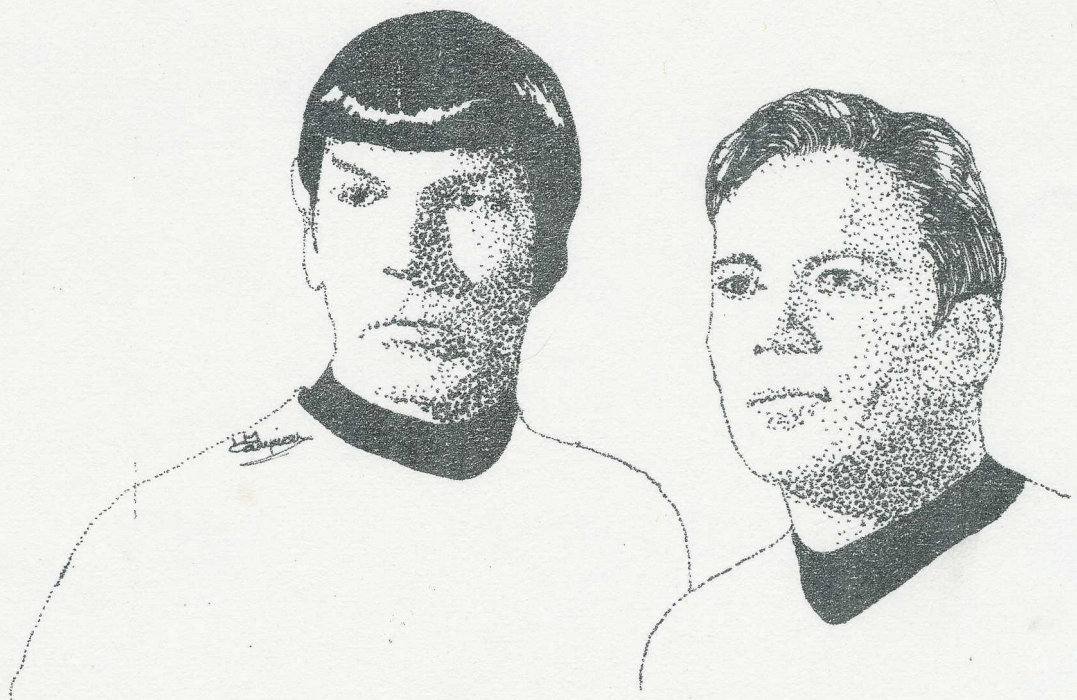


ONE LAST WISH

FULFILLED

karen hayden



ONE LAST WISH FULFILLED

and sequel

A PROMISE KEPT

by

KAREN HAYDEN

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ONE LAST WISH FULFILLED

by

Karen Hayden

"Checkmate!"

"Congratulations, Captain. You win, again."

"I'm only able to because I've had a good teacher, Spock."

Captain James Kirk looked across at his Vulcan friend affectionately. Those words had been said so many times before, but they still held a special, private significance for the two men. However, the levity lightened drastically as Jim saw within the dark brown eyes...what? It couldn't be identified, but there was definitely...something.

"Is there anything wrong, Spock?"

His answer was a straightening of the already ramrod back. "I am, perhaps, a little...tired, Captain. I have been doing a great deal of extra research following the recent planet surveys that we have undertaken. A little meditation within the confines of my cabin will serve to dissipate the fatigue." He rose to his feet, and stood still, looking down at his commanding officer. "If you will excuse me, Jim, I shall see you on duty in the morning."

Jim was uncertain. There was nothing tangible, no proof that there was something wrong, but.... He could do nothing more but nod in reply. "Thank you for the game, Spock...."

But the Vulcan didn't seem to hear him. He simply turned and left the recreation room with his face impassive, more Vulcan than he'd been for a long time.

Bones McCoy entered almost immediately, looking behind him. As he turned back around, almost stumbling into a table, he noticed Jim and approached him quickly.

"That was Spock leaving, just then, wasn't it? Or has another Vulcan beamed aboard that I haven't met yet?"

It took a few seconds for Jim to register Bones' presence. "What? ...Oh, yes. It was him, I think...."

"Eh....Something wrong?"

"Nothing I can put my finger on...but there is something...He says he's tired, Bones."

"Well, even Vulcans tire sometimes, and he has been pushing himself pretty hard recently, trying to get those reports finished."

"Yes...." Jim's brow furrowed, and he tapped the table irritably with his finger-tips.

"Look, do you want me to see him? Not that that pointy-eared Vulcan of ours would tell me anything, but it might be worth a try if you're really worried about him."

"No. Thanks, Bones, but I don't think he's ill or anything. And if he's worried about something, I think he'd come to me with it eventually. Give him some time." He pulled himself to his feet, stretching and yawning as he did so. "I think it's time I turned in. I'll get back to you, Bones." He pulled his shirt down, and walked swiftly from the room.

The blue eyes that watched the Enterprise's Captain leave were haunted.

His cabin seemed lonely, deserted, empty. It had been a long, long time since he'd felt so isolated on this ship; even longer since he'd felt unable to confide in his friend, Jim Kirk. But he knew that it would do no good. Talk would not help. It would only cause unnecessary pain. Now...it was too late, for him, for them.

The lamp of meditation flickered in the dimness of the room, and as the Vulcan moved towards it, he shivered uncontrollably. It had started already. His hand moved hesitantly to the thermostat - and stopped on the switch. It would not help him to succumb too soon to

the discomfort of the effects of the debility. He moved the switch by one degree only, and wrapped his arms around himself for warmth as he sank to the floor in his private meditation. He would have to be very careful, in future, to keep himself completely under control.

Jim paced his cabin like a caged animal. He was tired, but found himself unable to sleep. His worry for his first officer had manifested itself more fully since leaving the recreation room. There was definitely something wrong with the Vulcan, and he could not rest till he made sure it was not serious. He had been looking tired for days, now Jim came to think of it, even listless on occasions, but he'd thought, as Bones had stated, that it was overwork. Now he wasn't so sure. Bones had carried out the statutory medical checks on all members of the landing party after they had returned from each survey, and they'd all checked out okay. So what? What had happened to Spock since leaving Addressa 7, their last planet-fall? He reached for the intercom button. It was probably foolish, but he had to check.

"Kirk to sickbay." As expected, Bones answered immediately.

"Hi, Jim. What can I do for you? Thought you were sleeping?"

"My brain isn't co-operating." He hesitated slightly. "Have you finished your analysis of the reports from Addressa 7 yet, Bones?"

"This afternoon. All normal. Why?"

"Nothing unusual? Are you sure?"

"Of course! What is it, Jim? Still worried about Spock?"

"Yeah, a little... Seems I'm worrying about nothing again. See you in the morning, Bones."

"Okay. Sleep well! You need it!"

They broke contact and Jim made his way to his bed, finally falling into a troubled sleep.

Bones looked at the viewscreen in front of him for quite a few minutes after the image had faded. It always concerned him to see Jim so wound up about something, especially when it had something to do with their first officer. Spock was such an enigma that he often had them all worrying about inconsequential things. But was the worry groundless this time, or had Jim actually seen something hidden from everyone else, an unstipulated fact that he himself hadn't detected? Well, it was too late to worry about it now. He could do little more than store the occurrences away for future reference. But he determined that he'd keep a close eye on his two friends.

Spock was already on the bridge when Jim went on duty next morning. Not unusual in itself, but Jim was immediately gripped by a sense of forboding. He nodded cordially at his bridge crew as usual, but instead of resuming his seat and asking for the normal status report, he proceeded to Spock's station, hands grasped tightly behind his back.

Chekov and Sulu exchanged surprised, confused glances. They couldn't remember a time when Kirk hadn't asked for that status report as soon as he had entered the bridge on resumption of a new duty shift. Something was definitely wrong.

"Anything happening, Mr. Spock?" The statement was casual, non-committal. The Vulcan looked up from his instruments, looking momentarily startled. He hadn't heard his Captain approach, and Jim knew it. What was wrong with those exquisite ears of his? "Tell me, Spock. Confide in me - before I go completely mad!"

The eyebrows rose as they had so many times before, and Spock straightened in front of his commanding officer.

"Tell you what, sir? I have nothing to report."

"You know what I mean! Damnit, tell me what's wrong, please!" Jim deliberately kept his voice low, but Spock had no apparent trouble hearing him. Was it a false impression that he'd received earlier when he'd thought that Spock hadn't heard him approach?

"There is nothing 'wrong', sir. All is well - with ship's status - and myself."

Jim wasn't satisfied, but he could do nothing more here on the bridge. Perhaps later.... No! Definitely later! He stepped down into the well of the bridge and sat down, and much to the relief of his helmsman and navigator asked for the delayed report. He was all business now.

As Kirk spoke to his men, Spock found himself studying the handsome profile of the man he'd begun to acknowledge as 'brother'. He found even that a little difficult for his vision was beginning to blur now, and it was getting worse each day. It would not take long for the cloud to fall completely and he would then be shrouded in complete darkness. Till that moment came he would nurture this sight of his friend, and revel in it, with no embarrassment.

Jim could see out of the corner of his eye, and he wondered why Spock was looking at him like that. It was not the time or place to ask him, but he would find out soon. He was grateful that the present mission was proving to be an uneventful one. At least for the moment he could spend some time to concentrate on his friend's all-too-evident predicament.

An hour passed. Routine. Then, with no apparent reason, Spock stumbled at his console. He managed to catch himself in time to hide it from the other crewmembers and, he hoped, his Captain. But there wasn't much that escaped the notice of James Kirk, especially while on duty on his bridge. Spock felt unable to cope with the fact that his faculties were leaving him, slowly drifting from his grasp. He was thirsty, too. And there was sweat on his brow... No! This was wrong! Vulcans do not perspire. He would have to leave the bridge. Holding tightly to his console behind his back he looked directly at Jim, and spoke quietly, calculatingly.

"May I have your permission to leave the bridge, sir? I have some reports that I have to collect from the laboratories."

Jim looked at him with barely concealed concern, and answered immediately.

"Of course, Spock." He gave the Vulcan a friendly smile and watched closely as he approached the turbolift. He'd never seen his Vulcan walk so slowly, so stiffly. As soon as the turbolift doors closed behind him, Jim pounced on the intercom button. "McCoy, I want you to take a look at Spock as soon as possible. There is something very seriously wrong!" The words were spoken quietly, but earnestly, and Bones could detect the open concern. He wasted no time. As he picked up his medikit, he asked:

"Where is he?"

"The science lab. I'll meet you there!"

Jim jumped from his seat. "You have the con, Mr. Sulu." He was gone before the concerned helmsman could acknowledge him.

As James Kirk rode the turbolift down to deck two, cursing its slowness, he also cursed himself. He should have checked before, done something as soon as he'd suspected that something was wrong.

The lift drew to a halt and he exited quickly. As he strode down the corridor to the labs he passed surprised crewmembers. They had seen the worry on his face and obviously wondered what was wrong.

Bones was outside the laboratory, waiting for him. "He's not here, Jim!"

"Where, then?" The man in the golden shirt turned around slowly, surveying the area, wringing his hands together in helplessness. "His cabin!?! Come on, Bones. There couldn't be anywhere else!"

"Wait, Jim!" The shout stopped Kirk in his tracks, but he didn't turn back around, just kept staring down the corridor. "Do you really want to do this alone?"

"I won't be alone!"

"You know what I mean. Shouldn't we get some security guards, extra medics? We don't know what to expect."

"No, we don't, but there is no need for guards. You should know Spock better than that. There's no need, and I won't infringe on his privacy, when we've got no facts. I respect him too much for that. And you're the only medic he'll see - you know that. Come on. Hurry!"

He was leading the way towards the turbolift before Bones could say anything further. As they travelled downwards Bones gripped his friend's arm in an encouraging gesture of friendship, and hope. Jim Kirk found himself smiling in reply.

The door was locked. Locked to even him, Jim Kirk. He reached for the intercom and buzzer and saw that his hand was shaking.

"Bones, what if it's Pon Farr again?"

Bones was blunt. "Then there's nothing we can do! Come on. Press the damned thing!"

There was no reply. Not that they'd really expected one, but they had hoped. Before a second thought Kirk used his "pass-key" combination, and the door slid silently back.

Spock was slumped over his desk and they both rushed to his side. The Vulcan's head rose slowly and he stared, unseeing, at the two men. Recognition seemed to dawn very slowly. But finally words did come.

"I must render my...apologies...Captain. I failed you by leaving the bridge and not returning."

"Nonsense, Spock. I only wish you had called one of us sooner, told us that something was wrong."

"Wrong, Captain? There is nothing wrong. I...needed to entertain a period of meditation, that is all."

Jim Kirk looked at him long and hard. That explanation was not holding true with him. He knew Spock far too well, and Spock knew it himself. Things like that just did not happen. He sank to his knees beside his friend, placing his arms around in a gesture of support.

"Please tell me, Spock. Confide in me."

The Vulcan pointedly ignored the kneeling human and turned instead to Bones and spoke very quietly.

"It would be more appropriate, doctor, if the Captain were not present at this time. No doubt you will require a medical examination after I have told you what I must, and I request that to be carried out in this cabin, and...without anyone else's presence."

Jim pulled himself backwards to stare into the Vulcan's face, but Spock would not meet his eyes. He knew only too well that he had hurt the human. Bones simply stared at both men in incredulity. Kirk found his voice.

"Spock...I...."

"Doctor...."

"Okay, okay. I think it would be better, Jim." He hesitated, then added, "For all concerned. Get back to that bridge of yours and I'll contact you later."

Jim dragged himself to his feet, dazed, but nodded in assent. He left the room quickly, afraid of what he might say in momentary anger. He felt a deep sense of duty and guilt which seemed to tell him that he should remain...but he also knew that he must withstand it, and refuse it - for Spock's sake.

As the door slid closed behind the Captain, Spock rose unsteadily to his feet and turned towards his meditation lamp, seeming to draw strength from it. When he eventually spoke, it was in a voice quieter and more precise than McCoy had ever heard before.

"I asked...Jim...to leave because I have no wish to see him suffer, and I will ask you to ensure the same thing after I have explained the situation to you."

"What do you mean, Spock? Explain yourself, man!"

"Doctor, please have patience. You have read my reports, made during the survey I carried out on Addressa 7?"

"Of course I have! What is this?" Bones was fast losing the patience that Spock had requested him to have. The Vulcan gestured him to sit, and McCoy did so.

"You recall that I discovered ancient ruins, ruins more ancient than my tricorder could register at the time?"

"Y-es...." The doctor was growing more cautious, more - worried by the intensity of the Vulcan's voice.

"I have, since the survey, been able to establish that the ruins were built by a landing party consisting of Vulcans, from the time before Surak. Primitive, barbaric, murderous, people of my race, yet so unlike us that we do not speak of them often.... Amidst those ruins a disease has bred, carried there from their time, held in incubation - until now. We thought it extinct long ago, but it obviously has properties that even we Vulcans did not suspect. It is undetectable in its first stages...detectable only when it is too late.... They left it there - for me to find." His last words were unusually harshly delivered and McCoy sat straighter in his chair, and took a deep breath, afraid of what was going to be said next.

"Spock. What are you trying to say?"

"Doctor McCoy. I have that disease."

McCoy sank deeper into the depths of his inner self, unsure of what to do or say. He was stunned, and he felt disbelief forming. But the total lack of any expression on Spock's face proved the truth in the Vulcan's words.

"What disease, Spock?" The words were gentle, completely devoid of any of the normal McCoy sarcasm. "What do you mean when you say that it is undetectable - till it's too late?"

"Doctor, the disease, the great plague of Vulcan, is called the Skag Maug. It has been extinct for centuries on my planet...and there is NO cure. I will soon die."

Spock had turned to the doctor, calm, seemingly unconcerned by his revelation. It was inevitable that the characteristic McCoy explosion was to follow.

"I wish people would leave medicine to me around here! Allow me to decide if and when you will die, Spock!!" He instantly realised what he had said and regretted it, but as always it was too late after his tongue had done its work. All he could do was mumble an apology.

"Apologies are unnecessary...Bones. All I require is a promise."

"Name it, my friend."

"Jim must not know until it is absolutely necessary. You must help me keep it...from him...it must be a...secret...until he has to know." Spock turned away once more, allowing the significance of his words to penetrate the doctor's brain. "Now you know the truth you can, perhaps, help my failing sight and hearing by bestowing on me the dubious benefits of your beads and rattles.... I need to remain functional for a short while more. I need more time...with Jim...there are things to be said...."

The last sentence was whispered, and Bones could barely hear the tortured words.

"...Failing sight..."

"I do not blame you doctor. You know nothing of this disease and you could not be expected to. The name of the plague lives in our history, but the symptoms are unknown...to everyone except the Vulcan race. The cure, too, has been lost to everyone.... My sight began to blur soon after I returned from the planet survey, and I concluded then that it was, perhaps, the first symptom. It is illogical, but I suspected that the plague was present, even though I knew nothing of the nature of the ruins or the planet. But, though inexorable, it is progressing

slowly. It is my hearing which seems to have deteriorated most quickly." He hesitated. "I ask you, doctor, to agree to my wishes concerning Jim. He...could not cope with this... Not yet...."

Bones' professionalism took hold of him, stunned though he was.

"I'll do as you ask...for now. But I can't promise how long I can keep your secret. Jim knows you too well to hide a thing like this from him for long, and he would want to know, Spock!"

"Not yet!"

"Agreed. But I want you to come to sickbay with me. I have to believe what you have told me, but I have to try and help you! I can't just stand by!"

The Vulcan's eyes softened, affection for his friend clearly evident.

"I understand, doctor, and I will not combat you in this issue...."

McCoy nodded, thankful, and rose unsteadily to his feet. His eyes were misted, for he knew full well that what Spock had stated was true. He, of all people, would have researched it all so very carefully, so thoroughly, and no matter how much he, Bones McCoy hoped there would be a mistake, he knew that there would be none. The Enterprise chief surgeon was helpless. His suggestion of a medical examination was a useless, futile gesture, but one he had to make.

He forced his feet forward and placed his shaking hand upon the lean, stiffened shoulder. "Don't worry, Spock. Jim won't suffer. I'll make sure of that. I promise you."

Spock nodded his thanks. "One more thing, Spock. I have to ask this."

"Proceed."

"H...How long?"

"A matter of days only, Bones. There will not be much time for any of us. Jim and I have shared much over the years, but I regret that we did not get to know each other better."

"Spock, my friend. I think we know each other better than either of us will admit."

Spock looked away, perhaps afraid of what his face might divulge to the doctor, but then he turned back to meet the penetrating blue eyes of the Georgian gentleman.

"I trust you, McCoy."

The two men left the austere surroundings side by side.

James Kirk had left the first officer's quarters in a miasma of conflicting emotions. He wanted to help, but couldn't. He wanted to be at Spock's side, but couldn't be. And he felt suddenly inadequate.

The corridor was unwelcome, cold, lonely, despite the fact that crew was abundant as always. The corridor lights merged into psychedelic confusion and he found himself having to stop walking as everything coalesced, putting his one hand against the bulkhead in support. The other wiped the perspiration from his brow and rubbed his tired eyes.

It would do not good to return to the bridge now. What he needed desperately was privacy, and time to think. He reached for the intercom button and checked with Sulu that all was well on the bridge. Having received confirmation that all was most definitely running smoothly, he headed for the one place on the ship where he could find solace.

It did not take him long to reach the observation deck, and he revelled in the wonderful feeling of freedom and peace that the sight of open space gave to him. He paced the deck, hands behind his back, and pondered the future. The feeling of forboding that he had felt on the bridge returned twofold, and he could not help thinking the worst. Would McCoy find that there was something wrong with their Vulcan that he could not cure this time? No! Morbidity would help none of them!

He pulled his commandatorial shoulders erect and proud around him and strode towards the door, the bridge and 'his' chair his goal.

Uhura turned towards her Captain as he entered his domain once more, a little surprised to see him unaccompanied by Spock. None of the bridge crew knew what had transpired since their Captain had left them an hour before.

"Doctor McCoy has requested that you contact him in sickbay, sir."

Nodding quickly, he moved to the deserted science station as if it resembled an ironic solution to his turmoil. Sulu, who had stood up to hand command back over to Kirk, promptly sat down again.

"Kirk here, Bones. What's happened?"

Bones coughed a little before answering. "I've run some tests and there's little else I can do. There's no immediate problem, just a requirement for observation." It wasn't a lie.

"But there is something wrong with him?"

"He's been overworking, that's all. Those reports he made back on Addressa 7 needed a lot of extra correlation. You know what he's like, Jim. I sometimes wonder if he's a workoholic or something. Anyway, stop worrying. He's on his way back up now."

"Okay, I'll take your word for it, Bones, but why the hell did he ask me to leave? Hell, he didn't ask, he told me. Why?"

Bones was thoughtful, and thankful too, for the fact that their conversation was not on visual. His eyes were again misted for he had found, as he'd expected to, that there was nothing he could do to help in any way. He tried his best to sound cheerfully confident, his normal self as he replied:

"Now would you like to be observed while being medically examined? I never thought I'd see the day when Spock was modest, but this is the one. Now cheer up! How about joining me for a drink later?" McCoy was thinking something very different to what he had spoken, however. Mentally he was hoping desperately that Jim would accept his offer. Why he did not know. But he knew he needed to talk to him. His wishes were not answered, though. The reply that came to him was -

"Thanks Bones, but no thanks. I'm not in a drinking mood, and I wouldn't be very good company right now. Another time. Thanks for seeing Spock for me. I'll try and take your advice!" The intercom was closed.

Spock entered the bridge, his presence as tangible as ever, definitely their Vulcan.

"If you don't mind, sir, I would appreciate it if I could resume my station. Your presence would be much appreciated if it were occupying your own command chair."

Jim smiled his special smile, welcoming Spock back to the bridge, and pushed his hair back as he stood up.

"Be my guest. Spock?"

"Sir?"

"Oh, never mind, Spock."

The lean figure resumed his seat, a gleam in his eye as he revelled in the pure joy which he suddenly realised he felt at being able to tease his friend.

Spock joined his friend in his cabin when their mutual duty shift had ended. A chess game was their initial intention, but Spock seemed to be unable to concentrate.

"What is wrong, my friend? Your...mind...is not on the game. And I've noticed today that you keep on watching me... Why?" Though Jim's words were serious, and his intent, too, he still aimed his familiar smile at the man opposite him. It brought an unusually poignant reaction - Spock, too, smiled. "I wish so much that you would do that more often, Spock. It is not wrong to show your emotion in that way." Jim placed his hands upon the table, palms upwards. "Now please tell

me. What is wrong?"

Instead of answering the question immediately, Spock placed his hands too, upon the table, his fingertips touching Jim's, and stared at them for several seconds. Jim hardly dared to breathe.

"You have always been a very...special...individual to me, Jim. Ever since I first saw you, since the time you assumed command of this vessel, I have felt a strange rapport between us. It cannot be explained, it simply exists. I can admit that - now. It has grown and strengthened, has it not?"

Thoughtful, reticent, Jim simply nodded in reply, smiling again.

"You made me into the...man...I am, Jim. You helped me see that to...feel...is not wrong; that to show your affection and friendship for my fellow man, for you, is a right thing to do. I have accepted the human half of me, thanks to you, and that is why I am now able to say these things to you - and they have waited far too long. I thank you for helping me to live my life instead of simply existing in it." He stopped suddenly, and looked at the golden head before him, bowed in thought. It was not like him to show such emotionalism, but the time was so short now, and he had delayed so long in saying them, that he knew they had to be said before it was too late. He hoped that Jim would understand without an explanation.

Jim could sense the scrutiny and raised his head to meet the penetrating eyes.

"I'm not sure why you suddenly felt the need to say those things after all these years, Spock, but I'm overjoyed that you finally found what you needed to enable you to say them. It means so much to me to know that I have been able to help you, if only in a small way. You're special to me, too, but I think you have always known that." The Vulcan nodded. Jim smiled again, happy to know that the Vulcan could see beneath what he kept visible for his crew. "I would not be the Captain I am without you at my side, Spock. You made me what I am!"

"Captain, you are what you are. It takes a special man to make a special Captain, and you are that man. I simply provided the medium which you used to aid you in your decisions and your command life."

"Used, Spock? A poor choice of words, if I may say so. I would never use you!"

"Agreed, Captain. I did not wish the statement to have that meaning."

"I know. And I understand what you were trying to say. I thank you for always being there, always at my side. You were there in the beginning, and you'll be there at the end."

Spock's eyes suddenly closed, causing Jim to rush to his side, his arms automatically clutching his shoulders. "Spock! What's wrong? What did I say?"

Haunted eyes met the hazel ones of the Enterprise Captain, as the words were whispered in reply. He could not tell Jim that he would not be there at the end. Not yet. But he had to say something. "There is nothing 'wrong', Jim, I assure you. I am simply a little - overwhelmed, I think the word is - to hear such things said about me. It is illogical to feel that way, but I do nonetheless. I...thank you." He rose and looked down at his Captain who remained on his knees in surprise at the sudden movement. "If you will excuse me, Jim, I shall retire now. Thank you for what has been said here today. It was long...overdue. Thank you, too, for the game, and I apologise for being unable to complete it."

"Nonsense, Spock. Another time. There'll be plenty of time. Goodnight. I'll see you in the morning."

As the door closed behind his first officer, Jim found himself whispering "Sleep well...." And he rubbed his fingertips together, where Spock had touched them, in a gesture of deep affection.

It was a few days later that the inexplicable occurred; at least it was the inexplicable to all but Spock and McCoy. While working in the science laboratory, carrying out experiments where he was separating different cultures to examine them more thoroughly, the precise, unerring Vulcan, dropped them to the floor. The technicians nearby stared in astonishment, and the junior science officer, Millotus, who had been assisting the first officer, backed away. He was totally unsure of what to do or say. Such a thing had never happened before!

Finally finding his tongue, Millotus spoke, very quietly, disciplined.

"Is there anything I can do, Mr. Spock?"

Cold eyes, housed in a face of stone turned on him, and the young man shivered.

"Complete the experiment, Lieutenant, and report to me on completion. And you will cease to pry!"

The words were delivered forcefully, and as the Vulcan turned to leave the room, the air became charged with an aura of expectation. Millotus was unsure of what would happen next, and he remained rooted to the spot, completely shaken by the reprimand he had received - for no reason. He was tempted to contact the sickbay, but felt it was not his place to do so. He decided to simply 'keep it to himself' for the present. He would forever regret that decision.

The impossible had occurred this day. Spock had lost his temper, had become...emotional. They waited.

But nothing else occurred. The Vulcan placed his arms rigidly at his side, and walked slowly from the room. If the technicians could have seen the normally impassive face of their first officer, they would have seen tears in the dark brown eyes. It was no longer impassive.

Thankfully the corridor was deserted and there was no-one to witness the emotion which Spock could no longer keep in check. His brilliant brain waves were confused, frustrated into submission. He knew that his faculties were failing him, that the time was very near now. He would soon be totally blind, for the contact lenses that Bones had developed for him no longer helped. And the pain would soon become more than even his Vulcan will could control. It was time to go to McCoy, and to tell Jim...but first there was something that had to be done, before it was too late. A tape to record. As he had listened to Jim's last orders when his Captain had been lost in the Tholian Web, then this would be his way of telling Jim of his...feelings...for him. His only real chance. His last chance.

Only a few hours had passed, and yet by the time the tall man clad in blue entered Dr. McCoy's office, he was in the throes of convulsive pain, wracking his entire body, and he actually shivered with its effect.

Bones was too experienced not to notice the pain which Spock was valiantly trying to disguise, and rushed instantly to his side, guiding him to a chair. A painkilling injection hissed against the Vulcan's arm.

Bones almost choked on the words that had to be said. "It's time, then, Spock?"

"Affirmative. My faculties are deserting me. I can no longer function as first officer, and I will not let the efficiency of the Enterprise suffer due to my debility. I would be gratified if you could possibly provide me with further...medication...."

Bones cut him off. "Spock, you've already been dosed up to those exquisite eyebrows of yours. I daren't give you anything further. Do I understand you to be saying that you can no longer control that pain?"

Spock nodded, and shook suddenly as another wave of pain took him.

"Then the only alternative now is permanent sedation."

"No!" His eyes were wild, and his fist slammed down onto the desktop, in a gesture so unlike Spock that Bones found himself stepping backwards in surprise. Seeming to realise what he was displaying, Spock schooled his features into the impassive expression of normal, and said, "I apologise, doctor. I will not require sedation. I will not require your aid at all for very much longer... I will be able to sustain control for the length of time I will require to do what must be done."

"Jim? You want me to tell him, now?"

Spock nodded again. "It would be...better...for him if the information came from you. I regret having to place such a burden upon your shoulders...Bones."

"If this is all I can do for you, my friend, then I will do it gladly. I should have told him before, Spock.... Will you go to bed? A private room? Please?"

"Very well, doctor, though it matters little where the inevitable occurs."

The calm logic, the total acceptance of the situation, shook McCoy to the very core of his being. He wished that he could school himself as Spock had done, and thus be able to help his friends more fully in this great need of theirs. But he was human, he was McCoy, and he could not be what he was not. Not even now. Not even for them. And they wouldn't want him to be.

Wordlessly he showed their unique first officer into the private room he had already prepared, knowing that there would be need of it. Then, returning to his office, shaking, trembling with reaction, he thumbed the intercom button.

"Bridge."

"Bridge. Kirk here."

"Jim...I...I need to see you. Can you leave the bridge?"

"Can't it wait till later, Bones?"

"No!" Bones took a deep sigh, and swept his hair back from a brow that was wet with the perspiration of despair. "No, I've waited too long already.... In your cabin, okay? In five minutes... Please!"

"Okay, Bones. Okay. I'll be right down." Jim's voice had softened significantly, and he stared at the intercom with concern. He broke the contact, but remained seated. Something was definitely wrong. His chief surgeon was worried about something.... Well, sitting here would not give him the answer.

"You have the con, Mr. Sulu. I'll be in my quarters."

"Aye, sir."

Captain James Kirk mounted the bridge steps with alacrity, giving Uhura a friendly smile as he did so, and exited.

The cabin door was closed, but Jim could sense that Bones was already inside - and that was definitely not like him. It dilated at his approach, and he entered quickly. Bones was seated at his desk, a glass in his hand.

"Hope you don't mind, Jim...perhaps you'd better join me...and sit down." He waved the glass in the air.

Dazed, bemused, Jim did as Bones bade, not really thinking why. It seemed an automatic reaction, somehow, a duplication of something they'd done often before. But this time? This time it was different. As he sat opposite the chief surgeon his confusion turned to deep concern. The deep blue eyes were haunted. No - worse! More than that...they were cold and lifeless, almost like the stone that sometimes inhabited the sockets of his Vulcan friend. Realisation suddenly dawned.

"Spock! It's him, isn't it? There's something wrong.... I've been hearing isolated reports recently about Spock dropping things, knocking things over. But I've been treating them as unsubstantiated rumours, thinking that you'd tell me if something truly was wrong. Were those rumours correct?" Jim had given Bones little time to answer

his question directly, instead choosing to portray his concern in the spoken word. Now he was giving Bones the chance to speak, the doctor felt unable to. He downed a large gulp of the green liquid before him, then turned the glass slowly around in his hand before downing the last drop and replying.

"I sometimes wish to God that you weren't so damned perceptive! I could have done with a few more of these before having to tell you this...." He was staring at the empty glass. Noticing that the bottle was out of reach, he reached over for Jim's glass which remained untouched before him. Kirk placed his hand on top of Bones', preventing him from doing so.

"Tell me what?" He remained as calm as possible but his patience was shortening fast.

"Jim, my friend. There is no easy way of saying this.... I only wish.... Jim, Spock is dying."

The silence was deafening, and Bones squirmed in his chair under the glare of his commanding officer.

"You're drunk! You must be!! That's some sick joke, McCoy!" His angry disbelief echoed around the enclosed space of the cabin, and Bones clutched his head. He'd expected an outburst, of course, but hadn't expected to be immediately condemned. Instantly, he rose to his feet, looking hurt and dejected. He pushed the glass aside, watching it fall to smash upon the floor.

"I'm as sober as you! If only I could say it was a joke! If only I didn't have to stand by hopelessly, and watch that...that beautiful man...die...."

Kirk, too had risen to his feet. His initial anger seemed to dissipate immediately as he saw the seriousness, the expression of despair etched into the other man's face, and he stared at the shattered glass, unable to meet the blazing eyes.

'If this is true...then my life will be like that glass...shattered ...destroyed.'

"And how the hell do you think I feel?"

Jim had been thinking out loud in his confusion, and had to shake himself back to reality. He looked at the doctor, pity in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Bones. So very sorry.... I need the truth."

Nodding, McCoy paced the room, as if hoping that the movement would drive away the demon of despair. But it didn't help. It only served to worsen his feeling of frustration, and he sank onto the bed. Jim followed him, numbed, disbelieving, not wanting to hear the truth he knew had to come, but also knowing that he had to hear it.

"It's a disease, Jim...long extinct...called the Skaag Maug. Spock ...picked it up back on Addressa 7...."

Interposing desperately, Jim asked, "There's a cure! There's got to be?!"

"No. No cure. Not even the Vulcans know of one. All records have been lost during the passing of infinity... Infinity. A long time.... The infinity of life - and death...." He seemed to pull himself together again before continuing, "It's undetectable...till it's too late ...and I'm totally, completely helpless...."

His voice finally broke and McCoy's head sank into his hands and the tears freely flowed across his cheeks. It was the first time he'd allowed himself to cry over this. The first time he'd allowed himself to leave the road of professionalism.

Jim sank to his knees beside his friend, surprising himself at his own acceptance of the facts, now he knew them fully. He knew now of the truth, that Bones had relayed to him the facts as they were known. The time had come. The time both he, and Spock, had always dreaded. Death. An ugly word, for it meant the ultimate separation, and he, James Kirk, had always feared the day.

Instead of screaming insanely down the corridors, however, as he'd dreamt himself doing so many times before, he found himself with his arms around Bones, as his own tears began to fall. Each attempted, in vain, to give comfort to the other.

Between the sobs Bones talked, confused, erratic. "I should have seen that something was wrong...when he first got back...could've done something...so damned helpless...nothing I can do...."

"You couldn't have known, Bones. You just said it...it's undetectable - till it's too late...." A sigh racked the young body as the truth sank further into his already numbed brain. "Why didn't you tell me before...I might have been able to help him... There's much to be said...."

The brilliant blue eyes met the misted hazel ones and their owner's arms encircled the yellow-clad shoulders.

"It was his wish, Jim, that you didn't know until...the time...was near. He loves you, Jim...loves you too much to see you suffer."

Jim's head fell onto the older man's shoulder, mentally acknowledging what his friend had gone through - for him. Both of them had suffered, to prevent him suffering. He felt very young all of a sudden, very vulnerable, very helpless.

Bones felt as if he'd unavoidably been placed into the role of the father that Jim had lost, and he found his hand running through the unruly locks of golden hair. And he felt the need to talk, to reassure the young man before him that what had been done was for him, because of him.

"Spock knows how you feel, Jim. And I can see that there is a great deal more than friendship between the pair of you. I think, perhaps, Spock has come to replace Sam, to become the brother that you needed so badly. I've been a bystander for quite a while now...." Jim looked up then, pained, but Bones continued quickly as the weary head returned to the shoulder of support. "Don't worry, Jim. I've liked it that way. I've been so happy for the two of you. To see you happy, content in each others company, revelling in the life that you share, that has sustained me through a great deal. And you never shut me out. I couldn't share what you have - but you were always there if I needed you. Know that I will be near now when you most need someone; that I feel even deeper for the...loss you will have to face."

The words had been somewhat inappropriate, but they had also needed to be said, and Bones couldn't bring himself to regret saying it.

"Where is he, Bones?" The young head slowly rose once more, and the body had pulled itself upright, shaking with reaction, as Bones himself had done in sickbay. The question had been inevitable, and it did not surprise the doctor. He simply whispered, "Sickbay."

Jim wiped the tears of grief from the eyes full of emotion and pulled his shirt straight before exiting his cabin. He walked like an old man instead of the vibrant Captain that he was.

It seemed to take forever to reach the ship's hospital and when the doors eventually did beckon him, he found himself hesitating outside them, steeling himself for the moment that he'd willingly trade the universe to avoid. Finally, after taking a deep breath, he stepped through the sterility field and into the medical complex.

Nurse Chapel stepped forward to greet her Captain, but he shook his head and walked past her, instinctively knowing where to go. Christine was as oblivious as everyone aboard ship to what was occurring in the private room.

The door of that private room was painted red for it signified the domain of those in intensive care normally. This, however, was not normal, but the macabre abnormal. Kirk walked through the door and stood just inside it, allowing his eyes to become accustomed to the dimmed lighting. The bed was definitely occupied and his heart missed

a beat as he recognised the elegant ears of his dearest friend. Spock's breathing was shallow, but regular, and it was obvious that he slept - or was, perhaps, in the depths of meditation. Either way he would not know that there was anyone present for a while. And that was exactly how Jim wanted it - for a while.

James Kirk stood beside the bed, his hands behind his back, lest he be tempted to touch the perfect face upon the pillow, and disturb the untroubled 'sleep'. The Vulcan looked so peaceful there; lying, seemingly oblivious to the fate that awaited him in...how long? Weeks? Days? ...or perhaps only hours.... He shivered, and looked at the face and beyond. He could see behind those eyes, in part, into the mind that was closed to all others. But he was willing himself to be able to communicate how he felt.

What am I to do, Spock? My life will end with yours, as surely as if my heart itself stopped beating....

He had to fight back the tears as Spock stirred, and the Vulcan's eyelids slowly opened. He did not turn however. He simply whispered one word.

"Jim."

"I'm here, Spock!" Kirk took the hand that lay beside the still, lean body into his. Spock squeezed it gently.

"McCoy has informed you of the...situation?"

"Y...Yes, Spock. I know of it...."

This time the head did turn towards Jim, but as he met the eyes that dominated the 'alien' face, he realised with a start that they were sightless.

"Spock...Y..You're blind!"

"Do not fret, my friend. I have had prior experience of this particular infringement on my life. Unfortunately, my second eyelid will not rise this time." Jim shivered as he recalled the incident Spock was referring to. He had lost his brother on Deneva and had caused Spock's blindness. Now he was to lose his brother again.... "I can see you, Jim. As clearly as ever. I always did think you a handsome man... that smile of yours, and that lock of hair...." He stopped himself in mid-sentence. Then continued, haltingly. "Forgive me, Jim. It is not...like me...to reduce myself to emotionalism...and yet, though I apologise, I do not regret that which I have said."

This time it was Jim who squeezed the hand which he held in his. "There is nothing to regret. I feel so pleased that you can think of me in that way.... It means an awful lot to me...especially now...."

"Jim, please do not avoid the subject. The...time...is very near now. Time is too short for us to be false with one another, and now is not the time to begin acting like that towards each other, after all these years."

Kirk looked deep within the dark eyes. They had always been so vital, so alive...had always provided the means by which the special Vulcan had been able to revel in which he 'loved' most - the scientific and the curious occupations of his life. Now all that was already lost to him.

"I want to face this, Spock...but how can I? I've always tried to accept the fact that...death...could claim either of us at any time. But I'd always hoped it would claim me first. Especially now...."

"Hell, I'm sorry. That sounds so damned selfish, so self-centred ...so...."

"Jim! You must never speak like that of yourself. I...have always felt the same way. It is fortunate for me that my wish has been granted."

"But how can I live without you, Spock? You are me!" He sighed then. "It sounds as though I'm crying out for pity. I'm not, and yet.... It is I who should be helping you, and instead I'm proclaiming my grief!"

"Jim, my friend...my brother...you're helping me more than you could ever know, just by being here, just by being you. And please do not feel the need to apologise. Friends should never feel that need. Real friends understand, can feel the other - what they're doing and thinking.... I know that you're looking at me and I can see you as I have so many times before. I know that there is no pity in your eyes, just that unique affection that you keep for the few. I feel honoured and privileged to be one of the few in your life. I know that you're thinking of all the times we've shared danger - and escaped. We've always returned together before...but this time you will have to return alone.."

James Kirk was crying now. He could stop himself no longer, but he felt no embarrassment or regret.

"The meld, Spock? Is that how you know?"

"Mainly, Jim. The meld is powerful between us...and even death will not break it entirely...does that concern you?"

"I've never been so happy, Spock. It's the one morsel of hope that I have, now."

"I am pleased. It is more than the meld alone, however. I said before, in your cabin, that there was a special rapport between us. Do you still feel that?" Jim immediately nodded in agreement. "That is good. Things will be easier...for both of us."

Not sure of what his Vulcan meant by that, he found himself asking the one question that Spock, had, in part, been fearing.

"What Spock? What will be easier for us?"

Spock moved slightly - and groaned. The pain was worse now, and the few injections that McCoy still allowed him no longer helped. Jim moved nearer in support. The Vulcan brought his other hand over towards Jim and wiped the tears from his cheek before holding on to the young shoulder.

"Before I ask you what I have to ask, I must tell you this. Though no-one knows the full signs and symptoms of this disease, I do know that they will be...unpleasant...."

"It won't affect me, Spock! I'll stay at your side...through everything!"

"I know that - but you must allow me to continue, Jim. I must tell you this to...attempt to explain.... My sight has already left me, my hearing, too, is impaired. Soon my co-ordination will become affected...and my speech...."

"But that means...."

"Yes, my perceptive friend. My brain will become affected...long before the end...."

Jim's mind screamed in protest. *No! Not the ultimate destruction! Not for Spock! God, no!* It shouted contempt at whatever deity watched over them. *Not the destruction of his logic, his intellect, his reason, his very will! His very soul will be destroyed. No! Death itself would be preferable. He could accept that - but not in that way.*

The meld had told Spock what Jim had been thinking, and he placed his fingers gently upon the cheek of the grief-wracked human.

"You understand, Jim. It is difficult for you to accept that fact, but please derive solace from it. You do understand. And that is so important - you must understand when I ask you what I must."

Taking a deep breath, Jim spoke very quietly, very carefully.

"Ask Spock. Just ask."

"Jim, my...brother...please allow me dignity, the dignity so important to my race, to me. Allow me to die now, before I lose all.... I could not contemplate a life, no matter how short, without my intellect. Do not force me to live longer...than...now."

"Y...you want me to...Kill you?!"

"No. Kill me, no. I'm asking you to allow me to die - there is a difference."

Jim sank his head onto the side of the bed, shocked, drained, and Spock placed his hand upon the head - exactly as Bones had done only an hour before. His thoughts were tangled and confused.

Euthanasia...he's asking me to perform euthanasia.... It's not the easy way out, though - far from it. He's providing a means of lessening the agony for others...for me. It's his wish to leave us in this way, so have I the right to stand in his way, to oppose him?... But can I do it?... Kirk's hand was convulsively clenching, and he found himself squeezing the Vulcan's hand hard, as if it were the only way he could prove to himself that the Vulcan was still with him - for the present at least. *I cannot contemplate a life alone, and yet I cannot stand by and see him in pain if I have the means within my grasp to prevent it. Terror would be there, too, besides the pain. Yes, even for him there would be terror. It would rear its head as the faculties so important to him continued to fail him. I cannot allow that...can I?!*

"Jim, I do not want to force your decision, but I must know soon. There is not much time."

Their eyes met once more, sightless though Spock's were, and even though Jim had found himself momentarily contemplating the unified sleep of eternity, he could instantly see in those eyes that Spock would not have Jim's death with his. He wouldn't have it - and he couldn't have it.

Jim found his voice. "Spock, we've faced so much together; we've been together longer than I can remember. I cannot contemplate us... not together! McCoy was right. You have come to replace Sam, in fact you've become more of a brother than even he was. It's hard for me to have to face losing a brother again...and yet, how can I oppose you in this, if it is what you really want?*

"Do you have to ask?"

"No. I know. I think I always have. Deep down I've always known the way you'd want things to be in a situation such as this. I've just not been able to face it before. What can I say...." He breathed a long shuddering sigh. "I answer yes to your request. I promise to do as you ask...because of you...."

Strangely, he no longer cried. And yet perhaps it wasn't so strange after all. The need to cry was no longer present because he had promised to do what Spock ~~most~~ wanted him to. What he most needed now was strength enough - for both of them - to carry this through.

But his answer wasn't quite enough. There was something else held within the depths of brown, and that something didn't have to be orally stated. Jim knew what it was instinctively. Spock was asking him, begging him not to join him in eternal darkness. Reassurance was desperately needed.

"Spock, my friend, I promise you...to face the future...for you. I will live my life - and yours! Whatever I do, wherever I go, you will be there, by my side, as always!"

"That is all I want to know Jim." He smiled then, that beautiful, meaningful, affectionate smile which he showed to only one man in all the universe. And Jim found himself responding, despite everything. He didn't feel depressed or unhappy any longer, for this was what Spock wanted, this was the way it had to be, for both of them.

Spock could sense his friend's eyes on him, and he luxuriated in the feeling of pure love which flowed over him. It was unfair in many respects that a situation like this was the one to cause him to admit his true feelings. Now was not the time, however. His Captain would soon find out. *It will not be long, Jim. You will soon join me. It is our destiny to be together through all time.*

They squeezed each others hands again, offering the silent agreement, the private pact. It was all the strength Spock had left. He could do no more.

I'll be back, Spock...in a moment."

The Vulcan didn't have to ask the human where he was going. It was what he himself wanted...it would not take long.

Jim walked in a kind of daze. He felt doubt in himself. Would he be able to carry it through? But in the same instant he realised that the special love that bound the two of them together would give him the courage to carry out Spock's last wish.

The outer room was deserted. Bones had obviously arranged everything. The medicine cabinet was unlocked, too. Realisation struck home. McCoy had known all along what Spock had intended, had known that he would ask his Captain to carry it out. His supposition was substantiated by the fact that a hypospray, filled with Neural Paralyser, stood ready. An overdose was lethal for Vulcans, but it would be painless and swift.

Kirk looked at the hypospray for several seconds before attempting to pick it up. When he did attempt it, his hands were shaking so much that he dropped it to shatter the silence which thickened the air around him. The sweat dripped from his brow and he bent to retrieve it. Finally, with it safely held between unsteady fingers he turned back towards the blood-red door.

Spock continued to stare at the entrance to his room, and he sensed immediately that James Kirk had re-entered.

"I told you once, Jim, after our visit to Omicron Ceti III, that that was the first time in my life that I had been happy. I was wrong. I realise that now. I've been happy ever since I've known you - it's just that I've never been able to admit it - till now. Come, sit beside me again."

Jim complied, only too pleased to see that Spock wanted to delay the inevitable a little longer. The long, tender fingers once more caressed his cheek, ran through his hair, savouring that which was, and always would be his own. Then the hand dropped suddenly to pat Jim's hand in which the hypo lay. It was the final, silent request, and Jim knew it. He knew, too, that he couldn't let his friend down, that it was not the time to think of himself - only Spock. He took a deep, deep breath and gripped the hypo more tightly before gently pulling his hand away from the Vulcan's. Placing it gently against the arm, lying unmoving now, he pressed the plunger home. It hissed quietly in the deathly silence, and Jim found himself shivering slightly.

Spock smiled, and raised his hand with the remaining strength he had left. Jim took it in both his eagerly, and listened to the breathing of his friend as it began to slow into the rhythm of...sleep. He whispered four short, sweet words:

"I love you, Spock."

The Vulcan's face was strangely peaceful. He'd accepted what had to occur, and was thankful for what James Kirk had done for him. Jim's face, too, was calm, but within him his soul was in torment. But his eyes never left the face of his dearest friend. He waited for 'the moment', hardly breathing himself, now, and dreaded it. As he watched, the dark windows, sightless for so long now, closed, and the breathing ceased. Spock's hand grew cold in his.

Jim's body arched in agony and he sat up quickly. "No!" He hugged the still body and whispered again "I love you, Spock." He felt empty, alone, as if all others were gone, as if he were the only person left in the entire universe - in all infinity. His heart felt cold, his mind numbed and confused. And yet, despite the grief he found himself smiling gently, and ensconced in an aura of happiness as he realised that he had been able to carry out what Spock had wanted. The very special Vulcan was at peace now - sleeping peacefully, dreaming peacefully,

free from pain. And he was as dignified in that sleep as he had been in his unique life. Kirk nestled into the Vulcan's chest, their hands still entwined....

It was there that Bones McCoy found them.

M'Benga and Nurse Chapel had accompanied him into the room, but when Bones saw the embrace before him he said but one word, "Out!" Shocked, stunned, they could do nothing but obey. Neither knew who the two bodies upon the bed were.

McCoy's legs were shaking, and threatening to give out on him at any moment, but he forced himself forward, knowing that he would have to be the one to break the embrace - otherwise it would never be broken. His hand reached out, hesitantly, and laid upon the young shoulder. It was not wracked with sobs as Bones had expected it to be and for a moment he feared that Jim had chosen to join the Vulcan in the eternal sleep - but no. That was not the way it would be. He knew only too well, knew Spock too well.

The head rose slowly until its owner was sitting upright, then it turned, as if in slow motion, to stare at Bones. There were no tears. It wasn't entirely sane. McCoy's heart missed several beats.

"B...Bones...I'm glad you came. You knew, didn't you!" It wasn't a question.

"I knew. He didn't tell me his intentions - but I knew."

As they spoke, Jim's fingers wandered to the face once more, perhaps attempting to establish the meld once more, perhaps just forming a final physical link before he prised the stiff fingers from his other hand, as he knew he'd have to.

"I want to thank you, Bones. For him, for me...but there aren't words enough.... It was what he wanted, and what I had to do.... So long.... So many years.... So many missions.... Must leave you now, my friend.... Don't want to but I know I must - to keep my promise...." The words were becoming disjointed, and McCoy watched both men anxiously, fear growing within him. As he watched, Jim brought his one hand down from the calm, cold face, and broke the death grip. There was a small crack as the fingers broke, and Jim jumped as he realised what he had done. Pulling himself suddenly to his feet, bumping into Bones as he did so, and making him, too, jump violently, he backed away slightly. The hazel eyes never left the still form.

"Take care of him for me, Bones.... I'll take him home...."

Captain James T. Kirk backed even further from the bed - and ran.

The observation deck again. Always the place to host the Starship Captain in times of distress, or important decisions for which he could find no solution. Usually it was the only place upon the ship where he could find real peace, real tranquility in the face of 'danger'. But not this time. Not now. Not after...that. Even the beckoning stars did nothing for his tortured mind or soul. They just seemed to shine forth and accentuate the fact that one life no longer shone.

Did I do right? Even if that was what he wanted, did I have the right to do that? Self-doubt was beginning to manifest itself. It was inevitable. He paced the corridor, his hands held tightly behind his back. *What have I done?*

He was thankful that the deck was completely deserted, but as these thoughts were pouring through his brain a door slid aside at the opposite end of the deck, and a young ensign entered. She exited quickly, however, when she saw her Captain's face as he turned towards her. She had never seen such grief and guilt etched into a man's face before - and she hoped she'd never see it again. Perhaps she should contact Mr. Spock? But no. It was not her place to interfere with her Captain.

I did not wish you to suffer, my friend, and that is why I asked McCoy not to tell you until the time was near. Give him counsel for he has endured much for us both in the past - and especially now. He has borne this alone for a number of days, Jim. He is a good man, and a special friend..... I only wish I could have brought myself to tell him so. But I hope he is as perceptive as I believe him to be...." He hesitated again. This time it seemed to be hard for him to get his breath. Jim shuddered to see the effort that it took the man on the screen to complete the message that was so important to him, to both of them. Spock placed his hands at the side of his face, index fingers together, and looked directly at the screen again.

"And you, Jim? You are the unique man whom I've had the honour to call friend, whom I've come to know as my brother. You have integrity, the love of life and your fellow man, the concern for all which makes the greatest of leaders. You lead your ship, you lead your life. Those under you would follow you into hell if it was necessary. I am only sorry that I was not given that opportunity for I would have done so gladly. Instead I can only pledge to look over you, to watch over you.

I knew that you would agree to what I asked you to do, I knew before I asked, and it meant a great deal to me to be able to know that. Thank you for that, also. I would not wish you to grieve for long, Jim. And do not doubt that you did the right thing. It was logical for me to...go...before I became a burden on yourself, and the ship.

I want to ask you one final request, my friend. I want you to enjoy your life and take pleasure in it, as you always have. Life is its own answer, and you will discover that one day. Accept that fact - for both of us. Continue to do alone what we would have done together, and know that I am with you. Revel in it all - and I can lie in peace as I await you. We will live forever, together, when the times comes, for a love such as we have does not die with death. Till that time comes, then live life for both of us.

And remember one thing, James Kirk. I love you."

The veiwscreen held Spock's image for a few seconds more, then finally winked out. Jim had remained totally silent throughout, unable to speak even if he had wanted to. And he hadn't. Those words were far too precious to be needlessly interrupted.

He pulled himself upright, removing his hand from the viewscreen where his hand had been caressing the image of his special friend. He had just heard things that he had begun to think he would never hear - and he rejoiced. He rubbed eyes, wet with...what? Grief? Despair? No. A tear of pure joy had escaped. Spock had felt as he himself had, and that knowledge brought joy to his heart that he'd begun to think he'd never feel.

Jim held the tape very carefully between his fingers. Then whispered three words as he knelt down, bathed with the gentle light of the idlomputt, its flicker caressing him as Spock's fingers had.

"I promise, Spock."

* * * * *

A PROMISE KEPT

by

Karen Hayden

The life that I have,
Is all that I have,
And the life that I have
Is yours.

The love that I have
Of the life that I have,
Is yours and yours and yours.

A sleep I shall have,
A rest I shall have,
Yet death will be but a pause;
For the peace of my years,
In the long, green grass
Will be yours and yours and yours.

Author unknown.

"ETA at Vulcan, Mr. Sulu."

Sulu's voice was subdued as he answered his commanding officer.

"3.52 days, Sir."

"Very good. You have the con. until further notice."

None of the bridge crew were surprised to hear such orders. They had seen little of their Captain since they had received notification from sickbay of their First Officer's death. It had been a shock to all of them. They hadn't known of his illness, but had definitely realised that something was wrong. And he had been so conspicuous in his absence. Now they were beginning to adjust to the fact that that absence was now permanent, that Mr. Spock was dead. What they could not accept was their Captain's grief. There had been no details. But none were needed to clarify the fact that none of them wanted to admit. And as true as the fact was that Mr. Spock was dead, then equally true was the fact that half of Captain Kirk was dead also. It was evident to all.

Uhura found her eyes misting again as she watched the retreating back of James Kirk. That back was so straight, his shoulders held so high, his head so erect. But she could see past the calm command image that he portrayed for his crew. She could see that his soul was torn, his heart cracked, his mind numbed. She had handled the messages to and from Admiral Stockden at Starfleet Command. She knew what others didn't. She knew that Jim Kirk had fought to obtain permission to return Spock's body to Vulcan - and she knew full well that if they hadn't received that permission they would still be 3.52 days away from Vulcan now. If only she could help. If only she knew the details and reason for Spock's death she could, perhaps, help her friend and Captain.... But that could not be. And she knew it.

As soon as the turbolift doors closed behind him, Jim allowed himself to sag against the bulkhead. It was getting to be more of a strain every day to enter that bridge. The thrill of sitting in his command chair was non-existent. The glow was gone from his life. A special, very significant part of him was gone.

Was it only three days since his death? In some respects it seemed as if three centuries had passed.

As the lift drew to a halt on deck five, he schooled his features to meet his crew, and placed his hands behind his back to stop them shaking. His steps were hesitant as they walked along the corridor, and he noticed several pairs of eyes look in his direction. 'Where was their Captain's confident gait', they seemed to ask. But then they remembered, and averted those eyes.

As he neared the one special door on the entire ship, locked against all but his entry, he slowed his progress. He hadn't entered that cabin, Spock's cabin, since that evening when he had played the tape left by Spock. It wasn't that he had felt himself to be an intruder - that thought had been completely dispelled on that very visit. He was afraid. Afraid to enter into the Vulcan world aboard the ship; afraid to feel Spock's presence; afraid to remember too well. It would take time. And time was short. He would have to prepare Spock's possessions to hand over to his parents, together with his... body. No-one else could do it. He wouldn't allow anyone else to touch his possessions, to enter into his domain. That room was all that was left of him now - in the physical sense, at least, and it was sacred. He knew that Spock was always with him and would probably think his actions illogical - he shivered at the familiar word - but for now he had to continue with his illogic. Still three days left. Three days could be an eternity...or no time at all.

He forced his feet forward. Then stopped again outside his own cabin as the door dilated before him. That cabin was empty now. There was nothing there that he needed, or wanted.. Only one place aboard this ship could give him solace. He retraced his steps, looking longingly again at the door to the Vulcan's cabin as he passed it, and entered the turbolift.

Doctor Leonard McCoy looked up as the door opened and tensed as he saw Jim standing there.... He had dreaded this day. He had known it would come and was somewhat surprised that it hadn't come before.... But then he realised that it was not surprising at all.

He hadn't seen Jim Kirk since that night and had received only vague rumours of the Captain roaming the decks of his ship at all hours of the night and day - except for the rare and very short visits he had made to the bridge. Captain Kirk had spent much of the time on the observation deck - a place that most of the crewmembers now avoided since the encounter James Kirk had had with a young female ensign there.

Bones felt a stab of guilt that Jim had been coping with their First Officer's death on his own, but he, Leonard McCoy, had had his own guilt and grief to contend with. And Jim had never made the effort to come to him. He did not know that Jim had gone to the sickbay on there separate occasions during that three day period and had retreated each time in fear and trepidation. And that he, too, felt guilt that he had not gone to his friend's side.

He stood there now, as tense as Bones was, his hazel eyes glazed, his hair ruffled. Bones' own brilliant blue eyes misted as he stared at his friend, once so proud and strong, but now so...lost.

Using the desk as a much-needed support he pulled himself to his feet, and gestured Jim into the room, pointing to a seat opposite him. But Kirk remained immobile. Very quietly he spoke.

"I want to see him, Bones."

The time had come. McCoy's shoulders sagged. Then he nodded, and approached the doorway to his right that led to the mortuary. He hesitated to make sure that Jim was following. He was, slowly, but he looked as if he would collapse at any minute. His face was pale, his forehead beaded with sweat, his hands clenched tightly. But now was not

the time to give aid and Bones knew it - the doctor stepped through the door.

It was in this stark, cold, sterile, featureless room that he had spent over two hours carrying out the mandatory autopsy on his friend. Though he had dreaded doing it, and had found himself shaking each time he had hesitated, he had known that it was something he had to do - for Spock, for Jim, and for himself. None other could have performed such a task.

The Vulcan lay upon a table in the exact centre of the room. Bones had not been able to bring himself to place Spock in the cryogenic chamber, as was normal, but had, instead, lowered the temperature of the entire room to that which was required, and had left him lying in the dignified pose that was so very fitting.

Jim froze just inside the doorway, staring at his friend, lying there as if in state. Spock was in peace now, free from pain, and Jim found himself having to continually remind himself of that fact. Bones turned, his heels scraping on the floor and causing a grating noise to reverberate around the room and stir the thin sheet which covered the supine form. The hazel eyes were wet now, but the lips were parted in a smile of pure love. Bones had been so afraid that a breakdown would occur, but instead it proved to be what was most needed by the grief-filled man.

Suddenly he moved forward, slowly passing Bones, and reached hesitantly down to pick up the cold hand - a duplication of an act that he had performed only three days before. This was the first time he had looked upon Spock's face since he had run from that room and he was now revelling in what he was experiencing.

Bones, perceptive as always, left for a few minutes, and returned with a blanket from sickbay. Silently, he placed it around his young friend's shoulders as he sat beside the table, and gently squeezed the yellow clad shoulder in silent understanding. Then he left, closing the door behind him.

The room was silent. Silent except for the quiet breathing of the one man still alive in a duo which had no equal in the universe. That man of grief-wracked breath said no words, for the bond, still strong between them, meant there was no need. There would never again be the need for words, for the link would last forever. They would be together, forever.... They both knew that and believed.

In the link, however, Jim found himself 'voicing' his greatest fear again. Had he made the right decision? He had performed the task as Spock himself had requested; he had done as he had been asked to do, in the way he had been asked to do it. But, he realised, he had done it with few questions and little doubt. The idea of going to Vulcan for help had never entered his head; neither had he thought of going to the greatest medical minds in the galaxy for advice. He had taken Spock's word, as Dr. McCoy had done, and they had taken it as fact. Under normal circumstances he would not have now been questioning that special Vulcan's words. But the circumstances were not...normal. The disease might well have affected his logic, his reasoning capacity, much sooner than he had anticipated. He might have been wrong and they hadn't checked!

The guilt, heaped upon him by his thoughts of grief, caused his head to fall in weary dejection upon the chest beneath his hand. It was unmoving, cold. The life-forces were gone now. But the mental forces were more than alive! Spock's voice was inside his head; his emotions, too - those kept restrained for so long - they were being released now even easier than Spock had been able to release them near the end of his life. He needed no more battles in his life to keep his human side in check. Now he could show himself as he really was! The voice was

issuing forth its message very vehemently indeed, and it caused Jim to clutch the Vulcan's hand even tighter in reaction.

"Jim, you made a promise to me. You must not grieve so. The decision was the only one possible for both of us, and you did all you could have done before making it...as...Bones did."* There was only the slightest hesitation over the 'nickname' of their mutual friend. "You asked the questions you should have asked. There is no doubt in my mind. Please ease the doubt from yours. I love you all the more because of what you did and we will be together when the time comes. Till then, keep your promise, Jim. It is important to both of us...."*

Then the voice was gone. Jim looked hesitantly around the room, but there was no-one there. Only one person could have said those words to him. It hadn't been imagination, or delusion. It had been real and Jim knew it. It had been Spock's voice!

Pulling himself upright and looking down at the calm, dignified face lying upon the white sheet, haloed by the perfect black hair, Jim felt a surge of happiness within his heart and the grief seemed to dissipate greatly. All that Spock had said to him near 'the end', and on the tape which he now kept so carefully within his cabin, was being enhanced by what was now happening. Releasing the hand he had held for so long he whispered:

"I can keep the promise now, Spock, and I will!" With that parting phrase he headed for the door, his head erect and proud once more, knowing that though he would still grieve for his friend, he could cope with that grief now, and could cope with his life too. He also knew that he would not need to see Spock again. The face of his friend was forever implanted upon his mind and could always see it - and he had his voice, too, now, thanks to that final visit, and the bond. Now it was time to give Bones the help that he so desperately needed, as he had promised Spock that he would.

The office was empty and Jim felt panic quickly rising. Then he realised what it must have cost Bones to have seen his two friends together again like that. He must have retreated to his cabin with his grief, unable to face that room, or even sickbay at that time.

The poor doctor had had to withstand it all alone. The death of Spock; the autopsy; the never-ending questions from the crew. He'd had to withstand all that, just as he'd had to withstand the fact that Spock was dying and could do nothing to help. All alone, for even his good friend, Montgomery Scott, could not have helped at that time. The only man who could have helped him was wracked by his own breed of grief and could help no-one. Not even himself.

Jim pulled himself more erect. That is not true now, he told himself. I can help now, and I will! He had taken too long already.

Turning to ensure that the door had closed securely behind him he smoothed it gently with his fingertips, a loving smile upon his lips. Then he resolutely headed for the door, and the turbolift beyond.

He hesitated outside the door of his Chief Surgeon's cabin. It had been a long time since he'd been in there. Captain James Kirk took a deep sigh, hefted the bottle under his other arm and knocked.

Bones was surprised enough by the suddenness and unusual mode of the knock to drag himself to the door and open it. He couldn't keep a smile from lighting his features when he saw who his caller was.

"Thanks for coming, Jim...means a lot to me." Then his face took on a bemused look. "Why the knock?"

Kirk grinned. "Thought I'd get your curiosity aroused...and it worked, didn't it!" Then he patted the slender bottle. "Nearly dropped this, mind! Got a couple of glasses?" The pale blue fluid glinted in the light, and Bones nodded quickly, moving to his dresser.

"Just what the doctor ordered! Sit down, Jim. Make yourself at home." He was trying to provide an aura of enforced cheerfulness, and Jim appreciated the effort the doctor was making for both of them. But he also knew that that atmosphere would not last for long. His mind wandered back to the time when Bones had done this very thing for him when he had had his command taken from him by the M5 computer. Strange. The benefits of alcohol were dubious but on such occasions, it was the only thing that could get the tongue moving in the mode of mental release.

Kirk settled into the chair that had been proffered by his friend, and watched as the doctor spilled some of the liquid and swore quietly to himself. So characteristic of him...but he had changed. His hair was greyer. He was...older. Was it the occurrences of the last few days which had enhanced it - or had he been so preoccupied with Spock's company in recent months that he had begun to ignore this Georgian gentleman? No. He knew deep down that that was untrue. Bones had said himself during the conversation they had had when he had learnt that Spock was soon to die, that he was happy for his two friends - grateful that they had found love together that few ever found. The words came drifting back. *"...And you never shut me out. I couldn't share what you have - but you were always there if I needed you...."*

Bones handed him his drink, and broke his chain of thought.

"Penny for them." Jim looked at him for a few seconds then shook his head. Bones nodded himself, in understanding, and sat beside his friend. Silence engulfed them like an all-encompassing blanket. Then McCoy coughed.

"H...How long till we get to Vulcan?" The words were quiet, spoken in reverence to their friend - and they had been hard.

"Only three days...not long now.... I..I informed the Ambassador of...his death...and he has made arrangements for us to beam directly to his home." He still couldn't bring himself to say 'Spock's death'. Whenever he thought of it, it was always with the prefix of 'he' or 'his'. And Bones had noticed that once again and looked up with pained eyes. Then something seemed to register with him and he sat forward slightly.

"Us?"

"Of course. You will be coming with...us...won't you?!" Without waiting for a reply he carried on. "Sarek remembered the time when we went to Vulcan with Spock, and helped him with the ceremony during his... Plak Tow, and there is always an open invitation for both of us there. You're as great a friend of Spock's as I am - and he wants you there, wants us both there, as Spock himself would have." The words were coming easier for Jim now, but Bones did not look convinced. In fact his words were slightly mocking as he said:

"Spock did not give me the impression that he wanted me anywhere."

Grief had worked its toll on the surgeon too. It was obvious to Jim Kirk that he needed reassurance desperately, the same reassurance that Jim himself had received from...other sources. His words were gentle.

"You should know better than that, Bones. But come with me, and I will prove it to you. I have something you must see." He rose quickly, placing his untouched drink on the table. Bones looked sceptical, unconvinced, but he rose to follow, after draining his drink in one gulp.

James T. Kirk led the way along the corridor to his own cabin, his aim to play his very precious tape to his other friend, Bones McCoy. He knew Spock would understand, and he didn't doubt that the Vulcan would consider his decision most logical. He found himself smiling at the thought, and he directed that smile at Bones. But the mood of the Georgian gentleman was broken and instead of returning the smile, he scowled.

As they arrived at the door of Spock's cabin, Bones halted suddenly, and backed across the corridor. Jim went to his side hurriedly. "What's wrong, Bones?"

He pointed shakily at the door. "I haven't been past here since ...since.... That's the first time I've been to my cabin...the first time I've been past here...since...." He faltered, choking on his words.

No other explanation was needed. Jim understood exactly. Bones had evidently ensconced himself in his medical section since their friend's death, unable to return to his cabin, unable to face the crew, having no one to face it with. Kirk mentally chastised himself again for placing himself in selfish isolation whilst Bones had so desperately needed him. He went to his friend's side and placed his arm protectively around the older man's shoulders, guiding him past the Vulcan's cabin, and into his own.

As always the room seemed to welcome the doctor with 'open arms'. Though sparsely furnished it held an atmosphere of friendship and companionship, which, Bones suddenly realised, he had sorely missed. His eyes wandered aimlessly around the room, soaking up the sight of it, as Jim went to his safe. Those brilliant blue eyes came to rest upon Spock's idlomputt, resting now upon Jim's dresser, and he realised the significance of it immediately. He had to smile despite himself. The eyes returned to his young Captain. It was then that he noticed that the young man held a tape cartridge reverently between his fingers.

"Sit down, Bones."

As McCoy did so, Jim doused the room lights to leave them bathed in the warm glow of the firepot. Then he placed the tape within the viewer, activating it as he sat across from the doctor, and they both watched the last taped message of their mutual friend.

As Kirk listened to the message again, for the first time since 'that night', he realised how wrong he had been to even think that Spock had been wrong in his conclusions. And he knew, too, that he had been wrong to doubt what Spock had told him and promised him. He found his eyes misting, but held back the tears with great effort, for his Chief Surgeon's sake. He did, however, place his fingertips upon the Vulcan's face for a brief moment, thinking.

Bones, too, found thoughts of his own passing through his mind. Thoughts of the conversation he had had with the Vulcan, Spock, when he had been told of the disease, and the inevitable death. Spock had made it all too clear then just how much the doctor meant to him as friend and colleague, and just how much trust he had in him. And McCoy knew just how wrong he had been to think that Spock had not cared. He felt the salty droplets fall down his cheeks as he remembered that, and realised how much this tape meant to James Kirk, and realised too, that it meant a great deal to Jim to be able to share it with him now.

With great difficulty Bones removed his eyes from the screen to find Jim looking at him. They exchanged a weary smile, both knowing how much it meant to each of them to hear just what they had meant to their friend Spock. And seeing Bones' tears fall, Jim found his own etching a path down his cheeks.

The tape ended. James T. Kirk rose swiftly and went to Bones' side once more. They embraced, each needing the proffered shoulder. The emotional outlet of the free-flowing tears enabled the grief held within them to dissipate even more and both men were able to revel in the love they both felt for their Vulcan - and the love that their Vulcan had had for them.

"I wanted to show you, Bones, that Spock did feel, and that you meant so much to him, though he was never able to show you."

Bones eyes met those of his commanding officer, his features softening. "He showed me, Jim. In more ways than I could ever describe. I was just too stubborn and pig-headed to see it and acknowledge it...."

He choked on his words and savagely brushed the tears from his eyes. "It's too late now, though, isn't it?! Too late to show him!"

"No, Bones!" Kirk grabbed his arms. "He is here with us still! His body may have died, but not his spirit. That is Spock, his 'emotional' will lives on, and always will! Please remember that, Bones! He knows!"

Relief dawned on Bones' face and he visibly cheered.

"Would you help me with something, please Bones?" asked James Kirk.

"Name it." With that simple answer McCoy was acknowledging the fact that Jim had done his utmost to help him, and he now knew that it was his turn to return the gesture.

"Would you help me pack...Spock's possessions? Please. It has to be done...but I don't think I could do it...alone." It was the truth. It was the ultimate gesture, that which acknowledged the fact that Spock would definitely not return and Jim knew that it would be a difficult task to perform. It would help both the men to be able to carry it out together.

Doctor McCoy took a few seconds before he answered, while he stared at the now blank viewing screen, reflecting on what had occurred. Then he returned his gaze to Jim, who was standing so expectantly beside him.

"I would be honoured to help you, my friend, as I would be honoured to accompany you - and Spock - to Vulcan."

Their eyes met once more, and Jim found that he could smile. A bridge had been crossed.

"Come on, then. I think now is the time, don't you?"

Bones simply nodded and exited at his friend's side.

Leonard McCoy paced outside his Captain's cabin, then stopped to reach for the buzzer once more. That made the third time he had tried. Still no answer. Obviously Jim was not in - but then where was he? He scowled at a crewman who passed him in embarrassment, and turned to press the buzzer again, though he knew it would be useless. A voice behind him made him start.

"Looking for me, Bones?"

Too startled to answer immediately, Bones found his eyes wandering over the face of the handsome young man before him searchingly. The hazel eyes shone with life once more, and the instantaneous, friendly smile was firmly planted upon his lips. His whole stance had changed - for the better. He was the Captain again!

The man in the green wrap-over shirt placed his hands upon his hips, balancing lightly on the balls of his feet. "Well, Bones?" He was teasing now.

Without answering the question, McCoy posed one of his own. "Where have you been? I'd like to know what you think you're doing leaving a man knocking at your door like this when you're not in! It's thoroughly embarrassing!" Kirk's smile simply broadened, enjoying his friend's tirade. "No doubt you've forgotten your invitation to me for a lunchtime drink...."

Another crewman passed them as Jim stood there, feigning surprise and forgetfulness, and placed his most innocent expression upon his face. Then he took pity on his friend and gestured the doctor into his cabin.

As the door closed securely behind them, he said, "I've been busy, Bones. Something I had to do...."

Warning bells sounded in the Chief Surgeon's brain but he forced himself to ask the question, "What?"

There was no hesitation as Jim replied to him. "I had a duty shift on the bridge to carry out!"

The older man's face lit up with his relieved, happy smile and clapped a hand enthusiastically onto the green-clad shoulder.

"Sit down, Bones. I'd like to talk."

"Sure...." The doctor settled himself into the chair beside the desk, his eyes resting on the idlomputt as Jim poured the promised drink.

"Thank you for last night, Bones. You helped me face up to things. You helped me see things; that there is a lot ahead for us. For him, too. I've a promise to keep...." His words slowed down, as he became momentarily thoughtful. He pulled himself together to continue. "I'd begun to get self-indulgent in my grief; I began to pity myself. That was derogatory to Spock's memory, besides being selfish. I abandoned you when you most needed me...and I'm so sorry. It took Spock himself to show me how wrong I had been!" McCoy made no attempt to interrupt, knowing that Jim needed to say what he felt necessary. "You know, Bones, I can hear him at my side! Those confident, sure steps of his, always at my side...just as Edith said they would be...." Jim became reticent again as more memories came flooding back, and as Bones saw the look in his eyes, he judged that it was time for him to speak.

"What drew you to the bridge, my friend?"

"Spock...I'm nearest to him there, somehow, and it's where I belong. You heard his tape, Bones. He wanted me to carry on, to live life for the both of us, and to enjoy life. I can't do that by being withdrawn and refusing to face life. I realise that now. Yesterday made me see that...and packing his belongings was the...end. And seeing him like that...." He raised his shoulders high and proud with some effort. "Nothing to worry about now, Bones. I'm...myself again."

McCoy smiled at his friend, his whole face lighting up with the pure joy that he felt for his commanding officer now that he had finally accepted reality. He took a sip of his drink, and Jim did the same. Their eyes locked across the rim of their glasses, and though no words were uttered, they both knew that it was a significant gesture, a silent toast for the future.

Replacing the glass on the table, Bones rose from his seat. "Well, must get back to the grindstone!"

Jim nodded, smiling again. "Don't go working too hard!"

Bones laughed - then stopped at the door.

"Thank you too, my friend." Then he was gone.

Only half a day before their arrival at the planet Vulcan. Kirk felt apprehensive about that moment. It would be the final farewell. And he didn't want that time to come. But it was also the time when his friend would be able to return to the planet that he had loved so much, and for that reason Jim looked forward to it. It was what Spock most wanted. He had promised himself that he would take Spock home, that he would return his body to the dust from whence he had come, should that which they had both dreaded ever occur. Now it had occurred and the time was near.

The hazel eyes wandered over his domain, briefly stopping at each console, checking the status of each - but those eyes remained on the vacant science console for many minutes, and as each crewmember noticed that fact they carefully averted their eyes. In his mind's eye, Kirk could see the lean, strong body, clad in science blue, carrying out his duties, as he had always done. And as he thought of times gone by, he felt rather than saw the 'presence' beside him, standing on his right - as 'he' had done so many times before, supportive, normal. There was a shadow. And the faint sound of Vulcan breathing. And the aura of... familiarity. He knew it well. Subconsciously, he felt as though he should look around that bridge, to check if others could see what he could, sense what he could. But he could not bring his senses to do as he bade, could not bring his eyes away from that one spot to his right.

Then he knew. Realisation gripped him that it was all genuine. Spock was there. And he smiled.

"Captain?.....Sir?....." Uhura looked at her Captain with some concern. He seemed so preoccupied with something - or was it someone? - at his right. It didn't occur to her immediately that it was an absurd thought for there was no-one, in fact, standing at his right. When it did finally occur to her, she realised that it was not absurd at all, for she could swear that she, too, could see a shadow there. One word came instantly to mind - Spock! She rubbed her eyes, suddenly afraid for a reason she couldn't quite define. When she looked again there was nothing. But there had been...something....

"Sir?" She tried again. This time he responded, physically shaking himself, to turn towards her. There was a shadow of a smile upon his face.

"Yes, Uhura? Forgive me. My mind was...elsewhere." She responded to his smile, knowing exactly where his mind had been.

"We're receiving communication from a Vulcan shuttle, sir. It's Ambassador Sarek." She kept her voice deliberately gentle, not knowing what the mention of the name of Spock's father would do to him. But she was pleasantly surprised, and pleased too, to see no disturbing alarm evident on the handsome face. Instead he nodded, as if he'd been expecting such a notification.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Please relay it to my quarters." He rose to his feet, and turned to stare once more at the science console. Then he added: "Please ask Doctor McCoy to meet me there."

"Aye, aye, sir."

As Captain Kirk walked to the turbolift doors, Sulu stepped smoothly to the command chair. He was used to command now - and this time it seemed especially significant for all of them. Jim turned around just as he sat down, and he smiled contentedly to himself, grateful for such an efficient crew.

Uhura watched the turbolift doors close on her Captain and her mind wandered back to the day before. She had felt an intense sense of elation then, when she saw Captain James Kirk walk through those very doors, entering his bridge. He hadn't been dejected, or depressed, or detached from command as he had been since their First Officer had died. He had been proud, confident again. He had proved to all present that he was the Captain of the 'Enterprise', as he would always be. Something of great significance had occurred the night before, that she knew, and though she had no idea what that something had been, she praised it. He had approached his chair, looked directly at Spock's console - and had smiled! A breakthrough had occurred, a bridge had been crossed, and she knew that he would never have to cross that bridge again.

She, Lieutenant Uhura, communications officer on the bridge of the USS 'Enterprise' turned back to her console, a contented smile on her face.

The image of Ambassador Sarek, dignified as always, was haloed on the small viewscreen in Jim's quarters. Both the captain and the ship's senior surgeon were listening earnestly to his words.

"Captain, Doctor. It will be...good to meet you again. Unfortunately, she who is my wife was unable to accompany me. She is still in...mourning." The earth terms were causing him difficulty, but both men could see that the Vulcan was making a great effort for their sakes. It was obvious, that despite the fact that the Ambassador had served on Earth for a good many years, he still found its terms of bereavement to be difficulty, particularly when dealing with such a...personal subject. "Amanda will meet us on our arrival. Please forgive my early arrival. I understand that it is not according to...procedure, but it has been so long...since I saw...my son." Jim was finding the uncharacteristic

hesitation of this man to be unnerving, but it brought home to him just how much Spock's death had affected this man, just how much Spock had meant to him. Kirk felt a momentary stab of guilt again, but it passed quickly as he remembered anew the words that Spock had uttered to him. Jim found himself looking at Bones, and both their eyes misted in sympathetic unison. The doctor placed an encouraging, supportive hand upon his arm.

We are honoured...to receive you aboard our ship, Sir. Please bring your shuttle aboard. We will meet you on the hangar deck." Then, seemingly on impulse he added: "We've taken good care of him, Sir." He didn't know why he had felt the need to say those last six words, or even if he should have said them, but the reply they received proved all.

"Thank you, gentlemen, from the three of us...."

Outside Kirk's cabin Bones halted. "Jim...I'll go on back.... There are things to be done...."

Jim could see by the doctor's face that he was not looking forward to meeting Sarek - because of the circumstances. And he was finding it difficult to cope with the feeling. But Jim could also see that Bones wanted to spare Jim from being present when they - prepared - Spock's body for his journey. And Kirk felt great sympathy for his friend - and gratitude too. He acknowledged his gesture with a smile and a nod, then he turned away and headed for the turbolift, ready for his lonely journey down to the hangar deck. He knew that Bones would be waiting for them in his office.

As the Enterprise Captain waited for the deck to pressurise his mind wandered painfully back to the time when he had first met the Vulcan Ambassador. So much had occurred during that journey to that neutral planetoid of Babel; each separate occurrence holding a special vital significance for all of them. It had been proven then that Spock and his father really did feel a great deal for each other, despite the fact that the Vulcan race professed to have no such feelings. But he had also learnt that Spock loved him. And perhaps that love was even deeper than that he held for his father.... And Spock had refused to admit to any illogic in the situation. Sarek had subsequently learned of the situation. He hadn't spoken of it then or since, but he knew all - and Kirk knew that all was accepted by that man. Suddenly he realised that he felt no more apprehension at this meeting.

Sarek was approaching him now; proud, regal almost; straight and tall - and he was dressed in a black robe. Was he observing human tradition or did the Vulcans too observe that ancient Earth custom? *Strange*, he thought. *Never entered my mind before....* And neither had he considered how a Vulcan funeral was conducted.... Logically, no doubt, but.... He suddenly felt very frightened by the thought.

As the Vulcan Ambassador drew level with him, he performed the now familiar salute of his people, and looked deeply into the familiar hazel eyes.

"You honour me with your presence, Captain."

Captain Kirk proudly returned the salutation by performing a precise half-bow. Then, as he pulled himself erect once more, he looked into the dark depths of Sarek's eyes and saw the strict emotional barriers slip slowly down to reveal his grief.

"It means much to my wife and I to have you with us...at this time..."

Jim disguised his gratified pride by performing another bow as he fought back the tears which threatened to break forth. The details of Spock's death hadn't been fully explained as yet. Subspace radio had its limitations, especially when dealing with such a delicate matter.

Jim began to wish that Bones was with him. How was he to tell this man that he, James Kirk, had ultimately been the instrument of his son's death?

Fully Vulcan again now, Sarek posed another question. "And the doctor?"

Kirk had to cough to clear his throat of the lump which had formed there. Sarek did not miss it, or its cause. "He is in the sickbay, Sir. If you would accompany me there, he is...preparing everything for us...."

A silent nod was his answer, and the journey through the corridors was made in mutual silence.

Doctor Leonard McCoy was pacing the length of his office, apprehensive tension more than evident, his hands placed firmly behind his back. As the door slid aside and Christine Chapel walked in he stopped abruptly, shock clearly upon his face.

"Chris... What are you doing here? There's no need to come on duty yet...you know that."

"I know that, doctor...but I've no - need - to grieve now...." She coughed quietly and changed the subject. "I just wanted to tell you that the Captain and...Ambassador Sarek have arrived."

"Yes...show them in would you." He couldn't bring himself to say much more right now, but he resolved to speak to his nurse again later, and perhaps try to help her. Chapel had been relieved of duty after she had learnt of Spock's death. Her grief at his demise had wracked her very soul it had seemed, and no amount of counselling or consolation could help. She had needed privacy and time. Bones couldn't help wondering what had happened so suddenly to change all that.

She had exited, and her place at the door had been taken by the two men she had spoken of. Bones made a half bow of respect to the Vulcan Ambassador, a clear sign of the high esteem Bones held for the man.

"Doctor McCoy. It is an honour to meet you again." Bones gestured for the men to come further into his office as he flushed at the compliment that had been paid him. He wanted to tell the Ambassador that the honour was a mutual one, that he was relieved that he was able to be with them at this time...that he was sorry; but no words would escape his constricted throat.

Sarek looked at the craggy face of the chief surgeon, understanding clearly upon his own. Jim found himself smiling in gratitude as he witnessed that unique understanding. The Vulcan spoke.

"I would like to...talk. But there is something far more urgent that I must do." Sarek's words were gentle and his companions knew immediately what he meant. Bones turned to face the door and gestured Sarek through it. Neither man attempted to follow him for they both knew his dire need to be alone with the son who meant so very much to him.

James Kirk suddenly felt very vulnerable, and he swung around the office, as if seeking a means of escape from the weight which had suddenly descended upon him. Bones felt great pity for his friend well up within him and he stepped to his side quickly.

"Go to your cabin, Jim. Sarek will know where to find you when the time is right."

"Their eyes met, Jim's full of gratitude, Bones' full of understanding. Kirk nodded, wiping a hand across a brow that was wet, rubbing eyes that were so...tired.

"Thank you, Bones."

Nurse Chapel wiped her eyes quickly as she heard the familiar footsteps of her chief surgeon approach from behind her. She stopped tidying the cabinet in front of her as he voice, quiet, comforting, asked:

"Can I help?"

Without turning, she answered him, duplicative quietitude in her own hesitant voice. "No-one can help...him, now doctor." She sank into a nearby chair.

"You're so wrong there, Chris." *At least I hope you are - for someone else's sake as well as your own* he added under his breath. He sat beside her, studying her profile which was haggard now through lack of sleep. "He did care, you know.... He may not have been able to show it, but he did care about...a lot of people, and a lot of things. Remember that...remember him."

"Oh, I'll do that. How could I do anything else?" She forced a weak smile, and looked at him, wiping her tears away with a hand that shook. "That's why I'm here now.... My grief was beginning to eat me away. But that's not what he would have wanted, and it does not do honour to his memory to retreat from - life. So I've decided to carry on, to go on living. Life won't be the same any more, but I have his memory...." She broke down again then, and gripped Bones' arm in an almost desperate plea. "How does the Captain cope? How does he live with the grief and the hurt, and that terrible loss?"

Bones found himself having to swallow to have to keep his own threatening tears in check. "Captain Kirk is a unique kind of a man, Chris. Definitely one of a kind." He briefly remembered another time he had uttered such words. Then, he had been talking to a young man named Charlie Evans who had begun to almost idolise their special Captain. Now.... "He has qualities that even I know little of. They can't be defined in the normal sense, and that is why he is able to cope with...this. Those qualities. What he is. Who he is. Spock and he were closer than...." He hesitated, afraid of saying too much. "Well, you know what I mean. He's learnt exactly what you have, but he was able to learn it a little sooner.... He had to - because he's the Captain. Don't worry about him. He's going to be alright. It'll take time, but he'll be okay."

"And you?" The question was unexpected, and Bones felt himself grow momentarily flustered by it. As Chris noticed the expression on his face, she spoke again. "I'm sorry, I had no right."

"Don't apologise for caring, Chris. I appreciate that, more than you can know." He patted her arm reassuringly. "I'll be alright...." She smiled at him, relieved, but didn't hear the two words that Bones had uttered under his breath. "....in time...."

The walk was a long one. The corridors were deserted. His mind was dwelling in another sphere, that of times past. A smile crept onto the features of Captain James Kirk, the man with the hair of gold, as the memories drifted, hung by gossamer threads, suspended from the clouds of infinity. And then he realised that there was no-one at his side, no 'presence'; that in fact there had been no-one beside him since that time on the bridge when he had first realised that Spock was there. It was lonely. And frightening. Alone. Difficult. But then he also realised that he had been able to continue without 'help'. It had been Spock's way of proving to him that he could.

"Captain Kirk, please sit down."

"Thank you, sir."

Sarek stood just inside the door of Jim's cabin, having finally left his son. It had been a long two hours, and Jim couldn't help feeling a little envy. Sarek had been with him; he had been alone. But he chastised himself, almost as soon as the thought formed itself, for having such reasonable connotations. Sarek had deserved those precious few hours, and Jim knew that both the Vulcans appreciated the final moments left to them. Jim had had his moment....

After having risen to his feet as soon as the Vulcan had entered, Jim sank gratefully back into his chair. This was the moment he had most dreaded. He was unsure of what Sarek would say, or want to be told, but it was almost inevitable that the truth would have to be told now. Sarek had a right to know exactly how his son had died, to receive the reassurance that Spock had not suffered and had succumbed to eternal peace free from the pain that would have been inevitable had the disease, the dreaded Skag Maug, run its course.

The light seemed to reflect from the dark hair, streaked with grey, of the serene man, dressed as he had been on arrival, in the black robe of mourning. Jim was struck by the strength within this man who was holding his grief in control and he fervently hoped that he had had that control when Spock had succumbed.

The expected duologue, however, did not occur. As Jim's hazel eyes met the darker ones of the man now sitting opposite him, fully prepared to tell him what he had to, the Vulcan Ambassador steepled his fingers before him and spoke. In the split second before the words registered with him, Kirk suddenly thought of the similarity between the man sitting there before him, and of his great friend. This man could easily be an older Spock, and he felt a lump form in his throat once more as he realised anew that he would never be able to share the aging process of life with his friend....

"Captain Kirk, I believe you hold the intent to tell me something."

Jim straightened. "I should have known that I could hide little from you, Sir. There is something you must know.... It is difficult for me to say it...but you have a right to know." He took a deep breath. "Your son...."

Sarek interposed skilfully, his ambassadorial skills evident. "I wanted to be sure that I was correct in my assumption. You feel you have to tell me that my son died of something other than the Skag Maug. Am I correct?"

Kirk sighed in relief; a burden had been removed and he felt more confident now in the presence of Spock's father. Though he still felt a semblance of guilt because of his actions, he no longer thought that he had done wrong. But would Sarek feel the same way?

"You are correct, Sir. May I ask how...."

"How I know. It is the Vulcan way, Captain, to feel the...need to die in dignity.... Spock discussed the subject with me and explained how he would want circumstances to transpire. I know enough of this disease to know that the cessation of its cause is an agonising one. It is not logical to cause your body to undergo such an amount of suffering when you have the means within your grasp to remove that suffering." Though the words were precise, calculating, totally Vulcan in their entirety; those words were also gentle. And the eyes betrayed all the emotion that Sarek had always denied having; the emotion that Amanda, his wife, Spock's mother, had always known was present. And Jim could read the look in those eyes as if they were an open book. And he was thankful.

"I know, Captain, what Spock would have wanted to occur...and I know that he would have wanted you to be with him and to help him.

My wife and I are...grateful...for the help you gave so freely to our son. We grieve for the loss to the Universe of such a man; we also grieve for you, but we also know and are thankful that he suffers no more."

"I...am grateful, Sir, for your understanding - and for your acceptance of what has happened. And, I too, grieve...." The words were choked, hesitant.

"We know. I know you well, Captain. My son chose his friend well.... That is how I knew what was passing through your mind on my entrance."

James Kirk could find no words. The reaction of Spock's father was unexpected and he was not sure how to handle it. Pushing himself to his feet he paced the length of his cabin once - then realised.

"Forgive me, Sir. I...."

"Apologies are unnecessary. Illogical. I understand. It is illogical too, to feel guilt over an act carried out at the request of your best friend. Spock wanted to...sleep...and you helped him as he wanted you to. I thank you - as Spock does."

Jim stood before this man, he who was supposed to have no emotions, no 'feelings' and he silently rejoiced. He rejoiced for knowing Sarek, and he rejoiced that Spock had had such a man as a father. The tears of ...he wasn't sure what...fell, unhindered, with no embarrassment. He could hold them back no longer, even in his presence - and he realised that Sarek didn't expect him to.

The older man rose slowly to his feet - and stepped forwards. He restrained himself from actually touching the young Captain, but his eyes did the touching that his hands did not, consolative, compassionate.

After a few seconds, Jim turned away once more, wiping the tears from his eyes. Then he spoke slowly. "It is time, Sir, to begin the final - arrangements."

Sarek nodded in reply.

Doctor McCoy stood waiting for them in his own private domain. This time his feelings of apprehension had been dispelled by the obvious understanding and acceptance that Sarek held within his realm. And he could see that the tension that had been so evident in Jim's eyes when last they had seen each other had now completely disappeared, to be replaced by an inner peace. Whatever Sarek had said to him had obviously enhanced what Spock had already said to the unique starship Captain. And Bones was thankful.

The Vulcan Ambassador automatically directed the Vulcan salute at the doctor - and Bones returned it, somewhat awkwardly perhaps, but it was his way of thanking the man, and of the transferring his respect for both he and his son. A smile touched the corners of the Vulcan's mouth in response. Jim found himself watching the exchange with his heart swelling uncontrollably within him. Finally Kirk spoke.

"Scotty...."

McCoy cut him off. "Scotty has everything under control, Captain. He is just finalising the details of orbit around...Vulcan."

"Already?....." The single word had been whispered, but Bones had heard it, and he nodded slowly, his own regret mirroring that which his friend was now feeling. Not regret that they had arrived, for it was what Spock himself had wanted, but regret that this would be the time when they would take the Vulcan First Officer from 'his' ship for the last time.

Guessing Jim's thoughts, Sarek stepped a little closer in support, as Bones announced to them that: "The...preparations have been made. All is ready."

Both men stepped forward to stand beside the doctor, supportive. Both 'Enterprise' officers, now clad in dress uniform, looked at each other briefly. There had been something more than support in Sarek's gesture. They realised that none of them knew what that something was, but each felt sincere, overwhelming gratitude for it being there.

As they stood there, the door in front of them slid silently aside, and two medics came forward, guiding before them a medtable, upon which was a glass-topped coffin. Its sides were etched with drawings of the space around them, stars. And Vulcan symbols, too...and with one name entwined with Spock's upon the lid: JIM. Inside, clearly visible to them all, lay the still form of Commander Spock, First Officer of the 'Enterprise' and Vulcan. The trio brought themselves to strict attention in respect and acknowledgement of what this man had been, and, each deep in their own thoughts, found themselves with their eyes transfixed upon his face.

Spock was dressed now in his dress uniform of science blue, his hair was combed immaculately, as always, his hands lay gently at his sides. The IDIC, of which he had always been so proud, was attached to his tunic, together with his other decorations. He was a proud and honourable man in every sense of the word; a man to be proud of; a man to be proud to have known. Regal, dignified now in death, as he had been in life, as he had always been.

Then the full realisation hit Jim Kirk. The full significance of the two words upon the top of that coffin. His name and Spock's, entwined there, together, in full view. He knew that Sarek had brought the coffin with him.... Then he knew. Sarek's words to him had been more than true! He understood even more than he had voiced in the Captain's cabin. Jim found himself looking from Spock's face to his father's, and Sarek caught the look, knowing immediately why it had been directed at him.

"It is what my son most wanted at this time, James. And what my wife and I were more than pleased to grant him."

Kirk felt his knees go weak, felt his heart beat faster, felt his brain go numb. And then he smiled the wonderful smile that only he possessed.

The medics had moved to the door, leaving the men alone with their thoughts - and the coffin. Now, Kirk motioned them forward and they took their places once more either side of the glass receptacle. As the three men looked once more into each others eyes, they seemed to form a mutual, silent agreement to take up positions themselves, either side of, and behind the transparent vessel.

Standing side by side, Sarek in the middle of the trio, the entourage left the haven of the ship's hospital and began to make its way through the corridors. Those corridors were silent now, devoid of the sounds which proved it to be alive. Silent in the deepest sign of respect. Less than alive.

As they passed, each crewmember stood, unbidden, at attention, and bowed their heads. The same was repeated throughout the ship for Scotty had ensured that this final journey could be watched by all who wanted to, relayed via every viewscreen, to all aboard her. And all eyes that were able to, were, in fact, watching.

Kirk found himself absently noting that each corridor they passed through seemed even busier than normal - as if every available crewman had made the supreme effort to be near at this time, to actually be present to pay their own private tribute. And he felt proud.

Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott was standing before the hangar deck door, and stood at attention and saluted on their arrival. Jim nodded at him in thanks but found himself unable to summon a smile to his lips - even one of encouragement for his dear Scottish friend. But Scotty understood. He palmed the door open to reveal an honour-guard, forming an avenue of bowed heads. Salty moisture leapt unbidden to the hazel windows, and Kirk found himself looking once more at the peaceful face lying before him. Within his mind he whispered: *You were well loved, my friend, and you will never be forgotten.*

They walked slowly down the aisle of men.

Uhura was crying as she watched the occurrence on the screen before her. Her duties had prevented her from being present at the hangar deck, but secretly she was thankful for she knew she would have broken down completely and would not have helped her commanding officer at all. Tears fell down her ebony cheeks, her love for her Captain, and her respect for his First Officer openly apparent to all. There was pain in

her eyes, for she knew, as everyone did, that this was goodbye. Not an au revoir this time. There would be no return from this 'mission' for their special Vulcan. And pain seemed to wrack her soul because of that very fact - and because she knew what this parting meant to James T. Kirk.

She continued to watch as the entourage boarded the Vulcan shuttle; she watched as her Captain hesitated at its door, to turn and salute his men - both those actually present, and those watching via the viewscreens - a special gesture of gratitude for what they had done for him and his companions. And she watched as the door of that shuttle slid silently forward to block the chasm that had seemingly formed between it and the ship.

Then she turned to the helmsman and navigator who sat so rigidly concentrative before her and smiled:

"It's nearly time, gentlemen."

At that moment the intercom came to life and a distinctive Scottish burr issued from it.

"Right, bridge.... In five seconds, if you please. All is ready down here."

"Aye, aye, Mr. Scott." The acknowledgement came from Uhura for the two young men who had control of the great ship within their hands had much too much on their minds to distract themselves. Timing would be critical.

As the five seconds finished their course, the two men pressed the relevant buttons, pushed the levers, to undertake the complex manouvres that they and Mr. Scott had so painstakingly worked out. Then they sighed great sighs of relief and allowed themselves to smile at last, as they felt the ship beneath them do exactly what they had bidden.

The Starship 'Enterprise' was haloed in the viewing screen of the shuttle and as James Kirk and Leonard McCoy looked lovingly at her - for themselves, as well as for Spock - they found themselves taking deep breaths of wonder and supreme awe. Kirk looked quickly at Sarek, at the control of the vessel.

"I think you should see this, Sir."

Intrigued, Sarek moved beside them and allowed his features to soften considerably as he saw the manouvre the ship was carrying out - and realised its vital significance.

The bow of the ship had tilted forward, very slowly, very gently, towards the shuttle - towards Spock! And now it was tilting back once more to its original position, again very slowly, very gently. The 'Enterprise' had bowed to her First Officer, her own sign of respect for him. And again Jim felt proud.

McCoy left his side to go to Spock's; Sarek returned to his controls, but Kirk found himself almost physically tied to that sight of his ship. She floated there, surrounded by space, just as the heart was by its pericardium, safe, protected, beautifully vital - and yet she was also so vulnerable. Her hull glinted, almost twinkled in the light of a million stars, almost as if she were a star herself. And then his eyes wandered to those stars, suspended in that velvet ocean, and he sighed.

"You're out there, somewhere, aren't you, Spock! You've seen what has transpired today. And you know how much you're loved.*"

Then, almost as if those thoughts had given him much needed strength, he found himself able to join Dr. McCoy at Spock's side. There they remained, silent, retrospective, for the remainder of the short journey. As they entered the scarlet atmosphere of the strange and beautiful planet from whence their friend had come, Bones witnessed a shiver convulse the frame of the man beside him - and he, himself, felt fear for what was to come.

The lovely form of Amanda stood waiting for them at their private shuttle landing area. She, too, was clad in the traditional black of her homeland, and she stood tearless, in respect for her son and her husband. James Kirk stood hesitantly in the doorway of the craft, watching her, thinking again how remarkable she was, and admiring her bravery. As she walked slowly towards them, the hesitation left him and he found himself able to descend to meet her.

"Lady Amanda. I am so glad to meet you again...though I wish with all my heart...that it were under different...circumstances."

"I know how you feel, James - for you feel as I do." There was no hesitation in her voice, for years living ~~among~~ the disciplines of Vulcans provided her with the required control. "We understand each other well."

"You honour me, ma'am." He bowed to her. Bones came up behind them and stood for a moment, savouring the scene, then Amanda herself noticed his arrival and greeted him.

"Doctor McCoy. Thank you for coming."

"I am honoured to be here, ma'am. It means...much to me." His piercing blue eyes met hers, and she saw within those eyes of hers the grief that she was holding so valiantly in check - and wondered how she did it, wishing that he, too, could have that control so that he could better aid his friend. He reached out to her, feeling the need to convey his understanding and mutual feelings and gently squeezed her arm. She patted his hand in thanks.

"Please come with me, gentlemen." She gestured towards the house. It was early morning and the sun was rising behind the beautiful imposing building, and it haloed it invitingly. But Jim's eyes filled with pain, and turned once more towards the shuttle. Both Amanda and Bones knew that he could not face leaving Spock now, they knew that he was feeling the inevitable fear of the final departure.

It was Amanda who took the initiative and stepped to his side, and Bones surreptitiously stepped nearer to him also.

"He is in safe hands, James. Sarek has certain...duties to be performed." Jim's eyebrows rose in a silent question. "The...coffin... must be taken to the Khi'Lahr, ready for the service. One of the most ancient of the Vulcans traditions, and one which is very important to my people. As soon as...the receptacle has arrived..." Her voice faltered then and she looked deep into the hazel eyes, asking him to accept it. Kirk's eyes twinkled in understanding and she was grateful. Though he hesitated for one minute more, looking at the shuttle, as if seeing the coffin held within for the last time, he finally took her hand in his and pulled her gently up the path.

Bones smiled - for the first time in a long time, it seemed. It was nice to see these two people together, their mutual need fulfilled, at least for the time being. He walked happily behind them, knowing that Jim understood now, that the Vulcan customs had to be carried out, exactly according to that custom, exactly as Sarek - and Spock too - needed it to be done.

Spock's family was an important one and he himself had been an important member of the Vulcan race, an important representative of his people. It was only natural that his people would want to pay their final respects to him at the family temple, the Khi'Lahr.

The house was as they remembered it. Austere in a lot of respects, sparsely furnished, but also friendly and homely due to Amanda's influence. And they knew that though Sarek had said little about it, he deeply appreciated those influences of Earth. Just as the two Enterprise officer's did now. This house seemed to hold a touch of sanity in their world which had seemingly turned into an insane amalgum around them, due to the circumstances.

As Amanda directed them into Sarek's study, its walls so familiarly lined with real books, they heard the shuttle outside rise from its landing area to head for the distant town of Shi Kahr. As Jim caught a glimpse of it through the window, he stopped in his tracks, shivering. Next time he saw the coffin that was held within that metal vehicle he knew it would be at the actual funeral service. He caught McCoy's concerned gaze and shook his head slightly, conveying to Bones the message that he would be alright. Then he forced himself forward and sat beside the lady in their company, fully prepared to do exactly as she would want them to. Bones took a seat opposite them.

Amanda impulsively took Jim's hands into hers and looked deep into his eyes.

"James, I do not quite know what I would have done, had you not been able to be here now...." Then she pulled herself upright, controlling herself once more. "We must first attend the Khi'Lahr, gentlemen. There, tribute will be paid to my son by all of Vulcan. T'Pau will be in attendance, as will all the council members of our tribes."

Kirk's face darkened considerably. "All those people...I hadn't expected all those people...."

"I know how you must feel." She looked at Bones. "Both of you. But it is...tradition."

"We understand. And I apologise."

"No need. Apologies are unnecessary between us." She smiled gently, but the smile was brief. Her grief was overwhelming. "After the Khi'Lahr we will return to the family 'temple', that which the Vulcans call the Sha'Loom. There we will be alone, just the four of us, to say our farewells to he, who means so much to us all...." Finally her control broke and her grief overflowed from her hidden soul to run unhindered down her lovely cheeks.

Jim looked at the tears, so duplicative of how he felt, then he reached for her. Gratefully, she hugged him, placing her head upon his shoulder and allowed her emotions to run free, for perhaps the first time since she'd learnt of Spock's death. He hugged her close, caressing her hair. Then he buried his face into that hair and cried too.

After many minutes filled only with their sobbing, Jim forced his head erect and looked across to his friend. The doctor had cried also, but his tears had been silent, his grief kept in check now. He had cried himself out on board ship. Now he felt numb and drained. But he found the will somewhere to form an expression of consideration and understanding - and Jim nodded his thanks.

The movements roused Amanda and she raised her head too. Jim kept his arm protectively around her, but used his other hand to wipe away another tear as it flowed down her cheek. He rubbed the salty droplet between his fingertips, caressing it, then whispered:

"Better?"

"Much better." She sighed. "Please excuse me. I must...ready myself...before my husband returns. We will have to leave immediately...."

Rising to her feet, she walked from the room, her head held high. Neither man felt able to say anything. They simply reseated themselves and waited, reflective in their own thoughts. Those thoughts were not disturbed until they heard the sound they had subconsciously been dreading - that of the returning shuttle.

Jim jumped to his feet and walked quickly to the window to watch it land, his hands wrapped tightly behind his back. Then he turned desperately towards Bones and the expression on that young face caused the doctor to shiver uncontrollably. It was so full of helpless anguish. McCoy rose to go to his side - but then stopped as he watched that expression change slowly to one of...hope? Jim's eyes were focussed behind him, and he turned to see who stood there. Of course - Amanda. She was dressed once more in black, a regal costume indicative of the occasion.

Spock's mother reached up and pulled a veil down around her hair, then she indicated the door.

"My husband awaits us. Please follow me." She walked back out, her head again held high, there being no indication whatsoever that her control had ever been broken. They followed, each man on either side of her, as they had placed themselves either side of Sarek on board their ship.

As they stopped momentarily at the door, Jim felt the wind blow through his hair, ruffling it, causing the familiar lock of hair to fall over his forehead. And instinctively he pushed it back. Then the wind seemed to turn into quiet, sweet, soft words, projected at him from one definitive source. They seemed to say: *I am here....*

Kirk turned quickly to McCoy and Amanda, but it was all too evident that they hadn't spoken. Relieved at the reassurance that Spock was obviously giving him through that oh-so-precious meld, he was able to pull his shoulders up into the proud pose of the Captain Kirk, and proceed as he had hoped he would be able to.

The journey was made in reverent silence, and it seemed to Kirk that even the shuttle itself seemed to be making less noise than it had on their journey from the 'Enterprise' - and even then it had been almost silent. There was an overwhelming sense of dedicated respect on this planet for its dead, and Jim knew that he wasn't the only one who sensed it. Bones, too, was evidently effected profoundly by it.

It was the marked absence of the coffin which seemed to scream out to them both. This was the first time since his death that Spock had been so far from them. It was indicative of the future, that Jim knew all too well, but.... Then he knew also that he would be able to endure it, thanks to one overpowering factor!

As they slowly circled, preparing to land, Jim was able to study the large building below them, which he instinctively knew was their destination. And, he realised, large was a gross understatement! The Khi'Lahr was immense. Another sign of the import the Vulcan people paid their dead. It stood about three stories high and it was topped by expansive turrets which were reminiscent of their native planet's medieval castles. There were no windows, just one enormous door at one side of it. The sandy-coloured stone was covered in similar etchings, carvings as that upon the coffin lid. Both men found themselves completely awestruck by the immensity and bearing of the structure.

They landed.

The immediate area was completely deserted except for the presence of six Vulcan youths, who stood, three on either side of the door. Each held a frame on which were affixed tiny bells, those same devices, familiar from another time, long ago - that time of Spock's pon farr. Kirk shivered at the memory. The symbolism of that which the youths held was different now, of course, but the significance of them was obviously very precise. They were not being shaken at all this time; instead each youth held his individual 'frame' out in front of him as Sarek walked past them. They made very sure that the bells did not move and they kept their heads bowed low, their eyes well away from the mourners. To each, Sarek bowed his own head in acknowledgement.

The Ambassador hadn't spoken at all since his return from this temple. He had simply greeted his wife wordlessly, their fingers joining in the traditional way. Their fingers were joined in the same way now.

At first Jim had thought of venturing a question as to procedure - but had thought better of it. The silence was evidently a righteous and reverent one and was more inappropriate to break it. Their roles would obviously become clear in time.

Sarek had reached the door, and as he and his wife waited for it to be opened, Kirk and McCoy were able to catch up to them. As soon as they, too, stood before the door, towering above them for twenty feet or more, it swung open silently and apparently unaided. Before them a domed room of gigantic proportions met their eyes. It seemed to be constructed of a ruby-red, rock-like substance, which shone, glistened in the subdued lighting. Kirk got the vague impression that if he had shouted then, there would have been no echo, for though there were hundreds of people present, there was no sound whatsoever - not even breathing it seemed.

A macabre analogy entered the brain of the Enterprise Captain: Quiet as the grave.... He suddenly felt faint. Faint from fear and apprehension. It pervaded his body, his soul, and he couldn't quite define what there was to fear. But he felt it nonetheless. Looking at Bones for support, he noticed that the doctor had also gone white, ghostly pale, then Bones looked towards him. His eyes were wide, his brow wet with the sweat of fear. But they both knew that they could not give much support to each other now. Now was the time for silence, for reverence, for acceptance of what was about to happen.

Jim looked again at the people present. They stood in a circle, line behind line, until the whole room was full to capacity. The circle was broken in but one place - that directly opposite the door, that opposite them.

Sarek led the way now, his wife one step behind him. McCoy and Kirk walked slowly behind her, side by side, giving each other the only support they could give. And it was meagre in the extreme under the circumstances. As they reached the point where they joined the circle, to complete it, Jim could see what they had, in fact, encircled and realised that he had known all along. The coffin, exactly as they had last seen it, lay upon the floor. Jim looked at it longingly knowing that the man within it was the one man he wanted to see - alive! - again. He felt the salty sting of tears and closed his eyes quickly. When he was finally able to open them again, he was able to allow his eyes to wander over his surroundings.

Upon the floor, quite clearly defined, was an IDIC, marked out, pure, exactly like that which Spock now wore. Sarek and his companions stood at the side of the triangle directly opposite the apex; Spock's coffin was positioned very carefully, exactly as the white jewel would be. Kirk found himself taking a deep breath and felt a whole new understanding of the Vulcan people swell his breast. He felt even happier now that he had brought Spock home to such accolade.

Time passed slowly. Nothing happened. No sound, no movement. It was as if everyone present were paying their last respects by performing the mental link the Vulcans prized so highly between themselves and the man they had all admired so much. It was as if words and music were totally unnecessary whilst performing such a tribute to such a man.

Jim could not help looking at the faces opposite him. Faces of men and women, Vulcans true, every one of them, each paying the ultimate tribute to one who had not been of true blood of their land. But it mattered not now. Was that regret on some of those faces? Perhaps they were the 'companions' of Spock's youth; those who had not understood; those who had ridiculed him, hurt him, caused him real pain....

Strangely Jim felt no bitterness towards them. They were receiving their 'punishment' now. They had been the ones to lose, for they had spurned the one man in all the universe who would never have an equal; they had rejected one who had proved himself to be so unique. They had lost!

Watching closely, his eyes transfixed now upon the exquisite pointy ears of his brother, he felt his heart miss a beat as the coffin was bathed in a silver glow like that of a silver sun. Then it slowly rose upwards, gently upwards, on an unseen pedestal, until it reached the dome above.

It was almost an apotheosis.

There it remained.

As slowly as it had risen, the room emptied. Each line in turn, heads bowed, filed towards the door, passing the family of Spock as they did so. Each performed the traditional Vulcan salute - but they also bowed, and Jim and Bones knew that they weren't just simply paying their respects to Spock's parents, but to them as well.

It took many, many minutes, but finally all had gone - except for one woman, familiar in her regal bearing, in her dignified demeanor. She stood, leaning on a great staff of office, staring upwards. Sarek stepped forward towards her. Amanda did not move, except to place a hand on an arm of each man next to her.

As recognition dawned, Jim whispered: "It's T'Pau."

Amanda looked sideways at him and nodded. Then she spoke, for the first time since leaving the house. There were no tears. Simply a dignified respect exuding from her every pore for her son.

"She has always held a certain...fondness...for Spock. T'Pau held my son in high esteem, both as a representative of Vulcan - and as a person.... And she grieves now...her age does not help her...."

Her words had been delivered in the quietest of whispers, but Jim had heard every word, and as he looked at the old woman before them, he remembered again the time of Spock's pon farr, ~~so~~ long ago now, or so it seemed.

T'Pau had officiated then, and had upheld the tradition of her land fully. But he remembered that moment when Spock had knelt before her, and she had briefly touched his head. It had been a gesture of respect, but it had also been one of deep affection. Her face had softened considerably for those few brief moments as she had looked at Spock's bowed head before her. He couldn't help wondering whether Spock had known of her opinion of him - and hoped that he had.

Remembering brought that shiver back again - but also an intense sense of pity for T'Pau of Vulcan. Impulsively, James Kirk walked forward, as Sarek and T'Pau exchanged the mutual salutation of the Vulcan people. Amanda wasn't surprised and neither was Sarek as he realised that Jim stood at his elbow. Surreptitiously he moved away. He had said what had been necessary to her.

"Forgive me, Ma'am, for intruding."

The old woman's face turned towards Jim. "Thee causes no intrusion, James Kirk." Jim's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Yes, I remember thee. Thee art Spock's friend and Captain. Thee who was prepared to risk all for him. Thee is remembered very well." She seemed to sigh then. "It is a great loss to all who knew him."

"Yes, Ma'am. A great loss." He raised his eyes to the coffin high above them, then returned his gaze to the old woman. "But at least we who knew him did have that great fortune. Those who have never done so will never know their loss."

T'Pau did not reply immediately. Instead she looked deep into those exquisite hazel eyes of Captain James T. Kirk - and saw what was there. Then she whispered:

"Spock did indeed choose his friends well." She drew herself erect and turned to the door, as if what she had seen in those eyes had given her the strength that she had lacked before.

They were alone. Kirk, standing beneath the brilliant light which still bathed the coffin; Amanda, Sarek and McCoy watching him quietly. Then Jim turned, questioning. Sarek realised his unspoken question immediately.

"Spock is no longer here, James. He awaits our presence at the Sha'Loom. Come. The journey is short."

As he watched the proud young starship Captain walk towards him, Sarek could not help thinking how vulnerable he looked. Almost as Spock had been as a child.... He had failed in so many respect with his son; had not given comfort and support where it had been so desperately needed. Perhaps he could make amends where this man was concerned.... Resolved, he told himself that it was definitely not illogical.

This building was different, entirely so, to that of the Kha'Lahr. Sha'Loom was small, welcoming almost in its constructive composition. It was almost red in colour, as if reflecting all the sunsets of infinity. And it was surrounded by the beautiful flowers so characteristic of Amanda's influence.

The door stood open.

Ambassador Sarek stood to one side of that door, Amanda at his side, their fingers entwined.

"Spock is within, gentlemen. He awaits us for the last farewell."

It was an unusually emotional statement to have been made by Sarek of Vulcan, but then Jim looked into the deep brown eyes, those so like Spock's; he could see that he had made it especially for their benefit - and Amanda's too. And he greatly appreciated that gesture.

Sarek, in turn, could see that gratitude within Jim's own expressive eyes.

He gently bowed them through the door.

It was cool within, a pleasant contrast to the hellish heat outside. The contrast seemed to form a macabre idiosyncrasy, but it seemed irrelevant under the circumstances and Kirk passed it from his mind. The roof was low but semi-transparent, and so it gave the impression that it and its occupants could literally reach for the sky - and the stars beyond. It gave both the Earthmen a pleasant feeling, as the exchange of glances and quick smiles told them. This building held a 'nice' atmosphere, one which gave them renewed hope and acceptance for what was occurring.

The coffin dominated the room this time; a monument, belittling the monumental of the universe. It held a man who had no equal, and each person present knew that above all else. It lay upon a slab of pure white rock, pitted with eternal age, scarred by the passing of time. That was all the details that the eyes of the beholder could register for the sight of it brought tears even to the eyes of Sarek. Unhindered tears; unembarrassed tears; tears of love that they could all show, now that they were free from protocol and tradition. Even Sarek, he who was a Vulcan of Vulcans, found the salty droplets falling from his haunted eyes, causing the emotion that had been hidden for so long to issue forth with no shame or label of illogic.

As the Ambassador led them to seats, placed close together at the coffin's side, they each found their fingers hesitating upon its top, caressing it. Jim found his fingers lingering upon their names, so clear, so prominent, so meaningful. And he was sure he heard 'his' voice once more, declaring that he was near.

Each took their places and the muted sounds, unmistakable, of the Vulcan harp permeated the air around them. And they all knew, seemingly instantaneously, that it was Spock himself playing. He was there.

Amanda was seated between Jim and her husband, McCoy sat close beside Jim. Their positions held a special significance. Perhaps none of them knew exactly what, but it was present. Jim could feel Bones' eyes on him, but he couldn't bring himself to look away, to take his eyes from Spock's face. The Vulcan seemed even more at peace now that he was home, now that he had returned. Kirk knew that though the eyes were closed, they still held their vibrant look on life; he knew that they would forever shine with hidden light. He also knew that the heart would still hold within it all that Spock had 'loved'. And he knew that Spock held the galaxy within his hands.

Quite suddenly, Kirk realised that the IDIC had been removed and wondered why that which Spock had thought so much of had been taken. But then he realised that it was probably another of the traditions of the uniquely unusual planet and the concerned furrow disappeared from his brow.

Subconsciously he noticed that the sound of the music had begun to fade and as he brought his mind fully back to 'reality', he felt the Lady Amanda place her hand upon his arm. He placed his other hand upon hers and squeezed it gently, knowing how she felt, and understanding then why she had sat between himself and her husband. She needed to portray her emotions, but she couldn't allow herself to subject Sarek to them. He was having great difficulty in maintaining the decorum so important to what and who he was, without added emotionalism.

Sarek could see Jim's eyes upon him, out of the corner of his eye. But he knew that he dared not meet those penetrating eyes of the starship Captain else he would lose the little control he was maintaining with great difficulty. Never before had he felt his emotions so close to the surface; never before had he 'felt'. He knew it was a sign of just how much his son had really meant to him; a sign of how much regret he felt for wasting eighteen precious years of their lives when he had rejected Spock's choice of career. It had turned out that that choice had been a logical one after the course of time. Spock had represented his planet in the best way possible, had made his family and people proud of him, had upheld all that the principles of IDIC could ever have stood for. And Sarek was proud. He knew that his own father would disapprove greatly but he cared not - now.

James Kirk. Best friend of his son, commanding officer of his son. A unique man. And one who had made Spock's life in Starfleet a good one. And he, too, had proved all that IDIC had stood for. His relationship with Spock had been the ultimate combination of diversity. Not illogical. Not wrong. Not irrelevant. And again he was proud to have Jim present.

With great difficulty he schooled his mind to accept the discipline of his life once more, to maintain control for a few moments more, until they could leave this place, until....

He shook his head slightly, as if to clear his confused mental processes. And closed his eyes.

The star amidst the gloom, with Spock held safely within it, was suddenly bathed in the light of a thousand suns. Jim jumped in surprise and it was Amanda's turn to give his hand a squeeze of encouragement. The light was so brilliant that Jim was forced to close his eyes, though he hated doing so, hated taking his eyes from Spock for even a minute - now that the minutes were so few. He forced them open once more to find the light greatly subdued. It was fading fast, and he forced his eyes to see Spock within its aura...but somehow he knew that he would not be able to. The gesture was a futile one. Spock would be gone. Almost blindly he reached for Bones' hand and they held on tightly, all three of them, forming a triad which contained more love for that one man named Spock than could justifiably be explained for anyone else. The backs of the men stiffened in apprehension and even Amanda who knew what to expect, moved closer towards Jim, seeking the support that she so desperately needed. Gently Jim moved his arm from by her side to lie around her shoulders, pulling her close, giving her that support.

The coffin had gone. Replacing it was a small, ornate, cubic container. It, too, was carved with the same symbols that covered the coffin lid, and it was made of a dark, mahogany-type wood, inlaid with tiny IDIC's. On it's lid were the two names of the two men who meant so much to each other: Jim and Spock.

The ashes of Commander Spock, Vulcan First Officer of the 'USS Enterprise', the son of Ambassador Sarek and his wife Amanda, lay before them. The physical Spock, the body of the man, was no more. But his 'spirit', his essence, that which was Spock, was free to live forever - and Jim knew that he would.

After only a very few seconds, the amazing woman who was Amanda, brought herself to her feet and walked serenely to the other side of the stone altar and placed her hand upon the handle affixed upon the top of the wooden receptacle. Sarek, in turn, schooled his features once more and joined his wife, he being at the opposite side of the altar to her. Thus positioned, they lifted that precious vessel between them and walked from the temple, exiting by another door to that through which they had entered.

Bones stared, transfixed, numbed, at what had occurred before them. His hand still held his Captain's - and those hands were cold. Finally, Kirk drew his eyes away to look at his friend, but the normally brilliant eyes of blue were dimmed, haunted. And moisture-filled. Jim's too were full of more than grief. That had engulfed them from the very day of Spock's death. This which overwhelmed them now was almost an emptying of the soul. Then they looked at the empty altar stone before them and knew what must be done. A latin phrase from the academy sprung to Jim's mind as he rose unsteadily to his feet: 'Non omnis moriar' - 'I shall not wholly die'! The words gave him renewed hope and he found the strength within himself to pull his doctor friend gently to his feet and lead the way from the room, following in the wake of the Vulcan couple - and Spock.

Before them rose the mountains of this red planet, the range which seemed to stretch endlessly into infinity across the planet - and beyond, it seemed. They towered above them, rising forever upwards, glistening in the sun which was fast setting now. They seemed to symbolise the fingers of creation reaching for the vast infinitude.

Steps had been carefully carved into that mountainside, rising in carefully ascending order. Jim wondered what would happen next and felt a momentary stab of fear once more. Again fear of the unknown. Again he looked to his friend for support, knowing only too well that he, too, felt the same fear, even if he didn't let it show. He realised with a start that they had, in fact, witnessed the final farewell which Sarek had spoken of. He would never again see that lean form clad in science blue; could never see those exquisite pointed ears; those upswept eyebrows; those characteristic poses of hands behind back, or steepled in thought. Kirk realised that the primary fear that lay within him was that of never seeing his friend again....

"Bones! Help me!" The words were barely spoken, but were forceful in the extreme and they wrenched Bones' heart. The hazel eyes were focussed now on the Sha'Loom, just below them. For a moment, Jim was thinking of returning - Bones could see that. With his characteristic perception, Bones could see the thought passing through Jim's mind.... If he returned Spock may be waiting as he always had been before.... Something had to be said and Bones had to say it.

"Jim, it's real! He's at peace now. We can't have him back, no matter how hard we wish for them. You must believe it - and accept it!"

Kirk's eyes looked once more at McCoy, pleading this time, begging.

"How?" Just one word, but it held all the pain that the young body had endured due to injuries through his short but eventful career - and more too. There on the hillside, bathed in the sunshine of an alien land, they hugged each other. Mutual agony was shared. Mutual grief halved. Then they carried on up the hillside to join the parents of the man for whom they grieved.

A plateau spread its way across their level of sight, a plateau of scarlet, and brown rocks, interspersed with sand of grey and yellow. Surrounding them on three sides were high tracts of land, causing an enclosed area which made them feel completely protected - and strangely at peace too. The vertical expanse of rock on their right-hand side looked strangely artificial in contrast to the rest of their topographical surroundings and they couldn't help wondering why. It shone like wet obsidian and it, too, had a large IDIC carved deep into its facets, causing it to look like a three-dimensional image within another. A similar altar to that which they had left behind dominated the immediate area, standing in the exact centre of the plateau. This one, however, was carved straight out of the rocky floor itself, as if it had been here for aeons and would remain there, unchanged, for aeons more. It was this altar that Sarek and Amanda now approached with distinctive reverence.

Numbly, Kirk and McCoy followed. They remained at a discreet distance at first, too stunned to completely register what was about to happen. They simply watched as the Vulcan and human stood, facing each other, holding the precious receptacle between them, their fingertips touching gently. It was a total and complete symbiosis.

Sarek nodded once to his wife. Amanda turned then towards the two men awaiting their attention.

"James, you would honour my husband and I - and Spock too -if you would complete the Ker'Hay."

Kirk stood for a moment, speechless, stunned even more by the request, not sure of what was expected of him. Then he forced his mind to register reality again and made himself walk proudly forward.

"I am...honoured.... I will do as you ask of me...."

"Place the Ker'Hay upon the yellow slab on top of the altar. Gently. When that is done, press your names downwards and stand back."

The instructions were delivered quietly, but precisely, almost in a detached air, calmly. Jim nodded once in reply and then reverently took the Ker'Hay into his hands. As he did so, Sarek and Amanda backed away, entrusting their son completely to him.

Behind the starship Captain, the Vulcan parents of their dearest friend gestured for Bones to come forward and join them, and he did so gratefully, standing beside them. He had not wanted to stand alone as the inevitable occurred. He felt fear - and pain too - for his friend at having to undertake such a task, but then realised almost in the same instant that James T. Kirk was feeling singularly honoured and more than grateful at being allowed to perform the final task of the private ritualistic funeral.

The terrain was stony, his hands were shaking, and so he stopped several times between the spot where he had lifted the Ker'Hay into his hands and when he reached the altar-stone. The stone itself seemed to beckon to him, as if trying to reassure him that all would be alright, and that it was right. He placed the Ker'Hay upon the slab as instructed, but before pressing down their names as he had been told to do, he allowed his fingers to run briefly over the receptacle, savouring the last moment. He had guessed now, what was about to happen, and he knew it was the ultimate.

Finally he pressed the names downwards, ever so gently and they both coalesced, joined into one, into completion, and their act of joining triggered off other reactions which left him totally stunned.

The right hand side of the plateau, that which had looked so artificial, slid silently downwards to leave an open channel, down which a gentle breeze of wonderful composition began to blow. The Ker'Hay cracked into four separate and distinct pieces, each side falling down to reveal a shallow receptacle, within which was...Spock. The physical

Vulcan. The 'remains' of the 'Enterprise' First Officer. And as they stood transfixed, a captive tableau of four people totally captivated, each pair of eyes glued to that scene before them, the gentle breeze caught each individual ash between its phantom fingers and carried them away, to travel, forever, the world that had been so loved.

Jim watched. Unable to move. Unable to speak. Unable to even breathe. He listened to the breeze as it whistled quietly around him, caressing his hair, his face, and found his thoughts wandering back, as if carried on that very wind. It was the first time he had allowed himself to recall the incidents of the past since...that night....

The journey to Babel came instantly to mind. The importance of the occurrences during that journey had been unmistakable. He had come so near to death, but he had recovered to discover the real love that Spock held within his Vulcan heart. He had learnt long ago that Spock thought a great deal of him as a Captain and a man, but the instances that had led up to the attack upon him by the Orion had seemed to have instilled in Spock the ability to show just how the respect he had held for his Captain had inevitably turned to real love. The incident during Spock's Pon Farr, too. They had fought then, to the death, they had thought. And Spock had believed him to be dead. When that belief had been proved false, he had shown such open affection, such relief, that Jim had actually felt the sting of tears for a brief moment. Spock had risked all to try and save him when he had been trapped in the Tholian Web, during a special interphase; and he had proved his loyalty and devotion above all else to him, James T. Kirk, when the 'Enterprise' had been controlled by the M5 computer. During that incident most had thought of the computer as 'Captain' - but not Spock. No, he had proved then to Jim that he needed him, that they needed each other. The same had occurred numerous times, more times than he could remember, he realised, but all the incidents during their shared lives had led from one to the other in wondrous proof of their feelings of one another. And those feelings were something to feel extreme pride over.

...And then he remembered Edith. Spock had told him that she would have to die and he had begun to feel resentment for his Vulcan, as if he had been the one to create all of history. But Spock had been right. She had had to die to save them all, and he had been the only one afterwards to be able to help him through his inestimable grief. He hadn't thought that he would ever feel such grief again...how wrong he had been....

The past echoed and re-echoed as he remembered and watched and remembered. And he felt his heart beat with the throb of stronger, more vibrant life as he suddenly realised that far from it being the end, it was the beginning. A new existence - but not alone. Never alone. Not even now.... The wind .. is Spock.

The Ker'Hay was empty now. It was over.

He turned around to face Spock's parents and his dear friend and he found he could actually smile.

"Thank you." It was all he could say but it was enough.

Amanda reached out her hand and he took it willingly, thankfully, and together they all retraced their steps back down the mountain.

Inside the house again, they faced each other in front of the fire, secure, happy, confident of the future, content. Sarek and Amanda had changed into more appropriate clothes and now stood hand in hand before them, all emotional barriers dropped. Though Bones and Jim remained dressed in the dress uniform of protocol and necessity, they felt an aura of happy euphoria envelope them.

"James, it meant such a great deal to all of us to have you here...at this time. We want you to know that we both understand what occurred between yourself and our son at his death - and we are grateful. We now feel that though we have lost a son, we have also gained one." There was real compassion on Sarek's face as he looked at the young starship Captain before him and as he continued speaking the corners of his eyes creased in the semblance of a smile. "I hope you can bring yourself to call this home. You are forever welcome here." Then he turned towards Dr. McCoy. "As you are also doctor."

Bones beamed all over his craggy face in answer to the ambassador's statement and also because of the pure joy which was so evident upon his Captain's face. Kirk himself was speechless and Amanda smiled at his momentary discomfort.

The Vulcan Ambassador then reached into his robe. What he brought out caused now familiar tears to form within the hazel depths. Spock's IDIC lay within Sarek's palm.

"I know you noticed its disappearance, James. It is tradition for the Vulcans to take their IDIC with them in death...but we allowed Spock to cause that tradition to be broken. It was what he most wanted, and we had to allow it for him, and for you too. Our son wanted you to have this and asked me to present it to you...when the time was right. I am more than pleased to be able to do so."

Jim was nonplussed. He was unable to say anything; he was as dumbfounded as he had been on the mountainside. It was Amanda once more who gave him the encouragement and support that he so needed, by smiling her lovely smile at him and nodding gently. He bowed his head. And Sarek placed the chain around his neck, allowing the IDIC to fall onto his chest. It shone there with all the greatness that Spock himself had possessed and Jim's smile mirrored that shine, his pride so evident in his stature and bearing.

Sarek raised his hand in the Vulcan salute - and James T. Kirk duplicated it. Then the Vulcan Ambassador pressed the palm of his hand to Jim's, salute joining salute, the ritual embrace, forming the bond of the family.

Bones clapped his commanding officer on his back and squeezed his shoulder, beaming once again. Jim returned his smile with a brilliant one of his own.

"Thank you, sir...I...."

"No need to talk, James. We know. There is no need for words between us now."

Kirk fingered the IDIC, caressing it, as he had the image of Spock on the viewscreen when he had shown Bones the tape. Then he pulled himself erect.

"We must go."

"Yes. We understand. But return soon."

"I will." Kirk bowed and Sarek returned the bow. Amanda found herself hugging her 'new' son as she had been unable to do to Spock. Then they all performed the traditional salute for one final time. "Live Long and Prosper, Sir, Lady Amanda."

It was Sarek who answered for both he and his wife: "Live Long and Prosper, our son."

The two 'Enterprise' officers left the room, happy, contented. Jim led the way immediately into the garden.

"Just one more look, Bones." The young face seemed to plead with the older man, as if afraid that his final plans would be denigrated. But his friend understood.

"I know, Jim. I know."

The mountains were completely haloed now by the setting sun, that same sun which had risen on their arrival that morning. Much had happened in this long day. Those mountains were now more beautiful than ever. They rose upwards, proudly, honourably, for the stars.

And then the wind blew.

Jim seemed to savour it for a brief moment, then spoke with the same enthusiasm so characteristic of him. "The wind is Spock! Do you know that, Bones?! The wind is Spock! That wind will forever blow, and Spock is within it. And he may even reach the stars again...." He became reflective again and Bones had to smile as he saw the expression upon the handsome face. Then he pressed his arm, very gently.

"The 'Enterprise' is waiting, Jim."

Kirk looked at his Chief Surgeon, then once more at the mountains. "Yes." He pulled his communicator out from under his shirt. "Mr.Scott. Beam us up, please."

And as the transporter beam claimed them, the wind continued to blow its farewell. As the sparkling ceased, so did the journey of the wind for the present, as it returned to its 'home' of the distant mountains.

The transporter room was a pleasant sight of familiarity after the pressures of the day, as was the sight of his Chief Engineer behind the console. As the Captain surveyed the room, he realised that he had had to beam straight back aboard his ship. To have stayed on the planet Vulcan any longer would have caused his control, his belief, and his acceptance of what had occurred, to shatter completely. In time, he knew, he would reflect fully on what had happened, and remember clearly, but now what he needed was his work, his responsibility, his crew, his ship to keep his mind busy, to stop him thinking.

Scotty smiled a welcome to the two men.

"Good to see you, Scotty." It had been Bones who had spoken, in lieu of their Captain. He understood completely what a miasma of emotions was passing through Jim Kirk's heart and mind.

"The feeling is a mutual one, gentlemen." Scott looked at his Captain, and took a deep breath. "Captain Kirk, we have just received new orders. I was about to contact you...I held off as long as I could." It hurt him to see James Kirk like that, so...dejected. But that dejection was different to that which had plagued him when he had left the ship that morning. Scotty wondered how his bearing had been made to change.... Looking at the man dressed in gold, he knew that the best thing for him, and the 'Enterprise' - his ship, was to get back to familiar routine as soon as possible. Jim was thankful, though he did not voice that thanks. As soon as Scotty's words fully penetrated his brain, he became the Captain again, all personal feelings firmly placed aside.

"Thank you, Scotty." His voice was firm, genuine, no hesitation there at all. Kirk finally stepped down from the platform, hands clenched at his sides and he slowly walked towards the console. "And those orders are?"

"An investigatory mission, sir. Orion pirates are reported to have attacked a merchant vessel in Quadrant 765. We are instructed to proceed there, investigate, and take whatever action you deem necessary."

Jim sighed. Then he nodded and walked to the intercom on the transporter console, placing his forearms either side of it, and leaned on them heavily. "Kirk to bridge."

Sulu answered immediately, barely disguised relief in his voice. He was obviously glad to have his commanding officer back. But he was as efficient as always, after much practice in that centre seat.

"Plot a course to Quadrant...." he looked briefly at Scotty, "...765. Warp Factor 4."

"Course already plotted sir." After two seconds he reported. "Laid in, sir. Warp 4."

"Very good. Carry on. I'll be up there to relieve you in a few moments, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye, aye, sir." Contact was broken and as Jim headed for the door, he spoke quietly over his shoulder.

"Back to your engines, Scotty. I'm able to carry on...now."

The doors closed on his retreating back, leaving Scotty and Bones to stare at each other.

"Is he alright, Leonard?"

"It'll take time, Scotty. But he'll be alright. It's been...hard on him."

"Aye.... And you?"

The brilliant blue eyes twinkled at his friend. "Scotty, I've witnessed something - wonderful and beautiful today. I couldn't fail but be alright! Come on." He pointed at the door. "He'll be relying on us to be near." He led the way out, his destination the brain of their special ship, Scotty's the soul.

Captain James T. Kirk was out of dress uniform now, and he felt more at ease, more...normal, if that would ever be possible again. Standing at the turbolift doors, he acknowledged the greetings of his bridge-crew by his charming smile and a slight nod of the golden head. Then he surveyed 'his' domain. It was as if the sight of it was a drink to a thirsty man; it provided him with something familiar to hold on to, something that would never change.

Chekov stood at the science station, looking at his Captain with a mixture of nervousness and trepidation upon his young face. Kirk immediately noticed that look and made a decision. Now would be a good time to tell him the news that he had for him. He strode over, hands casually at his sides.

"Mr. Chekov." Another smile of charm and encouragement was aimed at him, and the trepidation dissipated.

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Chekov, you have always done a good job here. You learnt well from...Mr. Spock and he always spoke very highly of you." His voice seemed to catch in his throat, the hesitation over Spock's name only too evident. Kirk coughed, and his hazel windows clouded. Chekov discreetly changed his position to stand at a stiffer attention. "His recommendation was that you take his place as Science Officer on his - departure. I corroborate that recommendation and I am sure Starfleet will also. So I think you may now consider yourself Science Officer of the starship 'Enterprise'. On official notification from Starfleet your rank will be Lieutenant."

It was practically the last thing that Chekov had expected and he felt his breath leave his body in a long, relieved sigh. Then he pulled himself together as best he could. "T...Thank you, sir!" He took a deep breath then. "I will do my utmost to justify Mr....Spock's confidence in me, sir...."

Kirk nodded at him. "I know you will." It was his own way of instilling in the nervous young man that he did have confidence in him. And he meant it too, though he knew it would take time to adjust to the new Science Officer on his ship. Kirk placed his hands firmly behind his back then and stepped down into the well of the bridge, the heart of operations, and took his place in the command chair - his chair.

Chekov remained looking at him for a few seconds more, completely stunned, knowing that he could never replace the best Science Officer in the fleet. But he also knew that to have been given that prestigious position proved a very great deal, from many points of view. And he vowed there and then that difficult though his new position was, he would do his damndest to uphold that confidence that Spock and Captain Kirk had in him, and to make his Captain as proud of him as was possible. Resolutely he turned to the console which was now his.

"Mr. Sulu. ETA at Quadrant 765?"

"4.7 hours, sir."

"And if we went to Warp 5?"

"Three hours, sir."

"Then do just that." The expression on Captain Kirk's face left no room for questions, but silence met his orders at first, nonetheless. But then Sulu acknowledged, and performed his task. Once that had been completed, he looked up to see his Captain standing at his side.

"Sir?"

Kirk looked at him for a few seconds, then began to speak. His words were not quiet, for they were meant for all on the bridge to hear.

"Mr. Sulu, from this moment you will undertake the duties of Executive Officer aboard this ship. I have recommended you for the position of First Officer, and on official notification from Starfleet that position will be permanent. Your new rank will be Lieutenant Commander."

"As stunned as Chekov had been, he rose slowly to his feet, to stand to attention as he said: "Aye, aye, sir. Thank you."

"Carry on." Jim's eyes met Bones'. The doctor had been standing unobtrusively beside the engineering station and had witnessed all that had occurred. With his eyes he gestured for Jim to come over to him. Surprisingly, perhaps, Kirk did just that, casually, slowly.

McCoy kept his voice low. "Time for a drink, don't you think?"

Kirk looked at him enquiringly. "I haven't been here two minutes, Bones, I've...." But his voice petered out slowly as he saw the expression in his friend's eyes. "Okay, okay, a very quick one. Not the time - but it will suffice." He strode over to the turbolift doors, calling over his shoulder: "Mr. Sulu, take over. I'll be in my quarters if I'm needed." He shot a glance at McCoy. "...And back here in fifteen minutes."

A glass of Saurian brandy was nestled between his hands before Bones spoke.

"That was a sudden promotion, wasn't it, Jim?"

"Doctor, I do not think that is within the realms of your duty as chief surgeon aboard this ship!" There was momentary, inexplicable anger in Jim's face and Bones was not at all sure what to do. The blue eyes could not hide his hurt however, and Jim immediately noticed his look. He relented. "Hell, I'm sorry, Bones. Don't know why I said that" He took a deep breath and drank down some of the brandy. "The decision had been made for me, but it was not an arbitrary one. I couldn't go against Spock's highest recommendations, even if I'd wanted to - and there was certainly no need to." There! He had said 'his' name. No hesitation. No pain. "Sulu's appointment was my idea! The ship needs a First Officer, Sulu is a good man and the only one who could replace... him." Kirk downed the rest of the brandy in one gulp and Bones watched him concernedly, as the Captain rubbed tired eyes, as if trying to clear his still numbed senses. Then, quite suddenly, he rose to his feet, pushing his golden hair back and stretching. "Must be getting back... need to. This could be a tough one, knowing the Orions. See you later, Bones!" He strode to the door as confidently as he had done on the bridge - but he stopped before it opened, facing it. "I'm sorry for the outburst...."

Bones stepped quickly to his side, placing his hand upon the tense shoulder. The muscles were tense, stretched to their extreme. "It's okay. Really. I do understand! And I am here!!"

The Captain of the 'Enterprise' did not turn, but the tenseness in the muscles lessened considerably, conveying what Bones needed to know. And the surgeon knew that his concern was unfounded.

The 'USS Enterprise' had arrived at the last reported position of the Orion pirates, but there was no sign of any ships. No debris. No ionised trails. No residue of any kind. No evidence whatsoever to substantiate the report that a merchant ship or any other had been attacked there, despite continuous sensor sweeps by Chekov.

Sulu turned to face his Captain and they both knew that they were thinking the same thing. A trap!

Kirk acted. "Deflector screens up! Long range sensors on full operation. Lt. Uhura, monitor all frequencies and inform me immediately if anything unusual registers!"

"Aye, aye, sir." Acknowledgements from all quarters. Peak efficiency as always. Then Chekov spoke.

"There are no ships of any configuration within a radius of ten parsecs, sir. There is, however, a planet at the extreme range of sensors. Unclassified. Totally unknown to us. It is my opinion, sir, that if the Orions are in this sector, they have to be on that planet."

Kirk looked at his young Science Officer. "Agreed." A moment passed, the bridge silent, expectant. Then another. Doctor McCoy entered unnoticed and stood unobtrusively at the side of the turbolift watching, worried. Finally, Kirk pulled himself higher into his chair, decisions made.

"Mr. Sulu, plot a course for that planet. Warp factor one. Extreme caution." The great vessel slid gracefully onto its new heading as bidden, and each member of the bridge compliment took a deep breath. They each knew their commanding officer's intentions and feared them. There was no-one now who could stem the enthusiasm or the impetuosity of their special Captain and they feared the dangers that awaited him - now he was alone. Now that Spock was gone.

Orbit had been achieved and Chekov was again performing his duties.

"It reads as Class M, sir, but highly unstable. No life-readings. I think there may be a natural dampening field surrounding it, preventing the sensors from registering fully. It does not mean that the Orions are not down there, sir." Kirk continued listening wordlessly, analysing the information that the young man was providing him with. "The 'field' may even affect communications if a landing party goes down, sir. Large deposits of rodimium."

"Any ship?"

"None that I can detect. It may be shielded by the planet but I think that highly unlikely, sir."

Kirk looked reflectively at the viewscreen, allowing the information to pass through his mind. The planet was framed before him, purple in colour, with swirling ionised clouds covering much of the land area. It was the first challenge. The first mission for him, Captain James Tiberius Kirk, since Spock had...died..... He uncrossed his legs and, as he pulled himself to his feet, Uhura turned away, unable to face him as he uttered the inevitable instructions. She couldn't quite define why, but she was scared.

"I'll take a landing party down. Uhura ask Rogers - minerologist, and Peters - geologist, to meet me in the transporter room. Also a full security detail."

"Aye sir." Her voice was choked but it went unnoticed as Sulu began to speak. "Sir, this might be a trap!"

"I'm well aware of that fact, Mr. Sulu."

"Then I respectfully request that I...."

"Request denied!" Then his voice softened. "Thank you, but this is my job. Something I must do." He didn't clarify the statement.

"Then at least allow me to accompany you, sir!"

"No. No, you'll be in command here. I'll be taking my Science Officer with me for this one." He turned to Chekov then, who stood expectantly beside his console. "Mr. Chekov."

They both walked to the lift doors but Kirk hesitated at Uhura's station. "Lieutenant, I thought I heard Dr. McCoy enter the bridge."

"You did sir... But when we made orbit...he...left...."

Kirk's eyes drew together in thought, but he managed a smile for the Bantu woman he was so fond of. Then he led the way into the lift.

"What in hell's name do you think you're doing?"

Doctor Leonard McCoy stormed into the transporter room, approaching Jim with a face almost red with fury.

Kirk started, felt anger rise, then forced it back as he realised the reason for his friend's outburst - and understood. The rest of the landing party diplomatically began a conversation amongst themselves as their Captain gently guided his friend to one side of the room.

"Bones, it's okay! If the Orions are down there, then we've got to get them. And what can happen with an army of security guards?" Bones looked at the six security men who waited patiently for their Captain to join them.

"Not much of an army.... Damn it, it could be a trap and we won't even be in contact with you!"

Jim couldn't help smiling. "You can certainly get all the details when you want to, Bones! Stop worrying!"

"But Spock isn't...." He stopped himself, but it had already been said.

Jim looked at him, his mind alert, but his eyes distant. "Precisely. Spock isn't here. I know. That's the very reason that this must be done. This is the first time that I've beamed down without him being at my side, or waiting for me up here, nearby, since.... Don't you understand, Bones? I have to do this!" He looked desperately at his friend, begging for understanding. "Spock isn't my guardian angel and if I don't do this now, then I'll never be able to do anything. If I am to be the Captain again, then I must face this."

Bones saw the pleading in the hazel depths. "Then at least let me come with you! Need a bit of excitement. Business is lousy."

That was answered by a firm shake of the golden head. "If I'm to keep my promise to him, then I must carry on. And I must go down, alone, to prove to myself...." He couldn't go on, but he finally found the understanding and acceptance for what he had to do within the blue eyes of the 'Enterprise' Chief Surgeon. "Well, must be off. Have a drink ready for me when I get back!" He jumped up onto the platform to join his landing party and smiled his wonderful smile. "Anyway. He is with me! Energise, Mr. Kyle."

"Good luck, Jim!" McCoy was determined not to make the same mistake as he had made when Spock had entered the amoeba, near solar system Gamma 7A! Kirk was able to wave his hand in acknowledgement before the transporter effect claimed him. The emptiness and silence which seemed to engulf McCoy caused him to reflect instantly on Jim's last statement. Kirk believed so deeply that Spock was still at his side. He hoped with all his heart that Jim was right.

The entire planet has a purplish hue and if it wasn't for the unfriendly terrain and the constant buffeting that it received by the constant tremors, it could almost have been called beautiful. There was no vegetation and no evidence of habitation, but it was still...welcoming.

The party fanned out, visually examining their uninspiring surroundings.

"Tricorders," Kirk called.

Simultaneously, both the women scientists and Chekov himself, reported that despite the fact that the tricorders functioned exactly as they should, they could achieve no readings. As a precautionary measure, Jim took out his communicator but received no answer to his calls. They

were not surprised after the warning that Chekov had given them on board ship, but the security guard closed in around their commanding officer, three of them forming a protective triangle around his person. Jim noted it, but said nothing, despite the fact that he disliked the close attention. He registered the fact that the guards were only doing a very good job under difficult circumstances.

"Well, gentlemen. Ladies. We may as well investigate the immediate area. We'll return here in an hour, when the automatic beam-up procedure will be in operation. Keep your eyes open."

He led the way, as was normal, as they descended the slight slope in front of them scanning the horizon. The loose sand and shale beneath their feet and the added hazard of the tremors did not improve matters and they lost their footing frequently. One of the women fell and Jim was at her side in an instant, helping her to her feet.

"Are you alright?"

"Fine sir. Just winded a little." She held onto him for a moment, feeling comforted and strengthened by his presence, and they waited for her to get her breath back. Finally, she pulled herself upright, indicating that she was ready to go on.

"Stick close to one of the security guards. You too! He indicated the other girl and then walked on.

Chekov called to him, excitedly. "Sir! Footprints!"

"Yes." He smiled at the young man's enthusiasm. "They're heading for those hills.... Well, what have we got to lose?" The decision made, they headed for the towering turrets of rock about a mile distant.

It didn't take them long to cover the distance. The going was easier in the rockier terrain and they could move faster, seemingly free now from the tremors. The tricorders were capable of basic recording and the scientists carried out their primary duties of recording their surroundings as they travelled. This planet would be valuable for its deposits of rodimium, if for nothing else, and the readings would be important for future reference.

Nearer the hills the wind blew and Jim's mind was wrenched back to Vulcan, to what had...happened there. And he heard 'his' voice again. It seemed to whisper *Take care...*, but he wasn't sure, and his concentration was broken by one of the security guards enquiring what was wrong.

"I'm fine.... Just fine." Pointing to the hills, he said, "There are some caves. I think they warrant investigation."

The scientists nodded enthusiastically and headed for them immediately, leaving their commanding officer to contemplate the wind. After a few seconds, he grew curious of the unusual structure of those very hills before him. Surely they weren't conducive to the development of caves... Almost on impulse he moved forward, followed discreetly by his 'guards'. Instinctive curiosity seemed to engulf him and he entered.

A violent explosion engulfed the area, the silence savagely shattering about them and all the members of the landing party threw themselves to the ground. All except one.

As the choking red dust settled they saw what they most dreaded. The cave entrance into which their Captain had entered was no more. In its place was a collection of rocks and rubble, the result of a rockfall. The security guards began to dig at the all-encompassing rocks with their bare hands, afraid to use their phasers for fear of bringing more rubble down upon the body of Captain Kirk. Chekov pulled his communicator into action, almost sure that it would be hopeless, but hoping nonetheless. His hope was answered. Amidst static and interference, the voice of Mr. Sulu, First Officer of the Starship 'Enterprise', issued forth. It was as if the explosion itself had caused a link to be vitally established between them and their ship.

"Sulu. We need an emergency team of medics and technicians right now! There's been an explosion! It's the Captain."

On the bridge, Uhura dropped her head into her arms. Her great fear had been realised....

Seconds later, Scotty himself had beamed down, accompanied by McCoy and the rest of their teams. Bones was white. White with fear, tension.... He blamed himself for what had happened, because he hadn't been there, and because he hadn't been able to talk his friend out of beaming down. And he blamed himself again for not being able to save Spock. He paced back and forth as Scotty feverishly organised his teams as they began to phaser the bigger boulders out of the way; then set up tractor beams to pull the rest of the debris from the cave mouth.

Someone caught a glimpse of command yellow. All operations ceased and Bones dived in to assess the situation, knowing that undue haste now could very possibly cost Jim his life - if he wasn't already dead.... He pushed that thought quickly from his mind.

"Careful, Scotty. Be very, very careful. He's right under it!" The instructions were unnecessary, but Bones felt he had to say something.

The rest of the rocks were removed to reveal the form of what had been a whole and vibrantly alive man. It was barely recognisable as such now. The face, so handsome, that they knew so well, was bloody from numerous cuts and grazes; the hair normally golden was red with dust - and blood. Most of the command yellow was drenched with red; the legs were battered pulp.

McCoy swallowed compulsively, desperately trying to control the nausea he felt but he wasted no time. He administered one rapid injection of cordrazine in an attempt to stabilise the heart-flutter which his tricorder had registered. A painkiller would be useless. Then he gently cradled the battered head in his arms as the transporter beam claimed them, as per Sulu's instructions.

It had been a long, long operation, and now Doctor Leonard McCoy stood beside his patient as he lay, unmoving, upon the diagnostic bed. The lighting was subdued and he couldn't help thinking back to the time when Spock had lain in a bed just like this one - and had died! To drag his thoughts away from such morbidity, he allowed his eyes to rest upon the scanner readings. They were all abnormally low - too low. Heartbeat was slow, irregular; the K3 factor indicator registered very high levels of pain, despite the painkilling drugs which Bones had now administered; all the other readings were fluctuating wildly. But he could do no more. Every ounce of his skill, every particle of his will had been used, seemingly to no avail. Captain James T. Kirk was dying.

The rib-cage had been smashed, the fragments penetrating both lungs; his liver had been punctured; his spleen had ruptured; there had been severe internal haemorrhaging. The injuries had been terrible, almost impossibly severe and it was a miracle to Bones that they had been able to get him out from under the rockfall alive. Now, he had done all he could. Now, it was all up to Jim himself.

And that was what Bones most feared. Jim's superior will to live, his unique willpower had pulled him through bad injuries before - but perhaps now he would not fight....

Finally, he pulled his hand from Jim's. He had been holding it now for...how long? He couldn't remember. Relative time was non-existent for him. He was too exhausted, both mentally and physically, to remember anything but that awful sight of his friend amongst the rubble on that god-forsaken planet.

It had been a trap. Scotty had established that much. All the caves had been 'booby-trapped', long before they had arrived on the planet.

The Orions had known that the Federation would receive the bogus message and they knew that Starfleet could not afford not to send help. They had not known that the 'Enterprise' would be sent, it was just an effective incident of service. Jim Kirk had just been the unfortunate one to have walked into their trap....

Damn the universe!

Bones forced himself to leave the bedside, knowing that if he stayed any longer he would break down completely. He felt so damned helpless and inadequate - just as he had felt when Spock had.... He shook himself violently. To dwell on that would not help Jim! Wearily he entered his office and sank into the chair facing the door, his head falling onto his arms in despair.

McCoy remembered the words that Spock had left for Jim on his tape: "We will live forever, together, when the time comes." Jim believed that above all else. And Bones knew that it was what Jim wanted most. Would Kirk let himself go, prevent himself from fighting, so that he could join Spock in that eternal sleep? McCoy could not help his anguished thoughts from being uttered aloud and they echoed slightly around the small room....

"Oh, God! I've lost one of my dearest friends.... I couldn't stand losing another!..."

Suddenly, amidst his frustrated, angered thoughts, he heard some words; words that were being directed at him; words spoken calmly, quietly, by a voice oh, so very, very, familiar to him. He shook his head, sure that it was his guilt which was creating sounds within his brain that his consciousness could not cope with. But no. There they were again! He forced his head upright to stare at the doorway before him, the direction from whence the words had come. Haloed in that doorway was Commander Spock.

"You will not lose him, Bones." The figure, solid in substance - McCoy was sure of that! - stood there, hands behind back, clad in a dress uniform of science blue. Exactly like Spock.... It was Spock! He nodded at Bones, very gently, then turned and walked into the ward.

Completely stunned, Bones found himself unable to move. It could not be Spock. Spock was dead! But then he remembered Jim's faith, his belief that Spock was always with him and began to believe himself. After all, no-one except Spock could stand like that, or have that familiar expression upon his face. He staggered to the door and looked with misted eyes to where he knew the figure had gone.

Spock stood beside Jim's still form and an expression of true and real pain flickered over the Vulcan's features. Then he schooled them and placed his hands carefully upon the face of Jim Kirk, in the familiar mode of performing the mind meld. He looked up once to nod again at the doctor, a smile turning the corners of his mouth, then he sank into deep concentration. Bones simply stood, transfixed at his office door, stunned, a new belief flowing through his mind. He knew from that instant that Jim Kirk would recover and that all would be well again. He returned to his office, fearful of disturbing such a private, peaceful, poignant scene.

As he sank once more into his chair, content that Jim was in good hands, he began to reflect on his thoughts of a few moments before. Perhaps Spock had told Jim that he would join his Vulcan when the time came, and that that time would come soon, but looked upon logically, time did not exist in the true sense for Spock now. 'Soon' might mean for him a time ten years, twenty years or even fifty years distant. He had wanted Jim to carry on living, enjoying life for the both of them. Again it was illogical for Spock to allow Jim to lose the fight for life this soon. So he had returned to aid their mutual friend, the surgeon, when all hope had seemed lost. He had come back to reassure Bones McCoy and to give Jim the will to live by 'physically' performing the mind meld

so familiar to them all. Quite suddenly that knowledge seemed to pervade his very soul. And Doctor McCoy sighed contentedly.

Minutes ticked by inexorably as Bones listened for the slightest sound, hesitant to return into the ward again until the mind meld was completed. It seemed slightly macabre to him for a brief instant that a ghost, for that was what Spock was now, was performing a mental coalition with his best friend. But the moment passed swiftly. There was nothing macabre in the situation at all.

A slight moan met his ears and he stiffened. Then he heard the sound of a muffled sigh. It had to be Jim! Rushing to the door, he grasped the door jamb firmly to give himself support and looked across at the bed in which the 'Enterprise' Captain lay. The hazel windows were open. He was alone. In two strides, Bones was beside the bed.

"Easy now, Jim. Just lie still. Everything is going to be just fine." His eyes rose to the diagnostic panel to find, to his relief, that the indicators, though far from normal, had stabilised and risen considerably. The K3 indicator registered no pain whatsoever and he mentally thanked Spock for that too. Then the man with the blue eyes smiled.

Kirk raised a heavily bandaged arm to rub his eyes. "I feel like I've been...hit with a sledge-hammer...." Those few words caused him to pant heavily, completely breathless due to the pressure in his chest caused by the damaged ribcage.

Bones smiled again. "Quite an interesting analogy under the circumstances.... We'll talk about it later - now there's going to be a later." Jim's eyes met his, understanding the significance of those words. Then Bones placed a hand gently upon Jim's arm. "I'll give you something to make you sleep. You need plenty of rest - and no arguments!" Jim smiled wickedly, but then nodded in agreement as he felt the exhaustive reaction setting in. He knew that full explanations of what had happened to him could wait.

"Okay, Okay! Thanks, Bones.... You did...a good job...again...."

"Spock did most of the work, Jim."

Kirk's eyes opened again to meet the blue whirlpools of emotion beside him.

"Spock?"

Bones nodded. "He was here.... I saw him, Jim! I actually saw him - and he even spoke to me. You were right. You always have been."

Without taking his eyes from Bones', Jim spoke again. "And he... helped to heal me?"

"Y-e-s.... But he also did something much more important, Jim. He gave you back your will to live."

Jim's eyes widened, then his whole face brightened in new understanding.

"I...understand now." The words were whispered and Bones could barely hear them. "The promise. My promise...."

"It's been kept, Jim!"

Kirk could say no more. He simply settled himself back, at peace now, and happy. New contentment enveloped him and a new realisation. He had kept his word to his dearest friend, his brother. He had a future ahead of him which would hold as much joy and happiness as the past had done. It could still be a good life.

Captain James T. Kirk slept peacefully, a smile upon his handsome face.

* * * * *

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