returned to the Bridge. A medical team removed the dead and injured. Lt. Sevel, one of my relief helmsmen, offered his help; I put him onto the station, while I moved to the centre seat and co-ordinated all departments. Spock did the real work throughout the ship, going from deck to deck, checking everyone and everything personally. Where did he find the stamina?

A semblance of normality began to return as the crew recovered from their ordeal. However, they tired easily and I would only allow them to work two hour shifts, insisting they keep to a rota and rest as much as possible. I was worried about Spock. He had been away from the Bridge for almost seven hours. An hour ago, I had finally persuaded him to go off-duty, but an emergency had arisen in Engineering, a malfunction in the warp drive which had to be attended to immediately. As most of the engineering staff were gravely ill, leaving only junior officers and technicians available, Spock had no choice but to take the responsibility.

He had promised me that he would take rest as soon as possible, trying to hide his extreme exhaustion from me, but as I watched him on the screen, I could see - even sense - that his Vulcan stamina was ebbing. His duty held him though. As Science Officer he was responsible for virtually all sections of the ship; as First Officer he was responsible for everything. He had left me in command of the Bridge, delegating that to me, so I kept the T'Varon running as smoothly as I could for him, easily accepting the duties of Captain.

I stayed at my post through the long hours, not allowing myself any time off. The time sped by as I became completely caught up with controlling the ship, but tiredness was making its presence felt. With sheer determination and too many cups of coffee, I continued. There was no-one fit enough to relieve me.

The message from Starbase 21 arrived, twenty-four and a half hours after my original communication to them. Vulcan efficiency - They had contacted the Vulcan ship 'Surakin' to rendezvous with us. Relief left me weak as I heard the news and I could feel the quiet joy in the air as the others absorbed that good news. The Surakin, another ship of the Vulcan fleet, commanded by Captain Stonn; there would be medical personnel able to deal with my injured

shipmates.

Thirty minutes later, the Surakin contacted us. Luckily - or more likely, logically - the Vulcans had a very reliable back-up system for emergencies. Each Vulcan base and ship had at least one person of the highest degree of telepathic ability; when subspace communication was too slow, they could send a message from one mind to another - despite the distance - within an amazingly short time. They had used this method to reach the Surakin, patrolling the Neutral Zone, only a few hours away from us at maximum warp. My esteem for these people rose once again. Was there no end to their capabilities? I wondered who was the strongest telepath on this ship, the one who could have reached for help if he had been able. It came as no surprise when the computer informed me that it was Captain T'Zen.

The screen filled with the image of a young Vulcan, perhaps ten years older than Spock. He was the least dignified Vulcan I had ever seen; his manner was brusque, even unpleasant as he spoke. "T'Varon, this is Captain Stonn of the Surakin. What is your condition?"

"Lt-Commander James Kirk in temporary command, sir. There are twenty-seven dead, one hundred and thirty-six injured, and all other crew members are still in shock but are recovering. We urgently need medical assistance. Please relay co-ordinates for rendezvous."

His eyebrow rose on seeing me; Vulcan surprise on seeing a Human commanding. He swivelled to give orders to his crew then returned to look at me. "It is done."

"Coming through now, sir," Lt T'Sal said. "At warp three we will rendezvous in two point seven solar hours."

"Very well, Lieutenant, set course," I said, then looked up at the screen again. "Captain, I regret that our warp capabilities have been damaged and warp three is our maximum speed. We are working to improve it, but I cannot give you any guarantees."

"Keep us informed," he said curtly. "We are proceeding at warp eight. Is Captain T'Zen alive?"

"She is gravely ill, sir. The Rynami attack was very severe and it killed her husband."

There was no reaction at all to that news on his arrogant face. "Where is the Second Officer?" He obviously had not heard of Selek's demotion. I swallowed back my anger at his harsh, unfeeling tone, forcing myself to stay still, not allowing myself to show emotion nor be intimidated by him.

"Mr Spock is now First Officer, sir. He is involved in the warp drive repairs. You must understand the nature of the attack we faced. I - a Human - was the only person not affected, therefore Mr Spock placed me - the only logical choice - in command. No-one else is functioning at full capacity yet."

"I see," he said slowly. "Keep channels open between our two ships. My officers are at the disposal of their Vulcan kindred. Stonn out."

I let out a breath and glanced at T'Sal. She raised one perfectly shaped eyebrow and there was a sympathetic expression on her face.

"My people do not know yours very well," she said. "It is something we must remedy."

I nodded. "Yes, we have much to learn about each other."

"Our philosophy is based on the equality of all. That includes those who are not Vulcans. It is regrettable that some do not understand that."

She was telling me that Stonn was a bigot, as Selek had been; she was warning me of the difficulties I might face when the Surakin arrived. Thrusting the unpleasant thought from my mind, I returned to my duties. Dr T'Renna reported that three more had died, the Captain was not responding to treatment, and the other injured were still comatose. She hesitated before she continued with the rest of her report.

"Mr Kirk, I have placed Spock under medical orders to rest in his quarters."

My heart skipped a beat as worry and fear gripped me relentlessly in a tight knot. "Doctor - " I began.

"He will recover," she quickly informed me, "but he needs complete rest now. That leaves you in command of the T'Varon until further notice. Are you able?"

My relief left me shaken, but holding onto my control, I answered her. "Doctor, I am all right. Please take great care of him - and the others. Spock has suffered great trauma and has not allowed himself any respite... he - "

"Commander Kirk," she said, interrupting me. "Do not fear for your t'hy'la. If not for your ability to protect him from the attack... Without the bond between you, none of us would have survived. Truly, your friendship reflects the values of I.D.I.C., for your differences combined to create a defence and a way of saving us all."

From her, that was quite an admission, and it registered with me that for the first time she had called me Commander Kirk. "Thank you," I replied politely. "I will visit Spock as soon as I can leave the Bridge. Please tell him that."

"He is asleep," she said, "but he asked me to inform you that he has every confidence in you."

I was silent as I digested that. He had left me in command of the Bridge, but he had been there for me to call upon. Now he could not be disturbed and I was on my own, with no-one to relieve me yet, no-one fit enough to take on the responsibilities of command. I banished my exhaustion. I would not let Spock down. He would be proud of me.

STONN

The Surakin rendezvoused with us at the precise time calculated. Spock had worked with the engineering staff on repairing the warp engines, and warp three had been maintained at all times. I sighed with relief as teams of medical personnel beamed aboard. Now the exhausted and sick doctors and nurses of my ship would be able to relax.

The lift doors opened and a group of Vulcan officers walked onto the Bridge. I stood up to greet them. One of them was Captain Stonn. He moved over to me, his arrogant stare looking me up and down.

I stood still, but at ease. "Greetings, Captain. You are most welcome."

"Report," he replied coldly, impersonally, even with hostility.

He was of superior rank to me, but *I* was in command of this ship; he had no right to be so uncivil. Such a manner was unworthy of a Vulcan. "The crew is not recovered from the attack, sir. I would be grateful if you would assign me relief crew to take over vital ship's functions."

"You are relieved," he said abruptly.

I drew myself up. I did not like his attitude; he had no right to relieve me unless I was unfit for duty and he had no grounds for that. "Sir, I have been left in command of this ship and here I will stay until Captain T'Zen, Mr Spock, or any other of the command crew are fit to relieve me - or if I decide that it is time for me to rest and turn over command - temporarily - to you or one of your officers." There was a change of expression in his eyes. I had angered him, but I stood my ground. "Please relieve my Bridge crew. They are exhausted."

The eyes of the T'Varon crew were upon me, and somehow I felt their support. That made me stronger. Clasp my hands behind my back, I stared Captain Stonn out. To my great satisfaction, *he* was the one to break eye contact; he ordered the others to the Bridge stations with sullen commands.

Lt. T'Sal and Lt. Storon stopped beside me before they left. "Sir, your quickness of thought and your courage saved us all. We are truly grateful," T'Sal said.

I was deeply grateful and touched by her open praise. She was trying to help me by letting these strange Vulcans know of my abilities.

"Indeed," Storon added. "We ask that you join us for dinner, once duty permits. You would honour us greatly if you accept, Commander Kirk."

I bowed to them both. "I am the one honoured. Thank you."

There was a strange choked feeling within me. They had shown Stonn and his crew that I - a Human - was accepted as one of them; they had given me praise and respect, making sure that Stonn knew that they accepted my command - and valued me.

Stonn faced me once more. "You are relieved, Mr Kirk," he persisted.

"No, sir. If you will excuse me, I must brief the crew."

I sat on the command chair, busying myself with issuing orders, requesting and receiving reports, all the administrative duties a commanding officer must deal with. To my satisfaction, the Surakin accepted my command, but whether Stonn had given permission or not, I did not know nor care. He stood at the back of my chair silently, as I made sure that my ship was being looked after properly by these new people.

At the first moment's respite, Stonn moved to my side. "Your devotion to duty is most interesting. I have allowed you to continue for you alone knew the status of ship's functions. Now that my crew is fully briefed you will leave the Bridge and confine yourself to quarters. I will take command now."

"On what grounds, Captain Stonn?" I asked, trying to keep my anger in check.

"Your command was purely temporary until someone with ability could take over. You

are not in the chain of command; you are a Human serving on an assignment which is purely of a political nature. You do not have the authority to remain in control of this ship. I, as senior officer, a Captain in the Vulcan fleet, do hereby relieve you."

It was increasingly difficult to control my temper at this insufferable, arrogant bigot. Just who did he think he was? I would fight him all the way. He would not usurp my rights like this. His shifty eyes strayed to my ears and there was disdain in his expression.

"I have all the authority I need, Captain Stonn," I said. "Commander Spock - the First Officer - placed me in command."

"Then where is the log entry confirming this?" he asked.

My stomach heaved at his callousness. "Sir, we were under attack by a weapon aimed precisely at the Psionic centres of the Vulcan mind. There was no time for log entries. We were in grave danger. Mr Spock gave me command to leave him free to rouse the others and attend the damage to the engines. He did the logical thing."

"He is half-Human. He did not adhere to strict Vulcan rules of discipline. All changes of command must be logged."

"Sir, it was an emergency situation. That overrules anything. Survival is paramount. Regulation 11, paragraph 1."

Stonn's eyes flashed in fury. He stared at me in an unsuccessful attempt to intimidate me. I stared back at him for no-one could make me flinch from their gaze - except Spock. No-one else had the power. After what we had been through, I was not going to allow this upstart Vulcan Captain to take over. "If you do not leave the Bridge at once. I will call a Security team to place you in confinement," he snapped.

The weary hours spent studying Vulcan regulations had not been wasted. I knew them through and through. In an emergency situation, a senior officer from another ship could take command, but did these circumstances constitute an emergency? That was where the interpretation could be different. As far as I was concerned, the emergency was over, and all that we needed was assistance from the Surakin crew. Standing as tall as possible, drawing on as much calm and dignity as possible, I was guided by Spock's lessons on the control of my emotions.

My heartbeat was slow and steady, my voice even as I replied. "Sir, I respectfully suggest that you do not have the right to relieve me in this manner. Regulation 14, paragraph 3, states; 'The officer in command, while in adequate physical and mental health, may not be forcibly removed from duty, unless a severe emergency beyond his capability requires intervention by another officer of command rank.' The severe emergency we had has been dealt with by Commander Spock and myself. He placed me in command and you have no grounds to relieve me. As I am familiar with the workings of this ship, I will oversee the repairs and maintenance. I am grateful for your assistance, but I require only that. I am quite capable of commanding the T'Varon."

The silence was almost deafening. I wondered if Stonn had ever been defied in such a way before. A cold, dark look settled upon his features and I braced myself for whatever was to come; it would not be pleasant.

He depressed the button for intraship communications. "Security to the Bridge."

"Captain Stonn, do not overstep your authority," I warned.

"You are the one overstepping your authority, Kirk. You are not in the line of command. You are unfit for such responsibility. You are a Human, here on sufferance, and will not tell a Captain of the Vulcan fleet what to do. You are to be confined in the Brig until further notice."

It was depressingly familiar. Selek had done the same thing, but that time Spock had been with me and the Captain had been made aware of the situation very quickly. This time, T'Zen was seriously ill and Spock was unable to help me. There was no-one else in a position to help me; I could only rely on myself. Well, I would not give in to him, I would fight him every step of the way.

"Sufferance!" I exclaimed. "I do not think that the Vulcan Council would allow me here on sufferance. I am here in an experiment in interspecies co-operation, to test the true principles of I.D.I.C. These principles exist amongst the majority of Vulcans, but there are a few who do not live by these standards who practise bigotry, who are narrow-minded and petty in their dealings with other species."

He gave a guilty start. "You accuse me?"

"I accuse no-one, sir. I only speak the truth. Think, Captain. You will have to answer to the Council if you act out of anything other than the proper adherence to regulations."

He turned away, walked to the upper level, and paced between the Science station and the lift doors. The others kept their eyes on their consoles, busy at their duties, but all were listening intently. Would he listen to reason or was he as blindly prejudiced as Selek had been? I stared at the viewscreen, seeing his ship paralleling our course to Starbase 21. It was possible that an enquiry would be held there. Would Stonn be willing to risk that?

The intercom sounded, breaking my reverie. "Kirk here," I said.

"Sickbay. Dr T'Renna here. Commander Kirk, Captain T'Zen is settling into a healing trance. She is through the crisis of bond-breaking. She will now steadily improve and will recover fully in an estimated time of three days."

I sighed with profound relief. I had the greatest respect for my Captain. She was a brave, understanding and generous woman; a very fine officer. She had - from the start - accepted me and had allowed me the chance to prove myself.

"Mr Spock is in a deep sleep," she continued. "His life- indications are strong and he is recovering from the attack more quickly than any other on the ship. Once he awakens he will wish to see his t'hy'la. You will be summoned."

"Very well, Dr T'Renna, I will await your summons eagerly for I desperately wish to see my t'hy'la."

There was a very slight touch of humour in her voice as she replied. "I will endeavour to be elsewhere at that moment."

I almost laughed, but quickly restrained myself, remembering where I was. She was referring to the last time Spock had been gravely ill and my behaviour over him. I had shocked her with my emotional responses and my ability to overcome the Human handicap of non-telepathy to reach Spock's mind.

"If you wish, Doctor," I said, allowing myself a small grin.

As the Doctor continued with her report on the status of the injured, others entered the Bridge, no doubt the Security Officers Stonn had requested, but I did my best to ignore everyone. "Thank you," I finally said to T'Renna, "make sure that *you* have sufficient rest. The Surakin medics can handle things until your staff are sufficiently recovered."

"And you, Commander - are you still functioning properly?"

I grimaced a little at her question. "Dr T'Renna, I was not affected by the Rynami attack. I have no problems." Well - not exactly. I could almost feel Stonn breathing down my neck.

"It is fortunate you were aboard the T'Varon, Commander Kirk. And that you were able to take control, protect your bondbrother and enable him to function. To stir the power of Meronite - to destroy the alien with it - is a feat out of legend. Truly you and Spock are worthy successors to t'hy'la of the past. I salute thee."

Her words sent shivers of real joy through me. T'Renna, who once had been so hostile to me, now paid Spock and I much honour. Furthermore, it was gratifying to know that these strange Vulcans had heard her. Then it dawned on me that she had intended those words for their ears.

"My deepest thanks for your gracious words," I replied.

"I am honoured," she replied. "Sickbay out."

Cutting the connection, I looked up into the silence where Stonn stood watching me, his expression one of puzzlement. Beside him were two officers from his Security team, one male - and the other possibly the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. I tried not to gape at her shapely figure, her perfect, exotic features, her creamy skin and jet black hair. All Vulcan women were stunning, but this one was exceptional.

"You and Spock are t'hy'la!" Stonn exclaimed.

"Yes," I said, wondering again at the reverence and respect these people who repressed, even denied, emotion had for a relationship which involved such deep feelings, a bond closer than any other.

He exchanged a glance with the female Security officer, and her perfectly shaped eyebrow rose. "Lt-Commander T'Pring, escort Kirk to his quarters. He is clearly tired as he is but Human. He needs rest. Make sure there is a guard at his door at all times."

He had certainly changed his tune a little, but was still trying to remove me from the Bridge. Did he detest Humans so much that even being near one disgusted him?

"Am I under arrest?" I asked, with a touch of sarcasm.

"No, but you have been through an ordeal. You must take rest. I am empowered to enforce you to take that rest."

I shook my head. "Only if the Chief Medical Officer can supply proof that I am incapable of command."

"I will obtain that proof," he countered.

"You may try, Captain Stonn. Now if you will excuse me, I must attend to my duties."

I sat down on the command chair and continued with my work, but I knew that it would be impossible to stay here forever. I was weary and light-headed from hunger, but stubbornly would not allow that cold-hearted bastard to forcibly remove me, and would wait until someone from my own ship was well enough to take my place. Stonn was obviously uncertain. My arguments about his motives must have struck a chord with him. If he was accused of wrongful behaviour towards me, then his own career would be in jeopardy.

Some time later, the lift doors opened again and another unknown Vulcan stepped from it. He glanced at Stonn, who ordered him to approach me. I prepared myself for the next onslaught and swivelled around to face the newcomer.

"I am Dr Sivon, Chief Medical Officer of the Surakin. Please accompany me to Sickbay for a physical examination."

I stared at him with interest. He was the oldest Vulcan I had seen aboard a Starship. He exuded competence and wisdom, not unlike that of the Vulcan ambassador Sarek. Something about him made me want to trust him. There were streaks of grey in his otherwise black hair; his face was slightly lined about the eyes and chin. He appeared about seventy or so, by Human standards, but was probably well over a hundred years old. His dark eyes rested upon me with compassion - even kindness - and something in me responded.

"Thank you, Dr Sivon," I said, "but I am all right. Once off duty, I will certainly come to Sickbay. Please inform me, how is Commander Spock?"

His expression softened further. "He sleeps peacefully. I have consulted Dr T'Renna and have learned of your actions and Spock's. Commander Kirk, it is most commendable that you remain at your post, but you are fatigued. You have remained on duty for much too long. It is time to turn over command to someone else. The danger is over; you must now consider yourself."

He sounded so reasonable and logical and I knew he was talking sense. I *was* exhausted; the strain of all that had happened, the stress of running the ship almost singlehandedly, metaphorically spoon-feeding the crew, had taken its toll. I was desperate for sleep - it must have been more than a day and a half since I had wakened to the sound of the intercom and the news of the message from my family; but most of all, I wanted to be with Spock, to determine for myself that he was all right.

"Dr Sivon," Stonn snapped. "Order him to Sickbay on your authority."

Sivon looked at his Captain. "Commander Kirk is not bound by *my* orders, sir. However, I hope to persuade him to allow himself some rest after his heroic and successful efforts in saving the majority of the T'Varon crew."

Stonn turned away, his eyes flashing in anger. He called T'Pring over and stood talking to her quietly.

Why was the Doctor taking my side? Did he have some grievance against Stonn? Or was he just looking at this from a logical and fair point of view? I did not know, but I liked him; in some ways he reminded me of Bones. Sivon once again looked at me with eyes which were kindly, and suddenly my weariness hit me. I had kept it at bay because there had been no choice, no-one had been able to help me, to share the responsibility. Giving in to Stonn was unthinkable for me; my defiance and argument had stopped his arrogant attempts to remove

me, but if it was *my* choice, I could relinquish command. Indeed, if I did not I would soon reach the stage of being unfit to deal with anything.

My thoughts turned to Spock. He would be furious with me if I was foolish and took risks with myself which were not necessary. His anger was something I would not willingly provoke. What would he want me to do?

"You speak sense, Dr Sivon," I said, "and I am grateful to you for your interest and understanding."

His voice was gentle as he replied. "Then please come with me. You must be at the side of your bondbrother. After such an ordeal, he must awaken to find you there; it is his right. Indeed, it is his need and yours to be together. Anyone can now command the ship; you have a greater duty."

That decided me; it was probably the only argument that could make me leave the command chair, for sitting here, running this Starship, seemed so natural and right to me. I was comfortable and relaxed. It was what I wanted most in my life: to be a Starship Captain.

"Very well," I conceded, "the emergency is over and I should take some rest." I pressed the log key. "Lt-Commander James T. Kirk, commanding; I now temporarily relinquish command to Captain Stonn of the U.S.S. Surakin until I or any member of the T'Varon crew is recovered enough to return to duty." I switched it off and stood up. "Captain Stonn, the ship is yours. I will be with Mr Spock. Please contact me if you need any advice." The anger in his eyes increased, but I did not care a damn.

"Security - " he began.

"Unnecessary," Dr Sivon said sharply. "He will be with his t'hy'la. That is his place."

Stonn did not argue, but silently walked to the centre seat and sat down. The beautiful T'Pring stared at me as I passed her and there was curiosity in her large, expressive eyes. Why was she so interested in me? But Sivon, who accompanied me into the lift, distracted me and I forgot about her.

"Will you allow me to examine you, Commander Kirk?" he asked.

"If you wish," I replied, "but I assure you that I am just fatigued and hungry."

"Indeed, if that is all, it is easily remedied," he said, with a tiny, grave smile.

I watched him wonderingly and he met my inquiring gaze openly. "Sir, you have been most kind to me."

He raised an eyebrow. "Captain Stonn is young. He has had little experience with non-Vulcans. He has had little experience with anything..." I almost burst out into laughter. I had just heard criticism, the older person complaining about the younger generation. Perhaps Humans and Vulcans were not so different, after all. "It is his first command. He is able - but..." he trailed off, then added after a moment, "I had a t'hy'la once."

My throat caught, sensing the pain behind his words. "Sir?" I inquired.

"It was many years ago, before you were born." His kindly eyes darkened and changed as he recalled the memory. "He died of an infection which I was unable to cure."

"I'm sorry," I tried, unable to express my regret to him in speech.

Yet he seemed to understand my feelings and his eyes brightened. "I have the memories always... but they are not the same as the living presence, the touch, the joining of minds... You are fortunate indeed."

I swallowed hard, knowing what he meant. This bond Spock and I shared was compulsive and deeply felt, the hours apart under these difficult circumstances had been tedious and lonely. Now I could no longer stay away from him, needing the security of his presence.

"The bond of t'hy'la is a deep commitment," Sivon added, "but rewarding beyond all others, despite the difficulties."

It is indeed, sir," I agreed, wholeheartedly.

DOUBTS

Spock lay on his bed asleep. I gazed down upon him, wanting to rouse him, talk with him, assure myself he was all right - but I restrained myself. Dr Sivon brought me food, watched me as I sat at Spock's desk and ate, then ran his mediscanner over me, checked the computer for my medical records, then nodded slightly and stood up.

"Your Human readings are most peculiar, but appear to be normal for your species. However, you *are* overtired and must rest. I will leave you with Spock. If he seems ill when he awakens, call me."

I thanked him, then settled down in the chair with a fresh cup of coffee. I sipped at it, content to be in Spock's familiar cabin, knowing he was only a few metres away from me and safe. I rubbed at my eyes and yawned as my exhaustion crept over me relentlessly; sliding down further into the softness of the chair, I slipped into a doze.

"Jim..." Spock's voice was full of exasperation. "Go to your bed."

I was immediately alert and dived into his sleeping area to see him sitting up, in the process of getting out of the bed. I flung myself upon him in impetuous, unrestrained delight, knocking him flat on his back.

"Jim!" he exclaimed. *JIM!* His mind-voice filtered through me, bringing with it all his startlement at my impulsive hug.

I closed my eyes, sending him all my happiness. *The touching and joining of minds... your living presence beside me...* I repeated Sivon's words. *I have missed you.* The link between us when in physical contact crackled with the force of my feelings.

Indeed, he responded, as he attempted to sit up.

Embarrassed now, I coughed, released him, pumped up his pillows, then sat back. He settled down to look at me, scrutinising in the way only he could. I flushed and cleared my throat as he gave me his full attention. Sometimes I could take his gaze, at other times - like now - I could not. My cheeks burned hotly as the realisation that once again I had lost control of my emotions - despite the progress in my lessons on restraint - shamed me. Forcing myself

not to lower my eyes, I endured it.

Finally he spoke. "Report, Mr Kirk."

So it was to be formal. Well, perhaps that was for the best. It would give me time to regain my composure. He listened silently as I briefed him on recent events, and as I recounted my refusal to allow Stonn the ship, it seemed very childish of me to have behaved in that way. Doubts filtered through me. Had I done the correct thing? Had it been foolishly Human of me, wanting to keep control of the T'Varon? What would Spock have done in my place? I awaited his judgement with trepidation. Would he approve of my actions or would he not even understand the position I had been in? His expression gave nothing away.

"Captain Stonn may press charges against you, Mr Kirk," he said, eventually. "He had the right to take command, if he thought the situation warranted it. Regulations permit it."

A slight wave of hurt passed through me at his stiff, formal manner and his reference to Stonn's opinion. Did he not trust mine?

"It was a matter of personal opinion, Mr Spock," I replied. "It was my right to voice my objections."

"I did not give you permission to speak, Mr Kirk," he said sharply. "Do not interrupt me."

Stung by his attitude and his tone, I rose to my feet and stood, hands behind my back. If he wanted to act the commanding officer, then I was honour-bound to act the subordinate, but I wondered what had become of the easygoing and relaxed relationship usually there when we were alone. Why the military behaviour? All I could deduce was that he did not approve of the way I had treated Stonn. It was what I had been afraid of. Spock - so deeply immersed in Vulcan discipline - believed that respect to a senior officer must always be shown.

He continued relentlessly. "On a Vulcan ship your behaviour could be interpreted as insubordination. You refused to obey the orders of a Captain, you did not relinquish command to a superior officer. You may be in serious trouble. It is possible that your time with the Vulcan fleet is at an end."

He was correct - I knew it. Perhaps I had ruined everything for myself, and worse, had jeopardised the future of Vulcan-Terran co-operation. My stubbornness, maybe my selfishness, at not giving up command had overcome me, because I wanted command more than anything - I yearned for it. Maybe that was why I did not relinquish the Con, for all I could think about was the gratification of my own needs, not the well-being and safety of the T'Varon and her crew.

Spock stared up at me expressionlessly, the very calm, almost cold Vulcan officer. Had I shamed him? Had I let him down after he had trusted me with the ship? My eyes shut tightly for a moment as it suddenly hit me that his good opinion of me mattered much more than Starship command. Fool that I was, to place our friendship under such strain.

"I am senior officer of the T'Varon whilst the Captain is ill. If I judge you to have behaved irresponsibly, you will answer to me. Now you will give me your reason for disobeying Captain Stonn."

I tightly clasped my hands together. Never had I expected to be cross-examined like this, but it was my duty to answer him truthfully.

"Sir, I believed his interpretation of regulations to be wrong. He wished to assume command because he considered me unfit - being a Human - and that transfer of command from you to me was invalid as it was not recorded in the ship's log. However, I believed it was my responsibility to ensure that the relief crew was fully briefed by one who knew the ship's status. We were no longer in an emergency situation and it was unnecessary for him to take over at that point, when I was available."

I remained silent for a few moments trying to examine my motives, my reasons for staying on the Bridge, for I had to be honest with myself; if I was not, then how could I face Spock? I could not lie to my bond-brother; the relationship we shared was open and honest. One could not hide anything of that nature from the other. Human friendships were much safer than being t'hy'la, one could keep the worst parts of one's nature from the other; in this relationship with a telepath, there was no such option.

I looked into his eyes, facing him openly. "You left me in command, sir. I would not betray your trust in me. I could not commit such a crime against you. I was best fitted to organise the new crew even if Captain Stonn thinks otherwise. Perhaps..." I hesitated. Could I admit such a thing? Yes - I must. "Perhaps his attitude angered me." I took a deep breath. "It did anger me, but I did my job to the best of my ability." I straightened my shoulders, swallowed hard, but did not take my gaze from his. "If I have done wrong in your eyes, then I ask forgiveness. I will accept any punishment you deem fit."

His face showed nothing and that caused cold shivers to run down my spine. Used to reading him better now - or so I thought - I wondered if I had been deluding myself by thinking myself able to understand him. Had all my actions been so very wrong? The ways of Vulcans were still incomprehensible by all I was familiar with.

Forcing my body to remain motionless, I stared at the wall, unable now to stand the power of his gaze. Silently I prayed for his understanding, his sympathy and compassion; his forgiveness if I had done wrong. I could not bear him to be disappointed in me, but the horrible fear that he was tormented me.

There was a long silence before he spoke. "Your refusal to relinquish command to Captain Stonn is certain. You have admitted it. Whether it is a breach of regulations is open to interpretation."

A hard lump formed in my throat, threatening to choke me; digging my nails into my hands forcibly, I felt a sharp pain lance up into my wrist. I ignored the discomfort, my mind only on his voice, trying to tell if there was any touch of compassion in his tone, but it was impossible to determine for he could be more emotionless than anyone, if he so chose to be.

There was a pause during which my breathing seemed to stop. "It is - in my opinion - at most a minor infraction," he continued after what seemed an eternity. Those words caused an intense surge of joy to permeate my senses and I quickly gave him my full attention. His eyes had lost their severe expression and now were warm as they regarded me. I physically swayed, but managed to steady myself.

"Mr Kirk, you took control of the ship, running her single-handedly, saving the lives of the Captain, First Officer and most of the crew. You defeated the enemy and brought the ship to a rescue vessel. It is highly unlikely that any charges brought by Captain Stonn would be upheld. Your actions cannot be faulted. If there are any questions raised concerning your right to command, please be assured that I will support your position and defend you, for I know what is in your heart."

At times like these, I could hug him and submerge myself into our telepathic link with reckless abandon, just wanting to show him how much his friendship meant to me, needing to transmit my deep feelings for him, but caution prevailed. He would not welcome such a display from me; somehow I must find the patience to await the moment he would let his guard down and permit me to join with him in our special unity.

"Thank you," I said gratefully.

"You have a most disturbing ability for getting into trouble, Mr Kirk."

"Another fault," I admitted, with an embarrassed chuckle.

"Indeed," he commented, in his enigmatic way.

I flushed again, but did not allow my embarrassment to overcome me. "May I bring you some food?"

He watched me for long moments before he replied. "No, thank you. Now you will rest; you have done quite enough for any being."

He was doing it again - looking after me, when he was the one who needed care. I was not going to allow that. "Spock, when did you last eat? You must at least take some Simbia."

"I do not require - " he began.

"I will get it for you," I interrupted, ignoring his protests with a determined effort not to shiver at the annoyed looks he was giving me. He was too selfless, never concerned about his own comfort and safety, but I was bound - it was my duty - to care for him if necessary.

Bringing the Simbia to him, I placed it in his hand and sat down to watch him drink it. With a sudden sigh of resignation, he did so, then handed me the empty container. We stared at one another and this time he was the one to yield before my determination. He glanced down and when he met my eyes again, their expression had softened. I grinned at him, delighted he was not annoyed with me any more, but I could not help but intrude on his privacy under these conditions; it was my right and he had to accept that.

"I have not yet thanked you for saving my life," he said.

"You don't need to thank me," I replied, dismissing it lightly.

"But I must. It would be ill-mannered of me... it would be ungracious... it..." He trailed off and held out his hand to me. "May I touch your thoughts?"

Happiness enveloped me. He was allowing me in, he was letting me share his thoughts, giving me the most wondrous gift of all, a part of his inner self. In answer I caught his hand and guided it to my face. He smiled very slightly and with a sudden move pulled me into a tight embrace. I returned his hold with unconcealed delight; after what we had been through and the many hours apart, to be so close, to feel him alive and well, to sense his telepathic touch slowly filtering through me, was sheer joy.

We slipped into the familiarity of the link, but deeper than ever before, into the most intensely moving sensations I had ever known. We did not converse, but shared feelings and emotions in some kind of mutual harmony. Nothing like this had happened in our previous melds; I did not flinch from it, but accepted and reached for it, knowing that we were truly

joining in a togetherness which went beyond any I had ever known, in a giving and receiving of the essence of one another. A blending, a fusion of the deepest, purest kind.

Time stood still in our world.....

Jim, his mind-voice persisted until I finally took notice. Jim - your feelings overwhelm me.

I tried to find my inner voice, but it was not easy. I wanted to stay in this magical place of peace and harmony, where loneliness did not exist. *Forgive me, t'hy'la, I finally managed. I love the closeness we now share, it is a balm to me, it brings me such contentment.*

Indeed, it is most interesting.

My laughter sent rippling waves through us both. *Is that the only way you can describe it?*

No, he replied, honestly, but it is the only way I will describe it.

Even in this most intimate of all communication, he would not verbally admit his feelings to me. Well, it did not matter, for I knew them anyway. I had felt them encompass my whole being.

As I was held back, I reluctantly opened my eyes, to see his amused gaze upon me. "You must sleep," he said. "You are exhausted."

He was correct. Everything had caught up with me; I could barely hold onto consciousness, the drowsiness in my body was all-demanding. Slumping down into the warmth, I knew nothing more.

REJECTION

When I awoke, the room was dark and I was alone. I sat up, confused and uncertain. How had I come to be sleeping in Spock's room? How long had I been here? Then the memory of my exhausted fall into slumber returned and flopping back on the bed I relaxed and stretched out. I felt so good, deeply rested and content; it was a welcome benefit of the mind-meld, this glow of well-being.

The sound of the door-chime startled me. I began to sit up, about to answer when Spock's voice sounded in the outer chamber, activating the voice-command lock. I settled back and closed my eyes, content to lie here until it was necessary to rise.

"Commander Spock - greetings," a female voice said.

"Greetings, Commander T'Pring."

"I am here to inquire about Mr Kirk's whereabouts."

"He is here."

"Why is he not in his cabin?"

"He sleeps."

"In your bed?" The Security Officer sounded surprised.

"Yes, he has overtaxed his strength. I would keep him close to me."

A comforting warmth filled me at those words and I turned over onto my front and hugged the pillow, burying my face into its softness.

"I am ordered to keep him under guard."

"He is *my* responsibility. There is no need to place him under guard. He has done no wrong."

"Captain Stonn accuses him of insubordination."

"Captain Stonn may - if he wishes - bring charges against Commander Kirk when we reach Starbase 21. On this ship, he may not. I am senior officer and will deal with any member of my crew."

"You are not in command, Mr. Spock."

"Once I am pronounced medically fit, I will resume my duties."

"I have my orders, Spock," she said, her voice full of warning.

"T'Pring, you may not have him. I pledge his behaviour with my life. It is my right to take responsibility for him, as well you know."

"You would do this for a Human?"

"He is my bond-brother. He will answer to me if he misbehaves."

My eyes were wide open now. What were they talking about? What new aspect of our relationship were they discussing? Could I even ask Spock, for he thought me to be asleep and their voices were very low. I'm not even sure how it was possible for me to hear them, but I seemed to be attuned in some way to Spock and was aware of all the conversation. I would answer to him if I misbehaved! I swallowed hard. What in hell did that mean? Somehow, I did not care to find out.

"Very well, I will inform the Captain," T'Pring said, then there was a moment of tense silence. "It has been many years, Spock."

"Indeed."

"I wish to speak plainly."

"Then do so."

"I do not wish to marry you."

I gasped with astonishment. She was Spock's betrothed! The beautiful Security Officer who had looked at me with such curiosity. Why...? How could she not want to marry my t'hy'la?

Spock's voice was even, but I sensed a raw hurt from him. "Explain."

"I wish to bond with another."

"Who?"

"Captain Stonn."

I was amazed. How stupid could she be to want that arrogant, ugly bastard, and reject the gentle, remarkable Spock? Could it be that she did not want to marry one who was half-Human? One who had joined in brotherhood with a Terran?

"I cannot free you, T'Pring. There is only one way you can divorce me and that will have to wait until the proper time."

"Our bonding cannot be a true one. I do not feel your touch."

"I feel yours, T'Pring, deep within the centre of my mind."

"I wish it dissolved."

"I deeply regret that you do not accept our betrothal. If it is your wish, you may try to obtain an annulment. If it is not permitted, I will meet you at the appointed place."

"Very well, Spock."

There was the hiss of the doors opening and closing, then complete silence. I lay in the darkness, scarcely daring to breathe. My friend had just been rejected. What were the consequences of her words? If she could not get the annulment, they would have to marry with Spock knowing she did not want him, or else be divorced at the proper time - whatever that meant... How could I help him in this most difficult of times?

Jim... His call reached my mind. I don't know how I heard that silent plea, but I was out of that bed in a second, and rushing into the outer cabin, where he stood, still as a statue. I stared up at him with much concern. He frowned, shook himself a little, his startlement at seeing me breaking his usual strict control.

"Jim - I thought you asleep. I did not mean to awaken you."

"I woke a few minutes ago," I ventured. "I did not mean to eavesdrop... but... I heard. And then you called me."

His eyes filled with shock and a touch of awe, but he quickly beat it down and found his calm again. "Then you will know that you must do exactly as I tell you and not defy Captain Stonn again. I am responsible for your behaviour. If you do not obey me you will be severely punished."

His voice was clipped and precise and in a tone which brooked no disobedience. I would have allowed no-one else to speak to me in such a manner, but it was Spock - and I realised the stress he was under.

"I swear I will obey you, sir," I said. "I will not bring any shame upon you."

"Very well," he said, his tone softening as he took in my dishevelled hair, my lack of clothing, my submissive attitude.

I decided not to bring up the subject of T'Pring unless he wished it; it was obviously too sensitive to discuss at the moment. I could only give him what he needed from me and that was my word that I would obey him. I sighed and vowed to myself that I would not let him down.

He seemed to relax and with a slight smile I inquired, "Did you undress me?"

"Affirmative," he replied, curtly.

That tone showed me that no teasing would be accepted. I bit back the comment, and said, "Thank you. I would have burned up if I had slept with my clothes on."

"Indeed, you were perspiring freely. You may use my shower, then you will report with me to Sickbay."

There was nothing else to do but follow his orders. He had to see that I was willing and able to support him and not behave childishly. I was a Starfleet officer, but also his t'hy'la and Human. Neither Stonn nor any other would find fault with Spock through me.

Dr Sivon passed us both as medically fit for duty. We sat in his office as he confirmed the test results and once again my awareness of his compassionate manner and wisdom was very strong. He studied us both keenly and I knew he thought of his long-dead t'hy'la. How had he survived such a loss? I shuddered at the thought of the emptiness there would be if Spock was taken from me.

"I sense the bond between you," Sivon said. "It lingers around you both in an aura which is unmistakeable."

Spock's eyebrow rose. "Indeed," he only said.

Sivon almost smiled. "Indeed. I am a Healer of the seventh level."

The eyebrow rose further. "Indeed!"

I did not know what Sivon meant, but he obviously had very special gifts even amongst the Vulcan people.

He looked at me. "Something has changed since I saw you." He concentrated on me and around me, then a smile did reach his gentle face. "Ah. You have reached the deep communion. I am pleased." I frowned. How had he known? Spock also was surprised. "Do not let my abilities concern you," Sivon continued, "I know how you feel; I have shared such joy also. Cherish it, for it is like no other. Honour one another - for you are both unique."

Spock stood and I immediately followed his example. He bowed to the doctor with much respect. "I heed thy words of wisdom, Healer."

"Live long and prosper in thy brotherhood," he replied.

These Vulcans never ceased to amaze me. Not emotionless, but controlled, deeply sensitive people who were greatly misunderstood by the other members of the Federation. I bowed with all the respect my clumsy body could show and received another gracious smile from the distinguished Healer. I returned it, then followed Spock from the room.

After a silent meal in the Rec Room we made our way to the Bridge. Spock's demeanour proclaimed loudly and clearly that he wished to be left in peace, and I did not dare intrude upon his privacy at this point. I was still unsure as to his mood after T'Pring's rejection and his strict words to me. At any other time, he could have been brought around by teasing, but I was strongly aware that he needed to be totally Vulcan now in his confrontation with Stonn and would need me to stand with him, to support him.

The lift sped on its way, swiftly and silently. I watched Spock with anxiety, afraid for him and, I must admit, afraid of him, if I did or said something foolish. One of my greatest faults is my impulsiveness and it was not the first time that it had landed me in trouble. As we neared the Bridge, his eyes sought out mine. *I will not shame thee*, I tried to say. *I will not dishonour thee*, but I could not find my voice.

He had demanded my obedience, but was unsure whether I could give it to him. I had to prove that I could and would, but was deeply distressed that he should have to doubt me. I recalled the communion we had shared, the profound sharing of feelings, then my exhausted slide into sleep. He had cared for me, putting me to bed as if I were a child and my thoughts filled with the wonder of such a friendship.

The lift stopped, but he touched the lock and turned to face me. "Jim - I did not mean to be so harsh with you," he said, taking me completely by surprise. Once again, I had misunderstood him, thinking that he did not wish me to show my concern, assuming that he wanted to be alone.

"You were not harsh," I said. "You had the right to say what you did. I have sworn to obey you."

"Yes, you did swear it," he replied with a slight smile at the edge of his lips, "but in a most unmilitary state of undress."

I grinned widely at his teasing. "If that invalidates it, then I will gladly swear it again."

He placed both hands upon my shoulders. "That will not be necessary, Jim. You were sincere. Even to a non-telepath it would be obvious... but you cannot hide anything from me. I would not have you afraid of me."

"I am only afraid of my own impulsiveness and your anger if it hurt you."

"You are correct to fear my anger, Jim - but it will not be unleashed at you - " he paused - "unless, of course you merit it."

"I will do my utmost not to kindle the flames of Vulcan anger," I teased him right back, but added seriously, "I don't think I could bear its heat."

He squeezed my shoulder tightly. "Then you will not provoke it?"

"I will not provoke it," I repeated, fervently.

"Good, then we will now take our ship to Starbase 21."

"Yes, sir," I said.

He took a very deep breath and I realised that he must be apprehensive about confronting Stonn, not only as a Captain who now ran the ship, but as his rival for T'Pring. I

clasped his arms and opened my mind to him, trying to transmit my unwavering support.

You are twice the man Stonn is. Do not let him intimidate you, I sent silently.

He leaned upon me, drawing some kind of strength, and I braced myself, willing to give him anything he needed from me. It was like a passage of my will, my determination to his, and I was full of pride that he should ask it, for it showed me again how much he valued me.

A few moments later, he stood back, released the door-lock and entered the Bridge.

CONFRONTATIONS

All was calm. Personnel from the Surakin efficiently manned all stations. Stonn still sat in the centre seat. With a surety and calm which was perfectly and totally Vulcan, Spock walked over to the Captain. I followed and stood by his shoulder, clasped my hands behind my back and endeavoured to keep still.

"Commander Spock reporting for duty, sir," he said. "I now relieve you."

Stonn looked up at him. "I am in command of the T'Varon, Mr Spock. You may however take over the Science Station."

Spock did not move. "Sir, I respectfully remind you that I am First Officer of this vessel. Dr Sivon has passed me as medically fit to return to duty. In the Captain's absence, command falls upon me. It is logical for you to return to your ship, while I assume command of mine."

Stonn stared at him with barely concealed hostility. "It is my judgement that I, as senior officer, am constrained to remain while my crew run the T'Varon."

"You are only permitted to do this under emergency regulations, sir. I will command your crew until my own are sufficiently recovered."

My breathing grew faster as I listened to the argument between them. Would Stonn listen to reason, or would he blindly and arrogantly assume that he was best fitted to take the ship to the Starbase?

"I consider this an emergency," came the clipped reply.

"I do not, sir. The Rynami are destroyed. The warp engines are working satisfactorily at warp 3. I only need key personnel to assist in the maintenance and running of the ship. Your prime duty is to the Surakin. I thank you for your help, but respectfully submit that your presence on the Bridge is unnecessary now."

My anger seethed inside me as Stonn continued to resist. They quoted regulations back and forth, bandied logic against logic until my mind began to reel with the complexity of it. I bit back my emotions as Stonn grew more insulting; I had promised Spock not to defy the Surakin Captain, but it was almost impossible to hold my tongue when Stonn cast a baleful glance upon me and said disdainfully, "How can one who has taken a Human as bond-brother, who gives a Human command of a Vulcan ship, be trusted? Humans are an inferior species."

Spock's mouth drew into a thin line and I could sense his deep and bitter anger. "Mr Kirk saved the ship. You have no right to speak of him in such a manner."

An ugly sneer crossed Stonn's face. "Of course, *you* are half-Human. Perhaps you cleave to your mother's species. I have heard of unnatural practices amongst such primitives. Perhaps it is not the bonding of t'hy'la between you, but something base - unspeakable - accepted amongst emotion-seeking savages. Perhaps the animal passions of Humans are strong within you, son of Amanda - perhaps you find this... Human... attractive. Perhaps you wish to mate with him. Perhaps you have already done so."

The horror which emanated from Spock swept through my senses. Stonn had maliciously insulted him with deliberate intent. The bastard! He wanted T'Pring, he wanted to degrade Spock and was using me to do it. Amongst Vulcans homosexual unions were unknown, although it was accepted as normal by Humans and many other species. I had no prejudices concerning any loving relationship; in Starfleet one learned to tolerate and understand all types of sexual contact without necessarily being a part of it oneself, but to Vulcans the male-female bond was the only sexual union known, unlike the bond of t'hy'la which knew no barriers. The mind knew nothing of gender, only compatibility, a relationship of the purest, deepest kind.

"I have been informed that he slept in your bed," Stonn continued.

I fumed with anger at his innuendo. So T'Pring had told him and together they had twisted it into an accusation of something - to them - dirty. How dare they?

"Your remarks are out of order, Captain Stonn," Spock said as coldly as I had ever heard him speak. "It is dishonourable to insult another. Please leave the Bridge at once."

He was on a knife-edge. I, who knew him so well, could see the tiny signs he showed of his fury, feel the pounding of his heart beating loudly in my ears, hear the anger in his mind. I shook with the intensity of his feelings, and their effect on my own.

Stonn was not so controlled. His eyes blazed. "Pervert! Child of an unnatural alliance! You dare to order me!"

I could have killed him; I willingly would have fired a phaser at him, or struck a knife into his heart for treating my bond-brother so. The world narrowed into a haze of conflict and blind, livid wrath, as I fought to restrain my temper.

"Yes - I order you," Spock said, his tone menacing, his every word precise. "Your presence is not required any more. You have allowed your emotions to overcome your control. If you do not leave at once, I will order my Human t'hy'la to escort you to the Brig, where you will await trial on Starbase 21 for the crime of slander against a fellow officer, prejudice against another species, and malicious intent to undermine a ruling of the Vulcan Council."

I could restrain myself no longer. "I shall willingly bring those charges against you, Captain Stonn."

"Mr Kirk - remain quiet," Spock said.

I barely heard him; my pent-up anger burst out of me uncontrollably. "You have no right to malign what is good and true. You have insulted my t'hy'la. You are contemptible."

"Silence," Spock ordered, his glance raking at me like a sharp knife.

"But he has no right to insult you," I argued, my emotions overriding my good sense.

"He - "

"Silence, I said," he hissed at me.

I shivered violently as his displeasure rippled through the open wound, causing me intense, bitter pain. Fool that I was - I had sworn not to defy Stonn, sworn to obey Spock... I stared into his angry eyes, craving his forgiveness, but he sent a bolt of telepathic fury which tore through me in an agonising wave, then turned away, dismissing me as if I were an insect, unworthy of his attention.

"Captain Stonn, you are relieved of command of the T'Varon," Spock said, his icy tone all too apparent. "If you do not leave voluntarily, I will arrest you as unfit for command, and advise your First Officer to take charge of the Surakin."

Stonn was silent. Then with a dark look at Spock he brushed by him, then me, and swept towards the lift. All stared after him in shocked silence, and once the doors closed behind him, Spock surveyed the Bridge crew. "Attend to your work," he commanded, harshly.

They obeyed him swiftly and there was quiet once more. I swallowed fearfully, wondering what to do. Would he forgive me for butting in when I should have kept my mouth shut? I churned inside with shame. The Human he had accepted as his t'hy'la had disobeyed him, shaming him before the others; I was useless - a wretch who did not deserve the honour he had given me. I cursed my impulsive outburst and swore to myself that I would gain his forgiveness somehow.

He sat down on the command chair and pressed the intercom. "Security Officer to the Bridge."

I frowned in puzzlement. Surely he was not going to arrest me! "Mr Spock?" I began.

"You will be silent," he murmured in such a tone that sweat broke out upon me, trickling down my back in fear. I bent my head, determined to accept whatever fate he decreed for me with resignation.

A few minutes later, a Security Officer arrived. "Your stasis control," Spock requested.

I began to tremble with horror. He was so furious with me, he was going to confine me within stasis cuffs, a course usually taken with violent or excessively vicious prisoners. How contemptible he must think me. I did not dare to look at him, but meekly held out my wrists. Moments later they were locked in the field, able to move enough so as not to cause discomfort, but imprisoned all the same, like a common criminal.

"Confine him to quarters," he said.

I paced my quarters relentlessly, berating myself unmercifully. Why had I not been able to control my tongue? I had walked right into Stonn's trap, reinforcing his contempt for all that was Human, for Spock, whose betrothed he wanted. I could have cried, but the release of tears escaped me. My insides churned with terror, my eyes burned, my mind recoiled at the searing look he had given me the anger at me, burning deeply within him.

The door-chime interrupted my pacing. *Please let it be him*, I prayed. "Enter," I called in a hoarse croak, but to my surprise and disappointment my visitors were T'Renna and Sivon.

The two Vulcans eyed me intently for a time and there was sympathy in their faces. Dr T'Renna came forward. "Mr Kirk, you must relax, you will become ill." She indicated a seat. "Please sit down."

I shook my head. "I cannot."

Sivon moved forward to face me, and to my amazement, he gently, but firmly forced me to sit upon my chair, keeping his hand upon my shoulder. I tried to move away but he would not allow it. "You must try to relax, Mr Kirk." His touch sent reassurance through me and I remembered that he was a Healer of the highest level. I fought to control my tears. "The displeasure of a t'hy'la is like a thorn in an open wound; it tears and twists in the flesh, in the mind, like fire."

He understood... My voice was shaky as I asked for advice. "What can I do? How can I make things right?"

"The provocation was severe. Your misdemeanour will be forgiven in time."

"He is furious with me." I held out my hands, showing them the shimmering field of my confining cuffs.

Sivon's eyes were full of sympathy as they rested upon me. "Even young Vulcans can be a trifle hot-headed. Even Spock, more Vulcan than any other, cannot control under such difficult circumstances."

"I let him down, shamed him," I persisted.

"You defended him and the bond between you," T'Renna said, touching my other shoulder. "He will soon come to realise that. Be patient."

I tried to hold onto my precarious control, but I knew that these two Healers felt and accepted my pain, and in their kindness were trying to ease my way. "I thank you for your understanding," I said.

Sivon tightened his grip on me. "My touch is not the one you need, but if you will permit it, I will strengthen you."

I looked at him, gratitude welling up inside me. He had personal experience of the intense relationship of t'hy'la. He envied me even my pain at this time, for he knew and considered all my suffering worth it, for what had been...

"And what is to come," he said gently.

I gave a start, suddenly realising that some sort of mind-meld had taken place.

"I am a Healer," he said, as if that should explain it.

They stayed with me for a time, urging me - unsuccessfully - to eat or drink, but I refused knowing that I would be physically sick if any food passed my lips. Finally they left me alone, promising to return in a few hours. I thanked them, and once they had left, resumed my pacing.

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Spock did not arrive until fully twelve hours later. I had not slept, nor eaten nor drank; I was frantic with worry and fear. All sense of belonging and security were lost during those long and bitter hours as I condemned myself for my outburst, as I punished myself for my behaviour. I was harsh and unforgiving with myself. I had promised not to defy Stonn - to obey Spock. To obey him. He had the right to expect it of me and I had reneged on my word, dishonoured both of us and the precious bond we shared.

I started back in fear as he strode into the room. His face was expressionless, his manner cold. I bit my lip, not knowing what was expected of me, not knowing what he would do. How had everything turned so wrong between us again? How could I have been so stupid? My stomach churned violently as he studied me, and I could not control the involuntary shiver which swept unrelentingly through my body. I lowered my eyes, wracked by guilt, not knowing how to undo the damage I had done or take back the words so rashly uttered.

Of its own accord, my body slid down to kneel at his feet in abject apology. "My t'hy'la... I beg thy forgiveness," I whispered hoarsely, bowing my head. There was no pride in me, nothing but the need to atone for my transgression.

The silence in the room was oppressive as I awaited his response. My mind cried out to him in silent plea as I focussed inwards on the link between us, as my perceptions narrowed down to that fragile thread, sensing it even without touch, aware of its existence somewhere beyond my ability to reach.

"Stand," he ordered, shaking me out of my concentration. I looked up at him, searching for any sign of compassion, but there was none. He stood, the stasis control in his hand, his body stiff, his face cold. "I will uncuff you."

I held out my arms to him, my eyes not moving from their study of his impassive features, watching desperately for some flicker of feeling. He pressed the controls and the stasis cuffs dissolved, leaving me free again. They had not given me any physical pain nor had they left marks on my skin, but the humiliation and indignity of their restraint had left me deeply distressed; that Spock had considered me worthless enough to be imprisoned in them was an even deeper hurt. Yet I had deserved it.

"You did not obey me," he said sharply.

"I know," I said, stumbling over my words in an attempt to reach some kind of understanding with him. "I tried to keep control, but when he insulted you... when he accused you... when he..."

"I ordered you to stand up," he said, interrupting me.

Slowly I rose to my feet and stood, my hands clasped behind me. My impulse had been to stay where I was, to plead with him until he relented, but caution prevailed. I did not dare to defy him again.

"Does my displeasure cause you to neglect yourself so?" he asked in a voice tinged with reproach. "Does my understanding mean so much to you that you overcome your fierce Human pride to plead so?"

My tension began to lift, leaving me trembling with relief. My answer came straight from the heart. "Yes. I would do anything for you."

His expression softened at my admission, causing me to shake more. "And I for you," he

replied.

Tears stung at my eyelids. "Even forgive such a fool as I?"

"Even that," he gently teased.

I flushed deeply at his slightly mocking tone and penetrating look, his uncanny ability to reduce a confident, self-reliant Human into an embarrassed, quivering wreck, sick with horror at having angered him.

Something in his expression changed as he watched me, and curiously I held out my hand. "Spock?"

"I should not have incarcerated you in stasis cuffs. You did not deserve such an indignity. I succumbed to emotion, anger at Stonn, which I then directed at you. My behaviour was unforgivable."

"Nonsense," I chided him. "You did what you thought was correct. You are the commanding officer and I disobeyed you. You had every right to punish me. I accept that. Maybe you were a little harsh, but it was your decision and I submitted to your judgement." I smiled a little as the reason for his behaviour dawned upon me. "You would not have treated another so severely. It was worse for you because *I* was the one defying you, so you reacted by being tougher on me than normal."

He frowned in confusion. "I do not understand."

"Allow me to show you, permit me to explain." I moved close to him, reaching for the contact of the meld I had been wishing so desperately for these past hours, remembering the feelings we had shared - the communion, Sivon had called it - the joy we should cherish - the bond of the t'hy'la.

All hurts and indignity, all misunderstandings were healed and swept away as we communed in honesty, as we merged our souls. Such wondrous emotions surged between us, such happiness encompassed me as the depth of his regard for me was revealed, feelings I returned to him with all the abandon of my emotional Humanness. Slowly we parted; for once he had not forced an end to the meld, despite the fact that he had been completely overwhelmed by me again; it was a joint decision taken mysteriously in the depths of our shared thoughts. I blinked as physical sensation returned and grinned into the warm, bony shoulder my face was pressed into. Unconsciously, we had moved into a tight hug as we had melded and I could feel his embarrassment as he realised he was holding me. I laughed with amusement. How could he possibly be embarrassed?

He stepped back, struggling for Vulcan control, clasping his hands behind his back, forcing himself back into the reserved, remote First Officer. He did not quite succeed, there was a slight flush upon his cheeks, and his eyes were warm, shining with happiness.

I shook my head. "You are totally illogical, Mr Spock..." I teased him, seeing with satisfaction that the flush deepened.

"Indeed, Mr Kirk," came his stiff reply.

STARBASE

By the time we were called to the inquiry tribunal at Starbase 21, I was fully rested, although a trifle apprehensive about Stonn. I felt sure that he could be very vindictive against Spock, especially after his humiliation. Spock only placed a hand on my shoulder, wordlessly sending his support. With a grin to him, I straightened my back and followed him into the office of the Base Commander - Commodore T'Paz. Beside the Commodore sat Captain T'Zen, her beautiful face intent upon us. Also seated at the table were Dr T'Renna, Dr Sivon and another Vulcan who was unfamiliar to me. He was elderly, distinguished, and wore Admiral's stripes.

I stood at Spock's side and waited in the long silence, trying not to fidget under the five pairs of Vulcan eyes staring at us. After an interminable time, Commodore T'Paz addressed us. She was an elegant middle-aged woman, authoritative, but gentle - and very beautiful in a mature way.

"Lt-Commander Spock, Lt-Commander Kirk. We have studied the reports on the Rynami incident and have reached an unanimous decision on your actions."

My lips were dry as I wondered what their verdict would be. Would they favour Stonn's account? Would they think that I had acted incorrectly? That Spock had been wrong? I drew from Spock's radiant calm and relaxed.

The Admiral rose to his feet, and the others immediately followed suit. "Lt-Commander Spock. By the powers invested in me by Starfleet and the Vulcan Council, I now promote you to the rank of Commander."

My heart skipped erratically with delight. It was justly deserved. The Admiral moved forward to face Spock. He held a small box in his hands which he opened to reveal a glittering medal in the shape of the ancient Vulcan symbol Ka'la'qy'n. It was the highest of all honours, given only to a select few, the bravest of the brave. My t'hy'la was certainly that.

The Admiral lifted the medal out, pinned it on Spock's tunic then stepped back saying, "You are awarded the medal of valour for services to your ship and crew." He and the others bowed deeply to Spock, then he in turn bowed to them.

Full of joy for my Bondbrother, it was difficult to keep my body still. It wanted to dance with excitement, but with a supreme effort, I kept it under control. The distinguished Vulcan turned to me and I met his gaze as evenly as possible. What would he say to me? Would he say anything? He turned away for a moment and a slight tinge of disappointment touched me. Perhaps he did not think I merited any praise. Well, I was not looking for it. Spock's approval was all I needed, and the knowledge that *he* was being recognised.

"Lt-Commander Kirk. By the powers invested in me by Starfleet and the Vulcan Council, I now promote you to the rank of Commander." I shuddered inside, startled by the great honour bestowed upon me. "Furthermore, because of your bravery and ability under emergency conditions, it is the wish of Captain T'Zen that you be given command duties, taking on the responsibilities of Second Officer."

I could scarcely breathe. They were allowing me into the chain of command; no longer would I be serving as Helmsman, purely as an experiment in inter-species co-operation, but as a full Commander - third in command of the ship. Savouring this wonderful moment, I exchanged a long look with Spock, sensing his delight, sending him mine.

The Admiral lifted a box from the desk, opened it to reveal another medal, identical to Spock's, and pinned it on my tunic, then stepped back to say, "You are awarded the medal of valour for services to your ship and crew."

They all bowed to me, exactly as they had done to Spock, and I returned the gesture as I had seen my t'hy'la do. It took all the training he had given me in emotional control to keep myself from crying out with happiness, and by the time I had straightened to look at the assembled officers, I was calm, almost Vulcan-like in my demeanour. Almost touching Spock, I could sense his approval of me and my victory over myself. Poor Spock - he would pay for this later, when I exploded with joy!

Captain T'Zen watched us with what appeared to be satisfaction. Sivon studied us, almost smiling. Even T'Renna's normally severe mien had softened. T'Zen stepped forward. "Commander Kirk. Commander Spock. You may now have two weeks leave here on Starbase 21 whilst repairs are being affected on the ship. This planet offers much. It is of great beauty, and I believe that after your ordeal you will find the fresh air and quietness of its wild areas beneficial. You are dismissed."

In a haze, I followed Spock from the room. Leave! We were having two weeks leave! I struggled to keep my pace even, my face impassive, but I could barely restrain my excitement, and once safely in Spock's quarters, almost bursting with enthusiasm, I grabbed him in a bear-hug and swung him around. His eyes flashed with complete and utter amazement as he hung onto me for support.

"Jim!" he exclaimed, as his weight almost knocked me over, but he somehow managed to find his feet, stood as if rooted to the ground and surveyed me. "Commander Kirk, you are behaving like an excited Human..."

"Commander Spock - I am an excited Human," I unashamedly admitted. "This calls for a drink." All Starbases had a bar - several bars: even a Vulcan Base had facilities for other species. "I'll buy you a drink."

His expression was now one of puzzlement. "There are a wide variety of drinks available from the food selectors, Jim. Why would you wish to buy one?"

"Spock... Spock, I mean a real drink. Saurian Brandy, the most potent drink in the galaxy. It'll put hairs on your chest."

His eyebrows rose up into his hairline. "But there are already hairs on my chest!" he exclaimed; of course, taking me literally.

I took a deep breath and tried to explain. "I... uh... mean - it... um..." I trailed off at the stare he was giving me.

"Saurian Brandy is an alcoholic beverage. Vulcans do not drink alcohol. It is illogical."

I interrupted him before he could give me a lecture on the subject. "Spock - I will buy you anything you want, it's just a way of celebrating our promotions."

In the end, he conceded to my enthusiasm and accompanied me to the Terran bar, a small establishment run for visiting Human and Humanoid personnel. Spock caused quite a stir when he entered. It was highly possible he was the first Vulcan to grace its portals. I led the way over to a small table and reluctantly he followed, awkwardly seating himself next to me. He placed his hands on the table, clasped them tightly together and stared at the wall.

I grinned. "What will you have?"

He cleared his throat. "Water."

"Water it is." I called the waiter, ordered a double Saurian brandy for myself, and an Altair water for Spock - the purest water in the galaxy.

I tried to ignore the interested stares of the other patrons of the bar, mainly Starfleet and merchant ship officers of various Humanoid species. The waiter returned with our drinks and I took a long, appreciative sniff of the brandy before taking a tentative sip of its delicious, intoxicating taste. It burned a trail of fire down my throat and I licked my lips with appreciation. Spock watched me curiously, studying my every reaction as I slowly savoured every mouthful. I looked up at him and that seemed to give him the opening he was waiting for. He lectured me on the harmful effects of alcohol, giving me every known, imaginable detail from every study known to Man - or Vulcan.

"Are you trying to spoil my enjoyment?" I asked, pointedly - perhaps a little aggressively.

His eyes widened. "Indeed not, Jim. I am only concerned for your health."

Ignoring him, I ordered another, finished the first, then took a generous gulp of the second. The drinks were making me light-headed. I chuckled and said, "Try some." My senses were reeling a little. Boy, this stuff was potent, and my system was clear after living on the wholesome Vulcan diet for so long. I think it was having an effect on me. Normally it would take much more to get me tipsy.

"Jim - we will leave," he ordered.

I blinked. "Why?" I squeezed my eyes tightly shut. Jim Kirk not able to hold his drink? What was the matter with me?

"I... want to stay... have some more," I argued, as the room began to sway in a pleasant, graceful manner.

Unable to control the loud belch escaping from my lips, I smiled apologetically to him and took another swig. It spread through my insides in a glowing raging warmth.

"You are showing signs of intoxication," Spock said, disapprovingly. "We will leave."

"Aw ... Spock - don't spoil my fun," I said, thoughtlessly grabbing his arm. Touching him in public! Touching a Vulcan in public! I was aghast at my own temerity!

"The behaviour of Humans is incomprehensible to me. You may stay here if you wish. I am leaving to prepare for shore leave. I will see you when I return in two weeks.

That sobered me up immediately. "What? Where are you going? I thought - I assumed we were going together."

His face was cold. Oh no - I had upset him again by my idiotic Human behaviour. Stupid, stupid fool. Stupid, drunken fool!

"I am going to the interior of the planet to rest and meditate," he said curtly.

"But what about me?" I asked, a little hurt that he was shutting me out. *A little hurt!* Who was I trying to kid?

"Obviously the shore leave requirements of a Human differ from those of a Vulcan. Starbase 21 has every facility to amuse Humans." He glanced at the drink in my hand with distaste, then stood up. "If you will excuse me."

As I stared at his retreating back, my mind grew numbed with this new misunderstanding between us. My fault. It had been all my fault, yet again. Hurriedly I rose to follow, but the bartender stopped me, wanting payment. Hastily, I gave him my Starfleet credit rating, but the time it took him to check the account and transfer the amount seemed to last much longer than the few seconds that it did. At the door, I was stopped by some officers from the U.S.S. Caledonia, people whom I did not know, but who had certainly heard of me. As politely as possible I excused myself, only to be besieged by media reporters anxious for an interview.

I almost pushed them out of the way until I remembered that my mission on the T'Varon was of galaxy-wide interest and I had to give a good impression for Starfleet, for my family, for Humans as a species. Damn! Spock... Where was he? If he left without me, this misunderstanding would last for weeks. I could not bear the force of his displeasure if it was seriously directed at me. He knew it too.

Forcing myself to be pleasant, I tried to answer the questions. /What was it like to serve on a Vulcan ship? / How did I relate to my shipmates? / Had I adapted to the different attitudes of Vulcans? / Did I miss Human company? / How did I feel about my promotion?/ The questions went on and on until to my great relief, two Security Officers came to my rescue, bringing the interview to a close. I thanked them and hastened to the Transporter room, hoping and praying that Spock had not left. It had been more than an hour since I had seen him; he could easily have packed, and even now be at his destination.

I hurried down the corridors of the ship, passing only a few Starbase maintenance crew; most of the regular personnel would already be ashore. I crashed into Spock's quarters calling his name. The rooms were empty. Damn. My stomach lurched with nausea. I touched the intercom. "Mr Spock - are you still aboard? Please respond."

I counted the seconds - five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten... "Spock..." I called again.

The door hissed open, startling me. Spock walked in, his eyes unreadable as they caught mine. "Yes, Mr Kirk?"

"I don't want to sample the Starbase facilities for Humans," I blurted out, not caring that I sounded like a child in trouble with his parents. "I want to go with you."

"You have not been amongst your own people for many months. You will enjoy their company. You need recreation suitable for a young Human."

I stepped forward. "No - please. I would rather be with you - if you will allow it. I apologise for my behaviour in the bar, the brandy went to my head."

He relented a little. "Apology accepted. However it would be unwise for you to accompany me; I will be walking in the planet's wild areas, sleeping in the open, living simply. You would be bored."

"No. No!" I argued, desperate now not to be left here; the thought of walking through

beautiful countryside, breathing scented air seemed so appealing. "I've roughed it before with Sam; I will enjoy it, please let me come. I will try to behave, I promise. I will endeavour not to be an irritation to you - please." Vaguely I was amazed at myself, pleading with him again - but I did not care. All that mattered was that he should not go on leave without me.

To my great relief, he relented further. "My bondbrother is not an irritation to me. He is uniquely himself. If you wish to accompany me, I would be honoured." His words caused a glow in me that the alcohol could not match. "Please contact ship's stores and order another sleeping bag for yourself."

I burst out laughing as my irreverent sense of humour responded. "You mean we are using separate ones this time?" I teased.

"Affirmative," he replied with great dignity.

"I see. Well, perhaps you will change your mind."

His eyebrow rose, his face flushed, and I could see he was severely tempted to retaliate to my teasing. "Indeed," he replied coolly, "that is entirely possible."

It was my turn to redden. He stared at me and I grinned a little, pleased with his ability to get his own back on me - something I needed, to keep me in line. "The pleasures of the Human facilities at Starbase 21 are obviously more suited to your temperament. It would be logical for you to remain there."

I groaned silently. Had I read him so very wrong again? I bent my head down in sheer frustration and annoyance. "Of course," he continued, "when dealing with a Human, logic does not apply, and despite your strange sense of humour and mystifying ability to pick arguments with me, I ask that you join me for a time when there will be no barrier between us of rank, but where we can just be friends."

A deep warmth enveloped me and I held out my hand to him. "Friends," I agreed.

Our hands clasped, confirming the bargain, but I hoped I would be able to keep myself in check and not ruin his shore leave. He needed to relax after the ordeal he had gone through; perhaps it would be better if I permitted him to be alone.

No, his firm thought entered my head. I have always spent shore leave alone. There were many times I yearned for a companion.

I have always spent shore leave amongst others, I answered honestly, but still, I have felt alone. It was true, a strange enigma, but true. I think this will be the best shore leave I have ever had.

Two weeks later we returned to the T'Varon, exhilarated from the healthy living, the invigorating exercise of hiking through miles of beautiful scenery, the fresh, clean air in our lungs, the relaxed and interesting companionship we shared. We were so different, yet so compatible; I reflected that it *had* been my best ever shore leave.

The long days out in the open had tanned my skin, refreshed me from the many months in deep space, and had eased out any remaining tensions. I was ready now to take on the responsibilities of Second Officer of the T'Varon. We were welcomed aboard by a crew fully recovered from the devastating attack; the dead and seriously injured had been replaced by

new personnel. As we passed our shipmates all bowed to us with deepest respect, their way of thanking us for saving their lives.

One new crewmember frowned at me. "A Human!" he exclaimed to his companion. "You bow to a Human?"

The other - Lt Salen of Communications - spoke to the boy sharply. "This is Commander Kirk, Second Officer - t'hy'la to Commander Spock, First Officer."

The young officer's eyes widened slightly, then he too, bowed respectfully. I nodded to him, then asked. "What is your name, Lieutenant?"

He looked at me, and I could see his nervousness - carefully hidden - but distinguishable all the same. "Lt Sival, sir."

"Welcome aboard, Lt Sival," I said.

He bowed again. "I am honoured, sir."

Spock watched me with mild amusement, and as we walked away, he commented, "I do not think you will have any problems commanding Vulcans."

"I wish I were so confident," I said. "You all seem to know so much more than me. It is unsettling."

"A command officer must rely on the specialists to supply all available data. You need not know everything yourself."

"You do," I retaliated.

He raised an eyebrow. "You are incorrect. I have much to learn. *You* have already taught me much."

I smiled at him with much affection. He was too modest. He glanced away from my open emotions and quickly I brought them under control. We were back on the ship. I was Second Officer and must hold the respect of those under me. I must restrain my impulsiveness - in public at least - or else I would embarrass my friend. Well, I could not complain. He had put up with much during our shore leave, allowing me to express myself without restriction. Eventually Spock had unbent, losing much of his strict control, relaxing in a fashion I once would have never believed possible. His trust in me was deeply touching.

He seemed to understand my thoughts, for he added, "All the crew have much respect for you, Jim." He always knew how to ease my doubts and I relaxed inside and was content. "We need not report for duty for two point five hours. Do you wish to go to the Gymnasium?"

I was surprised and full of eagerness at that request. "Oh - yes, Spock - I certainly would." I lowered my voice for his ears only. "I'm going to get you back for the time we wrestled by the lake."

He folded his arms in front of him. "Indeed."

"Yes - you've not yet experienced *all* my dirty tactics."

I watched the alarm on his face slowly increase and was pleased. Vulcan, and stronger

than me, but I could shake him; in fact, I took great pains in finding ways to do that. With confidence, I strode along the corridors towards the Gymnasium. Spock's hesitant footsteps sounded behind me.



'STARSHIP CAPTAIN'

UNCERTAINTIES

The screen cleared to reveal the council of Admirals, an impressive display of Starfleet's finest. All manner of beings sat upon the podium, representatives of almost every race in the Federation. Admiral Komack - the spokesperson for the Council - stood at the forefront of the group.

"Commander James T. Kirk," he said. "We have studied Captain T'Zen's report, First Officer Spock's report and your own personal account of your mission. We are pleased at your successful integration into the T'Varon. Your determination, courage, and flexibility have shown our Vulcan members that it is possible for other species to work closely with them on a Starship. They have asked me to convey their congratulations to you."

I bowed to them. "Thank you, sir."

Holding my breath, I waited. Would they keep their word to me? Did I even merit my own command? Would they consider my achievements on the T'Varon important and successful enough to reward me with my dream?

Admiral Komack's face revealed nothing. Sometimes he could be as unreadable as a Vulcan. He took his time to speak, but his words were worth every agonising second he had made me wait. "When you return to Earth, you will find your next assignment awaiting you. It is the unanimous vote of this council that you be promoted to Captain, and given command of the USS Enterprise."

I tried to restrain my gasp of astonishment. They were giving me my Starship - and not just any Starship but the latest, most advanced ship in the fleet. She had been years in the making! I had seen her once, before my departure to join the T'Varon. She was magnificent! Never would I have suspected that they would give her to a young, untried Captain like myself. Everyone assumed she would be commanded by an experienced starship officer, a veteran Starfleet Captain or Commodore.

There was nothing I wanted to do more than jump for joy, leap into the air, yell with delight... but my discipline held as I remembered the two Vulcans who stood on either side of me, and the time I had spent learning restraint of behaviour. I was determined to be a credit to my teacher.

Respectfully, I bowed again to the Council. "I am deeply honoured, and thank you sincerely."

"Well done, Captain Kirk," Komack said, his face breaking into a smile.

I could not restrain my grin of happiness. 'Captain Kirk'... It had a certain ring to it; it sounded right. My dream was coming true. Since my youth, I had dreamed of starship command - it had been my goal, my ambition in life, and now it was almost here... I could scarcely believe my good fortune.

Komack was speaking, so I brought myself back to Earth and tried to listen. "The formal inauguration ceremony will take place at Starfleet Headquarters in four solar days. The ceremony will be seen throughout the Galaxy. Your successful mission has been a giant step in interspecies co-operation and we sincerely hope will pave the way for other such ventures."

"It is my greatest wish to see that happen, sir," I said, only too aware of Spock standing by my right shoulder. I had never broached the subject to him, never having dared to voice my deepest personal wish to him, for I had been unsure of my future, uncertain if they would give me my ship. Now it was imperative that I speak frankly to my friend, for I had to persuade him to come with me to the Enterprise.

There were some formalities between Komack and Captain T'Zen about arrival times and representation from the T'Varon, while I stood impatiently waiting for them to finish. I glanced up at Spock, and for a split second our eyes met; I was unable to read his expression at all, something which chilled me, for I had come to know him well. We were friends - more than friends. Bond-brothers...

Finally the transmission ended, and I breathed a sigh of relief. My heart still pounded wildly with excitement, but I attempted to control it, for Spock was very receptive to my emotions; he was a powerful telepath.

T'Zen inclined her head to me. Her face was impassive but I knew that she was pleased. My appointment reflected on her status in Starfleet and on Vulcan. I was glad that I had not failed her. She had supported me, shown sympathy and understanding, despite the problems concerning me and her husband, Seleik.

"I will regret losing you. But I offer you my congratulations, Captain Kirk."

I returned her gesture. "Captain, I have learned much from your example. It has been a privilege to be a member of your crew. The lessons I have learned here will not be forgotten."

She only raised an eyebrow, but did not comment. Her beautiful dark eyes seemed to soften for a moment and I smiled at her.

"Congratulations, Captain Kirk," Spock's familiar deep voice said.

With a lift of the heart, I turned to him. In the past year we had become very close, we had shared danger and hardship together, and a companionship which was more deeply satisfying than any I had ever known, yet... There was still much I did not understand about him, despite the telepathic communication we had shared. I wondered how he felt about my promotion, and if he would consider coming with me. He had to come with me! I did not know how I would survive without him...

"Mr Spock," I said, "it is you I must thank. If not for your help, none of this would have been possible. I would never have been able to adjust to life on this ship."

There was a slight sparkle in his eyes, but he quickly concealed it as the Captain dismissed us from her cabin after confirming that the T'Varon would be returning me to Earth in time for the inauguration ceremony. I had four solar days to persuade Spock. If I could bring him with me, it would be a major coup; if I could not, then it would be a severe personal loss to me, perhaps even one I could not take. The bond of brotherhood ran very deep, Spock had told me once. I understood that well, for I could not envisage my life without his company.

"May we talk?" I asked, as we walked along the corridor.

"If you wish, Captain," he replied.

I grinned widely. Spock was calling me Captain, and it sounded so right. I recalled the

many times I had dreamed of this; yet for more than a year, *he* had been my senior officer on the T'Varon. I had accepted his command easily enough, my respect for him was unbounded, but would he accept *me* as his commanding officer? Would any Vulcan? I knew he respected me and had given me his friendship. For a moment I remembered how I had yearned for his regard, how I had needed his companionship, how I had broken down his defences, until at last, he had given me his trust.

We walked to my cabin. Once there he stood, hands behind his back, his eyes upon me in his concentrated, penetrating gaze. How did he feel about my departure; did he feel as I did? Would he be able to bear being alone again? He enjoyed my company, even though my unpredictable Humanness still caused him startlement at times. We spent time together on duty and off. I had even beaten him at chess occasionally, to his surprise and mine; and I must admit, to my great delight. We had shared work-outs in the gymnasium and he had taught me Vulcan fighting techniques which had increased my muscle power and skills. We had discussed, debated, argued over all manner of subjects, a practice which had sharpened my mental skills dramatically. I had learned so much from him, and he had learned a little from me - mostly bad habits, I am ashamed to admit, like poker...

"Spock... I must leave here..." I said, stating the obvious.

"Indeed, Captain," he replied non-committally, his face expressionless.

I went straight to the point as is my normal way. No amount of Vulcan training had been able to knock that out of me. "A Starship Captain may choose his command team." I cleared my throat, suddenly very nervous. "Spock... I want you to be my First Officer and Science Officer."

The shock hit him. I saw it in his eyes and in the slight tremor of his thin shoulders. Silently I prayed for his acceptance.

"Spock," I continued, unable to keep the plea from my tone, "come with me. I need you with me. I can't leave you here... I could not be parted from you."

He did not respond and I trailed into silence. As the time lengthened and he did not reply, I began to be very afraid. "Spock," I tried again. "It will be difficult for you - a Vulcan amongst non-Vulcans - I know that; but it must happen. Vulcans must make the next move if the co-operation is to continue. Who better than you, Spock? I would give you all my support as you have given me yours. We are friends, we are bond-brothers, we can make it work."

I had not seen him look so austere for many months. I had forgotten how cold he could appear. A shiver ran through me - he was retreating from me. I could not allow that, I would not permit him to do that. My hands reached out to touch him, but he stepped back to avoid me, and I shuddered with fear. He allowed my touch now, sometimes he even reached for me as a friend should. Why was he acting this way? Had I offended him so deeply by my request?

"If you will excuse me, Captain," he said evenly. "I have matters to attend to."

My throat had suddenly gone dry. I tried for calm. I must think this out reasonably, logically. I must try to understand this from his point of view. The T'Varon was going into Spacedock for a re-fit. Spock's tour of duty was almost finished. A transfer at this time would be easy, if he wished it, if... It suddenly came to me, fool that I was. I should have realised it earlier. The Vulcan Council would have to permit it. I swallowed the lump in my throat. What if they objected? There would be little, probably nothing, I could do about it.

The prospect of starship command without the cool, logical, supportive presence of Spock beside me seemed impossible. My panic increased its grip upon my heart. Where was my self reliance and independence? The bond of brotherhood had infiltrated my very essence, it made me stronger, but it also made me vulnerable to the very real fear of a loneliness without him which would be intolerable.

"Very well, Mr Spock," I replied, formally, as calmly as I could force my shaky voice to sound.

Inside I churned with emotion and I watched him leave, my feelings in a complete turmoil. He had befriended a Human stranger who had been out of his depth, full of loneliness and pain, and had changed his life. His was the only friendship I had known for almost a full year; it was the only one he had ever known. We were close in a way I had never been with a Human, not with Gary, not even with my brother Sam. Spock was my brother just as surely as Sam was; we had merged in a telepathic unity which defied all description. To part from him and possibly never meet again was unthinkable. I resolved that if he would not come with me, I would make my life here. Starfleet would give me the necessary permission; I did not dare to think that they might refuse.

The attack by the Klingon vessel came only two hours later. I rushed to my post on the Bridge, and in the heat of battle forgot my personal problems. We worked, an efficient, well trained crew in the face of Klingon hostility. It had been a sneak attack, one intended to catch us unawares; but no-one surprises Vulcans in that manner. We chased them as far as the Neutral Zone, but did not follow them in. We patrolled the area until the USS Highlander relieved us, then returned on our heading for to Earth.

The time taken up by the Klingons meant that there would be no chance for any formalities before the ceremony. The Galaxy-wide interest in my mission was so intense that Starfleet, yielding to pressure from the Federation Council, decided not to postpone it, for we would just manage to reach Earth at maximum warp and beam down straight to Starfleet Headquarters for the beginning of the inauguration.

Interspecies co-operation, especially regarding Vulcans, was the most important issue in Federation politics. I would be the focus of everyone's attention on Earth. It was something which I did not care about, and did not want. My promotion was rapidly turning sour.

Spock kept away from me and I forced myself to respect his need for privacy, but it was very difficult. I could not understand why he would not speak to me, but I was afraid to go to him, in case that made the situation worse. My time was spent in uncertainty and loneliness. My other shipmates, noting my unhappiness, sought me out and included me in their discussions and meetings. I barely acknowledged their kindness, but they took no offence, and sometimes out of shame I would try to respond to their efforts.

I lay on my bed during my last rest period on the T'Varon, the ship which had been my home for more than a year. I could not sleep; I tossed about in anxiety, unable to relax. Earth was only twelve hours away, and I did not know if Spock would consent to serve with me on the Enterprise, even if he would be allowed to. If he was forced to remain in the Vulcan fleet, would I be allowed to stay here? The hero of the Federation, James T. Kirk, who had successfully shown that a Human could work with Vulcans... Little did they know that without Spock's compassion and support I would have failed miserably. I shuddered as I remembered my first weeks here.

I must have dozed, for the sound of the door-chime startled me. I sat up, wondering for a moment where I was. I sighed as I realised I had been dreaming again, my favourite dream which might not now become reality. Quickly I stood, straightened my shirt and clasped my hands tightly in front of me.

"Enter," I said.

Spock strode in. I smiled with delight on seeing him and moved forward to greet him. He looked down at the ground and a tinge of fear crept through me at his manner. He seemed strained, exhausted, even nervous. I could clearly feel the tension emanating from him.

"Spock," I whispered. What had happened? There was so little time left before beam-down - only a few hours...

To my complete and utter astonishment, he sank down on one knee before me, took hold of my hands and pressed my fingers against each side of his face, his hands covering mine. I could not understand. What was he doing? Tiny shivers crept along my fingers, through my hands, my arms and into my head, until his familiar telepathic touch reached into my open and receptive mind.

I pledge thee my loyalty, Captain, his mind-voice said.

A shakiness took hold of me at the sight of him - normally so proud, dignified and tall - kneeling at my feet. The realisation that he was telling me he was coming with me filtered through my being, but the way he was informing me stunned me. Was this how a Vulcan committed himself to another? I did not know. I was only aware that Spock had pledged loyalty to me in the sincerest and noblest way possible, in an allegiance which was his own personal choice.

I will always be thy friend. That I swear to thee, he added after a long pause.

My happiness was ecstatic. I reached for the correct response. I did not know what it was, but I must try, for I could sense he awaited my answer.

I accept thy loyalty and friendship with gratitude and thanks, I said knowing how inadequate my words were, but it must have been sufficient, for he stared up at me with a smile in his dark, gleaming eyes.

"You are coming with me," I stated unnecessarily, both aloud and in mind-speech.

Indeed, Captain, he replied silently.

He brought my hands down from his face, but held onto them tightly as I questioned him. "When did you decide? Why did you wait so long to tell me? Why would you not talk to me?" I couldn't prevent the touch of anger from my voice.

"I wished it all along, Captain, but the Vulcan Council was uncertain. They only contacted me minutes ago with their decision to grant me permission." He clung onto me as if my words, my feelings were vital to him; he had obviously sensed my anger. I could not speak for the mixed emotions twisting inside me. "I have brought you pain by not telling you of this before, but I was afraid to speak in case they refused. My only thoughts were to spare you, but I see I have seriously misinterpreted your responses in this matter. I humbly beg thy forgiveness."

Unable to bear seeing him plead like this, I pulled him to his feet. "It is nothing, you did not wish me to go through the agony of waiting, you wanted to spare me the tension, but you suffered it alone, Spock. Don't ever do that again. You must share these things with me, for it was worse not having you confide in me. It made me feel so alone, and I am not used to that any more."

He bowed his head in acceptance of my words, in shame at my admonishment. My affection for him almost overcame me at his contrite and humble manner.

I covered my smile. "You must obey me now, Spock."

He looked at me. "Yes, Captain."

My grin broke out at his seriousness and in response he gave me a small hesitant smile, suspecting - no doubt - that I was teasing him a little. "It will be difficult for you, my friend," I said. "You are most courageous to attempt it."

"I will follow where you lead," he replied.

I sighed deeply. "I will be seeing all my family and friends again." It was a strange feeling to know that. I felt the slight tension in him. "Spock - I will not neglect or abandon you for others, but you must accept that amongst Humans it is commonplace to have many friends." I returned his grip firmly, trying to send reassurance with it. "Not like us - nothing could come close to that, perhaps with the exception of the love of one's family." Privately, though, I wondered if even that equalled my relationship with my bond-brother.

He listened closely to me. "I will accept what is, Jim. All that is important is that we are together."

He was willing to leave all he knew, to follow me on a long mission amongst strangers who did not know how to deal with a Vulcan. I would try to ease the way for him as much as possible, but I knew the intolerance of many Humans, the arrogant attitudes, the hurtful comments, the prejudices which still prevailed in many. They would not understand him. Was I being selfish in wanting him with me? Would it not be better that he stayed here with everything and everyone he knew? Where he was highly respected and at home...

"Spock..." I began.

"Where you are is home to me, my brother," he said. "Do not be concerned. It is my choice to follow you, my decision to serve you. Please accept the logic of the situation."

It had very little to do with logic. His devotion to me, his selflessness brought tears to my eyes. I pulled him against me and held him tightly. He had been my shield, my teacher, my haven here. I loved him like a brother. I had obeyed his orders - well, most of them - now he would have to obey mine. I wondered anew if I could command him, if I had the ability, for he would not respect me if I was incompetent. Somehow, though, I suspected that in his own quiet way he would teach me how to command.

I had taught him something of the giving of Human warmth and feeling and he had learned how to accept my touch and return it. He hugged me now in a manner no Human could match. His telepathic touch was ever present, I always sensed it through my skin; it was a sensation which never failed to delight me, for it made me feel so close to him.

After a time, he stepped back into his usual formal pose. "Your emotions are

overcoming your control."

I coughed, trying to cover my embarrassment, but I would not let him away with that. "You took your time to notice that."

He had the grace to avert his eyes, and I grinned a little; how I loved to tease him.

"Perhaps..." he finally conceded.

"Definitely... But you are correct, Spock. You have tried to teach me to control my emotions. You have taught me restraint and courtesy. I will not forget those lessons. I understand your need for privacy; I would never cause you any embarrassment in front of others." I grinned widely and added with a touch of mischief, "I'll only hug you when we are alone."

He smiled ever so slightly. "You have taught me the value of physical contact. I am grateful."

I chuckled. "There was once a time I would not have believed you would admit such a thing." He raised an eyebrow, but did not comment. "There was another time when I went down on my knees and begged you for your friendship. If you had refused me then, I would have been totally devastated. If you had declined to come with me to the Enterprise, I believe I would have begged you to reconsider in the same way, for I could not, I would not have been able to leave without you."

He stared at me, his expression full of understanding. "The bond of brotherhood is most illogical. I have learned that it is not humiliating to beg forgiveness from my brother."

"There is no such thing as pride between us, Spock. We know each other too well for that." I smiled at him. "But you are stuck with me now. You will have to deal with a Captain who was once your subordinate - not that you were ever heavy handed with your authority."

"Indeed, you often tried to take command."

"Sometimes you would allow it..."

"If the situation warranted it."

"Or if I pestered you enough."

He sighed with defeat. "You are a born leader, Jim. I have always felt that power within you and have yearned to follow you. I am content. You have known it too. Your dream foretold it."

"My dream!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, the dream where you were on a Starship and I stood by your side and called you Captain."

"You knew my dream?" I could not believe it at first, then I suddenly remembered the time we had been trapped in the cave together. I had fallen asleep whilst still in mind-contact with Spock. I dreamed it then; perhaps he had shared that with me. I sighed at the memory of the closeness we had found, the merging of our thoughts and spirits as we had kept one another alive.

"It was my dream also, Jim, for you brought me into it, making me a part of it. I did not wish to intrude, to pry, but I could not free myself from you as you slept within me; your mind was completely entangled around mine." He stared off into the distance for a moment as if recalling that time. "It was most disquieting."

My poor Vulcan friend. How did he put up with me? "I'm sorry..." I began.

"It was always my hope that you would ask me to join you when the time came," he continued, as if I had not spoken.

"When I asked you, I thought you were shocked, because of the way you reacted."

"It was fear - the fear of not knowing if I would be permitted to serve with you and the prospect of being alone again." He gazed at me with frightening intensity. "You have taught me much about openness, Jim... but still it is difficult for me at times. I did not wish to be so cold with you, nor to avoid you, but if once I had given in to my feelings, I would not have been able to function."

I saw that he was worried that I was hurt or angry with him. I sought to reassure him. "I don't blame you, Spock."

He relaxed visibly, and I briefly touched his arm for a moment. "Please sit down," I said.

He settled into a chair and watched me as I paced the room for a few minutes. My thoughts were in a jangle, for the emotions of the past four days had taken their toll. I was exhausted.

In a few hours, I would officially be Captain of the Enterprise. I had gained my reward for my successful mission here, but I knew that I brought with me the greatest prize of all. He knew how much I valued him, but he would find it very difficult to adjust to our new life, where our situation was totally reversed, where I would be amongst old familiar friends and family, where even the rules were different in the Human-dominated Starfleet wing. I would not have him feel shut out from my life. I would not allow him to be hurt.

Coming to a halt in front of him, I knelt down. "Spock - I will always be thy friend. That I swear to thee." I wanted to reassure him, perhaps he even needed that from me.

The emotion in his eyes was plain as, those words which echoed his own, caught off-guard,. He stared at me, knowing I had seen, but did not attempt to hide it as once he would have.

"See, you've brought me to my knees again," I tried to joke lamely in an attempt to deal with the aura of intense emotion around us.

"Indeed," he responded. "An amazing feat, to bring a stubborn, proud, impulsive, rash Human to his knees."

I grinned. "Especially now, since he is your Captain."

"Especially now," Spock repeated with a slight twinkle in his eyes. "But a Vulcan knows how to achieve such miracles."

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "And how do you explain that?" This I had to hear.

"It is perhaps to do with my natural ability to inspire deep respect and awe in other species," he said.

I laughed. He was teasing me, but it was, in my opinion, the simple truth. "Yes?" I encouraged.

He raised an eyebrow. "Or perhaps the mystique and power I project?"

"Very good, Spock," I said. Was he really teasing me? Was he unaware that everything he was saying was true? "Perhaps it is even the friendship you have kindled in the heart of this Human." No more teasing - I reached for the mind-touch and he did not refuse me. We had to deal with the reality of our feelings; there was no point in covering them at times like this. We both needed the comfort and security of our special unity.

His hand touched my face, the warmth of his fingertips penetrating into my innermost self. We stayed there communicating without words and it strengthened me for the ordeal ahead; I believe it helped Spock also, for as we finally parted I could sense his confidence and optimism clearly.

I stood and stretched with a deep feeling of well-being within me. My tiredness had completely gone; the mind-meld had banished that as if it had never existed.

"How long before we beam down?" I asked.

Spock rose to his feet. "Two point three hours," he replied. "But we are to report to the briefing room in one point five hours. Captain T'Zen wishes to speak to us."

"Time enough for us to take a shower," I said. "Make ourselves presentable." I should have amended that. Spock looked immaculate, unlike me, who always seemed to get into disarray. The puzzlement on his face was most amusing.

"Together?" he asked, his tone full of surprise.

"What!" I exclaimed. "Of course together..."

I waited with anticipation for the green flush to form on his face. I was not disappointed. It crept up along his cheekbones, ran along the side of his face to his ears. I could almost feel the heat emanating from the tips of those pointed ears.

"Spock," I reasoned, "we have shared a sleeping bag, we have shared thoughts and dreams, can we not share a shower?" I started to strip. "Sometimes you are most illogical," I added.

He cleared his throat. "I ask your pardon, but I have matters to attend to in my quarters."

I stood watching him, my shirt in my hand, and took pity on him. "All right Spock. You will have to pack your belongings and you don't have much time."

He bowed his head, but not before I saw the relief in his eyes. What was I to do with him? No matter how close we became, he was still so reticent at times. He was an enigma.

"Jim..." he said hesitantly. My Human behaviour still confused him.

"I was teasing you, Spock," I said. "But taking a shower with another isn't so bad, I've done it often with Sam."

"He is your brother," he said.

"So are you," I countered.

I left him with that and went into my bathroom. My friendship with Spock was certainly not dull. I was privileged to be his friend and I hoped that he understood my feelings on that. Despite the mind-links, we often misunderstood one another. The chasm between Vulcan and Human was very narrow, but it was also very deep.

HOMECOMING

I believe it was an impressive and startling sight as I beamed directly to the Admiralty ceremony with my Vulcan escort. The excitement in the air was unmistakable. All the media of the Galaxy was there: well, I had certainly not missed them! My family and friends were in the guests' enclosure and I could see, even *feel* their happiness; a factor attributable to my heightened senses after the telepathic rapport with Spock.

Spock and I had taken leave of our shipmates in a dignified and moving farewell; now only Captain T'Zen, Lt T'Sal and Commander Storon stood with us. I dreaded the moment of parting with them.

After a long tedious speech by the President of the Federation Council, the moment came when I was officially given my Captain's stripes by Admiral Nogura. He was pleased with me, but tight-lipped and poker-faced as usual; he did not let it show too much. I stepped back. Now I was expected to make a speech, but I would do more than that, I would give them the shock of their lives.

"Members of the Council and all beings present. I thank you for your confidence in me and the honour you bestow upon me. I eagerly look forward to taking up my post as Captain of the USS Enterprise." I took a very deep breath. Were they ready for it? It did not matter. I was ready to tell them. "In keeping with tradition, I invoke my right to request my command team." I paused, searching the faces of the Admirals for any sign of knowledge, but did not see any. "As First Officer and Science Officer, I wish Commander Spock of Vulcan."

The uproar which followed was deafening; the atmosphere in the chamber became electric as the Council and spectators alike considered the implications of my words. Spock stepped to my side.

"Now the cat is amongst the pigeons," I commented.

He frowned. "Why would a feline mammal wish to be amongst birds of the family Columbidae?" he asked curiously.

I laughed aloud. "I'll explain later, Spock. I think I have shocked them!"

"Indeed, Captain," he agreed.

It took several minutes for order to be restored. I spent the time watching the faces of the people all around us. The Vulcans sat there calmly and quietly - of course, they had known

Spock had been granted permission to leave the Vulcan fleet. My family were full of excitement; their joy was apparent. How I wanted to greet them. How I longed to be amongst them again!

Among the Starfleet personnel, I caught a glimpse of my old friends; Bones... Gary... Lee... Carol... Ruth... and many more. What a reunion I would have with them all.

Glancing up at the giant viewscreen, I saw myself and Spock mirrored there. I had to admit that we made an impressive sight; James T. Kirk, Human Starship Captain - average height, muscled build but slim - Lord, I was so slim! Blondish hair, hazel eyes, good-looking in a boyish way, twenty-nine years old, but still looking so young...

At my right shoulder, my tall, lean, dark-eyed, black-haired Vulcan friend. His face was impassive, but I could see the tiny signs of tension in him, trapped here in this emotion-filled chamber. Others would think him austere, unyielding, unfeeling; but he looked so perfect there, my balance, my shield, protective, supportive, dependable. He exuded mystique, charisma and sheer power.

Eventually silence descended as all waited for Admiral Nogura to speak. He stared at us and for once, he was smiling. That had to be a miracle!

"Commander Spock," he said.

Spock acknowledged him with a graceful bow.

"Your outstanding reputation is known to us. We are honoured to offer you the position as First Officer and Science Officer aboard the Enterprise."

"I am deeply honoured to have the privilege of serving under Captain Kirk's command," Spock replied gravely.

I turned to face him, and he bowed to me. I was deeply touched as I realised how much he honoured me by such a gesture of fealty in public. In return, I bowed to him as Vulcan courtesy required. Only the Vulcans present would fully understand the respect we had shown one another. Spock had trained me well in the nuances of Vulcan behaviour; I wanted him to approve of me.

Nogura was beaming. We had made his day. Could I stand the old tyrant being so happy? He would give me anything I wanted now!

"I also request Lt Commander Montgomery Scott as my Chief Engineer, Dr Leonard McCoy as Medical Officer, Lt Commander Gary Mitchell as Navigator and Lt Commander Lee Kelso as Helmsman."

I had thought long and hard about this. Scott was the finest engineer in Starfleet, and had worked on the Enterprise from the very beginning. There was nothing he did not know about her and I needed an engineer totally committed to her welfare. I had met Scott on several occasions and he had impressed me greatly. He was a fine commander also and would make an excellent second officer.

Bones - well, he was my only choice for CMO. Where I was going I would need his advice and judgement. My old friend, always full of practical advice, homey, old-fashioned country doctor principles, but a brilliant and original medical mind. I believe there was nothing he could not cure, with the exception of the common cold...

Gary - he would be annoyed at not being my First Officer. We had always planned together of Starship command with he as my First Officer or me as his. I knew now that it would never work; I suspected that I had always doubted his ability, but after serving with Spock, I was certain of it. I hoped he would accept the position of Navigator with good grace and be content; if he did not, well there were other ships and he was a highly skilled navigator. I had to choose who was best for me and my ship.

Lee was an excellent helmsman who had worked under my command before and who, I knew, would serve me well. The other positions I would fill later. Spock and I would consider all available personnel and would choose the very best.

I watched as each of these officers was offered and accepted the posts. My eyes shone with unshed tears as I formally shook hands with them, and I tried not to be alarmed at the dull resentment in Gary's eyes. The men took their places behind me.

"Captain Kirk," Nogura said. "You are now free to celebrate your appointment with your family and friends. You will officially board the Enterprise in one solar month. You and Commander Spock may take a well deserved leave at this point. Congratulations."

I thanked him and the council, bowing to them in the Vulcan way which was second nature to me now, even though I was not nearly as elegant about it as any Vulcan; especially my bond-brother. Spock and I took our leave of our Vulcan shipmates, with their best wishes and encouraging words warming us both. I was sorry to leave them, I was so used to them now, but I wondered how Spock felt about leaving the Captain he had served with for more than seven years.

Finally I turned and left the chamber, followed by my friends. Once out I walked quickly to the private reception area, almost running in my eagerness to greet my family. There would be total privacy there to indulge my happiness, away from the prying cameras which were everywhere else.

I burst into the room and moments later was holding my beloved mother in my arms, crushing her to me. The touch and scent of her brought back so many happy childhood memories.

"Mom..." I whispered, kissing the soft skin of her face.

She laughed, she cried, returning my love for her with her own warm kisses. "Jim, my baby... Jim..." she sobbed.

She burrowed her face into my shoulder and I bent to nuzzle her soft, sweet-smelling hair. I smiled. Her 'baby' towered over her now, not that such a little matter would change her perception of me; I would always be her baby. My eyes were moist with tears; there was no need to restrain my emotions here, not amongst these people.

Holding me back, she stared at me with pride and joy in her eyes. "Jim - you have made me so proud of you." Her eyes streamed with tears and I gently wiped them away with my fingers. "Let me look at you." She sniffed, tried to bring herself under control and eyed me with the scrutiny only a mother can employ. "Jim, you look wonderful... but you have lost so much weight! Have you been eating properly?" she accused me.

I laughed with sheer delight at her motherly concern. She never changed. "Yes, I have, but I have been living on a Vulcan diet. It is highly nutritious and non-fattening. I am fitter than ever."

She smiled, released me, then turned me towards - Sam. He was just as I remembered him; strong, decisive, admirable and loving. I threw myself into his arms and we hugged one another tightly for long, long moments. He, who had always comforted me, now needed that from me; somehow he seemed more fragile now. Perhaps it was due to my extra muscle power, for my brother, who never wept, now did so, with happiness on seeing me, leaning on my shoulder as if he could not support himself. "Sam..." I murmured, deeply touched by his open love for me. "Sam." I held him back and we grinned at one another; he with a slight touch of embarrassment.

"Jim - I am so proud of you! We are all so proud... We all missed you."

I hugged him again, my heart singing with joy at being reunited with my loved ones.

Aurelan, my beautiful, gentle sister-in-law, little Peter, now eight years old, embraced me; my cousins Ian and Janine greeted me with deep warmth, their delightful six year old daughter Tessa, with her long gleaming dark hair, colourfully beribboned, lifted her arms up to me, waiting to be thrown into the air. She remembered how I had done that one summer's day before I had joined the Vulcan fleet. She squealed with delight as I tossed her high and caught her.

I was encircled by my friends. Carol, my beautiful ex-lover, whom I caught and kissed with all my old passion for her. She returned it, but at the sound of cheerful mockery from the others, we parted in mutual embarrassment. Swept up in a round of kisses with all my old girlfriends, my suppressed sexuality was suddenly brought to the surface; at that moment, I knew that I could not - I would not - be alone this night.

"Hey, what about us?" asked a familiar voice in an unmistakable Georgia drawl.

"Bones!" I yelled, throwing my arms about him. He laughed, returning my hug enthusiastically. "Bones..."

"It's so damn good to see you Jim!" he exclaimed, his voice almost breaking; he held me back and eyed me critically. "You look terrific - no flab at all." He slapped my midriff hard. "All muscle. That Vulcan diet must agree with you."

I laughed. "I doubt you would like it, it's totally vegetarian."

"I can't figure out how *you* adapted to it!! You with that penchant for sweet, sugary concoctions... Jim Kirk - you were always a carnivore."

"Oh, the food selectors *could* have supplied them all, but I would have earned the disapproval of my shipmates."

He grinned and shook his head as if in disbelief.

Gary was next. He stood there silently and I reached out a hand to him. Would he forgive me for not appointing him as my First Officer? I would explain it to him; he would understand. I would *make* him understand. Very slowly, he smiled at me, and my worry lifted slightly.

"Well, Jim. The conquering hero returns. Good to see you, kid."

I pulled him against me; he was tense for only a moment, then relaxed and returned my hold, but I felt a reserve in him which had never been there before. We had been so close to

one another, but the time apart and my choice of First Officer had placed a barrier between us.

"It's so good to see you, Gary. I missed you," I said.

"Missed you too, old friend," he said softly.

We stood back from each other in awkward silence, but there were so many other people there - family and acquaintances - to be greeted that there was no more time to speak. I was caught up in an excited, happy group of people, all pleased, all wanting my attention at once; an impossible situation, which I tried to handle tactfully.

A sudden dampener was thrown upon my joy as I caught a glimpse of Spock standing near the door, as far away from us as possible: alone. A pang of guilt overcame me as I realised that I had abandoned him already. What must he think of me? How could he possibly tolerate all this emotion? I excused myself from the crowd, and quickly walked over to him. The strain on his face was only too obvious to me now and I felt the ache of deep regret at exposing him to this.

"Spock," I said contritely. "Forgive me. Please allow me to introduce you." I had automatically slipped into the Vulcan language.

"Very well, Captain," he replied in the same.

I hesitated. "Are you all right?"

"I am quite well," he replied formally.

"Spock." I chided him a little. Why was he being so formal with me? Then I realised that amongst these strange Humans - their thoughts broadcasting throughout the room - he would need all of his concentration for his shields. "Can you go through with this?" I asked worriedly. I did not want to throw more emotion at him, but I feared for his discomfort and stress.

His eyes softened as they stared into mine. "If it is your wish."

I swallowed hard. His loyalty and devotion to me were more intense than ever; he would expose himself to any pain or risk for me, even the charged emotions of my family and friends. I smiled at him with real affection and gratitude. I would not touch him here, much as I wanted to, but I knew ... It came to me, a sudden profound revelation, that all those hugs and kisses from these Humans were insignificant compared to his telepathic touch only a few hours ago. It was a scary thought, and one I would mull over later, for I had become aware of the complete silence within the room.

I indicated to Spock that he should accompany me. We walked over to the others, and I saw how they stared at him, curiosity on their faces. We stopped, and he stood at my right shoulder, almost touching.

"May I introduce Commander Spock, the person who made all of this possible. If not for him, my mission on the T'Varon would have failed. I was lost there, alone, totally out of my depth, until he befriended me. He helped me in ways too complex to explain. He saved my life on several occasions and taught me many things - but, above all else, he has honoured me by giving me his friendship and his loyalty. Those I cherish and value, for they are beyond price." I stopped, aware of their surprise, their shock. I smiled, knowing it was difficult for them to accept my words, for it was unheard of to know the friendship of a Vulcan. They all

held preconceived idea of Vulcan coldness and formality - myths perpetuated by the Vulcans themselves. I had seen otherwise - but I had been in a very privileged position, able to learn about them, serving with them on a Starship.

"Mr Spock has graciously accepted my request - my plea - to come with me to the Enterprise. I will be eternally grateful to him." I glanced at Spock, seeing how he stood immobile, but sensing that he was uneasy at my praise. I did not let that stop me, for I had to inform these people of my deep regard for him. I wanted them to accept and value him as the exceptional being he was. "We know little of the Vulcan people, here on Earth, but I have spent more than a year living with them, and I assure you that they are the most honourable, noblest and gentlest beings in the galaxy. I was honoured to be a part of their society, and am privileged to call one my friend."

I held out my hand to my mother. "Mr Spock, may I introduce you to my mother, Winona."

I received my first taste of Spock's appeal to Human women with my mother's reaction. Her eyes shone, she stared at him raptly, her face slowly flushing. Unthinkingly, she raised her hand towards him, but after a moment, realising her error, perhaps from my sharp intake of breath or her own knowledge of not touching a Vulcan, she drew back, embarrassed.

However, Spock lightly took hold of her hand and bowed over it. My mother's other hand flew to her mouth and she stared down at his shining black hair, her flushed cheeks deepening in colour. I had never seen her so flustered; my strong, independent mother, her behaviour more like a young girl with a media star.

"Lady Winona," Spock said in his rich deep voice. "I am honoured to meet you."

I smiled widely as I realised he was showing her the respect and honour he would with his own mother. My emotion as this registered threatened to overcome my composure. He was willing to take the hand of a strange Human, accepting all of her unbridled emotions assaulting him, and he had done that for me.

My mother's delight was apparent as he straightened, carefully released her hand, then stood silently before her. She clasped her hands together. "Mr Spock, it is a pleasure to meet you." She looked up into his impassive face. If she was small beside me, she looked somehow tiny beside his tall, dignified form. "You have brought my son home safely to me. I do not know how to thank you for such a precious gift."

He raised an eyebrow. "Your son is too generous in his praise, my lady. He omits to tell you of the times he saved *my* life."

I grinned a little at his remark.

"Jim has always been modest about such things," my mother commented.

"Indeed, but there is little else he is modest about."

I almost choked. Quickly I steered my Vulcan friend away, before his honest bluntness caused me further embarrassment, but I caught my mother's amused response. I ignored it and introduced the others to Spock. No-one else tried to touch him, I was pleased to note; Spock inclined his head politely to them all and I watched with real interest the appraising interested stares of the women. Something about Spock seemed to attract their undivided attention.

Was it his slightly satanic appearance? The dark penetrating alien eyes? His magnetism? His physical aura and charisma? He had brought me, a Human male with all my independence and strength, to my knees, begging for friendship. What would he do to a Human female with the further complication of sexual attraction thrown in?

I considered him. He was handsome in his own unusual way. He would be attractive to women, especially with that remote, yet gentle manner, that air of natural power, but non-aggressive, intelligent and shy. I had not considered Spock to be a rival in this way, but then I laughed at my stupidity. He would have no interest in the females of my species. He was bonded; Vulcan through and through, despite his Human half. He was not interested in sex, he was too young yet, his time of marriage years away.

The men reacted to him differently. Sam with curiosity and fascination; Bones with extreme medical interest but with a certain nervousness; Gary with a sullen resentment which I did not like. I knew that I had to have a long talk with my old friend.

Peter smiled at Spock in the innocence of childhood. "Why are your ears pointed?"

Spock raised an eyebrow, but he answered the boy with serious consideration. "It is a characteristic of the Vulcan people."

"Is it true you can read minds?" Peter asked, his eyes wide with apprehension.

"I have that ability, but it is a skill which is seldom used amongst Vulcans."

Aurelan pulled her son away, telling him not to be so inquisitive. I smiled; Peter was a lot like me. There was a tug at my hand.

"Uncle Jim," Tessa cried. "Lift me!" She put her arms up and I lifted her to sit on the crook of my arm.

"This is Tessa, Mr Spock," I said.

He inclined his head to her with grave courtesy and she giggled.

"Tessa is six years old," I said to his questioning look as if that should explain her.

"Indeed," he replied.

She reached out to touch his hair. "Tessa," I warned.

"Oh please! Please - it's so shiny."

"No, Tessa," I ordered.

My tone must have upset her, for she burst into tears and clung to my neck in a temper tantrum which held all the magnitude of a photon torpedo. Her mother tried to take her from me, but the child screamed and kicked and would not release me. Afraid now that I might hurt her if I used my strength to force her away, I stood there helplessly, unable to deal with her.

"Tessa." I tried to use reason. "You are a big girl now. You cannot have your own way all the time."

She screamed louder and dug me hard with her elbows and knees. I am unused to

children and had no idea of how to cope with her.

"Tessa." Spock's voice penetrated through the bedlam of noise. Amazingly, she quietened and turned to look at him. "It is unnecessary for you to behave in such a fashion. You are a child, but even one as young as you must learn discipline."

I stared at him open-mouthed - we all did - but it seemed to work for Tessa, although her little bottom lip trembled, she seemed to find some kind of control over her childish emotions. I was amazed at my Vulcan friend. His calm, rational presence was so strong that even a child felt the aura of his reason and power.

"You have hidden depths, my friend," I said as I put Tessa down; Spock shifted uncomfortably under my admiration, finally lowering his eyes under my scrutiny.

After that everyone spoke at once and it was some time before we made our way to the reception area, where we would be having our celebratory meal. Many of Starfleet's top people were there and I was very impressed by the honour accorded to me.

There was a long table reserved for us. I sat at the centre, my mother at one side of me, Sam at the other, but I indicated to Spock that he should sit opposite me, for I had seen that he was about to seat himself in the corner.

I would not allow him to isolate himself. He would have to learn to make concessions here, as I had to on the T'Varon. Tessa scrambled up onto the chair at his right and I tried to hide my amusement at the sight of the tiny girl gazing up at the austere Vulcan, her eyes wide with hero-worship and fascination. Ruth, my lovely first love who now worked at Spacedock engineering section, sat at his other side. I had seen the delicate manoeuvring to get to that chair; at least four of my ex's had tried. What was this power Spock had over women of all ages?

As we dined, the conversation ebbed and flowed around us. Out of habit, I ate a Vulcan dish. Somehow the scent of meat seemed alien to me. Everyone was very curious about my time on the T'Varon and I recounted some of the incidents which had befallen us. Spock was silent, unless directly asked a question, but that did not put the others off from trying to converse with him. He used an economy of words as he had when I had first known him. I knew it was his shyness, his reserve. I hoped the others would not think him to be aloof, but even more, I hoped that his shields would protect him from such a group of excited and emotional Humans.

"Spock," I said, lapsing into Vulcan, "you are uncomfortable here." His body was rigid with tension. I, who knew him so well, could see the strain in the way he sat, the tight clasp of his hands upon the table, the bunched muscles in his arms.

He gazed at me in his intense way and I could hear the slight gasps from my mother and Sam as they caught the edges of the power from his stare. I smiled, used to his deep-seeing eyes, even wanting them upon me.

"I must accustom myself to Human company, Captain," he said.

"I don't want you to be so formal, Spock - it's still Jim, here."

"Very well, Jim," he said. "It is most interesting being amongst so many illogical Humans. I am only used to one."

I laughed aloud at his sly dig at me, startling the others, who certainly had no knowledge of what we were saying, nor would they have believed that any Vulcan could tease. I had taught him that... It was an achievement I was very proud about, even if I did get the worst of it at times.

"Thank you, my friend," I said.

"You are welcome, my friend," he replied. "I am pleased to see you so happy."

"My family, my friends... It is wonderful to see them again and to know that you are here also."

"I sense the warmth all around you, Jim. It beats at my shields in waves. Is this Human love?"

I flushed with pleasure on hearing his telepathic impressions. A person knows when he is loved, but to have it confirmed in such a fashion was very satisfying.

"Yes, Spock. Human love and happiness."

"It is fascinating to observe. The lady Winona's is the most powerful of all."

"Mother love. You must know something about that."

He did not reply and I remembered how he had told me once how his own mother had not shown him much affection, in deference to the tradition of her husband's people. I wished I could have bitten that remark back.

"I am sorry, Spock," I murmured.

"It is unimportant, Jim. Please do not be unhappy. I am content here with you, my friend."

Suddenly realising that there was complete silence around us, I sat back and glanced at the watching people. "Oh - forgive me. I am so used to speaking in the Vulcan language."

The thin piping voice of the little girl intruded. "What is T'hy'la?" she asked. "It is a lovely word."

I grinned a little as I met Spock's eyes. Why had the child picked out that one word out of the unintelligible - to her - Vulcans sounds? She was kneeling up on her seat, gazing at Spock questioningly. She ignored me - well, who was I? Only her Uncle Jim, a man regarded by the population of the galaxy as a hero.

Spock turned to her. "T'hy'la," he pronounced it properly, in the way that meant brother of his soul.

She attempted to copy him.

"That is very good," Spock said. "It means friend."

Her eyes lit up. "Are you Uncle Jim's friend?"

"Yes, I have that honour," he replied solemnly.

"Do you like my ribbons?" she asked, startling my logical friend by the complete change of subject.

He blinked, glanced at me for help, but I could only grin at him in amusement. He put his best polite demeanour on it. "They are most attractive."

"What is your word for ribbons?" she asked, encouraged by his interest.

Did Vulcan children wear ribbons? I could not think of a word for it in the Vulcan language.

"Zylla," he said. Strips of cloth, the nearest concept in his language to ribbon.

"Zylla," she repeated. "I can count up to two hundred .. may I show you?"

He blinked several times at the further change of topic, raised his eyebrows and once again looked at me for some kind of assistance; but by this time I was becoming unglued at the humour of the situation and dared not speak for fear of falling on the floor in laughter. No amounts of illogic from me could prepare him for a six year old Human child.

"Tessa," her mother tried. "Leave Mr Spock alone."

"Oh, please Mommy, please..." the child pleaded. She was drawn to him; sensing his calm air of authority and knowledge, she was reaching for the teacher in him.

Spock turned to my cousin. "With your permission, Lady Janine, I will listen to your daughter."

Janine blushed and stammered her assent. It was difficult for me to contain my amusement as we all sat eating our dessert, listening to my friend, a scientific genius by any standard, tutoring a six year old child in basic infant arithmetic. His patience was infinite, as I knew only too well, but I had not realised the depth of his ability to reach down to the elementary level and inspire such interest in the heart of his pupil.

Tessa's eyes sparkled when she received a word of praise from him; I knew the feeling and at that moment, I envied her.

The music started a few minutes later. Starfleet's famous orchestra, made up of permanently assigned talented musicians who were renowned throughout the length and breadth of the Federation. Turning to my mother, I asked her to dance. Laughingly, she accepted, and we made our way to the dance floor.

She looked at me while we danced, then commented. "You are out of practice, Jim."

"Vulcans don't dance, as far as I know," I replied.

She held me tightly. "You've grown up, Jim. You've really changed."

"It was about time I grew up," I remarked.

"Living with Vulcans has taught you courtesy and discipline."

"Living with Vulcans has taught me to be a better person."

She stroked my face. "Your Mr Spock is just..." I awaited her appraisal of him with interest, seeing how her brow furrowed as she struggled to find the correct word. My mother was an excellent judge of character. "Just gorgeous."

"Gorgeous!" I exclaimed, not expecting that one.

"Gorgeous. I have never met a more handsome and charismatic male of any species." She smiled at my shocked expression and quickly added, "Except of course, you, my love." I laughed at her diplomacy. "He is delightful, Jim. So proper and so shy. I can see how fond of him you are."

"That doesn't even begin to describe my feelings for him. I don't know if I can even put it into words. We have become very close in a way unimaginable to Humans. He has given up the life he knows to follow me. He consented to accompany me for the sake of our friendship. I still don't know how it all happened and I can barely believe how lucky I am. I am still amazed and awed that we should share such a relationship."

"My Jim," she said wonderingly. "You could always charm the birds from the trees."

The dance ended, but I was not allowed to resume my seat as the various ladies in my group claimed a dance with me. Occasionally I would glance over at Spock, but the little girl and now Peter claimed his attention, and he was giving them a lesson on something - probably Quantum Physics, if I knew my Vulcan.

I held Carol to me as we danced, and we both knew we would be together this night. I wondered if I dared tell her of how long I had been celibate. She obviously sensed my arousal and smiled a little; her eyes sparkling knowingly. I reached for control. A few more hours - surely I could manage that, after more than a year!

Hand in hand, we returned to the table and as I sat next to Spock, Carol at my other side, my mother suggested that I come home for a week or so, bringing my friends with me. I immediately agreed, for that was exactly what I wanted to do.

"Spock - I want you to see the farm. Please will you join us? We can visit the British Museum later."

I could tell under his calm demeanour that he was pleased. "I would be honoured, Captain."

"British Museum!" Gary exclaimed in horror. "What about the nightclubs, the pleasure palaces, Jim? You've been away for over a year! We're going to paint the town red..."

I grinned at him. "I promised Spock that I would accompany him to the British Museum, but I'll take in a nightclub with you one night, old friend - don't worry."

"You! Museums!" Gary groaned. "How boring, how stuffy - ugh!"

He never changed. Still irresponsible, still irreverent. I shook my head. Perhaps I had become more serious minded, for the immature pleasures he enjoyed - and I had once enjoyed also - seemed unimportant. I wanted to show Spock my home and tour some of the great historical places of Earth with him. I wanted... relaxation.

Spock's voice disturbed my reverie. "Why would you wish to paint the town red, Mr Mitchell? Surely, even with Captain Kirk's help, you would not have the time to complete

every building before..."

"Spock," I exclaimed, trying to control my mirth. "He didn't literally mean paint the town. It is an expression, meaning... um... to have fun - to enjoy oneself."

Spock stared at me in puzzlement. "I do not know how Humans can understand one another, if they do not say what they mean."

"It is something you will have to learn, Mr Spock. I know it would be unthinkable to use such terms in the Vulcan language, but here on Earth, we have many such phrases." I shuddered slightly inside. There were going to be misunderstandings until Spock learned to judge the meanings behind the words.

"I will of course attempt it, Captain. I have a certain minor skill with language, but it is most illogical."

Minor skill!! Who was he trying to kid? He could pick up a language faster than anyone I had ever known. Was it his natural modesty? Or did he truly believe that his linguistic ability was inconsequential? He had a lot to learn about himself. I had tried to teach him, but had never really succeeded in making him believe how very special he was. The best Science Officer in the fleet, acknowledged as that by the Vulcans, yet he still strove for perfection in all things, still doubted himself, still questioned himself. Perhaps it was the Human in him.

As the guests were arranged, I turned to Carol and asked if she would also come to the farm. She shook her head. "I'm stationed on Vega," she replied, much to my disappointment. "I only returned to see your inauguration, to be with you at this moment of triumph." She smiled at me with loving affection. "I have to leave tomorrow."

I sighed, touched by her willingness, her gesture, travelling all that way just to be with me at this turning point, this crossroads in my life. I held her hand between my own. "Be with me tonight?" I asked her.

She frowned a little at my seriousness. "Of course I will, Jim."

We smiled at one another. It was always like this between us, loving one another but wrapped up in our respective careers, and with so little time and no inclination to settle down in any form of marriage. Once we had spent three months together, but that was the longest; we had a wonderful time, but our outlook on life and our work were quite different. We took the moments we had, enjoyed them to the fullest, then went our separate ways; the only arrangement possible.

That evening was one of the happiest of my life. Even when Admirals Nogura and Komack joined us later it did not spoil my enjoyment. Spock, still involved with his pupils, did not notice them. "Mr Spock," I said, standing up to face the Admirals. He looked up from the paper he was writing on, the faces of the children staring up from either side of him. *Three innocents*, I thought to myself with a certain amusement.

He rose to his feet, clasped his hands behind him, and stared in front of him with that austere military way that showed only the perfectly disciplined Vulcan officer. I presented him to them, and he bowed slightly. They returned his greeting and I could see how much he impressed them. That was no surprise; I, who knew him better than anyone, never failed to be impressed.

"Mr Spock," Nogura said courteously. "It is a pleasure to meet you." He was a small man, but imposing despite his lack of height. He had not made it to the Admiralty without a certain ruthlessness, but he was much respected.

"It is an honour to meet you, sir."

"I will expect you and Captain Kirk in my office on November third at 0.900 hours for your final orders before you take up your appointments on the Enterprise. Will you be staying at the Vulcan Embassy? I may want to speak with you sooner."

Before Spock could reply, I jumped in. It was something we had not fully discussed, but I knew that Spock would not mind. "Mr Spock is my guest. He will be staying with me."

Komack stared at me with smiling approval. "Admiral Zaminsky told me that if anyone could do it you could, Kirk."

I felt my eyebrows rise. "Sir?"

He did not clarify his words, but I believe I understood him all the same. It was a fine compliment.

"Why did you decided to join an all-worlds ship, Mr Spock?" Nogura asked. "Your people have always declined before."

"Captain Kirk asked me," Spock replied, simply.

They looked at me with guarded respect, for I knew that they had personally asked for Vulcans to join, many times.

Nogura was persistent. "Why did you ultimately accept, Mr Spock?"

Spock looked at him directly, and I could see the legendary, unflappable Admiral flinch at the eye-contact. I knew the feeling and I almost felt sorry for him.

"Captain Kirk is my friend. It was his wish that I accept the position of First Officer of the Enterprise."

Those two distinguished Human Admirals stared at him with admiration. All Humans held a particularly healthy respect for Vulcans; there was something imposing, awe-inspiring about a species of such intelligence and civilisation. Spock had all the attributes of his father's people, and the compassion and capacity for deep feeling of his mother's. He was unique, the best of both sides of his heritage. I knew that only too well.

"Mr Spock is a Vulcan," piped the voice of my little cousin. "He is teaching me multip... Multi... pi..."

"Multiplication," Spock said slowly, looking down at her upturned face.

She smiled up at him with all her charm and innocence, repeated the word and added, "and division. He is very clever, much better than my teacher."

The Admirals laughed. "We must not keep you from such important work, Mr Spock," Komack said, jokingly.

Spock replied in all seriousness. "Indeed, sir."

I smiled at my friend reassuringly, then followed the Admirals as they had indicated to me. They stopped a short distance away.

"How *did* you do it, Kirk?" Nogura asked. "The Vulcans consider Spock to be the best Science Officer in their fleet, the best of all the Vulcans - *and* he is the son of Ambassador Sarek. Do you realise what a breakthrough this is?"

"Sir, I do not know exactly. All I can tell you is that Spock and I became close friends. He was my guide, my mentor on the T'Varon. If not for him, my mission there would have failed. I owe him everything, not the least my life, several times over."

Nogura clasped my shoulder. "Jim, your mission was a historic one. You showed Vulcans that a Human could work with them and you persuaded one of them, Sarek's son, no less, to work with us. More will follow if Spock succeeds."

I agreed, but I voiced my concerns to them. "Humans are not as tolerant of others as we like to believe. It is difficult to understand Vulcan ways. Even I, who call Spock my friend, still don't understand certain things about him. Humans tend to place their own values and ideas upon others, forgetting *they* have different standards of behaviour. The Vulcan people live by a high moral code. Much value is placed on courtesy and privacy, not something we Humans are particularly good at."

"You will see that your crew is educated on such matters, Kirk," Nogura said. "Mr Spock's success is of prime importance to the future of integration."

"Certainly my crew will be taught to respect the Vulcan way." I grinned, then added, "But I know from personal experience that Mr Spock will soon convince all who meet him that he is worthy of their deepest respect and admiration. I had barely met him before I was completely desperate for his good opinion of me. His charisma is powerful, sirs. I believe you have noticed it?"

"You speak passionately, Kirk," Nogura commented.

"Indeed, sir. Spock is my friend. He did not give that friendship to me lightly. He was my senior officer on the T'Varon. I had to earn his respect. He came here because of me; I would not have him regret that decision."

"Some doubted that you were the correct one for the T'Varon. They were wrong," Komack said.

Nogura nodded in agreement. "You were the best example we could give the Vulcans. Adaptable, willing to learn, yet determinedly and passionately Human. You were able to break the barrier between them and other people of the Federation. You have extended it into the realms of personal friendship. Well done, Captain Kirk. We at Starfleet are proud of you."

They left me there, looking after them in certain surprise at their praise. I felt exhilarated; everything was going right for me.

After more hours of dancing, discussion, drinking and much enjoyment, we made our way to Starfleet's luxury residence for homecoming personnel and their families. Everyone knew that Carol and I would be sharing and no-one batted an eyelid... except - Well, how was my Vulcan friend to know?

He frowned as I asked Carol to wait for me in my room, assuring her that I would not be long. She sighed, but did as I requested and I was left alone in the corridor with Spock.

"May I come in for a moment?" I asked.

He opened his door and waited for me to enter. I walked ahead of him, a strange feeling inside of me as I remembered that I was his Commander now, and Vulcan courtesy to a senior officer was paramount.

"Spock," I said, turning to him. "I will meet you in the transporter room at 17.00 hours. Then we will go to my home."

He raised his eyebrows. "17.00 hours, Captain?"

I cleared my throat. "I... um... need some time alone with Carol."

"She is your betrothed?" he asked.

I flushed a little. Why was I so awkward with him still? Certain matters were so difficult to discuss with him. Sex - for example. My friend knew nothing of such needs. He could not understand how it was possible to be driven to such a physical relationship without the telepathic bonding between compatible male and female. All Vulcans remained chaste until marriage, their energies channelled into study and research.

"Um, no.. but she is a close... she is a lover... I love Carol, always have. I know Vulcans have no concept of the term outside marriage, Spock - but Humans are not monogamous, not like Vulcans are."

He stared at me in puzzlement.

"Spock," I continued, earnestly wanting him to understand. "I have not... I mean, I... " Damn. How could I explain it to him? It was so alien to all he knew. "I have not had the opportunity for sexual experience... since..." I trailed off in embarrassment. Closer to him than any other, yet the most ridiculous things caused such complications between us. "Since before I joined the T'Varon." Had it been that long? For me, that had to be a record! "It has been a very long time. I need this. You do understand, don't you?"

After an interminable moment, he replied. "I see, Captain. Thank you for informing me. I do not exactly comprehend, for I have never been aware of this physical need, personally. I have, however, read that it is normal amongst Human males."

I grinned, relaxed a little, and turned to go - then I hesitated and turned back to him, reaching to touch his shoulder. "You impressed everyone tonight. I am very proud of you."

Carol was awaiting me, but I could not prevent myself from drawing him into a tight hug. He returned it for a few seconds, then released me, a look of puzzlement crossing his features. I did not dare to ask what was causing it. Always receptive to my feelings, he was sensing what was all too clearly uppermost in my body and mind. I had to get out of this room, before he bluntly asked me a question which any Human would not.

I tried to restrain my urgency to leave. "Till tomorrow. Sleep well."

"Sleep well, Jim," he said.

I laughed as I stepped away from his Vulcan warmth. "I doubt I will be sleeping much, this night," I foolishly commented.

He raised an eyebrow and frowned in his innocence; still laughing I headed for the door.

"What is the strange excitement within you tonight, Jim?" He asked the dreaded question I had hoped to avoid. "I have never sensed it in you before."

I groaned and stopped at the doorway. "Read some books on Human biology."

"Please specify?"

"Spock - you are a fast reader, you will find it soon enough."

He stepped towards me. "Jim, what is the matter with you? Are you all right?"

"I will be, if you allow me to leave!" I snapped.

He seemed taken aback, even a little hurt; my remark had been abrupt, and most impolite. I had to remember once again that his customs were quite different from mine, that he was all alone in an alien environment. I was the only familiar person in his world now. He relied on me. I walked over to him again.

"I'm sorry, Spock. Please forgive my bad manners and my illogical behaviour."

He stared at me for a long time; I bore it as patiently as I could, trying not to think of lovely Carol Marcus sitting on the bed waiting...

"Very well, Jim - but there is much I cannot understand about Humans."

"And much I do not understand about Vulcans, but we will continue the learning, Spock. Agreed?"

"Agreed, Jim."

Quickly, I left the room, before he could ask me any more about the strange behaviour of the Human male.

HOME

How shall I describe that night? Only that Carol and I did not sleep too much and it was worth every moment. She left at mid-day to return to her work, leaving me exhausted but content. All our old sparkle had been there, but regretfully, as always, there had been so little time for us. I slept a little until Sam arrived to tell me it was nearly time to leave. I flopped back down onto the bed and groaned softly.

"Quite a night," he commented, a knowing grin upon his face.

"Quite a night," I agreed.

He laughed, pulled me from the bed, and we wrestled as we had done when we were children, laughing and joking all the time; but now I was stronger than he, and it was not long

before he was pinioned beneath me.

"Help!" he gasped. "My little brother, the Starship Captain, is bigger and stronger than me now..."

Laughingly, I released him and sat back. "You can blame Mr Spock for that. My extra strength is the result of many exhausting hours in the gymnasium with him."

As I showered and dressed, we talked about the year we had been apart, and it was as if I had never been away. Sam and I had always been close and I was delighted to have his company again; but it was strange to be so open with someone again. Spock had been the only outlet for my feelings in such a long time, and there I had been forced to make concessions and had learned, up to a point, to control my emotions. Yet - the relationship with Spock went deeper than any other - it was a curious dilemma.

We made our way to the transporter room, where the rest of the family descended on me in a laughing, chattering group. I was relieved to see Spock sitting there, and I quickly strode over, eager to be with him again. His eyes studied me in careful scrutiny and I bore it as I am accustomed to doing. Why did I flush this time? I had not done so for many months.

Gary came to my side. "I'm glad you're here at last. Mr Spock and I were having the dulllest of conversations."

I glanced at him in mute reprimand and thankfully, he caught himself, becoming silent and lowering his eyes. Once I had the chance, he and I would have a very long and honest talk.

"Mr Spock! Mr Spock!" the children cried, running up to us.

"Greetings," he said, courteously.

"Oh, Mr Spock!" Tessa cried. "Will you teach me more today?"

"Please, Mr Spock..." Peter added.

"If you so desire," Spock replied.

I grinned at them then turned to Gary. "Learn from the children."

He frowned, but I could see that he did not understand my meaning. I had the horrible suspicion that Gary was going to cause me certain problems.

We materialised in the front garden of the farm. Unfortunately we were caught in a heavy downpour of rain and had to rush inside. Spock, however, remained on the porch and it was not difficult to know why. Vulcan - a hot arid world - where water was precious, rarely had rainfall this heavy.

My mother followed my gaze. "I have a problem with the rooms, Jim," she said. "We have so many guests, I'm not sure where to put them all."

I understood what she meant. "Spock will share with me."

She smiled, slipped her arm around my waist and leaned against me. "Good. I wouldn't want him to feel uncomfortable here. You can take your old room. Is that all right?"

I sighed. My old room; the one I had shared with Sam for so many years. She still seemed unsure and I bent to kiss her cheek. "Don't worry, Mom."

"He is such a private person. He seems so alone."

Her mothering instincts had always been strong. Spock had touched that within her. I remembered all the waifs she had befriended and helped. Her kindness and love of all life knew no bounds. I hoped I had inherited some of those qualities from her.

"He is very private, but he is not alone now. We are friends." I hesitated, then decided to tell her a little. "Once we were trapped together in a freezing cave. We spent three days there until rescued. Spock was ill... We had to keep each other mentally active and physically warm, otherwise we both would have died. We kept one another alive." My mind travelled back, remembering our ordeal. "He saved me from the claws of a wild cat, and a Klingon disrupter, despite being so ill. He risked his life for me."

She watched me carefully, and I smiled a little at her. "Then you can share a room," she said.

"Easily - even happily, for I love his company."

"Your love for him is very strong," she stated. She had always understood me well.

"Yes. It is like no other," I admitted.

"You live the true principles of the Federation," she said. "That is a wonderful thing."

We stayed up late, talking. Spock sat quietly on a chair, listening, occasionally speaking if asked a question. I tried to draw him into the conversation, but his shyness and reserve were too powerful, too ingrained; I decided to leave him to find his own level of participation. These were not Vulcans engaged in scientific theories, but Humans with all our inconsistencies and illogic. Gary was in fine form as he sat on the floor in the centre of the group. I laughed loudly at his wit. Spock, unable to comprehend his humour, watched with curiosity, the children at his feet. Peter and Tessa sat there happily. They seemed fascinated by the chance to be a part of adult company, but I suspected that they just wanted to be close to Spock. Their parents had already admitted to me that they had never seen them so taken with anyone; did they see behind his carefully assumed mask?

When it was the children's bedtime they protested strongly and noisily and would only go if Spock came to say goodnight to them. He graciously agreed, after a silent appeal to me for guidance; I could only shrug helplessly at him, unable to be of any assistance in his predicament. Once he had left, we all grinned at each other in mutual amusement.

"Well, would you believe it!" Sam exclaimed. "My own son prefers Mr Spock to tuck him in. I'm only his dad, after all."

"He has a way with children," I said, remembering the way he had helped me, helpless as a child, on the T'Varon.

Gary stood up, and moved over to sit on Spock's vacated chair. "Can't understand it, he's as cold as ice."

"No," Winona disagreed. "Reserved, yes. Cold - no."

"Children always know," Sam commented. "He has an aura of goodness about him." Sam understood, he was a lot like me. Earlier, I had seen him in reasonably relaxed conversation with Spock.

My mother chuckled. "Goodness, yes - but a woman sees other things."

"Mother!" Sam and I exclaimed teasingly.

"He is a very attractive man," she added.

I laughed as I recalled how all my ex-girlfriends had flocked about him. "He is strangely compelling," I said, "a very complex being. I probably know him better than anyone else, but there is still so much mystery about him. I can tell you this much. You will all learn to admire and respect him. He is a scientific genius of the like you have never known. His abilities are amazing. He can outcompute the computer, yet he has the patience to teach a child."

They listened to me with much interest, and I grinned with slight embarrassment. Gary snorted a little and the reaction caused me to become angered with him. Why was he being so damned obnoxious?

Aurelan and Janine returned, with Spock silently following behind them. Both women were self-conscious in his presence; they laughed and giggled like schoolgirls, not adult women. What was this magic Spock had over the female of the species? Resuming their places upon the couch, Aurelan and Janine both commented on how quietly their children had settled down; an unusual occurrence.

"Mr Spock told them a lovely story," Aurelan said with a shy smile. My outgoing, energetic sister-in-law was blushing like a teenager.

Well, who was I to be amused? Spock had caused me to flush to the roots of my hair on occasion! I wondered, though, what story he had given the children. I made a note to ask him later.

Spock hesitated, when he saw that his chair had been occupied. I did not know what to say. We were not on duty; I could not order Gary to vacate the seat, but how could I allow Spock to stand about in awkwardness? Gary seemed pleased at Spock's reaction, and inwardly I seethed at him. He had done it deliberately then; it was just like him, to openly try to annoy someone whom he resented... or was jealous of, I suddenly realised.

My Vulcan friend was not easily thrown. He was used to *me* and my often unfathomable behaviour. He walked over to stand beside me and after a slightly uncertain glance at me, he gracefully sank into a cross-legged position at my feet. Pleased at his willingness to be relaxed with me, despite the ignorance of others, I leaned forward to lightly touch his shoulder. He looked up at me. As I had sought his company on the T'Varon he now sought mine, here. I would not fail him.

"I was telling everyone of your boundless patience, Spock," I said.

"Indeed," he replied.

I slid from my chair to sit on the floor beside him. "Teaching the children must be easier than it was to teach me."

"Teaching you has been most difficult," he teased me gently, "but you have been a willing pupil."

"Willing, but not always able," I answered self-deprecatingly.

"If one tries to the best of one's ability, as you do, Captain, then you must not belittle yourself. You are not a trained scientist as I am. You are, however, a born leader - a very rare ability indeed. Each has his own gifts and complements the other. Such is the meaning of diversity."

I sighed deeply at his words. He always made me feel better, lifting my spirits when my thoughts became too negative. What an asset he was to me.

"You speak with your customary wisdom, Spock," I said gratefully. "Thank you."

"It is my privilege to serve you in this, sir."

I could feel the silence all around us and wondered what the people here, the family and friends who meant so much to me, thought of my Vulcan friend. None of them were used to Vulcans. What did they see? They would never understand him. How could they? He had allowed only me to become close to him.

As the conversation shifted and changed, I stayed by my bond-brother, comfortable with him as always; after a further hour, I was so tired - well, I had scarcely slept the night before - my eyes kept shutting and I began to drift into a doze. Spock caught my arm as I lost my balance. I forced my eyes open.

"Jim," he said, in the Vulcan language, "you must sleep now."

I nodded in agreement. "You are correct, my friend. I wonder if I could reach the room without you carrying me there," I grinned, wondering how he would take my teasing.

His outraged look brought me much amusement.

"I will carry you, if you wish," he said, obviously deciding to call my bluff. He watched me keenly.

I considered it. He could easily lift me by force, but I did not think that I wanted other Humans to see me put in such an undignified position. I remembered how helpless I was in the powerful grip of my friend. I decided that he had defeated me. He would take me literally, lifting me up like a child - or a sack of potatoes - if I so much as hinted that he could... or would he? I didn't dare take the chance. Alone with me, he could do pretty much what he wanted with me. He knew that, and I think he had come to enjoy our fitness training and the wrestling I had taught him, even though I was usually at a disadvantage.

"Oh, no thanks," I quickly countered. "I'll manage." I would pay him back though. "You stay as long as you wish, Spock. You are a source of much fascination to everyone."

He stared at me in almost a frightened way, as I stood up, said my goodnights and left the room. For a moment I regretted my cruelty in leaving him there, then I dismissed it. He

would have to learn to be in Human company other than my own.

My old room was the same as ever; homey, comfortable, full of mementos, books, toys, and happy memories. Quickly, before I completely crashed out, I showered, barely dried myself and slid between the cool sheets. The atmosphere of the place filtered through to me, lulling me in the rosy haze of childhood. Within a very short time, I was sound asleep, dreaming pleasant dreams.

When I awoke, it was morning. Sunlight slipped through the gap in the drapes and the breeze gently freshened the room with the scent of country air. Stretching out with contentment, I turned on my side and gazed at the other bed. Spock was still asleep. I watched him for a minute, remembering our cave ordeal. In some ways, it had been the best time of my life, for it had brought me close to my friend, in a way, perhaps, I would never have been privileged to know, under normal circumstances.

My whole future now lay ahead of me. The life I had always dreamed about. Starship command. Spock at my side. Questing for knowledge, seeking out new frontiers.

I left the bed, walked over to the window and lifted the drapes aside; not for us the sterility and modernity of a voice-activated viewscreen showing any view programmed into the computer instead of the true scene outside, we were a little old fashioned; we all liked traditional, glass windows. The scene before my eyes brought back my childhood here. The fertile grasslands, the gently rolling hills in the distance, my playground and Sam's as we were growing up. All this beauty... I had been very lucky. My life in this place had been like one long, happy summer.

As I stood reminiscing, I did not hear Spock's approach.

"Jim," he murmured.

So used to his silent movements, I was not even a little surprised, but with a touch of mischief I leaned back, hoping to startle him. I believe I was successful, for he caught my arms tightly and supported me. Grinning, I looked up at him and he shook his head slightly.

"Jim, you could have fallen flat on your back," he said.

"No, not with you standing there. I knew you would catch me."

"You like to take risks," he commented, disapprovingly.

"No, Spock, not this time," I said.

Closing my eyes, I waited. It did not take long for his touch to filter through my receptiveness, for his mind to come into contact with mine. How I loved these times of communion between us; it was a sensation, a completeness like no other. Often words were unnecessary, like now; just a passing of the essence of one another in a deep spiritual communication which went beyond any Human experience.

After a time, I turned to hold him tightly. Nothing I did bothered him now, for he accepted my Human feelings for him in the way I showed them. In private, of course; in public I would not do anything to embarrass him. Well, not like this, anyway.

"Let's have breakfast," I said, "and then I'll show you the countryside."

"That would be interesting," he replied.

"Good, perhaps even enjoyable?"

He held me back and studied me. "Enjoyment is alien to me - it is an emotional condition."

I snorted with disbelief. Did he think that I would allow him to get away with that? "And what was that I felt from you in the mind-meld?"

A tiny flicker of amusement crossed his features. "I am sure I fail to comprehend your meaning."

My scepticism must have been obvious to him, but he did not take the bait. I knew then that I would get no more from him. He could be very stubborn.

Bones and Gary were already breakfasting. They greeted me cheerfully.

"Well, Jim," Bones commented, "you look well and rested."

I nodded. I felt good, but whether it was from the long, peaceful sleep or the mind-meld, or even a combination of both, I did not know.

"Too bad your room-mate last night ain't as pretty as Carol," Gary said.

I stared at him in annoyance, his flippant remarks were far from amusing. Had I lost my sense of humour? Or was I seeing things through the more serious Vulcan viewpoint, realising what Spock might think of such comments and be hurt by them?

"You must be the only Human ever to have spent the night with a Vulcan," he continued tactlessly, laughing at his own words, a sneer on his face.

"You are incorrect, Mr Mitchell," Spock answered, before I had the chance to tell Gary to shut up. "My mother is a Human, my father a Vulcan. It is logical to assume that they have spent nights together."

I spluttered, trying to control my laughter. Gary stared at Spock open-mouthed and I grinned at his expression. Spock had countered him in a way which had effectively stopped him short and I was pleased. My Vulcan was showing me that he could look after himself pretty well.

Sitting down at the table, I indicated to Spock to sit next to me.

"Once I spent three days and nights alone with Spock, trapped in a freezing cave on a barren, isolated planet. I doubt I could have tolerated *your* company for that long, Gary." My tone was full of censure; perhaps it would make him think twice about what he was saying in future. He flushed and looked down. He understood my reprimand.

Bones looked from one of us to the other. "Jim - he is only kidding. You know Gary..."

"Do I?" I asked him. "I thought he would be pleased to show courtesy to Mr Spock, who has given up the life he knew on a Vulcan ship to serve with me. The person who is without doubt the best Science Officer in the fleet, and believe me, I can vouch for that. The one who saved my life and made my captaincy possible; the one who has been a true friend to me."

McCoy looked at me, then at Spock in clinical appraisal. "All that time together in a freezing cave, huh? That is where people find out much about each other. How did you stay alive?"

"We had some provisions - though not many," I said. "A sleeping bag and a blanket, emergency food rations..."

"Frostbite?" McCoy asked.

"It was probably close," I said as I remembered how I had rubbed Spock's hands and feet. Luckily, he still did not know about the feet. He had been unconscious then.

"You would have to conserve body-warmth," Bones said, staring in amazement at Spock's Vulcan reserve, obviously trying to imagine how he would have allowed such survival techniques as were necessary. It had not been easy, I recalled with a chuckle, but snuggling in a sleeping bag with a chilled Vulcan was not so bad, once his initial embarrassment had been overcome, in those freezing temperatures we had been exposed to.

"Captain Kirk saved me from certain death from hypothermia," Spock suddenly said.

Bones smiled in sudden understanding. "Men trapped in such circumstances will form a close friendship - or a deep hatred for one another."

"We were friends before that, Doctor, and have remained so."

"I thought Vulcans avoided touch, Mr Spock," McCoy said curiously.

"Indeed we do, for we are telepaths. However, in such a situation, logic dictates that survival is the first rule.

"Sounds real cosy to me," Gary said, still not having learned his lesson, "just the two of you, curled up together in -"

I stood up, angered. Why did he always have to cheapen everything? "Shut up!" I hissed at him.

He blanched at my tone. "I'm sorry, Jim," he said after a short time, his eyes unable to meet mine.

I fumed with exasperation. How would Spock cope with Humans? I, so used now to Vulcan courtesy, logic and honour, was finding difficulties with them, and I was a Human! The frailties of my Human friends were appalling to me! How had Spock and the T'Varon crew put up with me? I swore under my breath.

"Jim," Gary complained, "can't you take a joke any more?"

"Your jokes are not very amusing."

McCoy tried to mediate, but I was furious with Gary and would not be placated. "You

have continually made snide remarks about Vulcans. What is wrong with you? If you cannot work with Mr Spock without insulting him, you had better transfer to another ship."

He paled further, picked up his coffee and studied the cup. I could not control my anger at him and was about to speak, when Spock intervened.

"Jim, please do not be concerned on my account. I am impervious to insults. Mr Mitchell is perhaps - ill-mannered, but he is not prejudiced. I am a Vulcan, Human insults do not affect me, I do not understand them for I have no emotion, no feelings to be hurt."

Who did he think he was kidding? He knew that I would never buy that, not me, the one who shared thoughts with him, yet... perhaps the *others* would, for it was just what everyone believed about his people - cold, unemotional, without feelings.

I resumed my seat. "I don't know how you are going to get used to Humans, Spock. I know how much I have tried your patience. What will living with more than 400 of us do to you? Gary is just one example. He's flippant, full of inane jokes and innuendo..." I paused, remembering the friend whose company I had always enjoyed in the past. "Yet he is generous, honest and will do anything to help a friend... but he can be so damn *irritating*..."

Gary almost choked, laughed a little and on impulse I reached over to clasp his arm. "He is very like me in some ways," I added. We grinned at one another, then I glanced from him to Bones and then to Spock. "I want this to work. It won't be easy, for I am inexperienced and will need all the support you all can give me in my new command." I concentrated on my old friends - they had to understand from the start.

"Mr Spock has pledged me his loyalty. That loyalty is absolute. We became friends during my time on his ship, a friendship which works by its own special rules - *Vulcan* rules which are different from anything we Humans know. It is a friendship of the purest, deepest kind; you must understand that and accept that, no matter how strange it may appear. It will not change my feelings for my old friends. I want us to learn to work together as a team. We have to prove that we can adapt to working with a Vulcan. He must be accepted on my ship and given all the respect within you. He was my senior officer on the T'Varon and I will admit to you that it was very easy for me to obey his orders. He is a fine officer."

I grinned a little at Spock. "My problem now will be how to command *him*."

He raised a surprised eyebrow. "You do command me, Captain. I have given you my oath of loyalty. I have pledged friendship to you. It is binding and lasting unto death. Such pledges, taken in mind-link, cannot be broken."

My joy at his openness was overwhelming. "I thank thee," I murmured in Vulcan.

My passionate speech and Spock's words had caused strong emotional reaction in my two Human friends - I could tell by their expressions, and perhaps through a *little* residue left from the telepathic communion I had shared earlier with Spock.

"Jim," McCoy said, his eyes alight with his own warm and affectionate friendship for me, "I will do everything in my power to help you." He held out his hand and clasped mine tightly. "You have my loyalty, Captain. Don't ever doubt it."

His sincerity was obvious and I smiled at him with real gratitude. He returned it with a wide grin of his own and I shook his hand vigorously, trying to impart my feeling to him. Finally, I turned to Gary, who, after a glance at me, stood up, moved to the window and stared

out. Bones and I exchanged a meaningful look and I knew he was trying to tell me that my once closest friend needed some reassurance from me.

"Gary," I said, as I moved to stand at his back, "Mr Spock's qualifications made him the only possible choice as my First Officer. You will achieve that rank soon enough, perhaps even your own command. In the meantime, I need you as my navigator. I know of no-one better. I need your expertise on my ship."

His tension seemed to ease a little. He faced me and there was a lopsided, challenging grin on his lips. "There is no better navigator than me, but I would have made you a helluva First Officer too."

"I don't doubt it, Gary, but you must let it go, accept what is." I gripped his arm. "Make it work. Give me your loyalty."

His eyes widened at my insistence, and I wondered what he would do. For a moment I remembered how Spock had pledged his loyalty. I could not imagine Gary doing anything like that. He was determined, proud, even arrogant. We had always competed in sport, grades, promotions and for women. It dawned on me that to accept my command might be difficult for him. I would have to show my authority or there could be trouble later. Firmness and determination were the only things he would respect.

"Pledge your loyalty to me, Gary. I demand it."

A startled expression flicked across his face and he swallowed and stammered. "I'd... I don't... know how..."

"Gary," I insisted, "I must have this pledge from you. It is my right as your Captain and your friend. You must commit yourself to me, now. I must hear those words from you."

I stared at him intently and he wavered under my gaze; it was something he had never done before. Perhaps I had never been so dominant with him before, but I had to assert myself; he had to know who was in command.

He looked down, shifted about, then finally met my eyes. "I... give you my loyalty, Captain," he said quietly.

I grinned, pulling him close to me, but although he returned my hug when I held him back I caught a glimpse of some strange expression in his eyes. The thought that he might still cause me problems lingered in my mind.

I turned to Spock, who on seeing my attention, immediately rose to his feet. I could not help but compare Gary's sullen and forced compliance to my command with Spock's completely willing and noble act of allegiance. I checked myself. Living with Vulcans had made me discontented with Human behaviour; that was a danger I had to be aware of.

"Can you ride a horse?" I asked.

He blinked several times in Vulcan alarm. "No, sir."

"Oh, well, we'll take a ground-car."

"Where are we going, sir?"

"I want to show you the farm."

"May we not walk, Captain?"

"It is a big farm," I informed him. "We'll use the ground-car and will also walk. How is that for a compromise?"

"Indeed, sir."

"Spock, stop being so formal. 'Jim' will do here."

"Very well, Jim," he said resignedly.

Everyone else declined to come with us, probably realising that I wanted to show Spock the farm alone. My mother packed us some food, Spock accepting the hamper of fruit and vegetables from her with a grave courtesy that delighted her maternal instincts.

It was a beautiful sunny day as we toured the countryside; Spock was fascinated by all the greenery and as we picnicked by a stream he stared, almost mesmerised by the gentle flow of running water.

I lay on my stomach, watching the glistening stones in the shallow water, remembering the many times I had lain here, dreaming of travelling in space, going from one strange, exotic world to another, meeting all types of interesting alien life. Now one of those beings sat there beside me, staring into my stream along with me.

Leaning on my elbow, I watched his profile until he turned to face me. "We will be the best Captain and First Officer in the Fleet," I said.

His expression mirrored my own enthusiasm. "We will be, Jim."

"Any regrets about leaving the Vulcan Fleet?" I asked, suddenly insecure for no apparent reason.

"None," he immediately replied.

I rolled over and lay flat on my back, staring up into the sky, breathing in the fresh country air, filling my lungs with its purity. Listening to the gurgling of the stream and the sound of birdsong, many childhood memories crowded in on me. I turned my head towards the curious gaze of my companion, trying to reach out to him in thought. To my disappointment there was no connection. On occasion he could pick me up without touch.

"Jim," he said, "I do not wish you to worry about me. I will deal with the Humans under my command in my own way. None of them could possibly be as difficult as you were."

His remark caused me to flop back in gales of laughter, which surprised him. He frowned, not understanding.

"I think I have just been insulted!" I exclaimed.

"I only relate my opinion," he answered with a touch of pique in his voice.

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The next days passed quickly as I renewed my acquaintance with my family and friends. I laughed more than I had done for a very long time, wrapped in the warmth and companionship which surrounded me. Often Spock would go for solitary walks and I did not protest, knowing that he needed to be alone. At other times he would spend hours with the children, teaching them many things. Their fascination with him seemed unending; that was something I could understand very well.

Winona was very drawn to her Vulcan guest and would occasionally forget herself and fuss over him as if he were her own son. All courtesy that he was, he did not protest and would allow her motherly concern; perhaps he even enjoyed it, but he would never admit his feelings about it to me.

As much as I enjoyed all the company, sometimes I would weary of it and accompany Spock on one of his outings. We would walk in a companionable silence, which was very pleasant indeed, and I decided that I would soon broach the subject of visiting the British Museum as we had planned.

Six days after our arrival at the farm, I was sitting on the porch, eating lunch with the others, when Spock came out of the house and stood silently by me. Something in his stance alerted me and I immediately rose to my feet, every alarm bell in me ringing and hammering in my ears.

"Spock, what is it?" I asked.

To one who knew him well, his features were filled with tension. "I have received an urgent communique from my father. I must return at once to Vulcan."

The shock of his words hit me like an icy shower. "What has happened, Spock? Why do you have to leave?"

He glanced at the interested group at the table. "It is personal," he replied, lapsing into Vulcan.

I followed automatically. "I will accompany you."

"No, please. You must stay here with your family and enjoy your leave."

I stepped towards him in concern and dismay. "There is so much I want to show you on Earth, so much to do, to say... When will you return?"

His eyes were full of pain, his difficulty with this was equal, perhaps even more profound than my own. "I will return as soon as possible. I wish to stay here with you, but my father's orders must be obeyed. Please forgive me for leaving you so abruptly."

"When must you leave?"

"Immediately," came the horrifying reply. "The ship leaves in an hour. They await my signal for transporting. My belongings are already on board."

"Spock..." I whispered as the suddenness of it all left me shaken and weak. "Please... a moment..."

A communicator sounded. He took it from his belt and flipped it open. "Spock here."

"Commander Spock," came a clipped, precise Vulcan voice, "we are ready to beam you aboard."

The ache in his eyes reflected my own. "Thirty seconds," he said.

I could not believe this. What was the urgency? Why was he not telling me? What could possibly be so important to whip him away so suddenly? I held out my hands to him in a desperate plea.

He took them in his, then bowed his head before me as I helplessly stared in horror, shuddering at this sudden leave-taking. He placed my fingers against his forehead, the mind-contact racing through me, flaring with powerful force inside my head. *Farewell, my t'hy'la*, his inner voice said with agonising pain.

There was a sudden rush of warmth from him, making me catch my breath as the message he sent of his devotion and loyalty to me entered deeply into my soul. I cried inside for us, for the cruel fate which was ripping us apart. *Spock...* I tried to say.

He released my hands, stared at me for a long, penetrating moment, then moved away to stand the required distance from the others for transporter pick-up. He watched me as if imprinting my image upon his memory, until seconds later he disappeared into transporter sparkle and was gone.

Chills encompassed my body, causing me to shiver violently. I felt as if a part of me had been torn away, a gasping wound lay open and throbbing with pain. Emptiness loomed before me.

Farewell, my t'hy'la, I whispered inside, shaken to the core by his departure, moved deeply by his fervent, silent message.

I swayed, but a strong grip steadied my shoulders. Blinded by tears, I could not see who supported me. Sam's voice reached me, penetrating through my grief. "Jim - what happened? Are you all right?"

For long moments I stood there, stunned and empty. What kind of emergency could have needed such urgent attention? He had looked so stressed, so anguished. Vulcan seemed so far away. He would be gone for at least two weeks; so much of our leave together wasted...

I reached inwards, searching for strength to bear this sudden crisis; to my wonder, I felt the tingle of Spock's touch deep within me, some residue of the telepathic contact still lingered, a part of Spock's essence clung precariously onto my inmost self. I held onto it tightly and that comforted me a little, easing my emptiness.

"His father, Ambassador Sarek, has summoned him to Vulcan," I finally answered Sam numbly. "I don't know why."

Clasping my hands tightly together, I tried to control my shaking. The horrible thought had struck me that Spock might not return in time to join the Enterprise. What if Sarek's influence in the Vulcan Council had caused them to withdraw their permission for Spock's transfer? What if I never saw my bond-brother again? My mind raced from one frightening scenario to another.

"At least now we can have some fun, Jim," Gary's sarcastic voice broke in on my thoughts. "You don't have to feel obligated to tour boring museums now."

"Gary, shut up," Bones hissed at him.

Full of the bitterest anger I had ever known, I turned to Gary, ready to tear him apart for that unthinking, callous remark. He knew it too, for he started back from me in fear. Sam held me back, Bones helping him, and together they bundled me into the house and to my room.

"Gary didn't mean it, Jim," my brother tried to soothe me.

But I would not be calmed. The injustice of taking my friend from me, Gary's insensitivity, angered and horrified me. My rage overcame me with an intensity so great that I barely knew what I was saying. Sam bore it as he had when I was a child and finally I found myself weeping in his arms as I had often done before. Bones stood close to us, unsure of how to help, but trying to support me by his presence. Gradually I quietened down, sat on the bed, my brother and my friend sitting on either side of me.

Sam put his arm around my shoulder in brotherly concern. "Jim, he will return soon."

I sniffed and rubbed at my face. "I know. It was the suddenness, and Gary... He just made me see red."

"He can't control his big mouth," Bones said. "He never could... Jim." He looked over at Sam for a second, then back to me. "I've never seen you so attached to anyone."

Sam squeezed my shoulder. "Bones is right. It's as if there is a special bond between you and Mr Spock."

I smiled a little at their perceptiveness. "There is, Sam. A *very* special bond. I don't know how to explain it." I tried for Vulcan control, but it was difficult to manage.

"I saw it in him too," Sam continued. "It is said Vulcans have no feelings, but I don't believe that after seeing how he bowed to you in parting, how he looked at you before the transporter took him. Jim - he really cares about you..." My brother's eyes were wide with amazement at the thought.

I reached for the slight tingle still within me. "Yes, we are bound in... a kind of brotherhood." I looked at Sam, somehow wanting him to understand. "It is a bond as powerful as ours in its own way. As if he is the brother of my spirit, as you are the brother of my blood. I can't begin to explain to you what we have shared. Please try to understand me, Sam. He is my balance, my other self. I don't know how else to describe it."

"Don't even try, then," he said. "You have broken the barrier of interspecies relations during your time on the T'Varon and have forged a very powerful friendship with a Vulcan. That says a great deal about you, little brother. I am very proud of you."

I hugged my brother tightly. He held me, ruffled my hair as if I was still a child, then pushed me back.

Bones coughed, embarrassed - no doubt - by all this emotion. I turned to him and he grinned at me. "The love in this household just kills me," he joked.

I laughed and gripped his arm. "I'm sorry, Bones," I sympathised.

"Gary will give you more trouble. He's jealous."

I sighed. "I know, I'll give him more attention. Bones, am I doing the correct thing, bringing Gary onto my ship?"

He shrugged. "It's your decision, Jim. I can only say that it will never be dull with him around."

The three of us laughed, and I felt much more at ease now. Sam, my big brother, always made me see the positive side of the situation. McCoy also, in his own way, was able to stop me short with his practical, old-country-doctor advice.

I spent the next days in a round of parties and nightclubs with all my old friends, throwing myself into it with a fervour which I did not question too much. I more than made up for my lack of female companionship on the T'Varon, but it was strangely unsatisfying, unlike the one night I had spent with Carol.

My contacts with the Vulcan Embassy had borne little fruit. I had tried to communicate with Spock on Vulcan, but had been told, every time, that he was unavailable. Finally, I arranged to see Admiral Sivald, who was on Earth in advisory capacity to Starfleet. He was a distinguished elderly Vulcan whose exploratory missions were legend. I bore his intense gaze easily as I stood before his desk, for no-one's eyes were more penetrating than Spock's; Sivald's look meant nothing to me. When he was ready, I told him why I was there.

"It is not my concern, Captain Kirk," he said. "The Embassy attaches are the only ones who can assist you."

"Sir - with respect, you are a Starfleet Officer. I have served in the Vulcan Fleet. Spock is my bond-brother. I have the right to contact him. You are obliged to help me."

He studied me silently for several minutes. I held my ground; no-one was going to intimidate me, not even a Vulcan Admiral. "Captain," he said finally, "a Vulcan son is subject to his parents' wishes. Sarek has the right."

"What of *my* rights?" I asked. "No-one may keep him from my side."

"That is true," he conceded, "but you must be patient. There are other forces at work here."

"What other forces?" I demanded, trying to contain my fears under rigid control. "Explain, sir."

He raised an eyebrow in Vulcan surprise at my tone, but he answered me. "Sarek disapproves of the decision to allow Spock to serve on the Enterprise."

My fears had been well founded. Sarek was going to try to overturn the decision. If anyone had the influence to do it, it was the Vulcan Ambassador.

"I will go to Vulcan myself," I began.

"No, Kirk. That is unwise. The matter is between father and son. You must not interfere. The decision of the Council must stand. Spock has permission to join your ship. If he does not take that option, then it will be his personal choice."

"Or one forced upon him by his father," I said bitterly.

Sivald was unmoved. "Have faith in your bond-brother. You are fortunate indeed to be a participant in such a relationship. It is increasingly rare amongst our people."

"Rare, sir?" I was amazed. "I thought it was normal, commonplace..."

He shook his head. "Once that was so. In the last thousand years it has been less commonly known. It is a legacy of the past, the most mysterious of Vulcan bonds; some say the most valuable of all. It transcends gender, family, class; now it has even transcended species. Most remarkable." He stood up and came over to stand in front of me. He towered over me; he was a giant of a man, almost seven feet tall, yet like almost all of his people he was courteous and gentle and great in wisdom.

"Captain Kirk, no-one can take your t'hy'la from you. Not even Sarek has that power, if Spock wishes to be with you. Have confidence; Spock will return. I have studied all the reports on you. I am convinced the bonding is a true one."

"Is there a chance it is not?" I asked, horrified at a thought which had never occurred to me before.

"There is an infinitesimal possibility, due to your Humanness and Spock's."

I was sick with worry now. What if Sarek persuaded Spock that our bond of brotherhood was not true to Vulcan tradition, and he need not be bound by it? Vulcan parents held much more influence with their children than any other species in the galaxy, and Spock - not officially an adult according to Vulcan law - might be strongly pressurised to meet his father's demands.

As courteously as I was able, I thanked the Admiral and left his office. I was poor company after that. I told my friends that I was returning to the farm for a few days' rest. Twelve days after Spock's departure, I went home. Only my mother was there, and I spent the time relaxing, talking with her, riding on horseback around the farm, trying to allow the peace of the place to soak out my many worries.

Nothing could ease my loneliness for Spock's company and the fear that he would not return to me. My mother bore my sullen behaviour with great fortitude and much love. She was a great comfort to me.

Spock's message finally arrived two days after my return. I had been out riding. Immediately upon my arrival, my mother greeted me with much excitement, informing me that my bond-brother would be here in five hours. I let out an inarticulate cry of joy, picked up my poor startled mother and enthusiastically swung her around.

She grabbed onto my neck. "Jim!" she exclaimed.

Placing her down gently, I held her tightly to me. "I knew he would be back! I knew it!"

"Of course," she replied, rocking me as she had done when I was a child. I had told her a little about my relationship with Spock and she understood something of my feelings for him. "He is your other self," she added, instinctively grasping the essence of it.

I held her back, staring over her head at the chronometer. Five hours - five long hours. What would I do for this endless time of waiting?

"Jim, make yourself useful. Go check the dinner."

I gave a sudden start, then grinned. Winona liked to cook; she was old fashioned that way. Staring at her in mock horror, I protested. "But I'm a Starship Captain!"

"Not here, you're not," she bossed me. "Here, *I* am in command."

"Yes, ma'am," I said laughingly as I went to obey her orders.

I paced about impatiently as the time finally came near. I had already called Spacedock and they had confirmed the arrival of a private Vulcan craft. It was difficult not to go there and meet Spock, but he had asked in his message that I await his arrival and I knew why. He wanted our meeting to be private, and he was - of course - correct, for once he came near me, I would not be able to restrain myself. He knew me too well.

It was after midnight when the call from Transporter Control finally came. I confirmed the co-ordinates then rushed out onto the porch staring into the starlit garden, my eyes straining for signs of his arrival. The time passed in interminable slowness as I paced the confines of the small porch in a fever-pitch of excitement. Eventually, I spied the slow materialisation as my Vulcan friend solidified into familiarity. He wore a simple outfit, all in black, which was his sombre preference in clothing other than his uniform. It made him look more dignified than ever. What a contrast he made to me in the old, shabby jeans and shirt I used to wear in my teens.

"Greetings, Captain," he said formally with a slight bow.

My relief overwhelmed me. He was here to stay this time. "Spock," I murmured. "I missed you."

"Indeed, Captain," he replied, his voice even and emotionless.

I swore silently. To hell with restraint, propriety and formality. Covering the short distance between us in seconds, I threw my arms about him in unconcealed delight. He stood still within my hold and did not return it. Numbly, I wondered if our separation had put a barrier between us again and I felt an icy wave of fear, for I could not bear such a regression in our friendship, not now, not after all this time... Then it dawned on me what a fool I was. He had left here when the house had been crowded with people! "We are alone," I assured him, opening myself to him, awaiting the telepathic contact. "Don't go double-Vulcan with me!"

He relaxed slowly, the tension drained from his body and moments later a tenuous thread of mind-touch entered me. I sighed deeply as I was completely enfolded in the special, warm closeness of a Vulcan embrace, his thoughts and feelings mingling with mine as his barriers wavered erratically, then suddenly collapsed with the force of our combined emotion.

Knowledge of the events which had befallen him since our parting swept into me.

VULCAN

Spock rematerialised in the transporter room of the Vulcan ship. He strove to keep his features expressionless, calling upon all his years of training and discipline. He was escorted to his quarters and only when finally alone did he allow himself to succumb to his despair.

He leaned his head upon his hands. Sarek's orders had been clear. "RETURN AT ONCE TO VULCAN. MY PERSONAL SHUTTLE IS WAITING TO ESCORT YOU."

He recalled the sternness of Sarek's face, the voice which brooked no disobedience. Spock shuddered inside. What did his father want? Why had he ordered him home so abruptly and without explanation? Then it came to him in a sudden, horrifying flash of insight. He stood up, paced the small cabin, then flung himself down upon the bunk, almost weeping in fear.

His father wished to dissuade him from joining the Enterprise, despite the Council ruling. Sarek had never approved of his son's entry into Starfleet. Only after much persuasion by T'Pol, the family matriarch, and by the Fleet Admirals, had Sarek permitted himself to accept Spock's decision, and only then because the field his son had chosen was a much respected one, which brought honour to the family. To have his son serve on a Human-dominated ship would lower Sarek's status amongst certain factions of Vulcan society. Sarek's political opinion tended to lean towards these groups, even though he himself had shaken these traditionalists by marrying a Human woman.

Spock remembered his father's grudging approval of his son's achievement in reaching the position of the T'Pol's Science Officer at such a young age. Spock revered Sarek, but he was afraid of him, of showing some Human quirk which might earn his displeasure. All his life he had striven to be better than anyone else, to be completely Vulcan and worthy of the honour of being Sarek's son. But there was something in him which wanted more. He could never understand some of the drives within him, but he knew they were a legacy from his Human mother and would always surface, no matter how he tried to control them.

He pressed his face into the pillow, reliving every moment of his parting with Jim. The horror on his Human friend's face, his open shock and pain over Spock's imminent departure; his own misery and dismay over the sudden forced leave-taking. The nightmare of having to break the news to Jim. He took a deep breath, trying to summon Vulcan calm. Jim had become a part of him in the way described in the legends of the Vulcan people. They had exchanged thoughts, feelings and understanding; they had bonded in the brotherhood of ancient times. No-one could part them if they did not willingly choose to; not even a father had that right.

Spock delved into his memory, recalling how Jim - a non-telepath - with only his persistence, courage and Human love, had transcended the ability of his species in the most mystifying manner, reaching into the deep recesses of mind and soul, saving Spock's life, more precious to him than his own. Spock tried to comfort himself with the images and sensations from the many happy times he had shared with his Human bond-brother, the feeling of togetherness there was in his company, even the startlement and outrage caused by Human teasing, which had now become something to be enjoyed, even returned if possible.

He kept to his cabin during the five day journey to Vulcan, preparing himself for the ordeal ahead. His patience, carefully trained over the years, still served him, but he found that without the energising and stimulating presence of Jim Kirk, the emptiness and loneliness of the days seemed to make them pass in agonising slowness. Once so used to being alone, accepting it as a normal way of life, he now found it impossible to bear the isolation and sterility oppressing him on this Vulcan ship.

On arrival at Vulcan Space Central he was met by one of his father's aides and escorted to the city of Shikahr. His parents awaited him in the comfortable reception room of their house.

His mother's face lit up with delight on seeing her son, but she quickly restrained her emotions, knowing that neither Spock nor Sarek would approve of them. "Welcome, my son," she said with a calm she did not feel.

"Welcome my son," Sarek said, his voice flat and emotionless.

"You honour me, Lady Mother," Spock replied, keeping his shields tightly in place, afraid that Sarek's

minimal telepathy might discern the forbidden emotion which raged within. "I come in answer to your summons, my father."

Nothing would be said about the reason for his recall to Vulcan until after the three of them had dined together, so Spock sat filled with tension, barely eating, comparing the silent dinner to the joyful, talkative meals at Jim's home.

In his mind's eye, he saw the smiling face of his Human bond-brother and longed to be in his company again. Jim - who had so easily reached through years of Vulcan defences and had touched his soul, drawing from him that which had lain dormant and unknown; the need to join with another in mutual trust and understanding.

At first it had been difficult to accept Jim's enthusiastic, uninhibited, emotional personality; especially when that powerful affection threatened to overwhelm him. Jim had tried to learn something of emotional restraint, knowing how Spock's telepathic senses were being assaulted, but Spock knew that it was those very traits, plus determination and selfless devotion, which had saved him from death. Now he - a Vulcan - had learned to return in his own way a little of the Human's affection, and wanted nothing more than to be with him.

He had known when they had parted that Jim had held himself in check because of the watching people there. Jim, careful of Spock's dignity around others, despite his own shock and pain. Spock's farewell gesture had moved his friend deeply, the telepathic message had reached its target, and would always live there, a part of him, a testimonial of his bond-brother's feelings.

"We will talk," Sarek said.

Spock thrust his thoughts away when he felt his father's eyes on him, and dutifully followed his parents into the study. Sarek sat at his desk, Spock opposite him, while Amanda settled into the window seat. Spock noted that his mother seemed agitated and watched him with barely concealed concern. Had she sensed his distraction during the meal? Had he been that obvious?

Patiently, he awaited his father's words with outward calm, but he churned inside with dreaded premonition of what those words would be.

"I am opposed to your serving on the Enterprise," Sarek said bluntly. "I wish you to remain in the Vulcan Fleet or, preferably, to join the Academy of Science."

Spock sat straight, his hands clasped tightly together in front of him. His worst fears had just been voiced and even though he had expected it, he could not control the chill of fear from sweeping its way through him. He drew strength from within; he must defy his father, something unheard of from a young Vulcan. Disobedience of one's parents was against the tradition of his people, yet he must do just that.

"I ask forgiveness, sir, but I have been given permission to join the Enterprise and I will do so."

Sarek's eyes flashed. "The Council did not consult me."

"I was unaware of that, sir."

"I was on a diplomatic mission. Only on my return did I discover that T'Pol had given family consent on my behalf. She did not have the right." Spock took a moment to consider it. T'Pol, as Head of the Family, did have the right to take Sarek's place on such matters. Why was Sarek disputing that? T'Pol, who had always been his mentor. Her faith and confidence in him had always played a major part in easing the difficulties of his youth.

"Sir, I have given my oath of loyalty to Captain Kirk. It is done."

"No. You cannot be subordinate to a Human. It is unthinkable. You are my son. It was one thing for Kirk to serve on one of our ships on a temporary basis, under Vulcan command - under your command. It is impossible for my son to be under his command."

"He is worthy, sir, and he is my t'hy'la according to the ancient traditions."

"Impossible," Sarek argued. "No Human can bond in the Vulcan way."

"Father, it has happened. He is my true brother. He saved my life and I owe him everything. We have merged in the bond of brotherhood, spontaneously, naturally, as it is told in legend."

Spock held on to his courage. He knew that his father's anger was very near the surface. To defy his father! To argue with him in such a manner! UnVulcan... Disgraceful behaviour for a son. Unforgivable.

"You are mistaken, my son," Sarek said, more gently, reasoning now. "I do not say that Kirk is not brave, even admirable, but he is not a telepath. He cannot know the joy of telepathic bonding; he does not know the inner depths of the mind as a Vulcan does. It is beyond his capabilities."

"There is little beyond my t'hy'la's capabilities, father. He is unique. He is special. I have vowed loyalty to him, my mind to his; it cannot be undone. I ask you to accept. I ask you to grant me leave to return to Earth."

Sarek stared at his son with a fury he had never shown before. "You have knelt before him! You have sworn fealty to him! How could you shame your people, your family, by this?"

Spock trembled inside, but he answered his father with grim determination. "Where is the shame in it, father? He is my t'hy'la. In the ancient days it was a privilege to be the brother of a leader, the one responsible for the safety and welfare of his monarch."

"Kirk is not royalty. Kirk is Human."

"Captain Kirk is a leader. He will command a Starship, the most powerful ship in the fleet. He is today's equivalent of royalty. He honoured me by asking that I serve as his First Officer."

Sarek stood up. "No. You are mistaken." His face was rigid with tension.

"Sir, Captain Kirk reached through all my barriers and caught my life-force. I could not escape him, nor, finally, did I wish to, for I also was drawn to him and wished his company."

"A Human cannot be your bond-brother."

"Father, he -"

"You dare to remain seated before me!" Sarek interrupted, his voice hard with anger.

Spock tasted bitter fear as he struggled weakly to his feet. "I ask your pardon, sir."

"You will not return to Earth. I have called a meeting of the Council. Its decision must be rescinded."

"Father - I plead with thee," Spock entreated. He was not too proud to beg his father to relent. He would do anything to stop the injustice of repealing the Council decision. Not return to Earth! Not be permitted to join the Enterprise! Not to be with Jim! "Honoured Father, I beg of thee -"

"I will do it," Sarek said. "I will persuade the Council that it was in error."

"Sarek." Amanda spoke for the first time. "You must not do this. It is wrong."

"I will do it, my wife," Sarek replied icily. "Spock, remain in the house. Stay in seclusion until you have my permission to leave. You will not accept or transmit any messages."

A shudder of horror swept through Spock at those orders. His father had the power to enforce them, and in his present frame of mind would not hesitate in doing so. He bowed his head in acknowledgement.

"I will not tolerate any disobedience from my son," Sarek continued.

Spock kept his head lowered until he heard Sarek leave the room, then he looked up. He met his mother's eyes and saw that her dismay and pain reflected his own. Amanda came over to him and with motherly sympathy held out a tentative hand to him.

"I'm sorry, Spock," she said softly, her voice full of concern. "I tried to stop him, but he is determined to prevent you from serving on the Enterprise."

"Why, Mother, why?" Spock asked, taking her hand between both of his. "He married a Human, why is he against my serving with Humans?"

Amanda stared in surprise at their joined hands. She had never known Spock to do such a Human thing before. Her son, so perfectly Vulcan, had never, since he had been a young child, shown her any sign of Human feelings. She knew that he had repressed them in honour of his father, as she had trained herself to do also, but Sarek had never expected her to be Vulcan as he had expected their son to be, and had always made concessions to her Humanness.

"Sarek is a complex man. Even after all these years of marriage, there are times I do not understand him." She looked deeply into her son's dark eyes, seeing the pain in his usually expressionless gaze. "You have changed, Spock."

With an impulse he could not control, Spock bent down and gently kissed his mother's hand. Amanda gasped with surprise, then smiled with a dawning joy as Spock straightened to his full height.

"I have always wanted to do that, Mother," he said. "Jim Kirk has taught me that the giving of one's feelings can be a pleasant and rewarding experience."

Tears glistened in Amanda's eyes. "I often despaired of you having any part of me within you. Now I see that you have. Your friend has released it. He must be a remarkable person."

"Indeed he is," Spock agreed. "I will never return to being what I was before. Cold, empty and alone. I am Vulcan - that will never change; but I have found my t'hy'la. He is my Captain and I will serve him. My pledge to him cannot be broken."

"I am on your side, Spock," Amanda said. "I will attempt to persuade Sarek to change his attitude. I fear it will be most difficult, for in a family decision such as this I am powerless to object officially."

Spock nodded. He knew the law. Amanda - being Human - and not a born member of any ranking Vulcan Family, had only taken on membership of her husband's family, and had to accept Sarek's decision regarding his son's career, marriage, even his education as a child. Although Amanda could often influence him, she was unable - under Vulcan law - to oppose him. Her position on Vulcan was an honorary one and she had always known and accepted it. She had never been made to feel an outsider, but now, when she could

not help her son through the channels available to any Vulcan mother, she cursed the rigidity of Vulcan law.

Three days later, Spock was summoned before the Council. All of Vulcan's ruling body was there; a measure of the importance of the meeting. T'Pau, the Head of his Family, presided over the assembly. Spock bowed respectfully before them, keeping his telepathic shields firmly in place.

Sarek sat amongst the delegates, Amanda at his side. Spock, glancing at his father, could not tell anything from his severe expression, but a shiver of fear ran down his spine as he sensed that Amanda had not been able to influence Sarek's opinion.

T'Pau stood. She was frailer than Spock remembered. He saw how she leaned heavily on her ornate staff of office.

"Approach me, child," she said.

Obediently, Spock walked to her, greeting her in the Vulcan salute, before kneeling in homage at her feet. He bowed his head and awaited her words.

Her eyes softened slightly as she looked down upon his shining hair. "Spock, thy father objects to thy serving under a Human commander. His reasons have validity. He was not present to state his opposition when we gave thee permission to join Enterprise. He has now invoked his right and asks us to rescind our decision. Although thee are a minor under Vulcan law, thee may still voice thy opinion."

Spock barely breathed as he listened to her. He felt her sympathy. She had always sought him out, she had trained him in many disciplines, including the Healing ones. He owed her much.

T'Pau studied Spock - her youngest great-grandchild. He had been a willing and able pupil, the best student she had ever taught in her long lifetime. Although disappointed that he had not become a Healer, she had approved his decision to join Starfleet as a Science Officer. It had been the logical career for one with so many talents.

This half-Vulcan, half-Human child of Sarek and Amanda was acknowledged as the most brilliant scientist of his generation. Many had been surprised that Spock should excel in such truly Vulcan virtues, but T'Pau had reasoned that his Human half gave him the random and often illogical flash of insight which was lacking in his contemporaries, thus giving him an edge in his thinking which left other Vulcans at a loss.

Spock knelt before her in uncertainty and, perhaps, awe; but she sensed a determination in him, a courage which had brought him through the many difficulties of his childhood and youth. He was an enigma. T'Pau took a special pride in him, which was pleasing to her; he was her favourite, the only one who was intellectually equal to herself, but she kept it carefully hidden under her austere mien.

"T'Pau," Spock said, looking up at her with eyes the image of her long-dead husband, "I have Council permission to join the Enterprise. You cannot rescind it without losing face in the eyes of the Federation. They will say that Vulcans renege on their word. It will cause ill feeling and resentment in Starfleet. The harmony between Vulcans and others will be disrupted, perhaps endangered Vulcan cannot afford this; our role within the United Federation of Planets would be seriously undermined." He paused for a moment, searching for some sign of approval on her face, but found nothing but impassivity. "On Earth, I have been treated with much courtesy. They have welcomed me with respect and have advised me that they are pleased that a Vulcan has, at last, joined their Fleet. Captain Kirk took me to his home where I was the guest of his esteemed Lady Mother. I have been treated as a member of their family. Captain Kirk is my brother according to ancient tradition.

His telepathic senses could not avoid the wave of surprise that admission brought. He did not let it stop him. "He became so, during the time he served on the T Varon; it happened as it is told in ancient texts. We are joined in spirit. I wish to serve under his command. It is my entitlement, for he is my t'hy'la and we may not be forcibly parted." He tried to control his rising fears as the complete silence within the chamber filtered through to him. "I ask the Council to allow their decision to stand and grant me permission to return to Earth immediately."

He bowed his head to indicate he had finished.

"Sarek," T Pau said. "Speak."

Sarek came to the floor, bowed to the assembly and began. "I did not give my approval for Spock's appointment, therefore I consider it invalid and wish the Council to rescind the decision."

"What of Spock's observations on the harm it will do to relations within the Federation?"

"It is of no matter," Sarek said. "They will accept it eventually. They do not wish to offend us and will not want to cause any trouble. They rely too heavily on our diplomacy and scientific achievements."

"There is the other matter of Spock's bond-brother," T Pau added.

"I have already intimated my opinion to my son. A Human cannot bond with a Vulcan in that manner. It is unheard of."

"Sarek, you have bonded in marriage with a Human," T Pau argued. She remembered the outrage that had caused amongst some factions.

"That is different," Sarek said. "It is not to be compared with the spiritual binding of t'hy'la."

T Pau glanced at Spock's bent head. Close to him physically, she sensed his horror and fear over his father's words. Poor child, always torn between his mixed heritage, trying to be more Vulcan than any other to please his stubborn father. She had defended him before; she would do so again.

"Who can say what is possible? Our minds must be open to new ideas. Captain T Zen and Dr T Renna observed Spock and the Human, Kirk, aboard the T Varon. In their opinion the bonding is a true one. T Renna merged with them both and clearly saw it. She also observed how Kirk - a non-telepath - reached into Spock, transcending the ability of his species, to draw Spock out of a condition where his chances of survival were low indeed."

T Pau drew on her many years of command. She raised herself to her full height, staring down at Sarek with eyes powerfully compelling; all her authority as President of the Council and Head of the Family behind her.

"No-one, not even a parent, may keep t'hy'la apart."

Sarek lowered his eyes before her. "They will vouch for this?" he asked.

"They will."

Sarek clasped his hands together and looked towards his kneeling son. "My child," he said, gently, persuasively.

Spock rose to his feet and turned to meet his father's gaze, trying to control his trembling. He could not disgrace himself and his family before the ruling Council of Vulcan. He must not allow his Human doubts

and fears to overcome him. T'Pol had granted him the privilege of adult responsibility, even though technically until Pon Farr he was still a minor. He must behave as an adult.

"I await thy words, my father," he said.

"You still insist that you are bound in brotherhood to Kirk?" Sarek asked.

"Affirmative, sir," Spock replied, formally.

Sarek's anger suddenly blazed from his eyes with frightening force, but Spock did not flinch from it. "T'Pol and T'Renna are mistaken, the bond of brotherhood is uncommon in these times. They are not experts in the matter."

"Sir," Spock said, as calmly as he could, "I know it to be true. I feel it deep within me. I beg thee to accept it and give me permission to return to Earth."

Sarek stared at him for a very long moment then turned to the Council. "What is your decision?"

T'Pol glanced at each delegate in turn, then spoke for them all. "Our earlier decision stands. We will not rescind it."

Sarek fought to control his fury, knowing that all those in the room were receiving it. His son, a particularly gifted telepath, would certainly be aware of it. Changing his tactics, he sent the full force of his disapproval at his son. "Spock, as you are but a minor, a father's wishes may take precedence over the Council rulings. You have the choice. Return to Earth and you will incur my extreme displeasure."

Spock stood straight, caught between his father and his t'hy'la. Whatever he did would hurt one of them. He considered it for only a split second; his father did not need him.

"I beg thy forgiveness, my father, but I cannot follow your wishes. I have vowed my loyalty to my Captain and must return to his side."

"So be it," the older Vulcan said, his face as expressionless as a mask. "I will not speak to thee again."

A slight tremor ran through Spock's body, but he halted it with iron control.

"You have the right, Sarek," T'Pol said, "but I believe you are being unnecessarily harsh and intransigent."

"I have the right," Sarek repeated. "My wife, attend."

He reached out a hand as Amanda moved over to him. She touched her finger-tips to his. "You may take leave of your son."

Amanda stared at her son with sympathy and love as he bowed to her in farewell; a vulnerable, hurt young man - she could not think of him as a child, as the others did - torn by the decision forced upon him. Bound as she was by her husband's judgement, she could only cry inside for him. She remembered her son's tender kiss and she wanted nothing more than to hold him close to her, show him her love; such a display was impossible here, on a world where the showing of emotions was frowned upon, and she could only hope that his formidable telepathic ability would pick up her thoughts.

"Farewell, Spock," was all she could say.

"Farewell, Lady Mother," he replied, formally.

As Sarek led her from the chamber and Spock was lost to her sight, she resolved to make Sarek change his mind, no matter how long it took.

The silence in the council chamber was almost deafening. Spock stood in turmoil and hurt, but strove to mask it before so many telepaths. His father's rejection had been a severe blow to him and he struggled to accept that he might never reconcile to Sarek; never see Amanda again.

Finally, T'Pau spoke. "We grieve with thee, Spock. You have gained Sarek's displeasure over this. Do you wish to alter your decision?"

Spock returned to kneel at her feet, sensing the sympathy in her tone, knowing that his revered great-grandmother would work on his behalf along with Amanda to persuade Sarek to relent.

"I can make no other decision, T'Pau. The bonding with my Captain is a true one; it has changed my life. I cannot abandon him. He wishes me to accompany him and my duty clearly is to him and no other. We have united in the ancient way of mind, spirit and soul. I have sworn an oath of loyalty and friendship to him. I must follow him - thus it is written in the ancient manuscripts of our people."

"Then you must return in all haste to Earth," T'Pau said. "My personal cruiser will be at your disposal within the hour."

"I thank thee," Spock said with deeply felt gratitude.

"Child, thee are brave to risk Sarek's anger. He seeks to protect his only son. He wished you to enter the Academy of Science to use your talents to further the knowledge and understanding of the universe."

"I believe I do that in Starfleet," Spock replied.

"Indeed you do," she agreed, "but Sarek has never approved of Starfleet. Perhaps in time he will change his views. The co-operation of our people with others in the Federation must continue. Your appointment has created much goodwill. Captain Kirk's inauguration was seen throughout the Galaxy. In the opinion of this Council, thee and thy bond-brother were most impressive. If you find Kirk worthy of your loyalty, then he is, indeed, the best of his species. Your duty now is to him. He will need you."

She lifted her hand in salute. "Live long and prosper, Spock."

Spock returned the greeting. "Live long and prosper, T'Pau."

He stood, bowed before her, then the rest of the Council, gratified by their support.

He did not see his parents before his departure, but there was a communication from his mother minutes before the ship went into warp drive.

"I'm sorry, Spock," Amanda said, her lovely eyes strained with worry and tension. "He will not relent."

Spock tried to contain his disappointment. "Tell him that I will respect and honour him always, but my word has been given, and I cannot break it."

"He knows it, but he is most stubborn," Amanda said with a wry smile.

"Indeed," Spock replied.

Amanda watched him with careful scrutiny. "Spock, I do not know when we shall meet again, but always remember that my thoughts are with you, and... I am very proud of you."

"You honour me, Lady Mother."

Amanda smiled, lovingly. "Give my greetings to your bond-brother and his Lady Mother. I am grateful that they accept you as one of their family. I am pleased you have found such a friend as Captain Kirk. Perhaps one day I will meet him." She held out her hand. "Live long and prosper, Spock."

He mirrored her gesture. "Live long and prosper, Mother."

After Amanda's image faded, Spock stood looking at the blank screen for a long time. Regret welled up within him at the estrangement with his father, and he reviewed everything which had happened, along with all of his options. Every time, he came to the same conclusion, the one unalterable fact. Jim was his responsibility - his first and only duty was to him. There was nothing else he could have done, nothing else he wished to do. With that realisation, he pushed his father's objections aside and did not think about them again.

The days passed more quickly than on the outward journey to Vulcan. The crew engaged him in many interesting scientific discussions and the time passed pleasantly. Once within the Sol system, he sent a message informing Jim of his arrival time. He did not dare to think that his friend might have been worried about him, awaiting any news of his return; he assumed that Jim was enjoying his leave without any knowledge of the situation he had faced on Vulcan.

From the observation deck he watched the approach to the beautiful blue/green planet, so different from the desert world of Vulcan. Earth was part of his heritage too, but he had never felt any tie to it until now. His mother had no family here, she had made her life on Vulcan. but his Human brother was here; Spock, a part of his family now, felt the sudden thrill of homecoming, the pull of the world below, and he yearned to be there in the well-remembered warm atmosphere of Jim's home.

It took several hours for docking procedures to be completed, but finally Spock stood in the main transporter room at Spacedock awaiting confirmation of transporter co-ordinates. He heard Jim's voice verify and give permission, and his heart skipped a beat at the sound of his t'hy'la. Did he detect a touch of excitement in that tone?

The familiar disorientation of transporter travel was a welcome sensation, passing quickly to the touch of a chill evening breeze, bringing with it the scent of grass and flowers. He breathed the fresh country air deeply into his lungs and focussed on the joyful face of his friend, not much looking like a Starship Captain the way he was attired, in well-worn jeans and shirt; appearing more like a boy.

He greeted his friend formally, afraid to surrender to the raging emotions within him at being here at last. But a few moments later, his enthusiastic, affectionate bond-brother, restrained by no such fears, had thrown himself on Spock in a crushing hug, his body and mind vibrating with delight and happiness. In that instant, Spock knew he could never face the Vulcan sterility of non-emotion ever again.

With the greatest of effort he stood, forcing himself not to respond to that hug, afraid that the others might see; but he should have known that Jim would never cause him discomfort or embarrassment, and when he was informed that they were alone, he threw aside his restraint, encircling Jim within his arms and his mind in joyful reunion.

They stood there in a telepathic rapport which swept away all the agonising worries of the past weeks, oblivious of the chill night air. Their thoughts mingled and intertwined in familiar harmony and both Vulcan and Human knew contentment and peace with one another.

EPILOGUE.

Enterprise... My ship, my beautiful lady, awaits me. She is my reward, my prize for my successful year amongst the Vulcans. With Spock's help, I have picked the very best for my crew. Starfleet can refuse me nothing. My dream of Starship command is a reality now. There will be much danger, we will face many unknowns, but that does not scare me. Spock is with me, and with such a friend by my side, committed to me totally, oathbound in the Vulcan way, I will not fail.

I am used to being under Spock's command, now he is under mine. I feel a little uncomfortable with that, although I know he does not. He has chosen willingly to follow me, even defying his father for my sake.

I sit here upon the centre seat. Spock stands by my side and calls me Captain. The life I have always dreamed about is about to begin. I am ready to take on the future, for I am in my rightful place. The power of my ship's engines throb underneath my feet, she awaits my order, she awaits my command.

"Mr Spock - prepare for launch," I say.

"All systems ready, Captain," he answers.

My whole life has been building up to this moment when I take my ship out of Space-dock - when my Starship readies herself for warp-speed.

I stare up into the dark alien eyes of my bond-brother and see the smile in them as he watches me. I grin happily at him, then return my attention to the launch procedures. This is what I was born for. This is what I am.

Starship Captain...



