

# ***Reflections of Honor***

by  
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## **PROLOGUE**

The two fugitives slipped into the city at dawn, seeking the questionable sanctuary of a place they had once called home. Spock knew it was not the best of hiding places, but it would have to serve. They would not be there long, in any case. It was home no longer.

They had been trapped in a multi-stranded web; Spock leaving Starfleet to return to Vulcan, bringing Lara, his Human wife, with him because he had discovered – to his glory and to his shame – that the prospect of a life without her was too bleak to be borne. Now the two of them were caught up in the rebellion that raged on Vulcan and on other planets as they broke away from the Federation to form a new Republic.

And already, the Republic was rotting with treachery. Spock's half-sister T'Faie had used a snare of half-truth to put Lara's life in jeopardy, and he could save it only by treachery of his own. He had been offered – and refused –

a command in the Republic's Eosian spacefleet. Now he would accept it, but only because it would buy Lara's safety.

He left her in a safe hiding place, contacting the Eosian commander P'lef, making arrangements to leave Vulcan in her courier ship, but the price he demanded was enough radio time to contact Kirk, on Vulcan blockade duty with the *Enterprise*. He knew Jim would come, thinking two people planned to escape from the madness Vulcan had become, and Spock did not correct that misunderstanding until the moment Jim arrived at the burnt-out family compound where they had sought sanctuary.

And then there was no time to argue, no time to explain why he was pushing his wife into the arms of this man who had been both his friend and her lover. Even as Kirk attempted to change Spock's mind, the compound's barriers were being attacked by the rebels who searched for him. He took one last gamble, crashing into Lara's mind with a desperate link to convince her to go –

*Get out of here, Lara. Go with Jim and don't look back. Get off my world; get out of my life. They'll destroy you if you stay, and everything I've done, every tradition I've defied to keep you with me and keep you safe has been just an empty gesture if you stay here and allow that. I won't permit it, because if you don't exist, then part of me – all that's left of me – won't exist, either. Because I love you. Against every tradition of my race, against every tenet of order and logic, I love you.*

And then broke the link with a brutal swiftness and watched them dissolve into nothingness before he made his own escape. It was many hours before he realized he'd said something in the link that he'd never been able to speak aloud ...*I love you.*



They were standing so close – Lara thrown into Kirk's arms by the force of Spock's gesture – that the transporter took them together, a tangle of arms and legs and emotions, and brought them back into being in their separate togetherness.

Later, when she had time to reflect on it, Lara was thankful for that. It permitted her to catch his movement at its inception.

“Jim – wait!” Hand on his arm, feeling the corded muscles tight with anger, feeling the astonished gaze of Kyle at the transporter console, feeling the panicked desperation in her own gesture. And his gaze on her, sudden, blistering in its heat, mad for a moment with intolerable frustration.

“I have to talk to you.”

“Later, Lara. Right now--”

“Right now you're about to make the biggest mistake of your life. Give me five minutes. *Please!*”

Pinned, like a bird in flight by a hunter's shot, in that

instant between lifeflight and deathfall, he stopped. Felt, somehow, the depth of her desperation.

“Five minutes,” he snapped. “Kyle, have the bridge crew stand by combat stations. Get a landing party ready, full sidearms, and hold our orbital position.”

He charged out of the transporter room with Lara in his turbulent wake, a death grip on his arm, hit the security lock on the briefing room door across the hallway, and stormed through the opening doors which slid shut behind them and locked with a faintly audible click.

Only when the doors were shut and she was between him and the intercom did she trust herself to speak. Her skull was pounding with the cumulative effects of the mind-link and the transport process, and her heart pounding with the desperation of her need to stop him. She couldn't tell even herself why it was so necessary; how could she convince him?

His eyes were still flaming, the vein in his temple leaping in barely-controlled fury. At her, at Spock, at himself. It was Kirk, not Lara, who broke the crackling silence.

“What's going on down there? What's he planning?”

“I don't know, exactly. But it's important that you let him do it. No – not just important. Vital. Jim, if you interfere, you'll destroy whatever self-respect he has left.”

“I'm just supposed to disappear, is that it?”

“That's *exactly* it! Take your ship and get out. Whatever

demons he has to face, he has to face them alone. He's gone through things in the last year that would have driven a lesser man mad. I couldn't tell you in a thousand years all the traditions he's been forced to break, the things he's had to do, to keep his sanity and his honor, and this is part of it. If you go back there, if you interfere, he'll see it as the one betrayal he can't forgive. Jim, if you love him, leave him alone."

Her words cut through his anger like a blade of ice. *If you love him...* Not *if you love me*. Not even now, in a desperation that robbed her of everything else, standing before him in a kind of naked defenselessness that shook him to the very roots of his being, did she call up the one weapon she still had. And her conscious choice to leave it unwielded made it a weapon against which he had no defense.

He sank into a chair, drained, and seeing his surrender, she surrendered too, sliding down the wall she had braced herself against to slump on the deck with her head bowed and the unbearably intense relief making her eyes stream. That, and the realization that it was over, really over, at last; that she was drifting, lost, alone again without either fortress she had hidden in. Spock was lost to her now, as surely as if he were dead, and in bending Kirk to permit that loss, she felt she had spent her last coin with him as well.

Kirk stood up, gratified to find his legs would still hold him, and walked to the intercom. "This is the Captain.

Secure from general quarters. Break orbit and resume prior heading. I repeat, resume prior heading.”

He reached down and caught Lara’s arm, pulling her to her feet, unresisting. “Come on. You can’t stay here.”

She allowed him to lift her, with a kind of numbness that wrapped her like a smothering blanket, and to lead her to the turbolift and then to the guest quarters on deck five. She wouldn’t permit herself to think – to feel – anything, or even to wipe away the wetness on her face, and he didn’t speak to her again before he left her, envious of the grief she could show, while he had to go on being what he was.

On the outside, anyway. On the inside, it was as if his chest was full of ground glass, and every breath he took cut a little more of him into ribbons. He finished the watch without speaking to anyone, and the bridge crew knew better than to ask what had happened on Vulcan.

They knew only that he had diverted the *Enterprise* from her assigned blockade course in response to a sudden signal from Spock, had beamed down to Vulcan alone, and had returned with Spock’s wife, both of them in a state that bordered on madness. The grapevine told them that much. Their varied imaginations filled in the details.

They considered the possibilities and discussed them in detail over coffee, at duty stations, in the gym, as the days went by and Kirk appeared on the bridge for his watches and retreated to his quarters immediately thereafter,

speaking to no one. Lara Merritt remained in her quarters, and if she ate or wept or slept or paced, she did it out of their sight.

*Spock was dead*, one story went, killed by Kirk in a jealous rage, and the woman the prize in the battle.

*No*, said another. Spock was the victor, and the woman discarded for her unfaithfulness.

*The signal was a ruse*, still another said. Spock was imprisoned on Vulcan, Kirk had beamed into an ambush, and the woman was inadvertently transported back with him as he escaped.

*Spock was not in prison*; he had planned the ambush and participated in it because he feared meeting his former captain in the field.

Into this web of supposition and wild conjecture strode Lieutenant Uhura, vibrating with anger and looking twice her size as she stalked into the officer's mess on the third night after the strange mission.

"Enough!" she shouted, standing in the middle of the room. The conversations ground to a halt as they looked in amazement at the sudden ebony Amazon who dared them to cross her purpose, whatever it was. "You're behaving like a pack of jackals!" she snapped. "I've heard the craziest damned collection of lies and viciousness in the last three days that I've ever heard in my life, and I want it stopped. *Now!*"

“I don’t know what happened down there, any more than you do, but I know whatever it was, it cut the Captain up like nothing I’ve ever seen. And you damned ghouls are licking your chops over it. You make me sick, all of you!”

“We diverted to Vulcan for one reason, and only one reason – to remove a Federation citizen who was in danger. That’s what Mr. Spock’s message was, and that’s the way it’s down in the log, and the next person I hear saying otherwise goes on report for insubordination and incitement to disaffection. *Have you got that?*”

Apparently they did, for no one had the temerity to challenge her.

She muscled her way to a servoport and punched up a combination with an anger that left half the buttons on the panel cracked, jerked the tray out, and left with a simmering anger that hung after her passing like ozone in lightning’s wake.

By the time she reached the closed doors on deck five, most of the anger was gone. She breathed the rest of it out with a fierce determination and touched not the call button but the intercom.

“Dr. Merritt? It’s Lieutenant Uhura. May I come in?”

The answering voice was hollow beyond the distortion of the speaker; it sounded like that of an old woman. “Go away. I don’t want to see anyone.”

“It’s important.”

“Leave me alone.”

She was ready to give up when she thought of Kirk’s face that day on the bridge. He looked like a man eaten away from the inside, and she knew if something wasn’t done, soon, they’d either bury him or lock him away.

“There’s been a message from Vulcan,” she lied.

The lock clicked, the doors slid open, and Uhura stepped into Lara Merritt’s private hell. Had she not had implicit faith in Kyle’s identification, backed up by Kirk’s log entry, she would have sworn this was not the woman she’d served with for over a year. This was a wracked and tortured creature that might have been pursuing hag or hag-ridden quarry, all great stormcloud eyes with demons screaming silently out of them, and stark bony ridge of cheekbone and brow that leaped into prominence in the half-light. It was an apparition that vibrated with an urgency that made Uhura regret the necessity of the lie, but not its telling.

“What is it? What have you heard?”

The hand on her arm was a death’s-hand, clutching as if it could draw the nonexistent message out through Uhura’s skin. She put the tray on the dresser, not looking into those eyes where the demons screamed.

“There was no message.”

The hand, impossibly, tightened even more, swung her around into a blow that split her lip and set stars dancing in

her field of vision. She fell back against the ridge of the bureau and gained her balance with a furious tension that left her own hands clenched and her spine stiff. She stepped forward, clamping down on the instinct to strike back, with a fierceness that sent tremors along her jaw and into her neck. Chin up, mouth drawn into a thin line, she faced the demons and spoke carefully, quietly.

“If it makes you feel better, Lara, do it again.” Then, slowly, she turned her face aside, waiting for the second blow, expecting it, tensing for it.

It didn't come. She saw instead, from the periphery of her vision, Lara's rage and frustration crumbling into itself like a flower dying. Saw the two hands clenched together in front of the haggard woman, with tremors starting up her arms like sere earth crumbling before the ground waves of an earthquake.

Uhura broke her stance then, softening, flowing into the utterly and ultimately nurturing female she was. “Lara--” she said, and reached out.

“Don't ... touch ... me. Please.”

The motion continued, nut-brown arms encircling the thin shoulders, feeling the tremors and the sharpness of bones barely covered by skin. “It's over, Lara. Whatever it was, it's over, and you survived it. And now it's time to get back to the business of living.”

Guiding, insisting, she steered the other woman to the desk

and sat her down, returning for the tray left on the bureau.  
“Drink this.”

“What is it?”

“An ancient Bantu healing potion. Oolong tea. Strong enough to eat the bottom out of the cup.”

She didn't rise to the gibe, but only turned her head away, dark hair swinging down to curtain her face.

“Drink, dammit, or I'll have M'Benga pump it into your bloodstream.” And at the silence that greeted the threat, added – “You think I won't?”

Lara breathed out some bit of tension, her shoulders drooping and her head rolling back to loosen knotted neck tendons. “All right, *Admiral* Uhura.” She picked up the cup, tested the tea's warmth, and tossed it back with a motion that ended in a shudder. “Jesus. No wonder the Empire crumbled.”

“Now, eat.” A bowl appeared on the desk.

“Don't tell me. Bantu penicillin, right? Chicken soup?”

“Right.”

“Wrong. Call M'Benga if you want, but I'm not eating synthesized chicken soup.”

“I don't think he could get it through the IV tubing.”

Lara looked up, and Uhura could see that some of the pallor was gone; some spark burned there again. “Shall we

call it a draw?"

Uhura nodded in acknowledgement. "Come down to the mess and make your own choice."

Something in the drawn face snapped shut. "No." It was nearly inaudible, but it had the cold strength of stone behind it.

"You can't hide in here forever." There was no answer, as if the bare covering of flesh was already gone and only the bones sat there, grim spectre of a woman. Uhura's mind cast backward, to an event she had not personally witnessed, but which had become part of the *Enterprise* mythos.

"There was another time when you would have stayed hidden," she said. "Another time when you ran a gauntlet for a man's honor and bought it back for him. That was a long time ago, Lara, and some people have forgotten it."

The other woman stirred, as if waking from a long sleep and recalling a vanished dream. It seemed long ago when she and Spock and Jim had walked boldly through the ship, daring anyone and everyone to say there was betrayal or vengeance in either man's mind.

"Jim?" She looked around the room as if she expected to find him there. "Where--?"

"On the bridge. still, for another hour. He doesn't have the luxury of hiding away, you see. He does what he has to do, and ignores the eyes and the questions. And he does it

alone, because you haven't got the guts to help him."

Not even that sharp goad could rouse her anger now. There was only a bitterness in her voice, and a heaviness. "I can't help him. He doesn't need me."

"You're wrong. I don't know what you gave him that no other woman ever has, but he needs you. He put his career on the line for you, violating Vulcan space, and now you won't even speak to him."

"I didn't ask him to come." The great dark eyes studied the hands twisting together in the lap.

"No. And he couldn't go to you without being asked. Not after the last time." The white, strained face came up at that, fear or anger or betrayal in the eyes – Uhura couldn't tell which.

"He *told* you?"

"Not in so many words, no. But Scotty said they'd found you, and then the captain came back – alone. I don't think I've ever seen him quite so alone. Until now. And it's killing him, Lara. It's eating him alive, and he won't let anybody get close enough to him to make it stop. Except, maybe, you."

Uhura realized she was shaking in her intensity, close to tears herself. She stopped, unable to muster any more words. Lara was looking at her hands again, limp and lifeless. She didn't reply, didn't even raise her head as Uhura made a wordless sound deep in her throat and left

the room.

Lara sat for some time, quiet, and then slowly, as if it were a great effort, rose and left the room for the empty corridors.

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He didn't see her at first, as he keyed open the security lock and slipped into the dark room, a shadow entering shadow. He stood for a long moment with his back braced against the door, feeling the tiredness break over him. He started across the room, familiar in its darkness, a quiet haven.

“Jim--”

He stopped midstride and reached back for the light.

“Don't, please. Leave it off.”

“Lara?” He wasn't ready, yet, to accept it. “How--?”

“If you don't want old lovers cluttering up your quarters, you should change the security lock.”

He stood silent in the darkness, unsure of what meaning might underlie the words. Finally he said the only thing he could think of. “I've never locked anything against you.”

“Maybe you should have. A long time ago. And kept it locked.”

He knew where she was now. Her voice had led his eyes to the shaded form sitting at the desk, and he crossed the

room to stand over her, his empty hands curling as he restrained the urge to touch her.

“No,” he said. “I can’t accept that. You can’t lock yourself away from love; there’s little enough of it in the world as it is.”

“Anything as destructive as love *should* be kept out. If we hadn’t--”

“How far back do you want to go, Lara? Who gets the blame? You and me, for reaching out to one another? Spock, for knowing, and doing nothing about it? Or maybe Amanda and Sarek, for allowing him to be born in the first place?” She wouldn’t look up at him; he dropped to one knee and reached out to turn her face toward his. “If we had held ourselves apart, would that have kept T’Pau alive? Kept Spock from going back to Vulcan? I don’t think so. It would have just meant three unhappy people.”

“As opposed to the three happy people we have now?” She knew that was wrong, and hurtful, and not what she wanted to say, not any way to help him. But the words formed of themselves, and the bitterness in her voice chilled him so that he felt his hand fall away.

“I’m sorry,” he said gruffly, and got up. The weariness was back, and the frustration of helplessness. “I thought I had given you some pleasure, some happiness at least. If I didn’t, I’m sorry. I tried.”

Her quick movement in rising startled him; it was the first

sign she had given of vitality. “It wasn’t you! It was me, my fault. I can’t... I just destroy whatever I love. I won’t destroy anything else, Jim.”

“What have you destroyed?”

“Whatever it was that you and Spock shared, for starters.”

“Then why did he call me, and why did I respond? Why would--”

“What?” She remembered, suddenly, something Uhura had said ... *he couldn’t go to you without being asked* ... and it chilled her that she hadn’t questioned it further at the time.

“What do you mean, he called you?”

Her hand on his arm was cold as death, cold and shaking.

“You didn’t think I just dropped in because I was in the neighborhood, did you? He contacted the ship – I don’t know how – and I thought you were both coming off, but he only meant to get you off-planet. And he knew I’d come, knew I’d do whatever he asked – for him, or for you. Does that sound like we’re enemies?”

She was a long time responding. “I didn’t know... I guess I didn’t think.” She was silent for a moment, remembering something else she hadn’t questioned, something Spock had told her. *There is something T’Faie wants me to do...* Whatever it was, it has plainly been repugnant to him, but she knew with a cold certainty that he had given in to his half-sister’s demand, had compromised his own honor in order to get her off-planet. ...*everything I’ve done, every*

*tradition I've defied...*

The realization of what he meant, the weight of it, was too much for her, and her knees buckled. Kirk's arms went around her, supporting, loving.

"Oh, God, Jim, what is he doing?"

"I thought you knew."

"I thought so, too. Now I'm beginning to wonder."

"Whatever it is, he wanted you out of it. Wanted you to be safe, and with someone who loves you. I do, Lara. He knows that – knew it when he asked me to help."

She could feel the length of his body against hers, feel the warmth and humanness of it and the offering of something that could lead to a deeper intimacy, a deeper comforting. An awareness of that, and an awareness of her own body's willingness to accept it, disturbed her, and she stiffened against him.

He felt the change in her stance and understood its meaning, releasing her reluctantly. It seemed he was about to say something else when the alarm klaxon sounded and his intercom burst into life, summoning him to the bridge.

"This isn't finished," he said as he turned for the door. "Wait for me here."

"I'm going to sickbay. They might need--"

Her words were cut off as the doors shut behind him; he had no time to argue. No time, no time – there was never a

balance of it, he thought as the turbolift moved him through the ship. It either crawled or flashed by. There was no time, even, to properly consider that observation as the car stopped on the bridge.

Sulu released the con, announcing they had picked up a small craft at extreme sensor range. It had refused to answer their hail and must therefore be considered a blockade runner. Kirk ordered warp four and watched the image grow steadily as information regarding ship's status was fed him by the bridge crew.

“Entering phaser range.”

“Fire phaser.”

As the beam cut through the blackness, the craft dipped and swerved in a standard evasive pattern, and the distance between them decreased steadily.

“Sensors indicate the craft to be an Eosian courier ship,” Varyschenk announced from the science console. Kirk knew them; small, fast craft, little more than warp engines and shielding, harder to catch and kill than a Terran cockroach. They would have to be within optimum, not maximum, phaser range to do any appreciable damage. The unknown courier pilot evidently knew it, too; the ship was straining gamely in a race whose outcome was predetermined.

They were already closing the distance rapidly; he was preparing to give the command to fire when Varyschenk

broke in. "I'm getting two patterns now. They've launched an object ... could be a passenger bubble." His hands blurred on the console as he made adjustments and coordinated the readouts to the other bridge stations. "Yes," he said. "A passenger bubble ... but I'm not getting any life forms."

His voice held a puzzlement Kirk did not share. "Fire on that launch," he snapped.

Sulu's confirmation was broken off mid-word as the phasers found their target and a spectacular explosion dyed the blackness. Kirk knew there was only one substance capable of creating such force within such a small package, and the Science Officer confirmed it.

"An anti-matter device," he announced.

"Give me the spill pattern. Can we run through it?"

They were already entering the fringes of the pattern when the reply came. "Sensors indicate an 85 percent probability of shield overload if we make the run."

Kirk ordered a course change which would pull them out of the highly unstable space with maximum speed. When they had cleared it, the courier was again at the bare edge of sensor range, streaking for Eos and safety.

Technically, no state of war yet existed between the Federation and her wayward children; their mission was blockade duty, and they were not to intrude on Eosian space. But that haven was many hours away at the

courier's speed, and in the meantime it was officially and illegally within Federation space.

Kirk ordered an increase to warp five, and the courier's image blossomed on the screen, well within optimum range now. "Lock on and--"

"I've lost the image, sir," Sulu announced.

He didn't think, he just yelled, "*Sublight speed!*" as if by raising his voice, he could alter the laws of dimensional physics, knowing even as he spoke, that the starship's warp engines had carried them many AU's beyond the courier's position.

*Shit*, he thought, and barely kept it inaudible. If the pilot knew his business – and apparently he did – this leapfrog game of sublight to warp speed could keep them searching indefinitely for a ship which was not at any given moment even within the same time continuum as the searcher.

When the sensors had readjusted themselves to sublight readings, the courier was gone. Kirk ordered a resumption of warp speed on their quarry's former course without much hope of success, and indeed the sensors showed nothing but the mocking distortion of hyperspace.

"Break off pursuit," he ordered. "Secure from general quarters. Navigator, take us back to the blockade pattern." *Damn*. Cochrane deceleration had nabbed them again.

A wild thought struck him and lumped in his belly like some internal iceberg. Spock was a past master of the

Cochrane maneuver, one of the few men Kirk knew who had the nerve and the skill to push a ship to its breaking point, the way it had to be pushed in order for the tactic to work.

He willed the thought away. It was a standard tactic, taught at the Academy for a century and more, even if it was seldom used. The Eosians numbered plenty of Academy graduates in their space forces. He couldn't permit himself to fantasize Spock's presence on every ship they jumped, and what would the Vulcan be doing heading out for Eos, anyway?

The watch crew was returning to the bridge now, relieving the primary crew who'd dropped everything when the alert klaxons blared. Each of them would now return to their interrupted routine – meal, sleep, whatever – and try to resume it. Most would not be able to succeed for several hours.

Kirk wondered if he could, at all. He'd been so damn tired when he left the bridge, so unprepared to find what he'd found in his cabin. Part of him wanted her to be there, part of him hoped she wouldn't be.

She wasn't.

He called sickbay, but she had already left. There was no response from the com in her room. He stripped and showered and fell into bed, too tired to sleep. He told himself he was glad she hadn't been there, that he just didn't have the stamina for a big emotional scene at the

moment, but he recognized that for a lie. There was nothing he could do, really, but lie there hoping his body would relax enough to let him rest and to concentrate on thinking of nothing until enough boredom set in to force his mind to sleep.

He didn't know whether to be relieved or annoyed when the call buzzer sounded. He pulled on a pair of pants and padded to the door barefoot. If he called out permission to enter, he was laying himself wide open for what might be an unwanted visitor, but if he keyed open the door himself, he could block the entrance of anyone he didn't especially want to see.

"Hello, Jim." Her voice was as husky as he remembered it, not the tortured, shaking tone she had used in their earlier conversation. Still not sure if he was awake or dreaming, he reached for her hand, drawing her into his dream or reality, willing to accept it for whatever it was, without question, without explanation.

Looking at her in full light for the first time in days, he decided she was real. His dreams of her did not include this skeletal thinness or haunted expression.

"When I came in here the first time," she said, looking anywhere but at his face, "I meant to... I hoped there might be some comfort I could offer you, something I could say or do to make the hell you're going through a little easier to bear, somehow. I'm afraid I didn't do a very good job of it. I'd like to try again."

It had the sound of a carefully rehearsed speech, and for some reason, that angered him. Wordlessly, he led her across the room to the sleeping alcove and pulled her down to sit beside him on the bed. She didn't resist when he untied the thigh-length tabard she wore over the soft shirt, or when he pulled the shirt off over her head. Nor did she assist him. Unmoving, unspeaking, she suffered the touch that masqueraded as caress, until he touched her face, turning it toward his own.

“You really would, wouldn't you?” he asked.

“Would what?”

“Go to bed with me. Even though you wouldn't really be there.”

“If that's what you want.”

“That's what I want from a whore, dammit! Not from you.”

Something in her was mildly surprised that the words didn't sting. There were no tears left to spend on herself, and she had long since given up trying to justify or defend whatever drives had led her to his bed before.

“I'm sorry. I have nothing else to offer you, Jim.”

“Since when?”

“Since ... ever, I guess.”

He rose angrily and walked away as far as the divider grille, reached up and hung onto it with both hands so that there was something solid to cling to. He didn't look at her,

and his voice was low, falsely calm.

“Get out of here, Lara. I won’t expiate whatever sins you think you’ve committed by making you the Captain’s Whore.” He heard the soft rustle of cloth and knew she was dressing. She didn’t speak until she was through.

“I don’t expect you to give me anything you won’t give yourself. We all build our own prisons, Jim. We set ourselves up as judge, jury, and executioner, and we go before the bar already convinced of our own guilt.

“I chose to isolate myself physically, but you don’t have that luxury, so you built your prison inside your head, and hung yourself up on a mental cross because I stopped you from going back for Spock.”

He let the muscles in his neck relax, dropping his head between his upraised arms, like a man waiting passively for an axe to fall, thinking, *Go away, please; I can’t handle this, not now, not right now...*

“Lara...” It might have been anger or anguish, blessing or curse.

“There was nothing you could have done there, Jim. Believe me. He’s fighting for his honor, and if you’d taken the fight away from him, you’d have taken the honor, too. He’d have come to hate you for that. I couldn’t let that happen to you, and I couldn’t let it happen to him, either. You still don’t see that – you still think you’ve failed him, so now you’ve got to destroy yourself. If I won’t stand by

and let you do it, you think you have to destroy me, too.”

He could feel something churning inside himself; that ground glass in his lungs that he'd encysted – or thought he'd encysted – with the walls he'd erected, inside and outside. She was right; she was wrong. There had to be something he could have done, somehow, and he hadn't done it. He'd walked away – had let Spock push him away, and then had let Lara keep him from going back – because in truth, he hadn't known what else to do. And he considered that cowardice. His fears, his focusless guilts, were as much for himself as for Spock, because he feared nothing so much as the inability to take action. It was a bitterness in his throat and a stinging in his eyes, that inability, and it terrified and enraged him at the same time.

“Get out,” he rasped, and again didn't know if he was begging or ordering.

“What does it take to get you out of purgatory, Jim? What cosmic bishop do I have to bribe?” He could hear her crossing the room, desert boots scuffing softly on the flooring. “I can't pray you out, I can't buy you out, and now it seems I can't even drag you out kicking and screaming. Are you planning to homestead Hell?”

She touched the nape of his neck, just at the hairline. It was the warm and human touch he knew and remembered of her, not the skeletal grasping of their earlier meeting. That had been a ghost's grip, one he could have shaken off with his reality-talisman. But this *was* reality, and he had no

magic to work against it.

He kept his eyes shut, knowing if he opened them, they'd overflow; knowing everything he'd kept held back and pinned down since he and Lara had come back from Vulcan would rise up and shatter him as completely as the phaser beams had shattered the renegade cruiser's passenger bubble.

She kept one hand on his neck; with the other, she was prying his fingers free of the grille, saying softly "Let it go, Jim; let it go." But she wasn't talking about the grille. He did let go finally, let it all go, and she was there, holding on to him as if he were drowning, guiding him to the narrow bed where he clung to her blinded by tears and furious at himself.

He couldn't remember ever having done this before, not as an adult, not as a starship captain. His pride wanted her gone, wanted her not to witness this weakness, but something deeper than pride, and older, and stronger, made him cling to the slim firmness of her. She was his anchor to reality, and as she returned his grip, that pinpoint of reality gradually grew until it encompassed all of him and he felt his wholeness coming back. He didn't have to push away the anger and the frustration any more, and he realized they wouldn't shatter him as he had feared. Instead, they were slowly overcome and absorbed by his own rediscovered reality and by the fine and necessary balance that reality brought with it.

He loosened his grip on her finally, not needing the touch, but neither of them moved to break it completely. He was searching for something to say, something clever or balancing, but he found only a deep comforting emptiness in his mind.

He didn't ever realize he had slipped over the edge of consciousness until he woke sometime later to find that Lara slept, too, stretched out beside him with her hand still curled around his. He disentangled himself, thinking he could be up and gone before she woke, but she stirred at his movement and her eyes came open, smoky and muzzy from sleep.

She propped herself on both elbows to look at the bulkhead chronometer and then dropped back. "Oh, hell. I didn't mean to go to sleep."

"And I didn't mean to come apart on you last night. I'm sorry, Lara."

"For what?"

"For acting like an idiot. I'm still not sure just what happened."

"Catharsis happened, Jim. The walls came tumbling down." She smothered a yawn. "I'm thinking of getting a trumpet and setting up shop."

"It's not funny," he said sharply.

"I didn't really mean it that way. It's just that ... well, I've knocked down a hell of a lot of walls in the last few years.

Including some I should have left standing. But not yours, not this time. This one had to come down or it would have crushed you.”

He leaned back against the bulkhead, needing to put some distance between them, needing to turn her disturbingly sharp perceptions away from him. “What other walls?” he prompted.

“Mine. Spock’s.”

“And found ... what?”

“Behind mine – a woman who’s not as strong or as brave as she thought she was. Behind his – ten thousand demons. Vulcan ones, Human ones, some very unique ones all his own. And one man, trying to keep them all within bounds, so that he *can* be his own man.” She gave her head a little shake, staring at some midpoint in space that held a vision closed off to him.

He moved uncomfortably, wondering what she saw and how much of her vision she could share. “The security team wants to debrief you,” he said finally, knowing she’d be approached, wanting her to be forewarned. “M’Benga and I have been holding them off ever since you beamed up.”

She mulled this for a moment, and he knew her loyalties were already at war.

“If you do it before you reactivate your commission, it might be easier for you. Otherwise ... there’s not much you

can legally refuse to tell them. Not without--”

“I’m not reactivating.” The statement was totally unexpected, and it caught him mentally flat-footed with his guard down.

“You--”

“Don’t ... try ... to run ... my life.” There was a steeliness in the voice he’d never heard before. “It didn’t work before, and it won’t work this time.”

“We could *make it* work.”

“No, Jim, we couldn’t. How long do you think it would be before I was back in your bed?” She realized, suddenly, what she’d said and where she was, and made a short gesture with her hands. “See?”

“It wasn’t exactly a night of wild debauch.”

“And you’re going to wear a sign around your neck advertising that, I suppose.” She sat up, hugging her knees and meeting his eyes with her calm, smoky gaze. “By 0600, everybody on the ship will know I spent the night in your cabin.”

“It doesn’t matter. I need you, Lara.”

“It does matter. And what you need is your command. I won’t endanger that again.”

“Now who’s running someone else’s life?”

“I’m *not*. I’m trying to run my own life. The only way I

know how.”



They'd compromised, eventually, after days of wrangling and nights of lying awake in their separate quarters, each firmly convinced that the other was irrevocably wrong and just too proud and too stubborn to admit it.

Lara had voluntarily reactivated her commission, a bare jump ahead of the Federation Defense League, which was calling up reserve officers and recent retirees at an unprecedented rate as war was declared on the rebellious planets of the new Republic. But she had refused a shipboard assignment – any shipboard assignment – with a stubbornness that took the case to the Defense League's high tribunal and a court martial.

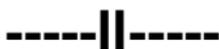
The tribunal's decision was a masterpiece of military double-talk and blatant jingoism, all of which boiled down to a landmark decision, called into service in all subsequent cases in which a Starfleet officer had close family ties with the rebels. Such officers would not be placed in assignments which might lead to “breaches of internal security”, but would be assigned to noncombatant units requiring minimal security clearances.

She hadn't been fighting anybody else's personal battle, though she allowed her defense to be presented on those lines; nor had she objected to the undeniably effective leverage applied by her father, and through him, the entire diplomatic corps. She was fighting her own battle, and

doing it with any weapon that came to hand, because she was the one who faced the prison term if the battle was lost.

Kirk followed the maneuverings through the ten months they took, alternating between anger and envy. By the time the decision was set in military granite and Lara accepted an assignment at a starbase convalescent hospital, it had become painfully obvious that her husband was indeed taking an active part in the rebellion. A very active part.

It was unfortunate, he reflected, that the ruling did not extend to officers whose ties with the rebels were emotional rather than familial.



“The Federation is dying, Spock, as T’Pau of Vulcan is dying.”

“Who told you that? Who pours such lies into your ears?”

His hands tightened on the slim wrists; he could feel the bones, fragile as a bird’s, under his fingers. But the laughing, mocking face in front of him only smiled sardonically. He bore down with his hands, feeling the bones shatter under the pressure, and still the smile did not fade, though the rest of the face did – wavering, shifting, becoming another outline built around that red and twisted mouth.

“You are a survivor,” the new face said. “I have certain

knowledge of that fact, remember.” And the hands, the face, the entity that mocked him drifted away, leaving mist in his hands and laughter in the air.

He jerked awake, throwing the bedcover away in a savage gesture that would have astonished those who had known him in another time, who more than once had trusted themselves to his reputation for gentle strength. Naked, he swung off the bed’s platform and crossed the room to the carafe on the desk, poured a glass of water, and bolted it down as another man might have bolted a shot of whiskey.

He was perceptive enough to know why he had that particular dream, over and over and over. It was a single distorted reflection of what had, in reality, been two separate confrontations – the first on Eos with Kyra, the second on Vulcan with T’Faie. What haunted him was that both had been proven right. The Federation lay shattered, while he survived – but only by betraying his own principles.

But perception did not empower him to keep the dream from recurring. That was a weakness, and a shame to him. Vulcans did not dream. Not ever. In lightsleep, the physical responses shut down, but the mind retained awareness of one’s surroundings. In deep sleep, entered only when security was assured (and how long had that been, for him? Years, he thought.), the body hovered so close to physical death that a brainscan would have revealed no sentience at all, not even on an instinctive, animal level.

But *he* dreamed. Because he was not totally Vulcan, he supposed. If he needed any proof beyond the dreams, there was the other manifestation, equally damning and equally Human. He always awoke from them in an intense state of sexual arousal. It bore no relationship to what he had shared with Lara. It was a redblack lust, more ferocious and more mindless than *plak tow*; a desire not merely to mate with but to subjugate and humiliate the woman – *any* woman, he realized – with sheer brute strength. The state threatened both his self-image and his sanity with its compelling reappearance.

He recognized its destructive capabilities, but as with the dream, recognition did not lead to control. There remained only relentless subjugation, as difficult and as wearying as the subjugation of his other Human tendencies had been for him as a child. Once he had thought he could let those tendencies come forward. Once he had permitted himself to feel ... and this was the result.

He reached inside himself for the controls. It was becoming harder each time, but he persisted, until at last he could feel them glaciating that portion of his mind he recognized as Human, smothering it in another layer of ice until the next time his traitor body should force him into what he had begun to think of as humansleep. He left the room to shower and dress and report to the bridge.

He never dreamed of Lara.



T'Riell watched the telemetry monitors intently. She knew the patterns well by now, but they never failed to hypnotize her. When she was certain that the pattern was the same, that he would sleep no more this night – in any mode – she left the monitors and went to his quarters.

He responded to the buzzer by releasing the latch control. This was a new development, she noted, this locking business. They had inherited the system intact with the rest of the ship when Lyran forces took her away from the Federation. In their rush to get her battle-ready, to convert the Federation's *Darius* to the Republic's *Nyhie*, the locks had never been deactivated. Some of the Lyran crew members used them; nearly all the Eosians did. But none of the Vulcans. Until now.

As she stepped into the room, he was pulling on the lavender-grey tunic, and the insignia of rank on the tunic's breast winked solemnly at her in the room's dim light. She did not bother with preliminaries. They had been through the debate so often that neither of them needed the opening moves now.

"How long?" she demanded.

"As long as necessary," he replied smoothly, thrusting his long arms into the sleeves and settling the tunic across his gaunt chest.

"This is madness," she said.

"Agreed. Only a madman would condone warfare, or think

that it will alter anything permanently.”

“I do not speak of politics, Commander.” She knew he was already aware of that, but she said it anyway. “I speak of your refusal to permit me to treat you.”

“I am not ill,” he told her, and thought – *not in any way your medicines can reach, Healer.*

“ should like to confirm that statement.”

“Request denied.”

“Commander Spock--”

“This is not Starfleet, Healer,” he told her coldly. “Your medical authority does not extend to your commanding officer.”

T’Riell knew the discussion was, essentially, over, and that she was no closer than she had been before, but she was unwilling to let the matter drop this time as she had in the past. “Your sleep patterns--” she began.

“Are different from standard Vulcan sleep patterns,” he finished wearily, then looked at her sternly. “Healer, if you do not by now know that you must make allowances for my ... unique physiology ... I must seriously question your suitability for this position. I permitted you to install your voyeuristic machines--” He gestured toward the telemetric bed. “--with the assumption that you would content yourself with monitoring my rest periods. If you continue to disturb my duty hours, I

T'Riell knew of certainty that this particular period was not assigned as command's duty shift, but she did not point that out. She was, rather, noting and filing away a number of medical-psychiatric observations which she would include in her next report to the Fleet Surgeon – who *did* outrank Commander Spock and who could therefore issue a compelling order that he submit to an in-depth psychometric examination. Which examination, she was quite sure, would result in his being pulled off-line before his sanity crashed in around him like an eggshell in a fist.

He was already in the process of brushing past her when the alert klaxons kicked on, and the accidental touch filled her mind with the resonance of danger, as much as the klaxons themselves did.

T'Riell and her insistent harping on his physical and mental condition was forgotten as he moved with single-minded haste toward the turbolift. As it spilled him on the bridge, his quick glance noted with approval the efficiency of the bridge crew.

Waynar, his Eosian First Officer, rose smoothly from the con as Spock approached it. If he was surprised at the speed with which his commander responded to the alert, he did not show it. Like most of the non-Vulcan crew members, Waynar thought Vulcans to be much more telepathic than they actually were. Nothing about Vulcans, Waynar told himself, could surprise him any more.

He was shortly to be proven wrong.

“Firefight, sir,” he explained. “A Federation heavy cruiser bracketed by three Romulan warships.”

Spock slipped into the chair. It was uncomfortably warm from the Eosian’s body heat, and the controls he touched were slick with sweat.

*Just a mop-up*, he told himself. Wait for the outcome of the uneven battle – a foregone conclusion at those odds – and see what damage could be done the battle-weary victors. That was the advantage of having three separate forces at war on this front – and the hell, too. To stand by like a carrion-eating kabori and watch a valiant ship go down. A ship that represented a philosophy he’d once sworn to defend with his life...

No. Those distracting thoughts had no place in his mind now. He touched a control on the console, killing the klaxons, and swung the chair toward Waynar, dispossessed now and having no duty on the bridge, yet unable to leave until dismissed.

“A battle surveillance does not require full alert status,” he pointed out.

*Not by The Book*, Waynar thought, embarrassed by his overreaction, and letting his embarrassment turn to a quick anger that spilled into his voice. “Permission to leave the bridge, sir.”

“Granted,” Spock said absently, watching the flashes of the distant firefight, glad to have Waynar out of the way

instead of hovering ineffectually at his shoulder. He called for a minor course correction that would bring them into better surveillance range.

In the months since *Nyhie* had been on line, he'd had her sensor screens altered to increase their flexibility and range, just as he'd had the ship itself altered before he took her into battle. She was the fastest, most flexible craft in the Republic fleet now, and he suppressed a Human glimmer of pride at that thought.

The Federation starship was definitely losing ground, he noted. Her phaser bolts were faded from their crimson deadliness to near pink, and in all the time he'd been watching, she hadn't launched a single photon torpedo. Her aft shields flared as a Romulan phaser was deflected, but the glow hung around her far too long as the weakened defense mechanism slowly dissipated the energy. She couldn't take much more of that. The battle must have been going on for some time, he decided. He knew quite well what the tolerance of a starship was. He should. He'd served on one long enough. Even *Enterprise* had her limits.

Why should that thought have suddenly erupted? Unless... No. *Enterprise* wasn't in this quadrant at all, assuming his intelligence reports were accurate. Assumptions, though, were dangerous. He was gripped by a sudden certainty he couldn't shake.

“Narrow the field and increase magnification on that Federation ship. Stand by for status change.”

The screen blanked for a second as the order was carried out, and then the starship was alone in the field. He still couldn't make out the registration number, but he was sure. So sure.

“Boost magnification.”

The helmswoman lifted her eyes from her board. “The power drain, sir--”

“Boost magnification,” he repeated. It was one of the few times he'd ever had to repeat an order. He could see them clearly now – NCC 1701 – and his fingers hit the switch he'd only minutes ago deactivated.

The red alert klaxons blared through the bridge for ten cycles before he cut them off, leaving only the flashing lights to remind the crew of their battle status. As he received battle-ready reports from the gunnery stations, he caught a glimpse of Waynar coming back hastily, red-faced as if he'd been running, and bristling with self-importance.

“We're going in?”

“Affirmative, Mr. Waynar.”

“The Federation ship is down, then?”

Spock didn't answer. He was busy doing several things at once, an activity that would have pleased him immensely had there not been two names clamoring in his mind. Looking back on it later, he didn't know which he'd thought of first. He only knew that when he'd seen those numbers, he'd known a moment of most unsettling

emotion.

*Enterprise*. Jim/Lara. Or Lara/Jim. It didn't matter. He reached for a link unused these many months, ripping away the scar tissue he'd so carefully formed, searching for some call from her. There was none. Of course. He'd made it quite plain to her. If her mind was calling to anyone, it would be calling to Jim, somewhere in the tangle of emotions flaring from *Enterprise*. He had no time to search her out now, anyway.

They were within firing range of the Romulan ship lying off *Enterprise's* bow, and as he'd hoped, there was no indication they'd been spotted. The Romulan's attention was all on her rapidly-failing prey. The first photon torpedo from *Nyhie* hit her amidships and shattered the minimum shielding there; the second ruptured both primary and secondary hulls. The suddenly-freed artificial atmosphere rushed out, carrying with it bodies and parts of bodies, equipment, and chunks of the ship itself, making a hideous snowstorm of many colors against the blackness of the starfield.

*Enterprise* was not fired on at all, and Waynar thought, *By the Comet, he's actually going to try to take her intact!* The audacity of it nearly took his breath away, but he had little time to dwell on it as the second Romulan ship broke away from *Enterprise* to turn her guns on this newer, vital target. But her crew was tired, her phasers losing their punch, and she simply couldn't outmaneuver the extra thrust programmed into *Nyhie's* modified engines.

Darting like a wasp, *Nyhie* was all over the second Romulan, her phasers like crimson flame, until the report came through that their quarry's port shields were down. A deadly clutch of photon torpedoes was dispatched, and the Romulan vessel, primary hull breached in three separate places, wallowed away.

The third Romulan ship, not liking the odds, broke off abruptly, and Spock, determining to finish the job at hand, let her go. He kept pounding at the second ship, mortally wounded now, until she blossomed like some malignant flower as her captain asked for one bit more power than her overtaxed engines could deliver, and the matter-antimatter containment shields ruptured with the strain.

It was over nearly as suddenly as it had begun, and the helmswoman waited for the signal to come about. She found herself shaking a bit. A heavy cruiser. What a prize that would make! They'd all take a step up if Spock could pull this one off.

She rather thought he could.

As the course coordinates were fed to her, she looked up sharply. The course he was calling for would take them away from the crippled, defenseless starship. She swiveled in her chair, looking at him for explanation, and it was like running into a stone wall full tilt. His eyes dared her to make some comment, to ask the question, and something inside her froze as quickly as if it had been exposed to the absolute zero of open space. Spock's eyes drilled into her,

carrying that numbing cold, and she turned quickly back to her board, entering the course he had called for.

The unasked question hung in the air of the bridge like the ice crystals from the first ruined Romulan vessel, but no one – not even the impetuous Waynar – dared ask it.



Kirk had been in the mess when the alert sounded, and his stomach rumbled in complaint when he settled into the con. It was to be the last non-essential thought he would be able to entertain for some time.

Outgunned, rat-trapped, attack capability nearly nil after four hours of the most furious battle he could remember, Kirk knew he had to make a decision ... *now*. He could sit here and wait for the inevitable, or he could self-destruct, and take at least one, possibly two, Romulan ships with him. But only if he did it *now*, while he still had the capacity to pick the precise time and place.

But 430 lives...

They took a bad hit, and the bridge filled with smoke from a fire somewhere belowdecks. He was sure he must be hearing things when Varyschenk reported a fourth ship streaking toward them – a Federation destroyer.

Aft scanners showed the destruction of the tenacious Romulan off their bow, and his heart jumped. Someone started a cheer, but it was choked off when the destroyer

appeared impossibly soon on the forward scanner.

“We haven’t got anything capable of that speed,” the navigator said, and someone – Kirk was never sure just who – said “Jesus! I’ll bet it’s *Nyhie*.”

His mind stopped dead, like a seized engine. *Nyhie*. That meant... it meant his words nightmares come true. It meant him and Spock, toe to toe, slugging it out, and ending with one of them dead or captured.

But *Nyhie* wasn’t firing on them. She was reducing the second Romulan ship to scrap iron, and streaking away at what was obviously and impossibly warp 10, almost before he could gather his shattered wits about him.

What functions remained for him to complete before he left the bridge for the first time in what seemed like months were directed by that portion of his mind which responded to the deeply ingrained patterns necessary to the continued survival of any Starfleet line officer. The other part of his mind was occupied, in spite of his attempts to suppress it, with the still-vivid and still vividly painful memories of the last time he had seen the Vulcan face-to-face.

Even when he left the bridge, bound for his quarters and his bed, the images continued to play in his brain. He knew sleep was going to elude him, even though his body cried for it. He knew he could call M’Benga for chemical oblivion, but refused to make the call, because it might become necessary for him to resume his duties on the bridge at any moment. And because, deep inside, he feared

that a synthetic nirvana might become so overwhelmingly attractive that he could never willingly withdraw from it.

And so he stripped off his uniform, rank with the smell of fear and fatigue, showered without really feeling the water, and turned to battle his memories on a field already reduced to the rubble of his hopes and what he had once stood for.



The message came from Starfleet 30 days later.

He knew he was in line for a commodore's stripe, maybe even flagship status for *Enterprise*, and he received the sealed communiqué with mixed emotions. Emotions which rapidly changed colors, from the mixed neutrality of beige to the howling vividness of scarlet when he broke open the seal and played the tape. At the end of it, the Fleet Admiral invited his comments, which would, if Captain Kirk desired, become part of the official record. The only ones Captain Kirk could think of at that moment would have melted the tape, the player, and possibly the entire console.

There would be no commodore's stripe, no flagship status for *Enterprise*. That wasn't mentioned in the tape, of course, but it was blatantly clear, and it didn't bother him much. What bothered him – and he gave an angry snort when he caught himself thinking of it in those terms – what *enraged* him was the accusation that he should have taken offensive action against *Nyhie*, but that he had foregone that action because he knew his former first officer was in

command.

After an hour of angry pacing and half a dozen removals of the bottle of Saurian brandy from his locker – each time putting it back unopened because he knew he was too angry to appreciate it and it was too good to waste as a spite drink – he decided he would send, as his response, an unedited transcript of the bridge log from the beginning of the Romulan attack to the end of the startling and unexpected rescue, and another copy of the report he had filed at the time.

If those brass-plated cretins didn't realize that, first, *Enterprise* was in no shape to take offensive action against anything more powerful than a dragonfly; and that second, no one was sure their rescuer had been *Nyhie* until it was all over and they'd had time to review the sensor tapes, then there was no sense arguing with them anyway.

He mentally slammed the doors on the subject of the reprimand and went down to the gym, hoping to work off his anger on the handball court. He pounced on Sulu, who was a powerful player when he chose to be, and assumed himself lost in the game when a disturbing thought crept out of that supposedly closed cupboard.

*The reason you're so mad, the thought said, is because you don't really know what you'd have done if you'd met Nyhie head-on.*

*Like hell.* He batted the ball into the backcourt with a careless follow-through that made him wince. *She's a rebel*

*ship. I'd have fired on her.*

*On Spock?*

*Yes. On Spock.*

And the 4.5 centimeter ball, travelling at roughly 187 kilometers per hour, caught him square in the solar plexus and knocked him down quite as efficiently and as painfully as a slug from one of Sulu's antique firearms would have done.

In the star-spangled pain that followed, as he tried to hang on to both his dignity and his consciousness, two voices clamored. One was Sulu's. The other was that of his own awareness, which debated objectively whether the incident sprang from a body that didn't move quickly enough, or from a mind that harbored unacceptable thoughts.

One of them, he decided, had undeniably turned traitor.

## -----IV-----

Traitor. The word hummed in Kyra's mind, even after she had closed the cover of the official report of the *Enterprise* incident.

It wasn't the first time she'd read it. There had been ample opportunity to go over it time and time again while Spock, summoned to Eos at her command, dodged and fought his way back to home port. He had to know what was coming, she thought. Why, then, had he returned? What plan-

within-a-plan led him to Eos and disgrace?

She touched the cover of the other folder, the one prepared by T'Riell. Was the Vulcan healer correct? Had Spock crossed the precarious line between the permissible madness of combat and the forbidden madness of the inner soul?

She would see. He waited for her now, in the anteroom. She would have sensed his presence, even without the announcement of the page. That vital mind, that vital body, sent signals as strong as any homing beacon to one with her telepathic powers.

She stood carefully, arched her long, supple body before the mirror, and smoothed the high-waisted gown carefully. She was satisfied that her pregnancy would not be discernible. It had not yet been officially announced; the time was not ripe. But that was not the reason she sought to hide her thickening waistline from Spock. She wanted him to see her at full power, desirable and unattainable, not as a royal broodmare with another man's seed quickening in her belly. Still, there was an unconscious care in her movements as she crossed to the door, an odd and protective tilt to her pelvis. Her body acknowledged and accommodated this new life, even if her mind did not.

She clamped down hard on her expression when she saw him standing there in a vagrant shaft of light filtering through the window grille.

“Commander Spock. Have you come to plead your case?”

He ignored her extended palms, and she bit back anger at the snub. Men had been executed for less.

“You summoned me, Your Matros.”

“Indeed I did. How careless of me to forget.”

“Perhaps Your Matros has had other matters on her mind.” His eyes, expressionless, moved unerringly to her belly, and she knew she was coloring in fury.

Angered by his sudden intuitiveness, she attacked him with her mind, projecting images of herself and her consort Tisai locked in embrace. She pinioned his gaze, amethyst on ebony, giving all her concentration to holding him there, battering at his consciousness with the vision, so real to her that her own body responded with quickened breathing and a tingling in her breasts. In her mind, in his, the figures turned until she was superior, her curtain of silver hair falling to shield her partner’s face. The vision-figure arched back in sudden ecstasy, and Tisai wore Spock’s face, Spock’s hands, Spock’s body.

Kyra felt the muscles of her face moving into a sardonic smile. Leave him with that, she thought; let him think on what might have been...

She set her mind to break the contact and found she could not. The balance had shifted somewhere, somehow, and now it was Spock’s mind that controlled, that sent, that blurred the image of herself into something she was not, even as she struggled to hold it there. The silver hair

darkened, shortened, until it barely grazed a jawline stronger than her own, just as the woman's body was smaller, harder than her own. A Human body that the long, delicate Vulcan hands caressed; a Human face that moved to hover above his; a Human will that yielded as he moved to reassume control with a gentleness that was steel clad in velvet.

Kyra knew that face, knew the name. Her influence, her fortune, had purchased that information for her once. Now neither was sufficiently powerful to shut away the vision of Spock and his Human wife.

The silent, intense battle charged the very air in the room; it seemed to draw the oxygen out of her lungs as she struggled to replace Lara's yielding image with her own dominant one. She would not lose – *could not* lose. Not here, not in her own stronghold. Her long fingers curled into claws. She would shred the flesh from his bones. She would shout for her guards. She would ... surrender.

And that quickly, it was over. Like a marionette cut loose from its strings, she felt her joints give way, and she slumped over the high back of a chaise, struggling for breath.

He still had not moved; had not traded the mask of his face for any outward sign of triumph. His victory was so complete that he did not need the empty posturing of demonstrated power.

“You bastard,” she hissed.

“As you wish, Your Matros.” The slight incline of his head was a mockery of acceptance. He thought he could afford that, she decided. Thought that because he had won this battle, the issue was decided. She straightened painfully and reached for the bell cord, wishing she had a weapon. If he attacked her now, before the guard responded...

But still he did not move, though he must have known full well what the gesture meant. She felt her strength coming back, arrogance lifting her chin and straightening her spine. The guards burst in, weapons at the ready, and skidded to embarrassed halts, confused at the outwardly calm scene. Kyra did not look at them; they were only instruments, and not particularly worthy ones, at that. Her gaze, her words, were for Spock.

“Your death will not be noble, Vulcan. And it will not be swift. But it will give me great pleasure.” She nodded at her men and they approached him warily, expecting a resistance that did not come.

“Get this garbage out of here,” she snapped. “Its smell offends me.” And turned her back abruptly as they took him away, not understanding why the quick tears burned in her eyes, or why her ultimate victory tasted so sour.



Commander P'lef was uneasy in her mind. She liked it not, this business of hanging a man by his own honor. Especially when it had been that honor which put his head in the noose to begin with. She should not have allowed it

to come to this, should have spoken out sooner.

Ah, but one did not move rashly against the crown, part of her mind said. The telepathic power held only by the women of the ruling house made even the thought of a rebellion supremely dangerous. And yet, another part of her mind knew it was a greater rashness, a greater danger, not to move when the bearer of the crown debased all it stood for.

Spock had become an obsession with Kyra. It would have been better for both him and Eos had he responded differently to Kyra's advances in those first revolt-torn days of her Matriarchy, years ago. Had he tarried with her then as she thought she desired, she would have tired of him quickly, possibly as quickly as she had tired of Tisai, her consort. But in denying her, Spock had become the unattainable – a new thing in the pampered existence of the child-woman Kyra had been then. And she had spent years learning all she could about him, about the society that formed him.

Kyra thought she had found a flaw in that society, thought its growing dissatisfaction with the Federation would provide a handhold in her climb to reach Spock. Yet he had denied her a second time when she offered him more than herself and a consort's place on a single planet.

It was not the width of his ambition Kyra had misjudged, it was the depth of his commitment to the Federation he served, to the Human he called captain and friend. Even

when Kyra joined forces with the Vulcan's inimical half-sister T'Faie, he had not turned his back on that commitment. True, he had taken the command thrust upon him, but P'lef knew he had done so only to buy the life of the Human woman he loved.

Kyra had made a serious misstep then, with her judgment turned inside-out by the demands of her latest bed-partner. Making Waynar Spock's second-in-command was a grievous error, and giving him command of the *Nyhie* in Spock's absence was an even worse one. The man was more at home on the battlefields of the Matriarch's court than on those of starflung space. His reports to Kyra had been designed more to undermine Spock and promote himself than to give the Matriarch a true picture of what was going on in the field.

Waynar had made a botch of it, as P'lef knew he would. She also knew he would undoubtedly botch permanent command of the *Nyhie*. Men, with their raging passions and love of manipulation, made poor soldiers. Perhaps if they had power of their own and were not compelled to leach it away from their women instead, things would be different.

P'lef sighed and took a sip of steaming tloss, careful not to spill any on the full dress uniform. Wishing would not alter reality.

And reality was that Spock had met his former captain in the field six months ago and allowed him free passage to

safety. Worse than allowed it – cleared the way for it. Waynar lost no time in reporting that. Coming as it did within hours of T’Riell’s report of Spock’s physical and mental condition, it had spiked Kyra’s rage to a new level of vindictiveness.

The court-martial order had been signed by P’lef as chief of military operations, but Kyra might as well have held the stylus. Even now, as P’lef waited for the board to return its verdict, the Matriarch sat across the room and smiled to herself, refining the penalty in her busy mind.

The courier came in quietly and bowed them into the courtroom proper. P’lef noted with distaste that pennants and tapestries of Eos had been hung therein during the deliberations. The commander had little patience with the trappings of the Matriarchy; she wished she had the courage to demand their removal, at least from the tribunal’s table where she would sit.

*Matros, she thought, you press too far.*

There was the shuffle of rising forms as the Commander and the Matriarch entered and were seated. Spock remained standing, silent and weathered as a stone fortress, bringing a dignity to the dress uniform that P’lef wished were more prevalent. Someone pressed a sealed packet into P’lef’s hand; she broke the seal, quite aware of what it would say.

*What would they do, she wondered, if I read what is in my conscience instead? And knew even as she formed the*

thought that it was a purely rhetorical question. Her own disgrace would not ameliorate Spock's.

"Spock of Vulcan," she read, "by grace of our Matriarch commander of the destroyer *Nyhie*, this tribunal finds you guilty of offering aid to an enemy of the crown in time of war, which is an act of treason and punishable by death." She went on with the specifics of the charges, glancing up occasionally to see if there was any reaction from the prisoner or the court.

There was none from any quarter; no one was surprised by the verdict, least of all Spock. The list of particulars was long; her throat was dry before she finished, and she wished she had brought the tloss into the courtroom with her. When she had finished, she laid the papers aside.

"Commander Spock, do you understand the decision of this court?"

Kyra broke in before he could reply. "That is merely a formality of record," she explained in dulcet tones. "However, you do have the right to have the charges repeated in your own language."

He spoke for the first time, in fluent and formal High Eosian, as unaccented as Kyra's own. "Tyranny is the same in any language, Your Matros. The perversion of justice to serve one's own ends requires no translation."

Kyra nearly lost control then, going white and half-rising as P'lef gaveled for order and restrained herself from

applauding the Vulcan's bold act.

"You will strike that from the record," Kyra instructed. "Let it read only that the prisoner declined translation."

"So done," P'lef replied. It would be harder to strike the Vulcan's words from the memory of those present, she knew.

"Commander Spock..." P'lef spent the words carefully, knowing it would be the last time he would be addressed by that title. "...the crown reserves the right of sentencing in all capital offenses. You will approach the dais and acknowledge the sovereignty of Her Matros."

He moved away from the defendant's table, flanked by two masters of order, but their restraints were not necessary. Three paces from the flag-draped platform, he dropped gracefully to his knees, back straight, head raised in quiet pride. P'lef would have sworn there was no change in his expression, yet he seemed somehow to wear a mocking smile.

Kyra saw it, too, and she gripped the arms of the chair as dignity struggled with temper. After long seconds, dignity won, yet still she did not speak, enjoying now the breathless attention of the court. When she began, her speech had the sound of something carefully rehearsed.

"Thy treachery grieves us, Spock. Thee came to us a fugitive from thy own land, and we did grant thee sanctuary."

*Fugitive, yes, P'lef thought. But made so by your own machinations, Matros, and those of the woman T'Faie. It was not sanctuary to which he delivered himself – it was bondage. And he knew it.*

Kyra flicked the other woman a quick and venomous glance, and P'lef knew her own angry thoughts had betrayed her. She realized there might be two bodies swinging from the gallows now, and was mildly surprised to discover that the picture did not particularly frighten her.

The Matriarch was warming to her role now, the center of attention, the dispenser of life and death. “And thy accusations of tyranny do grieve us further still. We would have thee know the justice of Eos, Spock. If thou wilt admit thy transgressions against us and beg forgiveness of the crown, we will grant thee clemency.”

Spock, wordless, faced her with no change of expression. Yet P'lef felt strongly that there was an unspoken communication between the two telepaths, for Kyra's face reddened in anger and her chin came up as though the Vulcan had voiced some base insult. She rose slowly, the raised platform and upright posture making her tower over the prisoner, despite the distortion of her now-obvious pregnancy.

“Thy rank is forfeit, Spock, and all privileges appurtenant thereto. Yet thy life will not be forfeit, for the life of a traitor is but a coin cheaply spent and soon forgotten. We grant thee life, Spock of Vulcan, and call for chann-tav.”

P'lef fought down a sickness in her throat. The chann-tav had not been invoked in centuries, not since the ascendancy of the Matriarchy. But it was still in the old books, so Kyra could not be barred, even by an act of the Senate. P'lef saw puzzlement reflected on the faces of the crowd. There were few in the courtroom who even understood the punishment, she realized. Most certainly, the condemned man did not.

Kyra realized it, too. Even that was part of her plan. She rolled the words forth in a clear and unwavering voice. "Thy eyes, which saw the enemy and did not track him, are forfeit. Thy arm, which did not smite him, is forfeit. The lives of thy sons, who did not fall in the battle thee fled, are forfeit. And that thy seed shall never flower again in this land, thy manhood also is forfeit. And when these forfeits are paid, thou shalt beg in the streets for thy bread, that all who see thee shall know the price of treason."

There was shock in the crowd, reflected in checked movements and indrawn breath, but none came from the prisoner. P'lef willed him to leap up, to strike out at the arrogant, towering figure and thereby purchase his own instant and relatively painless death. But he only regarded Kyra with that dark and unflinching gaze, asking no quarter, granting none. The masters of order moved as though to pull him upright; he stopped first one and then the other with the dignity of his stare, rising smoothly to his feet.

"Your mercy and justice are noted, Your Matros," he said.

“May they stand as your monument when the towers of Eos fall.” He inclined his head in a mock bow, the grace of it lost in Kyra’s sharp gesture and shrill command.

“Take him away,” she snapped, abandoning the formal tone and manner. Almost as an afterthought, she added, “The sentence will be carried out tomorrow. Publicly.” She turned as quickly as her growing bulk would permit, and stalked out, leaving the beginnings of babble in her wake.



It was dark in the cell, a full, inky blackness meant to give a foretaste of things to come. Spock considered the blackness, tasted it, rolled it around in his mind. It was no stranger to him. For two months, while the evidence against him had been assembled and the deliberations undertaken, this fetid cell had been his home. And if Kyra had her way, there would be more blackness ahead of him.

It would have been a lie to pretend he did not fear the punishment set out for him. And, as he had told someone long ago, lies to oneself are the worst of all. But fear, or lack of it, could not alter the future. He put it aside as irrelevant, like the beating of his heart or the way his prisoner’s tunic fit. There was a situation to be dealt with; there were decisions to be made.

He considered his options. He could go meekly to the butcher’s block, as if Kyra was within her rights to order the debasement of another sentient being. He could seek the best opportunity for an escape attempt and either

achieve it or force his guards to cut him down. If he succeeded, he would be alone on a hostile world, but with other options open to him. If he failed, it would not matter, for failure would mean instant death. Or, he could simply leave now, turning his mind inward until nothing remained but the physical envelope.

Perhaps that was the best way to defeat her. To present the shell to be carved up any way it pleased her, but to have the satisfaction of knowing the real Spock, the one she sought to debase, was far beyond her reach. The shell would die quickly without the mind to direct it; if not before the time scheduled for the public butchering, then surely during it. In either case, Kyra would be empty-handed, publicly defied.

Something else clamored in his mind, some stubborn logic that kept his lungs drawing breath and sped blood through vessels. *The purpose of life is life. To seek death is illogical.*

Yet had he not sought it, consciously or otherwise, in the foolhardy risks he took with *Nyhie*? And sought it knowingly, even eagerly, in that final confrontation with Kyra?

It had gained him nothing, he knew. No reason to place in her mind, there in the courtroom, a replay of that last mental exchange between them. He had known that even as he formed the vision of himself and Lara and thrust it into Kyra's easily-accessible mind, had known it would

infuriate her.

*One last great act of defiance.*

Something deep inside him gave a sardonic, silent laugh at that. The act had been as foolish and pointless as carrying her mark on his body had been. His fingertips brushed the twisted scar on his right cheek – the failed mnemonic that was to have reminded him of Kyra's ruthlessness, of the danger of crossing her. Allowing it to remain had been an empty gesture. He would have it removed--

*Again, the dark and empty mental laughter. When, Vulcan? When you return to ShiKahr? When the force of your mind shatters these stones, changes the flow of time to wipe out the years since you first met her?*

The soft scrape of a tray in the food-delivery slot jerked his mind out of its futile circling. His nose told him there was meat on the tray, and he made no move toward it, though his stomach cramped sharply in its emptiness. *There are still some things I will not do for you, Kyra.*

That thought, as much as anything, made his decision for him. There were, indeed, things he would not do for her, gifts he would not give her. His dignity was one of them.

He settled himself in the darkness and began to cast off his body. He slowed his breathing, slowed his heart, waited for the loss of sensation in his extremities that would tell him the process was beginning.

It did not come. He told himself to be patient, to

concentrate only on drawing his essence inward, but his time-sense would not shut down, and he was aware that the minutes ticked by into hours and he was no nearer his goal.

Had he lost, somehow, the Vulcan ability to separate body from mind? Or had he never really had it, debased always by the Human blood that flowed in his veins? He thought of the dreams, of the humansleep that had dogged him for months now.

T'Riell had tried to tell him, but he had ignored her. It would please her to be proven right, he thought. She was a skillful and knowledgeable healer, and he thought that in perhaps another place, another time, they might have been well-mated.

There. Human thoughts again. Even here, even now, his heritage followed him, thwarted him. He smoothed the thoughts down, black water over red stone, but the waves broke and the crags stood free, victorious. He saw T'Riell's face, floating in an out-of-focus hallucination, and thought, *No. If I must have visions, let them be other faces, other times.* He tried to loosen the swept-back hair, to soften the slanting brow and fine-drawn line of ear, seeking a face he never dreamed. But T'Riell remained, her mouth moving soundlessly.

*Go away, his mind roared. Go away, T'Riell!*

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“Bring the light closer, Commander.”

“What is it, Healer?”

“He is turning inward. I did not think he would have the strength.”

“Turning...?” P’lef was confused.

“I cannot explain it now. But he is not aware of us. And unless we can bring him back, we’ll never get him out of here.” T’Riell found a pulse point, noted the faintness and the chill of the skin. She drew back an open hand and slapped him, rocking him back with such force that she had to use the other arm to keep him from toppling over.

“*Spock!*” She slapped him again, her hand stinging, and repeated the action a third time.

P’lef stepped forward angrily. “I’m not risking my life for you to torment him!”

“Stay out of this, Commander.” The hand rose again, cracked against skin, and Spock shuddered, making as if to pull away. “Spock, come back!”

“Go away,” he said tonelessly. “Go away, T’Riell.”

She backhanded him, feeling the skin split over her knuckles and he was suddenly alert, catching her wrists, rising and dragging her up with him.

“You are wrong,” he hissed. “Who pours such lies into your ears?” He tightened his grip, and T’Riell knew he was not seeing her at all. In his hands, as they bore down on her wrists, in his body as he held her immobile against him, the

heat of *plak tow* exploded, threatening her own consciousness. Whatever his tormented vision, it was rife with demanding sexuality, battering at her own control.

“P’lef – break his hold. Hurry.”

To the Eosian, it seemed as if both Vulcans had lost their senses. She hesitated until T’Riell’s voice rose with a note of panic P’lef had never heard. “Commander – *now! Please!*”

She stepped forward, raised the weight of the hand torch in a double-handed grip, and brought it down with all her force at the inner crook of Spock’s right elbow. He spun away, right arm dangling uselessly, left arm raised at her. “*No!*” he roared. “Not this time, Kyra. This time, I shall end it!”

T’Riell launched herself at his unprotected back, strong searching fingers closing on the vital juncture, and he swayed like a towering colossus, crumbling slowly to the damp stone.

P’lef, shaken by the unexpected violence, gathered her thoughts slowly. “By the Comet, Healer, have we risked our lives to rescue a madman?”

“I do not know, Commander. His actions were not inconsistent with some of the telemetry readings I took on board *Nyhie*. But whether the condition is permanent...” She trailed off, shook her head. This was no time to delve into Vulcan biology. “We will have to carry him to the

surface. If the guards regain consciousness before we beam up--”

“Then we shall die immediately, instead of later.” P’lef shrugged. “Treason is a one-way street.”

“One which I would suggest we travel rather quickly, Commander. Even a one-way street leads somewhere.”

## -----V-----

*Rumors*, Kirk thought. *If you haven't heard a good one by 0900, make one up.* He sipped at his coffee, which was now stone-cold, grimaced, and turned his attention back to the intelligence report. *Now there's an optimistic title if I ever heard one. Intelligence report. Rumor report, more likely.*

Something was up, that was certain. Action in the sector was down; the heart seemed to be going out of the Republic's fleet. Reports from Vulcan said the Separatist movement was tottering, that Sarek's voice of reason was gaining strength. If Vulcan pulled out, the rest would come apart like a pair of cheap boots in a rainstorm, he knew.

But this ... this didn't make any sense. The Eosian forces in full revolt, the Matriarchy ordering reprisals on a bloodbath scale? Kyra was cutting her own throat, if these reports were true. And *Nyhie*... no reports of any kind on her action, not for the last three months. And even in the months before that, she had seemed to be working her way

back to Eos.

He wondered where Spock stood in all this. Right in the middle, he'd wager. Whichever side he was on, he'd go down fighting. And take as many of the enemy with him as possible. The only trouble was – who was the enemy, now?

His head hurt, and his coffee was cold. He wasn't supposed to drink it, anyway, he remembered. M'Benga was on his back about caffeine overload, and had been trying for a month to nail his captain down for a snoop at what the doctor said was an incipient ulcer.

An ulcer. Terrific. Just what he needed. Almost as much as he needed this cockamamie assignment – escorting a transport full of bigwigs on an inspection tour. If Command felt it was absolutely necessary to cart 150 observers through a hotly-contested sector, why the hell hadn't they given them something bigger than a transport to joyride in? No photon arming, and only two phaser banks ... they might as well have sent them out on bicycles. *Hirayama* would be nothing but a stone around his neck if *Enterprise* ran into trouble.

He put aside both the annoyingly incomplete intelligence report and the thorny problem of trying to understand the mental processes of Starfleet Command, and called for a readout on the replacements they'd picked up yesterday. He'd have to do the old welcome-aboard thing, and fire off a famous Kirk pep-talk. Only who was supposed to pep-talk him? Who assured the Captain that he was out here

facing off the Forces of Evil and that his strength was the strength of ten because he was Pure of Heart?

*Self-pity, my friend, is something you don't need right now. Save it for shore leave, and impress the hell out of some sweet young thing who'll be happy to--*

The half of his attention which had been on the list of names suddenly became whole, and he stopped the run to make sure. He noted the room assignment number and hit the proper toggles on the intercom.

The response was slow, the voice garbled, and he thought – *How many can there be?* He kept his voice level as he said, “Report to the Captain’s office, Lieutenant.” He took the mumbled “*Ygthw*” for an affirmation and closed the connection, remembering. It seemed longer than it was, really. So much had happened. A lifetime. And even if it was who he hoped, there would still be some things missing. A lot of things.

*Half a loaf, friend. And maybe more.*

He pushed back from the desk and walked to the outer office where a clerical yeoman was coding data chips for retrieval. “Madigan, get me a pot of coffee. A big pot. And two cups.”

She cocked an eyebrow at him. One of M’Benga’s spies, no doubt. Her words confirmed it. “Captain, you know you’re not supposed--”

“Yeoman...” He grinned at her. “What did you just call

me?”

“Captain, sir.”

“That’s right.” He held her gaze, waiting for her to work it out in her mind. When she did, she blushed.

“Yes, sir. And two cups.”

He watched appreciatively as she left, the pert curve of her rump making the short uniform skirt swing enticingly. He was beginning to feel better already. The doors hadn’t closed completely, and they stuttered, reversing movement to admit someone else.

“Captain.”

“It *is* you!” He crossed the space between them, grinning, caught the offered hand. “Come on in here. Damn, it’s good to see you. And a lieutenant, yet. You’ll be booting me out of the center chair, next.”

Pavel Chekov rubbed two fingers across the stripes on his sleeve and pulled up the offered chair. “Not for a while yet, Captain.”

Kirk studied the young man, noting a new maturity and a thinness in the face. “I wasn’t sure it was you,” he admitted. “You sounded ... different.”

Chekov grinned. “I had a mouth full of toothpaste,” he admitted.

“And you look ... different.”

“Vell, it vas a new brand,” he offered.

Kirk laughed. “More than toothpaste, I think. So, where have you been? I see you’ve got a new rating to go with that stripe.”

“Yes, sir. Veaponry. I took some training after I got off medical leave.”

“What happened?”

Chekov shrugged. “*Potemkin* took some hits. I vas in the wrong place at the wrong time. Nothing serious. But I spent some time at the rehab hospital on Starbase 16.”

“You’re certified fit for duty, aren’t you?” Kirk’s attention was distracted as Madigan brought the coffee tray in.

“I had a miraculous recowery when I heard I had a chance to get back here.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Kirk handed across a cup and saluted with his own. “They check you out on that new veaponry console?”

“Yes, sir. I fact, my first tour starts in a few minutes. Then I double back for first tour tomorrow. Just like old times.” *Not quite*, Kirk thought, but said nothing as the younger man continued. “And, oh, speaking of old times, I saw Dr. Merritt at the hospital.”

“On Sixteen?” He kept his voice carefully level. “So that’s where she wound up.” He swirled his coffee in the cup. “How is she?” The question seemed to make Chekov

uncomfortable, as though he suddenly wished he hadn't mentioned the incident.

"Sort of ... empty. Like she was waiting for something, but she wasn't sure what." He sipped reflectively at his drink. "I guess it's been pretty rough on her, with Mr. Spock..." He trailed off. "Is he still ... uh ... with the *Nyhie*?"

"As far as we know. The reports are pretty sketchy." Kirk was uncomfortable with the turn the conversation had taken and realized Chekov was, too. They nursed their coffee and spoke of trivialities until the clock rescued them. When Chekov had gone, he swung the chair around to face the bulkhead, as if its blankness could wipe blank the jumble of emotion in his mind.

After the tortuous delays and endless circling of the court case, he'd purposely put thoughts of Lara away. The process of regrowth, of healing, had been as slow and as difficult as purging his body of some addictive drug. But it was gone now – *she* was gone. He had convinced himself of that. Contacting her would only start the process over again, and for what?

Still, the thought nagged at his mind. A stop at Starbase 16 was on *Hirayama's* itinerary, and therefore on theirs. Should he beam down, see her, start it all over again?

Lara had once called loneliness the central and inevitable fact of human existence. He'd disagreed, then. Now, he wasn't sure. If it was inevitable, why should he taunt himself by reopening old wounds? But could he knowingly

be that close to Lara and *not* see her?

He wished there was someone he could talk to about it. Some other mind to bounce ideas off; some cool voice of logic or impassioned humanism to echo back his words with their own added coloration.

The central and inevitable fact... Perhaps it was. He couldn't recall a time when he'd felt more alone.

The sigh of the opening doors brought him reluctantly out of his reverie. Probably Madigan, he thought, checking to see if he needed anything before she left. Perhaps she... No. He knew how that would end, and it would solve nothing.

"Good night, Madigan," he said without turning. "Enjoy your evening."

"The name's McCoy, Captain. It hasn't been *that* long, has it?" The familiar drawl reached out and grabbed him at the first word, spun the chair around and propelled him halfway across the room before the memory of their parting stopped him.

"..*Bones*?" The question was tentative, halting, weighted with uncertainty.

"Hello, Jim." McCoy, too, bore a sheepish grin and a posture of indecision. Then it was gone and they were hanging onto each other and pounding backs and shoulders like winning-side rooters at some old-home-week athletic contest.

The emotion was too intense to last long. They broke apart, some of the self-consciousness returning. Kirk was the first to regain some semblance of coherence.

“What the hell are you doing here? I was just thinking about you! Sit down.”

McCoy, grinning, found the chair Chekov had so recently vacated. “Don’t tell anybody, but I’m a stowaway.”

“A what?”

“Well, things got a little boring on *Hirayama*, so I used my immense powers of charm, and a little bribery--”

“*Hirayama*? You’ve been there all along?” Kirk settled himself on the edge of the desk. “I think you’d better start at the beginning. Including where you got that shirt.”

“Kinda fetching, isn’t it?” he said, smoothing the silky yellow fabric splashed with crimson starbursts. “A gift from a certain lady of my acquaintance.”

“I presume you were treating her for color-blindness.”

McCoy chuckled. “Not quite. Although there was a certain amount of treat involved.”

“Bones,” he prompted. “The *Hirayama*. Remember?”

“Oh, yeah. Well, I was gonna go home after Argelius...” He trailed off, chagrined and embarrassed as he recalled the bitterness of their parting.

“I remember.” Kirk’s voice was soft. “Mint juleps and

grandkids, you said.”

“Have you got an idea how boring an eight-month-old kid can get after twenty minutes? Almost as boring as mint juleps and rocking chairs.

“Well, after about six weeks, I was climbin’ the walls. Then I got a note from Christensen at the Experimental Branch of the Federation Health Institute, wanting me to guinea-pig for her. I figured what the hell. I didn’t have much to lose, and she had some theories about the Fabrini treatments that looked pretty good.

“To make a long story short, four months later, I had a prototype whatsit wired into my spleen, and an offer from FHI to do some consulting. When this observation mission came along, they decided they needed someone with my vast store of medical knowledge, and Carol thought--”

“Carol.”

“Umm... Dr. Christensen--”

“The lady with the ... interesting ... taste in shirts.”

“That would be tellin’, Jim.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Anyway, Carol wanted to see if this gizmo would do the trick in the field as well as it does in the lab. I guess it does. So far, so good, anyway.”

McCoy shifted slightly in the chair with a twinge of something akin to pain crossing his face. Looking at him,

Kirk wondered if the “so far, so good” was real or just something McCoy had convinced himself of. There were signs of aging – in the salt-and-pepper hair, in the beginnings of crepe along the jawline and at the throat. McCoy had looked like death warmed over the last time Kirk had seen him, and while he was obviously healthier now, he was still not the Bones of old.

“You wouldn’t have a little touch of bourbon in that jug, would you?” McCoy asked hopefully.

“Just coffee. There’s some brandy in my cabin, though. Want to go down there?”

“No. Here’s as good as any place, I reckon. I would take some of that coffee, though.” Whatever McCoy had in his craw, he was working it around while Kirk refilled the cups and handed one over. The thickening of his Georgia drawl and his continued shifting in the chair told Kirk that much.

McCoy looked into the dark liquid as if he might find words written there. Kirk recognized the gesture; he had used it often enough himself. The words were never there, though.

“I’ve known since the day before we left that *Enterprise* was gonna be our escort,” McCoy said, almost apologetically. “I almost backed out. And then I thought, what the hell, there’d still be a couple miles of space between us. It wasn’t enough, I guess.”

He set the coffee down untasted. “Jim, what I’m tryin’ to

say is I'm sorry. About what I said, what I did to you back at Argelius." He stopped Kirk's reply with a gesture of his hand. "No, let me get this out. I was a sick, tired, cranky old bastard. I was hurting. I was scared. And I ran. I ran as far as I could, but it wasn't far enough. Because *I* was still there, wherever I went, and every morning I'd wake up knowing I ran out on you when what you needed was a good swift kick in the butt."

Kirk felt the laughter coming and tried to shut it off, but he couldn't. McCoy's speech had taken such a crazy, zigzag path from apology to self-pity to righteous indignation that there was simply no other response possible. He felt like somebody had taken the three bitter years since McCoy's departure and jerked them off like frayed and dirty plastiderm from a long-healed wound. And the laughter was the final healing.

McCoy was surprised, maybe even a little miffed, at Kirk's response until he recognized it for what it was and retraced the pathway himself. He began to grin, a little sheepishly. "Well, you *did!*" he grumbled.

Kirk let the emotion run itself dry before he spoke. "You're right, Bones. A little late, but one hundred percent, dead on-center right." He slid off the desk and clapped McCoy on the shoulder. "Come on. Let's go crack open that brandy." He waved away McCoy's beginning motion toward the coffee cup. "You don't really want that. Probably give you some exotic Russian disease."

“Russian?” McCoy queried as they walked through the offices toward the corridor.

“That was Chekov’s cup. He’s been reassigned here – I was just talking to him before you showed up.”

“Chekov? How’s he doing?”

“Going around in circles, thanks to the superior wisdom of Starfleet. He was in rehab on Starbase 16, so naturally the first assignment he gets after leave takes him right back there.”

“Chekov was on Sixteen?” McCoy asked as they stepped into the turbolift. “That young man leads a charmed life. He must’ve just got out in time.”

“To fill this slot? Yeah, I guess it was kind of odd.”

McCoy gave him a strange look. “You mean you haven’t heard? It wasn’t in the orders?”

“Our orders? Just to escort *Hirayama* on a tour of damaged facilities.” A black premonition was creeping up Kirk’s spine. “But Sixteen’s a hospital base. I thought ... I assumed you’d be picking up some personnel there.” The turbolift had stopped, but he made no move to leave it. “What’s going on, Bones?”

“Jim, Sixteen was hit by Romulans three weeks ago. It was the second hospital base to be hit in the last month, and a hospital transport’s been attacked since then. I don’t know what it is the Romulans are after, but...” McCoy trailed off as Kirk’s obvious shock penetrated. “Jim? What’s wrong?”

“Chekov ... didn’t know about the raid. But he told me ... he said Lara Merritt was there. How bad was the damage, Bones? Where did they take the survivors?”

McCoy shook his head. “I don’t have all the details. But ... if it was like the others, the Romulans came in after the initial attack. The body counts don’t jibe with the known populations, but... I’m sorry, Jim. We’re assuming there are no survivors.”

Kirk felt the strength flowing out of his legs, as if something had opened a great gash in his flesh. A voice in his mind screamed *Not fair; not fair!* To be so close ... to have the memory of her raised up again, ripping away the protective scars, just so this new assault would be exquisitely painful...

He heard McCoy’s voice, far away, calling his name, felt the touch of a caring hand on his arm, and shook it off as if it were some crawling vermin. The roaring in his mind clarified to a sound that should, somehow, he realized, have a meaning. The words that followed, ripping through the turbolift speakers, gave him a direction, a focus for his rage. He had never, he realized, responded to a red alert with such eagerness.

McCoy trailed behind him as he made his way to the bridge. The deck rocked under them, and he knew the ship had been hit solidly.

He swung into the chair calling for status and damage reports, and his blood chilled as he saw the outline of their

attacker on the main screen. The silhouette was unmistakably that of a Federation destroyer. And there was only one Federation destroyer that would fire on them – *Nyhie*.

“Varyschenk, get me a grid pattern to provide maximum protection for *Hirayama*. Uhura, patch navigation through to their bridge and set up a navicomp lock. They’re sitting ducks. And I want her damage reports on anything over a level three. Mr. Chekov, buy me some time. If he gets past us, he’ll take that transport apart a plate at a time.”

Even as Chekov nodded and began laying in a fire pattern for the phasers, Kirk knew something was very wrong. *Nyhie* wasn’t dancing to the tune he’d called. There was no maneuvering by the smaller, faster ship, no feint, no distracting phaser burst to draw *Enterprise* away and expose the weaker *Hirayama*. The renegade destroyer was coming straight at them, lobbing a photon torpedo head-on, into the strongest part of *Enterprise*’s shielding. The shields transmitted a shudder through the deck, but held. As *Nyhie* held – dead on, straight for them.

Alone, *Enterprise* could have maneuvered away, gone sublight, done any number of things. But not with *Hirayama* hanging around her neck like a chain, with all those passengers and crew to consider. Kirk had no choice. He called the orders that would swing *Hirayama* into an arc so the transport’s phasers could slice into *Nyhie* in that microsecond when the destroyer’s shielding powers would be centered against the photon torpedo *Enterprise*

launched.

*Nyhie* bloomed like a nova, white-hot death that flared the *Enterprise* viewscreen to an eye-burning intensity and blinded the forward scan sensor. Kirk didn't need external eyes to know what had happened. He had bought the more than 700 lives on board the *Enterprise* and the *Hirayama*, but only at the cost of every living thing on the *Nyhie*.

Every living thing.

Including her commander.

Some level of his mind registered what was happening on the bridge – the status reports, the movement of Bones brushing past his chair to calm the near-hysteria of a rookie navigator temporarily blinded by the intense light which had flashed from the screen before it died, even the congratulations piped over from the bridge of the *Hirayama*.

Heard them, but didn't respond. Couldn't respond. Because some other level of his mind, some inner voice heard only by himself, screamed the only fact that mattered at all.

*Spock is dead, and his blood is on my hands. Forever.*

## -----VI-----

Spock came back reluctantly, knowing he had failed. Kyra would win, after all. There would be the public humiliation she wanted for him, the--

No. This was not the damp and gritty floor of his cell under his back. It was smooth and cool and it vibrated slightly. And the sounds ... a med-bed?

He opened his eyes to T'Riell's serene face. She nodded expressionlessly. "Very good, Spock. What does your body tell you?"

He flashed her a look tinged with annoyance. It was a child's exercise that she asked of him, when so many other questions clamored for answers. She had no right--

The anger, the chaos, the lack of control in his mind, startled him into the realization that she was quite right in asking him to center. Slowly, he began to assimilate the information, and as he examined and called out the responses of his body, he felt order coming back. Her calm glance moved from his face to the med panel and back as she compared his body-awareness with what the sensors told her.

"Is there nothing else?" she asked when he was finished.

There was; he had not intended to mention it. "An awareness of healing," he conceded.

"Where?"

"In my right arm." He concentrated on the sensation. "A broken bone?" The question was as much for himself as it was for her.

"Yes."

“How?”

“You are a difficult person to rescue, Spock.”

“Rescue?”

“From Eos. And from yourself. You were turning inward when we reached you – hallucinating. Commander P’lef used only the force deemed necessary at the time.” She answered his quizzical look and stopped his question by reaching for an intercom switch. The act, coupled with Spock’s impressions of the room, confirmed his suspicion that they were on a ship. He held his questions until P’lef appeared. The unadorned tunic she wore was still Eosian military in origin, but the dark splotches on breast and cuff spoke of recently removed insignia.

“This will cost you dearly, Commander,” he said.

“I have neither sons nor manhood to lose, Spock.”

“I am sure Kyra could make adjustments.”

“Doubtless she could. But she will have to catch us first.”

He studied her harsh face, her quiet manner, before he spoke again. “Why, P’lef?”

“Because you are a man of honor.”

“If I am, you know I cannot permit this.” He started to swing off the bed, but T’Riell barred his way as P’lef spoke again.

“Then say it is because I have found there are prices I will

not pay. Your life, your integrity, are two of them.”

“Commander--”

“Mr. Spock, we have gone to a great deal of trouble and expense to come this far. I have heard you abhor waste, and that is all this endeavor will be if we do not continue.”

He raised one eyebrow in a sardonic gesture of acceptance. “Commander, your logic may be somewhat faulty, but I yield to your intent.”

She gave him a mocking half-bow.

“May I ask where we are going – and on what ship?”

“My scout. Mine now, anyway,” she stated defiantly. “As to where – Vulcan.”

“Through Federation space?”

“Do you know any other way to get there?”

“No. But ... may I remind you that, even if we elude the Federation patrols, Vulcan and Eos are still allies. I doubt we will be received there with open arms.”

“You have been long away,” T’Riell offered. “Things are changing on Vulcan. S’Rakel’s power is eroding. Your father’s group has gained much influence, Spock, and your appearance will give him the strength to break the Separatists’ hold. The Federation would be willing to overlook much in order to have Vulcan back.”

“There is a small matter of my fleeing the authorities, and

assisting another to flee.”

“That has been set aside, Spock. There is no one now to press charges against your wife.”

He flicked her a look sharp as a whiplash, annoyed that she knew so much. If the healer understood it was for Lara’s protection that he had agreed to join the Eosians, did she also know who and what were truly behind the move against him? Then his curiosity overcame his reticence.

“T’Faie is ... gone?”

“Gone, dead, who knows? Or cares?” T’Riell stopped abruptly. “I beg forgiveness, Spock. I forgot she is your kinswoman.”

“She is also my enemy. The two are not mutually exclusive, Healer.” He wondered again where she obtained her information, how much she knew. “She has a son,” he said slowly. *My son, he thought, whom I can neither publicly acknowledge nor privately deny, and whose hate for me burns even more coldly than does his mother’s.* “Selek, too, is dangerous.”

T’Riell shrugged. “He may be with her. I know only that neither of them is on Vulcan. Or Eos.” She glanced past him to the sensor panel, to the traitorous gauges that revealed entirely too much to a knowing mind. She was a Healer, and a Vulcan. If she knew the source of the panel’s disturbance, she did not comment on it. She said only, “You must rest now, Spock. There is much to be done on

Vulcan when we arrive.”



T’Riell’s prediction was correct, though for a few moments it seemed not to be so. Their arrival in ShiKahr was unobtrusive, and Spock, who was on the bridge when P’lef’s fugitive ship was granted clearance, was surprised at the ease with which the renegade obtained sanctuary.

The quiet welcome by his father, who made no mention of the conditions of Spock’s flight from Vulcan, was quickly replaced by a seemingly endless round of meetings, strategy sessions, estimations of strengths and weaknesses in both Separatist and Federationist positions.

Spock found himself made the figurehead of the drive to withdraw from the Republic and petition for readmission to the Federation. Sarek realized it was little known that neither Spock’s affiliation with the rebels nor the end of that association was of his son’s own making, and so to the public at large, Spock became the personification of Vulcan – acted upon by myriad outside forces, striving to take the proper course, the honorable course, only to withdraw in disillusionment when the drive for a republic began to shatter from the conflicting aims and chauvinistic power plays within its structure. He knew he was being used, and did not care. The all-night meetings, the constant marshalling of logic against key individuals or important groups whose votes they needed, left him little time to dwell on his own situation.

The compelling, disturbing dreams became infrequent, and T'Riell became less an annoying watchdog of his health and more a partner in his political efforts. The quickness of her intellect and the stubbornness of her character reminded him of Lara, but she was more politically sophisticated and tougher than his wife had ever been. It was with very little surprise that he learned her initial assignment to the *Nyhie* had been no accident. T'Riell had been one of the Federationists' more informative agents. Unlike Lara, the quietly efficient Vulcan woman had been a master of deception. And, unlike Lara, she brought him no tranquility.

For that, he found himself seeking out T'Borr and the child Skolann. The odd relationship had begun when he paid the customary tcha-klei's visit to the boy on the second anniversary of the pledging ceremony.

His duties toward the child – godparent, teacher, mentor – would not formally begin until the boy's fifth year, when mental training imposed by the tcha-klei would be added to physical training imposed by the family, both combining to prepare the boy for the challenge of the kahswan in his seventh year. Prior to that, the tcha-klei was expected only to monitor the tcha-tzin's progress on an occasional basis.

The difficult circumstances of the child's birth on that night when terror ran the streets of ShiKahr and T'Borr's bondmate fell its victim, had apparently not harmed the boy, though the shock of Sundering had thrown his mother into premature labor. When Spock's hands had helped him

into the world, Skolann's survival had seemed doubtful. But now he was a sturdy, chubby child with a surprisingly large vocabulary and an already marked penchant for taking things apart. He was still in the developmental stage at which touch was important, and he had climbed onto Spock's lap on that first visit with neither hesitation nor spoken invitation, as soon as the lap became available.

Spock had touched the boy's face lightly, and the toddler had regarded him solemnly as the vague infantile memory of their tcha-klei/tcha-tzin bonding surfaced in his young mind. Skolann had placed his chubby palm on Spock's face in an instinctive response which was years away from any real meaning, yet Spock had felt a curious stirring he could not quite identify.

His visits to the house of T'Borr and Skolann became more frequent than the responsibilities strictly required of a tcha-klei. He found in the cool stone home of the young widow some measure of the serenity he had thought forever banished from his life.

On the eve of the Council vote, it seemed only natural for him to find himself at her door. Skolann, already in his night clothes, toddled without hesitancy to the tall, quiet form, and Spock picked him up in what he realized had become an automatic response. He realized, too, with something akin to regret, that Skolann's telepathic powers would begin to bud in the coming year, and the casual physical contact with the child would have to be ended then.

He was examining this unexpected and disturbing bubble of emotion with such intensity that he barely heard T'Borr's greeting; did not even think to wonder that the child should be up so late, so obviously expecting his visit.

They stood in the entryway, and he realized finally that there was an odd tension about T'Borr. It would not be proper to ask its origin, of course, but the impression clung to his mind as Skolann prattled, unheard, about the day's events.

The child knew he was being ignored, and put his hand on Spock's face to draw attention back to himself. His fingers touched the mark on Spock's face, and his attention was suddenly riveted on this newly-discovered facet of his tcha-klei.

"What's 'at?" he demanded.

"It is a scar, Skolann. Where the skin healed imperfectly over a cut."

The boy's fingers mapped his own face. "I don' have one," he announced.

"No, you do not."

Skolann considered this for a moment. He touched Spock's face again. "Hurts?" he asked.

Spock brushed shaggy bangs from the dark eyes which regarded him so solemnly. "Not any more," he said. Half a truth was enough for a child less than three years old.

Skolann decided he did not like the mark, principally because he didn't have one of his own. "Make it gone," he said, pushing at it.

"I cannot do that, tcha-tzin."

"I can, if you would allow it."

Spock turned at the sound of a voice which did not belong in this place. T'Riell stood in the doorway to the living room with a mug of parra in her hand. He looked from one woman to the other, one eyebrow climbing rapidly. This turn of events did not bode well.

T'Borr stepped in smoothly and took the child from his arms. "It is bedtime now, Skolann." She caught Spock's quizzical glance. "Please go in and sit down. I shall join you both in a moment."

Spock's discomfort grew when he followed T'Riell into the living room. The half-empty pot of parra said the two women had been together for some time; the third cup still upside-down on the low table said he had been expected. He was being manipulated again, and this time, he *did* mind it. Very much.

T'Riell sat as if the room was hers and picked up the conversation mid-stride. "I *could*, you know. Remove it. Kyra has no hold on you now; why keep anything to remind you?"

This was patently impossible, he told himself. There was simply no way for T'Riell to be operating on the basis of

anything but guesswork. He kept his face and voice carefully bland as he responded. “Your logic eludes me, Healer – first that you would presume this has anything to do with the Matriarch, and second that I should concern myself at all with its removal.”

“I will concede that you have no vanity, Spock. But you do have a tendency to cling to symbols.” She warded off his interruption with a swift movement of her hand. “No – hear me out. You question my conclusions, as if I had not had ample opportunity to make certain inferences after living and working in your presence for some time. I observed you very closely, Spock. You know that. What I think you do not know – because you were never conscious of it – is that when you reviewed order tapes from the Matriarch, you would touch that scar. And on the bridge – when you carried out direct orders that conflicted with your own preferences – you touched it like some evil talisman.

“Kyra marked you, somehow; scarred something in you much deeper than the face you show the world. And as long as you carry that mark – inside or out – you’ll never be free of her.”

T’Riell leaned forward in her intensity, as though lessening the space between them could also bridge the distance between their attitudes. “The war is over for you, Spock. After the Senate votes tomorrow, it will be over for all of us. And Kyra’s power is waning. Her husband would see the crown on his own head, or would pass it to their daughter and rule as regent until the child attains maturity.

If the Federation does not crush Kyra, her own people will, simply because she is unfit to rule. Carrying your battle scars into peace is as inappropriate as carrying a *lirpa* to meditation.”

Spock forced himself to sit back, to cross his legs casually as he templed his fingers. “I think perhaps my father chose the wrong spokesperson for the Federationists,” he said easily. “Anyone who could construct such a cathedral of misapplied logic on the basis of a few centimeters of keloid tissue could easily use the same technique to shatter the Separatists’ philosophy. You may have missed your calling, Healer.”

T’Riell’s spine stiffened in anger, and Spock felt rather pleased with his evasion. He had a Vulcan’s typical distaste for outright lies, but Jim Kirk had tutored him well in the fine art of bluffing. One more statement was all he needed to totally confuse her, and the sweetness of it was that it permitted him to accomplish something he wanted done anyway.

“Had I known you were so concerned, T’Riell, I would have spared us both this emotional tirade. Set a date for a time next week, and you may perform your dermatological exorcism.”

T’Riell was speechless with a mixture of frustration, anger, and embarrassment. She had gone forth to slay a dragon, quested loudly and long, only to find she had been chasing a firefly. Her instincts told her the firefly was really a

dragon in disguise, but there was little she could do to prove it.

T'Borr's entrance put an abrupt end to the mismatched sparring bout. She took one look at T'Riell's bristling posture and Spock's elaborately casual one, and set about smoothing the waters in the only way she could. Forcing herself to exude an air of serenity, she filled the parra cups, serving Spock first as an expression of his status. He found both her strained calmness and her gesture of servility annoying. Nor was he encouraged when she sat near T'Riell instead of taking her customary place near him.

The two women exchanged glances. T'Borr gave a small nod, and T'Riell edged forward again in her low chair. *Now we come to the real purpose*, Spock thought, and felt a kind of battle-ready calm spread through him.

"Spock, there is something we must discuss," the healer began.

"Indeed?"

"Yes." T'Riell, usually so outspoken, was obviously having great difficulty. Even T'Borr's calm was faltering as she toyed with her cup and tried without success to keep her face from coloring in confusion or embarrassment. T'Riell cleared her throat and tried again.

"As staff surgeon on the *Nyhie*, I made certain ... um ... observations about your physical condition. Your behavior when Commander P'lef and I removed you from Eos tends

to bear those observations out.” The silence that followed her statement was deafening in its intensity.

“Yes?” he said, finally.

“And I ... I mean, we ... T’Borr and I...”

“Go on, T’Riell.”

“This is so...” She made a gesture of impatience, then blurted it out. “Spock, where is your bondmate?”

“That is none of your business, Healer.”

“It is *precisely* my business!” she exploded. “As a Healer, and as one who understands your value here. Spock, your medical records indicate you will enter *pon farr* in approximately two more years. Certain of your physiological responses lead me to believe you may not have that much time. You must make some provision for that.”

Understanding hit him like a physical blow. “Are you suggesting an alternate bonding?”

“Yes.” Surprisingly, it was T’Borr who spoke. “We are both free, both healthy. Either of us would make a suitable surrogate. We ask you to choose, now, so that the arrangements may be made.”

Spock rose to his feet in a barely-controlled motion of incipient violence. “I am bonded,” he said, cutting each word off precisely. “I have a wife. This is not a suitable discussion, and I will not continue it.”

T'Riell moved quickly to her feet and barred his way. "You will! You must. A few moments ago, we spoke of symbols. I said you cling to them, and you know the truth of that. Your Human wife is one – a symbol, nothing more. You carry your bonding as you carry that scar – a monument to a past that no longer exists for you."

"Stand aside, T'Riell. Do not meddle where you are not wanted."

A second slim form joined the first. "No, Spock," T'Borr said. "My son's father was lost to senseless violence. I would not have his tcha-klei lost the same way. Choose one of us, or name another – but choose."

They were as stone before him, and he knew he could not pass them without violence. There had been enough of that in his past. Too much.

"There is an alternative," he said softly.

"What?" T'Riell asked.

"The Kolinahr." The idea, which had been taunting him with its promise of total serenity, total logic, had not yet been voiced to anyone. Not even fully to himself. That he should be explaining it to these two women before he had settled the issue in his own mind was unthinkable. But then, so was continuing this painful discussion.

"The Masters of Kolinahr have freed themselves of the cycle," he said.

"They will not accept you for that purpose alone," T'Riell

challenged.

“I am aware of that, Healer. There are other, more compelling reasons for me to seek out the Masters.” He stopped her question with a shake of his head. “I will not discuss them with you. Already you have violated my privacy to a shameful extent.”

“Two years is not long enough to achieve Mastery,” she insisted.

“Perhaps not. But it is sufficient to begin.”

T’Riell’s anger threatened to overwhelm her, and she knew it. She struggled to suppress it until she could make one more statement. “P’lef was wrong when she said we risked our lives to rescue a madman, Spock. We risked them to rescue a fool.”

She turned on her heel and stalked away, with only the wind chimes in the garden to bid her peaceful journey. Spock would have followed her – not to bring her back, but because the serenity he had found in this house was now shattered forever, but T’Borr’s hand on his arm halted his movement.

Control was a constant struggle for her at the best of times. Now, disturbed by the harsh words of the exchange, and shamed that their offer had been shunned, she was near the ultimate disgrace of tears.

“You would throw your life away rather than bond with one of us? Are we – am I – so repellant as all that?”

He shook his head. “No.” He covered her hand with one of his own, and touched her cheek lightly with the other, feeling her tremble at this unexpected intimacy. “T’Borr,” he said, in the old, old tongue, “little night-bird. Lovely thou art as a pool in the desert, and as sweet to the soul. Honored I am by thy offer, but accept it, I cannot.” He broke the contact gently and held her at arm’s length, returning his speech to the contemporary mode. “I have violated too many vows already, T’Borr. This one, at least, I shall keep.”

“But if it means your life--”

“I doubt that it will. Two years is a long time, and my wife may decide to return to Vulcan. The bond is part of her, now, even though she is Human.”

“And if she does not return? Or if, as T’Riell suggested, your time comes before then?”

“There are too many variables in your hypothesis, T’Borr.” There was a gentle smile in his voice, if none on his face.

“I would not wish to see thee dead, Spock.”

This time the smile extended to his eyes. “In that, we are agreed. I shall endeavor to remain alive – for both of us.” He released her, and slipped past her unresisting form. “And now, I really must go. I do not share T’Riell’s certainty about tomorrow’s vote, and there are people I must see in the morning.”

## -----VII-----

A dull ache woke in James Kirk as he opened his eyes. He accepted it with resignation as an old acquaintance, if not exactly a friend. He knew its dimensions and its depth and its insistence quite well by now. It had been his constant companion for months, ever since the day...

No, he decided. He would not dwell on that. He would permit the ache to gnaw at him in those moments when there was nothing else to occupy his mind, but he would not allow it to consume him, as it had threatened to do in those first few days.

He got up and began preparations for the day's duties, wishing McCoy was still on board. Bones had been his rescue in those first horrid days after the *Nyhie* incident, but *Hirayama's* tour was over, and Bones gone with it – reluctantly, true, but gone all the same.

Kirk had sensed that McCoy could easily have been pushed into asking for active duty again, but he would not do that to his old friend. Bones had begun a new life, and seemed happy with it. He had given enough to the demands of Starfleet duty, had lost enough of his life in the sterile embrace of a cold silver mistress called *Enterprise*, and Kirk could not ask him for more. He had to learn to live with himself, by himself; to accept that two of the most important people in his universe were gone because he had not acted on his instincts nearly three years ago in that ruined house on Vulcan.

Bones could do all the rationalizing he wanted – Kirk was not God, not omniscient; Lara was a sentient adult and thus fully entitled to choose her own path, as was Spock; Kirk's reaction to *Nyhie's* attack had been the only possible response... *Yes, Bones, I know. I know. But still...*

The day's business held no attraction for him. The Federation could have accepted Vulcan's formal petition for re-entry without every available starship in attendance. He would much rather be out mopping up Republic hold-outs, or throwing the power of the *Enterprise* against the still-active Romulans.

There would be time enough for that later, the admiralty had pointed out to him when he voiced his objections. It was politically expedient that as much Starfleet brass as possible be present for the acceptance of Vulcan's petition. Any skimping on Starfleet's part would have made it look as though it was an act of surrender by the Vulcan High Council, and any hint of that would have collapsed the whole intricately-wrought façade.

He smoothed the final closure on the dress uniform and decided to skip breakfast. It would never do to appear at the ceremony with toast crumbs under his neckband or egg yolk on his sleeve.



It was every bit as painful as he had known it would be.

Everywhere he looked, there was a smooth, dark head bent

in courteous attention, the elegant line of upswept ears, a set of strong, long-fingered hands, a pair of lean shoulders set just so... Everything he saw and heard brought him an agony of recognition – a sudden soaring of spirit, followed by the ugly realization of inescapable truth.

He listened to the grand speeches, the formal, careful movements of this surrender which must at all costs never seem to be one, and heard not a word. He watched as the senators were introduced one by one, and blinked back tears when Sarek's name was called.

At the reception afterward, he purposely avoided entering the line of uniformed officers who formally proceeded down the rank of Vulcan dignitaries, knowing he could not face Spock's father without breaking down completely. He had seriously considered leaving directly from the open plaza where the ceremony had been held, but knew he could not do so without drawing undue attention to himself. Somewhere in this building, he thought, there must be transport booths where he could depart in privacy, if not particularly in dignity.

He was searching for one in the maze of corridors when he heard his name called, and turned to see Amanda coming toward him.

“Captain Kirk! I *thought* that was you.” There was kindness in her tone, and a true note of welcome. Somehow, that was worse than accusation.

“Amanda.” He took her offered hand, swallowing down

the thickness in his throat.

She gave him a curious look. “Are you unwell, Jim? Vulcan can be a bit overwhelming, I know.”

He could not believe she was saying these things – slipping back into the easy familiarity she had adopted when he had been a guest in her home once, eons ago, lifetimes ago. The horrible thought struck him that she didn’t *know* – didn’t know she was holding the hand of her son’s murderer. The thought made him feel abruptly ill, and he dropped her hand.

She frowned then, and reached up to touch his face. “You’re *not* well! Come, sit down.” She pulled him to an unpadded bench along the wall. “Let me get you some water.”

He caught at her skirt. “No, Amanda. Thank you, no. It was just – the shock of seeing you again.” She sat next to him, still questioning. “Amanda ... I’m so sorry. About Spock. He, of all people, should be here today.” That was enough. He would not – *could not* – say more.

“Yes,” she agreed briskly. “He should indeed. But you know he hates being fussed over. And he’s had more than his share of that since he came home, what with—Jim? *Captain!*”

It was no wonder she was shocked – he was laughing and crying at the same time, hugging her exuberantly and then releasing her as he jumped to his feet.

“He’s here? He’s all right? Oh, God, Amanda – I thought he was dead! I thought – oh, it doesn’t matter now. Where is he? Can I see him?” He was babbling, and he knew it, and didn’t care. Six months of guilt, of agonized self-recrimination, were gone and he was like a coiled spring suddenly cut free – out of control and reaching heights he’d never dreamed.

He grasped both her hands and pulled her to her feet. “Lady, I could *kiss* you! I think I will!” And he did – a joyous smack on the cheek that drew forth a startled gasp and then a wry chuckle as she stepped back and tucked an escaping strand of hair into her coiffure.

“Young man, you had better restrain yourself. Here comes my husband, and he hasn’t killed a man for making a pass at me in *ages*.”



Ages it seemed indeed before he could get it all explained to them and they located a comm booth to let Spock know he was coming. He felt an absurd urge to weep again when, standing out of the unit’s pickup range, he saw his friend’s face and heard that familiar and well-loved voice.

Amanda had broken the news to her son, who displayed only a raised eyebrow at it. Kirk could not bring himself to use the comm – he wanted their meeting to be private, and trusted neither his voice nor his face to behave properly in public.

He hailed a skimmer and urged it on until they were within a quarter-mile of the house, when the panic hit him. He ordered the driver to stop, and got out. If the driver was at all nonplussed by his passenger's behavior, he did not show it.

Kirk stood on the neat path, and felt the uncertainty rise in him. What would he say; what kind of reception awaited him? He was ... frightened. Petrified at the thought of meeting this man who had been brother, compatriot, friend. The realization angered him, and he walked the remaining distance propelled by that anger. It ran out on him as he passed through the front gate, and he stood sweating and scared under the hot white sun of Vulcan.

The chaos and ruin of the courtyard the last time he'd been here had been replaced by careful cosmetic work that hid the scars of ShiKahr's strife. New plants and slender stripling trees flourished about the repaired fountain, and both the houses wore unmarred outer coats. He had not thought to ask which house.

There was a movement at the doorway of the older, larger dwelling, a sudden darkness in which a darker form stood silhouetted. Like a bird hypnotized by a snake, like a robot answering some electronic summons, he moved toward the doorway, thinking, *Meet me, dammit! Come halfway! Do something!*

And at the last moment, he did. He stepped through the doorway and across the flagstones with his hand out. Kirk

didn't know later how he'd made that last step. He knew only the warmth of the handclasp and then the sudden, startling embrace, and the sound of a husky voice saying his name.

They broke apart, mutually embarrassed as only strong men can be when emotion grabs them by the nape of the neck and shakes them till their souls rattle. Then they were inside, with the door closed behind them and seated facing each other across a low game table littered with chessmen.

Kirk began, his voice still ragged. "I thought ... oh, Jesus, Spock. I thought you were dead. On the *Nyhi*. And that I'd done it."

Spock's eyebrow climbed, and he almost smiled. "I am very glad I am not. Was not."

"I should have known it wasn't you. He came right at me – right down our throats. Jesus."

"Jim," he said softly, "your deity had very little to do with it, I think." He met Kirk's outstretched hand and clasped it in his own. "It is very good to see you, my friend."

"Yes," was all he could manage, and he knew he'd been right to avoid the cold and impersonal comm booth.

Spock released his grip and clasped his hands together on the table, very contained, very Vulcan. "I presume ... Lara ... did not beam down with you."

Kirk's joy came crashing down about him. There were no words in him to say what must be said. "No." He didn't

elaborate.

Spock sensed something amiss, and thought he had found it. “She would not wish to come, I suppose, if she thought--” He broke off. “Lara would have known,” he said slowly, as if explaining it to himself. “Through the bond, no matter how much... She was not with you when you destroyed the *Nybie*, was she? And she is not with you now.” There was no question in the tone.

“No, Spock, she isn’t.” He reached for the Vulcan’s hand; found only emptiness. “We think... oh, dammit, Spock, she was on a hospital base the Romulans raided. There were no survivors.”

“No.” It was not a plea, not a denial. It was a simple statement of fact.

Kirk reached again, still found nothing. “Spock, I’m sorry. We just don’t know--”

“She is not dead.”

Kirk was stunned into silence. That Spock, of all people, would refuse to accept an ugly fact...

“Just as she would have felt my death through the bond, so I would have felt hers. She is not dead, Jim.”

Kirk came to his feet, sending the table and the chessmen spinning. “Then where the hell is she? You sit there calmly and tell me she could have survived the carnage I saw on that base! I *saw* it, Spock – and it still makes me want to vomit every time I think about it! So don’t tell me you

have some inside link to a dead woman. If she's alive, where *is* she? Use that magic link, dammit, and *tell me!*"

The look Spock gave him was filled with infinite patience, infinite compassion. "I do not know. I only know she is alive."

"How, dammit?"

"Sit down, please, Jim. Shouting will not change the facts." Spock righted the table and picked up a pawn, toying with it as Kirk sat.

"I'm sorry, Spock. It's just ... I don't know. Everything went straight to hell. Lara wouldn't stay on the *Enterprise* – because of me. She reactivated her commission, and wound up on that hospital base. I didn't hear about her until just a few minutes before the *Nyhie* attacked us. For six months, I thought both of you were dead. Now you're not, and the first thing you want to know is what happened to the life you entrusted to me. Then you tell me *she's* not dead, either. Deal it out in smaller doses, will you?"

"I shall try." He spoke slowly, the hands that worried the chess piece telling how difficult it was for him. "When a Vulcan man and woman bond ... in marriage ... a very deep link is formed. Its purpose is to ensure the wife's response when her mate ... enters *pon farr*. There are other ... uses." The pawn tumbled slowly between his hands, its jade hue nearly the color of his skin. "When the physical distance between the pair is close, they can feel each other's pain, or fright, or need."

Kirk nodded slowly. “The way you did on Banus, when Lara was looking for that baby. And later on Parsus II, when we were looking for you.”

“Yes. I should have known Lara was not with you, from before – when I intervened in that Romulan attack. She was already gone then, wasn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“I could not find her fear. I thought...” He trailed off. Some things could not be discussed. Not even with this man. “There must be a certain ... proximity, as I have said, for the emanations of fear, or of pain. But death ... no, Jim. When two Vulcans are bonded and one of them dies, the effect is shattering. There is no mistaking it.”

“Lara isn’t Vulcan,” Kirk said softly.

“And I, only half. This is true. But we bonded, just the same.” The pawn changed hands again, twisting in its fall. “We shared ... *I* shared ... I had access to her emotions almost constantly, whether I wanted it or not.”

Kirk squirmed slightly in the chair, feeling the color rise in his face. He’d assumed as much, long ago, but to have Spock admit it to him...

Spock went on quietly. “I have no doubt that we share a link nearly as deep as two true Vulcans. I would *know*, Jim; believe me.”

“But where *is* she?”

“If it *was* Romulans who attacked the base--”

“It was. We have some of the early-warning tapes, and there were some Romulan weapons recovered from the site.”

Spock met his friend’s eyes, and his fist closed slowly around the pawn as he spoke. “If Lara is alive – and I am convinced she is; and if Romulan forces attacked that base – and you are convinced they did; then she is somewhere within the Romulan Empire.”

## -----VIII-----

Lara was asleep when the sirens went off. The screaming incorporated itself into the fabric of her dream, and she could not understand why Jim hadn’t shut the alert klaxons off, because everyone was at the proper battle station. She told Spock to make Jim stop the noise, but he looked at her calmly and began pounding the desk-top with his fist.

Then, suddenly, she was awake with the sirens blaring painfully in her ears and a muffled voice coming through the door, which shook with someone’s frantic blows.

“Doctor Merritt! Wake up! We’ve got trouble! Doctor Merritt?”

“I’m coming.” She grabbed her robe and yanked the sash tight as she pulled open the door. Ketrting, the ward orderly, grabbed her arm and jerked her into the hallway. “What’s going on?” she demanded.

“Those are attack sirens. We’re supposed to evac everybody into the underground levels.”

She allowed him to pull her down the corridor as other night workers were roused and hustled away by day personnel. “This is a hospital base!” she insisted numbly.

“Yeah, well, somebody didn’t get the message. Come on! Christ, you sleep like the dead.”

*You sleep like the dead.*

It was a phrase she would remember.

She had been helping evacuate non-ambulatory cases when the building she was in was hit, plunging her into black unconsciousness. When she came to, she found herself under the body of the patient, with someone’s blood drying on the front of her robe and harsh voices in her ears. The weight of the dead man was suddenly gone, and she was yanked up by one arm, staring into the Vulcanoid face of a scowling, helmeted man.

She was pushed and pulled and shouted at in an unintelligible language that sounded remotely Vulcan, herded together with perhaps fifty people in a crazy mix of medical staff and support personnel and ambulatory patients, dematted in a poorly-balanced mass transport beam and rematerialized so abruptly that it was hours before she could do anything but sit very still and try not to vomit.

When she could move again, and think, she found that no

one knew any more than she did. There were about 200 of them, as nearly as she could estimate, in a large, bare room whose floor vibrated slightly. Not a warehouse, then, or any building on a planet. But whose ship, and why, and who the others were, she didn't know.

She found Kettring, unconscious in his own filth, and turned him so he wouldn't choke, and tried not to panic. There was a rumbling sound, and she turned to see wide doors opening. A line of helmeted, uniformed men stood across the doorway, and what she at first thought were weapons revealed themselves to be hoses. The icy water knocked her off her feet, but it carried away the filth left by those who hadn't had the sense – or the experience – to wait out a bad transporter ride quietly.

The water began to drain away through grilles in the deck, and she thought of Kettring as the doors closed again and warm air poured into the huge cell. The force of the hoses had carried him, along with three others who had been unconscious, to the far wall. All four were dead, drowned in the six inches of water that had flooded their prison. She collapsed against the bulkhead, pulled Kettring's still form across her lap, and waited for screaming hysteria that did not come.

She had no way of telling time, and she knew that large portions of it disappeared in sleep or delirium or hysterical catatonia. Either by design or because their captors breathed a different atmosphere than Humans, the oxygen content in the room was critically low. Movement brought

dizziness, logical thinking brought sleepiness. At one point, another three dozen prisoners were beamed aboard en masse, and they went through the transporter-sickness period and hosing-down process again. Two people drowned in that one.

There was food of a sort delivered to them, and she found toilet facilities in one corner of the vast room, though many of the prisoners were too ill or disoriented to use them. She helped drag the two bodies to the food-delivery door, where they were removed at the next mealtime. She wondered who had performed that service for Kettring, where his body was now.

From talking to some of the others, she began to see a pattern. Members of the last group beamed aboard had been on a hospital transport ship; the others had been on hospital bases. All told the same story of attack and abduction, and the former patients confirmed her suspicions that their captors were Romulan.

She was in the first group to be transported off the ship; disoriented as she was, she could not tell whether it had been a matter of days or of weeks. When she rematerialized, her body told her she'd been held in transit for too long. She tried to explain that to the soldier who pulled her off the pad, but he didn't understand or didn't care, and she had the small satisfaction of fouling his uniform as she gave way to nausea again.

He snarled at her and thrust her through a door, and for the

first time in uncounted days, there was some semblance of reality in her world again. It was a room scaled for people, not cargo, and it held an armed chair, a desk-console with a second chair behind it, and two Romulan men who were clean and well-fed and actually smiling kindly.

One of them – the younger – led her to the chair and gave her a clean, damp cloth. As she washed her face and hands and tried to clean the caked and smelly robe, he fastened webbing across her ankles, took the cloth away, and repeated the process with her arms.

“Don’t be alarmed,” he said softly. “I know you have not had a pleasant journey, but you have nothing to fear now.”

He crossed the room to sit behind the console, and the second man approached her. “We have only a few questions, so you may be processed here to everyone’s benefit. It is very important that you tell us the truth, and you will not be harmed. What is your skill, please.”

Lara looked at him in stupefied shock.

“Come now, my lady, you must have a skill.”

“I’m a ditch-digger,” she snapped, and something inside her head exploded, sending torrents of pain through her body. She realized she was screaming, and choked the sound off, humiliated, as the waves of pain receded.

“Please do not lie again. It is most unpleasant for all of us. What is your skill?”

“I’m a physician.” She tensed against expected pain, but it

did not come, and her questioner did not miss the reaction.

“You see? We do not harm you, or cause you needless discomfort.” He sat on the edge of the desk. “What is your name?”

She was tired, so tired. And dirty. She could smell her own rank odor. All they wanted was her name. If she told them what they wanted, perhaps there would be peace for her. She would tell them, yes. Her name. Her whole name, the one she used on legal documents and for solemnly formal occasions. Was this a solemnly formal occasion? She could not remember.

“Your name,” he repeated, and she took a deep breath so she could get it all out right, the way they wanted it.

“Larissa Federikovna--”

The door flew open and a squarish man burst in, jabbering excitedly in Romulan. The two men exchanged glances; her questioner gave a brief nod, and the younger man left with the intruder.

The older man, the one who had been questioning her, crossed the desk to sit behind the console. “I apologize for the interruption, Dr. Kovna. Things are a bit unsettled here,” he said, studying a screen hidden from her view.

She pushed back giddiness from a mind racing with sudden possibilities as the seconds ticked by and she was not assaulted by the excruciating pain. They were not infallible!

“What is your specialty, Doctor?”

She tried to will her reluctant brain to logical thought. What would be the least useful skill to these men?

“Obstetri—” She broke off as the pain struck her again, the convulsive arching of her body straining against the restraints. When it ended, she slumped against the webbing, breathing hoarsely.

“Dr. Kovna, you are doing this to yourself. As long as you are within the verifier’s field, any purposeful falsehood you voice will cause you pain. Tell me your specialty, please.”

“May I have some water?”

“Certainly.”

She wanted water less than she wanted a few seconds to nurture the rebirth of rationality in her thoughts. There would be no more lies – she did not think she could endure another punishment like the last. Yet partial truths did not seem to activate the verifier. Something told her any information she could withhold from these men might conceivably be of help to her.

He held the cup to her lips and smoothed the tangled hair off her brow, a touch that filled her with a revulsion she forced down. “Now,” he said, when he was again seated at the console, “your specialty.”

“At the hospital base, I worked in the burn ward.”

“And before that?”

“I originally specialized in viral mutations.”

His attention went from the screens to her face with a snap that disturbed her deeply. “I see,” he said. “And why did you change?”

“After ... hostilities broke out, there was a much greater need for clinical practitioners than for researchers.” The half-truth passed without punishment.

“Of course. I have just a few more questions, Doctor.”

The other things he asked her were routine and seemingly random queries about her general background. After a few minutes, a Romulan woman – the first she had seen here – entered, apparently in response to some hidden signal.

“Thiera will show you to your accommodations now, and issue you some clean clothing, Doctor Kovna.” As the woman knelt to release the restraints, Lara could not resist a question.

“What is my status here, please? Am I a prisoner of war?”

He looked at her with the kind of solemn regret she had sometimes seen in Spock, and the unbidden comparison chilled her. “My lady,” he said softly, “in times such as these, are we not all ... prisoners ... of war?”

His response, and her unwilling comparison of this stranger to her husband, disturbed her deeply. She was little comforted by the man who spoke to them after the evening meal. A group of fifty, some of whom she recognized as physicians from her own hospital, had been given a formal

dinner in a candlelit room, windowless, as were all the rooms she had thus far seen.

He introduced himself as Jernall, commander of the facility. "You are guests of the Romulan Empire," he said graciously, the candlelight making the lines on his face look like deep ravines in sere earth. "We regret the necessity which brought you here, and hope it will soon be possible to return you to your comrades and families. The speed with which that is accomplished depends, of course, entirely on your own Federation command. While you are with us, you will be accorded all courtesies due your status.

"Tomorrow, you will be shown which areas of this facility are open to your use. Please do not attempt to leave them. It is necessary that much of this facility be off limits to you, and I am sure you understand that.

"It has been our experience that many of you will have received training in escape procedures. Please do not attempt to put that training into use. This is an underground facility on a planet whose atmosphere is deadly to you. Should you manage to leave the protected area, the result would be fatal. The only transportation to and from this facility is accomplished through dematting, which works much like your Federation transporters. And the only demat receivers in the area are on board Romulan vessels. Your welcome there, should you somehow achieve dematting, would be less than friendly.

"Now, I am sure you are all weary after your long trip.

Your rooms await you. For your own safety, do not leave them after you have been escorted there. Good night.”

As the group left the room with half a dozen Romulan escorts, one of the doctors Lara had known on Starbase 16 fell into step beside her. “Somehow, I don’t feel very reassured,” Kurt Petersen muttered.

“Me, either. Listen,” she said, keeping her voice low, “do me a favor. As far as our hosts know, my name is Dr. Kovna, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

He gave her such a sharp look that one of the Romulans stepped in front of them, scowling. “How--?” Petersen began.

“Later,” she said, forcing a disarming smile at the guard. He gave both prisoners a sharp look but took no further action and Lara wondered whether he was there to monitor their conversations, or merely to break them up.

She did not for a moment believe Jernall’s insinuation that their presence here was merely one of the unfortunate vicissitudes of war, or that Federation cooperation had anything to do with how long they would be detained. Jernall, or someone up the chain of command, had a very specific use in mind for them, she was sure; and whatever it was would surely benefit the Romulan Empire far more than anything or anyone else.



For three weeks, nothing happened. Nothing. She slept, ate,

exercised rather desultorily in the facility provided for them, traded speculation and medical trivia with the others – who all seemed to be doctors, from one facility or another – and tried to pull her mind and body together after the nightmare flight that had ended here.

It was late one evening – or what passed for evening in the artificial rhythm of her prison – that she had a caller. It was Damann, the Romulan who had first questioned her, and who had frequently checked on the prisoners' needs in the weeks since. He spread his hands in a gesture of harmlessness when she opened the door.

“Dr. Kovna, I am sorry to disturb you, but we have a problem.” When she didn't answer, he went on, not making any attempt to enter her room. “Some of the Humans who came here with you have fallen ill. We have no one on our staff qualified to treat them. Would you--”

“I can try,” she said, anticipating his request. It was not as if they were Romulan patients, after all. And it would break the monotony. “Although I don't know how much I can do without proper equipment.”

He looked a bit chagrined. “My lady, I have to confess – and I hope you will hold this in confidence ... your Federation is far advanced in terms of medical expertise. Most of our equipment is patterned after your own.”

*Patterned after?* she thought, when she saw the lab he led her to. *It was lifted right off that hospital transport they attacked, or I'll eat that anabolic protoplaser!* Even the

pharmaceuticals and the synthesizer were Federation issue, right down to the labels. She did not point it out to Damann. Doubtless he knew precisely where the equipment had come from, but if he wanted to think she was deceived, she would allow it.

The four patients in the ward he showed her were not just ill – they were deathly ill, and she was furious at their condition. “Damann, this is disgraceful! Why was someone not summoned earlier?”

Again, that apologetic look. “My lady, we are a proud people. It is most ... difficult for us to admit there are skills we do not possess. I will tell you another confidence. Commander Jernall will be most upset when he finds we have requested your assistance. If I should appear in the dining hall tomorrow in a green tunic--” He gestured at her own prison uniform. “--you will know he has discovered my actions. Do you Human physicians not swear an oath--”

“Forget about my oath, and get out of my way, Damann. I have work to do.”

Lara did not realize how much she had missed clinical practice until she began treating the three men and one woman given to her care. She settled in without a second thought, setting up coolant pads to reduce fevers, taking blood and tissue samples and vital signs, trying to determine what was wrong.

Where the infection source had come from or whether it

was contagious, she couldn't yet determine. To be on the safe side, she made a quarantine sign and hung it on the door, and chased away a curious guard a few hours later with such force that Damann appeared minutes later, obviously roused out of bed.

She refused to let him in, gesturing through the door glass to the comm unit on the wall. "I don't know what they have," she told him through the intercom, "but it may be airborne – contagious. Contact your own medical staff and have them set up whatever decontamination procedure they normally use – they'll have something established. Meanwhile, nobody comes in here and nobody goes out."

"But, Dr. Kovna, you must eat, and sleep--"

"When I'm tired, I'll sleep. When I'm hungry, I'll let you know. Meantime, I'm busy. And nobody comes in here. *Nobody!*" She was surprised at the wave of satisfaction that swept over her as she shut the comm on his protests. Even in bondage, private rebellion was possible, she decided, and returned to work.

Much of it was waiting. Tests took time, standard treatments had to be begun and watched for effect, and changed if no improvement was forthcoming. None was.

It was like trying to put a jigsaw puzzle together while wearing a blindfold. She had no idea of their medical histories, no inoculation records, and for the moment all she could treat were the symptoms. Even those, with the patients comatose, were general and vague. High fevers,

occasional spasming of the muscles in the back and thighs, and enough evidence of past vomiting that she set up intravenous saline drips for each of them, to ward off dehydration and to try to keep some semblance of electrolyte balance. Then there was nothing to do but wait for something to show up in the tissue cultures.

The woman died early in the morning, as sounds in the hallway told her the base's personnel were beginning another day's duty. The answer – or at least part of it – showed up in the post-mortem. Brain and spinal cord tissue showed severe inflammation of both external and internal membranes, hallmark of any one of several varieties of meningitis.

She was looking at the slides and trying to remember long-ago lectures on the subject when she heard the door of the ward open. Angry that the quarantine had been violated, she stalked into the ward. Damann and a guard, both wearing isolation suits, were carrying a stretcher.

Damann didn't wait for her to start. He just explained there were two more cases of illness and handed her an isolation suit.

"I've already been exposed, Damann. And they're hot to work in."

"I am not a physician, Dr. Kovna, but I believe some diseases are more communicable in the early stages. And these two are not yet so sick as the others." He stepped away from his companion and touched the security channel

control on his suit microphone. “I regret having possibly endangered you this much, my lady. If you should fall ill, I should be desolate.” He gave her a slightly sheepish grin. “I should also find myself reassigned to the sanitation crew on a battlefront cruiser, according to Commander Jernall.”

She tried to remind herself that this man was an enemy, and could not. In truth, she was beginning to regret having volunteered so incautiously; the idea of becoming a patient herself held very little appeal. “Tell you what,” she said. “You get me a computer tie-in to whatever Human medical data you have, and I’ll wear the suit.”

He gave a half-bow, and something inside her churned at the familiarity of the gesture. “You drive a hard bargain, Dr. Kovna. But I shall see what I can do.”

Apparently, the medical data bank from the starship had been lifted right along with the terminal, for she found a relatively full response to the questions she asked it later. The inflammation of both the dura and pia mater had given her the first clue, and the computer’s data backed up her guess. Vegan choriomeningitis – or something very similar – was the prime suspect.

For her three original patients, there was very little she could do. Prompt treatment – within 24 hours of appearance of the first symptoms – was critical. But for the two new arrivals, there was hope. She programmed the synthesizer for the antibiotics she wanted, and injected the two newcomers. Then she called Damann.

“I need some nursing help.”

“Dr. Kovna, it is not possible.”

“Don’t tell me that! There were over 200 prisoners on the ship that brought me here, and I know for a fact that some of them were nurses. I want at least two – four would be better.”

The comm unit she was using had no screen, but she could hear his hesitation. Finally, he said, “Only the physicians were given separate quarters. There is a high probability that all the nurses have been exposed to the ailment.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about. Look, I know what this thing is, and if it gets loose on this base, you’ll have more trouble than you’ve ever thought possible. Everyone here needs to be inoculated, and I can’t do it alone. Have your own people do it if you don’t trust me. They can tap into my medicomp for the information.”

“I will pass your recommendation to my superior,” he said coldly.

“I still need nurses here. The patients I have need constant monitoring, or I’ll lose every one of them. The original ones are beyond my help already, I’m afraid.”

The hesitation was longer this time. “You may have to consider anyone already infected as expendable,” he said at last, “and concentrate on the preventative inoculations you mentioned.”

“That’s inhuman!” she said, unthinking. When he did not

respond, she realized what she had said. “I’m sorry, Damann. But if you have your own people handle the inoculations and provide me with some nurses--”

“I said I would relay your recommendations, Dr. Kovna. But some things are beyond my power. If you would like to be relieved of your task, I would understand.”

She felt sick. Not in the way her patients were sick, but in the way she had felt when the concept of triage had first been explained to her – in some situations, one simply had to eliminate treatment of patients whose recovery was unlikely, and spend one’s energies on those who had a chance for survival. The idea had been abhorrent to her then, and it still was. But to just quit... There were still other lives to be considered.

“Dr. Kovna?”

“I’ll stay, Damann. But, please, try to find me some nurses.”

He broke the connection without answering. And there was no recovery for any of her patients. When the two for whom she had the most hope died, post-mortems showed an inexplicable difference in the infecting bacteria. By that time, five new patients had been delivered, and this time she started with spinal taps, wanting a look at the bacilli before she started shotgun treatment.

She tried five different compounds in the end. Four of them failed. Heartened by the success of even one, she used the

treatment on the next group of patients carried into her ward, only to lose each one of them. It was maddening. Each time she thought she had a handle on the problem, the bacillus appeared in a slightly altered form. Caught up in the research that kept hitting brick walls, working alone with inadequate sleep and hasty meals that were inevitably cold when she got to them, she found herself functioning in a remote, uncaring daze. The men and women who kept appearing in the ward ceased being sick people in need of treatment; they were only sources for tissue samples so she could begin trying to catch and identify the elusive, mutating bacilli.

The days blurred; she lost track of them. She might have been an automaton on some assembly line, or a besotted fortune-hunter chasing some malignant rainbow whose pot of death kept dancing just beyond her reach. It might have gone on forever, had she not caught her isolation suit on the corner of her desk and ripped a 10-centimeter hole in the fabric.

She shut herself in the lab and called for help. Damann's voice was calm and rational in response, and she remembered suddenly that there was a world outside the lab, outside the ward; someplace where people did not sicken and convulse and die. Someplace where she could nurse her own beaten soul before it, too, died.

"I want out," she told him flatly when he brought her a replacement suit.

He studied her carefully through his own mask. “Yes,” he said. “You’ve done enough, my lady.”

She was too numbed by fatigue to be surprised at the decontamination booth he led her to. She simply submitted to the procedure, put on clean clothes for the first time in memory, and allowed herself to be led back to the room she’d left so long ago. She was too tired even to consider the tray of food waiting there; all she wanted to do was sleep forever.

She couldn’t, of course. Eventually – how much later, she was unsure – she did wake up, stomach growling, sleep center sated. She had slept long enough for the food on the tray to solidify into an inedible mass.

She went prowling for something to eat, and was two full steps into the dining hall before she realized it was full of Romulan soldiers. She plunged out, some level of her mind mildly amused that she could still be panicked by a gathering of uniforms, and collided solidly with another figure in the hallway.

“Lara?” Without the voice, she would never have been able to identify Kurt Petersen. The robust dandy was gone, replaced by an unkempt and bearded scarecrow.

“My God, Kurt, what’s happened to you?”

He managed a weak grin. “Damn near everything.”

She realized, suddenly, how long she must have been isolated, and now it seemed vital to learn what had

happened to the others. She glanced quickly up and down the temporarily empty corridors and grabbed his hand. “Come into my room, Kurt. I need to talk to you.”

Once there, he sat on her rumpled bed and looked hopefully at the tray, scowling when he realized the state of its contents. “Damn,” he said. “Can’t this little conference wait? It’s been so long since I’ve had a real meal that my stomach thinks my throat’s been cut.”

“Believe me, you don’t want to go into that dining room. Half the fleet’s in there.” She sat across from him in the room’s single chair. “Kurt ... what’s going on? You look so ... have they been mistreating you?”

He managed a dry laugh. “Nothing so dramatic, I’m afraid. No, I did this all to myself – The Doctor Galahad Syndrome. You know – the dedicated, self-sacrificing young physician, locked in mortal combat with the forces of death and disease.” He made a face at his own facetiousness, then sobered. “After we’d been here two or three weeks, Damann came and asked me if I’d treat some of our people who’d come down with something particularly nasty. Y’know – he’s really not a half-bad fellow – for a Romulan. Anyway, I got caught up in this thing. You know how it is. There’s never a convenient time to stop and eat, and it’s such a hassle to decontaminate and go back to quarters that you end up sleeping in the wards...” He trailed off.

Lara felt a cold chill, and then anger. If the two of them had

been permitted to work together, relieve each other, pool their findings... She passed her tongue over suddenly dry lips. "Meningitis?" she asked.

Petersen had been idly scratching at his beard. "What?"

"Was it meningitis?"

"No. Wish it had been – *that*, I can treat. No; it was some kind of anthrax." He rubbed at his beard again, and she saw memories of rage and frustration flicker over his face. "Lara, it was the damndest thing I ever ran into. Every time I thought I had it nailed down, it changed on me. I've never seen so many spontaneous mutations. And they wouldn't give me any nursing help ... they just kept bringing in cases ... it was hell."

She sat frozen in the chair, her mind racing, searching for some reason behind this madness. One outbreak of deadly disease, she could accept. But two? Or more? She thought of all the doctors who'd been in her elite little group of prisoners, and how she hadn't seen any of the patients or nursing staff that had accompanied her on the ship ... or had she? Hadn't there been a patient here who looked familiar? A wasted, pale face that might have been identifiable, if she'd only taken the time to look... And Damann ... so kind, so thoughtful. And everything he'd done had backed her into a tighter and tighter corner.

Petersen was speaking to her, reaching out from some vast distance to touch her arm. "Lara? Are you all right?"

She drew a deep breath. “Kurt,” she said slowly, “I think we’ve been had.”



Damann brought her food tray in the morning. She was glad; it saved her the trouble of trying to track him down. She glared at him from across the room, furious.

“What kind of hell-hole are you people running here, Damann?”

“What are you talking about, Dr. Kovna?”

“I’m talking about human guinea pigs. I’m talking about spontaneous mutations that aren’t spontaneous at all. I’m talking about the bill of goods you sold me to get me to play along with the plan! Is this why you people raided hospital bases to begin with? To get experimental animals for your little games?”

He set the tray down carefully and moved to stand between her and the door. “You are overwrought, my lady. I should not have permitted you to spend so much time treating those poor individuals--”

“--that your people purposely infected,” she finished. “How many nasty little germs are you playing with here on the Experimental Farm?”

Damann’s solicitous manner fell away; she wondered how she could ever have seen anything of Spock in him. “You are very clever, Dr. Kovna. Now I suppose you will make some dramatic statement about how you will no longer be

a party to preparations for germ warfare. Spare me, please. Dr. Petersen has already played that scene this morning.” He removed a communications device from a pouch on his belt and opened a channel. “Send a guard to transfer Dr. Kovna to the subject barracks,” he said. He put the device away and picked the tray up.

“I am grieved by your cleverness, my lady. You were one of our most promising researchers, and I quite looked forward to reading your reports as you logged them in your computer. We were confident that when we created a mutation even you could not treat, we would have a supreme weapon to turn loose on Federation home planets. Now, I fear, you will simply become ... what did you call it? A ... guinea pig ... I believe.”

He stood aside to permit the guards to enter. “Goodbye, Dr. Kovna,” he said as they took her away.

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She looked around the drab dormitory and cursed her own stupidity for the thousandth time. What had she thought to gain by her attack on Damann? That he would give her a medal and free passage home?

She'd had free passage, all right – a one-way trip to a grey-walled holding pen, where she would wait with forty other women until someone chose her body to play hostess to death. She wondered what had happened to Kurt; what would happen to her. How long would they let her wait, thinking each time the door opened that someone would

point at her and motion her to follow?

It happened late on the second day. The square, swarthy guard who made the seemingly random choices picked her out of the dinner line and prodded her down a hallway. In spite of her resolution to be calm when it happened, she felt the cold sweat gathering on her skin and the pressure fluttering like a netted bird in her chest.

The guard stopped at a bright blue door, opened it, and pushed her inside. A man stood with his back to her, and she had a moment's mad image of herself leaping at him, striking out, doing anything but going quietly to slaughter, and then he turned.

It was Selek.

She felt as though she had been hit in the chest, and she grabbed the back of a chair for support, her vision blurring. Spock's son, here...

"It *is* you," he said. "I thought so, when I saw you in the dining hall, but they told me your name was Kovna."

She fought down panic. "A slight misunderstanding," she said, surprised that she could talk at all.

"And a most fortunate one. It would have been most embarrassing to your husband to find you a prisoner of his allies. It might even have been fatal for him."

"What are you doing here, Selek?"

"My duty, as a member of the Republic-Empire alliance.

Things became boring on Vulcan after you left, and there seemed to be many more opportunities in the service of the Empire.”

“You’ve never served anyone but yourself.”

He smiled, and the coldness of it frightened her more than anger would have. “You are very perceptive, Aunt. Or should I say Stepmother? It becomes rather confused.” He crossed to where she stood and kicked the chair out from between them. “I think we need not bother clarifying that relationship, since we have a new one now – owner and property.”

She backed away, but he lunged after her, and she fell, twisting out of his grasp. She fought him grimly, silently, remembering the last time, in the cellars of B’al Graai. But here, there was no weapon with which to strike out, no Spock to respond to cry or thought. There was only one hundred pounds of Earthwoman pitted against a battle-trained Vulcan male. The outcome was never in doubt.

He did not take her then; he only proved, graphically and painfully, that he had the power to do so any time he liked. When he let her up, they were both scratched and bleeding. He tossed her the ragged remnants of her prisoner’s tunic.

“Cover yourself, woman. We go to my ship now.” He pulled his communicator from a sealed pocket and ordered dematting for both of them, without bothering to see if she had complied.



The journey was something she was never able to remember clearly, and she accepted that blurring as merciful. There was a tiny cabin – apparently Selekt's rank was not so high as his reference to "my ship" might have led her to believe, but he did rate private quarters.

When it was obvious that the door was going to remain firmly locked, and that everything in the room was either securely bolted down or made of plastiform, she spent most of her time asleep, safe from herself in unconsciousness. Selekt returned only to demonstrate her subjugation in an unending series of sexual assaults that ranged from sheer brutality to carefully planned and exquisitely cruel cat-and-mouse games. Then he would sleep heavily, arise, prepare himself for another day, and leave again.

One day he brought her a dark, shapeless garment that reached to mid-thigh and brusquely ordered her to dress. "We are leaving," he said.

She remembered the Romulan eyes that watched her from the corridors of the ship as they walked to the dematt booth, and how they were replaced by new eyes, equally dark, equally curious, as they rematted.

She had seen enough military bases to know when she was on one; had seen enough of military life to know from the degree of deference offered Selekt that he was a middle-ranking officer – a Lieutenant-Commander, perhaps, or

whatever the Romulan equivalent was. And she had seen enough military housing to recognize the dark and poorly-built quarters to which he unceremoniously hauled her as housing befitting his rank.

The first night, she ran.

She wriggled out from under the arm that pinned her between Selek's bulk and the peeling wall, put on the dark dress, tried unsuccessfully to pry open the storage locker where he kept his weapons, and ran barefoot into the darkness.

The base was quiet, locked down for the night. There was activity only near the airstrip, far across the compound; in the rumble of a garbage crawler as it scavenged the bins; and at the main gate. She hugged the pools of darkness, slipping from one to the next with an animal stealth she did not know she had. She knew better than to simply try to walk through the perimeter. There were no walls, only four-meter tall towers spaced at ten-meter intervals. But the scorched grass and the drying bodies of small rodents told her the towers' force field was deadly.

She crawled into the spiny shrubbery just out of the circle of light at the gate, and waited. The sounds of the crawler were the only noises in the night, drawing slowly toward her and then fading away. Finally it approached the main gate, the stench of old refuse hanging about it like a fog.

It stopped in the circle of light, and the driver got out to walk into the guardhouse. She sprinted for the covered bed,

hauling herself up over the tailboard by fingernails and scraped toes and raw determination, slipping into the bed as the crawler began to move. She refused to consider what she might be standing in. She only knew it stank and felt slippery under her feet.

The crawler rounded a curve, slowing as if for a climb, and the guardhouse disappeared behind the shoulder of a hill. She vaulted over the tailgate and dived into another patch of the spiny shrubs. When the vehicle's rumble had faded, she took a moment to orient herself, and then she began to run.

It took Selek four days to find her. In that time, she learned that the base stood in an uninhabited desert, marked by gullies and clumps of thornbush and an occasional pool of stagnant, bitter water. She learned that the leaves and smallest stems of the thornbushes were edible ... almost; and on the fourth day, she learned she could catch a lizard with her bare hands and eat it raw.

She learned one other thing. She learned not to run.

Selek did not come alone. The punishment he had designed for her began as soon as they had run her to ground, and it lasted throughout the rest of that day and far into the night. There was cessation only when her new captors found themselves temporarily out of virility or imagination. They had a great deal of both.

When they returned to the base, Selek beat her into semi-consciousness and locked her in a closet. When he finally

let her out two days later, she knew she would not run again. Ever.

## -----IX-----

Kirk stood alone on the observation deck, looking out at the stars. He knew he shouldn't be there – looking out across the vast distances made him realize just how futile their search was – but the place held a fascination for him that he could not shake.

He passed a weary hand across his face and sat down in one of the chairs. *If you had any sense, you'd go to bed*, he told himself.

*Actually*, he corrected, *if you had any sense, you'd take that admiral's star and Earthside post Nogura's been dangling in front of you for six months, and leave the mopping up to someone else.*

But he'd seen this war start, and he would see it end, all from the bridge of the *Enterprise*. Whether they ever found Lara or not, he could not walk away from this particular unfinished task.

He really should go to bed, he knew. They'd jumped a Romulan light cruiser late that day, and he was feeling the bone-deep, battle-bred exhaustion that always came from making too many crucial decisions too fast; from buying his life and his crew's lives with the blood of other beings who were momentarily designated "the enemy".

Maybe it *was* time to hang it up. A man could be on line only so long, and then he burned out. Sometimes he took a lot of other people with him when that happened.

He heard a politely-cleared throat and turned to see Spock standing behind the row of chairs. It still gave him a jolt to see the Vulcan here, but out of uniform. He remembered the strings he'd pulled to get Spock observer status to begin with, and wondered if he'd ever be able to pay back all the favors he'd called in for that caper.

“Sit down, Spock. How'd you know I was here?”

Spock settled in beside him, watching the slow dance of the starfield through the plasteel port. “I believe some of the crew have begun referring to me as ‘The Bloodhound’. Is it not that creature’s function to find things?”

Kirk felt a twinge of anger, mixed with guilt. It was he who had first used the term, in trying to explain why he wanted Spock on board. The official title settled on was “Locator”, since part of their mission was to try to find the Starfleet personnel who continued to vanish from attacked hospital ships and bases. He wished he'd never drawn that particular canine analogy, though; he should have known someone would pick up on it.

“I’m sorry, Spock. I’ll let it be known that I don’t approve--”

“It is of no importance. I thought it might amuse you, or I would not have mentioned it.”

“Nice try, Spock. But I’m afraid not much amuses me any more.” He opaqued the viewport. “What’s on your mind?”

“Lieutenant Uhura has been able to obtain a directional fix from the record beacon ejected by the Romulan ship. The transmission is directed at a star system within our patrol sector.”

He nodded and pushed up from the chair. “Okay. I’ll authorize the course change. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

Spock considered pointing out the fallaciousness of that statement, and decided against it. The two men still trod very carefully around one another, and neither was fully comfortable with the gentle teasing that had marked their former relationship.

He sat quietly after Kirk left, staring at the opaqued viewport. He did not need to clear it; did not need to see the starfield to know the immensity of his task ... their task.

That was one thing they still shared.



For three days, they followed the path pointed out by the brief burst of signal from the Romulan’s record beacon. The star system resolved itself into a white dwarf with six planets, two of them habitable. On the fourth day, as they began to sort data on which of the two M-type planets would be the more likely choice, the matter was resolved for them.

Seemingly from out of nowhere, a squadron of tiny intrasystem fighting ships appeared, peppering the *Enterprise's* shields with blasts from every direction. Surprise was their biggest weapon; that and sublight maneuverability. *Enterprise* took out three of them before her shielding began to overload and Kirk ordered them to warp out of the system. The fighters, lacking warp capacity, could not follow.

The maneuver did not particularly please Mr. Scott. He was torn between the desire to “go back an’ teach those insolent puppies a lesson” and his realization that the defense systems of his beloved ship had been strained to the danger point by the attack.

“It’s all right, Scotty. We’ve got what we need, anyway. There’s something the Romulans feel is very important on that third planet.”

Uhura, also in on the briefing, frowned. “Captain, what communications I could monitor appeared to be directed at the *fifth* planet.”

He couldn’t keep the grin off his face. “That’s right.”

“Then why--” Sulu asked.

“Sulu, did you ever do any grouse hunting?”

“Sir?”

“Grouse-hunting. In the nesting season, or before the young can fly. You can always tell where the nest is, because it’s in the opposite direction from where the hen

flies. I don't know if the Romulans have grouse... but I know if I had a base and nothing but those little fighters to protect it, I wouldn't jump up and yell 'Here it is!' the first time an enemy ship stumbled into the system. I'd faint, and call for help. Which is why we're going to take a little closer look at the third planet."

He felt even more sure of it after the fighters jumped them again on the next try. When they warped out again, Kirk had his plan ready.

"I don't think we can risk a beamdown, even if we had a scan of the layout – which we don't – because we also don't know what kind of intruder alert system they have. But the transporter would be the fastest way to get us – and any prisoners – out. Scotty, can you convert the cargo transporter to take large numbers of people safely? And did you get the bugs worked out of that shuttle-adapted cloaking device?"

Though the Romulan-designed cloaking device had largely been abandoned on ships of the line because of the power drain at warp speeds, Scott had insisted it was still a useful tool on shuttles where invisibility to sensors might be needed. And to that end, he had been working for months on an adaptation to do just that, and was delighted with an opportunity to field-test it.

"Aye on both counts, sir."

"Rig it for the *Columbus* then, and we'll go down that way. Mr. Spock, Mr. Chekov, Mr. Sulu, and whatever security

team is on top of the roster will be assigned. Oh – make one of those security men O’Bannion. Isn’t he the one that transferred over from covert ops?”

“That’s the one, Captain.”

“Good. If there are no prisoners there, maybe we can still pick up some information on Romulan movements and tactics in this sector. Whatever’s down there that they’re so anxious to keep us out of should prove to be interesting.”



It didn’t look particularly interesting, at first. *Columbus* was making tedious scansweeps of the surface from an 80-kilometer orbit, and had found only a great deal of desert, a few landlocked seas, and three apparently active volcanoes. Other than that, nothing.

Kirk was beginning to get a little nervous. What if he had outsmarted himself? He looked back at Spock, sitting directly behind Sulu’s pilot position, with a questioning expression on his face. Spock caught the look and shook his head slightly.

Nothing. Kirk wished he had more confidence in Spock’s insistence that Lara was alive somewhere; that they could use the link to track down the missing personnel, now numbering over five hundred. Spock wouldn’t lie ... not about this. Not to him... But suppose he was wrong? Suppose he was Human enough to delude himself into believing something he wanted very much to believe?

“Captain, I’m getting a power reading.” Sulu’s voice yanked him back to reality, and he looked at the screens. “There – on that high plateau on the sub-continent. See it?”

It was gone almost before it registered, but a second sweep confirmed it.

“Doesn’t look worry big,” Chekov said from the seat behind Kirk.

“Wouldn’t have to be, for a P.O.W. camp, or maybe a supply base. They’re pretty far off the beaten track, and not very well defended, so it’s probably not a major staging area.” Kirk turned back to Sulu. “Where’s the terminator?”

“Less than an hour away from this longitude, Captain.”

“Okay. We’ll wait it out. You can use the time to pick us a landing site within hiking distance. After it gets dark, we’ll set her down.”

The long twilight of the desert had deepened to black, and the first moon was just rising when they made planetfall. The security team drew straws to see who would ferry the shuttle back to the *Enterprise* as the other six crept into the darkness.

Kirk had never particularly enjoyed commando raids, but this was one exploratory trip he wasn’t going to miss out on. Before they left the landing site, Spock had pulled him aside. In the moonlight, the Vulcan’s face had an ashen pallor, the skin drawn taut over the bones of his face, his eyes unreadable pits of blackness.

“Lara is here.” He nodded in the direction of the base, a blue-white glow over the rim of a hill.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

Spock hesitated, and Kirk had to resist an urge to shake the answer out of him. “The link ... is very weak. Altered.” He touched Kirk’s shoulder in a rare gesture. “Jim,” he said softly, “you may not be pleased with what we find. But you must accept it.”

Kirk tried without much success to shake off the foreboding Spock’s words had caused, as they crept to the darkest part of the base’s perimeter. Things were not yet settled for the night, and they sought shelter in a gully while waiting. Sulu and Spock came back from an exploration of the perimeter with the news that a force field with an apparently deadly charge surrounded the base.

“Can we divert it long enough to get through?”

“Not in the time we have available with the equipment at hand, Captain,” Spock said. “We have three options – to take out one of the towers, which would surely result in a general alarm; to locate and disable the base’s primary power source, which would give us the advantage of darkness; or to enter through the gate, which would mean a direct confrontation with the guard.”

Kirk didn’t like any of the options; somebody was liable to get hurt any way they played it.

“I’d like to get in as quietly as possible. That means the

gate. Blowing that power source could be a good cover for getting out if we need a distraction. We've got some time to work with; let's spend it on those two options, and on picking our targets."

He had estimated two hours; it was closer to three before they were ready. A central, windowless building looked to be the most likely spot for handling large numbers of prisoners. They would concentrate their efforts there, with Chekov and one of the security men detailed to stand by at the power plant. He made a last-minute check with Scotty to see that the transporter was ready and waiting. It was.

"Phasers on maximum stun," he ordered, and they moved.

The first moon was near setting; they would have slightly less than twenty minutes before the second one rose. They went over the crest of the hill cautiously and slithered down, six creatures of darkness.

Two sentries stood at the gatehouse, talking in low tones. Kirk could feel the sweat of tension pasting his shirt to his ribs and back. The sentries parted, one of them walking back toward the compound with his weapon slung carelessly across his back. The second stood for a moment in the gatehouse, speaking into a comm unit on the wall, and then settled down with his feet on the desk, munching on a large brownish-green fruit.

Kirk gave an almost imperceptible nod, and then inched closer. A rock tossed into the shrubbery at the base of the guardhouse pulled the sentry's attention away from his

snack; as he stepped into the night to investigate, the beam from Kirk's phaser knocked him down on the spot.

A quick tricorder check confirmed the gateway was free of the deadly force field, and they moved forward swiftly, hauling the guard's unconscious body into the chair and propping him upright. They filtered through the darkness, aiming for the main building, when Spock stopped suddenly, his face a mask of strained concentration.

"No," he said softly.

"Spock?"

"She is not there – not in that building."

"Where, then?"

He nodded toward a row of raw, angular buildings, none of them much larger than an officer's cabin on board the *Enterprise*. From one of them, light filtered through the window coverings.

Kirk halted the group, "Change of plans," he announced softly. "Spock and I will check out that place with the lights; Sulu and O'Bannion, you take the big one. If you find any prisoners, signal me and beam everybody up after you've taken out any guards. If there's no one in there – O'Bannion, that's your department. You know what we're looking for and where to find it. Chekov and Walz, go on to the power plant. If we need it blown, somebody will signal you. If the power goes, everybody get out fast. Otherwise, wait for my signal." He checked out the faces,

an almost talismanic ritual of his. So far, everything had gone well. But they were still a long way from home. “All right, move out And good luck.”



“K’nand-ti,” Pragnyn said, playing his last tile. The other men at the table voiced varying degrees of disgust as Pragnyn raked in the pile of credit chips.

Selek was not happy with the turn of the tiles, but he was not happy with much these days. He called for another round of drinks, and watched as the Earthwoman brought the tray out carefully. That much was good, at least. He’d made it very clear to her, before the k’mand-ti players arrived, what would happen to her if she misbehaved in front of his friends.

He didn’t really expect any problem, though. The woman had been very quiet lately; too quiet, in fact. She no longer fought him with the white-hot hatred she’d once possessed, and that diminished his pleasure considerably. Most of the time lately, it was like bedding a corpse. When the game ended – if it ever did – he would try the technique Klavat had told him about this afternoon. Klavat got the idea from a procurer in Trankket, who claimed it would put the spirit back into the most jaded goods. Once was all it took, he claimed; most of his girls were so petrified by the thought of a repeat performance that they became extremely amendable to any suggestion made to them thereafter.

Yes, he would definitely try that. He grinned and felt a

pleasant anticipatory twitching in his groin at the thought.

“Selek, are you in this round or not?” Pragnyn asked.

“In.”

“Then pledge.”

“I pledge.” He took a five-credit chip from the basket near his hand and tossed it into the pledge pile as Pragnyn pushed the ten tiles to him. The basket was nearly empty; his luck tonight had been terrible. It was probably the Earthwoman’s fault. He had been ill-at-ease for days at the thought of having the knives his guests always carried brought into the same house with her. Selek was extremely cautious with his weapons, keeping them all under lock, even his boot-knife. Except tonight, of course. He’d sooner be publicly flogged than to have his companions know he normally went bladeless at home because he couldn’t trust his woman.

“Selek, are you playing or not?” Klavat snapped.

He stood the game tiles on edge, one at a time, then turned them face down again, suppressing a smile. Good. Four power tiles, two voids, and a sweeper. With a selection like that to play, and three miscellaneous losers to lead, he should take the round easily. He checked the board, played a loser, and began to concentrate on the round.

One by one, the play moved around the table. After the first circle, Klavat dropped out, and each of the remaining players pledged again. By the end of the third round, Selek

had played all his worthless tiles, and his chip basket was empty. Pragnyn led a power tile, as did Chandra, and Selekt touched the first void, which would give him the advantage.

“Pledge,” Pragnyn snapped as Selekt picked up the tile.

“Carry me.”

“No.”

“Pragnyn, you know I’m short. Carry me; if you win this round, I’ll work your training drill tomorrow.”

“No.”

“I’ll carry you,” Klavat offered, reaching for his chip basket.

“We agreed before – no carrying.” Pragnyn was adamant. “Pledge or yield.”

Selekt fumed. He had drawn the best hand of the evening, and all he needed was 35 credits to stay in to the end. “Be reasonable,” he cajoled.

“I am always reasonable, Selekt, We did, however, settle the rules before we began.” The old warrior coughed delicately and drained his glass. “Tell your woman I am out of skarn.”

She came into the room at his summons, and Selekt was struck by an idea. “Pragnyn,” he said carefully, “I have a pledge, if you will accept it for all the rest of this round.”

“Let me see it.”

“It just filled your glass.”

Pragnyn watched as the woman moved away and Selek grabbed her by the wrist. He considered the foam on his skarn. “And if you lose the round?”

“Then I forfeit my pledge, and you have a new bed-warmer.”

The older man snorted. “That one? She’s so skinny I’d cut myself to ribbons the first night!”

Klavat grinned. “There’s more there than you think, grey-beard. I was with Selek when we brought her back from the desert, and I know.”

“I want no runner.”

“She won’t run,” Selek said firmly.

Pragnyn wavered. “I like to see what I’m getting,” he said.

Selek turned to Lara. “Disrobe,” he said in Vulcan. Her chin came up at that; it was the first word she’d understood in the whole conversation.

“Disrobe,” he said again, nodding to the grizzled elder across the table from him. “Pragnyn wants to see what he thinks he will win.”

She pulled back, cheeks blazing, understanding now what their conversation must have been about. Selek came out of his chair and slapped her. His powerful hands caught at the

neckline of the dress and ripped it away in one quick motion. She gasped and tried to turn away; he grabbed her by the hair, and suddenly the room became chaos.

The lights went out as the front door crashed in; she heard the sound of breaking windowplast and the crash of a table being overturned. There were shouts, punctuated by the bright stab of a phaser bolt, then another. Selek let go of her, and she spun crazily across the room, tripping over Klavat's unconscious form. She struck her cheekbone on the sole of his boot, and felt the skin split open. As she reached up to brush the blood away, her fingers stumbled onto something hard ... the hilt of his boot-knife.

She focused for a moment on the gleam of the hilt in the darkness, her concentration an island of calm in the melee around her. Then suddenly, all the rage and humiliation of the past six months boiled up inside her. She drew the weapon from its sheath, and its weight in her palm filled her with a growing sense of power.

Klavat was first – he of the thornbush switches and the tweaking fingers. She slit his throat as he lay there, feeling the warm blood cascade over her hands, and began to laugh softly at the simplicity of the act.

She came to her feet, exultant, slashing out at anything that moved. Her knife connected with something solid; she twisted in and up, inflamed by the man's scream. She recognized Selek's silhouette as he turned toward her, and she lunged for him with the double-edged blade held low,

feeling her blood sing as his flesh ripped open under its kiss. She burned with power, and fell with him as he collapsed, striking again and again, losing herself in the rhythmic rise and fall of the blade.

Someone grabbed at her from behind, and she whirled, slashing out with a roar. The form backed up, fell, and she moved in for the kill. Then there was a firm touch on her neck. And then there was nothing.



Kirk knew there was a needle in his arm, knew it before he opened his eyes. He didn't want to open them; he didn't like needles. But awareness was coming back, and with it the memory of his last conscious moment.

The power plant had been blown just as he had decided he was going through that window, lights or no lights – when the big man in the Romulan uniform had grabbed Lara by the hair. Then the lights did go out, and Spock went crashing through the front door as he dived through the window, and everything became a blur of phaser shots, falling bodies, and the demon with the knife. She'd slashed him across the arm seconds before he fell, and if Spock hadn't been there...

He refused to think about that, but his mind continued to replay the scene – the beam-up, reforming on the pad, trying to shut off the bleeding as bright red arterial blood spurted from his arm, the medical team crashing through the doors, a glimpse of Lara's naked, blood-smearred body

as they transferred her to a gurney and pulled a blanket over her. He didn't want to remember any of that.

He surrendered to the present instead and opened his eyes. M'Benga was watching him. "How do you feel?" the black man said.

"Shitty. Why the needle?"

"Only way I know to get blood back inside people. And opening up a 20-centimeter gash tends to let quite a bit out."

"Is everybody all right?"

"They will be. With the possible exception of Dr. Merritt."

He started to sit up and found both arms in restraints.

"You're not going anywhere," M'Benga announced, "and neither is she. If I have to sedate you, too, I will."

"How is she?"

"Sedated, like I said. And she'll stay that way until we get to a starbase, if I have my way."

Kirk studied M'Benga's solemn face. "Spill it," he ordered.

"She came around in the treatment room and went completely berserk. She decked Chapel with the instrument tray and came after me with a pair of surgical scissors. When Spock tried to stop her, she threw a basin of disinfectant in his face – he'll be all right, but that stuff was not made to go in the eyes. By that time, there were three orderlies in the room. One of them has a broken nose, one

has about half his thumb bitten off, and one of them's going to be singing soprano for a week." He shook his head slightly at Kirk's barely-concealed grin. "It's not funny, Captain. Dr. Merritt is apparently still locked up in her very own hell, and I don't know if we can get her out of it or not."

Kirk breathed a soft curse. "Maybe Spock can--"

"Ab-so-lute-ly not. I know what you're thinking, and I won't permit it. If he were to link with her, the condition she's in, we could have two maniacs on our hands. And one of them would be a Vulcan. No thank you, sir."

"He's already linked with her, Djo. That's how we found her."

"You mean the marital bond?" He stopped Kirk's question by reminding him that Vulcan medicine was his subspecialty. "That alone is one reason for keeping Dr. Merritt out. That and her general physical condition."

"Which is?"

"Not good. She's severely malnourished, for one thing. I did an extensive examination when we finally got her sedated, Captain, and it's no wonder she cracked. There are classic indications of extended periods of the worst kind of abuse you can imagine – general as well as sexual. She has a hairline fracture of the jaw, several broken and rehealed ribs, an abdominal hematoma the size of my hand, lacerations of the--"

“That’s enough, Djo. I don’t think...”

“Yeah. I know what you mean. It’ll all be in my written report, anyway. I wouldn’t advise you to read it on a full stomach.”



The room was as silent as any room on a warping starship can be. The ventilator hummed to itself, the heating unit clucked softly from time to time, and the walls gave faint vibratory echoes of the massive warp engines. The only other sound was the soft breathing of the man who sat cross-legged on the bed.

Spock did not consciously hear the susurrations of the systems that conspired to keep him alive in the hostile environment of space. They were too much a part of his life to be obtrusive, and there were other stimuli that riveted his attention now, despite his attempts to shut them out.

Lara was screaming. Deep within her sedated consciousness, some essential part of her mind continued to strike out, and it set up an answering call within him. Like a loop of tape in a viewer, she relived – and he relived – that moment when the knifeblade sank into the yielding flesh of Selek. His son.

He had recognized Selek the moment he and Kirk had begun observing the occupants of the house, and it had taken all his control to keep from intervening immediately.

Only when Selek's intent became obvious to him had he asked Kirk to have the power plant blown, and sketched a quick scenario for getting Lara out. Part of his hesitancy had come from the knowledge that he would not leave that room until Selek was dead. But Lara had beaten him to it, and had done so with such violence and passionate emotion that it had cost her her sanity, and might yet cost him his.

He knew what he had to do. Had known it from the moment he rendered her unconscious. To save her life, he'd had the assistance of his best friend and the technology of a mighty civilization. To save her mind, he had only himself, and the teachings of another civilization, equally mighty, equally demanding. He shook off the light state of meditation he had achieved, rising gracefully from the bed and slipping into the dimly-lit corridors of the sleeping ship.

The night nurse was reading something from a padd, occasionally checking the monitor screens. She did not hear his approach; did not really feel the touch on her shoulder until the instant before blackness engulfed her.

Wraithlike, he moved to Lara's room and touched her neck with a spray-hypo whose contents would counteract the sedative in her bloodstream. Within minutes, the body function monitors started to rise and she began to stir, her frenzied mind fighting through the narcotic to strain her limbs against the restraints that held her in the bed. He did not wait for full consciousness to return before initiating the mind-meld; he did not want her waking screams to

bring any interruption.

The jolt of her madness caught him almost instantly, before he had delved below the most elementary level. It gripped him like the jaws of a ravening beast, and he choked back a cry, struggling for a firmer hold. She met him like a warrior at full battle-strength, battering his hold on her and on rationality, flooding his mind with disjointed images of crashing fists and male bodies and the anguish of forced penetration, screaming and lashing out. He let her mind pummel his, absorbing the blows like a vast ocean absorbs the torrents of a winter storm, accepting all the pent-up fury she possessed.

Deep within her mind, the screaming subsided to convulsive sobs, and his mind wept with hers in anger and heartbreak at the death of some essential innocence which had nothing to do with sexuality.

Reaching within his exhausted self, he searched for the strength to go on, faltering, reaching a state of near panic when he knew he did not have it; could not call forth the Herculean effort to go beyond fury, beyond death, to renewed life. He was empty ... he did not have the strength. He felt their interlocked being slipping toward some black void, and knew he was powerless to stop it. He called out to her, the anguished mental cry of a drowning mind ... and she answered. From some chasm of soul, from some essence that had endured untouched, a force mustered itself, marshalling strength as it gathered in her mind, surging forward with irresistible force to engulf him.

He locked onto it, refracted it through his own being, and found the same essence within himself.

Their minds mingled, and he knew his wife as he had never known her – as child and woman at once, growing, changing, absorbing disappointment and relishing triumph, building on both, gathering the reservoir of strength that had ultimately saved them both. For all that Selek had taken away, he had not robbed her of this ultimate strength and the willingness to share it.

Gently, he broke the physical link, feeling the remnants of the deeper touching still within him, whole again but at once less and more than he had been before. And understood, with a deep and tearing pain, why his attempts to turn Lara's love to Jim had been foredoomed, why he would have always been a ghost at the banquet, and the pain he had caused them both in his clumsy attempts to manipulate their lives shamed and belittled all of them. Reluctantly, he opened his eyes to find her watching him, still a bit confused, a bit unsure.

He released the restraints and moved to brush the dark tangle of hair away from her damp forehead. She flinched away from him, drawing into tense readiness and he felt a great rending within his chest. When she realized what she had done, tears gathered in her eyes.

“Oh, Spock. I'm sorry ... I just--”

“It's all right. I understand.” And he did. She had given all she could, had reached out beyond the farthest boundaries

in a way she had never thought possible; but in so doing, she had left nothing for herself. Her mind was whole, her body would heal, but that brief glimpse of Lara he had been given in the depths of the bond was closed to him now, perhaps forever.



“You’re right,” she said. “I don’t understand. To come so far ... and then to retreat into the ultimate symbol of all that is Vulcan ... why, Spock? Why the Kolinahr?”

They were in the guest quarters assigned to her after her release from sickbay, a site he had chosen carefully to tell her of his intentions. The discussion was not going well.

“You are correct in saying I have strayed far from my origins. It is for that reason that I must undertake the discipline.”

“You talk as though you’re ashamed of your Human half!”

“No. But I am not Human, Lara, and can never be. Much that I have done in the five years we have been fully bonded has come about as a direct result of yielding to that Humanness. Would you have accepted my yielding so gladly, had you known the pain it would cause you?”

She had no answer for that, and he went on.

“I cannot survive without half of myself, any more than you could survive without your immune system. It gives you the strength to overcome infection; my Vulcanness gives me the strength to overcome the weakness of my

mixed heritage.”

“Being Human is not a *disease!*”

“I did not mean to imply that. It was perhaps an unfortunate analogy. But the fact remains that I must return to the source of all we became, or I will be destroyed.” He toyed with a data chip lying on the desktop before going on. “Lara, if you had not killed Selek, I would have done so. Not out of revenge, not because in choosing his depravity he forfeited his right to live – I would have killed him, and slowly, for the simple pleasure it would have given me.

“Twice, I gave him life. Once, through the trickery of his mother. And in the cellars of B’al Graai, when I had my hands around his throat, I gave him life again ... because I made the one conscious decision that ultimately separates man from beast – *I will not kill today.*

“I could not make that decision today; not for him or for any other being whose death would bring me pleasure.” He looked up at her. “Lara, do not ask me to become what my son was. And I will, if I do not undertake the Kolinahr.”

She flung herself into a chair and rubbed at her forehead. She sighed and looked at him, not wanting to ask the next question, but knowing she must. “And what about *pon farr?*” He gave her no answer beyond a raised eyebrow.

“Spock, you can’t think I’m not aware of it. As deep as the bond is right now, I’d know from half a galaxy away. You

can't be more than six months from the beginning of another cycle. I can sense the need growing in you right now; sometimes it wakes me up at night, and I lie there wondering what I'm supposed to do – what your response would be if I got up right then and went to your bed.”

“And what of *your* response? I feel your nightmares, Lara. I see you draw back whenever a man comes within touching distance of you. I know the terror that waits for you in the darkened corners of every room.”

“I've lived through worse,” she snapped. “They say you never miss a slice from a loaf that's already been cut.”

He frowned at her. “That is unnecessarily crude, my wife.”

“*Pon farr* is crude, Spock! And I *am* bonded to you. If you walk away now, you condemn yourself to death, and me to the torment of enduring it, all because of some stubborn, pigheaded pride that's ... that...” She stuttered to a halt, casting about for some comparison to make, then shook her head in frustration and ran her hand through her hair. “You are doing precisely what you did before,” she said finally. “Making decisions about us without consulting me at all.”

“The Kolinahr decision concerns only me, Lara.”

“*You* are part of *us*! That's what I'm trying to get across to you – and you're not *listening*!”

“I am listening. And I will grant you your definition of ‘us’ if you will acknowledge the necessity of my undergoing Kolinahr.”

“I can’t imagine you becoming what Selek was,” she said with a shudder. “But to live with the fear it might happen ... yes, I can see the necessity of it. That still doesn’t answer the question of *pon farr*. You as much as admitted, when we started this ... discussion ... that they won’t even consider accepting you until you’ve completed this cycle.”

“I do not recall having made such a statement.”

“Not in so many words, no. You said something about their demanding fitness, preparation – a willingness to submit yourself totally to their discipline. Did you think I wouldn’t understand what that meant?”

He regretted having made the statement, and regretted even more the quick intellect which gave her so much more knowledge than his brief reference had contained.

“I won’t preach logic at you,” she continued. “There’s only one answer, and you know what it is. I’m your wife, and your bondmate. Let me *be* that, Spock, at least this one more time. And then go away to your Kolinahr, and wall yourself up forever, if that’s what you want. But don’t leave me with your blood on my hands. That’s the one thing I don’t think I could survive.”

“You are asking me to do what Selek did, Lara – to use your body as a convenience.” He chose the brutal words deliberately, delivered them without emotion, and saw her go pale and clamp her jaw shut tightly in an effort to hold back tears.

“That was cruel,” she said softly, when she had her voice under control.

“*Pon farr* is cruel,” he said, just as softly.

“But *you* are not.”

“Not now, perhaps. But in *plak tow*...”

She rose from her chair and crossed to where he sat. “I remember the last time, Spock. It doesn’t frighten me.”

“Do you also remember a caution I once gave you against lying to yourself?”

She colored and looked away from him. He rose uncertainly, knowing he had wounded her and regretting the necessity of it.

“You remember too much,” she said. “Yes, I’m frightened. I’m terrified that I’ll never be able to be touched by a man I love without remembering...” She turned to face him, her eyes bright with tears. “Oh, Spock, I’m so scared! Help me, please!” She stumbled into his arms and he held her quietly for a long time, until she stopped trembling.

There would be no nightmares this night, and no demons lurking in the darkness that gathered as he lowered the lights, then turned to take her in his arms again.



“*Captain’s Log, Stardate 7407.5:*

“I am pleased to report that Starfleet Command this date confirms our patrol sector secured. The information gathered by Lieutenant O’Bannion in the raid on the Romulan supply base six weeks ago has been of inestimable value in clearing this sector, and a commendation for that work is attached hereto, to be entered in his service record.

“Information extracted from the captured data also permitted us to locate the site at which the Romulans were holding the missing medical personnel. Contact was made at 0946 hours, this date.

“We encountered only automated defenses in our approach to the base, which sensor readings indicated was an underground facility on a J-type planet with a methane atmosphere. Our hails to the base were not answered, nor did they offer any response to our initial barrage. Part of the facility was breached in that assault, and a landing/rescue party was beamed down in environmental suits.

“For a full report on the condition of the base, see Chief Medical Officer Djomo M’Benga’s report, appended to and hereby made a part of this record. In brief, it appears that the Romulans were conducting biological warfare experiments at the facility, utilizing Starfleet personnel as both researchers and subjects, when one or more of the organisms being studied contaminated the facility. Dr. M’Benga theorizes that the contaminant was a variant of the microbe *bacillus anthracis*, which he discovered in the

air filtration system of a barracks housing male prisoners. Whether the contamination was accidental or an act of sabotage by one of the prisoners cannot at this time be determined.”

Kirk hit the ‘Pause’ button, wondering if he needed to add anything more. His concentration was interrupted by a buzz at his office door. “Come,” he announced.

Uhura was in the room and in front of his desk before the doors stopped moving, her smile a nova in the darkness of her face. “Captain, we just got word – the Romulan High Command is asking for a cease-fire! We’re ordered to break off patrol and proceed to Starbase Nine for refit and home leave.”

He could feel his own face moving in a smile, and held on very tightly to his image of the proper behavior for a dignified starship captain who has just been told that his war, for all intents and purposes, is over. It was a losing battle to begin with, and he surrendered completely when Uhura impulsively leaned over his desk and tossed a folder full of notes into the air. He came out of his chair with a grin and swung her off her feet in a jubilant bear-hug. Ensign Madigan came through the door just in time to see him clear the entire surface of the desk with one grand sweep of his arm.

“Don’t just stand there,” he said, taking in her astonishment. “Celebrate something! I have a course change to order and a very fine announcement to make.”

The captain and the lieutenant charged out of the office, leaving one very confused clerical yeoman surveying the chaos and shaking her head.

*Officers!* She thought, and started picking up folders.



It was the first time in the entire mission that the dining room had been used. Dinner in the mess hall had seemed totally inappropriate, but as Kirk emptied his wine glass, he wondered if the decision had been the correct one, last night out or not. M'Benga, Scott, and Sulu, deep in a heated three-way discussion over whose department was throwing the best staff party, had left for a first-hand tour of the situation, leaving himself, Lara, and Spock in an uncomfortable silence.

The grapevine told him Lara had moved into Spock's quarters two weeks ago. He told himself it was what he had expected – she was Spock's wife, after all ... but somehow he was having more trouble with the fact than he had anticipated. On a ship that buzzed with home-leave plans, with rumors of promotion and reassignment, these three had been silent, each unwilling or unable to initiate a discussion of what the future held for them as individuals, as three people who had altered each others' life-patterns irrevocably.

“We have to talk about this,” he said finally.

Lara pulled herself together first. At the base of her throat,

he could see a pulse beating, slow and steady. “Yes,” she said. She unclenched her hands and reached out to touch Spock. Their fingers intertwined on the tabletop, an intricately carved sculpture of jade and alabaster. A long look passed between them; then, as if a message had been conveyed, Lara’s other hand moved tentatively toward Kirk, palm up, open, waiting.

He almost reached out to take it. Every muscle in his body, every atom of his being, was drawn to that delicate hand, as metal filings are drawn to a magnet. But he was not a pile of metal scrapings, not a random collection of errant molecules. Though he was not sure precisely what she meant by the gesture, he feared it. His soul was still bleeding; he would not throw it onto a bed of nails again.

“No.”

“Jim,” she said. “Please.”

In the silence, five years tumbled through his mind. Years of hope and trust and betrayal, of choice and change and the one constant ... the one ineluctable fact that stood paramount in his being – he loved this woman. Had loved her as he had never loved another, had surrendered more for her than he had ever surrendered for any other. And all she wanted was a touch. A simple, Human gesture he would have given to any stranger on any street he had ever walked, under any alien sun.

“Jim,” she said again, and her fingers stretched out toward his.

Almost of its own volition his hand moved; his fingers touched hers and were enclosed and moved by the warm Human strength of them, to cover and join with the clasped hands of Spock and Lara. The jade and alabaster sculpture became jade and alabaster and bronze.

The triad of flesh set off a clamoring resonance in his mind; a tangled, dissonant symphony of apprehension and regret mixed with acceptance and calm; the whole overlaid by the distinctly sexual tension he recognized as his own unvarying response to some imminent and potentially deadly physical conflict. Its incongruity here, now, startled and disturbed him, and he would have broken the telepathic/telempathic touch – whatever it was – had the other hands not held him fast.

His eyes met Spock's, and he thought, *No wonder you never liked to be touched, if it was always like this.*

Spock nodded as if Kirk had spoken. "The manifestation ... is particularly strong at the moment, Jim. It is seldom so powerful. But the three of us have ... touched one another's lives in so many ways ... on so many levels..." He trailed off, unwilling or unable to finish it. Kirk felt both attitudes.

Lara took up the voicing. "We've talked about our futures, Jim – Spock and I. And about yours, too." She pushed on over his incipient objection. "I'm sorry – we couldn't ... we couldn't deal with each other without an awareness of you. You're too much a part of us." She bit at her lower lip,

and then went on. "I'm going to Vulcan, for a while. It's ... necessary."

She didn't need to elaborate. Kirk realized that not all the visceral male tension in the room was coming from him, and he understood.

"But I can't stay. There have been too many changes. In Spock, in me, in you. Change is the only constant, really. None of us can escape that, none of us can withstand it. Spock wants--" She broke off, shook her head. "Spock *needs* ... to master the Kolinahr discipline, and he can't do that in the presence of a bondmate. I need to seek my own kind of discipline – the kind I was looking for on that Starfleet hospital base, before the Romulans came charging in. I'd like to go to Hadrian, to that children's hospital post you offered to get for me once, if it's still a viable project, and if you're still willing to pull a few strings. And you, Jim, whether you realize it or not, you need to get on with your life. We've stolen enough of it from you.

"The grapevine says there's an Admiral's star waiting for you. You know that, even if it's not official. Nogura doesn't access a man's whole service record for nothing." She caught his look and grinned, and for a moment she was the Lara he'd begun to love a million years ago when she sat in his sickroom and listened to him talk about his childhood.

"Don't start looking for any one person to blame. It's common knowledge all over the ship." She squeezed his hand. "*Change*, Jim. That's what it's all about. You can dig

in your heels and fight it, or you can ride it like a comet, but it's coming, and you can't stop it.

“All we've done, all we've learned, all the hurts and healings we've given each other, are just a part of that change.”

Something in him knew she was right; knew they could never turn the clock back to that day in sickbay, or to any other moment. What he and Lara had once shared was ended; the need for it was ended. The hands that touched his were defining the new order, not re-establishing the old one. All anyone ever had was *now* ... this moment, this decision, this life that was the sum total of everything that had gone before, for good or for ill. The only constant was change, and he had to let it happen or be broken by it. He did not want to be broken.

“Lara,” he said, forcing a grin, “I don't believe I have ever won an argument with you in all the time I've known you.”

“Nor have I, Captain,” Spock said with a quiet smile in his dark eyes. “And *that*, I believe, is one thing that will never change.”

Kirk withdrew his hand from the union, breaking the triple bond; feeling not loss, but a sense of completeness and of healing. That healing, that completion, was what they had meant to accomplish, he realized. One final, loving touch to say goodbye on.

He poured the last of the wine into their glasses. “One

more toast my friends. To change ... and to us.”

They touched glasses and drank silently, consecrating the moment, celebrating themselves. Kirk put his glass down carefully and stood up. He touched each face briefly with his eyes, imprinting the moment in his memory, against the changes he knew would come.

“If you’ll excuse me,” he said, “I still have a ship to run. In case you’d forgotten ... we’re going home.”

THE END