

Scotpress

**TENDER
EXPRESSIONS**

Wendy

Montgomery

a STAR TREK
fanzine

TENDER EXPRESSIONS

by

Wendy Montgomery

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Editors - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini

Typing - Sheila Clark

Proofreading - Janet Quarton, Sheila Clark & Valerie Piacentini

Printing of Masters - Janet Quarton

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In TENDER EXPRESSIONS Spock is approaching pon farr. When T'Alina comes on board it seems that his problems are over.

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Sheila Clark
6 Craigmill Cottages
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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

TENDER EXPRESSIONS

A famous Earth philosopher once said, "There is someone for everyone. You just need to wait until the right one comes along."

After all the years of looking into his friend's eyes across the dinner table, James T. Kirk was dealing with the mixed emotions of allowing another the privilege.

Their last mission had been over three months ago. While exploring Maaya, a planet the Federation believed to be uninhabited, twenty three crew men and women, from security and life sciences, had died. The Federation Council had wanted a detailed report on the chances for colonisation. But what they got was two dozen mutilated bodies and some fragmented reports.

The planet was quarantined, and the bodies sent home for burial. It was all handled in a quiet, orderly fashion. But the loss of any person under his command bothered Kirk. He considered every one of his personnel his children. All but a few, who were his close friends.

Shore leave at Starbase 15 had brought new life back into the tired veterans. After a week they returned with light hearts, and the tragic memories properly filed away.

Kirk also found himself staring into the young faces of the replacements. Either Starfleet was recruiting them younger these days, or he was getting older. They looked like children - all but one. She had been transferred from the Alliance, following a rather bad encounter with a Klingon battlecruiser on the wrong side of the neutral zone.

She had caught Kirk's attention. She had also captured Spock's.

The fact that she was a field technician in life sciences as well as a competent medical officer hadn't affected the Captain at first. But it seemed as though every time he turned to ask Spock a question, she was there. On duty and off, they seemed to be together. The longer it progressed, the more his First Officer was being drawn away from him.

Now he sat staring at them across the officers' mess. He had no appetite for the food he had selected, but neither did he want to listen to another of McCoy's lectures on good eating habits. He was bored by the simple tasks Starfleet had chosen for them recently. Yet he was intrigued by the relationship building before his eyes.

Slowly, he raised a forkful of his dinner. He was paying so much attention to his First Officer that he almost stabbed himself in the cheek.

"You'd better start paying more attention to your dinner and less to them." McCoy placed a hand on his commanding officer's shoulder. He had been observing Kirk for a while, waiting for the time when he would be most receptive of his friendly meddling and advice. "I would really hate putting stitches into that lovely face of yours."

Kirk said nothing, just dropped the fork back to his plate. If looks could kill, McCoy would have been dead two times over. "May I join you?" he asked, but without waiting for a reply dropped down on the other side of the table. "If I didn't know you better, I would swear you were jealous."

McCoy searched his commander's face, his professional judgement working on overtime. Kirk's gaze was glued on the two Vulcans. He already knew the validity of his off-hand comment. James Kirk was displaying a classic textbook case. And it scared him.

Leaning back in the chair, he too looked over at the unusual couple. Personally, he found the whole thing quite enjoyable. For years he had bandied words with Spock over the attributes of female companionship. He was glad to see someone taking his advice - for once.

T'Alina was beautiful, in anyone's eyes. Her long black hair had been drawn back and skilfully fastened in a bun at the back of her head. Her almond-shaped eyes were a soft fawn. Her upswept eyebrows seemed to complement her high cheekbones.

She sat with an air of dignity, displaying the signs of her family upbringing. Although each Vulcan child was taught the same lessons, it was the teacher who had the influence over an individual's outcome.

McCoy had had occasion recently to work beside her. Although she possessed the formal disciplines of the Vulcan training, she had tempered it with a softness he had never witnessed before. She gave him a feeling of gentle control whenever they were close together. Possibly she would have the same effect on Spock.

He tried not to stare as they passed by and went out of the room. Yet he noticed a gleam in the First Officer's eyes that showed like flames through the rigid Vulcan mask.

Somehow, he got the feeling that Spock was in love.

But then memory provided another answer. He shuddered at the thought. A time when their cool, gentle Vulcan had been turned into a raving madman. He had almost forgotten ~~that~~ Time existed. It had been nearly seven years since the diverted trip to Vulcan almost took their Captain's life.

That was a Time of terror and pain for more than just Spock. If he was in the grip of pon farr, the Vulcan would become a dangerous man. There could be no running to Vulcan this time. It was too far away.

McCoy shrugged off the thoughts. They had been spending too much time together for something as complicated as that. In his heart, McCoy knew she could only be an asset to their Vulcan. He hoped Spock saw the logic in the choice.

"Finish your dinner and I'll play you a game of chess." McCoy nudged his Captain.

The only reply was a sigh.

The main rec room was abnormally quiet for this time of night.

Spock had found it easier to speak with T'Alina in this place. Even an occasional person passing by never mattered. This was their place.

Many evenings had found the two Vulcans sitting side by side before one of the viewports. They spoke of many things. Their conversation had grown more personal as they did. This night, they stood before the lazily moving stars.

Spock's hands were clasped tightly behind his back, his face a hardened mask. He had come to a point where he could no longer put off the question.

"The Time draws near," he said soberly. "Even now, I can feel the insanity starting to build within me." Not once did he look at her. He closed his eyes tightly, and bowed his head, ashamed of the natural biological processes occurring within him.

From the time a Vulcan girl is old enough to understand, her mother prepares her for this Time. Instruction is extensive, for the male is totally dependent on his mate. She alone has the power of life and death for him. To refuse one in need is unthinkable.

She knew how hard it had been for him to reveal his feelings to her. It was a thing never spoken of in the presence of another. It was the most intimate and complex part of all Vulcan life.

Spock had told her of the fate of his own bondmate. The story of T'Pring and the ritual of Kah-if-farr had come in short, painful sentences. He told only the pieces he felt she had a right to hear, to know why he was in this situation. The rest was again closed out of his mind.

Her eyes closed tight, as she too thought of her bondmate. As tradition dictated, she had been joined to a Vulcan male at the age of seven. But she had never known the true bonding of pon farr. His life had been lost in a battle against the Klingons. She had prepared for so long - and suddenly there was nothing.

"I accept," she whispered, just loud enough for Vulcan ears to hear.

Kirk had been delighted to get Spock's message, asking to see him. Although he had a dozen other things that needed to be done, he gladly made time for his old friend. But what Spock was telling him now sent an icy chill up his back.

"I understand the problem, Spock." Kirk spoke with a gentleness that he knew was necessary. "But there is no way that I can get you to Vulcan. We are more than two weeks away at our best speed."

"The matter has been dealt with." Spock's words had a tremble to them. "T'Alina has agreed to be my wife." Kirk's mouth dropped open. "I only request that we are allowed time off our duties."

"How much time?"

"A week. Possibly ten days." Spock looked eyes with his closest friend. "While in the grip of pon farr, I can be seen by no-one. We will lock ourselves away." His voice softened with each word.

There was a long moment of silence between the two men. Kirk realised that this was something very difficult for Spock to discuss. Sense of duty as well as friendship had brought them together this evening. It was easy enough to file his First Officer's marriage, and a few personnel changes would cover the science station during the shifts normally assigned to the Vulcan.

Yet there was something making him hesitate. He knew that the decision would change both their lives. Spock had finally been drawn away to another. This promised to be more than the short romances that he, Kirk, had had over the years. *This* was a lifetime commitment. It brought responsibilities with it that he had never had the courage to face.

But if he didn't support his friend now, in his time of need, he knew it would mean an end to their friendship. Spock needed his emotional strength right now, and he would willingly give it.

"I'll take care of everything. Starfleet will require two witnesses to the ceremony." Spock opened his mouth to object, but Kirk never allowed him a word. "I'll handle that as well. All I need is your word that your ritual is completed, and that will satisfy me. I'll get McCoy to be the other witness. He'll sign where I tell him to." He tried to put a little humour into it, but Spock wasn't receptive.

"Jim." Spock's voice was hardly audible. "Thank you."

"What else are friends for?" Kirk ushered his First Officer out of his quarters, and stood for a moment gathering his thoughts. Never before had he been faced with such a delicate matter. Spock, being in the early stages of *pon farr*, was in no condition to handle the thousand and one requirements Starfleet put on a prospective bride and groom.

He sighed as he sat down again behind his desk. He added Spock's request to the already long list of paperwork he had to face. Sometimes he wondered why he had accepted the Captaincy. Surely there were better things to do with his life than paperwork!

Then he reminded himself - there was a ration of it with any job.

The red glow of Spock's burning firepot cast an almost mystical atmosphere on the meditation chamber. This night it would witness a ritual shrouded in antiquity.

Although not formally pledged, they had chosen each other out of a need that stretched as far back as Time itself. Later, when the need was past, they would return to Vulcan and seek the blessings on the bonding. Right now, it was more important that the link between the two minds be established before *pon farr* stripped the reality from them.

T'Alina, dressed in a satin white gown, already knelt, surrounded by the red glow. Spock stood for a moment, looking at his bride. She was deep in meditation. He allowed himself the pleasure of studying her. No longer did she seem like the most logical choice. Now she was beautiful, to his eyes and his heart.

He could feel her readiness as he drew close to her. He struck

a gong three times; once for each of them, and once for the united being they would become. Then he knelt.

Her left hand reached out to match his. She felt a touch on her soul. Then he placed his fingers against her face. His touch was strong, stronger than any she had ever known. She heard his words in Vulcan through the tenuous thread they now shared.

Her response was automatic.

Her breathing slowed almost to a stop as she placed herself totally under his control. Each reply, verbal or mental, came with split second response. She could already feel the fire building within him. Yet there was no fear inside her for what she knew was going to happen.

He had chosen a special link between them, one that went deeper than any he had ever shared. He felt it his right. They were no longer two children with parents and a priest presiding over their actions. They were adults who fully understood the implications of the bond.

Pathways guided him down the complexity of the female's mind. Thoughts of their future together passed through to him first. He noted how illogical several of them appeared to be. A Human contamination, no doubt. He let them pass and travelled deeper.

Memories of the past assaulted him with a force he could not easily control. The face of the Other appeared as a three dimensional figure to him. It was a child's face and an immature bonding that he felt. The thoughts were acted out, like scenes from a play.

Two children walked together upon the sands of Vulcan. Their bonding had served to unite two already close beings. They swore an undying pledge to each other in the shadows of the ancient city.

Years passed quickly now. The children had grown, and plans for their future were made. Together they had left their homeworld for the freedom of Space. Although separated by distance at Starfleet Academy, they were never more than a thought away from each other.

Fate had allowed them to be assigned to the same Starship. Their pledge was still intact. Long off-duty hours were spent in the company of the other. A special bond had grown between them, and she knew the Time of Mating was soon. Leave had been granted and plans were made for the journey to the place of Koon-ut-kal-if-fee.

But the two bodies would never be joined as the souls had been. Pain and grief were unleashed upon Spock's unsuspecting mind. He felt all her anguish as the Other lay dying in her arms. The sudden death had torn the bond between them, leaving her receptive to all the ugliness of hatred.

Months in the deserts on Vulcan, spent in isolated meditation, had purged all the hatred. It had been locked away with the memories of the Other, until now. It was something so personal that she could never have spoken of it openly. But it was something she felt he had to understand.

Past the memories was an innocent, untouched area. It felt clean and new. It opened easily to him. It was here that he placed his mark and sealed his bond.

He opened his mind to her, but she did not spend time there. He had nothing she truly wanted to know. She remained on a superficial level, secure in the knowledge that he understood her reasons. The bond he had buried deep in her was all that was necessary now.

Later, when he was in the plak-tow, she could enter the depths of his mind. It was not necessary to make the journey twice.

The ritual completed, they separated. A spastic gasp for air brought T'Alina back to reality. She felt a slight discomfort, and knew it was the bond. She would grow accustomed to it in time.

Opening his eyes, Spock looked into the face of his wife. Her eyes remained closed, a single tear streaking each cheek. Slowly he reached out a hand, his fingers wiping the moisture from her face. This was a final farewell to the Other.

He sounded the gong once to symbolise the unity, and rose. With a special tenderness, he drew his wife to her feet. She still did not look upon his face. Cradling her chin in his palm, he raised her head. He gazed into her soft eyes. They held a gentleness he had never known before.

"How long?" Her voice trembled slightly.

"Two days, maybe less." Spock's manner stiffened as he regained the mask of logic and non-emotion.

"I will await the Time."

There was nothing else she could say. She had made her choice a long time ago, and had come too far to turn away.

Yet no matter how well prepared her training had made her, she now felt fear. Two lives depended on her responses during the plak-tow.

Right now she could not stand to feel his touch. It only served to confuse her. Slowly, she backed away from him. There were so many things jumbled in her mind right now. She needed time to think.

She turned and walked away.

In silence, Spock looked after her. Finally the cabin door separated them. But he still felt her in his mind.

The bond was good.

Fire, burning hot, blazed all around her. Sweat poured from her body as she kicked off the blankets. Her hands pawed at her nightgown. Soon it lay in shreds on the floor.

She thrashed violently, as if in the grip of a nightmare. Breathing was shallow and rapid, but the air only seemed to feed the fire. At some level of reality, she knew the Time had come. Soon her husband would be here, and the mating would begin. Her mind raced with the thoughts of what she had to do.

It had been two nights since the bonding. Now the time was ripe and there could be no more delay. She heard her cabin door open to admit the one. Slowly, as if in a trance, she rose to meet him. Her

hands moved over his body, removing the thin protective clothing.

She felt his touch as he lowered her back to the bed. It was like tiny fingers of fire. She felt the burning in her mind, through their link. Savage passion struck out at her through the bond. She fought to control it.

Slowly she began to speak the words of the ritual, over and over until his mind said them as well. The savage emotions were still there but now in a state where she could control them.

Time had no meaning for her. Her mind floated somewhere between reality and the fantasy escape of her mind. At some point she could feel the climax of his actions, and the flame cool. It gave her little comfort, as she knew it would repeat itself all too soon.

Her husband lay beside her now, sleeping. The flame no longer burned in her mind. Slowly, she drew the sheet up around her. She turned away from Spock. In the silence of the room, she buried her head in the pillow, and cried.

The ritual was repeated several times. With each came a stronger control over her mate, and he began sleeping for hours between attacks. Rest was coming easier and in greater quantity, but she dared not leave for long enough even to get something to eat. Water from the bathroom had to serve.

Five days had passed, and she could feel the flame begin to cool within Spock. She felt she could wait no longer. Her strength was almost gone. It was only her strong will, and the knowledge that if she stopped him it would mean certain death, that kept her going.

Her whole body ached; her mind called out for rest.

It was the middle of a night shift, when the corridors were empty, that she slipped out of her cabin. She could barely walk, the pain was so bad. But her hunger helped her to reach the officers' mess. It was deserted.

She leaned back against the door frame as dizziness swept over her. Then she felt the hands. She knew it was not Spock, but she didn't care who they belonged to. There was nothing left of her rigid Vulcan disciplines, and it didn't matter any more who was witness to the shameful display.

The chair felt hard against her aching muscles. She lowered her head to the table and laid it on folded arms.

The touch of the stranger reached out to her again. "T'Alina."

The voice penetrated her tired, aching mind. She raised her head to look into gentle blue eyes.

"Drink this." McCoy held out a cup of hot tea.

She couldn't bear to touch it. The warmth of the cup reminded her rattled mind of the flame. Her hands shook so badly she dropped it to the floor. Then her entire body began to shake, as if suddenly very cold. McCoy reached out to hold her. She cried long and hard. Even when she thought there were no more tears, they flowed like streams down her cheeks.

McCoy had been out on an emergency call when he spotted the

young Vulcan. She had half stumbled along the corridor, using the wall as support. He knew what Kirk had told him, and he pieced the rest of it together as T'Alina continued to soak his shirt.

He didn't need a medical scanner to tell him that she was on the point of collapse. Rest and nourishment were what she needed most, but he couldn't force them upon her. Yet he could give her a fighting edge. A hypo hissed against her upper arm. In moments she was calm.

He tried again to get fluid into her. This time, he handed her cool fruit juice. He kept a hand on the cup as she raised it to her dry, chapped lips. She took sips at first, making sure her system would not reject it. Convinced that she could tolerate more, she downed the remainder.

McCoy sat across the table, watching her consume a bowl of cold potato soup and bread. It was a start, but he knew she had a long way to go yet. Finally she pushed away from the table. She had to get back before Spock awoke.

As much as he wanted to stop her, he knew he couldn't.

"It is almost done," she whispered to the doctor as they slowly walked the corridors back to her quarters.

"Well, when it is," he said in a commanding tone, "I want you in sickbay. One cup of fruit juice and a bowl of soup doesn't feed you for a week. We're going to need to build you up again before I let you back on duty."

"Medical order, Doctor?" she asked, a strange smile on her face. The smile pleased him, but he would rather have seen it on a healthy face instead of the bruised, half dead one he now saw.

"You bet your pointed ears it is."

Then he saw pain flash across her face. His heart felt for her.

"He is beginning to stir again. I must be there when he wakes."

With great reluctance, he watched her slip back into her quarters.

For another three days the flame burned within her husband. She could stand no more; she had no will left to fight against the raging passion. One more time and she would die in the attempt. She had spent the last day in a state of unconscious response.

Now she lay face down on the bed, oblivious of the things around her. A hand reached out and gently brushed the sweat-soaked hair from her face. There was no more fire in his touch; the pon farr had passed. Tender arms reached out to hold her, but she could not feel them.

Spock realised then what he had done. He laid her back down and covered her. She was near death. He could feel her life slipping away as he dressed and awaited the arrival of the medical team.

There was sorrow in his heart as he eased himself down to the edge of the bed. She made no move this time; she had slipped into a

coma.

For two days McCoy fought to hold on to the thread of life still within the young Vulcan. He sat with her by the hour, talking to her, reading her poetry, and knowing that she could not hear him. But he never gave up hope. His words were as much for himself as his patient.

Spock had not come to see the damage he had caused. Yet each morning at breakfast he made an inquiry into her condition. McCoy's answer was the same each day.

It was during one of his vigils on the third day that he heard the weak voice call out. His heart jumped.

"T'Alina, can you hear me?" His voice was as soft and gentle as he could manage through his excitement. "T'Alina, it's Dr. McCoy." He put a special stress on the name.

With a flutter, her eyes opened, but looked for a moment as if she found it impossible to focus.

"Spock."

Her lips formed the name, her voice barely adding a whisper of sound.

"He's just fine." Her head turned, her eyes searching his face. "I don't mind saying, young lady, you have had us all worried. Including Spock." He added the last two words with a professional flair.

She said nothing in response. Slowly she closed her eyes and slipped into a Vulcan healing trance.

James Kirk watched his First Officer from across the bridge. There seemed to be something different about the stony expression. The more he looked, the more he was convinced that the Vulcan was mellowing. There was a softness in his eyes that he, Kirk, had rarely seen.

Marriage agreed with his friend, but it did not with Kirk. It had been just over seven months since the bonding and ritual of pon farr. In that time, so many things had changed.

Off-duty time found Spock and T'Alina together. They shared a closeness that he, James Kirk, thought had no room for old friends and chess games.

And then there was yet another thing added to drive a wedge between them. McCoy had almost exploded with excitement when he announced the little bundle was on its way.

But he wasn't about to sit back and let their friendship go. He had never realised how much he depended on Spock's friendship until it seemed that it had gone. He had an idea that he hoped would reunite the threads and reweave what they once had.

Kirk felt a hand tap his shoulder. He had been waiting for the

shift change, and now it took him completely unaware.

"Captain, is there something wrong?" Chekov's Russian accent cut through his daydream.

"No, Lieutenant. Just doing a little thinking." Easing himself out of the command chair, he gladly turned the ship over to the young officer of the day.

The majority of the bridge crew had already changed over. Even Spock was heading for the lift. He had to hurry, or he would lose the Vulcan's attention to his wife.

"Spock, can I have a word with you?" he blurted, ascending the steps.

"Captain, I do have an appointment with Dr. McCoy." But there was a pleading look on the face of his friend that made Spock amend his plans. "We can discuss what you wish as we ride down."

"Bones? Are you ill, Spock?" He had waited to speak until the lift doors provided privacy.

"Not I, Captain. T'Alina is presently with McCoy." Kirk suddenly realised that he was bothered even by the mention of her name. "I have some questions I must ask the good doctor."

Spock studied his friend for a moment. He had not said much about T'Alina since the night of the bonding. Even now, with all the time that had passed, Kirk seemed uncomfortable at the mention of her.

"Have you got any plans for this evening?"

"None that I am aware of."

"I think it's about time I made amends and tried to get to know your wife." Kirk's voice was quiet and heavy. "I'd like the two of you to join me for dinner later." His words were almost a mumble as he finished. "I've missed your company."

"I see," Spock whispered.

He hadn't realised how much he had been neglecting his dearest friend. Although the ritual of pon farr was a biological function over which he had no control, he still felt distressed at causing his chosen one so much pain. He had been spending time with her as payment for her close brush with death.

Possibly he had paid enough for the feelings he had allowed to possess him? It was time to reach out again to the old habits, and Kirk was giving him a helping hand.

"We would be honoured. What time would you like us, and where?"

"How about 18.00 hours in my quarters?"

"We will be there." The doors opened and Spock stepped out. "I shall see you then," he added before moving off.

The doors to sickbay parted with their natural swiftness as Spock approached. Beyond, McCoy and T'Alina stood speaking. The Doctor was giving her his usual lecture on her condition. At times

it seemed as though he hovered over her like a mother hen. Spock waited for them to finish.

"Oh, Spock. I didn't hear you come in." McCoy beamed as he looked at the Vulcan. He could feel T'Alina stiffening as much as he saw it.

"My wife, attend." Spock's voice was commanding as he held out the first two fingers of his right hand. She crossed the distance and held her fingers to his. His voice was softer, but no less rigid, as he spoke to her.

"I wish to speak to the Doctor. You will prepare for dinner with the Captain. I shall be in our quarters in ample time to prepare myself."

Obediently, she left.

"O.K., Spock. I'm going to presume that this isn't a social call. What's bothering you?" The formal, stiff way the Vulcan treated T'Alina bothered McCoy. He had to keep reminding himself that it was simply the Vulcan way. Still, the knowledge didn't make it any easier to watch.

"First, I require a report on my wife's condition." Spock stood, hands clasped behind his back, waiting for the reply.

"Well, things are progressing at a rate within normal standards. Despite the way she got into this, she is a strong, healthy woman. She's at a point in the pregnancy where I begin to pay special attention to the child. I like to keep a steady monitor on the heart rate and movements. It is at this time that she could be most susceptible to a miscarriage.

"Although the child hasn't started to turn yet, I'm not overly concerned about it. There is plenty of time. Its movements are more frequent, and I find that most straighten themselves out before too long."

Spock listened, and digested every word. That was McCoy's only indication that he was indeed interested. But he still experienced some concern, and since the Doctor's report omitted mention of the points that worried him, he knew that his wife had not mentioned them.

"Doctor, may we speak somewhere that is more private?"

"My office?" McCoy offered. Spock nodded, and they moved into the tiny room, jammed with medical journals and equipment. "What is it, Spock - pre-daddy jitters?"

McCoy laughed, but sobered as he saw the strained look on the Vulcan's face.

"No," he replied sharply. "Lately I have had some anxiety concerning my wife. She has been acting rather oddly."

"Oh? She never mentioned anything abnormal to me." McCoy waved towards a chair. "Sit down." As Spock complied, he sat behind the desk.

"Recently, I have frequently noticed her weeping in the middle of the night. I feel I could tolerate that if it weren't for the

fact that she has emotional displays as well. All this occurs while she believes I am still asleep. It is most distressing. She attempts to shield it from me, and it puts a strain on our bond."

"Spock, I'm going to be the first to admit that I don't have all that much experience with Vulcans; but right now, she's not that much different from any other woman. Her body is going through a lot of changes. She doesn't understand it, and is too proud to admit it.

"I've seen her around you. She displays the stiff facade of a true Vulcan. And you expect it of her. You never see her while she is working, or when I'm around. She knows then that she doesn't have to be something that at the moment she's not.

"Once I knew she was pregnant, I pulled some old research data on Vulcan childbearing. I found out something I don't think even you know.

"While in the grip of pon farr, you were stripped of all your Vulcan dignity. You lashed out at her with savage passion. There was no way you could control the emotions that possessed you.

"Well, *she's* got that problem now. Chemical changes in her system have made it impossible for her to remain unchanged. It has been known to drive some women insane.

"Yet when she is around you, she is the picture of Vulcan control. Her subsequent bouts of crying are only a physical release of the tension that builds up inside her. It's tearing her apart inside. She could never stand to disappoint you." McCoy couldn't tell if he was getting through yet or not.

"We talk while we work and while I examine her. Do you know how much she cares for you? You might think she went through pon farr with you simply out of some Vulcan loyalty, to save your life. She went through hell for you because she loves you, and it almost cost her her life." The Doctor paused to take a breath, and let his words sink in.

Spock was abnormally quiet. McCoy had half expected the Vulcan to stop him somewhere along the line, but he sat there and listened to the entire ravings of a country doctor. He softened his approach slightly, and continued.

"I realise it is hard for you to show emotion, especially to her, but you must try. You'd be surprised how easy it can be. Reach out and touch her when she is near you at night. Feel the child. It's yours as well. She didn't do it alone. It takes two to create life, but it only takes one to kill it." McCoy leaned forward on the desk. "Any questions?"

"Just one thing." Spock shifted uncomfortably. "T'Alina has been partaking of rather abnormal food."

McCoy sighed inwardly. Spock had changed the subject. He wondered if anything he said had reached the logical mind. Well, he had tried his best. He could do no more.

"With some of the things she consumes, it does not amaze me that she becomes ill."

"Cravings." The medical officer stressed the word. "They are normal, and express a need of the body. What are some of them?"

"She consumes an enormous amount of sour cream. That in itself would not have disturbed me, but she seems to prefer taking it with ripe olives. And what she chooses to combine with ice cream..." Spock could not bring himself to utter the words.

"It sounds normal enough. Her body is demanding an increased intake of calcium. The fine delicate bones of the child are starting to grow and develop. You said something about her becoming sick. Physically ill?"

"Violently."

That's not a good sign. I think it would be better if we try taking her off all dairy products by mouth and replacing it by calcium injections. It won't do to have her losing weight now. We can start in the morning. Do you want to tell her, or shall I?"

"I can discuss the matter with her upon arrival." Spock stood to leave.

"One more thing."

Spock paused to look back.

"I'll be taking T'Alina off full active duty in another month or so. She'll start to slow down, getting more tired, requiring more sleep. If I were you, I would start thinking of where you want it born, and who will have the honour of delivering it."

"The matter has already been decided. The child will be born on Vulcan. Arrangements have already been made. As for the one who will attend T'Alina during the delivery, I have every confidence in your ability. My wife prefers your touch to that of a stranger. Now, if you will excuse me, we have a dinner engagement with the Captain."

McCoy had already guessed the preferred location for the birth, but somehow he had never thought he would be there to deliver the next generation. He had expected to hand T'Alina over to a Vulcan Healer or midwife.

He shrugged the thought aside, and sat again. He had a mound of paperwork he had been putting off for far too long.

James Kirk ran around his quarters, trying to do everything at the last minute. Spock and T'Alina would arrive in ten minutes and he still hadn't managed to get the table set. He was more nervous about this dinner than of anything since the day he took over command of the Enterprise.

He had literally bumped into Janice Rand, while hiding some things from the possible view of the Vulcans.

Out of the kindness of her heart, Janice had taken pity on him and offered her assistance. He jumped at the chance, and began issuing orders in his most nervous tone. He cursed himself for the hundredth time, for not giving himself more time.

Finally, he stood back and surveyed the results. His desk made a rather lovely table, with a cloth and china to ornament it. The food Janice had selected included some of Spock's favourites. Now

all that remained were his guests.

There was a moment of silence, and Kirk eased himself into a chair to do some thinking. There was no valid reason for him to dislike T'Alina. Although she had captured Spock's attention, Kirk knew he had no excuse for allowing the situation to progress to this intolerable point.

He and Spock had shared more than just space on the Bridge. They had a friendship that had survived and thrived over the years. Even when separated by dangerous and secret missions, they managed to wind up together again.

But the years had not *all* been good and flourishing. They had had their share of disagreements.

Spock had taken a back seat to several of *his* relationships over the years - but always they managed to resume their close friendship. And T'Alina would not be around for much longer. She would be shipped out six weeks before the child was due. Then Spock would return to the familiar pattern of chess games and dinner...

His thoughts of self-reassurance were disturbed by the door chime.

"Come!" he called, rising from his chair. Spock entered, his wife a step behind.

Kirk hadn't seen her much in the past few months, from choice, and was somewhat taken back by her appearance. She was beautiful - even he admitted it now. There was a healthy glow to her face, and a tenderness in her eyes. Motherhood definitely agreed with her.

As far as that was concerned, he noticed the size of her belly. Much larger than he had expected. McCoy had not said anything about twins. He dismissed the thought in the next instant, and decided that the caftan she wore exaggerated the size.

Dinner itself was consumed in a shroud of silence. Several times, Kirk had noticed T'Alina giving questioning looks to Spock before returning to pick at her food. She ate very little. He chalked it up to a new restriction by McCoy; he had been on the end of a few of these himself.

In actuality, almost everything was combined in various ways with dairy produce.

She had wanted to argue the point with Spock when he first told her of the dietary changes, but the memory of her violent bouts of vomiting made it easier to accept.

When Spock had questioned her about her neglect in not mentioning the trouble to McCoy, she had no answer for him. She had simply assumed that it would pass, as her brief days of morning sickness had. Then she began to wonder how many other things the two of them had discussed in her absence.

T'Alina assisted Janice in returning the dishes to the mess, and returned to her husband. She sat silently listening to the general conversation and occasional reminiscences between the two old friends.

When Kirk departed to get a bottle of wine and a couple of

glasses, T'Alina finally spoke.

"I would prefer to return to our quarters, husband." Her eyes pleaded with him.

"Are you feeling ill again?"

"No, I did not consume enough of the dinner to cause me discomfort. I am merely fatigued." The truth was that she was also starving. As soon as she left, she intended to hit the nearest mess hall. There had to be *something* out there that wasn't forbidden!

"I had not intended to leave so early."

"I had not intended you to join me." That would ruin all her plans. "A chess game or two would not hurt; the two of you should spend time together. You have not done so in far too long."

Before Kirk had returned, she was gone.

Placing the tray of wine and glasses on the table, Kirk looked around. "We seem to be missing someone."

"T'Alina has retired for the evening."

"Well... Then I guess you'll be - "

With a raised eyebrow, Spock held out two closed hands. The Captain stared at him for a moment then chose the right one. The Vulcan opened it to reveal a black pawn.

It finally sank in.

The first game was won by Kirk. Spock's attention was not on the game, and he had taken advantage of every mistake. Still, it was a close game. The second was won by Spock; mind oriented towards the game once more, he made quick work of the pieces. This was more like normal.

The third game dragged on, neither man giving any advantage to the other. They were several moves into it before a conversation began.

"What are your plans for the future, Spock?" Kirk had been dying to ask the question for some time, and now he braced himself for the answer.

"By the word 'your', I will assume you meant T'Alina as well as myself?"

Kirk nodded.

"My wife will resign her commission when it becomes time to head home to Vulcan. Our child will be raised there. She will have the support of both my parents, as well as her own father." Spock made a move that produced a sigh from his opponent. "I have properties there, and with half my earnings going to her, her needs will be provided for."

There was a long period of silence. Kirk wanted very much to ask about Spock's own choice, but held back. Friendly enquiries were one thing, badgering for the reply he wanted was another.

"I, on the other hand," Spock finally continued, "will remain here, on board the Enterprise. It is what we both want."

You mean the three of us, Kirk thought.

Again silence fell upon the cabin. The third game eventually went to Kirk.

"I believe I have had enough, Captain. I shall see you on the Bridge in the morning." Spock spoke with a peculiar strain in his voice. His lack of concentration had come near the end of their game, and Kirk realised that this was a hollow victory.

As Spock drew near his own quarters, he could feel T'Alina trying to pull back from their link. He knew that she was in emotional turmoil again, and being awake when it started made the strain worse. He had to do something - it couldn't continue like this.

His cabin was dark when he entered, save for the red glow in the meditation area. The figure of his wife lay still on the bed. Quietly, he removed his uniform and prepared for bed. The words of Dr. McCoy made sense to him now; he saw it as his only way to reach her.

Gently, he lowered himself between the sheets. He drew close to her. She stirred slightly, and finally settled on her back.

Reaching out a hand, he placed it gently on her belly. The child - *his* child - stirred within. It brought a strange sensation to his mind. He did not remove his hand.

Thoughts flooded his mind. Memories of his childhood with Sarek. There had been many times when his father had showed him the kind of attentions that could have been understood as affection. But he had not seen it as such - at the time.

Even when they argued about his choice of career, he knew there was a loving reason deep inside his father for his attitudes. Yet the argument had separated them for too many years.

He thought of how he would soon have a child himself, to follow in the Vulcan tradition. Because of his Human mother, he had had to make the - for him - difficult choice of following his father's heritage. *His* child would not have such a traumatic decision to make.

Still, there were many things that his Human half forced him to consider. There was a chance that his child would have a recessive Human gene. Odds were that some part of the infant would reflect it.

Again came a strain through the marital bond, tearing all other thoughts from his mind. T'Alina was awake, and trying desperately to hold back her tears. Slowly, he reached out a hand and drew her near. He whispered a single word in her ear.

Then, as if a dam had burst, the tears began to flow. She buried her head deep into his shoulder. Her breaths were taken in spasmodic inhalations. The tears flowed like water.

When she began to calm to a point where he thought she was rational enough to hear him, he began to speak. His voice held a gentleness she had never heard before from him. It helped to calm

her further.

"I understand." These were McCoy's words, but they would serve. "This is a most stressful time for a woman, and I have not been tolerant of your needs." His hand wiped a new stream of tears from her cheek. "But that will change. No more will you be allowed to act when in my presence. I expect you to behave as your body tells you is appropriate."

T'Alina wasn't sure what had happened to change him so, but she was grateful. She reached out and placed an arm around his chest. Right now, this was what she wanted - physical contact with her mate.

Spock sensed it as well, and he held her even tighter. The strain on their link was completely gone now. He felt slightly uncomfortable in that position, but did not try to disengage her. He would spend the night that way, if need be...

The planet Dalmarra was a desert-like world, beyond the boundaries of both Federation and Romulan space. The area had been claimed by neither side.

Not much had been known about it until a strange message had come from the area, begging for the Federation's help.

The plea had passed quickly through the Council, and a debate began. It was decided that a planet so close to the Romulan Empire, yet neutral, could be a useful ally. So it was decreed that a single Starship would be despatched to deal with the crisis.

The Enterprise had been making deliveries to the outer planets of Federation space, as part of a routine maintenance check, when the orders came through. Kirk was delighted when he acknowledged the orders; their days of long, boring milk runs were over. His crew thrived on excitement, and hopefully they would have plenty to keep them going for a long time to come.

Kirk signed a biology department requisition, and handed it back to T'Alina. She hadn't been able to wear her uniform for some time now. He was pleased to see that her maternity pants and smock were in a fashion resembling the duty clothing. He smiled slightly, and could have sworn she responded in kind.

Six weeks had passed since the night Spock had first reached out to his wife. His love seemed to grow as the child did. There was a new softness to Spock; Kirk noticed that she reflected it also.

Marriage was hard enough in itself to adjust to, but when a child was expected so soon, it put an added strain on any relationship - even a Vulcan one. Then, again, he hadn't done anything to make it easier on Spock either.

Their friendship had returned to the point from which it had been 'estranged'. Evenings - when duty shifts permitted - were again spent on either side of a chess table. The nights, Spock spent with his wife in his arms.

It was some comfort to Kirk that this was the last mission before they returned her home to Vulcan. Her date was rapidly getting closer, and it made him nervous. One would have thought he was the father! Spock seemed to be taking it all too calmly.

During the first few months of the marriage, Spock's relationships had been tenuous at best; he had paid proper attention to his duties, but was distant and cold otherwise. Something had happened to change his First Officer, but Spock would never admit what it was. Kirk never probed beyond the second attempt. He simply took the changes as they came along, and welcomed them.

McCoy knew what was going on, but was as close-mouthed as the Vulcan. He only made note that T'Alina's midnight tears had stopped. He was now optimistic about a normal, healthy delivery.

"Achieving standard orbit, Captain," Sulu announced.

"Sensor readings, Mr. Spock."

"The atmosphere is arid. Temperature is 40.2 degrees Celsius. The surface of the planet is eighty percent desert," Spock replied, gazing into his computer display.

"A hot one," Kirk muttered.

Spock rose to finish his report. "I have located a Romulan garrison, as well as a fairly large city."

"Equip a landing party with desert gear, and assemble them in the transporter room. We go down in ten minutes," Kirk ordered before leaving the bridge.

When the orders for this mission had come through, Kirk had handed Spock the task of selecting the landing detail. He had discussed his logical choice with T'Alina, and she had agreed completely. But would his commanding officer approve?

That, he would find out in nine point three seven minutes.

Spock stood, hands clasped behind his back, talking softly with Dr. McCoy. Scott paid no attention to the pair; their affection and tolerance for each other was common knowledge among the bridge crew. What he didn't realise was that the Vulcan was trying to gain the Doctor as an ally.

Kirk bounded into the transporter room, ready to get the assignment over and done with. It wasn't his idea of fun, to go walking into a totally unknown situation, with an enemy as deadly as the Romulans.

Kirk threw a puzzled look at McCoy. He had half expected to be taking his senior officers down with him. He wanted nothing but the finest this time around. Still, he had allowed Spock to make all the landing party decisions. Obviously, he had felt that McCoy would not fit in.

"Not joining us, Bones?" he said, half laughing.

"Not me," McCoy blurted out. "You won't find me frying my brains on those deserts." He shifted uncomfortably, glancing at Spock. "I've assigned someone from Life Sciences that fits more than one of the requirements."

No sooner had McCoy managed to get the words out than the doors opened to admit the final member of the landing party. T'Alina strode in, and stood beside her confused Captain. She adjusted the medical equipment, tricorder, and emergency rations slung across her shoulder.

Kirk stood, mouth gaping open, a look of anger on his face. "No," he said flatly. "I will not allow her down there. Not in her condition."

"But Jim, she is - "

"Captain." T'Alina broke off McCoy's protest. "I am still a commissioned officer in this fleet, and am on active duty. There is no valid medical reason to exclude me from this mission. Spock and I were born and raised on a desert world. Then there is our physical resemblance to the Romulans. It gives us the ability to blend in with the enemy."

"She has a point," McCoy mumbled.

Kirk shot him a look that would have disturbed a lesser man. "Spock?" he pleaded, feeling that his First Officer was his last chance.

"Captain, I would not have selected her if I felt she was not capable of fulfilling her obligations."

"I seem to be outnumbered." Kirk sighed deeply. "All right. Let's get down there."

Before he could move onto the platform, the intercom sounded. "Kirk here," he announced, activating the system.

"Chekov here, sir. We have picked up a vessel on long range sensors. It is coming directly from Romulan space. It's travelling at sub-light speed."

"Have they spotted us yet?" Kirk threw a glance at Spock. All he received in reply was a pair of raised eyebrows.

"No, sir. It appears to be a small scoutship. It has not changed direction or speed. It seems in no hurry to get here."

"How long, present speed, until they arrive?"

"Two days."

"Put the planet between us and that ship. Maintain alert status, and radio silence for at least thirty six hours. Either Mr. Spock or myself will contact you." He closed the communication. "You heard him, Spock. We have forty eight hours to find out what's going on down there. Remember, both of you, this is a disputed area of unspecified space. Neither of us really has a legal right to be here. We are only here because of a request from the planet."

Kirk climbed the steps to the platform. "Scotty, take care of my ship. Get out of here if it looks like trouble. Contact Starfleet and inform them of our situation."

"Sir, shall we beam you up before leaving?"

"Use your own judgement. If you can't get a fix on us, leave

without us. I don't want this ship in danger." A nod from the Chief Engineer satisfied the apprehensive Captain.

The hot dry air hit Kirk like a blast from a furnace as the transporter released the three figures. His lungs felt as if they were on fire. He couldn't bear to take a breath.

T'Alina was at his side in an instant. A hypo hissed, pumping its contents into his upper arm.

Kirk's breathing eased in a few moments. "Thanks," he whispered.

"Forgive me for being so blunt, sir," she said, helping him to his feet, "but possibly you should not have come. You are not suited for it."

"I'll be all right." The look she gave Spock expressed all her fears.

The Vulcan knew the stubbornness of his Captain. Nothing was going to keep him from heading this mission. He would make it through on his unyielding will, if it came down to it.

The whine of Spock's tricorder carried on the waves of silence across the desert.

He was not encouraged by the readings. It was mid-morning, and it would get hotter before it cooled.

"The Romulan encampment is thirteen kilometres in that direction." Spock pointed north, towards the sun. "The city is six point five kilometres due east."

"We start at the city," Kirk said, taking one last look 'around.

This world was mostly flat, barren of anything but sand. Dunes rose and fell in ever-growing mounds of sand. Rests were taken at regular intervals in order to allow the Human to gather his senses and strength.

Spock and T'Alina walked side by side, with Kirk a step or two behind. There was an unspoken communication between the two Vulcans, so when it was time to stop for an afternoon rest, Kirk never realised that the Vulcans had planned it for his sake.

"We shall spend the hot hours of the day here."

Spock had picked the shade of a particularly tall dune. The sun had been heading down, past the meridian, and the shade would increase as time passed. T'Alina eased herself down on the sand, while Kirk dropped, exhausted. A ration of water - and two minutes - found the Human deep in sleep.

Spock scanned the horizon once more before putting away his tricorder and gracefully easing himself to the sand beside his wife.

She stared out at the sand, lightly rubbing her abdomen. Spock's hand joined hers. He looked at her tired face.

"You should rest."

"At the moment, I am not tired." She sighed and closed her eyes, lost in thought. "This place makes me long for home. Although a different desert, it calls to me all the same... to a place within me that considers the wasteland home."

"Soon you will be back on Vulcan, with a small one to sit beside you."

"And you will be gone." She turned her face away from him. This was the first mention of his decision to remain in Starfleet since the matter had been decided. He slowly removed his hand, his face hardening.

"You will never be alone. Your father will be there, and my parents will be within walking distance." He paused for a moment. "But you must guard yourself against my mother. She will, without a doubt, try to raise the infant."

T'Alina sighed, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. Her eyes showed her levity. "I shall remember that."

The moon had been full, allowing the trio to use the cover and coolness of night to reach their objective. Tricorder readings had directed them across the endless sand.

An engraved wooden sign hung suspended over the entrance. Four letters were all that appeared.

IASO.

Kirk accepted it as the name of the city.

It was constructed fortress style, with a four-metre stone wall around the perimeter. The huge wooden doors were closed and bolted from the inside, but Kirk felt the need to push at them nonetheless.

Kneeling down close to the wall, Kirk prepared a packet of dehydrated rations, intended for breakfast. He hadn't realised it, but T'Alina had selected the provisions with her dietary restrictions in mind. She had been doing quite well with the injunctions. Here, however, her husband provided the service Dr. McCoy had reserved for himself.

With a quick word to T'Alina, Spock set off for a little investigative reconnaissance. He walked the perimeter of the wall, listening to the sounds of the desert around him. Small animals scurried across the sand in the predawn coolness. He studied them for a moment, making mental notations on their appearance. He would record his thoughts when he was able to use his scientific tricorder.

Voices caught his attention. He paused as near them as he safely could, and pressed himself against the coolness of the stones.

"I don't understand why the Commander is allowing these backward natives to celebrate."

Spock's translator interpreted the Romulan words.

"He wants to show them how generous we can be. Seems they have

been obedient lately. Frankly, I think they're plotting something, and just waiting for a weak moment to make their move."

"Well, they won't make a move here. I don't plan on letting my guard down for one minute. This may be their ancient festival of whoever that god of theirs is, but I have no intention of changing our alert status. This is one place that will not fall."

"You'd better get started on the assignments. The nomads will be here in a couple of hours."

Spock looked out over the desert as he listened to the guards moving away. It was almost dawn.

Their best chance of contacting the ones who had requested their help still lay in the city. They had been handed the perfect way to slip in undetected.

He began moving in the shadows of the wall again. He would finish his reconnaissance before returning to his companions.

A thin line of purple stretched from end to end of the sky, across the horizon. Vibrant reds arched high into the sky, giving it the illusion of fire. It reminded T'Alina of how soon she would be returning to her own ancient world.

She had a formal ritual to perform upon arrival. Through the bonding and pon farr, she was considered Spock's wife. But in the place of Koon-ut-kal-i-fee, they would speak the ancient words once more, and she would be formally accepted as one of his family.

She closed her eyes and dozed. McCoy had warned her of the fatigue that would grow. It had been getting worse over the past week.

Catching her action - or lack of it - Kirk closed his eyes to sleep as well.

Hands, with a gentleness she knew so well, shook T'Alina's shoulders. Her eyes lazily opened. Spock's head was framed by the golden sun.

"It is time to move."

With his assistance, she made it to her feet.

Spock had awakened his Captain first, and relayed the information he had gathered. Quickly, he gave T'Alina an edited version.

People in white, loose-fitting cloaks filed in an orderly fashion through the open gates. Kirk waited until the guards were facing away before making their move. The three Federation officers slipped in, sandwiched between several natives.

Curiosity made T'Alina study the people as they passed.

They were definitely humanoid. They were several inches taller, on average, than she herself - the females by three or four inches,

the males by upwards of a foot. Their skin had been darkened by years of life in the desert. But their ears were what really caught her attention. They were enormous, almost four times the size of the average Human's.

A strange discomfort hit her as several natives pushed and shoved her into others. She set her mind against it, but in doing so lost contact with her two companions. Suddenly a hand grasped hers and pulled her from the group.

A pair of unfamiliar arms held her close for a moment in the shadow of a tall building. "Are you all right?" Kirk asked, releasing her. "You look awfully pale."

"Just the close confines of the crowd. All that is needed is a little air." She breathed deeply. "Where is Spock?"

"I don't know. We got separated by several natives." They waited for a moment to allow the bulk of the crowd to pass. "He can't be very far away. We just have to locate him."

Peering round the corner, Kirk studied the sights beyond.

A courtyard, almost fifty metres across, was lined with merchants and jammed with people. A group of musicians with strange instruments began assembling on a platform in the centre of the chaos.

There was no sign of Spock.

Several Romulan guards milled throughout the natives in the crowd. Even more walked the perimeter of the selling area. It wasn't going to be easy to get past them to search for his First Officer.

Kirk glanced at his companion, and groaned. "Wait right here. I'll be back in a moment." Before she could reply, he was gone.

It was exactly two point three minutes before Kirk returned. He handed her a white robe, with an order to put it on. She took it, a puzzled look on her face. He replied to the unspoken question as he donned a robe himself.

"You may blend in with the Romulans, but right now I need you inconspicuous."

She threw the robe over her head in one fluid motion. She didn't dare question him on how he got it. Positioning the hood to cover her ears and most of her face, she was ready to join him in re-entering the crowd.

Following her commander's lead, T'Alina eased herself back into the throng of natives.

They wandered around for nearly two hours, weaving in and out of various displays and attractions. Occasionally, Kirk would pick up an object and examine it, then gently replace it before moving on.

T'Alina paid little attention to the native articles; she kept a watchful eye out for her husband. She could feel her mate through their link, and knew that he was safe. Unfortunately, she could not use it to tell exactly where he was.

More wandering provided nothing. Kirk listened to pieces of several conversations as he passed. The translator embedded beside his left ear did its best to provide him with the bits, but it was difficult to catch more than the basic drift. Only one thing was certain - a hatred of the Romulans.

Then something caught his eye. With a sideways glance, he knew T'Alina had seen it as well. Her expression stiffened as she watched Spock, surrounded by four Romulans, being pulled from the square.

She only had time for a quick scream as a hand clasped over her mouth and she was pulled from the crowd. Kirk scrambled to follow; he had lost one officer, he had no intention of losing the other.

T'Alina's advanced state of pregnancy did not allow her to struggle. She was pulled into an alley.

She held her silence until she was released. "Who are you, and what do you intend to do with me?" The two who had grabbed her did not reply.

She began to study them and her new surroundings. The two were adolescents, little more than children; they had to be no more than fifteen. Although they had not been overly rough with her, the clubs they held gave her the impression that they wouldn't hesitate to strike out if they thought it necessary.

The alley was dark and dirty. The sun was hidden by the five-storey buildings whose backs opened to the narrow passageway. Papers and other litter blew about in the wind.

"Ossa, Afet!" someone called out. Her two guards backed away.

An older man, with a seasoned face and gray hair, stepped forward. "They will not hurt you," he said, drawing near. "A woman in your condition is sacred here."

Reaching up, the old man removed her hood. He stepped back and gasped.

"You are one of them! You are a Romulan!" The two young men closed in on her again.

"I am not a Romulan. I am from a race known as Vulcan. We are distant brothers of the Romulans - centuries ago, a portion of my race ventured out into the stars. It is believed that they were the fathers of the race who live by violence. I and my people are devoted to peace."

"I saw you travelling with an Off-worlder."

"He is my commanding officer."

"All right, everyone, freeze," Kirk ordered, stepping out from the concealment of a building, phaser in hand. "Come over here, Lieutenant." He motioned, and she obeyed. "I want to know what is going on around here."

"Excuse me for the awkward way of contacting you, but I could not risk your reaction alerting the enemy." The elder man held out a hand to them. "I am Davii, Leader of all who fight against the Romulans." He did not back down in the face of Kirk's phaser. "You are not of this world. I can only hope that you have come in reply

to my request."

"We have," T'Alina replied. A hand on her Captain's arm brought the lowering of his weapon. "Do you know where they have taken our other companion?"

"They will take him to their encampment. He will be questioned, then put to death." Kirk felt a slight tightening of the grip on his arm. "We will see that that does not happen. My home is not far from here. We will wait there until dark."

He turned and walked down the alley. The two officers followed.

The home was little more than a shack out in the desert. Three rooms made up the adobe-style hut. Davii's idea of a 'short' distance had taken them over an hour to cross. There was a reception committee waiting upon their arrival.

Davii's wife had prepared food, and stood in the doorway watching their approach. It had been a long time since strangers had shared a meal in their home. It felt good to have the chance to do so again.

T'Alina sat next to her commanding officer, watching him stuff the freshly cooked meat into his mouth. She passed on everything but the bread, and some fruit juice. This caught Davii's attention. Never being one to hold his tongue, he questioned her actions.

"I do not partake of animal flesh," she replied coldly. The words sounded so much like Spock's that it made Kirk grin. "Captain," she continued, "I am very tired. I wonder if there is possibly anywhere I might meditate for a while, then sleep?"

Kirk looked at Davii. With a wave of his hand, he summoned his wife Neora to his side. "Take the Lieutenant to our son's room. She needs rest."

With a nod, she was gone.

As soon as T'Alina was out of hearing range, Kirk continued the conversation he had begun out in the desert. "You said that you learned about the Federation from passing merchants. What made you finally contact us?"

"Two years ago, the Romulans came to our world. At first there were few of them. They said they wished us to become part of their Empire. When we turned down their 'offer', they began to bring more people here - and forced war. We found ourselves fighting against each other.

"One side was composed of those who believed promises of great riches from the Romulan mother world. The rest of us just wanted to be free. Civil war raged for the first time in two thousand years. When we heard that the Federation was opposed to the Romulan rule, we sent an urgent plea for help."

"Just what is it that you want from us?"

"We have a plan to rid our world of the disease, but we need a show of strength. Each time we tried to bring an uprising against them, a ship would arrive and bring more men. We would be

slaughtered. Now, with *your* ship and men..."

"We will not fight your battles for you," Kirk snapped. "We have laws against such things. If that is what you summoned us here for, then I must disappoint you."

"You do not understand, Captain. We are quite capable of fighting our own battles. We merely want your ship to circle our world and frighten off those who would come from the sky."

"Do you mean to tell me that you had no other use for us than as a decoy?" Kirk jumped to his feet and began to pace. His anger was reflected in his words. "One of my men faces death at the hands of the Romulans, the other has pushed herself beyond the limits of what her body is presently capable of, just so that you could play soldiers?"

"Captain, calm yourself. Tell me one thing. How would you feel if your world was in the hands of the Romulans? What would you try, to erase the memory of your only child?" Kirk stopped and stared at the native. "I saw my son bound in the courtyard of Iaso, and put to death because he dared to speak out against them." He paused to bridge the memories and control his own rage.

"We are desperate people. I am sorry about your two officers - but I saw this as a last chance to save millions of my people."

Kirk returned to his chair and sat down hard. He couldn't condemn Davii for his cause, just his method.

"How long do you need my ship?"

"When you were discovered, messages were sent out to all my people. By sundown, they will gather here. We will reach the encampment just after dawn. You and the female will be permitted to search for the other. But be warned - we will only be able to allow you thirty minutes to find him and leave. We intend to destroy the encampment totally."

"I see." Kirk began to rub his eyes with the heel of his hand, hoping to rid himself of his own tiredness.

"You need rest. I will have Neora show you to a room."

"I would prefer to check on T'Alina first."

"Surely." A second wave, and Kirk was shown the way.

T'Alina lay stretched out on a straw-stuffed mattress. A thin sheet covered her large form. Kirk pulled an over-stuffed chair up beside the bed. He sat staring into the pale face. He knew he should have forbidden her from coming. If the physical strain didn't break her, the mental one would. He couldn't see how she was taking Spock's capture so well.

He closed his eyes and leaned back. He would spend a few minutes here before moving to a bed of his own.

Soon he was asleep.

Spock's hands had been bound behind his back as he was dragged

from the courtyard. A rather bumpy ride in a land vehicle deposited him at the garrison. Taken through the corridors at a quick pace, he was left in a cell.

Two and a half hours passed before anyone returned for him. A door at the far end of the building was opened, and the Vulcan was pushed into an office.

Behind a huge wooden desk sat a Romulan Commander. The prisoner was forced down into a seat and the guards took up positions by the door.

"Well, we are honoured by your presence. It is not often we get a Federation officer in our midst. And such a famous one at that.

"You are Spock of the Enterprise."

Spock gave no reaction.

"You don't need to confirm it. We have already processed your identity.

"We know you never go anywhere without your Captain. I have issued extra men to search for him. You could save yourself a lot of punishment - tell me why you are here, why the Enterprise circles this planet."

Spock sat silent.

"We have methods of getting answers. They can strip even a Vulcan mind.

"We borrowed a little device from the Klingons. You may have been exposed to their mindsifter - but we have made improvements they never thought possible. We have adjusted it for Vulcan brain waves. I assure you, it will not be pleasant."

Still Spock said nothing. There was no way he would ever betray the Federation. He didn't know where his Captain and his wife were, but he could feel that she was safe.

"Take him away."

Spock's hands and feet were strapped to a chair, and electrodes were attached to his head. His face was as if it were carved from granite.

The Romulan Commander stood by and watched his men prepare the prisoner. "I am giving you one last chance to answer my questions."

Spock only closed his eyes in concentration.

Slowly, he withdrew into his mind. If he could reach a deep enough point before the electrical disruption reached him, he would be safe. Level by level, he could feel the serenity of his mind...

Suddenly, he was struck by a pain, greater than anything he had ever experienced.

He strained for control, withdrawing further and further into his subconscious mind. But the pain followed him, increasing the

more he tried to resist.

Outside, his body went limp.

T'Alina woke with a scream of pain. In an instant, Kirk was there. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he cradled her in his arms. She shook violently all over. He wasn't sure what to do other than hold her, so he continued to do that.

Slowly, the shaking subsided. Kirk waited a few moments longer until he pulled her away to question her. Before he could say anything, she softly volunteered an answer.

"I felt a great unshielded pain through our bond." Her words were shaky. "It was a sharp, burning torture."

"I didn't feel it." Kirk's thread of contact with Spock had always been sensitive. It had formed after several mind melds between them. Still, recently it *had* been pretty silent. Possibly hers was far more sensitive than his.

T'Alina drew a few deep breaths, gaining control over the link. She forced the sensation totally from her mind, and built a barrier to hold it at bay.

"Better?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Is he dead?" Kirk could hardly bring himself to speak the words.

"No, Captain. Injured in some way, but not dead. He probably doesn't even realise that his mind called out to me in his agony."

"T'Alina."

She was startled for a second. He had never used her name, to her knowledge, before, unless prefixed by her rank.

"I'm concerned for you."

"I will be all right, Captain." He could hear the strain in her voice.

"I hope you aren't offended by what I'm about to say..." He paused to make sure she was listening. "But Spock is my best friend. With him gone, I intend to take over your care and protection."

"I do hope you don't intend to treat me like a frail Human female. I could not tolerate that."

"I will do as I feel appropriate at the time." He looked into soft eyes. "But I *will* try not to over-indulge my fears." There was a distant, far-away pain in her eyes, and he felt for her. He knew what was causing that pain.

"We're about to move out," Davii said from the doorway. He had been drawn to the room by the scream, and stood silently watching the two off-worlders. His piece said, he moved away.

"Do you need something for the pain?" The look on her face as he helped her to her feet was one that he had seen all too often on Spock's. She still felt his pain, and was trying to hide it.

"I think not. If my senses are dulled now, it could hamper the outcome. I would refer to stay alert."

Kirk nodded acceptance of her wishes, but silently vowed to keep a close eye on her.

The night was cold, and the small band stopped only once to rest. It didn't seem long enough before they moved off again. At some point, Kirk noticed that the pained look was gone from T'Alina's face. She said simply that Spock had achieved a healing trance and was no longer in pain.

Ten metres outside the garrison, the group stopped. After settling T'Alina in the sand, Kirk moved forward to speak with Davii. Orders were being given, and he lent his military experience to polish the details.

Davii waved his arm through the air, and two young men moved over the crest of the dune and across the sand.

Kirk watched in an amazed silence as the two scrambled up behind the two sentries. With one slice of a knife from each, they fell; all remained quiet. Another wave, and the rest moved across the sand.

The garrison was enormous. Twenty prefabricated buildings had been assembled at right angles to each other. It was designed for more than just a temporary stay.

"Your man should be there." Davii pointed to a far, isolated building. "When my people were taken they were left there before being put to death."

"Thank you," Kirk replied, gathering his equipment and rousing T'Alina.

"Remember the plan. I will give you as much time as I can, but I cannot speak for my men. They have waited a long time for this day, and hatred will rule their actions."

With a hand clasped firmly on T'Alina's upper arm, Kirk urged her towards the indicated building. Davii watched for a moment then moved off to join his men.

Hard-soled boots struck an even rhythm against the concrete hallways. Pulling back into the shadow of a doorway, they waited for three Romulan soldiers to pass. They were getting nowhere fast. Then T'Alina took matters into her own hands.

"Trust me, Captain," she said before stepping out into the light.

"Guards!" Her voice was filled with authority, and they reacted appropriately. "I have captured the other Federation pig. Come, he must be taken to the Commander." She drew Kirk out so they could see him.

"Well done. The Commander will be pleased." So excited about having the Human handed over to them, the guards never took a real

good look at T'Alina.

Kirk's hands were bound behind his back, his communicator and phaser confiscated. T'Alina could hear the soldier talking to his prisoner as she drifted back, out of sight. "Since the Commander is out right now, we'll give you a little time to renew an old acquaintance."

They walked along several corridors and into a second building. An order was given to get the cell key. It was then that T'Alina made her move.

"Now!" she shouted. From beneath her cloak she produced a phaser. She fired, bringing down the guard who had separated from the group. As she turned back, she caught sight of Kirk's flying kick to a Romulan chest. The guard slammed against a far wall and slumped to the floor.

The third guard was taken down by her phaser. In a moment she was at her Captain's side, helping him to his feet.

"The restraints - hurry!" he commanded. A single shot, placed directly at the locking mechanism, snapped the bindings from his wrists. "Thanks."

Slowly, he rubbed the slight burn the phaser blast had produced on his wrist. "Spock can't be far." He scooped up his phaser and communicator.

She once again had mental contact with her mate, and his calm presence pleased her.

Kirk peered round a distant corner and found their objective. Two guards stood watch on either side of a door.

"I think that's it."

"I believe you are correct, Captain," T'Alina said, pulling back from her own look. "What we need is a way to dispose of the guards and force open the door at the same time."

A small explosion from the fighting outside gave her an idea.

"Give me your phaser." She held out her hand and he dropped the phaser into it. Carefully, she set it to overload, and waited to throw it.

It exploded in an enormous roar directly in front of the two guards. It accomplished both tasks.

The sight of the mutilated bodies and the walls, spotted with green blood, made her ill. One hand grabbed her stomach, the other her mouth, as she tried to hold back the urge to vomit.

Kirk never saw her action; he pushed through the smoke towards the free-swinging door.

From within the cell, the tall figure of his First Officer emerged. Kirk rushed forward to greet him.

"Captain. Although I approve of the rescue itself, I do have some reservations as to the method chosen. It could have been very dangerous."

"Don't talk to me about it," Kirk replied, half laughing. "It was your wife's idea."

"Indeed." Spock lifted one eyebrow as he looked towards his mate. She straightened under his stare. Her mind was, for the moment, in control of her body.

"Come on, we have to get out of here. The natives plan on bringing the house down around us."

"That would be most unwise," Spock said, starting to run. "I spent a little time listening to the talk among my guards. It seems that this is also a fuel storage facility. If the natives should ignite it, this entire area would be destroyed."

Kirk acknowledged the warning and quickened his own pace. But as he ran, it became apparent to him that T'Alina was lagging behind. By the time they reached the outer door she was more than two corridors behind. Spock noticed it as well.

"I'll wait for her," Kirk said breathlessly. "Get out to the desert and contact the ship!" He shoved his communicator into Spock's hand. "Have them look on to you, so we can get out of here in a hurry." He noticed a slight hesitation in his First officer. "Go on - I can handle it from here on out."

With a reassuring smile from his Captain, Spock took off at a trot.

Kirk leaned back against the door jamb and watched the Vulcan go. He was grateful for the chance to rest. The hot desert air was beginning to strain his breathing again.

A few moments brought his other officer. She came to a standstill beside him.

"I fear you were correct, Captain," she whispered. "I was not as well suited for this mission as I first thought."

"Nonsense," he reassured her. "If it weren't for you, I might never have found Spock. You were a greater help than you know."

"But I can run no further." Suddenly she grabbed at her belly. A wave of pain spread across her face. Kirk reached out and grasped her shoulders. He feared she was going into labour.

"Can you walk?"

She nodded. Kirk set a brisk but tolerable pace towards the distant sand. He could see Spock standing out against the brown sand. He guided T'Alina towards him.

Kirk felt the blast more than heard it. There was a loud roaring noise, a forceful rush of super-heated air, and a stinging pain in his right arm. He could feel himself falling face forward towards the sand, and there was no way to stop it. Darkness swept over his mind as he lost consciousness.

Sensations returned to Kirk in lethargic movements. First came the muffled screams of the people around him, then the pain. He lay there for long moments, fighting for consciousness.

Suddenly he remembered T'Alina.

Forcing his eyes open, he strained to see her.

There, lying on the sand beside him, was her inert form. Slowly, he pulled his aching body up to his knees. Ignoring the rebellious pain and seeping blood, he reached out an arm and turned her over.

Her face was still, as if in death. He searched for a pulse. His heart sank. He could barely feel it, it was so weak. He placed a hand on her abdomen; the child was still.

Then Spock was there. Kirk looked up at him. His First Officer's face was a display of the horror he felt. Spock's knees buckled under him. A trembling hand reached out to brush the dark hair from her dead-white face.

Gently, he eased a hand around her, and lifted her into his strong arms. Flipping open the communicator, he choked out a single word.

"Energise."

Scott's brogue broke through the thunderous sounds around them as the transport took hold. "Emergency medical team standing by."

The transporter room was in an ordered state when the three appeared. A gurney was pushed forward, and with great reluctance Spock lowered his wife to the clean sheets.

Without hesitation, McCoy tore open the material surrounding her belly. He would trust only his touch this time to give him answers. Gently, he placed his hands on the swell. The foetus moved sluggishly under the slight pressure. He didn't like that. His expression was one of total concentration as he moved his hands several times.

Finally, he straightened and began shouting. "Get her to O.R. Two. Hang two units and start an I.V. Prepare foetal monitors, with a constant readout on heartbeats. I want her prepped by the time I arrive." Softly, he added to Chapel, "Prepare an incubator - and hope we're in time."

With an efficiency he had rarely seen, the gurney was gone. Spock had no intention of leaving T'Alina's side until they actually took her into surgery.

McCoy turned his attention to his Captain. Kirk sat on the steps, cradling his right arm in his left.

"How are you doing?"

"Fine," he lied. "Is she going to be all right?" Kirk inclined his head towards the departing medical team.

"It's too early to tell." McCoy tried not to let his doubt creep into his words. "But it's not good. Come on - I'll get somebody to look at that arm for you."

Gathering the last of his equipment, McCoy steered his Captain towards the lift.

Dr. Leonard McCoy listened to two sets of heartbeats as he scrubbed for surgery. No fancy electrical machinery or tricks could save the two of them now. Only skill and a steady hand would give even the slightest chance for life. He hated the odds, and he didn't need Spock to quote them for him.

"We're ready, Doctor," Chapel announced quietly.

He paused for a moment to search the peaceful face of his patient. She looked as if there was no pain. He was thankful that she had not regained consciousness. Her cold, pale skin told him how she really was. She stood on the threshold of death.

"The infant's heart rate is 95 and steady." Chapel read the monitor for him. It wasn't all that good, but at least it had stabilised. He glanced around, half expecting Spock to be still hanging around. It had taken two orderlies to pry the very logical First Officer from his wife's side.

With a flutter, T'Alina opened her eyes, shocking McCoy. She tried to move, but found herself restrained by a pair of very determined hands.

"Don't move."

The doctor's voice was gentle as he moved to a better position for her to see him.

"How bad?"

"I won't know until I get in there." He saw the pained look in her eyes and knew she was already mentally checking her own body.

A labour pain tore through her abdomen. She gasped and tried to roll onto her side. McCoy took her in his arms and held her till it passed.

"Doctor, you know as well as I do what is happening. Tell me everything. I really want to know."

"Premature labour was triggered by your over-exertion and the shock. There was tremendous damage done by the explosion. There is massive haemorrhaging around the liver and spleen. The uterus is definitely ruptured, but we have managed to stop the seepage of amniotic fluid."

"Leonard, if it comes down to a choice, save the child."

Again a labour pain gripped her entire body. McCoy felt for her, but there was nothing he could do but hold her until it passed.

"I never told Spock that we tested for the sex of the child. Only you and I know."

"Heart beat dropping, Doctor." Chapel's voice was almost a shout. "Foetal rate now 86."

"No more talk." McCoy turned quickly back to T'Alina. "Or I'll have no choice either way."

"My bond with Spock must be severed before I am put to sleep."

She saw a strange look in his eyes. He knew there was no time. "If I don't, he will die along with me."

"And what if you should survive? I don't intend to give up on you so easily."

"I know the chances as well as you do. If I should make it, the link can always be restored. This is only a precaution."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No. Just give me a few moments."

Concentration was hard as a third labour pain gripped her. Fighting against it she continued as the pain dissipated.

Drawing into her mind, she sought the thread that mentally joined her with her mate. Slowly, she willed the dissolution, and felt it eroding. Her strength ebbed away with the bond.

A deep unconsciousness claimed her mind now. McCoy looked down into her bone-white face. With a nod, he began surgery.

With the numerous abrasions covered with a synthetic skin, and the arm properly placed in a sling, Kirk was released from sickbay. Emerging from a treatment room, he saw Spock sitting alone on the far side of the room.

He felt for his friend. There had been no word since McCoy took T'Alina into surgery more than two hours previously.

"Spock."

The Vulcan looked up.

"I'm sure Bones is doing all he can. Just remember, he's the best we've got." He half expected a retort about the doctor's medical ability, but nothing came.

Kirk sat down beside him, wishing there was something he could say - or do - to make the pain go away. He hadn't realised until now how really close Spock and his wife had become.

"Have you heard anything about the Romulan ship?" He had been wondering about it all through the examination and treatment, but no-one would allow him contact with the Bridge.

"According to Mr. Scott, they detected us only minutes before the garrison exploded. They had no wish to fight once their ground forces had been destroyed. They turned about and headed for home space."

"Well, that's one thing less I have to worry about." His comment did not ease the pain in the other's eyes. "Spock, are you blaming yourself?"

The Vulcan closed his eyes and bowed his head. Kirk knew then that he was. "It's not your fault."

"I should not have asked her to go."

"You couldn't have known what was going to happen down there. Every mission is a gamble, and you know it. You take your most competent people down with you, and hope for the best." He tried not to appear too harsh, but he had no intention of allowing his First Officer to sink into a self-tormented state. "What about the natives? Have we had any contact with them?"

"They thanked us for coming, and declined our further assistance, even with their casualties."

Remembering Davii's attitude, Kirk was not surprised.

The next hour was spent in a horrible, lingering silence. The pain killers M'Benga had given him were really taking hold. He had to fight to stay awake. But when McCoy entered the room, Kirk's mind snapped alert.

He could tell McCoy's news by the look on his face. He had spent many years with the Chief Medical Officer, and could read him like a book.

"I'm sorry, Spock. I couldn't save them both."

The Vulcan shook ever so slightly. He would grieve, no matter which one had been lost.

"I really had no choice in the matter. T'Alina was simply injured too badly. By the time I got her into surgery, she was haemorrhaging too much. I tried everything humanly possible."

Kirk knew McCoy was hurting as well. He and T'Alina had become very close. The journey to Vulcan and the delivery of the little one was all he had talked about for the past week.

"The child?" Spock asked. The words were strained.

"I had to take him by caesarian section. He is severely premature, of course." McCoy tried to sound a touch more optimistic. "But if he is as stubborn as his father, there may be hope."

Finally, it sank into Kirk's drugged mind. McCoy had taken an evasive way of spilling the news, but the message was received all the same.

"A son!" He wore a broad smile.

Spock was silent. His mind wasn't on what he still had but on what he had lost. Even what he had didn't seem to be all that stable at the moment.

He had felt the severing of the bond, and knew McCoy's reply before it was said. It hurt nonetheless. "May I see her?"

"I thought you might want to..." McCoy pointed towards another room, and Spock followed.

T'Alina lay on an examining table at the far end of sickbay. Slowly, Spock drew near. For long moments he stood staring into her death-white face. He was totally unaware of the doctor's actions as he continued to fight back the hurt and pain.

If it were anyone but Spock, McCoy would have stood by, waiting for the fall out. But the Vulcan he had to leave alone. With a touch on his Captain's arm, he would give his friend peace.

McCoy steered Kirk towards his office. Two brandies were poured and they sat silent for a while.

"A son," Kirk muttered, the smile returning slowly. "How is he, really?"

McCoy just shook his head and looked down into the glass. "It's not good. T'Alina caught a lot of flying debris from the explosion. One severed the uterus and lodged in the child. I had to perform surgery on him the moment he was born, or lose him."

Kirk winced, and downed the last of his brandy. McCoy reached over and poured him another.

"Christine is monitoring him right now. The next few days should tell us if he'll make it or not. I only hope, for Spock's sake, that he does." Drawing the last drop from his glass, the surgeon prepared to leave.

"I've got to call Starfleet Command, and I'd prefer to do it from here."

"No problem, Jim. I'll seal the door behind me." He placed a light touch on his commander's shoulder. "If you're too tired to wander all the way back to your quarters, just crawl into one of the beds out there. Nobody will notice." With a nod, McCoy was gone.

The part Kirk hated most about being Captain was the job he had to perform right now. The loss of any crew personnel was hard, but when it was someone close, it was almost unbearable. He opened the intercom and asked Uhura to make the connection. He had to hurry. The combination of pain killers and brandy was quickly claiming him.

It was half an hour later before McCoy went back to check on the Vulcan. He found the latter still standing beside the bed, his wife's limp hand grasped in his. There was a slight bow to his head, and he saw it stiffen again.

"Leonard." Spock's voice was tender, and it tore at McCoy inside. "Will you see that she is prepared for burial on Vulcan?"

"Sure." He drew close and put a sympathetic hand on the other's shoulder. It was then that he saw the tears that wet Spock's face. He had something to say, and knew he had to spit it out before the emotion choked him.

"Jim has already contacted Starfleet Command, and received permission for the Enterprise to proceed directly to Vulcan. We will be there in five days."

Spock only nodded.

Kirk sat in the quiet of his quarters to make this call. Uhura signalled the contact and patched it through.

Four days had passed since the death, and he made the call to try and save another life.

The image of a beautiful woman in her fifties filled his screen. She smiled brightly at him.

"Hello, Captain," Amanda chimed. "What can I do for you?"

"Is Sarek there?"

"No; he is attending a conference on Satrin, and won't be back for another two days." Then she became as sober as Kirk. "Captain, what is it? What's happened?"

"There has been an accident..."

"Oh my god - not my son?" Amanda gasped.

"No, Spock is alive." The words still stuck in his throat. "It's T'Alina. We beamed down into an unknown situation, and she was injured very badly." He could see the pain in her eyes, and knew he had to tell her the rest. "She died four days ago."

"Were they able to save the child?"

"Yes; Spock has a son. His condition is stable, and McCoy has every hope he'll make it. At the moment, my concern is for Spock. I must get in touch with Sarek as soon as possible."

"I see. Well, as I told you, he is on Satrin. The conference ends later today, and he was planning to spend an extra day wrapping up some personal business before coming home. I can give you the call numbers of the hotel he is staying at. I'm sure he can interrupt his schedule to speak to you."

A series of digits flashed on the screen, and he quickly wrote then down. "Thank you. The Enterprise is en route to Vulcan right now, and should be there in thirty-six hours."

"As always, Captain, you and Dr. McCoy are welcome in this house."

"Thanks. There are so many things still to do that I'm not sure where to start. Spock wants T'Alina buried on Vulcan. Arrangements have to be made at your end."

"I will deal with them. Everything will be prepared by the time you arrive." She gave him a quick smile that filled him with confidence and eased his tension.

Goodbyes were said and the transmission ended. This had been the easy one, and as much as it needed to be done, he dreaded making the next call.

The Enterprise slowly slid into orbit around Satrin. They were taking on a single passenger. It was Kirk's last-ditch effort to reach his First Officer and friend.

In the days since T'Alina's death, Spock had isolated himself in his quarters. To several attempts at contact, he had given no response.

Dr. McCoy had left numerous trays of food in the corridor outside the Vulcan's quarters. Each one had had a medical order attached to it. But when he returned later, none had been touched.

The shimmering of the transporter solidified into a tall stiff figure. Kirk stepped forward, holding his hand in the traditional Vulcan salute.

"Permission to come aboard, Captain."

"Welcome, Ambassador Sarek."

He swore that this man had not changed in all the years since their first meeting. That Babel conference seemed like a lifetime now.

"Mr. Sulu." Kirk addressed the helm officer. "Take us out. Warp factor one. On course for Vulcan."

"Where is he?"

"Your son?" Sarek nodded. "Spock has locked himself in his quarters."

"Locked?" That one word gave him a better grasp of what was happening, than all of the Captain's long transmission. "I wish to see my grandson, then I will face my son."

Kirk acknowledged and led the way.

All the nurses, from the three shifts, had gathered around one very small bundle in the intensive care unit of sickbay. It was an important moment for all who had looked after the latest addition to the crew. Dr. McCoy reached into the incubator and gently eased out the eighty-hour-old infant. A gasp drew his first good breath of non-specially-oxygenated air. It brought a smile to the doctor as he held him close.

McCoy cradled the infant in his arm and bundled the blanket tightly about him. He had given in to his nurses' constant nagging to hold the child. Still, the child was far too small to be left out for more than a couple of minutes.

He had only gained an ounce in the last few days, and the doctor hoped that the loving attention would make the child thrive.

As he handed the tiny bundle to Chapel, McCoy saw Kirk and Sarek enter. There was a broad smile on his face as he drew near. Kirk noticed the commotion.

"What's going on over there? That's more activity than a toy sale at Christmas time."

"I decided that a couple of minutes out of the incubator wouldn't hurt the little fellow." He glanced at the group of cooing females. "They drew straws to see who was going to be the first to hold him. If you want my opinion, I think Christine pulled rank on all of them."

"Does the child not have a name?" Sarek asked. Tradition dictated that a name should be given within the first day of life.

"No. We felt that was Spock's right, and since we haven't heard a word from him since the birth, we just refer to him as 'little fellow'," McCoy replied soberly. He waved Chapel over so that the Ambassador could get a good look.

Sarek never reached out for the child, but as McCoy drew back the blanket, he saw a sparkle in the old Vulcan's eyes. The infant stirred slightly and looked up at his grandfather. Sarek studied him with loving eyes.

Black hair was already thick against his head. His upswept eyebrows and pointed ears were well defined, and pleased the older Vulcan. His skin colour was horribly pale, but Sarek reminded himself how premature the infant was. Its tiny size confirmed it.

What really caught his attention were his grandson's eyes. It was natural for Human babies, but Vulcans always had brown eyes. They were born with them. These weren't just any shade of blue, they were a deep, radiant colour like Amanda's.

McCoy hated to break the touching scene, but he had left the infant out longer than he had first intended. It protested slightly as it was lowered back into the cosy environment of the incubator. Although it fussed slightly, it settled in nicely.

Kirk drew McCoy away from the crowd so that the three of them could talk.

"How is the child's physical condition, Doctor?" Sarek quickly enquired.

"I wish I had better news for you. He's not gaining weight the way he should be. The repair work I had to do on his digestive system is healing quite well. But I have a bigger concern. Two days ago I began hearing a heart murmur. It is fairly common in premature babies born eight weeks early.

"I'm afraid if it doesn't improve soon, I may have no choice but to perform more surgery."

Sarek had a genuine look of sorrow in his eyes.

"It wouldn't worry me so much if the child were stronger. At this point, he would never survive."

For a long while Sarek stood looking down at the now-sleeping infant. It brought back so many memories of when his own son was born. There were no life-threatening circumstances then, just a lot of pride and anticipation. There was neither of these this time. Only sorrow and grief.

He set his mind against the unpleasant things Kirk had told him. He was going to find a way to break through to his son. There was a strength only he could give the child.

Off he went, guided by Kirk, to face his son. There was determination set in his cold face.

Kirk stood at Sarek's side as he activated the door chime for the third time.

"Spock, it is I, your father. You have never closed me out before. May I enter?"

The words were spoken with a firmness that Kirk knew well. As Sarek raised his hand to chime one last time, the panel slid open. The Captain threw Sarek a quick nod, and left.

The room beyond was dark. He could see no-one. Then his eyes settled on a figure surrounded by the red glow of a meditation flame. Beneath the heavy black robe was a withered figure. The older Vulcan paused a few moments before drawing near.

The face he looked into was a stranger to him. Dehydration and fasting had taken their toll. Sarek matched his son's kneeling pose and waited in the silence as he gathered his thoughts. This was not going to be easy for either man. In all his experience as an Ambassador, he had never had to deal with anything this difficult.

"Grief is an emotion I can share with you now, my son." Spock closed his eyes even tighter. "But hate and self-persecution are not."

The younger man bowed his head. His father had read him so easily...

"It was I who..." Spock's voice wavered as he tried to speak.

"It was not you. She made her own choice." He let moments pass in silence. "Did she not know of the danger to her own life when she agreed to serve you during the pon farr? Did she not put your life above her own? Did she not risk that life and the one of her unborn child to save you again on Dalmarra?"

"If she had not gone - "

"You would have died, leaving her alone to raise the child. I can see the logic in her choice. Although she could better provide for the child's needs in a maternal manner, it is you who offer him a better life, and she knew it. It is very difficult, and sometimes impossible, for a woman to bring a son to maturity.

"Dr. McCoy informs me you have not seen your son. I have. As I looked down into the innocent face, it reminded me of the day when you were born. It was difficult for me to understand how something as beautiful as life had come from such a violent act. I was proud of you, as I am now of your son."

Again Sarek let silence force the words into his son's mind. "You must let go of the hatred that is within you. Grieve for your loss, and start to build the new life that is within your son."

At first there was no reaction. Then Sarek saw a tear spill from his son's eye. Then a second and a third.

He reached out to his child and drew him near.

Spock buried his face deep in his father's shoulder, and wept.

A very weary Sarek programmed his selection into the food processor in the officer's mess. With a stifled yawn, he reached for the tray. His actions were being observed by the Captain, who waited patiently for a chance to speak with him.

"Ambassador."

The Vulcan turned to greet him.

"How's Spock this morning?"

"Better, Captain." Sarek tried to suppress another yawn. "Excuse me, but I got very little sleep last night. There were many things to discuss and solutions to be found."

"I did a little arranging myself. I just finished talking to Starfleet Command. Spock has thirty days' home leave, starting today."

"I thank you, Captain. That will be of great help."

"Did you discuss the child at all?"

"Yes, my grandson took a lot of time. I think my views finally won out - due to the fact that Spock fell asleep halfway through." Kirk couldn't help but giggle. "My grandson has a name now. It is Senra."

"That's beautiful. What does it mean?"

"It means 'blessed one'." Sarek began to shift the tray in his hands. "Excuse me, Captain, but I wish to return to Spock before he wakes. I shall see you and Dr. McCoy later, after we have arrived." With a courteous bow, he stepped out into the hall.

Dress uniforms, bright with gold braiding and decorations, lined either side of the casket. An honour guard detachment and the two senior Federation officers were all that were allowed to beam down to the planet's surface with the bereaved family.

Since the Vulcan government had restricted the number of attending personnel, Kirk had agreed to a memorial and funeral meal for all confined aboard the ship. The people in Life Sciences had begun the request, but almost everyone planned to attend.

A United Federation of Planets flag, as well as the Vulcan flag, lay draped over the coffin. McCoy eyed them with the same discerning glance as he did the attendants.

Kirk looked drawn and tired, as did Sarek. Amanda's eyes were slightly swollen and red, from obvious hours of crying. And Spock just stood, a blank expression on his face, as if he didn't feel anything.

The funeral was winding to a close, and none too soon to suit McCoy. Heat and the high collar of a dress uniform did not mix well.

The ancient words were spoken in Vulcan by a priestess of the

Temple of Gol. With a final blessing, she was carried away. Kirk dismissed the guards and took McCoy by the arm, to follow Sarek and Amanda.

Spock stayed behind to perform his final act as husband and father. For nearly ten minutes he stood looking down at the one who had touched his soul.

"You gave to me so much." His voice was calm as he spoke his thoughts. "I knew friendship before you, but never the kind we shared. I shall carry it in my heart for eternity." Lightly, he brushed his hand against her gown. McCoy had chosen the one she wore on the night of their bonding.

"I saw our son for the first time this morning. Great things shall become of him. My father states that he is most like me, but then he never had the chance to know you. He has my mother's eyes, but your face. I thank you for giving life to me through him. I know you would respect the decision I have made concerning his immediate welfare."

Four acolytes drew near, and Spock backed away. His final moments with his mate seemed all too short. He stood in silence as they folded the flags and handed them back to him. Then they moved with the casket through the main temple. He knew she would always be here.

A special place had been arranged for her in the family area. Her ashes would one day be joined by his, and forever they would be together.

The back gardens of his father's house were silent as Spock finally walked towards the building. It was the winter season, and recent rains had brought on the native flowers. The sky was beginning to cloud over; rain would come again by nightfall.

Kirk and McCoy stood in the light of the solarium, with his parents. All turned to look his way as he entered. Sarek handed him a glass with a small amount of brandy in the bottom. He took a single sip, and put it down.

"Gentlemen," he began, placing the flags on a nearby table. "Many things have occurred in the past few days.

"Among all the urgent needs at the moment, that of my son is uppermost in my thoughts. Therefore, with the aid of my grandmother T'Pau, I have secured the private services of a doctor to be temporarily assigned to the hospital here on Vulcan. I believe him to be highly competent, and the choice I know T'Alina would have made."

Kirk shifted nervously. Sometimes he wished that Spock would spit out his decisions before they turned into one of the lectures during which he used to fall asleep in his Academy days.

"Dr. McCoy, I wish you to know that you are welcome in the house for the duration of your stay."

McCoy almost choked on his drink. Kirk stared dumbfounded. Never in his wildest dreams did the Doctor think he would be serving in a Vulcan hospital. "Now wait a minute..."

"I do not understand your apprehension, Doctor. You are the best suited for the task. You were there during the pregnancy and the delivery," Spock reminded him. "You also performed the initial surgery. You have followed his progress for the past five days."

Spock's hands clenched behind his back. "Since you were already cleared by Starfleet Command to be here for the delivery, the terms just needed to be altered slightly. Is there a specific reason that you wish to hand my son over to a stranger?"

"Spock, we would be at each other's throats over what was best for him."

"I will not be here. I leave first thing in the morning for four weeks in the desert. After that, I shall be aboard the Enterprise."

"Just how long do you intend to keep me here?" McCoy snapped. "I have duties to attend to back on the ship."

"There will be someone arriving within the next few days to take over your duties aboard the ship. You are assigned here until you petition the Federation Council and request a return."

"At which time," Sarek interrupted, "Amanda and I will take over the child's welfare."

This decision had not been an easy one for Spock to accept. He felt his own childhood spoiled by his father. He felt Senra needed a stable set of parents. His Human half had always conflicted with his Vulcan training. His son would have it easier. Since he was only one quarter Human, the ancient ways would be easier for him to accept. Then, too, Sarek had developed a leniency in the years since his youth.

"While I am away, my father will be legal guardian. If anything should arise, and you cannot contact me, he holds power over the child. His decisions speak for me as well."

McCoy found himself at a loss for words. It appeared as though the two Vulcans had it all planned. No doubt they had the child's life mapped out until his own bonding and marriage.

There was nothing left to argue about. The two Vulcans had planned things too well. All that was left to him was to pack up his personal items, gather up the infant and transport everything down to the planet.

As the shuttle was being prepared, McCoy stared down into the incubator. Senra was sleeping peacefully, unaware of the transfer he was about to become part of. The only home he had known was the protection of the Enterprise.

Now he would be thrust into a whole new environment; one to which he belonged, but which was still alien to him. McCoy was glad, deep in his heart, that Spock had arranged for him to attend the infant. One familiar face would help, even at this early age.

Kirk entered sickbay, and paused a moment to watch his Chief Medical Officer. He had developed such a personal attachment for the infant that it would be difficult to separate them when the final break had to come.

"Bones."

His voice was commanding, drawing the doctor's attention away from the child.

"Scotty says the shuttle is all prepared. The things Spock requested were packed and loaded first. Your stuff has also been taken care of." Kirk looked into the gentle face of his friend. "All that's left is the two of you."

"Don't look that way, Jim. I'll be back. I don't plan on spending the rest of my life there. I just feel as if I can't leave him yet. T'Alina meant a lot to me. I'm doing this for her."

Kirk knew he was doing it for Spock as well, though he would never admit it. It had surprised everyone when Spock made his announcement. For all their bickering over the years, the Vulcan had still turned to McCoy and placed his son in the Doctor's arms.

The technicians had arrived to move the incubator. McCoy gently eased his hands around the infant, and rolled him into his arms. Extra blankets were wrapped round the still-sleeping child. It had begun to thrive just from the brief contact he had allowed the nurses to have.

"Bones," Kirk said quietly, looking down at the tiny bundle. "Can I hold him?" His voice was timid, and McCoy almost missed it.

"I don't see why not. You can carry him down to the shuttle."

The transfer was made without waking Senra. Cradling the tiny head in his bent elbow, Kirk smiled with pleasure. But he hurt inside.

He had not treated T'Alina well, and he had just finally accepted her when she had died. Senra looked so much like her, it was heart-breaking.

It didn't take long to reach the shuttle, and he had to hand the baby back to McCoy. There would be no more midnight trips down to sickbay to check on the infant - nor would there be the heart-stopping agony every time McCoy was called to sickbay for an emergency.

"The Enterprise has been called out as soon as the shuttle returns," Kirk said, watching the two of them settle into place. "We've been assigned to this quadrant for the next six months. If there's anything you need, don't hesitate to call."

"I won't" McCoy still felt a tug between his head and his heart. "I'll see you in a couple of months. Don't forget, communications works both ways." A quick farewell was exchanged, and Kirk moved away.

The hatch sealed, and the shuttle was off. Kirk stood back and watched it disappear into the darkness of space. Both his friends were gone. One for thirty days, the other indefinitely.

He turned from the sight of the closing hangar doors and headed for the bridge. He still had his ship and four hundred lives depending on him.

The equipment was installed and Senra settled once more. McCoy decided to check out the rest of the hospital facilities before heading to his temporary home.

The pediatric department amazed him. He had made a special request that Senra be placed in intensive care, with round the clock observation, but what he saw in the regular ward told him it would have sufficed. There were only a couple of children in the ward, and he didn't intrude on their privacy.

Orders given, he departed. As he walked, he thought of the two Healers who had been assigned to him to help follow Senra's case. They were both Vulcan. What else could he have expected? One was a woman in her late thirties and the other a man in his early sixties. They would function under the Human doctor or in his absence.

Amanda had prepared him a lovely meal of Earth dishes. Soon after he finished, McCoy excused himself and returned to his room. His personal things had been dumped in the centre of the room. It would take him hours to unpack everything.

Having placed his things exactly where he wanted them, he prepared for bed. Lying on top of the thin blankets, he began reading a file of medical reports. Since Senra had been literally handed over to him, he had dug up everything he could on Vulcan physiology and child development.

A knock on the door drew his attention away from the papers.

"Come," he called out, pulling himself up to sit on the edge of the bed.

The door swung open, and Amanda stood in the hall beyond. "I thought you might like some tea before retiring." She placed a tray on the table beside his bed.

"Thanks. That's very kind of you," McCoy replied, pouring some milk and sugar into the dark liquid. "Is Spock here yet?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, he just came in. Would you like me to send him up here?"

"No. Just let him know the transfer went well, and Senra is in the I.C.U. on the second floor. I don't expect him to spend any time with his son, I just think he should know."

"Doctor, you must try to understand Spock," Amanda said gently, sitting in a chair opposite him. "Being brought up in the Vulcan way, he was taught to hide his feelings, and deny them. I have gone through this with Sarek. Both of them care for the child, but are not allowed to express it.

"Right now, my son is hurting for his loss. Her death was the hardest thing for him to accept. Since Senra is still close to death himself, Spock is trying to shield himself against the possible grief of the loss of his son as well. I saw Sarek go through the same pain years ago.

"What I'm about to tell you must not go any further than this room." She paused and McCoy nodded acknowledgment. "When Spock was six, Sarek again felt the fire of pon farr. I became pregnant with our second child. As difficult as my first pregnancy was, the second was worse.

"I was ill almost from the first day. No matter what the Healers did, I kept losing weight, and was having great difficulty carrying the child. It was born prematurely, more so than Senra. They convinced Sarek to bond with his daughter. Despite that bond, she lived only two days.

"When she died, it almost killed Sarek. In the fifty two hours of her life he had become so attached to her that not even his logic stopped him from sinking into depression. We told Spock, but I fear he could only understand his father's pain and loss. The memory has remained with him to this day."

McCoy sipped his tea as he listened and understood. It explained so many things about Spock. Still, his concerns were with Senra and the battle he was having to keep the boy alive.

"The problem with premature infants at Senra's stage is that they fail to survive because they don't want to," he finally said. "They need physical attention to stimulate them into living, and he has lost that with his mother. A parental bond means nothing without the attention to follow through on it."

Amanda smiled at him "That is what we are here for." She rose to leave. "I shall see you in the morning."

"Goodnight." Finishing his tea, McCoy lay back to sleep. He would need all his parental instincts as well as his medical judgement to win this fight.

"Doctor." A hand reached out and shook his shoulder. "Dr. McCoy. Wake up."

McCoy opened one eye then the other. Spock stood over him in a sliver of light from the hallway.

"Spock? What do you want?" he asked sleepily.

"It concerns my son." The Vulcan's voice was grave.

With a snap, the doctor was fully awake. "What's wrong? Did the hospital leave any word?"

"No." Spock sat gently on the edge of the bed. McCoy looked at the window to try and judge the time. It was totally dark outside. "I went down to see my son before I left, and I was denied entry to his room."

"What?"

"I was informed that you left no orders allowing me to see Senra."

"But I left no orders saying you *couldn't* see him." He saw a hurt look in Spock's eyes. "I'll take care of it first thing in the morning." He started to lie back, but a hand reached out for him.

"Please, I would like to see him before I leave. I had planned on being gone before dawn."

McCoy kicked back the sheet and stood. No matter how much he wanted his sleep, Spock was asking for something he had hoped for. He dressed in his hospital whites and departed, Spock in tow.

The walk to the hospital was made in silence. The calm of the intensive care unit was about to be shattered. McCoy argued with the nurse on duty while Spock slipped into the other room.

Monitors of all sorts gave constant readouts on the tiny infant. The Vulcan ignored them and moved directly to the incubator. Senra was awake and appeared to look up at him. Long slender fingers reached up and released the clasps, opening the side of the unit.

An alarm sounded at the nurse's station, and the young woman beside McCoy rose. With a steady grasp on her arm, he said, "Sit down, T'Ella." He knew what was happening, and a quick glance at the monitors confirmed it. "And for god's sake, turn off that alarm."

She complied without a word.

For long moment, Spock stared at his son. The child's movements were swift and jerky, so unlike the fluid ones Spock had felt inside T'Alina.

Years ago, Dr. McCoy had tried to show him the proper way to hold an infant. He thought it would be easier now if he had paid attention then.

One hand eased under Senra's head and neck, the other his back. Slowly, he drew the infant to himself. It squirmed, but did not cry out. Spock lowered his son gently to his lap. He paused for a moment, looking into the bright blue eyes.

Reaching out, Spock placed the fingers of his right hand along the forehead and side of Senra's face. There was no hesitation or fear in entering the infant's mind. It was pure and untouched. Yet he chose a special bond for the two of them.

Then he gave his son a gift. A bit of strength from his own consciousness, and a will to live from his soul. He tried to let Senra know how much he cared for him, and that he would always be there for him. To Spock these were Human concerns, yet if it helped to give life to his son, it would be permitted. No-one but he would ever know the feelings they had shared.

Withdrawing back into himself, he felt the tenuous bond between them. He would always be near his son in thought. Sturdy hands replaced the now sleeping child.

Spock didn't see McCoy standing in the doorway until he turned to leave. Immediately, he froze.

"Ready to go back?"

"Doctor..." Spock's voice stiffened as his spine had. "What I did..."

"Won't go any further than this room." McCoy was gentle and understanding. "Come on. I want to get a few more hours of sleep; and you have a date in the desert." He turned to go, and Spock followed.

The giant gaseous blaze of the Vulcan sun blazed down on the single figure marching across the sand. It was dawn on the sixth day, and Spock finally stood staring at the temple. This was the place of Koon-ut-kal-i-fee.

The temple stood as a ruin, memory to an ancient ritual. Enormous stones were worn into odd shapes by the thousands of years of desert punishment. In the centre a raging fire blazed in deep pit. Above it hung a wind chime a stone mallet.

Spock lowered his pack to the ground, and drew close to the ceremonial chimes. A breeze swept in from the desert, and rung tiny bells fixed into one stone. Pausing a moment, he let the peace and serenity fill him. He also felt the presence of another among the ruins.

His eyes could see no-one.

Then he felt a stirring deep within him. He shuddered in a reflex action. Gathering the stone mallet, he struck the wind chimes.

He waited, for what, he didn't know. Then he slowly recited the words of the marriage ceremony. But they felt empty without his chosen one by his side.

The ritual completed, he erected his shelter and prepared a camp for the duration of his stay. When the sun was directly overhead, he sat in the shade of his tent and dozed.

"Spock."

A voice called out to him. It was soft and gentle, not unlike that of his wife.

"Spock!" it called again; this time slightly louder.

He tossed about, trying to wake from what was obviously a dream. His eyes parted a fraction. Standing on the sand before him was a figure in white. The wind ruffled the ankle-length gown.

"Beloved." It called out to him once more. This time he knew the voice was T'Alina's. She held out a hand to him. He made no move.

"Why have you come to the place of mating? Have you come seeking me?" the figure asked.

"That is illogical. I could not come seeking you, as you are dead and no longer exist."

"But I live through our bond; in your heart and mind. Remember the words of our bonding. You just said them in the place of Koon-ut-kal-i-fee."

"Parted from me and never parted. Never and always touching and

touched."

"You have come to perform the ritual, then say goodbye. However illogical it is, you feel cheated at not being able to hold me at the end. Your mind has conjured me up, to make peace with your heart." The figure drew near and sat on the sand beside him.

There was a pleasant smile in her eyes as she stared at him. Spock sat studying her for a moment. At the time McCoy had allowed him a few minutes with his already dead wife, there had been a look of pain and death on her face. They were no longer present. The distortion of her figure through pregnancy was also gone. She appeared as she had the night of their bonding.

Slowly he reached out to touch her hand. It was solid. There was a stirring in his mind, a stirring her touch had always brought. His hand raised to her face, their bond joined them as one, and he drew physically close to her. He felt as if he could stay in her presence for ever.

Amanda sat amid the monitors, rocking her grandson, and singing soft Earth lullabies. McCoy watched a moment from the doorway, then drew close to the loving scene.

Senra turned to look up at him as he came into the infant's field of vision. He followed the doctor with his still blue eyes. They showed no sign of changing.

"How's my little fellow today?"

Senra squirmed slightly as McCoy reached out to him. The doctor wore the same pleasing smile he always did around the child.

"How is he doing, Leonard?" Amanda asked.

"Well, he's gained almost an ounce a day since we arrived. He has been taking his formula well, and keeping most of it down." His expression quickly sobered.

"What is it? There is something you're not telling me."

"It's his heart. I had hoped the defect would correct itself as he grew. But the latest tests show it progressively worse. I am seriously considering surgery."

"Is there no other way?"

"Surgery on an infant as small as Senra carries numerous risks. I'll make my decision after this afternoon's tests. However, as in the case of Sarek's heart operation, fresh blood is needed. This little one - " he reached out with a smile again - "will need a direct source from his father or grandfather. Though an ample supply of T-negative is on hand in the bank here, it is always better to have a direct descending match.

"Since Spock is who only knows where in the desert, I was hoping Sarek would oblige."

"I will discuss the matter with him as soon as I return home. Will you be joining us for dinner?"

"Yes. I haven't anything to keep me here late tonight."

Amanda began to rise, but a hand on her shoulder eased her back down. "Take a few more minutes with him. It won't hurt."

As Amanda started rocking again, McCoy made a smooth exit. He had tried to sound optimistic regarding Senra's health, but actually he was scared. He would allow her all the time she wanted to spend with her grandson. She might not have the privilege for much longer.

Surgery was performed two days later. Despite his skill and experience on a Vulcan heart, it took McCoy nearly eight hours to correct the defective valve and stabilize the infant.

Amanda and Sarek were waiting for him in an outer room when he finally left Senra to the recovery team.

"How is he, Dr. McCoy?" Amanda quickly blurted out.

"He's in recovery right now. They should be bringing him back to I.C.U. in a few hours."

"What are his chances, Doctor?" Sarek asked soberly.

"Well, at the moment they stand at fifty-fifty. If he survives the night, they will improve to seventy five-twenty five."

"Acceptable." Sarek fell silent for a moment. "Contact us if my presence is needed further."

"I'll spend the night here. I want to be close in case anything happens." He saw the strain on Amanda's face. "Has anyone heard from Spock?"

"Not since he left," Amanda replied. "He's not due back for another three weeks."

"Let's hope he has someone to come home to. I'll see you in the morning." McCoy turned and walked back into the recovery room.

There was nothing further for the grandparents to do, so Sarek skilfully guided his wife towards the front door. He knew she would not sleep, but it was better to have her at home worrying than out in public. In the privacy of their bedroom, it could be tolerated.

Slowly, McCoy rocked in the chair beside the incubator. Senra slept peacefully inside the environmentally controlled chamber. The even rhythm of the heart monitor hypnotised the doctor into a restful state. Leaning his head back, he closed his tired eyes. Silently, he slipped into a relaxed sleep.

On occasion a night nurse would enter to check the function of the I.V. and certain monitors. No-one bothered him. He never even felt the blanket that was carefully draped over him.

A gentle voice filtered through the tired mind as Amanda placed a steady hand on McCoy's shoulder.

"Leonard," she called again softly.

Like a shot, he was alert and sitting forward. The blanket fell to his lap. He hastily looked around the room. Amanda wore a strange smile.

"I thought twelve hours was long enough to let you sleep."

McCoy dropped back in the chair and closed his eyes again.

"Would you like some coffee?"

"Yes, I feel as if I could use several right now, just to wake up." The sound of the steady rhythm greeted his ears. It was a good, strong beat and it brought a warm feeling to the old doctor.

A hot cup was placed in his grip, and he lifted it to his lips. It felt good going down. With a sigh, he sat up again. Senra stirred slightly in the incubator. McCoy drew close and stared down at him.

He set aside the half cup of coffee and reached in through the hand holes. Gently he reached out a finger to the infant's face. Senra grasped it firmly and held tight. It brought a startled reaction from McCoy. That in turn frightened the child.

A surprised scream and cry brought tears to the doctor's eyes. Amanda started whispering soothing things to her grandson, but found the effort stopped by McCoy. When questioned about his strange behaviour he replied simply, "It is the best thing these old ears have ever heard. You see, he has never cried before. I think he is going to be just fine now."

Spock lazily stretched stiff, sore muscles. The shadow of the temple extended far beyond him. His clothes were soaked with perspiration.

A hand rubbed along his chin, confirming the suspicion that he had been asleep for days.

He was alone again.

He knew it was all a heat induced hallucination. Still, deep in his mind stirred the memories of his wife. He would never be without her; she would live on in his thoughts.

There was another consciousness among his thoughts. It was not the bond to his son, but to his father. Theirs had not been felt in more years than he could remember. Yet the message was being received clearly. His son had passed a crisis, and was expected to live.

The threads that joined him to his own son confirmed the knowledge brought by his father. He could sense the tiny infant growing in strength.

Quickly he changed and packed his camp once more. He still had three weeks, and there were several other places he wanted to visit before returning to the Enterprise. It was not often that he took leave, and home leave was rare.

Slinging the pack across his shoulders and onto his back, Spock headed out into the desert. He had fulfilled his pledge here, and it was time to move on.

Senra's strength grew as the days passed. Two weeks to the day after surgery, he was strong enough to leave his incubator and the I.C.U. for the open spaces of a crib and a private room.

McCoy still spent long hours with him, but on occasion there were other matters that drew his attention. Like the time the three-year-old daughter of the Earth Ambassador had to be admitted with viral pneumonia.

Vulcan Healers, although on occasion exposed to Humans, never truly knew how to act towards them. McCoy slipped in and reassured the nervous young parents and gave some necessary attention to the child.

More and more, he found the Healers coming to him with bizarre cases, and requesting his input. It was all becoming a routine he felt he could live with for ever; Sarek noted it as well.

Amanda spent what time she could at the hospital, taking reports home to her husband. Since the Vulcan Council was in session, his time was pretty much occupied by other things. But never was the child out of his thoughts.

It was on one of his afternoon strolls home that McCoy spotted a familiar figure in the back gardens of the house. He almost broke the wooden gate down as he burst through it at a trot.

"Jim!" he yelled, drawing near. "Am I ever glad to see you." One hand clasped his Captain's arm, the other slapped him on the back.

"Well, Bones, you seem in pretty high spirits. Have an easy day at the office?"

"Not bad; not bad at all." Amanda entered the garden with a tray containing three tall glasses of fruit juice. "So tell me, what brings you to this neck of the woods? The Enterprise isn't due to pick up Spock for two more days."

"Well," Kirk replied, taking his juice and sitting on a stone bench; slowly he sipped the liquid. "I got a message from a Captain Dalma of the freighter Itaska. Seems she had rather a large crate with your name on it, and orders to have it here by today.

"When she ran into a little delay, she called me with a plea to get it here quickly. Since we had no other pressing business, I made the detour."

McCoy wore a broad smile. "Great; where is it?"

"Still aboard the Enterprise. I wasn't sure where you wanted it, and I had no intention of trying to help you cart it all over while you decide. Now, where should Scotty beam it?"

McCoy threw a quick glance at Amanda. "It's for you."

"Me?"

"All right - where would you like it?" Kirk quickly asked.

"But I don't even know what it is!"

With wisdom and grace, she finally decided on the living room.

Scott was glad to have it out of the transporter room at last, and made Kirk promise to divulge the secret contents as soon as he returned.

Amanda studied the huge wooden crate with enthusiasm. Before they had a chance to open it, Sarek entered. "What is this, my wife?" he asked soberly, inspecting it from a distance.

"I don't know. Dr. McCoy had something shipped from Earth, then said it belonged to me."

"Open it and see what it contains."

Sarek and Kirk worked at the bindings for nearly half an hour before the lid was free and the sides fell open. Straw, used as packing material, was carefully removed and placed in bags, to be spread on the garden beds later.

There was a gleam in Amanda's eyes when the contents were finally revealed.

"Do you like it?"

"I have never seen anything so beautiful in my life."

It was a cradle, hung from pins on a U-shaped frame. Intricate designs had been carved into the frame and basket. An off-white satin blanket lay neatly folded on the tiny mattress.

"It was mine when I was a child. It's an antique dating back two hundred years."

Lightly, Amanda reached out and swung the basket.

"Thank you for the generous gift," Sarek said. "But such a thing must have sentimental memories for you."

"It does. My daughter Joanna spent her first few nights of life in that cradle." There was a faraway look of loss in McCoy's eyes. "I have no further use for it. Besides, you're going to need something for Senra to sleep in when he comes home."

Now Kirk understood the reason behind the rush order. "When, Bones?"

"Is tomorrow soon enough?"

"Tomorrow?" Amanda almost shouted. "Couldn't you have given me more warning? I have so many things to do." Muttering to herself, she left the men alone.

"Are you certain the child is well enough to come home to us?" Sarek asked, watching Kirk removing the portions of the crate.

"I think he is, and your own Healers agree with me. His weight

was up this morning, and his heart is strong enough. Of course, I will be here for a while to make sure he settles in without complications. I don't know how long it will take for my 'petition of reinstatement to active duty' to clear the Federation Council and Starfleet Command."

"How long would you like it to take, Doctor?" Sarek asked, looking up from his inspection of the cradle.

"If you're offering to give it a helping hand, don't. I'm in no hurry to ship out. I can wait as long as they want."

"I wonder, Doctor, if your desire for a lengthy delay in processing your orders is focused on one being." He gave the cradle a slight rock.

Now Kirk was back, and waiting for the reply.

"I can't deny that he has something to do with it. But not everything. When I first started my practice, it was small, and I dealt with a great many country people with large families. I saw a lot of life in those days; I even helped deliver some of it.

"But on the Enterprise, I see mostly death. Mutilated bodies of men and women young enough to be my children parade by me in nameless order. These hands - " he held them out - "were not meant to give peaceful ends to suffering children, they are for giving and preserving life.

"When I saw T'Alina die, it hurt more than the countless lives I saw wasted against our enemies. I was terrified that everything I touched would die. That's why I fought so hard to keep her child alive; to give it a decent chance at life.

"I don't feel as if I am ready to go back to that meat factory yet."

Kirk listened and tried to understand. There had been times when he felt the same, and no-one had given him the chance to escape for a while and gather himself back together.

"I understand," Sarek finally said. "You are welcome in my house for as long as your stay proves to be."

"Thank you." With a grin and a slap of his hands, McCoy said, "Where shall we put the nursery?"

Amanda and Sarek had decided on the small room at the end of the upstairs hall; next to their room. It would make it easier for Amanda to tend the child during the night. So between them Kirk and McCoy managed to struggle the cradle up the stairs. Sarek gave excellent directions and had figured out the exact angles needed to wedge it through the narrow turn at the top of the steps.

When the nursery door swung open, Sarek stood at the threshold staring at his wife. She sat in the middle of the floor, pulling tiny baby items out of a box. Kirk nearly backed into the Vulcan, unaware that he had stopped.

"Where did you get those?" Sarek demanded, a hint of irritation in his normal even tone.

"They were Spock's" she replied innocently.

"I thought them gone a long time ago."

"Forgive me for the deception, but I couldn't part with them. I always hoped to have another child in this house, and I couldn't see buying new things when we already had usable items available."

"Logical." His irritation faded against her reasoning. "You may keep them."

With the placement of the cradle, it was time for Kirk to leave. McCoy walked him back out to the garden.

"Bones - tell Spock we will be back for him the day after tomorrow." Kirk looked deep into his friend's eyes. "Don't get so used to this place that you'll want to stay a lifetime. It gets pretty lonely out there without you."

"Don't worry, Jim. By the time Starfleet gets around to my request, I'll be more than ready to come home."

McCoy stepped back as Kirk contacted the ship. An instant later, he was alone again.

Spock heard a voice out of his childhood, as he drew near his father's house. In the back garden, he found his mother sitting among the flowering plants, a tiny object cradled in her arms. He knew it was Senra. She was singing to him as she had to her own son so many years ago.

He was silent as he drew closer. Amanda didn't need to see him to know that her son was near.

"Welcome home, Spock," she said, abruptly cutting the song short.

Spock's shadow fell across her as he leaned over her shoulder. Senra was asleep, bundled in several blankets. The night air was beginning to cool. It would be a cold night, Spock noted.

"Come inside. I shall put Senra to bed and make your dinner." In one smooth graceful motion, she rose and headed for the house. Spock followed.

He took note of the room chosen for the nursery. It had been his as an infant. Once he had begun to grow, a larger room was demanded. He noticed the intricate designs on the cradle, and knew that it had come from Earth. McCoy, no doubt. There would be time later to request an explanation from the doctor.

Seated at the dining room table, Spock took bites of food between his questions. He had been gone a long time, and there was much to catch up on.

"Dr. McCoy brought Senra home early this afternoon. He was called back to the hospital soon after," Amanda explained. "It seems they wanted his help with an emergency."

"He seems to be settling in rather well here. I wonder if he will be able to return to the Enterprise when the time to leave

presents itself."

"Your father has also voiced that concern. He and Kirk spoke at length with him, and seemed satisfied with the answer."

"Jim? When was the Captain here?"

"Two days ago," she replied, pouring her son another cup of herbal tea. "He brought the cradle. Seems Leonard wanted it here before Senra came home from the hospital."

So he was right, McCoy had provided the piece of furniture. It scared him slightly to think he could predict the doctor's actions so accurately. "It is a most generous gift."

"Yes. Too generous, your father thinks. Leonard has become very attached to the child. It will be hard for him to leave. It would be worse if he were not allowed to keep in touch with Senra's progress." There was a stress in her tone.

"Dr. McCoy had a close relationship with T'Alina. It is only natural that he has transferred that attention to my son. It will be permissible for him to check on Senra's condition when the need arises. Visits can also be arranged through you."

"Thank you, Spock." There was a warm smile on her face, but he still had not determined the reason why she always felt it necessary to thank logic.

Amanda rose to leave, then looked down at her child. "Your father and I must attend a reception this evening."

Spock's face was quite panic-stricken. His mother noticed it immediately. "Senra is asleep, and should remain that way until someone returns. I do not expect Leonard to be out very late."

"If something should arise and demand attention..." Spock almost stammered out the words, but held control long enough to get his point across.

"Everything that is needed is in the chest of drawers in the nursery. His formula is in bottles in the kitchen," she replied, trying to hold back the giggle growing within her. "I'm sure you will have no trouble. Should you really need help, Leonard is only as far away as the communications terminal."

With a last word of encouragement, she ascended the stairs, to prepare herself for the evening. Sarek would be home soon, and she needed to be ready before then.

Spock sat in the solarium playing his lyrette when his parents departed for the evening. There was a sense of loss in his heart as he played a special tune. It had been T'Alina's favourite. The soul-crushing grief he had felt at her death was little more than a memory now.

He played until he could no longer fight off the growing fatigue. The Enterprise would be there early in the morning, and he did not expect to get much rest once he took charge of the science department again. Surely leaving it to the young officers under his command had undone all his logical preparations.

McCoy entered the house to the sounds of screamed cries. With great speed he was up the stairs and heading for Senra's room.

Spock's voice made him stop at the door and watch with amusement.

The Vulcan had a gentle edge to his rigid words. "Your grandmother assured me that you would remain asleep until someone else returned home."

Senra continued to voice himself.

"You have proved her in error."

The older Vulcan's large hands fumbled with the fasteners of the infant's diapers. McCoy had to stifle a laugh. It confused Spock how Humans made it look so easy. He found nothing simple about it.

"Screaming will not improve the situation in any way. I am not the one who soaked my linens." There was no irritation in his tone as he continued to fumble with a clean sleeping gown.

Dry once more, Senra settled to a calmer state. Now Spock knew he had to prepare his son's food. His mother had made a point of informing him where the formula was kept. He hesitated as to what to do with the infant while he went downstairs.

He could not place him back in the cradle, and he did not feel like changing the wet sheets yet. The logical solution presented itself. Spreading the satin blanket out on the floor, he placed Senra atop it, on his stomach.

McCoy ducked into his room as Spock left the nursery and headed down the stairs. The child was quiet now and he decided to retire for the night. He would keep an ear open for any sign that Spock needed his help, but he seemed to have everything under control.

Spock sat in a chair beside the bed, his son in one bent arm, the bottle of formula in a steady hand. Senra downed the three ounces quickly, and Spock skilfully relieved his son of the trapped air. It took only moments for Senra to fall asleep, and Spock soon found himself dozing as well.

Since he had no desire at all to change the bedding in the cradle, he wrapped the blanket tightly around his son and leaned back in the chair. The quiet of his own room helped to close his weary eyes. Soon he joined his son in sleep.

It was in this strange position that James Kirk found his First Officer the next morning. McCoy had risen early to finish with the emergency laid in his lap the night before.

Kirk paused a moment at the door, Amanda by his side, and peered in at the homely sight. He smiled at his companion. She moved forward, and gently picked up the sleeping infant.

Spock stirred and opened his eyes with a flutter. Kirk's smiling face greeted him. He stiffened as he sat straight again.

"Good morning, Spock. Ready to go?"

"It will take me a few minutes." Spock stiffly arose, his muscles not responding properly.

"We have time yet. Have some breakfast, the Enterprise isn't due to leave for three hours."

In silence Spock left his side, heading for the bathroom.

Kirk joined Amanda in the kitchen.

With breakfast consumed, it was time to return to the ship. Spock had already said goodbye to his father, and stood with his mother and Kirk in the back garden. In her arms, Amanda held Senra.

"I'm sorry the visit has been so short, Jim,"

"I wish it could have been happier circumstances that brought me this time. Maybe when we return to pick up Bones, we can work a few more hours in."

"You know you are always welcome in this house."

"Goodbye, Mother." Spock said nothing to his son. The gentle, peaceful expression Spock had worn when Kirk found him hours before was gone. His stone mask was again in place, the barriers strong.

"I will keep you informed on Senra's progress." Amanda stepped back as Kirk opened his communicator.

Spock's last sight as the transporter beam caught him was his son's face. Despite his still bright blue eyes, he was the image of T'Alina.

The Enterprise returned two months later to retrieve its newly-activated Chief Medical Officer.

Kirk waited patiently in the transporter room for the familiar figure to appear. It was taking an abnormally long time, even for McCoy. He shot another look at Scott, who simply shrugged in response. Finally the signal was received, and the unit was activated.

Moments later McCoy stepped from the transporter platform and said in a stiff voice, "Permission to come aboard, Captain."

"Granted."

Not even Kirk's warm smile seemed to melt the icy expression on the doctor's face. McCoy turned slowly and walked out of the room.

He was home, and although he had longed for it at times, he couldn't help but feel a deep loss at having to say goodbye to Senra. It had been as hard on him as watching his own daughter being dragged from his life.

Yet Sarek had said that his home was always open to him. Leave could be taken there, but there was a fear that he could never truly be a part of that young life. The years would find them drifting apart and he would be no more than a story told by Senra's Human

grandmother.

But no-one could ever erase the memories he had of a very special child.