

"THE VULCANOID PERSUASION"

By

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Foreword

I had wanted to call this "Star Trek" novel "Pitchforks and Pointed Ears," a quote of course from the "Star Trek" episode "Obsession," but I knew that that would be just too cute. You may regard it as the book's nickname, if you like. In "The Vulcanoid Persuasion," I wanted to give readers what I've loved most in the "Star Trek" novels that I have read and enjoyed best: familiar favorite aliens, not newly-invented ones that we've never heard of before; in-joke references to real "Star Trek" episodes; and camaraderie among the major characters. In addition, I believe that most fans have fantasies about the main characters. In the "Star Trek" novels that I've liked best, it was clear that some of those fantasies were being provided by their authors. The writer was indulging his or her own "Star Trek" dreams. In "The Vulcanoid Persuasion," I present some of my own. Perhaps they will parallel yours. If so, I sincerely hope that their presence will add to your enjoyment.

Prologue

You will note from the carefully chosen Star Dates, that this novel takes place immediately after the end of the third season of "Star Trek," and before any of the "Star Trek" movies.

Chapter One

"Captain's log, Star Date 6060.1. It is with no small amount of relief that we are warping away from the planet Bethea. Having my first officer and my chief medical officer missing for the better part of three days had caused me more tension than I care to endure again any time soon. The enigmatic object discovered on the planet by one of the reconnaissance teams will bear closer study by our ship's science department, before any conclusive report regarding it can be filed."

"Jim!" McCoy called after him. "Jim, have you got a minute?"

"Sure, Bones, what can I do for you?" Kirk paused to let him catch up with him.

"I'm glad that you put it that way. I have a request."

"I'll do my best." They recommenced walking down the corridor.

"The next time that there are several different recon parties beaming down to a planet, if I'm to be a member of one of them...."

"Yes?" Kirk prompted him.

"Let it be one of the ones without Spock."

"Why Bones, I'm shocked! Didn't you two enjoy your little vacation?"

"Are you kidding?! Jim, you know how much Spock and I are at each other's throats even when there are other people around us. Well imagine what it was like for us to be alone together all of that time! We didn't have you there to tell us to stop it when we quarreled too much. We didn't have anyone there to at least try to change the subject for us. I nearly argued myself hoarse! Three *days*, Jim! Three days of being cooped up with *Spock!*"

"It was that bad?"

"Well, it would be inappropriate to say that tempers flared; he doesn't have one. But he sure is an expert at inflaming mine."

Kirk shrugged helplessly. "Well, I'm sorry, Bones. I had six different search parties out looking for the two of you at any one time. And I was counting on Spock's practicality to at least keep you safe and sheltered."

"Well, yes, he did that."

"So maybe he wasn't such a bad choice for you." Kirk looked hopeful.

"Don't push it, Jim."

Kirk cleared his throat. "Well, speaking of changing the subject, and you *were* a moment ago, while you two were busy being missing, one of the other teams brought back something interesting. It's in the science lab. I'd like for you and Spock to take a look at it."

"Separately, I trust?"

Kirk's face fell in exasperation. "I thought that we were changing the subject?"

The explosion knocked nearly every crewmember aboard the U.S.S. Enterprise off of his feet. It definitely changed the subject.

Chapter Two

"Captain's log, Star Date 6060.3. A horrendous explosion has rocked the ship. No outer hull damage appears to have been sustained, but the blast, which seems to have centered in the science laboratory section, has taken out portions of at least two decks. Cause unknown. Sickbay reports a tremendous number of casualties. Exact figures unknown. But our ship's science department has evidently been devastated. I must, regretfully, report an extreme loss of life and equipment, as well as severe physical damage to the ship, to Starfleet Command."

"Sir," Kirk said to the admiral on the private viewscreen in his quarters. "We have lost, at best estimate, fifty crewmembers. Virtually our entire science department. A situation that I find a great deal more distressing than even the severe structural damage."

"We realize that, Captain, and since your initial report, we have been working steadily on prompt, appropriate solutions to both of your problems. First off, repairs to the Enterprise herself will be undertaken at space station K2. You will proceed there immediately."

"Then, about the crew...."

"Replacements for your science department members are being selected. They will be ready for you to pick up after your repairs have been completed."

"Pick up where, sir? At Starfleet Command Headquarters?"

"No, Captain. You will indeed be fortunate. You have been chosen to receive the best possible science team."

"Best possible?"

"Vulcans."

"Vul.... All fifty of them?"

"That's right. Fifty Vulcanian replacements. As you know, from years of working with First Officer Spock, Vulcans are natural-born scientists."

"Yes, sir. But Mr. Spock is half-human, which makes it a great deal easier to work with him."

"It's settled, Kirk. You will pick up the replacements on the planet Vulcan in six months, after repairs are completed."

Kirk stared at the darkened viewscreen. He supposed that he should not be surprised. He had heard of the recent push in Starfleet to make starships more multiracial, more representative of the widely diverse planetary members that they defended. The days of segregated, one-species ships like the destroyed Intrepid, manned exclusively by Vulcans, and the destroyed Excalibur, manned entirely by humans, were gone. And really, Kirk admitted to himself, those days should be gone. "We're one Federation," he mused aloud. "I should welcome this." And yet, the thought of fifty pure-blooded, logical Vulcans, cold enough to make even Mr. Spock seem emotional, quite frankly alarmed him. But the last thing that he must do, he realized, was to let them intimidate him. Or at least, he must not let them know that they intimidated him. And his reaction was understandable, he consoled himself. Any human, he knew, seemed to feel instinctively ill-at-ease around those who accurately and relentlessly witnessed and discussed his every weakness and failing. It was also difficult to be firm and disciplinary with someone who could easily throw you through the nearest wall. Well, Kirk would have six months in which to master his misgivings. And in the meantime, he must carefully hide them from Spock. On the other hand, even Spock might not be too comfortable with this. Being half-human, he had felt very much criticized by his society, and even by his own father, throughout childhood, and even as an adult. That fact had been one of the main motivating factors in Spock's choosing Starfleet over the Vulcan Science Academy, in the first place. And now, that critical society was about to follow Spock into his retreat. "Or maybe he *will* have some advantages from this," Kirk contradicted himself. "Spock admits that we get on his nerves sometimes. Maybe his compatriots will be a relief." In any case, Spock should be able to help Kirk to learn to deal with them. But McCoy! Now that would be another matter. The doctor's reaction would be predictable and extreme, he knew. Well, best to table his own doubts and get it over with promptly. He punched the intercom.

"Spock here."

"Mr. Spock. Please report to me immediately in my quarters."

"Acknowledged."

"Sickbay. Bones? Am I disturbing you?"

"No. It's over, Jim. We did what we could, which added up to close to nothing. In many cases, there weren't even any remains to find."

"Then you're not busy?"

"There's almost no one alive from the area to be busy *with*, Jim. And if you have any destination in mind, I'd love to get out of here."

"Fine. My quarters."

"I'll be right there."

He was true to his word. The eager McCoy arrived almost as rapidly as the efficient Spock.

"Gentlemen." Kirk waved them to seats. "We've received our orders."

"That was fast," McCoy observed.

"Yes. It seems that Headquarters moves somewhat better in an emergency."

"So where do we get fixed up, Jim?"

"Space Station K2."

"How long do we have to be there?"

"Six months."

"Six...months!" McCoy's face managed a cross between crestfallen and outraged.

"Considering the amount of damage that the ship has sustained, Doctor," Spock pointed out, "I would consider six months to be appropriately precautionary."

"Leave it to you not to even consider the severe boredom that we'll suffer because of it!"

"That is irrelevant."

Kirk listened to their sparring, wondering how their well-worn relationship would change, given fifty more Vulcans for either or both of them to find quarrel with, together or separately.

McCoy surrendered the issue in disgust. "All right, when do we get the crew replacements, before or after repairs?"

"After," Kirk said, endeavoring to hide his relief at the word.

"Will we pick them up, or will they be ferried to the station?"

"We'll pick them up ourselves."

At that point, Kirk's reticence began to register on his two listeners.

"Captain." Spock hesitated. "Are you quite all right?"

"Jim," said McCoy. "There's something that you're not telling us."

Kirk opened his mouth, but no words came out of it.

McCoy tried a new tactic. "Where do we pick them up, then?"

"Vulcan." Kirk coughed.

"Vulcan?? Why in blazes will they be on Vulcan?!"

Kirk cleared his throat. "Because...that's the usual place where one finds...Vulcans."

McCoy blinked stupidly at him.

Spock's eyebrows climbed into his hair.

"The replacements?!" McCoy hissed.

"Yes."

"Vulcans?!"

"Yes."

"Fifty?!!!"

"Yes."

"No!!!"

"Fascinating."

Chapter Three

"Kirk here."

"Uhura here, Captain. There is a follow-up message from Starfleet. I have the admiral."

"Put him on, Lieutenant."

As the admiral talked, Kirk listened; and the Captain's face sagged lower and lower until the admiral signed off; and then Kirk put his head in his hands, and muttered, "How am I ever going to tell McCoy??"

Captain James T. Kirk suffered his way down to sickbay. This would be the last straw, he knew, to his harried, harassed, overworked, frustrated, tragedy-laden chief medical officer. Just what I need, Kirk thought, to be the bearer of bad news to someone already overburdened with it. Well, maybe I'll get lucky and he won't be in there.

No such luck. McCoy looked up from his desk as the door slid aside. He motioned to the stack of papers in front of him. "Death reports."

Great, Kirk thought, just great. And here comes Mary Sunshine to make your day complete.

"I wonder if we'll ever know why these people died, what went wrong down there."

"I talked to Scotty about it. But the chances are next to zero. There isn't enough intact evidence left to even begin to make a guess."

"Well, it doesn't really matter. Knowing why wouldn't bring back those people."

"No."

"What's on your mind, Jim?"

Kirk took a deep breath, and blurted bluntly, "I have good news."

"I could use some."

"You won't be spending six months at station K2."

"We won't? Good! I'm gl..." Then Kirk's use of the word "you" instead of "we" hit him. McCoy's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean *I* won't be spending six months at station K2? The rest of you are going and I'm *not*?"

"That's right."

"Where am *I* going?"

Kirk coughed. "Vulcan."

"What?!" McCoy came out of his chair so fast that it tipped backward and crashed to the deck. "For how long?!"

"For the entire six months."

The doctor's face flushed angrily. "Now why in the devil would I go there, if you'll pardon the pun?!"

"Orders."

"From Starfleet?!"

"Yes."

"Vulcan is not my idea of shore leave!"

"This isn't shore leave." Kirk shook his head unhappily. "Fleet is concerned about the fact that Dr. M'Benga is the only doctor on board who is a specialist in Vulcan physiology. That makes him the only one trained to deal with any possible Vulcanian medical emergency. And we're about to have fifty more Vulcans aboard who could have such emergencies."

"Yes! And have you considered what it'll be like having fifty Vulcans all going through pon farr at the same time?!"

Kirk blinked. "I don't think that that's very likely. If Spock were here, he'd quote the odds against it."

"Please *don't*!"

"I can't."

"Thank god!"

"Anyway," Kirk went on, "Headquarters wants you to receive intensive Vulcan specialty training. Just for the six months that we'll be in dry-dock."

"*Just* for...!"

"Well." Kirk shrugged helplessly. "Look at it this way: they could've just assigned an additional doctor to you: a Vulcan doctor. I don't mean a doctor who doctors Vulcans, like M'Benga; I mean a doctor who *is* a Vulcan. Right here in your department, for you to fight with, even more than you do with Spock."

"Oh, for the...! They won't have to! The patients'll come in here and argue with me about their treatments! Spock does, every time he's a patient! Sarek did, when he was a patient!"

"Well those were the only two Vulcans that you've ever operated on; you said so yourself. After the extra training, you'll have more confidence in operating on Vulcans, and in dealing with them. So you'll be better prepared to handle their criticisms and put them in their places." Better prepared than I will be, too, he mentally added.

"Do you mean that you're in favor of this?!"

"No, of course not. I'm just trying to help you to find a bright side in going to Vulcan."

"I'd rather go to that newly discovered, ominous-sounding, Cardassian front!"

Kirk went over to his friend and put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Bones."

McCoy slumped and began to look more despondent than angry. "Have you told Spock yet?"

"No. Do you want me to, or would you rather do it?"

"I...I don't know. Boy, he's gonna love this!"

Kirk made no reply; he did not know what to say. He didn't even bother to remind McCoy that Vulcans didn't tend to love events, or much else, for that matter.

For long moments, McCoy just stood staring at his boots.

When the silence became awkward, and Kirk's genuine concern for his friend had risen all the way through worry to near panic, Kirk suggested, "Come on, let's go tell him together; it'll be easier that way." He urged the doctor forward with a gentle hand on his back.

"Jim." McCoy did not move or raise his eyes. "I'm going to ask a favor of you. A big one."

"What is it?"

"And I really need for you to say yes."

Kirk swallowed. "If I can." He hoped fervently that the favor would be something that he could grant. He didn't want to say no to McCoy in the state that he had been in lately.

"Please. Let Spock go with me."

Kirk was stunned. "Spock? To Vulcan?"

"Yes."

"For the six months?"

"Yes."

Shock prevented Kirk from answering right away, so McCoy misunderstood his hesitation, and jumped into the gap. "Confound it, Jim, I'm scared! Those green-blooded, muscle-bound, cold fish make me nervous! I'll admit that I may not always be entirely thrilled with our pointy-eared friend, but he's a barrel of laughs compared to the rest of them!"

"Easy, easy." Kirk squeezed his shoulder reassuringly. "Now I didn't say no, did I? You didn't give me much of a chance to say anything. And the answer is yes."

"Yes?" McCoy raised his eyes to Kirk's.

Kirk grinned and shrugged. "I shouldn't need Spock for a repair mission."

"Thanks." He let Kirk lead him out into the corridor, heading for Spock's quarters.

Judging from the doctor's bleak expression, he was clearly wishing the same thing that Kirk had been wishing as he'd approached sickbay: that his quarry would not be at home. McCoy held his breath as Kirk pressed the door chime.

"Come," was the immediate response.

The two humans shrugged at each other and entered. Then they stood inside looking at each other: McCoy drooping disheartenedly and Kirk watching him anxiously.

After a moment of seeing his two visitors play "after you, Alphonse," Spock prompted, "Yes, gentlemen?"

Kirk decided that he had better speak; it was evident that McCoy was not going to do so. "Uh, we have more news. Bones has received different orders from the rest of us."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. He's not going with us to K2."

"Where is the doctor going?"

Kirk choked slightly on the answer. "Vulcan."

Once again, Spock's eyebrows introduced themselves to his hair.

For several minutes, none of the three spoke, and then McCoy forced himself to raise his eyes for the first time to Spock's face. And found the unemotional science officer as close to amusement as he had ever seen him.

McCoy sputtered, "What's so damn funny, Spock?!"

Spock struggled to right the almost-curve at the corners of his lips, and was largely successful. "I suppose," he explained, "that even Vulcans are not immune to irony."

Flustered, McCoy dropped his eyes once more to his boots.

Kirk leapt into the awkward gap. "Headquarters wants Bones to have intensive study in Vulcan physiology for those months that we'll be out of action anyway, because of the new crewmembers."

"Logical." Spock nodded.

McCoy rolled his eyes. "Oh, there's that magic word! It'll probably be the only word I'll hear for six months straight! Out of anyone!"

"Bones...."

"That's probably all that Vulcans ever do all day, is stand around saying 'logical' to each other!"

Kirk's hand returned to its spot on the doctor's shoulder. "Take it easy." To Spock, he continued, "Starfleet felt that M'Benga alone would not be sufficient in an emergency."

Spock nodded again, carefully avoiding pronouncing the word that had so set off McCoy.

Having completed the first half of the purpose in going to Spock's quarters, Kirk looked at the nonresponsive doctor, looked at Spock, and shrugged.

Spock took that as his cue. "Was there anything further, gentlemen?" he prompted.

Kirk nudged McCoy. "Was there?"

McCoy shot him an annoyed glance.

"Do you want me to ask him for you?"

This peaked Spock's curiosity; he observed the uncomfortable human with interest.

"No. No, I'll...do it." He took a step forward and met the Vulcan's eyes. "I...I'm sorry I took it out on you, Spock." He tried to smile. "I suppose that a person shouldn't fuss at someone when he's about to make a request of him."

Spock continued to appear receptive, but made no reply.

McCoy glanced nervously at Kirk, then proceeded to say, "Especially a big request like this."

Spock tilted his head to one side. "What do you wish to ask of me, Doctor?"

McCoy took a deep breath. "Go with me. Please. I'm afraid.... That is, I don't want to go alone. I don't understand most of the customs; it would be too easy for me to make mistakes. And...well...Vulcans make me nervous!"

"But I am Vulcan."

"Yes, but I'm used to you!"

Spock's brows shot upward.

"I think.... Mostly....," McCoy stammered. "Confound it! Don't make me go there alone!"

"Doctor, I am more than willing to accompany you. I was simply curious as to your reasons for wishing it. And I agree that I should go with you."

"You do?" McCoy blinked.

Spock regarded him wryly. "You certainly will need someone to shield you from the results of your own bumbling diplomatic inadequacies, Doctor."

McCoy stuttered fretfully, not knowing whether to thank Spock or curse him.

Kirk laid a restraining hand on McCoy's arm. "Well! Now that that's settled." He crossed to the intercom and thumbed the switch. "Bridge. Mr. Sulu?"

"Sulu here."

"Lay in a course, Mr. Sulu. To Vulcan." He coughed.

"Aye, sir."

"Engage." He shut off the link.

"Have you noticed that you do that every time now?" McCoy asked Kirk.

"Do what?"

"Cough. Every time that you say Vulcan."

"I do?" Kirk shifted self-consciously.

"You do."

"Well...."

"Maybe I should stay aboard, and watch your condition very closely."

"Nice try, Bones."

Chapter Four

"I want to thank you, Spock," McCoy said to him in the transporter room.

"For what, Doctor?"

"For arranging for us to stay with your parents, during our time on Vulcan."

Spock was indifferent. "It was logical, Doctor. Since my parents live right in ShiKahr, where the Vulcan Science Academy is located...."

"I know," McCoy interrupted. "I accept that it's logical. But thanks anyway." He turned to Captain Kirk who had come in to see off his two friends. "It'll be a relief to have at least one human nearby. Especially one as charming and as gracious as Spock's mother."

Kirk nodded. "Indeed it will. It'll make your stay almost bearable."

McCoy looked pained. "Bearable if I could spend every moment of it inside of that house."

Kirk tried to disregard the obvious complaint. "Give my best regards to Lady Amanda."

McCoy nodded distractedly. "Bad enough to have to be a student again, but to have to be one at the Vulcan Science Academy."

"Consider it a challenge."

"The challenge will be the other people that I have to work with: the professors and the students."

"Are you ready, Doctor?" Spock encouraged him from where he already stood on the transporter platform.

"No, but you never have let that stop you."

Spock dismissed the doctor's quip with a slight twitch of his head.

"Now, Jim," McCoy cautioned pleadingly, "whatever you do, don't forget to come back and get us!"

"In six months," Kirk agreed.

"Don't be a minute late!"

"I promise. Get going."

McCoy took one step, and then turned back to him once more. "Don't forget where you left us! We don't want to be marooned together again!"

"Bones! Scoot."

"Doctor, you are wasting time."

"You noticed. It's called deliberately stalling."

"Bones...!"

"I'm going! I'm going!"

McCoy stepped up to his place beside Spock and regarded him apprehensively. The Vulcan watched him curiously.

"Energize," Kirk said.

Sarek and Amanda were waiting in the courtyard in front of their home, and watching as the two sparkling pillars of glitter became two blue-and-black uniforms containing their son and the friend who had saved Sarek's life nearly two standard years earlier on the Enterprise.

Sarek and Spock greeted each other formally with the proper Vulcan hand salute.

Amanda's eyes drank in the most welcome sight of her son. Through long practice, she was able to restrain herself from giving him the hug that she wished, but the desire for it remained in her eyes. Necessarily deprived of that outlet, she bestowed her warmth instead upon the doctor, where it would be more appreciated. He returned her sentiment in kind, sensing in her someone who could be an understanding friend and confidante during his long ordeal.

After the greetings were extended, the two homeowners invited their houseguests into the spacious living room, which bore prominently the mark of a human touch in its decoration. Amanda's influence was felt in the soft blue tone of the walls, and in the comfortable overstuffed furniture. McCoy sank happily into the sofa, realizing that, here at least, he would find a haven in which he could temporarily forget where he was.

As if she read his thoughts, Amanda smiled and said, "Spock relayed to us that you were somewhat unhappy about coming here." She did not have the telepathic ability of her adopted countrymen, but her personal instincts and sensitivity tended to make up for the lack.

"Here." McCoy's hand indicated the house. "Definitely not. *Here*." His arm swung a wider arc, indicating a much larger environment. "Definitely."

She chuckled understandingly.

"No, your kind hospitality is the only bright spot in my otherwise bleak assignment." He sighed.

Their two Vulcan companions studied them curiously.

"I know how you feel, Doctor."

"Leonard, please."

"Leonard, then." She smiled. "I was nervous, too, when Sarek first brought me here."

"I can well imagine."

"But after a time I grew accustomed to this world, and even began to feel as if I belonged."

"I doubt if I'll reach that point."

"Perhaps not, in six months."

McCoy muttered something under his breath containing the word "forever".

Amanda's eyes twinkled merrily and she wisely decided not to ask him to repeat. "Well, anyway, Leonard, my husband and I will do our best to give you a pleasant place to which to retreat."

"You already have." He smiled appreciatively.

"Interesting," Sarek observed.

"Indeed," agreed Spock. "But if you will excuse us," he said as he rose, "the doctor and I must go to the Academy to meet his advisor, and to enroll him in the proper courses."

McCoy rolled his eyes. "Must we?"

Spock refused the redundancy of answering such a rhetorical question, and turned instead to Sarek. "If we may borrow your flyer, Father?"

"Certainly."

McCoy rose reluctantly.

"You'll be back soon," Amanda reassured him.

"Not soon enough." With one more backward glance at the inviting furniture in the soothingly familiar room, he regretfully followed Spock out through the door.

As the flyer made its way soundlessly toward the Academy at the heart of the city, its silence was punctuated by the oppressive lack of conversation between its two occupants.

McCoy's pulse pounded in his ears; he feared that his mouth was developing a nervous twitch; and one knee jumped disconcertingly. He hoped that Spock wouldn't notice. If only Vulcans weren't so judgmental, he mentally lamented, so harsh in their criticisms....

"Relax, Doctor," Spock interrupted his thoughts.

McCoy sighed. So much for hoping that Spock wouldn't notice. He intentionally willed his spine to be a bit less rigid in the overly-stiff seat and squirmed into it fitfully. "I never know what to say to a Vulcan."

"Hmm. Unlike you humans, we do not make unnecessary conversation, such as about the weather. You should simply remember to discuss with them only that which is necessary and relevant."

"Meaning a lot of awkward silences. Great." One such awkward silence immediately ensued. McCoy groaned and was ignored.

Spock expertly landed the flyer in front of a huge, ancient, forbidding colossus of a stone building. McCoy followed Spock out, craned his neck to take in its size, and groaned again. Spock led the way up the marble steps and through the doors. He indicated a hallway to their right. McCoy trailed him obediently, his nerves causing him to attain and slightly surpass Spock's pace, as if he could get the six months over with that much faster by accelerating. His sudden lead as they rounded the corner to the right was what caused McCoy to slam into

the Vulcan female.

"Why don't you watch where you're going?!" he barked tensely.

"A slower pace would be recommended in these halls." She looked him over critically, taking in his rounded, human ears and his gently-curved eyebrows.

McCoy studied her in turn. Her black hair was tied back severely, rendering her upswept brows and pointed ears all too apparent. But that was not all that was apparent. "Aren't you a bit young to be here?"

She straightened coldly in Vulcan dignity. "I am old enough to be assigned to the crew of a starship, which I will be joining six months from now."

"The Enterprise," Spock guessed.

"Affirmative."

"I am First Officer Spock of the Enterprise."

One brow rose in response. "Greetings, sir. I am Petrasek."

Spock acknowledged with a nod.

McCoy rolled his eyes.

Petrasek nodded again to Spock and continued on in her previous direction, paying no further heed to McCoy.

"Oh lord!" McCoy's eyes rose to the ceiling.

"Doctor?"

"Yes?" He waited resignedly for the chastising that he knew was to come.

"Perhaps you could endeavor to make a better first impression on the other forty-nine, should we encounter them."

"Yes, Spock." Eyes still fixed on the ceiling, McCoy followed behind Spock slowly and carefully, after his embarrassment and his double-scolding, determined that any additional collisions must involve Spock and not him.

They proceeded without further incident to an office door.

"This is the office of your advisor," Spock informed McCoy, tapping politely.

"Enter," came the response.

McCoy had always thought of Spock as large and powerful. But his stature seemed diminished by that of the advisor, who introduced himself as Spacek. He was taller and broader than Spock, perhaps equally muscular, and presented the impression of being even more formidable and forbidding. He was expecting them; he knew of McCoy's assignment; but he greeted them, not with the typical Vulcan indifference that McCoy had expected, but with something nearing condescension. McCoy had long been aware of the existence of anti-human prejudice in some of these supposedly emotionless, completely rational beings. He had felt it first with T'Pol, whose evident disgust at Kirk's and McCoy's attendance at Spock's pon farr had led her to demand how Spock pledged their behavior. Her tone and attitude had suggested to McCoy that he and Kirk were viewed as unruly puppies who might at any moment wet on the floor. Her obvious preoccupation with the physical and mental superiority of her own race had manifested itself as an almost-sneer as she had addressed the two Earthmen as "outworlders." McCoy's disconcerting fear and resentment at her nerve-jangling treatment of them came rushing back to him now, as he heard the same severe tone and saw the same harsh eyes in this man, his advisor. His nerves already frayed to the breaking point by an unwanted assignment on an undesirable planet, compounded by a lecture given him first by a young snip not dry behind her pointed ears and then by his supposed friend and protector Spock, now followed by evident racial hostility from the man upon whom he was to be dependent for his academic guidance, McCoy felt something inside snap as he was handed his course schedule.

"Five classes in a row each day, with no break between any two of them?!" he exploded humanly. "You've got to be kidding!"

Spacek stared coldly at the perpetrator of the pathetic display.

Spock, decidedly nonplussed, cast a tired look at his suddenly even-more-difficult-than-usual companion.

Spacek turned to Spock, deliberately ignoring the insolent inferior who had initiated the outburst, and speculated, "Perhaps the simple-minded schools on the home planet of your rather infantile companion would be more geared to his developmental level. If he is to remain here, perhaps you will find a way to get this undisciplined child under your control in time for his first class tomorrow." With a wave of his hand, he indicated their dismissal.

Once on the outside of the office door, Spock said simply, "Honing your diplomatic skills, Doctor?"

McCoy rolled his eyes tragically. "This is going to be fun for six months."

Chapter Five

Spock grounded the flyer and stepped out into the scorchingly-hot Vulcanian mid-afternoon. As usual, he had come to pick up McCoy at the end of his last class of the day. While the doctor obviously could have learned to operate the vehicle for himself, such procedure was deemed impractical; Sarek and Amanda, and perhaps even Spock, would be needing it as well at various unpredictable times. McCoy could not be allowed to monopolize the machine for the hours that he would be away each day.

Spock ascended the stairs, turned right, and followed the all-too-familiar path toward the classroom in which the last of McCoy's five daily courses was held. He arrived at the closed door, and heard the muffled voice of the professor still lecturing inside. Realizing that he was some five minutes early, Spock quietly retreated a few steps away, not wishing to pose a distraction.

The hand snaked around the corner and found its purchase on Spock's right shoulder. Instantly realizing the purpose from having previously inflicted the method on scores of humans and humanoids himself throughout the years, Spock summoned his Vulcan strength in a near-super-human effort to remain conscious, and his other hand lunged at the invader that was even then squeezing the feeling out of his entire right arm and his consciousness out of his brain. Spock's left hand found the attacker's right, but the numbness spreading in all directions from the source of the sharp pain was beginning to draw his left arm, and mind as well, into the enveloping darkness. One final severe constriction of the assailant's hand plunged Spock inexorably into the rushing blackness and silence of unconsciousness. Two hands gripped Spock's two wrists, and dragged him through a nearby door that then closed behind him.

A tired Leonard McCoy shuffled behind the other students on his way to the door. He had found that it was better to follow than to precede Vulcan students: they tended to depart more efficiently than humans, not stopping to cluster and chatter and clog the exit. Come to think of it, McCoy mused glumly to himself, they tended to do everything more efficiently than their human counterparts. One question never heard in Vulcan classrooms, frequently heard in human classrooms, was "I don't understand." It wasn't that they didn't admit it; it was that it actually never seemed to be true for them. They really were walking computers. I wonder if there's any such thing as a retarded Vulcan? McCoy asked himself silently, then realized, *Sure* there is. A human. Me. At least, that was how they'd made him feel at times. Not that they'd done anything overt. They just progressed naturally and smoothly at a rate about five times that in Earthly classrooms. On Earth, Doctor McCoy had been one of the most intelligent students in his very prestigious college. Here, he was at the bottom of his class.

Now through the door, McCoy looked around expectantly. Where was his friend, his protector? The familiar, welcome face that had begun to look almost human to him after repeated, long-term exposure to these strict, rigid thinking-machines? Spock was nowhere in sight. McCoy was baffled. Spock was never late. It was unheard of for him even to be a second behind schedule. Feeling lost, depressed, and anxious to get home, and even more anxious to get away from the Academy for the few hours that he could, McCoy headed on down the hall. Perhaps he would encounter Spock on the way. Or maybe Spock had remained with the flyer today for some reason. His sudden burst of speed earned him stares from some of his classmates, whose steady, efficient pace he'd begun to exceed. He forced himself to rein-in a bit, remembering his embarrassing collision with Petrasek on his first day here. He avoided their stares and self-consciously followed behind them. As the group neared the main door, it became evident that McCoy was not going to encounter Spock on the way. He must be at the flyer, McCoy assured himself lamely. He was trying not to worry, but the prospect of being abandoned here, coupled with real concern for his friend, made the attempt increasingly difficult. And what would McCoy do if the flyer were not there either? There was no one inside the Academy, among all of his professors and classmates, whom he trusted enough to ask for assistance.

Once through the main door, and out onto the spacious marble steps, McCoy could break out from behind the others to the side and pelt down the stairs without fear of collision. He charged to the spot where Spock always parked the flyer, and sure enough, it was there. But no Spock. Now what should he do? They could not possibly have missed each other. McCoy had taken the most direct possible route from the classroom to the flyer. In the interests of efficiency, Spock would have followed no other passage either. McCoy looked helplessly from the flyer to the building and back again. He wished desperately for Sarek and Amanda to advise him. Should he try to operate the flyer, and go get them? But what if Spock were hurt and needed his help? Besides, he had not been taught to operate the flyer; he could easily wreck it; and that would compound problems immeasurably.

Having no other satisfactory recourse in mind, McCoy returned once again to the Academy. He entered and despondently began to retrace his steps. By this time, the doctor was not very optimistic of the outcome. But just as he rounded the corner leading to the classroom, he nearly collided with Spock.

"Spock!!" McCoy yelled joyfully. "This was one collision I would have been happy to have!" For the first time, McCoy could relate to Amanda's desire to hug Spock; he was experiencing the same impulse himself.

"Doctor." Spock's face was serious with concern. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine! Why?"

"Good. It had occurred to me that the assailant might have been after you as well. Or even primarily."

McCoy blinked. "What assailant?"

"The one that attacked me. Come," he instructed as he took McCoy's arm, "let us go home; I'll explain on the way."

"Attacked you?!" McCoy blurted, but followed. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Quite."

"What happened?!"

"I was waiting for you outside of your classroom when the attack took place. I had arrived a few minutes early."

"What sort of attack? Phaser? Fists?"

Spock glanced ruefully at the doctor. "The Vulcan nerve pinch."

McCoy's eyes popped, and he suffered one loud outburst of laughter before he could subdue his reaction.

Spock cast him an unappreciative look.

"Uh, sorry. I suppose that even humans are not immune to irony," he deliberately misquoted.

"Hmm. Indeed," Spock acknowledged wryly.

"Well, now you've probably learned one thing about that nerve pinch that you use so much."

"And what is that, Doctor?"

"It hurts."

Spock shrugged the fact off as insignificant.

"I suppose that it was done to you by another Vulcan."

"Obviously," Spock observed drily, "since no human, even Captain Kirk, seems to be able to master the technique."

"And you really have tried to teach him before, haven't you?"

"On numerous occasions."

"But who was willing to volunteer to be the victim for his practice sessions?"

"I allowed him to practice on me."

"That was your mistake. You should have given him a less formidable opponent."

"I did not struggle. However, Doctor, your suggestion has merit. I will keep you in mind as his practice victim for our next session."

“Oh no. Please. You’re forgetting that I already know how much it hurts. But speaking of struggling, I’ll bet that you didn’t go down without a fight today.”

"That is true. However, I was not able to see my assailant."

"That's too bad. You have no idea at all who it was?"

"Negative."

"Do you have any guess as to why it was done?"

"Guess, Doctor?"

"Excuse me. I meant theory."

"None."

"When you woke up, had you been moved?"

"Unknown. Either I was not moved, or I was returned to the site of the attack. However, Doctor, it is likely that I was moved and then returned, because if I had not been, you and your classmates could easily have seen me lying in the hallway; I was not far away from your classroom at the time."

"Then you regained consciousness at the location of the attack."

"Affirmative."

"Spock." McCoy hesitated. "Why did you say a few minutes ago that you wondered if I might be the primary target of the attacker?"

"Merely because you, not I, are the stranger here. And because there are those who do not approve of the presence of humans among us."

"Oh." McCoy was sorry that he'd asked. "But now that whoever it was didn't get me, we can rule that out, right Spock?"

"Not at all, Doctor. There are any number of possible reasons why a potential attacker could have failed to reach you."

"But, we know, now, that he was after you," McCoy stammered.

"My attack could have been a prelude to your own. The intention could have been to remove your protector first, as an easier means of capturing you."

Now McCoy was really sorry that he'd asked. He shivered and moved a little closer to Spock for the rest of the walk to the flyer.

Chapter Six

Dr. Leonard McCoy sighed inwardly as he followed the other students during class-change. Now well into his third month of exile, he had grown to feel used to the treadmill of his new life. Used to it in the way that one grew accustomed to a recurring nightmare which, while it never totally lost its horror, still became somewhat blunted through simple overexposure. Each morning he awoke; saw that, yes, he really was still there in the nicely furnished guest-bedroom of a house that, in another location, would have been absolutely delightful; heard Spock's soft tap on the bedroom door; moaned and pulled the covers defensively up over his head; and felt his Vulcan friend literally dragging him out from under to face the day. Each day he silently and mechanically suffered his way through five non-stop, endless courses. Each evening he enjoyed his only real respite: sitting in the living room conversing pleasantly with Sarek and Amanda, who truly were good company. Then it was off to bed, to sleep away what hours he could of his sentence, before the next morning came to annoy him. At least there had been no further incidents like the one when Spock was attacked, early in McCoy's term of imprisonment. They had not forgotten the issue, but neither had they resolved it, and additional discussion of the matter had seemed pointless.

McCoy and the other students entered their next class, a lab, and each went directly and efficiently to his assigned lab table to recommence working on the experiment. McCoy was glad that they had not been told to pair off and work with lab partners. Having five professors constantly judging him was pressure enough; he did not want a critical lab partner providing more of the same. He was also all too aware that none of the Vulcan students would have wished to work with him anyway, and he did not need to have the fact blatantly demonstrated to him by witnessing their responses to an order to pair up with others. As it was, this was the most tolerable part of his student-day. He could be left alone to work quietly and unobtrusively; he did not have to be called upon by professors to answer questions. It was not that he did not know the answers: he was holding his own better and better all the time as he grew accustomed to the more rapid pace. It was the emotions. His own. No matter how carefully he phrased his responses, nor how great his effort to speak them in a bland, neutral tone, his voice always came out sounding to him like the overzealous commentary of an Earthly sportscaster. Compared to the stoic, boring tonalities of all of those around him, he came off sounding either exuberant, or tragic, or flustered. The sound of his own voice in class dismayed him. The corresponding reactions of his classmates distressed him even more. They turned each time to stare at the excitable human. In response to their stares, he blushed. And then they watched that. It was not that they were cruel or vicious; it was simply that they were curious about this strange, emotive alien in their midst. They studied him, just as they studied the various specimens set before them in their labs. In fact, McCoy often wondered just how much difference the Vulcans saw between him and the creatures under their microscopes. He had attempted to put these misgivings into words only the night before this. He had tried to express to his housemates the painful difference between how he was treated at home and how he was treated at the Academy. He had attempted to explain to Spock and Sarek that, while they treated him as a person, however different, the other Vulcans clearly regarded him as a subhuman animal. They had listened politely, but had not really understood. They had attributed these concerns to McCoy's own overactive fears and inhibitions. Only Amanda had understood. She had smiled tenderly, her eyes gentle with sorrow for him, and she had patted his hand. That had been enough.

McCoy's escapist reminiscences of the previous evening were interrupted by a sudden snag in his experiment. He had run out of one of the chemicals needed in this stage of the procedure. He looked around self-consciously. All of the Vulcans were studiously proceeding with their work in perfect smooth harmony and complete silence. He dared not speak up and ask one for help. He would have every eye in the room painfully upon him again. He did not want their attention; in fact, he preferred not to give them his, either. He raised his eyes uncertainly to Professor Sondak's desk and was not surprised to see it vacant. This was one item in common between Vulcan professors and human professors: a tendency to wander off from science labs and leave them unmonitored, apparently oblivious to the very real danger that a student, through

innocent miscalculation, could blow himself up, and the room with him. On Earth, in college, McCoy had often witnessed this negligence, and had twice seen reasonably serious mishaps result. Fortunately, there had been no loss of life on either occasion, but there had been loss of equipment. The Earthly professors had simply been off playing with the computers. McCoy wondered what his Vulcan professor's excuse would be if anyone dared to ask. No doubt, it would be logical.

McCoy realized that this line of thought was getting him nowhere. He fought down the urge to sigh, not wanting the undivided staring attention of his classmates, and wandered from the room in search of the needed chemical. He glanced into several classrooms, realizing that they would be stocked only with text-viewers, and found himself in front of his advisor's office. McCoy knocked softly. Receiving no response, he swung the door open and peered timidly around the edge of it.

"Professor Spacek?"

The room was unoccupied. McCoy saw a door at the rear of the office, behind the desk, that had on several prior occasions peaked his curiosity. Perhaps the advisor was in there. McCoy let himself into the office proper and approached the rear door. He tapped on it. When he received no answer, he tried the knob. McCoy was stunned to discover that it was locked. In all of his time at the Academy, McCoy had never previously encountered a locked door. It was not the policy of the Academy to employ locks, since learning was considered to be freely available to all. Door-locks were deemed inappropriate to this philosophy. Sure that he must have been mistaken, McCoy jiggled the doorknob again.

His arm was seized from behind by an iron grip. McCoy spun to face the forbidding visage of Spacek, and gasped involuntarily.

"Human," the professor addressed him ominously. "What are you doing?"

"I...I was trying to find you. I wanted to ask for.... That is, I've run out of...."

"Whatever it is that you have run out of, you will not find it in there."

"The...the door is locked," he stated in amazement.

"Perhaps even a human can understand that that means that you are not allowed inside."

"Y...yes, sir." McCoy sought to pry the bone-crushing fingers from his arm.

Spacek retained his vise-like grip long enough to impress upon his victim the impossibility of escape unless he, Spacek, wished to allow it. Then he contemptfully released him.

McCoy backed away for several paces, and then turned and walked rapidly from the office.

Hours later, after his last class, McCoy elatedly greeted Spock, exhibiting even greater relief than usual. If Spock noticed the difference, he made no comment.

McCoy managed to contain himself until they entered the flyer, and then he said, "There's something that I don't understand!"

"You should ask your instructor."

"I don't mean in class! I mean in the Academy! There's something funny going on in there!"

"'Funny,' Doctor? That human word has a variety of different interpretations."

"I mean weird! Unexplainable! There's something going on in there that's not supposed to be!"

"Would you care to elaborate?"

"Yes I would care to elaborate! Have you ever known any of the Academy doors to be locked?"

"Not in my experience."

"Aha! That's what I thought! Well, one is, now!"

Spock was unimpressed.

McCoy shifted his eyes conspiratorially and dropped his bombshell. "And it's that inner door behind Spacek's desk in his office!" He looked triumphant, expecting Spock to show at least a modicum of interest. He was to be disappointed.

"And how would you know that, Doctor?" Spock eyed his human companion regretfully, clearly already having deduced the answer.

"I tried it!" McCoy shrugged elaborately, unashamed.

"Doctor McCoy," Spock admonished him tiredly. "I believe that I have instructed you before on Vulcan respect for privacy."

"Yes, but...."

"What you did was inexcusable in Vulcan society," Spock droned on, refusing to be interrupted. "Perhaps Spock was correct in referring to you as an undisciplined child. Were you truly a child, and were I your father, I would, after such offense, administer the quaint, primitive Earthly ritual known as a spanking."

McCoy blinked at him.

"Do not tempt me, Doctor. I have often been curious about that peculiar ritual."

McCoy reached out to him plaintively, as though touching could help Spock to understand. "But that's just it. I'm curious. About that door. And about why Spock reacted so strongly when he caught me."

Spock closed his eyes in something nearing despair. "He caught you."

"Yes! And he hurt me!"

Spock was obviously suppressing the urge to express joy at this revelation.

"Well? Don't you care?"

"Are you injured, Doctor? Do you need medical assistance?"

"No, but...."

"Then, no. I am uninterested."

"But," McCoy tried lamely, "I was only trying to find Spock. I needed to ask him...."

"Doctor." Spock's eyes penetrated his. "I repeat, do not tempt me."

McCoy swallowed and fell silent.

The two rode the rest of the way in absolute quiet.

When the flyer landed in the courtyard, McCoy stormed out and away from Spock. He stomped into the house, his face fuming. Amanda and Sarek looked up in amazement at the usually sweet-tempered doctor. Some of his fury abated in his embarrassment. By this time, Spock had entered behind him, and McCoy moved away automatically. His eyes shot glares into Spock, who fixed him with a frozen stare in return.

"What's going on; what's wrong?" Amanda's voice was filled with concern. "Spock?"

Instead, Spock addressed the doctor. "You could have kept this between us. Instead, as usual, you allowed your emotions to rule you."

"What would have been the point?!" McCoy demanded. "I knew that you would tell on me!"

Spock's near-impatience returned. "A childish choice of words again, Doctor?"

McCoy bit back a retort, and turned to Spock's parents. "Spock's angry with me."

"Doctor, Vulcans do not get angry," Spock reminded him.

"Huh! That's what you say!"

Spock ignored McCoy, and proceeded to inform his parents of the human's "crime." At the end, they looked at McCoy expectantly.

McCoy pointed an accusatory finger at Spock. "He threatened to spank me!"

Sarek's eyebrows rose. "Indeed? An appropriate punishment, if somewhat archaic."

"Oh for the love of...!"

"Leonard." Amanda rose and approached him. "You must try to understand that Vulcans value their privacy above all else. It's sacred to them. Entering someone else's office when he's not there, let alone trying another door when there is no response from within, is considered to be an extreme breach of protocol."

"Oh please don't take their side!"

"I'm not." She took his beseeching hand in hers. "I'm not, Leonard. But I've lived here for a long time, and I'm trying to help you learn what I've learned about Vulcans over the years. What you did is considered very wrong here."

McCoy lowered his eyes bitterly. "I'm tired. May I just go to bed, please?"
She let go in disappointment. "Of course."

Chapter Seven

McCoy relearned the difference between tired and sleepy. He tossed incessantly in the bed, and could not fall asleep. The peaceful nothingness that would have been especially welcome after such a trying day would not envelope him. His arm still ached dully from Spock's hammerlock, but the far greater pain came from the remembrance of the severe look in Spock's eyes, the stern attitude of Sarek, and the failure of even Amanda to support him. The abandonment and disapproval of the only people on the entire planet whom he trusted was almost too much to bear. The three of them had been the only comfort that had kept him going during this horrible ordeal. Now where was he going to turn? This final blow made him miss Jim Kirk now more than ever. He had barely been able to hold those feelings at bay throughout the day-to-day trials; now they came flooding in on him. He needed Jim, needed his reassurance, and above all, needed his approval. It would be another three months before McCoy would see his captain; and even worse, life in this house would probably become as awkward and difficult from now on as life in the Academy.

The Academy. Something was going on there. Something sinister. He felt it in his gut. First, there had been the attack on Spock. Now, there was a locked room into which McCoy was not permitted. A connection? Skimpy evidence, to be sure. So what did he have to go on, really? Human intuition? Great. A commodity Vulcans valued highly, right? Sure. Right up there with Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. Without more facts to back up his suspicions, Spock and Sarek would never believe him. Facts. Facts and logic. That magic word, logic. So what was the logical thing to do? He wouldn't get any facts lying here. He wouldn't get any sleep either. Might as well get up and accomplish something. Besides, this house no longer seemed as friendly and inviting as it had. If Spock and Sarek would not investigate these strange occurrences, then he would.

McCoy sat up and swung his feet over the edge of the bed. He eased himself quietly to the floor, reminding himself of how careful he must be not to make the least noise; acute Vulcan hearing would pick up the slightest sound. He groped in the dark for his clothes and pulled them on stealthily. Then came the hard part: getting from his room to the outside of the house. McCoy eased the bedroom door silently open, thinking, What'll I do if one of them is still in the living room? What'll I say? How will I explain this? McCoy wasn't sure which would get him into more trouble: the truth or a lie. He hoped fervently not to have to offer either. He would much rather solve the mystery and then neatly hand them the solution; they would have to listen to him, then. His heart thumping so loudly that he feared that their Vulcan ears would hear it, he peered cautiously around the doorway to the living room. Relief! No one there. McCoy tiptoed to the front door, and soundlessly let himself out of it. It was a bit of a walk to the Academy, but not too bad in the cool of the night. McCoy certainly wouldn't want to try it in the heat of the Vulcan day, though. A Vulcan, perhaps, could manage it, but certainly not a human. McCoy mentally fussed at himself for that thought: he received enough reminders of human inferiority from Vulcans; he didn't need to pile more of them on himself.

When McCoy arrived at the Academy, there was no one in sight. He pulled open the main door, thinking ironically, Of course I can get in: doors around here are never locked, right? As he ventured down the hall in his well-worn direction, he was mildly disconcerted at the sound of his own footsteps; unlike upon the carpeting of home, silent tiptoeing was impossible on the well-shined floors of the Academy. No matter how carefully he walked, the echo came back to him unnervingly. It was almost a relief to arrive before the theoretically more frightening door of his advisor.

McCoy gulped, turned the knob, and slipped inside of the outer office. He pulled out the phaser that he had hoped never to have to use here, as he crossed to the rear door. He gritted his teeth as he endured the sound of the phaser eliminating the lock. The door swung wide to reveal an inner lab.

McCoy started violently as his eyes took in the view to his right. An intricate transparent tank containing a nurturing envelope of green blood surrounding...a fetus. Ectogenesis. A Vulcan baby developing independently, not within a female body. McCoy was impressed. Had the

Vulcans really progressed this far? So far that they could do this? No, he reminded himself, not they: he. Spacek. In total secrecy, in an inner lab behind his office, taking advantage of Vulcan privacy taboos to lock his secret away from everyone else. A scientific achievement like this he should share! Not only with Vulcan society, but with humans and everyone else as well! The boon to women everywhere would be staggering! But somehow, McCoy doubted Spacek's concern for women, even of his own kind, let alone those of other species. Spacek's prejudice against humans probably extended to every other non-Vulcan species and to females in general as well. He was the kind of man who displayed a regard only for himself and his own immediate circle.

Forcing himself to tear his eyes away from the tantalizing spectacle in the tank and the medical breakthrough that it represented, McCoy noticed for the first time what was contained in the view to the left side of the lab. A computer. He approached it gingerly, hoping that his limited knowledge of computers would be sufficient. It did not completely resemble the other computers in the Academy. It appeared to be private access, not tied in to the central computer. If that were true, there was a chance that the revolutionary data on this grand experiment might not be burdened with secret access codes, since Spacek would not expect anyone to violate the Vulcan privacy taboo and break in here.

"Computer, tie in." McCoy forced his voice to sound as confident and routine as possible. "Display files on ectogenesis experiment."

"Working. On screen."

Dr. McCoy thanked his good fortune and commenced studying the display. A long series of biochemical formulas was interspersed with descriptive passages. McCoy emitted a low whistle as certain key phrases came to his attention: "clone research," "subject: Spock," "tissue samples," and "eliminated contaminating human elements."

"Computer off."

McCoy sat in horror, pondering what he had just learned. Spacek had cloned a new Spock from the original, but one that was free of the genetic influence of Amanda. This was Sarek's child, but without the human mother. This was what Spock would be if he were a pure Vulcan, and not half-human. McCoy again looked over at the baby growing in the tank. This was Spock, but without the qualities that made him so much more gentle and likeable than most Vulcans, so much easier to get along with than the others. McCoy had occasionally wondered, during his stay on Vulcan, whether he had perhaps over-estimated Spacek's prejudice against humans. He now saw that he had seriously under-estimated it. Dare he use the word hate in regard to a Vulcan? The typical Vulcan would tell him that this was impossible, but it seemed to him now that Spacek must truly hate humans to go to such lengths to prove a point. And what other motive could there be besides proving a point? Apparently Spacek wished to show, as this child grew up, that it was in some way superior to Spock, or perhaps even in every way: physically, mentally, emotionally. McCoy grunted at the thought of the word "emotionally": to Spacek, "emotionally superior" would mean total lack of emotions. The child's emotional success would be judged by its coldness. This baby was to be used as the pawn in a sick experiment, its life used to make a case against its genetic relatives, Spock and Sarek. And the reference to tissue samples: of course! Spacek must have been the one who had nerve-pinched Spock early in their stay on Vulcan. He must have dragged the unconscious Spock into his office and into this very inner lab. He must have drawn an insignificantly small tissue sample from his hapless victim; a mere few cells would have done in order to clone the baby now before McCoy. Then he must have quickly deposited the still unconscious Spock right back in the hall from where he had taken him. That explained the students' failure to see Spock lying helpless in the hall; Spock was taken before class-dismissal and returned after the students' departure, probably at the very moment that McCoy had been fuming and fretting by the flyer, wondering what to do. If only he had just waited there by the classroom! He might have seen the culprit return the victim to the scene of the crime! And they would have gotten to the bottom of things immediately, and avoided all of the subsequent hassles! They also might have prevented this, McCoy thought as he looked sadly at the baby in the tank. The child was definitely too far along to "prevent." It

already existed. And because of the method of ectogenesis, it was not as if a mother's choice in regard to her own body was involved; there was no mother. Therefore, abortion seemed somehow inappropriate. The decision should be that of Spock and Sarek, but.... How was he going to tell them?? Since the mystery had arisen, McCoy had been so eager to resolve it, so that he could hand the solution to Spock and Sarek with a flourish and with a hearty I-told-you-so. But now.... That innocent baby was, by no fault of its own, the ultimate insult to the pride of both men. How could McCoy be the one to throw that in their faces?

"Human."

McCoy wheeled and winced in fear at the sight of Spock looming in the doorway.

Chapter Eight

Spacek's hands closed with finality around McCoy's upper arms. He squeezed viciously and the human winced and tried not to cry out in pain.

"I believe that your species calls this breaking and entering, and considers it a crime," Spacek told him. "Now what shall be your punishment?"

McCoy watched his captor, wide-eyed, and uttered not a sound.

Spacek's eyes lit with something which, in a human, would be called sadism. "Are you familiar with tal-shaya?"

To McCoy's mind came again, unbidden, the sight of the Tellarite that he'd examined nearly two years earlier, who had been brutally murdered. His neck had been broken by someone who had known precisely where to apply pressure in order to snap the neck instantly. It had not been a pretty sight. Spock had called the method tal-shaya, and had indicated that it had been known by Vulcans since ancient times. And now Spacek was threatening to do it to him. McCoy tried not to let his fear show in his face, but it rose to betray him in a slight twitch of his lips and a subtle flicker of his eyes.

Cruelty flashed in Spacek's eyes once again; he seemed to be enjoying the human's fright; it fascinated him.

"Yes," he continued menacingly. "I see that you are."

He released his hold on one of McCoy's arms and reached his hand around to the back of his neck. His probing fingers found McCoy's back bone in the center of the back of the neck, and zeroed in on a specific spot, adjusting slightly to position the ball of his middle finger exactly on target.

McCoy swallowed hard, and Spacek felt it with the heel of his hand. His eyes brightened in the Vulcan equivalent of subtle amusement. Spacek imparted an infinitesimal amount of pressure to the neck bone. McCoy closed his eyes and allowed one small whimper to escape.

Spacek abruptly released his deadly grip and returned his hand to the human's arm. McCoy's eyes flew open in astonishment.

"Perhaps that will be your fate," taunted Spacek. "Later. But first, I wish to find out just how much you know." He cast a glance at the computer to his left. With that, still gripping McCoy's arms, he propelled his victim backward across the room, pressing McCoy's back into the far wall.

A nightmarish vision flashed instantly into McCoy's dreading mind, a memory of being shoved in the same manner into a different wall by a different Vulcan. He once again saw the other face vividly before him: a bearded antimatter Spock from a parallel universe pinning his helpless victim against the wall, reaching long alien fingers to McCoy's head, and probing his mind violently and relentlessly. The pain of that savage encounter came rushing back to him: the sensation of the delicate layers of McCoy's brain being peeled back to reveal the tender innermost heart of his thoughts; the unwanted outer layers being cast roughly aside in the process, like ripping unneeded pages out of a book. And he remembered the aftermath: a dazed, confused McCoy trying in vain to retrieve those lost pages and to put them into some semblance of order; a feeling of being lost and unable to reclaim the very memories that the alien, wrong-universe Spock had violated; and the need to be led by the arm by that very same violator to the transporter room and handed to Mr. Scott like a small child who couldn't find his way.

And now it was going to happen to him again.

McCoy watched helplessly as Spacek's strong fingers reached slowly to his head. The courage that he'd been struggling so hard to preserve shattered and fell to pieces. He emitted a cry of anguish, and in the last second before he felt Spacek's touch, McCoy screamed, "Spock!!"

The first thing that Spacek encountered upon entering the human's mind was his terror. Waves upon waves of it assaulted him as he penetrated. To many Vulcans, this would be distasteful, but Spacek did not find it so. McCoy's panic reaffirmed Spacek's own assumption of superiority over this pathetic creature, and thus emboldened his confidence. As long as he could directly experience the spell of horror that he cast over his victim, Vulcan power over humans

was confirmed. Spacek sought first to discover the source of McCoy's frantic resistance to the probe. He saw the recollection of the previous experience as the human saw it, but overlaid with his own more mature interpretation as well. The bearded Spock had not been gentle, to be sure, but neither had he gone out of his way to inflict the pain that McCoy remembered so well. But Spacek would deliberately hurt him. Experimentally, he advanced that thought directly into the human mind that he studied. The reverberation of McCoy's corresponding horror struck him almost physically and delighted him. Like a knife slicing into delicate tissue, Spacek thrust his formidable presence into the first layers of McCoy's open, vulnerable mind, tearing unwanted fragments with intentional vindictiveness. McCoy's agony pulsed back at him like a living thing; Spacek felt the fragile human mind writhe and recoil under his assault. There he paused for brief moments, savoring the human's mental cries at his torture. Then, like an old-fashioned hypodermic needle, Spacek injected his force deeper into the suffering mind. Like salt rubbed into an open wound, Spacek stung his way in, until he felt the puny resistance of a pitiful being pleading, "Get out! Get out!" Vengefully wielding his mental strength like a club, he brutally bludgeoned his way deeper and farther until the tiny begging voice was silenced in the paralysis of searing pain. At this point, Spacek paused once again in his attack, luxuriating in the emotional torrent of spasms which welled in unstoppable tides from McCoy's battered mind. Never entirely unaware of external physical events, Spacek could feel the uncontrollable shuddering of his frail captive where he held him imprisoned against the wall. McCoy's tremors were in perfect harmony with Spacek's sharp stabs of conquest. Lest McCoy dare to actually physically struggle against his tormentor, Spacek harshly dug his fingers even more deeply into the arm that he held. Far beyond any hope of delivering the anticipated resistance, McCoy's mind issued a plaintiff cry, imploring his invader to grant some measure of pity. Instead, the intruder, revitalized by this additional display of human helplessness, seized his Vulcan strength like a ramrod, and bore wrathfully and mercilessly the rest of the way into the exposed heart of McCoy's mind. With a tiny wail of surrender, the tender inner being of McCoy offered for inspection every moment of its life-memory. Spacek saw and cast aside many things that he would have liked to scrutinize if he had had forever in which to do so, such as the peculiar relationship between McCoy and Spock. Instead, Spacek dug into the recent data that he sought. He witnessed McCoy's successful operation of the computer, along with the many informational charts that it displayed. He saw, and simultaneously registered McCoy's prior reactions to, the certain key phrases in the data: "clone research," "subject: Spock," "tissue samples," and "eliminated contaminating human elements." He watched with interest McCoy's previous conclusions, including his accurate mental replay of how those tissue samples had been obtained from Spock and why there had not been any witnesses. Spacek observed with wry amusement McCoy's theorizing as to the possibility of hatred within a Vulcan, and troubled himself to confirm for the human that yes, while Vulcans submerged their feelings from the outside world and usually even from themselves, those feelings did exist, and could, somewhat rarely, include hate. Finally, Spacek felt the sensitive human's deep concern over the potentially injured pride of Spock and Sarek upon the revelation of the existence and nature of the baby in the ectogenetic tank. He felt, too, McCoy's earlier dread at the thought that he should have to be the one to inform them of this development. "Don't worry," Spacek mockingly communicated to McCoy. "You won't have to." He flashed into the human's waiting mind a vivid image of his own neck being broken by Spacek: the head snapping backward grotesquely and the body crumpling like a ragdoll. Spacek paused a moment to appreciate the renewed wave of fear that this inspired, and then yanked carelessly free of the human's mind, hearing a corresponding yelp that was partly mental echo and partly vocal.

The dilated, unfocusing blue eyes of McCoy stared back at the withdrawn Vulcan, not quite seeing him, but trying vainly to find some shred of mercy just the same. Spacek, once more gripping McCoy's arms, dragged the stumbling, half-aware human back into the outer office. He propped the swaying man in the corner and slapped a replacement code-access lock on the inner lab door.

"I'm not going to kill you here," he told his victim, pulling him toward the outer door which led into the hallway. Just as he was about to yank McCoy into the hall, Spacek stopped and cocked his head, listening intently. His Vulcan ears had discerned a sound not accounted for by the two of them. He concentrated. Footsteps. Deciding quickly, Spacek reached to McCoy's shoulder and pinched hard. McCoy winced and then collapsed into blessed merciful oblivion.

Chapter Nine

Spock lay awake in the darkness, mentally replaying his quarrel with Dr. McCoy. The human had indeed committed an extreme breach of Vulcan etiquette in entering Spock's office without permission and trying a locked door, but it was certainly possible that he had done so in innocent ignorance of the severity of the offense. After all, McCoy had begged Spock to accompany him to Vulcan because of the fear of situations precisely like this one. His exact words had been: "I don't understand most of the customs; it would be too easy for me to make mistakes." Perhaps Spock should have employed a gentler, more tolerant approach in dealing with the doctor's error. Quarreling was illogical. Humans did require a great deal of patience, but Spock had always prided himself on his ability to cope with their peculiarities. This may have been an occasion on which his performance had not been as admirable as usual. If so, he should rectify the situation as soon as possible.

Spock calculated the probability that the doctor would be asleep as being very low. A typical human, after an argument of that magnitude, should require more hours than had passed in order to return to a sufficiently calm state in which sleep would be possible. Therefore, it was logical to approach McCoy now.

Having arrived at that conclusion, Spock executed it efficiently by coming to his feet soundlessly so as to disturb no one else in the household, and slipped from his bedroom to the guest room. He pushed the door open and observed the empty bed. Spock's brows knit in immediate vexation. Where could his unruly charge have gone now? No sooner had he posed the question in his mind than the answer presented itself. Knowing McCoy, after having had such an argument, there was only one place that he would go.

As Spock crossed the living room on his way to pursue his aggravating responsibility, he made the decision not to take the flyer. Its engine sound, however faint, would be certain to awaken Sarek. Spock and his disobedient companion had caused his parents enough inconvenience.

Sarek lay awake in the darkness, mentally reliving the rather startling upheaval between his son and their guest. Startling, yes, but not totally unexpected. He could recall similar scenes in which he himself had participated: the role of Spock taken by him and the role of McCoy filled by Amanda. When he had first brought her here, she had made comparable gauche errors. And he had been similarly impatient and unforgiving. They had grown together through the years because she had learned to be prudent and he had learned to be forgiving. If Spock and McCoy were to reasonably well endure their time together on Vulcan, they must learn the same things. If Sarek were to help, he must begin with Spock. The logical one must be convinced first; it would be the easier task. Then, together they could work with McCoy.

Sarek calculated the odds of Spock being asleep as quite low. He would be busy computing ways of more effectively dealing with the doctor. Therefore, this would be a good time to approach him.

Having reached that conclusion, Sarek slid carefully from beside his sleeping wife and came silently to his feet. He slipped into the hall, crossed to his son's door, and opened it. The bed was empty. Sarek raised one eyebrow. Evidently Spock had progressed more rapidly than Sarek had anticipated in his calculations of how to more appropriately deal with the human. He would therefore have gone to McCoy's room. Sarek proceeded to the guest bedroom and opened the door, expecting to see the two of them conversing quietly on the bed, and preparing to offer his services as referee if needed. Instead, he found another empty bed. Both eyebrows elevated. Had they gone to the living room? A quick survey in that direction revealed another negative. Where would they have gone? Back to the location of the source of the argument: the Academy? No, Spock would never have permitted that. But if he had not been consulted; if McCoy had left first? Yes, Spock would have gone after him.

Sarek crossed to the living room door, deciding to take the flyer. Its faint engine would never be discerned by the human ears of the only person left in the house.

Sarek grounded the flyer in front of the imposing structure that was the Academy. He entered the main door and then paused. He had not accompanied Spock and McCoy here; he did not know the location of McCoy's classrooms or the office around which the debate had raged. He walked to the foot of the stairs leading to upper levels and listened intently, straining to hear the slightest sound, such as footsteps on the stairs, doors opening, or voices. Hearing nothing from above, he turned his attention to the floor on which he presently was. Sarek listened first to the right...and heard the footsteps. He proceeded immediately down the hall to the right, and rounded the corner, in time to see Spock pausing midway down the hall and looking back at him.

"Father." Spock raised one eyebrow. "I heard your approach. But right before the sound of your steps, I heard other footsteps in the opposite direction. Someone apparently left Spacek's office and made a hasty departure. Perhaps because of having heard the sound of my approach."

"McCoy?"

Spock looked doubtful. "Why would McCoy run from me?"

"Fear of retribution? You and he are not exactly on the best of terms at the moment, and he surely knows that he came here against your wishes."

"Or," Spock speculated, "he might have fled because he did not know for certain that it was I."

"Who else would be in here at this hour?"

"Unknown. We have insufficient data. At the risk of being ourselves guilty of the offense for which I was so ready to punish the doctor, I suggest that we check Spacek's office for some clue. We do need to find McCoy."

"That would seem a necessary procedure."

Father and son proceeded down the hall to the door of the advisor's office. They listened at the door momentarily, and then, hearing nothing, Spock regretfully reached for the knob and turned it. The door swung inward to reveal the unmoving body of McCoy lying helpless on the floor.

The two Vulcans rushed to his side and felt carefully for pulse and respiration. The doctor was alive but unconscious.

"He does not appear to have injured himself in the fall," Spock pronounced. "He apparently has been the victim of a nerve pinch."

"Undoubtedly inflicted by the person that you heard departing from this office."

"Spacek."

"Logical."

Spock glanced at the inner office door behind the desk, which had been the cause of so much controversy, and saw that it bore a code-access lock. He indicated its presence to his father with an inclination of his head. "At least McCoy did not succeed in breaking into the room about which he was so curious."

Sarek nodded. "That is fortunate. Human curiosity can indeed lead these people into extreme measures that they would not otherwise take."

"Undoubtedly Spacek caught McCoy here and nerve-pinched him. McCoy is fortunate that Spacek did not choose a more extreme punishment."

"What I do not understand is why Spacek fled at the sound of your approach. Logically he should have waited to issue a complaint to you regarding the doctor's behavior."

"Especially when such a breach was committed twice in one day. And even if he did not surmise that it was I who approached, there was still no logical reason for him to flee."

"Perhaps we'll have our answers at a later time. Meanwhile, we should take McCoy home. I brought the flyer."

"Fortunate. I shall carry our misbehaving human."

"Spock, do not be too surprised at him. My early years with your mother were not without incident."

"Indeed." Spock rose, lifting McCoy easily in his arms. "I shall endeavor to keep that in mind."

The conversation continued as they exited the office and returned to the flyer.

"After an eventful night such as this," Sarek proposed, "McCoy will be tired. We should keep him home from his classes."

"He also will prefer not to face Spock, in his shame."

"Perhaps. But evidently, McCoy still does not believe that he has committed any offense."

"Fascinating."

Upon reaching the flyer, Sarek climbed into the pilot's seat after assisting Spock's entry with his awkward burden on the passenger's side. At that moment, McCoy stirred fitfully in Spock's arms.

"Ummm. No. No!" McCoy's head rolled back from the support of Spock's shoulder, and Spock quickly brought his other hand up from behind to cradle the human's head.

"Doctor, are you all right?"

McCoy's dazed eyes tried and failed to focus on Spock's face. "Don't kill me. Please. Don't spank me." Then he fainted once again into oblivion.

Spock turned to his father. "Extreme disorientation. Not unusual, I suppose, in a human who has undergone a nerve pinch."

"He will be all right," Sarek agreed. "Do not be concerned."

Chapter Ten

Dr. Leonard McCoy lay in his bed in Sarek's and Amanda's guest room suffering silently. The misery in his head was both physical and emotional. In addition to the actual pain, he endured the sense of incompleteness, the baffling vacancies in his thoughts. One moment, he would think that he remembered everything clearly. But then the next moment, his thoughts scattered like dandelion seeds in the breeze, floating off in an infinite number of different directions. Spock had ransacked McCoy's mind like a thief searching through bureau drawers, throwing all of the contents out in disarray. McCoy knew that all of the thoughts were still there, if only he could find a way to gather them all back up again and put them in their proper places. Any attempt, however, to retrieve and reorganize the confused, disjointed memories and fragments of his mind led to further agony. And McCoy knew, with the deepest dread in his heart, that the only cure was the same as the cause. Someone else, another Vulcan, must go inside his mind and set things to rights. And he feared that with every atom of his being. For that reason, he'd been carefully avoiding Spock and Sarek for days. Or when he could not avoid them, he engaged in as little conversation as possible. Fortunately, reticence did not disquiet Vulcans. They accepted his silence as moodiness, or as shame over his breach of Vulcan etiquette, or as simply an improvement in his personality. The human tendency to babble had, after all, never pleased Vulcans. And babble would indeed be the accurate term if the doctor were to become conversational now: in his present state, he could not maintain coherence for long. Then his Vulcan companions would suspect what was wrong with him, and would realize what they would have to do to him. And that must not be allowed to happen. McCoy had been through it before, after all. After the bearded, mirror-image Spock in the antimatter universe had torn into his mind. After he had been led to the transporter room like a helpless child and handed to Mr. Scott. After they had returned to their own Enterprise and McCoy had bluffed his way carefully through a few insignificant jokes with Kirk and Spock on the bridge. That had not required a great deal of concentration. After all of that, McCoy had done his stubborn best to seclude himself in his sickbay and hide from what he'd begun to suspect was inevitable. He'd avoided Kirk and Spock like a pro. Until the day that his snoopy, too-intelligent friend Jim Kirk had sought him out, concerned at his withdrawal....

"Bones, what's going on?"

"What?"

"You've been too quiet lately. That is, when I see you. And I hardly even get to do that anymore, recently."

"Oh, it's nothing, Jim. I'm just...preoccupied."

"Now try the truth."

"I resent that."

"Don't bother. You've been different ever since we got back from that wrong-way universe."

McCoy just looked at him and pursed his lips.

"What'd Spock do to you?"

"Nothing."

"Bones...."

"Ask him. He'll tell you. Nothing."

"Not our Spock," Kirk clarified with exaggerated patience. "The bearded Spock."

"Leave it alone, Jim."

"I can't. It's my fault."

"Now just how do you figure that?"

"He warned me."

"What?"

"He warned me that he was after you. That he was going to do something to you. He questioned me; I refused to answer. He said, 'Dr. McCoy has a plenitude of human weaknesses. Sentimental, soft. You may not tell me what I want to know. But he will.' He couldn't have said it in a more threatening tone. I knew that he wanted to hurt you. I knew that, and yet I left you

alone with him in sickbay while the rest of us went on to the transporter room."

"That was my choice. So that I could save his life."

"But you didn't know that he wanted you alone. I did. And I let it happen."

"Let it go, Jim. It's over."

Kirk approached urgently. "You're hurt. I can tell. And I as good as did it to you myself; I caused it by neglect. Now you've got to tell me what he did to you."

"Jim...." McCoy shook his head.

"Damnit, Bones, I'm to blame! Let me help you!"

McCoy sighed deeply. "The Vulcan mind probe."

Kirk was puzzled. "That's all? Nothing else?"

"That was enough. It can be done either of two ways, Jim." His voice was tired. "It can be gentle, persuasive. Or it can be rough, like a sledgehammer. The latter way, the attacker shatters your mind and then selects what he wants from among the scattered pieces."

"Oh my god."

"It hurts, Jim. Horribly."

Kirk took his arm. "How can I help you?"

"You can't. I'm a doctor, and I don't even know how to put the pieces of a mind back together. It's not physical; it's mental."

"Spock can help you!"

"No." McCoy tried to pull away from him.

"Well of course he can! He can undo what's been done!"

"No! Jim, don't you understand? I don't want to face that again! I'm afraid of it! Damnit, Jim, I'm frightened!"

"Bones, Bones, I can understand that. But Spock won't hurt you. He'll do it the gentle way. You can't stay like this."

"I know! I know! I just...."

Kirk was staring at him in horror. McCoy knew that Kirk had never before seen him so near tears.

"Just rest here." Kirk eased his friend into a chair.

McCoy sat numbly in his office and watched Kirk slip into the outer sickbay area to use the intercom. After a few moments, he saw Spock arrive, and heard the two of them talking in low tones, including Jim's words, "He's terrified." He saw Spock nod in acknowledgement, and watched them come in and stand before him.

"Doctor, I regret that my counterpart hurt you. I can repair the damage."

"No."

"Doctor, you know that there is no other way."

"I can't stand it! The mind probe hurts!"

"It will not when I perform it."

"But...!"

"Bones." Kirk laid a hand on his shoulder. "I'll be right here beside you. I'll be here every minute."

McCoy sniffed and stopped refusing. He did not say yes. But neither did he continue to say no.

When Spock came to him, and reached long alien fingers toward his head, McCoy whimpered once, and closed his eyes....

McCoy was not going to go through that again. He just couldn't. Somehow he would conceal his mental rape from Spock and Sarek. Somehow he would solve his own problem this time.

And he certainly couldn't face telling them about the baby, either. The ectogenetic baby in the tank that was both Sarek's son and Spock's twin and yet neither. The baby that bore ultimate prejudice against humans, and that carried with it the supreme insult from all that was proudly Vulcan, to the two who were seen as the betrayers of Vulcan heritage: his own two

Vulcan benefactors. After all that they had done for him to make his time here bearable, he could not tell them that.

McCoy was at least glad that he had been allowed to stay home for the several days since the attack. Illness was considered by the school to be a legitimate excuse, as long as the patient/student studied at home and kept up with his work. So long as his assignments were done and sent in on time, no eyebrows would be raised. At least not at the Academy. Home was another matter. But so far, McCoy had managed to dodge such inquiries by pleading fatigue or headache or sore shoulder or embarrassment at facing Spacek. So far, he'd gotten away with it. As for the inevitable day when he should run out of excuses? Perhaps by then, he would have decided upon a method of his own by which to deal with Spacek.

Chapter Eleven

McCoy realized, after the fact, what his big mistake had been. He'd been so busy dodging Spock and Sarek that he'd forgotten about Amanda. In his previous experience with this sort of dilemma, following his mind-butchering encounter with the bearded Spock, he'd been cautious enough to avoid Kirk as well as Spock. Considering how well Kirk knew McCoy, there would have been no doubt about the likelihood of Kirk sensing a problem. Supposedly, Amanda did not know McCoy nearly as well. But he had neglected to recall her empathy and sensitivity. And now she was going to be his new Kirk.

"Leonard, come sit beside me."

He complied. Her gentleness drew him and soothed him; it reached a deep, desperate need that tormented him from within his heart. Her presence was all that eased his loneliness and fear.

"Now. Why don't you tell me about it?"

He was instantly on guard. "What?"

"They're not here. You can tell me now."

"I...I don't understand."

"Sarek and Spock. They're not here right now. You can tell me all about why you've been avoiding them."

McCoy sagged in dismay. "It's that obvious?"

"Only to me. They're not aware of it."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Good." He nodded.

"But avoiding them won't solve whatever the problem is. Won't you tell me?"

He was silent.

"Leonard, I don't want to believe that you're afraid of my husband and my son, but I'm beginning to wonder. Don't you trust them?"

"Yes." But McCoy did not elaborate further.

"Is it something that you've done? And you're afraid that they'll find out about it?"

"No."

"Is it something that they have done? And it upset you?"

"No."

"Then it must be something that someone else has done."

No answer.

"Spacek?"

"Amanda, please."

"Sarek and Spock believe that Spacek simply nerve-pinned you and then left. They are puzzled at your continued illness after what was, to them, a very minor trauma. Spock thinks that you have exaggerated the pain of the experience in your mind. He bases that on certain remarks that you made to him prior to the incident, regarding your fear of the procedure. He cites the human tendency to 'talk oneself into something.' Sarek has accepted that explanation, reasoning that Spock, being half-human, understands these matters better than he." She waited, hoping for a reply. When none was forthcoming, she continued, "But they should have consulted me. Because I'm completely human. And I know that something else was done to you."

McCoy did not look up, and still made no response.

"Now," she said as she pretended to draw herself up gruffly, "are you going to tell me what else was done to you, or am I going to go to Sarek and Spock with my theory and let them question you?"

He met her eyes for the first time. She was shocked at the dread that she saw in them.

"Leonard!" she exclaimed as she reached a hand to his arm.

"Don't do that. Please don't go to them. I'll tell you." He leaned his head back on the sofa for support. "Spacek hurt me before the nerve pinch."

"How?" she whispered.

"Mind probe." His voice was just as soft.

"Oh." She partially understood. "He was not careful?"

McCoy laughed humorlessly. The sound visibly frightened her. "He was careful to be as deliberately careless as possible. He tortured me. He even projected into my mind at the beginning that that was what he was going to do."

"Oh my lord, Leonard!"

"He hates humans. And don't tell me that Vulcans can't hate. He admitted it to me, through the link. He is what we humans call a sadist. I think that my torture was the best entertainment that he's had in years."

"Oh, Leonard! And you haven't recovered?"

"No." His voice was weak. "I've tried. And tried. But I can't do it by myself. Someone else has to go back in and straighten out the mess."

"Spock and Sarek."

"And I don't want them to."

"But why?"

"I've been through this before, you see. Spock had to help me like this once before. When the cure is the same as the cause, it's frightening. That's part of it. But also, however gentle Spock is, having things put back together isn't easy, either. It...doesn't exactly hurt. But it...isn't easy." He closed his eyes.

"Neither is the effort of explaining this to me, I can see. Come." She took his arm encouragingly. "Let's get you back to bed."

McCoy let Amanda lead him to his room and tumble him into the bed. His eyes opened once more before sleep overtook him, and he pleaded, "Don't tell them. Promise me."

Amanda was spared the awful decision between lying to him and alarming him with the truth, because McCoy didn't remain awake long enough to necessitate an answer.

Amanda was waiting for Spock and Sarek in the living room when they returned home.

"I need to talk to you two. About Leonard," she began without preamble.

"Indeed?" Sarek raised one eyebrow.

They seated themselves and watched her expectantly.

"I had a long talk with him today. I initiated it. I didn't buy your theory about how he'd blown the nerve pinch out of proportion and brought this on himself."

Both men refrained from making inquiries as to how one could purchase a theory, or comments regarding the colloquialism implying that wind could somehow be required to alter the proportions of a nerve pinch. They had long since learned that to frustrate Amanda in such a manner was to prolong unnecessarily her already strong human tendency toward verbosity.

"I was sure that Spock had hurt him in some other way. He's been so withdrawn ever since that night when you two carried him home from the Academy. You wouldn't notice, you probably enjoyed his silence."

The two Vulcans neither confirmed nor denied her supposition.

"But I noticed. And I particularly noticed that he's been avoiding both of you. Not me: he seems to be comforted by my presence. Just you. You enter a room; he leaves it. You ask him a question; he answers as briefly as possible and falls silent. You're in the house; he hides in his room as much as possible. You leave the house; he comes out again. He probably would not have come out into the living room today if you'd been here. And he certainly wouldn't have talked with me like he did, in your presence. Anyway, I was right. He's hurt. And I don't mean the nerve pinch. Spock mind-probed him." She paused to let that sink in on the men.

Spock's eyebrows elevated. "Am I to assume that the probe was not administered in a prudent manner?"

"You could say that. Leonard was tortured."

Two pairs of brown eyes exchanged looks from beneath highly raised brows.

"Now I understand," Spock announced.

"You do?" Sarek did not share his comprehension.

"Yes," Amanda concurred. "Leonard said that you had been through this with him before, Spock."

"Affirmative." Spock turned to his father. "After a traumatic mind probe, McCoy is terrified of any further probing, even of a remedial nature. He avoids us out of fear."

"Interesting," Sarek observed. "I offer assistance."

"I accept. Your assistance will be welcome."

They stood and proceeded toward the guest bedroom.

"Can I help?" Amanda rose anxiously.

"Unknown. Your presence may calm the patient," Spock suggested.

She ran after them. "Please don't frighten him. He begged me not to even tell you."

Sarek looked at her. "That would have been most illogical, my wife."

Amanda bit her lip in frustration.

Spock turned to her, and spoke somewhat more diplomatically. "Mother. We'll be as kind as possible."

She nodded gratefully.

Spock opened the door and they looked in upon the sleeping human. Spock started to approach the bed, but Amanda gripped his arm to restrain him. "Let me."

She eased herself gently down to sit beside their guest where he lay stretched out in rather fitful sleep.

"Leonard?" she murmured, gently brushing back a lock of hair that had fallen into his face. He moaned and stirred but did not open his eyes. She looked up to the two men and whispered, "Stay there by the door. Don't let him see you at first." Then she raised her voice slightly and took his hand. "Leonard."

The blue eyes opened.

"Leonard, I was asked to make two promises. Your Captain Kirk asked me to take good care of you. And you asked me not to tell Sarek and Spock that you had been seriously hurt. I can't obey both requests, Leonard. I've had to choose." She raised her eyes to the two Vulcans by the door.

McCoy followed her gaze. "No!" He turned his head away from them in distress. "Protect me! Amanda, please!"

"Leonard." She took his face between her hands. "Sweetie, I understand, but you need their help! Now please don't make this any worse than it has to be!"

Spock went around to the other side of the bed and sat. "Doctor McCoy, you know that it is necessary and you know that we will be careful. With my father's help, it will go that much easier. Two of us repairing the damage will be faster and more thorough."

"No!!" McCoy tried to squirm out of Amanda's grasp. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut in resistance.

Spock looked up at Sarek as if asking to be forgiven.

"Leonard," he said tenderly. "Bones."

McCoy's eyes flew open in astonishment.

"On Minara, when Jim and I thought that you were dying, you said that I had a good bedside manner. Do not lose faith in me now."

Blue eyes steadily watched brown. Then blue eyes surrendered with a subtle flicker of movement. A barely perceptible nod confirmed assent.

Spock gently touched the right side of McCoy's face and found the correct pressure points with his fingers. Sarek sat unobtrusively above McCoy's head on the bed and applied his fingers to the left side of McCoy's face. Amanda stood and retreated a few steps so as not to be drawn into the link. Spock and Sarek reached out very slowly and found each other first. Then they both settled onto McCoy's mind like a warm, comforting blanket. To their horror, McCoy's mind was an open wound, a devastated wasteland resembling the results of old-fashioned strip-mining. They hovered for a moment, observing in growing horror the senseless, pointless, illogical damage that had been done. The comparatively minor harm that had been inflicted by

the bearded Spock had been as nothing, Spock realized. Then, recovering their impartial logic with effort, they methodically and efficiently began replacing freely floating fragments of a mind, like putting the ransacked items back into the bureau drawers. They stopped at regular intervals to console the scared mind that they sought to repair. As they gathered the scattered pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, they were forced to examine them, to see where they fit. And they learned a great deal. They saw Spock's sick enjoyment of McCoy's pain and fear. They saw how slowly he had proceeded, to draw out the torture as much as he could. They saw his promise of agony at the onset. They saw his threat of tal-shaya at the end. And they saw the baby. And the computer data. And McCoy's wish not to hurt their pride by telling them. They soothed and comforted and put all of the pieces back together. Then they calmly and gently withdrew.

McCoy blinked at them and tried to focus.

Spock's hand slipped softly away from McCoy's face.

McCoy smiled.

Spock and Sarek stayed long enough to make certain that the traumatized human was all right. Then they rose and purposefully started for the door.

Amanda followed in alarm. "Where are you going?"

Spock turned to her. "Mother. Stay and take care of him."

She was confused. "Will he be all right?"

Sarek turned. "Affirmative. We shall return shortly."

They strode from the guest room and through the living room, offering no additional information.

"You were embarrassed, my son," Sarek commented as they exited through the front door, "by your method of convincing McCoy."

"True, Father. I hoped that you would concur that when dealing with a traumatized human, one must use a human approach."

"Logical."

Chapter Twelve

Spock and Sarek stood in the open doorway of Spacek's office. Their quarry looked up at them from his paperwork on his desk. They entered and closed the door behind them.

"I believe that you know why we are here," Sarek began.

"The human coward has told you," Spacek surmised.

"The one to whom you refer," Spock emphasized, "is a being. A thinking, rational being, whom you tortured without mercy...."

"Rational?" Spacek interrupted. "Humans? Emotional humans: rational? It is that kind of thinking, in recent times, that has turned Vulcans soft and spineless. We take pity on these poor inferior creatures, and allow them into our society, and share our culture and science with them, and what do they do in return? Pollute us. Weaken us."

Sarek replied, "I find your claim of the word rational for our species' exclusive use strangely inappropriate. The sadism and cruelty and viciousness with which you tore McCoy's mind are usually considered traits of very sick human minds. Not Vulcan."

"And I find your judgment of me strangely ironic," Spacek sneered in return, "since you and your family are the epitome of human contamination of Vulcan."

"The IDIC," Spock reminded him. "Our dedication to Infinite Diversity In Infinite Combinations. Humans are a part of that diversity."

"Words. Just words. Philosophy. But with no basis in reality. Humans are not our equals and you know it. And yet, in the Federation, they are often treated as our superiors. Sometimes they command starships. Humans actually command starships. And occasionally Vulcans even serve under them." He regarded Spock significantly. "You disgrace yourself. You serve under a human captain. But then I must remember that you are half-human." He spat the term in disgust. He turned to Sarek. "But you are the greater shame. You have disgraced your Vulcan heritage by mixing your pure blood with the red blood of a human. You were from one of our most honored families. This is how you honor us."

Sarek ignored him. "I demand to see the baby that you have illegally created through your inexcusable attack on my son."

"I have had every intention all along of showing you." Spacek stepped back toward the sealed door and punched the code into the lock. The door swung open responsively. Spacek led the way into the inner lab which had served as the setting for McCoy's brutalization.

After their mind link with him, Spock and Sarek found the room eerily familiar. They knew instinctively where to look for the computer. And the tank. They walked closer and observed the well-developed fetus, studying it in silence for a moment.

Then Sarek spoke, "Such a waste. Such a brilliant mind to be able to achieve this: ectogenesis. And yet that mind is wasted because of prejudice."

"I have wasted nothing," Spacek said smugly. "I have proven a point. Soon this child will be ready to emerge from the tank. It will show the superiority of a pure Vulcan over an otherwise identical half-Vulcan. Sarek." Spacek turned directly to him. "This is your real son."

Spock watched in amazement as Sarek wrestled visibly with the nearest thing to anger that he had ever seen him display.

Once barely under control, Sarek stated, "I chose my human wife willingly. The reasons and circumstances are not your concern. Our union created a son who incorporates the best traits of both species. In everything that Spock has done and in everything that Spock has been he has honored himself, his family, and his planet. He is my real son."

Spock continued to watch his father, a most un-Vulcan glow surging in his heart.

Sarek regained the rest of his control and proceeded, "In your attack on McCoy, in your assault on Spock, in your insults of me and of my wife, and in your creation of an illicit child of our genes, you have committed a major offense against my family." He recited formally, "I invoke the ancient rite."

Spacek nodded slowly. "I did not think that one of your family would have the courage."

"Have you any last statement?" Spock inquired.

"This was what I was going to do to your human," he replied contemptuously. "I regret that I did not proceed."

"Is there any additional statement?"

"Negative."

Spock stepped forward and reached to grip Spacek's arms. "If you need to be restrained...."

"Negative," Spacek repeated. "I will face my execution without assistance. Your human would have preferred the comfort of your restraining hands. I do not. I am not a weakling human."

Spock dropped his arms to his sides and watched expressionlessly as Sarek went forward to stand before Spacek.

Spacek lifted his chin in Vulcan pride and dignity, and announced, "When I almost did this to your human, he closed his eyes in fear. I will squarely meet the eyes of my executioner."

Spacek watched unflinchingly as Sarek's hand rose to his neck and slipped around to the back of it. Sarek's middle finger probed for the exact spot on Spacek's neck bone, and his other fingers came to rest around it. Spacek's eyes hardly blinked as they unwaveringly stared into Sarek's.

As abruptly as squeezing the trigger of a phaser, Sarek instantly exerted maximum pressure on the delicate spot of the bone with his finger. Spacek's neck snapped audibly as his head folded suddenly backward, almost coming to rest against his back. Sarek released the body, and it crumpled limply to the floor.

Spock and Sarek stared down at the corpse.

Sarek spoke, "We will salvage the data in the computer so that the advancement of ectogenesis will not be lost."

"Logical," Spock replied. "It should prove quite valuable to all species."

"Certain cloning details might be useful as well."

"Affirmative."

"A problem with a less clear-cut solution is the child."

"Yes. That will be difficult to resolve."

"I am reluctant to tell your mother."

"That is understandable. However, telling her will prove unavoidable."

"Yes. Of greater concern is what to do with the child. It is genetically mine. And yours. But not your mother's."

"Which would seem to make things a trifle awkward."

"It would be an unfair burden on your mother to expect her to participate in the upbringing of a child that is not of her genes. Still, it is our responsibility. My responsibility. It is genetically of my family, and therefore it is my duty to see that it is provided for in every way. Meanwhile, the baby is not yet ready to be removed from the tank. We can consult the computer and see to its needs regularly while it remains where it is. We will have arrived at a solution for its disposition by the time that it is mature enough to emerge."

"That only leaves one matter which requires our immediate attention."

"Spacek," Sarek acknowledged, as he bent to sling the body up over his shoulders.

"If you need assistance, Father...."

"Not necessary."

They departed through the outer office, Sarek carrying his burden, made their way out of the Academy, and approached the Bureau of Internal Affairs. Once inside, they addressed the receptionist.

"An execution was required." Sarek explained, "Spacek committed a major offense against our family."

"Very well, I will make a report to T'Pau. You will be asked to verify. And your name?"

"Sarek."

"Acknowledged, Ambassador." The receptionist recognized the name. "And you were witness? Or assistant?" he now addressed Spock.

"Spock," he said as he inclined his head. "I was a witness only. No assistance was required. I made the appropriate offer. However, it was declined."

"It sounds as if everything was in order. You will be contacted soon for the formality of verification."

They nodded. Sarek deposited the body. They left.

"Father," Spock addressed him when they were outside again.

"Yes, Spock?"

"In regard to what you said to Spock about my retaining the best traits of both species, and about my having honored us...."

"Yes, Son?"

"I express appreciation."

"That is not necessary."

"I know. But my mother taught me the value of saying 'Thank you'."

"Your mother is very gracious."

"Indeed."

"It is when you emulate her in things just such as that, that you prove the validity of what I said to Spock."

"I am honored. Perhaps you should express that to Mother."

"Perhaps I should."

Chapter Thirteen

When Spock and Sarek reentered the house and made their way into the guest room, they found McCoy sitting up in bed and Amanda perched on the foot of the bed chatting with him. McCoy actually seemed quite perky.

The two Vulcans nodded at the pleasant sight.

"Hi!" McCoy greeted them cheerily.

"You seem well-recovered, Doctor," Spock observed.

"Thanks to you two," was McCoy's heartfelt reply. "But now we have some problems to deal with, don't we?"

"Such as?"

"Well, Spock for one."

"You need not concern yourself further with him," Spock instructed simply.

Immediately suspicious of her son's enigmatic reply, Amanda turned to her husband.

"Sarek...."

Sarek replied, "He committed a major offense against our family."

Amanda gasped loudly, because she knew instantly what that meant and what they had done.

McCoy, however, was at a loss. "What?"

Spock explained, "Execution was the penalty."

"Was?! You mean it's already been done?!" He looked at Amanda where she stood watching Sarek and Spock in something nearing trepidation. The truth dawned on McCoy. "You two did it?!"

Spock informed him, "Unlike your human society, we do not burden ourselves with the cumbersome system of police, courts, and lawyers. On Vulcan, justice is swift, logical, and administered by the victims of the crime."

McCoy stared at them, wide-eyed.

Sarek regarded McCoy in puzzlement. "Surely you experience no regret?"

"Regret? No. Amazement? Yes. I didn't think that you would do it. I didn't think that you would ever kill."

Spock pointed out, "Doctor, I remind you of what I said some time ago, when my parents were guests aboard the Enterprise: 'If there were a reason. My father is quite capable of killing. Logically and efficiently.' Did you doubt me?"

"Well, no."

"And you have seen me kill, in the past, when necessary, in the line of duty."

"Well, yes."

"Then I fail to discern the reason for your confusion."

"Well, I guess it just seems so cold-blooded that way."

"I see. And how cold-blooded was his attack on you?"

"Oh. Good point."

Sarek contributed, "Mercy shall not be shown to the merciless."

Spock added, "And only the victims are qualified to accurately assess the damage that they have sustained, in order to arrive at a just penalty."

"What did you do to him?" McCoy asked quietly. "You broke his neck, didn't you?"

"Affirmative."

"That's what he was going to do to me."

"Then our solution was appropriate, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes." McCoy met their eyes. "You're right. Your system is better. In ours, we waste a lot of time and funds and let uninjured strangers make wrong decisions."

"Illogical."

"Yes. Well, we still have another problem to resolve. That matter that I was too embarrassed to tell you." McCoy knew that that simple reference would be sufficient to alert them to the issue to which he referred. Having thoroughly probed his mind, they were fully aware of both the topic and the extent of his discomfort about it.

"Yes," agreed Sarek. "It will be a matter a great deal more difficult to resolve. I must begin by telling my wife."

Amanda looked to her husband expectantly. To her surprise, he began by extending index and middle fingers together in the gesture by which Vulcans show affection to a spouse. She automatically mirrored the gesture, and went to him to cross his fingers with hers. She waited for him to speak.

"Amanda, Spacek created an illicit child of my genes."

"A child?!" She gasped.

"He did so using tissue drawn from Spock. It was he who nerve-pinched Spock in the Academy many months ago."

She looked from one Vulcan to the other. Then her husband's exact choice of words dawned on her. "A child of your genes? Not of mine?"

"No."

Spock explained, "Spacek filtered out the human elements."

"I see." She lowered her eyes.

"It was the nature of his experiment."

She looked at McCoy. "You were right. He hates us. Hated us," she corrected. "Some Vulcans really do hate humans. Why?" She directed the question to her husband.

"His reasons are unimportant," Sarek replied evasively.

She eyed him suspiciously. "Sarek. You're trying to protect me."

"Amanda." McCoy broke in, "Let him. What I felt from Spacek, what he communicated to me during the probe.... Don't ask."

"Oh." She lowered her gaze once more.

The men waited silently.

Presently, Amanda raised her eyes again to her husband. "Then this child, this...twin?... but not exactly...of Spock...."

"Clone," Spock offered. "The term is clone. A deliberate, genetically-engineered creation."

"Thank you. It is what you would be if you were only your father's child and not mine."

"Yes."

The two Vulcans watched her almost sympathetically as she wrestled with her emotions. After a moment, she came to a decision. "It doesn't matter. I will love it anyway. It is your child, my husband. I love you. I will love the child."

"Amanda, I knew that you would not reject the child on the basis of its genetic tampering. Your graciousness is one of the traits that I was referring to when I told Spacek that Spock incorporates the best traits of both species. This he received from you."

"Oh, Sarek!" she said tearfully. "Will you please indulge me in a human gesture right now?"

"What is that, my wife?"

"Hold me!"

Sarek tolerantly enveloped Amanda in his arms, and she settled happily into his embrace.

Spock regarded his parents appreciatively and curiously.

McCoy looked away out of courtesy.

After a few moments, Sarek released Amanda, and she brushed at her tears.

"Well!" she said. "Where is the baby?"

"In an ectogenetic tank. It is not yet mature."

"Ectogenetic? I didn't know that we had the technology for that."

"We have now," Sarek stated succinctly.

"The data is preserved in the computer files in the lab," Spock elaborated. "We will be able to present it to the scientific community."

"So at least Spacek's life wasn't completely for nothing," McCoy observed.

"But he misused his knowledge," Sarek said.

"Any discovery can be used for good or for ill by its discoverer," Spock agreed.

McCoy nodded. "But now I find it beautifully ironic that his achievement will be used for the betterment and the enrichment of the lives of all people. Including humans."

"Indeed." Spock raised his eyebrows. "Very appropriate."

McCoy decided that it was time to lighten the mood. "Well, I should think that this experience should increase the respect that you two have for good old human intuition."

"Really, Doctor?" Spock inquired.

"Why, yes. So the next time that I tell you that something funny is going on somewhere, will you please believe me?"

"Hmmm," Spock responded noncommittally. "And the next time that I tell you that you are seriously violating Vulcan etiquette and custom, will you believe me?"

"Oh, absolutely!" McCoy exclaimed with conviction.

Spock's brows rose in surprise.

"But then I always was an obedient child. I always would do anything to get out of a spanking."

McCoy and Amanda hooted with laughter as Spock and Sarek watched them in bemused tolerance.

Chapter Fourteen

"Jim! Am I ever glad to see you!" McCoy charged forward eagerly as his captain materialized in front of the house.

Kirk grinned. "Are you going to hug me, Bones?"

"Don't bet against it! Boy are you ever a sight for sore eyes!"

Sarek and Spock watched the display curiously from a few paces behind the two male humans. Amanda smiled understandingly.

Kirk and McCoy clapped each other on the back, and then Kirk looked beyond him.

"Spock."

"Captain."

"Ambassador Sarek, Lady Amanda."

"Captain Kirk."

"Won't you come inside?" their hostess invited.

"Thank you; I'd be delighted." He followed them. "Well! Bones, have you had the time of your life playing student?"

"You've got to be kidding!" McCoy exploded. "While you've been lazing around in dry-dock, we've had an epic adventure!"

Kirk looked at him. "Really? What happened?"

McCoy looked at Spock and Sarek. They said nothing, and merely looked back at him.

McCoy shrugged and went ahead, "Jim, the next time that Spock tells you that Vulcans are completely without emotions, you'll be able to say 'Poppycock!'"

Kirk straightened in surprise. "Well, I doubt if I'll say it in quite that way, Bones. 'Poppycock' is your favorite word, not mine. But, continue."

McCoy looked rueful at the irrelevancy, and proceeded, "We found a green-blooded, pure Vulcan with more hate in him toward humans than a roomful of Klingons at a space station bar!"

"That's...a lot of hate," Kirk admitted.

"Doctor," Spock interrupted. "Every species has its misfits. Even ours."

McCoy glared at the intrusion.

"Go on," Kirk prompted.

"Well, this 'misfit'," he stressed in Spock's direction, "was my advisor at the Academy."

"Oh my," Kirk sympathized. "And he flunked you."

"No, he did not!" McCoy emphasized. "He mind-probed me! Viciously! Like the bearded Spock! Even worse!"

"Uh oh!" Kirk knew what that meant.

"So of course you know what Spock and Sarek had to do to me to straighten out the mess!"

"Oh dear. But having been through it before, I assume that you went to them willingly this time, and admitted the problem."

Spock broke in, "He did not."

"Bones!"

"I can't help it!"

"Well, how did you manage without me there to drag you to Spock and hold you down for him?"

"Amanda did it. She bullies very well. No offense," McCoy added to her.

"That was a compliment, Leonard, thank you." Her eyes twinkled.

McCoy shook his head.

"Why did he mind-probe you?"

"To find out how much I knew about the baby."

"Baby?!" Kirk was stunned. "Whose baby? Your baby?!"

"Spock's baby. Sort of, anyway."

"Yours?! Spock's?! Bones, what have you and Spock been up to while I've been gone?!"

McCoy colored in embarrassment and fury.

Spock's eyebrows climbed skyward.

"Not mine!" McCoy fairly shouted.

"Well, you didn't say that before," Kirk teased.

"Spock's! And Sarek's, sort of, and not on purpose. By accident."

Kirk gave up trying to understand and merely stared.

Spock took over, "Doctor, you are explaining this exceptionally badly. Captain, the Vulcan in question, Spock, because of his extreme prejudice toward humans, and therefore toward our mixed family, took it upon himself to create a clone of me, but with human factors eliminated. In essence, it is my pure-Vulcan twin, and my father's genetic descendant."

"I see. Well, under Vulcan law, isn't that illegal?"

"Indeed," Sarek contributed for the first time.

"Then, if you would like me to make a report to the proper authorities...."

"Don't bother." McCoy waved it away with a dismissing gesture. "They killed him." He inclined his head in the Vulcans' direction.

Kirk was stunned anew.

Sarek explained, "On Vulcan, execution is immediate, and administered by the victims of the crime."

"I see." Kirk's voice was hushed.

"Yeah." McCoy nodded at his human companion. "It threw me, too."

"Curious," Sarek observed. "Your human reaction is most illogical. In general, your species is far more violent than ours. And yet you cannot readily comprehend the execution of so blatant a criminal."

"I can." Kirk seemed to be trying as hard to convince himself as to convince Sarek. "Intellectually, I can. But emotionally...." He hesitated.

Spock and Sarek nodded with brows slightly elevated, acknowledging the human's admission of the prime source of human weakness.

Embarrassed, Kirk cleared his throat. "Well, anyway, I'd certainly like to meet this clone of Spock one of these days."

"I believe that that could be arranged in a few years, Captain," Sarek offered.

"I'll look forward to it. But in the meantime, Ambassador, Lady Amanda, if you'll excuse us, we must all go back to our ship and prepare for the arrival of fifty new crewmen."

Once back on the Enterprise, Kirk invited Spock and McCoy to his quarters for a brief relaxing chat and a celebration of their reunion.

"Jim," Spock began. "We have not told you everything."

McCoy looked askance.

"Doctor, if you will sit down please."

McCoy sat, thinking furiously in an attempt to anticipate where this could be leading.

"And, Captain, if you will come over here please."

Kirk approached in puzzlement.

"Captain, the doctor has volunteered to be your practice-victim in your effort to learn to administer the Vulcan nerve pinch."

McCoy leaped to his feet so fast that he toppled the chair. "I'd rather have the spanking!" he blurted.

Kirk broke in, "Nerve pinch? Spanking? Do you two want to explain this to me? Very slowly."

Spock informed him, "The doctor deserves a spanking for playing hooky."

McCoy accused, "You're just jealous because I passed anyway!"

Spock insisted, "Only due to the leniency of the Academy after your ordeal."

"Poppycock!"

Kirk chuckled, shaking his head. It would take him a long time to sort out all of the facts, he knew. But it would be entertaining.

Chapter Fifteen

"Captain's log, Star Date 6065.2. With a sorely missed First Officer Spock and Chief Medical Officer McCoy now settled back in aboard the Enterprise after their six-month ordeal on the planet Vulcan, we now await the transportation of the fifty Vulcanian replacements of our decimated science department. I wish that I could welcome their arrival with as much unbridled joy."

Captain James T. Kirk of the United Starship Enterprise stared at a reflection in his mirror that failed to look as cheerful and confident as he kept insisting to himself that it should. The smart, olive dress uniform trimmed in gold spoke of a captain who had mastered his history and his destiny with aplomb. The pale, perspiration-beaded face above it suggested a man who had merely stumbled fortuitously, hesitantly, and temporarily into good fortune that might be snatched from him at the next instant.

"This will not do," he muttered fitfully, tugging at the hem of the dress shirt, and knowing full well that it was his facial features, and not the shirt, that he must tug back into order. Kirk seized a tissue and dabbed at the moisture which betrayed his brow. The removal of the dampness improved his demeanor but not his expression. Kirk grunted in disapproval. He studied each facial fragment critically, seeking the culprit. Was it his slack jaw, refusing to be set in a firm posture of power? Was it his slim nose declining to flare challengingly? No. It was the eyes. The eyes which should have looked back at him with the daring of a commander, instead bore the doubt of a yeoman. The eyes which must inspire respect in stern, unyielding, emotionless supermen, would instead reveal to them Kirk's basic unease with pure-blooded Vulcans. The message that he must not send to them would be telegraphed instantly by those eyes.

It was true. The Vulcans intimidated him. And that was the one fact that he could never let them know.

With a tiny stab of guilt, he realized that Spock and McCoy most certainly already knew. When the orders had been received, six months earlier, regarding the impending assignment of the Vulcans aboard his ship, Kirk had developed a subconscious twitch. He had coughed each time that he had said the word "Vulcan." Unaware of the tendency himself, he had been quite taken aback when McCoy had brought it to his attention. In front of Spock. Kirk colored slightly in embarrassment at the thought of Spock knowing about his fears. No, he thought resentfully, not fears. He refused to acknowledge the word. Doubts, he corrected mentally, yes, the word "doubts" would do. And surely Spock would understand, and not resent his feelings. After all, it was different; Spock was half-human, and that made it much easier to get along with him. On the other hand, Sarek, Spock's father, was a pure Vulcan, and Kirk had always gotten along well enough with him. But these were strangers, and unpredictable.

Groaning in self annoyance, Kirk threw up his hands at his internal argument, and headed for the door of his cabin.

First Officer Spock firmly tugged the hem of his crisp blue dress uniform into place. His reflection in the mirror showed a perfect, spotless, wrinkle-free uniform, and every hair in place. It showed stern, commanding, confident eyes. It did not show what lay behind those eyes. A Vulcan kept his inner thoughts and feelings well-shielded. But they were there, lurking beneath the surface, for only his own mind to see. Vulcans. His own compatriots? Perhaps. But pure-blooded Vulcans, unburdened by the human frailties that so often tripped his logic. Critical, judgmental, relentless, pure-blooded Vulcans. Even as a child, Spock had known the sting of their pronouncements upon him. In his mind, he heard again the taunts of the other children, "Earther! Barbarian! Emotional earther! You could never be a true Vulcan! You haven't even mastered a simple nerve pinch yet, Earther!" He did, of course, master it, not long after, but the barbs of their vicious teasing remained. When he was an older child, it had been the shielding of his thoughts and the concealment of his feelings from his facial expressions which had eluded him slightly longer than was normal for Vulcans. And once again it had brought him the scorn of his classmates. Intellectually and academically he had excelled, earning the right to apply for any

career that he wished. Sarek had encouraged him to accept a position at the Vulcan Science Academy. But all around him were those who would remember and disdain the half-human who had trailed them all in emotional discipline. So he had fled instead to the safety of Starfleet, where being different was the rule rather than the exception. He'd found a home here, on the Enterprise, among those who had learned to accept him utterly and without reservation. And now the critical society which he had left behind was going to follow him into his retreat. Perplexing, Spock acknowledged silently, pursing his lips. But a problem for him alone. They would never be allowed to know of his doubts in their regard. For Spock had mastered his mental shielding after all. A little later than usual, perhaps. But he had achieved it thoroughly. And not one of the fifty new crewmembers would ever be permitted to perceive the waves of doubt that coursed through his very well-shielded mind.

Firm in his resolve, Spock exited his cabin.

Dr. Leonard McCoy paced nervously in his quarters. He caught sight of his reflection in the mirror as he passed, and paused to tug fretfully at the hem of his blue dress uniform.

"Damned uncomfortable contraption!" he fussed, recalling his own previous laments against that same uniform. "Feels like my neck's in a sling!" he had told Jim Kirk on that prior occasion while waiting to greet Spock's parents on their first visit to the Enterprise. But it was more than just the uniform this time, he knew. Fifty Vulcans! Fifty!! McCoy ran a distraught hand through his hair, and then muttered angrily at the rumpled result. He seized the comb and carelessly tortured the mess back into place. Dangerous, sadistic Vulcans! He grinned ruefully at what he knew would be their reaction to being labeled sadistic. Their eyebrows would fly skyward, and they would in turn label him illogical. But was he really? Against his will, he saw again the bearded Spock from the antimatter universe reaching his fingers toward McCoy's head, seeking the mind-probe contact. And he felt again the pain of the encounter. But that had been as nothing compared to his violation by Spacek, his human-hating advisor at the Vulcan Academy. McCoy shivered uncontrollably as the agony of those memories surged again within him. Gasping at his vividly-recalled torment, McCoy reached to steady himself on his dresser. Perspiration ran down his face. "Why is it so hot in here?" he mumbled. And the mind probe wasn't the only form of torture employed by Vulcans. He felt again the sharp sting of Spock's nerve pinch on his shoulder, beside the Guardian of Forever, and that of Spacek, in his office. McCoy winced at the memories. But that was not the worst. Tal-shaya. The Vulcan method of breaking the neck. Vulcans knew exactly where to apply pressure in order to snap the neck instantly, leaving a grotesquely-twisted corpse. He remembered the murdered Tellarite that he'd seen aboard ship, during the visit of Spock's parents. And he recalled the mental image that Spacek had projected to him during the mind probe, of the same thing happening to him. McCoy's perspiration turned to a cold sweat as he trembled violently, leaning heavily against the dresser. "When did it suddenly get cold in here?" he muttered absently, forcing himself to straighten. He pulled again, uselessly, at the shirt collar, repeating aloud, "Feels like my neck's in a sling!" He added, "Well, maybe a neck-sling's just the thing." He laughed humorlessly at the unintended rhyme. "Just the thing to protect against tal-shaya?" he added in a doubtful, forlorn whisper.

McCoy started reluctantly for the door. "Well, I know one thing. If any of those Vulcans comes at me with a hand toward my face or shoulder or neck, I'm gonna run first and ask questions later!" With a final backward glance, he left his cabin.

Chapter Sixteen

Captain Kirk assumed his best confident smile to greet Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy as they entered the transporter room. Spock acknowledged with a courteous nod, and McCoy attempted an unsuccessful grin which turned into a successful grimace. They formally took their places to Kirk's left, with Spock in the middle and McCoy nearest the door. How appropriate, McCoy thought: if I have to run for it, there'll be no one in my way.

The transporter officer interrupted his thoughts. "Captain Kirk, they signal that the first group is ready to beam aboard, sir."

As Kirk acknowledged, McCoy grumbled to Spock, "We're finally leaving your planet, and now we have to take it with us."

Spock's only response was raised eyebrows and a slight straightening of his stance.

Kirk looked around him at McCoy. "Now, Bones...."

"And remember, Jim," McCoy plunged ahead anyway. "Don't cough when you say 'Vulcan'."

Kirk's poise slipped. He coughed. "I have no intention of saying it," he declared stiffly. "Energize."

As the first group shimmered and coalesced on the platform, McCoy noted with some internal distress several burly, typically muscular Vulcan males. But, surprisingly, he only gave them a glance. His attention was drawn instead to one petite, youngish female, her hair tied back severely, emphasizing her sharp Vulcan features. Oh no, thought McCoy, not her already, not in the very first group.

The newcomers filed stiffly past their three-member welcoming committee, stopping briefly at each man to deliver a succinct introduction. When McCoy's turn came to acknowledge Petrasek, she replied icily, "We've met."

Upon completion of the formality, the scientists were escorted by a waiting yeoman to their quarters.

With the transporter room temporarily cleared of strangers, McCoy complained to Spock, "Well, that was a great beginning."

"If you'll recall, Doctor, I did caution you about first impressions."

Kirk tilted his head quizzically at McCoy. "What was that all about?"

McCoy didn't look at him. "You don't want to know."

Keeping the reluctance out of his voice, Kirk announced, "Energize."

A second group of Vulcans sparkled into existence on the pads.

As the party filed through the receiving line, a stocky male, looking vaguely familiar, presented himself before Spock. "Spencek," he addressed the first officer coldly. "I believe that you're acquainted with my father's brother who was a professor at the Vulcan Academy."

"Indeed?" inquired Spock. "And his name?"

"Spacek."

Spock raised his eyebrows and nodded slowly.

The second group followed its escort.

McCoy turned emphatically to Spock. "And you were concerned about the first impressions *I* made? All I did was collide with Petrasek in a corridor; Spencek knows you bumped off his uncle!"

Spock's only reply was a tolerant, long-suffering sigh.

Kirk stiffened in distress. "His uncle...? ...Was the professor that you and your father had to execute for his attacks on you and McCoy?"

Spock nodded. "And for his creation of an illicit ectogenetic clone of me with human factors eliminated. He committed a major offense against my family," he recited formally. "Talshaya was the penalty."

McCoy shivered unnoticed in response.

"I...," Kirk said hesitantly, "don't deny the appropriateness of you and your father having...er...employed...."

"Invoked the ancient rite," Spock assisted him.

"Uh, yes. I don't question the propriety of your actions; I'm sure that it's all very...um... correct in your society. But it could make things rather awkward for us here."

"Affirmative," Spock admitted.

"Captain?" the transporter chief reminded respectfully.

"Oh yes," Kirk answered distractedly. "Energize."

The third group materialized.

As each member presented himself to the three waiting officers, one tall svelte female made a more extensive-than-usual greeting to Kirk. "T'Rethe, Captain. I have looked forward to meeting you. The immortal Captain Kirk, who managed to die on our planet and yet lives."

Kirk groaned inwardly. He had hoped that none of them would bring up that incident. When Spock had been stricken with the Vulcan mating drive, he and Kirk had been forced to engage in combat "to the death." McCoy had saved Kirk's life with an injection to knock him out, simulating death. Convenient, but it had always caused Kirk embarrassment later when meeting Vulcans who knew of the event. He had even halfway wondered later whether he had violated Vulcan law by being alive, and whether Vulcans would require his execution if they caught up with him. Apparently not, since he'd met several, and since none of them had tried to do him in, but it was still a disquieting thought. Kirk managed a sheepish smile. "Well, you know what they say, starship captains have to be superhuman."

"Super...*human*?" T'Rethe emphasized.

Kirk reddened abruptly, realizing the racial inappropriateness of using such a word to a Vulcan. He gulped.

"Curious," T'Rethe observed, and departed with the others.

Kirk slumped.

"Shall I surgically remove your foot from your mouth, Jim?"

"Foot from his mouth, Doctor?" Spock asked.

"Oh my." Kirk mopped at his face.

"Well, anyway, Jim," McCoy went on, "you had to expect that with fifty new Vulcans aboard, someone would know of that miraculous survival trick of yours."

"I suppose." Kirk sighed. "Should I take her reminder as joy at my recuperative powers or distress at my having violated Vulcan protocol by being alive?"

"I wouldn't bet on the first," McCoy quipped.

"Neither, Jim." Spock explained, "Merely as a statement of fact."

With another heavy sigh, Kirk ordered, "Energize," once again. The three officers endured the remaining Vulcan groups without further humiliating incident.

When the last of them had departed for assigned quarters, McCoy turned to Kirk. "Jim, I need a drink!"

Kirk smiled tightly, and nodded sharply without a word to McCoy. "Spock," Kirk addressed him. "You have the conn. We'll be in my quarters."

Spock nodded almost sympathetically. With greater understanding than I expected, Kirk thought. On sudden impulse, he almost invited the Vulcan to join them, but then thought better of it. It would embarrass Spock to know that he'd been that transparent. And Kirk certainly didn't want to annoy Spock. He was the one Vulcan on the ship whom Kirk trusted.

"Saurian brandy?" Kirk asked minutes later while looking into his cabinet, his back to the room.

"Uh huh." McCoy dropped into a chair.

Kirk crossed the room with a flask and two glasses, set the latter on the table, and began to pour. "Say when."

"Yeah, okay. When." McCoy waved at it distractedly.

"Did you see the muscles on most of the men?" Kirk mused, half to McCoy, half to himself.

McCoy fixed him with an unappreciative stare, and said, "On second thought, make mine a double."

Kirk obediently recommenced pouring. "And I thought that I kept in shape," he added woefully.

McCoy seized his drink and downed a good fraction of it. "Jim, I don't think that either one of us would even be any match for one of the women."

Kirk looked mournful. "Well, hopefully we won't have to be. Theoretically they're on our side."

"Theoretically," McCoy emphasized, taking another long draught.

Kirk tried to smile. "Not even a match for one of the women, uh? Not even Petrasek?" He was rewarded with a sour face and a grunt. "What happened anyway? You just collided with her: nothing else?"

McCoy nodded. "That was it."

"That shouldn't have been any big deal."

"A slower pace would be recommended in these halls'," McCoy quoted in disgust. "Vulcans are fussy about everything, Jim; you know that."

He nodded absently, and then sat down across from the doctor. "Spencek is the one that worries me. Spock and Sarek really killed Spacek?"

"Yes," McCoy replied softly.

"Did you see them do it?"

"No."

"That's too bad."

McCoy stared. "I didn't think so."

Kirk hastened to explain, "Oh, I just meant, it's hard to believe, that's all."

"Vulcans don't lie, remember?"

Kirk ignored the statement of the obvious. "Spock took it coolly, though, don't you think? I mean, learning that Spencek was Spacek's nephew."

"What else could he do? Besides, he didn't need to worry; I was panicking enough for both of us. Remember, I'm the one that Spacek tortured. And if Spencek knew about one thing, he probably knew about the other. And how do you think that made me feel? Looking into his eyes and knowing that he knew what his uncle did to me." McCoy drained the glass and reached for the bottle.

"Take it easy, Bones," Kirk advised. "You don't want to get drunk."

"Who doesn't?"

Kirk favored him with a skeptical look. "You want our new Vulcans to see you drunk on their first day?"

"Great!" McCoy pretended to approve the concept overly enthusiastically. "Then instead of running into Petrasek, I can stagger into her!"

Kirk watched the doctor thoughtfully, just sipping at his own drink. He's handling this even worse than I am, he realized, and I had thought that his time on Vulcan would prepare him to deal better with these people, that he would be better prepared than I. Instead, it seems to have had the opposite effect; it seems to have made him even more discomfited. I'll have to not only watch my own reactions very carefully; I'll also have to keep a close eye on McCoy.

Chapter Seventeen

"Captain's log, Star Date 6065.4. We have received orders to proceed to the planet Eridomas 7, and to conduct a scientific investigation of that primitive world. While it is teeming with life, it bears no intelligence above the level of its apish tribal creatures. I can only surmise that this is a deliberately-chosen training mission, to give the ship's officers and the new science department a chance to see how well we can work together."

Kirk and McCoy arrived in the transporter room in time to see Spock organizing his science team.

"Captain Kirk, we are ready," he announced formally.

"Very well," Kirk acknowledged as he and McCoy took their places on the platform.

The five men and three women on Spock's team included Spencek and Petrasek, McCoy noted with dismay. Oh well, he decided reluctantly, if the purpose of this mission is to see how well we can get along, better to get the worst over with first.

"Energize," Kirk ordered.

Glitter replaced the room, and then was itself replaced by dense jungle all around them.

"Readings indicate that the nearest tribal settlement is in that direction." Spock indicated a path beyond McCoy.

Without waiting for further orders, McCoy turned and took a step along the indicated route. And promptly collided with Petrasek, who was attempting to do the same. Swallowing his acute emotional distress, McCoy backed off and reluctantly met her harsh chastising eyes.

"Shall a scientific expedition be led by a member of the science team? Or by the ship's doctor?" she demanded.

McCoy swallowed again and made no reply.

Without further comment, Petrasek turned and proceeded down the path.

McCoy looked at Kirk and shrugged elaborately. Kirk spread his palms in a helpless gesture in return. Spock was deliberately not looking at the doctor, which in itself spoke volumes.

McCoy stood very quietly aside as the entire party filed past him. He was suddenly more than content to bring up the rear.

The path was narrow, barely passable, through the thick undergrowth, necessitating a single file approach. On all sides, gaudy, outlandish flowers in outrageous hues of turquoise and fuchsia hung like living trumpets from the overgrowth. McCoy thought fleetingly that it was a pity that Mr. Sulu was not along on this landing party. The amateur botanist would have enjoyed seeing these. In fact, he would doubtless have wished to add them to his collection. His hobby had led him to possess quite a roomful of exotic plants.

Petrasek silently led the party with stealth and efficiency to the edge of a clearing where she paused and knelt to observe. The other Vulcans distributed themselves soundlessly to either side of her to peer through the bushes at the mud-and-straw huts and the large hairy creatures going about their business among them only a few hundred meters away from the observers' positions.

"All right," Kirk took charge in a hoarse whisper, "everybody fan out; surround the village."

One tall slim Vulcan male turned to look at him. "Captain, that approach is illogical."

Oh no, McCoy thought, defiance already. That didn't take long. The doctor struggled to remember the Vulcan's name. There had been so many introductions. Spornak. That was it.

A nonplussed Kirk stared at the questioning Vulcan. "We'll learn more that way. We'll have a view from all sides," he attempted a conciliatory explanation.

Undeterred, Spornak pursued, "We might alarm them. They will see the posture as a prelude to attack."

Spencek agreed, "Which may, in turn, provoke them to attack first. In which case our separated positions would give them a divide-and-conquer advantage."

Kirk bit his lip. Unbidden, his prior thoughts came rushing back: "...difficult to be firm and disciplinary with someone who could easily throw you through the nearest wall." Throw *me*

through the nearest wall, he corrected mentally, dismally. Well, no walls here. But if I'm to command these Vulcans, I'd better take my stand here and now. Displaying more confidence than he felt, Kirk reminded them pointedly, "If we do this right, they're not supposed to see us at all. It is hard to imagine how they can be alarmed by a condition of which they're unaware. Fan out."

Spornak nodded silent acceptance, although doubt flickered in his eyes. Spencek simply stared coldly. Kirk was very much aware of the eyes of all six of the others upon him as they heard and watched the exchange.

Without further comment, the eight Vulcans spread through the bushes in both directions to comply.

When they were gone, Kirk sighed his relief.

Spock touched his arm and cautioned him, "Jim, they can sense your ill-ease."

Kirk pulled back in shock. "How do you know?"

Spock raised a brow. "So can I."

"Oh." Kirk coughed.

McCoy flashed him a warning look.

Kirk retorted defensively, "I didn't say 'Vulcan'."

"No," McCoy responded agreeably. "Now you cough just by thinking of one."

Kirk turned away from him, and fixed Spock with a penetrating look. "About the disagreement. Do you think that I'm wrong?"

"Captain," Spock disparaged, refusing to commit himself. "Both arguments have merit. That is not the point. The point is that you must command. Vulcans do not readily accept a human captain. They are testing you."

"And I failed the first test," Kirk surmised bitterly.

"Not...failed." Spock chose his words carefully. "I believe that a better interpretation would be that the first round ended in a draw."

"And I'd better start winning," Kirk finished for him.

"Yes, Jim." Spock did not hedge on this last point.

Kirk nodded, his downcast eyes tense but resolute.

"Don't take it too hard, Jim." McCoy sought to reassure him. "This isn't easy on any of us," he finished pointedly, including Spock with his eyes.

Spock's eyes, in return, did not deny his inclusion.

"Thank you." Kirk tried to smile. "Both of you."

Spock touched Kirk again to interrupt, and Kirk looked up expectantly.

"They are returning," Spock warned him. "I hear them."

"Right," Kirk acknowledged understanding of the implication that the upper-level pow-wow must not be overheard.

Instantly, Vulcans began appearing from both sides.

Reluctantly, McCoy had to admit to himself that Spornak might have a point. Seeing the Vulcans coming at him from all directions alarmed even him; and he, unlike the creatures, was supposed to be their ally.

"Captain." Spencek reported dutifully, "We each took thorough tricorder readings from our various positions as ordered."

Kirk opened his mouth to issue a routine reply, but before he could deliver it, his eyes widened in alarm.

Spock's head snapped around quickly to follow Kirk's gaze, and saw the creature which had risen up behind Spencek.

"Behind you." Spock leaped to assist Spencek, who whirled at Spock's warning.

Before Spock could reach him, three more of the apes broke through the bushes in front of them. One seized Petrasek. Her stretching fingers lunged for the beast's shoulder, but it was too tall for her to reach. Spornak had no such difficulty. His fingers found purchase on the same creature's other shoulder, even as it evaded Petrasek's grip on the first. Simultaneously, Spock

and Spencek each pinched a beast into unconsciousness, while another Vulcan male similarly brought down the fourth.

A watching McCoy winced sympathetically.

Kirk was staring, too, but with a different emotion in his eyes: envy.

"I certainly wish that I could learn to do that," he announced to Spock, as all of the Vulcans brushed themselves off, none the worse for wear.

"I am quite willing to try again to teach you, Captain," Spock offered, with a meaningful look at McCoy.

McCoy's eyes widened in realization of Spock's implication. On Vulcan, Spock and McCoy had discussed the possibility of allowing Kirk to use McCoy as his practice-victim in his attempt to learn the Vulcan nerve pinch; Spock willingly, McCoy unwillingly.

"Aw, no." The doctor backed away decisively.

Spornak nodded his agreement. "It is a valuable ability to have. Humans should learn it. One can dispose of one's enemy harmlessly."

Spock, realizing the unlikelihood of humans mastering the technique, defended his red-blooded shipmates. "True, it is convenient. But it is not an absolutely necessary method to use."

Spencek regarded Spock with a challenging stare. "You would perhaps prefer tal-shaya?"

Spock fixed him with a stony look in return. "I was referring to the perfectly legitimate alternative of a phaser on stun."

Spencek watched him for a moment, and then replied condescendingly, "Crude. But adequate, I suppose, if one has no better way."

Kirk suppressed a sigh. The training mission certainly had not shown how well the two races could work together. Or had it? Was this the best that they could do?

Chapter Eighteen

Kirk's communicator beeped. Almost with relief at the welcome interruption, he flipped it open and said his prerequisite, "Kirk here."

"Scott here, sir. I'm sorry to intrude."

"That's quite all right, Scotty. I believe that we're finished." He was forced to ask himself in just how many different ways he meant that. "Go ahead, Mr. Scott," he encouraged.

"We're pickin' up a distress call, sir. From our science outpost on Diathanie."

"Set course immediately. Beam us up, and head there at warp eight as soon as we're aboard the ship. Kirk out." He regarded McCoy with the hardly-disguised light of new enthusiasm in his eyes. The doctor read him well. A chance to get back upon their bridge with their own familiar personnel around them for a while, and away from these annoying newcomers. McCoy telegraphed to Kirk his approval in return. And for once, he actually enjoyed the sensation of the transporter beam closing in on him.

"Scotty, what have you got?" Kirk settled comfortably into his seat on the bridge.

"Just a message that they're under attack, and then nothing," Scott replied in frustration.

"It was just an automatic distress signal. I tried to raise them directly, but there was no reply."

"There hasn't been any trouble in that sector," Kirk mused thoughtfully.

"How many scientists are working at that outpost?" McCoy wondered from his familiar place to Kirk's left.

"Eleven," Spock replied from his right. "And they made their routine report just two months ago."

"Well, we'll get to the bottom of it," Kirk assured him confidently, his old flair returning.

"Coming into scanning range, Keptin," Chekov informed him.

Kirk sat forward in his seat. "Any enemy vessels, Mr. Chekov?"

"Negative, sir."

"Radiation on the surface? Evidence of explosions?"

"None, Keptin."

"Any sign of damage at all?"

"No, sir. Not that I can detect."

"Odd," Spock commented.

"Yes, Mr. Spock, very odd. We'll beam down and take a look at it. Come with me.

Scotty, you have the conn." He rose from the command chair.

"Aye, sir."

Spock's eyebrows climbed. "Just you and I, Captain?"

Kirk read him well, but chose to pretend that he did not. "And Bones. There may be injuries to treat."

"Right," McCoy acknowledged, and started to follow.

"Captain." Spock hesitated. "We have a mystery on a scientific outpost," he emphasized.

"Logically, a scientific team should investigate."

"I'll depend on you to supply that scientific element," Kirk responded tightly.

Spock was not to be deterred. "A larger landing party could search with greater efficiency."

"Sorry, Spock, not this time."

"But this is an ideal opportunity to continue to test..."

"No," Kirk denied flatly. "This is a genuine emergency, not just a curiosity-serving field trip. I'll need people around me who know how to work together; I can't have your science team standing around questioning me. I've had enough quarrels for one day," he finished, leaving it to interpretation whether he was referring to Spock's disagreement just now, or to the argumentative new Vulcans.

"Yes, sir," Spock rejoined flatly, all too aware of the ambiguity.

Without looking back, Kirk turned and marched into the turbolift, McCoy close behind him.

When the lift doors sealed them in, McCoy remarked, "You were a little hard on Spock just now."

Kirk was unmoved. "He'll get over it."

McCoy was startled. "Don't take this out on Spock, Jim. He's on your side."

"Et tu, McCoy?" Kirk accused. "Since when do you want to work with those quarrelsome thinking machines?"

"That's it, isn't it?" McCoy challenged. "You're not worried about the fact that this is an emergency; that's only an excuse. You just want to get away from the Vulcans for a while."

The lift doors parted, sparing Kirk the burden of making an even angrier retort, and giving him the opportunity to charge away from the doctor at full speed. But he could not run away from his own thoughts. And deep down, he faced the harsh reality that he could not deny the validity of McCoy's accusation.

By the time that McCoy caught up with him in the transporter room, some of the former's annoyance had dissipated and he was anxious to make amends. "Look, Jim, heaven knows, I don't enjoy being around them, either. I was as happy to get a break from them as you were. It's just that Spock happens to be right about...." He broke off as the doors whispered open and Spock followed them into the room.

Without another word, the three took their places on the transporter pads.

"Energize," Kirk told the duty officer.

They materialized into the gloom.

"Spock, what's happened to the lights?"

"I shall endeavor to find out, Captain." The hum and whistle of Spock's tricorder was followed a moment later by his pronouncement, "Malfunction at the source, Captain. This dim emergency lighting will have to do, at least for a time."

"Well, that's all right. My eyes are beginning to adjust. Let's split up and see if we can raise anyone."

"Affirmative."

The three set out in three separate directions, finding no one.

Just when Kirk was beginning to decide that the outpost was deserted, he heard the familiar whine of the transporter. No, not familiar. Not quite. Similar, but subtly altered. Not *the* transporter. But *a* transporter.

All of those thoughts flashed through Kirk's mind milliseconds before the beam caught him.

A disoriented Kirk found himself in an alien transporter room. He looked around in bewilderment at the harsh gray of his surroundings. Then he looked at the person standing behind the foreign console. In view of Kirk's recent experiences, it was not surprising that his mind immediately identified the individual as Vulcan. But then the face smirked. Smirked?! Romulan!

The smiling face spoke, "Welcome, Kirk. I am Telan. Of the Romulan ship Teshar."

"What are you doing here?" Kirk demanded as he stepped down from the platform. "So far into Federation space? What is the meaning of this? And what do you want with me?"

In lieu of reply, his grinning host hit a switch on the panel, and declared, "Got him, Commander."

"Good, Telan," came a feminine reply. "Get us out of here," was also heard from up on the bridge before the connection was broken.

Within moments the transporter room doors parted, and the female Romulan Commander entered the room, wearing a facial expression that closely matched that of her subcommander.

"Captain James Kirk," she revealed. "I am Commander Saterra."

"Commander," he returned politely.

"You needn't worry about your comrades on the planet or on your ship; they're quite unharmed; we have no interest in them."

"Of course you realize that as soon as they see that I'm gone, they'll be very interested in *you*. You'll have quite a battle on your hands."

She murmured her laughter. "They didn't even know that we were there, Kirk, and we departed at maximum speed as soon as we had you. There'll be no battle."

Kirk stared.

"And now, Kirk, I have business with *you*."

Chapter Nineteen

"Jim?" McCoy called casually, feeling his way back through the dim corridor. "I don't think that anybody's home. At least not down that way. Jim?" He emerged into the room in which they had originally beamed down, and muttered, "That's funny. Spock?" he called, somewhat louder.

"Yes, Doctor," came the muffled reply.

"Oh thank heaven. I was beginning to think that you two had abandoned me."

"What is that, Dr. McCoy?" Spock's voice was clearer as he came out of his passageway.

"I said that I think that this outpost is deserted. And that includes the captain. He didn't answer me when I called."

"Hm. Human hearing is less acute than Vulcan. It is likely that he did not hear your call, or that you did not hear his reply."

"Well let's look for him, shall we? This place gives me the spooks."

"The spooks, Doctor?"

McCoy scowled. "I don't like it here. Come on; Jim went this way."

They followed Kirk's route into a room which was a dead end. No other corridors led from it. And Kirk was not inside of the room.

"Now I really don't like it here," McCoy decided.

"I am forced to agree with you, Doctor. Spock to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Scott here."

"We seem to have...misplaced the captain. Will you initiate a full sensor scan of the building, please?"

"Aye, sir." After an agonizing pause, Scott's voice came back to say, "I only read the two of you in the building, Mr. Spock."

"That's crazy," McCoy broke in anxiously. "Why would he go outside?"

"We do not know for sure that he has done so, Doctor."

"But..."

"Mr. Scott. Scan for him on the planet's surface."

"Aye." After a more painful pause, the engineer responded, "There's no sign of him on the planet, sir."

"What??" McCoy blurted.

"Beam us up at once, and scan space for him. Spock out."

"But..." This time, McCoy was cut off not by Spock, but by the transporter beam.

Immediately after materializing, he tried again without missing a beat. "But he can't be alive if he's in space."

"True, Doctor."

"Then what...?"

"But that does not mean that he is not there."

McCoy closed his mouth abruptly.

Scott called from the bridge. Spock crossed to the panel.

"Mr. Spock."

"I am here, Mr. Scott; go ahead."

"I find no trace of Captain Kirk in space, but there is evidence of a residual trail extending from the other side of the planet, out into space."

"What kind of trail, Mr. Scott?"

"It looks like the residue of matter-antimatter drive, Mr. Spock."

"Like ours!" put in McCoy.

"Also like that of the Klingon Empire, the Romulan Empire, and some several dozen other species," Spock pointed out to him.

"Oh."

"Follow it, Mr. Scott."

"But Scotty," McCoy interjected. "If there was another ship in orbit, why weren't we aware of it all along?"

"Accordin' to the readings, the trail begins at exactly the point in orbit, opposite to where we started. It took a little time for us to move around in our orbit into a position in which we could pick up on its presence. So it was well-concealed by the planet. By the time that we moved around farther, the ship was gone."

"That's still no proof that they took Jim!"

"If they did," Spock pointed out, "they carried out the operation with great precision and efficiency. They are obviously a most formidable opponent."

"If they did," McCoy emphasized. "What if they didn't?"

"Where else would you suggest that we look, Doctor?"

McCoy had no answer.

"The coincidence is too great, Dr. McCoy. It is highly probable that the alien ship did indeed abduct the captain. I'll be up on the bridge."

"I'm going with you!"

"Negative, Doctor." Spock handed his tricorder to McCoy. "I want you to correlate these readings that we obtained in both your tricorder and mine. We are still responsible for locating the missing outpost scientists."

McCoy glared. "Now look...!"

"Mr. Spock?" Scott interrupted.

"Yes, Mr. Scott?"

"The alien vessel is already out of scanner range. It must have headed away at maximum warp. We're in pursuit."

"Good. I'm on my way. Spock out."

"Now wait just one minute, Spock! These readings can wait! I want to go with you! I'm worried about Jim!"

"Doctor, your presence on the bridge would not in any way accelerate our pursuit. Please report to sickbay and correlate those readings." He strode out of the transporter room without a backward glance.

"Hmph! See if I ever defend you again when Jim picks on you!" McCoy muttered, unheard. Then he added gloomily, "If I ever again get the chance."

A desolate McCoy sat scanning the data tapes for clues to the disappearance of the outpost scientists. Despite his natural dedication to the preservation of all life, his heart just was not in it.

"I can just imagine what life around here will be like if we don't find Jim. Spock'll take over, of course." He shook his head in distress. "Well, then the Vulcans'll be happy. I guess, at least happier than they are now, with one of us in command. A Vulcan captain, and the entire science team Vulcan. That'll make life pretty unbearable for us common humans."

"What's that, Dr. McCoy?"

"Oh, hi, Christine. Nothing. Just talking to myself."

"Come on now. Tell Nurse Chapel what's troubling you," she coaxed indulgently.

"The Vulcans."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"Well, first, it didn't go well down on the planet. On Eridomas 7. They quarreled with Jim; they quarreled with me. They even gave Spock the business; well, just a little. Jim and I were darned uncomfortable working with them; I can tell you that."

"Hmmm. Well, these things take time."

"Yes, well, and then Jim disappeared on Diathanie. And Spock wouldn't even let me go up to the bridge with him while we search. He knew how worried I was, and he didn't even care."

"Now, Doctor, he has a lot of responsibility right now, and he has to think about all angles of the situation."

"Yes, that's what worries me."

"What?"

"That he has a lot of responsibility now. And a lot of power. Which he might keep if we don't find Jim. And that would set our Vulcans up quite nicely, wouldn't it?"

She chuckled doubtfully.

He looked up sharply at her.

"Why, you're getting paranoid!" she observed in surprise.

"Am I? Or maybe it would set you up nicely, too; you like Vulcans, after all, or at least, one particular Vulcan. You even learned to make plomik soup for him, as I recall. Maybe I picked the wrong one to complain to this time!"

"Leonard!"

The ship-wide intercom interrupted. "This is First Officer Spock. Spencek, Spornak, report to the bridge. Spock out."

"Uh huh!" McCoy nodded vigorously. "Paranoid, am I? Well it sure didn't take long for Spock to move his buddies into our positions! I'm starting to feel very squeezed out around here!" With that, McCoy stormed out of sickbay, leaving a very hurt Christine Chapel to watch him go.

Chapter Twenty

Captain Kirk sat alone in the small bare room where they had put him, waiting for Commander Saterra to come to him, as she had...promised...? threatened...? He couldn't decide which was the better word. He could vaguely imagine what was in store for him, and preferred not to imagine it. And he had been worried about Vulcans! Such a breeze to deal with compared to Romulans! He had exchanged one mild "pointed-eared" problem for another, terribly dangerous one; it had not been a bargain. What was the old expression: out of the frying pan into the fire? Well, it certainly seemed apt. Still, the Enterprise personnel would of course be looking for him. But would they find him? And more to the point, would they find him in time? The Romulans had a reputation for torturing humans; their methods were reputed to be more subtle, less blatant than those of the Klingons, but no less effective. What I wouldn't give right now for a roomful of those Vulcans I was so worried about, he thought. And if I get out of this, I really must give serious consideration to learning that Vulcan nerve pinch. On the other hand, the Romulans, distant brothers of the Vulcans, probably know that one, too. I think I'd better hope that they do that to me, Dr. McCoy's fears about it notwithstanding. I think that I'd rather be unconscious for a while. It would definitely be a safer way to pass the time. No one is likely to torture a sleeping man.

As if in answer to his thoughts, the door slid aside to admit Saterra.

"Trying to guess what we have in store for you, Kirk?"

"I'm still trying to figure out why you want me. You went out of your way to abduct me, at great personal risk. You must have a pretty strong motive."

Saterra sat down across from him without answering.

Kirk tried a different tactic. "We were investigating the disappearance of a scientific research team on that outpost from which you snatched me. I don't suppose that you know anything about that?"

"Of course. We killed them. And then we sent out the automatic distress call to attract the Enterprise; we knew that it was nearby. Oh, we had nothing against your outpost team, really. They were just a convenient way to lure you into our influence," she explained casually.

"You killed eleven people? Just to get me?" Kirk fought down his rage.

"Don't you think that you're a worthy prize?" She grinned, and then grew more serious. "Now then. Intelligence reports that you have fifty new Vulcan crewmen aboard the Enterprise. How does this affect the traditionally smooth relationship among your shipmates?"

Kirk was careful to sound nonchalant. "It's no problem."

"I see. Well perhaps I can sabotage that relationship. As you did the career of my good friend, the Romulan Flagship Commander. I've wanted you ever since you and Spock destroyed her."

"So that's what this is all about: revenge."

"Why not? She was one of our best officers. She had a brilliant future ahead of her. But it would please my Empire to see the harmony aboard the Enterprise break down in any case."

"Just how do you plan to engineer that?"

She leaned forward. "By altering your mind, your attitudes."

Suddenly, Kirk remembered the words of the Romulan Flagship Commander to whom she referred, and from whom he and Spock had stolen the cloaking device: "There are Romulan methods, completely effective against humans, and human weaknesses." He could still hear her saying it. He had wondered what those methods were. He hadn't really wanted his curiosity satisfied. Now it would be. It wasn't worth it.

"I...don't suppose that there's any way of talking you out of it." He watched her face, and then concluded, "I thought not," and launched himself straight at her. He hadn't really thought that he stood much of a chance. But he also didn't think that he'd have a better opportunity. One against one, after all. Assuming that they were not being monitored. Which they probably were.

She absorbed the impact of his body easily by not fighting it, and calmly rolled with him backward off of the chair. Saterra continued the fluid rolling motion, and rolled on top of him into a sitting position. Knowing that he could and would readily unseat her, and that she only had

milliseconds in which to prevent it, she reached to his shoulder and deftly squeezed. But no unconsciousness came. Her target had been farther along his shoulder, farther away from his neck, than the spot employed by Vulcans. Instead of the anticipated blessed oblivion, a numbing pain spread from the region, paralyzing him. Kirk moaned.

"And now, Captain," she observed conversationally, "I think that you'll stop struggling long enough for me to find out how things are *really* going, aboard your starship."

She reached toward Kirk's face in an all-too-familiar gesture. Unlike the pinch, this approach had the expected result as Kirk felt the intrusion. With his internal eye, he saw her find and discard in disappointment the near perfection in his relationship with Spock. All friendships had their moments of strain, to be sure. But in general, theirs was a model of congeniality. Then Saterra encountered the memory engrams of the new Vulcan science department. She paused and hovered over them with interest. She saw Spencek, whom Kirk seriously mistrusted, and Kirk's quite plausible concern that the Vulcan might harbor a dangerous vendetta against Spock, and possibly against McCoy, on behalf of his executed uncle, Spacek. She saw Spornak, who intimidated and confused Kirk, by questioning his orders at every turn. She saw Petrasek, who had a habit of creating awkward moments with McCoy, who in turn innocently stumbled into unpleasant situations with her, adding to everyone's discomfort. She saw T'Rethe, who had reawakened Kirk's fears that every Vulcan that he would meet would question his very right to be alive. And she saw a whole host of others, some as yet nameless in Kirk's memory, not one of whom had earned the slightest trust or warmth in Kirk's human heart.

Satisfied, she withdrew, and regarded him in amusement. "No problems, you said, Captain?"

Kirk struggled to speak; the paralysis was slowly leaving his vocal cords. "What...did you expect me to say? That it's not working? That I wish that we had back our human science team? That I wish that the Vulcans would all go home?"

She smiled. "Well, that's the truth."

"And by the way," Kirk complained bitterly. "I don't appreciate having you turn my mind into a big living billboard from which you can read absolutely everything."

"Now you should appreciate the way that I did it, Kirk. No pain at all. There could have been a great deal of it."

"I know." Kirk recalled McCoy's ordeals all too well. "Well, anyway, now that you know that things are already going badly back home, you've no need to sabotage what's already a complete disaster. We created more than adequate damage, all on our own. So now you can just send me home to wallow in our own mess."

"Oh, but I do have something to sabotage, Kirk."

"Now what would that be?"

"Your beautiful relationship with Spock."

Kirk froze. Then he said, "You can't. It's not possible. Nothing in the universe would change my feelings for him."

She laughed. "In fact, Kirk, it will be surprisingly easy. Because it will be greatly facilitated by your fears of the other Vulcans. All that I have to do is make you start seeing him the way that you see them."

Kirk twisted angrily beneath her. Saterra's fingers returned to his shoulder. Kirk stopped fighting.

"That's better," she praised him. "You don't want me to pinch you again."

"I still say that it won't work," Kirk insisted desperately. "You can't turn me against Spock. No matter how much you torture me."

"Oh, did I give that impression? I'm not going to torture you!"

"Then, how...."

"That would make you fear me, not Spock. In fact, I'm not going to mind-probe you anymore at all. I have a device that will do that for me."

"A device?"

"Yes. A revised-history machine. A brain-washing machine. Call it whatever you like. It will reach into your mind – gently! – and locate a memory from your past with Spock. Then, it will restructure that memory into a new shape, in which Spock will play a sinister role, instead of a beneficent one. It will do that again and again, with many different instances from your lives together, until it begins to sink in to you that Spock is someone to dread."

In desperation, Kirk writhed and fought beneath her. Sattera pinched his shoulder hard. The spreading agony numbed his muscles, and they failed him. He groaned.

"I think that we can begin now."

Chapter Twenty-One

McCoy charged from sickbay and stormed down the corridor, muttering to himself, "Stay in sickbay, my foot! I'll show him who'll stay in sickbay! I'm the doctor around here; if anybody's supposed to confine other people to sickbay, it's supposed to be *me*! Non-medics don't confine doctors to sickbay; it's the other way around! If I knew of anything that Spock had wrong – even a hangnail! – I'd confine *him*! The idea! Replacing Jim and me on the bridge with those...those... Vulcans!" It was the nastiest thing that he could think of to call them. "I'll show him! I'll see what's going on up there! He can't leave me out of this! Jim needs us! Somebody *else* can do those reports!"

The turbolift doors flashed open in front of him. He charged in without a pause. And nearly collided with Petrasek coming out of them. His mouth flew open in astonishment. She fixed him with a stony glare in return. Any lecture that she might have intended to deliver to him was fortunately cut off by the turbolift doors sliding shut, separating the two.

The near-collision inspired new mutterings from McCoy. "Green-blooded Vulcans everywhere! On the turbolift! On the bridge! Can't get away from 'em!"

The doors snapped open again, and he was facing the ones on the bridge. Spock turned toward him expectantly by swiveling his appropriated captain's seat. Spencek and Spornak regarded him from where they were ranged behind Spock along the rail. The three watched him as if he were an intruder whom they expected to state his business.

McCoy's many angry complaints stuck in his throat. All that he managed was a thin croaking sound.

"Yes, Doctor?" Spock inquired.

"I...finished with the reports."

"I see. Anything conclusive?"

McCoy shook his head.

Spock turned back to the viewscreen. One beat later, Spencek and Spornak followed suit.

McCoy glanced around the bridge to see whether any humans had been allowed to stay. He was gratified to see Sulu, Chekov, and Uhura still at their posts. But another Vulcan whose name McCoy could not recall was positioned at Spock's science station. McCoy supposed that that made sense. After all, Spock was too busy with the conn. And why not a Vulcan? They were all scientists.

Just then, the nameless Vulcan reported, in a barrage of technicalities. Whatever it was, it interested Spock and the other two enough to go see for themselves. As they clustered around the station, McCoy sidled close to Mr. Sulu's post.

"Everything okay?" McCoy whispered.

Sulu was bewildered. "Of course, Doctor; why shouldn't it be?"

"Well, I just...."

"Problem, Dr. McCoy?" Spock called down to him from the science station where the Vulcans stood, staring at him.

Drat! He'd forgotten about acute Vulcan hearing.

"Uh," he stammered. "Uh, no! I was just wondering how the search was going?"

"Insufficient data at present."

"Oh." He stared at Sulu's console, red-faced, wishing that they'd look away from him.

They eventually did. McCoy looked at Sulu and shrugged, and then moved away, wondering idly, If Vulcans get embarrassed, do they blush greener? And if they sunburn, do they turn *really* green? Then, he shook his head at his own ruminations, and wondered if he was losing his mind. Maybe Christine was right. Maybe he was just getting paranoid. Obviously Sulu found nothing wrong in the way that things were proceeding. *Or*, he was afraid to tell him in front of them. No, no, McCoy mustn't think that way. He mustn't wonder if Spock was after Jim's command – although he *had* wondered it once before, in that affair with the Tholians – just because the Vulcans would have a cushy situation if Spock got it. After all, the Vulcans could hardly have been able to plan this; they hadn't known that Kirk was about to disappear. Unless they had engineered the disappearance. No, no, absolutely not. Spock wouldn't be a part of

anything like that. After all, he was uncomfortable with their presence here, too, wasn't he? But then, why had he surrounded himself with them here on the bridge, at his first opportunity? In an attempt to help foster and encourage good working relations between him and the new crewmen, that's why, McCoy admonished himself. The same reason that he'd wanted to take them along to Diathanie. And Jim had refused. How annoyed had that made Spock? Annoyed enough to...? No, of course not! It had to be just that Spock would go to great lengths to hide from these Vulcans the fact that they made him uncomfortable, too.

McCoy's private internal quarrel raged, accompanied by a parade of warring emotions marching across his face. But he was oblivious: both to *it*, and to the Vulcan eyes which were *not* oblivious to it.

"Curious," Spornak noted quietly.

"Interesting," Spencek remarked. "Can you interpret those expressions, First Officer Spock?"

"Negative. Are you quite all right, Doctor?" He raised his voice to human audibility.

"Hmmm? Oh! Sorry. What was that, Spock?"

"I asked you if you were all right."

"Oh. Yes. Of course. Why not?"

"You seem...preoccupied...distressed."

"Oh. Well, I...I miss Jim."

"I see. Then there is nothing that you need from me."

From you?? The human thought ironically. "No," McCoy whispered.

"In that case, proceed with your report, Spelak."

Spelak! That was it! The name of the Vulcan at the science station.

"Yes, First Officer Spock. From this data, we can conclude that the enemy ship has entered the Romulan neutral zone."

"Hm." Spock looked thoughtful. "That would seem to pose some awkward difficulties."

"Yes, sir."

"We cannot enter the neutral zone without the permission of Starfleet Command. The regulations are quite specific. Lieutenant Uhura?"

"Yes, Mr. Spock?"

"Contact Starfleet Command. Report our situation. Request permission to enter the Romulan neutral zone in pursuit of the ship which we believe has abducted our captain. Request a prompt reply."

"Yes, sir."

McCoy couldn't believe his ears. He had grown increasingly agitated during Spock's orders to Uhura.

"Spock?!" he blurted.

"Doctor?" Spock acknowledged.

The eyes of four Vulcans studied him again. McCoy swallowed, suddenly self-conscious, but knew that he now had no choice but to plunge ahead with his concern.

"What...?" he faltered. "What are we going to do while Uhura calls Starfleet?!"

"We are going to wait, Doctor."

"But we can't just sit here! Starfleet could take forever!"

"That is hardly likely."

"But...! You know what I mean! They'll take too long! Each moment that we delay is giving the Romulans even more of a head start than they've already got! And it's also giving them more and more time to do to Jim whatever vile plans that they have in mind for him!"

"That cannot be helped. Regulations specifically...."

"As Jim would say, 'Blast regulations!' Jim's in trouble, and he needs us!"

"Doctor, I seriously doubt that our rashly causing an interstellar war would help the captain. Nor would he be in favor of it."

"Who said anything about...?"

"Doctor, the discussion is closed."

McCoy started to retort, and then blanched and timidly subsided. With all eyes upon him, he left the bridge.

As McCoy got on the turbolift, several young crewmen got off of it. It was shift-change. The newly-relieved Sulu, Chekov, and Uhura boarded the next lift together.

"What was that all about?!" Sulu exclaimed when the doors had shut.

"Dr. McCoy seems very agitated," Chekov observed.

"Well, you know, I can't say that I blame him," Uhura put in promptly. "Mr. Spock is right, of course, about the regulations, but it *is* difficult just sitting here when it's our captain who's at stake."

"Yes, it is," Sulu agreed. "But I didn't mean that. His protest didn't bother me; that seemed normal; I was referring to two other things."

"Like what?" wondered Chekov.

"Well, first of all, what was that business about sneaking close and whispering to me about whether everything was all right?"

"Yes, I suppose that that was rather strange," Chekov mused.

"And what was the second thing?" encouraged Uhura.

"Well, as I said, I wasn't surprised when McCoy fought with Spock; he always does. But why did he *stop* fighting with him?"

Chekov and Uhura exchanged a glance.

"Well, you saw it. One minute he was just getting cranked up to rage at him real well, in his own famous style, and the next minute he got pale, got quiet, and got out."

"Yes," Chekov concurred. "He usually enjoys the argument too much to leave."

"He sure didn't enjoy it this time. Not even while he was pursuing it. Did you see how tense he was? Even for the short time that he was arguing."

"Could it be the Vulcans?" Uhura thought out loud.

"What?" Chekov looked at her.

"The new Vulcans," she continued. "Could it be that Dr. McCoy is uncomfortable arguing with Spock in front of them?"

"I suppose that it's possible," Chekov admitted slowly.

"Hey, you might have something there," Sulu declared. "That could explain both weird incidents. He doesn't trust them."

"But what does he think that they're going to do?" Chekov asked.

"I wonder," Uhura agreed.

"Maybe," Sulu speculated, "just maybe something happened down there on Eridomas 7 that we don't know about yet."

Chapter Twenty-Two

The device settled firmly onto Kirk's head at Saterra's touch. Now bound at both wrists and ankles, Kirk could do little to resist. But at least now there would be no further need for the Romulan pinch-paralysis. Kirk could feel the probe enter: gently, as she had promised. But relentlessly, also. There was no resisting its entry. Brief, careful experimentation revealed to him that the device would employ as much force, and only as much, as it had to, in order to prevent any rebellion from him. Once it had reached completely into his mind's heart, it settled there, seeking, questing, a memory that it could use. Kirk felt it sort efficiently through the engrams, like fingers through a card file. Shortly, it seemed satisfied and paused.

The room around Kirk seemed to dissolve and the bonds on his hands and feet appeared to disintegrate. For a moment, Kirk wondered if he could possibly have been beamed aboard the Enterprise, but then he realized that he could not be there, either. Green grass and blue sky suddenly stretched around him; he was on *neither* ship.

What resembled a farming community was laid out before him. Kirk looked around at the scenery. He was alone. He took an uncertain step toward the nearest farmhouse. There was nothing for him to do but to approach the buildings and try to raise someone inside of them. Even if that hypothetical someone could not help Kirk to get back where he belonged, he might at least be able to tell him where he was. In any case, Kirk was infinitely better off than he had been aboard the Teshar. The intellectual part of his mind wondered how he had escaped from the Romulan ship; perhaps he would find some clue here. The emotional part of his mind didn't care; it was simply overjoyed at finding itself anywhere else but there. Kirk simply had not yet had time to truly worry about how he would regain the Enterprise.

As he neared the closest building, a figure stepped out from behind it. Kirk turned automatically toward it, and then stopped dead in astonishment and utter joy. McCoy! It couldn't be this easy!

"Bones!" He waved and sprinted toward him.

"Are you back already?" the doctor demanded in annoyance.

Kirk stopped. "What?"

"I thought that you were going to go find Spock."

"I...I was?"

"Jim." McCoy grew impatient. "We've got to evacuate this colony, remember? We have no time for fiddling. The Berthold rays will kill these people; we've got to get them out of here. You told me to see Elias Sandoval and start organizing the evacuation, and you promised to go find Spock; he sounded so strange on the communicator just now. So why've you returned already, and without him?"

Kirk's jaw worked. Berthold rays.... Elias Sandoval.... Evacuation.... This was.... "Omicron Ceti Three!" he blurted.

"Yeah, what about it?" McCoy returned testily. "You said that you could home in on Spock with your communicator; he left the frequency open, remember?"

Kirk raised his arm and stared dumbly at the communicator lying open in his hand. He could've sworn he'd not been holding it.

"Get going, Jim!" the doctor urged.

Kirk backed away, and then turned and strode toward the forest. How had he been transported back in time? He was reliving an incident from his own past, from three years ago. How could it be? No, not quite reliving. It was different this time. McCoy had not had to fuss at him to get moving that other time; he'd just gone. So history had been slightly revised. The words struck a responsive chord. History revised.... A revised-history machine! Saterra was going to.... But he'd left Saterra behind on the Teshar! Or had he? She couldn't be manipulating him from this distance. Unless...there was no distance. Unless he was not really here. But...it seemed so real. In any case, he knew what he would find. Spock and Leila Kalomi. Spock looking ridiculous hanging upside-down from that tree branch. Spock laughing and being silly. Well, that was harmless enough. Spock's emotions had been brought to the fore by the spores in the flowers, the spores which actually thrived on the otherwise lethal Berthold rays. People

infected by the spores were actually safe here, safe from the radiation. Safe, but silly. Oh well, Kirk supposed that he wouldn't mind reliving the frustrating, but not really dangerous incident on this planet. However, it was disheartening to think that he might actually still be aboard the Teshar.

Yes, there was Spock, hanging by his knees and one hand from that tree branch. There he was, grinning, albeit upside-down, and laughing. But not quite with the same laugh that Kirk had remembered. Not quite so carefree and humorous. More somber. Lower-pitched. And with a grin that was not quite as broad and innocent. And where was Leila?

Kirk stopped, a vague uncertainty filling him. What had Sattera said about changes? That Spock would be different? Kirk paused, watching him, and took a step backward, contemplating going back for McCoy for support. The doctor would be greatly annoyed at the renewed failure of Kirk's mission, but that was of no consequence. Suddenly, Kirk was very much in need of McCoy's reassuring presence.

Spock flipped in the air and landed on his feet as he had done before at this point. He walked toward Kirk as he had done the first time. Almost. But with a more purposeful stride; not so nonchalant. Kirk took another step backward.

"Jim," Spock addressed him soberly. "I didn't appreciate the way that you ordered me back to the settlement. I didn't appreciate it at all." He reached and gripped the human's arm above the elbow.

Kirk inhaled sharply at the Vulcan strength, trying not to let his sudden intake of air turn into a gasp.

"I trust that you will not talk to me like that again."

Kirk tried to ignore the pain. "We have to evacuate the colonists. To save their lives."

"No, we don't."

"I know that you *think* that we don't, Spock. And I know that you can't help acting this way. It's all because of the spores."

Spock chuckled humorlessly. The sound unnerved Kirk.

"I know all about them, you see. They've brought out your emotions. They're making you act like this."

"No, Jim. They're not the reason why I've changed." Somehow, Spock's employment of Kirk's first name carried, not the intimacy of friendship, but the impertinence of insolence.

"Then how about if you tell me." Kirk gritted his teeth against the growing painful numbness in his upper arm.

"How about if I show you the spores instead," Spock offered somberly. "You claim that you know so much about them."

"No."

A grin that was truly sinister curled Spock's lips and lit his eyes. He yanked sharply at the arm as he commenced to stride toward the open fields.

Kirk lurched helplessly after him, caught off guard, and nearly pulled off of his feet. After taking several quick steps in an effort to recover his balance, Kirk regained his footing, dug in his heels, and strained against Spock in resistance.

The Vulcan paused and stared deeply into Kirk's eyes. Rather than the anger which Kirk expected to see in the Vulcan's brown eyes, the human was startled to see pleasure...enjoyment. Spock was pleased that his captive had resisted; it gave him a chance to...viciously squeeze the arm that he still held.

This time, Kirk could not help crying out sharply. Against his will, his eyes surrendered.

Satisfied, Spock gave a harder yank on the arm, and propelled Kirk toward the flowers.

The victim offered no further resistance until the edge of the field was reached, and the pale, wide-mouthed flowers nearest him turned toward him in response to his presence. Kirk looked into them unwillingly, and saw the yellow spores in the center which might launch into his face at any moment.

"Spock! No!" Kirk tried again to struggle. "This isn't supposed to happen to me *now*! Not until I'm back on the Enterprise! I have to be there so that I can break the hold of the spores on

me, and then help everyone else back to normal afterward! This isn't supposed to make you violent, Spock! The spores are benevolent and peaceful!"

Spock twisted Kirk roughly around to face him. The deep, alien eyes bored into Kirk's own, while the powerful fingers burrowed into his flesh.

"I told you," the Vulcan informed him slowly. "The spores have nothing to do with my altered behavior. But you will face them. Now." He spun his captain around and shoved his face into the nearest of the waiting flowers. Kirk's outcry accompanied the noisy out-gassing of the spores.

He felt his control slipping from his own possession into Spock's as the spores took hold; he was now subtly under Spock's command, just as he had been the first time, due to the spores. Beneath his diminishing will, his tiny, dying, internal voice was crying in anguish, "Spock did this to me."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Typical bureaucratic inefficiency being what it was, Sulu, Chekov, and Uhura were back on shift by the time that the response from Starfleet Command finally came into the communications station. A very agitated, wild-eyed McCoy was also on hand on the bridge. He'd spent a rough few hours: trying to eat, trying to sleep, trying to relax, and succeeding at none of them. His fear and mistrust of the Vulcans was constantly at war with his desire to be on the bridge in order to be close at hand when the order should be received. His aggravated state had continued and grown virtually unabated in the hours since the request had been sent. Now concerned human eyes, as well as curious Vulcan ones, watched the haggard doctor.

"Message coming in now, Mr. Spock," Uhura relayed to the temporarily-in-command first officer.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"It's rather ambiguous, sir. It instructs us to 'pursue cautiously'."

"Then we shall do exactly that. Mr. Chekov, one quarter impulse power."

"Aye, sir."

Up until that point, McCoy's silent internal fuming had merely unnerved him and provoked interested stares. But like the glowing embers onto which additional fuel is suddenly thrown, McCoy's anger burst into an inferno.

"Spock, you've got to be joking!"

The first officer blinked at him.

"One quarter impulse! Do you realize how long that'll take?!"

"Fourteen point three seven...."

"Blast it, Spock; you know what I mean! It'll take too long!"

"Doctor, it is possible that we'll be able to increase our pace slightly if no sign of additional enemy ships...."

"Possible?! Slightly?! That's not good enough!"

"Dr. McCoy...."

"Damnit, Spock; Jim's in trouble and he needs us! Is that the best that you can do for him?!"

All eyes were upon the doctor. Especially Vulcan eyes.

Spencek turned from his position to the first officer's right, and asked, "You permit him to address you in that manner?"

Spock clarified, "McCoy holds the rank of lieutenant commander."

Spornak turned from his place at Spock's left, and said, "But you command."

"At present. And only until the return of our captain."

McCoy blurted, "Which may never happen at our current speed!"

Spock regarded McCoy tiredly, as if to communicate the fact that that additional outburst had not helped matters.

But McCoy was beyond reason and was not to be deterred; he glared back, unrepentant.

The Vulcans, having no respect for those who were beyond reason, the trait that they prized most highly, looked the human up and down coldly. Which set him off worse.

Flustered, he flared at Spencek and Spornak, "Well I certainly outrank both of you, and why don't you stay out of it anyway!"

Spock visibly suppressed the urge to sigh. "Dr. McCoy, please return to the sickbay and remain there until I send for you."

McCoy retorted furiously, "Now listen, you green blooded...." He paused and blushed crimson as the other two green-bloods raised eyebrows.

Clearly nonplussed, Spock repeated, "Doctor, will you return to sickbay, please?"

"You request of him?" Spencek challenged. "Do you indeed command?"

Spock fixed Spencek with a long hard stare, and then turned back to the human. "Dr. McCoy, I order you to return to sickbay. Now."

McCoy's mouth flew open in shock. He exclaimed, "Why you...!"

Spornak took a step toward McCoy, ready to enforce the order.

McCoy shut his mouth, paled, backed up a pace, turned, and retreated from the bridge. Sulu and Chekov cast careful, sideways looks at each other across their shared console. Their knowing expressions sent to each other the same message: Yes, we guessed right; the Vulcans intimidate McCoy.

"Sickbay be damned!" McCoy exploded in the turbolift. "Engineering!" he barked at the computer. "We'll see what Scotty has to say about all of this!"

When the turbolift let the steaming doctor out at the engineering level, he stalked in and startled the first technician that he came to, with a loud, "Where's Mr. Scott?!"

"Oh! Dr. McCoy, sir. He's in his office."

"Thanks." Without a backward glance, the doctor charged in the indicated direction. He rang for entry at the door.

"Come."

McCoy entered gratefully and let the door slide shut behind him, in relief.

"Ah, Doctor." Scott looked up and smiled. "It's not often that you get down here."

"Scotty, I really need to talk to you."

Scott's smile faded. "Why, Dr. McCoy, what's wrong now?"

McCoy slumped. "I don't know, Scotty; maybe Christine's right; maybe I am paranoid, but..."

"Here now, sit down. Care for a Scotch?"

"Thanks." McCoy paused to slow his rapid breathing-rate while the chief engineer poured. He accepted the drink appreciatively.

Scott sat down across from him. "Now tell me. What's goin' on?"

"It's Spock." At the engineer's surprised expression, he added hastily, "Or the new Vulcans. Or both; I don't know. I guess Spock's just trying to impress them. He just ordered me off of the bridge."

Scott sat up straighter. "What did ye do to deserve *that*?"

"I just argued with him. Nothing more than usual, though."

"In front o' the new Vulcans?"

McCoy nodded.

"Aha. That's what set him off, Leonard."

"You mean that he wouldn't have done it if they hadn't been there?"

"That's exactly what I mean. Ye've got to realize, Doctor; Spock's walkin' a tightrope. Between us and them. Especially since he's...half us and half them. He's done it all of his life. This is probably the hardest time he's had to face yet."

"I suppose that you're right. But I just feel like they're not doing all that they can for Jim."

"They. Ye make it sound like a conspiracy."

"I guess that that's how I see it."

"Oh, come on now, Doctor; you canna really believe...."

The door chimed. A voice called, "Mr. Scott?"

McCoy's eyes grew wide and his suddenly-white knuckles gripped the chair arms.

"Spock!" He whispered urgently, "Scotty, he ordered me to sickbay!"

Scott's eyes popped, then. "Under my desk!"

McCoy dove for cover, but before Scott could answer Spock, the concealed human's arm snaked out as its owner remembered the drink on the desk. The hand snatched it quickly and withdrew.

Obviously struggling to keep his voice neutral, the Scotsman bade Spock enter.

The latter did so, but with two Vulcan companions behind him, Scott noted.

"Mr. Scott," the first officer began without preamble. "We have been discussing the logistics of rescuing the captain without provoking a battle with the Romulans, if possible. We have some time before we will be close enough for the Romulan ship to detect us, since we have been ordered to pursue cautiously. In that time, would it be possible for you to reinstall the cloaking device which we previously appropriated from the Romulans?"

Trying not to glance nervously under the desk and call attention to his quaking fellow human, Scott replied, "Ah, I see what ye're gettin' at: beat 'em at their own game."

"Precisely, Mr. Scott."

"Well, it'll take some doin', but it's worth a try."

"Do you require any assistance?" offered one of Spock's followers.

Spencek! thought McCoy, nearly bumping his head on the underside of the desk. Up until now, he hadn't realized that Spock was not alone.

"Thank ye, but I think my engineers can handle it."

The other Vulcan put in, "Assuming that the Romulans have not learned to penetrate their own cloaking device, this should be the best strategy."

"Aye, it should."

Spornak, that figures, thought McCoy, barely resisting the urge to risk sipping at his drink.

"Excellent, Mr. Scott," said Spock. "Then we'll leave you to your work."

After the three Vulcans had departed, Scott rushed to look under the desk. "Are ye all right, Doctor?"

"Oh, just dandy." He struggled to climb out from under it. "There they were, The Three Musketeers, together again. Or the three musket-ears! May I have a refill?"

Briefly left alone on the bridge, the humans present swiveled in their chairs to exchange reactions.

"Wow!" Sulu began. "Were we ever right!"

"I'll say!" agreed Uhura. "Poor Dr. McCoy! That was a first! Being ordered off of the bridge!"

"Well." Chekov put in reluctantly, "I guess that he backed Mr. Spock into a corner. He left him no choice."

"I suppose not," Sulu admitted. "But I felt sorry for him, anyway. And I don't blame him for feeling intimidated. In his place, I would be uncomfortable, too."

"And was he ever!" Uhura emphasized. "Did you see his face when Spornak started toward him?!"

"No, I missed that," Sulu said with obvious regret.

"We couldn't turn around without being too obvious about it." Chekov was rueful.

"Well, I could! And his expression was something to behold," she informed them. "Poor Dr. McCoy!" She broke off abruptly, and the three friends swung in their chairs to face their stations as the turbolift doors parted to readmit the three Vulcans.

Chapter Twenty-Four

"Hot as Vulcan; now I know what that expression means." James T. Kirk's own words came rushing back to accompany the blistering heat and the blazing red sky. The ancient stone pillars, mere meters away from him, announced his location in the land of Spock's family, where his "combat to the death" with Spock had to resolve Spock's affliction with the Vulcan mating drive. Like some medieval Stonehenge, the pillars symbolized to Kirk the ordeal that he was about to relive. Like huge, oversized tombstones, they warned him of the very real danger inherent in the conflict. And where was McCoy? The doctor was supposed to be by his side, *had* to be by his side. McCoy was the one who had to save his life by the timely injection of the neural paralyzer, to simulate death. Without it... Without it, the battle would continue until Kirk really died.

There stood Spock, deep in the "blood fever," beyond speaking or moving. There was T'Pring, self-assured and relaxed, knowing that whatever happened, she won. There stood Stonn, waiting like a vulture to benefit however he could from the suffering of others. There sat T'Pau, smug in her belief of Vulcan superiority and triumph. And here stood Kirk, helpless and alone. The only human. Almost poignantly vulnerable.

In Spock's irrational condition of the mating drive, he had been unable to help and protect Kirk the first time around; and now, under Saterra's additional control, he could not even want to *try*.

What was that? It seemed to Kirk that he had picked up a stray thought from elsewhere, not his own. From Saterra's machine? Somehow he did not think so. It seemed to be coming from...Spock. But how could that be? In the "blood fever," Spock should even be beyond thinking.

No, there it was again, unmistakably this time. And the thought was directed to...T'Pau. Kirk was not a telepath. He should not be able to pick up the thoughts of others. But there was no mistake. It was coming in louder, stronger.

"T'Pau, all is going according to plan. I will dispose of this human quickly and easily. And I will replace him as captain."

"That is good. Our people have too long held a secondary role in the Starfleet. We need to infiltrate to higher positions."

"We will do so. And when I am captain of the Enterprise, I will move others of our people into key positions on the starship."

"That is excellent. I will choose them for you and send them to you. All will be as it should be."

"Affirmative. Stonn?"

"Acknowledged."

"You acted well. The subterfuge of your having posed as a disgruntled suitor of T'Pring has fooled and confused the human."

"I am honored."

"T'Pring?"

"Acknowledged."

"You have also performed well. Your actions in the cause will benefit our people for all time to come."

"Your words honor me."

"Spock? You will proceed with the combat now."

"I hear and obey, T'Pau." Spock's head rose, and his hands dropped back to his sides. His eyes fixed upon Kirk.

"Spock! Wait a moment!"

Spock took a step toward him. Two guards handed the vicious blades to Kirk and Spock. The Vulcan advanced on the human.

"Spock!" he tried in desperation. "Where's Bones? He was supposed to beam down with us!"

"Yes. You would have liked that, wouldn't you? Another human. A comforting presence. You humans rely heavily on your comforts."

"Spock, we're supposed to be friends." Kirk backed away, circling, to buy time.

"I have changed."

"Yes, because of the mating drive. But that'll be temporary."

"No. Not because of the mating drive."

Not paying careful heed to what he was doing, Kirk backed nearly into Stonn. Becoming aware of him at the last possible moment, Kirk recoiled from him, flaring at him, "And *you*, you parasite! Letting someone else fight your battle for you! Letting a *human* fight your battle for you!" Kirk emphasized, pretending not to know that Stonn was simply performing a role.

The latter failed to take the bait. He merely smiled. Smiled?? A Vulcan?? "You amuse us well, Kirk," he declared.

"And you, T'Pring!" Kirk accused. "Failing to fulfill your proper obligations! Using others to get your own way! Those are supposed to be *human* failings!"

She echoed Stonn's smile.

"And T'Pau!" Kirk took several quick steps to avoid the slowly pursuing Spock. "You call your planet *civilized*? And yet you permit *this*??? You *encourage* it! This is my first time on Vulcan, and *this* is what I see?! I expected futuristic cities, advanced centers of learning, state-of-the-art transportation! And what greets me instead? Architecture so primitive that almost *no* area on Earth still resembles it! Transportation so archaic that you had to be carried in on a *sedan chair* by other Vulcans! Attitudes and customs so primeval that you allow – and even favor! – *violence*! You, the conceited 'superior' race which *disdains* violence! And yet you present it here, to impress your 'outworlder' visitor, on his *very first visit*!"

"And your last." T'Pau's lip curled bitterly in her contempt for the human's tirade, which had obviously hit the mark all too well.

Spock swung the weapon.

Kirk sidestepped, barely avoiding the blow.

The fight proceeded much as Kirk had remembered it from the first time, including the ripping of his shirt and his flesh beneath it. But in this replay, the Vulcans seemed more amused and intrigued by the red of his human blood from the wound. Bright red. The color of their Vulcan sky. Soon they anticipated a pool of red in their soil to mirror the heights above them.

The bladed weapons were exchanged for the Vulcan sling. The sling with which Kirk knew that Spock was destined to strangle him. The absence of McCoy preyed upon his mind. No one else could save him. No one else would even *try*.

A new presence caught Kirk's attention. McCoy?? His heart jumped hopefully. No. It descended again in disappointment. A Vulcan. A female. T'Rethe!

She smiled as she saw him recognize her. "You should have died on our planet, Captain. And now you will."

Kirk's barely-controlled panic surfaced. "No! T'Rethe, no!! Help me! As your captain, I order you to help me!!!"

She laughed.

Spock lunged and got the sling around Kirk's neck.

"Please, Spock, wait!" he gasped in desperation. "I *know*! Listen to me! I *know*, don't you see! I heard you, earlier! I know what you really want! To be captain...." He barely choked out the last words.

Spock paused for a moment before pulling the cord...tight. He leered at the human. "I know. We meant for you to hear."

Chapter Twenty-Five

An enraged Leonard McCoy paced back and forth in sickbay. He was furious with himself for obeying, however belatedly, Spock's order to confine himself to sickbay, but he was terrified by his close call at almost being caught in Scott's office. His fear being slightly stronger than his anger, he was now following orders – and raging at himself for doing so. McCoy propelled himself from one end of the room to the other, like a trapped animal in a cage.

"Doctor McCoy."

The human whirled. Spock had come in behind him.

The Vulcan stated, "I left the bridge as soon as it was seemly."

"What have you come to order me to do *this* time?!" McCoy yelled.

One brow rose. "Technically, you were out of line."

"Since when have you let that bother you? We quarrel all the time, whether you're in command or not! Since when do you order me off of the bridge?!" He waved a challenging hand to emphasize his affront.

Unperturbed, Spock explained, "Since we have new crewmen in front of whom we must observe exact proper procedure."

"You mean in front of *Vulcans*." McCoy's eyes lit. "That's it, isn't it? If they were Andorians or Tellarites, you wouldn't let them faze you. But no. They're *Vulcans*! And that's *different*! You feel like they're watching you, judging you. And that maybe they'll even report back to Vulcan on you, on what kind of Vulcan you've become! And that maybe T'Pol will hear about it, or even your father! It's like having spies aboard, isn't it?! Spies to watch your every move in dealing with us *inferior* humans! You're afraid to let them see what our relationship is really like, ...but *Spock*! Don't you understand? Sooner or later they'll *have* to see it! How long do you think that we can go on with this *charade*? Our relationship *works*! What's wrong with letting them see that? But no, you're too insecure for that! You've felt criticized by your own countrymen ever since *childhood*! So now you're trying to pretend that you're glad that they're here – even *Spencek*! Whose uncle you had to *kill*! You're trying to impress them now and cozy up to them and be buddies...!"

"That is enough, Doctor."

"What are you gonna do, Spock, spank me?" McCoy retorted, referring to Spock's half-serious threat during their stay on Vulcan.

Spock fixed him with an expression that clearly considered the possibility.

Suddenly uneasy, despite the absurdity of the notion, McCoy changed the subject rapidly. "Or maybe you'd like to lock me up in the brig! Why settle for mere confinement to sickbay?"

Spock came deeper into the room. "I knew, of course, that you would want to speak with me alone on the subject, after my unprecedented move against you on the bridge."

"Yes," McCoy began, and then a sudden thought struck him. "Who's in charge up there, anyway? *Them*?!"

Spock regarded the doctor in barely-veiled disappointment. "I left Mr. Sulu in command of the bridge. Mr. Scott outranks him, of course, but I have him occupied with another task."

McCoy's jaw twitched guiltily, knowing what that task was, and knowing that he was not expected to know. He spoke quickly to cover it. "A human? You actually left a human in charge? I'm amazed! Why not Spencek? Or Spornak?"

"As you well know, Doctor, they are hardly of command rank."

"Well, that didn't stop you from moving them in as permanent new fixtures on the bridge!"

"I merely selected them as my welcome advisors during this crisis. Their training with me in this capacity will benefit them as well."

"Since when do you feel the need of additional Vulcans to advise you?!"

"Since the captain is missing, and you became irrational." Spock barely held his temper in check.

McCoy blinked at him. He faltered, "But you...you didn't want me on the bridge with you. You told me to work on those reports instead."

"Which were vital, and which need not have taken you long."

"And...and then I could have come up there? And you would've been glad that I did? But no, I did go up, and you were already busy with the Vulcans. And you barely acknowledged me."

Spock eyed him. "What would you have had me say, Doctor? Greet you in the human fashion? 'So delighted that you could join us. Do stay a while. We've missed you.'" The question in his voice well-revealed the absurdity of the careless, trivial, human-style banter, and it renewed McCoy's anger.

"Well, that would have been a heck-sight better than your cold formal Vulcan style: 'Proceed with your report. Insufficient data.'"

They watched each other for a moment.

Then Spock challenged, "Better in whose viewpoint? Yours? And what impression would it have made on our new crewmen?"

"And that's all that you care about: our new crewmen," McCoy responded bitterly. "I'm surprised that you came down here without them. You actually came to see me alone? Without your shadows? Aren't you afraid that I won't obey you without them here? Without your *enforcers*?"

Spock rose to the challenge. "I do not need...enforcers," he emphasized the human's word choice.

McCoy ignored the implied threat. "Tell *them* that. They think that you *do*. You saw how Spornak came toward me when I refused to obey your order to leave the bridge. You saw how Spencek looked at me."

"They were merely responding as any good security team would, when witnessing gross insubordination toward a commanding officer."

"They're not a security team!"

"They acted in lieu of one. There was none present."

"But let's get to the bottom line, Spock. When Spornak came toward me like that: what would you have let him do to me?"

Spock evaded the question. "I trust that you yourself would not have allowed the situation to reach that point. In fact, you *did* not."

"That's true. But that's not the question, is it? Let's just suppose. What would you have let him do?"

Spock hesitated. "You left me no choice, Doctor. I could not have interfered. Spornak was acting on my behalf."

"You *still* haven't answered my question."

Spock nodded slowly. "I would have allowed him to act in an appropriate Vulcan manner in response to your defiance."

McCoy swallowed, almost dreading the pursuit of what he'd started. In a small voice, he guessed, "Tal-shaya?"

Spock's face broke momentarily into an almost human mixture of astonishment and disgust at the doctor's melodramatic naïveté. "Certainly not," he declared with evident distaste.

McCoy's own face managed a cross between relieved and bewildered. "Then...what...?"

"The Vulcan nerve pinch," Spock reassured him anticlimactically.

"Oh," McCoy gulped. "Oh," he repeated, recovering slowly. "But...but even so. You know that I'm afraid of that, too."

"I am well aware of that, Doctor. Which is why I surmised, as I said, that you would not permit the situation to develop to that point."

"I...I see. But it still upsets me to know that you would have let him do it. Knowing that I'm frightened of it."

Spock watched him for a moment before he spoke, "I am sorry, Doctor. But good relations with the new crewmen must be maintained."

"At the expense of our friendship?" McCoy's blue eyes studied him.

Brown eyes watched blue.

Then, at length, Spock said, "I came down here because I knew that you would need some time in which to rant and rave at me, and that it must be done in private, not in front of the Vulcans. Are you quite satisfied now, Leonard?" Without awaiting a reply, Spock walked out of the sickbay.

McCoy watched him go, in shock. Had he hurt his Vulcan friend that badly? How could he have misjudged Spock so? Suddenly, he was again angry with himself, but for a different reason. Whereas he had previously berated himself for obeying Spock, he now chastised himself for offending him.

McCoy shook his head. He sauntered half-heartedly to his liquor cabinet. Now where was that bootlegged Romulan ale? If only he could have had a drink on Vulcan, his time there might have gone easier, he knew.

Humans had that crude, inappropriate, inefficient means of dealing – or misdealing – with their problems. Vulcans had no such approach. The Vulcan method was subtler, more direct and to the point.

A very hurt Spock proceeded directly, and expressionlessly, to his quarters. The warmth of the higher temperature inside, and the familiarity of the Vulcan artifacts placed decoratively about the room, began the soothing process. Spock knelt before the Vulcan altar and initiated his meditation. In time, he would purge the unwanted, counter-productive emotions.

Chapter Twenty-Six

James T. Kirk tossed fitfully, trying uselessly to sleep. Why should he be so restless? His mission tomorrow was, after all, a simple diplomatic one. He merely had to approach a very gentle, peaceful people, and persuade them to establish formal relations and trade agreements with the Federation. But what was this sense of foreboding, of something terribly amiss, which haunted him?

Picking up thoughts.... No! Was he truly picking up another's thoughts? How could he? And why was there an unpleasant familiarity in that concept? Mentally shrugging, Kirk stopped resisting and gave in to the idea. After all, if he truly could pick up the thoughts of another, he might learn something from the contact. How could it hurt to try? He concentrated.

"Hear me...hear me...send him to you...dispose of him...tomorrow...hear me...."

The thoughts would come no clearer. They did not make a great deal of sense. And yet Kirk knew with unreasoning certainty that the sender of the thoughts was Spock. And he knew with a growing sense of dread that the "him" who would be sent and disposed of was Kirk himself. But to whom would he be sent? About the recipient of the message, he had no clue. He did not even have any proof that the message had been received. Yet with an irrational sinking in his heart, he believed that it had been.

With a tiny moan of frustration, Kirk rolled over and managed to drop into a fretful sleep.

The next day, a nervously-alert Kirk reported to the transporter room to beam down to the planet with the landing party. He furtively wondered if it would change anything if he reversed his previous decision and included Spock in the group. But he supposed not. Whomever Spock had waiting for him would still be there doing exactly that, whether the first officer were along or not.

Kirk assumed his position on the platform, and gave the order to energize.

As negotiations progressed, some of Kirk's fears abated. True, the new culture was not readily accepting of the Federation, but on the other hand, Kirk did not know when he had encountered such a harmless, innocent, gentle race. As it became obvious that the aliens were not going to accept the Federation immediately, and that further, later contacts would be needed, Kirk actually began to relax at the prospect of a rapidly approaching beam-up. Surely nothing was going to be done to him by these pleasant people. True, beaming back aboard in the middle of a storm was unsettling, but as Kirk took his place among McCoy, Scott, and Uhura for the return to the Enterprise, he knew that he would soon be out of harm's way, and besides, a random storm could not possibly have been part of Spock's plans.

A rough beam-up almost altered his opinion, but as the familiar transporter room took shape around him.... No. The room disappeared again...and was replaced by an unfamiliar transporter room. With a bearded Spock behind the console, saluting him. As Kirk's hazel eyes met the strange Spock's brown ones, Kirk knew with a dreadful sickening sensation that here before him was the receiver of Spock's message. The human captain proceeded through his ordeal in the antimatter universe, reliving the scenes that he recognized all too well from his prior trip through this particular event, and taking care to keep his distance whenever possible from the sinister, alien Spock. With a jolt of horror, Kirk heard the evil almost-double remind Kirk of his wish to trap McCoy alone for answers. With a sadness beyond endurance Kirk saw the moment of that fateful encounter approach, knowing what it would do to the doctor, but knowing that, under these revised circumstances, he dared not interfere. In this version of history, the risk was even greater to *him* than it was to McCoy. The latter would be, he recalled, temporarily mentally damaged, but the damage could be repaired upon return to the matter universe. The doctor would not be disposed of, at least, as he, Kirk, would be. With a sinking heart, Kirk listened to McCoy's request that the rest of their little band should go on to the transporter room, and allow McCoy to remain and save the evil Spock's life, and then join them. Gritting his teeth and digging his nails into his palms, Kirk abandoned McCoy to his fate, dwelling on the irony that in the previous two "revised-history" excursions, Kirk had wished mightily for McCoy's presence for his own emotional security. Now that he had it, he would gladly wish it away, to remove his sensitive friend from the line of fire. But it was he that Saterra

wished to torture with her images. Kirk had better do what he could to protect himself. The doctor was not really here, he told himself insistently. He didn't really *have* McCoy's presence, for comfort or otherwise.

Yes he did. He had McCoy's presence. Within *himself*.

Kirk was startled, but only somewhat, after the way that things had been going, to look down and see a briefly-unconscious bearded Spock lying placidly, for the moment, on the examining table, and to see also a blue, instead of yellow, sleeve covering his own arm. His mind had been transferred into the fragile body of McCoy, and now *he* was the one who was going to be tortured by the cruel Vulcan. Kirk spared a moment to marvel at Saterra's cleverness as the eyes of his sadistic tormentor opened.

Spock sat up, and roughly gripped his victim's arm.

"Why did the captain let me live?" Spock-with-a-beard demanded.

Kirk, in the body of McCoy, offered no reply, but privately inquired of himself, Yes, why indeed?

The wrong-universe Spock squeezed the arm harder and jumped off of the table, propelling Kirk backward across the room into the far wall.

I'm beginning to see why McCoy was so damaged by this scene, Kirk realized inwardly, with growing dread, but I get the feeling that the worst is yet to come.

Kirk had, on several occasions, previously experienced the Vulcan mind probe, but this was his first painful entry. McCoy's description, dating from the first time that this event had occurred, came flooding back to him as he was made brutally aware of its accuracy: "the sensation of the delicate layers of McCoy's brain being peeled back to reveal the tender innermost heart of his thoughts, the unwanted outer layers being cast roughly aside in the process, like ripping unneeded pages out of a book." Very true. Only this time, it was Kirk's brain. And he knew what was to come later: "a dazed, confused McCoy trying in vain to retrieve those lost pages and to put them into some semblance of order; a feeling of being lost and unable to reclaim the very memories that the alien, wrong-universe Spock had violated." But this time, it would be a dazed, confused Kirk. And then he remembered the cure. The only cure for this affliction. The cure was the same as the cause. Someone else must go back in and put his thoughts in order. The benevolent, right-universe Spock must do so. Benevolent Spock? There was none! The Spock that Kirk knew so well had *done* this to him, had sent Kirk to be victimized by the bearded Spock. He would not help him. Given the chance, he would hurt him worse.

Reluctantly, Kirk began to sympathize with McCoy, whom he, Kirk, had forced to submit to the cure for his own good. McCoy had been terrified, and had expressed that, even when done gently, the cure wasn't easy. When done gently. And Spock, his own Spock, would not do it gently. Not this time. Not with Saterra in control. Kirk wondered ruefully if a McCoy-in-Kirk's body would be the one to force Kirk-in-McCoy's-body to submit, upon his return to the "real" universe, or whether a grinning, monstrous "real" Spock would already be waiting for him upon his arrival.

Kirk tried to cling to one thought: unlike what had genuinely happened to McCoy the first time around, this time Kirk was not truly being mentally damaged by the bearded Spock, any more than Kirk had really been strangled by the clean-shaven Spock on Vulcan, or forcibly exposed to the spores by same on Omicron Ceti Three.

It was hard to hang on to those reassurances when the pain was so very real, though. And, of course, the bearded Spock had picked up on every one of them, during the probe.

He grinned into Kirk's suffering mind. "You're not going back to your own ship. Your Spock will not cure you. Nor will he need to finish torturing you instead. I am here, and I am not going to release you. He sent you to me. And I sent mine to him."

"I know," Kirk admitted.

"Yes, I see that you do. And I see in your memory that once before, on the prior occasion, you said to me: 'Be the captain of this Enterprise, Mr. Spock.' Did you realize what you were saying? What I would have to do?"

Kirk shivered in understanding. The bearded Spock would have to kill the antimatter Kirk. Probably with brutal Vulcan methods.

"Yes," Kirk faltered. "But that was when I saw you as good, and my other-universe double as evil."

"Hm," his torturer mused. "Have you ever wondered if your counterpart might have been saying the same thing at the same time, back then, to your Spock? About you?"

"Not until now," Kirk confessed with a shudder.

The bearded Spock laughed softly. "If I were you, I would learn to be careful what you do and say, in a parallel universe. Not that you'll ever get the chance to benefit from that knowledge now."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

No, getting potted like a plant was not the answer, McCoy knew. The guilt would remain and the problem would still be there. But McCoy would be less able to deal with it. He put the ale back in the cabinet.

The human sat down sorrowfully at the desk. He had definitely gone too far this time. Teasing Spock, even arguing with him was one thing, but this was quite another. He had actually threatened to dissolve their friendship. He had really implied that the relationship could die if Spock allowed one of the other Vulcans to nerve-pinch him on his behalf. How could he have done that? How could he have put such a cheap price tag on their friendship? So what if he was phobic about the nerve pinch, and the other Vulcan methods; wasn't Spock worth enduring a few hardships?

And that had not been his only offense. He had come right out and accused Spock of only caring about the new crewmen. After all the years, and all the shared crises, could he truly have said that to Spock, or thought that about him? The very fact that Spock had come down here alone to see him after McCoy's rudeness on the bridge proved the falseness of that claim. And especially, Spock's stated and demonstrated willingness to allow the doctor to fulfill his human need to berate Spock and get the anger off of his chest also belied it.

But the lowest blow of all was deliberately calling attention to Spock's own insecurities. One thing that a human must never do is point out and analyze emotional motivations in a Vulcan. And McCoy had done so relentlessly, looking all the way back to Spock's childhood to find the motives, and implying that Spock himself was intimidated by other Vulcans, including even his own father. McCoy's doing so had been crueler than the Vulcan methods of which he was so afraid.

"Yes, you've really done it this time, Leonard," McCoy chastised himself. And that reminded him of another thing. Spock's almost unheard-of employment of the doctor's first name revealed starkly the depth of hurt to which he'd been subjected. Spock used the name only when intense feeling was involved.

McCoy sat back and sighed. "Well, I've done it again. Exposed Spock's weaknesses intentionally to hurt him." One previous occasion of which the doctor was especially ashamed was when he and Spock had been forced by planetary officials on a very Roman-like world to fight two huge, burly men in an arena. Spock had saved McCoy's life, and then they had been jailed. During their confinement, McCoy had awkwardly sought a way in which to thank the Vulcan for rescuing him. Spock, in trying to avoid the development of the situation into an emotional scene, had resorted to logic with which to explain away his actions. Embarrassed and angered, McCoy had torn into him....

"I know why you're not afraid to die, Spock. You're more afraid of living. Each day you stay alive is just one more day you might slip, and let your human half peek out. That's it, isn't it? Insecurity. Why, you wouldn't know what to do with a genuine, warm, decent feeling."

McCoy reflected back upon that moment, thinking, I shouldn't have done that, torn him down that way. It was cruel. It made him seem so vulnerable all of a sudden. I had been so exasperated, that all I'd wanted to do at the moment was to hurt him, to expose his weakness. After I saw how thoroughly I had done so, I was shocked and sorry. But then it was too late; the damage was done. I can only hope that he forgave me in time. He was only trying to save his pride by saying that logic was his only motive, and I certainly knew that it wasn't. And he *had* saved my life. I should have been grateful enough to tolerate his social strangeness. Now that I think about it, back in the arena, he had been trying not to injure his opponent since Vulcans abhor violence, but when he saw me on the floor, about to be finished off, he clobbered his opponent and mine instantly, with grave determination, recklessly, with no regard for his safety or theirs. I guess that there is some tenderness in him after all. And then I, the oaf that I can sometimes be, had to go blundering in and expose it.

And now I've done it again. Worse, McCoy groaned, because this time, I've managed to point out his insecurities, accuse him of not caring, and threaten to terminate our friendship, all at the same time. Wonderful. And I was wrong about him anyway; he had valid, sensible replies for

every accusation that I made. Well, all but one. The accusation that I didn't dare to make. The one that I only thought, but didn't say: the one about doubting his efforts in regard to the rescue of Jim. The one that this whole argument has really been about, anyway. I just didn't quite have the nerve to bring that up again; no matter how angry I got, I couldn't quite go that far. I couldn't bring myself to say: I don't trust you to want to save Jim. McCoy shook his head in an attempt to shake off the horror that that thought inspired, certainly glad that at least he had not gone that far. After having heard his replies to the accusations that I *did* make, I realize that that unspeakable one would have been a false accusation, too. I *do* trust Spock. He wouldn't let anything happen to Jim.

McCoy leaned back in his chair. But I wish that I could feel the same way about the other Vulcans. I just don't. I don't trust them. Not with me, and not with Jim. For one thing, they don't know him well enough to be that dedicated to rescuing him. For another thing, their attitude toward humans, any humans, is hardly exemplary. I wouldn't put it past them to want to be rid of Jim, and have Spock put in charge. Particularly since the only experience that they ever had with Jim was to argue with him. That quarrel down on Eridomas 7 between Spencek and Spornak on the one hand, and Jim on the other, was most unfortunate. Because now it's the only memory that they have of our captain. Even Spock admitted that it left them with a wrong impression. They were testing Jim, Spock said. Testing! What they were doing was bullying him! Seeing if he *could* be bullied. And, as Spock admitted, they were using their Vulcan telepathic abilities to see if it was working. Unfair tactics, to say the least! And from what Spock indicated, the message that they were receiving in that way was not a good one. They've probably decided by now that they've got a captain that they can either eliminate or manipulate. Now that the Romulans have handed them a golden opportunity to do the former.

With my outbursts, I haven't made things any easier. I've strained my relationship with Spock right in front of the very people whom I should have tried to impress with its harmony. I should have, could have, been up on the bridge at this very moment, advising and having influence over the proceedings. Instead, I'm sitting down here confined to sickbay like an unruly child who's been sent to his room. Hmph! Seems to me that I recall that that's just about what Spock called me when we were on Vulcan, too, an undisciplined child. That's what first prompted him to jokingly threaten to spank me. Assuming that it *was* a joke. I should have known better than to fight with Spock in front of those other Vulcans; I should have known that that would be an unwise move. Of course, I didn't ask for those interlopers to be on the bridge, anyway. Invaders! But Spock says that he needed them. Because Jim was missing, and I was being unreliable...what was it that he said? Irrational. Now that really hurt. Although maybe I deserved it; I don't know. But I'd better be darn careful how I treat Spock from now on, regardless. If I haven't already pushed him too far, it won't take much more. And I've already learned that he'll be stricter with me and less forgiving in front of those new Vulcans than he had been before they came. I've also learned that he'll let them enforce his orders to me. McCoy shivered. I guess that I can't blame him, after all, but it *is* something that I'd like to avoid.

Dr. McCoy pulled himself tiredly from his chair. Well if I'm stuck here, I might as well pace.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

James T. Kirk saw the holding cell of the Romulan ship around him. Had he actually been allowed to come out from under the influence of the wicked revised-history machine for a while? He reached one hand gingerly to his head. The device was not there. But that proved nothing. During the images that the machine sent to him, it and the bonds seemed to disappear. Undoubtedly so that he could act freely, or at least appear to act freely, within the framework of the fiction. Yes, it *was* fiction, he kept reminding himself. But during the process of each "story," he suffered the experience with the same sense of reality as he had endured the plain, unadorned truth, the first time around that same incident. Was this how Captain Christopher Pike had been made to feel, at the hands of the Talosians? If so, Kirk could now sympathize fully. And it was scary to realize that the Romulans had already learned to manipulate the human brain, albeit with the aid of a machine, as the Talosians could. How long would it be before the Romulans needed no machine, either?

Kirk wondered whether Saterra would show up in his cell, to talk to him again. She was putting all of this effort into destroying his relationship with Spock. Which implied that she intended to ultimately let him go back to the Enterprise, or else what would be the point? Well, was it working? Kirk tried visualizing Spock in his mind, to see what would happen; and sure enough, a tremor of fear ran the length of his spine and his breathing rate increased. Damn! Mustn't let her succeed! Mustn't let her manipulate him!

As if in response to his cue, the cell doors parted, and Kirk rolled his head on the table on which he was lying to reluctantly face Commander Saterra. She entered. No! It was *not* Saterra! It was a commander, all right, but not *that* particular Romulan Commander; it was another female one! Of course! The Flagship Commander from whom Kirk had stolen the cloaking device. But what was she doing here? She was not alone. Spock entered behind her. The fear coursed through him again. Why was Spock here?

The Commander and Spock both smiled at him. It was difficult to tell which smile was more evil, more malevolent.

The Romulan spoke first, "Did you really think that you could fool me with this little charade, Kirk?"

"What?"

"Oh come now. Let's not play games. You're operating under Starfleet's orders."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

She feigned patience. "You and Spock have orders to steal our cloaking device. You've planned an elaborate subterfuge, including Spock pretending to romance me, in order to gain access to it."

Kirk's eyes flicked quickly to Spock's face, silently demanding, How does she know?

Spock's enigmatic grin gave Kirk no answers.

"And you," the Commander continued as if she had not paused. "Your job is to pretend to be insane, so that Spock can claim that you ordered your ship across the neutral zone on your own initiative, thus letting your Starfleet Command off of the hook."

Kirk held his breath in shock, trying not to let his eyes reply to her.

"But you see, your little plan is going to fail," she went on, "because we have you trapped here, and you will carry out none of those actions."

"We?"

"Yes." She smiled broadly. "Spock and I. Surely you've guessed?"

"Spock?" Kirk inquired in a small voice.

Still grinning, the Vulcan approached him.

His nervousness beginning to show, Kirk attempted to squirm deeper into the unyielding surface of the table.

Spock leaned his fists beside Kirk on the table and observed his helpless captain in amusement.

"You would betray Starfleet?" Kirk asked faintly.

"I would betray you."

"Why?"

"I believe that you know why."

"The revised-history machine."

Instead of replying, Spock laughed, and then prompted, "Do you remember how this scene was supposed to go, Jim? You're supposed to pretend to attack me, muttering, 'I'll kill you,' and I'm supposed to pretend to use the Vulcan death grip to stop you."

Kirk made no reply, but fought to calm his pounding heart.

"But then," Spock proceeded, "it's supposed to turn out that there's no such thing as the Vulcan death grip, and that all I really did was give you a nerve pinch to simulate death."

"Well." Kirk cleared his throat and tried again. "Well, I have no intention of attacking you."

Spock was not disappointed as Kirk hoped he'd be. "That does not cause me any hardship, as I have every intention of proceeding with my part of the demonstration either way."

Kirk waited.

"But with a few small deviations, of course."

"Like what?" he couldn't help asking.

"I won't bother with the nerve pinch." He watched for Kirk's reaction, and the latter was determined to give him none, thinking, That's all right; I won't miss it; it hurts anyway.

"Because that would end my demonstration too quickly," Spock added when no reply was forthcoming. "The fictitious death grip will go on much longer. And you did find it painful, did you not, Jim? I believe that your exact words to McCoy later were, 'My neck feels like it's been twisted off'."

Kirk mentally cursed the machine's ability to pull that memory from him. But Spock's last remark raised another thought. "McCoy!" Kirk blurted. "McCoy's supposed to be here! In this scene! To pronounce me dead and take me home to the Enterprise!"

Spock laughed again. "I've told you before, Jim. Since you find that cowardly human a comfort, we will not allow him to be here. You are not here to be comforted."

Spock started to reach for Kirk's face.

The latter braced himself.

Spock paused. "Oh, and one more thing, Jim. Supposedly, the Vulcan death grip is fictional. Supposedly. But if it is continued long enough, who knows?"

Kirk saw Spock's spreading fingers arch in all directions to his forehead, his temples, his cheeks, as Spock's palm loomed larger and larger in Kirk's field of vision. He felt the fingers begin to tighten, accompanied by the Vulcan's sinister laugh. As before, the alien's probing fingers found all of the right pressure points with which to cause pain: the delicate center of his forehead, the soft depressions of his temples in which the veins throbbed, the tender hollows of his cheeks. Kirk grimaced and struggled, and the Vulcan squeezed harder, enjoying Kirk's torment. In spite of Kirk's promise, both to himself and to Spock, not to fight back, he found his arms involuntarily rising against the Vulcan. His hands pressed on Spock's chest in a vain attempt to push him away from him. Spock chuckled appreciatively and squeezed much harder. Kirk cried out in pain.

"Good, Jim," Spock encouraged. "Fight me. Give me an excuse to increase the torture. Not that I need an excuse." Spock stepped up his pressure by several degrees, eliciting a scream from his victim.

The Romulan Flagship Commander watched and smiled and enjoyed the display. She was not the only commander who did.

In a room not far from Kirk's cell, Commander Saterra sat and monitored the progress of Kirk's indoctrination into "Spock-phobia." She had watched each event that the machine had selected with great enjoyment, but this was clearly her favorite. The Commander of the Flagship whom Kirk and Spock had thoroughly disgraced with their vile plot to steal the cloaking device was her friend. A promising career woman with a golden future ahead of her, who had, after all, made it to Commander of the Flagship already in her young years. And then she ended up

romanced by a Vulcan, fooled by a human, abducted across the neutral zone into Federation territory by the Enterprise, disgraced before her fellows. Saterra's dear friend destroyed, ruined. And here she had within her hands one of the two men responsible. And she was quite literally using the other to torture him. Appropriate. But most appropriate of all was the reenactment of this particular episode from Kirk's past. She hadn't influenced the machine's choices in any way; it had just selected likely passages in which Spock had particularly stood out in Kirk's memory, zeroing in on those most likely to produce the desired result. It hadn't known of the special reasons for her personal vendetta against Kirk. She'd merely gotten lucky.

She murmured her laughter as she sat back to enjoy the show, savoring her delight at what the machine had chosen. She listened happily to the music of Kirk's shrieks and wails, each one avenging her dear friend.

"Ah yes, revenge," she revealed. "What a nice ironic selection for the machine to have made."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Leonard McCoy paced back and forth across sickbay, muttering to himself at every step. Thus occupied, it is little wonder that he failed to hear the soft steps which entered the room behind him, and which paused there a moment for their owner to observe McCoy's animated self-recriminations.

After watching the human's odd antics for a time, the new arrival stepped out of the shadows to reveal himself. McCoy still did not hear. But as he swung around on the next lap of his trek, he saw. An involuntary gasp escaped from the doctor and he stopped in his tracks.

"Do not be alarmed," the Vulcan said.

McCoy blushed with embarrassment and anger. "You should know better than to sneak up on someone like that! And how long were you standing there, anyway?!"

"Long enough to be curious." His visitor entered the room more deeply. "I do not understand."

"What's there to understand?" McCoy barked.

"This human tendency to talk to oneself. What does it accomplish?"

Flustered, McCoy considered several angry retorts, but made none of them, as the alien took another casual step in his direction, causing him considerable emotional distress, and instantly banishing his anger.

The newcomer saw this. "Why do I make you nervous?"

McCoy's jaw twitched in the knowledge of his obvious transparency. By way of reply, he answered the question with a question. "Did you come here because you have your uncle's violent tendencies?"

This brought Spencek as close to amusement as a pure Vulcan could possibly be. "So that is what is troubling you. No. I am here merely because I am curious about your peculiar relationship with Spock."

McCoy swallowed. "So was your uncle. But he was too busy torturing me to pursue it." McCoy vividly remembered catching Spencek's stray thought that there were many things in McCoy's mind that he would have liked to scrutinize if he had had forever in which to do so, such as the peculiar relationship between McCoy and Spock. But he had cast them aside for lack of time.

Spencek surprised him. "I regret what my uncle did to you."

McCoy stammered, "Thank you."

"But I think that you will agree that he was well punished for the offense."

The human swallowed again and nodded.

The Vulcan tilted his head quizzically. "Do I detect regret on your part, at my uncle's execution?"

"Well, no, not exactly. I guess that I was just shocked that such extreme measures were used. And...and I find tal-shaya...alarming."

"I see. It is considered a merciful form of execution."

"By your people, maybe. I'd hate to see what you'd call an unmerciful one."

The Vulcan seemed about to reply.

"No, don't tell me." McCoy waved it away hastily. "I don't want to know."

The near-amusement returned. "You appear to be a very sensitive individual."

McCoy shrugged.

"Which is on the subject of my original errand in coming to see you. You expended so much useless emotion needlessly."

McCoy misunderstood. "With Spencek? He forced me to. Deliberately."

"No, I meant now, with Spock, quarreling with him on the bridge, then muttering to yourself about it down here."

The human was defensive. "Look, our relationship works. And we don't need you or Spornak or the others to interfere with it!"

"You have always quarreled?"

"Yes!"

"And...that...works?"

"Yes!"

"Interesting."

"Or at least," McCoy faltered, "it *did* work. Before you and the others came."

"Are you suggesting that we are a disruptive influence?"

"That's exactly what I'm suggesting! Spock never ordered me off of the bridge before, and...well, when Spornak came at me, probably to nerve pinch me for disobeying Spock, ...well, Spock was going to *let* him!"

Spencek blinked. "Is that unusual?"

"Yes, it's unusual! I find the nerve pinch alarming, too, and Spock *knows* that! I would have expected Spock to protect me!"

"But you were defying him."

"I, ...yeah, but, ...oh forget it!"

"No." Spencek stepped closer. "Go ahead and tell me. I really am interested. I am trying to understand you."

"Hmph! Your people study ours, like specimens under a microscope."

"Is that your impression of us?"

"That's how I felt on Vulcan. While I was a student there at the Academy."

"When Spencek was your professor."

McCoy gulped. "Yes."

"That topic seems to cause you discomfort."

"Well, it's...it's awkward. With you."

"Understandable. But it need not be."

The doctor waved his hands helplessly.

"But getting back to the previous subject: you think of Spock as your protector?"

"Well, yes I do. I especially did on Vulcan. And he was."

"And now you feel that that relationship is damaged."

"Yes, ...sort of, I guess. Or maybe not. I *did* think so. But maybe not after all. Or maybe it wasn't, much, but now I've just made it worse. Or...oh hell, I don't know!"

"You appear rather confused on the issue."

McCoy stared. "You know, you Vulcans have a talent for understatement."

The light of near-amusement returned. "You seem to be someone who knows us well, but understands us little."

"Brother, you can say that again!"

Spencek was genuinely puzzled. "Why should I...."

"...wish to repeat it, yeah I know," McCoy finished for him.

Spencek nodded. "You have just proven my point. You anticipated what I was going to say."

"Well partly. But I'm surprised that you didn't start by telling me that I'm not your brother."

"You are not," Spencek agreed in all seriousness.

"Right." McCoy nodded knowingly, his tone mildly sarcastic.

Spencek shook his head. "Do you believe that our two species will ever genuinely understand each other?"

"I doubt it. For instance, I don't think that I could ever understand a race that intentionally rejects its own emotions."

Spencek considered before replying, "We believe emotions to be...useless and counterproductive."

"And we believe them to be what makes living worthwhile."

Spencek's brows rose. "Fear? And anger?"

"No. Joy. And love."

"Perhaps. But you cannot have the good without also accepting the bad."

"And you can't get rid of the bad without also losing the good."

Spencek nodded. "Hm. We *will* have difficulty understanding each other. We are truly opposites."

"We are the flip side of the coin from you. But maybe we'll turn out to be mutually complimentary."

"In which case, the IDIC is truly the wise philosophy."

McCoy nodded. "Now *there* we're in agreement. And I happen to think that Spock incorporates the best of both worlds."

"Perhaps he does."

"And he's the only person that I know who at least partially understands both sides."

"If so, that will make him an invaluable commodity. Especially aboard this ship."

McCoy agreed emphatically. "Especially now."

"With us here, yes. I join you in hoping that your relationship with him is undamaged."

The human was amazed. "Thank you."

"And now I'll take my leave of you." The Vulcan departed.

McCoy stood staring at the empty doorway for some time after Spencek had gone. He had actually managed to have a reasonably civilized conversation with one of them. And most of it had even made sense. And with Spencek's nephew yet. He wondered what Spock would think if he knew about this. Spock. McCoy must find some way of patching it up with his Vulcan friend. And he could hardly wait to tell him that he had experienced at least a reasonable conversation with Spencek. That made two he trusted. Or at least, almost trusted. The others? Who knew? As the expression said, Rome was not built in a day. It would take time. He knew that, at least for a while, he would still be wary of the rest. And there would be times when he would mistrust their motives. But at least one of them had extended a hand to him. Perhaps, in time, there would be more.

Chapter Thirty

Oh no. Not again. Kirk couldn't really be on the planet Vulcan again. Why would the machine choose the same setting twice? But all around him were the red sky, the molten rocks, the oppressive heat. And yet, if he was on Vulcan, he was certainly in a different area this time. Gone was the "Stonehenge" of the land of Spock's family. In fact, there was no sign of civilization at all. If one could refer to the setting of the Vulcan "marriage or challenge" as civilization. The lack of evidence of habitation shouldn't surprise him too much, though, he realized; every planet still had its wilderness areas. And that's exactly where he was: in a red rock wilderness. Plants existed around him. They were even green, as was normal in his viewpoint. But Kirk wasn't enough of a botanist to be able to identify plants with planets. He could be absolutely anywhere, for all he learned from the growth. Working under the theory that he was on Vulcan, Kirk determined to avoid the civilized areas. He must avoid hostile, dangerous Vulcans, and especially Spock. Cruel, sadistic Spock! That one must be avoided at all costs.

One fact was unsettling, though, in view of the theory that he was situated in a Vulcan wilderness: he had never before been in one. In all of the previous traumas inflicted upon him by the revised-history machine, Kirk had been forced to relive situations and places that he really had lived at some point in his career. Oh, there had been changes. Dreadful changes! But at least a germ of each idea had been true.

Kirk shrugged it off, and pushed his way through the underbrush. Whatever happened, he was going to keep moving and not let them catch him. Not any of them! And most especially, not Spock!

A soft stirring in the bushes just ahead of Kirk stopped him cold. A figure clad in a long, loose-fitting, crocheted, multi-pastel garment appeared. Kirk's eyes rose to the face. Vulcan! The human began to back away from the alien. The stranger advanced slowly toward him. No, not a stranger. Vaguely familiar. Surak! The historical figure! The peacemaker! The one Vulcan referred to by his people as "father of all we now hold true!" And Kirk had met him before, or at least, the alien reincarnation of him, at the same time that he had met the recreated image of Abraham Lincoln. Yes of course! This planet wasn't Vulcan. It was the planet on which Kirk had met Lincoln and Surak. And Colonel Greene and several other evil figures from history.

"I see that you know me."

"Yes, I...I believe that I do. You're Surak, the...the peacemaker," Kirk emphasized hopefully.

"I *was*," Surak emphasized in return, taking a step nearer.

Concealing his nervousness, Kirk intentionally misunderstood. "Yes, I know that you're no longer living; you're a figure from history."

"Hm." Surak smiled. "That's not what I meant. I meant that I am no longer the peacemaker." He took another step.

"No." Kirk's control slipped; he backed carefully away from the other. "You're supposed to be the most nonviolent Vulcan of all time."

"It is an interesting thing about that." Surak walked forward steadily. "One gets tired of being nonviolent all of the time. It becomes boring."

Kirk turned and fled. He heard the thump of footsteps behind him. He pushed himself harder, hearing the bumping of his own heart keeping time with the pounding beats of the steps of his pursuer. Small plants low to the ground tangled Kirk's feet and threatened to trip him, and still he pressed on harder. Surak was barely behind him.

"For a peacemaker," Kirk puffed in frustration, "he certainly does keep himself in good fighting shape!" He finished as he leaped over a small embankment and rolled down a hill.

"Of course he does. He is a Vulcan," said a voice at whose feet Kirk had neatly rolled.

Kirk gripped the grass to stop his motion, and his eyes flashed upward to the face of Sarek, Spock's father.

"No!" Kirk reversed his roll, desperately hoping not to slam into the feet of Surak, coming down the hill. His wish, for the time, was granted. The human scrambled to his own feet, looked frantically about for others, and, seeing none at the moment, made one feeble attempt.

"Ambassador! Please! In Amanda's name, I ask you! Help me!!"

"I think not." Sarek advanced.

Kirk sprinted away from him.

Two sets of steps hammered behind him. Risking a quick glance, he confirmed Sarek and Surak in hot pursuit.

"Hot is right," the human complained. "The heat here is as bad as Vulcan. They're used to it; I'm not. It'll get me even if they don't." Still Kirk ran on, deciding that death by heat stroke was infinitely preferable to death by Vulcans.

Another small hill rose before the captain. Huffing at the growing pain in his chest, he questioned his ability to handle it. But with grim determination, never breaking his stride, Kirk launched himself at it. He crested the top, his aching calf-muscles shouting at him. And nearly collided with Spock, standing placidly at the top of the hill.

With a cry, Kirk veered to the right, lost his footing, fell, and rolled, fearing mightily that he might roll back down the hill that he had just conquered, and into the waiting arms of Sarek and Surak. He did not, but struggled to his feet in time to see the pair gain the hilltop and Spock advancing toward him.

"No!!!" Kirk shrieked, not even bothering to try to reason with Spock. The human careened away with three Vulcans on his heels. As the pain in his legs became a dull throb, and the pressure in his chest threatened to crush the life from him, Kirk knew with a horrifying certainty that if he did not soon find a hiding place where he could be quiet and recover, he would collapse where he was and lie waiting for the Vulcans to do whatever they wished with him. Because he knew with sickening dread in his heart, that even rested and in the best of shape, he was no match for any one of them. But exhausted, and against three?

"Where's Abraham Lincoln when you really need him?" Kirk panted. Somehow he knew that that friendly ally who had fought beside him here before would not appear now.

But like a revelation, Kirk saw before him the rocky fortress with the cave at the top, which he and Lincoln and the others had used as a base, when they had once before fought the battle against evil on this planet.

A hiding place! Kirk exulted silently, hoping to creep into it without his pursuers seeing. He crouched down quickly behind the rocks at the bottom and paused, listening. The footsteps no longer thundered after him. Perhaps he had lost them? Daring to hope, Kirk crept stealthily upward among the rocks. Ignoring the agony in every move of his legs, he did not stop until he had crawled into the secluded cavern at the very top. There, he pitched himself from his knees forward onto his stomach, and lay shuddering.

"It took you longer than we anticipated."

Kirk's head whipped up sharply, paining his neck.

Spencek and Spornak stepped away from the shadowy rear of the cave.

"No!!!" Kirk tried to turn onto his back. Even that was almost too much effort. The sound of footsteps at the cave entrance however provided him with the incentive that he needed to finish the motion.

Spock, Sarek, and Surak stood watching him from the cave-front.

Kirk sobbed once and turned his face away in defeat.

The five Vulcans observed quietly for long moments, moving no closer.

Kirk barely regained control and looked back at them, not bothering to wipe away the tears. "All right, you've got me. And I'm sure that I can guess what's next."

Spornak assured him, "We'll let you recover from your run first."

Spencek agreed, "We're not in any hurry."

Kirk gasped, "Get it over with, why don't you!" He choked slightly, and coughed hard.

"In your present condition?" Spock feigned concern. "That would be cruel."

Kirk turned to look at the three in the entranceway. He saw Sarek and Surak smiling with Spock at his joke. The three were not even winded.

Kirk accused them, "You-all could have caught me at any time. You're toying with me!"

Sarek nodded. "And enjoying it; you may be sure."

Swallowing a nasty retort so as not to anger them, Kirk requested simply, "Let me go."
To his surprise, Surak suggested to the others, "That might be a good idea." But then he added, "We could enjoy chasing him again."

The other four laughed their approval, and Kirk was overcome with a fit of coughing.
Spock took a step forward in mock pity. "Shall I pat you on the back? Isn't that what you humans usually do for this ailment?"

"Don't." Kirk motioned him away, barely able to speak. "You'd probably hit me hard enough to kill me."

The Vulcan smiled. "Oh no. That's not how we plan to do it at all," he suggested significantly.

The five watched for his fear to surface.

Kirk refused to cooperate. He replied offhandedly, "What difference does it make how you do it? I'll be just as dead either way." But in his heart, he knew that it did make a difference to him. And with sudden clarity, he also knew why he kept coughing. In his mind, he heard McCoy's voice reminding him, "You cough every time that you say Vulcan, Jim. You cough just thinking about Vulcans." Maybe Kirk truly was becoming "allergic" to the pointed-eared, green-blooded aliens. Just as Saterra wanted him to be.

"Perhaps," Spock acknowledged. "But then again, perhaps not."

"Talking in riddles?" the human challenged him. "I thought that you people believed in getting bluntly to the point."

"Hm," Spock considered. "You do not seem to fear our Vulcan methods as McCoy does. Perhaps we can change that."

Kirk fought to keep his voice steady. "How are you going to arrange that? Take turns nerve-pinching me? You'll get pretty bored, waiting for me to wake up each time."

Spock smiled. "An amusing thought, but no."

"We have tal-shaya in mind," explained Sarek.

Kirk warred to keep the fear out of his eyes. "Well you can only do that once. If it's fear you're after, that's not the way."

"Do not be so certain," Surak cautioned him.

Kirk watched them, his eyes flickering from one face to another amongst them.

Spock knelt beside him, and relished his explanation, "You humans have a game, I believe, called Russian Roulette. You pass around an old-style hand-weapon with only one projectile within it. Each member of the group initiates the triggering mechanism once, aiming at his own head. The game continues until the projectile is fired into one of the participants, killing him."

Kirk could no longer vouch for the expression in his eyes. He had an inkling of what Spock was getting at, and knew with heart-breaking certainty that, if Spock was really suggesting what Kirk thought that he was, Kirk's control would shatter, and the Vulcans would witness the fear that they craved.

Spock seemed to sense that fact; he grinned more broadly. "We will now invent a new version of the game. We'll call it Vulcan Roulette. The five of us will take turns reaching a hand around to the back of your neck, finding the delicate spot on your neck-bone with the middle finger, applying an ever-so-slight amount of pressure, and then releasing you. One of us will truly break your neck. But you'll have to endure the entire slow procedure with each of us, wondering whether that one is the Vulcan who will kill you."

The human's control broke. He whimpered loudly, and then his chest heaved in a new spell of coughing.

In pretended sympathy, Spock grasped Kirk's arm and turned him carefully onto his side. He patted his back soothingly. When the fit subsided, Spock rolled the human again onto his back.

"You see?" He bent over him. "I can be gentle."

Tears of terror and of the strain of coughing welled in Kirk's eyes. "You're supposed to be my friend."

The Vulcan's eyes pierced his. "I'll tell you one more time. I have changed." With that, Spock sat back and got to his feet. Kirk made a feeble gesture to reach out to Spock to pull him back again. The Vulcan ignored it.

"Surak," Spock said.

The indicated individual went to Kirk slowly and knelt next to him. Surak's eyes and Kirk's met and never wavered. Out of his peripheral vision, Kirk watched the approach of the alien hand. He felt it softly disturb his hair. He felt its gentle, almost-caress along the back of his neck until it settled there with a firmer grip. He felt the finger probe for the fragile place. Kirk's heart thundered in his ears. Above the din, his mind shouted, It won't be the first one; they want to prolong this; Surak won't kill you. As Kirk felt the beginning of the mild pressure, he almost doubted that conclusion, with a heart-stopping surge of panic, but then the pressure halted and the hand withdrew. A tiny sound escaped Kirk's throat as he closed his eyes in relief, breaking the constant contact that they'd had with those of Surak.

Kirk's head rolled to the side, and he lay there, breathing hard and staring at the ground.

"Sarek," Surak said.

Spock's father went next to kneel beside the helpless human. His eyes locked with Kirk's. The hand approached and slid past the victim's right ear. Kirk felt the almost-tickle of its progress along his flesh, until it came to rest, its middle finger seeking the delicate spot. The human's ears ached with the pounding of his pulse within them. A dull ache at the center of the back of his neck came to join the other, as Sarek exerted the pressure. This is it! Kirk's mind screamed, and a terrified cry escaped him. But the pressure eased, and the hand pulled back, and Kirk was left momentarily in relief, limp and spent.

"Spock," Sarek said.

His first officer returned to kneel once again at his side. Their eyes joined. Kirk felt the tingle of Spock's long fingers in their passage along his skin. The fingers paused in the center of his neck, searching daintily for the special point. A weakness of hopeless fright descended on the hapless victim as the pressure began. And continued. Kirk's eyes grew wide in the realization that Spock had already gone too far to release; his brief experience with the other two Vulcans had taught him that. A softening "give" within the bone barely preceded the audible crunch and Kirk's last, child-like cry.

Chapter Thirty-One

A very tense Leonard McCoy suffered his way through the journey of the turbolift. Was he being too bold? He had not been granted permission to leave sickbay; he had not been summoned at all. And yet, surely Spock would be generous with the human when he learned of his purpose in going to the bridge. Unless McCoy had offended the Vulcan beyond hope of generosity. Therein lay McCoy's true motive; he knew that he had to verify for himself that such was not the case, that Spock was not past forgiving him.

McCoy took a deep breath as the lift doors slipped aside at his destination. He took one step onto the bridge and was once again instantly center stage. He met Spock's eyes first, warily, half-expecting to be ordered out again. First Officer Spock spoke not a word, but looked back at the doctor warningly. The message was unmistakable: the human must behave, or else. Regarding "or else what," McCoy had no doubt: no measure would be too extreme to maintain order in front of the new crewmen. He nodded silent understanding. He next turned toward Spencek, who favored him with a bemused expression. McCoy answered it with a twitch of his right jaw which almost metamorphosed into a subtle half-smile. Only then did he dare look toward Spornak. The Vulcan looked back coldly. McCoy dropped his eyes hastily.

The human cleared his throat and forced himself to face Spock again. "Mr. Spock." Spock's brows shot upward at the delineated respect couched in the "mister."

McCoy went on, "I, uh, ...I want to apologize for my outburst. For *both* of my outbursts," he corrected significantly. He was genuinely sorry for what he'd said in sickbay. And he truly wanted to help support Spock's tenuous position in front of the others. His intense blue eyes and his carefully-chosen words communicated those intentions clearly to Spock, who raised his head in amazed appreciation.

A startled Chekov swung around quickly in his seat and stared, and then, suddenly remembering himself, just as rapidly turned back again, blushing furiously.

"Your apology is accepted," Spock returned, the depth of his eyes revealing that total acceptance and forgiveness were made, for all offenses.

McCoy nodded receipt of the complete message, and smiled faintly.

Spencek regarded McCoy with interest, and sent the doctor an encoded message of his own, "Perhaps indeed it does work."

McCoy's smile broadened in comprehension.

Spornak was clearly impressed. He looked at Spock with greater respect, and then his eyes traveled between Spock and McCoy in curiosity, at last fixing McCoy with an expression of increased tolerance.

Thus reassured, McCoy asked humbly, "May I stay? Please?"

"Certainly, Doctor," Spock replied, and then added, "I am...pleased that you are here," as his compromise with the human form of greeting.

McCoy grinned hugely in appreciation.

Sulu, Chekov, and Uhura dared risk secretive glances among themselves, silently telegraphing to one another: Whatever it was, it's all right now.

Chapter Thirty-Two

James T. Kirk was in agony. His head rolled from side to side, as he wondered how it could even do that, with a broken neck. He had to struggle to recall that it was not really broken, and that the fiction of tal-shaya had been imposed by the most recent bout with the revised-history machine. The perspiration from the imagined pursuit during the last trauma had partially dried on him; he lay shivering in a cold sweat of fear of Spock and of all of the other Vulcans that he had ever known.

"Mr. Spock?" Sulu looked over his shoulder. "We'll be coming into transporter range within ten minutes."

"Good. Mr. Scott, is our cloak still holding?"

"Firmly in place, sir."

"Acknowledged. Spelak, scan for Captain Kirk on the enemy ship. Your task should be simple; you're looking for the only human aboard a Romulan vessel."

"Aye, sir. Scanning."

"Spencek, Spornak. You'll be beaming over with me."

They nodded crisply.

"Outfit a landing party to accompany us. Include Storn, Stell, Soran, and Sparn."

"All Vulcans," McCoy blurted without thinking.

Spock turned to him. "Do you have a question, Doctor?"

"Well." He hesitated. "They're all scientists. Shouldn't you take a security team?"

"I believe that we'll be more than adequate to handle any difficulty, Doctor."

"But, ...well, I don't doubt that, but...I think that you should take me with you."

"Negative," Spock declared flatly.

McCoy leaned closer desperately. "But Jim might be injured."

"That is why I want you to stand by in the transporter room. You may treat him the instant that we've beamed back aboard the Enterprise."

"That may be too late!"

"Doctor, we absolutely will not consider taking you with us. It is too risky. We cannot expose you to the grave danger of the Romulans. As Vulcans, we are much better prepared to deal with the threat that they pose."

"Maybe so," McCoy conceded, "but I'll hardly feel like I'm in any danger with all of you around me."

Spornak's frozen look returned. "We will be quite occupied having one human to protect. We certainly do not need to increase the odds against us by having two of you to look after simultaneously."

McCoy's cheeks burned. "Do you know that tact is not exactly your strong suit?"

"Leonard." Spock motioned him closer. "You are not even totally relaxed yet with Vulcans. How will you feel if you are imprisoned by Romulans?"

McCoy, suddenly unnerved, tried to conceal how well Spock's words had hit home. "I'll do whatever it takes to save Jim."

Spock watched him steadily. "So will we."

"Do you not trust us?" Spornak challenged him. "Do you not believe that we will bring him back with us?"

Put on the spot, McCoy shifted uncomfortably. "I didn't say that. I...I'd just like to see Jim for myself. Right away, please."

"Not possible." Spock eyed him.

"But..."

Spock's brows rose, silencing him.

Spencek regarded the human with interest. "Another functional quarrel, Doctor?"

McCoy's eyes flitted between Spock and Spencek. He nodded distractedly to Spencek. Then he nodded obediently to Spock, and turned away from him in surrender.

"Human readings detected," Spelak reported.

"Condition?" Spock demanded.

"Living. But under significant stress."

McCoy's gaze returned to Spock's face.

Spock's expression revealed that his position on the matter had not changed. "Doctor, you will accompany us to the transporter room and remain there until we return."

"Yes, sir," McCoy acknowledged softly.

"Mr. Scott, you have the conn."

"Aye, sir."

"Spencek, Spornak, McCoy. Let's go."

The four filed into the turbolift and made the trip to the transporter room without speaking. The silence made the human uneasy, but he could think of nothing to say. As Spock had once told him, Vulcans did not indulge in "small talk."

The lift released them, and they walked briskly into the transporter room. The required four additional Vulcans awaited them: all large, powerful, muscular males, McCoy noted. The three from the bridge joined them efficiently on the platform.

McCoy walked close and reached out a pleading hand to Spock. "Please. No matter what happens. Bring Jim home."

Spock's eyes penetrated his. "We will." He looked away and said, "Energize."

James Kirk suffered and fretted, and squirmed restlessly on the table. He tried not to wonder when the next onslaught of revised history would come, and how much worse it could get. How much more could the Vulcans do to him than they'd already done? He struggled rapidly to suppress the thought; he didn't want to know.

Something tingled in the air. It was beginning again.

"No!" Kirk moaned.

The sensation built into the tinny whine of a transporter.

"No, don't!" Kirk groaned.

Seven figures began to materialize in the room. Kirk watched them with growing horror. They were all Vulcans.

"No!!"

They rushed toward him. Spock was in the lead.

"No!!!"

"Captain?" Spock reached toward him in concern.

"No, don't!!!" Kirk raised his arms to ward off the vicious Vulcan attack.

"Jim. Hear me," Spock tried to get through to him.

"No! No more evil! Leave me alone!"

"Jim, I'm here to help you."

"Yes, I know, you can be gentle when you want to be. And then the torture begins! Where's Bones? You never let McCoy be here to comfort me!"

Spock exchanged glances with Spencek, and then replied, "In fact he wanted to come with us. I deemed it necessary to leave him behind."

"You always do! I knew it! He tried to help me!"

"Jim, *we* are here to help you. We'll take you to where McCoy is waiting."

"No! It's a trick; it's always a trick!"

"Captain, we must be going."

"No!! I'm not going to walk into a trap! McCoy won't be there; he's never there!"

"Jim, we must hurry." He reached for the tormented human.

"No!!!" Kirk's arms flailed madly to ward off Spock's touch.

Startled Vulcan eyes met each other. They had anticipated a fight; they had not expected the fight to come from their captain.

Spock caught both flying wrists and restrained them, noting that, for a human, especially in Kirk's obviously depleted condition, the captain had considerable strength. He transferred both wrists into one hand, and reached regretfully for Kirk's shoulder.

The human watched the hand approach with dreading eyes. "That figures," he proclaimed bitterly. "The only one of your wicked methods that you haven't used on me yet." Kirk tried vainly to twist aside, but the alien fingers found their grip. Kirk screamed horribly just before the pinch squeezed the sound from him.

Spock stood for a moment watching the limp human, and then, shielding his thoughts carefully from the other Vulcans around him, he scooped up his captain and ordered Spornak to signal the ship.

Leonard McCoy watched the Vulcans materialize. His heart warmed at the sight of Spock with Kirk cradled tenderly in his arms. McCoy rushed forward eagerly. Spock's expression stopped him.

"Doctor." Spock hesitated uncharacteristically. "There is something terribly wrong."

McCoy watched Spock's face with speechless dread.

Spock tore his eyes away long enough to address the intercom at the transporter console.

"Mr. Scott?"

"Scott here."

"Warp us out of here."

"Aye, sir."

Spock's eyes returned to McCoy, who fumbled for his medical tricorder.

"Well, he's unconscious," McCoy reported. "But it doesn't register as a coma, or anything that..."

"Doctor."

"Yes?"

"He is unconscious because I administered the Vulcan nerve pinch."

Shocked, angry, human eyes bored back at Spock. "You did *what*!?"

With pained, exaggerated patience, Spock explained, "I assure you, Doctor, I did not do it for any frivolous reasons. It was necessary to render the captain unconscious."

"Necessary?! Why?!"

"He fought us."

McCoy blinked.

All Vulcan eyes were upon him.

McCoy shook himself loose from their steady gaze. "Yes, well, let's...get him to sickbay." He led the way from the transporter room, feeling vaguely uneasy about turning his back on them, wondering when they would next find it "necessary" to do it to him.

In the sickbay, McCoy completed his thorough examination.

Spock, Spencek, and Spornak waited, out of the way, for the verdict. The other four Vulcans had returned to duty.

McCoy sighed, and turned to them. "Whatever it is, it's not physical. He's exhausted, but that's all."

"He would not willingly come with us," Spock reiterated. "He was disoriented, hysterical. He was terrified of us, and accused us of torturing him. And..." He paused.

"And?" McCoy prompted.

"And, he kept asking for you," Spock admitted ruefully. "He accused us of keeping you away from him deliberately."

McCoy straightened abruptly. "Well, that much he's got right."

Spock regarded the doctor unappreciatively.

With a tiny moan, Kirk stirred.

"He's coming out of it," McCoy stated unnecessarily.

Spock stepped closer in concern as the hazel eyes opened. "Captain?"

"No! Stay away from me! Stop hurting me! Leave me alone!" His eyes fixed on McCoy; he grabbed the doctor's arm in panicked joy with both hands. "Bones!!! Stay with me! Protect me! Don't let them near me! But be careful." He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "They'll hurt you, too."

Stunned blue eyes rose to look at Spock. "Now this is certainly interesting."

Spock regarded the doctor disparagingly. "Surely you do not believe...."

"No," McCoy conceded casually. "But it is ironic in view of what we've just been through lately."

Spock dismissed it. "The point is, Doctor, what can you do for him?"

"I told you already, Mr. Spock. It's not physical. It's mental. This is not something that I can mend."

A very satisfied Commander Saterra sat back and watched the Enterprise warp away from her ship. It had arrived at a most opportune moment, between revised-history episodes, and after she'd had adequate time to do major damage. She rubbed her arms and shivered deliciously at the thought of what must be happening aboard the Federation starship right now. She was only sorry that she could not be there to enjoy its repercussions first hand.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Spock, McCoy, Spencek, and Spornak regarded one another somberly in the briefing room. Captain Kirk had been assigned an all-human medical team to look after him. No Vulcans were allowed to enter the ward.

"There is only one solution," Spock pronounced carefully. "The Vulcan mind meld."

McCoy stared. "You can't be serious."

"It will tell us what really happened to the captain. It may also offer me the means to alleviate the problem."

"It could also kill him! In his present state, he could die of fright if you used your Vulcan methods on him! You'd be doing the very thing that he dreads!"

"What would you suggest, Doctor? That he be transferred to a ship without Vulcans? That all of us be transferred elsewhere? Sooner or later, he would encounter some of our people again. And what then?"

"Do you realize what you're suggesting? Do you have any idea of how he'll react when he sees you coming at him like that? Sorry, Spock; I can't sanction it."

"Doctor McCoy." Spock declared firmly, "There is no alternative."

Spencek and Spornak nodded their concurrence and looked at the doctor expectantly.

"Now just one minute...!"

Spock's brows rose.

"Aw no! You're not gonna pull that on me! Not this time! This is a medical matter, Spock! It's my decision! You can't bully me on this one! I stand firm this time!"

Spock's tightly-controlled eyes bored into the doctor.

Spencek's dark, foreboding eyes warned him.

Spornak rose from the table, and circled toward the human, his eyes threatening.

"Oh god, no!" McCoy shoved his chair away from the table and sideways, in an effort to face the advancing Vulcan. "Spock! Stop him!" Hearing nothing from the first officer, McCoy turned to face him frantically. "Spock!!" His tone rose desperately.

"I am in command." Spock's words dripped icily.

"Oh my god," McCoy breathed as Spornak went around behind him. His beseeching eyes never left Spock's face as he felt Spornak's presence so close at his back. He stiffened as he felt the fingers take their position on his shoulder. The color drained from his face.

"Submit to the orders of your commander," Spornak instructed.

McCoy watched Spock's unyielding eyes, and whispered, "No. Not even to prevent this." He closed his eyes and winced in anticipation. His lip trembled.

Spornak eyed Spock. Spock shook his head at Spornak. Spornak released his grip, and returned to his seat. McCoy's eyes flew open in astonishment, and he did not trust himself to speak. He fought to control his panting.

Spock explained slowly, "I have every right to enforce my order. Until the last moment I considered doing so. Do not assume that I will not do so on similar occasions in the future."

McCoy lowered his eyes.

"But this situation truly is different. There is as much risk as you say. And Captain Kirk is human, like you. Perhaps you are better equipped to judge what he can stand."

McCoy's eyes rose again in amazement.

"Yet, you tell me that you can do nothing to improve his condition. What alternative solution do you recommend?"

McCoy felt very much put on the spot as all three Vulcans sat waiting for his answer. He shook his head in frustration. "I don't have a solution. But making Jim's fears come true is certainly not the answer."

"I see. Then you automatically condemn the captain to spend the rest of his life as an emotional cripple."

The words sank in on the human. McCoy sighed deeply. "I know. I know that you're right about that part of it. But your way risks his death."

"It also presents the only known opportunity for his cure."

McCoy thought it over, and then emphasized, "If you do this, ...let's make sure that you're prepared for what you'll be facing. He won't cooperate. You won't be able to reason with him. He'll be irrational. He'll fight you. You'll have to use brute force."

Spock nodded. "I am prepared."

McCoy looked at him. "You've never forced a mind meld before, Spock. I didn't think that you ever would."

"I prefer not to do so. It is not a decision that I take lightly. But we have to have our captain back, regardless."

McCoy was gratified to hear Spock word it in just that way. He mellowed. "All right. But I want to be there. In the room, throughout the procedure."

"Of course." Spock nodded.

The four rose, and McCoy started for the door.

"Doctor." Spock called him back briefly.

"Yes?" McCoy waited.

"I repeat. Do not make any assumptions about whether I will enforce my decisions in the future. Such assumptions would be false."

McCoy took a deep breath. "Yes, sir. I understand."

Kirk lay in sickbay placidly enough, but for his active mind. He was waiting, wondering when Spock and his other terrible Vulcans would attack again. When the sickbay door slid aside, he turned toward it quickly and saw Spock. And two other Vulcans. And McCoy.

"Bones! Help me!" he begged as Spock came to him. "Don't let him get me!"

"Jim, listen," McCoy pleaded, taking a step forward. "Let him help you."

"What's happened to you, McCoy?" Suspicion rose in Kirk's eyes. "What have they done to you?"

"Jim, please!"

Spock reached the bed and extended his hands toward Kirk's head. "Jim, you need my help."

"No!!!" Kirk fought madly.

While Spock was able to capture the flying arms and restrain his captain's violence, he could not do that and simultaneously perform the mind meld. He turned to look over his shoulder at Spencek and Spornak near the doorway. "I require your assistance."

At their approach, Kirk screamed and struggled insanely.

"Jim," McCoy murmured sadly, and he scrutinized the indicators above Kirk's bed, especially the heart monitors.

Spornak arrived at the right side of the bed, and relieved Spock of the human's flailing arms.

Spencek appeared on the left and pinned Kirk's shoulders.

It broke McCoy's heart to see them do that to him.

Spock reached again for Kirk's head.

"No!!!" he shrieked. "Not tal-shaya!!!"

Spock directed a troubled glance at McCoy over his shoulder.

"He sounds like me." McCoy's voice was hushed.

Spock's hands found Kirk's temples, and the penetration began. Kirk's last scream died off into a tiny wail. Spock probed carefully, gently, seeking the cause of the affliction, soothing and comforting all the while. Spencek and Spornak continued to hold Kirk down for Spock as a precaution, but it was shortly no longer necessary; the human had relaxed. Spock found and studied the source of the disability, all of the lies that had been inflicted upon the victim, and then he flooded the captain with reminders of how those distorted events had really happened, revealing Spock's caring and trustworthiness to the confused man. He consoled and reassured him, and when at last he withdrew, Kirk blinked calmly at him.

"Jim!" McCoy called intently.

"I'm all right, Bones," Kirk assured him tiredly.

The three Vulcans released their hold, and stood watching their captain. McCoy went anxiously to the foot of the bed.

But Kirk's attention was exclusively for his first officer. "Spock, I'm sorry. Saterra did this to me. She...."

"I know." Spock spared him the need to explain. "I know everything that you were forced to experience. It is...regrettable." He cast a look toward his two Vulcan companions.

Kirk nodded, and his eyes closed in exhaustion.

The other four moved away from the bed, to allow the captain to sleep.

"Spock, I...," McCoy faltered, in a whisper. "I'm sorry that I tried to stop you. Obviously, you were right. But even so, it was hard for me to watch. It gave me sympathy pains just to see you put him through that. I'm certainly grateful that you didn't force me to submit to the mind meld that time on Vulcan, that you talked me into it instead."

"I always prefer persuasion when possible," Spock clarified. "With you, it was possible."

Behind them, the door to the ward slid open, and a worried face peered in at them. "How did it go? Is he all right?"

"Oh, come in, Christine," McCoy urged. "Yes, he'll be just fine. Oh, uh, and Christine, I owe you a big apology for some very wrong things that I said a while ago. I was way off base. Forgive me?"

She was pleased. "Of course, Doctor. You were...under a lot of...stress." She nodded to each man, and then left.

McCoy turned to see three curious Vulcans watching him. "Oh! Never mind. Just a... human aberration." He regarded Spencek significantly, and added, "A functional quarrel."

The Vulcans nodded acceptance.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Dr. Leonard McCoy practically whistled on his way back to sickbay. He had his friend, his captain back, and the Vulcans were not, after all, engaged in a conspiracy to take over the Enterprise.

At an intersecting corridor, he paused and saw another figure approaching the juncture. McCoy actually smiled, and bowed with an elaborate "after you" gesture to usher Petrasek ahead of him. She flashed him her first tolerant, appreciative look in return.

McCoy continued happily down his hallway, until the sickbay doors parted to admit him.

"You sent for me, Spock?"

"Yes, Doctor." Spock was flanked on each side, as usual, by Spencek and Spornak.

"How are you feeling, Jim?" He addressed the human perched on the side of the bed.

"I'm feeling absolutely wonderful, and ready to go back to duty," Kirk hinted.

"Oh, I get it. Yes, Jim, I'll release you. I know what it's like to be confined for too long to sickbay." He cast a humorous glance at the three Vulcans, who then looked back at him with eyebrows raised.

"Incidentally, Doctor," Spock commented. "The next time that you hide under Mr. Scott's desk, you might go more quietly if you do not wish for us to hear you through the door."

McCoy stared. He could swear that the three Vulcans were smiling at him.

Kirk was staring at McCoy in turn. "Under Scotty's desk, Bones?"

McCoy's attention was divided between the Vulcan threesome and his captain. "Well, things got a little weird around here while you were gone, Jim."

"I can't wait to hear all about it."

"Later. Uh, Spock. While we're discussing my mistakes, I have a confession to make." He watched the Vulcan in mild consternation.

Spock refused to make it easier on him by speaking.

"Uh...", he stammered. "I never did finish those reports."

"Doctor McCoy, you deserve a spanking."

McCoy's own brows shot upward.

"A spanking?" inquired Spencek.

"A human custom," Spock explained. "McCoy earns one almost daily."

McCoy glanced nervously at Kirk, who responded, "Well, Bones, better that than Vulcan Roulette."

Spock was noticeably pleased to see Kirk so well recovered that he could joke about it.

"What?" asked McCoy.

"I'll tell you about it sometime," was all that Kirk would say on the subject. "But what's this about reports?"

Spock told him, "I ordered McCoy to evaluate the data that we obtained on Diathanie in an effort to determine the fate of the eleven scientists stationed there. It would appear that my instructions were not obeyed."

"Oh." Kirk nodded. "Well, I can answer that one. I'll get you off the hook, Bones. Saterra admitted to me that the Romulans had killed those scientists as part of the plot to lure us there, so that they could grab me."

"Indeed. Regrettable," said Spock.

"Yes."

"Yes, but thanks for letting me off the hook, Jim."

"You're welcome, Bones."

"But you are not completely 'off of it', Doctor," Spock warned him. "I did, after all, have a purpose in mind in calling you down here, just now."

"Yes?" McCoy tensed visibly.

"The four of us," he said as he included the other two Vulcans and Kirk with his eyes, "have come to the conclusion, on the basis of Captain Kirk's recent ordeal, that it is absolutely essential for him to learn to administer the Vulcan nerve pinch." He paused to let his words sink in effectively.

They did. McCoy's eyes grew wide.

"And we will be needing a practice-victim."

McCoy began to back carefully toward the door.

Spornak circled quickly behind him to block his path.

McCoy looked from one to another of the Vulcans in growing alarm. "This is your revenge for my insubordination earlier!"

None of them denied the assumption.

McCoy appealed to the only other human in the room. "Jim, say that you wouldn't! Please say that you wouldn't!"

"Actually, Bones, I have a 'bone' to pick with you, myself. Remember our quarrel on the turbolift before we beamed down to Diathanie?"

"Oh, lord, everything comes back to haunt me!" He rolled his eyes skyward.

"And what was it that you did to Nurse Chapel?" Kirk pursued. "Spock told me that there was something wrong there, too."

McCoy's eyes shifted guiltily. "I accused her of being in cahoots with the Vulcans in a plot to take over command from you."

"Bones, really!"

Six Vulcan brows shot upward.

"It does sound sort of silly now, doesn't it?"

"Just a bit," Kirk concurred. "Have a seat, Bones."

"Oh no. No, please."

"Sit." Kirk pointed at the chair.

McCoy resignedly dropped into it. "After I'm dead, send my remains back to Georgia."

"This is the nerve pinch, not tal-shaya."

"Unless you screw it up, that is. There're only a few centimeters difference. What would you Vulcans do if humans didn't have necks, anyway?"

No one troubled to answer the absurd question.

Kirk went behind McCoy, seized a shoulder and squeezed.

"Ow!" McCoy cringed away from his grip.

"No, Captain." Spock instructed, "Place your fingers right here, closer to the junction between the shoulder and the neck, and then pinch more quickly."

Kirk changed his hand position obediently and squeezed hard.

With an abbreviated grunt, McCoy collapsed forward from the chair into a heap on the floor.

Kirk stared first at McCoy, then at his hand, and exclaimed, "I did it. I don't believe it. I did it!" He grinned hugely at the Vulcans.

"Excellent, Jim," Spock agreed.

Spencek and Spornak nodded.

"Well, I'd better get up to the bridge. Will you...?" He waved a hand at the crumpled human.

"We shall look after him," Spock assured him. "There'll be no problem."

Kirk practically bounced to the door, casting frequent backward glances at the fallen form. He was outstandingly pleased with himself. "Wait'll the next time that those Romulans get me!" he muttered triumphantly.

After Kirk's departure, Spock knelt and rolled McCoy over onto his back.

The doctor opened one eye. "Is he gone? Good." He picked himself up, dusted himself off, and rubbed, grimacing, at his shoulder.

"Doctor McCoy, you were faking." Spock showed his annoyance, straightening.

"Naturally." At Spock's expression, he went on, "Well I couldn't keep letting him try. It hurts."

"Doctor, I should spank you."

McCoy backed all of the way to the door and out through it as the three Vulcans watched.

Chapter Thirty-Five

"Captain's log, Star Date 7090.3. We are in standard orbit around the planet Vulcan from which we will shortly be taking aboard a very special visitor. The pure Vulcan clone of Mr. Spock, now a young boy eleven Earth-years-old, will be spending some time with us. Spock's father, Ambassador Sarek, will be bringing young Sevak aboard; it will be my science officer's first meeting with his near-twin."

James T. Kirk paused a moment in his quarters to reflect upon the very unusual background of Sevak. The child had been cloned from Mr. Spock and matured ectogenetically in a tank in a secret laboratory, by the Vulcan professor Spacek, who, because of his hatred toward humans, had sought to prove that a pure-Vulcan version of Spock, with all human factors eliminated, would be vastly superior in every way to the real, half-human Spock. The professor had been executed by Sarek and Spock for his crime. The child, the innocent pawn in this vile experiment, had been raised by Spock's parents, Sarek and Amanda. What would the little boy be like? Would he have Amanda's tenderness or Sarek's discipline? How well would he relate to Spock? And how would the youngster react upon his first encounter with Spencek, the nephew of his illicit creator, Spacek? Time would tell.

Kirk exited his quarters and proceeded to the hangar deck. Spock and McCoy were there waiting for him, Spock already appearing nonplussed. A quick glance at the doctor's enormous grin easily enabled Kirk to guess why. McCoy must have been teasing the pragmatic Spock again.

"Jim, listen to this." The doctor was eager to include another human in his elfin humor. "I asked Spock how he feels about finally meeting his son...."

"Doctor, he is not my son," Spock said with a tired voice typical of a sentence which had had to be repeated too many times already.

The human grin widened. "Your brother...."

"Not technically."

"Your twin?"

"Only partially."

"Sarek's son?"

"Not properly."

"Amanda's son?"

"Not at all."

"See, Jim? Then I suggested to Spock that he should marry and adopt Sevak legally, and simplify everything."

That drew the darkest look of all from the Vulcan.

McCoy giggled naughtily.

Kirk shook his head. "Bones, are you sure that you should be teasing Spock about this? It was a pretty sensitive subject eleven years ago."

"But that *was* eleven years ago," McCoy emphasized. "He's had time now to adjust."

"That right, Spock?"

"Hm, indeed. But I find it ironic that the doctor has previously accused Vulcans of being tactless."

"Oh lighten up, Spock." McCoy nudged him, then he confided to Kirk, "He's just worried about how they'll get along."

"Doctor, worrying is not typical of Vulcans."

"That's what you say. But relax, Spock, you and Sevak'll do just fine. You'll be a model father." He winked at Kirk.

"Doctor, I am not his father," Spock repeated in bored tones.

McCoy chuckled appreciatively. "That's what they all say!"

Kirk smiled in spite of himself, but then forced his features to straighten themselves. "Careful, Doctor, you don't want to rile him too much. Remember what Spock threatens to do when he grows too annoyed with you."

"Oh. Right. Daddy spank." His wording inspired new humor from Kirk and McCoy,

which they fought quickly to suppress.

Spock's eyes bored holes through both of them.

Kirk struggled to right his expression. "Sorry, Spock."

"Apology accepted, Captain." But his eyes still accused the doctor.

"I'd better apologize, too," McCoy decided. "I don't want Spock to sic Spencek and Spornak on me. I'm sorry, too, Spock."

Spock's returning, "Accepted, Doctor," sounded only marginally without reservation.

McCoy had no more time to ponder the extent of Spock's possible residual annoyance, however, as the computer signaled that the shuttlecraft had arrived and the hangar deck had pressurized. Without further comment, the three officers entered the deck. They eyed the shuttlecraft anxiously.

"Jim." McCoy confided in hushed tones, "This reminds me of eleven years ago, when we waited together in the transporter room to greet the fifty new Vulcan crewmen that we were taking aboard then."

"Yes," Kirk admitted in partial agreement. "But this time we're meeting only one new Vulcan. Less stress this way."

"For you and me maybe. I'm not so sure about him." He indicated the science officer with his eyes.

Spock either didn't hear them, or more likely, pretended not to, as he stood rigidly at attention, watching the shuttlecraft.

The craft doors parted. Sarek and his small charge emerged. As the Vulcan pair approached, Kirk and McCoy were torn between the desire to strain eagerly for more than a glimpse of the miniature Vulcan, and the courtesy of granting their attention first to the adult who had brought him, as was proper. Their hopefully subtle efforts gained them little more than the impression of a typical Vulcan child: black hair, dark eyes, pointed ears, slanted eyebrows.

"Father." Spock raised his right hand in the proper fingers-two-by-two-and-thumb-alone gesture of Vulcan greeting. "May you live long and prosper."

"Live long and prosper, my son," Sarek returned affably.

The two humans did not attempt to mimic the gesture, but greeted their guest in the human fashion.

"Nice to see you again, Ambassador Sarek," Kirk began.

"Captain Kirk." Sarek nodded his easy acceptance.

"Ambassador." McCoy smiled. "Now perhaps *we* can share our hospitality with *you*," he added, remembering how welcome Sarek and Amanda had made him feel in their home for the six months that he had spent on Vulcan.

"Doctor." Sarek responded amiably, "You are most gracious."

McCoy's smile widened at the subtle reference. Sarek and Spock had previously employed the adjective to describe Amanda. Sarek's remark now had certainly placed McCoy in good company.

The ambassador indicated his smaller companion. "And this is Sevak."

"Greetings, Sevak," Spock began. "May your visit with us be a fruitful one."

"Spock," the child replied simply, making no attempt to garnish his greeting as the adults had theirs.

"Sevak." Kirk pretended to ignore any awkwardness in the boy's abruptness. "We're pleased to have you with us." As he spoke, he took the opportunity to study the youngster in greater detail. Sevak looked not unlike how one would expect a young version of Spock to appear, except for the harder lines and sharper angles in his face; the boy was without the softening of his features that Spock had.

"Captain," was the only response.

"Sevak," McCoy tried bravely. "I've especially looked forward to meeting you. I was the first among us to see you, before you were born. I was the one who discovered the tank in which you grew."

"Doctor." The boy was obviously unimpressed.

"Well." Kirk cleared his throat. "Shall we go up to the bridge? It occurs to me, Ambassador, that you never got to see it on your previous visit. And I know that a young boy like Sevak would be fascinated." He deliberately chose one of the Vulcans' favorite words.

"Yes, that would be most agreeable, Captain Kirk," Sarek said.

The child made no reply.

The trip up to the bridge was uncomfortable, none of the adults having anything further to say at the moment, and the boy not inclined toward conversation in any event. The hustle-and-bustle of bridge activity as the lift doors parted was a welcome relief.

"Spock, would you care to make introductions?" Kirk urged as the five stepped off of the lift.

"Indeed, Captain." Spock motioned for Sevak to follow. "This is Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott, temporarily in command of the bridge." He indicated the man in the center seat.

"Hello, lad." Scott smiled easily. "Nice to have you with us."

"At the navigation console are Mr. Sulu and Mr. Chekov."

"Hi." Both grinned.

"And Lieutenant Uhura at communications."

"Hello, Sevak."

"My station is over here." Spock led the way to the science station, trying to overlook the fact that Sevak had returned none of the greetings.

Instead of posing questions, as Spock had assumed that the boy would do, Sevak automatically slid into Spock's chair and initiated button-pushing computer communication.

"Sevak," Sarek addressed him.

Sevak turned toward the ambassador.

"It is not appropriate for you to tamper with any equipment on this starship, and most especially not without requesting permission first."

Sevak removed his hands from the console and stood. He waited sullenly.

"Sevak," Spock ventured, encouraged by his father's evident position in regard to the child. "It also is customary to return greeting to those who have expressed it to you."

"In human society, perhaps," Sevak declared solemnly.

"In both human and Vulcan society," Spock emphasized.

Sevak ignored him. "Everyone on duty on this bridge is human. Why are our people not assigned here?"

"Sevak." Spock corrected, "They are all our people, humans and Vulcans. We are all one Federation."

"I am sure that you would think so. Since you are my half-human counterpart, perhaps you are too tolerant and indulgent of humans?"

"Sevak." Spock reprimanded him, "You will refrain from questioning me in that manner."

Sevak's face lost its Vulcanian aloofness. "Why?" He raised his voice challengingly, "Shall I fear that you might lose your half-human temper?" He was evidently quite oblivious to the fact that he himself had lost his own.

"Sevak," Spock and Sarek sternly chorused his name, each advancing a step toward him.

His face flushed green with anger and embarrassment, Sevak fled back into the turbolift. The doors shut behind him.

All eyes on the bridge watched him go.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Kirk, Spock, and McCoy sat staring at each other in various degrees of consternation in Spock's quarters, where they'd taken refuge from the crew in order to privately discuss the strange development. Sarek had gone after Sevak so that he should not become lost belowdecks.

"Incredible!" Kirk began, "Sarek's greeting was absolutely warm compared to the coldness of Sevak's!"

"Except for the temper tantrum." Spock pronounced the last two words with evident distaste.

"Yes," Kirk observed. "Since that was the only thing about him that wasn't cold, it was almost a relief."

Spock dismissed the remark with which he could hardly be expected to concur. "What about my mother's influence? Surely there should have been some."

Kirk couldn't resist teasing, "Is the human persuasion starting to look good to you, Spock?" When he saw Spock's disparaging expression, he went on seriously, "I, too, would have expected the Lady Amanda's gentleness to enter the picture."

"Yes." Spock managed to incorporate much depth into the one word.

"On the other hand," Kirk went on, "it's possible that your mother deliberately held back somewhat from exerting too much influence over the boy. Didn't your father impress upon her when they were raising you, that he expected you to be brought up in the Vulcan manner?"

"That is true."

"It was probably difficult for your mother to restrain her normal human impulses with her own son; I'm sure that her feelings came directly into conflict with her desire to be extremely obedient toward her husband, as all wives of Vulcans are. But in time, she evidently learned to resolve the conflict, or at least to live with it, because she obviously did not overly-humanize you."

Spock nodded.

Kirk continued, "After practicing with you for all of those years, imagine how much easier it must have been to restrict her influence over a child that's not genetically hers to begin with; plus she would feel on even less firm ground in the raising of this one than she was with you."

"That sounds likely, Captain."

"As for Sevak," Kirk theorized, "I'd say that he's overcompensating. He's trying to be the perfect Vulcan. And he's rejecting everything that he perceives as human. Didn't you go through that stage, too, Spock?" Kirk prompted with a twinkling eye.

"Indeed I did," Spock confessed, "as a Vulcan child, especially during the timeframe which you humans refer to as 'the teenage years'."

"Not just then." Kirk's eyes sparkled. "I seem to recall you going through a similar phase during our earliest years together, right after I first became captain. I used to think that you would never loosen up and fit in with us."

Spock straightened in feigned wounded Vulcan dignity.

Kirk forged ahead in haste, "But I'll admit that Sevak does seem to have an especially large chip on his shoulder in regard to you, Spock. I wonder. Could it be that he has heard so many favorable comments about you from your parents? And not only from them. From others on Vulcan as well. After all, you've become a bit of a legend on your whole planet."

Spock acknowledged reluctantly.

"Maybe he feels that he can't live up to that."

"In which case, I would be the very one to help him to do so."

"Granted, but he's not going to think of that. Not now. He's a boy." Kirk shrugged as if that last sentence explained everything.

"A boy," Spock repeated, as if those two words were to blame for all difficulties.

"Another thing that won't help, Spock," Kirk proceeded hesitantly. "Surely Sevak is aware of the circumstances of his existence: of Spacek's purpose in creating him. He knows that

he is supposed to be superior to you, and that everyone will be watching to see the results of that experiment."

"Actually, Captain, that thought had occurred to me." Spock did not add that his own uneasiness toward the boy was naturally attributable to that same detail.

"And here's something else," Kirk pointed out ruefully. "Sevak knows that you and Sarek blamed Spock for Sevak's illicit creation, and that you executed him for it. He'll conclude from that, that you two don't want him."

Spock's head rose in startlement.

"I know," Kirk soothed hastily. "I know that that's not true. You know it, and I know it, but Sevak doesn't know it."

"Surely my father has demonstrated his concern for the boy in these eleven years. And I believe that I revealed my own interest in him by requesting this visit."

"Of course you did. But he's just a child. There's no adult interpretation."

Spock clearly wrestled with the idea.

In the conversational break, it occurred to Kirk to remember that they were not the only two people in the room. "Bones? You're awfully quiet all of a sudden."

"Uncharacteristically so," Spock put in promptly.

"Hmm?" McCoy was oblivious to the mild barb. "Oh, sorry, I was just thinking. A boy's struggles to grow up and become a man. Universal problem. Sounds like the main theme of a book that I read years ago. A very old, good southern novel, a classic. It took place in Florida, near the Georgia where I grew up. Seems to me that it was called 'The Yearling'. The little boy in the story was about Sevak's age, too. But of course, Sevak's problems aren't the same as Jody Baxter's."

Spock was unimpressed with the doctor's contribution. "Hm. Quaint, but I fail to see how that can help us in our present situation."

McCoy regarded Spock mysteriously. "You never know."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The turbolift deposited Sevak near the crew lounge, as the young Vulcan had requested. He entered and was gratified to see, at the table to the far right, several Vulcans engaged in conversation. The boy approached shyly.

They turned to look at him as he arrived beside them.

"Greetings to you," Sevak stiffly addressed them, raising his hand in the Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper. I am Sevak."

The three automatically mirrored the gesture.

"I am Spencek," spoke the one to Sevak's near left.

The child's eyes began to widen in recognition of the name as he examined the stocky male, but he quickly checked the un-Vulcan response.

"I am Spornak," said the tall slender male to Sevak's near right.

"I am Petrasek," added the petite female across the table from them. "Will you join us?" She indicated a vacant chair to her right.

"I accept." Sevak seated himself between Spencek and Petrasek.

"You are the young clone of First Officer Spock," Spencek identified him.

"Affirmative." Sevak could not resist adding, "And you are the nephew of my creator, Spacek."

"That is true," Spencek acknowledged stoically.

"I had heard that you were on the Enterprise," the youngster pursued.

No reply seemed necessary. None was made.

"Ambassador Sarek brought you aboard?" Spornak inquired.

"Affirmative."

"And you have been released to tour the ship unescorted?"

Sevak hesitated, then. "Negative."

Three pairs of brows rose.

"Then the logical question," Petrasek said, "is why you appear to be doing precisely that."

"I...I was on the bridge. Then I left."

"You were on the bridge with permission?" Spencek asked.

"Affirmative."

"And you departed without permission?" Spornak assumed.

"Affirmative." His eyes lowered to his lap.

"Why?" Petrasek pressed him.

"Too many humans."

Three pairs of eyes exchanged glances.

"The majority of the personnel on this ship are human," Spencek reminded him. "We number only fifty-one."

"Why must they dominate the bridge?" the boy dared to demand. "Surely some of our people should be there."

"I assume that at least one was," Spornak surmised. "Was not First Officer Spock on hand to greet you?"

"He was," Sevak declared with cold eyes.

"Then I fail to discern the reason for your objection."

"I do not consider him to be one of us," Sevak pronounced.

The brows rose higher.

"In a certain sense, he is your half-brother," Spencek observed.

"But then there is the other half," Sevak objected.

"We cannot speak against him," Spornak pointed out firmly. "He is second-in-command of this vessel, and therefore our superior. We have found him to be an excellent commander every time that the situation has warranted that he must serve as such."

"But he is half-human," Sevak insisted. "And that explains why he was permitted to rise to so high a rank."

"You should honor his achievement," Petrasek told him. "Are you instead ashamed of it?"

"He possesses too relaxed a nature. He has assumed some of their mannerisms. He even encouraged me to accede to some of their customs."

Spencek nodded. "One must at least attempt to get along, to understand...."

"Even Sarek," Sevak interrupted. "He is too tolerant of humans, too. He indulges his human wife too much. He exhibited something near affection for Spock. He greeted the humans, Kirk and McCoy, as if they were old friends."

"They are," Spornak emphasized. "And Ambassador Sarek is another whose accomplishments you should respect."

Sevak made no reply.

"Do not despair against tolerance," Petrasek cautioned. "It is the basis of our philosophy of the IDIC."

"I can accept it in general," Sevak faltered. "But I have difficulty in regard to those round-eared, pink-skinned...."

"Sevak," Petrasek cut him off sharply. "There is no room for prejudice in the IDIC. And there is no partial acceptance of it. One either does or does not."

"They are not even telepathic," Sevak attempted to defend his reasoning. "They are not as intelligent as we are, nor as strong. They cannot even perform the nerve pinch, or tal-shaya."

"They do at least try," Spencek informed him. "Captain Kirk once attempted to master the nerve pinch."

"Did he succeed?" Sevak's interest increased.

"Negative," Spencek was forced to admit.

"I thought not."

"Do not be so self-assured," Petrasek warned. "The ones whose Vulcan status you called into question, First Officer Spock and Ambassador Sarek, fully qualify as Vulcan on the basis of every criteria that you listed: telepathic, intelligent, strong, fully capable of performing the nerve pinch, tal-shaya...."

"And of misusing the ability."

"Explain."

"They should not have executed Spacek, my creator. Your uncle," he stressed, meeting Spencek's eyes.

Spencek refused to be swayed. "My uncle committed a crime. He obtained the tissue for your creation by attacking First Officer Spock. He engineered the development of a new member of Ambassador Sarek's family without first obtaining Sarek's permission."

"Sarek would not have granted it."

"Perhaps not. But Spacek was still obligated to observe proper protocol."

"I am glad that he did not. I am grateful to him for my existence, and to you on behalf of your uncle."

Petrasek pointed out astutely, "You pride yourself on your own Vulcan status as being above that of your relatives, yet you approve of the flaunting of our custom where it has benefited you personally, you reject the philosophy that we respect most devotedly, and you employ emotional human words such as 'glad' and 'grateful'. Are you truly Vulcan?"

Sevak's composure shattered. He stammered, "I...I am young." He regarded her, wide-eyed.

"Indeed," she agreed. "With much to learn."

"Granted." He fought to banish the unwanted emotions from his face and from his voice. "I try. But it is difficult. I have been raised partly by a human. She is emotional and weak. It is distasteful. I...I try, but then I see her inferior tendencies within myself, and I am ashamed." He hung his head in confession, his pale green skin turning a shade deeper.

The three adult Vulcans waited for the unacceptable emotional display to subside.

Sevak regained marginal control and raised his eyes to their faces once more. "Will you assist me?" He looked from one to the next. "Will you aid me in learning to be more Vulcan, and less human?"

"We will attempt to do so," Spencek concurred.

"Have you any other transgressions to confess?" Spornak urged as a first step in the procedure.

"Affirmative," Sevak admitted emotionlessly. "When I left the bridge, without permission," he added obediently in Spornak's direction, "I displayed a fit of temper before so doing. I beg forgiveness. I submit myself to you for appropriate disciplinary measures."

"Sevak." A new voice short-circuited the necessary ritualistic reply.

The youngster turned toward the door. "Sarek."

"You will come with me at once."

Sevak rose obediently and, with only one backward glance toward his three companions at the table, he followed Sarek out into the corridor.

Sarek checked both ends of the hall for listeners, and then pronounced, "You will not ever again quarrel with Spock on the bridge of his ship. His command of his subordinates must not be compromised. Ship's discipline must be maintained. Now what have you to say?"

"I beg forgiveness, Sarek. I did not comport myself in a proper Vulcan manner."

"Indeed you did not. Shall I punish you, or shall Spock?"

"I submit myself for appropriate disciplinary measures." Sevak left the choice up to Sarek.

"Your discipline shall result in our forgiveness," Sarek formally replied. Then he added, "Spock and I shall both see to your correction. Let us go find him."

Sarek led Sevak to Spock, where the two adults would perform the painless but revealing mind probe, in which the youngster's un-Vulcan failings would be relentlessly scrutinized, to the extreme humiliation of the victim: a most effective form of punishment.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

It stirred and awoke. The groggy, reaching mind stretched and flexed itself through space. It wondered why it had awakened, what unfortunate activity had roused it prematurely. It was not yet time. Eons more should pass before the entity should trouble itself to prowl the cosmos. It cast its annoyed attention at the nearest light-island in the eternal darkness, seeking the cause of its arousal from hibernation. So much disturbance lay within; so much energetic coming and going in the increasingly busy little galaxy. Such a nuisance. Who was responsible for the commotion? Could they be stopped? The being would try to halt their activities, but slowly; it did not want to overtax itself. It did not want to have to awaken too much.

"Doctor. We need to speak with you."

McCoy turned toward the sickbay door to see Spock and Sarek standing solemnly before him.

"Well, I suppose that I can guess what this is about." The human braced himself. "But I stand by what I did."

"Your action was inexcusable."

"So was yours! He's just a child, Spock!"

"Precisely, Doctor. A child badly in need of correction. Also, not your child. Not your decision. Not your responsibility."

"Not yours, either," McCoy snapped. "I seem to recall that you did a rather vigorous job earlier of convincing me that Sevak is not your son."

"Irrelevant. He is a Vulcan. That fact alone makes him at least partially my responsibility."

"And mine," Sarek spoke for the first time. "In addition to the racial and genetic kinship, I am the boy's legal guardian."

"Well." McCoy was unmoved. "I don't know what you're complaining about; you got to do what you wanted with him; I didn't get there in time to stop you."

"Not what we wanted, Doctor," Spock declared with distaste. "What was necessary. And the procedure did not reach its proper completion."

"Your interference was not welcome," Sarek stated.

"Not welcome in whose judgment? Yours? Or Sevak's? Seems to me that the boy was pretty grateful for my help."

"Following the disciplinary mind probe," Spock explained sternly, "the subject is to be left alone in solitary meditation to reflect upon the exposure of his failings to other Vulcans."

"You mean to have salt rubbed into the wound! To have insult added to injury!"

Spock went on as if McCoy had not spoken, "The subject is not to be coddled, and consoled, and drugged into unconsciousness."

"I just injected a tranquilizer to help him sleep! He was distraught!"

"He would have purged himself of the emotions of shame and disgrace as part of the meditational healing process. He would have emerged a more disciplined Vulcan for the experience. You have sabotaged that effort."

"You mean like the Vulcan healing trance?"

"Similar," Spock confirmed.

"But the trance is to relieve physical injuries," Sarek clarified. "Meditation is for those of an emotional nature."

"Look, I'm sorry! But imagine how I felt, after what Spock had done to me." He referred to the agonizing mind probe that the Vulcan professor had inflicted upon him.

"That is fundamentally different," Spock admonished. "You were illegally tortured. The procedure that we employed was physically painless. It is accepted as the standard means of punishment for an unruly child."

"Well it may be accepted by you, Mr. Spock, but it's not accepted by me!"

Spock dismissed the objection, and added, "It is the Vulcan equivalent of the human method of spanking." He eyed the doctor meaningfully.

McCoy swallowed, unnerved at the reference, and hurried to change the subject. "Any human on this ship would have helped him, in the state that he was in, Spock!"

"Any Vulcan on this ship would have administered the correction, following Sevak's display on the bridge," Spock informed him.

"And Sevak himself knew that the method was proper." Sarek went on, "We did not force him. He submitted to the punishment of his own free will. He was preparing to submit to it at the hands of your crewmen: Spencek, Spornak, and Petrasek, when I found him."

McCoy's head jerked in disbelief. "To strangers?!"

"To Vulcans," Sarek reminded him pointedly.

"Why?! Why to strangers?!"

"To any available Vulcans," Sarek stated. "Any that were nearby could have performed the service."

"Service?! You mean disservice!"

"Any could have helped him in his quest to improve himself. Any could have done this for him."

"For him?! To him!" McCoy insisted stubbornly.

"You do not understand, Doctor," Sarek said.

"You're damned right I don't!"

"Exactly how did you manage to administer your interference so quickly, Doctor?" Spock questioned him. "We only left Sevak alone in my quarters for moments."

"I was suspicious of your motives when Sarek walked in with the boy. Sevak's eyes were so downcast...."

"He was preparing," Spock said.

"And then, Spock, when you asked Jim and me to leave your quarters, that really made me wonder what you were up to. I knew that I couldn't dare to take on the two of you, but I waited just outside of your quarters, in case I should be professionally needed. I heard Sevak scream, by the way," he announced accusationally.

"Merely his normal, childish reaction to having his emotions penetrated," Sarek revealed.

"Well that really concerned me, so I hid around the corner, and waited for you two to reappear. Then I raced back into your quarters the minute that you were out of sight. It's my job, Spock!"

"To interfere in Vulcan custom? This was not a medical matter, Doctor."

"It certainly looked like one! And sounded like one!"

"How did you explain to Captain Kirk that you wished to hover and eavesdrop outside of my door?"

"I didn't," McCoy confessed. "I just made sure that I set out in the opposite direction than he did, and then rushed right back inside as soon as you two and he were gone."

"I see. And what are we to do with you now, Doctor?"

McCoy gulped and backed up slowly. "Not what you did to him! It would remind me too much of Spacek! It would...!"

"It would not work on a human," Spock cut him off bluntly.

"It...it wouldn't?" McCoy stuttered in relief.

Sarek explained, "It can only work on those who are ashamed of their own emotions."

"Oh! "

Spock emphasized, "I remind you that the purpose is to help in the development of a more logical Vulcan. In your case, that would be absurd."

The insult, the ultimate possible to any Vulcan, was wasted on McCoy. "Oh, good!" he breathed.

"So we'll have to settle for the human equivalent."

One beat later, Spock's point sank in, and the human inhaled sharply. "Oh, no. No!" He backed toward the wall.

The two Vulcans advanced.

"Spock, I...I didn't know!"

"If Sevak had been in need of medical assistance, we would have informed you."

"Oh god no! Please!"

It found what it sought. The incorporeal alien entity noticed the many stellar groups in which life had awakened. Spacefaring life. And like noisy neighbors, they had interfered with its sleep. It identified several groupings of the hurrying, scurrying little beings. If the disturbance were to be halted, each individual organization must be separately dealt with, halted into silence. The creature felt probingly into one aggregation of vessels with its mind. It reached lazily into one of those vessels, to see what it could learn.

McCoy tried vainly to pry Spock's fingers from his wrist. He twisted madly in a hopeless attempt to prevent Sarek from going behind him. "Spock, please! I'm too old for this!" he complained loudly.

"One would not discern that fact from your actions," Spock declared.

"Any Vulcan behaving as irresponsibly as you would be subjected to the same punishment which we administered to Sevak, regardless of age," Sarek added. "However, I have never known of an adult Vulcan who would merit such treatment."

The three quarreling men felt the tingle of its grasp as they saw each other fade from amid the dim, lowered lighting of the starship's artificial night.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

"Captain's log, Star Date 7090.5. It is now three hours since Nurse Chapel reported the disappearance of First Officer Spock, Chief Medical Officer McCoy, and Vulcan Ambassador Sarek from the sickbay. According to the nurse, the two Vulcans entered to speak with the doctor, who was already inside. None of the three ever reemerged. They would appear to have vanished without a trace."

Captain James Kirk leaned his head in his hand, and his elbow on the arm of his command chair. Where were his dear friends? Where could they have gone? And how?

Eyes boring into him brought him up sharply. The young Vulcan guest stood looking at him.

"Oh," Kirk acknowledged distractedly. "Hello, Sevak."

"Greetings," the youngster addressed shortly. "Where are Sarek, Spock, and McCoy?"

"I wish that I knew. If you listened to my log entry, you already know that I have no idea."

"You say that they were last seen in the sickbay. Perhaps they simply left."

Kirk struggled to keep his tone civil. "I hardly think so. No one has seen them for three hours."

"Possibly they do not wish to be seen. Or at least, Spock and Sarek might not. They may have desired privacy."

"Deliberately hiding?! For three hours? What possible reason could they have had?"

Sevak hesitated. Instead of replying, he answered the question with a question, "What prompted your nurse to go in and check on them in the first place?"

Kirk eyed the boy doubtfully. Should he tell him? He shrugged mentally. "She heard shouting. She was concerned."

The child was unsurprised. "I thought as much. They were quarreling about me."

"How do you know that?" Kirk was suspicious.

"Because I am fully aware of the topic upon which their disagreement was based."

"How about telling me."

Sevak drew a long breath. He clearly worked to keep his tone neutral. "Sarek and Spock punished me for my outburst on the bridge. Dr. McCoy disapproved of their method. He...helped me. They readily discovered the fact when they returned to me. They would have gone after him."

"Oh my." Kirk rubbed his forehead at the new complication. "You said that they punished you. How?"

The young Vulcan was reluctant to tell the human captain. "By a Vulcan method totally appropriate to my offense."

Kirk looked at him. "So you don't resent it?"

"Negative."

"Hmm." Kirk thought, but the kind-hearted doctor would, of course, go on and get himself into trouble over it anyway.

"But that is why I find the timing of their disappearance significant."

Kirk was startled by the boy's apparent conclusion. "So you wonder if Spock and Sarek dragged McCoy away somewhere to punish him? For three hours?!" If they did, Kirk was certainly going to have one haggard, hysterical, ship's doctor on his hands.

"The possibility exists," Sevak stated simply.

"Hmmm. Well, all right, Sevak, thank you."

The boy did not move.

"Uh, you can go now."

The boy remained before him.

Kirk shook his head. "Mr. Sulu, scan space for them again."

"Yes, sir."

The boy spoke up again, "What if they are not within range of your scanners?"

"Look, young man," Kirk tried, "I don't have any answers right now."

"Negative results on scan, Captain."

"I guess that I'm not surprised. Thank you, Mr. Sulu. Security?" He bumped a button on his panel.

"Security, aye."

"Turn up anything yet?"

"Negative, sir. They can't be aboard; we've looked everywhere. No clues either."

"Thank you. Keep me posted. Kirk out."

"They may simply not have searched thoroughly enough," Sevak observed.

Kirk groaned. Was he still here? "Look, I'm a little busy right now."

"If they deliberately sought seclusion, your security team might never find them."

"Impossible," Kirk retorted testily. "Maybe your two Vulcans could have wanted that, but then there would have been one very noisy Leonard McCoy whose outcries would have brought the cavalry from all directions."

"Not if they nerve-pinched him."

"Look, kid, you're not helping me. Things are a little frantic here right now. I have no time for babysitting!"

Sevak finally got the message. Without a word, he turned and walked off of the bridge.

Sevak took the turbolift down to the science laboratory section, knowing that he would find others of his own kind within it. He was not disappointed. He was especially fortunate to encounter someone familiar.

Sevak approached Spencek gingerly. "Greetings. Am I disturbing you?"

"Negative. Do you wish to speak with me privately?"

"If it is permitted."

Spencek led the way into a tiny cubicle. There was barely room for both to enter and sit down, but it would suffice.

"Are you here to submit to the mind probe, as we discussed?" Spencek inquired.

"Negative. Sarek and Spock administered it."

"Indeed. And did you learn from it?"

"Affirmative."

"Then how may I be of assistance?"

"I am trying to understand humans."

Spencek's brows elevated. "I am not certain how much aid I can provide on that account. I do not believe that any of us fully comprehend them."

"But you live and work among them daily."

"I am willing to try to help you, Sevak. Ask your questions."

"Captain Kirk bewilders me."

"Ah yes, he is a complicated human."

"I was up on the bridge, attempting to offer relevant data pertaining to the disappearance of Sarek, Spock, and McCoy. Instead of appreciating it or acting upon it, Captain Kirk dismissed me from the bridge."

Spencek's mind returned automatically to the occasion, eleven years before, when he, Spock, and Spornak had done the same to Dr. McCoy.

"That procedure...is not unprecedented."

"But I was trying to help. It was not like my earlier visit to the bridge in which I was disruptive."

"As I have said, Captain Kirk is a complex human. We have found him, however, to be an excellent commander. Admittedly, we did not always think so. What else is troubling you?"

"Dr. McCoy puzzles me."

Spencek nodded. "I am not surprised. He is the most enigmatic human on board this ship."

"After Spock and Sarek punished me, I was lying on Spock's bed in his quarters, trying to enter meditation. I confess that I was not having much success as yet. Dr. McCoy entered. He seemed frantically upset at the display of emotion in my face."

"Presumably, the doctor had never previously witnessed the aftermath of a correctional mind probe, and the initiation of meditation."

"I suppose not. He asked me whether I was hurt. When I answered negatively, he seemed to become more, instead of less, agitated. He dried my tears and held me close to him. Then he lowered me back to the bed and injected me with something that he said would enable me to sleep. It did."

"I can explain, at least partially."

"Please proceed."

"The human was motivated by compassion. Of all of the humans on this ship, McCoy appears to possess more of that emotion than any of the others do. In addition, he is the one who becomes the most easily alarmed by our various Vulcan techniques."

"I see."

"And now you must answer a question for me." He eyed the child curiously.

"I will do so if I am able."

"How did his interference affect the procedure of punishment?"

Sevak's eyes dropped. "I will confess that it made the transition easier for me. I cannot judge whether the process of correction was as effective on me. But I suffered less from it. At the risk of again using the word 'grateful,' for which Petrasek correctly admonished me, I certainly did not object to his intrusion."

"Indeed? Interesting."

"But what you have said in explanation of his actions raises another matter. If Dr. McCoy is so alarmed by our Vulcan methods, why was he willing to risk punishment by helping me? Surely he was aware of the consequences of his actions."

"Perhaps not. Humans frequently do not reason in advance the most likely outcome of their activities."

"Curious."

"Also, the outcome may not have been precisely as you anticipated. Spock and Sarek would not have employed the same means of punishment against a human that they used on you."

Sevak's brows rose. "Why not?"

"It would not work on a human."

Sevak stared.

"Humans do not experience regret at their emotional displays."

"Fascinating. Then you do not believe that Spock and Sarek would have taken McCoy into seclusion for punishment as they did me."

"It is not likely. Any methods of retribution that they could have employed against the doctor would have made privacy unnecessary. For example, McCoy is especially sensitive to the prospect of the nerve pinch."

Sevak blinked. "That is not punishment."

"To Dr. McCoy, it is."

Sevak shook his head in wonderment. Then he surmised, "Then the three are truly missing."

"It is most likely. Is there anything else disturbing you?"

"Affirmative." The boy hesitated. "Humans are so strange. Before Dr. McCoy gave me the injection to put me to sleep, he gave me a recording of an ancient Earth novel to read. He said that it would help me to grow up. But I do not see how; it is about humans."

Spencek replied thoughtfully, "You were raised not exclusively by the Vulcan Sarek, but also by the human Amanda. Perhaps you should read the book."

"Perhaps I should."

Chapter Forty

Spock's first action upon re-materialization was to release his grip on McCoy's wrist. The latter immediately backed into the corner farthest from his two Vulcan potential attackers. McCoy's eyes remained exclusively on them. Their eyes, by contrast, were everywhere but upon him. The human watched them nervously, and willed himself to be as quiet and inconspicuous as possible while the two Vulcans examined their new surroundings. The three were in a simple cell, most closely resembling an old-fashioned Earthly jail cell, complete with three solid walls and three primitive beds: one suspended from each wall by taut chains, and sealed in the fourth direction by thick, formidable, vertical metal bars. If there was any building beyond the bars, it was lost in the gloom. There was nothing to be seen outside of their cell.

"Curious," Spock commented. "The means by which we were removed from the Enterprise would indicate the intervention of a very advanced technology. However, this primitive structure would appear to be inconsistent with that supposition."

Sarek theorized, "Perhaps the appearance of our prison was created intentionally to look familiar to us."

"Logical. Which would reduce the odds of our locating a flaw enabling us to escape to a disappointingly small value."

"Agreed. However, it would be illogical not to at least continue the attempt."

As the two Vulcans proceeded to scrutinize their cell, millimeter by millimeter, it was occasionally necessary for McCoy to move slightly in order to stay out of their way. He did so subtly and unobtrusively, and only as much as necessary. But the inevitable moment came when Spock and Sarek unintentionally and obviously converged on his spot. Unable to squeeze between them and thereby to escape to the far side of the cell, McCoy attempted to make himself smaller between them. As they moved ever closer in their search, this solution, too, proved futile. As McCoy squirmed to make himself tiny, both Vulcans noticed at more or less the same instant. They raised their brows at him.

"Uh, sorry," he fumbled. "I'll just get out of your way." He risked placing careful fingers on Sarek's left arm and Spock's right to propel himself between them and to the relative safety of the far side, where he whirled quickly to face them again.

They watched him go as if they had only just rediscovered why the human should be afraid of them. They exchanged glances.

"Doctor. You may relax," Spock advised in the overindulgence which bordered on near-amusement.

"What...what do you mean?" McCoy feigned ignorance, not wanting to destroy the last vestige of hope that they had forgotten the subject of his distress.

"It is obvious that you are concerned over the events which took place in the sickbay," Sarek observed with exaggerated tolerance.

"Uh...yes...well," McCoy stammered in disappointment.

With supernormal patience, Spock informed him, "We will abandon that issue for the present, Doctor."

"Oh?...Oh! Thank you!"

They watched him curiously as he slowly calmed.

When he trusted himself to speak again with any semblance of normalcy, he said, "What I wouldn't have given to have heard you say that back in the sickbay! And I'm grateful now!" he hastened to add. Then he went on, "But now I'm afraid that I'm in an even deeper mess." His eyes rose from them and he surveyed his surroundings as if seeing them for the first time.

"Indeed," Spock concurred.

Feeling suddenly weak as at least some of the tension drained with the passing of the most immediate emergency, McCoy dropped to sit on the nearest bunk, the one along the wall to the left of the bars.

Spock and Sarek turned from him to recommence their study of their prison. After much additional, and in McCoy's unvoiced opinion superfluous, examination, they abandoned their

efforts and sat on the two remaining bunks, Sarek in the center one. Their surrender confirmed McCoy's long-held opinion that the three were imprisoned hopelessly. His earlier anticipation of the result, however, did nothing to allay the sinking of his heart at their evident confirmation.

The arrival of the fourth presence within the room was neither seen nor heard, but felt by all three of the occupants. Each of the men sat up just a little straighter.

"Spock! There's something here!" McCoy warned him unnecessarily.

"I believe that we are all well aware of that, Doctor."

It did not speak aloud. No words issued from its existence. But still its message was imparted.

"You are from a ship which is a member of the organization known as United Federation of Planets? Your organization is one of many which has disturbed my sleep. There must be a way to halt your activities. Perhaps the means can be found within one of you. I will return later to probe you. After I have...rested."

The being was no longer present.

McCoy slumped.

"Fascinating," declared Spock.

"Most interesting," agreed his father.

"Interesting?!" McCoy forgot his earlier fear of the two Vulcans in face of the new greater fear. "Do you realize what that thing intends to do?! It's going to mind-probe us!" His thoughts went back in dread to the vicious mind probe that he'd endured at the cruel, capable hands of the bearded Spock from the antimatter universe, and of his sadistic Vulcan advisor at the Academy, Professor Spacek. McCoy shivered violently. He could not face that a third time. He simply could not.

"Indeed, Doctor," Spock concurred. "It does intend to mind-probe us. And it intends to seek out possible weaknesses in the defenses of the Federation."

"And that would jeopardize all of the planets that we represent," Sarek clarified.

McCoy sank more deeply into the bed as the full implication hit him. He had been so alarmed at the reference to probing, that he had not looked farther. Spock and Sarek had, naturally, skimmed beyond that minor detail to examine the bigger picture. The three of them would unintentionally endanger everything that they had ever known or believed in, everything about which they cared.

"Well," he tried lamely. "Maybe it can't learn anything important from us."

Spock stared at him in disbelief. "From a Federation ambassador? From a Starfleet scientist? From a doctor well-versed in the physiologies and frailties of most Federation species?"

McCoy abandoned that attempt. "Jim will be looking for us," he tried hopefully.

"He'll have no idea of where to look."

McCoy's head drooped and he fell silent.

"I find it interesting," Sarek commented, "that McCoy, too, heard the message, as he is not telepathic, and therefore should not have been receptive. This could indicate that it projected its thoughts directly into our minds."

"What difference does that make?" McCoy regarded him balefully.

"It tells us that the creature has a very powerful mind," Sarek informed him.

"Oh," McCoy replied glumly, immediately sorry that he'd asked. He sighed. "Let's go back to the sickbay, and I'll settle for the spanking."

No reply was offered to the impossible proposal.

"I wonder if it'll even let us go back after it does probe us," the human wondered mournfully.

"Or if we'll even have a home to which to return, if it does," Spock reminded him.

"You just had to say that."

"Another aspect of its revelation that we have not yet discussed," Sarek began, "is its reference to our activities having disturbed its sleep, and its need to rest before probing us."

"Indeed," Spock commented. "That would seem to indicate that the creature possesses at least some weakness. However, I am doubtful that it is a weakness which we could exploit."

"Why not?" urged McCoy, a glimmer of hope entering his eyes.

"Because of the extreme power of the alien mind," Sarek replied.

Spock offered, "It would be like a terrestrial ant attempting to exploit an elephant's need for sleep. If the elephant lies down and rolls on the ant, the insect will be just as dead as if the elephant had been fully awake."

"Oh," McCoy repeated dismally. It was too much for him to solve. "Well, speaking of rest, the alien is not the only one who's tired." He turned and stretched out full-length on the narrow bed, his feet toward the prison bars. "And the way that things seem to appear and disappear around here, I think that I'll make use of this bed while it's still here."

The Vulcans watched him expressionlessly.

After a few moments of silence, McCoy spoke again, "Spock?"

"Yes, Doctor?"

"I...I don't mean to sound selfish, and of course I'm terribly worried about the Federation, but I don't want to be mind-probed again," he said in a small voice. "I'm scared. I don't want to be searched through and violated and torn apart again, like I was by the bearded Spock, and like I was again by Professor Spacek. And I don't want you two to have to go back in afterward and straighten out my mind like you did before, either. I...I can't face it again. Please. You've got to get us out of this. You've got to find some way to get us out of here. Please." He turned his face to the wall. Tiny sounds issued from the upset human.

Spock exchanged a look with Sarek, and then the former rose soundlessly from his bed. With quiet steps Spock crossed the small room. Unsuspected by McCoy, Spock reached one hand down toward the human's head. As the fingers connected, Spock instantly imparted a quick, gentle mind touch with only one message in it: Sleep.

McCoy did.

Chapter Forty-One

"Captain?"

Kirk jolted from his reverie. He had nearly fallen asleep. Not quite, but almost. Refusing relief, rejecting the right to have time to eat, shower, or even sleep, Kirk had remained at his post nonstop ever since the report of the disappearance of his three friends.

"Yes, what is it, Scotty? What have you got?"

"A clue, sir. Maybe."

Kirk sat up straighter, now fully awake. "What is it?"

"The residue of a beam, sir. An analog of our own transporter beam, but much more complex, and far more advanced. It penetrated the ship at Star Date 7090.38 exactly."

"Not long before Chapel reported the disappearances!"

"Precisely, sir."

"Location?"

Scott grinned. He'd been saving the best for last. "Sickbay, Captain."

Kirk echoed his grin. "Did it leave a trail?"

"Aye, that it did, sir. Not a strong one. But one that we can follow right enough."

"Do so." Kirk nodded tersely.

Scott practically bounced to obey the order.

The off-duty Lieutenant Hikaru Sulu and Ensign Pavel Chekov sat across from each other in the crewmen's lounge.

"It seems so strange around here without Spock and McCoy arguing. It's too quiet," Sulu decided.

"Yes. I miss their quarrels," Chekov agreed.

"I have a feeling that we're not the only ones who miss them."

Chekov nodded. "Captain Kirk is taking it very hard."

"Oh. Sure he is. But he's not the one that I meant."

"Oh? Who else?"

"Sevak."

"The young Vulcan boy?" Chekov frowned. "But he doesn't seem to like them, at least not Spock and Sarek, I mean. Look how insolent he was toward them when they first took him onto the bridge."

"Don't kid yourself," Sulu confided wisely. "Remember how insistently he tried to remain on the bridge and offer theories to Captain Kirk after the disappearances."

"But his theories were completely ridiculous," protested the Russian.

"That's not the point. The point is that he was trying to help. He was trying to find a way to get them back; he was trying to offer hope to Captain Kirk; and just maybe, he was trying to find some hope for himself." The Oriental sat back with a self-satisfied look.

"I suppose," ventured Chekov. "But that business about their having punished him? So severely that Dr. McCoy had felt the need to interfere...."

"Doesn't matter." Sulu waved it away confidently. "A child always still loves his parents. *Especially* when they care enough to correct him. Besides, you know that Dr. McCoy always overreacts. Particularly toward Vulcans."

"Love?" Chekov grinned at him with a "gotcha" expression. "Do you realize what you just said? You used the word 'love' in reference to a Vulcan!"

Sulu refused to be rattled. He dismissed it, saying, "Love, or whatever its equivalent is in Vulcan society. I think that they feel more than they want us to know that they do. And that's why I feel so sorry for Sevak. He's never been separated from his relatives like this, before now. On Vulcan, Sarek and Amanda were always around; they were always there for him. Here, he had Sarek and Spock to rely on – he was only just getting to know Spock – when bam! No more family. A ship full of strangers."

"There are other Vulcans here."

"Not the same thing. Oh he'll turn to them. He'll have to; he has no other choice. But he misses and needs Spock, and especially Sarek. Don't fool yourself."

"Maybe."

"I wish that we could do something for him."

"Like what?"

"Companionship perhaps. I don't know, though, I guess we shouldn't risk it. Our efforts might be seen by the Vulcans here as interference. Remember what happened to Dr. McCoy when he interfered."

"Now who's overreacting in regard to Vulcans?" Chekov's eyes twinkled.

Sulu nodded, admitting a point for Chekov. "You're probably right, but, all the same, I think that we should play it cautiously. The rumors that I've heard indicate that Spencek especially, and to a lesser extent Spornak and Petrasek, are taking an interest in the child."

"Spencek?" Chekov's eyes widened. "The nephew of Sevak's illegal creator, Spacek?"

"The very same."

"Ooo, that's awkward!"

"You're telling me."

"You don't think that he would take it out on the boy? That his uncle was killed because of him?"

"No, I doubt it. Just the opposite, apparently. He seems quite fond of Sevak."

"Fond? There you go again!"

"I can't help it." Sulu shook his head. "It's automatic to use emotion words to describe all people, even Vulcans. Just as it's normal to anthropomorphize animals."

"Now you're comparing Vulcans to animals?" Chekov teased.

"Oh, cut it out, Pav." Sulu grinned. "Or I'll give you a fencing lesson!"

Chekov paled noticeably.

"Seriously, though, if we see a way to help Sevak, let's. But we'll be subtle about it of course."

The small subject of all of the discussion turned off the viewer. He sat back and pondered what he had read. Dr. McCoy's favorite novel contained much in significant agricultural detail and barbaric hunting techniques, but it was interesting otherwise. Sevak wondered how the very sensitive human McCoy dealt with the many violent, human against human, passages. But he knew somehow, instinctively, that it was not that material either to which the doctor had meant to call his attention. It was the relationship of the boy, Jody, to his parents. He had taken them for granted, and not truly realized how much he needed them and cared for them, until he was in danger of losing them. He had allowed various petty squabbles to intrude upon the relationship until it was almost too late. Just as Sevak had done. Only for him it *was* too late. Sarek and Spock were gone. They might never return. And Sevak's last act toward his elders had been to disappoint them and reject them. Very un-Vulcan tears coursed down the child's face.

Chapter Forty-Two

When Spock had satisfied himself that McCoy was sleeping peacefully, he went to sit, not on his own bed, but next to Sarek on his bunk, with his back to the human.

"Father." He spoke in low tones so as not to awaken the doctor. "We have much to discuss."

"Indeed. It is good that you removed McCoy from the discussion. He would only have agitated himself, and could have contributed nothing."

Spock nodded. "I regret that I see no normal means of escape."

"Nor I. Apparently the entity considers no escape possible, either. Notice how openly it revealed its plans to us, as if it knows that we can do nothing to stop it."

"Its assessment would appear to be accurate. McCoy may have heard its message along with us, but I do not believe that he is fully cognizant of the extreme power of the mind with which we're dealing."

"Quite correct," Sarek noted. "And I perceive from what you have just said, that you caught a glimpse during the brief mind link of the strength of the alien mind, just as I did."

"Affirmative. It was quite formidable. I do not believe that I will be able to shield against it."

"Nor will I."

"Do you believe it possible that we could combine our efforts in an attempt to shut out its probing?"

"That is not very likely. And even if we could, for ourselves, we would not be able to protect the human."

Spock agreed reluctantly. "And he of course possesses no shielding ability whatsoever of his own."

"Neither is there any hope that McCoy's non-telepathic brain could be immune to the being's probing. He has already confirmed reception of the original message."

"And unlike the doctor, I do not hold any hope of the Enterprise finding us."

"Certainly not in time. The entity could return again at any moment. We do not know when the probe will take place. How long the creature needs to 'rest'."

Spock nodded slowly. "I regret then that I can find only one other logical alternative."

"I also can find only the one. Our continued existence presents a grave threat to the safety of the Federation."

"We must prevent the probe at all costs. Our minds must not be used as source-matter for the undermining of all of our species. We cannot weigh our three lives against the entirety of the Federation."

"We must suicide to avoid the probe."

"Agreed."

Sarek hesitated uncharacteristically. "McCoy will not cooperate."

Spock indulged himself in an almost-human sigh. "I know. He will have to be forced. It is absolutely vital for the survival of the entire Federation. You and I certainly cannot abandon him here; he is the most vulnerable of the three of us."

"Granted. But he will not listen to your logic."

"No. But he is a commissioned officer in the Fleet just as I am. He knew the risks when he signed aboard our vessel."

"With humans, there seems to be a vast difference between knowing the risk and accepting the defeat."

"They also have a tendency never to want the fateful moment to be 'now'. They always attempt to put it off until 'later'," Spock observed.

"In this case, however, McCoy will have to realize that 'now' has come."

"Indeed."

"I would suggest that tal-shaya is the logical means for us to employ," Sarek concluded.

"Unquestionably."

"As you have said, McCoy will have to be forced. I would recommend that he be the first. One of us may need to restrain him for the other, Spock."

"The doctor is not much of a fighter."

"True. But humans are never stronger than when they fight desperately for their own lives. And have no doubt: he will fight us."

"Agreed. I will perform tal-shaya on McCoy. I believe that he will accept it easier from me. He knows me better. That seems to have some significance to humans. I will at least attempt to reason with him, to give him a chance to submit to the logic of the situation. But I will be prepared for a fight. And if I need your assistance...."

"I will be there," Sarek finished for him.

"And after that?" Spock turned carefully-controlled eyes to his father.

"I will perform tal-shaya on you next, my son."

Spock's eyes lowered. "I express appreciation. You are making this most difficult on yourself, Father."

"I will cope."

"It takes great control, both physical and mental, to perform tal-shaya upon oneself. There are only a few examples in history of it being successfully done."

"I am aware of that. I shall be one of them."

"If you fail. You will be in agony. And with no one to help you. Your own hands will no longer function. There can be no second attempt. You will die very slowly."

"I will not fail. It is my duty as your father to help you along ahead of me, Spock."

"I thank you."

They sat quietly for a moment. Then, Spock's eyes strayed to the innocently-sleeping human on the bunk.

"Father, I have a confession to make. It will not be easy for me to do it to McCoy."

"Do you want me to do it for you, Son?"

"No. It will be easier for him if I do it. That is what is important. I must think of him. And also, the doctor is my responsibility."

"As you wish."

"But there is something that I *am* asking of you."

"And what is that?"

"Your forgiveness. For any indulgent tenderness that I may display toward the doctor, just as you forgave my gentleness toward him which preceded the restorative mind probe that we had to perform on him on Vulcan."

"Granted."

"I express appreciation. This will be infinitely harder on McCoy than that was. He will need kindness all the more."

"That is quite correct."

After another pause, Spock went on, "This is ironic, Father."

"How so?"

"McCoy begged us to find a way out of this. We have done so."

"Yes. This is hardly what he had in mind."

"Nevertheless, at least he will not have to suffer the probe again."

The two Vulcans sat watching the calm face of the sleeping human.

Chapter Forty-Three

Kirk paced the bridge. He was no longer comfortable in his command seat. The nervous energy which welled up in unstoppable tides from within him had to go somewhere. Walking helped. It was as if the motion of his pacing could somehow help the starship to move faster. Its speed seemed to languish when he sat.

"How's our trail, Scotty?" he asked for the umpteenth time.

"Still holding, sir. And maybe growing a wee bit stronger."

"It just seems impossible that we could have gone this far without encountering its source. How can the beam have reached so far to kidnap them?"

"I dunno, sir. But it did."

Kirk waved a disgusted hand at the unrelenting viewscreen, with its endless stream of stars.

Sevak stared unseeingly at the darkened viewer. He trembled from his emotional upheaval. In the end of "The Yearling," Jody had run home desperately, frantically, in irrational dread that his parents would no longer be there, that they would not want him, that they would have moved away without him, that they would be dead. That they would have abandoned him. The human boy had bolted insanely into the yard of his home screaming, "Pa!" Sevak suffered the overwhelming urge to do the same. But where was he to run? The human boy's worst nightmares had come true, not for him, but for Sevak: the parents *had* left him; they might *never* return; they *might* be dead. And they might not want him? Had they ever? They had taken care of him, but that was not the same thing. But Sevak knew as he had never known before that he wanted them. Totally and unreservedly. And if they would ever come back to him, he would show them, and make them want him. And then, if necessary, he would let them help him repent for his un-Vulcan display of concern. But for now, there was no log cabin to which he could return.

Sevak pulled himself up out of the chair. He must run somewhere. He would go to the ship's gym. He could run there. He could work off his emotional upset.

Thankfully, there was no one there when he arrived. He ran. And ran. Many times he circled the large open area, and still he ran. On one lap, his eyes caught sight of a large bulky contraption with whose usage Sevak was only vaguely familiar. He believed that it was called a punching bag. It was a human device. As a Vulcan, Sevak had never been encouraged to utilize such equipment. He paused near it. The running had helped to dissipate his energy, but not his frustration. The punching bag could do that; it was designed to alleviate such tension. But its purpose was so clearly violent in nature. Not proper for a Vulcan. An unemotional being was expected to dispose of an enemy with a quick pinch on the shoulder, or a quick break of the neck. Without malice. He was not expected to injure the opponent slowly and cruelly, as some of the humans had done in that book that he'd read. Sevak had never even been taught to make a fist. Yet that was clearly what this piece of athletic equipment was for, in the very nature of its design. Sevak raised his right hand and slowly watched his fingers close one by one. He folded the thumb down in front of them. He stared at the result as if it didn't even belong to him. He wondered whether he'd done it right. Sevak looked around self-consciously, to be sure that he was still alone. Then he drew back carefully and struck the object. The action left him with a curiously satisfied sensation. He struck it again. And again.

Spencek and Spornak left the science lab together. The work-related conversation that they had exchanged inside continued outside of the lab.

At last, Spencek put up a hand. "We are off-duty. I would recommend a change of pace."

"I had intended to use the computer in my quarters to conduct further research."

"And if you do, and if I do, and if we both continue to do so, we will ultimately no longer be physically Vulcan."

At Spornak's raised brows, Spencek hastened to add, "Mentally yes. Physically no. We will lose our training."

Spornak nodded acknowledgement. "What would you suggest?"

Spencek announced formally, "I challenge you to practice-combat with the ahn-woon."

"I accept."

The Vulcan sling was a good weapon with which to practice. It required skill. And its use need not be fatal.

Spencek and Spornak changed out of their uniforms and entered the gym. And saw Sevak engaged in violently pounding a primitive piece of human equipment. They paused, stunned, and approached no farther. But Sevak's acute Vulcan hearing had alerted him to the presence of others. He froze. Having to explain his actions to humans would be bad enough. But if the newcomers were Vulcans....

Sevak turned reluctantly to face the new arrivals. Spencek and Spornak. Two of the Vulcans whom he had requested to help him to become more Vulcan and less human. The worst possible choices to witness his shame. The boy blushed bright green in embarrassment.

"Sevak?" Spencek took a step closer. "Are you quite all right?"

Not trusting himself to speak, because he knew that his voice would be full of the anxiety, the frustration, and the fear with which he'd pounded the punching bag, and full also of the humiliation at having been caught doing so, just as his face already was filled, in having colored a deeper shade of green, Sevak fled around them toward the door.

Their heads turned to follow his course.

"Sevak?" Spornak tried. "Can we be of any assistance?"

Sevak bolted through the door without answering, making himself a mental note to report to them later, when he could be calm, for disciplinary measures.

Hikaru Sulu and Pavel Chekov approached the ship's gym: Sulu eagerly, Chekov reluctantly.

"Come on, Pav," Sulu urged. "You'll love it."

"I seriously doubt it."

"How did you ever get interested in anything? Everything must be new once. Remember, for everything there is a first time."

"And a last time. Which this will also be if you put out my eye with that thing."

"With a fencing foil? You've got to be kidding. There's a protective cap on the end."

"It will fall off, with my luck."

"And you wear padding. And a mask."

"Those will fall off, too."

Sulu shook his head and chuckled.

The gym door just ahead of them flew open and a small figure raced out through it.

Sevak collided with Sulu. And struggled to keep going.

"Hey, hey, hey, easy!" Sulu grappled to get a hold of him. At length, he caught the youngster around the waist and lifted him in his arms.

Sevak seriously considered a nerve pinch to free himself, but decided not to bother.

Sulu looked with concern into the perspiring little green face. "Sevak? What's wrong?"

Sevak went on panting, and made no reply.

"Come on," Sulu decided. "Let's go to my quarters. Let's talk."

"Hikaru," Chekov cautioned nervously. "While you were busy with the boy, I caught a glimpse inside the gym through its opened door. Spencek and Spornak are in there."

"Well what of it?" Sulu pretended not to care.

"They probably saw you grab him."

"So?" Sulu feigned ignorance of Chekov's point.

"So, they may see our intervention as interference, remember?"

Sulu looked from the tormented little face in his arms to the hesitant adult face beside him. His eyes hardened resolutely. "I'll take that chance." He started away, with the child in tow.

"Hikaru?!" Chekov called after him.

"Coming with me?" Sulu inquired over his shoulder.

"I might as well." Chekov shrugged. He muttered to himself as he started forward, "Now you're getting me into something even more dangerous than fencing."

When Sulu entered his quarters, he set the distressed child on the bed, and he himself perched on the foot of it. Chekov came in behind him and pulled up a chair.

"Come on now, Sevak," Sulu urged softly. "Tell us about it."

"There is nothing to tell." The small face fought for composure.

"We're not here to judge you; we're not here to criticize you; and we're not here to punish you," he soothed.

"Unlike the Vulcans," Chekov blurted.

Sulu cast a you're-not-helping-me frown at his companion.

"They are not wrong to judge and punish me," Sevak corrected them. "It is their duty."

"Even when it upsets you?" Chekov ventured.

"Especially when it upsets me." The little chin rose in proud defiance. "I am a Vulcan. Vulcans are not supposed to get upset."

"Then something must have gone amiss lately." Sulu smiled gently. "We've seen you upset quite a bit recently."

The young Vulcan said nothing.

"Let me guess," Sulu experimented. "You miss Spock and Sarek."

There was no reply.

"In spite of the quarrels, in spite of your disapproval of the human influences in their lives, in spite of their rather harsh punishment of you, you've begun to realize that you need them."

Sevak's right jaw twitched at the bull's eye.

Sulu pressed his advantage. "And now, you worry about whether we'll find them. You wonder how they really feel about you. And you wish that you had the chance to show them how you really feel about them. Even if it is considered un-Vulcan." He grinned, but compassionately.

Sevak stared at the human, wide-eyed. "How do you know all of this? Your species is not telepathic."

"Of course not." Sulu laughed amiably. "I know all of this because the problem is universal. Nearly every child goes through it."

"Growing up is difficult." Sevak thought of the book. "Did you go through it, too?"

"After a fashion, sure."

"And you?" He turned to Chekov.

"Yes, more or less."

"No two people have exactly the same experience, Sevak," Sulu clarified. "But it is a problem that we all had to varying degrees. And yes, even the Vulcans. I, uh...." He glanced at Chekov. "I happen to have heard that Spock didn't have an easy time of it as a child, either."

"Really?"

"Really. But what I want you to remember," he said, as he leaned closer, "is that Captain Kirk has a habit of rescuing his people. He's got a good long record on that score. I think that you'll get your chance to show Sarek and Spock how you feel."

Sevak may have been able to banish the negative feelings from his eyes in front of these two humans when they'd first carried him here. But he couldn't conceal the hope from them now. He didn't even try.

Sulu and Chekov smiled at him in response.

"It is curious," Sevak said then.

"What is?"

"You humans, so many of you, always seem to want to help me. You two do. Dr. McCoy did."

Chekov winced at the unwelcome reminder. It made him think of how the doctor had gotten himself into trouble as a result. As Chekov and Sulu might yet do.

Sulu answered easily, "We're glad to, Sevak. Come to us any time that you need us."

"I express appreciation."

"You're welcome."

Chapter Forty-Four

The moment that Spock and Sarek had been awaiting – and if they were honest with themselves, dreading – came to pass. Dr. McCoy awoke.

He turned groggy eyes to look at them where they sat together on Sarek's bunk. "Hi," he mumbled sleepily. "Do you have the solution?"

"The solution, Doctor?" Spock asked.

"A way out of here!"

The two Vulcans regarded each other somberly.

Spock replied, "Perhaps."

"Well, let's get on with it!" McCoy insisted.

Sarek cautioned, "It is not a conventional type of escape."

"Nothing about this whole predicament is conventional! Come on, tell me!"

Spock exchanged another look with Sarek, and then went to sit beside McCoy's prone form on his bunk.

The human watched him expectantly.

Spock began, "We cannot get out of this cell; we cannot shield against the mind probe of the entity; and we do not believe that the Enterprise can get us out in time."

McCoy blinked. "Okay. Now that you've told me all of the things that we *can't* do, how about telling me what we *can* do?"

Spock was not to be hurried. "It is crucial that the alien not probe us. With the knowledge that we possess, it could destroy the Federation."

"All of that's true, Spock, but I still haven't heard a solution in there anywhere."

"I simply wanted to begin by helping you to see the logic of the situation."

"All right, fine. Now how do we get out of this?"

Spock took a deep breath, and said, "The alien creature will not be able to probe a brain that is not living." He waited. It only took two seconds.

"*What?!*" McCoy hissed.

"We will have to suicide in order to prevent the probe."

"You can't be serious!"

"Doctor, I assure you that I have never been more serious."

"I'd sooner be probed!" McCoy shouted. "That...solution!...would be, as we say on Earth, like burning down a house to kill a fly!"

Spock straightened abruptly. "Actually, Doctor, in this case, it would be killing three flies in order to prevent the burning of the house. The house in question being the Federation."

"Are you out of your mind?!"

"I can assure you that I am quite sane."

"Well I won't do it!"

Spock watched him. "We anticipated that you would say that."

"And I did. What now?" McCoy's tone was belligerent and resentful.

Spock's eyes never wavered. "You will have to be forced."

McCoy went white. His head fell back upon the bunk. His next "*What?!*" was a ghost of the previous one.

"I am sorry, Doctor. Truly I am. But we cannot leave you here defenseless. You must go with us."

"What you're talking about isn't suicide," he whispered tensely. "It's murder!"

"My father and I will not be alive to be arrested."

"Oh this is crazy!" McCoy's voice broke. "Tell me that you wouldn't, Spock. Please say that you wouldn't."

"In fact, I am the one who will."

McCoy glanced at Sarek, as if only just remembering that he was there, and then back at Spock. "You're going to...?" he faltered in a hushed tone.

"Yes, Doctor."

"No...."

"I am sorry."

"How?" he requested, with eyes that debated whether or not he wished to hear the answer.

Spock nodded confirmation of the human's obvious suspicions. "Tal-shaya."

"No!!!" He turned his face to the side and sobbed once.

"Believe me, Doctor, it is the best way. It is very quick. It is almost painless."

"Almost," McCoy repeated bitterly.

"Leonard, listen to me...." Spock reached a hand toward his face.

McCoy screamed, writhed aside, and pressed his back and neck desperately into the bedding in the hopes of preventing probing fingers from sliding between and seeking vulnerability.

The hand withdrew as Spock realized how McCoy had misinterpreted the gesture. "You misunderstood me. I'm not going to do it right this minute."

"Oh." McCoy relaxed slowly in the bed. "You scared me," he whimpered.

"I'm sorry," Spock whispered. The hand approached again slowly.

McCoy watched it, but did not flinch. The fingers brushed his cheek, and then carefully pressed his temple, imparting waves of soothing reassurance. McCoy closed his eyes and almost lost his terrorized grimace as he calmed somewhat under the tranquilizing influence.

Presently Spock's hand withdrew. He spoke softly, "Listen to me, Leonard. We are officers of Starfleet. It is our responsibility to protect the Federation. We vowed to give our lives if necessary."

"I know," McCoy said in a small voice, without opening his eyes. "But it's scary!"

"So is the prospect of a mind probe by the alien. This is the best way for us, and for the Federation."

His eyes opened and pleaded with the Vulcan. "I know that I'm afraid of the nerve pinch, but I fear this so much more. Can't you nerve-pinch me first, so that I won't feel this?"

Spock struggled momentarily with his pity for the human. He truly regretted the answer that he had to give. "No. Tal-shaya cannot be performed on a limp body. Your neck-bone must be rigid. That is why we could not do it to you in your sleep."

The eyes grew wide. "You considered it?"

"We would have, if it had been possible. It would have been easier on you that way."

The eyes closed again. McCoy sniffed.

"And now, Leonard. Shall we get it over with and end your torment?" The hand descended toward the neck.

McCoy panicked. With a shriek, he twisted away, and both arms came up defensively. Spock was ready for him. He seized both wrists with powerful hands.

"McCoy, stop it," he urged. "There is no other way."

With both of Spock's hands occupied, McCoy dared to risk exposing the back of his neck for just an instant as he swiveled his head toward the neighboring bunk.

"Sarek! Help me!" he appealed to him.

"I support the actions of my son. If he needs assistance in subduing you, I will provide it."

McCoy's stricken face turned back to Spock. "Don't *do* this to me!"

"Do not struggle. It will be easier for you."

He transferred both human wrists into his left hand. His right reached for McCoy's neck. The human cried out, and then pressed his back and neck into the bed with all of his might as he had done before, to create a seal impenetrable to fingers. But bedding is soft and flexible, and Vulcans have great strength. The fingers burrowed without difficulty. McCoy screamed again and his eyes narrowed in defeat as he felt their relentless progress.

"I will be quick. It will not hurt."

The fingers found the fatal spot.

McCoy looked into Spock's face with tears in his eyes.

Chapter Forty-Five

"Energize!" yelled a triumphant Kirk in the transporter room.

A broadly grinning Scott moved to comply.

Three figures began to materialize on the platform: one separately, two together.

Kirk's eyes strained eagerly at them. He easily identified the individual, seated figure as Sarek. His head snapped around quickly to recognize the two who were locked together: Spock was in a sitting position, and...yes! that was McCoy lying down beside him. But...

The three transportees did not move. They remained where they were, rigidly posed like wax-work statues in a museum. It was as if they were in shock.

"Spock?" Kirk called encouragingly. "Bones?" he added hopefully.

They moved then, subtly. Sarek's face changed. A solemn mask descended over his features. Spock's expression managed a mixture of horror and relief. McCoy's head fell back against the floor, causing Spock's hand, whose position Kirk had not noticed until now, to slide up and away from it. But why had Spock been supporting McCoy's head? Kirk wondered.

Spock stared at his own hand as if it were a vile thing, and then his eyes traveled back to the human's face, his horror increasing, rather than abating.

Kirk's own heart began to pound harder. "Spock? What's wrong?"

No one answered him.

McCoy rolled over onto his left side, toward Spock. He struggled to get his arms under him, to boost himself upward, but his limbs were weak and nonresponsive; he nearly collapsed onto his face. Spock came out of his stupor hastily and reached both hands to support the doctor. McCoy made a savage sound and pulled away from the Vulcan. He crawled ineffectually forward on hands and knees. His stricken face made Kirk's heart leap in alarm.

"Bones! What is it?! Tell me!"

McCoy raised himself awkwardly to his feet. The first attempt to walk was a false start which nearly pitched him to his knees again. He stumbled down the few stairs in a way that would have been comical, had it not been horrifying. With a face that looked as if it could not choose among shouting, crying, or sneering, McCoy half-walked, half-crawled the width of the transporter chamber. Spock and Sarek still did not move, but never took their eyes off of the doctor. Once again at least temporarily on his feet, McCoy paused at the transporter room door, and turned to cast a look of pure revulsion at the two Vulcans watching him. Then, without a word, he walked out of it.

It returned, rested, to probe its three captives. The cell was empty. Strange. Well. It would be too much trouble to pursue them. And they only represented one organization, after all. There were so many others even more disturbing.

Chapter Forty-Six

Sevak found it very difficult to sit still. The news had reached him that Spock and Sarek had been beamed back aboard the Enterprise. Now he would have his chance. Now he would show them how he really felt about them. And he would see if there were any hope that they could care about him. He was waiting in Spock's quarters to surprise them. He did not think that the science officer would mind him going in there. After all, Sarek and Spock had taken him in there themselves once. For punishment. He almost shivered at that memory. Well, he decided fatalistically, if they were going to be displeased at the revelation that he planned, he was certainly revealing it in the right place. It would save them the trouble of seeking seclusion in which to discipline him.

The door whispered aside. Spock and Sarek entered, wearing slightly un-Vulcan expressions of their own. Their faces were solemn, weary. Sevak rose in concern and puzzlement. The movement caught their attention. They saw the boy, and quickly adjusted their features back to neutral. Sevak hesitated; it was not proper for a young Vulcan to ask his elders about their feelings. He must not inquire. He must politely pretend not to have noticed. He was taking risk enough in his intention to tell them about his own feelings as it was.

"Spock? Sarek?" he faltered. "May I speak with you?"

"Affirmative." They seated themselves and waited.

"I have something to confess to you. And then, I will submit to you for discipline if you require."

"Oh?" Sarek's brow rose. "What have you to confess?"

"Feelings. Improper feelings. Emotions."

"Indeed. And what is the nature of these feelings?"

The child took a deep breath. "I missed you. I was terribly worried about you. And now, I am so pleased that you have returned."

"I see." Sarek kept his voice carefully expressionless, imagining idly how Amanda would react if Sarek punished the boy for this particular transgression. "Is that all?"

"No."

"What else?"

"I became so...upset...that I attempted to work off my feelings in the gym, by repeatedly striking a primitive human device."

"Interesting. Did that help?"

"No. Yes. I don't know. A little."

"Is there anything else?"

"Yes."

"Proceed."

"While I was striking the device, Spencek and Spornak came in and caught me at it. They asked if I was all right. I was terribly embarrassed. I ran out without answering them. I have not reported back to them for correction."

"I see. Is there more?"

"Yes."

"Go on then."

"I have spent much time wishing...hoping...that you two care for me, as I have learned that I care for both of you."

Spock and Sarek regarded him in utter amazement. They saw for the very first time how expressive their child's face was. Then they saw the tears, Sevak's tears, which welled hopefully in his eyes. They realized that here at last was Amanda's influence that they'd wished to see in the child. They let him cry.

Spock exchanged a look with Sarek, and confirmed that his father's tolerance was higher than usual, perhaps due to the events of the day, or possibly because this new development with Sevak represented, if not correct Vulcan behavior, at least an improvement in the youngster's attitude.

However, while Spock had satisfied himself that Sarek was not offended, Sevak had not. The child wiped his eyes and regarded Sarek almost fearfully. "I am ashamed."

"No. Do not be. In the family, all is understood."

"Then...you accept me?"

Sarek replied, "Affirmative...my son."

Sevak smiled, struggled to straighten his features, lost the battle, and gave in to the expression. "If you are going to punish me...it was worth it."

Sarek and Spock exchanged a look in which they telegraphed to each other that they could not bear to hurt anyone else that day.

"No," Sarek announced. "We will not punish you."

The tension which had been in Sevak's back throughout the exchange relaxed at last. "Thank you. But can you forget that I have disgraced myself?"

"You have not disgraced yourself. There was no one here to see it but us, and we shall tell no one. In the family, all is silence. It will be our secret."

Sevak nodded his appreciation. Then he offered conversationally, "You know what helped me to realize that I must appreciate you while you are here with me, instead of waiting until later and then experiencing regret? A book."

"A book?" Sarek inquired.

"A human book," Sevak announced unashamedly. He had indeed come far. "It is about how difficult it is to grow up, and about how petty quarrels should not be allowed to permanently affect a relationship."

"Indeed, interesting. And where did you find such a book?" Sarek asked politely.

"Dr. McCoy gave it to me."

Both adult faces lost their easy, relaxed composure. Both stiffened uncomfortably.

"When did this take place?" Spock wanted to know.

"Before you disappeared. Right before, in fact." He hesitated. "He gave it to me right before he gave me the tranquilizer, when he helped me. I...I hope that you did not really punish him for helping me. Did you?"

"No," Spock said softly.

"And you won't punish him for giving me the book will you? He only wanted to help."

"No, we will not," Sarek promised.

"Good. I must go and see him next. I must tell him how he helped me. I cannot wait to tell him."

Spock and Sarek exchanged looks once again.

Spock stated flatly, "You had better wait."

Sevak's brow furrowed in puzzlement. "But why?"

Sarek said enigmatically, "The doctor is not himself."

Sevak watched them, looking from one face to the other, and waited.

They looked at each other, and decided, wordlessly, to tell him.

"We were captured," Sarek began, "by a powerful alien intellect capable of greater mind-linking ability than we possess, and greater than that against which we can shield."

Sevak's eyes grew wide. He could not imagine an entity more telepathically formidable than Vulcans. He would have believed that such was impossible.

"The alien communicated its intention," Spock went on, "to probe us shortly, in an effort to discover information destructive to the Federation."

The eyes of the listener grew wider.

"We had few alternatives," Sarek took over the narrative. "We could find no means of escape from the structure in which we found ourselves imprisoned. We did not see how the Enterprise could reach us in time. We could not shield even ourselves, let alone a human, against the intrusion of the alien mind."

"But we knew," Spock continued, "that we had to prevent the probing at all costs. The information in our minds could have brought the Federation to ruin. Once the being would have

received such data, there would have been no stopping it. The problem had to be eliminated at the source." He paused.

Sarek stated, "We chose suicide to prevent the probe."

A small gasp escaped their young audience before he could catch himself.

They ignored it.

"Not surprisingly," Spock admitted, "Dr. McCoy did not wish to participate in our solution. He argued, and then refused. We said that we would have to force him. He tried to talk us out of it; he begged; he tried to play one of us against the other; he screamed; he fought; and finally he cried. I had my hand poised on his neck, ready to inflict tal-shaya. The Enterprise beamed us in, in that instant. We materialized, still in position. I was one second away from killing him, and he knows it. The hatred in his face when he looked at us was unprecedented. He ran from us." Spock's head lowered from the effort of telling his story.

"I...," Sevak stammered. "I understand the logic of what you did, but...."

"I know," Spock acknowledged. "This is probably truly the end of whatever relationship existed between us and McCoy."

Chapter Forty-Seven

A very bewildered, puzzled, disappointed James T. Kirk prowled the corridors. The elation, the celebration, that he'd expected to experience at the dramatic rescue of his dearest friends had been pulled from his grasp, and he felt hurt and cheated. Where were the drinks in his quarters, and the pounding of backs, and the shaking of hands that generally followed such melodramatic occurrences? Instead of congratulations and appreciation for their daring rescue, the three had been positively funereal in response. And they had not really spoken to him at all. One had gone one way and the other two had gone the other way, and all in total silence. Obviously there was a great mystery going on here, and Kirk was feeling very left out of it. And very determined to get to the bottom of it. Well, whom should he ask, McCoy or the two Vulcans? McCoy was the greater concern, and the more mysterious. He'd left the transporter pad in the most unsteady condition that Kirk had ever seen him. So why not find him first and ask *him* what was going on with the three of them? Kirk could always go to Spock and Sarek later if he didn't get all of the answers. So, where would McCoy be, in sickbay? If he wasn't, he should be, the way that he'd stumbled and fumbled his way out of the transporter room. Kirk would look there first.

The sickbay door slid aside to admit him, and he saw a lone figure sitting slightly slumped in dim gloomy lighting at McCoy's desk with his back to the door. The figure was oblivious to Kirk's entry and did not stir. Kirk went forward in concern. It was McCoy all right, but still he did not acknowledge his visitor. It was inconceivable that he did not yet hear him.

The captain reached out and put a sympathetic hand on the doctor's upper back. Instantly, instead of too little reaction he got too much, as McCoy jolted upright violently. He cringed exaggeratedly from the touch.

"Bones, easy! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to scare you! I just...."

McCoy squinted at him. "Oh it's you. Thank god. I was afraid that it was someone else."

Kirk frowned. "Who were you afraid that it was?"

"Hmph! Nobody! Care for a drink?"

It was then that Kirk noticed the bottle. What was left of it. And the empty glass.

"How many of those have you had?"

"Oh, I'm just getting started!" McCoy leaned back almost dangerously in the chair. "I want to get real relaxed. And flexible. And limp. Not rigid. Especially not rigid. No rigid bones." He chuckled at some private joke. "No rigid bones. Get it? No rigid 'Bones'." He giggled.

"You're drunk."

A finger extended waveringly into the air. "Darn tootin'! You're right! Good guess, Jim!" He staggered to his feet. "Give the man a cigar!"

"McCoy, what's going on here?"

"Why, I'm having a good time! You're the one who's stiff! Loosen up, Jim! Don't be rigid. It's never safe to be rigid!" A new round of giggling ended in a hiccup.

"There are some things that just don't add up here."

"Well, now I'm the wrong one to ask about that. I'm not one of your walking adding machines. But you've got a lot of 'em to choose from on this ship." He spread his arms expansively, and nearly lost his balance. "You've got fifty-one of 'em to ask." He frowned. "No. Fifty-two. Fifty-three. Fifty-three of 'em right now. You've got a bargain, Jim! You've got two extra ones to ask."

"This has something to do with the Vulcans."

McCoy blinked bleary eyes at him. "What Vulcans?"

Kirk shook his head. "I'll admit that I thought that we'd be celebrating, after your rescue. Drinking. But not like this."

"I *am* celebrating! You're the one who's not cooperating! Join me!"

"No thanks. One of us had better keep his sanity."

McCoy didn't even bother to get insulted. In fact, Kirk wasn't sure that he'd heard. He took hold of the doctor's arm to get his attention.

"It's about Spock and Sarek. Right?"

If Kirk had anticipated a big reaction, he was to be disappointed. McCoy just smiled and repeated, "Have a drink, Jim."

Kirk was not to be swayed. "What happened?"

"When?"

The captain hesitated. "I'm not sure. I guess, when Spock and Sarek came in here to see you after you had helped Sevak to recover from his punishment in Spock's quarters."

"Oh, nothing much."

"Nurse Chapel said that she heard shouting."

"Yeah, I guess that we had a little of that."

"Sevak said that he was sure that Sarek and Spock would punish you for interfering in Sevak's discipline."

"Yeah, that, too."

"Sevak didn't want to tell me what they did to him. He just said that it was some Vulcan method. He assumed that they would intend to do the same to you."

"No. Just a spanking."

"Oh! Oh. So that's what this is all about; though I must admit that I'd assumed that that whole spanking business could only have been a joke. Do you mean to say that they really...?"

McCoy's eyes transformed from silly and lethargic to bitter. "Oh sure, I'd get this upset over a spanking!"

"All right, so that's not it. What happened while you were away from the Enterprise?"

"Nothing."

"Bones...."

"Absolutely nothing!" The eyes flared. "You want it in writing?"

"I want to help."

"There's nothing to help. Nothing's wrong. Everything's fine."

"Damn it, Bones, don't shut me out!"

There was no reply. Tired frustrated eyes met tired frustrated eyes.

"All right." Kirk attempted, "Let's try another angle. The three of you certainly looked strange when we beamed you back here. You and Spock were in that weird position. None of you moved at first. You had trouble getting up from the floor. Spock tried to help you, and you wouldn't let him. You staggered across the room, and you weren't even drunk yet then. I mean, I *assume* that you weren't. You glared at the other two on your way out of the door. All three of you looked like you'd just attended a funeral...."

Inexplicably, McCoy found something amusing in that. He smiled sickly.

It annoyed Kirk. He demanded testily, "And why was Spock supporting your head anyway?"

McCoy's eyes lit. "Supporting my head? Is that how it looked to you? Now *that's* funny!" But this time the doctor didn't laugh.

Kirk stared, nonplussed, not certain how to proceed. "Is this one of those situations where you need a mind probe from Spock and Sarek, but you're afraid to have them do it, so you avoid them?"

"No. I don't need anything from them."

Kirk watched McCoy steadily for long moments. "You're not going to tell me, are you?"

McCoy's blue eyes stared back into Kirk's hazel ones.

Kirk's voice was soft. "They did something so terrible to you, that you can't even tell me?"

McCoy's eyes rolled back, and he collapsed forward into Kirk's arms.

"Oh, Bones!" Kirk maneuvered the awkward dead weight against one arm, and got the dangling legs up over the other. He carried his friend to the nearest diagnostic bed and laid him on it. He hit the intercom switch.

"Chapel here."

"Nurse? You're needed in sickbay. Right now."

Christine Chapel was accustomed to arriving fast to emergencies. This was no exception.

"He's drunk," Kirk informed her. "He passed out in my arms. Is anything else wrong?"

She ran the scans. "No. Not physically. But he's been acting peculiarly ever since he got back from... wherever."

"You're telling me!" But then he had a thought. "Yes, *tell* me, as a matter of fact! You might know something that I don't."

"Well, this is the second medical scan that I've run on him since he's been back here. He requested the first one himself. The minute that he got in the door, in fact."

"Really?" Kirk was eager. "Did he ask you to check anything in particular?"

"Yes, that was what was so odd. He asked me to run a check on his skeletal structure."

Kirk frowned. "His.... Any one bone specifically?"

"Now that's what I asked him. And here's the really strange part. He seemed about to answer me, and then changed his mind. And he just said, 'No, check all of 'em. And especially look for very small hairline fractures. Everywhere.'"

Kirk stared. "Did you find any?"

"No. He's okay. But then when I told him that I hadn't found any, it didn't seem to make him that much happier. Oh, I mean, he was glad that he was all right; it's not that. But, it didn't pull him out of his depression."

Kirk sighed.

Chapel shrugged.

The mystery deepened.

Chapter Forty-Eight

A doubly frustrated Kirk roamed the corridors again. He'd tried valiantly to find out what was going on, and all he'd received for his trouble was a bewildering array of jokes, private references that made no sense, and a few disjointed facts, all of which failed outstandingly to add up to anything. Well, McCoy had referred him to the "adding machines." It was time that he tried them. And he wasn't accepting any nonsense, either. At least the Vulcans would be sober.

Kirk rounded the corner in time to see Sevak leaving Spock's quarters. Good. That meant that the science officer was probably in there. Hardly giving the door time to completely close behind Sevak's departure, Kirk charged at it, making it reopen. He roared inside, to be greeted by two startled Vulcans. But he was too annoyed to be embarrassed by his breach of proper protocol in not having rung for entry first.

"All right, I want to know what the devil's going on here," he bellowed with fists on hips. "I've just come from McCoy. He's drunk. He spoke in riddles, answered my questions enigmatically, wouldn't tell me a thing. He passed out in my arms, and not just because he was drunk, either; something else is terribly wrong. I think that you've done something horrible to him, and he won't tell me what. But I mean to find out what it is. And if you two start playing games with me, too, I swear that I'll..." Kirk abruptly remembered himself.

Four Vulcan eyebrows were hiding under their wearers' hair.

Kirk's hands dropped to his sides. He spoke more quietly, "Just tell me what's going on, gentlemen."

Spock motioned to a chair. "Sit down, Captain."

Kirk sat, feeling as if he were suddenly about to be let in on something momentous.

The Vulcans sat down facing him.

"Perhaps you have surmised," Spock began, "that the three of us were captured by an extremely powerful and advanced alien mind."

Kirk nodded. "It had to be, in order to reach almost from the edge of the galaxy, and into this ship. Did you...meet it?"

"Indeed we did. But it was not life as we know it at all. It was totally incorporeal, and undoubtedly had been for eons. Whether it had ever possessed a body such as ours, one could not say. But it evidently had been dormant for some time, judging from the references that it made to our activities having 'disturbed its sleep,' and to its need for rest."

Kirk's nose and forehead wrinkled. "You disturbed its sleep? Nurse Chapel said that she heard shouting in the sickbay; that must have been some argument to have disturbed it at that distance!"

"No, Captain." Spock explained patiently, "The three of us did not disturb it; the entirety of the Federation did."

"And not only the Federation," Sarek added. "It made reference to other 'organizations' as well. Perhaps such as the Romulans or the Klingons."

Kirk sat up straighter. "Then, what made it grab the three of you? Out of all of that?"

"Random selection," Spock assumed. "And presumably it has chosen, or will choose, random victims from among the other 'organizations' as well."

Kirk shook his head. "What's the point? Why does it want a collection of beings that it finds so annoying?"

Spock glanced at his father. "To mind-probe, in order to search for weaknesses in the parent 'organization' from which the specimens came."

Kirk sat forward in alarm. "It mind-probed you for weaknesses in the Federation?! So that it could exploit those weaknesses and destroy the 'disturbance'?"

"Negative," Spock assured him. "It *intended* to do so. It communicated to us, through a brief mind touch, its intention of doing so, as soon as it fulfilled its need to rest."

"And it didn't get back to you before we rescued you?"

"It did not."

Kirk sighed his relief.

"But it was through that brief mind touch that we learned of the formidable power of the alien mind," Sarek said. "And we were able to calculate from that that we would not be able to shield against its probe."

"Well, that would explain some of McCoy's upset," Kirk concluded. "He would of course be terrified of the alien probe after what he's been through before, on more than one occasion. But why does he appear to be blaming *you*?"

Spock hesitated. "There is more to our story than that, Captain."

"I'm listening."

"Having deduced that there would be no possibility of shielding against the creature, and having searched our cell and exhausted any chance of escape by normal means, we deemed our situation desperate."

"But you knew that I'd come after you!"

Sarek stated, "We doubted that you could reach us in time."

"We had to prevent the probe, Captain. At all costs," Spock informed him. "The information that the being could have obtained from the three of us might have been sufficient to bring about the destruction of the Federation."

"I agree with that," Kirk offered slowly. "But why do I get the awful feeling that I'm not going to like where this is leading?"

Spock went on, "Seeing no way to escape or shield, and a very low probability of timely rescue, my father and I concluded that suicide was the necessary solution."

Kirk blinked. "Well I can...see how you arrived at that. But I'll bet that McCoy put up an argument that made the quarrel in the sickbay look feeble!"

"Not then. The doctor was asleep."

Kirk's frown returned. "How did he manage to sleep at a time like that?"

"With my help. I put him to sleep with a gentle mind touch."

"Is he aware of that?"

"Uncertain."

"Hmm. That might have made him annoyed at you right there. So you two made all of your decisions without him."

"Yes, Captain."

"And when he woke up, you told him? I'll bet that *that* got you quite a reaction!"

"Indeed. McCoy refused to cooperate."

"I could have told you that. If I'd been there for you to ask."

"We had anticipated that outcome ourselves," Sarek agreed. "And we knew what we had to do."

Kirk stared at the calm face of the ambassador in sudden alarm. "What you had to do? What do you mean, what you had to do?!"

"For the good of the Federation," Sarek returned, unruffled. "We had to force the doctor to submit to our decision."

Kirk's hand flew to his mouth. "Oh my god, you didn't!"

"No. Not quite," Spock reminded him.

"But...I mean...you let him know that you were going to...?!"

"Yes, Captain."

"Oh no! How?! By what means?! Not...!"

"Tal-shaya." Spock nodded.

"No!!" Kirk slumped. "But you know how he feels about that! How he fears your Vulcan methods!"

"We had no phasers, Captain. Tal-shaya was the quickest, most merciful means available to us."

"It was the only logical choice," Sarek confirmed.

"Logic!" Kirk sputtered at the absurdity. Then his eyes grew wide. "Oh my lord, that explains everything! That odd position that you and Bones were in when we beamed you aboard." He stared at Spock. "Oh dear god," he whispered. "And it just looked to me as if you

were supporting his head! No wonder McCoy reacted as he did when I told him that that's what it looked like!"

Spock stared back, unblinking.

"Then...! You were that close to doing it when...!"

The Vulcan nodded. "If you had beamed us aboard one second later, it would have been too late."

Kirk's hands rose to cover his own face. He sat for a moment, trying to absorb the impact of these emotional blows. Then another thought came to him, and he raised his eyes once more to Spock. "You were going to, not your father? How did you come to that decision?"

"I surmised that my friendship with McCoy would make it easier for him to receive it from me."

"But I stated my willingness to restrain McCoy for Spock, if necessary," Sarek offered.

Kirk's eyes flew to Sarek's face and back to Spock's again. "Your friendship with McCoy?! Do you realize what you've *done* to your friendship with McCoy?! On Vulcan, he thought of you as his protector! Don't you see what you've done?! He won't see how he can ever trust you again!"

"Yes, Captain. I understand."

Kirk shook his head. "And to have had the two of you gang up on him like that! He must have felt so helpless!"

Sarek corrected, "I did not get involved."

Kirk regarded him unsympathetically. "No, you just made it very clear that you would if necessary. Same thing." Then the next inspiration hit. "That explains Nurse Chapel's mystery!"

Until now, Spock had been working to keep his face carefully neutral. But at this, the concern rose in his eyes. "To what are you referring, Jim?"

Kirk eyed him. "McCoy went to her immediately after rescue. He requested a thorough examination of his skeletal structure. He told her to look for hairline fractures."

Spock sat forward anxiously. "Did she find any?"

"No, she didn't find any. Did you expect her to?"

Spock confessed, "I had already begun to exert the pressure."

"Oh god! So, on top of everything else...he was probably in pain."

"Probably some."

Kirk's face fell. "So his difficulty in walking out of the transporter room may have been more than just emotional trauma."

"Yes, Jim."

"And that's why he went straight to her. The discomfort must have made him worry about how much you had...accomplished."

Kirk and Spock sat silently, each regaining control in his own way.

Then Kirk commented, "Of course, I'm glad that you didn't think of this, because McCoy'd be dead right now if you had, but it might have been kinder to do it in his sleep."

"We thought of that, obviously," Sarek pointed out to him. "But it would not have been possible."

"Why not?"

"Because tal-shaya requires a rigid bone, not a limp one," Spock told him.

Kirk was hit by a revelation. "That explains McCoy's remarks about wanting to get drunk so that he'd have limp bones, not rigid bones! Did you tell him that...?!"

"Yes, Captain, we did. He had requested a nerve pinch, so that he would be unconscious and not feel tal-shaya."

Kirk's heart broke again. "And that gives us some estimate of the desperation to which you'd pushed him. He fears the nerve pinch."

Spock made no reply.

Kirk looked up wearily, but curiously. "After you'd disposed of McCoy, I suppose that one of you was going to do it to the other? And then what was the other one going to do?"

Sarek replied dutifully, "I was going to perform tal-shaya upon Spock. And then I was going to execute the method on myself."

Kirk stared in fascinated horror. "You were going to kill your own son? And then break your own neck? How could you do that?!"

Sarek misunderstood. "Tal-shaya," he repeated simply.

"But I...no...I mean...well first of all, how could even a Vulcan bring himself to kill his own son?!"

"It was not a decision that I would make lightly. But the logic of the situation could not be denied."

Kirk shook his head slowly, staring at the ambassador.

"Allow me to anticipate the second part of your question, Captain," Spock broke in to explain. "I believe that you were requesting the logistics of a Vulcan breaking his own neck."

Kirk tore his eyes away from Spock's father, with effort, in order to nod briefly at Spock.

"In fact, Captain, my father selected for himself a most difficult task. Committing tal-shaya on oneself is an accomplishment that few have achieved in our history. To attempt, and to fail, is to die in agony." He paused for his words to sink in on his listener. "My father chose the hardest role for himself." He watched to see if Kirk was appropriately impressed. Kirk nodded his grudging respect.

After a few minutes, the human sighed. "But we still have our original problem. McCoy.... I'm not saying that I would have seen a better solution, if I'd been in your place, but I couldn't have done what you were going to do."

"Then you would have automatically condemned the Federation to disaster," Sarek informed him succinctly.

"That may be so," Kirk admitted. "But I'll tell you, Spock, I wouldn't have wanted to face, myself, what McCoy faced with you, either."

Spock watched him.

"And I can't honestly say that I'd be dealing with it any better than he is, right now."

Spock hesitated. "We had hoped that, in time, McCoy could understand."

"Intellectually? Maybe. Emotionally? Never. It's likely that he'll never forgive you."

"Captain. I'm sorry."

"So am I, Spock. My guess is that you've lost him."

Chapter Forty-Nine

Nurse Christine Chapel knew where to go to find Vulcans. The science department always held a large assortment, it being the station to which they were all assigned. If one were seeking a specific Vulcan, there was no guarantee, necessarily; but if a random selection would suffice, that department was always a more than adequate source.

On her way there, she tried to force herself not to be nervous. She told herself that it was silly; she just wanted to ask a few simple questions. But her years-long fascination with the stoic, green-blooded aliens was the very reason for which she found them intimidating. It was hard not to be self-conscious before someone for whom one felt a great deal of respect and admiration. That, coupled with her not-so-secret love for Spock, made her interest in the species almost obsessive. Hence her agitation at approaching any of them.

But this was in the line of duty, she reminded herself; she was obligated to seek instruction which might illuminate the issue that mystified her. She owed it to Dr. McCoy to learn all that she could. With that, she willed herself to walk through the door.

The sheer number of Vulcans working, studying, or purposefully traversing the room took away her breath. She did not think that she had ever previously seen so many in one place. But then, her exposure had never been all that thorough. I'm the only human in the room, she abruptly realized. The effect that that revelation had on her heart was not beneficial. Relax, Christine, she silently scolded herself. Perhaps it would be easier if she made her appeal to one of the women. She might see that as less threatening. Yes, her heart slowed slightly in response. She glanced around quickly and singled out one who was working alone at a console. Her selection was also quite short. Shorter than she. It helped.

Christine took a few tentative steps toward her target, and a small number of the Vulcans, none of whom had paid her any notice until now, favored her with a brief disinterested glance. Which got her heart going again.

Attempting to hide it, Christine hastened the rest of the way to her choice. "Uh, excuse me, um...."

"Petrasek." The dark eyes met hers. "Yes?"

"Might I have a word with you in private, if it is convenient?" The blonde human tried bravely to mimic the Vulcan manner of speaking.

"Affirmative." The black-haired alien rose and ushered her into a tiny, cramped cubicle. There was barely room to maneuver, forcing the two women to stand quite close to one another. The proximity unnerved Christine. Petrasek was shorter, but not that much shorter. And she probably possessed several times the human woman's strength.

"I am Nurse Christine Chapel."

"I know."

She should not have been surprised. The Vulcan minority, with its nearly perfect power of recall, would long since have memorized the name of every individual in the human majority. "I...I don't mean to pry, but I have questions that are very much in the line of duty."

"Very well. Proceed."

"My...my questions are in regard to a specific Vulcan technique."

"Which technique is that?"

"Um.... Sometimes, if...you need to kill someone, you...break his neck."

Petrask nodded once. "You refer to tal-shaya."

Bingo! Christine thought. I knew that I remembered something like that, from the accusations against Sarek the first time that he'd come onto the Enterprise! Then it must indeed have been the neck-bone that had Leonard so concerned. Nothing else made sense anyway; why would logical Vulcans go around breaking arms or legs? It still was hard to imagine a problem considering with which two Vulcans McCoy'd been stranded. But she'd had nothing else to go on in this mystery.

"How is it done?" Christine asked hesitantly.

"By applying the pressure of one finger on a very specific delicate spot on the neck-bone."

"Which spot?"

"It is difficult to describe without the aid of diagrams."

The follow-up request was inevitable and obvious, although it took almost more willpower than Christine had, to ignore her discomfort at the prospect. "Can...can you show me? Without hurting me?" she could not stop herself from adding.

"Of course." The Vulcan reached slender fingers around behind the human's neck, and centered her middle finger against a point almost precisely midway between the base of the hairline and the level of the shoulder.

The spot did feel quite tender. It took all of Christine's courage not to flinch. She wondered if Petrasek could feel her trembling.

"There," the Vulcan informed her.

"Oh," the human whispered, suppressing a shudder.

The hand withdrew. Petrasek tilted her head quizzically. "Is there a medical problem?"

"What?" Christine paled self-consciously.

"In the sickbay."

"Oh!" Christine reddened in embarrassment, then hurried to cover it with clinical professionalism. "I'm not sure yet; there might be. That was why I needed more information."

Petrasek nodded. "Is there anything else?"

"No. Thank you; you've been quite helpful."

The Vulcan nodded again and led the way out of the cubicle.

Christine Chapel walked briskly out of the science department, trying to force her ragged nerves off of center stage, in her eagerness to return to sickbay to scrutinize the precise location on McCoy's readings with the micron scanner.

Petrasek watched her go, allowing herself a brief instant in which to consider the thought that life would be a great deal easier for Vulcans if humans would learn to shield their thoughts and emotions.

According to Sevak's calculations, Spencek and Spornak should be off duty now. He further computed the probability as reasonably high that they would be in the ship's gym again. Their sparring-workouts had become quite regular.

The boy entered shyly. The two adult males were indeed engaged in mock combat. Not desiring to disturb them, Sevak sat down quietly to watch.

Both men, in turn, were immediately, clearly aware of his presence, but they just as obviously pretended not to be, so as not to alarm the child before he was ready to speak to them.

At the end of the current round, Spencek and Spornak cast surreptitious glances at the young face, and saw his earnest, receptive expression. They dropped their weapons and approached cautiously.

Spencek addressed the boy first, "The last time that we saw you in here, you avoided us. You will not do so this time?"

Sevak rose formally to his feet. "I was embarrassed. You had caught me in the midst of a vile display of emotion. I was ashamed to face you. I will submit to punishment if you deem it appropriate. I beg forgiveness."

Spencek considered. "Did you confess your transgression to Ambassador Sarek and First Officer Spock, now that they have returned?"

"Affirmative."

"And did they see fit to subject you to correction?"

"Negative."

"Then we will draw the same conclusion. You have our forgiveness."

"I express appreciation."

Spornak ventured, "Is there something else that you wish to discuss with us?"

"Affirmative."

"Then speak."

"As you have said, I briefly avoided you. But now I am concerned about a different kind of avoidance. One that I regret may be more permanent."

"Specify."

"I have previously discussed with Spencek the fact that the human McCoy is a most atypical individual," he informed Spornak, including them both with his eyes. "He had previously displayed friendship for Spock and Sarek, and concern for me. But now, as a result of circumstances surrounding the abduction of the three of them from the Enterprise for a time, McCoy avoids them obsessively; and it would appear that the friendship has ended."

"Indeed?" Spencek inquired, "What circumstances are those?"

"To protect themselves from being mind-probed for Federation weaknesses by an alien entity with mental powers greater than ours, Spock and Sarek deemed that the three must suicide by tal-shaya. McCoy resisted. They prepared to force him. The three were rescued. Now, McCoy will not forgive."

The adults nodded slowly.

"We have learned never to expect logic from McCoy," Spencek informed him.

"And we have also learned that McCoy has a horror of all Vulcan methods, particularly that one," Spornak added. "Even the nerve pinch alarms him; I know from personal experience."

"I know. Spencek told me."

"What is it that you wish to accomplish in this matter, Sevak?" Spencek wondered.

"I seek a means to assist them in the restoration of their friendship."

"That may not be possible," Spornak said. "Considering McCoy's extreme sensitivity in regard to the procedure in question, restoration may not be welcome."

"I see."

"This issue concerns you greatly," Spencek observed.

The boy hesitated, not wishing to commit another un-Vulcan act, and bring the potential of discipline again upon himself. "I owe a lot to my elders. And Dr. McCoy was kind to me."

They nodded again.

"We shall give the matter further thought," Spencek offered. "If we arrive at a potential solution, we will act appropriately."

"Again, I am in your debt," Sevak acknowledged. "And now I will cease to disturb your match." He left.

Their practice-combat resumed.

Chapter Fifty

McCoy's evasion of the two Vulcans ended: abruptly, prematurely, and against his volition.

Spock and Sarek entered the sickbay, seeking an opportunity to reason with the doctor, an approach which might have worked had McCoy been a Vulcan. He was not.

McCoy heard the door open, turned casually, gasped loudly, and fell back against his desk, catching himself with his palms on the desktop.

They came within a meter of him and stopped.

"Doctor," Spock began hesitantly. "We hoped to find you...."

"Sober?" McCoy glared. "I'm sober, all right!"

"We have been concerned," Sarek expressed.

"Don't bother! I don't want your pity. I couldn't have it when I needed it...." His voice caught, and then he went on, "I don't need it now."

Spock ignored McCoy's refusals. "I trust that I did not injure you." There was a gentle, plaintiff quality to Spock's inquiry which McCoy, in turn, ignored.

"Why would you think that?" the human retorted bitterly. "Just because I was so clumsy that I practically fell off of the transporter platform?! I was in shock, damnit!"

"I hoped that that was all," Spock agreed, "and that you were not also in pain. I knew that I had already begun to impart an infinitesimal amount of pressure. I hoped that I had not partially broken...."

"What do you care?!" McCoy roared, unwilling to hear the dreadful words spoken, the words which would be the inevitable ending of Spock's sentence.

"We care, Leonard." Spock's tone was tender.

"Bull!" His eyes grew intense. "If you really cared about me, you never could have considered doing what you almost did to me!"

"Incorrect," Sarek informed him. "After Spock had completed his task with you, I would have committed tal-shaya upon him. Do you wish to believe that I have no regard for my own son?"

McCoy rejected the question. "In the first place, you'd have a hard time proving to me now, or then for that matter, that you really would've killed Spock after me, and I choose not to believe it. In the second place, I just love the way that you word it: 'after Spock had completed his task' with me! Now isn't that a nice, cold, impersonal, tidy way of describing something very messy!"

Sarek blinked, undaunted. "Would you have preferred that I describe it in very blatant, ugly, explicit terms?" He seemed on the verge of doing exactly that.

"No," McCoy whispered shakily. "You've done enough to me."

"Doctor," Spock urged. "You also fail to appreciate the fact that, in withholding his own execution until last, my father took the most difficult task upon himself. Committing tal-shaya on oneself is extremely hard to do. And failure results in terrible suffering."

"What do you want, applause?! I'm supposed to be impressed because Sarek was going to make the big sacrifice, huh? And I guess that I'm expected to feel like a jerk because you two are so brave and I'm so sensitive, right? Well, we knew that already! We've always known that I'm soft, so what's the big surprise?! What the hell do you want from me?!"

Spock answered quietly, "I want you to understand how difficult it was for me to do what I nearly did to you."

"And take you off the hook, is that it?" His voice was low and hostile. "No, Spock, forget it. If you do have one shred of guilt in you about this, you just keep it. I'm not going to make this one bit easier on you than you made my near-murder on me. I can be just as relentless. Now get away from me, both of you." He marshaled his courage and tried to go around Spock, on the side away from Sarek, not daring to walk between them.

Spock grabbed his arm and their eyes met. "Wait. Listen to me."

McCoy's eyes lit with fear and hate. "Get your Vulcan hands off of me! You don't have to kill me now; we're safe. Or maybe you just *want* to; but just you remember I can scream real

loudly, and there are a lot of people on this ship who would come running. You haven't got me alone anymore. You lost your best chance."

Spock allowed McCoy to pull free from his grasp.

The doctor stalked out of the sickbay. He wandered the corridors aimlessly for a time, and then he finally realized that his tension had to go somewhere, and so did he.

McCoy rarely ever used the ship's gym, but he seemed to remember that there was a punching bag in there that might come in very handy right now. Especially if he imagined it possessing a face. A greenish one. With pointed ears and slanted eyebrows. Now with a destination in mind, he increased his pace and charged the rest of the way there and into the large room.

Preoccupied, he had rushed well into the gym before he saw them. Spencek and Spornak. Spock's frequent henchmen. Engaged in a despicable form of Vulcan combat. He stopped short almost in front of them.

The two Vulcans saw him in the same instant, and dropped their slings. They advanced on him. McCoy turned to run. Spencek seized a human wrist and spun him around to face them. They backed him into the nearest corner.

Flustered, McCoy shouted, "Are you going to finish the job that they started?!"

Spencek demanded, "Why is it so difficult for you to comprehend logical motives?"

Trying to ignore his discomfort at being cornered like a trapped animal, McCoy retorted, "Life and death are not just logic! There's always hope! You don't just give up!"

Spencek reminded him, "The entire Federation was at stake."

The human's voice shook. "I couldn't expect you to understand the cold-blooded horror of tal-shaya. Your uncle Spacek tried to do it to me!"

The Vulcan quietly replied, "And your Mr. Spock and his father did it to my uncle. Partly on your behalf. But I accept their reasons."

"Well, I can't!"

Spornak entered the conversation. "If one examines the evidence of history, you humans are more likely to be violent and kill than we are. Why fear us?"

McCoy tried to put his feelings into words. "Since human motives are emotional, there's always a chance of talking the attacker out of it. Especially if one is willing to beg. But your motives are always logical; so once you've reasoned it out and made up your mind, that's it, the victim has no chance of changing your mind. Your people see the issues and decisions as black and white; you don't see any shades of gray. There's a relentlessness about it that makes my blood run cold. It's merciless. You make me feel so helpless and vulnerable."

"I think that I begin to see," Spornak admitted thoughtfully.

"Another factor is your Vulcan strength," McCoy continued. "I don't stand a chance and I know it. It's unnerving."

"I see," agreed Spencek. "But our strength is what it is. We have no control over that. You should not insist on seeing it as a conspiracy."

"Oh no? Well I notice that you're deliberately working out to maintain it. Making sure that you keep the edge on us lowly humans?"

There was no reply. The human had hit too close to the truth to be denied.

"And speaking of conspiracies." McCoy plunged ahead, "Notice how you're always ganging up on me? You two almost always come after me as a pair. Very intimidating. Calculatedly so. And sometimes you even play 'good guy-bad guy' with me. Especially when you want to enforce Spock's orders."

"Good guy-bad guy?" Spornak wanted to know.

"Yes. That's when one of you, usually Spencek, shows a little subtle sympathy to me, while the other one, generally Spornak, threatens me with your wicked Vulcan methods. You see, that way, I'm supposed to panic and run to Spencek and confide in him and do whatever he wants – which is all that Spornak ever wanted, anyway."

Spencek was stunned. "Have you always seen us in these roles?"

"No, not always. There was a time, in the beginning, when I was equally terrified of both of you."

They blinked.

"And then there was a time," he reminisced in more reasonable tones, "when you first bothered to speak to me alone, Spencek. Much better. Not so frightening."

"Dr. McCoy, I assure you," Spencek informed him earnestly, "that we have never intentionally played games with you."

"I believe you. But maybe that was the trouble," he said as his eyes grew distant, "in my big disaster with Spock and Sarek. Because they didn't play games with me. Because they didn't play 'good guy-bad guy'. Because there was no good guy for me to turn to, no one that I could rely on to protect me, to save me from the other. They both turned evil on me at once. They didn't give me an ally to run to and confide in, and they didn't give me a way out; they just decided that I was going to die and that was that. Black and white. Cold and inhumane. They even made the decision while I was asleep. I had nothing to say about it. And they even *put* me to sleep; they even engineered *that*. They probably think that I don't know, but I've given it a lot of thought, and it just wasn't natural; I just don't drop off like that. They did something to me. More of their filthy Vulcan methods! Yes, maybe it would be easier on us humans if you Vulcans did really play games with us. Soften the blows of your nightmarish decisions. Cushion the impact of your cold unyielding logic. Because when you do stand against one of us as an unmovable united front, it's often more than we can bear."

Spencek hesitated. "I'm not sure that I know how to reply to that, Doctor."

"On Vulcan," McCoy suggested, "your uncle Spock compared me to a child. An unruly, undisciplined child. A little later, I aggravated Spock to the point that he expressed agreement with that judgment. It was then that he first, half-jokingly, threatened to spank me. Perhaps it would help if you Vulcans thought of us as children, and treated us accordingly. And then inflicted no punishments worse than a spanking." His eyelids drooped and he leaned into the corner for support. "May I go now, please? Or are you going to grab me and manhandle me the way that Spock just did? Or drag me to him and Sarek kicking and screaming?"

Wordlessly, Spencek and Spornak stood aside.

McCoy retreated.

Chapter Fifty-One

Chekov lagged behind Sulu.

The Oriental turned to look at him. "Are you coming?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"I keep telling you, you'll like fencing!"

"Maybe I'll get lucky, and we'll get sidetracked like we did the other time."

"Oh, come on, Pavel!"

Sulu led the way through the door, and a very reluctant Chekov followed. Just inside of the door, Sulu stopped dead, and Chekov ran into him.

"Hey! What is this? I thought that you were the one that was so eager; now you're changing your mind?" Then the Russian looked around him and saw who else was in the gym. He forced an unenthusiastic smile. "Oh. Hello."

Sulu echoed, "Hello."

"Greetings." Once again, Spencek and Spornak each dropped his ahn-woon.

"We're sorry that we disturbed you," Sulu apologized.

"We did not know that you were here," Chekov explained. "We'll come back another time." He tugged at Sulu's sleeve, now having not one, but two reasons for wishing to depart.

Spencek turned to Spornak. "This would appear to be our day for making humans uneasy."

"Perhaps it is contagious," Spornak agreed.

"Stay," Spencek urged the humans. "This gym is surely large enough for all of us. And possibly you will tell us why we suddenly make you nervous."

The humans exchanged unhappy looks.

"All right." Sulu decided to admit it. "While Spock and Sarek were missing, we were concerned about Sevak, and tried to help him. We think that you know that. And I guess that we're just wondering if you saw our efforts as interference, just as Spock and Sarek objected to what Dr. McCoy did for the boy."

"I see." Spencek nodded, and then answered, "Negative. We were...impressed by your interest."

"Oh!" the two humans chorused.

"Is that all that is troubling you?" Spornak wanted to know.

"That's it," Sulu responded.

"Good. Then perhaps you'll stay. In what physical activity do you wish to engage?"

"Fencing," Sulu announced brightly.

"Well, one of us wishes to. The other one of us is not so sure," Chekov added.

His companion turned to glare at him. "Pavel!"

"Hikaru..." He shrugged.

"Hm." Spencek suggested, "Since you cannot agree, perhaps we can offer you an alternative. Have you ever used an ahn-woon?" He bent to retrieve his from the floor.

"No," both humans replied.

"We will instruct you," Spornak offered, picking up his own. "You will not be injured."

Sulu and Chekov looked at each other. The prospect was certainly intriguing.

"All right," Sulu spoke for both.

"Excellent." Spencek went to fetch two more Vulcan slings.

Each Vulcan took his pupil to the opposite end of the gym and mock-combat resumed, a great deal more gently.

A miserable James T. Kirk sat in his quarters with his head in his hands. The Spock-McCoy crisis was certainly the most baffling that he had ever faced. Both were perfectly safe, perfectly healthy, ...and perfectly impossible to place in the same room together. And that simply would not do. If this ship were ever to run smoothly again, Kirk must find some way to resolve this. In a way, he agreed, or at least sympathized, with McCoy. But somehow he knew that it would not help to let McCoy know that. In fact, it would be detrimental. It would reaffirm the

doctor's self-righteous martyr complex. And a more counter-productive achievement Kirk could not imagine. So, much as it pained him to do so, he must take the "tough guy" approach, or at least as much as was possible without pushing the doctor over the edge.

Gathering his determination, Kirk set out for sickbay.

He walked in, saw that McCoy was alone, and unceremoniously announced, "The Lady Amanda told me about your previous avoidance of Spock and Sarek while you were on Vulcan; you're doing it again."

McCoy growled, "Who has a better right?"

"Maybe," Kirk conceded. "But just the same, I wish that I had her here to straighten you out again."

McCoy glared. "Straighten me out?! What do you know about it anyway?!"

Kirk softened. "I know, Bones, I know. And I'm sorry."

"You know? About what happened?"

"Yes."

"*They* told you?" He snarled the first word.

"Yes."

McCoy stood nodding for a moment. Then, he mused, "I'll bet that *that* conversation was something."

"They feel terrible about it, Bones."

There was no reply.

Kirk hesitated. "Does it still hurt?"

"Only in here." McCoy's hand went to his heart. "But my neck-bone, my whole back-bone for that matter, feels so...."

"Injured?" Kirk demanded in alarm.

"No. Squeamish. Vulnerable. Scared. I can still feel his touch on my neck."

Kirk shivered inwardly. McCoy had gotten to him, and in record time. He hurried to conceal it. "No wonder you jumped so badly when I put my hand on your back."

"Yes, I was afraid that it was him."

"But you know that he won't do anything now."

"That's just it, Jim, do I? Can you guarantee me that this'll never happen again? That Spock and I won't ever find ourselves in similar circumstances? That he won't choose the same solution? That he won't have time to go *through* with it next time?" His tone intensified at the end.

"No," Kirk said softly.

They stood silently for a moment.

Kirk tried, "But I *can* promise you that odds are very much against it."

"Odds!" McCoy huffed. "Now you sound like him!" Then a thought came to him. "Why were you so sure that I was going to say 'injured' a minute ago?"

Kirk's eyes wandered uncomfortably. This was a bad time to admit this to McCoy; it would only make things worse. But he couldn't lie to him.

"Jim?" McCoy prompted.

Kirk faced him squarely. "Nurse Chapel went back over your readings again with a micron-scanner, once she knew exactly where to look."

"And?"

"And, ...while there's no hairline fracture, there *is* evidence of slight molecular stress."

They regarded each other.

"So the process had indeed begun," McCoy realized.

"Yes. It will heal," Kirk reminded him. "Will *you*?" he added significantly.

He ducked the question. "Does Spock know? About the stress?"

"Nurse Chapel said that she intended to tell him."

McCoy made no reply.

"He feels awful about it now, Bones. That'll make it worse."

"I hope that you're not expecting me to feel sorry for him."

Kirk shook his head in frustration. "Look, how do you think that I felt after all of those images on Saterra's ship?" He referred to his torture by the Romulan "revised-history" machine, in which Spock was portrayed as a cruel, sadistic enemy who would hurt him at every opportunity. "And Spock was the first one that I had to face afterward."

McCoy was not swayed. "That was the result of brainwashing. This is reality."

"All right, Bones, granted." Then, Kirk had a sudden hunch and decided to play it. "Let's hear a little more of this reality of yours. Now I understand that Spock and Sarek made the decision without you, and told you when you awakened?"

"That's correct."

Kirk ventured, "So, what did Spock do, just say, 'Hi Doctor; glad you're awake; and by the way, I'm, going to kill you'?"

McCoy made a face. "Of course not." Which was, obviously, the answer that Kirk expected.

He pursued, "Well, what happened in between those events?"

McCoy sighed. Rehashing the scene was clearly not one of his favorite things to do. Kirk was sorry, but he was counting on something specific that he knew could help him with McCoy. *If* it had happened.

"Well," McCoy narrated, "Spock presented the logic of our predicament, why the situation was desperate. Then he dumped their 'solution' on me. We argued. I refused. Spock said that they would force me. I panicked. I quarreled. I begged. Spock said that he was sorry. I asked how he would do it. He told me. Tal-shaya. I cried. Spock...gave me a gentle mind touch to comfort me. I pleaded with him to nerve-pinch me so that I wouldn't feel it. He explained why he couldn't. He tried it on me. I screamed and fought. I appealed to Sarek. He refused me. I fought harder. Spock won. I lost."

Kirk's "bingo" had come halfway through McCoy's halted but vivid account. He could hardly contain his excitement. It had been all he could do not to yell, "Aha!" in the middle of the doctor's narration.

"So!" Kirk didn't even try to mask the thrill that he felt. "Just as I expected! Spock was kind to you, at least as much as he could afford to be, not cold, not unfeeling. He gave you a gentle mind touch. He tried to comfort you. He said that he was sorry."

McCoy looked at him.

"He regretted it, Bones," Kirk insisted. "He didn't *want* to do it to you. He felt that he had no choice. But at least he was tender and gentle to you. And in front of his father yet; that can't have been easy on him, either. That should mean something to you."

McCoy partly accepted it. "Maybe so, Jim. But you try it. Open your eyes and look up into Spock's eyes, and feel his hand on your neck, and know what he is going to do to you, ...and then miraculously forgive him later."

Kirk had no answer. He regarded McCoy somberly. He walked over to the doctor and put a hand on his shoulder. "He at least tried to be kind to you. Just you keep that in mind."

McCoy's eyes clouded over and he leaned a heavy head onto Kirk's shoulder. The startled captain patted his back helplessly.

"They tried to kill me, Jim!" McCoy wailed in misery.

Kirk went on patting and hoped that that was what McCoy needed: to cry it out of his system.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Dr. Leonard McCoy sat alone in his quarters. He stared at his folded hands in front of him, wondering at the strange turns that his life had recently taken. He doubted his ability to cope on a ship overrun with Vulcans, now that he'd been emotionally regressed to a stage like that of over a decade earlier, when the mere sight of the pointed-eared, greenish aliens had made his blood run cold. At that earlier time, he had trusted only Spock. Now, he saw Spock as the ultimate betrayer.

The door buzzer rang for attention. McCoy stiffened. He braced himself. "Come."

The door slid aside. A diminutive visitor took one step over the threshold and stood waiting.

Some, not quite all, of McCoy's tension left him. He looked over his guest with neutral eyes.

After a moment, Sevak spoke, "You run from Spock; you run from Sarek; you run from Spencek and Spornak. Are you going to run from me, too?"

"No."

"I want to help you as you helped me."

McCoy sighed. "Careful. You might get yourself into real trouble. If Spock and Sarek mind your way of helping me half as much as they objected to my means of helping you, you'll be in for it."

Sevak stepped closer. "I'll take that chance. But I wasn't referring to the help that you gave me with the injection."

"Oh? What other kind was there?"

"The book."

"What book?"

"The novel that you gave me to read. 'The Yearling.' I learned a lot from it. I learned that I, like Jody, should appreciate my elders while they are present, and not wait for the inevitable day when I shall lose them, and then feel regret for having neglected them. I discovered that, however un-Vulcan it may be, I care for Sarek and Spock, and need them. I missed them while they were gone. And I found out that it is no disgrace to express those sentiments to Sarek and Spock. All of this I achieved thanks to you and your book."

McCoy nodded distractedly.

Sevak could tell that his words were not having the desired effect. The human was now too wrapped up in his own crisis to be touched by his accomplishment with the boy. In determination, Sevak took another step closer and raised his voice. "Did you know that there was a sequel?"

"What?"

"A sequel. I looked in your ship's computer banks and found it."

"So?" McCoy asked disinterestedly.

"So, I read it, too, and learned something else from it: about avoidance; it accomplishes nothing."

McCoy turned flaring eyes away impatiently.

Sevak insisted, "In both novels, there is a character named Oliver. In the original novel, and even more in the sequel, he avoided the Forresters – humans with the strength of Vulcans – because they had tried to kill him. But he worked it out with help from Penny Baxter, Jody's father, so that he could go home safely and the friendship was restored."

"Sevak," McCoy said tiredly, "I can see where you're going with this, but...."

"There is a quote in *both* books," Sevak pushed on, undaunted. "Its grammar is atrocious, because the characters were uneducated, but its meaning is revealing. It says, 'No man couldn't live on Baxters' Island without the Forresters was his friends.' So, Dr. McCoy? Can one live on the Enterprise without Spock as his friend? Or, more importantly," he asked as he closed the remaining distance between them with a final step, and placed one hand on the doctor's shoulder, "do you even *want* to?"

Captain James T. Kirk sat alone in his quarters. He stared at his clenched fists in front of him, pondering the ironic twists that had recently befallen him. He questioned his ability to ever put the broken pieces of his Enterprise family back together again. Days earlier, all that he'd needed or wanted was to get his three missing comrades back into the fold. Now, he saw that that accomplishment had been a mere trifle.

The door-chime signaled for admittance. Kirk tensed. He called reluctantly, "Come."

The door retreated. An unexpected visitor entered the room.

"Bones?" Kirk rose from his chair in concern.

McCoy approached with a hesitant gait and sheepish eyes. "Jim, I need to ask a favor of you."

"Name it," Kirk said, and meant it.

"I need for you to be Penny Baxter for me."

"What?"

"Oh nothing, just a reference to that book that I gave Sevak to read. No, I mean that I need you to be a negotiator, and hopefully not also a referee, in a dispute that I'm having with someone on board this ship. Just because he tried to kill me, he thinks that that gives him the right to let me walk out on our friendship because of it. Well, I want you to help me to tell him that he can't let me go that easily."

"Bones! Really?" Kirk whispered.

McCoy's eyes sparkled slightly and he managed a faint smile.

Kirk grinned hugely. "Well, if that isn't the damndest, most convoluted way of telling me.... But I'll take it."

They patted each other on the back.

Chapter Fifty-Three

"Now you're sure that you're up to this?" Kirk peered anxiously into McCoy's face, no doubt wishing for the Vulcan ability to see deeper than skin-level. "Do you need more time?"

"Jim, don't give me more time." McCoy fought to clear the tension from his voice. "Don't give me a chance to lose my nerve."

"Oh, okay!" Kirk hastened. "We can't have that!" He hesitated at Spock's door. "But, uh, just the same, why don't you let me speak to him, and Sarek if he's there, a moment alone first, and then I'll call you in; all right?"

"You don't have to talk me into that one!" McCoy gladly stood aside, out of sight of the door when it should open at their signal.

Kirk rang for entry.

"Come."

Kirk glanced quickly at the doctor, who tensed slightly at the sound of the Vulcan voice, and then moved close enough for his presence to trigger the two halves of the door to part.

Spock and Sarek were both there.

Without preliminary, Kirk announced, "I have wonderful news." He met both pairs of inquiring eyes. "McCoy has made a significant emotional recovery. He's ready to make up with you. I'm here to...pave the way."

Both listeners rose.

"Excellent, Jim." Spock was awed.

"Indeed," agreed Sarek. "Most fortunate."

"Yes," Kirk glanced over his shoulder at the closed door. "Now whatever you do, don't alarm him." He knew that his warning would be greeted by raised brows. He was not disappointed. He glanced again at the door.

Spock surmised, "Is he waiting outside, Captain?"

"Yes." Kirk nodded.

"Then, I'll...."

"No! I'll get him." With a raised hand Kirk bade them stay where they were, as he returned to the door to admit the doctor. The door moved aside at his approach, and he peeked around the corner at one very nervous fellow human. "Come on; are you ready?"

"Are you sure that you want me to answer that?" But McCoy followed Kirk inside of the room. He entered just far enough for the door to close behind him. Kirk stayed by his side.

Spock and Sarek waited silently, not trusting themselves to know the right things to say to the agitated human.

"Spock, I...," McCoy began. "I guess that there are different definitions of sober. One of them is the ability to reason clearly. When you and Sarek came to see me in the sickbay, I suppose that I still wasn't really sober, although I claimed that I was. I want you to let go of your guilt. I'm sorry that I accused you of *wanting* to kill me. I know better, honestly I do. I don't truly doubt that you care."

Moved, Spock responded, "Thank you, Doctor. That...means a great deal."

"Sevak helped me to see that I need you, Spock. By turning some of my own therapy back on me. That's quite a boy that you two have."

Both Vulcans nodded appreciation.

McCoy hesitated, and then took several steps closer.

The Vulcans dared not move.

The doctor went on, "I'm sorry that I rejected your sympathy. I do want it, and need it, really I do. And I genuinely did appreciate your gentleness, your attempt to be kind to me before...the fateful moment back in that alien jail cell. It's a pity that the circumstances were so bad that I couldn't show you what it meant to me."

Spock obviously wanted to approach McCoy. He barely held back from doing so. Then the human's eyes invited him. Spock took a few careful steps. He reached out a tentative hand.

"Will you trust me to touch you?"

McCoy nodded, with almost no hesitation.

A gentle hand slipped cautiously to the back of his neck and carefully examined the abused place.

McCoy closed his eyes and relaxed his tension in a soft shuddering sigh.

"I am so sorry, Leonard," Spock apologized. "Although I am...pleased to concur that there is indeed no fracture. But I am especially regretful about the molecular stress that you sustained."

"It'll heal." McCoy did not open his eyes.

"And I'm sorry that we frightened you."

The eyes opened. "That has already healed."

Spock almost smiled back at him. Not quite. But almost. He withdrew his hand.

Sarek approached McCoy's other side. "Then perhaps you will not be afraid if I, too, express my concern for the torment that you suffered at our hands. We would have avoided it if we could have."

"I know that you would have. And thank you, Sarek." McCoy was impressed. "I know that it takes a lot for a Vulcan to express regret to a human."

"I owe you that. And more. What we put you through was necessary. And unforgivable."

"And I forgive you anyway."

The three watched each other awkwardly, not knowing what else to say.

"Well!" Kirk incorporated much feeling into the one word.

McCoy looked over his shoulder at him. "It's not over yet, Jim. I messed up with Spencek and Spornak, too." He turned back to Spock's raised brows. "They tried to straighten me out, also. Right after you two tried in the sickbay. I was...uncooperative, to say the least."

"That's all right, Bones," Kirk reassured him. "We'll fix that, too." He hit the intercom. "This is Captain Kirk. Spencek, Spornak, please report to me immediately in Mr. Spock's quarters."

Then followed an embarrassing few moments of silence while the four waited for the new arrivals. But only a few moments. The Vulcans, as always, were prompt. They rang for entry and were admitted.

"You sent for us, Captain?" Spencek inquired.

Their eyebrows elevated at the sight of McCoy in so unexpected a location, but being disciplined Vulcans, they displayed no additional reaction.

"I know that you're off duty," Kirk began apologetically. "I hope that we didn't interrupt anything important."

"Not at all, Captain. In fact, our companions appeared to be quite relieved that we were called away from them. You now have two very exhausted Earthmen among your crew," Spencek informed him.

"Oh?"

"Yes." Spornak explained, "We were instructing Sulu and Chekov in Vulcan combat."

"Oh my." He shook his head, and then turned to McCoy, who took his cue.

"Spencek, Spornak, I'm sorry. I realize that you were only trying to help the situation. I should've at least given you a chance. I didn't mean.... Well, I meant the explanation of my feelings, of the psychological effect that you Vulcans have on me at times. But I didn't mean the hostility."

They watched him for a moment.

Then, Spencek spoke, "There is a human custom. One which I find interesting."

"And what's that?" McCoy prompted.

Spencek extended a hand. McCoy took it and beamed at him. They shook. Spornak nodded concurrence. They released.

Spencek's eyes glinted subtly. "Then you do not really wish to be treated as a child?"

McCoy blushed pink. "No."

"What is that, Doctor?" Spock was curious.

"Well, I, uh..." The entrapped human cleared his throat awkwardly. "I rather stupidly suggested to Spencek and Spornak that it might be easier on us poor delicate humans if you Vulcans thought of us as children and treated us accordingly, and inflicted no punishments worse than a spanking." He glanced self-consciously at Spock.

The latter's brows climbed at the reminder. "Hm."

Chapter Fifty-Four

Weeks later, Kirk, Spock, McCoy, Sarek, and Sevak materialized in a swirl of glitter in front of the ambassador's home on Vulcan. Amanda went running out to meet them. After the exchange of the multitudes of greetings: some warm and effusive, others polite and restrained, everyone trooped into the house.

"Well, Sevak." Amanda encouraged him, "I hope that you learned a lot about the starship."

"Yes, Ma'am, I did. But the most important things that I learned were not about the ship."

"Oh?"

"Most importantly, from Dr. McCoy, and from a book that he lent me, I learned about the appreciation of one's elders, and the value of harmonious relationships."

Amanda regarded him in stunned amazement. She battled visibly with her desire to hug him. And gave in to it. Sevak, for his part, had the challenge of feigning Vulcan aloofness to the procedure. But his eyes betrayed him. Anyone paying careful attention would have seen that he liked it.

When at last she had finished with Sevak, Amanda turned eagerly to McCoy, and barely restrained herself from bestowing upon him the same procedure. "Leonard, I don't know how to thank you! What a transformation in our child! However did you manage it?"

"Please." McCoy held up a hand. "Don't praise me too much. I don't deserve it. My heart was in the right place, and I suppose that I did do a few good things. But I also set a very bad example. Sevak at least partly learned from me how *not* to handle situations. It was avoidance again. I evaded Spock and Sarek worse than ever, for quite some time."

"Why?"

McCoy sighed. "It's a very long story. Sarek can tell you later. But you might enjoy knowing that, since you weren't there to straighten me out again, the job of bullying me has gone back to Jim. He tried at least." He flashed a good-sport grin at his captain.

"Good for you, Jim!" she enthused.

"Thank you," Kirk said with reservation. "But I also must apologize for something else that I did. In addition to Bones, I also bullied Sevak, and I was way off base when I did so. I really do like the boy. But I was under a great deal of stress at the time, and frankly, I ended up ordering him off of the bridge."

A totally deadpan Sevak suggested, "Perhaps Captain Kirk should receive punishment. Vulcan-style."

Kirk regarded the boy ruefully. "Well, you learned a good deal about human humor, I see."

Amanda was mildly alarmed at the reference. "Vulcan-style punishment?! Sarek! Spock! You didn't! To Sevak?!"

Sarek observed her stoically. "He required it, my wife."

"Oh, Sarek!"

"Which reminds me." Spock looked at McCoy. "The doctor interfered. He disrupted the latter portion of Sevak's correction, and we did not have the opportunity to finish dealing with him on the subject. Doctor, it is time for your much-delayed spanking."

"Oh!" Kirk was startled. "It didn't happen yet, Bones? I thought that it had."

McCoy admitted reluctantly, "No."

"Good! I get to watch! This I've got to see!"

McCoy turned to Spock and Sarek, and requested, "If you absolutely must, can we do it in seclusion? When you punished Sevak, you didn't do it in public."

Spock was interested. "Are you requesting privacy for the purpose of safeguarding your dignity? As we did with Sevak?"

"Yes."

Spock nodded. "That is legitimate, then."

Sarek put in, "Do you trust us to be alone with you?"

"I suppose so."

"Very well," Sarek led the way back into the all-too-familiar bedroom which had been McCoy's haven during his six-month stay on Vulcan eleven years earlier.

Spock closed the door behind the three of them.

The two Vulcans approached matter-of-factly.

McCoy backed gradually toward the nearest corner.

"We're joking, right?" He tried to smile. "This is to tease Jim."

"Is that what you think, Doctor?" Spock wondered, advancing all the while.

McCoy tried to pretend that he wasn't growing nervous. "And I can yell really loudly. And Jim'll think you're really beating me."

Sarek suggested, "Or, we really will be."

McCoy lost some of his composure. "Spock?! All right, this is to tease me as well as Jim. I see that now. But you won't really do it, right?"

"Perhaps we shall. And perhaps we shall not," Spock responded enigmatically.

"Uh...! You're supposed to be teasing Jim! Not me!" He forced himself to brighten desperately, as he said, "And I'll tease Jim really well when we go out there. I'll pretend that I'm sore and miserable." He ran out of backing room. The corner intruded against his body. "Spock! I'll be convincing!"

"We shall see."

In the living room, Kirk heard a yelp. "My lord, they were serious!"

"Vulcans are very strict, Jim," Amanda reminded him. "Nothing that they do surprises me."

A short while later, two pale green Vulcans returned with one very red-faced human. As Kirk stared, McCoy dropped wordlessly into the soft sofa, only to spring instantly and noisily back out of it.

Kirk shook his head, and muttered, "They were serious." At normal volume, he complained, "I always miss everything!"

McCoy's complaint was louder as he bellowed, "I wish that *I* did!"

But Kirk stared at the doctor more closely. Was that a wink from McCoy? Aimed at Spock and Sarek? No, probably not. It had to be just a trick of the light. Didn't it?